

Strengthening Peace and Resilience in Nigeria (SPRiNG)

The Role of Religion in Contemporary Violence in Nigeria

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The Strengthening Peace and Resilience in Nigeria (SPRiNG) Programme is a four-year (2024-2028) UK-funded initiative designed to support a more peaceful and climate-resilient Nigeria. SPRiNG is grounded in a politically informed, evidence-based approach that integrates environmental science, political economy, and conflict analysis. By addressing the root causes of conflict and vulnerability, SPRiNG works to reduce violence, strengthen local systems, and promote inclusive governance across conflict-affected areas in North-West and North-Central Nigeria. The programme is implemented by Tetra Tech International Development in partnership with Nextier SPD (Nextier), the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD), and the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD).

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Acronyms

ACLED: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data

APP: All People's Party

CAN: Christian Association of Nigeria

FCT: Federal Capital Territory

FBO: Faith-Based Organisation

FESTAC: Pan-African Festival of Arts and Culture

ISWAP: Islamic State West Africa Province (*Wilayat Gharb Ifriqiyah*)

JAS: *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad* (Community of the Sunnah People for Dawah and Jihad)

JNI: Jama'atu Nasril Islam

LGA: Local Government Area

NIREC: Nigeria Inter-Religious Council

NSCIA: Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs

NYSC: National Youth Service Corps

MACBAN: Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria

NGO: Non-Governmental Organisation

UNODC: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

Executive Summary

Religion plays an important but often misunderstood role in contemporary violence in Nigeria. While dominant narratives frequently frame conflicts as a binary clash between Islam and Christianity, the reality is far more complex. Nigeria is religiously mixed across regions, and both Islam and Christianity are internally diverse, with tensions often occurring within rather than between communities of faith.

Historically, religious differences intersected with colonial legacies. The educational and development gaps between the North and South contributed to horizontal inequalities after independence and continue to shape socio-economic and regional tensions today.

Empirical data challenges dominant perceptions of the prevalence of “religious violence.” According to the Nigeria Watch database, about 27% of fatalities reported between 2006 and 2025 were linked to conflicts designated as religious, but only 1% resulted directly from clashes between Christian and Muslim groups. A major part of the death toll was related to insurgencies involving extremist factions such as Boko Haram, with many victims being Muslim. Overall, insecurity is driven by a combination of factors, including crime, land disputes, political competition, and economic grievances.

Key underlying drivers of violence include:

- Structural inequalities (especially education and regional development gaps)/
- Politicisation of religious identities/
- Weak governance and security institutions.
- Competing narratives and misinformation.
- Local conflicts (e.g., farmer-herder disputes) framed in religious terms.

Importantly, trends show that violence involving religious actors has declined in recent years, contradicting widespread claims of escalating religious persecution or genocide. However, narratives of religious victimhood - promoted by political actors, religious leaders, and international stakeholders - continue to shape perceptions and exacerbate tensions. These narratives are often instrumentalised for political gain, electoral mobilisation, or foreign support.

Religion also plays a significant role in politics and public life. Both Muslim and Christian leaders influence voting behaviour and policy debates, sometimes reinforcing divisions. At the same time, faith-based organisations (FBOs) can contribute to peacebuilding, even if they are not immune to corruption, bias, or dissemination of hate speech.

In conclusion, some conflicts in Nigeria are better understood as “violence with religious coloration.” Addressing them requires tackling underlying political, economic, and social drivers, while carefully managing the powerful influence of religious narratives in society.

The main policy recommendations from the study are:

- Reducing the North-South educational and developmental gaps.
- Strengthening monitoring, regulation and oversight of religious groups.
- Promoting balanced, evidence-based media narratives.
- Supporting interfaith dialogue and harnessing the messages and agencies of religious groups for peacebuilding.

Introduction

This study analyses the extent to which violence in contemporary Nigeria has religious underpinnings and colorations. Its specific objectives are to examine:

1. The trends and patterns of violence motivated by religious agenda and targeting of individuals and groups based on religious identity;
2. The factors accounting for the prevalent characterisation of violence from religious perspectives; and
3. The impact of religious narratives on conflict dynamics and interfaith relations.

In a first part, the study examines the concept of “religious violence” and a “North/South divide”. It quickly reviews the demographic data, the colonial legacy and the historical background of the Islamisation and Christianisation of Nigeria. It also highlights the complexity of Islam and Christianity, with tensions often occurring within rather than between communities of faith, as well as the difficulties in assessing religious motivations in perpetrating violence and targeting groups based on religious identity.

In the second part, the study explains the methodology of the Nigeria Watch database to analyse the prevalence and intensity of fatal incidents designated as religious, compared to other forms of violence. The desk-based review of Nigerian daily newspapers is also used to examine the way violence is framed from religious perspectives and the impact of religious narratives on peace, conflict and inter-faith relations. Due to the current controversy on a Christian genocide, the study focuses on Christianity and Islam, which does not mean that other religious affiliations should be ignored.

The third part of the report then analyses religion as an area of contest and controversy on the diplomatic front, in the diaspora and within Nigeria to get support and mobilise voters. It studies the religious interpretations of violence and shows that narratives of a Christian or a Muslim genocide clearly have an impact on conflict dynamics and interfaith relations. The fourth part of the report thus analyses the religionisation of politics and the politicisation of religion, especially since the end of military rule and commencement of the democratic dispensation in 1999. It also examines the issues in the context of the upcoming 2027 general elections. Finally, the conclusion in the fifth part of the report proposes recommendations for peacebuilding policy and practice.

1. The Context

From the North to the South, Nigeria is reportedly divided along a line which is often framed as a clash of civilisation between the Islamic North and Christian South: a cultural as well as a development challenge. However, the religious geography of most populated country in Africa is more complex. There are significant population of Christian communities in the North. In the same vein, there are significant Muslim population in the South, especially the South-West. In fact, almost half of the inhabitants of Lagos were Muslim in the mid-19th Century and the presence of Fulani communities in Yorubaland has been on record for quite some time.¹

Historically, Islam came to Nigeria through the North West and the North East. In the Lake Chad Basin, Kanem-Borno was the first to be reached by Islamic preachers from the 11th century. From the 14th century, Dyula merchants by who came from the Sahara and were known as *Wangara* in Hausa brought Islam to Kano and Zaria. For a long time, however, Islam remained confined to a small urban elite that sought to maintain its monopoly over learning and knowledge. By 1900 only a quarter of the population of today's Nigeria was Muslim, against half in the neighbouring German colony of Kamerun².

Meanwhile, Christianity came from the south on the Atlantic coast. In the Niger Delta, for example, the baptized son of a traditional ruler (*Olu*) travelled from Warri as early as 1600 to study at the University of Coimbra on a scholarship from the King of Portugal. Christian evangelisation thus preceded British colonisation at the end of the 19th century. It

¹ Balogun, Mushin Adekunle [2013], “Islam in Lagos: Its Growth and Development”, in Oyeweso, Siyan & Raheemson, Misbaudeen (ed.), *Actors and Institutions in the Development of Islam in Lagos State*, Ibadan, Matrixcy Books, p. 31; Morton-Williams, Peter [1968], “The Fulani Penetration into Nupe and Yoruba in the 19th Century”, in Ioan Lewis (ed.), *History and Social Anthropology*, London, Routledge, pp.1-24.

² Watson, Charles [1904], “Statistical and Comparative Survey of Islam in Africa”, in Zwemer, Samuel Marinus, Wherry, Elwood Morris & Barton, James (eds.), *The Mohammedan World of Today. Being Papers read at the First Missionary Conference on behalf of the Mohammedan World*, New York, Revell, p.285.

spread inland mainly from Lagos and Calabar, with largely Protestant missions among the Yoruba in the South West and largely Catholic missions among the Igbo in the South East.

With the growth of a British administration and a market economy, colonisation then encouraged mass conversions to Islam or Christianity to the detriment of African traditional religions. In the North, the number of Muslims increased as a result of the development of trade and transport, which enabled Sufi brotherhoods to reach rural communities. In the South, Christian missions gained ground in modern cities and produced educated elites who would play leading roles in British colonial administration as well as in the nascent nationalist movement. The British banned Christian mission schools in the predominantly Muslim regions of the North, so as to preserve their alliance with the Hausa-Fulani and Kanuri aristocracies respectively in the Sokoto caliphate and the Borno sultanate. This created the educational gap along religious lines that has affected development and integration in Nigeria.

At independence in 1960, the civil service was thus dominated by Southerners, who were largely Christians, who had the diplomas required, while there were very few government schools and no university in the North. This pattern played no small part in the first military coups of 1966, followed by the Biafra secession war in 1967-1970, led by Igbo. Following economic blockades, which caused starvation among the population, the Biafran leaders portrayed the population as being the victims of a genocide perpetrated by Muslim Northerners in order to get support from western countries. This is ironic because Gen Yakubu Gowon, the head of the Nigeria military government who led the war effort was a Christian from the North (current Plateau State). Since the end of the civil, religious issues became so sensitive that the government stopped counting the number of Muslims and Christians. The last census with (outdated) figures on the religious affiliations of Nigerians was published in 1963.³ However, there have been different claims among different religious groups about the religious breakdown of Nigeria's population in the absence of official sources. More objective analysis by the Pew Research Centre and Demographic Health Surveys indicate that the Muslim population is growing faster because of higher fecundity and decreased infant mortality rates in northern rural areas⁴. By 2050, Nigeria could thus be the fourth country with the single largest population of Muslims, after Indonesia, Pakistan and India, while hosting the second largest Christian community in the world.⁵

In such a context, it is difficult to assess the role played by religion in contemporary violence. In many cases of lethal incidents, the victims are not properly identified. It is also a challenge to appraise the religious motivations of the perpetrators of violence among social, political and economic factors. Moreover, the concept of "religious violence" needs some clarification.

