

Introduction

In November 2025, the Trump administration brought the debate on the persecution of Nigerian Christians to the international agenda by including Nigeria on the list of *Countries of Particular Concern*¹. This is a ranking of countries in which the United States considers that religious freedom is not respected. The US president then accused the Nigerian government of not doing enough to protect Christians from violence and ordered the Pentagon to prepare for a possible intervention in the African country². A month later, in December 2025, Donald Trump made good on his threat and launched an attack on Islamic State terrorists in north-western Nigeria.

This is how Trump explained it on social media: "Tonight, at my direction as Commander in Chief, the United States launched a powerful and deadly strike against ISIS Terrorist Scum in Northwest Nigeria, who have been targeting and viciously killing, primarily, innocent Christians, at levels not seen for many years, and even Centuries! I have previously warned these Terrorists that if they did not stop the slaughtering of Christians, there would be hell to pay, and tonight, there was."³.



Map 1: Area of US strikes on ISIS targets in north-western Nigeria on 25 December 2025. Source: <https://www.cbsnews.com/>

¹ Countries of Particular Concern, U.S. Department of State. Available at: <https://www.state.gov/countries-of-particular-concern-special-watch-list-countries-entities-of-particular-concern/>

² KAHN, M. *US designates Nigeria 'Country of Particular Concern' after Trump threat over alleged attacks on Christians*, ABC News, 04/11/2025. Available at: <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/us-designates-nigeria-country-concern-after-trump-threat/story?id=127148133>

³ *U.S. launches strikes on ISIS targets in Nigeria on Christmas Day, Trump says*, CBS News, 26/12/2025. Available at: <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/u-s-launches-strikes-on-isis-targets-in-nigeria-trump-says/>

What is happening to Christians in Nigeria? Are we facing genocide, as some organisations claim, or is religion irrelevant to the terrorist violence suffered by Nigerian Christian communities? The answer is neither; however it is clear that we need to identify objectively the shade of grey that most closely reflects what is happening to Christians in the most populous country in Africa. This is the only way to understand the full extent of all overlapping conflicts in Nigeria.

Jihadism in Sub-Saharan Africa

In recent years, Africa has become a major focal point for jihadist terrorism. Almost half of all deaths caused by extremists worldwide occur in Africa⁴, highlighting the shifting priorities of terrorist groups such as the Islamic State and Al Qaeda, which originated in the Middle East but in recent years have also turned their attention to sub-Saharan Africa.

According to the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, the continent as a whole has witnessed approximately 155,000 deaths linked to militant Islamist groups over the past decade, primarily in five regional theatres and countries: Sahel, Somalia, Lake Chad Basin, Mozambique and North Africa⁵. The increased presence of jihadist groups on the continent is turning traditional hostilities based on protecting resources such as land and water from rival groups, into religious conflicts with attacks and sometimes massacres against religious leaders, churches or mosques. And although some African governments may want to ignore it, the religious factor has become a key contributor to numerous conflicts.

⁴ International Christian Concern, *Global Persecution Index 2025*. Available at: <https://persecution.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/2025-Global-Persecution-Index.pdf>

⁵ Africa Center for Strategic Studies, *The evolution of Africa's militant Islamist groups*, 28/07/2025. Available at: <https://africacenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Deaths-Linked-to-MIGs-In-Last-Decade.pdf>

