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# Nigeria: Overview and U.S. Policy

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## Nigeria: Key Issues and U.S. Policy

**Overview.** Nigeria is Africa's most populous country, largest economy, and top oil producer. It is the United States' second-largest trade partner and third-largest destination for U.S. foreign direct investment in Africa, and it routinely ranks among the top recipients of U.S. aid globally. Nigerians are the largest African diaspora group in the United States. By virtue of the country's size and influence, many U.S. policy and aid objectives in Africa arguably hinge to a significant extent on developments in Nigeria. Security, governance, and human rights concerns in Nigeria have drawn congressional attention and pose challenges for U.S. engagement.

**People and Politics.** Nigeria is poised to overtake the United States as the third most populous country in the world by 2050, with a population projected to exceed 375 million, according to U.N. estimates. The country is ethnically, linguistically, and religiously diverse; its political system is distinguished by a number of formal and informal institutions designed to distribute power, public services, and state employment opportunities along ethno-regional lines.

Nigeria has been a multiparty republic since 1999, after decades of military rule. Governance has improved in many respects, yet repression of political opponents and journalists, corruption, and security force abuses persist. President Bola Tinubu took office in May 2023, following elections marred by extensive administrative shortcomings and alleged vote rigging. President Tinubu has impressed investors and rating agencies with a series of far-reaching economic reforms, but public discontent has mounted over rising costs and declining purchasing power, and prospects for his economic agenda are uncertain. As head of the West African regional body, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Tinubu also took a strong initial stance against a military coup in neighboring Niger, but faced domestic backlash for imposing economic sanctions and floating a possible military intervention. Tensions between ECOWAS and the Nigerien junta continue to simmer.

**Security.** Nigeria faces serious security challenges on several fronts. In the northeast, conflict between government forces and a long-running Islamist insurgency has killed tens of thousands of civilians, displaced millions, and involved extensive human rights abuses by all parties. In northwest and central Nigeria, an escalation of disputes between herders and farmers has fueled wider ethno-religious violence, mass abductions for ransom, and emergent Islamist extremist activity. In the southeast, conflict between security forces and armed separatists has killed hundreds since 2020, with a spike in violence surrounding the 2023 elections. The oil-rich Niger Delta, to the south, has been plagued by gang violence and episodic militancy for decades; oil theft and other risks have increasingly prompted oil majors, including U.S. firms, to divest their onshore and shallow-water assets. The deterioration of security conditions in Nigeria over the past decade has strained the country's military and police, and perpetrators of violence often evade arrest or prosecution. Security forces have reportedly committed extensive abuses, exacerbating local grievances and complicating U.S. partnership programs.

**Economy.** With a rapidly growing population, extensive oil and gas reserves, and high potential in the services, agriculture, and manufacturing sectors, Nigeria is arguably positioned to emerge as a global economic powerhouse. The country faces stark economic and development challenges, however: it is home to one of the world's largest extremely poor populations, and lack of access to electricity and other basic services afflicts millions of individual Nigerians and constrains economic activity as a whole. Dependence on petroleum exports makes Nigeria's economic and government revenues highly vulnerable to price volatility. Crude oil and other mineral fuels have long dominated Nigerian exports to the United States, accounting for 90% of U.S. imports from the country, by value, in 2022.

**U.S. Assistance.** Non-humanitarian aid for Nigeria managed by the State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) totaled \$645 million in FY2022 allocations, not including regionally and centrally managed funds. A large share of such assistance was for health programs. In addition, the United States committed roughly \$355 million in humanitarian assistance for Nigeria in FY2022; U.S. humanitarian aid for Nigeria has totaled over \$2.6 billion since FY2015.

**Congress.** Congressional attention on Nigeria has centered on elections and other governance issues, terrorist threats, and human rights and humanitarian conditions. Some Members have expressed concern over religious freedom violations in Nigeria and abuses by Nigeria's military. In the 118<sup>th</sup> Congress, a proposed amendment to a version of the National Defense Authorization Act for FY2024 (H.R. 2670) would have required the Secretary of State to report to Congress on efforts to urge accountability for civilian casualties and human rights abuses by Nigeria's armed forces. The amendment was not adopted for debate on the House floor. Military sales have been a focus of congressional scrutiny, most recently in 2021, when some Members reportedly placed a pre-notification hold on a proposed sale of military helicopters to Nigeria on human rights grounds (the sale later proceeded).

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## Introduction

With Africa's largest economy, extensive oil and gas reserves, and a population on pace to exceed 375 million by mid-century, Nigeria's economic and demographic heft position it to play a major role on the global stage. Stark governance and security challenges cloud this outlook, however, amid immense development gaps: according to the World Bank, roughly one in five poor people in sub-Saharan Africa live in Nigeria.<sup>1</sup> By virtue of Nigeria's demographic size and influence beyond its borders, the attainment of major global development aims, such as the U.N. Sustainable Development Goals, arguably hinges to a large extent on developments in Nigeria.

President Bola Tinubu took office in May 2023, following a hotly contested election marred by extensive administrative problems and alleged vote rigging. His government inherited a mounting fiscal crisis, an underperforming economy, unprecedented security and humanitarian challenges, and a polity that is distrustful of government and divided along ethnic, religious, and regional lines.<sup>2</sup> President Tinubu has announced a series of pro-market reforms that have won praise from investors and U.S. officials, but public discontent has mounted over rising costs and declining purchasing power, and prospects for his economic agenda are uncertain.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, it remains to be seen if Tinubu will make progress toward reining in security force abuses and religious freedom violations, which have strained relations with the United States and are highly charged political issues within Nigeria. As Congress debates policy and budgetary priorities in Nigeria, it may weigh Nigeria's geostrategic importance and the promise of Tinubu's early reform efforts against human rights issues, widespread insecurity, and scarce resources and divergent aims on the part of Nigerian authorities, all of which may constrain progress toward U.S. objectives.

## Demography

With approximately 225 million people, Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa and sixth most populous globally; by 2050, it is poised to overtake the United States as the world's third most populous country, behind India and China.<sup>4</sup> Around three in five Nigerians are below the age of 25, raising the possibility of a "demographic dividend" in the coming decades—contingent upon whether Nigeria's government and economy proves capable of providing a rapidly growing populace with quality services and livelihoods.<sup>5</sup>

Nigeria's population is highly diverse, comprising hundreds of ethnic and linguistic groups. There are no official statistics on ethnic or religious affiliation; efforts to collect such data have been highly controversial.<sup>6</sup> Nigeria's largest ethnic groups are the Hausa-Fulani, made up of two

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<sup>1</sup> World Bank, *Nigeria Poverty Assessment 2022: A Better Future for All Nigerians*, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> In a 2022 survey by Afrobarometer, a nongovernmental survey network, close to 90% of Nigerians stated that the country was moving in the wrong direction, 71% said they have little to no trust in the president, and nearly 80% said they had little to no trust in the National Assembly. Afrobarometer, *Nigeria Round 9 Summary of Results*, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> In a September 2023 meeting with President Tinubu, President Biden "welcomed the Tinubu Administration's steps to reform Nigeria's economy," according to a White House readout. White House, "Readout of President Biden's Engagement with Nigerian President Bola Tinubu," September 10, 2023.

<sup>4</sup> Population projection for 2023 from U.N. Population Division, *World Population Prospects 2022 Revision*, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> A demographic dividend refers to growth that can result from a rise in a country's working-age population; see United Nations, "Harnessing the economic dividends from demographic change," July 6, 2023. Data on Nigeria's population under 25 from U.S. Census Bureau, International Database, "Population by Age" Tables, accessed October 15, 2023.

<sup>6</sup> The last census that produced data on ethnic or religious affiliation in Nigeria occurred in 1963 and featured extensive irregularities. Nigeria's military government annulled the results of a 1973 census exercise, which were widely viewed (continued...)

groups (the Hausa and Fulani) concentrated in the north whose mutual assimilation has led them to be often, but not always, considered as a bloc in the context of Nigerian politics;<sup>7</sup> the Yoruba, a majority in the southwest; and the Igbo, who predominate in the southeast. Observers describe this population as roughly evenly balanced between a mainly Muslim north and a predominately Christian south, though some demographic researchers assert that higher fertility rates in the north are likely to place Muslims in the majority in the coming decades.<sup>8</sup>

**Figure I. Nigeria**



**Source:** CRS graphic, using data from the State Department and Esri, a GIS mapping software company.

## Politics and Governance

Nigeria has been a multiparty republic since 1999, after three decades of military rule punctuated by recurrent coups and intermittent attempts to restore civilian authority. A federal republic with 36 states, its political structure resembles that of the United States, with a bicameral National Assembly comprising a 109-member Senate and 360-member House of Representatives.

as fraudulent. Ensuing censuses have excluded questions on ethnicity or religion. Several nongovernment studies have sought to enumerate Nigeria's ethno-religious demography; their methodologies and results are a subject of debate.

<sup>7</sup> The Hausa and Fulani are present in several African countries; the term "Hausa-Fulani" is generally only used when referring to the groups in Nigeria. Some researchers have objected to the "Hausa-Fulani" label. On Hausa-Fulani identity, see Moses Ochonu, "Colonialism within Colonialism: The Hausa-Caliphate Imaginary and the British Colonial Administration of the Nigerian Middle Belt," *African Studies Quarterly* vol. 10, nos. 2-3 (2008): 98-100.

<sup>8</sup> A study of eleven nationally representative surveys conducted between 1990 and 2018 found that "identification with Christianity is likely to have been the majority among Nigerian adults through this period" but that "Christians seem unlikely to maintain their place as the largest religious group in Nigeria for long," due to higher fertility rates in the north. Andrew McKinnon, "Christians, Muslims and Traditional Worshipers in Nigeria: Estimating the Relative Proportions from Eleven Nationally Representative Social Surveys," *Review of Religious Research* 63 (2021): 303-315.

Since a 1967-1970 civil war pitting an Igbo-led separatist insurgency in the southeast against the federal government, Nigeria's political leaders have adopted a number of formal and informal institutions to distribute political power and public resources along ethno-regional lines and stave off a return to mass ethnic violence. Electoral rules effectively require the formation of cross-ethnic political parties to win office;<sup>9</sup> appointments to the civil service and other state posts are constitutionally required to ensure “no predominance” by a single ethnic or regional group;<sup>10</sup> and political parties have tended to rotate candidates for office and split tickets (at all levels of government) along ethno-regional or religious lines.<sup>11</sup> A defining feature of Nigeria's governance system is the monthly allocation of many federally collected revenues—notably including oil and gas receipts—to state and local governments, which rely heavily on these transfers for financing and informal patronage resources. According to one observer, such power-sharing arrangements “have had a major impact on how Nigerians talk about fairness in political life and on how they demand services and benefits from the federal government.”<sup>12</sup>

## The 2023 General Elections

Nigeria held general elections in February and March 2023. With incumbent President Muhammadu Buhari of the All Progressives Congress (APC) facing term limits, the APC selected Tinubu, a former governor of Lagos State—which includes the megacity of Lagos—as its flagbearer. Tinubu narrowly won with a 37% plurality. His closest challengers were former vice president Atiku Abubakar of the People's Democratic Party (PDP, 29%) and former governor Peter Obi of the Labor Party (25%), whose populist campaign had won the support of many young Nigerians, especially among fellow ethnic Igbo in the southeast. In National Assembly polls, the APC retained a majority in the Senate and remained the largest party in the House. The APC also controls 20 of 36 governorships, followed by 13 for the PDP.

