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RELIGION AND VIOLENCE IN NIGERIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR SECURITY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract

In the 21st century, Nigeria has confronted a complex security crisis in which religion frequently intersects with violence as both a mobilizing ideology and an exacerbating identity marker. Jihadist insurgencies led by Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), farmer-herder clashes in the Middle Belt that often acquire religious overtones, urban riots triggered by blasphemy accusations, and the instrumentalization of faith by political elites have together produced devastating human and developmental costs. This paper provides an empirically grounded analysis, drawing on longitudinal data from ACLED (2009-2025), the Global Terrorism Index 2025/2026, International Crisis Group analyses, IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix figures, and scholarly literature. It employs a hybrid theoretical framework integrating primordialism, instrumentalism, environmental security theory, and social identity theory, treating religion not as an independent cause but as the connective mechanism through which identity attachments, elite manipulation, ecological stress, and threat perception combine into sustained violence. The study shows that although only about 4.3% of security events (2020-2024) are explicitly religion-targeted, religious framing amplifies broader grievances over land, resources, governance failure, and elite competition. The implications for national security are severe: territorial fragmentation, erosion of social cohesion, economic stagnation, military overstretch, massive internal displacement (over 3.7 million IDPs nationwide as of early 2026), and risks of regional contagion across the Sahel and

Lake Chad Basin. The paper concludes with multi-layered recommendations spanning governance reform, climate adaptation, interfaith initiatives, and international partnership, arguing that only a holistic approach addressing both ideological drivers and structural root causes can safeguard Nigeria's stability.

Keywords: Religious violence, Boko Haram, ISWAP, farmer-herder conflict, national security, Nigeria, terrorism, internal displacement.

Introduction

Nigeria, as a secular state, is made up of highly developed and diversified religious groups. Apart from Christianity and Islam, which are the most widely practised, there are numerous local faiths grouped as Traditional Religions (National Bureau of Statistics, 2026). With an estimated population exceeding 220 million and a highly diverse ethno-religious composition (roughly 50% Muslim, 49% Christian, and indigenous beliefs), Nigeria stands as Africa's demographic and economic powerhouse (House of Commons Library, 2023). Yet since the return to democratic rule in 1999, the country has been plagued by recurrent episodes of violence in which religious identity plays a significant, if not always primary, role. The adoption of Sharia criminal law in twelve northern states shortly after 1999 heightened Christian-Muslim tensions, while the 2009 uprising by Boko Haram in Maiduguri transformed sporadic riots into a sustained jihadist insurgency that, at its 2014-2015 peak, was ranked the world's deadliest terrorist organization by the Global Terrorism Index (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2015).

In the 21st century, religious violence has evolved into hybrid threats. Jihadist groups explicitly invoke Salafi-jihadist ideology to justify attacks on the state, "apostate" Muslims, and civilians (Thurston, 2017). In the Middle Belt, longstanding competition between predominantly Christian sedentary farmers and predominantly Muslim nomadic Fulani herders has intensified amid climate change, population pressure, and desertification, frequently acquiring religious colouring in local narratives (Higazi, 2016; Kwaja & Ademola-Adelehin, 2018). Urban centres have witnessed deadly riots sparked by blasphemy allegations or provocative sermons. Political elites on all sides have occasionally instrumentalized religious sentiment for electoral gain or to deflect attention from governance failures (Meagher, 2014).

As of March 2026, the scale remains alarming. ACLED data indicate nearly 53,000 deaths from targeted political violence with religious dimensions since 2009. In 2025 alone, the country suffered 11,968 conflict-related fatalities, surpassing several active war zones in the Middle East and North Africa. Terrorism-specific deaths rose to 750 (a 46% increase from 2024), with ISWAP and Boko Haram accounting for 80% of the toll and Borno State bearing the brunt (67% of incidents and 72% of fatalities). Internal displacement figures from IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix (Round 50, July 2025) show 2,292,477 IDPs in the Northeast, while the North-Central and North-West zones host an additional 1.32 million. Beyond the human cost, religious violence has also degraded the everyday functioning of the state: Ibenwa et al. (2025) show that recurrent religiously inflected violence disrupts the delivery of basic public services, including healthcare, education, and security administration, in affected communities, compounding the governance failures that fuel the conflict in the first place. These figures underscore a protracted, multi-theatre crisis that threatens human lives, territorial integrity, economic development, and democratic consolidation.

