

## Nigeria: Persecution or Civil Unrest?<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

Nigeria has, in recent years, earned the reputation of being a country with an alarming record of religiously-related violence. Numerous incidents of such violence have resulted in the wanton loss of lives and property, inflicted pain and suffering on individual persons and communities as well as undermined the fabric of the society. No one seems to be in doubt about the far-reaching and appalling implications of this for religious freedom. However, the phenomenon has also triggered a debate among analysts and commentators about the question of whether the Nigerian situation is actually persecution, or just civil unrest. This paper argues that the Nigerian case is a classic example of what could be referred to as *persecution eclipse* – a situation whereby persecution and civil conflict overlap to the extent that the former is in a real or imaginative sense overshadowed or rendered almost invisible by the latter.

The paper further argues that *persecution eclipse* is a dangerous set of lenses that: minimises, overlooks or denies the suffering of a victim of persecution; encourages a causal analysis that provides vicarious justifications for the perpetrators' actions; shifts the focus of interrogation from religious freedom violations to conflict analysis; and embraces an instrumental view of conflict in which religion assumes an insignificant place in the analysis. The concept of *persecution eclipse* is proposed here to show how religious freedom itself can become a casualty in a situation where genuine persecution becomes lost in a murky debate. This paper seeks to show that there are both insidious and elevated forms of persecution against Christians in northern Nigeria. It also acknowledges that inter-religious conflicts bordering on struggle over power and resources are endemic in Nigeria. To be exact, these conflicts have been used as vehicles to pursue the objectives of persecution and to widen its scope. In order to misinform the outside world, perpetrators have learned to invent narratives that conceal the nexus between persecution and conflict and engage in propaganda using mainstream and social media.

### Brief Background of the Country

Nigeria has a population of about 170 million, by far the most populous nation in Africa. The country is a mosaic of diversities – it is multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-religious. There are over 250 ethnic groups. Christianity and Islam are the predominant religions, but there are numerous traditional religions as well. There are no reliable statistics on the religious composition of the population. This is because religion was excluded in the last census the country conducted in 2006. However, conflicting estimates from different sources exist. For example, the CIA World Fact Book gives the

composition as follows: Muslims 50%, Christians 40% and indigenous beliefs 10%.<sup>2</sup> The Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA) puts the breakdown as follows: Christian (46.45%), Muslim (45.53%), Ethno-religionist/traditional religions (7.67%), Agnostic (0.25%) and Other (0.09%).<sup>3</sup> Pew Forum estimates Christians to be 49.3%, Muslims 48.8%, Hindu 0.1%, Buddhist 0.1%, Folk religion 1.4%, Jewish religion 0.1%, other religion 0.1% and unaffiliated 0.4%.<sup>4</sup> Pew Forum gave these estimates with a caveat, noting that Nigeria is among the nine countries in the world without a clear religious majority. The politics of population census is a major one in Nigeria. Majority-minority dichotomy permeates the national psyche and manifests political and social formations. Those who pursue a religious agenda claim to be in the majority by discounting the realities of others. For example, the introduction of *Sharia* in Kaduna State, where there is no clear majority, was contentious and volatile.

Christianity is the majority religion in southern Nigeria; Islam is predominant in the north. However, there are many Muslims in the south and a large population of Christians in the north.

Nigeria emerged from a prolonged period of military dictatorship in 1999. Since its return to democratic rule, the country has been rocked by a plethora of violent conflicts. The country is deeply divided along political, religious and ethnic lines. Struggle over access to lucrative political power has pitted different groups against each other. Ethnic, religious and regional alliances have been the basis of political mobilisation and contestations. Ethnic and religious identities tend to coincide and, as such, any disagreement between one ethnic group that predominantly belongs to a particular religion and another group, which largely belongs to a different religion, can easily assume a religious coloration. Hence, the preponderance of violent conflicts that have occurred in Nigeria in the last thirteen years could be categorised as ethno-religious conflicts.<sup>5</sup> Northern Nigeria, in particular, has become the fault line where ethno-religious conflicts erupt recurrently between the Muslim majority and the Christian minority.

In spite of Nigeria's vast oil resources and economic potential, human development has remained abysmally low. The country's HDI<sup>6</sup> is 0.459 (the average for Africa is 0.463), putting it at 156<sup>th</sup> position out of the 187 countries ranked. High levels of poverty and social discontent among the population have been widely attributed to endemic official corruption and a lack of good governance. Since 1999, successive governments of Nigeria have claimed to fight corruption, but the results have been insignificant. The many socio-economic challenges befalling the country are compounded by growing insecurity and violent extremism. The country was ranked 146 out of 158 countries scored on the Global Peace Index (GPI)<sup>7</sup> and occupied 14<sup>th</sup> position on the Failed State Index<sup>8</sup>, indicating a legitimate cause for concern.

