

## The Lakurawa: North West Nigeria's "Newest" Threat

A resurgent armed group, the Lakurawa is plaguing the North West of Nigeria, adding to the victimization faced by communities already deeply affected by banditry violence, farmer-herder conflicts and climate change. In its most recent survey in the North West of Nigeria, the Managing Exits from Armed Conflict (MEAC) project was able to gather perspectives from 2,236 community members across Katsina, Sokoto and Zamfara states about the Lakurawa. Here is what we know.

### Background on the Lakurawa

Little is known about the origins of the cross-border armed group known as the "Lakurawa" (1). Some sources indicate that the group was formed in 2010 by herdsmen from Mali and Niger who settled in Sokoto State, which had long been impacted by instances of banditry and cattle rustling (2). Although difficult to verify and confirm at the time of writing, one well-placed MEAC source traced the origins of the Lakurawa to a group of Malian herdsman who fought alongside the Séléka militia coalition against the Anti-balaka in the Central African Republic around 2012-2013. After eventually returning to Mali, the group clashed with the military, forcing them to relocate to Niger. Following several years of moving in and out of Nigeria's northwestern region, the group appears to have settled in Nigeria more permanently (3).



Other sources indeed indicate that sometime around 2017, the herdsmen, who initially carried rifles to protect themselves and their cattle, were seasonally hired by local leaders in the North West of Nigeria to combat bandits and provide protection to communities (4). While the Lakurawa was reportedly successful in pushing back various bandit groups, it gradually turned against the communities it was hired to protect. The herdsmen-turned-militiamen established bases in border communities in north-western Sokoto (5), levied taxes against them, and sought to impose their version of Sharia law, harshly punishing those accused of breaking its strict code (6). As a result, the relationship between the group and communities quickly deteriorated and turned violent, and in 2022, the group was dislodged by Nigerian security forces and retreated into Niger (7).



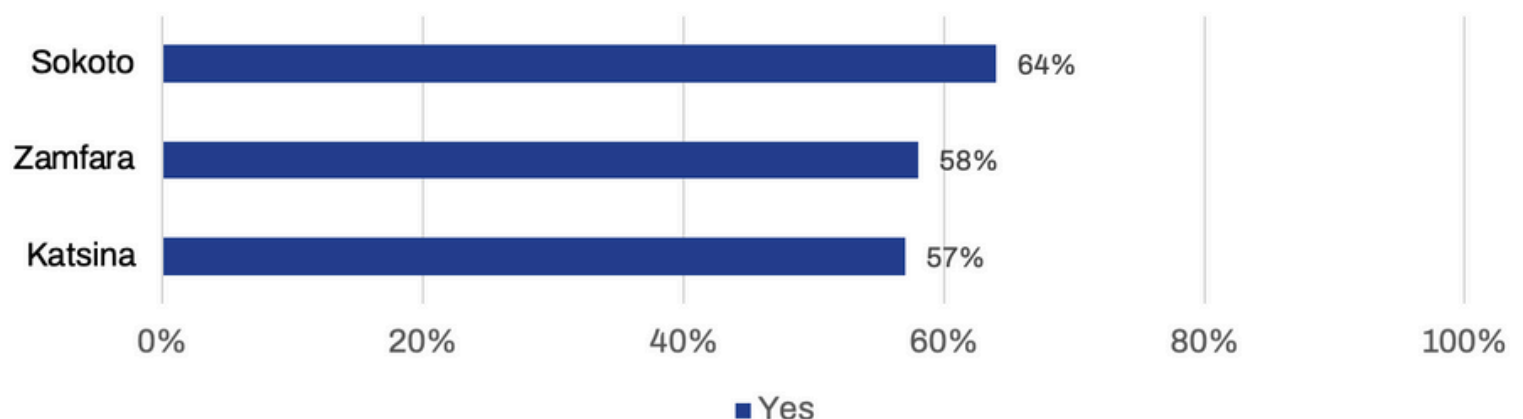
In recent statements, the Nigerian military attributed the Lakurawa's reemergence in September 2024 to a gap in security coordination between Niger and Nigeria following the suspension of joint border patrols due to the coup in Niger in July 2023 (8). The group now operates primarily in the dense forests of northwestern Sokoto and northern Kebbi states, along the Niger-Nigeria border (9). Suspected of being affiliated with the Islamic State Greater Sahara (ISGS), the Lakurawa is estimated to be composed of some 200 fighters and is reportedly well-armed with small arms and light weapons, explosives and drones (10). Nigerian authorities proscribed the Lakurawa as a terrorist organization in January 2025, paving the way for the use of military force against the group (11).



