



Border Governance and National Security in Nigeria: Evidence from the Operations of the Nigeria Immigration Service in Katsina State

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Abstract

Border control has become an increasingly important component of national security strategy as states confront the growing challenges of irregular migration, transnational organised crime, arms trafficking and violent extremism. In Nigeria, these challenges are particularly pronounced along the country's northern borders, where porous frontiers continue to facilitate cross-border criminal activities despite several institutional and policy interventions. This article examines the role of the Nigeria Immigration Service in strengthening national security through border control in Katsina State between 2019 and 2023. Unlike previous studies that relied primarily on field surveys, the article adopts a qualitative documentary research design based entirely on secondary sources, including peer-reviewed literature, government publications, policy documents, reports of international organisations, and security assessments. The study is anchored on Routine Activity Theory to explain how deficiencies in capable guardianship create opportunities for cross-border criminality. Evidence from the reviewed literature indicates that although the Nigeria Immigration Service has introduced reforms such as biometric border management systems, intelligence-led surveillance and interagency collaboration, its effectiveness continues to be constrained by inadequate manpower, limited technological infrastructure, corruption, weak institutional coordination and the proliferation of informal crossing routes. The review further reveals that border insecurity in Katsina State is sustained by the interaction of institutional weaknesses, socio-economic realities and the adaptive strategies of transnational criminal networks operating across the Nigeria-Niger border. The article concludes that strengthening border governance requires more than enforcement measures; it demands integrated border management, improved intelligence sharing, sustained technological investment, stronger interagency coordination and active participation of border communities. These measures are essential for enhancing national security and promoting effective border governance in Nigeria.

Keywords: Border Governance, Border Security, National Security.



1.0 Introduction

Border control has become an indispensable component of contemporary national security as states increasingly confront complex transnational threats that transcend territorial boundaries. The expansion of irregular migration, organised crime, terrorism, human trafficking, illicit arms flows and drug smuggling has transformed border governance from a traditional immigration function into a multidimensional security imperative. Advances in transportation, communication technologies and regional integration have facilitated legitimate cross-border movement while simultaneously providing opportunities for criminal organisations to exploit weak border governance systems (Andreas, 2022; Betts, 2021). Consequently, governments across the world have increasingly adopted integrated border management strategies that combine surveillance technologies, intelligence gathering, interagency collaboration and international cooperation to strengthen border security without undermining lawful mobility and economic exchange.

Globally, evidence suggests that effective border governance extends beyond physical barriers and enforcement operations. The International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2024) observes that migrant smuggling networks have become increasingly sophisticated, operating across multiple jurisdictions and adapting rapidly to changing border enforcement measures. Similarly, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2023) notes that organised criminal groups increasingly integrate human trafficking, illicit financial flows, arms trafficking and drug smuggling into interconnected transnational networks that exploit governance deficiencies along international borders. These developments have shifted scholarly and policy attention from conventional border policing towards intelligence-led, technology-driven and collaborative approaches that strengthen institutional resilience while promoting legitimate migration and trade.

Across Africa, border governance presents distinctive challenges arising from extensive porous frontiers, weak institutional capacity, limited technological infrastructure and enduring socio-economic vulnerabilities. Colonial boundary demarcations created borders that frequently divide culturally homogeneous communities, thereby encouraging continuous cross-border social and economic interactions that often occur outside formal regulatory systems (Adepoju, 2015). The Sahel region has become particularly vulnerable due to persistent armed conflicts,



terrorism, irregular migration and illicit trafficking networks operating across poorly governed territories (International Crisis Group, 2023). These conditions have increased pressure on national border management institutions while simultaneously exposing limitations in existing security architectures.

The West African sub-region presents additional complexities because the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Protocol on Free Movement promotes regional integration through unrestricted movement of persons among member states. While this framework facilitates trade, labour mobility and regional cooperation, it also creates opportunities for transnational criminal networks to exploit weaknesses in border administration where surveillance and institutional coordination remain inadequate (Okunade & Ogunnubi, 2019). Consequently, border management within West Africa requires balancing regional integration objectives with national security priorities through effective intelligence sharing, institutional collaboration and coordinated border governance.

Nigeria occupies a strategic position within these regional security dynamics because it shares approximately 4,047 kilometres of land borders with the Republic of Benin, Niger Republic, Chad and Cameroon. These extensive borders traverse forests, deserts, rivers and sparsely populated settlements that remain difficult to monitor effectively. Numerous studies have shown that porous borders have facilitated the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, irregular migration, fuel smuggling, human trafficking and the infiltration of armed groups responsible for insurgency, banditry and kidnapping across different parts of the country (Eke, 2018; Onuoha, 2020). Although successive governments have introduced policy initiatives, including the Integrated Border Management Strategy, the 2019 land border closure, electronic border management systems and enhanced interagency collaboration, available evidence indicates that criminal networks have demonstrated remarkable adaptability by shifting operations to informal crossing routes and exploiting institutional weaknesses (Ezeibe et al., 2020; World Bank, 2021).

