

Why Did the United States Conduct Strikes in Nigeria?



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On December 25, 2025, the United States struck two apparent Islamic State camps in northwest Nigeria with Tomahawk missiles. U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) announced that it struck “ISIS terrorists in Nigeria” in collaboration with the Nigerian government.

Q1: Who did the strikes target?

A1: President Trump stated that the attack targeted Islamic State militants in Nigeria's Sokoto state. President Trump was almost certainly referring to the Islamic State-Sahel Province (ISSP) or Lakurawa, a local group with increasing ties to the Islamic State.

ISSP is an Islamic State group active in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Nigeria. The group grew in strength in 2025 and now commands more fighters, controls more territory, and conducts deadlier attacks than it ever has before. Much of ISSP's recent gains have come in Niger and Nigeria, where it has increased coordination with other terrorist groups and established an operational presence.

Much of ISSP's progress in Nigeria over the past year can be attributed to the emerging terrorist group Lakurawa, a local group that has pledged allegiance to ISSP but remains largely independent. As it has expanded its foothold, Lakurawa has built its own forms of local governance and brutally cracked down on those who do not comply with its religious rules.

Q2: Why did the Trump administration target these groups?

A2: President Trump publicly linked the strike to alleged systematic killings of Christians in Nigeria, although Nigerian officials and some analysts have pushed back against U.S. government claims that jihadist groups target Christians specifically, emphasizing that these terrorists target all faiths. U.S. AFRICOM Commander General Dagvin Anderson also stated that the military's goal was to "protect Americans and disrupt violent extremist organizations where they are." Justifying strikes against Salafi-jihadist groups in Africa based on the threat they pose to the United States is increasingly common for the Trump administration. AFRICOM repeatedly cited the threat from terrorist organizations as a justification for air strikes in Somalia in 2025, for example.

A number of overlapping conflicts in Nigeria have led to the deaths of Christians in the country. Competition between majority-Christian farmers and primarily Muslim herders over scarce resources has resulted in massacres. Salafi-jihadist groups have also specifically targeted Christians, but their infiltration into northwest Nigeria is

relatively recent and accounts for less of the region's violence than farmer-herder conflict and banditry.

Nor have Muslims escaped the killing. The region's Salafi-jihadists conduct indiscriminate violence and target Muslims who reject their extreme interpretation of Islam. In August 2025, gunmen massacred at least 13 people at a mosque during a series of attacks in northwest Nigeria. The day before the U.S. strikes, a suicide bomber struck a mosque in the northeastern city of Maiduguri, killing at least five and injuring dozens more.

The threat that the Sahel's Salafi-jihadist groups pose to the United States is uncertain. Experts have repeatedly noted a lack of evidence that the Sahel's Salafi-jihadist groups have the interest or ability to attack the U.S. homeland. The Defense Intelligence Agency assessed in 2025 that Islamic State and Al Qaeda affiliates in Africa "focus on plotting attacks locally," although it also noted that some affiliates would probably "advance" plotting elsewhere in 2025. Even so, there is little doubt that the region's Salafi-jihadist groups threaten regional stability and U.S. facilities in their areas of operation.

The violence in Nigeria is part of a broader, Sahel-wide crisis. West Africa's terrorist groups are currently the world's most active and increasingly threaten regional governments. In 2025, ISSP conducted a record number of large-scale attacks across the Sahel, moving with freedom across the Mali-Niger border. In 2025, ISSP concentrated its areas of operation in southern Niger for the first time, carrying out nearly twice as many attacks in Niger in 2025 than all of 2024. The group also claimed its first attack in the Dosso region and drew closer to Niamey, Niger's capital.

The violence has also contributed to greater political instability and Russian influence in the region. Increasing insecurity has delegitimized many of the region's governments and opened the door to coups d'état, while Russia has sold itself as an alternative to Western partners.

The ascendance of West Africa's Salafi-jihadist groups represents a longer-term threat to the United States, no matter their current focus. Intentions are often more opaque and mutable than capabilities, meaning that the ascendance of Africa's terrorist

organizations should be concerning even if they do not currently seem particularly interested in directly attacking U.S. interests. AFRICOM also assessed that “if ISIS and al-Qaeda groups continue their expansion, they will pose a direct threat to the U.S. homeland.” Finally, Islamic State ideology remains appealing to terrorists across the world and continues to inspire attacks like those perpetrated last New Years in New Orleans and this December in Sydney.

Q3: How will these strikes affect the organizations they targeted?

A3: Isolated strikes like the ones carried out by the United States last night are unlikely to significantly reduce the terrorist threat in the region or reverse Nigeria’s growing insecurity. Despite the chairman of a local government in Sokoto State stating that U.S. strikes likely killed fighters, the killings will provide at most a temporary setback.

The losses from the U.S. attacks last night will only represent a small fraction of ISSP and Lakurawa resources. According to UN estimates, ISSP has between 2,000 and 3,000 fighters and operates across an area covering many hundreds of miles. Lakurawa is much smaller, commanding only about 200 fighters, but it will probably be able to recruit replacements for any members killed. The deaths of a few operatives will do nothing to reverse the gains both groups have made over the past few years. The administration may be counting on the threat of further strikes to deter these groups from further activity in Nigeria, but deterring terrorist groups through punishment strategies is a highly uncertain endeavor. The Trump administration will probably have to conduct many more strikes if it is to establish a credible deterrent.

Q4: What will happen next?

A4: Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth wrote after the attack that there was “More to come” but did not elaborate. It is possible that the United States is considering increasing its long-range strikes against terrorist groups in Nigeria, as it has in Somalia. The United States could also consider more multidimensional support like military training and development aid that targets the conflict’s varied, complex drivers. However, reversing increases in northern Nigeria’s insecurity will be extremely difficult.

Furthermore, Nigeria's terrorist threat is not isolated to Lakurawa or ISSP, so any successful counterterrorism operation would require a broader scope to eliminate the jihadist threat in the country. In the past three years, the Nigerian military has been spread thin fighting breakoffs of Boko Haram, the Islamic State - West Africa Province (ISWAP), and Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JAS), which have operated primarily in the northeastern Lake Chad region of Nigeria but have also expanded their areas of operation into central and western Nigeria. Lakurawa and ISSP are relatively nascent threats in Nigeria compared with ISWAP and JAS, which have been entrenched in the country for years.

A sustained campaign of counterterrorist strikes could weaken the Salafi-jihadist groups in Nigeria, but the time required would be long and the prospects for success uncertain at best. Degrading terrorist groups through air campaigns is possible, but it takes a long time and is more likely to cause the collapse of new groups rather than more established organizations like ISSP. In addition, ISSP can take advantage of its relative safe havens in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, where the United States lacks a significant military presence following a series of coups d'état and the expulsion of UN and French forces over the past five years. The best-case scenario absent larger political changes across the Sahel is therefore a shift of Salafi-jihadist violence from Nigeria to other regional states.

Salafi-jihadists are only one driver of violence in northern Nigeria. Even if a U.S.-enabled military campaign could degrade them so that they no longer pose a threat within Nigeria, farmer-herder conflicts would persist. A more comprehensive approach including military, legal, and development measures that addresses the root causes of violence, especially the increasing scarcity of land that can support both groups, would stand a better chance of improving security in the country's north and decreasing support for militant groups. It would also smack of the type of nation-building that President Trump has so vehemently rejected and would be extremely costly, difficult, and uncertain.

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