

# **The increasingly transnational nature of conflict in North and West Africa**

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Chapter 2 shows that transnational conflicts involving non-state actors have become an important feature in Africa since the end of the Cold War. The geographic spread and opportunistic relocation of such conflicts is amplified by the porosity of some borders that facilitate the circulation of fighters, hostages and weapons. Several factors explain why African borders have gradually become synonymous with political disorder. In recent years, state forces have crossed borders to contribute to the restoration of order, destabilise neighbours, exert their right of hot pursuit, or establish joint military initiatives that pool personnel, materiel, and intelligence on violent organisations. Non-state actors have also contributed to the regionalisation of conflict by relocating to other countries when pressured by counter-insurgency initiatives. They use borderlands as a haven to recruit, train their forces, plan their attacks, and exploit state weaknesses and local grievances. The regionalisation of conflict involves physical, social, and strategic costs on both state forces and their opponents.

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## KEY MESSAGES

- » **Conflicts in North and West Africa are increasingly transnational, making borders, borderlands, and border communities ever more important for the stability of the state.**
- » **Traditionally, the development of violent organisations in border regions is understood as a result of either state failure or state policy.**
- » **In recent years, state-centred approaches to transnational conflicts have been replaced with other approaches that emphasise the autonomy and resilience of non-state actors.**
- » **States cross borders to help restore order, destabilise neighbours, or co-ordinate regional offensives. Their enemies relocate to other countries when defeated by state forces, to create safe havens, and to exploit the grievances of border communities.**
- » **Going transnational is costly and risky. Even when borders offer jurisdictional protection and opportunities, they nonetheless affect the mobility of armed groups.**

In Africa, the creation of modern boundaries in the early 20th century was a long-lasting process that shaped the trajectory of colonial and postcolonial states. During the colonial period, borders helped elites project their political powers and establish a durable source of revenue. Since much of the colonial revenue depended on import taxes, the sustainability of colonies relied on securing borders, fighting against smuggling, and redirecting regional flows toward the ports and railways built by the French or the British (Howard and Shain, 2005<sup>[1]</sup>). However, as shown by Nugent (2019<sup>[2]</sup>), colonial powers struggled

to establish a productive social contract with borderlanders that would promote economic development across the region. Instead, they implemented various models of integration according to precolonial history, local resistances, and the colonial policies of each territory. In Senegal, for example, a combination of high rates of personal taxation and few public goods led to the emergence of a coercive social contract only limited by the relative ability of colonial forces to control mobility. Across the border, in Gambia, the British implemented a rather permissive social contract outside of Banjul,

with few expenditures and light taxation. The most productive social contract was found in the urbanised part of the Gold Coast (Ghana), where pressure from local elites ultimately led to the delivery of public goods without personal taxation, and in German Togoland, where high expenditures were combined with a lighter tax burden than in the *Afrique-Occidentale Française*.

Newly independent African states had little incentives (and financial means) to challenge the social contracts established during the colonial period and, as a result, there was considerable continuity between colonial and postcolonial states. As informal trade expanded,

state institutions proved increasingly unable to deliver public goods in exchange for taxation, and fashioned rules without implementing them. The emergence of a parasitical economy almost entirely built on smuggling in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century not only made cross-border co-operation and the harmonisation of economic policies difficult in the region (Bach, 2016<sub>[3]</sub>). It also encouraged the spatial expansion of political violence and the transnational movement of violent actors (Carmignani and Kler, 2016<sub>[4]</sub>), illustrating the fundamental duality of African borders, as sources of opportunities and risks for state and non-state actors alike (Brambilla and Jones, 2019<sub>[5]</sub>).

## NOT ALL BORDERS ARE THE SAME

Boundaries and borders are politically constructed lines of division that separate two pieces of land from one another. Such lines are often made quite real and impactful through the actions of those that try to assert control within them. When these lines run between two national states, they are described as international boundaries and are usually clearly defined in terms of location from point to point through treaties and other political processes. This has made international boundaries an important legal topic as these lines serve to delimit the geographic extent within which states can conduct their affairs independently under the concept of sovereignty.

Another defining characteristic of boundaries has been the function they have performed throughout history. For example, well-defined borders have been repeatedly identified as not just a key element of the definition of the modern state, but as a major element in building state institutions and forming a collective sense of national identity. For this reason, borders have been connected to modern state-building projects and to the management of political conflicts between neighbouring states as well. Disputes about the location of boundary lines remains a crucial point of conflict between governments, including in West Africa (Box 2.1) and can be a source of violence in extreme cases.

From this perspective, well-defined international borders have been argued as serving to stabilise both internal and external political relations. Where borders are porous, uncontrolled, or perhaps uncontrollable, the extension of state authority to border regions can be decidedly uneven (Avdan and Gelpi, 2017<sub>[6]</sub>). Such border conditions have typified much of the post-colonial period in Africa and have been linked to broader critiques of state development (Laremont, 2005<sub>[7]</sub>). Further, it is important to note that despite providing the common function of delimiting state sovereignty, not all borders are the same all the time. A border crossing in an urban area or along a major transportation route may be tightly controlled while a border located a few kilometres away may be largely ungoverned. Further, borders that are aligned with certain natural features, like rivers or bodies of water, may serve to limit movement even without formal control in a way that other border contexts may not (Dobler, 2016<sub>[8]</sub>). Lastly, border control is fluid over time and a stretch of border may be managed episodically or inconsistently (Radil, Pinos and Ptak, 2021<sub>[9]</sub>).

### State-centred approaches to borders and conflict

Until recently, much of the literature on borders and conflict was state-centric and considered

**Box 2.1**

## Border disputes between Niger and its neighbours

In 2005, a territorial dispute between Niger and Benin was resolved in a ruling by the International Court of Justice (ICJ). The ICJ ruling marked an end to four decades of sporadic conflict between the two states and border communities over access to land and resources to support livestock and crop agriculture. The new boundary between the two countries was delineated along the course of the Niger and Mekrou rivers. The ICJ granted possession of 16 of the 25 disputed islands to Niger including the 40 square kilometres island of Lété, which was the main cause of border tensions. Benin retained sovereignty over a territory of about 1 100 square kilometres in the extreme north of the country.

In the same region, the course of a 650 kilometres stretch of the common border between Burkina Faso and Niger was also a source of dispute between the two states since their independence in 1960. The dispute was ultimately referred to the ICJ in 2010 and the court's judgement in 2013 served to clarify the location of the border. The new border location in turn led to the need for an exchange of territory that had been under the de facto control of each state. Under the settlement, Burkina Faso received 786 square kilometres of territory and 4 towns while Niger received 277 square kilometres and 14 towns.

