

An Existential Threat to Christianity in Nigeria?

lausanne.org/content/lga/2019-07/existential-threat-christianity-nigeria

The Spiritual Problem of Antisemitism, Dan Sered & Simon Stout

Lausanne Global Analysis · July 2019 · Volume 8 / Issue 4

Systemic persecution and its implications

Gideon Para-Mallam



'Christianity lies in achieving greatness in the face of the world's hatred.'^[1] Fifteen-year old Leah Sharibu's refusal to deny Christ and convert to Islam, which cost her freedom, exemplifies what Christians are going through in Nigeria.^[2] The threat to make her a slave for life in captivity, by the Islamic Jihad in West Africa (ISWAP), a Boko Haram faction, says it all. Her case and those of thousands being killed because of their Christian faith reveal that Christians are under severe persecution.^[3] However, the Nigerian authorities have always downplayed or denied this reality.

Nigeria's population is evenly divided between Muslims and Christians.^[4] The church in Nigeria has one of the most dynamic evangelical and missionary movements in Africa and indeed the world, with about 7,200

missionaries and a missional presence in about 196 countries.^[5] Nigeria has been delisted from the countries with unengaged unreached peoples groups (UUPGs).

Despite this vibrancy, the future of the church in Nigeria is at stake because of persecution. Although Nigeria is officially not at war, what the church is witnessing is tantamount to a declaration of war against Christians. Especially in rural areas, Christians are being killed and dispossessed of their ancestral farmlands. Their homes are being burnt and many have been internally displaced or taken refuge in neighbouring countries such as Cameroon, Niger, and Chad. Others are in captivity and slavery.

The government feeds the public and international community with misleading narratives and explanations for the terror. This makes it imperative to provide a coherent and factual account. Indeed, the situation has concerning implications for the future of Christianity, not only in Nigeria, but Africa and globally.

Systemic persecution

The persecution occurs in systemic, institutionalized, and direct forms. 'Persecution can take many different forms. There is of course the obvious and painful one of physical harm. . . . Persecution can also be [subtler].'^[6] This occurs when the instruments of the State, particularly in Northern Nigeria, are variously used to target and marginalize Christians.

This takes different forms across states, but the pattern is almost predictable:

- Christian students are denied places to meet for prayer, Bible study, and worship.
- Christians are denied Certificate of Occupancy (C of O) for lands where church buildings are already in place.
- Abductions and forced marriages of young and under-aged Christian girls are common and increasing. This is especially prevalent among the Maguzawa unreached people groups and Hausas who convert to Christianity.

