Chapter 1

Conflict and regional stability in North and West Africa

This chapter maps the networks of rivalries and alliances of violent organisations in conflict in North and West Africa. The conflicts in this region have become more difficult to resolve due to the complexities involved in the relationships between belligerents. Groups that are allied one day can fight each other the next and return to co-operation later still. New groups also arise, split and reunite in a somewhat unpredictable manner. The complexity of North and West African conflicts is further amplified by the fact that they are rarely limited to a single country, as in the Central Sahel and the Lake Chad region today. Thus far, the evolution of the complex relations between actors in conflict remains poorly understood. Because modern conflicts involve hundreds of versatile actors, mapping these networks of rivalries and alliances is a key step toward understanding the long-term prospects for political stability and designing policies that can put an end to the surging political violence in the region. Based on the network analysis, four main policy options are put forward in this chapter to improve the long-term political stability of North and West Africa.

KEY MESSAGES

» **North and West African conflicts have become more difficult to resolve because of the complexities involved in the relationships between belligerents.**

» **Fluid rivalries and alliances among state forces, rebels and extremist organisations shape regional patterns of violence in North and West Africa.**

» **A dynamic approach is needed to better understand how violent organisations fight each other, how rivalries and alliances change over time and how military interventions affect conflict networks.**

Political violence has been on the rise in North and West Africa since the early 2010s. Fuelled by local grievances, national struggles and global ideologies, conflicts in the region have become more violent and widespread than ever (OECD/SWAC, 2020[1]). In the last decade, more than 100 000 people have been killed as a result of clashes between government forces and the groups that challenge them, including local militias, rebel groups and violent extremist organisations. Further, many such conflicts have spilt over state borders, creating instability and insecurity in multiple states simultaneously.

A worrying trend is that violence increasingly targets civilians, particularly in rural and border regions, where state power and infrastructures have long been deficient. Thus far, none of the military interventions led by regional or international coalitions has proved fully capable of halting the use of violence by non-state groups to advance their aims. Although some interventions have led to temporary suppression of hostilities among belligerents, this has not proved a durable means of reducing violence in the longer term.

Map 1.1

Countries covered in this report
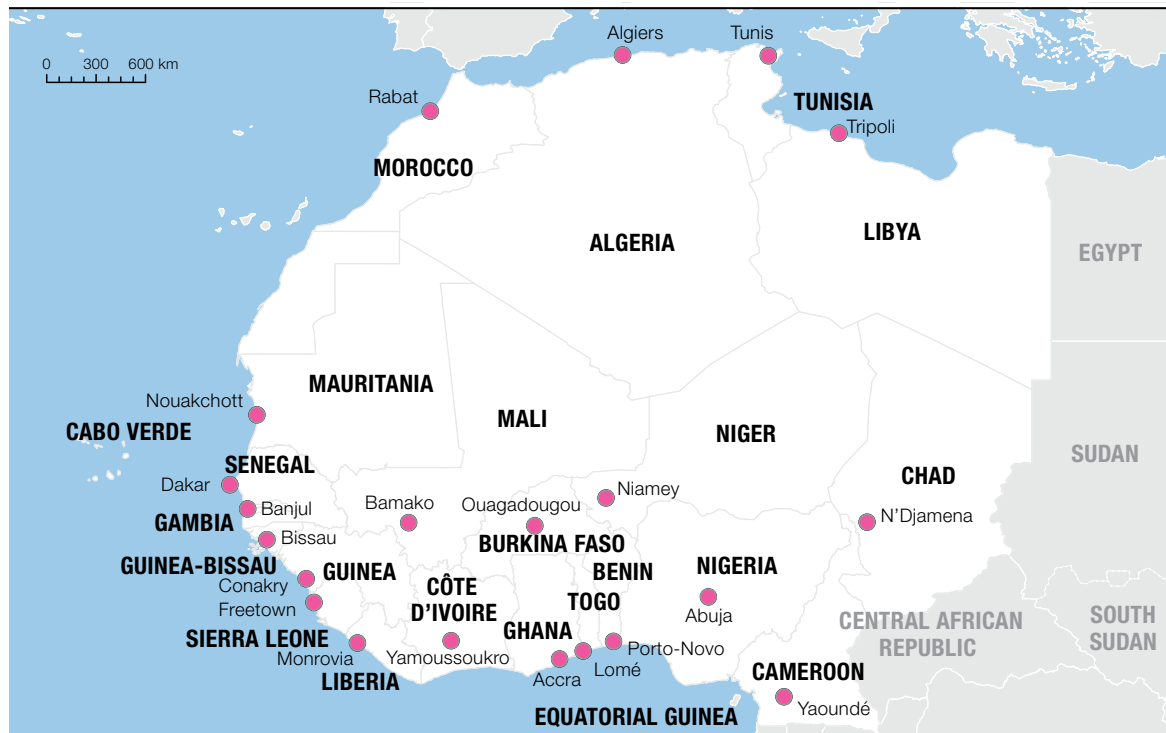
Source: Authors.

HOW RIVALRIES AND ALLIANCES SHAPE CONFLICTS

The growing number of actors involved in conflicts and the complexity of their relationships call for new approaches capable of modelling the temporal evolution of oppositional and co-operative relationships. Using network analysis, this report examines how the fluid relationships among violent organisations shape regional patterns of violence in North and West Africa. More specifically, the report maps the changing rivalries and alliances among state forces, rebels, extremist organisations and their victims in 21 North and West African countries from 1997 through 2020 (Map 1.1).

Building on a database of 36 760 violent events collected by the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED, 2020[2]), this dynamic approach to conflict addresses three crucial questions for the future of the region:

- **Who is allied with whom? Who is in conflict with whom?** This report first examines the relationships that bind the violent organisations of the region together.

These relationships form a **conflict network** in which violent organisations cannot be understood in isolation from each other (Chapter 2). Using a formal approach to networks, the report maps the relationships between states, rebel groups and extremist organisations to better understand the overall social structure of their networks and the role of each actor within this larger system (Box 1.1 and Chapter 3). The report first identifies all the actors that are using violence, or are the targets of violence, and then maps both the oppositional and co-operative relationships between these actors. Lastly, the report uses a formal network analysis to highlight which actors are the most important or central to the overall systems of conflict.

- **How do rivalries and alliances evolve over time?** The report next examines changes in relationships between states, rebel groups and violent extremist organisations. It is assumed that the relationships between

Box 1.1
A dynamic approach to conflict networks

What makes this report original is its use of a formal relational approach, known as social network analysis (SNA), to map the co-operative and oppositional relationships of violent organisations in North and West Africa. Since the 9/11 attacks on the United States, SNA has been increasingly used to understand how violent organisations are internally structured and how they can potentially be disrupted (Chapter 3). This report adopts a similar perspective and applies it to the entire set of actors operating in the region. By taking into account both the overall structure of the network formed by the ties between the various groups as well as the overall position of each actor in this network, SNA can provide a nuanced understanding of conflicts. In particular, it suggests that the attributes of the actors in conflict, such as their nationality, objectives or military strength, cannot alone explain the complexity of contemporary conflicts.

Instead, social network analysis suggests that conflict can be understood by taking into account the interdependent system in which actors are embedded. In a socially complex conflict environment, this system's structure provides differential opportunities for, or constraints upon, their political and military actions. As such, the ability of violent organisations to achieve their goals or to carry out violence is affected by their relative position to both their allies and rivals. In Nigeria, for example, the Boko Haram insurgency has exacerbated violence in the region by leading other armed groups to take up arms against each other, even when they were not targeted by the jihadist organisation (Dorff, Gallop and Minhas, 2020[3]). This is not an outcome that can be understood by examining any armed groups alone or even by examining the relations between any pair or trio of groups.

Another original contribution of the report is to use an explicitly dynamic approach that focuses on the evolution of conflict networks over time. This approach takes into account the fact that co-operative and oppositional relations are dynamic by nature. Ties are established and can persist or strengthen over time, but they can also weaken, dissolve quietly or suddenly end. Yet the majority of conflict studies have not been concerned with how networks change, leaving uncertainty about basic questions such as how long groups tend to co-operate with or oppose each other, how common it is for these relationships to reverse over time, or how the introduction or removal of key actors can affect the relationships between other actors.
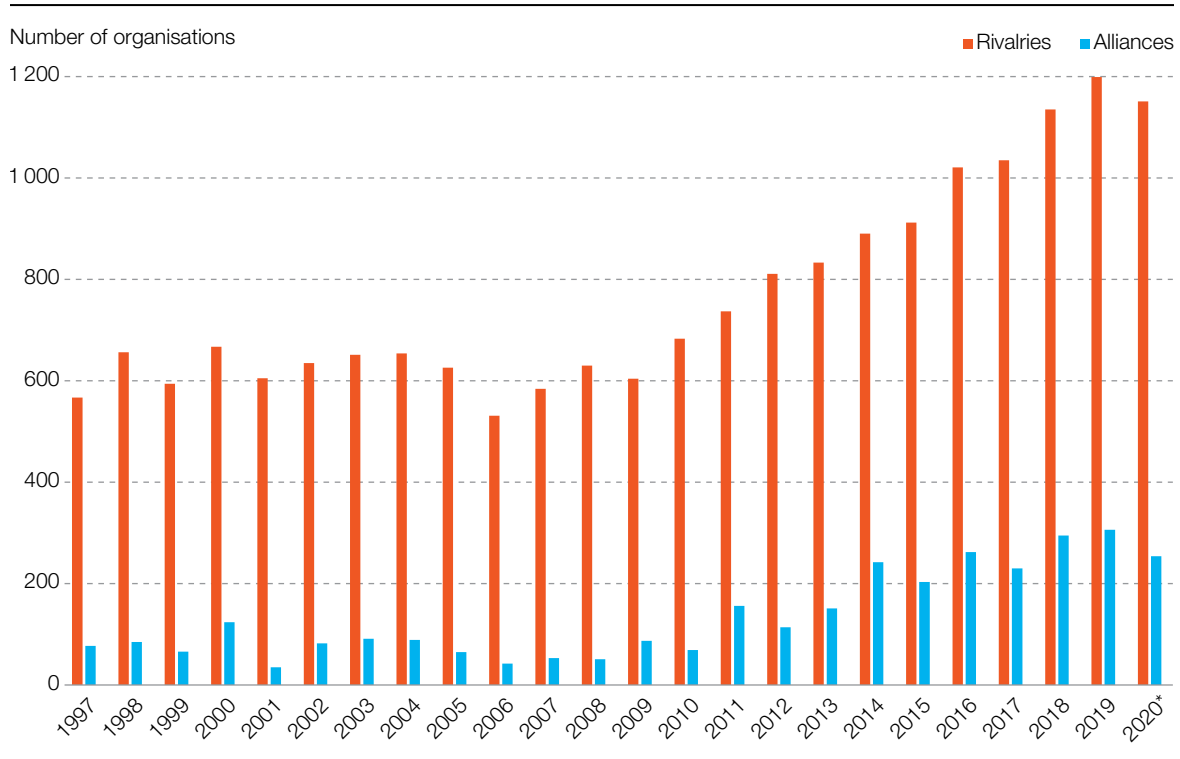
Source: Authors.

