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Nation–State Conflict in Nigeria: Historical Trajectories, Political Marginalisation, and the Strategic Dimensions of Igbo Interest

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Abstract

This paper reconceptualises Igbo–Nigerian relations as a persistent nation-state conflict rather than a mere regional grievance. It traces the historical trajectory from colonial amalgamation through the 1966 pogroms, the 1967–1970 Civil War, post-war reconstruction policies, and contemporary IPOB-related tensions. The study aims to identify how state formation, political exclusion, and unequal access to federal power have shaped Igbo strategic interests in Nigeria. Using historical-qualitative analysis and time-series event tracing, the paper is anchored in the Relative Deprivation Theory, the Internal Colonialism Theory, and the Conflict Theory. Findings indicate that recurrent crises emerged from the interaction of ethnic nationalism, centralised state power, security coercion, and perceived distributive inequities. The paper concludes that durable stability requires rule-bound federal inclusion, equal citizenship, historical acknowledgement, and institutional safeguards against ethnic exclusion. It recommends constitutional, political, and reconciliation reforms to rebuild reciprocal trust between the Igbo nation and the Nigerian state.

1. Introduction

Modern Nigeria is a multi-ethnic state created through colonial amalgamation and sustained through successive constitutional and military regimes. Since independence, relations between the Nigerian state and major national groups have alternated between cooperation, competition, and conflict. Among these relationships, the interaction between the Igbo nation (Ndi Igbo) and the Nigerian state has been especially consequential because it encompasses the 1966 pogroms, the secession of Biafra, the 1967–1970 Civil War, post-war reconstruction controversies, and contemporary separatist agitations (Igwe, 2025; International Crisis Group, 2022; Siollun, 2021; Achebe, 2012). What has been, therefore, is not merely a sequence of isolated crises, but a recurring struggle over security, citizenship, political representation, and access to state power.

Thus, what exists today is a situation in which formal national unity coexists with enduring grievances about exclusion, uneven federal representation, security operations, and historical memory. Contemporary debates around federal character, resource allocation, infrastructure deficits, electoral inclusion, and the treatment of IPOB-related agitation illustrate how unresolved historical claims continue to shape present politics (Oluka, 2026; Human Rights Watch, 2023; SBM Intelligence, 2023; International Crisis Group, 2022). These disputes are not simply cultural disagreements; they concern the distribution of power, recognition, and protection within the state.

What ought to be, in a constitutional democracy, is a relationship grounded in equal citizenship, rule-bound inclusion, accountable governance, and reciprocal loyalty between citizens and the state. A stable multinational federation requires institutions that manage diversity without converting ethnic competition into permanent political exclusion. Where significant groups perceive that state power is systematically inaccessible, the legitimacy of national institutions becomes contested (Ike & Ojuejifor, 2025; International IDEA, 2023; Suberu, 2001; Horowitz, 1985).

The problem that prompted this research is that much of the literature either treats Igbo grievances as episodic regional complaints or analyses Biafra primarily as a civil war episode, leaving insufficient attention to the longer history of Igbo political marginalisation that links pre-war development, wartime rupture, post-war policies, and contemporary agitation. The result is an incomplete explanation of why the conflict has repeatedly re-emerged across different political eras despite changes in regime type and constitutional arrangements.

For analytical clarity, the term "nation" in this paper refers to a historically conscious people who perceive themselves as a distinct political community. In contrast, a state refers to the sovereign institution that exercises supreme legal and coercive authority within a defined territory. In universal application, when we speak of nation in Europe, we mean the English, French, Dutch, German, Russian, Czech, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian and other linguistic groups. This remark applies equally to the Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, Efik, Kanuri, Ijaw, Edo, Tiv, Idoma, Gwari, Urhobo and other groups in Nigeria (Azikiwe, 1978). The conventions of state may disguise the terminology but cannot obscure its universal application. Nation–state conflict denotes persistent contention between a national community and the state over recognition, security, representation, resource distribution, or political authority. When a nation is subjected to the impact of another nation's political manipulations, the tendency is to produce a crisis of existence, depending upon several sociological factors. Viewed in this way, political marginalisation is the systematic or perceived exclusion of a group from effective participation in high-level state decision-making, public appointments, resource allocation, and agenda setting. Igbo strategic interest refers to the collective political, economic, security, and cultural objectives pursued by Ndi Igbo within the Nigerian federation (Uchendu, 1964; Horowitz, 1985; International IDEA, 2023; Emegha, 2023). The usefulness of any of the concepts, ideas, or theories lies in their implications for practical solutions to the problems of the Nigerian state.

The paper adopts the Relative Deprivation Theory, Internal Colonialism Theory, and Conflict Theory to explain how perceived inequalities, centralised state structures, and competition over power can produce recurrent mobilisation and resistance. Methodologically, the study employs historical–qualitative analysis, documentary research, and time-series event tracing across the period 1914–2026.

Accordingly, the paper intends to accomplish four tasks: (1) reconstruct the historical trajectory of Igbo–state relations from colonial amalgamation to contemporary agitation; (2) demonstrate the developmental achievements of Eastern Nigeria before the Civil War using official regional development records and historical scholarship; (3) analyse major conflict episodes, including the 1966 pogroms, the Civil War, post-war reconstruction policies, and IPOB-related confrontations, through a time-series framework that links events, figures, and outcomes; and (4) evaluate the implications of these patterns for federal inclusion, democratic legitimacy, and the future management of diversity in Nigeria. Consequently, this article seeks to answer four interrelated questions:

1. How has the relationship between the Igbo nation and the Nigerian state evolved from colonial incorporation to the present period?
2. What developmental achievements characterised Eastern Nigeria before the Civil War?
3. What major conflict episodes have defined Igbo–state relations between 1966 and 2026, and what have been their political, economic, and social consequences?
4. What institutional measures are necessary for promoting inclusion, national integration, and sustainable peace within the Nigerian federation? Addressing these questions will contribute to contemporary debates on nation-building, federalism, ethnic relations, and conflict management in Nigeria.

