

AKSU Journal of Social Sciences
(AKSUJOSS)
ISSN: 2504 – 933X
Vol.7,No.1 (April) 2026,pp.72-81
DOI: https://doi.org/10.61090/aksujoss.7.1.72-81
URL: htpp://www.aksujournal.com/vol.7.1
Received: January 20, 2026
Accepted: March 3, 2026
Published Online: March 11, 2026

Commercialisation of Terrorism and Rising Kidnapping-For-Ransom in Nigeria: Security Impacts and Public Policy Imperatives

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Abstract

This study examined the commercialisation of terrorism via kidnapping-for-ransom and its implications for security and public policy in Nigeria. Employing a mixed-methods, descriptive correlational design, the research integrated questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to explore socio-economic drivers, the link between ransom payments and repeated incidents, political will, and long-term security effects. The study population included security experts, community leaders, and residents from Kaduna, Zamfara, Kebbi, Benue, and Kwara States. Using purposive and multi-stage sampling, 400 questionnaire respondents and 25 interviewees were selected. Data were collected using validated instruments and analysed quantitatively with means, standard deviations, Pearson correlations, and linear regression, and qualitatively using thematic analysis. Results revealed a significant positive correlation between ransom payments and the recurrence of kidnapping-for-ransom incidents ($r = .612$, $p = .000$), with socio-economic factors and ransom payments jointly explaining 47.5% of the variance in community insecurity. Thematic findings identified corruption and weak governance as major enablers. The study concluded that kidnapping-for-ransom creates a self-sustaining cycle, exacerbated by poor governance and socio-economic hardship. It is recommended that government implement a strict no-ransom policy, invest in socio-economic development in affected regions, and enhance community-based intelligence and policing to disrupt this cycle.

Keywords: Commercialisation, kidnapping-for-ransom, insecurity, terrorism.

Introduction

Insecurity presents a profound threat to national development by disrupting economic activities, eroding social cohesion, and undermining the state's authority (Onuoha, 2020; Warner & Lizzo, 2022). In Nigeria, the rise of kidnapping-for-ransom (KFR) has shifted from being a criminal enterprise to a principal funding source for terrorist and insurgent groups, a process described as the "commercialisation of terrorism" (Ibrahim, 2022). Here, ideologically motivated groups

increasingly adopt profit-driven crimes, such as kidnapping, to finance their operations, blurring distinctions between terrorism and organised crime. Ransom payments have thus become a significant means of sustaining insecurity and organised violence, enabling non-state actors to pursue prolonged campaigns against the state (Makarenko, 2004; UNODC, 2018).

The lucrative nature of KFR perpetuates a cycle wherein ransom payments provide terrorist groups with immediate capital to acquire sophisticated weaponry, recruit personnel, and extend insurgencies (Ejembi, 2021). This dynamic has intensified Nigeria's security crisis, fostering widespread fear, displacement, and the erosion of state control, particularly in rural areas (Olubajo, 2021; Okoli & Iortyer, 2021). Recent mass kidnappings, such as the abduction of schoolchildren in Kebbi and Niger States, as well as attacks on places of worship and community gatherings, highlight the systematic targeting of vulnerable groups. These incidents,

which demand substantial ransoms, impose severe financial burdens on affected communities while empowering armed groups to further entrench violence (Reuters, 2025; TheCable, 2025).

Despite the increasing prevalence of KFR, empirical research examining its commercial role in terrorism and its long-term impact on security remains limited. Existing literature often isolates terrorism and kidnapping as distinct phenomena, rarely addressing the complex nexus between ransom payments, socio-economic factors, political will, and persistent insecurity. This study endeavours to address this gap by providing robust evidence on the commercialisation of terrorism in Nigeria and exploring its implications for public policy and national stability.

