

## Fulani Responses to Pastoralist Crisis and Mass Violence

*James Courtright*

**Conflicts over the last decade in the central Sahel and parts of Nigeria have been fuelled, among other factors, by a deep-seated crisis in pastoralism. Following a century of the gradual erosion of herders' political, economic, and social powers, immediate threats to their livelihoods led small groups of largely Fulani herders to – independently from one another – take up arms. Although these groups are only one small element of the broader Fulani social system, blame was directed at the entire Fulani community, leading to an escalation of communal conflict. Fulani Responses – civil society activism, taking up arms, and displacement – have failed to stem the violence. To contain acute conflicts, next to negotiations with militants, Western African governments need to address the crisis in pastoralism by enforcing laws in grazing areas and corridors, making investments in rural livelihoods and taking action to bring some measure of justice to communities torn apart by more than a decade of conflict.**

Fulani (“Fulbe” in their languages, “Peul” in French) are a decentralized community of 30 million people spread across at least 19 African countries.<sup>1</sup> Although almost all Fulani are Muslim and trace their ancestry to semi-nomadic pastoralists, the community encompasses around a dozen major interrelated languages and cultural systems and is profoundly heterogeneous. For example, whereas small groups of Fulani in the Sahel continue to migrate seasonally with their livestock, Fulani in the highlands of Guinea settled permanently in large urban centres centuries ago and developed complex agricultural systems. Indeed, although all Fulani are often imagined as practicing transhumance,<sup>2</sup> in reality the vast majority are settled. Furthermore, each Fulani cultural group has its own internal hierarchy, which manifests in complex clan and/or caste systems. Fulani constitute a minority in every country they live in, and their nomadic heritage often leaves them open to being scapegoated as “foreigners” during national crises. Apart from a few notable exceptions, Fulani as a whole – and particularly those who still practice some form of semi-nomadic pastoralism – tend to be underrepresented in national governments.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Senegal, Mauritania, The Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Togo, Benin, Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, Central Africa Republic and Sudan.

<sup>2</sup> Transfer of livestock from one grazing ground to another, as from lowlands to highlands, with the changing of seasons.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew D. Turner, “Fulani Pastoralism in West Africa,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History* (Oxford University Press, 2022).

## Fulani Responses to Pastoralist Crisis and Mass Violence

Although Fulani societies in many parts of West Africa are thriving, in the central Sahelian countries of Mali, Burkina Faso (and to a lesser extent Niger), and parts of Nigeria, Fulani herders are facing an existential crisis. A century of erosion of pastoralist livelihoods has led small groups of Fulani herders to resort to violence – in some cases alongside jihadist insurgents, in others as part of organized bandit groups – and sometimes in quasi-spontaneous clashes with nearby farmers. Amid an environment of insecurity and impunity, neighbouring communities (and in some cases security forces) have scapegoated the entire Fulani community, unleashing a wave of violence against Fulani civilians. Responses by different segments of Fulani communities – civil society activism, taking up arms, and displacement – have failed to stop the onslaught.

## An Existential Crisis

The current crisis that Fulani pastoralists are facing has its roots in a century and a half of social, political, and economic transformations. A series of revolutions led by charismatic Fulani religious leaders in the 18th and 19th centuries produced a string of Islamic theocracies across West Africa. These polities reflected, to different degrees, elements of Fulani social organization, and as such, prioritized land tenure arrangements, which allowed for both pastoralism and agriculture.<sup>4</sup> However, beginning in the colonial era, power shifted to newly established capitals and an emerging class of Western educated elites. Whereas settled Fulani leaders were incorporated into the colonial and post-colonial governments (again, to different degrees), rural communities, particularly those that still practised semi-nomadic pastoralism, were not.<sup>5</sup> After independence in the 1960s, catastrophic droughts in the 1970s and 1980s decimated Sahelian herds, destroying generations of wealth. To survive, thousands continued the decades long practice of moving their herds further south into the central regions of Ivory Coast, Ghana, Togo, Benin, and Nigeria, where they encountered expanding farming communities with whom they did not share a history of coexisting. Meanwhile, national governments and donors focused investments on agriculture, sometimes at the expense of rural pastoralists, who frequently complain of the loss of pasture land and livestock corridors following the extension of motor pumps, irrigation, and improved fertilisers to rural farmers.<sup>6</sup>

These external shocks to pastoral livelihoods were accompanied by shifting power dynamics within different Fulani societies. In the lush inner delta of the Niger river – a unique ecosystem in central Mali that can support large herds of livestock during the punishing eight-month dry season – semi-nomadic herders began to chafe at the increasingly exorbitant fees paid to hereditary Fulani land owners in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, in central Nigeria, decades of southward migratory drift by herders led to disputes between newer Fulani arrivals and the Fulani herders who had been visiting these areas for generations.<sup>8</sup> In some places, groups of pastoralists felt abandoned when the settled and

<sup>4</sup> Amadou Hampaté Bâ and J. Daget, *L'empire Peul Du Macina (1818-1853)* (Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire: Les Nouvelles Éditions Africaines et Éditions de l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 1984), 81.

