

# **A Critical Human Rights Juncture in Nigeria**

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## **I. Introduction**

It is an honor to participate in this important hearing. Thank you especially to Commission Co-Chairs the Honorable Congressman Randy Hultgren and the Honorable Congressman James P. McGovern. Thank you more broadly to the distinguished Members of this incredibly important Commission and to the staff who have helped make today possible.

I stand with the other witnesses in acknowledging that Nigeria is at a critical human rights juncture. One of the primary drivers of forces threatening to fracture Nigeria today is escalating conflict in the Middle Belt. Yet as far as I am aware this is the first hearing on Capitol Hill to uniquely focus on this reality. Thank you Commissioners for once again taking a leading voice in identifying emerging threats and seeking to build consensus on Capitol Hill and beyond on the primacy of human rights. Thank you.

It is my hope that those who are participating more broadly in this first of its kind hearing on conflict in the Middle Belt of Nigeria will follow your lead and join you in examining and deploying effective strategies to address violent attacks, restore communities that have been burned to the ground, and build platforms for collaborative peace.

## **II. Middle Belt Violence: A Serious Challenge Threatening to Fracture Nigeria**

Middle Belt violence is a serious challenge threatening to fracture Nigeria. In 2016, the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Wilberforce Initiative launched a major initiative to research and to build engagement around the religious freedom realities within Nigeria. As part of this effort members of our team including Congressman Frank R. Wolf and myself traveled throughout Nigeria interacting with more than 500 individuals and traveling to multiple sites in the states of Bauchi, Nasarawa, Plateau, and to Abuja, and meeting with representatives from Adamawa, Benue, Borno, Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, and Sokoto.<sup>1</sup> Since then we have returned to Nigeria while also meeting with a number of key stakeholders including:

- Multiple U.S. Congressional leaders and their staff
- Assistant Secretary of State Linda Thomas-Greenfield
- Former U.S. Ambassadors to Nigeria, Ambassador Entwistle and Ambassador Campbell
- Current U.S. Ambassador to Nigeria, Ambassador Symington
- Variety of U.N. officials
- More than a dozen Members of the Nigerian National Assembly
- Many Nigerian partners

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<sup>1</sup> In June 2016, the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Wilberforce Initiative released a full 86 page report detailing a range of religious freedom challenges within Nigeria: 21<sup>st</sup> Century Wilberforce Initiative, "Nigeria: Fractured and Forgotten, Discrimination and Violence Along Religious Fault Lines" (June 2016): <http://www.standwithnigeria.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Nigeria-Fractured-and-Forgotten.pdf> (accessed September 26, 2017).

Some of the numerous challenges currently facing Nigeria – such as Boko Haram in the northeast and more recently Biafra in the east – have received significant attention within both the Nigerian government and the international community. Unfortunately, violence in the Middle Belt has often been overlooked and deemphasized even in the midst of some particularly brutal hostilities.

Perhaps the most severe example of conflict in the Middle Belt is one that just passed its year-and-a-half anniversary with still none of the participants held accountable: the assault on Agatu. The Agatu attack began on Monday, February 22, 2016 at some point after midday. At least two flat-bottom boats sailed up the Benue River to launch a full-scale attack on the community. A Nigerian outfit called SBM Intelligence obtained cellphone video from a deceased terrorist and posted it to YouTube with the video showing the men getting ready to launch the boats upriver. The languages captured on this video include Fulfude, Hausa, Gurma and Zamara, of which the last two are more prominent in Niger.

The boats landed in the Agatu area around 3:00pm and immediately launched an attack. According to an eyewitness who visited with us five days after the attack, the militants were about to shoot when he began shouting that he was a Muslim. The attackers demanded he quote from the *Quran*, which the individual did and pointed to a small mosque as his normal place of worship. The Fulani militants repositioned their attack sparing that individual and those in that immediate vicinity. The attack lasted two days and multiple eyewitnesses, with whom we visited less than one week after this attack occurred, confirmed that at some point on Monday evening a helicopter landed and resupplied the militants.

