Migration Governance and Border Security in Northeast Nigeria

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Abstract

Migration governance and border security are critical aspects of national security. Migration is a dynamic feature of population distribution and has the potential to jeopardize national security if not well-managed. Nigeria's security is threatened by transnational organized crimes, including irregular migration and the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) due to the nature of the country's boundary contingency. There is a dearth of a multi-layered approach that includes surveillance technology, personnel, and infrastructure to handle border security challenges in Nigeria. This study analyzes the relationship between migration governance and border security in Nigeria. The study adopted Everett Lee's theory of migration, while relying on documentary method for data collection and were analysed qualitatively. The study argued that irregular migration sustained by an expansive border, a lack of manpower, and corruption undermined border security in Northeast Nigeria. Weak enforcement of trans-border agreements, limited cooperation between Nigerian security forces and law enforcement officers in neighboring states, and poor border security funding accounted for the rise in the proliferation of SALW in Northeast Nigeria. To regulate irregular migration into the Northeast, Nigerian government should provide adequate manpower, training, incentives, and equipment for the grooming of efficient and uncompromising border security agencies.

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Introduction

The challenges of migration governance and border security in Northeast Nigeria and the broader West African region cannot be fully understood without acknowledging the colonial legacy that shaped Africa's modern borders. The arbitrary partitioning of the continent by European powers during the 1884–1885 Berlin Conference created artificial boundaries that ignored ethnic, cultural, and economic ties among communities (Dakas, 2018; Okorn, 2024; Rwigema, 2025; Zhang & Lu, 2025). These colonial-era borders divided ethnic groups and trade routes between Nigeria and its northeastern neighbors (Zhang & Lu, 2025), creating a basis for ongoing border insecurity and uncontrolled cross-border mobility (Mbah et al., 2021; Adebajo, 2022). The growth of irregular migrant channels, minimal administrative presence, and permeable boundaries are all examples of the long-lasting repercussions of this colonial cartography.

The unstable security environment, characterized by insurgency, displacement, and humanitarian crises, further exacerbates the situation in Northeast Nigeria (Ewalefoh, 2020; Udeh, 2024; Ogbue, Omiunu & Okafor, 2024). The area, which shares borders with Cameroon, Chad, and Niger, has developed into a significant transit hub for transnational crime and both voluntary and forced migration (Janssen & Marchand, 2020; Iwuoha, 2025). Despite initiatives to promote regional mobility and integration, the ECOWAS Transhumance Protocol and the ECOWAS Free Movement of Persons Protocol have, in reality, both facilitated and complicated migration governance (Idowu & Agbalajobi, 2022; Nwangwu, 2025). Despite the fact that these protocols are meant to encourage economic integration and legal mobility, their execution is hindered by inadequate state capacity, inadequate interstate coordination, and security threats associated with unregulated cross-border movement.

Thus, citizens of member states have the freedom to travel, live, and work in other member nations without a visa according to the 1979 adoption of the ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol (Belete-Hailu, 2024). By creating legal pathways for livestock herding, the Transhumance Protocol aims to control the seasonal migration of pastoralists across international borders (Nori, 2019). However, non-state actors, such as smugglers and terrorists, frequently take advantage of these rules in areas like Northeast Nigeria, where border control is brittle, by using unmonitored routes (Ogbonna et al., 2023; Lenshie et al., 2024). Additionally, states' capacity to differentiate between security concerns and lawful mobility is compromised by the lack of reliable tracking technologies and biometric registration (Iwuoha, 2025), increasing the likelihood of violent extremism, irregular migration, and inter-communal conflicts (Lenshie, 2018).

Migration governance and border security have become critical concerns in Nigeria due to the country's extensive and porous borders, particularly in the Northeast. This region, covering over 275,000 square kilometers and home to diverse ethnic groups, shares deep socio-cultural and migratory ties with neighbouring Niger, Chad, and Cameroon (Onuoha, 2013). Nigeria's borders include 1,499 illegal and only 84 legal entry points, making them vulnerable to irregular migration, smuggling, and the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW) (Chinedu, 2019; Statista, 2021). Despite entering into bilateral and multilateral agreements and signing regional and international protocols on SALW control, challenges persist due to poor enforcement and weak governance structures (Akinyemi, 2013; Tesimina, 2015, Hoffmann & Melly, 2015). Irregular migration has been linked to transnational crimes such as human trafficking, terrorism, and arms smuggling, posing threats to national sovereignty, economic development, and internal security (Uehling, 2004; Vinogradova, Kulyamina, Koroleva, & Larionova, 2015). Scholars argue that these dynamics, rooted in governance failures and border insecurity, require a systematic examination of Nigeria's domestic and international migration and security policies to mitigate emerging threats.