Existing scholarship on Nigerian religious violence has tended to specialize narrowly: studies of Boko Haram and ISWAP (Thurston, 2017) rarely engage the Middle Belt farmer-herder literature (Higazi, 2016; Kwaja & Ademola-Adelehin, 2018), and both bodies of work are largely treated separately from broader analyses of elite instrumentalization and state capacity (Meagher, 2014). Few studies

integrate these strands within a single theoretical architecture capable of explaining why religion functions differently across these theatres while still remaining the common thread that amplifies otherwise distinct grievances. This paper addresses that gap by combining primordialist, instrumentalist, environmental security, and social identity perspectives into a single hybrid framework, applied to current empirical data through 2025-2026. Its distinct contribution is twofold: theoretically, it demonstrates how these four lenses interact rather than compete as explanations; empirically, it offers one of the most current data-grounded accounts of the crisis, capturing the 2025 jihadist resurgence that postdates most existing scholarly treatments.

This paper moves beyond simplistic binaries ("religious genocide" versus "purely resource-based conflict") to present a nuanced, data-driven analysis of the dynamics, drivers, and security implications of religion-linked violence in contemporary Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

Understanding the entanglement of religion and violence in Nigeria requires a multi-theoretical lens.

Primordialism (Horowitz, 1985) emphasizes the deep affective power of ethnic and religious identities, which create seemingly immutable "us versus them" boundaries. In Nigeria, colonial indirect rule and missionary activity reinforced Muslim-Christian divides, while pre-colonial jihads and missionary expansions left legacies of mistrust. Primordial attachments make religious identity a potent mobiliser during crises.

Instrumentalism highlights how political and economic elites deliberately manipulate religious sentiment for power or material gain (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Stern, 2003). Northern politicians have historically deployed Sharia rhetoric; southern leaders sometimes amplify Christian victimhood narratives. Religious leaders and vigilante groups may also exploit faith for recruitment or legitimacy, and weak state institutions create the permissive conditions in which such instrumentalization flourishes (Meagher, 2014).

Environmental security theory links violence to resource scarcity exacerbated by climate change (Homer-Dixon, 1999). Desertification in the far North has pushed Fulani herders southward into the Middle Belt, intensifying competition over arable land and water with indigenous farming communities (Higazi, 2016). What begins as a livelihood dispute easily acquires religious and ethnic framing when perpetrators and victims belong to different faith groups (Kwaja & Ademola-Adelehin, 2018).

Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) complements these approaches by explaining how perceived threats strengthen in-group cohesion while heightening out-group hostility. Jacoby (2008) demonstrates that in protracted conflict settings, repeated exposure to violence reliably hardens collective identity boundaries regardless of the specific ideological content of the conflict. In Nigeria's case, exposure to violence has been associated with increased ethnoreligious hostility, particularly among Christian communities facing Fulani herder attacks, though the effect appears weaker or more context-dependent among Muslim populations, where intra-faith violence (e.g., Boko Haram targeting fellow Muslims) predominates.

These frameworks are interdependent rather than competing. Religion functions as the connective tissue that binds primordial loyalties, elite opportunism, ecological stress, and identity-based threat perception into sustained violence: primordialism explains why religious boundaries carry such emotional weight; instrumentalism explains who activates them and why; environmental security theory explains where and when resource pressure creates the conditions for conflict to emerge; and

social identity theory explains how exposure to violence then entrenches and reproduces those boundaries over time. No single lens, applied alone, accounts for the full pattern observed in Nigeria's multiple, simultaneous theatres of religiously inflected conflict.

Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative secondary data analysis design. It does not generate new primary data through fieldwork, survey instruments, or interviews; rather, it synthesizes and interprets existing quantitative and qualitative data through the hybrid theoretical framework outlined above.

Three categories of sources were used. First, longitudinal conflict-event data were drawn from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED, 2009-2025), the Global Terrorism Index (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2026), and ACAPS Nigeria conflict dynamics reporting (2025), which together provide fatality counts, incident frequencies, and actor attributions disaggregated by zone and year. Second, displacement data were drawn from the International Organization for Migration's Displacement Tracking Matrix (Round 50, July 2025). Third, qualitative and interpretive material was drawn from International Crisis Group reports on farmer-herder violence and the Northeast insurgency, and from peer-reviewed scholarly literature on Boko Haram and ISWAP (Thurston, 2017), Middle Belt farmer-herder dynamics (Higazi, 2016; Kwaja & Ademola-Adelehin, 2018), and Nigerian security-sector governance (Meagher, 2014).

