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U.S. House of Representatives – Foreign Affairs Committee Subcommittee on Africa

“Conflict and persecution in Nigeria: The case for a CPC designation”

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Rayburn House Office Building 220

Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Jacobs, and distinguished Committee members, I appreciate this opportunity to testify before this committee today.

I serve as Director of the Africa Program at the Wilson Center, although the views expressed here are my own. I have over two decades of experience working on peace, security, and governance issues in Africa, including almost 10 years leading projects focused on conflict mitigation, civil-military relations, and community security in Nigeria and across West Africa.

For over 20 years, the Wilson Center Africa program has actively worked to address the most critical issues facing Africa and U.S.- Africa relations, with the aim of helping to build mutually beneficial relations between the United States and the continent and enhancing knowledge and understanding about Africa in the United States.

Consecutive U.S. Administrations have described the U.S. relationship with Nigeria as among the most important in Africa. Nigeria is a key economic, security, and development partner in Africa, and its population is projected to overtake the United States and become the third most populous country in the world by 2050.

This year marks 26 years of uninterrupted democratic rule in Nigeria, the longest period of constitutional governance since the country's independence from the British in October 1960. Furthermore, as Nigeria serves a second one-year chairmanship of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the country's leaders understandably expect to lead regional coordination efforts, given Nigeria's size, political and economic influence, and decision-making power within the bloc. As ECOWAS turns 50 this year, good leadership will be crucial amid the recent breakaway of three junta-led countries from the bloc, rising terrorism, and growing threats to economic stability and peaceful coexistence that have beset the subregion in recent years. However, whether and how Nigeria tackles its own internal governance and security challenges will set the pace not only at home, but also in the broader West Africa region.

As Nigeria's internal struggles worsen, what is clear is that the country's instability is rooted in a vital shortcoming: After 64 years of independence, the country still struggles to cultivate a national identity rooted in basic freedoms and dignity for its people. In Nigeria today, “ethnicity, religion, and language – not nationality – remain the benchmarks of

personal identity for the country's highly diverse population. While Nigeria has witnessed repeated ethnic and religious clashes over the years, its ethnically and religiously diverse population is not the problem or the cause of these conflicts. The Pan-African polling institute, [Afrobarometer, in a 2021 survey](#), showed that nine in 10 Nigerians are tolerant of people from different religions, ethnic groups, nationalities, and political parties. The problem, however, is that ethnicity and religion in Nigeria have become instrumental markers that are used to mobilize and successfully acquire power, resources, and political dominance.

It is important to understand the nature of the violence in Nigeria – and its causes, which extend beyond the religious or ethnic overtones that appear to motivate that animosity.

I grew up in Jos, Plateau state in Nigeria's Middle-Belt region, and I visit the region regularly, including in December 2024, just a few days before the gruesome Christmas weekend attack that killed an estimated 200 villagers and forced tens of thousands to flee. Such attacks have plagued Plateau State for more than 20 years. Having grown up in Nigeria's Middle Belt region, I am deeply aware of the compounding impacts of these protracted conflicts on once-vibrant communities.

In actuality, religious and ethnic violence is a symptom, and the hate speech and [conspiracy theories](#) that often drive it are throwing fuel on a fire long ignited by Nigerians' frustration over what essentially are failures of governance.

Nigeria is faced with several different but overlapping security crises. Almost every corner of the country has been hit by some form of violence and crime. In November 2024, the Nigerian military confirmed the emergence of a new armed terrorist group known as 'Lukarawa' in the northwestern part of the country. This is in addition to Nigeria already fighting several armed groups, including Islamist militants Boko Haram and its offshoot Islamic State West Africa Province and several bandit gangs. According to [the 2025 Global Terrorism Index \(GTI\)](#), Nigeria now ranks sixth, moving up from eighth position in 2023 and 2024. Since 2011, Nigeria has consistently ranked among the ten most terrorism-affected countries in the world, indicating ongoing challenges in addressing terrorism.

Whether labeled as "banditry" or "terrorism" or "communal clashes" or "ethno-religious conflict," at the root of this violence is a failure of governance to meet the population's most basic needs – not only livelihoods, education, and health care, but also their [need for perpetrators to be held legitimately accountable](#).

