

IN DISORDER, THEY THRIVE: HOW RURAL DISTRESS FUELS MILITANCY AND BANDITRY IN THE CENTRAL SAHEL

ANOUAR BOUKHARS & CARL PILGRAM

MARCH 2023



Middle
East
Institute

WWW.MEI.EDU

ABOUT THE MIDDLE EAST INSTITUTE

The Middle East Institute is a center of knowledge dedicated to narrowing divides between the peoples of the Middle East and the United States. With over 70 years' experience, MEI has established itself as a credible, non-partisan source of insight and policy analysis on all matters concerning the Middle East. MEI is distinguished by its holistic approach to the region and its deep understanding of the Middle East's political, economic and cultural contexts. Through the collaborative work of its three centers – Policy & Research, Arts & Culture, and Education – MEI provides current and future leaders with the resources necessary to build a future of mutual understanding.

INTELLECTUAL INDEPENDENCE

MEI maintains strict intellectual independence in all of its projects and publications. MEI as an organization does not adopt or advocate positions on particular issues, nor does it accept funding that seeks to influence the opinions or conclusions of its scholars. Instead, it serves as a convener and forum for discussion and debate, and it regularly publishes and presents a variety of views. All work produced or published by MEI represents solely the opinions and views of its scholars.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. Anouar Boukhars is a professor of countering violent extremism and counterterrorism at the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, National Defense University. He also serves as associate professor of political science at McDaniel College. Boukhars is the author of *Politics in Morocco: Executive Monarchy and Enlightened Authoritarianism* (Routledge, 2010) and coauthor of *Salafism in the Maghreb: Politics, Piety, and Militancy* (Oxford University Press, 2019). He is also the coeditor of *Perilous Desert: Insecurity in the Sahara* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2013) and *Perspectives on Western Sahara: Myths, Nationalisms and Geopolitics* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2013).

Carl Pilgram is the senior Academic Associate at the Africa Center for Strategic Studies.

The views expressed are theirs and not an official policy or position of the National Defense University, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

Cover photo: Fighters from a local armed group Gatia, and pro-government armed group National Liberation Movement of Azawad, patrol around the town of Menaka on Nov. 21, 2020. [Photo by SOULEYMANE AG ANARA/AFP via Getty Images.](#)

Opposite photo: A fighter for Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA) patrols through town during the Congress for the Fusion of Movements in Kidal on Aug. 28, 2022. [Photo by SOULEYMANE AG ANARA/AFP via Getty Images.](#)



CONTENTS & KEY POINTS

CONTENTS

Introduction	4
Crisis of Pastoralism Coming Due	4
Drifting Into Militancy	6
“Falling” Into Banditry	9
Conclusion	10



KEY POINTS

- The central Sahel is buffeted by three main forms of armed conflict that overlap and fuel each other: communal conflict, banditry, and violent extremism. These conflicts are partly rooted in a crisis of governance of rural areas, and are exacerbated by climate change, demographics, and internal and cross-border migration.
- Reversing the spiral of insecurity and violence in the central Sahel requires that states demonstrate their usefulness as providers of security and impartial justice.
- Military and law enforcement efforts must be community centered, with the protection of lives and livelihoods at the center of responses to degrade violent extremist organizations.
- Fostering cooperation and dialogue between security actors, local authorities, and civilian populations, especially those that are marginalized and stigmatized, is key to restoring trust in public institutions.

Introduction

The central Sahel — Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger — has changed dramatically since the armed insurgencies that emerged in northern Mali in 2012. The resulting deterioration in security has been worse and more far reaching than anything experienced by the region in recent times. Aggressive extremist organizations, unaccountable community-based armed groups, and criminal gangs have all proliferated, wreaking havoc on populations in the central Sahel countryside. As conflicts have become more multi-faceted and serious human rights violations, including by security services, more pervasive, civilian deaths have reached staggering levels. In the last decade, internal displacement in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger has skyrocketed nearly ten-fold to surpass 2 million people in 2022. On the frontline of this unfolding security and humanitarian crisis are rural populations, a majority of whom bear the brunt of atrocities and abuse. A minority, however, has been used as cannon fodder for violent extremist groups (VEGs) and other disruptive and destabilizing armed actors.¹

The fact that rural areas have become a ripe breeding ground for militancy and banditry is a manifestation of a profound dislocation of the rural socio-economic order. The biggest casualties of this dislocation — a consequence of the misgovernance of rural spaces — have been nomadic pastoralists, who have seen a dramatic degradation of their traditional livelihoods. In situations of state fragility and creeping violent extremist insurgencies, the inability or unwillingness of governments to reverse this downward spiral has eroded trust in the authorities, frayed social cohesion between nomadic herders and farmer populations, and dramatically increased the risks of violence.