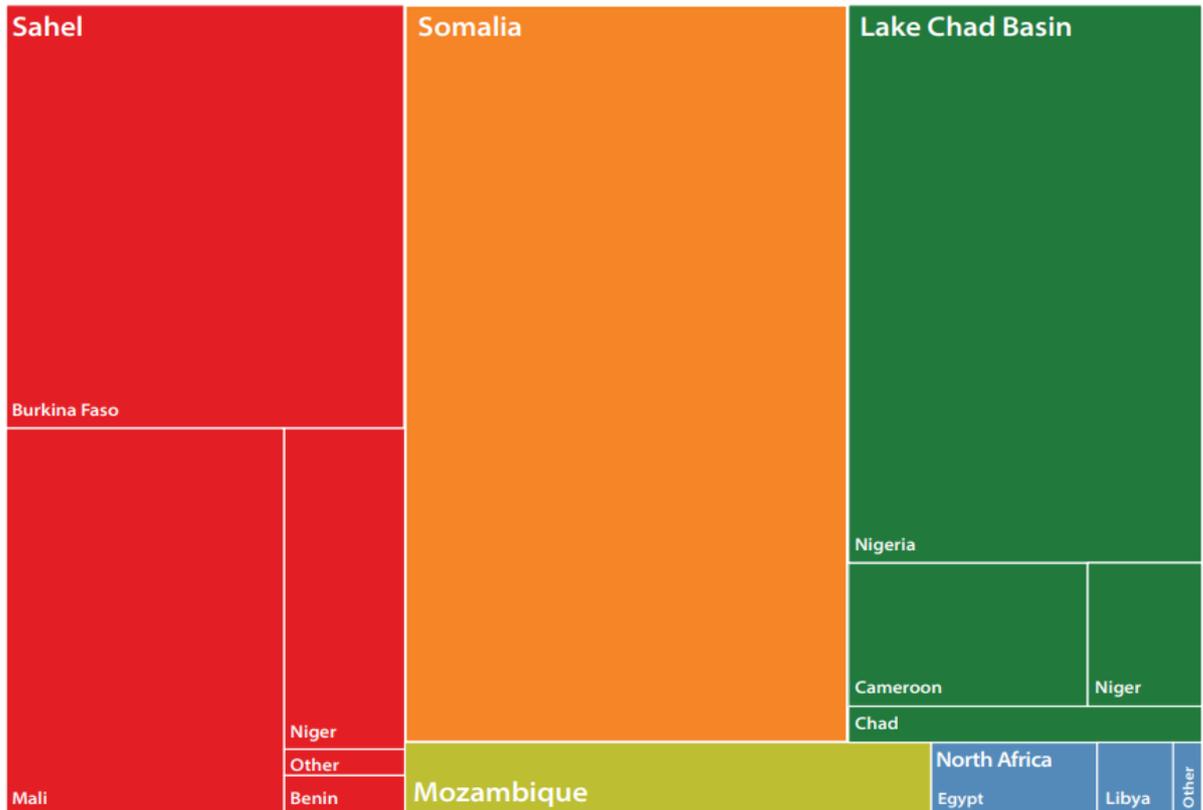


Figure 1: Proportion of deaths related to jihadist groups by region and country. Source: Africa Center for Strategic Studies, *The evolution of Africa's militant Islamist groups*, 28/07/2025. Available at: <https://africacenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Deaths-Linked-to-MIGs-In-Last-Decade.pdf>

What can we infer from the data?

There are 92 million Christians in Nigeria, accounting for 43% of the country's population and 4% of the world's Christian population⁶. Nigeria has experienced a considerable rise in the number of fatalities related to militant Islamist groups in the last decade. Several Christian organisations such as *Open Doors*, *Aid to the Church in Need* and *International Christian Concern* produce annual reports methodically compiling data from credible, first-hand sources that clearly illustrate the persecution faced by many Christian communities around the world, including those in Nigeria. The most recent figures are from the latest *Open Doors* report, published in January 2026, which states that of the 4,849 Christians killed worldwide for their faith during the reporting period (October 2024-September 2025), 3,490 were killed in Nigeria⁷.

⁶ Pew Research Center, *Christian population change*, 09/06/2025. Available at: [https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/06/09/christian-population-change/#:~:text=The%20number%20\(or%20count\)%20](https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/06/09/christian-population-change/#:~:text=The%20number%20(or%20count)%20)

⁷ Open Doors, *World Watch List 2026*, Available at: <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/persecution/countries/>

Without neglecting the data and the work of the aforementioned Christian organisations, the most complete, exhaustive and illustrative figures for understanding events in Nigeria are those from the Observatory for Religious Freedom in Africa. This is because, in addition to the number of Christians killed, they record the number of Muslim victims and the group or organisations behind the attack. They are thus more useful for assessing the importance or unimportance of the religion as a factor in acts of violence.

The Observatory for Religious Freedom in Africa's report on Nigeria addresses its methodology and argues that the inclusion of attributes such as religious background is vital to understand the extent and nature of the violence. It also sheds light on traditional analyses that either attribute all blame to the traditional herdsman-farmer conflict, aggravated by environmental degradation, or consider jihadism and the attempt to impose Islam by the power of the sword as the sole motivating factor. "The Observatory wants to let the data speak for itself without purposefully steering towards one or other of these narratives", they state⁸.

According to this report, the total number of people killed within the four-year reporting period (October 2019-September 2023) was 55,910. Of these deaths, the number of Christians killed was 16,769, while the total number of Muslims was 6,235. The number of followers of traditional African religions was 154. The religious identity of the remaining 7,722 civilians killed is unknown. Security forces (4,953) and terrorist groups (20,077) also recorded a high number of fatalities.

