IIRF Reports

Iulian Chifu, John M. Nomikos, Shaul Shay, János Besenyő, Darko Trifunovi, Juan Cayón Peña, Rastislav Kazanský and Thomas Wegener Friis

Analytical Intelligence Report: Nigerian Christians as Victims of Islamist Extremism

2025/27

International Institute for Religious Freedom

IIRF International Institute for Religious Freedom

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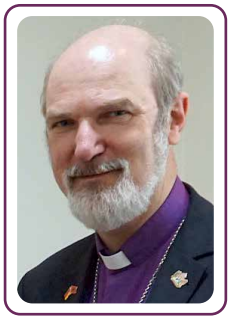

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Analytical Intelligence Report: Nigerian Christians as Victims of Islamist Extremism

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This report carries exceptional weight because it has been endorsed by leading global experts in security, terrorism, intelligence studies, and hybrid threats. Their signatures are not a formality but a reflection of a unified professional consensus grounded in decades of experience analyzing contemporary conflicts, extremist movements, and regional security dynamics. These experts represent internationally respected academic and research institutions that have long shaped global security policy. Their endorsement provides this document with a high degree of professional legitimacy, confirming that its findings should be taken seriously—not merely as an analytical overview, but as a strategic contribution to understanding one of the most complex security challenges currently unfolding in Africa. At the same time, the report is designed to serve a constructive purpose: to support the authorities of Nigeria, who are confronting an extremely complicated multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and security environment.

The objective is not criticism but assistance—offering clear, precise, and objective information that can help state institutions implement effective reforms, stabilize affected regions, and rebuild public trust. It is in the interest of all parties—Nigeria, the wider West African region, and the international community—to preserve Nigeria's stability, territorial integrity, and cohesion, as well as the safety and dignity of all its citizens, regardless of ethnic or religious identity. Backed by the authority of leading experts, this document represents a step toward deeper understanding and a shared effort to identify sustainable solutions.

Introduction

The security environment in northern and central Nigeria cannot be understood without clarifying the terminology often used to describe armed actors in the region. Although public discourse frequently refers to a so-called "Fulani jihadi group," no such formal organization exists. Instead, the term reflects a convergence of three dynamics: armed Fulani-majority pastoralist networks involved in rural violence and banditry, Islamist organizations that recruit among Fulani communities and operate in Fulani-dominated spaces, and a politicized narrative in which actors, particularly in Christian-majority regions, label almost all armed Fulani as ideologically motivated Islamists. This conceptual confusion has contributed to misdiagnosing the threat and to policies that risk further radicalization.

The Fulani, a widespread West and Central African ethnic group numbering more than twenty million, are historically pastoralists who migrate along transhumance routes, though many have become sedentary. In Nigeria, Fulani populations are concentrated across the northwest, northeast, and the Middle Belt regions. Their social and economic structures have been severely disrupted by climate change, shrinking grazing lands, population growth, the erosion of customary dispute-resolution institutions, and the proliferation of small arms. These pressures have contributed to clashes with farming communities, especially in Plateau, Benue, Nasarawa, Taraba, and southern Kaduna. While

most Fulani civilians are non-violent and many are victims of armed actors, Islamist movements have exploited Fulani grievances, portraying themselves as defenders of pastoral Muslims against state neglect and communal hostility.

Three Islamist organisations are central to the Nigerian theatre. Boko Haram, formally Jama'at Ahl al-Sunna li'l-Da'wa wa'l-Jihad, emerged in the early 2000s and escalated into a major insurgency after the 2009 crackdown in Maiduguri. Operating primarily in Borno, Yobe, and parts of Adamawa and along the Lake Chad Basin, Boko Haram developed a reputation for mass casualty attacks, suicide bombings, and high-profile kidnappings, including the Chibok schoolgirls. Although ethnically mixed, Boko Haram has incorporated Fulani fighters through coercion, taxation, and promises of protection. Its influence has declined since the death of its former leader, Abubakar Shekau, in 2021, but residual cells continue to terrorise rural populations. The Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), which split from Boko Haram in 2015 after pledging allegiance to ISIS, has overtaken Boko Haram as the most capable Islamist force in the region. ISWAP combines military efficiency with quasi-state governance, administering sharia courts, collecting taxes, regulating trade, and offering security to local communities. Its operations extend across the Lake Chad Basin into Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. ISWAP has actively recruited Fulani herders by providing grazing security, mediating resource disputes, and embedding itself in pastoral economies through zakat taxation on cattle. Its attacks on Nigerian military installations have increased in sophistication, reinforcing its status as the dominant Islamist actor. Ansaru, formally known as the Vanguard for the Protection of Muslims in Black Africa, broke away from Boko Haram in 2012 and aligned with al-Qaeda. Although smaller, Ansaru has become strategically significant because of its presence in northwest Nigeria and its growing collaboration with criminal bandit groups in Kaduna, Zamfara, Katsina, and Niger State. It positions itself as a protector of Muslim communities, offering preaching, limited social support, and security in areas where state authority is weak. By embedding within Fulani-majority rural areas and providing training and ideological framing to bandit groups, Ansaru represents a bridge through which al-Qaeda influences the region and potentially steers non-ideological bandits toward Islamist identity.

