

# Responding to the Challenge of Fragility and Security in West Africa

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By Alexandre Marc, Neelam Verjee, and Stephen Mogaka

**Fragility, Conflict, and Violence Group**

**World Bank**

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**This paper aims to provide an analysis of the major trends in conflict and violence across West Africa since 1960, with an overview of the causes and the duration of conflicts and violence in the subregion. A key conclusion of the paper is that the subregion has on average experienced fewer conflict events and fatalities as a result of conflict than have the other subregions on the continent. In particular, West Africa experienced significantly less conflict and violence between 1970 and 1990 than Africa's other subregions, especially Southern Africa, which became a pawn in the Cold War. A resurgence of violence and conflict in West Africa since 2010 has sparked concerns that emerging threats could undermine the subregion's future development, and derail hard-won economic gains at a time when the growth outlook appears very encouraging. The spike in violence and conflict, and the rise of religious extremism—in particular in Mali and in northern Nigeria—has proven disruptive for the subregion, while drug trafficking and maritime piracy have rapidly taken root in West Africa and contributed to locking some countries like Guinea-Bissau into fragility traps. The challenge for the countries in the subregion is to transform their security institutions to effectively address these emerging threats.**

West Africa has often been perceived as one of Africa's most violent subregions. Indeed, as various conflicts battered the region through the 1990's, the examples of countries such as Sierra Leone and Côte d'Ivoire were held up as a signpost for the future of the planet.<sup>1</sup> Recent events in West Africa have pivoted the world's attention back to the risk of conflict and fragility in the region. The upheaval in Nigeria and in Mali, as well as the recent coups in Guinea-Bissau and Burkina Faso, shows that West Africa is still prone to violence. In reality however, a mapping of West Africa's postcolonial history of conflict demonstrates that the subregion has suffered fewer fatalities from conflicts over the last 60 years than the other subregions on the continent. Despite the many political and governance challenges and various stresses that beset the region after independence, West Africa has also experienced fewer recorded conflict events in its post-independence history, than Africa's other subregions.<sup>2</sup>

In the decade after 1970, following the period in which most West African countries gained independence (dates range across the region, from Ghana in 1957 to Cape Verde in 1975), fatalities due to regional conflict remained very low. The run-up to independence and the political transition from colonialism to self-rule was a largely peaceful period for West Africa, with the region's countries among the first on the continent to shake off the colonial shackles. The only nation in the region to fight a war for its independence was Guinea-Bissau, which waged an armed struggle against its colonizer Portugal. Between 1963 and 1974, the country underwent a drawn out, rural, armed rebellion that claimed an estimated 15,000 lives. A consequence of this experience has been to inject a culture of militarization into Guinea-Bissau's

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<sup>1</sup> Kaplan, 1994.

<sup>2</sup> This paper relies on fatalities as a result of conflict as a key indicator of violence. The authors recognize that there are some limitations in this. For instance, data might not always be reliable, and using fatality figures does not encapsulate the full cost of conflict, including non-lethal forms of violence or the long-term costs.

political dynamic, with the military continuing to play a disproportionate role in the country's political process.<sup>3</sup>

As the majority of West African countries experienced a peaceful postcolonial handover of power, fatalities plummeted from the 2 million death toll that resulted from the other major conflict of the first post-independence decade in the subregion, that of the separatist Biafran War in Nigeria (1967–1970), to a low near-zero figure in the 1970s. With the end of the Biafran War, West Africa enjoyed a period of relative tranquility until December 1989, when the Liberian civil war signaled the beginning of the subregion's slide into a crucible of political violence and internecine conflict. Various explanations have been offered to further understanding of the causes of the conflicts that wracked the region during the next decade, particularly the devastating civil wars of the Mano River Basin countries. Among these is the effect of the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991, which heralded the thawing of the Cold War. For two decades, competition between the United States and Russia helped maintain the status quo in West Africa, as the great powers supported their client states, indirectly working to widen state-society gaps and weaken governance. The former colonial powers of France and Great Britain played a particularly critical role in West Africa in shaping the nature, evolution, and outcomes of various post-Cold War conflicts across the subregion.<sup>4</sup>

Support to states with very strong ties to the former colonial power—such as Samuel Doe's Liberia, Gnassingbé Eyadéma's Togo, and Côte d'Ivoire under Félix Houphouët-Boigny—gave authoritarian leaders an effective *carte blanche* to exercise repressive means of control. The end of the Cold War undermined the power of several regimes in West Africa, either directly or indirectly, as unconditional backing was pulled overnight, which dried up the supply of arms, military assistance programs, funding, and other interventions. This left authoritarian states fundamentally exposed, weakened, and stripped of their monopolies of violence, which opened them up to attacks from dissident groups. When conflicts did erupt after the end of the Cold War, there was no remaining imperative for external powers to intervene in defense of Western interests.<sup>5</sup>

Other theories about the onset of civil war and political violence—termed “greed versus grievance” theories—question whether economic incentives or broader social and political motives drive societies to violence.<sup>6</sup> Collier and Hoeffler find strong association between both primary commodity exports (such as the opportunity for rebellion) and the lack of opportunities for young men (such as the cost of rebellion), with civil conflict, suggesting support for the “greed” hypothesis.<sup>7</sup> They also find that the proxies used for grievance as a driver of conflict are “insignificant,” with ethnic dominance showing solely adverse effects, implying that conflict is

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<sup>3</sup> N'Diaye, 2011, p. 46.

<sup>4</sup> N'Diaye, 2011, p. 51.

<sup>5</sup> N'Diaye, 2011, p. 53.

<sup>6</sup> World Bank, 2011, p. 75.

<sup>7</sup> Collier and Hoeffler, 2002.

more likely in a highly polarized environment.<sup>8</sup> Critics of the “greed” hypothesis argue that it fits specific conflicts better than others, i.e., the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone, and that it fails to account for the historical transformations in the character and dynamics of conflict. A further criticism is that the distinctions employed to differentiate greed from grievance are “simplistic.”<sup>9</sup>

Fearon and Laitin argue that the conditions that favor insurgency, such as poverty, are better at denoting which countries are at risk of civil war than are measures of grievance, such as the lack of democracy.<sup>10</sup> Other theories to explain the onset of violent conflict include theories about the “commitment problem,” in which actors cannot reconcile conflicting agendas and refrain from violence.<sup>11</sup> Today, there is agreement that grievance factors tend to explain the origin of conflicts, while greed factors tend to prolong conflicts.

