

Chapter 4

The changing geography of conflict in North and West Africa

Chapter 4 studies the spatial distribution of violent events and fatalities in North and West Africa since the mid-2010s. The chapter shows that political violence has experienced a contrasted evolution in the region. While violence has reached historical lows north of the Sahara following the formation of a Government of National Unity in Libya in 2020, West Africa is engulfed in an unprecedented wave of violence since 2016. Nearly one-half of all violent events and one-third of the fatalities observed in West Africa since 1997 occurred in the last three years. Using the Spatial Conflict Dynamics indicator (SCDI), the chapter confirms that political violence is both more intense in terms of victims and more diffuse geographically than ever.

KEY MESSAGES

- » Political violence has receded in North Africa while reaching unprecedented levels in West Africa. Nearly one-half of the violent events and one-third of the fatalities recorded in West Africa since 1997 took place in the last three years.
- » South of the Sahara, political violence has both intensified and expanded geographically, as revealed by the Spatial Conflict Dynamics indicator (SCDI).
- » The vast majority of conflicts exhibit a clustered distribution of violent events. However, the overall number of regions with dispersed violent locations is increasing, suggesting that violence is spreading.
- » More than half of the Nigerian territory was affected by one type of conflict or another in 2020. Apart from Nigeria's troubles, the epicentre of borderland violence in West Africa is along the Malian-Burkina Faso-Niger region.

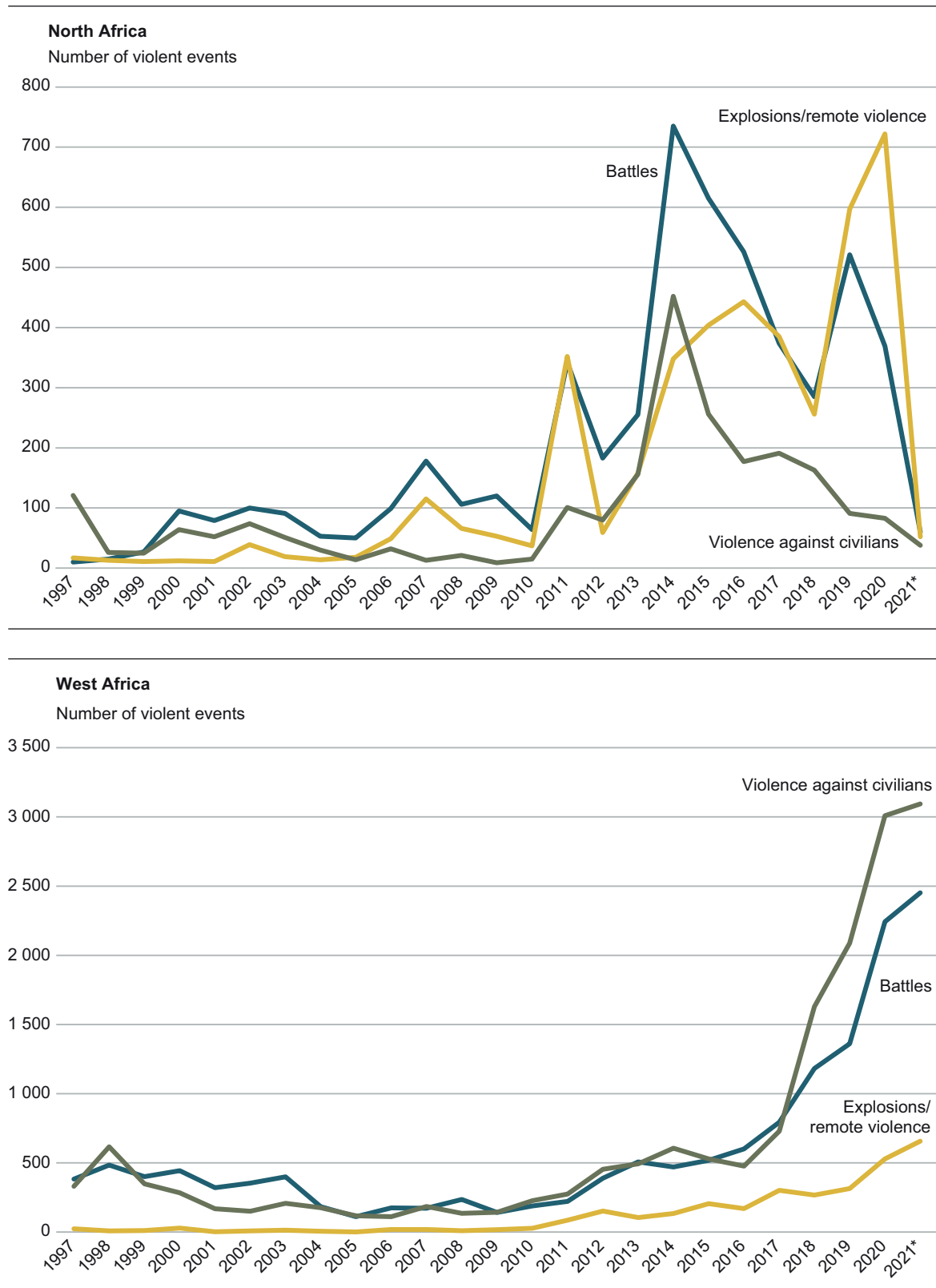
VIOLENCE EVOLVES DIFFERENTLY IN NORTH AND WEST AFRICA

Political violence in North and West Africa has experienced a contrasted evolution since the end of the 2010s. A strong decrease in political violence is observed north of the Sahara following the signature of a permanent ceasefire between the Libyan National Army (LNA) and the Government of National Accord (GNA) in October 2020 and the formation of a Government of National Unity in March 2021 in Libya. If the current trend continues, only around 150 violent events will take place in North Africa by the end of 2021 compared to more than 1 200 in 2019, which was the largest number ever recorded since detailed data was provided by

ACLED in 1997 (Figure 4.1). The number of fatalities should also reach an all-time low in 2021, with around 200 deaths per year, against 5 000 during the First Libyan Civil War in 2011, and 3 700 during the Second Libyan Civil War in 2014 (Figure 4.2). All types of violence have decreased sharply north of the Sahara since 2020, including explosions and remote violence that had reached record highs with the failed offensive of Marshal Khalifa Haftar against Tripoli in the last phase of the Libyan conflict.

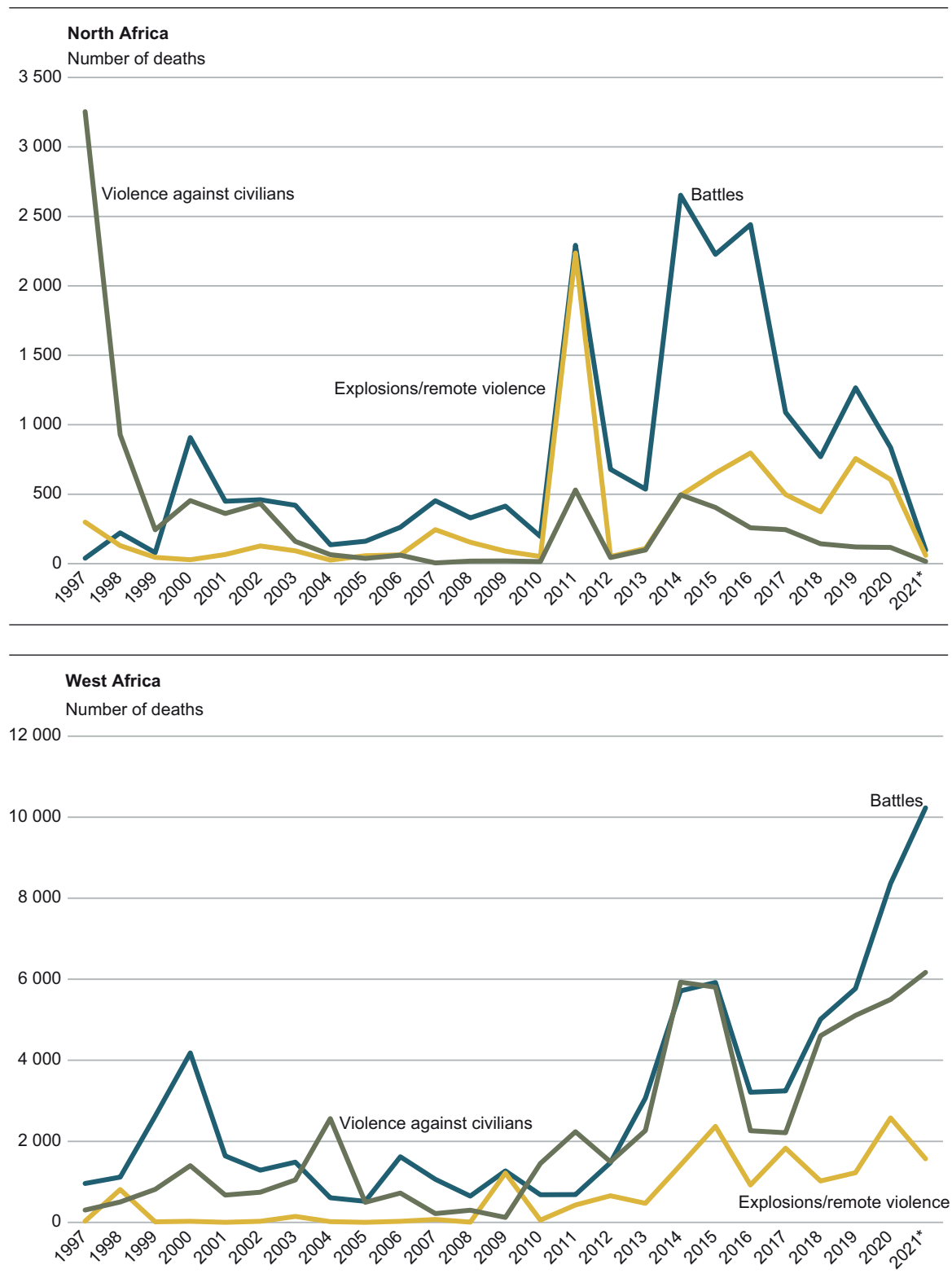
South of the Sahara, the security situation has worsened since the mid-2010s. The last three years have been the worst ever observed in the

Figure 4.1
Violent events by type in North and West Africa, 1997-2021



Note: 2021 data are projections based on a doubling of the number of events recorded through 30 June.
Source: Authors based on ACLED (2021_[1]) data. ACLED data is publicly available.

