

MP-IDSA *Commentary*

US-Nigeria Counter-Terror Cooperation

Miruthulani Murali

July 30, 2026

Summary

US–Nigeria counter-terrorism cooperation, with positive operational outcomes, offers lessons for developing resilient and sustainable regional counter-terrorism partnerships in Africa.

The US Africa Command (AFRICOM) on 16 May 2026 stated that in a joint campaign with Nigerian forces in north-eastern Nigeria, Abu-Bilal al-Minuki, head of ISIS global operations, along with other senior ISIS terrorists, were killed.¹ Leveraging US intelligence capabilities, the largely Nigeria-led ground forces benefitted from American advanced surveillance, intelligence analysis and joint planning. AFRICOM Commander Gen. Dagvin Anderson had earlier in January 2026 posited that this kind of collaboration could be a model for future security cooperation in Africa.²

This new approach has proven particularly effective in the Lake Chad basin, where violent extremist organisations make full use of the treacherous terrain and porous international borders to carry out their attacks. In these operational environments, intelligence fusion and coordinated planning help improve situational awareness, strengthen operational decision-making, and enhance partner-state capacity-building without requiring a longer or prolonged foreign military deployment. Taken together, these developments suggest that intelligence has evolved from providing a supporting role into a key operational imperative in contemporary counter-terrorism cooperation.

The US and Nigeria had launched a joint counter-terrorism operation in late December last year, which targeted Islamic State of West Africa Province (ISWAP), Boko Haram, and other armed bandit groups operating in the region. US forces, in coordination with Nigerian authorities, conducted strikes against ISWAP in Sokoto State, Nigeria, on Christmas Day of 2025.³ This was followed by a major joint military offensive in north-eastern Nigeria in May 2026. Combining Special Forces raids and several rounds of airstrikes, the operations killed many jihadists and destroyed terrorist infrastructure in the region.⁴

The vaunted success of the present phase of US–Nigeria joint operations ironically came in the wake of tensions between the two countries. US Senator Ted Cruz raised alarm over what he characterised as an ongoing “Christian genocide” in

¹ [**“ISIS Number Two Killed in Nigeria”**](#), U.S. Africa Command Public Affairs website, 16 May 2026.

² [**“Joint Statement at the End of the First Session of the US-Nigeria Joint Working Group to Address Nigeria’s Country of Particular Concern Designation”**](#), U.S. Embassy and Consulate in Nigeria, 22 January 2026.

³ Gregory Svirnovskiy, [**“US Forces Launch Christmas Strike on ISIS in Nigeria, Trump Says”**](#), *Politico*, 25 December 2025.

⁴ Johnson Eyiango, [**“175 Boko Haram/ISWAP Fighters Eliminated in Nigeria-US Joint Operations – DHQ”**](#), *The Guardian Nigeria*, 19 May 2026.

Nigeria.⁵ However, Gimba Kakanda, Senior Special Assistant to the President of Nigeria on Research and Analytics, argued that this characterisation oversimplified a far more complex issue, rooted in ethnic rivalries, land disputes, and resource competition rather than deliberate religious persecution.⁶ Notably, Boko Haram and ISWAP victims have included both Christians and Muslims. In his response, Nigerian President Bola Tinubu noted that the security challenges facing his country did not constitute a war against any particular religion. He countered that “portraying Nigeria’s security challenges as a targeted campaign against a single religious group is a gross misrepresentation of reality”.⁷

Despite these statements, US President Donald Trump designated Nigeria as a ‘Country of Particular Concern’ in November 2025 due to concerns about religious freedom.⁸ The designation highlighted the differing interpretations in Washington and Abuja of Nigeria’s security crisis, with the former placing greater emphasis on religious freedom concerns. At the same time, the latter argued that the violence stemmed from a broader combination of insurgency, criminality and local conflicts.

Meanwhile, the Global Terrorism Index of 2026 found Nigeria to have recorded the largest increase in terrorism-related fatalities worldwide in 2025, which registered a 46 per cent spike, with the death toll rising to 750 that year.⁹ The terror killings have been mainly attributed to two terrorist groups—the ISWAP and Boko Haram—which reportedly carried out 80 per cent of all terrorism-related deaths in the country.¹⁰ When considered collectively, these developments indicate that Nigeria’s security situation has grown increasingly complex, with persistent terrorist activity continuing to shape both external engagement and domestic security priorities.

Nevertheless, despite Trump’s designation of Nigeria as a ‘country of particular concern’, bilateral cooperation in counter-terrorism efforts continued to deepen. In February this year, the US even promised to supply Nigeria with 12 A-29 Super Tucano light attack aircraft and 12 AH-1Z attack helicopters, in addition to funding

⁵ Bābā Ayé, [**“Tall Tales of Genocide in Nigeria: Political Hypocrisy Amidst Systemic Crisis”**](#), *Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research*, 25 November 2025.