## Community perceptions of the Lakurawa: presence and recruitment efforts

While the Lakurawa has only recently started making headlines in international media, MEAC's survey confirms that the group is relatively well known across the North West: 60 per cent of respondents in Sokoto, Katsina and Zamfara interviewed between January and February 2025 indicating having heard of the group (12). In Sokoto State, where the Lakurawa is most active, 64 per cent of those interviewed knew of the Lakurawa (13).

**Q: Have you ever heard of an armed group called Lakurawa?**







Among MEAC's sample, rates of victimization by the Lakurawa remain very low: less than 1 per cent (5 respondents) reported that the Lakurawa had attacked their community or caused other forms of harm (14). This is likely reflective of MEAC's sample, which is largely drawn from a semi-urban population across three states, two of which the Lakurawa does not yet seem to be very active in (15). For the few respondents who had been harmed by the Lakurawa, they cited attacks, killing and the destruction of property, as well as norms policing. For example, one respondent explained "they are like Boko Haram in their religious practice" (16). Another detailed further how "they give punishment to people, especially when they realised they have shaved beard or when they are smoking cigarettes" (17).

According to other sources, in its early days, the Lakurawa's presence in communities across Sokoto State was welcomed – even encouraged – as it seemed successful in countering bandit attacks which had long plagued these communities (18). With time there has been a drastic shift in perception. Among those who had heard of the Lakurawa, an overwhelming majority (97 per cent) do not believe that the Lakurawa currently provides protection from bandit attacks (19).

In an effort to recruit more members, the Lakurawa has reportedly been offering various incentives to those who agree to join its ranks, including money, seeds, farming tools and irrigation machines (20) – much needed items in an area deeply affected by climate change and the loss of agriculture-based livelihoods. Visibility on the Lakurawa's recruitment efforts across the three states where MEAC conducted its survey remains relatively low, with only 2 to 3 per cent of respondents in Katsina and Zamfara respectively reporting that the Lakurawa had tried to recruit people in their communities (21). In Sokoto, MEAC's data appears to confirm the group's efforts to recruit: 8 per cent of respondents reported that the Lakurawa had tried to recruit from their communities (22). While these figures remain low and the data does not specify when recruitment attempts took place, these findings serve as a warning of the group's attempts to expand and entrench itself in communities in Sokoto.



The Lakurawa's trajectory offers valuable lessons as it exemplifies how grassroots security solutions are potentially evolving into threats themselves. When communities must rely on vigilante and community security actors, these groups can provide temporary relief but also carry risks. Over time, they can become entrenched, evolve into insurgent forces or merge with criminal or other armed groups, escalating violence and instability. To prevent this, strong oversight, clear mandates and strategic exit programmes are crucial to ensure that these groups remain focused on short-term, community-aligned objectives and do not spiral into larger threats.



As the Lakurawa is expanding the frontiers of conflict in the North West, its impact on an already fragile region must be closely monitored. The group's presence in an area already deeply affected by banditry violence will worsen security challenges for communities and complicate the role of other non-state community-based security actors in the region, such as the Yan Sakai (23). In addition, efforts by the Lakurawa to cooperate or merge with local bandit groups or armed groups such as Boko Haram could further compound security threats and regionalize the conflict. The fragmentation and multiplication of armed groups throughout the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin highlight the need for greater and more effective conflict-prevention mechanisms, as well as greater investment in stabilization programming.