



Foreign Policy and Facts: Evaluating Policy Implications of Trump's Nigeria Speech

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Abstract

This article examines U.S. foreign policy discourse following President Donald Trump's November 2025 remarks about alleged “Christian genocide” in Nigeria. Through secondary sources and content analysis of Trump's statements, we compare the faith-based narrative he advanced with empirical data on Nigeria's conflicts. We find out that Nigeria's violence stems largely from ethnic, economic, and counterinsurgency struggles, not systematic targeting of one religion. Nigerian leaders and analysts emphasize that “no group is specifically targeted on religious or ethnic grounds,” noting both Christians and Muslims suffer attacks. Trump's rhetoric, threatening military action “guns-a-blazing” to save “our cherished Christians”, aligns with pressure from U.S. religious-interest groups but lacks factual support. We discuss how religious freedom norms (IRFA) interface with realpolitik, and the dangers of letting domestic ideology drive interventionist policy. The analysis concludes that U.S. response should prioritize cooperative counterterrorism and aid strategies over unilateral threats. Recommendations include fact-based policy, multilateral engagement, and targeted support to all Nigerians facing violence, thus aligning foreign policy actions with facts rather than ideology.

Keywords: Faith, Foreign policy, United States, Nigeria, Policy

Introduction

In late October 2025, President Trump announced that Nigeria would be redesignated as a “Country of Particular Concern” for religious freedom violations, and warned of possible U.S. military action if Nigeria did not stop what he termed the “killing of Christians”. He posted on Truth Social that “*thousands of Christians are being killed*,” characterizing Nigeria as “disgraced” and vowing to “wipe out the Islamic Terrorists” if Nigeria failed to act. These comments generated a storm of debate. Nigerian President Bola Tinubu immediately rejected the characterization: Nigeria is a “*democracy governed by constitutional guarantees of religious liberty*” and terrorism “affects citizens across faiths”. Local news reports and analysts underscored that violence in Nigeria spans multiple conflicts; Islamist insurgency, farmer-herder clashes, and banditry – affecting both Christians and Muslims (Amabuokiri, 2025).

This paper investigates the policy implications of Trump's statements, focusing on the intersection

of faith-based rhetoric and foreign policy decision-making. We ask: What are the factual realities of Nigeria's conflicts? How do Trump's claims align with data and on-the-ground accounts? And crucially, what are the likely consequences for U.S.-Nigeria relations and U.S. counterterrorism objectives?

By reviewing literature on religion in foreign policy and analyzing secondary sources (news, NGO reports, statements) about Nigeria, we aim to provide a nuanced assessment. The analysis proceeds as follows: a literature review surveys scholarship on religion and U.S. foreign policy, including norms like the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA); an empirical review presents facts about Nigeria's security situation and reactions; a theoretical framework discusses how identity narratives influence policy; and finally we draw conclusions and offer recommendations.



Literature Review

Scholars and analysts note that U.S. foreign policy has long invoked *religious freedom* as a moral priority. The 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) mandates annual reviews of global religious freedom and allows the President to designate “Countries of Particular Concern” for systemic violations. In practice, IRFA reflects a liberal-internationalist norm that the U.S. should confront persecution abroad. However, research also shows that religious identity often intersects with domestic politics and strategic interests. For example, U.S. evangelical and conservative groups have increased their influence on policy in recent years, supporting interventions framed as defending persecuted Christians. Analysts of the Trump administration's foreign policy (“faithful” agenda) warn that it sometimes prioritized symbolic actions appealing to religious constituents (e.g. conservative evangelicals) rather than pragmatic strategy (Catholic Review, (2025).

Beyond the international relations literature, governance scholars argue that effective public policy should be grounded in empirical evidence, institutional accountability, transparency, and objective decision-making rather than ideological or political considerations. Public governance literature emphasizes that evidence-based policymaking enhances institutional legitimacy, policy effectiveness, and public trust. According to Ademeso et al. (2025), good governance requires that policy decisions be guided by transparency, accountability, participation, and the rule of law, all of which depend on accurate information and objective assessment rather than politically constructed narratives. Similar arguments are advanced by Ademeso, Bulus, and Chukwuemeka (2025), who contend that sustainable public policy must be adapted to contextual realities while maintaining internationally accepted governance principles. These governance perspectives provide a useful lens for assessing the implications of foreign policy decisions founded upon contested narratives rather than verifiable evidence.