## **Brief Overview of Religious Freedom in the Country**

Nigeria is among the countries in the world that contain clear constitutional provisions for religious freedom. Article 10 of the Constitution clearly states that, “The Government of the Federation or of a State shall not adopt any religion as State Religion.” This provision was designed to guarantee freedom of religion by upholding the multi-religious character of the country. However, from 1999, this was put to the test when twelve states in the north adopted *Sharia* law in controversial circumstances. Proponents of *Sharia* argued that its introduction did not amount to adopting a State Religion. Christians, on the other hand, opposed *Sharia* on the grounds that it would infringe their rights and accord Muslims undue advantages, since, in practice, Islam does not distinguish between faith and politics. Sadly, the *Sharia* issue triggered violent confrontations and the loss of many lives.

Furthermore, Article 15 (2), of the Constitution states that, “... discrimination on the grounds of place of origin, sex, RELIGION [*author’s emphasis*], status, ethnic or linguistic association or ties shall be prohibited.” It goes on to echo Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by stating that:

(1) Every person shall be entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom (either alone or in community with others, and in public or in private) to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance.

(2) No person attending any place of education shall be required to receive religious instruction or to take part in or attend any religious ceremony or observance if such instruction ceremony or observance relates to a religion other than his own, or religion not approved by his parent or guardian.

(3) No religious community or denomination shall be prevented from providing religious instruction for pupils of that community or denomination in any place of education maintained wholly by that community or denomination.

The Constitution upholds the fundamental right of people to believe or not to believe. It forbids anyone from suffering on account of his or her religion or faith. The right to manifest what one believes or to practise one’s religion is also provided for in the law of the land.

Notwithstanding this legal framework, Nigeria’s record of upholding religious freedom is wretched. The Pew Forum Religious Restriction Index rates countries based on the degrees of Social Hostilities and Government Restrictions. Of the 25 most populous countries ranked in the index, Nigeria is among those with a very high degree of Social Hostilities (SH) and a high level of Government Restrictions (GR). Between 2007 and

2010, the GR increased from moderate to high<sup>9</sup>, possibly as a result of the government's crackdown on the Islamist terrorist group Boko Haram. The Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA) uses four indices to assess Nigeria's religious freedom rating, namely, Government Regulation of Religion (4.7), Government Favouritism of Religion (7.2), Social Regulation of Religion (5.8) and Religious Persecution (6).<sup>10</sup> The indices are based on a scale of 0-10; the higher the value, the greater the prevalence or severity. The World Watch List, a ranking of the 50 countries with the greatest persecution of Christians, ranks Nigeria as number 13.<sup>11</sup>

Nigeria is ranked 7<sup>th</sup> out of 158 countries, on the Global Terrorist Index (GTI) 2012<sup>12</sup>, a worrying development. The terrorist activities of the Islamist sect Boko Haram and its various offshoots have increased considerably in the last three years, becoming the greatest threat to religious freedom, and even to national unity. The authors of the GTI adopt the definition of the Global Terrorist Database (GTD), which refers to terrorism as "the threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence by a non-state actor to attain a political, economic, RELIGIOUS [*author's emphasis*], or social goals through fear, coercion, or intimidation."<sup>13</sup> As noted in the GTI, religion is the most common motivation for contemporary terrorist organisations.<sup>14</sup> That religion is the overarching ideology of Boko Haram is instructive regarding the impact of Islamist terrorism on religious freedom in Nigeria. This will be elaborated further in subsequent sections.

### **Defining Religious Persecution**

Like many concepts, the word 'persecution' is definitional,<sup>15</sup> and therefore it is necessary to clarify it. The etymological origin of the word 'persecution' is the Latin expression *persequi*, meaning "to pursue". This by implication "suggests that the TARGET [*author's emphasis*] is being pursued or sought after for some particular characteristic that he or she possesses, almost like a criminal."<sup>16</sup> Given the focus of this paper, the definition of persecution proposed here applies to religious persecution. Put simply, religious persecution refers to any unjust action of any form and the level of hostility directed at individuals or groups regarded as the *religious other*, essentially for faith related reasons, resulting in any kind or level of harm to the victims. The implication of this definition is that religious persecution may involve varying types and degrees of hostility. In other words, we can talk about the severity of persecution. The Open Door's World Watch List is an example of a systematic approach to measuring the severity of persecution in the countries being assessed. This is done through a broad methodology that allows the weighting of various elements of persecution, from taken-for-granted, day-to-day actions of persecutors which deprive Christians of their fundamental or citizenship rights, to the more severe cases of torture, hard labour, enslavement and death.

It is also important to note that the target of persecution is considered as the *religious other* by the persecutor – the victim of religious persecution is targeted by virtue of his

or her religious identity which is considered inferior or even in some way threatening by the persecutor. Persons who are being persecuted know what persecution is. They have no difficulty in knowing that they suffer because of their faith/belief and for being the religious *other*.

