



Research Article

## Private Security and National Security in Nigeria: Roles, Challenges, and the Path to Effective Regulation

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**Abstract.** The escalating scale and complexity of insecurity in Nigeria—ranging from insurgency and banditry to kidnapping, oil theft, and urban crime—have exposed the limits of public security agencies and created space for private security companies (PSCs) to emerge as significant actors in the national security architecture. This article examines the role of the private security industry in strengthening national security in Nigeria, situating the discussion within the broader global shift toward the privatisation and commercialisation of security functions. Using a qualitative, doctrinal review of secondary literature, legislation, and policy documents, the article traces the historical evolution of private security in Nigeria, appraises the legal and regulatory framework anchored on the Private Guard Companies Act of 1986, and analyses the contributions of PSCs to critical infrastructure protection, economic security, employment generation, and support for conventional security agencies. The article also identifies key challenges, including weak regulation, poor remuneration, the prohibition on bearing firearms, corruption, and the absence of formal integration into national security planning. It concludes that private security is an indispensable, though under-utilised, pillar of national security in Nigeria and recommends comprehensive legal reform, professionalisation, and structured public-private security collaboration.

**Keywords:** private security; national security; Nigeria; Private Guard Companies Act; public-private security collaboration

## INTRODUCTION

Security is the bedrock upon which the survival, stability, and development of any nation rest. In Nigeria, the state's constitutional obligation to secure lives and property, enshrined in Section 14(2)(b) of the 1999 Constitution (as amended), has come under severe strain over the past two decades. The proliferation of Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) insurgency in the North-East, banditry and mass abductions in the North-West and North-Central, farmer-herder conflicts across the Middle Belt, secessionist agitation and kidnapping in the South-East, oil theft and pipeline vandalism in the Niger Delta, and violent crime in major urban centres have combined to overwhelm the capacity of conventional public security institutions—the Nigeria Police Force, the Armed Forces, the Department of State Services, and the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC).

Against this backdrop, private security companies (PSCs) have grown from a marginal presence into one of the largest employers of labour in Nigeria, providing guarding, surveillance, cash-in-transit, close protection, investigation, and consultancy services to households, businesses, critical infrastructure operators, and, increasingly, government agencies. This growth mirrors a global trend in which state monopoly over the legitimate use of force has given way to a plural security architecture involving both public and private actors. The central question this article interrogates is whether, and to what extent, private security contributes to national security in Nigeria, and what must be done to optimise this contribution.

Nigeria's security environment has become progressively more complex since the return to civil rule in 1999. What began as isolated incidents of communal clashes and armed robbery has metastasised into a multi-front security crisis involving religiously motivated insurgency, ethnically inflected banditry, transnational organised crime, and a resurgence of separatist violence. The Global Terrorism Index and successive editions of the Global Peace Index have consistently ranked Nigeria among the countries most severely affected by terrorism and organised violence in sub-Saharan Africa. Public confidence in the capacity of the Nigeria Police Force and other statutory security agencies to guarantee personal and collective safety has correspondingly declined, prompting individuals, households, religious institutions, corporate entities, and even sub-national governments to turn to private security providers as a practical, if imperfect, alternative or supplement.

## Statement of the Problem

Existing scholarship on Nigeria's national security architecture has tended to focus overwhelmingly on the roles, capacities, and failings of statutory security agencies, with comparatively limited attention paid to the growing footprint of private security actors. Where the private security industry is discussed, the literature

is often descriptive, cataloguing the size and scope of the industry without systematically interrogating its strategic significance for national security or the policy reforms required to optimise its contribution. This article addresses this gap by providing an integrated analysis of the roles, legal framework, challenges, and prospects of private security in relation to national security in Nigeria, with a view to informing policy and regulatory reform.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The specific objectives of this article are to: (i) clarify the concepts of private security and national security as they apply to the Nigerian context; (ii) trace the historical evolution of the private security industry in Nigeria; (iii) examine the legal and regulatory framework governing the industry; (iv) analyse the specific ways in which private security contributes to national security; (v) identify the principal challenges confronting the industry; and (vi) proffer evidence-based recommendations for strengthening the industry's contribution to national security.

The article is structured as follows: Section 2 clarifies the core concepts of private security and national security; Section 3 outlines the theoretical framework and methodology; Section 4 traces the historical development of private security in Nigeria; Section 5 reviews the legal and regulatory framework; Section 6 examines the nexus between private security and national security, including comparative lessons from other jurisdictions; Section 7 discusses the challenges confronting the industry; Section 8 considers its prospects; Section 9 proffers recommendations; and Section 10 concludes the article.

