

Written Submission

Submitted to the

**Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission**

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Hearing on: “Atrocities and Mass Killings in Nigeria’s Middle Belt: A Prelude to Genocide?”

December 17<sup>th</sup>, 2020

Co-Chairmen McGovern and Smith, Members of the Lantos Commission, and distinguished guests, thank you for this opportunity to testify before you on the nexus between atrocity prevention, interfaith relations and religious freedom, and peacebuilding in Nigeria in the face of alarming rural violence that you have brought to the public’s attention.

My name is Fatima Madaki, Project Manager for Advancing Religious Tolerance. My work at Search for Common Ground (Search) is to engage faith actors and other influential stakeholders to understand the inter-religious dynamics contributing to violence and peace, and find opportunities to bring people together across different religions to work together. Search has worked in Nigeria since 2004 and currently has six offices across the country (Abuja, Jos, Maiduguri, Warri, Yola, and Yobe).<sup>1</sup> With funding from the USAID, the State Department, UN agencies, the French government, the Dutch government, the German government, private donors, and foundations and corporations, we work on transforming violent extremism, promoting reconciliation across dividing lines, strengthening community-led security, and strengthening democratic governance.<sup>2</sup> Through this work, we have engaged religious leaders, civil society, youth, women, media, and government stakeholders to bridge religious divides, promote religious freedom, and foster ethno-religious understanding and collaboration to promote non-violence and unity.<sup>3</sup> In one initiative in Nigeria, Search brought together Christian and Muslim religious leaders to protect holy sites as places for peace and reconciliation, and created a Universal Code for Protection of Holy Sites.<sup>4</sup>

In this testimony, I will offer some background on the situation and civil society initiatives to address religious violence before discussing the impact of legal, formal arrangements for and social, informal practice of religious freedom in Nigeria; opportunities for increased interfaith cooperation to prevent violence and build social cohesion and peace; and considerations surrounding narratives of religious identity. I will then outline six actions that the United States government can take to prevent violence and build peace in Nigeria by addressing these opportunities and concerns. The views I express in this testimony are informed by my work with Search, but should not be construed as representing any official position of Search.

### **Background and Civil Society Initiatives**

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<sup>1</sup> Search for Common Ground. “Nigeria.” 2020. <https://www.sfcg.org/nigeria/>

<sup>2</sup> For more information about Search’s work, please reference our 2019-2020 Impact Report: <https://www.sfcg.org/impact-report/>

<sup>3</sup> To learn more, please refer to the following two collections of several Search papers on Nigeria and evaluations of our Nigeria programs: <https://www.sfcg.org/tag/nigeria-reports/> and <https://www.sfcg.org/tag/nigeria-evaluations/>

<sup>4</sup> Search for Common Ground. “Building Consensus On Protection Of Holy Sites In Northern Nigeria.” 2017.

<https://www.sfcg.org/building-consensus-protection-holy-sites-northern-nigeria/>

Nigeria is one of the most religious countries in the world. Almost all Nigerians identify as either Christian or Muslim, and 87% of citizens believe that religion plays an important role in their life.<sup>5</sup> The country has faced large-scale and devastating conflict and violence across the North East, Middle Belt, and Niger Delta regions of the country, resulting in thousands of deaths.<sup>6</sup> Citizens face multiple conflicts that are not religious in nature, but often play out or are manipulated along ethno-religious lines because so much of the population participates in organized religion.<sup>7</sup> The religious divide between the mostly Christian farmers and the Muslim-majority Fulani herders is perceived as one of the main triggers of the farmer-herder conflict in the Middle Belt; however, other factors, such as a growing population, the scarcity of natural resources, and climate change are also contributing to the rise in violence, causing a southwest shift in the pastoralist population's migratory patterns.<sup>8</sup>