Another salient feature of persecution is the religious motivation that drives the hostility. As with other forms of persecution, religious persecution is driven by certain motivations that may stem from an intense hatred toward the religious other; religiocentrism<sup>17</sup>; the quest to suppress religious minorities; the pursuit of a mission to impose one religion on the rest of society or a state; and the belief in the sacred duty to kill *others*.

The last delineating characteristic of persecution based on our definition is the harm inflicted on the victim. Again, the degree and nature of the harm may vary. Persecution may cause the victim psychological, social and/or physical harm. The psychological and social impacts of persecution, although less visible, are too grave to be ignored.

### **Typologies of Persecution in Nigeria**

With the above brief exposé of persecution in focus, this section of the paper attempts to characterise the typologies of persecution experienced by Christians in Nigeria. As there is no rule of thumb for such taxonomy, a simple approach is proposed. First, persecution will be classified into two broad categories. Then specific examples within each will be highlighted.

The first broad category of persecution that Christians in northern Nigeria experience is *insidious persecution*. This category is endemic in northern Nigeria and typified by the daily experiences of many Christian minorities in the region. Some examples of these include: discrimination in employment; stagnation in promotion in public service; suppression of ministries; denial of church building permits; preventing Christian children in public schools from receiving Christian religious studies (while Muslim counterparts receive Islamic religious studies); denying Christians the opportunity to reach elective and appointive positions; imposing the veil on Christian female students; denying Christian students a place of worship on campuses (whereas mosques can be built anywhere); discrimination in admission to tertiary institutions; forcing young Christian girls into marriage against their parents' wishes (while forbidding Christian boys from having relationships with Muslim girls); and the maltreatment and threatening of converts to Christianity. Such discrimination is common in most of the 12 *Sharia* states and has become normal for Christians in northern Nigeria. It is a reality that Christians in that region of the country have come to terms with. These common practices of persecution accentuate the domination-subordination relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims in northern Nigeria.<sup>18</sup> In a nutshell, *insidious persecution*

undermines a person's dignity, development and religious liberty; it may also involve physical harm to the victim(s).

The second category of persecution that Christians in northern Nigeria are subjected to is *elevated persecution*. This form of persecution used to be intermittent, but in recent years has become more entrenched and is evolving. *Elevated persecution* is a more lethal form of persecution. It is employed by extremists against Christians in northern Nigeria. Unsatisfied with the impact of *insidious persecution*, Islamists started to adopt more vicious strategies against Christians living in the region. At first, this took the form of sporadic violence involving attacks against Christians, their places of worship and homes. Some examples of these include: the 18 February 2006 violence against Christians by Muslim groups in Maiduguri in reaction to cartoons of Prophet Mohammed published in a Danish newspaper in 2005; attacks against Christians following a newspaper editorial by a journalist about Muslims protesting against Nigeria's hosting of the Miss World Beauty Pageant in 2002, which Muslim clerics considered blasphemous and resulted in a 'fatwa'<sup>19</sup>; recurrent attacks on Christians and their businesses by Muslim youths who have been indoctrinated with the superstitious belief that the 'sinfulness' of non-Muslims is responsible for lunar or solar eclipses, and attacks against Christians in Kano in reaction to America's launching of war in Afghanistan<sup>20</sup>.

Such violence still occurs in northern Nigeria. For example, in November 2012 a rumour in Kano that a Christian man had blasphemed the Prophet [Mohammed] resulted in the killing of four Christians and looting and burning of Christians' shops and homes. This attack was triggered by what the Kano State police chief, Ibrahim Idris, described as "misinformation". According to the BBC<sup>21</sup>:

Mr Idris said the riot broke out when a Christian tailor mispronounced the name of a dress while chatting with his Muslim neighbour in Hausa, the main language spoken in the north, changing the meaning to "the Prophet has come to the market", AFP reports.

Angry Muslim youths then attacked Christian-owned shops, looting and burning them, he said.

Nigerian Christians are subjected to such episodic violence at the slightest rumour of 'blasphemy' or 'provocation', whether 'committed' in Nigeria or abroad. After such attacks occur the usual reaction from state authorities and Muslim religious leaders is to dismiss the action as the "activities of hoodlums and miscreants"; the government generally promises an investigation into the incident and that it will bring the culprits to justice. That is however usually the last thing to be heard about it. When the next incident occurs, the same pattern of response is repeated. The impunity enjoyed by those who perpetrate such violence has become an incentive for this kind of persecution. Muslim religious leaders in the north have failed to come out bravely to condemn the violence in the strongest terms, and to call the section of their community

that engages in such atrocious behaviour to order. They have also failed to challenge or educate their clerics and followers about the distortions that lead them to violent outbursts against Christians.