The 2023 elections featured record-low turnout, widespread delays and other logistical issues, and claims of extensive rigging—though Yiaga Africa, a domestic observer group that administered a U.S.-funded parallel vote tabulation, assessed that fraud did not affect the overall outcome of the presidential election.<sup>13</sup> Attacks on electoral personnel and facilities surged in the months prior to the polls, notably in the southeast; European Union (EU) observers recorded 74 deaths from electoral violence.<sup>14</sup> Some Members of Congress expressed concerns over the conduct of the polls.<sup>15</sup> Observers from the International Republican Institute and National Democratic Institute assessed that they “fell well short of Nigerian citizens' legitimate and reasonable expectations.”<sup>16</sup>

<sup>9</sup> For instance, Nigeria's constitution requires that a presidential candidate secure not less than one-quarter of votes cast in two-thirds of all states; candidates for state governor must secure one-quarter of votes cast in each local government area in the state. See *Nigeria's Constitution of 1999 with Amendments through 2011*, Chapter VI, §133 and §179.

<sup>10</sup> *Nigeria's Constitution of 1999 with Amendments through 2011*, Chapter II, §3.

<sup>11</sup> The practice of rotating candidates for office on an ethno-regional basis is known as “zoning.” At the national level, parties have often, but not always, nominated candidate for president to rotate the presidency between north and south after two terms in office, and split their tickets between a Christian and a Muslim.

<sup>12</sup> Brandon Kendhammer, “Getting Our Piece of the National Cake: Consociational Power Sharing and Neopatrimonialism in Nigeria,” *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* vol. 21 (2015): 144.

<sup>13</sup> Yiaga Africa, *Dashed Hopes? Yiaga Africa Report on Nigeria's 2023 General Election*, 2023.

<sup>14</sup> EU Election Observation Mission, *Nigeria General Elections 25 February and 18 March: Final Report*, 2023.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Senator Jim Risch, “U.S. Shouldn't Rush to Embrace Nigerian Election Results,” March 2, 2023; Representative Ilhan Omar, “Statement on Presidential Election in Nigeria,” March 3, 2023.

<sup>16</sup> International Republican Institute/National Democratic Institute, International Election Observation Mission to Nigeria, *Final Report of the 2023 Election*, 2023.

Following Tinubu's declared victory, second- and third-place finishers Atiku and Obi filed petitions claiming to have won the election and seeking to nullify the result. In September 2023, a tribunal dismissed the petitions. Atiku and Obi are appealing the decision before the Supreme Court, though many analysts doubt the case will result in an invalidation of Tinubu's victory.<sup>17</sup>

## The Tinubu Administration (May 2023 – Present)

President Tinubu has rolled out a series of far-reaching economic reforms since his inauguration in May 2023. In his inaugural address, he announced the termination of Nigeria's decades-old fuel subsidy, which had kept local gas prices low but drained state finances (the subsidy cost \$10 billion in 2022), enabled extensive corruption, and incentivized cross-border smuggling.<sup>18</sup> His government also has moved to dismantle a multiple exchange rate regime that had resulted in persistent foreign exchange shortages and other distortions and discouraged foreign investors.<sup>19</sup> Tinubu has fired his predecessor's central bank governor, who spearheaded that exchange-rate system and other controversial policies, and replaced the country's top anti-corruption official.

Foreign investors and credit rating agencies have broadly welcomed Tinubu's reforms.<sup>20</sup> Market adjustments have depleted local purchasing power, however: local gas prices have spiked since the fuel subsidy removal, and the value of Nigeria's currency, the naira, has been on a sustained decline since the announced currency float. The country's main labor federation has repeatedly threatened to strike over rising prices; the Tinubu administration has agreed to a minimum wage increase and other demands, though their implementation remains to be seen.<sup>21</sup> President Tinubu has suspended other initiatives, such as an excise tax on telecommunications services, in response to public discontent. Whether, and with what further concessions, the Tinubu administration can shore up support for its market-oriented economic reforms are major questions in the near term.

## Civic Space and Elections

Nigeria's civic space has expanded since the return of civilian authority in 1999. Today, Nigeria's civil society comprises a broad range of advocacy groups, labor unions, and ethnic, cultural, and religious associations. Nonetheless, successive Nigerian governments have curtailed freedoms of speech, assembly, and the press. Activists and journalists have faced terrorism or other charges for commenting on sensitive issues, and the State Department has accused successive Nigerian governments of using excessive force against protesters.<sup>22</sup> A crackdown on protests against police brutality in 2020 drew condemnation, including from some Members of Congress (see **Text Box**).

### The 2020 #EndSARS Protests<sup>23</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Atiku also has accused Tinubu of forging his diploma from a U.S. university; pursuant to a U.S. court order, the university released Tinubu's academic records and confirmed his graduation in October 2023. BBC, "Bola Tinubu diploma: No evidence Nigeria's president forged college record," October 11, 2023.

<sup>18</sup> Camillus Eboh, "Nigeria's NNPC spent \$10 billion on fuel subsidy in 2022," Reuters, January 20, 2023.

<sup>19</sup> Chinedu Asadu, "Nigeria lets market set currency exchange rate to stabilize economy, woo investors," Associated Press (AP), June 15, 2023.

<sup>20</sup> In August 2023, S&P upgraded Nigeria's outlook from negative to stable, citing Tinubu's reform initiatives. See also Fitch Ratings, "Initial Reform Steps Positive for Nigeria's Credit Profile," June 8, 2023.

<sup>21</sup> Chinedu Asadu, "A government shutdown in Nigeria has been averted after unions suspended a labor strike," AP, October 3, 2023.

<sup>22</sup> See annual State Department *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* since 2000.

<sup>23</sup> For more, see CRS Insight IN11525, *Nigeria: #EndSARS Protests Against Police Brutality*, by Tomás F. Husted.

In October 2020, video circulated on social media purporting to document an extrajudicial killing by members of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a police unit that human rights groups had previously accused of abuses. The protests that ensued were among the largest popular mobilizations in Nigeria's history; the campaign gained steam as celebrities and world leaders, including some Members of Congress, expressed solidarity.<sup>24</sup> The Buhari administration responded by dissolving SARS and announcing other police reforms, while deploying security forces to disperse demonstrations; witnesses accused authorities of recruiting or permitting gangs to attack protesters.<sup>25</sup> The protests culminated on October 20, when police and military personnel reportedly used live fire to disperse demonstrators gathered at the Lekki Tollgate and Alausa areas of Lagos State.<sup>26</sup> Observers accused security forces of killing multiple civilians; in a 2021 report, a state-convened panel of inquiry described the events as a "massacre" and accused authorities of stymieing its investigation.<sup>27</sup> Federal and state officials denied reports of civilian fatalities, and no security personnel faced charges for abuses against #EndSARS protesters.

## Corruption and U.S. Kleptocracy Recovery Efforts

Corruption in Nigeria is reportedly pervasive, and it has been the focus of extensive research, commentary, and civic activism.<sup>28</sup> Surveys indicate widespread suspicion of public office-holders and other government officials.<sup>29</sup> Several state agencies work to combat corruption, including the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), which has received U.S. assistance and collaborated with U.S. agencies in law enforcement actions (see "Cybercrime, Financial Crime, and U.S. Responses"). These agencies have seized billions of dollars' worth of ill-gotten assets and prosecuted a number of current and former officials. Nigeria's government also has worked with foreign partners, including the United States, to repatriate the proceeds of past corruption.

### U.S. Kleptocracy Recovery Efforts

The U.S. Government has acted to seize and recover proceeds of corruption in Nigeria located in or laundered through the United States, and to repatriate such funds for the benefit of the Nigerian people. U.S. attention has centered, in large part, on assets acquired by former military leader Sani Abacha and his co-conspirators, who embezzled billions of dollars in public funds during Abacha's rule (from 1993 until his death in 1998). In 2013, the Department of Justice (DOJ) filed a civil forfeiture suit against over \$625 million in assets belonging to Abacha and his associates; pursuant to that suit, in 2014, DOJ seized roughly \$480 million in assets allegedly laundered through U.S. banks and stored in multiple jurisdictions.<sup>30</sup> DOJ has sought to enforce this judgment, and some seized funds have been repatriated to Nigeria.<sup>31</sup> DOJ also has seized U.S. assets acquired by other Nigerian politicians.<sup>32</sup> Some

<sup>24</sup> Several Members tweeted in support of the #EndSARS protests and accountability for police abuses in Nigeria. In the 117<sup>th</sup> Congress, H.Res. 235 sought to express support for the #EndSARS protesters' demands, among other aims.

<sup>25</sup> Sam Olukoya, "Protesters attacked in Nigerian demos against police abuse," Associated Press, October 15, 2020.

<sup>26</sup> Stephanie Busari et al., "'They pointed their guns at us and started shooting,'" *CNN*, November 19, 2020.

<sup>27</sup> Lagos State Judicial Panel of Inquiry on Restitution for Victims of SARS Related Abuses and Other Matters, *Report of Lekki Incident Investigation of 20<sup>th</sup> October 2020*, 2021.

<sup>28</sup> On patterns of corruption in Nigeria, see Matthew T. Page, *A New Taxonomy for Corruption in Nigeria*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (CEIP), 2018.

<sup>29</sup> See, among others, Richard Kweitsu, "Amid growing insecurity, Nigerians fault police for corruption and lack of professionalism," Afrobarometer Dispatch no. 715, October 11, 2023.

<sup>30</sup> DOJ, "U.S. Forfeits Over \$480 Million Stolen by Former Nigerian Dictator in Largest Forfeiture Ever Obtained Through a Kleptocracy Action," August 7, 2014.

<sup>31</sup> DOJ, "U.S. Repatriates over \$311.7 Million in Assets to the Nigerian People that were Stolen by Former Nigerian Dictator and His Associates," May 4, 2020.

<sup>32</sup> See, e.g., DOJ, "United States to Repatriate Nearly \$1 Million to Federal Republic of Nigeria," February 16, 2023.



Members have expressed concern over the possible diversion of funds repatriated to Nigeria.<sup>33</sup> More broadly, some Nigerian civil society organizations have sought clarification on the disposition of returned assets.<sup>34</sup>

## Interfaith Relations and Religious Freedom Concerns<sup>35</sup>

According to Pew Research Center, 93% of Nigerians surveyed in 2019 stated that religion was very important in their lives, among the highest rates globally.<sup>36</sup> As noted above, Muslims and Christians constitute majorities in the north and south, respectively, though there are significant populations of Muslims in the south, and of Christians in the north. There is extensive intra-religious diversity, such as between and within Sufi, Salafi, Shia, and heterodox Muslims, and Catholics and Protestants of various denominations. According to the State Department, many Nigerians “syncretize indigenous animism or traditional practices with Islam or Christianity.”<sup>37</sup>

While Nigeria has a long history of religious tolerance and nonviolent conflict resolution between faith groups, the country has experienced extensive interreligious violence, notably in religiously mixed areas of the north.<sup>38</sup> Religious discrimination also has been an enduring problem at the state level, amid accusations that the federal government has taken limited action to address religious freedom concerns (see **Text Box**). In 2019, the Trump Administration placed Nigeria on the “Special Watch List” for religious freedom issues under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA, P.L. 105-292, as amended), and in 2020, it named Nigeria a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) for “having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom.” Designation as a CPC can result in punitive measures, subject to a waiver; President Trump waived any such measures for Nigeria, citing national interest.<sup>39</sup> The Biden Administration did not designate Nigeria as a CPC in 2021 or 2022. Several Members of Congress and the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom have criticized Nigeria’s delisting.<sup>40</sup> H.Res. 82, introduced in early 2023, would call for Nigeria’s designation as a CPC, among other provisions.

### Religious Discrimination and Interfaith Conflict in Nigeria: Selected Concerns

Annual State Department religious freedom and human rights reports have highlighted various issues related to interfaith relations and religious freedom in Nigeria, including:

**Sharia Law and Blasphemy.** Nigeria has a plural legal system in which English law, customary law, and—in the north—*sharia* (Islamic) law govern concurrently. Muslims in northern Nigeria have observed a form of *sharia* for centuries, though the jurisdiction of *sharia* courts was limited to personal matters after independence. Following

<sup>33</sup> Letters from Senator Charles Grassley to then-Director Deborah Connor, DOJ Money Laundering and Asset Recovery Section, April 1, 2020 and June 29, 2020; letter from Representatives Steve Chabot and Christopher Smith to then-Attorney General William P. Barr and then-Secretary of State Michael Pompeo, April 15, 2020.

