

Kidnapping as an Evolving Security Threat in Africa: Drivers, Trends, and Resilience Options in The Artificial Intelligence Age

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ABSTRACT

Kidnapping has emerged as one of Africa's most complex and rapidly evolving security threats, transforming from isolated criminal activity into a structured security economy associated with terrorism financing, organised crime, governance fragility, and socioeconomic vulnerabilities. This study examines the drivers, regional trajectories, and resilience options associated with kidnapping in Africa, with particular attention to the emerging role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in contemporary security governance. The study adopts a narrative review and policy-analysis design, drawing evidence from criminal justice statistics, conflict-event datasets, terrorism-impact indices, institutional reports, and recent scholarly literature on kidnapping, organised crime, terrorism financing, and AI-enabled security applications. Data sources were selected based on relevance, credibility, geographical representation, and recency, with emphasis on materials published between 2020 and 2026. Through thematic synthesis and comparative analysis, the study identifies poverty, unemployment, weak governance, porous borders, climate-related resource pressures, judicial limitations, and criminal-terrorist financing networks as major drivers sustaining kidnapping across African regions that calls for pragmatic advances rather than the usual rhetoric. The study further examines empirical applications of AI-enabled security interventions, including automated surveillance and crime analytics in South Africa, digital security initiatives in Kenya, citizen-reporting and predictive policing experiments in Ethiopia, and AI-supported financial intelligence mechanisms relevant to counter-terrorism financing. Findings indicate that AI offers significant opportunities for strengthening kidnapping prevention through predictive analytics, intelligence coordination, financial monitoring, and early-warning systems. However, the technology also introduces risks associated with surveillance abuse, algorithmic bias, data protection concerns, and potential exploitation by criminal and extremist actors. The study argues that AI should be understood as a security-enhancing instrument rather than a substitute for governance reform. Sustainable resilience against kidnapping in Africa requires integrating responsible AI deployment with institutional strengthening, socioeconomic development, regional intelligence cooperation, community participation, and human-rights-based security governance.

Keywords: Kidnapping for ransom; Terrorism financing; Artificial intelligence; Predictive policing; Security resilience

INTRODUCTION

Kidnapping has become one of the most visible manifestations of Africa's evolving security challenges. Once largely perceived as an occasional criminal activity associated with political violence, interpersonal disputes, or elite-targeted abductions, kidnapping has transformed into a complex security economy involving organised criminal networks, violent extremist organisations, insurgent groups, and transnational illicit actors. The contemporary kidnapping landscape demonstrates considerable adaptability, with perpetrators continuously modifying their strategies, victim selection patterns, operational methods, and financial mechanisms in response to changes in state security approaches and technological environments.

Across Africa, kidnapping increasingly operates within broader ecosystems of insecurity. In the Sahel, abduction has become integrated into terrorism financing and insurgent governance structures, enabling armed groups to generate revenue, enforce territorial influence, and undermine state authority (Financial Action Task Force FATF, 2013; United Nations Meetings Coverage, 2025). In Nigeria, kidnapping has evolved through the convergence of armed banditry, terrorism, illegal mining, rural insecurity, and organised criminal enterprise. In South Africa, kidnapping has developed into a sophisticated urban crime industry involving extortion, vehicle hijacking, and organised robbery networks (Institute for Security Studies, ISS Africa, 2024).

The scale and complexity of the challenge are reflected in available crime and conflict data. In South Africa, the South African Police Service (SAPS) recorded a substantial increase in kidnapping incidents over the past decade, with more than 17,000 cases reported during the 2023/2024 period, demonstrating the expansion of kidnapping beyond traditional conflict environments (ISS Africa, 2024). Similarly, conflict-event analysis across the Sahel indicates a significant transformation in victim patterns, with local civilians increasingly replacing foreign nationals as the primary targets of kidnap-for-ransom operations (Laskaris & Walther, 2026).

Nigeria provides perhaps the most illustrative example of the continent's kidnapping crisis. The country has experienced increasing incidents of mass abductions involving schoolchildren, rural communities, religious institutions, and travellers. These incidents according to Nature Humanities and Social Sciences Communications (2025) reflect the interaction of weak rural governance, unemployment, criminal networks, and violent extremist activities. Recent empirical studies identify unemployment, governance failures, socioeconomic deprivation, and limited state capacity as significant factors explaining the persistence of kidnapping within Nigeria's security environment.

