

COMMENTARY

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The danger of a single story about Fulani pastoralists



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Abstract

In the last few years, an increasing number of articles, reports, websites, and official documents have been published with narratives that link Fulani pastoralists to insecurity in West and Central Africa. In this article, we critically analyse one of these documents: a legislation factsheet from the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) titled *Factsheet: Fulani Communities* that was published in September 2020. We focus our analysis on this factsheet because it is an official document from a US government entity that aims to inform policy-makers, it contains problematic narratives that are emblematic of larger discourses about Fulani pastoralists, and it links to a number of questionable sources. We critically reviewed the narratives in the factsheet and the linked sources. We found that even though it aims to be fair and balanced, the factsheet is biased against Fulani pastoralists, primarily because it links one single group to violence and religious tension and its use of problematic sources. In conclusion, we find that the factsheet perpetuates a single story or stereotype about Fulani pastoralists and thereby fuels existing inflammatory rhetoric that will likely increase insecurity, rather than contribute to peace and stability in the region.

Keywords: Stereotypes, US Government, Violence and religious tension, West and Central Africa

Introduction

In the last few years, an increasing number of articles, reports, websites, and government documents have been published that examine the role of pastoralists in violence and insecurity across West and Central Africa (e.g. Brottem and McDonnell 2020; Krätli and Toulmin 2020; International Crisis Group 2017; Kwaja and Smith 2020; Velturo, 2020a, b; Benjaminsen and Ba 2018; Nagarajan 2019; Chauvin et al. 2020; Institute for Economics & Peace 2020). While many of these reports caution that the link between pastoralism and violence is neither clear nor straightforward and that the situation is complex (e.g. Brottem 2021; Krätli and Toulmin 2020), there are many publications that promote narratives that hold pastoralists responsible for violence, insecurity, terrorism, and even genocide (e.g. The Economist 2017; Clarke 2020). Researchers have warned about these problematic

narratives because there is the risk that each conflict involving pastoralists will be treated as a terrorist or genocidal act (e.g. Rangé et al., 2020; Igwebuike 2020; Jobbins and McDonnell 2021; Bukari and Schareika 2015).

Here we present the results of a critical analysis of one of these publications: *USCIRF Legislation Factsheet: Religious Tensions and Fulani Communities*. The factsheet was published in September 2020 by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). While there are many similar documents published by government agencies, international organizations, and civic organizations (e.g. United Nations 2020; Kwaja and Smith 2020; Nagarajan 2019; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2017), we focus our analysis on this factsheet for three reasons. First, it is an official document from a US government entity that aims to inform politicians and policy-makers and thus carries considerable weight because it is used to shape US policy in the region. Second, it contains a number of problematic narratives that are emblematic of the larger discourse on Fulani pastoralists. Third, the factsheet draws upon

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many questionable sources and thereby propagates inflammatory narratives.

We critically reviewed the narratives in the factsheet and the sources that were linked to in the factsheet. In addition, we examined the production of the factsheet and the larger context in which these narratives are produced and circulated. We found that even though it aims to be fair and balanced, the factsheet is biased against Fulani pastoralists, which is evidenced in the text and in the use of sources with a religious bias against Fulani pastoralists. One of the main problems is that the factsheet reinforces stereotypes about Fulani pastoralists as violent jihadists targeting Christians. These stereotypes circulate in fundamentalist Christian media in the USA, Nigeria, and elsewhere. These stereotypes do not contribute to any meaningful solution of the violence and insecurity in West and Central Africa. On the contrary, the propagation of stereotypes likely only fans the flames of violent conflict in the region and does not advance the protection of religious freedom. The overarching problem of the factsheet is that it singles out one group and links it to violence and insecurity in the region.

Biographical background

Early in my career, I (Mark Moritz) wrote three papers about herder-farmer conflicts across West Africa (Moritz, 2006a, b, 2010). They are among my most-cited papers (even though I have written many other papers about other aspects of pastoral systems). I have since shifted my research focus on the management of common-pool resources, ecology of infectious diseases, and coupled human and natural systems. Because the topic of herder-farmer conflicts is at the intersection of several concerns—environmental security, rangeland degradation, climate change, religious conflict, and the war on terror—it draws considerable attention from researchers other than social anthropologists, human geographers, and rangeland ecologists who have traditionally studied pastoral systems. The number of papers, reports, and websites devoted to herder-farmer conflicts—both scholarly and non-scholarly—has increased in the last decades, and because of my early papers on herder-farmer conflicts, I am often asked to review papers on the topic. However, many of these papers are not scientifically rigorous and highly prejudiced against Fulani pastoralists, and therefore, I generally decline to review these papers. In the last few years, I have avoided writing about the topic of insecurity unless it directly affected the pastoralists that I was working with in the Far North Region of Cameroon (Moritz and Scholte 2011; Moritz et al. 2019; Pennaz et al. 2018).