2. Conceptual Clarification: Nation, State, Ethnicity and Nation-State Conflict

Nation

The concept of a nation refers to a community of people who share a common historical consciousness, cultural heritage, collective identity, and a sense of political destiny. In post-colonial societies of the 20th Century, the nation-state is the characteristic form of organisation for the assumption of state power (Adesina, 2025; Schmitz et al., 2023; Uchendu, 1964). Unlike a state, a nation is primarily a socio-cultural and psychological construct rooted in shared memories, language, traditions, myths of origin, and collective aspirations. Scholars generally agree that nations are socially constructed communities whose members perceive themselves as belonging to the same political and cultural entity regardless of whether they possess sovereign statehood (Feinstein, 2024; Schmitz et al., 2023).

Nations may exist within, across, or outside the territorial boundaries of a state. Consequently, not all nations possess independent states, and not all states contain a single nation. Examples such as the Kurds, Catalans, Palestinians, and the Igbo demonstrate that a nation can maintain a distinct political identity without sovereign statehood. Most contemporary nation-states, including Nigeria, are multicultural, and the colonial impact is only one factor in this pluralism (Raphael, 2025; Uchendu, 2000). Hence, the nation-states are rooted in our tribal customs and go back thousands of years. In the Nigerian context, the Igbo constitute a nation because they share a common historical experience, linguistic affinity, cultural traditions, territorial concentration in south-eastern Nigeria, and a collective consciousness that predates colonial rule (Afigbo, 1981; Achebe, 2012).

State

A state refers to a sovereign political institution that exercises legitimate authority over a defined territory and population. Classical and contemporary political theories identify four essential attributes of statehood: territory, population, government, and sovereignty. The state possesses the authority to

formulate laws, regulate social relations, maintain security, and represent society within the international system (Ike & Okonkwo, 2026; Visoka, 2022).

Unlike a nation, which derives legitimacy from shared identity and historical consciousness, the state derives legitimacy from legal authority and institutional control. Modern states often encompass multiple nations and ethnic groups, making them multinational political entities rather than culturally homogeneous communities (Uchendu, 2000). Nigeria exemplifies such a multinational state, comprising over 250 ethnic groups and numerous nationalities incorporated into a single political framework through British colonial amalgamation in 1914 (Babalola & Okafor, 2022).

Ethnicity

Ethnicity refers to a form of social identity based on shared ancestry, language, culture, customs, traditions, and historical experiences (Udoh & Ojiridike, 2025). Ethnic groups distinguish themselves from others through perceived cultural differences and collective identification. While ethnicity and nationhood are closely related, they are not synonymous. Ethnicity primarily emphasises cultural identity, whereas nationhood introduces a political dimension involving collective aspirations, self-determination, and claims to recognition within or beyond the state (Cederman et al., 2025).

In Nigeria, ethnicity remains a significant determinant of political mobilisation, access to resources, electoral competition, and state-society relations (Raphael, 2025; Adesina, 2025). The colonial strategy of indirect rule and the post-colonial struggle for political power reinforced ethnic consciousness, transforming many ethnic identities into politically organised nationalities. Consequently, groups such as the Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa-Fulani are simultaneously ethnic groups and nationalities because they possess both cultural distinctiveness and political aspirations (Babalola & Okafor, 2022).

Nation-State Conflict

The "nation-state" is a modern rather than a contemporary institution. It came into existence in the last three hundred years (Uchendu, 2000). Nation-state conflict refers to persistent tensions, contestations, or confrontations between a national group and the state arising from disputes over political representation, resource distribution, recognition, security, autonomy, or self-determination. Such conflicts emerge when a nation perceives that the state no longer adequately protects its interests, identity, rights, or access to power. The conflict may manifest through political agitation, resistance movements, separatist campaigns, civil disobedience, armed struggle, or demands for constitutional restructuring (Cederman et al., 2025; Emegha & Ofobuike, 2024; Lekunze, 2023). A good example of a nation-state in Europe is Switzerland. The Swiss harboured four main nations: German, French, Italian, and Romansch (Azikiwe, 1978). After much bickering and dissipation of energy, national sentiment prevailed, and the Peace of Westphalia made it possible for a new state to be created in 1648. One hundred and fifty years later, the Helvetic Republic emerged, and it lasted until 1874, when its

Constitution was adopted (Azikiwe, 1978). Today, Switzerland is a federation of 26 cantons (states), each of which is sovereign, so far as its independence and legislative powers are not restricted by the federal constitution.

Contemporary scholarship increasingly associates nation–state conflicts with perceptions of exclusion, unequal citizenship, historical grievances, and failures of nation-building. In multinational states, the inability to reconcile national identities with state institutions often generates competing loyalties and challenges to political legitimacy (Babalola & Okafor, 2022; Feinstein, 2024). Within this framework, the relationship between the Igbo nation and the Nigerian state can be understood as a nation-state conflict that has evolved through different historical phases. The conflict did not begin with the declaration of Biafra in 1967, nor did it end with the cessation of hostilities in 1970.

