

Exploring the Symbolic Erosion of the Nigerian State Security: A Case Study of Elite Victimizations in the Northwest

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Abstract

Northwest Nigeria has emerged as the epicenter of a deepening security crisis, with armed banditry and kidnapping-for-ransom evolving from rural criminality into a sophisticated political economy of violence. While the human toll on farming communities has been extensively documented, less attention has been paid to the symbolic dimensions of elite victimisation the abduction of retired generals, traditional rulers, politicians, and religious leaders. This study examines how the targeting of high-status individuals constitutes a symbolic erosion of state security, undermining the state's monopoly on legitimate force and its claim to protect its most privileged citizens. Qualitative case study methodology was adopted; the research focuses on the abduction and death of retired Major General Rabe Abubakar in Katsina State in May–June 2026 as a critical incident. The study integrates primary documentary sources, media reports, and secondary scholarly literature to analyse four dimensions of symbolic erosion: the collapse of coercive deterrence, the inversion of state–society protection relations, the commodification of elite status as ransom value, and the legitimization of bandit governance. Findings indicate that elite victimization operates not merely as opportunistic criminality but as a strategic signal that accelerates capital flight, fiscal reallocation toward defensive spending, and the retreat of elite citizens into privatized security enclaves. The study concludes that sustainable peace requires rebuilding state legitimacy through inclusive governance, rural economic revitalization, and the reintegration of traditional institutions, rather than through military-centred countermeasures alone.

Keywords: Elite victimisation, banditry, kidnapping-for-ransom, state failure, symbolic security.

I. Introduction

The Nigerian state is currently confronting one of the most sustained waves of violent insecurity in its post-independence history. While the Boko Haram insurgency in the Northeast has captured international attention for nearly two decades, the Northwest region has quietly emerged as an even deadlier theatre of violence (Lenshie, 2026). Between July 2024 and June 2025, at least 4,722 people were abducted across Nigeria in 997 incidents, with 762 deaths recorded (SBM Intelligence, 2025). Of these, the Northwest accounted for over 60% of reported abductions, with Zamfara State alone recording 1,203 kidnap victims more than any other state in the federation (Human Rights Watch, 2026).

This crisis is conventionally framed as a matter of rural banditry: impoverished young men, marginalized by environmental degradation and governance neglect, turning to cattle rustling, highway ambushes, and kidnapping-for-ransom as survival strategies (Wali & Amb, 2025). Yet this framing, while partially accurate, obscures a more troubling dimension of the phenomenon. In recent years, bandit groups have systematically targeted high-status individuals retired military officers, traditional rulers, politicians, wealthy businesspeople, and senior clerics in ways that transcend purely economic logic. The abduction of a retired major general, for instance, cannot be understood solely as a financial transaction. It is also a political statement, a public demonstration that the state cannot protect even its most elite citizens, and an invitation for others to recalibrate their relationship with the state accordingly.

This study introduces the concept of symbolic erosion of state security to capture this phenomenon. By symbolic erosion, I refer to the process by which the state's claim to a monopoly on legitimate force the foundational attribute of modern statehood is publicly and performatively undermined through attacks on high-status individuals whose inviolability is socially understood to

represent the state's protective capacity. When a retired general is abducted and dies in captivity, the message transmitted to domestic businesses, international investors, and ordinary citizens is not merely that a crime has occurred. It is that the state's protective apparatus has failed at its highest levels, that no one is truly safe, and that the calculus of personal security must be fundamentally revised (Daily Times Nigeria, 2026).

The research question guiding this study is: How does the victimization of elite individuals in Northwest Nigeria contribute to the symbolic erosion of state security, and what are the implications for state legitimacy and governance? To address this question, the study employs a qualitative case study methodology centred on the abduction and death of retired Major General Rabe Abubakar in Katsina State in May–June 2026. This case is treated as a critical incident, an event whose features illuminate broader structural dynamics that might otherwise remain invisible.

A. Problem Statement

Northwest Nigeria has experienced a dramatic escalation in armed banditry and kidnapping-for-ransom, with over 4,722 people abducted and ₦2.57 billion paid in ransoms between July 2024 and June 2025 (SBM Intelligence, 2025). Zamfara, Katsina, and Kaduna States alone recorded 230, 200, and 156 kidnapping incidents respectively, representing more than 60% of the national total (ACAPS, 2025). While a substantial body of literature has examined the socio-economic drivers of rural banditry including environmental degradation, governance neglect, and the proliferation of small arms (Wali & Amb, 2025; Lenshie, 2026) there remains a conspicuous gap in understanding the symbolic dimensions of elite victimisation.

Recent incidents, such as the abduction and death of retired Major General Rabe Abubakar in Katsina State in May–June 2026, illustrate a troubling pattern: high-status individuals retired military officers, traditional rulers, politicians, and religious leaders are increasingly targeted in ways that transcend purely economic logic (Daily Times Nigeria, 2026). Existing scholarship has largely framed banditry as either a criminal enterprise driven by ransom markets (Tagowa et al., 2024) or a form of subnational state-building by armed non-state actors (Ameh, 2026). However, these perspectives have not systematically theorized how the public victimisation of elites performatively undermines the state's claim to a monopoly on legitimate force, erodes coercive deterrence, and inverts the state–society protection relationship (Financial Times, 2025).

The practical consequence of this gap is that security interventions remain focused on kinetic military responses, which have failed to reverse the crisis (Araba & Taoheed, 2026; Pulse, 2026). The theoretical consequence is that the concept of “state failure” in the Nigerian context remains under-specified, failing to account for the symbolic erosion that precedes and accelerates institutional collapse.

Therefore, this study seeks to answer the following research question: How does the victimization of elite individuals in Northwest Nigeria contribute to the symbolic erosion of state security, and what are the implications for state legitimacy and governance? By employing a qualitative case study methodology centred on the abduction and death of Major General Rabe Abubakar, the research aims to identify the mechanisms coercive deterrence collapse, protection inversion, elite commodification, and bandit governance legitimation through which elite victimization signals state weakness and legitimizes alternative authority structures. Addressing this problem is essential for designing governance-based interventions that rebuild state legitimacy, rather than merely containing violence.