Geopolitical zone	2020-2023							
	Total Killed	Total civilians killed	Christians killed	Muslims killed	ATRs killed	Unknown religious identity	Security Forces killed	Terror Groups killed
North West	18,635	11,626	5,250	3,678	52	2,646	912	6,097
North Central	11,974	8,789	6,081	1,106	22	1,580	584	2,601
North East	18,508	5,521	2,595	1,262	21	1,643	2,612	10,375
South East	3,251	2,273	1,677	78	2	516	526	452
South South	1,978	1,369	622	23	15	709	236	373
South West	1,564	1,302	544	88	42	628	83	179
Grand Total	55,910	30,880	16,769	6,235	154	7,722	4,953	20,077

Table 1: People killed in Nigeria within the context of 'Terror groups' from Oct 2019 until Sept 2023. Source: Observatory for Religious Freedom in Africa. Available at: <https://orfa.africa/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/26082024-ORFA-4-YEARS-REPORT.pdf>

⁸ Observatory for Religious Freedom in Africa, *Countering the myth of religious indifference in Nigerian terror*, 29/08/2024. Available at: <https://orfa.africa/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/26082024-ORFA-4-YEARS-REPORT.pdf>

Armed Fulani militants were the deadliest terrorist group for Christians (55%), followed by "Other Terrorist Groups"⁹ (29%). Boko Haram was responsible for 6% of all Christians killed and ISWAP (Islamic State of West Africa Province) for 2%. For Muslims, "Other Terrorist Groups" were the deadliest (responsible for 53% of all Muslims killed), followed by armed Fulani herdsmen (24%), Boko Haram (9%) and ISWAP (4%).

Perpetrators	2020-2023											
	Total killings											
	Total # of incidents with killings	Total of killings	Total civilians killed	% total civilians killed	Christians killed	% Christians killed	Muslims killed	% Muslims killed	ATRs killed	Unknown religious identity killed	Security Forces killed	Terror Groups killed
Other Terrorist Groups	3,588	15,954	12,039	39	4,895	29	3,334	53	57	3,753	1,675	2,240
Armed Fulani Herdsmen	2,175	13,109	11,948	39	9,153	55	1,473	24	31	1,291	627	534
Boko Haram	400	4,359	2,200	7	971	6	548	9	-	681	590	1,569
Security Forces	1,934	15,094	1,342	4	506	3	317	5	12	507	272	13,480
Locals	543	1,060	917	3	273	2	123	2	5	516	30	113
Cultists	473	1,116	912	3	306	2	53	1	36	517	6	198
ISWAP	549	4,130	879	3	297	2	222	4	2	358	1,683	1,568
Assailants	139	282	263	1	141	1	68	1	3	51	10	9
Communal clash	44	221	197	1	138	1	36	1	7	16	-	24
IPOB (Indigenous People of Biafra)	80	207	117	0	69	0	16	0	-	32	57	33
Vigilantes	45	378	66	0	20	0	45	1	1	-	3	309
Total	9,970	55,910	30,880		16,769		6,235		154	7,722	4,953	20,077

Table 2: Attacks carried out by different aggressor categories between October 2019 and September 2023, with percentages of civilians, Christians and Muslims killed by different aggressors. Source: Observatory for Religious Freedom in Africa. Available at: <https://orfa.africa/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/26082024-ORFA-4-YEARS-REPORT.pdf>

It is important to calculate the ratio of Christians to Muslims killed by different aggressors. In this regard, the most illustrative figure is the notable disproportion between the victims of armed Fulani herdsmen: 6.2 Christians killed for every Muslim. In the case of Boko Haram, it was 1.8 Christians for every Muslim and in the case of ISWAP, it was 1.3 Christians for every Muslim.

In light of these figures, the Observatory argues that violent attacks on communities in central and northern areas are often labelled as "conflicts between farmers and herders" and attributed to climate change, but the study data show that this is often not the case. "Insisting on one generic narrative, engaging in denial and insisting on political correctness is not only overly simplistic in many cases but also misleading and unhelpful. For example, when villagers report that they have been attacked by Armed Fulani Herdsmen or Fulani militia, it is important to report this fact instead of using the word "Bandits" or "Unknown Gunmen".", the Observatory concludes.

