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Unity of statehood, ethno-religious conflicts and national security in Nigeria

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Abstract

The study examines the unity of statehood and ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria, with a specific focus on the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and Fulani herdsmen, and their implications for national security. Each of these conflicts has roots in historical grievances, religious extremism, and competition over resources, contributing to significant national security challenges. Utilising a mixed-methods approach, the research draws on secondary data from academic journal articles, books, and reports from reputable organisations such as the International Crisis Group and the United States Institute of Peace. Additionally, qualitative interviews with key informants, including experts in Nigerian politics, security personnel, and representatives from conflict resolution organisations, were conducted to enrich the analysis.The findings reveal that these conflicts are deeply rooted in socio-economic disparities, historical-religious grievances, and competition over resources. Respondents highlighted that marginalisation and feelings of oppression contribute significantly to the animosity between different ethnic and religious groups. The research underscores the critical role of effective governance and community-driven conflict resolution mechanisms in addressing these tensions. Moreover, the study identifies the necessity for comprehensive land use policies and resource management strategies as pivotal in reducing conflicts between herders and farmers. Recommendations include fostering inter-ethnic understanding through education and awareness campaigns, addressing economic inequalities, and ensuring inclusive governance to enhance trust among diverse communities.

Keywords: Statehood, Ethno-Religion, Conflict, Security, National Security, Nigeria

Introduction

Nigeria, as a complex geo-political entity, is home to a vast diversity of around 500 ethnic groups. These groups are largely categorized under three primary religious affiliations: African Traditional Religion (ATR), Islam, and Christianity.

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This composition influences the nation's socio-political landscape, reflecting both cultural diversity and intricate inter-group dynamics.[2] The nation's rich cultural diversity, which is a source of pride, has also been a catalyst for recurrent ethno-religious conflicts. These conflicts, deeply rooted in historical, religious, socio-economic, and political factors, have posed significant challenges to Nigeria's national security, undermining efforts to build a stable and unified state.[3] Sometimes religion identity becomes part of an ethnic group's identity or vice versa, and present a volatile social mixture coupled with the power of the ethnic group's myth of common descent.[4]

The origins of these conflicts can be traced back to the colonial era, where British policies of indirect rule exacerbated existing divisions by emphasizing ethnic and religious identities for administrative convenience.[5] The amalgamation of the northern and southern protectorates in 1914, which brought together diverse groups with little shared history, laid the groundwork for the tensions that have persisted throughout Nigeria's post-colonial history.[6] The legacy of these colonial policies continues to influence the socio-political landscape, contributing to the fragmentation of Nigerian society along ethno-religious lines.

The impact of these conflicts on national security is profound. Ethno-religious violence has led to the loss of thousands of lives, the displacement of millions, and the destruction of communities. The rise of militant groups, such as Boko Haram, which has exploited religious divisions to further its agenda, has further compounded the security challenges facing Nigeria. The insurgency, which began in the northeastern region, has spread to other parts of the country, posing a significant threat to national cohesion and stability.[7] Moreover, the economic implications of these conflicts are severe. The disruption of economic activities in conflict-prone areas has led to widespread poverty and unemployment, further fueling the cycle of violence. The destruction of infrastructure and the displacement of populations have also stunted economic development, exacerbating socio-economic inequalities and creating fertile ground for further unrest.[8] No doubt, Nigeria faces complex security issues due to the violent activities of Boko Haram and its faction, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), which particularly impact the Northeast. Attacks on civilians, kidnappings, and economic disruptions are prevalent, with ISWAP imposing strict controls on farming and fishing in Borno, State Yobe State and

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[2]Nwamuo, B. E.Eze, O. C.Alaku, E. C. & Dodo, E. A., "Ethnicity, Religion, and Conflicts in Nigeria, 1999–2021: An Expository Analysis of Youths' Involvement", *International Journal of Management, Social Sciences, Peace and Conflict Studies* (IJMSSPCS), 5(2), 109-123. ISSN: 2682-6135, 2022.

[3] Falola, T., & Heaton, M. M., *A History of Nigeria*. Cambridge University Press, 2008.

[4] Adamu, B& Musa, I. An Analysis of Ethno-Religious Conflict in Kaduna State. Kashere Journal of Politics and International Relations. Vol.3 issue 1.2025

[5]Mamdani, M., *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of lateColonialism,* Princeton University Press, 1996.

[6] Coleman, J. S., *Nigeria: Background to Nationalism*. University of California Press, 1958.

[7]Aghedo, I., &Osumah, O., The Boko Haram Uprising: How Should Nigeria Respond?*Third World Quarterly*, 33(5), 853-869, 2012.

[8] International Crisis Group, Northern Nigeria: Background to Conflict. Africa Report No. 168, 2010.

