



African Security Report

Mapping conflict, violence and extremism in Africa

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Trends in instability and armed conflict in Africa.

When considering levels of conflict in a country or indeed globally, it is important to consider population size. A more crowded world is inevitably more turbulent, particularly in those regions with large cohorts of young people without jobs or prospects. It can therefore be expected that a world with 7.2 billion people (the estimate for 2016) will have more deaths as a result of armed conflict than a world with only 3 billion people (the global population in 1960).

An important reason for this historical increase of conflict is the division of the world into stable and unstable territorial states with defined and sometimes questioned international boundaries. This and the political issues it causes largely explains the upsurge in deaths from armed conflict.

Attempts to change borders such as the current dispute between Russia and the Ukraine or between Ethiopia and Eritrea some years ago, still happen but are relatively rare. Since borders are largely set, most armed conflicts today are internal rather than between states. An example of the violent impact of efforts to redefine borders can currently be seen in conflicts in Iraq and Syria where the Islamic state is challenging the status quo ante.

Taking a shorter historical view of Africa: during the period 1989 to 2015, i.e. from the end of the Cold War, Africa's population almost doubled, increasing by an estimated 89% (or by 546 million people) to 1 159 million. In 1989, Africa had 12% of the world's population and 39% of its armed-conflict incidents. by 2014 Africa had 16% of the world's population and 52% of the world's armed-conflict incidents, a hefty increase from just 40% the previous year.

While armed conflict globally appears to be declining when compared to population size, other types of violence especially in Africa follow a different trend. Certainly, the rise of social media and the 24-hour news cycle show a world in turmoil. The ever-present camera, now on every smart phone, ensures the global circulation of graphic images of war and conflict. Social media accentuate this view by conveying intense personal views, emotions and observations that are recycled globally.

This trend is vitally important in the case of violent Islamic extremism. Al-Qaeda and the Islamic state, Boko Haram and Al-Shabab the four best known global brands, are dependent on relaying violence porn through mainstream media (e.g. television), social media (e.g. Twitter, YouTube and Facebook) and the World Wide Web for their growth and reputation.

In a world where war between countries is seldom officially declared and where the nature of organised violence has changed, the dividing line between armed conflict, organised crime and extremist political violence/terrorism has become blurred.

In the last five years Africa has seen a dramatic increase in conflict-related political and insurgent events thus broadly accompanied by a fourfold increase in fatalities. Events in Angola, the democratic republic of Congo (DRC) and Sierra Leone previously dominated, in 2014/2015 events in the Central African republic (CAR), the DRC, Egypt, Libya, Nigeria, South Africa, South Sudan, Sudan, Somalia and Kenya all represent a significant portion of events over the last few years.

The increase in events therefore occurs quite broadly across a number of African countries, including countries that were impacted by the Arab spring (e.g. Egypt and Libya), rebel activity (the CAR, Sudan, South Sudan and the DRC), terrorism (Nigeria and Somalia), and riots (South Africa). In addition, in 2014 Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and South Africa had presidential or general elections, occurrences that probably increase the number of politically violent events since they push up the political temperature.

Despite the concurrent increase in fatality and event levels, the relationship between these two trends is complex and differs regionally and country by country. Thus, the Arab spring and political turbulence in countries such as South Africa increased political conflict events sharply but did not result in commensurate increases in fatalities. However, simultaneous increases in fatalities did occur in countries such as Nigeria (largely because of the activities of Boko Haram) and Somalia (because of al-Shabaab's campaign), and were largely unrelated to the increase in politically violent events.

Almost 37% of the 39 286 fatalities recorded by ACLED in Africa in 2014 occurred in Nigeria.

Although there were almost as many incidents of riots and protests as battles or violent activities against civilians, the fatality rate per event for riots and protests was considerably lower. Riots and protests have increased throughout the continent but the greatest number in 2015/2016 took place in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Mali, South Africa, Nigeria and Kenya.

In summary, separate agencies confirm that the period from 2010/2016 has generally seen an continuous upsurge in political and criminal activity (by recent historical standards) with subsequent increases in both the total number of conflict/politically related events and associated fatalities thereafter but in different countries and for different reasons.

For several decades Africa has been one of the global regions with the highest armed conflict burden when measured relative to population size. Africa also evidences a high level of so-called 'nonstate conflict', i.e. conflicts between various armed groups and factions fighting one another and not the government.

