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Beyond Military Intervention: A Sustainable US Strategy for Security in Nigeria

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Nigeria faces a security crisis. A wide variety of armed groups, ranging from the transnational jihadist organization Islamic State (IS) and the endemic jihadist group Boko Haram to a variety of criminal gangs known as “bandits,” terrorize civilians across rural Nigeria. Between 2023 to 2025, over 10,000 Nigerian civilians were killed and hundreds of thousands displaced by violence.

This humanitarian crisis in Africa's most populous nation has drawn the attention of many Christian groups and members of the U.S. Congress, who have expressed alarm over the alleged prevalence of religiously motivated killings of Christians. Analysts reject this framing, noting that only around 5% of killings are primarily driven by religious tensions. In late 2025, President Trump began harshly criticizing Nigeria's government for allegedly tolerating the killing of Christians and threatened to invade Nigeria. This rhetoric was followed by military action, including airstrikes, joint special forces raids, and the deployment of two hundred U.S. soldiers to Nigeria. These military strikes suggest that the White House now envisions a growing U.S. counterterrorism footprint in Nigeria. Given the complex nature of Nigeria's security challenges, further U.S. military involvement will likely be ineffectual and may further destabilize the nation.

A more effective and less costly approach to countering instability in Nigeria involves taking on a multidimensional approach to security including security sector reforms, cross-border counterterrorism partnerships with Nigeria's neighbors, and efforts to address the root causes of violence in Nigeria. The United States should foster security partnerships with Nigeria's neighbors, including by opening channels

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for cooperation with Niger's military regime. The United States should also work to promote reforms to Nigeria's security apparatus to curb abuses against civilians and condition future arms sales on effective reforms. Support for community peacebuilding through partnership with community leaders also provides a cost-effective means of promoting a lasting peace, while the United States should support an inclusive and legitimate Nigerian federal election in 2027. Finally, U.S. officials should refrain from rhetoric on violence in Nigeria which could inflame sectarian tensions and threaten the country's stability.

Background

Nigeria faces an internal security crisis in which numerous non-state armed groups, including both jihadist terror groups and organized crime gangs, prey upon civilians. President Bola Tinubu pledged to restore domestic security upon his election in 2023, yet violence against civilians, primarily in rural Nigeria, has continued. Nigeria's security woes have worsened dramatically in the past several years: the 2026 Global Terrorism Index ranked Nigeria as the fourth-most terrorism-afflicted nation worldwide, an increase from eighth as recently as 2024.¹ According to Amnesty International, over 10,000 Nigerians were murdered by armed groups and violent crime during Tinubu's first two years in office, while hundreds of thousands have been displaced.²

Threats to stability and domestic security in Nigeria are manyfold. In the Lake Chad region in the country's northeast, the jihadist group Boko Haram and its newer rival Islamic State Sahel Province are the primary security threats.³ In the northwest, criminal groups known locally as "bandits" have run rampant, terrorizing civilians through abductions, robberies, and killings, while new armed groups such as Lakuwara blur the line between criminality and jihadist terrorism.⁴ The agrarian Middle Belt of central Nigeria has seen armed conflict perpetrated by roving militias, internally displacing over 65,000 people due to violence.⁵

Nigeria's security challenges are part of a broader pattern of growing insecurity across West Africa. Military coups in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Nigeria's

northern neighbor of Niger within the past several years have rattled the region's governments, while jihadist groups have recently expanded their reach from the Sahel states southward towards West Africa's coastal states, previously free from jihadist attacks. Nigeria's northern neighbor, Niger, has been particularly afflicted by terrorist violence and is ranked second in the Global Terrorism Index.⁶

These transnational jihadist groups pose a growing threat to Nigeria and its neighbors. The Sahel-based jihadist group Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM) has expanded southward into Nigeria's western neighbor of Benin and claimed its first deadly attack on soldiers in Nigeria in October 2025. Although international attention has centered on Sahelian jihadists' attempts to expand southward, the Lake Chad basin along Nigeria's northeast border saw a 28% surge in conflict-related deaths, as Boko Haram and Islamic State-West Africa Province proved increasingly sophisticated in their attacks.⁷ The overall picture is one of increasingly-deadly terrorist activity in Nigeria's border regions.

