

Between *Fitnah* and *Ṣulḥ*: An Islamic Analysis of Religion as a Catalyst for Conflict and an Instrument of Sustainable Peacebuilding in Nigeria

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Abstract

Religion plays an ambivalent role in Nigeria, serving both as a catalyst for conflict and a resource for sustainable peacebuilding. This study examines the instrumentalization of religion in Nigerian conflicts and explores the contribution of Islamic concepts of *fitnah* (discord) and *ṣulḥ* (reconciliation) to understanding religious violence and peacebuilding. Employing a qualitative, multi-source documentary approach, the study analyzes scholarly literature, media reports, institutional documents, and public statements, including those associated with the 2025 Northern Ulama Summit. The findings indicate that religiously framed conflicts, including the Boko Haram insurgency and farmer-herder violence, are shaped by the interaction of religious narratives, political competition, socio-economic inequalities, and governance failures. Conversely, Islamic ethical principles and faith-based initiatives provide resources for mediation, interfaith dialogue, and communal reconciliation. Sustainable peace therefore requires responsible religious leadership, inclusive dialogue, social justice, and accountable governance. The study contributes an integrated *fitnah-ṣulḥ* analytical framework that connects the processes of religious instrumentalization and conflict escalation with ethical approaches to reconciliation. This framework offers a context-sensitive perspective for examining religion's contrasting roles in Nigeria's conflict and peacebuilding dynamics.

Keywords: *Religion and Conflict, Fitnah, Ṣulḥ, Peacebuilding, Nigeria.*

INTRODUCTION

Religion occupies a central position in Nigeria's social, cultural, and political life. It provides moral guidance, shapes communal identities, and influences public discourse, yet it has also been implicated in various forms of violent conflict. In a religiously plural society where faith identities frequently intersect with ethnicity, political interests, and socio-economic grievances, religious narratives may be mobilized either to deepen social divisions or to promote reconciliation and peaceful coexistence. Since the return to democratic rule in 1999, Nigeria has experienced recurrent ethno-religious tensions, sectarian conflicts, extremist violence, and communal disputes, alongside numerous

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religiously inspired initiatives aimed at mediation, dialogue, and peacebuilding.

This apparent contradiction provides the central problem addressed by this study. Religion should neither be treated as inherently conflict-producing nor romanticized as inherently peace-promoting. Rather, its social consequences depend significantly on how religious beliefs, institutions, leaders, and identities are interpreted and mobilized within particular political and socio-economic contexts. Existing conflicts involving Boko Haram, farmer–herder violence, sectarian tensions, and communal disputes demonstrate that religious language can become intertwined with political competition, economic marginalization, identity politics, governance failures, and misinformation. At the same time, Islamic and other religious traditions provide ethical resources for reconciliation, justice, dialogue, forgiveness, and restoration of social relationships.

Previous studies have examined the complex relationship between religion, conflict, and peacebuilding in Nigeria from different perspectives. Jatau and Maza (2023) investigated the relationship between religion, democracy, and peace, highlighting the ways religious affiliations and political interests intersect within Nigeria’s democratic environment.¹ Similarly, Araba et al. (2025) explored the interplay between religion and conflict, emphasizing the contributions of religious leaders, faith-based organizations, and interfaith dialogue to sustainable peacebuilding.² Gambo et al. (2025) examined ethno-religious violence and peacebuilding approaches in Jos, Plateau State, providing a more localized perspective on conflict dynamics and reconciliation efforts.³ These studies demonstrate that religious conflict cannot be adequately understood independently of its political, social, and institutional contexts.

Other studies have focused more specifically on the practical mechanisms through which religious actors contribute to conflict resolution. Shaibu and Praise (2025) examined the role of the Interfaith Mediation Centre in resolving religious and ethnic conflicts in Kaduna North, identifying the significance of interfaith dialogue, community engagement, and conflict resolution initiatives.⁴ Saleh (2022) similarly investigated the role of the Interfaith Mediation Centre in managing farmer–herder conflicts in Bauchi State.⁵ Meanwhile, Farman and Yucel (2023) reconsidered the Treaty of Hudaybiyyah in relation to early Islamic experiences of *fitan*, demonstrating the relevance of Islamic

¹ Victoria Jatau and Kangdim Dingji Maza, “Democracy, Peace, and Religion in Nigeria: Can Religion Be Used to Consolidate or Undermine Democracy and Peace?,” *Religions* 14, no. 10 (2023): 1305, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14101305>.

² Akeem Ayanda Araba et al., “The Interplay of Religion and Conflict: Pathways to Sustainable Peace Building in Nigeria,” *Wukari International Studies Journal* 9, no. 3 (2025): 50–60.

³ J. Gambo et al., “Ethno-Religious Violence and Peacebuilding Approaches in Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria,” *African Journal of Stability and Development* 17, no. 1 (2025): 108–31, <https://doi.org/10.53982/ajsd.2025.1701.06-j>.

⁴ Margaret Aladi Shaibu and Aboki Linda Praise, “The Interfaith Mediation Centre and Conflict Resolution in Kaduna North Local Government, 2002–2023,” *UZU: UNIZIK Journal of History and International Studies* 11, no. 1 (2025): 102–17.

⁵ Musa Saleh, “Role of Interfaith Mediation Centre in Managing Conflict between Farmers and Herdsmen in Bauchi State, Nigeria,” *Journal of African History, Culture and Arts* 2, no. 2 (2022): 110–23, <https://doi.org/10.57040/jahca.v2i2.203>.

historical traditions to discussions of conflict and reconciliation.⁶ Collectively, these studies provide important historical, institutional, and practical perspectives on religious peacebuilding.

Despite these contributions, the existing literature examined in this study tends to address the political dimensions of religious conflict, the activities of faith-based organizations, or Islamic traditions of reconciliation as relatively distinct areas of inquiry. Less explicit attention has been given to integrating the Islamic concepts of *fitnah* and *ṣulh* within a single analytical framework for explaining how religious identities and institutions may contribute to conflict escalation while also offering ethical resources for reconciliation. This analytical limitation is particularly relevant in Nigeria, where religiously framed violence and religious peacebuilding initiatives frequently emerge within overlapping political, economic, and communal contexts.

Against this background, the study employs the Islamic concepts of *fitnah* and *ṣulh* as complementary analytical lenses. *Fitnah*, in its relevant socio-political sense, provides a framework for examining discord, social disruption, and the destructive instrumentalization of religious identity. *Ṣulh*, by contrast, provides an Islamic framework for reconciliation, mediation, restoration of relationships, and the pursuit of social harmony. The juxtaposition of these concepts enables the study to examine how religion may contribute to conflict while simultaneously providing resources for transforming conflict and building sustainable peace.

The originality of this study lies in its integrated interpretation of *fitnah* and *ṣulh* as complementary dimensions of religious conflict and peacebuilding within the Nigerian context. Rather than examining religious violence and religious reconciliation as disconnected phenomena, the study brings together Islamic ethical concepts, historical conflict dynamics, and contemporary religious peacebuilding practices. This approach seeks to clarify the conditions under which religious identities may be instrumentalized to intensify social divisions and the ways Islamic principles of justice, reconciliation, compassion, and consultation may support constructive responses to such divisions. The proposed analytical perspective is intended as a context-sensitive conceptual contribution rather than a universally validated model of conflict resolution.

