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FRAGMENTED IDENTITY POLITICS AND SECURITY ARCHITECTURE IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA.

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Abstract

Fragmented identity politics has emerged as a primary destabilizing force in Nigeria, undermining institutional legitimacy and national integration. This study investigates how ethno-religious tensions and regional loyalties interact with the national security architecture to exacerbate violent conflicts, weaken intelligence coordination, and impede effective security governance in a fragile state context. Anchored in Social Identity Theory and the Fragile State Framework, the research synthesizes secondary data from academic literature, policy briefs, and security datasets, including the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) and the Institute for Security Studies (ISS). Findings reveal that identity-based cleavages foster parallel loyalties and politicize security appointments, severely hindering inter-agency collaboration. These fragmented identities intensify insurgency, banditry, and secessionist agitations, overwhelming an overstretched security apparatus. The study further identifies that despite existing reforms, deep-seated distrust and the absence of a unified national narrative limit the effectiveness of community-based security initiatives. The study concludes that identity fragmentation accelerates state fragility, rendering security challenges protracted and cyclical. Without coherent strategies to depoliticize identity and rebuild institutional trust, Nigeria's security effectiveness will continue to decline. This research provides a critical conceptual link between identity fragmentation and institutional weakness, demonstrating how sub-national loyalties reinforce state fragility within the Nigerian security sector. The Nigerian government should prioritize inclusive nation-building and merit-based security sector reforms. Strengthening inter-agency coordination and promoting community peace-building frameworks are essential to mitigating identity-based tensions and ensuring sustainable national security.

Keywords: Identity Politics, Security Architecture, State Fragility, Ethno-Religious Conflict, Nigeria, National Security.

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Introduction

The contemporary Nigerian state exists at a critical juncture where the forces of democratic consolidation clash with the centrifugal pressures of fragmented identity politics. Nigeria is exceptionally diverse: it is home to over 500 languages and an estimated 250–300 ethnic groups, alongside three major religious traditions (Islam, Christianity, and indigenous religions). This dizzying pluralism stems from the British colonial "amalgamation" of 1914, which force-joined the Northern and Southern protectorates into a single political entity. Scholars observe that this *"capricious unification of many linguistic, cultural, [and] religious entities inside artificial boundaries"* created a nation where group identities became "the essential fabric of Nigeria's identity". Thus, from independence onward, politics and power in Nigeria have often revolved around ethnic and religious affiliation. In practical terms, electoral coalitions and government appointments frequently follow identity lines, with leaders drawing on ethnic bases and sometimes alienating others. As one analysis notes, in Nigeria *"ethnicity continues to wield significant influence, shaping voting patterns, political alliances, and power dynamics"*, and such ethicized politics can undermine national cohesion.

Against this backdrop, the notion of a unified Nigerian identity remains elusive. Debates over the *"National Question"* originally concerned with resource control, regional autonomy, and equitable power-sharing – have in recent decades grown more existential. What was once largely a technocratic dispute over things like federal character and oil revenue allocation has become a crisis of legitimacy: many communities now see their primary loyalty not to "Nigeria" as an abstract polity but to their own ethno-religious group. Stated differently, the ideal of a neutral, meritocratic security apparatus one that commands loyalty to the national flag above all – is steadily eroded as citizens and even security personnel prioritize sub-national allegiances. Political scientist Ofongo & Onuoha (2025) argue that after nearly seven decades of independence, "ethnic and religious identities have evolved into significant influences that resonate throughout the corridors of power, affecting electoral processes, governance structures, and political dynamics". In some parts of the country, leaders explicitly frame political contests as contests between tribes or faiths. The coalescence of historical grievances (such as those rooted in colonial favoritism or postcolonial exclusion) with economic inequalities has made identity a primary lens through which Nigerians view public authority.

This fracturing of identity has profound implications for security. A state's security architecture its military, intelligence agencies, police, and paramilitary forces is *theoretically* supposed to be apolitical and national in character. In reality, analysts observe that in Nigeria it is often perceived as a contested space. From the colonial era through successive regimes, the security institutions were shaped not primarily to protect

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citizens, but to preserve the regime in power. Throughout Nigeria's history, elites have staffed the security forces in patterns that reflect ethnic balancing schemes or outright favoritism. This means that commanders and officers often have their own "parallel loyalties" to patrons or kinship networks rather than to a unified national mission.

