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Subcommittee on Africa

"One Year Later: Assessing Nigeria's Efforts to Protect Christians and Secure the Middle Belt"

A Testimony by:

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Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Jacobs, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on Nigeria, religious freedom, and security in the Middle Belt. I am honored to share my views with you on this important topic. CSIS does not take policy positions, so the views represented in this testimony are my own and not those of my employer.

I have appeared before Congress previously to discuss conflict, insecurity, and religious freedom in Nigeria.[1] I return today deeply concerned about the continuing loss of life, but convinced that our policy conversation must become more forward-looking. I returned from Nigeria earlier this week after traveling to Jos, in Plateau State, and meeting stakeholders there and elsewhere in the country. Those conversations offered a direct perspective on affected communities' experiences and the continuing challenges of prevention, protection, accountability, and reconciliation.

Those conversations reinforced two conclusions. First, the insecurity confronting Middle Belt communities is real and severe. Christians have suffered horrific attacks, including incidents in which religious identity is clearly relevant. Those attacks must be confronted honestly and unequivocally. Second, Christians are not the sole victims, and religion alone cannot explain the wider crisis. Muslim communities have also suffered devastating attacks. Religious identity can intersect with ethnicity, land disputes, political competition, livelihoods, criminality, governance failures, and longstanding grievances.

Recognizing this complexity does not diminish Christian suffering. It helps us understand the problem accurately and respond effectively.

Nigeria was designated a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) on October 31, 2025. Under the International Religious Freedom Act, designation applies to governments that engage in or tolerate "particularly severe violations of religious freedom"—"systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom."[2] The purpose of my testimony today is not to relitigate that designation, but to focus on what should come next.

More than a year later, Congress should ask whether Nigeria has done enough to protect all communities, regardless of religion or ethnicity, and improve security in the Middle Belt. There has been increased engagement and some important steps. A joint U.S.-Nigeria operation earlier this year killed Abu-Bilal al-Minuki, a senior Islamic State commander, demonstrating the potential of deeper security cooperation.[3] But counterterrorism successes do not, by themselves, establish that vulnerable communities are consistently safer. There is not yet sufficient evidence that the underlying problems of prevention, state capacity, accountability, and impunity have been adequately addressed.

Designation can be an instrument of policy. It should not become a substitute for policy. And protecting religious freedom ultimately requires protecting people.

I. The Prevailing Frame Captures a Serious Problem, but Not the Whole Crisis

The hearing's focus on Christians in the Middle Belt draws attention to serious abuses. Christians have been killed, abducted, displaced, and attacked, and Christian institutions targeted. These facts must neither be minimized nor explained away.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's 2026 Annual Report described religious freedom conditions during 2025 as "abysmal," documenting attacks on Christians and authorities' failures to respond, investigate, or pursue justice. It also reports attacks on Muslims and practitioners of traditional religions, including Muslims killed by insurgents in Sokoto and Borno states.[4]

We must distinguish between documenting Christian victims, identifying attacks in which religion was central, and treating religious persecution as a sufficient explanation for Nigeria's wider insecurity. Evidence supports the first two in particular cases, not the third across Nigeria's varied conflicts. Victims' religious identity tells us **who** suffered; it does not, by itself, establish **why** they were attacked. Equally, describing violence as communal, criminal, or resource-related does not prove religion played no role.

Motivation must be assessed through perpetrators, targeting patterns, statements, local histories, political incentives, and individual circumstances. We should resist both denying religious persecution where evidence supports it and imposing a religious explanation where it does not. Neither error serves victims.

II. The Insecurity in the Middle Belt Is Also a Human-Security Crisis

Stakeholders I met emphasized that many affected communities lie beyond Jos, but also in rural communities in different Local Government Areas across plateau state. Difficult terrain, poor roads, dispersed settlements, and recurring localized attacks complicate prevention and rapid response. This is also a crisis of state capacity and human security.

The State Department's bilateral assessment identifies deficient infrastructure, weak social-service delivery, and significant security and rule-of-law challenges.[5] These weaknesses matter directly to civilian protection. Roads enable security personnel, ambulances, and emergency services to reach communities; communications carry credible warnings; policing, courts, and health services determine whether people receive protection, justice, and treatment. These are not peripheral development concerns. They are part of the security architecture.

