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ABSTRACT

Hostage-taking and kidnapping have become aggressively rampant in Nigeria, particularly in the southwest, with a resultant inauguration of Western Nigeria Security Network (WNSN), codenamed 'Amotekun' in Southwest Nigeria. Despite the apparent success of WNSN in this region to stem these ills, it is regarded as a counter-culturist and 'next felony,' without considering how it has created and continues to offer another paradigm for citizens' protection in the face of numerous security challenges. Such prevalent perceptions are fraught with claims that WNSN is a product of unconstitutionality, and ethnic mingling. Therefore, this paper beams its searchlight on the WNSN operations in Southwest Nigeria, a region that has recently become a haven for kidnappers. It examines the evolution of the WNSN as a regional security scheme to combat rising insecurity and proposes an alternative initiative to address regional security concerns.

Keywords: WNSN, *amotekun*, regional security, southwest, nigeria.

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ABSTRACT

Hostage-taking and kidnapping have become aggressively rampant in Nigeria, particularly in the southwest, with a resultant inauguration of Western Nigeria Security Network (WNSN), codenamed 'Amotekun' in Southwest Nigeria. Despite the apparent success of WNSN in this region to stem these ills, it is regarded as a counter-culturist and 'next felony,' without considering how it has created and continues to offer another paradigm for citizens' protection in the face of numerous security challenges. Such prevalent perceptions are fraught with claims that WNSN is a product of unconstitutionality, and ethnic mingling. Therefore, this paper beams its searchlight on the WNSN operations in Southwest Nigeria, a region that has recently become a haven for kidnappers. It examines the evolution of the WNSN as a regional security scheme to combat rising insecurity and proposes an alternative initiative to address regional security concerns. The survey evidenced that WNSN has played a key role in detecting kidnappers' hideouts, gathering intelligence, and constantly rescuing kidnapped victims from the whims and caprices of their tormentors. It has also continued to provide robust intelligence on kidnappers to security agencies such as the Nigerian Police Force (NPF), State Security Service (SSS), and Nigeria Security and Civil Defense Corps (NSCDC), and other special forces. The paper concludes that WNSN is a positive and needful response to the long-running debate over community policing, functioning as an alternative approach to securing Nigeria against the numerous security challenges bedeviling the country.

Keywords: WNSN, amotekun, regional security, southwest, nigeria.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The collapse of state power, particularly in the realm of law enforcement and security, has been at the center of scholarly and ideological discussions concerning the future of Africa's politics and governance ever since the Cold War ended (Nolte, 2007). Certainly, the hand of time has long been speeded up in terms of various security concerns in Nigeria. Lately, insurgency, armed robbery, cattle rustling, herdsman-farmer clash, piracy, rape, human trafficking, domestic violence, and kidnapping are just a few of the issues facing governance. These issues have, understandably, threatened the country's corporate existence spanning over six decades; there has also been the general issue of the country failing to have the type of robust security framework/architecture required to boost the internal and national security. Intrinsically, as part of the contractual allegiance it owes her citizens, as exclusively outlined in Chapter 2, Section 14, (2a) of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 as amended, 'the fundamental aim of Federal and State governments will be the security and welfare of the people', and the government is seen rising to the challenge of adopting a series of tougher security measures and strategies to curtail security threats.

It is however apparent that these initiatives and strategies have consistently been thwarted by diverse security challenges embroiling the nation.

Consequently, it has sparked continued debates about the efficacy of the strategies adopted to combat security challenges headlong. However, formal state institutions are mostly debated when it comes to the provision of public goods, particularly security (Agbiboa, 2019). Among such queries was raised by Agwanwo (2014) concerning Nigeria is experiencing very serious security and crime issues, which appear to be dampening the institutional capacity of the criminal justice system, calling into question the role and ability of the police to protect citizens' lives and property. Congruently, the majority opined that the police alone can no longer exterminate the innumerable security threats directed at the nation.

Correspondingly, Ekiti state Governor, Dr. John Kayode Fayemi while featuring on the July edition of the monthly programme tagged 'Meet Your Governor' aired by all media outfits in the state, argues that the structural operation of the federal police is grossly inadequate to secure the entire nation (Independent Newspaper, 2019). Similarly, this view is affirmed by Badejo (2020) who states that "Nigeria is politically charged and lacks safety and security, which is an understatement. Terrorists are competing to see who can kill more people than the other. Many nationalities' drums of separation have recently become louder." Kidnapping, which was once limited to the Niger Delta, has now made travelling throughout the country extremely dangerous. However, in comparison to the rest of the country, the southwestern region had previously been relatively peaceful. Surprisingly, the region which was once known for its limpid ambience has recently witnessed weird and outlandish kidnapping operations.