Boko Haram and ISWAP

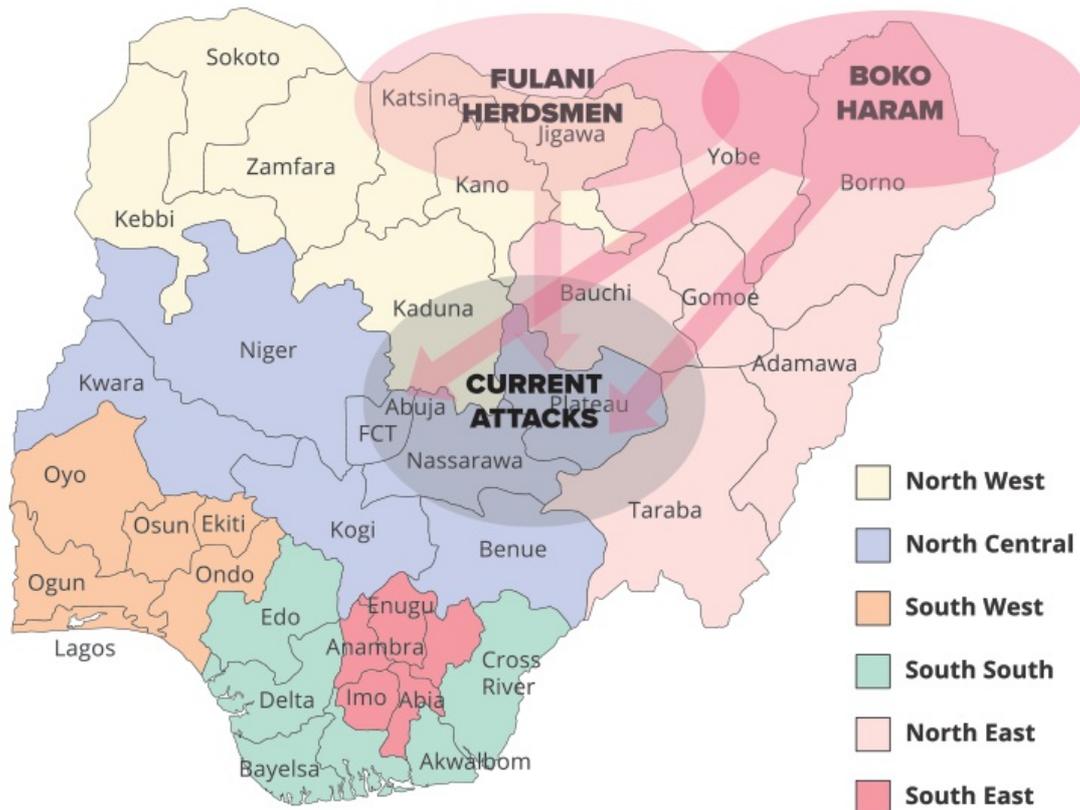
By 2018, Boko Haram had killed more than 20,000 people and displaced nearly 2.6 million.^[7] The Northeast has been hardest hit by attacks on state agents, Christians, and moderate Muslims. ISWAP broke away from Boko Haram in 2015 and pledged allegiance to Islamic State.^[8] They are holding Leah Sharibu and others in captivity and believe Christians should be their main target.

Fulani Herder Attacks

Since 2015 there has been an upsurge in violent attacks, predominantly on Christian-dominated farming communities. Fulani herders are predominantly nomads, and Muslims have migrated and lived peacefully with the ethnic nationalities of the Middle Belt for decades.

Cattle grazing, which was once relatively peaceful, triggers crime and violence today, leading to killings and displacement of thousands of Christians. The Global Terrorism Index 2018 rated Fulani Herder attacks as the second biggest internal security threat in Nigeria after Boko Haram insurgency. The same group is rated the third most deadly terrorist group in the world, after Al-Qaida and Boko Haram, while Nigeria is ranked the third most terrorized country in the world, after Afghanistan and Syria.^[9]

Nigeria



Wider implications

These attacks pose an existential threat to the church in Nigeria and have wider implications for world evangelization. No doubt, over time, what is happening now will affect the spread of the gospel through the Nigerian church.

Many young Christians are discouraged by systemic injustice and the lack of government redress. Some see the church as helpless in fighting back. They conclude that the church leadership is irrelevant to their survival and protection, having failed to negotiate with the political class. Consequently, some are returning to idolatry, syncretism, African Traditional Religions, drugs, and occultism. If this situation continues, the decline and eventual death of the church could be a matter of years away.

Meanwhile, northern Christians who have endured decades of persecution and who have been willing to die for their faith, are beginning to experience faith fatigue and discouragement. Persistent attacks on Christians are pushing some to opt for a militant response.

The implications of terror reach beyond Nigeria. These ethno-religious challenges have become a major West African sub-regional security problem which already affects Cameroon, Niger, and Chad. Boko Haram's poison is spreading across the region and the continent, and Africa is under threat of Islamization from Islamic State-inspired groups. However, God has the final say!