The regional picture is incomplete without considering the Sahel, where Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), al-Qaeda's official branch, has developed a Fulani-centric mobilisation model. Its sub-unit, Katiba Macina, draws on Fulani ethnic identity and memories of the nineteenth-century Macina Empire. Operating in central Mali, northern Burkina Faso, and western Niger, it uses propaganda that casts jihad as a defence of pastoral communities. JNIM and Katiba Macina employ economic warfare by blockading roads, controlling trade corridors, taxing herders, and restricting fuel movement, contributing to humanitarian crises. The recent spread of JNIM activity toward Nigeria and reporting of JNIM-linked attacks inside Nigeria indicates a developing cross-border risk, particularly as Niger serves as a geographical bridge between Sahel Islamism and Nigeria's northwest bandit–Islamist nexus.

These actors interact with armed bandit networks that dominate north-western Nigeria. These groups are not ideologically driven at their core but operate lucrative economies based on cattle rustling, kidnapping for ransom, extortion, and territorial control. Many bandit fighters are Fulani, though Hausa and other groups are also present. Because of shared geography, kinship routes, and economic interests, Islamist organisations have increasingly cooperated with bandits by offering weapons, training, ideological rebranding, and logistical support. This convergence raises the possibility that the northwest could transform from a criminal crisis into a full-blown insurgency resembling those in central Mali or Burkina Faso.

The geography of Islamist–Fulani interaction forms four overlapping zones. The Lake Chad Basin remains the epicenter of Islamist governance, taxation, and recruitment among pastoralists. The Northwest Convergence Belt—Zamfara, Katsina, Sokoto, Kebbi, and Kaduna—has become the primary interface between banditry and Islamism. The Middle Belt, while less ideologically driven, experiences severe Christian–Muslim communal violence into which Islamists insert themselves opportunistically. The Sahelian Fulani Islamist Arc, centred in Mali and Burkina Faso, now exerts gravitational influence over cross-border Fulani networks that extend into Nigeria. The timeline of this evolution reflects the gradual fusion of crises. Between 2009 and 2013, Boko Haram grew into a full insurgency while early banditry spread in Zamfara. Between 2014 and 2018, farmer–herder killings surged across the Middle Belt, while public narratives increasingly framed Fulani militancy as jihadist. Between 2015 and 2017, ISWAP formed and JNIM consolidated in the Sahel. From 2018 to 2020, mass kidnappings and rural raids escalated in the northwest, and analysts began warning of Islamist–bandit convergence. From 2021 onward, ISWAP strengthened, Ansaru re-embedded into bandit territories, and Sahel Islamist tactics—especially economic warfare—began to appear in Nigeria. By 2024–2025, international organisations warned of record hunger linked directly to militant disruptions, and the Nigerian government declared a national security emergency acknowledging the combined insurgent–bandit–communal threat.

For counterterrorism purposes, ISWAP is the most strategically dangerous actor due to its governance capacity, ability to tax and regulate populations, and growing legitimacy among rural communities. Boko Haram remains violent but less strategically coherent. Ansaru's role is pivotal because it channels al-Qaeda influence into bandit heartlands. Bandit groups form a massive reservoir of human resources that could be ideologically captured if incentives align. Financing flows through kidnapping, cattle taxation, cross-border trade, fuel smuggling, and informal financial systems.

From an ethno-religious conflict perspective, violence in the Middle Belt is frequently framed as a religious war against Christians. Armed Fulani groups or Islamist factions indeed carry out many church attacks, village massacres, and killings of clergy. However, many attacks are driven by land competition, revenge, or profit, not theological motivation. At the same time, Fulani Muslim communities have been victims of retaliatory massacres and security force abu-

ses. Islamists intentionally amplify sectarian perceptions because communal polarization accelerates recruitment and undermines state legitimacy.