Sources were selected for relevance (direct bearing on religiously inflected violence and security outcomes in Nigeria), recency (priority given to data covering 2020 onward, supplemented by historical sources for context), and credibility (preference for data providers with transparent, peer-reviewed, or institutionally audited methodologies). Data were triangulated across sources where possible; where figures diverged, the most recent and methodologically transparent source was prioritized, and the discrepancy is noted in the text.

This approach has identifiable limitations. Secondary data analysis cannot capture local, community-level dynamics, perpetrator motivations, or victim narratives with the granularity that primary fieldwork would allow. ACLED and similar event datasets face well-documented challenges in consistently distinguishing religious motivation from overlapping ethnic, economic, and political drivers, meaning that the 4.3% figure for "explicitly religion-targeted" events should be read as a conservative, coding-dependent estimate rather than a precise measure of religion's causal role. Some institutional sources (ACAPS, ICG, SBM Intelligence) do not always disclose full methodological detail, which constrains independent verification of certain figures. Finally, because this is a desk-based review of existing data and literature, the analysis is bounded by what these sources have chosen to measure and report, and may underrepresent dynamics that institutional monitors are less equipped to capture, such as intra-household or theological dimensions of radicalization. No primary human-subjects data were collected, so no ethical clearance was required; the analytical choices made nonetheless sought to avoid amplifying single-source claims and to attribute contested figures transparently.

Historical Context and Evolution of Religious Violence

Religious tensions in Nigeria predate independence. Colonial amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates in 1914 superimposed Christian missionary influence in the South onto Islamic emirate structures in the North. Post-independence crises, such as the 1966-1970 civil war (with its ethnic-religious undertones) and the 1980s Maitatsine uprisings, foreshadowed later patterns. The 1999 democratic transition and subsequent Sharia implementation in northern states triggered riots in Kaduna, Jos, and elsewhere, killing thousands.

The turning point arrived in 2009 with Boko Haram's violent campaign against Western education and the Nigerian state. The group's 2014 territorial gains, abduction of the Chibok schoolgirls, and pledge of allegiance to ISIS brought global attention. Although Nigerian and regional forces reclaimed territory by 2015-2016, internal splits led to the emergence of ISWAP, which adopted more sophisticated tactics including drone use and night raids. Inter-factional fighting between Boko Haram (JAS) and ISWAP has continued, often with devastating civilian consequences (Thurston, 2017).

Concurrently, Middle Belt violence escalated. International Crisis Group (2018, 2021) reports documented how farmer-herder clashes, once seasonal and negotiable, became deadlier due to proliferation of small arms, weak governance, and climate-induced southward herder migration. Higazi (2016) and Kwaja and Ademola-Adelehin (2018) similarly argue that while not all incidents are religiously motivated, attacks on predominantly Christian farming villages by Muslim herder militias have fuelled perceptions of targeted persecution, even as data show that jihadist groups kill far more Muslims than Christians overall.

Urban religious riots triggered by perceived blasphemy, provocative preaching, or electoral disputes have erupted periodically in Kano, Jos, Kaduna, and other cities, demonstrating religion's capacity to ignite rapid, contagious violence.

Empirical Patterns and Trends: Data Presentation

Quantitative evidence reveals both the scale and the complexity of the crisis.

Table 1: Terrorism Fatalities and Incidents in Nigeria, 2024-2025 (GTI 2026)

Year	Terrorism Incidents	Terrorism Deaths	% Change in Deaths	Primary Groups Responsible
2024	120	513 (approx.)	—	ISWAP & Boko Haram
2025	171	750	+46%	ISWAP (384 deaths), Boko Haram (213 deaths); ~80% combined

Source: Global Terrorism Index 2026, Institute for Economics & Peace.