Three main lines of arguments play against the concept of religious violence⁶. The Marxist view portrays religion as an artificial construction to discipline gullible people. Consequently, one should only talk about political and social violence. But faith-based organisations (FBO) also dismiss the concept of "religious violence" when they claim that their confession is intrinsically peaceful. For instance, mainstream Muslim and Christian believers consider that the insurgents of Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin and the Lord Resistance Army in the Central African Republic are not Muslim or Christian. Such disclaimers place these groups outside the religious domain. Many studies show that the religious motivations of groups who claim to kill in the name of God are not as important as other political, military, economic, and social factors that motivate them.⁷

Hence it makes more sense to analyse "violence with religious colorations" rather than "religious violence" as such. It is indeed necessary to analyse the conflicting narratives of various stakeholders (including journalists) who understand some attacks to be motivated by religious beliefs, crime, a political agenda and / or ethnic affiliations. What is also worthy of note is that, from a doctrinal point of view, religious tensions mainly oppose groups of the same prophetic tradition: the Salafis and the Sufis amongst Muslims; Pentecostals and the Catholics. In this regard, it is important to consider the diversity of Christianity and Islam, which are definitely not monolithic blocs opposing each other.

³ Ostien, Philip [2012], *Percentages By Religion of the 1952 and 1963 Populations of Nigeria's Present 36 States*, Oxford, Nigeria Research Network Background Paper No. 1, 14p.

⁴ Pérouse de Montclos, Marc-Antoine [2022], « Les enjeux politiques de la démographie des religions au Nigeria », Paris, *Working Paper du Ceped* n°51, 12p.

⁵ Hackett, Conrad et al. [2015], *The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050*, Washington DC, Pew Research Center, 245p.

⁶ Pérouse de Montclos, Marc-Antoine [2024], *Prophètes en armes ! Des « violences religieuses » en Afrique*, Paris, Maisonneuve et Larose / Hémisphères, 253p.

⁷ See, for instance, United Nations Development Programme [2017], *Journey to Extremism in Africa : Drivers, Incentives and the Tipping Point for Recruitment*, New York, UNDP, 112p.

2. The Facts: Data on Trends and Patterns

An evidence-based analysis unveils the complexity of violence with religious colorations. Attacks against churches or mosques are publicised and usually attract a lot of attention from the general public (see Annex 2). But the body count of lethal violence in Nigeria shows that road accidents and daily crime are much more deadly. A lot of Christians and Muslims lose their lives from road accidents and criminal activities rather than because of their religious identities. This pattern is confirmed by the database of the Nigeria Watch project at the University of Ibadan.

2.1. Methodology

The Nigeria Watch database records lethal incidents according to their date, the number of fatalities reported and their location within the 774 Local Government Areas (LGAs) listed in the 1999 Constitution⁸. Whenever information is available, causes are mentioned as related to land clashes, cattle grazing disputes, political conflicts, economic competition, the control of market areas, oil production or distribution, crime, cultism, accidents... and religious issues if the confrontations are framed and justified by stakeholders on religious grounds. The protagonists of violence, which include both the victims and the perpetrators, are also selected in a list that comprises the police, the army (including the navy and the air force), other government security forces that use firearms, armed gangs, cult societies, churches, islamic groups, communities, political parties, oil companies, other for-profit entities, trade unions, and NGOs. Finally, the relationship between the stakeholders of the incidents, if they are properly identified, sometimes help to define the ethnic, social, political, religious or military types of confrontations. In this case, religious violence is defined as opposing churches against islamic groups or other churches, or islamic groups against churches or other islamic groups.

The Nigeria Watch project focuses on fatalities reported by ten Nigerian daily newspapers: Daily Champion, Guardian, Leadership, Punch, This Day, Vanguard, Independent, Nigerian Tribune, Daily Trust, and The Nation. It has the longest series of record on lethal incidents, since 2006, and it follows the international standards of body count practitioners.⁹ The Nigeria Watch project also scans and keeps records of original news reports and articles that say much more about the social complexity of violence incidence than only putting violence into numbers. Moreover, unlike other database on violence, the Nigeria Watch database relies on a consistent corpus of robust data to identify knowledge gaps and avoid possible biases when a rise in violence only reflects better media coverage.

2.2. Main Findings

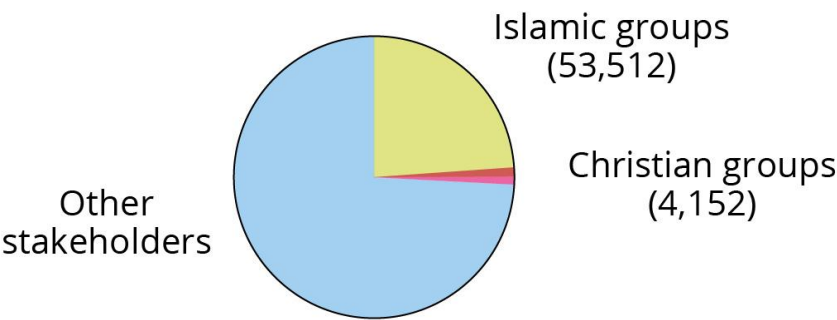
The Nigeria Watch project uncovers several key findings. Analysing the stakeholders of lethal violence, first, it puts into perspective the share of Christian and Islamic groups amongst identified protagonists of killings perpetrated between 1st June 2006 and 31 December 2025 (Graph 1). Clashes where Islamic groups were involved (mainly Boko Haram and dissent jihadi factions) actually resulted in 53,512 fatalities (or 24.1%) out of a total of 222,274 reported during this period¹⁰. The figure was much lower when it came to Christian groups: 1.9%, or 4,152 violent deaths out of 222,274. And it was minimal (1%, or 2,366 fatalities) when analysing confrontations between Christian and Islamic groups.

⁸ For more details on the methodology online, see: <https://www.nigeriawatch.org>

⁹ ECW [2016], *Standards for Casualty Recording*, Londres, Every Casualty Worldwide, 62p.; UNODC [2022], *Organized Crime in Nigeria: A Threat Assessment*, Vienna, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, p. 1.

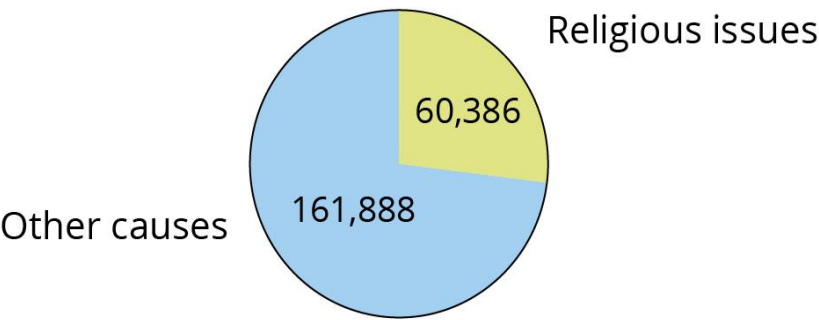
¹⁰ Better known under the nickname Boko Haram ("Western education is sacrilege"), the "Sunni Community for the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad" (*Jama'atu Ahlis-Sunnah Lidda'awati Wal Jihad*) emerged around 2002 in the Borno region of North-Eastern Nigeria, bordering the Republics Niger, Chad and Cameroon. In 2015, one of the factions of the group paid allegiance to Daesh and decided to be called the Islamic State in West Africa (*Wilayat Gharb Ifriqiyah*).

