CHAPTER 12

Fulani and Jihad: The Argument Against Simplistic Narratives in West Africa

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Introduction

Islamist extremism is on the rise in West Africa, with violent extremist attacks doubling every year since 2015.[1] International terrorist organisations such as Al-Qaeda and Islamic State (IS) are teaming up with local fighters and jihadist leaders to control large swathes of territory in this fragile region. Many foreign-policy experts have noted in recent years that the epicentre of global terrorism is shifting from the Middle East to Africa, with West Africa and the Horn of Africa the most significant theatres[2] and the south-eastern corridor a rising threat.

In West Africa, the Fulani are a powerful and diverse collection of ethnically affiliated groups. Commonly associated with Islam and with the herding of livestock, Fulani communities have long been powerful players in the social and political lifeblood of West African societies. In addition, Fulani are commonly perceived to be strongly associated with the history of jihad in the region, both by academics and by local civil society.[3]

For many, evidence of strong ties between Fulani groups and jihad are well rooted in history. Fulani leaders, often from elite tribes and backgrounds, played significant roles in many of the jihadist revolutions that swept the region in the 18th and 19th centuries.[4] One of the most successful of these, Uthman Dan Fodio's jihad that established the Sokoto caliphate in what is now Nigeria, is commonly known as the Fulani Jihad.[5]

Today, many continue to highlight links between Fulani groups and terrorist organisations as evidence of an inherent connection between the two. Some argue that the Fulani are at higher risk of joining jihadist movements than other

ethnic groups.[6] In some cases, extremist groups themselves seem to be operating under this assumption and are using recruitment strategies that specifically target Fulani fighters.[7] In some areas of the region, practitioners and experts report a growing narrative among civil society that Fulani are equivalent to extremism.[8]

Yet others opine how erroneous, and harmful, these assumptions are. False equivalencies between Fulani and jihad have led to security forces and vigilante militias targeting innocent civilians in their attempts to root out terrorists.[9] This phenomenon has even exacerbated the terrorist threat, as extremists play on impunity for these attacks to recruit those who feel that they have been wrongfully targeted.

This chapter aims to set the record straight. It does not deny the important role that many Fulani groups played in the West African jihadist movements of the 18th and 19th centuries, nor does it ignore the role that many Fulani individuals currently play as leaders and fighters in modern-day terrorist organisations in the region. Instead, it places these observations in a broader historical and political context. It places past and present jihadist movements in the region in comparison with one another, and interrogates the roles that Fulani did and did not play in these movements. In doing so, it attempts to shed light on findings that may be useful in informing policy and efforts aimed at reducing violence in the region.

Who Are the Fulani?

The Fulani – also commonly referred to as the Fulbe or the Peuhl[10] – are an ethnically delineated grouping of peoples residing in many countries across West Africa. Fulani typically have several common characteristics, including that they share dialects from a common linguistic family (Fulfulde), are typically Muslim, and tend to be livestock herders or otherwise deal in the trading and rearing of livestock as a source of livelihood.[11] It is important to note, however, that many Muslims and many pastoralists in West Africa are not Fulani.

Historians and anthropologists believe that the Fulani emerged around the turn of the first millennium along the south-western fringes of the Sahara Desert. Fulfulde is a member of the Niger-Congo linguistic lineage, and the Fulani also show strong influences from outlier Berber peoples.[12] Estimates of their

population size range from 5 million to 65 million,[13] spanning east to west from Senegal through Chad and into Sudan, and extending south as far as northern Côte d'Ivoire and Benin, across Nigeria and northern Cameroon, and into the Central African Republic and even northern Democratic Republic of Congo.[14]

Population estimates vary so greatly in part because there is little scholarly consensus regarding the definition and boundaries of the Fulani ethnicity. Experts debate whether the Fulani in fact constitute a single ethnic group or rather many distantly related sub-groups. Some scholars cite that members of Fulani groups espouse a common socio-ethnic identity with one another, despite their geographic and cultural diversity. Victor Azarya described the Fulani as "a large group of people, several millions in number, attributing themselves to the same collective identity".[15] Roger Blench argues that there is substantively greater unity among the Fulbe communities of west and central Africa than across pastoralist communities in East Africa.[16]