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the Sambisa Forest. These restrictions have deepened poverty and food insecurity in the region.[9] Although the Nigerian government has made military advancements, insurgents often respond by shifting their tactics to evade capture or defeat.[10]

Ethnic and religious dynamics further complicate these security challenges, especially in the Middle Belt, where resource-based conflicts between herders and farmers have been exacerbated by ethnic and religious tensions.[11] U.S. policy on Nigeria's religious freedom status has varied, with Nigeria recently removed from the U.S. "Countries of Particular Concern" list—a decision that sparked controversy among human rights advocates.[12] Continued violence in the region highlights the necessity for more inclusive religious freedom policies to address underlying religious motivations.[13]

In the Southeast, the activities of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) present additional security concerns. IPOB's "sit-at-home" protests, intended to support their detained leader Nnamdi Kanu, have led to forced economic shutdowns, disrupting local economies and causing conflict among communities.[14] Although IPOB claimed to halt these protests, factions within the group continue to enforce them violently.[15] These security concerns intersect with socio-economic issues, including growing poverty exacerbated by recent policy shifts like the removal of fuel subsidies. Although President Tinubu's administration has implemented economic relief programs, the rising cost of living remains challenging for many Nigerians, heightening socio-political tensions across the country.[16]

Addressing the challenges posed by ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria requires a multi-faceted approach. This includes promoting inclusive governance, strengthening legal and institutional frameworks, and fostering interfaith dialogue to build trust and understanding among Nigeria's diverse communities. The role of religious leaders, civil society organizations, and the international community in supporting these efforts is crucial to achieving

[9] International Crisis Group, Northern Nigeria: Background to Conflict. Africa Report No. 168, 2010. UN Development Programme, Human Development in Conflict-Affected Areas. UNDP Report, 2024.
[10] United Nations Security Council, Counter-Terrorism Efforts in West Africa. UN Security Brief, 2023.
[11] Human Rights Watch, Nigeria's Ethnic and Religious Violence. HRW Annual Report, 2024.
[12] Hudson Institute, Nigeria's Religious Freedom Status in U.S. Policy. Hudson InstituteAnalysis, 2023.
[13] Freedom House, Global Religious Freedom Report. Freedom House Annual Report, 2024.
[14] Amnesty International, Nigerian Protests and Security Issues. Amnesty International Report, 2023.
[15] Council on Foreign Relations, The Role of IPOB and Nigeria's Southeast Crisis. CFRReport, 2024.
[16] World Bank, Nigeria's Socio-Economic Challenges and Reforms. World BankDevelopment Update. paper No. 6. Oxford, Centre for Research on Inequality, HumanSecurity and Ethnicity, 2023. African Development Bank, Nigeria's Economic Outlook. AfDB Report, 2024.

lasting peace and stability.[17] This paper will explore the historical roots of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria, analyze their impact on national security, and examine the efforts made by various stakeholders to address these challenges. By understanding the complex interplay of factors that drive these conflicts, we can develop more effective strategies for promoting national unity and security in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

Two prominent theories were adopted in this study: Ethnic Conflict Theory and Social Identity Theory.

Ethnic Conflict Theory

Ethnic Conflict Theory centers on the idea that ethnic identities often become the basis of social mobilization, especially when resources, political power, or cultural rights are contested.[18] This theory posits that ethnic groups are natural competitors over scarce resources, resulting in heightened intergroup tensions and, ultimately, violent conflicts. Key theorists like Donald Horowitz and Ted Gurr argue that ethnic conflict arises primarily from competition over power, resource allocation, and identity recognition, with each group seeking to protect or advance its interests, often at the expense of others.[19]

In Nigeria, ethnic conflict theory is particularly relevant, as ethnic groups often perceive themselves as competing for political dominance and access to state resources. Nigeria's federal structure, designed to accommodate its ethnic diversity, has at times inadvertently fueled competition, with groups perceiving the state as a prize to be captured by specific ethnic elites.[20] For instance, the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo groups have long vied for control of political power, with each ethnic bloc seeking to secure resources for its region, often to the detriment of national unity.

The herder-farmer clashes in Nigeria's Middle Belt exemplify ethnic conflict theory. Here, predominantly Fulani Muslim herders and largely Christian farming communities in states like Benue, Plateau, and Kaduna find themselves in frequent conflict over land resources. This competition over land resources, along with the cultural and religious distinctions, has led to a significant rise in violent confrontations. [21] This dynamic has led to increased militarization among communities, with local groups forming militias for self-defense, further straining national security and necessitating a stronger security response from the government.[22] These conflicts undermine the central government's

[17]Suberu, R, Federalism and Ethnic Conflict in Nigeria. Washington DC; USIS Press. 2001.
[18] Horowitz, D. L., *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*. University of California Press, 2000.
[19] Horowitz, D. L., *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*. University of California Press, 2000.
[20] Kew, D., & Phillips, E., "Ethnic Diversity and Federalism in Nigeria", *Journal of African Studies*, 2023.
[21] Ekong, M., "Resource Competition and Conflict in Nigeria's Middle Belt", *Peace andDevelopment Review*, 2024.
[22] Falola, T., *Ethnic Conflicts and Security Implications in Nigeria,* Cambridge University Press, 2024.

authority, challenging its ability to enforce laws and maintain peace across different regions.[23]