Source: Kill (2013)<sup>[10]</sup> and Walther (2015)<sup>[11]</sup>.

transnational actors through the prism of inter-state relations or not at all (Box 2.2). In political science especially, the development of violent organisations in border regions was understood as a result of either state failure or state policy.

- **State failure.** The first approach draws on the concept of a state's "monopoly on violence" which refers to a state as having a right to use violence within its own territory. When a state can no longer exercise its monopoly on violence, it tends to attract violent organisations that are either expelled from other countries or in search of a more secure haven (Innes, 2007<sup>[12]</sup>; Gray and Latour, 2010<sup>[13]</sup>). As "weak" or "failed" states, the absence of full state control over its own territory creates "ungoverned areas" or safe havens for transnational criminality and terrorism which contributes towards spreading terrorist attacks to neighbouring countries, as in Afghanistan, Mali, Somalia and Syria. This domino effect is largely attributed to the failure of states to contend with transnational actors. The idea that failed states allow violent organisations to spread in ungoverned areas and create sanctuaries has grown in popularity after the September 11 attacks and remains widely popular in

policy circles (Department of State, 2019<sup>[14]</sup>; UN, 2015<sup>[15]</sup>).

- **State policy.** The second approach argues that violent organisations defeated in their home country have no other choice but to relocate across borders (D'Amato, 2018<sup>[16]</sup>). It notes that extremist groups confronted with pressure by opposition forces tend to expand activities beyond the territory of a single state to avoid and recuperate from counterinsurgency operations by state forces operating within its own borders. Evidence for the state power theory consists of cases like the Sahel, Central Africa and the Great Lakes Region, in which rebels, warlords, and extremist groups such as Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Boko Haram or the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) have crossed boundaries to find safe havens when confronted with counterinsurgency initiatives.

These approaches suggest that states are either too weak to control their territory or too strong to tolerate terrorist organisations within their boundaries. More recent studies argue that these approaches are complementary. While the failed or weak state approach may partially explain exploitation of safe havens and transnational

Box 2.2

## Defining transnational conflicts

Many types of conflict have clear definitions. Interstate wars, for example, are armed struggles between the regular forces of two or more states, while civil wars are armed conflicts between a state's armed and/or security forces and inhabitants or citizens of the same state who seek to take control or secede. Such definitions of conflict often have expression in international law, creating specific policy frameworks to address them. By contrast, what is meant by "transnational conflict" is less settled and a source of active debate among scholars and policymakers alike (Twagiramungu et al., 2019<sub>[19]</sub>).

In a literal sense, a conflict is considered transnational if it extends beyond the borders of a single state, and any form of conflict not neatly contained by a state's borders could therefore be transnational by nature, including all interstate wars. Relying only on the inherent spatial dimension of conflict can be misleading, however, since most modern conflicts have aspects that span national borders without being "transnational conflicts" per se. For example, modern wars often involve foreign-based material support for a government or an armed non-state group, operational alliances with external actors, or full-fledged foreign military interventions. All of these circumstances would necessarily involve some form of cross-border interaction, as does the classic interstate war example of two states

at war with each other. In addition to being cross-border by nature, transnational conflicts include a sociological framing. Transnational violent actors are those groups drawn from the civilian world but that have societal relations spanning borders, such as an ethnic group whose traditional homeland falls within the territory of multiple states. This reflects a distinction often present in both the conflict literature and international law that the cross-border activities of states and those of civil society groups are fundamentally different. The former typically receives the label "international" rather than "transnational", especially when the activity involves another state.

Modern definitions of transnational conflict, violence or terrorism tend to combine these spatial and social components. For example, Crenshaw (2020<sub>[20]</sub>) argues that transnational terrorism attacks "may be initiated by local actors against foreign targets in conflict regions, or by radicalised local residents or transnational networks against targets outside the combat zone. These features of actor and location distinguish transnational terrorism from terrorism carried out by local parties within civil wars, which is not unusual." For these reasons, this report adopts a dual approach to transnational conflict, considering the issues and activities of non-state groups that spill across national boundaries.

violence, the development of violent extremist groups in border regions ultimately results from a combination of political will and military capabilities (Arsenault and Bacon, 2014<sub>[17]</sub>). Terrorist groups expand where the government is unwilling and/or unable to counter transnational actors. While there is no doubt that weak states have experienced tendencies to foster rebel, extremist, and other transnational actors, terrorist organisations can also be financially and politically supported by strong states, as in the example of Pakistan, who supported both the Taliban and the Haqqani network (US Government, 2004<sub>[18]</sub>). In other words, it is not merely the failure or power of states that provokes transnational actors to move

transnationally or exploit safe havens. Transnational actors have their own agency and do not react exclusively to pressure from states and militaries.

The state-centred approach to transnational conflicts have emphasized the importance of safe havens for anti-state armed groups and militias. Safe havens are typically considered to be specific geographical areas existing in states such as Afghanistan, Iraq or Yemen that groups can use to minimise external pressure while conducting necessary strategic activities like planning, recruitment, attacks, organising, and raising resources and revenue (Phillips and Kamen, 2014<sub>[21]</sub>). The literature identifies four

factors influencing the creation of safe havens: low population density, weak political governance, history of corruption and violence, and endemic poverty and low human development indices (Campana and Ducol, 2011<sub>[22]</sub>).

Safe havens are conceived as critical to extending the longevity of non-state actors facing major military threats (Arsenault and Bacon, 2014<sub>[17]</sub>) and as a requisite to overcome the disadvantages in personnel, resources, wealth, and power that prohibits non-state actors from engaging in continuous and protracted conflicts with state forces.

Many border regions serve as refuge for violent organisations around the world. Of the 75 foreign terrorist groups designated by the United States Department of State in March 2021, 32 use border areas extensively for their military operations. There are currently three global ‘hotspots’ of such groups. The largest

cluster (13 groups) is found in the shared border regions of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. The Lebanon-Syria border, Syria-Iraq borderlands, Southern Lebanon, and Kurdistan are home to another nine such organisations, including the Islamic State, that use borderlands as resources. Lastly, eight foreign terrorist organisations affiliated with Al Qaeda or the Islamic State operate in border regions in the Central Sahel and Lake Chad region.

Border regions used by terrorist groups tend to remain unstable for long periods, with catastrophic consequences for local communities, national cohesion and world stability. In that sense, border violence is not an isolated phenomenon that can easily be contained within the margins of the state. It reflects deeper political issues, such as perceived or effective marginalisation, that cannot be ignored by state elites for too long.

