

Trump in Africa: Nigeria's Bounded Agency and Structural Dependence Under US Pressure

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Since October 2025, the United States has been exerting sustained coercive pressure on Nigeria. It has redesignated the African state a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) for violations of Christian religious freedom, imposed visa restrictions and raised the spectre of military intervention. Abuja's response has been compliance, on the one hand, and rhetorical accommodation, frame contestation and the performance of sovereignty, on the other. However, the room for manoeuvre remains structurally narrow as Nigeria's counter-terrorism architecture continues to depend on US hardware and intelligence while Trump's transactional logic leaves little leeway for outright refusal. This means that Nigeria retains some form of agency over the representational frame for compliance. Crucially, the constraints shaping that compliance are not set by Washington alone; as the primary organising frameworks of Nigerian political life, religion and ethnicity ensure that any external pressure triggers incompatible domestic demands, leaving Nigerian President Tinubu constrained by both US leverage and the coalitional logic of a divided polity ahead of the 2027 election.

In October 2025, US President Donald Trump redesignated Nigeria a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) for violations of Christian religious freedom. At the same time, he threatened to cut off all aid and ordered the Pentagon to prepare for possible military intervention.¹ By February 2026, some 200 US troops had been deployed to bases at Maiduguri, Kainji and Bauchi.² Thus, within just four months, what began as an acute diplomatic crisis had been turned into a formal bilateral security partnership under a joint working group framework.³ That partnership has now started to yield operational results. For outside observers, there appear to be two framings of the trajectory of events: either Nigeria had no choice but to cede to American pressure or Abuja used its diplomatic skill to outmanoeuvre Washington. This policy brief seeks to unpack the Nigerian government's response to the recent US pressure. It examines i) what kind of agency is available to a structurally dependent state up against a coercive hegemon and ii) whether Abuja's actions to date constitute strategic manoeuvring or something much more modest. While it regards both framings as partly

¹ "Trump Threatens to Cut Off Aid to Nigeria, Orders Pentagon to 'Prepare for Possible Action' over Persecution of Christians", CBS News, November 1, 2025 (update).

² "US Troops: Security Lifeline or Sovereignty Gamble?", Daily Trust, February 28, 2026.

³ US Embassy and Consulate in Nigeria, "Joint Statement at the End of the First Session of the US-Nigeria Joint Working Group to Address Nigeria's Country of Particular Concern Designation", January 22, 2026.

correct, it argues that the distinction between them is more important than previous analysis has acknowledged.⁴ Nigeria is neither a passive responder to US demands nor a state taking advantage of a relationship it shapes on its own terms. Rather, it is a structurally dependent actor demonstrating what is described here as “bounded agency”, that is, the capacity to shape the domestic presentation of compliance under conditions it does not fundamentally control. In the case of Nigeria, those conditions are set not only by Washington's coercive demands but also by competing domestic audiences for which religion and ethnicity are the dominant currencies of political life. Hence, Abuja's manoeuvring is doubly bounded: constrained from the outside by US leverage and from the inside by the electoral and coalitional logic of a religiously and ethnically divided polity ahead of what promises to be a consequential election in 2027. Understanding this distinction has practical implications for how European policymakers should read Nigeria and engage with its leadership.

The Architecture of US Pressure and Nigerian Agency

US pressure on Nigeria has operated through two separate, albeit intertwined channels. The first is the religious freedom framework, which is rooted in the designation of Nigeria as a “Country of Particular Concern” (CPC) by the US State Department and anchored institutionally in the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF)⁵ and the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998.⁶ On 31 October 2025, the second Trump administration moved faster and went further than any of its predecessors when it announced Nigeria's CPC redesignation, which it framed in explicitly civilisational terms: “Christianity is facing an existential threat in Nigeria. Radical Islamists are responsible for this mass slaughter.”⁷ The following day, Trump threatened to cut off all aid to Nigeria. At the same time, he ordered the Pentagon to prepare for possible military action against what he called “that now disgraced country”.⁸ Trump's coercive toolkit also included partial travel restrictions on Nigerian nationals that his administration imposed in December 2025, citing shortcomings in vetting and information-sharing. Also in November 2025, Republican Senators, led by Ted Cruz, introduced the Nigeria Religious Freedom and Accountability Act, which codifies the designation in statute and mandates sanctions, including travel bans and asset freezes, against Nigerian officials deemed complicit in religious persecution.⁹ Those moves were also driven by the sustained campaign of an evangelical lobby that, at least since 2009, has been arguing that Christians in Nigeria's Middle Belt and northern region face systematic religiously motivated violence.¹⁰

⁴ Centre for Journalism Innovation and Development (CJID), *Analysis: Understanding the Media Narratives Around Nigeria's Designation as “Country of Particular Concern”* (Abuja: CJID, November 2025), accessed March 9, 2026; Democracy Centre for Transparency, “The Complexity Behind Nigeria's U.S. CPC Designation: Beyond Religious Narratives”, November 2025.

