

Indigenous Security Management as a Pathway to Resolving Nigeria Security Challenges

Woji Samuel Enyindah

Department of History and Diplomatic Studies
Ignatius Ajuru University of Education Port-Harcourt, Rivers State
sammywoji@gmail.com / 08056864624

Nsiegbe, Angel Austine

School of General and foundation studies
Captain Elechi Amadi polytechnic, Port-Harcourt, Rivers State
nsiegbeangel6@gmail.com / 08066633127

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Abstract

This paper examines the historical foundations of indigenous security management in Nigeria, tracing its erosion under colonial rule and the subsequent inherited security architecture that has proven structurally inadequate in combating terrorism, banditry, and organised crime in the twenty-first century. Drawing on multidisciplinary insights from security studies, history, political science, criminology, and sociology, the study argues that pre-colonial Nigerian societies operated sophisticated, community-anchored security systems that were systematically dismantled by British colonialism and replaced with a centralised, top-down security apparatus ill-suited to local realities. The paper further analyses the alarming rise of Boko Haram insurgency, banditry, and other forms of violent extremism as direct consequences of this inherited structural failure. Using the experiences of vigilante organisations such as the Bakassi Boys in the South East and Operation Amotekun in the South West, this work demonstrates the demonstrable effectiveness of indigenous, community-based security solutions. It concludes with a call for the formalised integration of indigenous security teams in Northern Nigeria under military and state supervision, operationalising the foundational criminological principle that crime is local and, therefore, security must be local.

Keywords: Indigenous, Security, Terrorism, Nigeria, Vigilantism

Introduction

Nigeria's contemporary security crisis, characterised by an entrenched Boko Haram insurgency in the North East, endemic banditry in the North West, and recurrent outbreaks of communal and criminal violence across the federation, is frequently analysed as a series of discrete emergencies requiring discrete tactical responses (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2026). This paper contends that such an analysis is incomplete. The persistence and mutation of insecurity across successive administrations, security votes, and military campaigns since 1999 suggest a structural rather than merely operational failure, one whose roots lie in the manner colonial rule dismantled functioning indigenous security systems and replaced them with an alien, centralised apparatus never designed to serve the governed (Aimiton, 2026). Drawing on security studies, history, political science, criminology, and sociology, this paper traces that historical rupture and

argues that the demonstrable, if imperfect, successes of community-based security outfits such as the Bakassi Boys in the South East (Meager, 2007) and Operation Amotekun in the South West (Olushola&Adeleke, 2026) constitute empirical evidence for a criminological proposition long established in the discipline: that because crime is fundamentally local in its origins, opportunities, and social embeddedness, effective security provision must likewise be organised at the local level.

Statement of Problem

Nigeria's contemporary security crisis persists despite decades of military deployment, security votes, and successive counter-insurgency and counter-banditry campaigns. The Boko Haram insurgency in the North East and the metastasis of armed banditry across the North West have proven remarkably resistant to conventional state responses, even as researchers continue to document new dimensions of the crisis: the entrenchment of "crimelordism" as a distinct organisational phase of Nigerian banditry (Okoli & Abubakar, 2021), the deepening of sub-national fragility across the North West's political economy (Aina, 2024), and the expansion of communal-level collaboration networks that sustain bandit operations from within the communities they prey upon (Obi & Iwuoha, 2023). Even large-scale, military-led responses framed as "shock and awe" campaigns have shown limited capacity to durably suppress the phenomenon (Aina et al., 2023).

The preceding sections of this paper located the origin of this resilience to a structural failure: the colonial dismantling of community-anchored indigenous security systems and their replacement with a centralised apparatus lacking the local social knowledge such systems once supplied (Aimiton, 2026; Onyeozili & Ebbe, 2012). What remains underexamined is why this structural vacuum has produced organised armed violence specifically, rather than mere disorder or apathy. A purely structural account explains the absence of effective security provision; it does not, by itself, explain why populations affected by that absence have organised into, or been absorbed by, armed groups. Scholars working on this same terrain have in fact cautioned against explanations that treat Nigeria's North West as simply an "ungoverned space," arguing instead that banditry there is embedded in identifiable political-economic and psychosocial dynamics that require closer theorisation (Ojo, 2020).