Although border security, migration governance, and regional integration have received a lot of scholarly attention in West Africa, most of the literature currently in publication treats these topics separately without sufficiently examining how they intersect in particular conflict-prone areas, such as Northeast Nigeria. The majority of studies concentrate on transnational concerns like terrorism and smuggling or the ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol in general, but they frequently ignore how colonial border legacies continue to influence the structural flaws in border governance institutions. Therefore, the central thrust of this paper is to investigate migration governance and border security in Northeast Nigeria.

Literature Review

Overlapping functions of border security agencies and irregular migration

The overlapping functions of border security agencies in Nigeria significantly contribute to the persistence of irregular migration, particularly in the Northeast region (Adeniran & Adeniran, 2020). This issue is rooted in historical, institutional, and operational complexities that undermine effective migration governance and border security. Nigeria's border management involves multiple agencies, including the Nigeria Immigration Service (NIS), Nigeria Customs Service (NCS), Nigeria Police Force (NPF), National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA), and the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP). The lack of clear delineation of responsibilities among these agencies leads to

jurisdictional conflicts and inefficiencies. For instance, at the Seme-Badagry border corridor, overlapping mandates have resulted in poor inter-agency collaboration, hindering the fight against transnational crimes such as human and drug trafficking (Igwe, 2024).

Nigeria's extensive and porous borders, with only 91 officially recognized out of approximately 4,080 routes, facilitate irregular migration and the infiltration of criminal elements (Chinedu, 2023). The overlapping functions of border agencies, coupled with inadequate resources and corruption, exacerbate these vulnerabilities (Vaseashta et al., 2024). The lack of coordinated efforts among agencies allows for the unchecked movement of people and goods, contributing to national insecurity. External actors, notably the European Union, have influenced Nigeria's border management through funding and policy directives aimed at curbing migration to Europe. However, these externally driven policies often do not align with local realities, leading to unintended consequences. For example, the criminalization of legal emigration and increased reliance on external support have altered local social dynamics and strained the capacities of border agencies (Talleraas, 2024).

The Nigerian government's approach to migration has increasingly involved securitization, framing migration as a security threat. This perspective has led to policies such as border closures and heightened surveillance, which often lack effectiveness due to the overlapping and sometimes conflicting roles of various security agencies. Such measures have not adequately addressed the root causes of irregular migration and have sometimes exacerbated the problem (Ogbonna et al., 2023). In essence, the overlapping functions of border security agencies in Nigeria contribute to the challenges of managing irregular migration. Institutional fragmentation, porous borders, external policy influences, and the securitization of migration collectively undermine effective border governance.

Although, Joshua and Makama (2017) argued that irregular migration in Nigeria is multi-factorial, and has been on the rise in recent times. It will continue to be a major, unstoppable factor in global life until the different push and pull factors associated with this migration, including social and economic disparities, are eliminated. Irregular migration has undoubtedly had a negative impact on Nigeria. Thus, in addressing irregular migration, Joshua & Makama (2017), Mohammed (2016), Yahaya, Liman, & Adadu (2018), Mohammed (2016), identified the causes of irregular migration and went further to examine its impact on national security and Nigeria at large, but they failed to link the overlapping functions of border security agencies to irregular migration.

In reviewing border security agencies and irregular migration literature, Strand of literature show that writers on migration have attributed the push and pull factors namely, political stability, a stable growing economic environment, job availability, modern infrastructure, higher life expectancy, access to justice, and human rights to migration; economic or fiscal structural policies and changes imposed on developing economies by the west and western-based international organisations s (Castel & Miller 2009; Onyeniyi, 2013; Cheesman, 2015; Carbone & Cassani, 2016; Chua, 2003; Adepoju, 2002).

Segawa and Gilkes (2015) in Parradang (2014), attributed the illegal route as a factor that encouraged the inflow of irregular migrants. Thus, Parradang (2014) argued that there are approximately 1,400 illicit routes into Nigeria, which are 1,316 more than the number of border control posts permitted. The 84 approved border controls cover the whole length of Nigeria's land border, which is 4,047 kilometres. For example, Ogun and Adamawa states each contain 83 and 80 unlawful postings, respectively (Parradang, 2014). The consequence is that Nigeria is unsafe as a result of cross-border population and commercial operations, as well as cross-border crossing and immigration. Nigeria's borders, with their numerous potholes, are used for all illegal activities, including human trafficking, the transportation of illegal weapons, the smuggling of food and non-food items, used cars, drugs, and other contraband goods (Parradang, 2014).