Exact numbers are difficult to obtain and to verify, but according to the United Nations, ten Agatu villages were razed, 300 were killed and 20,000 displaced.<sup>2</sup>

Though some denied that Fulani had even participated in this attack,<sup>3</sup> in an exclusive interview with *Premium Times* less than four weeks later, Saleh Bayeri, the Interim National Secretary of Gan Allah Fulani Association specifically claimed Fulani involvement and defended the actions of the Fulani militants noting that this “was a reprisal attack by his people against the Agatus” whom he accused of rustling 200 cattle and killing a prominent Fulani leader named Ardo Madaki three years prior.<sup>4</sup>

Taking at face value the factuality of these claims, raises additional questions. If it is true that Agatus stole 200 cattle and killed a prominent leader, the response claimed by this Fulani Association speaks to a level of sophistication that included waiting and planning over a three year period, enlisting attackers from outside the country, launching from boats moving upriver

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<sup>2</sup> Rupert Colville, Spokesperson for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, “OHCHR Press Briefing Notes – (1) Mozambique, (2) Nigeria,” (April 29, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Samuel Ogundipe, “Sultan Reacts to Benue, Enugu Killings, Says Blaming Fulani Herdsmen ‘Absurd,’” *Premium Times* (May 1, 2016), <http://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/202714-sultan-reacts-to-benue-enugu-killings-says-blaming-fulani-herdsmen-absurd.html> (accessed May 6, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Emmanuel Mayah, Sani Tukur and Hassan Adebayo, “Why We Struck in Agatu – Fulani Herdsmen,” *Premium Times* (March 19, 2016), <http://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/200426-exclusive-struck-agatu-fulani-herdsmen.html> (accessed May 6, 2016).

in the middle of the day, utilizing a helicopter at night to resupply, differentiating selection of targets on the basis of religion, retreating without interference, and to date, no known arrests.

This is not an isolated case. There are many examples throughout the Middle Belt of graphic violence, rapes, intentional targeting of religious minorities, and entire communities burned to the ground and forced to the brink of famine. What is unfolding is an evolving situation with a growing sophistication that suggests that a framework for analysis is perhaps no longer best understood through the lens of traditional farmer-herdsmen conflict.

To name a second, specific example, we visited with elders from Sho and Jol, two very small villages approximately 3 miles outside of Barkin Ladi. Both described how despite the fact that their communities had been repetitively attacked, no protection forces had been stationed in their villages. One elder from Sho began to cry describing how their village was at the time surviving in the midst of famine-like conditions by eating grass. The name of their village in the local language means “peace.” Peace is literally under siege in the Middle Belt.

The elders from Jol submitted written documentation and photographic evidence of destruction that included more than 100 dead, more than 10,000 displaced, more than 360 homes destroyed, over 1,400 hectares of crops ruined, and multiple hamlets destroyed with the land occupied by the attackers. As one of the community leaders from Jol expressed:

In our community we have [many] IDPs, but we have not received any help except for some mats that we have received. In the areas where the people have left because of displacement, the Fulani move in, take over that area, and settle down, and it becomes a place for the terrorists.

In 2014 a helicopter landed in a Fulani dominated area. We reported it to the security personnel, but they denied it. However, we saw that it landed at midnight and left at 4:00 a.m., and after that attacks occurred. The Fulani people have killed our women and killed members of our community in front of the security personnel. There is a complicity.

Members of Jol, and multiple other communities we visited, worry about a particular trend. In some instances, Fulani militants are burning hamlets, illegally erecting new structures, and assigning a new Fulani name to the area. Members of Jol worry this alteration of demographic and cartographic realities on the ground will leave Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) from that area permanently displaced.

Though a very small community, Jol has estimated that the Fulani militants combined destruction of churches, crops, homes and materials totaled more than the equivalent of \$1.9 million USD.

Like Agatu, Jol and Sho are indicative of a story being repeated dozens and dozens of times across the most rural portions of the Middle Belt. These ongoing and repetitive attacks are having a profound impact on the breadbasket of Nigeria with significant negative ramifications.

### **III. Middle Belt Violence: The Need for a New Narrative and Analysis**

As the consequences of repetitive attacks mount, the number of those impacted grows, feelings of isolation and retribution fester, and increasingly sophisticated weapons and tactics are deployed, there is a pressing need to move beyond a traditional farmer-herdsmen framework to a new narrative and analysis. Though there are no specific watershed moments demarcating this shift, 2014 seems to be a loose turning point.

Tensions and conflict have long existed between predominately Muslim, pastoralist Fulani and predominantly agrarian, Christian communities in the Middle Belt. Historically, traditional mechanisms for resolving conflict and restoring peace have been successful at the grassroots level when cattle have been raided, farm land trampled or other intercommunal relationships broken. These grassroots initiatives are often no longer effective.

The Middle Belt of Nigeria is a patchwork of religious and ethnic groupings with the single largest being that of the Fulani. Mostly cattle herders, there are more than 30 million Fulani across West Africa, with the largest groupings in Nigeria (18 million), Guinea (5 million), Cameroon (2 million), Mali (1 million), Niger (1 million) and Senegal (1 million).<sup>5</sup>

It is important to note the focus under discussion is on Fulani militants and not the Fulani as a whole, many of whom do not participate in acts of aggression, maintain peaceful coexistence with local communities, and do not support violence in the name of political or religious goals. Furthermore, the longer this conflict simmers the more likely individuals will embrace religious identities that can be militarized including Christian farmers who may form vigilante and reprisal attacks against Fulani. Should this occur, it would add to the levels of complexity and in worse case scenarios threaten the capital city of Abuja which lies along the Middle Belt.