Nigeria is among the leading recipients of U.S. security assistance in sub-Saharan Africa, including arms sales and military training.⁸ However, relations between Nigeria and the United States have soured over the past several months, as U.S. officials have harshly criticized Abuja over violence against Nigerian Christians. The White House and elected Republican officials have adopted the narrative that a "Christian genocide" is underway in Nigeria, perpetrated by jihadists with the connivance of the Nigerian government.

In October 2025, the White House re-designated Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern under the International Religious Freedom Act, joining a list just twelve countries long alongside U.S. adversaries China, Iran, and Russia.⁹ This designation, declaring that Nigeria has "engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom," can serve as a precursor to sanctions or aid restrictions.¹⁰ In a social media post the following day, President Trump threatened to cut off U.S. aid to Nigeria and instructed the Department of Defense to "prepare for possible action" to invade Nigeria, "guns-a-blazing," to prevent

the genocide of Christians. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth publicly concurred, declaring that “either the Nigerian government protects Christians, or we will kill the Islamic terrorists who are committing these horrible atrocities.”¹¹

Following President Trump’s threats of invasion, the United States launched airstrikes on Christmas Day, 2025, against alleged jihadist targets on the Nigeria-Niger border, in Nigeria’s northwest. Although some strikes are believed to have struck Lakurawa targets, at least one strike or debris impact on a village with no history of insurgent presence raised alarms among the Nigerian public about mistargeting.¹² These strikes broke from Nigeria’s policy, in effect since independence, of rejecting foreign military involvement on Nigerian soil. Although Abuja had not invited the strikes, Nigerian authorities, under pressure, reportedly shared intelligence with the United States.¹³

In subsequent months, the U.S. military has deepened its involvement in Nigeria. In November 2025, AFRICOM, the U.S. military command for Africa, resumed surveillance flights over Nigeria from its airbase in Ghana.¹⁴ In February 2026, two hundred U.S. soldiers and accompanying unmanned aerial warfare systems were deployed to Nigeria, allegedly in a training role. By May, U.S. and Nigerian forces were cooperating in joint kinetic operations. On May 15th, President Trump announced that U.S. and Nigerian special forces had killed Abu Bilal al-Minuki, a Nigerian-born Islamic State leader, in a raid in Lake Chad. Several days later, Nigerian authorities claimed to have killed 20 IS fighters in a joint U.S.-Nigerian raid.¹⁵

The increased U.S. military activity in Nigeria is taking place in parallel to the United States’ recent escalation of airstrikes against jihadists in Somalia, and renewed security cooperation talks with Mali and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, suggesting a surge in U.S. military engagement in Africa.¹⁶ As seen by its actions in Iran and Venezuela, the Trump administration has been unafraid to launch new military interventions unilaterally overseas, increasing the possibility that further military action in Nigeria is ahead.

Republicans in Congress have echoed the administration’s hard line on Nigeria. In February 2026, the House Foreign Affairs and Appropriations Committees jointly released a report reiterating the administration’s framing on violence against Christians and calling for the United States to redefine its strategic partnership with Nigeria to protect Christian communities and counter jihadist groups. The joint report’s blueprint for the U.S.-Nigeria relationship included stepping up security cooperation and the transfer of defense equipment, as well as recommending restrictions on humanitarian aid and targeted sanctions towards those responsible for violence against Christians.¹⁷

As seen in rhetoric by U.S. officials, the narrative of “Christian genocide” has become the overriding justification for Washington’s hard line towards Abuja. This narrative originated among Christians victimized by militia attacks in Nigeria’s Middle Belt and was subsequently adopted by evangelical Christian groups in the United States. For instance, the U.S. NGO Open Doors, which monitors prosecution of Christians internationally, declared Nigeria “the deadliest place in the world for followers of Jesus.”¹⁸ Amidst Nigeria’s security crisis, many Christians, who make up nearly half of Nigeria’s population, are among those civilians victimized by violence. However, analysts reject the idea of a Christian genocide in Nigeria as overly simplistic, noting that the criminal gangs and jihadist organizations responsible for abuses against civilians frequently target Muslims as well.¹⁹ Violence in Nigeria’s Middle Belt region, where many Christians in farming communities have been killed in attacks by herders who are predominantly Muslim, is a particular focus of the Christian genocide rhetoric. However, local leaders emphasize that these attacks are motivated by competition over land and resources, rather than religion.²⁰ Attacks against Christian civilians on the basis of their faith are comparatively infrequent (roughly 5% of attacks according to a 2022 estimate from the ACLED), in stark contrast to the narrative of widespread persecution of Christians implied by the Christian genocide label.²¹ Although Nigeria has seen instances of inter-religious violence, religious freedom is constitutionally guaranteed, security services are religiously-integrated, and Christian and Muslim communities frequently