Stakeholders I met emphasized a recurring gap between warning and effective response. That distinction matters. An early-warning system has limited value if warning does not produce action. Security personnel cannot effectively protect communities they cannot reach in time. An arrest does little to reduce impunity without a credible judicial process. And reconstruction cannot restore confidence if displaced families do not believe they can return safely.

For families, security means being able to farm, travel, attend school, practice their faith, obtain care, and resolve disputes peacefully. It means trusting institutions to protect basic rights regardless of religion or ethnicity. We must ask not only how to protect Christians, but what will make the Middle Belt safer for everyone. The questions are complementary: durable protection for Christians depends, in part, on institutions capable of protecting all communities.

III. Accurate Diagnosis Matters

Nigeria faces several overlapping crises with distinct geographic dynamics: Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) insurgency, banditry and kidnapping, communal and farmer-pastoralist violence, and criminal networks. Religion can intersect with ethnicity, geography, resources, political competition, economic pressures, and local conflict histories.

Different diagnoses require different responses. Counterterrorism cannot resolve every communal conflict; interfaith dialogue cannot replace policing; military deployments cannot repair justice institutions; development cannot substitute for accountability for murder. Complexity helps explain violence. It cannot absolve the state of its responsibility to protect citizens, regardless of who attacks them or why.

IV. What Has Changed Since Designation?

Congress should ask an empirical question: Are conditions improving? Available conflict evidence gives significant cause for concern, but requires careful interpretation.
A February 2026 the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data project (ACLED) analysis found that violent events involving jihadist groups in the connected Benin-Niger-Nigeria borderlands increased by 86 percent from 2024 to 2025, while related fatalities increased by 262 percent. Its scope covered Alibori and Borgou in Benin; Dosso in Niger; and Sokoto, Kebbi, Niger, and Kwara states in Nigeria. ACLED describes a connected conflict zone with distinct national dynamics.[6]

These are not national Nigerian figures, do not measure Christian killings separately, and are not a before-and-after assessment of CPC designation. They underscore the importance of geographic specificity. Conflict data can identify locations, actors, and changing patterns, but cannot alone establish religious motivation; national totals can also obscure local variation. Progress in the Middle Belt should be judged by whether people are safer, communities better protected, credible warnings acted upon, and security services effective and impartial. Are perpetrators investigated and prosecuted? Can displaced people return safely? Is impunity declining? These are the meaningful tests.

V. Interrupt Cycles of Attack and Reprisal

My consultations also raised the danger of attacks triggering reprisals across communal lines. These dynamics must be assessed incident by incident, not assumed. Where they occur, they deepen polarization and complicate reconciliation.

Narratives focused exclusively on one community's suffering risk convincing others that their losses do not matter. Different incidents have different perpetrators and motives, but require consistent treatment. Attacks on Christians and Muslims alike must be condemned unequivocally. Investigation and prosecution must not depend on victims' identity, political access, or international visibility. Equal citizenship and equal protection under the law should remain the guiding standard.

VI. Political and Religious Leadership Matters

Political and religious leaders influence how communities understand violence. Political leaders must not exploit communal grievances for advantage. Religious leaders can support mediation, reconciliation, early warning, and responsible public narratives; their authority should not deepen divisions.

Leaders should distinguish verified evidence from inflammatory claims and condemn attacks consistently. Selective empathy is dangerous. Christian deaths should not matter only to Christians, nor Muslim deaths only to Muslims. No leader should turn ordinary Nigerians' suffering into political currency, particularly as another national election approaches.

VII. Connect Designation to Measurable Outcomes

At the second U.S.-Nigeria Joint Working Group session on August 12, 2026, discussions focused on protecting Middle Belt Christians, strengthening judicial and security institutions for accountability, and military cooperation. The agenda also included displaced-person resettlement, counterterrorism prosecutions, terrorist financing, biometric information sharing, and law-enforcement capacity.[7]

The State Department noted Nigeria's reported efforts: prosecution of hundreds of Boko Haram and Islamic State-West Africa suspects, expanded judicial capacity, and recruitment and training of 50,000 additional police officers. It also identified concerns about civilian fatalities, humanitarian-expenditure transparency, and support for displaced populations.[7]

The next phase must emphasize implementation. What commitments were made, which institutions are responsible, by when, and what evidence would demonstrate progress? Meetings, announcements, and deployments alone are not outcomes. Safer communities, faster responses, credible investigations and prosecutions, reduced displacement, functioning institutions, and declining impunity are outcomes.

