

Opinions of U.S. anti-terrorism policy splits along religious lines in Nigeria

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Nigerian Christians and Muslims were divided along religious lines when it came to the U.S. war on terrorism, according to survey results released Wednesday.

A U.S. group lobbying for more attention to public opinion in areas it sees as prone to terrorism arranged for a random survey of more than 5,000 people across Nigeria's 36 states.

Africa's most populous nation, Nigeria has deep rifts between its primarily Muslim north and its the Christian south. The country's 130 million people are roughly evenly split between the two religions.

Washington-based Terror Free Tomorrow said more than half Nigeria's Muslims were opposed to U.S. anti-terrorism efforts, compared with 14 percent of Christians.

Forty-four percent of Nigerian Muslims said that suicide bombings were often or sometimes acceptable to defend Islam, a figure that fell to 31 percent among Christians, according to the survey.

Nigeria has seen frequent clashes between Muslims and Christians when religion and politics have intersected. During clashes in the central city of Onitsha earlier this year, more than 100 people died.

Many fear that the tens of millions of impoverished Nigerians might provide a ripe breeding ground for terrorist recruitment.

Al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden declared Nigeria ripe for liberation in 2003. Monday, the government charged a Nigerian man with recruiting and training members of al-Qaida to attack Americans citizens in Nigeria.

Nigeria is no stranger to orchestrated violence, though motivations are varied. Armed gangs have mounted attacks on oil installations in the south seeking everything from ransoms to political influence, and sharply cutting the country's oil production in the meantime.

The survey found that one in four Nigerians support such attacks, rising to more than a third of those living in the impoverished oil region.

Ken Ballen, the head of Terror Free Tomorrow, said the survey showed that Americans needed to engage with groups in Nigeria who might threaten strategic interests, perhaps by offering increased aid. He said post-tsunami aid in Indonesia greatly improved public opinion about the U.S. there.

The group — which counts U.S. Senator John McCain on its advisory board — pushes for the United States to work to gain the public's trust in areas seen as potential terrorism hotspots. It hired a local company, RMS Ltd of Lagos, to personally interview Nigerians in each state, in locations randomly selected from street maps and weighted to represent the country's demographic makeup. The margin of error was 1.38 percent.