Think-tank studies of the Nigeria case (e.g. Atlantic Council, Crisis Group) emphasize the risk of oversimplification. They argue that focusing

narrowly on a “Christian genocide” narrative ignores key facts: Nigeria faces *multiple overlapping conflicts* (Boko Haram insurgency, banditry, ethnic land disputes) in which victims span faiths (Amabuokiri, 2025). In this view, religion often becomes a retrospective label rather than a root cause. For instance, Atlantic Council analysts note that Nigerians complain about poor governance and insecurity above all, with neither Boko Haram's nor the Fulani farmer-herder conflicts being fundamentally faith-driven (Oestergaard, (2025); Amabuokiri, 2025). Such literature suggests that mischaracterizing these conflicts as purely religious risks misdirecting policy and alienating partners.

At the same time, advocacy groups for persecuted Christians (and some U.S. Congress members) have highlighted genuine attacks on Christian communities. These voices often cite high casualty figures and push for designations or sanctions. The resulting discourse has produced competing narratives: one painting Nigeria as a hotbed of Christian persecution, the other describing a complex security crisis affecting all Nigerians. Our review indicates a lack of peer-reviewed academic work on this specific episode (due to recency), so the analysis relies on expert reports, journalism, and policy commentary. We situate this case within international relations theory: normative obligations (IRFA/USCIRF) and realpolitik considerations, and the constructivist insight that leaders shape foreign policy through identity-based narratives (Catholic Review, 2025).

Empirical Review

Nigeria is Africa's most populous country (230 million) and has a roughly even split between Christians (45%) and Muslims (50%). It has endured multiple security crises. In the northeast, Islamist insurgents (Boko Haram, ISWAP) have waged terror campaigns for over a decade, killing tens of thousands; the majority of them Muslims. In the central “Middle Belt,” armed clashes between primarily Muslim Fulani herders and mostly Christian farmers (over land and resources) have also escalated, killing thousands on both sides (Amabuokiri, 2025). Beyond these, banditry and kidnappings linked to poverty and weak governance afflict various regions (Reuters, 2025).



Conflict-monitoring data confirm that violent incidents are not religion-targeted. The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) reported 1,923 violent attacks on civilians in Nigeria in the year leading up to November 2025, but *only 50* were explicitly linked to Christian identity. ACLED analysts note that insurgent groups may *frame* their narratives as anti-Christian, yet “*in practice, their violence is indiscriminate and devastates entire communities*”. Nigerian experts echo this: Rev. Yohanna Buru, a Kaduna cleric, states that “*everyone is being killed by these terrorist groups*” and that he has seen “*both mosques and churches being attacked*”. Political scientist Abdullahi Musa emphasizes that the root issues are governance failures, inequality, and resource competition, not an inter-faith war.

Nigerian authorities have robustly rejected the Christian-genocide narrative. President Tinubu wrote on social media that the U.S. claims “*do not reflect our national reality,*” noting constitutional protections for all faiths. The Foreign Ministry likewise urged Washington to remain a close ally and pledged to defend citizens of “*all religions*”. Local civil society and victims (often Christian farmers) uniformly call for better security from their own government, not foreign military intervention. For example, farmer Lawrence Zhongo (victim of Plateau State attacks) told Al Jazeera that “*Muslims are also killed*” in these raids and that the crisis is one of state failure.