Nigeria bears primary responsibility for protecting its citizens. The United States must assess whether its diplomatic, security, development, and religious-freedom instruments help achieve their intended objectives. The standard should be effective policy and measurable results.

VIII. The 2027 Elections Add Urgency

According to Nigeria's Independent National Electoral Commission's calendar, presidential and National Assembly elections are scheduled for January 16, 2027, followed by governorship and State House of Assembly elections on February 6, 2027.[8] Nigeria approaches these elections amid substantial insecurity and, in some communities, deep distrust.

In my assessment, this environment heightens the importance of monitoring incitement, identity-based mobilization, and election-related violence. Neither Nigeria nor the United States benefits when political competition exacerbates communal insecurity. Nigeria's elections belong to Nigerians. International partners can support peaceful choices without violence, intimidation, or exploitation of grievances.

Election-related conflict prevention is therefore a human-security priority, not merely a governance concern. The coming months offer an important window for action. With Nigeria's primary responsibility and the United States' supporting role clearly distinguished, I offer recommendations to both governments.

Recommendations to Congress

I offer Congress five recommendations.

1. Measure human-security outcomes using geographically and contextually specific evidence

Congress should press the administration for clear indicators: attacks and civilian fatalities; responses to credible warnings; investigations, prosecutions, and case outcomes; displacement and safe return; access to policing and emergency response; civilian confidence in security institutions; and evidence that early warning produces early action.

National casualty totals are insufficient. Ask where violence occurs, who the perpetrators and victims are, what evidence establishes motive, and whether incidents reveal wider patterns. Triangulate ACLED with U.S. and Nigerian government reporting, credible civil-society monitoring, and affected communities. Religious freedom must remain central, but no single dataset answers that question. The ultimate test is: **Are people safer?**

2. Broaden U.S. policy from security operations toward human security

U.S. policy should recognize that transportation, communications, policing, justice, health capacity, displacement, livelihoods, and local governance all affect whether communities are secure. Effective security depends on functioning institutions and infrastructure. Security cooperation should therefore connect more deliberately with investments in the institutional and human-security capacities that make civilian protection possible. These are complementary responsibilities, not alternatives to confronting terrorism and violent crime.

3. Keep civilian protection and accountability at the center of security cooperation

Nigeria needs capable institutions to confront terrorism and violent crime, but capability without accountability is insufficient. Assess U.S. assistance by whether it strengthens prevention, civilian protection, credible investigations, judicial capacity, accountability, and responsible security-sector performance alongside operational capability.

4. Support local prevention, mediation, and early action

Many Middle Belt conflicts have important local dimensions. Congress should support engagement with state and local authorities, civil society, women and youth organizations, traditional institutions, and credible religious leaders engaged in early warning, mediation, peacebuilding, and reconciliation. The critical transition is from **early warning to early action.** Communities need confidence that reporting a credible threat will lead to an effective response.

5. Prioritize conflict prevention ahead of the 2027 elections

Keep U.S. engagement rigorously nonpartisan and focused on peaceful competition. Communicate across Nigeria's political spectrum that exploiting religious, ethnic, or communal divisions undermines governance and human security. With national elections in January and state elections in February, prevention must precede escalation rather than follow violence.

Recommendations to the Government of Nigeria

I offer five recommendations to translate Nigeria's primary responsibility into effective protection, accountability, and prevention.

1. Make accountability visible

Nigerians should be able to see what happens after major attacks. Were investigations opened? Were suspects arrested? Were cases prosecuted, and what were the outcomes? Greater transparency about these steps would allow Nigerians themselves to assess whether impunity is declining. The measure of progress cannot simply be how many security operations are conducted. It must include whether perpetrators face justice.

2. Connect early warning to early action

Communities frequently know when tensions are rising. The critical challenge is ensuring those warnings produce timely responses. Federal, state, and local authorities should establish clearer mechanisms linking community information to security deployment, mediation, local government, emergency services, and other preventive responses. Early warning should be measured by whether it produces early action.