Informed by the aforementioned issue, the six southwestern governors of Ekiti, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Osun, and Oyo States converged in January 2020 to launch a regional security outfit, Western Nigeria Security Network (WNSN), in an effort to rid the southwestern region of all forms of criminality as well as provide a long-term alternative to the country's weak security architecture. Indeed, it is not arbitrary to argue that the fact that the southwestern region is home to millions of people, predominantly the Yoruba,

with shared ancestry, beliefs, values, and culture contributed to the initiative's speedy endorsement and establishment. The obvious affinities amongst these governors and the governed stimulated the timely and cooperative responses needed to obliterate the vehicles of insecurities in the region, in addition to the shared historical antecedents and geopolitical factors. Likewise, the integrative synergy of the region becomes apropos because of its obligatory stance to enhance economic growth and development; hence the necessity to adopt a well-articulated strategy that will enable the establishment of a solid socioeconomic foundation for the region and future generations (Nwoko & Osiki, 2016). Consequently, the major stakeholders in this region have joined forces to promote and ensure the security of investments and other economic activities, resulting in the WNSN initiative (Nwoko, 2021). Pertinently, the WNSN scheme is viewed as a response to recurring security challenges which not only tops the list but has become a recurrence episode in the region.

Basically, by virtue of the geographic area of southwest Nigeria, virtually all the communities have been compelled to comply with the demands of the marauding kidnapers, and consequently, the region has since become a haven for kidnapers. Subsequently, all manners of kidnapping operations have been successfully carried out. Previously, wealthy members of the society were the targets of kidnap gangs, but this has quickly evolved as everyone has become their target, not even the farmers working on their farmland, traditional rulers in their palaces, and petty traders in their shops are spared. Everyone has become easy targets for kidnapers in the region. As a matter of fact, the issue of kidnap has become a very worrisome occurrence, particularly because the region was once regarded as the most peaceful in the country as a whole, as it no longer enjoys the peace for which it was known. As a result, everyone, regardless of socioeconomic status, is now so fearful that they are unable to go about their normal lives for fear of becoming the next victim of this antisocial trend of 'kidnapping.'

Following this, it is not farfetched to suggest that the residents of these states who are subjected to incessant kidnap and hostage-taking are frequently terrified and frightened. As such, kidnapping is viewed as one way in which states and their residents are challenged. These challenges are evidential proof of loss of state authority, which eventually results in economic loss, human rights violations because the freedom and security of the citizens are not guaranteed, and instability, which frequently results in regional and national regrets. States confronted with ceaseless kidnap, which eventually eventuate in the breakdown of state power face enormous human security challenges that cannot be gainsaid. To this end, it behoves these states to obligatorily develop strategies to combat kidnapping in order to ensure protection. In contrast, Bamidele (2017:86) argues that ‘the irony of security sector governance and the fight against criminality in Nigeria is that non-state security groups, such as the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), also known as *Yan Gora*, are frequently overlooked.’

The Western Nigeria Security Network (WNSN), like the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), is a regional security outfit with divisions in all six states of the southwest region. WNSN or *Amotekun* is a group of young people who want to help the police and other security agencies combat kidnapping and other crimes in the region. However, as a mechanism for combating kidnapping syndicates in the region, the WNSN has elicited mixed feelings and reactions. Vast studies on non-state security organizations and informal security outfits have a tended to emphasize the detrimental effects, such as the commission of human rights crimes, and penchant for extra-judicial killings rather than the crucial roles these groups play in a community's safety and security (Ogbozor, 2016; Basiru & Osunkoya, 2019). Regardless of the castigations trailing the works of non-state security providers, it is evident such community-led groups, aid state security operations led by the Nigeria Police Force (NPF), State Security Service (SSS), Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC), and other special forces in the region. The WNSN

security outfit acts as a lower-level interface between state security agencies and neighbourhoods or hinterlands.

In accordance with the aforementioned, this paper contends that the emergence of WNSN as part of the mechanisms for fighting kidnapping, hostage-taking and other security threats represents a veritable example of a regional response to security challenges, as well as an indication of how kidnapping can be dealt with through regional efforts and knowledge. It also demonstrates or attests to the reality that offering security has never been a state monopoly, but rather a hyphenated field of delivery (Hills, 2009). Correspondingly, the WNSN has been effective in frustrating the activities of kidnappers by laying a marker and dislodging their hideouts in the forests, as well as rescuing a number of victims in their dens, due to its deep knowledge of the local environment and its involvement in the socio-cultural life of the locality. Since the kidnapping in 2006, information about regional security in the southwest has been scarce. In many cases, the government also restricts information about WNSN activities in the region. Even though collecting data on WNSN activities has been difficult due to security concerns, this paper still bases its conclusions on field research supplemented with open-source materials, media reports, official reports, and scholarly works. From April 11 to 29, 2022, research interviews were conducted with the Chairman of the Council of *Amotekun* Commanders in the Southwest region in Akure, Ondo and Ekiti States *Amotekun* Corps (ESAC), including the Commander in Ado-Ekiti, and Oyo State *Amotekun* Corps Commander in Ibadan, as well as the Ogun State police spokesman in Abeokuta.

II. REGIONAL SECURITY: A CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS

The dialogue on regional security initiative is rooted in the heart of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) initiated by Barry Buzan and afterward, advanced by Ole Waever. The duo's idea has since been regarded as part of the Copenhagen School's collective theoretical approach to security. Regional security conceives

securitisation as a more effective countermeasure against terrorism and less difficult to achieve, as well as indirectly implying a broad-spectrum security. Its emergence, centered on numerous security threats and how to counter them, indisputably gave birth to the concept of regional security as a paradigm shift to address challenges confronting every society, particularly at the basic level. In essence, the goal is to develop functional security architecture at the regional level in order to achieve seamless and effective security across the various strata of society. Given their proximity, states have perceived their immediate neighbours as potential sources of threat or protection. Buzan & Waever (2003:229) contend that the relational nature of security makes it impossible to understand the national security patterns of a state without a compact understanding of the pattern of regional security interdependence in which they exist.

