Executive summary

In the first six months of 2021, 60% of the victims of violent incidents in North and West Africa were located within 100 kilometres of a border. Almost half of them were civilians. The growing scale of transnational conflicts and groups against a backdrop of increasingly complex dynamics underscores the need for quantitative and qualitative place-based analyses of how borders help shape patterns of political violence (Chapter 1). The purpose of this report is to contribute to this work.

A spatial and contextualised approach to transnational conflicts

A clear and common definition of borders is a source of stability in both domestic and foreign political relations. When borders are porous, state authority can be uneven, allowing violent groups to develop safe havens or to relocate outside the country. This regionalisation of conflicts has physical, social and strategic costs, which fall on both state forces and their opponents.

In addition to the spatial component, transnational conflicts have a social dynamic and may reflect political problems, such as the perceived or actual marginalisation of certain social groups. These "new types of conflict" that mix local grievances with global discourses and span borders are characterised in North and West Africa by a proliferation of diverse actors — community or ethnic militias, vigilante groups, rebels and religious extremists fighting against and alongside traditional state actors (Chapter 2).

Designing and implementing place-based policies, beyond national or sectoral policies, appears to be one of the most effective ways of combating the political marginalisation of borderlands while promoting their economic centrality within the region.

Not all borders are alike

The governance of border regions combines informal and formal practices with alternative forms of co-operation, exchange and resilience and state regulation. Beyond simply marking a boundary line, borders are therefore more complex spatial and socio-economic concepts that facilitate or prevent cross-border exchanges. State and non-state actors also play a role through complex networks of alliances and frictions that have contributed to shaping the patterns of violence observed since the late 1990s.

Nevertheless, are borderlands in North and West Africa more violent than other areas within a state? How has the intensity of violence in border regions changed? Are some border regions more violent than others?

Tools for mapping border violence and its uneven development

Several approaches have been used to answer these questions including that of the buffer zones ranging from 10 to 200 kilometres extending along either side of borders, and a more innovative approach based on their accessibility to the rest of the country and on a more functional relationship with the border (Chapter 3).

Three types of violence were studied: battles, explosions and remote violence, as well as

violence against civilians from 1997 to mid-2021 at regional level and through case studies (Central and Eastern Sahel).

The patterns of violence in North and West Africa have experienced very contrasting evolutions, mainly due to the nature of the conflicts. For example, in West Africa, the violence is caused by asymmetric struggles between central governments and a multitude of non-state actors, resulting in many civilian casualties

The rapid upsurge in violence and casualties in West Africa since the mid-2010s reflects the intensification and expansion of several inter-related conflicts. Some clusters of violence are merging. In the Central Sahel, the Mali-Burkina Faso-Niger border formed a continuous line of high intensity violence in 2020. The Lake Chad region is also affected from N'Guigmi (Niger) to Mubi (Nigeria) and Maroua (Cameroon). Another unbroken band of insecurity has formed from northern Nigeria to the Niger Delta. The Spatial Conflict Dynamics indicator (SCDi) developed by SWAC/OECD and its partners emphasises the fact that these borderlands are more affected by concentrated, very intense violence, which suggesting that it is becoming entrenched (Chapter 4).

Conflicts decrease as distance from borders increases, however, their interactions fluctuate over space and time.

The exploration of the geographical distribution of borderland violence highlights that political violence is more frequent near borders than elsewhere in the region and tends to decrease gradually over distance from borders. More than 4 000 violent events and nearly 19 000 fatalities were observed within 10 kilometres of a border from 1997-2021. During the same period, 9% of all violent events and 11% of all fatalities fell within 10 kilometres of a border. A peak of violent activities can be observed between 100 and 110 kilometres, likely due to the presence of large urban centres located relatively close to borders, such as Maiduguri in northern Nigeria.

The relationship of violent events to borders varies significantly over time as discrete episodes of conflict have waxed and waned within

the region. The overall percentage of events near borders declined throughout the mid-2000s as conflict moved from the Gulf of Guinea to the Sahel. The most recent wave of violence within the region has been especially troubling as the percentage of events within 20 kilometres of a border increased every year between 2011 and 2016 to eventually exceed the historical annual average of 23% for 1997-2009. The overall increase of events near borders in recent years can herald either the relocation of a conflict within a state, the expansion of a conflict across state borders, or both.

Using the SCDi, the report shows that border violence is very unevenly distributed across North and West Africa. Violent events and fatalities tend to cluster in specific regions, such as the Lake Chad basin and the Liptako-Gourma, which have become persistent hotspots of violence. In border regions, political violence is more intense and more clustered than in the rest of North and West Africa, suggesting that borderlands experience a more alarming type of conflict than other regions.

The report shows that the drivers of political violence in borderlands are heavily dependent on the social and political contexts of each region. The concentration of violence in borderlands is explained by the local strategies of violent extremist organisations, who use these areas to conduct their attacks and mobilise civilian populations, and by the willingness of some states to conduct extra-territorial campaigns against them (Chapter 5).

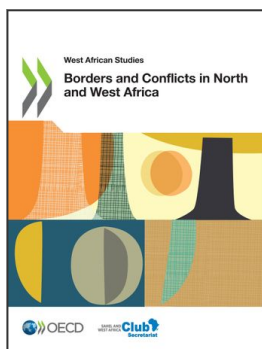**Border regions are not always the spatial epicentres of political conflicts**

Despite numerous "Sahel strategies" pointing to the need for a regional response, the response of North and West African states to the regionalisation of violence is patchy. Borderlands are not inherently violent. Patterns of border violence are the result of the state's relationship with its borders, but also of the interactions between all warring parties.

Better border security but also better interconnections between borderlands and the rest of the country would both go a long way to reducing border and transnational conflicts. Border towns

are key hubs in the regional movement of goods and people in North and West Africa, and should be the focus of investments.

Over and above the political implications of combating violence in the border regions of North and West Africa, the contributors to the last section of the report underline the increased fragility in the region, particularly in the Sahel, which combines extremist terrorism with local grievances. They recall the need to strengthen the protection of civilians, not only their security but also their dignity, by reinforcing the development of border areas to guarantee the territorial continuity necessary for regional integration (Chapter 6).