## NEW APPROACHES TO BORDERS AND CONFLICT

In recent years, state-centred approaches to transnational conflicts have gradually been challenged by alternative approaches that focus on the autonomy, resilience and shifting allegiances of non-state actors (Salehyan, 2009<sub>[24]</sub>; Iocchi, 2020<sub>[25]</sub>). Instead of a limited number of clearly defined actors, modern conflicts are characterised by a proliferation of communal or ethnic militias, self-defence groups, rebels, and religious extremists fighting against and alongside traditional state actors in a seemingly unpredictable manner (Forsberg, 2016<sub>[26]</sub>; OECD/SWAC, 2021<sub>[27]</sub>). The Bosnian war of the 1990s is a prototypical example, in which the Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian “sides” of the conflict each wielded their own private militias, many of which were associated with private mercenaries, illicit trade, or other non-state associations (Kaldor, 2012<sub>[28]</sub>). These “new wars” that combine local grievances with global narratives are often associated with armed conflicts that extend across national boundaries. They have stimulated the development of a “transnational turn” in the conflict literature that gradually discussed

the significance and involvement of non-state actors in international affairs, including non-governmental organisations, multinational corporations, terrorist organisations, and civil society groups (Iriye, 2007<sub>[29]</sub>).

According to this literature, governance in borderlands diverges significantly from statutory rules, and often resembles a hybrid between formal and informal practices (van den Boogaard, Prichard and Jibao, 2021<sub>[30]</sub>). Far from being “ungoverned”, borderlands are now considered as regions where alternative forms of co-operation, exchange, and resistance compete with the more hierarchical mode of regulation of the state (Meagher, 2014<sub>[31]</sub>). In such regions, local traditional authorities, religious institutions, civil society, ethnic associations, and trade networks are responsible for managing border functions and social relations (Arieli, 2016<sub>[32]</sub>; Lamarque, 2014<sub>[33]</sub>). In other words, there is no such thing as a “power vacuum” in which violent organisations could develop without competing with alternative forms of governance (Titeca and de Herdt, 2010<sub>[34]</sub>). Even in regions where the central state



is weakly present, other forms of power based on customary or civil law can be quite resilient, as in the Sahara today (Strazzari, 2015<sub>[35]</sub>).

Recent approaches no longer treat borders as exclusively rigid and enforced state-drawn boundary lines controlled by states and authorities. Instead, recent literature considers borders as complex spatial concepts that facilitate or prevent cross-border exchange (Brunet-Jailly, 2012<sub>[36]</sub>; Rumford, 2012<sub>[37]</sub>; Frowd, 2018<sub>[38]</sub>). This shift in approach is particularly well represented in the border studies literature that initially focused on the United States-Mexico border in the 1980s and has, since then, expanded to cover most regions of the world (Parker

and Vaughan-Williams, 2009<sub>[39]</sub>; Pisani, Reyes and García, 2009<sub>[40]</sub>; Makkonen and Williams, 2016<sub>[41]</sub>). One of the key contributions of this interdisciplinary approach has been to highlight the symbolic and identity-forming importance of international boundaries for those who live in borderlands and routinely cross borders (Scott, 2020<sub>[42]</sub>). In Africa, recent studies have explored how borders were both culturally produced and politically enforced through complex interactions between the state, informal entrepreneurs, violent organisations, and local communities (Nugent, 2008<sub>[43]</sub>; Zeller, 2009<sub>[44]</sub>; Walther, 2015<sub>[45]</sub>; Justin and De Vries, 2017<sub>[46]</sub>; Moyo and Nshimbi, 2019<sub>[47]</sub>).

## **BORDER DISORDERS IN NORTH AND WEST AFRICA**

In Africa<sup>1</sup>, transnational conflicts involving non-state actors have become an important feature since the end of the Cold War (Williams, 2011<sub>[48]</sub>; Radil, Irmischer and Walther, 2021<sub>[49]</sub>). The trend observed in Africa is not unique to the continent. It shares many similarities with other regions of the world, where a strong increase in the number and activities of transnational violent organisations has also been noted (Salehyan, 2009<sub>[24]</sub>). Terrorist organisations, for example, have become more international and transnational since the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) launched the first hijacking of a plane in 1968, a process that has accelerated since the end of the Soviet-Afghan War in the late 1980s.

In Africa, the geographic spread and opportunistic relocation of such conflicts is amplified by the porosity of some borders that facilitate the circulation of fighters, hostages and weapons. For instance, transnational actors who exploited porous borders were a central feature of the civil wars that tore apart the Gulf of Guinea during the “decade of despair” beginning with the first Liberian civil war in 1989 (Aluede, 2019<sub>[50]</sub>). These conflicts were followed by an expansion of religious extremism, rebellions, and communal violence in the 2000s that increasingly relied on the opportunistic relocation of violent

organisations across borders, particularly in the Lake Chad region and the Central Sahel. In 2012, for example, the offensive conducted by AQIM and the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) against the Malian army was supported by Tuareg fighters who fled Libya with arms, ammunitions, and explosives. Since then, this insurgency has spread to neighbouring Burkina Faso and Niger.

African borders have gradually become synonymous with political disorder for several reasons that relate to both state and non-state actors ([Table 2.1](#)). As discussed in the previous section, the dynamics of violent transnational actors in North and West Africa can hardly be attributed to the sole weakness or failure of states in the region. Rather, both state and non-state actors are involved in complex networks of alliances and conflict that shape the patterns of violence observed since the late 1990s (OECD/SWAC, 2021<sub>[27]</sub>) and both tend to use borders as a resource that can be mobilised to defeat their enemy. On the one hand, there is little doubt that state forces are more constrained by the existence of international boundaries than rebels and extremist organisations, for whom borders can represent an artificial line in the sand or a political manifestation of state order to be destroyed. On the other hand, borders are a powerful feature

of the world order that states can mobilise when they feel that their sovereignty is threatened by the incursion of non-state actors or other states on their territory.

In recent years, state forces have been known to cross into neighbouring countries to restore order at their margins, by cutting communication lines, destroying insurgent bases, or exerting their right of hot pursuit. In the Lake Chad region, for example, rights of pursuit have been negotiated between Nigeria and its neighbours on a bilateral basis to facilitate co-ordination against Boko Haram and its splinter group, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) (Albert, 2017<sup>[51]</sup>). Not all these initiatives are concerted. In 2010, for example, Mauritania conducted a series of raids against AQIM in northern Mali without the support of Malian forces (Harmon, 2014<sup>[52]</sup>). State forces may also intervene internationally to support an ally in difficulty, as when Guinean troops occupied the town of Yenga in 2011 to help Sierra Leone's army fight the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), a Sierra Leonean rebel group founded in Liberia.

