CENTRAL NIGERIA

OVERCOMING DANGEROUS SPEECH AND ENDEMIC RELIGIOUS DIVIDES

Views of a window inside the National Church of Nigeria (L) and the front of the Abuja National Mosque (R), on USCIRF visits to Nigeria in 2018.

CENTRAL NIGERIA

OVERCOMING DANGEROUS SPEECH AND ENDEMIC RELIGIOUS DIVIDES

By Ferdaouis Bagga,
Policy Analyst

United States Commission on International Religious Freedom

WHO WE ARE

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) that monitors the universal right to freedom of religion or belief abroad. USCIRF uses international standards to monitor violations of religious freedom or belief abroad and makes policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and Congressional leaders of both political parties. The Commission's work is supported by a professional, nonpartisan staff of regional subject matter experts. USCIRF is separate from the State Department, although the Department's Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom is a non-voting, *ex officio* Commissioner.

WHAT IS RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Inherent in religious freedom is the right to believe or not believe as one's conscience leads, and live out one's beliefs openly, peacefully, and without fear. Freedom of religion or belief is an expansive right that includes the freedoms of thought, conscience, expression, association, and assembly. While religious freedom is America's first freedom, it also is a core human right international law and treaty recognize; a necessary component of U.S. foreign policy and America's commitment to defending democracy and freedom globally; and a vital element of national security, critical to ensuring a more peaceful, prosperous, and stable world.

PROFESSIONAL STAFF

Dwight Bashir, *Director of Research and Policy*

Elizabeth K. Cassidy, *Director of International Law and Policy*

Thomas Kraemer, *Director of Operations and Finance*

Isaac Six, *Director of Congressional Affairs and Communications*

Tina L. Mufford, *Deputy Director of Research and Policy*

Ferdaouis Bagga, *Policy Analyst*

Jason Morton, *Policy Analyst*

Dominic Nardi, *Policy Analyst*

Scott Weiner, *Policy Analyst*

Kurt Werthmuller, *Policy Analyst*

Keely Bakken, *Researcher*

Alex Iverson, *Researcher*

Patrick Greenwalt, *Researcher*

Zach Udin, *Research Assistant*

Kirsten Lavery, *International Legal Specialist*

Javier Peña, *Communications Specialist*

Henry Young, *Management and Program Analyst*

Table of Contents

Executive Summary

In Nigeria, a range of state and societal violations have adversely impacted religious freedom conditions in the country. As a result, since 2009, USCIRF has recommended the U.S. Department of State designate Nigeria as a "country of particular concern," or CPC. Some of the most egregious are the denials of the right to life, liberty, and the security of people on the basis of religion or belief. Divides between religious communities and the spread of dangerous speech that incites further violence often prompt or escalate these violations. The Nigerian government has yet to find sustainable solutions to perennial conflict and religious polarization. In addition, the terrorist group Boko Haram has waged war in Nigeria for 10 years to eliminate religious freedom and impose an absolute religious authority in the northeast. State security forces, too, have arrested, detained, and killed individuals over differences of religion or belief. Moreover, the longstanding problem of sectarian conflict around ethno-religious divides, resources, and property and citizenship rights between citizens in the Middle Belt region of the country escalated in 2018.

Dangerous speech and polarizing narratives around religion have fueled violence, discrimination, and segregation between Muslims and Christians for decades, particularly, in central Nigeria. Some religious and political leaders have warned that national and state elections in February and March 2019 could be a flashpoint for further violence along ethnic and religious lines, in part due to polarization and disinformation, voter suppression and intimidation, and other threats to a peaceful process.

A number of religious leaders, non-governmental organizations, and government actors have proposed a range of solutions and made attempts to repair deeply entrenched religious divisions, such as making statements condemning hate speech or participating in interfaith fora, with varied success. The United States has also supported efforts to improve peace and security for Nigerian citizens to freely manifest their religion or belief. Towards that end, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom recommends that the United States increase its efforts to creatively and more effectively decrease religious discord, dangerous speech, and violence in the Middle Belt. The U.S. government should utilize the tools available under the International Religious Freedom Act, and enter into a binding agreement with the Nigerian government on commitments to improve religious freedom. Commitments could include enhancing programs to counter hate speech and incitement to violence based on religious identity; supporting the training of police and military officers on human rights standards and religious tolerance; and developing tailored conflict prevention mechanisms at the local, state, and federal levels.