Smuggling and tax evasion in cross-border movements across the Nigeria-Niger border provide transitional features of border economic activities, interaction patterns in border regions, and flouting of international laws and conventions on border crossing to the detriment of national interest and, invariably, national security in that era (Maranin 2010). He further indicated that the porous features of the border region and the prevailing economic policies of the neighbouring states are tantamount to influencing illegal cross-border transactions in goods, currency, and other threatening circumstances. These scholars, in accessing migration and border security, identified the illegal route as a factor that encouraged the inflow of irregular migrants but failed to attribute the overlapping of border security agencies to irregular migration.

Weak Enforcement of Trans-border Agreements and the Proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons

The proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs) in Nigeria is a pressing security concern, exacerbated by the weak enforcement of trans-border agreements. Despite Nigeria's participation in regional initiatives like the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons, the country continues to

grapple with the influx of illicit arms, undermining national security and stability (Mezie-Okoye, 2022). One of the primary challenges is the porous nature of Nigeria's borders. With over 1,400 illegal entry points, these unmonitored routes facilitate the unchecked movement of arms and other contraband. The vast and often ungoverned border areas, especially in the northeastern and northwestern regions, provide fertile ground for smugglers and non-state actors to operate with impunity. The lack of adequate border security infrastructure and personnel further compounds the problem, allowing for the seamless flow of SALWs into the country (Afegbua, 2023). Corruption within security agencies significantly undermines efforts to enforce trans-border agreements. There are instances of security personnel colluding with smugglers or turning a blind eye to illicit activities at the borders. Such corruption not only facilitates the proliferation of SALWs but also erodes public trust in law enforcement agencies, making collaborative efforts to curb arms smuggling more challenging.

According to Akinyemi (2013), one of the main responsibilities of a state is the extent to which it controls its borders, especially in the globalisation era, which has made transnational crimes easier. Consequently, the Boko-Haram attacks, killings, kidnappings, and arms smuggling are not surprising; they are basically due to poor border security. Akinyemi's argument is justifiable given the state of insecurity in Nigeria. Adding to the above assertion, Okumu (2011) views that generally, border security includes: geophysical control of a boundary through patrol by the military or a special border patrol protection force; immigration by internally enforcing laws, migration by controlling the transnational movement of people; and enhanced enforcement of immigration and migration laws by asking questions that assist in screening people using the border. Enhancing inspections through searches to ensure that harmful products or individuals do not enter a country, Enhancing the management of institutions and systems that contribute to border security, Detecting and preventing criminals and illegal persons, goods, drugs, and weapons, as well as other prohibited items, from entering a country.

This issue on Nigeria's trans-border migration policy and border security were further examined by Azom & Okoli (2016) and Mbaegbu (2019). According to Azom & Okoli (2016) and Mbaegbu (2019), lack of a clear border management policy and the proliferation of law enforcement agencies characterized Nigeria's border management. They claim that this leads to turmoil and intra-systemic conflict, which impedes effective border administration. Because of the porous nature of Nigeria's North East borders, Boko Haram has been able to move their troops, mercenaries, and weapons into Nigeria unnoticed in order to continue their terrorist activities. Apart from armed robbery, our porous borders have encouraged other trans-national criminal activities like trafficking of small and light weapons,

narcotizes and human beings, cars among others (Nte, 2011; Onuoha, 2013; Blum, 2014; Ani, 2012). In trafficking of arms, about 70% and 8 million illegal weapons in West Africa were reported to flow into Nigeria through neighboring states (Onuoha, 2013).

Thus, the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons aims to regulate the manufacture, sale, and transfer of SALWs within the West African sub-region (Mittawa, 2022; Fyanka, 2025). However, its implementation in Nigeria faces several hurdles. Legal and institutional frameworks are often fragmented, leading to inconsistencies in enforcement. Moreover, the lack of a centralized database for tracking arms and inadequate inter-agency coordination hampers the effective monitoring of SALWs. The activities of non-state armed groups, such as Boko Haram and various bandit groups further exacerbate the situation. These groups exploit the weak enforcement mechanisms and porous borders to acquire arms, fueling violence and instability across the country (Tar & Safana, 2021; Amali & Buthelezi, 2025). Their operations not only threaten national security but also hinder socio-economic development, especially in affected regions. In essence, the weak enforcement of trans-border agreements significantly contributes to the proliferation of SALWs in Nigeria.

However, literature considers the lack of integrated security efforts to be a source of criminal smuggling and other illicit networks. Temisan (2015); Menner (2012); Adam (2012); Idowu (2014); Temisan (2015); Border security in Nigeria has been harmed by a lack of cooperation and coordination between security personnel in Nigeria and other neighbouring countries. Temisan (2015) saw a lack of cooperation between security services (namely the NCS and NIS) in cooperative border patrol arrangements. Despite the global joint task force's efforts to improve security, particularly at borders, there has been a lack of communication, coordination, and cooperation amongst security agencies from other countries (Menner, 2014).

