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**Testimony by Oge Onubogu, Director, Africa Program, Wilson Center**

**U.S. House of Representatives – Foreign Affairs Committee Subcommittee on Africa**

**“The Future of Freedom in Nigeria”**

Wednesday February 14, 2024, at 2:00 PM

Rayburn House Office Building 220

Chairman James, Ranking Member Jacobs, distinguished Committee members, I very much appreciate this opportunity to discuss the Future of Freedom in Nigeria and U.S policy towards Nigeria.

I serve as Director of the Africa Program at the Wilson Center, although the views expressed here are my own. I have nearly two decades of experience working on peace, security, and governance issues in Africa, including my previous almost eight years leading the Nigeria and West Africa programs at the United States Institute of Peace.

For over 20 years, the Wilson Center Africa program has actively worked to address the most critical issues facing Africa and U.S.-Africa relations, with the aim of helping to build mutually beneficial relations between the United States and the continent and enhancing knowledge and understanding about Africa in the United States.

Today’s hearing is especially timely, as this month Nigeria marks one year since the country’s 2023 elections. Furthermore, as Nigeria takes over the chairmanship of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the country’s leaders understandably expect to lead regional coordination efforts, given Nigeria’s size, its political and economic influence, and its decision-making power within the bloc. Good leadership at ECOWAS will be crucial amid the series of coups and other anti-democratic upheavals that have beset the subregion in recent years. But whether and how Nigeria tackles its own governance and security challenges at home will set the pace not only at home, but also in its near-abroad.

I noted the danger to Nigeria’s stability in 2021 in an [article](#) published by Punch, one of the country’s most widely read newspapers:

“Nigeria, Africa’s demographic giant, is shuddering with its most dangerous instability in 50 years: insurgencies, uncontrolled criminality, and constrictions of freedom of expression. Nigeria is failing to fulfill basic tasks of a nation-state, and its partners need to halt “business as usual” to open an honest dialogue about the current failings. For the United States, this means dropping some old practices in the way America engages Nigerians. U.S. engagements must center more on Nigeria’s citizenry, notably the 70 percent who are younger than 35, and with Nigeria’s 36 disparate states and rapidly expanding cities.”



Unfortunately, Nigeria's internal struggles continue to worsen, even prompting internal debate about whether the country already qualifies as a "failed state." What is clear is that Nigeria's instability is rooted in a vital shortcoming: After 63 years of independence, the country still struggles to cultivate a national identity rooted in basic freedoms and dignity for its people.

The evidence is in Nigeria's perennial upheavals, as in the shocking attack during the Christmas weekend, when armed individuals invaded communities in Plateau State in the Middle Belt, killing an estimated 200 villagers and forcing tens of thousands to flee. Such attacks have plagued Plateau State for more than 20 years.

I visited the city of Jos in Plateau State the week of December 18. Having grown up there -- though my family is from southern Nigeria -- I consider myself what they would call an "original Jos girl," and it was wonderful to see people in good spirits, preparing for the Christmas holiday. So, it is doubly difficult for me to think of how that joy was shattered when those communities were attacked.

It is important to understand the nature of the violence in Nigeria -- and its causes, which extend beyond the religious or ethnic overtones that *appear* to spur that animosity. In actuality, religious and ethnic violence is a symptom, and the hate speech and [conspiracy theories](#) that often drive it are throwing fuel on a fire long ignited by Nigerians' frustration over what essentially are failures of governance.

Nigerian [civil society groups](#) that have documented violence in the country reported at the end of January that 2,423 people had been killed and 1,872 abducted in the eight months since President Bola Tinubu took office on May 29, 2023. And they noted that the pattern was a continuation from previous administrations -- 24,816 Nigerians were killed and 15,597 abducted in the five years that his predecessor, Muhammadu Buhari, was in office between 2019 and 2023. Just during one month between Dec. 1, 2023, and Jan. 3, 2024, more than [380 people were kidnapped in Nigeria](#).

Whether labeled as "banditry" or "terrorism" or "communal clashes" or "ethno-religious conflict," at the root of this violence is a failure of governance to meet the population's most basic needs -- not only livelihoods, education, and health care, but also their [need for perpetrators to be held legitimately accountable](#).

