



**Statement before the
U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Foreign Affairs - Subcommittee on Africa**

***“President Trump’s redesignation of Nigeria as a
“Country of Particular Concern—CPC”:
A serious, well-founded wake-up call.”***

A Testimony by:

Oge Onubogu

Director and Senior Fellow, Africa Program, Center for Strategic and
International Studies

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Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Jacobs, distinguished Members of the Committee, I am honored to share my views with you on this important topic.

I appeared before this committee in March, and since then, so much has changed in our country and around the world. Today, I appear before you as Director and Senior Fellow of the Africa Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). The CSIS Africa program analyzes key trends in security, governance, and development across Africa, with the aim of informing U.S. policy and fostering debate on critical issues affecting the African continent and U.S. relations with African countries. CSIS does not take policy positions, so the views represented in this testimony are my own and not those of my employer.

I have over two decades of experience working on peace, security, and governance issues in Africa, including over 10 years leading projects focused on conflict mitigation, civil-military relations, and community security in Nigeria. In keeping with the nonpartisan, policy-focused work of CSIS, I offer the following comments and recommendations.

In my testimony, I would like to reinforce the recommendations that I made before this committee in March¹, as they still hold true today. In addition, I would like to reflect on how this tenuous moment in U.S – Nigeria relations provide an opportunity for both countries to work together to address the critical threats of jihadist violence and insecurity in Nigeria, and to develop a more strategic and comprehensive bilateral partnership.

Consecutive U.S. Administrations have described the U.S. relationship with Nigeria as among the most important in Africa. Nigeria and the U.S. have a complicated bilateral relationship, with shared interests in counterterrorism and economic development, but this relationship is often marked by periods of friction. We are currently experiencing one of these periods of friction due to the U.S. redesignation of Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern for severe violations of religious freedom, accompanied by a U.S. presidential threat of military intervention and aid cuts.

As Africa's largest population and biggest oil producer, and one of the continent's largest economies, Nigeria has regional and continental influence but has long suffered from violent extremism and internal insecurity². This year marks 26 years of uninterrupted civilian rule in Nigeria, the longest period of constitutional governance since the country's independence from the British in October 1960.

As West Africa's hegemon and anchor of regional security, Nigeria's leadership in the subregion is crucial amid the recent breakaway of three junta-led countries from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), rising terrorism, and other anti-democratic upheavals that have beset the subregion in recent years. But whether and how Nigeria tackles its own governance and security challenges at home will set the pace not only in Nigeria, but also in the broader West Africa region.

¹ <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/oge-onubogu-testifies-us-house-representatives-conflict-and-persecution-nigeria-and-case>

² [Protests Test Nigeria's Democracy and its Leadership in Africa | United States Institute of Peace](#)

As Nigeria's internal struggles worsen, what is clear is that the country's instability is rooted in a vital shortcoming: After 64 years of independence, the country still struggles to cultivate a national identity rooted in basic freedoms and dignity for its people³.

In Nigeria today, ethnicity, religion, and language – not nationality – remain the benchmarks of identity for the country's highly diverse population⁴. While Nigeria has witnessed repeated ethnic and religious clashes over the years, its ethnically and religiously diverse population is not the problem or the cause of these conflicts. According to a 2021 Afrobarometer survey⁵, 90 percent of Nigerians express willingness to live with people from different ethnicities and religions. The survey also noted low levels of trust among citizens with 92 percent stating they "must be careful" when dealing with others, indicating that while there is a sense of unity among Nigerians, trust issues persist, affecting social interactions. The manipulation of low levels of public trust by Nigeria's political class confirms how ethnicity and religion have become instrumental markers that are used to mobilize and successfully acquire power, resources, and political dominance in the country.

It is important to understand the nature of the violence in Nigeria – and its causes, which extend beyond the religious or ethnic overtones that appear to motivate that animosity. I grew up in Jos, Plateau state in Nigeria's Middle-Belt region, and I visit the region regularly. Having grown up in the Middle Belt, I am deeply aware of the compounding impacts that these protracted conflicts have on once-vibrant communities. I am also from a family that is rooted in Christian missionary work in the Middle Belt, and so I understand the shared faith between Christian communities in the Middle-Belt and some Christian communities in the U.S., which is primarily rooted in the history of American missionary work in Nigeria.

However, a narrow narrative that reduces Nigeria's current security situation to a single story of widespread persecution and mass slaughter of Christians, misses other important considerations and oversimplifies the complexity of violence and inter-faith relations in the country. In actuality, religious and ethnic violence in Nigeria is a symptom, and the hate speech and conspiracy theories⁶ that often drive it are throwing fuel on a fire long ignited by the frustrations of Nigerians over what essentially are failures of governance⁷.

