

Article

Infiltration of Herdsmen Brand Terrorism in Bayelsa State, Nigeria: Security Implications for West Africa

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Abstract: The violent expansion of armed herdsmen into Bayelsa State, Nigeria, highlights the unchecked spread of herdsmen activities across the country, raising critical security concerns for West Africa. This study, framed by Le Bon's contagion theory, explores how emotional contagion and social amplification fuel the conflict. Using a qualitative approach, data were sourced from secondary materials such as books, journals, and government reports, and analyzed through content analysis. The results show that the ongoing crisis could lead to increased violence, displacement, and humanitarian issues, threatening regional stability. The study calls for enhanced regional security cooperation, addressing the root causes of the conflict, and promoting dialogue. It also identifies state complicity and weak governance as aggravating factors, recommending greater accountability from authorities to prevent further escalation.

Keywords: Contagion theory, Domino effect, Herdsmen, Security, Terrorism, West Africa region

1. Introduction

This paper builds upon the findings of Ifidi and Makbere's (2024) work, "the Infiltration of Herdsmen Brand Terror in Bayelsa, Nigeria: Assessing Government Policies" The research explores the strategies adopted by the Nigerian government in curbing the farmer-herder crisis. They conclude that "deep-seated corruption, weak institutions, ethnic intolerance, and negligence have impeded the implementation of necessary strategies, thereby exacerbating the crises". This is indeed worrisome as it draws attention to not only the failure of the Nigerian government in settling this conflict but also exposes the role played by the Nigerian government in intensifying the conflict. Moreover, the paper identifies self-help which is evident in both the farmers and herders as a catalyst in the conflict. This buttresses their argument that "without substantive results, a forceful and 'self-help' response from Bayelsans, a people accustomed to violence and home to several militant and cult sects, could further exacerbate the conflict, creating a breeding ground for regional insecurity" [1].

The evolution of the herdsmen-farmer conflict, while a seemingly recent development, is entrenched in West Africa's historical susceptibility to violence. Built on a myriad of challenges, ranging from colonial legacies, ethnic and religious tensions, economic disparities, and the proliferation of arms, the region has become a fertile ground for conflict as well as new security threats. Apart from Nigeria, which currently has the worst case of the herdsmen-farmers conflict in the region, Ghana, Mali, Burkina Faso, Senegal, and Côte d'Ivoire also share in this volatile crisis [2].

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Across West Africa, the conflict is embedded in the migratory traditions of herders (Fula people), combined with concerns such as climate change, population growth, and the rise of armed groups. Furthermore, as herders migrate in search of pasture and water for their cattle, they intrude on farmlands, causing clashes and sparking a cycle of violence, one, that threatens to destabilise entire nations and the West African region at large [3].

The infiltration of this brand of terror in Nigeria, particularly in Bayelsa State, exposes the uncontrolled spread of the conflict in the country. Bayelsa, a state in the Southern part of the country, several miles away from the conflict zone (Northern Nigeria) began to report and protest cases of herdsman violence in 2021. Shortly after, in March 2022, the first case of killings was officially recorded when 39-year-old Waadu Alfred, was found raped and macheted in the bush [4]. Since then, other acts of violence and fatalities have been recorded in the state bringing to light, the ineffectiveness of government strategies and policies in managing the crisis.

One may ask why the herdsman terror in Bayelsa possesses any implications for West Africa, considering it neither shares borders with any country nor has a high incident rate. In simple terms, Bayelsa's situation is the evidence (symbol) of the Nigerian government's failure in this crisis. First, it is necessary to reiterate that the infiltration of this conflict in Bayelsa State exposes its uncontrolled spread within the country as well as illuminates the boldness of members of the armed militia operating within the herder community. If this conflict is left unresolved, and with the ECOWAS-free movement of humans and livestock, it is only a matter of time before this violence is exported to unaffected countries.

Also, this conflict has the potential to ignite broader ethnic tensions as communities respond to the violence with their forms of self-defence, leading to cycles of retaliatory violence. If this materialises, it will have negative repercussions on the country's already dwindling economy—dependence on the state's oil reserves—which in turn directly affects countries like Niger, Togo, and Benin since they get petroleum products from Nigeria. Therefore, this paper analyses the security implications of the herdsman conflict, including the risk of spillover into neighbouring countries and the potential for increased regional instability [5].