From an intelligence perspective, the principal warning indicators include the expansion of sharia-style courts in bandit areas, joint operations or shared branding between Islamists and bandits, cross-border Fulani pastoral convoys under militant protection, and explicit references to Nigeria in JNIM propaganda. Vulnerabilities include unprotected schools, churches, markets, rural highways, and the shrinking humanitarian footprint that leaves space for Islamist service provision.

The link between Nigeria and the Sahel is strengthening. JNIM's Fulani-centered mobilization strategy, its economic warfare model, and its geographic proximity through Niger create conditions under which the northwest of Nigeria could become an extension of the Sahel insurgency belt. The potential unification of ideological Islamists and profit-driven bandits would constitute the most dangerous security shift in West Africa in decades.

Christian persecution narratives arise from real patterns of attacks but must be distinguished analytically. Boko Haram, ISWAP, and Ansaru have explicitly targeted Christians, churches, and symbols of non-Muslim identity. In the Middle Belt, however, while violence is resource-driven, these underlying resource conflicts are being systematically weaponized through an Islamist ideological framework, resulting in violence with the unmistakable and deliberate markers of religious persecution.

The synchronization of massacres with Christian holy days reveals an intent to desecrate and terrorize a faith community specifically. The December 24, 2016, attack in Goska, Southern Kaduna; the catastrophic, coordinated assaults on approximately 30 Christian villages in Bokkos, Plateau State, on Christmas Eve 2023, which killed over 200 people preparing for Christmas worship; and attacks during Palm Sunday and Easter in communities like Zikke, and communities in Benue form a clear pattern that transcends coincidental timing or simple resource disputes. On Easter Sunday in April 2022, about 24 Christian farmers were murdered by Fulani militants in Gwer west LGA of Benue state, in the same day, 24 Christians were killed in Ussa LGA of Taraba state. Furthermore, the intentional destruction of churches, structures with no strategic economic value, the specific execution of pastors and priests, and reliable survivor accounts of attackers chanting "Allahu Akbar" during these operations, collectively indicate a motive that is explicitly theological. These are not the hallmarks of bandits seeking grazing land; they are the signature actions of actors engaged in identity-based attacks.

Islamist militants require intelligence-led disruption, targeted strikes on leadership and logistics, and coordination with Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. Banditry and farmer–herder conflict require policing reform, land-use mediation, management of grazing corridors, compensation mechanisms, and livelihood alternatives for demobilized fighters. Civilian protection must prioritize transport corridors, schools, churches, and markets. Strategic communication must explicitly distinguish Fulani civilians from armed militants to prevent radicalization. In

the Middle Belt, an Islamist ideology exploits ethnic and economic grievances to fuel a sectarian war with clear objectives: the erasure of Christian presence, the displacement of communities and the occupation of the displaced communities with some renamed after the takeover. This requires that solutions for this region require a de-radicalization strategy as well. Regional cooperation must align Nigeria's response with Lake Chad and Sahel frameworks, as no national strategy can contain a transboundary insurgency.

Salafi-Islamist Environment Around Nigeria

Nigeria sits at the center of a widening ring of **Salafi-Islamist activity**, with armed movements operating on nearly every side of its borders and exerting influence across shared ethnic, pastoral, economic, and smuggling corridors. Although the intensity and ideological coherence vary by direction, the cumulative effect is that Nigeria is increasingly **encircled by Islamist ecosystems**, each capable of reinforcing or supplying militant elements inside Nigeria.

North—Southern Niger (Sahel Corridor)

To the north, southern Niger functions as a key gateway between Nigeria and the central Sahel. The region hosts **JNIM and Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP)** cells, as well as elements of **Katiba Macina**, which is heavily Fulani-based. These groups control rural spaces, trade, and regulate cross-border pastoral movement. Porous borders allow:

- movement of fighters,
- trafficking of weapons,
- ideological spillover into Nigeria's Sokoto, Kebbi, Katsina, and Zamfara states.

Northeast – Lake Chad Basin (Chad & Cameroon)

Nigeria's northeast borders the Lake Chad Basin, the most entrenched Salafi-Islamist theater in West Africa. **ISWAP** dominates here, while remnants of **Boko Haram (JAS)** persist. From Borno and Yobe outward into Chad and Cameroon, militant control and taxation systems extend across fishing communities, pastoral routes, and island networks. This front represents the **strongest and most institutionalized Islamist presence** directly adjacent to Nigeria.