An additional strand of literature identified issues of a weak border management system, such as insufficient staff, patrol vehicles, surveillance aircraft, and equipment, as well as the intelligence services' neglect or non-functioning. As a result, the system becomes weak and ineffective. All of these are undeniably important elements of Nigeria's key borders and waterways. Musa (2013), Hazen and Horner (2007), Onuoha (2013) asserts that poor border security has gone a long way to aid the operations of terrorist groups like Boko Haram, which are a threat to national security. Boko Haram has invented or used both transnational and national arms and weapons trafficking to oppress and terrorise Nigerians (Onuoha, 2013).The challenge of guarding the Nigerian border aids Boko Haram in carrying

out multiple successful attacks in Nigeria and neighbouring countries, killing thousands of people and displacing millions (Temisan, 2015). The porous nature of the border has enabled the terrorists to purchase or traffic weapons and travel to other neighboring countries for other assistance. This has led to several training camps in Chad, the Niger Republic, and Cameroon. This is why Okumu (2011) "viewed that insecure borders have greatly contributed to severe security threats such as insurrection, incursion, and terrorist activity.

Theoretical Framework

For examining border security and migration governance in Northeast Nigeria, Everett Lee's *Push and Pull Theory of Migration* (1966) provides a useful theoretical framework. A mix of push forces (things that force people to leave their place of origin), pull factors (things that draw people to a destination), intervening barriers, and personal considerations, according to Lee, are what drive migration (Lee, 1966). In areas impacted by violence, such as Northeast Nigeria, this paradigm closely reflects the realities of migrant dynamics. Millions of people have been forced to leave their homes in Northeast Nigeria due to push factors such as armed war, terrorism by Boko Haram and ISWAP, food shortages, poverty, and environmental degradation. For example, the region's increasingly conflict has resulted in approximately 2.1 million internally displaced individuals (IDPs), according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (UNHCR, 2023).

At the same time, pull factors that encourage outward movement include the prospect of security, the availability of humanitarian relief, and improved socioeconomic prospects in cities like Maiduguri or in nearby nations like Chad and Cameroon. The ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol, which permits people of member states to travel, live, and work across borders without a visa, has further encouraged regional mobility (ECOWAS Commission, 1979). Insecurity is increased by intervening barriers like Nigeria's inadequate border surveillance system, the 1,499 illegal border crossings and the 84 authorized border crossings (Chinedu, 2019), and the absence of biometric monitoring, which open up gaps that are used by insurgents, traffickers, and arms smugglers in addition to migrants. Thus, Irregular migration is a national security threat, and uncontrolled migrant movements across borders put additional strain on already frail state institutions, increase competition for scarce resources, and exacerbate ethnic and sectarian tensions (Dowty & Loescher, 1996). Even though states possess extensive authority to control the entrance of immigrants into their territories, they appeared to be unsuccessful in controlling irregular immigration (Bosniak, 1991). Nigeria's security issues stem from cross-border movement, causing irregular migration and

the spread of small arms and light weapons. This leads to transnational criminality, weakening border security and affecting migration governance. Poorly managed border areas contribute to this issue. Nigeria's border crossings between Niger Republic, Chad, and other countries are often driven by economic or criminal motives, including arms proliferation and smuggling. Neighbouring nations like Niger, Chad, and Cameroon promote migratory flows to northern Nigeria due to drought, desertification, deforestation, political instability, and dissatisfaction with unemployment, poverty, and low wages. These factors drive migrants to Nigeria, the economic powerhouse in the sub-Saharan region. (Norfolk, 2015; OPEC, 2015).

Additionally, individual characteristics like cultural and ethnic ties that transcend colonial borders have a big impact on migratory decisions. The Kanuri and Fulani ethnic groups, for instance, has significant transnational relationships that make border policing more difficult because they live throughout Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Cameroon (Onuoha, 2013). Nigerian immigration officials face challenges in determining national identities due to tribal marks and local dialects, affecting strict enforcement of immigration regulations. Family relationships contribute to irregular movements across northeastern borders. Family links between Kanuri in Borno and Chad and Niger are close, with royal and aristocratic families on both sides related by blood and marriage. The Shehu of Borno in Nigeria still holds traditional power in southern Niger. The migrant control frameworks of the states have authority to prevent immigrants' entry but often ineffective in regulating irregular immigration (Bosniak, 1991).