At the same time, Fulani groups' social and political structures and predominant economic activities vary greatly throughout the various states and territories they occupy. Katherine Homewood writes:

"[C]ontemporary Fulani, although identified by their common language, have thus come to comprise a broad array of economics, sub-ethnic groups and social forms, from the primarily agricultural or agropastoral Fulani of the Senegal Valley, to the mobile pastoral Wodaabe sub-clan of the Mbororo Fulani, to more settled, centralised, socially and politically differentiated Fulani livestock trading communities in Nigeria."[17]

Azarya notes that internal Fulani social structures create many divides among groups, including that "wealthier Fulbe are differentiated from poorer kinsmen, latecomers from earlier migrations, sedentary political office holders from religious specialists, etc."[18]

This intra-group diversity is so vast that some have argued that the divergence across various sub-groups that are called Fulani is greater than any common ethnic lineage or linguistic thread that bonds them. Some evidence the fact that the many dialects of Fulfulde are highly diverse, and that this linguistic diversity speaks to a broader socio-ethnic diversity.[19] Even within Fulani groups, their own definition of 'Fulaniness' can differ – Breedveld notes that higher-class Fulani tend to use a narrower definition of 'Fulani' than lower castes.[20]

Some have argued that 'Fulani' and other terms for them are driven by the need of outside communities to assign them a common identity. Burnham notes that "different stereotypes of Fulbe-ness are stressed by different groups under different circumstances".[21] Abu-Manga notes that "the only common element left among the Fulbe of Sudan is the term attributed to them, and even that is shared with other groups who migrated from West Africa".[22] However, he notes that it is precisely the external prescribing of the term 'Fulani' to these diverse groups that has allowed them to affiliate with a common, albeit externally defined, ethnic identity.

Thus, the Fulani present a problematic grey area for social scientists attempting to conduct ethno-centric studies, and for policymakers searching to draw parallels between Fulani behaviour and other ethnic groups. The Fulani seem to exist somewhere in between a cohesive and identifiable ethnic group, like the Hutus and Tutsis of Africa's Great Lakes region, and a broadly defined grouping of distantly related socio-linguistic peoples, like the broader Bantu-speaking peoples spread across east and southern Africa. This fuzzy picture has led people to make problematic assumptions and come to simplistic conclusions regarding the Fulani, assuming more cohesion and common identity across communities than perhaps exist.

Fulani and Jihad in Historical Context

Eric Hobsbawm described the late 18th and early 19th centuries as the 'age of revolution' across the Atlantic world.[23] While Haiti and the United States (US) fought vicious wars of independence in the Americas, social and industrial revolutions challenged existing monarchies and governments in western Europe. Less explored in historical study are the corresponding revolutions that took place during this period in West Africa, despite that West Africa is, and was, a key region in the Atlantic world. Across West Africa, during this 'age of revolution', states and empires rose and fell, many due to mass revolutionary movements by large swathes of West African civil society. Many of these revolutions took the form of Sufi jihadist movements.

The jihadist revolutions in West Africa first manifested at the very end of the 17th century in the Bundu plateau, now in western Senegal. Following the

example of Nasir al-Din, a Berber jihadist in Mauritania, a Muslim cleric named Malik Sy waged jihad in 1690 to bring about Fuuta Bundu, an Islamic state in Senegambia. Between 1727 and 1728, Muslim leaders in the highlands region of what is now Guinea waged jihad and established the Imamate of Fuuta Jalon. This trend extended to northern Senegambia in 1775 with the establishment of the Fuuta Toro Imamate. In 1804, Islamic preacher Uthman Dan Fodio waged jihad in Nigeria and established the Sokoto caliphate. Between 1817 and 1818, Sheku Amadu broke away from Sokoto to found the Macina caliphate in what is now Mali. In 1860, Omar Tall established the Toucouleur empire, a jihadist state that endured until the end of the century. By 1835, "West Africa had come under the dominance of jihad regimes".[24]