It rather reflects a longer historical process involving colonial incorporation, ethnic violence, civil war, post-war reconstruction policies, perceived political marginalisation, and contemporary self-determination movements such as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) (Oluka, 2026; Ojo, 2024; International Crisis Group, 2022; Uchendu, 2000). Hence, for this article, nation-state conflict is conceptualised as the persistent struggle between the Igbo nation and the Nigerian state over political inclusion, security, recognition, equitable participation in governance, and the broader question of belonging within the Nigerian federation.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in the Relative Deprivation Theory, Internal Colonialism Theory, and Conflict Theory. Thus, the adoption of a multi-theoretical framework is informed by the complex nature of the relationship between the Igbo nation and the Nigerian state. No single theory sufficiently explains the historical, political, economic, and psychological dimensions of the conflict. Together, these theories provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the origins, persistence, and transformation of nation–state conflict in Nigeria.

Relative Deprivation Theory

Relative Deprivation Theory is primarily associated with the works of Ted Robert Gurr (1970), who argued that conflict emerges when there is a perceived discrepancy between what people believe they deserve and what they actually obtain (Gurr, 1970). The theory focuses not on objective conditions alone but on subjective perceptions of inequality, exclusion, and frustration. Individuals and groups are more likely to mobilise politically when they perceive themselves as unfairly disadvantaged relative to other groups or relative to their own expectations (Lilly et al., 2023; Gurr, 1970). Contemporary studies continue to demonstrate that perceptions of group-based deprivation remain significant predictors of political mobilisation, ethnic grievances, and resistance movements.

The central proposition of the theory is that prolonged deprivation generates frustration, which may eventually produce protest, resistance, or rebellion. Deprivation does not automatically result in violence; it creates conditions under which collective action becomes more likely, particularly when a group perceives persistent exclusion from political opportunities and public resources (Siroky et al., 2020). The theory is significantly relevant to the Igbo experience in Nigeria. Since the end of the Civil War in 1970, many Igbo political elites, intellectuals, and civil society groups have argued that the region has experienced varying degrees of political exclusion, infrastructural neglect, and limited access to strategic positions within the federal system.

Contemporary separatist agitations, especially among sections of Igbo youth, can therefore be interpreted as manifestations of accumulated grievances arising from perceived disparities between expectations of equal citizenship and actual experiences within the Nigerian federation (Ahmed, 2023; International Crisis Group, 2022). While the theory successfully explains the psychological and motivational foundations of collective grievances, it does not adequately explain how such grievances become institutionalised within state structures. This limitation necessitates the incorporation of Internal Colonialism Theory.

Internal Colonialism Theory

Internal Colonialism Theory emerged from attempts to explain persistent inequalities within formally independent states. The theory argues that dominant groups within a country may establish political, economic, and administrative structures that systematically privilege certain regions or populations while subordinating others (Hechter, 1975). In such circumstances, marginalised groups may perceive themselves as colonies within their own country despite the absence of foreign rule (EBSCO Research Starters, 2022; Hechter, 1975).

According to the theory, domination is maintained through unequal access to political power, economic opportunities, state institutions, and developmental resources. The subordinate group often develops a consciousness of exclusion, which may generate demands for autonomy, restructuring, or self-determination. Internal colonial relationships are characterised by asymmetrical power relations in which one group exercises disproportionate influence over the allocation of national resources and the direction of public policy (Raphael, 2025).

Applied to the Nigerian context, proponents of the internal colonialism perspective argue that the post-civil-war political order produced patterns of governance that many Igbo perceive as structurally disadvantageous. These perceptions are often linked to debates surrounding federal appointments, infrastructure development, state creation, revenue allocation, military representation, and access to strategic positions within the federal bureaucracy. Within this framework, contemporary Igbo political grievances are interpreted not merely as episodic complaints but as responses to a long-term structure of political and economic subordination. The strength of Internal Colonialism Theory lies in its ability to explain the structural dimensions of marginalisation; however, the theory tends to emphasise domination

and exclusion at the expense of broader struggles for power that characterise all plural societies. Consequently, Conflict Theory is incorporated to provide a more comprehensive understanding of competition within the Nigerian state.

Conflict Theory

Conflict

Theory is rooted in the writings of Karl Marx and later expanded by scholars who viewed society as an arena of continuous competition among groups pursuing divergent interests. The theory assumes that social order is maintained not primarily through consensus but through power relations, competition, and the unequal distribution of resources (Collins, 1975). Consequently, conflict is regarded as a normal and inevitable feature of social and political life rather than an abnormal condition (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2022; Collins, 1975).

From the perspective of Conflict Theory, political institutions often reflect the interests of dominant groups, while subordinate groups continuously struggle to alter existing power arrangements. Competition over political authority, economic resources, symbolic recognition, and state power frequently generates tensions that may escalate into open conflict when institutional mechanisms for accommodation are weak. Recent scholarship on ethnopolitical conflict similarly emphasises that conflicts involving national or ethnic groups are often rooted in struggles over representation, recognition, and access to state power (Onyemachalu & Ejiofor, 2026).

The Nigerian state provides a classic example of a plural society characterised by multiple centres of political competition. Since independence, ethnic groups, regions, political parties, and elite coalitions have competed for control of federal institutions and national resources. Within this context, the conflict between the Igbo nation and the Nigerian state may be viewed as part of a broader struggle over inclusion, representation, and the distribution of power in a multi-ethnic federation. The Civil War, post-war political arrangements, constitutional debates, and contemporary separatist movements all reflect different phases of this ongoing contestation.

The major contribution of Conflict Theory to this study lies in its ability to situate Igbo-state relations within the broader dynamics of political competition in Nigeria. It highlights that nation-state conflict is not solely a product of deprivation or marginalisation but also of competing interests, rival elite projects, and struggles over the control of state power. Overall, the complexity of Igbo–state relations makes reliance on a single theoretical perspective inadequate. Taken together, the three theories provide a robust analytical framework for understanding the historical evolution of nation-state conflict between the Igbo nation and the Nigerian state from colonial incorporation to contemporary separatist agitation. They collectively explain how perceptions of deprivation, structures of exclusion, and competition for state power have interacted across different historical periods to shape the strategic dimensions of Igbo interest in Nigeria.