<sup>5</sup> Christian Lund, "Politics in a Sahelian Town: Dori and the Art of Alliance," *Geografisk Tidsskrift* 2 (1999): 15–25; J. W. M. van Dijk, "Livestock Transfers and Social Security in Fulbe Society in the Hayre, Central Mali," *Focaal: European Journal of Anthropology* 22/23 (1994): 97–112.

<sup>6</sup> Author interviews with Fulani leaders and herders in Bamako, Mali, August 2022; Numan, Nigeria, March 2023; Gushegu, Ghana, May 2022; Kaedi, Mauritania, February 2022; and Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, October 2023.

<sup>7</sup> Author interviews with Fulani land owners from central Mali in Bamako, Mali, February 2023.

<sup>8</sup> Philip Burnham and Murray Last, "From Pastoralist to Politician: The Problem of a Fulbe 'Aristocracy,'" *Cahiers d'études Africaines* 34, no. 133–135 (1994): 313–57; Roger Blench, "The Expansion and Adaptation of Fulbe Pastoralism to Subhumid and Humid Conditions in Nigeria" [L'expansion et l'adaptation Du Pastoralisme Peul Aux Conditions Climatiques Humides et Subhumides Du Nigeria], *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 34, no. 133/135 (1994): 197–212.

### Fulani Responses to Pastoralist Crisis and Mass Violence

urbanized Fulani elites, who they previously relied on in times of need, became part of the government and rebuffed their calls for support. Meanwhile, somewhat tangentially, former Fulani slaves (a caste unto themselves in some Fulani societies) in parts of central Mali and northern Burkina Faso were challenging their subservient position in society in disputes over land and access to local political power.<sup>9</sup> Thus, although specific dynamics differ, pastoralists across the region – who had often previously held privileged positions in the social order – felt squeezed not just by governments and farming communities, but also by other Fulani.

In the early 2010s, the crisis in pastoralism reached a critical point in both the central Sahel and Nigeria. In the central Sahel, the resumption of the Tuareg secessionist struggle in northern Mali in 2012 ignited tensions between and within pastoralist societies. Fulani pastoralists – watching their Tuareg rivals join the *Mouvement National pour la Libération de l’Azawad* – sent their sons to join the jihadist group the *Mouvement pour l’unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l’Ouest*. After the French intervention dislodged militants from northern towns, these armed Fulani pastoralists filtered back into central Mali, which had been abandoned by the state, and formed self-defence groups in small patches of forest. In 2015 these militants flocked to Fulani preacher Amadou Diallo, known as Amadou Koufa, who denounced the French and United Nations (UN) intervention, excoriated predatory forest agents who had long been the bane of Fulani herders, and accused settled Fulani elites of corruption and betraying rural herders.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, one of Koufa’s mentees, a Burkinabe preacher named Boureima Dicko, returned to Soum province, where he continued speaking out against corrupt local leaders and social inequalities within Fulani societies. Like Koufa, he took to the forest and began assassinating local rivals (most of whom were Fulani) and ambushing security forces.<sup>11</sup> In 2017 Koufa and three northern militant groups announced the creation of the jihadist coalition *Jama’at Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin* (JNIM) and pledged allegiance to Al Qaeda. Today JNIM also includes the movement founded by Dicko and controls large parts of central and northern Mali, around one half of Burkina Faso, as well as Niger’s border regions, and makes frequent incursions into northern Togo and Benin. Although JNIM has consistently publicly eschewed an exclusive ethnic identity, the over-representation of Fulani herders among leaders and rank-and-file militants can be traced back to the crisis in pastoralism.

