

CASE STUDIES ON LAND AND CONFLICT IN THE ARAB REGION

MOROCCO

Conflicts between nomadic pastoralists and farmers in the Souss region



Figure 1. Transhumance practices of local shepherds, Morocco. Source: Moussa Idrissi/Pexels

NATURE OF THE CONFLICT

Situated in the middle of the Kingdom of Morocco, Souss-Massa stretches from the Atlantic Ocean to the Atlas Mountains and the border with Algeria (Figure 2). As a junction between the north and the south of the country, it has an important strategic, economic and socio-cultural role.

This region has one of the most productive agroecosystems in Morocco (Hirich et al., 2016). Souss-Massa is known for pastoralist activities, which were traditionally integrated with settled farming. However, the traditional relationship of complementarity and cooperation between farmers and pastoralists has become confrontational (Boubrik, 2022). Although the overall number of mobile pastoralists in Morocco has decreased significantly, from around 68,500 in 2004 to 25,300 in 2014, an ever-growing number are moving towards the north of the country particularly to the Souss area, in search of pastures (Minority Rights Group, 2019).

Historically, pastoralists from the south-west used to move to the Souss region as part of their seasonal grazing routes. Their movement was regulated by agreements with the local farmers, which ensured that they respected cultivated areas (Boubrik, 2022). This was generally at well-defined period in the seasonal migration cycle and largely confined to specific grazing areas (Minority Rights Group, 2019). However, conflicts between the two groups – often leading to violent clashes – have been reported during the past few years. The settled farmers accuse the mobile pastoralists of trespassing on their lands and destroying crops.

These clashes have emerged concurrently with major transformations in Morocco's rural areas. Large areas that were once used as rangelands have been designated for cultivation by the Moroccan government's "Plan Vert" (Green Plan), launched in 2008 with support from international funding agencies and development organizations. Moreover, strict forest protection laws

have further adjusted the movement of the mobile pastoralists and their flocks. Such landscape dissection and compression associated with the land use changes driven by agricultural intensification are contributing to the decline of mobile pastoralism in the entire Arab region and have often been associated with conflicts (Hobbs et al., 2008; Zurayk et al., 2010).

Bedouins in the Arab region as well as pastoralists elsewhere have a different perception of land from the settled farmers. They believe that rangelands should be open to them as they have customary claims on their use, even though the land may formally “belong” to settled communities.

This communal vision of property is at odds with the increasingly dominant concept of land as private property, which has accompanied the movement of investment capital into farmland, spelling the end of “free access.” This trend is exacerbated by the fact that many settled communities practice livestock farming. The reduction of available pastureland is associated with these settled communities’ refusal to “share” the pastures with the mobile pastoralists who originate from the south.

Similar transformations have swept through the world of pastoralists who switched from subsistence to commercial herding. Mobile livestock production, which was traditionally a precarious, subsistence-driven activity,

is rapidly becoming a commodity trading endeavour, aimed at satisfying the increasing demand for meat in the urban areas, itself driven by dietary changes. Market forces and the lure of large profits have driven the intensification of livestock production in recent times, taking the system beyond its ecological limits. Swollen flocks, fed on a mix of animal feed and natural grazing, transported over long distances by trucks are now commonplace. These require far more rangeland than is available.

In this new world of livestock production, two types of pastoralists have emerged. The first type, which appeared around three decades ago, practices intensive pastoralism for commodity trading gains. These are mainly camel herders and are generally high official businessmen, army officers, political figures, and tribal leaders who live in urban areas and run their livestock businesses remotely, organized into cooperatives and associations. Camel breeding referred to as “entrepreneurial breeding” (Bonte, 2017) and aims to supply the local market of the southern provinces with camel meat and milk.

The second category are the “*kassaba*” breeders of large herds of sheep and other small ruminants (500 to 1,500 animals). These are heads of families who decided to make a living out of herding, destined to sell meat to the local markets depending on demand. They often hold