The problem, stated precisely, is therefore twofold: first, to account for the material and economic conditions under which insecurity in Nigeria's North East and North West has become profitable and self-sustaining, a political economy in its own right, rather than incidental disorder; and second, to account for the psychosocial mechanism by which economically and politically marginalised populations translate collective frustration into organised aggression, whether directed at the state, at rival communities, or at civilians. Historical materialism is adopted to address the first dimension and frustration-aggression theory the second, on the understanding that the two operate at complementary levels of explanation: one structural and economic, the other psychosocial.

Theoretical Framework

Historical Materialism

Historical materialism, developed by Marx and Engels, holds that a society's political order and its patterns of conflict are shaped fundamentally by underlying material conditions, particularly the relations of production and the distribution of resources among classes, rather than by ideology

operating independently of those conditions (Marx & Engels, 1998). Applied to organised violence, the theory directs attention to the concrete economic arrangements, land, livestock, minerals, and their control, that generates and sustains conflict, rather than treating violence as an autonomous ideological or criminal phenomenon.

This framework has clear and recent purchase in the Nigerian banditry literature specifically. Aina's (2024) study of sub-national fragility in North-West Nigeria situates the region's armed conflict within a political-economy analysis of weak state penetration, resource competition, and uneven local governance, treating banditry as a symptom of deeper structural fragility rather than a discrete security failure. In a related study, Aina, Ojo, and Oyewole (2023) examine the Nigerian state's militarised "shock and awe" response to banditry and find that such responses, because they target the symptom of armed violence without addressing its material roots in land access, resource competition, and rural economic exclusion, have produced only temporary and localised security gains. Okoli and Abubakar (2021) extend this materialist reading further, documenting the emergence of "crimelordism", a structured, quasi-economic hierarchy of banditry involving accumulation, patronage, and territorial control, as a new and more entrenched phase of the phenomenon, one that behaves less like opportunistic crime and more like an organised economic enterprise. Obi and Iwuoha (2023) complement this by tracing how banditry's expansion in the North West has depended on the active collaboration of communal-level actors, including land brokers and local power holders, whose participation is best explained by their material stake in the bandit economy rather than by ideology or coercion alone.

Taken together, this body of scholarship demonstrates that historical materialism is not an imported abstraction in this context but a framework Nigerian security scholars have themselves found productive for explaining precisely the cases under discussion in this paper: it grounds banditry's persistence in identifiable economic structures, land transactions, resource competition, and internal patronage economies, rather than in religious or purely criminological explanations alone.

Frustration-Aggression Theory

Frustration-aggression theory, originally formulated by Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer, and Sears (1939) and elaborated by Miller (1941), holds that aggression is typically a consequence of frustration, understood as the blocking of goal-directed activity, and that where legitimate channels for redress are unavailable, aggression becomes a probable outcome. Berkowitz (1989) later revised the original hypothesis, and argued that frustration produces a readiness for aggression rather than aggression as an automatic response, with the actual expression of aggression depending on situational and cognitive factors. Breuer and Elson (2017) provide a further contemporary synthesis of the theory's development and its continued relevance to explaining collective as well as individual aggression.

This theory has been applied directly, and very recently, to the exact case under discussion in this paper. Obi, Iwuoha, Aniche, and Asogwa (2025), in a study focused specifically on Zamfara State between 2011 and 2024, use frustration-aggression analysis to explain communal-level drivers of banditry, identifying wholesale and often exploitative farmland transactions, the breakdown of rudimentary communal vigilantism, and covert alliances between bandits and some traditional leaders for intelligence and benefit-sharing as key mechanisms through which accumulated communal frustration is channelled into sustained armed violence. Their study is significant for this paper's purposes because it applies the theory not to insurgency in the abstract but to the same

communal, land-based grievances that historical materialism identifies as banditry's material root, showing empirically how blocked access to land and failed local security arrangements generate the frustration that frustration-aggression theory holds to be a precursor of organised aggression.

Integrating the Two Frameworks

Historical materialism and frustration-aggression theory are deployed here as sequential and complementary levels of analysis rather than competing explanations. Historical materialism accounts for the structural and economic preconditions of insecurity, the land pressures, resource competition, and patronage economies documented by Aina (2024), Aina et al. (2023), Okoli and Abubakar (2021), and Obi and Iwuoha (2023). Frustration-aggression theory then accounts for the mechanism by which that structurally generated grievance is converted into organised violence, as demonstrated empirically for Zamfara State by Obi et al. (2025). This two-level framework is consistent with, and directly evidenced by, recent Nigerian scholarship examining these same cases; the present paper's contribution is to read the two together as a single explanatory chain running from material condition to psychosocial mechanism to armed outcome.