Regional security initiatives proponents believe that there should be a focus on the shared pattern of security concerns and interconnection that binds the states together, for it is the primary security concerns that knit them together so closely that their national security cannot pragmatically be considered apart from one another (Buzan, 1991:190). Likewise, Hettne (2000) argues for the importance of dealing with the region's social structures because it is crucially germane for a region to have its own identity, however nascent, as an interdependent state that is distinct and promotes security within a national construct.

Intrinsically, regional security mode or security management effectively makes it possible to get things done regionally because it is a viable channel. Since it involves states within geographical proximity of one another, and as a holistic unit, the security management enables the states to collectively solve their shared security challenges through long-term, resilient, and sustainable solutions. As such, rather than at the national level, the region effectuated an all-round success in achieving security arrangements during the post-second World War for instance. The aptness of these security perceptions is underscored by the growing realization that no

government or authority has the resources to adequately solve all public challenges/problems, and in the case of security, regional people, as stakeholders in their regions, not only understand their neighbourhoods better, but also share the common goal of promoting and protecting them. The understanding at the outset of the fight against kidnapping, and hostage-taking is that, while kidnapping and its variants are the work of marginal syndicates, these people are nonetheless integrated within the region and are not, on the whole, interlopers working alone. As a result, regional security forces, if involved in the fight against kidnapping, could be well-built to serve as an early warning mechanism/system for police and intelligence agencies if they come across information or have concerns about specific individuals or groups (Birt, 2009).

Regional security, inconsequential of the headlines and how it is emphasised, exemplifies a people-centered approach. Irrefutably, security is both desirable and necessary for everyone's survival. This is also true for community security, which represents the collective desire for safety and protection. Per se, regional security can be viewed as a tool for states to protect themselves collectively against a variety of security threats, including kidnapping. However, despite the fact that the WNSN has been heavily promoted as a tenable means for achieving safety against kidnapping in the southwest region, it appears that it has been grossly underutilized to achieve the desired results of fighting headlong and possibly nipping off kidnapping in the region.

Consequently, the meteoric rise in kidnapping cases in the southwest region has left regular Nigerian state security apparatuses overwhelmed and unable to protect the citizenry from the incessant threats posed to the region by the perpetrators of the gruesome cruelty, making it critical to investigate alternative and complementary approaches to enhancing security. Therefore, this paper examines the WNSN in order to contribute to the dialogue on a regional security approach to fight against kidnapping in Nigeria. In particular, this work intends to understand the resort to self-help by the states in the region, as exemplified by WNSN. In the

furtherance of these intentions, this research aims to advance the significant reasons state security agencies should partner with WNSN in their efforts to curtail kidnapping. Regional security or regional security partnerships/cooperative security systems at the regional level extend beyond international politics and into the security sphere. The practice of security cooperation has increased the importance of regional composite security frameworks in combating rising contemporary security challenges. It is assumed that security practices evolve. Proportionately, new security measures are invented, built upon, and gradually added to existing structures to make them more resilient to evolving threats.

To clarify the meaning of region amid so many debates, Agboola (2004) defines region as a flexible concept referring to a continuous and localized area intermediate between national and urban levels. In a not-too-dissimilar assertion, Saferworld (2014: 5) defines security partnership as:

A people-centered approach to addressing insecurity that integrates human security, development, and state-building paradigms, it works by bringing together a diverse range of state and civil society actors from both the demand and supply sides of security to collectively identify root causes of insecurity and develop coordinated responses to them. The approach is based on communities', local governments', and security providers' ability and willingness to address their sources of insecurity. It fosters a favourable environment for broader reforms and more people-centered policies at the sub-national and national levels.

However, swift significance and a major bottom line for regional security have been given appendage due to the incessant occurrence of crimes that have incapacitated both military and paramilitary agencies against their backs. Odewale & Lamidi (2020: 104) succinctly underscore the regional security partnership imperativeness by spotting the fact that:

The recurring decimal of social crimes, such as banditry and kidnapping, among other violent acts, has necessitated the reinvigoration of informal approaches to the security of lives and properties in recent times. Initially, group formations were visible as an unofficial response to criminal threats such as burglary, pot theft, and home-breaking cases. The severity of these crimes also influenced the concept of street policing, which has received little discussion but is evidence-based. Furthermore, its recurrence in various dimensions and forms sparked the current debate on community policing across Nigerian states, with some rapid formation, such as *Hisbah* police among joint task forces in the country. The police-community relations committee, in particular, is a permanent unit for interactions and operations involving communal security issues.