East – Northern Cameroon (Far North Region)

To the east, Cameroon's Far North hosts factions linked to **ISWAP and Boko Haram**, as well as smaller logistical support nodes. Mountainous terrain and ethnic continuities enable:

- safe havens,
- training and indoctrination enclaves,
- cross-border raids,
- Refugee flows Islamists can exploit.

Southeast—Cross-Border Influence via Central Africa

Nigeria's southeast is not directly adjacent to major Islamist fronts, but **logistical corridors** connect to:

- Remnants of Jama'at al-Murabitoon influence,
- Trafficking channels that link to Islamist pockets in CAR and Sudan,
- Creating latent risk rather than active presence. This axis primarily concerns weapons, foreign fighters, and financing networks.

South—Gulf of Guinea Maritime Axis

To the south, the Gulf of Guinea does **not** host entrenched Salafi-Islamist territories, but it is strategically relevant because:

- Coastal West African states (Benin, Togo, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire) have experienced **JNIM-linked incursions**,
- Extremists attempt to penetrate Christian-majority coastal societies,
- Maritime routes enable covert movement and smuggling. This axis represents **future expansion risk**, not current encirclement.

Southwest—Benin Corridor

Benin borders Nigeria to the west and is increasingly exposed to Islamist infiltration from Burkina Faso and Niger. Northern Benin now experiences:

- JNIM/ISSP incursions,
- attacks on park zones,
- militant taxation of road corridors.

This raises the possibility of a **western infiltration route into Nigeria**, especially via Kwara and Oyo rural belts in the long term.

West—Burkina Faso Influence Vector

Although Burkina Faso does not directly border Nigeria, large rural areas of its territory are now dominated by **JNIM and ISSP**. This form:

- the western ideological reservoir of Sahelian Islamism,
- a staging zone for the recruitment of Fulani pastoralists,
- a backbone for "Fulani Islamist" narratives that can be projected toward Nigeria's northwest.

Strategic Meaning

Taken together, the environment forms an **arc of Islamist influence**:

- **strongest pressure:** Northeast (ISWAP) and North (JNIM/ISSP)
- **emerging pressure:** West (Benin corridor) and Northwest (bandit–Islamist convergence)
- **latent/indirect:** Southeast and maritime South

The most dangerous development is the **bridging of Sahelian Islamism with Nigerian bandit ecosystems**, mainly through Fulani identity networks and pastoral mobility pathways. If these fronts link, Nigeria could become fully integrated into the **Sahel-to-Lake Chad Islamist continuum**, creating the largest continuous Salafi-Islamist operating space in Africa.

How are Islamists financed?

Islamist organizations in Nigeria and in the surrounding region finance themselves through a diversified set of revenue streams that link the Lake Chad Basin, the Sahel, Niger, Chad, Cameroon, and north-western Nigeria. The most significant source of funding is kidnapping for ransom, particularly the abduction of students, clergy, travellers, and workers, with negotiations handled by intermediaries and payments made in cash to avoid tracing. This market generates tens of millions of dollars annually and fuels both Islamist actors and criminal bandit groups, especially those cooperating with Ansaru and ISWAP. Alongside kidnapping, ISWAP and JNIM apply quasi-state taxation systems that impose "zakat" levies on livestock, fishing, trade corridors, and rural markets, enabling them to function as parallel governments and extract predictable income from pastoral and commercial activities. Stolen cattle and the broader livestock economy form another central financial mechanism, especially across Zamfara, Sokoto, Katsina, and Kaduna, where looted herds are sold through illegal markets and transnational Fulani trading networks. Smuggling also plays a significant financial role, including fuel, cigarettes, gold, narcotics, and weapons trafficking along Sahelian corridors linked to Libya and Sudan; these flows sustain JNIM, ISSP, Ansaru, and indirectly ISWAP. External support from global Islamist structures is present but limited: ISWAP receives operational, propaganda, and financial assistance from ISIS-linked channels, while Ansaru benefits from logistical and ideological backing from al-Qaeda, channeled through intermediaries in the Gulf and Sudan. In the Sahel, additional revenue comes from controlling gold mining sites, commercial routes, food markets, and fuel blockade strategies that create scarcity and dependency, with economic shockwaves felt across northern Nigeria. Local populations contribute financially through coercion framed as protection payments, access to water and grazing, and submission to sharia-based dispute resolution, which progressively transforms Islamist actors into de facto state authorities. In north-western Nigeria, the merging of bandit and Islamist economies has accelerated: bandit groups provide cash income through ransom and livestock theft, while Islamists offer weapons, ideological framing, and organizational structures, making the region a potential future insurgent theatre. Digital transactions and cryptocurrency are increasingly used to bypass surveillance, while diaspora-linked religious donations and concealed charity funding serve as secondary legitimizing sources rather than primary revenue streams.