Nigeria is facing overlapping security crises across the country, stemming from, among other things, religious extremism, banditry, criminality, resource competition, communal land disputes and separatist agitation. These security threats also tend to be enmeshed in history, tangled in poverty and worsened by political contestation.

The interplay between religion and politics in Nigeria is deep and complex. Nigerian political leaders rhetorically romanticize Nigeria's "unity" but do little to cultivate it. On the contrary, they often stoke ethnic and religious tensions in election campaigns, seemingly to distract from their failure to deliver for the people they are supposed to serve. The divisive political climate of

³ Punch Newspaper, 2021, It's time to end 'business as usual' with Nigeria, Oge Onubogu <https://punchng.com/its-time-to-end-business-as-usual-with-nigeria/>

⁴ AfroBarometer Working Paper, December 2024 "You're not like us! Ethnic discrimination and national belonging in Nigeria <WP206-Ethnic-discrimination-and-national-belonging-in-Nigeria-Afrobarometer-30nov24.pdf>

⁵ Afro Barometer, News release, 2021 news_release-tolerance_high_trust_low_in_nigeria-10march21.pdf

⁶ The New Humanitarian, 2022, The_New_Humanitarian_The_growing_appeal_of_secession_in_Nigeria's_southeast

⁷ <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/oge-onubogu-testifies-house-foreign-affairs-committee-future-freedom-nigeria>

the 2023 elections illustrated this tendency. It deepened rifts among ethnic and religious groups that already existed, largely because they have long been inflamed by political, religious, or other community “leaders.” As Nigeria approaches yet another contentious national election in 2027, religion will remain a significant factor, influencing candidate selection, voter behavior, and campaign strategies, just as we saw in 2023.

The Trump administration’s accusations that Nigeria is allowing targeted killings of Christians distracts from a wider problem of tackling jihadist violence, terrorism and widespread insecurity in the country. In the two decades following Nigeria’s return to civilian rule in 1999, the country was among the top recipients of U.S. security assistance, which was largely focused on counterterrorism support⁸. In fact, in August 2025, the Trump administration approved a possible military weapons sale of \$346 million to Nigeria⁹. Despite these large amounts of assistance, the extremist threat has continued to grow expanding beyond the country’s North-East where Boko Haram¹⁰ and Islamist groups have been waging a fifteen-year insurgency against the Nigerian state, to the North-West, where groups of so-called “bandits” are continually raiding rural villages and terrorising citizens. In both of these regions, the majority religion is Islam, and most of the victims have been Muslims. According to the 2025 Global Terrorism Index (GTI)¹¹, Nigeria now ranks sixth, moving up from the eighth position in 2023 and 2024, indicating larger ongoing systemic challenges in addressing terrorism.

Since the outbreak of the Boko Haram insurgency in 2009, successive Nigerian administrations, including that of incumbent President Bola Tinubu, have pledged to stamp it out—though they have had little success¹². There is wide acknowledgement by Nigerians that the security situation in the country has gotten worse in recent years. Amnesty International¹³ reported in May that roughly 10,000 people had been killed and many more abducted since the inauguration of President Tinubu in 2023. The Nigerian government disputes¹⁴ this figure, but its own National Human Rights Commission¹⁵ reports a significant rise in incidents of human rights violations across the country this year.

Therefore, narratives that focus solely on the killing of Christians tend to overlook the broader state of insecurity in the country and ignore the reality that religion is often a secondary factor in Nigeria’s internal violence, rather than its primary driver. While there have certainly been many incidents, in recent years, in which religious groups and places of worship have been targeted for atrocities, data suggest that killings motivated explicitly by religious extremism account for only a part of overall fatalities across the country. In 2022, a study conducted by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), found that from January 2020 to June 2022, amid an overall rise in attacks on civilians in Nigeria, “violence in which Christians have been

⁸ [Inside the \\$1.58 billion U.S.–Nigeria security alliance now facing political uncertainty | Business Insider Africa](#), November 2025

⁹ [US approves potential \\$346 million weapons sale to Nigeria to bolster security | AP News](#) Nigeria – Munitions, Precision Bombs, and Precision Rockets > Defense Security Cooperation Agency > Article Display | Defense Security Cooperation Agency

¹⁰ <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/understanding-sharia-intersection-islam-and-law>

¹¹ Global Terrorism Index, 2025 <https://www.economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Global-Terrorism-Index-2025.pdf>

¹² [Borno State: Boko Haram kills at least 60 in overnight attack](#)

¹³ [Nigeria: Mounting death toll and looming humanitarian crisis amid unchecked attacks by armed groups - Amnesty International Nigeria](#)

¹⁴ [Nigerian govt disputes Amnesty International's report on insecurity under Tinubu](#)

¹⁵ [OCTOBER 2025 HUMAN RIGHTS DASHBOARD - National Human Rights Commission](#)

specifically targeted in relation to their religious identity accounted for only 5 percent of reported events targeting civilians¹⁶.”