State forces may also cross boundaries to destabilise neighbouring regimes. In the Great Lakes region, for example, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) formed in Uganda invaded Rwanda and put an end to the genocide against Tutsis and moderate Hutus in 1994. In the following years, the RPF and its allies invaded Zaire to replace President Mobutu Sésé Séko who provided support to Hutu extremists in Eastern Zaire, setting in motion the First Congo War. In 1998, during the Second Congo War, rebels backed by Rwanda and Uganda invaded the newly renamed Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) to eliminate Hutu incursions across the western borders and create a buffer zone that would protect the Tutsis of Kivu (Alusala, 2019<sup>[53]</sup>).

These initiatives remain rare in West Africa, where most countries tend to avoid large-scale military operations across their borders and, instead, favour the establishment of joint military initiatives against insurgents. Joint military initiatives allow the small and underequipped military forces of many African countries to pool personnel and materiel and share intelligence on violent organisations. Among African

troops, the most ambitious joint initiative is without doubt the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) established in the Lake Chad region by Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria. Since the mid-2010s, the MNJTF has launched a series of military offensives against Boko Haram and ISWAP on Nigerian soil. Yet, co-ordination has remained poor due to rivalries between Nigeria and its neighbours and Nigeria's military weakness faced with a highly motivated enemy (Thurston, 2018<sup>[54]</sup>)

Non-state actors also contribute to the regionalisation of conflict by relocating to other countries when pressured by counter-insurgency initiatives. According to the well-known principle of communicating vessels, pressure exerted by one country on an armed group usually results in its opportunistic move to another country where military capabilities or political will are weaker. The recent history of AQIM provides the best illustration of this principle in North and West Africa. Until the mid-2000s, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) which changed its name to AQIM in 2007, was principally an Algerian group led by an Algerian emir from its stronghold of Kabylia, east of Algiers. Faced with increasing pressure from security forces in Algeria, the GSPC/AQIM progressively expanded its operations in the Sahara and the Sahel, where it was tolerated for many years by the Malian government and developed a network of alliances with Tuareg and Arab tribes that allowed the group to carry out numerous operations across the region (Walther and Christopoulos, 2015<sup>[56]</sup>). After the French intervention of 2013, some AQIM members fled to Libya where the chaos that followed the collapse of the regime of Colonel Gaddafi provided a fertile ground for jihadist organisations.

Boko Haram and ISWAP have experienced a similar evolution in recent years. While the group had focused its attacks on northeastern Nigeria until 2014, increasing pressure from government forces led Boko Haram to focus its attacks on neighbouring Chad, Cameroon, and Niger after a series of major offensives conducted under the umbrella of the MNJTF in 2015 (Dowd, 2018<sup>[57]</sup>). The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Central Africa followed the same



Table 2.1

Why do state and non-state actors go transnational?

State	Non-state
Restore order: Cut communication lines, destroy insurgent bases, right of hot pursuit	Relocate to another region or country after being defeated by government forces
Help or destabilise a neighbour	Use borderlands to recruit, train and plan attacks
Co-ordinate a regional offensive	Exploit state weaknesses and local grievances

Source: Adapted by the authors from Walther and Miles (2018<sub>[58]</sub>).

trend: historically based in northern Uganda, the group led by Joseph Kony started to extend its attacks to the DRC and the Central African Republic (CAR) in the late-2000s following a series of inconclusive joint military offensives undertaken by neighbouring countries (Schomerus, 2021<sub>[58]</sub>). Started in the mid-1980s in northern Uganda as a rebellion against the government of President Yoweri Museveni, the LRA's longevity is tightly linked to the group's opportunistic and strategic use of borders and borderlands (Box 2.3).

Non-state actors also use borderlands as a haven to recruit, train their forces, and plan their attacks without interference from their main enemies. The western part of the Gulf of Guinea provides a dramatic example of how wars and borders were intertwined during the civil wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia (Map 2.1). Within this region, several militia and rebel groups operated transnationally to gain access to valuable mineral resources and destabilise neighbouring political regimes. On Christmas Eve 1989, Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) entered Liberia to overthrow the Doe regime in Monrovia. His movement was originally assembled in neighbouring Côte d'Ivoire. Two years later, his enemies of the United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy (ULIMO) took refuge in Guinea and Sierra Leone, from which they secured strategic mine fields in Liberia (Ellis, 1998<sub>[60]</sub>). That same year, RUF rebels affiliated with Taylor's NPFL entered Sierra Leone from Liberia and secured parts of Sierra Leone rich in alluvial diamonds. They failed to conquer Freetown in 1995 and fled to Liberia from where

they continued to engage in smuggling, arms trafficking, and violence even after disarmament and peace accords in 2002 (Silberfein and Conteh, 2016<sub>[61]</sub>). The RUF was also recruited by renegade soldiers in neighbouring Guinea in their planned insurgency, and was involved in illicit transborder movements of mercenaries, child soldiers and weapons. Borders remained crucial to the Second Liberian War (1999-2003), during which rebels from the Liberian United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) and the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) invaded Liberia from Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire. Their offensive against Monrovia led to the exile of Charles Taylor in 2003.

Finally, non-state actors may move to borderlands to exploit state weaknesses and local grievances. Some interviewed jihadists have mentioned exploiting or capitalising on border porosity or lack of vigilance by claiming, "you come, we go, you go, we come back. We go wherever you aren't and you can't be everywhere" (Aydinli, 2010<sub>[62]</sub>). In recent years, for example, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) has expanded its operations in the border region of Tillabéri between Niger and Mali (Bøås, Cissé and Mahamane, 2020<sub>[63]</sub>). Originally based in Mali, ISGS progressively gained social control of the Tillabéri region by exploiting grievances among pastoral communities, for whom the lack of state support and expansion of farming into traditional pastureland created disputes left unaddressed by authorities. Through a combination of violence and intimidation, ISGS provided an alternative mode of governance that the state could not match, due to a lack of institutional strength and sovereign power.