actors in conflict are not static and that their position can be either enhanced or eroded over time. Further, the set of actors cannot be assumed to be static, either: new rebel groups and extremist organisations can arise while existing groups and organisations can split, merge or be defeated (Chapter 4). This dynamic is linked, on the one hand, to the ideology, objectives, access to resources and power of the organisations and, on the other hand, to their relationships on the battlefield. Each of these factors can alter the relationships between belligerents and their relative position. Using data on violent events, the report identifies the average duration between instances of co-operation and opposition in North and West Africa. Building on this insight, the report also tracks how both types of relationships change over time, and clarifies how the positions of the most important actors ebb and flow over the duration of a conflict.

• **How do military interventions affect conflict networks?** One of the major external factors of change in today's conflicts is foreign and multinational military interventions, which have frequently occurred in North and West Africa. Therefore, this report examines how military interventions affect the network dynamics of actors in conflict, an issue that remains largely unknown, despite being crucial for assessing the potential for peace

Figure 1.1
Rivalries and alliances in North and West Africa, 1997–2020

* Data available through 30 June 2020.

Source: Authors, based on data from ACLED (2020[2]), *The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project*, https://acleddata.com/data-export-tool/.

in the region. The report discusses whether military powers should support one of the competing groups in conflict or try to keep warring parties apart. It also considers how these interventions have affected the most powerful organisations in the conflicts, and the relationships among them (Chapter 5).

This report benefits from repeated daily observations of violent organisations over 23 years and proposes a framework for future investigations in the region (Chapter 3). To do so, the report analyses the temporal evolution of conflict networks at the regional and local levels. First, it examines the origins and changes in major rivalries and alliances in both North and West Africa. This regional scope is made necessary by the transnational nature of several conflicts in the region.

This regional analysis is followed by an examination of three case studies where violent organisations have developed rapidly since the mid-1990s, have extended beyond state boundaries, and have caused significant numbers of violent events and deaths. These cases are: the Mali insurgency and its consequences in the Central Sahel since 2012; the Boko Haram insurgency in the Lake Chad region since 2009; and the Libyan civil wars since 2011. In each of the case studies, military interventions led by regional or international coalitions undoubtedly created new opportunities and challenges for the participants. However, the overall evolution of the web of relationships during such interventions remains unknown.

MORE ENEMIES THAN ALLIES

This report finds that violent organisations in North and West Africa fight much more than they collaborate with each other (Chapter 4). In 2020, the network that connects the organisations involved in conflictual events counts 562 nodes, more than four times the number of organisations involved in building alliances across the region (Figure 1.1). The report notes similar disparities in each theatre of operations: only 28 alliances are recorded in Mali and the Central Sahel, against 237 rivalries, for example.

The paucity of alliances reflects the difficulty of building long-lasting coalitions between organisations that use political violence to pursue local and opportunistic agendas. Violent organisations often share a common enemy without developing an ideological project that would allow them to overcome their tribal, ethnic or national divisions.

Another worrying trend is that the number of belligerents has strongly increased in the region. Fuelled by insurgencies, rebellions and *coups d'état* in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria and Libya, the overall number of organisations involved in violent acts has almost doubled, from 604 in 2009 to 1 199 in 2019. If the situation continues to deteriorate, 2020 will be the year that counts the highest number of organisations in conflict since detailed data on political violence has been recorded in the late 1990s, with 1 151 organisations recorded through June. The multiplication of violent organisations contributes to disseminating violence to previously peaceful regions and affecting the lives of people who had not experienced conflict so far. These results confirm earlier studies that noted that North and West African conflicts were becoming more intense than in the past and tended to diffuse regionally (OECD/SWAC, 2020[1]).

SHIFTING ALLEGIANCES

North and West African conflicts have become more difficult to resolve than ever because of the complexities involved in the relationships between belligerents. This report shows that depending on the opportunities offered by the local, national and global political scenes, actors in conflict can fight for or against their governments, promote national unity or secessionism, and join militias, rebellions or violent extremist organisations. This flexibility in allegiance gives the impression that conflicts have no permanent "side" for which actors could fight. Iyad ag Ghali, the leader of the Group for Supporting Islam and Muslims (JNIM) is a case in point. After having fought as a mercenary in Libya and as a rebel in northern Mali, ag Ghali worked as a hostage negotiator in his country and as a government councillor in Saudi Arabia. Unable to take the leadership of the secular National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) in Mali in 2011, he founded the jihadist organisation Ansar Dine (Defenders of the Faith) (Box 4.4).

A similar volatility characterises the relationships between the various non-state organisations and groups involved in the region's armed struggles. In today's conflicts, groups that were allied one day can fight each other the next and return to co-operation later still. New groups also arise, split and reunite in a somewhat unpredictable manner. Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) illustrates this complexity (Figure 1.2). Before it pledged allegiance to Al Qaeda in 2007, AQIM was known as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), itself a splinter group of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) responsible for the killing of thousands of civilians during the Algerian Civil War. In the early 2010s, some of the components of AQIM split to form the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), while other militants formed Those Who Sign in Blood. In 2013, MUJAO and Those Who Sign in Blood merged to form al-Mourabitoun (The Sentinels). These groups re-joined AQIM in 2015 with the exception of some factions, who formed the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). In 2017, al-Mourabitoun, Ansar Dine, Katibat Macina and the Saharan branch of AQIM merged into JNIM (Box 5.1).

