

## The Unknown Gunmen and Insecurity in South East Nigeria, 2020-2023: Implications for Regional Stability and Development

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### Abstract

This study examines the activities of unknown gunmen in South East Nigeria from 2020 to 2023, amidst a backdrop of escalating insecurity and socio-political turbulence in the region. The emergence of these gunmen has posed significant challenges to governance, security, and community stability, necessitating a deeper understanding of their root causes and impacts. The primary problem addressed is the persistent violence and instability caused by these groups, exacerbated by historical grievances, economic disparities, weak institutional frameworks, and political tensions. The study aims to analyze the root causes of the gunmen's activities, and to evaluate government and law enforcement responses. Methodologically, the study employs a qualitative approach, drawing on extensive literature review, analysis of historical context, and examination of empirical data and media reports. The research findings highlight the interconnected factors driving the phenomenon, including socio-economic marginalization, ethnic nationalism, institutional failures, and external influences. The study underscores the urgency of integrated security, governance, and socio-economic interventions to foster sustainable peace and development in South East Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Unknown gunmen, insecurity, governance, socio-economic factors, south-east Nigeria.

### Introduction

The security situation in South East Nigeria has undergone significant deterioration over recent years, marked by a series of violent incidents and rising instability. This region, traditionally known for its vibrant cultural heritage and economic activities, has become a hotspot for violent attacks perpetrated by groups collectively referred to as "unknown gunmen". These attacks have not only led to the loss of lives and properties but have also instilled a deep sense of fear and uncertainty among the local population. For instance, "254 people died in 63 incidents recorded in the first five months of 2021. Ebonyi state recorded the highest statistics with 101 fatalities (92 civilians and nine security agents). Imo state came second with 60 casualties, out of which were 35 civilians and 25 security agents. Anambra and Abia recorded 37 (25 civilians and 12 security agents) and 33 (19 civilians and 14 security agents) deaths, respectively. With 22 fatalities (17 civilians and six security agents), Enugu state is the least violent state in the Southeast for the period under review."<sup>1</sup>

Historically, South East Nigeria has been relatively peaceful compared to other regions in the country, despite its experience of civil war between 1967 and 1970. However, in the past decade, the region has witnessed a surge in violent activities, including targeted killings, kidnappings, and armed robberies. These incidents are often attributed to various factors, including political unrest, economic disenfranchisement, and unresolved ethnic tensions. The emergence of the unknown gunmen phenomenon is a recent but critical addition to the complex security landscape of the region. The activities of these unknown gunmen have significant implications for both local and national security. They have disrupted economic activities, hindered development projects, and strained the capacity of security forces. The attacks are often unpredictable and ruthless, targeting both civilians and security personnel. This unpredictability has made it challenging for authorities to develop a coherent and effective response strategy, exacerbating the feeling of vulnerability among residents.

Several theories have been proposed to explain the rise of unknown gunmen in South East Nigeria. Some analysts point to the region's economic challenges, including high unemployment rates and poverty, which may drive young men towards criminal activities as a means of survival. Others highlight political motives, suggesting that some of these attacks may be linked to broader efforts to destabilize the region or influence political outcomes. Additionally, the porous nature of Nigeria's borders and the proliferation of small arms have facilitated the operations of these violent groups. Against this backdrop, this study aims to shed light on the nature of the unknown gunmen phenomenon, its root causes, and potential strategies for mitigating its impact on the region's security and development.

### Definition of terms

It is necessary to begin this paper by defining key terms used in it. The term "unknown gunmen" is a phrase often used to describe sectional violence taking place in the south-east of the country. According to Dave Umahi, Governor of Ebonyi State:

Let our people come out to speak out that the unknown gunmen are not really unknown gunmen, they are our young men and women who will defend our

land tomorrow. They should stop being killed; they should stop giving themselves to be killed.<sup>2</sup>

On his part, the governor of Anambra State, Charles Soludo, stated that:

A majority of the unknown gunmen are Igbo. "Let us be very clear: These criminals causing mayhem in Anambra are Igbo (dominantly from other South East states) whose real objective is lucrative criminality and foisting their idolatrous religion on the region. Why is it that everywhere they gather and in every camp they operate, there is a deity/idol to which they routinely offer blood in sacrifice? Igbo are known for their enterprise but these criminals are bent on killing Ndigbo businesses."<sup>3</sup>

