Chapter 5

Conflict networks and military interventions in North and West Africa

This chapter examines the impact of military interventions on conflict networks in North and West Africa. It illustrates that the French involvement in the Sahel, NATO's Operation Unified Protector in Libya, and the joint offensive against Boko Haram around Lake Chad, were interventions that aimed to tip the balance of power to one side. None of these efforts, however, has achieved a lasting resolution to the violence that continues to tear apart North and West Africa. The impact of these interventions on conflict networks has been limited in duration and the jihadist and rebel organisations have strengthened following the initial shock. Finally, there has been an ever-increasing price paid by civilians in the region since 2010, reminding of the need for future interventions to act more in favour of protecting civilians.

KEY MESSAGES

» **Military interventions in Mali, Libya and around Lake Chad have reshuffled the conflict environment in which violent organisations operate across North and West Africa.**

» **Military interventions temporarily weakened their opponents without achieving long-lasting stability. Jihadist and rebel organisations have strengthened following the initial shock of the interventions.**

» **Jihadist groups weakened by military interventions have either pledged allegiance to violent global organisations, split according to ethnic and geographical lines or merged with other groups.**

» **Jihadist groups have also responded to military interventions by moving to more remote or less monitored areas, participating in the regional diffusion of violence observed in North and West Africa since the late 2000s.**

MILITARY INTERVENTIONS IN NORTH AND WEST AFRICA

Military interventions have punctuated the recent history of North and West African countries with regularity (Schmidt, 2018[1]). Since the end of the Cold War, no fewer than 20 major military interventions have been carried out to prevent war crimes, restore political stability or fight against extremist organisations in 12 countries, from Guinea-Bissau to Chad (Map 5.1). In a region where interstate conflicts are rare, the vast majority of these interventions have been initiated by multinational organisations, military alliances and regional economic communities (OECD/SWAC, 2020[2]) for a detailed account).

The United Nations (UN) has intervened six times in the region since 1997. The Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) established by Security Council resolution 2100 of 25 April 2013

is the latest UN mission in the region. It is the most expensive current operation run by the UN, with an annual cost of USD 1.22 billion, from July 2019 through June 2020. MINUSMA is also the third most dangerous UN mission in operation, with 225 personnel killed as of November 2020, after the United Nations–African Union Mission in Darfur (UNAMID, 284 killed) and the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) created in 1978 (320 killed). When the number of casualties resulting from "malicious acts" is considered, MINUSMA is the most dangerous mission ever established by the UN, after the United Nations Operation in the Congo (ONUC) conducted in the 1960s (United Nations, 2020[3]). The 133 personnel killed as a direct result of the Malian insurgency represent 13% of all casualties recorded by the UN in 77 missions since 1948.

<u>Map 5.1</u>

Major military interventions in North and West Africa, 1997–2020

Source: Adapted from OECD/SWAC (2020[2]), *The Geography of Conflict in North and West Africa*, West African Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/02181039-en.

In North Africa, the most important military intervention of the last decade was the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Operation Unified Protector (2011), which initially took the form of an enforced no-fly zone and naval blockade against the regime of Colonel Gaddafi in Libya. While NATO does not track the operational costs to each member country, the cost of the operation to the United States alone amounted to more than USD 1 billion (Gertler, 2011[4]). In West Africa, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has intervened three times to put an end to the civil wars of Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea-Bissau in the 1990s using the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG). The ECOWAS interventions relied heavily on Nigerian armed forces, while other African forces participated at different times. The overall cost of these interventions is unknown.

Several major interventions have also been launched by France in North and West Africa. France has intervened militarily in six of its former colonies (Burkina Faso, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Niger, Mali, and Mauritania) since the late 1980s. France also briefly participated in Liberia (Operation Providence), and more actively in NATO's intervention in Libya. From 1997 to 2019, French forces were directly involved in armed conflict in West Africa, making it the country with the longest record of intervention in the region. The end of Operations Epervier and Licorne in the early 2010s in Chad and Côte d'Ivoire coincided with the launch of Operation Serval in 2013 and Operation Barkhane in 2014 in the Sahel. The cost of Operation Serval and French support to MINUSMA is evaluated at EUR 642 million for 2013 (Sénat, 2015[5]). In 2017, France's operational budget for the Sahel was EUR 690 million, which is about half of the EUR 1 330 million earmarked by France for external operations (Sénat, 2018[6]). If spending remains constant this year, the French military will have spent around EUR 5 billion in the Sahel from 2013 to 2020, including the contribution to the European Union Training Mission in Mali (EUTM Mali).

HOW MILITARY INTERVENTIONS SHAPE CONFLICT NETWORKS

While the intervention of external powers may have multiple motivations, two main categories of intervention emerge depending on whom is ultimately the target of the intervention. In mediatory interventions, third parties get involved in a neutral fashion with the goal to reach a peaceful resolution of a conflict. Multinational and international organisations tend to favour this kind of intervention that mediates between warring parties. For example, the goal of the United Nations Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI) established in the mid-2000s was to "observe and monitor the implementation of the comprehensive ceasefire agreement of 3 May 2003, and investigate violations of the ceasefire" (United Nations, 2004, p. 29[7]). In partisan interventions, third parties take sides with one of the belligerents, with the objective to influence the outcome of the conflict in their favour (Corbetta and Grant, 2012[8]). For example, Operation Epervier launched by France in Chad in 1986 provided military support to Chadian forces opposing an invasion of the north of the country by Libyan troops.

Theoretically, the impact of military intervention can be represented as a creation of a new tie between two actors, known as a dyad. The introduction of a third party can lead to six potential scenarios according to whether these two actors co-operate with, or compete against, each other (Figure 5.1).

1. The first scenario is when the intervening power (A) adopts a mediatory approach and supports two actors that already work together (B and C). This creates a stable group of three actors, known as a triad, in which "friends of friends are friends". In recent years, French Operation Barkhane, for example, has supported both the Malian military and some of its allied militias in the east of the country. The likely outcome of this kind of intervention is an increase in co-operation and the formation of a larger coalition.

2. Instead of supporting two actors that work together, the intervening power can also choose to fight each of them. This second scenario represents a mediatory strategy that also creates a stable situation in which "enemies of enemies are friends". This occurs

when a foreign military attacks two terrorist organisations, for example. In Mali, French forces have targeted both the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and the Group for Supporting Islam and Muslims (JNIM). There was more violence overall, as the intervening power multiplies the number of attacks in the region.

3. The intervening power may also choose to adopt a partisan strategy and support one actor while attacking another. This third scenario is likely to create an unstable situation in which "friends of friends are enemies". The newly created tension between B and C can lead to a shift of allegiance between them; instead of collaborating, one of them may decide to work with the intervening power against its former ally.

4. In the fourth scenario, the intervening power supports both belligerents in conflict. This mediatory strategy creates an unstable situation similar to the third scenario described above, where "friends of friends are enemies". The relationships within this unstable triad are likely to incite belligerents to change allegiance and create a triad in which all actors are co-operating with each other, as in the first scenario.

5. An intervening power can also decide to follow a mediatory strategy and attack both belligerents, which will create yet another unstable situation where "enemies of enemies are enemies". To resolve the tension between them, the belligerents will likely work together, which is likely to lead to a situation similar to scenario 2 above, in which violence has increased.

6. Finally, if the intervening power follows a partisan strategy and attacks one actor while supporting another, the triad is theoretically stable because "enemies of enemies are friends". The likely outcome of this intervention is more violence as one of the two belligerents is forced to fight one more enemy.
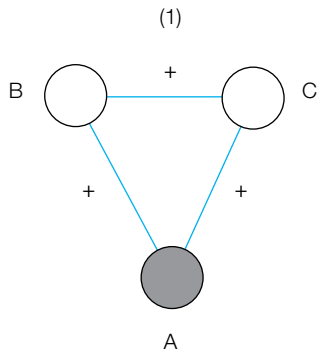
The six theoretical scenarios described above suggests that military interventions can influence the increase or decrease of violence depending
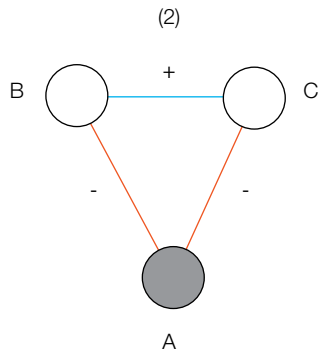
Figure 5.1

What happens when an external power intervenes in a conflict?
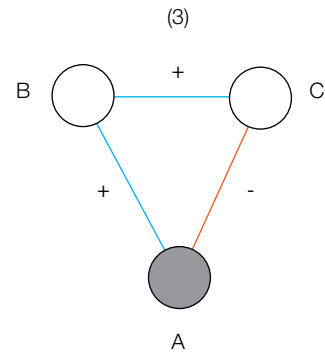
Intervention in a co-operative dyad
A is the intervening power, B and C are two allies

Intervention in a conflictual dyad
A is the intervening power, B and C are two enemies

Source: Authors.

Table 5.1

External interventions, impact on a conflict network and violence

Scenario	Type of external intervention	Impact on a conflict network	Outcome
1	Mediatory	Creates a stable situation conducive to co-operation between actors	Less violence
2	Mediatory	Creates a stable situation conducive to opposition between actors	More violence
3	Partisan	Creates an unstable situation that leads actors to shift allegiances and fight each other	More violence
4	Mediatory	Creates an unstable situation that leads actors to shift allegiances and collaborate with each other	Less violence
5	Mediatory	Creates an unstable situation that leads actors to shift allegiances and work together	Less violence
6	Partisan	Creates a stable situation conducive to opposition between actors	More violence

Source: Authors.

on the pre-existing relationships between actors involved in a conflict (Table 5.1). Each can lead to an increase or decrease in violence. If, as assumed above, the relationship between the intervening power and the belligerents cannot change over time, then the outcome of an external intervention relies entirely on the shoulders of the belligerents, whose shifts in allegiances can lead to more or less violence. Supporting or attacking belligerents indiscriminately can lead them to work together. The number of parties involved in real-world conflict is usually greater than in these theoretical scenarios, which further increases the importance of understanding pre-existing co-operative or conflictual relationships for an intervening party.

A NETWORK APPROACH TO POLITICAL POWER

The impact of military interventions on conflicts is studied using the Positive-Negative (PN) centrality index developed to assess the political power of an organisation (Chapter 3). The PN index assumes that the power of an organisation derives from the constraints and opportunities offered by the entire network of enemies and allies in which an organisation is embedded. The PN builds on the assumption that "having positive ties to well-connected others contributes positively to a node's centrality" (Everett and Borgatti, 2014, p. 117[9]). Organisations with low PN centrality are allied with actors who are embedded in numerous alliances, and in conflict with those who have few other enemies. In other words, they are friends with those that have many friends, and enemies with those that have few other enemies. Organisations with high PN centrality represent the inverse circumstance.

These groups are allied with actors who have few other allies and are in conflict with those who have many other enemies. Put differently, they are friends with those with few friends, and enemies with those who have many other enemies (Figure 5.2).[1]

The most important organisations in a network characterised by high levels of conflict and violence are typically those with the highest PN scores. For example, an organisation whose allies have fewer allies of their own are in a favourable position; the organisation is more influential within that network since their allies have few other options for co-operation. The same is true when considering the organisation's position relative to those they are opposed to. If their opponents themselves have many opponents, their opponents are more constrained to act.

Figure 5.2
How low and high Positive-Negative centrality scores relate to political power

A - Low PN score
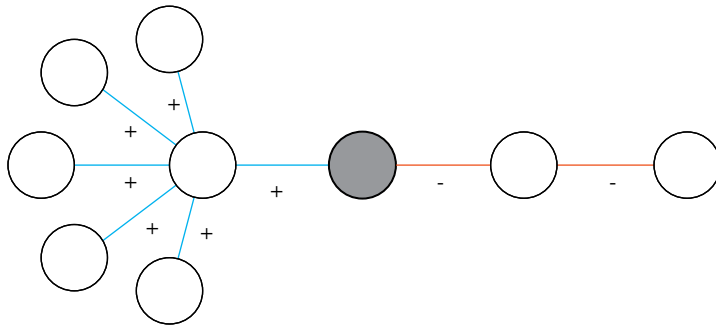
The focal actor (in grey) has a low PN score. It is allied with a group that has many other allies and is opposed to a group with few opponents of their own.