The civil wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia, which together resulted in an estimated 800,000 fatalities, drew to a close in the early 2000s. The civil war in Guinea-Bissau, which contributed to a spike in casualties in 1998, ended a year later. The death toll from conflict in West Africa nearly halved after 1999, and continued a gradual downward trajectory until 2006 and 2007—albeit with a brief spike in 2003 in part due to the low-intensity civil war in Côte d’Ivoire. The number of fatalities from conflict events began a gradual climb once again after 2007 and accelerated in 2010 due to the outbreak of violence in Mali and Nigeria (see Table 1).

The last decade has seen a dramatic change in the character of the violence in West Africa. Violence has shifted away from the large-scale conflict events and intrastate wars that characterized the postcolonial and post-Cold War periods, and moved toward an increase in low-level insurgencies and political violence by nonstate actors. The countries of the Mano River Basin conflict system—Côte d’Ivoire, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Guinea—successfully emerged from conflict and continue to demonstrate resilience. This comes despite the high level of interconnectivity between them, and the lack of resolution around some of the underlying causes of the initial political violence that rocked the region, such as issues of land access and migration.

The push toward democratization that started in the 1990s has gradually seen elections replace military coups as the sole credible means of transferring power in the region. A counterintuitive consequence of this has been the increase in election-related violence across the subregion, reflecting the newly introduced competition. The zero-sum stakes of many elections in the majority of countries, and the manipulation of identities for political gain, makes political violence particularly incendiary.

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<sup>8</sup> Collier and Sambanis, 2005, p. 18.

<sup>9</sup> Fearon and Laitin, 2001.

<sup>10</sup> Luckham et al., 2001, p. 14.

<sup>11</sup> World Bank, 2011, p. 75.

Drug trafficking, maritime piracy, and religious extremism have emerged as growing threats to stability. A spike in narcotics trafficking through the subregion has undermined governance and corroded state institutions; a surge in maritime piracy threatens the stability and economic development of the coastal states in the Gulf of Guinea; while a sharp increase in deadly attacks by Boko Haram against Nigeria’s civilian population and the rise of extremist groups in the Sahel—such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Ansar Dine—risk plunging the region into a protracted period of instability.

**Table 1. Selected conflicts in West Africa**

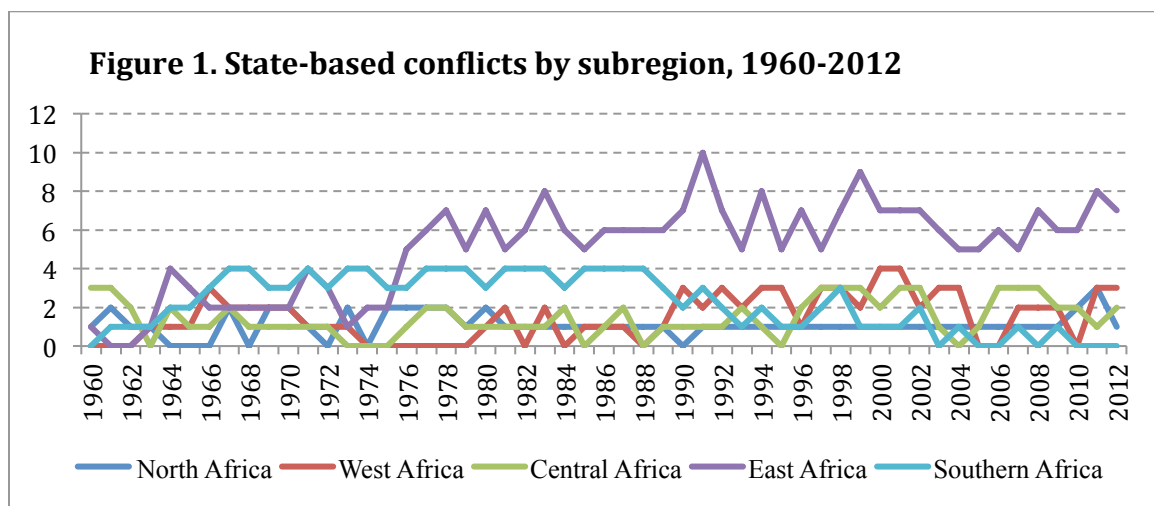
| Name of conflict                  | Country                | Years        | Nature of conflict     | Fatalities (estimates) |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------|--------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| Guinea-Bissau War of Independence | Guinea-Bissau          | 1962–1974    | insurgency             | 15,000                 |
| Biafran War                       | Nigeria                | 1967–1970    | civil war              | 500,000–2,000,000      |
| Casamance conflict                | Senegal                | 1982–present | insurgency             | 5,000                  |
| Mauritania and Senegal War        | Mauritania and Senegal | 1989–1990    | international conflict | 500                    |
| First Liberian Civil War          | Liberia                | 1989–1996    | civil war              | 100,000–220,000        |
| Tuareg rebellion                  | Mali                   | 1990–1995    | insurgency             | N/A                    |
| Sierra Leone Civil War            | Sierra Leone           | 1991–2002    | civil war              | 50,000–300,000         |
| Guinea-Bissau Civil War           | Guinea-Bissau          | 1998–1999    | civil war              | 655                    |
| Second Liberian Civil War         | Liberia                | 1999–2003    | civil war              | 150,000–300,000        |
| First Ivorian Civil War           | Côte d’Ivoire          | 2002–2007    | civil war              | 3,000                  |
| Niger Delta conflict              | Nigeria                | 2004–2009    | insurgency             | 2,500–4,000            |
| Tuareg rebellion                  | Niger                  | 2007–2009    | insurgency             | 270–400                |
| Boko Haram uprising               | Nigeria                | 2009–present | insurgency             | 11,200                 |
| Second Ivorian Civil War          | Côte d’Ivoire          | 2010–2011    | civil war              | 3,000                  |
| Conflict in Northern Mali         | Mali                   | 2012–2013    | insurgency             | 1,270                  |

Source: Data on fatalities is derived from various sources, including Marshall, 2005; ACLED, n.d.; Human Rights Watch, 2011b; Nigeria Social Violence Dataset, 2014; and Reuters, 2009.