The governor was able to make this categorical statement on the identity of the unknown gunmen following series of expeditions carried out to dislodge the criminals from their hideouts in several forests in the state. However, in this essay, the term "unknown gunmen" refers to unidentified armed individuals or groups engaging in violent and criminal activities, particularly in South East Nigeria. These perpetrators are characterized by their anonymity, as they often carry out attacks without revealing their identities or affiliations. Their activities include targeted killings, kidnappings, armed robberies, and assaults on security personnel and civilians. The lack of clear information about their motives, origins, and organizational structure adds to the challenge of addressing the threat they pose.

Another term that requires definition is "South east, Nigeria", a term used in this essay to describe the geographical area occupied by the states of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo. The inhabitants of this area are the Igbo, one of the major ethnic nationalities in the Nigerian nation state. In this work therefore, the south east will be used synonymously with the Igbo. Although some groups of the Igbo live outside the south east, in Delta and Rivers states, they constitute a very small percentage of the Igbo people.<sup>4</sup> The core Igbo people live in south east geographical zone, the area covered in this study.

### **Historical context and background**

The roots of insecurity in South East Nigeria can be traced back to the colonial era when the British employed a divide-and-rule strategy, fostering ethnic divisions to consolidate power. This policy fragmented indigenous communities, disrupting traditional governance structures and sowing seeds of ethnic mistrust and competition. The amalgamation of disparate ethnic groups into a single entity created a fragile unity, laying a foundation for future conflicts. The Igbo, a dominant ethnic group in the region, faced significant marginalization and resentment from neighboring groups, a tension that has persisted and evolved over the decades. Following Nigeria's independence in 1960, the South East experienced significant political and economic marginalization, exacerbating regional tensions. The Biafran War (1967-1970), sparked by the South East's secession attempt, left deep scars on the region. The war's aftermath saw further economic and infrastructural neglect, reinforcing feelings of alienation and mistrust towards the central government. The perceived inequity in resource allocation and political representation has fueled ongoing grievances and unrest, contributing to the region's instability.<sup>5</sup>

Economic factors have also played a critical role in fostering insecurity in the South East. The region, once a hub of commerce and industry, has seen significant economic decline due to poor governance, corruption, and inadequate investment. High levels of unemployment, particularly among the youth, have led to widespread poverty and disillusionment. The lack of viable economic opportunities has pushed many towards criminal activities, including those perpetrated by the so-called "unknown gunmen." The desperation and frustration borne out of economic hardship serve as a breeding ground for insecurity.

In recent decades, the rise of militancy and insurgency has further complicated the security landscape in the South East. Groups such as the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) have emerged, advocating for the region's secession. While these groups initially pursued their goals through non-violent means, the state's heavy-handed response often led to clashes and a subsequent escalation in violence. The activities of unknown gunmen are often intertwined with these broader militant movements, adding a layer of complexity to the insecurity.

The persistent insecurity in South East Nigeria is also a result of weak security infrastructure and governance challenges. The region suffers from inadequate policing, lack of intelligence capabilities, and insufficient resources to combat crime effectively. Corruption within the security forces and judiciary further undermines efforts to address insecurity. Additionally, governance issues, including poor service delivery, lack of accountability, and ineffective local administration, exacerbate the situation. The state's inability to provide basic

security and justice has eroded public trust and allowed criminal elements to thrive, perpetuating a cycle of violence and instability.<sup>6</sup>

### The emergence of the "unknown gunmen"

The issue of the Unknown Gunmen in the South-East region of Nigeria started in the year 2020. According to the Vanguard newspaper, Unknown gunmen became a phenomenon in the zone in the aftermath of the #EndSARS protests in 2020.<sup>7</sup> There are two developments which took place simultaneously in Enugu, the capital of Enugu State. First, the Nigerian Army launched a new military operation in the South-East. The operation, according to the then Chief of Army Staff, Lt. General Faruk Yahaya, "will curb rising cases of insecurity in the zone. It hopes to tackle insurgency, kidnapping and rising banditry in the South-East, and check wanton killings and incineration of public facilities in the zone".<sup>58</sup> The second was a meeting convened by governors of the South-East states, where political and operational solutions to the escalating insecurity in the region were explored. Four of the five governors attended, with Willie Obiano of Anambra State abstaining. The meeting included major political stakeholders and traditional rulers and resulted in an agreement to rejuvenate "Ebubeagu," a security initiative similar to the South-West's "Amotekun." This outfit will draw members from all South-East states to complement existing intelligence and security services. Additionally, the governors resolved to end the frequent "sit at home" orders imposed by the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), noting the significant economic losses these orders cause for workers and business owners.<sup>69</sup>