### **Conceptual Clarification**

#### **Private Security**

Private security refers to the provision of protective, investigative, and risk-management services by non-state, profit-oriented or voluntary organisations to individuals, corporate bodies, and, in some instances, government institutions, in exchange for a fee. It encompasses a wide spectrum of activities, including static and mobile guarding, access control, cash-in-transit services, electronic surveillance, close protection (bodyguard) services, private investigation, and consultancy on risk and safety management. In the Nigerian context, private security is largely commercialised rather than fully privatised: private guard companies (PGCs) operate alongside, and are legally subordinate to, the public security apparatus, and they are statutorily barred from bearing firearms. This distinguishes the Nigerian private security landscape from jurisdictions such as South Africa and the United States, where armed private security and even private military contracting are more extensively permitted.

#### **National Security**

National security has evolved from a narrow, state-centric conception focused on military defence against external aggression to a broader, human-centred paradigm that embraces political stability, economic well-being, environmental sustainability, and freedom from crime and violence. In Nigeria's National Security

Strategy, security is framed around the safety and welfare of citizens, the protection of the country's territorial integrity, and the preservation of core national values and interests. This expanded conception of national security creates conceptual room for non-state actors, including private security operators, to be recognised as legitimate contributors to the overall security architecture, particularly at the sub-national and community levels where the visible presence of public security agencies is often thin.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY**

### **Theoretical Framework**

This article is anchored on the situational crime prevention theory and the public-private partnership (participatory) theory of security. Situational crime prevention theory, associated with Clarke, posits that crime can be reduced by altering the immediate environment to increase the effort and risk associated with offending while reducing the rewards; this is precisely the function performed by guarding, access control, surveillance cameras, and patrols provided by private security operators. By manipulating the immediate physical and social environment around a potential target—installing perimeter fencing, deploying visible guards, restricting access, and maintaining surveillance—private security providers raise the effort and risk of offending for would-be criminals while lowering the anticipated reward, thereby displacing or deterring criminal activity.

The public-private partnership theory, on the other hand, holds that security is a public good that is most efficiently and effectively provided through collaborative arrangements between the state and non-state actors, given the resource, personnel, and coverage limitations of the state acting alone. This theory recognises that the state's traditional monopoly over the legitimate provision of security has, in practice, given way to a plural security architecture in which state and non-state actors co-produce safety, with the state retaining ultimate regulatory and coercive authority while delegating routine protective functions to licensed private operators. Read together, these two theories provide a coherent lens for understanding how private security actors, though profit-driven, generate genuine public security value and why their formal integration into the national security architecture is theoretically justified rather than merely a pragmatic afterthought.

### **Methodology**

This article adopts a qualitative, doctrinal, and exploratory research design, relying on secondary data drawn from statutes, government policy documents, peer-reviewed journal articles, institutional reports, and reputable online sources. Content analysis was used to synthesise the literature on the historical development, regulation, roles, and challenges of private security in Nigeria, and to situate the Nigerian experience within comparative and theoretical perspectives on the privatisation of security globally. This approach is appropriate for a subject area in which primary quantitative data on the private security industry remain fragmented and, in many cases, unreliable, owing to the large informal segment of the industry.

## DISCUSSION

### Historical Development of Private Security in Nigeria

The private security industry in Nigeria traces its origins to the colonial era, when expatriate firms and trading companies engaged night watchmen (commonly referred to as "mai-gadi") to guard warehouses and residential quarters. The industry remained informal and largely unregulated until the post-independence period, when rising urbanisation, industrialisation, and the aftermath of the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970) created demand for more organised protective services for factories, banks, and expatriate residences. The 1970s oil boom accelerated this demand, as multinational oil companies and an expanding class of wealthy Nigerians sought protection for assets and personnel.