4. Historical Evolution of Igbo–State Relations

The relationship between the Igbo nation and the Nigerian state predates political independence and can be traced to the British colonial amalgamation of 1914. The amalgamation brought together diverse ethnic nationalities with distinct political traditions, economic structures, and cultural identities under a single administrative framework. While colonial authorities viewed amalgamation as an administrative and economic necessity, it created a multinational state in which different groups would subsequently compete for political influence and access to state resources (Nkwede & Chinagorom, 2025; Falola & Heaton, 2008; Coleman, 1958).

The Igbo entered the colonial state with a highly decentralised political system characterised by republican traditions, village democracy, and extensive commercial networks. Unlike the centralised emirate structures of Northern Nigeria and the monarchical institutions that existed in much of Yorubaland, pre-colonial Igbo society was organised around autonomous communities and participatory governance structures (Uchendu, 2000; Falola & Heaton, 2008; Afigbo, 1981). Colonial rule transformed these indigenous arrangements through indirect rule, warrant chieftaincy institutions, taxation, missionary education, and integration into the emerging Nigerian economy.

The introduction of Western education created opportunities that many Igbo communities rapidly embraced. By the 1940s and 1950s, the Igbo had become one of the most educationally mobile populations in Nigeria. Achebe (2012) posits that this educational advancement facilitated extensive participation in the civil service, commerce, journalism, law, medicine, and nationalist politics. Consequently, the Igbo played a significant role in the struggle against colonial rule and in the negotiation of Nigeria's constitutional transition to independence. The constitutional developments of the colonial and immediate post-colonial periods encouraged the emergence of regional political identities. Table 1 below clearly shows major political developments influencing Igbo-State relations.

Table 1
Major Political Developments Affecting Igbo–State Relations, 1914–1966

Year	Event	Significance for Igbo–State Relations
1914	Amalgamation of Northern and Southern Nigeria	Incorporated the Igbo into a larger colonial state
1929	Aba Women's War	Demonstrated resistance to colonial authority and taxation
1946	Richards Constitution	Expanded regionalism and political competition
1951	Macpherson Constitution	Increased regional autonomy and electoral participation
1954	Lyttleton Constitution	Established federalism and strengthened regional governments
1960	Nigerian Independence	Igbo leaders became central actors in national governance
1963	Republican Constitution	Consolidated regional competition within the federation
1966	Military coups and political crises	Marked the breakdown of elite consensus and national cohesion

Source

Adapted from Coleman (1958), Afigbo (1981), and Falola and Heaton (2008).

Although Nigerian nationalism united diverse groups against colonial rule, regional competition increasingly shaped political behaviour after independence. The National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC), led by Nnamdi Azikiwe, emerged as a major political platform through which many Igbo political aspirations were expressed within the Nigerian federation (Sklar, 1963). Despite growing political competition, the period between 1959 and 1966 also witnessed remarkable developmental achievements in Eastern Nigeria under the leadership of Dr. Michael Iheonukara Okpara. Historians frequently describe the Eastern Region as one of the fastest-growing regional economies in tropical Africa during this period (Okpara Foundation, 2022). Table 2 below shows some of the major development indicators in Eastern Nigeria from 1959 to 1966.

Table 2
Selected Development Indicators in Eastern Nigeria, 1959–1966

Sector	Major Achievements
Agriculture	Expansion of farm settlement schemes and agricultural modernisation
Industry	Establishment of industrial estates and regional manufacturing enterprises
Education	Significant expansion of primary, secondary, and technical education
Infrastructure	Construction of roads, public utilities, and urban development projects
Commerce	Increased participation in domestic and international trade
Employment	Growth in public and private sector employment opportunities

Source

Eastern Nigeria Development Plan (1962–1968); Government of Eastern Nigeria Annual Reports.

Table 2 above showed that the Okpara administration in Eastern Nigeria pursued a development strategy that combined agricultural modernisation, industrialisation, and human capital development. The famous farm settlement programme increased agricultural productivity while simultaneously addressing rural unemployment. Regional corporations established manufacturing enterprises in sectors such as textiles, ceramics, plastics, and palm produce processing. Educational investments expanded literacy and produced skilled manpower required for economic transformation (Onyemachalu & Ejiofor, 2026; Njoku, 2023). Table 3 clearly illustrates the development performance of Southeast Nigeria before the civil war of 1967.

Table 3
Indicators of Eastern Nigeria's Development Performance Pre-Civil War

Indicator	Approximate Trend (1959–1966)	Outcome
School enrolment	Significant increase	Expansion of skilled workforce
Industrial establishments	Rapid growth	Increased regional production
Road construction	Continuous expansion	Improved market integration
Agricultural output	Sustained growth	Enhanced export earnings
Public investment	Rising annually	Accelerated regional development
Compiled from Eastern Nigeria Development Plan (1962–1968), Federal Office of Statistics reports, and contemporary historical studies		

As tabulated in Table 3 above, these developmental achievements demonstrate that before the political crises of 1966, the Igbo nation was deeply invested in the Nigerian project and actively contributing to national development. Rather than indicating an inevitable path toward conflict, the evidence suggests a

period of increasing integration, economic advancement, and political participation. The subsequent deterioration of relations between the Igbo nation and the Nigerian state, therefore, requires explanation through the extraordinary political events that unfolded in 1966, particularly the military coups, ethnic violence, and the collapse of constitutional governance.