In its simplest form, security describes the lack of danger and threat. Afolabi (2016, p. 1) describes it as "the presence of peace, safety, gladness, and the protection of human and physical resources." This means that security cannot be oversimplified to only mean the absence of danger and threats. This is because a secure environment should foster societal development and advancement. Afolabi goes on to say that security is defined as a "feeling of being safe from harm, fear, anxiety, oppression, danger, poverty, and the preservation of core values" (2016, p. 2). As a result, security can be perceived as the protection and preservation of individuals, communities, and states from threats that endanger their safety, dignity, and well-being.

Yet, due to the broad nature of security and the evolving international system, security cannot be defined by a single precise definition. This is because the complex and changing nature of the international system gives new meanings to concepts like security which border various aspects of society and human existence. In addition, in the field of international relations and politics, defining security is a challenging task, as various schools of thought perceive it differently [6]. Hence, conceptualising security requires a clear understanding of its dimensions, which include the traditionalist and the non-traditionalist dimensions.

The period up to the end of the Cold War in international politics and international relations is described as the traditionalist dimension. During this period, scholars perceived security from a realist standpoint, with the state at the centre [7]. Realism asserts that conflict is an inevitable part of international politics and that state governments must be prepared to protect their national interests. The anarchic nature of the international

system demands that for a state's survival, it must protect its territory from external threats, ensuring that security, is primarily, the responsibility of the state [8]. According to this self-help strategy, nations are driven to seek power, develop military weapons, and engage in a balance of power to safeguard their interests while discouraging any threats. Therefore, states give priority to their security and continuity and behave in manners that optimise their influence and safeguard their interests.

Subsequently, it can be deduced that traditionalists view security as safeguarding against dangers, external attacks, and intrusions. They are concerned with state sovereignty, national defence and territorial integrity while emphasising peace and conflict prevention through military measures like deterrence, non-offensive defence, etc [9]. According to Walt (1991), security is the study of military threat, usage, and control. Security examines factors that increase the likelihood of force, how force impacts people, nations, and society, and how states prevent or fight conflict [10].

The non-traditionalist dimension on the other hand argues that security goes beyond military capabilities to include other concerns such as environmental, economic, and human security [11]. In the aftermath of the Cold War and the September 11 attacks, security was reassessed, resulting in the acknowledgement of non-state risks such as terrorism and cyber warfare. As a result, security threats may arise from non-military areas like poverty, health crises, and political instability, affecting entities beyond the state [12]. Sola Ogunsanwo frames it the best as they argue that:

Security is more than military security or security from external attacks. For many inhabitants in developing countries, security is conceived as the basic level of the struggle for survival. Therefore, in order to provide an integrated African Security Assessment, the non-military dimension of security should be added. Henceforth, security as a concept should be applied in its broader sense to include economic security, social security, environmental security, food security, equality of life security and technological security [13].

Sola Ogunsanwo's position disputes traditional ways of conceptualising security, especially in the case of African countries. Security, as he puts it, involves something far deeper than just military power or defence from an aggressor. Security for many people is deeply tied up with the basic fight for survival. This point of view calls for the inclusion of a wider scope of security in development activities, for example, prevention of hunger, economic development, equity, environmental sustainability, and development of technology as opposed to military action [14].

On a wider scope, based on the postulations of Baldwin, 1997; Baylis, 2008; Booth, 1991; Buzan, 1983; Williams, 2008 as cited in Adhikari, 2024, the conceptualisation of security must contain these elements;

1. on the origin, meaning and impact, threats and dangers can transcend national borders.
2. threats are not necessarily borne out of state competition or balance of power as they can be political (e.g., terrorism) and economic (e.g., financial crises) in scope.
3. resource shortages and illegal migration lead to societal and political instability, thereby posing security risks.
4. natural hazards such as global warming are often the result of human interference, leading to dangerous and often irreversible consequences for countries and societies.
5. state strategies are often too weak to deal with the problem, necessitating regional and multilateral cooperation.
6. security at both the individual and international level is no longer defined just by the sovereignty or territorial integrity of the state, but also by the survival, well-being, and dignity of the people.

Thus, Barry Buzan (1991 as cited in Afolabi, 2016) resolved that security analysis and conceptualisation involves three levels: the individual level which focuses on personal safety and well-being, the national level which centres on state security and sovereignty, and the international level which addresses global security challenges and collaboration.

