

Complex Conflicts in Africa



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Executive Summary

On the night of June 4-5, 2021, unknown assailants massacred at least 160 people in Solhan, Burkina Faso.² How could that country, long hailed for its tolerant society,³ have descended into mass violence?

As estimates of Solhan's casualties rose, accusations about culpability flew: the regional affiliate of al-Qaida denied responsibility,⁴ but even the Islamic State called that a lie.⁵ Observers pondered the massacre's broader causes, pointing to divisive civilian vigilantes,⁶ contentious gold mining,⁷ and the failures of military-centric responses to the wider Sahel crisis.⁸ None of these explanations are mutually exclusive. Meanwhile, the questions confronting Burkina Faso are relevant to conflicts elsewhere in Africa.

This paper analyzes the continent's conflict landscape, focusing on *complexity*. The paper critiques buzzwords such as "state fragility," "ethnic violence," "extremism," and "poor governance." Rather, the paper focuses on multi-causality, ambiguity, history, contingency, human agency, state policy, and endogenous conflict processes.

Much of Africa is peaceful and stable. Many trends in Africa appear in other regions, and Africa should not be pathologized. Yet resolving the continent's conflicts will not be easy. Strategies predicated on counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, military training programs, and "good governance" have all faltered. Many peace agreements have proven flimsy. External interventions have often done harm as well as good. The paper recommends extreme caution for external actors, including NATO, seeking to build peace in Africa.

² "Burkina Faso : après le massacre de Solhan, le bilan relevé à 160 morts," *Le Monde*, 6 June 2021, accessed 11 July 2021, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2021/06/06/burkina-faso-apres-le-massacre-de-solhan-le-bilan-releve-a-160-morts_6083098_3212.html.

³ See International Crisis Group, "Burkina Faso: Preserving the Religious Balance," 6 September 2016, accessed 11 July 2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/afrika/west-afrika/burkina-faso/burkina-faso-preserving-religious-balance>.

⁴ Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wa-l-Muslimin, "Bayan wa-stinkar," 8 June 2021, posted by the journalist Wassim Nasr to Twitter, accessed 11 July 2021, <https://twitter.com/SimNasr/status/1402300648113291264>.

⁵ Islamic State, "50 Qatilan wa-Jarihan min Quwwat Nayjiriya wa-Nijar," *Al-Naba'* 292 (24 June 2021): 6-7, accessed 11 July 2021, <https://jihadology.net/wp-content/uploads/pda/2021/06/The-Islamic-State-al-Naba%CC%84-Newsletter-292.pdf> (registration required). See also MENASTREAM, Twitter post, 24 June 2021, accessed 11 July 2021, <https://twitter.com/MENASTREAM/status/1408155312142491649>.

⁶ Grégoire Sauvage, "Burkina Faso: Islamist Groups Target Civilians in 'Cycle of Vendettas'," *France24*, 7 June 2021, accessed 11 July 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/afrika/20210607-burkina-faso-islamist-groups-target-civilians-in-cycle-of-vendettas>.

⁷ Neil Munshi, "Instability in the Sahel: How a Jihadi Gold Rush Is Fuelling Violence in Africa," *Financial Times*, 27 June 2021, accessed 11 July 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/8ff4c2ca-7ac3-4f3b-96ba-6fb74bbb60d5>.

⁸ Matthieu Millecamps, "Massacre de Solhan au Burkina : pourquoi l'armée ne parvient pas à protéger les civils," *Jeune Afrique*, 9 June 2021, accessed 11 July 2021, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1185689/politique/massacre-de-solhan-au-burkina-larmee-incapable-de-contenir-la-violence-contre-les-civils/>.

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1. Introduction

Parts of Africa are among the world's major theaters of war. Conflict declined in Africa during the late 1990s and the 2000s,⁹ but the 2010s brought an increase in state violence, environmental stressors, and religious mobilization.¹⁰ The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) project counted nearly 40,000 violent fatalities on the African continent in 2020.¹¹ The same year, the Uppsala Conflict Data Program counted fifty-six state-based conflicts worldwide – a “record-high number” – of which thirty were in Africa.¹² Both ACLED and the International Crisis Group place Ethiopia, the Sahel, and other African conflict zones in the list of conflicts that worry them the most.¹³

Many contemporary African conflicts are multi-dimensional. This is not to suggest that anticolonial or Cold War-era rebellions were simple – even wars between states and clearly delineated rebel forces often involved sub-conflicts. Yet the continent's post-Cold War conflicts feature multiple protagonists, murky motives, crowded fields of external actors, and fraught interactions between battlefields and politics. “Warlords,” “parochial rebels,” and government-aligned militias blur battle-lines between states and rebels.¹⁴