<sup>34</sup> *The Guardian (Nigeria)*, “Return £4.2m Ibora loot to Delta State, Reps orders FG,” March 11, 2021.

<sup>35</sup> See CRS In Focus IF12234, *Interfaith Relations and Religious Freedom in Nigeria*, by Tomás F. Husted.

<sup>36</sup> Pew Research Center, “The Global God Divide,” July 20, 2020.

<sup>37</sup> State Department, *2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Nigeria*.

<sup>38</sup> A 2020 Afrobarometer survey found that a large majority of Nigerian respondents stated they would be content or would not care if their neighbor practiced a religion other than their own. Afrobarometer, “Nigerians show high tolerance for diversity but low trust in fellow citizens, Afrobarometer study shows,” March 10, 2021.

<sup>39</sup> State Department, “Secretary of State’s Determinations under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 and Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2016,” January 13, 2021. See also CRS In Focus IF10803, *Global Human Rights: International Religious Freedom Policy*, by Michael A. Weber.

<sup>40</sup> See, e.g., Letter from Senators Hawley, Lankford, Cramer, Braun, Inhofe, Cotton, and Rubio to Secretary of State Antony Blinken, December 13, 2021; Representative Chris Smith, “Biden’s retreat from the noble and necessary fight to protect victims of religious persecution in Nigeria,” November 23, 2021; USCIRF, “USCIRF Appalled at Administration’s Removal of Nigeria from List of Violators of Religious Freedom,” November 17, 2021.

Nigeria's transition to civilian rule in 1999, several state governments in the north reintroduced *sharia* criminal codes, which now operate in 12 northern states and the Federal Capital Territory surrounding the capital. The introduction of *sharia* criminal codes prompted interreligious clashes in parts of the north. *Sharia* courts may not compel participation by non-Muslims, but non-Muslims and Shia Muslims—a minority in the largely Sunni north (see below)—reportedly have experienced discrimination under *sharia*.<sup>41</sup> Religious freedom organizations have expressed particular concern over prosecutions for blasphemy, which is illegal under both *sharia* and customary law.<sup>42</sup> Secular courts have overturned several high-profile blasphemy convictions, but others—including the conviction, by a secular court, of prominent atheist Mubarak Bala in 2022—have stood. There also have been several instances of mob violence following blasphemy allegations, including at least three lynchings since 2022.<sup>43</sup>

**Anti-Shia Repression.** Nigeria's minority Shia Muslim community is concentrated in the northwest, and many belong to the Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN), a religious movement led by outspoken cleric and longtime government critic Ibrahim Zakzaky. Since Zakzaky's rise to prominence in the 1970s, he and his supporters have been involved in periodic clashes with state authorities. Human rights groups have repeatedly accused security forces of using excessive force to disperse IMN gatherings. In 2014, for instance, soldiers fired on IMN members in Kaduna State, killing 35 people, including three of Zakzaky's sons.<sup>44</sup> In 2015, following a confrontation with IMN members over a roadblock, the military reportedly killed nearly 350 IMN members and arrested Zakzaky and hundreds of others, charging Zakzaky with murder.<sup>45</sup> Security forces killed dozens and arrested hundreds during ensuing IMN protests calling for Zakzaky's release.<sup>46</sup> A state court acquitted Zakzaky of all charges in 2021.

**Islamist Extremism.** The State Department has designated two Nigerian-origin Islamist extremist groups, Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (IS-WA), as "entities of particular concern" under IRFA.<sup>47</sup> (For background on Boko Haram and IS-WA, see "Islamic State West Africa Province," below.) Boko Haram gained notoriety for its brutality against any non-affiliates, targeting Muslims as well as Christians; IS-WA has generally refrained from killing Muslim civilians, focusing on Christian and government targets, though it has also brutally punished Muslims for failing to adhere to its interpretation of *sharia*.<sup>48</sup> Christians were among the victims of two mass kidnappings that have attracted sustained interest from Congress: Boko Haram's abduction of 276 girls from Chibok (Borno State) in 2014 and IS-WA's abduction of 110 girls from Dapchi (Yobe State) in 2018. Dozens of those abducted in Chibok remain missing; of those abducted in Dapchi, all have been released except a Christian, Leah Sharibu, whom IS-WA reportedly has kept in captivity due to her refusal to convert to Islam.<sup>49</sup>

**Middle Belt Violence.** Nigeria's ethno-religiously diverse "Middle Belt," a variously defined zone of north and central Nigeria, has long been a theater for interreligious conflict. For decades, concerns in this region centered on recurrent riots between Muslims and Christians, often sparked by "an event of religious significance" such as an instance of alleged blasphemy.<sup>50</sup> Such violence often coincided with political disputes between "Indigenes"—whom the government recognizes as descended from a given area's original inhabitants, entitling them to preferential access to government employment, political participation, and education—and "settlers," considered non-native. In the Middle Belt, "Indigenes" are often Christian, while many "settlers" are ethnic Hausa-Fulani Muslims.

<sup>41</sup> Non-Muslims may elect to have their case tried in *sharia* courts; some non-Muslims view them as more efficient and less corrupt than secular courts. See USCIRF, *Shari'ah Criminal Law in Northern Nigeria: Implementation of Expanded Shari'ah Penal and Criminal Procedure Codes in Kano, Sokoto, and Zamfara States, 2017-2019*, 2019.

<sup>42</sup> USCIRF, "USCIRF Condemns Death Sentence for Yahaya Sharif-Aminu on Blasphemy Charges," August 11, 2020; UNICEF, "UNICEF statement on sentencing of 13-year-old child to 10-years' imprisonment with 'menial labour' for blasphemy," September 16, 2020.

<sup>43</sup> Chinedu Asadu, "An atheist in northern Nigeria was arrested. Then the attacks against the others worsened," AP, October 5, 2023.

<sup>44</sup> State Department, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2014: Nigeria*, 2015.

<sup>45</sup> HRW, "Nigeria: End Impunity for Killings of Shia," December 12, 2018.

<sup>46</sup> Dionne Searcey and Emmanuel Akinwotu, "Nigeria Says Soldiers Who Killed Marchers Were Provoked. Video Shows Otherwise," *New York Times*, December 17, 2018.

<sup>47</sup> State Department, "Secretary of State's Determinations under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 and Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2016," January 13, 2021.

<sup>48</sup> International Crisis Group (ICG), *After Shekau: Confronting Jihadists in Nigeria's North East*, 2022.

<sup>49</sup> *This Day*, "Elusive Freedom as Leah Sharibu Marks Five Years in Captivity," February 23, 2023.

<sup>50</sup> Laura Thaut Vinson, "Pastoralism, Ethnicity, and Subnational Conflict Resolution in the Middle Belt," in A. Carl Levan and Patrick Ukata, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Nigerian Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2019): 682.

In the past decade, observer attention has focused on intercommunal violence between Muslim, ethnic Fulani herders and Christian farmers (see “Rural Insecurity: Herder-Farmer Conflict and Banditry”). Many analysts contend that religious ideology is not a primary driver of such conflicts, which they argue stem from resource disputes pitting “Indigene” groups against “settler” Fulani.<sup>51</sup> Nonetheless, the violence has aggravated sectarian tensions and spurred killing along religious lines, including attacks on religious leaders and places of worship.

## Foreign Affairs

**Niger.** In July 2023, military officers overthrew the elected president in neighboring Niger, which became the sixth country in Africa where a military has seized power since 2020. In response, President Tinubu—who had been elected as Chair of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) two weeks prior—closed land borders with Niger, cut off electricity exports (Nigeria supplies most of Niger’s electricity), and announced sanctions on the coup leaders. Other ECOWAS heads of state joined Tinubu in instituting border closures and economic sanctions. In August, after ECOWAS threatened the use of force to restore constitutional order in Niger, Tinubu wrote to Nigeria’s Senate seeking support for, among other things, a “military build-up and deployment of personnel for military intervention... should [the junta] remain recalcitrant.”<sup>52</sup>

The move spurred blowback across Nigeria’s political class, particularly in the north, which is connected to Niger through commercial and demographic ties.<sup>53</sup> The ECOWAS sanctions and proposed use of military force have also been widely criticized by politicians and civil society groups within Niger. Mali and Burkina Faso, which are suspended from ECOWAS after their own coups, have pledged to defend Niger’s junta in the event of an intervention.<sup>54</sup> In mid-August, ECOWAS activated its “standby force,” a nascent arrangement for joint member state military deployments. ECOWAS negotiations with the Nigerien junta were ongoing as of November 2023.

**The People’s Republic of China (PRC, or China).** China is Nigeria’s top source of imports, and one of its top export destinations. Chinese construction firms have undertaken a number of public works and infrastructure projects in the country, many financed wholly or partly by China’s Ex-Im Bank.<sup>55</sup> Recently finished or ongoing projects include a deep-water port that opened in early 2023; the 700-megawatt Zungeru Hydroelectric Power Project, now in development; and several new railways and highways.<sup>56</sup> Nigeria has been a leading regional recipient of Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) and hosts two special economic zones partly financed by Chinese authorities or state enterprises that offer incentives to Chinese manufacturing firms.<sup>57</sup> China also

<sup>51</sup> A literature review by Search for Common Ground (SFCG), a U.S. NGO engaged in conflict prevention efforts in the Middle Belt, found “broad consensus that while religious divisions are a contributing source of conflict between pastoralist and non-pastoralist ethnic groups [in Nigeria], they are not the sole or primary cause.” See Leif Brottem and Andrew McDonnell, *Pastoralism and Conflict in the Sudano-Sahel: A Review of the Literature*, SFCG, 2020. For an analysis that emphasizes the role of religious divisions in the violence, see UK All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief, *Nigeria: Unfolding Genocide?*, 2020.

<sup>52</sup> Ruth Olurounbi, “Nigerian Leader Seeks Approval for Potential Deployment in Niger,” *Bloomberg*, August 4, 2023.

<sup>53</sup> Elian Peltier and Ismail Alfa, “No More Coups in West Africa, Nigeria’s Leader Vowed. Niger Called His Bluff.” *New York Times*, August 9, 2023.

<sup>54</sup> Reuters, “Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso sign Sahel security pact,” September 16, 2023.

<sup>55</sup> For an overview of available information on Chinese investment and construction activities in Nigeria, see the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS)-China Africa Research Initiative (CARI) databases and American Enterprise Institute (AEI)’s China Global Investment Tracker.

<sup>56</sup> On Chinese railway projects in Nigeria, see Yunnan Chen, *China’s Role in Nigerian Railway Development and Implications for Security and Development*, U.S. Institute of Peace, 2018.

<sup>57</sup> Yunnan Chen, “Africa’s China”: *Chinese Manufacturing Investments in Nigeria in the Post-Oil Boom Era and Channels for Technology Transfer*, SAIS-CARI, 2020.

has provided financing to support expansions of Nigeria’s information and communication technology infrastructure; Chinese technology firm Huawei has been involved in these efforts.<sup>58</sup> In the past two decades, China has become a top supplier of military equipment to Nigeria; recent Nigerian acquisitions include tanks, armored vehicles, aircraft, drone systems, and artillery.