Graph 1. Share of fatalities in lethal incidents where Christian and Islamic groups are identified as protagonists in Nigeria (2006-2025)

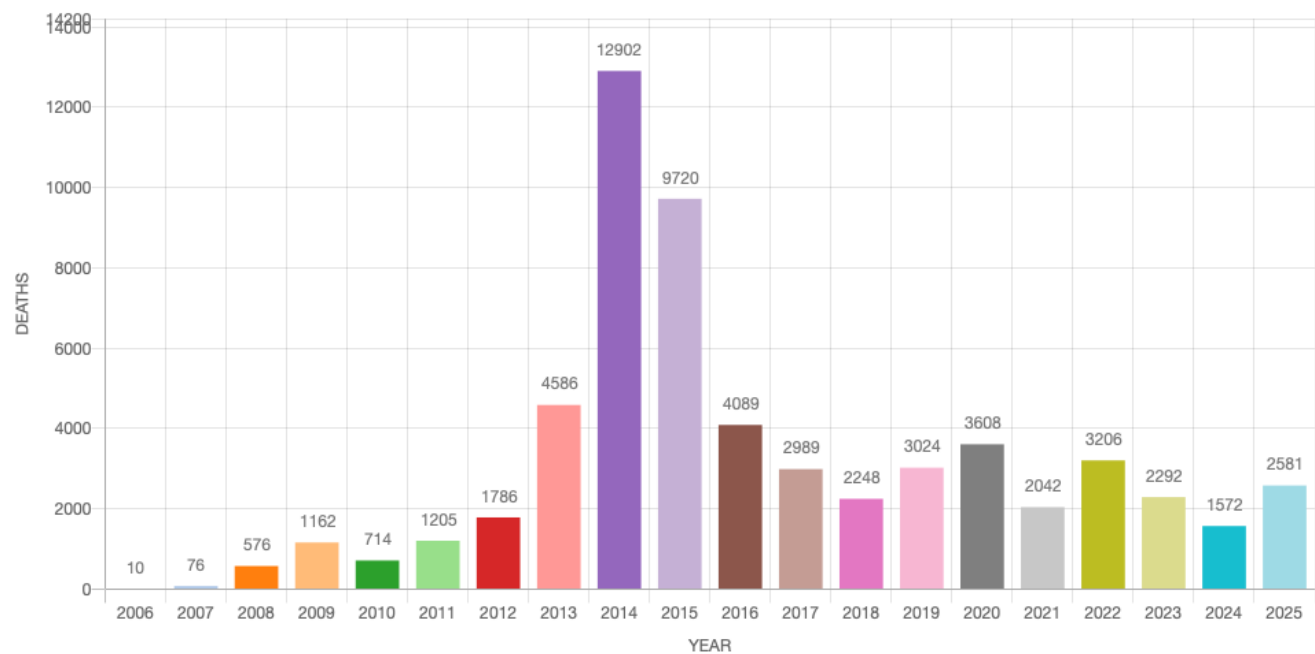


In the same vein, violence related to religious issues killed 60,386 people between 1st June 2006 and 31 December 2025, or 27,2% out of a total of 222,274 (Graph 2). This death toll is quite high. Yet journalists often report that the religious affiliations of the victims or the perpetrators are not the only factors of complex clashes which combine a broad variety of causes. Moreover, most fatalities result from the Boko Haram conflict, especially during peak years that coincided with the implementation of emergency rule and the multiplication of military operations in the northeastern states of Borno, Yobe and Adamawa in 2014 and 2015 (Graph 3 & Graph 4). This explains why, together with Plateau, Borno appears as the state most affected by so-called religious violence in Nigeria during the period 2006-2025 (Map).

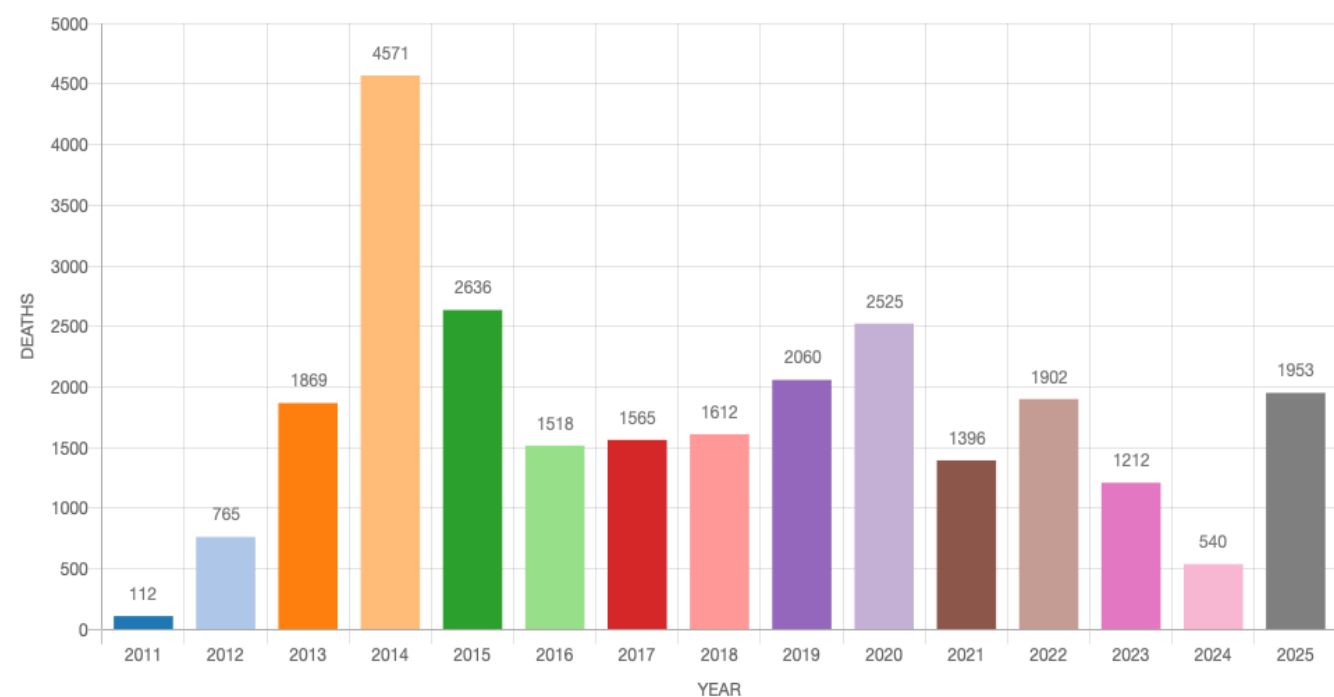
Graph 2. Share of fatalities related to violence designated as religious in Nigeria (2006-2025)



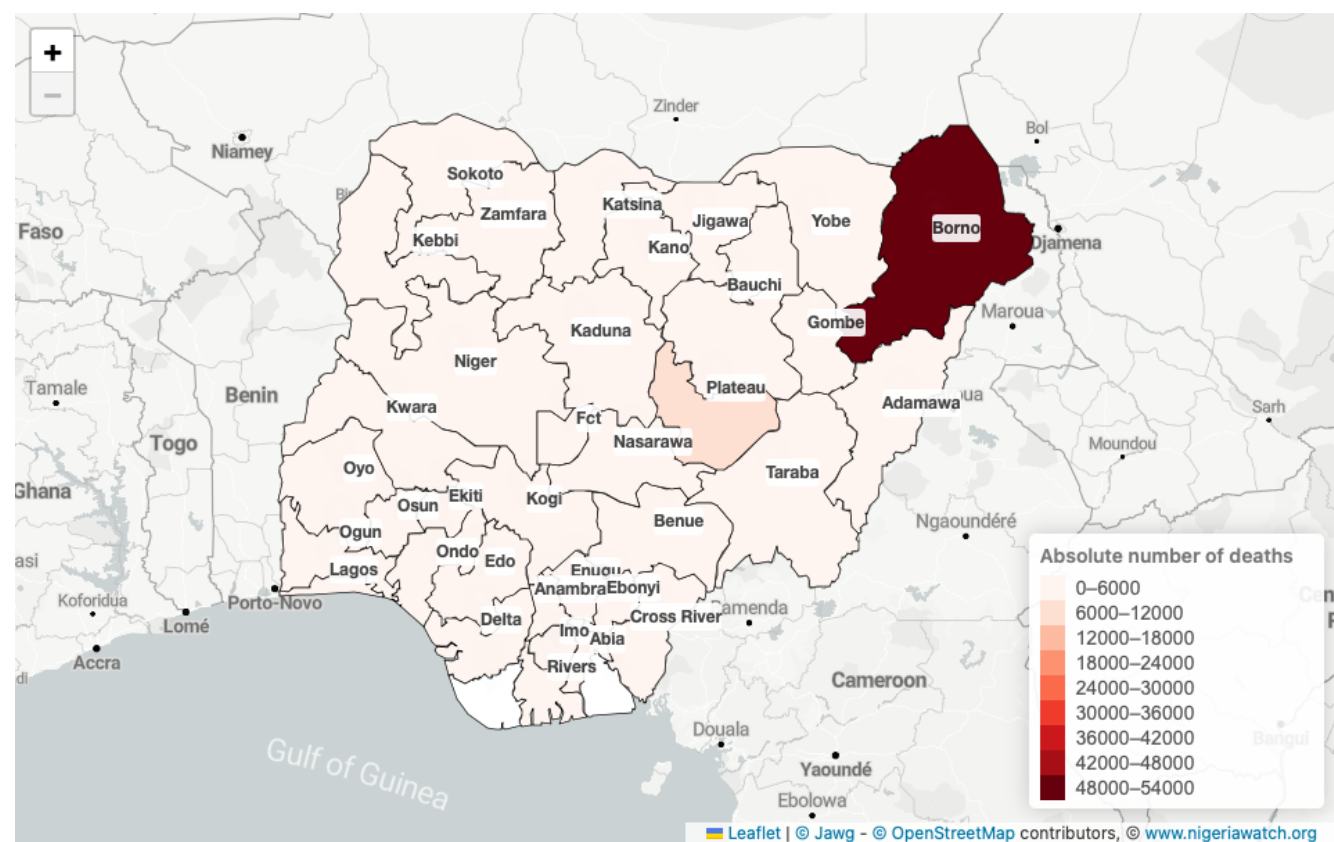
Graph 3. Violence designated as religious in Nigeria: number of fatalities per year (2006-2025)