Government formally recognised the sector with the promulgation of the Private Guard Companies Act No. 23 of 1986, which vested regulatory authority in the Ministry of Interior and required all private guard companies to be licensed. The enactment of the Act was itself a response to the uncontrolled proliferation of informal guarding arrangements in the early 1980s and reflected government's recognition that private guarding, if left entirely unregulated, could pose risks to public order. From a handful of licensed operators in the 1980s, the industry has expanded dramatically alongside Nigeria's deepening security crisis: available regulatory data indicate that by 2019, over 1,100 private guard companies were licensed to operate in Nigeria, with a further 740 unregistered companies at various stages of the licensing process, and that registered companies alone employed more than 828,000 persons in 2018, up from roughly 791,000 in 2017 and 771,000 in 2016. This makes the private security industry one of the largest single sources of formal employment in Nigeria, rivalling, and by some estimates exceeding, the combined personnel strength of the Nigeria Police Force.

This growth has been driven less by proactive government policy than by the reactive response of citizens, businesses, and, increasingly, state and local governments to the state's inability to guarantee adequate protection amid escalating insecurity. The return to civil rule in 1999, the oil boom of the 2000s, the rise of Boko Haram after 2009, and the subsequent diffusion of banditry and kidnapping into previously peaceful states each produced a discernible surge in demand for private guarding, surveillance, and close-protection services. By the 2020s, private security had become a routine feature of everyday life in Nigeria, visible at the gates of banks, schools, hospitals, shopping malls, gated residential estates, and increasingly at the perimeter of government buildings themselves.

### Legal and Regulatory Framework Governing Private Security in Nigeria

The principal legislation governing private security in Nigeria remains the Private Guard Companies Act No. 23 of 1986, which requires every person or company intending to operate a private guard company to obtain a licence from the Minister of Interior, subject to conditions relating to share capital, Nigerian ownership, and character references. The Act criminalises the unlicensed operation of a guard company and empowers the Minister to revoke licences for non-compliance. Complementary instruments include the Companies and Allied Matters Act, which

governs the corporate registration of security firms, and sector-specific guidelines issued by the Central Bank of Nigeria for security arrangements in the banking sector.

Despite its foundational role, the 1986 Act has been widely criticised by scholars and practitioners as outdated, having been enacted nearly four decades ago in a security environment vastly different from contemporary Nigeria. Notable gaps include the absence of a dedicated, independent regulatory agency with the capacity to monitor and enforce standards across the entire industry; the absence of minimum wage and welfare protections for private security personnel; the blanket prohibition on private guards bearing firearms even when guarding high-risk assets such as banks and critical infrastructure; and the lack of standardised training, licensing examinations, and continuing professional development requirements. The regulatory vacuum has permitted the proliferation of unregistered and substandard operators, undermining public confidence in the sector and, by extension, its potential contribution to national security. Successive efforts to reform the legal framework, including private member bills seeking to establish a Private Security Industry Regulatory Commission, have not yet been signed into law.

### **The Nexus Between Private Security and National Security in Nigeria Complementing Conventional Security Agencies**

With an estimated police-to-citizen ratio far below the United Nations-recommended standard, the Nigeria Police Force is structurally incapable of providing adequate protection to every individual, business, and facility across the federation. Private security personnel fill this vacuum by providing the first line of defence at residences, offices, factories, schools, religious centres, and event venues, thereby freeing public security agencies to focus on more serious crime, public order, and specialised threats such as terrorism and armed insurgency. In effect, PSCs perform a triage function, absorbing routine guarding and access-control duties that would otherwise stretch already overstretched police and military personnel.

### **Protection of Critical National Infrastructure**

Critical national infrastructure, including oil and gas installations, power generation and transmission facilities, telecommunications masts, seaports, airports, and banking halls, represents both the economic lifeline of the nation and a prime target for sabotage, vandalism, and terrorism. Private security firms are extensively engaged by the Nigerian National Petroleum Company Limited, power distribution companies, and telecommunications operators to provide static guarding, surveillance, and community liaison services around such installations, complementing the statutory protection provided by the Nigeria Police Force's specialised units and the military's Joint Task Forces. The scale of infrastructure dispersed across Nigeria's vast territory makes exclusive reliance on public security agencies impracticable, underscoring the strategic importance of private security in this domain.

### **Safeguarding the Economy and Foreign Investment**

Investor confidence is closely tied to perceptions of security. Multinational corporations and foreign investors routinely factor the availability and quality of private security services into decisions on where to locate operations, particularly in high-risk sectors such as oil and gas, mining, and manufacturing. By providing risk assessment, close protection for expatriate staff, and asset protection services, private security companies help to de-risk the operating environment for both domestic and foreign businesses, thereby indirectly supporting economic security, which is itself a core dimension of national security. Banks, insurance companies, and cash-in-transit operations, in particular, depend almost entirely on private security for the physical protection of cash and valuables in transit and in storage.