B - High PN score
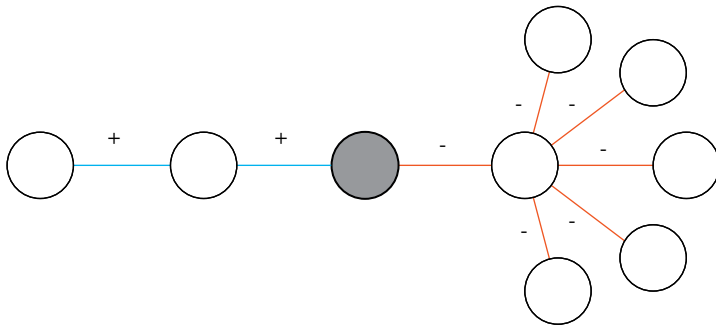
The focal actor (in grey) has a high PN score. It is allied with a group that has few allies of their own and is opposed to a group with many other opponents.

Source: Authors.

The PN index also makes it possible to identify shifts in a conflict network by comparing the political power of violent organisations before, during and after a military intervention. This study focuses on three military interventions that have shaped the conflicts in the region:

• The first military intervention is Operation Serval, carried out by France from 11 January 2013 to 15 July 2014 in Mali. Around 500 military and civilian deaths directly imputable to clashes between French forces and insurgents were recorded during the Operation in the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) database (Figure 5.3). Three-quarters of the fatalities were caused by battles between government forces, the French army, rebels and jihadist organisations. Operation Serval received logistical support from Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain,

the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the United Kingdom and the United States. Chad committed combat forces under French command. Serval was replaced by Operation Barkhane in July 2014 (Shurkin, 2020[10]). Barkhane received logistical support from Germany and the United Kingdom while Estonia committed combat forces under French command.

• The second military intervention is the offensive launched by Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad and Niger under the umbrella of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) against Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). This study focuses on the period from 23 January to 24 December 2015, during which some of the most decisive operations were conducted in the Lake Chad region. This ongoing intervention is by far the deadliest of the

Figure 5.3

Deaths related to military operations in Mali, Lake Chad and Libya
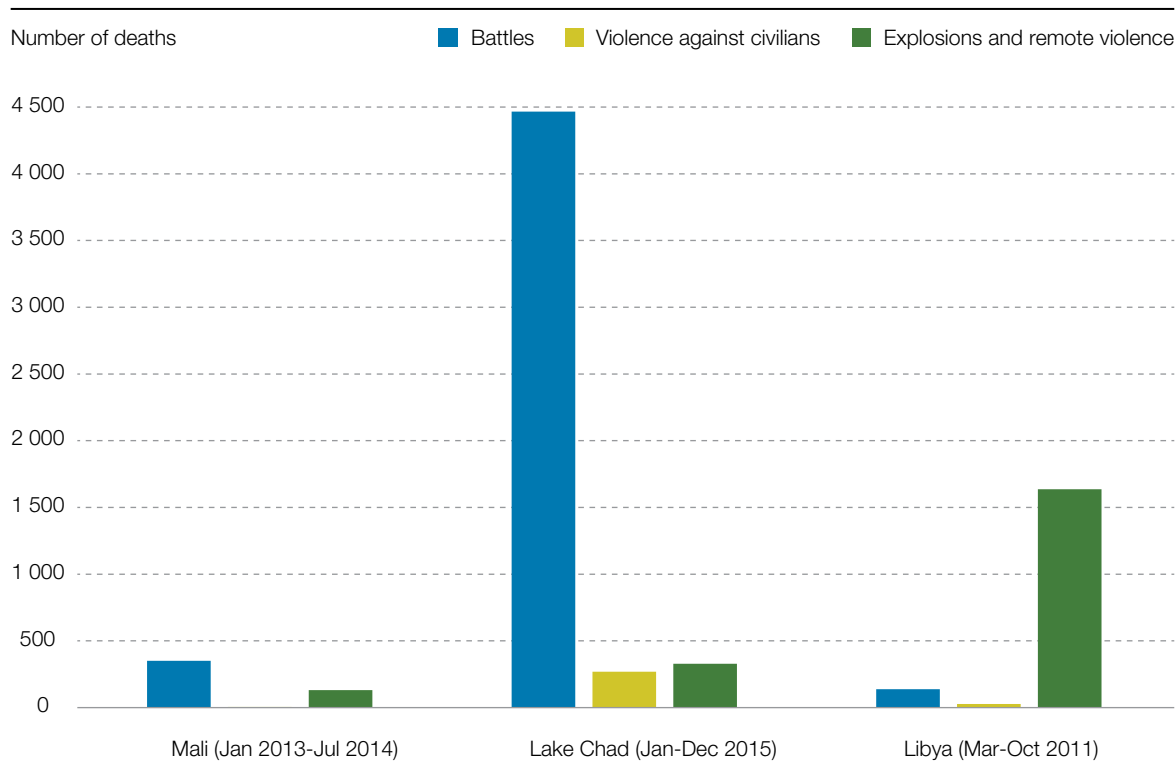
Source: Authors, based on data from ACLED (2020[11]), *The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project*, https://acleddata.com/data-export-tool/.

region, with more than 5 000 deaths directly related to the intervention recorded by ACLED in 2015. As in Mali, battles represent the vast majority of the events and deaths (88%) involving the Nigerian and MNJTF forces against Boko Haram and ISWAP.

- The third intervention is NATO's Operation Unified Protector against the regime of Colonel Gaddafi in Libya, conducted from 23 March to 31 October 2011. The intervention was split between four different national operations conducted by Canada, France, the United Kingdom and the United States. Belgium, Denmark, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Qatar, Spain and the UAE committed forces under US command while Bulgaria, Jordan, Romania, Sweden and Turkey participated independently from US command. More than 1 800 deaths are related to Operation Unified Protector in the ACLED database. Nine of out ten victims died as a result of explosions and remote violence caused by bombardments, drones

and improvised explosive devices (IEDs). This study also considers the Western Campaign initiated by the Libyan National Army (LNA) and their foreign backers against the Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli. The campaign was launched on 4 April 2019 and ended with the withdrawal of LNA forces on 5 June 2020.

The analysis covers the entire region for which violent events related to one of the three military interventions described above as they have been recorded in the ACLED database. In Mali and Central Sahel, the area of conflict includes the whole of Mali and Burkina Faso as well as eastern Mauritania, western Niger and southern Algeria. Around Lake Chad, the study covers the regions where most Boko Haram and ISWAP attacks have been observed since 2009. This includes much of northern and eastern Nigeria, the southern part of the Diffa region in Niger, northern Cameroon, Lake Chad and the N'Djamena region. In Libya, the entire country is covered in the study (Map 4.1).

Figure 5.4

Events and fatalities in Mali and Central Sahel, 2012–20
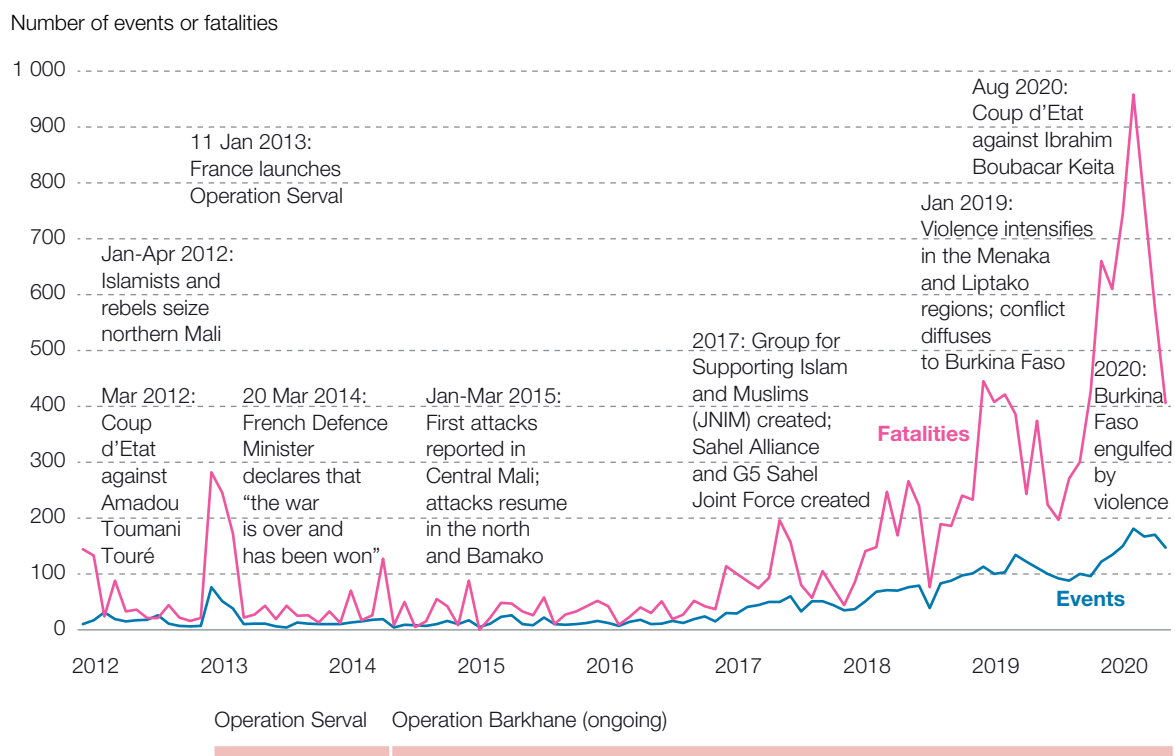
Note: Data available through 30 June 2020.

Source: Authors, based on data from ACLED (2020[11]), *The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project*, https://acleddata.com/data-export-tool/.

OPERATIONS SERVAL AND BARKHANE IN THE SAHEL

The French army launched Operation Serval to stop the advance of jihadist organisations affiliated with Al Qaeda towards Central Mali on 11 January 2013. French forces intervened at the request of the interim government of Mali that succeeded Amadou Toumani Touré, whose regime was overthrown by a military junta on 21–22 March 2012. A highly mobile and mechanised intervention backed by Malian and Chadian troops, Serval successfully reasserted control over the north of the country and killed hundreds of violent extremists in a few weeks (Chivvis, 2015[12]).

Overall, Operation Serval had a significant impact on the geography of violence. The Operation reduced the number of events and fatalities from pre-intervention levels, limited the locations of violent events within Mali, and reduced the concentration of violent events when they did occur. However, Serval and its successor

Barkhane were largely unable to prevent a surge in violence and a return to pre-intervention conflict levels in subsequent years. As a result, violence in Mali and neighbouring countries has re-emerged since early 2017 and has now surpassed the levels that triggered the intervention in 2013 (Figure 5.4). Violence has taken other forms as well: in many parts of Mali and the Central Sahel, regions characterised by clustered events of high intensity are now surrounded by regions in which violence is more diffuse, suggesting a diffusion of the insurgency (OECD/SWAC, 2020[2]).

France's interventions and militant groups

In addition to producing a far more complex geography than was present in 2013, Serval and Barkhane have also contributed to reshuffling

Box 5.1
Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)

Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is a jihadist group founded in Algeria whose units and offshoots have conducted operations from Algeria and Libya in the north to as far south as Côte d'Ivoire. AQIM originated in the late 1990s as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), itself a coalition of field commanders who broke away from the Armed Islamic Group (GIA). The GIA, at one time the most powerful hardliner faction within Algeria's 1991–2002 civil war, antagonised many of its own members as well as wide swaths of Algerian society by the mid-1990s due to its leaders' capriciousness, bloodthirstiness and ideological exclusivism. These traits led to both internal violence as well as massacres in Algerian villages and other atrocities. The GSPC stated in its founding charter that it remained committed to fighting the state, but that it rejected indiscriminate violence and ex-communication (*takfir*) against civilians. The GSPC had ties to Al Qaeda from virtually the moment of its creation: it pledged allegiance to Al Qaeda in 2003, formally became part of Al Qaeda in 2006, and took the name AQIM in 2007 (Bencherif, 2020[14]).