The study therefore focuses on the relationship between religion, conflict, and peacebuilding in Nigeria. Particular attention is given to the ways religious actors and institutions respond to violent conflict, the structural conditions within which religious narratives are mobilized, and the extent to which Islamic principles of reconciliation can contribute to sustainable peace. Contemporary initiatives involving interfaith dialogue, intra-faith reconciliation, religious mediation, and the public interventions of Islamic scholars are considered alongside the broader political and socio-economic conditions that shape conflict and peacebuilding.

Accordingly, this study addresses three interrelated research questions concerning the ambivalent role of religion in Nigeria. First, it examines how the concept of *fitnah* can

⁶ Mursal Farman and Salih Yucel, "Rereading the Hudaybiyya Treaty: With Special Reference to Ibn 'Umar's Role in Fitan," *Religions* 14, no. 5 (2023): 666, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14050666>.

explain the instrumentalization of religion in Nigerian conflicts, particularly when religious identities and narratives are mobilized to intensify social divisions and violence. Second, it investigates how the concept of *ṣulḥ* is utilized in Islamic peacebuilding practices, including mediation, dialogue, and reconciliation initiatives. Third, it explores the socio-political conditions necessary for religion to function as a source of sustainable peace rather than a catalyst for conflict. These questions provide the analytical direction for understanding the relationship between religious conflict, Islamic ethical principles, and the pursuit of peaceful coexistence in Nigeria.

By addressing these questions, the study seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of religion in Nigeria, emphasizing both its potential for social disruption and its capacity for reconciliation and peacebuilding. It argues that sustainable peace requires more than the suppression of religiously framed conflict; it also requires responsible religious leadership, constructive interfaith and intra-faith engagement, social justice, accountable governance, and the deliberate mobilization of religious ethical resources for peaceful coexistence.

The Ambivalence of Religion in Nigeria

Religion in Nigeria operates as an ambivalent social force, functioning both as a potential catalyst for conflict (*fitnah*) and as a resource for sustainable peacebuilding (*ṣulḥ*). This duality has become particularly evident since the return to democratic governance in 1999, when religious identities increasingly intersected with political competition, ethnic affiliations, and socio-economic inequalities. The Boko Haram insurgency, recurrent farmer–herder conflicts, and sectarian tensions demonstrate how religious narratives may become entangled with struggles over political authority, access to resources, and communal recognition. Nevertheless, these conflicts cannot be explained through theological differences alone, since political marginalization, weak governance, and structural inequalities also shape their emergence and escalation.⁷

Within Nigerian Islam, diverse religious orientations, including Sunni, Shia, Sufi, and Salafi traditions, reflect different theological interpretations, institutional affiliations, and approaches to social engagement. Although these differences may occasionally contribute to religious competition, they should not be equated with violent extremism. The emergence of Boko Haram illustrates a more specific process in which extremist religious interpretations become associated with political grievances and institutional instability. Bose and Usman (2025) examine the relationship between Islamic reform movements and the Boko Haram phenomenon, highlighting the importance of historical and ideological contexts in understanding contemporary religious mobilization.⁸ Such developments suggest that the conflict-producing potential of religion is conditioned by

⁷ Jatau and Maza, “Democracy, Peace, and Religion in Nigeria: Can Religion Be Used to Consolidate or Undermine Democracy and Peace?”; Onome Alex Onohworemu and Abraham O. Egbadju, “Nigeria and the Challenges of Terrorism in the 21st Century,” *Qualitative Research of Business and Social Sciences* 3, no. 1 (2025): 67–78, <https://doi.org/10.31316/crobss.v3i1.8525>.

⁸ Hamza Muhammed Bose and Adamu Babayo Usman, “Reassessing Islamic Reform Movements in Northern Nigeria: The 1804 Sokoto Jihad and the Boko Haram Phenomenon,” *International Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies Research* 10, no. 6 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.70382/nijhcsr.v10i6.013>.

the ways religious identities and interpretations are employed within particular political and social circumstances.

The ambivalence of religion is not restricted to Islam. Christianity and African Traditional Religions also possess ethical traditions and communal institutions capable of promoting reconciliation, while their adherents may experience divisions associated with leadership, identity, and political interests. Islamic principles of mediation and consultation, Christian teachings concerning forgiveness and social justice, and communal practices associated with African Traditional Religions may contribute to dialogue and peaceful coexistence. Araba et al. (2025) emphasize the contributions of religious leaders, faith-based organizations, and interfaith engagement to reconciliation in Nigeria.⁹ Consequently, the capacity of religion to promote either conflict or peace should be understood as context-dependent rather than as an inherent characteristic of any particular religious tradition.

Religious peacebuilding initiatives further demonstrate this ambivalence. The activities of the Interfaith Mediation Centre in Kaduna and Bauchi illustrate how religious institutions may mobilize their moral authority and community networks to facilitate dialogue, mediate disputes, and rebuild social trust.¹⁰ Such initiatives suggest that religion can contribute constructively to peacebuilding when its ethical resources are supported by responsible leadership, inclusive participation, and appropriate institutional arrangements.

Defining *Fitnah* and *Ṣulh* in the Nigerian Context

The Arabic term *fitnah* has multiple meanings in Islamic discourse, including trial, temptation, persecution, discord, and civil strife. Its interpretation depends on the textual and historical context in which it appears. Within the Qur'anic tradition, *fitnah* may refer to tests of faith, persecution, or circumstances that threaten communal stability. In Islamic history, the term is also associated with major internal conflicts within the early Muslim community, particularly the First and Second *Fitnah*, which involved disputes over leadership, political legitimacy, and communal authority. These historical experiences illustrate how competing political claims and religious interpretations may contribute to division and the erosion of communal trust.

In the present study, *fitnah* is employed primarily in its socio-political sense as an analytical concept for examining religiously framed discord, social fragmentation, and the instrumentalization of religious identities. This understanding is relevant to Nigeria, where religious rhetoric has sometimes been mobilized to intensify political competition, justify exclusion, or transform socio-economic grievances into communal hostility. However, the application of *fitnah* to contemporary Nigerian conflicts does not imply that every disagreement represents religious discord or that modern conflicts are directly equivalent to early Islamic civil wars. Rather, the concept provides an interpretive

⁹ Araba et al., “The Interplay of Religion and Conflict: Pathways to Sustainable Peace Building in Nigeria.”

¹⁰ Saleh, “Role of Interfaith Mediation Centre in Managing Conflict between Farmers and Herdsmen in Bauchi State, Nigeria”; Shaibu and Praise, “The Interfaith Mediation Centre and Conflict Resolution in Kaduna North Local Government, 2002–2023.”

perspective for examining how religious beliefs and identities may become implicated in broader processes of conflict escalation.

By contrast, *ṣulḥ* refers to reconciliation, amicable settlement, or the negotiated resolution of disputes. It is deeply embedded in Islamic legal and ethical traditions as a mechanism for restoring relationships, preventing further hostility, and promoting social harmony. The Qur'an emphasizes the importance of reconciliation and justice in resolving disputes among believers (Qur'an 49:9–10). Accordingly, *ṣulḥ* extends beyond the immediate cessation of violence to encompass the restoration of trust, the protection of human dignity, and the pursuit of equitable relationships. These principles are closely associated with broader Islamic ethical values, including *ʿadl* (justice), *iḥsān* (compassion and excellence), and *shūrā* (consultation).

The historical significance of *ṣulḥ* is illustrated by the Treaty of Hudaibiyyah, concluded between the Prophet Muhammad and the Quraysh of Mecca in 628 CE. The agreement demonstrates the importance of negotiation, compromise, and restraint in preventing the escalation of conflict. Farman and Yucel (2023),¹¹ in their examination of the Treaty of Hudaibiyyah in relation to early Islamic experiences of *fitan*, provide a historical perspective relevant to understanding how negotiated settlements can contribute to political stability and peaceful coexistence. In this sense, *ṣulḥ* represents both a practical mechanism for resolving disputes and an ethical commitment to justice, compassion, and communal responsibility.