In the last few years, *elevated persecution* has assumed a more lethal form. An Islamist sect named “People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad” – commonly known as Boko Haram (meaning Western education is a sacrilege) – that is seeking to establish a strict version of *Sharia* and to create an Islamic state in northern Nigeria, has engaged in terrorist attacks against Christians, churches and Muslims from other traditions. The sect issued an ultimatum to Christians and southerners to leave northern Nigeria in three days. In Borno, Adamawa and Yobe states it has conducted house-to-house attacks against Christians in an effort to eliminate them. The escalation of attacks against Christians has caused a mass displacement.<sup>22</sup> For example, Boko Haram’s attacks in Yobe State claimed over 100 lives in November 2011.<sup>23</sup>

Boko Haram has also been targeting churches, shooting worshippers and carrying out suicide bombings. Several churches have been attacked, many Christians have been killed and hundreds injured. For example, Boko Haram claimed responsibility for a series of bomb blasts in Jos, Plateau State, which occurred on Christmas Eve of 2010, and claimed at least 80 lives.<sup>24</sup> The Islamist group also carried out the 2011 Christmas Day bombing of St. Theresa Catholic Church at Madalla, Niger State in central Nigeria in which 44 people were killed and many injured (two other churches were also attacked on the same day).<sup>25</sup> A suicide bomb attack on COCIN (Church of Christ in Nations) Headquarters Church in Jos on 26 February 2012 left three dead and 38 injured.<sup>26</sup> Eleven people died in another suicide bomb attack targeting St. Finbarr’s Catholic Church in Jos on 11 March 2012.<sup>27</sup> On 29 April 2012, Boko Haram militants stormed campus church services at the Bayero University Kano (BUK) with bombs and guns, leaving nineteen students and one professor dead.<sup>28</sup> Boko Haram also claimed responsibility for carrying out a suicide bomb attack on Harvest Field of Christ Church in Bauchi State on 3 June 2012, where 21 people were killed and 45 others injured.<sup>29</sup>

On 17 June 2012, the group carried out simultaneous attacks on three churches in Kaduna State: two in Zaria and one in Kaduna metropolis, killing over 50 people and wounding 131 others.<sup>30</sup> Around the Muslim holiday of Eid Al-Adha holiday on 28 October 2012, a Boko Haram suicide bomber rammed a vehicle into St. Rita’s Catholic Church in Malali, Kaduna metropolis, killing fifteen people and injuring many others.<sup>31</sup> In a demonstration of the level of their determination, the sect carried out twin bomb attacks on a church in Jaji military complex near Kaduna on 25 November 2012, which claimed eleven lives and injured 30 others.<sup>32</sup> Christians in northern Nigeria have learned from previous years that Christmas is a time for extra vigilance. Consequently, in 2012 Christmas was marked in a low key manner amid increased security measures all over

northern and central Nigeria. Nevertheless, Boko Haram managed to carry out attacks on Christmas Eve in Potiskum in Yobe State and in Maiduguri, the Borno State capital, in which twelve Christian worshippers were killed.<sup>33</sup>

In the last three or four years another pattern of *elevated persecution* has been witnessed in the area. This has taken the form of invasions of isolated, geographically dispersed Christian villages by armed assailants. Initially considered to be attacks by armed Fulani herdsmen, these assaults have become increasingly widespread and highly organised. Armed attackers take victims by surprise, usually arriving late at night or before dawn. For example, in a series of coordinated attacks on three Christian communities in Barkin Ladi and Riyom Local Government Areas of Plateau State, 100 people, including women and children, were killed in July 2012. Boko Haram subsequently claimed responsibility for the attacks and made its intention clear:

The sect “thanked God for the success of the attacks” and vowed that there was no going back on the jihad (Holy War) it had launched against Christians and the government. It also asked “Christians in Nigeria to accept Islam” as a condition for a ceasefire.<sup>34</sup>

Many Christian villages in Kaduna, Bauchi, Plateau, Yobe, Borno and Adamawa states have experienced such attacks. Many Christians have fled from flashpoints in Borno and Yobe. Some have even abandoned their farms, shops and other personal belongings, only to hear later that these items were taken by their neighbours.<sup>35</sup> A female Christian community leader<sup>36</sup> narrated her ordeal during an interview. She was forced to abandon her job in the Borno State public service and take refuge in her native home in Chibok. She thought she was safe in this predominantly Christian area until Boko Haram extended its attacks to the area, killing innocent people and burning churches and homes of Christians. According to the woman, the attackers vowed to “reduce the area to a non-Christian community.” Such stories are widespread in the aforementioned states. Hardly a week goes by without news of attacks on Christian villages. Many Christians who were interviewed during the course of this research strongly believe that their communities are under siege.