Figure 4.2
Fatalities due to violent events by type in North and West Africa, 1997-2021



Note: 2021 data are projections based on a doubling of the number of events recorded through 30 June.

Source: Authors based on ACLED (2021_[1]) data. ACLED data is publicly available.

Table 4.1

Violent events and fatalities by country, 2020-21

	Violent events		Fatalities		Population		Events (%) vs Population (%)	Fatalities (%) vs Population (%)
	Number	%	Number	%	Number (x 1000)	%	Ratio	Ratio
Nigeria	3 406	33.6	12 506	46.2	211 401	38.0	0.9	1.2
Cameroon	1 685	16.6	2 428	9.0	27 224	4.9	3.4	1.8
Mali	1 469	14.5	3 774	13.9	20 856	3.7	3.9	3.7
Libya	1 140	11.3	1 543	5.7	6 959	1.2	9.0	4.6
Burkina Faso	1 114	11.0	3 219	11.9	21 497	3.9	2.8	3.1
Niger	572	5.6	1 835	6.8	25 131	4.5	1.3	1.5
Chad	160	1.6	1 361	5.0	16 915	3.0	0.5	1.7
Benin	100	1.0	90	0.3	12 451	2.2	0.4	0.1
Others	485	4.8	314	1.2	214 454	38.5	0.1	0.0
Total	10 131	100.0	27 070	100.0	556 887	100.0	1.0	1.0

Note: Data available through 30 June 2021. Countries with a ratio between violence and population higher than 1 are highlighted.

Source: Authors based on ACLED (2021^[1]) data and United Nations (2019^[2]). ACLED data is publicly available.

region, with more than 15 000 violent events and 46 000 fatalities. To put this in perspective, the number of violent events observed since 2019 corresponds to nearly one-half of all political violence recorded by ACLED in West Africa since 1997. One-third of the fatalities of the region were recorded in the last three years alone. All types of violent events have experienced a strong increase. There were more than 2 200 battles and 3 000 incidents against civilians

in 2020, an unprecedented level of violence that signals an historic degradation of the security situation in the region. Since 2017, the number of violent events involving civilians has surpassed the number of battles in West Africa and the gap between the two types of violent events is increasing. Explosions and remote violence, which had been relatively uncommon in West Africa until the mid-2010s, killed more than 2 500 people in 500 incidents in 2020.

VIOLENCE IS CONCENTRATED IN A FEW COUNTRIES

Political violence is very unevenly distributed across North and West Africa (Table 4.1). From January 2020 to June 2021, 87% of violent events and fatalities were concentrated in only five countries: Nigeria, Cameroon, Mali, Libya, and Burkina Faso. Nigeria remains by far the main epicentre of political violence, with more than 12 000 people killed in 3 400 incidents, a trend that emerged already in the 1990s (OECD/SWAC, 2020^[2]). One-third of all violent events and nearly one-half of all fatalities are recorded in this country, where three major

insurgencies are currently ongoing (Lake Chad, Middle Belt and Niger Delta).

Cameroon is the second most affected country in terms of violent events (17%), due to the insurgency waged by Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) around Lake Chad, and the more recent conflict between the government and English-speaking communities along the western borders. The Malian conflict and its ramifications in Burkina Faso and Niger explains why these three countries are among

Table 4.2
Violent events and fatalities by region in Mali, 2020-21

	Violent events		Fatalities	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Mopti	718	48.9	2025	53.7
Gao	288	19.6	814	21.6
Tombouctou	135	9.2	297	7.9
Segou	125	8.5	332	8.8
Menaka	70	4.8	150	4.0
Kidal	48	3.3	69	1.8
Sikasso	41	2.8	30	0.8
Kayes	22	1.5	20	0.5
Koulikoro	15	1.0	29	0.8
Bamako	7	0.5	8	0.2
Total	1 469	100.0	3 774	100.0

Note: Data available through 30 June 2021.

Source: Authors based on ACLED (2021^[1]) data. ACLED data is publicly available.

the most affected by political violence in recent years. Fewer than 100 violent events or fatalities were observed in 14 countries of the region, including much of North Africa, the Gulf of Guinea, and Mauritania, where political violence has almost disappeared.

The seven countries mentioned above experience more violence than what would be assumed by the size of their population in 2021. As [Table 4.1](#) shows, the ratio between the percentage of events or fatalities in each country and the percentage of their population is usually higher than 1. Violence per inhabitant is relatively close to the regional average in Nigeria, despite being the main epicentre of conflict of West Africa, while violence per inhabitant is nine times higher in sparsely populated Libya than in the region.

The major clusters of political violence that emerged in West Africa in the 2000s have expanded geographically and in intensity since 2015 ([Map 4.1](#)). In the Central Sahel, the diffusion of the Malian conflict across the Burkinabe and Nigerien borders is the most worrying. The most violent region of Mali is by far Mopti, where one-half of the violent events and fatalities are

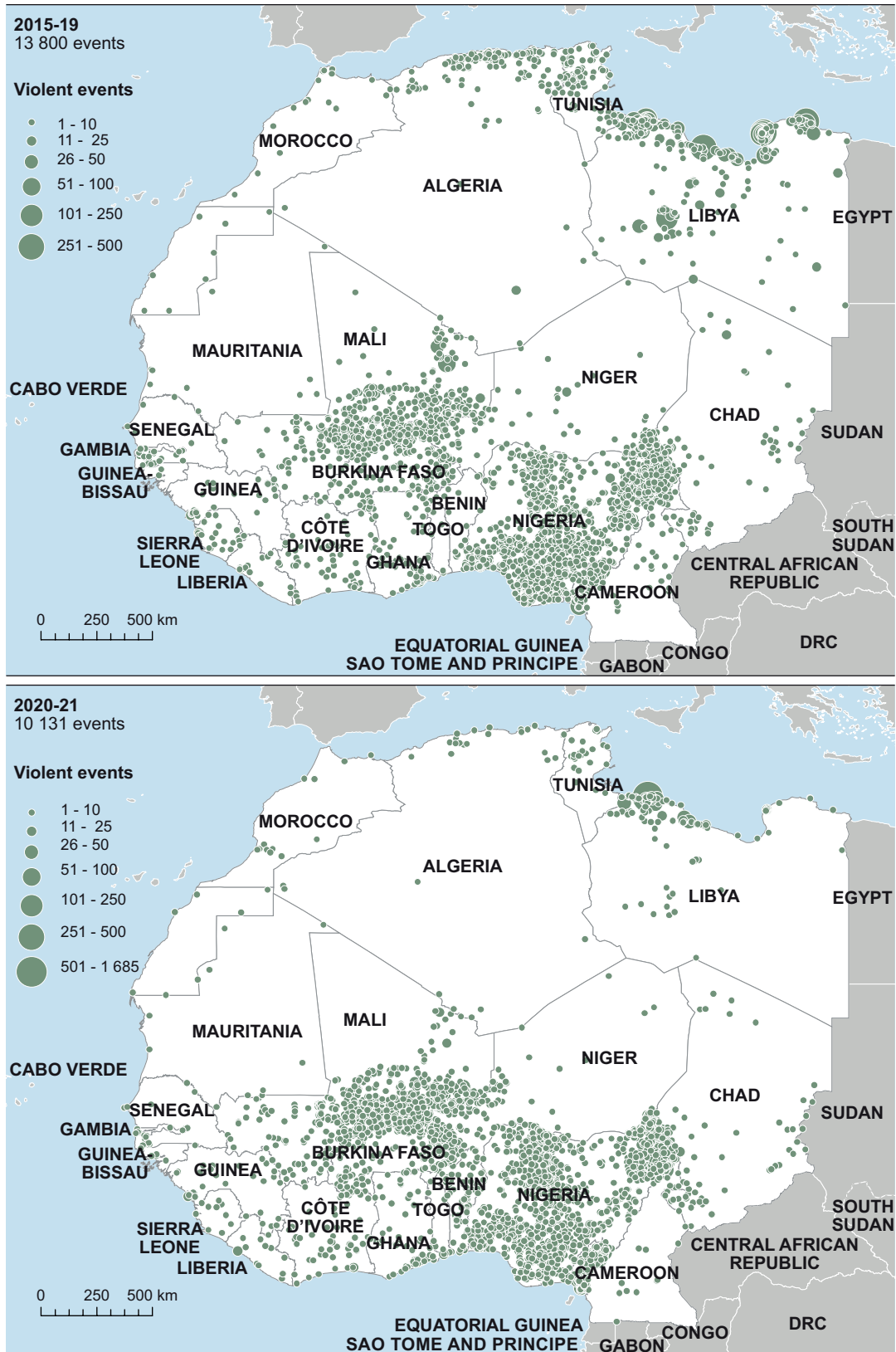
observed, followed by the region of Gao with around 20% of events and fatalities (see [Map 4.8](#)). The Kidal region, where the Malian conflict started in 2012, is no longer a major epicentre of violence in the region: fewer than 50 violent events were located in this region from 2020-21, which represents 3% of the national total ([Table 4.2](#)). These figures illustrate the shift of the Malian conflict from the Sahara to the Sahel and its southern peripheries.