Within Nigeria's contemporary socio-political environment, *ṣulḥ* offers a framework for understanding the reconciliation efforts undertaken by religious leaders, traditional authorities, and faith-based organizations. These initiatives include interfaith dialogue, community mediation, and negotiated approaches to resolving disputes involving religious and ethnic communities. Studies of the Interfaith Mediation Centre in Bauchi and Kaduna demonstrate the practical significance of mediation and dialogue in addressing communal tensions.¹² Nevertheless, such interventions operate within broader institutional and political contexts, and their effectiveness cannot be attributed to religious principles alone.

Taken together, *fitnah* and *ṣulḥ* provide complementary analytical perspectives. Whereas *fitnah* is used to interpret the mobilization of religious identities in processes of discord and conflict escalation, *ṣulḥ* provides an ethical framework for evaluating reconciliation, mediation, and the restoration of communal relationships. Their relationship does not imply that conflict inevitably leads to reconciliation, but rather highlights the contrasting ways religious ideas and institutions may influence social relations.

¹¹ Farman and Yucel, "Rereading the Hudaibiyya Treaty: With Special Reference to Ibn 'Umar's Role in Fitan."

¹² Saleh, "Role of Interfaith Mediation Centre in Managing Conflict between Farmers and Herdsmen in Bauchi State, Nigeria"; Shaibu and Praise, "The Interfaith Mediation Centre and Conflict Resolution in Kaduna North Local Government, 2002–2023."

The Dual Role of Religion: A Catalyst for Conflict and an Instrument of Peace

The dual role of religion in Nigeria becomes particularly apparent when religious identities interact with political competition, economic inequality, and institutional weaknesses. On the one hand, religious narratives may be instrumentalized by political actors, extremist movements, or competing communal groups to reinforce exclusionary identities and justify hostility. The Boko Haram insurgency and farmer–herder conflicts demonstrate how religious affiliations may intersect with disputes over political power, security, land, and resources. Although these conflicts are frequently framed in religious terms, their underlying dynamics involve multiple and interconnected factors that cannot be reduced to theological disagreements.¹³

The Boko Haram insurgency illustrates the relationship between extremist religious mobilization and broader political grievances. Historical and contemporary analyses indicate that the movement developed within an environment marked by poverty, political exclusion, governance failures, and contested religious authority.¹⁴ Similarly, farmer–herder conflicts in Nigeria's Middle Belt involve competition over land and water resources, changing environmental conditions, insecurity, and ethnic identities. Religious differences may intensify these disputes when communal grievances are interpreted through exclusionary narratives. From the perspective of *fitnah*, these developments illustrate how the instrumentalization of religion can deepen social fragmentation and undermine communal trust.

On the other hand, religion provides ethical principles, institutional networks, and social relationships that can support conflict resolution and sustainable peacebuilding. Islamic teachings concerning reconciliation, justice, compassion, and consultation offer normative guidance for addressing disputes and promoting peaceful coexistence. Religious leaders may exercise moral authority within their communities, enabling them to discourage violence, facilitate dialogue, and encourage reconciliation. Comparable ethical commitments within Christian and African Traditional Religious communities also provide opportunities for interreligious cooperation. The constructive role of religion therefore depends on the responsible mobilization of its ethical and institutional resources rather than on religious affiliation alone.¹⁵

The practical application of these principles is reflected in the activities of faith-based organizations and interfaith mediation initiatives. Saleh (2022)¹⁶ examines the role

¹³ Gambo et al., “Ethno-Religious Violence and Peacebuilding Approaches in Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria”; Araba et al., “The Interplay of Religion and Conflict: Pathways to Sustainable Peace Building in Nigeria.”

¹⁴ Bose and Usman, “Reassessing Islamic Reform Movements in Northern Nigeria: The 1804 Sokoto Jihad and the Boko Haram Phenomenon”; Onohworemu and Egbadju, “Nigeria and the Challenges of Terrorism in the 21st Century”; Syahrul Hanafi et al., “Measuring of the Shariah Compliance in the Shariah Cooperative from Maqashid Al-Shariah Perspectives,” *Al-Jadwa: Jurnal Studi Islam* 5, no. 2 (2026): 164–85, <https://doi.org/10.38073/aljadwa.4464>; Ismael Ibrahim Ahmed, “Challenges of Teaching Philosophy in the Absence of Educational Resources Among Eleventh Grade Teachers in Duhok Governorate Preparatory Schools,” *Adabuna: Jurnal Pendidikan Dan Pemikiran* 5, no. 2 (2026): 80–99, <https://doi.org/10.38073/adabuna.v5i2.4421>.

¹⁵ Araba et al., “The Interplay of Religion and Conflict: Pathways to Sustainable Peace Building in Nigeria.”

¹⁶ Saleh, “Role of Interfaith Mediation Centre in Managing Conflict between Farmers and Herdsmen in Bauchi State, Nigeria.”

of the Interfaith Mediation Centre in addressing farmer–herder conflicts in Bauchi State, while Shaibu and Praise (2025)¹⁷ investigate its contributions to conflict resolution in Kaduna North. Their findings illustrate how dialogue, community engagement, and mediation may contribute to reducing tensions and rebuilding relationships among conflicting groups. Nevertheless, such initiatives face limitations associated with financial constraints, institutional capacity, insecurity, and changing political circumstances. These conditions demonstrate that religious peacebuilding requires sustained institutional and socio-political support.

The analytical framework adopted in this study therefore understands religion as a context-dependent force whose social consequences are shaped by religious interpretation, institutional conduct, and broader political and economic conditions. Within this framework, *fitnah* explains how religious identities and narratives may be mobilized to intensify conflict, whereas *ṣulḥ* provides a basis for examining reconciliation and peacebuilding practices. Their integration offers a perspective for analyzing the transition from religiously framed discord toward constructive engagement, while recognizing that reconciliation depends on social justice, accountable governance, and the active participation of affected communities. This framework guides the subsequent examination of historical conflicts, contemporary religious tensions, and peacebuilding initiatives in Nigeria.

METHOD

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, multi-source documentary research design to examine the relationship between religion, conflict, and sustainable peacebuilding in Nigeria. The research is conceptual and analytical rather than based on primary field interviews. It relies on the examination and interpretation of academic literature, media reports, public statements, and institutional documents to investigate how religious beliefs, identities, and institutions are implicated in conflict and how the Islamic concepts of *fitnah* and *ṣulḥ* can inform the analysis of reconciliation and peacebuilding.

The qualitative approach is appropriate because the study seeks to interpret religious meanings, historical developments, political narratives, and institutional responses rather than measure the statistical effectiveness of particular peacebuilding interventions. By examining different categories of documentary evidence, the research considers the interaction between religious ideas and the political, economic, and social conditions shaping conflict and peaceful coexistence in Nigeria.

Sources of Data

The study draws on three principal categories of documentary sources. The first comprises academic literature, including scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and other relevant publications addressing religion and conflict, Islamic peacebuilding, *fitnah*, *ṣulḥ*, religious pluralism, and contemporary security challenges in Nigeria. These

¹⁷ Shaibu and Praise, “The Interfaith Mediation Centre and Conflict Resolution in Kaduna North Local Government, 2002–2023.”

materials provide the conceptual and empirical foundations for understanding religious conflict and reconciliation. The second category consists of media reports and publicly available statements documenting religiously framed violence, communal disputes, peacebuilding initiatives, and interventions by religious actors. These materials are used to contextualize developments involving Boko Haram, farmer–herder conflicts, sectarian tensions, and interfaith reconciliation. Media accounts are interpreted with attention to their publication dates, attribution, and the distinction between reported claims and independently established findings.