Reductionist terms – “state fragility,” “violent extremism,” “porous borders,” “inter-communal violence,” and “resource conflict” – are regularly invoked to explain conflict in Africa. These terms have some value. For example, according to the 2020 Fragile States Index, African states made up fifteen of the world's twenty most fragile states.¹⁵ In terms of violent extremism, organizations affiliated with either al-Qaida or the Islamic State operate in the Sahel, the Lake Chad Basin, Somalia, Mozambique, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Meanwhile, border regions are indeed often hotspots of conflict.¹⁶ Inter-communal violence is another trend, with contemporary conflicts unraveling formerly peaceful inter-ethnic relationships. Finally, various groups fight for control over oil, gold, or other resources.

Yet the continent's conflicts are too varied to simply reflect generic factors such as state fragility. For one thing, history matters: for example, Somalia and South Sudan were respectively ranked

⁹ Scott Straus, “Wars do end! Changing patterns of political violence in sub-Saharan Africa,” *African Affairs* 111:443 (April 2012): 179-201.

¹⁰ Paul D. Williams, “Continuity and Change in War and Conflict in Africa,” *PRISM* 6:4, 16 May 2017, accessed 11 July 2021, <https://cco.ndu.edu/PRISM-6-4/Article/1171839/continuity-and-change-in-war-and-conflict-in-africa/>.

¹¹ Calculations using the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project database, accessed 11 July 2021, <https://acleddata.com/dashboard/#/dashboard>.

¹² Therése Pettersson et al., “Organized Violence 1989-2020, with a Special Emphasis on Syria,” *Journal of Peace Research*, published online 1 July 2021, accessed 11 July 2021, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/00223433211026126#_i11.

¹³ Clionadh Raleigh et al., “Ten Conflicts to Worry About in 2021,” Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, 2 February 2021, accessed 11 July 2021, <https://acleddata.com/2021/02/02/ten-conflicts-to-worry-about-in-2021/>; Robert Malley, “10 Conflicts to Watch in 2021,” International Crisis Group, 30 December 2020, accessed 11 July 2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/10-conflicts-watch-2021>, accessed 11 July 2021.

¹⁴ William Reno, *Warfare in Independent Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

¹⁵ Fragile States Index, “Global Data (2020),” accessed 11 July 2021, <https://fragilestatesindex.org/data/>.

¹⁶ See Marie Trémolières, Olivier Walther, and Steven Radil, “Conflict Networks in North and West Africa,” OECD, 2021, accessed 11 July 2021, https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/development/the-geography-of-conflict-in-north-and-west-africa_02181039-en?_ga=2.208878290.1197555047.1625412877-1922884364.1625412877.

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second and third on the 2020 Fragile States Index. Yet Somalia's fragmentation after the central state collapsed in 1991 thrust new actors into the spotlight, whereas South Sudan's civil war since 2013, just two years after that country's independence, has been dominated by long-familiar faces. Meanwhile, not all states react the same way to rebellion. Even a single state may act inconsistently: Nigeria has cracked down uncompromisingly on the Boko Haram insurgency, pursued a flawed amnesty program in the oil-rich Niger Delta, veered between bluster and confusion in confronting rebels in the south east, and reacted haltingly to banditry in the northwest. Finally, violence shapes violence – processes, choices, and contingencies build on one another to shape events, narrow pathways, and reshape identities.¹⁷

2. Methodology and Structure of the Paper

This paper surveys secondary literature from scholars, think tanks, governments, and non-governmental organizations. To illustrate themes, the paper refers to particular conflicts, drawing on primary documents, journalistic coverage, and secondary literature. Given the author's research focus on West Africa and the Sahel, most examples are taken from those subregions.

The core of this paper is the following section, titled “The Landscape of Contemporary Armed Conflict in Africa.” That section comprises four sub-sections: “a multiplicity of actors,” “types of armed conflict,” “how politics shapes conflict,” and “patterns and trends.” A further section assesses some implications of Africa's conflict trends when it comes to international stabilization efforts. The paper closes with recommendations for NATO and a brief conclusion.

