



Zongo, Nigeria (Michael Madukwe/Mercy Corps)

‘FEAR OF THE UNKNOWN’

Religion, Identity, and Conflict in Northern Nigeria

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Intercommunal conflict in northern Nigeria has killed thousands of people, displaced countless others, and wreaked havoc on local markets and livelihoods. These conflicts are animated by multiple overlapping cleavages related to identity – including ethnicity and religion – and livelihood activities, namely farming and pastoralism. In recent years, clashes in the region have become increasingly violent and their possible religious dimensions have garnered greater attention. Religious tensions in the north have existed for decades. Yet some policymakers and journalists suggest that the recent uptick in intercommunal violence is religiously motivated, and that it amounts to a deadly campaign of persecution against Christians in the Muslim-majority north. Others have de-emphasized religion and characterize these conflicts as a consequence of increased banditry and growing resource competition between mostly Muslim herders and Christian farmers.

Addressing violence in northern Nigeria requires a nuanced understanding of its underlying drivers and the role of identity, including religion. This study explores the dynamics of, and motivations for, violent conflict in the region, with a particular focus on unpacking the influence of religious actors, beliefs, and identities. We combine an analysis of violent events data from North West and North Central Nigeria with field research conducted in Kaduna and Kano states. Our field research had two phases. The first phase used 165 in-

depth interviews with key informants and local community members to capture qualitative insights into conflict dynamics, processes, and pathways to violence. The second phase used a survey of 750 residents in 15 communities to quantitatively evaluate the factors associated with individuals' support for, and willingness to participate in, political and religious violence. Our findings underscore the complex, multi-faceted nature of violence in the region and challenge emerging narratives regarding the role of religious motivations and the centrality of religious persecution. They also have important implications for government and donor-led efforts to prevent conflict and forge peace in Nigeria.

Key Findings

Only some violence in northern Nigeria has been inter-religious in nature, and Muslims and Christians have been both perpetrators *and* victims.

Conflict data from multiple sources – including ACLED, the Council on Foreign Relations, and Nigeria Watch – indicate that from 2011 to 2020, violence coded as inter-religious made up a fraction of conflict events in the region. Only nine percent of attacks explicitly targeted or were carried out by religious groups, and only 10 percent of fatalities were ascribed to conflicts over a religious issue. Since 2016, deaths from conflicts over religious issues have waned relative to the number of people killed by criminal violence and conflicts over land and cattle grazing. While deaths from inter-religious violence increased in 2020, they still paled in comparison to those caused by crime and resource conflicts. These trends were confirmed in interviews and surveys. Equally important, inter-religious violence has been perpetrated by, and on, both Muslims *and* Christians. Christians appear to have suffered more attacks on average, and likely as a result, they were more likely to report feeling victimized. Yet a majority of Muslim and Christian respondents said that members of both faiths are responsible for violence in their area, as opposed to pinning blame solely on one side.

Violence that falls along religious lines is often driven by other issues.

We find that the more religious people are, the *less* likely they are to support or engage in violence, and the more likely they are to express pro-peace attitudes. In a survey experiment, we also find that identifying the perpetrator of a hypothetical transgression as a religious out-group member has no effect on respondents' support for more severe forms of retaliation. These results question the notion that intergroup conflict in northern Nigeria is a product of religious discrimination or a clash of religious civilizations. Moreover, there is little evidence that a lack of religious freedom leads people to embrace violence. Rather than religious belief or animus, **we find that intercommunal violence is largely driven by insecurity and a lack of trust between ethno-religious groups competing for political power and control over natural resources.** As these groups contend for access to land and water – which have become increasingly scarce due to climate change and shifts in agro-pastoralist markets – the Nigerian state has not sufficiently arbitrated between them or taken adequate steps to ensure their protection. This has amplified fear and uncertainty and prompted communities to form militias for self-defense, giving rise to security dilemmas, problems of credible commitment, and information failures. Low social trust has exacerbated these strategic dilemmas and heightened the risk of intergroup conflict. As one community leader we spoke with pithily put it, “a major cause of conflict...is **fear of the unknown.**” In our survey, an increase in perceived insecurity corresponds with a 25 to 35 percent increase in respondents' support for the use of violence and their willingness to engage in it. Meanwhile, a *decrease* in social cohesion, including intergroup trust, is associated with a 43 to 60 percent increase in respondents' willingness to endorse violence (Figure 1).