The third category includes publicly accessible institutional documents, communiqués, policy-related materials, and reports produced by religious organizations, humanitarian institutions, and other relevant bodies. Particular attention is given to documented peacebuilding interventions and public statements associated with religious leaders, interfaith organizations, and the 2025 Northern Ulama Summit. These sources provide evidence of publicly articulated positions concerning religious responsibility, conflict prevention, reconciliation, and social cohesion. No direct interviews were conducted in this study. Consequently, statements attributed to religious leaders and other actors are treated as publicly documented evidence rather than interview-generated primary data. This distinction is maintained throughout the analysis to avoid attributing undocumented personal experiences or private opinions to the individuals concerned.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection followed the documentary identification, screening, selection, and organization procedures described in the original research. Relevant academic materials were identified through searches focused on the principal concepts and issues of the study, including *fitnah*, *ṣulh*, religion and conflict, religious instrumentalization, Islamic peacebuilding, interfaith dialogue, Boko Haram, farmer–herder conflicts, and religious reconciliation in Nigeria. Media reports and public statements were subsequently examined for their relevance to documented incidents of religiously framed conflict, the activities of religious institutions, and public responses to violence and peacebuilding initiatives. Institutional documents were included where they contained substantive information about mediation, reconciliation, interreligious relations, conflict prevention, or the role of religious actors in public peacebuilding efforts.

The materials were selected according to their relevance to the research questions and their usefulness in explaining the relationship between religious identities, conflict dynamics, and reconciliation practices. Sources that were peripheral to these concerns or did not provide substantive evidence relevant to the study were excluded from the analytical discussion. The selected materials were then organized thematically to facilitate comparison across historical contexts, institutional responses, and religious perspectives.

Data Analysis

The collected materials were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis. The analytical process involved repeated reading of the selected documents, identifying recurring concepts and arguments, grouping related information into thematic categories,

comparing evidence across different sources, and interpreting the resulting patterns in relation to the research questions and conceptual framework. The analysis was organized around three interconnected themes. The first addressed the instrumentalization of religious identities and narratives in conflict situations, interpreted through the socio-political dimensions of *fitnah*. The second examined the ethical principles and practical expressions of *ṣulḥ* in religious mediation, reconciliation, and peacebuilding. The third explored the political, economic, and institutional conditions that influence whether religious actors contribute to conflict escalation or sustainable peace.

Particular attention was given to distinguishing documentary evidence from the researchers' interpretations. Where academic studies, media accounts, and institutional documents offered different explanations of a conflict or peacebuilding initiative, these differences were considered in the interpretation rather than treated as interchangeable accounts. Institutional statements were primarily examined as evidence of the positions expressed by their issuing organizations, while academic literature provided broader historical and analytical perspectives.

Analytical Framework

The interpretation is informed by the ambivalence of religion as a social phenomenon, recognizing that religious identities, beliefs, and institutions may contribute to both conflict and reconciliation depending on their interpretation and mobilization within particular socio-political circumstances. This perspective is complemented by the Islamic concepts of *fitnah* and *ṣulḥ*, which function as the principal analytical lenses of the study. Within this framework, *fitnah* is used to examine religiously framed discord, social fragmentation, exclusionary narratives, and the instrumentalization of religious identity. Conversely, *ṣulḥ* is employed to interpret reconciliation, dialogue, mediation, and efforts to restore relationships among conflicting communities. These concepts are applied to the documentary evidence as interpretive categories rather than as predetermined explanations of the causes or outcomes of particular conflicts.

The integration of these perspectives enables the study to examine how religion may contribute to the escalation of communal tensions while also providing ethical and institutional resources for sustainable peacebuilding. The framework further recognizes the importance of social justice, accountable governance, and inclusive institutional engagement in shaping the possibilities and limitations of religious reconciliation initiatives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Historical and Contemporary Analysis of Religion and Conflict in Nigeria

1. Pre-1999 Religious Dynamics and Conflicts

The history of religious conflict in Nigeria predates the country's independence in 1960, although the nature and intensity of these conflicts have evolved across different historical periods. In the pre-colonial era, the expansion of Islam in Northern Nigeria was intertwined with political contestation and religious reform, particularly during the nineteenth-century jihad led by Usman dan Fodio. This

movement culminated in the establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate, which combined Islamic reform with the consolidation of political authority.¹⁸ During colonial rule, British indirect administration further reshaped political and religious relationships, while uneven educational development and competition for institutional authority contributed to enduring regional inequalities.¹⁹

Following independence, Nigeria experienced political instability, regional competition, military interventions, and the Nigerian Civil War of 1967–1970. Although these developments were not exclusively religious, religious affiliations frequently intersected with ethnic identity and political competition. Subsequent military administrations also confronted religious tensions, including the Maitatsine disturbances of the early 1980s. These developments indicate that contemporary religious conflict emerged within a longer history of contested authority, unequal development, and communal divisions.²⁰ Viewed through the concept of *fitnah*, these historical developments illustrate how religious identity may become associated with conflicts over political legitimacy and collective belonging. This interpretation does not reduce Nigeria's historical crises to religious disputes; instead, it highlights the circumstances in which religious narratives may amplify existing political and social disagreements.

2. Post-1999 Developments: The Rise of Sectarianism and Extremism

The return to civilian rule in 1999 marked an important turning point in Nigeria's political and religious landscape. Although democratization created opportunities for greater political participation, it also occurred amid persistent regional inequality, institutional weaknesses, and competition over religious and ethnic identities. The implementation of Shari'ah-based legal reforms in several northern states became one of the most contested developments during this period, contributing to public debates about religious freedom, political representation, and the relationship between religion and state authority.²¹

The growing prominence of religious identity in political mobilization did not necessarily mean that religious differences independently caused violence. Rather, political competition, economic marginalization, contested governance, and exclusionary narratives interacted with religious affiliations to create conditions in which communal tensions could escalate. Adedeji (2024)²² and Onohworemu and

¹⁸ Murray Last, *The Sokoto Caliphate* (Oxford University Press, 2021), 1082–110, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197532768.003.0040>.

¹⁹ Toyin Falola and Matthew M. Heaton, *A History of Nigeria* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511819711>.

²⁰ Matthew Hassan Kukah, *Religion, Politics and Power in Northern Nigeria* (Spectrum Books, 1993); Manzoora Apenna Lawal and Kazeem Dauda, "Religious Insurgency and the Quest for Sustainable Peace in Nigeria: The Islamic Model as a Panacea," *Indonesian Journal of Interdisciplinary Islamic Studies* 6, no. 2 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.20885/ijiis.vol6.iss2.art1>.

²¹ Jatau and Maza, "Democracy, Peace, and Religion in Nigeria: Can Religion Be Used to Consolidate or Undermine Democracy and Peace?"

²² Amos Adedeji, "Dimension of Religious Violence and Its Antecedent Effects on National Integration and Social Development in Nigeria," *Journal of Contemporary Philosophical and Anthropological Studies* 2, no. 2 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.59652/jcpas.v2i2.177>.

Egbadju (2025)²³ emphasize the broader consequences of religiously framed violence and structural inequalities for national integration and development. These developments illustrate an important dimension of *fitnah*: the instrumentalization of religious identity in ways that intensify social divisions. However, this process should be distinguished from ordinary religious disagreement, which does not necessarily produce hostility or violence.