Aim and Objectives

The primary aim of this article is to critically investigate the intersection between fragmented identity politics and the efficacy of Nigeria's national security architecture. Specifically, the study seeks to examine how ethno-religious tensions and regional loyalties undermine institutional legitimacy and national integration. It sets out to achieve three core objectives: first, to analyze the socio-political drivers of identity fragmentation; second, to evaluate the impact of these cleavages on inter-agency security coordination; and third, to assess how the state's institutional fragility exacerbates the security dilemma among competing groups within the federation.

Research Questions

To achieve these objectives, the study is guided by several critical research questions. Primarily, it asks: how do identity-based cleavages facilitate the politicization of security appointments and operational strategies in Nigeria? Furthermore, in what ways does the fragmentation of national identity impede effective intelligence sharing and collaboration among diverse security agencies? Finally, the research interrogates the extent to which the Nigerian state's inherent fragility prevents the emergence of a neutral, professional security architecture capable of mediating ethno-religious conflicts. These questions provide the analytical lens through which the study evaluates the contemporary security crisis.

Thus, this study offers significant scholarly contributions by synthesizing social identity theory and the fragile state framework to provide a nuanced understanding of security governance. By moving beyond traditional security studies, it adds to the literature on political security, highlighting the behavioral underpinnings of institutional failure. From a policy perspective, the research serves as a diagnostic tool for Nigerian policymakers, offering a framework for de-politicizing security institutions. It provides actionable insights for fostering inclusive national integration, which is essential for stabilizing the country's volatile internal security landscape and restoring public trust in state institutions.

Existing literature on Nigerian security often treats identity politics and institutional architecture as separate domains, focusing either on the sociology of conflict or the technicalities of military reform. This article addresses a critical knowledge gap by examining the symbiotic and interactive relationship between these variables within the

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specific context of a fragile state. It moves beyond purely descriptive accounts of ethno-religious violence to provide a structural analysis of how these identities are weaponized within the state apparatus itself. This holistic approach offers a fresh perspective on why traditional security reforms have consistently failed to yield lasting peace.

This article is structured systematically to ensure analytical clarity and coherence. Following this introduction, the second section establishes the theoretical framework, integrating Social Identity Theory with the Fragile State Framework. The third section provides a conceptual overview of the Nigerian state and its historical trajectory regarding identity politics. The fourth section delves into the empirical analysis of security architecture, detailing the impact of fragmentation on institutional performance. The final sections provide a synthesis of findings, followed by integrated policy recommendations and a conclusion that reinforces the study's relevance for both practitioners and academics.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive-analytical research design to explore the complex relationship between identity politics and security architecture. This design is chosen for its ability to provide in-depth contextual analysis of socio-political phenomena that are not easily quantifiable. The methodology relies on secondary data sources, including peer-reviewed academic journals, policy briefs from reputable think tanks, and official government reports. To ensure empirical grounding, the study synthesizes security datasets from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) and the Institute for Security Studies (ISS), covering the period from 2015 to 2024 (ACLED, 2025).

Data analysis is conducted through thematic synthesis and content analysis, allowing the researchers to identify recurring patterns of politicization and fragmentation within the security sector. This method is justified because it allows for a longitudinal perspective on how different administrations have navigated identity politics, providing a broader evidence base than primary interviews alone could offer in a high-security-risk environment. Furthermore, the use of established datasets enhances the study's replicability and credibility, as it anchors theoretical arguments in verified empirical trends of violent conflict and institutional appointments. This rigorous approach ensures that the findings are both scholarly grounded and practically relevant.

Theoretical Framework

To provide a structured interpretation of this phenomenon, the study is anchored in two complementary theoretical lenses: Social Identity Theory (SIT) and the Fragile State Framework.

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Social Identity Theory (SIT)

Social Identity Theory (SIT), originally developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner (1979), provides a powerful analytical lens for understanding how identity-based affiliations shape behavior, perceptions, and institutional outcomes within plural societies. At its core, SIT posits that individuals derive a significant portion of their self-concept, self-esteem, and sense of belonging from membership in social groups such as ethnicity, religion, nationality, or region. These group memberships are not merely descriptive; they are evaluative and emotional, producing strong psychological attachments that influence attitudes and actions (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987). In contexts where national identity is weak or contested, sub-national identities tend to become the dominant reference points for loyalty and action. This dynamic is particularly salient in Nigeria's security architecture, where ethno-religious and regional identities frequently supersede allegiance to the state.