So why am I going back to this topic and writing this commentary? There are a few reasons. First, I was

invited to participate in an informational meeting titled *Transhumant Pastoralism in Africa's Sudano-Sahel: Emerging Challenges for Human and Wildlife Security*, organized by the US Fish and Wildlife Service in October 2017 (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2017). At this meeting, narratives that linked pastoralists to insecurity as well as critical analyses of these narratives both circulated. This marked the start of an ongoing informal dialogue with policy analysts, activists, and scholars working on this topic. Second, while I no longer actively study herder-farmer conflicts, I do follow activists, researchers, journalists, and policy-makers on Twitter who are engaged in these topics to keep up to date on the latest developments, particularly in the Chad Basin where I have conducted most of my research. In October 2020, I came across a tweet about a factsheet from the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) titled *Fulani Communities* and when I read it, I was struck by how the factsheet aims to be fair and balanced, while at the same time seemed to perpetuate stereotypes about Fulani pastoralists. I was troubled when I followed some of the hyperlinks in the factsheet and discovered that many sources were highly biased, misleading, and inflammatory. While there are counter-narratives that explain that the situation is more complex, these do not seem to gain as much traction as the simple narratives that propagate existing stereotypes about Fulani pastoralists.

One of the problems of writing a critical commentary that highlights the danger of a single story is that it brings more attention to these same problematic narratives. That, however, is a risk we are willing to take because it is important to call out the problems and dangers of these narratives, especially when it concerns US government policies towards Africa.

Methods

I started writing our paper as a commentary about the factsheet and the danger of a single story about Fulani pastoralists, but then realized that if I am making claims about the sources, these claims should be supported by evidence, and therefore, I conducted a systematic analysis of the hyperlinked sources in the factsheet with the help of Mamediarra Mbacke, an undergraduate student in anthropology at the Ohio State University. As a result, the paper is somewhat of a hybrid between a commentary and a research report. Here we briefly describe how we conducted our analyses of the factsheet and the hyperlinked sources.

In our analysis of the USCIRF factsheet on *Fulani Communities* (USCIRF, 2020a, b, c), we focus on a few major themes rather than a detailed discourse analysis of all the statements and arguments in the factsheet. Presenting a detailed discourse analysis would take the

length of a book manuscript. For example, the first sentence of the factsheet, “The Fulani are one of the largest ethnic groups in the world” (underlined text indicates hyperlink in the original), establishes that *the* Fulani are one ethnic group, rather than a highly diverse set of cultural communities. Moreover, the underlined text in that first sentence links to an article on BBC News that does not support the claim that Fulani are one of the largest ethnic groups. Rather, it states that Fulani “are *believed* to be the *largest semi-nomadic group* in the world and are found across West and Central Africa - from Senegal to the Central African Republic” (emphasis added).

In addition to reviewing the arguments of the factsheet, we examined all 68 sources that were used to support the arguments, i.e. sources that the factsheet provided hyperlinks to. We analysed the quality and reliability of the sources and whether the sources supported the arguments in the factsheet. We coded the following for each source: (1) the type of source, i.e. whether it was a news article, blog post, or scholarly article; (2) the country of origin of the source; and (3) the nature of the evidence, i.e. whether it was based on empirical data, anecdotes, or secondary sources. In addition, we assessed whether the source was reliable, which involved a more subjective judgement, in which we considered whether the claims were reasonable, outrageous, or simply too sweeping; whether claims were supported by any evidence; and what evidence was used and cited to support the claims.

While we systematically reviewed the hyperlinked sources, we used mostly qualitative analysis, not quantitative analysis. For example, to highlight the problem of the sources, we closely analyse a number of problematic sources, but we do not provide statistics for the overall number of problematic sources. One of the main reasons for focusing on qualitative analysis is that it was very difficult to assess the reliability and trustworthiness of all the sources. To be clear, we assessed most of the sources as reliable and trustworthy, but ideally, for a document that aims to inform policy-makers, all sources are reliable and trustworthy, but that is clearly not the case.