Within this financial landscape, each group relies on a distinctive model. ISWAP is primarily funded through structured taxation of civilians, zakat on livestock and trade, levies on fishing and transit routes, seizures of military assets, and

supplemental ISIS support. Boko Haram (JAS), now territorially weakened, depends on looting, forced contributions, opportunistic attacks, and the exploitation of stolen goods. Ansaru finances itself through high-value kidnappings and its integration with bandit economies in northwest Nigeria, while also drawing on al-Qaeda-linked logistical channels. JNIM and its Fulani-dominated Katiba Macina faction raise revenue by taxing livestock and commerce, controlling transport routes, imposing fuel and market blockades, and accessing gold-smuggling networks across Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Bandit networks, meanwhile, are the main generators of cash through mass ransom operations, cattle theft, and smuggling, increasingly reinforced by Islamist partnerships that provide legitimacy and armament. The overall strategic risk lies in the convergence of Sahelian Islamist capital, Nigerian bandit cash flows, and transnational Fulani pastoral trade routes, which together form the largest integrated financial engine for Islamism on the African continent and create the conditions for a hybrid insurgency stretching from Mali to northern Nigeria.

Leadership

The Islamist landscape in Nigeria and the broader Sahel is shaped by a group of key leaders whose backgrounds, ideological trajectories, and operational records have defined the evolution of ISWAP, Boko Haram, Ansaru, JNIM, Katiba Macina and the militant structures that intersect with bandit networks in northwest Nigeria. Within ISWAP, the most influential figure remains **Abu Musab al-Barnawi**, the son of Boko Haram founder Mohammed Yusuf, who rose first as the spokesperson of Boko Haram before leading the faction that pledged allegiance to ISIS in 2015. **Abu Musab al-Barnawi** positioned ISWAP as a more disciplined and structured organization, rejecting indiscriminate massacres of Muslims and instead promoting a strategy of governing territory, taxing populations, and attacking military targets. Although his role has become less publicly visible following ISIS internal reshuffles, intelligence assessments indicate that he retains strategic authority within the group, shaping doctrine, recruitment, and military planning. Under his ideological influence, ISWAP developed a shura-style leadership council and produced commanders such as **Abba Gana (also known as Ba Lawan or Abu Mus'ab)**, who is believed to have overseen coordinated assaults on Nigerian military bases, the implementation of zakat taxation systems around Lake Chad, and the formation of mobile strike units capable of overrunning fortified positions. ISWAP's leadership history demonstrates a shift from charismatic central command to collective military professionalism, making it the most capable Islamist organization in the region.

Boko Haram's leadership narrative is dominated by **Abubakar Shekau**, whose biography and operational style reshaped the insurgency from 2010 onward. Known for his extreme brutality, theatrical propaganda, and rejection of any negotiating framework, **Abubakar Shekau** led Boko Haram through a phase marked by mass killings, suicide bombing campaigns involving women and children, and high-profile kidnappings such as the 2014 abduction of the

Chibok schoolgirls. His death in 2021 during clashes with ISWAP marked a turning point, fragmenting the group into dispersed cells. The most prominent surviving commander associated with the remnants of Boko Haram is **Bakura Doro (also called Bakura Sahalaba)**, who operates in the Lake Chad islands where he coordinates smuggling, cross-border raids, and recruitment among isolated fishing communities. Unlike **Abubakar Shekau**, **Bakura Doro** commands far less influence and territory, and Boko Haram's operational capacity has declined into sporadic ambushes, looting raids, and opportunistic attacks driven by survival rather than strategic intent. Ansaru's leadership history revolves around **Khalid al-Barnawi (also known as Mohammed Usman)**, who emerged from training networks connected to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. Before his capture in 2016, **Khalid al-Barnawi** specialized in hostage-taking operations targeting foreigners, diplomats, and high-value Nigerian elites, drawing on logistics routes extending into Mali and the Sahel. His operational doctrine emphasized precision attacks and a rejection of **Abubakar Shekau's** mass-casualty terrorism, framing Ansaru as a "protector of Muslims in Black Africa." After his capture, Ansaru adopted a more clandestine leadership model, and current intelligence reporting identifies **Abu Ubaydah Yusuf** as the likely senior figure guiding its resurgence in the dense forest belts of Kaduna, Zamfara and Katsina. Under his direction, **Abu Ubaydah Yusuf** embedded Ansaru within Fulani-majority rural communities, established alliances with powerful bandit commanders, supplied weapons and ideological indoctrination, and reintroduced al-Qaeda's gradualist strategy of infiltration rather than shock violence. This has allowed **Abu Ubaydah Yusuf** to position Ansaru as the primary vector through which Islamist ideology enters the northwest bandit ecosystem.