Meanwhile, more than 1,000 kilometres away in Nigeria, completely different groups of Fulani pastoralists were also taking up arms as threats to their immediate livelihoods mounted. In the early 2010s, disputes between Fulani herders and farming communities in the north-west and the Middle Belt over access to land and water began to escalate. Amid a proliferation of light arms and in an environment of impunity, cycles of retaliatory violence emerged. In the Middle Belt, violence was sparked by highly localized disputes, but it was

<sup>9</sup> Slavery has varied afterlives among different Fulani communities across the region. Since the abolition of slavery, many of the formerly enslaved communities, who already spoke Pulaar/Fulfulde as a mother tongue, have taken noble Fulani surnames and practice Islam, in an effort to elide their subservient background and be accepted as “Fulbe.” Mirjam de Bruijn and Lotte Pelckmans, “Facing Dilemmas: Former Fulbe Slaves in Modern Mali,” *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne Des Études Africaines* 39, no. 1 (2005): 69–95; “The Social Roots of Jihadist Violence in Burkina Faso’s North” (Brussels, Belgium: International Crisis Group, October 12, 2017); John Fredrick Straussberger, “The ‘Particular Situation’ in the Futa Jallon: Ethnicity, Region, and Nation in Twentieth-Century Guinea,” 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Author interviews with Fulani community leaders in Bamako, Mali, in February 2023; Tor A. Benjaminsen and Boubacar Ba, “Why Do Pastoralists in Mali Join Jihadist Groups? A Political Ecological Explanation,” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 46, no. 1 (January 2, 2019): 1–20; Sangaré Boukary, “Le Centre Du Mali: Épicentre Du Djihadisme?” (Brussels, Belgium: Group for Research and Information on Peace and Security, May 20, 2016).

<sup>11</sup> Author interviews with Fulani community leaders in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, in October 2023; “The Social Roots of Jihadist Violence in Burkina Faso’s North.”

### Fulani Responses to Pastoralist Crisis and Mass Violence

often quickly re-cast after the fact as being motivated by religious animus.<sup>12</sup> However, particularly in Zamfara state in the north-west, some of the perpetrators of this violence began organizing as criminal bands and engaged in cattle rustling and kidnapping for ransom. By 2015 there were at least a dozen “bandit warlords” – most of whom were Fulani, but whose followers included both Fulani and Hausa – based in nearby forests attacking settled Hausa communities, stealing large numbers of livestock from Fulani, and fighting among themselves.<sup>13</sup> Although Fulani bandits in north-west Nigeria, communal militias in the Middle Belt, and Sahelian insurgents exhibit different motivations for fighting and vastly different kinds of organization, all have their roots, to some degree, in the crisis in pastoralism.

From the central Sahel to parts of Nigeria, the entire Fulani community has been blamed, to different degrees, for the escalating violence related to jihadists or bandits. Following Koufa and Dicko’s first attacks on state representatives, national security forces – in many cases under-resourced, with poor morale, and unsure of who was attacking them – responded with arbitrary arrests, torture, and extrajudicial killings in nearby Fulani communities.<sup>14</sup> Although both civilian and military leaders in Bamako and Ouagadougou have denounced the “amalgam” conflating Fulani communities with jihadists, the canard that Fulani support the jihadists is widespread. Similarly, in north-west Nigeria, many Hausa communities laid the blame for banditry on the shoulders of the entire Fulani community. In the Middle Belt, where Fulani herders have clashed with (mostly Christian) farmers, the scapegoating of Fulani has taken a conspiratorial bent. Particularly during the second administration of Muhammadu Buhari (2015–2023), media figures and political opponents described Fulani involved in clashes as “killer herdsman” and claimed they were part of a wider Fulani plot to kill Christians and extend the 19th century Sokoto state into southern Nigeria, bringing the scapegoating to high politics as a way to attack the then-president (whose father is Fulani).<sup>15</sup> Although the exact message differs depending on the national and local dynamics, beyond its use as a justification for mass violence against civilians, the general scapegoating of Fulani obscures the real drivers of violence and elides government for their role in precipitating the crisis.

As swaths of rural areas in the central Sahel and Nigeria were plagued with insecurity, other communities began to organize their own self-defence groups. In central Mali, decentralized groups known as Donso or Dozo emerged out of traditional hunting associations in Bambara communities, while dozens of young Dogon men joined the more centralized group Dan na Ambassagou. Across the border in Burkina Faso, Kogleweogo, meaning “guardians of the bush”, were organized on a “village by village” basis to provide local security. In 2020 these units were formalized as an auxiliary force for the military and re-branded the Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland (VDP).<sup>16</sup> Zamfara and other north-western states in Nigeria have long had state-sponsored vigilante groups, but as bandits wreaked

<sup>12</sup> Author interviews in Adamawa State, Nigeria, in March 2023; “Herders Against Farmers: Nigeria’s Expanding Conflict” (Abuja/Brussels: International Crisis Group, September 2017).

<sup>13</sup> “Violence in Nigeria’s North West: Rolling Back the Mayhem” (Abuja/Brussels: International Crisis Group, May 18, 2020); Murtala Ahmed Rufai, “Vigilante Groups and Rural Banditry in Zamfara State: Excesses and Contradictions,” *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention* 7, no. 6 (June 2018): 65–73; Adam Higazi and Idayat Hassan, “Conflict Analysis and Assessment of Potential Support to Transitional Justice in Northwest Nigeria” (European Resources for Mediation Support (ERMES) III and Facility on Justice in Conflict and Transition, January 2022).