Here is one example of how we analysed the sources. The second sentence of the factsheet reads as follows, “Predominantly Muslim and historically associated with cattle herding and livestock rearing, Fulani communities stretch across the African continent from Senegal to Sudan” (1). The underlined text is a hyperlink to an article in the CTC Sentinel, a magazine published by the Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) at West Point, titled *The Fulani Crisis: Communal Violence and Radicalization in the Sahel*, written by Andrew McGregor, an independent consultant who specializes in security issues in the Islamic world (source 59). McGregor’s article states that Fulani communities “range across 21 African countries from Mauritania’s Atlantic coast to the Red Sea coast in

Sudan”. However, the article is primarily about violence in Nigeria. It is unclear why this particular article is used to support the claim that Fulani can be found across Africa. Moreover, McGregor’s article makes several sweeping, unfounded, and inflammatory statements. To give just one example, in the conclusion section, the author writes, “For Islamist militants, the Fulani represent an enormous potential pool of armed, highly mobile fighters with intimate knowledge of local terrain and routes” (39), which turns all Fulani pastoralists who graze their animals in the bush into potential jihadists. The article is highly biased, and the sources that McGregor uses are also biased and include newspaper articles from Nigeria, with titles like *The menace of Fulani herdsman*, *Fulani menace will be fixed permanently*, and *Military begins plans to tackle Fulani herdsman menace*. Not all the sources are as biased and problematic as the piece by McGregor, but this source is not an outlier in terms of its bias against Fulani pastoralists.

Problems with the USCIRF factsheet

The US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) describes itself as “an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on threats to 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” (USCIRF, 2020a). The commission has been accused of focusing on the prosecution of Christians, rather than followers of other religions (Hackett, Silk, and Hoover 2000). Most of the commissioners are affiliated with Christian organizations and one was president of the Family Research Council, a fundamentalist protestant group.

The *USCIRF Legislation Factsheet: Religious Tensions and Fulani Communities in West and Central Africa* was released on October 01, 2020. The main argument of the factsheet is the following:

The following factsheet explores the role that religion plays in escalating violence committed by and against Fulani communities in west and central Africa. Although the extent to which religious ideology plays a direct role in driving violence involving Fulani communities remains a subject of debate, the trend of increasing violence by and against Fulani groups is clearly aggravating religious tensions (USCIRF, 2020a :1).

While the statement above notes that Fulani are both committing violence *and* are victims of violence and that the role of religious ideology in the violence remains a subject of debate, the take-away message is that Fulani

communities are linked to religious violence. In fact, the simple production of a factsheet on Fulani communities makes that case. This is also clear by how the factsheet is interpreted and retweeted, e.g. “USCIRF report examines role religion plays in Fulani attacks on Christians” (October 3, 2020)¹. In other words, while the factsheet aims to give a fair and balanced assessment and explains that the insecurity in the region is complex and multi-faceted and that religion’s role is a matter of debate (USCIRF, 2020a :4), there are major problems with the ways it represents Fulani and the violence and insecurity in West and Central Africa. Here we want to highlight five main problems of the factsheet: (1) focus on one group, (2) linking Fulani religious identity to centuries-old jihads, (3) linking Fulani to contemporary jihadist groups, (4) the way it portrays Fulani as perpetrators of violence, and (5) the use of hyperlinks to questionable sources.

First, the factsheet relies on a problematic and grossly oversimplified assumption that the Fulani are a single, cohesive ethnic group, rather than highly diverse cultural-linguistic communities that can be found across West and Central Africa, as well as the Horn of Africa. While the factsheet notes the diversity, the section *Who are the Fulani?* ends with an argument for representing them as one group and that is how Fulani are represented in the remainder of the document:

Some analysts and practitioners argue that Fulani groups have more differences than they have similarities, and the insistence that they are a cohesive ethnic group is mainly driven by the need for outsiders to ascribe them a common identity. Others note that Fulani demonstrate remarkable cohesion of self-identity considering their geographic scope and demographic diversity (USCIRF, 2020a :2).

While the section presents arguments for and against considering Fulani as a distinct ethnic group, the last sentence in this discussion indicates that they can be treated as one group. This is also what the title of the factsheet—Fulani Communities—and the first sentence—“The Fulani ...”—indicate. However, this is problematic because the term “Fulani” covers diverse communities across many nations that do not form a single group with a cohesive social identity. We would argue that there is no such thing as “the Fulani”.