Some commentators have criticized the alleged opacity of Chinese loans to Nigeria, and raised concerns over potential threats to Nigeria’s sovereignty arising from indebtedness to China.<sup>59</sup> Researchers also have raised concerns related to illicit activity by Chinese commercial actors in Nigeria, such as bribery, illegal logging, and illicit fishing.<sup>60</sup> Preliminary polling results from Afrobarometer, a regional survey group, suggest that China’s influence is viewed as mostly positive by nearly half of Nigerians, against roughly 40% for the United States, though Nigerians’ positive perceptions of both China and the United States have declined considerably since 2019.<sup>61</sup>

**Russia.** Russia has been a major supplier of military equipment, including attack helicopters, to Nigeria; Nigeria also operates Soviet-made military equipment acquired from the Soviet Union or third countries. Nigeria and Russia signed a military cooperation agreement in 2021. Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine has been a point of friction in bilateral ties. The war has roiled global food, fuel, and fertilizer markets, harming Nigeria’s economy, and former President Buhari alleged that weapons from the Russia-Ukraine war had been diverted into Nigeria and the wider region.<sup>62</sup> Nigeria has voted with the United States on 4 of 6 U.N. General Assembly resolutions on the Russia-Ukraine war, but (alongside many other African countries) abstained from two, to suspend Russia from the U.N. Human Rights Council, and to call for Russia to pay reparations to Ukraine.<sup>63</sup> In April 2023, Russia stated that it would send a shipment of potash (used in fertilizer production) to Nigeria free of charge, though the delivery has faced delays.<sup>64</sup> In July 2023, Vice President Kashim Shettima led Nigeria’s delegation to the Russia-Africa Summit in Moscow.

**Israel-Hamas Conflict.** President Tinubu has called for a ceasefire in the conflict between Israel and Hamas, and urged a “peaceful resolution of the conflict through dialogue.”<sup>65</sup> Public opinion concerning the conflict appears somewhat divided: some Muslim organizations have protested in solidarity with the Palestinian people and called for a review of bilateral relations with Israel, while the country’s main Christian association issued a statement recognizing Israel’s right to self-defense, while “emphasiz[ing] the importance of proportionality and the avoidance of harm to innocent civilians.”<sup>66</sup> In early November, Nigeria’s Senate passed a resolution calling on the Tinubu administration to support an end to the conflict and to press for a two-state solution.

<sup>58</sup> Nils Hungerland and Kendrick Chan, *Assessing China’s Digital Silk Road: Huawei’s Engagement in Nigeria*, LSE Ideas, 2021.

<sup>59</sup> See, e.g., *The Guardian (Nigeria)*, “Chinese loan and Nigeria’s sovereignty,” August 11, 2020.

<sup>60</sup> Matthew T. Page, *The Intersection of China’s Commercial Interests and Nigeria’s Conflict Landscape*, 2018.

<sup>61</sup> Results of the most recent round of Afrobarometer polling, shared via Afrobarometer’s official X (formerly Twitter) account (@afrobarometer), April 25, 2023, at <https://twitter.com/afrobarometer/status/1650859906193555456>.

<sup>62</sup> Timothy Obiezu, “Nigerian President: Ukraine War Funneling Arms, Fighters into Lake Chad Basin,” *Voice of America (VOA)*, November 30, 2022.

<sup>63</sup> The two votes on which Nigeria abstained were for U.N. General Assembly Resolutions ES-11/3 and ES-11/5.

<sup>64</sup> *Africa Intelligence*, “Vice President Shettima to blame for Russian fertiliser delay,” October 10, 2023.

<sup>65</sup> Ignatius Igwe, “Israel-Palestine War: Nigeria Calls For Ceasefire, Peaceful Resolution,” *Channels Television*, October 8, 2023.

<sup>66</sup> Timothy Obiezu, “As Israel Fights Hamas, Support for Palestinians Grows in Nigeria,” *VOA*, October 20, 2023; and Christian Association of Nigeria, “CAN Press Statement on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict,” October 11, 2023.

## Security Challenges

The sections below provide overviews of select security issues in Nigeria that have attracted attention from some Members of Congress and other U.S. policymakers. Some general trends may be observed across patterns of insecurity and government responses:

**Security forces are under strain.** Nigerian military personnel are deployed to all 36 of Nigeria's states on internal security operations, stretching thin a force estimated to comprise 143,000 active-duty personnel.<sup>67</sup> Defense spending has risen over the past decade, and the government has expanded its military capabilities with the acquisition of new ground and air assets, but the military often has struggled to restore stability and state authority in zones cleared during periodic offensives or bombing raids. Surveys indicate low troop morale and discontent with poor equipment and living conditions, infrequent rotation, and other issues.<sup>68</sup> Nigeria's national police force also is under-resourced, and many officers are hired as private security for wealthy and middle-class Nigerians, foreigners, and businesses. Vigilante groups have emerged in some areas, varying in size and state backing, with uncertain prospects for future demobilization.

**Security forces have committed extensive abuses.** Observers have accused Nigerian security forces of extrajudicial killings, torture, and other human rights violations.<sup>69</sup> Human rights groups estimate that thousands have died in Nigerian military custody since 2011.<sup>70</sup> As discussed below ("Security Assistance and Cooperation"), reported security force abuses have raised concerns in Congress and complicated U.S. security cooperation.

**Impunity is widespread.** Perpetrators of violence often have eluded prosecution, as authorities have in many cases proved unable or unwilling to hold instigators to account. Where authorities have intervened, human rights groups have repeatedly accused security forces of conducting arbitrary mass arrests following episodes of violence.<sup>71</sup> In some cases, authorities have released suspects without charge once tensions cooled.<sup>72</sup> In others, detainees—including thousands arrested for alleged ties to Boko Haram—have remained in pre-trial detention for years, often in conditions that Amnesty International and other human rights groups describe as inhumane.<sup>73</sup> Several thousand Boko Haram suspects faced prosecution in three mass trials held in 2017-2018 that resulted in hundreds of convictions; some observers raised concerns with those trials and assessed that prosecutions primarily targeted civilians or low-level offenders.<sup>74</sup>

**Corruption is a key challenge.** Procurement fraud, embezzlement, and other forms of corruption have reportedly drained defense sector resources.<sup>75</sup> By many accounts, there is little transparency into defense budgeting and procurement; several military officers have been convicted of self-

<sup>67</sup> International Institute for Security Studies (IISS), *The Military Balance 2022*, 2022.

<sup>68</sup> Temitope B. Oriola, "Nigerian Soldiers on the War Against Boko Haram," *African Affairs*, vol. 120, no. 479 (2021).

<sup>69</sup> See, e.g., State Department annual *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* since 2009.

<sup>70</sup> Amnesty International, *"We Dried Our Tears": Addressing the Toll on Children of Northeast Nigeria's Conflict*, 2020.

<sup>71</sup> Annual State Department *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* have consistently documented instances of arbitrary arrests by Nigerian security forces.

<sup>72</sup> HRW, *"Leave Everything to God": Accountability for Inter-Communal Violence in Plateau and Kaduna States, Nigeria*, 2013; AI, *Harvest of Death: Three Years of Bloody Clashes Between Farmers and Herders in Nigeria*, 2018.

<sup>73</sup> Amnesty International, *"We Dried Our Tears."*

<sup>74</sup> HRW, "Nigeria: Flawed Trials of Boko Haram Suspects," September 17, 2018; Allan Ngari and Akinola Olojo, *Besieged but Not Relenting: Ensuring Fair Trials for Nigeria's Terrorism Suspects*, Institute for Security Studies, 2020.

<sup>75</sup> Eva Anderson and Matthew T. Page, *Weaponising Transparency: Defense Procurement Reform as a Counterterrorism Strategy in Nigeria*, Transparency International (TI) Defense and Security, 2017.

enrichment. Off-budget expenditures are common. Transparency International has described Nigeria’s legislature as “largely passive and compliant” in its oversight of defense issues.<sup>76</sup>

## Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (IS-WA)

Founded in the early 2000s as a Salafist Sunni Muslim reform movement, *Jama’u Ahlis Sunna Lidda’awati wal Jihad* (JAS)—more commonly known as Boko Haram, which roughly translates to “Western culture is forbidden”—evolved beginning in 2009 into one of the world’s deadliest extremist groups. It gained global notoriety for its brutal tactics, including its use of women and children as suicide bombers. IS-WA, an Islamic State affiliate that splintered from Boko Haram in

2016, has eclipsed its parent organization and established itself as the leading Islamist extremist group in the Lake Chad Basin region, comprising border regions of Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon, and Niger.<sup>77</sup> In 2021, Boko Haram’s longtime leader committed suicide after coming under siege by IS-WA militants, prompting thousands of Boko Haram fighters and non-combatants living in the group’s strongholds to surrender to Nigerian authorities.



IS-WA has sought to consolidate its control in the northeast, warring with remnant Boko Haram cells while sustaining attacks on military personnel and other targets in Nigeria and neighboring states.<sup>78</sup> Some former Boko Haram fighters, meanwhile, reportedly have relocated to join criminal gangs or emergent extremist cells based in northwest and north-central Nigeria (see below). While the Nigerian government regularly claims to have killed numerous militants in airstrikes, ground forces have struggled to restore stability in cleared zones. Analysts debate the extent of IS-WA’s ties with core IS and with other IS affiliates (notably IS-Sahel), but by some accounts collaboration with IS-Sahel may be growing.<sup>79</sup> IS-WA appears to act independently, however, funding itself through “war spoils, extortion of the local population,” and taxation of local commerce.<sup>80</sup> In 2021, U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM)’s then-Commander assessed that “neither Boko Haram nor ISIS-WA today pose a significant threat to U.S. interests.”<sup>81</sup> Both groups are U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs).

In 2016, the Nigerian government launched Safe Corridor, a de-radicalization and reintegration program for ex-combatants. Hundreds of men and boys have participated. Analysts have raised a number of concerns related to the program, including with poor screening that has resulted in misclassification of civilians as militants, abuses against participants, and opposition by some officials and communities to the reintegration of ex-militants into society.<sup>82</sup> Observers contend that regional military coordination has moderately improved since the 2014 activation of the

<sup>76</sup> TI Defense and Security, *Government Defense Integrity Index 2020: Nigeria*, 2021.

<sup>77</sup> Boko Haram pledged allegiance to IS in 2015; a leadership dispute later fractured the group, and a splinter faction gained the Islamic State’s recognition as IS-WA in 2016. See CRS In Focus IF10173, *Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province*.

<sup>78</sup> International Crisis Group (ICG), “Fighting among Boko Haram Splinters Rages On,” May 30, 2023.

<sup>79</sup> On reports of growing collaboration, see U.N. doc. S/2023/549.

<sup>80</sup> UNSC, *Monitoring Team’s Twenty-ninth report*, UN doc. S/2022/83, February 3, 2022.

<sup>81</sup> Testimony of AFRICOM Commander General Stephen Townsend before the Senate Armed Services Committee, *U.S. Africa Command and U.S. Southern Command*, hearing, 117<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., April 28, 2021.

<sup>82</sup> ICG, *An Exit from Boko Haram? Assessing Nigeria’s Operation Safe Corridor*, 2021.

African Union-authorized Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF)—comprising troops from Nigeria, Benin, Cameroon, Chad, and Niger—though low interoperability and inconsistent funding, among other challenges, have reportedly limited its effectiveness.<sup>83</sup>

As of August 2023, according to U.N. data, an estimated 11.1 million people in the Lake Chad Basin were in need of humanitarian assistance.<sup>84</sup> Approximately 2.4 million people are displaced in Nigeria; another 355,000 are refugees in neighboring countries, most in Niger and Cameroon.<sup>85</sup> Humanitarian groups have faced severe access constraints and other operational challenges. Boko Haram and IS-WA have kidnapped and killed humanitarian workers and destroyed aid facilities. Nigeria’s military has restricted humanitarian access beyond urban areas and repeatedly accused international humanitarian agencies of supporting terrorists, at times suspending their operations.