### **Employment Generation and Socio-Economic Stability**

The private security industry is among the largest formal employers in Nigeria, providing direct employment to hundreds of thousands of Nigerians, many of them youths who might otherwise be vulnerable to recruitment into criminal or extremist networks due to unemployment and idleness. In this sense, the industry contributes to national security not only through its protective functions but also through its socio-economic role in absorbing surplus labour and providing a legitimate livelihood, thereby indirectly reducing the pool of recruits available to armed groups and criminal syndicates. This linkage between employment, youth restiveness, and insecurity has been widely documented in the literature on the drivers of conflict and criminality in Nigeria.

### **Support for Counter-Terrorism, Counter-Insurgency, and Community Policing**

While private security personnel in Nigeria are not permitted to engage directly in combat operations against insurgents or armed bandits, they contribute to counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency efforts through intelligence gathering, community liaison, and early-warning functions. Their embeddedness within local communities positions them to detect and report suspicious activity to public security agencies, complementing the community policing model that Nigeria's security sector reform agenda has sought to promote. In the Niger Delta, for example, community-based surveillance contractors engaged to protect pipeline infrastructure have played a documented role in curbing oil theft and vandalism through local intelligence networks, illustrating the potential for structured collaboration between private actors and the state's security apparatus.

### **Comparative Perspectives: Lessons from Other Jurisdictions**

A comparative examination of private security regulation in other jurisdictions illuminates possible reform pathways for Nigeria. In South Africa, the Private Security Industry Regulatory Authority (PSIRA), established under the Private Security Industry Regulation Act of 2001, licenses and regulates an industry that employs more private security personnel than the combined strength of the South African Police Service and the South African National Defence Force, and that is formally integrated

into the country's broader crime-prevention strategy. In the United Kingdom, the Security Industry Authority licenses individual operatives as well as companies, enforces mandatory training standards, and maintains a public register of approved contractors, lending the industry a degree of professional legitimacy that is largely absent in Nigeria. In the United States, private security personnel outnumber public police officers by a significant margin, and specialised categories of armed private security are permitted under state-level licensing regimes tailored to the risk profile of the assets being protected.

These comparative experiences suggest that the most successful private security regimes share three common features: an independent regulatory authority insulated from undue political interference; mandatory, standardised training and licensing requirements for both companies and individual operatives; and formal mechanisms for integrating private security into national or local crime-prevention and security-coordination structures. Nigeria's current framework, anchored on a single, outdated statute administered directly by a government ministry without a dedicated regulatory agency, falls short on all three counts, presenting a clear roadmap for the reforms discussed later in this article.

### **Challenges Confronting the Private Security Industry in Nigeria**

Notwithstanding its considerable contributions to national security, the private security industry in Nigeria is beset by significant challenges that limit its effectiveness, undermine public confidence, and impede its formal integration into the national security architecture. These challenges are examined in turn below.

**Weak and Outdated Regulation:** The Private Guard Companies Act of 1986 is widely regarded as obsolete, lacking provisions for modern threats, standardised training curricula, and an independent regulatory commission with adequate enforcement capacity.

**Proliferation of Unlicensed Operators:** High licensing costs and weak enforcement have encouraged the proliferation of unregistered guard companies operating without oversight, undermining industry standards and public trust.

**Prohibition on Bearing Firearms:** Private guards are statutorily barred from carrying firearms, leaving them ill-equipped to protect high-value assets or defend themselves against armed criminals, thereby limiting their operational effectiveness.

**Poor Remuneration and Welfare:** Many private security personnel are paid below the national minimum wage, work long hours without adequate insurance or social security coverage, contributing to low morale, high staff turnover, and, in some cases, susceptibility to compromise by criminal elements.

**Inadequate Training and Professionalisation:** Training standards vary widely across operators, with many companies providing minimal or no formal training, resulting in inconsistent service quality and occasional complicity in the very crimes personnel are engaged to prevent.

**Elite Capture and Corruption:** The ownership and management of some private security companies by politically connected individuals raise concerns about regulatory capture, conflicts of interest, and the potential politicisation of security provisioning.