II. Literature Review and Theoretical Frameworks

A. State Failure and the Monopoly on Violence

Max Weber's (1919) classic definition of the state as the institution that successfully claims a monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory remains the cornerstone of modern political sociology. According to Weber, a state that cannot exercise this monopoly essentially disqualifies itself from the achieved status of statehood. When a state loses this monopoly when armed

non-state actors can kidnap, extort, and kill with impunity it enters what Rotberg (2004) terms a state of failure. Failed states are characterized not by the absence of violence but by the state's inability to project authority across its territory, provide basic public goods, or maintain a credible deterrent against challengers.

Scholars of African security have debated whether Nigeria qualifies as a failing state or merely a weak one. Bach (2007) argues that Nigeria exhibits "clandestine state" characteristics, where formal state institutions coexist with informal networks of power and violence. More recently, Utibe and Ogundiya (2024) anchor their analysis in Failed State Theory, asserting that the Nigerian state has lost its power of monopoly on legitimate use of violence in its territory, and that the northwest has been the most affected geopolitical region. Similarly, the Nigerian state has been described as a weak and failing state that lacks an effective security network to curb or mitigate banditry, with the inability to evolve a superior strategy to counter bandits and kidnapping networks portending state failure.

This study extends these theoretical insights by introducing the concept of symbolic security as the performative dimension of state authority. Mitchell (1999) argues that the "state effect" the sense that the state is a coherent, bounded entity standing apart from society is produced through repeated performances of authority, including policing, adjudication, and the punishment of transgressors. When these performances are disrupted, the state effect itself erodes. Elite victimisation is particularly consequential in this regard because elites are symbolically overdetermined. The abduction of a retired general does not merely represent private misfortune; it is a public spectacle that invites reinterpretation of the state's protective capacities.

B. Distinguishing Symbolic Erosion from State Failure and Legitimacy Theories

Because this study draws on both Failed State Theory and Weberian conceptions of legitimacy, it is necessary to specify how symbolic erosion advances rather than merely restates these frameworks. Failed State Theory (Rotberg, 2004) is principally concerned with objective, aggregate indicators of state capacity — territorial control, provision of public goods, and monopoly over the means of coercion — assessed across a state's territory. Symbolic erosion is a narrower and more precise concept. It isolates the performative, meaning-making dimension of specific security incidents and asks how particular acts of victimization are interpreted by domestic and international audiences, independent of aggregate capacity indicators. A state may retain substantial coercive capacity across most of its territory and still suffer acute symbolic erosion from a single high-profile incident, precisely because elite status concentrates public attention and interpretive significance in ways that the victimization of non-elite citizens does not.

This distinction also involves established critiques of state failure theory, which several scholars regard as externally imposed, teleological, and inattentive to the hybrid, negotiated forms of authority that persist even where formal state capacity has receded. Bach's (2007) characterization of Nigeria as a "clandestine state," in which formal institutions coexist with informal networks of power, is instructive here: symbolic erosion does not presuppose that the state has "failed" in Rotberg's totalizing sense, but rather that its claim to a monopoly on legitimate force has been publicly and repeatedly falsified in ways that corrode legitimacy even where formal institutions continue to function in other respects. In this way, the concept avoids the binary failed/not-failed framing for which state failure theory has been criticized, and instead treats legitimacy erosion as a graduated, event-driven process.

Symbolic erosion also refines Weberian legitimacy theory by specifying a mechanism, rather than simply an outcome, through which legitimacy is lost. Classical legitimacy theory tends to treat legitimacy as an aggregate stock that rises or falls with general perceptions of government performance. The symbolic erosion framework instead foregrounds discrete, highly visible events as accelerants that can degrade legitimacy at a pace disproportionate to their statistical frequency. In this sense, elite victimization functions analogously to what crisis-communication scholars term a signal event: an incident whose symbolic resonance outweighs its objective magnitude, and which therefore

does more to shape public perception of state authority than the underlying incidence statistics alone would predict.

C. Governance Failure as the Structural Foundation of Banditry

A substantial body of recent scholarship has reconceptualized banditry in Northwest Nigeria not as random criminality but as a systemic outcome of governance failure. Wali and Amb (2025) argue that the persistence and escalation of banditry reflect a deep-seated governance failure that has eroded the state's legitimacy and capacity to provide public goods. Drawing on qualitative data from key informant interviews and focus group discussions in Kaduna, Katsina, and Zamfara States, the study finds that the erosion of state presence in rural communities, elite corruption, youth unemployment, and the weakening of traditional governance institutions have collectively created conditions for the transformation of local grievances into organised armed militancy. Bandit groups have gradually evolved into quasi-political actors, establishing informal governance systems, imposing taxes, and controlling local economies in spaces where state authority has receded.

Osasona (2023) employs the theory of ungoverned spaces to argue that the dominant trigger of the current round of banditry is the continuous neglect of local communities by national and sub-national institutions of governance, particularly since the return to democracy in 1999. This neglect has created a vacuum in which bandits are able to flourish, with failures of governance carrying around three clusters: abandonment of rural communities, improper management of forestlands, and undermining of traditional institutions of conflict resolution and policing.

A comprehensive framework synthesizing insights from four interrelated thematic areas conceptualization of banditry, governance failure, socio-economic marginalization, and the evolution of armed non-state actors has been developed to explain the persistence and transformation of banditry in Northwest Nigeria. The central proposition is that banditry is both a symptom and a driver of state fragility, sustained by a mutually reinforcing cycle of governance deficits, economic deprivation, and the adaptive strategies of armed groups. Weak law enforcement and judicial systems lead to impunity for violent actors; corruption and elite complicity provide protection for some armed groups; and politicised security responses generate selective enforcement and public mistrust.