The threat is further complicated by the emergence of digital technologies and Artificial Intelligence (AI). While AI offers new possibilities for predictive policing, intelligence analysis, biometric identification, financial monitoring, and emergency response coordination, it simultaneously creates opportunities for criminal and extremist organisations to improve propaganda, recruitment, communication, and operational planning (GNET, 2025; Soufan Center, 2025). This dual-use character makes AI both a potential instrument of security resilience and a possible amplifier of insecurity.

The central argument of this study is that kidnapping in Africa cannot be effectively understood or addressed through a narrow criminal justice perspective alone. Rather, it represents a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by the interaction of socioeconomic exclusion, governance fragility, conflict dynamics, organised crime, technological transformation, and institutional resilience. Consequently, while AI-enabled security innovations provide valuable operational advantages, they must be embedded within broader governance reforms, human-rights safeguards, and development-oriented approaches.

Accordingly, this study addresses three major questions:

1. What structural and proximate factors explain the persistence and diversification of kidnapping across African security environments?
2. How have regional patterns of kidnapping evolved, and how are they connected to wider terrorism and organised-crime dynamics?
3. What role can Artificial Intelligence realistically play in strengthening security resilience against kidnapping while managing emerging technological risks?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Understanding kidnapping as an evolving security threat in Africa requires an analytical approach capable of explaining both the immediate conditions that facilitate criminal behaviour and the deeper structural factors that allow such criminal economies to persist. This study is therefore anchored on three complementary perspectives of Routine Activity Theory; State Fragility Theory; and the Security Resilience Perspective. Together, these

perspectives provide a multidimensional explanation of why kidnapping expands, how it becomes institutionalised, and the conditions required for sustainable responses in the Artificial Intelligence (AI) era.

Routine Activity Theory

The Routine Activity Theory (RAT), developed by Cohen and Felson (1979), explains criminal occurrence through the convergence of three elements: a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the absence of capable guardianship. The theory shifts attention away from criminal motivation alone towards the social and environmental conditions that create opportunities for crime. Applied to kidnapping in Africa, the theory provides useful insights into how contemporary security environments create opportunities for criminal networks. For instance, motivated offenders emerged from various contexts, including unemployed youth populations, organised criminal groups, insurgent organisations, and extremist movements. UNDP (2023) however, has canvassed that the presence of poverty or unemployment alone does not automatically generate criminality; rather, these conditions interact with weak institutions, conflict environments, and criminal incentives to increase vulnerability to recruitment. The availability of suitable targets has also expanded considerably emanating from the growth of urbanisation, commercial transportation networks, educational institutions, mining activities, humanitarian operations, and digital financial systems which has created new opportunities exploited by kidnapping networks. The more reason why Laskaris & Walther (2026) affirmed that the increasing targeting of schoolchildren, farmers, traders, and ordinary citizens across parts of Nigeria and the Sahel demonstrated the changing victim profile.

Again, inadequate guardianship remains a major factor sustaining kidnapping. Weak policing capacity, poor intelligence coordination, porous borders, corruption, limited surveillance infrastructure, and ineffective judicial systems reduce the perceived risks associated with kidnapping. Consequently, offenders increasingly perceive kidnapping as a profitable activity with relatively limited consequences (International Review of the Red Cross, 2023). Within this theoretical perspective, Artificial Intelligence becomes relevant because it strengthens the concept of "capable guardianship." AI-enabled surveillance, predictive analytics, digital crime mapping, biometric identification, financial monitoring, and automated intelligence systems can improve state capacity to anticipate and respond to kidnapping. However, RAT also suggests that technology alone cannot eliminate crime where motivated offenders and structural vulnerabilities remain.

State Fragility Theory

While Routine Activity Theory explains the immediate opportunities that facilitate kidnapping, State Fragility Theory provides a broader explanation of why these opportunities persist over time. State Fragility Theory argues that insecurity becomes entrenched when governments experience declining institutional effectiveness, weak legitimacy, inadequate territorial control, ineffective justice systems, and inability to provide essential public services (Rotberg, 2004). Fragile states often experience what Rotberg (2004) described as a failure of the state's fundamental responsibility of protecting citizens and maintaining legitimate authority throughout its territory.