In view of this, empirical evidence suggests that while violence in Nigeria is severe and indeed affects Christian communities, it is not a case of one-sided religious genocide. Both Christians and Muslims have suffered immensely. In context, the U.S. church–state commission (USCIRF) had long flagged Nigeria for serious violations of religious freedom – but those violations include attacks on mosques, enforcement of strict blasphemy laws, and general insecurity. Notably, USCIRF's 3 Nov 2025 press release welcomed Nigeria's CPC designation and cited attacks on both Christian and Muslim targets (a church massacre killing 200 and a mosque attack killing 27). This underscores that Nigerian Christians do face violence, but in the

context of broader religious and political turmoil.

Theoretical Framework

Constructivism emerged as a major theoretical perspective in International Relations during the late 1980s and early 1990s as a response to the limitations of realism and liberalism in explaining state behaviour. The theory is most prominently associated with Alexander Wendt (1992; 1999), who argues that international politics is socially constructed through shared ideas, beliefs, identities, norms, and collective meanings rather than being determined solely by material power or military capabilities. Wendt's famous assertion that “anarchy is what states make of it” underscores the constructivist position that the international system acquires meaning only through the interactions and interpretations of political actors.

Unlike realism, which views states as rational actors pursuing survival and power in an anarchic international system, constructivism argues that state interests are neither fixed nor given. Instead, they are shaped by historical experiences, cultural values, political identities, domestic beliefs, and prevailing international norms. Consequently, foreign policy decisions are influenced not only by objective realities but also by how political leaders interpret events and construct narratives around them.

Constructivists contend that language, discourse, symbols, and political rhetoric are powerful instruments that shape public perception and policy choices. Political leaders employ narratives to define threats, identify allies and enemies, legitimize policy actions, and mobilize domestic and international support. Through repeated discourse, certain interpretations become accepted as social reality even when empirical evidence may suggest otherwise.

Although Constructivism explains how identities and political narratives shape foreign policy, principles of public governance equally require that state actions remain consistent with accountability, institutional responsibility, and evidence-based decision-making. Ademeso et al. (2025) argue that governance legitimacy depends



on transparency and rational policy formulation, suggesting that foreign policy narratives should be continuously evaluated against empirical evidence to avoid institutional distortions. This governance perspective complements constructivist explanations by emphasizing that socially constructed narratives should not replace factual policy analysis.

Scholars such as Martha Finnemore (1996), Peter Katzenstein (1996), and Nicholas Onuf (1989) further argue that international norms and identities influence how states perceive their responsibilities toward other states. Foreign policy is therefore a product of both material interests and socially constructed understandings of appropriate behaviour.

Application of Constructivism to the Study

Constructivism provides the most appropriate theoretical lens for analysing the policy implications of President Donald Trump's remarks regarding alleged "Christian genocide" in Nigeria. Rather than focusing exclusively on the empirical realities of insecurity in Nigeria, the theory explains how political narratives and identity constructions influence foreign policy formulation.

Trump's public statements framed Nigeria primarily as a country where Christians are systematically persecuted, thereby constructing a religious identity narrative that portrayed the conflict as one between Christians and Islamic extremists. This framing differed significantly from empirical evidence presented by Nigerian authorities, security experts, and conflict-monitoring organizations, which shows that violence in Nigeria affects both Christians and Muslims and is driven by a complex interaction of insurgency, farmer-herder conflicts, banditry, governance failures, and socioeconomic factors.

From a constructivist perspective, Trump's rhetoric illustrates how leaders construct meanings that shape foreign policy preferences. His repeated references to protecting "our cherished Christians" demonstrate the use of religious identity as a foreign policy narrative capable of influencing

public opinion, mobilizing domestic political constituencies, and justifying international actions. Constructivism explains that such discourse may become influential regardless of whether it accurately reflects realities on the ground.

The theory also explains why different actors interpreted the same Nigerian security crisis differently. While Nigerian officials framed the violence as a multidimensional security and governance challenge, Trump and some religious advocacy groups interpreted it primarily as religious persecution. These competing interpretations illustrate the constructivist argument that international politics is shaped by socially constructed meanings rather than objective facts alone.