⁵ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) accessed March 4, 2026, <https://www.uscirf.gov>.

⁶ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), “International Religious Freedom Act of 1998; as Amended”.

⁷ “Trump threatens Nigeria with potential military action over claims of Christian persecution”, *PBS News*, November 1, 2025; “Trump Says Christians Face ‘Existential Threat’ in Nigeria”, *CBS News*, November 1, 2025, accessed March 12 2026; “Trump Threatens to Cut Off Aid to Nigeria, Orders Pentagon to ‘Prepare for Possible Action’ over Persecution of Christians”, *CBS News*, November 1, 2025 (update).

⁸ Joseph Winter, “Trump Tells Military to Prepare for ‘Action’ Against Islamist Militants in Nigeria”, *BBC News*, November 2, 2025 (updated November 3, 2025).

⁹ US Senator Ted Cruz, “Sen. Cruz Introduces Bill Against Persecution of Nigerian Christians”, press release, September 11, 2025.

¹⁰ Decision Magazine, “Nigeria Designated as a country of particular concern”, November 3, 2025.; Simon Lewis, “U.S. Removes Nigeria from Religious Freedom List Ahead of Blinken Visit”, *Reuters*, November 2021.

The second channel of US pressure is security cooperation, especially in the area of counter-terrorism. Its aim differs from that of the normative pressure of the CPC redesignation: right at the moment when it had lost its foothold in Niger, Washington sought to obtain Nigerian consent to a deeper US security presence through the promise of military hardware, training and intelligence cooperation. While the two channels of pressure were not always coordinated, their combined impact was such as to create an environment for Nigeria in which normative stigmatisation and security inducements limited its room for refusal on either front. Nigeria's engagement with the US under Obama and Biden shows how much more straightforward its exercise of influence over bilateral relations with Washington was before Trump's second term significantly compressed the room for manoeuvre. During the Obama and Biden eras, Abuja was able to avoid a CPC designation through sustained diplomatic engagement and the cultivation of allies within the State Department bureaucracy who understood that the picture of Nigerian violence was more complex than that painted by US advocacy organisations. Nigeria was first designated a CPC in 2019 during Trump's first term.¹¹ The Biden administration removed that designation in 2021, immediately before Secretary of State Blinken's visit to Abuja. This suggests Nigerian diplomatic engagement shaped an outcome that would otherwise have been unfavourable¹²; in other words, a weaker state was able to influence the terms of an asymmetric relationship. Trump's second term, however, differs completely – both in kind and degree – from its predecessors. Among other things, US foreign policy under Trump operates according to an explicitly coercive logic¹³ that can be colloquially framed as follows: either meet US expectations or bear the tangible costs in the form of visa restrictions, the slashing of aid and, in Nigeria's case, the direct threat of military intervention. Whereas in the Obama and Biden eras, Nigeria retained meaningful room to influence US framings and decisions despite the asymmetric relationship. Trump's transactional logic has compressed that room considerably. As argued below, Nigeria's response to date can be described as one of bounded agency in that it is able to partly shape the terms, timing and domestic framing of its compliance with US demands.

There is another factor that has had an impact on Nigeria's positioning. In September 2023, President Bola Tinubu recalled all Nigerian envoys, leaving most foreign posts,¹⁴ including Washington, without ambassador-level representation for more than two years at a moment when bilateral ties were at their most strained in recent history. It was not until May 2026, amid the CPC crisis, that a Nigerian ambassador-designate to Washington, retired Colonel Lateef Kayode Are, officially resumed at his duty post, having been initially nominated in November 2025. Thus, Nigeria's ability to manage its relations with Washington had to be improvised through personal networks – not least National Security Adviser Nuhu Ribadu's direct relations with his US counterparts – and a Washington lobbying contract signed in early 2026.¹⁵

¹¹ USCIRF, "Naming of Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern".

