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POLICY BRIEF

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When the State Cannot Protect: The Christmas Day U.S. Airstrikes and the Imperative of Security Sector Reform in Nigeria

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Executive Summary

On December 25, 2025, American Tomahawk missiles and Reaper drones struck targets in northwestern Nigeria. President Donald Trump called it a “powerful and deadly” response to what he termed Christian genocide. The Nigerian government said the strikes hit two ISIS camps with their full consent. Citizens learned the details from foreign media outlets.

This was not the first foreign military action on Nigerian soil. But it exposed something deeper: a state unable to protect its territory, unwilling to hold conflict profiteers accountable, and incapable of controlling the narrative about violence within its own borders.

This policy brief draws on a high-level dialogue convened five days after the strikes by Conflict Research Network (CORN) West Africa and The Africa Disruptions Lab (TADLab). The December 30, 2025 virtual dialogue brought together over 180 participants, including academics, security practitioners, civil society leaders, policy experts, and journalists from Nigeria and beyond, to interrogate what the airstrikes revealed about Nigeria’s sovereignty, security architecture, and future.



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The consensus was stark: the strikes were a symptom of state failure. While some Nigerians expressed relief that someone finally acted against terrorist groups operating with impunity, others felt national humiliation. Nearly everyone questioned the framing: How does bombing ISIS targets in the northwest protect Christian farmers being killed in the north-central region by bandits and herders? The religious narrative, participants warned, oversimplifies a complex crisis and risks deepening polarization.

More troubling were the findings about why Nigeria reached this point. Participants described a security architecture compromised by elite complicity in violence, a political economy where conflict generates profit, intelligence failures ignored by compromised officials, and regional security mechanisms weakened by Nigeria's internal dysfunction. Sovereignty, they argued, exists on paper but has been hollowed out by governance failure and impunity.

The dialogue identified urgent pathways forward:

Re-center human security as the foundation of national security policy, prioritizing citizen safety over regime protection.

End impunity by prosecuting terrorism financiers and conflict profiteers, regardless of political status.

Reform security sector governance through transparent procurement, independent oversight, and improved inter-agency coordination.

Rebuild strategic communication capacity to prevent external actors from defining Nigerian security narratives.

Reassert effective state authority across ungoverned territories through legitimate, accountable means.

Strengthen border governance and regional cooperation, recognizing that Nigeria's stability anchors West African security.

Build broad-based civic coalitions that cut across religious and ethnic lines to demand accountability and governance.

The brief concludes with a warning: without decisive reform and collective action, external interventions will continue to fill the vacuum left by a weakened state. The Christmas Day airstrikes should serve as both alarm and opportunity—a moment for Nigeria to take full responsibility for its security, redefine its national interest, and rebuild the social contract between state and citizens.



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Background: How Nigeria Arrived at This Moment



<https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2025/12/27/us-air-strikes-wont-fix-nigerias-security-crisis-but-could-make-it-worse>

The Deepening Crisis

Nigeria's security crisis is not new, but its scale and complexity have transformed dramatically since 2009. What began as isolated conflicts has evolved into a convergence of terrorism, banditry, mass kidnapping, ethno-religious violence, and state fragility that now threatens the country's territorial integrity and social fabric.

The inflection point came in 2009 with the extrajudicial killing of Mohammed Yusuf, founder of Boko Haram. What followed was one of the world's deadliest insurgencies. The group transformed into a sophisticated military force, later splintering into factions, including the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). By 2020, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) documented more than 350,000 deaths—most from humanitarian collapse rather than combat (UNDP,

2021). As of 2024, over 2.2 million people remained internally displaced across the northeast, with 400,000 seeking refuge in neighboring countries (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 2024).