In Nigeria, recent years have seen an increase in the number of daily attacks conducted by Boko Haram and ISWAP following the Nigerian government's decision to withdraw from the countryside and concentrate its forces (and civilians) in garrison towns. Communal violence, cattle rustling, kidnapping, and banditry are also more frequent in Zamfara, Sokoto, and Katsina States near the Nigerien border. Despite being violently repressed by security forces, this form of violence is progressing due to the proliferation of light weapons in northern Nigeria ([Map 4.2](#)).

Across the region, Tripoli is the city where the largest number of violent events (541) and fatalities (521) were recorded from 2020 through mid-2021, due to the Western Libya

Map 4.1

Violent events in North and West Africa, 2015-21



Note: Data available through 30 June 2021.

Source: Authors based on ACLED (2021_[9]) data. ACLED data is publicly available.

Map 4.2

The Northeast, Middle Belt and Delta of Nigeria



Note: Major conflict areas are indicated with polka dots.

Source: OECD/SWAC (2020_[27]).

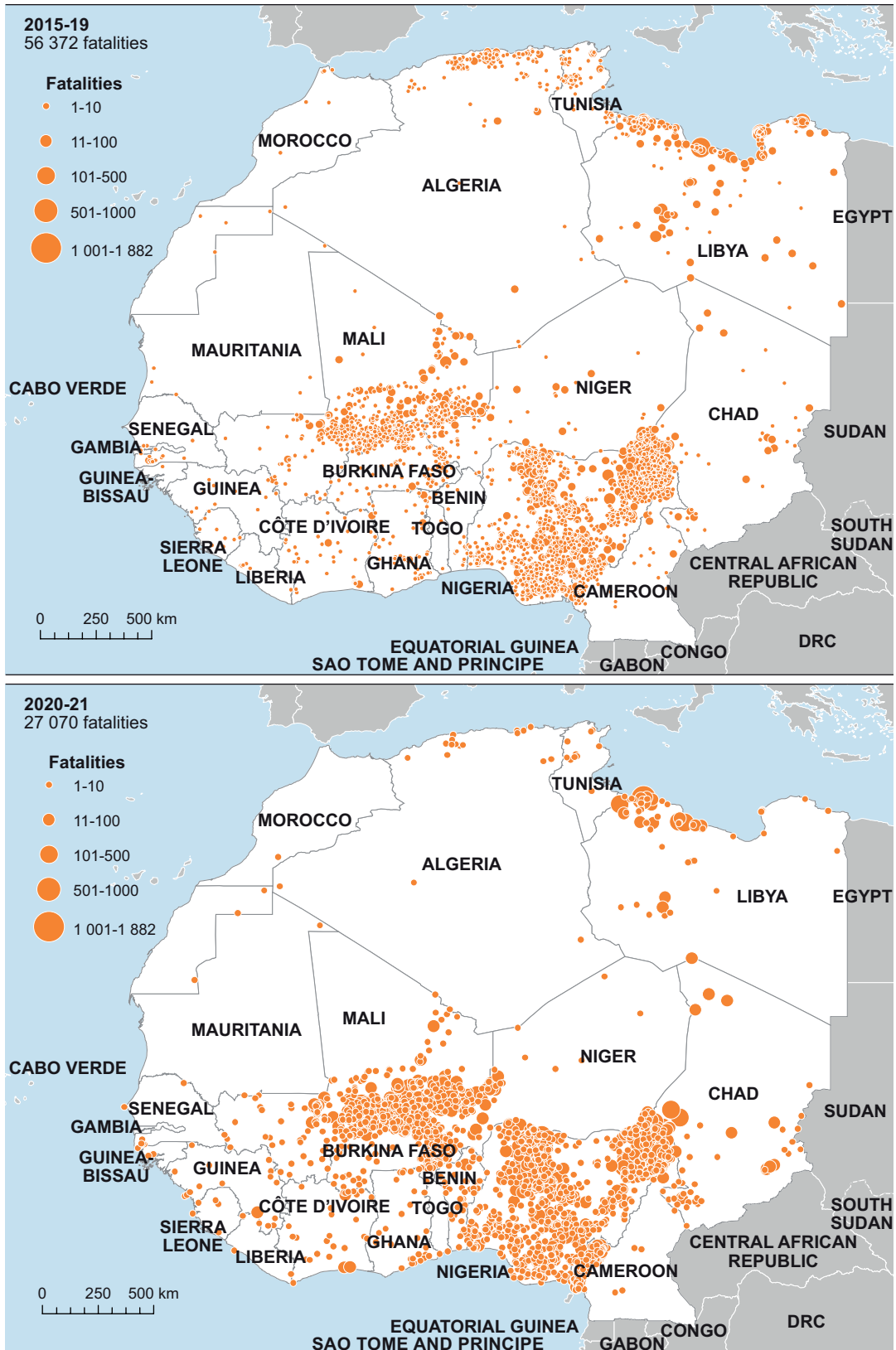
Campaign initiated by the LNA in April 2019. In West Africa, cities located between Nigeria and Cameroon (Bamenda, Mora, Maiduguri, Kolofata) are among the most affected by violent events, while small and large cities affected by the Boko Haram and ISWAP insurgency in northern Nigeria (Zurmi, Mongano) and Chad (Mao) have experienced the largest number of fatalities (Map 4.3).

Outside of these major conflict areas, eastern and northern Chad have emerged as yet another source of instability in the Sahara (Box 4.1). In eastern Chad, communal violence is on the rise

in the regions of Ouaddai, Sila and Wadi Fira that border Darfur in neighbouring Sudan. These conflicts are marked by long-standing tensions between herders and farmers and increasingly along ethnic lines between Arab and non-Arab populations and have killed 37 people from 2020 through mid-2021. Separately in the remote northern Chadian region of Tibesti neighbouring Libya, clashes between gold miners and local militias, and battles between government forces and rebels from the Front for Change and Concord in Chad (FACT), have killed 128 people from 2020 to mid-2021.

Map 4.3

Fatalities due to violent events in North and West Africa, 2015-21



Note: Data available through 30 June 2021

Source: Authors based on ACLED (2021_[1]) data. ACLED data is publicly available.

Box 4.1**Chad's border-related conflicts**

Since it entered independence from France in 1960 under the rule of François Tombalbaye (in power 1960-1975), Chad has been at the centre of numerous border conflicts in both the north and south of the country. After the Libyan coup d'état of September 1969, Gaddafi claimed the Aouzou Strip, a territory stretching across the Libya-Chad border. Libyan soldiers made periodic incursions into Chadian territory between 1973 and 1987, and sponsored various rebels against the Chadian state, while French-backed Chadian governments and anti-Libyan rebel factions combated Gaddafi's forces. One notable episode from the war was the 1987 defeat and capture of Gaddafi's then-subordinate Khalifa Haftar, who emerged after 2011 as a pivotal actor in Libya, with influence extending into Chad. After efforts at peace-making between Chad and Libya starting in 1988, the International Court of Justice eventually ruled in 1994 that the Aouzou Strip should remain part of Chad.

In recent years, Chad has experienced cross-border attacks related to the Darfur crisis in Sudan,

a major jihadist insurgency around Lake Chad, and renewed rebel incursions from Libya and the Central African Republic (CAR). These conflicts have contributed to the militarisation of the state in Chad (Eizenga, 2018^[4]), a dynamic visible in Idriss Déby's self-styling as "Field Marshal" before his death, in the swiftness of the family takeover following his demise, and in the role that Déby and his successors have sought to play as regional security actors in the Sahel. The fragility of the Chadian state has incentivised authorities there to offer up Chadian military contributions to Sahelian ventures, including France's Operation Serval in Mali, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), the Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF) around Lake Chad, and the G5 Sahel Joint Force in the tri-border zone of the central Sahel. In this way, Chad's own cross-border military deployments are key techniques for maintaining international and peer support for continued Déby family rule at home.

Source: Alexander Thurston for this publication.