In essence, Everett Lee's theory shows that the humanitarian, security, and governance aspects of the factors influencing migration in Northeast Nigeria are intricately linked. Given regional mobility frameworks like the ECOWAS Transhumance Protocol, which have been manipulated in unstable security environments despite facilitating legal mobility for pastoralists; this underscores the significance of researching border security and migration governance in this context (Hoffmann & Melly, 2015). Furthermore, international migration poses security threats and requires cooperation between origin, transit, and destination countries for effective management (Koser, 2005). The Nigerian government has signed regional and bilateral agreements to enhance migration governance and border security, resulting in bodies like the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) and joint commissions with Chad and Cameroon (Aniekwe & Brooks, 2023; Gbenda & Idris, 2024). However, the Nigeria's government implementation of the policy of securitizing migration and border control in northeast Nigeria has led to weak border securitization thereby causing security difficulties and militarization of international borders (Faleye, 2019; Ogbonna et al., 2023).

Ineffective immigration enforcement is due to insufficient manpower, corruption, poor inter-agency cooperation, insufficient equipment, and overlapping security agency functions (Eselebor, 2019).

Discussion and Findings

A. *Juxtaposition of overlapping functions of border security agencies and irregular migration in northeast Nigeria*

Nigeria's duplication of establishment act functions undermines border management, resulting in scant inspections and difficulty detecting irregular migrants due to 147 irregular and 84 regular routes (Akinyemi, 2013; Menner, 2014). Similarly, Adams (2012) noted that Nigeria has 1475 official and 2000 unofficial border sites. Corroborating this view, Musa (2015) confirmed that Nigerian security agencies have discovered 250 unidentified footprints from the Damaturu/Maiduguri axis linking Cameroon, Chad, and Niger. The porosity of Nigeria's border is evident through the use of dried trees, oil drums, and tyres (Gbemre, 2016). Border security agencies in Nigeria aim to combat transnational criminality but duplication in functions and duties has mitigated this issue. These borders management agencies in Nigeria and their establishment act as stated in the table 1 below:

Table 1: Major Border Management Agencies in Nigeria and Establishment Act

Serial	Name of Agency	Establishment Act
1.	Nigerian Immigration Service (NIS)	CAP 171 Laws of the Federation of Nigeria, 1963; Immigration Act, 2015; NIS *Directorate of Border Patrol, ECOWAS & African Affairs* charged with preventing irregular migration, weapons smuggling and terrorism
2.	Nigerian Customs Service (NCS)	Customs and Exercise Act CAP C45; Nigeria Customs Service Act, 2013. Part II, Section (f)... "in collaboration with the relevant agencies, carry out all border enforcement and regulatory activity required by law"
3.	National Drugs Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA)	Decree No 48 of 1989; National Drugs Law Enforcement Agency Act, 1989 Section 8(d)
4.	Nigeria Police Force (NPF)	Section 194, 1979 Constitution; Police Act, 1979 (Police Border Patrol Unit)
5.	Department of State Services (DSS)	National Security Agencies Act, 1986
6.	Nigerian Army (NA)	1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (Section 217-222)

7.	Nigerian Navy (NN)	1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (Section 217-222)
8.	Nigerian Air Force (NAF)	1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (Section 217-222)
9.	National Agency for Food, Drugs Administration and Control (NAFDAC)	National Agency for Food, Drugs Administration and Control Act CAP N1, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria, 2004
10.	National Boundary Commission (NBC)	National Boundaries Commission Act, CAP 238 Laws of the Federation of Nigeria, 1990
11.	Border Communities Development Agency (BCDA)	Border Communities Development Agency Act, 2003
12.	Standard Organization of Nigeria (SON)	Standard Organization of Nigeria Act, 2015
13.	National Veterinary Quarantine Service (NVQS)	Animal Diseases Control Act, CAP.A17 Laws of the Federation of Nigeria, 2004

Source: Adopted from Egonu, N. (2017).