But the insurgency represents only one dimension of the crisis. From 2015 onward, there has been large-scale rural banditry across northwestern and north-central Nigeria. Armed groups—locally called “bandits”—attack villages, abduct schoolchildren for ransom, extort communities, and disrupt agricultural production. Research by the International Crisis Group (ICG) shows these groups operating with increasing sophistication, sometimes forming tactical alliances with jihadist organizations (ICG, 2020). Simultaneously, the north-central region has experienced persistent farmer-herder violence driven by land competition, climate pressures, demographic change,



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and governance vacuum. While often framed in religious or ethnic terms, scholars emphasize that these conflicts are rooted in resource scarcity and state neglect (ICG, 2018). The result is a hydra-headed security crisis with multiple armed actors operating across vast territories beyond state control.

The Human Toll

The cumulative effect is devastating. Local economies have collapsed in many areas due to displacement, loss of farmland, and constant fear. The World Bank (2022) reports that Nigeria has the world's largest population living in extreme poverty,

with insecurity contributing significantly to economic vulnerability and food insecurity.

Education and healthcare systems in conflict zones have deteriorated sharply. Schools across the northwest and northeast remain closed due to attacks and abductions, undermining long-term development. Women and girls face heightened risks of sexual violence, forced marriage, and trafficking. Men and boys are vulnerable to forced recruitment. Communities carry layers of trauma, grief, and distrust.

Governance Failure and Security Sector Weaknesses

The security crisis cannot be separated from governance collapse. Nigeria exhibits classic markers of state fragility: corruption, poor institutional capacity, and uneven state presence.

The security sector reflects these acutely.

Overstretched military:

Nigerian forces are deployed in nearly every state, leaving them thinly spread and unable to concentrate force effectively. What should be a domestic policing function has become a permanent military deployment.

Intelligence failures:

Poor coordination between security agencies continues to hinder early warning and rapid response. When foreign intelligence services provide dossiers on terrorism financiers, they gather dust.

Corruption and procurement scandals:

Evidence shows systematic diversion of security funds and inflated contracts linked directly to operational ineffectiveness. A Transparency International (TI) report documented persistent corruption risks in Nigeria's defense sector despite escalating security threats (TI, 2024).

Regime protection over citizen protection:

Analysts note that Nigeria's security apparatus prioritizes protecting political elites rather than citizens (Adams et al., 2025). This has decimated public trust. Many Nigerians now rely on vigilante groups and informal security arrangements.

Regional Destabilization

Nigeria's crisis has been shaped by developments beyond its borders. The 2011 collapse of Libya and subsequent proliferation of arms across the Sahel dramatically altered West Africa's security environment. Armed groups, traffickers, and mercenaries now move fluidly across porous borders. Jihadist insurgencies in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have created a regional arc of instability intersecting with Nigeria's northern frontiers (Center for Preventive Action, 2025). The withdrawal of French forces from the Sahel, the rise of military juntas, and the formation of the Alliance of Sahel States have further weakened regional coordination. The Economic Community

of West African States (ECOWAS), once a robust security actor, now faces internal fractures and declining legitimacy. Meanwhile, global power competition has intensified. China, Russia, and Western states vie for influence through security partnerships, arms sales, and military cooperation. Nigeria, as West Africa's largest economy and most populous nation, sits at the center of this contestation.

It is in this context—state fragility, regional instability, and geopolitical competition—that American missiles struck Nigerian soil on Christmas Day 2025.

The Christmas Day Airstrikes: What Happened

The Operation

According to U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) and subsequent media coverage, the December 25, 2025 strikes involved Tomahawk missiles and Reaper drones targeting suspected terrorist hideouts in Sokoto State in northwestern Nigeria (Africa Report, 2025). The Nigerian government announced that the operation was conducted "with the full involvement of the Armed Forces of Nigeria" and with President Bola Tinubu's consent (AhrumOnline, 2025). Yet timelines and operational details diverged between Washington and Abuja.

Reports indicate strikes hit targets in or around the Bauni forest axis of Tangaza Local Government Area in Sokoto State, near Nigeria's northern borderlands. Debris from expended munitions caused damage as far south as Offa in Kwara State. U.S. officials described targets broadly as "ISIS terrorists" and "Islamic State-linked camps." Nigerian government

statements only mentioned "two major Islamic State camps." (AhrumOnline, 2025).