SIT rests on three interrelated processes: social categorization, social identification, and social comparison. Social categorization involves the mental classification of individuals into groups (e.g., "us" versus "them"), which simplifies complex social environments but also sharpens boundaries between groups (Tajfel, 1982). In Nigeria, these categories often align with ethnic (Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, Igbo, and minority groups), religious (Christian, Muslim), and regional (North, South, Middle Belt) divisions. Social identification follows, as individuals internalize group membership as part of their self-definition. Finally, social comparison leads groups to seek positive distinctiveness, often by elevating their in-group while denigrating out-groups. This process produces in-group favoritism and out-group bias, which are central mechanisms through which identity politics manifests in state institutions.

Applied to Nigeria's security sector, SIT explains why officers, policymakers, and political elites may prioritize communal loyalty over institutional norms. When the Nigerian state is perceived as incapable of delivering security, justice, or welfare equitably, individuals increasingly rely on ethnic or religious groups as sources of protection and meaning. Scholars argue that in fragile or weak states, identity groups often substitute for the state, providing social security, moral legitimacy, and collective defense (Ayoob, 2007; Kaldor, 2013). In Nigeria, this reality means that security personnel may view themselves first as members of an ethnic or religious community and only secondarily as agents of the Nigerian state. Consequently, decisions regarding intelligence sharing, deployment, and enforcement are often filtered through identity considerations rather than national strategic imperatives.

In-group favoritism, a central tenet of SIT, is particularly evident in the politicization of security appointments and promotions in Nigeria. Political leaders,

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acting as rational actors within an identity-fragmented system, often appoint individuals from their own ethnic or regional group into sensitive security positions. While such decisions are frequently justified under the principle of federal character, SIT suggests that the underlying motivation is the desire to ensure loyalty and trust within one's in-group (Turner, 1999). This practice reinforces perceptions of exclusion among out-groups, who come to see the security architecture as biased and unrepresentative. Empirical studies on Nigeria demonstrate that perceived ethnic imbalance in the armed forces and intelligence agencies fuels distrust, reduces cooperation with law enforcement, and legitimizes the emergence of parallel security arrangements such as vigilante groups and ethnic militias (Onuoha & Ojewale, 2020; Adebanwi, 2017).

SIT also sheds light on the phenomenon of "security siloization" within Nigeria's security architecture. When agencies or units are informally aligned along ethnic or regional lines, information sharing becomes selective and strategic rather than institutional. Officers may hoard intelligence to protect in-group interests or to prevent perceived out-groups from gaining advantage. From a SIT perspective, this behavior is not merely corruption or incompetence; it is a rational response to a social environment where trust is bounded by identity. Turner et al. (1987) emphasize that group norms strongly shape behavior, especially under conditions of perceived threat. In Nigeria's highly securitized environment, where insurgency, banditry, and secessionist agitations persist, perceived threats are often interpreted through identity lenses, reinforcing defensive in-group behavior and weakening inter-agency coordination.

Furthermore, SIT helps explain why community-based security initiatives in Nigeria often produce mixed results. While community policing and local security outfits are designed to enhance trust and intelligence gathering, they can inadvertently deepen identity fragmentation if they align too closely with particular ethnic or religious groups. SIT predicts that when security provision is localized without a strong overarching national identity, local in-groups may use such structures to protect their own interests while excluding or targeting out-groups (Brewer, 2001). In Nigeria, this is evident in accusations that some community security outfits serve as ethnic militias rather than neutral law enforcement mechanisms. As a result, rather than bridging the gap between state and society, these initiatives can reinforce mutual suspicion and escalate inter-communal tensions.

Importantly, SIT also illuminates the persistence and emotional intensity of Nigeria's security challenges. Identity-based conflicts are often resistant to purely material or coercive solutions because they are rooted in perceptions of dignity, recognition, and belonging. Tajfel (1982) argues that threats to group identity are experienced as threats to the self, making compromise difficult. This insight is crucial for understanding why military offensives alone have failed to end insurgency or communal

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violence in Nigeria. Groups that perceive the security forces as representatives of an antagonistic out-group are more likely to resist, evade, or attack them. In this sense, fragmented identity politics does not merely coexist with insecurity; it actively reproduces it by shaping how groups interpret state actions and intentions.