3. The Landscape of Contemporary Armed Conflict in Africa

a. A multiplicity of actors

As in Syria and elsewhere, African conflicts often feature a fragmented landscape of actors, posing profound challenges for states, peacebuilders, and analysts. Fragmentation can follow different pathways. First, a single armed movement can fracture along interpersonal, ethnic, or ideological lines. Second, peace processes can cause violent disagreements among rebels, and/or incentivize the formation of new rebel groups for political gain. Third, actions elicit reactions: as one group or community arms itself, others may feel a need to arm themselves as well. Fourth, states may tolerate militias as counterweights to rebels, but withdrawing support can turn militias against the state. All of these forms of fragmentation can appear within a single conflict, as has been the case in Mali.¹⁸

¹⁷ Wolfram Lacher, *Libya's Fragmentation: Structure and Process in Violent Conflict* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2020); see also Stathis Kalyvas, “Ethnic Defection in Civil War,” *Comparative Political Studies* 41:8 (2008): 1043-1068.

¹⁸ For histories of rebel fragmentation in northern Mali, see Baz Lecocq, *Disputed Desert: Decolonization, Competing Nationalisms and Tuareg Rebellions in Mali* (Leiden: Brill, 2010); and Pierre Boilley, *Les Touaregs Kel Adagh. Dépendances et révoltes : du Soudan français au Mali contemporain* (Paris: Karthala, 2012); and Stephanie Pezard and Michael Shurkin, *Achieving Peace in Northern Mali: Past Agreements, Local Conflicts, and the Prospects for a Durable Settlement* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2015). For a critical perspective on the current peace deal for northern Mali, the 2015 Algiers Accord, see Judd Devemont and Marielle Harris, “Why Mali

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Fragmentation weakens authority, and is hard to reverse; in many conflicts, centrifugal forces are more powerful than centripetal ones. Yet there are few truly “ungoverned spaces”: concepts such as “rebel governance,”¹⁹ “alternatively governed spaces,”²⁰ and “heterarchy”²¹ point to the advantages armed movements can offer ordinary people, including protection, arbitration, resource management, and services. Meanwhile, civilians sometimes impose political costs on armed movements that behave abusively – civilians can, for example, throw support to rival armed groups.

Another result of fragmentation is ambiguity about the perpetrators of violence.²² Under cover of fragmentation, opportunists can attack with a degree of impunity; sometimes it can be difficult to attribute responsibility for a given attack. Stories abound of assailants passing themselves off as someone else, for example when extremists don soldiers’ uniforms. Disputes break out over state responses to violence, or lack thereof – in many conflicts, soldiers are accused of failing to prevent attacks despite advance warning, which can raise accusations of incompetence, fear, or collusion. All of these problems have appeared in Nigeria, for example.²³ Competing accounts, rumors, conspiracy theories, disinformation, and denialism can all originate with governments, militaries, armed groups, civil society organizations, and/or local communities.²⁴ The multiplicity of competing perceptions can itself fuel conflict.

Needs a New Peace Deal,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, 15 April 2020, accessed 13 July 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/why-mali-needs-new-peace-deal>. For background on how one community’s decision to take up arms can produce domino effects, see Adam Thiam, “Centre du Mali: Enjeux et Dangers d’une crise négligée,” Center for Humanitarian Dialogue and Institut du Macina, March 2017, accessed 13 July 2021, <https://www.hdcentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Centre-du-Mali-Enjeux-et-dangers-dune-crise-n%C3%A9glig%C3%A9e.pdf>. Finally, for reporting on the challenges the state has faced in attempting to subdue militias, see Rémi Carayol, “Mali. Le jeu trouble de l’État avec les milices,” *OrientXXI*, 9 August 2019, accessed 13 July 2021, <https://orientxxi.info/magazine/mali-le-jeu-trouble-de-l-etat-avec-les-milices.3207>.

¹⁹ Ana Arjona, Nelson Kasfir, and Zachariah Mampilly, eds., *Rebel Governance in Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

²⁰ Clionadh Raleigh and Caitriona Dowd, “Governance and Conflict in the Sahel’s ‘Ungoverned Space’,” *Stability Journal* 2:2 (2013), accessed 13 July 2021, available at <https://www.stabilityjournal.org/articles/10.5334/sta.bs/>.

²¹ Thomas Hüsken and Georg Klute, “Political Orders in the Making: Emerging Forms of Political Organization from Libya to Northern Mali,” *African Security* 8:4 (2015): 320-337.

²² See Jacob Mundy, *Imaginative Geographies of Algerian Violence: Conflict Science, Conflict Management, Antipolitics* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015).