Precolonial Indigenous Security Architecture

Prior to British conquest, the territories that would become Nigeria were not, as colonial ethnography often suggested, lawless or without mechanisms of order. Rather, security and social control were embedded within diverse and often sophisticated political structures calibrated to local social organisation (Agamini, 2025). Among centralised polities such as the Sokoto Caliphate, the Oyo Empire, the Benin Empire, and the Kanem-Borno Empire, security was organised hierarchically under monarchs, councils of chiefs, and standing or mobilisable military structures, with the Oyo Empire's Oyomesi council even possessing the constitutional authority to check and, where necessary, remove an Alaafin deemed unjust or derelict in his duties (Agamini, 2025). Among decentralised or acephalous societies, most notably the Igbo of the South East, order was maintained through an intricate lattice of institutions: councils of elders, age-grade associations, title-taking societies, oracular authorities, and secret societies such as the Ekpe among the Ibibio and the Ogboni among the Yoruba, each of which fulfilled judicial, religious, and coercive functions simultaneously (Agamini, 2025; Onyeozili & Ebbe, 2012).

The scholarly record on Igbo social control is particularly instructive for understanding how security functioned without a centralised police force. Onyeozili and Ebbe's (2012) ethnographic study of precolonial Igboland documents how councils of elders, age-grade associations, title-making associations, oracles, Dibia (medicine men) fraternities, and secret societies combined customary standards of conduct with negative sanctions to preserve collective order, with age-grade cohorts in particular serving a policing function, including the monitoring of known offenders in village markets, that in some communities persisted well into the postcolonial period (Onyeozili & Ebbe, 2012). Crucially, this system was inherently local: it derived its legitimacy and its operational knowledge from intimate familiarity with kinship networks, land disputes, and individual reputations within a bounded community, a form of situational and social knowledge that no imported or externally imposed police force could readily replicate (Onyeozili & Ebbe, 2012).

The Colonial Rupture

British colonial rule did not simply supplement these indigenous systems; it actively worked to discredit, subordinate, and ultimately supplant them. Formal policing in the territory began with the annexation of Lagos in 1861, when small, heavily armed constabularies organised along paramilitary rather than civil lines were established, and by 1930 these regional forces had been consolidated into a single Nigeria Police Force under central colonial control (Aimiton, 2026). Scholarship on colonial policing consistently emphasises that this apparatus was not conceived primarily for crime control in the manner later claimed; its principal purpose was to subdue indigenous societies, enforce taxation and labour regulations, and protect the commercial and extractive interests of the colonial economy, with crime control emerging only as a subsequent rationalisation of an essentially coercive project (Aimiton, 2026). Force rather than consent underwrote colonial authority from the outset, a pattern epitomised by episodes such as the 1949 shooting of striking coal miners at Enugu, which exposed the chasm between colonial policing and public welfare and intensified nationalist opposition (Aimiton, 2026).

Regional studies of this rupture in the South East corroborate the broader pattern. Research on colonial policing in southeastern Nigeria finds that the imposition of foreign policing methods disrupted traditional systems of governance and conflict resolution and fostered an enduring legacy of mistrust between communities and law enforcement agencies, one whose implications continue to shape contemporary policing challenges in the region, including corruption and strained community relations. Where indirect rule was applied, as in the emirates of the North, existing authority structures were formally retained but subordinated to colonial supervision; where it could not readily be applied, as among the acephalous Igbo, the British improvised the artificial institution of the Warrant Chief, an imposition so poorly matched to existing political norms that it precipitated the Aba Women's War of 1929 (Aimiton, 2026). In both cases, the outcome was the same: the systematic erosion of security systems whose legitimacy had rested on local knowledge, kinship accountability, and consensual authority, in favour of an apparatus whose legitimacy rested on the capacity for coercion alone.