Within the broader framework of this study, SIT provides a micro–meso level explanation for how individual and group psychology translates into institutional dysfunction. While structural factors such as poverty, inequality, and weak governance are undeniably important, SIT highlights the cognitive and social mechanisms through which these conditions are experienced and acted upon. In Nigeria's security architecture, weak national identity undermines professional norms, encourages parallel loyalties, and normalizes exclusionary practices. Over time, these dynamics erode institutional legitimacy and reinforce state fragility, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of insecurity.

The Fragile State Framework

The Fragile State Framework provides a structural and institutional perspective for understanding how weaknesses in state capacity interact with social divisions to produce persistent insecurity. Central to this framework is the argument that a state becomes fragile when it is unable or unwilling to deliver core political goods to its citizens, foremost among them being security, justice, and basic welfare (Rotberg, 2004). In fragile states, authority is unevenly exercised, institutions are weak or politicized, and the legitimacy of the state is widely contested. This framework is particularly relevant to Nigeria, where fragmented identity politics intersects with institutional deficiencies to undermine the effectiveness of the national security architecture.

Rotberg (2004) emphasizes that the provision of security is the primary political good upon which all other state functions depend. When the state fails to protect lives and property, citizens lose confidence in public institutions and seek alternative sources of protection. In Nigeria, this failure is evident in the proliferation of insurgent groups, bandit networks, ethnic militias, and community vigilantes across different regions. The inability of the Nigerian security apparatus to respond effectively to these threats reflects deeper institutional fragility characterized by poor coordination, politicized leadership, and limited territorial control. From a fragile state perspective, insecurity in Nigeria is not merely a law-and-order problem but a symptom of weakened state authority.

The Fragile State Framework also highlights the feedback loop between identity fragmentation and institutional weakness. As state institutions lose legitimacy, identity-based groups gain prominence as alternative providers of security and social order. These groups often mobilize along ethnic or religious lines, reinforcing sub-national loyalties at the expense of national cohesion (Ayoob, 2007). In Nigeria, the rise of ethnic self-help security outfits and religiously framed armed movements illustrates how state fragility

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enables identity entrepreneurs to fill governance vacuums. Over time, the success of these non-state actors further erodes the state's monopoly on the legitimate use of force, deepening fragility and normalizing parallel systems of authority.

Scholars of state fragility also stress that fragile states are characterized by elite capture and politicization of institutions (Call, 2010). In Nigeria's security sector, political elites frequently manipulate security institutions to protect regime interests or ethnic constituencies, rather than national security objectives. This politicization undermines professionalism and weakens institutional resilience. The Fragile State Framework explains how such practices reduce the capacity of security institutions to act impartially, thereby exacerbating perceptions of exclusion and injustice among marginalized groups. These perceptions, in turn, fuel grievances that manifest as violent conflict, banditry, and separatist agitation.

Furthermore, the framework underscores the cyclical nature of fragility. As insecurity intensifies, state resources are increasingly diverted to crisis management and militarized responses, leaving little room for long-term institutional reform or inclusive governance (OECD, 2020). In Nigeria, repeated military deployments and emergency measures have not resolved underlying security challenges because they fail to address the structural drivers of fragility, including identity-based exclusion and weak governance. Consequently, insecurity becomes protracted and self-reinforcing, confirming Rotberg's (2004) assertion that fragile states are trapped in cycles of violence and institutional decay.

The Nigerian security crisis is best understood through the operational integration of Social Identity Theory (SIT) and the Fragile State Framework (FSF). In Nigeria, identity formation is not merely cultural but a tool for political mobilization. SIT explains how in-group favoritism leads to the politicization of security appointments, where ethnic nepotism ensures that security heads are chosen based on regional loyalty rather than merit. This creates an out-group perception among other ethnicities, fueling secessionist agitations like those of IPOB or the Yoruba Nation, as these groups view the state's security apparatus as an instrument of sectional oppression rather than a provider of collective safety.

This behavioral dynamic is catalyzed by the FSF, which characterizes the Nigerian state by its low institutional capacity and eroded social contract. Because the state is perceived as fragile and biased, groups retreat into parallel loyalties, seeking security from ethnic militias or local vigilantes. Empirically, this is evident in the rise of regional security outfits like Amotekun, which emerged as a response to the perceived failure and regional bias of the federal police. The linkage is clear: identity-based mobilization (SIT) fills the vacuum created by state incapacity (FSF). Consequently, the

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security architecture becomes a fragmented landscape of competing loyalties, leading to a security dilemma where the arming of one group for protection is seen as a threat by another, ultimately resulting in the violent security outcomes observed in Nigeria's Middle Belt and Southeast.