Contemporary research such as OECD (2022) has expanded this understanding by emphasising that fragility involves interacting political, economic, environmental, and security vulnerabilities rather than simply military weakness. As such, across Africa, kidnapping frequently flourishes within spaces characterised by limited state presence. In parts of the Sahel, vast ungoverned territories, weak border management, and insufficient public services have created environments where extremist and criminal groups establish alternative systems of authority. Corroborating this stance in Nigeria, International Review of the Red Cross (2023) contended that rural communities affected by limited security presence and economic marginalisation have become particularly vulnerable to banditry and kidnapping networks.

The theory also explains why purely military approaches often produce limited long-term success. Where governance weaknesses remain unresolved, criminal networks frequently regenerate after security operations because the social, economic, and institutional conditions supporting recruitment remain unchanged. From this perspective, AI-enabled security systems should be understood as institutional strengthening mechanisms rather than replacements for effective governance. Surveillance technologies, predictive policing, and digital

intelligence platforms can enhance state capacity, but their effectiveness depends on accountable institutions, professional security services, functioning courts, and public legitimacy altogether.

Security Resilience Perspective

The concept of security resilience provides a contemporary framework for understanding how societies anticipate, withstand, adapt to, and recover from complex security threats. Unlike traditional security approaches that focus mainly on eliminating threats, resilience emphasises adaptive capacity, institutional learning, community participation, and the ability to maintain essential social functions during periods of insecurity (OECD, 2022; UNDP, 2023). This perspective is particularly relevant to kidnapping because the threat is dynamic, adaptive, and interconnected with broader social systems. Effective resilience therefore requires more than arresting perpetrators after incidents occur.

It involves strengthening prevention mechanisms, improving intelligence capabilities, reducing vulnerability, enhancing community awareness, and addressing structural conditions that encourage criminal participation. Within this framework, AI represents one component of wider resilience architecture. AI-supported early-warning systems, predictive analytics, financial intelligence, and digital reporting platforms can enhance anticipatory security. However, resilience theory also highlights that technology must operate within legitimate institutional frameworks. Without transparency, accountability, and public trust, advanced technologies may create new vulnerabilities, including privacy violations, discrimination, and misuse of surveillance powers.

The integration of these theories provides a comprehensive explanation of kidnapping dynamics in Africa. Routine Activity Theory explains the immediate opportunity structure of kidnapping by identifying offenders, targets, and weaknesses in guardianship. State Fragility Theory explains the structural environment that allows kidnapping economies to emerge and persist. Security Resilience Theory explains the requirements for sustainable response, emphasising adaptation, institutional capacity, technology governance, and societal participation. Together, these perspectives suggest that kidnapping should be understood as a product of interacting criminal opportunities, governance failures, and resilience deficits. Consequently, effective responses require simultaneous attention to security operations, socioeconomic development, institutional reform, and responsible technological innovation.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Drivers of Kidnapping and the Evolving Threat Landscape in Africa

The expansion of kidnapping across Africa reflects the interaction of multiple structural, institutional, economic, environmental, and technological factors. Contemporary kidnapping should not be interpreted merely as a criminal act committed by isolated offenders; rather, it represents a complex security economy sustained by conditions that provide opportunities, incentives, and operational space for criminal and extremist actors. The evidence reviewed in this study demonstrates that kidnapping has evolved into a strategic instrument used for financial accumulation, territorial influence, political intimidation, and social control. The drivers identified in the literature are interconnected. Poverty, unemployment, weak governance, corruption, inadequate justice systems, porous borders, climate-related pressures, and technological adaptation collectively create an environment in which kidnapping networks can emerge, survive, and expand.

Poverty, Youth Unemployment and Socioeconomic Vulnerabilities

One of the most consistently identified drivers of kidnapping in Africa is socioeconomic deprivation. Although poverty does not automatically translate into criminal behaviour, extensive deprivation combined with weak institutions and limited legitimate economic opportunities can create recruitment environments for criminal organisations. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2023) advanced that insecurity in many fragile contexts is reinforced by a cycle in which poverty reduces state legitimacy, weak governance increases vulnerability, and insecurity further undermines economic development. This cycle is particularly visible in regions where young populations experience limited access to employment, education, and social mobility. In North-West Nigeria, for example, armed banditry and kidnapping have expanded within communities

characterised by poverty, unemployment, weak rural governance, and limited state presence. The International Review of the Red Cross (2023) notes that banditry in the region increasingly represents an economically motivated activity, where participation may be perceived by some vulnerable youths as a pathway towards financial survival.