Our field research shows that duplication of functions within agencies hinders apprehension of irregular migrants due to overlapping duties. The Nigerian government creates agencies with similar acts and duties, leading to major problems in addressing irregular migrants (Ochogwu & Babatunde, 2023). The Nigeria Customs Service's DCG of drug and enforcement unit identifies the expansive Nigerian border as a factor in irregular migration. He further noted that these migrants are not labeled illegal migrants because illegal criminalizes them, as they view the border as an imaginary line they should be thus regarded as irregular migrants.
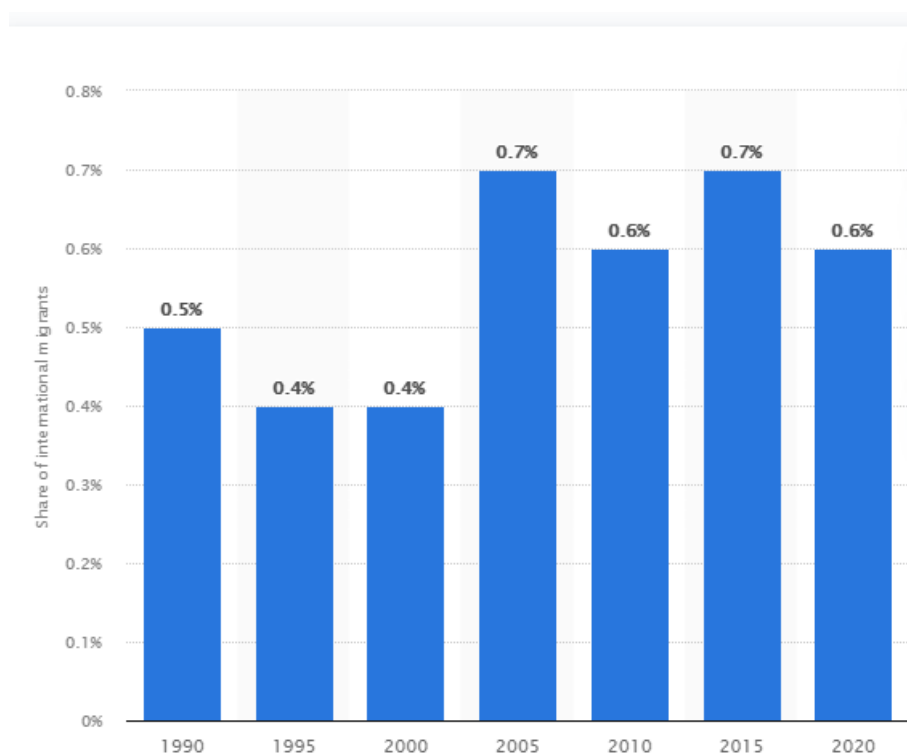
Source: (IOM 2019).

Figure 1: Number of documented immigrants in Nigeria in selected years from 1990 to 2020

The Figure 1 shows an increase in international migrants in Nigeria from 1990 to 2020, with a significant increase in numbers from 2010 to 2020. The percentage of international migrants increased from 0.5% to 0.6%. The Nigerian Immigration Service arrested and repatriated 430 irregular migrants between January and November 2014, mostly from Niger Republic, Cameroon, Chad, and Mali. The figure also shows an increase in international migrants in Nigeria, with 90% coming from the Niger Republic.

Table 2: Nigeria's International Land Borders shared with its neighbors (in km)

Country	Benin	Cameroon	Chad	Niger	Nigeria
Benin				266	773
Cameroon					1,690
Chad				1,175	871
Niger	266		1,175		1,497
Nigeria	773	1,690	871	1,497	

**Source:** SWAC Secretariat (SWAC/OECD) 2021.

B. *Weak enforcement of trans-border agreements and the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW) in Northeast Nigeria*

Nigeria is a source, transit point, and destination of small arms and light weapons (SALW), and their proliferation generally is not a new phenomenon. The pattern, trend, and implications, on the other hand, have been a major source of concern for the international community (Onuoha, 2020). The proliferation of weaponry has become a major concern, particularly since the end of the Cold War and the rivalry between superpowers (Ola, 2018; in Ayuba and Okafor, 2020). Concerns about the spread of illegal small arms and light weapons in northeast Nigeria have grown as violent crimes and conflicts have escalated domestic and multilateral border control procedures as well as trans-border security cooperation between Nigeria and her northeast neighbors, viz., Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, and the impact on weapons proliferation in northeast Nigeria**.**

As a result, Due to the religious and ethno-cultural affinity between the peoples of northern Nigeria and southern Niger, border ties between the two countries have traditionally been marked by open cross-border flows (Ojedokun, 2018; Pries, 2019; Idris et al., 2024). Large influxes of irregular migrants, as well as more lately Boko Haram terrorists and SALW have raised security worries about the border's porosity (Ehiane, 2024; Dike, 2025; Amali, & Buthelezi, 2025). The signing of a Bilateral Defense Agreement between Nigeria and Niger on October 18, 2012 in Niamey and confirmation by the Nigerian government on August 14, 2013 in Abuja exemplifies bilateral border security cooperation between the two countries. The agreement focuses on providing reciprocal military support and border security, as well as increased cooperation in information exchange and training activities, and cooperation on cross-border terrorism, border demarcation and construction of roads and railways (World Politics Review, 2012).Thus, there are numerous trans-border security agreements between Nigeria and other nations (Dike, 2025; Sowale, 2025). Despite the fact that weapons smuggling, trafficking, and proliferation constitute a serious threat to society's safety and stability, several security accords have failed to explicitly prioritize their management (Fyanka, 2025; Okoli et al., 2025).

