UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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Religious Tensions and Fulani Communities in West and Central Africa

The Fulani are *one of the largest ethnic groups in the world*. Predominantly Muslim and historically associated with cattle herding and livestock rearing, Fulani communities stretch across the African continent from *Senegal to Sudan*. Fulani groups and individuals are a critical aspect of the social, political, and economic fabric of west and central Africa.

In recent years, Fulani communities have become caught up in recurrent cycles of resource conflict and intercommunal violence in some areas of west and central Africa. According to many analysts and local civil society representatives, this violence has *escalated religious tensions* in a region home to many Muslim and Christian communities that have peacefully lived side-by-side for centuries.

The following factsheet explores the role that religion plays in escalating violence committed by and against Fulani communities in west and central Africa. Although the extent to which religious ideology plays a direct role in driving violence involving Fulani communities remains a subject of debate, the trend of increasing violence by and against Fulani groups is clearly aggravating religious tensions.

Who are Fulani?

Fulani, also commonly referred to as the Fulbe or the Peuhl, are often considered the *largest nomadic ethnic group in the world*. They *reside* in Senegal, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Mali, Burkina Faso, Benin, Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon, Central African Republic (CAR), Chad, Sudan, and South Sudan, among other places.

Members of Fulani groups often speak dialects from a common language (Fulfulde), they are typically Muslim, and they often have a shared history of livestock herding or otherwise deal in the trading and rearing of livestock as a source of livelihood. Fulani are an *ethnic minority* in every country in which they reside.

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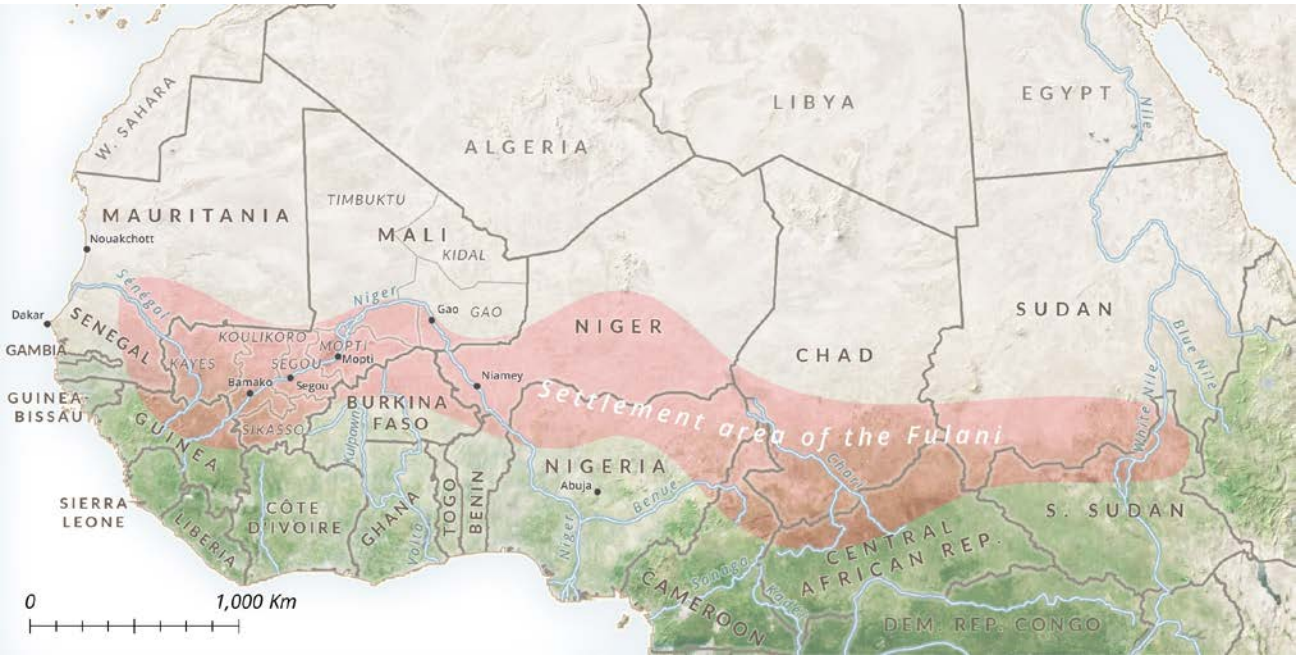

Image source: CTC Sentinel, 2017.

Despite these common characteristics, members of Fulani groups also demonstrate significant diversity across geographies, subclans, and individuals. While many Fulani live a nomadic or semi-nomadic lifestyle, many others *practice farming* or a *hybrid livelihood* combining sedentary agriculture and livestock rearing. Still others have migrated to urban centers in search of jobs and opportunities. Fulani from elite clans have often resided in towns and cities and served as political figures and advisors. Heads of state like *Nigeria's President Muhammadu Buhari* and *Senegal's President Macky Sall* claim Fulani heritage.

This intragroup diversity makes generalizations difficult. Estimates of the Fulani population in Africa range from *five million* to *65 million*, in part because there is little consensus regarding the definition and boundaries of the Fulani ethnicity. *Some analysts* and practitioners argue that Fulani groups have more differences than they have similarities, and the insistence that they are a cohesive ethnic group is mainly driven by the need for outsiders to ascribe them a common identity. *Others note* that Fulani demonstrate remarkable cohesion of self-identity considering their geographic scope and demographic diversity.

Fulani and Islam

Anecdotal evidence and qualitative research suggest that the *vast majority* of Fulani are Sunni Muslim. Fulani Muslims often practice *Sufism*, a form of Islamic mysticism that is prominent in west Africa and Sudan and around the world. Islamic practice among Fulani individuals ranges from moderate to conservative. Scholars report that some Fulani groups combine Islamic and *traditional practices*. For example, the traditional concept of *Pulaaku*, a "code of conduct" prominent across Fulani groups, continues to play a strong spiritual role in many Fulani cultures. There is also evidence of some *Fulani converts* to Christianity.

Some Fulani groups played a *significant role* in several violent campaigns to implement Islamic rule in west Africa in the 18th and early 19th centuries. Although these campaigns were *predominantly Fulani-led*, they were ethnically diverse. There are *many instances* of non-Fulani fighters taking part, and there are *examples* of Fulani groups and communities refusing to participate. Still, in several cases the resulting caliphates privileged people from specific, elite Fulani clans for political positions over non-Fulani individuals. This contributed to *resentment* among non-Fulani communities in some areas born from the marginalization and discrimination they experienced under Islamic rule. In some countries today, this resentment lingers and is apparent in *civil society rhetoric*.

Fulani and Religious Violence

In recent years, violence and insecurity have escalated in many countries with prominent Fulani populations. In several cases, this violence has involved Fulani communities, both as victims and as perpetrators. This trend is driven by a complex confluence of climate variability, population growth, arms proliferation, poor governance, intercommunal tensions, illicit economic activity, and inequitable distribution of services and resources. Violence by and against Fulani groups is escalating and feeding into broader cycles of retaliatory violence and revenge, increasing the risk of atrocities in countries like Mali, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Cameroon, and CAR.

Experts and practitioners continue to debate the extent to which religious ideology plays a direct role in driving violence involving Fulani communities and individuals in west and central Africa. However, violence by and against Fulani groups is clearly aggravating religious tensions in countries like Nigeria and CAR. A 2019 USCIRF study found that narratives around the causes of violence involving Fulani communities in Nigeria's Middle Belt "are some of the most polarizing between religious communities." Violence involving Fulani communities continues to exacerbate Muslim-Christian tensions in CAR, a country that has been experiencing ethno-religious violence for more than five years.

Fulani as Victims

Over the past several years, Fulani communities have frequently been victims of violence in west and central Africa. In Mali, attacks targeting Fulani in January, February, and May of this year killed 14, 31, and 43 civilians, respectively. Similar attacks on Fulani communities in neighboring Burkina Faso killed dozens of civilians in the first half of 2020. In Cameroon, at least 250 Fulani have been killed and 80,000 displaced since 2016, with Fulani communities reporting they have been victims of intimidation, kidnappings, assassinations, and theft by Ambazonian separatist fighters. In Nigeria, youth attacked a Fulani settlement in January, killing 23 people, with smaller attacks on Fulani in May and July each killing three civilians.

The drivers of violence against Fulani communities are complex and multifaceted. Common drivers of this violence include intercommunal tensions, ethnic targeting, and escalating resource competition and land conflict. However, in a few instances, Fulani appear to have been targeted because of their religion or perceived religious affiliation.

In southern Kaduna state, Nigeria, Fulani have accused Christian militias of attacking them in an attempt to eliminate Muslims from the area. Fulani Muslims in CAR were some of the most affected victims of sectarian violence that broke out there in 2013. Fulani in CAR found themselves trapped in Muslim enclaves in various parts of the country for fear of facing violence if they ventured into areas controlled by predominantly Christian militias known as "anti-balaka."

In some countries, Fulani civilians are targeted because they are perceived to be affiliated with Islamic extremism. In some parts of Nigeria, those seeking to incite violence against Fulani communities frequently employ claims that Fulani are "jihadist herdsmen" attempting to "Islamize" the country—it is important to note that these claims are difficult to verify due to the lack of reliable information from the region. In Burkina Faso, counterterrorism forces deployed to fight jihadist groups have reportedly specifically targeted Fulani communities, committing human rights abuses and summary executions against Fulani civilians.