3. Treat infrastructure as part of the security architecture

Transportation, communications, policing, health services, functioning courts, and effective local government determine whether authorities can reach communities, provide assistance and treatment, and deliver justice. Nigeria cannot solve a human-security crisis through military means alone.

4. Ensure consistent protection and accountability

Respond unequivocally to identity-based violence against Christians, Muslims, practitioners of traditional religions, and people of no faith. Recognizing one community's suffering must not minimize another's. Apply protection, investigation, and accountability consistently, regardless of victims' or perpetrators' identities. Equal citizenship and equal protection must guide the response.

5. Demand responsible political and religious leadership ahead of the 2027 elections

Political actors must not exploit ethnicity, religion, or communal grievances for electoral advantage. Authorities should respond consistently to incitement and political violence, whoever

is responsible. Religious leaders should lower tensions, distinguish verified evidence from inflammatory narratives, and condemn violence consistently. Political competition need not come at the expense of social cohesion or human security.

A Shared Interest in Human Security

Engagement and accountability should reinforce one another. Nigeria must protect its citizens; the United States should assess whether its policies effectively support that objective; political and religious leaders must use their influence responsibly.

The common denominator is human security: a Christian farmer unable to reach her farm, a displaced Muslim family, a child unable to attend school, a community whose warnings go unanswered, and a victim denied justice. Their experiences—not analytically incomplete narratives—should anchor our assessment.

Conclusion

Chairman, Ranking Member, distinguished Members: Christians in Nigeria have suffered horrific violence, and their government has an unequivocal obligation to protect them. But Christians are not the only victims, religion is not the only driver, and religious freedom cannot be secured apart from state capacity, infrastructure, justice, and governance.

My visit to Jos reinforced that these distinctions are not academic. They affect how communities understand one another, whether violence produces reconciliation or further grievance, whether government interventions address causes or symptoms, and whether U.S. policy helps make people safer. We must distinguish where religion is central, where it interacts with other factors, and where other drivers predominate.

More than a year after designation, ask practical questions: Are people safer? Do warnings produce action? Can institutions reach vulnerable communities? Do perpetrators face justice? Can displaced families return safely? Are leaders lowering tensions? Can Nigerians of every faith rely on equal protection?

The seriousness of Christian suffering and the complexity of Nigeria's insecurity can both be true. Acknowledging the second does not diminish the first; it improves our chance of responding effectively to both.

Congress need not choose between accountability and engagement. It must connect them. The goal is not to debate whose suffering matters most, but to build institutions capable of protecting every Nigerian.

Designation can be an instrument of policy. It should not become a substitute for policy.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I look forward to your questions.

Footnotes

1. Oge Onubogu, testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Africa, "Conflict and Persecution in Nigeria: The Case for a CPC Designation," March 12, 2025. Written testimony; and "President Trump's Redesignation of Nigeria as a 'Country of Particular Concern—CPC': A Serious, Well-founded Wake-up Call," November 20, 2025. Written testimony.
2. U.S. Department of State, "Countries of Particular Concern, Special Watch List Countries, Entities of Particular Concern," noting Nigeria's designation as a Country of Particular Concern on October 31, 2025, and the International Religious Freedom Act standard for "particularly severe violations of religious freedom." [state.gov]
3. Alexander Palmer, "The Killing of Abu-Bilal al-Minuki and the U.S. Military's Deepening Involvement in Nigeria," Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 18, 2026. [csis.org]
4. U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, "Nigeria," *2026 Annual Report*, March 2026. [uscirf.gov]
5. U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Relations With Nigeria," Bureau of African Affairs, August 21, 2023. [2021-2025.state.gov]
6. Héni Nsaibia, "Q&A: Why Is Jihadist Violence Escalating in the Benin, Niger, and Nigeria Border Triangle?" Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), February 26, 2026. [acleddata.com]
7. U.S. Department of State, "Second Session of the U.S.-Nigeria Joint Working Group to Address Nigeria's Country of Particular Concern Designation," Office of the Spokesperson, August 13, 2026. [state.gov]
8. Independent National Electoral Commission, "Full Election Calendar," listing the Presidential/National Assembly election for January 16, 2027, and the Governorship/State House of Assembly election for February 6, 2027. [inecnigeria.org]