This is in part why establishing a new narrative and analysis is so critical. Though multiple rationales exist for altering the traditional description of farmer-herdsmen conflict, two seem particularly noteworthy.

First, the preponderance of evidence, the predominantly asymmetrical nature of the attacks, and the growing sophistication in weapons and tactics simply does not fit a pattern connoted in a farmer-herdsmen motif.

One particular attack in mid-November 2016 garnered significant media attention within Nigeria and illustrates the growing complexities associated with this conflict. This specific incident focused on five villages in the Kauru Local Government Association (LGA) in Kaduna.<sup>6</sup> It was an attack that left 45 villagers killed and destroyed 120 homes. The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Wilberforce Initiative received gruesome pictures from contacts in Nigeria demonstrating that a number of those killed were hacked to death including toddlers wearing nothing but diapers. Available evidence speaks to a predominantly asymmetric attack with, in this case, the majority of the victims being children, women and the elderly.

Approximately three weeks after the attack, the governor of Kaduna, Malam Nasir el-Rufai released a statement noting that the massacre had been carried out by Fulani, that none of the

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<sup>5</sup> "Fulani / Fulbe," The Joshua Project, <https://joshuaproject.net/clusters/173> (accessed May 6, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> "45 Killed in Yet Another Attack on Christian Communities in Nigeria," *World Watch Monitor* (November 19, 2016).

Fulani involved were from Nigeria, but were rather Fulani from Niger, Cameroon, Chad, Mali and Senegal. Furthermore, he noted that this was a reprisal attack from an incident in 2011 where individuals from the aforementioned countries had been killed as they moved cattle through that area, and that affected citizens should not arm themselves but trust the appropriate security forces for protection.<sup>7</sup>

Within a few days, the Senator representing that region released his response to the Governor in part to contradict what he claimed were misleading statements.<sup>8</sup> The Senator's primary points were:

- It was inappropriate to characterize this as a reprisal attack given that he could find no documented evidence that individuals from those countries had been killed in that area in 2011 as claimed by the Governor;
- It was unlikely that Fulani from all of those countries would have converged in a rural part of Southern Kaduna which is not on a natural transitory route for cattle herders;
- If the Governor's investigation had been detailed enough within three weeks to accurately pinpoint the specific multi-national attackers, the Governor should release those details and locations to federal security forces, something that had not yet been done;
- The Governor had refused for more than a month requests from the Senator to discuss increasing security in Southern Kaduna;
- Weeks after the attack, the Kaduna State Government had not released any funds to help the victims even though there were still a number without food or shelter;
- Victims should be prepared to defend themselves because the State was unwilling to do so.

It is not possible to independently verify which of these two statements is more accurate. The point of its inclusion, however, is to demonstrate the level of tension that is growing. If the Governor's perspective is right it is troubling as it would indicate that this was a reprisal attack that was planned and executed over a five year period and that involved a multi-national attack inside Nigeria with foreign agents collaborating with one another from five countries.

If the Senator's perspective is correct it is also troubling as he directly accuses the Governor of fabricating evidence and attempting to shift blame from a local agency to a "foreign" element. This would raise additional sets of questions related to weapons, insecurity, and accountability.

Regardless of which perspective is a more accurate representation of the reality, what is left undisputed is that entire communities were burned to the ground, dozens of civilians were killed, and many more left homeless. It also demonstrates a growing complexity, a growing sophistication, increasing violence, integrated attacks, unassisted communities and growing calls for local communities to defend themselves. Since 2014 this has no longer been a simple conflict between farmers and herders. Fulani militants have been the overwhelming aggressors and are assaulting communities with supply helicopters, raids launched from multiple boats, machine guns mounted on vehicles, AK47s, scorched earth policies and sustained offensives that are leveling communities and that may last for months in particular locations without governmental intervention.

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<sup>7</sup> Isaiah Benjamin, "Foreigners Behind Southern Kaduna Massacre – el-Rufai," *Leadership Nigeria*, <http://leadership.ng/news/562419/foreigners-behind-southern-kaduna-massacre-el-rufai>, (December 4, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> Press Statement from Senator Danjuma Tella Laah, December 8, 2016.

In addition, there is a second rationale for shifting to a new narrative and analysis. Though not yet reflected in the majority of media reports or international analysis, elites within Nigeria are themselves beginning to frame these attacks with language that moves beyond farmer-herdsmen constructs.