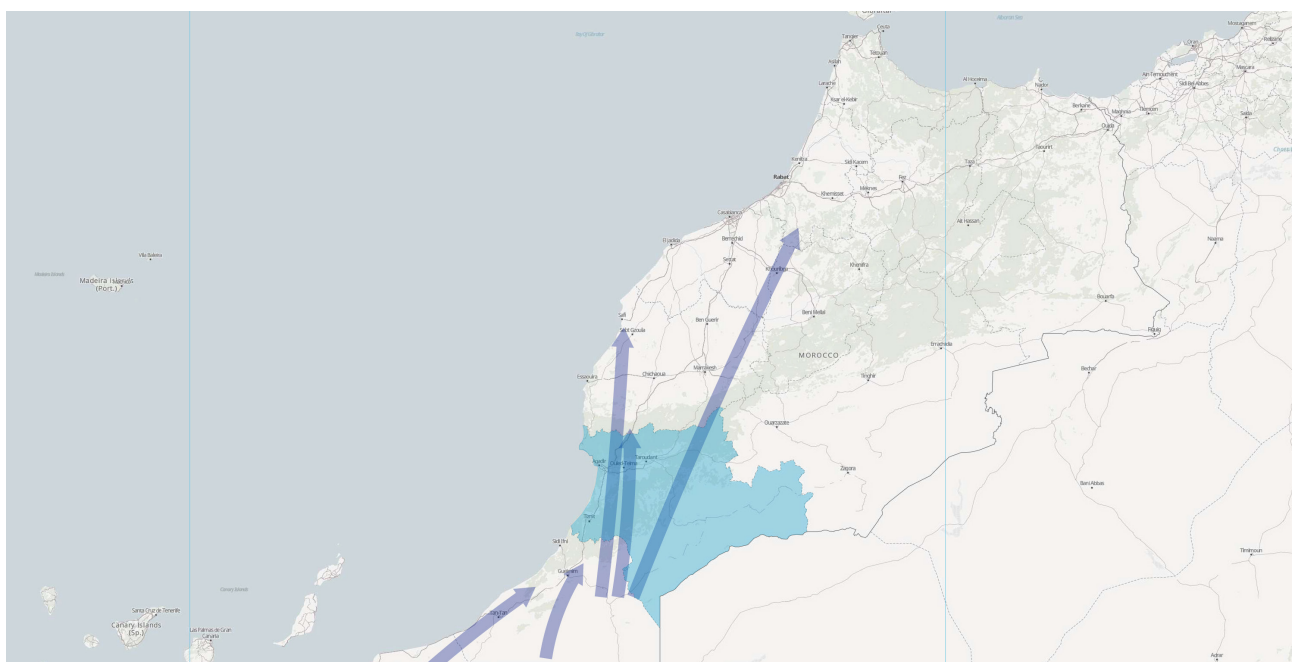


Figure 2. Souss-Massa region, Morocco, showing main pastoral movement routes. Source: Base map from UN GeoPortal, routes adapted from the image in Boubrik (2022)

other jobs at the same time. During the dry season, due to the scarcity of natural grazing resources and the lack of water, they direct their herds to the riparian parts of Souss (Figure 2). Bigger and oversized herds require new mobility techniques, such as trucks and off-road cars to cover many areas in the quickest way possible. Hence, mechanical transportation replaced the traditional modes of pastoral mobility, and access to technology such as mobile phones allowed pastoralists to take their herds to farther locations around the country. Trucks have revolutionized mobility, allowing pastoralists to explore more distant routes (Ben Saad and Bourbouze, 2010).

These non-traditional *kassaba* pastoralists, mostly young people at the service of big entrepreneurs looking to sell meat at the national level, stand in opposition to the usual self-subsistence activities. Their presence disturbed the existing environmental and social relationships in the Souss region, leading to confrontations and violent clashes over access to land and resources. While the traditional pastoralists kept flocks as fungible assets and benefited principally from selling dairy products, the *kassaba*'s aim is to fattening the largest possible number of sheep during one or two seasons and then selling to the abattoirs combine other form of activities with herd migration during times of resource scarcity sell meat to the local markets depending on demand. entrepreneurial breeders of camels live in urban areas and run their livestock businesses remotely sell meat at the national level young people at the service of big entrepreneurs heads of families who decided to make a living out of herding practices intensive pastoralism for commodity trading gains breeders of sheep and other small ruminants *kassaba* high official businessmen, army officers, political figures, and tribal leaders camel herders. The later approach is driven by entrepreneurial capital and is based on overstocking animals beyond the carrying capacity of the rangelands, regardless of the resulting environmental damage.

In addition to mechanization, a new social perspective emerged, reshaping pastoral movements. Previously, pastoralists used to only move around their tribal areas; however, this has changed as the liberal and capitalist



Figure 3. "Traditional" sheep holders in rural landscape of Morocco.
Source: Tobias Waibl/Pexels

concept of the "individual" as a "citizen of the whole nation and country" has become more prominent. The pastoralists feel that they have the right to move wherever they want within the whole territory of the state, justifying it as their right as Moroccan citizens. The state does allow transhumance, as long as it respects the law and private properties. Thus, nomadic routes no longer follow the traditional pastoralist axes of mobility, and the traditional farmer–pastoral relationships are ruptured, creating challenges for both settled populations and pastoralists alike (Boubrik, 2019).