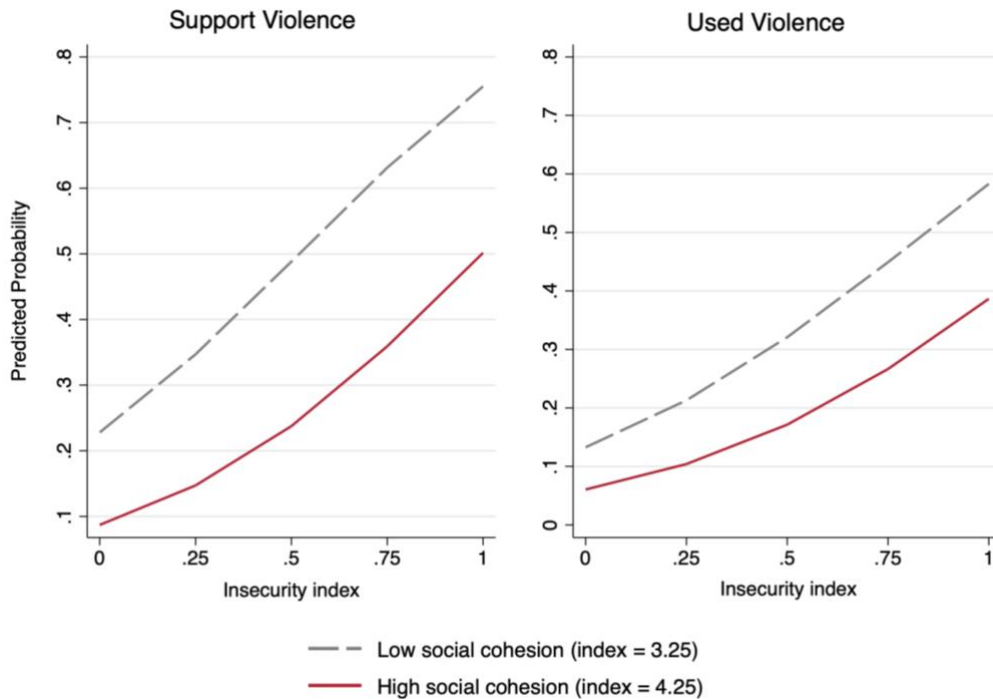


FIGURE 1 | PREDICTED PROBABILITY OF INSECURITY AND SOCIAL COHESION.¹

Religion in northern Nigeria provides opportunity and motivation for specific actors to mobilize violence in pursuit of political, economic, or personal objectives.

While we do not find that religion is a key driver of conflict in Nigeria, two features of it provide opportunities for violence. The first is its diversity: Muslims and Christians each constitute roughly half of the country’s population. The second is the overlap between religious and other identities – including ethnicity, livelihoods practices (farmer-herder), and *indigene* (indigenous) status, which provides preferential access to government jobs and land ownership. Since religious differences are reinforced by other parallel differences, it intensifies divisions between groups and allows tensions in one identity dimension to spill over into another. Yet these divisions do not automatically lead to conflict. We found that certain individuals instrumentalize and manipulate these divisions for their own gain. By seizing on fear, uncertainty, and intergroup mistrust, both elites and members of the mass public are able to motivate and mobilize violence. **Political and religious leaders intentionally politicize or enhance the salience of religious identity to spur people to action, while members of the mass public make solidarity claims to co-ethnics or co-religionists to garner support in a quarrel.** These mobilization tactics often transform disputes that are fundamentally political, interpersonal, or criminal into ethno-religious conflict. Elites are particularly prone to activating group identities around elections, which create windows of vulnerability by raising the potential for shifts in power between groups. It is no coincidence, then, that some of the most intense inter-religious violence in northern Nigeria has occurred during elections and political transitions. As one person in Kano told us, “some people just wrap a dispute around religion so they can gain more support, and if you approach the issue with an open mind, most times you will see that what causes the problem has nothing to do with religion at all.”

¹ This figure shows the mean predicted probabilities for indices of insecurity and social cohesion on support for, and willingness to use, violence, based on logistic regression. The relationships depicted are highly statistically significant ($p < 0.01$).

Religious leaders are both spoilers of peace and custodians of it.

Religious leaders play a dual role in intercommunal conflict. On the one hand, both Muslim and Christian leaders have stoked interfaith tensions and inspired violence by engaging in hate speech, fanning fears of other groups, and politicizing religion. Among people we surveyed, those who report that their religious leaders make political sermons are much more likely to endorse violence. On the other hand, they have led conflict mediation and dispute resolution initiatives within and between religious communities. For example, those who say that religious leaders help resolve disputes in their area are significantly *less* likely to support, or say they are willing to use, violence. This finding holds no matter how often people say that religious leaders are actually successful in resolving disputes. Critically, we do not find a similar relationship between attitudes towards violence and the involvement of other key actors in dispute resolution – including traditional leaders, civil society organizations, and local government officials.