intermarry.²²

Regardless of the truth of assertions of Christian genocide, the ensuing diplomatic spat between Washington and Abuja has, in the words of one analyst, “brought bilateral ties to their lowest point since the 1970s.”²³ President Tinubu’s government has sought to mend ties with Washington, including by dispatching the president’s National Security Advisor to meet with U.S. Vice President Vance and Defense Secretary Hegseth, and by hiring a high-dollar lobbying firm to promote Nigeria with the administration.²⁴ Tinubu has also declared a state of national emergency and announced an expansion in military recruitment, ahead of 2027 presidential elections he is widely expected to win.²⁵ The absence of invasion rhetoric and the recent joint military operations suggest that Nigeria-U.S. relations have warmed in spring 2026, but the relationship remains on uncertain footing as the deteriorated security situation persists.

US Interests in Nigeria

The U.S.-Nigeria relationship is multidimensional, including security and counterterrorism, economic, humanitarian, and political dimensions. Nigeria’s immense economic potential, substantial regional influence, and commercial ties to the United States make it central to U.S. engagement with the African continent. Nigeria has Africa’s largest economy, is Africa’s most populous nation, and by 2050, is expected to be the world’s third-largest country by population, surpassing the United States.²⁶ Given Nigeria’s economic and demographic heft in its region and its role as the linchpin of numerous joint West African initiatives, a strong working relationship with the Nigerian government facilitates U.S. initiatives across the West African region. As the African continent grows in influence over the coming decades, a strong U.S.-Nigeria relationship will become only increasingly important.

Nigeria is the United States’ second-largest trade partner in sub-Saharan Africa, as well as the site of nearly \$6 billion in U.S. foreign direct investment as of 2023. The vast majority of Nigeria’s exports to the United States are in oil and natural gas, where

U.S. firms Chevron and ExxonMobil maintain investments.²⁷ Nigeria’s economy is poised to continue its growth and diversification in the coming decades, offering further opportunities for U.S. investment and access to Africa’s largest consumer market, facilitated by the sizable Nigerian diaspora in the United States, should U.S.-Nigeria relations remain warm.

Nigeria’s large population of citizens living in poverty make the nation a priority for U.S. overseas development assistance. Successive U.S. administrations have historically made substantial investments in foreign assistance to Nigeria, primarily by addressing deficiencies in healthcare. As of 2022, nonemergency U.S. foreign aid to Nigeria totaled \$627 million, roughly 90% of which was in the health field, such as AIDS relief and malaria prevention.²⁸ The Trump administration restructured health aid to Nigeria, instead negotiating a memorandum of understanding compelling Abuja to match U.S. healthcare contributions with its own healthcare spending, including by supporting Christian faith-based healthcare providers.²⁹

At the intersection of humanitarian and counterterrorism objectives, concerned citizens, advocacy groups, and members of the U.S. Congress have historically expressed concern for the welfare of vulnerable groups in Nigeria in the face of militant violence. The fate of the Chibok schoolgirls, kidnapped by Boko Haram militants in 2014, provoked widespread concern among the American public and elected officials. As discussed above, recent attacks on Christians in Nigeria have led to alarm among elected officials and faith-based advocacy groups in the United States, and to the recent designation of Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.³⁰ Protecting Christians from religious violence is thus a prominent concern in U.S.-Nigeria relations, as is civilian security more generally.

West Africa is also a region of increased concern over jihadist terrorism. Although the epicenter of jihadist activity is in the Sahel, analysts have sounded the alarm about transnational jihadist groups’ expansion into neighboring coastal states, such as Benin and

Cote d'Ivoire. As of 2026, the Global Terrorism Index ranked Nigeria fourth on its list of nations most-impacted by terrorism worldwide, highlighting Nigeria's alarming security situation.³¹

Working to constrain the strength of jihadist groups is a long-time objective of post-Cold War U.S. policy towards Africa. The White House's 2025 National Security Strategy states that the United States is to "remain wary of resurgent Islamist terrorist activity in parts of Africa while avoiding any long-term American presence or commitments."³² The United States has historically provided substantial security assistance to Nigeria to assist in countering jihadist groups, degrading these groups' capacity to target the United States or Americans abroad.