Fulani leaders played key roles in many of these jihads.[25] The leaders of the jihadist revolutions that founded Fuuta Bundu, Fuuta Jalon, and Fuuta Toro – Malik Sy, Karamokho Alfa, and Sulayman Baal, respectively – are all identified by historians as ethnic Fulbe.[26] Uthman Dan Fodio, founder of the Sokoto caliphate, was also Fulani, and his Islamic movement has often been known among scholars as the 'Fulani Jihad' (although some scholars tout that Fodio also identified as Hausa).[27] Sheku Amadu, who founded the Macina empire, too, was ethnically Fulani,[28] as was Omar Tall, the founder of the Toucouleur empire, who came from the Fulbe-speaking Toucouleur ethnic group.[29]

Some of these leaders drew on their ethnic identities to recruit other Fulani fighters for their campaigns, and as a result these revolutions are often associated heavily with Fulani groups. Lovejoy writes that by the end of the 18th century, "jihad had become fully associated with the Fulbe", and that ethnic Fulani were "particularly influent" in West African jihadist movements.[30] This is confirmed for the Macina empire by Johnson, who writes that the Fulani were the "dominant people of the Macina theocracy",[31] and by Shillington, who writes that Sheku Amadu's jihad had "ardent support from Fulani pastoralists".[32] Philips writes that the majority of Dan Fodio's flagbearers were Fulani, and that most of the civil servants and councillors appointed in the Sokoto caliphate were also Fulani.[33] Lovejoy also notes that the term 'Fuuta' indicated a Fulani-led state, demonstrating the strength of the Fulani people in the jihadist movements of the region.[34]

However, the core driving forces of these jihadist movements were broader

and more global than ethnic grievance. The social and economic upheavals of the transatlantic slave trade and other increased interaction between Europe, Africa and the Americas were major drivers of the spread of jihad in West Africa at this time.[35] The wealth that flooded into West Africa as a result of increased trade with Europe and the Americas, both of goods and of people, allowed new entrepreneurs and business people to flourish, disrupting the status quo.[36] As opportunities for trading cattle expanded, Fulani herdsmen and other pastoralist groups considerably improved their financial position, but this was not always reflected in their political or social capital under the ruling empires of the day.[37] This imbalance bred resentment and fed revolutionary jihadist ideologies.

Many jihadist movements at the time were also motivated by aspirations to reduce the number of Muslim Africans captured and sold into the transatlantic slave trade. Lovejoy notes that "the Muslim interior of West Africa was underrepresented in terms of the number of slaves who moved as part of the transatlantic migration", due in no small part to the efforts of jihadist states like Fuuta Jallon and others to protect practising Muslims from capture.[38] Philips writes that eventually the concern over the illegal enslavement of Muslims became the *casus belli* of Dan Fodio's jihad.[39]

Considering the broader social nature of the drivers, jihadist narratives were often based on a broader ideology than ethnic affiliation and loyalty. Lovejoy notes that the jihads of the day were not an ethnic phenomenon.[40] Waldman notes of Dan Fodio that ethnic sympathy played only a minor role in his articulation of grievances, and that "identity was not essential to the success of his movement".[41] Dan Fodio warned that "to believe that every Fulani is Muslim" was "false and an illusion".[42]

As a result of this broad narrative that transcended ethnic identity, not all fighters in these jihadist movements were Fulani. Several scholars highlight that the various jihadist movements throughout this period attracted fighters and supporters from all segments of the population, across a range of identities and ethnic backgrounds.[43] Hill notes that Dan Fodio was supported by Hausa peasants,[44] and Aremu points out that the lingua franca under the Sokoto caliphate was Hausa, not Fulfulde.[45] In 1789, non-Fulani Muslim Mahdi Fatta attempted to wage jihad in Moria, though his efforts were unsuccessful.[46] Philips writes "the history of Islam in West Africa is littered with the remains of minor

Islamic revolts…only the revolts which involved the Fulani to some extent were successful", implying that there were many Islamic movements that were not led by Fulani.[47]

