Chapter 2

Violent organisations in conflict in North and West Africa

This chapter examines the relationships between state and non-state actors within armed conflicts in Africa. These relations are an important part of the complexity of conflict within the region but remain poorly understood. The first section of the chapter shows that violent non-state organisations involved in conflicts are quite diverse when it comes to their objectives, legal status and visibility. The internal structure of each organisation can also vary tremendously: while some organisations favour a centralised structure in which decisions and resources flow from top to bottom, other organisations tend to be structured around decentralised and autonomous cells. The second section shows that significant volatility in Africa characterises the relationships between these organisations. Non-state violent actors dedicate a meaningful portion of their energy and resources to competing with each other instead of exclusively targeting the state. Alliances between them are rarer despite their obvious benefits in terms of co-ordination, resources and exchange of information. Rivalries between such groups are shaped by ideology, access to resources and political leverage, and divergences on the use of violence against civilians, among other factors.

KEY MESSAGES

» Current conflicts in North and West Africa involve numerous and varied non-state violent organisations in pursuit of incompatible objectives.

» A significant point of contention within violent organisations is whether they should target local regimes, which they see as corrupt and apostates, or their international allies, such as the United States, France and Israel.

» While risky, co-operation with other non-state organisations can help promote an ideology, co-ordinate actions, bring more resources and contribute to expanding social or geographical reach.

» External military interventions have a broad impact on alliances and rivalries between state forces, rebel groups and violent extremist organisations.

THE DIVERSITY OF VIOLENT NON-STATE ORGANISATIONS

An important part of the complexity of armed conflicts in North and West Africa has to do with the sheer number of both state and non-state actors that are in pursuit of incompatible political objectives. Regular state forces defending national territory are often fighting alongside various ethnic or pro-government militias and against secessionist rebels in search of greater autonomy or independence, jihadist groups striving to impose religious law, militias funded by politicians or businesspersons, and warlords or criminal enterprises seeking to enrich themselves.

The political motivations of each of these types of non-state actors have evolved over time. Rebellions, for example, have taken up arms against African regimes for several reasons over the last 60 years (Reno, 2011[1]). Anti-colonial rebels mainly fought in the Portuguese colonies of Guinea, Mozambique and Angola. In contrast,

Box 2.1

Conflict and borders in the Gulf of Guinea in the 1990s

The politician and warlord Charles Taylor, who entered Liberia on Christmas Eve 1989 to overthrow the Doe regime in Monrovia, originally assembled his National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) in neighbouring Côte d'Ivoire. In 1991, the United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy (ULIMO) opposed to Taylor took refuge in Guinea and Sierra Leone, from which the movement secured strategic minefields in Liberia (Ellis, 1998[2]). That same year, Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebels affiliated with Taylor's NPFL came from Liberia to secure parts of Sierra Leone rich in alluvial diamonds.

After their failed attempt to conquer Freetown in 1995 and the counter-offensive that followed, RUF fighters fled to Liberia. During the Second Liberian War that started in 1999, 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.

Source: Walther, O.J. and W. Miles (eds.) (2018[3]), *African Border Disorders: Addressing Transnational Extremist Organizations*, Routledge, New York.

movements inspired by Marxist-Leninist ideology fought white-dominated regimes in Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), South West Africa (Namibia) and South Africa. Rebellions also developed in Uganda, Ethiopia and Eritrea, with the aim to overthrow oppressive regimes and replace them with new political systems. By the early 1990s, warlords fought to control local resources and terrorised the local populations of the Gulf of Guinea and the Great Lakes region (Box 2.1) following the introduction of multi-party electoral politics and the collapse of state patronage networks. By the early 2000s, yet another generation of rebels emerged in countries such as Nigeria, where marginalised groups struggled to gain better positions within national politics. These parochial rebels did not necessarily rebel against the state and were often patronised by local politicians.

Despite the changing motivations and different issues at play in these cases, non-state organisations that use violence can be classified into several broad categories (Box 2.2). The visibility of organisations is an obvious criterion. Some, like Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), operate clandestinely, while others operate openly even when they are in opposition to the state, such as the Libyan National Army (LNA). Violent organisations may also differ according to their motivations. Organisations driven by profit can use violence

to gain market share or expand their activities, whereas those motivated by values seek to impose an ideology, religion or ethnic identity through violent means (Price, 2019[4]). Most states involved in an active conflict in Africa support both a military and several militias, two types of overt organisations that put the aims of the state before profit, at least officially (Table 2.1).

This typology is particularly useful in distinguishing between two types of covert violent groups: criminal and terrorist organisations. Unlike criminal gangs, terrorist organisations are primordially motivated by values rather than profits, as the ultimate goal of a terrorist organisation is to change a political system to its advantage. As Hoffman (2017, p. 38[6]) argues, "the criminal is not concerned with influencing or affecting public opinion; he simply wants to abscond with his money or accomplish his mercenary task in the quickest and easiest way possible so that he may reap his reward and enjoy the fruits of his labors." Because they are value-driven, terrorist organisations typically promote a particular ideology or exclusive identity-based (religious or otherwise) interpretation. The potential risks and the lack of tangible profits for members of terrorist groups can make recruitment particularly challenging. Leaders of terrorist organisations must therefore develop a sense of shared ideological or identity-based struggle to attract and motivate rank-and-file members.

Box 2.2

Violent, radical or Islamist organisations?

This report uses several terms to refer to the organisations involved in politically violent events in North and West Africa.

Violent extremist organisations refer to illegal and covert organisations that advance their political agenda through violent means. These organisations include both rebel groups such as the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) and terrorist groups such as AQIM. The objective of some of these organisations is to institute an alternative political order guided by Islamic principles through violent means.

Violent Islamist organisations are those radical organisations in the region that promote a "vision of Islamic political order that rejects the legitimacy of the modern sovereign nation-state and seeks to establish a pan-Islamic polity or renewed caliphate." These organisations emphasise "violent struggle (jihad) as the primary or even the exclusively legitimate method for the pursuit of political change" (Mandaville, 2014, p. 330[5]). As explained in Chapter 3, 123 such organisations are identified in North and West Africa. These include Al Qaeda, the Islamic State, and their various regional affiliates and allies, Boko Haram and its avatars, numerous Libyan brigades and battalions, and some militias and explicitly violent Islamist organisations.

Source: Authors.

Table 2.1

Types of violent organisations according to visibility and motivation

	Profit-driven	**Value-driven**
Overt	Mercenaries	Militias Government forces
Covert	Criminal organisations	Terrorist organisations Secessionist ethnic rebels

Source: Adapted from Price, B.C. (2019[4]), *Targeting Top Terrorists: Understanding Leadership Removal in Counterterrorism Strategy*, Columbia University Press, New York.

A significant limitation of this classification, however, is to put terrorist organisations and secessionist ethnic rebel groups in the same category. There are clear distinctions between them and nowhere is this more evident than in the West African Sahel. In the region, the strategy and motivations of jihadist groups inspired by a Salafi ideology are fundamentally different from separatist or ethno-nationalist rebel movements. While secessionist rebel movements contest the legitimacy of particular governments or seek to create a new state for their ethnic group, they do so by acting within the general logic of the international state order. In contrast, jihadist organisations seek to dismantle the secular state and replace it with a model based on a strict interpretation of religion.

Unlike most secessionist rebel groups that seek more autonomy, independence or better access to national resources, jihadist groups are not motivated by gaining access to the legal command of the state but by imposing a social framework modelled upon a literal interpretation of religious texts. The most radical organisations are also little interested in engaging in a peace negotiation with the state, which they consider apostate and illegitimate (Thurston, 2018[7]). The very nature of jihadist organisations, therefore, poses an existential threat to African state elites, who have little to offer them.