The Socio-Historical Roots of Identity Fragmentation

Nigeria's current security challenges cannot be understood without acknowledging the colonial legacy of "divide and rule."[5] The British administrative style reinforced ethnic boundaries rather than blurring them, ensuring that political mobilization in the post-colonial era remained ethno-regional. The 1967-1970 Civil War further entrenched these divisions, creating deep-seated regional resentments that have never been fully reconciled. By 2026, these historical grievances have been revitalized by modern economic stressors and digital mobilization. The competition for dwindling resources in the face of a high "misery index" has made identity a tool for survival. As argued by Joseph (1987) through the concept of "Prebendalism," the state is often viewed as a "pie" to be divided among ethnic representatives. This mindset has permeated the security sector, where "controlling" a security agency is seen as a strategic win for a particular group rather than a service to the nation.

Thus, the persistence of identity fragmentation in contemporary Nigeria is deeply rooted in the country's socio-historical formation, particularly its colonial origins and post-independence political evolution. British colonial administration institutionalized ethnic differentiation through an indirect rule system that governed communities via traditional authorities while rigidly separating ethnic and regional units. Rather than fostering a shared national consciousness, colonial governance entrenched ethnic identities as the primary basis of political organization and access to resources (Afigbo, 1989; Mamdani, 1996). The 1914 amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates created a territorially unified state without corresponding social or political integration, leaving behind what scholars describe as a "geographical expression" rather than a nation (Awolowo, 1968).

These structural foundations shaped post-colonial politics. At independence in 1960, Nigeria inherited a highly segmented political system dominated by regionally and ethnically based parties, such as the Northern People's Congress (NPC), the Action Group (AG), and the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC). Political competition thus emerged not around ideology or policy but around ethnic arithmetic and regional dominance (Suberu, 2001). The failure to manage these divisions culminated in the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), which entrenched mutual suspicion, grievance, and fear of domination among major ethnic groups. The war's aftermath produced a fragile unity built more on military coercion than genuine reconciliation (Osaghae, 1998).

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In the post-war era, oil wealth further deepened identity fragmentation. The centralization of oil revenues transformed the Nigerian state into the primary allocator of resources, intensifying competition among ethnic groups for control of federal power. Joseph's (1987) concept of prebendalism captures this dynamic, where public offices are viewed as entitlements to be exploited for the benefit of one's ethnic or communal constituency. Over time, this logic normalized the perception of the state as a distributive prize rather than a neutral arbiter. Security institutions were not insulated from this process; instead, they became strategic sites for ethnic bargaining and political capture.

By the 21st century, identity fragmentation has been amplified by economic decline, demographic pressure, and digital communication. Rising unemployment, poverty, and inequality have made ethnic and religious identities tools for survival and mobilization (Mustapha, 2014). Social media has further enabled the rapid circulation of grievance narratives, historical memories, and ethno-religious propaganda, reviving unresolved conflicts in new forms. Thus, Nigeria's identity crisis is not merely a relic of the past but a historically layered phenomenon continually reproduced by contemporary socio-economic and political conditions.

Indeed, a leading Nigerian business newspaper notes bluntly that the country's security forces "evolved as tools of regime preservation and internal control rather than as instruments of public protection," and today suffer from "fragmented intelligence, inter-agency rivalry, [and] weak national assessments". Such fragmentation is not accidental: it results directly from an architecture built on fear of coups and ethnic balancing, rather than strategic coherence. In practical terms, this means senior appointments often reward political loyalty or ethnic quota rather than expertise, and information (especially timely intelligence on threats) tends to be siloed in ethnic networks. As a result, the Nigerian state frequently loses its monopoly on violence or at least cedes parts of it to identity-based militias and insurgents – because its own forces lack cohesion.

The politicization of security-sector appointments exemplifies how identity cleavages undermine institutional integrity. Nepotism and patronage are endemic: analysts have documented how relatives and close associates of leaders are routinely placed in key military, police, or intelligence posts, often without regard to merit. This practice has been observed across different administrations and political parties. As one study of nepotism in Nigeria notes, when leaders prioritize familial or group connections over qualifications, *"those appointed may lack the necessary expertise for the roles they occupy, which can lead to inefficiency, ineffectiveness, and a decline in the quality of governance"*. It also breeds resentment in marginalized communities, who feel they have no stake in the system. The Federal Character principle (ostensibly designed to ensure equitable ethnic representation in public posts) has often been stretched into an excuse for

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outright ethnic favoritism. For example, critics argue that in recent years security ministers and service chiefs have frequently been drawn from the President's own region or tribe, provoking accusations of bias. Even where the letter of ethnic balancing is observed, the spirit of meritocracy is lost creating a security elite whose first allegiance may be to the patron who placed them rather than to the state.