<sup>14</sup> Author interviews with Fulani community leaders in Bamako, Mali, in August 2022; “‘We Used to Be Brothers’: Self-Defense Group Abuses in Central Mali” (Human Rights Watch, December 2018); “‘By Day We Fear the Army, by Night the Jihadists’: Abuses by Armed Islamists and Security Forces in Burkina Faso” (Human Rights Watch, May 2018).

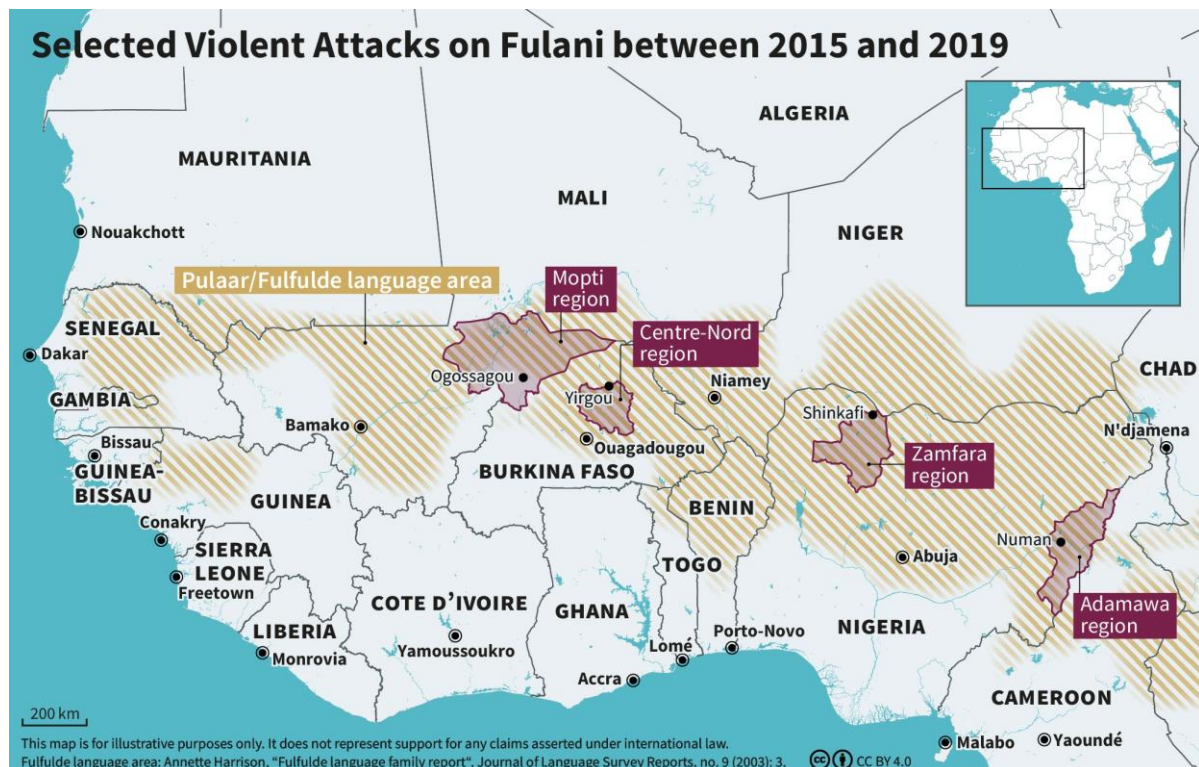
<sup>15</sup> For an example of this rhetoric from a prominent Nigerian politics, see Femi Fani-Kayode, “The Fulani of Nigeria,” *Sahara Reporters*, August 26, 2019, <https://saharareporters.com/2019/08/26/fulani-nigeria-femi-fani-kayode>.

<sup>16</sup> “Burkina Faso: Arming Civilians at the Cost of Social Cohesion?” (Dakar/Brussels: International Crisis Group, December 2023).

