



**Mobilising Against  
Communitarisation:  
A Contributing  
Factor to Pastoral  
and Security Crises  
in the Sahel**

**The expansion of jihadism and the use of self-defence groups to deal with it have crystallised identity and ethnic tensions, exacerbating pre-existing conflicts and prejudices between communities.**

In the Sahel, pastoral communities have long been subject to culturalist prejudices, with livestock breeding seen as the flagship activity of certain ethnic groups. Now, the idea that these communities are instigators or accomplices of jihadist insurgencies is gaining ground in the minds of many Sahelian actors. Such clichés encourage exactions against the populations of these communities. In such a context, the use of self-defence groups, essentially made up of sedentary populations, aggravates the situation.

Thus, the fight against terrorism overlaps with local score-settling, most often related to land disputes. Within the pastoral populations themselves, old antagonisms arising from the competitive exploitation of natural resources are aggravated by the fact that some people seek to revive these antagonisms by joining armed groups. The violence committed leads to a chain of reprisals and reinforces the mechanics of joining armed groups.

### Identity-based tensions exacerbated by military responses

Herders are very often marginalised by the public policies of most countries in the region, wherein livestock mobility suffers from a negative image in discourses and texts. During the post-colonial construction of strong and secure states, public authorities encouraged the sedentarisation of mobile livestock. This has contributed to the distrust of pastoral communities and their distanced relationship with the state and its institutions. This climate of mutual distrust is conducive to the development of persistent stereotypes about herders and, particularly, transhumant pastoralists.

Herders are wrongly associated with violence in any form. Once suspected of fuelling the main banditry networks in the Sahel, they are now thought to be the spearhead of jihadist groups. This widespread perception among national and local authorities, as well as among sedentary communities, is tarnishing the relationship that these actors have with herders. Herders are less and less perceived through the prism of their socio-professional specificity, but rather through their ethnic origin and their supposed collusion with jihadists.

To date, responses to jihadist insurgencies have focused on military interventions by Sahelian states with the support of Western countries and the United Nations, on the one hand, and on the creation and/or strengthening of self-defence groups (Mali, Burkina Faso and even Niger recently), on the other. For the time being, these types of responses have not helped to calm the climate or restore confidence between the various involved parties.

In such a context, three major consequences linked to tensions and conflicts can be noted in the Sahel zone.

### **The crisis in pastoralism is aggravated by the heavy human and economic toll that herders are paying as a result of the security crisis**

Abuses against herders are affecting thousands of families in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. In recent years, injustices committed against herders — including the arrest of several thousands of them, often on the sole basis of their ethnicity — have left







their families in a precarious position. Summary executions have decimated many families, increasing the number of widows and orphans, while having profound psychological, security and economic consequences for the affected households. These acts have been coupled with predatory practices: the long-standing phenomenon of cattle rustling has expanded in recent years, increasing the vulnerability of pastoral communities.

Competition over access to natural resources has increased, including among herders. In all the pastoral areas of the Sahel, the roots of old conflicts over the use of resources are still alive, which maintains tensions between farmers and herders in most cases, but also between actors from the same community. In the exposed areas of central Mali, as in several localities in the Burkina Faso Sahel, self-defence groups are the armed wing of sedentary populations who, under the guise of the fight against terrorism, are forcibly challenging the land use or ownership rights of herder families, sometimes including agro-pastoralists.

In the Liptako-Gourma area, herders from different communities have chosen to join armed groups to secure their livestock or to settle disputes caused by competition over pastoral resources. The internal displacement of millions of people in the region — usually based on community affiliation — has disrupted the rights to use local resources, often to the benefit of the communities that remain.


Victims of abuse or their relatives are often driven into the arms of jihadist groups because they seek protection or sometimes revenge. Thus, joining jihadist groups is not always religiously

motivated. It is often a way of coping with various abuses, violence and injustices.

### **The increasing militarisation of the various communities gives the impression — largely false — of a frontal polarisation of the communities**

Given the many suspicions, accusations and violence to which herders are subjected, a large majority of them now feel stigmatised. This feeling aggravates the situation and pushes them to adopt an attitude of community withdrawal, which is conducive to the formation and development of armed groups in which identity now takes precedence: this is particularly the case at present within the Fulani community. This withdrawal in turn leads to the same attitude in other communities who feel they have to defend themselves against what appears to be a 'Fulani phenomenon'.

The image of polarised communities, largely amplified by social medias, tends to prevail to the detriment of the reality on the ground. However, this reality must be qualified. On one hand, no armed group is exclusively Fulani, and on the other hand, the majority of the Fulani community rejects membership in these groups. These groups are increasingly recruiting from all communities and claim to belong to the community of Muslims (Umma), which transcends ethnicity. Moreover, even if they are trapped in this polarisation, communities often try to escape the control of armed groups by trying to build peace among themselves.



## The urgent need to act in favour of positive and sustainable transformations

This cycle of violence and stigmatisation requires a strong commitment from national and regional authorities to foster a climate of understanding and social cohesion that protects the human rights of all communities and citizens. Together with them, the Billital Maroobè Network (RBM) is committed to taking strong action to: (i) end impunity and abuses; (ii) restore trust within pastoral communities and with other communities; (iii) promote a human security approach to counter-terrorism; and (iv) enhance the role and contribution of socio-professional organisations in creating more harmonious and flourishing societies.

In concrete terms, the commitment of the government, with the support of all stakeholders including the RBM, must be multi-faceted and address the following requirements:

### **End impunity and regain the confidence of pastoral communities.**

To this end, it is necessary to put in place efficient and operational mechanisms for prosecution and, above all, if necessary punish the perpetrators of blood crimes committed against civilian populations, regardless of their ethnic, religious or professional affiliation. The effective fight against impunity is an indispensable condition for security, on the one hand, and for reconciliation and living together among communities, on the other. It will limit the risk of repetition of these crimes and break the vicious circle of violence and revenge. The return of public social services (education, health, access to water) to pastoral areas, where possible, is also essential if States want to regain the confidence of the population.

### **Stop abuses perpetrated by self-defence groups.**

Depending on the context, achieving this goal requires different actions, all of which go beyond combating impunity. These may

include limiting the prerogatives of self-defence groups, strengthening their supervision, or revising their membership to make it more inclusive.

### **Refocus the fight against terrorism on human security.**

This change is necessary to improve the image of defence and security forces among herders. This implies prioritising the protection of civilian populations, particularly through the fight against banditry, which affects the daily lives of herders and threatens their livelihoods, especially through livestock theft.

### **Enhance the role of rural socio-professional organisations as key actors in dialogue and consultation.**

This will make it possible to place the region's farmers and pastoral communities at the heart of the initiatives promoted in terms of conflict prevention and management, particularly through the implementation of relevant solutions that meet the challenge of sustainably developing their activities and their territories.



This policy brief was prepared based on the results of the RBM study "Listening to herders in the Sahel and West Africa: What is the future for pastoralism in the face of insecurity and its impacts?" (September 2021)



## Keep in touch

Réseau Billital Maroobé – BP: 10 648 Niamey Niger – Tel: +227 20 74 11 99

<https://www.maroobe.com/>  @RBM  @RBM  @RBM  @RBM