Religion is deeply embedded in all aspects of Nigerian life – shaping not only citizens' moral values, but also their moral understanding of the world, especially in times of crisis.<sup>9</sup> In the context of ongoing violence and insecurity, coupled with few socio-economic opportunities and poor local governance, interreligious tensions have become a vector for fears and frustrations across Nigeria.<sup>10</sup> Yet, while many actors focus on religious intolerance or view the country's conflicts as religious in nature, the reality is that most Nigerians want to live in harmony with their neighbors of different faiths.<sup>11</sup> A 2010 Pew Research report found that 71% of Nigerian citizens think that it is a good thing for people of other faiths to have freedom to practice their beliefs, while 82% of citizens in 2017 indicated tolerance for other religions as measured by their degree of willingness to have people from other religious groups as their neighbors.<sup>12</sup> As widely trusted leaders in their communities,<sup>13</sup> faith actors are uniquely positioned to

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<sup>5</sup> Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life. "Tolerance and Tension: Islam and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa." 2010. <https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2010/04/sub-saharan-africa-full-report.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Jude Ilo, Udo, Ier Jonathan-Ichaver, and 'Yemi Adamolekun. "The Deadliest Conflict You've Never Heard of." *Foreign Affairs*, January 23, 2019. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/nigeria/2019-01-23/deadliest-conflict-youve-never-heard>; Human Rights Watch. "'Leave Everything to God.'" 2013. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/12/12/leave-everything-god/accountability-inter-communal-violence-plateau-and-kaduna>

<sup>7</sup> Kwaja, Christ M.A. and Katie Smith. "Transnational Dimensions Of Conflict Between Farmers And Herders In The Western Sahel And Lake Chad Basin." Search for Common Ground. 2020. [https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/SFCG\\_Policy\\_Brief\\_Transnational\\_Dimension\\_to\\_FH\\_Conflicts.pdf](https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/SFCG_Policy_Brief_Transnational_Dimension_to_FH_Conflicts.pdf); Search for Common Ground. "The Common Ground Approach to Religious Engagement." 2010. <https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/CGA-to-RE-Overview.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Ogbozor, Ernest N., Don John Omale, and Mallam Mairiga Umar. "Building Bridges Between Herders and Farmers in Plateau, Nasarawa, and Kaduna States." Search for Common Ground. 2018. <http://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Final-Evaluation-Building-Bridges-Between-Herders-and-Farmers-in-Plateau-Nasarawa-and-Kaduna-States-August-2018.pdf>; Bagu, Chom and Katie Smith. "Past Is Prologue: Criminality & Reprisal Attacks In Nigeria's Middle Belt." Search for Common Ground. 2017. [https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Criminality-Reprisal-Attack\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Criminality-Reprisal-Attack_FINAL.pdf); Kwaja, Christ M.A. and Katie Smith. "Transnational Dimensions Of Conflict Between Farmers And Herders In The Western Sahel And Lake Chad Basin." Search for Common Ground. 2020. [https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/SFCG\\_Policy\\_Brief\\_Transnational\\_Dimension\\_to\\_FH\\_Conflicts.pdf](https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/SFCG_Policy_Brief_Transnational_Dimension_to_FH_Conflicts.pdf); Search for Common Ground. "The Common Ground Approach to Religious Engagement." 2010. <https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/CGA-to-RE-Overview.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Search for Common Ground. "The Common Ground Approach to Religious Engagement." 2010. <https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/CGA-to-RE-Overview.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Kwaja, Christ M.A. and Katie Smith. "Transnational Dimensions Of Conflict Between Farmers And Herders In The Western Sahel And Lake Chad Basin." Search for Common Ground. 2020. [https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/SFCG\\_Policy\\_Brief\\_Transnational\\_Dimension\\_to\\_FH\\_Conflicts.pdf](https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/SFCG_Policy_Brief_Transnational_Dimension_to_FH_Conflicts.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Search for Common Ground. "The Common Ground Approach to Religious Engagement." 2010. <https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/CGA-to-RE-Overview.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life. "Tolerance and Tension: Islam and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa." 2010. <https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2010/04/sub-saharan-africa-full-report.pdf>; Howard, Brian. "Religion in Africa." Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 339. 2020. [http://afrobarometer.org/sites/default/files/publications/Policy%20papers/ab\\_r7\\_dispatchno339\\_pap12\\_religion\\_in\\_africa.pdf](http://afrobarometer.org/sites/default/files/publications/Policy%20papers/ab_r7_dispatchno339_pap12_religion_in_africa.pdf)