Figure 1.2

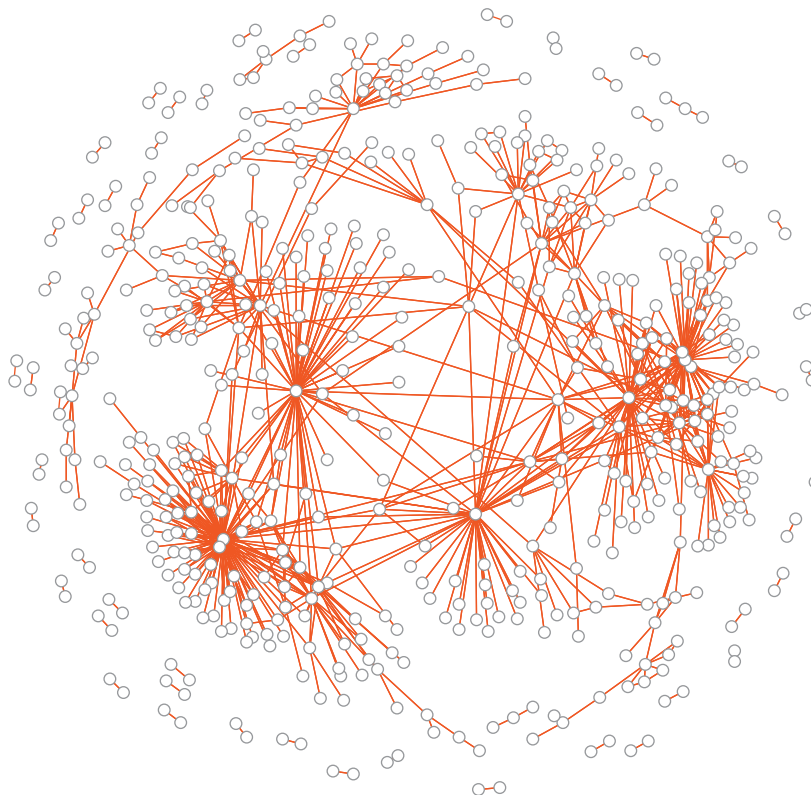Simplified evolution of AQIM-related groups, 1992–2020
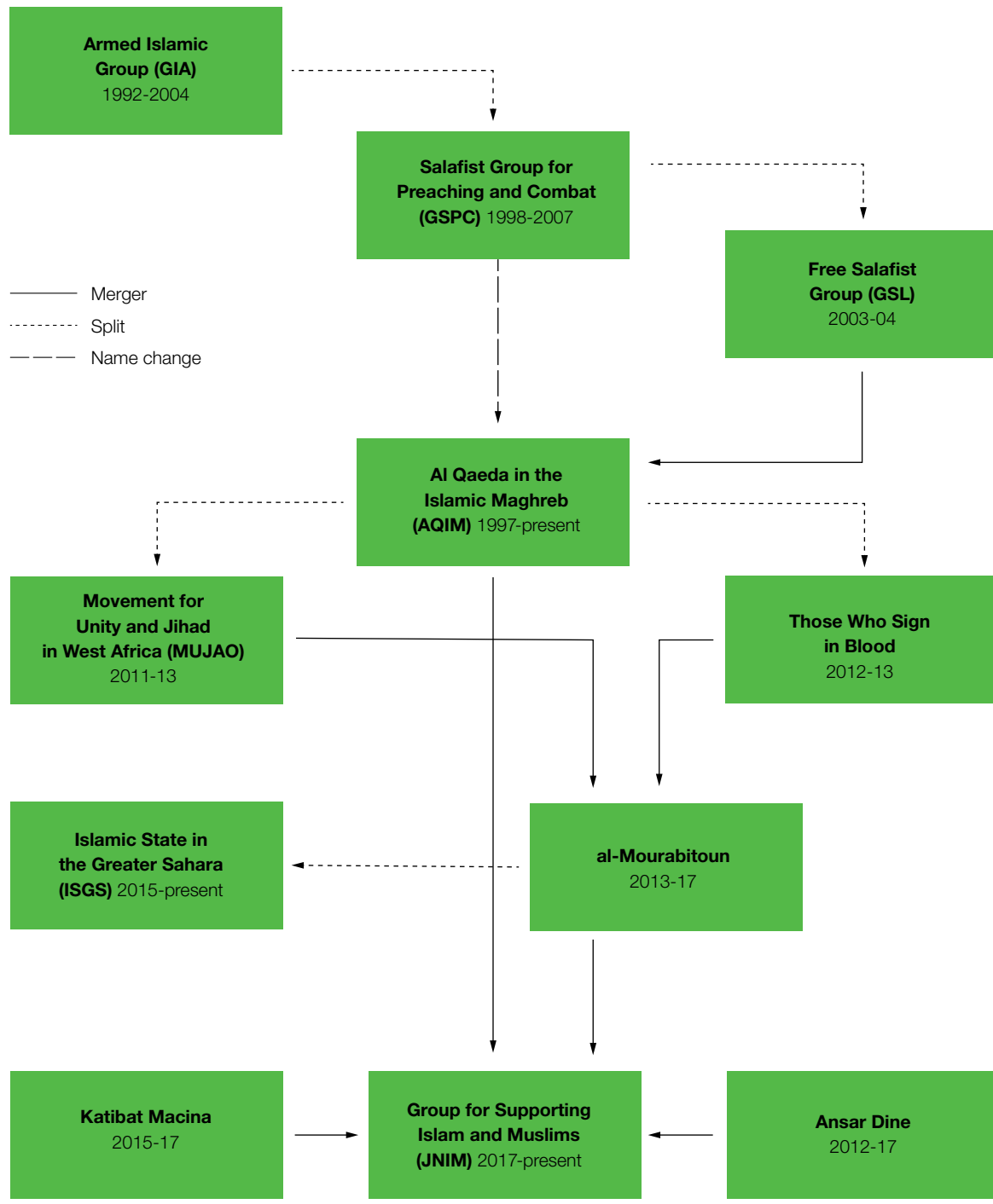
Note: Those Who Sign in Blood is also known as the Veiled Men Battalion (al-Mulathamun).

Source: Authors.

Figure 1.3

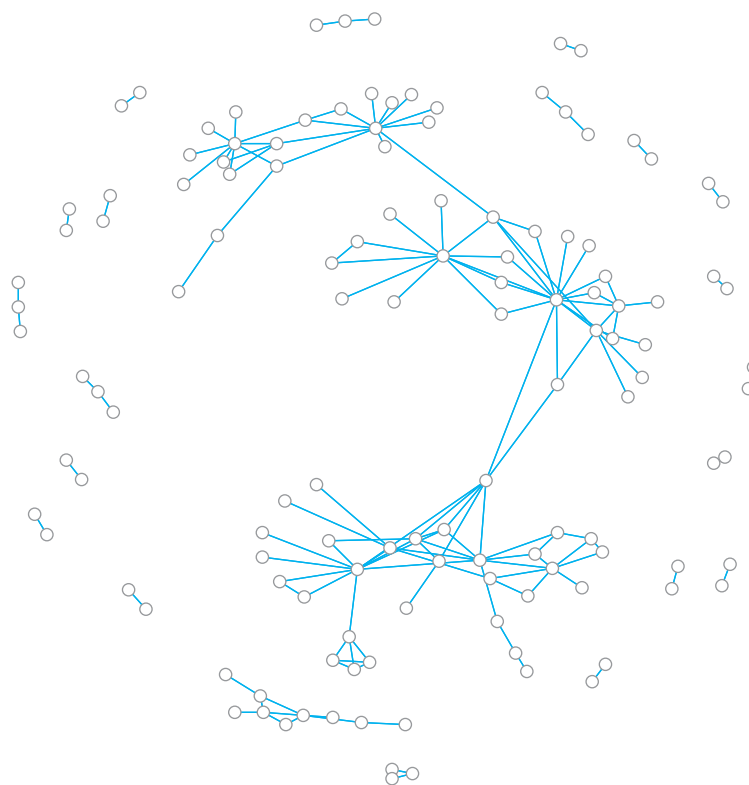Opposition and co-operation networks in North and West Africa, 2020

Rivalries

Number of nodes: 562
Number of ties: 828
Density: 0.5%
Average number of enemies: 3.0

Alliances

Number of nodes: 129
Number of ties: 147
Density: 1.8%
Average number of allies: 2.3

Note: Data available through 30 June 2020.

Source: Authors, based on data from ACLED (2020[2]), *The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project*, https://acleddata.com/data-export-tool/.

These shifting allegiances increase the complexity in modern conflicts, which no longer clearly involve a unified front or coalition of opposition to governments where fighting occurs along clear ideological lines. Instead, conflicts involve coalitions of armed groups with opportunistic allegiances and divergent interests. AQIM, for example, is only one of the dozen major actors involved in the Malian conflict, along with government forces, ethnic militias, ethno-nationalist rebels, hunter associations, and other organisations affiliated with Al Qaeda and the Islamic State. In 2019, for example, 81 unique organisations were involved in the Malian conflict, either as perpetrators or victims, including 6 rebel groups, 9 violent extremist organisations and 34 militias organised around communal or ethnic grounds. Furthermore, AQIM is both co-operating with and opposed to other groups that are also fighting the Malian government and its international allies, including France and the United Nations.

OPPOSITION AND CO-OPERATION NETWORKS LOOK ALIKE

This report highlights surprising similarities between co-operation and opposition networks: both are rather decentralised and organised around a few key organisations (Figure 1.3). This structure, called "cosmopolitan" to emphasise the absence of closely-knit communities, demonstrates the paucity of ties between organisations, and the large number of steps required to reach all actors of the network. A cosmopolitan structure such as the one observed in the opposition and co-operation networks suggests that violent organisations tend to reproduce the same patterns irrespective of the nature of the ties that link them.