Over the past decade, the intersection of ethnicity (mostly Fulani) and occupation (nomadic livestock herding) has ignited the plight of rural areas into a Sahelian powder keg.² As the

1. Jean-Hervé Jezequel and Vincent Foucher, “Forced Out of Towns in the Sahel, Africa’s Jihadists Go Rural,” International Crisis Group, January 11, 2017, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/mali/forced-out-towns-sahel-african-jihadists-go-rural>

2. Modibo Ghaly Cissé, “Understanding Fulani Perspectives on the Sahel Crisis,” Africa Center for Strategic Studies, April 22, 2020. <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/understanding-fulani-perspectives-sahel-crisis/>; Boukary Sangaré, ‘Le Centre du Mali : vers une question peule ?’ in *Biographies de la Radicalisation*:

distress in the pastoral economy deepened, a small number of aggrieved Fulani nomadic herders joined armed groups or drifted into banditry. This has created what many in the Sahel call “the Fulani question,” a dangerous conflation in people’s minds of a particular ethnic identity with violent extremism. This amalgam has only hardened with time: Today, stereotypical and prejudicial portrayals of Fulani herders as violent criminals and terrorists abound in the media and the common discourse of non-pastoralist communities. The negative perception of Fulani is also prevalent within the political and security spheres, where nomadic herders are severely underrepresented. This Fulani stigmatization risks creating a self-fulfilling prophesy whereby national and local community perceptions lead to their own confirmation. Already the targeting of Fulani communities by state forces and community militias have contributed to further recruitment for VEGs and bandit gangs, unleashing a vicious cycle of bloody revenge and retaliation.

Crisis of Pastoralism Coming Due

The pastoralist plight has been long in the making. For decades before the onset of the Sahel security crisis in 2012, pastoralists had seen their land rights and access to resources jeopardized by unfavorable state policies, failures of rural governance, and periodic dislocations brought about by drought and violent conflicts. Herders’ structural mobility had put them at a serious disadvantage in the competition for shrinking land, forage, and water resources. It also negatively impacted their levels of educational participation, as national schooling systems were tailored toward sedentary communities and conducted in classrooms in permanent locations. This led to their political marginalization, as constant mobility and low levels of educational attainment relegated nomadic herders to inferior status in all decision-making bodies.

Indeed, since colonial times, nomadic herders’ interests had rarely featured prominently in public policies, particularly those that apply to agricultural and environmental projects. Worse, even when laws and regulations were made to safeguard pastoralists’ property rights, they were undermined by local authorities and sedentary village chiefs. The result had been a gradual shrinking of herders’ traditional pastureland.

Des messages cachés du changement social, ed. Mirjam de Bruijn (Langaa RPCIG, 2018), 203-224.

Population growth added to the travails of pastoralists as competition for land increased and pressure mounted on governments to expand agriculture. The expansion of farming and its extension into the Sahel lowlands and riverbanks curtailed herders' access to grazing pastures, pastoral enclaves, resting areas, and watering points. It also disrupted the migratory routes of livestock, making herders' mobility even more expensive and vulnerable to armed robbery, cattle theft, and abuse at border crossings.³ Such expansion in turn encouraged internal migration of sedentary populations from saturated agricultural lands into vast pastoral areas. The arrival of new agricultural populations upset the demographic balances and ignited competition for access to land.

In Burkina Faso, the establishment of banana plantations, cotton fields, and cashew and mango tree groves along major watercourses undermined livestock farming, increasing tensions between migrants from the north of the country on the one hand and herders on the other, as well as with indigenous farmer populations. The same tensions occurred in Burkina Faso's east and Sahel regions, where since the mid-2000s new agricultural projects have encroached on traditional pastoral zones in lowlands and flooded areas. In central Mali and southwestern and northwestern Niger, the expansion of agricultural cultivation into grazing areas, livestock trails, and pastoral enclaves became a major source of conflict with farming communities. The rapid expansion of cities and rural and urban communes in regions like western Burkina Faso and in Tillabéri and Maradi in Niger added to tensions as they significantly reduced grazing areas and transhumance corridors.