Pertinently, regional security partnerships distinguish between the system-level interaction of national powers, whose capabilities allow them to transcend distance, and the subsystem-level interaction of lesser powers, whose primary security environment is in their local region. The fact that most threats travel more easily over short distances than over long distances, security interdependence is typically patterned into regionally based clusters. As a result, regional security is an obvious matrix of a realistic and useful initiative for enhancing strong regional security, which, of course, speaks volumes and has implications for achieving national security. To accomplish this, regional security requires not only cooperation but also commitment in terms of pooling resources among states within the said constituent to sustain and keep the outfit afloat. More often than not, it also necessitates collaboration with traditional state security agencies, most importantly to achieve a holistic securitization based on long-term partnership and collaboration.

In contrast, the inclusion of the WNSN as a regional security network in Nigeria's southwest has yet to fully embody the type that properly demonstrates bringing on board all of the local community needed to make it an all-inclusive

initiative. Although it is widely acknowledged that regional security is primarily driven by state cooperation, the local people who inhabit its heart have more important roles to play in ensuring its success. Refusal to enlighten them of their expected responsibilities could be detrimental because it has been documented that locals in some communities have conspired with syndicates to kidnap members of their communities rather than work with the WNSN. For instance, Ekiti State Governor Dr. Kayode Fayemi revealed, while hosting members of the Ekiti State Council of Elders in his office on September 7, 2022, that it had been ascertained that local citizens were working with foreign elements to commit the heinous crime of kidnapping in the state, as evidenced by the number of arrests that included some of our own local citizens (Nigerian Tribune, 2022).

Given this, it becomes germanely apropos that local people must be sensitized against collaborating with criminal elements undertaking kidnapping in their vicinity and as well made them aware of the importance of regional security networks in ensuring local people's safety in their various communities. By doing so, they recognize that the benefit far outweighs the shortcoming in such an initiative, and in return, the outfit receives not only the nod but also robust cooperation in making their task of preventing kidnapping an easy one. It is thus conceived that, in order for the regional security network's efforts to stamp out kidnapping in southwest Nigeria, people in the various hinterlands must be given good education and convincing reasons to embrace the initiative as belonging to them, as opposed to the usual mindset they have long nursed against conventional security agencies, summed up in 'cat and dog' coexistence.

Regional security networks in southwest Nigeria are widely misunderstood as having nothing to do with the hinterland communities and instead with the urban cities that serve as state capitals. However, on closer inspection, kidnapping, and hostage-taking are no longer confined to cities; rather, they have spread to the region's hinterlands and forested communities. As a result, residents must be made aware that a

security network has been established to protect them from kidnapers and hostage-takers in such communities. Another bottleneck in the regional security network is citizens' failure and reluctance to provide vital information required to respond aggressively to criminals in their community. This has been found to significantly impede the WNSN's efforts to rid the region of kidnapers. Although some of these bottlenecks may be attributed to a lack of an effective communication strategy and initiative on the part of the Corps and members of the public in the fight against the known and common community nuisance, 'kidnapping.'

While it is critical for the WNSN to reach out to the people for information and appropriate intelligence about their surroundings, the government must equally be ready to provide the outfit with the necessary arms and operational tools to work with, as fighting kidnapers necessitates being overly well equipped and battle-ready (armed to the teeth). By doing so, security can best be promoted and maintained if local people have greater access to the intelligence-gathering process. Collaborations and partnerships with state security agencies can ensure the active participation of the local people in regional security. A strategic partnership between WNSN and state security agencies, in particular, will help people feel more connected to the anti-kidnapping effort. Broadly speaking, community security has embraced the value of partnerships and collaborative policy development and programme delivery, recognizing that the causes of domestic insurgency are diverse and complex, linked to a variety of social and economic conditions beyond the control of security agencies and frequently necessitating a coordinated response (Stabilisation Unit, 2014).

However, noticeably in the Southwest, the fight against kidnapping strategy typically requires NPF, SSS, NSCDC, and other special forces to seek the support of WNSN in gathering intelligence and identifying kidnapers. While WNSN is an important component of community security in practice, its collaboration with state-led security agencies has received far less

attention than other aspects such as community engagement and local problem-solving.

III. THE EVOLUTION, COMPOSITION AND ADMINISTRATION OF WESTERN NIGERIA SECURITY NETWORK

The call for the establishment of the WNSN was first mentioned at the regional security summit held in Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria in June 2019 and attended by all six state governors, dubbed the Development Agenda for Western Nigeria (DAWN). As a result, the security outfit, also known as *Amotekun*, which means leopard in Yoruba, is an operational nomenclature for the WNSN. The leopard represents strength, perseverance, ambition, independence, toughness, patience, wisdom, and fearlessness. The *Amotekun* is also known for its distinct hunting behavior and well-camouflaged appearance, which enable it to defend its territories from intruders. In either case, the animal exudes confidence, strength, and the ability to chase and catch up with prey at lightning speed (Oladele & Adeniran, 2020; Adetunmbi & Adedigba, 2021; Nwoko, 2021).