This is a puzzling observation. Because fighting an enemy and building alliances are conceptually very different, one would have expected the structure of opposition and co-operation networks to be quite different from each other. The fact that they are not suggests that opposition and co-operation should be conceptualised as two possible, rather than exclusive, options to the belligerents. These results point to the fundamental flexible and opportunistic nature of relationships that bind violent organisations in the region. Rather than formal agreement or existential oppositions, rivalries and alliances should be conceived as two alternatives that can be mobilised as circumstances change.
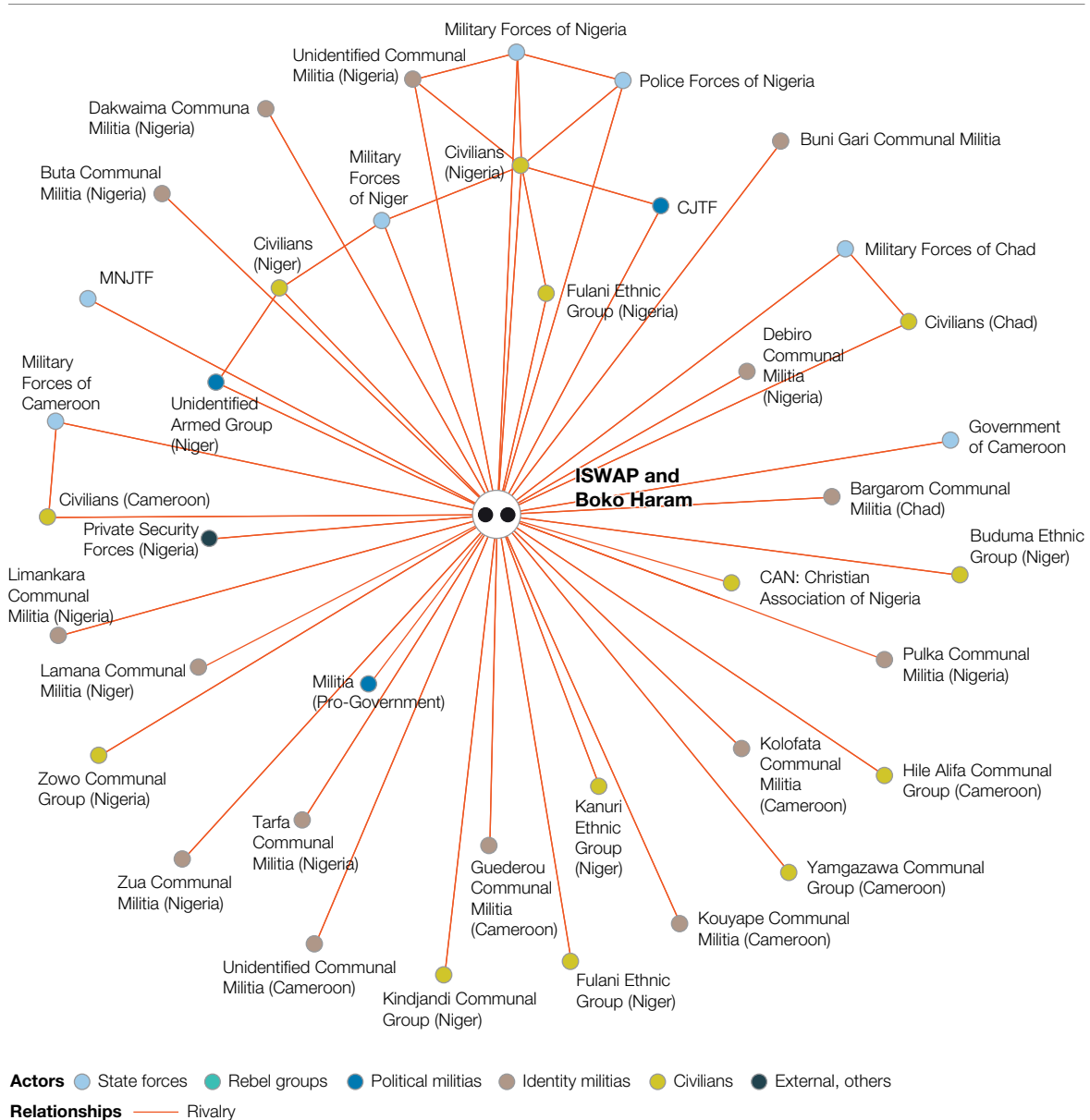
The loose and decentralised network of enemies and allies observed at the regional level is remarkably similar to the conflict environment in each of the three main theatres of operations:

- In Mali and the Central Sahel, violent organisations and their victims form a conflict network that transcends national boundaries. The jihadist organisations JNIM and ISGS have the largest number of enemies in the region. They also lie between organisations that do not necessarily fight each other, such as government forces and their allied militias. In network terms, being surround by many enemies and playing the role of brokers is a liability in a conflict environment where most organisations tend to maximise the number of their allies while trying to minimise the number of enemies. The co-operation network of this region is centred on state forces, who play an important brokerage role between large military coalitions such as the G5 Sahel and communal militias and self-defence groups.

- The Lake Chad region is the deadliest conflict considered in this report, with almost 59 000 people killed since the beginning of the Boko Haram uprising in 2009. The network that binds violent organisations in this region is more cohesive than elsewhere in North and West Africa. This is explained by the fact that the Lake Chad insurgency is dominated by the armed struggle between two major belligerents, the Nigerian forces on one side and the Boko Haram insurgency on the other. The peculiarities of the conflict landscape are visible when the network of enemies of both Boko Haram and its splinter group, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) in 2020 is shown (Figure 1.4). The star shape of the network suggests that the enemies of both organisations are rarely fighting each other,

Figure 1.4

The enemies of Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province, 2020

Actors ● State forces ● Rebel groups ● Political militias ● Identity militias ● Civilians ● External, others
Relationships —— Rivalry

Notes: Boko Haram and ISWAP are considered as a single node in this figure due to the high number of events for which the responsibility of each organisation cannot be determined. CJTF stands for Civilian Joint Task Force. Data available through 30 June 2020.

Source: Authors, based on data from ACLED (2020[2]), *The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project*, https://acleddata.com/data-export-tool/.

except for government forces and civilians in Chad, Niger and Nigeria. The Nigerian military forces are by far the most central organisation in the co-operation network due to their co-ordination role within the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF). The dominance of the Nigerian military contrasts strongly with the quasi absence of alliances established by jihadist organisations in the region.

- The Libyan network is dominated by two powerful organisations, the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) and the Libyan National Army (LNA) based in Benghazi. Both are backed by powerful foreign powers. In addition to fighting each other, the GNA and LNA are in opposition with a large number of militias, private security forces and civilians who generally

have fewer enemies than themselves. This explains why the Libyan network is currently more centralised and less fragmented than other conflict networks in the region. The GNA and LNA are also the main nodes of the co-operation network, but both have struggled to maintain alliances based on versatile allies. Due to continuously changing alliances, centralising command has proved somewhat elusive in Libya since the fall of Colonel Gaddafi's government in 2011.

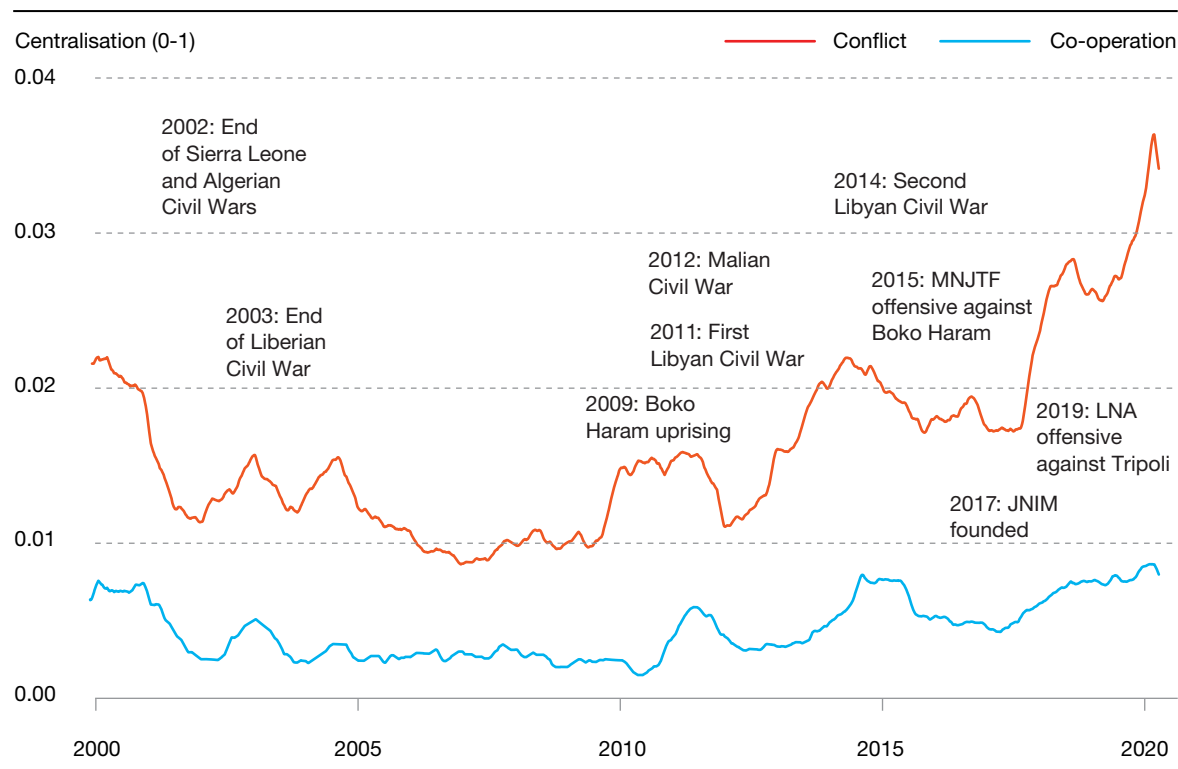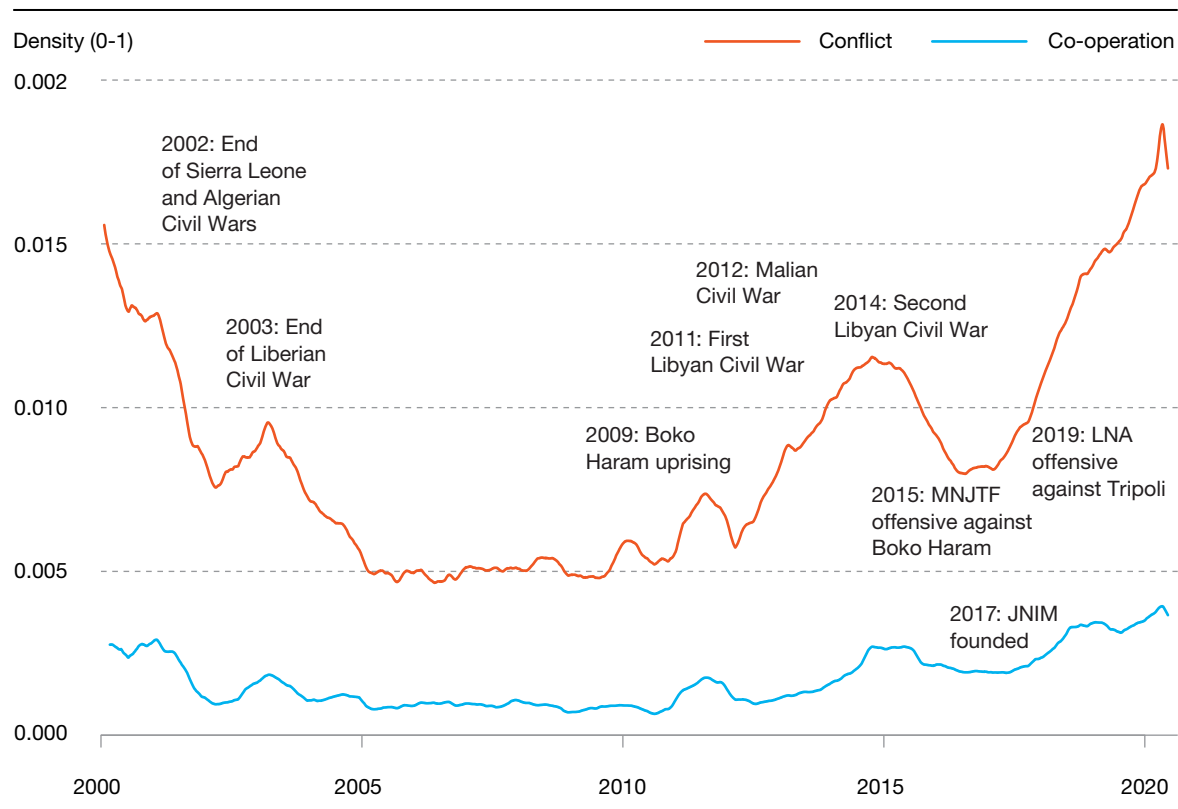## A GROWING POLARISATION OF CONFLICT NETWORKS

