

Testimony for USCIRF hearing on Religious Freedom, Violence, and U.S. Policy in Nigeria

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Good day all. I thank Chair Turkel, Vice-Chair Cooper, and Commissioner Davie for hosting this hearing, and I thank my distinguished colleagues for their testimonies. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on some of the important dynamics affecting security, social cohesion, and religious freedom in Africa's most populous state. The views I express today are my own and do not necessarily reflect the official positions of any of the organizations with which I am affiliated, though I am indebted to several of these organizations and my colleagues therein for facilitating the research that forms the basis of my testimony today.

I will focus my testimony on some of the drivers of terrorism in Nigeria and the Nigerian government's response to this terrorism. In particular, I will focus on two sets of militants that have been officially designated by the Nigerian government as terrorists and are sometimes conflated in Nigeria's political discourse: On the one hand, Salafi-jihadist militants, namely the Boko Haram group and its offshoots, which have historically operated in Nigeria's northeast; and on the other hand, the militants known colloquially as bandits who have terrorized large swathes of northwestern and north-central Nigeria in recent years. I will be discussing the modus operandi of these different actors, including the degree to which religion does or does not factor into their exceedingly violent insurgencies and the extent to which these different militants have cooperated or converged.

To give the bottom-line up front, Nigeria's jihadists and bandits are both incredibly deadly and can be quite indiscriminate in their violence against civilians, but their motivations differ in notable ways. While jihadists are waging an ideological struggle rooted in an extreme religious ideology, Nigeria's bandits are mostly motivated by a combination of personal ambitions and grievances stemming from interethnic conflict and, in contrast to jihadists, do not generally target civilians on the basis of religion. Unfortunately, the Nigerian state has proven incapable of adequately protecting civilians from these nonstate actors, resulting in numerous massacres, abductions, and related violence against Nigerians of all faiths, violence that has torn at Nigeria's social fabric.

I think it will be helpful to briefly characterize each set of militants before explaining the drivers of violence further. There are three primary Salafi-jihadist groups presently operating in Nigeria: The original Boko Haram group, also known by its acronym JAS, whose longtime leader Abubakar Shekau was killed in a factional clash in May 2021. The group that killed him, the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), emerged as a splinter of Boko Haram in 2016 and is now the most powerful jihadist group in Nigeria. It controls significant rural territory in northeastern Nigeria and parts of neighboring Cameroon, Chad, and Niger and is an official "province" within the Islamic State network. Another one-time Boko Haram splinter group, "The Vanguard for the Protection of Muslims in Black Africa," better known by its Arabic abbreviation, Ansaru, is aligned with al-Qaeda and, after a period of dormancy in the mid- to late 2010s, has resurfaced in the past two years, albeit adopting a somewhat different modus operandi than the original group.¹ These three jihadist groups are rivals, and

factional clashes have become common, particularly between Boko Haram and ISWAP in the northeast. However, the groups also appear to occasionally cooperate with each other, particularly in northwestern and north-central Nigeria, a region where jihadists are expanding their influence but are nonetheless outnumbered by well-armed bandits.

Nigeria's bandits are a difficult subset of militants to define. Generally speaking, they are rural gangs that engage in criminal activities such as cattle rustling, extortion, looting of villages, and kidnapping for ransom (increasingly on a mass scale). Criminal violence is widespread throughout the country, but large-scale banditry has grown most acute in the northwest, particularly Zamfara state, in the past decade. In this region, most bandits (but not all) are ethnic Fulani pastoralists who claim to have taken up arms in self-defense. It is hard to generalize regarding bandits because there are so many of them—as many as 30,000 bandits spread over more than 100 gangs in northwestern Nigeria alone. The most powerful gang leaders operate as warlords, exercising de facto sovereignty over swathes of the countryside and the communities therein.² Even the largest gangs are loosely organized, however, and gangs frequently fracture and fight each other in a manner reminiscent of gang warfare in other parts of the world.³ Many Nigerians, including officials and prominent media outlets, have begun referring to bandits as terrorists or bandit-terrorists, especially after the formal designation of these militants by the Nigerian federal government in January 2022.