On January 9, 2020, all the six south-west governors of Ekiti, Ondo, Oyo, Ogun, Osun, and Lagos States unilaterally agreed to the formation of the corps as the first regional security outfit initiated by the South-West geopolitical zone in Nigeria. On the other hand, everyone's mind wanders with the question, why is WNSN in the southwest region? What could have prompted the agitation and subsequent establishment of WNSN? Could it have been precipitated by the shenanigans of the region's gladiators? Without reducing the three questions to probabilities or conjectures, it should be stated that the idea of forming a regional security outfit was motivated by the prevalent pervasive issues and a number of insecurity problems such as herder-farmer clashes, banditry, cultism, armed robbery, kidnapping, and hostage-taking that plagued the region on a regular basis, giving the region the appearance of a battlefield.

In attestation of the bleak security situation that pervades the southwest region and, by extension, Nigeria as a whole, the concept of WNSN regional

security outfit arose as a result of the central government's failure to protect its citizens, and because the region has lost faith in the country's security agencies. Subsequently, they no longer feel secure, necessitating the need for them to seek an alternative. For instance, Nwoko (2021:1) observes that the *Amotekun* initiative arose as a result of the region and the country's deteriorating security situation, which the Nigerian government has demonstrated a lack of capacity to address. In a similar vein, Iwuamadi et al. (2021) argues that the increase in violence in the country has left the centrally-controlled Nigerian state security apparatuses clearly overwhelmed and unable to protect the citizenry from the country's diverse threats. This has increased the desire for polity restructuring and decentralization of the nation's security apparatuses. Following the failure of the central government to meet those desires, the governments of the six states that comprise the country's South West zone established a regional security network, the WNSN, codenamed Operation *Amotekun*.

The WNSN security outfit was designed to accommodate both state and non-state actors, including local hunters, the Oodua People's Congress (OPC), Agbekoya, the Nigeria Security and Civil Defense Corps (NSCDC), vigilante groups, security experts, and other Yoruba socio-cultural groups involved in local security. Not only that, but the group was supposed to work under the supervision of the Nigerian Police Force. According to the country's Inspector General of Police, Mohammed Adamu, the Nigerian Police Force (NPF) will be involved in the recruitment, training, and deployment of personnel assigned to *Amotekun* operations (Izuora, 2020). The plan was to create a framework that would provide the logistics and support needed for effective community policing in the southwest region.

Thus, the WNSN was formed to supplement the activities of traditional policing organizations such as the NPF, NSCDC, SSS and other state security institutions (Olawale, 2020). WNSN security outfit has units in each of the six states of the region. The activities within its jurisdiction

will be coordinated by the local government organ. Each local government will have a relationship with the state command. The six-state commands will report to the regional command and operate from the control center in Ibadan, Oyo State and work closely with the Developmental Agenda for Western Nigeria (DAWN) Commission, which oversees the initiative administratively. The WNSN setup appears to stoutly rely on Dane guns for its weapons and ammunition, which are similar to those used by hunters when hunting animals in the forest.

For coordinated operations and administrative robustness, the security outfit has its regional headquarters located in Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria. However, in each of the six states' capitals, a correspondent office is located and coordinated by the commandant, with its activities regulated by the commissioner of Police in each of the states. To cater for the financial commitment of the outfit, a security trust fund was established to foot the bill. Each state is also obliged to recruit the number of personnel they are capable of maintaining. The initiative not only serves as an intelligent arm for conventional security; it also assists security forces in conducting more intensive and extensive routine patrols throughout the region. As a result, they serve as CCTV in most rural areas, gathering information about crimes and suspicious activities for interpretation and appropriate action.

Furthermore, security has featured prominently in today's framework, with continents, sub continents, regions, states, and local communities all competing intrinsically and extrinsically to improve their immediate domestic security posture. Stability is inevitably a major policy challenge for policymakers as well as communities and groups all over the world. This is because the framework remains a complex phenomenon that, without a doubt, necessitates not only defense initiative but also concrete precautionary and resilient decisions to be managed in order to avoid the loss of lives and property. As a result, security demands not only physical protection from existing harm, but also the development of resilient socio-political and economic structures

to deal with its complexities. Accordingly, as a necessary consequence, the WNSN was established in Nigeria's southwest region.

IV. REGIONAL SECURITY: WNSN AND ANTI-KIDNAPPING IN SOUTHWEST NIGERIA

Thus far, the fight against kidnapping led by the Nigerian Police Force (NPF) and other allied forces in Nigeria's southwest region has been ultra-conservative and has failed to meet the expectation of curbing the growing threat of kidnapping in the region. This is evident by the security agencies' almost non-existent dislodgement of kidnapers and rescue operations of victims, which are, of course, nowhere near or comparable to the torrent of daily successful kidnapping operations carried out by mafias and criminal gangs in the region. In fact, hardly a day passes without hearing or reading unbelievable news or events such as kidnapping, hostage-taking, and abduction of citizens riveting the southwest region. In a survey conducted in 2013 by the CLEEN Foundation in collaboration with the United States-based Macarthur Foundation to ascertain the region with the highest number of kidnappings in the country, the southwest region has the highest number of kidnappings, with 5% of respondents from the region who participated in the survey alleging they have either been kidnapped or attempts have been made to kidnap them (Premium Times, 2013).

