

Nigeria and the “Genocide by Another Name”

Martinluther Nwaneri

Aston University, Birmingham, United Kingdom

This essay argues that while Nigeria’s insecurity is complex, there exists a clear, historical, and systematic pattern of targeted violence against Christian communities. This pattern is rooted in centuries-old Islamic political structures, reinforced by political Islam and radical militant groups, and aided by inadequate state response. The violence exhibits characteristics of genocidal targeting, with specific episodes like the Dogo N’ Hauwa massacre illustrating its scale, coordination, and religious motivation.

Keywords: Christian Genocide, Political Islam, Radical Islam, Targeted Violence, Nigerian Christian Communities, Genocidal Patten

Introduction

In October 2025, United States President Donald Trump issued an unusually direct warning to Nigeria’s President, Bola Ahmed Tinubu, urging him to take decisive action against what he described as “Islamic terrorists” perpetrating genocide against Christian communities. He cautioned that failure to act could prompt U.S. intervention aimed at “completely wiping out the Islamic terrorists who are committing these horrible atrocities”. This intervention threat followed the U.S. government’s designation of Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) in response to persistent, large-scale killings of Christians and other grave violations of religious freedom.

Trump’s remarks and the CPC designation triggered sharp responses from Nigerian government officials, several of whom dismissed the allegations as exaggerated, politically motivated, or lacking nuance. Many Nigerian analysts similarly argued that the country’s security crisis is complex and multi-layered, contending that individuals of various religious backgrounds, including Muslims, have also suffered major casualties. Some even maintained that more Muslims than Christians have been killed in recent years.

These counterarguments contain partial truths. Nigeria’s insecurity is unquestionably complex, shaped by a convergence of weak governance, extremist insurgency, herder–farmer clashes, banditry, ethnic tensions, resource pressures, and declining economic conditions. It is likewise correct that numerous non-Christian populations, including Muslims, have been victims of violence across different regions.

Yet acknowledging this complexity does not erase the specificity of targeted anti-Christian violence. Multiple truths can coexist: Nigeria’s security crisis is multidimensional, and Christians have been disproportionately, persistently, and systematically targeted in particular geopolitical and socio-religious contexts across the Middle Belt and northern regions. The fact that non-Christian populations have also suffered violence does not diminish the documented patterns of deliberate attacks on Christian communities, including the destruction of villages, burning of churches, forced displacement, and mass killings. These patterns cannot be adequately explained as mere manifestations of generalized insecurity.

International watchdogs, including the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF 2021), and Open Doors International (2023), have consistently shown that Christians form a disproportionately targeted group in many of these attacks. When evaluated against the definition of genocide articulated in the UN Genocide Convention (1948)—the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group—it becomes reasonable to argue that the violence unfolding in parts of Nigeria exhibits characteristics of genocidal intent or pattern. The targeted killings, systematic destruction of Christian settlements, strategic displacement, and religiously motivated nature of many attacks align with indicators identified by genocide scholars such as Gregory Stanton (1996) in the early and middle stages of genocidal processes.

To examine these patterns empirically and historically, this study adopts a qualitative research design integrating historical analysis, ethnographic engagement, direct observation, and semi-structured interviews across central and northern Nigeria. The analysis draws upon the author’s long-term field-based research dating back to the 1990s, involving repeated visits to major conflict sites such as Jos North, Jos South, including Dogo N’ Hauwa, Toto, Guma, Bwari, and other affected communities in Plateau, Nasarawa, Benue States, and the Federal Capital Territory. Over this period, interviews were conducted with community leaders, traditional rulers, group representatives, and residents, alongside continuous documentation of evolving political and security dynamics across the country. To supplement this longitudinal ethnographic record, a team of trained research assistants undertook field visits in the first quarter of 2024 to recently attacked or deserted communities in Plateau State; their structured reports, including the tabulated list of affected settlements, provided additional empirical depth. Together, these data sources enabled triangulation across historical accounts, lived observations, and contemporary testimonies, thereby grounding the study in rich, context-specific evidence.

Drawing from this integrated body of data, the article argues that Islamic violence in Nigeria manifests as a dual-structured phenomenon comprising a political arm and a radical militant arm, distinct in method yet convergent in long-term strategic objectives. To understand the depth and persistence of the current crisis, it is necessary first to situate it within the historical evolution of Islamic violence in Nigeria and the ways in which these patterns continue to shape contemporary realities.

Historical Background—The Roots of Islamic Violence in Nigeria

The historical roots of Islamic violence in Nigeria can be traced to the 19th-century Fulani jihads led by Usman dan Fodio. Beginning in 1804, these campaigns aimed to establish Islamic governance across the Hausa states of present-day northern Nigeria (Last, 1967; Hiskett, 1973). Through successive military conquests, the jihadists displaced the indigenous Hausa Habe rulers and instituted an Islamic emirate system centred on the Sokoto Caliphate. Scholars note that this emergent order was not merely Islamic but also distinctly Fulani in character, as Fulani leaders assumed emirship across much of the conquered territory (Falola, 1999). The Caliphate’s influence extended beyond the Hausa heartland into the Middle Belt, where groups such as the Berom, Tiv, and Jukun mounted sustained resistance; although this slowed the southward expansion, it did not fully halt it. Some scholars, including Chinweizu (2013), characterise this historical process as a form of “internal colonisation”, whereby the displacement of indigenous traditional institutions and their replacement with Fulani Islamic emirate structures constituted a domestic colonial order within Nigeria. Chinweizu further argues that this Islamic colonisation of northern Nigeria forms the foundational root of many contemporary challenges in the country, including the pervasive insecurity observed today.