address and prevent violence and build bridges across divides throughout Nigeria. Many Nigerian civil society leaders have partnered with faith actors to create initiatives to promote interfaith cooperation, given their unique position of influence in the population.

The experience of conflict in the Middle Belt can't be separated from previous conflicts or conflicts in other areas of the country. Northern Nigeria has been at the receiving end of egregious acts of explicit and unaddressed religious killings – from the legacies and ongoing threat of Boko Haram to the explicit religious riots throughout the 2000s that originated in Jos.<sup>14</sup> While the riots have calmed, no one – neither Christian nor Muslim – was held accountable for the violence committed.<sup>15</sup> We cannot underestimate the depth of these wounds that have been left to fester. In June 2018, Search saw these wounds intersect with the natural resource and livelihoods conflicts playing out between farmers and herders. Incidences of cattle rustling set off a series of reprisal attacks between herders and farmers in Barkin Ladi LGA when participants in the violence took up arms as a way to respond. No one was held accountable for the theft or the violent attacks. Local media and influential community figures publicly lamented the violence as religiously-motivated. Two weeks later, these sentiments reached a peak and we saw swift and expansive violence, where people were targeted based on their ethnic, religious, or political identities.

In spite of the extremely dangerous and complicated circumstances, countless Nigerians – from civil society leaders to women and youth leaders to faith actors – are leading their communities and country toward transforming conflict by implementing initiatives to promote interfaith trust and cooperation, shared sense of humanity, religious freedom, and peace among the population. For example, Search-Nigeria launched a program in 2015 to build social and cultural bridges between farmers and herders in Kaduna, Nasarawa, and Plateau states.<sup>16</sup> The program used dialogue and mediation as tools for building and strengthening intercultural understanding between the two groups; as well as supporting efforts towards the conflict prevention, management and resolution as the case may be.<sup>17</sup> Through the use of mediation, Nigerian-based organizations and agencies such as the Interfaith Mediation Centre (IMC), Justice Development and Peace Caritas, Community Action for Popular Participation (CAPP) have been deeply involved in series intervention with some degree of success that are linked to fostering harmony, rebuilding trust and the cessation of violence in several communities throughout the Middle Belt.<sup>18</sup> Search-Nigeria is currently implementing a project to advance the protection of religious freedom and tolerance among religious communities, reduce vigilante justice tied to blasphemy and apostasy laws, and improve weak mechanisms for seeking justice in response to religious freedom violations in Northern Nigeria by 1) training lawyers and advocates in human rights protection laws and frameworks in the formal justice system to increase legal defense of those accused of blasphemy, and 2) mobilizing religious

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<sup>13</sup> Search for Common Ground. "The Common Ground Approach to Religious Engagement." 2010. <https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/CGA-to-RE-Overview.pdf>; Howard, Brian. "Religion in Africa." Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 339. 2020.

