



Reports

Kyle Wisdom

Disaggregating Chaos: Analyzing Nigeria's Four Patterns of Violence

A regional typology of violent incidents
recorded in Nigeria, January–September
2025

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International Institute
for Religious Freedom



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for Religious Freedom

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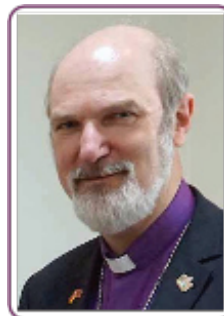
We understand Freedom of Religion and Belief (FoRB) as a fundamental and interdependent human right as described in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. In line with CCPR General Comment No. 22, we view FoRB as a broad and multidimensional concept that needs to be protected for all faiths in all spheres of society.



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A regional typology of violent incidents recorded in Nigeria, January–September 2025

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Summary: Four patterns, not one crisis

The 2025¹ Nigeria data does not describe a single national emergency with regional variations.² It describes four distinct systems of violence that differ in who carries them out, what they are trying to achieve, how they generate casualties, and who they affect. Their statistical signatures are not merely different — in the two largest cases they are close to opposite.

A single national figure of **4,728 killed** and **4,160 abducted** averages these four systems together. That average describes none of them accurately, and it obscures the finding most useful to advocacy: that the region with the highest lethality against Christian communities and the region with the highest abduction volume are different places, driven by different actors, with different victim profiles.

System	Incidents	Killed	Abducted	Defining signature
Ransom economy	839	1,510	3,075	3.67 taken per incident; 72 % name bandits or militia
Land seizure by massacre	526	1,838	460	Most deaths of any system; 47 % name Fulani actors
Jihadist insurgency	198	719	238	3.63 killed per incident, the highest; 53 % name ISWAP
Criminal and cult violence	359	617	384	Cult actors in a fifth of incidents; clergy targeted individually
National total	1,924	4,728	4,160	—

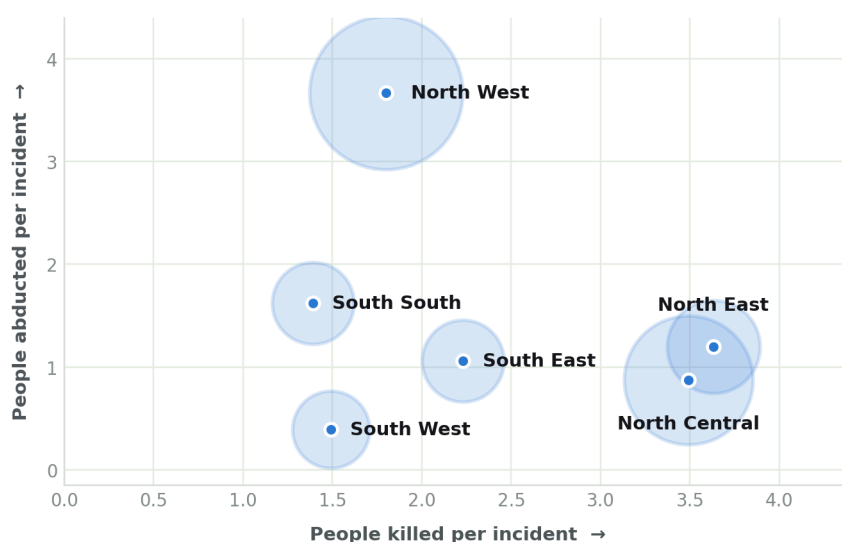


Figure 1: Each region plotted by what an average incident there produces. Circle area is incident volume. The North West sits at one extreme and the Middle Belt and North East at the other, with nothing in between — the clearest single expression of the typology.

¹ The analysis window is January to September 2025.

² Regions follow Nigeria’s six geopolitical zones with one deliberate exception: Niger State is grouped with the North West rather than the North Central zone. Niger state shares an extended border with the North West and Niger’s incidents name bandits or militia in 80 % of cases — a higher share than the North West itself — and only 6 % name Fulani or pastoralist actors, against 47 % across the rest of the Middle Belt. It records 2.76 abductions and 1.37 deaths per incident, and its victims are majority Muslim. On every measure that defines the systems in this report, Niger behaves as part of the ransom economy. Readers comparing these figures to zone-based sources should account for this. Special thank you to Kola Alapinni, Esq. for suggesting this reframing.