Theoretical Framework:

Contagion Theory: Grounded in the fields of sociology and social psychology, contagion theory explains how, in a 'crowd' or 'collective', emotions or ideas can spread rapidly, just like a contagious disease. In his seminal work, "The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind," published in 1895, French psychologist Gustave Le Bon laid the groundwork for the contagion theory. Other scholars associated with its development are sociologists Robert E. Park and Herbert Blumer. The theory suggests that people tend to lose their rational thinking when they become part of a crowd, as they can "catch" emotions or behaviours from others through various forms of social interaction and influence [15].

The theory of contagion posits that social contagion arises because of various mechanisms, including imitation, mimicry, suggestion, emotional contagion, and conformity. For instance, individuals might assimilate the behaviours or emotions of their peers due to societal pressures, an inclination for approval, or unconscious mimicry. In the context of social movements or riots, contagion theory suggests that emotions and behaviours can spread rapidly among participants, leading to collective action, and sometimes escalating into violence or unrest [16].

The contagion theory offers a persuasive structure to grasp how the herdsmen crisis in Nigeria affects other West African countries. By studying the mechanisms of social contagion, we can spot several elements that promote the spread of violence and instability in the area. The infiltration of the herdsmen brand of terror in Bayelsa is unarguably a ripple effect of the crisis in other states, particularly from the Northern states. Several possibilities in this situation exist.

First, the crisis in these states has displaced citizens as well as resulted in the breakdown of social order, creating an environment of fear and anxiety, which in turn has facilitated the operations of armed groups within the herder community. This emotional contagion creates an atmosphere of fear and doubt. This aids the armed groups in the recruitment of new members. As the feelings of fear, anxiety, anger, and frustration grow stronger, members lose their rational thinking which invariably leads to collective action. The collective action, in this situation has led to the destabilisation of communities far beyond the conflict zone [17].

In addition, the perceived complicity of the government in this conflict – whether through inaction or direct support for certain groups – has further fuelled the spread of violence. When communities lose faith in the ability of their governments to protect their interest, they may turn to armed groups (conformity) for security, thereby perpetuating the cycle of violence – the reality of the Nigerian farmer-herder conflict. Also, the one-sided representation of the entire herder community in the media may cause others within the group to empathise with the perpetrators of the violence. The effects are behaviours of mimicry, imitation and conformity.

2. Materials and Methods

This study utilized content analysis to examine secondary data from credible sources such as journal databases, reports, and textbooks, with the goal of identifying trends and patterns within the West African region. Graziano and Raulin (2007) describe content analysis as a systematic approach to evaluating qualitative data, including text, audio, video, and images. It involves an objective, structured review of materials to uncover

patterns, themes, or trends. In this context, key concepts, causes, and implications of the herdsman-farmer conflict were analyzed to gain a comprehensive understanding of its dynamics and assess its potential to spread into neighboring West African countries.

3. Results and Discussion

Fulani Herders: Terrorist or Victims?

The Fulani herders have garnered significant attention due to their involvement in violent conflicts across Nigeria and the broader African continent. Brottem (2021) reports that since the violence surged in 2010, there have been over 15,000 recorded deaths. In 2015, the Global Terrorism Index ranked them as the fourth deadliest terrorist group globally. Additionally, Bazan stated that:

the Global Terrorism Index 2019 published by the Institute for Economics and Peace, indicates that the primary driver of the increase in terrorism in Sub-Saharan Africa was a rise in terrorist activity in Nigeria attributed, not to Boko Haram, ISWAP, or Ansaru, but to Fulani extremists: in 2018, Fulani extremists were responsible for the majority of terror-related deaths in Nigeria (1,158 fatalities), with an increase by 261 and 308 per cent, respectively, from the prior year. Most Fulani attacks were armed assaults (200 out of 297 attacks) against civilians (84 per cent of the attacks).

Bazan's statement is insightful as it clearly shows the severity of herdsman's actions in comparison to the actions of other established terrorist organisations in the country. Additionally, it highlights how terrorist activities in Nigeria impact the Sub-Saharan region. Despite the data above, scholars, policymakers, elected officials, and members of the Fulani community have argued that the label 'terrorist' is an extreme representation of the group [18].