The MNJTF's contingents illustrate the lack of trans-border enforcement agreements. Political instability and collapse in governments such as Libya, Mali, and the Central African Republic have been primary drivers of SALW proliferation in northeast Nigeria ((Tar & Safana, 2021; Sambo & Sule, 2024; Balogun, 2024). The Boko Haram insurgency, which has drastically raised the demand for such weapons in order to conduct its war against the Nigerian state, has been a primary pull factor for the spread of SALW in northeast Nigeria during the research period. The porosity of Nigeria's borders and the lack of execution of trans-border security

agreements noted above demonstrate the weakness of the intervening obstacle. The proliferation of SALW in northeast Nigeria is indexed by the rate of seizure of such weapons by the security forces and the number of casualties and fatalities attributed to their use (Idowu & Agbalajobi, 2022; Fyanka, 2025). The annual number of illicit weapons seized by the NCS in Nigeria since 2015 to 2022 has varied between 16,343 and 2,671 small arms and light weapons per year. It is clear that this number represents only a small fraction of the illicit weapons in circulation in Nigeria. Aggregated statistics availed in NCS about weapons seized due to violations of applicable.
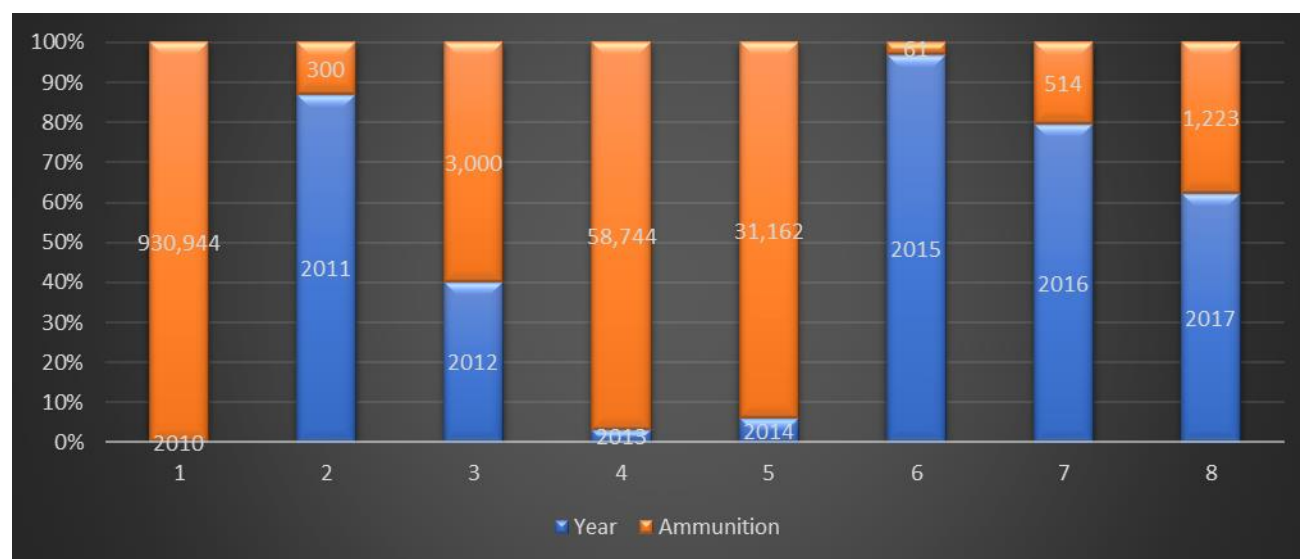

Source: Nigeria Customs service (2021).

Figure 2: Ammunition and explosives devices seized by the NCS from 2010-2017

Correspondingly, in 2010, the number of rounds of ammunition and explosive devices seized climbed significantly, and this trend continued in 2013 and 2014 (See Figure 2). This can be linked to an increase in guns seizures, which increased gradually in proportion to all seized items between 2016 and 2017. The number of rounds of ammunition and explosive devices seized, on the other hand, increased significantly in 2010, 2013, and 2014 (See figure 2), but remained low in the previous years under consideration. Seizures of explosive devices, on the other hand, reveal a different pattern. These changes may not necessarily indicate an increase in trafficking but the NCS may have increased their efforts on intercepting SALW shipments as seen in the figure that total estimated deaths caused by SALW in the northeast between 2015 and 2021.