Similarly, recent quantitative analysis of kidnapping in Nigeria demonstrates that unemployment, economic hardship, and governance failures significantly influence the scale and persistence of kidnapping activities (Humanities and Social Sciences Communications, 2025). The implication is that counter-kidnapping strategies focused exclusively on military operations may achieve temporary disruption but are unlikely to produce sustainable outcomes without addressing socioeconomic vulnerabilities.

Weak Governance, State Capacity Deficits and Institutional Fragility

Beyond economic factors, kidnapping thrives where state institutions lack the capacity, legitimacy, or reach required to provide effective security and justice. State Fragility Theory explains that criminal networks expand when governments experience declining territorial control, weak law enforcement institutions, limited public service delivery, and reduced citizen confidence (Rotberg, 2004; OECD, 2022).

Across several African contexts, kidnapping networks exploit governance gaps by operating in areas where: security presence is limited; intelligence coordination is weak; judicial processes are slow; corruption undermines enforcement; criminal investigations lack forensic capacity; and communities distrust state authorities. The Sahel provides one of the clearest examples. The weakening of state authority across parts of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger has created spaces where extremist and criminal organisations compete with governments for influence and control. The United Nations Security Council (2025) has repeatedly highlighted that governance deficits, political instability, and limited institutional reach have contributed to the expansion of terrorism and associated criminal economies across the region. Obviously, in such environments, kidnapping serves multiple purposes. It generates revenue through ransom payments, demonstrates the weakness of government authority, provides bargaining leverage, and enables armed groups to maintain influence over local populations.

Kidnapping as a Criminal Economy and Terrorism Financing Mechanism

A major transformation in Africa's kidnapping landscape is its increasing integration into wider criminal and terrorist financing systems. Historically, kidnapping for ransom often targeted wealthy individuals, foreign workers, or political figures. However, contemporary patterns demonstrate diversification, with criminal and extremist groups increasingly targeting ordinary citizens, communities, schools, and commercial actors. The Financial Action Task Force (FATF, 2013) identified kidnapping for ransom as an important source of financing for terrorist organisations operating in West Africa. Ransom payments, extortion, taxation of local populations, illegal mining, trafficking, and other illicit activities have become interconnected sources of revenue sustaining armed groups.

In the Sahel, kidnapping has been particularly significant within the financing strategies of jihadist organisations. Research by Laskaris and Walther (2026), analysing more than two decades of kidnapping data, demonstrates that the region has experienced a shift from foreign-targeted abductions towards increased targeting of local populations. This transformation is strategically important because local civilian kidnapping often requires fewer resources, carries lower operational risks, and provides armed groups with continuous economic opportunities. The United Nations Security Council (2022, 2025) has similarly identified kidnapping, illegal resource exploitation, and extortion as major financing mechanisms supporting terrorist organisations across Africa.

Porous Borders and Transnational Criminal Networks

Africa's extensive borders, particularly in conflict-prone regions, create significant opportunities for criminal mobility. Many kidnapping networks operate across national boundaries, exploiting weak border controls, limited surveillance capacity, and fragmented security cooperation. The Sahel illustrates this challenge clearly. Vast territories stretching across Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad, and neighbouring countries provide operational environments where armed groups can move personnel, weapons, and financial resources. The

African Union and regional security organisations have repeatedly emphasised that transnational criminal networks require coordinated regional responses rather than isolated national interventions. The withdrawal of some Sahelian states from traditional regional security arrangements has further complicated intelligence sharing and collective counter-terrorism coordination (Security Council Report, 2025). Consequently, kidnapping has become increasingly difficult to address through national policing alone.

Climate Change, Resource Competition and Environmental Insecurity

Environmental pressures have become an emerging driver of insecurity in Africa. Climate change, land degradation, water scarcity, and competition over natural resources increasingly interact with existing social tensions. The United Nations Security Council (2023, 2025) has highlighted how climate-related pressures can intensify competition over livelihoods, increase displacement, and create recruitment opportunities for armed groups. In parts of the Sahel, declining agricultural productivity and competition between pastoralist and farming communities have contributed to social tensions that criminal and extremist groups exploit. Similarly, competition over valuable resources, including gold and other minerals, has attracted armed groups and criminal networks seeking alternative revenue sources. Therefore, kidnapping must increasingly be understood within a broader human-security framework where environmental stress contributes indirectly to criminal opportunity structures.