Moritz and Mbacke (2022) in their paper, "The Danger of a Single Story about Fulani Pastoralists," argue that the media, reputable government agencies (the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom), and academic publications, despite attempting to be fair, express a single narrative about Fulani pastoralists, labelling them as violent terrorists as well as linking them to jihadist groups. They propose that this oversimplified portrayal of a distinct group will worsen regional insecurity rather than promote peace and stability. According to them, "there is a real risk that pastoralists will become "collateral damage" in the war on terror because of stereotypes about Fulani pastoralists" [19].

Likewise, Kendrick and Sanders, in their 2024 publication, "Don't Call It Farmer-Herder Conflict," state that "beneath this seemingly innocuous label lies a complex web of assumptions, ethnic implications, and obscured dynamics" [20]. They argue that since herders are mostly people of the Fulbe tribe (Fulani, Fula, and Peul), it is assumed that the conflict is tribal, involving all members of this group. This narrative is false, as not all members of the Fulbe group are involved in this conflict. The consequences of such narratives are governments' and individuals' marginalisation, mistrust, and maltreatment of the group. Leif Brottem sums it up the best in his 2021 brief, "The Growing Complexity of Farmer-Herder Conflict in West and Central Africa." He states that:

Ironically, most livestock herders have no association with extremist groups and are often victims of their actions. Nonetheless, once the genie of intercommunal conflict is unleashed, passions take over. Attacks become deadlier, expulsions more frequent, and reprisals extend to communities not immediately linked to the initial flashpoint. The stakes quickly shift from questions over resource access or local politics to deep-seated notions of identity. Entire communities are labelled bandits, insurgents, or terrorists [21].

Indeed, this statement is representative of the conflict, as the unwarranted killing of innocent members of the Fulani tribe usually results in retaliatory attacks by other members of the group in countries like Nigeria. One of the many examples is the 2017

Bachama attack. This attack in Adamawa State, Nigeria, was a reprisal for the killing of more than 55 Fulani by supposed 'Bachama youth militias in Numan'.

Ifidi and Makbere (2024) state that it is necessary to acknowledge the dual nature of the conflict as both the farmers and herders have experienced great loss. Herders are victims of this conflict just like their farmer counterparts. The obvious loss of grazing routes, the desertification of their communities, cattle rustling, and banditry coupled with the negative label of 'terrorist' have put them at a loss.

Notwithstanding, while this paper acknowledges the plight of the Fulbe, it is essential to recognise the considerable evidence of violence perpetrated by armed militia groups within the Fulani community. Okorie (2016) reported that:

...in May, this year, Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria said openly that the reason for killing over 1,000 people in Benue state was the killing of over 800 cattle by Tiv youths. In other words, Miyetti Allah boldly told Nigerians that its members (herdsmen) killed over 1,000 Agatu people in Benue state because their cows were killed [22].

MACBAN, an organisation that represents cattle breeders (herders), openly expressed this dreadful act with claims that the failure of the Nigerian government and weak institutions have prompted them to embark on self-help ventures. Also, the data presented by Brottem (2021) and Bazán (2020) demonstrates their involvement in violent conflicts and terrorist activities. As Ifidi and Makbere (2024) suggest, the violent actions of certain Fulani herders, whether motivated by self-defence or retaliation, can instil fear and intimidation among local communities. This justifies labelling such activities as acts of terror, particularly when they involve deliberate violence against civilians and disregard for human life [23].

The Herdsmen Phenomenon in Bayelsa State, Nigeria

The recent infiltration of herdsmen brand terror in Bayelsa, a state situated in the southern part of Nigeria, is another new and concerning phase of development in the security landscape of the region. Bayelsa State strategically sits at the confluence of the Niger River and the Atlantic Ocean in Nigeria's Niger Delta region [24]. Its swamps, mangroves, and rivers make up its coastal landscape, and although this has favoured militant and pirate activities, they create a natural obstacle for herders moving from northern Nigeria. This geography helps to reduce the impact of the farmer-herder conflict on the state. Yet, the state's abundant oil and gas deposits have drawn more people to the area, which combined with its yearly floods, has led to more competition for resources and land.