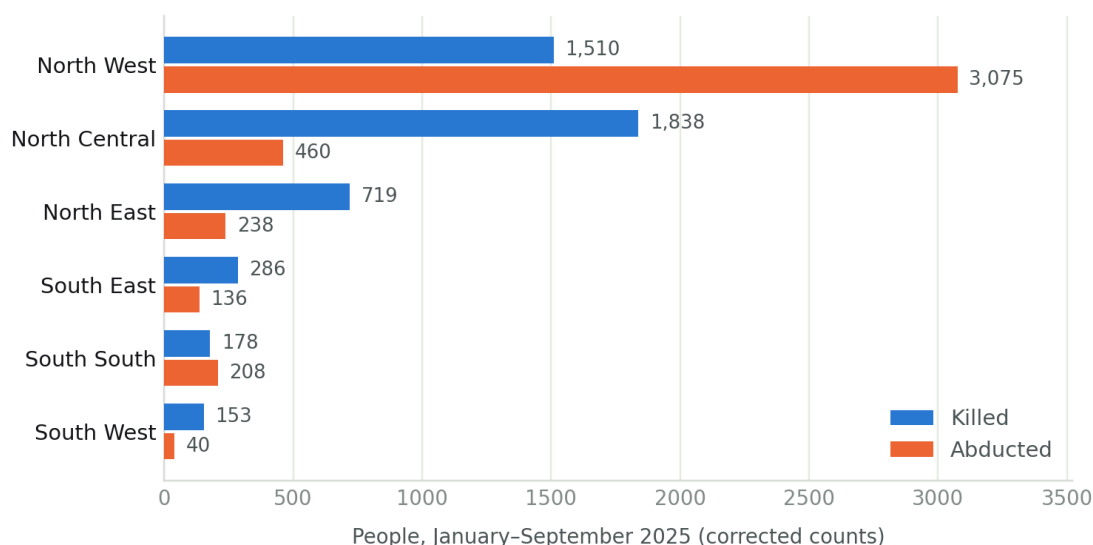


Figure 2: The North West leads on people taken; the Middle Belt leads on people killed, from fewer incidents.

Pattern 1: The ransom economy

North West: Zamfara, Katsina, Kaduna, Sokoto, Kebbi, Niger

6

839

Incidents

3,075

Abducted

3.67

Taken per incident

62 %

Involve a death

65 %

Muslim victims

This is the largest system by incident count and the only one in which abduction, not killing, is the objective. **Seventy-two per cent of North West incidents name bandits or militia** as the perpetrating actor — the highest actor concentration of any region in the dataset. Only 62 % of incidents involve a death at all, the lowest fatality rate in the country. The violence appears instrumental rather than expressive: a hostage generates revenue, a corpse does not. Killing occurs where it enforces compliance, deters pursuit, or punishes non-payment.

The scale also appears industrial rather than episodic. **Ninety-three incidents took ten or more people at once**, and those events account for **63 % of all North West abductions**. Zamfara alone records 999 people taken across 173 incidents, Kaduna 822 across 268, and Niger 257 across 93. Under this pattern analysis, places of worship should be viewed as collection points rather than as ideological targets — worshippers seized mid-prayer, imams taken after preaching against the militias, congregations held together for a collective ransom.

Victims are **65 % Muslim and 34 % Christian**. This is the region where a religious-persecution framing fits the evidence least well and a governance-collapse framing fits it best. Worship-linked incidents are lower here than anywhere else in the country at 8 %, which is consistent with an economy that selects targets by their capacity to pay rather than by what they believe.

Policy implication

The North West supports a protection and governance claim: the state has ceded territorial control to armed groups operating a kidnapping economy, and civilians of both faiths are the revenue base. It does not support an anti-Christian persecution claim, and advancing one here would be contradicted by IIRF's own data.

Pattern 2: Land seizure by massacre

Middle Belt: Benue, Plateau, Nasarawa

526

Incidents

1,838

Killed

3.49

Killed per incident

53 %

Deaths in 10+ events

82 %

Christian victims

This system produces **more deaths than any other — 1,838, or 39 % of the national total** — and is the one that most resembles a campaign rather than a crime wave. It records 3.49 deaths against 0.87 abductions per incident, the sharpest inversion of the North West's profile anywhere in the country. Forty-seven per cent of incidents name Fulani, herder or pastoralist actors, and farming or grazing activity appears in roughly a quarter. The data shows that competition for land is certainly a contributing factor in this region just as much as it shows a disproportionate percentage of Christian victims.³

The regional total is driven by a small number of large attacks. **Thirty-three incidents killed ten or more people** and account for **53 % of the region's deaths**; the six largest events alone produced 513. The recurring pattern in the incident narratives is a night attack on a farming settlement, homes burned, and survivors displaced onto mission compounds and IDP sites — which then become targets in their own right. Yelwata in Benue and the Bokkos and Bassa clusters in Plateau are the clearest instances.