²³ On ambiguity about perpetrators, see Bulama Bukarti, “Nigeria’s School Kidnapping Crisis Is Even Worse Than You Think,” *Washington Post*, 9 June 2021, accessed 13 July 2021,

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/06/09/nigerias-school-kidnapping-crisis-is-even-worse-than-you-think/>. On actors impersonating soldiers, see John Campbell, “Nigerian Military Introduces Controversial Plans to Identify Terrorists and Criminals,” Council on Foreign Relations’ Africa in Transition blog, 30 October 2019, accessed 13 July 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/nigerian-military-introduces-controversial-plans-identify-terrorists-and-criminals>. On soldiers’ failure to act, see Amnesty International, “Nigerian Authorities Failed to Act on Warnings about Boko Haram Raid on School,” 9 May 2014, accessed 13 July 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/press-releases/2014/05/nigerian-authorities-failed-act-warnings-about-boko-haram-raid-school/>.

²⁴ For one discussion of this phenomenon, see Adam Sandor, “The Power of Rumour(s) in International Interventions: MINUSMA’s Management of Mali’s Rumour Mill,” *International Affairs* 96:4 (2020): 913-934.

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b. Types of armed conflict

Formal, declared, interstate wars are rare in Africa today (although cross-border incursions by states are not at all rare). Several other types of armed conflict are prominent:

First, *conventional civil wars*, in the sense of a binary conflict largely bounded by one state's borders. There are at least four subtypes of such wars: (a) war between a central state and a separatist movement seeking autonomy for a particular territory; (b) war between incumbents and a rebel movement that seeks to capture the state apparatus for itself; (c) war between two incumbents competing for control of the state; and (d) rebellion by a subnational actor seeking greater recognition.²⁵

Second, *jihadist insurgencies*. Jihadists aim at overthrowing the existing state system and imposing their version of the just Islamic society, although jihadist ideology sometimes appears to be a cover for more materially-minded actors.²⁶ Jihadists' efforts at building "proto-states" typically evoke major military interventions,²⁷ trapping jihadists in a "boom-bust" cycle.²⁸ Jihadists, due to their own stances and due to other actors' rejection of their demands, have little prospect of normalization through peace talks, although there are noteworthy trends toward limited, temporary, localized deals with jihadists in Mali and Burkina Faso.²⁹ Many other countries have attempted deradicalization and amnesty programs, with mixed results – and not always because of bad faith on the part of former militants, but also because incumbents may be unwilling to accept militants-turned-politicians,³⁰ and/or because local communities may be unwilling to reintegrate perpetrators of violence.

Third are *resource-based conflicts*, although such conflicts inevitably involve other axes of violence. For example, "farmer-herder" conflicts center on who can use whose land in what way, but other dimensions are present: ethnicity, religion, hate speech, local politics, and the proliferation of small arms.³¹ Many resource-based conflicts are localized, but some conflicts also involve national governments or multinational corporations.

²⁵ For a more complex typology, see Reno, *Warfare in Independent Africa*; for a history of separatist movements, see Charles Thomas and Toyin Falola, *Secession and Separatist Conflicts in Postcolonial Africa* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2020).

²⁶ Anouar Boukhars, "The Paradox of Modern Jihadi Insurgencies: The Case of the Sahel and Maghreb," Al Jazeera Center for Studies, 15 July 2018, accessed 16 August 2021, https://studies.aljazeera.net/sites/default/files/articles/reports/documents/0b73e590819840a59370fd6fddc17ccc_100.pdf.

²⁷ Brynjar Lia, "Understanding Jihadi Proto-States," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9:4 (2015): 31-41.

²⁸ Aisha Ahmad, "The Long Jihad: The Boom-Bust Cycle behind Jihadist Durability," *Journal of Global Security Studies*, published online 23 January 2021, accessed 13 July 2021, <https://academic.oup.com/jogss/advance-article-abstract/doi/10.1093/jogss/ogaa048/6117996>.

²⁹ See Sam Mednick, "Burkina Faso's Secret Peace Talks and Fragile Jihadist Ceasefire," *The New Humanitarian*, 11 March 2021, accessed 13 July 2021, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2021/3/11/Burkina-Faso-secret-peace-talks-and-jihadist-ceasefire>.

³⁰ See Christopher Anzalone and Stig Hansen, "The Saga of Mukhtar Robow and Somalia's Fractious Politics," *War on the Rocks*, 30 January 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/01/the-saga-of-mukhtar-robow-and-somalias-fractious-politics/>, accessed 15 August 2021.