For example, in May 2016, President Buhari referenced Fulani attacks in the Middle Belt as those carried out by “foreigners” who had infiltrated the country. In September 2016, the influential Sultan of Sokoto, Sa’ad Abubakar III, noted for the first time his belief that there were Fulani herdsmen moving around with guns and causing violence with local farmers, and that these individuals were “foreign terrorists” who should be treated as terrorists “by the Nigerian security agencies.”<sup>9</sup> In November 2016, the Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria released a statement noting that criminals were using the Association to perpetrate illegal activities.<sup>10</sup> Even as recently as this week, Garba Shehu, President Buhari’s Special Assistant on Media and Publicity, claimed that while the actions of Fulani herdsmen were not best understood in terms of terrorism, there were Fulani “criminal gangs” engaging in direct attacks on civilians in the Middle Belt.<sup>11</sup>

In other words, within the last twelve months, key leaders within Nigeria have begun to acknowledge the attackers with labels such as foreigners, foreign terrorists, and criminal gangs.

Locating new terminology to describe the conflict on the ground is contested with different observers suggesting differing terminology with accompanying rationale. Even if there is not yet consensus around the most accurate terminology to utilize, due in part to difficulty in establishing organizing principles and the absence of clearly articulated rationales, there is emerging agreement that continuing to utilize a simple designation of herder-farmer conflict is misrepresentative and prevents further intentional engagement at a time when such engagement is essential.

#### **IV. Middle Belt Violence: An Escalating Reality**

What is without question is that violence in the Middle Belt is an escalating reality. This is in part due to cattle rustling that exists within the Middle Belt to the detriment of Fulani pastoralists. However, the majority of the attacks in recent years cannot be construed solely as reprisals. SBM Intelligence notes that between 1997 and 2010 there were 18 incidents involving herdsmen and farming communities in the Middle Belt while between 2011 and 2015, there were 371.<sup>12</sup> Moreover the majority of the attacks are initiated by Fulani militants and due to their ability to secure significantly more sophisticated weapons and maintain sustained

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<sup>9</sup> “Fulani Herdsmen Moving with Guns are Foreign Terrorists – Sultan,” *Vanguard* (September 13, 2016): <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2016/09/fulani-herdsmen-moving-guns-foreign-terrorists-sultan/> (accessed November 9, 2016).

<sup>10</sup> “Herdsmen Association Warn Members Against Criminal Activity,” *Pulse Nigeria* (November 6, 2016).

<sup>11</sup> “Killer Herdsmen Not Terrorists, Says Garba Shehu,” *Nigeria Today* (September 22, 2017): <https://www.nigeriatoday.ng/2017/09/killer-herdsmen-not-terrorists-says-garba-shehu/> (accessed September 25, 2017).

<sup>12</sup> “Death and the Herdsmen,” *SBM Intelligence*, 5-6.

offensives without significant pushback or judicial accountability, the conflict is highly asymmetric.

Throughout 2016, the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Wilberforce Initiative maintained an ongoing tabulation building upon available public and private data. The numbers we suggest underreport what is actually occurring. For example, in attacks resulting in the deaths of “multiple” though numerically unspecified individuals, we used the number “two” as the lowest possible accounting for “multiple” when in fact the numbers may have been significantly higher. If there were conflicting reports regarding a particular situation, we used the lowest reported number. We know that our numbers are therefore underreporting the gravity of the situation. All the same, focused exclusively on Fulani militancy, in 2016:

Total Number of Non-Fulani Victims:	1,141
Total Number of Fulani Victims:	31 (2.7% of the total)
Total Number of Attacks:	96
Total Number of LGAs:	58
States Impacted:	21

We have maintained a similar tracker for 2017, here reporting for the first time January – July 2017:

Total Number of Non-Fulani Victims:	264
Total Number of Muslim, Non-Fulani Victims:	21
Total Number of Fulani Victims:	24 (7.8% of the total)
Total Number of Attacks:	83 (63 similar attacks last year, 31.7% increase)
Total Number of LGAs:	61
States Impacted:	31

This is to say that the trend line of lethality that loosely began in 2014 is continuing into 2017. While positively, in the first six months of 2017 there has been a significant decrease in the number of victims, there has been an increase in the frequency of attacks. In comparing the first half of 2017 to the first half of 2016, the number of attacks rose from 63 to 83, an increase of 31.7%.

The geographic scope and diversity impacted by Fulani militancy is more sizeable and significant than that of Boko Haram. This is not to compare Fulani militancy directly to Boko Haram. One of the significant differentiators is that Boko Haram’s impact has been less-broad but far deeper. It was more total destruction. Fulani militancy appears to be more surgical, targeting specific LGAs while leaving alone certain areas altogether. It is important to again note that the focus under discussion is on Fulani militants and not the Fulani as a whole.