### Fulani Responses to Pastoralist Crisis and Mass Violence

havoc in rural communities, more extreme members of these groups – frustrated by the lack of government support – began forming their own de-centralized vigilante groups, known as Yan Sakai in Hausa.<sup>17</sup>

The ethnic self-defence militias that sprang up to counter insecurity have played a central role in exacerbating violence. In the central Sahel, ethnic militias first targeted Fulani civilians following insurgent attacks for which they accused civilians of being complicit. However, as the conflicts have progressed, it appears that some communal militias are using the excuse of Fulani complicity to settle local scores. VDP units in Burkina Faso are regularly accused of using the cover of war to expel Fulani communities to seize their land and livestock.<sup>18</sup> A disturbing number of the attacks on Fulani civilians contain the logic of ethnic cleansing. For example, a series of gruesome public assassinations of Fulani in Shinkafi, Zamfara state, in 2015 and 2016 seemed designed to frighten the entire Fulani community into leaving the area. Similarly, escalating clashes between Bwatiye farmers and Fulani herders in the Numan local government area in 2017 ended with Bwatiye militants launching raids on the few Fulani communities remaining and forbidding them from returning for five years.<sup>19</sup> Attacks on Fulani civilians in the central Sahel often involve the burning of huts and granaries and the stealing of livestock. Following the government-backed expansion of the VDP into rural areas in Burkina Faso’s south-east in 2022<sup>20</sup>, thousands of Fulani communities fled the area, fearing violence. Those that remained have since been forced out, and Fulani leaders from these communities report that rural areas controlled by the VDP no longer have any Fulani residents.<sup>21</sup>



<sup>17</sup> Rufai, "Vigilante Groups and Rural Banditry in Zamfara State," 67–70.

<sup>18</sup> Author interviews with Burkinabe asylum seekers in northern Ghana in August 2023 and with a VDP commander in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, in October 2023; "Arming Civilians at the Cost of Social Cohesion?," 15.

<sup>19</sup> Rufai, "Vigilante Groups and Rural Banditry in Zamfara State," 72; author interviews with Fulani and Bwatiye community leaders in Numan, Nigeria, March 2023.

<sup>20</sup> International Crisis Group, *Burkina Faso: Arming Civilians at the Cost of Social Cohesion?* (Washington D.C.: International Crisis Group, 2023), Report No. 313, accessed January 31, 2025.

<sup>21</sup> Author interviews with Burkinabe asylum seekers in northern Ghana in August 2023 and February 2024, and with Fulani community leaders in Ouagadougou in October 2023.

## Fulani Responses

Fulani communities across the region have struggled to mount a response to these crises. Efforts to defend Fulani communities against scapegoating – mostly by elite-dominated Fulani cultural or human rights associations – have become captured by political interests, crumbled under internal schisms, or been harassed into silence by military governments. Taking up arms has only exacerbated the scapegoating and violence. The response of communities directly affected by violence – displacement – is ensuring immediate survival, but also potentially expands violence against Fulani into new areas.

### Organizing as Response to the Crisis

As rural Fulani civilians were targeted by insurgent, militia, and state forces, Fulani elites across the region mobilized as individuals and in civil society groups to defend the wider community. Like the community as a whole, Fulani elites and civil society are a diverse group of actors with different interests occupying varied levels of political power. Although individual Fulani hold important positions in governments and traditional institutions, most activism related to the violence against Fulani has been pursued by civil society organizations. In Nigeria the most well-known national group claiming to support Fulani issues is Mi Yeti Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria (MACBAN), which was founded in the 1970s and today has numerous competing spin-offs. In the Sahel, Tabital Pulaaku, which was first established in the early 1990s in Mali to valorize Fulani culture, has active national organizations in multiple countries, which since the early 2000s are technically all connected to an umbrella group, Tabital Pulaaku International. Meanwhile, organizations such as Réseau Billital Maroobé, a coalition of pastoralist organizations from Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger) and Association pour la Promotion de l'Élevage au Sahel et en Savane have a developmentalist approach and advocate specifically for the interests of semi-nomadic herders. More recently, as violence against civilians has increased, younger Fulani (and other ethnic groups) activists have established more explicitly human rights-based organizations such as Observator Kisal in Mali and Collectif contre l'impunité et la Stigmatisation des Communautés (CISC) in Burkina Faso, which specialize in the documentation of abuses against civilians, regardless of ethnicity.

These civil society organizations have taken different approaches to addressing the violence against Fulani. Initially, these groups played an important role in bringing attention to the targeting of Fulani civilians (and other minorities) in rural areas. Newspapers from the early 2010s show that members of MACBAN were among the first people to warn that an escalation of cattle rustling in the north-west was upending pastoralist communities. In the Sahel, Tabital Pulaaku, Observator Kisal, and CISC regularly published public reports of abuses against Fulani (and other ethnic groups) civilians while helping UN investigators, researchers, and journalists track down victims and corroborate accounts of violence.<sup>22</sup> Beyond monitoring and raising awareness, some Fulani elites played important roles in early negotiations with armed groups. For example, in early 2015 members of the Malian Fulani elite reached out to leaders of the armed groups mobilizing in the centre at the time – including some who were already aligned with Koufa – in an effort to persuade them to lay down their weapons and join the government's demobilization programme.<sup>23</sup> In

<sup>22</sup> Author interviews with Fulani civil society activists in Bamako, Mali, in August 2022 and February 2023, and Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, in July 2022.