Victims are **82 % Christian**, the highest Christian share of any northern system. Benue and Plateau together produce **1,531 deaths — 32 % of the national total from 17 % of incidents**. Benue records 5.35 deaths per incident and Plateau 4.25, against a national average of 2.46. Worship and clergy are named in 24 % of incidents, the highest in the country.

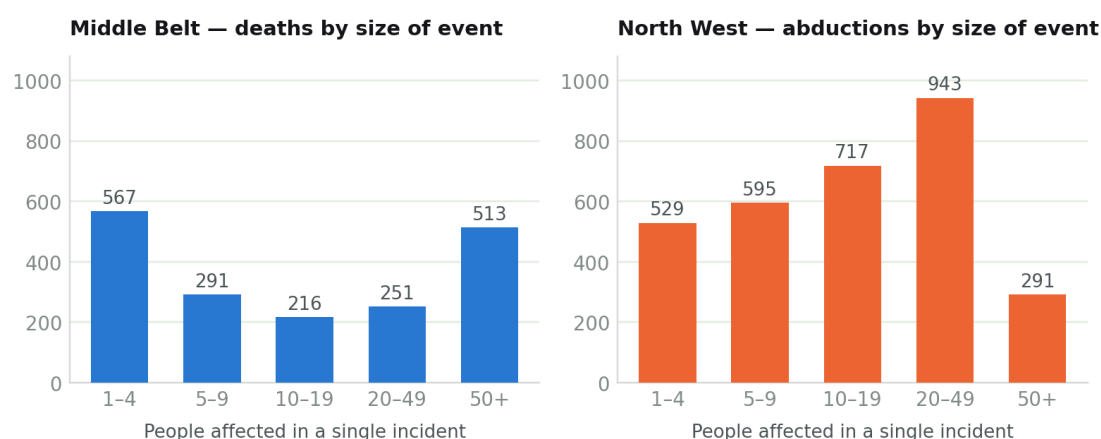


Figure 3: Both systems concentrate in large events, but along different axes. Middle Belt deaths remain weighted toward the 50-plus bracket; North West abductions cluster in the 10-to-49 bracket, the band consistent with organized ransom operations.

³ See the IIRF submission to the UN earlier this year for more discussion of the narrative wars. <https://iirf.global/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/2026-12-IIRF-Report.pdf>

Policy implication

This is the strongest religious-freedom case in the dataset, and it stands on its own evidence without needing the national aggregate. The death volume, the regional concentration, the settlement-burning pattern and the victim profile are mutually reinforcing and drawn from the same records.

Note that the case rests on total deaths and on who is targeted, not on deaths per incident. The Middle Belt claim is one of scale and pattern, and should be argued that way.

The caution: the 47 % naming Fulani actors is a keyword signature drawn from source reporting, and reporting on Nigeria carries known attribution biases. It reflects what monitors and press recorded, not an independently verified perpetrator.

Pattern 3: Jihadist insurgency

North East: Borno, Adamawa, Bauchi, Taraba, Yobe, Gombe

198	719	3.63	53 %	48 / 53
Incidents	Killed	Killed per incident	Name ISWAP / BH	Christian / Muslim

The smallest of the three northern systems by volume, and **the most lethal per event in the country at 3.63 deaths per incident**. Fifty-three percent of North East incidents name ISWAP, Boko Haram or Islamic State as the actor; no other region reaches 2%. It is also the only region with a meaningful explosive signature — IEDs or bombs appear in 15 % of incidents, against 1 % or less everywhere else.

That weapon profile produces the system's distinguishing feature. Roadside devices, mosque and market bombings and suicide attacks kill whoever is present, and the victim split is correspondingly the most balanced in the country at **48 % Christian and 53 % Muslim**. The 27 explosive incidents alone account for 143 deaths. Both communities sit inside the blast radius of the same insurgency, and neither is being selected in preference to the other.