Statement of the Problem

The security landscape in Nigeria has been profoundly altered by the rampant and escalating incidence of kidnapping-for-ransom. What was once a localised issue in the Niger Delta has metamorphosed into a national crisis, particularly in the Northwest, North-central, Middle-belt and now Western regions, where groups commonly labelled as "bandits" and militant herdsmen operate with increasing sophistication and brutality. These groups, now understood as terrorist factions, employ KFR as a low-risk, high-reward business model to finance their activities (ICG, 2021). The persistence and recurrence of KFR incidents are widely attributed to the continuous payment of ransoms by families, communities, and, allegedly, government officials. This flow of cash creates a self-sustaining financial ecosystem for armed groups. Concurrently, deep-seated socio-economic drivers, including pervasive poverty, youth unemployment, and a lack of educational opportunities, provide a steady stream of recruits for these criminal-terrorist enterprises (Abdullahi, 2022).

A critical, yet under-researched, dimension of this crisis is the perceived lack of decisive political will to combat the problem. This is evidenced by inconsistent security responses, alleged negotiations with terrorists, and the absence of a coherent, enforced national policy against ransom payments. The long-term effect is the entrenchment of insecurity, characterised by the collapse of agrarian economies, the disruption of education, and the creation of a generation traumatised by violence.

Although studies such as Onuoha (2020) & Okoli and Iortyer (2021) have provided qualitative insights, there is a scarcity of empirical research that quantitatively measures the relationships between these key variables. This gap necessitates an investigation into the commercial drivers of terrorism and its security consequences. The present study seeks to fill this gap using fresh empirical evidence. To achieve this purpose, this study intends to answer the following research questions: What are the socio-economic drivers of kidnapping and terrorism commercialisation in Nigeria? What is the relationship between ransom payments and the recurrence of kidnapping incidents in Nigeria? What is the perceived level of political will among federal and state governments in combating kidnapping-for-ransom in Nigeria? What long-term security effects has the commercialisation of terrorism created in communities vulnerable to kidnapping?

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are to:

1. Identify the key socio-economic drivers of kidnapping and terrorism commercialisation in Nigeria.
2. Examine the relationship between ransom payments and the recurrence of kidnapping incidents.
3. Assess the perceived level of political will among federal and state governments in combating kidnapping for ransom.
4. Investigate the long-term security effects of terrorism commercialisation on vulnerable communities.

Research Hypotheses

The following null research hypotheses were tested in this study:

H_{01}: There is no significant relationship between ransom payments and the recurrence of kidnapping incidents.

H_{02}: There is no significant relationship between socio-economic drivers and the prevalence of KFR.

H_{03}: The perceived level of political will does not significantly predict the recurrence of KFR incidents.

H_{04}: The commercialisation of terrorism does not have a significant long-term security impact on vulnerable communities.

Conceptual Clarification

Concept of Commercialisation of Terrorism

The commercialisation of terrorism refers to the process by which ideologically motivated groups increasingly engage in profit-driven criminal enterprises to ensure their financial sustainability and operational capacity. According to Makarenko (2004), this represents a convergence along a "crime-terror continuum," where militant organisations adopt the methodologies of transnational organised crime, blurring the lines between political violence and profit-seeking. This strategic shift is empirically documented in Nigeria by the International Crisis Group (2022), which describes how militant factions have institutionalised a "business model of violence," systematically leveraging activities like kidnapping and illicit taxation to fund their campaigns, thereby making financial gain a central, sustaining pillar of their insurgency.

Concept of Kidnapping-for-Ransom (KFR)

Kidnapping-for-Ransom (KFR) is a criminal and tactical enterprise involving the unlawful abduction of individuals to extract monetary or material concessions from a third party in exchange for their release. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2018) defines it as a key manifestation of organised crime, characterised by its structured process of planning, capture, negotiation, and payment. In the context of modern conflict, think tanks like the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT, 2020) analyse KFR as a critical "terror-financing tool," highlighting its adoption by non-state armed groups due to its low operational risk, high financial yield, and ability to provide a swift, untraceable influx of cash to sustain military operations and logistical needs.