¹² Lewis, "U.S. Removes Nigeria from Religious Freedom List Ahead of Blinken Visit".

¹³ Kamel, Amir Magdy. "The art of the Trump-Iran deal: An unsuccessful coercive foreign policy", *Global Policy* 15, no. 2 (2024), 234-246.

¹⁴ Vanguard News, "Tinubu Has Recalled All Ambassadors, Minister", September 2023.

¹⁵ "Nigeria hires American firm to counter false narratives about country", *Premium Times*, January 14, 2026.

The Repertoire of Nigeria's Bounded Agency

Shaping the Narratives at Home

The Nigerian government's response to Trump's CPC redesignation is noteworthy for its careful calibration. Tinubu neither directly addressed nor named Trump in his initial public reaction. What he did was to offer a measured affirmation of Nigeria's constitutional protections for religious freedom and asserted that the violence affected all Nigerians regardless of faith: "Religious freedom and tolerance have been a core tenet of our collective identity and shall always remain so."¹⁶ The statement made no mention of the US allegation of genocide and focused instead on "shared values" with the United States. At the same time, it gave an indication of the narrow two-channel band within which any response had to operate: externally, it was keeping the door open to negotiations with Washington, which the Nigerian Foreign Ministry referred to as a "close ally"¹⁷; internally, it was seeking to manage the political fallout across a deeply divided electorate. Tinubu, a Muslim married to a Christian and the head of a country divided more or less evenly between those two faiths, could not afford to be seen as dismissive of Christian concerns, particularly with the 2027 presidential elections just around the corner. Equally, he could not afford to endorse Trump's framing of Nigerian violence as radical Islamic extremism targeting Christians, as that would be politically toxic among the country's predominantly Muslim northern constituencies. The decision to acknowledge the violence while rejecting the Christian persecution frame was designed, above all, for a domestic audience. Nigeria had no control over its redesignation, but it could shape how it was narrated at home.

However, Nigerian press commentaries reflected the public's expectation of something more than just careful messaging. The editorial board of *Punch* argued that "the best response is crushing the terrorists and stopping the slaughter, whether of Christians or Muslims", adding that "efforts to downplay the harsh reality cannot succeed as the body count rises".¹⁸ But concrete security-related action was exactly what the government was least equipped to undertake. Almost simultaneously, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) issued a statement rejecting the characterisation of violence in Nigeria as anti-Christian genocide, which provided the necessary regional cover¹⁹ and allowed Abuja to frame its rejection of Trump's framing as consistent with a broader African consensus. Whether the ECOWAS statement was engineered by Nigeria or emerged independently is unclear. Either way, it served Abuja's purposes.

Contesting the Frame: Legitimate Pushback Within Structural Limits

Underlying the logic of rhetorical accommodation and domestic insulation is the strategy of contesting the frameworks through which US pressure is legitimised. Last October, Nigerian immediate past Foreign Minister Yusuf Tuggar used various international forums and platforms to push back against the redesignation of Nigeria as a CPC.²⁰ At the same time, in November 2025, the government unveiled the National Counter Terrorism Centre's Strate-

¹⁶ State House, Abuja, "Nigeria Stands Firmly as a Democracy Governed by Constitutional Guarantees of Religious Liberty", November 2, 2025.

¹⁷ "Nigeria pushes back against Trump's claims in diplomatic offensive", *African Business*, November 5, 2025.

¹⁸ "Trump's Redesignation of Nigeria as a CPC", *Punch*, November 3, 2025.

¹⁹ "ECOWAS Rejects Trump's Genocide Allegation Against Nigeria", *Premium Times*, November 6, 2025.

²⁰ "Nigeria FM Refutes Trump's Claims of Christian Persecution", *Deutsche Welle*, November 4, 2025.

gic Plan 2025–2030, which placed a premium on bilateral cooperation with the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) to enhance intelligence-sharing.²¹ The plan's emphasis on the US partnership signalled that Nigeria was taking Washington's security concerns seriously even as it contested the Christian genocide framing. Furthermore, following the redesignation, Nigerian National Security Adviser Nuhu Ribadu travelled to Washington for direct talks with senior US officials, including Secretary of War Pete Hegseth.²² He thereby became involved in the behind-the-scenes engagement that had been made considerably more difficult by the absence of a Nigerian ambassador. While these steps failed to achieve a reversal of US policy, there was a measurable softening on the part of the US administration. For one, Trump's personal attacks on Nigeria became less frequent after Ribadu's Washington visit; and on Christmas Day 2025, the first American kinetic operation on Nigerian soil took place in Sokoto State in northwestern Nigeria. The airstrike was subsequently framed as a collaborative operation of the US and Nigerian governments, with immediate past Foreign Minister Tuggar confirming it had been authorised by Tinubu and the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) describing it as a joint effort.