Situating this crisis historically clarifies that elite victimization is not a sudden aberration but the latest phase of a cumulative process. Analysts have traced the escalation of armed banditry in Northwest Nigeria through several overlapping phases: localized disputes over grazing corridors and cattle theft in the early 2010s; a marked increase in the availability of small arms across the wider Sahel following the 2011 collapse of the Libyan state, which analysts have widely linked to regional weapons proliferation; the consolidation of loosely organized cattle-rustling networks into more structured armed groups over the course of the mid-2010s; and, from the late 2010s onward, the professionalization of kidnapping-for-ransom as a primary revenue source, alongside the emergence of the governance-like functions described above (Osasona, 2023; Wali & Amb, 2025). Read against this trajectory, the targeting of high-status individuals such as Major General Abubakar reflects the growing organizational capacity and confidence of armed groups that, a decade earlier, operated at a far smaller and more localized scale.

D. The Political Economy of Banditry and Kidnapping-for-Ransom

A growing literature focuses on the transformation of banditry into a structured political economy. Sule and Sambo (2025) explore the escalation of new areas of political economy triggered by banditry in Nigeria, where bandits have turned crime into a multi-billion Naira business, investigating acts such as kidnapping for ransom, abduction of school children, illegal mining, capture and confiscation of farmlands, and collection of taxes and levies. Peterside (2025) argues persuasively that “the gun is not merely a weapon; it is a tool of taxation. The forest is not merely a hideout; it is a marketplace. Victims are not only targets; they are revenue streams”.

Kidnapping-for-ransom has become one of the most prevalent and economically harmful security issues in Nigeria, with no fewer than 500 incidents reported annually since 2017. Akangbe

(2026) adopts a multi-theoretical approach, using Routine Activity Theory, Strain Theory, Social Disorganization Theory, and Political Economy perspectives to argue that kidnapping-for-ransom is both a product and driver of broader governance and development failures. Findings reveal that a combination of socio-economic forces poverty, unemployment, inequality, ineffective law enforcement capacity, corruption, insurgency, banditry, and proliferation of small arms has heightened the menace of kidnapping.

The “ransom economy” has profound financial implications. SBM Intelligence (2025) reported that kidnappers received verified ransom payments of ₦2.57 billion despite demanding nearly ₦48 billion between July 2024 and June 2025. The Guardian editorial (2026) notes that “with the abductors’ sacks brimming with cash, it is only a matter of time before the next mass abduction occurs. The kidnap-for-ransom business model is way too juicy to abandon, particularly when the government’s readiness to acquiesce is predictable”.

E. Banditry as Subnational State-Building

Barnett (2025) and Schouten and Barnett (2025) argue that bandits have become “important de facto authorities in swathes of rural northwest Nigeria,” engaged in a “battle for the bush” that is fundamentally a struggle over land, governance, and rural livelihoods. In response to the state’s failure to mediate land tensions or provide equitable land policies, bandits have violently reclaimed and reshaped the governance of the bush, imposing levies on farming and controlling access to land and cattle. Ameh (2026) extends this analysis, arguing that banditry in Northwest Nigeria constitutes a form of “subnational state-building” by armed non-state actors. Bandits have developed their own rules, security provisions, and dispute resolution mechanisms that directly challenge conventional government authority. This perspective is reinforced by studies on amnesty implementation, which find that existing research has blamed banditry on bad governance, ungoverned spaces, and a failed state thesis, but little academic discourse has covered the gap between amnesty implementation for bandits and how it undermines human security in the region.

F. Counter-Banditry Operations and Hybrid Security Governance

The Nigerian state’s primary response to the banditry crisis has been military-centred, notably through Operation Fagge Yamma (also known as Operation Fansan Yamma), a joint military task force mandated to address escalating banditry, kidnapping, and terrorism in North-West Nigeria. However, Araba and Taoheed (2026) provide a critical assessment, revealing a significant paradox: while the operation has achieved notable kinetic success in reducing the frequency of large-scale bandit attacks, its overall effectiveness and long-term sustainability are severely undermined by critical systemic failures. These include a profound lack of inter-agency coordination and “turf wars,” a persistent trust deficit with local communities driven by a lack of consultation, and perceptions of unprofessionalism and slow emergency response. The study concludes that the operation cannot succeed as a purely kinetic, top-down intervention and recommends a fundamental shift toward an integrated hybrid security model that formally mandates intelligence sharing and empowers state vigilance groups as partners.

G. The Inversion of State–Society Protection Relations

The security crisis has also transformed the relationship between state and society. Danmusa (2025) explores the growing significance of Private Security Organizations (PSOs) within Nigeria’s evolving national security framework, finding that as public law enforcement struggles with persistent threats, PSOs have become essential actors in plural policing and crime prevention strategies. Adeniji (2026) examines the role of informal security outfits socio-cultural groups, vigilantes, community policing, private security firms finding that the security challenge in Nigeria has compelled communities to engage these informal actors rather than depend totally on state-controlled formal security outfits. However, these informal security outfits are largely associated with unaccountability and involvement in human rights breaches. The Guardian (2026) captures the constitutional paradox

underlying this transformation: state governors have no direct constitutional authority over the police, military, or other federal security agencies operating within their territories, yet citizens expect state governments to guarantee safety when insecurity escalates. This tension between a centralized security architecture and local security realities lies at the heart of Nigeria's current dilemma.

H. Research Gap and the Contribution of the Present Study

Despite the rich body of literature on governance failure, political economy, and counter-banditry operations, a conspicuous gap remains. Existing scholarship has not systematically theorized how the public victimization of elites retired generals, traditional rulers, politicians, and religious leaders performatively undermines the state's claim to a monopoly on legitimate force. While Wali and Amb (2025) note that bandits have evolved into quasi-political actors, and Barnett (2025) documents bandit governance functions, no study has examined elite victimization as a mechanism of symbolic erosion that signals state weakness, accelerates capital flight, and legitimizes alternative authority structures.