This haziness has fed public anxiety and competing interpretations. Who exactly was hit? What was Nigeria's operational role? What were the casualties? The ambiguity itself became part of the problem.

Trump's Framing: Protection of Christians

President Trump hailed the strikes as a response to what he had called, nearly two months prior, the "mass slaughter" and "Christian genocide" in Nigeria. He explicitly linked the operation to his administration's commitment to protecting northern Christian communities suffering "sustained genocidal attacks." (Shola, 2025).



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This framing resonated with global Christian advocacy networks (African Security Analysis, 2025). But it sat uneasily with operational and geographical facts. The strikes targeted ISIS-linked actors in the far northwest. The documented mass killings of Christian farmers have occurred primarily in the north-central region, particularly Benue and Plateau states. The perpetrators there are predominantly bandits and herders, not ISIS-affiliated terrorists (Africa Report, 2025).

Many have asked: How does bombing targets in the northwest protect Christian lives in the north-central? The concern is that external actors may instrumentalize religious narratives even when event locations and perpetrator profiles are markedly different.

Reactions: Humiliation, Relief, and Fear

Public reaction revealed Nigeria's fractured state. For many, the most jarring aspect was not the targeting of militants but what it exposed about Nigeria's loss of control. AFRICOM's confident public messaging and Trump's triumphant social media announcement contrasted sharply with the Nigerian government's delayed, contradictory communication, suggesting a state unaware of the action until it was underway or concluded.

Some viewed the strikes as national humiliation. There are longstanding allegations of high-level complicity in terrorism financing and security sector corruption, including failure to act on foreign intelligence about terrorism financiers. In this context, proponents argue the U.S. may have acted unilaterally precisely because Nigerian security structures are compromised.

Others felt ambivalent relief, especially in regions most impacted by terrorist attacks. For the first time in years, the north-central

region felt momentary respite. Groups that perpetrated violence with impunity might now exercise caution. But relief was inseparable from desperation—and quickly gave way to fear of retaliation. Just days after the strikes, ISWAP launched a deadly assault in Yobe State (David, 2025). More attacks followed (Dickson, 2026). As of this writing, the question persists: what did the airstrikes actually accomplish?

This skepticism is well-founded. Evidence from counterterrorism air campaigns shows that without a sustained ground presence, airstrikes merely dislodge violent groups temporarily. They reorganize, relocate, and often retaliate against civilian

Why This Moment Matters

The Christmas Day strikes crystallize several structural issues simultaneously:

- A security architecture that is overstretched, fragmented, and mistrusted
- Sovereignty that is legally intact but practically fragile
- A conflict ecosystem where both local and external actors weaponize identity and fear
- A geopolitical environment where Nigeria risks being acted upon rather than acting

The strikes were less significant for their tactical impact than for what they revealed about Nigeria's diminished capacity to govern its own security space.

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Insights from the Dialogue

The virtual dialogue held on December 30th featured three eminent panelists: Mr. Dele Farotimi, retired Nigerian lawyer, writer, and human rights activist; Prof. Oluwafunmilayo Para-Mallam, Chairperson of the Nigeria chapter of the African Women's Leadership Network and member of the Presidential High-Level Advisory Committee on Women's Economic Empowerment and Gender Equality; and Dr. Fatima Akilu, Executive Director of Neem Foundation and former Director of the Behavioral Analysis and Strategic Communication Unit at the Office of the National Security Advisor.

Their insights, combined with robust participant engagement, illuminated the deeper governance, identity, and geopolitical dynamics shaping Nigeria's trajectory.



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There was broad agreement that the U.S. action did not emerge in a vacuum. The panelists interpreted the strikes as the outcome of prolonged state failure and erosion of Nigeria's capacity to enforce its monopoly on the use of force.