The Nigeria Immigration Service (NIS) occupies a central position within Nigeria's border governance framework through its statutory responsibility for migration management, border surveillance, immigration enforcement and collaboration with other national security agencies. In recent years, the Service has implemented several institutional reforms, including biometric



enrolment systems, electronic passport administration, Advance Passenger Information platforms and intelligence-based border monitoring. Despite these initiatives, operational effectiveness continues to be constrained by inadequate manpower, insufficient logistics, limited surveillance technologies, corruption, weak interagency coordination and the existence of numerous unapproved border routes that undermine effective migration control (Akinyemi, 2021; Salihu, 2022).

These challenges are particularly evident in Katsina State, which shares an extensive international boundary with the Niger Republic and remains one of Nigeria's most strategically important border states. Border communities such as Jibia and Mai'Adua serve as major transit corridors for legitimate trade and population mobility but have also become important routes for irregular migration, arms trafficking, cattle rustling, banditry and other forms of transnational organised crime. The deterioration of security within the North-West between 2019 and 2023 further demonstrated the strategic relationship between effective border governance and internal security, as criminal groups increasingly exploited unregulated crossing points to evade security operations and sustain cross-border criminal networks (International Crisis Group, 2020; SBM Intelligence, 2021).

Although border control has attracted considerable scholarly attention, existing studies remain characterised by three important limitations. First, much of the literature adopts broad national or regional perspectives, with limited emphasis on the operational realities confronting frontline border institutions. Second, many empirical investigations rely predominantly on primary field surveys, while relatively few synthesise the growing body of documentary evidence generated by governments, international organisations and recent scholarly research. Third, insufficient attention has been devoted to understanding how institutional capacity, intelligence-led border management and evolving transnational criminal strategies interact to influence national security outcomes in strategically significant border environments such as Katsina State.

1.1 Conceptual Discourse on Border Control and National Security

Border control has evolved considerably from its traditional function of regulating the movement of people and goods across territorial boundaries into a comprehensive governance



mechanism that safeguards sovereignty, facilitates legitimate mobility and addresses multidimensional security threats. Contemporary scholarship increasingly recognises that effective border control extends beyond physical checkpoints and immigration inspections to encompass intelligence gathering, technological surveillance, institutional coordination and international cooperation (Andreas, 2022; Akinyemi, 2021). This broader understanding reflects the changing nature of global security, where criminal organisations, terrorist networks and irregular migration increasingly operate across national jurisdictions, exploiting weaknesses in border governance systems. Consequently, border control has become an essential instrument through which states seek to balance national security objectives with international trade, regional integration and human mobility.

The concept of national security has similarly undergone significant transformation. Earlier perspectives largely equated national security with military defence and territorial protection against external aggression. Contemporary security literature, however, adopts a broader conception that incorporates political stability, economic resilience, public safety, institutional effectiveness and protection against transnational threats (Buzan et al., 1998; Nwolise, 2006). Within this expanded framework, border management assumes strategic importance because the effectiveness of border institutions directly influences a state's capacity to prevent terrorism, organised crime, illicit arms trafficking, irregular migration and other cross-border security threats. National security therefore depends not only on military capability but also on the effectiveness of civilian institutions responsible for regulating cross-border movements and maintaining territorial integrity.

The relationship between border control and national security has become increasingly evident in both developed and developing countries. Adamson (2019) argues that contemporary states increasingly securitise migration by integrating border governance into broader national security strategies. This approach reflects growing concerns that irregular migration may facilitate transnational criminal activities, terrorism financing and human trafficking. Goodman (2024) similarly observes that many governments have expanded intelligence-led border operations and deployed advanced surveillance technologies to strengthen border resilience against evolving security threats. Although these strategies have enhanced monitoring capabilities, evidence suggests that enforcement-oriented approaches alone rarely eliminate



cross-border crime because criminal networks continuously adapt by identifying alternative routes and exploiting institutional weaknesses. Consequently, contemporary border governance increasingly emphasises integrated border management that combines intelligence, technology, international cooperation and community engagement.