CONFLICT MANIFESTATIONS

Because the arrival of pastoralists to the Souss coincides with the harvest season, the massive herds destroy and consume crops, depriving farmers of their only annual income (Boubrik, 2022). Every year, without exception, the elevated tension triggers violent conflicts. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, shepherds took advantage of the lockdowns to lead their flocks into villages and agricultural land and attacked residents who tried to oppose them (Boubrik, 2022). Confrontations between individuals transformed into pitched battles with the use of cold weapons¹ and vehicles, resulting in tragic deaths on both sides. The land

¹ A weapon that does not involve fire or explosions, such as knives, spears, and daggers.

tenure system at Souss is communal, and rangelands are the collective property of the residents (apart from private and state lands). As land is managed according to customary law, mobilization takes place in a collective manner to defend the land and its resources, which increases the chances of large clashes. Some villagers started locking up and even poisoning watering holes to push pastoralists out of their lands (Boubrik, 2021).

At the community level, demonstrations and sit-ins are taking place to protest pastoral encroachment and aggressions, and even students are dropping out of school to protest with their parents. Associations of Souss peasants maintain strong social media presence, propagating their positions. The conflict took a political dimension, as the herders are widely accused on social media of being part of an “Arab pastoralists mafia” funded by Arabian Gulf capital, and in coordination with the Moroccan state, trying to establish control over Amazigh tribal land and force the native population out. Boubrik (2021) argues that conflicts between pastoralists and settled farmers cross ethnic boundaries and often take place among groups that share kinship, but that the use of the term “Arab” versus “Amazigh” is essentially the political instrumentalization of this issue. The terms “Bedouin”, “mobile” (rouhhal), and “Arab” have become synonymous, indicating that “Arab” is not always used strictly as an ethnic descriptor. However, it is frequently interpreted this way by outside experts, which imposes an ethnic tone on conflicts where one does not apply. This narrative obscures the root issue of the disruption caused by the penetration and infusion of external capital and by the over-exploitation of land-based resources beyond the carrying capacity of the ecosystems; it also fuels the wrong perception of intractability of “ethnic conflicts”.

■ ROOT CAUSES

The intensification of production by both farmers and pastoralists is primarily driven by infusion of external capital into rural areas, aiming to create easily marketable commodities. Also, natural resource scarcity associated with climatic fluctuations and change constitute the layered root causes of the conflict. Intensification of production beyond the territory’s ecological limits also fundamentally alters the social relations between farmers and pastoralists.

Appropriate governmental plans related to agriculture and land tenure systems are lacking and, collective communal lands are not managed properly. The authorities are unable to intervene and establish effective conflict resolution mechanisms. These elements combine into weak land governance, which is another powerful root cause of the conflict.

■ PROXIMATE FACTORS

The “Plan Vert” initiated in 2008 stipulated policies that aim to maximize agricultural production. Its objective is to make agriculture one of the main growth engines of the country (Boubrik, 2022). This has encouraged the expansion of agricultural surfaces, thereby restricting grazing and hindering transhumance corridors. Consequently, the privatization of land advanced, and ever more territory came under private or state ownership. After a mutual agreement with farmers, pastoralists were allowed to access agricultural fields and feed their livestock with crop residues. However, nowadays, farmers banned access to their private lands in response to encroachments of huge herds, which has fuelled violent clashes between the two parties.

TABLE 1: ROOT CAUSE ANALYSIS OF LAND AND CONFLICT IN SOUSS-MASSA, MOROCCO

ROOT CAUSES	PROXIMATE FACTORS	TRIGGERS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Penetration and infusion of external capital • Over-exploitation of land-based resources • Weak land administration and management systems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changes in farming and pastoralist modes of production • Changes in land use and in land users (from rangelands to commercial farming) • Climate change and land degradation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Destruction of crops by groups of pastoralists • Fencing off and excluding pastoralists from traditional grazing land • Poisoning of water wells

The change of the farming mode of production is a proximate factor to the conflict. Pastoralists' mode of production also changed simultaneously, from subsistence to commodity trading, as they pursue financial profitability without considering the ecological implications. In addition, apprenticeship and technical knowledge used to be passed down between generations of shepherds, including the mutual respect of villagers, their lands, and the environment. The new generation of pastoralists, working to maximise profit do not have the required skills to take care of the herd and do not take into consideration the wellbeing of the community and their surroundings, triggering conflicts with the villagers (Boubrik, 2022).