Across Nigeria's northern frontier, the dominant Islamist authority is **Iyad ag-Ghali**, the founder and leader of JNIM, whose biography spans Tuareg rebellion, diplomatic engagement, and eventual complete alignment with al-Qaeda. **Iyad ag-Ghali** transformed disparate militant factions in Mali into a unified Islamist coalition in 2017, extending influence into Burkina Faso and Niger. His operational history includes negotiations with governments, the capture of towns in northern Mali, the orchestration of complex ambushes, and the establishment of shadow governance that rivals state authority. Under **Iyad ag-Ghali's** leadership, JNIM evolved into the most expansive al-Qaeda franchise in Africa, shaping the ideological narratives that now resonate with Fulani communities extending toward Nigeria.

The most crucial figure in the Fulani-centric strand of Sahelian Islamism is **Amadou Kouffa**, emir of Katiba Macina. A former preacher from central Mali, **Amadou Kouffa** capitalised on grievances among Fulani pastoralists, framing Islamism as a defense of grazing rights, dignity, and Islamic purity. His operational history includes recruitment networks embedded in rural mosques, campaigns against Malian security forces, the imposition of sharia courts, and the pioneering of economic warfare through road blockades, market taxation, and fuel restrictions. **Amadou Kouffa's** propaganda resonates strongly with Fulani communities across Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and increasingly the northwest of Nigeria, making him a key ideological catalyst for cross-border radicalization.

Although not formally Islamist, bandit leaders in northwest Nigeria play a critical role in the militant ecosystem. Figures such as **Dogo Gide**, **Bello Turji**, and **Kachalla Halilu** have built armed domains capable of mass kidnappings, territorial control, and commercial taxation. Their biographies reflect transformations from cattle rustlers into warlords commanding hundreds of fighters. Their operational histories include attacks on villages, control of forest sanctuaries, negotiation of ransom logistics, and increasingly, collaboration with Islamist elements who provide ideology, weapons, and legitimacy. Their evolution represents the most dangerous convergence point between criminality and Islamist insurgency.

Nexus with other Gulf countries

Although governments such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and other Gulf states formally prohibit terrorism and publicly deny any support to radical organizations, intelligence assessments show that Islamist circles in Nigeria and neighboring countries have benefited from a mix of ideological influence, private financing, charitable networks, religious sponsorship, and financial routes that originate from within these states. The most foundational link is ideological: for several decades, Saudi-backed religious institutions promoted Wahhabi and Salafi doctrine through mosque construction, distribution of literature, funding of Islamic schools, and scholarships that trained clerics who later returned to West Africa. This process weakened traditional Sufi and Maliki religious authority, reshaped local Islamic identity, and created a theological space in which Salafi-Islamist narratives could take root, even if unintentionally. Many of the early preachers who influenced Boko Haram's worldview were shaped by this doctrinal environment, demonstrating how ideological export served as a precondition for later radicalization. In addition to ideological influence, Islamist and extremist networks in Nigeria and the Sahel have drawn financial benefit from private donors, businessmen, informal religious benefactors and charitable organizations based in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, and other Gulf jurisdictions. These contributions were often framed as humanitarian or religious donations, but once transferred through opaque channels such as *hawala* systems, unregulated zakat funds, or charitable trusts, they were diverted toward extremist recruitment, propaganda, and operational logistics. Security services have documented cases in which financial transfers originating in the Gulf passed through Sudan, the UAE, Mauritania, or Turkey before reaching Islamist facilitators linked to Boko Haram, ISWAP, Ansaru, or JNIM. This multi-stage routing allows actors within Gulf states to support radical networks **without direct governmental fingerprints**, while enabling terrorist groups to portray themselves as part of a wider Islamist cause.