This challenge is particularly pronounced across Africa, where many international boundaries traverse difficult terrain and divide historically integrated ethnic and commercial communities. The colonial origins of African borders created extensive frontiers that remain difficult to monitor because communities on both sides often maintain longstanding economic, cultural and familial relationships (Adepoju, 2015). These realities have encouraged substantial informal cross-border trade and migration that coexist alongside formal border systems. While such interactions contribute significantly to regional economic integration, they also create opportunities for organised criminal groups to conceal illicit activities within legitimate cross-border movements. The Sahel region has become especially vulnerable as armed groups, traffickers and insurgent organisations exploit weak state presence and limited institutional capacity to establish transnational operational networks (International Crisis Group, 2023).

Within West Africa, implementation of the ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement has further complicated border governance. The protocol remains fundamental to regional integration by promoting free movement of persons, trade and investment among member states. Nevertheless, weak institutional capacity within several border agencies has limited governments' ability to distinguish efficiently between legitimate movement and criminal activities. Okunade and Ogunnubi (2019) contend that porous borders across West Africa continue to facilitate smuggling, irregular migration, trafficking in persons and proliferation of small arms, thereby increasing security vulnerabilities. The policy challenge therefore lies not in restricting regional mobility but in strengthening border governance institutions capable of simultaneously facilitating lawful movement while disrupting transnational criminal networks.

Nigeria exemplifies many of these regional challenges because of its strategic geographical position and extensive international borders with Benin, Niger, Chad and Cameroon. Numerous studies associate Nigeria's porous borders with the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, irregular migration, fuel smuggling, terrorism and banditry, particularly across the northern region (Eke, 2018; Onuoha, 2020). Criminal organisations increasingly exploit



unapproved crossing routes, inadequate surveillance technologies and institutional coordination gaps to evade security agencies. The 2019 land border closure demonstrated both the opportunities and limitations of enforcement-centred border policies. Although the policy reduced some categories of smuggling, it also encouraged diversion to informal crossing routes, confirming that border security requires adaptive and intelligence-driven responses rather than isolated enforcement operations (Ezeibe et al., 2020).

Within Nigeria's border governance architecture, the Nigeria Immigration Service occupies a pivotal institutional position through its statutory responsibilities for migration management, border surveillance, intelligence gathering and enforcement of immigration laws. Recent institutional reforms, including biometric registration systems, electronic passport administration, border information management systems and enhanced intelligence collaboration, have strengthened aspects of migration management (Akinyemi, 2021). Nevertheless, empirical evidence consistently identifies significant operational constraints, including manpower shortages, inadequate logistics, obsolete surveillance infrastructure, corruption, insufficient funding and weak interagency coordination (Salihu, 2022). These limitations reduce institutional capacity to monitor numerous informal crossing routes that continue to facilitate transnational organised crime.

Katsina State represents one of Nigeria's most strategically important border environments because of its long international boundary with the Niger Republic and its proximity to the unstable Sahel region. Border communities such as Jibia and Mai'Adua simultaneously function as centres of legitimate commerce and important transit corridors for irregular migration, arms trafficking, livestock rustling and cross-border banditry. Reports by the International Crisis Group (2020) and SBM Intelligence (2021) demonstrate that armed groups increasingly exploit these border corridors to obtain weapons, recruit collaborators and evade security operations. These developments reinforce the proposition that border insecurity is not solely a consequence of porous frontiers but also reflects broader institutional deficiencies, socio-economic conditions and the adaptive capacity of transnational criminal organisations.

1.2 Theoretical Framework

This article is anchored on Routine Activity Theory (RAT) developed by Cohen and Felson



(1979), which explains criminal behaviour as the convergence of three essential elements: a motivated offender, a suitable target and the absence of capable guardianship. The theory argues that crime is not determined solely by offenders' motivations but by environmental conditions that create opportunities for criminal activities. Consequently, strengthening guardianship through surveillance, regulation and institutional presence reduces opportunities for criminal behaviour. Although originally developed to explain conventional crimes within urban environments, Routine Activity Theory has increasingly been applied to transnational crimes such as human trafficking, arms smuggling, drug trafficking and irregular migration because these offences similarly depend on opportunities created by weak surveillance and inadequate institutional oversight (Felson & Clarke, 1998). Within border governance literature, capable guardianship extends beyond physical security personnel to include intelligence systems, technological surveillance, interagency cooperation, effective legal frameworks and active community participation in reporting suspicious activities. Border institutions therefore function as guardians whose effectiveness determines the extent to which criminal organisations can exploit territorial boundaries.