Even where our data is limited, incomplete or undervalues the numerical impact, additional sources continue to confirm that Fulani militancy is an escalating threat with significant negative ramifications. For example:

- In announcing the first of its kind hearing on Capitol Hill focused on conflict in the Middle Belt, the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission noted that Middle Belt conflict cost the Nigerian economy between 2012-2015 \$14 billion USD.<sup>13</sup>
- The 2015 Global Terrorism Index described Fulani Militants as the fourth most lethal group in their Index.<sup>14</sup> Throughout 2016, Nigeria was the only country tracked by the Global Terrorism Index simultaneously facing two of the top five most lethal organizations.
- The 2016 Global Terrorism Index noted positively that there were fewer deaths related to terrorism across the world including an 18% reduction in the number of people killed by Boko Haram in Nigeria.<sup>15</sup> Even with this reduction, Nigeria remained just behind Iraq and Afghanistan as the third most impacted country by terrorism in the world. The report noted that there had been a significant reduction in number of individuals killed across the Middle Belt while still stating, “Attacks by Fulani ethnic militants – groups of semi-nomadic, ethnic-based pastoralists engaged in conflict with farming communities – were recorded in the Middle Belt.”<sup>16</sup> This generally occurs with available evidence related to numbers killed in 2015, the year reported by the 2016 report. It is anticipated that the 2017 Global Terrorism Index will indicate an uptick related to Fulani militants.
- In their 2017 report, the Pew Research Center documents that within the twenty-five most populous countries in the world, Nigeria has the highest social hostilities due to religion, of which Middle Belt violence is one contributor.<sup>17</sup>
- In their 2017 report, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom recommended Nigeria as a Tier 1 Country of Particular Concern writing in part, “Sectarian violence between predominantly Muslim herders and predominantly Christian farmers increased, and the Nigerian federal government failed to implement effective strategies to prevent or stop such violence or to hold perpetrators accountable.”<sup>18</sup> Their report continued:

In recent years, sectarian violence has occurred in rural areas between predominantly Christian farmers and predominantly Muslim nomadic herders. While this violence usually does not start as a religious conflict, it often takes on religious undertones and is

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<sup>13</sup> “Nigeria: Conflict in the Middle Belt,” Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, United States Congress, Announcement (September 27, 2017), <https://humanrightscommission.house.gov/events/hearings/nigeria-conflict-middle-belt> (accessed September 25, 2017).

<sup>14</sup> “Global Terrorism Index 2015: Measuring and Understanding the Impact of Terrorism,” *Institute for Economics & Peace* (November 2015), 22.

<sup>15</sup> “Global Terrorism Index 2016: Measuring and Understanding the Impact of Terrorism,” *Institute for Economics & Peace* (November 2016), 2, 4.

<sup>16</sup> “Global Terrorism Index 2016), *Institute for Economics & Peace*, 27.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Lipka, “Religious Restrictions Vary Significantly in the World’s Most Populous Countries,” *Pew Research Center* (April 13, 2017), <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/13/religious-restrictions-vary-significantly-in-the-worlds-most-populous-countries/http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/13/religious-restrictions-vary-significantly-in-the-worlds-most-populous-countries/> (accessed on September 26, 2017).

<sup>18</sup> “Nigeria Chapter – 2017 Annual Report,” *United States Commission on International Religious Freedom* (April 2017), <http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Nigeria.2017.pdf> (accessed September 26, 2017).

perceived as a religion-based conflict for many involved.... Recurrent violence in rural areas increased in the reporting period, resulting in hundreds of deaths and a number of churches destroyed. Such attacks were reported in Kaduna, Plateau, Bauchi, Taraba, and Benue states. For example, in March in Agatu Local Government Area, Benue State, an estimated 100–300 were killed and there were reports of at least six villages destroyed. On December 19, the Catholic Archdiocese of Kafan reported that in 2016 at least 800 were killed in sectarian violence in 53 villages in southern Kaduna. The Archdiocese also reported that 16 churches were destroyed during the year. The Nigerian government has long failed to respond adequately to this violence. The federal police are rarely deployed, let alone in a timely manner. While the government deployed police and the military to southern Kaduna to address violence in that area, nongovernmental interlocutors universally told USCIRF that the deployments stick to main roads and do not venture into more rural areas where the violence occurs, and they do not respond when forewarned of the potential for violence or when violence occurs.<sup>19</sup>

- In their 2017 Mid-Year Update, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre noted, “International attention has tended to focus on Boko Haram’s brutality, but inter-communal clashes fueled by ethnic and religious tensions flare regularly throughout the Middle Belt, the dividing line between the Muslim north and Christian south. Communal violence is triggered by myriad factors, including ethno-religious disputes, crime, cattle rustling, land disputes and tensions between pastoralists and farmers.”<sup>20</sup>