⁹ The category "Other Terrorist Groups" consists of a variety of unidentified terrorist groups, although the characteristics of their attacks were comparable to attacks by armed Fulani herdsmen, Boko Haram and/or ISWAP.

The Fulani have traditionally been a pastoral and nomadic group specialising in herding livestock. Although there are other factors at play, such as economic prosperity and the desire to gain land, terrorist attacks by armed Fulani groups cannot simply be reduced to a clash over resources or violence between farmers and herders. The Fulani strategically target Christian communities, key Christian leaders and churches. To highlight a noteworthy example of the terror spread by these groups against Christian communities, on Christmas Eve 2023, Fulani militants made headlines around the world when they killed more than 200 Christians in a series of coordinated attacks on 21 Christian villages¹⁰. According to data from the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (*U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom*), approximately 30,000 Fulani militants operate in various groups in north-western Nigeria, each with between 10 and 1,000 members, mainly targeting Christian communities in this region of the country¹¹.

According to Statista¹², of the 11,000 to 12,000 Christians killed by Boko Haram, ISWAP and Fulani militants between 2015 and 2020, the latter were responsible for more than 7,400 of those killings¹³.

Some local analysts claim that ISWAP is allegedly funding Fulani militants in their attacks on Christian farmers. The jihadists allegedly perceive this as another new opportunity to attack Christians, whom they see as an obstacle to establishing an Islamic State in West Africa¹⁴.

However, the independent conflict monitor, ALECD¹⁵, supports a contrasting perspective. According to ALECD, despite increased attacks against Christians, this community is not one of the primary targets of political violence in Nigeria. While Christians represent

¹⁰ WENDT, M. International Christian Concern, *A Case for Nigeria's Country of Particular Concern Status*. Available at: <https://www.persecution.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/A-Case-for-Nigerias-CPC-Status-Under-IRFA.pdf>

¹¹ The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, *USCIRF Nigeria 2025 annual report*, Available at: <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2025-04/Nigeria%202025%20USCIRF%20Annual%20Report.pdf>

¹² Statista is a global data and intelligence platform with a comprehensive collection of statistics, reports and analyses on more than 80,000 topics from 22,500 sources across 170 industries.

¹³ Statista, *Number of Christians killed by terrorist groups in Nigeria between 2015 and 2020, by perpetrator*, 28/11/2025. Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1198134/christians-killed-by-terrorist-groups-in-nigeria/>

¹⁴ International Christian Concern, *Global Persecution Index 2025*. Available at: <https://persecution.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/2025-Global-Persecution-Index.pdf>

¹⁵ ACLED is an independent and impartial conflict observatory that provides real-time data and analysis on violent conflicts and protests in all countries and territories around the world.

approximately 50% of the population, violence specifically targeting Christians because of their religious identity only accounts for 5% of reported incidents against civilians¹⁶.

ALECD argues that the international media often portrays violence as a phenomenon arising primarily from religious tensions or divisions. However, ACLED's analysis of its data suggests that this is an oversimplification. For example, violence in the north-west encompasses a wide range of identities, livelihoods and territorial divisions, and is carried out by various community and political militias. Christians, according to ACLED, are not the most frequently targeted identity group in Nigeria, as there is a higher rate of attacks targeting groups based on gender and ethnicity, as well as profession and government affiliation.

What is the stance of Christian leaders and the Nigerian Federal Government?

Where do Christian community leaders place themselves in the debate on the importance of religion in violence?

In Nigeria, about 60% of Christians are Protestant - Pentecostal, Anglican, Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian or Lutheran - and 37% Catholic¹⁷.

The Christian Council of Nigeria, which encompasses the majority of Protestant churches, issued a statement¹⁸ on 5 November 2025 regarding the US government's decision to place Nigeria on its list of Countries of Particular Concern for serious human rights violations and persecution against Christians. The CCN argued that this US decision is not an act of foreign interference but a positive development and an act of global solidarity. Furthermore, they stressed that this was not the time for political debates and divisive narratives on whether a Christian genocide is taking place in Nigeria, and called for all Nigerians to be united, across all political, ethnic and religious divides, in order to put an end to the bloodshed. Furthermore, the CCN denounced the apparent lack of

¹⁶ ACLED, *Attacks on Christians Spike in Nigeria Alongside Overall Rise in Violence Targeting Civilians*, 21/07/2022. Available at: <https://acleddata.com/brief/fact-sheet-attacks-christians-spike-nigeria-alongside-overall-rise-violence-targeting>

¹⁷ Pew Research Center, *Islam and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2024/06/sub-saharan-africa-chapter-1.pdf>

¹⁸ Christian Council of Nigeria, *Seize this opportunity now to end killings in Nigeria*, 05/11/2025. Available at: <https://ccnnigeria.org.ng/seize-this-opportunity-now-to-end-killings-in-nigeria-ccn-admonishes-fg/>

political will to stop the killings and abductions that have turned parts of Nigeria into danger zones.