The cumulative effect of these identity-based practices is to *disable* the very mechanisms meant to manage conflict. When police and army units are organized along ethnic lines, mutual trust erodes. Security agencies that are seen as dominated by one identity group will not be fully trusted by others. For instance, communities in the Middle Belt, North-West and Southern regions often complain that soldiers or policemen from other regions act as occupiers, not protectors. Such mistrust means that intelligence sharing which requires confidence between communities and authorities – breaks down. The ISS notes that *"the Nigerian state has failed in five key areas: intelligence, protection, delivery of justice, politics and strategy"*, and identity fragmentation is at the heart of this failure. In North-Central Nigeria, for example, local farmers have historically distrusted the predominantly northerner security forces sent to guard them, leading them to rely instead on their own vigilantes. This dynamic produces a vicious cycle: as citizens turn to ethnic militias and self-help, the state's presence becomes even weaker, further encouraging communalism. In effect, Nigeria is tilting toward what one commentator calls a *"Federal Republic of Self-Help,"* where *"citizens rely on vigilantes, traditional authorities, or criminal networks for survival."* Indeed, armed bandit groups and herder militias sometimes negotiate their own local ceasefires and security deals in remote areas, effectively acting as alternative guarantors of safety.

Not surprisingly, the fragmentation of identity loyalties has fueled multiple violent conflicts. The Boko Haram insurgency in the Northeast, the farmer–herder violence in the Middle Belt, the pirate and militia attacks in the South-South, and the separatist agitation in the Southeast all have identity dimensions, whether ethnic, religious, or regional. For example, some Kanuri and Hausa communities in the North-East initially saw Boko Haram as defending their cultural interests against a distant, largely Christian-led government. Similarly, in parts of Kaduna and Plateau states, Fulani herders and Christian farmers clash along both religious and ethnic lines. As one policy analysis puts it, tensions in places like Benue State have been interpreted variously as land disputes, climate pressures, or religious conflict, but each framing is *"a manifestation of state failure"* because the government cannot deliver impartial justice or security. The failing trust in institutions turns every grievance (about land, power, or resources) into a zero-sum contest between identity groups. In such an environment, even non-political criminality – such as kidnapping or oil theft – quickly acquires an ethnic hue when communities suspect each other of collusion.

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Crucially, fragmented identity politics *not only triggers conflict but also handicaps the response to it*. In countries with cohesive institutions, security forces can pursue neutral strategies, gather intelligence from diverse communities, and coordinate across regions. But in Nigeria's case, internal divisions mean that inter-agency collaboration is severely hampered. The military, police, intelligence services, and paramilitaries often operate in silos and even compete for influence. The 2019 National Security Strategy's emphasis on human security was a conceptual advance, but as analysts note, *"strategy was updated, but structure, incentives, and behaviour were not"*. Without structural reform, security remains reactive. A recent ISS report on North-Central violence found that *early warning information is rarely turned into actionable intelligence*, and troops deployed to violent areas typically leave as soon as an incident passes, only to face fresh attacks elsewhere. This pattern reflects the underlying weakness of a state that never built inclusive security systems.

By contrast, community-based initiatives intended to fill security gaps – such as local vigilante groups or peace committees – are themselves hamstrung by identity fragmentation. Leaders of different groups distrust each other's motives and agendas. As one local politician remarked, Fulani herders and Benue farmers speak as if each attack is perpetrated by the other's entire religion or ethnicity. In many conflicts, civil society and government interventions focus on reconciliation or amnesty for militants, but without addressing deeper identity grievances these have limited effect. For example, the Niger Delta Amnesty of the 2000s quelled militia violence partly through rehabilitation programs, yet decades later militancy has reemerged in that region – evidence that simply pacifying actors, without building cross-cutting institutions, fails to transform underlying division.