Social Identity Theory

Social Conflict Theory, as proposed by Karl Marx, interprets society through a lens of competition for limited resources, where various groups vie for power, control, and status within a hierarchical social structure.[24] This theory posits that society is characterized by inequalities in resource distribution and power, inevitably leading to tension and conflict as different groups strive to fulfill their needs and safeguard their interests. According to Social Conflict Theory, such struggles for dominance—rather than social harmony—define societal interactions, especially when power and resources are unevenly distributed among ethnic or religious factions. In Nigeria, this theory sheds light on the tensions arising from regional and ethnic disparities, especially in cases like the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) movement, which highlights the perceived marginalization of the Igbo ethnic group within the country's socio-political structure.[25]

IPOB's demands for self-determination and greater autonomy for the Igbo people exemplify the core tenets of Social Conflict Theory Social Conflict Theory also explains why the Nigerian government's response to IPOB has been one of suppression rather than negotiation. In seeking to maintain its control, the government has deployed military force and restricted IPOB's activities, arguing that secessionist movements threaten national unity and stability. From a conflict theory perspective, this approach underscores the state's vested interest in retaining power and resources, preventing any potential loss of sovereignty that IPOB's demands could entail. The recurring clashes between IPOB supporters and security forces have thus deepened the divide, reinforcing IPOB's narrative of systemic oppression and intensifying the group's commitment to its cause.[26]

As scholars suggest, the persistence of these conflicts in Nigeria underscores the need for systemic reform to address regional grievances effectively, promoting more inclusive governance structures that can alleviate the social tensions underlying separatist movements and other forms of ethnic strife.[27]

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[23] International Crisis Group, Nigeria's Northeast Insurgency Update. ICG Report, 2023.
[24] Crossman, A.,*Understanding Conflict Theory,* Retrieved fromhttps://www.thoughtco.com/conflict- ethnic theory-3026622, 2019, July 3.
[25] Thio, A., *Sociology: A brief Introduction* (7th ed.), Pearson, 2008. Ugwumba, E., Understanding the Herder-Farmer Conflict in Nigeria. Reuters/Afolabi Sotunde Press, 2018.
[26]Okonta, I, Ethno-Religious Conflict and Sustainable Development in Nigeria. HTS Teologies/Theological Studies. De Gruyter. 2020, October 13.
[27] Thio, A., *Sociology: A brief Introduction* (7th ed.). Pearson, 2008. Crossman, A., *Understanding Conflict Theory*. Retrieved fromhttps://www.thoughtco.com/conflict-ethnic theory-3026622, 2019, July 3.

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Methodology

The paper employs a mixed-methods approach, utilizing secondary data and primary interviews with key informants to gain a comprehensive understanding of the complex relationship between these conflicts and national security in Nigeria. The study design focuses on two significant groups: the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and Fulani herdsmen. This approach is chosen for its ability to provide a comprehensive understanding of complex social issues and to capture the nuanced dynamics of these conflicts. Data collection is conducted through a multi-source strategy, including historical records, policy documents, and academic literature. Historical records offer insights into the origins and developments of the conflicts. Academic journal articles, books, and reports from reputable organizations such as the International Crisis Group and the United States Institute of Peace are used to gather secondary data, enriching the analysis with a broader perspective.

Data analysis involves thematic analysis, where data is coded into categories based on recurrent themes and concepts. This process helps identify patterns and relationships within the data, allowing for a detailed examination of the causes and consequences of the conflicts. Thematic analysis also facilitates a comparative examination of the different conflicts, highlighting commonalities and differences in their impact on national security. Overall, the methodology is designed to provide a thorough and nuanced analysis of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria, combining diverse data sources and analytical techniques to generate meaningful insights and recommendations for enhancing national security.

Historical Perspective

Nigeria's ethno-religious conflicts are deeply rooted in its colonial and post-colonial history. The British colonial administration, which governed Nigeria from the late 19th century until independence in 1960, played a significant role in shaping the country's ethno-religious landscape. The British employed a policy of indirect rule, which involved governing through local traditional rulers rather than direct administration. This policy inadvertently exacerbated ethnic divisions by reinforcing existing identities and hierarchies.[28]

The amalgamation of Nigeria in 1914 marked the beginning of significant ethnic and religious tensions within the newly unified territory. Prior to this amalgamation under British rule, Nigeria did not exist as a single nation; instead, it was a collection of diverse ethnic groups with distinct histories and cultures spread across the region. By merging these groups into one political entity, British colonial policy laid the groundwork for rivalries and conflicts among these groups, which have persisted throughout Nigeria's history.[29] This union established Nigeria as a political and social construct with both the individual histories of its ethnic groups and the broader narrative of a unified

[28] Mamdani, M., *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of late Colonialism,* Princeton University Press, 1996.
[29]Ezeani, C.E. Economic and Development Policy-Making in Nigeria. Journal of African Law 56(1) pp109-138.2012 February, 13.