<sup>23</sup> "Central Mali: An Uprising in the Making?" (Brussels, Belgium: International Crisis Group, July 6, 2016).

## Fulani Responses to Pastoralist Crisis and Mass Violence

northern Burkina Faso, the Emir of Djibo was involved in negotiations with local members of JNIM to de-mine a road and allow displaced communities to return to their villages.<sup>24</sup>

Although the victimization of Fulani has led to calls for a transnational response, these associations have yet to present a united front and instead have largely either become co-opted by politicians, fractured by infighting, or silenced by military juntas. Tabital Pulaaku International, currently led by Muhammadu Sanusi II in Nigeria, holds large meetings every two years that gather government ministers, religious leaders, and traditional elites to discuss how to advocate for Fulani communities. However, given the diversity of Fulani political and social realities across the continent, not to mention rivalries between members, these meetings have yet to result in a coordinated transnational campaign.<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile, on the national level, Tabital Pulaaku's closeness to sitting governments has, in places, damaged their legitimacy. For example, in Mali, there is a widespread perception that national Tabital Pulaaku leaders – almost all of whom are former government officials – resist openly criticizing (both former and current) governments because they want to keep their options open to rejoin the civil service in the future.<sup>26</sup> In Nigeria MACBAN (which is not affiliated with Tabital Pulaaku but is pursuing a similar mission) and its spinoffs are also often accused of spending more energy fighting among themselves and pursuing personal political interests than representing the wider Fulani community.<sup>27</sup> Rights-based organizations in the Sahel, such as CISC and Observator Kisal, have avoided politicization and fracturing. However, under military juntas, these groups have been harassed into silence, with their leaders being forced into exile, disappeared, or subjected to forced conscription. Organizations focused on developmentalist goals have avoided engaging in overt politics or advocacy to avoid a similar fate.

## Fighting as Response to the Crisis

Although most Fulani have pursued peaceful means to curb violence against Fulani civilians, a vocal minority have called on Fulani to take up arms to defend themselves. Between 2016 and 2019, there were multiple attempts in central Mali to form a Fulani militia – supported by community elites – to fight communal militias and stymie recruitment into jihadist groups. Although these groups received attention from Western media, they ultimately dissolved due to internal rivalries and a failure to prevent attacks on Fulani civilians.<sup>28</sup> Today, JNIM actively recruits among Fulani communities by speaking out against abuses and portraying itself as the only force challenging those who are massacring Fulani civilians. Despite the fact that most Fulani reject JNIM's violence, this awkward reality has contributed to the belief that all Fulani support the jihadists. Meanwhile, in Nigeria's northwest, some pastoralists responded to cattle rustling, banditry, and attacks by Yan Sakai by joining bandits to seize back what was stolen from them. However, unlike JNIM, these groups do not regularly claim to be protecting Fulani civilians, and instead many openly engage in mass violence against Fulani civilians. Further south in the Middle Belt, the Fulani victimized in clashes with farmers will often retaliate with violence, yet despite the claims of

<sup>24</sup> Author interviews with Fulani negotiators and traditional leaders in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, October 2023.

<sup>25</sup> Author interviews with members of Tabital Pulaaku in Bamako, Mali, and Tamale, Ghana, February 2023 and November 2024. Demba Ndiaye, "Lamido Sanusi II the Powerful New President of Tabital Pulaaku," *Planet Fulbe*, September 25, 2022, <https://suudu-baaba.com/wp/2022/09/25/lamido-sanusi-ii-is-the-new-president-of-tpi/>.

<sup>26</sup> Personal communications with Malian researcher, October 2024.

<sup>27</sup> Author interviews with Fulani herders in Adamawa State, Nigeria, in March 2023.

<sup>28</sup> Rémi Carayol, "Mali: le mouvement peul de l'ANSIPRJ dépose les armes," *Jeune Afrique*, November 22, 2016, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/376208/politique/mali-mouvement-peul-de-lansiprj-depose-armes/>.

some propagandists, these are usually isolated attacks and there are no organized armed groups uniting Fulani in this area.<sup>29</sup>