In the past, the apparent lack of regional security in the fight against kidnapping in the region grew the success rate of kidnapping. It significantly increased the region's high number of cornucopia kidnapping occurrences, more than twice as many as what obtains in other regions that make up the country. In reaction to this common knowledge, the Nigerian Police Force's operations demonstrated a lack of involvement of a regional security in the fight against kidnapping in the region. For instance, during a visit to Ondo State Governor Rotimi Akeredolu in Akure, the erstwhile Deputy Inspector General of Police in Charge of Operations, Abdulmajid Ali, briefed him that:

Plan was in full swing, with squad members currently undergoing training in Abuja before being dispatched to Ondo State and other southwest states to combat kidnapping. The Inspector General of Police has dispatched me not only to Ondo State, but also to other southwest states, to inspect the security architecture on the ground and to advise on how to redesign the security apparatus. I decided to start with Ondo before moving on to Ekiti and Osun because, with Ondo being one of the focal points of recent events, I believe we need to sit down with my officers here and discuss how we can work together in the future. I want you to know that the Inspector General of Police is conscious of what has been going on, particularly along the road, how some of these miscreants are disturbing the peace (Vanguard Newspaper, 2019).

Nonetheless, kidnappings are on the rise in the region, necessitating the pursuit of alternative approaches, including regional security policies. Local hunters, the Odua People's Congress (OPC), Agbekoya, the Nigeria Security and Civil Defense Corps (NSCDC), vigilante groups, security experts, and other Yoruba socio-cultural groups involved in local security comprise the WNSN in the Southwest region (Vanguard Newspaper, 2019). The WNSN security outfit has a correspondence office in each of the six southwestern states: Ekiti, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Osun, and Oyo, each with its own commander in charge of members in the hinterlands, towns, and villages under his command. According to Adetunmbi & Adedigba (2021):

Amotekun security outfit is a local affair. Squads of Operation *Amotekun* are stationed at 52 backstops spread across the south-west geopolitical region. Each state has its own unit of measurement. The activities within its jurisdiction will be coordinated by the local government organ. Each local government will interact with the state command. The six-state commands will report to the regional command and operate from the control center in Ibadan, Oyo State, and the operational base in Gbongan, Osun State. They will also

collaborate closely with the Developmental Agenda for Western Nigeria (DAWN) Commission, which will provide administrative oversight for the initiative.

The *Amotekun* security unit resembles the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) in the Northeast counter-insurgency campaign. The southwest *Amotekun* is to effectively collaborate with all countermeasure's mercenaries in the region, assisting the NPF and other forces in curbing kidnapping in the region. Professor Banji Akintoye, for instance, gave insight into the type of partnership and collaboration that would exist between *Amotekun* personnel and conventional police, noting that they would be specifically trained on the standard operating procedure. According to him, some people are wondering how the police will interact with *Amotekun*; his response was: 'Don't forget that we are being led by highly educated people who will properly shape their relationship so that *Amotekun* and the Police can work together without conflict. There will be no disagreements' (Yahaya & Bello, 2020:166). However, it is clear from Akintoye's submission that collaboration between state and non-state actors is required to combat kidnapping in the region. Ondo State Governor Rotimi Akeredolu, a Senior Advocate of Nigeria (SAN), backed this up, saying, we cannot predict the exactitude where this unfortunate disturbance will take place, and thus we felt that a combined effort of all of us would be very necessary (Ayoola, 2019).

It is apparent from the foregoing that foiling kidnapping syndicates and their heinous operations in the region requires the cooperation and partnership of multiple security agencies. Most importantly, it is clear that the WNSN understands the region's terrain better than any other security agency in the region. Moreover, it is common knowledge that no external forces can successfully penetrate a neighborhood to rid it of kidnappers unless the residents of that neighborhood actively support or collaborate, which, of course, is where the WNSN support role comes in. However, since early 2020, when the WNSN regional security outfit was endorsed by the six southwestern governors, it has been supplying not only intelligence to the police but

also leading the fight against kidnapping in the region.

WNSN, for example, has been proactive in assisting police and other state security forces, which has helped to reduce the occurrence of kidnapping and hostage-taking activities in the southwest region. Recently, men from Ekiti State's *Amotekun* Corps apprehended Abdurahman Ibrahim, a 30-year-old kidnapper who specializes in abducting residents of Ijesa Isu in the state's Ikole Local Government Area. We discovered local protective charms against gunshots on him. He pretended to be a cattle tender looking for the person who had given him the cattle. The suspect was however handed over to police for a full investigation and possible prosecution (Brig. Gen. Joe Komolafe (rtd), personal interview).¹

Bearing in mind that WNSN, with a subsidiary *Amotekun* Corps, in each of the six states of Nigeria's southwest, is of course, a continuation of the ongoing debate on community security. It has also demonstrated the problematic backdrop against which regional security emerges. According to Nwoko (2021:1), 'the *Amotekun* initiative arose from the fallout of the region' and the country's worsening security situation, which the Nigerian government has demonstrated a lack of capacity to address.' The coordinated efforts of the region's major stakeholders (the governors of the six states) to promote and ensure the security of citizens' lives and property, on the other hand, are regarded as a success in the fight against kidnapping and hostage-taking, which previously dominated the region.