The present study addresses this gap by introducing the concept of symbolic erosion of state security and applying it to a qualitative case study of the abduction and death of retired Major General Rabe Abubakar in Katsina State (May–June 2026). Specifically, the study examines four mechanisms through which elite victimization drives symbolic erosion: the collapse of coercive deterrence, the inversion of state–society protection relations, the commodification of elite status as ransom value, and the legitimization of bandit governance. By bridging the literatures on state failure, political economy of violence, and symbolic security, this study offers a novel analytical framework for understanding how elite victimization contributes to the delegitimization of the Nigerian state in Northwest Nigeria.

III. Methodology

This study employs qualitative case study methodology. Yin (2018) defines the case study as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident. The abduction and death of retired Major General Rabe Abubakar is selected as a critical case an event that exemplifies the broader phenomenon of elite victimisation in Northwest Nigeria and allows for thick description and theoretical generalisation (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

The qualitative approach is particularly suited to investigating complex social phenomena where subjective experiences, community narratives, and institutional dynamics must be understood in context (Araba & Taoheed, 2026). As recent studies of banditry have demonstrated, qualitative methods can capture the lived realities of insecurity that quantitative data alone cannot convey (Lenshie, 2026; Wali & Amb, 2025).

Data for this study are drawn from three categories of sources; primary documentary sources include official statements from the Katsina State Government, the Defence Headquarters of the Nigerian Armed Forces, and reports from the Nigerian Senate ad-hoc committee on national security. These sources provide authoritative accounts of security operations, policy responses, and official interpretations of the crisis. Media reports include coverage of the Abubakar abduction from Nigerian and international news outlets, including Daily Times Nigeria, Dawn, Pulse, and The New Humanitarian. Media reports are treated as primary data in the sense that they constitute the public record through which the symbolic meaning of elite victimization is transmitted and contested. Secondary scholarly literature includes peer-reviewed articles, academic book chapters, and think-tank reports published between 2020 and 2026. These sources provide theoretical frameworks, comparative cases, and empirical findings that contextualise the Abubakar case within broader patterns of banditry and state failure in Northwest Nigeria.

Data analysis proceeds through three stages. First, event reconstruction establishes a chronological narrative of the Abubakar abduction, drawing on multiple sources to verify facts and identify points of interpretive divergence. Second, thematic analysis identifies patterns across the four

dimensions of symbolic erosion outlined in the theoretical framework. Third, cross-case comparison situates the Abubakar case within the broader universe of elite victimisation incidents in Northwest Nigeria, drawing on statistical data from SBM Intelligence, ACAPS, and Human Rights Watch.

A. Ethical Considerations

This study deals with traumatic events involving loss of life and extreme duress. The analysis respects the dignity of victims and their families by avoiding gratuitous detail, refraining from speculation about individuals' suffering, and focusing on structural rather than personal dimensions of the events discussed. All media sources cited are publicly available and have been previously published.

Researching traumatic events of this kind through secondary sources nonetheless raises distinct methodological and ethical challenges that warrant explicit acknowledgment. Media coverage of high-profile abductions is itself shaped by commercial incentives toward dramatization, by the political interests of official sources, and by the limited ability of journalists to verify claims made by armed actors; the analysis has therefore treated media accounts as interpretive artefacts to be read critically, rather than as neutral transcripts of events, and has cross-checked key facts across multiple outlets and official statements where possible. There is also a risk that repeated academic and journalistic attention to a single traumatic case can itself become a further imposition on surviving family members, who did not consent to their tragedy becoming a scholarly case study; this study has sought to mitigate that risk by confining discussion to information already in the public domain and by declining to speculate about matters, such as the fate of Major General Abubakar's wife, that remain officially unconfirmed. Any future extension of this research into primary data collection — including the interviews, surveys, and focus groups proposed in the Future Research section below — would carry additional risks that must be planned for in advance. Communities in bandit-affected areas may face retaliation for speaking with researchers, and security officials, community leaders, and analysts may be exposed to professional or personal risk if their identities or specific statements are traceable. Any such research would therefore require, at minimum: informed consent procedures that clearly communicate these risks in locally appropriate languages; anonymization or aggregation of sensitive testimony rather than attribution to named individuals or precisely identifiable communities; secure storage and restricted access to raw data; partnership with local research assistants and community gatekeepers who understand the specific security context of each field site; and a protocol for suspending or relocating fieldwork if local conditions deteriorate. Given the traumatic subject matter, any interview-based extension of this work should also incorporate trauma-informed interviewing practices and provide participants with information about locally available psychosocial support.

IV. Case Study: The Abduction and Death of Major General Rabe Abubakar

A. Event Narrative

On 30 May 2026, retired Major General Rabe Abubakar and his wife were abducted by suspected bandits in Katsina State, Northwest Nigeria. The couple was ambushed along the Marabar Musawa–Kafinsoli road in Matazu Local Government Area while travelling from Abubakar's hometown of Matazu to a wedding in the state capital, Katsina a distance of approximately 90 kilometres (Dawn, 2026; Daily Times Nigeria, 2026). Their driver sustained a gunshot wound but survived. Major General Abubakar was a high-profile figure in Nigerian military history. He served as the Defence Spokesperson between 2015 and 2017, a role that gave him national visibility and institutional authority. At the time of his abduction, he was a retired senior officer with extensive knowledge of military operations and security protocols (Okafor, 2026). The abduction immediately drew national attention. Unlike the countless abductions of anonymous travellers and farmers that occur daily in the region, the kidnapping of a retired general was a qualitatively different event. It was, as one commentator noted, “a deeply troubling reminder of the need for an intensified, collective front against criminal syndicates” (Daily Times Nigeria, 2026).

B. Captors' Demands and State Response

The kidnappers released a social media video in which Major General Abubakar and his wife were compelled to relay specific demands. The abductors sought a conditional swap: the release of three detained bandit members identified as Sani, Aminu, and Nasiru who had been arrested by law enforcement in Jikamshi and Kano. Additionally, the captors demanded the return of seized livestock as a prerequisite for the couple's release (Daily Times Nigeria, 2026).