INTENSIFICATION AND EXPANSION OF VIOLENCE

The rapid increase in the number of violent events and fatalities recorded in West Africa since the mid-2010s reflects the intensification and expansion of several interconnected conflicts. These changes can be measured using the SCDi developed to assess the changing geography of conflict in the region (OECD/SWAC, 2020^[2]; Walther et al., 2021^[5]). As discussed in [Chapter 3](#), the SCDi measures both the intensity and the spatial concentration of political violence for each of the 6 540 "cells" or regions of 50 by 50 kilometres that compose North and West Africa. The SCDi measures two interrelated

spatial forms of violence by cell: conflict intensity and conflict concentration. Conflict intensity corresponds to the number of violent events in a given region divided by its area. Conflict concentration compares the average distance between violent events in a given region with the average distance if events were randomly distributed. This determines whether violent events in a cell are rather clustered or dispersed. The cells can experience a high or low intensity of conflict, as well as a clustered or dispersed distribution of violent events.

CONFLICTS ARE INTENSIFYING, ESPECIALLY IN WEST AFRICA

Since 2019, conflicts have tended to intensify in West Africa, where an increasing number of regions are now experiencing high levels of violence. Violence has become more intense in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Mali, Niger, and Nigeria. In these countries, regions where conflict intensity was low until the late 2010s tend to exhibit a higher level of violence in 2019 and 2020 ([Map 4.4](#)). Moreover, isolated clusters of high-intensity violence have started to coalesce. In the Central Sahel, the Mali-Burkina Faso-Niger border formed a continuous cluster of high-intensity violence in 2020, while several parts of the region were still unaffected by

or relatively preserved from conflict in 2018. Each major conflict in Nigeria has followed the same evolution. The Lake Chad region is now a compact cluster of high-intensity violence from N’Guigmi in Niger to Mubi in Nigeria and Maroua in Cameroon. Another uninterrupted cluster of violence has emerged from the north of Nigeria to the Niger delta, across the entire country. In North Africa, regions that experience high-intensity violence are far less numerous in 2019 and 2020 than in previous years and almost exclusively centred on Tripoli and other coastal cities.

VIOLENCE IS BECOMING MORE DISPERSED

In 2019 and 2020, the vast majority of regions that experience conflict (>80%) exhibited a clustered distribution of violent events, which means that conflict is largely localised and violent events are likely to occur near each other. Regions that tend to experience a high intensity of violence, as discussed in the previous section, also tend to exhibit clustered violence. Accordingly, concentrated conflicts were particularly numerous between Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, in Nigeria, and in north-western Libya until 2020 ([Map 4.5](#)).

However, the overall number of regions with clustered violent locations has decreased noticeably from its peak of 2011, where it represented

95% of all events, to 82% in 2021 ([Figure 4.3](#)). The corresponding increase in dispersed violence may be a sign that conflicts are weakening, or, on the contrary, that they are spreading to previously unaffected regions. In both cases, a dispersed pattern identifies regions where a transition is underway. In West Africa, dispersed events appear at the margins of large conflict areas, such as in southern Mali, but also in Ghana, Côte d’Ivoire and south-western Nigeria. This suggests that dispersed violence is spreading to new regions. In Libya, the violence that remains is heavily clustered in urban areas and recent dispersed events can be interpreted as a remnant of the Second Civil War.

THE CHANGING GEOGRAPHY OF VIOLENCE

The analysis of the intensity and concentration of violence can help understand the changing geography of violence in the region. Developed with this purpose in mind, the SCDi identifies four types of conflicts, depending on whether violence is intensifying locally, accelerating, in transition, or lingering.

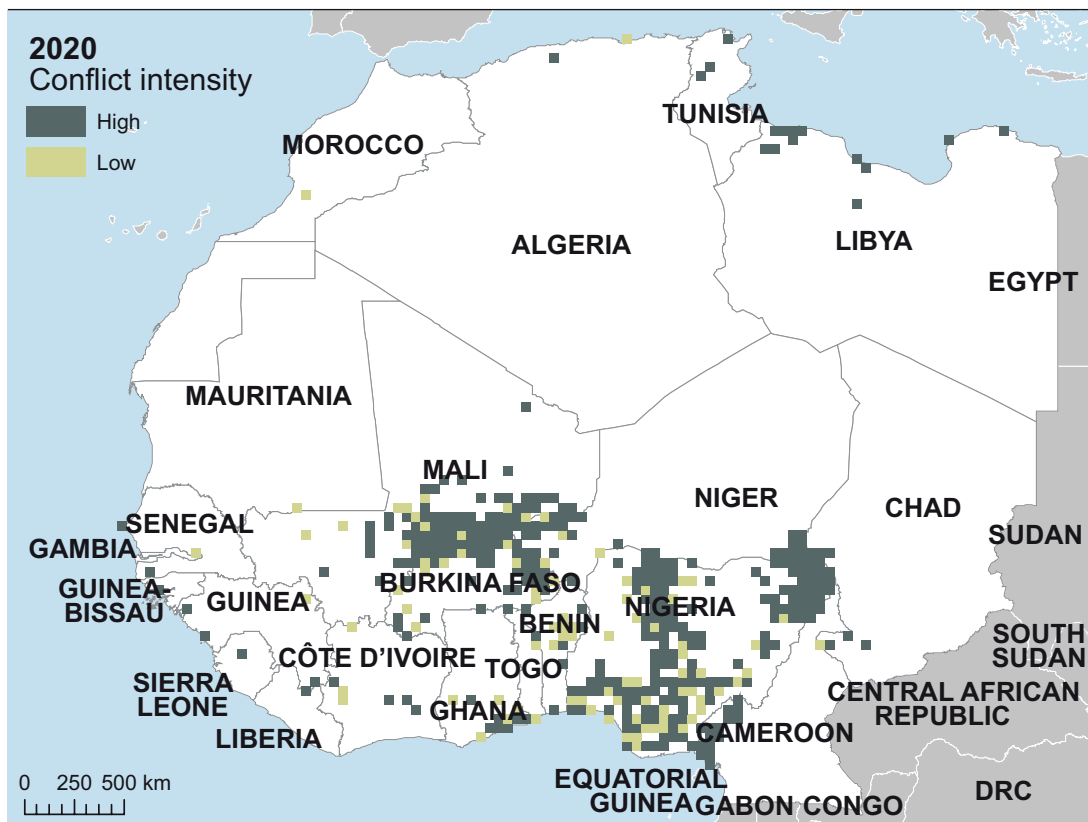
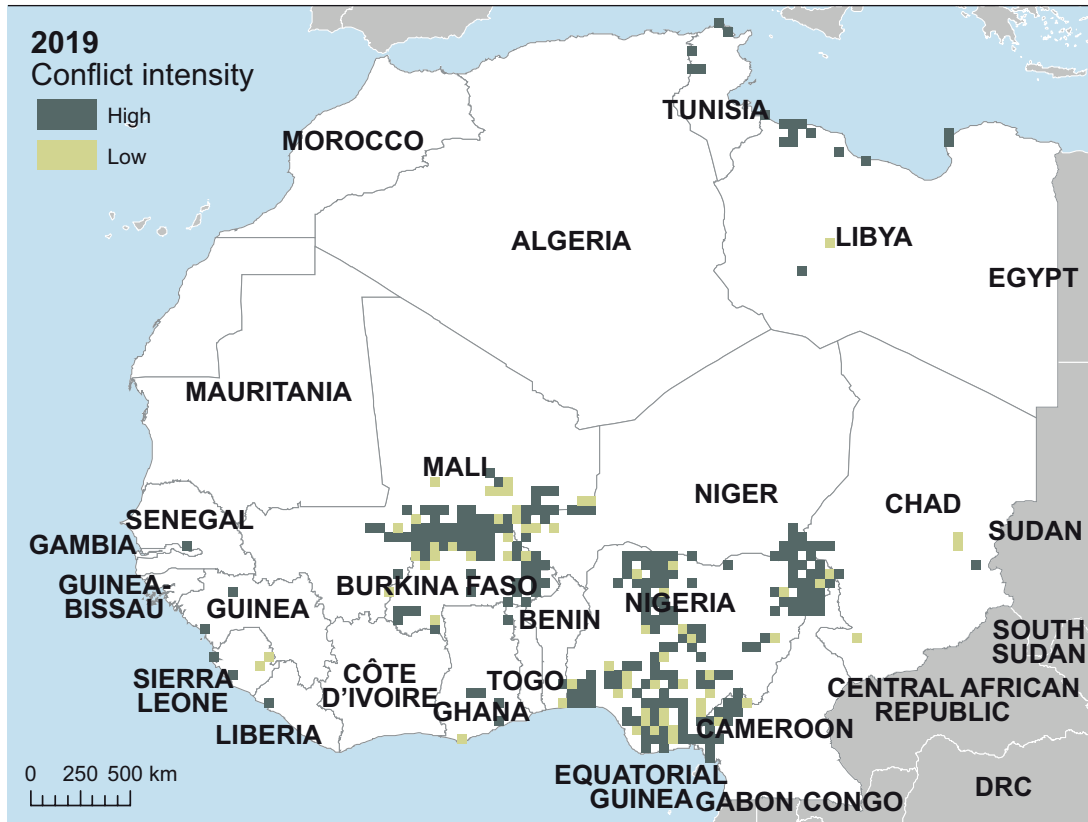
- Regions where violence is both intense and clustered are the most worrying. In recent years, these regions have occupied a growing portion of the Central Sahel and of Nigeria