Conflict in the Middle Belt Region

Conflict in the Middle Belt—a variously defined region extending across multiple administrative geopolitical zones, including North-Central Nigeria—arises from a web of issues and includes violent clashes between farmers and herders. These clashes also resemble farmer-herder conflict in other parts of Nigeria and West Africa, and are a product of an intense competition for resources and livelihoods. The scale and sites of clashes are related to high population growth, expansion of farms, and environmental degradation in northern states. Intercommunal conflict is also interlinked with policies on "indigeneity" and citizenship. Although originally intended as a protective measure, such policies have marginalized certain ethnic and religious groups who may not be recognized as indigenous to their state of residence. In addition, the proliferation of small arms has empowered more criminal gangs, bandits,

and cattle rustlers to wreak havoc indiscriminately across Nigeria. Finally, violence in this region can also be a product of deep societal mistrust and historical grievances between some religious and ethnic groups. Among the many diverse language and ethnic groups residing in the Middle Belt are the Adara, Bachama, Bassa, Berom, Fulani, Irigwe, and Tiv. Often these ethnic groups are further defined according to a predominant ethno-religious affiliation, such as "Christian Bachama" or "Muslim Fulani."

Although Boko Haram terrorist violence continues to make the northeast one of the most dangerous regions in Nigeria, reports indicate that in 2018 conflict in the Middle Belt has had an even greater death toll and more human suffering. This is especially true in states to the east of the capital territory of Abuja, including Plateau, Nasarawa, Benue, Taraba, and Adamawa states, which saw the most sectarian violence in 2018 (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Council on Foreign Relations Nigeria Security Tracker; states in descending order according to total number of deaths in 2018.
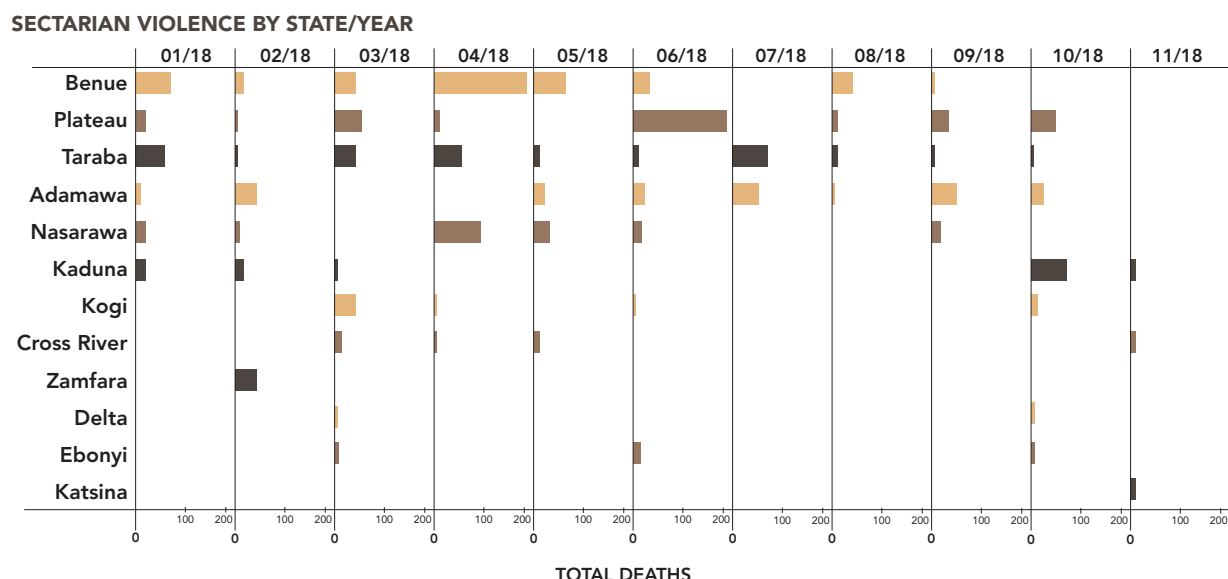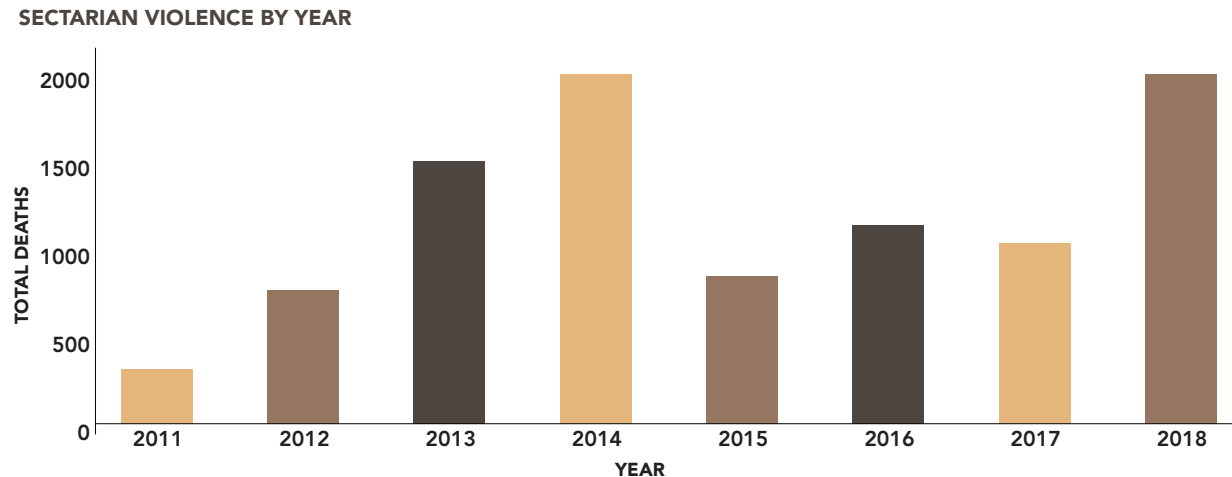