Box 2.3

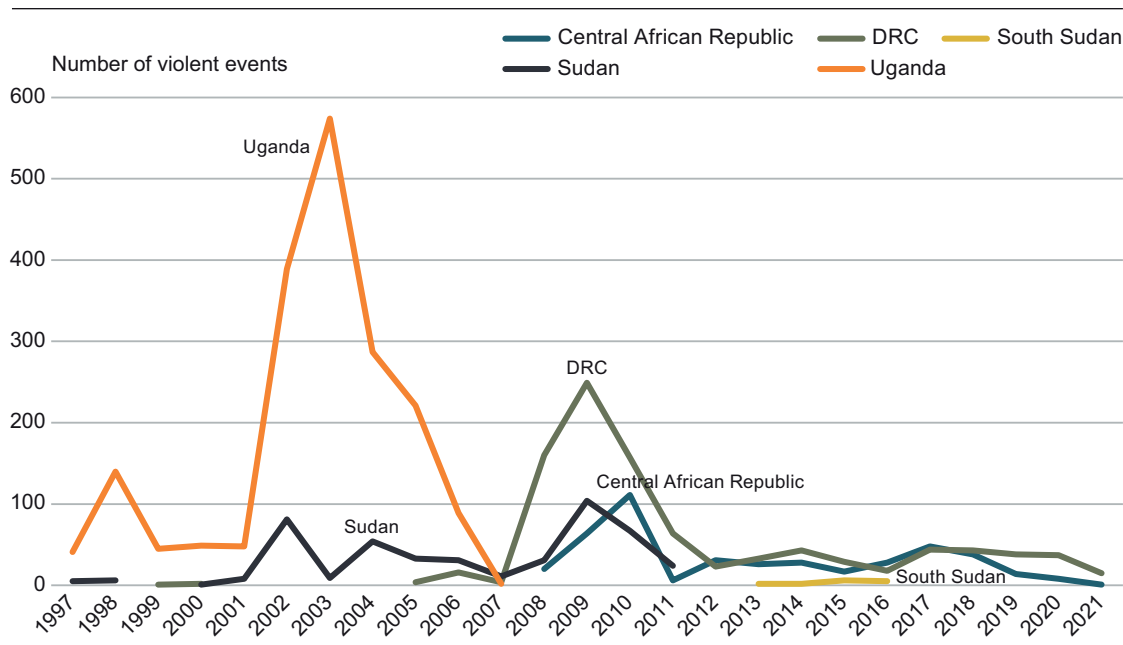
The Lord's Resistance Army: Borderlands as facilitators of longevity

At first glance, the history of violence in the borderlands of Uganda, Sudan, South Sudan, the DRC and the CAR appears directly linked to military activity against the LRA. A spike in violence committed in Uganda in the late 1990s and early 2000s was intertwined with Operations North and Ironfist, two Ugandan military campaigns against the LRA. Animosity between the governments of Uganda and Sudan at the time fuelled a cross-border proxy war in which each government supported the rebels against the other respective government. The LRA's need for shelter, particularly during Operation Ironfist, increased with the LRA at times leading a fairly peaceful co-existence with Sudanese civilians. What is today's South Sudan became a more precarious safe haven after the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) rebels offered free passage in the areas it controlled to the Ugandan army, leading to an increase in violent incidents.

LRA violence in Uganda effectively ended with the Juba Peace Talks initiated in 2006. The LRA moved first into Sudan (later South Sudan) and then assembled in the Sudanese borderlands with the DRC. During this time, which follows the aftermath of Sudan's 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement, violent incidents were common, with clear attribution to a specific group often challenging due to the sheer numbers of often small armed groups. As the Juba Talks were increasingly being held under military pressure by the Ugandan army, violent incidents against Congolese civilians increased, with a dramatic and devastating rise after the ill-planned 2008 aerial bombardment of the LRA camp (Operation Lightning Thunder) that marked the end of this peace effort. With the LRA now scattered, civilians in CAR, DRC and South Sudan became victims of violence and self-organised into protective militias.

Figure 2.1

Violent events involving the Lord's Resistance Army by country, 1997-2021



Source: Authors based on ACLED (2021<sup>[59]</sup>) data. ACLED data is publicly available.

(Continues overleaf)

(Box 2.3 continued)

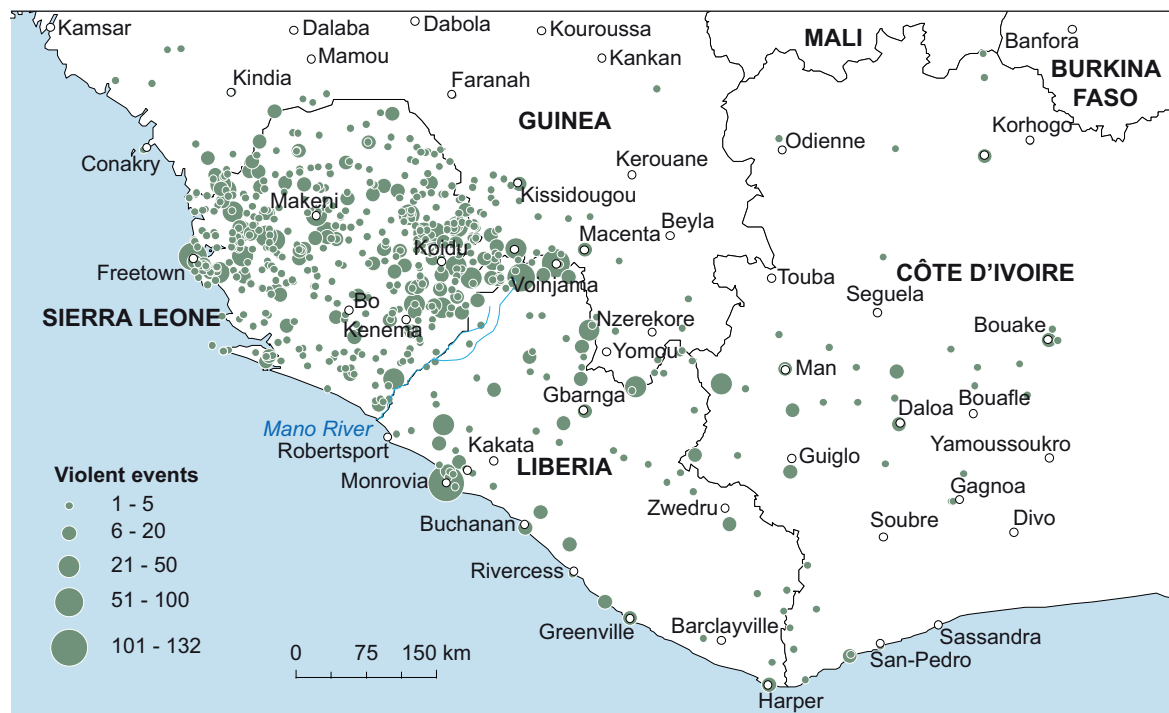
On the surface, the LRA's military strategy of operating as borderland rebels does not appear very durable. The group's violent activity has declined sharply in all countries since the early 2010s, with only 46 violent events recorded in 2020, more than 10 times less than in 2002 (Figure 2.1). Yet, these numbers fail to capture the LRA's strategic and opportunistic use of mobility across borders and in borderlands. Strategically, the LRA used government interests in proxy wars and unclear control mechanisms across borderlands to seek shelter or move their troops and goods. These strategies were often born out of or strengthened by opportunism, with the LRA utilising geopolitical dynamics to their advantage. The LRA crisscrossed

the border between South Sudan and the DRC for years to elude the UN peacekeeping mission in the region. If the LRA had been conclusively either in the DRC or Sudan, the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUC, later MONUSCO) or the United Nations Mission in the Sudan (UNMIS) would have theoretically been able to pursue them. For the LRA, a major aim over long periods of their rebellion has been to ensure survival against the Ugandan government of Yoweri Museveni. Moving across borders and utilising borderlands has allowed the LRA to succeed continuously in this aim.