Herdsmen, usually nomadic people who take to cattle rearing, have been involved in acts of violence and terror across various parts of the country. This conflict between herdsmen and local farming communities, although centuries old, has risen, taking an undeniable violent turn, constituting widespread displacement, loss of lives, and property damage. A major driver of this conflict is the competition for land and water, different research shows (Brottem, 2021; Ifidi & Makbere, 2024; Oghuvbu & Oghuvbu, 2020; and the International Crisis Group, 2017 & 2018). In Nigeria's Middle Belt region, where farmers and herders actively compete for diminishing resources, increased desertification and climate change have recently made struggles over these resources worse. The conflict also has strong ethnic and religious tones: most herders are Muslim Fulani, while farmers are predominantly Christian. This has only widened mistrust and hostility, making reconciliation more difficult [25].

The Fulani tribe in Nigeria dominates the herder occupation, further contributing to their migration and, thus, increased cases of conflict between them and farmers. This transhumance activity means that herdsmen have moved south of Nigeria (to states like Bayelsa), transferring the conflict to these areas (International Crisis Group, 2017). This incomprehensible relationship between herders and farmers emanates from the jihadist

intentions of Usman Dan Fodio in the 1800s, which has bred religious sentiments and distrust among the Fulani and other non-Muslim peoples of the middle belt and southern Nigeria [26].

Furthermore, security issues and self-help problems have contributed to the present state of the herdsmen-farmers conflict, with cattle rustling and rural banditry making herdsmen take to arms to defend themselves and their cattle. The farmer and herder alike have a deep-seated resentment against what they perceive as blatant government indifference to their pleas, that is, either bringing the perpetrators of the crime before the courts or preventing further attacks.

One of the steps taken by the Bayelsa State government is the move to ban open grazing in the state, as this has been said to be one of the bases for farmers and herdsmen conflict. In 2021, the governor, Senator Douye Diri, granted executive affirmation of the 'Livestock Breeding, Rearing, and Marketing Regulation Law'. In addition, the government formed a task force charged to investigate and prosecute those involved in violence. All these measures have not solved the problem but rather, intensified it. Not only have there been reports of continued violence in some parts of the state, but the pattern in Table 1 below shows that the violence escalated to killings in 2022 after the implementation of the ban.

Table 1. Some Recorded Cases of Herdsmen Terror in Bayelsa State

S/N	DATE	LOCATION	DEATHS	INCIDENTS
1.	Feb. 2021	Edepie Roundabout, Yenagoa		Bayelsa women protest herdsmen's invasion of farmlands (Oyadongha, Enogholase, & Aliu, 2021).
2.	Feb. 19, 2021	Otuoke community, Ogbia LGA		Mr Goodhead Nation 58 years old and his son Samuel Nation 18 years old were attacked by an unidentified Fulani herder, who used a machete to inflict severe injuries on the head and fingers of Samuel nation after accusing them of stealing his cattle (Igoni, 2021).
3.	Mar. 2022	Opuma Community, Ogbia LGA	1	Blockade of the Nembe/Ogbia Road. Aggrieved youths protested the killing of a 39-year-old woman, Waadu Alfred in the bush. She was tied to a stake, raped and had lethal machete cuts on her body (Ogunde, 2022).
4.	Mar. 14, 2023	Zarama	1	Blockade of the East/West Road at Zarama protesting the beheading of 49-year-old Alexander Diri while in the forest (Igoni, 2023).
5.	Mar. 20, 2023	Okordia, Yenagoa	2	The murder of 49-year-old Chief Bob Wilson and Anozia Alex. Nyekefamo Jimiro hospitalised due to gunshot wounds. Reason: the deceased stopped herdsmen from grazing on farmlands and fishing camps (Igoni, 2023).
6.	Jan. 31, 2024	Zarama		Zarama women blockaded the East/West Road protesting against herdsmen's disruptive activities on their farmlands.

Source: Ifidi and Makbere (2024)

Most of the critics consider the response to this crisis by the state and Nigerian governments inefficient. The study by Ifidi and Makbere (2024) shows a pattern of belated intervention and actual or lack of tackling the root causes of the violence. Several factors contribute to this phenomenon; however, weak government institutions and corruption on the part of the government continue to feed the conflict [27].