Technological Adaptation and the Digital Transformation of Kidnapping

The contemporary kidnapping environment is also shaped by technological change. Criminal organisations increasingly use digital platforms for: communication; victim identification; financial transfers; recruitment; propaganda; intelligence gathering; and operational coordination. The same technological transformation affecting legitimate security institutions is therefore also available to criminal actors. Artificial Intelligence introduces a further dimension. While AI can enhance state capacity through predictive analytics and intelligence processing, criminal groups may exploit AI for misinformation, automated communication, cyber-enabled fraud, and improved operational planning (GNET, 2025; Soufan Center, 2025). This technological competition reinforces the need for responsible AI governance and adaptive security institutions.

The Professionalisation of Kidnapping

A significant feature of Africa's contemporary kidnapping landscape is the emergence of kidnapping as a professionalised criminal enterprise. Rather than random criminal acts, many kidnapping operations now involve: specialised surveillance of victims; organised recruitment networks; negotiation structures; financial channels; intelligence gathering; logistical support systems; and connections with other criminal markets.

South Africa provides an important example of this transformation. ISS Africa (2024) reports that kidnapping in the country is increasingly connected with aggravated robbery, hijacking, and organised extortion economies rather than traditional ransom kidnapping alone. This demonstrates that kidnapping has become embedded within broader criminal business models. The implication is that kidnapping is not simply a law-enforcement problem; it is a governance, development, security, and technological challenge requiring integrated responses.

Regional Trends in the Evolving Kidnapping Threat Landscape in Africa

The geography of kidnapping in Africa demonstrates significant regional variations shaped by differences in governance structures, conflict dynamics, economic conditions, criminal networks, and state responses. While the underlying drivers of kidnapping are broadly similar across the continent, the manifestations differ considerably. In some regions, kidnapping functions primarily as a financing mechanism for terrorism and insurgency; in others, it represents an extension of organised criminal economies, extortion systems, and urban insecurity.

The Sahel has become one of the world's most significant theatres of violent extremism and kidnapping-related insecurity. Countries including Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and parts of Chad have experienced the expansion of armed groups that combine ideological motivations with criminal economies. The Global Terrorism Index (Institute for Economics and Peace [IEP], 2026) identifies the Sahel as the epicentre of contemporary terrorism,

accounting for a disproportionate share of global terrorism-related deaths despite representing a relatively small proportion of global attacks. This insecurity environment has provided fertile conditions for kidnapping networks connected to jihadist organisations, local militias, and criminal enterprises.

A major transformation in Sahelian kidnapping patterns is the shift from foreign-targeted abductions towards the targeting of local populations. Laskaris and Walther (2026), analysing more than two decades of kidnapping incidents, demonstrate that civilians, particularly women and vulnerable communities, have increasingly become the primary victims of abduction. This transformation reflects strategic adaptation by armed groups. Local kidnappings: require fewer operational resources; generate regular income; reinforce community control; punish perceived opponents; provide intelligence advantages; and strengthen territorial influence.

Kidnapping has therefore become integrated into the governance structures of some armed groups, where ransom, taxation, and protection payments function as alternative forms of economic administration. The weakening of regional security cooperation has further complicated responses. Political transitions and changing external security partnerships in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have altered regional counter-terrorism arrangements and created intelligence-sharing challenges (Security Council Report, 2025).

Nigeria represents one of the most complex kidnapping environments in Africa because multiple security threats converge within the country. These include: Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) insurgency; rural banditry; organised criminal networks; communal conflicts; illegal mining activities; and economic insecurity. Unlike some Sahelian contexts where kidnapping is primarily linked to ideological insurgency, Nigeria demonstrates a hybrid model in which criminal and extremist motivations overlap. The north-western states of Zamfara, Kaduna, Katsina, Sokoto, Kebbi, and Niger have experienced persistent kidnapping associated with armed bandit groups. The International Review of the Red Cross (2023) notes that many of these groups operate within criminal economies driven by financial incentives rather than purely ideological objectives.