Drawbacks and Risks of the United States' Military-First Policy

In recent months, U.S. policy towards Nigeria has moved in a confrontational direction as President Trump, administration officials, and Republicans in Congress have ramped up the pressure on Nigeria's government. President Trump and Congressional Republicans have excoriated Abuja for allegedly tolerating the genocide of Nigeria's Christians and threatened unilateral military action in response. On December 25, 2025, the United States launched missile strikes on alleged jihadist targets in northwest Nigeria, the first foreign military operations on Nigerian soil since the nation's independence.

Several months since the December 2025 strikes, the negative consequences of the U.S. strikes have become apparent, while the impact on militant groups' capacity appears minimal. Local jihadist groups' attacks on civilians have subsequently increased, discrediting the notion that these strikes were effective in curbing violence.

These outcomes of the December strikes illustrate the perils of faulty intelligence and the challenges of seeking to shape Nigeria's complex security environment through airpower alone, particularly without a sustained bombing campaign. Since early 2026, the United States has also stepped up its military involvement in Nigeria, deploying around 200 troops

to train the Nigerian military and carrying out a special forces raid that killed a high-ranking Islamic State leader in May 2026.³³

This new level of U.S. military involvement in Nigeria may produce tactical successes, but periodic military strikes are insufficient to produce lasting solutions to Nigeria's complex security challenges. What is more, without attainable benchmarks for victory, the United States risks inadvertently committing itself to a sustained presence in Nigeria at a mounting human and financial cost. The experience of France's failed 2014-2022 counterterrorism military intervention in the Sahel, where a Western military force consistently produced tactical victories yet was incapable of building up local partners to quell jihadism on their own, is an instructive and sobering parallel.

In addition to being unlikely to deliver strategic success through military strength, the U.S. military presence in Nigeria and the Trump administration's tough line strategy with Abuja could easily produce complications which undermine Nigeria's stability and strengthen the jihadist hand. The U.S. military presence in Nigeria could easily fuel jihadist propaganda narratives and alienate civilians by undermining the legitimacy of Nigeria's government and inadvertently killing civilians. The administration's diplomatic strategy towards Nigeria, meanwhile, risks poisoning relations with Abuja through its coercive tenor as well as touching off further violence against civilians on the ground. In the aggregate, the current U.S. policy towards Nigeria bears significant risks of harming U.S. interests in the long term. While it may produce short-term, limited military success on the ground, it is unlikely to produce lasting peace and security in Nigeria and instead is likely to worsen the country's instability. In a diplomatic sense, it also shows signs of damaging the U.S.-Nigeria relationship, with ensuing negative consequences for U.S. foreign policy across West Africa.

December 2025 Airstrikes

On December 25, 2025, U.S. missiles struck several targets in Sokoto state in northwest Nigeria. President Trump claimed that these strikes were mounted in

defense of Nigeria's Christian community and had targeted the Islamic State.³⁴ Sokoto is a majority-Muslim state with no record of attacks against Christians or an Islamic State presence, although it is instead troubled by Lakurawa, a hybrid jihadist and criminal organization active across the forested, sparsely-policed borderlands of Niger, Nigeria, and Benin. Reports suggest that the U.S. strikes killed over 100 Lakurawa fighters. Given the group's access to cross-border sanctuaries and the continued weakness of the Nigerian state's presence in this region, it is foolhardy to presume that this one-time strike is a knockout blow to Lakurawa.³⁵ Indeed, Lakurawa has continued to carry out attacks and expand its footprint in northwestern Nigeria in the wake of the strikes.³⁶

Political Impact

The strategic consequences of the December strikes are detrimental to Nigerian security and U.S. interests in the nation, far out of proportion to the strikes' limited tactical success. Although Nigerian authorities have claimed publicly that the strikes were a joint endeavor, the strikes depart from Nigeria's long-held aversion to foreign military operations on its soil. Against a context of steadily worsening relations with the United States, it's evident that U.S. pressure and the threat of unilateral action compelled Abuja to accede to the strikes.³⁷ While Nigeria will seek to mend relations with the United States in the short term, the impacts of the strike on the Nigerian public will likely contribute to a worsened security situation and harm U.S. interests.

