



Nigeria and the Reality of Religious War

U.S. President Donald Trump recently elicited alarm when he expressed that he was considering military action in Nigeria due to religious violence in the country. While Trump sought to characterize the situation there as simply one consisting of violence against Christians by Muslim extremists, analysts and experts were quick to point out that the reality on the ground is much more complex as both Christians and Muslims have been victims of violence at the hands of extremist groups like Boko Haram. In fact, while the level of violence against Christians has of course been deeply alarming, some monitoring organizations have indicated that the majority of victims of these groups in Nigeria have been Muslims. This has led human rights advocates to lament the false notion that religious violence in Nigeria is solely a case of Muslim-on-Christian attacks and that there is any type of purely one-sided persecution as a dangerous oversimplification of the crisis. On top of being a mischaracterization, it also risks fueling extremist propaganda and undermining efforts to curb the violence.

In actuality, violence in Nigeria is multifaceted and is partly driven by elements other than religion including disputes over access to land and resources. Factors such as climate change, competition for fertile land, and population growth have further exacerbated this issue in recent years. This has resulted in both Muslims and Christians being perpetrators of violence and victims of it. In Nigeria's Middle Belt region, one of the major sources of violence is conflict between predominantly Muslim Fulani herders and largely Christian farmers regarding aforementioned access to land and resources – with this misleadingly being framed sometimes as a “religious conflict.” Furthermore, while abhorrent extremist groups like Boko Haram have certainly contributed to the escalation of violence, media outlets tend to often highlight their attacks on churches and Christian communities even as these terrorists are indiscriminate in their targeting of Christians, Muslims, and others.

The complex security crisis in Nigeria has prompted observers to reject the notion that it is somehow a systematic and nationwide religious war being perpetrated by one group against another. Analysis from reputable groups like the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) indicates that violence explicitly targeting Christians based on their religion accounts for a very small percentage (around 5%) of all violent incidents over the past five years. Instead, Nigerians of all faiths and ethnicities are victims of violence, and the majority of deaths actually occur in the country's northern states – affecting Muslim communities in particular. The vast

majority of incidents documented have been deemed to be over land and resource disputes, not specific targeting because of religious affiliation.

Human rights activists, faith leaders, civil society members, journalists, and others have argued that framing the violence in Nigeria as religious in nature is inaccurate. While there are undoubtedly serious security challenges that need to be better addressed by the government, these individuals have chronicled how an array of interreligious mixed communities peacefully coexist throughout the country. As one civil society member aptly put it, “We are indeed losing precious lives...But we’re losing them to terrorism, banditry, and communal conflicts fueled by poor governance, not a campaign to eliminate one faith.” Thus, labeling what is taking place in Nigeria as purely religious violence is harmful and will only fuel extremist elements of society. Rather than threaten direct military intervention, the withdrawal of aid, or sanctions, influential entities on the global stage like the United States should engage with the Nigerian government to help bolster its efforts to root out extremism by clamping down on the sponsors and financial backers of these groups – both within Nigeria and outside of the country. Ultimately, there is also the need to more effectively tackle the issues that are driving the troubling levels of extremism and insecurity in the first place such as poverty and unemployment.