

# Executive summary

## Understanding relationships between actors in conflict underpins prospects for long-term political stability

Political violence in North and West Africa is on the rise. In the last decade, clashes between government forces and local militias, rebel groups and extremist organisations have resulted in over 100 000 deaths. Conflicts have become more violent, increasingly targeting civilians, particularly in rural and border areas, where state power and infrastructures have long been deficient. Hundreds of actors with diverging agendas are involved, and the complex relationships between them have profound consequences on conflict resolution and its geography. This report illustrates that violent organisations cannot be understood in isolation from each other; they are part of a *conflict network*.

Conflict has become more widespread, spilling over national borders and creating instability in multiple states. Today, the cross-border nature of conflicts further complicates the role of governments in their resolution. Rebel groups and extremist organisations can operate in one country and use another as a safe haven for training and recruitment, thereby developing divergent relationships with neighbouring government forces in pursuit of their political agenda in another state. Thus, understanding the complex relationships between actors, and how they evolve over time, underpins long-term prospects for political stability in the region.

## Innovative and dynamic tools to better understand violence

This report offers an innovative approach to analysing these complex relationships, known as dynamic social network analysis (DSNA). DSNA goes beyond solely analysing specific attributes of actors, such as their nationality, objectives, or military strength, and takes into account both the overall structure of conflict networks as well as the positioning of actors within them, over time and spatially ([Chapter 1](#)).

This dynamic approach addresses three crucial questions for the future of North and West Africa:

### 1 Who is allied with whom? Who is in conflict with whom?

Building on a dataset of 36 760 violent events over a 23-year period for 21 North and West African countries, this report maps the conflict environment, at the local and regional levels, and identifies the rivalries and alliances among actors that shape patterns of violence. It also highlights the most important or central actors in the overall system of conflict.

### 2 How do rivalries and alliances evolve over time?

The report provides an insight into how groups tend to co-operate with or oppose each other, how common it is for these relationships to reverse over time and how the introduction or removal of key actors

can affect relationships between others. The report also highlights the causes of fragmentation of violent organisations ([Chapter 2](#)).

### **3 How do military interventions affect conflict networks?**

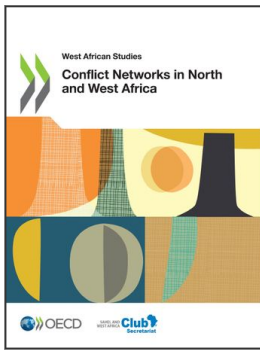
This report examines the impact of external military interventions on conflict network dynamics, which remains largely unknown, despite being crucial for assessing the potential for peace in the region ([Chapters 2](#) and [3](#)). Moreover, the report shows that military interventions have not resolved, in a sustainable manner, the conflicts that still ravage the region today. Some interventions even contribute to the resilience of jihadists and rebel organisations ([Chapter 5](#)). The report further underscores that military interventions cannot address the root causes of conflict nor bring about the necessary political change required to restore stability. This remains within the remit of national governments.

#### **The importance of a multi-scalar perspective and place-based policies**

The unique cross-border nature and territorial dimension of conflict calls for more place-based policies as well as both a local and regional

perspective. The fact that border areas are the most dangerous regions of North and West Africa illustrates this point. This is further demonstrated by three case studies focusing on the major theatres of conflict in the region: the Mali insurgency and its consequences in the Central Sahel (Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger), the Boko Haram insurgency in the Lake Chad region (Cameroon, Chad, Niger, Nigeria) and the First and Second Libyan wars ([Chapter 4](#)). The innovative and timely analyses — from 1990 to mid-2020 — provided in this report serve to inform the design and implementation of policies supporting the resolution of ongoing conflicts. They also illustrate how a multi-scalar perspective and place-based policies are instrumental in achieving this goal.

Finally, policies focusing on building regional alliances to address the diffusion of political violence should be pursued. Governments and partners should co-ordinate in making border areas a priority and should take into account their geographic and social specificities. Policies should also focus on strengthening national cohesion by fostering the development of more decentralised actions and institutions that benefit all equally and contribute to a more inclusive dialogue with populations.



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