

NIGERIA

The Dynamics Behind Trump's Decision to Bomb ISIS in Nigeria

Facing the Sahel's growing terrorism threat, the Trump administration could discover that its avoidance of "long-term American presence or commitments" in Africa is impracticable.



Nigeria police, Anti-Bomb squad, secure the scene of a U.S. airstrike in Northwest, Jabo, Nigeria, Friday on December 26, 2025. Tunde Omolehin/Associated Press



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EXPERTS

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President Donald Trump announced on Christmas Day that the United States had struck Islamic State militants in northwest Nigeria. The president had accused the group of persecuting and killing Nigerian Christians in the country.

U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) and Nigerian officials confirmed the strikes in Sokoto, a Nigerian Muslim-majority state of four million people that borders Niger. Nigerian Information Minister Mohammed Idris said that sixteen precision strikes were conducted in coordination with the United States using guided missiles launched from Reaper drones. The minister noted that the attack was carried out with the “full involvement of the Armed Forces of Nigeria” and with “explicit approval” from Nigerian President Bola Ahmed Tinubu.

AFRICOM said that “multiple ISIS terrorists were killed in the ISIS camps” that were targeted in the strikes. Nigerian officials characterized the attack as “successful.”

The strikes follow increased tensions between Washington and Abuja, but it could be an indication that the U.S.-Nigeria security and diplomatic relationship continues to evolve. It could also have implications for the United States and Africa as countries attempt to address the threat of terrorism in the

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WHY DID THE UNITED STATES LAUNCH THE AIRSTRIKES?

The airstrikes were in response to what Trump described in a Truth Social post as Islamist terrorist attacks that “primarily” targeted “innocent Christian” communities across the northern and Middle Belt regions of Nigeria. Reportedly launched from vessels in the Gulf of Guinea, the drone strikes on suspected terrorist camps by Lakurawa—the armed group affiliated with the Islamic State operating in the Sahel—in the northwestern corridor of the country came after a tense few weeks between the United States and Nigeria. It started off with threats by Trump to go into Nigeria “guns-a-blazing” if the Nigerian authorities did nothing to curb “the slaughtering of Christians” “at levels not seen for many years” by various Islamist groups.

Nigerian authorities have said that the strikes were carried out with their explicit approval—and using intelligence provided by them. According to media reports, U.S. planes had undertaken intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance operations in the region in early December. In an official statement, the Nigerian Ministry of Foreign Affairs later confirmed that it was “structured security cooperation” with various “international partners, including the United States of America,” that “led to

precision hits on terrorist targets in Nigeria by airstrikes in the North West.”

The immediate military impact of the strikes is difficult to gauge, however, beyond the militants who AFRICOM said were killed. Trump told reporters that the United States had successfully “decimated” terrorist camps. Debris from the strikes has been sighted in Jabo, a farming community in the Tambuwal Local Government Area located about fifty-eight kilometers south of the Sokoto state capital, and in Offa in the southeastern part of Kwara state. Both U.S. and Nigerian authorities have said that there were no civilian casualties. Residents of communities near the strike locations have reported seeing suspected terrorists take flight following the attacks on their hideouts.

NIGERIA'S DOMESTIC RESPONSE TO THE ATTACKS

Nigerians have largely welcomed the attacks as a long overdue response to decades of terrorism by sundry Islamist groups and the country's deteriorating security situation more broadly. John Joseph Hayab, secretary general of the Christian Association of Nigeria, Kaduna state office, welcomed “any help that is toward bringing to an end the persistent killings by bandits and terrorists.” Auxiliary Bishop of Maiduguri John Bogna Bakani called the military strikes “long overdue” and commended the Tinubu government's openness to “international assistance in the face of overwhelming insecurity.”

This Day, one of the country's leading dailies, published an editorial that described the strikes on terrorist targets as “a bold undertaking with many positive meanings” and welcomed it as “a fitting but long overdue diplomatic signal to all terrorism merchants, sponsors, and foot soldiers in Nigeria that their days are numbered.” Welcoming the military strikes as “timely and effective,” former Senate Leader Ali Ndume called for their

West Africa Province and Boko Haram” in the country’s North East region.

Others have sounded a note of caution. Although he welcomes the collaboration between Nigerian and U.S. forces, former Sokoto state Governor Aminu Tambuwal urged the Nigerian authorities to be leery of any “hidden agenda” in the U.S. pursuit of “the fight against terrorism.” Conservative Islamic cleric Sheikh Ahmad Gumi described the attacks as “potentially polarizing and detrimental to (Nigerian) national sovereignty.” Although he accepted the necessity of the strikes, Gumi said he preferred that such action be undertaken by “neutral” countries such as China, Pakistan, and Turkey. The cleric demanded that Nigeria “halt all military cooperation with the United States immediately because of its imperial tendencies and seek the help of those neutral countries mentioned.”