Although Nigeria's constitution and other binding documents formally guarantee basic freedoms and dignity, the government's ineffectiveness has made those promises largely meaningless in the lives of the country's 206 million people. Nigerian political leaders rhetorically romanticize Nigeria's "unity," but do little to cultivate it. On the contrary, they often stoke ethnic and religious tensions in election campaigns, seemingly to distract from their own failure to deliver for the people they are supposed to serve.

The divisive political climate of the 2023 elections illustrated this tendency. It deepened rifts among ethnic and religious groups that already existed, largely because they have long been inflamed by political, religious, or other community "leaders." The toxic narrative of "us" versus "them" that permeated the campaign had far-reaching consequences, even fueling calls for secession, and not only in the historically separatist Biafra region of the southeast, but also in other parts of Nigeria.

Secessionist movements, however, remain largely isolated -- for now -- because most Nigerians crave the unity that at least some leaders have promised rhetorically, even as they failed to deliver.



Polls show that a majority of Nigerians value diverse communities, identify equally with their ethnicity and nationality, and believe there is more that unites Nigerians as one people than divides them. An Africa Polling Institute survey, the [Nigeria Social Cohesion Survey 2022](#), for example, found that, while divisions among Nigerians were growing, 71 percent are still “willing to cooperate” in building unity. These data, despite Nigeria’s increasing tensions and dysfunctions, suggest that it is not concepts of unity and comity across ethnic and religious groups that Nigerians oppose but rather the structural sources of the poverty, inequality, violence, corruption, and impunity that affect their daily lives.

Certainly some data such as that from the non-denominational global network [Open Doors](#), appears to indicate that violence against Christians, who make up 46 percent of Nigeria’s population, increased under the previous administration of President Buhari. But we also know that violence overall has increased over time, from the notorious days when the militant group Boko Haram was committing widespread atrocities in the country’s north to the spread of violence due to competition over land, such as the conflicts between farmers and herders, and that, in turn, is due in part to desertification slowly eating away at arable land. Open Doors, for example, noted in its recent annual report that, “The rise of Islamic militancy occurs against the backdrop of climate change, environmental degradation and population growth, pushing Fulani herders, whose origins are pastoral and Islamic, and their cattle southwards.”

Indeed, the Social Cohesion Survey found that an overwhelming majority of *all* Nigerians (96 percent) consider human rights abuses and violations to be a problem in the country, indicating not only that violence and rights abuses afflict many groups but also that Nigerians understand and respect the concept of human rights.

So back to the root causes. Achieving a working democracy and improved governance that can meet people’s needs and halt violent turmoil will require Nigeria’s power structures to broaden their dialogue with society, including with groups now excluded from influence. Open Doors noted that President Tinubu appears to be introducing more balance in Muslim and Christian representation in his Cabinet. Much more will need to be done to build the people’s trust and nurture the inclusion that is currently lacking and that would strengthen Nigeria’s social cohesion.

In 2014, Nigeria’s central government held a five-month “National Conference” that proposed limited changes to the structures of government — yet years later, even these have not been implemented. To support a more thorough dialogue that advances real change, the United States can help Nigerians at the grass roots who are looking for solutions for their country and who are ready to confront the failings of the past six decades. That will require a dialogue between the United States and counterparts in Nigeria of unprecedented breadth and honesty, engaging not only Nigeria’s national leadership but also its state and local political leaders and with civil society.

### **Recommendations for the United States:**

- 1) Start talking with -- and listening to -- “Naija.”** America’s engagement with Nigeria primarily occurs with Nigeria’s perceived centers of power — the state and the institutions and corporations that dominate Nigeria’s oil production and its financial industry. Those forces apparently have been unable or unwilling to address the country’s problems. Real engagement requires the U.S. and its allies to understand another significant power center



in Nigeria: the more than 140 million citizens younger than 35 who are excluded from institutional political and economic power and who have built their own identity as “Naija” — marginalized but resilient citizens who take pride in surviving the abuses of the state through ingenuity and entrepreneurship. The U.S. government has a few programs engaging with this cohort, but not nearly enough to make a difference, and they should be far more involved in their own country’s decision-making.

