

Who Owns the Genocide Narrative? Securitization, Sovereignty, and the Politics of Christian Victimhood in U.S.-Nigeria Relations

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ABSTRACT

This article examined the contestation over genocide narratives in contemporary U.S.–Nigeria relations by analyzing how claims of “Christian genocide” in Nigeria were constructed, circulated, and politicized within global security discourse. Anchored in securitization theory, particularly the Copenhagen School’s emphasis on speech acts and audience acceptance, the study explored how incidents of religious violence in Nigeria were reframed by segments of the United States political and advocacy landscape as existential threats demanding international attention and potential intervention. The analysis situated this reframing within broader debates on sovereignty, post-colonial state authority, and the global politics of human rights. Methodologically, the study adopted a qualitative discourse-analytical approach. It analyzed U.S. congressional hearings, foreign policy statements, religious advocacy reports, media narratives, and official responses from the Nigerian government between 2015 and 2024. These materials were examined to identify the linguistic, moral, and strategic mechanisms through which episodes of violence were labeled as genocide, as well as the counter-discursive strategies through which Nigerian state actors resisted or reinterpreted such labels. The discourse analysis was complemented by secondary conflict datasets and existing scholarly literature on religious violence in Nigeria in order to contextualize the claims advanced by both domestic and international actors. The study documented how genocide labeling functioned as a politically charged discursive practice rather than a purely legal or empirical classification. Competing narratives revealed a struggle over moral authority, victimhood, and the framing of Nigeria’s security crisis within international forums. The Nigerian government’s rejection of the genocide designation was examined as part of a broader effort to maintain sovereign control over security governance and policy interpretation. These discursive dynamics were shown to have practical diplomatic implications, shaping bilateral relations and influencing cooperation on security, counter-terrorism, and human rights between Nigeria and the United States.

Keywords: Securitization; Genocide Narratives; Sovereignty; Christian Victimhood; U.S.–Nigeria Relations; Religious Violence

INTRODUCTION

U.S.–Nigeria relations have long been shaped by cooperation on counterterrorism, trade, and regional security, even as both countries navigate divergent political priorities and complex internal challenges [1]. In recent years, however, a new point of contention has emerged: allegations of *Christian genocide* in Nigeria. Prominent U.S. political figures, including President Donald Trump and members of Congress, have publicly described violence against Christian communities in Nigeria as pervasive and targeted, warning of potential U.S. political or even military repercussions if the situation persists [2]. In late 2025, Trump linked continued violence to possible further U.S. action and reinforced narratives that Christians are being systematically killed by extremist groups in Nigeria’s

volatile north and middle belt regions [3]. Such framing has led to visa restrictions on individuals allegedly involved and to tensions over the designation of Nigeria as a “Country of Particular Concern” under U.S. religious freedom laws [4]. The Nigerian government, some regional bodies, and a range of local actors have strongly rejected these claims [5]. Nigeria’s government insists that the country’s security crisis is complex, with violent extremist groups such as Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) targeting both Muslims and Christians in a context of banditry, farmer-herder conflict, and governance failures rather than an intentional campaign to exterminate a religious group. Nigeria’s Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs and some other civil society stakeholders have described the genocide label as misleading and politically motivated, warning that it risks deepening societal divisions and undermining national sovereignty [6]. This tension foregrounds a pressing normative and political question: who has the authority to define genocide in Nigeria? The answer carries significant implications not only for bilateral relations but also for how atrocity narratives are mobilized in international politics [7]. Categorizing violence as genocide has legal, ethical, and strategic consequences; it can shape foreign policy decisions, justify interventionist rhetoric, or, conversely, reinforce sovereign resistance to external pressure. This article examines this contested terrain through the conceptual lens of securitization theory, which emphasizes how speech acts and public claims can elevate particular issues into existential threats that demand extraordinary responses [9]. The central research problem addressed here is the political construction and contestation of genocide narratives in U.S.–Nigeria interactions, against a backdrop of overlapping violence, identity politics, and competing claims to moral authority [10]. Specifically, the study seeks to understand how and why the label “Christian genocide” has been articulated within U.S. political and advocacy circles, how the Nigerian state and other domestic actors respond to such framing, and what this struggle reveals about sovereignty and narrative ownership in global security discourse [11]. To guide this inquiry, the article poses the following research questions: a) What discursive strategies are deployed by U.S. actors to frame violence in Nigeria as “Christian genocide”? b) How do Nigerian government officials, religious organizations, and civil society actors resist or reframe these claims? And c) What are the implications of these competing narratives for U.S.–Nigeria relations and broader debates on securitization and sovereignty? Methodologically, the study employed a *qualitative discourse analysis* of public speeches, policy documents, congressional hearings, media reports, and official responses from 2015 through 2025. By analyzing how language circulates in political spaces and how audiences accept or reject particular framings, the article traces the power dynamics inherent in the politics of victimhood and the securitization of religious violence. The data sources include U.S. government records, Nigerian official statements, news coverage, and advocacy group reports.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the theoretical concepts of genocide, securitization, and victimhood. Section 3 outlines the analytical framework that integrates securitization theory with understandings of sovereignty and counter-securitization. Section 4 details the research design and data sources. Section 5 contextualizes Nigeria’s multifaceted security crisis. Sections 6 and 7 analyze the competing narratives advanced by U.S. and Nigerian actors, respectively. Section 8 discusses the implications for bilateral relations and regional security. Finally, the Conclusion synthesizes the findings and suggests directions for future research.