Overall, West Africa has been less affected by conflict and violence than other regions in Africa. Deaths from conflict in the subregion dramatically declined in the 1970s following the end of the Biafran War. The toll then climbed again to about 150,000 deaths by 2004 as a result of a slew of

post-Cold War civil wars that wracked the region.<sup>12</sup> During the same period, deaths due to conflict across Eastern Africa climbed steadily, to a peak of 1.6 million in 2004, while fatalities from conflict in Central Africa fell from 200,000 in 1960 to close to zero in the 1980s, but then increased again to stand at just short of 1.6 million deaths by 2004.<sup>13</sup>

Data on deaths from conflict in West Africa also contrasts with the trend seen in Southern Africa during the same period, when countries there waged protracted wars of independence against the colonial powers. The conflicts in Mozambique, Angola, South Africa, and Namibia, among others, saw the conflict-related death toll consistently increase throughout the 1960s before plateauing in the 1980s at 600,000 deaths per decade, as the subregion became a Cold War battleground.<sup>14</sup> The conflict-related death toll in the subregion only recently significantly reduced.<sup>15</sup>



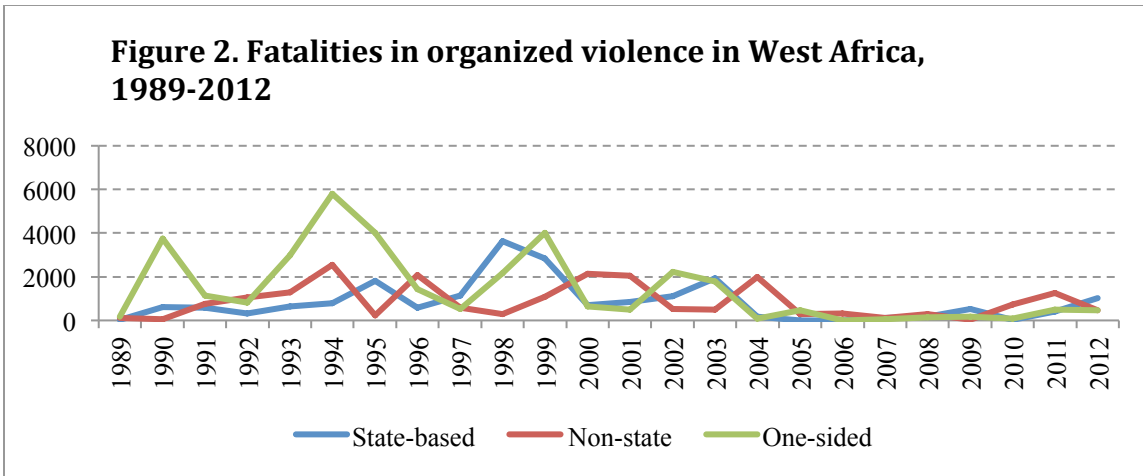
Source: Themnér and Wallensteen, 2013.

<sup>12</sup> ACPP, 2006.

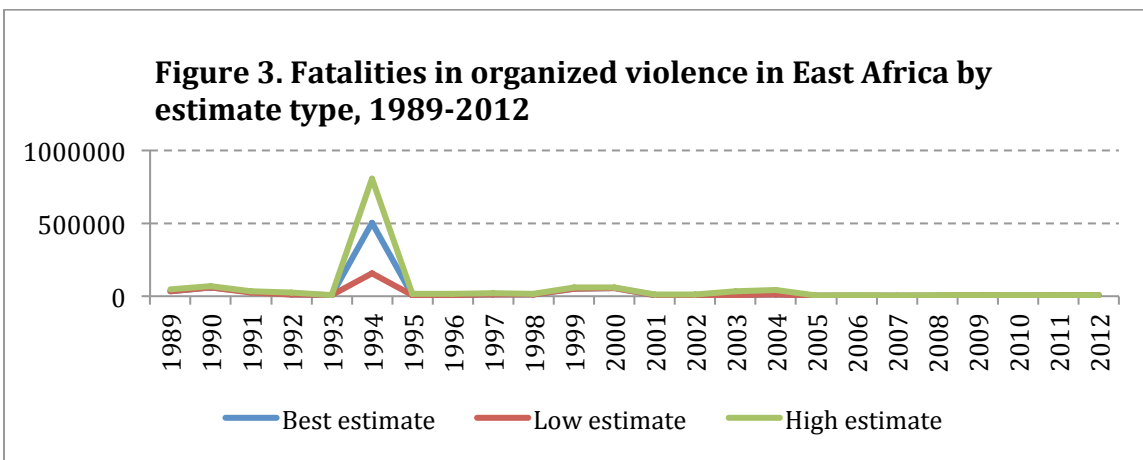
<sup>13</sup> ACPP, 2006.

<sup>14</sup> ACPP, 2006.

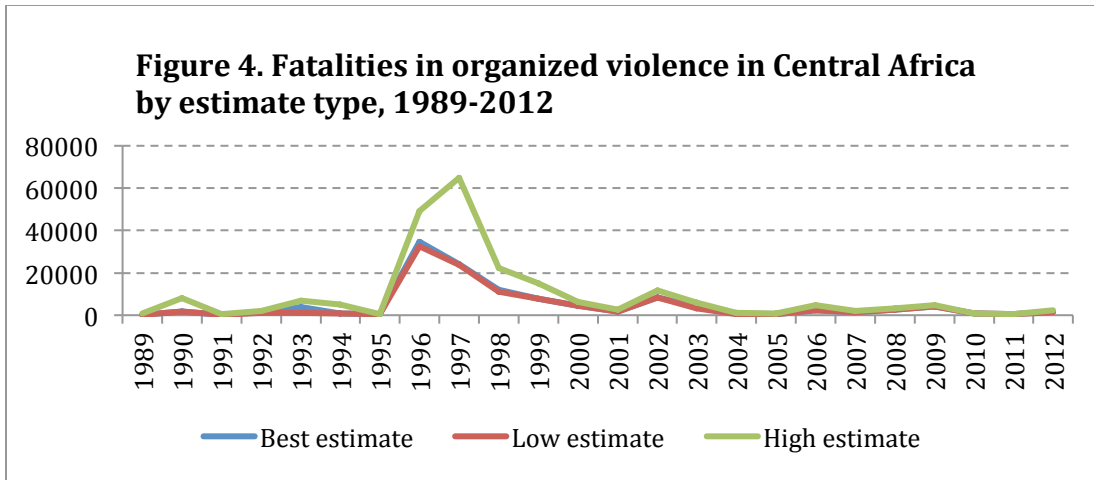
<sup>15</sup> Themnér and Wallensteen, 2013.