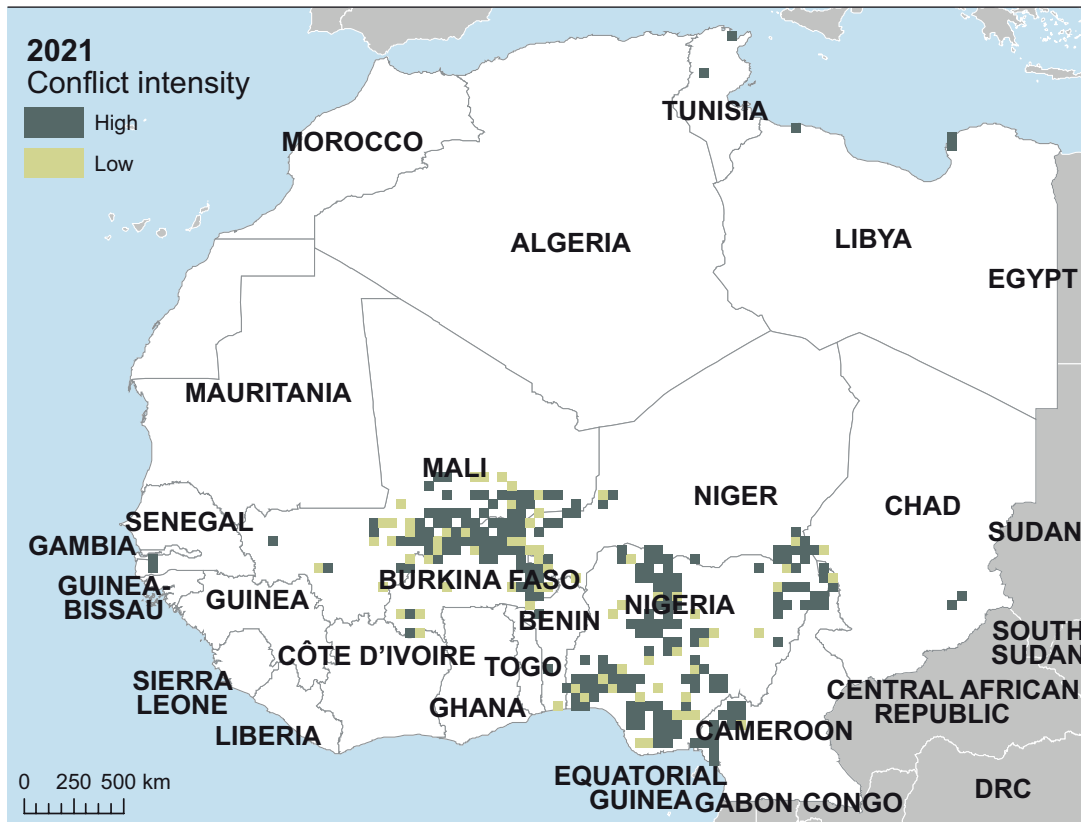
(Type 1 indicated on [Map 4.6](#) and [Map 4.7](#)). Nigeria is by far the country that counts the largest number of conflict regions (495). More than one-half of the Nigerian territory (52%) is affected by one type of conflict or another in 2020.

- Regions where violence is intense but dispersed are far less frequent in North and West Africa (Type 2). They are usually located immediately next to a major source of violence, as in some remote parts of the

Map 4.4

Intensity of conflict in North and West Africa, 2019-21





Note: Data available through 30 June 2021.

Source: Authors based on ACLED (2021_[1]) data. ACLED data is publicly available.

Mali-Burkina Faso border (Map 4.8), or in the Niger River Delta in Nigeria (Map 4.9). In these regions, conflicts are accelerating.

- Regions where violence is both clustered and of low intensity, are in transition (Type 3). They are relatively well represented at the margins of major hotspots of violence, as in Mali and Nigeria, but also in more remote regions where violence has remained diffuse so far, as in northern Ghana or around Tripoli (Map 4.10). Conflicts may start or end in these regions.
- Regions where violence is both dispersed and of low intensity are quite unusual (Type 4). They are often isolated from major conflict areas.

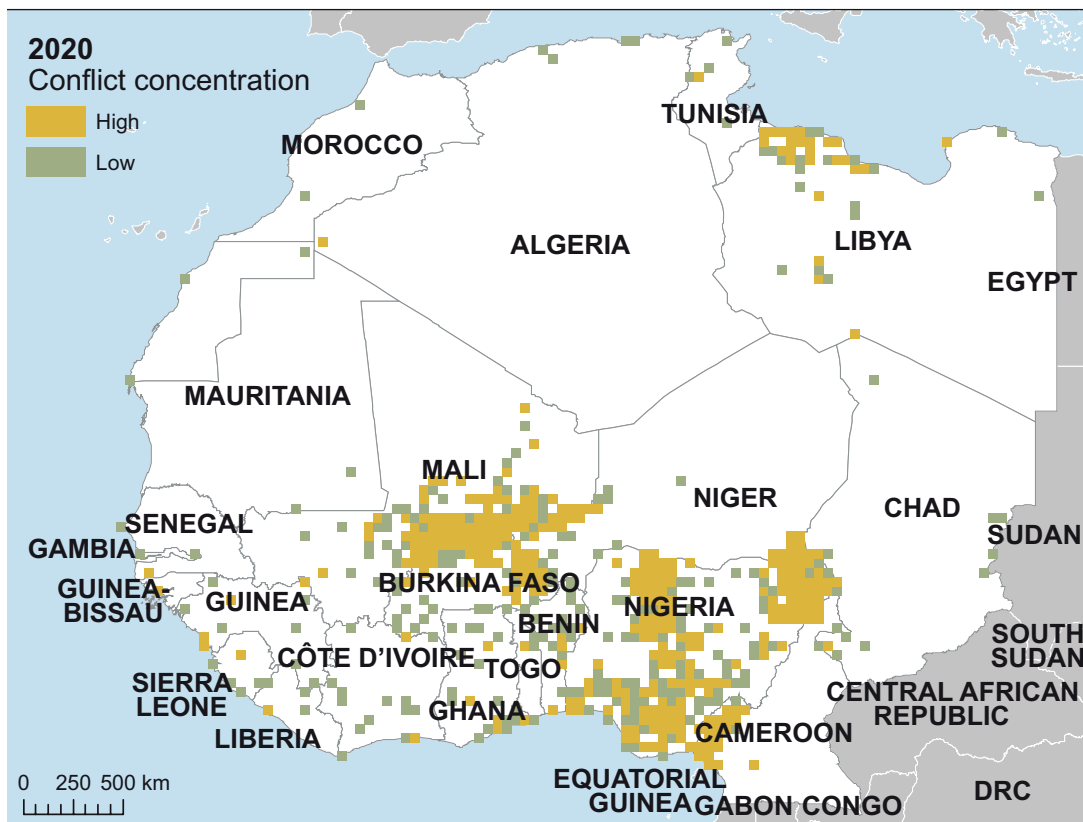
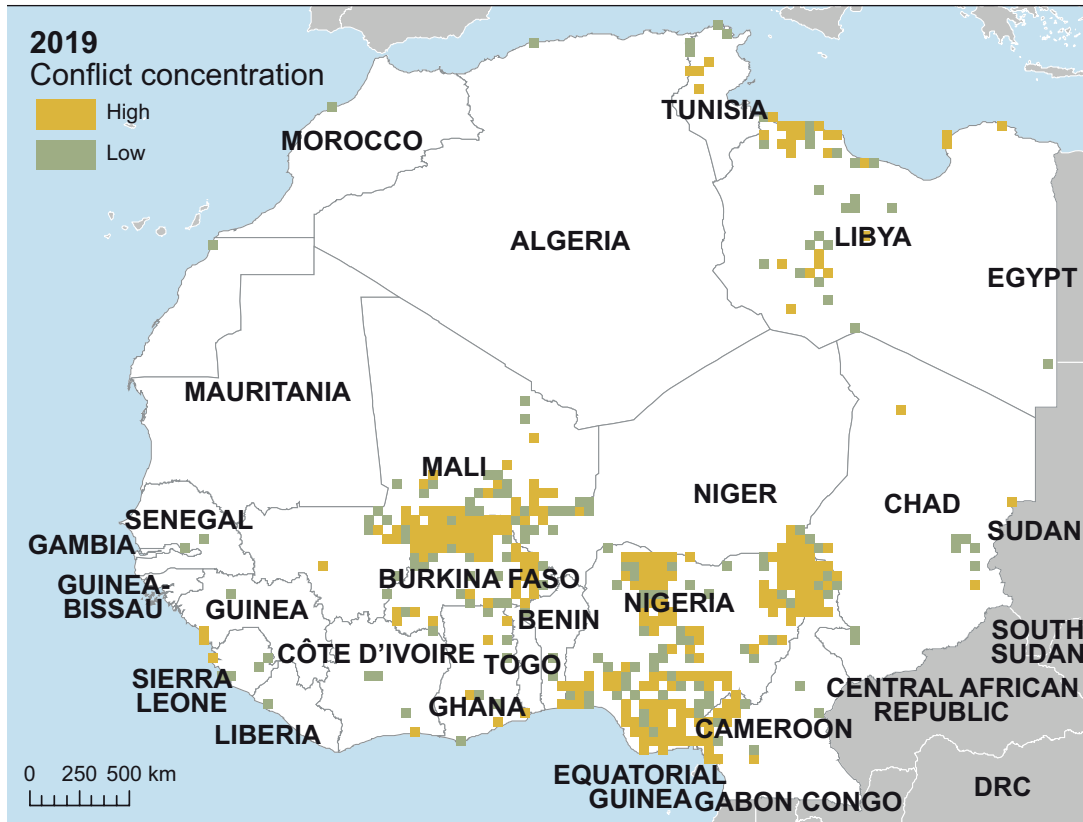
The SCDi confirms that the last 10 years are marked by an increase in all types of conflicts in North and West Africa. In 2020, 606 cells were affected by conflict, against 300 in 2016 and less than 100 in 2011. In other words, the number of regions affected by conflict has been multiplied by six in the last decade. Clustered and intense