The GSPC's formation, however, overlapped with the decline of the civil war. Amnesty initiatives by the Algerian government, the killing of the GIA's last major emir in 2002, and the Algerian population's war fatigue all sapped the GSPC's potential for finding renewed mass support for jihadist violence in Algeria. As AQIM, the group launched devastating attacks inside Algeria in 2007 and 2011 – but only sporadically. The overall trend was a shift of AQIM's centre of gravity to the Sahara and the Sahel, where enterprising field commanders such as Mokhtar Belmokhtar (Box 2.5) and Abdelhamid Abu Zayd conducted lucrative kidnappings and developed multi-faceted economic and political relationships in Mali, Mauritania and Niger (Thurston, 2020[13]).

These ties facilitated AQIM's entry into the northern Malian rebellion of 2012, in which AQIM quickly came to play a major role, particularly in the jihadist occupation of Timbuktu (Bøås, 2014[15]). In 2013, AQIM suffered losses as a French-led military intervention expelled jihadists from northern Malian cities; Abu Zayd was killed in February 2013 in far northern Mali. Since 2013, French forces have hunted top AQIM leaders, killing senior leaders such as the group's long-time emir, Abdelmalek Droukdel, in 2020 (Box 2.4). Meanwhile, AQIM has suffered recurring splits and internal tensions, including defections to the Islamic State in both Algeria and the Sahel. However, working mainly through its Mali-centric subsidiary JNIM, AQIM remains a potent force in the Sahara-Sahel region, although Droukdel's death may mark the culmination of a trend where JNIM is eclipsing AQIM in importance and capacity.

Source: Original text provided by Alexander Thurston.

the relationships within and between violent organisations operating in the region. As Thurston (2020, p. 138[13]) has argued, "The intervention not only reversed the entire jihadist project but also splintered the Ansar al-Din coalition back into its prewar components." The jihadist organisation Ansar Dine was formed in December 2011 by Iyad ag Ghali, a Tuareg powerbroker who led secular rebellions against the Malian state in 1990 and 2006. Ag Ghali created Ansar Dine as an alternative vehicle for relevance and power after his bid for leadership of the separatist National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) had been rejected (Box 4.4). Ansar Dine attracted

other senior Tuareg leaders and politicians in the Kidal Region of Mali. Its creation also reflected ag Ghali's increasingly close ideological, political and economic ties to Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) (Box 5.1).

The French intervention, in turn, prompted a split within Ansar Dine. Ifoghas politicians from the Kidal region, who had initially regarded Ansar Dine as a vehicle "for protecting their political relevance and containing ag Ghali's radicalism" now considered their association with the jihadist movement as a liability (Thurston, 2020, p. 139[13]). Splitting with Ansar Dine, several prominent Tuareg leaders broke off to create a group initially

called the Islamic Movement of Azawad (IMA), which was quickly renamed the High Council for the Unity of Azawad (HCUA) under the leadership of Alghabass ag Intalla, a former mayor and deputy of Kidal and son of the paramount ruler (*amenokal*) of the Kel Adagh Tuareg. The HCUA also received political backing from the hereditary Tuareg establishment in the Kidal Region. Ag Ghali remained in the jihadist camp. In the years after France's intervention, his organisation continued launching attacks in northern Mali while also expanding southward. Together, ag Ghali's Ansar Dine, Kouffa's Katibat Macina, the Saharan units of AQIM and al-Mourabitoun (The Sentinels), formed a coalition called JNIM in 2017 (Roetman, Migeon and Dudouet, 2019[16]).

In eastern Mali, Operation Serval expelled the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) from the city of Gao and contributed to fragmenting the jihadist movement along ideological and geographical lines (Thurston, 2020[13]). Regionally minded militants linked to Mokhtar Belmokhtar conducted various attacks in the region. In August 2013, the Veiled Men Battalion (al-Mulathamun, also known as Those Who Sign in Blood) of Mokhtar Belmokhtar merged with MUJAO to form al-Mourabitoun. Some Arab militants joined the newly formed Arab Movement of Azawad (MAA). Other militants started to recruit locally, notably among the Fulani community of the Gao and Menaka region.

One of these enterprising militants was Adnan Abu Walid al Sahrawi, a former spokesman and head of MUJAO's Shura Council and deputy leader of al-Mourabitoun. In May 2015, al Sahrawi formed ISGS after internal conflicts within al-Mourabitoun. Al Sahrawi pledged allegiance to the Islamic State and Abu Bakr al Baghdadi in 2015, and the Islamic State accepted the pledge the following year (Warner, 2017[17]). In March 2019, ISGS formally became a regional unit of the Islamic State West Africa Province rather than a new province of its own (Nsaibia and Weiss, 2020[18]). Belmokhtar opposed the affiliation to the Islamic State, and his portion of al-Mourabitoun rejoined AQIM in late 2015, eventually becoming a founding component of AQIM's subsidiary, JNIM.

ISGS's most famous attack is the October 2017 ambush on a joint Nigerien-American patrol

outside the Nigerien village of Tongo-Tongo. ISGS also conducted high-casualty attacks on Nigerien military outposts at Inates in December 2019 and Chinagodrar in January 2020. Despite its formal relationship with the Islamic State, until roughly the second half of 2019, there was accommodation and even sometimes co-ordination between ISGS and JNIM (Le Roux, 2019[19]). In recent years, however, ISGS and JNIM have increasingly clashed in the Mali-Burkina Faso border region over territory and strategic disagreements, including JNIM's willingness to negotiate with the Malian government (Map 4.2). The Islamic State's central leadership may also have pressured ISGS to confront JNIM as part of the global conflict between the Islamic State and Al Qaeda (Nsaibia and Weiss, 2020[18]).

Another group of former MUJAO jihadists returned to the Mopti region in Central Mali and joined Amadou Kouffa's Katibat Macina, formed in early 2015 (Box 5.2). The term Macina refers both to a geographical zone within present-day Mali and to an Islamic polity founded by the Fulani jihadist Seku Amadu in the early 19th century (Miles, 2018[20]). Katibat Macina has selectively invoked the name of Amadu's theocratic state and attacked its physical traces, including the mausoleum of its founder. Katibat Macina recruited heavily but not exclusively among the Fulani, from which Kouffa hails, and its opponents and victims sometimes responded to the jihadist violence by demonising the Fulani as a whole. Inter-ethnic violence, especially between Fulani and Dogon, but also between Fulani and Bambara, swept through the Mopti region. Kouffa has struck a tenuous balance between presenting Katibat Macina as the defender of the Fulani and presenting his battalion as a multi-ethnic jihadist force aiming to create a theocratic utopia (Thurston, 2020[13]). Kouffa benefits not just from inter-ethnic tensions but intra-ethnic tensions among the Fulani, recruiting from among young and marginalised Fulani herders and villagers who then targeted Fulani administrators, imams and oligarchs (Thiam, 2017[21]).

Under ag Ghali's ally Amadou Kouffa, the Ansar Dine-affiliated Katibat Macina initiated a campaign of violence in the Mopti and Ségou Regions of central Mali and then expanded mostly eastwards. The first attack took place in

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Box 5.2
Amadou Kouffa

Amadou Kouffa is a Fulani preacher born in Niafunké, Mali, likely in the 1950s. The outlines of his early life are difficult to reconstruct, but he was an itinerant Qur'an student, and then a preacher of local renown, who joined many other Malian clerics in opposing a 2009 attempt to reform Mali's Family Code. Kouffa was also a member of the Da'wa preaching movement (known globally as Jama'at al-Tabligh). He may have travelled with Da'wa to Afghanistan and Pakistan. Through Da'wa, Kouffa met Iyad ag Ghali, the northern Malian politician and rebel leader and the future leader of Ansar Dine (and later JNIM) in northern Mali (Le Roux, 2019[19]). Between July and December 2012, Kouffa received military training from Ansar Dine in the Timbuktu region and participated in the offensive by AQIM, MUJAO and Ansar Dine against Malian forces into central Mali in January 2013.

Source: Original text provided by Alexander Thurston.

January 2015 in the western part of the Niger River Inner Delta. Katibat Macina fighters may have participated in some of the most prominent terrorist attacks in the Sahel, including attacks in Bamako in 2015 and Ouagadougou in 2016. Katibat Macina was a founding component of the jihadist coalition, JNIM, in 2017. Kouffa is not the formal second in command, but given his importance in central Mali and northern Burkina Faso, and given French strikes against AQIM figures within JNIM, Kouffa has become the second-most important figure in JNIM after ag Ghali. In 2018, Kouffa was reported dead in a French raid (Lebovich, 2018[22]), but emerged alive in a February 2019 video. Meanwhile, as clashes grew between JNIM and ISGS in 2019–20, Kouffa was a central figure in the conflict, some of which concerned competition over territory in his zone of operations. Beyond Mali, Katibat Macina has been a key vehicle for Ansar Dine's, and then JNIM's, bridge building with militants in Burkina Faso. Kouffa reportedly had a close relationship with Ibrahim Dicko, founder of the Burkinabè jihadist group Ansaroul Islam (Box 4.3).

Operation Serval also led to major restructuring among the MNLA, a Tuareg-led movement that advocates the creation of a separatist state in northern Mali (Thomas and Falola, 2020[23]). The MNLA was formed in late 2011 by several constituencies – Tuareg activists in the diaspora, Tuareg returnees from Libya, Malian army defectors, and remnants of the rebel faction led by Ibrahim ag Bahanga, who died in a car accident in August 2011 in Mali. In early 2012, the MNLA launched its uprising to take control of northern Mali, aided by Ansar Dine, AQIM and MUJAO (Walther and Christopoulos, 2015[24]). Amid a power struggle following the MNLA's declaration of northern independence in April 2012, Ansar Dine, AQIM and MUJAO expelled the MNLA from Timbuktu, Gao, and Kidal (Baldaro and Raineri, 2020[25]). After the French intervention in January 2013, the MNLA swiftly returned to Kidal and became a key military and political actor there. The MNLA was considered an "anti-jihadist counterweight" by the French (Thurston, 2020, p. 139[13]) that "helped guide French forces and continued working with them in different capacities through the transition from Operation Serval to the regionally focused Operation Barkhane in August 2014" (Lebovich, 2019[26]).

In 2014, the MNLA, the HCUA and part of the Arab Movement of Azawad (MAA) formed the Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA), a bloc for representing the ex-rebel movements and the Kidal establishment more broadly within peace talks and other venues. The CMA became one of three signatories to the 2015 Algiers peace accord, along with the Malian government and a coalition of anti-rebel militias known as the *Plateforme*. The CMA also gradually consolidated significant political and military control over Kidal, outmanoeuvring rival militias and signalling to the Malian state that state authority would have real limits in Kidal (Lebovich, 2017[27]).

