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# U.S. Intervention in Nigeria's Security Crisis

An Analysis of the Christmas Day 2025 Tomahawk Strike  
in Sokoto State, Nigeria

## About the Article

The Christmas Day 2025 US missile strike was far more contested than the official narrative suggested. The US had multiple motivations beyond counterterrorism. Military action alone cannot resolve Nigeria's security crisis.

## About the Author

**Flavia Onwuelo** is a CEILS student at the University of Trento. Daughter of Nigerian immigrants in Italy, she grew up translating for her parents, gaining early insight into migration, rights and institutions. She studies EU and international law, with an interest on security, migration governance and European policy and integration. Active as an EST Ambassador, in ELSA, AIESEC, and MEP Trento, she aims to use her cross-cultural background to support a more inclusive Europe.

## 1. Introduction: Nigeria's Fragmented Security Crisis

**N**igeria is Africa's most populous state, home to more than 220 million people, and the site of one of the continent's most complex and multidimensional security crises. When U.S. forces launched a Tomahawk missile strike in north-western Nigeria on Christmas Day 2025, many commentators reached for that familiar shorthand, with significant analytical and political consequences. Nigeria's security landscape operates across at least three distinct theatres. In the north-east, where the conflict has its deepest roots, Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JAS, popularly known as Boko Haram) and its Islamic State-affiliated offshoot, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), are locked in a contest for dominance that combines indiscriminate violence against civilian communities with internal political. In the Middle Belt, communal violence between Fulani herders and settled farming communities oscillates ethnic conflict, resource competition, and jihadist infiltration<sup>[OBJ]</sup>. In the north-west, organised criminal banditry, kidnapping-for-ransom networks, and the relatively newer ideological presence of groups such as Lakurawa overlap in ways that resist easy categorisation.

Lakurawa first appeared in documented form around 2018 in Sokoto and Kebbi states, near the border with Niger. Initially welcomed by community leaders as a vigilante force against bandits, the group gradually imposed coercive governance: enforcing a strict interpretation of Islamic law, demanding zakat payments,

abducting adolescents, and punishing communities that refused compliance. Nigeria officially designated Lakurawa a terrorist organisation in November 2024.

The extent of the group's links to the Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP) are debated among analysts. The Soufan Center describes Lakurawa as a 'strategic conduit linking the territorial ambitions of Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP) and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP),' while the Critical Threats Project characterises it as an ISSP subgroup that has operationalised rear support zones running from Niger down into Sokoto and Kebbi states.<sup>[OBJ]</sup> The group's origins can be the merger of a Malian contingent of former Macina Liberation Front fighters and a Nigerien faction with roots in herding-community defence. This layered origin story matters: it makes Lakurawa simultaneously a local phenomenon, a transnational spillover actor, and a potential ISIS proxy all at once. The Christmas Day raid crystallised this ambiguity rather than resolving it.

### The Effect of Framing: US Military action in Nigeria

## 2. The Official Narrative: What Abuja and Washington Said

On 25 December 2025, between approximately 00:12 and 01:30 local time, the United States conducted a Tomahawk cruise missile strike in north-western Nigeria. According to U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), the operation was carried out 'at the direction of the President of the United States and the Secretary of War, and in coordination with Nigerian authorities. The command's initial assessment stated that 'multiple ISIS terrorists were killed in the ISIS camps' in Sokoto State.

President Donald Trump announced the operation on Truth Social in characteristically assertive language, describing the targets as 'ISIS Terrorist Scum in Northwest Nigeria, who have been targeting and viciously killing, primarily, innocent Christians, at levels not seen for many years, and even Centuries.' Trump added that he had deliberately delayed the strike by one day to have it fall on Christmas, basically framing it as a symbolic gift. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth wrote on social media: 'More to come... Grateful for Nigerian government support & cooperation. Merry Christmas!'

The Nigerian federal government confirmed the strikes and claimed joint ownership of the operation. Information Minister Mohammed Idris stated that the operation had focused on the Bauni forest area in Tangaza, describing the targets as two major ISIS enclaves used as assembly and staging bases for planned 'large-scale terrorist attacks' in Nigeria. Foreign Minister Yusuf Tuggar confirmed that Nigeria had shared intelligence with the Americans, described the operation as a 'joint operation,' and explicitly distanced it from any religious framing.