³¹ Leif Brottem, "The Growing Complexity of Farmer-Herder Conflict in West and Central Africa," *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, Africa Security Brief 39, 12 July 2021, accessed 13 July 2021, <https://africacenter.org/publication/growing-complexity-farmer-herder-conflict-west-central-africa/>; and Oluwole

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Fourth, there is *organized crime and banditry*. Armed networks may prey on noncombatants and/or clash with one another over control of smuggling routes or territory. Crime and banditry can in turn elicit the formation of community self-defense militias.³² And where rule of law is weak, state complicity can fuel criminality.³³

Fifth is *mass violence*, often when a previously binary conflict transforms into one with more protagonists. As noted above, multiple factors can fuel such transmutations, including fragmentation among rebels, a rise in communal militias, and the climate of suspicion that can arise during conflict. Conflicts can also activate latent tensions within communities, for example concerning land.

c. How politics shapes conflict

Developments in the formal political sphere – elections, revolutions, coups, strikes, protests, etc. – affect the trajectories of conflicts, and vice versa. Yet it is sometimes difficult to make one-to-one connections between specific political events and the trajectories of armed conflicts. For example, in 2014, a popular revolution overthrew Burkina Faso’s longtime ruler Blaise Compaoré. In January 2016, jihadists attacked a major hotel in the capital. That year, an insurgency broke out in the north, later spreading to the east. Commentators have parsed the relationship between the 2014 revolution and the subsequent terrorism and insurgency in different ways. Supporters of the old regime argue that Compaoré kept the country stable. Sitting President Roch Kaboré blames Compaoré’s policies for setting the stage for the present instability.³⁴ Others even allege that Compaoré’s supporters are abetting extremism as a means of attempting to reclaim power.³⁵ Arguing about what caused what is itself a political exercise with serious implications – but no understanding of Burkina Faso’s violence today would be possible without considering how the revolution affected the security landscape.

War also creates feedback loops where the political sphere and the conflict sphere each affect the other. For example, the powerful Sudanese military-political figure Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo,

Ojewale, “What’s Driving Violence in Nigeria’s North Central Region,” 7 July 2021, accessed 13 July 2021, <https://theconversation.com/whats-driving-violence-in-nigerias-north-central-region-163532>.

³² For example, see Peter Tinti, “Illicit Trafficking and Instability in Mali: Past, Present and Future,” The Global Initiative, January 2014, accessed 13 July 2021, <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Illicit-Trafficking-and-Instability-in-Mali-Past-present-and-future.pdf>; International Crisis Group, “Drug Trafficking, Violence and Politics in Northern Mali,” 13 December 2018, accessed 13 July 2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/mali/267-narcotrafic-violence-et-politique-au-nord-du-mali>; and International Crisis Group, “Managing Trafficking in Northern Niger,” 6 January 2020, accessed 16 August 2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/niger/285-managing-trafficking-northern-niger>.

³³ Catherine Kelly, “Justice and Rule of Law Key to African Security,” Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 25 May 2021, accessed 16 August 2021, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/justice-and-rule-of-law-key-to-african-security/>.

³⁴ Christophe Ayad, “Le président burkinabé met en cause les « collusions » de son prédécesseur avec les djihadistes,” *Le Monde*, 6 November 2017, accessed 13 July 2021, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2017/11/06/le-president-burkinabe-met-en-cause-les-collusions-de-son-predecesseur-avec-les-djihadistes_5210917_3212.html.

³⁵ Joe Penney, “Blowback in Africa: How America’s Counterterror Strategy Helped Destabilize Burkina Faso,” The Intercept, 22 November 2018, accessed 13 July 2021, <https://theintercept.com/2018/11/22/burkina-faso-us-relations/>.

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known as Hemedti, rose from a militia leader within the Darfur-based Janjaweed in the early 2000s, through the paramilitary Rapid Support Force created in 2013, to become a key actor in politics following the fall of longtime ruler Omar al-Bashir in 2019. Within what Alex de Waal calls the “political marketplace” of the Horn of Africa, the ability to mobilize armed supporters is a key determinant of one’s position within political negotiations.³⁶ Politicians stir conflicts to maintain power, but those conflicts produce new actors who seek power for themselves.