The most consequential institutional outcome of the Nigerian government's pushback was the convening of the US-Nigeria Joint Working Group in Abuja on 22 January 2026. National Security Adviser Ribadu led a Nigerian delegation comprising representatives from various government ministries and agencies. US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, Allison Hooker led the US side. The joint statement of the working group committed the two governments to reducing violence against vulnerable groups and creating the conditions for the free practice of faith. Nigeria's ability to turn the CPC crisis into a formal bilateral institutional framework is perhaps the clearest demonstration of the tactical elements of its bounded agency: the country's redesignation was not reversed but its consequences were ameliorated by the establishment of a joint architecture that gave Abuja a formal channel through which to shape the relationship going forward. However, the working group's joint statement did accept the basic premise of the redesignation by committing specifically to the protection of Christians and other vulnerable groups²³ – a concession that earlier Nigerian statements had consistently avoided. In early May 2026, Ribadu undertook a second working visit to Washington, where he met Vice President JD Vance, Secretary of State Marco Rubio, Under Secretary of State Allison Hooker and Assistant Secretary of War Daniel Zimmerman to review the progress of the Joint Working Group framework.²⁴ The visit marked a further institutionalisation of the personal-network diplomacy that had characterised Nigeria's engagement from the outset of the crisis. And it coincided with the intelligence work that culminated days later in a military operation against Abu-Bilal al-Minuki, Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL's) shadow commander in West Africa.

Managing Compliance: Troop Deployment and Performances of Sovereignty

The reasons for Nigeria's apparent compliance are best understood from the February 2026 deployment of approximately 200 US military personnel to Maiduguri, Kainji and Bauchi.

²¹ National Counter Terrorism Centre (NCTC), Strategic Plan 2025–2030 (Abuja: NCTC, November 2025).

²² US Department of War, "Readout of Secretary of War Pete Hegseth's Meeting With Federal Republic of Nigeria National Security Advisor Mr. Mallam Nuhu Ribadu", press release, November 21, 2025.

²³ US Embassy and Consulate in Nigeria, "Joint Statement".⁶

²⁴ State House, Abuja, "Nigeria, United States deepen cooperation on security, counterterrorism as Ribadu meets Vance, Rubio", May 9, 2026.

That deployment followed a period of intense coercive pressure – that is, it took place at a time when refusal would have come at a very high cost. Nigerian elites were confronted with the possibility of personal sanctions under the Cruz bill; the government faced the prospect of aid restrictions, which would have had implications for an economy already battered by high inflation and currency depreciation; and Trump's explicit military threats rendered any refusal of American counter-terrorism assistance politically difficult to defend. According to Reuters, the 200 US personnel at Maiduguri, Kainji and Bauchi are intelligence analysts, advisers and trainers assigned to strictly non-combat roles. They operate a newly established US-Nigeria intelligence fusion cell and fly numerous MQ-9 Reaper drones to collect intelligence over northern Nigeria.²⁵ Notwithstanding this significant deployment, which could easily have been interpreted as a Nigerian concession, Nigeria's Defence Headquarters (DHQ) used language affirming that Nigerian forces retained full command authority and would lead all missions on sovereign territory.²⁶ While these moves are aimed, above all, at protecting Tinubu's domestic political standing – particularly in the north of the country – they nonetheless constitute performances of sovereignty. The biggest operational impact to date of the intelligence fusion cell and the MQ-9 drone operations was on 16 May 2026, when, at Trump's direction and in coordination with the Nigerian government, AFRICOM conducted an assault in the Lake Chad Basin that led to the killing of Abu-Bilal al-Minuki.²⁷ On 17 and 18 May AFRICOM carried out follow-up strikes in the Metele area of Borno State in which around 100 Islamic State–West Africa Province (ISWAP) terrorists were killed.²⁸