Despite the importance of regional security and WNSN, which has made significant strides in the fight against kidnapping in the region, it has received a backlash from some quarters, with some declaring its establishment to be illegal because it is not backed by any known law in the land, and as a result, they have remained coy on such an approach to tame kidnapping and other security threats in the region. In a statement made

¹Interview with the Ekiti State *Amotekun* Corps (ESAC) Commandant, Brig. Gen. Joe Komolafe (rtd), in Ado-Ekiti, April 11, 2022, 11am-1pm

available to Vanguard on January 9, 2020, Special Assistant on Media and Public Relations to the Attorney General of the Federation and Minister of Justice, Dr. Umar Gwandu, criticized the establishment of the outfit. The bulletin reads:

The formation of the security organization known as *Amotekun* is illegal and violates Nigerian law. The Federal Republic of Nigeria Constitution of 1999 (as amended) established the Army, Navy, and Air Force, as well as the Police and numerous paramilitary organizations, for the purpose of Nigeria's defence (Vanguard Newspaper, 2020).

The Minister's statement appeared to be a reiteration of Okodolor's (2019) earlier position that no State government, whether singly or in a group, has the legal right and competence to establish any form of organization or agency for the defense of Nigeria or any of its constituent parts.

Regardless of the criticism leveled at the WNSN security outfit, the organization's activities are solely focused on combating kidnapping and other security challenges in the region. According to Adetumbi & Adedigba (2021:28), the aim of establishing the *Amotekun* security outfit is to ensure an end to insecurity in the southwestern region of Nigeria. The WNSN team has received widespread acclaim for its serious and competent approach to addressing kidnapping in the southwest. Visibly, the success of the NPF, NSCDC, and DSS in the fight against kidnapping in the region is based on a shared understanding, effective partnership, and collaboration with the WNSN. A huge part of the success has been made possible because of the better understanding of the environment by identifying the major forests that serve as hideouts for kidnapping syndicates and gangs and an upward supply of intelligence for NPF, NSCDC and SSS for seamless bursting of operation of kidnap members. For the purpose of enlightening the general public most especially on vague issues bordering on how *Amotekun* security team has been partnering other security agencies in the fight against kidnapping in the region, more often than not, *Amotekun* outfit works closely with the DSS, and when it wants to carry out any

operation, most times it engages men of the SSS, NSCDC, NPF and all other forces (Chief Adetunji Adeleye, personal interview).²

The activities of kidnapers in the region have been significantly disrupted as a result of the WNSN's active participation in intelligence gathering, merged with the combined efforts of the NPF, DSS, NSCDC, and inter - and intra Special Forces. This growing cooperation between the WNSN and security agencies has aided the forces in their efforts to rid the region of kidnapers and reclaim the ungoverned spaces (forests) from the kidnapping gangs. As more space is taken away, kidnapers are forced to flee the region for neighbouring states that do not share such cooperation, such as the southwest region, where their activities have met with stiff resistance. Despite this, in less than three years since its inception; the WNSN has made significant progress in combating kidnapping and other criminalities in the region. It can however be strengthened further to become a dependable conglomerate on which other state security agencies can rely for firepower and intelligence.

It is patent that the WNSN intelligence-gathering and regional anti-kidnapping initiatives have resulted in some successes. Not that alone, the initiative seemed to be the missing link in the anti-kidnapping campaign other security agencies in the region have long desired, with the string of support and onslaught culminating in victories coming their way in the quest to rid the region of kidnapers and hostage takers. For instance, between January and December 2021, the outfit captured 18 suspected criminals in possession of dangerous weapons such as over 500 daggers, knives, and guns concealed in sacks loaded with tiger nuts in Ondo State as part of its efforts to combat kidnapers and criminals in the region (Nigerian Tribune, 2021). Correspondingly, on Saturday, December 25, 2021, the WNSN's Joint Patrol team rescued 11 people who were being held captive by their abductors along the Ipetumodu-Ilesha expressway in Osun State. On Christmas Eve, the victims were said to be

²Interview with the Chairman of the Council of *Amotekun* Commanders in the Southwest region, Chief Adetunji Adeleye, in Akure Ondo State, April 14, 2022, 12 – 2pm

traveling from Lagos to Ado-Ekiti. Chief Adetunji Adeleye, Chairman of the Council of *Amotekun* Commanders in the Southwest region, confirms that the rescue operation was carried out by a joint team of *Amotekun* from Ondo and Osun States involved in the inter-border patrol in the southwest. According to him:

We received a distress call around 1 a.m. from one of the families of the kidnapped victims, asking for ransom. As a result, we took action. We were successful in locating the kidnapers. The victims were rescued, and some of their belongings were recovered, but the kidnapers fled. It was along the Ipetumodu axis in Osun State, and when we arrived at a village about 10 kilometers from the road, we discovered that the den is a regular dump area for kidnapers because we discovered so many items indicating that it is a permanent place where they keep kidnapped victims. Adetunji reaffirms that it is to reassure the people of Ondo and Osun States that *Amotekun* will stop at nothing to join forces with other security agencies to ensure that criminals are driven away from the states (Nigerian Tribune 2021).