3. The Emergence of Boko Haram and Its Salafi-Jihadist Ideology

The emergence of Boko Haram in the early 2000s represents a significant development in Nigeria's post-1999 security environment. Initially associated with a radical religious reform movement in northeastern Nigeria, the organization subsequently developed into a violent insurgency opposing the Nigerian state and established political institutions. The killing of its founder, Muhammad Yusuf, in 2009 marked an important turning point in its escalation into sustained armed violence.²⁴

Table 1. Humanitarian and Security Impact of the Boko Haram Insurgency in Nigeria (2011–2025)

Metric	Estimates Reported in the Original Manuscript	Source
Total fatalities	Over 38,000 deaths since 2011	Braimah et al. (2024)
Peak attack rate	Approximately 18 incidents per month on average	Braimah et al. (2024)
Displacement	2.1 million internally displaced persons	Global Centre for R2P (2025)
Education loss	Approximately 2,300 teachers killed and 1,400 schools destroyed	Ilerhunmwuwa (2025)

Boko Haram's development cannot be explained solely through its religious ideology. Political exclusion, economic insecurity, unemployment, corruption, and weak institutional responses contributed to the conditions within which extremist narratives gained influence. The movement's subsequent fragmentation and the emergence of the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) further complicated the regional security environment. The distinction between Boko Haram and ISWAP is particularly important because their organizational trajectories, strategies, and relationships with local communities have evolved differently.²⁵ The humanitarian consequences of the insurgency have been extensive, including deaths, forced displacement, disruption of educational services, and destruction of public

²³ Onohworemu and Egbadju, “Nigeria and the Challenges of Terrorism in the 21st Century.”

²⁴ Bose and Usman, “Reassessing Islamic Reform Movements in Northern Nigeria: The 1804 Sokoto Jihad and the Boko Haram Phenomenon”; Issac Ilerhunmwuwa, “Understanding the Emergence, the Impact, and the Countering of Boko Haram,” *Journal of Global Faultlines* 12, no. 1 (2025): 61–81, <https://doi.org/10.13169/jglobfaul.12.1.0005>.

²⁵ Tomás F. Husted, *Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province* (Congressional Research Service, 2022), <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10173>; Joseph Odunayo Braimah et al., “Predicting the Path of Insurgency: Data-Driven Strategies to Counter Boko Haram in Nigeria,” *F1000Research* 13 (2024): 989, <https://doi.org/10.12688/f1000research.153978.1>.

infrastructure. The original manuscript summarizes several reported indicators in Table 1.

Beyond documenting the consequences of insurgency, these indicators demonstrate the importance of considering the social conditions that sustain religiously framed violence. From the perspective of *fitnah*, the Boko Haram insurgency illustrates how extremist interpretations can be mobilized alongside political grievances, contributing to social fragmentation and the erosion of institutional legitimacy. Sustainable responses must therefore address security threats while also considering governance, education, economic opportunity, and community trust.

4. The Interplay of Religion, Politics, and Socio-Economic Factors

The persistence of violent conflict in Nigeria reflects the interaction between religion, politics, and socio-economic conditions. Although religious narratives may provide symbolic justification for violence, underlying grievances frequently concern political representation, access to resources, institutional accountability, and economic inequality. These factors can transform local disputes into broader identity-based conflicts when religious affiliation becomes a marker of collective exclusion or perceived threat.²⁶

Poverty, unemployment, and limited educational opportunities may also create conditions in which extremist organizations recruit individuals by exploiting grievances and distrust toward state institutions. Nevertheless, economic deprivation does not automatically produce religious extremism. Its influence depends on additional political, ideological, and organizational factors. Onohworemu and Egbadju (2025)²⁷ demonstrate the importance of structural deprivation, corruption, and weak governance in explaining contemporary terrorism in Nigeria. This relationship suggests that the concept of *fitnah* is analytically useful when interpreted alongside structural explanations of violence. Religious instrumentalization becomes especially consequential when existing grievances are framed through narratives of religious exclusion and communal antagonism.

5. Post-2015 Developments: Escalation and Fragmentation of Conflicts

The period following the 2015 general elections witnessed further fragmentation of Nigeria's security challenges. Alongside the continued activities of Boko Haram and ISWAP, armed banditry, kidnapping, and farmer–herder violence expanded in several regions. These developments involved different actors, motivations, and local circumstances, although they frequently intersected with broader concerns about governance, insecurity, and communal identity.²⁸

The development of ISWAP as a distinct armed organization illustrates the

²⁶ Araba et al., “The Interplay of Religion and Conflict: Pathways to Sustainable Peace Building in Nigeria.”

²⁷ Onohworemu and Egbadju, “Nigeria and the Challenges of Terrorism in the 21st Century.”

²⁸ E. E. Esamagu and T. A. Adeyinka, “Rethinking Nigeria’s Security Threats: Armed Banditry and Its Impacts on the People of North-West Nigeria, 2010–2025,” *Agidigbo: ABUAD Journal of the Humanities* 13, No. 1, (2025): 364–379, ahead of print, 2010, <https://doi.org/10.53982/agidigbo.2025.1301.24->.

changing nature of extremist violence, while the proliferation of bandit groups in the Northwest demonstrates that insecurity cannot be understood exclusively through religious ideology. In some areas, criminal organizations have exploited weak state authority, rural insecurity, and economic vulnerability to engage in kidnapping, extortion, and attacks against communities.²⁹ These developments reinforce the need to distinguish between religiously motivated extremism, criminal violence, and communal disputes, even where their consequences overlap. Treating all forms of insecurity as manifestations of religious conflict risks obscuring differences in their causes and the interventions required to address them.

6. The Proliferation of Armed Groups and Banditry in the Northwest

Northwestern Nigeria, particularly Zamfara, Katsina, and Sokoto States, has experienced persistent armed banditry and related insecurity. What began in some localities as disputes involving land, livestock, and rural resources developed into more complex forms of organized violence, including mass kidnapping, extortion, cattle theft, and attacks on settlements.³⁰ Research on affected communities indicates that banditry has consequences extending beyond immediate physical violence. It disrupts livelihoods, damages local economies, contributes to displacement, and weakens confidence in public institutions.³¹ Although some armed groups have been reported to interact with extremist networks, it would be inaccurate to attribute identical religious motivations to all bandit organizations.

The relevance of *fitnah* in this context lies particularly in the ways identity-based narratives and communal mistrust may intensify violence. However, the primary drivers of particular banditry incidents must be established through their specific political, criminal, and economic circumstances. Consequently, peacebuilding approaches should combine effective security measures with mediation, livelihood restoration, community engagement, and accountable governance.

7. The Persistence of Farmer–Herder Conflicts in the Middle Belt

The Middle Belt of Nigeria has experienced recurring farmer–herder conflicts involving land access, water resources, agricultural livelihoods, and communal security. Environmental pressures, changes in land use, livestock movement, and weak mechanisms for managing disputes have contributed to tensions between pastoralist and farming communities.³² Although these conflicts frequently involve

²⁹ Johanna Kleffmann et al., *Banditry Violence in Nigeria's North West: Insights from Affected Communities* (United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.37559/MEAC/24/05>.

³⁰ God'stime Osariyekemwen Igiebor, "Banditry in Nigeria: Implications for National Security," *African Journal of Politics and Administrative Studies* 17, no. 2 (2024): 1–26, <https://doi.org/10.4314/ajpas.v17i2.1>; Esamagu and Adeyinka, "Rethinking Nigeria's Security Threats: Armed Banditry and Its Impacts on the People of North-West Nigeria, 2010–2025."