Incumbents’ political calculations can also affect when they escalate or de-escalate. For example, before Mali’s 2018 elections, then-President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta’s team reportedly reached an agreement with the north’s foremost ex-rebel bloc to provide security for voters in some regions.³⁷ Keïta, who won the elections, achieved very high scores in the north. Sometimes even ostensible rivals cooperate in the service of achieving a limited objective, as “wartime political orders” emerge.³⁸ “War economies” can allow state and non-state actors to benefit from conflict,³⁹ creating conflicts of interest that can perpetuate stalemates.

d. Patterns and trends

One pattern in Africa is *cyclical conflict*. Many sites of conflict today have histories of prior conflicts. One example is Sudan and South Sudan: civil wars occurred from 1955-1972 and from 1983-2005, featuring not just north-south conflict but also internal South Sudanese tensions that reappeared in the South Sudanese civil war starting in 2013.⁴⁰

Breaking cycles of conflict is difficult. Peace deals sometimes paper over the causes of conflict, and/or sideline ordinary people. Truth and reconciliation commissions promise more fundamental reckonings, but there is no one-size-fits-all model, and commissions can bring difficult questions about implementation, accountability, and impunity. Yet another model involves an individual authoritarian personality imposing unity on a formerly divided society – Paul Kagame in Rwanda and Meles Zenawi in Ethiopia furnish examples – yet their successors cannot always manage the latent tensions that remain. Ethiopia’s Tigray conflict in 2020-2021 has pitted a powerful regional party against a central government attempting to refashion the balance of power in the country.

Another trend is *stalemate*. For example, in 2015 the militaries of Chad, Niger, and Nigeria, with external support, crushed the “proto-state” that Boko Haram had built during late 2014. The group’s remnants, forced into remote areas, encountered near-starvation conditions.⁴¹ Yet the

³⁶ Alex de Waal, *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa: Money, War and the Business of Power* (London: Zed, 2015).

³⁷ Baba Ahmed, “Présidentielle au Mali : comment IBK a conquis les voix du Nord,” *Jeune Afrique*, 24 August 2018, accessed 13 July 2021, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/619504/politique/presidentielle-au-mali-comment-ibk-a-conquis-les-voix-du-nord/>.

³⁸ Paul Staniland, “States, Insurgents, and Wartime Political Orders,” *Perspectives on Politics* 10:2 (2012): 243-264.

³⁹ See, for example, Emeka Njoku, “Merchants of Terror: Neo-Patrimonialism, Counterterrorism Economy, and Expansion of Terrorism in Nigeria,” *African Conflict and Peacebuilding Review* 10:2 (2020): 83-107.

⁴⁰ Clémence Pinaud, *War and Genocide in South Sudan* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021).

⁴¹ Islamic State West Africa Province, *Khadh’ al-Waram min al-Khawarij al-Shakawiyya bi-Bay’at Ahl al-Karam*, published online by Qanat al-Haqa’iq li-I’lam, 2018, accessed 13 July 2021, available at <https://jihadology.net/wp-content/uploads/pda/2018/06/abucc84-yucc84suf-al-barnawicc84-22take-out-the-tumor22.pdf>.

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Nigerian military and allies could not totally destroy Boko Haram; the group, and especially its offshoot the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), bounced back. A partial Nigerian military retreat from the northeastern countryside, which became official policy in 2017,⁴² implicitly acknowledged the difficulty of defeating militants. At the same time, the prospects for ISWAP – the stronger of the two factions – to hold major cities also appear slim.⁴³ Stalemates entrench humanitarian crises and frustrate publics (including voters) well beyond the conflict zones.

A third trend is *contagion*. Predictions about an “arc of instability” spreading across Africa are overblown, yet conflicts often spread if they are not checked. Examples include the Sahelian conflict, which has begun to affect Cote d’Ivoire, Benin, and other West African coastal states.⁴⁴ Contagion is not simply the spread of an undifferentiated conflict into new zones; rather, local realities produce locally articulated versions of the broader war.

Halting contagion is difficult, and the solutions are sometimes counterintuitive and context-dependent. For example, jihadists regularly attacked Mauritania from 2005-2011, but then attacks declined, and Mauritania avoided major spillover from the conflict that began in Mali in 2012. The causes of Mauritania’s partial success appear manifold: mobile counterterrorism units, militarization of border areas, and the dismantling of urban terrorist cells likely helped, but so did policymakers’ choices to cease cross-border raids into Mali, minimize participation in the French-led intervention in Mali in 2013, and lighten the treatment of hardline clerics and accused militants at home.⁴⁵ What has worked in Mauritania is not easy to replicate elsewhere: Mauritania is geographically vast but has a low population (under five million, by most estimates), and the Mauritanian elite is more cohesive than in neighboring, conflict-torn Mali.

A final trend is *resilience*. The grimmest predictions about twenty-first century Africa, forecasting chaos and collapse, have not come to fruition. Central states have proven remarkably durable: external support, intra-elite bargains, and rebel parochialism have allowed a degree of normalcy in many conflict-affected countries. Even in the midst of the worst phase of the Boko Haram insurgency, Nigeria conducted one of its most successful and transparent elections in 2015.

