



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

ISSUE UPDATE: ABUSES AGAINST FULANI MUSLIM CIVILIANS

May 2023

Nury Turkel
Chair

Abraham Cooper
Vice Chair

Commissioners

David Curry

Frederick A. Davie

Mohamed Magid

Stephen Schneck

Eric Ueland

Frank Wolf

Erin D. Singshinsuk
Executive Director

USCIRF's Mission

To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.

Abuses against Fulani Muslim Civilians – Religious Freedom Implications in West and Central Africa

Overview

Across west and central Africa, escalating violence and abuses against Fulani Muslim civilians are negatively impacting religious freedom for many communities. Governments and state-backed forces in Mali, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Central African Republic (CAR), Benin, and Togo have [targeted Fulani Muslim civilians](#) with violence and human rights abuses based on their ethnoreligious identity or [assumptions](#) regarding their religious beliefs. Some governments have strategically exploited Muslim sites and holidays to target and commit abuses against Fulani Muslims. This issue update documents common abuses against Fulani Muslim civilians and their implications for religious freedom in west and central Africa.

The scope of this report is limited to state-sponsored abuses against civilians based on Fulani Muslim identity. Pursuing a victim-centered approach, the analysis focuses on Fulani Muslim civilians, not on armed groups that many call Fulani militants, Fulani terrorists, or killer herdsmen. This report aims to elucidate a specific and often misunderstood aspect of violence dynamics impacting religious freedom in west and central Africa. It is important to note that civilians of other ethnoreligious backgrounds across a variety of faiths also face significant violence and religious freedom threats in the region.

Background

Fulani (or *Peuhl* in French) comprise a predominantly Muslim ethnic group prominent across much of west and central Africa. Fulani Muslims exhibit tremendous cultural diversity and practice a variety of Islamic traditions, often mixed with rituals from non-Islamic indigenous faiths. Fulani Muslims most commonly adhere to a Sufi tradition rooted in the Sunni-based Maliki school of thought common across much of west Africa. Fulani Muslims are often associated with pastoralism and livestock herding, and for many Fulani Muslims, livestock hold a place of [spiritual significance](#) in their worldviews.

As Salafi and other alternative approaches to Islam have spread in popularity across west and central Africa, Fulani Muslim civilians have found themselves under attack on [several fronts](#). Some Muslims, including most militant Islamist leaders, consider many Fulani Muslim civilians who reject their ideologies to be apostates due to their flexible interpretations of Islam and incorporating non-Muslim spiritual practices into their faiths. Militant Islamist groups have [coerced and forced](#) vulnerable Muslim

civilians, including Fulani Muslims, to adhere to their interpretation of Islam. As militant Islamist activity has increased, including by groups who include some fighters of Fulani descent, regional governments and other security actors [equate](#) entire groups of Fulani Muslim civilians with Salafi jihadist beliefs because of their Muslim faith and marginalized identity and therefore consider them legitimate targets for violence and human rights abuses. Ethnonationalist armed groups of Fulani origin fighting for stronger representation and power, who frequently commit gruesome attacks and egregious human rights abuses in pursuit of their aims, often [attack and intimidate](#) Fulani Muslim civilian leaders and communities who preach peace and ethnoreligious harmony.

These dynamics have made Fulani Muslim civilians vulnerable to attack and abuse from many different actors in west and central Africa on account of their ethnoreligious identity or their beliefs. The relative roles that religion and ethnicity play in each incident of Fulani Muslim targeting vary. In Christian-majority contexts like CAR, southern Nigeria, and coastal West African countries, religion plays a stronger role. In Muslim majority contexts like Mali, Burkina Faso, and northern Nigeria, ethnicity plays a stronger role and the implications for religious freedom are more indirect by fueling militant Islamist violence that threatens religious freedom for many communities. In these theaters, government actions have also yielded direct religious freedom violations including attacks on Muslim holidays and mosques.

Massacres and Other Violent Abuses

In recent years, government forces in several countries have participated in or encouraged violence against Fulani Muslim civilians. Much of this violence is based on ethnoreligious identity or has used religious days or sites to strategically target Fulani Muslim civilians, often due to unfounded assumptions that Fulani Muslims are more likely to be associated with Salafi jihadist beliefs.