While most Middle Belt communities in 1804 were traditionalists and the Hausa Habe states were neither Christian nor Westernized, the jihad nevertheless laid a durable political, religious, and socio-cultural foundation. It reshaped northern identity and authority structures and entrenched a legacy of Islamic dominion that later political leaders would seek to preserve or resurrect across Nigeria.

This continuity was later affirmed by Sir Ahmadu Bello, Premier of Northern Nigeria and a direct descendant of Usman dan Fodio. He was reported to have remarked in a speech purportedly delivered on 12 October 1960, twelve days after Nigeria’s independence, in which he stated that the new nation of Nigeria should be regarded as the estate of Usman dan Fodio. He further asserted the need to prevent any transfer of power, to deploy minority groups in the North as instruments of control, and to treat the South as a conquered territory that should neither rule nor determine its own future (Awhefeada, 2018). Scholars widely interpret this statement as signalling an enduring aspiration to extend Islamic political and cultural influence throughout Nigeria, mirroring the ideological ambitions of the 19th-century jihad (Suberu, 1994; Kukah, 1993). Historically, the Sokoto Caliphate expanded through the fusion of military conquest, sociopolitical reorganisation, and religious reform. Although Islam maintains that it is a religion of peace and is not inherently violent, the specific mode of expansion linked to the dan Fodio jihad relied heavily on coercive tactics, warfare, population displacement, and the imposition of new hierarchies. These set a precedent that has continued to shape religious-political dynamics in northern Nigeria.

British colonial rule (1900-1960) slowed but did not reverse this trajectory. Through indirect rule, the British rather preserved the emirate institutions, protected Islamic legal systems, and constrained Christian missionary activity across most Muslim-majority emirates (Kane, 2003). Consequently, by independence in 1960, northern Nigeria had already undergone more than a century of Islamic consolidation, while the rest of Nigeria had become Christian courtesy of the British.

In the post-independence era, the Islamic consolidation in the north deepened. By the 1960s-1990s, the “core North” increasingly marginalised non-Muslim populations, many of whom migrated toward the North Central belt following repeated discrimination, social pressure, and targeted episodes of violence. Scholars argue that both state-aligned political actors and radical Islamic groups contributed to this climate, with Christian minorities often facing exclusion, intimidation, and periodic attacks (Ostien, 2007; Kukah, 1993).

Religiously motivated violence became recurrent during the 1980s and 1990s, intertwined with political grievances, ethnic tensions, and rising extremism. One of the earliest examples of religiously motivated violence in post-independence northern Nigeria was the Maitatsine crisis of 1980, led by the radical preacher Muhammadu Marwa. His followers launched a violent uprising in Kano, resulting in thousands of deaths. While Maitatsine militants primarily clashed with state forces and local Muslim communities, some non-Muslims, including Christians, were also affected by the unrest (Falola, 1998).

Subsequent outbreaks reinforced this pattern. Riots in Kano in 1982 over the expansion of an Anglican church led to the burning of Christian homes and places of worship (Ibrahim, 1989). The Kafanchan crisis of 1987, sparked by a dispute during a Christian student programme titled “Jesus Campus”, spread rapidly across Kaduna State, destroying churches, mosques, and residences (Falola, 1998; Mustapha, 2014).

The 1992 Zangon-Kataf conflict further underscored the intersection of ethnic and religious grievances. A dispute over the relocation of a market escalated into mass violence, with hundreds killed. Scholars note that underlying the conflict was long-standing tensions between Hausa-Fulani Muslim dominance and Atypap Christian political aspirations (Kastfelt, 1994; Suberu, 2001).

The decade also witnessed symbolic acts of extreme sectarian violence. On 26 December 1994, the murder and public beheading of Gideon Alaluka by a Kano Islamic mob became emblematic of the era’s hostility (Human Rights Watch, 1995). In 1991, riots followed an evangelical crusade by Reinhard Bonnke in Kano, during which more than 20 churches were burned and numerous Christians killed (Ibrahim, 1989; Kukah, 1993). These were not merely spontaneous eruptions but often mobilised by extremist groups who perceived Christian evangelism as a threat to established Islamic religious hierarchies.

By the 2000s, the fundamental drivers remained unaddressed. The 2002 Miss World riots in Kaduna, triggered by a newspaper article deemed insulting to the Prophet Muhammad, resulted in over 200 deaths, primarily Christians, and the destruction of significant Christian properties (Human Rights Watch, 2003). Analysts argue that although the article served as the immediate spark, the deeper causes lay in unresolved religious grievances and weak institutional governance.

More recent incidents, such as the killings of Evangelist Eunice Olawale and Deborah Samuel, demonstrate the persistence of targeted violence against Christians. Human rights organisations have also highlighted the systematic abduction of Christian schoolgirls, most notably the 2014 Chibok kidnapping, as a form of gendered religious persecution involving forced conversions, sexual slavery, and summary executions (Amnesty International, 2015; International Crisis Group, 2016).