The nature of these demands is significant. The kidnappers were not primarily seeking cash ransom, though such payments are common in the region. Instead, they demanded the release of imprisoned associates and the return of confiscated property. This shifts the abduction from a simple criminal transaction to a political negotiation. The bandits were positioning themselves as a belligerent force entitled to prisoner exchanges a de facto recognition of their status as a non-state armed group. As the Daily Times Nigeria (2026) observed, "the criminal elements were leveraging high-value hostages to force constitutional authorities into illegal extrajudicial concessions." The state response was, by all accounts, ineffective. Despite "relentless and concerted efforts to secure his safe release," as the Katsina State Government later claimed, the security services were unable to locate the captives, negotiate a resolution, or mount a successful rescue operation (Dawn, 2026). The failure to act or the inability to act effectively spoke volumes about the state's degraded capacity in the region.

C. Death in Captivity

Exactly two weeks after his abduction, on 13 June 2026, Major General Abubakar died in captivity. An official statement from Nasiru Mu'azu, the Katsina State Commissioner of Internal Security and Home Affairs, confirmed that the retired general died from "severe medical complications related to diabetes and hypertension" (Daily Times Nigeria, 2026). The Defence Headquarters issued a separate statement confirming the death "in captivity following his abduction" (Dawn, 2026). The cause of death diabetes and hypertension complications highlights a dimension of elite victimization that is often overlooked. High-status captives, particularly older individuals, frequently have chronic medical conditions that require regular pharmaceutical care and monitoring. When such individuals are held in remote forest camps, denied access to medication, and subjected to extreme psychological stress, their health deteriorates rapidly. Major General Abubakar's death is therefore not merely a security failure; it is a public health failure, demonstrating that the state cannot even ensure that its detained citizens receive basic medical attention. At the time of writing, the status of Major General Abubakar's wife remains unknown. Security agencies have not confirmed whether she has been released, remains in captivity, or has also died (Daily Times Nigeria, 2026).

D. The Symbolic Weight of the Case

Why does this single abduction matter beyond its immediate human tragedy? The answer lies in the symbolic capital of the victim. Major General Abubakar was not an ordinary citizen; he was a retired general who had served as the military's public face to the nation. His abduction and death signal that the armed forces the institution theoretically most capable of protecting itself and others cannot protect its own senior officers. This message cascades through Nigerian society: if a retired general is not safe, who is?

The Daily Times Nigeria (2026) captured this precisely:

"This high-profile casualty carries profound implications for Nigeria's macroeconomic stability, internal revenue generation, and national security infrastructure. ... The abduction and subsequent death of a high-ranking retired military officer signals to domestic businesses and international investors that even highly secured elite figures remain vulnerable to systemic insecurity. When critical trade routes and agricultural zones across northern local governments are rendered unsafe, logistics costs soar, transport networks fracture, and foreign direct investment into regional agro-allied industries completely stalls."

This economic framing is crucial. Elite victimisation is not merely a security or humanitarian problem; it is an economic problem with direct implications for investment, trade, and fiscal sustainability. Each high-profile abduction reinforces the perception that Nigeria is an unsafe destination for capital, talent, and enterprise.

V. Analysis: Four Dimensions of Symbolic Erosion

A. A Comparative Typology of Elite Victimization Incidents

Before turning to the four mechanisms of symbolic erosion, it is useful to situate the Abubakar case within a broader typology of elite victimization incidents. The typology below is constructed from the secondary sources examined for this study — principally SBM Intelligence (2025), ACAPS (2025), and Human Rights Watch (2026) — and is offered as a heuristic device rather than a statistically representative sample. Testing its generalizability would require the systematic, interview-based dataset proposed in the Future Research section below.

Military elites. The Abubakar case (Katsina, 2026) illustrates this category. Demands centred not on cash but on the release of detained associates and the return of seized livestock, and the symbolic function of such incidents is to expose the collapse of coercive deterrence at the state's institutional apex.

Judicial elites. The largest single ransom recorded in the sources reviewed — ₦766 million — was paid for the release of Justice Haruna Mshelia in Borno State (SBM Intelligence, 2025). Incidents in this category demonstrate the commodification of judicial authority and raise concerns for the independence and security of the bench.

Religious elites. SBM Intelligence (2025) records at least 17 priests abducted, with average ransom demands of ₦85 million. Religious figures appear to be targeted in ways that erode the sanctuary and moral authority historically associated with clerical status.

Traditional rulers. Although no single traditional ruler case is examined in depth here, the broader literature documents bandit groups imposing levies on farming communities and adjudicating land and grazing disputes in ways that displace traditional authority (Barnett, 2025; Wali & Amb, 2025); the victimization or coercion of traditional rulers in these contexts' functions primarily to legitimate bandit governance.

Political and business elites. Ameh's (2026) account of banditry as subnational state-building suggests that politicians and wealthy businesspeople are targeted partly for negotiation leverage, reinforcing the inversion of state–society protection relations described below.

Two patterns emerge from this preliminary typology. First, the nature of the demand — cash ransom versus prisoner exchange or restitution of property — appears to track the victim's institutional role rather than wealth alone: military figures attract political demands, while judicial and religious figures attract primarily financial ones. Second, each category of elite victimization appears to correspond most directly to one of the four mechanisms of symbolic erosion developed below, suggesting that the mechanisms are not merely additive but are activated selectively depending on who is targeted. A systematic incident database, of the kind proposed later in this study, would allow these preliminary associations to be tested against a larger population of cases.

B. The Collapse of Coercive Deterrence

The first dimension of symbolic erosion is the collapse of coercive deterrence, the state's ability to credibly threaten violence against those who violate its laws. Deterrence operates through a combination of capability (the state's actual capacity to punish) and credibility (the perception that the state will use that capacity when violations occur). Elite victimisation erodes both.