A popular narrative has emerged in some segments of Nigerian society that jihadists and bandits are two sides of the same coin: that the bandits, being northern Muslims (and particularly Fulani),⁴ are motivated by radical religious ideology similar to Boko Haram's and are agents in the same politico-religious conspiracy to overrun the country.

The reality is more complex, but can be summarized as such: Jihadists and bandits are organizationally and ideologically distinct. While jihadists are absolutely motivated by extreme religious ideology, most bandits—who, I must note, can be even *more* violent against civilians than jihadists—are motivated by personal ambitions, both material and political, as well as anger stemming from the grievances of pastoralist communities. The victims of both bandits and jihadists are not confined to one religious or ethnic group: These victims include Muslims, Christians and practitioners of traditional religions, although here too I must elaborate to capture some nuance.

With regards to Nigeria's jihadists, there is no doubt that they are, in their own minds, waging a religious war to Islamize Nigeria. The original Boko Haram emerged as a mass preaching movement in the northeastern state of Borno in the 2000s and called for the imposition of "pure" Sharia law and Islamic culture in Nigeria, in contrast to the supposedly diluted and corrupted Sharia that northern governors were implementing at the time. Beginning in 2009, Boko Haram morphed into a brutal insurgency marked by its indiscriminate attacks against civilians, with Yusuf's successor, Abubakar Shekau, particularly reveling in such violence. During the group's zenith between 2011 and 2014, the group staged waves of horrific terror attacks against Christians in northern Nigeria in an effort to stoke a religious war. However, Muslims have also fallen victim to Boko Haram's violence in shocking numbers, particularly in northeastern Nigeria. This is explained by the fact that Shekau had such an extreme interpretation of *takfir*, the Islamic practice of declaring a fellow Muslim an apostate, that it justified mass violence against civilians in the predominantly Muslim northeastern states.⁵ Additionally, civilians of all faiths have suffered

from the devastating humanitarian impacts of the Boko Haram conflict, with the UN Development Programme estimating that ten times as many people have died from malnutrition and related ailments as from direct combat.⁶

Shekau's indiscriminate violence against Muslims was notably too extreme for even the Islamic State. With the backing of this global terror movement, several senior Boko Haram commanders who had grown skeptical of Shekau's leadership style over the years split from Boko Haram by 2016, forming ISWAP as a distinct group in the process.⁷ In the six years since, ISWAP has made a strategic effort to avoid harming Muslim civilians who do not actively work with the Nigerian government, trying instead to build political legitimacy from rural (Muslim) communities in the northeast by filling the governance vacuums left by the Nigerian state there in a proto-statal manner.⁸ The group has consequently focused its attacks on security forces and Christian communities. The latter includes relatively frequent attacks on Christian villages in southern Borno state as well as a newer campaign to target Christians in central Nigerian states that kicked off earlier this year. There are certainly exceptions to these broad trends, as ISWAP has killed Muslim civilians in the northeast on multiple occasions, either to enforce their edicts or as punishment for these communities' cooperation (real or perceived) with the Nigerian state. On the whole, however, ISWAP's violence against *civilians* can be said to be more religiously selective than Boko Haram's historically was (though the primary targets of ISWAP's attacks are nonetheless the military and security forces rather than civilians).⁹

The third jihadist group operating in Nigeria, Ansaru, is small and has struggled to establish a durable base of operations since its reemergence a few years ago, claiming few attacks as a result. However, the group's rhetoric and propaganda, as well as reports from local communities where the group operates, suggests that it has a similar *modus operandi* to ISWAP insofar as it seeks to avoid alienating rural Muslim communities and instead wishes to fight the Nigerian government.¹⁰ There may also be cells of jihadists operating within Nigeria who are not directly under the control of any one group or commander at this time, a trend that has likely become more pronounced after the death of Abubakar Shekau, as those fighters of his who had migrated from the northeast have been left without a clear leader.