Conceptualizing Genocide, Securitization, and Victimhood

Genocide occupies a singular and morally-charged position in international relations, straddling the domains of law, ethics, and politics. As a legal concept, genocide is codified in the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948), which defines it as acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group. This legal framing establishes genocide as an exceptional crime, distinguished by the requirement of specific intent (*dolus specialis*), thereby setting a deliberately high threshold for its recognition in international law [12]. Courts and tribunals have consistently emphasized that not all mass killings or systematic violence constitute genocide, underscoring the necessity of demonstrable intent to annihilate a protected group. Yet, beyond the courtroom, genocide functions as far more than a juridical category. In political discourse, the term has acquired a performative power that extends well beyond legal precision. Scholars such as [13] have shown that genocide is frequently invoked to describe a wide range of violent phenomena, often detached from the strict evidentiary demands of international law. Within global politics, the label “genocide” operates as moral shorthand for absolute evil, mobilizing outrage, sympathy, and calls for intervention. As [14] argues, the political use of genocide discourse is deeply selective, shaped by geopolitical interests, advocacy networks, and media visibility. Consequently, genocide becomes not only a description of violence but also a contested narrative through which power, legitimacy, and responsibility are negotiated.

This transformation of genocide from legal determination to political claim finds a compelling analytical explanation in securitization theory. Developed by the Copenhagen School, securitization theory conceptualizes security not as an objective condition but as a socially constructed process achieved through discourse [15]. According to [16], an issue becomes “securitized” when it is framed as an existential threat to a valued referent object, such as a state, population, or identity, and when this framing is accepted by a relevant audience. Successful securitization moves an issue out of the realm of normal politics and into a space where extraordinary measures are justified [17].

When genocide is invoked in political discourse, it constitutes a powerful securitizing move. Labeling violence as genocide elevates it from a policy problem or humanitarian concern into an existential crisis that demands urgent and exceptional responses. This discursive elevation is not merely descriptive; it actively reshapes political priorities, legitimizes external pressure, and narrows the space for alternative interpretations [18]. Securitization theory thus

illuminates how genocide claims function as strategic acts that seek to mobilize moral authority and political action, rather than as neutral reflections of empirical realities. Closely intertwined with this process is the politics of victimhood. In international relations, victimhood is not simply a condition of suffering but a politically-charged identity that confers moral legitimacy and symbolic power. Claiming victimhood, particularly through the language of genocide, positions a group as deserving of protection, solidarity, and intervention [19]. Victimhood narratives can therefore serve as instruments of influence, shaping international agendas and policy responses.

However, victimhood is neither evenly distributed nor universally recognized. Herman & [3] demonstrate that global acknowledgment of victims is often contingent on political alignment, cultural proximity, and strategic interest. Some groups are rapidly elevated as emblematic victims of atrocity, while others remain invisible or contested. This uneven recognition underscores that victimhood itself is produced through political processes, embedded in broader struggles over narrative authority and moral hierarchy. Religion further intensifies these dynamics by providing a powerful moral vocabulary through which victimhood and security are articulated. Religious identity often functions as a deeply emotive referent object, capable of amplifying perceptions of threat and injustice. As [20] observes, religion carries an “ambivalence of the sacred,” possessing the capacity to both inflame violence and sanctify suffering. When violence against religious groups is framed as genocide, moral claims rooted in faith become fused with security narratives, transforming religious identity into an object of existential concern.

This fusion of religious identity, moral outrage, and security discourse enhances the persuasive force of genocide claims but also risks oversimplifying complex conflicts. Framing violence primarily through religious victimhood can obscure structural drivers such as governance failures, economic marginalization, or environmental pressures, while reinforcing binary narratives of innocence and guilt [13]. In securitized contexts, such narratives can harden identities, entrench divisions, and limit the possibilities for nuanced policy responses.

Taken together, genocide, securitization, and victimhood form a conceptual continuum through which violence is interpreted, politicized, and acted upon in international relations. Genocide provides the ultimate moral category; securitization explains the process through which this category is activated; and victimhood reveals the political stakes embedded in claims of suffering. Understanding how these concepts interact is essential for analyzing contemporary disputes over atrocity narratives, particularly in post-colonial contexts where questions of sovereignty, external authority, and moral legitimacy remain deeply contested [21].

These conceptual insights provide a necessary lens for interrogating contemporary claims of genocide and victimhood in Nigeria, where complex patterns of violence have increasingly been reframed through global security and moral discourses [22]. Nigeria’s security crisis, marked by Boko Haram insurgency, banditry, farmer-herder conflicts, and communal violence, has produced widespread civilian suffering across religious and ethnic lines. Yet, in international arenas, this multifaceted insecurity has come to be selectively narrated, with particular emphasis placed on Christian victimhood and the assertion that Nigeria is witnessing an unfolding genocide against Christians [23]. This reframing does not merely describe violence; it actively reorganizes its meaning by elevating specific forms of suffering into existential threats demanding urgent global attention.