The Inherited Postcolonial Architecture and Its Structural Inadequacy

Nigeria's independence in 1960 did not feature a corresponding reconstruction of its security architecture. Instead, the postcolonial state inherited, largely intact, a centralised, militarised police and security structure conceived for colonial subjugation rather than democratic accountability (Aimiton 2026). Contemporary policing scholarship in Nigeria repeatedly identifies this inheritance as the proximate cause of persistent institutional dysfunction: a system that continues to demonise, discredit, and supplant traditional mechanisms of policing without providing an adequate substitute, and one whose orientation toward political control rather than public service has been carried forward largely unreformed (Haruna, 2024). Recent decolonial analyses of Nigerian federalism and policing similarly find that patterns of coloniality, understood as colonial-influenced structures of authority, have positioned the federal police to serve elite political interests rather than the citizenry, leaving the force incapacitated in the face of rising insecurity even as civil society and human rights bodies document the resulting governance gap.

This structural mismatch is compounded by simple scale. A single federal police force, commanded from Abuja and rotated across an ethnically and geographically diverse federation of over two hundred million people, cannot replicate the situational knowledge that once anchored

indigenous security systems in kinship networks and local reputational accountability (Onyeozili & Ebbe, 2012). Officers posted to unfamiliar terrain, often deliberately rotated away from their states of origin as a colonial-era anti-corruption safeguard, frequently lack the local language competence, terrain familiarity, and community trust necessary for effective intelligence gathering, precisely the assets that precolonial age-grade associations and councils of elders possessed as a matter of course (Onyeozili & Ebbe, 2012; Agamini, 2025). It is this structural deficit, rather than any single failure of leadership or funding, that this paper identifies as the deep cause of Nigeria's contemporary inability to contain terrorism, banditry, and organised crime.

Boko Haram and the North East: Insurgency as Structural Consequence

The Boko Haram insurgency, which began as an armed rebellion in July 2009 following the extrajudicial killing of the group's founder, Mohammed Yusuf, in police custody (Britannica, 2026), is frequently analysed through the lens of religious extremism or foreign jihadist influence. Yet a substantial body of scholarship situates its emergence and persistence within the same structural failure traced above. Historical analyses of domestic terrorism in the North East attribute the conditions for Boko Haram's emergence to frustration generated by high unemployment, poverty, and weak governance, circumstances that a distant, under-resourced, and mistrusted federal security apparatus was structurally unable to address before they escalated into violence (Britannica, 2026). The United States Institute of Peace has similarly characterised the insurgency as both a symptom of state fragility and a further corrosive force upon it, noting that prolonged struggles against economic, social, and political pressures had already sapped the Nigerian government's capacity to govern effectively in the region well before the insurgency began (United States Institute of Peace, 2018).

The security vacuum this produced is perhaps most vividly illustrated by the emergence of the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) in Borno State. As Boko Haram increasingly targeted civilians and state employees, local groups of young men, initially armed with little more than sticks, organised themselves into vigilante patrols precisely because the state's own security apparatus had proven incapable of protecting them (United States Institute of Peace, 2018). The Nigerian military ultimately came to depend on the CJTF for intelligence gathering and checkpoint management, and the CJTF is widely credited with having played a decisive role in preventing the fall of Maiduguri to the insurgents (United States Institute of Peace, 2018). That a federal state possessing a standing army was compelled to rely on informally organised, locally recruited civilian auxiliaries to hold its own regional capital is itself a striking empirical vindication of this paper's central argument: local, community-embedded actors retained a capacity for effective security provision that the inherited centralised architecture had lost (United States Institute of Peace, 2018).

Banditry in the North West: A Second Structural Failure

A parallel, though distinct, crisis has unfolded across Zamfara, Katsina, Kaduna, Sokoto, and Niger states, where armed banditry, driven by an overlapping tangle of cattle rustling, the proliferation of small arms, illicit artisanal gold mining, and youth unemployment, has displaced hundreds of thousands of people and normalised mass kidnapping for ransom (Wodu, 2020; Clingendael Institute, 2024). Analysts at the Council on Foreign Relations have observed that repeated resort to shallow, poorly conceived peace deals represents an age-old failure of the Nigerian security and political establishment, and have argued that any durable resolution requires building trust with

vulnerable communities through early-warning systems developed in partnership with vigilantes and local leaders rather than through militarised offensives alone (Wodu, 2020). Successive state-level amnesty programmes in Zamfara and Katsina, though initially attracting large numbers of repentant bandits, collapsed as fighters reneged on their commitments, at a reported cost of tens of millions of naira with little lasting security dividend (Jamestown Foundation, 2025).