[http://afrobarometer.org/sites/default/files/publications/Policy%20papers/ab\\_r7\\_dispatchno339\\_pap12\\_religion\\_in\\_africa.pdf](http://afrobarometer.org/sites/default/files/publications/Policy%20papers/ab_r7_dispatchno339_pap12_religion_in_africa.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Mlambo, Nontobeko. "Nigeria: Between Boko Haram and Herder/Farmer Attacks - The Complexity of Conflict." AllAfrica. 2019. <https://allafrica.com/stories/201907300133.html>; Reuters. "Timeline: Ethnic and religious unrest in Nigeria." 2011. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nigeria-blast-timeline/timeline-ethnic-and-religious-unrest-in-nigeria-idUSTRE7BO09920111225>; Human Rights Watch. "Nigeria: Jos. A City Torn Apart." 2001. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2001/12/18/jos/city-torn-apart>

<sup>15</sup> Human Rights Watch. "'Leave Everything to God.'" 2013. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/12/12/leave-everything-god/accountability-inter-communal-violence-plateau-and-kaduna>

<sup>16</sup> Kwaja, Chris M.A. and Bukola I. Ademola-Adelehin. "Responses to Conflict Between Farmers and Herders in the Middle Belt of Nigeria." Search for Common Ground. 2018. <https://psnnigeria.files.wordpress.com/2018/05/responses-to-conflicts-between-farmers-and-herders-in-the-middle-belt-final.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

leaders and policymakers to jointly counter violent rhetoric through positive public messages of religious pluralism and respect.<sup>19</sup>

Larger, higher-level civil society efforts include the Interfaith Mediation Centre (IMC) and the Nigeria InterReligious Council (NIREC). IMC is a Nigerian organization<sup>20</sup> that advocates peaceful interfaith coexistence and aims to prevent the recurrence of violent religious conflict in the region.<sup>21</sup> The Center has mentored many faith-based local organizations to advocate for peaceful coexistence between people of all faiths, and mediated a lasting peace agreement that ended fighting in the area of Yelwa-Shendam in Plateau state in 2004-2005 after over a thousand people were killed in religious violence.<sup>22</sup> Comprised of thirty Muslim leaders and thirty Christian leaders, NIREC is a permanent and independent body established to convene religious leaders and traditional rulers to promote greater interaction and understating among their leadership and followers and lay a foundation for sustainable peace and religious harmony in Nigeria.<sup>23</sup>

As conflict intensifies in both frequency and brutality in the Middle Belt,<sup>24</sup> international action remains urgently needed to support these and other Nigerian-led efforts to halt violence and promote peace. When assessing the conflict, mapping out U.S. involvement with Nigeria, and envisioning a peaceful future for Nigeria, we need to take care to recognize not only how religion drives violence, but also more broadly how it affects victims' understanding of conflict and how it contributes to building peace.

### Issues, Opportunities, and Recommendations

As protracted conflict continues to threaten Nigeria's stability and development, the U.S. government should take note of the following current issues and opportunities ripe for engagement to assist Nigerian civil society actors in preventing violence and promoting social cohesion, religious freedom, and peace.

- 1. Legal and formal arrangements for religious freedom exist, but pose accessibility challenges for Nigerians that need to be addressed.** Religious freedom is enshrined in Article 38 of the Nigerian constitution, which states that "every person is entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion," including freedom to change or propagate one's religious affiliation.<sup>25</sup> Despite this overarching legal protection, discrimination and violence against members of various religious groups regularly occurs. While there exist some monitoring and early warning mechanisms intended to help prevent violent conflict, communities and governments alike rarely use these measures. Nigerians lack a formal reporting procedure through which they may raise concerns when they feel they have experienced religious discrimination. Entities that do engage with these tools are predominantly faith-based organizations, and accordingly, offer subjective data interpretation rather than an objective assessment of reported incidents. Further, no credible

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<sup>19</sup> Momale, Saleh B., Makama Danjuma Mazadu, Mafeng Gwallson, Barrister Nuhu Ibrahim, and Zakariyya Salihu Usman. "Advancing Religious Tolerance (ART. 38) Project: Draft Report for Context Analysis." Search for Common Ground. 2020. [https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Final-Report-ART38-Context-Analysis-April-07-2020\\_IRT\\_PARE-Final-Kemili-Norman-William.pdf](https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Final-Report-ART38-Context-Analysis-April-07-2020_IRT_PARE-Final-Kemili-Norman-William.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> To learn more about Interfaith Mediation Centre, you can find their website at <https://interfaithmediation.org/>.