On July 30, 2021, the men of the Oyo State *Amotekun* team, worked closely with local vigilantes and hunters, and won another battle when they killed two kidnapers during an unsuccessful kidnapping attempt by the kidnapers who stormed Iwere-Ile town in Oyo State, Nigeria. Weapons were recovered from the kidnapers and turned over to the police, despite the fact that three other kidnap syndicate members managed to flee after being shot (Daily Post, 2021). Equally, the WNSN team in Oyo State successfully dealt a major blow to kidnapers who were operating in the state's forests near Ibarapa and Oke-Ogun areas. As stated by Retd Col. Olayinka Olayanju in an interview: 'We had begun clearing out the dense forests surrounding the four councils that had recently been the target of kidnapping and rape. At Aiyede, when our personnel entered the forest, they were ambushed; this sparked a gunfight in which three of the assailants perished. In the process, one of our men sustained little injury; on the whole, we

are happy that he is recuperating fast from the hurt' (Retd Col. Olayinka Olayanju, personal interview).³

However, on April 24, 2022, the *Amotekun*, in collaboration with the police and vigilantes, were strategic in a raid on a kidnapper's hideout in Ogun State, when the joint security forces stormed Abule Oba, off Ayetoro Road in Abeokuta North Local Government Area, the kidnap syndicates were captured. While responding, the state's police spokesman affirms that:

The police had received a tip that two commercial motorcyclists running errands for the kidnapping syndicate, Hammed Taiwo and Kehinde Jimoh had been seen in the Rounder neighborhood of Abeokuta. During questioning, they admitted to being a part of the syndicate but claimed that their primary responsibility was to run errands and keep an eye on their surroundings to avoid being discovered by law enforcement. Their confession aided authorities to find their hiding place, where they regularly gathered after demanding ransom from their victims. Nine members of the syndicate were detained during the operation (Abimbola Oyeyemi, personal interview).⁴

In general, it appears that district partnerships and collaboration between the WNSN Corps and state security agencies will continue to receive the full support of the southwest states. On the whole, the fight against kidnapping and hostage-taking remains the responsibility of the Nigerian government, which will require regional and community support to succeed. Though the region has faced opposition in the form of constitutionality and legality from various quarters, most notably the Attorney General and Minister of Justice, since the establishment of the security outfit, the obvious truth is that the region's outfit is making tremendous efforts in

combating kidnapping. The structure for collaboration and integration into the current anti-kidnapping strategic approach, on the other hand, does not appear to be a primary focus for the central government. Certainly, the government can provide better security by focusing more on the positive contributions of the WNSN in protecting their communities, since no state can subdue kidnapping exclusively through state-sponsored security agency operations. As a result, it is pivotal that the government, in partnership with WNSN, engages in the region to better understand kidnapper hideouts and operating modes in the region.

V. CONCLUSION

The relevance of WNSN Corps as a key player in the regional effort to counter kidnapping in southwest Nigeria has been articulated in this article. Given their sheer numbers, ingenuity, vitality, and local knowledge of the region, which have fueled and added significant boost to locating kidnappers' hideouts, gathering intelligence, and constantly rescuing and liberating kidnapped victims from the whims and caprices of their tormentors, WNSN, as an institution in southwest Nigeria, without a doubt deserves to be seen as a key player in the ongoing fight to thwart kidnapping, hostage-taking in the region.

Going by the current level of cooperation between WNSN, NPF, SSS, NSCDC, and other special forces in the fight against kidnapping, which has recently made the region inhabitable for kidnap mafias, it is evident that a more robust and long-lasting regional security option is required to defeat kidnapping in the southwest. It must be emphasized that effective communication among the various *Amotekun* units, commanders, state governors, NPF, SSS, NSCDC, and Special Forces in the area has also greatly aided the region's efforts to combat kidnapping. This is especially true of the joint/combined border patrol among states against kidnappers in the region, which is a significant advancement in the fight against kidnapping in the region. In this regard, it is crucial to reconsider the common perception of WNSN in southwest Nigeria, and by extension,

³Interview with the Oyo State Commander of Operation *Amotekun*, Retd Col. Olayinka Olayanju, (ret'd), in Ibadan, April 20, 2022, 2 – 3:30 pm

⁴Interview with the Ogun State police spokesman, Abimbola Oyeyemi, in Abeokuta, April 29, 2022, 12:45 – 2pm

Nigeria, and to see it more as a constant source of creativity, ingenuity, possibility, and serious obstacles for kidnapping operations in the region as opposed to symbol of separation, misconception as ethnic supporting armed group, and as equipped tool in the hands of the region's shenanigans.

Apart from the foregoing, it is pivotal to strengthen intelligence sharing among security agencies in the region and its neighbours in order to tackle kidnapping. Moreover, regional and national forces must be vigilant in foiling coordinated kidnapping assaults before they are carried out. To improve its effectiveness and offer a better security chain, the WNSN Corps could also be structured a little more in a chain of command structures: community, local government, state, and regional levels. Not just that; the emphasis must also be on giving the group access to resources, training, and retraining, as well as some sort of legal backing. Most importantly, personnel can be improved in the area of training and retraining in a periodic manner to keep the men of the outfit with a modern method of securitization without resulting in human rights violations and security breaches. In this regard, the WNSN Corps in the southwest would be a bulwark handy not only in the region's fight against kidnapping but also in enhancing the national security architecture.

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