Figure 5.5

French military forces and their allies in Mali and the Central Sahel, 2013–20
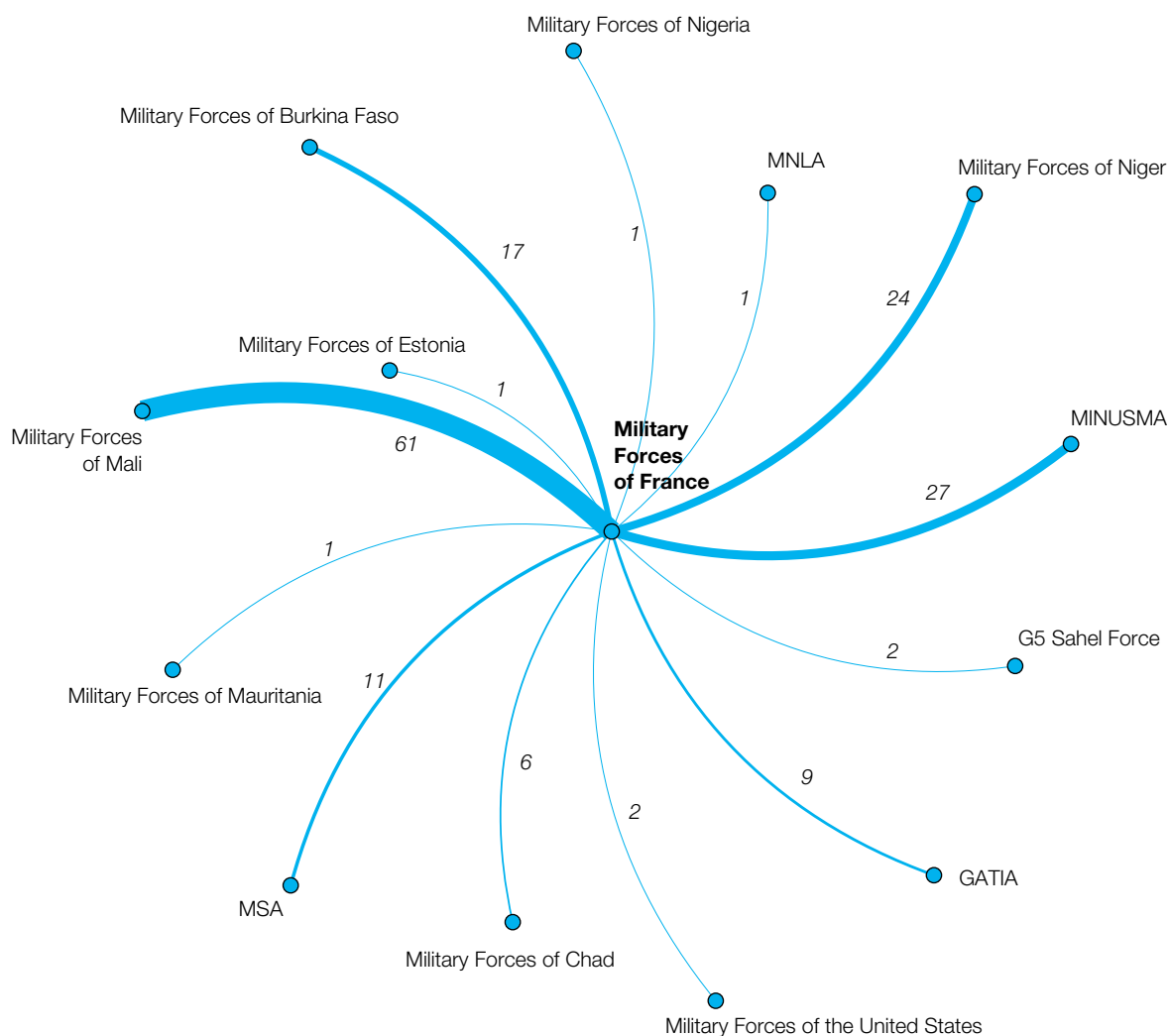
Note: The width of the ties between organisations is proportional to the number of collaborations events recorded over the entire study period. Data available through 30 June 2020.

Source: Authors, based on data from ACLED (2020[11]), *The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project*, https://acleddata.com/data-export-tool/.

The MNLA retains a major role in the CMA and in the politics of what appears to be Kidal's de facto autonomy, but the HCUA's role within the CMA appears significantly stronger. Ag Ghali appears to maintain some level of communication with ex-Ansar Dine members who now belong to CMA, suggesting that the boundaries between rebel and jihadist organisations remain porous.

Allies and enemies of French forces

France's intervention in Mali in January 2013 placed French forces in the centre of the region's conflict network. The French were allied with Malian state forces, various pro-Malian government militias and other state forces operating throughout the region while being opposed to all the identity-based militias and rebel groups seeking to overthrow the Malian government. Since 2013, French forces have collaborated with state and non-state organisations 163 times, according to the ACLED database (Figure 5.5). The military forces of Mali are by far the biggest ally of France in the country, with 61 collaborations, followed distantly by MINUSMA, and the military forces of Niger and Burkina Faso. These collaborations

reflect the operations conducted by the French and their allies in the border region of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. To improve the number and effectiveness of joint missions with Malian units, the French initiated Operation Takuba in 2019, a task force that will include other European special forces in co-ordination with G5 members and the UN (Shurkin, 2020[10]).

In early 2018, following the Tongo-Tongo attack, France's Operation Barkhane began partnering with two Malian militias to combat the ISGS in eastern Mali: the Imghad Tuareg Self-Defense Group and Allies (GATIA) led by El Hadj ag Gamou and the Movement for the Salvation of Azawad (MSA) founded by Moussa ag Acharatoumane. GATIA is a leading member of the Plateforme, a coalition of pro-government militias signatories of the 2015 peace agreement. Originally active in northern Mali, GATIA relocated in the Menaka region after the CMA established military dominance in the Kidal Region in the mid-2010s (Thurston, 2020[13]). As its name indicates, it has become a vehicle for the interests of Imghad Tuareg, whose political objectives often clash with those of the "noble" Ifoghas (OECD/SWAC, 2020[2]). Allied with GATIA, MSA presents itself as a militia defending the interests of the Daoussahak (or Idaksahak) Tuareg communities, whose pastoralist grounds strand the Niger-Mali border in the Menaka region. The anti-ISGS mission helped to fuel and accelerate complex processes of ethnic communities' alignment and realignment for, and against, the different sides, as Fulani, Tuareg, Daoussahak and other communities responded to atrocities committed by GATIA, MSA and ISGS (United Nations, 2018[28]).

French recourse to ethnic and communal militias in Mali and the Sahel has been limited, an undeniable sign of change from colonial approaches that relied heavily on auxiliary troops and militias (Shurkin, 2020[10]). Joint operations between the French, GATIA and MSA represent only 12% of the collaborations and are concentrated in the Gao, Ansongo and Menaka districts (*Cercles*) of eastern Mali. In late February 2018, for example, French forces and their allies conducted a joint operation against ISGS in the In-Delimane region east of Gao with a view to capturing or killing ISGS leader al

Sahrawi. This joint offensive of Barkhane, GATIA and MSA pushed ISGS into new territories, including eastern Burkina Faso where it has dominated remote areas by taking over gold mines, expelling authorities and restoring locals' access to forests (Maclean, 2019[29]). In April of the same year, an attack by ISGS militants against MSA and GATIA militiamen was repelled with the support of Barkhane forces in the area of Akabar near the Niger border.

Conflicts involving French forces have killed more than 2 000 people in Mali and neighbouring Niger and Burkina Faso since Operation Serval was launched in January 2013. ISGS and JNIM remain by far the main opponents of French military forces in the region (Figure 5.6). More than half (54%) of the 315 violent events involving French military forces have been linked to these two organisations. Before they eventually merged with JNIM, Ansar Dine and AQIM were involved in 28% of the events recorded in the region. Clashes with rebel groups and militias represent a negligible share of the remaining events in which the French are involved. The lethality of these clashes reflects the evolution of the Malian conflict: after a peak of 422 fatalities recorded in 2013 due to Operation Serval, the number of people killed in clashes involving French forces reached an all-time low in 2016 with 12 fatalities, before accelerating in recent years. The year 2020 is the most lethal recorded so far, with 804 fatalities through June.

Operation Serval and political power in Mali

Because Serval was an intervention carried out on behalf of the Malian government, the inclusion of French forces reinforced the pre-intervention patterns of alliances and helped to harden the patterns of opposition. This created a dynamic that led first to higher levels of co-operation among the various rebel and jihadist groups but later to fractures between them (Box 5.3).

The intervention also had a noticeable effect on the relative power of the various groups important to the conflict. This can be seen in Figure 5.8, which summarises shifts in the PN index for key groups in Mali before, during and following Serval. Most importantly is the boost the intervention gave to

Figure 5.6

French military forces and their enemies in Mali and the Central Sahel, 2013–20
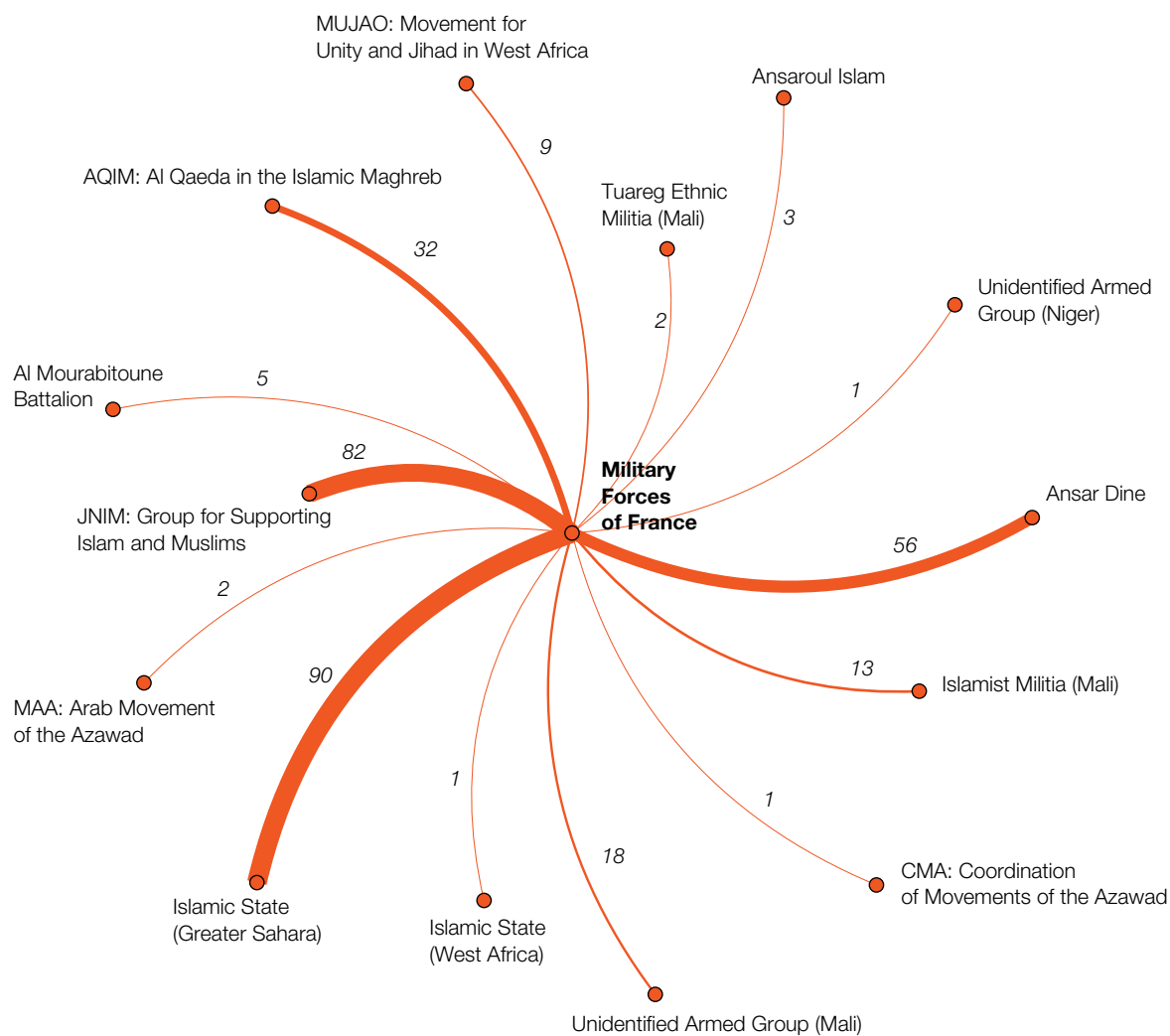
Note: The width of the ties between organisations is proportional to the number of conflictual events recorded over the entire study period. Organisations are listed according to their name at the time of each recorded violent event, which explains why sub-components of current jihadist organisations, such as AQIM and al-Mourabitoun, appear as individual nodes. Data available through 30 June 2020.

Source: Authors, based on data from ACLED (2020[11]), *The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project*, https://acleddata.com/data-export-tool/.

Malian forces after 2014. The Malian military's PN score increased significantly following the intervention, which means its overall position was improved relative to its various opponents. This shift reflects the fact that the number and relative position of the Malian state's allies were improved by the intervention, while the number of opponents and their relative position were reduced. From this perspective, Serval's intervention was a partial success; not only did the Malian state survive its challengers at the time, but it also emerged relatively empowered when compared to its foes following the intervention.