Climate change exacerbated these demographic and migration pressures on resources, further accentuating the imbalances in relationships between and among herders and farmers. The droughts of the 1970s and 1980s, combined with the growing irregularity of seasons, caused the drying up of ponds and watercourses as well as fodder scarcity, leading to the decimation of livestock.⁴ As a result, herders had to migrate

3. Mathieu Pellerin, "Listening to Herders in West Africa and the Sahel: What Future for Pastoralism in the Face of Insecurity and its Impacts?," Réseau Billital Maroobé (RBM) and Partners, September 2021, <https://www.inter-reseaux.org/wp-content/uploads/Edited-Report-Pastoralism-and-Insecurity-in-the-Sahel-and-West-Africa-RBM.pdf>

4. Miriam de Bruijn, "Rapports interethniques et identité. L'exemple des pasteurs

south while others had to sell their livestock at a loss to agro-pastoralists, farmers, and other "new breeders," including soldiers, government officials, and businessmen, who then employed them as shepherds.

The degradation of pastoral infrastructure was accentuated by policies that encouraged the sedentarization of herds and the privatization of rangelands, water points, and usage rights. This appropriation dynamic benefited some agro-pastoralists, farmers, and ranchers, who not only expanded their land ownership of cultivated areas but, over time, became the biggest owners of herds. These new breeders then started imposing taxes on and, in some cases, severely restricted or outrightly prohibited herders' access to pastoral resources.

This crisis of access to pastoral resources became a ticking time bomb. Livestock herders saw their access to pastoral resources severely curtailed and their social position painfully downgraded. Their frustrations mounted with every public policy that neglected their interests or developmental project that prioritized agribusiness, ranching, and mining at their expense. Their disillusionment with national and local authorities and elites deepened as nomadic populations grew increasingly convinced that they have no place in power systems, which, in any case, are lacking when it comes to issues of redress, impartiality, and equal justice. With the shrinking of pastoral resources, incidences of damage to the fields increased as did illegal attempts by herders to circumvent laws that prevented them from grazing on protected lands or accessing water points. This created "an industry of corruption and racketeering among government agents."⁵ Sedentary village chiefs impose exorbitant and arbitrary fines on nomadic pastoralists. Some gendarmes as well as water and forest management officials shake them down for bribes in exchange for access to off-limits pastoral resources. Other rackets involve abusing the impounding of stray animals.

For nomadic pastoralists, especially Fulani, their breaking point came with the onset of the insurgency in northern Mali in 2012. The eviction of Malian security forces from the north of the country and the establishment of armed groups drove several

peuls et des cultivateurs hummbeebe au Mali central" in *L'ethnicité peule dans des contextes nouveaux*, eds. Y. Diallo and G. Schlee (Paris, 2000), 15-36.

5. Pellerin, "Listening to Herders in West Africa."

communities to seek the protection of armed actors against rival communities. This is how some Fulani herders joined the Movement for the Unity of Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) in search of military training and protection from the excesses of the largely undisciplined Tuareg⁶ fighters of the secular National Liberation Movement of Azawad (MNLA) as well as marauding gangs that stole their herds and harassed them in rural areas.

Drifting Into Militancy

The erosion of nomadic pastoralism did not just spring into sudden existence. But what is new is how this slow-burning crisis has, in the last decade, become a major contributor to fueling violent extremist insurgencies in the Sahel. This is partly explained by the fact that prior to the 2012 security crisis, when a coalition of insurgent groups took control of the major population centers of northern Mali, VEGs had mostly been led by Algerians and Mauritians, and their recruiting base consisted predominantly of their compatriots, in addition to Malian Arabs. Equally important, the nomadic pastoralists' crisis was most closely felt in Niger and Mali, where the Tuareg led various armed conflicts against the two states. The outbreak of the 2012 crisis in northern Mali, however, unleashed a proliferation of non-state armed groups as well as a frantic search by rural populations for either protection, revenge against injustices, or gaining the upper hand in the struggle for scarce resources.⁷ This provided fertile ground for VEGs to diversify and expand their recruiting base to encompass aggrieved nomadic herders who were most vulnerable to insecurity.