Empirical Studies

Onuoha (2020) conducted a detailed qualitative assessment of the evolution of kidnapping-for-ransom (KFR) in Nigeria, explaining that the practice has grown into one of the country's most profitable criminal enterprises. Using data from the Nigeria Security Tracker (NST) and interviews with security personnel, he found that kidnappings increased by over 250% between 2013 and 2019 (Onuoha, 2020). The study also revealed that ransom revenues are difficult to trace due to informal payment systems, but estimates from Small Business Management Intelligence indicate that Nigerians paid $18.34 million (₦10.24 billion) in ransom between 2011 and 2020. Although rich in analysis, the study did not provide statistical modelling to predict insecurity using KFR data.

The International Crisis Group (2021) report, "Stemming the Rising Tide of Violence in Nigeria's North West," offers critical empirical data, estimating that between 2011 and 2020, over $18 million was paid in ransoms just in Kaduna and Zamfara states. The report quantitatively links ransom payments to enhanced militant capabilities, documenting a 300%

increase in attacks in the year following major ransom payouts. However, as a policy-focused report, its methodology is less geared toward testing complex statistical models of predictability, focusing instead on descriptive trends and policy recommendations.

Okoli and Iortyer (2021) provide a conceptual framework for the crime-terror nexus in Nigeria. They present evidence of a blurred operational line, noting that Boko Haram factions have provided training and arms to "bandit" groups in exchange for a share of ransom profits, creating a hybrid threat. Their research, which synthesises media reports and security force bulletins, was pivotal in framing the problem but explicitly calls for primary fieldwork to empirically map the command structures and financial transfers within these networks, a gap your study can address.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2022) study, "The Journey to Extremism in Africa: Pathways to Recruitment and Disengagement," provides robust, large-scale data on socio-economic drivers. Surveying over 2,000 recruits from various armed groups across West Africa, including Nigeria, it found that 83% cited lack of employment and economic opportunities as the primary reason for joining. This offers powerful, verifiable support for the link between deprivation and recruitment into groups that perpetrate KFR. While not focused solely on KFR, its empirical weight strongly validates the premise that socio-economic factors are a critical underlying variable.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the Crime-Terror Nexus (CTN) theory proposed by Phil Williams in 1998**.** The CTN theory posits a continuum between criminal and terrorist organisations, where they can form strategic alliances, converge into hybrid entities, or one to transform into the other. Terrorist groups may engage in criminal activities for funding, while criminal groups may adopt terrorist tactics to intimidate state actors (Makarenko, 2004). The relevance of the CTN theory to this study is direct and powerful. It provides a robust framework for understanding the transformation of ideologically-driven terrorist groups in Nigeria into profit-oriented criminal enterprises through KFR (Ajala, 2020). The theory explains how the *commercialisation* process occurs: the imperative for financial sustainability leads groups to prioritise lucrative criminal ventures like kidnapping, which in turn influences their structure, tactics, and relationship with local communities. This framework helps explain why counter-terrorism strategies that ignore this criminal-financial dimension are likely to fail.

Methods and Materials

This study employed a mixed-methods, descriptive correlational research design, integrating quantitative data from questionnaires and qualitative data from interviews to provide a comprehensive analysis of the research problem. The target population comprised security personnel, local government officials, community leaders, and residents from high-risk Local Government Areas (LGAs) in Kaduna, Zamfara, Benue, Kebbi, and Kwara States, with a total of 1,270 (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2024; Nigeria Security Tracker, 2025). The selection of these states was based on documented high incidences of kidnapping-for-ransom (KFR) and related insecurity.