The number of conflict actors has steadily increased in recent years. The traditional pattern of governments fighting rebels has given way to a complex tapestry within which rebel movements split and fight one another for supremacy and sometimes the government as well. They generally do so on the periphery of states and seldom threaten central state control in capitals, although there are notable exceptions, as with Mali, the CAR and Libya, Somalia amongst others.

The intensity of non-state conflict in Africa has peaked twice in recent years and the rise in fatalities from 2010 to 2016 is largely the result of Insurgent groups, organised crime in post conflict countries and corruption in poorly governed states.

Explanations for instability which is the main trigger for conflict obviously differ from country to country but statistically the largest indicator of future conflict is past conflict. Breaking the conflict trap is exceptionally difficult and once a country has experienced large-scale internal conflict, such as currently the case with Libya, Sudan, south Sudan, the CAR, Nigeria, Bissau, Somalia and the DRC, only an extraordinary large effort, often with the assistance of the international community through comprehensive peacekeeping or peace building efforts along with an affective political mandate, is able to break that cycle. Some countries with a long history of conflict do make progress, such as Ethiopia, Rwanda, Angola, Mozambique and Sierra Leone, but stability often remains fragile with the constant chance of reversal.

Generally, a government's capacity to ensure law and order, police its territory effectively, monitor borders and suppress dissent is the most important determinant of stability, or the lack thereof. The majority of African governments do not fully control their territory, are unable to police their borders and, in many cases such as the DRC, Mali, Somalia may be battling rebel groups that effectively control some of its provinces. In these circumstances external events have a greater impact upon domestic stability than would otherwise be the case. Thus, relatively insignificant events such as the actions of a large multinational corporation pursuing commercial advantage, or a riot could have an impact vastly out of proportion to its original intention or scope. This in turn fuels further instability.

The capacity gaps within broken and poorly governed societies create a vacuum that is often filled by grassroots insurgences:

Definitions of terrorism have always been contentious in Africa for two reasons. In a number of countries ranging from Algeria to South Africa, groups that were designated terrorist by a number of Western governments later became liberation movements and, shortly thereafter, governments. Another reason is that it is often difficult to draw a reasonable distinction between the actions of sub-state organisations such as the Lord resistance Army (Uganda/eastern DRC), the Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda (eastern DRC), the Mai Mai (eastern DRC), and Balaika and séléka (the CAR), and 'accepted' terrorist organisations such as Boko Haram (Nigeria) and al-shabaab (Somalia). As a result, the coding/classification of terrorist incidents are fraught with political and practical challenges; even more problematic is labelling organisations (instead of acts) as inherently terrorist in terms of amelioration strategies. For these reasons, organisations such as the African Union (AU), have adopted a complex definition of terrorism that notes that 'the struggle waged by peoples in accordance with the principles of international law for their liberation or self-determination, including armed struggle against colonialism, occupation, aggression and domination by foreign forces shall not be considered as terrorist acts.

In most authoritarian African countries, the outcome is predictable: the Islamisation of dissent. As dissent turns Islamic, what naturally follows is the politicisation of Islam. The result is the growth of radicalisation and, sometimes and many times in Africa extremist violence.

In recent history, the key events that have driven the larger increases in violent Islamist extremism globally can be set out in three broad cycles. The first cycle started with the 11 September 2001 attacks on the USA (9/11) that led to the war in Afghanistan shortly thereafter and eventually to a steady attrition of the ability of al-Qaeda to pursue international terrorism.

When looking back five years later, the impact of the Arab spring was largely to weaken authoritarian control in the affected countries. However, the momentum was insufficient to facilitate a legitimate and effective replacement of government. The uprising's most spectacular and destabilising episode was the ousting of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, which spread Tuareg mercenaries, weapons and supplies across the Sahel, leading to the establishment of the short-lived Islamic republic of Azawad in northern Mali. It opened up a jihadist space in the Sahel between Mauritania, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya.

Eventually the blowback of the War on Terror (the invasion of Iraq in particular), the regional impact of the collapse of central state control in Libya and the domestic counter-terrorism measures adopted by the current government in Egypt and elsewhere may have set political and economic liberalisation in North Africa back several years. Perceptions of risk are highly correlated with levels of news coverage, but may be quite different from actual risk. The current impression, considering the extent of news coverage, is that terrorism is a large contributor to instability and to fatalities in Africa, particularly in those countries with high levels of conflict.