Collectively, these episodes reveal a long-standing pattern in which religious triggers ignite violence that is deeply embedded within broader political and socioeconomic inequalities. They highlight the persistent vulnerability of Christian communities in northern Nigeria, where Islam does not merely claim dominance but actively asserts it through street-level violence, often shielded by political cover, compounded by the inconsistent and frequently inadequate responses of state security institutions. These events also demonstrate the capacity of extremist groups to exploit local grievances to advance broader ideological objectives.

These incidents were neither isolated nor random; they formed part of a broader movement toward Islamization in local politics. This reached a turning point between 1999 and 2001, when 12 northern states: Zamfara, Kano, Sokoto, Katsina, Jigawa, Kebbi, Kaduna, Niger, Borno, Yobe, Gombe, and Bauchi, implemented Sharia criminal law despite Nigeria’s secular constitution (Ostien, 2007). The introduction of Sharia institutionalised new structures, including the Hisbah police, further entangling religious identity with state governance. This moment marked a decisive advance of political Islam, embedding religious authority directly into state institutions.

Shortly thereafter, radical Islamist groups emerged, building upon the ideological foundations established by political Islam. Boko Haram, founded in 2002, two years after 12 northern states formally implemented Sharia law, articulated a vision closely aligned with state-level Islamization: the establishment of a caliphate governed exclusively by Sharia across Nigeria. Chinweizu (2013) contends that the implementation of Sharia by both political Islam and radical Islamist groups was motivated not only by perceived marginalisation of the North under the administration of President Olusegun Obasanjo, a Southern Christian who served from 1999 to 2007, but also as part of a broader agenda of the Islamic Caliphate to maintain and extend its power and dominance over Nigeria.

From 2009 onwards, Boko Haram’s violent insurgency systematically targeted Christians, churches, schools, and government institutions. In this way, the group can be understood as both enforcing and further radicalizing the Sharia-based framework previously introduced by political Islam across northern Nigerian states.

These developments raise a critical question: Are the political Islamization efforts of northern state governments and the militant Islamic project of groups like Boko Haram distinctly separate phenomena, or do they emerge from a shared historical and ideological continuum, two expressions of the same underlying trajectory?

This remains one of the most important and contested debates in contemporary Nigerian security, religious, and governance discourse.

Expansion to North Central: The Plateau Case

By the early 1990s, the social and political landscape of northern Nigeria had already undergone decades of Islamisation and demographic restructuring. It appeared post independent Islamic hegemony of the core north has been completed. Scholars such as Kukah (1993) and Falola (1998) note that non-Muslim communities in the “core North” increasingly experienced political marginalisation, economic exclusion, and episodic sectarian violence throughout the post-independence era. These conditions set the stage for a second phase of expansion into the North Central region, including Plateau State, historically known for its Christian-majority indigenous populations and relative religious pluralism. Here, political Islam and radical Islamist movements operated in tandem, reinforcing one another.

The dynamics observed in Kaduna and other flashpoints were mirrored in Plateau State, where disputes over indigeneity, political representation, and religious identity shaped recurring patterns of violence. The same script. In 1991, the military administration of General Ibrahim Babangida created Jos North Local Government Area, a decision that became a major catalyst for renewed tension. Indigenous Christian groups, particularly the Berom, Afizere, and Anaguta, contested the move, arguing that the new administrative configuration strategically shifted political influence toward Hausa-Fulani Muslim settlers. Scholars have argued that this restructuring altered electoral boundaries, weakened the authority of the Gbong Gwom Jos, and undermined the traditional institutional mechanisms that had historically safeguarded Christian indigenous autonomy (Higazi, 2011; Krause, 2011). The creation of Jos North is thus widely interpreted as a turning point that heightened competition over land and political power, reinforcing the patterns of Hausa-Fulani Muslim versus indigenous Christian contestation observed in Zangon-Kataf and other northern conflict-prone areas.

This administrative restructuring laid the foundation for subsequent mass violence against Christian communities in Plateau State in 1994, 2001, 2006-2008, 2009, 2010, and in subsequent years. Boko Haram’s expansion into Plateau around 2010, including coordinated bombings of churches and public spaces, further radicalised the conflict by linking local grievances to broader jihadist objectives (Onuoha, 2012). Simultaneously, violent armed groups commonly referred to as “Fulani herdsmen” escalated attacks on Christian farming communities across Plateau and the wider Middle Belt. Multiple research reports, including those by the International Crisis Group (2018) and Amnesty International (2018), document the systematic nature of these assaults, involving military-grade weaponry, coordinated planning, and the destruction of entire villages.

The Dogo N’ Hauwa Massacre

The 2010 Dogo N’ Hauwa massacre represents one of the most egregious episodes of violence in Plateau State. Approximately 500 Christian villagers across three communities were killed overnight in an attack marked by coordinated shootings, arson, and mutilation (Human Rights Watch, 2010). I was in Dogo N’ Hauwa some days after these killings and observed things myself in 2010. Field observations conducted days after the incident corroborated eyewitness accounts describing attackers shouting religious slogans such as “Allah Akbar” while

burning homes and killing fleeing residents. The scale, brutality, and organisation of the assault challenge portrayals of the perpetrators as ordinary herders. Research questions whether violent attacks attributed to “Fulani herdsmen” reflect actions by traditional pastoralists or more organised militia-like networks, noting that violence has escalated beyond grazing disputes into structured conflict dynamics (George et al., 2022). Former President Goodluck Jonathan publicly questioned narratives attributing such attacks to untrained herders, noting their sophisticated logistics and weaponry. Field studies further indicate that these groups often function as organised militias with ideological, political, and sometimes transnational support structures (Blench, 2010).