SECTARIAN VIOLENCE BY STATE/YEAR

Figure 2: Council on Foreign Relations Nigeria Security Tracker; with 2,037 total deaths from sectarian conflict recorded in 2018.

SECTARIAN VIOLENCE BY YEAR

Moreover, some media reports and security and violent incident trackers showed more violent incidents and fatalities due to intercommunal conflict, surpassing the damage due to Boko Haram attacks in 2018. According to data analysis by the Council on Foreign Relations' Nigeria Security Tracker, 2018 has seen almost the same numbers of deaths from sectarian conflict as 2014, and almost double the number of deaths in the Middle Belt region compared to 2017 (Figure 2).

An Amnesty International report released in December 2018 also indicates over 2,000 people were killed in violent clashes between members of farmer and herder communities, mostly in Middle Belt states. In Nigeria, religion has been and continues to be a powerful and exponential escalation factor in conflict. An incident or crime involving a few people of different religious, ethnic, or occupational identities can escalate if one community seeks collective revenge against the other group. In the past few years, conflicts based on ethnic and religious identity have killed thousands of people and displaced tens of thousands. After a spike in violence in Benue state in January 2018, thousands mourned at the mass burial of the 73 victims. In an attack in April thought to be perpetrated by herders, 19 people were killed in a Catholic church during a mass in Benue state. In June, in Plateau state, ethnic Berom militias reportedly mounted roadblocks and stopped and killed passersby identified as Fulani or Muslim, but also sometimes targeted Christian enemies. In June, attacks on multiple villages in Plateau state, reportedly

by Fulani militia, killed more than 200 people; Human Rights Watch called this tragedy "a clear indication that the decades-long conflict has reached new levels of brutality." Finally, in October, clashes between Adara Christian and Hausa Muslim youth militia resulted in more than 50 people killed.

At the same time, other multi-religious areas in the Middle Belt have not seen such interreligious violence. Research has shown that unique factors, such as the existence of power-sharing institutions, contribute to peace in some of these areas. The northern states of Kaduna and Zamfara, on the other hand, have seen a similar level and type of rural violence continue in 2018, but not framed along religious lines. Meanwhile, land disputes with high numbers of fatalities, the displacement of thousands of people, and destruction of property occurred in southern states such as Cross River. Indeed, the scope of the conflict is unique to these geographic, demographic, and historical contexts, and does not assume the polarized religious dimensions of some areas in the Middle Belt.

In addition to addressing the major security and governance challenges, particularly in rural parts of Nigeria, non-military solutions are essential to grappling with the complex issues of ethnic and religious-based division and violence. Thus far, however, political and religious leaders have been unable to adequately promote peaceful solutions as interreligious relations continue to deteriorate.

Addressing Hateful and Dangerous Speech

Hate speech in Nigeria is used against many identity groups, including those based on ethnicity, political opinion, religion, and combinations thereof, and has historically been amplified around elections. For Nigerians, a variety of speech or insults could be considered "hate speech" – for example, an insult to one's family by someone of a different religion or ethnicity, or an assertion that one religion is dominant (or has a higher share of the population) in an area than another could be called hate speech. In April 2018 the PeaceTech Lab published a lexicon of hate speech terms, outlining more than a dozen offensive and inflammatory words and phrases and their meanings in Nigeria. Although there is no universal definition for hate speech, the United Nations explains that hate speech is usually "any kind of communication in speech, writing or behavior that denigrates a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, or other identity factor. While all incitement to discrimination, hostility, or violence is hate speech, not all hate speech constitutes incitement." To focus on the potential result of violence, experts have defined a specific subcategory of hate speech: "dangerous speech" is "any form of expression that can increase the risk that its audience will condone or participate in violence against members of another group."

Nigeria acceded to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) in 1993, which requires in Article 20 that "Any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law." However, to avoid unduly restricting fundamental rights that the ICCPR protects, including freedom of expression, this provision is interpreted narrowly, to mandate prohibition only of speech inciting imminent violence (see UN Human Rights Council Resolution 16/18 (2011)). Other types of hate speech should be countered through non-criminal measures, including dialogue, education, and counter-speech.