In [CAR](#), following contested elections at the end of 2020, the Christian-dominated government [disproportionately targeted Fulani Muslims](#) with abuse and intimidation in its campaign to reassert control

over the country. In late 2021 and early 2022, the CAR government recruited vigilante fighters from mainly Christian communities to attack a community of Fulani Muslims in [Boyo, Ouaka prefecture](#), killing at least 20 civilians. The attackers used machetes, raped at least five women and girls, and held several hundred civilians for three days in the village mosque and threatened to kill them. The attack intended to punish the Fulani Muslim community of Boyo, which was perceived as being supportive of a rebel armed group in the region. Government authorities and their proxies have also targeted individual Fulani Muslims based on ethnoreligious identity and [subjected them](#) to torture, inhumane treatment, and summary execution.

In the final days of Ramadan in March 2022, Malian armed forces backed by Russian mercenaries from the Wagner Group [massacred over 300 civilians](#), the majority of whom were Fulani Muslims, at a cattle market in Moura. During the attack, Malian soldiers and Wagner mercenaries rounded up hundreds of unarmed Fulani Muslim civilian men, marched them outside the city, and shot them dead. The attackers [justified](#) the abuses by expressing beliefs that Fulani Muslims are inherently linked with Salafi jihadist beliefs. The military chose to target the livestock market strategically in the final days of Ramadan because they knew many Fulani Muslims would be there to buy and sell cattle commonly used in ceremonies celebrating Eid.

In [Burkina Faso](#), government-backed vigilante fighters [executed](#) at least 42 civilians and disappeared 14 others between September 2021 and April 2022, the majority of whom were Fulani Muslims. Many of their bodies were found bound, blindfolded, and shot in large numbers. During the attack, authorities invaded a mosque and forcibly disappeared at least 15 civilians. Thousands of Fulani Muslims fled the region following these attacks. In December 2022, government-backed forces primarily made up of fighters from the traditional Dogon ethnoreligious community killed more than 80 civilians, mostly Fulani Muslims, in [Nouna, Kossi province](#). Fighters went door-to-door targeting Fulani Muslims and shooting unarmed civilians. In both cases vigilantes [targeted Fulani Muslim civilians](#) in retaliation for attacks by militant Islamist fighters on their bases nearby.

Violations against civilians in Nigeria take place in a particularly complex context, and many other religious freedom challenges in Nigeria lay outside the scope of this report. USCIRF captures religious violence in other reports on Nigeria, which can be accessed at www.uscirf.gov/countries/nigeria. Many ethnoreligious groups face violence in various regions of Nigeria committed by armed actors, including militant Islamist groups. According to an [OpenDoors International 2023 Report](#), thousands of Christians have been targeted and killed, face increased violence because of their faith, and “the Nigerian government has failed to prevent the increase of brutal acts of violence of which many Nigerians are victims, but most particularly Christians — with impunity.” The systematic, ongoing, and egregious nature of violence in various regions of Nigeria based on religion or belief is why USCIRF has recommended the State Department designate Nigeria as a country of particular concern, as well as appoint a Special Envoy for Nigeria and the Great Lakes Region.

Authorities in [Nigeria](#) frequently [encourage](#) civilians to arm themselves for self-protection rather than providing security through transparent and accountable state-backed forces. This strategy has had devastating ramifications for interfaith trust, escalating [ethnoreligious violence](#) impacting many groups in the region, including Fulani Muslims. In 2022 assailants affiliated with ethnonationalists protecting Igbo Christian interests [attacked a cattle](#) market in Abia Taraba state following a migration of Fulani Muslim pastoralists to the region, killing at least eight Fulani Muslim civilians. The attackers justified the violence by stating that they feared the Fulani Muslims were terrorists and that their cattle would ruin their crops. In 2023 a [bomb blast](#) at a cattle market between Nasarawa and Benue states killed more than 50 Fulani Muslim civilians in a region that government neglect has left rife with sectarian tension.