Qatar-linked networks played a different yet significant role by acting as mediators in ransom negotiations. While officially presented as humanitarian diplomacy, these channels helped transfer large ransom payments to Islamist organizations, indirectly strengthening the kidnapping economy that now finances terrorism in Nigeria and the Sahel. Gulf-based media platforms also contributed

by giving discursive space to narratives portraying Islamist insurgencies as resistance movements, which fed psychological radicalization pipelines across African Muslim communities. Beyond ideology and donations, Gulf states have financial infrastructure—offshore banking nodes, permissive charity regulations, trade-based money laundering channels—that Islamist facilitators have exploited to move funds extracted from criminal economies in West Africa, such as cattle rustling, kidnap ransoms, and gold trafficking.

Therefore, the intelligence picture shows that states of the Gulf support, finance, and sustain terrorist circles in Nigeria and its surrounding region **not through official state policy**, but through four overlapping mechanisms: the export of hardline Salafi religious doctrine that erodes traditional African Islam; private donors and charitable institutions that push money into extremist ecosystems under religious cover; ransom mediation and humanitarian negotiation structures that legitimize and finance kidnapping; and financial systems that allow laundering, transfer, and concealment of funds used by Islamist networks. These combined effects empower domestic radicals to present themselves as part of a transnational movement, give them access to money that the Nigerian state cannot easily trace, and strengthen the ideological credibility of Islamist propaganda among Fulani, Kanuri, and Hausa Muslim audiences. From an intelligence standpoint, the relationship should not be described as direct or official sponsorship, but rather as **indirect state-enabled facilitation**, in which permissive religious, legal, financial, and diplomatic environments in Gulf states create the conditions that allow Islamist networks in Nigeria, Niger, Chad, Cameroon, Mali, and Burkina Faso to raise, move, legitimize, and sanctify their resources. Effective disruption, therefore, requires cooperation with Gulf regulators, oversight of foreign religious funding, strengthened monitoring of humanitarian and zakat flows, and renewed support for indigenous West African Islamic scholarship capable of countering the ideological foundations that Gulf-based actors exported.

Below is a **clear, evidence-based account, grounded in verified facts, UN/EU/US data, NGO reports**, and **documented patterns of targeted violence.**

Evidence of the Suffering of Christians in Nigeria

Nigeria today faces one of the world's most severe and under-reported humanitarian and security crises involving targeted violence against Christian communities. While the conflict is complex and rooted in multiple factors—ethnic, economic, criminal, and Islamist—the **pattern of attacks, scale of casualties, and geographic concentration** overwhelmingly demonstrate that Christian populations in the Middle Belt and the North are disproportionately affected.

Credible International Sources Confirm Systematic Attacks:

United Nations

- UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has repeatedly documented **"widespread and systematic attacks on civilian populations"** in Northern and Middle Belt states, including Plateau, Benue, Kaduna, and Taraba.
- UN OCHA reports identify that **Christian farming communities** are the principal victims in areas targeted by **Islamist insurgents (Boko Haram, ISWAP)** and **Fulani militant groups**.

United States (State Department & USCIRF)

- The US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has stated that **"Christians in Nigeria face existential threats in several regions of the country."**
- The US State Department's International Religious Freedom Report notes **mass killings, church burnings, abductions, sexual violence, and village destruction** predominantly targeting Christian areas.

European Union & European Parliament

- Multiple EU parliamentary resolutions describe **"targeted killings of Christians by Islamist and extremist groups"** in Nigeria.
- EU observers highlight **impunity**, lack of state protection, and the **religiously motivated nature** of many attacks.

Data from International Human Rights Organizations

Amnesty International

- Documents **massacres of Christian villages**, including the murder of clergy, the burning of churches, and the destruction of Christian schools.
- Confirms that the majority of mass casualty incidents in Kaduna, Plateau, and Benue involve Christian-majority communities.

Human Rights Watch

- Chronicles patterns of **religiously-tainted attacks** by extremist factions and Fulani militant networks, citing:
  - Targeting of Sunday worshippers
  - Destruction of Christian farmland
  - Abductions of female Christian students and church workers
  - Attacks timed on Christian religious holidays (Christmas & Easter)

International Crisis Group

- Notes that **over 60 % of rural attacks in the Middle Belt target Christian communities**, often accompanied by the destruction of churches and chapels as symbolic acts.