Another limitation of the classification presented above is that the distinction between profit-driven and value-driven organisations builds on the overarching goal of violent organisations, and not on their actual means

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Box 2.3

Hezbollah and the crime-terrorism nexus

The "Party of God" (Ḥizbu'llāh) has been implicated in criminal activities on a global scale under the aegis of its External Security Organization and with the active or coerced support of the Lebanese Shiite diaspora in Europe, Africa, the Americas and Australia. Hezbollah's business logic has evolved from a reliance on Iran to diversification into drug, arms and human trafficking; cigarette smuggling; trading diamonds; counterfeiting goods and medications; money laundering; financial, credit card and passport fraud; sham marriages; and intellectual property crime.

A portion of the profits derived from these illicit activities is remitted to Hezbollah in southern Lebanon where they serve to finance social, religious and educational services, military resistance, and political activity among the Shiite community. Hezbollah's activities have extended to the United States, where fundraising cells are widely involved in criminal activities. From March 1996 to July 2000, for example, a network based in Charlotte, North Carolina, ran a criminal enterprise involving marriage and immigration fraud, procurement of dual-use technology, credit card fraud, and material support of a terrorist organisation. The network also operated a very lucrative cigarette-smuggling operation driven by differential tax rates between states.

Source: Leuprecht, C. et al. (2017[14]), "Hezbollah's global tentacles: A relational approach to convergence with transnational organised crime", *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 29/5, pp. 902–921.

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of existence. Terrorist organisations and rebel groups often engage in criminal activities for profit, leading several observers to speak of a nexus between transnational organised crime and terrorism (Miklaucic and Brewer, 2013[8]; Ruggiero, 2019[9]). For instance, the militant group Hezbollah has invested in a vast range of criminal activities around the world to support its military struggle in the Middle East (Levitt, 2013[10]) (Box 2.3). In West Africa, violent extremist organisations are also deeply involved in criminal activities, including protection rackets, robbery, people and arms trafficking, money laundering, smuggling and drug trafficking (Lacher, 2011[11]; Larémont, 2011[12]; de Tessières, 2018[13]).

In North Africa and the Sahel, one of the most lucrative criminal activities for covert groups has been kidnapping for ransom. Overall, the kidnapping industry in the Sahel may have generated at least USD 125 million from 2008 to 2014 (Callimachi, 2014[15]). While the exact amount of ransoms paid is difficult to assess due to the opacity of the negotiations and the number of intermediaries involved, this money has likely fuelled their international development, training and arms purchases. These revenues have also facilitated the development of alliances between AQIM and local leaders and made the recruitment

of combatants easier for extremist organisations. As Lacher (2015, p. 75[16]) explains, the ransoms "were the single most important factor behind the group's growth in northern Mali, and their eventual takeover during the conflict of 2012." The large amounts of cash paid by European governments also help to explain why the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) eventually split from AQIM after having kidnapped several tourists in south-western Algeria in 2011.

For these reasons, an additional factor that helps to distinguish between violent organisations is to compare their visibility (overt or covert) with their legality. Covert organisations, such as terrorists, criminals, gangs, traffickers and conspiracies, thrive by undermining the legitimacy of the state, exploiting the resources of the private sector, and weakening the capacity of civil society actors (Morselli, Giguère and Petit, 2007[17]; Van der Hulst, 2011[18]; Cunningham, Everton and Murphy, 2016[19]). Often called "dark networks" in reference to their covert and illegal nature (Gerdes, 2015[20]), these organisations must overcome collective-action problems that are not fundamentally different from those of other networks. On the one hand, they must cope with an uneven distribution of

Table 2.2

Types of violent organisations according to visibility and legality

	Legal	Illegal
Overt	Rwandan Patriotic Front	Liberia under Charles Taylor
Covert	Nigerian Intelligence Agency	Al Qaeda, Ansar Dine Cocaine trafficking

Source: Adapted from Milward, H. and J. Raab (2006[21]), "Dark networks as organizational problems: Elements of a theory", *International Public Management Journal*, Vol. 9/3, pp. 333–360 and Oliver, K. et al. (2014[22]), "Covert Networks: Structures, Processes, and Types", University of Manchester Mitchell Centre Working Paper.

assets, enforce trust and ideology, recruit and co-ordinate activities at a distance, disseminate decisions about goals, and distribute funds and resources. On the other hand, dark networks must remain concealed from authorities, which sets them apart from legal covert organisations and illegal overt organisations (Table 2.2). Consequently, direct communication between members needs to be restricted, weapons, explosives and financial assets must be moved without being detected by security agencies, and recruitment and training must be carried out in secret.

This approach to classification also has limitations, namely a reliance on the visible attributes of the organisations. In other words, while the nature and objectives of covert illegal organisations are typically well documented, far less is known about their operations, internal structures and connections to other similar organisations. While the formal attributes of such organisations matter, a significant part of their strength comes from their capabilities to connect people and places rather than from just their military might, technological advance or numerical size.

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN VIOLENT NON-STATE ORGANISATIONS

The diversity of violent non-state organisations is a significant part of the complexity of conflict in North and West Africa. Indeed, in most contemporary conflicts, states are confronted by a shifting set of overt, covert, value-driven, and illegal groups that are often interacting with each other, as well as with state forces. In general, this has led to a complicated and dynamic political milieu in the region where the relationships between non-state groups are characterised by shifting patterns of both co-operation and opposition. This section discusses the circumstances involved in these relationships, with an emphasis on what is known about the alliances and rivalries between non-state actors.

Alliances

While violent non-state organisations have been known to enter into partnerships with states, they are often reluctant to co-operate with other non-state groups. Non-state groups may see each other as potential competitors,

especially if seizing the state or achieving territorial control over a region is their primary goal. Beyond zero-sum thinking about long-term objectives, co-operative relations with other groups can bring additional risks to a group's daily activities. For instance, working with an ally can make violent organisations more vulnerable to communication interception by counter-terrorism agencies, while joint action with another organisation can also bring more attention and pressure from the state, create new enemies among other non-state groups, or introduce divisions over tactics and strategy. In some situations, however, violent organisations choose to develop alliances with each other to overcome individual group weaknesses and vulnerabilities (Moghadam, 2017[23]). While risky, co-operation with other organisations can help promote an ideology, co-ordinate actions and bring more resources. Larger coalitions can facilitate the exchange of tacit knowledge between violent organisations and contribute to expanding their social or geographical reach.

The theories and typologies developed so far to explain why violent organisations co-operate tend to rely on qualitative assessments of individual cases rather than on a structural approach to networks of alliances (Bacon, 2014[24]). According to Karmon (2005[25]), co-operation among (terrorist) groups can take at least three main forms. First, groups can share a similar ideology and reinforce their collaboration through official statements. Secondly, groups can support each other financially, or share material, propaganda, weapons, information and training. In the Sahara-Sahel, AQIM has supported Boko Haram with arms and training in the early 2010s, for example (Werenfels, 2015[26]). Thirdly, violent organisations can conduct joint operations and share intelligence prior to or during attacks against government or civilian targets. In 2014, for example, Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia kidnapped Mohamed bin Sheikh, the secretary of the Tunisian ambassador in Tripoli, in collaboration with Libyan jihadists.

Perhaps because violent organisations tend to spend more time fighting each other than building alliances, the effect of intergroup alliances on conflict outcomes is less documented than the impact of fragmentation (Bapat and Bond, 2012[27]; Horowitz and Potter, 2014[28]; Popovic, 2018[29]). Large-N studies show that alliances are associated with variables such as the ability to control territory, moderate group size (100–999 members) and religious motivation (Phillips, 2018[30]). Among terrorist groups in particular, alliances are more frequent between groups that share a similar ideology, age, adversaries and region, and have small numbers of fighters (Asal et al., 2016[31]).