Second, the discussion of the religious identity of contemporary Fulani is linked to religious wars (jihads) that happened more than 200 years ago across West Africa. Again, while the document aims to be fair and balanced,

half of the section on Fulani and Islam is about their involvement in religious wars that happened a long time ago:

Some Fulani groups played a significant role in several violent campaigns to implement Islamic rule in west Africa in the 18th and early 19th centuries. Although these campaigns were predominantly Fulaniled, they were ethnically diverse. There are many instances of non-Fulani fighters taking part, and there are examples of Fulani groups and communities refusing to participate (USCIRF, 2020a :2).

Again, even though the factsheet notes that not all Fulani participated in the jihads and that non-Fulani also participated, the factsheet presumes considerable continuity over a 200-year period in which West Africa was greatly affected by colonialization, independence, and globalization, which are not mentioned in the factsheet. Thus, the significance of long-ago jihads is emphasized over more recent and direct histories that have shaped religious identities among diverse Fulani communities.

Third, the factsheet links Fulani to different terrorist groups in West Africa, even though the members of these terrorist groups come from a range of different ethnic groups. Moreover, no evidence is provided in support of these claims—instead, there are references to “some cite” or hyperlinks to sources that also do not offer evidence for these claims.

Some cite Fulani participation in violent jihadist organizations as evidence of religious motivations. Fulani are disproportionately represented among some jihadist groups operating in the central Sahel, like the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and Al-Qaeda affiliates Macina Liberation Front and Ansaroul Islam. In Nigeria there is increasing geographic overlap and evidence of relationship building between jihadist groups and organized criminal bandits that are known to include Fulani fighters (USCIRF, 2020a :4).

For example, the hyperlinked text disproportionately represented links to a page on the website of the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, an academic institution within the US Department of Defense (source 65) that does not provide any evidence that Fulani are disproportionately represented among jihadist groups—it just repeats the assertion. This is highly problematic because these assertions, when repeated enough, become an “unquestioned truth” and part of a larger narrative that links Fulani pastoralists to jihadist groups. The irony is that USCIRF earlier issued a report, warning about how “dangerous speech and polarizing narratives around religion have fueled violence, discrimination, and

¹EIN Presswire: Religion Newswire @EINReligionNews, USCIRF report examines role religion plays in Fulani attacks on Christians. http://s.einnews.com/_8SH5QecBt. 8:00 PM · Oct 3, 2020-EIN Presswire <https://twitter.com/EINReligionNews/status/1312543137366265859>.

segregation between Muslims and Christians for decades, particularly in central Nigeria” (USCIRF 2019), which is cited in the factsheet. Apparently, it does not stop USCIRF from continuing to spread these dangerous polarizing narratives about Fulani pastoralists.

Fourth, the way the factsheet is written affirms the notion that Fulani are the problem. The middle part of the factsheet describes the role of Fulani as victims, perpetrators, and peacemakers, but a close analysis shows that the description is not as fair and balanced as the organization suggests. For example, compare the language of two sections: *Fulani as Victims* and *Fulani as Perpetrators*. The first sentence of the shorter section *Fulani as Victims* uses the passive tense, “Over the past several years, Fulani communities have frequently been victims of violence in west and central Africa”, while the first sentence of the longer section *Fulani as Perpetrators* uses the active tense, “Fulani individuals and militias have also been responsible for numerous incidents of violence against civilians in recent years”. Of course, one of the reasons for having a passive sentence in one section (victims) and an active sentence in the other (perpetrators) is because the topic of religious violence across West Africa is told through the lens of Fulani communities, which is the focus of the factsheet. And thus, the overarching sense of the factsheet is that Fulani are mostly to blame for the violence. Moreover, in the section *Fulani as Victims*, the framing is such that it seems that the victims are blamed for the violence, e.g. “In some countries, Fulani civilians are targeted because they are perceived to be affiliated with Islamic extremism” (3). The third section, *Fulani as Peacemakers*, provides examples of Fulani living peacefully with other groups, but to make the argument that Fulani leaders in Nigeria promote peaceful solutions, the factsheet quotes an incendiary statement from, “a Fulani fighter that claimed that ‘Nigeria belongs to the Fulani’”, USCIRF, 2020a :4). Moreover, to support the argument that Guinea is not affected by Fulani jihadism, the factsheet links to a source with the title *Fulani people and Jihadism in Sahel and West African countries* (source 30). The factsheet could have made the argument that Fulani leaders in Nigeria are promoting peaceful solutions and social harmony without citing a “Fulani fighter” making incendiary claims and without linking to a source with a problematic title (and content). In other words, even though the section on *Fulani as Peacemakers* aims to counter the stereotype of Fulani jihadists, the way it does so undermines the message.