The CPC designation, Trump's threat of invasion, and the 2025 strikes have evidently led President Tinubu's government to view Washington with wariness. Abuja recently contracted a top-dollar Republican Party-affiliated lobbying firm in Washington, the most expensive DC lobbying contract of any foreign government.³⁸ This is the behavior of a government which views the Trump administration as a prospective threat. Mindful of its need for arms purchases and development assistance from the United States, Abuja is likely to pursue a policy of accommodation, rather than defiance, towards U.S. demands. Seeking other security partners is a likely next move—the European Union, for instance, is

seeking deepened security ties with Abuja.³⁹

While Nigeria's government seeks to display its compliance with Washington's demands, the Trump administration's tough line on Nigeria risks exacerbating fault lines in Nigerian society. Painting American actions in Nigeria in sectarian terms, with the United States as the defender of Nigeria's Christians, risks provoking greater religious violence. Although many Nigerian Christians have cheered the Trump administration's attention to their plight, the United States' accusations of Christian genocide risk inflaming religious tensions, paradoxically placing Nigeria's Christians in greater danger of intercommunal violence.⁴⁰ Current U.S. policy towards Nigeria also risks alienating Nigeria's Muslims. U.S. military strikes cast as defense of Christians, rather than actions for the security of all Nigerians, play into jihadist propaganda by portraying the United States as hostile to Muslims and the Nigerian government as a stooge for American and Christian interests.

The particular context of the December strikes also risks provoking blowback. Local inhabitants reported missile debris striking farmland and abandoned farm buildings, while rumors spread on social media that the strikes had killed civilians.⁴¹ As Sokoto state is the seat of Nigeria's sultan, the spiritual head of Nigeria's Muslim community, the strikes could easily be interpreted as anti-Islamic, lending credence to jihadist narratives.⁴² The timing of the attacks, on Christmas Day, further plays into this narrative.

What's Next for the Military-First Strategy?

War Secretary Hegseth's statements following the strikes about pursuing a more "aggressive" strategy in Africa suggested that foreign policy decisionmakers envision continued military engagement in Nigeria. This was borne out by the deployment of U.S. troops to Nigeria and the special forces killing of Abu Bilal al-Minuku. As the United States pursues further military action in Nigeria, the risks of unleashing further violence and instability increase, while a military-centric strategy is unlikely to produce enduring security.

U.S. escalation in Nigeria is fraught with risk. With each subsequent U.S. military strike in Nigeria, the risks of civilian casualties increase; a single strike resulting in the death of civilians, if publicized, would be a tremendous gift to jihadist propaganda and would alienate the civilian communities whose support is sorely needed in allowing government forces to restore stability on the ground. If the United States becomes further associated with the military campaign against jihadist groups, particularly under the banner of defending Nigerian Christians, Christian communities and American citizens and businesses in Nigeria would be increasingly at risk of retaliatory violence from outraged civilians or jihadist attacks.

Both a future air campaign or a continued campaign of special forces strikes would face daunting obstacles and long odds of success in resolving Nigeria's deep-rooted instability. Numerous armed organizations threaten security across the nation of 240 million, and intense coordination with Nigerian army and police forces would be necessary to defeat Boko Haram, Lakuwara, and organized crime syndicates. Even if jihadist groups were defeated on the battlefield, they have proven resilient in the past; Boko Haram was declared defeated by the Nigerian government in 2009 and 2019, yet has rebuilt itself and reemerged.⁴³ Without robust and effective programs to reintegrate former fighters and address the economic grievances fueling the growth of jihadist insurgency, battlefield victories over jihadist groups would likely be limited.

France's Operation Barkhane, a 2014-2022 military counter-insurgency intervention across several Sahel including Nigeria's neighbor Niger, faced similar dynamics to a hypothetical U.S. military intervention in Nigeria, including weak state capacity and agile, resilient cross-border jihadist opponents.⁴⁴ Despite the French advantage in military technology, the campaign proved an "intractable conflict" and a costly failure after eight years; much as occurred in Vietnam, the last time when the United States took on France's losing counterinsurgency campaign, a large-scale American military intervention in Nigeria would in all likelihood be an expensive and bloody failure.⁴⁵ A smaller intervention with occasional pinprick strikes such as the May 2026 raid, meanwhile, would face the issue of Nigeria's fragmented terror landscape. As instability in

Nigeria is driven by a variety of armed groups which are often localized, decapitation strikes such as the killing of al-Minuki offer little hope of meaningfully reducing instability or violence against civilians.