The US and Nigerian governments' respective framing of these attacks is analytically important and speaks volumes about the evolution of their partnership since the CPC redesignation. For his part, Trump declared that the operation had eliminated the “most active terrorist in the world” and praised Nigeria for the part it had played, while Tinubu thanked Trump “for his leadership and unwavering support” and said Nigeria was looking forward to “more decisive strikes against all terrorist enclaves across the nation”.²⁹ Just six months after Trump had threatened to bomb Nigeria for persecuting Christians, the two presidents were jointly celebrating the killing of an ISIL commander on Nigerian soil and giving each other the credit in public. A broader qualification applies to military and security assistance. It is true that in recent years, Nigeria received 12 A-29 Super Tucano aircraft and USD 38 million in infrastructure improvements at the Kainji Air Base.³⁰ But while it has made efforts to reduce dependence on the US by acquiring Turkish Bayraktar drones,³¹ Washington largely remains its partner of choice for military hardware and intelligence partnerships.

²⁵ David Lewis, “U.S. Drones Deployed to Nigeria Alongside Troops for Intelligence, Training”, Reuters, March 21, 2026.

²⁶ Yakubu Mohammed, “Defence Headquarters Clarifies Relationship With US Troops Deployed to Nigeria”, *Premium Times*, February 7, 2026.

²⁷ Reuters, “ISIS second-in-command Abu-Bilal al-Minuki killed by US and Nigerian forces, Presidents say”, May 16, 2026.

²⁸ “After killing top commander, US sustains attacks on Islamic State in Nigeria”, *Reuters*, May 18, 2026, “Joint Nigeria-US strikes kill 175 Islamic State group fighters, both militaries say”, *France 24*, May 19, 2026.

²⁹ “Trump, Nigeria claim killing of IS second-in-command”, *Le Monde*, May 16, 2026.

³⁰ US Embassy and Consulate in Nigeria, “U.S. and Nigerian Officials Join to Celebrate \$38 Million in Kainji Air Force Base Improvements”, April 28, 2023.

³¹ Solomon Odeniyi, “Army acquires 43 drones, wings 46 Turkey-trained personnel”, December 19, 2024.

Domestic Audiences and Internal Parameters of Abuja's Manoeuvring

Trump's coercive foreign policy was not the sole factor determining Abuja's bounded-agency responses; Nigeria's numerous domestic audiences played a role here, too. With their often competing demands, it was they who defined the parameters within which Nigeria's bounded agency had to operate. If there appeared to be some inconsistency in the government's statements, this was in part because of the structurally incompatible positions of the domestic audiences it was addressing. For one, religion and ethnicity are the primary organising frameworks of political life in Nigeria, shaping electoral coalitions, resource allocation and the legitimacy of state authority at every level of governance.³² Thus, the federal government's room for manoeuvre on any issue that may be important for religious or ethnic identities is narrow in ways that have little to do with Washington's preferences and almost everything to do with Nigerian domestic politics.

Before examining Nigeria's domestic audiences, it is worth noting where their interests converge and where they diverge, since the picture is considerably more complex than a simple north-south or Muslim-Christian binary. Together with civil society, virtually all domestic audiences, Muslim governors in the north, Christian denominations in the south and Islamic bodies wanted the government to act more decisively on security issues and to stop the violence in the country. They diverged over whether US pressure was a legitimate vehicle for addressing that violence and whether accepting the US framing of the problem as Christian persecution would ultimately help or harm Nigeria's internal cohesion. Further complicating the picture were elite interests within the All Progressives Congress (APC) governing coalition, whose calculation was primarily electoral ahead of the 2027 ballot: APC governors, senators and ministers remained almost totally silent, neither publicly defending Tinubu's approach nor criticising it. Public defence of Tinubu's moderate position would have risked alienating Christian constituents within the coalition, while open criticism would have threatened to validate the US evangelical framing or appeared to welcome foreign interference in Nigerian affairs. Only silence incurred no immediate electoral cost. And this suggests that intra-party debate was constrained by partisan solidarity just at the moment when transparent public deliberation might have strengthened the government's domestic legitimacy.