While intergroup alliances may be somewhat unusual in most conflicts, interdependencies can provide valuable resources, such as intelligence sharing and tactical support that groups can use against a well-organised and capable government (Akcinaroglu, 2012[32]). In North and West Africa, for example, the merger of Ansar Dine, AQIM, al-Mourabitoun, and Katibat Macina in March 2017 has been interpreted as a strategic action to maximise economic resources (Weiss, 2017[33]). A study conducted on 600 groups in the world from 1987 to 2005 shows that

co-operation can help terrorist organisations survive, especially in more capable and more autocratic states (Phillips, 2014[34]). In conflict situations where an external party, such as a foreign military power, is capable of enforcing co-operation between warring parties that leads to a peace settlement, armed groups might have an interest in forming coalitions and aligning with the side they believe has the highest chance of winning the conflict (Christia, 2012[35]).

Although alliances between non-state groups may be useful in some circumstances, they may also be somewhat volatile over time. For instance, an agreement among actors can dissolve when conditions change, when a new opportunity for one group comes along or when a common enemy is defeated. When the French launched a military offensive in northern Mali in 2013, for example, fighters from Ansar Dine joined the MNLA or the newly created Islamic Movement of Azawad (IMA). A few months later, IMA integrated the new High Council for the Unity of Azawad (HCUA). During the same period, fighters of the MUJAO also created their own movement, the Arab Movement of Azawad (MAA), arguing that their goal was now to reach a peace agreement (Walther and Tisseron, 2015[36]).

The reasons why armed groups may co-operate for short durations are more frequently documented than the factors that could explain more persistent alliances. In conflict environments where non-state organisations proliferate, government forces, rebel groups and violent extremist organisations have numerous possibilities to forge longer-term alliances to advance their objectives. However, the literature has not yet explored such questions, and it is not clear what may motivate such choices.

One of the most promising approaches is the use of social network analysis to address this question, as illustrated by Gade, Hafez and Gabbay (2019[37]). The authors argue that agreements among non-state groups in civil wars are more likely if the groups share a common understanding of whom they are fighting for and against, of the intended post-conflict social, political and religious order and of their territorial aspiration. It is worth noting that these three elements form the foundations of ideology in

many value-driven organisations, which means that these types of groups may be more likely to form alliances. In addition to ideology, Gade, Hafez and Gabbay evaluate how the distribution of power between groups and state sponsorship inform alliance choices among rebels. Using the case of Syria, they find that the distribution of power between groups does not seem to be decisive in explaining alliances while having a common state sponsor does not encourage co-operation. Their study shows, however, that sharing a common ideological foundation prevents infighting by helping organisations recruit, co-ordinate action, enforce loyalty and prevent defection.

The fact that ideologically proximate organisations have a lower propensity for infighting than ideologically opposed ones in Syria is in line with other large-N studies that suggest that rebel groups who share a similar ideology are less prone to fragmentation (Fjelde and Nilsson, 2018[38]). However, the positive impact of ideology is only significant for leftist organisations, which are rare in North and West Africa, where the belief that Islam should guide all aspects of social and political life has led to a proliferation of Islamist organisations since at least the early 1980s.

Considering the importance of alliance formation in the resolution of conflict, there is a clear need for more research on the relational factors that can lead organisations to collaborate. This report contributes to filling this gap by documenting how the presence and duration of alliances among state and non-state actors evolve over time in North and West Africa.

Rivalries

In contrast with the current literature on co-operative relations among violent non-state organisations, a great deal is known about competition between such groups. Obviously, non-state actors operating in the same region can be operating from vastly different and incompatible agendas, which can lead to the development of hostile relations even when they have the same foes. For instance, in the Malian Tuareg rebellion of 2012, the efforts by MNLA to create an independent Tuareg state in northern Mali were initially supported by Ansar Dine.

However, the two groups ultimately ended up fighting each other over Ansar Dine's strict vision of imposing Islamic rule over the region. In this way, the incompatibility of ideology discussed in the previous section is a major factor that explains that such groups may actively oppose each other even while they also oppose a government.

Another major issue in the literature is that non-state groups can be quite unstable over time and are particularly prone to fragmenting or splitting into separate and often competing factions. Thus far, several reasons have been suggested to explain the seemingly constant propensity for groups to fragment (Asal, Brown and Dalton, 2012[39]). It has been shown, for example, that infighting is particularly high when rebel organisations are engaged in areas with drug cultivation, when they exercise effective territorial control beyond government reach and are numerically strong (Fjelde and Nilsson, 2012[40]). Rivalries between terrorist groups in the world have also been associated with competition over drug trafficking and state sponsorship as well as with ethnic differences, especially when operating within a civil conflict country (Phillips, 2018[30]).

While common, fragmentation among violent organisations is also risky, destructive and resource consuming. Internal divisions that lead to a group splitting tend to increase the potential for civil war because the multiplication of belligerents creates uncertainties as to what concessions could be made and what commitments could resolve a conflict through non-violent means (Cunningham, 2013[41]). A lack of intra-movement cohesion among rebel organisations also increases the level of violence directed against civilians who increasingly fall victim to rape, kidnapping, looting and murder (Metelits, 2009[42]). Fragmented groups are therefore more likely to resort to violence to achieve their political goals than unitary groups (Bakke, Cunningham and Seymour, 2012[43]; Cunningham, Bakke and Seymour, 2012[44]). A longitudinal analysis of terrorist incidents from 1970 to 1997 confirms that competition between religious and nationalist terrorist organisations leads to more violence (Nemeth, 2014[45]).

Considering the costs of fragmentation, one could wonder why violent organisations spend

Table 2.3

Factors that lead to fragmentation among violent organisations

Internal factors	External factors
Ideology: What are the ideological foundations of the organisation?	**State strength**: How capable is the state to counter the organisation?
Objectives, strategy and tactics: How should violence be used? Who is a legitimate enemy?	**State support**: Does the state support one party in the conflict?
Resources: What resources should be used to advance the organisation's agenda?	**State concession**: What can be won from the state?
Structure: How was the organisation structured before the conflict, and is it internally divided today?	**Foreign support**: Which external power supports the organisation?
Power: How is power distributed internally?	**Competition**: How much inter-organisational fighting is going on?
Size: How many organisations compete and how many fighters do they have?	**Battlefield performance**: How capable is the organisation militarily?

Source: Compiled from Staniland, P. (2014[47]), *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca; Bakke, K.M., Cunningham, K.G. and L.J.M. Seymour (2012[43]), "A plague of initials: Fragmentation, cohesion, and infighting in civil wars", *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 10/2, pp. 265–283; Gade, E.K., Hafez, M.M. and M. Gabbay (2019[37]), "Fratricide in rebel movements: A network analysis of Syrian militant infighting", *Journal of Peace Research*, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343318806940; Gartenstein-Ross, D. et al. (2019[48]), "When Jihadist factions split: A data-driven network analysis", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, pp. 1–25; Asal, V., Brown, M. and A. Dalton (2012[39]), "Why split? Organizational splits among ethnopolitical organizations in the Middle East", *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 56/1, pp. 94–117; Moghadam, A. and B. Fishman (eds.) (2011[49]), *Fault Lines in Global Jihad: Organizational, Strategic, and Ideological Fissures*, Routledge, New York.

such considerable amounts of time and resources fighting each other when they could be fighting the government (Nygård and Weintraub, 2015[46]). The many factors identified in the literature point to two complementary explanations. A first strand of literature tends to explain fragmentation in terms of internal issues. These self-inflicted wounds include such factors as diverse as competing ideologies, definition of objectives, access to resources, structural fault lines, distribution of power and size. Another strand of the literature explains the lack of cohesion among violent organisations in terms of external factors, most notably the counterinsurgency and counter-terrorism efforts developed by states, foreign support, competition with other organisations and battlefield performance (Table 2.3).

Internal factors of fragmentation

One of the most convincing frameworks that explains why violent organisations are divided internally can be found in *Fault Lines in Global Jihad*, written ten years after the 9/11 attacks (Moghadam and Fishman, 2011[49]). The authors argue that Al Qaeda, like many other violent organisations, is divided between several ideological streams that compete against each other.