This improvement in the Malian military's status in the network was also a function of the weakening of its prime opposition during and after the intervention. For example, AQIM, MUJAO and Ansar Dine all exhibited markedly lower PN scores after the intervention. This means that their overall network position had deteriorated as a result of the intervention. In each case, each of these groups had fewer allies after the intervention or at least allies that were less reliant on them than they were before the intervention. These groups also had more enemies or enemies that were themselves

Box 5.3
An application of balance theory to the Malian conflict

The Malian conflict involves four main types of actors: government forces and their international allies, communal and ethnic militias, separatist rebels, and jihadist organisations (Desgrais, Guichaoua and Lebovich, 2018[30]). The links between these actors are positive when these types of actors tend to collaborate and are negative otherwise. The overall conflict environment can be decomposed into four groups of three actors (or triads), as indicated on the right-hand side of Figure 5.7. Are these configurations of ties more likely to promote a peaceful resolution of the conflict or, on the contrary, encourage violence between warring parties?

To address this question, balance theory can be used to predict which actors tend to form theoretically stable triads over time. Balance theory assumes that relations among a group of three actors are stable if all the possible relations are positive or if two actors have negative relations with a third party (Doreian and Krackhardt, 2001[31]) (Chapter 3). In the first case, "friends of a friend are friends" while in the second case, "enemies of an enemy are friends". In contrast, triads formed of two positive and one negative tie and of three negative ties are theoretically unstable, as friends of friends tend to become friends, and enemies of enemies also tend to become friends.

Stable triads in which actors fight each other reinforce the status quo and are unlikely to lead to a rapid resolution of the conflict. They make a peace agreement more difficult and have the potential to encourage more violence between the actors in conflict. Unstable triads may lead to changes in the balance of powers between actors that could facili-tate the victory of one side against the others. In other words, conflicts in which stable triads dominate are theoretically more difficult to resolve than conflicts where unstable triads can lead to power changes.

All of the triads observed between govern-ment forces, militias, rebels and jihadists in Mali are theoretically stable because they are composed of two negative ties and one positive tie. In other words,

"enemies of enemies are friends" in most situations: rebels and jihadists are opposed to states, while militias usually work with states against jihadist and rebel organisations. The relationship between the rebels and the jihadists is the only one that can occasionally change over time. While rebels usually have a much more secular agenda than jihadist organisations, they may occasionally join forces with them. When rebels and jihadists fight each other, two unstable triads composed of three negative ties are created, one between the government, the rebels and the jihadists (number 3 of Figure 5.7), and one between the rebels, militias and jihadists (number 4). In this case, "enemies of enemies are enemies", rather than allies.

The competition between rebels and jihadists is key to understanding the evolution of the conflict because it introduces a structural tension within the conflict environment that can only be resolved by a change of alliance. This change can take two theoretical forms. The first configuration is if the rebels and jihadists join forces against the government. In this case, the conflict is likely to end with state collapse. Such alliance happened once in the first phase of the Malian conflict in early 2012 but was short-lived: the jihadists of Ansar Dine rapidly took over the rebels of the MNLA after both groups conquered most of northern Mali (Bencherif and Campana, 2017[32]). The second configuration is when the government succeeds in convincing the rebels to work against the jihadists and form a larger coalition. This option is not as unrealistic as it sounds. Many rebels are fighting for better access to the government or the army, rather than actual independence and could put their grievances aside in exchange for a larger share of the national budget, regional investments or power positions within their region.

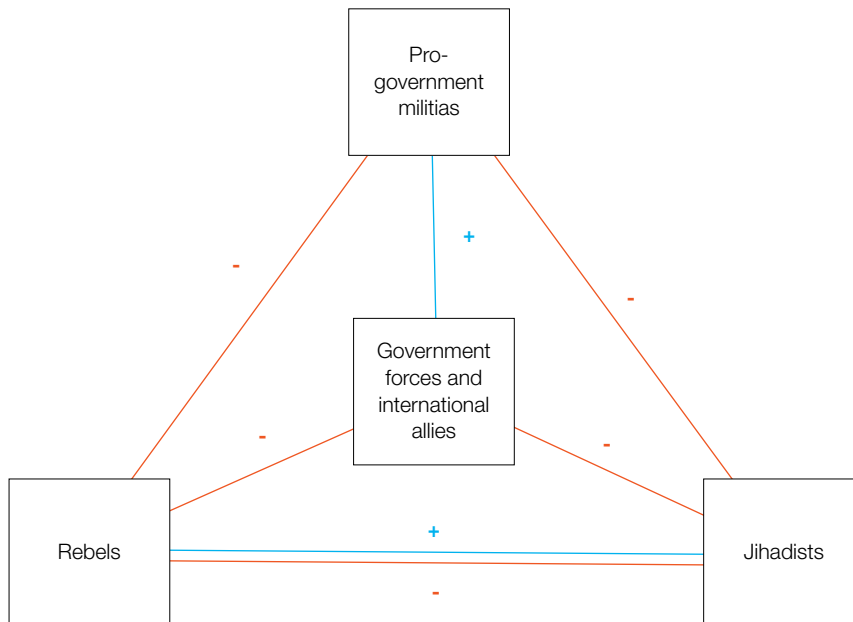Source: Original text provided by Olivier Walther.

(continues overleaf)

(Box 5.3 continued)

Figure 5.7

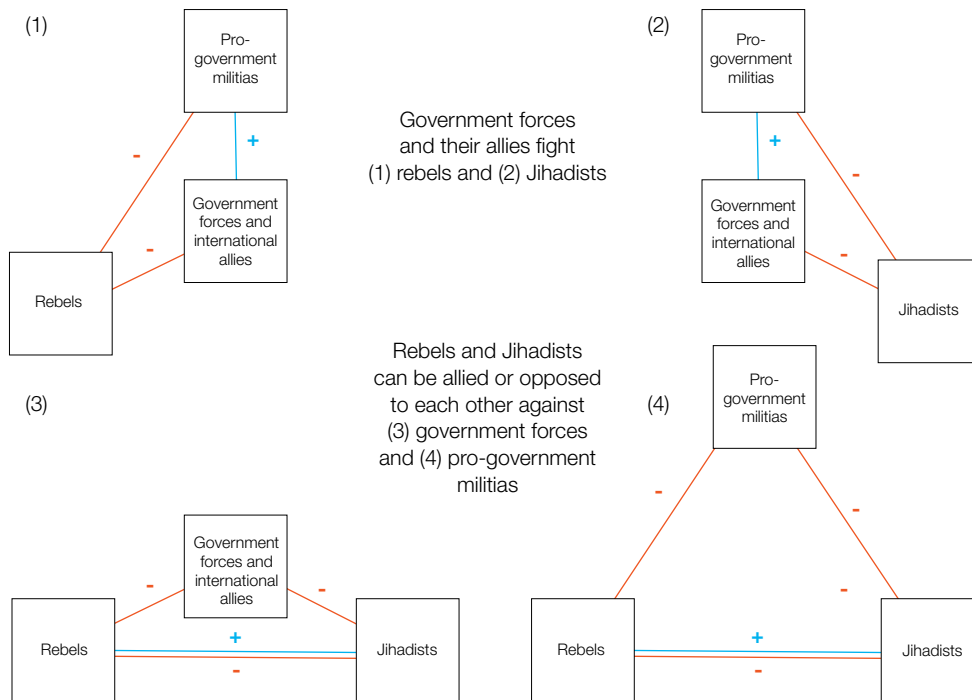A schematic representation of alliances and conflicts in Mali

Simplified representation of the Malian network
Ties indicate alliances and opposition between actors

Four groups of three actors (triads)
Ties indicate alliances and opposition between actors

Government forces and their allies fight (1) rebels and (2) Jihadists

Rebels and Jihadists can be allied or opposed to each other against (3) government forces and (4) pro-government militias

Source: Authors.

Figure 5.8

How France's Operation Serval affected political power in Mali, 2012–15
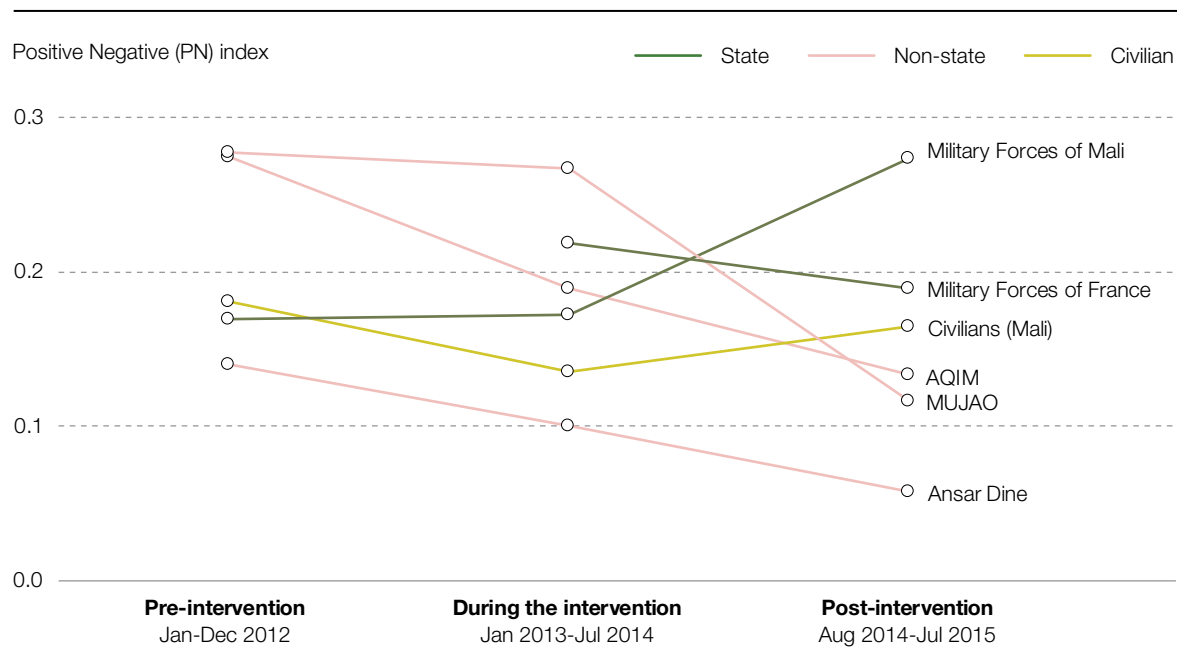
Source: Authors, based on data from ACLED (2020[11]), *The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project*, https://acleddata.com/data-export-tool/.

less constrained than they were before, like the Malian military. This also highlights how the PN shifts produced by the French intervention also tended to reflect the dominant overall structure of the conflict network. Gains in network position by forces on one side were inevitably linked to losses in position by their opponents.

Finally, it is important to note the role of civilians in this conflict, as reflected in the PN. Civilians have borne the brunt of many of the conflicts in North and West Africa, including during the French intervention in Mali. The relative position of civilians was eroded

during Serval and only marginally improved afterwards. Further, civilians were consistently among the entities with the weakest overall network position in the conflict network during all phases of Serval. This not only speaks to the increased targeting of civilians by groups like AQIM that occurred during the invention, but also to the ongoing vulnerability of civilians even following a "successful" intervention like Serval. While the intervention did allow the Malian state to survive, it did little to improve the conditions of civilians during or after the conflict.

THE MULTINATIONAL OFFENSIVE AROUND LAKE CHAD

The Lake Chad region is the deadliest theatre of operation of the region, with nearly 59 000 people killed since January 2009, against 21 500 in Libya since 2011 and 14 650 in Mali and the Central Sahel since 2012. The region is the epicentre of a major insurgency led by the jihadist organisation Boko Haram and its breakaway group ISWAP against the Nigerian government (Chapter 4).