Source: Mareike Schomerus for this publication.

Map 2.1

Violent events in the western Gulf of Guinea, 1997-2003



Source: Authors, based on ACLED (2021<sup>[59]</sup>) data. ACLED data is publicly available.

## Costs and benefits of going transnational

The assumption that violent transnational actors frequently move across borders or retreat to cross-border safe havens implies they can do so easily. However, the regionalisation of conflict in North and West Africa clearly involves costs for both state forces and their opponents. Borders are expensive and dangerous to cross for all belligerents, who must assess the advantages and disadvantages of conducting attacks in a distant location. The costs associated with border crossings explain why even the most “transnational” groups tend to operate largely within the limits of one country (Map 2.2).

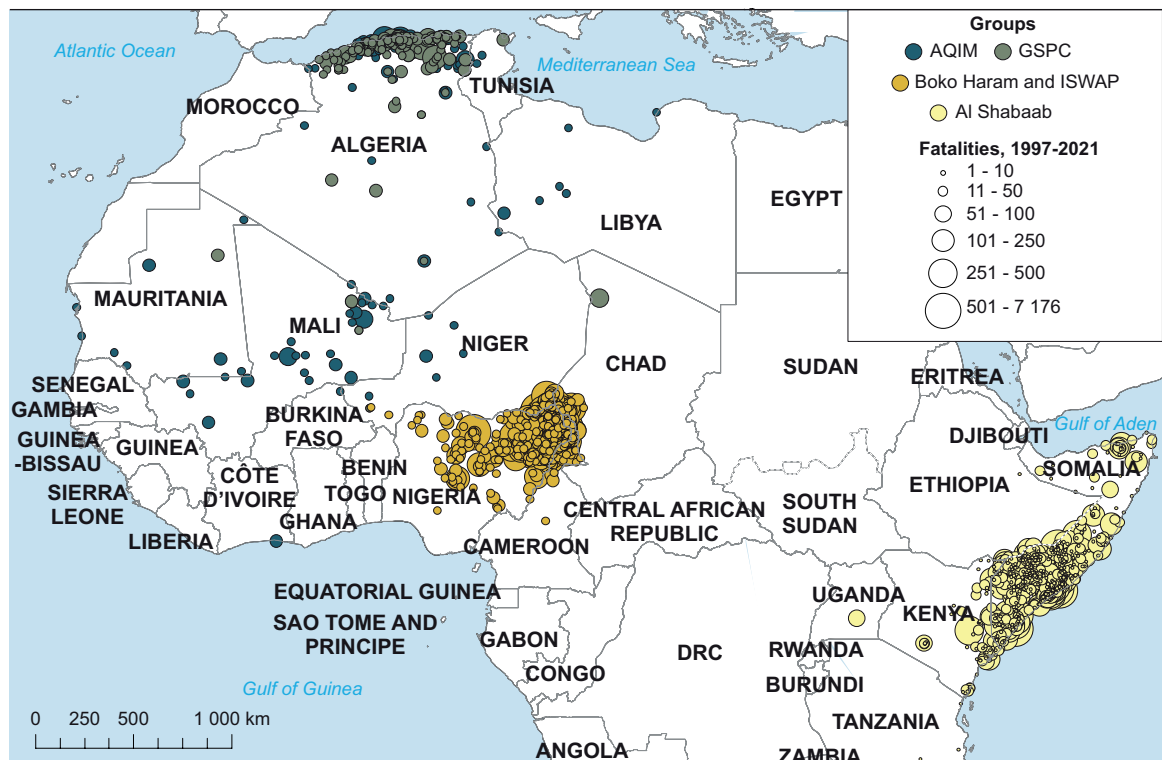
In the last two decades, for example, nearly 95% of the fatalities and violent events related to Al Shabaab between 2006 and 2021 were in Somalia, even if the armed group was capable of conducting spectacular operations in neighbouring Kenya (Table 2.2). Despite being known as one of the most mobile armed groups in North Africa, more than 90% of the fatalities and violent events related to the GSPC were in Algeria between 1999 and 2006, while the proportion of domestic fatalities and events exceeds 75% for AQIM between 2007 and 2017. While violent events committed by Boko Haram and ISWAP in the Lake Chad region have been comparatively “international” since 2009, three-quarters of the fatalities attributed to these groups are located in northern Nigeria rather than in neighbouring Cameroon, Chad and Niger.

Borders represent an obstacle that armed groups need to overcome when they travel internationally (Box 2.4). A practical cause of the obstacle might be the overhead incurred in crossing a border. People and resources must be transported from one location to another, which takes time and costs money. A distant location imposes transaction costs, such as unfamiliarity with the physical and social terrain, different languages, and an increased risk associated with operating away from “home turf,” where it may be less obvious who can or should be bribed. Costs associated with mobility for transnational groups in general and transnational movement specifically can be summarised as either physical, social, or strategic in nature (D’Amato, 2018<sub>[16]</sub>).

- Physical costs.** These costs are associated with knowledge of the territory, resources, and physical capabilities. Crossing borders is perhaps easier in some parts of the world than others, but it is never without cost in material terms, risk of being identified by local farmers or herders, or tracked down by government forces or drones. In June 2020, for example, French and American forces learned that AQIM leader Abdelmalek Droukdel was on his way to meet Iyad Ag Ghaly, the leader of the Group for Supporting Islam and Muslims (JNIM), in northern Mali. The French used four helicopters and one drone to track and attack Droukdel’s white SUV after it crossed the Algerian border (France 24, 2020<sub>[64]</sub>). All the Jihadists were killed except their driver. The location where Droukdel was killed is a remote stretch of the Malian border more than 800 miles from Bamako as the crow flies.
- Strategic costs.** Going transnational allows for escape from government forces but it can also trigger new state reactions that are difficult to predict. States are more inclined to co-operate if a violent organisation starts attacking their territory than if it respects their territorial integrity. Expanding geographically can also create more enemies than a group can afford to have. In the early 2010s, for example, the leadership of AQIM was aware of such strategic costs. In a confidential letter found in Timbuktu, Droukdel warned his Saharan commanders that “the great powers with hegemony over the international situation (...) still have many cards to play that enable them to prevent the creation of an Islamic state in Azawad ruled by the jihadis and Islamists”. Therefore, Droukdel warned them that “a military intervention will occur, whether directly or indirectly, or that a complete economic, political and military blockade will be imposed along with multiple pressures, which in the end will either force us to retreat to our rear bases or will provoke the people against us” (AP, 2013<sub>[65]</sub>). He strongly opposed AQIM’s decision to go to war against the secular MNLA and encouraged them to build long-lasting alliances in Mali, with both political leaders and local communities.