I will now turn to the main militant actors in the northwest, the bandits, who have a different *modus operandi* than jihadists, even as they have grown in power and brutality such that their attacks are often as terroristic as any jihadist. The bandits defy easy description and cannot be easily placed into neat conceptual boxes: They are not exclusively warlords, nor criminals, nor ethnonationalist militants, but rather some unique mold of militant.

Most bandits, at least in the northwest, are ethnic Fulani pastoralists who claim to have taken up arms in protest of the government's mistreatment and neglect of herders, though members of other ethnic groups are sometimes also present in these gangs. While many bandits first turned to militancy with genuine grievances against the state, they have since developed a more criminal *modus operandi*. Rather than channel their grievances into a rebellion against the Nigerian government, the bandits primarily attack ordinary villagers and travelers and feud with rival gangs in their pursuit of wealth, power, and notoriety.

Religion is not the primary driver of banditry-terrorism in the northwest. Ethnicity, and the political economy of warlordism, play much larger roles. One of the primary grievances of the bandits is that Fulani have been profiled, harassed, expelled, and murdered by the

region's Hausa majority (a predominantly Muslim ethnic group) in disputes over land use. Notions of ethnic solidarity or chauvinism therefore sometimes drive bandits' behavior, with some bandits conducting retaliatory attacks against Hausa communities that have recently killed Fulani herders. The ethnic dimension of banditry fluctuates in salience, however, with bandits making more of an effort to assume the mantle of ethnic militants at times of heightened Hausa-Fulani tensions but otherwise operating as profit-maximizing and influence-maximizing militants, often attacking their fellow Fulani in the process.¹¹

Because the bandits are strongest in the predominantly Muslim northwest, and because the bandits' main antagonists (at least in their own telling) are the Nigerian state and Hausa communities, the best available evidence suggests that the majority of bandits' victims in the northwest are Muslim and, more broadly, that the bandits do not care much about the faith of their victims.¹² The bandits are themselves mostly Sunni Muslim, though most of the bandits demonstrate little interest in religious observance and, unlike jihadists, frequently engage in "un-Islamic" vices such as drugs or alcohol. They also show little compunction in attacking places of worship – just last week, to take one example, bandits in Bukuyyum Local Government of Zamfara state stormed a mosque during Friday prayers and opened fire on worshippers, killing at least 15 people.¹³

This takes us to the question of cooperation between bandits and jihadists, a topic that has been the subject of much rumor and speculation in Nigeria of late. Earlier this year, I published a study along with two of my Nigerian colleagues, Dr. Murtala Ahmed Rufa'i and Abdulaziz, that unpacked the extent to which the much-feared "crime-terror nexus" has materialized in northern Nigeria. We found, based on our cumulative months of fieldwork and unparalleled access to various conflict actors, that cooperation between bandits and jihadists has been more limited than the conventional wisdom suggests. Jihadists have attempted on numerous occasions over the past decade to ingratiate themselves with bandits in the northwest and recruit them to their ideological cause, but, more often than not, jihadists have failed in these efforts.¹⁴

Several factors account for this relative lack of convergence between bandits and jihadists. The major bandit kingpins have reached a level of power and influence within their areas of operations such that they have little to gain, and potentially much to lose, by subordinating themselves to a jihadist organization and its strict rules and conventions. The fact that the bandits are so divided amongst themselves and lack a common political agenda also makes it difficult for the jihadists to rally bandits en masse, as aligning with one gang automatically makes the jihadists the enemy of another. The bandits can also be quite parochial and suspicious of non-Fulani, which is a challenge for Boko Haram, ISWAP and Ansaru, which are primarily comprised of indigenes of northeastern ethnic groups such as the Kanuri.¹⁵ These factors mean that while bandits and jihadists sometimes enjoy mutually beneficial, one-off cooperation, few bandits in the northwest have meaningfully converted to jihadism.