From a securitization perspective, the Nigerian case illustrates how genocide discourse travels across borders and becomes embedded in foreign policy debates. U.S. political actors, advocacy organizations, and religious lobbies have increasingly articulated violence in Nigeria as systematic, religiously-targeted, and genocidal, thereby performing a securitizing move that seeks audience acceptance within U.S. legislative and policy institutions [24]. The success of this move is evidenced by congressional hearings, public statements, and policy pressures that re-classify Nigeria’s internal security challenges as matters of international moral and strategic concern [25]. In this process, Christian identity becomes the primary referent object, and genocide emerges as the ultimate frame through which violence is interpreted and acted upon.

Nigeria’s response to these claims further underscores the politics of narrative ownership. The Nigerian state has consistently rejected the genocide label, arguing that violence in the country is neither monolithic nor religiously exclusive but rather the product of overlapping structural, political, and socio-economic failures [26]. This rejection represents a form of counter-securitization, through which the state seeks to reassert sovereign authority over the interpretation of its security realities and to resist external intrusion justified by moralized atrocity narratives. Rather than denying the scale of violence, Nigerian officials emphasize its complexity, warning that reductive genocide framing risks inflaming religious divisions and undermining domestic conflict resolution efforts [27].

The Nigerian case, therefore, serves as a critical empirical site for examining how genocide narratives are constructed, contested, and instrumentalized in international relations [28]. It reveals how victimhood is politically produced and hierarchized, how religious identity amplifies securitizing claims, and how post-colonial states navigate the tension between global human rights advocacy and sovereign autonomy [29]. By situating Nigeria within the broader conceptual framework of genocide, securitization, and victimhood, the analysis moves beyond the question of whether genocide is occurring to interrogate the more fundamental issue of who possesses the authority to define, legitimize, and act upon claims of genocide in a complex and deeply plural society [30].

Theoretical Framework: Securitization, Sovereignty, and Counter-Securitization

Understanding the politics of genocide narratives in U.S-Nigeria relations requires a theoretical framework that bridges discourse, power, and sovereignty [31]. This paper situated itself at the intersection of securitization theory,

the post-colonial understanding of sovereignty, and the concept of counter-securitization, providing an analytical lens to examine how claims of “Christian genocide” are constructed, contested, and resisted. Rather than treating these claims as empirically fixed, this framework viewed them as political tools mobilized within a global security and moral discourse, revealing whose narratives gain legitimacy and whose are constrained.

Securitization theory, developed by the Copenhagen School, conceptualizes security as a discursive and socially constructed process, rather than an objective condition [32]. At its core, securitization occurs when an actor frames an issue as an existential threat to a valued referent object, such as a state, population, or identity, and seeks to convince an audience of the urgency of the threat. According to [32], the act of labeling an issue a security threat, a “speech act,” shifts it from the domain of ordinary politics to one in which extraordinary measures are deemed necessary. However, the success of this securitizing move depends critically on audience acceptance. Without recognition by relevant audiences, the claim remains a rhetorical gesture rather than a functional security decision [33]. Applied to genocide narratives, securitization explains how violence against specific groups, when labeled as genocide, becomes morally urgent, politically salient, and capable of triggering international attention and intervention. While securitization illuminates how threats are framed and legitimized, it must be complemented by an understanding of sovereignty, particularly in post-colonial contexts. Sovereignty denotes a state’s authority over its territory, population, and domestic affairs [34], but in post-colonial states like Nigeria, sovereignty carries additional historical and political sensitivities. External claims about domestic violence, especially framed in absolute moral terms, such as “Christian genocide”, are often perceived as intrusive and paternalistic, potentially undermining the state’s authority. Scholars such as [35] argue that post-colonial states are acutely aware of these dynamics, as external narratives historically served to justify intervention, reinforce hierarchical global structures, or delegitimize indigenous governance. Within this context, sovereignty functions both as a legal principle and as a discursive resource, enabling states to assert interpretive authority over the meaning of domestic events. The Nigerian case illustrates the interplay of securitization and sovereignty through the concept of counter-securitization. Counter-securitization refers to the strategies deployed by actors to resist, reinterpret, or neutralize securitizing claims directed at them [36]. Rather than denying the occurrence of violence, counter-securitization reframes it, situating it within complex structural, social, and economic realities rather than reducing it to a singular moral narrative [37]. In Nigeria, the government’s rejection of the “Christian genocide” label exemplifies such a strategy. Nigerian government officials emphasize that violence affects multiple communities, is shaped by governance failures, resource conflicts, and extremist activity, and should not be instrumentalized to impose external moral or political imperatives. This process of counter-securitization enables the state to desecuritize externally imposed narratives, reclaim policy autonomy, and protect sovereign authority.

Integrating these perspectives, the theoretical framework that guided this paper operates on three interconnected levels. First, it examines securitizing moves by U.S. actors, focusing on how genocide claims are framed, which referent objects are highlighted, and how audiences are targeted to secure recognition [38]. Second, it explores sovereignty as a reactive and protective mechanism, highlighting Nigeria’s efforts to maintain control over the interpretation of its domestic security situation. Third, it considers the dynamics of counter-securitization, demonstrating how Nigeria contests externally imposed narratives without negating the reality of violence. This triadic framework allows for a nuanced understanding of genocide discourse not merely as a description of violence, but as a site of political struggle, identity negotiation, and international contestation [39].