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nation. This unification brought together diverse ethnic groups, including the Hausa-Fulani in the North, the Yoruba in the West, and the Igbo in the East, each with distinct cultures, languages, and religions. The lack of a cohesive national identity and the emphasis on ethnic differences contributed to the formation of a fragmented societal structure.[30] The colonial administration's favoritism towards certain ethnic groups, particularly in terms of political and economic benefits, sowed seeds of resentment and competition that would later manifest in violent conflicts.

During colonial rule, Lugard recognized that respecting Islamic beliefs was crucial for his success. He assured the leaders of the former Caliphate that their religion and customs would remain untouched while power shifted to the British. This arrangement allowed the feudal elite to collaborate with the British, leading to the oppression of the people in exchange for preserving their privileges. Consequently, this established a lasting socio-political distrust and conflict between Muslims and Christians in Northern Nigeria.[31] The British favoritism towards Muslims exacerbated tensions, contributing to divisions and animosity among religious groups, as religion significantly influences national issues in Nigeria.

Post-independence Nigeria inherited these divisions, and the failure to adequately address them has contributed to ongoing ethno-religious tensions. The early years of independence were marked by attempts to reconcile these divisions through federalism and various political arrangements. However, these efforts often fell short due to a lack of genuine integration and continued competition for resources and political power among ethnic groups.[32] Since gaining independence, Nigeria has experienced several significant ethno-religious conflicts that have had profound impacts on its national stability. One of the earliest and most significant conflicts was the Biafra War (1967-1970), which was driven by ethnic nationalism and economic grievances. The war was precipitated by the secession of the southeastern region, predominantly inhabited by the Igbo, who sought to establish the Republic of Biafra. The conflict resulted in widespread loss of life, displacement, and economic disruption, highlighting the deep-seated ethnic divisions within the country.[33]

Another significant ethno-religious conflict occurred in July 1999 in Sagamu, Ogun State, involving the Oro cult group. Tensions flared when members of this traditional worship group claimed that Hausa women disrupted their ceremony. This disagreement escalated into widespread violence, resulting in numerous casualties among both Yorubas and Hausas before a curfew was imposed to restore order. The unrest also triggered retaliatory attacks in Kano, leading to substantial loss of life and property damage valued in the billions.[34]

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[30] Coleman, J. S., *Nigeria: Background to Nationalism,* University of California Press, 1958.
[31]Nwamuo, B. E., Eze, O. C., Alaku, E. C., & Dodo, E. A., "Ethnicity, Religion, and Conflicts in Nigeria, 1999–2021: An Expository Analysis of Youths' Involvement", *International Journal of Management, Social Sciences, Peace and Conflict Studies* (IJMSSPCS), 5(2), 109-123. ISSN: 2682-6135, 2022.
[32] Falola, T., & Heaton, M. M., *A History of Nigeria,* Cambridge University Press, 2008.
[33] Ojukwu, C., *The Biafra Story,* Cambridge University Press, 1968.
[34]Kura, K. H., *Muslim-Christian Cooperation for Conflict Prevention/Management, Peace Building and Reconciliation in Northern Nigeria*. A paper delivered at a conference on

The Kafanchan-Kaduna crisis of the 1980s and 1990s, along with the Kaduna Sharia riots in 2000 and the Jos riots of 2001, claimed hundreds of lives.[35] The impacts of these conflicts extended beyond the immediate violence. One notable earlier religious conflict was the Maitatsine revolt in 1980, led by Mohammed Marwa, known as Maitatsine. He sought to impose his unique religious ideology on the populace, leading to attacks on other religious groups by his followers, the 'Yan Tatsine.' The Nigerian army intervened, resulting in around 5,000 fatalities, including Maitatsine himself.[36]

Another serious incident occurred in October 2000, during the Idi-Araba/Oko-Oba ethnic conflict in Lagos, which also involved clashes between Yorubas and Hausas, later spreading to Kano.[37] . In September 2001, ethnic violence erupted in Benue State between the Tivs and the Junkuns, stemming from a case of mistaken identity. Tiv youths mistakenly believed nineteen soldiers to be Junkuns in disguise and killed them. In retaliation, the Nigerian army conducted brutal reprisals in Saki-Biam, resulting in at least a hundred deaths.[38] The Kaduna and Enugu riots are further examples of ethno-religious conflict in Nigeria, primarily ignited by the introduction of Islamic law (Sharia) by northern governors. Governor Ahmed Yerima of Zamfara State was the first to implement Sharia in October 1999, which provoked backlash, particularly among the Christian population. The situation escalated when Governor Mohammed Makarfi of Kaduna attempted to introduce Sharia in February 2000. The existing animosity between the Muslim and Christian communities, coupled with their similar population sizes, led to significant violence and numerous casualties.[39]

The continued violence in Jos, Plateau State, which erupted again in November 2008 is a case at hand. The conflict was primarily between the indigenous Berom ethnic group, who are predominantly Christian, and the Muslim Hausa settlers. This particular flare-up was triggered by disputes over local elections, resulting in hundreds of deaths and the displacement of thousands. The violence was exacerbated by the government's failure to address underlying

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Muslim-Christian Cooperation in States of Nigeria. 6th-9th Oct. 2010, Kaduna, PCMRA, 2010.