This quest for protection became a major driver of violent extremism in the post-2012 security crisis. In Mali, Fulani nomadic populations quickly aligned themselves with armed actors, including the MUJAO, as some Tuareg groups affiliated with the MNLA took advantage of the rebels' early successes in the battlefield to raid rival communities and steal their livestock. In Niger, the alliance between Daoussahaks Tuareg and the MNLA also drove some Fulani to join the MUJAO,

6. The Tuareg are a nomadic pastoralist group of Berber origin.

7. Rida Lyammouri, "Central Mali: Armed Community Mobilization in Crisis," Washington D.C.: RESOLVE Network, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.37805/cbags2021.4>.

the group that was willing and able to help them defend themselves. Fulani's distrust of authorities and customary chiefs, whom they accused of "inaction or even complicity" in past resource conflicts with the Daoussahaks and Zarma agro-pastoralists, contributed to such drift into the orbit of VEGs.

As communal violence escalated, and VEGs expanded into new territories in central Mali as well as the northern, eastern, and Sahel regions of Burkina Faso, revenge seekers constituted a new contingent of recruits for the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), which emerged in 2015, and al-Qaeda's Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), a coalition of four VEGs formed in 2017. A notable case in point of this dynamic played out in early 2019, after the Koglweogo, a Burkinabe self-defense armed group, retaliated for the killing of a Mossi village chief and his son by massacring over 200 Fulani civilians. Such atrocities drove several Fulani herders desirous to exact revenge on the Mossi populations (the main ethnic group in Burkina Faso), whom they blamed for supporting the massacres, to join VEGs. This cycle of revenge and retaliation took place in other Sahelian theaters marked by worsening ethnic polarization, further facilitating VEGs' reach into new areas.

The growing militarization of communities and the tendency to resort to arms to settle old scores added fuel to raging rural insurgencies. The ineffectiveness of land laws and dispute resolution mechanisms as well as the non-implementation of court decisions had long exacerbated conflicts over pastoral resources. The geographical expansion of VEGs into such contested areas and the resultant proliferation of self-defense groups transformed these conflicts into violent, armed confrontations. This is exactly what happened in May 2012, when Dogon farmers attacked the Malian village of Sari, on the border of Burkina Faso, killing several Fulani villagers, stealing hundreds of their cattle, and burning countless huts. The root of the conflict started with the non-enforcement of court judgments in favor of herders' rights to access wells and livestock corridors controlled by Dogon farmers.⁸ After the May attack, an appreciable number of displaced Fulani joined the ranks of the dominant VEG at the time, the MUJAO, and later the al-Qaeda-affiliated Katiba Macina.

8. Tor A. Benjaminsen & Boubacar Ba, "Fulani-Dogon Killings in Mali: Farmer-Herder Conflicts as Insurgency and Counterinsurgency," *African Security*, 14:1, 4-26, (2021), DOI: 10.1080/19392206.2021.1925035.



Photo above: A Fulani herder leads his livestock to graze in the fields between Sevare and Mopti in central Mali on March 18, 2021. [Photo by MICHELE CATTANI/AFP via Getty Images.](#)

This dynamic also played out in other theaters where sedentary armed groups, such as the Koglweogo and the Volunteers for the Defense of the Fatherland in Burkina Faso or the Yan Banga in northwestern Nigeria, took advantage of the war against VEGs to appropriate pastoral lands.⁹ This tendency to join or approach armed actors to redress injustices has become prevalent after the 2012 security crisis. In several cases in Mali and Burkina Faso, the non-enforcement of court decisions on land ownership and roaming rights pushed the aggrieved parties to take justice into their own hands by joining VEGs. To be sure, this phenomenon is not only limited to nomadic herders. Conflicts between and within groups of farmers and fishermen have also led some of the belligerents to join VEGs

9. Nathalie Prévost, "Le Sahel au confluent d'une double crise pastorale et sécuritaire," *Le Point Afrique*, June 23, 2021, https://www.lepoint.fr/afrique/le-sahel-au-confluent-d-une-double-crise-pastorale-et-securitaire-23-06-2021-2432502_3826.php.

such as the Katiba Macina, whose attempts to regulate local conflicts earned them the support of different actors.