Nigerian government and civil society actors have taken a range of approaches to counter hate and dangerous speech. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have conducted community discussions, radio programs, and other activities across the country. Political leaders and lawmakers continue to take strong public stances against hate speech, often condemning it or calling on fellow leaders to restrain from engaging in it. Debate about criminalizing hate speech is ongoing, and several bills to do so are still being considered, but there is as of yet no federal law. Many Nigerians worry that hate speech laws can be vague and inhibit freedom of expression, but the public has expressed both resistance to and support for recently proposed bills related to inflammatory speech.

In February 2018, Senator Aliyu Abdullahi, who represents Niger state, introduced a bill to criminalize hate speech and incitement to violence on the basis of ethnicity and religion. News reports noted that Abdullahi's drive to sponsor the bill was the "cases of religious and ethnic violence experienced in the past years." However, Nigerians widely criticized the bill because it would demand death by hanging for any person guilty of hate speech resulting in the death of another person. Also, the bill was seen as intending to target certain political parties and prohibit speech critical of the government. Other civil society and political actors have similarly called for a national hate speech law, increasingly so in the lead up to the 2019 presidential election. Since 2017, prominent religious leaders and civil society leaders have worked together to promote a separate religious tolerance and hate speech bill that they view as important to deter

further violence ahead of elections. In 2016, Kaduna state Governor El Rufai put forward a bill in that state to revise a 1984 law to add sections aimed at stemming religious extremism and hate speech. The bill would charge committees from the leading Muslim and Christian organizations—the Jama'atu Nasril Islam (JNI) and the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN)—with reviewing and granting permits for religious preaching as well as other regulation. The bill has not passed, however, due to opposition from Christian and Muslim leaders. This law is similar to other state-level laws that also regulate religious activities and which have been problematic for respect of freedom of religion or belief.

At the same time, other laws have been used without naming hate speech directly but with the intention or effect of thwarting it. For example, the Cybercrime Act of 2015 outlines penalties for certain forms of hate speech and prohibits the distribution of "material which denies or approves or justifies acts constituting genocide or crimes against humanity." This act criminalizes any person who with intent threatens or insults publicly "through a computer system or network (i) persons for the reason that they belong to a group distinguished by race, colour, descent, national or ethnic origin, as well as religion, if used as a pretext for any of these factors; or (ii) a group of persons which is distinguished by any of these characteristics . . ."

In a Twitter thread in August 2017, Vice President Yemi Osinbajo declared that hate speech would be considered "a specie" of terrorism (Figure 3) and tied it to acts prohibited under the Terrorism Prevention Act. He drew a link between hate speech and both intimidation and violence, and called on leaders not to remain silent in the face of such speech.

Figure 3: Tweets by Vice President Yemi Osinbajo in August 2017

Prof Yemi Osinbajo ✔
@ProfOsinbajo
Follow

voices. The silence of leaders at this time - in our country- will be a grave disservice to our country, its peace & its future. (3/3)

3:07 AM - 17 Aug 2017

Prof Yemi Osinbajo ✔
@ProfOsinbajo
Follow

Germany & the extermination of Jews to the Rwandan genocide succeeded in achieving their barbarous ends by the silence of influential (2/3)

3:07 AM - 17 Aug 2017

Prof Yemi Osinbajo ✔
@ProfOsinbajo
Follow

Silence in such situations can only be seen as an endorsement. Hate speech & the promotion of the same through history from Nazi (1/3)

3:07 AM - 17 Aug 2017

Prof Yemi Osinbajo ✔
@ProfOsinbajo
Follow

reasonably be regarded as having been done to seriously intimidate a population (3/3)

2:59 AM - 17 Aug 2017

Prof Yemi Osinbajo ✔
@ProfOsinbajo
Follow

defines terrorism as an act which deliberately done with malice which may seriously harm a country or is intended or can be (2/3)

2:59 AM - 17 Aug 2017

Prof Yemi Osinbajo ✔
@ProfOsinbajo
Follow

FG has today drawn the line on hate speech. Hate speech is a specie of terrorism. The Terrorism Prevention Act 2011 as amended (1/3)

2:59 AM - 17 Aug 2017

Countering or Spreading Divisions
Media and Mass Messages

In addition to legislative efforts, civil society actors have taken up numerous projects aiming to counter hateful and dangerous speech, often in partnership with local religious leaders. Radio programs have been one successful means of addressing hate speech with mass reach, discussing interreligious issues, and encouraging civic engagement and nonviolent solutions to local problems. In July, during a radio program broadcast across 12 states, guest speakers and callers discussed the drivers and impacts of ethnic and religious conflict and the roles citizens can play to end violence. In another radio program in October, civil society guest speakers, including religious leaders, discussed politicians' promotion of hatred in the political space and religious teachings against hate and prejudice. Citizens who called in expressed concerns that some religious institutions and leaders also engage inappropriately in politics and elections.