### **Civil Conflicts as a Vehicle for Persecution**

Inter-communal conflicts have had a debilitating impact on Nigeria’s development. The common causes of such social conflicts are: land and boundary disputes; struggles for political power; the indigene/settler divide; diminished grazing land and encroachment of pastoralists onto cultivated lands; political marginalisation; discrimination and hindered opportunities; historic grievances, social discontent, ethnic chauvinism; religious extremism; weak institutions; corruption and bad governance. While this paper acknowledges the potential of each of these factors to increase a society’s proneness to



conflict, there is nevertheless a nexus between conflict and persecution in which the former drives the latter.

In the case of Nigeria there are structural and systemic issues that have nurtured conflicts. Using the Onion Metaphor,<sup>37</sup> one could say that in a conflict situation, parties involved have positions, interests and needs. Regardless of one's religion or creed, in most situations, needs are associated with the basic necessities of life. For example, exercising discrimination or enforcing deprivation against any group is unacceptable. Any action that is inimical to the well-being of people, regardless of their faith, cannot be justified. It cannot say that in every single conflict with a religious coloration Christians were right and Muslims wrong. What is needed is a case-by-case analysis.

In northern Nigeria conflict has been effectively deployed by Muslims to advance a politico-religious agenda to the detriment of other faith groups. For example, the introduction of "*Full Sharia*" by twelve northern states under controversial circumstances was facilitated by conflict. As soon as the states indicated their plan to adopt *Sharia*, there was opposition from local Christian communities. Graffiti that appeared on public walls illustrated that Muslims were bracing for a showdown rather than having a healthy national debate about the constitutionality or otherwise of the new *Sharia* proposal. Some of the statements read: "*Sharia dole ne*" ("*Sharia* is a must!"); "*Sharia* or bloodshed"; "*Sharia ko mutuwa*" ("*Sharia* or death!").<sup>38</sup> Also, peaceful protests by Christians were overrun by militant Muslims and violence soon erupted across many northern cities. Thousands of people died. Some Christians from the southern part of the country, particularly those dealing in products and services that could possibly be prohibited by *Sharia* laws, relocated to other places for fear of *Sharia* or of losing their livelihoods. Through the imposition of *Sharia*, authorities in most of the twelve states further subdued local Christian communities (including those indigenous to the area). The introduction of *Full Sharia* also consolidated *insidious persecution* by entrenching the second class status of religious minorities within those states reinforcing the absolute control of members of the Muslim community over the political space of each state.

The majority of the incidents of conflicts that have been reported in the international media as 'clashes' between Muslims and Christians in actual fact have been one-sided violence against Christians. For example, several of the instances of *elevated persecution* enumerated earlier may have been reported in the media as a 'clash' between Christians and Muslims. A prominent human rights activist observed this about the media:

Most northern Christians can only listen to agenda set by the Hausa services of the international media and not participate. Quite a lot of errors are peddled and this works to the disadvantage of Christians. The media often sets an agenda for conflict. Why is the international media interested in setting negative agenda? Are they

actually monitored by the editorial board when they prepare their stories about conflicts? International media is stoking conflict this way.<sup>39</sup>

Regardless of the stated reason for any outbreak of mass violence in *Sharia* states, mobs invariably resort to church burning, as will be illustrated later. However, even prior to church burnings, tacit or open hostility and harassment are regular features. A pastor, whose church has been destroyed three times in separate conflicts, said:

Even before our church was burnt people were throwing stones at our church and throwing faeces into our church. We were warned that we would have to leave the place of our worship. We have never done that to anyone. Our church in Kaduna was burnt three times. If this is not religious, why is the church a target? Who in our congregation has offended anyone? Even before the Boko Haram crisis, we have been a target of persecution. They don't want a church located in their neighbourhood. All of the churches in the area have been burnt.<sup>40</sup>

Increasingly overt hostility to the presence of Christianity in Muslim hinterlands has manifested itself in frequent outbreaks of violence. As a consequence, there are many abandoned church-owned properties in neighbourhoods that Christians can no longer enter. The pastor quoted here mentioned that his church building has become a waste dumping ground.

Another recent example of how conflict is used to pursue a religious agenda was the post-election violence of 2011. As a Christian candidate from the southern region was announced as the winner of the presidential election, Muslim youths took to the streets across the *Sharia* states. They attacked non-Muslims, and destroyed their shops and homes. More than 350 churches were destroyed and over 800 lives lost in three days of rioting.<sup>41</sup> This was simply dismissed as a spontaneous riot by analysts with insufficient knowledge of the nuances of the history of Muslim-Christian relations in Nigeria. However, it was in reality a manifestation of a longstanding northern supremacism and rejection of the equal right of non-Muslims to vie for key positions. The prominent late Muslim scholar, Sheikh Abubakar Gumi, a recipient of Islam's highest service honour, the King Faisal International Award, publicly declared in 1987 that Muslims in Nigeria would never allow non-Muslims to assume political leadership of the country.<sup>42</sup> The fulfilment of this vision cannot be attained through the ballot box due to the fact that southern Muslims do not subscribe to it and the political make-up of Nigeria is too complex for any group to have their way without building alliances with others. Consequently, violence is the sole remaining recourse for those of an uncompromising disposition. Sadly, this attitude has permeated the northern Muslims' concept of leadership and power to the extent that even campus elections are infused with religious sentiments and often degenerate into violence.