In recent years, most victims¹⁷ of violence in the Middle Belt have been Christians in farming communities and from various ethnic groups. Most are presumed to have been killed by herders who are predominantly Fulani and Muslim, but they were not killed explicitly because of their faith. Some political and traditional leaders in the Middle-Belt have sometimes described the killings in their region as “genocidal”, however, they also often elaborate that the killings are motivated by ethnic or material considerations such as land, rather than religious differences¹⁸.

It is also important to consider that in some regions of the country the perpetrators of violence against Christians are also Christians themselves. A good example is in the predominantly Christian South-East region¹⁹ of the country, where at least 1,844 people were killed between January 2021 and June 2023²⁰. Finally, claims of state-sponsored or targeted anti-Christian violence fail to consider Nigeria’s imperfect but still substantial support for the free exercise of religion, as guaranteed by the country’s constitution. However, there is no denying that in some parts of the country, both Christians and Muslims complain of constraints to practice their religion freely. In some of the twelve northern states where governments incorporated Sharia law into their legal systems two decades ago, citizens have been killed or imprisoned over charges of blasphemy. But, for the most part, Nigerians of all faiths live together, peacefully, often intermarrying, with President Tinubu who is a Muslim and married to a Christian, often cited as an example.

Nevertheless, the high level of insecurity across the country has left many religious communities, including Christians, at risk, due to the shortfalls of political will in the government and operational capacity in the military and other security services. Whether labeled as “banditry” or “terrorism” or “communal clashes” or “ethno-religious conflict,” at the root of this violence is a failure of governance to meet the population’s most basic needs – not only livelihoods, education, and health care, but also their need for perpetrators²¹ to be held legitimately accountable²². The failure to hold perpetrators of these violent acts accountable has created both a sense of impunity among those who carry out these attacks and a sense of grievance in the affected communities.

The reaction of Nigerian citizens to the U.S redesignation of Nigeria as a “Country of Particular Concern” and the subsequent threats regarding the persecution of Christians are mixed. On one hand, Nigerians, Christian groups in particular, welcome the current international spotlight, viewing it as an overdue opportunity to pressure the Nigerian government into taking decisive action against the violence. At the same time, many Nigerians of all faiths, including Christians, worry that President Trump’s rhetoric—especially the threat of unilateral military action against the country—will be counterproductive and draw attention away from the specific problem of pervasive insecurity across the country, by inflaming existing political tensions and divisions.

¹⁶ [Fact Sheet: Attacks on Christians Spike in Nigeria Alongside Overall Rise in Violence Targeting Civilians | ACLED](#)

¹⁷ <https://www.usip.org/publications/2017/09/nigeria-conflict-middle-belt-oge-onubogu-testimony>

¹⁸ <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2025/04/genocide-in-plateau-inside-story-of-plot-to-grab-land-wipe-out-natives-gov-mutfwang/>

¹⁹ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr44/9363/2025/en/>

²⁰ <https://www.thecable.ng/christians-killing-christians-in-south-east-its-not-about-religion-says-soludo-on-genocide-claims/>

²¹ <https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/03/nigeria-needs-justice-not-payoffs-build-peace>

²² The Economist, 2024, [Kidnappers are wreaking havoc in Nigeria](#)

There are also concerns that it would undermine the sovereignty of Nigeria and could create an excuse for a military takeover, which would most certainly cause chaos in the country, and in the broader West Africa and Sahel, as Nigeria is the anchor of security in the region.

Overall, public opinion polls and surveys show a broad consensus among Nigerians about the severity of the security challenges in their country²³. The polls also show that Nigerians value diverse communities, identify equally with their ethnicity and nationality, and believe there is more that unites Nigerians as one people than divides them. An Africa Polling Institute survey, the Nigeria Social Cohesion Survey 2025²⁴, for example, found that, while divisions among Nigerians are growing, Nigerians are still “willing to cooperate” in building unity, and that they are united in their struggle against economic realities, and their collective desire for peace.

So, back to the root causes. Achieving improved governance and accountability that can meet the needs of Nigerians and halt the violent turmoil will require Nigeria’s power structures to take the lead and to broaden dialogue with society and summon the utmost political will to tackle the insecurity. The United States can leverage this moment of diplomatic tension with Nigeria to support a more thorough dialogue that advances real change. This will require a dialogue between the United States and counterparts in Nigeria of unprecedented breadth and honesty, engaging not only Nigeria’s national leadership but also its state and local political leaders and with civil society.