At the local level, the chairman of Tangaza local government confirmed publicly that the strikes had hit Lakurawa camps, killing many fighters and forcing others to flee. The Nigerian Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a formal statement affirming that 'precision hits had been made' and that the country remained 'engaged in structured security cooperation with international partners, including the United States of America.' This cascade of coordinated statements, from AFRICOM to the White House to Abuja to local officials, constructed a coherent narrative: a precision operation, jointly authorised, with no

civilian casualties, against a clearly identified ISIS threat. The picture on the ground was considerably more complicated.

### **3. The Contested Reality: Targets, Labels, and Aftermath**

#### **3.1 Targeting Uncertainty and Operational Gaps**

The first fractures in the official narrative appeared almost immediately. Residents of Jabo, a village in Sokoto State, told the Associated Press that they had been woken up in the middle of the night by massive explosions that lit the sky. Abubakar Sani, who lives near the explosion site, said: 'As it approached our area, the heat became intense. Our rooms began to shake, and then fire broke out.' Residents stated that Jabo had never previously experienced a militant attack.

The Nigerian government subsequently explained that Jabo and Offa, another affected area in Kwara State where debris fell near a hotel, had been struck by errant munitions, not deliberate hits. At least four missile warheads failed to detonate and fell short of their intended targets. Analysts described the government's explanation as damage control for a possible targeting error, potentially stemming from faulty or imprecisely applied intelligence.

The Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime reported that field sources initially found no evidence of the casualties claimed immediately after the raid, with at least one report suggesting the missiles had hit 'empty farmland', raising the possibility that Lakurawa had been tipped off and evacuated its camps

beforehand. The New Humanitarian subsequently reported that approximately 155 Lakurawa fighters were killed in total, including 19 who later died from wounds, with roughly 200 others missing. ISS Africa corroborated this general order of magnitude, noting that Lakurawa commander Dando Sibou reportedly survived, having left the area five minutes before the second missile impact.

### 3.2 The Problem of Labels: ISIS, ISSP, Lakurawa, or Bandits?

Perhaps the most analytically significant problem is the one of classification. Trump and AFRICOM described the targets as 'ISIS.' The Foundation for Defense of Democracies assessed that the strikes most likely targeted Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP) camps or Lakurawa, and that ISWAP, Nigeria's primary north-eastern IS affiliate, was not involved. CSIS confirmed that Trump was 'almost certainly referring to the Islamic State-Sahel Province (ISSP) or Lakurawa, a local group with increasing ties to the Islamic State,' noting that ISSP 'grew in strength in 2025 and now commands more fighters, controls more territory, and conducts deadlier attacks than it ever has before.'

As Al Jazeera's Nigeria correspondent Ahmed Idris observed from Lagos, 'the violence in Nigeria's northwest is largely driven by criminal banditry rather than jihadist ideology, and Sokoto State is probably the last place many Nigerians would think' that anti-Christian persecution was occurring, given that the state is overwhelmingly Muslim. ISS Africa describes

Lakurawa as a 'crime-terror hybrid' group, while the Soufan Center characterises it as a 'strategic conduit' between ISSP and ISWAP. Modern Diplomacy argues for treating it as effectively an ISSP subgroup, noting that geospatial analysis shows the group 'is not only clustered near ISSP strongholds but appears to be expanding along similar vectors of movement.'

Mislabelling this entity as simply 'ISIS' serves a clear political purpose: it frames the operation within a familiar threat narrative legible to domestic conservative and evangelical audiences. But it risks systematically misdiagnosing the conflict and obscuring the structural drivers of violence, poor governance, state absence in rural communities, impoverishment, that no precision strike can address.

**"A precision strike on a complex crisis – and the narrative was the real target."**

### 3.3 The Religious Frame and Its Political Costs

Trump's framing of the strike as a response to the killing of 'primarily, innocent Christians' generated immediate controversy. As CSIS noted, north-western jihadist groups 'conduct indiscriminate violence and target Muslims who refuse their extreme interpretation of Islam.' Foreign Minister Tuggar stated explicitly that the operation was 'not aimed at targeting members of any particular religious community,' and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs emphasised that counter-terrorism cooperation prioritises civilian protection and national unity regardless of religion.

Sheikh Ahmad Gumi, one of Nigeria's most influential Islamic scholars, condemned the strikes as 'potentially polarising and detrimental to Nigerian national sovereignty,' warning that U.S. involvement framed around protecting Christians would 'ultimately polarise our nation.' He called on the government to 'halt all military cooperation with the USA immediately' and suggested approaching 'neutral countries' such as China, Pakistan, and Turkey instead. Notably, the Sultan of Sokoto who is the spiritual leader of Nigerian Muslims, issued no official public statement, a silence that many Nigerian observers interpreted as deliberate distancing.