<sup>21</sup> Peace Insight. "Interfaith Mediation Centre." 2020. <https://www.peaceinsight.org/en/organisations/interfaith-mediation-centre/?location=nigeria&theme>

<sup>22</sup> United States Institute of Peace. "Nigeria's Imam and Pastor: Faith at the Front." 2017. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2017/09/nigerias-imam-and-pastor-faith-front-video>; Peace Insight. "Interfaith Mediation Centre." 2020. <https://www.peaceinsight.org/en/organisations/interfaith-mediation-centre/?location=nigeria&theme>

<sup>23</sup> To learn more about the Nigeria InterReligious Council, you can find their website at: <http://www.nirec.org.ng/about.php>

<sup>24</sup> Harwood, Asch. "Update: The Numbers Behind Sectarian Violence in Nigeria." Council on Foreign Relations. 2019. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/update-numbers-behind-sectarian-violence-nigeria>

<sup>25</sup> The Federal Republic of Nigeria. "Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria." 1999. [https://publicofficialsfinancialdisclosure.worldbank.org/sites/fdl/files/assets/law-library-files/Nigeria\\_Constitution\\_1999\\_en.pdf](https://publicofficialsfinancialdisclosure.worldbank.org/sites/fdl/files/assets/law-library-files/Nigeria_Constitution_1999_en.pdf)

entity exists to gather legitimate data surrounding atrocities. Additionally, laws that criminalize blasphemy and apostasy continue to spark violent vigilante justice attempts perpetuated against people accused of these crimes.<sup>26</sup>

Religious groups have also noted a legal dimension of religious freedom evidenced by Nigeria's use of both Sharia and customary law in various states. Nigeria's federal legal system offers much autonomy to local and state-level courts.<sup>27</sup> Many Nigerians consider this system unfair, particularly to people who do not belong to the majority identity group there or who do not live in that area. A recent survey found that 67% of Nigerians believe that only civil law should govern the country, as opposed to the 32% who feel that religious law should primarily govern.<sup>28</sup> Legal judgements also often lack a unified standard across states, leading to unwarranted discrepancies in judgements depending on each state.<sup>29</sup> These feelings are evidenced in many Christians' and Muslims' attitudes toward Sharia and customary law, respectively, although this grievance is shared by many citizens outside of religious contexts. Christians in the largely Muslim-populated Northern Nigeria, where courts practice Sharia law, consider this practice to be a violation of their religious rights.<sup>30</sup> Conversely, Muslims in the largely Christian-populated Southern region, where courts practice customary law, consider customary law discriminatory not only on the basis of religion, given its reliance on local traditional customs in Christian areas, but also on the basis of ethnicity.<sup>31</sup> To address these perceived barriers to legally-protected religious freedom and interfaith cooperation, the Nigerian government and public should consider how Sharia and customary legal systems – in addition to common law – can coexist in the country without marginalizing various identity groups and potentially stoking conflict.

- 2. While freedom of religion is protected under law, the social practice of religious freedom falls short of legal standards due to intragroup and intergroup religious violence.** 22% of Nigerians reported that they experienced discrimination based on their religion during 2017.<sup>32</sup> 11% of citizens say they personally experienced violence by political or religious extremists between 2017-2018, while 26% expressed that they feared, but did not experience, violence.<sup>33</sup> Nigeria has a longstanding history of explicitly religious killings, from religious riots in the 2000s to ongoing threats from Boko Haram.<sup>34</sup> Just this week, Boko Haram kidnapped several hundred schoolboys in Katsina state, hundreds of miles away from their northeastern base.<sup>35</sup> Further,