The 2015 offensive against Boko Haram

In 2015, the degradation of the security situation in northern Nigeria reached critical levels that prompted the Nigerian government to launch a major military counter-offensive under the umbrella of the MNJTF (OECD/SWAC, 2020[2]). The MNJTF is a military formation initiated

Figure 5.9

Events and fatalities in the Lake Chad region, 2009–20
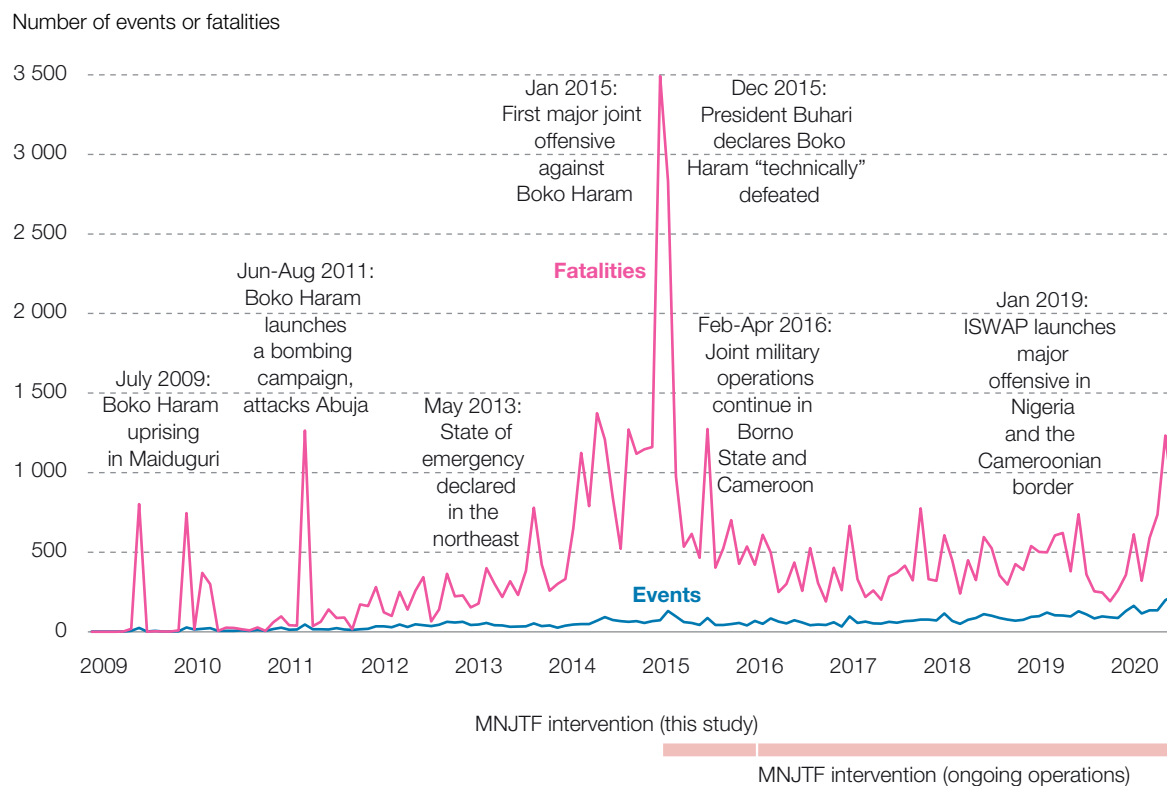
Number of events or fatalities

Note: Data available through 30 June 2020.

Source: Authors, based on data from ACLED (2020[11]), *The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project*, https://acleddata.com/data-export-tool/.

by Nigeria in 1994 with a mandate to address cross-border security issues in the Lake Chad region under a joint command structure. It was reactivated in 2012 by the African Union to counter the Boko Haram insurgency and now includes Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria. The offensive is the deadliest operation conducted by military forces in North and West Africa since the late 1990s. A staggering 1 065 people were killed every month in the region during the MNJTF counter-offensive in 2015. This is almost twice as much as the average number of fatalities recorded in Mali and Central Sahel during Operation Serval in 2013–14 (540 victims per month), and during Operation Unified Protector in Libya in 2011 (562 victims per month).

Code-named Operation Lafiya Dolé (Peace by Force), the military intervention started in late January 2015 with an aerial bombardment on Boko Haram-controlled Malam Fatori in Borno State. Nigerian and Chadian forces launched

several offensives in the far eastern corner of Borno State and in the Sambisa Forest. This area offers a sanctuary at a reasonable distance from both Maiduguri in the north and the Cameroonian border in the west. Airstrikes and ground operations allowed Nigerian and Chadian troops to reclaim several cities along the Nigerian and Cameroonian borders, including Gwoza, where the headquarters of Boko Haram was located, and to release hundreds of woman and child hostages used by the group as servile workers or sex slaves.

By the end of 2015, Boko Haram had lost much of its former territory in Borno State and neighbouring regions. Hundreds of fighters were killed by government forces. Those who escaped were unable to tax markets, extract food supplies from farmers or steal cattle on the same scale as before. Boko Haram also lost a sizable part of its arsenal and pick-up trucks. As a book published by ISWAP in 2018 recalls, "the mujahideen

remained scattered and dispersed on every occasion of the battles except the odd occasion, and they became wholly afflicted with hunger and poverty, such that they ate the leaves of trees, and the Tawagheet [idolaters] took prisoner many of the women and children of the mujahideen, and the matter reached the nadir, and people fell into despair" (Al-Tamimi, 2018[33]).

The military intervention of Nigeria and the MNJTF profoundly affected the geography of violence around Lake Chad. Violence intensified in the first two months of the intervention and stabilised to pre-intervention levels at the end of 2015, a pattern similar to the one observed in Mali during Operation Serval. As in Mali, the military intervention conducted under the umbrella of the MNJTF proved unable to eliminate violence, which has remained persistent in specific locations since then, particularly in regions that have experienced prolonged clashes since the early 2010s, such as in Borno, and Yobe states (Figure 5.9).

Despite the regional expansion of Boko Haram and ISWAP, Nigeria remains the main battleground against the insurgency. More than three-quarters (76%) of the deaths resulting from these clashes have been recorded in Nigeria. The most affected region within Nigeria remains, by far, the state of Borno, with more than 60% of deaths observed since the late 2000s. One out of ten victims of the violence between Boko Haram, ISWP and government forces was recorded in Maiduguri, the capital city of Borno State, which makes it the most dangerous location in the whole of North and West Africa (OECD/SWAC, 2020[2]). South of Maiduguri, numerous military operations have been launched since 2015 to dislodge Boko Haram from its sanctuaries of the Sambisa Forest, around Damaturu, and from the mountainous region that borders Cameroon. Military operations have also been launched to attack ISWAP's strongholds along the Niger border and in the lake region.

Military offensives against Boko Haram and ISWAP have claimed the lives of 26 000 soldiers and jihadist militants in the cross-border region. Since the Nigerian military reclaimed much of Borno State in 2015, the number of soldiers and militants killed as a result of clashes between state forces, and Boko Haram or ISWAP has nearly always been superior to the number of civilians killed by the jihadist organisations (Figure 5.10).

The MNJTF intervention against Boko Haram and ISWAP

The military intervention conducted under the MNJTF umbrella was also a key factor in prompting Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau to pledge allegiance to the Islamic State and become its West Africa Province in 2015. Interviews with Boko Haram and ISWAP defectors tend to confirm that the pledge of allegiance to Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi on 7 March was a cry for help formulated at the worst possible moment for the organisations. As Foucher (2020, p. 3[34]) argues, "Shekau needed any assistance the Islamic State could provide, not only to beat back the Nigerian military and their allies but also to stem the renewed tide of internal criticism panning his performance as a leader. In the end, he saw swearing allegiance as a necessary risk."

The 2015 military intervention also exacerbated internal tensions within Boko Haram. In August 2016, the Islamic State announced that Shekau was eventually removed from his position as the leader (*wali*) of ISWAP and replaced by Abu Mus'ab al-Barnawi. A majority of the fighters broke away from Boko Haram, taking the Islamic State's endorsement with them. Since 2016, the two factions have fought each other nine times in the Diffa region of Niger and Borno State of Nigeria, resulting in 42 fatalities, according to the ACLED database. In September 2016, for example, in-fighting between the Shekau and al-Barnawi factions over a leadership tussle in Borno State led to an estimated 13 people killed. Both Boko Haram and ISWAP have also targeted civilians who allegedly provided supplies to the other faction, as in the village of Gogone near Bosso in February 2020. These incidents between Boko Haram and ISWAP represent a drop in the bucket compared to the 4 895 events and 42 877 fatalities related to both groups since June 2009.

Figure 5.10

Fatalities involving Boko Haram/ISWAP, state forces and civilians, 2010–20
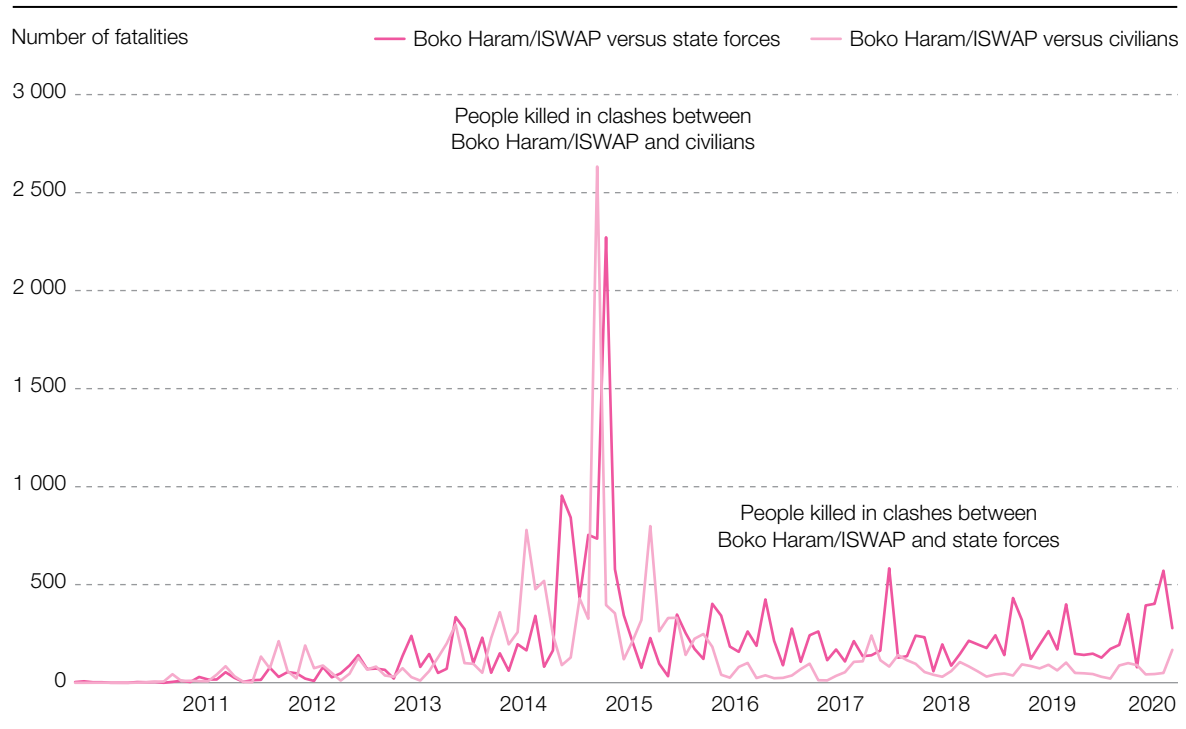
Note: Data available through 30 June 2020.

Source: Authors, based on data from ACLED (2020[11]), *The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project*, https://acleddata.com/data-export-tool/.

The MNJTF intervention and political power around Lake Chad

Like Operation Serval, the 2015 MNJTF campaign was a partisan intervention designed to end the Boko Haram insurgency in the Lake Chad region. The task force was made up of military units from Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria acting on behalf of their various governments but operating under a unified command structure led by Nigeria. Similar to Serval, this intervention also reflected the pre-existing patterns of non-state organisations that were challenging state forces. However, the campaign did significantly diminish Boko Haram and ISWAP's overall positions in the conflict network.