Trends of Conflict in West Africa

The West African story is paradoxical: It is a region blessed with natural wealth yet is home to four—Sierra Leone, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger—of the top ten poorest

countries in the world (UNDP, 2024). Several factors, such as colonial legacies, weak governance and institutions, corruption, neocolonialism, etc., have contributed to this paradox. These factors, together, have turned the region into a hotspot for violence. The West African region is home to sixteen (16) countries, as seen in Figure 1. These are Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, The Gambia, and Togo (United Nations Statistics Division, 2012).



Figure 1. Map of West Africa

Source:(Marc et al., 2015)

Except for Cabo Verde, all other fifteen countries have experienced several forms of state and non-state violence since their independence. From civil wars (Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Liberia, Guinea-Bissau, and Ivory Coast), coups d'état (Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, The Gambia, and Togo), to various forms of ethnic clashes and insurgencies (Boko Haram, Islamist insurgency, Maghreb insurgency, Al Qaeda Jihadist, etc.), the region has seen it all [28].

Table 2. Some selected conflicts in West Africa

Name of conflict	Country	Years	Nature of conflict	Estimated fatalities
Guinea-Bissau War of Independence	Guinea-Bissau	1962–74	Insurgency	15,000
Biafran War	Nigeria	1967–70	Civil war	500,000–2,000,000
Casamance conflict	Senegal	1982–present	Insurgency	5,000
Mauritania and Senegal War	Mauritania and Senegal	1989–90	International conflict	500
First Liberian Civil War	Liberia	1989–96	Civil war	100,000–220,000
Tuareg rebellion	Mali	1990–95	Insurgency	—
Sierra Leone Civil War	Sierra Leone	1991–2002	Civil war	50,000–300,000
Guinea-Bissau Civil War	Guinea-Bissau	1998–99	Civil war	655
Second Liberian Civil War	Liberia	1999–2003	Civil war	150,000–300,000
First Ivorian Civil War	Côte d'Ivoire	2002–07	Civil war	3,000
Niger Delta conflict	Nigeria	2004–09	Insurgency	2,500–4,000
Tuareg rebellion	Niger	2007–09	Insurgency	270–400
Boko Haram uprising	Nigeria	2009–present	Insurgency	11,200
Second Ivorian Civil War	Côte d'Ivoire	2010–11	Civil war	3,000
Conflict in Northern Mali	Mali	2012–13	Insurgency	1,270

Over the last decade, the region has experienced a shift from state-centric violence (coups) to non-state violence that characterise the postcolonial and post-Cold War conceptualisation of security. The increased presence of non-state actors in conflicts in West Africa has posed new challenges for regional stability and security. The rise of terrorist groups like Boko Haram (late 2000s till date), Al-Qaeda Jihadist, and Islamist insurgents from the 2010s till date has further complicated the security landscape in the region. These groups have exploited weak governance, porous borders, and ethnic and religious tensions to expand their influence and carry out attacks. The ongoing conflict in the Sahel region, particularly in countries like Mali and Burkina Faso, highlights the complex nature of security threats in West Africa. The persistent exponential increase in community-based militias has reactivated the pre-existing conflicts in countries like Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, resulting in coups d'état.



Figure 2. Spread of Armed Conflicts in West Africa

Source: (Davis, 2021)

The figure highlights the intensity of armed conflicts in the region. Nigeria, Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso reflect a high rate of high-intensity armed conflicts that is related to the confluence of Islamist terrorist groups (IS, ISWAP, Boko Haram and Al Qaeda) and armed militia within the herder community.

Furthermore, the region has seen the rise of violent confrontations between farmers and herders. The figure 2 below shows the exponential increase in violence from 2010 to 2021. Nigeria shows the worst case, with some spillover into Benin. Burkina Faso and Mali also experienced a marginal increase in violent events from 2018 to 2021. Lastly, Ghana, although incomparable to the others, has also shown an increase in violence.