Government failure to protect the rights of Fulani Muslim civilians has also had indirect consequences for Christian civilians, as abuses have led some members of Fulani communities to arm themselves and conduct reprisal attacks based on ethnoreligious identity. In October 2022, after assailants [killed](#) five Fulani Muslim civilians in northcentral Nigeria, suspected armed Fulani-affiliated assailants stormed a local Christian village and fired indiscriminately, killing 18 people in alleged retaliation. Christian communities across Nigeria are threatened by gruesome, deadly attacks from by armed groups that exploit Fulani civilian grievance to pursue violent, criminal, and political aims.

Forced Displacement

In addition to facing violence, Fulani Muslims have also been subjected to forced displacement due to xenophobic rhetoric and policies. Fulani Muslims are often considered foreigners in their own countries, including by the state actors responsible for protecting their rights. Narratives of Fulani Muslims as foreigners can stem from the nomadic or transhumant nature of some Fulani Muslims’ ways of life. However, assumptions of foreignness are often inaccurate or overly simplistic, as many Fulani Muslims have dual citizenship or multiple nationalities (as allowed under international law) or spend their entire lives in a single country. Some practice completely sedentary livelihoods on rural farms or in urban centers.

Rhetoric representing Fulani Muslims as foreigners is especially prominent in Christian majority areas of CAR and Nigeria. In CAR, authorities from the predominately Christian government and Christian civil society actors often refer to Fulani Muslims as “Chadians,” referencing their neighbor to the north, even though many Fulani Muslims living in CAR are CAR citizens. In Nigeria, state officials often generalize Fulani Muslims as all “foreigners,” stating that they are “not Nigerian,” and “not from here,” despite that many of them [hold Nigerian citizenship](#) and have lived in Nigeria for generations. Local actors frequently amplify these assumptions and narratives, which resemble other narratives that governments use to demonize ethnoreligious minorities like [Rohingya Muslims](#) in Burma and [Yazidis](#) in Iraq.

In both CAR and Nigeria, government policies have yielded forced displacement of Fulani Muslims from Christian majority areas. At the onset of the recent crisis in CAR, Fulani Muslims made up a substantial portion of the country's Muslim population. During the country's civil war, [80 percent](#) of the Muslim population was displaced, including many Fulani Muslims. Displaced persons were disallowed from voting in the 2020 presidential and local elections, further disempowering Fulani Muslims from political participation in CAR.

In southern Nigeria, several states passed [laws](#) banning livestock herding, effectively displacing those who rely on cattle rearing as a form of livelihood. These policies have overwhelmingly and disproportionately impacted Fulani Muslims relative to other ethnoreligious groups. Some Fulani Muslim farmers in these states have fled land they inhabited for decades, expressing the belief that they were no longer welcome and citing concerns that anti-grazing laws would embolden armed actors intent on anti-Fulani Muslim violence. Many Fulani Muslims throughout the country assess that these laws were designed to deliberately expel Fulani Muslims from southern states based on their ethnoreligious identity.

Religious Freedom Implications

Biases and abuses against Fulani Muslims pose both direct and indirect threats to religious freedom in various contexts in west Africa. In Christian-majority contexts like CAR, southern Nigeria, and coastal West Africa, religion plays a stronger role. In Muslim majority contexts like Mali, Burkina Faso, and northern Nigeria ethnicity plays a stronger role and implications for religious freedom are more indirect.

In southern Nigeria, commentators often interpret Fulani Muslim ambitions to increase their political representation in decisions regarding land policy as religiously motivated attempts to "Islamize" the country. Many reporters and advocacy organizations imply that ethnonationalist fighters in northwest Nigeria receive federal government support because they share a common religious identity and supposed religious agenda with the Muslim-dominated security forces. However, there is no evidence of such a link, and most Fulani Muslims in Nigeria express disappointment in how their marginalization continued under the administration of President Muhammadu Buhari. In the absence of government intervention in the face of violence, fighters that mobilize to protect predominantly Christian communities have used these narratives to justify violence against Fulani Muslims, including against

civilians. Meanwhile, in CAR Christian communities in some regions have forced Fulani Muslims into [religious enclaves](#) that significantly restrict their freedom of movement.