The meeting also reaffirmed the commitment of "Ndigbo" to the upcoming November 6, 2021, governorship election in Anambra, pledging support for an incident-free poll. The governors and stakeholders emphasized the importance of maintaining socioeconomic stability and ensuring the safety and security of the region. They highlighted the detrimental impact of the sit-at-home orders and underscored the necessity of unified action to address security challenges effectively.<sup>710</sup>

Few days after, there were violence and bloodletting across the South-East, Nigeria, including, Anambra, Imo and Enugu States. At first, they unknown gunmen attacked federal government facilities. They were then believed to be part of the Eastern Security Network, the paramilitary organization of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), a pro- Biafra separatist movement.

### Key incidents and timeline of attacks by unknown gunmen

SN	Date	State(s)	Incidents
1	August, 2020	Many states in the south east zone	A wave of violence erupted with coordinated attacks on police stations and security personnel across several states in the South East. These attacks marked the emergence of "unknown gunmen" as a significant security threat in the region.
2	December 2020	Imo State	An attack on a police checkpoint in Orlu, Imo State, resulted in the death of several officers. This incident highlighted the increasing boldness and organization of the unknown gunmen.
3	January 2021	Enugu State	In Enugu State, a police station in the Iwollo Oghe area was attacked, leading to the deaths of several officers and the destruction of property
4	March 2021	Imo and Anambra states	Multiple attacks on police and military facilities were reported across Imo and Anambra states. The attack on the Nigerian Correctional Facility in Owerri, Imo State, where over 1,800 inmates were freed, garnered significant national and international attention.
5	April 2021	Imo State	The security situation continued to deteriorate with attacks on security checkpoints and government buildings. In one notable incident, the country home of the Imo State Governor, Hope Uzodinma, was set ablaze.
6	May 2021	Imo State	Unknown gunmen attacked and killed two prominent traditional rulers in Imo State. This attack was part of a broader trend targeting traditional institutions and community leaders.
7	September 2021	Ebonyi State	The residence of a former Minister of State for Education, Emeka Nwajiuba, was attacked in Ebonyi State. Several security personnel were killed in the incident.
8	January 2022	Anambra and Enugu states	A series of coordinated attacks on police stations in Anambra and Enugu states resulted in multiple casualties. The attacks signaled an escalation in the tactics and capabilities of the unknown gunmen.

9	February 2022	Anambra State	An attack on a police station in Ihiala, Anambra State, left several officers dead and vehicles destroyed. This incident was part of a broader strategy to undermine security forces' presence in the region.
10	May 2022	Anambra State	The murder of Dr. Chike Akunyili, husband of the late former NAFDAC DG Dora Akunyili, in Anambra State, highlighted the increasing targeting of prominent individuals and civilians by unknown gunmen.
11	June 2022	Ebonyi State	A police station in Ezza North, Ebonyi State, was attacked, resulting in the deaths of several officers and the destruction of infrastructure.
12	March 2023	Anambra State	An attack on the convoy of Senator Ifeanyi Ubah in Anambra State resulted in multiple fatalities, including security personnel and aides. This attack underscored the vulnerability of political figures in the region.
13	April 2023	Imo State	The assassination of a local council chairman in Orlu, Imo State, was part of a series of targeted killings of political and community leaders.
14	June 2023	Abia State	A daring attack on a military checkpoint in Abia State left several soldiers dead and heightened concerns about the deteriorating security situation in the South East.

**Sources:** Authors compilation

These incidents reflect the ongoing and escalating violence perpetrated by unknown gunmen in South East Nigeria. The attacks have targeted security forces, political figures, traditional rulers, and civilians, contributing to a climate of fear and instability in the region. The timeline highlights the increasing frequency and boldness of these attacks, underscoring the urgent need for effective security measures and conflict resolution strategies.