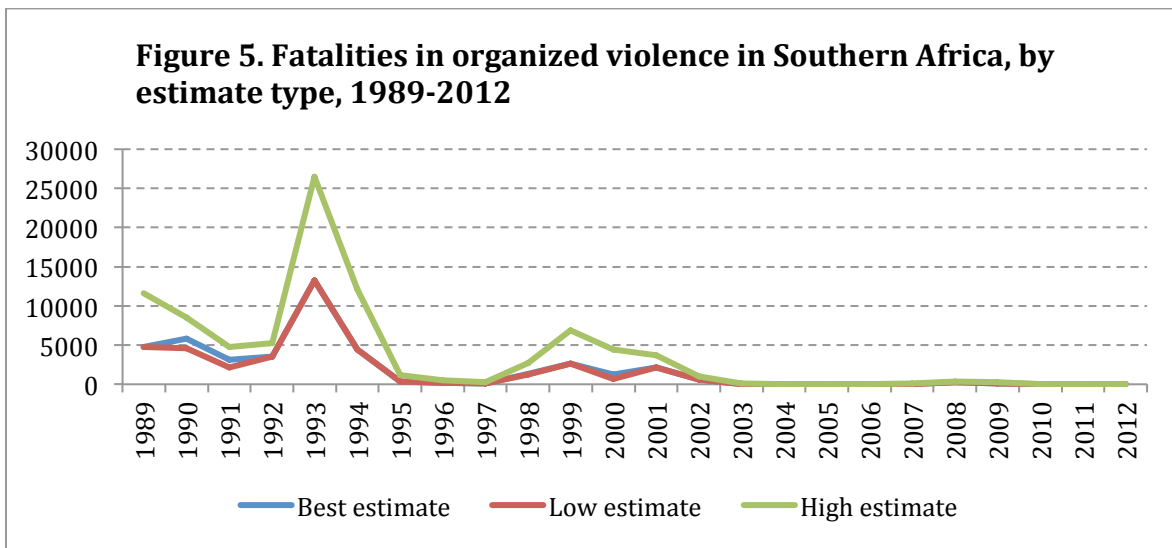
Sources: UCDP Battle-Related Deaths Dataset v.5-2013, 1989–2012; UCDP Non-state Conflict Dataset v. 2.5-2013, 1989-2012; and UCDP One-Sided Violence Dataset v 1.4-2013, 1989–2012.



Sources: UCDP Battle-Related Deaths Dataset v.5-2013, 1989–2012; UCDP Non-state Conflict Dataset v. 2.5-2013, 1989-2012; and UCDP One-Sided Violence Dataset v 1.4-2013, 1989–2012.



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Sources: UCDP Battle-Related Deaths Dataset v.5-2013, 1989–2012; UCDP Non-state Conflict Dataset v. 2.5-2013, 1989-2012; and UCDP One-Sided Violence Dataset v 1.4-2013, 1989–2012.

### The nature of violence and conflict in West Africa

The multiple forms of violence in West Africa overlap to form an interlocking and mutating landscape of conflict across the region. Lines of potential fracture, such as religious, ethnic, cultural, or linguistic differences, that in and of themselves represent the countries’ multi-ethnic make-up, have acted as incendiary devices in which perceptions of injustice, marginalization, and exclusion are manifested. The nature of the violence has significantly changed in the period since independence, as swaths of the region display signs of stabilization even as they wrestle



with new and insidious security threats. During this time, the subregion has also experienced an improvement in efforts to prevent conflicts, which has contributed to its overall stability.

### Intrastate conflicts dominate

The vast majority of the armed conflicts that have occurred in West Africa after independence have been intrastate, as opposed to between states. There have only been two cases of war in which the parties have been sovereign states: the war between Mali and Burkina Faso in April 1985 and the war between Senegal and Mauritania in April 1989. In both cases, active combat lasted no longer than a week.<sup>16</sup>

During its short postcolonial history, West Africa has recorded five large-scale civil wars, and at least seven other conflicts of a lesser magnitude, with more localized unrest,<sup>17</sup> in addition to a significant number of military coups. The Biafran War (1967–1970), which cost up to 2 million lives, was the subregion’s first large-scale civil war. The others, which took place following the end of the Cold War, were the two phases of the Liberian civil war (1989–1996 and then again from 1999–2003), as well as the civil war in Sierra Leone (1991–2002), Guinea-Bissau (1998–1999) and finally, Côte d’Ivoire (2002–2007 and then again in 2010–2011).

In terms of scale and impact, these conflicts (minus the Biafran War) cost nearly 827,000 lives,<sup>18</sup> with Liberia’s civil wars alone resulting in around 520,000 deaths. The impact of the conflicts and violence on the civilian population was also extensive, with the conflicts in Sierra Leone and Liberia alone generating about 1 million refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs).<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, sexual and gender-based violence against both men and women was pervasive in all conflicts, not to mention the psychological and physiological trauma of conflict and violence, as well as the economic and social costs of war.

In other conflicts of lesser magnitude, the Casamance separatist insurgency in Senegal has been ongoing since 1982, while Ghana experienced land disputes in the north in the mid-1990s that manifested as ethnic tensions. Mali and Niger saw Tuareg uprisings, and there have been crises of security and governance in Guinea and Burkina Faso. Last but not least are the overlapping

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<sup>16</sup> Souaré, 2010.

<sup>17</sup> M’Cormack, 2011, p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> All estimates are high estimates. The key is as follows: (1) *Best estimate*. The UCDP best estimate consists of the aggregated most reliable numbers for all battle-related incidents during a year. If different reports provide different estimates, an examination is made into what source is most reliable. If no such distinction can be made, UCDP as a rule includes the lower figure given. (2) *Low estimate*. The UCDP low estimate consists of the aggregated low estimates for all battle-related incidents during a year. If different reports provide different estimates and a higher estimate is considered more reliable, the low estimate is also reported if deemed reasonable. (3) *High estimate*. The UCDP high estimate consists of the aggregated high estimates for all battle-related incidents during a year. If different reports provide different estimates and a lower estimate is considered more or equally reliable, the high estimate is also reported if deemed reasonable. If there are incidents in which there is some uncertainty about what parties have been involved, these are also included in the high estimate (UCDP, n.d.).

<sup>19</sup> Luckham et al., 2001, p. 39.

forms of political, communal, ethnoreligious, election-related, and resource-related strife that have affected Nigeria over many years now.