The temporal study of conflicts shows that opposition networks tend to be denser and more centralised over time in North and West Africa. This evolution is alarming. It means that violent organisations tend to have an increasing number of enemies, a sure sign that conflicts are intensifying in the region and that each theatre of operation becomes increasingly focused on a limited number of key belligerents. This polarisation of the conflict environment has devastating consequences for civilian populations, who are often targeted by both jihadist organisations and government forces. This report also shows that the slight increase in co-operation noted across the region since the early 2010s is out of proportion with the rise in conflictual relationships.

To visualise these trends, this report applies two metrics to both opposition and co-operation networks. Density represents the number of ties present in a network compared with the number of ties that could potentially exist. Centralisation describes to what extent the network is centralised around a few key organisations (Figure 1.5). Both metrics confirm that the opposition networks that connect organisations in conflict are becoming more intense and increasingly centralised on a few key actors everywhere in North and West Africa. Each of the subnational conflict theatre networks self-evidently displays higher levels of conflict than does the overall region. However, there is also a significant amount of volatility in the structure of Libya's opposition networks, while Lake Chad has been more consistent over time. By contrast, Mali and the Central Sahel's opposition networks are rapidly becoming potentially deadlier and polarised since 2017 after several years of relative stability.

The evolution of co-operation between organisations shows that there is a slight overall trend toward increased co-operation since 2009, but that alliances remain the exception rather than the norm. However, each of the conflict theatres displays more evidence of co-operation than within the overall region. Further, alliances are highly volatile over time, particularly in Libya and Mali. Both demonstrate periods with low levels of co-operation punctuated by intervals with a great deal more co-operation. The increasing density and centralisation observed in the network of allies among military forces should be regarded as a consequence of the increase in conflict in the region. As security conditions continue to deteriorate, government forces multiply their collaborations, in search of a better-adapted security framework.

That these trends are present in combination with the ever-growing number of belligerents since 2009 is particularly distressing. The increasing number of belligerents, increasing density of conflictual relationships and polarisation on powerful organisations capable of conducting extensive military operations make a peaceful resolution of the North and West African conflicts more elusive than ever. These conditions are present in varying degrees in all three of the primary conflict regions as well. More than a decade after the outbreak of the Boko Haram insurgency in northern Nigeria, political violence has evolved and coalesced into multiple conflictual subnational theatres that have resisted all efforts of resolution to date. Given the trends identified in this report, it is difficult to see an end to this process in the short term. It is reasonable to expect that the conflict networks will continue to enlarge, intensify and centralise.

Figure 1.5

Network density and centralisation in North and West Africa, 2000–20

Density (0-1)

| | Conflict | Co-operation |

2002: End
of Sierra Leone
and Algerian
Civil Wars

2003: End
of Liberian
Civil War

2012: Malian
Civil War

2011: First
Libyan Civil War

2014: Second
Libyan Civil War

2009: Boko
Haram uprising

2015: MNJTF
offensive against
Boko Haram

2019: LNA
offensive
against Tripoli

2017: JNIM
founded

Centralisation (0-1)

| | Conflict | Co-operation |

2002: End
of Sierra Leone
and Algerian
Civil Wars

2003: End
of Liberian
Civil War

2012: Malian
Civil War

2011: First
Libyan Civil War

2014: Second
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2009: Boko
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founded

Note: Data available through 30 June 2020.

Source: Authors, based on data from ACLED (2020[2]), *The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project*, https://acleddata.com/data-export-tool/.

HOW MILITARY INTERVENTIONS RESHUFFLE CONFLICT NETWORKS

Despite obvious differences in strategy and tactics, the French involvement in the Sahel, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) Operation Unified Protector and the joint offensive against Boko Haram around Lake Chad were all designed to influence the outcome of a conflict by siding with one of the belligerents. However, none of these efforts managed to bring a swift resolution of the conflicts, which continue to tear apart North and West Africa. Almost a decade after the Arab Spring and the fall of Colonel Gaddafi, neither Libya, nor Mali, and certainly not the Lake Chad region, is more peaceful than before. In recent years, and despite an increasing involvement of foreign backers, the legacy of these military interventions has been an inability to prevent a return to violence. None of the interventions considered in this study has been followed by a stabilisation phase during which social, economic and political actions can be undertaken by police forces or civilian agencies.

This report focusses on one of the most elusive factors that explain the limited results of military interventions on the resolution of conflict: the ever-changing alliances and oppositions that bind violent organisations and their victims. This network approach suggests that the military interventions in Mali, around Lake Chad, and in Libya have considerably reshuffled the conflict environment in which violent organisations operate across the region. The introduction of an external party in each conflict has not only increased the number of organisations involved in acts of violence; it has also exacerbated internal rivalries and created new configurations among the belligerents that make conflict more violent and potentially more difficult to resolve.

To better understand how military interventions can affect conflict networks, the report measures the political power of some of the organisations involved in each of the three major conflicts of the region before, during and after each intervention. Political power is studied using the Positive Negative (PN) index, which measures the constraints and opportunities offered by the network of enemies and allies

in which an organisation is embedded. Unlike other measures of power that rely on the attributes of organisations, such as their size or number of weapons, PN measures whether an organisation is more or less constrained by the overall structure of the conflict environment to develop its own agenda. PN assumes that an organisation is in a more powerful situation if it is connected to organisations that have few allies than to well-connected ones. PN applies the same logic to negative ties: it is preferable to have enemies that themselves have many enemies than to have enemies that are less constrained by their oppositional ties to other organisations.

In both the Central Sahel and the Lake Chad region, military interventions reinforced the pre-existing patterns of alliances and contributed to hardening the patterns of opposition. This is explained by the fact that both the French-led Serval and Barkhane operations and the Nigerian-led offensive conducted under the umbrella of the MNJTF were designed to influence the outcome of a conflict by resolutely siding with government forces. These interventions heavily contributed to boosting the political power of Malian and Nigerian armed forces while reducing the power of jihadist organisations (Figure 1.6). In other words, the structural position of Malian and Nigerian forces was improved by the new alliances formed during the intervention, while the structural position of their opponents deteriorated.
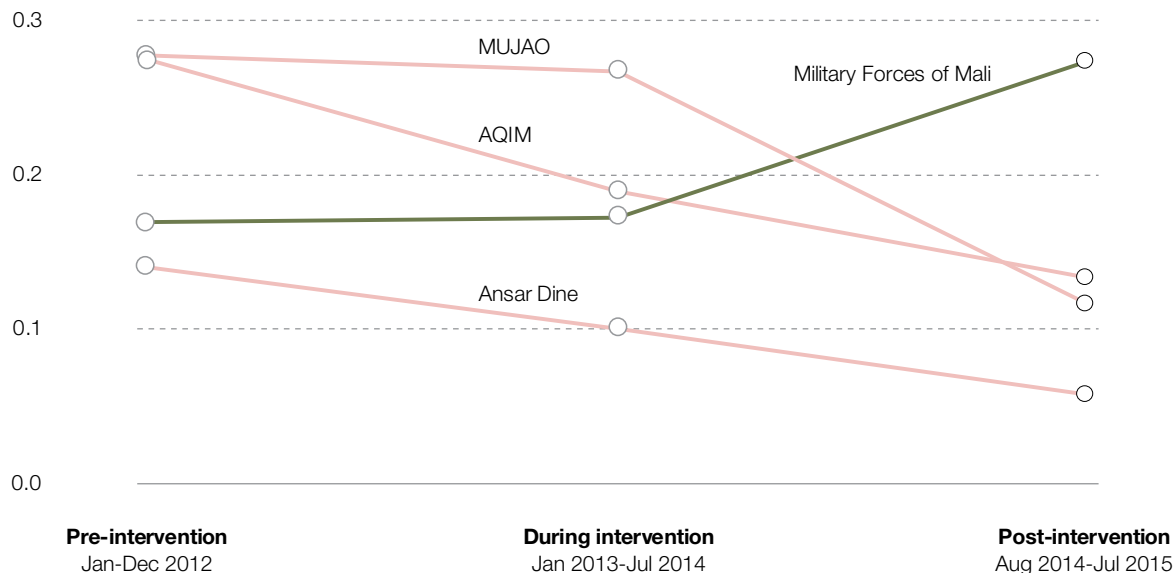
In both regions, jihadist organisations were largely unable to build alliances during the intervention, and their allies were less reliant on them than before the intervention. In Mali, for example, numerous fighters from Ansar Dine joined the MNLA or the newly created Islamic Movement of Azawad (IMA) when French forces launched its offensive in January 2013. In Nigeria, the MNJTF offensive exacerbated internal tensions within Boko Haram and contributed to splitting the organisation between two factions that did not co-operate against government forces. As a result of the military interventions, jihadist organisations affiliated with Al Qaeda or the Islamic State also faced more enemies, or