Internal disputes in Al Qaeda also arose around the goals, strategy and tactics to be employed, particularly when it came to defining a common enemy and using violence against Muslim populations. Internal struggles have also centred on the generation and distribution of resources between Al Qaeda and its regional affiliates, such as AQIM in North and West Africa. Al Qaeda is also bitterly divided by internal disputes pertaining to the leadership structure of the organisation and the need to organise militants of different tribal or ethnic origins. Finally, Al Qaeda has struggled with how to exert power over a global network while maintaining a decentralised structure. Each of these factors is relevant to the North and West African violent organisations examined in this report.

Ideology

Ideology is a Janus-faced factor that can explain both fragmentation and cohesion among violent organisations. In North and West Africa and beyond, sharing a common Islamist ideology can hardly be seen as a factor of cohesion among violent organisations. The example of Al Qaeda and the Islamic State tends to suggest that shared ideology is not a sufficient condition for terrorist organisations to co-operate

(Moghadam, 2017[23]). Organisations with similar ideology often compete, and splits occur within ideologically like-minded groups. Conversely, groups with different ideology can co-operate when they have a common opponent. This is because ideologies such as communism, nationalism, or Islamism are large umbrellas under which both extremist and centrist organisations can operate (Hafez, 2020[50]). In the Middle East, the Shia militant group Hezbollah and the Sunni fundamentalist organisation Hamas, for example, have shared financial, symbolic and training resources against their common enemy, Israel (Price, 2019[4]).

Islamism is a divided ideology. While fundamentalists promote a literal interpretation of the Quran and the words and acts of Muhammad (Sunna) and strict adherence to religious law (sharia), they frequently disagree on the means to be adopted to advance their religious and political agenda. For example, the Salafi movement, which is the dominant form of Islamist activism in North and West Africa, is composed of several branches that compete against each other depending on whether they promote an extremist or centrist agenda. Members of the quietist branch, such as the Sufi orders in West Africa, have adopted a peaceful and non-political approach that stresses religious education and proselytising instead of political activism. This branch is increasingly challenged by an activist school that advocates for more direct yet non-violent involvement in political affairs, as the Muslim Brotherhood or the Ennahda Movement in Tunisia. At the other end of the spectrum, jihadist groups such as the Group for Supporting Islam and Muslims (Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wa-l-Muslimin, JNIM) seek to overthrow secular governments, cut their ties with the West and "purify" other Muslims, using violence.

Jihadist organisations share three ideological views that set them apart from other reform religious movements in North and West Africa (Ibrahim, 2017[51]). First, they see the world through the prism of a clash of religions and consider that it is the duty of all Muslims to confront the West and its local allies through military means and terrorist tactics. Second, jihadist organisations reject what they regard as anti-Islamic practices, such as Sufism, and Western-inspired institutions such as democracy, nation-states or modern education (Thurston, 2018[7]). Third, they see fellow Muslims who do not strictly adhere to a literal interpretation of the Quran and the Sunna as infidels who must abandon their religious practices or be eliminated.

Quietist, activist and jihadist Islamist organisation often compete in the same region. In Northern Nigeria and Niger, for example, traditional Sufi brotherhoods compete with more conservative Islamist movements, such as the Society for the Removal of Innovation and Re-establishment of the Sunna (Izala), which promotes a non-violent reformist agenda (McCullough et al., 2017[52]). The Izala movement rejects ostentation and expensive social obligations that prevent many entrepreneurs from enriching themselves, which make it especially popular among West African traders (Kuépié, Tenikue and Walther, 2016[53]). Izala members compete with the Salafi-Jihadist organisation Boko Haram, which emerged as a mass religious movement in Northern Nigeria in the early 2000s before transforming into one of the deadliest armed groups in the world (Thurston, 2018[7]). Its attacks have targeted Sufi and Salafi religious movements, the wider Muslim and Christian civilian population, and the Nigerian state, which the movement regards as corrupt and illegitimate.

Objectives and the use of violence

Fragmentation within non-state organisations often comes from disagreements over goals, strategy and tactics. The most controversial issues are those who relate to the use of violence. Disagreements over who constitutes a legitimate target and over mass destruction tactics and the killing of innocent Muslims explain major splits within violent organisations in the region. Of particular importance for the organisations fighting in North and West Africa is the controversial notion of *takfir* (or ex-communication) that determines who is a Muslim and who is an infidel, and specifies under what circumstances a Muslim can be killed. Violent organisations have different interpretations of *takfir* and therefore differ as to who can represent a legitimate target.

Significant differences in the use of violence have been observed in the last decades among violent organisations in North and West Africa.

Box 2.4
Abdelmalek Droukdel

Abdelmalek Droukdel (aka Abu Musab Abdel Wadoud) was born in 1970, in Meftah, Algeria. He attended the University of Blida where he studied mathematics. In 1993, Droukdel joined one of the armed groups participating in the Algerian Civil War, which had broken out in 1991. By the mid-1990s, he was part of the GIA, working as a bomb maker and then as a battalion leader (Droukdel, c. 2005[57]). He then joined the GIA breakaway called the GSPC, rising to become head of its Council of Notables in 2003. Droukdel was selected as the GSPC's leader in 2004 after the death of the previous emir, Nabil Sahraoui (New York Times, 2008[58]). In 2006, Droukdel pledged allegiance to Osama bin Laden and, the following year, renamed his organisation AQIM. Droukdel served as the emir of AQIM until he was killed by French soldiers in northern Mali on 3 June 2020.

Presumably operating mostly from Kabylia, Droukdel co-ordinated numerous attacks against the government and civilian targets in northern Algeria, such as the government palace and the criminal investigation department in Algiers in April 2007, or against United Nations (UN) officers and the Constitutional Court building in Algiers in December 2007. Droukdel and AQIM struggled, however, to sustain an effective campaign of violence within Algeria, and occasional spates of violence, as in 2011, did not seriously threaten the Algerian state.

Droukdel was more effective in overseeing an expansion of AQIM's activities into the Sahara-Sahel region. Yet he had recurring disputes with a key Saharan field commander, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, who broke away from AQIM in late 2012 before re-joining in 2015 (Callimachi, 2013[59]). Droukdel was unable to prevent splinter groups from developing their own terrorist and smuggling activities south of the Sahara (Chapter 1). In 2011, some components of AQIM split to form the MUJAO. Amid the northern Malian rebellion of 2012, AQIM supported and fought alongside the jihadist organisation Ansar Dine, led by Iyad ag Ghali. Ansar Dine, AQIM and MUJAO ruled northern Mali during roughly the second half of 2012. Droukdel ordered his fighters not to impose sharia law in occupied areas so harshly that it would scare off the local population. However, his orders were partly disregarded, and consequences that Droukdel warned of – namely a foreign intervention in Mali – came to pass. In 2017, several AQIM and Ansar Dine units formed JNIM, formally subordinate to Droukdel's authority. By the time of his death, however, Droukdel's influence may have been less than that of JNIM's leader, Iyad ag Ghali.

Source: Original text provided by Susanna Goewey and Alexander Thurston.

The Armed Islamic Group (GIA), which fought against the Algerian government during the civil war (1991–2002), is representative of the most violent approach (Hafez, 2020[50]). In addition to targeting the state and other Islamist groups such as the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), GIA used extreme violence against civilians, journalists and foreigners to achieve its goal of destroying the secular government and instituting an Islamic state governed by religious law (Martinez, 2000[54]). This hard-liner strategy caused massive desertion within GIA. While the Islamic Salvation Army (AIS) declared a unilateral ceasefire with the government in 1997, members of the GIA disillusioned with its policy of indiscriminate massacre created the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) in 1998.