Despite the artificial borders imposed by the colonial powers, the quasi absence of interstate conflicts can be explained by the sanctity of territorial boundaries. This concept found resonance across West Africa following independence and was bolstered by the inclusion of an article in the Organization of African Unity (OAU) Charter of 1963 in support of territorial integrity.<sup>20</sup> In line with the principles of pan-Africanism, countries of the subregion maintained respect for territorial boundaries in the postcolonial period despite the arbitrary nature of borders and the common linguistic and cultural heritages shared by transnational ethnic groups. An additional dimension was the weakness of states at the time of independence. The incomplete process of nation building had left countries struggling to establish order, security, and stability. In this light, borders and international boundaries acted as “external shells” that no party was willing to challenge—a state of being that can be described as “negative peace.”<sup>21</sup> With the end of the Cold War, there appears to have been a shift in sentiment, as the allure of pan-Africanism faded and took a backseat to the multiple triggers and causes of conflict and violence. As a result, the past decades have seen several instances of regional spillovers of conflict across porous and mutable boundaries.

Since the beginning of the new millennium, the incidence of civil war in West Africa has dramatically dropped off, suggesting that large-scale political violence is on the wane.<sup>22</sup> Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea-Bissau all entered a postconflict phase and successfully conducted multiparty elections, and after a brief relapse in 2010 following its elections, Côte d’Ivoire has once again returned to stability. This trend represents a watershed in the political stabilization of the region, even as emerging threats and alternative forms of political violence have come to replace large-scale conflicts and civil wars.

Guinea-Bissau remains unstable and the coup of 2012 set the clock back, but without igniting major violence. The country is stuck in a “fragility trap”, defined as a situation in which fragile and conflict-affected countries are caught in a slow-growth/poor-governance equilibrium that stems from the weakness of their institutions and policies. Political instability has undermined the capacity of successive governments to guarantee control of the territory, deliver basic public services and infrastructure to its population, and create a climate conducive to economic investment.<sup>23</sup> It is also an example of a country that has been unable to address the challenge of political interference by the army. The situation in Guinea-Bissau was significantly worsened by the 1998 civil war, which damaged the country’s physical capital. However, it has made some progress since, and successfully held peaceful elections in 2014.

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<sup>20</sup> Zacher, 2001, p. 222.

<sup>21</sup> Kacowicz, 1997, p. 382.

<sup>22</sup> Straus, 2012, p. 182.

<sup>23</sup> Andriamihaja et al., n.d., p. 3.

Evidence for the stabilization across the subregion is also seen in the decline in battle deaths across the continent as a whole, which, according to the ACLED,<sup>24</sup> have been on a steady downward trend over the past two decades. Part of this trend can be attributed to the move toward democratization and multi-party elections, which permits grievances to be expressed at the ballot box instead of on the battlefield. Credit also goes to the role played by regional mechanisms for dispute resolution and conflict prevention and management such as Economic Community Of West African States (ECOWAS), which helped bring about a fragile peace and draw a close to the festering civil wars of the Mano River Basin.

### **Military coups as a quasi-unique form of power transfer**

Despite the decline in overall conflict events during the period between 1970 and 1990, West Africa continued to lead the continent by considerable margin in terms of number and frequency of military coups. The subregion experienced nearly three times as many attempts (either successful or unsuccessful) at unconstitutional changes of government (including military coups) in the decades after 1960 as any other subregion on the continent.<sup>25</sup> The region's first coup took place in Togo in 1963 with the ouster and murder of the country's first president, Sylvanus Olympio,<sup>26</sup> who had adopted an autocratic single-party system that largely marginalized the north. After the coup, the military handed over power to a consortium of opposition groups, as it was too weak to consolidate power and the ousted regime had significant backing in the capital city.<sup>27</sup>

Between 1960 and 2014, the countries of the subregion experienced a total of 104 attempted and successful coups. This is compared to 48 attempts in East Africa; 35 in Central Africa; and just 16 successful and attempted coups in Southern Africa during the same period. The level of coup activity has varied considerably across West Africa. Senegal, often held up as an example of political stability in West Africa, has never experienced a successful coup; neither has Cape Verde. Burkina Faso and Benin meanwhile, have had seven coups; Mauritania has had six; Ghana and Sierra Leone have each had five; and Niger and Guinea-Bissau have had four (see Table 2).

**Table 2. Military coups in West Africa, 1960 to date**

| <b>Country</b> | <b>Total number of successful military coups</b>   | <b>Year in which last successful coup took place</b> |
|----------------|--|--|
| Benin          | 7 coups (1963, 1965 [3 coups], 1967, 1969, 1972)   | 1972   |
| Burkina Faso   | 7 coups (1966, 1974, 1980, 1982, 1983, 1987, 2014) | 2014   |
| Côte d'Ivoire  | 2 coups (1999, 2002)                               | 2002   |
| The Gambia     | 1 coup (1994)                                      | 1994   |

<sup>24</sup> ACPP, 2006.

<sup>25</sup> ACPP, 2006.

<sup>26</sup> Carbone, 2013, p. 6.

<sup>27</sup> Young, 2012.

|               |  |      |
|---------------|--|------|
| Ghana         | 5 coups (1966, 1972, 1978, 1979, 1981)           | 1981 |
| Guinea        | 2 coups (1984, 2008)                             | 2008 |
| Guinea-Bissau | 4 coups (1980, 1999, 2003, 2012)                 | 2012 |
| Liberia       | 1 coup (1980)                                    | 1980 |
| Mali          | 3 coups (1968, 1991, 2012)                       | 2012 |
| Mauritania    | 6 coups (1978, 1979, 1980, 1984, 2005, 2008)     | 2008 |
| Niger         | 4 coups (1974, 1996, 1999, 2010)                 | 2010 |
| Nigeria       | 6 coups (1966 [2 coups], 1975, 1983, 1985, 1993) | 1993 |
| Sierra Leone  | 5 coups (1967, 1968, 1992, 1996, 1997)           | 1997 |
| Togo          | 2 coups (1963, 1967)                             | 1967 |

Sources: Barka and Ncube, 2012; Shillington, 2004; media sources.