Political Dynamics

Outside of military intervention, proponents of the hardline approach to Nigeria suggest that increasing pressure on Nigerian authorities to tackle jihadist violence will incentivize Abuja to take on a greater role in curtailing violence against Christians. To some extent, this approach can be credited with prompting President Tinubu to undertake needed policing reforms, including declaring a national emergency and announcing plans to swell police forces in November 2025.⁴⁶ However, continued pressure tactics run the risk of poisoning relations with a government whose cooperation is essential in achieving U.S. objectives in Nigeria, and may encourage largely cosmetic or rhetorical fixes at the expense of needed policy reforms.

Worse yet, Nigeria was recently rattled by the arrest last October of numerous military officers accused of plotting a coup.⁴⁷ In a region where governments in Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Guinea-Bissau have been toppled by the military within the last several years alone, the risk exists that a worsening security situation and a government visibly at odds with the United States could prompt a military takeover in Nigeria. Further unilateral military strikes or coercive actions by the United States could also harm perceptions of the United States in other African nations, where colonial legacies have left governments and the public sensitive to violations of their sovereignty. While taking a tough tone with Abuja can assist in driving needed reforms to promote security in Nigeria, these rhetorical actions should be restrained and tied to specific desired policy reforms.

Effective Peacebuilding in Nigeria

As the United States seeks to help bring about civilian security and degrade jihadist groups in Nigeria, the current U.S. approach of launching strikes against selected jihadist targets and ramping up pressure on the Nigerian government for alleged failures to protect

Christians bears clear risks of destabilizing the country and harming U.S. interests. Promoting lasting stability in Nigeria instead requires supporting the Nigerian government and regional partners in promoting a comprehensive approach to security, including military and governance reforms.

Rather than attempting to use unilateral military action, the United States should work as a mediator to encourage cross-border cooperation between Abuja and bordering nations to target jihadist groups. Eschewing a military-centric mindset towards counterterrorism and instead embracing a multidimensional vision of security is essential in shaping policies to truly quell the root causes of violence against civilians in Nigeria. The United States should learn from the pitfalls of the Nigerian government's past counter-insurgency efforts against Boko Haram to support security sector reforms which work to bring the civilian population on board with counter-insurgency efforts, such as curbing military abuses against civilians and expanding Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) efforts to provide insurgents with routes to lay down their arms.

Current military cooperation initiatives, such as arms sales and the deployment of U.S. troops to Nigeria, should be reevaluated considering their efficacy towards ensuring civilian security, and kept to a minimum to avoid U.S. military overreach. In its place, the United States should promote micro-scale peacebuilding and economic development initiatives at the local level in conflict-affected areas to promote economic growth and lasting security. Finally, U.S. officials and policymakers should refrain from rhetoric which could inflame sectarian tensions in Nigeria, instead emphasizing the United States' role as a partner in peacebuilding and economic growth to Nigerians of all backgrounds.

Promoting Cross-Border Cooperation

Terror groups thrive in proximity to international borders—in recent decades, over 40% of terror attacks worldwide took place within 50 kilometers of a border—and Nigeria's borderlands are no exception.⁴⁸ Jihadist organizations benefit greatly from Nigeria's porous borders, allowing fighters to retreat into

neighboring Niger, Benin, and Chad in the face of Nigerian government offensives. These cross-border sanctuaries allow jihadist fighters to regroup, as well as, in at least one case, allowing Nigerian jihadists to forge collaborative relationships with jihadist groups from the Sahel region.⁴⁹ Cross-border collaboration is thus essential in curbing the jihadist threat, as seen through the success of past cooperation between the Nigerian, Nigerien, and Chadian military (via the African Union-convened Multinational Joint Task Force) in campaigns against Boko Haram.⁵⁰

The United States should work to foster greater military cooperation between Nigeria and its neighbors in neutralizing jihadist border sanctuaries. Existing U.S. security relationships with Benin and Chad will facilitate the United States' ability to foster bilateral counterterrorism cooperation, while underscoring the United States' unique role as a mediator for cooperation between the region's security forces. Although U.S.-Niger relations have been frozen since the 2023 coup brought an anti-Western military regime to power, the Trump administration has begun pursuing outreach to the Sahelian military governments, with counter-terrorism cooperation a natural area of shared interest.⁵¹ Although Niger's junta is unlikely to accept a return to membership in the Multinational Joint Task Force, initial cooperation measures could include an agreement facilitating communication channels between both militaries and permitting the two countries' militaries to continue hot pursuit of jihadist fighters across borders, with agreements on intelligence-sharing and joint military operations as a future goal.