This 2017 Mid-Year Update built upon their earlier reports which not only indicated a growing level of violence, but that such violence should be understood in part as an outgrowth of ethnic and religious identifications. For example, the IDMC had found that of all the IDPs in Nigeria, 12.6 percent were displaced due to communal clashes, 2.4 percent by natural disasters, and 85 percent “as a result of insurgency attacks by Islamists.”<sup>21</sup> In what remains the IDMC’s most recent map, they have a category they call “religious violence,” and they have mapped “religious violence” conflicts only in the Middle Belt.<sup>22</sup> In other words, the IDMC only associates “religious violence” with Fulani militancy and not with Boko Haram.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, out of the twenty countries the IDMC is currently tracking in Sub-Saharan Africa, religious violence as a cause for internal displacement is only found in the Middle Belt of Nigeria.

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<sup>19</sup> Nigeria Chapter – 2017 Annual Report,” *United States Commission on International Religious Freedom*, <http://www.uscirtf.gov/sites/default/files/Nigeria.2017.pdf>.

<sup>20</sup> “Nigeria: Mid-Year Update 2017 (January – June),” *Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre* <http://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/nigeria/> (accessed September 25, 2017).

<sup>21</sup> “Nigeria IDP Figures Analysis,” Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, <http://www.internal-displacement.org/sub-saharan-africa/nigeria/figures-analysis> (accessed May 6, 2016).

<sup>22</sup> Map of “Nigeria: Internal Displacement as of December 2014,” Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, <http://www.internal-displacement.org/sub-saharan-africa/nigeria/2014/nigeria-internal-displacement-as-of-december-2014> (accessed May 6, 2016).

<sup>23</sup> Given Boko Haram’s pledged allegiance to the Islamic State, some might question the exclusion of Boko Haram. However the point here is to highlight that religion – even if only one among others – remains a factor in the Middle Belt.

- In a September 2017 report issued by the International Crisis Group entitled, “Herders against Farmers: Nigeria’s Expanding Deadly Conflict,” they write:

Violent conflicts between nomadic herders from northern Nigeria and sedentary agrarian communities in the central and southern zones have escalated in recent years and are spreading southward, threatening the country’s security and stability. With an estimated death toll of approximately 2,500 people in 2016, these clashes are becoming as potentially dangerous as the Boko Haram insurgency in the north east. Yet to date, response to the crisis at both the federal and state levels has been poor.<sup>24</sup>

The report continues:

As these conflicts increase in frequency, intensity and geographical scope, so does their humanitarian and economic toll. The increasing availability of illicit firearms, both locally-produced and smuggled in from outside, worsens the bloodshed. Over the past five years, thousands have been killed; precise tallies are unavailable, but a survey of open source reports suggests fatalities may have reached an annual average of more than 2,000 from 2011 to 2016, for some years exceeding the toll from the Boko Haram insurgency. Tens of thousands have been forcibly displaced, with properties, crops and livestock worth billions of naira destroyed, at great cost to local and state economies.<sup>25</sup>

- The *Council on Foreign Relations* maintains in the Nigeria Security Tracker one of the most comprehensive and publicly available trackers related to number of individuals killed. If their data set is restricted to January 2016 – September 2017 in order to gather a more recent snapshot, their data indicates that Sectarian Actors – of which Fulani militants are undoubtedly the largest – have led to more deaths in the previous 27 months than Boko Haram. While Borno remain the state within this timeframe suffering the highest number of casualties, the second state is that of Benue, one of the states most impacted by Fulani militancy.<sup>26</sup>

All of this data points towards one direction: violence in the Middle Belt is escalating and necessitates altered engagement both within Nigeria and the international community.

## V. Middle Belt Violence: Who are the Primary Victims?

To date much of the more systematic research has focused on establishing this new reality, seeking to determine the overall impact and considering the drivers to this conflict – all of which are critical. Research focused on the victims has often been more anecdotal.

Perhaps one possible exception may be by the International Criminal Court. Though it appears to be in very early stages and has not been independently confirmed, there are reports that the Officer of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) has opened an investigation

<sup>24</sup> “Herders Against Farmers: Nigeria’s Expanding Deadly Conflict,” *International Crisis Group* (September 19, 2017), i.

<sup>25</sup> “Herders Against Farmers,” *International Crisis Group*, i-ii.