Military coups in West Africa have come about as the result of a number of factors, and the origins and form of each have varied. The legacy of colonial rule has meant a number of countries in the subregion are more likely to succumb to military coups. Colonial-era practices, such as the policy of favoring specific communities or regions in the process of recruiting people to the armed forces, helped weaken security institutions. At the time of independence, many fledgling states were presented with the conundrum of armed forces whose composition and allegiance was perceived as being to a particular ethnic group or region, instead of to the nascent state.<sup>28</sup> In particular, the north-south divide was most pronounced in the postindependence armed forces of Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Benin, Togo, and Ghana.<sup>29</sup> Francophone countries faced the additional challenge of integrating citizens who had been recruited by France from across West Africa to fight in its various military campaigns—in particular in Europe and Indochina—into their newly created national armies. This posed a significant economic and logistical challenge for the new states. In the case of Togo, it contributed to the subregion’s first military coup in 1963 after the president refused to sanction the integration of returnee soldiers into the armed forces.<sup>30</sup>

The nature of post-independence politics and competition for political power further increased the likelihood of military coups, as excluded and marginalized elites in single-party states resorted to coups to wrest power from the incumbents. Indeed, a major cause of coups in West Africa in the postindependence decades has been shown to be ethnic antagonisms “stemming from cultural plurality and political competition,” as well as the existence of strong militaries with a “factionalized officer corps.”<sup>31</sup> In sum, the incidence of coups has been primarily driven

<sup>28</sup> Fawole and Ukeje, 2005.

<sup>29</sup> Kandeh, 2004a.

<sup>30</sup> Kandeh, 2004a.

<sup>31</sup> Kposowa and Jenkins, 1993, p. 126.

by the competition of “elite rivalries inside the military and the civilian government.”<sup>32</sup> By the mid-1960s, military coups had become the method of choice to displace a regime, and remained thus until the wave of democratization in 1990 opened up West Africa’s political arena.<sup>33</sup>

Coups were also the result of external intervention in the state, either by neighboring states or further afield. Nkrumah was accused of complicity in the region’s first coup in Togo, after that country’s independence; it was claimed that he wanted to annex the country, though this was never substantiated.<sup>34</sup> A final factor was the role of economic downturns in the fortunes of leaders—tightened budgets often meant a reduction in the size of the army or unpaid salaries, both of which could trigger coups.<sup>35</sup>

In the last two decades, some military coups have been triggered by attempts to amend or fiddle with constitutions to prolong a leader’s tenure in power, signaling a growing intolerance of the phenomenon of “president for life.” For instance, the February 2010 coup in Niger was directly linked to the attempt by President Mamadou Tandja to manipulate the country’s constitutional arrangements and keep his hold on power.<sup>36</sup> Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo’s May 2006 attempt to pass a bill to extend his stay in power by a third term was thrown out by the senate, which asserted the constitution’s supremacy. This marked a key moment in the country’s political development, particularly since military coups had been responsible for the overthrow of Nigeria’s First and Second Republics.<sup>37</sup> The majority of successful and attempted coups in West Africa—49 of them—took place from 1970–1980, having picked up from the 19 recorded in the previous decade. Meanwhile, the period between 1990 and 2010 saw 36 attempted and successful coups. The most noticeable drop-off in coup activity came in the first decade of the new century, as regularized multiparty elections became the accepted means of power transfer.

Three main factors have been credited for the decline in incidence of military coups in West Africa. The first was the move by several governments in the direction of inclusive politics and an increase in political competition, amidst calls for democratization from both the citizens of West African nations and from the international community, which wielded political conditionality. A second factor was the role of regional bodies such as ECOWAS and the AU, and policy instruments including the Lomé Declaration, the African Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance, and the Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance of the Economic Community of West African States. These served to strengthen norms that helped socialize elites and the military and prohibit military coups. The third factor in deterring plotters and prospective putschists has been the role played by security sector reform (SSR) programs.

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<sup>32</sup> Kposowa and Jenkins, 1993, p. 126.

<sup>33</sup> Young, 2012.

<sup>34</sup> Willoughby, 2013.

<sup>35</sup> O’Kane, 1993, p. 251.

<sup>36</sup> Souaré, 2010, p. 6.

<sup>37</sup> Posner and Young, 2007, p. 1.

However, despite the progress made in recent years in stabilizing the form of power transfers, West Africa still continues to experience coups. The March 2012 coup in Mali caught many by surprise, as it came just weeks ahead of planned elections, and the outgoing president had made clear his intentions to hand power over to a democratically elected leader.<sup>38</sup> In the same year, a coup in Guinea-Bissau halted the second round of an election, which the former prime minister Carlos Gomes Júnior was expected to win. Despite the progress made in civil-military relations, support for military rule has been strong among certain populations in recent years amidst disillusionment with civilian politicians.<sup>39</sup> For instance, support for military rule in Mali both before and after the 2012 coup has been captured by Afrobarometer surveys. ECOWAS has played a critical role in both Guinea-Bissau and Mali, but its interventions have also come under scrutiny, amidst allegations of inconsistency and double standards in its response.<sup>40</sup>

While challenges linger around the incidence of military coups, significant progress has been made, as demonstrated in Nigeria and Ghana, which were the regional trendsetters in terms of coups. Both countries have transitioned to civilian rule as a result of domestic factors, with Ghana heralded as a model for successful democratic transition following several peaceful handovers of power.

### Subregional conflict systems

The frequency of regional spillovers of internal conflicts in West Africa highlights the close level of interconnectivity between countries, where localized conflicts can trigger region-wide conflict systems and destabilize neighboring countries. The conflicts that emerge from a single conflict system may have diverse causes and varying durations, with some more lethal than others. They are interlinked, however, and therefore necessitate region-wide approaches to conflict resolution and management.<sup>41</sup> The theory of conflict systems posits that conflicts can spill across borders and are in fact shaped and sustained by strong transnational connections between countries.<sup>42</sup>

Conflict systems are characterized by an epicenter, or a source, as well as a dynamic that accounts for its evolution, spread, and regression.<sup>43</sup> The spread and spillover of conflicts is facilitated by diverse transnational links. Borders are porous, and communities on either side maintain close ties based on ethnicity, language, culture, and trade.<sup>44</sup> Shared grievances, such as environmental or socioeconomic factors, or marginalization based on a common identity, find ideological support across borders, which also facilitate the movement of people—militias, workers, and refugees—as well as arms, drugs, and contraband.<sup>45</sup> The movement of large

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<sup>38</sup> Ogude, 2012.

<sup>39</sup> Coulibaly and Bratton, 2013.

<sup>40</sup> Hounkpe, 2012.

<sup>41</sup> Diallo, 2009, p. 2.

<sup>42</sup> Buhaug and Gleditsch, 2008.