The PN centrality index shows the relative strength of Boko Haram and ISWAP's position in the conflict network before and during the MNJTF's campaign. As seen in Figure 5.11, Boko Haram's PN score was the highest of any major organisation in the region in 2014 and

2015, with scores well above that of the various state forces in opposition to it. This means Boko Haram was favourably positioned relative to both its allies and its enemies and its relative strength was seen in its successful attacks in early 2015, such as the destruction of MNTJF's headquarters in Baga, Nigeria in January of that year. However, following the intervention, Boko Haram's position had significantly degraded as its PN score in 2016 was now lower than all of its opponents. A similar shift in position was observed with ISWAP, a splinter group from Boko Haram, after the intervention. For these reasons, and similar to Serval, the 2015 MNTJF campaign was something of a limited success as it did serve to diminish Boko Haram and ISWAP.

Somewhat differently from Serval, however, the 2015 campaign did not fundamentally alter the status of the various state forces. For example, the Nigerian military's PN score was flat throughout the campaign, while scores of the other state forces only showed mild improvement during the intervention, followed by moderate declines afterwards. From this

Figure 5.11

How the multinational intervention affected political power around Lake Chad, 2014–16
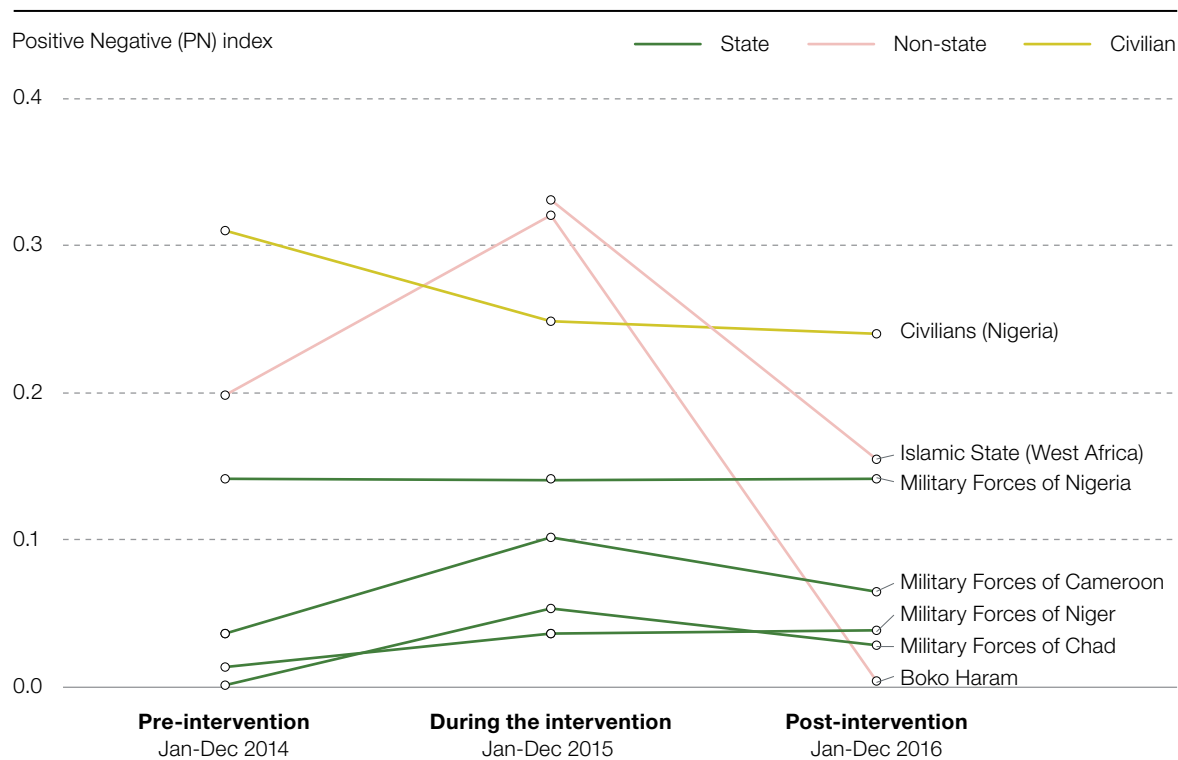
Source: Authors, based on data from ACLED (2020[11]), *The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project*, https://acleddata.com/data-export-tool/.

perspective, the intervention did not empower state forces at the expense of their opponents. This is likely due to two interrelated changes in the conflict network. First, a leadership dispute caused Boko Haram to splinter in early 2016. The two successor organisations, Boko Haram and ISWAP, were openly hostile to each other, rather than allied against the shared enemy of state forces. Second, the conflict network grew by 25% in terms of new organisations following the intervention campaign. Some of this reflected the splintering of Boko Haram but was mostly the result of the activation of various local defence militias, many of which were organised along ethnic communal lines. The combined effect of these shifts was twofold: previously empowered non-state groups like Boko Haram were diminished while states forces were not

necessarily better positioned overall as they were now confronted with more potential opponents.

The growth of the conflict network again points to the centrality of civilians in the campaign. The PN score for civilians was decreased during the campaign, which highlights that they were increasingly the targets of violence. This underscores the relative vulnerability of civilians in the region, and the inability of the campaign to limit civilian casualties. As shown in Figure 5.10, civilian fatalities spiked during the campaign and such deaths were caused nearly as often by state forces as they were by Boko Haram and/or ISWAP. This helps explain the expansion of the conflict network after the campaign as many local militias were frequently opposed to both non-state organisations like Boko Haram or ISWAP as well as state forces.

NATO'S INTERVENTION AND THE WESTERN OFFENSIVE IN LIBYA

NATOS's Operation Unified Protector

NATO's Operation Unified Protector, launched on March 2011, was initially a mediatory military intervention against the Libyan government or the rebels with the aim of "enforcing an arms embargo, maintaining a no-fly zone and protecting civilians and civilian-populated areas from attack or the threat of attack" (NATO, 2012[35]). However, the initial mission to protect civilians morphed into a sustained air assault on Libyan forces even where they did not actively pursue rebels and, ultimately led, to a regime change. The Operation officially ended shortly after Muammar Gaddafi was killed in late October of that year.

The NATO intervention did not put an end to the conflict in Libya. Fighting between various factions of the rebellion started shortly after the end of the operation. After several years of trying to form a new national government, political rivalries between two primary factions, the House of Representatives (HoR) and the General National Congress (GNC), led to the start of the Second Libyan Civil War in May 2014, a conflict that continues to devastate Libya to this day (Chapter 4).

Since 2014, the war has been characterised by a competition between the Tripoli-based and UN-backed GNA put in place in 2015 as part of the Libyan Political Agreement brokered by the UN and the eastern LNA in Benghazi that is affiliated with the HoR in Tobruk. The GNA's armed forces comprise the remains of Libya's official military. In contrast, the LNA's forces are led by Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, an officer who took part in the 1969 coup that brought Gaddafi to power before joining the opposition and moving to the United States in the 1990s. Numerous other ethnic or local militias and armed groups are involved in this conflict, fighting for both sides, as well as terrorist groups, such as the Islamic State and Al Qaeda.

The Western Campaign

With the launch of the LNA's invasion of western Libya in April 2019, many militias that are based in that region began to fight against the LNA under the GNA's umbrella. Many of these groups were previously opponents of each other before the LNA's invasion, having recently fought among one another in western Libya. However, these now GNA-allied groups largely oppose the dictatorial figure they see in Haftar (Lacher, 2019[36]). This mobilisation of previously antagonistic forces has limited their ability to fight cohesively as one GNA force, instead of as separate communities fighting towards a similar goal.

LNA forces largely originate in eastern and southern Libya but have important supporters in western Libya as well. Many of the militias who support LNA include Madkhali Salafists, who fiercely oppose political Islam, a sentiment that the GNA has been accused of harbouring. The pro-LNA militias were also mostly Gaddafi regime loyalists in 2011, and the stigmatisation of loyalists by revolutionary supporters in Libya has driven some militias to support the LNA (Lacher, 2019[36]). Difficulty in convincing some of its militias to mobilise has led the LNA to hire Sudanese and Chadian mercenaries, although these have been mainly kept away from the front lines. The LNA's alliance of militias is considered more fragile than the GNA's because while the GNA depends on a common threat from the LNA to keep them together, the LNA's alliance of militias depends on the success of its aims to keep these forces loyal.

Both the GNA and LNA have support from international backers as well as from Libya militias. Turkey, as one of the GNA's largest supporters, has sent weapons, missiles, vehicles and drones in response to foreign support for the LNA, which includes weapons and drones sent by the UAE, as well as political and financial support from Egypt (International Crisis Group, 2020[37]; Lacher, 2020[38]). The LNA also receives support from Russian mercenaries (Reynolds, 2019[39]). The flow of arms into Libya from foreign backers has also been in contravention of the UN Security Council's arms embargo, which has been in place since 2011. Stopping the foreign flow of arms was also central to the January 2020 ceasefire brokered by the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL).

Figure 5.12
Events and fatalities in Libya, 2011–20

Note: Data available through 30 June 2020.
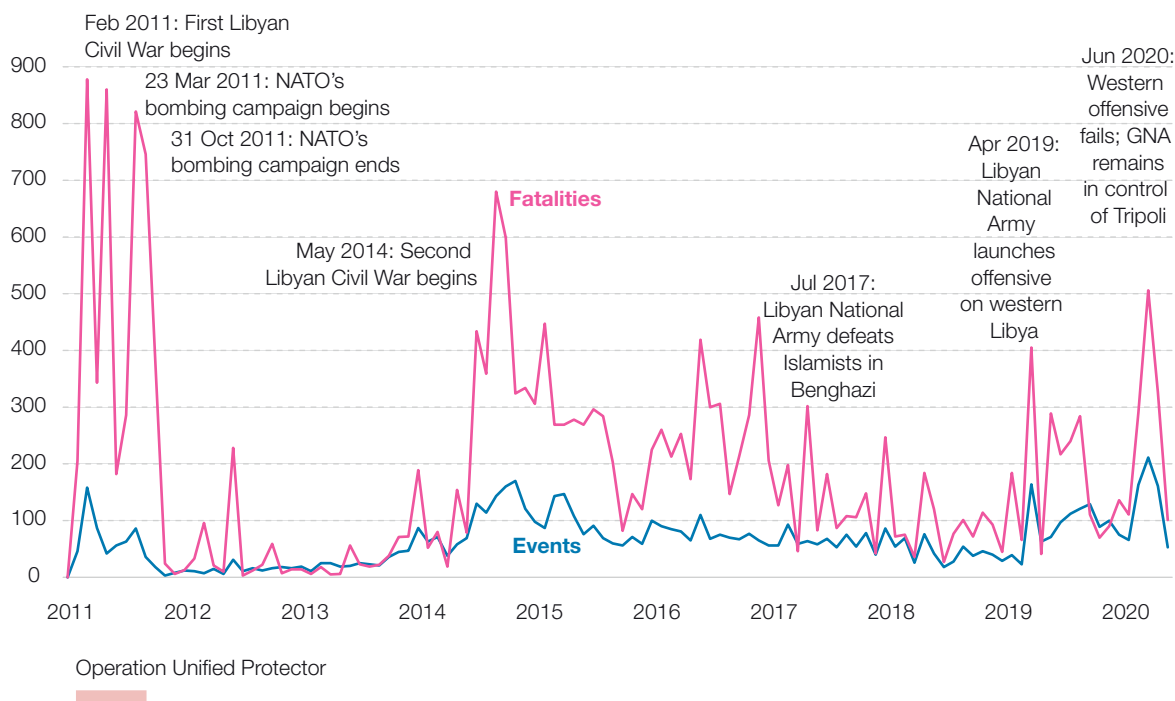
Source: Authors, based on data from ACLED (2020[11]), *The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project*, https://acleddata.com/data-export-tool/.

The LNA's offensive in April 2019 saw early successes with LNA forces surrounding Tripoli. Following several ceasefires in early 2020, GNA forces were able to push pro-LNA fighters out of Tripoli back east towards the city of Sirte, which is about halfway between Tripoli and Benghazi, in April and May of that year (Figure 5.12). As of July 2020, the front lines have remained close to Sirte (United Nations, 2020[40]), signalling the failure of Haftar's efforts to cripple the GNA. It is not possible to know whether the various coalitions organised in support of either side will remain intact, and if the flow of arms from foreign powers will continue.