Finally, while the factsheet aims to offer a fair and balanced assessment, a closer look at the sources linked to the document shows that this is not true for all the sources used and linked to the factsheet. Many are overwhelmingly biased against Fulani (pastoralists). The hyperlinks to these sources thus undermine the factsheet’s aim to use a fair and balanced approach.

Problems with the hyperlinked sources

There are 85 hyperlinks in the factsheet that link to 68 unique sources, ten of which are linked to multiple hyperlinks (see Table S1). Most of the sources are best described as online media (e.g. OrientXXI Magazine, The Christian Post, The New Humanitarian) (19), followed by news sites (e.g. BBC, Al Jazeera) (16), academic sources (e.g. books, articles, book review) (16), reports and websites of non-governmental organizations (e.g. International Crisis Group, Human Rights Watch) (11), blogs (6), websites of international organizations (e.g. UN security council, UNEP, UNICEF) (3), and a few link to other USCIRF documents (3). Most of the sources are from the USA (28), followed by the UK (11), Nigeria (8), and France (6). The other sources are from Belgium, Germany, Kenya, Netherlands, and Qatar. The sources were mostly published in the last few years: 2020 (35), 2019 (11), 2018 (5), and 2017 (5). The oldest sources are all academic sources. A large number of the sources focus on Nigeria (29), which is the most populous country in West Africa with a long history of widespread violent conflict.

The academic sources include two books, five research articles, five reports from the Africa Center for Strategic Studies at the National Defense University, and one book review that was linked to four times. There is also considerable variation in the quality of the academic sources. The two books, book review, and a few research articles are from reputable publishers and are grounded in sound scholarly research. However, that is not true for all sources. For example, one article is on folk Islam among the Hausa of Northern Nigeria published by the *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* and relies on secondary sources that falsely claim that Hausa are not worshipping Allah, but instead live in fear of spirits and witchcraft (source 27). It is unclear why this source is used and hyperlinked. It is not that there is a scarcity of sources. On the contrary, there is a very large body of literature on Fulani pastoralists. A search on Google Scholar in May 2021 using the search term “Fulani” returns 65,900 results and “Fulani AND pastoral*” generates 10,900 results.

Most of the news sources are from reputable organizations like Aljazeera (3), BBC News (3), New York Times (3), The Guardian (1), RFI (1), France 24 (1), Forbes (1), and Middle East Eye (1). In general, these news sources are more factual and less biased than some of the other sources used in the factsheet. While some of the sources offer a more nuanced and evidence-based assessment of the insecurity problems across West and Central Africa, others do not. One category of problematic sources is websites from Nigerian news organizations, which can be both highly partisan and highly biased against either Christians or Muslims (Igwebuike 2020), but mostly

against Fulani pastoralists (Chiluwa and Chiluwa 2020). One example of a highly biased source linked to in the factsheet is a source by the Nigerian Voice (source 2), though others are much less biased (e.g. source 29, 32).

Another problematic category of sources in terms of bias against Fulani communities is websites from Christian organizations in the USA, like the *Christian Post*, *Morning Star News*, and *America: The Jesuit Review*. Here is an example that shows evidence of bias against Fulani pastoralists. One sentence in the factsheet links Fulani to genocide, “In Nigeria’s Middle Belt, incidents of suspected Fulani militants burning churches and attacking predominantly Christian villages and Christian religious ceremonies have led to allegations that suspected Fulani fighters are committing genocide against Christians” (3). The hyperlinked text, predominantly Christian village, links to an article in the online magazine *America: The Jesuit Review*. The opening sentences read, “Are Nigeria’s Christians the target of a genocide? That is the conclusion of a number of religious freedom analysts and Nigerian clergy who joined a recent online press call”. The religious freedom analysts are from an organization called *In Defense of Christians* and an organization called *Genocide Watch*. Spokespersons from both groups make allegations and incendiary statements, for example, in the article, Gregory Stanton, the founding president and chair of Genocide Watch, is making the case that Fulani massacres of Christians fit the U.N. definition of acts of genocide, saying that “they now arrive with truckloads of fighters and simply massacre a Christian village and leave the Muslim village alone”. However, in the same article, Anietie Ewang, a researcher for the Africa Division of *Human Rights Watch* offers a much more nuanced assessment,

[Anietie Ewang] argued that there was “nothing to suggest these are targeted attacks [against Christians], but there are religious and ethnic undertones because of the history and that cannot be taken away”. “We are seeing violence on both sides, revenge attacks,” she said, “with very little being done in terms of investigation and protection and accountability on the part of the authorities.” She added, “When people don’t see accountability and justice being done, you have a society that becomes perceived as a kind of free-for-all.