It was into this vacuum that the Yan Sakai vigilante movement emerged among predominantly Hausa farming communities seeking self-protection where state forces could not or would not intervene (Egbejule, 2022). The movement's trajectory, however, also illustrates the risks of informal security provision proceeding entirely outside formal state supervision: accused of indiscriminate reprisals against Fulani communities, the Yan Sakai provoked the formation of a rival Fulani militia, the Yan Bindiga, whose activities gradually converged with those of the forest-based bandit gangs the vigilantes had originally organised to resist (Mohammed 2026). Current estimates place the number of active gunmen in the North West at approximately thirty thousand, operating across more than one hundred loosely networked gangs, with reporting increasingly documenting the infiltration of jihadist networks such as Ansaru and Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin into bandit ranks through financial inducement and ideological recruitment (Mohammed, 2026; Clingendael Institute, 2024). This trajectory does not refute the case for local security; rather, it underscores the paper's concluding argument that indigenous security structures require formal state and military supervision to convert their local legitimacy and situational knowledge into disciplined, accountable, and sustainable security provision, rather than being left to operate as unregulated militias.

The Bakassi Boys: Evidence from the South East

The Bakassi Boys emerged in Aba, Abia State, in 1998 and 1999, organised initially by traders and market associations in response to a spiralling wave of armed robbery that conventional policing had failed to contain (Maegher, 2007). Their methods, which combined summary justice with invocations of traditional spiritual authority, including the ritual use of a machete alleged to change colour upon contact with a guilty party, were extrajudicial and often brutal, resulting in scores of documented extrajudicial killings that drew sustained condemnation from human rights organisations and the Nigerian federal government (Maegher, 2007; Njoku&Nzeagwu, 2021). Yet their impact on the ground was immediate and, by most contemporaneous accounts, substantial: commercial activity in Aba, Onitsha, and other affected cities recovered markedly, and residents reported being able to move about freely for the first time in years (Njoku&Nzeagwu, 2021). The group's early success in Aba was sufficiently persuasive that the governors of Abia and Anambra States formally invited them to Onitsha and, subsequently, Owerri, with Anambra State according the group legal recognition through dedicated legislation in August 2000 (Njoku&Nzeagwu, 2021).

The Bakassi Boys episode is best read neither as a wholesale endorsement of vigilante justice nor as a cautionary tale to be dismissed outright, but as an ambivalent demonstration of the underlying thesis. Their operational success derived precisely from the same assets that had characterised precolonial security systems: intimate knowledge of local criminal networks, communal legitimacy, and rapid, unbureaucratic responsiveness (Onyeozili & Ebbe, 2012; Njoku&Nzeagwu, 2021). Their eventual disbandment and the persistent controversy surrounding their methods equally demonstrate the risks of local security capacity operating entirely outside a framework of

judicial oversight and human rights accountability (Njoku&Nzeagwu, 2021). The lesson for policy, consistent with this paper's concluding argument, is not that indigenous security structures should be abandoned, but that their manifest local effectiveness must be channelled through formal state and military supervision capable of imposing due process constraints that informal vigilante justice, left to its own devices, does not reliably provide.

Amotekun: Evidence from the South West

Operation Amotekun, formally the Western Nigeria Security Network, was established in January 2020 by the governors of Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Osun, Ondo, and Ekiti States as a regional security outfit intended to complement, rather than replace, the Nigeria Police Force in confronting kidnapping, banditry, armed robbery, and farmer-herder conflict across the South West (Olubode & Ogunnoiki, 2020) . Unlike the Bakassi Boys, Amotekun was conceived from its inception as a formally constituted, state-backed security corps operating under statutory authority and, notably, has increasingly been framed by its proponents as a proof of concept for state policing more broadly, with commanders in Ondo State pointing to convictions secured against Amotekun-apprehended suspects as judicial validation of the outfit's operational effectiveness (Momoh, 2026).