³¹ Kleffmann et al., *Banditry Violence in Nigeria's North West: Insights from Affected Communities*.

³² Chukwuemeka Joseph Ohadiugha and Nuhu Dogara Gado, "The Farmer–Herder Conflict in Nigeria: A Quest for Appropriate Policy," *International Journal of Business and Management Review* 13, no. 1 (2025): 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.37745/ijbmr.2013/vol13n1115>; Macpherson Uchenna Nnam, "Violent Herder–

communities with differing religious and ethnic affiliations, their causes should not be reduced to a simple confrontation between Muslims and Christians. Political competition, land tenure disputes, the proliferation of small arms, and ineffective security responses contribute to their escalation. Religious narratives may intensify these tensions when communities interpret attacks and reprisals through collective identities.

The humanitarian consequences of farmer–herder violence include loss of life, displacement, destruction of agricultural resources, and growing food insecurity. Reporting on violence in Benue State has highlighted the extent of these consequences, although casualty figures must be evaluated according to the dates, geographical coverage, and categories used by their respective sources.³³ The application of *fitnah* to these conflicts therefore concerns the transformation of disputes into wider communal hostility through exclusionary interpretations of religious and ethnic identity. Conversely, *ṣulh* provides a normative perspective for evaluating mediation, dialogue, negotiated access to resources, and the restoration of relationships between affected communities.

8. The Impact of Social Media on Religious Tensions and Misinformation

Social media has become an influential component of Nigeria's contemporary religious and political environment. Digital platforms facilitate communication, religious education, and public participation, but they may also enable the circulation of misinformation, inflammatory narratives, and hate speech that intensify communal tensions.³⁴ In conflict-affected settings, misleading information and hostile representations of religious communities can reinforce mistrust and increase the possibility of retaliatory violence. However, the influence of social media should be assessed within the broader political and social context rather than treated as an independent cause of conflict. The 2025 Northern Ulama Summit in Kaduna addressed concerns regarding the misuse of digital platforms and emphasized the responsibility of religious leaders and other public actors to encourage truthful communication and social cohesion. Reports of the summit indicate that participants called for greater ethical responsibility in public discourse, including the use of social media.³⁵ From the perspective of *fitnah*, disinformation becomes particularly

Farmer Conflicts and Human Security in Nigeria: A Focus on Food Security,” *Development in Practice* 36, no. 8 (2026): 1577–88, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2025.2573963>.

³³ Ejembi Ogwuche, *Benue Farmer-Herder Clashes Claim 2,800 Lives in Two Years – Amnesty International*, June 27, 2024, <https://dailypost.ng/2024/06/27/benue-farmer-herder-clashes-claim-2800-lives-in-two-years-amnesty-international/>.

³⁴ Amina Abana, “Leveraging Social Media as Avenues for Da’wah among Muslim Youths in Nigeria,” *Islamic Communication Journal* 10, no. 1 (2025): 19–36, <https://doi.org/10.21580/icj.2025.10.1.26054>; Nkechi G. Onah et al., “Hate Speech and Ethno-Religious Conflicts in Nigeria: Implications for Political Stability,” *MAHABBAAH: Journal of Religion and Education* 2, no. 2 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.47135/mahabbah.v2i2.31>.

³⁵ Abdulqadir Muhammad, “Categorisation of Ramadan Tafsir Circles and Their Challenges in Jos, Nigeria,” *International Journal of Innovative Social Sciences and Humanities Research* 13, No. 3 (2025): 251–267, ahead of print, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.16993923>; Hakeem Baba-Ahmed, *Northern*

significant when it contributes to communal suspicion and the mobilization of religious hostility. From the perspective of *ṣulh*, responsible communication can support dialogue, reduce misunderstanding, and strengthen the conditions necessary for reconciliation.

Islam as an Instrument of Sustainable Peacebuilding (*Ṣulh*)

1. The Concept of *Ṣulh* in Islamic Tradition

The concept of *ṣulh* occupies an important place in Islamic approaches to reconciliation and conflict resolution. As discussed in the conceptual framework, it emphasizes peaceful settlement, the restoration of relationships, and the pursuit of justice. Its relevance to contemporary peacebuilding lies in the connection between normative ethical principles and practical mechanisms for resolving disputes. Islamic teachings encourage reconciliation, fairness, restraint, and compassion. The Qur'an emphasizes the importance of restoring peace between disputing parties while acting justly (Qur'an 49:9–10). These principles suggest that reconciliation should not be limited to ending immediate violence but should also address grievances and strengthen relationships within affected communities.

Atoi and Ajiji (2024)³⁶ emphasize the significance of religious ethical values, including nonviolence, forgiveness, social justice, reconciliation, and the dignity of human life, in addressing conflict in Nigeria. These values provide a broader ethical context for understanding *ṣulh* as a process concerned with both interpersonal relationships and social conditions.

Table 2. Core Islamic Ethical Values and Their Application in Peacebuilding Processes

Value	Concept	Application in Peacebuilding
Qist	Justice / Equity	Ensuring fair distribution of resources and rights as a prerequisite for peace
Khayr	Goodness	Acting with altruism and seeking the welfare of the entire community
Iḥsān	Excellence / Compassion	Going beyond what is required to perform acts of kindness and moral responsibility
Salām	Peace	Pursuing safety, peaceful coexistence, and spiritual well-being

These values are interconnected rather than independent prescriptions. Justice is important for addressing grievances, compassion contributes to the restoration of relationships, and a commitment to the common good encourages cooperation across communal boundaries. Their practical application, however, depends on the institutions and actors responsible for facilitating reconciliation.

2. The Treaty of Hudaibiyyah as a Model for Reconciliation

The Treaty of Hudaibiyyah, concluded between the Prophet Muhammad and

Muslim Summit, October 21, 2025, <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2025/10/northern-muslim-summit-by-hakeem-baba-ahmed>.

³⁶ Ewere Nelson Atoi and Mark Danjuma Ajiji, “Ethics of Peace, Religion and Conflict Resolution in Nigeria,” *Voyages Journal of Religious Studies* 9, no. 2 (2024): 21–36.

the Quraysh of Mecca in 628 CE, provides an important historical illustration of negotiation, restraint, and the pursuit of peaceful settlement. The agreement emerged during a period of political and religious tension and involved concessions intended to prevent immediate confrontation. Although some terms were initially perceived as unfavorable by members of the Muslim community, the agreement created an opportunity for a period of reduced hostility. The treaty is therefore significant as a historical example of the willingness to prioritize negotiated settlement over immediate confrontation.³⁷

Its contemporary relevance should be understood analytically rather than as a direct institutional model applicable to every Nigerian conflict. Nevertheless, the principles illustrated by Hudaibiyyah—including negotiation, restraint, respect for agreements, and consideration of long-term consequences—can inform the ethical evaluation of reconciliation initiatives. Within the present study, this historical example supports the interpretation of *ṣulḥ* as an approach that values peaceful engagement while acknowledging the need for justice, mutual responsibility, and sustainable institutional arrangements.

The Application of *Ṣulḥ* in Contemporary Nigerian Conflicts

The practical application of *ṣulḥ* in Nigeria is reflected in the activities of religious leaders, faith-based organizations, and community mediation initiatives. Such efforts seek to reduce tensions, facilitate communication, and restore relationships among communities affected by religiously framed violence and other forms of insecurity. The Qur'anic emphasis on reconciliation provides a normative basis for these practices, particularly when disputes involve communities with shared religious identities. In interfaith contexts, comparable ethical commitments to justice, compassion, and peaceful coexistence may provide common ground for dialogue and cooperation.