<sup>43</sup> Diallo, 2009, p. 2.

<sup>44</sup> Kacowicz, 1997, p. 380.

<sup>45</sup> Kacowicz, 1997, p. 380.

numbers of refugees across borders can contribute to the spillover of conflict, while facilitating arms smuggling and increasing the pool of rebels for recruitment.<sup>46</sup>

The complexity and depth of ties between countries whose boundaries were drawn in an arbitrary fashion means it is almost inevitable that conflict will spread. In some cases, countries share the internal dimensions of a conflict and are therefore exposed to the same stresses as in the case of Liberia and Sierra Leone, where deteriorating economic performance in the 1980s under the aegis of repressive and authoritarian governments resulted in lower household income and social spending and declining access to health care and education. In other cases, the cross-border linkages and porous borders make neighbor states vulnerable to the contagion effect of conflict events.<sup>47</sup> Although Guinea did not experience the same intensity of conflict as its neighbors in the Mano River Basin during the 1990s, it was affected by the large flow of refugees as well as unrest in the south.<sup>48</sup> The “bad neighborhood” effect, where violence in one country can affect the prospects of neighboring countries, suggests that countries can lose 0.7 percent of their annual gross domestic product (GDP) for every neighbor involved in a war.<sup>49</sup>

West Africa has also been susceptible to cross-border influences from North Africa; Libya has played a considerable role in the region’s political development for several decades. Armed with petro-dollars, Libya’s leader Muammar Gaddafi meddled in the region’s political movements and rebel uprisings, funding select leaders and backing ventures such as Charles Taylor’s exploits in the Mano River Basin and Foday Sankoh’s Revolutionary United Front. After the fall of the Gaddafi regime, thousands of impoverished and unemployed migrant workers, as well as armed men who had fought for Gaddafi, returned southward to their homes. They contributed to unrest in Niger and launched an uprising against the government of Mali. A further destabilizing factor from North Africa has been the spillover of international ideological groups into the Sahel from Libya and Algeria, which grafted extremist ideology onto local grievances in Mali, thereby escalating and internationalizing the conflict there.<sup>50</sup>

### **Figure 6. West Africa Regional Conflict Systems**

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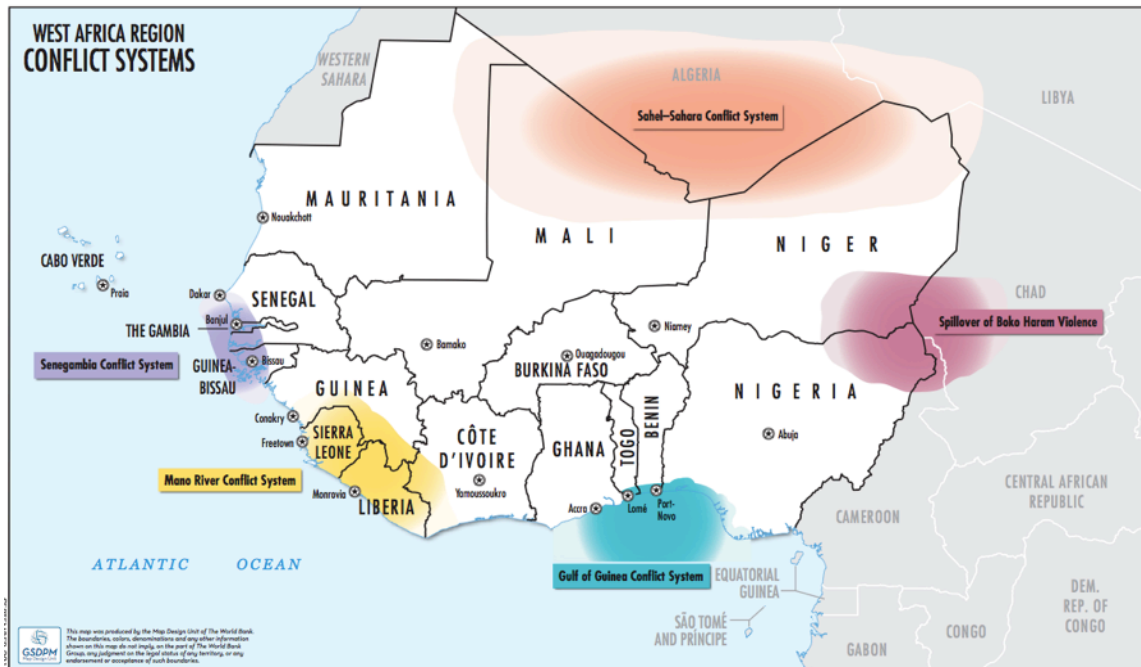
<sup>46</sup> Blattman and Miguel, 2009.

<sup>47</sup> N’Diaye, 2011, p. 49.

<sup>48</sup> Jörgel and Utas, 2007.

<sup>49</sup> World Bank, 2011b, p. 65.

<sup>50</sup> World Bank, 2011b, p. 68.



Source: ECOWAS and World Bank.

Within West Africa, there are a number of conflict systems. The most destabilizing of these has been the Mano River Basin conflict system, in which the countries of Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Côte d'Ivoire form part of the same conflict complex. The political entrepreneurship of Charles Taylor lit the match of a region-wide conflict system in the Mano River Basin in 1989 by launching the civil war in Liberia from inside Côte d'Ivoire through his lumpen military.<sup>51</sup> Like a domino effect, it set into motion the civil war in Sierra Leone in 1991–2002, a second civil war in Liberia from 1999–2003, stirred up sectarian violence in Côte d'Ivoire in 2002, and threw Guinea into a period of significant political instability.<sup>52</sup>

The conflict was enabled by access to natural resources—specifically Liberian timber—and control of the diamond trade in Sierra Leone. Notwithstanding the role of elites such as Taylor, the conflicts in the Mano River Basin were the offspring of common structural weaknesses across all the countries. The personalized and predatory systems of governance in Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Guinea repressed and marginalized tracts of the population. The ingredients for the collapse into conflict of the countries of the Mano River Basin were found in this failure of governance, common grievance, and economic crisis. Porous borders, refugee flows, and the existence of cross-border communities all contributed to instability and the spillover of conflict, as for instance from Liberia to Côte d'Ivoire. A number of these Liberian networks were re-activated and contributed to violence after the 2010 disputed elections in Côte d'Ivoire.<sup>53</sup> Taylor's armies of marauding child soldiers added a further element to tensions, as did the

<sup>51</sup> Sawyer, 2004.