Figure 1.6

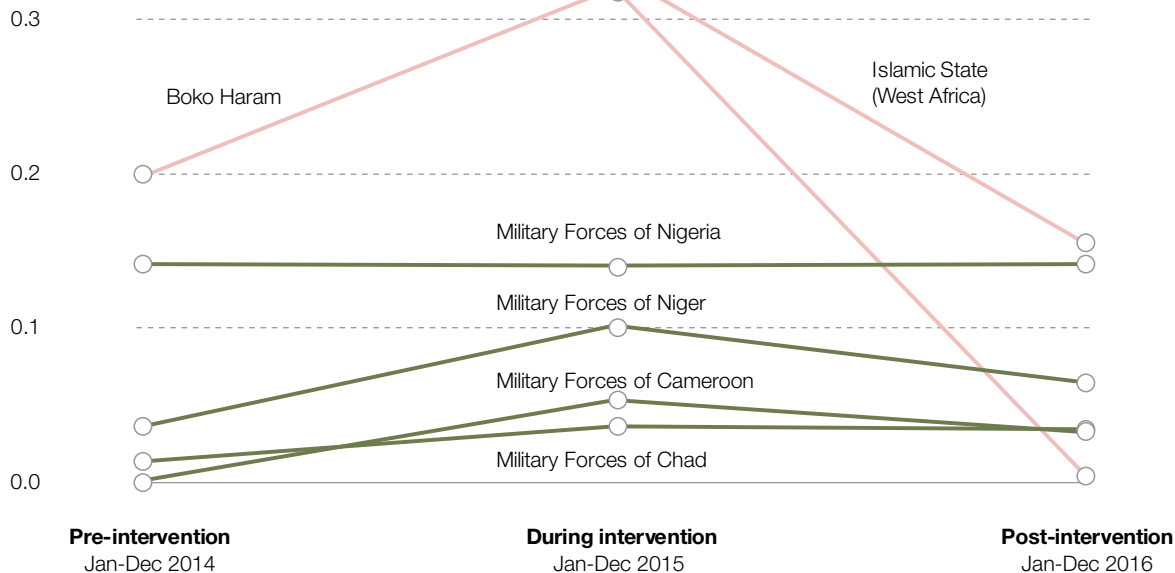How Serval and the MNJTF affected political power in Mali and the Lake Chad region

France's Operation Serval in Mali

Positive Negative index (0-1)

| Pre-intervention | During intervention | Post-intervention |
| Jan-Dec 2012 | Jan 2013-Jul 2014 | Aug 2014-Jul 2015 |

The MNJTF intervention in the Lake Chad region

Positive Negative index (0-1)

| Pre-intervention | During intervention | Post-intervention |
| Jan-Dec 2014 | Jan-Dec 2015 | Jan-Dec 2016 |

Source: Authors, based on data from ACLED (2020[2]), *The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project*, https://acleddata.com/data-export-tool/.

Map 1.2

Fatalities involving Boko Haram, ISWAP and government forces, 2009–20
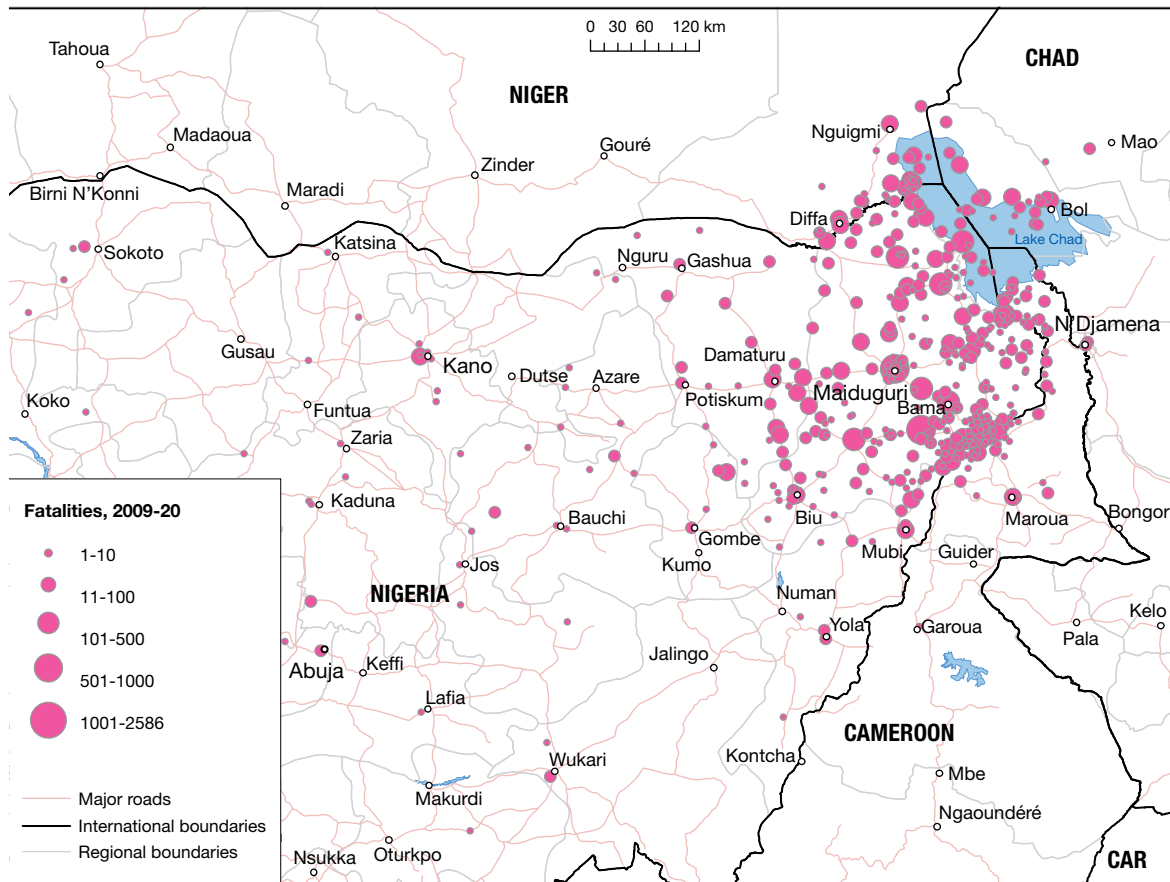
Source: Authors, based on data from ACLED (2020[2]), *The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project*, https://acleddata.com/data-export-tool/.

enemies that were less constrained than they were before, like the Malian and Nigerian military.

In Libya, the 2011 NATO intervention was an intervention nominally intended to protect civilians from reprisals by the Libyan military during the uprising, but functioned as a de facto mission supporting regime change. NATO's airpower campaign initially focused on attacking Libyan military units that were besieging rebel groups in eastern cities before expanding into strikes on military bases and units throughout the country. As in Mali and northern Nigeria, NATO's intervention contributed to boosting the political power of the belligerents supported by foreign military powers. The National Liberation Army (NLA) was thus better positioned than the pro-regime groups that were still resisting after NATO's Operation Unified Protector ended.

The gains resulting from these military interventions have proved short-lived, however.