Beyond killings, these attacks have entailed severe human rights violations, including rape, kidnapping, the destruction of entire communities, forced displacement, and devastation of farmlands, crimes documented across Plateau, Benue, Taraba, Nasarawa, and parts of southern Nigeria (Amnesty International, 2018). In many instances, displaced Christian communities were supplanted by Muslim herding settlers or left fallow. Despite the severity of these acts, successive Nigerian governments have frequently failed to identify perpetrators, trace their sources of funding and weaponry, or prosecute those arrested. Reports indicate that some suspects were transferred to Abuja “on orders from above”, after which their cases effectively disappeared (International Crisis Group, 2018).

Patterns and Structural Dynamics

These episodes reveal a persistent structural pattern: Militant mobilisations by Hausa-Fulani Muslim groups systematically seek to assert territorial and political dominance over indigenous, predominantly Christian communities. Scholars examining farmer-herder conflicts and indigene-settler dynamics highlight this recurring asymmetry. Higazi (2011) and Danjibo (2009) demonstrate that attacks on indigenous communities often follow a logic of territorial expansion, while Ukiwo (2003) and Krause (2011) emphasise that such violence is frequently legitimised through claims of religious or demographic ascendancy.

This dynamic is not confined to a single locality. Analysts have identified a recurring “Zangon-Kataf playbook”—a systematic cycle of demographic pressure, contestation of traditional authority, violent confrontation, and subsequent political restructuring. Variations of this pattern are evident across multiple regions. For instance, in Jos and across Plateau State, Muslim settler claims increasingly undermined indigenous Christian autonomy (Higazi, 2011; Krause, 2011). In Toto, Nasarawa, traditional Christian leader was relegated to third-class status, while the Muslim ruler was elevated to first-class authority. A similar scenario unfolded in Bwari, Abuja, where recurrent clashes between indigenous Christian Gbagyi communities and Muslim Hausa settled groups followed disputes over the relative status of the traditional stools, with the elevation of the Sarkin Bwari relative to the Esu exacerbating grievances and illustrating patterns of ethnic and religious marginalisation observed elsewhere (Daily Trust, 2017; Tribune Online, 2017; Nwaneri & Ukandu, 2019). Across Christian farming communities in Benue, Fulani militant networks have been implicated in large-scale land seizures, village burnings, and forced displacement, further reflecting this strategic pattern of control (International Crisis Group, 2017; Amnesty International, 2018). Scholars argue that these events form part of a broader trend in which religiously framed violence functions as a vehicle for demographic and territorial consolidation (Okoli & Lenshie, 2018).

State Response and Accountability

Equally concerning is the nature of state responses. Across multiple studies, affected communities report that government officials and security agencies frequently adopt an implicit or explicit stance of “accommodate

the attackers, abandon the land or die” (Amnesty International, 2018; Human Rights Watch, 2014; International Crisis Group, 2017). In some cases, displaced populations were advised to “learn to live with” Muslim armed groups occupying their ancestral lands, reinforcing perceptions of state complicity or, at minimum, state failure. These responses deepen mistrust and entrench the belief among indigenous Christian communities that the state, often influenced by political Islam, is unwilling or unable to guarantee their rights, security, or territorial integrity.

Non-action extends to investigative processes as well. For example, the Niki Tobi Judicial Commission of Inquiry (2021), which examined earlier Plateau crises, documented instances where security operatives either failed to intervene or were implicated in partiality. A. S. Abubakar, Plateau’s Police Commissioner during a period of severe violence, was indicted by multiple inquiry testimonies yet subsequently promoted to Inspector-General of Police in Nigeria. Similarly, the Galtimari Committee Report (2011), convened to investigate Boko Haram’s origins and sponsors, identified systemic security failures and recommended prosecution of implicated actors; however, none of the key recommendations were implemented (Onuoha, 2012). Such long-standing failures raise concerns about historical and systemic biases favoring Muslim perpetrators, with serious implications for the integrity of Nigeria’s secular constitutional structure.

Some Displaced Communities and Massacres in Plateau State as of 2023/2024

I have focused on the Dogo N’ Hauwa case as an illustrative example of the violence affecting many Christian communities in Plateau. Fieldwork conducted by my research team has documented widespread displacement across the state, revealing an alarming level of destruction and depopulation. The table below is drawn from our field surveys and has been cross-referenced with data from the Peace Seeds Development Foundation (PSDF), a local humanitarian organization operating in Plateau State. Their own data is reproduced as Table 2.