Reforming Nigeria's Security Sector

Nigeria's security forces have a variety of deficiencies which have hindered their ability to effectively carry out military and policing duties to foster security. As Nigeria's security partner, the United States has some leverage to push for reforms to create a military and police force capable of creating the conditions for lasting security.

First, the Nigerian military has a record of abuses against civilians, which are highly detrimental to any counterinsurgency force. Incidents of looting,

torturing, and killing civilians severely undermine the military's credibility, foster jihadist recruitment, and poison relationships with the civilian population which are crucial for intelligence-gathering and effective counterinsurgency.⁵² A United Nations report on terrorism in Africa found that a remarkable 71% of former insurgents reported that the government's use of force, such as the killing or arrest of a family member, had been key to their radicalization.⁵³ Curbing abuses against civilians is thus essential to ending insurgency at its roots. Although reshaping the military's institutional culture to prevent such abuses is an endeavor beyond easy reach for any foreign partner, the United States can push for training reforms to promote professionalism and respect for civilians, as well as accountability measures for soldiers who have committed abuses against civilians.

The U.S. military presence in Nigeria, in a training role, should be evaluated carefully to ensure best practices and avoid mission creep. Although training from U.S. soldiers can be valuable in diffusing technical expertise in crucial subjects such as intelligence or reconnaissance, the U.S. troop presence in Nigeria should remain strictly in a training capacity and be limited in duration, to avoid a costly and unnecessary permanent presence in Nigeria. To ensure that the current period of U.S. involvement in Nigeria's security affairs does not become an on-ramp into a sustained U.S. military presence in Nigeria, the Department of Defense should set clear guardrails and an internal timeline around mission and withdrawal to avoid mission creep.

As a leading arms supplier to Nigeria, the United States should ensure that any sale of arms to Abuja includes training to prevent civilian casualties from misuse of military equipment and should limit sales to arms and equipment useful in confronting a lightly armed and mobile insurgent enemy. The sale of equipment offers critical leverage to the United States in promoting security sector reforms; arms sales should be contingent on specific benchmarks in security reforms and peacebuilding efforts.

Ending the cycle of violence fueling jihadist activity necessitates a robust Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) program which allows

jihadist fighters to lay down their arms and be reintegrated into civilian life. Although Abuja has acknowledged on paper the necessity of DDR programming, the Nigerian government's DDR initiatives are often under-resourced and suffer from flaws including flawed benchmarks for deradicalization and failure to provide sufficient follow-through for individuals graduating the program.⁵⁴ As Abuja revisits its DDR programs, the United States should encourage greater budget expenditures for the program and provide technical assistance to shape more effective DDR programming.

Addressing the Root Causes of Violence

As part of a multidimensional approach to security in Nigeria, the United States should pursue initiatives that address the root causes of Nigeria's instability, recognizing that violence is the symptom of the development challenges afflicting Nigeria. Key among these is poverty and economic underdevelopment, which fuel sectarian violence over scarce resources and provide recruits fueling the growth of jihadist groups. Where possible, the United States should resume development assistance aimed at fostering economic growth. In Nigeria's federal system, micro-scale projects accomplished in partnership with state and local governments and tailored to local needs are likely to be more effective than initiatives launched at the national level.

Community peacebuilding projects provide an important and cost-effective means of curbing violence at the local level. For instance, the Community Initiatives to Promote Peace program, a U.S.-backed program in northern Nigeria from 2019 to 2024, trained community leaders from violence-prone areas in mediation and negotiation techniques. Several years later, only 19% of people from villages which had experienced this training reported experiencing violent conflict—compared to over 40% of villages which had not received the training. At a program cost of only \$85,000 over three years, programs such as this one offer a remarkably cost-effective means of curbing intercommunal violence and promoting sustained peace.⁵⁵ The United States should work to sponsor and support these programs in conflict-prone areas to reduce violence against civilians and build the

foundation for lasting stability.