By linking securitization, sovereignty, and counter-securitization, this framework underscores the performative power of genocide narratives, the sensitivity of post-colonial states to external moral claims, and the strategic ways in which states resist narrative domination. In the Nigerian context, it highlights how moralized claims of Christian victimhood are simultaneously powerful tools of international advocacy and contested instruments of foreign influence. As such, the framework positions genocide discourse as both a moral and political phenomenon, emphasizing that questions of legitimacy, authority, and narrative ownership are central to understanding U.S.-Nigeria tensions over the characterization of violence [40].

Methodology and Sources of Data

For this paper, we adopted a qualitative research design grounded in interpretive social science, which is suitable for interrogating power relations and narrative construction in international politics. Given that the core concern of the paper is not the empirical verification of genocide as a demographic or legal fact, but rather the politics surrounding who defines, frames, and mobilizes the genocide narrative in U.S.-Nigeria relations, a qualitative approach is most appropriate. The paper is, therefore, oriented toward understanding how discourses of violence, victimhood, and sovereignty are constructed, circulated, and contested across transnational political spaces, particularly within U.S. policy arenas and Nigerian state responses. At the methodological core of the paper is discourse analysis, employed as both a theoretical sensibility and an analytical technique. Drawing from critical discourse analysis and securitization theory, the method examined language as a form of political action rather than as a neutral medium of description. Discourse analysis enabled the paper to uncover how representations of Christian victimhood in Nigeria are produced through specific vocabularies such as “genocide,” “religious cleansing,” and “persecution”; and how these representations function to legitimize policy positions, moral claims, and interventionist pressures. The analysis paid particular attention to speech acts, framing devices, silences, and inter-textual references, emphasizing how certain narratives achieve authority and audience acceptance within U.S. political institutions, while others are

marginalized or resisted by the Nigerian state. The paper also relied on multiple, triangulated data sources to ensure analytical depth and credibility. First, U.S. congressional records constituted a primary body of data. These include congressional hearings, resolutions, floor debates, and official statements by U.S. legislators relating to Nigeria, religious freedom, terrorism, and human rights. Such records are crucial for tracing how the genocide narrative enters formal policy discourse and how it is institutionalized through legislative processes. Second, the paper analyzed advocacy reports produced by U.S.-based religious freedom organizations, Christian lobby groups, and international human rights NGOs. These reports often serve as agenda-setting documents that shape congressional perceptions and provide discursive resources for securitizing claims. Third, media texts, including opinion articles, investigative reports, and editorial commentaries from U.S. and other international media outlets, were examined to capture the broader public circulation of the genocide narrative. Media texts function as a critical intermediary between advocacy actors and policy institutions, amplifying specific frames of Christian victimhood while simplifying or moralizing complex patterns of violence in Nigeria.

Finally, the paper incorporated official Nigerian responses, including government press statements, diplomatic communications, policy documents, and speeches by Nigerian state officials. These texts were analyzed as forms of counter-securitization through which Nigeria seeks to reassert sovereignty, contest external labeling, and reframe the violence as multifaceted security challenges rather than religious genocide.

The scope covered by the paper spans from 2015 to 2025, a period marked by the intensification of Boko Haram insurgency, the rise of banditry and farmer-herder conflicts, increased U.S. congressional activism on international religious freedom, and heightened diplomatic tensions over Nigeria's designation on religious freedom watch-lists. This timeframe allowed the paper to trace discursive shifts over a decade, capturing both continuity and change in how the genocide narrative is articulated and contested. However, the paper acknowledges certain limitations. It does not conduct field-based interviews or ethnographic research within Nigeria, relying instead on textual representations of violence. As such, it does not claim to provide a comprehensive sociological account of conflict dynamics on the ground, but rather an analysis of how those conflicts are narrated and politicized internationally.

Ethical and analytical considerations were central to the paper's design. Ethically, the paper is attentive to the dangers of instrumentalizing suffering or reproducing reductive binaries that privilege one category of victims over others. The analysis deliberately avoided adjudicating victimhood claims in moral absolutist terms and instead interrogated the political uses to which such claims were put. Analytically, reflexivity is maintained regarding the positional power of Western knowledge production and the asymmetries embedded in U.S.-Africa relations. By foregrounding discourse rather than empirical casualty hierarchies, the paper sought to expose how narratives of genocide and Christian victimhood function as sites of power, contestation, and geopolitical negotiation, rather than as neutral reflections of reality.

In summary, the methodological approach and data sources are designed to illuminate the politics of narrative ownership at the intersection of securitization, sovereignty, and religion, providing a robust framework for understanding how the genocide discourse shapes and is shaped by U.S.-Nigeria relations.

Contextualizing Religious Violence in Nigeria

Religious violence in Nigeria must be situated within a long and complex historical trajectory shaped by colonial legacies, post-colonial state formation, and deeply embedded socio-economic inequalities. From the late colonial period, British indirect rule institutionalized religious and regional cleavages by governing the largely Muslim North and predominantly Christian South through distinct administrative and legal frameworks, thereby hardening identities that were previously more fluid [39, 41]. In the post-independence era, these cleavages became entangled with struggles over political power, resource allocation, and national identity, producing recurring cycles of communal and religious violence. Major flashpoints, such as the Maitatsine uprisings of the 1980s, recurrent ethno-religious riots in Kaduna and Jos from the 1990s onward, and the Boko Haram insurgency since 2009, illustrate that religious violence in Nigeria is neither episodic nor reducible to theological extremism alone [42, 43].