[35] Osaghae, E. E., &Suberu, R. T., *A History of Identities, Violence, and Stability in Nigeria,* CRISE Working Paper No. 6. Oxford, Centre for Research on Inequality, Human Security and Ethnicity, 2005.

[36] Human Rights Watch, Nigeria: Events of 2019. New York: Human Rights Watch, 2020.

[37] Kura, K. H., *Muslim-Christian Cooperation for Conflict Prevention/Management, Peace Building and Reconciliation in Northern Nigeria,* A paper delivered at a conference on Muslim-Christian Cooperation in States of Nigeria. 6th-9th Oct. 2010, Kaduna, PCMRA, p.34, 2010.

[38]Kura, K. H., *Muslim-Christian Cooperation for Conflict Prevention/Management, Peace Building and Reconciliation in Northern Nigeria,* A paper delivered at a conference onMuslim-Christian Cooperation in States of Nigeria. 6th-9th Oct. 2010, Kaduna, PCMRA, 2010. Human Rights Watch, Nigeria: Events of 2019. New York: Human Rights Watch, 2020.

[39]Nwamuo, B. E., Eze, O. C., Alaku, E. C., & Dodo, E. A., "Ethnicity, Religion, and Conflictsin Nigeria, 1999–2021: An Expository Analysis of Youths' Involvement", *International Journal of Management, Social Sciences, Peace and Conflict Studies* (IJMSSPCS), 5(2), 2023, 109-123. ISSN: 2682-6135.

tensions regarding land ownership and resource allocation, which have fueled inter-communal rivalries for years.[40]

In 2011, the violence escalated further when the Boko Haram terrorist group emerged, exploiting ethno-religious tensions in northern Nigeria. Initially, Boko Haram's focus was on opposing Western education, but it evolved into a more militant organization targeting both Christian and moderate Muslim communities. The group's insurgency has led to widespread violence, displacing millions and claiming thousands of lives. The Nigerian government's military response, often brutal, has further intensified the cycle of violence and created an atmosphere of fear and insecurity across the region.[41]

The crisis in the Middle Belt region, particularly in Benue State, has also gained prominence during the period above and up to now. The conflict between the predominantly Christian Tiv farmers and the Muslim Fulani herdsmen over grazing rights has become a focal point of ethno-religious violence. In 2018, clashes erupted that resulted in the deaths of over 300 people in just a few weeks, highlighting the deadly consequences of competition for land and resources. The government's inability to address these grievances and provide adequate security has led to increasing distrust among communities and calls for self-defense measures.[42]

In 2015, the introduction of anti-grazing laws in Benue State further escalated tensions. The laws were enacted to curb the violence between farmers and herders, but they were met with fierce resistance from the Fulani herdsmen, leading to retaliatory attacks that resulted in significant loss of life and property. This cycle of violence underscored how legislative measures intended to maintain peace can sometimes exacerbate existing conflicts when not accompanied by dialogue and reconciliation efforts.[43]

Ethnic and religious conflicts are prevalent across Nigeria, deeply rooted in the nation's socio-political structure. Since gaining independence, successive leaders have often failed to address the underlying factors contributing to these divisions, sometimes exacerbating them instead. Key factors fueling these conflicts include suspicion, marginalization, neglect, oppression, nepotism, and discrimination, along with issues like illiteracy, unemployment, and religious

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[40] Osaghae, E. E., &Suberu, R. T., A History of Identities, Violence, and Stability in Nigeria, CRISE Working Paper No. 6. Oxford, Centre for Research on Inequality, Human Security and Ethnicity, 2025. Kura, K. H., *Muslim-Christian Cooperation for Conflict Prevention/Management, Peace Building and Reconciliation in Northern Nigeria,* A paper delivered at a conference on Muslim-Christian Cooperation in States of Nigeria. 6th-9th Oct. 2010, Kaduna, PCMRA, P. 34, 2010.

[41] Human Rights Watch, World Report 2012: Events of 2011. New York: Human Rights Watch, 2012.

[42]Nwamuo, B. E., Eze, O. C., Alaku, E. C., & Dodo, E. A., "Ethnicity, Religion, and Conflictsin Nigeria, 1999–2021: An Expository Analysis of Youths' Involvement", *InternationalJournal of Management, Social Sciences, Peace and Conflict Studies* (IJMSSPCS), 5(2), 2023, 109-123. ISSN: 2682-6135.

[43] Ibrahim, J., "Ethnic and Religious Conflicts in Nigeria: A Review of the Recent Trends", *African Journal of Political Science*, 24(1), 2019.

intolerance. Additionally, political dynamics often intertwine with ethnic identities, leading to youth being mobilized as instruments of conflict.