<sup>26</sup> “Nigeria Security Tracker: Mapping Violence in Nigeria,” Council on Foreign Relations, <http://www.cfr.org/nigeria/nigeria-security-tracker/p29483> (accessed September 25, 2017).

into the actions of Fulani militants in the Middle Belt. Of course the ICC may well determine to close this investigation without additional public disclosure.<sup>27</sup> However, should it move forward it would likely help give greater focus on the victims themselves.

What is clear is that thousands have died and that in some years the numbers killed in the Middle Belt might have surpassed the numbers killed by Boko Haram in that particular year. There are growing concerns about reprisal attacks, the most gruesome of which was in October 2016 when a mob formed around a commercial bus that had broken down in Kaduna State, hacked the Fulani passengers to death, set the bus and one other vehicle on fire, and killed 14.<sup>28</sup> Nonetheless, the tracker we are maintaining at the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Wilberforce Initiative indicates that in the last eighteen months (January 2016 – July 2017), less than 4% of all victims were Fulani.

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Center estimates that as of June 2017 there were 185,000 IDPs across the Middle Belt of Nigeria, and most are not living in camps but in communities that have been impacted or are susceptible to attack.<sup>29</sup> Many of these IDPs report that they have not received any outside help or support. Thousands of hectares of crops have been destroyed leaving portions of the Middle Belt more vulnerable to food insecurity and even famine. Multiple villages have been burned to the ground, and in at least some instances, that territory has been claimed by Fulani militants for grazing territory.

Since January 2016 there have been at least 179 different attacks. Available evidence appears to indicate that the vast majority of these attacks have been asymmetrical, initiated by Fulani militants, and concentrated on villages that are predominantly comprised of Christians.

There is evidence that some Fulani in neighboring countries have been radicalized, and that given the interplay and interlinks between Fulani, this could have knock-on effects in Nigeria and beyond.<sup>30</sup> There are also indicators that some Fulani militants are repeating the tactics of Boko Haram in terms of community attacks. Nonetheless, it must be stressed that as of yet there are not substantive indicators that religion is the primary motivation.

Our own working thesis, which continues to remain open to change as new evidence emerges:

Fulani militants seem to be primarily driven by economic interests of securing additional and permanent grazing territory but are almost exclusively attacking LGAs that have high percentages of Christians, a minority religion. It is therefore an economic driver being played out along religious and ethnic lines in an environment of general insecurity and impunity and thus has real potential for further escalation.

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<sup>27</sup> Wale Odunsi, "Herdsman Killings: ICC Begins Investigation," *Daily Post* (August 17, 2017), <http://dailypost.ng/2017/08/17/herdsmen-killings-icc-begins-investigation/> (accessed September 26, 2017).

<sup>28</sup> "Mob Attacks Fulani Herdsmen in Nigeria," *AFP* (October 18, 2016): <http://www.timeslive.co.za/africa/2016/10/18/Mob-attacks-Fulani-herdsmen-in-Nigeria> (accessed November 9, 2016).

<sup>29</sup> "Nigeria: Figures Analysis," *Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre* <http://www.internal-displacement.org/assets/country-profiles/NGA-Nigeria-Figures-Analysis.pdf> (accessed September 26, 2017).

<sup>30</sup> Akinyemi Akinrujumu, "Buhari Blames Mali, Libya for Fulani Herdsmen Attacks," *Naij* (November 22, 2016).

Christian LGAs therefore seem to be the primary victims of the attacks and have disproportionately suffered from this conflict, not primarily because of religious rationales, but seemingly out of a political calculation that there will not be significant negative repercussions for concentrating attacks on these communities. The evidence on the ground thus far proves the calculation accurate. The numbers of victims and costs to peace and human flourishing are already astonishing, but should this cycle continue, the possibility that this could devolve into a conflict more clearly framed around religious lines is real and which could have catastrophic consequences for Nigeria and the region as a whole.

Some, such as the on-the-ground organization the Stefanos Foundation, believe that the process of religious ideological calcification is already further advanced. Others believe that this not yet a significant factor. Identifying where on this continuum the process exists is difficult. What is clear – even if the internal motivations are primarily economic – the violence is being most consistently deployed against religious minorities, which in this case are Christian communities.

It is possible that over 90% of all of the victims of the violence in the Middle Belt come from Christian communities.

If it is true that these are the communities in the Middle Belt that have been most impacted and that are most vulnerable to these particular attacks, that should give policy makers areas for potential initial engagement.

## **VI. Middle Belt Violence: Lowered Thresholds Driving this Violence**

Addressing the conflict in the Middle Belt is urgent. While identifying the organizers of the violence remains contested, one approach would be to consider how to increase the barriers that naturally preclude violent attacks. Conversely, ongoing corruption, negative reactions from the government and government forces, undermined rule of law, weakened institutions, famine, and the violence of Boko Haram have all lowered the thresholds towards violence in Nigeria. If these thresholds could be strengthened the result would be a decrease in conflict. Though others could be identified, ten thresholds seem to be of particular relevance.