Elections and political appointments are two primary areas where the interplay between religion and politics is most clearly demonstrated in Nigeria. Nigerian political leaders rhetorically romanticize Nigeria's "unity" but do little to cultivate it. On the contrary, they often stoke ethnic and religious tensions in election campaigns, seemingly to distract from their failure to deliver for the people they are supposed to serve.

The divisive political climate of the 2023 elections illustrated this tendency. It deepened rifts among ethnic and religious groups that already existed, largely because they have long been inflamed by political, religious, or other community “leaders.” The toxic narrative of “us” versus “them” that permeated the campaign had far-reaching consequences, even fueling calls for secession in different parts of the country. Furthermore, off-cycle elections conducted in 2024 exposed the fragility of Nigeria’s electoral process, as some political actors openly intimidated election officials and violently disrupted elections, suspending by-elections in the states of Kano, Akwa Ibom, and Enugu. These events confirm that political actors are succeeding in rolling back reforms introduced to enhance the integrity and quality of elections in Nigeria.

Secessionist movements, however, remain primarily isolated – for now – because most Nigerians crave the unity that at least some leaders have promised rhetorically, even as they failed to deliver. Polls show that a majority of Nigerians value diverse communities, identify equally with their ethnicity and nationality and believe there is more that unites Nigerians as one people than divides them. An Africa Polling Institute survey, the [Nigeria Social Cohesion Survey 2022](#), for example, found that, while divisions among Nigerians were growing, 71 percent are still “willing to cooperate” in building unity. These data, despite Nigeria’s increasing tensions and dysfunctions, suggest that it is not concepts of unity and comity across ethnic and religious groups that Nigerians oppose but rather the structural sources of the poverty, inequality, violence, corruption, and impunity that affect their daily lives.

Certainly, recent data such as that from the non-denominational global network [Open Doors](#), appears to indicate that violence against Christians, who make up 46 percent of Nigeria’s population, was unaddressed by the previous Buhari administration, and no tangible progress has been made under the current Tinubu administration. But we also know that violence overall in Nigeria has increased over time. Nigeria’s Human Rights Commission reported that complaints of human rights violations rose by 25 percent in February 2025. Indeed, the Social Cohesion Survey found that an overwhelming majority of Nigerians (96 percent) consider human rights abuses and violations to be a problem in the country. This indicates not only that violence and rights abuses afflict many groups but also that Nigerians understand and respect the concept of human rights.

So, back to the root causes. Achieving a working democracy and improved governance that can meet people’s needs and halt violent turmoil will require Nigeria’s power structures to broaden their dialogue with society, including with groups now excluded from influence. Open Doors noted that President Tinubu appears to be introducing more balance in Muslim and Christian representation in his Cabinet. Much more will need to be done to build the people’s trust and nurture the inclusion that is currently lacking and that would strengthen Nigeria’s social cohesion.

In 2014, Nigeria's central government held a five-month "National Conference" that proposed limited changes to the structures of government — yet years later, even these have not been implemented. To support a more thorough dialogue that advances real change, the United States can partner with Nigerians at the grassroots who are looking for solutions for their country and who are ready to confront the failings of the past six decades. That will require a dialogue between the United States and counterparts in Nigeria of unprecedented breadth and honesty, engaging not only Nigeria's national leadership but also its state and local political leaders and with civil society.

Recommendations for the United States:

Engage deeply and broadly with communities across Nigeria to better understand the nuances driving the conflicts in Nigeria. While it's never wise to dismiss religion as a cause of conflict, it is unproductive to label a conflict as solely driven by religion, when there are so many other factors at play. The root causes of Nigeria's conflicts are deeper and more complex than are generally discussed—and that violence is more a symptom than a cause of the real problem.

Prioritize a holistic and long-term vision for U.S engagement with Nigeria on issues of peace and security: It will be impossible to advance U.S. strategic objectives of stability and prosperity in Africa without a peaceful, democratic, and economically thriving Nigeria. The U.S.-Nigeria Binational Commission formed in 2010 already provides a framework that supports country-country level discussions on issues of peace, security, and governance. After 15 years it is time to take stock. Discussions on peace, security, and governance should take a fresh look that emphasizes partnership sustained over the long term, seeking areas where cooperation is still possible, and efforts that are most promising for real change, such as local, non-government initiatives. Security assistance should be shaped with long-term goals that will enable and incentivize specific reforms. Nigeria's partners must recognize that the country's political and security leaders bear a significant share of responsibility for many of Nigeria's security challenges.