Consider the capability dimension. Bandits in Northwest Nigeria have become so heavily armed and organisationally sophisticated that security forces struggle to contain them, let alone defeat them. Approximately 30,000 “bandits” are estimated to operate in the region, with networks ranging from small cells to motorbike-riding formations numbering in the hundreds or thousands (The New Humanitarian, 2026). These groups maintain camps in a vast forest straddling Zamfara, Katsina,

Kaduna, Sokoto, Kebbi, and Niger States, from which they launch attacks on communities with relative impunity (BSS News, 2025).

The incapacity of security forces is starkly illustrated by incident data. Between 2023 and 2025, kidnapping incidents in Northwest Nigeria surged to 716 recorded events, peaking in 2024 with 290 incidents a nearly 50% increase from the 195 incidents recorded in 2023 (ACAPS, 2025). Zamfara, Katsina, and Kaduna States alone accounted for 230, 200, and 156 incidents respectively. These numbers represent not a random distribution of crime but a systematic inability of the state to assert territorial control.

The credibility dimension is equally troubling. Even when the state possesses the technical capacity to respond, the perception that it will do so has been severely eroded by repeated failures. As one security analyst observed, “peace discussions, negotiations, and amnesty programmes have not ended banditry, but national-level military deployments have equally failed to resolve the crisis” (Pulse, 2026). The North-West governors themselves acknowledged this failure in May 2026, announcing that they would no longer negotiate with bandits after years of failed peace deals (Pulse, 2026). The Abubakar case crystallizes this collapse. A retired general, travelling on a major road during daytime hours, was abducted and held for two weeks without the state being able to locate, negotiate for, or rescue him. If the state cannot protect a general, what deterrent threat does it pose to a rural farmer or a schoolteacher? The answer, increasingly, is none at all.

C. The Inversion of State–Society Protection Relations

The second dimension of symbolic erosion is the inversion of state–society protection relations. In a properly functioning state, citizens pay taxes to the state, and the state provides security as a public good. In Northwest Nigeria today, this relationship has been inverted: elite citizens pay bandits for “protection” (through informal levies), and they pay police officers privately for personal security services that should be publicly provided.

The Financial Times (2025) documented this phenomenon in depth:

“The elite are responding to abductions and demands for huge ransoms by hiring police for personal security. ... With underpaid police turning to side contracts with the rich, security has become a luxury and kidnapping, a profitable business born of inequality.”

This inversion has two corrosive effects. First, it undermines the public character of policing. When police officers are hired as private bodyguards by wealthy clients, their loyalty and attention are diverted from the broader population. Policing becomes a market commodity rather than a public good, exacerbating inequality and eroding the state’s claim to equal protection.

Second, the inversion normalises the idea that security is a private responsibility, not a public entitlement. As the Emir of Argungu’s recent remarks illustrate, some traditional leaders now openly encourage communities to “get weapons and defend themselves” against bandits, warning that “the silence of leaders is complicity” (Newswatch, 2026). While this reflects genuine frustration, it also signals a delegitimisation of the state’s protective role. When the state’s chief functionaries and traditional allies advocate for self-help security, the state’s monopoly on legitimate force is symbolically abandoned.

Quantitative data underscore the scale of this inversion. Between July 2024 and June 2025, kidnappers received verified ransom payments of ₦2.57 billion despite demanding nearly ₦48 billion (SBM Intelligence, 2025). The average ransom per case was approximately ₦2.7 million (National Bureau of Statistics, cited in BusinessDay, 2025). These figures represent wealth transferred from citizens (and, increasingly, from their families and communities) to criminal networks, a reverse redistribution that reinforces bandit economies while depleting state resources.

D. The Commodification of Elite Status as Ransom Value

The third dimension of symbolic erosion is the commodification of elite status. In the kidnapping-for-ransom economy, social position is converted into a price tag. The more prominent, wealthy, or

institutionally connected an individual, the higher their ransom value. Elite status, which in a functioning state confers security and privilege, instead becomes a marker of vulnerability. Tagowa et al. (2024) argue that kidnapping has become the “new criminal economy in Nigeria where billions of Naira is paid as ransom to kidnappers.” They introduce the concept of “commoditising human beings” to capture how individuals are reduced to exchange values within criminal markets. This commodification is not uniform; it is calibrated to social status. Political elites are considered “ransomable” by virtue of their social positions, with higher status generating higher expected ransoms (AEH, n.d.).

The Abubakar case exemplifies this calibration. The kidnappers did not demand a fixed cash ransom; they demanded prisoner releases and livestock return. These demands reflect an assessment of Abubakar’s value not merely in monetary terms but in political terms. As a retired general, he was seen as a high-value asset whose release could command concessions that lower-status captives could not. His death therefore represents not only a human tragedy but also a miscalculation of value a reminder that the commodity logic of kidnapping is inherently unstable.

Statistical evidence supports the commodification thesis. According to SBM Intelligence (2025), religious figures are systematically targeted, with at least 17 priests abducted and average ransom demands of ₦85 million. The single largest recorded ransom ₦766 million was paid for the release of Justice Haruna Mshelia in Borno State. These figures demonstrate that kidnappers possess sophisticated intelligence about the financial and institutional resources of potential victims, and that ransoms are calibrated accordingly. The implications for state legitimacy are profound. When the state cannot prevent the commodification of its citizens, and when it cannot ensure that ransoms are not paid (the Payment of Ransom Prohibition Law notwithstanding), it implicitly concedes that criminal markets can assign value to human lives more effectively than the state can protect them. This concession is symbolically devastating.

E. The Legitimation of Bandit Governance

The fourth dimension of symbolic erosion is the legitimation of bandit governance. As the state recedes from rural areas, bandit groups have stepped into the vacuum, providing rudimentary forms of order, conflict resolution, and economic regulation. While these services are coercive and extractive, they nevertheless constitute a form of governance what Ameh (2026) calls “subnational state-building.”

Peterside (2025) describes this phenomenon vividly:

“In many places, insecurity is seen as a failure of policing or military capacity. However, in the North-West, that explanation is too small. Here, the crisis is deeply tied to illicit economies. Illegal mining, ransom markets, rustled livestock, and ‘protection’ rackets now regulate movement, farming, trade, and even community life.”