Ted Cruz and the Northern States of Nigeria

Ted Cruz's proposed Nigeria Religious Freedom Accountability Act explicitly targeted the governors of Nigeria's 12 northern states – all of which introduced a Sharia-based legal system between 1999 and 2002 – with personal sanctions, including travel/visa bans and asset freezes.³³ The northern states responded with a categorical and coordinated rejection of any US characterisation of Sharia governance as persecutory, sending a signal to Abuja that conceding to the persecution narrative was not a viable option. Similarly, the Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF), the main socio-political organisation in the north of the country, issued a statement rejecting the persecution framing and asserting that violence in the north affected Muslims and Christians alike.³⁴ This coordinated institutional voice for the northern position gave Abuja political cover and at the same time stymied any federal government

³² E. E. Osaghae and R. T. Suberu, "A History of Identities, Violence, and Stability in Nigeria", Centre for Research on Inequality, Human Security and Ethnicity, University of Oxford, CRISE Working Paper 6, 2025, 1–27; R. T. Suberu, *Federalism and Ethnic Conflict in Nigeria* (United States Institute of Peace Press, 2002).

³³ "CPC blacklist: 12 Nigerian Governors, Other Officials May Face US Sanctions", Punch, 3 November 2025, accessed March 16, 2026.

³⁴ "ACF Kicks Over US' Re-designation Of Nigeria As 'Country of Particular Concern'", *Leadership*, November 2025, accessed May 24, 2026.

move towards accommodating the CPC redesignation. The wider northern political caucus (comprising the APC northern governors and the ACF) implicitly made clear that structural demands on Sharia law or any government posture validating the US framing would have serious consequences for Tinubu's APC coalition in 2027. In this context, Abuja's decision to designate National Security Adviser Ribadu, a Muslim northerner, as the main interlocutor with Washington was not only a security-related move but also a carefully calibrated political signal. It communicated to the north that engagement with US demands would be managed through someone whose credentials insulated the administration from accusations of capitulation to American evangelical pressure.

Christians in Nigeria

At the same time, the domestic Christian constituencies exerted largely unified pressure that both constrained and partly enabled Tinubu's response. The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) endorsed the genocide characterisation and welcomed international scrutiny, in effect legitimising the US narrative.³⁵ When the Presidency claimed that a meeting with the leadership of CAN had softened the latter's position, that claim was publicly repudiated by the CAN leaders, who accused the Presidency of misrepresentation.³⁶ Thus, the official attempt to manufacture a domestic Christian consensus that did not exist was exposed. The Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN) went further, acknowledging genocide against Christians in the country and urging Tinubu to cooperate with Trump.³⁷ The Anglican community framed the crisis as a security and governance failure that demanded domestic accountability,³⁸ while Bishop of Sokoto Matthew Kukah cautioned that the CPC redesignation could further entrench already polarised positions³⁹ and the northern branch of CAN called for government accountability and foreign intervention.⁴⁰ The net effect of all these was to deny Tinubu any single credible Christian interlocutor whose endorsement might have provided political cover across the full denominational spectrum.

Institutional Signalling and the Islamic Response

The appointment of General Christopher Gwabin Musa, a Christian from the north and former chief of defence staff, as minister of defence in December 2025 illustrated that Tinubu's manoeuvring took place not only via public statements but also through institutional choices.⁴¹ Musa's appointment was a strategic one and performed both a political and ethno-religious function. It preserved the north's hold on the defence portfolio and at the same time addressed CAN and the PFN's demand for Christian visibility in security governance without conceding the political compact with the Muslim constituencies in the north. In short, it could be interpreted as both a security-related and political decision – one that sought to reach the full range of structurally incompatible audiences without fully satisfying any of them. On the Muslim side, the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs publicly

³⁵ Christian Association of Nigeria, "'Christian genocide' – CAN clarifies position", press statement, 8 October 2025, accessed March 16, 2026.

³⁶ *Idem*.

³⁷ "There is Christian genocide, cooperate with Trump, PFN president tells Tinubu", *The Guardian*, November 7, 2025.

³⁸ Musa Luka Musa, "Seek Help If You Can't Tackle Insecurity, Anglican Primate Tells FG", *Daily Trust*, November 12, 2025.

³⁹ Monday Ateboh, "Why Nigeria should not be designated a country of concern – Bishop Kukah", *Premium Times*, October 21, 2025.

⁴⁰ Saheed Oyelakin, "Trump Urged Action Against Killings, Didn't Threaten Nigeria – Northern CAN Chair", *Punch*, November 12, 2025.