Moreover, support for these jihads among Fulani populations was far from universal. Azarya notes that there were groups of Fulani who took little part in the jihads, or even opposed them, highlighting that these groups continued to live at the margins of the new caliphates and grew increasingly differentiated from the ruling Fulani sub-clans.[48] Waldman writes that a large number of Fulani did not rally to Dan Fodio's side, and that not even all Muslims agreed to fight with him, citing that Dan Fodio was "constantly forced to appeal for help from them and others".[49] Philips writes that the jihad was not a totally Fulani affair anywhere in Hausaland, noting that in one province, only six of the 12 Fulani clans supported the jihad.[50] Some Fulani spied against Dan Fodio for the neighbouring Ningi.[51]

Some jihadist leaders were antagonistic towards other Fulani leaders and communities. In Macina, when Amadu assessed that many Fulani chiefs were declaring loyalty out of self-interest rather than religious ideology, he "overthrew them one by one",[52] despite their shared ethnic affiliation. Johnson also notes that Amadu established his caliphate in part by driving out fellow Fulani leader Galadio.[53] Philips reports that Dan Fodio did not hesitate to attack Fulani with whom he disagreed.[54]

It is also important to point out the limitations of much of the literature available on the details of these jihadist movements. Much of the historical and anthropological study that catalogues the history of jihadist movements in West Africa was conducted about half a century ago in the 1960s and 1970s. More recent study would surely benefit our understanding of the historical context in which these jihads occurred, allowing for advances in historical and social scientific study to improve the quality of the analysis. Moreover, in some cases the reliability of the primary source material on which these accounts and studies are based, often collected through oral historical accounts, has been called into question. For example, Gomez challenges some of the foundational studies recounting the formation of Fuuta Bundu, highlighting that many of the interviewees are anonymous, and of those who are traceable, many originate from outside the borders of the empire in question. Gomez points out that oral history

in the region has often been "designed to appeal more to the popular" audience than to historians.[55]

Once again, we are left with an unclear picture. There can be no doubt that Fulani leaders played significant roles in the majority of jihadist movements in the 18th and 19th centuries in West Africa, and that their followings likely included significant numbers of Fulani fighters and supporters. Yet drivers of these revolutions were complex and global, incorporating economic and political dynamics that extended well beyond ethnic grievances. Some scholars report that jihadist ideological narratives did not play particularly heavily on ethnicity, instead seeking to include non-Fulani individuals and groups in their calls for revolution. While many jihadist fighters were Fulani, many others were not, and some Fulani opposed these movements altogether.

Fulani and Terrorism in the 21st Century

The tradition of jihad has once again risen to prominence in some regions of West Africa in the 21st century. This phenomenon has been placed in a broader global context of growing Islamic extremism and the global War on Terror led by western states and supported by many others. At the same time, regional experts continue to highlight that many of the drivers of these movements are rooted in local dynamics and grievances.

Moreover, once again the Fulani have been placed front and centre in the narrative of contemporary West African Islamic extremism. Following a brief summary of the current terrorism landscape in West Africa, this section interrogates alleged links between modern jihadist movements and Fulani communities. It finds that, just as was true in the 18th and 19th centuries, links between the Fulani and terrorism in the 21st century are complex.

West Africa's Current Terrorism Landscape

Over the past decade, the growth of violent Islamic extremist movements in West Africa has accelerated at an alarming rate. The region has experienced the most rapid increase in militant Islamist group activity of any region in Africa in recent years, with extremist-group violence doubling every year since 2015.[56] This growth has not necessarily been consistent, and extremist groups have

experienced victories and setbacks as they battle with state security forces and with local populations. However, the rise of Islamic extremist activity in West Africa in recent years has been significant, and threats posed by jihadist violence now permeate most facets of social, political and economic life in many countries in the region.

Contemporary West Africa is home to a complex constellation of jihadist movements, some of which have been homegrown and others imported from abroad. This landscape is fluid and constantly evolving, with groups frequently allying with one another and with other insurgencies when it is opportune to do so, and fracturing as a result of internal power struggles or external shocks. At the time of writing, there are three terrorist organisations of particular import operating in central and West Africa: Boko Haram, Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM).