Significantly, the Sultan of Sokoto and putative spiritual leader of Nigerian Muslims, Muhammadu Sa’ad Abubakar III, has issued no official statement.

THE U.S.-NIGERIA SECURITY AND DIPLOMATIC COLLABORATION

Despite the tension of the past few weeks—ostensibly triggered by President Trump’s unflattering portrayal of Nigeria and subsequent threat to undertake unilateral military action in the country—relations between the two countries remain, by and large, equitable. Military action against suspected terrorists that was conducted with full Nigerian support signals that both Washington and Abuja are on the same page as far as the threat posed by violent Islamist terrorism is concerned.

The two countries appear to have attempted to work through the disagreements that have surfaced in recent weeks.

Following Trump’s threat last month of unilateral military action, a high-powered Nigerian delegation ()ational

Security Adviser Nuhu Ribadu traveled to Washington, where it met with several senior U.S. government officials, including U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth. At the same time, at least one U.S. delegation has visited Abuja, the Nigerian Federal Capital Territory, on a fact-finding mission regarding the alleged persecution of Christians.

Nigerian Foreign Minister Yusuf Tuggar has described the airstrikes as “a new phase of an old conflict,” adding that, from the perspective of the Nigerian authorities, “it is something that is ongoing.” If that is the case, diplomatic furor over how to respond to the threat of jihadist violence could end up being yet another chapter in a checkered but historically stable relationship.

How that aligns with the White House's priorities remains to be seen. U.S. relations with Africa under the Trump administration have been dictated by an “America First” approach whereby, for the most part, Washington has placed economic interest and person-to-person negotiations over and above longstanding diplomatic principles and protocols. In August, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio directed the State Department to refrain from commenting on the “fairness or integrity” of most elections. The administration's National Security Strategy (NSS) reiterates its determination to avoid “any long-term American presence or commitments” in Africa.


The administration could find that this strategy to avoid a long-term U.S. presence in the region is impracticable, however. The profusion and growing strength of Islamist groups across the Sahel will be difficult to avoid, and eradicating Islamist terrorism will most certainly require more than targeted airstrikes. The NSS is guided also by wariness of “resurgent Islamist terrorist activity in parts of Africa,” and military action against jihadist bases in Nigeria furthers U.S. security objectives in the region.

There is reason to believe that the Christmas Day airstrikes are the first of many. Following the attacks, the Nigerian Ministry of Foreign Affairs promised to continue to work closely “with its partners... to weaken terrorist networks, disrupt their financing and logistics, and prevent cross-border threats, while strengthening Nigeria’s own security institutions and intelligence capabilities.” Hgeseth has signaled that there is “more to come.” The Nigerian authorities seem to have realized that the Trump administration’s interest in the plight of Nigerian Christians is durable.

Given the historical prevalence of Boko Haram attacks in the northeastern part of the country, it is not unlikely that the next round of airstrikes would target suspected terrorists and bases in that region. Demonstrable success against the insurgency will be a political booster for the Tinubu administration as the country prepares for nationwide elections in 2027; on the contrary, failure and continued Islamist attacks will increase political pressure to reduce insecurity and show proof that the collaboration with Washington is worth it.

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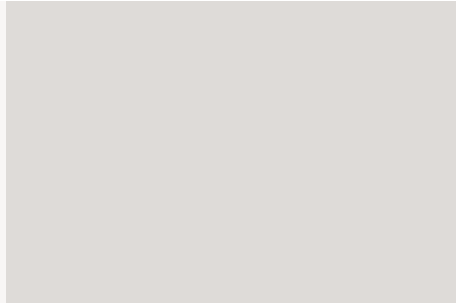
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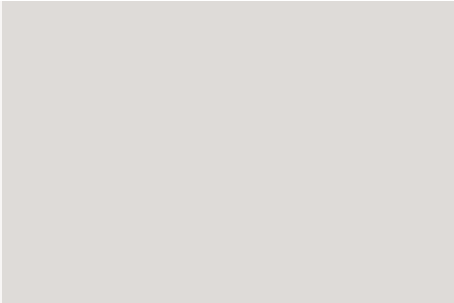
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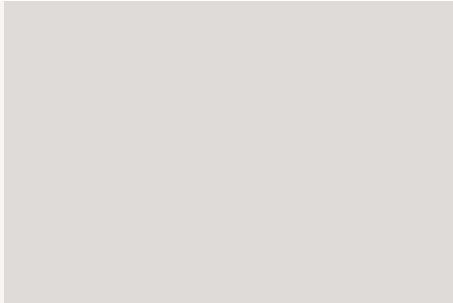
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