#### **Factors contributing to the rise of unknown gunmen**

The rise of unknown gunmen in South East Nigeria can be attributed to a combination of factors including historical grievances, socio-economic challenges, institutional failures, political manipulation, and external influences. These factors have created a complex web of issues that have fueled violence and instability in the region. Historical grievances and marginalization play a significant role in the rise of unknown gunmen. The South East region, home to the Igbo ethnic group, has a long history of feeling politically and economically marginalized since the end of the Nigerian Civil War in 1970. Despite the official end of hostilities, the region has continued to suffer from systemic neglect and underdevelopment. Economic deprivation is rampant, with the South East experiencing some of the highest rates of poverty and unemployment in the country. Industrial development is minimal, and infrastructure remains underdeveloped, leading to widespread discontent and a sense of abandonment among the youth. This economic marginalization is compounded by political exclusion, with many in the South East feeling disenfranchised and underrepresented in the federal government. The lack of significant political representation exacerbates feelings of alienation and injustice, creating a fertile ground for radicalization and the emergence of violent groups.<sup>811</sup>

Ethnic nationalism and the resurgence of Biafran agitation have also significantly contributed to the rise of unknown gunmen. The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), a secessionist group advocating for the independence of Biafra, has gained substantial support in the South East. IPOB's calls for self-determination and secession resonate deeply with many in the region, particularly the youth who feel that their future is bleak under the current Nigerian state. The activities of IPOB and its armed wing, the Eastern Security Network (ESN), have led to frequent clashes with Nigerian security forces. The government's heavy-handed approach to suppressing pro-Biafra movements has further radicalized elements within the movement, leading them to resort to violence. The killing and arrest of IPOB members by security forces have created martyrs, fueling a cycle of violence and retribution.<sup>912</sup> This conflict between IPOB and the Nigerian state has significantly contributed to the rise of unknown gunmen, who often act under the guise of Biafran agitation.

Institutional weaknesses and failures in law enforcement and justice have also played a crucial role in the proliferation of unknown gunmen. The police force in the South East is often under-resourced, poorly trained, and plagued by corruption. This ineffectiveness has led to a loss of public confidence in the state's ability to maintain order and provide security. The inadequacy of the police is compounded by a dysfunctional judicial system characterized by delays and corruption. Criminals often go unpunished, and justice is seldom served, leading to a culture of impunity. This lack of accountability encourages more criminal activities and vigilantism. As a result, many communities take the law into their own hands, leading to the rise of armed groups that operate outside the purview of the state. These groups, often referred to as unknown gunmen, fill the security vacuum left by the state's failure to enforce law and order effectively.

Socio-economic challenges such as high unemployment and poverty levels have driven many young people in the South East towards criminal activities and militancy. With limited legitimate opportunities for employment and economic advancement, many youths see joining armed groups as a means of survival and financial gain. The promise of quick money and a sense of belonging provided by these groups can be compelling incentives for disenfranchised youths. Educational disparities also play a role, as limited access to quality education reduces the chances for upward social mobility. Uneducated and disenfranchised youth are more susceptible to radicalization and criminality. The socio-economic environment in the South East, characterized by widespread poverty, unemployment, and lack of educational opportunities, creates a breeding ground for the rise of unknown gunmen.

Political manipulation and corruption further exacerbate the security situation in the South East. Local politicians and elites sometimes manipulate violent groups for their own ends, such as gaining political leverage or settling personal scores. This politicization of violence contributes to the proliferation and empowerment of unknown gunmen. During election periods, politicians have been known to arm and finance thugs to intimidate opponents and influence outcomes. These armed groups often turn rogue and continue their activities post-election, contributing to the general insecurity in the region. Corruption at various levels of government also siphons resources away from essential services and security, weakening the state's capacity to respond to security threats effectively. The involvement of political actors in the activities of armed groups complicates efforts to address the issue and further entrenches the culture of violence and impunity.

### **Unknown Gunmen Impact on communities and governance**

The activities of unknown gunmen in South East Nigeria reveal complex dynamics that profoundly impact communities and governance in the region. These gunmen, often associated with acts of violence, have raised significant security concerns and socio-political implications. Firstly, the activities of unknown gunmen have led to heightened insecurity and fear within communities. Incidents such as targeted attacks on security personnel, government officials, and civilians have destabilized local populations, disrupting daily life and economic activities. The fear of violence has prompted some communities to adopt self-defense measures, further fracturing social cohesion and trust.