- 2) **Engage deeply with the communities that are deeply aggrieved or even agitating for secession.** Without interfering in internal affairs, the United States nevertheless needs to understand the impulses for secession, if only to model such dialogue for Nigerian leaders who may be hesitant to engage at this level. While it’s never wise to dismiss religion as a cause of conflict, it is [unproductive to label a conflict as solely driven by religion](#), when there are so many other factors at play. Nigeria’s government formally affirms the right to free expression, but it periodically suppresses nonviolent separatist advocacy by force. U.S. diplomacy and peacebuilding efforts should promote dialogue with these dissident communities, to help open a path for Nigeria’s government to do so. To be sure, such engagement must be shaped carefully and with a detailed understanding of how different communities perceive their conflicts with the state.
- 3) **Work more with Nigeria’s disparate states and its growing city centers.** The country’s 36 states hold significant power in the realpolitik of Nigeria — and they are distinct enough to warrant specific attention. The U.S. government should decentralize its engagement with Nigeria by strengthening its dialogues with, and support to, receptive government and civic leaders at state and local levels. The states of the Middle Belt, with its population of 45 million, would be a good place to start, given their need for assistance with local-level security to create the safety needed for agriculture and manufacturing that is its base to thrive. This does not mean purely security assistance, but rather the kind of peacebuilding initiatives that would be more sustainable over time.
- 4) **Re-evaluate the 2014 Security Governance Initiative**, which had potential but never got off the ground in Nigeria. The fresh look should emphasize partnership sustained over the long term, seeking areas where cooperation is still possible, and efforts that are most promising for real change, such as local, non-government initiatives. Security assistance should be shaped with long-term goals that will enable and incentivize specific reforms. Nigeria’s partners must recognize that the country’s political and security leaders bear a significant share of responsibility for many of Nigeria’s security challenges.
- 5) **Rethink U.S. and international policies that lead to knee-jerk responses to crises.** The Boko Haram kidnapping of schoolgirls from the town of Chibok 10 years ago attracted dramatic attention worldwide with the #BringBackOurGirls campaign. But that also created unyielding pressure on both the Nigerian authorities and the international community to respond. The slap-dash Safe Schools Initiative crafted by Nigeria and international donors to improve security at schools in the northeast region unfortunately turned out to be



unsustainable, and its effectiveness is now being questioned. Such kidnappings have not only continued in the region but also have spread west.

**Recommendations for the Nigerian Government:**

- 1) Coordinate federal and state action and messaging.** The federal military is now actively deployed in every state, typically operating alongside other security agencies as well as community self-defense groups (known in Nigerian parlance as “vigilante groups”), many of which are authorized by state governments. As a result of the December attacks in Plateau State, President Tinubu has [approved the immediate establishment of a permanent military base](#) there. But the effective coordination so desperately needed among Nigeria’s federal and state governments is too often undermined by finger-pointing. That must stop.
- 2) Get serious about police reform.** In 2016, the nonprofit International Police Science Association’s global index rated policing in Nigeria as the worst in the world. The government must stop offering the equivalent of window dressing, such as the unfulfilled promises to overhaul the [abusive SARS special police unit](#) that prompted widespread street protests in 2020, and the failure of at least three police reform committees under different administrations (in 2006, 2009, and 2012). The 2020 government announcement that it would hire constables to improve police relations with local communities would be a positive step if it leads to an inclusive policing structure that considers perspectives of Nigeria’s different ethnic and religious groups. A fundamental step would be to redirect the large numbers of police who provide personal security services to wealthy elites, assigning those officers to instead address serious crime.
- 3) Make accountability – of perpetrators and of the authorities -- central to the response.** Nigerians need justice. Criminality in the Middle Belt, as elsewhere, has metastasized in part because of impunity. The trends underlying the violence can be traced and can be anticipated if the appropriate government security agencies have effective early warning and rapid response mechanisms.

Clearly, a fresh approach is needed, both for Nigeria and the international community. U.S. and international policies should certainly embrace Nigeria as an aspiring democracy and strategic partner in Africa, but those policies must include a better understanding of the country’s complexities. Stepping back to honestly re-analyze how governance in Nigeria really works -- and how it does not -- is crucial to the crisis at hand. America’s own vital interests in Nigeria are at stake, too.

Thank you for inviting me to testify, and I look forward to your questions.