Table 1

Our Field Surveys of Displaced Christian Communities in Plateau State 2024

S/N	Communities
1	Gashish
2	Ropp
3	Kira-falls
4	Fan
5	Machanga
6	Lungai
7	Ngyong
8	Murfet
9	Makunday
10	Tamiso
11	Chiana
12	Tahore
13	Gawarba
14	Dares
15	Meyenga
16	Darwat
17	Butura Kampan in Bokkos
18	Vodni in Pushit District Mangu
19	Ndun
20	Changal

Table 1 to be continued

21	Kombili
22	Mangni
23	Bitra Washna
24	Gwet
25	Mutona
26	Komtul
27	Pyantughul
28	Pwasko
29	Kwaghaskipang-Lang
30	Dangdai
31	Kwangkong
32	Tyop
33	Gudum
34	Alohom
35	Wang
36	Hirpiya
37	Butura Kampani
38	Dares
39	Maiyanga
40	Manjankai
41	Garau
42	Gong-gong
43	Dan-Hausa
44	Gaude
45	Kikyau
46	Mangul
47	Jwak-kong/Jwakchom
48	Jwak-maitumbi
49	Aper-pushit
50	Mbwor
51	Nten
52	Kubon
53	Chisu
54	Larkas
55	Jipun
56	Gohutkung
57	Kwaahas-panyam
58	Fushi
59	Ajina
60	Kubat
61	Fungzai
62	Bwai-kuwes
63	Sabongari
64	Yilpo
65	Kyampus
66	Murish
67	Dungmunaan
68	Dyesguna

Table 1 to be continued

69	Tulkinat
70	Jwakji
71	Manja
72	Atughun
73	Bwai
74	Kantoma
75	Attakar Village
76	Mutfet Village
77	Ngyang Village
78	Bodel Village
79	Washna Village
80	A'tuhun Village
81	Sanyan
82	Sundul
83	Ngyong
84	Kop Manderken
85	Kamluk
86	Mawuri
87	Mbong
88	Fasher
89	Makundang
90	Chirang
91	Tahore
92	Tamiso

Source: Research Team Field Survey, 2023-2024.

Table 2 below is the data of Peace Seeds Development Foundation (PSDF), a local humanitarian organization operating in Plateau State, focusing on Bokkos:

Table 2

Information Sheet of Christian Villages Affected by Unprovoked Attacks Across Bokkos LGA From 23rd to 29th December 2023

S/N	Name of village/community	No. of persons killed	No. of persons displaced (IDPS)	No. of houses burnt	Date of attack
1	Kambar Mapeli	16	50	25	23/12/2023
2	Ndung	4	613	200	24/12/2023
3	Sangyang	3	105	45	24/12/2023
4	Mutfet	14	471	85	24/12/2023
5	Ngyong	5	700	39	24/12/2023
6	Chirang	30	1,500	232	24/12/2023
7	Dares	9	300	35	24/12/2023
8	Maiyanga	17	858	58	24/12/2023
9	Tamiso	4	254	155	24/12/2023
10	Lunghai	3	465	140	24/12/2023
11	Tahore	17	675	122	24/12/2023
12	Darwat	12	1,323	52	24/12/2023
13	Makarang	7	336	26	24/12/2023
14	Butura Kampani	12	739	68	24/12/2023

Table 2 to be continued

15	Fitton Mbar	5	625	23	26/12/2023
16	Makundang & Tuje	3	716	8	24/12/2023
17	Hurum	9	1,230	72	24/12/2023
18	Mbong	11	2,321	70	24/12/2023
19	Yelwa Nono	3	836	16	24/12/2023
20	Mawuri	2	282	3	24/12/2023
21	Garah-Mushere	1	-	-	24/12/2023
22	Kamluk	5	430	45	24/12/2023
23	Sundul	1	491	12	24/12/2023
24	Fashar	1	612	29	24/12/2023
25	Maijankai	-	-	-	24/12/2023
26	Bodel		685	All houses burnt	29/12/2023
27	Manvuu		589	3	29/12/2023
28	Fatamba		421	17	29/12/2023
29	Bi ta weel		771	21	29/12/2023
Total		185	18,398	1,601	

Notes. Important highlights: *Four major IDPs Camps have been set up in Bokkos Town which include: 1. COCIN Central Bokkos; 2. Christ Apostolic Church (Central) Bokkos; 3. Catholic Church Bokkos; 4. Christ Apostolic Church Takai. Source: Peace Seeds Development Foundation (PSDF), 2024.

A similar pattern of violence has emerged across neighbouring Christian-dominated states in the North Central and is increasingly moving southward, an expansion that some analysts interpret as reflecting broader dynamics of territorial contestation and demographic pressure associated with armed Fulani groups (International Crisis Group, 2017a; International Crisis Group, 2017b; Okoli & Lenshie, 2018). In Benue and Nasarawa States, for example, sustained attacks on rural Christian farming communities, particularly in Guma, Logo, Agatu, Gwer West, Otukpo, Kwande, Gwer East, Doma, Keana, Obi, Awe, Lafia, and Toto, have resulted in mass displacement, the destruction of villages, and long-term occupation of ancestral lands. Studies by Amnesty International (2018) and Krause (2011) highlight that these localities have become epicentres of targeted violence, where patterns of killing, land dispossession, and demographic replacement mirror those previously documented in Plateau and southern Kaduna.

Any comprehensive conflict analysis of these regions must therefore account for the religious identities of both perpetrators and victims. Multiple scholars argue that omitting the religious dimension produces an incomplete or distorted understanding of the drivers, motivations, and consequences of the violence (Danjibo, 2009; Higazi, 2016). The religious targeting of predominantly Christian communities is not incidental but deeply embedded in the logic of the attacks.