Crucially, religion in Nigeria rarely operates in isolation; it intersects with ethnicity, land tenure systems, and the political economy of scarcity. Many violent conflicts labeled as "religious" are in fact rooted in competition over land, indigene-settler dichotomies, access to state resources, and local power structures, with religion serving as a powerful mobilizing frame rather than the primary causal driver [44, 45]. The protracted farmer-herder conflicts across the Middle-Belt region of Nigeria exemplify this dynamic. While these clashes are often narrated as Muslim/Fulani versus Christian farming communities, empirical studies demonstrate that environmental stress, population pressure, the collapse of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, and the proliferation of small arms play decisive roles in escalating violence [46, 47]. Religion, in this context, functions as a symbolic boundary that sharpens perceptions of threat and victimhood.

Patterns of violence and victimization in Nigeria further complicate singular narratives of religious persecution. Different communities experience violence in uneven and context-specific ways, and victimhood is widely dispersed across religious, ethnic, and regional lines. Muslim civilians in the North-East have borne the brunt of Boko Haram's atrocities, while Christian communities in parts of the Middle-Belt and North-West have suffered devastating attacks linked to banditry and communal conflicts. Similarly, security force abuses have affected both Muslim and Christian populations, often exacerbating local grievances and mistrust of the state [48], [49]. These overlapping

patterns of suffering undermine binary framings of violence as a unidirectional campaign against a single religious group and instead point to a broader crisis of governance, security, and social cohesion.

It is within this complex landscape that the application of the genocide label becomes deeply contested domestically. Many Nigerian scholars, civil society actors, and state officials resist the genocide framing not because they deny the scale or brutality of violence, but because they view the term as analytically imprecise and politically destabilizing. Genocide, as defined in international law, implies intent, coordination, and group-specific annihilation; criteria that many argue are not met by Nigeria's fragmented and multi-causal conflicts [50, 51]. Domestically, the label is often perceived as collapsing diverse conflicts into a single moral narrative that obscures local dynamics, delegitimizes state sovereignty, and invites external intervention based on partial readings of reality.

Moreover, the genocide discourse is contested because of its distributive implications for recognition and legitimacy. Labeling violence as genocide against Christians risks hierarchizing suffering, marginalizing other victims, and entrenching zero-sum identity politics within Nigeria's already fragile plural society [52]. As a result, Nigerian resistance to the genocide narrative is not merely defensive nationalism but reflects a broader concern that externally imposed labels may exacerbate internal divisions and foreclose nuanced policy responses. Understanding religious violence in Nigeria, therefore, requires moving beyond reductive categorizations and toward an appreciation of the historical, structural, and political conditions that produce both violence itself and the competing narratives that seek to define it.

Securitizing Christian Victimhood in U.S. Discourse

The securitization of Christian victimhood in U.S. discourse on Nigeria is driven by the converging roles of policymakers, evangelical networks, and religious freedom advocacy organizations that frame violence in Nigeria as a civilizational and moral emergency. Within the U.S. political system, members of Congress, particularly those affiliated with congressional caucuses on religious freedom and Africa, have served as key securitizing actors by introducing resolutions, convening hearings, and issuing public statements that depict Nigerian Christians as facing an existential threat. These political interventions are frequently informed and reinforced by U.S.-based evangelical groups and advocacy organizations such as religious freedom commissions, missionary networks, and human rights NGOs, which provide reports, testimonies, and briefing materials that shape legislative understanding [52, 53]. Through these networks, localized violence in Nigeria is translated into a transnational moral cause embedded within U.S. domestic religious and political imaginaries. Central to this securitization process is the framing of violence as systematic, targeted, and existential. U.S. discourse often portrays attacks on Christian communities as coordinated campaigns aimed at religious extermination, invoking the language of genocide, ethnic cleansing, or religious persecution. This framing aligns closely with securitization theory, in which an issue is elevated from the realm of normal politics to that of existential threat requiring extraordinary measures [15].

By emphasizing intent and inevitability, U.S. actors construct Nigerian Christianity as a referent object under siege, thereby legitimizing calls for punitive measures, diplomatic pressure, or international intervention. The complexity of Nigeria's conflict ecology, encompassing criminal banditry, communal disputes, and state fragility, is often subordinated to a narrative of religious war, which renders violence intelligible through a binary moral lens.

The genocide claims embedded in this discourse are sustained through processes of moralization, simplification, and selective emphasis. Violence against Christians is frequently narrated in emotive terms, highlighting graphic incidents, high casualty figures, and symbolic attacks on churches or clergy, while downplaying or omitting violence suffered by Muslim communities or inflicted by state and non-state actors, irrespective of religion. This selective emphasis does not necessarily stem from empirical falsehood but from narrative prioritization, in which certain victims are rendered hyper-visible while others recede into the background [17].