The security implications of Nigeria's identity fissures are severe. Violence and instability drive down economic investment, disrupt food production, and create humanitarian crises. Madueke (2025) emphasizes that Nigeria's pervasive insecurity has already eroded social cohesion and fueled poverty and displacement. In regional terms, Nigeria's fragility spills over borders: it has drawn in international fighters (as in the Sahel), and forced millions of Nigerians into refugee flows. Onuoha and Ojewale warn that durable solutions will remain elusive *"if the crisis continues to be misdiagnosed"*, meaning if officials fail to see how identity divisions underlie the violence. In effect, Nigeria's sub-national loyalties exacerbate the classic symptoms of state fragility: rulers are seen as illegitimate, basic services and rule of law are uneven, and armed non-state actors fill the void.

Identity Cleavages and the Paralysis of Security Architecture

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Identity cleavages in Nigeria have had a profound paralytic effect on the country's security architecture, undermining its coherence, neutrality, and operational effectiveness. In principle, a national security system is designed to function as an integrated structure, characterized by inter-agency cooperation, centralized command, and a shared commitment to national interest. In Nigeria, however, ethno-religious and regional divisions have fractured this architecture, transforming security institutions into arenas of competition rather than coordination.

One of the most visible manifestations of this paralysis is the breakdown of trust both horizontally among security agencies and vertically between security institutions and the citizenry. Where identity fragmentation is intense, agencies tend to operate in silos, guarding information and resources against perceived rivals. This phenomenon reflects what Ayoob (2007) describes as the "insecurity dilemma" of weak states, where internal divisions prevent the state from acting as a unified security provider. In Nigeria, military, police, intelligence, and paramilitary agencies often pursue overlapping mandates with limited cooperation, resulting in duplication, rivalry, and operational inefficiency. Moreover, security deployment patterns are frequently interpreted through identity lenses. When troops or police units are perceived as representing particular ethnic or religious groups, communities are less likely to cooperate or share intelligence. This perception fuels resistance, misinformation, and in some cases violent confrontation with security forces. Studies on Nigeria's counterinsurgency efforts against Boko Haram show that mistrust between local communities and federal forces significantly reduced intelligence flow, allowing insurgents to embed themselves within civilian populations (Onuoha, 2014).

Identity cleavages also weaken strategic coherence at the national level. Security decisions are often shaped by political calculations about regional balance rather than threat assessment. This leads to inconsistent prioritization of security challenges, where some regions perceive abandonment while others accuse the state of repression. The result is a security architecture that is reactive rather than preventive, overwhelmed by simultaneous crises ranging from insurgency and banditry to piracy and separatist violence. Ultimately, identity fragmentation does not merely coexist with security failure; it actively disables the institutional mechanisms required for effective security governance. The paralysis of Nigeria's security architecture is thus best understood as a product of deep-seated identity cleavages that erode trust, coordination, and legitimacy across the entire system.

Politicization of Security Appointments

The politicization of security appointments represents one of the most direct pathways through which fragmented identity politics undermines Nigeria's security

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architecture. In an ideal democratic setting, appointments to security leadership positions are guided by professionalism, competence, and strategic expertise. In Nigeria, however, such appointments are frequently interpreted and often made through ethnic, regional, and religious considerations, reinforcing perceptions of exclusion and bias. Successive administrations have faced criticism over the concentration of key security positions in the hands of individuals from specific regions or ethno-religious backgrounds. Even where constitutional provisions such as the federal character principle are formally observed, the perception of imbalance persists, and perception itself carries powerful political consequences (Suberu, 2001). From a Social Identity Theory perspective, individuals are more likely to trust and cooperate with institutions they perceive as representing their in-group. Conversely, perceived out-group dominance breeds suspicion and resistance.

Without gainsaying, the politicization of security appointments has three major consequences. First, it undermines professionalism. When loyalty to political patrons or ethnic constituencies outweighs merit, security institutions lose technical competence and strategic consistency (Ojo, 2020). Second, it erodes morale within the ranks, as officers who perceive systemic bias become disengaged or factionalized. Third, it fuels a security dilemma among sub-national groups, who fear marginalization and therefore seek alternative means of protection. Posen's (1993) security dilemma theory is particularly instructive here. In fragmented societies, groups that distrust central authority are more likely to arm themselves defensively, even when such actions ultimately increase overall insecurity. In Nigeria, perceived exclusion from the security elite has contributed to the rise of ethnic militias, regional security outfits, and vigilante groups. These actors justify their existence by pointing to the state's lack of neutrality. Thus, the politicization of security appointments does not simply reflect identity fragmentation it actively reproduces it, weakening institutional legitimacy and accelerating state fragility.