Map 2.2

Violent events involving select transnational organisations, 1999-2021



Note: The data pertaining to GSPC cover the period 1999-2006, AQIM: 2007-2017, Boko Haram and ISWAP: 2009-2021, Al Shabaab: 2006-2021. Source: Authors based on ACLED (2021<sup>[59]</sup>) data. ACLED data is publicly available.

Table 2.2

Fatalities and violent events involving select transnational organisations by country, 1999-2021

Organisations	National		Transnational	
	Fatalities (%)	Events (%)	Fatalities (%)	Events (%)
Al Shabaab (Somalia, 2006-21)	95.2	96.4	4.8	3.6
Boko Haram and/or ISWAP (Nigeria, 2009-21)	79.8	63.4	20.2	36.6
GSPC (Algeria, 1999-2006)	92.8	96.5	7.2	3.5
AQIM (Algeria, 2007-17)	77.6	78.9	22.4	21.1

Source: Authors based on ACLED (2021<sup>[59]</sup>) data. ACLED data is publicly available.

- **Social costs.** When violent organisations relocate to another region or country, they can lose the support of the civilian population upon which they normally rely for intelligence, mobility, and other resources. Rebuilding social and political relations with local communities is a complicated and long-term process. In Northern Mali, for example, AQIM took years to develop a

network of alliances with Tuareg and Arab tribes that allowed the group to carry out numerous operations across the region (Thurston, 2020<sup>[67]</sup>). This strategy was not without setbacks. When local Jihadist groups started to impose sharia and destroy local shrines, the population reacted negatively and turned its back on extremist groups. Between Mali and Niger, it also took several

**Box 2.4****Modelling the cost of borders in North and West Africa**

A simple way to model the obstacles associated with borders is to conceive of a border as an additional distance to be covered between two locations by an armed group. For example, in a region where the average speed of pick-up trucks is 50 km/h, the addition of 100 kilometres to account for crossing a border adds a delay of two hours. This simple principle can be used to compare the actual location of violent attacks in a region with their hypothetical location if borders were to cause an additional delay to armed groups. If the actual and hypothetical locations are identical, one can presume that borders are not a significant obstacle to the mobility of armed groups, who are largely free to develop an internationalist agenda. If they are far apart, it means, on the contrary, that armed groups are heavily constrained by national boundaries and may develop a more national or local agenda.

[Map 2.3](#) shows the distortions created on the actual location of violent attacks in North and West

Africa committed by violent Islamist organisations from 1997-2015 when borders are modelled as equivalent to an increased distance of 50, 100 and 500 kilometres between countries. The map suggests that the presence of a border has little influence until its potential overhead is at least equivalent to the costs of 100 kilometres of intra-country travel. When the distortion is increased to 100 kilometres, attack locations in different countries begin to separate on the map, indicating that they have become less similar, especially along the Gulf of Guinea, where countries appear as separated clusters. On the other hand, the border between Algeria and Tunisia shows little change, indicating how similar attack locations in these countries are. When the effect of a border is increased to be equivalent to 500 kilometres, locations clearly separate by country, which means that cross-border locations seem less similar, and locations within the same country, by contrast, seem more similar to one another.

years for ISGS to convince local chiefs to work with the insurgents against the central government. This strategy seems to have paid off, however. When ISGS attacked American and Nigerien troops in Tongo Tongo in 2017, complicity with local chiefs ensured that the military was delayed until the Jihadists arrived in the village.

Thus far, the largest obstacle to the internationalisation of Jihadist organisations has been their inability to create supranational entities that would overcome their localised ethnic and tribal divisions. This represents one of the greatest paradoxes (and limitations) of such organisations. On the one hand, a key objective of Jihadist groups is to build on a supranational community of believers to create new political entities in which the political and the religious would not be separated, as during the Islamic Golden Age which begun in the 8<sup>th</sup> century (Moghadam and Fishman, 2011<sub>[68]</sub>). Unlike traditional rebels who are primordially interested in creating a

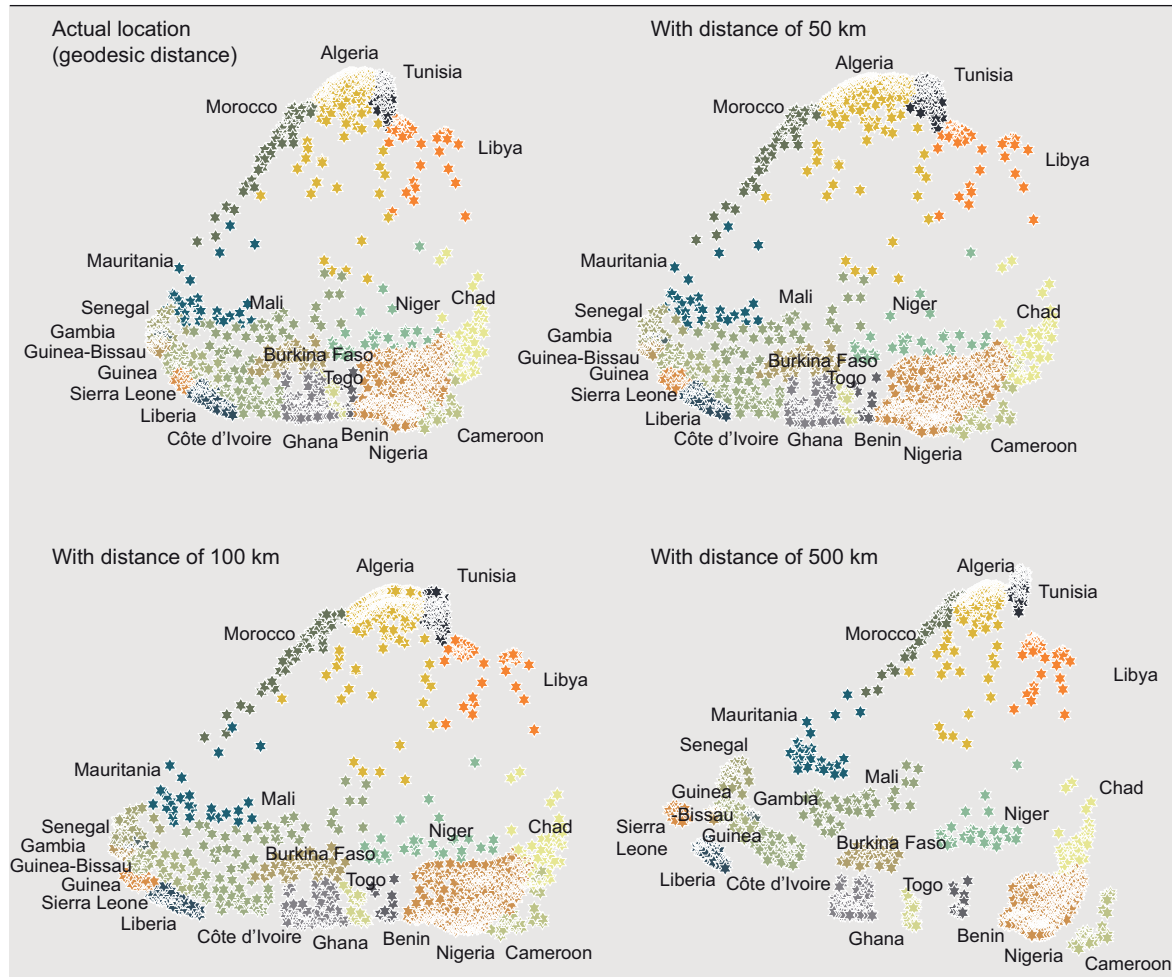
new country or becoming more autonomous, Jihadist groups recognise that tribal, ethnic, and national divisions are an obstacle to their global project. This is why the most internationalist of them, such as Osama Bin Laden, wish to unite Muslims on the basis of their religion rather than on the basis of their local or national allegiances. On the other hand, most Jihadist organisations still rely on tribal and ethnic support for funding, allegiance, and military operations against their common enemies. In the Sahara-Sahel, particularly, very few Jihadist organisations have succeeded in developing a religious and political project that would transcend ethnic and national boundaries, as the examples of Ansar Dine, Katibat Macina and Boko Haram clearly show.