The conflict in Jos, the capital of Plateau State in central Nigeria, has received the most international publicity. This conflict involves contestation over the ownership of Jos and

a power struggle between the indigenous ethnic groups, on the one hand, who are predominantly Christian, and the Hausa and Fulani Muslim community, on the other. Often the conflict is described as an indigene/settler conflict in which settlers are discriminated against. However, such an analysis fails to capture key underlying elements of the conflict. The indigene/settler divide is a national issue – throughout Nigeria people are classified as indigenes and non-indigenes, a division that gives the former more advantages than the latter in their indigenous areas. Indigenes point out, however, that in other states they too are treated as settlers and do not enjoy the same rights as in their home states. Therefore, a constitutional change that abrogates this system may pave the way for a solution to this problem. The Jos conflict has claimed thousands of lives since it broke out in 2001. Both sides have been confronting and inflicting huge human cost on each other.

Besides the indigene/settler divide, Jos has other reasons that render it contentious. It is the capital of a predominantly Christian state in a Muslim majority region. Therefore, it is a hub of Christianity in the region, and a refuge for minorities who are disadvantaged because their cultures are distinct from those of the dominant ethnic groups in the north, the Hausa-Fulani. Another feature of Jos is the large presence of missionary offices and church headquarters. For this reason, there is an abiding suspicion about the motive for Hausa-Fulani's interest in Jos. The creation of a Jos office by the Jama'atu Izalatil Bid'ah Wa Iqamatis Sunnah (JIBWIS) and an increase in Islamic activities appear to lend credence to the suspicion. There is a widely held belief among members of the Christian community that the vicious cycle of violence experienced by Jos and its environs over the last twelve years is due to a Hausa-Fulani quest to overrun and Islamise the major Christian stronghold of the region.

### **Persecution Eclipse**

The concept of *persecution eclipse* describes the phenomenon whereby persecution and civil conflict interact and reinforce one other, to the extent that the latter overshadows and renders the former less visible. There is a long history of *insidious persecution* of Christians in northern Nigeria. These forms of persecution are gradual and widespread. However, in recent years, more vicious and violent forms have emerged, termed *elevated persecution*. This category of persecution involves the more direct use of violence against a Christian community. Thus, *persecution eclipse* allows attacks to be escalated against a religious group during a situation of conflict, with pundits and those having the power to intervene often unable to notice or simply ignoring the increasing vulnerability of the victims.

Persecution derives energy from civil conflict because, as has been illustrated earlier, the two can be used to pursue the same goals. For example, the war in Iraq became a vehicle for persecution that accelerated the persecution of Christians and caused many of them to flee. Likewise, the war in Syria may cast a similar shadow on the situation of

Christians. Islamist groups within the Syrian National Council and the many foreign jihadists taking part in the Syrian conflict have been targeting Christians in areas such as Homs and Aleppo. Many of the country's Christians are fleeing the country.<sup>43</sup> In this situation, not only are Christians more vulnerable, but they also face an uncertain future.

In the case of Nigeria, civil conflicts have been used as means to increase pressure on Christian minorities in the northern region. Violence, in the form of *elevated persecution*, has been deployed against Christians to prevent any expansion of Christianity, and to push Christians into the background with regard to their civil and political rights. The most disturbing dimension of *persecution eclipse* is the potential it has to obscure persecution.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Northern Nigeria offers a fascinating case study of the relationship between persecution and conflict. Events in the region illustrate that conflict can be used to advance the goals of persecution or to fast track them. The *insidious persecution*, with which Christians in northern Nigeria have long been familiar, appears to have been of limited efficacy. Consequently, a higher degree of persecution, *elevated persecution*, involving direct spontaneous attacks, violent confrontations and terror strikes, are increasingly being employed in the region.

Boko Haram's campaign of terror provides an appalling example of how jihadists have used the guise of insurgency allegedly to perpetrate unprecedented persecution. Many Christian rural communities are living under virtual siege by Islamists who invade such places periodically and kill innocent people. The goal is clear. Christians are fleeing from such flashpoints and the Christian presence is reducing significantly as a result of these religious cleansings.