Borno carries **496 of the region's 719 deaths** across 97 incidents. Farming, firewood collection and travel outside garrison towns recur throughout the narratives as the point of exposure — civilians are killed where the military perimeter ends.

Policy implication

The North East supports an insurgency and civilian-protection claim in which the balanced victim split is itself the finding. A jihadist actor killing Muslims and Christians in near-equal numbers is evidence about the actor's method and reach.

Pattern 4: Criminal and cult violence

South East, South South and South West: eighteen states

359	617	1.72	53	54
Incidents	Killed	Killed per incident	Cult-named	Clergy-linked

The three southern regions together produce 359 incidents — 19 % of the national total — and behave unlike anything in the north. Lethality is low, between **1.39 and 2.23 deaths per incident**, the bottom of the national range. The named actors are different in kind: cult groups appear in 18% of South South and 21% of South West incidents and essentially nowhere else in Nigeria.

Ransom is named more often here than in the North West — 10 to 12% of incidents against 4 % — despite far lower abduction volumes. That combination is the signature of individual kidnapping for profit rather than mass seizure. Fifty-four incidents involve named clergy, accounting for 109 people abducted and 104 killed: priests taken from residences, pastors ambushed on roads, seminarians held against ransom demands.

Separatist and political actors are present but marginal in the record. IPOB, ESN or Biafra are named in **10 of 359 southern incidents**, accounting for 44 deaths, and political or election-related language appears in six. Cult actors, at 15 % of incidents, are five times more common. Southern violence in this data is overwhelmingly criminal in character; the separatist dimension is real but should not be described as a driver of it.

Victims are overwhelmingly Christian — **95 % in the South East and 97 % in the South South** — but in regions with Christian majorities this reflects population composition, not target selection. The distinguishing feature of southern violence is not who is attacked in aggregate but that religious leaders are attacked as individuals, for what they are worth rather than as a proxy for their communities.

Policy implication

Southern incidents support a criminal-violence claim with a genuine clergy-targeting component. That component is real and worth documenting, but it is small in absolute terms and should not be aggregated upward into the northern figures. Treating the South as part of the same phenomenon as Benue or Zamfara would be a category error that weakens the case on all three.

Comparison: Identifiable patterns across the four systems

The tables and figures below give the evidence base for the typology. Actor and tactic patterns are keyword matches on incident titles and summaries, not the coded Perpetrator field.

	Fulani / pastoralist	Bandit / militia	ISWAP / Boko Haram	Cult	IED / explosive	Worship or clergy
North Central	47%	26%	0%	1%	0%	24%
North East	9%	14%	53%	0%	15%	15%
North West	13%	72%	1%	0%	0%	8%
South East	16%	11%	0%	6%	1%	14%
South South	12%	19%	0%	18%	0%	19%
South West	8%	17%	0%	21%	0%	17%

Figure 4: Share of each region's incidents whose narrative names the given actor or tactic. Each northern region has one dominant signature and the southern regions share a different one; the concentration is what separates the systems.