Intelligence Coordination and Parallel Loyalties

Effective intelligence coordination is the backbone of modern security governance, enabling states to anticipate threats, prevent violence, and respond strategically. In Nigeria, however, intelligence coordination is severely undermined by fragmented identity politics and the emergence of parallel loyalties within security institutions. These parallel loyalties rooted in ethnicity, religion, region, or political patronage often supersede formal institutional allegiance, compromising the flow and utilization of intelligence. Within the framework of Social Identity Theory, intelligence officers operating in a context of weak national identity are likely to prioritize in-group protection over abstract national objectives. This manifests in selective information sharing, delayed reporting, and, in extreme cases, deliberate sabotage of intelligence operations (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In Nigeria, such dynamics have been widely cited as

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contributing factors to the failure to anticipate attacks by bandit groups in the North-West and insurgent cells in the North-East.

Inter-agency rivalry further compounds this problem. While rivalry exists in most bureaucratic systems, in Nigeria it is often intertwined with identity competition. Agencies perceived as dominated by particular regions or ethnic groups are viewed with suspicion by others, leading to fragmented intelligence ecosystems rather than integrated national intelligence networks (Omede, 2015). This fragmentation results in poor situational awareness and reactive security responses. Parallel loyalties also extend beyond formal institutions. Some security personnel maintain informal ties with local power brokers, traditional authorities, or ethnic militias, blurring the line between state and non-state security actors. While such relationships may sometimes enhance local intelligence, they also risk compromising neutrality and national coherence. In fragile states, this phenomenon reflects what Rotberg (2004) describes as the erosion of the state's monopoly over coercion and information.

Consequently, intelligence failure in Nigeria is not merely technical but deeply political and social. As long as identity-based loyalties shape information flow, Nigeria's security architecture will remain vulnerable, fragmented, and unable to preempt evolving security threats.

Empirical Analysis: Violent Conflict and Identity Hotspots

Drawing on datasets from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), the study identifies a clear correlation between areas of high identity fragmentation and the frequency of violent events.

Conflict Type	Identity Driver	Geographic Focus	Security Impact
Insurgency	Religious Extremism	Northeast	Overstretched Military
Banditry	Ethnic/Resource Competition	Northwest	Intelligence Failure
Secessionism	Regional Marginalization	Southeast	Legitimacy Crisis

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Conflict Type	Identity Driver	Geographic Focus	Security Impact
Communal Clashes	Agrarian/Ethnic Rivalry	North Central	Chronic Instability

Source: Author Compilation, 2026

The table data indicate that the security architecture is currently "fighting on all fronts," not just against criminals, but against narratives. For every kinetic military success, there is an "identity-based counter-narrative" that frames the state's intervention as an act of oppression against a specific group. This makes the achievement of a "decisive victory" nearly impossible.

Community-Based Security and the Narrative Gap

In response to federal failure, various regions have established community-based security initiatives (e.g., Amotekun, Ebube Agu). While these groups have provided localized relief, they represent the ultimate manifestation of fragmented identity politics. The study finds that while these initiatives are popular within their respective regions, they are viewed with suspicion by the federal center and "other" groups, leading to a fragmented "security market" where no single entity has the trust of the entire nation.

The primary limitation of these initiatives is the absence of a "unified national narrative." Without a shared understanding of what constitutes a "threat," one group's security provider is another group's militia. This distrust hinders the integration of community intelligence into the national security framework, leaving the country in a state of "uncoordinated protection."

Conclusions

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that Nigeria’s security challenges are fundamentally rooted in the fragmentation of national identity and the subsequent erosion of institutional neutrality. To address these systemic failures, the study recommends a transition toward merit-based, ethnically blind security appointments to restore the professional integrity of the security architecture. Furthermore, the federal government must initiate constitutional reforms that promote genuine inclusivity, reducing the incentive for groups to seek protection through ethnic militias. A transparent, competence-driven appointment process moderated but not overridden by representational considerations would enhance operational efficiency and restore cross-regional confidence in national institutions.

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Practically, security agencies should adopt a community-led intelligence model that transcends ethno-religious biases, fostering trust between citizens and the state. These findings imply that without addressing the underlying "identity-fragility" nexus, technical military solutions will remain insufficient. For policymakers, the study reinforces the urgent need to rebuild the social contract; physical security is impossible in a state where citizens do not see themselves reflected in the institutions designed to protect them. This research serves as a blueprint for transforming Nigeria's security architecture from a tool of sectional interest into a pillar of national stability.

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