Given the scale, intentionality, and identity-selective nature of the violence currently ravaging Nigeria's North-Central region, and now extending progressively into the southern states, serious questions arise regarding appropriate terminology. If the systematic killing, displacement, and territorial erasure of Christian communities do not constitute genocidal violence, scholars and policymakers must ask: *what, then, should we call it?*

Former Nigerian Minister of Youth and Sports, Solomon Dalung, has likewise affirmed that many communities in Plateau State have been overrun by armed Fulani militia, arguing that the violence constitutes terrorism rather than a farmer-herder conflict and noting that displaced lands are now controlled by armed groups functioning as “a parallel government in the bush” (Arise News, 2023; The Guardian, 2023; Punch, 2024; Sahara

Reporters, 2025). Recent reports from Kwara State in the North Central region indicate that armed Fulani men, apprehended in the forest, claim to have been armed by the office of the National Security Adviser, Nuhu Ribadu, who is himself Fulani. This development adds weight to the ongoing debate about the armed herdsmen phenomenon in Nigeria and supports my theory of political and radical Islam operating in tandem to pursue shared objectives (News Desk, 2025).

Political Recommendations and the Need for International Intervention

The persistent inability of Nigerian authorities to prevent mass atrocities, protect vulnerable populations, or ensure accountability for perpetrators underscores the urgent need for sustained international scrutiny and engagement. In this context, renewed attention from the United States under President Trump in 2025 represents a timely and significant development that affected communities and human rights observers should welcome. Such international involvement is not intended to undermine Nigerian sovereignty; rather, it seeks to reinforce constitutional guarantees that have repeatedly been violated through selective governance, inconsistent enforcement, and systemic security failures (Bellamy, 2009; Evans, 2015).

A central concern in this crisis is Nigeria’s repeated failure to uphold its primary duty under the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine, which obligates states to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity (United Nations, 2005). When a state is unable or unwilling to discharge this responsibility, R2P provides a legitimate, and in extreme cases moral, basis for the international community to intervene through diplomatic, humanitarian, and other peaceful mechanisms. Nigeria’s long-standing inability to prevent mass killings, displacement, and systematic targeting of civilian populations, especially Christians, constitutes a serious breach of this global norm, warranting sustained international engagement.

A critical step toward addressing these systemic failures involves the accurate identification and classification of violent actors. The so-called “herdsmen” militias, with a shadowy identity and motive, whose attacks have been extensively documented across the Middle Belt and southern Nigeria, should be formally designated as a terrorist organization. The Global Terrorism Index ranked this group in 2014-2015 as the fourth deadliest terrorist organization worldwide, behind Boko Haram, ISIS, and al-Shabab, based on casualty figures (Buchanam, 2015). By 2020, these militias were considered deadlier than Boko Haram in terms of killings (Chiluwa & Chiluwa, 2020). Formal recognition would facilitate systematic investigations into their leadership hierarchies, collaborators, financiers, logistical networks, and potential transnational connections. Such scrutiny is essential for holding accountable those responsible for killings, forced displacement, sexual violence, and other acts that constitute crimes against humanity. Absent this clarity, impunity will persist, perpetuating cycles of violence.

Equally critical is the re-evaluation of Nigeria’s legal and political architecture in the 12 northern states that adopted Sharia criminal law between 1999 and 2001. The entrenchment of Sharia as a de facto political system continues to challenge Nigeria’s secular constitutional framework, producing differential interpretations of citizenship, justice, and security. Restoring adherence to constitutional secularism is essential for rebuilding national cohesion and ensuring equal protection for all citizens (Ostien, 2007; Kukah, 1993).

Furthermore, the creation of functional, accountable state and regional policing structures is indispensable. Nigeria’s heavily centralized security apparatus has repeatedly failed to respond effectively to localized violence, particularly in rural communities subjected to sustained attacks. International partners, particularly the United States, must apply sustained diplomatic pressure, accompanied by clear timelines and measurable benchmarks,

to ensure the effective deployment of security resources. Given the history of infiltration by actors sympathetic to extremist ideologies within the Nigerian security sector, including political Islam, external oversight may be necessary to guarantee that counterinsurgency operations are conducted transparently and effectively (Chiluwa & Chiluwa, 2020). Coordinated international support, including intelligence sharing, technical assistance, and operational collaboration, could enhance the capacity of Nigerian forces and help dismantle networks of armed Islamist groups destabilizing the country.

Nigeria has consistently demonstrated limited capacity in addressing the proliferation of violent Islamic extremist groups, including Boko Haram, ISWAP, and armed bandit networks. This limitation is not primarily a matter of military hardware or firepower, but rather results from a complex interplay of factors, including the infiltration of elements sympathetic to these ideologies within the Nigerian security sector, a structural challenge that constrains the state’s ability to combat domestic threats effectively. Consequently, it is imperative that international partners, particularly the United States, exert sustained diplomatic and strategic pressure to ensure transparency and accountability in the deployment of Nigeria’s armed forces. Coordinated support, joint operations, including intelligence sharing and other operational assistance, could enhance the effectiveness of counterinsurgency efforts and help dismantle the networks of armed Islamists who continue to destabilize Nigeria.