Graph 4. Clashes between the Army and Islamic groups (mainly Boko Haram) in Nigeria: number of fatalities per year (2006-2025)

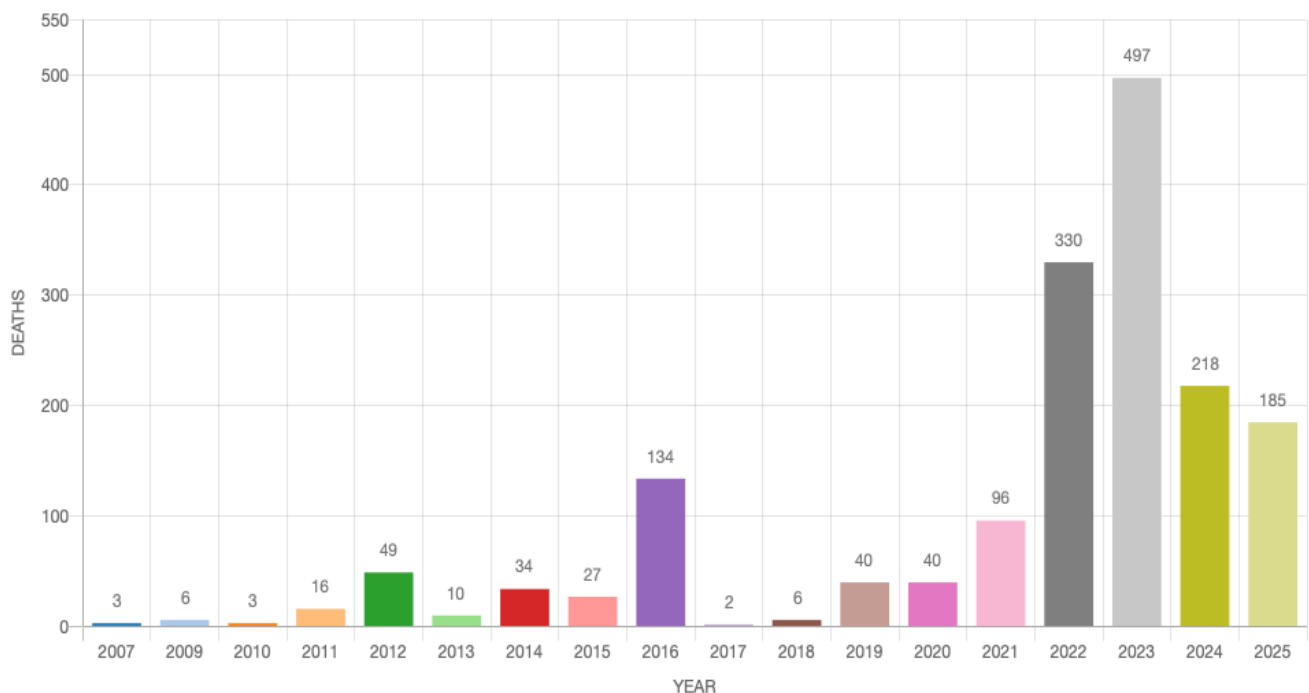


Map 1. States most affected by violence designated as religious in Nigeria as per the number of fatalities (2006-2025)



Interestingly, Borno has predominantly Muslim population and most of the victims of Boko Haram attacks reported are Muslims.¹¹ However, predominantly Christian communities in Southern Borno have also been victims of Boko Haram attacks. The fragmentation of the Boko Haram movement into many factions also contributed to fratricidal fighting within the sect initially founded by Mohamed Yusuf in Maiduguri around 2003. Thus 40% of the victims of the conflict in 2023 resulted from clashes between *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad* (JAS) (meaning Community of the Sunnah People for Dawah and Jihad), and *Wilayat Gharb Ifriqiyah* (meaning Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), rather than from confrontations with the Nigerian Army¹². These killings accounted for most of the fatalities reported in violence opposing different Islamic groups (Graph 5).

Graph 5. Clashes opposing at least two Islamic groups in Nigeria: number of fatalities per year (2006-2025)



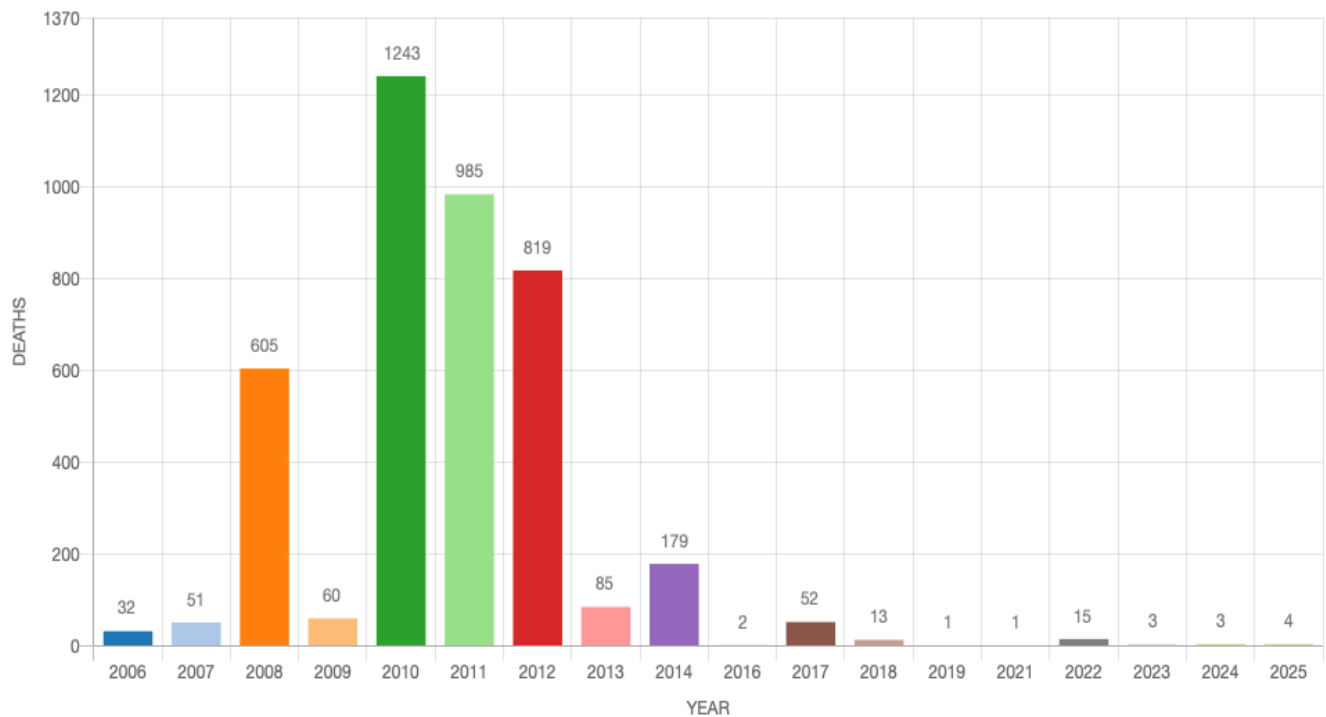
In North Central Nigeria there is less degree of preponderance of population of one religion over the other. This situation applies more to the grand narrative of a clash of civilisations between Islam and Christianity along a North/South divide. But this configuration has much to do with the ethnicisation of conflicts where religious and communal identities coincide. In Plateau State, for example, it is quite difficult to disentangle the economic and political motivations of clashes that oppose so called ‘settlers’ and ‘natives’ with different confessions and socio-professional status such as Muslim Fulani transhumant cattle breeders and Christian “Indigenes” cultivators.

Another key finding of the Nigeria Watch research group is that lethal violence related to religious issues is declining. The number of fatalities per year has decreased in conflicts involving Christian groups since 2010, Islamic groups since 2014 and Christian against Islamic groups since 2010 (Graphs 6, 7 & 8). But this trend contradicts dominant current narratives about a deterioration of the situation and allegations of Christian genocide. Perceptions of insecurity can indeed be very different from evidence-based assessments, especially when they are instrumentalised by politicians.