The key role that militants attempt to play in managing resources and easing conflicts is another major driver behind the regional expansion of VEGs.¹⁰ Beyond their coveted role of protecting nomadic herders, VEGs have been trying to impose a new order of governance in the territories where they operate by regulating access to resources and negotiating settlements to communal conflicts. In the several localities they control, they have appointed representatives dedicated specifically to fielding complaints and settling disputes.¹¹ Katiba Macina in central Mali had distinguished itself by its efforts to be neutral

10. Assanvo, William and Baba Dakono, Lori-Anne Thérroux-Bénoni and Ibrahim Maïga. "Violent Extremism, Organised Crime and Local Conflicts in Liptako-Gourma." *Institute for Security Studies*, December 2019: 1-24.

11. Pellerin, "Listening to Herders in West Africa."

in resolving disagreements over land and resources. The group is also known for enforcing its decisions on the terms of access to pastoral resources. In eastern Burkina Faso, VEGs have taken on the hated Water Resources and Forests agents by chasing them out of the hunting zones and protected areas. The restoration of freedom of access to these areas benefited all groups, including farmers, hunters, and fishermen. The role that some VEGs have come to play as enforcers of rules and mediators has positioned them as critical actors in any effort to manage and ease conflicts.

This perception of some VEGs as rectifiers of inequalitarian systems of rural governance extends to their roles as redressers of entrenched social hierarchies, including within pastoralist communities themselves. Nomadic elites and local authorities possess significant powers in the management of resources. In the Inner Niger Delta in Mali, the *Jowros*, or noble Fulani (*rimbé*) pastoralists, who have long been responsible for the management of the movement of herds and access rights to pastures, are resented for practices that some nomadic herders consider predatory. The *Jowros* have been accused of working in collusion with the local authorities and Defense and Security Forces (DSF) to restrict herders' mobility and access to pastoral resources through the imposition of exorbitant access taxes (*tolo*) or the outright transfer of pastoral lands to farmers. The 2015 emergence of Katiba Macina promised to reverse this state of affairs when the militant group prohibited the monetization of access to pastures. For some herders, this presented an opportunity to dismantle the authority of *Jowros* and shift the control of bushland to groups affiliated with VEGs. When, in 2019, Macina Katiba's leader, Hamadoun Kouffa, proved reluctant to expropriate the *Jowros* of their prerogatives, some herders began flocking to the ISGS, which had already been denouncing Kouffa and the JNIM for failing to enforce free access to pastures.

For disgruntled herders, the local Islamic State affiliate offers new opportunities not only for reversing the socio-political order but also for recapitalizing themselves through regaining control of lost pastoral resources or looting the livestock of enemy villages they attack.¹² ISGS combatants are often accused of stealing the herds of officials, civil servants, the

12. Mathieu Pellerin, "Les violences armées au Sahara. Du djihadisme aux insurrections?," *Etudes de l'Ifri*, December 2019, https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/pellerin_violence_armees_sahara_2019_1.pdf.

DSF, and anyone they suspect of being an informer or belonging to self-defense groups. In turn, the JNIM also engages in abducting livestock from actors enriched by the system, but the group tries to regulate these activities to prevent a slippery slope into utter criminality. The shift to predation has been most notable in theaters where the ISGS operates.¹³ One referenced explanation ties this to the ISGS's coexistence with several bandit groups that seize on opportunities of unrest and fighting to loot and steal cattle. For example, after the January 2019 massacres of Fulani civilians in Yirgou, Burkina Faso, and the subsequent cycle of retaliation and revenge this act unleashed, the raiding of agro-pastoralists' cattle skyrocketed. Another explanation for this drift into predation is attributed to the number of bandits and traffickers who reportedly became engaged in the ISGS to settle scores with their enemies. In eastern Burkina Faso, several bandits reportedly joined the ISGS after the Koglweogo successfully cracked down on their activities in 2015 and 2016.¹⁴ The same logic applied to poachers, who lost their access to hunting reserves after the state transformed such sites into magnets for tourists and game hunters. Depending on the circumstances, these actors share a common desire to strike at common enemies.