Nevertheless, reconciliation initiatives must address the political and socio-economic conditions that contribute to conflict. Dialogue alone may be insufficient where communities continue to experience insecurity, unequal access to resources, or limited confidence in public institutions. The effectiveness of *ṣulḥ*-based practices therefore depends on their integration with broader approaches to social justice, institutional accountability, and community participation.

Interfaith Dialogue and Collaboration

Interfaith dialogue represents an important expression of religious peacebuilding in Nigeria. Rather than requiring theological uniformity, such dialogue enables religious communities to identify shared social concerns, challenge stereotypes, and develop cooperative responses to conflict. Studies of religious peacebuilding in Nigeria indicate that dialogue initiatives may provide opportunities for mutual understanding, community

³⁷ Farman and Yucel, “Rereading the Hudaibiyya Treaty: With Special Reference to Ibn ‘Umar’s Role in Fitan”; Ishaq Abubakar Dauda, “An Analysis of Treaty of Hudaibiyah By Prophet Muhammad (Sallallahu Alayhi Wa Sallam): Its Benefits and Educational Implications to Conflict Resolution,” *Kontagora International Journal of Educational Research* 2, no. 3 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.16735763>.

participation, and the restoration of trust.³⁸ These activities are particularly relevant in environments where religious and ethnic divisions have become associated with repeated violence. The relationship between structural causes of conflict and possible reconciliation strategies can be summarized as follows.

Table 3. Structural Drivers of Conflict and Corresponding *Ṣulḥ*-Based Peacebuilding Strategies

Methodology	Application in Nigeria	Recent Evidence
Safe Spaces	Facilitated conversations between individuals and communities affected by violence	Interfaith mediation and community dialogue initiatives documented by Saleh (2022) and Shaibu & Praise (2025)
Joint Social Action	Collaborative responses to poverty, humanitarian needs, and community development	Community-based peacebuilding approaches discussed by Gambo et al. (2025)
Prophetic Advocacy	Religious leaders encouraging justice, responsible leadership, and peaceful coexistence	Public religious leadership and interfaith engagement discussed by Araba, Yusuf, and Shehu (2025)

The table illustrates possible relationships between peacebuilding strategies and the conditions associated with communal conflict. These categories should be understood as analytical descriptions rather than evidence that the effectiveness of each intervention has been independently measured by the present study. Organizations such as the Interfaith Mediation Centre (IMC) and the Interfaith Dialogue Forum for Peace (IDFP) provide institutional platforms through which some of these approaches have been pursued. Their activities illustrate the potential of religious organizations to support dialogue, cooperation, and conflict transformation, although their achievements and limitations must be evaluated within their respective contexts.

The Interfaith Mediation Centre (IMC) and Its Founders

The Interfaith Mediation Centre in Kaduna represents a prominent example of interreligious cooperation in Nigeria. Associated with Imam Muhammad Ashafa and Pastor James Wuye, the organization developed initiatives intended to promote reconciliation between communities affected by religious and ethnic violence. The IMC has undertaken activities involving dialogue facilitation, community engagement, mediation, and conflict resolution training. Shaibu and Praise (2025)³⁹ examine its contributions to conflict resolution in Kaduna North, identifying the importance of interfaith engagement while also documenting challenges related to funding, insecurity, and institutional support.

Similarly, Saleh (2022)⁴⁰ investigates the organization's role in managing farmer–

³⁸ Araba et al., “The Interplay of Religion and Conflict: Pathways to Sustainable Peace Building in Nigeria”; Gambo et al., “Ethno-Religious Violence and Peacebuilding Approaches in Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria.”

³⁹ Shaibu and Praise, “The Interfaith Mediation Centre and Conflict Resolution in Kaduna North Local Government, 2002–2023.”

⁴⁰ Saleh, “Role of Interfaith Mediation Centre in Managing Conflict between Farmers and Herdsmen in Bauchi State, Nigeria.”

herder conflict in Bauchi State. The study highlights cooperation with relevant community groups and security institutions as part of efforts to encourage dialogue and reduce tensions. These studies demonstrate the relevance of religious organizations as intermediaries in situations where communities may distrust formal institutions or opposing groups. However, the organizations' effectiveness cannot be generalized across all Nigerian conflicts because their activities depend on local circumstances, institutional capacity, and the willingness of participants to engage. From the perspective of *ṣulh*, the IMC illustrates how religious ethical commitments may be translated into practical engagement. Its activities also show that reconciliation requires ongoing institutional support rather than relying exclusively on individual moral authority.

The Interfaith Dialogue Forum for Peace (IDFP)

The Interfaith Dialogue Forum for Peace represents another institutional effort to encourage cooperation between religious communities in Nigeria. Its activities have included dialogue initiatives, engagement among religious representatives, and efforts to promote mutual understanding in response to communal tensions. The significance of such initiatives lies in the creation of structured opportunities for communication across religious boundaries. These platforms may enable participants to identify shared concerns and develop collaborative responses to violence and social insecurity. However, interfaith cooperation should not be treated as sufficient in isolation. Its contribution to sustainable peace depends on wider institutional conditions, including public security, political accountability, access to justice, and the participation of communities directly affected by conflict.

Intra-Faith Dialogue and Reconciliation

Although interfaith dialogue receives considerable attention in discussions of Nigerian peacebuilding, intra-faith reconciliation is also important. Religious communities may experience internal disagreements involving doctrinal interpretations, organizational leadership, political affiliations, and competing claims to religious authority. Within Muslim communities, dialogue involving different theological and institutional orientations can contribute to reducing mistrust and discouraging the use of religious differences as grounds for exclusion or hostility. Such initiatives are particularly relevant when internal disagreements become associated with broader political or communal tensions. The concept of *fitnah* provides an interpretive framework for understanding how religious disagreements may develop into destructive social divisions. Conversely, *ṣulh* emphasizes reconciliation, ethical restraint, and the restoration of relationships without requiring the elimination of legitimate theological differences. Intra-faith dialogue therefore complements interfaith initiatives by addressing tensions within religious communities that may otherwise undermine wider peacebuilding efforts.

The Northern Ulama Summit and Its Call for Unity

The Northern Ulama Summit held in Kaduna in October 2025 represents a contemporary example of collective engagement by Islamic religious leaders concerning national insecurity, social cohesion, and responsible religious leadership. Public reporting on the summit indicates that participants emphasized unity, moral responsibility,

responsible communication, and the need to address the social conditions contributing to instability. The discussions also highlighted concerns about the misuse of social media and the responsibilities of religious leaders in discouraging hostility.⁴¹ The original manuscript identifies several central themes emerging from the summit, summarized in Table 5.

Table 5. Summary of Key Resolutions from the Northern Ulama Summit on Unity and Peacebuilding (October 2025)

Resolution	Strategic Objective	Reference
Unified Voice	Strengthening the collective ethical responsibilities of Islamic scholars	Muhammad (2025)
Social Media Regulation	Discouraging hate speech, misinformation, and inflammatory religious communication	Baba-Ahmed (2025)
<i>Ṣulḥ</i> as Governance	Encouraging reconciliation, rehabilitation, and community rebuilding	Muhammad (2025)
Economic Resilience	Calling attention to poverty, unemployment, and socio-economic insecurity	21st Century Chronicle (2025)

The summit illustrates how religious leadership may contribute to public discussions of peacebuilding by encouraging ethical communication and collective responsibility. Its significance, however, should be distinguished from evidence of measurable improvements in security or reconciliation. Public statements demonstrate commitments and stated priorities, but they do not independently establish the subsequent effectiveness of the proposed interventions. From the perspective of *ṣulḥ*, the summit reflects an effort to mobilize Islamic ethical resources in support of social cohesion. At the same time, its concerns regarding religious rhetoric and misinformation illustrate an awareness of the conditions through which *fitnah* may be intensified.