1. Lack of development, lack of infrastructure, lack of education and lack of meaningful employment opportunities across much of northern Nigerian and the Middle Belt;
2. Influx of weapons and a lowering of their price across West Africa in general, in part due to failed states such as Libya;
3. Transnational loyalty and relationships among Fulani that enhance spread of weapons, negative ideology, sources of solidarity and perhaps at times experienced militants;
4. Pastoral lifestyle that has existed for hundreds of years and maintains an ideal status within the collective identity of many Fulani is facing substantive pressure and the possibility that this system could collapse. This includes financial pressures, tightening border control, restricted access to previous grazing routes, and changing environmental patterns;
5. Changing migratory and ownership patterns within Fulani are forcing migration patterns that are more southward and western and bringing new Fulani into local contexts without established local relationships. There are also changing dynamics around cattle ownership and the possibility that at least a few elites may be using off-the-books Fulani protection units to guard and move their cattle;
6. Growth of negative religious ideology among some;

7. General chaos and opportunistic cover provided by Boko Haram;
8. Hollowing out of the Nigerian State and historic ramifications of corruption which also corresponds to a strengthening within impacted communities that their religion is under attack and they need to look to themselves and/or their co-religionists / co-ethnicities for self-protection;
9. Lack of appropriate government response which in general has tended not to respond to violence in the Middle Belt and which in turn enforces the pursued actions, sense of victimization, self-organized protection, and an enhanced spiral of violence;
10. Negative on the ground narratives and legal realities which are clouding new engagement including: (1) historic context of discrimination against religious minorities, (2) historic narratives of victimhood, (3) constitutional issues around definitions of indigenous communities, and (4) continued narratives framed around herder-farmer conflict.

Though each threshold is unique, they are interrelated, and they each offer a meaningful point of engagement by both the Nigerian and the international community. Should these various thresholds be raised, the likelihood of largescale intercommunal violence would decrease.

## **VII. Middle Belt Violence: Strategies for Engagement Today**

Nigeria is facing a critical human rights juncture. But it is not a situation without hope. Real and significant progress has been made in addressing other challenges within Nigeria, and real and significant progress is available within the Middle Belt. Among other possibilities, the following strategies could lead to greater engagement today:

1. Identify strategies to address each of the above thresholds so that violence is less likely.
2. Urge the rapid appointment of an Assistant Secretary of State for Africa and during the confirmation hearings work to ensure there are questions about religions freedom within Africa broadly and Nigeria specifically.
3. When conflict in the Middle Belt is combined with the ongoing famine and Boko Haram, this complex situation quickly becomes a regional problem with trans-national movement and support. Urge the appointment of a Special Envoy who could marshal a regional response or otherwise work to ensure that there is a formal working group within the various regional stakeholders seeking to address these realities.
4. Strengthen and expand the portfolio of Ambassador Dan Mozena. Ambassador Mozena is currently appointed as Senior Coordinator on Boko Haram. This position could be expanded to include Boko Haram and violence in the Middle Belt and Ambassador Mozena's platform for engagement could be strengthened.
5. On December 14, 2016 S. 1632 / H.R. 3833 was signed into law directing the Departments of State and Defense to jointly develop a five-year strategy to help Nigeria. This could be expanded to include not only Boko Haram but also violence in the Middle Belt. Given the impact this strategy could ultimately have on the human rights situation in Nigeria, this Commission could request a hearing to evaluate the degree to which this plan has been developed and implemented.
6. Every six months there is a scheduled Bi-Lateral Commission meeting held between U.S. and Nigerian officials that has four working groups: Human Rights, Agricultural Development, Economic Development and Security, all of which would have relevance in the Middle Belt. Efforts could be taken to encourage the Bi-Lateral Commission to strategically discuss the Middle Belt.

7. In any pending or future arms sales to Nigeria, work to ensure that sale includes human rights training. To further emphasize this importance, this Commission could request a hearing that would investigate the actual curriculum on human rights training that is being offered, who is conducting that training, mechanisms to connect the human rights training to relevant Nigerian stakeholders such as the Human Rights Committee of the Nigerian National Assembly, and methods being utilized to evaluate the effectiveness and implementation of this training.
8. Work with counterparts in the Nigerian National Assembly to constitute a caucus focused on religious freedom and human rights among minority populations across Nigeria.
9. Call on the Nigerian Government to demonstrate their commitment to rule of law by stationing police across the Middle Belt in communities that have already been impacted.
10. Urge people of faith and goodwill across Nigeria to continue to build relationships with one another and to peacefully work towards a shared future of continued flourishing.