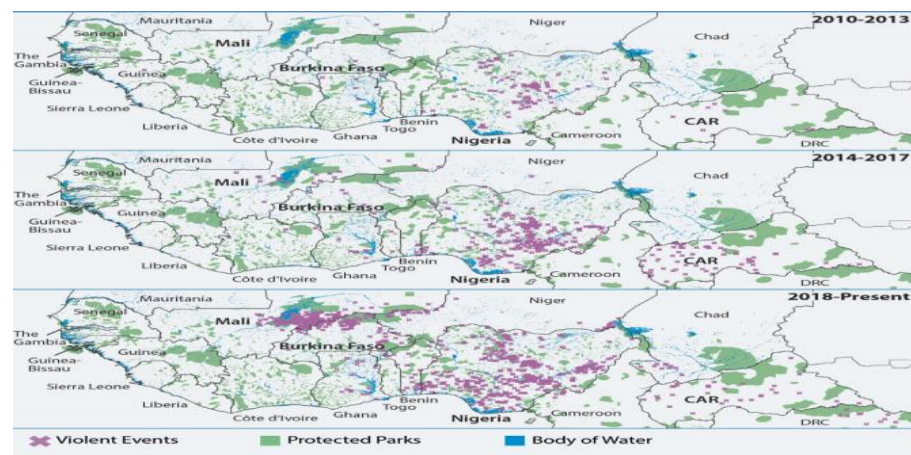


Figure 3. Farmer-Herder Clash in West Africa (2010 – 2021)

Source: (Brottem, 2021)

The Domino Effect: Security Implications for West Africa

The infiltration of herdsmen-related violence into Bayelsa is nothing but a symptom of the broad domino effect of conflicts in West Africa. This is an attestation from the history of the region's conflicts shown in Table 2, where a conflict in one country spills into another. A particularly good illustration of how insecurity spreads to other nations and gives rise to threats like ISWAP and ISIS-WA is the crisis that Boko Haram has caused. In the same vein, civil wars and the incessant coup d'etat in the post-colonial period between the 1960s and 1990s solidified this contagion argument. The resurgence of coups on the African stage further supports this, as within the fleeting period from 2020, the region has seen about six successful coups in the countries of Niger, Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso. From this backdrop, political instability in one country can have far-reaching consequences for neighbouring nations and the region.

The herdsmen crisis in Nigeria has profound implications for regional destabilisation in West Africa. The ongoing violence has affected not only the immediate conflict zones but has also contributed to widespread displacement and breakdown of social order. As a result of these activities by armed violent herdsmen, communities are often displaced; hence, mass displacement across borders occurs. This mostly further strains the limited resources within the neighbouring countries. This displacement disrupts agricultural production, trade, and other economic activities, weakening the social fabric that holds these communities together. Beyond this, infrastructural damage, including damage to roads, schools, and healthcare facilities, undermines development and sows the seeds of long-term instability. The illustration below highlights the reality of conflict-related displacement. In West Africa, Nigeria has the highest number of displaced people, followed by Burkina Faso. These figures will increase if the governments continue in their negligent and corrupt ways.

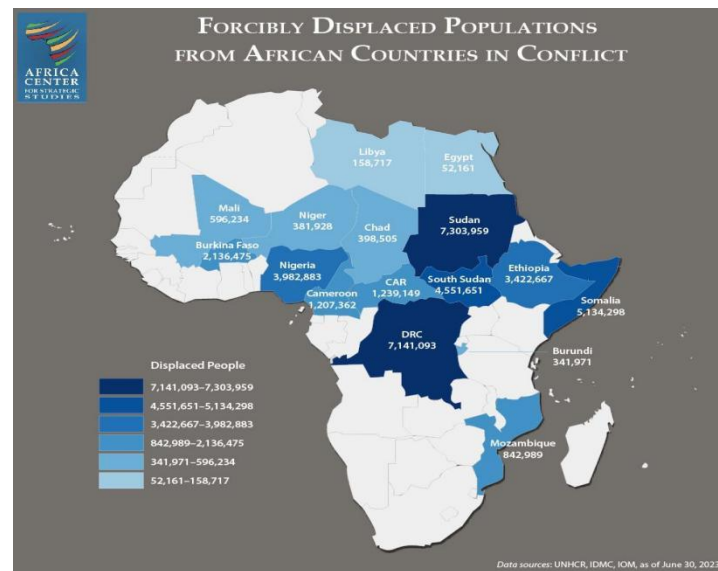


Figure 4. Forcibly Displaced Populations from African Countries in Conflict

Source: (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2023)

As violence transcends borders, ethnic and religious tensions latent in countries like Niger with similar socio-political dynamics as Nigeria can easily be provoked. The combination of the same grievances among ethnic groups in these countries with the rivalry for insufficient resources such as land and water create fertile ground for

the escalation of conflict. This could spiral upwards into local violence, much like in the herdsmen crisis of Nigeria, and may then make what was essentially a national problem a regional conflict. Cross-border violence can easily flare up age-old tensions where ethnic and religious divides have been perpetual sources of conflict. The region is more at risk of this occurring considering weak state institutions are unable to control such tensions, leaving the area open to ongoing violence.