Integrating *Fitnah* and *Ṣulḥ* in Sustainable Peacebuilding

The analysis of historical and contemporary conflicts in Nigeria demonstrates that religion's relationship with violence and reconciliation is shaped by its interaction with political institutions, economic conditions, communal identities, and religious leadership. The Boko Haram insurgency, armed banditry, farmer–herder disputes, and religiously framed misinformation illustrate different processes through which communal tensions may intensify. These conflicts cannot be attributed to theology alone, but religious narratives may influence how grievances are interpreted and mobilized. Within this context, *fitnah* provides an Islamic interpretive perspective for understanding the escalation of discord when religious identity is employed to justify exclusion, hostility, or violence. Its application is particularly useful for examining the social consequences of religious instrumentalization, while remaining attentive to the distinct causes of individual conflicts.

By contrast, *ṣulḥ* offers an ethical framework for interpreting reconciliation through mediation, dialogue, justice, and the restoration of relationships. The activities of

⁴¹ Muhammad, “Categorisation of Ramadan Tafsir Circles and Their Challenges in Jos, Nigeria.”; Hakeem Baba-Ahmed, *Northern Muslim Summit*.

the Interfaith Mediation Centre, interfaith and intra-faith dialogue initiatives, and public interventions by Islamic scholars illustrate different ways religious institutions may seek to translate these principles into peacebuilding practices. The relationship between *fitnah* and *ṣulh* therefore provides a complementary analytical framework rather than a simple opposition between violent and peaceful religion. The same broad religious environment may contain actors who intensify communal divisions and others who seek to repair them. The outcomes depend on how religious interpretations are mobilized, the credibility of institutions, the participation of affected communities, and the broader political and economic conditions in which interventions occur.

This interpretation extends existing discussions of religion and conflict in Nigeria by bringing the processes of religious instrumentalization and reconciliation into a shared conceptual analysis. Whereas previous studies have examined political dimensions of religious conflict, religious mediation, and specific peacebuilding organizations, the present study emphasizes the analytical relationship between the conditions that intensify discord and the ethical resources through which reconciliation may be pursued. Sustainable peacebuilding consequently requires more than religious dialogue alone. It also depends on accountable governance, equitable access to resources, community security, responsible public communication, and institutional measures that address underlying grievances. The contribution of *ṣulh* lies in providing an ethical orientation for these efforts, while the concept of *fitnah* helps identify the dangers of allowing religious identities to become instruments of social fragmentation.

Taken together, the findings suggest that religion can contribute constructively to sustainable peacebuilding when reconciliation is supported by justice, inclusive participation, and responsible institutional leadership. The integrated *fitnah-ṣulh* perspective thus offers a context-sensitive framework for interpreting the ambivalent role of religion in Nigeria, while acknowledging that its explanatory value requires further examination through comparative and field-based research.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that religion in Nigeria is neither a purely destabilizing force nor an automatic guarantor of peace, but an ambivalent social power whose impact depends on interpretation, leadership, and socio-political context. Through the complementary analytical lenses of *fitnah* and *ṣulh*, the study reveals how religious identities and narratives may be instrumentalized to deepen communal divisions, legitimize violence, and obscure underlying political and socio-economic grievances. The experiences of Boko Haram, farmer–herder conflicts, sectarian tensions, and religiously framed misinformation illustrate how such instrumentalization can contribute to social fragmentation and insecurity. At the same time, Islamic ethical principles and faith-based institutions provide important resources for mediation, reconciliation, and the restoration of communal relationships.

The findings further demonstrate that *ṣulh* offers a relevant ethical framework for understanding religious peacebuilding practices in Nigeria. Islamic principles of justice,

compassion, consultation, and reconciliation provide a normative foundation for dialogue and peaceful conflict resolution. Contemporary initiatives involving the Interfaith Mediation Centre, interfaith and intra-faith engagement, and collective interventions by Islamic religious leaders illustrate how these principles may be translated into practical efforts to reduce hostility and promote social cohesion. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of such initiatives depends on responsible religious leadership, inclusive community participation, institutional support, and the willingness of conflicting parties to engage constructively.

The study concludes that sustainable peace in Nigeria requires a deliberate strategy that restrains the instrumentalization of religion for violence while strengthening its capacity for reconciliation. This entails promoting accountable religious leadership, encouraging interfaith and intra-faith dialogue, countering misinformation and inflammatory religious narratives, and addressing structural injustices that contribute to radicalization and communal conflict. The principal conceptual contribution of this study lies in integrating *fitnah* and *ṣulḥ* within a single analytical perspective that explains the contrasting roles religion may assume in conflict escalation and peacebuilding. Rather than treating these roles as separate phenomena, the framework emphasizes how religious interpretations, institutional practices, and socio-political conditions shape their expression. Embedding *ṣulḥ* within broader governance, development, and justice initiatives consequently offers a context-sensitive approach to strengthening sustainable peace in Nigeria's religiously plural society.

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The analysis relies primarily on secondary literature, media reports, public statements, communiqués, and institutional documents without direct interviews or field-based observations. Consequently, the findings reflect publicly documented perspectives and institutional positions rather than the personal experiences, motivations, or unpublished views of religious actors, conflict victims, and community members. Media sources and public statements may also present selective or strategic narratives that do not fully capture the complexity of local realities. Although evidence from different documentary sources was compared to strengthen the credibility of the analysis, the conclusions should be interpreted within the boundaries of qualitative documentary research. Furthermore, the proposed *fitnah*–*ṣulḥ* framework has not been empirically tested as a predictive model of conflict escalation or peacebuilding effectiveness.

Future research may extend these findings through empirical fieldwork involving interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation among religious leaders, peace practitioners, conflict victims, youth groups, women's associations, interfaith organizations, and local communities across different regions of Nigeria. Comparative studies examining the application of *fitnah* and *ṣulḥ* in specific conflict settings may provide deeper insights into the mechanisms through which religious values contribute to either conflict escalation or sustainable reconciliation. Further investigation into the long-term outcomes of faith-based mediation, intra-faith engagement, and community

reconciliation initiatives would also help assess the practical applicability of the integrated conceptual framework.

DECLARATION OF AI AND AI ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation and revision of this manuscript, the authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI) to assist with language refinement, grammatical correction, academic writing improvement, manuscript organization, and editorial revision. AI assistance was also employed to support the clarification of conceptual arguments and the presentation of the research findings. The authors remain responsible for critically reviewing and verifying all AI-assisted content, including the accuracy of interpretations, references, citations, and conclusions. AI-generated content was not treated as an independent source of research evidence. The authors assume full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, integrity, and final content of the manuscript.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Mubin Olatoye Raji: Conceptualization, methodology, investigation, documentary research, formal analysis, interpretation of findings, and writing of the original manuscript. Shaykh Luqman Jimoh: Review and refinement of the theoretical framework, critical analysis, validation, and review and editing of the manuscript. Both authors are responsible for reviewing and approving the final version of the manuscript and ensuring the accuracy and integrity of the research.

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DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

The authors declare that they have no financial, personal, professional, or other competing interests that could have influenced the research, analysis, or publication of this article.

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