- When Iyad ag Ghali created Ansar Dine in 2012, he tried to unify all Tuareg and Arab populations under the banner of Islam and create an organisation that would compete with other Tuareg rebel groups for the control of northern Mali. The two objectives



Map 2.3

Borders modelled as distance in North and West Africa, 1997-2015



Note: The maps show the actual location of violent attacks and their location modelled as equivalent to distances of 50, 100 and 500 kilometres.

Source: Adapted by the authors from Skillicorn et al. (2021<sup>[66]</sup>)

are contradictory by nature and, as a result, Ansar Dine has failed to recruit massively beyond its tribal base among the Ifoghas in Mali and has proven unable to unite Tuaregs from neighbouring countries.

- Katibat Macina provides another interesting example because its name 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. By calling his group “Macina”, Amadou Kouffa tried to recreate one of the few political and religious entities that was not based on local or national identity in the precolonial era. His project to create a multi-ethnic jihadist force based on a theocratic

utopia has largely failed, however. Most of the recruits who joined Katibat Macina came from Kouffa’s Fulani ethnic group. Kouffa’s attempt to present Katibat Macina as the defender of the Fulani also encouraged the development of inter-ethnic violence between the Fulani and their Dogon and Bambara neighbours, contributing to a shift in the main epicentre of the Malian conflict from the north of the country to the Inner Niger Delta region and Dogon country.

- When Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau declared the jihad against his enemies in 2010, he announced that areas under his control were now “part of an Islamic State that has nothing to do with Nigeria anymore”

(Pieri and Zenn, 2016<sup>[69]</sup>). Shekau's declaration of a caliphate was not simply an opportunistic call for attention from the Islamic State, the global jihadist community, or international media. Rather, Shekau was trying to recreate a precolonial political entity founded by Usman Dan Fodio in 1804 and known as the Sokoto Caliphate. A Fulani himself, Dan Fodio toppled the Hausa Muslims states of northern Nigeria and in their place established a caliphate that existed for one hundred years until the British imposed colonial rule over the region. East of Sokoto was another precolonial empire, the Kanem-Borno, which is the traditional homeland of the Kanuri. Boko Haram's expansion is almost fully within the boundaries of the historic Kanem-Borno Empire and most of its leaders and members belong to the Kanuri ethnic group. In contrast, Dan Fodio's Sokoto region has remained largely outside of Boko Haram's control. This represents a main paradox for Boko Haram who seeks legitimacy from the Fulani founder of the Sokoto Caliphate while operating predominantly in the Kanuri areas of the former Kanem-Borno Empire.

### **A spatial approach to transnational conflicts**

While there is no doubt that borders are critical to understanding the diffusion of violence, the dynamics and factors related to diffusion have not been fully clarified. Extremists in Africa have proven particularly resilient against state and military pressure, partially because of transnational strategies, safe havens, and other strategies to evade capture and opposition. The theories relating to international relations propose that interventions must especially target

transnational spread, otherwise conflicts may spread and destabilise regions. Therefore, it is critical to understand the factors contributing to conflict contagion.

This report addresses this question by adopting a regional approach that focusses on the combined impact of state and non-state actors on transnational conflicts. First, the report acknowledges that the role of state and non-state actors in provoking and preventing transnational violence requires further scrutiny. Some recent scholarship has challenge state-centred views of transnational conflict, contending that local, social, and non-state actors are critical factors in shaping dynamics around safe havens and border regions. The report expands these efforts, by providing a disaggregated analysis of the violent events involving armed forces and their enemies in borderlands. By doing so, the report contributes to the burgeoning literature on violent actor's transnationalism and adoption of safe havens in response to state power or weakness.

The work also adopts a more spatial perspective on transnational violence in the region. While numerous single-case studies throughout the region have shown the salience of borderlands for violent groups, the literature continues to lack a region-wide analysis that can provide a baseline against which to situate such individual case-studies. Consequently, little is known about the overall relationships between political violence and borderlands region-wide and basic empirical questions remain unaddressed. For example, are regional borderlands in North and West Africa more violent than other state spaces? Has the intensity of violence in border regions changed over time? Are some borderlands more violent than others? These pressing questions are addressed in the remaining chapters of this report.

**Note**

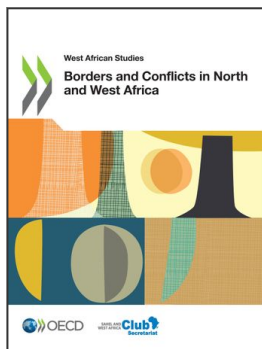
1 This section builds on Walther and Miles (2018<sup>[53]</sup>) and OECD/SWAC (2020<sup>[24]</sup>).

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**From:**  
**Borders and Conflicts in North and West Africa**

**Access the complete publication at:**  
<https://doi.org/10.1787/6da6d21e-en>

**Please cite this chapter as:**

OECD/Sahel and West Africa Club (2022), “The increasingly transnational nature of conflict in North and West Africa”, in *Borders and Conflicts in North and West Africa*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1787/b7b7cf00-en>

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