In the 2010s, major disagreements around the use of violence opposed the leadership of AQIM established in northern Algeria and its Saharan units (Lacher, 2015[16]). While AQIM leader Droukdel advocated for the establishment of durable alliances with local tribes in northern Mali, regional leaders of AQIM, MUJAO and Ansar Dine, such as Mokhtar Belmokhtar and Abu Zaid, followed an opposite strategy characterised by violent confrontation with the local population and its traditional leaders (Siegel, 2013[55]). In a letter recovered by the Associated Press in Timbuktu in January 2013, Droukdel

Box 2.5
Mokhtar Belmokhar

Mokhtar Belmokhtar was born in 1972 in Ghardaïa, Algeria. In 1991, he relocated to Afghanistan where he fought against the communist regime of Mohammad Najibullah and met a number of jihadists. After the outbreak of the Algerian Civil War, Belmokhtar returned to his home country by 1993 (Wojtanik, 2015[60]). Upon his arrival, he formed the Martyr's Brigade that would be eventually absorbed by the GIA. His unit was responsible for most operations across the Sahara and was primarily financed through kidnappings, cigarette smuggling, and the weapons and drug trade.

When the GIA began to crumble, Belmokhtar as commander for Zone 9 (southern Algeria) helped form the GSPC. As one of the leaders of the GSPC, Belmokhtar was in control of a large portion of the Algerian desert but quickly moved to widen his control to northern Mali, Mauritania and Niger. He built ties to influential local communities through marriage, economic arrangements and diplomatic outreach. Belmokhtar was crucial in attracting Mauritanian and Malian recruits, in particular, to the GSPC (Ould M. Salem, 2014[61]).

Belmokhtar helped facilitate connections between the GSPC and Al Qaeda, paving the way for the GSPC's transformation into AQIM in 2006–07. He hosted an Al Qaeda envoy to the Sahara and Algeria in 2000–01, and Belmokhtar's 2005 attack on a military outpost in Lemgheity in Mauritania garnered the praise of Osama bin Laden. During his time with AQIM, Belmokhtar had a role in many of the group's hostage negotiations involving foreigners (Wojtanik, 2015[60]). Yet Belmokhtar had recurring tensions with AQIM emir Abdelmalek Droukdel, as well as with another prominent AQIM Saharan field commander, Abdelhamid Abu Zaid.

Belmokhtar participated in the 2012 jihadist takeover of northern Mali but had bitter disputes with Droukdel and Abu Zaid during that same period. In late 2012, Belmokhtar broke with AQIM, making his unit al-Mulathamun (The Veiled Men) independent, though still loyal to Al Qaeda central. Al-Mulathamun joined forces with the MUJAO in August 2013 to form al-Mourabitoun. One of their attacks of note was conducting one of the worst hostage crises in decades on an Algerian gas plant, which would result in the death of 38 people. Belmokhtar and al-Mourabitoun re-joined AQIM in late 2015. In November 2016, Belmokhtar was targeted in a French airstrike in Libya. AQIM never confirmed his death, but he has not been seen in public since.

Source: Original text provided by Susanna Goewey and Alexander Thurston.

urged his Saharan lieutenants and the leader of Ansar Dine, Iyad ag Ghali, to cultivate local support to resist a foreign military intervention (Associated Press, 2013[56]). He criticised their decision to declare an Islamic State in Azawad, to enforce religious law by force and complained about the destruction of the Timbuktu shrines, which were strongly condemned by the international community. Droukdel also opposed the decision to terminate the strategic alliance forged with the MNLA that would have provided additional military strength and local legitimacy to the jihadists (Box 2.4 and Box 2.5).

In recent years, controversies on the use of violence against civilians have also contributed to dividing Boko Haram, the jihadist organisation active in the Lake Chad region. Founded by Mohammed Yusuf around 2002, the group has historically been led by two deputies, Abubakar Shekau and Mamman Nur, and a close associate, Khalid al-Barnawi (Campbell and Page, 2018[62]). After Nigerian government forces killed Yussuf in custody in 2009, Nur and al-Barnawi broke with Shekau to establish Ansaru, a group that targeted Christians and security forces. The use of indiscriminate violence against civilians by Shekau is one of the many factors that has motivated this split. In 2016, disagreement within the Boko Haram leadership over the killings of civilians led to yet another split within the organisation (Thurston, 2018[7]). In August, the Islamic State announced that it had appointed Abu-Musab

al-Barnawi as the new leader of the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), the name adopted by Boko Haram since March 2015 under the leadership of Shekau. The organisation split between a faction supporting the newly appointed Barnawi and a faction supporting Shekau, who referred to his group as Jama'at Alhul Sunnah Lidda'wati wal Jihad, the name previously adopted by Boko Haram until it pledged allegiance to the Islamic State (Zenn, 2019[63]).

Far and near enemy

Another central point of contention within violent organisations is whether they should target local regimes, which they see as corrupt and apostates, or their international allies, such as the United States, France and Israel. The debate around the near and far enemies of Islam is as old as the Salafi-Jihadist ideology. In the late 1970s, Mohammed Abdelsalam Faraj, the Egyptian leader of the Islamist group al-Jihad involved in the assassination of Anwar Saddat argued that the jihadist movement should target the near enemy represented by political regimes in the Muslim world rather than focusing on Israel, the far enemy (Brooke, 2011[64]). Faraj thought that the establishment of a caliphate in the countries ruled by secular regimes was a precondition to the (re)conquest of Israel.

Other Islamist thinkers strongly contested this vision and argued that jihadists around the world were part of a broader fight that aimed at reconquering Israel and expelling non-Muslims from Muslim countries. The main proponents of this internationalist approach were Osama Bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, who published a legal opinion (*fatwa*) known as the "International Islamic Front for Jihad on the Jews and Crusaders" in 1998. The *fatwa* indicates that the killing of civilian and military Americans and their allies "is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it, in order to liberate the al-Aqsa Mosque and the holy mosque [Mecca] from their grip, and in order for their armies to move out of all the lands of Islam" (Bin Laden et al., 1998[65]). The new focus given by Bin Laden and al-Zawahiri on the far enemy and its expanded definition to the United States provoked major disputes with Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, Abdullah Yusuf Azzam and the

Taliban, who advocated a much more localised jihad in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Despite strong resistance, Al Qaeda played an important role in re-orienting the nationalist orientation of many local Islamist groups, at least officially. These local franchises opportunistically used the Al Qaeda brand to attract international recognition. The Algerian Civil War provides a good illustration of these shifts. When the war started in 1991, Islamist groups initially targeted state security personnel (the local enemy) but, as the violence intensified in the 1990s, internal struggles within Islamist groups over the definition of the enemy rose rapidly (Le Sueur, 2010[66]). Within GSPC, leaders such as Hassan Hattab wanted to target state representatives and develop a national agenda. In contrast, others wanted to expand the fight to the far enemy, particularly France, as Al Qaeda recommended. Nabil Sahrawi eventually replaced Hattab in 2003, who joined the national reconciliation programme in 2005. GSPC changed its name to AQIM in 2007 under the leadership of Abdelmalek Droukdel and declared its intention to attack American and European targets.

In recent years, the debate on the primacy of the near or far enemy has been obscured by the fact that Western countries have intervened militarily in Muslim countries, and have paradoxically become much closer to Salafi-Jihadists movements than before. In the Middle East and Afghanistan, the United States and other Western countries such as France can now be seen both as a near and far enemy by violent organisations. Therefore, there is a need to distinguish between the intended impact of an attack and its actual geographic location. Both can be near or far (OECD/SWAC, 2020[67]). Violent organisations that target the far enemy do not necessarily have to carry out attacks far away from their home countries. They can choose to target individuals or interests locally, by taking hostages or attacking bars, restaurants and hotels frequented by foreigners. While armed groups may direct their propaganda against the far enemy, their immediate attacks may be much more limited geographically.

Some attacks may target local regimes (near enemy) and be intended to produce near impacts. In a region where extremist organisations have

rarely developed a global agenda and have limited organisational and military means, this pattern characterises the vast majority of violent organisations. An example is when Islamist militants of Boko Haram kill representatives of the Nigerian state and Christian populations in the Lake Chad region. Near-enemy attacks can also be conducted in order to bring about change in foreign or global politics. This occurs when terrorist groups attack facilities owned or operated by Westerners, such as the Radisson Blu Hotel attack in Bamako in 2015 by AQIM and al-Mourabitoun.

