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KEY FINDINGS

Religious freedom conditions in Nigeria remained poor in 2019, with both state- and societally perpetrated violations. The federal government continued to detain the leader of a Shi'a minority group, the Islamic Movement in Nigeria (IMN), and violently cracked down on its members during religious processions and protests. In July, the government banned the group, claiming it was violent and annoying to society. IMN members continued to protest in defiance of the ban, stating they were a nonviolent organization exercising their freedoms of religion, assembly, and speech. The IMN is the largest Shi'a organization in Nigeria, with an estimated three million followers. Since the Nigerian army's 2015 massacre of more than 340 IMN members, no military officials have been publicly held accountable.

Throughout the year, the [U.S.-designated](#) Foreign Terrorist Organizations Boko Haram and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)-West Africa continued their insurgencies in northeast Nigeria and the Lake Chad region. During the week of Christmas, ISIS-West Africa released a video showing the [horrific](#) killing of 11 captives and stated it was executing Christians in retaliation for the death of ISIS leader Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi. The terrorist groups targeted security forces more than in any previous year. Although

military and civilian forces were able to stem some attacks, Boko Haram successfully targeted military posts and convoys, houses, farmlands, and mosques; abducted civilians; and killed hostages, including numerous humanitarian aid workers. Since 2009, Boko Haram has [displaced](#) more than two million people and killed tens of thousands.

The widespread security issues of intercommunal and militia violence, rampant kidnapping, and general criminality also negatively impacted religious freedom. There were multiple reports of criminal attacks on religious and traditional leaders and houses of worship. In the surge of hundreds of kidnappings in 2019, media reported numerous incidents of kidnappings for ransom and the killing of Protestant and Catholic priests, including in [Enugu](#), [Ondo](#), and [Kaduna](#) states. There was less reporting of religious-based targeting in intercommunal violence in the Middle Belt region as compared to 2018; however, there continued to be reports of communal or ethnic militia attacks on entire communities, such as in Kaduna between Christian [Adara](#) and Muslim [Fulani](#) groups, in [Zamfara](#), and in [Taraba](#). The Nigerian government failed to effectively improve justice and security for its citizens, and was unsuccessful in addressing the immense need for accountability and reconciliation around past conflict.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate Nigeria as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for engaging in or tolerating systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), and continue to designate Boko Haram as an "entity of particular concern" for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by IRFA;
- Enter into a binding agreement, as authorized under Section 405(c) of IRFA, and provide associated financial and technical support, to obligate the Nigerian government to take substantial steps to address religious freedom violations, including but not limited to:
 - Enhance training for officials, the military, and police officers on countering hate speech based on religious identity, responding to sectarian violence, reporting on violence against religious communities, and holding accountable security officers accused of excessive use of force and other human rights abuses;
 - Increase conflict resolution programming and research to reduce violence and discrimination based on religious identity;
 - Increase funding for security sector reform and rule of law programming, and include religious institutional actors in security and justice programs;
- Establish an independent judicial commission of inquiry (COI) to investigate the Nigerian security forces' ineffective efforts to protect vulnerable religious communities, including Christians and Muslims, in the north and central regions of the country as well as the killing of IMN members in 2018 and 2019, then publicly releasing any relevant findings including evidence taken from police reports; and
- Allocate funding for programs that engage civil society, security, and official actors in inclusive efforts to protect places of worship and other holy sites.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Special Report:** [Central Nigeria: Overcoming Dangerous Speech and Endemic Religious Divides](#)
- **Special Report:** [Shari'ah Law in Northern Nigeria](#)
- **Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project adoption:** [Leah Sharibu](#)

Background

Nigeria is a highly religious country, with religion playing a prominent role in politics, governance, security, and justice. The [CIA World Factbook](#) estimates the population to be more than 203 million people, with 53.5 percent identified as Muslim, 45.9 percent as Christian, and 0.6 percent as holding other beliefs. Other groups include atheists, Baha'is, Jews, Hindus, and Buddhists. Indigenous traditions and syncretic practices are also found throughout the country. The 1999 constitution protects the freedom of religion or belief, prohibits discrimination, and does not assert a state religion. Twelve Muslim-majority northern states use Islamic Shari'a criminal and family laws alongside civil and customary laws. Blasphemy is prohibited in the Shari'a Penal Codes, and the Nigerian Criminal Code also includes a penalty of up to two years imprisonment for insulting a person's religion. USCIRF's [contracted report](#) on Shari'a criminal law in northern Nigeria discussed the mixed public perceptions of Shari'a institutions and hisbah police, and found that flogging remains a common form of punishment. This report and others revealed ongoing social and institutional bias against religious minorities such as Shi'a and societal taboos against atheism and humanism.

Intercommunal conflict continues to affect many states, in particular rural areas, and is related to competition over land and water resources, the expansion of farming, growth in population, the spread of small arms, religious and historical grievances, and citizenship policies. As ethnic and religious identity are closely intertwined, conflict between two ethnic groups can sometimes be framed as being between religious groups or can lead to reprisals that target individuals based on their religion.

The 2019 general elections did not see incidents of interreligious conflict. However, some campaigns did seek to appeal to voters along religious lines, and the [elections](#) were marred by [disinformation](#), incitement to violence, vote buying, and other corrupt practices.