Boko Haram (which has been loosely translated as 'western education is forbidden' in a mix of Arabic and Hausa) began as a homegrown jihadist movement in 2002 aimed at purifying Islam in northern Nigeria. In 2009, after the execution of Boko Haram's founder, Mohammed Yusuf, by Nigerian authorities, Abubakar Shekau took over as leader. Under Shekau's leadership, Boko Haram rose to international notoriety for its gruesome attacks and tactics, especially in the wake of the group's kidnapping of 276 schoolgirls from Chibok, Borno State, in 2014.

In 2015, Shekau pledged allegiance to the IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and the group was given the new moniker 'Islamic State in West Africa Province' (ISWAP). A year later, the group fractured, with many senior leaders splitting off from Shekau and forming their own movement under the leadership of Mamman Nur and Abu Musab al-Barnawi. This faction was recognised by the IS leadership and became ISWAP, while Shekau's faction reassumed the group's original name, Jama'tu Ahlis Sunna Lida'awati wal-Jihad (JAS). In 2018, an internal dispute within the ISWAP faction led to the execution of Nur and the ascendance of Abu Abdallah al-Barnawi as leader of ISWAP. Thus, there are currently two distinct factions of Boko Haram operating independently from, and sometimes in competition with, one another.[57]

ISGS was formed in 2015 when leader Adnan Abu Walid al Sahrawi broke from an Al-Qaeda-affiliated terrorist group in northern Mali (Al-Mourabitoun,

led by Belmokhtar) and pledged allegiance to IS. Sahrawi had been a jihadist fighter for many years, including a commander with Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Mahgreb (AQIM), and a leader in the founding of the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) in October 2011.[58]

JNIM is a conglomerate of four of the most powerful jihadist organisations in the Sahel region of Africa: AQIM, Ansar Dine, Al-Mourabitoun, and Katiba Macina. In 2017, these groups created an alliance under the leadership of Ansar Dine leader Iyad Ag Ghali. Although it is not an operational entity, JNIM facilitates communications and coordination among its affiliated groups, mitigates infighting, and shields individual leaders from unwanted attention.[59] Although ISGS is not a part of JNIM, reportedly these two groups communicate regularly with one another and are not subject to the broader antagonism that exists between Al-Qaeda and IS in the Middle East.[60]

These major terrorist organisations and conglomerates operate across two distinct geographical theatres. JNIM and ISGS operate in the Sahel region, particularly in central Mali, Burkina Faso and western Niger. Boko Haram's two factions operate in the Lake Chad Basin region at the intersection of northeastern Nigeria, northern Cameroon, Chad and Niger. However, in recent years, the distance between these two theatres has narrowed, as jihadist movements in the Sahel expand their territory further south and west, and as the IS leadership has made attempts to connect ISGS and ISWAP activities.[61]

As was the case in the 18th and 19th centuries, current jihadist trends in West Africa are driven in large part by socio-economic dynamics. A Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue/United Nations Development Programme survey of perceptions in the Sahel region found that "77,5% of the respondents perceive radicalisation as being driven by socio-economic forces while only 14,8% see it as a religious phenomenon".[62] Estelle highlights that poor social and economic conditions in Burkina Faso have made populations vulnerable to jihadist efforts.[63] In Nigeria, Mahmood and Ani report that underdevelopment, unemployment and other socio-economic drivers are "chief among the factors enabling the rise of Boko Haram",[64] while Evans and Kelikume find that poverty, unemployment and inequality are among the strongest drivers of violence in the region, including the rise of Boko Haram.[65]

However, contemporary jihadist movements in West Africa differ from their

18th and 19th century counterparts in several important ways. For example, while most jihadist movements during the 'age of revolution' were waged under the Sufi tradition,[66] contemporary Islamic extremism in the region is overwhelmingly Salafi. Whereas Sufi jihad advocates an inclusive form of Islamic tradition, interpreting Islamic law in a holistic and at times flexible way, Salafi tradition advocates a stricter form of Islam, including a highly literal interpretation of Islamic text and puritanical approaches to enforcing Islamic practice.[67]