Just as it can advance positive conversations, mass media can also reinforce divisions in Nigeria. Dangerous and polarizing speech can spread more widely and cause more harm through digital media, and social media platforms are increasingly accessible. According to We Are Social and Hootsuite, with a population of over 193 million people in Nigeria, there are 94.8 million internet users (49%), 19 million active social media users (10%), 105 million mobile users (54%), and 17 million active mobile social users (9%). WhatsApp and Facebook are by far the most used platforms. Where social media is not as accessible, or among older members of the population, radio and TV continue to reach all 36 states. According to perceptions polls conducted by Orange Door Research and the Nexus Fund in Plateau state in 2018, respondents believed that a majority of hate speech is spread by social media, followed by family and friends, radio,

and other means. WhatsApp, in particular, is often used to spread hate and polarizing messages.

Many Facebook posts and WhatsApp messages, which are widely shared and liked, decry the actions of religious and ethnic groups. Users promote claims that another group is playing the victim, lying, or violently attacking innocent people "on their side," and accuse the "other side" of protecting perpetrators of attacks. Such social media posts have the power to perpetuate stereotypes and the belief that different ethno-religious groups will be perpetual enemies, and use language that dehumanizes other ethnic and religious groups. Despite efforts to combat inciteful messages on platforms like Facebook and Twitter, such efforts are more difficult to implement on WhatsApp where messages are private and encrypted.

With conflict occurring across rural areas of the Middle Belt, media coverage of specific violent incidents is often highly limited. Problems with police investigations have left many journalists responsible for documenting conflict details and unable to rely on official data. News reports often vary widely as to the estimated numbers of individuals affected, and also differ from official figures if any are available. Moreover, many reports fail to investigate the causes of incidents or cite credible security sources. Some news reports promote prejudice against a particular group. Both Christians and Muslims have said that the media blatantly expresses bias against their religion, and that journalists will deliberately not report their story or perspective.

Outside the immediate communities affected by a specific incident, the general public's understanding of violent events is often incomplete. In some cases, false news about attacks has incited people to conduct revenge attacks in various parts of the country. The BBC has published multiple reports about the troubling

effects of "fake news" on conflict in Nigeria, including in June and November 2018. In their reporting, the BBC presented graphic photos which had been spread in online Nigerian media and attributed to recent attacks, but explained that in fact the photos came from other countries and contexts altogether. The BBC reports provide a critical spotlight on the problems of hate speech and false information, and what is being done to tackle them in Nigeria and through social media platforms.

In 2017 and 2018 some Nigerian news outlets took new initiatives to combat inadequate reporting and to improve the credibility of their brands. One internationally-funded program supports Nigerian journalists to collaborate on investigating claims spread on social media. Channels TV, one of the main stations in Nigeria, integrated hate speech training into its new journalism academy. Other programs also provide training and support for media on countering hate speech, with a particular focus on election campaigns.

Unfortunately, many of the challenges with media remain outside of journalists' control. Part of the gap in information can be attributed to police and government officials' efforts to deny journalists access to information. Furthermore, journalists have been threatened in particular for their reporting on conflict, the Nigerian military, and human rights abuses. Reporters Without Borders warns that journalists work in a "climate of permanent violence," often threatened and subject to violence, and that regional governors act with complete impunity when they are involved in blocking access to information or silencing the media. In August 2018 a radio station was reportedly partially demolished on orders of the Oyo state government because of its reporting. NGOs have also reported curtailing of internet freedom and crackdowns on particular bloggers and websites, including arrests under the Cybercrimes Act of 2015. In January 2019 the Nigerian military raided offices of the Daily Trust paper and arrested journalists over their reporting on the war with Boko Haram. Yet human rights organizations and journalists alike continue to take risks to document and report on violence in Nigeria.

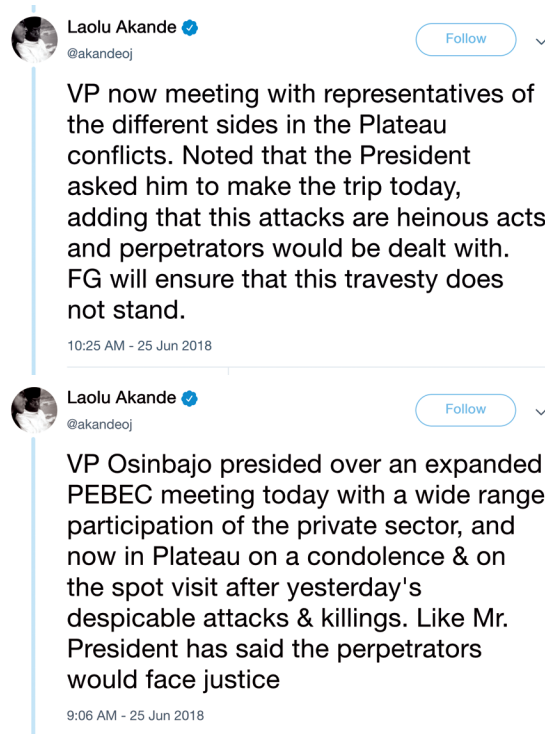# Messages from Elites and Status Influencers in Public Fora

One perpetual barrier to ending polarization and divisions remains the outsized influence of high status, or elite, individuals and groups promoting division based on religion. Political and religious leaders may intentionally or accidentally promote the continuation of conflict. Religious leaders' voices carry a special weight in Nigeria. As one person told USCIRF, "religious leaders are given full respect, especially Christians cannot speak above the word of a pastor." With the upcoming elections and announcements of presidential candidates, religious leaders are also heavily influential in the realm of civic education, including encouraging people to register to vote. Although religious actors have specifically endorsed candidates in the past, some warn against doing so in the upcoming election for fear that it will deepen religious tensions.