While these conflicts are widespread, they are particularly pronounced in the northern regions of Nigeria. The persistent outbreaks of violence in this area can be linked to a strong allegiance to religious beliefs, entrenched ethnic sentiments, cultural clashes, and competing religious ideologies. According to Ali and Yahaya,[44] ethnic conflict is intricate and sensitive, making resolution challenging. The personal toll of such conflicts—including loss of life and property—can breed long-lasting grudges, revenge, and cycles of violence if not adequately addressed. The diverse makeup of Nigeria's population has significantly influenced the dynamics of these ethnic conflicts.[45]

Policy Responses and Conflict Resolution

Recent responses have incorporated both reactive and proactive measures, aiming to address root causes, reduce violence, and support community reconciliation. Below are key policy responses and approaches to conflict resolution in Nigeria.

1. National Peace Committees and Dialogue Initiatives

To address growing divisions and hostilities, the Nigerian government and local organizations have established peace committees that facilitate dialogue among ethnic and religious groups. For example, the National Peace Committee (NPC), chaired by former Head of State General Abdulsalami Abubakar, plays a key role in advocating for peace and conducting peacebuilding workshops in conflict-prone regions. NPC's influence has been notable during election periods, urging political leaders and communities to resolve disputes non-violently.[46] These dialogue initiatives help groups air grievances and negotiate for shared benefits, reducing the likelihood of conflict escalation. However, some scholars argue that dialogue initiatives need stronger implementation frameworks to have a lasting impact.[47]

2. Establishment of Community Policing Programs

Community policing has been introduced as a measure to foster collaboration between security forces and local communities. The Nigerian government-initiated community policing programs to curb tensions in states like Kaduna and Plateau, where ethno-religious violence is prevalent. By engaging community members in security efforts, community policing helps to build trust between law enforcement and local populations, making it easier to de-escalate

[44] Ali, M., &Yahaya, A., "Ethnic Conflicts in Nigeria: Causes and Solutions", *Journal ofEthnic Studies,* 2019.
[45] Ali, M., &Yahaya, A., "Ethnic Conflicts in Nigeria: Causes and Solutions", *Journal of Ethnic Studies*, 2019.
[46] Alao, A., &Odukoya, J., "Peace Committees and Conflict Resolution in Nigeria", *Peace and Development Studies*, 2023.
[47] (Umejei, 2024).

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conflicts.[48] The effectiveness of this policy depends on transparency and resource allocation; however, resource constraints and lack of training sometimes undermine its efficacy, requiring further investment and capacity building.[49]

3. Resource Redistribution and Economic Development Programs

In regions like the Niger Delta and the Middle Belt, where resource allocation issues contribute to inter-group tensions, Nigeria has implemented policies to promote equitable resource distribution. The establishment of the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) aimed to address resource inequalities and fund local development, while similar measures in the North aim to reduce resource-based ethnic conflicts.[50] These programs are designed to alleviate competition over limited resources by ensuring each region benefits from national wealth. Though resource distribution initiatives are promising, their success often depends on transparency in governance and equitable allocation. Failures in implementation and corruption have, at times, hampered these efforts, calling for improved accountability measures.[51]

4. Educational and Cultural Integration Programs

Educational policies that promote multicultural and interfaith education have been introduced in Nigeria as a preventive approach to ethno-religious conflict. For instance, in conflict-prone areas, programs focus on integrating cultural diversity topics within the educational curriculum to foster mutual respect and understanding among students of different backgrounds. Organizations such as the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue have collaborated with local governments to support educational initiatives promoting religious tolerance.[52] Programs that integrate peace education are critical in fostering a generation that values diversity and mutual respect. However, they require sustained commitment and resources, as the impact on conflict prevention are long-term rather than immediate.

5. Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) Mechanisms

Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) techniques, such as mediation and arbitration, have been increasingly utilized to resolve local disputes without escalating them into wider conflicts. ADR programs allow communities to engage in conflict resolution outside the traditional court system, which can be time-consuming and costly. For example, in Kaduna State, mediation centers have been established to handle inter-community disputes before they escalate,

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[48]Okonofua, J., & Adebisi, T., "Community Policing in Nigeria: Prospects and Challenges", *Nigerian Journal of Public Safety*, 2024.
[49] International Crisis Group, "Nigeria's insurgency in the Northeast: A Contemporary Review", *Crisis Group Reports*, 2023.
[50] Ekong, M., "Resource Competition and Conflict in Nigeria's Middle Belt", *Peace and Development Review*, 2024.
[51] Adesoji, A., & Olaniyi, B., "Community-Based Interventions for Conflict Resolution in Nigeria", *African Journal of Peace and Security,* 2023.
[52]Aghedo, I., "Understanding Nigeria's Ethno-Religious Conflicts Through Social Identity", *Journal of African Politics*, 2022.

facilitating faster and community-based conflict resolution.[53] ADR has proven effective in promoting local ownership of peace processes, although its impact varies based on community participation and the availability of trained mediators.