The Problem with “Protection” Narratives

A central theme was the disconnect between the stated purpose—protecting Christians—and the operational reality. Dr. Fatima Akilu asked pointedly: “If they are bombing ISWAP or factions of ISIS in the northwest, how would that protect Christian lives in the Middle Belt?” While acknowledging that Christian communities in northern Nigeria have been disproportionately targeted, she noted that non-Christians have suffered similarly. She expressed concern that external actors may instrumentalize religious narratives to pursue aims not beneficial to Nigerians.

Prof. Para-Mallam emphasized that every life lost is a tragedy that should be treated as such. “Just because we don’t experience something or our people don’t experience something, doesn’t mean we have to deny another person’s reality,” she said. Denying specific experiences of any group, whether Christian or Muslim, is counterproductive to stemming insecurity, she emphasized.

Mr. Farotimi dismissed Trump’s portrayal as “political branding” aimed at “a foreign audience,” and not an accurate reading of Nigeria’s security situation. He described the narrative as simplistic, arguing that religion in parts of northern Nigeria functions largely as a marker of ethnic and historical identity rather than the root cause of violence. He cautioned that American interests in Nigeria cannot be assumed to be benign or altruistic.

External Intervention as Consequence of State Failure

There was broad agreement that the U.S. action did not emerge in a vacuum. The panelists interpreted the strikes as the outcome of prolonged state failure and erosion of Nigeria’s capacity to enforce its

monopoly on the use of force.

Prof. Para-Mallam stated bluntly: “The strikes were a result of state failure to deal with what has become a perennial security problem.” She argued that this failure extends beyond territorial defense to human security—evidence of failure to build a nation where every segment feels they belong, can contribute to development, and maximize their potential.

Mr. Farotimi argued that Nigeria didn’t arrive at this point by accident but through “deliberate design.” For him, the airstrikes were an ultimate insult, exposing not incapacity but multiple layers of complicity within the Nigerian state. He held strongly that sovereignty cannot be meaningfully claimed where citizens have been reduced to victims, and the state has abdicated basic responsibilities.

Dr. Akilu offered a more nuanced institutional perspective. Drawing on her experience at the Office of the National Security Adviser, she cautioned against underestimating the difficulty of counterinsurgency. Nigeria entered the Boko Haram conflict unprepared, with outdated weaponry, low morale, and little experience in asymmetric warfare. However, she characterized the Christmas Day strikes as troubling, particularly given that Nigeria had previously sought similar assistance from the U.S., which was refused.

Sovereignty Beyond Legal Formalism

The dialogue moved beyond narrow legal readings of sovereignty to explore its political, psychological, and symbolic dimensions.

Prof. Para-Mallam outlined constitutional and statutory bases that could justify



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cooperation with foreign militaries, citing executive powers and provisions in the Terrorism Prevention and Prohibition Act for international cooperation. However, she was clear that legality alone cannot resolve the deeper unease the strikes provoked.

Dr. Akilu emphasized that sovereignty is not just legal but political and psychological. The Nigerian government's delayed and fragmented communication after the strikes compounded public anxiety and created a vacuum filled by foreign media and external political narratives. "The main voice should never be an external voice," she argued. That is to say, hearing about strikes on Nigerian territory first from foreign outlets severely undermines public trust.

Mr. Farotimi questioned whether Nigeria possesses sovereignty in any substantive sense. He described sovereignty in Nigeria as "aspirational." As he explained, a state that cannot protect its citizens or account to them cannot meaningfully claim autonomous authority. Public acceptance of the foreign strikes was itself evidence of how far sovereignty had been hollowed out.

Communication Failure and Narrative Control

One of the strongest points of consensus concerned the catastrophic failure of state communication. The panelists described the information blackout following the strikes as a total failure that left citizens bewildered and confused. They recalled the embarrassment of learning about strike details via foreign media outlets. This vacuum allowed President Trump's framing to dominate early narratives. Dr. Akilu worried such framing risked "Americanizing" the narrative. Although they acknowledged the relief some Nigerians felt, they emphasized how

narrative ambiguity fueled suspicion, fear of retaliation, and polarization along religious lines.