## Rural Insecurity: Herder-Farmer Conflict and Banditry

Rural violence has surged in Nigeria over the past decade, especially in the northwest and central “Middle Belt” regions (see map).<sup>86</sup>

Some observers attribute the increase to a rise in conflicts between farmers and herders over access to land and resources and related issues. Such violence has intensified as socioeconomic, political, and ecological trends have reduced the compatibility of pastoral and farming livelihoods and raised the stakes of competition for resource access and control.<sup>87</sup>

In the northwest, clashes typically pit ethnic Fulani herders against ethnic Hausa farmers, two predominately Muslim groups. In the Middle Belt, as noted above, most violence has involved Fulani herders and Christian farmers of various ethnic groups. Hate speech has proliferated, with some analysts expressing particular concern over rhetoric that attributes unified, nefarious aims to the Fulani—an expansive ethnic group that spans much of West Africa.<sup>88</sup>

Mounting herder-farmer violence has provided a pretext for a broader escalation of insecurity; ethnic militias have mobilized, and lines between conflict drivers have blurred as violence has grown to encompass resource disputes, reprisal killings, and criminality. Media often refer to Fulani armed groups as “bandit” gangs. Among other incidents, bandits have abducted hundreds of children in mass kidnappings, collecting millions of dollars in ransom; intercepted a commuter



<sup>83</sup> See, e.g., Onuoha et al., *A quest to win the hearts and minds: Assessing the Effectiveness of the Multinational Joint Task Force*, Norwegian Institute of International Affairs Effectiveness of Peace Operations Network, 2023.

<sup>84</sup> U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), “Lake Chad Basin Humanitarian Snapshot as of 28 August 2023,” September 8, 2023.

<sup>85</sup> U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), “Operational Data Portal: Nigeria,” accessed October 16, 2023.

<sup>86</sup> The Middle Belt is an unofficial, variously defined region; there is debate over which states it includes. This map is not intended to authoritatively demarcate the Middle Belt. In some cases, definitions of the Middle Belt typically only include part of a state’s territory (e.g., southern Kaduna generally is included, while northern Kaduna is not). The CRS graphic above is based on descriptions in Moses E. Ochonu, *Colonialism by Proxy: Hausa Imperial Agents and Middle Belt Consciousness in Nigeria* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014) and ACAPS, “Nigeria,” among others.

<sup>87</sup> On these trends, see Leif Brottem and Andrew McDonnell, *Pastoralism and Conflict*; ICG, *Herders against Farmers: Nigeria’s Expanding Deadly Conflict*, 2017; Adam Higazi and Zahbia Yousuf, *From Cooperation to Contention: Political Unsettling and Farmer-Pastoralist Conflicts in Nigeria*, Conciliation Resources, 2017.

<sup>88</sup> See, e.g., Kingsley L. Madueke, *Driving Destruction: Cattle Rustling and Instability in Nigeria*, Global Initiative on Transnational Organized Crime, 2023.

train, taking dozens hostage; downed a military jet; and killed hundreds in a series of massacres. In some areas, bandits exert territorial control, extorting local communities and providing basic services, such as settling local disputes.<sup>89</sup> In turn, vigilante groups have formed to oppose the bandits, and have reportedly indiscriminately targeted Fulani communities in some areas.<sup>90</sup>

In this context, some analysts and U.S. officials have expressed concern over the prospects for Islamist extremists to gain a foothold beyond the northeast.<sup>91</sup> Among other trends, Ansaru—an Al Qaeda-affiliated Boko Haram splinter faction and U.S.-designated FTO that appeared dormant as of 2015—has reactivated in the northwest and Middle Belt, reportedly led by former Boko Haram fighters.<sup>92</sup> Some analysts assert that bandits and extremists have collaborated in some cases, but have also clashed over control of territory.<sup>93</sup> Most bandit gangs appear not to espouse a political or religious ideology, though some have mobilized under the banner of protecting Fulani.<sup>94</sup>

## Separatism in the Southeast

Since 2020, the emergence of a separatist movement in southeast Nigeria has triggered a wave of violence and sparked fears of a return to large scale ethnic conflict. Known as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), the separatists profess an aim to restore the would-be breakaway state of Biafra, which attempted to split from Nigeria in 1967, precipitating the devastating 1967-1970 Nigerian Civil War.<sup>95</sup> IPOB messaging has sought to leverage historic perceptions of



marginalization among the Igbo—Nigeria’s third-largest ethnic group, which led the original push for an independent Biafra—as well as newer grievances, such as disputes between Muslim herders and Christian farmers. (The Igbo are predominately Christian, and Igbo activists have long protested their perceived domination by the northern Hausa-Fulani and other ethnic groups.)

Violence escalated in mid-2020, as government forces conducted raids on IPOB meetings and arrested alleged IPOB sympathizers. IPOB later launched an armed wing, the Eastern Security Network (ESN). Unidentified gunmen have since killed dozens of state security personnel; human rights groups have accused security forces of killing over a hundred people in response,

<sup>89</sup> James Barnett, “The Bandit Warlords of Nigeria”; James Barnett and Murtala Rufai, “The Other Insurgency: Northwest Nigeria’s Worsening Bandit Crisis,” *War on the Rocks*, November 16, 2021.

<sup>90</sup> Obi Anyadike, “‘Everyone knows somebody who has been kidnapped’: Inside Nigeria’s banditry epidemic,” *The New Humanitarian*, January 30, 2023.

<sup>91</sup> In August 2020, the commander of U.S. Special Operations Command-Africa stated that “we’re seeing al-Qaida starting to make some inroads” in the northwest, but provided no further information about the assertion. State Department, “Digital Briefing on U.S. Efforts to Combat Terrorism in Africa during COVID,” August 4, 2020.

<sup>92</sup> James Barnett and Murtala Ahmed Rufa’i, “A ‘Sahelian’ or a ‘Littoral’ Crisis? Examining the Widening of Nigeria’s Boko Haram Conflict,” Hudson Institute, April 5, 2023.

<sup>93</sup> James Barnett, Murtala Ahmed Rufa’i, and Abdulaziz Abdulaziz, “Northwestern Nigeria: A Jihadization of Banditry, or a ‘Banditization’ of Jihad?” *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point (CTC) Sentinel*, January 2022; and *Daily Trust*, “Dilemma Of Kaduna Community Caught Between Ansaru, Bandit Hostilities,” August 6, 2022.

<sup>94</sup> James Barnett, “The Bandit Warlords of Nigeria”; James Barnett and Murtala Rufai, “The Other Insurgency: Northwest Nigeria’s Worsening Bandit Crisis,” *War on the Rocks*, November 16, 2021.

<sup>95</sup> For an account of the war, see John de St. Jorre, *The Nigerian Civil War* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1972), reprinted as *The Brothers’ War: Biafra and Nigeria* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009).



and of mass arrests and torture.<sup>96</sup> Violence surged around the 2023 general elections. In May 2023, gunmen attacked a U.S. government convoy as it traveled through Anambra State en route to a USAID project site, killing multiple locally employed staff as well as police.<sup>97</sup> IPOB denied that attack and has disavowed violence generally, though splits in the group—and the fact that authorities have rarely arrested assailants—make it difficult to assess culpability.

## Insecurity in the Niger Delta and Gulf of Guinea

Nigeria’s Niger Delta, an oil-rich region in southern Nigeria that borders the Gulf of Guinea, has long been a site of political unrest, criminality, and intermittent armed militancy linked to local grievances over perceived neglect, exploitation, and oil-related environmental devastation.<sup>98</sup> Militant violence peaked in the 2000s, with regular attacks on oil facilities and personnel. In 2009, the government announced an amnesty and introduced a monthly stipend for former Niger Delta militants. The program largely halted attacks on oil facilities, but some analysts contend it has failed to address root causes of insecurity—in particular, the perceived exploitation of local resources without adequate compensation. Attacks on oil facilities periodically resurge.<sup>99</sup>



The Niger Delta faces an array of additional security challenges. These include gang violence by secretive syndicates commonly known as “cults” or “confraternities,”<sup>100</sup> intercommunal clashes, and political violence. The Gulf of Guinea is among the world’s most dangerous bodies of water for attacks on vessels. Oil theft, known as “bunkering,” from oil pipelines for artisanal refinement and black-market sale is another key challenge that reportedly involves criminal networks, politicians, security personnel, and oil workers.<sup>101</sup> As discussed below (see “The Economy”), foreign oil firms have increasingly sought to divest from Nigeria’s onshore oil and gas industry, amid risks of insecurity, oil theft, and litigation from oil-producing communities due to oil spills.

## Trafficking in Persons and Narcotics Trafficking

**Trafficking in Persons.** Nigeria is a source, transit point, and destination for human trafficking. In its *Trafficking in Persons* report for 2023, the State Department ranked Nigeria on Tier 2, meaning it does not fully meet standards for eliminating trafficking but is making significant

<sup>96</sup> Amnesty International, “Nigeria: At least 115 people killed by security forces in four months in country’s Southeast,” August 5, 2021.

<sup>97</sup> State Department, “Attack on U.S. Convoy in Nigeria,” May 17, 2023; see also James Barnett, “Understanding the ‘Unknown Gunmen’ Who Attacked a US Convoy in Nigeria,” Hudson Institute, May 18, 2023.

<sup>98</sup> For a historical overview, see ICG, *Fuelling the Niger Delta Crisis*, 2006.

<sup>99</sup> See, e.g., Nextier SPD, *Assessment of the Presidential Amnesty Program (PAP)*, 2020.

<sup>100</sup> BBC, “The ultra-violent cult that became a global mafia,” December 13, 2021.

<sup>101</sup> Christina Katsouris and Aaron Sayne, *Nigeria’s Criminal Crude: International Options to Combat the Export of Stolen Oil*, Chatham House, 2013; TI, *Military Involvement in Oil Theft in the Niger Delta: A Discussion Paper*, 2019.

efforts to do so.<sup>102</sup> Edo State, in southwest Nigeria, is a hub for international sex and labor trafficking to Europe, particularly Italy, typically via Libya.<sup>103</sup>

**Narcotics Trafficking.** Narcotics trafficking is another key challenge and a long-standing focus of U.S. law enforcement assistance. Nigeria is a source, transit point, and destination market for drug trafficking, including of illicit recreational drugs (e.g., cocaine and heroin) as well as real and counterfeit opioids and other pharmaceuticals (e.g., tramadol, codeine, and anti-malarials).<sup>104</sup>

## Cybercrime, Financial Crime, and U.S. Responses

Cybercrime in Nigeria has been a focus of U.S. law enforcement assistance and justice sector actions. Nigeria is a global hub for cybercriminal activity, including “419 scams”—advance-fee fraud nicknamed for the article in Nigeria’s penal code that outlaws fraud—as well as business email compromise attacks and identity theft. Nigerians also are prominent in “romance scams,” in which conspirators defraud victims via fake online romantic relationships. Nigerian fraudsters reportedly stole millions of dollars in U.S. COVID-19 relief payments.<sup>105</sup>

U.S. and Nigerian authorities have collaborated to crack down on cybercrime, and coordinated U.S.-Nigerian law enforcement operations have led to hundreds of arrests. U.S. authorities have charged a number of Nigerian nationals with internet fraud and money laundering.<sup>106</sup> In 2020, the Treasury Department imposed sanctions on six Nigerian nationals for email and romance scams under Executive Order 13694 (as amended), pertaining to cybercrime.<sup>107</sup>

## The Economy

Nigeria’s economy is the largest in sub-Saharan Africa. Its oil sector, discussed below, has been a critical source of government revenues since large-scale production began in the 1970s, and oil dependence has significantly shaped Nigeria’s politics and economy. The non-oil economy is large and dynamic, driven by a rapidly growing population and burgeoning services sector. Lagos, Nigeria’s commercial capital, is among the world’s largest cities and is a technology and financial services hub in Africa; its population and annual gross domestic product (GDP) are larger than those of many African countries. Nigerian artists and musicians are prominent in global media, and the country’s film industry, “Nollywood,” is second to India’s Bollywood in

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<sup>102</sup> State Department, *2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: Nigeria*, 2023.