Prominent Nigerian religious and political leaders in 2018 continued using polarizing rhetoric that amplifies fear and suggests the inevitability of further violence. In one widely-reported example in March, following severe incidents of violence, former defense minister General T.Y. Danjuma made a public call for Nigerians to defend themselves from killings in the Middle Belt—and referred to the attacks as ethnic cleansing. He said "everyone of us must rise up. The armed forces are not neutral. They collude with the armed bandits that kill people." In so doing, he both justified and promoted more reprisal attacks. He also further polarized Christians and Muslims, and suggested government complicity in the violence, entrenching distrust of government and security actors. Nevertheless, many Nigerians recognized the incitement and condemned the speech. Still other prominent leaders have also incited division by labeling entire

ethnic groups as "terrorists." In October, the Supreme Council for Shari'ah in Nigeria shared a press release on social media titled "Berom Christians: The Real Terrorists," which claimed that "Since early 2001, the Plateau has become the most spectacular theatre of mass killings and destruction of properties by the so called "'indigenous Christians.'" The Berom Educational and Cultural Organization, in turn, spoke out against the promotion of ethnic hatred. Similarly, many public figures have attributed attacks in the Middle Belt broadly to "Fulani terrorists." This language has had the effect of collectively demonizing ethnic groups and has led to people being targeted or stigmatized based on their ethnic and religious affiliation. These terms have been frequently echoed by prominent religious leaders and the local population alike, and spread by the media. Other influential leaders have spoken out against the language. For example, former vice president and 2019 presidential candidate Atiku Abubakar in March encouraged media to refrain from using such language, instead advising ". . . let us identify them by their activities and not by their ethnicity."

Political leaders in Nigeria are increasingly using social media to communicate directly with the population (Figure 4). Government officials usually make public speeches regarding interreligious issues, hold meetings with religious leaders, visit sites of recent intercommunal violence, and share statements online to reassure the people that attention is being paid. After violence in January, federal government officials released statements that they were determined to resolve the ongoing herder-farmer conflict. For many Nigerians, these statements are expected and necessary, but not enough as the violence continues.

Figure 4: Tweets by President Muhammadu Buhari and Government Senior Special Assistant to Vice President Osinbajo, Laolu Akande in 2018.

Muhammadu Buhari ✓
@MBuhari

Follow ⌄

I want to assure the people of Benue, and all Nigerians, that we will ensure that the assailants are apprehended and brought to justice for this vile and sacrilegious act.

8:27 AM - 24 Apr 2018

Muhammadu Buhari ✓
@MBuhari

Follow ⌄

This latest assault on innocent persons is particularly despicable. Violating a place of worship, killing priests and worshippers is not only vile, evil and satanic, it is clearly calculated to stoke up religious conflict and plunge our communities into endless bloodletting.

8:19 AM - 24 Apr 2018

Muhammadu Buhari ✓
@MBuhari

Follow ⌄

I extend my sincere condolences to the Govt and people of Benue State, the Mbalom community, and especially the Bishop, priests & members of the St Ignatius' Catholic Church, whose premises was the unfortunate venue of the heinous killings of worshippers & two priests by gunmen.

8:16 AM - 24 Apr 2018

Laolu Akande ✓
@akandeoj

Follow ⌄

VP now meeting with representatives of the different sides in the Plateau conflicts. Noted that the President asked him to make the trip today, adding that this attacks are heinous acts and perpetrators would be dealt with. FG will ensure that this travesty does not stand.

10:25 AM - 25 Jun 2018

Laolu Akande ✓
@akandeoj

Follow ⌄

VP Osinbajo presided over an expanded PEBEC meeting today with a wide range participation of the private sector, and now in Plateau on a condolence & on the spot visit after yesterday's despicable attacks & killings. Like Mr. President has said the perpetrators would face justice

9:06 AM - 25 Jun 2018

Polarizing Narratives that Fuel and Reflect Religious Tensions

Throughout 2018, USCIRF learned from a variety of Nigerian civil society and government representatives about the many intersecting issues polarizing society. Economic and ethno-religious tensions were at the heart of many of the narratives explaining current conflict and security problems. Although Nigeria has long been a highly religious country, some religious community members say the division along religious lines is now the worst they have ever seen, and is severely affecting children and youth. Civil society representatives across religious lines noted that children as young as five want to know the religion of the people around them. While many interlocutors agreed that the Nigerian government needs to do much more to provide security for its citizens of all faiths, they disagreed on whether the government is intentionally neglecting, or even complicit in the attacks on civilians. They also disagreed about whether cattle grazing bans or other approaches are helpful in addressing farmer-herder conflict.