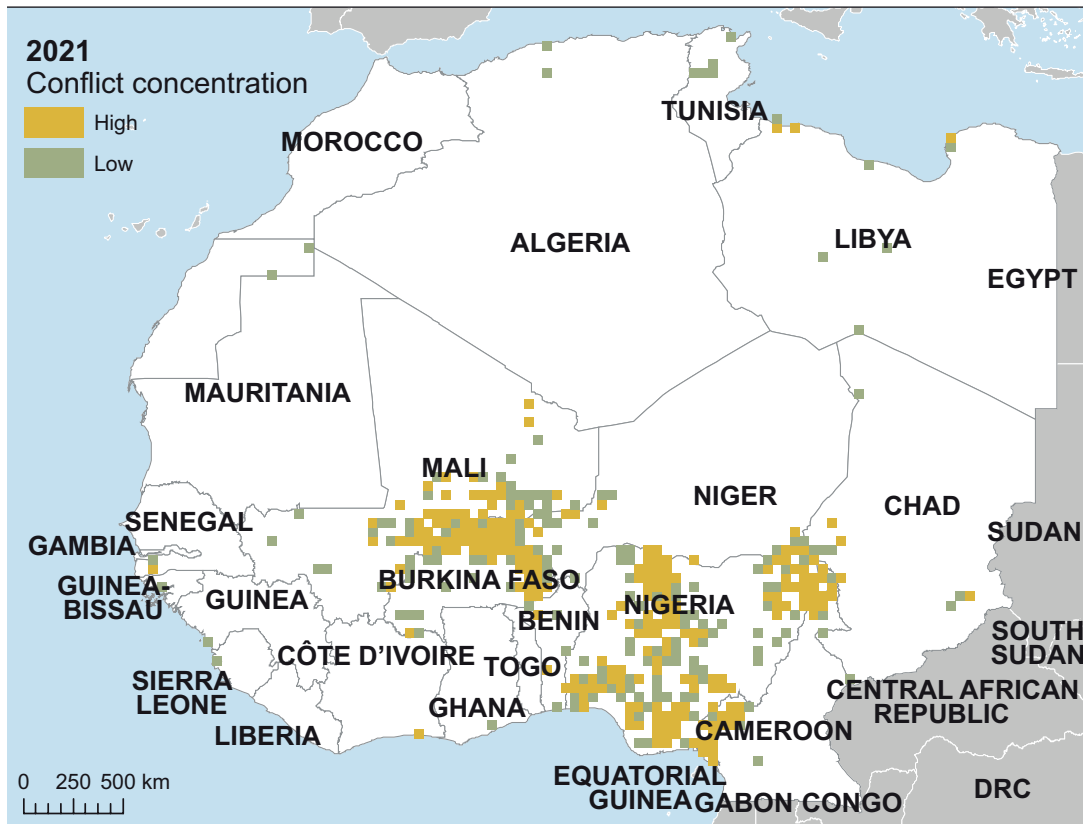
conflict (Type 1) have been the most represented in the region since the late 1990s. The occurrence has increased faster than any other type of conflict since the mid-2010s: 329 regions are affected by this type of violence in 2020 against 65 when the French intervened militarily in Mali in 2013 (Figure 4.4).

Clustered and intense conflicts represent more than half (54%) of the cells of the region in 2020, against 28% in 2005 (Figure 4.5). Regions in which conflicts are either beginning or ending (Type 3) have experienced spectacular growth and are now the second most represented in the region, with 185 cells in 2020. In spite of their growth, their share has declined since the mid-2000s where they represented one-half of the regions. For example, between 2005 and 2012, Type 3 Clustered low-intensity violence was the most observed SCDi category (52%). Regions where conflicts are lingering (Type 4) or accelerating (Type 2) were uncommon until ten years ago. Today, these two types of conflicts represent nearly 15% of the cells of the region.

Map 4.5

Concentration of conflict in North and West Africa, 2019-21



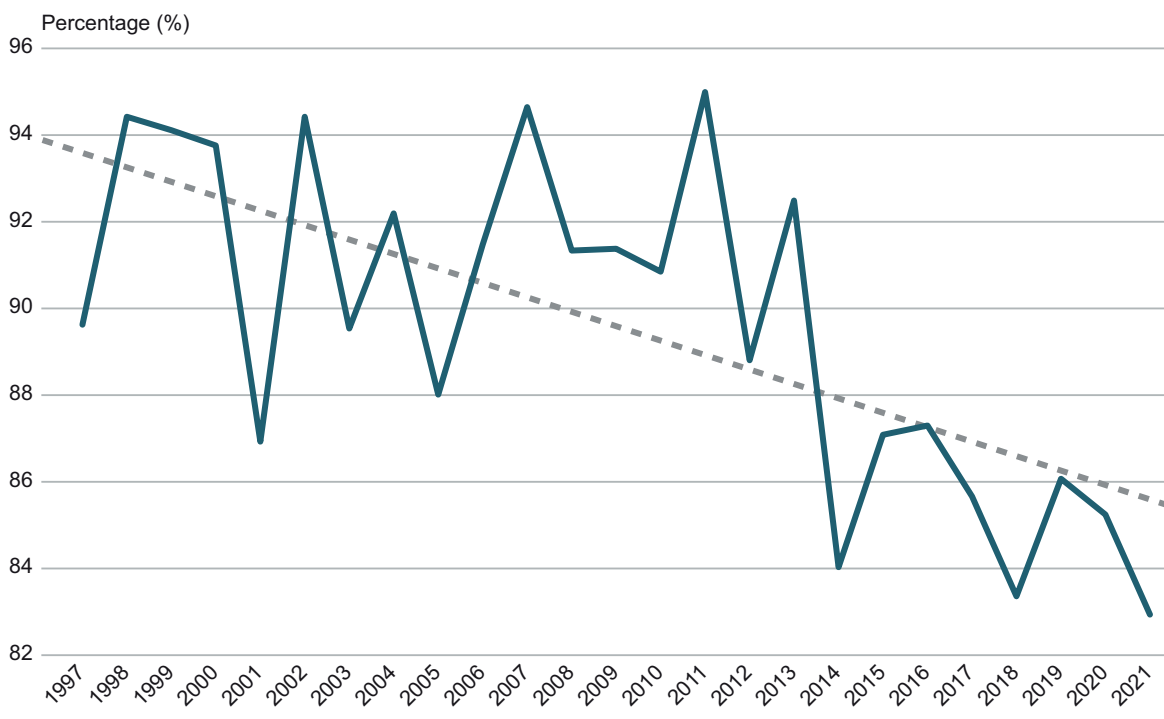


Note: Data available through 30 June 2021.

Source: Authors based on ACLED (2021_[1]) data. ACLED data is publicly available.

Figure 4.3

Proportion of conflict regions classified as clustered, 1997-2021

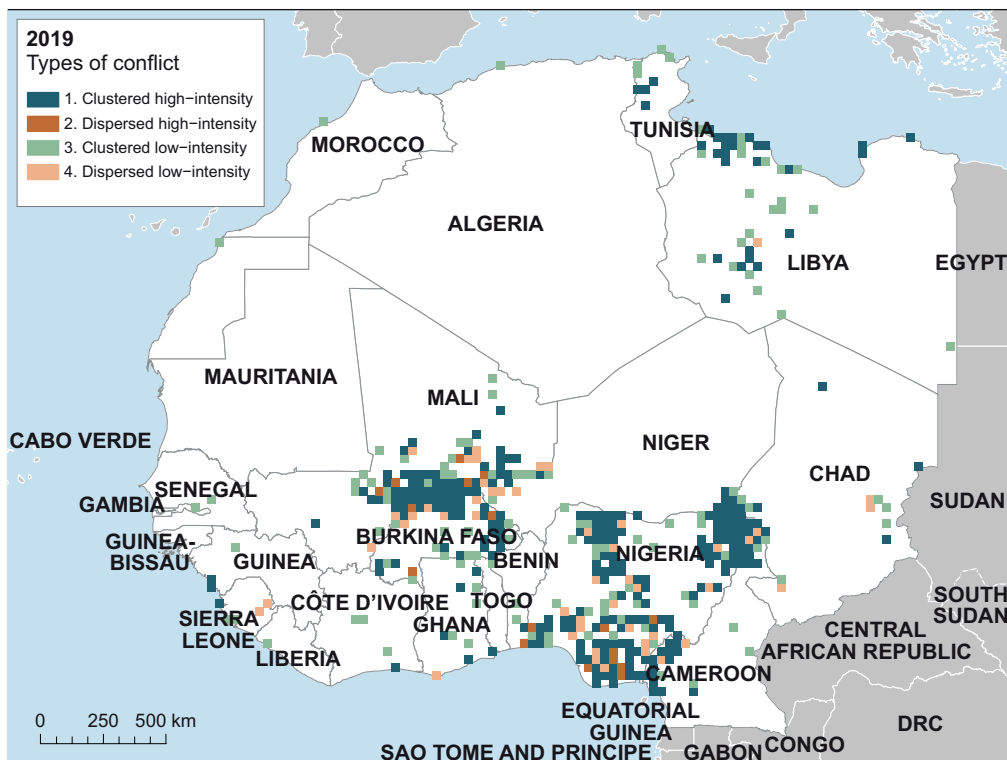


Note: Data available through 30 June 2021.