5. The 1966 Crisis, the Civil War, and the Institutionalisation of Nation-State Conflict

The year 1966 occupies a pivotal position in the history of relations between the Igbo nation and the Nigerian state. Before 1966, political competition among Nigeria's major ethnic groups occurred largely within constitutional and electoral frameworks despite regional tensions (Adesina, 2025). The events of 1966, however, fundamentally altered this relationship and transformed political rivalry into a profound nation–state conflict whose consequences continue to shape Nigerian politics. The military coups of January and July 1966, the anti-Igbo massacres in Northern Nigeria, the collapse of constitutional negotiations, and the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War collectively produced a crisis of trust between the Igbo nation and the Nigerian state (Siollun, 2021; Achebe, 2012).

The January 1966 Coup and Ethnic Perceptions

On 15 January 1966, a group of young military officers led by Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu overthrew Nigeria's First Republic. Although the coup plotters claimed national motives, the ethnic identities of many leading participants and the deaths of prominent Northern and Western political leaders contributed to the perception that the coup was an "Igbo coup." Historians have since demonstrated that this interpretation oversimplified the complexity of the coup and ignored the participation of officers from different ethnic backgrounds (Oguejiofor et al., 2025; Siollun, 2021). Nevertheless, the perception gained widespread acceptance in Northern Nigeria and significantly influenced subsequent events.

The coup resulted in the deaths of key political leaders, including Prime Minister Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, Northern Premier Ahmadu Bello, and Western Premier Samuel Akintola. Major-General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi, an Igbo officer, subsequently assumed leadership of the country as Head of State (Adesina, 2025; Nkwede & Chinagorom, 2025). His government's promulgation of Decree No. 34, which sought to replace federalism with a unitary administrative structure, intensified suspicions among many Northern political elites who viewed the policy as an attempt to consolidate Igbo dominance (Falola & Heaton, 2008).

The July 1966 Counter-Coup and Anti-Igbo Pogroms

Pogroms: On 29 July 1966, Northern military officers launched a counter-coup that resulted in the assassination of General Aguiyi-Ironsi and numerous Igbo military officers. Lieutenant-Colonel Yakubu

Gowon subsequently emerged as Head of State. More significantly, the counter-coup triggered widespread violence against Igbo civilians residing in Northern Nigeria (Udoh & Okonkwo, 2026; Nkwede & Chinagorom, 2025). Between May and October 1966, thousands of Igbo civilians were killed in a series of attacks across several Northern cities, including Kano, Kaduna, Jos, Zaria, and Makurdi. While estimates vary, most scholarly accounts place the death toll between 30,000 and 50,000 persons, with hundreds of thousands displaced and forced to flee to Eastern Nigeria (Bird & Ottanelli, 2023; Achebe, 2012; de St. Jorre, 1972).

For many Igbo, these killings represented a fundamental failure of the Nigerian state to protect its citizens. Consequently, the crisis transformed political grievances into existential fears concerning security, citizenship, and survival. Table 4 clearly demonstrates the impact of the 1966 anti-Igbo pogroms.

Table 4
Estimated Impact of the 1966 Anti-Igbo Pogroms

Indicator	Estimated Figure
Igbo civilians killed	30,000–50,000
Internally displaced persons	Over 1,000,000
Returnees to the Eastern Region	Approximately 1,000,000–1,500,000
Major affected cities	Kano, Kaduna, Jos, Zaria, Makurdi

Sources

Achebe (2012); de St. Jorre (1972); Bird and Ottanelli (2023).

The pogroms marked a critical turning point in Igbo perceptions of the Nigerian federation. From the perspective of Relative Deprivation Theory, they generated a profound sense of insecurity and exclusion. From the perspective of Internal Colonialism Theory, they reinforced perceptions that the state could no longer guarantee equal protection to all national groups.

The Aburi Accord and the Failure of Constitutional Settlement

In January 1967, Nigerian leaders met in Aburi, Ghana, in an effort to resolve the escalating crisis. The meeting produced what became known as the Aburi Accord, which proposed a loose federal arrangement granting substantial autonomy to the regions. However, disagreements over the interpretation and implementation of the Accord soon emerged between the Federal Military Government and the Eastern Region leadership under Lieutenant-Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu (Oluka, 2026; Adesina, 2025; Forsyth, 1969). The failure to implement the Aburi Accord deepened mistrust between both parties and accelerated the movement toward secession.

The Declaration of Biafra and the Civil War

On 30 May 1967, Ojukwu declared the independence of the Republic of Biafra. The Federal Military Government rejected the declaration and launched military operations aimed at preserving Nigeria's territorial integrity. Nkwede & Chinagorom (2025) aver that the conflict developed into a thirty-month civil war that lasted from July 1967 to January 1970. The Nigerian Civil War, therefore, remains one of the deadliest conflicts in post-colonial Africa. Although estimates vary considerably, historians generally agree that between one and three million people died during the conflict, the majority of whom were civilians affected by starvation, disease, and humanitarian crises arising from the federal blockade of Biafra (Uche, 2008; Achebe, 2012; United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2024). Table 5 below shows the humanitarian consequences of the civil war.

Table 5
Humanitarian Consequences of the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970)

Indicator	Estimated Figure
Duration of war	30 months
Military deaths	Approximately 100,000–200,000
Civilian deaths	1,000,000–3,000,000
Refugees and displaced persons	Over 4,000,000
Children affected by famine	Several million

Sources

Uche (2008); Achebe (2012); United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (2024).

The humanitarian catastrophe generated global attention and remains central to collective Igbo memory. Images of famine-stricken children became defining symbols of the conflict and contributed to international humanitarian advocacy.

Post-War Policies and the Institutionalisation of Grievances

The war officially ended on 15 January 1970 with General Gowon's declaration of a policy of "No Victor, No Vanquished." The federal government subsequently announced programmes of Reconstruction, Rehabilitation, and Reconciliation (the Three Rs). Despite these initiatives, several post-war policies generated long-term grievances within the Igbo community (Igwe, 2025; Adesina, 2025).