## Fleeing as Response to the Crisis

The primary way in which Fulani communities affected by violence are responding is by fleeing. For the last two years in a row, the Norwegian Refugee Council has ranked Burkina Faso the world most neglected displacement crisis, with Mali not far behind.<sup>30</sup> Although no statistics about ethnicity are public – and displaced people come from all ethnic backgrounds – humanitarian workers in Bamako and Ouagadougou indicate that a disproportionate share of those in need are Fulani.<sup>31</sup> Meanwhile, as violence has engulfed central Mali and Burkina Faso, herders far from the frontline have adjusted their annual transhumance routes to spend more time – or temporarily settle their families – in coastal countries.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, in Nigeria the crisis in the north-west and the Middle Belt has forced thousands of pastoralists to flee. Destinations differ, but generally speaking families are moving south, deeper into Nigeria, or in some cases east into neighbouring Cameroon or the Central African Republic.<sup>33</sup>

Although displacement and migration are ensuring survival for thousands of families, Fulani who flee often face stigmatization and, in some cases, may inadvertently play a role in exporting the conflict dynamics they fled. In Burkina Faso there have been cases of displaced Fulani being turned away by non-Fulani host communities and forced into more precarious circumstances.<sup>34</sup> In Ghana the military expelled Fulani Burkinabe asylum seekers in 2023 and has only allowed non-Fulani to register for refugee status.<sup>35</sup> In Nigeria, where the displacement of pastoralists from the north-west into central areas has coincided with a rise in banditry, militias (in some cases comprised of Fulani clans from the area) have emerged, targeting new arrivals based on clan affiliation. Those who choose to migrate further east into northern Cameroon often face a frosty welcome from farmers as well as local Fulani pastoralists, who complain that newcomers increase competition for grazing, introduce diseases, and engage in cattle rustling. Even further away – in the Anglophone region of Cameroon and the Central African Republic – Nigerian Fulani pastoralists looking for safe pasture risk becoming ensnared in separate conflicts that feature other Fulani communities, so much so that some choose to return to Nigeria.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Retaliatory violence is often organized at cattle markets by distributing kola nuts to relatives of victims and asking them to find weapons and participate in avenging their family members. While this can draw in Fulani pastoralists from other parts of Nigeria, following retaliatory attacks, attackers disband and pastoralists return to their herds. Author interviews with pastoralists in Yola and Numan, Nigeria, in March 2023.

<sup>30</sup> “Once Again, Burkina Faso Is the World’s Most Neglected Crisis,” Norwegian Refugee Council, June 3, 2024, <https://www.nrc.no/news/2024/june/once-again-burkina-faso-is-the-worlds-most-neglected-crisis/>.

<sup>31</sup> Author interviews with humanitarian workers in Bamako, Mali, in August 2022 and February 2023.

<sup>32</sup> Author interviews in northern Ghana, August 2023 and February 2024.

<sup>33</sup> Adam Higazi, “Peace and Security for Pastoralist Communities in African Borderlands” (Accord Insight, May 19, 2024), <https://reliefweb.int/report/niger/accord-insight-5-peace-and-security-pastoralist-communities-african-borderlands-may-2024>.

<sup>34</sup> Katia Golovko, Laurens Willeme, and Mathijs Cazemier, “The Integration of IDPs into Host Communities in Ouahigouya, Burkina Faso” (Clingendael Institute, December 2024), 12.

<sup>35</sup> James Courtright, “Ghana Accused of Expelling Fulani Asylum Seekers from Burkina Faso,” *The New Humanitarian*, April 18, 2024, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2024/04/18/ghana-accused-expelling-fulani-asylum-seekers-burkina-faso>.

<sup>36</sup> Higazi, “Peace and Security for Pastoralist Communities in African Borderlands,” 60–62; “With or Against Us - People of the North-West Region of Cameroon Caught Between the Army, Armed Separatists and Militias” (Amnesty International, June 2023).



## Conclusion

Although the situation appears grim, there are policies that national governments and foreign partners could implement that may go some way to first stymieing violence and eventually addressing the deeper causes of the crises. By re-assessing their relationship with communal militias and holding the particularly violent actors among them accountable, national governments could address a major source of violence against civilians as well as interrupt a key factor leading to recruitment into armed groups. In Mali, where Dan na Ambassagou and Donso groups are not a central component of the security architecture, leaders in Bamako have some space to discourage Russian forces from using them as scouts and guides, and follow through on previous promises of accountability. The situation in Burkina Faso, where the VDP are a key part of the war effort, is more complicated. Prosecuting people implicated in massacres and increasing oversight mechanisms, while also making concrete plans to integrate VDP into the military, may curb abuses without undermining the war effort. Similarly, in north-west Nigeria, investigating and prosecuting abusive Yan Sakai and their financial backers while integrating other units into the state-supervised vigilante programme might have a similar effect.