Another distinction is that there is more ethnic diversity across jihadist leaders in modern-day West Africa than there seems to have been during the 'age of revolution'. JAS leader Shekau and ISWAP leader Al-Barnawi are ethnic Kanuri. Sahrawi, leader of ISGS, comes from the Sahrawi ethnic group, a mixed Arab-Berber group in western Sahara and Morocco. Among the JNIM groups, Ghali is ethnically Tuareg, and AQIM's Abdelmalek Droukdel and Al-Mourabitoun's Belmokhtar are Arab fighters from Algeria. Katiba Macina's Amadou Koufa is the sole ethnic Fulani among the main modern jihadist leaders.

Yet the ethnic identity of leaders may not be as important in contemporary jihadist movements as it was in the 18th and 19th centuries. This is because, while current movements are often led by elites who came from wealthy and socially significant backgrounds, the ethos of these modern movements heavily focuses on non-elite fighters. Katiba Macina privileges non-elite pastoralists and calls for social change that will free herders from the yoke of the domination of elites.[68] Estelle writes of Ansarul Islam that "sermons focus on equality between the minority elites and the majority underclass…this narrative aims to mobilise lower classes and youth against traditional elites".[69]

This stands in contrast to the region's historical jihadist movements, where elites played a key role in the instigation and success of the movements.[70] For example, while 18th and 19th century jihads tended to be driven by more sedentary, educated and aristocratic Fulani sub-clans,[71] in recent movements nomadic communities are overrepresented among Fulani jihadist fighters, with settled and elite Fulani being more exposed to attacks and intimidation from jihadist elements.[72]

Interrogating Links between Fulani and Contemporary Terrorism

Contemporary analysts have noted the appearance of strong Fulani elements in

many modern West African jihadist movements. Benjaminsen and Ba report that Fulani have "joined jihadist groups in central Mali in larger numbers than any other ethnicity".[73] Nsaibia finds that Fulani desire to join terrorist groups as a method of self-protection against other ethnic militias that were supported by the government, which "likely enabled the growth of ISGS".[74] Hoije and Sangare report that it was the recruitment of Fulani by jihadist groups that prompted other ethnic groups like the Bambara and Dogon to set up their own militias in Mali.[75] Sangare notes that modern jihadist propaganda "finds a more 'natural' echo among the Fulani than other ethnic groups".[76]

Links between Fulani and modern-day jihadist movements appear to be more prevalent in the Sahelian theatre. JNIM affiliates Katiba Macina and Ansar Dine, as well as ISGS, have all been reported to recruit heavily from Fulani groups. Katiba Macina, led by Amadou Koufa, operates in the Mopti region of central Mali and reportedly draws on narratives of reviving the Macina caliphate, designing its outreach efforts around the discontent of Fulani communities.[77] Ansarul Islam – the Burkina Faso branch of Ansar Dine, which was led by Fulani preacher Ibrahim Malam Dicko until his death in May 2017 – mobilised the Fulani population around a sense of shared grievance, at times actively targeting non-Fulani groups with violence.[78] ISGS is also reported to heavily recruit from the Fulani community.[79] Moreover, some analysts highlight that these three groups have been primarily responsible for the growth of extremist violence in the region, including roughly two-thirds of the extremist attacks in the Sahel theatre from 2015 to 2019.[80] This could mean that Fulani-led groups are responsible for a disproportionately large amount of jihadist impact in current-day West Africa.