**Lack of Formal Integration into National Security Architecture:** Private security companies are rarely consulted in national security policy design and are not formally represented in security coordination structures at the federal or state level. Unlike jurisdictions where private security is formally recognised as an auxiliary component of national crime-prevention strategy, Nigerian PSCs operate largely in parallel to, rather than in structured partnership with, statutory security agencies, resulting in a fragmented and poorly harmonised security architecture in which valuable intelligence and situational awareness gathered by private operators is seldom systematically channelled into national security decision-making.

**Security Risks Associated with Poor Vetting:** The absence of a centralised, verifiable database for vetting prospective private security personnel has, in isolated but well-publicised cases, resulted in the infiltration of guard companies by individuals with criminal antecedents, occasionally implicated in burglary, armed robbery, and insider-assisted theft at the very premises they were engaged to protect, further eroding public trust in the industry.

### **Prospects for the Private Security Industry in Nigeria**

Despite these challenges, the outlook for the private security industry in Nigeria is promising. The persistence of insecurity, coupled with growing corporate and household demand for protective services, suggests continued growth in industry size and sophistication. Advances in technology, including closed-circuit television, biometric access control, drone surveillance, and artificial-intelligence-driven analytics, offer opportunities for private operators to enhance service quality and reduce reliance on manpower alone. There is also growing recognition among policymakers of the need for reform, evidenced by legislative efforts to establish a dedicated regulatory commission and to review the 1986 Act. If these reforms are pursued to completion, and if structured mechanisms for public-private security collaboration are institutionalised, the private security industry has the potential to become a formally recognised and strategically deployed pillar of Nigeria's national security architecture, along the lines already achieved in jurisdictions such as South Africa and the United Kingdom.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the foregoing analysis, the following recommendations are proffered:

1. **Legislative Reform:** The National Assembly should expedite the passage of a comprehensive Private Security Industry Regulation Bill to repeal and replace the Private Guard Companies Act of 1986, establishing an independent regulatory commission—modelled on South Africa's PSIRA and the United Kingdom's Security Industry Authority—with adequate statutory powers of licensing, inspection, standard-setting, and enforcement, and with a funding structure that insulates it from undue political interference.
2. **Standardised Training and Certification:** Government, in collaboration with accredited training institutions and industry associations, should institute mandatory minimum training curricula, certification examinations, and continuing professional development requirements for both private security

- companies and individual operatives, covering areas such as basic security operations, human rights, use of force, first aid, and emergency response.
3. Institutionalised Public-Private Collaboration: A structured framework for public-private security collaboration should be established at federal and state levels, including formal representation of the private security industry in security coordination councils, joint intelligence-sharing protocols, and coordinated deployment around critical infrastructure and high-risk events.
  4. Risk-Based Firearms Policy: Government should consider a carefully regulated, risk-based framework permitting selected categories of private security personnel guarding high-value or high-risk assets, such as banks and critical infrastructure, to bear firearms, subject to rigorous vetting, psychological assessment, specialised training, and strict licensing conditions, rather than the current blanket prohibition.
  5. Welfare and Remuneration Standards: Minimum wage and welfare standards, including health insurance, pension contributions, and reasonable working hours, should be enforced across the industry to improve personnel morale, reduce staff turnover, and minimise the vulnerability of poorly remunerated guards to compromise or complicity in crime.
  6. Enforcement Against Unlicensed Operators: Regulatory authorities should intensify enforcement against unlicensed and substandard operators, while simplifying and rationalising the cost and process of licensing to encourage formalisation of the large informal segment of the industry currently operating outside regulatory oversight.
  7. Centralised Vetting Database: A centralised, digitised database for the vetting and background-checking of prospective private security personnel should be established and made accessible to licensed operators, in order to reduce the risk of criminal infiltration of the industry and enhance public confidence in private security services.

## CONCLUSION

This article has examined the role of private security in strengthening national security in Nigeria against the backdrop of persistent and multidimensional insecurity that has overwhelmed the capacity of public security agencies. The evidence reviewed demonstrates that private security companies make substantial, if under-recognised, contributions to national security through complementing conventional security agencies, protecting critical infrastructure, safeguarding the economy, generating employment, and supporting community-level intelligence gathering. However, these contributions are constrained by an outdated regulatory framework, weak enforcement, poor remuneration, and the industry's exclusion from formal national security planning. Realising the full potential of private security as a strategic partner in Nigeria's national security architecture requires urgent legal reform, professionalisation of the workforce, and the institutionalisation of structured collaboration between public and private security actors. Only through such deliberate policy action can Nigeria harness the private security sector as a genuine force multiplier in the pursuit of national security.

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