In Mali, violence had surged since 2017 and now surpasses, by far, the levels that triggered Operation Serval in 2013. In 2017, groups affiliated with Al Qaeda coalesced to form the most potent jihadist coalition recorded in the region, only three years after Operation Barkhane replaced Serval. In northern Nigeria, violence has remained persistent in some locations around Lake Chad and the Cameroonian border (Map 1.2). Boko Haram and ISWAP remain far from defeated: in the first six months of 2020, 600 violent events attributed to either of these groups have caused the death of 2 623 people, according to the ACLED database. In Libya, the First Civil War was followed by a second conflict in 2014. The failed invasion of western Libya by General Khalifa Haftar's LNA forces in 2019 is the latest phase of conflict in the ongoing Libyan civil war without being a foreign intervention itself. However, the role of external military

Figure 1.7
Organisations in conflict by region, 2020
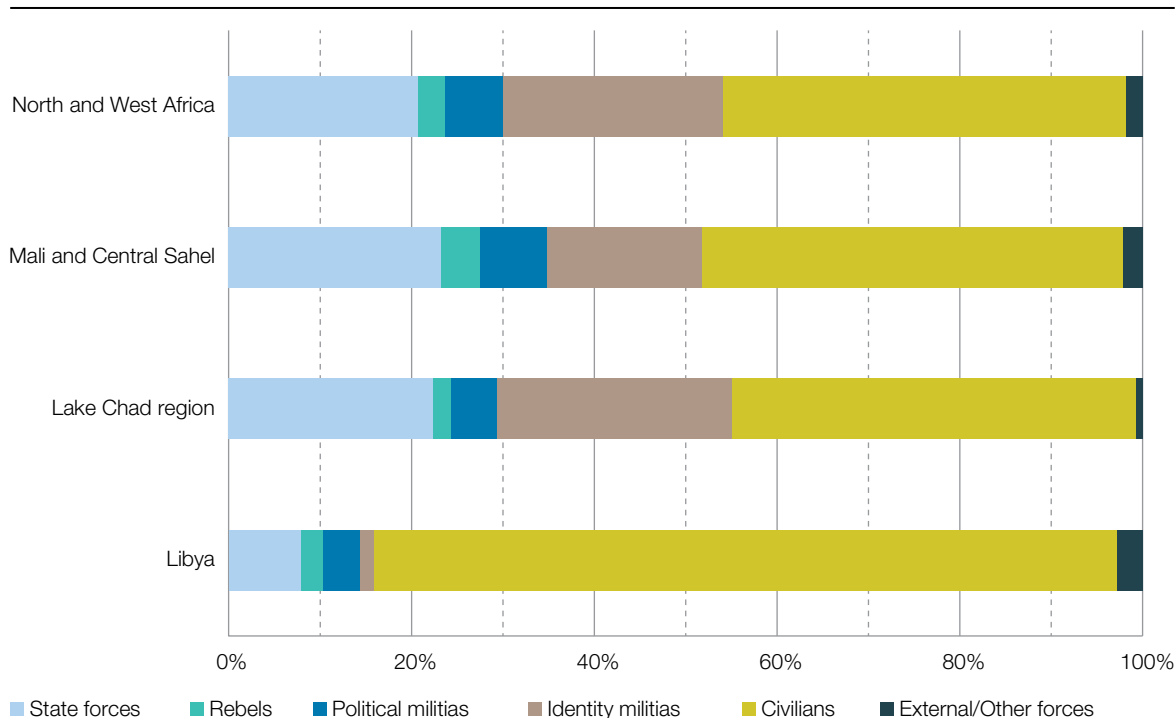
Note: Data available through 30 June 2020. The ACLED data does not distinguish between the perpetrator and the victim of a violent attack, except for civilians, who are always victims of violent events.

Source: Authors, based on data from ACLED (2020[2]), *The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project*, https://acleddata.com/data-export-tool/.

support for both of the primary parties, the LNA and the UN-supported GNA, is a growing point of concern and one that is likely to continue shaping the outcome of the conflict. The Western Campaign contributed to leading the GNA to forge a new coalition of previously non-allied armed groups, which considerably boosted its political power. The coalition formed around Haftar forces proved more fragile and may not be sustainable without future military successes.

POLITICAL OPTIONS TO ACHIEVE REGIONAL STABILITY

The evolution of the complex relations between actors in conflict in North and West Africa remains poorly understood despite its obvious importance to the ultimate resolution of armed conflicts. Because modern conflicts involve hundreds of versatile actors, mapping these networks of rivalries and alliances is a key step toward implementing policies that can put an end to the surging violence. Based on the network analysis, four main policy options can be suggested to improve the long-term political stability of North and West Africa.

Protecting civilians should become a priority

The most pressing issue is the need to better protect civilians, who remain the primary victims of the increased violence in North and West Africa. This confirms the findings in the previous OECD/SWAC (2020[1]) report. Civilians are involved as victims in more conflicts than any other types of actors in the region, including state forces, rebel groups, political and identity militias, and external forces. In 2020, civilians

represented more than half of the actors in conflict observed at the regional level, in Mali and the Central Sahel, and around Lake Chad (Figure 1.7). North of the Sahara, civilians represent 80% of the actors of the Libyan conflict, a very high percentage explained by indiscriminate shelling by the LNA and air force strikes conducted by the GNA during the Western Libya Campaign to capture Tripoli in 2019–20.

The number of civilian groups victims of violent events, has increased from 350 on average in the 2000s to 500 in 2019. To reverse this trend, protecting civilians should become the number one priority for state authorities and their international allies if they wish to promote regional stability. Nearly a decade after the beginning of the Malian civil war, little doubt remains that the most effective way to counter jihadist insurgencies is by addressing civilian issues, particularly in rural regions where local populations are often at the mercy of extremist organisations.

Thus far, none of the military interventions launched in North and West Africa has succeeded in creating secure areas for civilians where stabilisation policies could be developed by the police and civilian agencies. One of the effects of both the interventions themselves and of the responses by non-state armed organisations to the challenges posed by intervening forces has been an ever-increasing price paid by civilians in the region since 2010. In each intervention, violence against civilians surged, whether by design or as an unintended outcome. The worst situation can undoubtedly be found around Lake Chad, where four times more people have been killed as a result of the Boko Haram insurgency and other acts of violence since 2009 than during the Malian civil war. In this region durably marked by political violence, the counter-offensive launched by Nigeria and its neighbours under the umbrella of the MNJTF is the deadliest military intervention recorded in the region since the late 1990s.

Even in operations specified to protect civilians from harm, such as NATO's efforts in Libya, the result has been the same – more civilians targeted and killed each year. Civilians have also served as proxies for groups that were militarily weakened during the interventions. Many organisations that lacked the ability to confront the intervening forces or their allies still had the capacity to instead target non-combatants to establish their claims. An important implication of this is the need for future interventions to be as mindful of protecting civilians as they are in militarily aiding a political ally.

Communal and ethnic militias should be demilitarised

One of the key reasons why conflicts in North and West Africa are more intense than in the past is because of the growing number of belligerents involved. This report clearly shows that the multiplication of organisations in conflict contributes to diffusing political violence to regions that were previously spared from it, thus impacting the lives of a growing number of (mostly rural) people. More policy efforts should be made to limit this worrying trend and reduce the number of armed groups created, particularly political and identity militias, whose violence has significantly increased since the early 2010s (Figure 1.8).

In 2020, political and identity militias represented one-third of the organisations in conflict in North and West Africa. These militias do not only emerge in response to the increasing insecurity in the region. As elsewhere on the continent (Raleigh, 2016[4]), militias are also a primary cause of political insecurity in democratising states. Political elites, religious leaders and community strongmen often use militias as private armies to compete over access to resources, settle disputes and strengthen local power. State forces represent roughly 25% of the organisations in conflict in West Africa and less than 10% in Libya. Their growing involvement since the mid-2000s reflects the degrading security situation in the region and their rivalry towards both extremist organisations and the civilian population. State authorities should refrain from using such militias and make every effort to demilitarise them, favouring the use of trained troops that can be held accountable in cases of human rights violations. In the Sahara-Sahel, French forces refrained from using militias and auxiliary forces, in strong contrast with colonial and Cold War interventions (Shurkin, 2020[5]). However, this has not prevented the

Figure 1.8

Organisations in conflict by type in North and West Africa, 1997–2019
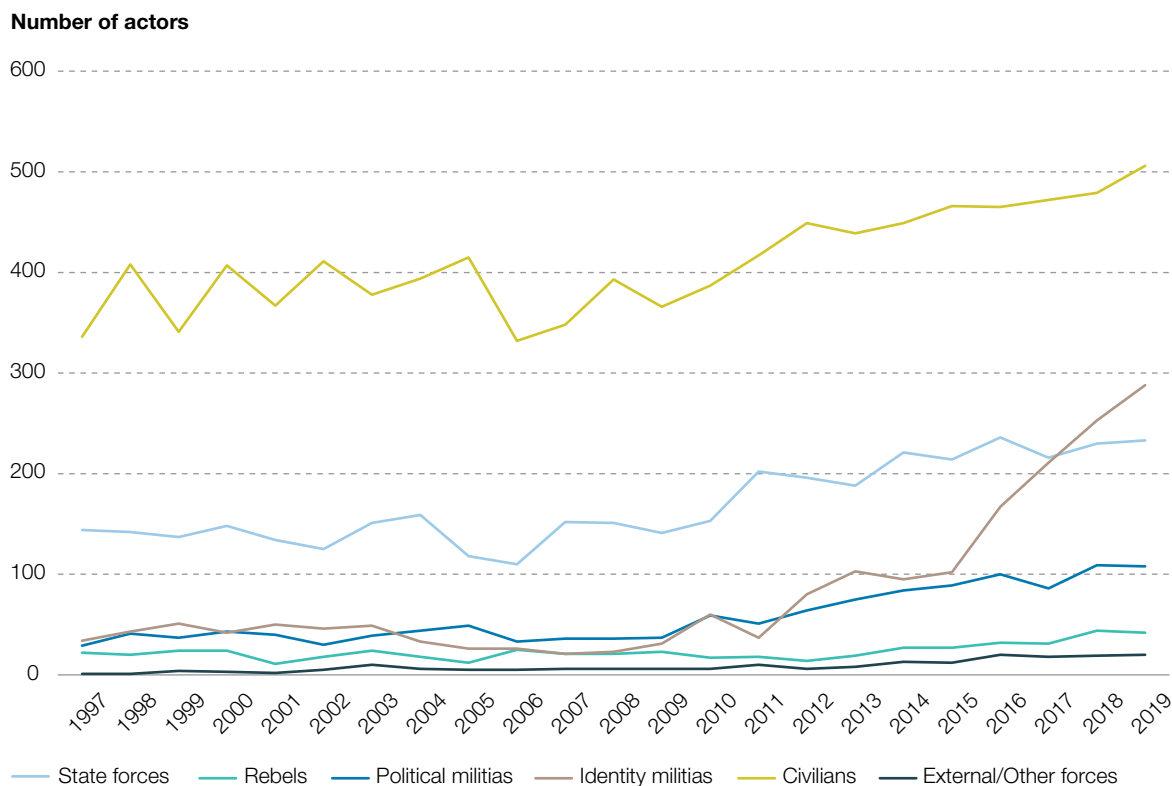
Number of actors

Note: Data available through 30 June 2020. The ACLED data does not distinguish between the perpetrator and the victim of a violent attack, except for civilians, who are always victims of violent events.