However, there is also evidence of Fulani populations that do not support these jihadist movements. Several writers note that groups such as Katiba Macina, Ansarul Islam and ISGS lack deep local support, and that supporters for these groups represent a "tiny fraction of the population",[81] even in regions with large Fulani populations.[82] In his analysis on Katiba Macina, Diallo writes that support for the group is "far from unanimous among the Fulani of central Mali".[83] Sangare says that in Nigeria, many Fulani militias remain autonomous from jihadist movements.[84] In some instances, jihadist groups have attacked or actively targeted Fulani communities.[85]

Furthermore, there are many regions in West Africa where Fulani are prominent

minorities but where jihadist groups have not spread or manifested. Guinea – the only country where Fulani make up the largest ethnic minority at 38% of the population – is not affected by jihadism, and the Fulani there "are not and have not been particularly involved in violent conflicts".[86] In northern Ghana, Bukari et al assess that Fulani and non-Fulani exist as 'cultural neighbours' and cooperate more frequently than they conflict with one another.[87]

Moreover, there is also evidence of jihadist groups in West Africa catering to non-Fulani communities. Estelle says that Ansarul Islam has recruited non-Fulani individuals by appealing to them on the basis of class.[88] Crisis Group reports that ISWAP recruits heavily from the Kanuri and Buduma ethnic groups.[89] ISWAP has reportedly dug wells, distributed seeds and fertilisers to farmers, and revitalised farming and fishing markets.[90] Considering that Fulani are traditionally pastoralists, this practice could indicate that ISWAP is catering not only to Fulani but to a variety of constituents across a range of livelihoods and ethnic affinities. The fact that most jihadist propaganda is conducted in Arabic or Hausa,[91] not in Fulfulde, also indicates that the intended audience is broader than Fulani.

It is important to note, however, that not all recent allegations accusing the Fulani of being terrorists are tied to jihad. Some of the most common accusations come from Nigeria's Middle Belt region, which is outside the area of operation of Boko Haram or any of the region's other major jihadist organisations. In this region, centuries-old conflicts between sedentary farming communities and nomadic herders – typically Fulani – have escalated in recent years. Many Nigerian commentaries refer to Fulani in this region as 'Fulani terrorists' or otherwise accuse them of extremism or terrorist activity.[92] These references are not necessarily a commentary on a group's religious or ideological objectives, but rather on the vicious, extreme and terror-inspiring tactics of some armed actors. The Global Terrorism Index designates a separate category for Fulani extremists, distinct from other jihadist movements operating in West Africa.

However, Nigeria is a country with chronic and internecine conflict between Muslim and Christian populations that is struggling with a significant jihadist threat. This context has impacted dynamics and narratives in other regions of the country. Some local informants link Fulani fighters in the Middle Belt with Boko Haram, despite the fact that this territory is outside the area in which the group's factions operate. The fact that Fulani are typically Muslim, and that they

played such a strong leadership role in the Sokoto caliphate, has also driven narratives that 'killer herdsmen' seek to wage jihad, establish sharia law, or otherwise Islamise the Middle Belt region.[93]

The literature and information available regarding Fulani participation in contemporary jihadist movements are also quite limited and may have significant gaps. Due to the security situation in the region, rigorous academic and scientific study has been curtailed and stifled in recent years. Most direct information on the situation comes from news outlets and humanitarian reports. These sources are often aimed at a general audience, and may simplify certain aspects of local social dynamics for the purpose of communicating a clear story or analysis. Additionally, reporters are not always well-educated regarding ethnic nuances, and may neglect or misinterpret important local social dynamics in their analyses or reporting.

The Risks of False Equivalencies

Allegations of robust links between Fulani groups and jihadist movements are difficult to substantiate due to the dynamic, complex nature of the regional context. The social, economic and geographic diversity within Fulani groups, the Salafi tradition touted by most 21st century jihad movements in West Africa, the ethnic diversity among contemporary jihadist leaders in the region, and the predominantly socio-economic drivers of jihad in West Africa (both in the past and in the present) all complicate attempts to draw direct links between Fulani communities and modern jihadist movements. In this shifting landscape, and considering the flaws inherent in the research and information available, the value that highlighting such links can bring to efforts to fight terrorism in the region is extremely limited.