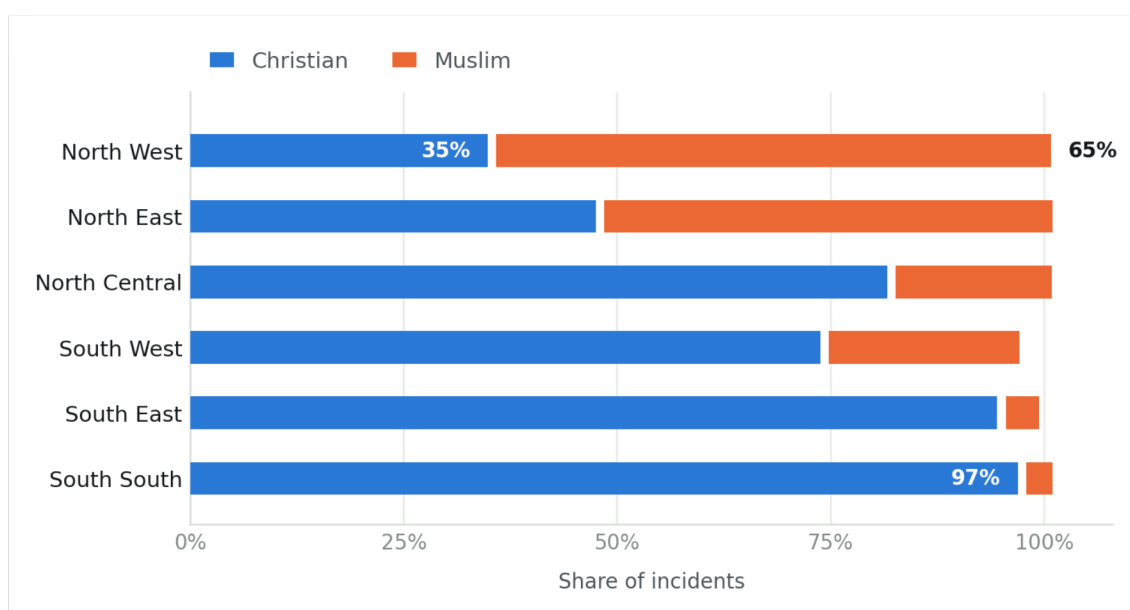


Figure 5: Victim religion as coded, by region. The gradient runs with the typology rather than against it: most Muslim in the ransom economy, most balanced under the insurgency, most Christian where the underlying population is Christian. Bars do not reach 100 % — traditional-religion and other incidents make up the remainder.

Why the distinction matters for reporting

A single national figure averages four systems that require four different responses. It also offers critics a straightforward rebuttal, because the aggregate genuinely does contain a large body of Muslim victims of a criminal economy — this is important because the data supports the targeting of Christians, but only in certain areas. The disaggregated position is both more accurate and more defensible:

- **Middle Belt** — a lethality claim, evidenced by the regional concentration, the settlement-burning pattern and a 82 % Christian victim profile. The strongest religious-freedom case in the data.
- **North West** — a governance and protection claim. An anti-Christian framing is not supported: two-thirds of victims are Muslim and mosques are struck as often as churches.
- **North East** — an insurgency claim in which a near-even victim split is the finding rather than a complication.
- **South** — a criminal-violence claim with a clergy-targeting component that is real, documented, and small.

Reporting the four separately costs nothing in advocacy terms. Each claim is supported by its own records, and the strongest of them does not depend on the national total at all.

Appendix: Raw counts by state

Raw counts, 1 January – 30 September 2025. All 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory appear. Niger State is listed under the North West; see footnote 1.

State	Incidents	Killed	Abducted	Killed/inc	Abducted/inc
North Central					
Benue	164	877	112	5.35	0.68
Plateau	154	654	59	4.25	0.38
Nasarawa	41	154	22	3.76	0.54
Kwara	80	81	123	1.01	1.54
Abuja FCT	40	40	46	1.00	1.15
Kogi	47	32	98	0.68	2.09
North East					
Borno	97	496	119	5.11	1.23
Taraba	21	80	35	3.81	1.67
Adamawa	31	70	55	2.26	1.77
Bauchi	27	39	17	1.44	0.63
Gombe	10	18	5	1.80	0.50
Yobe	12	16	7	1.33	0.58
North West					
Katsina	182	437	523	2.40	2.87
Zamfara	173	432	999	2.50	5.77
Kaduna	268	217	822	0.81	3.07
Sokoto	72	161	308	2.24	4.28
Niger	93	127	257	1.37	2.76
Kebbi	24	79	157	3.29	6.54
Jigawa	9	38	0	4.22	0.00
Kano	18	19	9	1.06	0.50
South East					
Ebonyi	25	88	16	3.52	0.64
Imo	32	86	17	2.69	0.53
Anambra	37	60	29	1.62	0.78
Enugu	20	32	68	1.60	3.40
Abia	14	20	6	1.43	0.43

State	Incidents	Killed	Abducted	Killed/inc	Abducted/inc
South South					
Edo	47	85	43	1.81	0.91
Rivers	15	34	38	2.27	2.53
Delta	34	26	50	0.76	1.47
Cross River	13	14	68	1.08	5.23
Bayelsa	12	11	9	0.92	0.75
Akwa Ibom	7	8	0	1.14	0.00
South West					
Ondo	36	78	29	2.17	0.81
Lagos	29	29	4	1.00	0.14
Osun	14	22	0	1.57	0.00
Ogun	12	15	1	1.25	0.08
Oyo	11	8	6	0.73	0.55
Ekiti	1	1	0	1.00	0.00
Unspecified					
Unspecified / unmapped	2	44	3	22.00	1.50
Total Jan-Sep	1,924	4,728	4,160	2.46	2.16



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