The Nigerian border environment reflects many of the conditions identified by Routine Activity Theory. Nigeria shares extensive land borders characterised by difficult terrain, numerous informal crossing routes and border communities with longstanding socio-economic interactions across national boundaries. These conditions create suitable opportunities for organised criminal groups involved in arms trafficking, irregular migration, livestock rustling, fuel smuggling, kidnapping and the movement of violent extremist groups. Where surveillance infrastructure is weak, institutional coordination is limited and border patrols are insufficient, the absence of capable guardianship enables these criminal networks to operate with relatively low risk of detection. The operational responsibilities of the Nigeria Immigration Service correspond directly with the theory's notion of capable guardianship. Through border surveillance, migration regulation, intelligence gathering, biometric verification and collaboration with other security agencies, the Service is expected to reduce opportunities for transnational crimes by increasing the risks associated with illegal border crossings. However, evidence from Nigeria indicates that inadequate manpower, obsolete surveillance technologies, corruption, logistical deficiencies and fragmented interagency coordination continue to



constrain institutional effectiveness, thereby creating conditions that criminal networks readily exploit (Akinyemi, 2021; Onuoha, 2020). The persistence of informal border routes in Katsina State further illustrates how deficiencies in guardianship provide opportunities for organised criminal activities despite existing border control policies.

1.3 Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative documentary research design based exclusively on secondary data. Relevant data were obtained from peer-reviewed journal articles, books, government publications, policy documents, reports of international organisations, and publications from security institutions, including the Nigeria Immigration Service (NIS), International Organization for Migration (IOM), United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), International Crisis Group (ICG), World Bank, and ECOWAS. Data were analysed using thematic content analysis, which involved identifying, comparing, and synthesising recurring themes on border governance, institutional capacity, transnational crime, and national security.

1.4 Border Control, the Nigeria Immigration Service and National Security in Katsina State

The effectiveness of border control is increasingly recognised as a critical determinant of national security, particularly in countries confronted by transnational criminal networks operating across porous frontiers. Evidence from the literature demonstrates that the relationship between border governance and security extends beyond territorial protection to include the regulation of migration, disruption of organised crime, protection of economic interests and preservation of state authority. Within Nigeria, these responsibilities are largely vested in the Nigeria Immigration Service (NIS), whose operational effectiveness significantly influences the country's capacity to respond to emerging cross-border threats.

1.5 Border Control and National Security Outcomes

Available evidence indicates that improvements in border governance contribute significantly to national security by restricting the movement of illicit goods, weapons and criminal actors. Intelligence-led border management, biometric identification systems and coordinated surveillance have enhanced migration control in several jurisdictions by improving the



detection of irregular border movements and strengthening institutional responsiveness (IOM, 2024; UNODC, 2023). Nigeria has similarly introduced reforms such as electronic passport systems, biometric verification, Advance Passenger Information platforms and the Border Information System to modernise migration management and improve intelligence collection. These initiatives have strengthened monitoring at designated border posts and enhanced information sharing among security institutions.

Despite these reforms, existing studies consistently demonstrate that institutional improvements have not translated into comprehensive border security because criminal organisations continuously adapt their operational strategies. Rather than eliminating illegal activities, intensified enforcement has frequently displaced smuggling routes towards informal crossing points characterised by limited surveillance and weak institutional presence (Ezeibe et al., 2020). This pattern is particularly evident along the Nigeria–Niger border, where numerous unapproved routes continue to facilitate the movement of small arms, irregular migrants, livestock and contraband goods. The available evidence therefore suggests that border security depends not merely on increasing enforcement activities but on developing adaptive institutional capabilities capable of responding to the evolving operational methods of transnational criminal organisations.

1.6 Institutional Capacity of the Nigeria Immigration Service

The literature identifies the Nigeria Immigration Service as the principal institution responsible for regulating cross-border movement and enforcing immigration laws. Beyond routine immigration functions, the Service contributes to national security through border surveillance, intelligence gathering, document verification and collaboration with other security agencies. Recent institutional reforms have demonstrated government commitment to strengthening migration governance through technological innovation and integrated border management.

Nevertheless, empirical studies consistently identify institutional capacity deficits that continue to undermine operational effectiveness. Inadequate manpower remains one of the most persistent challenges, particularly across remote border locations where relatively few personnel are required to monitor extensive and geographically difficult frontiers (Akinyemi, 2021). These shortages reduce patrol frequency, weaken intelligence gathering and increase



reliance on static checkpoints that are easily circumvented by organised criminal groups.

Technological limitations further constrain institutional performance. While automated migration systems have improved operations at major international entry points, many land border posts continue to experience inadequate surveillance infrastructure, unreliable communication systems and insufficient operational logistics. Such deficiencies reduce real-time situational awareness and delay operational responses to emerging security threats. Institutional effectiveness is further weakened by fragmented intelligence sharing and overlapping operational mandates among border management agencies, limiting coordinated responses to increasingly sophisticated criminal networks (Salihu, 2022). These findings indicate that strengthening border governance requires sustained investment not only in technology but also in institutional coordination, professional capacity development and operational logistics.