Pursuing dialogues and negotiations with armed groups, at all levels, may also help prevent further bloodshed. The patchwork of low-level dialogues and truces between communal representatives, ethnic militias, and jihadist insurgents in parts of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger between 2016 and 2022 did momentarily stymie violence in some communities (although critics, often fairly, referred to them more as “survival pacts”). Higher-level negotiations between the government and jihadists in Niger in 2022 and 2023 also appear to have temporarily arrested violence. However, these agreements were upended after military leaders staged coups, and security forces went on the offensive – in Mali with support from Wagner beginning in late 2021, in Burkina Faso with the expansion of the VDP a year later, and in Niger following the July 2023 coup.<sup>37</sup> Although the prospect of high-level talks between JNIM and Sahelian juntas is dim, military governments being more open to locally negotiated pacts (and there is evidence they have already done so when it is in their immediate interest) could disrupt retaliatory cycles of violence and score-settling as well as halt the displacement crisis. In Nigeria, the prospects for negotiation are even more complicated due to the fragmented nature of bandits in the north-west and the total lack of organization among violent actors in the Middle Belt. That being said, individual bandit groups in the north-west have claimed to desire negotiations with state governments.<sup>38</sup> It may be worth looking into the feasibility of adapting successful demobilization programmes from the war against Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province to the, albeit very different, context of the north-west.

In the long term, West African governments and their foreign donors must address the underlying issues that drive conflict related to the crisis in pastoralism outlined at the beginning of this brief. Although some national governments, and Fulani elites, propose implementing large-scale sedentarization plans that involve intensive North American-style ranching, looking instead at the relative successes of neighbouring West African countries such as Senegal and Mauritania in supporting pastoralist communities may offer more feasible options. Ranching is a costly endeavour in terms of both capital and land – particularly

<sup>37</sup> “Mediation of Local Conflicts in the Sahel: Burkina Faso, Mali & Niger” (Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2022); James Courtright, “In Central Mali, Communities Are Signing Agreements with Insurgents to Survive,” Institute of Current World Affairs, November 14, 2022, <https://www.icwa.org/mali-insurgents-agreements/>; Lisa Tschörner, “Dialogue with Jihadists in Niger: Potentials, Limits, Failure” (Megatrends Afrika, December 31, 2024).

<sup>38</sup> “Armed Nigerian Kidnappers Ask for Negotiations with Government,” *Voice of America*, May 13, 2024, <https://www.voaafrica.com/a/armed-nigerian-kidnappers-ask-for-negotiations-with-government-/7609642.html>.

## Fulani Responses to Pastoralist Crisis and Mass Violence

in places where it does not rain for eight months out of the year – that would require decades of political will and significant financial commitments from governments. On the other hand, enforcing laws that protect grazing areas that already exist, much as Senegal has done in the central Ferlo area, would provide pastoralists the space to continue their livelihoods without infringing on farmers. Establishing livestock corridors that connect grazing areas with rivers and seasonal ponds has reduced conflicts in Mauritania. Beyond more specific pastoralist needs, building rural livelihoods is crucial. Investing in schools, hospitals, and transport infrastructure would benefit all rural residents. Finally, perhaps the most important yet most challenging element will be to eventually hold perpetrators – from jihadists and bandits to communal militias and security forces – accountable, and build security and justice systems that address impunity.

From Senegal to Sudan, Fulani communities, in all their manifestations, are an integral part of West African social, political, and economic life. The vast majority of these communities live in peace and are not under any immediate or unique threat. That being said, the situation in the central Sahel and parts of Nigeria is dire. Although fears that these crises will spark regional-level, organized Fulani militancy are unjustified due to the communities' heterogeneity, the ongoing catastrophe is affecting Fulani communities thousands of miles apart, who see videos of Fulani being tortured on their smartphones and hear stories of herders vanished by state security, militias, or insurgents. Given the trajectory of the wars in the central Sahel and conflict in north-west Nigeria, it is difficult to see how communal violence can be averted and the social fabric slowly rewoven. Solutions will need to be driven by Fulani, but they must involve neighbouring communities, national governments, and even foreign actors. The future of millions of West Africans depends on it.

*James Courtright is an independent research analyst focusing on security and pastoralism in West Africa and a Research Associate at the Clingendael Institute.*

### Megatrends Afrika

is a joint project of SWP, IDOS and IfW.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s).

All project publications are subject to an internal peer review process.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

### SWP

Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik | German Institute for International and Security Affairs

**IDOS** German Institute of Development and Sustainability

**IfW** Kiel Institute for the World Economy

[www.megatrends-afrika.de](http://www.megatrends-afrika.de)

[megatrends-afrika@swp-berlin.org](mailto:megatrends-afrika@swp-berlin.org)

[swp-berlin.org](http://swp-berlin.org)

ISSN 2747-4119

DOI 10.18449/2025MTA-PB32



Funded by:

