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Interplay of Terrorism and Ethnic Complexities in the Sahel Region: The Case of Fulani Community

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the intricate interplay between ethnic complexities, militant Islamism, and the alarming increase in terrorism within the Sahel region. Focusing on the disproportionate involvement of Fulani individuals in militant Islamist groups, the study examines how escalating intercommunal conflicts have become a fertile ground for terrorism. As rural communities, facing insecurity, form militias for self-defence, the security landscape becomes increasingly complex. Militant Islamist groups strategically exploit existing tensions, legitimizing their authority and perpetuating a dangerous cycle of retaliation. This paper also delves into the stigmatization of Fulani individuals as jihadists, leading to the characterization of the current crisis as a "Fulani jihad" or "Fulani rebellion." Insurgent groups featuring Fulani fighters, such as the Islamic State of the Greater Sahara and Ansar Dine, contribute to the stigmatization. In conclusion, the research underscores the critical need for comprehensive approaches to address the interconnected challenges of extremism, intercommunal violence, and the increasing terrorism plaguing the Sahel region. Understanding the dynamics of ethnic complexities and their relationship with militant Islamism is pivotal for developing effective strategies to restore peace, social harmony, and stability in this vulnerable region.

Keywords: *Terrorism, Inter-communal conflict, Fulani community, Sahel.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Numerous interconnected and intricate social, economic, political, and security issues confront the Sahel region. Terrorist organisations have been able to continue their activities by gaining control over territory and inciting violence in the Sahel due to the incapacity of several Sahelian governments to provide effective security. Salafi-jihadis and outlaws have sought to take advantage of political, social, and economic voids as well as grievances.

Usually, groups aiming to effect political change use terrorism as a tactic in a conflictual environment. Climate change, bad governance, ethnic polarisation, abuse by state security,

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pastoral conflict, the spread of transnational Salafi-Islam ideology, conflict over the extraction of natural resources (especially gold), and the presence of external actors (like France) are just a few of the factors that have contributed to the current crisis in the Sahel (Icwa, n.d.).

II. ORIGIN OF THE CONFLICT

The events that transpired in October 2011 in Libya following the February Revolution set off a series of events that spread throughout North and West Africa and the Sahel. After 42 years, Qaddafi was violently removed, which strengthened the Tuareg separatist movement. Soldiers of ethnic Tuareg descent who had served in the Libyan army returned to Mali (McKernan, 2020). Salafi-jihadis came together to play a significant part in the Tuareg uprising in Mali in 2012, which ultimately resulted in the group taking control of Kidal, Gao, and Timbuktu (Icwa, n.d.). Fig.1 shows the short-lived Islamic Emirate of Azawad (Jacobs, 2012).

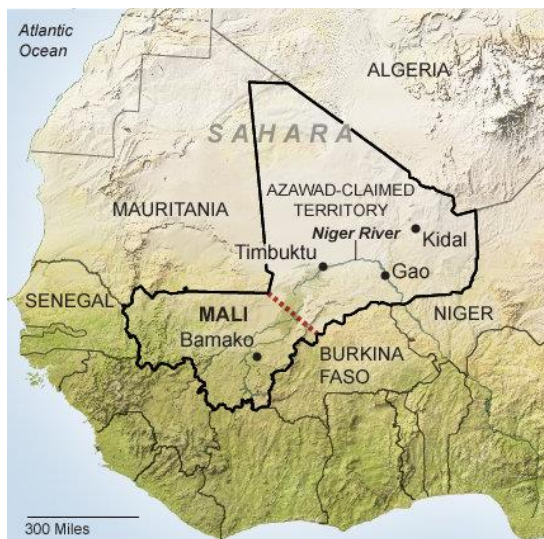


Fig.1(Jacobs,2012) Islamic Emirate of Azawad (2012-2013).

The Islamic Emirate of Azawad broke up after the Salafi-jihadis were ultimately vanquished. Tensions only grew higher when the conflict in Northern Mali was not effectively resolved by addressing its underlying causes. It resulted in political, social, and economic issues that migrated northward and led to intercommunal violence between Dogon and Fulani in the Mopti and Ségou regions (Benjaminsen & Ba, 2021). Additionally, this made Burkina Faso, Chad, Mauritania, and Niger more unstable, which led to an increase in jihadi activity and intercommunal violence (Benjaminsen & Ba, 2021). Fig.2 shows the increase in deaths in Sahel since 2011 conflicts (ACLED, n.d.).

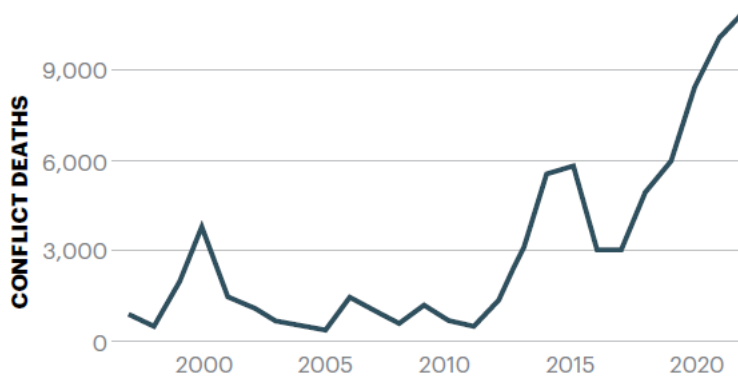


Fig.2(ACLED) Increase in deaths in Sahel.

III. RISE OF EXTREMISTS GROUPS – BOKO HARAM, ISGS AND ISWA

An attempt was made to portray the conflict as a component of a larger ideological, theological, political, social, economic, and cultural movement by organisations like al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). In order to win over some Tuareg elements, AQIM reframed its engagement over the past ten years, which resulted in the formation of relationships with organisations like Ansar al-Dine and al-Murabitoun. Between 2015 and 2017, they peaked in their activity; following that, terrorism rapidly declined, with no terrorist attacks being reported in the preceding five years. Both the decline and the emergence of IS in sub-Saharan Africa coincided with Islamic State West Africa (ISWA) (*Violent Extremism in the Sahel | Global Conflict Tracker*, n.d.).

Due to IS's ascent in Iraq and Syria and its goal of establishing regional hubs, relationships with regional players like Boko Haram were formed. This result in the rise of the Islamic State of the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and ISWA (*Examining Extremism: Islamic State in the Greater Sahara*, n.d.).

(A) Ecological and social factors in rising extremism

The security environment has been impacted by ecological degradation, which has forced people to look for new grazing areas, arable land, and water sources. Conflict between farmers and pastoralists has resulted from this, which has raised concerns about general security. On the other hand, the topography of Northwest Nigeria is favourable for an insurgency since the forests offer both financial and security benefits.

The Sahel has historically been home to two different kinds of terrorist organisations. First, local issues-focused groups like Ansar Dine, al-Mourabitoun, and the Katiba Macina frame their actions through an ethnic-nationalist-religious paradigm (Icwa, n.d.). These groups, however,

have ceased operations and have been absorbed into transnational jihadist groups, the second category of groups. Official ties exist between these groups and the Islamic State or al-Qaeda (Icwa, n.d.). Between 2007 and 2022, 6,408 terror attacks in the Sahel killed 22,074 people (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2023).

The terrorist landscape in the Sahel has changed significantly in the last ten years as a result of new groups arising and existing ones merging to accommodate local, regional, and global counterterrorism and counterinsurgency efforts. Due to these modifications, there has been a phenomenon known as the "jihadization of banditry," where criminal organisations attempt to justify their illicit activities by citing religious principles (Hummel, 2022). The decision made by some of these groups to affiliate with the international branches of al-Qaeda or the Islamic State may also contribute to the explanation of the rise in violence. The majority of attacks took place in border areas, where there is typically little government control and the military is more likely to operate from fortified bases (Thurston, 2020). Fig.3 shows the pattern of attacks from 2007-2021; mostly attacks happened away from the urban hubs (VOH, 2022).

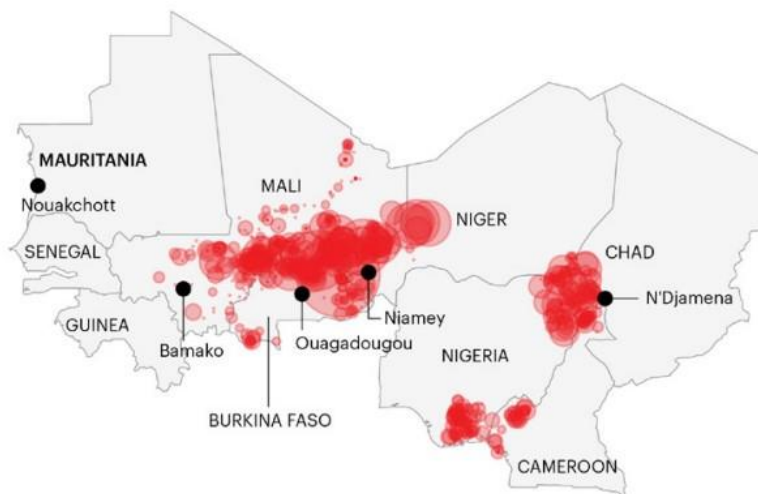


Fig.3 (VOH, 2022). Attacks in Sahel (2007-2021) happen in border areas

(B) Intercommunal Violence

The fundamental cause of successive Mali governments' ongoing incapacity to settle disputes peacefully is poor governance, which also paved the way for the rise of the Dogon, Fulani, and Babbara militias. Since the government was powerless to keep people safe, communities were forced to arm themselves. Comparable events between the Fulani and the Mossi transpired in Burkina Faso, resulting in multiple conflicts (Eberle, 2020).

The incident that occurred in January 2019, when a Koglweogo group attacked a Fulani village and killed over 40 people, is the most noteworthy illustration of how things have gotten worse

(BBC News, 2019). The rise in violence between communities has resulted in an increase in the recruitment by jihadi groups, specifically IS and JNIM.

(C) Ecological Effects in Sahel

Some of the most difficult consequences of ecological degradation are being felt in the Sahel (Eberle, 2020b). These include inadequate water supplies, inadequate food security, and rapid population growth—some of the fastest rates in the world. Existing ecological threats will be amplified by climate change. For many, migration is not an easy solution due to limited resources and rapid population growth. Not only must they negotiate hazardous terrain, but they also have to deal with criminal organisations, terrorist organisations, and other groups that prey on the weak. Competition for resources between farming and pastoralist communities has resulted in ethnic polarisation and violence within communities. (Eberle, 2020b)

According to IEP's 2022 Ecological Threat Report, for six Sahelian countries, water risk poses the greatest catastrophic threat, with food risk coming in second for three countries. For every nation in the region, rapid population growth increases the threat.

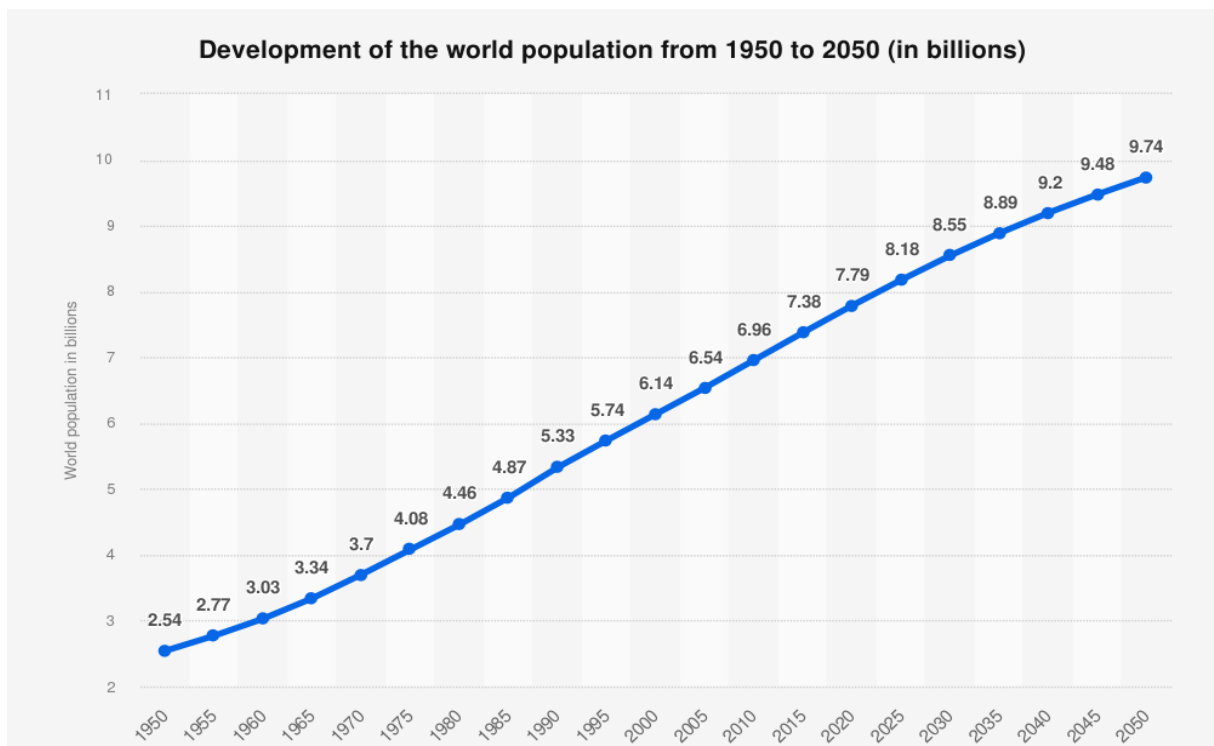


Fig.4 (Statista) Expected Population Growth in Niger

The country with the largest predicted population growth is Niger, where a rise from 25.1 million to 65.5 million people is expected by 2050, or 184% growth (Fig.4) (Statista, 2023). The world's highest concentration of hotspot nations—those most likely to implode in the face of additional shocks—is found in the Sahel. Out of the ten countries in the Sahel, six are

categorised as "hotspots," indicating that their catastrophic threat score is high or extremely high, and their resilience is low (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2023). These nations are Niger, Mauritania, Guinea, Cameroon, Chad and Nigeria. Many of these areas are already experiencing armed conflict (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2023).

(D) Terrorism and resource extraction

The region's broader intercommunal violence and terrorism are also associated with the extraction of natural resources, particularly gold. In Sudan, a rich gold vein spanning much of the Sahel was found in 2012. In the ten years that have passed, artisanal gold mining has spread quickly throughout the region, particularly in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2023). In certain of these regions, where there is frequently little state presence or control, gold plays a crucial role in the dynamics of conflict. The money raised could be essential for supporting group endeavours, but perhaps more important is control over the areas where gold is mined and transported, since this gives players access to resources that they can use to sway the local populace. Attacks in Burkina Faso have been focusing more on artisanal gold mines and the surrounding areas since 2018 (*Financial Times*, n.d.).

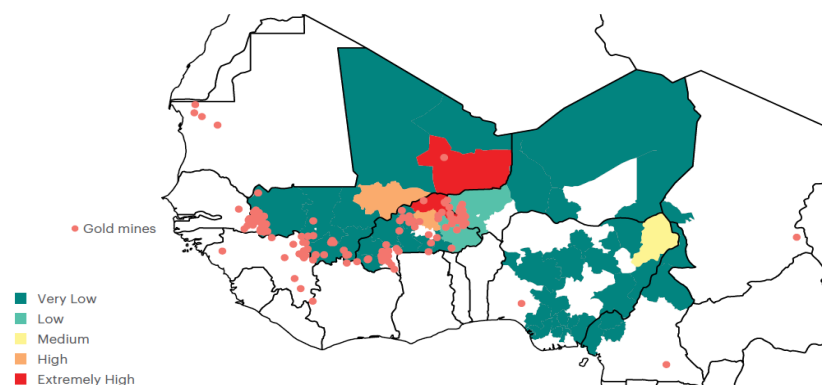


Fig.5 (US Geological Survey, n.d) Deaths near established gold mines

Fig.5 shows the increasing deaths in Sahel near established gold mines (US Geological Survey, n.d). (Due to its difficulty in tracing, gold is perfect for illicit smuggling. Before being exported, gold can be smuggled into Togo from mines in Burkina Faso and Mali (Dudouet, 2023). Gold has the potential to be worth billions of dollars, so even a tiny quantity could be very profitable for jihadi organisations. In July 2022, the Burkina Faso junta declared the closure of artisanal gold sites, ostensibly to limit financial access for jihadist groups (AfricaNews, 2023) . The impact this might have on accessibility to gold mining is unknown. Previous attempts of this kind have failed because jihadist organisations have successfully gained public support from the communities that rely on the mining.

(E) Terrorist strategies and tactics

Terrorist organisations, criminal enterprises, and ethnic-nationalist insurgent groups pose security threats to the Sahel. Intense fighting has coexisted with previous times of mutual understanding, cooperation, and tranquilly between the groups, particularly JNIM and IS (Benjaminsen & Ba, 2018). A number of smaller groups have united under one umbrella organisation, and other groups have planned joint attacks.

A detailed examination of the activities of major jihadi groups operating in the area reveals a variety of group-specific strategies and tactics. Studies indicate that ISWA employs a more hierarchical structure for alliance formation, while JNIM, an al-Qaeda affiliate, uses pastoral populism. Many Fulanis found resonance in the pastoral populism model because it draws attention to and takes advantage of their grievances regarding taxes, corruption, injustice, a lack of resources, and discrimination (Benjaminsen & Ba, 2018).

IV. CHANGING DYNAMICS IN CONTEMPORARY SAHEL

Over the past two years, the Sahel has seen changes in the spatial dynamics of terrorism. Formerly, the centre of terrorist activity was located in Chad, Cameroon, and Niger, with ISWA and Boko Haram mostly to blame. The number of terrorist deaths in Nigeria's Borno State and its neighbouring countries of Chad, Niger, and Cameroon has decreased since 2020 (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2023). In the meantime, the rise of IS affiliates and JNIM has caused a sharp increase in deaths in the tri-border region of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger (also known as Liptako-Gourma). Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger developed into the centre of Sahelian terrorism between 2012 and 2022 (Fig.6) (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2023).

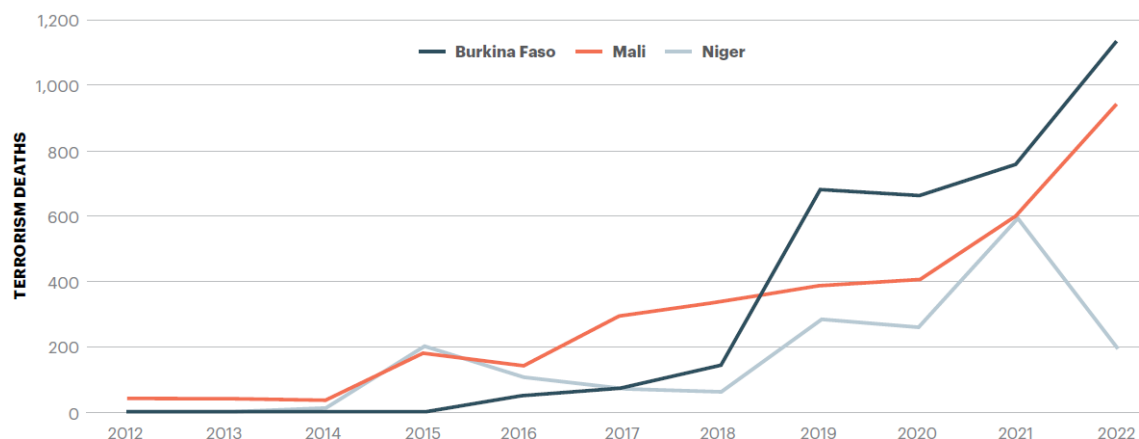


Fig.6(IEP,2023). Terror Deaths in Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso (2012-2022)

Geographically, terrorism kept moving from the Sahel into neighbouring coastal West Africa. Although the number of terrorist deaths was relatively low when compared to neighbouring

countries in the region, the biggest increases in terrorism were seen in Togo and Benin, countries that had not previously experienced any attacks (Wilson Center, n.d.).

In May, Togo saw its worst terror attacks since 2007—the year that terrorism events were first recorded. Eight soldiers were killed when jihadi terrorists from JNIM attacked Togolese military posts (VOA, 2022). At least fifteen civilians were slain in coordinated attacks on several villages in the region that borders Burkina Faso in July. (The Defence Post, 2022)

Togo experienced the second-largest increase in its GTI score globally as a result of these attacks, moving up 49 spots to take the 27th position overall (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2023).. Additionally, Benin had its worst year ever, with rising 23 places to 28th overall in the GTI (Fig.7) (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2023). This signifies the ongoing transnationalization of terrorism throughout the Sahel and coastal regions of West Africa.

RANK	COUNTRY	SCORE	RANK CHANGE	RANK	COUNTRY	SCORE	RANK CHANGE	RANK	COUNTRY	SCORE	RANK CHANGE
1	Afghanistan	8.822	↔	29	Sri Lanka	4.839	↓ 4	56	Ethiopia	3.044	↓ 7
2	Burkina Faso	8.564	↑ 2	30	United States of America	4.799	↓ 2	57	Argentina	2.875	↔
3	Somalia	8.463	↔	31	Greece	4.793	↓ 2	58	Slovakia	2.784	↑ 38
4	Mali	8.412	↑ 3	32	Libya	4.730	↓ 5	59	Belgium	2.763	↑ 11
5	Syria	8.161	↑ 1	33	Palestine	4.611	↓ 1	60	Spain	2.712	↓ 5
6	Pakistan	8.160	↑ 3	34	France	4.419	↑ 2	61	Austria	2.677	↓ 8
7	Iraq	8.139	↓ 5	35	Germany	4.242	↓ 4	62	Japan	2.398	↑ 12
8	Nigeria	8.065	↓ 3	36	Nepal	4.134	↓ 2	63	South Arabia	2.387	↓ 9
9	Myanmar (Burma)	7.977	↑ 1	37	Algeria	4.083	↑ 3	64	Sweden	2.307	↑ 7
10	Niger	7.616	↓ 2	38	Tanzania	4.065	↓ 3	65	Switzerland	2.205	↓ 9
11	Cameroon	7.347	↑ 1	39	Burundi	4.051	↓ 6	66	Ecuador	2.198	↓ 8
12	Mozambique	7.330	↓ 1	40	Tunisia	3.989	↓ 1	67	Netherlands	2.120	↓ 8
13	India	7.175	↔	41	Peru	3.856	↓ 3	68	Jordan	2.033	↓ 8
14	Democratic Republic of the Congo	6.872	↑ 2	42	United Kingdom	3.840	↓ 5	69	Australia	1.830	↓ 8
15	Colombia	6.697	↓ 1	43	Bangladesh	3.827	↓ 2	70	Uzbekistan	1.731	↑ 26
16	Egypt	6.632	↓ 1	44	Djibouti	3.800	↑ 52	71	Paraguay	1.605	↓ 7
17	Chile	6.619	↑ 1	45	Russia	3.799	↓ 1	72	Mexico	1.578	↓ 10
18	Philippines	6.328	↓ 1	46	New Zealand	3.776	↓ 4	73	Ukraine	1.535	↓ 10
19	Chad	6.168	↔	47	Côte d'Ivoire	3.747	↓ 4	74	Cyprus	1.392	↓ 8
20	Kenya	6.163	↔	48	Uganda	3.599	↓ 3	75	Malaysia	1.357	↓ 7
21	Iran	5.688	↑ 5	49	Norway	3.514	↑ 31	76	United Arab Emirates	1.241	↑ 20
22	Yemen	5.616	↓ 1	50	Tajikistan	3.438	↓ 3	77	Senegal	1.108	↓ 5
23	Türkiye	5.600	↔	51	Venezuela	3.409	↓ 5	78	Eswatini	1.058	↓ 5
24	Indonesia	5.502	↔	52	Lebanon	3.400	↔	=79	Bahrain	0.826	↓ 14
25	Israel	5.489	↑ 5	53	Italy	3.290	↓ 3	=79	Rwanda	0.826	↓ 3
26	Thailand	5.430	↓ 4	54	Canada	3.275	↓ 6	=79	South Africa	0.826	↓ 3
27	Togo	4.915	↑ 49	55	Central African Republic	3.194	↑ 12	=79	Uruguay	0.826	↓ 4
28	Benin	4.840	↑ 23								

Fig.7(IEP,2023) Global Terrorism Index

Additionally, JNIM is looking for new operational theatres and safe havens. Numerous of these new locations share demographic, economic, and ecological characteristics with areas where jihadi groups first appeared more than ten years ago, such as Mali, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, and other places (Vision of Humanity, 2023)

(A) Instable politics

Sub-Saharan Africa is seeing an increase in military takeovers. Thirteen coup attempts occurred between 2020 and 2022, seven of which were successful (Sampson et al., 2023). Coups are the result of structural flaws in the areas of poverty, mismanagement, corruption, and bad governance. Coup organisers usually assert that their acts aim to solve these structural issues.

The failure of government institutions to provide basic services to society is a result of widespread corruption, which exacerbates internal conflict and leaves the state open to external influence.

For instance, corruption in Mali has facilitated the growth of a patronage system, which has ultimately threatened security and development initiatives. The nation's ranking on the Human Development Index (HDI) is still quite low (United Nations, n.d.-a). Lower HDI scores are indicative of both poorer governance and more opportunity for terrorist organisations to foster discontent with the government and attract recruits and support.

Following two coups in 2022, Burkina Faso's instability has worsened even more. The first junta's inability to control the escalating crisis brought on by terror attacks set off the second coup in October 2022 (Jazeera, 2023). It's not always evident how political unrest and terrorism interact. In certain instances, regimes may grow more powerful as a means of combating terrorist organisations. In other places, like Burkina Faso, regimes that are unable to defend citizens may be fatally undermined. The chronic cycle of coups, destabilising violence, ecological degradation, and political instability portends badly for Burkina Faso's future and counterterrorism in general (Jazeera, 2023).

(B) International actions in Sahel

The Sahel has seen multiple security operations since 2012. These include the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), an EU Training Mission, and counterterrorism initiatives led by France like Operation Serval, Operation Barkhane, and the Takuba Initiative (Schofield, 2022). To help put an end to the insecurity, additional unilateral security operations, such as the G5 Sahel Initiative and the involvement of more private entities, have been implemented (*G5 Sahel*, n.d.).

February 2022 saw the start of France's withdrawal from Mali as ties with the military junta deteriorated (Jazeera, 2022). Operation Barkhane has been criticised for not being able to stop the jihadist insurgency's growth. By August 2022, French forces had completely withdrawn and had moved to neighbouring Niger. In November 2022, President Emmanuel Macron declared the end of Operation Barkhane (NEWS WIRES, 2022). The Burkina Faso junta declared in January 2023 that all French troops were required to evacuate the nation in a matter of weeks (Kindzeka, 2023).

The future of MINUSMA is also in doubt due to the withdrawal of peacekeepers from contributing nations who had previously collaborated with and been protected by French soldiers during Operation Barkhane (*MINUSMA at a Crossroads*, 2022). Although Barkhane

and MINUSMA have made some progress in providing security to Mali's urban centres, they have mainly failed to extend their operations to the country's rural areas, which are now dominated by jihadi groups.

Russian influence in the Sahel has grown dramatically, and the area is now a key arena for their rivalry with the West. Russia is now Mali's preferred security partner (Stronski, 2023). The Russian government deployed to Mali in December 2021 through their private military contractor, the Wagner Group, to work alongside Malian forces in counterterrorism operations.

In the meanwhile, 59% of Malians have negative opinions of France, making it extremely unpopular in many of its former colonies in the Sahel (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2023). Except for Niger and Benin, many other former French colonies engaged in ongoing insurgencies are perceived negatively overall. The military leaders of the juntas in Mali and Burkina Faso have taken advantage of the recent upsurge in anti-colonial populism in West Africa (Collins, 2022).

There are indications that France and Russia's geopolitical rivalry may hinder efforts to address the terrorism crisis in the Sahel, with counterterrorism cooperation between neighbouring states now being divided by which states receive Russian or French support.

V. LEVERAGING INTERCOMMUNAL STRIFE: THE EXPLOITATION BY VIOLENT EXTREMIST GROUPS IN SAHEL

The extent to which violent extremist groups are fueling intercommunal violence, which is also on the rise in the region, has not been well understood. The extremist organisations have attempted to take advantage of the heightened unrest and have employed tensions within communities as a recruiting tactic. Intercommunal trust and the social harmony that the region was previously known for have been destroyed by the disproportionate presence of Fulani among the militant Islamist groups that are responsible for the violence in northern Burkina Faso, western Niger, and northern and central Mali (Hummel, 2017). If intercommunal conflicts continue unchecked, the scope and complexity of the region's instability may quickly increase.

There have always been conflicts in the past between sedentary populations and pastoralists and semi-pastoralists. But in the Sahel, violence among them had remained comparatively uncommon. With the rise of violent extremism in the area, this situation has altered. Armed conflict between and within communities is becoming more common in today's world, and radical Islamist organisations are making it worse (Ammour, 2022). As insecurity increases, it puts communities' livelihoods in jeopardy, intensifies their need for protection, and undermines

the social cohesiveness that has long been a hallmark of Sahelian society.

(A) Recognizing the Connection Between Extremist Violence and Intercommunal Violence

As insecurity grows, Sahelian rural communities have taken matters into their own hands, forming militias for self-defence against militant Islamist groups and bandits (Quartz, 2022). This has led to a complex security landscape, with various armed groups operating independently of law enforcement.

The effectiveness of national armed forces and foreign troops in restoring security is questioned by local communities, contributing to the rise of self-defence militias. The national defence and security forces face a challenge from this variety of armed groups. The rise in violent acts by militant Islamists in the region has not been stopped by the increased presence of the national armed forces and the foreign troops. Several local communities question the ability of these military deployments to re-establish security and peace because there have been few noticeable improvements. In fact, national armed forces are occasionally seen as hostile occupying forces incapable of defending civilians (Ammour, 2022).

(B) Division of Communities

In the Sahel, militant Islamist groups aim to exploit the tensions that already exist between villagers in order to pierce their social fabric. As early as 2013, Abu Walid al Sahrawi, the founder of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), realised that intercommunal tensions offer a chance to incite social unrest, destabilise Sahelian societies, and establish the legitimacy and authority of militant Islamism (Ammour, 2022). He thought that in order to give themselves a religious, in this case Islamic, veneer and maintain the relevance of organisations like ISGS, militant Islamist groups needed to abandon large-scale operations in the wake of foreign counterterrorism interventions and wait for intercommunal conflicts to arise. Violent extremist groups aim to carve out their own sphere of influence and position themselves as the only realistic force capable of maintaining security in the area by inciting social unrest.

Violent extremist organisations aim to intensify social conflict between community-based armed groups that oppose their influence by using identity-based arguments to sharpen rivalries between communities and intentionally ethicized tensions. This is how radical Islamist organisations divide communities against each other, using coercion or persuasion to impose their laws while promising impoverished youth instant profits and a prosperous future (Ammour, 2022). Then, they defend their behaviour with religious indoctrination.

Increasing social unrest also gives militant Islamist organisations a platform to encourage

criminal activity. Whether it is bandits, militias, or jihadists attacking a village, they frequently turn to cattle theft as a means of attack (Pastres, 2023). Rogue ranchers can buy weapons, ammunition, fuel, and other supplies by engaging in cattle raiding. Even violence itself can be a source of enrichment.

VI. THE FULANI FACTOR

Some observers have simplified the situation to refer to it as a “Fulani jihad” or a “Fulani rebellion” due to the spread of insecurity in the Sahel (Waldman, 1965). They cite insurgent groups like the Islamic State of the Greater Sahara, Ansar Dine and other Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) affiliates that contain groups of Fulani fighters, the Front de Libération du Macina (FLM), led by Fulani preacher Amadou Koufa in central Mali, Ansaroul Islam, founded by Fulani Ibrahim Malam Dicko, and the Fulani Tolebe fighters from Niger who served in the West African Movement for Unity and Jihad (MUJAO) (Cissé, 2022). As a result of the stigmatisation of Fulani people, nearby community militias like the Dozo in central Mali and the Koglweogo in Burkina Faso have begun to target Fulani communities. These militias have carried out raids that have resulted in the deaths of hundreds of Fulani civilians. This has fuelled the recruitment of more militant Islamist groups and created a deadly cycle of retaliation and revenge (Cissé, 2022).

(A) Who are Fulanis?

The Fulani, who numbered about 25 million, are spread out over 21 African countries, from the Atlantic coast of Mauritania to the coast of the Red Sea in Sudan, although the Sahel region of West Africa is home to the majority of them (Hummel, 2017). The Fulani have a common language, called Fulfulde or Pulaar, but because of their vast geographic range, they go by many different names in the communities where they live, such as Fulbe, Fula, Peul, Peulh, and Fellata (Fig 8) (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2023). Almost everyone is Muslim. A third or so of the Fulani people still live a traditional semi-nomadic lifestyle of rearing cattle, which puts them at odds with settled agriculturalists during a period when resources like pastureland and water are under more stress. They usually carry weapons to defend their herds from rustlers, untamed animals, and other dangers; in recent years, the more popular machete has been supplanted by the ubiquitous AK-47 (Hummel, 2017).

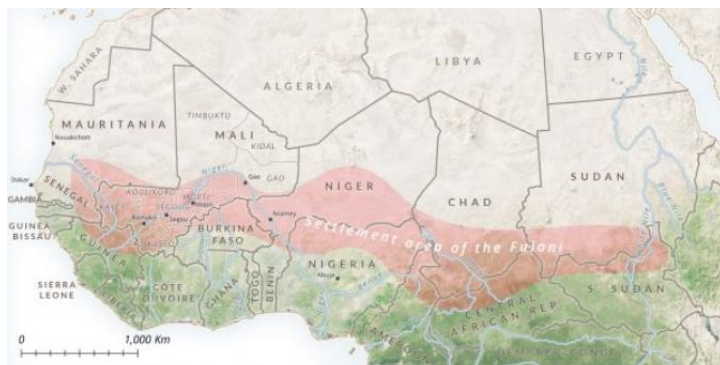


Fig8 (Britannica) Settlement area of the Fulani

During the post-harvest season, Fulani herders would customarily move their cattle south to fertilise the land and feed on crop residues. However, as competition for scarce resources like water and grazing land grows, climate change-related environmental pressures are forcing herders and their cattle into agricultural areas year-round, where they demolish crops (Center for American Progress, n.d.). More significantly, the herders are now going into areas they have never been before. The issue has been exacerbated by the rise of agro-pastoralism, in which farmers care for their own livestock, and the development of farms into the herders' customary passageways. Following disputes over ruined crops, farmers are usually met with violent responses from armed herders, which in turn triggers retaliatory attacks by farming communities on the herding camps (Kazeem, 2022). A contributing factor in the collapse of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms involving mediation and compensation is the lack of ties between new waves of herdsman and their communities. Due to the lack of protection provided by state security agencies from the ongoing violence, many farmers have started to leave their plots in search of safety elsewhere (Cissé, 2022). This has resulted in a shortage of food, the depopulation of fertile land, and additional harm to an already precarious economy.

(B) The Reasons and Effects of Fulani Adoption of Jihadist Thoughts

For as many different reasons as there are Fulani pastoralists in the Sahel, they have joined militant Islamist groups. These wandering shepherds have taken up arms in opposition to the wrongdoings of certain government officials who have been collecting arbitrary fines (*Daily Trust*, 2016). In other instances, following livestock epidemics like cattle plague and bovine pleuropneumonia, or severe droughts that devastated their herds and devastated their families, some Fulani have joined militant Islamist groups purely for financial gain (Cissé, 2022). Aside from the Malian armed forces, Islamist and separatist Tuareg groups made a lot of enemies in 2012 as they expanded their rebellion in northern Mali. Their fighters raided Fulani shepherds' cattle and pillaged the enterprises of Arab smugglers. In order to defend themselves against the

growing influence of the Tuareg Azawad National Liberation Movement (MNLA) and its Islamist allies al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Ansar Dine, these actions led Arab merchants to form and Fulani herders to join MUJAO in 2012 (Cissé, 2022). Fulani communities have continued to respond similarly to the ongoing violence. In the Mopti Region of central Mali, in March 2013, a Tuareg battalion killed 21 Fulani livestock merchants and dumped their bodies in the wells of the village of Doungoura (*Attacks and Killings Attributed to the Fulani Herdsmen (2013-2017)*, n.d.). Pastoralist leaders tried unsuccessfully in the future to get local and federal authorities involved in order to address their security concerns. The Malian gendarmerie then took two years to travel to Doungoura in order to conduct an investigation (Cissé, 2022). This fostered a sense of injustice by strengthening the impression that the international community and Malian authorities were uncaring about Fulani pastoralists. In an attempt to take advantage of this belief, Fulani pastoralists were urged in 2013 by Hama Founè Diallo, the future leader of the Mouvement pour la défense de la patrie (MDP), to rebel against the Malian government, but not to side with the jihadists. But by this time, many Fulani pastoralists had already been swayed by the ideologies of FLM leader Amadou Koufa, who was spreading jihad throughout the area, so his calls went largely unanswered (Cissé, 2022). Fulani herders, weary of what they saw as official abuses and indifference, were ready for a social revolution wrapped in religious inspiration. This was where Koufa's ideas found fertile ground. The Fulani are a dominant force among militant Islamist groups in the Sahel, driven by their desire for social change and protection. Consequently, this has been a major contributing factor to the rise in conflicts between communities (*Mali : Hama Founè Diallo, Mercenaire Du Delta*, n.d.). Following the armed forces' collaboration with non-Fulani militias, there has been an unprecedented wave of violence between communities manifested in the form of attacks on Fulani villages and camps. These militias have occasionally found themselves in the sights of the jihadists, who use them as reconnaissance scouts for the military (Vanguard, 2016). To put it succinctly, ethnic identity has led to intense polarisation and episodes of violence between communities. In turn, the Fulani massacres have increased the number of people joining militant Islamist organisations (Nigeria, 2016). Amadou Koufa said in a 2019 recording that it was ironic that Fulani herders who were labelled as jihadists by the term “yimbe laddè”, which means “bush men” in the Fulani language, would have made the bush their home whether or not they joined the jihad because, had they not joined, militias and soldiers would have hunted them down like game (HRW, 2022). Extremists offer their protection to Fulani communities and to those who have been displaced by violence and want to exact revenge on themselves by appealing to Fulani herders with this rhetoric.

VII. WAY FORWARD

There is a connection between systemic shortcomings, violent conflict, resource degradation, and widespread insecurity in the Sahel.

The most violent nations are also those experiencing the worst environmental degradation. The international community's and local governments' current efforts are unlikely to be sufficient to break the vicious cycles of resource degradation, insecurity, and conflict in the Sahel. The ongoing hostilities in Mali and Burkina Faso appear to be the focal point of Sahelian terror, which is also spreading to Benin, Togo, and the coastal regions of West Africa.

Terrorists operating locally and regionally are still modifying their strategies in an effort to take advantage of political gaps. The intensity of their campaigns and the growth of their operations indicate that organisations such as JNIM are transitioning from terrorism to insurgency. The growth of jihadist and terrorist activity in the Sahel is indicated by the expansion of operations in Burkina Faso and the spread into Benin and Togo. This is expected to further destabilise the region. In order to address the many crises in the area and produce better results overall, a systemic approach is required. This involves identifying and addressing important systemic components in a methodical manner. The creation of Positive Peace is one strategy to combat this insecurity.

(A) A Holistic Approach to Peace in Sahel: Beyond Military Tactics towards Lasting Stability

Efforts to address the complex challenges impeding peace in Sahel must transcend mere military strategies and delve into the root causes of instability. Central to a sustainable, long-term plan to combat terrorism is the prioritization of preventing violent extremism. This involves taking decisive actions such as combating impunity and fostering a global commitment to transitional justice.

To build a foundation for lasting peace, it is imperative to confront issues of poor governance, thereby restoring the confidence of local populations in their governments. The cornerstone of success lies in establishing an inclusive social contract between national authorities and citizens. At the heart of this transformative process is the strengthening of states and governments, aiming to restore credibility and accountability.

Crucially, breaking the cycle of violence requires a meticulous security sector reform (UNITAR, n.d.). This reform is designed not only to instil trust in security organs but also to align with global human rights commitments. Embracing rights-based approaches and championing the

rule of law become indispensable elements in countering terrorism effectively. In essence, a comprehensive and integrated strategy is vital to pave the way for a more peaceful and secure Sahel region.

(B) Empowering Youth in the Sahel: A Call for International Support

The youth in the Sahel region confront a dearth of economic opportunities, requiring interventions that address the broader context of their disempowerment, underlying causes, and grievances. In addition to initiatives focusing on youth livelihoods, it is essential for the international community to advocate for development and humanitarian programs that empower youth, providing them with hope, skills, education, and economic prospects.

The international community can play a pivotal role in promoting human security by ensuring that schools serve as safe, protective, and inclusive spaces. This involves enhancing students' and teachers' social-emotional skills. Given the challenges faced by displaced children with limited access to education due to violence-induced school closures, special safeguards are crucial. To address this, the international community should allocate funds to maintain access to education and provide essential goods and services that schools typically offer, such as food, water, healthcare, hygiene, and psychosocial support.

(C) Fostering Unity through Interfaith Initiatives: A Collaborative Approach

Recognizing the widespread trust that West Africans place in their religious leaders, surpassing that in local or regional government authorities, highlights the significance of religious institutions as crucial partners in the region. These institutions possess well-established and respected peacebuilding platforms at the village, communal, and national levels.

In contexts where applicable, it is imperative for the international community to endorse and support interfaith dialogues and platforms across all strata of society. Here, Christian, Muslim, and traditional actors can collaborate, showcasing unity and utilizing their collective voices for positive transformation. Moreover, efforts should be directed towards reinforcing existing interfaith initiatives that reinterpret the ongoing conflict in the Sahel. Rather than framing it as a religious conflict, these initiatives can highlight its roots in the exploitation of historical ethnic conflicts by external nonstate actors for their own gains.

(D) Empowering Local Governance and Civil Society: A Sustainable Approach

In the Sahel region, local government agencies have faced challenges in maintaining trust and delivering essential services like healthcare and education to their populations (WHO, 2023). It is imperative to collaborate with local governments, civil society, and religious authorities to

rebuild trust in both local and national state institutions and ensure civic participation. The international community should champion programs that establish meaningful, enduring relationships with local partners, prioritize close collaboration, and support free and fair elections. Embracing the principle of subsidiarity, efforts should focus on empowering and enabling local governments and communities.

In addition to fortifying local governance structures, equal attention must be given to enhancing the capacity of local civil society to hold governments and external actors accountable. Strengthening the advocacy skills of local civil society enables citizens to drive positive change in their communities and nations, addressing root causes exploited for violence. International support should actively back initiatives that educate civilians about their human rights and empower them to engage with UN efforts aimed at improving accountability to affected populations.

VIII. CONCLUSION

To sum up, the complex web of factors contributing to terrorism and intercommunal conflicts in the Sahel, with a specific focus on the Fulani people, underscores the urgent need for comprehensive and sustainable solutions. The historical, social, economic, and political dynamics in the region have created a volatile environment that requires a multifaceted approach to address the root causes of violence.

The Fulani people, as one of the many communities affected by these conflicts, have faced numerous challenges, including marginalization, resource competition, and the manipulation of ethnic and religious identities by extremist groups. As highlighted in this research paper, the intricate interplay of these factors has contributed to a cycle of violence that poses a significant threat to regional stability.

Efforts to counter terrorism must be accompanied by initiatives that promote education, economic development, and social cohesion. Investing in sustainable development projects, particularly in marginalized areas, can help alleviate grievances and reduce the appeal of extremist ideologies. Moreover, promoting intercommunal dialogue and understanding is essential to building trust among different ethnic and religious groups.

In conclusion, establishing peace in the Sahel requires a long-term commitment from governments, regional organizations, and the international community. The lessons learned from studying the specific case of the Fulani people can inform broader efforts to build resilience and foster peace in other regions facing similar challenges.

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