⁴¹ Musa replaced Badaru Abubakar of Jigawa State, a Muslim from the north. Because he had previously served as chief of defence, his appointment as minister of defence was endowed with professional credibility and insulated from being read purely as political theatre. Thus, the government was able to present it both as a merit-based security-related decision and as a gesture towards religious inclusivity.

contested the persecution narrative as misinformation, arguing that Nigerian Muslims were partners and not perpetrators in what was a shared security challenge.⁴² Jama'atu Nasril Islam (JNI), the umbrella organisation for all Muslims in Nigeria, called for national unity, intensified counter-terrorism efforts and a diplomatic approach towards engaging the US.⁴³ The Sultan of Sokoto, Muhammad Sa'ad Abubakar, the most symbolically significant Islamic authority in the country, was drawn into Tinubu's cross-faith consultation process, too. The political logic of this move was quite transparent during a crisis in which the most powerful Sharia state in Nigeria was clearly one of the main targets of Ted Cruz's proposed legislation: the engagement of the Sultan gave legitimacy to a process that could otherwise have been read as Abuja managing US pressure at the expense of the north. Thus, the logic driving Nigeria's responses had less to do with diplomatic strategy than with political survival; above all, it was about managing an electoral coalition that could not be put at risk ahead of the 2027 ballot and yet was impossible to satisfy at the same time.

Conclusion

Contrary to the assumption that Nigeria would capitulate under mounting US pressure or that its responses to the CPC redesignation reflected diplomatic strength, Abuja is tackling compliance with US demands through constrained, albeit tactical manoeuvring under conditions of structural dependence. Tinubu's government is being driven less by foreign-policy doctrine than by political expediency; specifically, the management of a divided polity whose structural incompatibilities cannot be glossed over in the run-up to the 2027 election. As a result, the diplomatic language used to follow this survival logic – “sovereignty”, “partnership” and “counter-terrorism cooperation” – should not be mistaken for the substance of that logic. Clearly, Nigeria has agency over the representational frame it gives to compliance with US demands, but it has considerably less agency over how it complies. The events of May 2026 demonstrate how far this logic can go. The joint operation in which Abu-Bilal al-Minuki was killed and which both Trump and Tinubu celebrated publicly represents the operational endpoint of a series of events that began with the CPC redesignation and the threat of military action against Nigeria. Abuja turned a crisis into a partnership without ever acknowledging the US framing that had generated the crisis in the first place. While this could be hailed as a meaningful achievement, it is also a reminder that the security architecture now in place in northeastern Nigeria, which has been built on US intelligence infrastructure, drone operations and an open-ended troop presence, will outlast the political moment that produced it.

Three recommendations for European and German policymakers emerge from this analysis. The first concerns what might be called “conditionality design”. European frameworks for engagement with Nigeria that use normative conditionality, whether on religious freedom, security-sector governance or democratic accountability, should be founded on verifiable institutional benchmarks and not just rhetorical government declarations. Nigeria has demonstrated a consistent capacity to produce the rhetorical and performative outputs (for example, through launches of strategic plans, inter-faith consultations and joint statements) that conditionality frameworks reward but it has done so without implementing the structural changes those outputs are meant to represent. European actors should identify the institutional actors, whether civil society organisations, state-level governance bodies

⁴² Suliyat Tella, “NSCIA Rejects US Claim of Christian Genocide, Says Designation Threatens Nigeria's Unity”, *The Guardian (Nigeria)*, November 9, 2025.

⁴³ “Trump's Threat: JNI Scribe Asks Tinubu to Lead High-Powered Delegation to US”, *Daily Trust*, November 7, 2025.

or judicial institutions, whose behaviour provides evidence of the genuine desire to bring about [real] change, and direct their engagement efforts and resources towards those actors instead of the federal government's representational machinery.

The second recommendation has to do with security cooperation. The US has established a deep operational partnership with Nigeria, as a result of which European security cooperation programmes in Nigeria's northeast are now operating within an architecture largely shaped by the US. Therefore, European actors should open direct coordination channels with AFRICOM and the Nigerian Defence Headquarters to make sure they understand the operational parameters of the US presence in Nigeria before committing resources to programmes that may duplicate, conflict with or be crowded out by American activities.

The third recommendation concerns the January 2027 elections. Every engagement with the Tinubu government between now and the ballot will be processed through the filter of the electioneering logic described in this policy brief. Commitments made, frameworks agreed and partnerships announced during this period carry a higher-than-normal risk of serving domestic political purposes rather than reflecting durable policy intentions. Hence, European actors should calibrate the depth of institutional commitments accordingly – for example, by emphasising accountability mechanisms and deferring high-profile partnership announcements that could be captured for electoral purposes.

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