Moreover, the increase in crime and terrorism within West Africa's porous borders is a direct cause of this spillover. The fact that jihadists and criminal organisations have no trouble travelling across borders makes this situation even worse. The instability propagated through the herdsmen crisis breeds a secure environment in which criminal elements like arms traffickers, smugglers, and human traffickers operate with impunity (Brottem, 2021). More dangerously, terrorist organisations like Boko Haram and ISIS-West Africa often exploit such conflicts to expand their influence, recruiting from disenfranchised populations affected by the violence. The herdsmen crisis, therefore, only acts to catalyse terrorism in these regions as extremist groups capitalise on weak borders and governance to gain ground in an already tumultuous region.

The humanitarian crisis resulting from the herdsmen conflict is another twist in the security challenges facing West Africa. This violence, as seen in the figure above, has forced the displacement of millions of people, causing widespread devastation through hunger, lack of shelter, and extremely limited health access. In the end, some of these internally displaced persons find themselves in refugee camps or makeshift settlements, most with very unpleasant living conditions and with humanitarian support stretched thin.

This strain on resources also creates tensions between the host communities and the displaced populations, further worsening social divisions. The ability of national governments and international organisations to respond in such situations often becomes completely overwhelmed, with severe humanitarian consequences. The sustained violence has disrupted farming and trade, worsening food insecurity, and has often created conditions just ripe for famine. Besides, such large-scale displacement adversely affects local governance structures, making it difficult to deliver essential services and restore order.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the uncontrolled herdsmen crisis in Nigeria presents significant security risks for the West African region, including regional destabilization, heightened ethnic and religious tensions, increased criminal and terrorist activities, and a deepening humanitarian crisis. Le Bon's contagion theory provides a framework for understanding how such violence can spread across borders, amplifying instability. The findings underscore the urgent need for coordinated regional efforts to address both the immediate violence and the deeper socio-political drivers of the conflict, such as corruption and weak governance structures. Effective policy responses must be impartial and target the underlying causes to prevent further escalation. Future research should explore specific mechanisms for fostering regional cooperation and assess the long-term impact of governance reforms on mitigating conflict across West Africa.

Policy Recommendations

1. **Deepen Regional Security Cooperation:** One of the key ways in which the spread of violence within the region can be tackled is through deepening security cooperation between West African countries. Given the porous borders across which armed groups and criminal elements move, regional organisations like the ECOWAS should invest in joint patrols and intelligence sharing. All sixteen countries need to work in concert to restrain the flow of small arms and light

weapons, which feed the conflicts and allow armed groups with impunity to move freely across borders. T

2. Address Root Causes of Conflict: National governments should partner with regional organisations in increasing investment in conflict-sensitive agricultural practices and livelihood programs, which reduce competition over land and water. Besides, inter-ethnic dialogue and frameworks of peaceful dispute resolution can make sure these local grievances do not evolve into violence.
3. Improve Governance and Weak Institutions: Poor governance and perceived state involvement in conflicts breeds distrust of government institutions and compel communities to seek security from armed groups. West African governments need to make up for lost governance time with increased transparency and adherence to the rule of law to regain trust with their populations. This would involve clamping down on corruption, enhancing accountability, and ensuring that state actors do not appear to side with any party to a conflict.
4. Establish a Coordinated Humanitarian Response: The humanitarian crisis brought on by the herdsman conflict requires a coordinated regional and international response. Governments, in tandem with international aid organisations, should ensure that adequate assistance to the displaced people in terms of food, shelter, health care, and education is accorded. Also, humanitarian aid should be combined with long-term development programs geared toward the rehabilitation and reintegration of those displaced persons into their respective societies.
5. Counter Extremism and Radicalisation: Governments and regional bodies must now work out comprehensive programs aimed at countering violent extremism due to the growing threat of crime and terrorism in the region. That means dealing with the causes of radicalisation: economic deprivation, political exclusion, and social alienation. Governments should promote more education and vocational training, particularly among the young.

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