The regional civil society coalition Afenifere has similarly commended the corps' operational effectiveness in confronting kidnapping, banditry, and rural insecurity, crediting it with restoring confidence among farmers, traders, and commuters despite what the coalition described as limited resources and constitutional constraints on the weapons its operatives may carry (Vanguard Nigeria, 2026). This assessment is not, however, uncontested. Other stakeholders, including the Yoruba Council of Elders and the Agbekoya farmers' association, have at various points characterised the outfit as underutilised and insufficiently resourced to secure the forested corridors where much banditry and kidnapping originates, arguing that state governments have underrated the role of established local security stakeholders (Vanguard Nigeria, 2020). Recent reporting indicates the corps has expanded to more than two thousand operatives and has formally sought federal approval for more advanced weaponry to counter increasingly sophisticated criminal networks, including gangs reportedly moving into the region from the Sahel. Taken together, the South West experience illustrates both the promise of formalised, state-supervised community security and the continuing constraints, principally around weaponry, funding, and federal-state coordination that limit its full realisation (Vanguard Nigeria, 2020, 2026; Momoh, 2026).

Toward a Criminological Justification for Formalised Local Security

The comparative record of the Bakassi Boys, Operation Amotekun, the Civilian Joint Task Force, and the Yan Sakai converges on a single criminological insight with a long lineage in the discipline: that crime is fundamentally local in its causes, its opportunity structures, and its social remedies, and that security provision divorced from local social knowledge is correspondingly handicapped. This proposition finds theoretical support in Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls's (1997) influential concept of collective efficacy, which links crime prevention to the willingness of community residents to intervene on one another's behalf, a capacity inherently rooted in local social cohesion rather than external enforcement. It finds further support in Wilson and Kelling's (1982) broken windows theory, which holds that disorder and crime flourish precisely where visible community guardianship is absent, and in the broader community-oriented policing literature, which has documented modest but measurable reductions in crime and meaningfully improved citizen

satisfaction where police work is decentralised and genuinely rooted in community partnership, even as scholars caution that community policing's benefits are neither automatic nor guaranteed to travel intact across very different institutional and social contexts.

Applied to the Nigerian case, these principles suggest that the country's persistent insecurity in the North East and North West is not primarily a deficit of manpower, hardware, or political will, all of which have in fact been deployed in substantial quantities without proportionate results, but a deficit of local social embeddedness in the security architecture itself (Sampson et al., 1997; United States Institute of Peace, 2018). The North East's CJTF (United States Institute of Peace, 2018) and the North West's Yan Sakai (Egbejule, 2022; Mohammed, 2026) both demonstrate that this local capacity for security organisation exists in the very regions currently suffering the gravest insecurity; what they lack, and what the Bakassi Boys (Njoku&Nzeagwu, 2021) and, to a greater degree, Operation Amotekun (Momoh, 2026) illustrate the value of supplying, is formal integration into a supervised state and military command structure capable of furnishing legal authority, disciplined training, human rights accountability, and coordinated logistics that purely informal or spontaneously organised vigilante groups cannot reliably provide on their own.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that Nigeria's contemporary struggle to contain terrorism, banditry, and organised crime is inseparable from a specific historical trajectory: the dismantling of sophisticated, community-anchored precolonial security systems by British colonial rule and their replacement with a centralised apparatus engineered for subjugation rather than for the situational, locally embedded knowledge that effective security provision requires. The subsequent postcolonial state inherited this architecture largely unreformed, and its structural mismatch with Nigeria's social and geographic realities has manifested in the persistence of the Boko Haram insurgency in the North East and the metastasis of armed banditry across the North West, crises that emerged, in significant part, precisely where the state's centralised security apparatus proved least able to draw on local knowledge and local legitimacy. The comparative experiences of the Bakassi Boys and Operation Amotekun, for all their differences in structure, oversight, and outcome, together demonstrate that indigenously organised, community-based security retains a demonstrable operational advantage rooted in exactly the assets that colonialism worked to destroy. Accordingly, this paper concludes with a call for the formalised integration of indigenous security teams already operating informally across Northern Nigeria, including successor structures to the Civilian Joint Task Force and the Yan Sakai, into a properly constituted framework of military and state supervision. Such integration, properly resourced, trained, and made accountable to human rights and due process standards, would operationalise rather than merely gesture toward the foundational criminological principle underlying this entire analysis that because crime is local, security, if it is to succeed where a century of centralised policing has failed, must be local as well.

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