However, these nuanced assessments of the situation are not as readily retweeted as the more incendiary pop-out quotes, like this one:

The nature of the attacks clearly fit the U.N. definition of acts of genocide. “They now arrive with

truckloads of fighters and simply massacre a Christian village and leave the Muslim village alone”.

The problem is not just the bias of the Jesuit Review and other Christian news organizations; it is that the factsheet hyperlinks to these highly biased sources. The result is that the single story about Fulani pastoralists is repeated over and over.

A number of the sources that are linked in the factsheet are from evangelical groups that have an explicit goal to convert people to Christianity, including the Fulani. This focus on Fulani as potential converts is also evident in the factsheet itself. The first paragraph of the factsheet section on *Fulani and Islam* is all about framing the relation between Fulani and their religion in a way that suggests that they can be converted. First, the form of Islam that Fulani practise is described as mysticism. Second, the argument is made that Fulani combine Islam practices with traditional practices and beliefs. Finally, the statement is made that there is evidence of Fulani converts to Christianity. However, that “evidence” comes from a news article from *The Christian Post* that states without any supporting evidence that “Thousands of Fulani are following Jesus Christ” quoting Todd Nettleton of Voice of Martyrs speaking to the Mission Network News (source 62). In other words, most of the sources describing the relationship between Fulani and Islam are from organizations that are actively trying to convert Fulani to Christianity. It suggests that the factsheet is written for Christian audiences in the USA.

The use of hyperlinks to online reports and open access sources is becoming more common, but it creates considerable problems when they link to biased and unreliable sources that perpetuate a single story. The result is an echo chamber in which stereotypes are repeated and amplified without any critical analysis.

The larger context of the factsheet

The factsheet does not come out of nowhere; it is part of a larger movement among some Christian groups in the USA that promotes a single story about Fulani pastoralists. Here we briefly discuss what we know about the production of the factsheet and how it was taken up in social media.

It is unclear who exactly came up with the idea to publish a factsheet on Fulani communities, but in general, USCIRF responds to questions and requests for information from policy-makers, practitioners, and advocates. In this case, there were questions about the role of religion in conflicts involving Fulani communities. Thus, the main goal of the factsheet was to provide information for those working to promote religious freedom in the region. We know that Madeline Vellturo, USCIRF Policy Analyst for West and Central Africa, is

listed as the author. She is an experienced analyst with 10 years of experience as a researcher and policy analyst for different organizations in Washington, D.C. and has written about the problematic narratives linking Fulani and jihad (Velturo 2020b). However, we do not know whether and to what extent the factsheet was edited by others in the organization, or who was responsible for the links in the factsheet.

In the USCIRF podcast about the factsheet, Velturo provides an informed and nuanced assessment of the security situation across West and Central Africa (USCIRF, 2020b). However, the interviewer in the podcast, Dwight Bashir, USCIRF Director of Outreach and Policy, keeps asking leading questions that do not reflect the “fair and balanced” approach of the factsheet, e.g. “So tell us who are the Fulani? Where do they live in Africa? And why are they becoming increasingly front and center in the conversation on religious tensions and violence in West and Central Africa?” At one point during the interview, Velturo argues that “we need to delink the conversation from ethnicity and focus it on individuals and identifiable groups”, which is also the final recommendation of the factsheet (USCIRF, 2020b :4). However, throughout the podcast, the interviewer ignores the nuances and keeps pushing the idea that Fulani are Muslim terrorists. For example, after Velturo explains that there is no evidence that Fulani are disproportionately involved in the terrorist organization Boko Haram and that most of the Boko Haram fighters are Kanuri, Bashir ignores that statement and asks, “but is there a sense of, you know, those who are members of Boko Haram, you know, how many Hausa Fulani or Fulani make up membership or is that not clear?”