Militants can also choose far-enemy targets to induce change in local politics. In the early 2000s, for example, GSPC kidnapped 32 European tourists in the Sahara, in order to bring resources to a movement that was essentially targeting the Algerian government. The ransom paid by European governments substantially helped the GSPC to expand its operations south of the Sahara. Finally, militants can conduct far-enemy attacks intending far impacts to strike at the heart of Western countries while maximising the global audience. While spectacular, these attacks are rare, because none of the regional franchises of Al Qaeda and the Islamic State in North and West Africa has the ability to conduct military operations far from their homeland.

Resources

The availability and distribution of resources is another popular explanation for the rivalries observed within violent organisations, particularly when these resources can help fight central governments (Fjelde and Nilsson, 2012[40]). In the Sahara-Sahel, where most of the resources come from the ability to move people and goods rather than from localised industrial production (Retaillé and Walther, 2013[68]), the lucrative business of trafficking drugs and arms has become a source of versatile conflicts and alliances, which transcend political and religious boundaries between groups (Walther and Tisseron, 2015[36]). Money flows generated by trafficking explain many episodes of violence between armed groups that compete for control of key trans-Saharan roads. Rebel groups, traffickers and terrorist organisations have increasingly targeted artisanal mines in eastern Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, where mining has intensified since the early 2010s due

to the discovery of new goldfields (International Crisis Group, 2019[69]).

Occasionally, groups forge alliances of convenience in order to conduct their business and maintain their influence. Two such deals took place between northern businesspersons and warlords in the commune of Anéfis, Mali in October 2015 and 2017, with the aim of keeping smuggling routes open and diminishing competition among traffickers (International Crisis Group, 2018[70]). Local traffickers and political leaders negotiate such deals in parallel with peace negotiations with the Malian state and its international backers. Yet, there are reasons to believe that the extent of the drug-terror nexus has often been exaggerated in the region (Lacher, 2013[71]). First, politically motivated organisations affiliated with Al Qaeda and the Islamic State have not transformed into criminal groups overnight. Their Islamist rhetoric is deeply embedded in their history and does not appear as a mere cover for their criminal activities (Boeke, 2016[72]). Second, jihadist organisations are not the only ones involved in trafficking in the region: state officials, militias, rebel groups and nomadic tribes also participate actively in the circulation of drugs and weapons across the Sahara (Strazzari, 2015[73]). A recent United Nations report (2018[74]) notes, for example, that drug traffickers from eastern Mali used Islamist organisations, pro-government militias and separatist groups for security purposes before the French-led intervention of 2013. Ever since the Accord for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali emanating from the Algiers process was signed in 2015, drug traffickers have sought protection from the signatory armed groups rather than terrorist organisations "in order to be less exposed" and benefit from their legitimacy (United Nations, 2018, p. 33[74]).

Structure

Fragmentation is exacerbated by structural factors that pertain to how each organisation and individual actors within them are tied to each other (Gartenstein-Ross et al., 2019[48]). The need to find a balance between efficiency and security has led violent organisations to adopt a variety of structures. Some organisations such as the Mafia in the United States or the Provisional Irish

Republican Army (IRA) in Northern Ireland have opted for a rather centralised structure in which decisions and resources flow from the top down. These structures are theoretically more efficient than decentralised ones but are also less resilient to threats, which explains why they are particularly rare. Instead, most criminal and terrorist organisations tend to adopt a decentralised structure built around independent cells that are unlikely to compromise the entire structure if destroyed, and loose hierarchies where great autonomy is granted to regional commanders (Price, 2019[4]). Decentralised networks in which individual cells are relatively independent of the core include such diverse organisations as the Islamic State or the local franchises of Al Qaeda in Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. Their relative lack of formal hierarchy makes them difficult to dismantle but also much more challenging to co-ordinate than centralised networks.

The balance between efficiency and security is frequently the source of significant tensions within violent non-state organisations, which are often bitterly split between those who emphasise greater co-ordination and those who prefer decentralised units. Extant research has focused on two important factors. First, studies focusing on intragroup dynamics suggests that the internal structure of warring groups is central to explaining the trajectories of insurgent groups (Staniland, 2014[47]). Social ties forged before and during war make violent organisations more cohesive and less prone to factionalisation. They also facilitate recruitment and allegiance during conflicts. Second, research has shown that extremist organisations were often bitterly divided by ethnic, tribal and national fault lines that crippled their growth and prevented their transnational expansion (Moghadam and Fishman, 2011[49]).

In that respect, pastoralist societies are particularly prone to fragmentation, a principle highlighted by structural anthropologist Evans-Pritchard (1940[75]), who noted that factions of the same order tended to attack each other, while they united against factions of a superior order. For example, in a society divided into tribes and factions, two factions belonging to the same tribe would attack each other but ally with one another against another tribe. More generally, many conflicts within North

and West African violent organisations reflect tribal, regional and social divisions. The Tuareg, a nomadic society that thus far has been unable to unite at the national or supranational level despite sharing a common linguistic and cultural heritage, provide a good example of this structural principle.

The Tuareg society is divided between several groups defined according to social status and racial categories: noble warriors (*imajeghen*), religious scholars (*ineslemen*), dependents or vassals (*imghad*), craftsmen (*inadan*) and former slaves (*iklan*) (Lecocq and Klute, 2019[76]). All but the craftsmen and the former slaves are perceived to be racially white. Noble tribes, such as the Ifoghas, have conflicting relationships with vassal tribes, other noble tribes from other regions, and with former slaves, also called *bellah* locally. These conflictual relationships were exacerbated during the 1990 rebellion in Mali, during which former slaves took arms against their former masters (Lecocq, 2005[77]). The Popular Liberation Front of Azawad (FPLA) and the Revolutionary Army for the Liberation of the Azawad (ARLA) represented lower social strata while the Peoples Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MPLA) represented nobility. Similar divisions marked the 2012 Tuareg rebellion: MNLA, Ansar Dine and HCUA represented the Ifoghas nobles while the Imghad Tuareg Self-Defense Group and Allies (GATIA) militia of General El Hadj ag Gamou represented the vassals (Box 2.6). Other fault lines include wealth differentials between individuals enriched by the trafficking business and those whose livelihood has been destroyed by repeated droughts and the collapse of the tourist industry. Finally, bitter disputes oppose the chiefs who had allied with the government since the rebellion of 1963 to preserve their privileges and unemployed young men who came back from Algeria and Libya in the 1990s (Lecocq, 2004[78] and OECD/SWAC, 2020[67]).

In addition to structural factors, fragmentation can also be explained by more mundane factors such as dissatisfaction with leadership, managerial issues, perception of incompetence or corruption (Asal, Brown and Dalton, 2012[39]). The letters exchanged between radical leaders and their subordinates as well as the documents recovered during raids against them usually

Box 2.6

Opportunistic shifts in Mali and Niger

The recent history of the Sahel provides many examples of opportunistic actors who do not hesitate to pass from the ranks of the army to the rebellion, from the rebellion to religious extremists, and from religious extremist groups to the rebellion or pro-government groups, if circumstances are favourable.

Iyad ag Ghali, the current leader of JNIM, is a case in point. Born in a noble Tuareg tribe of the Kidal region in Mali, ag Ghali fought as a mercenary in the Foreign Legion of the late Colonel Gaddafi in the 1980s and as a rebel in his own country in the 1990s. In the early 2000s, ag Ghali then worked as a negotiator for the Malian government in a hostage release and was appointed as a diplomat in Saudi Arabia in 2008. Having established ties with Islamists, he returned to Mali, unsuccessfully tried to take the lead of the secessionist MNLA movement before founding Ansar Dine, a jihadist group that merged with other radical groups in 2017 to form JNIM (Walther and Christopoulos, 2015[79]).