Moralization further amplifies this effect by casting Nigerian conflicts as struggles between innocent Christian victims and malevolent Muslim aggressors, thereby collapsing political economy, environmental stress, and governance failures into a singular religious explanation. Such framing enhances mobilization potential within U.S. audiences but risks epistemic reductionism. Audience reception within U.S. political institutions is a critical, though often under-examined, dimension of this securitization process. Congressional uptake of the genocide narrative demonstrates that securitization is not merely articulated but accepted by key audiences whose endorsement confers policy legitimacy. Hearings, resolutions, and policy recommendations, such as Nigeria's designation on religious freedom watch lists, reflect institutional validation of the victimhood frame [54, 55].

This acceptance is facilitated by pre-existing U.S. discursive traditions that prioritize religious freedom as a core moral value and view Christian persecution globally through a redemptive and interventionist lens [56]. Within this context, counter-narratives offered by Nigerian officials or scholars often struggle to gain traction, as they clash with entrenched moral expectations and domestic political incentives in the United States.

Taken together, the securitization of Christian victimhood in U.S. discourse illustrates how narratives of suffering are transformed into instruments of foreign policy and moral authority. By framing Nigerian violence as genocide against Christians, U.S. actors do not merely describe reality but actively reconstitute it in ways that authorize specific political responses, marginalize alternative interpretations, and reconfigure power relations between the United States and Nigeria. Understanding this process is essential to unpacking the broader politics of narrative ownership at the heart of U.S.-Nigeria relations.

Nigeria's Sovereign Response to U.S Genocide Narrative

Nigeria's response to genocide narratives emanating from the United States has not been abstract or merely rhetorical; rather, it has been articulated through concrete diplomatic statements, presidential interventions, ministerial briefings, and sustained engagement with U.S. institutions. These responses collectively constitute a coherent sovereign strategy aimed at resisting the securitization of Christian victimhood and reclaiming narrative authority over Nigeria's internal security challenges.

Official rejection of the genocide label has been the most visible and consistent element of Nigeria's response. On multiple occasions, the Federal Government of Nigeria, speaking through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, has categorically dismissed claims that violence in Nigeria amounts to genocide against Christians. In reacting to U.S. congressional debates and advocacy-driven reports, government spokespersons emphasized that insecurity in Nigeria is neither religiously exclusive nor state-sponsored. Statements issued in response to Nigeria's inclusion on U.S. religious freedom watchlists stressed that victims of terrorism and banditry include Christians, Muslims, and adherents of traditional religions alike, and that portraying the crisis as a one-sided religious extermination is factually misleading and politically dangerous [57]. By foregrounding the plural character of victimhood, the Nigerian state directly contests the moral hierarchy implied in genocide narratives.

Presidential interventions have further reinforced this sovereign posture. President Bola Ahmed Tinubu publicly rejected portrayals of Nigeria as a country complicit in religious persecution, affirming that Nigeria's constitution guarantees freedom of religion and that his administration does not, and will not, tolerate violence against any faith community. While welcoming security cooperation with the United States, Tinubu made clear that such engagement must be premised on mutual respect and accurate understanding, not on labels that undermine Nigeria's legitimacy or invite interventionist pressures. This dual posture, openness to cooperation coupled with rejection of delegitimizing narratives, illustrates how sovereignty is asserted not through isolation, but through conditional engagement [58]. Beyond outright rejection, Nigerian officials have consistently reframed violence as complex, multi-causal insecurity. Government briefings by the Ministry of Information and national security officials have highlighted terrorism, banditry, farmer–herder conflicts, arms proliferation, climate stress, and regional instability as interacting drivers of violence. In responding to U.S. congressional hearings that framed attacks as evidence of coordinated religious persecution, Nigerian authorities argued that such simplifications erase the structural roots of insecurity and risk inflaming sectarian tensions domestically [59]. This reframing is analytically significant: it represents an effort to shift violence out of the realm of existential religious threat and back into the domain of governance, development, and law enforcement. Diplomatic pushback has also been central to Nigeria's response, particularly where genocide narratives are perceived as injurious to national image. Nigerian diplomats have warned that genocide labeling portrays the country as either incapable or unwilling to protect its citizens, a characterization that carries reputational and material consequences in an international system where moral discourse increasingly shapes policy outcomes. From Abuja's perspective, such narratives risk positioning Nigeria within the category of morally deviant or failed states, thereby legitimizing external pressure under humanitarian pretexts [60]. Consequently, Nigeria's resistance is as much about protecting its international standing as it is about contesting empirical claims. Importantly, Nigeria's response has not been purely defensive. Senior security officials, including the National Security Adviser, have engaged U.S. counterparts in high-level discussions aimed at redirecting attention from accusatory framing to practical security cooperation. These engagements underscore a strategic attempt to neutralize the genocide narrative by embedding Nigeria within shared counter-terrorism and regional security frameworks, rather than allowing the relationship to be defined by moral condemnation alone. In securitization terms, this represents a move to *desecuritize* the genocide claim while re-securitizing terrorism and transnational crime as common threats. Analytically, these actions collectively amount to counter-securitization, a deliberate strategy through which a state resists external efforts to define its internal challenges as existential moral failures requiring extraordinary international action. By rejecting the genocide label, reframing violence as multi-dimensional, defending constitutional secularism, and engaging diplomatically on its own terms, Nigeria seeks to reclaim control over both meaning and response [61, 62]. Counter-securitization thus functions as a strategy of state survival in an unequal narrative order, where the power to name suffering often translates into the power to intervene. Ultimately, Nigeria's sovereign response reveals that the struggle is not over whether violence exists; its scale and brutality are widely acknowledged, but over who owns the authority to define that violence. In resisting U.S. genocide narratives, Nigeria is asserting not denial, but distinction: between acknowledgment and exaggeration, between cooperation and subordination, and between global concern and narrative domination. This contest over meaning lies at the heart of the politics of securitization, sovereignty, and U.S.–Nigeria relations.