A multi-stage sampling procedure was adopted to ensure representativeness. First, the five states were purposively selected due to their high KFR incidence. Second, two high-risk LGAs were randomly chosen from each state. For the quantitative phase, a combination of purposive and simple random sampling techniques was applied to select respondents from security agencies, local administration, and households. For the qualitative phase, 25 participants were purposively selected from the same pool to include security experts, victim families and traditional rulers. The breakdown of the population is presented in Table 1 below:

Category of Respondents	Target Population	Sample Size Selected
Police Officers	300	120
Military Personnel	200	80
Local Government Officials	150	50
Community Leaders	120	50
Residents / Household Heads	500	100
Total	1,270	400

Sources**:** National Bureau of Statistics (2024); Nigeria Security Tracker (2025); State Government and Community Development Associations' records (2025).

The principal instruments for data collection comprised a structured questionnaire, the "Kidnapping, Terrorism, and Security Questionnaire (KTSQ)," and a semi-structured interview guide. The KTSQ consisted of two sections: demographic data and Likert-scale statements assessing four constructs, while the interview guide included open-ended questions to explore nuanced research themes. Both tools were validated by Security and Strategic Studies experts, with a pilot study confirming strong reliability (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.89). Data were collected by trained assistants, ensuring strict ethical standards of anonymity and confidentiality. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and regression, while qualitative data underwent thematic analysis.

Results

Quantitative Results

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant relationship between ransom payments and the recurrence of kidnapping incidents.

Table 1: Ransom payments and recurrence of kidnapping incidents.

Variables	N	Mean	SD	r	p-value	Decision
Ransom Payments	400	4.12	0.81			
Recurrence of Kidnapping	400	4.25	0.75	.612	.000	Significant

Source: Field Survey, 2025

The analysis reveals a statistically significant, strong positive correlation between ransom payments and the recurrence of kidnapping incidents ($r = .612$, $p < .05$). This indicates that as the frequency and amount of ransom payments increase within a region, there is a corresponding and substantial rise in the repeated occurrence of kidnappings, empirically validating that KFR operates as a profitable, self-sustaining business model where successful transactions directly fuel the cycle of crime.

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant relationship between socio-economic drivers and the prevalence of KFR.

Table 2: Socio-economic drivers and prevalence of KFR.

Variables	N	Mean	SD	r	p-value	Decision
Socio-Economic Drivers	400	4.30	0.70			
Prevalence of KFR	400	4.25	0.75	.587	.000	Significant

Source: Field Survey, 2025

A statistically significant, moderately strong positive relationship was found between socio-economic drivers and the prevalence of KFR ($r = .587$, $p < .05$). This demonstrates that higher levels of poverty, unemployment, and lack of opportunity in a community are substantially linked to a greater frequency of kidnapping incidents, confirming that socio-economic deprivation serves as a primary enabler by providing both a recruitment pool for perpetrators and a vulnerable target population.

Hypothesis 3: The perceived level of political will does not significantly predict the recurrence of KFR incidents.

Table 3: Simple Linear Regression Analysis of Political Will Predicting KFR Recurrence

Model	N	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	Std. Error	F-ratio	p-value	Decision
Political Will → KFR	400	.521	.271	.269	.598	147.885	.000	Significant

Regression Coefficients for the Model

Predictor	B	Std. Error	Beta (β)	T	p-value
Constant	2.851	.201	--	14.184	.000
Perceived Political Will	-.415	.034	-.521	-12.161	.000

Source: Field Survey, 2025

The regression model is statistically significant (F-ratio = 147.885, $p < .05$), with perceived political will accounting for 27.1% of the variance in KFR recurrence. The negative beta coefficient ($\beta = -.521$) signifies a significant inverse predictive relationship, meaning, for every unit decrease in the perceived level of political will (i.e., greater government inaction or complicity), there is a predicted half-unit increase in the recurrence of kidnapping incidents, highlighting governance failure as a key predictor of the crisis.

Hypothesis 4: The commercialisation of terrorism does not have a significant long-term security impact on vulnerable communities.