1.7 Border Governance in Katsina State

Katsina State occupies a strategically important position within Nigeria's border security architecture because it shares a lengthy international boundary with the Niger Republic and lies adjacent to the unstable Sahel region. Border communities, particularly Jibia and Mai'Adua, serve simultaneously as centres of legitimate commercial exchange and transit corridors for irregular migration and organised criminal activities. Their geographical location has consequently elevated their strategic importance within Nigeria's national security framework.

Evidence reviewed for this study indicates that insecurity within Katsina State reflects the interaction of geographical, institutional and socio-economic factors rather than border porosity alone. The existence of numerous informal crossing routes, extensive rural terrain and longstanding cross-border socio-cultural relationships complicates effective border regulation. These conditions provide criminal organisations with opportunities to evade official checkpoints while maintaining access to local support networks and commercial activities that conceal illicit operations.

Reports by the International Crisis Group (2020) and SBM Intelligence (2021) further demonstrate that armed bandit groups operating across the North-West increasingly exploit cross-border mobility to acquire weapons, evade military operations and establish transnational



logistical networks. Consequently, border insecurity in Katsina should be understood as a regional governance challenge requiring coordinated responses extending beyond conventional immigration enforcement. This finding reinforces growing scholarly consensus that sustainable border security depends upon intelligence integration, regional cooperation and community participation rather than isolated enforcement measures.

1.8 Policy Implications for Integrated Border Management

The reviewed evidence demonstrates that effective border governance requires an integrated institutional approach combining enforcement, intelligence, technology, diplomacy and community engagement. Contemporary border management increasingly emphasises risk-based surveillance supported by real-time intelligence systems capable of identifying evolving criminal patterns before they materialise into security threats. International experience similarly demonstrates that technological innovation produces optimal results only when supported by effective institutional coordination, adequate funding and continuous personnel development.

For Nigeria, strengthening the operational capacity of the Nigeria Immigration Service should remain central to broader security sector reforms. Investment in surveillance technologies, unmanned aerial systems, biometric verification, geographic information systems, artificial intelligence-assisted border monitoring and interoperable intelligence platforms would significantly improve operational effectiveness. Equally important is strengthening intelligence sharing among the Nigeria Immigration Service, Nigeria Customs Service, Nigeria Police Force, Defence Intelligence Agency and the Armed Forces through institutionalised joint operational frameworks.

The evidence also demonstrates that border communities should be regarded as strategic security partners rather than passive recipients of government policies. Community-based intelligence mechanisms, strengthened public trust and expanded socio-economic opportunities can reduce local support for transnational criminal activities while improving the quality of information available to security agencies. Given the transnational nature of contemporary border threats, sustained bilateral cooperation between Nigeria and neighbouring states remains indispensable for disrupting criminal networks operating across shared frontiers.



The literature consistently demonstrates that effective border governance cannot be achieved through enforcement measures alone. Rather, national security outcomes depend upon the interaction of institutional capacity, technological innovation, intelligence-led operations, regional cooperation and community participation. Strengthening these interconnected dimensions offers the most sustainable pathway towards improving border security and mitigating transnational threats within Katsina State and across Nigeria's international borders.

1.9 Conclusion and Policy Implications

Although the Nigeria Immigration Service has introduced important reforms, including biometric border management systems, intelligence-led surveillance and enhanced interagency collaboration, persistent challenges such as inadequate manpower, limited technological infrastructure, corruption, weak institutional coordination and the proliferation of informal border routes continue to undermine operational effectiveness. The analysis further reveals that the security challenges confronting Katsina State are shaped by the interaction of institutional limitations, difficult geographical terrain, socio-economic realities and the adaptive strategies of transnational criminal networks operating across the Nigeria–Niger border. These findings suggest that enforcement-centred approaches alone cannot sustainably address contemporary border threats. Rather, effective border governance requires an integrated framework that combines technological innovation, intelligence-driven operations, institutional capacity building, regional cooperation and community participation.

From a policy perspective, the findings highlight the need for sustained investment in modern surveillance technologies, integrated border information systems and continuous professional development for border personnel. Equally important is strengthening intelligence sharing among border management agencies, institutionalising joint border operations and deepening bilateral cooperation with neighbouring states, particularly the Niger Republic. Finally, government should promote structured community engagement programmes that encourage information sharing and strengthen public confidence in border institutions.



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