The conflict-persecution convergence is a phenomenon that requires the close attention of those researching persecution, and particularly religious freedom. Many Christians in northern Nigeria that were interviewed during this study expressed disappointment at the prevailing international misinformation concerning conflicts in the north of the country. The situation of Christians in northern Nigeria has become even more deplorable in the last three to four years. Tragically, *persecution eclipse* has created an image of the Nigerian scenario that obscures the realities experienced by Christian minorities and their suffering at the hands of relentless jihadist forces.

One way to ensure that conflict does not distort the realities of persecution is by making efforts to obtain information from people who are directly affected. For fear of possible negative repercussion, many high ranking church leaders sometimes choose to be politically correct when reporting the persecution of Christians in their country in public

domains. There is a need to dig deeper into the situation, and to talk with people in their 'natural setting'. Organisations that publish indices or rankings on religious freedom and persecution should make an effort to support these with in-depth qualitative data.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Article issued by the World Watch Unit (WWU) of Open Doors International (ODI). The World Watch Unit acknowledges a Nigerian researcher whose name must remain confidential for security reasons.

<sup>2</sup> Nigeria country information, The World Fact Book, Central Intelligence Agency (CIA): <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ni.html>

<sup>3</sup> See Nigeria profile on the ARDA website: [http://www.thearda.com/internationalData/countries/Country\\_166\\_1.asp](http://www.thearda.com/internationalData/countries/Country_166_1.asp)

<sup>4</sup> The Global Religious Landscape: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Major Religious Groups as of 2010. The Pew Research Centre's Forum on Religion and Public Life, December 2012: [http://www.pewforum.org/uploadedFiles/Topics/Religious\\_Affiliation/globalReligion-full.pdf](http://www.pewforum.org/uploadedFiles/Topics/Religious_Affiliation/globalReligion-full.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> See Emeka Emmanuel Okafor. Sociological Implications of Communal and Ethno-Religious Clashes in New Democratic Nigeria. *Journal of Tribes and Tribals*, 5(1), (2007) 35- 45.

<sup>6</sup> The Human Development Index is contained in the Human Development Report published by the United Nations Development Programme: <http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/NGA.html>

<sup>7</sup> Global Peace Index (GPI) 2012, The Institute for Economics and Peace: <http://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/2012-Global-Peace-Index-Report.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Failed State Index 2012, Fund For Peace: <http://ffp.statesindex.org/>

<sup>9</sup> See Pew: <http://www.pewforum.org/Government/Rising-Tide-of-Restrictions-on-Religion-findings.aspx#interactive>

<sup>10</sup> ARDA : [http://www.thearda.com/internationalData/countries/Country\\_166\\_1.asp](http://www.thearda.com/internationalData/countries/Country_166_1.asp)

<sup>11</sup> World Watch List 2013: [http://www.opendoorsuk.org/resources/country\\_profiles.php](http://www.opendoorsuk.org/resources/country_profiles.php)

<sup>12</sup> Institute for Economics and Peace, 2012 *Global Terrorism Index*: <http://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/2012-Global-Terrorism-Index-Report1.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 6.

<sup>14</sup> The 2012 GTI, p.33, shows the number of incidents by terrorist group ideology 2002-2011 (chart 30). Religion is by far ahead of political and nationalist/separatist ideologies.

<sup>15</sup> See Tieszen L. Charles, *Re-Examining Religious Persecution: Constructing a Theological Framework for Understanding Persecution*, 2008 (Johannesburg: AcadSA Publishing) and Jack David Eller, *Cruel Creeds, Virtuous Violence: Religious Violence across Culture and History*, 2010, (New York: Prometheus Books).

<sup>16</sup> Eller, *ibid*, p. 162.

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<sup>17</sup> “Religiocentrism is defined as the combination of positive attitudes toward the religious ingroup and negative attitudes toward religious outgroup(s).” Carl Sterkens and Francis-Vincent Anthony, “A Comparative Study of Religiocentrism among Christian, Muslim and Hindu Students in Tamil Nadu, India,” *Journal of Empirical Theology* (2008, pp. 32-67), p. 34.

<sup>18</sup> See Yusufu Turaki, *Tainted Legacy: Islam, Colonialism and Slavery in Northern Nigeria*, 2010 (McLean/VA: Isaac Publishing).

<sup>19</sup> See Human Rights Watch Report, “The Miss World Riots: Continued Impunity for Killing in Kaduna,” 23 July 2003: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/country,,HRW,,NGA,,3f4f594b0,0.html>

<sup>20</sup> See B. Salami, Ethno-Religious Conflicts in Nigeria: Causal Analysis and Proposals for New Management Strategies, *European Journal of Social Sciences* – Volume 13, Number 3 (2010), pp. 345-353.