Table 4: Simple Linear Regression Analysis of Commercialisation Predicting Long-Term Security Impact

Model	N	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	Std. Error	F-ratio	p-value	Decision
Commercialisation → Security Impact	400	.689	.475	.473	.488	359.881	.000	Significant

Regression Coefficients for the Model

Predictor	B	Std. Error	Beta (β)	t	p-value
Constant	1.045	.145	--	7.207	.000
Commercialisation of Terrorism	.745	.039	.689	19.071	.000

Source: Field Survey, 2025

The regression model is highly significant (F-ratio = 359.881, $p < .05$), indicating that the commercialisation of terrorism is a powerful predictor of long-term insecurity. The model explains 47.5% of the variance in community security degradation, with the positive beta coefficient ($\beta = .689$) showing that for every single-unit increase in the commercialisation of terrorism (e.g., through more frequent and lucrative ransoms), there is a strong corresponding increase of 0.689 units in long-term security deterioration, such as displacement and economic collapse.

Discussion of Findings

The result for Hypothesis One revealed a significant positive relationship between ransom payments and the recurrence of kidnapping incidents ($r = .612$, $p = .000$). This finding confirms the economic logic underpinning the proliferation of kidnapping-for-ransom (KFR) activities in Nigeria: the ready availability of ransom funds creates a financial incentive structure that sustains and expands criminal networks. Secondary evidence from the United States Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has noted that ransom payments often create a "pay-to-play" incentive loop**,** whereby organised criminal groups are emboldened to replicate abductions as profitable ventures (FBI, 2023). Similarly, the Department of State Security (DSS) Nigeria has reported that ransom inflows are directly reinvested into logistics, weapon acquisitions, and recruitment, thereby making kidnapping a quasi-commercial enterprise.

This economic logic is vividly reflected in the qualitative theme "The Business of Kidnapping." Interviewees consistently described KFR as a structured, profit-oriented industry rather than random crime. A community leader from Zamfara explained, *"This is no longer just crime; it is an industry. They have managers, negotiators, and informants. The ransom is their seed capital for the next operation."* This narrative aligns with prior research by Warner and Lizzo (2022), who characterised KFR in the Sahel as a commercial ecosystem that replicates like a business model, with defined roles and revenue flows. The consistency between the quantitative correlation and the lived experiences of respondents strengthens the conclusion that ransom payments are not merely responses to isolated crimes but structural drivers of recurring abductions.

The result from hypothesis two demonstrated a significant link between socio-economic drivers and the prevalence of kidnapping ($r = .587$, $p = .000$). This finding underscores the role of poverty, unemployment, and economic marginalisation as fertile conditions that enable the commercialisation of terrorism and organised crime. Secondary literature supports this conclusion. For instance, the International Crisis Group (ICG) has identified economic deprivation in Nigeria's rural communities as a key driver of banditry and recruitment into criminal syndicates, noting that "youth unemployment and lack of livelihood options create an abundant pool of potential recruits for kidnapping operations" (ICG, 2022). Additionally, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) cites socio-economic inequality as a structural risk factor that increases susceptibility to involvement in illicit activities, including kidnapping and ransom economies (UNODC, 2022).

The interview theme "Collapse of Rural Livelihoods" powerfully corroborates this statistical association. Respondents from Benue and Kwara described how persistent poverty has transformed KFR from an exception to a pervasive survival strategy. One farmer lamented, *"We can no longer go to our farms. Our children can no longer go to school…and they have not just kidnapped our people, they have kidnapped our future."* This testimony demonstrates the relational nature of socio-economic marginality and insecurity: impoverished conditions not only heighten victimisation but also create pathways into participation as perpetrators. The lived experiences of respondents provide a rich contextual layer that explains why higher levels of economic deprivation correspond to higher frequencies of kidnapping incidents in the studied communities.