Source: Authors based on ACLED (2021_[1]) data. ACLED data is publicly available.

Map 4.6

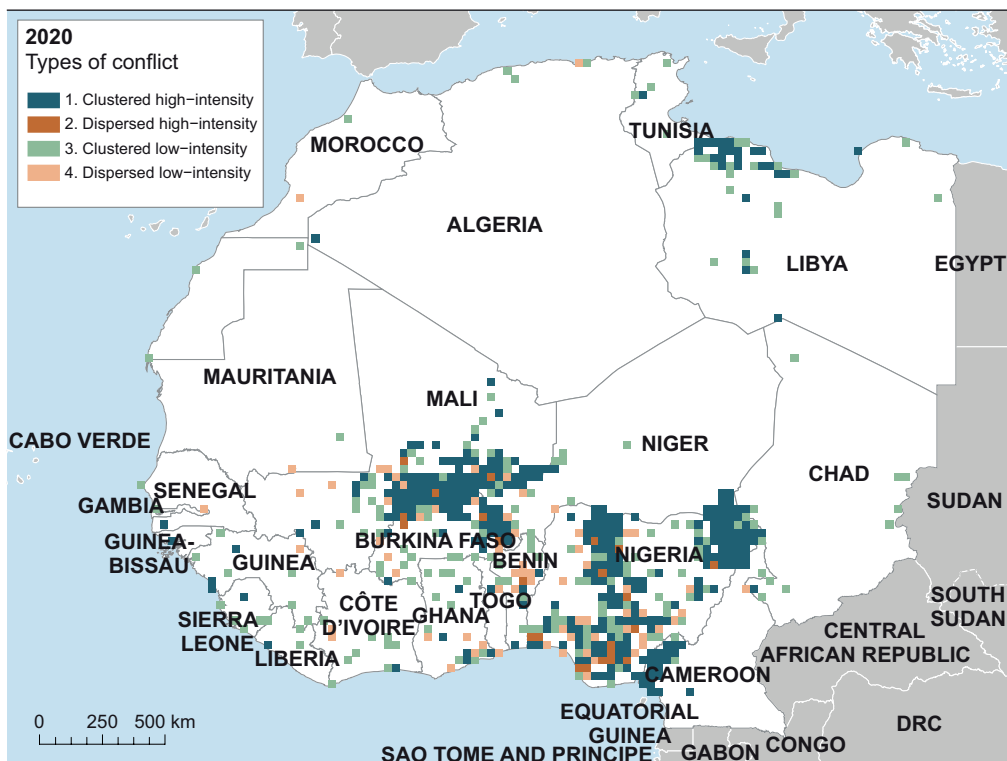
Spatial Conflict Dynamics indicator (SCDi) in North and West Africa, 2019



Source: Authors based on ACLED (2021^[1]) data. ACLED data is publicly available.

Map 4.7

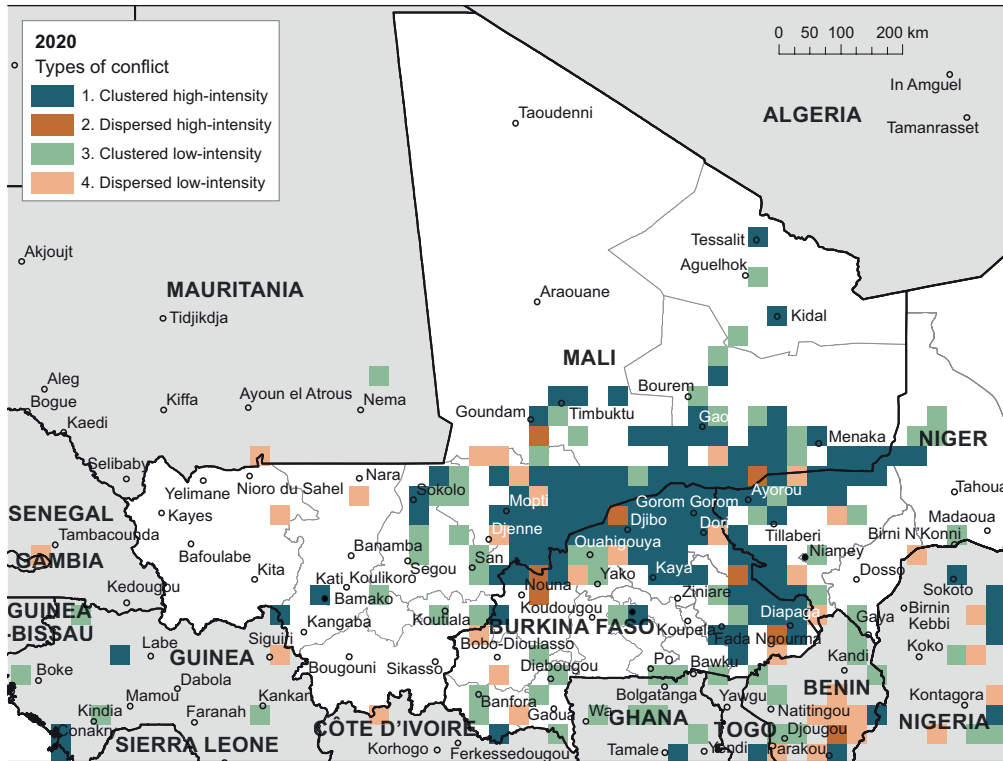
Spatial Conflict Dynamics indicator (SCDi) in North and West Africa, 2020



Source: Authors based on ACLED (2021^[1]) data. ACLED data is publicly available.

Map 4.8

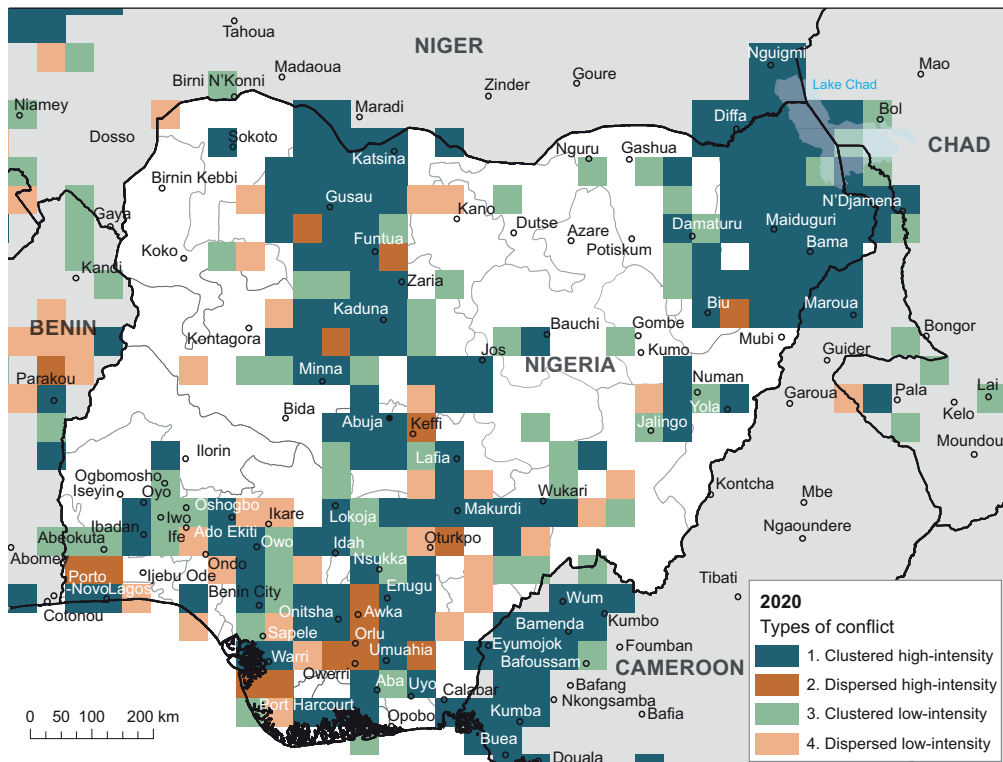
Spatial Conflict Dynamics indicator (SCDi) in Mali and Central Sahel, 2020



Source: Authors based on ACLED (2021_[1]) data. ACLED data is publicly available.