Open Doors International

- Ranks Nigeria as one of the **top countries in the world** for "extreme Christian persecution."
- M**ore Christians were killed for their faith in Nigeria than in all other countries combined** (in certain years).

Key Patterns of Violence Stated in Multiple Reports

Massacres of Christian Villages

Documented attacks in:

- Plateau State (Bokkos, Barkin Ladi, Mangu)
- Kaduna (Southern Kaduna, Zangon Kataf, Kagoro)
- Benue (Gwer West, Guma, Logo)

These attacks often involve:

- House-to-house killings
- Burning of churches
- Erasing entire villages seen as "Christian enclaves."

Targeting of Clergy

Reports confirm:

- More than **60 Christian pastors**, priests, or seminarians were killed or kidnapped in recent years.
- Church leaders are abducted for ransom or executed as intimidation.

Sexual Violence & Forced Islamisation

- Abduction of girls from Christian communities, including reproduction of patterns similar to Chibok and Dapchi.
- Forced marriages and conversions are documented across Kaduna and Katsina.

Church Burnings

Hundreds of churches have been destroyed by:

- Boko Haram
- ISWAP
- Fulani extremist factions

Destroying churches is often the first step in displacing Christian populations.

Christmas and Easter Attacks

A well-documented pattern:

- Coordinated attacks on **Christmas Eve** and **Easter services**, where crowds of Christian worshippers are deliberately targeted.

Statistical Evidence (Conservative Estimates)

Numbers vary by organization, but converging assessments indicate:

- **More than 5,000 Christians are killed annually** in peak years (Open Doors, various NGOs).
- **Over 3 million displaced**, primarily from Christian areas in the Middle Belt (UN OCHA).
- **Thousands of churches burned or closed** due to insecurity (Amnesty, NGO field data).

The UN, EU, and US emphasize that the **real numbers are likely significantly higher** due to rural inaccessibility and government underreporting.

Recognition of the Crisis by International Diplomats

- Former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo designated Nigeria a **Country of Particular Concern** (CPC) for religious persecution.
- Multiple EU committees have warned that **continued violence risks becoming a "silent genocide"** if not urgently addressed.
- The UK House of Lords debate (2023–2024) highlighted the **"mass, targeted elimination of Christian communities."**

Conclusion: The Evidence is Clear

Across all credible international sources—UN, US, EU, Amnesty, HRW, ICG, Open Doors—the evidence converges:

- **Christians in Nigeria are disproportionately targeted,**
- **Attacks follow identifiable patterns,**
- **The perpetrators are largely Islamist or extremist groups,**
- **and the state response is insufficient to protect vulnerable communities.**

The situation represents **one of the gravest religious-targeted crises in the world**, requiring urgent, coordinated international engagement.

The evidence from the Open Doors WWL 2025 dossier reveals a consistent and alarming pattern: **Christians in Nigeria are subjected to systematic, targeted, and multilayered violence that spans from mass executions in rural communities to state-linked extrajudicial killings in the Southeast.**

Across the North, Middle Belt, and increasingly the South, Christian villages are attacked in coordinated night raids, male population lines are selectively executed, families are burned alive in their homes, and Christian women and girls are abducted, raped, and enslaved as instruments of terror and forced Islamisation. Boko Haram, ISWAP, Fulani militant networks, armed bandit groups, and newly emerging Islamist formations act with near impunity, while in parts of the East, security forces themselves are implicated in killings, disappearances, and the destruction of civilian property.

The destruction of churches, Christian schools, community centers, and religious symbols is not incidental—it is deliberate. It aims to erase Christian presence, dismantle social cohesion, and force long-term demographic displacement. Village after village in Plateau, Kaduna, Benue, Taraba, Adamawa, and several South-Eastern states has been emptied, burned, or rendered uninhabitable. These patterns, verified independently by both reports, meet internationally recognized indicators of **sectarian mass atrocities and identity-based persecution**.

In total, the data show thousands of Christians killed every year, tens of thousands over the past decade, and millions displaced. The scale, frequency, and geographic spread of the attacks demonstrate that this is not random criminality nor isolated communal conflict, but rather a **coordinated and evolving campaign of violence against Christian populations**.

If these dynamics remain unaddressed, Nigeria risks further descent into a protracted religious and ethnic conflict whose humanitarian and geopolitical consequences will extend far beyond its borders. The urgency of international engagement—diplomatic, security, humanitarian, and investigative—cannot be overstated.

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