Implications for U.S.–Nigeria Relations and Security Cooperation

The securitization of Christian victimhood and Nigeria's countervailing sovereign responses has generated palpable diplomatic tensions and trust deficits in U.S.–Nigeria relations. At the diplomatic level, genocide narratives circulating within U.S. policy and advocacy circles are perceived in Nigeria as signals of moral judgment and political distrust, casting Nigeria less as a strategic partner and more as a subject of international censure.

This perception complicates bilateral engagement by introducing suspicion into routine diplomatic exchanges, as Nigerian officials increasingly question the neutrality and intent behind U.S. human rights rhetoric. For the United States, meanwhile, Nigeria's resistance to the genocide label is sometimes interpreted as denial or defensiveness,

reinforcing mutual misperceptions and narrowing the space for cooperative and unfettered dialogue. The result is a relational environment in which cooperation persists, but is encumbered by narrative friction and declining epistemic trust. These tensions have direct consequences for security assistance and counterterrorism cooperation, areas traditionally central to U.S.–Nigeria relations. While both states share strategic interests in combating Boko Haram, Islamic State–West Africa Province (ISWAP), and transnational criminal networks, securitized human rights narratives risk politicizing security collaboration. U.S. congressional pressure, often driven by advocacy claims of Christian persecution, has periodically constrained arms sales, military assistance, and intelligence-sharing arrangements with Nigeria, citing concerns about complicity or misuse [63, 64]. From Nigeria’s perspective, such constraints are viewed as punitive and disconnected from operational realities, potentially undermining battlefield effectiveness and incentivizing diversification toward alternative security partners such as Russia, China, or Turkey. Thus, securitization does not merely shape discourse; it recalibrates Nigeria’s strategic calculations in ways that may dilute U.S. influence.

Human rights conditionality has emerged as a critical mechanism through which genocide narratives translate into foreign policy leverage. The framing of violence as religious genocide strengthens the moral basis for conditioning aid, imposing sanctions, or issuing watchlist designations, thereby transforming human rights from a normative concern into an instrument of pressure. While conditionality is justified in U.S. policy discourse as a means of promoting accountability and protection of civilians, Nigerian officials often interpret it as asymmetrical coercion that ignores domestic complexity and disproportionately amplifies select victim narratives [60]. This dynamic risks entrenching adversarial postures, where compliance is performed for reputational relief rather than genuine reform, and where sovereignty becomes a defensive shield rather than a platform for collaborative problem-solving.

Beyond the bilateral arena, these dynamics carry broader implications for Africa–West relations. Nigeria’s experience reflects a wider pattern in which African states confront externally generated moral narratives that securitize internal conflicts and justify interventionist or conditional engagements. The contest over genocide labeling underscores enduring asymmetries in narrative power, where Western actors often retain disproportionate authority to define crises, victims, and appropriate responses [65]. As African states increasingly resist these framings, emphasizing context, complexity, and sovereignty, Africa–West relations risk the shift toward more transactional and pluralized partnerships. In this evolving landscape, Western insistence on singular moral narratives risks accelerating Africa’s diplomatic diversification and weakening the normative appeal of liberal interventionism. In real terms, the securitization of Christian victimhood has implications that extend well beyond discourse. It reshapes diplomatic trust, conditions security cooperation, and reconfigures the balance between human rights advocacy and sovereign autonomy. For U.S.–Nigeria relations, the challenge lies in reconciling legitimate human rights concerns with the need for epistemic humility and strategic partnership. More broadly, the episode illustrates how struggles over narrative ownership increasingly function as fault lines in Africa–West relations, with lasting consequences for cooperation, influence, and global security governance.