Among the most controversial were: (1) the £20 policy, which limited bank withdrawals by former Biafrans regardless of pre-war savings. (2) The abandonment property policy implemented in parts of Rivers State. (3) Perceived underrepresentation in federal institutions. (4) Limited reconstruction of war-

damaged infrastructure compared to expectations. Many scholars identify these policies as important factors in the persistence of post-war resentment and the emergence of subsequent demands for restructuring, equity, and self-determination (Ekwe-Ekwe, 2023; Nwanegbo & Odigbo, 2024; Nkwede & Chinagorom, 2025). Following the above, Table 6 shows the major post-war policies.

Table 6
Major Post-War Policies and Their Perceived Implications

Policy	Objective	Perceived Igbo Outcome
Reconstruction Programme	Rebuild war-affected areas	Viewed as unevenly implemented
£20 Policy	Currency stabilisation	Significant loss of accumulated savings
Abandoned Property Policy	Property administration	Economic dispossession claims
State Creation Exercises	Administrative decentralisation	Perceived political fragmentation
Federal Character Principle	National inclusion	Mixed perceptions regarding effectiveness

Sources

Adesina (2025); United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (2024).

Nation–State Conflict after 1970

The significance of the Civil War extends beyond the immediate conflict period. Rather than resolving underlying tensions, the war transformed the nature of the relationship between the Igbo nation and the Nigerian state. Questions concerning political representation, economic integration, historical justice, citizenship, and collective memory remained unresolved. Consequently, the conflict evolved from military confrontation into a prolonged struggle over recognition, inclusion, and belonging within the Nigerian federation. From the perspective of the Relative Deprivation Theory, the persistence of grievances reflects unmet expectations of equal citizenship and post-war justice. Internal Colonialism Theory highlights perceptions of structural disadvantage, while Conflict Theory explains the continuing competition for political influence and access to state power. Together, these perspectives suggest that the Civil War did not create the conflict in isolation but institutionalised a pattern of nation–state contestation whose effects continue to influence contemporary Nigerian politics.

6. Post-War Marginalisation, Democratic Politics, IPOB, and the Reconfiguration of Nation-State Conflict, 1970–2026

The conclusion of the Nigerian Civil War in January 1970 did not terminate the tensions between the Igbo nation and the Nigerian state. Rather, it inaugurated a new phase in which overt military confrontation gave way to struggles over political representation, economic reintegration, infrastructural development, citizenship rights, and historical memory (Oluka, 2026). While successive governments pursued policies aimed at national integration, many Igbo political actors and intellectuals argued that post-war arrangements failed to address the structural and psychological consequences of the conflict. Consequently, the nation–state conflict was reconfigured rather than resolved.

Post-War Reintegration and Emerging Grievances

The Federal Military Government's post-war programme of Reconstruction, Rehabilitation, and Reconciliation (the 3-Rs) sought to reintegrate the former Eastern Region into the Nigerian federation. However, several policies generated enduring controversies. The £20 compensation policy, under which former Biafrans received only £20 regardless of their pre-war bank balances, became a powerful symbol of economic dispossession. Similarly, disputes surrounding abandoned properties in parts of Rivers State reinforced perceptions of injustice among many affected families (Achebe, 2012; Ekwe-Ekwe, 2023). Although the federal government invested in reconstruction projects, critics argued that infrastructural recovery in the South-East lagged behind expectations. These perceptions gradually became embedded in political discourse and contributed to narratives of marginalisation that would later influence contemporary separatist movements.

Political Representation in the Fourth Republic

The return to democratic rule in 1999 created new opportunities for political participation. However, debates concerning equitable representation within federal institutions remained prominent. Political commentators frequently pointed to the absence of a Nigerian president of Igbo extraction since the end of the First Republic and questioned the distribution of key federal appointments, security positions, and infrastructural investments (Suberu, 2001; Nwangwu & Ononogbu, 2022). One frequently cited indicator concerns the number of states and local government areas allocated to the geopolitical zones (Udoh & Ojiridike, 2025). The South-East remains the only geopolitical zone with five states, whereas most other zones have six or seven states. Since federal allocations and representation structures are partly linked to state and local government configurations, many analysts argue that this disparity affects political influence and resource distribution. Table 7 below indicates the geopolitical zone and the number of states in each zone.

Table 7
Distribution of States by Geopolitical Zone in Nigeria

Geopolitical Zone	Number of States
North-West	7
North-East	6
North-Central	6 + FCT
South-West	6
South-South	6
South-East	5

Source

Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999, as amended).

Similarly, disparities in local government distribution have often featured in debates about representation and federal allocation. Table 8 presents the number of local government areas in each geopolitical zone, with South East having the fewest.

Table 8
Distribution of Local Government Areas by Geopolitical Zone

Zone	Number of LGAs
North-West	186
North-East	112
North-Central	119
South-West	137
South-South	123
South-East	95

Source

Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC); National Bureau of Statistics (2024).

Although these figures do not by themselves prove discrimination, they have become important reference points in discussions of political equity and inclusion. From the perspective of Relative Deprivation Theory, perceptions often matter as much as objective realities in shaping political mobilisation.

Developmental Concerns and Regional Infrastructure

Infrastructure has remained one of the most contested dimensions of Igbo–state relations in the post-war era. Civil society organisations, business associations, and regional leaders have repeatedly raised concerns regarding the condition of federal roads, seaports, rail networks, and industrial infrastructure in the South-East. The region's strategic commercial role in Nigeria's economy has intensified demands for improved federal investment (SBM Intelligence, 2023). One example frequently cited is the prolonged deterioration of major transport corridors linking Onitsha, Enugu, Aba, and Port Harcourt. Scholars argue that infrastructure deficits increase transaction costs, discourage industrial expansion, and reinforce perceptions of governmental neglect (Nwankwo, 2024).