The panelists agreed that without clear, credible communication from Nigerian authorities, even tactical gains—whether by government or external actors—become destabilizing.

Competing Interpretations of Violence

The dialogue examined whether violence in Nigeria constitutes religious persecution or genocide.

One perspective rejected the genocide framing because it obscures the multi-faith nature of victimhood and misrepresents conflicts rooted in land, resources, and governance failures. This emphasis was that religious framing risks marginalizing Muslim victims and deepening social divisions.

Another perspective advanced a layered interpretation. In parts of northern Nigeria, Christianity functions less as a belief and more as a marker of ethnic and historical identity. Attacks that appear religious may actually target specific minority communities whose religion signals their exclusion from dominant political orders.

It was also argued that Christians are disproportionately targeted, evidenced by the destruction of churches, forced conversions of abducted Christians, and the use of religious language during attacks. These patterns are observable in the north-central region. Acknowledging this does not negate Muslim suffering.

The Nigerian government's delayed and fragmented communication after the strikes compounded public anxiety and created a vacuum filled by foreign media and external political narratives.



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The core problem is the inability to enforce laws. This has entrenched a culture of impunity that incentivizes participation in violence.

Elite Complicity and the Political Economy of Insecurity

Perhaps the most striking convergence concerned allegations of elite complicity. The panel was unequivocal: terrorism in Nigeria persists not because of military incapacity but because “those who should be fighting terrorism are the real terrorists.”

They referenced public allegations and intelligence dossiers on key government officials, and the absence of prosecutions, as evidence that sabotage operates at the highest state levels. They recalled lists of alleged terrorism financiers handed to Nigerian authorities by foreign intelligence services—lists that resulted in no action.

According to the panelists, Nigeria’s insecurity is sustained by a “conflict industry” that diverts public resources through unaccountable security votes while failing to deliver safety. They emphasized that Nigeria already possesses legal tools to prosecute conflict entrepreneurs, including terrorism financing laws. The core problem is the inability to enforce laws. This has entrenched a culture of impunity that incentivizes participation in violence.

Regional and Geopolitical Implications

On regional security, the panelists agreed that ECOWAS and regional coalitions face severe constraints. Dr. Akilu highlighted the difficulty of combating unconventional armed groups even with regional cooperation. The Nigerian military, previously responsible for stabilization in West Africa, has become overwhelmed and overstretched due to massive internal deployments.

Mr. Farotimi argued that Nigeria’s dysfunction directly weakens ECOWAS. “Nigeria is ECOWAS, ECOWAS is Nigeria,” he stated, and added that regional security failure is inseparable from Nigeria’s internal collapse.

Acknowledging that foreign interventions in West Africa often promote intervening powers’ strategic interests, the panelists agreed the subregion’s—and particularly Nigeria’s—primary failure lies in not defining and defending their own interests in relations with external powers.

The Imperative of Collective Action

Despite the bleak diagnosis, the dialogue identified opportunities for turnaround.

Dr. Akilu emphasized resilience beyond the state, pointing to civil society, local peacebuilding, and community-level initiatives that continue to function despite government failure. She urged Nigerians not to despair or fall victim to divisive narratives but focus on shared humanity and common interests.

Mr. Farotimi and Prof. Para-Mallam both emphasized the necessity of collective citizen action. For Farotimi, only “the victims” can save Nigeria by finding common cause across imposed divisions. Echoing similar views, Prof. Para-Mallam encouraged broad-based coalitions that cut across religion, ethnicity, and politics. Silence and denial, she noted, have enabled predatory governance to persist with attendant insecurity.

Conclusion

The 2025 Christmas Day U.S. airstrikes did not introduce a new crisis into Nigeria's security landscape. They exposed and concentrated existing failures.

As the dialogue made clear, the strikes were less significant for their immediate tactical impact than for what they revealed: the fragility of Nigeria's sovereignty, the erosion of public trust in state institutions, and deep contradictions within security governance. The fact that Nigerians first learned of a military action on their territory by an external power through foreign media was itself emblematic of a state that has lost narrative control over its security domain.