## NATO's intervention and political power in Libya

NATO's intervention profoundly altered the political power of the main belligerents of the Libyan conflict. The Libyan military was in a significantly improved network position

relative to the rebel forces until the mid-point of the intervention in 2011, as seen in Figure 5.13. Comparing the Libyan military's PN index scores with those of the rebel National Liberation Army (NLA) before and during the campaign underscores how the rebellion was unlikely to have been successful absent the intervention. While the NLA emerged from the intervention somewhat weak from the perspective of the PN, it was better positioned against the various militias made up of ex-Libyan military forces following the military's collapse in October of 2011. As with the examples of the Malian and Lake Chad interventions, the NATO operation could be viewed as a success. It led to the collapse of the Libyan regime and its military and created a circumstance where the NLA was better positioned than the remaining pro-regime groups that were still resisting it after the intervention ended.

Like Serval and the MNJTF intervention, the NATO operation also had a negative impact

Figure 5.13

How NATO's Operation Unified Protector affected political power in Libya, 2010–12
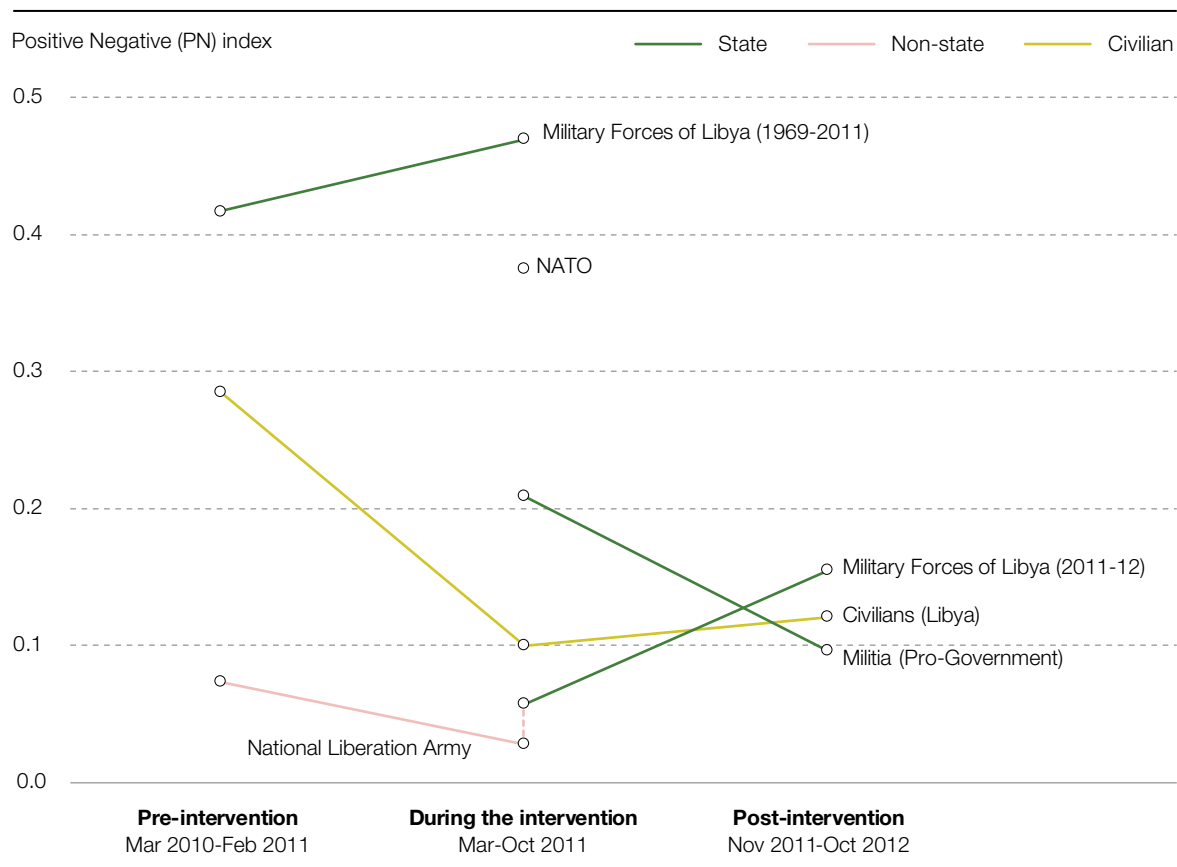
Source: Authors, based on data from ACLED (2020[11]), *The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project*, https://acleddata.com/data-export-tool/.

on civilians, as reflected by the PN scores. Even though the operation was launched in the name of protecting civilians, the position of civilians in the conflict network was significantly diminished during the intervention. This reflects an overall trend regarding civilian populations across all three interventions – civilian PN scores decreased during the interventions without much change after the interventions ended. This speaks to the overall inability of these types of interventions to create political conditions that lead to the full cessation of violence. It also speaks to how central civilians remain in these ongoing conflicts today.

## The Western Campaign and political power in Libya

The failed campaign by General Khalifa Haftar's LNA forces against the UN-backed GNA in 2019 represents a different form of intervention from the previous cases. First, while biased toward some of the parties, the flow of arms and other types of material support is an indirect rather than a direct intervention. This means that this support should be expected to impact the conflict networks even if the various foreign supporters are not directly involved in any specific violent event in the region. Second, because there are competing partisan interventions happening simultaneously, the current Libyan conflict may be more similar to other examples of internationalised civil wars where foreign powers back opposing sides during episodes of state collapse, such as the ongoing conflict in Syria (Walther and Pedersen, 2020[41]) or the Congo Wars between 1996 and 2003 (Radil, 2018[42]), rather than to Mali or the Lake Chad region.

PN index scores are presented for LNA's 2019–20 Western Campaign in Figure 5.14. The data used in this analysis extend through the

Figure 5.14

How Haftar's Western Campaign affected political power in Libya, 2018–20
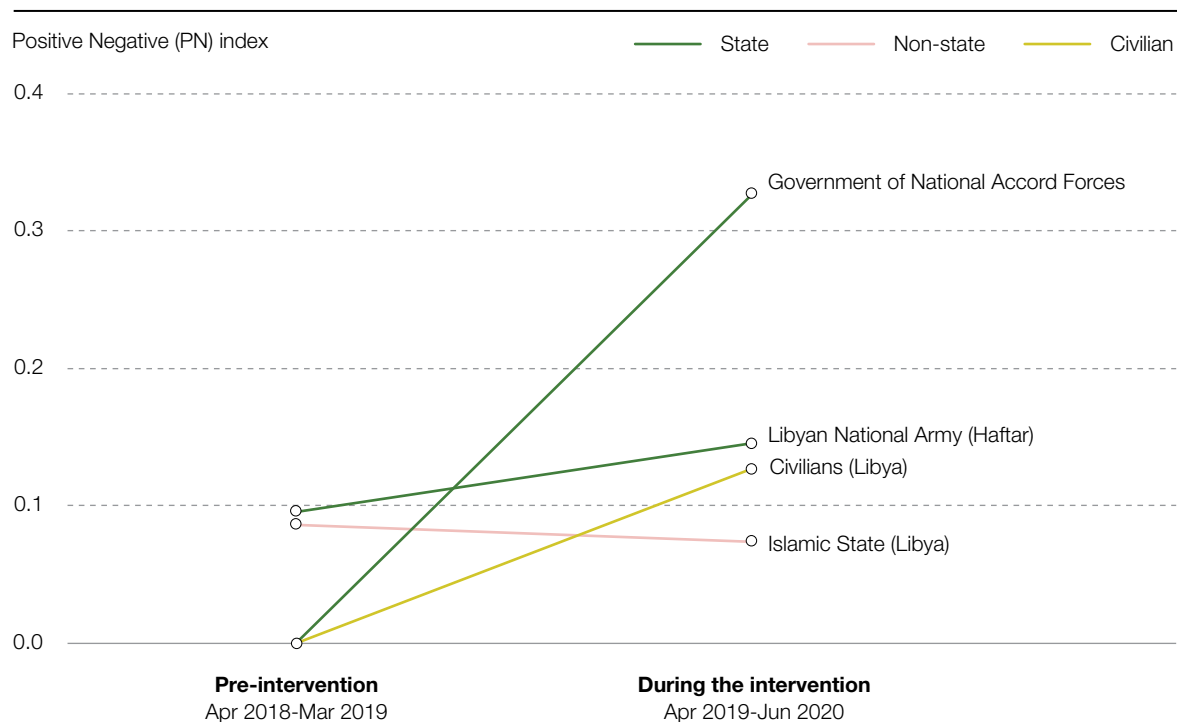
Source: Authors, based on data from ACLED (2020[11]), *The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project*, https://acleddata.com/data-export-tool/.

withdrawal of LNA forces from western Libya in June 2020. The reversal in relative network position between the LNA and the GNA over the course of the campaign is striking. While the campaign had little effect on the status of other groups in Libya, like the Islamic State, the GNA emerged in a much stronger position relative to the LNA than before the start of the campaign. This is likely a reflection of the creation of a GNA-led coalition of previously non-allied armed groups in western Libya that co-operated to resist the LNA, as well

as the indirect influence of increased foreign military support for the GNA. Because the LNA's own coalition of militias and other armed groups may not be sustainable without future military successes, it is likely that the LNA's status may be diminished in the future. However, continued foreign support by the LNA's backers may delay or even offset that effect. Whether the post-campaign effects follow those of others observed in the region relative to the status of civilians or other groups remains to be seen.

LEARNING FROM CONFLICT NETWORKS

The network analysis conducted in this chapter suggests that each partisan intervention altered the conflict networks through the creation of new triads – or groups of three actors – that are bound by two negative ties and one positive tie. These new triads form the heart of each conflict network and are typified by conditions under which the intervening power is allied with government forces against jihadist groups

(Mali, Lake Chad), or allied with rebels against government forces (Libya). In each case, the intervener formed positive ties with at least one of the parties central to the conflict and negative ties to that party's opponent. 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.

The more recent Western Campaign in Libya

presents an even more intricate case, where various foreign powers (some of them NATO members) back the LNA and others the GNA. Yet, the larger pattern remains as intervening forces form co-operative ties with a partner of their choice and adopt an oppositional stance to others. In network terms, this pattern of two organisations co-operating with each other and in opposition to the same third group is the logical outcome of any partisan intervention.

Each military intervention by a foreign power or a multinational coalition has led to the reinforcement of the political power of their allies and the reduction of the power of their opponents, particularly jihadist organisations in Mali and northern Nigeria, and the former Gaddafi regime in Libya. This is clearly confirmed by the study of the PN centrality index, which measures the structural position of each organisation based on the reconfigured architecture of the network in the wake of an intervention. In each case, the key organisations that were targeted by the intervention found themselves in a newly disadvantaged position within the types of triads formed by a partisan intervention. As a response, these organisations often had to form new partnerships beyond this core triad as a means to offset their new disadvantage relative to the other key actors. This, in turn, made them more reliant on others for success and reduced

their power and ability to act independently. When measured by the PN index, this reduced independence results in a lower PN score; in each intervention, the targeted member of the core triad of actors found themselves in exactly that circumstance.

Unfortunately, the impact of military interventions on these conflict networks has been rather limited in duration. Serval, the MNJTF and Operation Unified Protector each temporarily weakened their opponent without achieving stability. Worse, each intervention has encouraged jihadist and rebel organisations to respond to the initial shock of the military intervention in ways that may have made them more resilient. Because each insurgency is driven by local grievances, peculiar agendas, unique individuals and specific networks of actors, the response to military interventions has varied across the region. Weakened jihadist groups have alternatively pledged allegiance to global organisations such as the Islamic State, split according to ethnic and geographical lines or merged with other groups. These groups have also responded to military interventions by moving to more remote or less monitored areas, participating in the regional diffusion of violence observed in North and West Africa since the late 2000s (OECD/SWAC, 2020[2]).
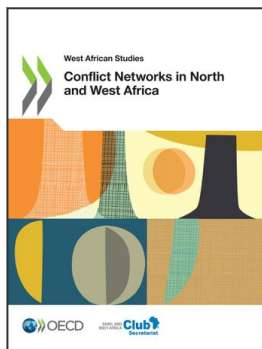
Notes

1 To simplify the interpretation of the results, the scores presented in the chapter are equivalent to 1-PN, so that high values indicate high political power, and low values indicate low political power.

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