Table 2: Conflict Fatalities by Zone, January 2023 - October 2025 (ACLED/ACAPS)

Zone	Fatalities	Incidents	Avg. Deaths/Incident	Key Drivers
Northeast	7,743	1,743	>4	Jihadist insurgency (Boko Haram/ISWAP)
NorthCentral (Middle Belt)	~5,500	>2,200	~2.5	Farmer-herder clashes
Northwest	Significant share	High	Variable	Banditry & emerging jihadist links
National (2025)	11,968	—	—	Multi-theatre overlap

Sources: ACLED (accessed 2025 data); ACAPS Nigeria Conflict Dynamics Report (November 2025).

Figure 1 presents cumulative and annual fatalities from targeted political violence with religious dimensions between 2009 and 2025. The trend shows a sharp escalation from 2009, a dramatic acceleration around 2014 (the period of Boko Haram's territorial peak), a partial decline through 2016-2022 attributable to military operations, and a renewed surge in 2025 driven by jihadist resurgence and intensified farmer-herder violence. Northeast lethality remains exceptionally high despite fluctuating incident numbers.

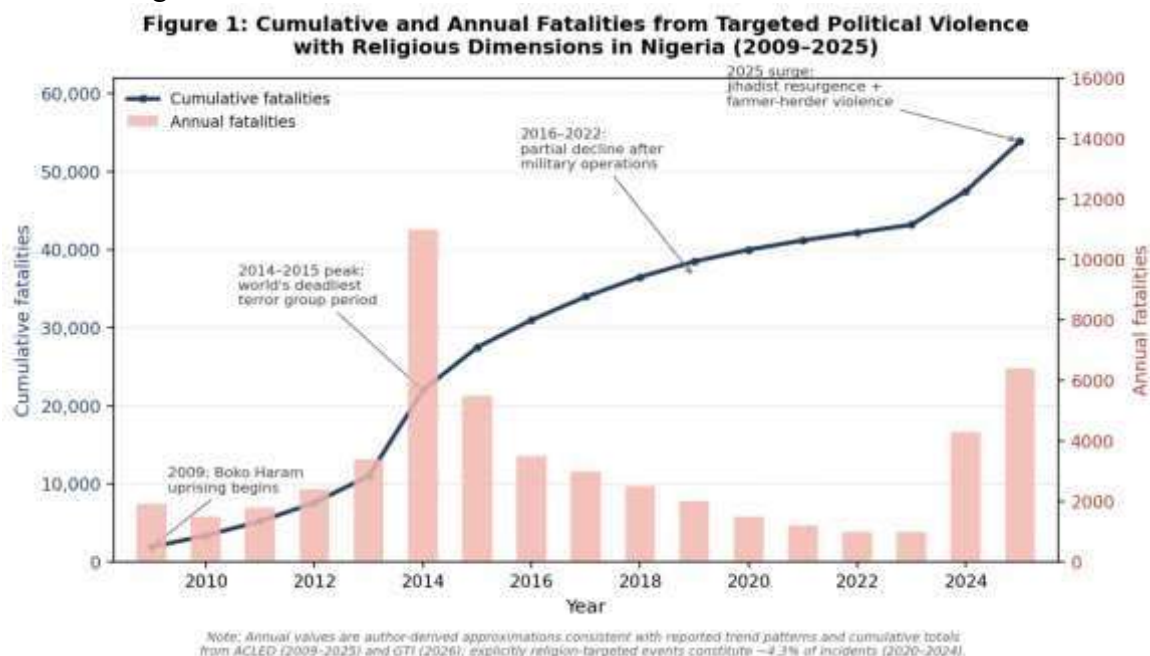


Figure 1. Cumulative and annual fatalities from targeted political violence with religious dimensions in Nigeria, 2009-2025. Data conceptualised from ACLED (2009-2025), GTI (2026), and author analysis.

ACLED analyses indicate that explicitly religion-targeted attacks constitute only approximately 4.3% of total security events between 2020 and 2024, yet their symbolic and psychological impact far exceeds their numerical share. Most victims of Boko Haram and ISWAP are fellow Muslims, complicating simplistic "Christian versus Muslim" narratives. In the Middle Belt, however, religious identity often aligns with livelihood roles (Christian farmers vs. Muslim herders), making violence readily interpretable through a faith lens, a dynamic Higazi (2016) terms the "ethnicization and religionization" of what begins as a resource conflict.