<sup>21</sup> “Nigeria riot over ‘blasphemy’ against Islam’s prophet,” BBC, News Africa, 23 November 2012: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-20448565>

<sup>22</sup> ‘Persistent Killings’: Christians flee deadly attacks in Nigeria,” NBC, 8 January 2012: [http://www.nbcnews.com/id/45909621/ns/world\\_news-africa/#.UTM-tqzauSo](http://www.nbcnews.com/id/45909621/ns/world_news-africa/#.UTM-tqzauSo)

<sup>23</sup> See David Cook, “Boko Haram Escalates Attacks on Christians in Northern Nigeria,” Combating Terrorism Centre, 24 April 2012: <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/boko-haram-escalates-attacks-on-christians-in-northern-nigeria>

<sup>24</sup> “Nigeria unrest: Suicide targets church in Jos,” BBC, 26 February 2012: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-17169935>

<sup>25</sup> “Madalla Christmas bombing, one year after,” Channels Television, 25 December 2012: <http://www.channelstv.com/home/2012/12/25/madalla-christmas-bombing-one-year-after/>

<sup>26</sup> “Suicide Bombers Attack COCIN Hqtrs Church in Jos During Service,” Leadership, 26 February 2012: [http://leadership.ng/nga/articles/17437/2012/02/26/suicide\\_bombers\\_attack\\_cocin\\_hqtrs\\_jos\\_during\\_service.html](http://leadership.ng/nga/articles/17437/2012/02/26/suicide_bombers_attack_cocin_hqtrs_jos_during_service.html)

<sup>27</sup> “Suicide bombers killed 8-yr-old, 10 others in Jos,” Punch, 12 March 2012: <http://www.punchng.com/news/suicide-bombers-kill-8-yr-old-10-others-in-jos-church/>

<sup>28</sup> “20 killed at Bayero University church services attack,” Vanguard, 29 April 2012: <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2012/04/20-killed-as-gunmen-attack-church-services-in-buk/>

<sup>29</sup> “Bauchi Church bombing: We did it, says Boko Haram,” Vanguard, 4 June 2012: <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2012/06/bauchi-church-bombing-we-did-it-says-boko-haram/>

<sup>30</sup> Boko Haram claims responsibility for Nigeria church bombings,” CNN, 18 June 2012: <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/06/18/world/africa/nigeria-church-bombings>

<sup>31</sup> “Suicide Bomber Attacks Catholic Church In Malali, Kaduna,” Leadership, 28 October 2012: [http://www.leadership.ng/nga/articles/38008/2012/10/28/breaking\\_news\\_suicide\\_bomber\\_attacks\\_catholic\\_church\\_malali\\_kaduna.html](http://www.leadership.ng/nga/articles/38008/2012/10/28/breaking_news_suicide_bomber_attacks_catholic_church_malali_kaduna.html). The author was in Kaduna at the time of the incident.

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<sup>32</sup> “Church Bombing Kills at Least 11 at Nigerian Post,” The New York Times, 25 November 2012: [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/26/world/africa/car-bombs-at-nigerian-military-church-kill-at-least-11.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/26/world/africa/car-bombs-at-nigerian-military-church-kill-at-least-11.html?_r=0)

<sup>33</sup> “12 killed in attacks on two churches in Nigeria,” CNN, 26 December 2012: <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/12/25/world/africa/nigeria-christmas-attack>

<sup>34</sup> “We’re behind Plateau mass killings – Boko Haram Says, Christians should accept Islam if they want peace,” Punch, 11 July 2012: <http://www.punchng.com/news/were-behind-plateau-mass-killings-boko-haram-%E2%80%A2-says-christians-should-accept-islam-if-they-want-peace/>

<sup>35</sup> Anonymous interview with a Borno State resident.

<sup>36</sup> Interviewed on 16 and 18 January 2013 in Mubi, Adamawa State.

<sup>37</sup> The Onion Metaphor or Doughnut is a conflict analysis tool which identifies the positions, interests and needs of parties to a conflict.

<sup>38</sup> The author witnessed the *Sharia* crises in northern Nigeria.

<sup>39</sup> Interview at the respondent’s office on 22 October 2012 in Kaduna. Identity of the respondent is not revealed for security reasons.

<sup>40</sup> Interview on 29 October 2012 in Kaduna. For the safety of the pastor his name and that of the church he belongs to are not revealed.

<sup>41</sup> “Nigeria: Post-Election Violence Killed 800,” Human Rights Watch, 17 May 2011: <http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/05/16/nigeria-post-election-violence-killed-800>

<sup>42</sup> See Pew Forum, “Historical Overview of Pentecostalism in Nigeria,” 2006: <http://www.pewforum.org/Christian/Evangelical-Protestant-Churches/Historical-Overview-of-Pentecostalism-in-Nigeria.aspx>

<sup>43</sup> See report in *The Independent* newspaper: “The plight of Syria's Christians: ‘We left Homs because they were trying to kill us,’” 2 November 2012: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/the-plight-of-syrias-christians-we-left-homs-because-they-were-trying-to-kill-us-8274710.html>