Local bandits can be "recruits of choice" for both the ISGS and JNIM.¹⁵ They generally know the terrain well and are often battle-hardened. The challenge, however, comes when VEG leaders try to set conditions for "sharing loot"¹⁶ and modify the rules of engagement of communities and demographics that the group considers vital for its popular support. This applies even to actors such as the ISGS, which has been quite inconsistent in its efforts to coopt or cooperate with bandits. The group has to reconcile its commitments to defend its target constituencies (mostly but not exclusively nomadic Fulani) from widespread banditry in the theaters where it operates with its policy of accommodating its fighters' engagement in cattle rustling and looting of villages. The challenge for the ISGS and, indeed, other VEGs active in areas replete with

13. Héli Nsaibia "Insecurity in Southwestern Burkina Faso in the Context of an Expanding Insurgency," *Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED)*, January 17, 2019, <https://acleddata.com/2019/01/17/insecurity-in-southwestern-burkina-faso-in-the-context-of-an-expanding-insurgency/>.

14. Mathieu Pellerin, "Les violences armées au Sahara."

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

bandit groups is two-fold: 1) preventing renegade operatives from carrying out wanton raiding of communities deemed not inimical to VEGs and 2) stemming the drift of some of their adherents into the more lucrative business of banditry. To be sure, not all bandits are driven by economic opportunism. Some join VEGs in search of “redemption and moral salvation in religion.”¹⁷ There are a number of cases where former bandits became diehard ideologues, as the case of Ansarul Islam’s second in command, Oumarou Boly, illustrates.¹⁸

“Falling” Into Banditry

While the afore-detailed reasons explain the drift of some herders into militancy, other factors are behind the uptick in regional cases of herders engaging in banditry. The recourse to banditry is not a new occurrence in the Sahel, nor is it confined to Fulani pastoralists.¹⁹ Before the 2012 crisis in Mali, farmers, fishermen, and hunters also engaged in such practices. Naturally, individual trajectories into banditry differed even if their bulk came from those who had seen their livelihoods negatively impacted by climate change, population growth, the privatization of protected areas and hunting reserves, and the states’ poor management of shrinking land and natural resources.²⁰ But the escalation of competition over scarce resources certainly aggravated intercommunal tensions and widened social rifts. In the 2000s, intercommunal clashes grew in frequency. Equally troublesome was the increase in cattle rustling gangs. This spawned the creation of several self-defense groups as well as the stigmatization of Fulani communities, often associated with banditry. The onset of the 2012 crisis in Mali proved a boon for banditry as criminal activities became the motor of the war economy.²¹

17. Ibid.

18. Hen Nsaibia & Caleb Weiss, “Ansaroul Islam and the Growing Terrorist Insurgency in Burkina Faso,” Combating Terrorism Center, March 2018, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/ansaroul-islam-growing-terrorist-insurgency-burkina-faso/>.

19. Wolfram Lacher, “Organized Crime and Conflict in the Sahel-Sahara Region,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 13, 2012.

20. Giovanni Zanoletti, “Mali : le ‘jihad de la vache’,” *Libération*, 12 juin 2019, https://www.liberation.fr/debats/2019/06/12/mali-le-jihad-de-la-vache_1733025/.

21. Mark Micallef et al., “After the storm: Organized crime across the Sahel-Sahara following upheaval in Libya and Mali,” Global Initiative Against

As insecurities spread within Mali and across its borders, cattle rustling surged, with most victims being Fulani herders who became trapped between armed groups competing for resources and political power. The proliferation and fragmentation of actors linked to the cattle-rustling economy have reshaped banditry in the Sahel as communities and individuals scramble to seek protection or, in some cases, enrichment. The typologies of some individuals who have joined bandit groups suggest different forms of motivation.²²

First, some individuals have exploited the security vacuums for personal enrichment and recapitalization of herds.²³ The lure of being put on the fast track to success is appealing as stories abound of how some of those who have taken up banditry acquired money and power to set the terms for the use of land and water. Their elevated status as successful men is the proverbial rags-to-riches tale, in which once impoverished rural dwellers have become important power players in competition for scarce and contested resources.