The education sector has become particularly vulnerable. School kidnappings have attracted international attention because they combine humanitarian consequences with significant psychological and political effects. Mass abductions of students have demonstrated how criminal groups exploit schools as high-value targets capable of generating national attention and ransom opportunities. The Lake Chad Basin presents an additional dimension where Boko Haram and ISWAP have integrated kidnapping into broader insurgency strategies. Kidnapping serves both financial and strategic purposes by financing operations, intimidating communities, and challenging state authority. Nigeria's experience illustrates the limitations of purely military approaches. Although security operations have weakened some armed groups, kidnapping persists because underlying conditions including unemployment, weak rural governance, limited justice access, and poverty remain unresolved.

South Africa provides a contrasting example of kidnapping occurring within a relatively stronger institutional environment. Unlike the Sahel, where kidnapping is often connected to insurgency, South African kidnapping is increasingly associated with organised crime, extortion, robbery, and criminal entrepreneurship. The South African Police Service recorded significant growth in kidnapping incidents during the past decade. ISS Africa (2024) highlights that a large proportion of reported kidnappings are connected to aggravated robbery and hijacking rather than traditional ransom kidnapping.

The emergence of express kidnapping represents a major trend. In such cases, victims are abducted temporarily and forced to: withdraw money from automated teller machines; transfer funds through digital banking; surrender valuables; or provide access to financial accounts. This demonstrates the adaptability of criminal networks to modern financial technologies. The professionalisation of kidnapping in South Africa reflects a broader transformation whereby criminal organisations increasingly treat kidnapping as a commercial activity rather than an occasional violent offence. However, the South African case also demonstrates that improved institutional capacity alone does not eliminate kidnapping. Instead, it requires continuous adaptation of policing strategies, intelligence systems, financial monitoring, and community security partnerships.

Artificial Intelligence and Security Resilience in Africa

The emergence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has introduced a significant transformation in contemporary security governance. Across the world, security institutions are increasingly adopting AI-enabled systems to improve intelligence analysis, crime prevention, surveillance, financial monitoring, and emergency response. Africa is gradually becoming part of this technological transition, although adoption remains uneven due to differences in infrastructure, regulatory capacity, funding, and institutional readiness. In the context of kidnapping, AI presents both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, AI can strengthen preventive and investigative capabilities by enabling security agencies to process large volumes of information, identify suspicious patterns, monitor criminal networks, and improve response coordination. On the other hand, AI can also create new vulnerabilities because criminal and extremist organisations may exploit similar technologies for propaganda, misinformation, cybercrime, and operational planning. Therefore, the security value of AI depends not only on technological capability but also on governance quality, ethical safeguards, institutional capacity, and respect for human rights.

Security resilience requires the ability of institutions and societies to anticipate threats, absorb shocks, adapt strategies, and recover from insecurity. AI contributes to this process through enhanced prediction, detection, and decision-support capabilities. Major AI applications relevant to counter-kidnapping include: predictive policing; automated surveillance systems; facial recognition technologies; automatic number plate recognition; geospatial crime mapping; digital financial intelligence; cyber-threat monitoring; emergency communication systems; and intelligence analysis. These applications do not replace human judgement but enhance the capacity of security institutions to identify risks and allocate limited resources more effectively.

AI Applications in Counter-Terrorism Financing

One of the most promising applications of AI in combating kidnapping relates to financial intelligence. Since kidnapping increasingly functions as a revenue-generating activity for criminal and extremist groups, identifying financial patterns is crucial. AI systems can analyse: suspicious transaction patterns; unusual money transfers; digital payment networks; cryptocurrency activities; links between financial accounts; and cross-border financial movements. The Financial Action Task Force (FATF, 2013) identified ransom payments as an important terrorism-financing challenge in West Africa. Contemporary AI-enabled financial monitoring provides opportunities to detect such flows more efficiently. However, African countries face limitations including: inadequate financial data; limited technical expertise; weak cooperation among agencies; privacy concerns; and uneven regulatory frameworks.