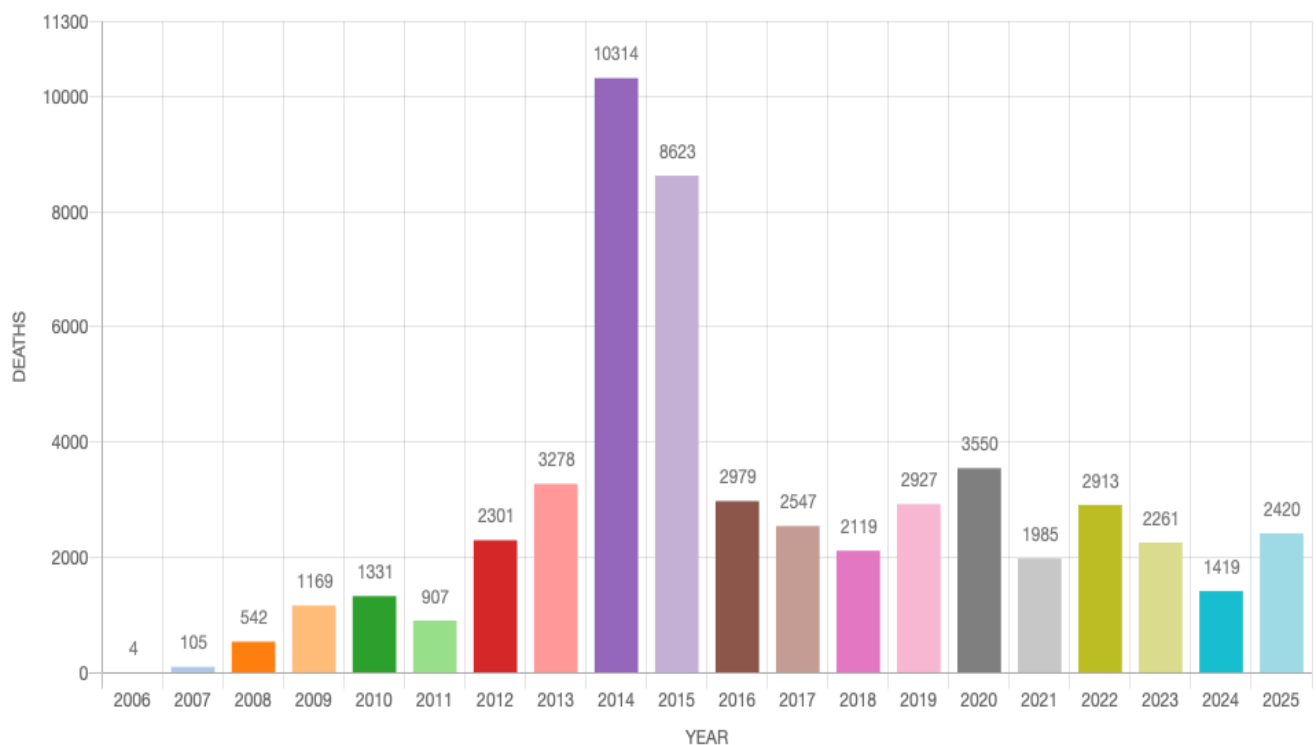
¹¹ Chouin, Gérard, Manuel Reinert & Elodie Apard [2014], “Body Count and Religion in the Boko Haram Crisis: Evidence from the Nigeria Watch Database”, in Pérouse de Montclos, Marc-Antoine (ed.) [2014], *Boko Haram: Islamism, Politics, Security, and the State in Nigeria*, Ibadan, IFRA-Nigeria, Leiden, African Studies Centre, Waposo Series n°2, pp.213-236.

¹² Ukoji, Vitus [2024], « Nigeria : Thirteenth Report on Violence (2023) », Ibadan, Nigeria Watch, p.13.

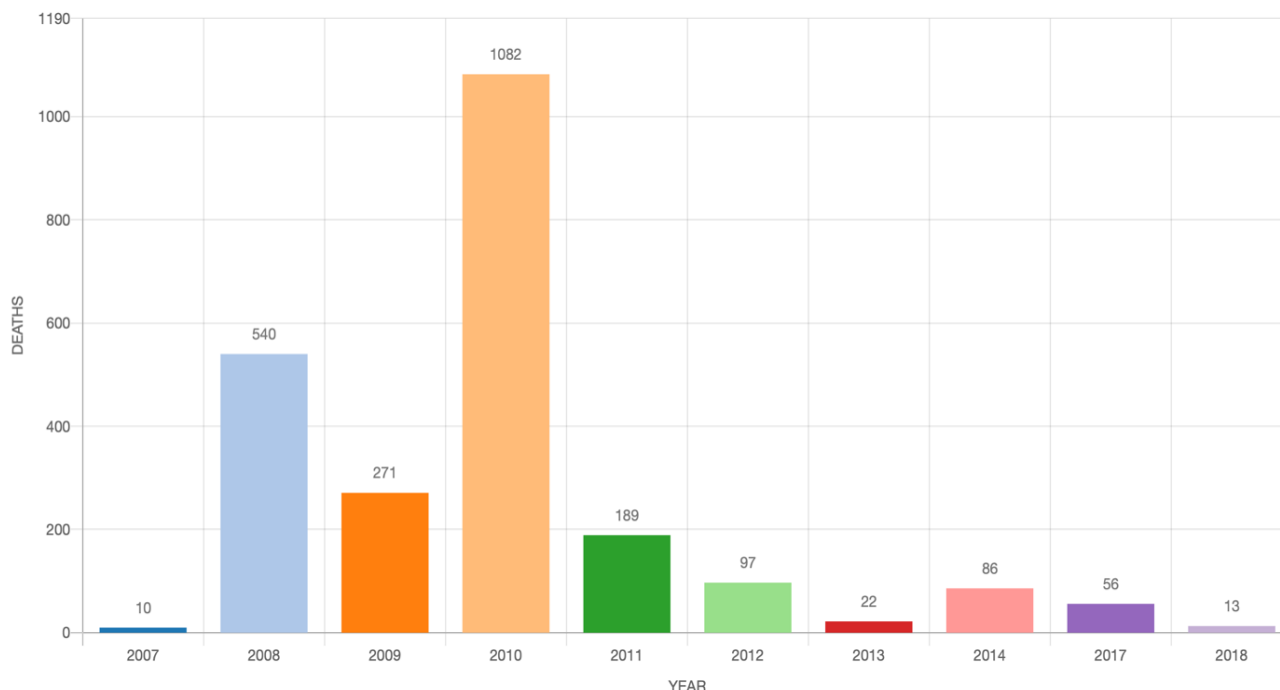
Graph 6. Violent incidents involving Christian groups in Nigeria: number of fatalities per year (2006-2025)



Graph 7. Violent incidents involving Islamic groups in Nigeria: number of fatalities per year (2006-2025)



Graph 8. Clashes opposing Christian and Islamic groups in Nigeria: number of fatalities per year (2006-2025)



3. The Controversy

3.1. Religion as an area of contest

Religion is an area of contest and controversy. Violence, first, can be interpreted as God's punishment, a spiritual war and the sign of a coming apocalypse. Such rhetoric instil fear and create tensions. But religion is also a way to mobilise believers and voters and sometimes get support abroad. Christian and Muslim clerics have a lot of influence in a country where 91% of the people say they go to the church, the temple or the mosque at least once in a week¹³. More so, many Nigerians view religious leaders as being more trustful and less corrupt than politicians according to surveys conducted by Afrobarometer among 1,600 adults in the 36 states of the Federation in 2017 and 2020¹⁴.

Internationally, religion is also an area of contest on the diplomatic front and in the diaspora. Historically, the universal dimensions of Islam and Christianity contributed a lot to disseminating patterns of piety and protest¹⁵. In Africa and overseas, the expansion of the two main religions of the Book (Christianity and Islam) followed pilgrimage, migration and missionary networks. But the circulation of religious ideas has not been one-way and some Nigerian scholars exported their Christian or Islamic theology abroad¹⁶. Since then, new information and communication technologies have amplified the globalisation of religion. Nowadays, clerics from Europe, America and the Middle East often

¹³ BBC surveys quoted by Gorder (van), Christian [2012], "Pentecostalism and The Challenges Facing Muslim-Christian Relations in Nigeria", in Wilkinson, Michael (ed.), *Global Pentecostal Movements: Migration, Mission and Public Religion*, Leiden, Brill, p.45.

¹⁴ Afrobarometer [2020], *Round 8 Survey in Nigeria*, East Lansing, Michigan State University, p.47 & 54; Afrobarometer [2017], *Round 7 Survey in Nigeria*, East Lansing, Michigan State University, p.25 & 27.

¹⁵ Juergensmeyer, Mark [2008], *Global Rebellion: Religious Challenges to the Secular State from Christian Militias to al Qaeda*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 370p. See also Bianchi, Robert [2013], *Islamic globalization: pilgrimage, capitalism, democracy, and diplomacy*, New Jersey, World Scientific Pub., 302p.; Kane, Ousmane (ed.) [2021], *Islamic Scholarship in Africa. New Directions and Global Contexts*, Woodbridge, James Currey, 489p.; Anderson, Allan [2004], *An Introduction to Pentecostalism: Global Charismatic Christianity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 318p.; Brouwer, Steve, Paul Gifford & Susan Rose (ed.) [1997], *Exporting the American Gospel: Global Christian Fundamentalism*, New York, Routledge, 344p.; Dempster, Murray, Byron Klaus & Douglas Petersen (eds.) [1999], *The Globalization of Pentecostalism: A Religion Made to Travel*, Oxford, Regnum, 406p.; Jenkins, Philip [2006], *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 252p.; Donald & Tetsunao Yamamori [2007], *Global Pentecostalism. The New Face of Christian Social Engagement*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 263p.; Wilkinson, Michael (ed.) [2012], *Global Pentecostal Movements: Migration, Mission and Public Religion*, Leiden, Brill, 237p.