Secondly, these activities challenge governance structures and authority. Government responses to the violence, including security crackdowns and emergency measures, sometimes exacerbate tensions and human rights concerns. The presence of unknown gunmen underscores governance weaknesses in maintaining law and order, prompting debates on security sector reform and community policing strategies.<sup>13</sup>

Thirdly, the gunmen's actions have political ramifications, influencing local and regional elections, governance dynamics, and inter-communal relations. Alleged links between gunmen and political factions raise suspicions of manipulation and coercion, impacting democratic processes and public trust in political institutions. The influence of these gunmen highlights governance challenges in ensuring fair and transparent electoral practices and addressing political grievances effectively.

Lastly, economic impacts are evident as businesses and investments face disruption and uncertainty due to insecurity. Vital economic sectors such as agriculture, trade, and tourism suffer from decreased productivity and investor confidence. The economic fallout exacerbates socio-economic inequalities and undermines efforts for sustainable development in affected communities.<sup>14</sup>

### **Responses from government and law enforcement**

The responses from government and law enforcement to the activities of unknown gunmen in South East Nigeria have been varied, reflecting the complexity and challenges posed by these security threats. Firstly, government responses have often included deployment of security forces to affected areas in efforts to quell violence and restore order. These operations aim to apprehend perpetrators, recover weapons, and dismantle criminal networks involved in the attacks. However, these measures have failed and sometimes been criticized for heavy-handedness, leading to allegations of human rights abuses and further alienating local populations.<sup>15</sup>

Secondly, there have been calls for enhanced intelligence gathering and cooperation between security agencies to better understand and counter the activities of unknown gunmen. Intelligence-led operations are crucial in identifying and preempting potential threats, but the effectiveness of such efforts can be hindered by logistical challenges, inadequate resources, and sometimes, lack of trust between security agencies and local communities.<sup>16</sup>

Thirdly, legal responses have included efforts to prosecute arrested suspects through established judicial processes. Legal frameworks are essential in ensuring accountability and justice for victims of violence, but the

judicial system's capacity and efficiency in handling cases related to armed insurgency and terrorism remain areas of concern.

Fourthly, government initiatives have aimed at addressing underlying socio-economic factors contributing to insecurity, such as youth unemployment and poverty. Programs focusing on job creation, vocational training, and community development seek to provide alternatives to young people susceptible to recruitment by criminal elements. However, the impact of these initiatives has been limited by funding constraints, implementation challenges, and the persistent security threat posed by unknown gunmen.

Lastly, there have been diplomatic efforts to seek regional and international cooperation in tackling cross-border criminal activities and arms trafficking that may fuel the activities of unknown gunmen. Collaborative efforts with neighboring countries and international organizations aim to strengthen border security and disrupt illicit networks involved in the proliferation of weapons and criminal activities.<sup>17</sup>

### Conclusion

The study set out to examine the activities of unknown gunmen in South East Nigeria from 2020 to 2023, shedding light on their multifaceted impacts and the complex socio-political dynamics underlying their emergence. The primary objective was to analyze the root causes of insecurity in the region, emphasizing historical grievances, socio-economic challenges, institutional weaknesses, political manipulation, and external influences. The research findings underscored the profound disruptions caused by these gunmen, ranging from heightened insecurity and economic setbacks to challenges in governance and community resilience. The interplay of factors such as ethnic nationalism, economic marginalization, and institutional failures has created a volatile environment conducive to violence, complicating efforts to restore peace and stability.

Furthermore, the study highlighted the varied responses from government and law enforcement, encompassing security operations, intelligence gathering, legal proceedings, socio-economic initiatives, and regional cooperation. While these responses have shown some effectiveness in containing immediate threats, persistent challenges such as human rights abuses, governance deficiencies, and socio-economic disparities continue to undermine long-term security objectives. Moving forward, addressing these security challenges requires holistic strategies that integrate robust law enforcement with socio-economic development, governance reforms, and inclusive dialogue to address underlying grievances and build resilient communities capable of withstanding future threats. By fostering trust, accountability, and equitable opportunities, South East Nigeria can embark on a path towards sustainable peace and prosperity for all its inhabitants

### Endnote

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