<sup>103</sup> HRW, “*You Pray for Death*”: *Trafficking of Women and Girls in Nigeria*, 2019.

<sup>104</sup> U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *At the Crossroads of Licit and Illicit: Tramadol and Other Pharmaceutical Opioids Trafficking in West Africa*, 2021.

<sup>105</sup> Ken Dilanian, Kit Ramgopal, and Chloe Atkins, “‘Easy money’: How international scam artists pulled off an epic theft of Covid benefits,” *NBC News*, August 15, 2021.

<sup>106</sup> In a prominent case, U.S. authorities charged social media influencer Ramon Olorunwa Abbas with conspiring to engage in money laundering; DOJ also mentioned Abbas as a co-conspirator in a scheme to launder money for North Korean cybercriminals. DOJ, “Nigerian National Brought to U.S. to Face Charges of Conspiring to Launder Hundreds of Millions of Dollars from Cybercrime Schemes,” July 3, 2020; DOJ, “Three North Korean Military Hackers Indicted in Wide-Ranging Scheme to Commit Cyberattacks and Financial Crimes Across the Globe,” February 17, 2021.

<sup>107</sup> Treasury Department, “Treasury Sanctions Nigerian Cyber Actors for Targeting U.S. Businesses and Individuals,” June 16, 2020.

annual output.<sup>108</sup> Investors have increasingly viewed Nigeria as a potentially lucrative consumer market for telecommunications, financial services, retail trade, and other industries.<sup>109</sup>

Nonetheless, Nigeria faces stark economic and development challenges, and a wide gap between rich and poor. According to a 2022 Nigerian government survey, 63% of Nigerians—roughly 133 million people—are multidimensionally poor, facing deprivations in education, health, and/or standard of living.<sup>110</sup> Service provision is limited in densely populated urban zones and in rural areas; according to the World Bank in 2021, approximately 60 million Nigerians do not have access to basic drinking water, and 80 million lack access to improved sanitation facilities.<sup>111</sup> Nigeria tops the World Bank’s list of countries with the largest populations lacking access to electricity, with an estimated 90 million people as of 2019.<sup>112</sup> Despite notable advancements in public healthcare provision, immense challenges remain: Nigeria accounts for over a quarter of annual malaria deaths and one of the top tuberculosis disease burdens globally, and is home to the world’s third-largest population living with HIV. According to UNAIDS, “one in seven babies born with HIV in the world is Nigerian.”<sup>113</sup> Numerous analyses have sought to identify barriers to the realization of Nigeria’s economic potential and explain the apparent contradiction between the country’s vast human and natural resources and its poor development indicators (see **Text Box**).

### **Impediments to Growth and Development in Nigeria: An Overview**

Many analyses of Nigeria’s development trajectory have focused on dysfunctions and structural distortions arising from Nigeria’s dependence on oil and gas, such as vulnerability to oil price swings and boom-and-bust cycles. Others have focused on constraints to efficient oil sector management in a political system in which officials at all levels of government face pressures to capture and distribute oil wealth.<sup>114</sup>

Efforts to spur non-oil industries via import restrictions, foreign exchange controls, and other protectionist policies have had limited success, some argue, in engendering diversification.<sup>115</sup> Many Nigerians are engaged in low-paying informal work such as subsistence agriculture or petty trading; according to the World Bank, “the wage jobs best able to lift people out of poverty are rare and unevenly distributed in Nigeria; most poor Nigerians hold household farm and non-farm jobs that cannot translate their hard work into an exit from poverty.”<sup>116</sup> Across various measures—including employment rates, educational attainment, digital literacy, financial inclusion, and access to agricultural inputs—barriers to quality employment are generally more pronounced among women.<sup>117</sup>

Corruption is a key barrier to private-sector activity, as is costly and unreliable power access. According to the State Department, other concerns include insecurity in parts of the country, “regulatory uncertainty, policy inconsistency, poor infrastructure, foreign exchange shortages and customs inconsistency and inefficiency.”<sup>118</sup>

The agriculture sector is central to Nigeria’s economy, and has been a focus of U.S. development assistance. It is the country’s leading employer and contributes roughly one-quarter of annual

<sup>108</sup> UNESCO, *The African film Industry: trends, challenges and opportunities for growth*, 2021.

<sup>109</sup> On challenges and opportunities for investors in Nigeria, see *Financial Times*, “Special Report: Investing in Nigeria” (February 14, 2022) a collection of articles available at <https://www.ft.com/reports/investing-in-nigeria>.

<sup>110</sup> Nigeria National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), *Nigeria Multidimensional Poverty Index (2022)*, 2022.

<sup>111</sup> World Bank, “Nigeria: Ensuring Water, Sanitation and Hygiene for All,” May 26, 2021.

<sup>112</sup> World Bank, *Tracking SDG7: The Energy Progress Report 2021*, 2021.

<sup>113</sup> UNAIDS, “Anambra, Nigeria, commits to eliminating vertical transmission of HIV by end of 2022,” September 6, 2021.

<sup>114</sup> On constraints to efficient policymaking in Nigeria, see Zainab Usman, “The ‘Resource Curse’ and the Constraints on Reforming Nigeria’s Oil Sector,” in Levan and Ukata, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Nigerian Politics*, 520-544.

<sup>115</sup> International Monetary Fund (IMF), *Nigeria: Selected Issues: Diversification of the Nigerian Economy*, 2021.

<sup>116</sup> World Bank, *Nigeria Poverty Assessment 2022: A Better Future for All Nigerians*.

<sup>117</sup> See NBS, *Labor Force Statistics*; and NBS, *National Youth Survey 2020*, 2021.

<sup>118</sup> State Department, *2022 Investment Climate Statements: Nigeria*, 2022.

GDP.<sup>119</sup> Top export crops include sesame seeds, cashew nuts, and cocoa beans. Nigeria's livestock industry is one of the largest in Africa and is expected to grow as rising incomes, population growth, and urbanization drive up demand for animal products.<sup>120</sup> Some analysts contend Nigeria's agriculture sector operates below potential, due to such issues as low fertilizer use (Nigeria has one of the world's lowest fertilizer usage rates), limited uptake of improved seeds, irrigation, and other technologies, poor access to credit, and high market access costs.<sup>121</sup>

Several analyses have assessed Nigeria to be particularly vulnerable to negative effects of climate change.<sup>122</sup> Northern Nigeria is chronically arid, and susceptible to highly variable rainfall, leading to drought and riverine flooding; the Middle Belt also faces exposure to aridity and flooding, with implications for herder-farmer violence and other land-use conflicts in the region.<sup>123</sup> Storm surges and riverine flooding pose key risks in southern Nigeria, particularly in densely populated coastal cities, including Lagos, that generally lack adequate drainage systems and other infrastructure. The burning of natural gas associated with oil drilling, known as gas flaring, has historically accounted for a considerable share of Nigeria's contributions to global greenhouse gas emissions.

## The Oil and Gas Sector

As of 2022, Nigeria was the world's 15<sup>th</sup> largest oil producer and 16<sup>th</sup> largest producer of natural gas liquids.<sup>124</sup> Oil and gas receipts remain the single most important contributor to government revenues, though they have accounted for a declining share of state earnings since the 2000s: in 2022, oil and gas accounted for around 40% of federal revenues.<sup>125</sup> Efforts are underway to expand domestic refining capacity, but Nigeria continues to import nearly all its fuel.<sup>126</sup>

Nigeria's crude oil production declined beginning in 2020, as the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), to which Nigeria belongs, responded to the global oil price crash by imposing quotas on members' output. Nigeria's output has yet to recover to pre-pandemic levels, as maintenance issues linked to past underinvestment and a strike by Exxon employees in 2023 have limited Nigeria's output to below its OPEC quota.<sup>127</sup> Decades of pipeline spills have ravaged the environment and devastated local livelihoods and health conditions. Local communities often blame the spills on equipment failure, while oil operators attribute them to pipeline sabotage.<sup>128</sup>

<sup>119</sup> World Bank DataBank, World Development Indicators, accessed October 17, 2023.

<sup>120</sup> Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), *Transforming Livestock Sector: Nigeria*, 2019.

<sup>121</sup> Dayo Phillip et al., *Constraints to Increasing Agricultural Productivity in Nigeria*, International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) Brief, 2009; Bedru Balana and Motunrayo Oyeyemi, *Credit Constraints and Agricultural Technology Adoption: Evidence from Nigeria*, IFPRI Working Paper, 2020.

<sup>122</sup> For instance, Nigeria ranked as the second most vulnerable country (tied with Chad) on UNICEF's 2021 Children's Climate Risk Index, a measure of children's vulnerability to environmental stress and extreme weather events (see UNICEF, *Children's Climate Risk Index*, 2021). Verisk Maplecroft, a risk consultancy, identified Lagos as one of ten cities at "extreme risk" of economic exposure to climate change (Verisk Maplecroft, "84% of world's fastest growing cities face 'extreme' climate change risks," November 21, 2018).

<sup>123</sup> USAID, *Fragility and Climate Risks in Nigeria*, 2018.

<sup>124</sup> Oil and gas production rankings from Energy Institute, *Statistical Review of World Energy: 72<sup>nd</sup> Edition*, 2023.

<sup>125</sup> Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN), *Economic Report: Fourth Quarter 2022*, 2022. For an analysis of such trends, see Sarah Burns and Olly Owen, "Nigeria: No Longer an Oil State?" Oxford Martin School Working Paper, August 2019.

<sup>126</sup> Elisha Bala-Gbogbo, "Nigeria seeks to restart four state oil refineries by end 2024," Reuters, August 25, 2023.

<sup>127</sup> Energy Information Administration, "Nigeria was the top crude oil producer in Africa, but disruptions threaten production," June 15, 2023.

<sup>128</sup> James Barnett, "The Oil Thieves of Nigeria," *New Lines Magazine*, January 26, 2023.

U.S. firms Chevron and ExxonMobil are among the largest international oil companies (IOCs) active in Nigeria's oil and gas sector. Others include Anglo-Dutch firm Shell (the leading IOC in Nigeria), French firm Total, and Italian firm Eni. Some IOCs have sought to sell their onshore and shallow-water assets in Nigeria, a trend analysts attribute to high costs associated with aging pipelines, insecurity, risks of litigation from local communities seeking reparations for oil spills, and IOC efforts to reduce emissions.<sup>129</sup> Nigerian authorities have contested some divestments, including a pending sale of Exxon's shallow-water holdings to a Nigerian firm.<sup>130</sup> Advocates have raised concerns that divestments could effectively exonerate IOCs from redressing oil pollution, and that environmental conditions could worsen with a transfer of assets to domestic firms.<sup>131</sup>

## U.S.-Nigeria Trade and Investment

Nigeria is the United States' second-largest trade partner and the third-largest destination of U.S. FDI in sub-Saharan Africa. Crude oil and other mineral fuels have historically accounted for the lion's share of Nigeria's exports to the United States, making up 90% of such exports, by value, in 2022.<sup>132</sup> Nigeria often ranks as a top exporter to the United States under the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA, P.L. 106-200, as amended) trade preference program; crude oil makes up nearly all of Nigeria's AGOA exports. The top categories of U.S. exports to Nigeria in 2022, by value, were automobiles, mineral fuels, cereals, machinery, and aircraft and related parts.