Artificial Intelligence as a Dual-Use Security Challenge

Although AI provides significant opportunities, it is not inherently a security solution. The same technologies available to governments can also be exploited by criminal and extremist organisations. The Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET, 2025) argues that violent extremist groups are increasingly experimenting with AI for: propaganda production; recruitment messaging; misinformation campaigns; cyber activities; automated communication; and operational planning. The Soufan Center (2025) similarly warns that terrorist organisations are likely to integrate AI into different stages of their operational processes. For kidnapping networks, potential AI misuse may include: automated victim targeting; social-media intelligence gathering; identity manipulation; misinformation campaigns; encrypted communication enhancement; financial fraud. This technological competition means that security institutions must develop not only AI capabilities but also AI risk-management strategies.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a narrative review and policy-analysis research design to examine kidnapping as an evolving security threat in Africa and to evaluate the emerging role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in strengthening security resilience. A narrative review approach was considered appropriate because the subject under investigation is multidisciplinary, requiring the integration of evidence from criminology, security studies, terrorism research, governance studies, artificial intelligence, and public policy. Unlike conventional systematic reviews that are often designed to estimate the effectiveness of specific interventions, narrative reviews allow researchers to synthesise diverse forms of evidence, identify conceptual relationships, explain emerging trends, and develop

theoretically informed interpretations of complex social phenomena (Grant & Booth, 2009; Snyder, 2019). Kidnapping in Africa represents such a complex phenomenon because available evidence is dispersed across multiple sources, including police statistics, conflict databases, terrorism indices, institutional reports, academic publications, and policy documents. Therefore, the adopted approach enabled the study to integrate quantitative indicators of kidnapping trends with qualitative interpretations of governance conditions, security responses, and technological developments.

To improve methodological transparency and respond to concerns regarding evidence selection, this study utilised multiple independent sources of information. The evidence base consisted of four major categories: (a) Criminal Justice and Official Security Statistics: Official crime statistics were obtained from recognised national and institutional sources, including: South African Police Service (SAPS) crime statistics; national security reports; criminal justice publications; and government policy documents. These sources provided information regarding kidnapping prevalence, geographical distribution, victim patterns, and law-enforcement responses; (b) Conflict and Terrorism Datasets. Conflict-related information was obtained from internationally recognised databases, including: Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED); Global Terrorism Index (GTI) produced by the Institute for Economics and Peace; and United Nations Security Council terrorism-related assessments. These datasets were selected because they provide systematic monitoring of violent events, terrorism incidents, armed-group activities, and regional security trends; (c) Policy and Institutional Literature: The study reviewed policy documents and analytical reports produced by authoritative institutions, including: African Union; United Nations; Financial Action Task Force (FATF); Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD); United Nations Development Programme (UNDP); Institute for Security Studies (ISS Africa); European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA); Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC).

These sources provided information on governance challenges, terrorism financing, organised crime networks, and policy responses; (d) Academic Literature: Peer-reviewed academic studies were retrieved from reputable scholarly databases, including: Scopus; Web of Science; ScienceDirect; SpringerLink; Taylor & Francis Online; Wiley Online Library; Sage Journals; and Google Scholar. Academic sources were used to provide theoretical explanations, empirical findings, and methodological insights regarding kidnapping, organised crime, artificial intelligence, predictive policing, and security governance. A structured search strategy was employed between May and June 2026.

The search process involved combinations of key terms related to the major themes of the study. The principal search terms included: "kidnapping in Africa"; "kidnap for ransom" "organised crime in Africa"; "terrorism financing"; "banditry and insecurity"; "artificial intelligence and security"; "predictive policing"; "AI-enabled surveillance"; "security resilience"; "Sahel insecurity"; "Nigeria kidnapping crisis"; and "African security technology". Boolean operators such as AND and OR were used to improve search precision. For example: "kidnapping" AND "Africa" AND "organised crime"; "artificial intelligence" AND "security" AND "Africa"; "predictive policing" AND "African countries"; "terrorism financing" AND "kidnap for ransom". The search focused mainly on publications between 2020 and 2026 to capture recent developments, while foundational theoretical works such as Cohen and Felson (1979) and Rotberg (2004) were retained because of their continuing conceptual relevance. The selected materials were analysed using thematic content analysis following the approach developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analytical process involved six stages: Stage One: Familiarisation with Evidence. All selected documents were carefully reviewed to identify recurring concepts, arguments, and patterns relating to kidnapping and AI-enabled security.

Towards an Integrated Security Resilience Framework for Countering Kidnapping in Africa

The evidence synthesised in this study demonstrates that kidnapping in Africa is not a single-dimensional criminal problem but a complex security phenomenon produced by the interaction of governance weaknesses, socioeconomic vulnerabilities, organised criminal economies, violent extremism, environmental pressures, and technological transformation. Consequently, responses based exclusively on military operations, policing, or technological acquisition are unlikely to produce sustainable outcomes. A durable response requires an integrated security resilience framework that combines preventive development strategies, effective criminal justice systems, regional security cooperation, responsible Artificial Intelligence deployment, community

participation, and institutional accountability. The framework proposed in this study is based on the assumption that security resilience is achieved when societies possess the capacity to: anticipate emerging threats; prevent criminal expansion; respond effectively when incidents occur; recover from insecurity; and adapt institutions to changing threat environments.