This interpretation is not uncontested. A significant body of scholarship, including Kwaja and Ademola-Adelehin (2018), argues that Middle Belt violence is primarily resource-based, driven by competition over shrinking grazing land and water access amid demographic growth and climate stress, with religious framing operating as a post-hoc narrative device rather than a root cause. On this view, removing the religious lens would still leave most of the underlying conflict drivers intact, since farmers and herders of the same faith have also clashed over land in other contexts. This paper's position, consistent with its hybrid framework, is that the two explanations are not mutually exclusive: resource scarcity is the proximate trigger in most individual incidents, but religious identity shapes how violence is interpreted, remembered, and retaliated against, which in turn affects the trajectory and intensity of subsequent rounds of conflict. The disagreement is therefore less about whether resource scarcity matters (both camps agree it does) than about how much independent causal weight to assign to religious identity once scarcity is accounted for.

Internal displacement compounds the crisis. IOM data (Round 50, July 2025) record 2,292,477 IDPs in the Northeast, with Borno State hosting the vast majority (approximately 1.75 million).

NorthCentral and North-West zones add another 1.32 million IDPs as of late 2024/early 2025. Protracted displacement strains host communities, disrupts education and livelihoods, and creates conditions conducive to further recruitment into armed groups.

Security Implications

The security ramifications are multi-dimensional and mutually reinforcing. **i.**

Territorial and Governance Fragmentation

Persistent religious-linked violence has created large swathes of territory where state authority is either absent or contested, effectively producing "ungoverned" or "alternately governed" spaces. In the Northeast, Boko Haram and ISWAP have long exploited rural areas and Lake Chad islands as operational bases, even after losing most urban strongholds by 2016-2017 (Thurston, 2017). ACLED data for 2025 show that ISWAP alone conducted 171 terrorism incidents, with 67% occurring in Borno State and an average of more than four deaths per event. These groups impose rudimentary taxation, administer justice, and provide selective protection, functioning as de facto parallel governments in pockets of territory.

In the Northwest and North-Central zones, bandit networks, some of which have adopted loose jihadist rhetoric, control forest reserves and mining sites, collecting levies from communities and artisanal miners. The International Crisis Group (2020) has documented how bandit commanders in Zamfara, Katsina, and Kaduna operate as local warlords, negotiating with politicians and security officials while extorting populations. The result is a patchwork of governance in which state institutions are either physically absent or compromised, undermining the monopoly on legitimate violence and creating safe havens for criminal economies (kidnapping for ransom, cattle rustling, gold-mining extortion) that generate revenue independent of the formal state.

This fragmentation threatens national cohesion in two ways. First, it physically disconnects communities from central authority, fostering local allegiances to non-state actors. Second, it weakens the federal government's capacity to project power uniformly across the federation, raising the prospect of de facto balkanization if current trends continue unchecked.

ii. Erosion of Social Cohesion and National Integration

Repeated cycles of religiously framed violence have deepened mutual suspicion between Nigeria's major faith communities, eroding the fragile sense of shared citizenship that underpins national integration. In the Middle Belt, attacks on predominantly Christian farming villages by predominantly Muslim Fulani herder militias have produced widespread perceptions among Christian communities of targeted religious persecution. Conversely, many Muslim herders view reprisal attacks by farming vigilantes and security forces as evidence of systemic bias against their faith and livelihood. These reciprocal narratives have hardened group boundaries, reducing inter-communal trust and complicating reconciliation efforts.

Social identity theory helps explain the mechanism: exposure to violence strengthens in-group solidarity while heightening out-group hostility (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Jacoby, 2008). A 2025 survey by the Network of Nigerian Facilitators documented elevated ethnoreligious hostility among Christian respondents in Plateau and Benue states following major attacks in 2023-2025, though the effect was weaker among Muslim respondents, where intra-faith violence (e.g., Boko Haram/ISWAP targeting fellow Muslims) predominates. In urban centres such as Jos, Kaduna, and Kano, episodic riots triggered by blasphemy allegations or provocative preaching further reinforce polarization.

The cumulative impact is a weakening of the federal character principle and the idea of Nigeria as a single political community. Secessionist rhetoric in the Southeast, while primarily ethnic, gains traction partly because of broader distrust in a state perceived as unable or unwilling to protect all citizens equally. Over time, this erosion of social cohesion undermines the legitimacy of national institutions and increases the risk of wider societal breakdown.

iii. Economic and Developmental Costs

Religious violence imposes substantial direct and indirect economic costs that constrain Nigeria's development trajectory. The Northeast's agricultural heartland, once a major producer of cereals, livestock, and fish, remains devastated by jihadist insurgency. Farms lie abandoned, markets are disrupted, and trade routes are insecure. The World Bank (2023) estimated that conflict in the Northeast had already cost the region over US\$9 billion in lost output between 2011 and 2020; updated figures for 2025-2026 are likely significantly higher given renewed ISWAP activity.