According to the Bureau of Economic Analysis, the U.S. direct investment position in Nigeria was \$5.6 billion in 2022, down 6.4% from 2021.<sup>133</sup> U.S. investment in Nigeria has historically been concentrated in the oil and gas sector, though the share of extractives in the U.S. FDI position in Nigeria has declined amid U.S. investment in other sectors, such as services.<sup>134</sup>

## Economic Trends and Outlook

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) projects Nigeria's GDP growth at 2.9% in 2023, down from 3.3% last year.<sup>135</sup> Fuel price increases spurred by President Tinubu's subsidy removal appear to have propelled inflation, which exceeded 25% in September 2023, the highest rate in decades. The naira currency fell to a record low in October 2023. The Central Bank of Nigeria has removed restrictions on the use of foreign exchange for imports of dozens of items, a protectionist policy introduced by the previous administration. It remains to be seen whether the Tinubu government can sustain support for its pro-market agenda, or whether it may backtrack on certain measures in the face of public discontent or further inflationary or currency pressures.

Fiscal conditions have come under increasing strain, amid new borrowing and a surge in fuel subsidy payments in 2021-2022 linked to elevated global gas prices. Interest payments are high as a share of government revenues: Nigeria has struggled to collect taxes outside of the oil and gas

<sup>129</sup> Stakeholder Democracy Network (SDN), *Divesting from the Delta: Implications for the Niger Delta as International Oil Companies Exit Onshore Production*, 2021.

<sup>130</sup> Wendell Roelf, "Nigerian oil regulator 'optimistic' on Exxon asset sale to Seplat," Reuters, October 11, 2023.

<sup>131</sup> Amnesty International, *Nigeria: Tainted Sale?*, May 26, 2023; Rachel Chason, "Big Oil is selling off its polluting assets — with unintended consequences," *Washington Post*, March 27, 2023.

<sup>132</sup> Information in this paragraph is from U.S. International Trade Commission Dataweb, accessed August 10, 2023.

<sup>133</sup> Bureau of Economic Analysis, "Nigeria - International Trade and Investment Country Facts," accessed October 17, 2023, available at <https://apps.bea.gov/international/factsheet/factsheet.html#429>.

<sup>134</sup> Bureau of Economic Analysis, "U.S. Direct Investment Abroad: Balance of Payments and Direct Investment Position Data," accessed October 17, 2023; see also U.S. International Trade Commission, *U.S. Trade and Investment with Sub-Saharan Africa: Recent Trends and New Developments*, 2020.

<sup>135</sup> IMF, World Economic Outlook database, October 2023 update.

sector, and has one of the world's lowest government revenue-to-GDP ratios.<sup>136</sup> The government's debt office estimates the debt service-to-revenue ratio at 74% in 2023, and projects a rise to 105% in 2025.<sup>137</sup> Boosting tax generation is a stated aim of the Tinubu administration. As of 2022, around 48% of Nigeria's external debt was owed to multilateral lenders, led by the World Bank; roughly 37% to commercial lenders; and 12% to bilateral lenders, led by China's Ex-Im Bank.<sup>138</sup>

## U.S. Relations and Assistance

Successive U.S. Administrations have described the U.S.-Nigeria relationship as among the most important U.S. partnerships in Africa. Nigerian presidents are often among the first African heads of state to receive calls from new U.S. presidents. Secretaries of State under each Administration since President Clinton have visited Nigeria. Amid travel disruptions linked to COVID-19, Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited Nigeria virtually in his first official "trip" to Africa in early 2021, and in late 2021 visited the country in his first in-person trip to the region. During the latter visit, Blinken met with then-President Buhari to discuss cooperation in public health, economic growth, climate change, and security, among other issues, and signed a five-year aid agreement entailing U.S. development assistance commitments worth \$2.1 billion.<sup>139</sup>

Bilateral relations include the U.S.-Nigeria Binational Commission (BNC), a forum inaugurated in 2010 that features regular high-level diplomatic visits and discussion of a range of interests. The last BNC, held in 2020, focused on trade and investment, governance, security cooperation, and development. A U.S.-Nigeria Commercial and Investment Dialogue (CID), launched in 2017, convenes U.S. and Nigerian officials and private sector actors to foster commercial ties, initially focused on "infrastructure, agriculture, digital economy, investment, and regulatory reform."<sup>140</sup> The State Department maintains an embassy in Abuja and consulate in Lagos, and supports "American Corners" in libraries throughout Nigeria to share information on U.S. culture. People-to-people ties are extensive, underpinned by a large U.S.-based Nigerian diaspora (see **Text Box**).

### Nigerian Diaspora Communities in the United States

There are roughly 450,000 foreign-born Nigerians resident in the United States, according to U.S. Census Bureau data, making Nigerians the largest African-born population in the United States.<sup>141</sup> Top areas of residence include the Houston, New York, Dallas-Fort Worth, Atlanta, Washington, D.C., and Baltimore metropolitan areas. Foreign-born Nigerians are among the best-educated diaspora groups in the United States; over 60% hold a bachelor's degree or higher, and many are employed in professional occupations such as science, medicine, and education. Remittances from the United States are a source of income for many Nigerian households.

**Niger.** The Biden Administration has expressed support for President Tinubu's efforts, via ECOWAS, to support a restoration of constitutional order in Niger, while stopping short of backing Tinubu's call for a military option, instead emphasizing "a diplomatic path."<sup>142</sup> In July

<sup>136</sup> OECD, *Revenue Statistics in Africa*, 2021.

<sup>137</sup> Nigeria Debt Management Office (DMO), *2022 Report of the Annual National Market Access Country (MAC) Debt Sustainability Analysis (DSA)*, 2023.

<sup>138</sup> NBS, *Nigerian Domestic & Foreign Debt, Q4 2022*, 2023.

<sup>139</sup> U.S. Embassy and Consulate in Nigeria, "Secretary Blinken Remarks at the Signing Ceremony for \$2.1 Billion Development Assistance Agreement with Nigerian VP Osinbajo and Foreign Min. Onyeama," November 19, 2021.

<sup>140</sup> U.S. Embassy Abuja, "U.S. & Nigeria Agree to Commercial and Investment Dialogue," November 21, 2017.

<sup>141</sup> CRS tabulation of data from U.S. Census Bureau, 2022 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates, "Table B05006: Place of Birth for the Foreign-Born Population in the United States," accessed October 17, 2023.

<sup>142</sup> State Department, "Secretary Blinken's Call with Nigerian President Bola Tinubu," July 29, 2023; State Department press briefing, August 8, 2023.

2023, Vice President Harris and Secretary Blinken each called President Tinubu to discuss Niger; in September 2023, President Biden met with Tinubu on the sidelines of the G20 Summit to discuss Tinubu’s domestic economic reforms and ECOWAS efforts related to Niger.<sup>143</sup>

## U.S. Assistance

Nigeria often ranks among the top annual recipients of U.S. foreign aid globally. According to public budget materials, bilateral State Department- and USAID-administered nonemergency aid for Nigeria totaled \$627.7 million in allocations of FY2022 appropriations (see **Table 1**).

**Table 1. Non-Humanitarian U.S. Assistance for Nigeria, by Sector, FY2020-FY2024**

\$ thousands, current dollars, allocations by year of appropriation

Sector	FY2020 (act.)	FY2021 (act.)	FY2022 (act.)	FY2023 (req.)	FY2024 (req.)
Health	403,739	577,253	572,987	550,143	549,250
Economic Growth	19,249	21,200	23,400	27,601	32,601
Education and Social Services	15,500	14,100	14,000	14,000	10,000
Democracy, Rights, and Governance	9,256	10,696	10,900	13,456	25,500
Peace and Security	4,684	4,450	6,396	5,200	4,300
<b>Total</b>	<b>452,428</b>	<b>627,699</b>	<b>627,683</b>	<b>610,400</b>	<b>621,651</b>

**Source:** State Department, *Congressional Budget Justification FY2022-FY2024*.

**Notes:** Figures do not include Food for Peace (FFP) assistance.

Health assistance has regularly comprised roughly 90% of annual State Department and USAID-administered aid for Nigeria. HIV/AIDS assistance under the U.S. President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) has long constituted the largest share of annual health assistance for Nigeria (see **Text Box**). Other health funding supports efforts to counter malaria—Nigeria is a President’s Malaria Initiative (PMI) focus country—support maternal and child health, control tuberculosis, enhance water and sanitation services, and promote nutrition, among other aims.

### PEPFAR in Nigeria: Selected Issues

Nigeria is home to one of the world’s largest populations of people living with HIV, estimated at roughly 2 million people.<sup>144</sup> The country’s HIV/AIDS adult prevalence rate is 1.3%, lower than that of many African countries, but Nigeria has one of the highest rates of new infection in the region; an uneven distribution of cases and limited testing in a large population have raised challenges for detection and treatment. PEPFAR has committed nearly \$8 billion for Nigeria since 2003.<sup>145</sup> The United States has provided additional support for Nigeria’s campaign against HIV/AIDS via contributions to multilateral health agencies and initiatives such as the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria (Global Fund) and UNAIDS. Fostering local ownership of the HIV/AIDS response in Nigeria has been a challenge. PEPFAR and the Global Fund accounted for 67% and 15%, respectively, of funding for

<sup>143</sup> White House, “Readout of President Biden’s Engagement with Nigerian President Bola Tinubu.”

<sup>144</sup> Onovo et al., “Estimation of HIV prevalence and burden in Nigeria: a Bayesian predictive modelling study,” *The Lancet*, vol. 62 (August 2023).

<sup>145</sup> U.S. Embassy and Consulate in Nigeria, “PEPFAR: 20 Years of Impact,” January 28, 2023.

HIV/AIDS response in Nigeria in 2018 (latest data); the Nigerian government accounted for 17%.<sup>146</sup> Congress is considering whether, and with what possible changes, to reauthorize funding for PEPFAR.<sup>147</sup>

Support for agriculture-led economic growth has typically comprised the second-largest category of U.S. assistance for Nigeria, which is one of 20 focus countries under Feed the Future (FTF), an agricultural development initiative. U.S. democracy, human rights, and governance (DRG) aid for Nigeria has included funding to help strengthen political competition and democratic institutions (e.g., electoral bodies), support conflict prevention and resolution, and build the capacity of civil society. DRG programs also have helped strengthen local law enforcement and the justice sector. Nigeria receives additional assistance through regionally and centrally managed programs, which public budget materials do not disaggregate by country.

## Humanitarian Assistance

The United States is the largest donor to the humanitarian response in Nigeria, having provided over \$2.6 billion in bilateral food and non-food assistance since FY2015 (see **Table 2**). The majority of these funds have supported the humanitarian response in the northeast, though U.S. humanitarian assistance also has targeted other regions, including the northwest and Middle Belt.

**Table 2. Humanitarian Assistance for Nigeria, FY2015-FY2023**

\$ thousands, current dollars, obligations

	FY2015-2019	FY2020	FY2021	FY2022	FY2023 (to date)
USAID/NGA	50,836.4	-	-	-	-
USAID/FFP	710,816.3	-	-	-	-
USAID/OFDA	386,266.6	-	-	-	-
USAID/BHA	*	335,994.3	316,704.2	356,554.9	190,394.6
State/PRM	148,200.0	57,524.6	47,385.5	49,995.4	5,000.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,296,119.3</b>	<b>393,518.9</b>	<b>364,089.7</b>	<b>406,550.3</b>	<b>195,394.6</b>

**Source:** CRS calculations based on USAID humanitarian fact sheets on Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin, FY2015-FY2023.

**Notes:** NGA=Nigeria; FFP=Food for Peace; OFDA=Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance; BHA=Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (established in FY2020); PRM=Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration. FY2020 totals include COVID-19-related assistance categorized as humanitarian aid.