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<sup>26</sup> United States Commission On International Religious Freedom. "Apostasy, Blasphemy, And Hate Speech Laws In Africa." 2019. [https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Africa%20Speech%20Laws%20FINAL\\_0.pdf](https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Africa%20Speech%20Laws%20FINAL_0.pdf)

<sup>27</sup> Akpan, Felix. "The Politics Of Local Government Autonomy In Nigeria Reloaded." European Scientific Journal 9, no. 35 (2013). <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/328023938.pdf>

<sup>28</sup> Howard, Brian. "Religion in Africa." Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 339. 2020. [http://afrobarometer.org/sites/default/files/publications/Policy%20papers/ab\\_r7\\_dispatchno339\\_pap12\\_religion\\_in\\_africa.pdf](http://afrobarometer.org/sites/default/files/publications/Policy%20papers/ab_r7_dispatchno339_pap12_religion_in_africa.pdf)

<sup>29</sup> Akpan, Felix. "The Politics Of Local Government Autonomy In Nigeria Reloaded." European Scientific Journal 9, no. 35 (2013). <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/328023938.pdf>

<sup>30</sup> Stonawski, Marcin, Michaela Potanč Oková, Matthew Cantele, And Vegard Skirbekk. "The changing religious composition of Nigeria: causes and implications of demographic divergence." Journal of Modern African Studies 54, no. 3 (2016). <http://pure.iiasa.ac.at/id/eprint/13485/1/The%20changing%20religious%20composition%20of%20Nigeria.pdf>

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Howard, Brian. "Religion in Africa." Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 339. 2020. [http://afrobarometer.org/sites/default/files/publications/Policy%20papers/ab\\_r7\\_dispatchno339\\_pap12\\_religion\\_in\\_africa.pdf](http://afrobarometer.org/sites/default/files/publications/Policy%20papers/ab_r7_dispatchno339_pap12_religion_in_africa.pdf)

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Mlambo, Nontobeko. "Nigeria: Between Boko Haram and Herder/Farmer Attacks - The Complexity of Conflict." AllAfrica. 2019. <https://allafrica.com/stories/201907300133.html>; Reuters. "Timeline: Ethnic and religious unrest in Nigeria." 2011. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nigeria-blast-timeline/timeline-ethnic-and-religious-unrest-in-nigeria-idUSTRE7BO09920111225>; Human Rights Watch. "Nigeria: Jos. A City Torn Apart." 2001. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2001/12/18/jos/city-torn-apart>



violence in the religiously-influenced farmer-herder conflicts nearly doubled in 2018 since 2017, with 2,037 lives lost.<sup>36</sup> Until religious violence ceases, freedom of religion will not be upheld in practice.

- 3. Many civil society groups and communities have become increasingly open to interfaith partnerships, built upon common areas of interest and concerns, over time.** After nearly 40 years of leading peacebuilding initiatives worldwide, Search has found that building bridges and ensuring cooperation between divided groups is most successful when groups focus on addressing areas of common interest and concern.<sup>37</sup> Search's Nigeria team recently noted during a project on advancing religious tolerance that stakeholders of different faiths in the country have been increasingly willing to work together to identify issues of shared interest and concern, and develop strategies to address them.<sup>38</sup> For example, Search-Nigeria most recently convened a group of high-level stakeholders to create three state action plans concerning three key areas: preventing violent extremism, strengthening partnerships with religious leaders to address violent extremism and other issues, and building capacity for policy and advocacy engagement at the state level. As existing and future U.S. government programs in Nigeria leverage shared interests across religious groups, such engagement will build on existing local efforts to create long-term interfaith partnerships that can become a uniting factor to solve other complex, intersecting issues in local communities.<sup>39</sup>

Initiatives should focus on including lower levels of religious communities, which are often excluded from meaningful participation in discussions and initiatives about peacebuilding. In 2017, 38% of Nigerians reported that they had only contacted their religious leaders once or a few times about an important problem or to share their views.<sup>40</sup> While high-level religious leaders have platforms to discuss and make recommendations on preserving religious freedom and peace, ordinary citizens are not involved in these conversations. However, their voices, along with the voices of locally influential community and religious actors, remain central to advancing the movement for peace in order to mobilize communities locally.<sup>41</sup> Initiatives should take a local peace architecture approach to managing conflicts by putting community relationships and security at the center--for example, by supporting local and community-based dispute resolution mechanisms.<sup>42</sup> The absence of such structures for effective mediation and sustained community level dialogues is a recipe for the escalation of violence.