CONCLUSION, POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This study examined kidnapping as an evolving security threat in Africa by analysing its drivers, regional manifestations, and resilience options within the emerging Artificial Intelligence (AI) environment. The evidence reviewed demonstrates that kidnapping has undergone a significant transformation from isolated criminal activity into a complex security economy connected with terrorism financing, organised crime, governance failures, and socioeconomic vulnerabilities.

Across Africa, kidnapping has developed different characteristics according to regional contexts. In the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin, it operates largely as a financing mechanism for violent extremist organisations and armed groups. In Nigeria, the phenomenon represents a convergence of insurgency, rural banditry, and organised criminal enterprise. In South Africa, kidnapping has increasingly evolved into an urban commercial crime associated with robbery, extortion, and criminal entrepreneurship. In the Horn of Africa and Central Africa, kidnapping remains embedded within prolonged conflicts, weak state authority, and armed-group competition.

A central finding of this study is that kidnapping persists because it has become economically rational for perpetrators operating within environments characterised by weak governance, unemployment, poverty, institutional fragility, and limited criminal justice effectiveness. Therefore, responses centred only on military force or reactive policing are insufficient. Sustainable solutions require addressing the structural conditions that enable criminal networks to recruit members, generate income, and maintain operational capacity.

The study further demonstrates that Artificial Intelligence introduces significant opportunities for strengthening security resilience in Africa. AI-supported predictive analytics, financial intelligence, surveillance technologies, digital reporting platforms, and data-driven crime analysis can improve prevention, detection, and response capabilities. Existing African examples from South Africa, Kenya, Ethiopia, and regional security initiatives indicate that AI is gradually becoming part of the continent's security architecture. However, the study also highlights that AI is not a neutral or automatic solution. The same technologies that support governments can also be exploited by criminal and extremist actors. Without appropriate governance frameworks, AI-enabled security systems may create risks involving privacy violations, discriminatory profiling, excessive surveillance, and institutional abuse.

Consequently, the future of counter-kidnapping strategies in Africa depends on achieving balance between technological innovation and responsible governance. AI must be embedded within human-rights-based legal frameworks, supported by capable institutions, and complemented by investments in education, employment, poverty reduction, and community resilience. Ultimately, kidnapping in Africa is both a security challenge and a development challenge. Addressing it requires a multidimensional approach that recognises the relationship between technology, governance, economics, and human security.

The findings generate several implications for policymakers, security institutions, and development actors. These includes: Governments should adopt integrated security-development strategies; Security institutions should develop responsible AI capacity; Regional organisations should strengthen intelligence cooperation; Criminal justice systems require urgent strengthening; Communities should become active partners in security governance. Kidnapping in Africa represents one of the clearest examples of how contemporary security threats are becoming increasingly interconnected. It exists at the intersection of crime, terrorism, governance failure, economic vulnerability, environmental pressure, and technological transformation. The Artificial Intelligence age provides Africa with new possibilities for strengthening security resilience, but technology alone cannot resolve problems created by institutional weakness and socioeconomic exclusion. The continent's most effective response will therefore depend on a balanced strategy: strong institutions + inclusive development + regional cooperation + responsible artificial intelligence governance. Only through such an integrated approach can African societies

reduce the profitability of kidnapping, strengthen public confidence, and build sustainable security resilience in the twenty-first century.

Although this study provides a broad synthesis of kidnapping trends and AI-related security responses, some limitations should be acknowledged. First, kidnapping statistics across Africa remain affected by underreporting due to fear, weak institutional recording systems, ransom negotiations, and limited access to conflict areas. Second, empirical evidence regarding AI effectiveness in African security operations remains limited because many AI initiatives are relatively new and operational data are often restricted for security reasons. Third, the rapid evolution of AI technologies means that future developments may alter both opportunities and risks identified in this study. Despite these limitations, the evidence provides an important foundation for understanding the relationship between kidnapping, security governance, and emerging technologies.

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