In the Middle Belt, farmer-herder clashes have similarly reduced agricultural productivity. Benue State, previously known as the "food basket of the nation," has seen sharp declines in yam, rice, and maize output due to displacement and fear of farming. Nationally, food inflation reached record levels in 2025, partly attributable to insecurity disrupting supply chains (SBM Intelligence, 2025; National Bureau of Statistics, 2026). SBM Intelligence (2025) estimates that the cumulative economic cost of conflict, including lost agricultural output, ransom payments, military expenditure, and investment flight, now exceeds US\$15 billion annually.

Foreign direct investment in mining, agriculture, and infrastructure has plummeted in conflict-affected zones. The artisanal gold sector in Zamfara and Kebbi, once a potential revenue source, has instead become a funding mechanism for banditry and jihadist groups. The overall developmental drag is severe: resources that should be invested in education, health, and climate adaptation are diverted to emergency response and security operations.

iv. Military and Law-Enforcement Overstretch

The Nigerian Armed Forces and police face unprecedented operational demands. They must simultaneously counter jihadist insurgency in the Northeast, banditry and kidnapping in the Northwest/North-Central, secessionist agitation and "unknown gunmen" violence in the Southeast, oil-related militancy in the Niger Delta, and election-related unrest nationwide. In 2025, ACLED recorded 171 terrorism incidents in the Northeast alone, while banditry-related fatalities in the Northwest reached 2,724 (Nextier Advisory, 2025). The military has maintained prolonged deployments, leading to documented cases of low morale, desertions, and human rights concerns (Meagher, 2014).

Overstretch has tangible consequences. Forward operating bases have been repeatedly overrun (e.g., New Marte and Wulgo in Borno in 2025), exposing troops to high-risk ambushes. Police capacity in rural areas is minimal, leaving communities vulnerable to bandit predation and vigilante self-help. The strain on personnel and equipment diverts resources from training, maintenance, and modernization, creating a cycle of tactical setbacks and reduced public confidence in state security forces.

v. Regional and International Ramifications

Nigeria's religious violence has clear cross-border implications. In the Lake Chad Basin, Boko Haram and ISWAP operate across porous frontiers with Cameroon, Chad, and Niger. Cross-border raids, refugee flows, and arms trafficking have destabilized neighbouring states. Cameroon's Far North region has suffered repeated attacks, while Niger and Chad have seen spillover violence. The

Multinational Joint Task Force has achieved partial successes but remains under-resourced and hampered by coordination challenges.

Internationally, Nigeria's rise to fourth place on the Global Terrorism Index 2026 has drawn increased attention from Western governments. The United States' re-designation of Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern for religious freedom violations (2025-2026 reports) reflects growing concern over targeted violence against Christians in the Middle Belt and the state's perceived inability to protect religious minorities (Bakare, 2026). Aid and security cooperation are increasingly conditional on measurable governance and human rights improvements, adding diplomatic pressure.

Failure to contain the crisis risks broader Sahelian contagion. The Lake Chad Basin already hosts one of the world's largest humanitarian emergencies; continued escalation could destabilize the wider region, intensify migration flows toward Europe, and create new opportunities for transnational jihadist networks.

vi. Humanitarian and Protection Crisis

The humanitarian toll of religiously inflected violence extends well beyond fatality counts and displacement figures, generating a protection crisis with long-term generational consequences. Gender-based violence is endemic in conflict-affected areas: women and girls abducted by Boko Haram and ISWAP, most visibly in the 2014 Chibok and 2018 Dapchi abductions, have faced forced marriage, sexual slavery, and, in some cases, coercion into suicide bombing missions. UNICEF and OCHA reporting on the Northeast has repeatedly documented sexual violence, including conflict-related rape and survival sex in displacement camps, as a persistent feature of the crisis, with humanitarian agencies noting chronic underreporting due to stigma and fear of reprisal.