Conversely, the risk that such narratives will yield false equivalencies between Fulani communities and jihadist movements presents significant threats to efforts to combat the spread of Islamic extremism in West Africa. The deliberate ethnic targeting of Fulani by security and counterterrorism forces, which is taking place across the region, will breed resentment and grievance among Fulani communities, including those who originally stood opposed to jihad.[94]

This has already happened. In central Mali, Diallo writes that:

"during the redeployment of state institutions in 2013, Malian security

forces clamped down on pastoral communities, leading to mass detention and extrajudicial killings…based more on the false equivalency of Fulani pastoral communities and terrorists, than on the proven culpability of the arrested. Disaffection towards the state and the mass appeal of non-state armed groups, especially Islamist-leaning, were the consequences of this security crackdown."[95]

In Burkina Faso, Dicko's attempts to begin a jihadist movement in his home province of Soum were initially unsuccessful because many Fulani community members, especially elites, were not supportive. Instead, Dicko was forced to travel to neighbouring Mali to recruit and conduct jihad. In November 2016, the Burkinabe security forces enacted a state of emergency in Soum to root out jihadists who had crossed the border from Mali. During this campaign, these state forces humiliated several local elders and traditional chiefs – actions which, according to Le Roux, Dicko was able to exploit to garner more support for his cause in his home province.[96]

When security forces or political actors overestimate the importance of ethnicity in driving jihadist activity, they may contribute to the toxic hardening of ethnic divides, often with violent consequences. For example, the perceived link between the Fulani community and Ansarul Islam in Burkina Faso drove the rise of ethnic self-defence militias in Mossi communities, known as *Koglweogo*. Le Roux reports that *Koglweogo* have inflicted violent punishments on innocent people in their pursuit of 'jihadists'.[97]

This dynamic contributes to the arguably more threatening security challenge facing West Africa today, which is escalating identity-based violence and the growing risk of atrocities, including crimes against humanity and genocide. The US Holocaust War Memorial Museum has warned that ethnic violence involving Fulani and non-Fulani groups in central Mali poses a high risk of atrocities,[98] and the United Nations has triggered an investigation into a Fulani massacre in 2019, believing it could constitute a crime against humanity.[99] In Nigeria, Christians continually accuse Fulani of committing genocide against them.[100] In the Central African Republic in 2016, contestation of power between Fulani and non-Fulani groups fuelled vicious identity-based violence that demonstrated the early warning signs of genocide.[101]

In this context, many communities, both Fulani and non-Fulani, join or support jihadist groups not out of any common religious or ideological belief, but

because those jihadists are armed and can keep them safe from the escalating cycles of retaliatory violence.[102] They also protect livelihoods and access to services as growing instability threatens rural areas, key roads and markets. This self-reinforcing cycle will be difficult to disrupt, especially if policymakers continue to privilege ethno-centric narratives.

Conclusion

The goal of this chapter was to set the record straight regarding alleged links between Fulani and jihad, examining cases in both the past and the present. As it turns out, the record is not straight at all. It is jagged and gnarled and twisted around itself.

Fulani groups played significant roles in the Sufi jihads that erupted in West Africa in the 18th and 19th centuries, and Fulani individuals continue to play influential roles in some of the Salafi jihadist movements prevalent in the region today. Yet throughout both eras, jihadist recruitment strategies frequently engaged a broad range of individuals across a diverse array of ethnic identities, and in both periods there are many examples of Fulani communities that did not support the jihadist movements. This is, in part, because the apparent links between Fulani and jihad are complicated by a dynamic political, economic and social context, the complexity of which far surpasses the simplistic, though admittedly appealing, narrative of a direct and linear relationship between the Fulani and jihad.

Thus, the value of such a narrative in informing actions aimed at reducing violent extremism in the region is far outweighed by its risks. False equivalencies between Fulani and jihad, which are already common, have fuelled and will continue to fuel actions against innocent civilians based on ethnic identity, which in turn breeds resentment and grievance on which jihadists can draw in their attempts to recruit new fighters for their causes.

The relationship between Fulani groups and jihadist movements in West Africa is, and has always been, extremely complex. Narratives implying a simple relationship are harmful, both to efforts to combat the spread of violent extremism, and to broader policies and programmes aimed at stabilising and developing the region. Scholars, policymakers and practitioners interested in reducing violence in the region should avoid ethnic narratives and focus instead on understanding

and addressing the political and economic drivers of the phenomenon.

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