Rise of Contemporary Self-Determination Movements

The resurgence of self-determination movements represents one of the most significant developments in post-war Igbo politics. Organisations such as the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), founded in 1999, and the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), founded in 2012, emerged partly in response to perceived failures of political integration and federal inclusion (Nkwede & Chinagorom, 2025). IPOB, under the leadership of Nnamdi Kanu, transformed the discourse around Biafra by utilising digital media, transnational networks and grassroots mobilisation. The organisation framed its campaign around issues of self-determination, political exclusion, security concerns, and historical injustice. In contrast, the Nigerian state viewed many of its activities as threats to national security/territorial integrity (International Crisis Group, 2022). Table 9 below presents the contemporary self-determination movements in the South East.

Table 9
Evolution of Contemporary Igbo Self-Determination Movements

Year	Organisation/Event	Significance
1999	MASSOB established	Renewed Biafran activism
2012	IPOB established	Intensified separatist mobilisation
2015	Arrest of Nnamdi Kanu	Escalation of protests
2017	IPOB proscribed by the Federal Govt.	Increased state–movement confrontation
2021	Re-arrest of Nnamdi Kanu	Renewed tensions in the South-East
2022–2026	Legal/political contestations	Persistence of nation–state conflict

Sources

International Crisis Group (2022); Human Rights Watch (2023).

Security Responses and Human Rights Concerns

The Nigerian state's response to separatist agitation has relied heavily on security measures, including military deployments, arrests, prosecutions, and the designation of IPOB as a terrorist organisation in 2017. Government officials argue that such measures are necessary to preserve national security and territorial integrity. However, human rights organisations have documented allegations of excessive force, arbitrary detention, and restrictions on civil liberties during security operations in the South-East (Human Rights Watch, 2023; Amnesty International, 2024). Table 10 below shows indicators of tensions in the South-East.

Table 10
Selected Indicators of Contemporary Nation–State Tensions in the South-East

Indicator	Observation
Separatist mobilisation	Increased since 2012
Security deployments	Intensified after 2015
Sit-at-home compliance	Significant in several South-East communities since 2021 after the arrest of an IPOB leader.
Human rights allegations	Reported by national and international organisations
Political restructuring demands	Persistent across major regional organisations

Sources

Human Rights Watch (2023); Amnesty International (2024); International Crisis Group (2022).

Reconfiguring Nation–State Conflict in Contemporary Nigeria

The contemporary phase of the conflict differs significantly from the period of the Civil War. Whereas the conflict of 1967–1970 was primarily a conventional military confrontation, the post-1999 phase is characterised by political mobilisation, identity assertion, legal contestation, civil resistance, media activism, and security operations. Nevertheless, both periods are connected by recurring themes of representation, citizenship, security, recognition, and belonging. The persistence of these issues suggests that the conflict cannot be adequately understood as a temporary security challenge. Rather, it reflects unresolved questions concerning the nature of the Nigerian federation and the relationship between national groups and state institutions. Relative Deprivation Theory explains how perceptions of exclusion continue to generate grievances; Internal Colonialism Theory highlights structural concerns regarding political and economic inequality; and Conflict Theory reveals how competition over power and resources sustains political contestation.

The Igbo-state relationship in contemporary Nigeria remains a significant example of nation-state conflict within a multinational federation. The challenge for policymakers is not merely the suppression of separatist agitation but the construction of institutions capable of fostering trust, inclusion, and equal citizenship across all national groups. The next section, therefore, synthesises these historical patterns through a comprehensive time-series analysis of conflict events, causal factors, outcomes, and implications, enabling a clearer understanding of the long-term trajectory of nation-state conflict in Nigeria.

7. Time-Series Analysis of Nation–State Conflict between the Igbo Nation and the Nigerian State, 1914–2026

The historical evidence presented in the preceding sections indicates that the relationship between the Igbo nation and the Nigerian state has evolved through multiple phases rather than a single episode of conflict. Although the Nigerian Civil War remains the most dramatic manifestation of this relationship, the roots of the conflict extend to colonial state formation, while its consequences continue to shape contemporary politics. A time-series analysis provides a systematic framework for examining how conflict triggers, state responses, and outcomes have changed over time while preserving a degree of continuity in the underlying issues of representation, security, recognition, and political inclusion. The analysis identifies seven major phases in the evolution of Igbo–state relations: colonial incorporation (1914–1945), constitutional competition (1946–1965), political rupture (1966), civil war (1967–1970), post-war reintegration (1970–1998), democratic contestation (1999–2014), and contemporary separatist mobilisation (2015–2026). Table 11 below presents timelines of conflict.

Table 11
Time-Series Analysis of Igbo–State Conflict, 1914–2026

Period	Conflict Trigger	Major Event(s)	State Response	Outcome	Effect on Igbo–State Relations
1914–1945	Colonial incorporation	Amalgamation and indirect rule	Centralised colonial administration	Political integration into Nigeria	Initial incorporation without major separatist tensions
1946–1965	Regional competition	Constitutional reforms and federal politics	Federal constitutional arrangements	Increased regional autonomy	Intensified ethnic competition
1966	Political crisis	January coup, July counter-coup, pogroms	Military intervention	Collapse of trust	Major rupture in relations
1967–1970	Secession and war	Biafran Declaration and Civil War	Military prosecution of war	Defeat of Biafra	Deepened historical grievances
1970–1998	Post-war reintegration	Reconstruction and military rule	Reconciliation programmes	Formal reintegration	Persistent marginalisation narratives
1999–2014	Democratic transition	Federal representation debates	Constitutional democracy	Renewed political participation	Continued demands for equity
2015–2026	Separatist resurgence	IPOB mobilisation and security operations	Arrests, proscription, military deployments	Ongoing contestation	Reconfigured nation–state conflict

Compiled from Afigbo (1981), Achebe (2012), Siollun (2021), International Crisis Group (2022), and Human Rights Watch (2023)

The table demonstrates that conflict intensity has fluctuated over time, but the fundamental issues at stake have remained remarkably consistent. Questions relating to political representation, security guarantees, distributive justice, and collective identity appear repeatedly across different historical periods.