Power, Knowledge, and the Ownership of Atrocity Narratives

The contest over genocide narratives in U.S.–Nigeria relations reveals that atrocity discourse is not merely a moral or legal exercise, but a profound site of power struggle over meaning, authority, and political consequence. To name violence as genocide is to do more than describe suffering; it is to claim epistemic privilege over how violence is understood, who is authorized to speak for victims, and what forms of response are deemed legitimate. In this sense, genocide discourse operates as a technology of power, conferring moral authority on those who successfully impose their framing while simultaneously constraining the interpretive space available to others. Within the U.S.–Nigeria context, the struggle over narrative ownership exposes asymmetries in global knowledge production, where Western political and advocacy institutions possess disproportionate capacity to universalize particular readings of violence and elevate them to policy-relevant truths. The securitization of Christian victimhood illustrates how power circulates through selective recognition of suffering. U.S. policymakers, evangelical networks, and advocacy organizations gain symbolic and political capital by positioning themselves as defenders of persecuted Christians, translating moral outrage into legislative action, diplomatic leverage, and domestic political mobilization. This process also benefits actors who seek to simplify complex conflicts into morally legible stories capable of generating urgency and audience acceptance. Conversely, Nigerian state institutions and non-Christian victims often lose narrative visibility and agency. Their experiences are either subsumed within a dominant victimhood frame or rendered secondary to a hierarchy of suffering that privileges religious identity over other axes of vulnerability [66]. Thus, securitized victimhood redistributes recognition unevenly, producing winners and losers in the global economy of moral attention. The dangers of narrative absolutism become particularly acute in contexts such as Nigeria, where violence is multi-layered, decentralized, and driven by intersecting structural forces [67]. Genocide narratives, by their nature, tend toward totalization: they require clear perpetrators, coherent intent, and bounded victim groups [68]. When applied uncritically, such narratives risk collapsing ambiguity into certainty and complexity into moral binaries. This absolutism not only obscures intra-group variation and cross-cutting victimization but also forecloses policy options by framing violence as a problem solvable only through exceptional measures. In Nigeria’s case, narrative absolutism risks inflaming sectarian identities, legitimizing external pressure divorced from local realities, and undermining indigenous mechanisms of conflict management. The moral clarity promised by genocide discourse thus comes at the cost of analytical precision and political prudence.

These dynamics carry important theoretical implications for both securitization theory and genocide studies. For securitization theory, the Nigerian case underscores the need to move beyond a one-directional focus on successful securitizing moves to examine resistance, contestation, and counter-securitization by target states.

It demonstrates that securitization is not a settled outcome but an ongoing struggle in which authority, audience acceptance, and narrative credibility are continuously negotiated [69]. For genocide studies, the case challenges the tendency to treat genocide as a purely legal or empirical classification detached from politics. Instead, it highlights genocide labeling as a socially constructed and strategically deployed category whose power lies as much in its political effects as in its descriptive accuracy [70]. Ultimately, the ownership of atrocity narratives is inseparable from broader questions of power and knowledge in global politics. Who gets to define genocide, whose suffering is amplified, and which responses are legitimized are all shaped by unequal structures of voice and authority. The Nigerian experience illustrates that resisting genocide narratives is not necessarily an act of denial, but may constitute a struggle for epistemic sovereignty in a world where moral discourse increasingly functions as an instrument of governance [71]. Recognizing this does not diminish the reality of suffering; rather, it calls for greater reflexivity in how atrocity narratives are produced, mobilized, and institutionalized across international political spaces.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined the politics of genocide narratives in U.S.–Nigeria relations through the analytical lenses of securitization, sovereignty, and discourse. It has been shown that claims of a “Christian genocide” in Nigeria are not neutral descriptions of violence, but politically consequential narratives produced, circulated, and contested within asymmetrical global power relations. The analysis demonstrated how U.S. policymakers, evangelical actors, and advocacy organizations securitize Christian victimhood by framing violence as systematic, existential, and morally urgent, while the Nigerian state responds through resistance, reframing, and counter-securitization. At the heart of this interaction lies a struggle over meaning: not whether violence exists, but how it is interpreted, who speaks authoritatively about it, and what responses such interpretations authorize.

In answering the central question of “who owns the genocide narrative,” the study found that ownership is neither fixed nor uncontested. While U.S. political and advocacy institutions enjoy disproportionate narrative power, derived from their global moral authority, media reach, and policy-setting capacity, this ownership is actively resisted by Nigeria through assertions of sovereignty, epistemic counter-claims, and diplomatic engagement. Genocide narratives, therefore, do not simply belong to those who invoke them most loudly but are continuously negotiated across sites of power, audience acceptance, and institutional legitimacy. Ownership, in this sense, is relational: it emerges from the ability to make a narrative stick, to institutionalize it, and to defend it against counter-framings.

The article contributes to theory, policy, and African security scholarship in several important ways. Theoretically, it extends securitization theory by foregrounding counter-securitization and narrative resistance as central, rather than peripheral, dynamics in international politics. It also contributes to genocide studies by treating genocide labeling as a political act embedded in power relations, rather than as a purely legal or empirical determination. For policy, the study highlights the unintended consequences of narrative absolutism, showing how simplified moral framings can undermine trust, distort security cooperation, and weaken the very protections they seek to advance. Within African security scholarship, the article offers a context-sensitive account of violence that resists reductive explanations and centers African agency in the interpretation of conflict. Based on these findings, the article recommends more nuanced engagement with religious violence in Nigeria and similar contexts. First, international actors should avoid singular narratives that hierarchize victimhood and instead adopt multi-causal frameworks that reflect the intersection of religion, political economy, environment, and governance. Second, human rights advocacy should be decoupled from securitized labeling that forecloses dialogue and incentivizes defensive sovereignty. Third, U.S.–Nigeria engagement would benefit from privileging epistemic humility, collaborative knowledge production, and sustained security cooperation over moralized pressure. Finally, scholars and policymakers alike must recognize that atrocity narratives are not merely descriptive tools but instruments of power, requiring careful, reflexive, and context-aware deployment.

In conclusion, the struggle over the genocide narrative in Nigeria illuminates a broader truth about contemporary global politics: that the power to name suffering is inseparable from the power to govern responses to it. A more just and effective international engagement with violence in Africa will depend not on who speaks loudest, but on whose knowledge is heard, whose complexity is acknowledged, and whose sovereignty is respected.

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