Other sources of weaponry have been linked to the proliferation of SALW in Nigeria, including the destabilization of Libya, the actions of AQIM jihadists in Mali, Boko Haram's operational networks with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and the Somalia-based jihadist group Al Shabaab (September 18, 2014; The Sun News). Weapons are allegedly trafficked into Nigeria via the open borders with Benin, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon (PRESCOM, 2015).
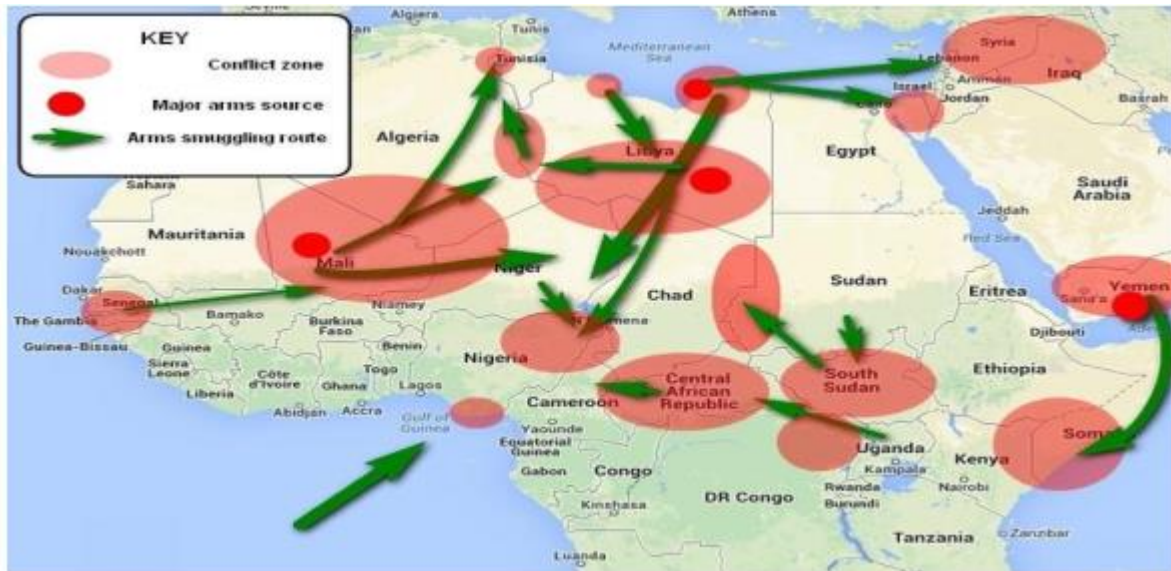
Source: The Huffington Post, June 15, 2014. Boko haram: Military is the problem, not the solution. www.huffpost.com.

Figure 3: Major Smuggling Routes for SALW

The key pathways for the illegal flow of SALW in North Africa, West Africa, the Horn of Africa, and the Middle East are depicted in Figure 3. Apart from the Gulf of Guinea, Nigeria's north-eastern borders are thought to be a significant route and destination for SALW trafficking. Nigeria is surrounded on all sides by four major conflict zones: Mali, Libya, Chad, and the Central African Republic (CAR). Smuggling routes run through Niger and Chad and into the conflict zone of northeast Nigeria through the north-eastern borders around Yobe and Borno, Libya and Mali are major sources of SALW in Nigeria, with smuggling routes running through Niger and Chad and into the conflict zone of northeast Nigeria through the north-eastern borders around Yobe and Borno.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study explores migration governance and border security in northeast Nigeria, highlighting how colonial-era borders, drawn without regard for ethnic and cultural lines, continue to challenge African states. In Nigeria, migration is shaped by its

role as a destination, origin, and transit country. Boundaries shared with Niger, Chad, and Cameroon are porous, with migration across them perceived as intra-cultural rather than international due to shared social and cultural ties. These factors contribute to persistent irregular migration.

The study finds that strong transnational networks rooted in economic, social, and cultural affinities drive consistent migratory flows across Nigeria's northeastern borders. Artificial colonial borders have not stopped these movements but have instead reclassified them as irregular under modern immigration laws. The porosity of borders is also attributed to difficult terrain and a lack of sufficient border control posts.

Evidence from maps and tables in the analysis above confirms the wide stretch of Nigeria's northeastern borders and the sparse presence of enforcement capacity. The study validates the hypothesis that overlapping functions among security agencies contribute to irregular migration. Additionally, northeast Nigeria's position on international arms trafficking routes and ongoing insurgency from Boko Haram make the region a hotspot for the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, intensified by weak cross-border security collaboration.

Based on its findings, the study recommends that the Nigerian government enhance border security by providing well-trained, well-equipped, and motivated personnel to manage the country's vast borders. Essential tools such as scanners, non-intrusive inspection devices, and the Electronic Passenger Automated Registration System (E-PARS) and other security surveillance technologies should be supplied to improve migration monitoring. Additionally, to curb the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW), the government should establish permanent, well-funded bilateral joint border forces with neighboring countries. It also urges strengthened internal operations targeting illegal arms production and calls for better international cooperation and full implementation of trans-border agreements to secure Nigeria's borders.

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