The podcast about the factsheet had 322 views in early April 2021, which is not much, but it is more than three times as much as the other podcasts that were listed on USCIRF’s Facebook page, but similar to other reports and podcasts on issues of religious freedom in Nigeria according to USCIRF. When we searched the Internet to see what organizations and individuals reposted, retweeted, or linked to the factsheet, we also see that the uptake is not widespread on the Internet (although we did not search Facebook). The factsheet has been picked up by a few online Christian news websites in the USA, and the tweets about the factsheet are mainly from one of these websites. In other words, the reach is not large—but there is a clear pattern—it seems to be retweeted mostly by Christian audiences. The question is why Christians are interested in Fulani? One answer is that Fulani have been targeted for a long time by Christian evangelical groups as an “unreached people group”, which are described as groups that lack enough followers of Christ and resources to evangelize their own people (Johsua Project 2021). What is even more

problematic is how these websites change the message of the factsheet. For example, USCIRF announces the publication of the factsheet on October 1, 2020, in the following tweet: “Today USCIRF released a new report which explores the role that religion plays in escalating violence committed *by and against* #Fulani communities in west and central #Africa” (emphasis added), while the tweet about the release from the editor of the Christian Post reads, “New USCIRF report examines role religion plays in Fulani attacks on Christians”. In other words, the story about the factsheet on social media is that Fulani are attacking Christians, not that Fulani are also victims of violence.

The factsheet ends with recommendations for the US government that we would support, arguing that,

An approach focused on individuals and identifiable armed groups would delink violence from perceived religious or ethnic identity, thereby deescalating interreligious tensions and sectarian violence. The U.S. can also support regional governments to build their capacity to identify specific violators of religious freedom, distinguish them from broader religious and ethnic groups, and hold them to account (USCIRF, 2020a :4).

In other words, the final recommendation is to *not* focus on Fulani communities and *not* link them to religious violence. Unfortunately, the uptake in the social media indicates that this is not the take-away message.

We do not know what the uptake of the factsheet was like among politicians and policy-makers in Washington DC. The factsheet may have contributed to a better understanding among politicians and policy-makers about the complexity of violence across West Africa. I (MM) read the factsheet as a scholar of pastoral societies and am therefore more sensitive to the stereotypical portrayal of pastoralists. It is very well possible that politicians and policy-makers are more likely to pick up the sections on *Fulani as Victims* and *Fulani as Peacemakers* and thus develop a more nuanced understanding of the complexity of the issue than they had previously.

Discussion

There are three major problems with the USCIRF factsheet about Fulani communities and the discourse about pastoralists across West and Central Africa in general. First, there is a methodological problem in that the narratives are based on a selective reading of limited empirical data, mostly anecdotes from a small number of cases that represent a sampling bias. Second, the flawed narrative of “the Fulani” as a single ethnic group is used to structure the analysis, and the problem of violence and

insecurity in the region is told by stereotyping that ethnic group. The third problem is that these stereotypes take a life of their own, become conventional wisdom, and do not contribute to addressing the problem of violence and insecurity across West and Central Africa and may contribute to furthering these conflicts. These problems are not limited to the factsheet; they are also problems in the scholarly literature on Fulani pastoralists.

First, there are major methodological problems, in particular the lack of evidence and a sampling bias. Jihadist movements, criminal organizations, and militias are difficult to study first-hand, so researchers must rely on indirect data, e.g. the impact of these organizations on populations, or interviews with people who were formerly members of these organizations. Thus, there is no systematic survey of the memberships of these organizations, and claims that Fulani are disproportionately represented in these organizations are generally not supported by any evidence. The “evidence” often consists of anecdotes from a small number of cases. Then there is the problem of sampling bias. It is logical that a study of violence and insecurity focuses on violent conflict. The problem is that the focus of the factsheet is on the violent conflict involving Fulani pastoralists. Therefore, violent conflicts that do not involve Fulani pastoralists are not considered, nor are most conflicts that are peacefully resolved.

Moreover, much of the factsheet and many of the sources focus on Nigeria, which is one of the countries that are most plagued by violence and the one in which the state is a main perpetrator of violence. While Nigeria is one of the most populous and largest economies in Africa, it is not representative of other African countries. It has a particular economic and political history that has shaped its current security problems. One cannot extrapolate from Nigeria to all West and Central Africa. The conditions may be similar in that herders and farmers share the same space and that this may lead to conflicts between the two groups. However, the outcomes of these conflicts are very different in Nigeria, and this has been the case for a long time—even before Boko Haram and other jihadist groups emerged on the scene. In other words, the political history and context of Nigeria play a major role. Just across the border in Benin, Cameroon, and Niger, herder-farmer conflicts have an entirely different character. And most problems involving pastoralists in these neighbouring countries can be explained as Nigerian conflicts spilling over the border.