A similar trajectory characterises the career of Brigadier General El Hadj ag Gamou, who comes from a vassal Tuareg tribe near Menaka, in eastern Mali. Ag Gamou started his career as a foreign fighter in the Foreign Legion in 1980 where he met ag Ghali. He took part in the conflicts in Syria, Libya and Lebanon before returning to Mali in 1988. There, he joined the Tuareg rebellion of the early 1990s as part of the FPLA before integrating into the Malian army. During the latest rebellion, ag Gamou took part in the fight against the MNLA and the Islamist groups. He created his own militia in 2014 while still a member of the Malian army.

Other cases are well documented. In Niger, Aghaly Alambo started as a rebel within the Niger Movement for Justice (NMJ) before becoming the advisor to the President of the National Assembly (Grégoire, 2013[80]). In Mali, the jihadist Oumar Ould Hamaha successively belonged to AQIM, Ansar Dine and MUJAO before being killed by French forces in the north of the country in 2014 (Boeke, 2016[72]). Another example of shifting allegiance is Assalat ag Habi, a senior Malian officer and former rebel who defected from the army in 2011, joined the MNLA and founded the Movement for the Salvation of Azawad (MSA) (Desgrais, Guichaoua and Lebovich, 2018[81]). A few weeks after being arrested by French soldiers, the former police chief of MUJAO, Yoro Ould Daha, was released by the Malian government and joined a pro-government faction of the MAA (Walther and Tisseron, 2015[36]).

Source: Original text provided by Olivier Walther.

provide a rare glimpse into these internal struggles (Associated Press, 2013[56]). An appealing example from Sub-Saharan Africa is the creation of Ansar Dine in December 2011. The split occurred as a result of the competition for leadership within the Tuareg rebellion. The leaders of the newly founded MNLA refused to appoint Iyad ag Ghali as the new secretary-general of the secessionist movement because they feared that he would be too close to Algeria and too extreme in his Islamist views (Bencherif and Campana, 2017[82]). In reaction, ag Ghali offered his services to AQIM, who ultimately encouraged him to create his own movement, Ansar Dine.

Power[1]

The distribution of power is frequently the source of major disputes within violent organisations. For some authors inspired by neorealist structuralism, power considerations rather than identity and ideology drive the formation and fracturing of rebel alliances (Christia, 2012[35]). Fragmentation results from deliberate calculations rather than a complex set of causal mechanisms that may be outside the control of the individual organisations and their leaderships. Rebel organisations fight to establish or embed themselves in a "minimum winning coalition" possessing "enough aggregate power to win the conflict, but with as few partners as possible so that the group can maximise its share

of post-war political control" (Christia, 2012, p. 240[35]).

As a reaction against the tendency to regard armed rebel movements as coherent challengers to the state, Bakke, Cunningham and Seymour (2012[43]) propose an interpretation of rebellions as being comprised of a shifting set of actors who share a central identity but may also engage in malleable allegiances and possess diametrically opposing interests. Consequently, the organisations that constitute a movement will all claim to share the same overarching identity but will also possess and pursue their own particular interests. It is in this nexus between common purposes of the movement and private interests of its constituent organisations that fragmentation occurs. As organisations compete for leadership and influence among the same constituency, dual contests within a movement can lead to infighting.

Bakke, Cunningham and Seymour (2012[43]) suggest that three related variables can explain internal divisions. The first variable is the number of organisations. Although the existence of many organisations within a movement suggests a multitude of internal differences, numerically fragmented movements may still be internally balanced if they manage to pursue their collective interests in concert. Conversely, a rebellion consisting of only two organisations may suffer from conflicts of interest and strategy, which may lead to infighting between two competing centres of gravity.

The second variable that affects the overall level of fragmentation is the level of institutionalisation that exists between the organisations. Cohesive movements have durable institutional links that tie the organisations together and co-ordinate their behaviour. In contrast, fragmented movements lack the networks that make co-ordinated military and political action possible. Overarching institutional structures such as intra-organisational alliances, central committees and practices of co-ordination with exiled rebels have a cohesive effect on the entire movement. They require that the institutional structures possess breadth and depth to produce political synchronisation, co-ordinate strategic efforts and constrain the actors included in the institutional framework.

The third variable is how power is distributed within the rebellion. The risk of fragmentation rises when power is dispersed across numerous organisations as it opens up windows of opportunity for individual factions to pursue their own interests. The risk of fragmentation decreases in rebellions dominated by one hegemonic organisation, as the ability of subordinate organisations to affect the collective goals of the rebellion is limited.

In summary, a rebellion will be extremely fragmented if it consists of numerous organisations with weak or no interconnecting institutional links and if power is dispersed among the groups. In contrast, a rebellion will be extremely cohesive if it consists of few organisations tied together by strong institutional links and if power is concentrated in one hegemonic organisation (Walther and Pedersen, 2020[83]).

External factors of fragmentation

Divisions within violent organisations are also reinforced by external factors pertaining to their relationships to the state and to other non-state actors (Seymour, Bakke and Cunningham, 2016[84]). Rebel groups often fight each other instead of forming coalitions when the government lacks repressive power. In Ethiopia's Eritrea and Tigray Provinces, for example, rivalries increased when insurgent groups saw expansion opportunities and faced relatively weaker rivals, including the government (Pischedda, 2018[85]). Counterinsurgency and counterterrorism efforts frequently lead violent organisations to split, either because a faction of the militants decides to surrender or adopts a more peaceful approach to conflict. During the Algerian Civil War, for example, the government of Abdelaziz Bouteflika offered armed Islamist militants the option to take advantage of a new amnesty law or be mercilessly killed by the government.

While peace negotiations are usually favourable to the creation of new coalitions, the signature of peace accords frequently leads to the fragmentation of armed groups. In 1991, for example, peace accords with the Tuareg rebellion were generally followed by internal divisions according to tribal lines (Walther and Tisseron, 2015[36]). Internally divided movements are also

more likely to receive concessions from the state than unitary ones because states often "divide and concede" rather than "divide and conquer" (Cunningham, 2011[86]). In the Sahara-Sahel, states have often encouraged these trends by integrating former rebels into the state apparatus, either in the military or in the government. In Niger, Rhissa ag Boula became an advisor to President Mahamadou Issoufou in 2011 after having played a key role in the 1990–95 and 2007–09 Tuareg rebellions. Other examples of former rebels appointed to government jobs include Aghaly Alambo, who became an advisor to the President of the National Assembly; Mohamed Anako, who presided the Regional Council of Agadez; Rhissa Feltou, the mayor of Agadez; and Issoufou ag Maha, the mayor of Tchirozérine (Grégoire, 2013[80]).

This strategy has been so successful that, for some rebel movements, the objective of the war is not so much to challenge the authority of the state than to claim better access to its resources. Nowhere is this more obvious than in Mali, where alliances between armed groups have been motivated by future political dividends (Desgrais, Guichaoua and Lebovich, 2018[81]). Rebels of the MNLA and other factions have artificially inflated the number of combatants that could be demobilised in order to provide steady jobs to their members in the Malian army. Rebels who had fled the Malian army and fought against it have even demanded that health benefits and salary arrears be paid and that rank progression and privileges during desertion be considered prior to their reintegration into the army (United Nations, 2018[74]).

Internal divisions also arise when states increase or withdraw their support to violent organisations, which they can use as proxies to fight wars within their own territory or abroad. For example, the First and Second Congo Wars were characterised by numerous rebel groups that were supported by neighbouring governments, including Angola, Rwanda and Uganda (Prunier, 2008[87]). Tracing the arc of the Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie (RCD) during the Second Congo War is illustrative. Following the overthrow of Mobutu Sese Seko in 1997, the RCD was the primary proxy force for both Rwanda and Uganda operating against the Congolese government. However, the RCD split in 1999 into two competing factions as the two supporting governments found themselves at odds over who would have full control over the RCD and over valuable and exploitable resources in the Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. The relations between the competing RCD factions mirrored the deterioration in the partnership between Rwanda and Uganda and led to open fighting in 1999 and 2000. Although not the only reason for the fragmentation of the RCD, it is also impossible to discuss the split fully without understanding the role of state sponsorship at the time.