The total number of fatalities (victims and attackers) from terrorism in Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Nigeria, Mali, CAR, Sudan and Somalia from 1995 to 2014. Terrorism in Algeria reduced to nominal levels by 2011 but it expanded exponentially in Nigeria And Mali. Also evident is the extensive growth of terrorism in Somalia from 2006, with a sharp increase from 2011. Without the impact of Al-Shabab and Boko Haram, fatalities from terrorism in Africa would have remained at a relatively constant level in the last two decades.

But what is the contribution of Islamist terrorism to terrorism? The total fatalities on both sides from political violence in Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Mali, Nigeria, Tunisia and Somalia, the countries in Africa most affected by Islamic terrorism. During the five-year period from 2011 to 2016, Agency data indicates that a total of 71 433 people died from political violence. Of these 24% died as a result of Islamist terror groups. The trend line indicates that Islamist terror is growing. The spikes in 2011 and 2015/16 were the result of events in Libya (where only a small amount of events are the result of terrorism) and Boko Haram in Nigeria, respectively.

Regime type and the multiplier effect of limited governance are important explanatory factors when considering Africa's relatively high conflict burden.

From 1989, terrorism in Africa constituted a relatively small component of global terrorist activity (as measured by the GTD). This changed in 2011 with the impact of events in Nigeria & Somalia owing to the extraordinary brutality and widespread kidnapping and murder by Boko Haram and Al-Shabab. This pushed up Africa's terrorist fatalities considerably.

Other types of political violence such as riots, violence against civilians, international companies and foreigners and the like have been responsible for far more incidents and higher levels of casualties than extremist Islamist violence. Thus, while Islamist terror dramatically increases in Africa, other types of political violence have increased more rapidly. The relative contribution of terrorism to that increase is extremely important to assess Africa's general stability and risk.

This conclusion should not detract from the threat of extreme Islamist violence, or the need to combat its nefarious impact, particularly in key affected countries such as Nigeria, Somalia, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, DRC, Sudan, South Sudan, Mali, Burkina Faso and Egypt. It is clear that the threat from Al-Qaeda and the Islamic state has spread to Africa in a concerted and meaningful way. Local insurgencies and movements align themselves to the Islamic state or Al-Qaeda as part of their efforts to increase their reach and influence. There is thus a bandwagon effect that is dependent on the success of the Islamic state vs Al-Qaeda brand. But it is also important to place the threat from extreme Islamic violence in Africa in its appropriate relative context.

Eventually the central challenge for sub-Saharan Africa is to build accountable, capable governments that are able to deliver security and inclusive growth. Some African states seem to be making steady if halting progress in this regard. Daunting this challenge may be but extremely necessary, due to the toxic mixture of competing religious groups and governments clashing with the desire by small elites, such as in Nigeria and other authoritarian states, to control political power and wealth.

Domestic counter-terrorism and integrated risk management measures have to be adopted by all commercial multinational interests in today's Africa

The escalating risk to commercial companies operating in remote, challenging and post conflict countries in Africa has increased dramatically as we have all witnessed in recent years. As development increases within some countries in Africa so does instability through corruption, criminality & insurgency heightening risk to your personnel facilities and company reputation if unprepared.

Conflicts and political instability are common in today's developing Africa. In many countries, situations that affect peaceful co-existence and sustainable development through political stability arise as a direct result of development and the corruption it brings, and the inability of government and the society in general to adequately address the grievances of the population such as wealth distribution along with the basic needs of people, food/water/housing etc.

Africa, the second largest continent in the world, is still passing through development stages. The nature of political power in many African states, together with the real and perceived consequences of capturing and maintaining power is a key source of conflict and political instability across the continent. It is frequently the case that political victory assumes a “winner-takes-all” form with respect to wealth and resources, patronage, and the prestige and prerogatives of office.

With the key factors in mind and in light of recent conflicts throughout Africa, it would appear that modern African conflicts are about economic resources corruption and political survival, terrorism can be traced to ethnicity, religion, and mainly Islamic ideology, hence the rise in political and socially motivated conflict and increased terrorism & criminality in developing Africa.