External military intervention, whether welcomed or resisted, cannot substitute for a functioning Nigerian state. While some citizens felt temporary relief, this sentiment was inseparable from desperation and exhaustion rather than confidence in sustainable solutions. Airstrikes may momentarily disrupt armed groups, but they neither dismantle the political economy of violence nor address structural drivers of insecurity: elite complicity, weak accountability, economic exclusion, porous

borders, and persistent prioritization of regime protection over human security. Equally important, the discussions revealed the dangers of reductive narratives. Framing Nigeria's complex violence solely through religious protection lenses risks distorting ground realities, deepening polarization, and creating openings for external actors to instrumentalize identity for strategic ends. At the same time, denying specific experiences of targeted communities undermines social trust and forecloses honest engagement with violence patterns. Nigeria's path forward depends on recognizing multiple truths without weaponizing them. The Christmas Day strikes should be read as a warning. A Nigeria that does not urgently rebuild its security architecture, restore accountability, and reclaim ownership of its national interest risks becoming a permanent theater for external interventions shaped by others' priorities.

The dialogue pointed not to resignation, but to the necessity of deliberate political choices, institutional reform, and collective civic action if Nigeria is to move from being acted upon to acting for itself.



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CORN West Africa is a peace praxis centre and knowledge platform for academics and practitioners based in institutions in West Africa who are working in the field of peace, security, and political violence. CORN mobilizes researchers to conduct cutting-edge research on peace, security, violent conflicts, and political violence. CORN translates research findings and knowledge into policy and programmatic solutions for conflict prevention, peacebuilding and conflict management in societies across West Africa.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the core observations from the discussion, the following are recommended:

■ Re-center Human Security in National Security Strategy

Nigeria's security approach must shift decisively from regime protection to human security. This requires measurable commitments to civilian protection, livelihood recovery in conflict-affected areas, trauma-informed responses, and rebuilding trust between citizens and security institutions.



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■ Establish Credible Accountability for Terrorism Financing and Complicity

Existing legal frameworks on terrorism financing and organized crime must be enforced without exception. Individuals credibly accused of enabling or financing violence, regardless of social or political status, must face accountability to end the culture of impunity.

■ Reform Security Sector Governance and Oversight

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■ Reform Security Sector Governance and Oversight

Security sector reform must prioritize transparency in procurement, independent oversight of security expenditure, and improved inter-agency coordination. Without addressing corruption and internal sabotage, increased military spending or foreign assistance will continue to yield diminishing returns.

■ Rebuild Strategic Communication Capacity

The Nigerian state must reclaim narrative authority over its security situation. Clear, timely, and credible communication should be institutionalized during security incidents to prevent information vacuums that allow external actors to define events in ways detrimental to Nigeria's security.

■ Strengthen Border Governance and Regional Security Cooperation

The Nigerian state should prioritize border management and intelligence-led control of arms flows while working to revitalize principled regional cooperation. A weakened Nigeria undermines ECOWAS; therefore, restoring Nigeria's internal stability is a prerequisite for regional security credibility.

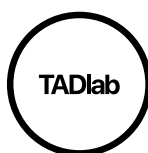
■ Build Broad-Based Civic Coalitions

Government, civil society, and faith-based actors should support platforms that foster cross-religious and cross-ethnic engagement. Addressing national trauma, recognizing victims across divides, and rebuilding social trust are not peripheral but central to long-term security.

The Africa Disruptions Lab is a collaborative research platform dedicated to understanding how large-scale social, political, economic, and technological disruptions shape societies across Africa, and how evidence-based responses can be developed in real time. Our work bridges research, policy, and practice by grounding inquiry in real-world contexts and engaging those most affected by change as active contributors to the research process. Our goals are to understand societal disruptions by identifying shared patterns and mechanisms across contexts; ground research in real-world settings through participatory and experimental methods; co-create knowledge with stakeholders directly affected by change; and translate research findings into accessible evidence that informs policy and practice.



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