This is not an excuse to be complacent. Just this year, one of the largest terror attacks in the country, the abduction of over sixty passengers from a train traveling from Abuja to the northern city of Kaduna, was conducted jointly by Zamfara-based bandits and Boko Haram elements. The attack underscores that even one-off instances of cooperation between bandits and jihadists can have devastating effects. Furthermore, some jihadists appear to have learned from their past mistakes and are making renewed efforts to recruit bandits by playing on anti-

government sentiments and transferring their specialist skillsets, namely the construction of IEDs. It is therefore important to monitor the state of relations between bandits and jihadists with nuance, identifying emerging points of cooperation and convergence without painting Nigeria's fluid and fractured militant landscape with too broad a brush.

Before concluding my remarks, I would like to briefly discuss the Nigerian government's response to terrorism in both its jihadist and bandit forms. A conspiratorial narrative has gained traction in certain segments of Nigerian society that the federal government under the leadership of President Muhammadu Buhari, himself a Fulani Muslim from the northwest, is turning a blind eye to—or even actively aiding—bandits and jihadists as they overrun Christian parts of Nigeria.

There is little evidence to support these theories, which are often employed for political gain. But this does not mean that the Nigerian government has fulfilled its obligations to its citizenry. On the contrary, the narrative that the government is failing to protect Christians from slaughter is incomplete for the very tragic reason that Muslims are also being slaughtered on a daily basis. Civilians bear the brunt of violence in northern Nigeria, especially in the northwest, where bandits tend to go for softer targets, attacking unarmed villagers or travelers rather than confronting security forces head on.¹⁶

The failure to protect civilian lives, be they Christian or Muslim, is rooted in systemic and overlapping political, economic, and security disfunction. Nigeria's political elite in Abuja often show little preoccupation with the security of their constituents, particularly in peripheral rural communities. Nigeria's security forces are overstretched, undermined by corruption and, in many instances, inter-service rivalries that prevent the adoption of consistent, coordinated, and coherent responses to national security threats. In this regard, I would proffer that the situation in the northwest is worse than that in the northeast, where the military, after many setbacks in the early and mid-2010s, has been engaged in relatively effective containment and attrition efforts against the jihadists of late (though I would add that this has resulted more in a bloody stalemate than a decisive victory).

In the northwest, by contrast, the militants are more organizationally fractured, geographically dispersed, and ingrained into the local political economy while the competing interests of local, state and federal politicians, military forces, and other powerbrokers have created significant policy dissonance. Most recently, this has been visible in the confusion regarding airstrikes earlier this month that targeted several bandit leaders in Zamfara who had enjoyed an informal amnesty agreement with the state government, airstrikes that prompted bloody reprisals or opportunistic raids by different gangs against defenseless civilians in the state. But it is not simply a problem of military operations. To highlight one problem: There is no national framework for dealing with the now-daily conundrum of kidnapping ransoms, leaving the subject of negotiating hostages' release to various independent intermediaries who often have ulterior motives. The Nigerian Senate has passed an amendment to the country's anti-terrorism law that criminalizes paying ransom to kidnappers, yet at the same time, most people I have interviewed recount that when they notify the security agencies that a relation has been kidnapped, the security agents express powerlessness and recommend that the families negotiate a ransom directly with the kidnappers.

I will conclude this testimony with a recommendation related to that last point: The US government should do whatever it can, within reason, to push its partners at the various levels

of Nigerian state and society to develop a more coordinated and coherent approach to address the plague of banditry, terrorism, and kidnapping in the northwest. I don't wish to paint too rosy a picture of the situation in the northeast, but I will say that over the thirteen years since the start of the Boko Haram conflict, the Nigerian government at all levels has made some progress in developing consistent policies regarding myriad elements of the conflict such as the surrender and deradicalization of insurgents and the professionalization of local vigilante groups. Some of these lessons can and should now be applied to the conflict in the northwest.