Narratives around the causes of violence in the Middle Belt are some of the most polarizing between religious communities. One widely reported narrative is that the sectarian conflict is fueled by hired criminals. Reports claim that criminals are posing as herders, "dressed like Fulani" to deceive the communities they attack. Proponents of this narrative suspect that, as many wealthy Nigerians own large herds of cattle and hire armed guards to defend them, there may be people paid by elite actors involved in the attacks. This is believable for witnesses who say that the attackers they saw were "not our Fulani neighbors" but rather others, even foreigners, whom they do not know. Other interlocutors say attacks in the Middle Belt are simply led by conflict entrepreneurs.

One of the most striking narratives is that for many Christians the violence occurring in this region is part of a broader plan to "Islamize" Nigeria by expelling Christians from the Middle Belt and seizing their land for Muslims. This narrative has existed for decades, since the reformulations of government in the 1960s, through the debates over the extension of Shari'ah implementation in the 1970s, the adoption of the federal constitution in 1999, the continuation of the Shari'ah debate and expansion in 2000, up to the present with the Boko Haram insurgency and the rise of the ISIS-West Africa faction.

In a cyclical fashion, fears of religious domination have led to interreligious violence, which has further amplified fears and motivated reprisal attacks. In the year 2000, more than 2,000 people were killed in fighting between Muslims and Christians in Kaduna over the Shari'ah debate. The history of conflict related to religious dominance in Nigeria strongly informs the views of many Nigerians today. Going back even further in history, many Nigerians still reference Usman Dan Fodio, the Fulani Muslim scholar who led a religious war in northern Nigeria from 1804 to 1810 to revive and reform Islam in the region, leading to the establishment of the Sunni Islamic Sokoto Caliphate. Some Christian leaders suggest that current conflict with Fulani herders is a continuation of this religious war, and some go so far as to say that herders are working on behalf of the Nigerian government to complete Dan Fodio's mission and conquer more territory. Corresponding to this narrative, some news reports on the Middle Belt conflict have used the terms "genocide" and "ethnic cleansing." However, other Christian leaders disagree with this framing and discuss the complexity of causes of violence in Nigeria. The narrative and fear of Islamization itself contributes to the polarization of society: it negatively portrays the spread of Islam as a threat to be thwarted, it allows for the generalization that all Muslims are interested or participating in the effort, and it is used to attribute conflicts between Muslim actors and

non-Muslim actors—or political/economic conditions that benefit Muslims over non-Muslims—as related to the effort.

Nonetheless, the narrative of Islamization remains a real and pervasive fear for many Christians in Nigeria. Interlocutors have shared with USCIRF a range of examples to describe the fear, including discrimination by government actors against Christians in employment and political leadership, freedoms for Muslims to build mosques but heavy restrictions on Christians building churches, statistics on the numbers of Muslims in government and security agencies in comparison to Christians, the growth in Islamic banking, government failure to protect Christians from violence, and the increasing death toll in parts of the Middle Belt. The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and the National Christian Elders' Forum have in the past year repeatedly expressed that this is an ongoing threat to the country and Christians. CAN leadership and others have highlighted Nigeria's participation in international Islamic organizations such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) as evidence of the Nigerian government's approval of or complicity in the Islamization of the country. Another example commonly cited is the appointment of Muslims to key leadership posts. Some interlocutors with whom USCIRF met said that the government has not been balanced, and several highlighted that Muslim individuals lead the "entire security apparatus"—which promotes the conspiracy theory of government complicity in a broader campaign.

In contrast, as noted previously, others describe conflict in the Middle Belt as primarily about resources and the increasing threats to Nigerians' livelihoods and traditional occupations of farming or herding. USCIRF met with Fulani and Berom community members near Jos, Plateau state, who said fighting over land has led youth in particular to resort to vio-

lence. Others said the religious element to the conflict is secondary. This tracks with research and conflict analyses conducted by international and Nigerian NGOs in states such as Plateau, Benue, and Nasarawa, which have found that competition over resources, particularly farmland and water access, is the main source of conflict. Civil society members, including the Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association (MAC-BAN), noted that it is in part because the majority of Fulani herders are Muslim that the conflict has taken on a religious tone in many areas. In other areas of the Middle Belt, however, conflict may occur between farming communities, or between herders and farmers of the same religion. MACBAN pointed out the government neglect of grazing reserves and the deterioration of pastures and routes in the north as part of the reason herders have been increasingly taking their cattle to new areas. One prominent imam shared with USCIRF his exasperation with the narrative that the government is attacking or persecuting Christians, and said that in fact the government has failed all of its citizens, including Muslims, by not tackling the root issues or providing adequate governance and security. Both Muslims and Christians have suffered massive loss of life in these conflicts, and share a common interest in building peace and security in the region.