## **4. Why Did the United States Intervene? Interests Behind the Narrative**

### **4.1 The Counterterrorism Rationale**

The most immediate operational explanation is counterterrorism: disrupting an ISIS-linked network in the western Sahel before it consolidates into an exportable threat node. ISSP conducted a record number of large-scale attacks across the Sahel in 2025, significantly expanding its operational footprint in southern Niger for the first time. CSIS assessed that the group 'now commands more fighters, controls more territory, and conducts deadlier attacks than it ever has before,' with much of its recent growth concentrated in Niger and Nigeria. Even on strictly tactical grounds, CSIS offered a sobering perspective: 'The losses from the U.S. attacks last night will only represent a small fraction of ISSP and Lakurawa resources. According to UN estimates, ISSP has between 2,000 and 3,000 fighters... Lakurawa is much smaller, commanding only about 200 fighters, but it will probably be

able to recruit replacements for any members killed.' Striking a few camps does not reverse structural trends.

### **4.2 Regional Positioning and Strategic Access**

Nigeria represents an indispensable anchor partner: with 220 million people, a substantial military, significant oil revenues, and continental strategic weight, Abuja is the natural pivot for any sustainable U.S. security architecture in West Africa.

The strike was, in this sense, also a point of entry. On 3 February 2026, AFRICOM commander General Anderson confirmed that a team of U.S. military specialists had been installed in Nigeria to assist in the fight against Islamic militants. By 13 February 2026, the first tranche of approximately 100 American intelligence analysts, advisers, and trainers had arrived at Maiduguri. A total of roughly 200 U.S. personnel were announced, covering multiple locations including Bauchi, with a focus on intelligence analysis, target identification, signals intelligence processing, and training the Nigerian Air Force. Nigeria's Defence Headquarters confirmed the deployment followed a formal Nigerian government request.

As The Intercept noted, this deployment pattern follows a familiar template: 'decades of American military assistance has coincided with increased violence and instability' across the Sahel. The question is not whether training assistance is useful, well it can be, but whether the structural logic of dependency is being reproduced rather than addressed.

### **4.3 The Signalling Function: Domestic Audiences and Deterrence Messaging**

Perhaps the most analytically underappreciated dimension of the Christmas Day strike is its function as political communication. Choosing Christmas Day, announcing it via Truth Social with vivid language about protecting Christians, framing it as a gift: these are not incidental features of the operation. They are its communicative architecture. For Trump's conservative and evangelical base, the message was clear: this administration acts, protects Christians, and destroys ISIS. For regional partners and global rivals, the signal was equally legible: the United States remains willing to project force in Africa, and its adversaries face consequences.

Secretary Hegseth's 'More to come' tweet, the deliberate one-day delay to fall on Christmas, the explicit invocation of Christian persecution, these are elements of geopolitical branding. The risk is that the assessment of operational results becomes secondary to the narrative of success. Whether Lakurawa was genuinely degraded matters less, in this framework, than whether the message landed.

### **5. Conclusion: Sovereignty Is Not Rhetoric**

The Christmas Day 2025 strike in Nigeria has already become one of those episodes that lends itself to opposing readings: a meaningful tactical blow against an emerging ISIS network, or a politically driven military action that simplified a complex crisis, alienated a significant segment of Nigerian civil society, and produced operational

results that remain contested. Both readings probably contain elements of truth.

What appears clearer, looking at the broader picture, is that U.S. intervention responds to a triple logic: disrupting ISIS-linked networks before they consolidate; maintaining intelligence access and influence in a West Africa increasingly contested by Russia and China; and sending a political message to multiple audiences, domestic and international. These interests are not automatically incompatible with Nigerian interests, but neither do they automatically coincide with them.

Nigeria is a sovereign state with its own internal political dynamics, its own religious sensitivities, and its own governance priorities. Importing a simplified narrative, ISIS kills Christians, America saves, into a context where violence is multidimensional, cross-confessional, and rooted in structural governance failures risks producing more harm than good at the level of social cohesion and institutional legitimacy. As Defence Minister Musa said plainly: 70% of the solution does not come from bombs.

Without serious investment in autonomous capabilities, intelligence, surveillance, precision targeting, civilian protection, operational follow-through, and without a governance strategy that brings the state back into the abandoned communities of the north, no number of Tomahawk missiles will structurally alter Nigeria's security trajectory. The stakes are not merely defeating Lakurawa or ISWAP. They are building a Nigerian security system that is genuinely Nigerian.

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