Child recruitment and exploitation remain severe. The United Nations has verified thousands of cases of child recruitment and use by armed groups in the Northeast since 2013, alongside recurring patterns of child abduction, forced labour, and use of children, including girls as young as seven, in attacks. Many children associated with armed groups face prolonged detention or social exclusion upon release, complicating reintegration.

Humanitarian access has been severely restricted by insecurity, with aid agencies repeatedly suspending operations in parts of Borno and Yobe states following attacks on humanitarian convoys and personnel, and with several local government areas remaining largely inaccessible to international organizations except via military escort. This access crisis compounds suffering in hard-to-reach areas, where malnutrition, disease, and unmet medical needs go unaddressed.

The cumulative effect is a generational vulnerability: children who have witnessed extreme violence, lost caregivers, or experienced displacement face heightened risk of trauma-related psychological harm and, in some documented cases, of recruitment into the very armed groups that victimized their communities, a cycle that humanitarian and development actors increasingly describe as central to the conflict's self-perpetuation.

Limitations

Several limitations bound the scope of this analysis. First, as a desk-based synthesis of secondary sources, the paper cannot capture local, community-level dynamics or the lived perspectives of perpetrators and victims with the depth that primary fieldwork, interviews, or ethnographic research would provide. Second, conflict-event datasets such as ACLED face well-documented coding challenges in distinguishing religious motivation from overlapping ethnic, economic, and political drivers; the 4.3% figure for explicitly religion-targeted events should therefore be read as a

conservative, classification-dependent estimate rather than a precise causal measure. Third, some institutional sources drawn upon (ACAPS, SBM Intelligence, Nextier Advisory) do not always publish full methodological detail, constraining independent verification of specific figures, including the US\$15 billion annual cost-of-conflict estimate. Finally, the analysis is necessarily bounded by what existing institutional monitors and scholars have chosen to measure and report, and may therefore underrepresent theological, intra-household, or psychological dimensions of radicalisation that are harder to capture through event-based or survey data. These limitations do not undermine the paper's central argument but should temper the precision with which its quantitative claims are interpreted.

Policy Recommendations

Addressing religion-linked violence demands a comprehensive, multi-pronged strategy that tackles both proximate triggers and structural drivers. The following are recommended.

- i. **Governance and Rule-of-Law Reforms:** Strengthen institutions to reduce elite instrumentalization of religion. Judicial reform, anti-corruption measures, and equitable resource distribution are essential to restore public trust.
- ii. **Climate and Resource Management:** Invest in climate-resilient agriculture, modern ranching systems, and negotiated grazing corridors to depoliticize farmer-herder conflicts. Integrate environmental security into national policy.
- iii. **Interfaith and Civic Education Initiatives:** Expand programmes through the National Orientation Agency, religious leaders, and civil society to promote tolerance, shared citizenship, and counter-narratives to extremism. Regulate hate speech and provocative preaching without violating freedoms.
- iv. **Security Sector Transformation:** Enhance intelligence-led, community-oriented policing and military operations while prioritizing human rights and accountability. Improve coordination across federal, state, and local levels.
- v. **Countering Violent Extremism and De-radicalization:** Develop ideologically sensitive programmes that address grievances without stigmatizing entire religious communities. Engage former combatants and at-risk youth.
- vi. **Durable Solutions for Displacement:** Accelerate safe, voluntary, and sustainable returns or local integration of IDPs through livelihood support, infrastructure reconstruction, and landrights clarification.
- vii. **Regional and International Cooperation:** Strengthen the Multinational Joint Task Force in the Lake Chad Basin and pursue diplomatic engagement with neighbours. International partners should provide targeted capacity-building and development assistance conditional on measurable governance improvements.

Conclusion

Religion and violence in 21st-century Nigeria represent a dangerous symbiosis in which faith is rarely the sole cause but frequently serves as a potent accelerator and legitimizer of deeper grievances rooted in resource scarcity, weak governance, elite manipulation, and identity-based fears. By adopting a holistic approach that simultaneously addresses ideological drivers, structural inequalities, and environmental pressures, Nigeria can begin to disentangle religion from violence. Success will require courageous leadership, inclusive dialogue, and sustained investment in human security. Failure risks not only continued human suffering but also permanent fragmentation, economic decline, and wider regional instability.

Nigeria's demographic vitality, cultural richness, and resilience remain assets. Transforming its diversity from a source of division into a foundation for strength is the central security imperative of the 21st century.

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