Climate change has resulted in rising temperatures, reduced rainfall, and longer spells of drought. These impacts intensify competition over resources, leading to clashes between the two parties (Minority Rights Group, 2019). They also accentuate the vulnerability of both groups, creating an atmosphere of mistrust that is conducive to conflicts. Each year 1,557 hectares of rangelands are lost to drought and degradation in the Maghreb region, and in nearly three decades, more than 8.3 million hectares of land have been severely degraded (Skalski, 2021).

TRIGGERS

The years of 2009 and 2010 were exceptionally wet and fertile in the region of the Souss River, especially when compared to the previous drought years. Mobile pastoralists from the east and south of Morocco flocked to the area. Since then, Souss became the favoured destination of mobile pastoralists, who trucked large herds into the area, triggering an intensification of the tensions between with the farmers. Such conflicts rapidly became violent and recurrent, while only isolated disputes had been occasionally reported in previous years.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION MECHANISMS

The mechanism for conflict resolution and inter-tribal alliances have disappeared due to the weakening of kinship ties. Consequently, traditional governance of collective natural resources and customary conflict-management system are no longer effective. The villagers are mainly concerned about the degradation of agricultural resources such as land, forests, and water,

and the management of pastoralist passage, whereas the state is worried that confrontations cause disturbances of public order, social peace, and coexistence. Driven by different perceptions, each involved party has adopted different resolution mechanisms.

Souss residents and elected members of the municipalities have taken the problem to the authorities to demand interventions against the pastoralists. Some presidents of municipal councils even went as far as submitting their resignations in response to what they perceived to be an overly passive state. Nationalist Amazigh groups have taken on this issue and made it their "cause célèbre".

Nomadic pastoralists organized themselves into associations to defend their interest. They too are concerned regarding the state's intervention. For instance, the president of the Association of Southern Herders for Development and Cooperation denounced the intervention of political parties in the quarrels between nomadic herders and peasants in the Souss region (Boubrik, 2022).

Due to the intensification of conflicts, in 2016 the state promulgated Law No. 113.13 on pastoral transhumance, and on the management and development of pastoral areas². The objective of this law is to put in place a specific and appropriate legal framework to remedy the critical conditions of rangelands caused by extensive pastoral activity. This is the first law in the history of Morocco that aims to provide a comprehensive legal framework for pastoral transhumance. This law is conditioned by a certain number of organic laws but only one related organic law has been approved by the government in 2018, with 17 more yet to be adopted. Further, since its approval the government has been progressively enacting implementing legal measures which have not yet led to full implementation of the law.

In 2018, the Ministry of Agriculture with the support of Qatar established a pastoral area of 2,000 hectares of fodder trees, to accommodate the herders and their families and provide proper sanitation and electrical infrastructure. However, as the area remains void of vegetation and cannot serve as a grazing space, the pastoralists started opposing this state-led initiative. Among continuing protests and submission of complaints, a satisfactory solution to this conflict is yet to be found.

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ABOUT THE CASE STUDY

The case study 'Conflicts between Nomadic Pastoralists and Farmers in the Souss Region' was documented by the Arab Land Initiative of UN-Habitat and the Global Land Tool Network (GLTN), in partnership with the Arab Group for the Protection of Nature (APN). This study forms part of a broader effort to analyze land-related conflict dynamics across the Arab region. The multi-level analysis draws on data from Dr. Rahal Boubrik's contribution to the Expert Group Meeting held in March 2021 and his 2022 paper 'Pastoralisme et Tensions Sociales au Sud du Maroc' and applies the GLTN tool 'How to Do a Root Cause Analysis of Land and Conflict for Peace Building' to identify the root causes of conflict, its proximate factors and triggers.

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Authors: Mariam Al Jaajaa, Rami Zurayk, Minerva Sadek, Elle Ambler

Reviewers and contributors: Rahal Boubrik, Clarissa Augustinus, Francesca La Monaca, Roula Maya, Abba Mehdi, Tempra Ombretta, Sina Schlimmer, Eleonora Francesca Serpi, Lisa Shahin.

Graphic designer: Francesca La Monaca

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UNITED NATIONS HUMAN SETTLEMENTS PROGRAMME

UN-Habitat

P.O. 30030, Nairobi, 00100, Kenya

Tel: +254 20 762 3120

Fax: +254 20 762 4266

www.unhabitat.org

GLTN Secretariat

Facilitated by UN-Habitat

P.O. 30030, Nairobi, 00100, Kenya

Tel: +254 20 76 5199

Fax: +254 20 762 4256

E-mail: gltn@unhabitat.org

www.gltn.net



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