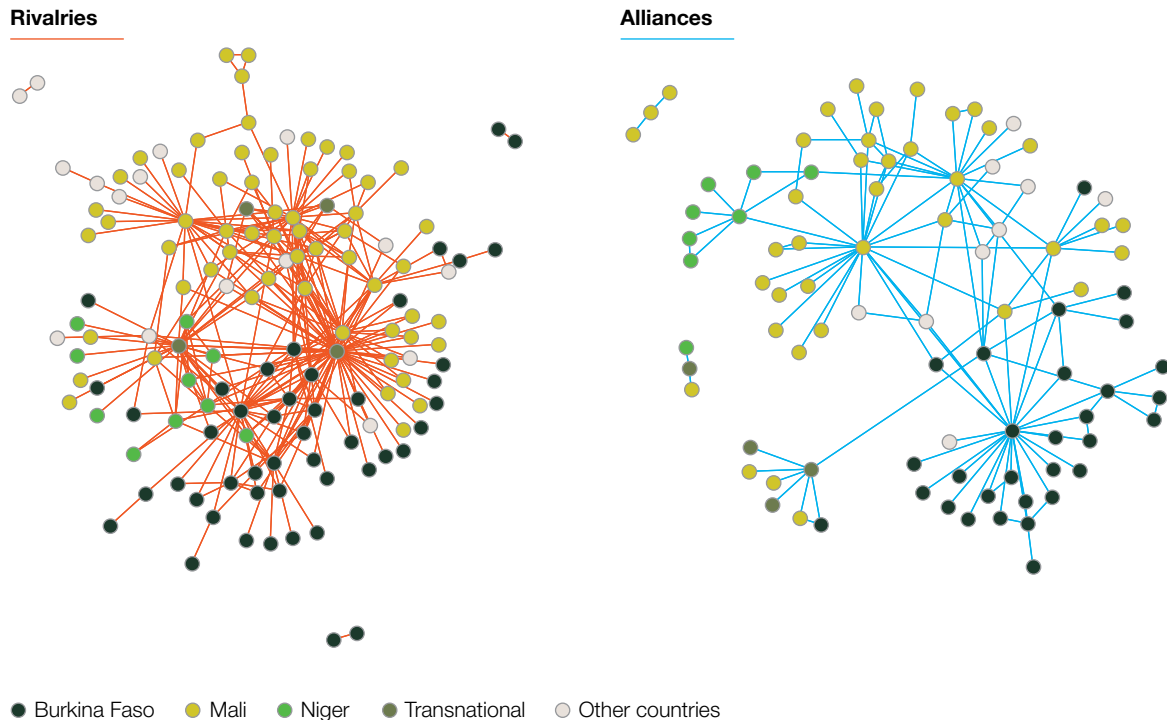Source: Authors, based on data from ACLED (2020[2]), *The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project*, https://acleddata.com/data-export-tool/.

development of numerous militias in rural regions and their use by local and national elites. In northern Nigeria, co-operation between government forces and local militias has proved instrumental in countering Boko Haram, but also led to a proliferation of weapons, a growing militarisation of the region, and a cycle of reprisals that has gravely affected civilians. It is in Libya, though, that the importance of militias and their potentially destabilising effect is the most pronounced. Both the LNA and the GNA are composed of a myriad of locally-based militias whose allegiances are rather volatile and hardly form a unified political and military entity. The heteroclite nature of the two main belligerents of the Libyan conflict make prospects of a ceasefire between LNA and GNA quite elusive, as each of their components pursues divergent objectives.

Build regional alliances, promote space-based policies and support border regions

The complexity of conflicts in North and West Africa is amplified by their transnational dimension. The Malian conflict, for example, is part of a larger conflict environment that comprises neighbouring Burkina Faso and Niger (Figure 1.9). In 2019, no fewer than 136 state and non-state actors were involved in acts of violence in the Central Sahel. Instead of forming three separate theatres of operations, both the co-operation and opposition networks of the Malian conflict extend beyond the boundaries of the Malian state, due to the activity of transnational violent organisations such as JNIM and ISGS (in green), and to joint military offensives launched by the countries of the region and their international allies (in grey).

Rivalries and alliances between organisations in the Central Sahel, 2019

Rivalries   **Alliances**

● Burkina Faso   ● Mali   ● Niger   ● Transnational   ○ Other countries

Source: Authors, based on data from ACLED (2020[2]), *The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project*, https://acleddata.com/data-export-tool/.

The cross-border nature of violence not only increases the number of belligerents; it also further complicates the co-operative and oppositional relationships with governments. Rebel groups and extremist organisations can operate in one country and use another as a safe haven for the training and recruitment of militants, thus developing divergent relationships with neighbouring government forces in pursuit of their political agenda in another state. Groups that oppose the government in one country may also support it in another. In the last decade, for example, secessionist movements have developed among Tuareg communities in northern Mali, while Tuareg has maintained co-operative relations with the government of Niger.

Sahelian states should pursue their efforts to build regional forces that can address the diffusion of political violence in the region, such as the G5 Sahel Joint Force. Nowhere in the region is the co-ordinated action of military forces more important than at the periphery of states. OECD/SWAC (2020[1]) found that 10% of the victims of acts of violence in the region were killed within 10 kilometres of a land border, making border areas the most dangerous regions of North and West Africa. The unique geography of conflict calls for more territorial policies. Long neglected by state authorities and poorly connected to regional and national urban centres, border regions should be the priority of the co-ordinated, all-of-government approaches of intervening powers in the region. Sahelian governments should also acknowledge the specificities of border regions and the need to reinforce national cohesion by developing decentralised institutions and infrastructure that benefit all equally.

Intervene militarily to keep warring parties apart rather than to take sides

Military interventions can profoundly alter the balance of power between belligerents, depending on whether third parties focus on strengthening existing collaborations between allies or targeting conflicts between enemies. The ultimate outcome of these military interventions

is usually hard to predict because it depends on the pre-existing relationships between belligerents, whose rivalries and alliances are often imperfectly known. Conflict network mapping can help to measure the direct and indirect impact of military interventions on all parties involved.

The situation in Libya, Mali and Nigeria raises questions on the results of military strategies that take sides with a belligerent versus those that seek mediation between warring parties. Interventions in which third parties get involved in a neutral fashion appear more likely to promote co-operation between belligerents, while also reducing violence. Although it can lead to violence, mediation offers more potential for longer-term stability, by creating a situation conducive to co-operation between actors, or by bringing actors to shift allegiances and collaborate with each other. So-called partisan interventions tend to favour opposition between actors, or changes of allegiance creating new confrontations.

The network analysis conducted in North and West Africa shows that partisan military interventions have contributed to forming alliances with at least one of the central parties to the conflict. For example, in Mali and Lake Chad, France and the MNJTF allied with states against their non-state rivals while in Libya, NATO allied with the anti-Gaddafi rebels. Paradoxically, this partisan strategy does not alter the balance of power between the intervener, states and their rivals. Without bringing about the political change needed to improve the security situation, military interventions have contributed to creating a situation where jihadist organisations are too weak to overthrow existing regimes, and government forces are too ill-equipped to put insurgencies to an end.
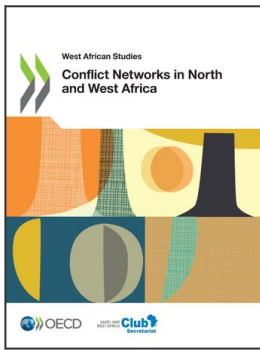
External military powers are now trying to maintain the balance of power without getting involved in the national political project and, since the end of the Cold War, have been focusing on military operations. At the same time, local regimes experience difficulty in implementing the necessary political reforms needed to manage the security situation beyond military interventions. Approaches lack co-ordination and tend to favour the status quo. As Shurkin (2020[5]) argued about Serval and Barkhane, "The French military limits itself to focusing on security in the anticipation that others will do the political work", stating that "its actions serve to perpetuate a political dispensation that is a driver of conflict."

Alongside their partners, Sahelian governments are part of a strategy of secular bulwark against Islamism. However, the structure of current conflicts shows that they are also motivated by community demands left unresolved by the authorities. Although extremist organisations have developed links with Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, their opposition to government forces and their violence against civilians is explained by highly localised factors, such as access to pastoral resources or control over trade routes, which take different forms in different societies and states.

The roots of such conflicts can hardly be addressed by military means alone. External forces cannot be the main instrument of political stability in the region. This would require an indefinite military commitment that is unlikely to eliminate the threat posed by jihadist organisations operating in North and West Africa and other forms of violence. It would require states to have sustainable political projects and alternatives to extremist ideologies based on fear and exclusion. All that military forces can continue to do is to create moments of opportunity to pursue the search for political solutions, which must originate from dialogue between the political forces involved.

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