Number of Terrorist Attacks and Victims in 2016 and 2017 Respectively:

| Country | Attacks | Killed | Injured |
|---------------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|
| Burkina Faso | 35 | 77 | 40 |
| | 77 | 118 | 45 |
| Mali | 122 | 285 | 215 |
| | 196 | 602 | 347 |
| Niger | 60 | 367 | 143 |
| | 20 | 190 | 72 |
| Nigeria | 331 | 3122 | 1159 |
| | 312 | 2180 | 1018 |
| TOTAL | 548 | 3851 | 1557 |
| | 605 | 3090 | 1482 |

Source: ECOWARN and Global Terrorism Database

Christian responses

How does the church serve as a witness in the context of persecution? Paradoxically, the attacks have not succeeded in deterring Christians from going to church. Maiduguri, the epi-centre of Boko Haram activities in the Northeast, is currently experiencing an increase in church attendance.

Many people choose rather to die than to deny their faith in Christ; this exemplifies genuine faith. It is very comforting and reassuring. It also offers the kind of hope only attributable to the work of the Holy Spirit and his divine presence. In the words of one anonymous Nigerian Christian:

They can take our homes, our possessions, our families, our lives. They can drive us out, like they've driven us out before. They can humiliate us and dehumanize us. But they cannot take our thoughts. They cannot take our talents. They cannot take our knowledge or our memories or our minds. Indeed, they cannot take our faith or our love for God and his Kingdom in Nigeria.^[10]

Global Christians need to demonstrate the ministry of presence: prayer support and physical visits to the persecuted church, including in Nigeria.^[11]

Way Forward: surviving and thriving

The children of Issachar in 1 Chronicles 12:32 understood the times and helped Israel to act with wisdom. I wish to propose concrete steps, inspired by the Nehemiatic model, which will guide the church to respond adequately to the terror attacks and to thrive:



1. The call and practice of prayer: Neh 2:4-6; Matt 26:41, Luke 18:1

There are voices within the church, saying: 'we have prayed enough' or 'prayer without action is useless.' I believe prayer and action are not mutually exclusive. We can pray and act, but action must never substitute for prayer. Jesus enjoined us to watch and pray—but neither watch without praying nor pray without watching. A combination reinforces the church's survival. In a strange way, persecution purifies and strengthens the church. The church is never weak when attacked; it becomes stronger. Prayer in times of persecution promotes revival and revival promotes survival and transformation.



2. Uncommon unity: Neh 2:18; John 17: 20-21

Uncommon unity, both locally and globally, is necessary for the survival of the church in Nigeria. The noticeable disunity among Christians along ethnic and denominational lines sometimes creates a conducive environment for persecution to thrive. Christians in solidarity can achieve more. The church needs to define her mission and build unity around a shared vision. The global church needs to demonstrate her love for the persecuted church through solidarity, advocacy, and publicity.



3. Advocacy and activism: Neh 2:16-20

Consistent activist advocacy is vitally needed in a context of persecution because of the fundamental violation of the right to life which is God given. Any form of persecution which tends towards genocide violates God's vision for creating humanity in its diversity and must be vigorously exposed.^[12] 'In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies but the silence of our friends.'^[13]



4. Situational survey and conflict analysis: Neh 2:12-17

There is need for well-documented empirical research into what is happening to Christians in Nigeria and around the world, and especially the impact of these attacks on the missional demographics of the church. The global church could assist practically in this.



5. Survival through self-defence: Neh 4 and 6: 15-16

Nehemiah effectively mobilized his people to defend themselves against attacks. He never asked his people to attack but he charged them to defend the work and by implication the land. Defending our ancestral lands need not be confused with defending the church. Only God can defend his church (Matt 16:18). Defending our ancestral lands is imperative; we should not be driven off our God-given land under any

guise. There is no biblical mandate for reprisal or retaliatory attacks. However, grassroots mobilization to defend and police our communities through vigilantes is necessary.



6. Proactive internal security measures

Heightened security consciousness has forced churches in many parts of Nigeria to adopt pragmatic measures to protect themselves. Church members take turns to provide security alongside security agents in identifying strangers coming to church premises. They also act to prevent cars from driving directly into their premises by mounting barricades of concrete boulders and iron bars and by placing logs loaded with sharp nails to puncture tyres of intruders, especially suicide bombers. This is helping immensely.