As noted earlier, a complex web of motivations for violence exists in the Middle Belt and the causes of conflict are often highly localized and rooted in competition over limited resources. Nevertheless, religion is an important strand of this web that cannot be dismissed, and a lens through which many Nigerians continue to view and describe conflict in this region. The narratives that communities use have the power to mobilize people around religious identity to conduct reprisal attacks, to escalate minor incidents into more deadly ones, and to deepen divisions.

U.S. Policy and Support for NGO Initiatives

The United States government has been actively supporting the Nigerian government and people to improve security and build peace and respect among religious groups. U.S. Ambassador to Nigeria Stuart Symington and other U.S. Embassy officials continue to encourage religious leaders, journalists, political leaders, and others to refrain from hateful and divisive speech. U.S. Consul General F. John Bray made remarks at a religious tolerance conference in Lagos in August 2018, in which he condemned the ongoing violence in the Middle Belt. He said that the U.S. Mission firmly believes that every life lost "whether a farmer or a herder, a Muslim or a Christian, a Berom or a Fulani–is a tragedy." He also emphasized the importance of all voices in promoting peace: "Our words matter. Each of us has a role to play in tamping down tensions between communities of all kinds. It is in your hands to ensure that this tragic violence does not descend into broader ethnic and religious fighting, and a cycle of reprisals."

U.S. NGOs such as Search for Common Ground, the United States Institute of Peace, Mercy Corps, and Nexus Fund, are just a few examples of groups working at the community level in the Middle Belt to address local farmer-herder conflict and to prevent hate speech and further violence. In one local initiative, a women's farmer-herder dialogue led to a woman preventing her husband from committing violence against a herder.

Dialogue at the local level is essential for building relationships between different religious communities as well as between citizens and local officials and security actors. Nigerian civil society leaders have consistently voiced to USCIRF the value of interreligious dialogue efforts, and have made important recommendations for improving their impact. They recommend programs that engage more youth, address trauma, combat and train community members on hate speech and its impact, and engage religious and traditional leaders, among others.

The U.S. government has long supported activities like this in Nigeria. For example, for more than five years, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has supported the Training of Leaders on Religious and National Coexistence (TOLERANCE) project, which has contributed to improving interfaith relations, advocating for religious freedom, and diminishing discrimination. In 2017, USAID brought together more than 150 stakeholders, Muslims and Christians, in partnership with several NGOs from the United States and Nigeria, to address farmer-herder issues. One key recommendation from the conference was to provide training for the media, which, as discussed earlier, sometimes exacerbate tensions by the nature of their reporting. Interlocutors praised the conference as productive and inclusive, but recommended more follow-up, in particular from the Nigerian government, to continue its impact.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In the lead up to the 2019 presidential election, and with the highly politicized nature of the conflict, both Nigerians and the international community have worried about a further downward spiral into violence. The Middle Belt region is widely seen as one of the most powerful constituencies to influence presidential elections because of its role as a swing region where the more Muslim north and mostly Christian south converge, and as a significant and continuous site of deadly sectarian conflict. As the U.S. government supports Nigerian preparations for the 2019 elections, including for the post-election period, it should work to enhance short- and long-term peacebuilding initiatives and combat the escalation of hate speech, polarization, and sectarian violence.

As USCIRF has noted in its Annual Report recommendations each year, the U.S. government should designate Nigeria a CPC, which would provide many opportunities and non-punitive measures for the U.S. government to more effectively promote respect for freedom of religion or belief in Nigeria, and to reduce polarization and conflict between religious groups. If it designates Nigeria as a CPC, the U.S. government should enter into a binding agreement with the Nigerian government to set forth mutually agreed upon commitments for improving religious freedom in Nigeria, and provide technical and financial support for the fulfillment of those commitments. Key commitments in this agreement could include:

- Increasing peacebuilding programming and research—in partnership with local and traditional leaders and other parts of civil society—in order to counter hate speech and incitement to violence based on religious identity, such as:
  - conducting a national survey on the manifestations and effects of dangerous speech in Nigeria;
  - holding action-oriented town halls and inter-ethnic/interreligious dialogues to reach more communities impacted by violence;
  - developing long-term radio programming to educate wider audiences and to build inter-religious understanding and collaborative peacebuilding;
  - training media actors on identifying and countering hateful and dangerous speech;
  - training of local, state, and federal officials on freedom of religion or belief and countering hate speech based on religious identity;
- Training police on conducting professional and thorough investigations into violent incidents and prosecuting perpetrators;
- Enhancing training for military and police officers on international human rights standards and religious tolerance; and
- Developing early warning systems and other conflict prevention mechanisms at the local, state, and federal levels.