Recommendations

Frame identity as a mobilizer of conflict, not a cause. Characterizing intercommunal conflict in northern Nigeria as primarily religiously motivated or the product of discrimination between Muslims and Christians masks the complex nature of conflict in the region and its core underlying causes, which are rooted in governance and security failures, resource constraints, and a lack of social cohesion. Productive approaches to peacebuilding must focus on these issues. An overemphasis on religion or other aspects of identity risks diverting attention away from these core conflict drivers and could ultimately make the situation worse. If certain groups are seen as privileged, or certain perpetrators or victims are singled out, it will only reify group divisions, amplify feelings of persecution, and encourage communities to interpret issues of peace and security through a narrowly religious or ethnic lens. This could directly undermine efforts to improve intergroup relations and promote peace.

Reduce fear and uncertainty by addressing governance failures. Insecurity in northern Nigeria is largely a consequence of inadequate and unresponsive governance. In order to ease communities' fears and provide much-needed security guarantees that can reduce the incentives for violence in the region, local and national authorities need to undertake several measures. First, they should institute power-sharing arrangements and other inclusive governance processes that ensure the active involvement of different ethno-religious groups and aim to give each group meaningful representation. Second, they should promote and facilitate the sharing of natural resources, especially land, by providing designated grazing areas for herders, supporting community-led mechanisms for mediating land disputes, and ensuring the clear and consistent application of indigene laws. Third, they should focus on improving security by increasing the reach and effectiveness of state security forces (while ensuring they adhere to human rights standards); by professionalizing vigilante groups; and by supporting community policing and the development of early warning and early response systems. Finally, they should ensure that perpetrators of violence and criminality are held responsible in a transparent and impartial manner, without political, religious, or ethnic favoritism. Justice and accountability are essential for deterring further violence.

Forge intergroup trust. We found that respondents who reported more frequent interactions with other ethno-religious groups – and especially those who reported more *positive* interactions – were significantly less likely to express support for violence or a willingness to engage in it. Greater and more positive out-group interactions were also associated with less discriminatory attitudes towards members of other ethnicities and religions. Constructive intergroup contact is crucial for reducing fear of the other and building trust across communities. Mercy Corps' programming in northern Nigeria has demonstrated that people-to-people activities that facilitate close cooperation between conflicting groups through joint community

development projects, natural resource management, and violence prevention planning can have a positive, measurable effect on social cohesion and perceptions of security.² These types of initiatives should be scaled up in order to ameliorate a key driver – and consequence – of conflict in the region.

Identify and elevate religious peacemakers. This study indicates that incorporating religious leaders into conflict management can positively influence people’s attitudes regardless of their effectiveness. But it also cautions against enlisting leaders who are keen to undermine, rather than encourage, peace between different groups. Given the critical role religious leaders play in local peace and conflict dynamics, initiatives aimed at improving intergroup relations should target them as “key people,” in addition to targeting members of their communities. Programs should engage in actor mapping to understand the role of local clerics in political and social mobilization and enlist those who have served as peacemakers as partners in conflict prevention and mitigation, while being wary of spoilers. Increasing the peacebuilding capacity of these leaders must continue to be a donor priority in northern Nigeria.³

Combat misinformation to stem conflict spillovers. The expansion of information and communications technology in Nigeria – from mobile phones to social media – has been a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it has galvanized civil society by providing easily accessible tools for increased dialogue and peaceful mobilization, and given youth in particular a platform to air their grievances and organize collective action. On the other hand, it has enabled the rapid spread of misinformation and disinformation, which has helped facilitate the spread of conflict in two ways: through *issue* spillover (a dispute over a personal issue becomes intercommunal) and *geography* spillover (rumors enable violence in one area to incite violence elsewhere). Donors and practitioners must work with government and civil society actors to arrest these processes, particularly in the wake of intercommunal clashes or during windows of risk, such as elections. Interventions should include resource media and information literacy education; community-level rumor and myth tracking; and supporting interfaith groups, traditional media, and social media activists in countering false narratives in real time. Given that dis/misinformation often spreads online and offline, initiatives aimed at combating social media harms must encompass both online activists and their offline counterparts.



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² Dawop et al. 2019; Mercy Corps 2017.

³ Mercy Corps 2016.

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