With that, I offer the following recommendations:

Recommendations for the United States:

Engage deeply and broadly with communities across Nigeria to better understand the nuances driving the conflicts in the country. While it’s never wise to dismiss religion as a cause of conflict, it is unproductive to label a conflict as solely driven by religion²⁵, or to single out just one group as a victim when there are so many other factors at play. The root causes of Nigeria’s conflicts and insecurity are deeper and more complex than are generally discussed—and that violence is more a symptom than a cause of the real problem. While there is a constructive role for the U.S. to play, it must avoid any policy of selective intervention and make it clear that its concerns incorporate all Nigerians of all religions, in order to avoid deepening sectarian divisions in the country.

Prioritize security governance, to help tackle the violence. The U.S. should take a fresh look at its existing security cooperation with Nigeria, and work with its counterparts in Nigeria to design a security assistance program that prioritizes security governance and conditions future military training and equipment on demonstrated progress on real reforms. The fresh look should emphasize partnership sustained over the long term, looking beyond only support for military training and equipment, but seeking areas across the security sector bureaucracy where cooperation is still possible such as, intelligence sharing, rule of law, and governance. It should also prioritize efforts that are

²³ [AD604-Nigerians-say-country-is-unsafe-Afrobarometer-17feb23.pdf](https://africapoling.org/2025/07/08/api-releases-2025-social-cohesion-report/)

²⁴ <https://africapoling.org/2025/07/08/api-releases-2025-social-cohesion-report/>

²⁵ Mercy Corps, 2021: ‘[FEAR OF THE UNKNOWN](#)’ Religion, Identity, and Conflict in Northern Nigeria,

most promising for real change, such as local or non-government initiatives. Security assistance should be shaped with long-term goals that will enable and incentivize specific reforms and benchmarks for accountability. Nigeria's partners must recognize that the country's political and security leaders bear a significant share of responsibility for many of Nigeria's security challenges²⁶.

Support local actors that are advancing inclusive peace and conflict resolution:

Nigeria's civil society is vibrant, and surveys show that Nigerians view religious leaders as more trustworthy, and less corrupt than public institutions²⁷. Peacebuilding programs that support moderate religious leaders, community networks, and civic actors to develop early warning systems and balanced messaging could help to avert crisis and shift the discussion from the identities and religious backgrounds of those involved in the conflict to focus more on developing sustainable solutions to end the violence. These community-led peacebuilding programs are low-cost and have proven to be highly effective in Nigeria's Middle Belt²⁸, however, the administration's cuts to development assistance have terminated some of these U.S.-funded peacebuilding programs²⁹, and recent threats to stop all development assistance to Nigeria risk undermining ongoing peacebuilding efforts.

Work more with Nigeria's disparate states and its growing city centers: The country's 36 states hold significant power in the realpolitik of Nigeria — and they are distinct enough to warrant specific attention. The U.S. government should decentralize its engagement with Nigeria by strengthening its dialogues with, and support to, receptive government and civic leaders at state and local levels. The states of the Middle Belt, with its population of 45 million, would be a good place to start, given their need for assistance with local-level security to create the safety needed for agriculture and manufacturing that is its base to thrive. This does not mean solely security assistance, but rather a framework that connects economic development with building sustainable peace by addressing the root causes of conflict through economic revitalization, institutional reform, and business-led initiatives.

Rethink reactive quick-win actions that may seem beneficial to Nigerians but could have larger and far-reaching negative impacts. If the Trump administration follows through on its threats of unilateral military action in Nigeria, it risks endangering the Christians that it claims it wants to protect. It could polarize Nigerians along religious divides, undermine local efforts of improving inter-faith relations, exacerbate extremism, and increase insecurity in the country. Even if the U.S. does not follow through with a military operation, its threats have already provided fuel for radical extremists in the country. It has also generated toxic commentary among Nigerians especially on social media which is not conducive for building the unity that many Nigerians crave. Instead of being reactive, the U.S. should focus on proactive long-term engagement in Nigeria that

²⁶ [Testimony by Oge Onubogu on the Future of Freedom in Nigeria_0.pdf](#), Oge Onubogu Testifies Before the House Foreign Affairs Committee on the Future of Freedom in Nigeria | Wilson Center

²⁷ [AD900: Nigerians view religious leaders as more trustworthy, less corrupt than public institutions – Afrobarometer](#)

²⁸ [PRG_NigeriaImpactEvaluation_R_lo_FINv3_Web.pdf](#)

²⁹ [The cuts that bleed: What happens when peace programs go dark | Devex](#)

prioritizes institutional support to address the root causes of instability rather than just responding to crisis.