Patterns of Conflict Escalation

A closer examination of the conflict trajectory reveals three major periods of escalation. The first occurred during constitutional negotiations in the late colonial era when regional competition increasingly shaped political behaviour. The second and most severe escalation occurred between 1966 and 1970, culminating in civil war. The third phase emerged after 2015 with the resurgence of separatist mobilisation and intensified state security responses. The data in Table 12 below suggest that violence

has generally occurred when political grievances became linked to questions of physical security and collective survival. The 1966 pogroms, for example, transformed political competition into an existential crisis, thereby creating conditions for secessionist mobilisation.

Table 12
Major Escalation Points in Igbo–State Conflict

Period	Principal Trigger	Estimated Impact
1946–1965	Regional political competition	Intensified ethnic political rivalry
1966	Coups and anti-Igbo massacres	30,000–50,000 deaths and mass displacement
1967–1970	Civil War	1–3 million deaths and a humanitarian crisis
2015–2026	IPOB-state confrontation	Security tensions and political polarisation

Sources

Achebe (2012); Siollun (2021); International Crisis Group (2022).

8. Discussion of Findings: Nation versus State in Nigeria

The findings of this study indicate that the relationship between the Igbo nation and the Nigerian state is best understood within the broader framework of nation–state conflict rather than as a purely ethnic dispute. Similar to cases involving the Kurds in Turkey, Catalans in Spain, and Québécois in Canada, the central issue revolves around the extent to which a distinct national community perceives itself as adequately represented, protected, and recognised within an existing state structure (Oluka, 2026; Ike & Okonkwo, 2026; Cederman et al., 2025; Ghai & Woodman, 2023). The Igbo case, therefore, reflects a broader pattern in which tensions emerge when state institutions are perceived as insufficiently accommodating national identities and aspirations.

The persistence of the conflict despite Nigeria's military victory in 1970 demonstrates that military success does not necessarily resolve underlying political grievances. While the Civil War ended secessionist efforts in the short term, it did not fully address concerns relating to post-war reconstruction, political inclusion, equitable representation, historical justice, and collective memory. Hence, the conflict evolved from armed confrontation into political agitation, demands for restructuring, and renewed self-determination movements. This finding supports the Relative Deprivation Theory, which argues that unresolved perceptions of exclusion can sustain grievances long after the original conflict has ended (Lilly et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the evidence suggests that the conflict is fundamentally about legitimacy, inclusion, and federalism rather than ethnicity alone. Ethnic diversity in itself does not inevitably produce conflict, as demonstrated by several multinational states that successfully manage diversity through inclusive institutions and equitable power-sharing arrangements. Thus, the recurring tensions between the Igbo nation and the Nigerian state are better explained by disputes over access to political power, resource

distribution, security guarantees, and the nature of federal citizenship. Ultimately, the study argues that the durability of Nigeria's unity depends less on coercive state capacity than on the ability of federal institutions to foster inclusion, trust, and equal citizenship. Where significant national groups perceive themselves as recognised stakeholders in the political system, the incentives for separatist mobilisation are substantially reduced. The Igbo case, therefore, underscores the broader challenge of nation-building in multinational states: reconciling national identities with the demands of a unified political order.

9. Conclusion

This study examined the historical trajectory of conflict between the Igbo nation and the Nigerian state from 1914 to 2026. The findings reveal that the conflict did not emerge inevitably from ethnic diversity but evolved through specific historical and political developments, particularly the crises of 1966, the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), and post-war governance arrangements. Evidence from the study demonstrates that the Igbo were active participants in Nigeria's political and economic development before the Civil War, especially through the remarkable developmental achievements of Eastern Nigeria under the Michael Okpara administration. However, the anti-Igbo pogroms, the Civil War, post-war economic policies, and persistent concerns over political representation and federal inclusion contributed to a recurring pattern of grievances that continues to influence contemporary state–society relations.

The study further established that the persistence of the conflict is best explained through the combined insights of Relative Deprivation Theory, Internal Colonialism Theory, and Conflict Theory. Together, these perspectives show that perceptions of exclusion, structural inequalities, and competition over political power have sustained tensions long after the end of armed conflict. Consequently, the challenge confronting Nigeria is not merely the management of separatist agitation but the creation of institutions capable of fostering trust, inclusion, and equal citizenship within a multinational federation.

10. Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study recommends the following:

1. Constitutional and federal reforms aimed at strengthening equitable representation and inclusive governance across all geopolitical zones.
2. A comprehensive national reconciliation programme to address unresolved historical grievances arising from the 1966 massacres and the Civil War.
3. Accelerated infrastructural and economic development in the South-East to promote balanced regional growth and reduce perceptions of marginalisation.
4. Inclusive political appointments and power-sharing mechanisms that reflect Nigeria's federal character and diversity.

Ultimately, sustainable peace and national cohesion in Nigeria depend on building a federation in which all national groups perceive themselves as equal stakeholders in the country's political, economic, and

social future.

Declarations

Ethics and Declaration

The study did not involve human or animal subjects; therefore, it required no ethical consent.

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Competing interest

The author declares no competing interests in carrying out this research.

Ethics and Consent

Ethics, consent to participate and publication are not applicable in this research

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