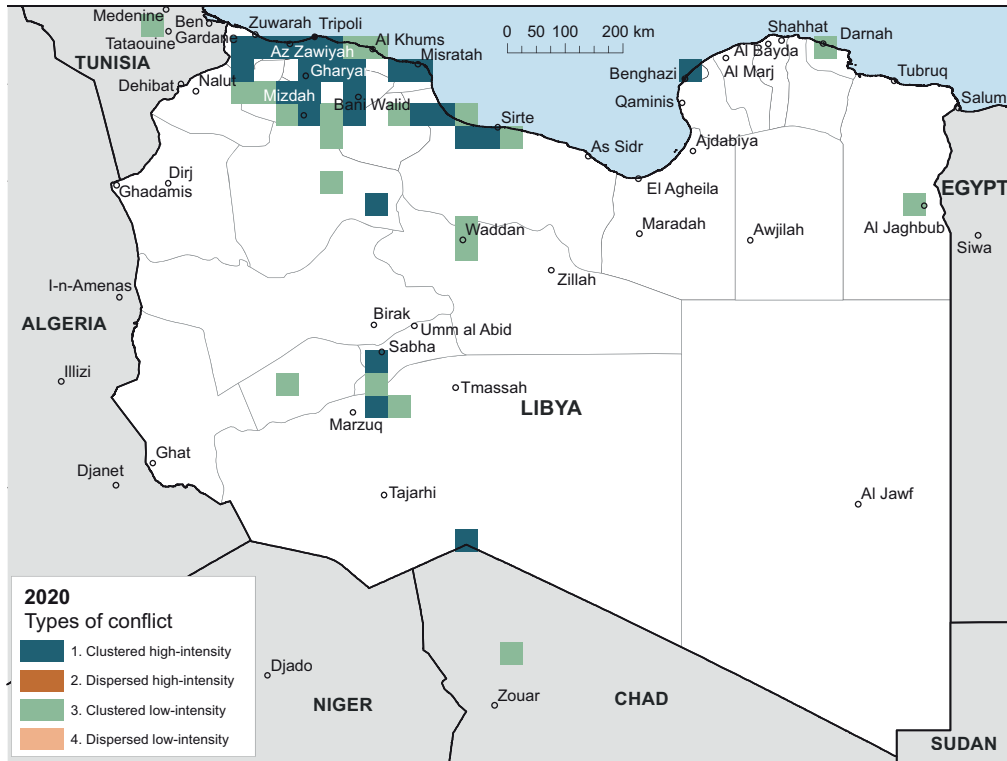
Map 4.9

Spatial Conflict Dynamics indicator (SCDi) in Nigeria and the Lake Chad region, 2020



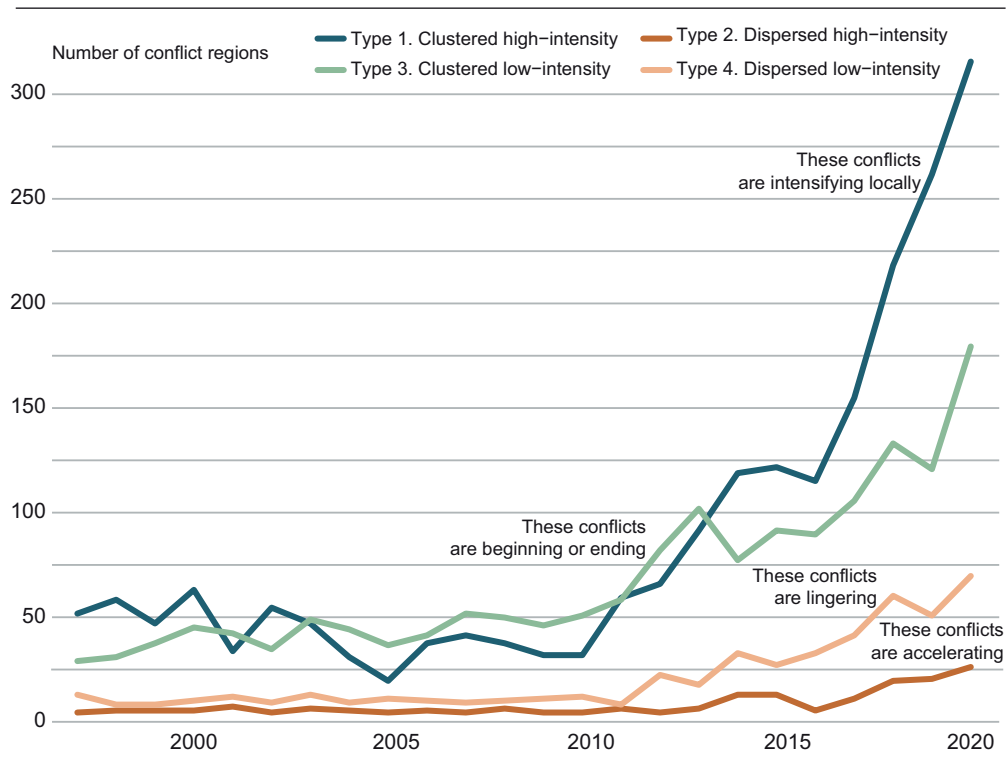
Source: Authors based on ACLED (2021_[1]) data. ACLED data is publicly available.

Map 4.10
Spatial Conflict Dynamics indicator (SCDi) in Libya, 2020



Source: Authors based on ACLED (2021_[1]) data. ACLED data is publicly available.

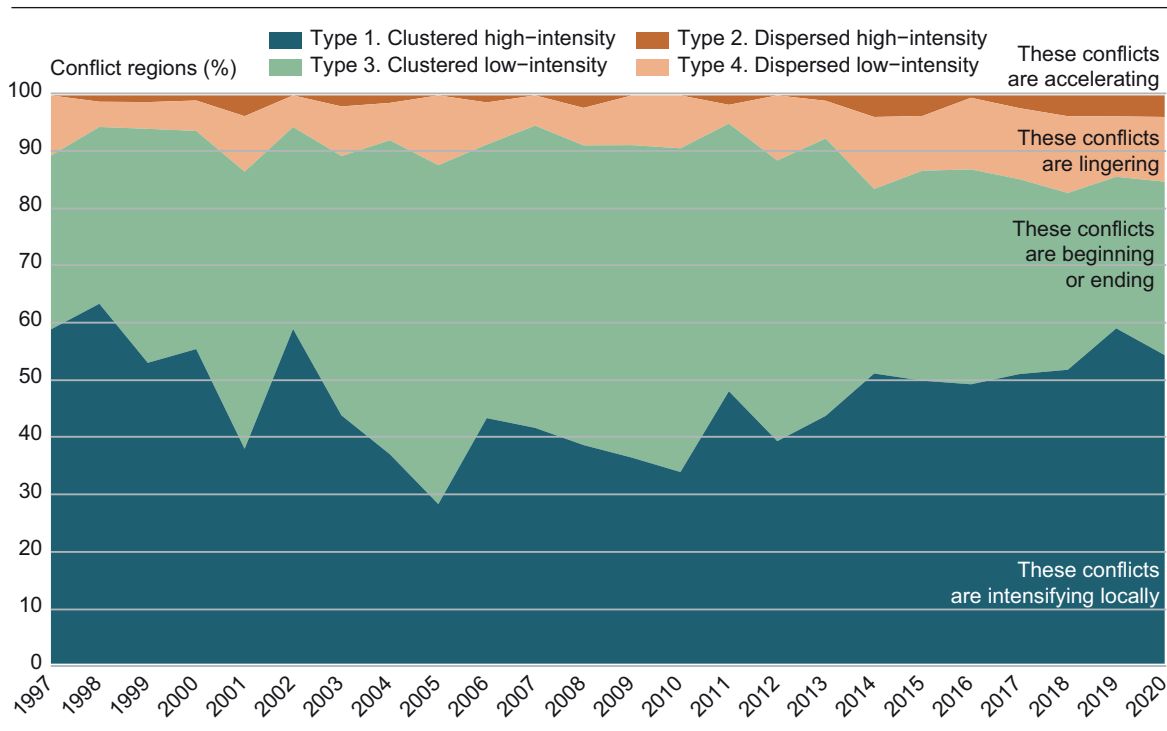
Figure 4.4
Number of conflicts by type, 1997-2020



Source: Authors based on ACLED (2021_[1]) data. ACLED data is publicly available.

Figure 4.5

Proportion of conflict regions in North and West Africa by type, 1997-2021



Note: Data available through 30 June 2021.

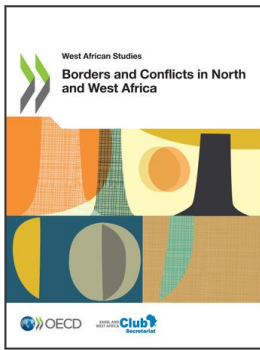
Source: Authors based on ACLED (2021^[1]) data. ACLED data is publicly available.

The evolution of the SCDi suggests that conflicts have not just become more violent in the region. Their nature has also changed. While violence is still clustered in a vast majority of conflict regions, patterns that are more diffuse have emerged that contribute to make

the geography of violence even more volatile than ever. This recent change in the nature of conflict evolution is particularly visible in border regions, where violence is both intensifying and expanding (Chapter 5).

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