## Security Assistance and Cooperation

In 2021, the State Department reported that security cooperation with Nigeria funded through the Departments of State and Defense had totaled roughly \$650 million since 2017.<sup>148</sup> Nigerian purchases of U.S. defense articles and services through the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) program account for roughly \$500 million of this total (see below). Otherwise, State Department-managed security assistance for Nigeria has aimed to build counterterrorism capacity, enhance maritime security, and professionalize Nigeria's military, among other efforts. Law enforcement

<sup>146</sup> Federal Government of Nigeria, *National Aids Spending Assessment (NASA) for the Period 2015-2018: Level and Flow of Resources and Expenditures of the National HIV and AIDS Response*, 2019.

<sup>147</sup> See CRS Video WVB00632, *International HIV/AIDS Assistance: What next for PEPFAR?*

<sup>148</sup> State Department, "The United States and Nigeria: Strategic Partners," November 18, 2021.



capacity building has been another focus of State Department programming, which has helped to establish a specialized police unit to assume law enforcement duties in the northeast, and to improve responses to drug trafficking.<sup>149</sup> Nigeria is a partner under the State Department’s Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP), a regional counterterrorism program, and also has benefitted from U.S. support to the Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF) in the Lake Chad Basin. The Department of Defense (DOD) also has administered security assistance for Nigeria under its “global train and equip” authority (10 U.S.C. 333).

The maintenance of U.S. defense articles provided to Nigeria has been a concern. For instance, a 2021 DOD evaluation of maritime security cooperation in the Gulf of Guinea between 2007 and 2018 identified “a strong reliance on the United States to provide parts and maintenance services” on the part of Nigeria’s navy.<sup>150</sup> The study found that Nigerian authorities often failed to provide support infrastructure and supplies, such as fuel and internet, to sustain U.S.-provided materiel.

### *U.S. Military Sales and Transfers*

Nigeria has made two major purchases under FMS: 12 A-29 “Super Tucano” light attack aircraft and associated weapons and training (notified in 2017 at an initial value of \$593 million) and 12 AH-1Z Cobra attack helicopters and accompanying systems (notified in 2022 at a value of \$997 million).<sup>151</sup> The A-29 sale was the largest FMS sale in Africa to date, until the AH-1Z sale. As discussed below, both sales were initially held up due to U.S. human rights concerns. The A-29s were inducted into Nigeria’s Air Force in 2021; the AH-1Zs have not yet been delivered.

Other Nigerian FMS purchases have supported the refurbishment of Kainji Air Base to house the A-29s, as well as the acquisition of munitions and rocket propellants, unmanned aircraft, targeting systems, bomb equipment, and surveillance systems.<sup>152</sup> The United States has provided materiel to Nigeria under other programs, including two Coast Guard cutters and 24 armor-protected vehicles under the Excess Defense Articles (EDA) programs.<sup>153</sup>

### *Human Rights Concerns*

Abuses by Nigerian security forces have spurred concern among some Members of Congress, complicated U.S. security cooperation, and impeded sales of U.S. defense articles and services.<sup>154</sup> In 2014, the Obama Administration blocked the transfer of U.S.-origin attack helicopters from Israel to Nigeria amid “concerns about Nigeria’s ability to use and maintain this type of helicopter [ ... and] the Nigerian military’s protection of civilians when conducting military operations.”<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> State Department, “Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs: Nigeria Summary.”

<sup>150</sup> DOD, *U.S. Maritime Security Cooperation in the Gulf of Guinea (2007-2018): Strategic Evaluation*, 2021.

<sup>151</sup> Defense Security Cooperation Agency, “Government of Nigeria – A-29 Super Tucano Aircraft, Weapons, and Associated Support,” August 3, 2017, and “Nigeria – AH-1Z Attack Helicopter Related FMS Acquisitions,” April 14, 2022.

<sup>152</sup> On construction of the airfield, see DOD “Contracts for May 7, 2021”; on munitions, “Contracts For June 21, 2018,” “Contracts For Sept. 14, 2018,” “Contracts for Feb. 6, 2019,” and “Contracts for July 31, 2020”; on unmanned aircraft, “Contracts for May 8, 2020,” on targeting systems, “Contracts for Oct. 5, 2018” and “Contracts for Sept. 25, 2020; on bomb equipment, “Contracts for June 1, 2018,”; and on surveillance systems, “Contracts for Dec. 21, 2018.”

<sup>153</sup> State Department, “U.S. Security Cooperation with Nigeria,” April 14, 2022.

<sup>154</sup> On reported abuses, see annual State Department *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices*.

<sup>155</sup> State Department, “Daily Press Briefing - November 12, 2014,” November 12, 2014.

In response, Nigeria's ambassador to the United States criticized the United States' alleged refusal to sell "lethal equipment" to Nigeria, and Nigeria's military cancelled a planned U.S. training.<sup>156</sup>

As noted above, both the A-29 and AH-1Z acquisitions were temporarily held up due to human rights concerns. In 2017, the Obama Administration suspended consideration of the A-29 sale after a Nigerian jet bombed a displaced persons camp; the sale was later revived by the Trump Administration.<sup>157</sup> Some Members of Congress expressed opposition to the sale; none introduced or moved to force consideration of a joint resolution of disapproval.<sup>158</sup> In 2021, according to press accounts, Senate Foreign Relations Committee leadership reportedly placed an informal, pre-notification hold on the proposed AH-1Z sale.<sup>159</sup> The sale went forward in 2022.

More recently, in December 2022, Reuters alleged that Nigeria's military had conducted a secret mass abortion program in the northeast that had terminated the pregnancies of at least 10,000 women and girls since 2013, many of whom had been raped by extremists.<sup>160</sup> Some Members expressed alarm at the allegations; State Department and DOD spokespersons separately called for an investigation.<sup>161</sup> Nigerian military authorities initially refused to investigate, but later agreed to comply with a Nigerian government inquiry into abuses in the northeast, including the Reuters allegations. The status of that investigation is unclear. In the 118<sup>th</sup> Congress, a proposed amendment to a version of the National Defense Authorization Act for FY2024 (H.R. 2670) would have required the Secretary of State to report to Congress on efforts to urge accountability for civilian casualties and human rights abuses by Nigeria's armed forces. The amendment was not adopted for debate on the House floor.

U.S. "Leahy laws," which prohibit the provision of U.S. security assistance to security force units implicated in gross violations of human rights, have precluded some Nigerian military personnel from receiving certain types of U.S. security assistance.<sup>162</sup> Between 2015 and 2018, and again in 2020 and 2021, the State Department designated Nigeria under the Child Soldiers Prevention Act (CSPA, Title IV of P.L. 110-457) in connection with the use of child soldiers by state-backed militias battling Boko Haram and/or the use of children, generally in support roles, by Nigeria's military.<sup>163</sup> That designation can carry restrictions on U.S. security assistance, subject to a waiver; successive Administrations have fully waived the restrictions for Nigeria, citing the U.S. interest. In October 2021, President Biden waived all CSPA aid restrictions on Nigeria for FY2022.

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<sup>156</sup> Michelle Faul, "Nigerian ambassador blasts US refusal to sell arms," AP, November 11, 2014; U.S. Embassy Abuja, "U.S. Government Regrets Nigerian Cancellation of Military Training," December 1, 2014.

<sup>157</sup> Phil Stewart and Warren Strobel, "Exclusive: U.S. seeks to approve attack aircraft for Nigeria in Boko Haram fight," Reuters, May 6, 2016.

<sup>158</sup> Letter from Senators Cory Booker and Rand Paul to Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, June 8, 2017.

<sup>159</sup> Robbie Gramer, "U.S. Lawmakers Hold Up Major Proposed Arms Sale to Nigeria," *Foreign Policy*, July 27, 2021.

<sup>160</sup> Paul Carsten, Reade Levinson, David Lewis, and Libby George, "The Abortion Assault," Reuters, December 7, 2022; and Reade Levinson, "More women describe enduring forced abortions in Nigerian Army programme," Reuters, April 19, 2023.

<sup>161</sup> Reuters, "Reaction to Reuters report on Nigerian military abortion programme," December 12, 2022; David Lewis and Daphne Psaedakis, "Senator wants review of U.S. security assistance to Nigeria following abortion report," Reuters, December 20, 2022; Reuters, "Pentagon calls for investigation into Reuters report of Nigeria child killings," December 13, 2022; and State Department Press Briefing, December 13, 2022.

<sup>162</sup> See House Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations, *Human Rights Vetting: Nigeria and Beyond*, hearing, 114<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., July 10, 2014.

<sup>163</sup> See State Department, Trafficking in Persons reports for 2015-2018, 2020, and 2021; on the use of children by the CJTF and Nigerian military, see State Department human rights reports for 2015-2018 and 2020.

## Outlook and Issues for Congress

President Tinubu has received praise from some foreign audiences for his aggressive economic reforms and strong stance on the coup in neighboring Niger, but both efforts have been widely unpopular domestically. Having entered office with less than 40% of the popular vote, Tinubu's political capital may be limited, according to some analysts.<sup>164</sup> Whether, and with what concessions, he can marshal political buy-in for his agenda are key questions.

The Nigerian government's poor governance and human rights record has driven growing U.S. criticism and threatened to strain bilateral ties, notably with respect to security cooperation. At the same time, the U.S.-Nigerian defense partnership has deepened through continued military sales and U.S. training and equipment activities, and bilateral engagement has increased amid military takeovers elsewhere in West Africa. As Congress considers engagement with Nigeria, Members may possibly draw lessons from U.S. approaches to other countries where U.S. governance and human rights concerns have arguably conflicted with U.S. security interests.<sup>165</sup>

Nigeria's size, economic weight, and regional influence position it to play an important role in the context of U.S.-Africa policy, as the attainment of various U.S. security, development, and global health objectives in the region arguably hinges on the advancement of such goals in Nigeria. As it considers budgetary, policy, and oversight priorities, Members may assess U.S. priorities in Nigeria in the context of various regional objectives. These might include:

- Development and global health promotion, in view of Nigeria's high poverty rate and disease burden—which, by virtue of the country's demographic size, weigh heavily on broader poverty and health trends in Africa. Members may review past U.S. development and health investments in Nigeria, and assess whether U.S. assistance is sufficient and properly targeted to help address its needs.
- Expanding U.S.-Africa trade and investment, in light of Nigeria's arguably immense economic potential. Congress may review current U.S.-Nigeria commercial relations, and assess the barriers to greater cooperation. Among other dynamics, Members may examine the ongoing divestment from Nigeria's oil industry by U.S. firms, and debate how (if at all) to spur greater U.S. commercial interest in Nigeria.
- Strengthening democracy and promoting human rights, amid extensive governance challenges in Nigeria and democratic backsliding in the broader sub-region. Congress may debate what mix of tools might best help promote good governance in Nigeria and weigh the merits of increased engagement (e.g., expanding democracy, human rights, and governance assistance and anti-kleptocracy efforts) against signals of U.S. concern and punitive measures (e.g., aid restrictions, sanctions, and public criticism); and
- Global power competition in Africa, in the context of Nigeria's robust commercial and military relationship with China. Congress may weigh various approaches for advancing U.S. influence, such as by expanding bilateral cooperation (through increased diplomatic engagement, foreign assistance, or military sales), promoting U.S. commercial competitiveness, and drawing attention to malign practices by foreign actors.

How Congress balances these priorities, as well as other U.S. interests—such as enhancing peace and security, responding to humanitarian crises, and maintaining and advancing U.S. strategic

<sup>164</sup> Economist Intelligence Unit, *Nigeria: Country Report October 2023*, 2023.

<sup>165</sup> See, e.g., Thomas Carothers and Benjamin Press, *Navigating the Democracy-Security Dilemma in U.S. Foreign Policy: Lessons from Egypt, India, and Turkey*, CEIP, November 4, 2021.

access and influence—is likely to continue to shape U.S. engagement in Nigeria. Congress may continue to influence bilateral relations through its appropriation and oversight of U.S. assistance, consideration of U.S. military sales, and engagement (e.g., through hearings, statements, travel, and correspondence) on issues related to Nigeria and U.S.-Nigeria policy.

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