On 25 November 2025, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria followed suit and issued a joint statement by all Nigerian bishops¹⁹ expressing their concern for Christian communities, especially those in the northern regions and the central belt of the country, which are the target of repeated attacks that result in numerous casualties. "Such prolonged unbearable conditions have given credence to allegations of 'genocide' in some quarters. Yet, mindful of the sacred dignity and inestimable worth of every human life, we are equally deeply concerned that Muslims and many other innocent citizens of diverse ethnic backgrounds have also been victims of this same cruelty" state the Nigerian bishops.

Furthermore, the statement calls on the government to put an end to this violence and not allow impunity to prevail, and highlights that in some cases there have been reports of delayed or withheld security responses, implying a possible lack of will to act.

For his part, when asked in November 2025 by a journalist about the safety of Christians in Nigeria, Pope Leo XIV stressed that "in certain areas, there is certainly a danger for Christians, but for all people. Christians and Muslims have been slaughtered. "There's a question of terrorism. There's a question that has to do a lot with economics, if you will, and control of the lands that they have. Unfortunately, many Christians have died, and I think it's very, it's important to seek a way for the government, with all peoples, to promote authentic religious freedom", concluded the pontiff²⁰.

In September 2025, the Federal Government of Nigeria issued a statement²¹ seeking to refute accusations of inaction and to deny that a systematic genocide against Christians was taking place in the country.

"Portraying Nigeria's security challenges as a targeted campaign against a single religious group is a gross misrepresentation of reality. Couching the situation as a deliberate, systematic attack on Christians is inaccurate and harmful. It oversimplifies a

¹⁹ Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria, *Peace in Nigeria: moving from fragility to stability*, 25/11/2025. Available at: <https://www.slqwitness.com/wp-content/uploads/MOVING-FROM-FRAGILITY-TO-STABILITY.pdf>

²⁰ BROCKHAUS, H. *Pope Leo XIV on Nigeria: "Han sido masacrados cristianos y musulmanes"*, Aciprensa, 18/11/2025. Available at: <https://www.aciprensa.com/noticias/119323/el-papa-leon-xiv-sobre-nigeria-han-sido-masacrados-cristianos-y-musulmanes>

²¹ *FG Refutes False Claims of Religious Genocide in Nigeria*, 28/09/2025. Available at: <https://fmino.gov.ng/fg-refutes-false-claims-of-religious-genocide-in-nigeria/>

complex, multifaceted security environment and plays into the hands of terrorists and criminals who seek to divide Nigerians along religious or ethnic lines. The violent activities of terrorist groups are not confined to any particular religious or ethnic community. Muslims, Christians, and even those who do not identify with any religion have suffered at their hands", maintained the Federal Government.

In any case, the Federal Government had to make a virtue out of necessity, and immediately following US strikes against jihadists on Nigerian soil in December 2025, the minister of foreign affairs of Nigeria, Yusuf Tuggar, declared that the Federal Government had been informed in advance and had cooperated with the US armed intervention. Tuggar told a local television station that his country had provided the US with information on the jihadists before the raids, and that he had spoken to Secretary of State Marco Rubio on the phone before and after the attack²².

Conclusions

While much of the violence devastating Nigeria stems from classic jihadist groups such as Boko Haram or ISWAP, other groups have become radicalised over time, and collectively are responsible to a great deal for the overall death toll in the country, especially among Christians.

While some conflicts are rooted in issues that extend beyond religion —many are based on ethnic tensions or focus on the distribution of limited resources— in light of the facts and data, religious divisions between communities have come to play an important role, adding further complexity to the conflicts.

Although the religious factor is not the only one at play, it has become significant in recent years. As has been revealed by the data analysed by the Observatory for Religious Freedom in Africa, the inclusion of attributes such as religious background is critical to understanding the extent and nature of violence.

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²² *U.S. launches strikes on ISIS targets in Nigeria on Christmas Day, Trump says*, CBS News, 26/12/2025. Available at: <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/u-s-launches-strikes-on-isis-targets-in-nigeria-trump-says/>