Ultimately, these measures are not merely policy recommendations; they constitute urgent imperatives. Nigeria stands at a critical juncture where repeated failures to uphold R2P obligations and protect vulnerable populations demand decisive action, both domestically and from the international community. Without such intervention, the country risks further fragmentation, escalating violence, and a deepening erosion of its democratic and constitutional foundations.

Conclusion

The systematic targeting of Christian communities in Nigeria reflects a complex interplay between political Islam and radical Islamist violence, historically rooted in the core northern states and increasingly extending into the North Central region and parts of the South. Evidence drawn from firsthand accounts, historical trajectories, judicial commission reports, and field-based research demonstrates the deliberate and sustained nature of these attacks, alongside the persistent neglect, complicity, or paralysis of state institutions.

Nigeria’s repeated failure to prevent mass atrocities and protect vulnerable populations represents a profound breach of both constitutional obligations and international norms, including the Responsibility to Protect. Addressing this crisis requires more than rhetorical commitment; it necessitates the establishment of credible domestic accountability mechanisms, the dismantling of extremist networks, and sustained international oversight and engagement. Only through such coordinated efforts can Nigeria restore the integrity of its secular constitutional order, prevent further destruction and displacement, and safeguard the lives and rights of targeted communities.

References

- Amnesty International. (2015). *“Our job is to shoot, slaughter and kill”: Boko Haram’s reign of terror in north-east Nigeria*. London: Amnesty International. Retrieved from <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr44/1360/2015/en/> (accessed on 15 November 2025).
- Amnesty International. (2018). *Harvest of death: Three years of bloody clashes between farmers and herders*. London: Amnesty International.

- Arise News. (2023). Solomon Dalung: Plateau State killings are terrorism acts, not farmer-herder conflict. Retrieved from <https://www.arise.tv/solomon-dalung-plateau-state-killings-are-terrorism-act-not-farmer-herder-conflict/> (accessed on 19 November 2025)
- Awhefeada, S. (2018). Accomplishing Sardauna’s mission. *The Guardian*, 15 January 2018.
- Bellamy, A. J. (2013). The responsibility to protect: Added value or hot air? *Cooperation and Conflict*, 48(3), 333-357. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45084728>
- Blench, R. (2010). *Conflict between pastoralists and cultivators in Nigeria* (A Review paper prepared for DFID, Nigeria). Cambridge: Kay Williamson Educational Foundation.
- Buchanam, R. (2015). Global terrorism index: Nigerian Fulani militants named as fourth deadliest terror group in world. *Independent UK Edition*, 18/11/2015.
- Chiluwa, I., & Chiluwa, I. M. (2020). Deadlier than Boko Haram: Representations of the Nigerian herder-farmer conflict in the local and foreign press. *Media, War and Conflict*, 15(1), 3-24. doi:10.1177/1750635220902490.
- Chinweizu. (2013). *Caliphate colonialism: The taproot of the trouble with Nigeria*. Nigeria: Chinweizu. ISBN:9789312008.
- Daily Trust. (2017). *Koros, Gbagyis battle for Bwari traditional stool*. Retrieved from <https://www.dailytrust.com/koros-gbagyis-battle-for-bwari-traditional-stool.html> (accessed on 17 January 2026).
- Danjibo, N. D. (2009). Islamic fundamentalism and sectarian violence: The Maitatsine and Boko Haram crises in northern Nigeria. *Peace and Conflict Studies Paper Series*, 1-21. Ibadan: University of Ibadan.
- Evans, G. (2015). The evolution of the responsibility to protect: From concept and principle to actionable norm. In R. Thakur and W. Maley (Eds.), *Theorising the Responsibility to Protect*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Falola, T. (1998). *Violence in Nigeria: The crisis of religious politics and secular ideologies*. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press.
- Falola, T. (1999). *The history of Nigeria*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Falola, T. (2009). *Colonialism and violence in Nigeria*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- George, J., Adelaja, A., Vaughan, T., & Awokuse, O. (2022). Explaining transhumance-related violence: Fulani ethnic militia in rural Nigeria. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 89, 275-286. doi:10.1016/j.jrurstud.2021.12.003
- Guardian Nigeria. (2023). Dalung hinges Plateau killings on terrorism, not old farmer-herder crisis. Retrieved from <https://guardian.ng/news/dalung-hinges-plateau-killings-on-terrorism-not-old-farmer-herder-crisis/> (accessed on 19 November 2025)
- Higazi, A. (2016). Farmer-pastoralist conflicts on the Jos Plateau, central Nigeria: Security responses of local vigilantes and the Nigerian state. *Conflict, Security & Development*, 16(4), 365-385. doi: 10.1080/14678802.2016.1200314
- Hiskett, M. (1973). *The sword of truth: The life and times of the Shehu Usman dan Fodio*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Human Rights Watch. (1995). *Nigeria: The Ogoni crisis—A case study of military repression in Southeastern Nigeria*. New York: Human Rights Watch.
- Human Rights Watch. (2003). *The “Miss World” riots: Continued impunity for killings in Nigeria*. Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/report/2003/07/01/miss-world-riots/continued-impunity-killings-nigeria> (accessed on 15 November 2025).
- Ibrahim, J. (1989). The politics of religion in Nigeria: The parameters of the 1987 crisis in Kaduna State. *Review of African Political Economy*, 16(45-46), 65-82.
- International Crisis Group. (2016). *Nigeria: Women and the Boko Haram insurgency* (Africa Report No. 242). Brussels: International Crisis Group. Retrieved from <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/nigeria/242-nigeria-women-and-boko-haram-insurgency>
- International Crisis Group. (2017a). *Herders against farmers: Nigeria’s expanding deadly donflict* (Africa Report No. 252). Brussels: International Crisis Group. Retrieved from <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/nigeria/252-herders-against-farmers-nigerias-expanding-deadly-conflict>
- International Crisis Group. (2017b). *Nigeria: Growing insecurity on multiple fronts*. Retrieved from <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/nigeria/nigeria-growing-insecurity-multiple-fronts>
- Kane, O. (2003). *Muslim modernity in postcolonial Nigeria: A study of the society for the removal of innovation and reinstatement of tradition*. Leiden: Brill.
- Kastfelt, N. (1994). *Religion and politics in Nigeria: A study of middle belt Christianity*. London: British Academic Press.
- Krause, J. (2011). *A deadly cycle: Ethno-Religious conflict in Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria*. Geneva: Geneva Declaration Secretariat. Retrieved from <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/142958/GD-WP-Jos-deadly-cycle.pdf>