This governance function is not incidental; it is central to banditry’s persistence. Bandit groups do not merely terrorise; they also protect—or rather, they offer protection in exchange for compliance. In some areas, bandits impose levies on farming and control access to land and cattle (Barnett, 2025). In others, they settle disputes between herders and farmers, functioning as *de facto* courts (Ameh, 2026). The Lakurawa group, active in Sokoto and Kebbi states, exerts control through livestock taxation and the selective provision of financial or agricultural support, punishing those who refuse to cooperate (ACAPS, 2025).

Elite victimization plays a crucial role in legitimising this bandit governance. When a retired general is abducted and the state cannot respond, the message is clear: the bandits, not the state, now exercise effective authority over the territory. Each successful abduction reinforces this message, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. As Wali and Amb (2025) found, “bandit groups have gradually evolved into quasi-political actors, establishing informal governance systems, imposing taxes, and controlling local economies in spaces where state authority has receded.”

The legitimization process is not merely perceptual; it has material consequences. As bandit governance becomes normalised, economic activity adapts to bandit control rather than state control. Farmers pay informal levies rather than taxes. Traders route goods through bandit-controlled corridors rather than state-patrolled roads. Communities negotiate with bandit leaders rather than state officials. In this environment, the state's claim to sovereignty becomes increasingly fictional.

Operation Fagge Yamma, the joint military task force deployed to address banditry in the Northwest, illustrates the difficulty of reversing this legitimization process. While the operation has achieved notable kinetic successes in reducing the frequency of large-scale attacks, its overall effectiveness is severely undermined by “a profound lack of inter-agency coordination and ‘turf wars,’ a persistent trust deficit with local communities driven by a lack of consultation, and perceptions of unprofessionalism and slow emergency response” (Araba & Taoheed, 2026). In other words, even when the state deploys military force, it struggles to displace the governance functions that bandits have already established.

VI. Discussion: Implications for State Legitimacy and Policy

A. The Legitimacy Crisis

The four dimensions of symbolic erosion discussed above converge on a single conclusion: the Nigerian state is experiencing a profound legitimacy crisis in Northwest Nigeria. Legitimacy, in Weberian terms, is the belief that a state's authority is justified and therefore worthy of voluntary compliance. When the state cannot protect its citizens, when its protectors become private contractors, when its citizens are reduced to commodities, and when bandits govern more effectively than the state, legitimacy evaporates.

Data on displacement captures the scale of this crisis. By March 2025, displacement in Northwest Nigeria exceeded 655,000 people approximately 20% higher than in December 2023 (ACAPS, 2025). These are not merely people who have been forced from their homes; they are people who have lost faith that the state can protect them if they return. As the ACAPS report notes, “a sustained increase in attack frequency means that communities face a constant and widespread threat, denying the safe windows needed for essential activities, such as farming, and fundamentally undermining the safety required for returns.”

The consequence is a self-reinforcing cycle of state retreat. As legitimacy declines, citizens look elsewhere for protection to bandits, to vigilantes, to private security. As citizens withdraw their compliance and cooperation, the state's ability to project authority further diminishes. As the state's authority diminishes, bandit governance expands. As bandit governance expands, legitimacy declines further. Breaking this cycle requires more than military operations; it requires rebuilding the relationship between state and society.

B. How Do Non-Elites Experience Elite Victimization?

A further question raised by this analysis and identified explicitly as a gap by external review of this study, is how ordinary, non-elite citizens experience and interpret the victimization of elites. The literature reviewed here offers indirect evidence but no direct answer. On one hand, the spread of informal security outfits, community vigilantism, and calls for self-armament — such as the Emir of Argungu's remarks encouraging communities to “get weapons and defend themselves” (Newswatch, 2026) — suggest that non-elite Nigerians already share, and may even have anticipated, the sense of state abandonment that elite victimization dramatizes for national and international audiences. Danmusa (2025) and Adeniji (2026) similarly document a broad-based turn toward informal and private security arrangements that cuts across class lines, even though the capacity to pay for private protection remains sharply stratified by wealth.

On the other hand, elite victimization could plausibly generate two quite different responses among non-elites, and the available secondary sources cannot adjudicate between them. It might produce a form of grim validation — a sense that if even a retired general and Defence Spokesperson could not be protected, the state's long-standing failure to protect ordinary farmers and traders is

confirmed rather than exceptional. Alternatively, it might deepen resentment and perceived inequality if elite victims are seen to receive disproportionate media attention, security investment, and negotiation effort relative to the anonymous victims who are abducted daily in the same region. Distinguishing between these possibilities and identifying which communities experience which response under what conditions, is an empirical question that cannot be resolved through documentary analysis alone and is addressed directly in the research agenda proposed below.

C. Rethinking Security Governance

The policy implications of this analysis are clear but challenging. First, security governance must shift from a purely kinetic, military-centred approach to an integrated hybrid model that formally mandates intelligence sharing and empowers state vigilance groups as partners (Araba & Taoheed, 2026). The top-down operations that have characterised state responses to date have consistently failed to address the governance vacuum that banditry exploits.

Second, addressing elite victimisation requires addressing the economic drivers of banditry. As the Nigerian Senate ad-hoc committee on national security concluded, illegal artisanal gold mining in Zamfara, Kaduna, and Katsina States is a critical factor driving insecurity, with proceeds used to procure arms and sustain violent criminal networks (BusinessDay, 2026). Regulating these illicit economies, while politically difficult, is essential to disrupting bandit financing.

Third, state legitimacy must be rebuilt through inclusive governance, rural economic revitalisation, justice sector reforms, and the reinvigoration of traditional and community-based institutions (Wali & Amb, 2025). Military operations alone cannot restore legitimacy; citizens must see tangible improvements in service delivery, economic opportunity, and access to justice.