This dynamic is present in wars outside the region as well. For instance, the case of the Syrian Civil War clearly shows how foreign support can cause significant divisions within violent organisations. Since its inception, the rebel movement in Syria has faced internal divisions and outright infighting along fault lines of religious extremism, political ideology and power struggles between rivals (Lister, 2015[88]). The Saudi-Qatari rivalry, for example, undermined the Supreme Military Council, an effort to provide a cohesive command structure for the Free Syrian Army (FSA), itself the major umbrella for so-called "mainstream" Syrian rebels (Walther and Pedersen, 2020[83]). While the Saudi government funded secularist groups, the Qatari government funded primarily Islamist groups. With different potential international backers to please, the number of groups proliferated, and the internal cohesion of the FSA diminished. Similarly, the United States and Turkish governments caused divisions among the FSA over the issue of co-operation with the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG). While the United States pressed its allies in both the FSA and the YPG to co-operate to fight the Islamic State under the umbrella of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), Turkey rejected any partnership of its FSA allies with the Kurdish YPG (Barfi, 2016[89]). Instead, Turkish forces co-operated with and funded some FSA groups to fight the SDF.

Extant studies on third-part interventions and civil wars focus on their impact on the outcome and duration of conflicts (Findley and Marineau, 2015[90]), primarily by conceiving of the civil war itself as a two-actor model (government vs. armed group). Foreign interventions in

civil wars can either be biased if they support one belligerent over the other, or unbiased otherwise. Generally, studies argue that biased third-party interventions help to shorten wars by tipping the domestic balance of power significantly to one side, while unbiased interventions tend to stagnate the conflict by stabilising the balance of power (Balch-Lindsay and Enterline, 2000[91]; Regan, 2002[92]). From 1816 to 1997, for example, third-party intervention on behalf of the government or the opposition tended to increase the likelihood of a negotiated settlement, while interventions that bolstered both the government and opposition led to longer conflict (Balch-Lindsay, Enterline and Joyce, 2008[93]).

The security outcomes of foreign interventions are still disputed. Recent research conducted at the world level since the end of the Cold War suggests that UN peacekeeping operations mitigate both the impact of fragmentation on conflict duration and intensity, by making conflict shorter and preventing battle deaths (Ari and Gizelis, 2020[94]). In Sub-Saharan Africa, where former colonial powers have intervened repeatedly since the 1960s (OECD/SWAC, 2020[67]), the military interventions launched to protect civilian populations and/or fight against extremist organisations have often led to a militarisation of local

politics that encourages authoritarian regimes, to present themselves as the guarantors of international security (Schmidt, 2018[95]).

Other studies eschew the balance of power framework and approach civil wars instead as a series of negotiations between rational actors who nevertheless have only incomplete information about their opponents and the conflict in general (Filson and Werner, 2002[96]; Slantchev, 2003[97]; Smith and Stam, 2004[98]; Walter, 2009[99]). Events, such as battles, serve to "update" actors' information about their own capabilities and those of other actors. Theoretically, complete knowledge of all actor's capabilities would lead to settlement of the conflict through a greater willingness to negotiate. Since interventions can update the incomplete information known by the actors, this literature finds that interventions decrease the duration of civil wars. Cunningham (2006[100], 2010[101]) argues, however, that because interventions increase the number of actors involved in a conflict, they should tend to lengthen civil wars. More actors means a greater risk of information asymmetries and more alliances that could shift. It also introduces a smaller range of acceptable terms for conflict resolution since more parties have demands they want met.

EXPLORING HOW NETWORKS AFFECT CONFLICT COMPLEXITY

It is undeniable that current conflicts in North and West Africa are characterised by complexity in several forms. One key element of this complexity is the involvement of numerous and varied non-state violent organisations in conflicts. Several typologies of non-state organisations have been proposed (overt/covert, value-driven/profit-driven, legal/illegal) to help to highlight key differences between the groups operating in the region. These typologies are useful in identifying why value-based organisations, such as secessionist rebels or jihadist terrorists, pose intractable problems for states as their political goals can threaten the territorial integrity or the overall existence of the state in a way that differs from profit-driven organisations, like mercenary armies. These typologies are also useful as they help to illuminate the limits of what can

be known for scientific inquiry of such conflicts. Many of the groups operating in the region are largely covert and illegal, which diminishes the potential for reliable observations of a group's characteristics, such as the number of members or the resources available to them.

Another key element to the complexity of conflicts in the region is the various relationships that violent non-state organisations develop with states and with each other. Because these organisations are often challenging states in the region, there can be incentives for them to work together in pursuit of their goals, even on a temporary or ad hoc basis. However, relatively little is practically known about this aspect of conflict, despite prominent examples of such co-operation in Mali and elsewhere. Much more attention has been given to developing the reasons why

non-state organisations would oppose each other, including factors that have both to do with the internal workings of an organisation and the external circumstances each organisation encounters. Further, the dynamics of both types of relationships, co-operative and oppositional, have been unexplored. This means little is known about which type of relation predominates or how stable these relations may be over time. In sum, the crucial relational element of the complexity of conflicts in the region has not been fully explored.

While many of these details of violent non-state organisations are typically obscured, their actions and effects are not. The attacks they undertake in the pursuit of their goals are well documented in both time and space, and this information can be used to leverage new insights into how different types of organisations relate to the state and each other. To accomplish this requires concepts and methods that focus on the relationships between these organisations, rather than on their various attributes or characteristics, and a set of robust data on the actions they undertake toward each other. This study adopts just such a relational approach using social network analysis to a regional-wide multi-year dataset on attacks initiated by these groups toward other organisations.

While significant gaps remain in the literature on the complexity of conflict involving violent non-state organisations, this study also embraces the clear need to contextualise these issues within the region. Sensitivity to context is applied by mapping how violent organisations are embedded within a larger network of alliances and rivalries. It is also done by recognising the importance of both a geographic and temporal perspective as well. Many of the topics discussed in this chapter have an underlying geography to them, which can in turn lead to spatially uneven outcomes depending on the location or setting in which an organisation primarily operates.

For example, while the ideology of an organisation may transcend a specific place or region, such as Islamic extremism, many organisations develop an amalgam of a "global" ideology adapted to specific local, regional or national conditions. Further, any relationships undertaken by violent non-state organisations are unlikely to remain permanent over time. Taken together, this requires ongoing consideration of questions of where and when relationships are undertaken, in addition to the more fundamental questions about who is co-operating with or is in opposition to whom. These approaches and the ideas behind them are discussed further in Chapter 3.

The complexity of today's conflict is also reinforced by external military interventions, which often have a broad impact on the patterns of alliances and rivalries between state forces, rebel groups and violent extremist organisations. Despite recent progress in the conflict literature, the impact of foreign interventions on alliances and rivalries between non-state organisations has rarely been examined formally. One of the objectives of this report is to contribute to filling this gap by adopting a more structural and systematic approach to networks of conflicts. Building on the principles of network analysis, this study assumes that the introduction of a new actor such as an intervening power is likely to alter the balance of power in the conflict environment, potentially leading to more, or less, violence. The outcome of the intervention depends on the relationships between the intervening power and the belligerents as much as on the relationships between the belligerents themselves. The policy implications of this study are quite evident. Understanding the structural consequences of a military intervention is not only crucial for external powers who hesitate to intervene in a conflict, but also for those who are forced to evaluate their contribution after several years of military intervention in a foreign country, as in the Sahel today.

Notes

1 This section builds on Walther and Pedersen (2020[83]) with the authorisation of the authors.

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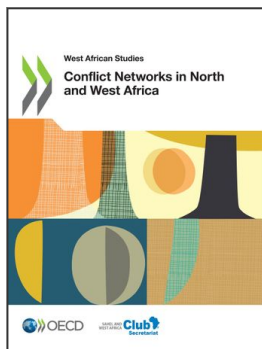
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