Foreword

In 2020, the Sahel and West Africa Club (SWAC/OECD) Secretariat published a landmark book in security studies, *The Geography of Conflict in North and West Africa*. Launched during the Munich Security Conference in February 2020, the study developed a new indicator to show the intensity and spatial distribution of political violence in three areas: Central Sahel, Lake Chad and Libya.

By leveraging data on all politically violent events that have taken place in Africa since 1997, the indicator shows which areas have experienced the highest rates of violence, how conflicts change geographically over time, and how military interventions influence the diffusion of conflicts and their intensity. This work also shows that the reality of violence in North and West Africa — one which involves multiple actors and extremely volatile interactions – is insufficiently integrated within stabilisation strategies.

This follow-up report, *Conflict Networks in North and West Africa*, aims to go further and provide a better understanding of this reality through an approach known as *Dynamic Social Network Analysis* (DSNA). Policymakers are – and rightly so – more interested in the results of analyses rather than in the methodology itself. However, it remains crucial to draw their attention to the need for methodological innovation. Going beyond statistics, which are often weak if not absent in Africa, DSNA allows for the assessment of the social capital of individuals or groups by observing their relationships with other actors in the network, and how this affects the formation of violence.

In the last decade, more than 100 000 people have been killed as a result of clashes between government forces, local militias, rebel groups and other violent extremist organisations. Furthermore, many conflicts have spilled over national borders, creating instability and insecurity in multiple countries, also prompting a rise in the number of violent organisations. The plurality of the interests involved, the changing patterns of relationships between groups – shifting from alliances to rivalries – and the complex nature of local motivations constitute important barriers to sustainable peace. The best possible understanding of these complex dynamics is needed to better adapt policy responses to each unique context.

There is no universal solution; no one-size-fits-all. For instance, in the central Sahel, the multiplicity of armed groups, and the instability of their relations, are much more marked than in the Lake Chad region. Nevertheless, it is possible to draw a number of lessons from the comparative analysis of violent networks. This may help inform a more efficient design of stabilisation strategies, both in the military and development fields, tailored to the specific circumstances of each conflict zone. This is precisely why this report is an invaluable contribution, providing food for thought and evidence-based knowledge for action.

Angel Gurría
Secretary-General
Organisation for Economic Co-operation
and Development (OECD)

Dr Ibrahim Assane Mayaki
Chief Executive Officer, African Union
Development Agency (AUDA-NEPAD) and
Honorary President, Sahel and West Africa Club
(SWAC)

The team and acknowledgments

External contributors

David G. Russell is an independent researcher of political geography. He holds an MSc in Geography from the University of Idaho. His research has focused on quantifying the spatiotemporal patterns of political violence and on how geopolitical rhetoric shapes the ways people see the world and its history. Mr Russell has conducted research at the Middle East Institute in Washington, DC, and he currently works as a consultant for the OECD/SWAC Secretariat. E-mail: davidguyrussell@gmail.com
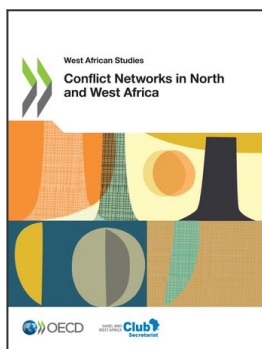
Matthew Pflaum is a PhD student in the Department of Geography at the University of Florida. He holds an MSc in African Studies and International Development from the University of Edinburgh and an MPH in global health/ infectious disease from Emory University. He is broadly interested in mobility and violence in West Africa and the Sahel and the factors contributing to joining militias and extremist organisations. The focus of his work is on pastoralist groups and the tensions that arise within other groups and governments over resources, land, governance, mobility and power. E-mail: mpflaum@ufl.edu

Alexander Thurston is Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Cincinnati. His research focuses on Islam and politics in northwest Africa, especially in Mali, Mauritania and Nigeria. He has held fellowships with the Council on Foreign Relations, the Wilson Center, and the American Council of Learned Societies. His most recent book is *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel: Local Politics and Rebel Groups* (Cambridge University Press, 2020).

Natalie Mesplay is an undergraduate student in the International Studies programme at the University of Idaho. She is interested in inter-national organisations and their impact on the world, as well as East Asian and African history.

The team also wishes to thank the following individuals for their contribution to the writing of this report:

Laurent Bossard, SWAC/OECD Secretariat; Leonardo A. Villalón, Tatiana Smirnova, Benjamin Soares and Susanna Goewey of the University of Florida; Clionadh Raleigh, University of Sussex; Tenzin Nyima, University of Minnesota; Joe Labianca and Steve Borgatti of the University of Kentucky; Eric Quintane, University of Los Andes; and Martin Everett, University of Manchester.

From:
Conflict Networks in North and West Africa