⁴² Paul Carsten and Ola Lanre, “Nigeria Puts Fortress Towns at Heart of New Boko Haram Strategy,” Reuters, 1 December 2017, accessed 13 July 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nigeria-security-borno/nigeria-puts-fortress-towns-at-heart-of-new-boko-haram-strategy-idUSKBN1DV4GU>.

⁴³ Alexander Thurston, “If Boko Haram’s Leader Is Dead, What’s Next for Northeastern Nigeria?” Lawfare, 30 May 2021, accessed 16 August 2021, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/if-boko-harams-leader-dead-whats-next-northeastern-nigeria>.

⁴⁴ See Kars de Bruijne, “Laws of Attraction: Northern Benin and Risk of Violent Extremist Spillover,” Clingendael, June 2021, accessed 13 July 2021, <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2021-07/laws-of-attraction.pdf>.

⁴⁵ Fred Wehrey, “Control and Contain: Mauritania’s Clerics and the Strategy Against Violent Extremism,” Carnegie Endowment, 29 March 2019, accessed 13 July 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/03/29/control-and-contain-mauritania-s-clerics-and-strategy-against-violent-extremism-pub-78729>; and Alexander Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel: Local Politics and Rebel Groups* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), Chapter Seven.

4. Implications for International Stabilization and State-Building Efforts

Conflict prevention is difficult, but is easier than conflict resolution.

If African and Western policymakers could rewind the clock, a number of moments would cry out for revisitation. For example, in the mid-2000s, Boko Haram was hardline, but not yet underground; Nigerian authorities acted inconsistently, surveilling and sometimes detaining the group's founder Muhammad Yusuf but never decisively pursuing a legal case against him. In 2009, overreach by local law enforcement against Boko Haram prompted fiery speeches from Yusuf, then a mass uprising by the movement across several states. Authorities massacred hundreds of people and killed Yusuf while in custody, and then considered the problem resolved.⁴⁶ A more consistent approach might have avoided the extremes of laxity and brutality. Authorities could have brought Yusuf to trial, addressed some of his supporters' grievances, and avoided the final escalation of Boko Haram into full-blown insurgency. All of this would have required finesse, pointing to the difficulty of conflict prevention. The Boko Haram example shows that authorities need to identify actors poised for mass conflict, but also approach tense situations in de-escalatory modes.

External interventions often carry unintended consequences, create counterproductive incentives, and lack exit strategies.

The NATO-led intervention in Libya in 2011 has been widely blamed, including by African heads of state, for triggering chaos in the Sahel region and beyond.⁴⁷ The “Libya factor” is often exaggerated at the expense of considering local drivers of violence in countries such as Mali. However, the intervention – supported by Western powers, the United Nations, and the Arab League – tipped the balance toward the weaker side in a civil war. By generating an inorganic victory, the intervention contributed profoundly to the ensuing fragmentation.

Developments in the Sahel, particularly in 2020-2021, also highlighted the limitations of external interventions. After two coups in Mali within just nine months, all amid a broader degradation of security and significant anti-French sentiment, France announced it would rebalance its counterterrorism forces, Operation Barkhane and Task Force Takuba. The coups also underscored the frustrations surrounding the European Union Training Mission in Mali, whose activities have neither enabled dramatic battlefield gains, nor improved civil-military relations, nor appreciably reduced security force abuses against civilians.⁴⁸ Critics pointed to the incentive structures unwittingly created by open-ended training missions, donor-funded programs, and

⁴⁶ Alexander Thurston, *Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement* (Princeton University Press, 2018), Chapter Two.

⁴⁷ See François Soudan, “Idriss Déby Itno : « En Libye, l’Histoire me donnera raison »,” *Jeune Afrique*, 26 December 2011, accessed 13 July 2021, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/188879/politique/idriss-d-by-itno-en-libye-l-histoire-me-donnera-raison/>.

⁴⁸ See Denis Tull, “Rebuilding Mali’s Army: The Dissonant Relationship Between Mali and Its International Partners,” *International Affairs* 95:2 (2019): 405-422.

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foreign deployments that involve little conditionality or responsiveness to political developments.⁴⁹

“Regional” forces are overrated.