¹⁶ Ahmed, Chanfi [2019], *AfroMecca in History. African Societies, Anti-Black Racism, and Teaching in al-Haram Mosque in Mecca*, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 168p.; Ahmed, Chanfi [2015], "Salafism and African Contributions", *The Journal of African History* vol.58, n°2, pp.372-373; Adogame, Afe (ed.) [2011], *Who is afraid of the Holy Ghost? Pentecostalism and globalization in Africa and Beyond*, Trenton (NJ), Africa World Press, 268p. On the export of traditional orisha or bori cults through the slave trade to America or North Africa, see also Olupona, Jacob & Terry Rey (eds.) [2008], *Orisa Devotion as World Religion: The Globalization of Yoruba Religious Culture*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 609p.; Wright, Zachary [2020], *Realizing Islam: The Tijaniyya in North Africa and the Eighteenth-Century Muslim World*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 326p.

proselytise online to reach the African flock¹⁷. In Nigeria too, Christian and Muslim clerics use social networks to preach and disseminate narratives about religious persecution¹⁸.

3.2. Lobbying and the narratives of a Christian or a Muslim genocide

Some of them thus present themselves as victims of genocide to obtain support from the West or Arab countries in the Gulf. The Sultan of Sokoto, Muhammad Sa'ad Abubakar, and traditional Muslim leaders, for instance, repeatedly condemn an alleged genocide of Muslims residing in Jos, Plateau State's symbolic capital in the Middle Belt¹⁹. Likewise, the Fulani herders' pressure group Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria (MACBAN) speak of genocide (see Annex 1) and has a strong religious orientation (Miyetti Allah means 'I thank God' in Fulfulde). Interestingly enough, their narratives point to problems that are also mentioned by Christian lobbies, i.e. the failure of the state to stop the killings, publish casualty figures, investigate criminal acts and protect civilians. In 2017, for example, the victims accused the Taraba authorities of complicity with the perpetrators of massacres of Fulani herders in Mambilla Plateau²⁰.

In the same vein, in 2025, some leaders of Pentecostal churches from the Middle Belt accused President Bola Tinubu of doing nothing (if not condoning and supporting) to stop and prevent the massacres of Christians by Fulani herders. They consequently pressed the American Congress to implement economic sanctions against the Nigerian government²¹. Some Igbo groups from the South-East also relayed this narrative as they felt they had been victims of a Christian genocide during the Biafra War. In a tiny shop of Onitsha, Emeka Umeagbalasi, a screwdriver salesman who founded a grandiloquent NGO called International Society for Civil Liberties and the Rule of Law in 2008, claimed to have documented 125,000 Christian deaths in Nigeria since 2009²². He acknowledged that he could not verify his data and simply assumed that victims were Christian when killings happened in a supposedly Christian area. Yet his figures were cited in the US by an evangelist influencer from Iowa, Judd Saul, as well as Senator Ted Cruz of Texas, Representative Riley Moore of Virginia and Representative Chris Smith of New Jersey to convince the White House that a genocide was occurring.

On Christmas Day 2025, President Donald Trump then conducted deadly strikes against alleged Islamic State forces in Sokoto and vowed more attacks if the militants kept killing Christians. But the Boko Haram movement and dissident jihadi factions are historically based in northeastern, not northwestern Nigeria. No militant fatalities have been confirmed in Sokoto after the US strikes and the perception of ineffective foreign air power has been reframed by the insurgents as proof of divine favour and enemy incompetence, which could feed recruitment. Moreover, military actions portrayed as anti-Muslim now risk provoking retaliatory violence against Christian communities and attract militants from across the Sahel to fight back against Western involvement. In Adamawa state on 29 December 2025, for instance, ISWAP attacked and killed some 11 people in Hong villages where Christians were threatened to convert or die.

4. Analysis

Combined with military kinetic actions, the narratives of a Christian genocide could thus pave the way for a War of Religion, a worst-case scenario. Targeting the Fulani and prominent opponents in the North also exacerbates political divisions with the South. US lawmakers, in this regard, contribute to amplify tensions as their proposed Nigeria Religious Freedom and Accountability Act of 2026 now intends to ban visas and freeze the assets of Rabi'u Kwankwaso, alleging his involvement in fostering religious and communal violence. This former governor of Kano State unsuccessfully ran for President of Nigeria against Bola Tinubu in 2023. And there could be a violent reaction in the North if he can't be a candidate in the next 2027 general elections, as during the riots of 2011, when the masses supported Muhammadu Buhari and protested against electoral fraud.

¹⁷ Bano, Massooda & Keiko Sakurai (ed.) [2015], *Shaping Global Islamic Discourses. The Role of al-Azhar, al-Medina and al-Mustafa*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 232p.; Schulze, Reinhard [2022], "Transnational Wahhabism: The Muslim World League and World Assembly of Muslim Youth", in Mandaville, Peter (ed.), *Wahhabism and the World: Understanding Saudi Arabia's Global Influence on Islam*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, pp.93-113.

¹⁸ Hackett, Rosalind & Benjamin Soares (eds.) [2015], *New Media and Religious Transformations in Africa*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 326p.

¹⁹ Aliyu, Sadeeq [12 Déc. 2008], "Nigeria: Gov Jang Must be Charged for Genocide - Plateau Muslim Umma", *Daily Trust*; Advertorial [3 Mars 2010], "Fulani Ardos Allege Genocide against Berom Terrorists", *Daily Trust*; Ahmed, Abdulazeez [28 Janv. 2010], "Jos Crisis a Genocide, Leadership Failure – Sultan", *New Nigerian*; Mudashir, Ismail [27 Janv. 2010], "Sultan - Jos Crisis Was Genocide", *Daily Trust*. Accès le 8 nov. 2024 : <https://allafrica.com/stories/201001280427.html>

²⁰ Editorial, "Genocide In Mambilla", *Daily Trust* 3 July 2017. Access: <https://dailytrust.com/genocide-in-mambilla/>

²¹ Pérouse de Montclos, Marc-Antoine, « Des États-Unis au Nigeria, la fabrique d'un 'génocide des chrétiens' », *Afrique XXI*, 21 avril 2025, 9p.

²² Maclean, Ruth [18 Jan. 2026], "The Screwdriver Salesman Behind Trump's Airstrikes in Nigeria", *New York Times*.

4.1. The characterisation of violence from religious perspectives

The narratives of a Christian genocide clearly have an impact on conflict dynamics and interfaith relations. But it is also important to analyse the factors accounting for the prevalent characterisation of violence from religious perspectives. The politicisation of religion by clerics and elected leaders is indeed a key challenge for a fragile democracy in the making. Muslim and Christian lobbies and platforms such as Jama'atu Nasril Islam (JNI), the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) and Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) are themselves divided by ethnic, doctrinal and political cleavages.²³ And they interfere in the electoral process when they mobilise their constituencies and give them voting instructions.

A lot has already been written on Islamic revival in Nigeria and there is no place here to review the demand for Sharia since the 1970s and the Second Republic (1979-83)²⁴. Suffice it to say that the Society for the Removal of Innovations and Re-establishment of Tradition (*Jama'atu Izalatil Bid'ah wa Iqamatus Sunnah*), created in 1978 and hereafter abridged Izala, has been at the forefront of Salafist activism in the North and the Middle Belt. Just before the short-lived Third Republic in 1993, which allowed only two political parties, its controversial mentor, Sheikh Mahmud Abubakar Gumi, thus argued that Muslims should not vote for and be ruled by a Christian president. He rather advocated for the creation of two Islamic and Christian parties, together with a religious division of Nigeria²⁵. As for Shiite leader Ibrahim El Zakzaky, he demanded the establishment of an Islamic Republic in the North, arguing that Muslims should obey God's Law and refuse to live under a Constitution written by the hand of Man²⁶.

Likewise, some Christian leaders in the South have argued against voting for Muslim presidents. Pastors, for example, have often given voting recommendations, demonised opponents and predicted results in favor of their preferred candidates. In the same vein, some have allowed or banned their followers from running or casting a ballot at the polling station, arguing that democracy should not give the right to vote for Satan²⁷. Before the 2015 general elections which ultimately saw the victory of a Muslim, for instance, Bishop David Oyedepo, leader of the Living Faith Church, aka Winners' Chapel, not only called his flock to support President Goodluck Jonathan, a Christian, but also to fight Boko Haram.²⁸ Meanwhile, Christian leaders such as Chris Okotie, Tunde Bakare and Yemi Osinbajo have tried and sometimes succeeded in being elected to offices. Examples include Vice-President Osinbajo; and Hyacinth Alia, a catholic priest, who was elected Governor of Benue state in 2023.

In 1977, Pentecostals protested against the "satanic" exhibitions of the second Pan-African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC), which they accused of celebrating the "demonic" fetishes of traditional religions. At the time, they formed a short-lived student movement that laid the foundations for a national mobilisation, later galvanized by the military government of General Ibrahim Babangida and its attempt to secure Nigeria a seat in the Organization of the Islamic Conference in 1986. In 1990, Christian activists were then arrested for being allegedly involved in a failed coup led by Major Gideon Orkar to "liberate" southern and central regions allegedly "reduced to slavery" by northern states, which were to be partly excised from the federation. The dictatorship of General Sani Abacha, another Muslim, also fuelled the fear of a forced islamisation of Christian-dominated areas.