Fourth, the symbolic dimension of elite victimization must be taken seriously. The state cannot afford to treat abductions of generals and traditional rulers as isolated incidents. Each such abduction is a performance of state weakness, and the state must develop a strategic communications capacity to counteract the narratives that bandits generate. This includes transparent reporting on security operations, accountability for failures, and public acknowledgment of victims' suffering.

D. Toward a Symbolic Security Audit Framework

The preceding recommendations remain, by design, broad. Building on the reviewer's suggestion that policy recommendations be made more specific and actionable, this section proposes a concrete instrument — a symbolic security audit — that different stakeholders could use to operationalize the analysis developed above. A symbolic security audit is defined here as a periodic, structured assessment of an institution's exposure to, and readiness for, high-symbolic-value security incidents, distinct from routine physical security assessments in that it evaluates communicative and legitimacy consequences alongside physical risk.

For the federal government: establish a standardized public reporting protocol requiring a preliminary public statement within 72 hours of any confirmed abduction or attack on a retired senior military officer, sitting or retired judicial officer, traditional ruler, or senior religious leader, specifying what is and is not yet known; and commission an annual, publicly reported symbolic security audit of the Northwest region, tracking incident typology, response times, and outcomes against the categories developed in this study. The principal implementation challenge here is coordinating reporting across federal, state, and traditional institutions that do not currently share a common incident-classification system.

For state governments: incorporate routine, non-public risk assessments into the travel planning of retired senior officers, traditional rulers, and judicial officers moving through corridors already identified in incident data (such as those documented by ACAPS, 2025) as high-risk; and designate a single state-level liaison office responsible for coordinating with families and communities during the response to a high-symbolic-value incident, reducing the fragmentation that Araba and Taoheed (2026) identify as undermining Operation Fagge Yamma. A key implementation challenge is resourcing this function without diverting scarce security personnel from front-line operations.

For security agencies: distinguish, within existing rapid-response protocols, between routine banditry incidents and high-symbolic-value incidents that carry disproportionate legitimacy consequences, and ensure that inter-agency coordination mechanisms — identified as a weakness by Araba and Taoheed (2026) — are activated automatically for the latter category rather than negotiated case by case.

For traditional and religious institutions: develop coordinated public-communication guidance so that, in the aftermath of an incident, statements from traditional and religious leaders inform and reassure communities without inadvertently amplifying bandit narratives or legitimating parallel governance claims, a risk illustrated by the ambivalence in the Emir of Argungu's widely reported remarks (Newswatch, 2026).

For the research and data community: establish and maintain a national elite-victimization incident database, extending the preliminary typology developed in this study (see "A Comparative Typology of Elite Victimization Incidents" above), to enable the kind of systematic, cross-case comparison that a single case study cannot provide.

Two implementation challenges cut across all five recommendations. First, publicly naming categories of individuals as high-risk targets could itself have perverse signalling effects, and any audit protocol would need to balance transparency against the risk of amplifying the very vulnerability it seeks to address. Second, resource constraints and inter-agency rivalries of the kind already documented in relation to Operation Fagge Yamma (Araba & Taoheed, 2026) are likely to affect a symbolic security audit framework just as they have affected kinetic operations; the framework proposed here is therefore best understood as a starting point for institutional design rather than a turnkey solution.

E. Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, as a qualitative case study, its findings are not statistically generalisable to all instances of elite victimisation in Northwest Nigeria. The Abubakar case is selected for its symbolic weight, but systematic quantitative analysis of elite victimization patterns would complement and extend the findings presented here.

Second, the study relies on secondary sources and media reports, not on primary interviews with victims, families, or perpetrators. Direct engagement with these actors, while ethically challenging, could provide deeper insight into the phenomenological experience of elite victimisation and the strategic calculations of bandit groups.

A concrete agenda for this primary research can be specified in outline. Semi-structured interviews could be conducted with three purposively sampled groups: state and federal security officials involved in the response to elite victimization incidents; traditional, religious, and community leaders in the local government areas most affected by such incidents (beginning with Matazu and neighbouring areas of Katsina State); and independent conflict analysts and journalists who have covered multiple cases. In parallel, structured surveys or focus group discussions with non-elite residents of high-incidence communities could probe directly with the question raised above — whether elite victimization is experienced as validating or as a source of resentment — using matched samples across communities with differing exposure to elite-targeted incidents. Consistent with the ethical safeguards outlined earlier in this study, such research would require locally embedded partners, anonymized reporting, and a clear protocol for withdrawing from field sites where security conditions deteriorate.

Third, the study focuses on the symbolic dimensions of elite victimisation, but further research could explore the psychological and social impacts on non-elite populations. How do ordinary citizens perceive elite victimisation? Does it intensify their sense of abandonment, or does it create a sense of ironic solidarity with the powerful?

Fourth, comparative research could examine elite victimization in other contexts such as Mexico, Colombia, or the Philippines to identify cross-national patterns and context-specific dynamics. Such comparisons would strengthen the theoretical generalizability of the symbolic erosion framework proposed here.

VII. Conclusion

The symbolic erosion of state security in Northwest Nigeria is not a marginal phenomenon or a secondary consequence of banditry. It is central to understanding how the crisis has deepened, how bandit governance has expanded, and how state legitimacy has collapsed. The abduction and death of retired Major General Rabe Abubakar is a tragic case in point a single event that illuminates the collapse of coercive deterrence, the inversion of protection relations, the commodification of elite status, and the legitimization of bandit governance. These four mechanisms of symbolic erosion are mutually reinforcing, creating a downward spiral that military operations alone cannot reverse. Breaking the spiral requires a fundamental rethinking of security governance: from kinetic operations to hybrid models, from top-down enforcement to community partnership, from reactive crisis management to proactive state-building.

The tragedy of the Abubakar case is not merely that a retired general died in captivity. It is that his death like so many others in Northwest Nigeria was preventable. The state has the resources, the institutions, and the personnel to protect its citizens. What it has lacked is the political will to govern effectively, the strategic clarity to address root causes, and the legitimacy to command voluntary compliance. Without these, the symbolic erosion of state security will continue, and more generals and more ordinary citizens will meet the same fate.

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