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<sup>35</sup> CBS News. "Boko Haram claims kidnap of hundreds of Nigerian schoolboys." December 15, 2020.

<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/boko-haram-nigeria-kidnapping-kankara-hundreds-schoolboys-katsina-attack/>

<sup>36</sup> Harwood, Asch. "Update: The Numbers Behind Sectarian Violence in Nigeria." Council on Foreign Relations. 2019.

<https://www.cfr.org/blog/update-numbers-behind-sectarian-violence-nigeria>

<sup>37</sup> Search for Common Ground. "The Common Ground Approach to Religious Engagement." 2010. <https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/CGA-to-RE-Overview.pdf>

<sup>38</sup> Momale, Saleh B., Makama Danjuma Mazadu, Mafeng Gwallson, Barrister Nuhu Ibrahim, and Zakariyya Salihu Usman. "Advancing Religious Tolerance (ART. 38) Project: Draft Report for Context Analysis." Search for Common Ground. 2020. [https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Final-Report-ART38-Context-Analysis-April-07-2020\\_IRT\\_PARE-Final-Kemili-Norman-William.pdf](https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Final-Report-ART38-Context-Analysis-April-07-2020_IRT_PARE-Final-Kemili-Norman-William.pdf)

<sup>39</sup> Search for Common Ground. "The Common Ground Approach to Religious Engagement." 2010. <https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/CGA-to-RE-Overview.pdf>

<sup>40</sup> Howard, Brian. "Religion in Africa." Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 339. 2020.

[http://afrobarometer.org/sites/default/files/publications/Policy%20papers/ab\\_r7\\_dispatchno339\\_pap12\\_religion\\_in\\_africa.pdf](http://afrobarometer.org/sites/default/files/publications/Policy%20papers/ab_r7_dispatchno339_pap12_religion_in_africa.pdf)

<sup>41</sup> Foster, Jillian J. "Plateau Will Arise! Phase II (PWA II): Consolidating an Architecture for Peace, Tolerance and Reconciliation. Final Evaluation Report." Search for Common Ground. 2017. <https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NGR505-Final-Evaluation-report-FINAL.pdf>

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

4. **Over-simplistic narratives to describe the violence in Northern Nigeria perpetuates harmful stereotypes and motivates tensions and violence based on religious identity.** In the Middle Belt area of Nigeria, a variety of factors are driving violence, including livelihoods competitions for land and water resources, criminality, and impunity. Ethnicity and religion play a significant role in Nigerian culture and everyday life, as elsewhere in the world, and also contribute to affected communities' understanding of the conflict. However, the characterization of this conflict along ethno-religious lines perpetuates harmful stereotypes and motivates tensions and violence based on these categorizations. Narratives that perpetuate the "other-ing" of certain groups are damaging and unproductive in addressing the root drivers of conflict. The international community should focus on how it can use religion and religious identity as a unifier and connector between different religious groups, rather than a mechanism of division or as a qualifier to distinguish perpetrators vs. victims.