4.2. The politicisation of religion since the end of military rule in 1999

The return to a democratically elected government did not put an end to "religious politics". In 1999, many Muslim Northerners felt they lost power to Southern Christians with the election of President Olusegun Obasanjo. The demand for a full Sharia Law (implemented during colonial rule and restricted to civilian affairs between Muslims only since independence) was thus promoted to defend a regional identity. It became a tool to mobilise voters for the opposition, especially under the aegis of the All People's Party (APP), which was nicknamed Abacha People's Party after the former military dictator (who was incidentally a Kanuri from Borno). Sharia was also used to attract the poor,

²³ Founded in 1976, CAN contains Catholics, mainline Protestant groups, Pentecostals, the African Instituted Churches and the Middle Belt's Fellowship of Churches of Christ in Nigeria. JNI is dominated by Sufis and traditional Islam's leaders from the North, while the NSCIA is more inclusive and accommodates some Izala preachers. See Shittu, Balogun Abdulazeez [2011], "The Role of the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs in Unifying Muslims in Nigeria: Prospects and Challenges", *International Journal for Muslim World Studies* vol. 9, n°1/2, pp.35-66; Salifu, Samuel [2018], *CAN, Religion, Politics and Power in Nigeria*, Kaduna, Sameka Press, 276p. ; Enwerem, Iheanyi M. [1995], *A dangerous awakening. The politicization of christianity in Nigeria*, Ibadan, IFRA, 252p.

²⁴ See, for example, Loimeier, Roman [1997], *Islamic Reform and Political Change in Northern Nigeria*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 415p. ; Last, Murray [2014], « From Dissent to Dissidence: The Genesis and Development of Reformist Islamic Groups in Northern Nigeria », in Mustapha, Abdul Raufu (ed.), *Sects & Social Disorder: Muslim identities & conflict in northern Nigeria*, London, James Currey, pp.18-53 ; Mohammed, Kyari [2018], "The Origins of Boko Haram", in LeVan, Carl & Patrick Ukata (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Nigerian Politics*, Oxford, OUP, pp.583-604.

²⁵ Coulon, Christian [1993], « Les itinéraires politiques de l'islam au Nord-Nigeria », in Bayart, Jean-François (dir.), *Religion et modernité politique en Afrique noire. Dieu pour tous et chacun pour soi*, Paris, Karthala, p.25.

²⁶ Interviews with the author in Zaria on 19 October 2000 and 2 October 2012.

²⁷ Burgess, Richard [2008], *Nigeria's Christian Revolution: The Civil War Revival and its Pentecostal Progeny, 1967-2006*, Oxford, Regnum Books, p.286.

²⁸ Adelakun Abimbola [2021], *Performing Power in Nigeria: Identity, Politics, and Pentecostalism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p.72.

claiming that it would foster development and social justice against the corruption of a predatory ruling class. Zamfara Governor Ahmad Sani Yerima was the first to extend Islamic Law beyond the domain of civilian affairs in 1999, soon to be followed by eleven other Northern states, yet with major differences from one to another²⁹.

The political manipulation of religion was so obvious that it was criticised by Sufi and Salafi clerics who argued that a secular state could not impose and implement the Commandments of God³⁰. The Sharia issue also exacerbated interreligious tensions, especially during riots in Kaduna in 2000, and affected the daily life of Christian communities in the North, who were stigmatised and “scapegoated” as “foreigners” responsible for all the vices of a modern society: alcoholism, prostitution, usury, debt, etc. Even if the corporal punishments of the Sharia criminal law are supposedly restricted to Muslims only, gender segregation in public transports and raids by the Hizbah police directly impacted the business of Christian communities who were sometimes confined in special urban areas, the “new towns” (*sabon gari*), during the colonial era.

Borno state, where Boko Haram emerged around 2002, is quite symptomatic in this regard. In 1966, the killings of Christian Igbo immigrants had been motivated by political and economic reasons against traders and civil servants who were perceived as being foreigners. After the end of the Biafra War and the nationalisation of mission schools, native Christian minorities then complained about discrimination regarding freedom of religion and access to land, the media, universities, and executive positions. To get Muslim votes and the support of Kanuri landlords during the Second Republic, Borno politicians thus stopped issuing certificates of occupancy for churches in 1979. Local Christian communities still felt unsecure during the Fourth Republic, after the end of military rule in 1999, when Borno politicians promised to extend the application of the Sharia law. Following the 2003 elections, for instance, Governor Ali Modu Sheriff nominated a supporter of Boko Haram as the head of the State Commission for Religious Affairs.

In the same vein, native Christian minorities in Borno have complained about restrictions to teach their religion in school, a matter they took to court as soon as 1979. Despite the sections 10 and 38 of the 1999 Constitution that proclaim freedom of religion, the teaching of ‘Christian Religious Knowledge’, its official name, is in fact limited to church private schools. By contrast, Islam is the only religion taught in all Borno public schools, where ‘Christian Religious Knowledge’ is replaced by Arabic lessons. As for Qur’anic teachers, some of them are trained and employed by the government. The power distribution in the core North East also contribute to the fears of native Christian minorities about political marginalisation. In Bauchi and Borno, elected governors and deputies have all been Muslims since 1979. Likewise, Yobe State has had Muslim governors and deputies since its creation in 1991, except for a brief military interlude in 1996-1998³¹.

Meanwhile in the South, religion has also been used by Christian politicians to get support. President Olusegun Obasanjo likened his 1999 election to a Parousia that enabled him to return to power as a civilian, 20 years after having ruled the country as a military leader. At the time, the President of the Senate in Abuja, Anyim Pius Anyim, was himself a prominent member of the Assemblies of God. As for Chris Okotie, a televangelist who founded the Household of God Church in Lagos in 1987, ran (and was defeated) in the 2003, 2007 and 2011 presidential elections under the banner of a small party he created, first under the name Justice Party, then FRESH Democratic Party according to the acronym of his slogan: Faith, Responsibility, Equality, Security, and Hope.

President Goodluck Jonathan was just as close to Pentecostal activists because he had no solid electoral base and therefore needed their support even more and considered his victory to be a “miracle”. Soon criticised for his incompetence and his inability to implement reforms and develop the country, he also used Pentecostal rhetoric to justify himself. On the occasion of an interdenominational religious service, he said his government was not “a plane without a pilot” because Nigeria was “being piloted by God himself”³². In 2013, he was also the first sitting head of state to make an official pilgrimage to Jerusalem. In a famous “celestial” camp already visited by Olusegun Obasanjo in Lagos, Goodluck Jonathan even went so far as to kneel publicly before the head of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, a first in the political history of Nigeria’s presidents.

His successor in 2015, Muhammadu Buhari, was a pious Muslim and a former military dictator who, as a child, had been educated in a traditional Qur’anic school in Katsina state. Despite his nationalist stand, he was suspected of being close to Salafist activists. In 2020, for instance, he donated money to help build the first Izala university, which

²⁹ Ostien, Philip (ed.) [2007], *Sharia implementation in northern Nigeria 1999-2006 : a sourcebook*, Ibadan, Spectrum Books, 5 vol.

³⁰ Mustapha, Abdul Raufu (ed.) [2014], *Sects & Social Disorder: Muslim identities & conflict in northern Nigeria*, London, James Currey, 234p.; Ben Amara, Ranzi [2020], *The Izala Movement in Nigeria: Genesis, Fragmentation and Revival*, Göttingen, Göttingen University Press, pp.192-3.

³¹ Magrin, Géraud & Pérouse de Montclos, Marc-Antoine (ed.) [2018], *Crisis and Development. The Lake Chad Region and Boko Haram*, Paris, AFD, 267p.

³² Adelakun Abimbola [2021], *Performing Power in Nigeria : Identity, Politics, and Pentecostalism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p.79.

was named As-Salam and located in Hadejia, Jigawa state. During his two terms, Muhammadu Buhari also performed the lesser hadj (Umrah) twice in 2019 and 2023, just before leaving his post. Meanwhile in Nigeria, he was criticised for favouring Muslim collaborators and advisors in Abuja. One of the key issues of Nigerian politics is indeed related to the religious and regional balance of elected leaders and executives. The federal character principle of the Republic supposedly regulates and monitors public service recruitment exercises in order to ensure the equitable representation of different groups in all tiers of government³³. It is completed by the so-called “**zoning**” rule.

When it comes to religious affiliations in contexts of religious diversity, the general idea is that if a state is governed by a Muslim, the Deputy Governor should be a Christian, and vice-versa. But this unwritten rule, which is not in the Constitution, is not compulsory. Some religiously diverse states are fully governed by Muslims in the North or Christians in the South. Since 2023, moreover, both the elect-president and vice-president, Bola Tinubu and Kashim Shettima, are Muslims, yet from different regions, respectively the South-West and the North-East. This configuration is different from the tickets of all their predecessors during the Fourth Republic. The religious identities of Bola Tinubu and Kashim Shettima has given ammunition to those who claim that the government is doing nothing to prevent the killings of Christians.

5. Recommendations

The challenges discussed in this study have implications for peacebuilding policy and practice.

5.1. Reducing the educational gap between Muslims living in the North and Christians in the South

From a structural point of view, first, the **educational gap** between Muslims living in the North and Christians in the South is still a problem that shapes identity constructs and exacerbates regional tensions along religious lines. Despite security challenges, aid agencies should thus continue supporting programmes that try to improve access to government schools and universities in states such as Borno, Yobe, Jigawa, Bauchi, Kano, Katsina, Sokoto and Kebbi.