⁶ Gimba Kakanda, [**“No, Bill Maher, There is No ‘Christian Genocide’ in Nigeria”**](#), *Al Jazeera*, 2 October 2025.

⁷ Shola Lawal, [**“Ted Cruz Blames Nigeria for ‘Mass Murder’ of Christians: What’s the Truth?”**](#), *Al Jazeera*, 8 October 2025.

⁸ [**“Naming of Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern is an Important Step to Advance Religious Freedom”**](#), U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), 3 November 2025.

⁹ [**“Global Terrorism Index 2026”**](#), *Relief Web*, 30 March 2026.

¹⁰ [**“How Terror Groups are Now Using AI to Improve Attacks”**](#), *Vision of Humanity*, 15 July 2026.

to modernise counter-terrorism facilities at Kainji Air Base to support the Tucano planes.¹¹

On 2 July 2026, meanwhile, the US announced the withdrawal of military personnel deployed to Nigeria for a temporary counter-terrorism (CT) mission in the Lake Chad basin.¹² While Washington stated that its security cooperation and intelligence sharing with the Nigerian government will continue, the Nigerian Defence Headquarters (DHQ) denied a complete US troop withdrawal. DHQ stated that roughly 200 US military advisors have been redeployed to provide enhanced counter-terrorism training, technical support and intelligence sharing.¹³ Samaila Uba, spokesperson for the Defence Headquarters of Nigeria, recently said the US advisors were in the country for training purposes and will not engage in combat or have a direct operational role. He maintained that Nigerian forces will maintain complete command authority.¹⁴

Notably, while Nigeria has strengthened its counter-terrorism cooperation with the United States, US counter-terrorism efforts in Niger collapsed after the government terminated security agreements and then withdrew all US forces in 2024.¹⁵ Following a 2023 political coup, the US Department of Defense officially completed its withdrawal from both Air Base 101 in Niamey and Air Base 201 in Agadez, bringing to an end US drone surveillance and ground training operations in Niger.¹⁶ The contrasting experiences of Nigeria and Niger show that political stability, host-government approval, and strategic alignment are just as important to the long-term viability of external security alliances.

The collapse of US counter-terrorism engagement in Niger, following a political coup, serves as a stark reminder that security partnerships built on fragile political foundations are vulnerable to rapid reversal. However, from a regional standpoint, the US–Nigeria effort in 2026 shows that, even amid broader political concerns, meaningful and operationally significant collaboration remains achievable.

¹¹ Redacción Zona Militar, [**“The United States Moves Forward with the Delivery of 12 AH-1Z Viper Attack Helicopters to the Nigerian Air Force”**](#), *Zona Militar*, 26 February 2026.

¹² [**“US Withdrew Forces from Nigeria After Operation Against ISIS, AFRICOM Chief Says”**](#), *Reuters*, 3 July 2026.

¹³ Tolu, [**“DHQ Denies Complete US Troop Withdrawal From Nigeria”**](#), *The Matrix*, 3 July 2026.

¹⁴ Camillus Eboh, [**“US Troops to Nigeria Will Avoid Combat, Focus on Training, Military Says”**](#), *Reuters*, 11 February 2026.

¹⁵ [**“US Military Says It Completes Niger Withdrawal”**](#), *Reuters*, 17 September 2024.

¹⁶ [**“U.S. Withdrawal from Niger Completed”**](#), U.S. Africa Command Public Affairs, 16 September 2024.

The US–Nigeria counter-terrorism cooperation, with positive operational outcomes, offers lessons for developing resilient, sustainable counter-terrorism partnerships across the Lake Chad Basin and the wider African security landscape. The experience underscores the value of intelligence sharing, partner-led ground operations, targeted military aid, and long-term capacity-building in countering evolving terrorist threats, rather than depending on protracted overseas military deployments, which are politically costly and logistically unsustainable.

The capacity of regional partners to oversee operations with outside intelligence support will become more crucial as terrorist groups in the area continue to modify their strategies and take advantage of ungoverned areas. In this sense, the 2026 campaign might serve as a model rather than a conclusion; if institutionalised through a multilateral framework like the Multinational Joint Task Force and the Lake Chad Basin Commission, it could provide a more resilient paradigm for regional security cooperation in Africa.

About the Author

Ms. Miruthulani Murali is Research Intern at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi.

Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses is a non-partisan, autonomous body dedicated to objective research and policy relevant studies on all aspects of defence and security. Its mission is to promote national and international security through the generation and dissemination of knowledge on defence and security-related issues.

Disclaimer: Views expressed in Manohar Parrikar IDSA's publications and on its website are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Manohar Parrikar IDSA or the Government of India.

© Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA) 2026