Revive the U.S. congressional bipartisan caucus on Nigeria which served as a space to prioritize discussions on issues of U.S.-Nigeria relations. U.S. relationship with Nigeria is among the most important and strategic partnerships in Africa. Nigeria's population is projected to overtake the United States and become the third most populous country in the world by 2050. An active congressional bipartisan caucus will signify the importance of this relationship, elevate discussions, and create a forum to proactively consider wide perspectives to better inform legislative responses to a broad range of issues, including those being discussed here today.

Recommendations for the Nigerian Government:

Appoint a Nigerian Ambassador to the United States. It has been over two years since Nigeria recalled its Ambassador from Washington, and from other diplomatic missions worldwide. Nigeria needs senior diplomatic representation in Washington to deepen its engagement with the U.S. across all spectrums (including on discussions like these), and to support and engage with Nigeria's dynamic and largely successful diaspora. The Nigerian government needs to improve its engagement with international actors, to clearly communicate Nigeria's security realities and to manage narratives about the country more effectively. In this regard, an urgent priority is for President Tinubu to appoint a competent Nigerian Ambassador to the U.S., as I recommended in my testimony in March³⁰.

Make accountability – of perpetrators and of the authorities -- central to the response. Nigerians need justice. Criminality in the Middle Belt, as elsewhere, has grown in part because of impunity. The trends underlying the violence can be traced and can be anticipated if the appropriate government security agencies have effective early warning and rapid response mechanisms. The narrative of "Christian genocide" has been able to gain traction in part because Nigeria's mass killings have gone on for years with no accountability or clear end in sight, and faith communities feel abandoned. The Nigerian government needs to summon political will, and channel greater resources towards dismantling the extremist and criminal groups operating across Nigeria's Northern and Middle Belt regions.

Get serious about police reform. Nigeria currently has a single federalized police force, which is not effective for the country's diverse and complex security challenges. There is a longstanding active national debate and ongoing legislative process to introduce state-level police. However, police reform should not be about state policing only, but it should consist of a broader conversation that is rooted in the country's present realities and applies lessons learned from past efforts. There has already been a failure of at least three police reform committees under different administrations (in 2006, 2009, and 2012). The Tinubu administration needs to move faster in implementing ongoing initiatives for

³⁰ <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/oge-onubogu-testifies-us-house-representatives-conflict-and-persecution-nigeria-and-case>

improving citizens' security, such as quickly recruiting the 30,000³¹ new police personnel he approved in June. The Nigerian military is overextended and performing duties that should fall under the purview of the police. A fundamental step would be to redirect the large numbers of police who provide personal security services to wealthy elites, assigning those officers to instead address serious crimes.

Coordinate federal and state action and messaging: effective coordination so desperately needed among Nigeria's federal and state governments is too often undermined by finger pointing. That must stop. Since assuming office, President Tinubu has called for better synergy and cooperation among security agencies to address insecurity in the country. However, concrete steps must be taken to move this aspiration into reality.

Lay the groundwork for peaceful elections in 2027: religion in Nigeria is a potent trigger for electoral violence when it is exploited for political gain. The current chairperson of Nigeria's Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) completed his tenure in October 2025. This leadership transition is an opportunity for the Nigerian government to restore public trust in the electoral system by prioritizing electoral reforms to ensure INEC's independence and transparency, fostering responsible political behavior, and strengthening security and judicial processes.

The violence in Nigeria has caused significant loss of life, period! but viewing the country's complex security landscape in narrow religious terms and focusing on one group of victims rather than threats faced by everyone is counterproductive. Clearly, a fresh approach is needed, both for Nigeria and the United States. Nigeria should seize this moment to honestly address the institutional weaknesses in its security, judicial, and conflict prevention systems that have hampered its capacity to end the killings and hold perpetrators accountable. The U.S. should maintain open lines for engagement, dialogue and cooperation with the Nigerian government and the Nigerian people, and its approach should include a better understanding of Nigeria's complexities. Both countries should leverage this moment of diplomatic tension to redefine and strengthen the U.S.-Nigeria bilateral relationship and work together to address the wider threats of jihadist violence in Nigeria, and in the broader West Africa and Sahel region. The vital interests of both countries are at stake.

Thank you for inviting me to testify, and I look forward to your questions.

³¹ <https://thenationonlineng.net/fg-will-rebuild-police-colleges-ahead-tinubus-30000-personnel-recruitment/>