Fulani as Perpetrators

Fulani individuals and militias have also been responsible for numerous incidents of violence against civilians in recent years. In Mali, the United Nations recorded that armed elements from Fulani communities were responsible for 47 attacks in the first half of 2020, claiming the lives of 162 civilians. In Nigeria, suspected Fulani gunmen staged an 11-day attack in Benue State in January 2018 that killed at least 80 people. In Cameroon, Fulani individuals were alleged to be the perpetrators of the Ngarbuh massacre that killed 22 people.

Once again, drivers of violence committed by Fulani-affiliated armed fighters are multidimensional, and the role that religious ideology plays in Fulani fighters' motivations is highly debated. In some areas, Fulani militants have been accused of deliberately targeting Christians based on their beliefs. As previously discussed, Fulani militia violence is commonplace in CAR, where political, ethnic, and resource-based violence has taken on sectarian dimensions. In Nigeria's Middle Belt, incidents of suspected Fulani militants burning churches and attacking predominantly Christian villages and Christian religious ceremonies have led to allegations that suspected Fulani fighters are committing genocide against Christians.

However, intra-Muslim violence involving Fulani groups in these countries complicates claims that Fulani militias are religiously motivated. In northwest Nigeria, pastoralist Fulani "bandits" frequently face off against predominantly Hausa "vigilante" farmers, who are also primarily Muslim, with clashes reaching *"critical levels"* in recent years. In CAR, militias claiming to protect Fulani interests, like the *Union for Peace in CAR (UPC)* and the *Retour, Reclamation et Réhabilitation (3R)*, have often clashed with other predominantly Muslim groups like the Popular Front for the Rebirth of CAR (FPRC) and the Central African Patriotic Movement (MPC).

Some cite Fulani participation in violent jihadist organizations as evidence of religious motivations. Fulani are *disproportionately represented* among some jihadist groups operating in the *central Sahel*, like the *Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)* and Al-Qaeda affiliates *Macina Liberation Front* and *Ansaroul Islam*. In Nigeria there is *increasing geographic overlap* and evidence of *relationship building* between jihadist groups and organized criminal bandits that are known to include Fulani fighters.

Yet *several analysts* familiar with the situation on the ground who were interviewed by USCIRF reported that religious ideology plays only a minor role in the motivations of most Fulani fighters, even those associated with jihadist groups. Common objectives between Fulani fighters and Islamic extremists include overthrowing regional governments, disrupting the perceived inequitable status quo and distribution of resources, and pilfering from illegal mining and trafficking activities. In some areas, jihadist leaders have *relaxed their expectations* of local fighters, including Fulani fighters, to adhere to strict religious practices where necessary. In general, jihadist groups and ideologies reportedly *do not enjoy much popular support* in Fulani-majority areas.

Fulani as Peacemakers

There are also many examples across west and central Africa of Fulani individuals and communities living peacefully with members of other groups. For example, *Guinea*—the only country where Fulani make up the largest ethnic minority at 38% of the population—is not affected by jihadism, and Fulani there "*are not and have not been particularly involved in violent conflicts*."

In northern Ghana, scholars have reported that Fulani and non-Fulani exist as "*cultural neighbors*" and cooperate more frequently than they conflict with one another.

Even in Nigeria, where Fulani are often associated with violent conflict, many Fulani communities actively promote peaceful solutions and social harmony across groups. For example, in the aftermath of *divisive comments* by a Fulani fighter that claimed that "Nigeria belongs to the Fulani," key Fulani leaders dissociated themselves from this statement. The Chairman of Fulani Chiefs in the South-West, Alhaji Bambado, said that this claim did not represent the views of all Fulani, and encouraged Fulani to "*ignore this bogus claim*" and continue to live harmoniously with other groups in Nigeria.

Conclusion

As one of the largest ethnic groups in the world, Fulani represent a diverse and widespread group of people spanning across west, central, and parts of east Africa. While generalizations regarding Fulani are difficult, in recent years violence committed by and against Fulani communities has become more deadly in several areas. The drivers of this violence are complex and multifaceted, and the extent to which religious ideology plays a prominent role remains a subject of debate. Yet, violence involving Fulani communities is aggravating religious tensions in a region where religious freedom violations are common.

Consequently, the U.S. government should invest in analysis that identifies the perpetrators of violence by and against Fulani groups and their motivations, especially in regions where these dynamics overlap with interreligious tensions. The U.S. should then enact targeted sanctions against individuals and identifiable armed groups that are found to be systematically targeting civilians based on their religion or belief. An approach focused on individuals and identifiable armed groups would delink violence from perceived religious or ethnic identity, thereby deescalating interreligious tensions and sectarian violence. The U.S. can also support regional governments to build their capacity to identify specific violators of religious freedom, distinguish them from broader religious and ethnic groups, and hold them to account.

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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on threats to religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.

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