In the same vein, developing students exchanges and brainstorming interactions between Northern and Southern stakeholders would help bridge the educational regional gap. Such a programme would not only target civil servants and decision-makers, but also journalists, the academia and students. Up to the 1990s, graduates of universities and polytechnics actually used to be posted for various assignments in the North or the South to develop common ties among the youth. This mandatory, post-tertiary scheme, called National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) was implemented by the military government after the Nigeria civil war, during the oil boom in the 1970s, to promote national unity. But today, it no longer requires Corps members to be posted to states other than their state of origin. Despite security challenges, it is thus very necessary to foster Muslim and Christian student exchanges between the North and the South.

5.2. Improving and enforcing the monitoring and regulation of religious groups

The Nigerian government should improve and enforce the regulation of religious affairs. At the **federal level**, the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) was established and supported by President Olusegun Obasanjo in 1999 to provide religious leaders and traditional rulers with a forum to promote greater interaction, sustainable peace and religious harmony in the country. It is supposed to be an independent body and it has equal number of Muslims and Christians, 25 each. But it has no local grounding and it is not inclusive. On the Muslim side, for instance, it has no representatives from groups such as the Ahmadiyya brotherhood or the Islamic Movement of Ibrahim El Zakzaky. Moreover, it is criticised for being inactive in the sociopolitical domain, a bit like the NSCIA, which is described by some as a “moon commission” because it does nothing but observe the moon to announce Islamic holidays.

The regulation of religious affairs is as weak at the **state level**. In northern Nigeria, for instance, many Qur'anic schools are not registered by ministries of education to check their curriculum. In the same vein, the licenses delivered by preaching boards to monitor the content of sermons are not standardised. In the region, only Yobe and

³³ Demarest, Leila, Arnim Langer & Ukoha Ukiwo [2020], “Nigeria’s Federal Character Commission (FCC): a critical appraisal”, *Oxford Development Studies* vol.48, n°4, pp.315-328.

Gombe have set up commissions that also target Christian preachers, like in the more religiously diverse states of Plateau, Bauchi and Nasarawa³⁴. But the predominantly Muslim states of Kano, Borno, Jigawa, Katsina, Kebbi,

Niger, Sokoto and Zamfara only deal with Islamic preachers, with different rules from one area to the other. More generally in the North and the South, many elected leaders do not even try to implement laws that could be seen as interfering in church or mosque activities, for fear of triggering protests and losing voters.

At the local government level, authorities find it quite difficult to maintain public order, regulate religious processions and reduce noise pollution from church's loudspeakers or muezzin's calls. Removing obstructions to traffic caused by street demonstrations and open-air Friday prayers can be quite challenging. During Ashura ceremonies in 2015, for instance, the Shiite minority of Ibrahim El Zakzaky blocked a Kaduna highway that the convoy of the Chief of Army Staff was to use, triggering a brutal crackdown that resulted in hundreds of civilian deaths (see Annex 2). In 2009, one of the causes of the Boko Haram uprising stemmed from the refusal of the new Shehu of Borno to grant members of the sect a prayer space to celebrate Eid and the end of Ramadan in Maiduguri³⁵.

There is need for stricter regulation of the activities of religious groups. Corruption is another challenge for FBOs. There have been many allegations of fraud and embezzlement in Islamic charities and Pentecostal churches. In the North, mallams are often accused of exploiting children in Qur'anic schools. In the South, some catholic priests have received "donations" from politicians to buy the votes of their parishioners, especially in Igboland³⁶. These practices have affected the whole Church. Nowadays, Igbo families have to pay mandatory fees for every service, from burial to marriage and even priestly ordination. Likewise, parishioners are subjected to on-going compulsory monetary taxations to finance unnecessary physical structures and buildings. The Catholic Church is not spared by **tribalism** either. In the Ahiara Diocese, for instance, Pope Francis had to personally intervene in 2017 to install Bishop Peter Ebere Okpaleke, whose nomination had been rejected by the dominant Mbaise Igbo subgroup in 2012.

5.3. Debunking stereotypes and the dominant narratives of the war on terror

Peacebuilding should not only target faith-based organisations (FBOs) but should also engage other stakeholders to deal with the dominant narratives of so-called religious violence. Fake news, ethnic stereotypes and misinformation exacerbate tensions. For instance, farmer-herder conflicts are often seen as a continuation of Fulani domination since the Sokoto jihad of Usman dan Fodio in 1804. Some media practitioners also describe the attacks as 'massacre', 'carnage', 'savagery', 'terrorism' and, sometimes, 'genocide' perpetrated against Christians³⁷. In these dominant narratives, the herders are all Fulani Muslims, and they are always the aggressors and the invaders, never the victims.

Hence it is necessary to develop **counter-narratives to debunk stereotypes** and balance the reporting of so-called religious or ethnic violence. Dominant narratives of the "**war on terror**" have produced various **adverse effects** in this regard. First, they introduced a lot of confusion as the authorities and some Nigerian scholars extended the qualification of terrorism to cattle rustlers in the North-West or maritime pirates in the Niger-Delta. Secondly, emergency rule and the demonisation of jihadi groups obscured human rights violations by government forces which legitimised the insurgents and facilitated their recruitment of youth trying to escape arbitrary arrest, torture and massacres³⁸. Thirdly, dominant narratives on terrorism contributed to giving a religious connotation to political conflicts as they insisted on the role played by the radicalisation of Islam through Salafi models imported from Saudi Arabia instead of trying to empower the masses and improve the local governance of a predatory fragile state³⁹. While the various factions of Boko Haram killed mainly Muslims, for instance, the media played the game of the insurgents when they focused on the suffering of Christian enclaves in Borno or Adamawa during attacks that delivered

³⁴ Garba, Ahmed Salisu [2018], "Government Regulation of Freedom of Religion in a Democratic Society: Islamic Preaching Board Laws and Boko Haram in Nigeria," in Iyi, John-Mark & Hennie Strydom (ed.), *Boko Haram and International Law*, Cham, Springer International Publishing, pp.237-258.

³⁵ Pérouse de Montclos, Marc-Antoine [2012], « Boko Haram et le terrorisme islamiste au Nigeria : insurrection religieuse, contestation politique ou protestation sociale ? », Paris, Centre d'études et de recherches internationales, Question de Recherche n°40, 33p.

³⁶ Enwerem, Iheanyi [2023], "Marginalization of Ndigbo in Nigerian Politics: The Role of Igbo Christian Witnessing", *International Journal of Political Science and Governance* n°5, vol.1, pp.118-126.

³⁷ Chilwa, Innocent & Isioma [2022], "Deadlier than Boko Haram": Representations of the Nigerian herder-farmer conflict in the local and foreign press" *Media, War & Conflict* vol.15, n°1, pp. 3-24; Chilwa, Innocent, Isioma Chilwa & Angie Igbinoba [2022], "Herdsman are terrorists: Analyzing news headlines on the herder-farmer conflict in the Nigerian press", in Chilwa, Innocent (ed), *Discourse, Media and Conflict: Examining war and resolution in the news*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 69-92; Abdulbaqi, Saudat Salah & Ogaga Ariemu [2017], "Newspapers framing of herdsman-farmers' conflicts in Nigeria and its implication on peace-oriented journalism", *Creative Artist: A Journal of Theatre and Media Studies* vol.11, n°2, pp. 77-105; Igwebuike, Ebuka Elias [2021], "Metaphorical constructions of herding in news reports on Fulani Herdsmen", *Continuum, Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* vol.35, n°1, pp. 85-98.

³⁸ Nwankwa, Michael (ed.), *Rethinking Boko Haram: The Evolution of a Jihadist Group since 2015*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, forthcoming; Pérouse de Montclos, Marc-Antoine, Nigeria's Interminable Insurgency? Addressing the Boko Haram Crisis, London, Chatham House, 2014, 36p.

³⁹ Pérouse de Montclos, Marc-Antoine [2021], "Saudi Wahhabis and Jihadi Terrorism in Africa: Between fairy tales and conspiracy theories", in Tar, Usman (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency in Africa*, London, Routledge, pp.74-87.

maximum psychological impact at a relatively low cost for the rebels. To pay more attention to the life of a Christian rather than a Muslim also goes against the universal values of humanitarian aid and paves the way for a sense of revenge that could trigger interreligious conflicts. Peacebuilding in Nigeria needs to keep a distance from narratives on terrorism that too often result in stigmatising Islam and / or ethnic communities such as the Fulani or the Kanuri.

5.4. Harnessing belief systems for peacebuilding

Peacebuilding in Nigeria should harness the potential of faith and belief systems that promote dialogue and conflict resolution. Undoubtedly, religion can be a tool for conflict management and transformation. Both Christianity and Islam are replete with resources that may influence resolution and reconciliation efforts. For instance, faith leaders can help with fostering interreligious dialogue, preventing radicalisation and moderating internal tensions between doves and hawks within a community of faith. It is important in this regard to harness religion as a political asset that can contribute to peace in the run up to the 2027 general elections.

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