6. Use of Legal Frameworks and Reforms

To address the legal underpinnings of conflict, the Nigerian government has passed reforms aimed at reinforcing the rule of law and protecting minority rights. The Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act, for example, is a legislative response aimed at reducing violence, including those linked to ethnic and religious conflicts. This law seeks to protect citizens from discriminatory practices and acts of violence based on ethnic or religious affiliations. Although legislative reforms are essential, enforcement remains challenging, as security forces need training to implement these laws effectively. Strengthening the judiciary's role and improving enforcement are necessary to ensure these legal protections are upheld.[54]

7. International Collaboration and Funding for Peacebuilding

Nigeria collaborates with international organizations, including the United Nations and African Union, to access peacebuilding funding and technical support. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), for instance, has supported peacebuilding efforts in the North-East region, focusing on resilience-building among youth and vulnerable populations impacted by violence. Such collaboration not only provides financial support but also promotes the exchange of successful peacebuilding practices from other regions.[55] International collaboration enables the Nigerian government to adopt effective peacebuilding strategies from global best practices, although the dependency on external funding may pose challenges to sustainable local ownership.

8. Religious Leaders' Engagement and Interfaith Dialogue

Religious leaders play a crucial role in Nigeria's conflict resolution efforts, as they wield significant influence within communities. Programs led by interfaith councils encourage cooperation between Christian and Muslim leaders to mitigate tensions and promote peace.[56] In Northern Nigeria, where ethno-religious tensions are most intense, initiatives that involve religious leaders in peace talks have contributed to calming hostilities, demonstrating the value of faith-based diplomacy. However, the success of these initiatives often depends on the sincerity of the leaders involved and the commitment of local authorities to follow through on agreements.

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[53] Falola, T., *Ethnic Conflicts and Security Implications in Nigeria,* Cambridge UniversityPress, 2024.
[54] International Crisis Group, Nigeria's Northeast Insurgency Update. ICG Report, 2023.
[55] Ojo, A., & Adeleke, O., "Religious Identity and Political Behavior in Nigeria", *African Political Review*, 2023.
[56] Adesoji, A., & Olaniyi, B., "Community-Based Interventions for Conflict Resolution inNigeria", *African Journal of Peace and Security*, 2023.

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Findings and Analysis

The study highlights that marginalization, competition for resources, and historical grievances are primary catalysts for the ethno-religious conflicts observed in Nigeria. These findings resonate with scholarly analyses that underscore how historical injustices can perpetuate cycles of violence. For instance, the marginalization experienced by IPOB, largely comprised of Igbo youths advocating for self-determination, stems from historical grievances related to the Biafran War. As noted by Ali and Yahaya,[57] this sense of exclusion fuels feelings of disenfranchisement among the Igbo, leading them to resort to protests and, at times, violence.

One respondent, articulated this sentiment: "The frustration within IPOB is rooted in decades of perceived neglect and marginalization by the central government. This feeling is not just about the present; it has historical roots that make their demands resonate deeply within their community"[58] Such historical underpinnings are crucial for understanding the present-day dynamics of ethno-religious conflicts.

Additionally, the competition for resources, particularly land and water, exacerbates tensions between the predominantly Muslim Fulani herdsmen and mainly Christian farming communities. The land conflicts have intensified due to climate change and population growth, leading to fierce competition over dwindling resources. As noted by the International Crisis Group (2017)[59], this competition has often spiraled into violent clashes, highlighting the urgent need for sustainable land-use policies. The ramifications of these conflicts extend beyond localized violence; they significantly threaten national security. The data suggests that unresolved ethno-religious tensions contribute to a broader climate of insecurity, undermining the government's authority and exacerbating feelings of vulnerability among citizens. An interviewee from a conflict resolution organization explained: "When communities engage in violence, it not only destroys lives but also weakens the state's legitimacy. This erosion of trust makes it easier for extremist groups to gain a foothold".[60] This perspective aligns with findings from the United States Institute of Peace, which emphasizes that ethnic conflicts can lead to a power vacuum, creating fertile ground for insurgency and violent extremism.

Furthermore, the conflicts have resulted in widespread displacement, with thousands fleeing their homes to escape violence. This mass displacement has led to humanitarian crises, straining local resources and services. As stated in a report by the International Crisis Group[61], "Displacement often leads to increased competition for limited resources in host communities, creating further tensions and potential for conflict." This cyclical nature of violence and

[57] Ali, M., &Yahaya, A., "Ethnic Conflicts in Nigeria: Causes and Solutions", *Journal ofEthnic Studies,* 2019.
[58]Anonymous Interview, 2024
[59] International Crisis Group 2017
[60]Anonymous Interview, 2024)
[61] International Crisis Group 2017

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displacement underlines the need for a multi-faceted approach to peacebuilding.

In terms of conflict resolution measures, the findings reveal a mixed assessment. While there are governmental and non-governmental efforts aimed at mediating these conflicts, many respondents expressed skepticism about their effectiveness. An interviewee noted, "The government often deploys forces to quell violence, but these measures are reactive rather than proactive. There's a lack of long-term strategies to address the root causes of these conflicts"[62] This sentiment is echoed in numerous studies that highlight the inadequacy of state responses in addressing the complexities of ethno-religious tensions.[63] Moreover, an Interviewee commented on the need for a more comprehensive approach: "Mediation efforts often overlook the voices of the local communities. Without their involvement, any peace process is likely to fail".[64] This observation aligns with the findings of the United States Institute of Peace, which stresses the importance of inclusivity in peacebuilding initiatives to foster ownership and sustainability of peace processes.

