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OPINION

Opinion

US air strikes won't fix Nigeria's security crisis but could make it worse

An attack on local armed groups does not address the root cause of violence; it could, however, drive polarisation.



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Police barricade the site of the US strike in Jabo, Sokoto State, northwestern Nigeria on December 26, 2025 [Qosim Suleiman/Al Jazeera]

The recent [strikes](#) by the United States on alleged ISIL (ISIS) targets in northwest Nigeria have been presented in Washington as a decisive counter-terror response. For the supporters of the administration of US President Donald Trump, the unprecedented operation signalled his country's renewed resolve in confronting terrorism. It is also making good on Trump's pledge to take action

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The first problem with the strikes is their lack of strategic logic. The initial strikes were launched in Sokoto in northwest Nigeria, a region that has experienced intense turmoil over the past decade. But this violence is not primarily driven by an ideological insurgency linked to ISIL, and no known ISIL-linked groups are operating in the region. Instead, security concerns in this region are rooted in [banditry](#), the collapse of rural economies, and competition for land. Armed groups here are fragmented and motivated largely by profit.

The Christmas Day strikes [appear](#) to have focused on a relatively new ideological armed group called Lakurawa, though its profile and any connection to ISIL are yet to be fully established.

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The ideological armed groups with the strongest presence in northern Nigeria are Boko Haram and the ISIL-affiliate in West Africa Province (ISWAP). The centre of these groups' activity remains hundreds of kilometres from Sokoto, in the northeast of Nigeria – the states of Borno, Yobe and Adamawa – where insurgency has a long history. This begs the question: Why strike the northwest first? The logic is unclear.

Equally concerning is the uncertainty surrounding casualties. So far, we have no authoritative figures. Some social media accounts claim there were no human casualties, suggesting the bombs fell on empty targets. Security analyst Brant Philip posted on his social media platform X: “According to a private source familiar with the US operation against the Islamic State in Nigeria, several strikes were launched, but most of the individuals and groups targeted were missed, and the actual damage inflicted remains mostly unknown.”

Nigerian news platform Arise TV reported on X that locals confirmed the incident caused widespread panic; according to its correspondent, at least one of the attacks happened in a district that had not suffered from violence before. They also noted that the full impact of the attack, including whether there were civilian casualties, is yet to be determined.

Other social media accounts have circulated images alleging civilian casualties, though these claims remain unverified. In a context where information warfare operates alongside armed

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suspicion, and giving hardline propagandists fertile ground to exploit. Rather than weakening alleged ISIL influence, the strikes could inadvertently energise recruitment and amplify grievance narratives.

If air strikes cannot solve Nigeria's security crisis, what can?

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them with security and basic services. In the northeast, where Boko Haram emerged, years of government neglect, heavy-handed security tactics, and economic exclusion created fertile ground for insurgency.

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The most sustainable security response must therefore be multi-layered. It requires investment in community-based policing, dialogue, and pathways for deradicalisation. It demands a state presence that protects rather than punishes. It means prioritising intelligence gathering, strengthening local authorities, and restoring trust between citizens and government institutions.

The US strikes may generate headlines and satisfy a domestic audience, but on the ground in Nigeria, they risk doing little more than empowering hardline messaging and deepening resentment.

Nigerians do not need the US to bomb their country into security and stability. They need autochthonous reform: Localised long-term support to rebuild trust, restore livelihoods, and strengthen state institutions. Anything less is a distraction.

***The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al***

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