This economic attraction of banditry conceals a second motivation: Some herders develop a romantic view of bandits as avengers against a system that has contributed to the pauperization of nomadic pastoralists. Indeed, there are many examples of herders who joined bandit groups in search of revenge against local authorities or sedentary self-defense groups. This dynamic of using bandits to settle communal and, sometimes, personal scores exists in areas where they are the only actors capable of dispensing revenge with weapons.

The third cohort of recruits consists of individuals who see no other choice to protect themselves and their livestock but to join the dominant bandit groups. Some villages reportedly provide a supply base of male recruits to bandit groups in exchange for sparing their lives and those of their herds from attacks. This tends to occur in areas where neither

Transnational Organized Crime,” November 2019, pp. 1-140, https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/After_the_storm_GI-TOC.pdf.

22. Anouar Boukhars & Catherine Lena Kelly, “Comparative Perspectives on Linkages between Violent Extremism and Organized Crime in Africa,” *African Security*, 15, no. 1, (2022): 26–50. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392206.2022.2048582> © 2022 Taylor & Francis.

23. Catherine Van Offelen, “Le vrai visage du terrorisme Sahélien : le grand banditisme et la criminalité ordinaire,” *Conflits*, 28 juillet 2020.



Photo above: Prince Adelabu Abiodun, a victim of the deadly ethnic clashes between the northern Fulani and southern Yoruba traders, speaks of burnt valuables at Shasha Market in Ibadan, southwest Nigeria, on Feb. 15, 2021. [Photo by PIUS UTOMI EKPEI/AFP via Getty Images.](#)

state authorities nor VEGs are present. It is also prevalent in contested territories where no armed group has full control.

Conclusion

The roots of the Sahel rural breakdown lie in failing governance structures. Local authorities, traditional nobilities, and sedentary local power holders have dominated local decision-making bodies, traditional councils, and the committees through which they enacted and enforced policies that deepened local imbalances between and within communities. This has eroded the credibility of local institutions, especially with nomadic pastoralists who have seen their interests and livelihoods being ridden roughshod over. The absence of trust in local governance systems has undermined state authority as many national governments have been unable or unwilling to redress local inequalities and inequities over access to and use of natural resources. The prolonged nature of this

crisis of governance of rural areas and the toll it has taken on communities, particularly nomadic herders, constituted a perfect storm for political instability, violent communal conflicts, radicalization, and criminalization. The onset of the Sahel security crisis in 2012 lit the fuse that led to the political and security breakdown in several Sahelian rural areas.

Correcting the perilous regional situation necessitates first a reckoning with the unequal systems that have been built up in the rural hinterlands. This requires finding the political will to establish more transparent and equitable land use and property rights rules. It also entails the participation of all stakeholders, especially pastoral communities that have been politically marginalized, in the decision-making bodies that have authority over the governance of natural resources. Confronting the crisis of misgovernance of rural areas will help rectify the deep social injustices that afflict pastoral communities. This is crucial in mitigating the temptations that

have led some young herders to join VEGs. It is also critical in preventing the transformation of community-based social and political grievances into religiously based revolts. For now, many recruits into VEGs are driven by a communal desire to challenge a rural order that is inimical to their livelihoods. If this struggle “mutates into religious radicalization,” then prospects for exiting extremism becomes extremely difficult.²⁴

Reversing the tide of bloodshed in the central Sahel also requires that local states bolster their supervision of self-defense groups.²⁵ The abuses perpetrated by some of these groups have stoked clashes along ethnic lines and contributed to driving an appreciable number of herders to seek the protection of VEGs. Greater emphasis is also needed on training and deploying professional security forces. Avoiding heavy-handed responses that alienate already aggrieved communities can mitigate VEG recruitment. It can also reduce the likelihood that government forces inadvertently amplify intercommunal tensions. The deployment of disciplined, professional forces can also protect citizens in contested areas, creating a buffer between antagonized communities. These actions can collectively help break the sequence contributing to militant violence against civilians.

24. Mathieu Pellerin, “Les violences armées au Sahara.”

25. “Mobilising Against Communitarisation: A Contributing Factor to Pastoral and Security Crises in the Sahel,” Policy Brief, October 2021, <https://peacenexus.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/RBM-PB-1-EN.pdf>.



Middle
East
Institute

WWW.MEI.EDU