- Kukah, M. H. (1993). *Religion, politics and power in Northern Nigeria*. Ibadan: Spectrum Books.
- Last, M. (1967). *The Sokoto Caliphate*. London: Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd.
- Mustapha, A. R. (Ed.). (2014). *Sects & social disorder: Muslim identities & conflict in Northern Nigeria*. Woodbridge, UK: James Currey.
- News Desk. (2025, December 17). Miyetti Allah members staffing NSA Ribadu-led security operation. *Truth Nigeria*. Retrieved from <https://truthnigeria.com/2025/12/miyetti-allah-members-staffing-nsa-ribadu-led-security-operation/>
- Nwaneri, M. & Ukandu, M. (2019). Bwari conflict and its management. In *Readings in peace and conflict: Essays in honour of Professor Isaac Olawale Albert* (pp. 705-720). Ibadan: Society for Peace Studies and Practice (SPSP).
- Okoli, A. C. & Lenshie, N. E. (2018). Nigeria: Nomadic migrancy and rural violence in Nigeria. *Conflict Studies Quarterly*, 25, 68-85.
- Onuoha, F. C. (2012). Boko Haram: Nigeria's extremist Islamic sect. *African Security Review*, 21(3), 53-65.
- Open Doors International. (2023, April). *Nigeria: Full country dossier—World Watch List 2023*. Retrieved from <https://www.opendoors.org/persecution/reports/Full-Country-Dossier-Nigeria-2023.pdf>
- Ostien, P. (2014). *Jonah Jang and the Jasawa: Ethno-religious conflict in Jos, Nigeria*. Abuja: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.
- Ostien, P. (Ed.). (2007). *Sharia implementation in Northern Nigeria 1999–2006: A sourcebook* (Volumes I–V). Ibadan: Spectrum Books.
- Punch Newspaper. (2024). FG must stop pretending—Plateau killings are genocide, says Dalung. Retrieved from <https://punchng.com/fg-must-stop-pretending-plateau-killings-are-genocide-dalung/> (accessed on 19 November 2025)
- Sahara Reporters. (2025, November 15). *Plateau is witnessing genocide: 64 communities forcefully taken over—Buhari's Minister Solomon Dalung Laments*. Retrieved from <https://saharareporters.com/2025/11/15/plateau-witnessing-genocide-64-communities-forcefully-taken-over-buharis-minister>
- Stanton, G. (1996). *Ten Stages of Genocide*. Genocide Watch. Retrieved from <https://www.genocidewatch.com/ten-stages-of-genocide> (accessed on 8 December 2025).
- Suberu, R. (1994). The democratic recession in Nigeria. *Current History*, 93(583), 201-205.
- Suberu, R. (2001). *Federalism and ethnic conflict in Nigeria*. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press.
- Tribune Online. (2017). Many injured, property destroyed as Gbagyi, Hausa clash in Abuja. *Tribune Online*. Retrieved from <https://tribuneonlineng.com/many-injured-property-destroyed-as-gbagyi-hausa-clash-in-abuja/> (accessed on 17 January 2026).
- Ukiwo, U. (2003). Politics, ethno-religious conflicts and democratic consolidation in Nigeria. *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 41(1), 115–138.
- United Nations. (2005). 2005 World Summit Outcome. *General Assembly Resolution A/RES/60/1*. New York: United Nations. Retrieved from <https://undocs.org/A/RES/60/1>
- United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). (2021). *United States Commission on International Religious Freedom 2021 Annual Report: USCIRF—Recommended for Countries of Particular Concern (CPC): Nigeria*. Washington, DC: USCIRF. Retrieved from <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2021-05/Nigeria%20Chapter%20AR2021.pdf>

Appendix



Figure 1. Demolished homes in the Christian communities in Plateau. Credit: our research team.



Figure 2. A Muslim Fulani settlement springing up to replace the displaced indigenous Christian group. Credit: our research team.



Figure 3. One of the IDP camps in Plateau state. Credit: our research team.