Systematic Repression of the Islamic Movement

In 2019, the Nigerian federal government continued to detain the leader of the IMN, Sheikh Ibrahim El Zakzaky, despite a 2016 court order demanding his release. In July, the government officially banned the IMN, but the group continued to organize religious occasions and protests around the country calling for Zakzaky's release. As a result of clashes with police in July, the [IMN](#) and [media](#) reported that more than nine people were killed. During the religious Ashura processions in September, the IMN [stated](#) that Nigerian police killed more than one dozen followers. In [August](#), the government allowed Zakzaky and his wife to travel to India for medical care; however, once there, Zakzaky declined treatment. In October, at least nine IMN members were reportedly [acquitted](#) of charges including of being members of the IMN and unlawful assembly; an unknown number of others remain in prison. Originally inspired by the 1979 Iranian revolution and maintaining photos of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on its website, the group has become the target of violence by the Nigerian government, which uses excessive force to repress IMN members and activities.

Boko Haram & ISIS-West Africa

In 2019, Boko Haram and the ISIS-affiliated faction (ISIS-West Africa) continued to wage an insurgency seeking to create an Islamic state

that conforms to their Salafi-jihadi ideology. They were responsible for attacks against houses of worship, civilians, and military targets. The group again targeted members of the Ekklesiyar Yan'uwa a Nigeria (EYN, Church of the Brethren in Nigeria), abducting EYN members and [destroying](#) an EYN church in March. Media reported incidents of suspected Boko Haram members attacking mosques in Maiduguri, including in February and June. In July, Boko Haram militants attacked a funeral in Borno State and killed at least 65 people. The Nigerian army was repeatedly accused of human rights abuses against displaced persons and former or suspected Boko Haram members—including thousands of [children](#). At the same time, the military engaged in efforts to prevent violent extremism and improve community relations, such as by holding interreligious seminars to promote counternarratives and attending prayer services to reassure worshippers fearing attacks.

Attacks in Houses of Worship

Civil society actors continued to conduct community programs to improve the protection of houses of worship and other holy sites, yet they remain particularly vulnerable. In addition to the attacks by Boko Haram, in 2019 armed groups and mobs also attacked churches and mosques throughout the country. In June, officials arrested three suspects for [attempting to burn](#) the St. Augustine Catholic Church in Kaduna. In September, a group of Christian youths reportedly [attacked](#) a mosque in Delta State out of anger over its construction. In October, a gang was accused of [attacking](#) a mosque and injuring some members. In Anambra State in May, media reported that members of the Indigenous Peoples of Biafra (IPOB)—a group seeking Biafran independence—attacked five Christians, including a priest, for holding a mass in defiance of IPOB orders to stay at home.

Key U.S. Policy

In August, U.S. Ambassador W. Stuart Symington left post, and on October 4, Mary Beth Leonard was [sworn in](#) as the new U.S. Ambassador to the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Throughout the year, the United States supported projects in Nigeria aimed at reducing conflict and improving justice and security, including programming funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) focused on managing conflict between farmers and herders. U.S. officials consistently engaged with the Nigerian government and civil society on religious freedom issues. On December 18, the U.S. Department of State for the first time [placed](#) Nigeria on its Special Watch List for countries that have engaged in or tolerated "severe violations of religious freedom," and again designated Boko Haram as an "entity of particular concern," as it had in 2018. The majority of the United States' fiscal year 2019 assistance was dedicated to emergency response and healthcare, and a smaller amount toward peace and security efforts. In May, Members of Congress introduced resolutions ([H.Res.375/S.Res.170](#)) recognizing the fifth anniversary of the Boko Haram kidnapping of hundreds of girls from Chibok and calling upon Nigeria to increase efforts to end the conflict and assist victims. In October, Members of Congress introduced a resolution ([H.Res.640](#)) "condemning the global persecution of Christians" and cited mass attacks on Christians in Nigeria in 2014 and 2018.

INDIVIDUAL VIEWS OF COMMISSIONERS GARY L. BAUER AND JOHNNIE MOORE

This chapter under-emphasizes the systematic, ongoing and egregious attacks against the Christian communities in the north and central parts of Nigeria, and over-simplifies the Nigerian government's challenges related to the Islamic Movement of Nigeria [IMN].

While the Nigerian government has most certainly overreached, sometimes targeting innocent Shi'a, the government is justified in its suspicion of the IMN, a group which has sometimes been referred to as the "Nigerian Hezbollah." Such a characterization is unsurprising given that group's website prominently includes photos of the leader of the 1979 Iranian Revolution Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and his successor and Iran's present Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei—their inspiration. Moreover, their marches have included portraits of Khomeini as well as Lebanon's Hezbollah chief, Hassan Nasrallah. The IMN's leader, Sheikh Ibrahim El ZakZaky, is an avowed anti-Semite who has a well documented relationship with Iran, including prominent visits to Qom in the Islamic Republic and there have been credible allegations about his receiving training and funding directly from the Iranian regime.

Finally, it is our conviction that Boko Haram, and those tribesmen inspired by them, intend on ethnically cleansing Nigeria of any Christian it cannot subjugate while threatening everyone that stands in their way, whatever their religion or ethnicity.