The significance of community engagement in mitigating ethno-religious conflicts was emphasized throughout the interviews. Many respondents highlighted those grassroots initiatives could play a pivotal role in fostering understanding and cooperation among diverse groups. A political analyst observed, "Community-driven initiatives are essential for addressing the misconceptions that fuel conflicts. They allow people to see each other as human beings rather than as enemies"[65]. This perspective resonates with broader research findings that advocate for community-led approaches to conflict resolution, which have been shown to be more effective in building lasting peace.[66]

In practical terms, several community-led initiatives in Nigeria have successfully reduced tensions. For instance, peace-building workshops that bring together youths from different ethnic backgrounds have fostered dialogue and understanding, demonstrating the potential for grassroots movements to make a significant impact.[67] By actively involving communities in peace processes, there is a greater likelihood of addressing the underlying issues that lead to conflict, creating a more resilient social fabric.

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[62]Anonymous Interview, 2024.
[63] Osaghae&Suberu, 2005
[64]Anonymous Interview, 2024.
[65]Anonymous Interview, 2024.
[66]Nwamuo, B. E., Eze, O. C., Alaku, E. C., & Dodo, E. A., "Ethnicity, Religion, and Conflicts in Nigeria, 1999–2021: An Expository Analysis of Youths' Involvement", *International Journal of Management, Social Sciences, Peace and Conflict Studies* (IJMSSPCS), 5(2), 2023,109-123. ISSN: 2682-6135.
[67] Kura, K. H., *Muslim-Christian Cooperation for Conflict Prevention/Management, Peace Building and Reconciliation in Northern Nigeria,* A paper delivered at a conference on Muslim-Christian Cooperation in States of Nigeria. 6th-9th Oct. 2010, Kaduna, PCMRA, 2010.

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Conclusion

The findings from this study underscore the intricate relationship between ethno-religious conflicts and national security in Nigeria, with specific focus on the IPOB and Fulani herdsmen. Through a combination of historical grievances, competition for resources, and inadequate conflict resolution measures, these tensions pose significant challenges to unity of statehood and national security. The insights from key informants emphasize the need for inclusive, community-driven approaches to peace building that address the root causes of conflict and foster collaboration among diverse groups and unity. As Nigeria continues to grapple with these challenges, it is imperative that policymakers prioritize strategies that promote understanding, dialogue, and long-term peace

Based on the findings, several recommendations are proposed to address the challenges posed by issue of the unity of statehood, ethno-religious conflicts and enhanced national security. One primary recommendation is the implementation of comprehensive land use and resource management policies. Given the competition for resources between herdsmen and agrarian communities, establishing sustainable practices that ensure equitable access to land and water is essential. Policymakers should consider frameworks that promote dialogue and collaboration among stakeholders, including farmers, herders, and local governments. The International Crisis Group emphasizes that such collaborative resource management strategies can mitigate tensions and promote peaceful coexistence.[68]

Additionally, fostering community-driven conflict resolution mechanisms is crucial. Local communities should be empowered to lead dialogues and mediation efforts. Respondents in the study consistently highlighted the importance of grassroots involvement, advocating for initiatives that prioritize local perspectives and solutions. The effectiveness of such approaches is supported by research indicating that locally driven conflict resolution tends to yield more sustainable outcomes.[69] The Nigerian government should also prioritize education and awareness campaigns that promote inter-ethnic and inter-religious understanding. These campaigns can help dismantle stereotypes and foster empathy among different groups. Engaging religious leaders and community influencers in these initiatives can amplify their impact, as they often hold significant sway within their communities.

Furthermore, addressing the underlying socio-economic disparities that fuel grievances is vital. Government policies should focus on equitable distribution of resources, investment in infrastructure, and job creation, particularly in conflict-prone regions. The United States Institute of Peace highlights that economic development initiatives can play a critical role in reducing tensions and promoting stability.[70]Finally, establishing inclusive governance structures

[68]International Crisis Group, 2017
[69]Nwamuo, B. E., Eze, O. C., Alaku, E. C., & Dodo, E. A., "Ethnicity, Religion, and Conflicts in Nigeria, 1999–2021: An Expository Analysis of Youths' Involvement", *International Journal of Management, Social Sciences, Peace and Conflict Studies* (IJMSSPCS), 5(2), 2023, 109-123. ISSN: 2682-6135.
[70] United States Institute of Peace, 2020

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that ensure the representation of all ethnic and religious groups in decision-making processes is essential. This inclusivity can help address feelings of marginalization and promote a sense of belonging among various communities. Policymakers should consider reforms that enhance transparency and accountability, fostering trust in government institutions.

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