Work more with Nigeria's disparate states and its growing city centers: The country's 36 states hold significant power in the realpolitik of Nigeria — and they are distinct enough to warrant specific attention. The U.S. government should decentralize its engagement with Nigeria by strengthening its dialogues with, and support to, receptive government and civic leaders at state and local levels. The states of the Middle Belt, with its population of 45 million, would be a good place to start, given their need for assistance with local-level security to create the safety needed for agriculture and manufacturing that is its base to thrive. This does not mean purely security assistance, but rather the kind of peace-building initiatives that would be more sustainable over time.

Support democratic actors that are advancing inclusive peace process and conflict resolution. Nigeria's civil society is vibrant, and surveys show that Nigerians view religious leaders as more trustworthy, and less corrupt than public institutions. The U.S can leverage its existing democratic tools to support civil society organizations and faith leaders who serve as important bridges between communities and governments, especially in communities where the government lacks credibility. Supporting faith-based communities, community networks, and civic actors to develop balanced messaging about the crisis would help to shift the discussion from the identities and religious backgrounds of those involved in the conflict to focus more on identifying sustainable solutions to resolve conflict.

Partner with the Nigerian government to make accountability – of perpetrators and of the authorities -- central to the response to conflict and persecution. Support the judiciary and institutions of government that are working to address terror financing.

Support initiatives with larger and more far-reaching positive impacts for stronger U.S. – Nigeria relations. U.S. and international policies that lead to knee-jerk responses to crises or are portrayed as immediate, quick-win actions that may seem beneficial to Nigerians could have larger and far-reaching impacts. For example, the Boko Haram kidnapping of schoolgirls from the town of Chibok 10 years ago attracted dramatic attention worldwide with the #BringBackOurGirls campaign. But that also created unyielding pressure on both the Nigerian authorities and the international community to respond. Unfortunately, the slapdash Safe Schools Initiative crafted by Nigeria and international donors to improve security at schools in the northeast region turned out to be unsustainable, and its effectiveness is now being questioned. Such kidnappings have not only continued in the region but also have spread west.

Revive the U.S congressional bipartisan caucus on Nigeria, that served as a space to discuss issues of concern to U.S-Nigeria relations. An active congressional bipartisan caucus on Nigeria will signify the importance of U.S-Nigeria relations and create a forum to consider wide perspectives on different issues to better inform legislative response.

Recommendations for the Nigerian Government:

- **Coordinate federal and state action and messaging.**
- **Get serious about police reform.** In December 2024, the governors of Nigeria's 36 states unanimously endorsed the establishment of state police as a measure to combat the nation's worsening security challenges.

- **Make accountability – of perpetrators and of the authorities -- central to the response.** Nigerians need justice. Criminality in the Middle Belt, as elsewhere, has metastasized in part because of impunity. The trends underlying the violence can be traced and can be anticipated if the appropriate government security agencies have effective early warning and rapid response mechanisms.
- **Start laying the groundwork for peaceful elections in 2027:** This year (2025) is a critical year for elections in Nigeria. The current chairperson of Nigeria's election commission will complete his second and final term in December 2025. This leadership transition will significantly impact the management of the 2027 elections. Prioritize rebuilding citizen trust in the electoral process. Start building national consensus of the composition of the commission's leadership and structure and ensure the commitment of key stakeholders and potential spoilers to peaceful elections.
- **Appoint a Nigerian Ambassador to the United States**

Clearly, a fresh approach is needed, both for Nigeria and the international community. U.S. and international policies should certainly embrace Nigeria as an aspiring democracy and strategic partner in Africa, but those policies must include a better understanding of the country's complexities. Stepping back to honestly re-analyze how governance in Nigeria really works -- and how it does not -- is crucial to the crisis at hand. America's own vital interests in Nigeria are at stake, too.

Thank you for inviting me to testify, and I look forward to your questions.