As Nigerians continue their longstanding sacrifices for and work on countless initiatives to build tolerance, peace, and a sense of shared humanity among religious groups, Americans should invest in and support these groundbreaking, locally-led, and nuanced efforts to assist and strengthen the ideas and initiatives that Nigerians have identified as most effective in creating a more healthy, just, and safe society in Nigeria. **Based on these observations, we offer six recommendations for the U.S. government and international actors engaging in Nigeria:**

1. **Encourage the Nigerian government to:**
  - a. **Establish objective and neutral early warning and early response (EWER) monitoring mechanisms** for civilians to report incidents of religious discrimination and violence to mitigate imminent threats, prevent violence, and protect civilians. This mechanism should be owned by the already established "high level interreligious dialogue forums" comprised of both Christian and Muslim leaders, and should be managed by credible international actors to maintain objectivity and elements of triangulation. Local community leaders should be supported in leading responses to signs of violence to ensure the incorporation of local input and nuance.<sup>43</sup>
  - b. **Promote and support high-level, interfaith stakeholder forms convened between states to identify and respond to early warning signs of violence.** As their membership spans across religions, these groups hold leverage to address and prevent potentially violent interfaith issues before they gain traction.
  - c. A number of civil society leaders have raised the idea of establishing a Presidential Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) based on their past and current promising work on justice, reconciliation, and peacebuilding. According to some Nigerian civil society leaders' vision, the TRC should consist of credible national and international civil society actors and members of Nigerian National Human Rights Commission to investigate atrocities and collect robust, objective, and credible data concerning incidents. **If this comes to fruition, the U.S. government should support Nigerians efforts to establish the TRC** in part by coordinating exchanges between Nigerian and non-Nigerian civil society actors, religious leaders, victim advocate lawyers, and other relevant stakeholders to share knowledge about how they have navigated similar contexts in other justice and reconciliation processes, which can inform Nigerian proceedings to increase their likelihood of facilitating long-term, sustainable peace.
2. **Engage actors from the top-down, middle-out, and bottom-up levels when engaging with religious communities.** Religion influences and is influenced by people's everyday experiences.

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<sup>43</sup> For more information on how to design and implement successful EWER mechanisms, read about Search's EWER program in Nigeria from 2015-2019. [https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Early\\_Warning\\_Early\\_Response\\_Policy\\_Brief.pdf](https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Early_Warning_Early_Response_Policy_Brief.pdf)

While necessary, important, and influential, calls for peace from high-level religious leaders alone are not sufficient to bring peace. They must be complemented by actions and messages from religious actors that influence the day-to-day life of Nigerians at the local levels and shape the broader community. Strong religious engagement includes faith leaders, but it must also involve the broader communities of faith that unite Nigerians. Youth ministry groups, widows' associations, and other congregations of the faithful are important actors within the community that should be a part of peace and development. By expanding the definition of religious actors to the broader communities of faith, we also are more inclusive of women, youth, and other religious actors who carry influence within their communities.

3. **Endorse, and encourage other key government actors to endorse, Freedom of Religion or Belief (FORB) initiatives including Search's current FORB project** to work with high-level religious leaders, legal practitioners, media, and members of civil society to develop and popularize a forthcoming two-year agenda that outlines key issues and strategies for multi-stakeholder engagement in promoting religious freedom in Nigeria.
4. **Identify, fund, and provide capacity-building services for local civil society initiatives – both informal and formal – on religious freedom, interfaith relations, and peacebuilding.**
5. **Make sure that when we address the religious dimensions of conflict, that we do not unintentionally perpetuate religious divides, stereotypes, and intolerance.** A nuanced understanding of the role of religion is essential to identify real solutions to today's problems and to avoid perpetuating religious divides, stereotypes, and intolerance. In all cases, there is a need for a thorough analysis of issues before identifying the role of religion in conflict and engaging with religious actors.
6. **USAID and the State Department should direct financial assistance to support efforts on promoting religious engagement in Nigeria through various training and cultural means.** These include the 2020 Executive Order on Religious Freedom released by President Trump, which calls for foreign service officers to be trained in religious engagement for effective programming in specific contexts, and the Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation, which supports projects to preserve a wide range of cultural heritage in countries including Nigeria, as well as other measures.