The time to act is now, as the situation in the northwest is increasingly dire and requires concerted efforts from all levels of Nigerian state and society as well as international partners. Thank you.

¹ For more on the discrepancies between the original Ansaru and the group presently operating in northwestern Nigeria under that name, see James Barnett, Murtala Ahmed Rufa'i, and Abdulaziz Abdulaziz, "Northwestern Nigeria: A Jihadization of Banditry, or a 'Banditization' of Jihad?" *CTC Sentinel* 15, no. 1 (January 2022): 46-67.

² In many other parts of Nigeria, including central and southern Nigeria, there are smaller gangs of local kidnapers that, while often well-armed and dangerous, lack the strength and de facto political influence of the powerful bandit warlords in the northwest. For the purposes of this testimony, I focus on the powerful bandit gangs and bandit warlords operating in northwestern Nigeria.

³ For more information on Nigeria's bandits, see James Barnett, "The Bandit Warlords of Nigeria," *New Lines Magazine*, December 1, 2021 and Idayat Hassan and James Barnett, "Northwest Nigeria's Bandit Problem: Explaining the Conflict drivers," Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD-West Africa), February 2022.

⁴ Given the role that Fulani have historically played in northern Nigeria's political-religious establishment after the jihad of 1804, led by Usman Dan Fodio and often referred to as "the Fulani jihad," there are longstanding suspicions within segments of Nigerian society that the Fulani have ambitions to Islamize the country. For more on the history of how these narratives and conspiracies have emerged, see Michael Nwankpa, "The North-South Divide: Nigerian Discourses on Boko Haram, the Fulani, and Islamization," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 29 (2021): 47-62.

⁵ Throughout its history, Boko Haram has staged multiple massacres that do not appear to have been religiously selective but were rather intended to instill terror in civilians and/or punish them for their perceived cooperation with the Nigerian government. For example, the group massacred hundreds of people on several occasions in the towns of Bama, Baga, and Gwoza in 2014-15 during the group's territorial conquest of these areas.

⁶ "Northeast Nigeria conflict killed more than 300,000 children: UN," *Al Jazeera*, June 24, 2021.

⁷ For more on the factors behind Boko Haram's fracturing, see James Barnett, "Remaining Without Expanding? Examining Jihadist Insurgency in Northeastern Nigeria," Hoover Institute *Caravan* 2132, September 21, 2021.

⁸ For more see "Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province," International Crisis Group, May 16, 2019.

⁹ Data from the open-source intelligence firm ExTrac suggests that since 2019, ISWAP has attacked military and security forces at a ratio of nearly 6:1 compared to civilians (the majority of civilian victims being Christians).

¹⁰ For more see Barnett, Rufa'i, and Abdulaziz, "A Jihadization of Banditry?"

¹¹ As many individuals, both Hausa and Fulani, that I have interviewed in the northwest and north-central regions have attested, unarmed Fulani herdsman are often "the first victims" of banditry in a given community as bandits seek to rustle their cattle or kidnap them for ransom. As one colleague from Sokoto state puts it, in much of the north, a Fulani herder is seen "as a walking ATM" because their wealth is tied up in a commodity that they carry with them, i.e., their herd.

¹² See Hassan and Barnett.

¹³ Mohammed Babangida, “Terrorists invade Zamfara mosque, kill 18 worshippers,” *Premium Times*, September 24, 2022.

¹⁴ See Barnett, Rufai’i, and Abdulaziz.

¹⁵ Boko Haram has historically sought to mitigate these challenges by dispatching Fulani commanders to the northwest. See Barnett, Rufai’i, and Abdulaziz.

¹⁶ In the northeast, ISWAP, as noted earlier, attacks security forces more than civilians in an effort to win support from the region’s mostly Muslim and mostly rural population.