Growing recognition of the limitations of foreign intervention, combined with growing attention to cross-border conflict dynamics, has fed African and Western governments’ and organizations’ enthusiasm for “regional” forces. Politically, such forces can be marketed as “African solutions to African problems,” even though they depend heavily on external funding, political endorsements, and logistical support. The African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) is the most successful of these forces, but has not resolved the underlying political problems in Somalia – causing some observers to argue for broadening AMISOM’s mandate.⁵⁰ The Multi-National Joint Task Force, meanwhile, is meant to integrate responses to the Boko Haram/ISWAP insurgency in the Lake Chad Basin, but the countries of the subregion often act unilaterally, as was evident during Chad’s 2020 “Bohoma Anger” operation. The G5 Sahel Joint Force has yet to achieve an operational tempo that would secure the central Sahel. In 2018, a jihadist attack forced the Joint Force to shift its headquarters from central Mali to Mali’s capital Bamako, a practical and symbolic demonstration of the Joint Force’s limited impact on the ground. If external interventions often falter, so too do “regional solutions.”

Competing narratives should be taken seriously, and are more complex than “truth” and “disinformation.”

The *Rashomon*-like character of competing conflict narratives creates feedback loops between violence on the ground, the resulting struggle to control narratives about what is happening, and the implication of those narratives in shaping further violence.⁵¹ Amid a rise of attention to disinformation campaigns, and especially Russian disinformation campaigns, both around the world and in Africa, there is nevertheless a risk of hastily labeling information as either true or false, information or disinformation. Indeed, the term “disinformation” has lost meaningful analytical value, now serving mostly a political epithet. External actors should not assume that challenges to official storylines are inherently malevolent. In their interactions with African leaders and governments, external actors should urge leaders to remain receptive to the perspectives of human rights organizations, investigative journalists, and community associations.

5. Key Takeaways and Recommendations for NATO

NATO should not seek greater involvement in Africa’s conflicts, even in support roles.

⁴⁹ See Anna Schmauder, Guillaume Soto-Mayor, and Delina Goxho, “La question de la gouvernance dans la stratégie de l’UE pour le Sahel,” *The Conversation*, 16 December 2020, accessed 13 July 2021, <https://theconversation.com/la-question-de-la-gouvernance-dans-la-strategie-de-lue-pour-le-sahel-152077>.

⁵⁰ Meressa K Dessu, “AMISOM Should Provide More Than Security in Somalia,” *ISS Today*, 25 February 2021, accessed 14 July 2021, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/amisom-should-provide-more-than-security-in-somalia>.

⁵¹ See, for example, Edoardo Baldaro, “*Rashomon* in the Sahel: Conflict Dynamics of Security Regionalism,” *Security Dialogue* 52:3 (2021): 266-283.

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NATO members have interests in Africa: the security of their citizens and businesses, the implications of African conflicts for global security and stability, the ramifications of war for migration, and so forth. But the existence of interests does not automatically make greater involvement wise or necessary. NATO, in an organizational capacity, has limited but growing involvement in Africa. Since 2005, NATO has had a partnership with the AU, including a liaison office at the AU headquarters in Addis Ababa and various forms of NATO support for AU efforts such as AMISOM.⁵² In 2017, NATO created its Strategic Direction-South Hub, whose “unique role...is to connect allies, partners and international, non-governmental and civil organizations by creating fluid dialogue resulting in universal understanding, trust and stability.”⁵³ These institutions should approach their missions cautiously, give advice to African governments sparingly, and avoid replicating other actors’ roles. In Africa as elsewhere, there are risks for NATO of mission creep or even mission drift, risks that relate to core questions about NATO’s purpose and even justification for existing in a post-Cold War environment. A strict reading of NATO’s mandate would imply that there is no natural function for NATO in Africa. Greater NATO involvement would also risk duplicating the activities of actors with more organic connections to Africa.

6. Conclusion

The cascading effects of war, humanitarian crises, climate change, and political instability could all make for a worse future for Africa. Yet alongside the complexity of the continent’s conflicts, their variability also stands out. As of 2021, some of the worst conflicts in Africa are in countries very recently hailed for their stability (such as Ethiopia), and some sites of past violence are now relatively secure (such as Mauritania). Peacebuilding in Africa remains more challenging than ever, but there are substantial grounds for optimism. The failures of many external interventions, meanwhile, should inspire not fatalism but rather creativity, particularly in terms of thinking beyond counterterrorism missions and military training programs.

⁵² NATO, “Cooperation with the African Union,” version as of 17 May 2021, accessed 16 July 2021, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_8191.htm.

⁵³ NATO, “NSD-S Hub Mission,” version as of 15 August 2021, accessed 15 August 2021, <https://thesouthernhub.org/about-us/mission>.