These trends may escalate in other Christian majority countries in coastal west Africa, where in recent years anti-Fulani Muslim sentiment and state targeting of Fulani Muslims have increased. [Benin](#), [Togo](#), [Ghana](#), and [Cote d'Ivoire](#) all have [geographic divides](#) between Christian-dominated federal governments and more politically empowered Christian communities located in the south and marginalized Muslim minority communities in the north. Already governments in [Togo](#) and [Benin](#) have committed arbitrary arrests and other human rights abuses against Fulani Muslim civilians as a part of their heightened security response to Islamist insurgencies at their borders.

In Muslim majority areas like Mali, Burkina Faso, and northern Nigeria, the religious freedom implications of anti-Fulani Muslim bias are more indirect, with mainly ethnic targeting aggravating [militant Islamist threats](#). Deliberate abuses against Fulani Muslim civilians [fuel](#) intercommunal grievances, instability, armed mobilization, violence, and war economies. These dynamics strengthen regional militant Islamist groups that pose a threat to the religious freedom of all religious communities in the region. Militant Islamist groups like Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), Jama'at Nasur al Islam wa Muslimin (JNIM), and Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) generate significant income stealing assets from, taxing, or selling protection to vulnerable Fulani Muslim communities that have been victims of abuse and violence. Militant Islamist groups have at times deliberately aggravated tensions between Fulani Muslims and other communities so that regional governments will punish Fulani Muslim communities unfairly and make them easier to exploit and recruit.

In northwest Nigeria, longstanding grievances and exclusion of Fulani Muslims has fed armed mobilization of violent [ethnonationalist militias](#). The presence of these groups threatens civilian government control and creates pockets of ungoverned terrain that [militant Islamist groups](#) have used to move fighters, weapons, and equipment. While recent research [debunks](#) theories of substantive ideological and strategic alliances between militant Islamist groups and ethnonationalist fighters in northwest Nigeria, these groups have been known to engage in business with one another and share soldiers at the tactical level in some instances.



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Conclusion

Across west and central Africa, anti-Fulani bias is fueling religious freedom violations. Governments have deliberately attacked Fulani Muslim civilians based on ethnoreligious identity and targeted days and sites of religious significance to commit abuses against Fulani Muslims, often driven by unfounded perceptions that Fulani Muslim civilians are inherently associated with Salafi jihadist beliefs and therefore legitimate targets for violence. In Christian majority areas, some governments have also contributed to xenophobic sentiment and passed policies that have disproportionately displaced Fulani Muslims from their land.

Anti-Fulani sentiment impacts religious freedom both directly through ethnoreligious targeting, human rights abuses based on perceived beliefs, and attacks on religious infrastructure, as well as indirectly by fueling militant Islamist groups and undermining global atrocity prevention mechanisms. Given these threats, policymakers and analysts who contribute to anti-Fulani Muslim rhetoric and sentiment will likely exacerbate religious freedom risks for Fulani Muslim civilians as well as other religious communities in west and central Africa.

Professional Staff

Danielle Ashbahian
Chief of Public Affairs

Keely Bakken
Supervisory Policy Analyst

Susan Bishai
Policy Analyst

Mollie Blum
Researcher

Elizabeth K. Cassidy
Director of Research and Policy

Mingzhi Chen
Senior Policy Analyst

Patrick Greenwalt
Policy Analyst

Sema Hasan
Policy Analyst

Roy Haskins
Director of Operations Management

Thomas Kraemer
Chief Administrative Officer

Veronica McCarthy
Public Affairs Associate

Hilary Miller
Researcher

Nora Morton
Operations Specialist

Dylan Schexnaydre
Researcher

Jamie Staley
Supervisory Policy Advisor

Zack Udin
Research Analyst

Madeline Velturo
Senior Policy Analyst

Scott Weiner
Supervisory Policy Analyst

Kurt Werthmuller
Supervisory Policy Analyst

Luke Wilson
Researcher

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