7. Dialogue and effective engagement: Neh 6

Nehemiah was a 'Christian' in politics. Nehemiah allowed the Bible to dictate his political beliefs, convictions and actions, unlike politicians today who are nominal and merely use their religion to advance political interests devoid of godly values.

Nehemiah effectively engaged his opponents through dialogue but not because he was foolish or compromising. There is a need for interfaith dialogue between Christians and Muslims working together for peace and reconciliation. Christian clergy need to prevent the potential militancy of their faithful and act jointly against reprisal attacks by Christian youth. Keeping communication lines open will always be positive and promote sustainable peace-building efforts. However, peace-building must be predicated on justice for victims of persecution.

Conclusion and recommendations

Terrorism as we know it today in West Africa thrives on religion, ignorance, and social disaffection. Christians in Nigeria are being killed with targeted precision, posing an existential threat to the church. The virtual

abandonment of missions and evangelism in some affected areas represents a clear danger. To succeed in the fight against terrorism, the youth across the religious and ethnic divide need to be united in working proactively to address this existential challenge.

We cannot wait for governments to end the cycle of violence in our communities and nations. We each have a role to play. Jesus has motivated and inspired me in the role I am playing: 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the sons of God' (Matt 5:9). Thankfully, the church's hope in Nigeria remains firmly rooted in the God who promised: 'I will not leave nor forsake you' (Heb 13:5).

Endnotes

1. St Ignatius of Antioch. [↑](#)
2. Leah Sharibu's appeal video link: <https://youtu.be/8hwT7ylZ0B4>. [↑](#)
3. *Editor's Note*: See article by John Azumah, entitled, 'The Challenge of Radical Islam', in March 2015 issue of *Lausanne Global Analysis* <https://www.lausanne.org/content/lga/2015-03/the-challenge-of-radical-islam>. [↑](#)
4. In 1963, the total population of Christians stood at 36 percent. In 2001, it was 40 percent. By 2008, it increased to 46 percent, and 48.3 percent in 2010. Recent research by the Pew Forum on the regional distribution of Christians in Nigeria, estimated the population of Christians now to be 50.8 percent (over 80 million). The sustained killing of Christians began in 2009. Research is needed to ascertain the impact of these attacks. <http://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-regions/>. [↑](#)
5. Nigeria Evangelical Missionary Association (NEMA). [↑](#)
6. 'Threats to the Christian Faith in Contemporary Nigeria', Keynote Address by Mathew Hassan Kukah, Catholic Bishop of Sokoto Diocese, at a conference in Lagos, 16 June 2018. [↑](#)
7. Internal Displacement Monitoring Center (IDMC): GRID Report. [↑](#)
8. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boko_Haram. [↑](#)
9. <http://saharareporters.com/2018/12/07/nigeria-ranked-3rd-most-terrorized-global>. [↑](#)
10. Amy Harmon, *Sand and Ash*, <http://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/47395935-from-sand-and-ashes>. [↑](#)

11. *Editor's Note:* See article by Yousaf Sadiq, entitled, 'How Should We Respond to the Persecution of Christians?' in January 2019 issue of *Lausanne Global Analysis* <https://www.lausanne.org/content/lga/2019-01/how-should-we-respond-to-the-persecution-of-christians>. [↑](#)
12. *Editor's Note:* See article by Ewelina Ochab, entitled, 'The Atrocities of the Islamic State: Reversing the eradication of religious minorities in Iraq and Syria' in March 2019 issue of *Lausanne Global Analysis* <https://www.lausanne.org/content/lga/2019-03/the-atrocities-of-the-islamic-state>. [↑](#)
13. Rev Dr Martin Luther King Jr, Baptist Minister and US Civil Rights Movement. [↑](#)

Date: 07 Jun 2019 · Grouping: Lausanne Global Analysis · Topics: [EPSA](#), [Religious Liberty](#)



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