The result from the regression analysis for hypothesis three showed that perceived low political will significantly predicts the recurrence of KFR incidents. This suggests that when communities perceive the state as ineffective, indecisive, or compromised, it reduces public confidence in security institutions and emboldens criminal actors. Empirical support for this interpretation comes from reports by the International Crisis Group (ICG, 2022) and the Africa Centre for Strategic Studies (ACSS, 2023)**,** which indicate that inconsistent military operations, fragmented policy responses, and political interference in security strategies have contributed to the resilience of banditry and kidnapping networks in Nigeria. The DSS has also acknowledged in internal assessments that political vacillation and identity politics can undercut coherent counter-insurgency strategies (DSS Annual Security Report, 2023).

The qualitative theme "Corruption and Complicit Governance" provides a contextual explanation for these quantitative results. A security analyst from Kaduna and Kebbi noted, *"There is no political will because some people in power benefit from the chaos…They are often tipped off before any operation."* This statement suggests that the absence of political will is not simply passive neglect but is perceived by some stakeholders as actively shaped by corruption and vested interests within state and security architectures. Such testimony elucidates how political will—or the lack thereof affects operational outcomes on the ground. Thus, the finding that low political will predicts recurrence of KFR is not only statistically robust but qualitatively grounded in the lived perspectives of community members and security practitioners.

The result from hypothesis four revealed that the commercialisation of terrorism accounts for a significant proportion of long-term insecurity ($R^2 = .475$, $p = .000$). This finding provides compelling empirical evidence that KFR is not merely a transient crime wave but a structural factor in sustained instability. This conclusion aligns with the Crime-Terror Nexus theoretical framework**,** which posits that when criminal and terrorist activities intersect, the resulting hybridised networks can sustain themselves through illicit economies (Williams, 1998; UNODC, 2022). The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) World Factbook and global terrorism indices also recognise that criminal financing mechanisms, such as ransom payments, can prolong conflict by ensuring operational continuity and resource flow to non-state armed groups (CIA, 2024).

The qualitative interviews offer rich narratives that deepen this statistical finding. The theme "Collapse of Rural Livelihoods" illustrates how the commercialisation of terrorism degrades social and economic systems over time. Farmers from Kwara and Benue described persistent food insecurity, school closures, and the breakdown of community structures, echoing the long-term consequences predicted by the quantitative model. Moreover, the "Corruption and Complicit Governance" theme reveals an additional mechanism: the entanglement of political actors and criminal networks can neutralise counter-terrorism efforts, thereby reinforcing insecurity. These qualitative insights enrich the empirical data by showing not just that commercialisation predicts insecurity, but *how* this process unfolds socio-economically and institutionally in affected communities.

Conclusion

The study concludes that the commercialisation of terrorism through kidnapping-for-ransom is a critical security threat in Nigeria, creating a vicious, self-financing cycle of violence. This cycle is powerfully driven by pervasive socio-economic vulnerabilities and is perpetuated by the continuous payment of ransoms, often amidst a backdrop of corruption and compromised governance. The long-term result, empirically confirmed and qualitatively detailed, is the deep entrenchment of insecurity and the economic collapse of vulnerable communities across states like Kaduna, Zamfara, Kebbi, Kwara, and Benue. Addressing this complex challenge requires a decisive and multi-faceted policy response that moves beyond kinetic measures alone.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. The Federal Government should publicly enforce and operationalise a strict, verifiable no-ransom payment policy, backed by law, to break the financial incentive for kidnappers.
2. State governments, in collaboration with federal agencies, should initiate massive and targeted socio-economic development programs in vulnerable regions, focusing on youth employment, vocational training, and educational opportunities to disincentivise recruitment into criminal-terrorist groups.
3. Security agencies should be strengthened with advanced technology for surveillance and intelligence gathering, and community policing frameworks should be established and funded to foster local cooperation and trust.
4. The government should embark on a strategic communication campaign to demonstrate political commitment, regularly informing citizens of security efforts and fostering a unified national stance against terrorism and kidnapping.

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