Second, there is the problem of focusing on “the Fulani”, which is not a single social or a political entity but consists of highly diverse communities distributed over a very large geographic area and many different countries. To treat all these communities as one group is highly problematic and particularly when writing about a topic like religious violence. It is ethnic stereotyping at its

worst. That this factsheet has not been condemned in the USA indicates that there are double standards when it comes to ethnic stereotyping in the USA versus Africa. Moreover, as the factsheet makes very clear, even with limited and incomplete data, there is considerable variation in the involvement of Fulani pastoralists in religious or other violence. It indicates that ethnicity is not a very useful explanation for religious and other violence across West and Central Africa.

It is as simple as the danger of the single story (Adichie 2009). It is not that there are no Fulani pastoralists who join jihadist groups—the problem is that it has become the single story that is told repeatedly and that seems to get the most traction. How many Fulani are there across West and Central Africa? Many millions. And how many of them are involved in banditry or jihadist organizations? A tiny fraction. Does it really help to link one group to violence and insecurity across an area that is the size of the USA? Who stands to gain from perpetuating these stereotypes? The factsheet draws from Christian fundamentalist sources in the USA and is picked up mostly by these same sources—it suggests that rather than protecting religious freedom and communities, the USCIRF is an active contributor to religious tensions in West and Central Africa by publishing factsheets like the one on Fulani communities. This factsheet does little to protect religious freedom. On the contrary, it likely makes the conflicts more intractable.

Again, these problems are not limited to this USCIRF factsheet; there are many other policy briefs from governmental and non-governmental organizations with similar problems. Other organizations also contribute to a toxic simplification of the insecurity problems in West Africa. For example, the Institute for Economics and Peace lists Fulani extremists together with terrorist organizations like Boko Haram and the Taliban in its Global Terrorism Index (Institute of Economics and Peace 2020, 89). The single story about Fulani pastoralists as jihadists is widespread.

But not all reports and organizations covering insecurity in West and Central Africa are as biased as the USCIRF factsheet and some of the sources it draws from. The International Crisis Group (International Crisis Group 2017, 2021), the Search for Common Ground (Brottem and McDonnell 2020; Kwaja and Smith 2020), and other organizations (Bisson et al. 2021; Kräfli and Toulmin 2020) cover similar topics, but their reports are generally more nuanced and less biased, and they do not single out one ethnic group. Other organizations are making concerted efforts to get the perspectives from all the communities affected by the violence and insecurity, including Fulani pastoralists, to find ways to promote peace, social cohesion, and economic development

(IPIS/Concordis 2020). Finally, the reports and organizations offer ways to reduce the tensions and move the region towards peace and justice, for example, the *Pastoralism and Conflict Toolkit* from the Search for Common Ground (Jobbins and McDonnell 2021). Although, problematically, many of these reports start with the premise that pastoralism is the problem, not agriculture; but that is a topic for another paper.

Academic researchers should also be cautious about how they represent Fulani pastoralists in their writings and reflect on how they may contribute to the single story. The problems we identified in the USCIRF factsheet also apply to the scholarly literature on pastoralists and insecurity in West and Central Africa, in particular the methodological problems of biased samples, a small number of cases, limited evidence, and the focus on one particular group. Even nuanced and complex analyses of the topic run the risk of reinforcing the single story about pastoralists and insecurity. For example, papers with titles like *Why do pastoralists in Mali join jihadist groups?* (Benjaminsen and Ba 2018) are not helpful, even if the political ecology analyses in this article clearly indicate that the structural context of the Malian state plays a critical role. It would have been better if the title of the article was something like *Why do government actions drive its citizen to join jihadist groups?* in which the state is the actor and no particular group is singled out. Writing about pastoralists and jihadist movements, not just in West and Central Africa but across the world, requires careful thought about how to represent the relationships between the two (e.g. Köhler 2021). As researchers, we have a responsibility to avoid contributing to these narratives as our publications risk being (mis)used by political groups that are targeting Fulani pastoralists.

Finally, in an earlier draft of this paper, we wrote about the *problem* of the single story, but one of our colleagues pointed out that Adichie's original phrase, the *danger* of the single story, is a more apt description. These stereotypes about Fulani pastoralists have potentially dangerous consequences, particularly when they are disseminated by entities of the US government, which has a drone base in Niger to monitor Islamic extremists in West and Central Africa. There is a real risk that pastoralists become "collateral damage" in the war on terror that is fed by stereotypes about Fulani pastoralists.

Supplementary Information

The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13570-021-00227-z>.

Additional file 1: Table S1. Sources linked to the Factsheet (LID = link ID, SID = source ID).

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Moritz conceptualized and designed the project; Moritz and Mbacke coded and analysed the data; Moritz wrote the paper; Mbacke edited the paper; and both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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