Furthermore, Constructivism helps explain how domestic political considerations within the United States, including the influence of evangelical Christian groups and religious freedom advocacy organizations, contributed to the framing of Nigeria as a religious freedom concern. The theory therefore demonstrates that foreign policy outcomes emerge from the interaction between identities, norms, beliefs, and political discourse.

Overall, Constructivism provides a comprehensive explanation of why political narratives can significantly influence foreign policy decisions even when those narratives diverge from empirical evidence. It is therefore highly suitable for analysing the relationship between faith-based rhetoric, policy formulation, and international relations in the Trump–Nigeria episode examined in this study.

Conclusion

The evidence shows that President Trump's portrayal of Nigeria as a site of Christian genocide is not supported by the complex realities on the ground. Security experts and data indicate that Boko Haram and other violent actors kill Nigerians of all faiths, and that herder–farmer clashes are rooted in land conflict, not a religious agenda (Amabuokiri, 2025). Local voices and analysts



stress that Nigerian Christians are victims, but so too are many Muslims, underlining that the nation's conflicts are multifaceted. Policymaking driven by the faulty narrative of a one-sided faith war can distort U.S. priorities.

Indeed, characterizing the violence as exclusively against Christians risks four dangers:

- (1) Eroding trust with Nigerian partners who reject the characterization (Salako, 2025);
- (2) Diverting resources from effective counterterrorism cooperation;
- (3) Heightening religious polarization in Nigeria and among U.S. audiences;
- (4) Setting a precedent of unilateral military threats that may be counterproductive.

Nigeria's own appeals (like Tinubu's) emphasize joint efforts to combat extremism, not confrontation with the United States. Reputable analysts (e.g. Obadare, USCIRF officials) advise that assistance and accountability measures are appropriate, but invasion or broad punitive measures would be counterproductive.

In light of these findings, U.S. policy should shift from religiously charged rhetoric to pragmatic partnership. The U.S. has tools (CPC designation, aid programs, intelligence cooperation) that can pressure Nigeria constructively, but it must apply them in ways that recognize Nigeria's internal dynamics. Trump's approach has spotlighted real issues, there are indeed communities under threat, but conflating these with a fictional religious genocide undermines policy. Future U.S. engagement should emphasize shared interests (stabilizing Nigeria, defeating terrorism) and mutual respect, rather than faith-based moralizing.

Recommendations

The following recommendations emanated from this research;
U.S. officials should closely consult credible sources (e.g. ACLED data, human rights reports) to understand Nigeria's conflicts. All communications should acknowledge that both Christians and Muslims suffer violence. This

avoids propaganda and keeps diplomacy grounded in facts.

Instead of unilateral threats, the U.S. should bolster joint counterterrorism efforts. This can include training Nigerian forces, sharing intelligence on Boko Haram/ISWAP, and supporting stabilization programs in affected regions. The Nigeria's common enemy is terrorism, not the U.S. Navy. Targeted sanctions on known extremist leaders, as suggested by USCIRF, could complement these efforts without harming civilians.

The CPC listing under IRFA should be leveraged to negotiate improvements in religious freedom and security. U.S. Congress should pair the designation with dialogue, technical aid, and conditional assistance that incentivize Nigerian government reforms (e.g. better protection of all minority communities). U.S. agencies (e.g. USCIRF, State Dept.) can provide capacity-building for local justice systems to address communal crimes. As noted by USCIRF and religious advocates, U.S. policy now has an opening to hold perpetrators to account in Nigeria.

U.S. leaders should avoid charged language that stigmatizes Nigeria or frames the crisis as a cosmic battle of faiths. Instead, statements should emphasize Nigeria's efforts and challenges, and American support for defending all citizens, irrespective of religion". Public diplomacy and media engagements should highlight stories of interfaith solidarity in Nigeria to counter divisive narratives.

Long-term peace in Nigeria requires tackling inequality, governance gaps, and climate pressures that drive communal conflict. U.S. foreign assistance (through USAID, MCC, etc.) should support development, conflict resolution, and resource management programs in the Middle Belt and North. By improving livelihoods and infrastructure, such programs reduce tensions that fuel extremist recruitment.



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