One particular concern on the horizon is the January 2027 Nigerian elections, where President Tinubu will face voters at the ballot box. In recent months, President Tinubu has worked to hobble and marginalize the divided opposition parties through patronage politics and court cases targeting the opposition, securing the allegiance of 31 of the nation's 36 powerful state governors. As a result of these political maneuvers, analysts now conclude that Tinubu faces nearly assured re-election.⁵⁶ An election in which Tinubu faces little meaningful opposition could spur instability as voters feel that they are unheard in Nigeria's democratic system, particularly given Nigeria's history of post-election violence. Bearing in mind the need to maintain a working relationship with Abuja, the United States should encourage Tinubu to limit state harassment of opposition parties and ensure a level electoral playing field, in which voters are afforded a meaningful choice and candidates peacefully articulate grievances of the Nigerian public.

Pro-Peace Rhetoric

Hardline rhetoric by President Trump has attracted considerable attention in Nigeria, particularly due to his allegations of Christian genocide and bellicose threats. Narratives that Christians are facing particular violence along religious lines are not borne out by the evidence and threaten to inflame sectarian tensions while potentially discrediting future U.S. actions in Nigeria. U.S. officials should refrain from these narratives, instead emphasizing that the United States desires peace and security for all Nigerians. While avoiding divisive rhetoric which could inflame tensions in Nigeria, the United States should also avoid recognition of the separatists of the so-called Biafra Republic Government in Exile, which has contracted lobbyists in Washington in hopes of gaining support for its aspirations of independence.⁵⁷

However, U.S. policymakers should continue to highlight violence against civilians in Nigeria, call out Abuja's missteps in Nigerian security affairs, and call for meaningful, inclusive policy reforms to progress towards greater security in Nigeria.

Conclusion

Nigeria's domestic insecurity crisis has worsened in recent years, with authorities incapable of quelling violent attacks against civilians. These violent attacks are perpetrated by a variety of armed groups, ranging from transnational jihadist groups to local militias and criminal organizations, and cannot be encapsulated by a single narrative. The United States has interests in assisting Africa's most populous nation, a major economy, and West Africa's leading power, in protecting its citizens from violent attack. Many Christian organizations in the United States have raised the alarm about violence against Nigeria's Christians, and the Trump administration has adopted this framing to justify growing U.S. military activity targeting the Islamic State in Nigeria, including the deployment of troops to Nigeria and a joint special forces raid targeting an IS leader in May 2026.

However, the rationale of protecting Christians from Islamist terror in Nigeria is a poor fit for Nigeria's security needs, as a narrative of interreligious violence is applicable to only a small proportion of Nigeria's complex landscape of instability. The plight of Nigerian Christian victims of violence is instead being used to legitimize the familiar counterterrorism playbook and an expanded role for AFRICOM in Nigeria. As U.S. military involvement in Nigeria deepens, so too do the associated costs, and the risks of retaliation against Americans—particularly due to the administration's persistent framing of its mission in Nigeria solely to defend Christians.

The way the administration is conducting its military escalation hampers the campaign's efficacy and increases the risks of unforeseen consequences—for instance, its harsh rhetoric towards Abuja hinders U.S.-Nigeria cooperation and hurts America's standing among the Nigerian public.

The United States' counterterrorism campaign in Nigeria also will do little to provide safety to Nigeria's Christians. It is instead essential to avoid conflating civilian security, the objective of protecting civilians from violence, with counterterrorism. In a nation where attacks by local militias and criminal organizations are a major cause of violence against

civilians, initiatives to foster peace and security at the local level will be far more effective in reducing abuses. So too are efforts to reform Nigeria's security apparatus, which has all too often been responsible for violence against civilians. Although lacking the eye-catching tactical successes of military strikes, a policy centered on diplomacy and peacebuilding is the only approach which offers a real path out of Nigeria's deep-rooted security challenges.

For Americans whose consciences have rightfully been stirred by the plight of Nigerians facing violent attacks, the task ahead is to put forth a U.S. policy which meaningfully supports peace in Nigeria. Reorienting U.S. policy in Nigeria from a primarily military, counterterrorism framework to one of peacebuilding and civilian security is essential to achieve this goal.

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