<sup>52</sup> M'Cormack, 2011.

<sup>53</sup> International Crisis Group, 2014a.



members of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) who were drawn from various nations and moved freely across boundaries to mete out unprecedented levels of violence on an unarmed population.

The fallout from the other conflict systems has thus far been of a lower magnitude, but nonetheless they have had a profound impact on their respective regional convergences. While tensions in some systems have abated, there is potential for them to flare up again. The southern Senegambia conflict system covers Senegal, the Gambia, and Guinea-Bissau. The uprising for self-determination in the Casamance region is rooted in the grievances of the Diola people regarding perceptions of political under-representation and economic disadvantage.<sup>54</sup> Links of kinsmanship between the secessionists and President Yahya Jammeh of the Gambia led to claims that he played an active role in aiding the rebels, as did various governments of Guinea-Bissau.<sup>55</sup> The Casamance uprising triggered the civil war in Guinea-Bissau from 1998–1999,<sup>56</sup> after officers from the armed forces were found to have aided Casamance separatists.

Other conflict systems in West Africa include the tensions and outbreaks of violence in the Sahel, between the governments of Mali and Niger, and the Tuareg rebels and other ethnic groups from the northern parts of both countries, which has had some resonance in Mauritania. The Tuaregs in the Sahel are found across multiple states, including Burkina Faso, Libya, Algeria, as well as in Mali and Niger. Their traditional lifestyles have come under pressure since independence, and drought, coupled with economic, political, and social marginalization, have triggered recurring rebellions in both Niger and Mali.<sup>57</sup> The insurgency in Nigeria’s Delta Region too, is impacting the security of the Gulf of Guinea countries of Benin and Togo—particularly through maritime piracy.

A final emerging conflict system in West Africa is the spillover of violence from the Boko Haram insurgency in northeast Nigeria. Although the insurgency led by the extremist group is “ultimately a Nigerian crisis,”<sup>58</sup> its militants have crossed over into Chad, Cameroon, and Niger, where borders drawn by colonial powers at the end of the nineteenth century had “little social relevance against the cultural unity of the old empire of Kanem-Bornu.”<sup>59</sup> The group has established camps on islands in Lake Chad, and in May 2014, suspected Boko Haram militants attacked a police station and camp run by a Chinese engineering company in Cameroon. At the May 2014 Paris Summit, neighboring countries committed to deepening their cooperation on security, as Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon, Chad, and Benin pledged to revive the Lake Chad Basin Multilateral Force.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> M’Cormack, 2011, p. 3.

<sup>55</sup> Fall, 2010.

<sup>56</sup> Fall, 2010.

<sup>57</sup> N’Diaye, 2011, p. 50.

<sup>58</sup> Pérouse de Montclos, 2014.

<sup>59</sup> Pérouse de Montclos, 2014.

<sup>60</sup> Pérouse de Montclos, 2014.

## The rapidly changing nature of violence in West Africa

The nature of violence in West Africa has significantly altered over the last decade. Conventional and large-scale conflict events, and civil wars, have receded in scale and intensity, but are being replaced by a new generation of threats. Election-related violence is on the rise, while recent years have seen a spike in extremism and terror attacks, drug trafficking, maritime piracy, and criminality. In addition, wars are increasingly being fought on the periphery of the state by armed insurgents who are both factionalized and in some cases, militarily weak.<sup>61</sup> This is evidenced by the campaign carried out by Boko Haram in Nigeria and the Tuareg and Arab uprisings in Mali.

### *Increase in election-related violence*

The wave of democratization in the 1990s that signaled waning tolerance for military coups marked a turning point for governance in the region but also brought with it new challenges in the form of election-related violence. Historically coup-prone countries such as Ghana, Nigeria, and Benin began to see a shift in civil-military relations, amidst a wave of multi-party elections across West Africa, including in Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, Mali, Cape Verde, and Sierra Leone, with Benin leading the charge in 1990.<sup>62</sup> The end of the Cold War saw the onset of civil wars, but also enabled new political openings. Although this process of political liberalization has had mixed results, it marks a milestone in the political maturation of the region.

The frequency and legitimacy of multi-party elections has meant that power is increasingly transferred via the ballot box, instead of down the barrel of a gun. The increase in the number of elections in West Africa since 1990<sup>63</sup> has been accompanied by a corresponding rise in internal struggles and election-related violence. Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire, Togo, Burkina Faso, and Sierra Leone have experienced varying degrees of turmoil and political violence before, during, or after elections. In Nigeria, election-related violence has intensified with each subsequent poll, with protests around the most recent elections in 2011 degenerating into communal violence that resulted in around 800 deaths, according to Human Rights Watch.<sup>64</sup>

The acceptance of elections as the standard for legitimate power transfers has led political rivals to view the process as a zero-sum game. This is largely because the stakes of the outcome are so high, with control of the state equating to very strong control over the economy and associated trappings, often for private gain.<sup>65</sup> The winner-takes-all system has been described as “an obstacle to democracy in Africa’s highly ethnicized politics,”<sup>66</sup> and does not adequately express the will of the voter. The Political Instability Task Force, which examined 141 episodes of instability worldwide between 1955 and 2003, concluded that partial democracies with

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<sup>61</sup> Straus, 2012, p. 181.

<sup>62</sup> Kacowicz, 1997, p. 370.

<sup>63</sup> Carbone, 2013, p. 8.

<sup>64</sup> Human Rights Watch, 2011a.

<sup>65</sup> Souaré, 2010, p. 6.

<sup>66</sup> Mesfin, 2008, p. 3.

factionalism resulted in the creation of regimes that were exceptionally unstable and at the highest risk of severe instability.

Additionally,<sup>67</sup> the majority system and the plurality system both effectively exaggerate the parliamentary representation of the largest political party.<sup>68</sup> In some cases, elections have spawned the ethnicization of politics and the hardening of ethnic identities. This is the case in Guinea, where challengers and incumbents alike are accused of played up inter-ethnic divisions to manipulate ethnicity as a mobilizing factor. Elections provide political entrepreneurs with an opportunity to strengthen their position and issue “extremist appeals” to mobilize their ethnic or religious constituencies, which can ramp up violence. In this way, elections have the potential to act as a “precipitating rather than an underlying”<sup>69</sup> cause of violence.

The retreat into identity politics reflects the challenge of institutionalizing democracy in ethnically diverse societies or very centralized political systems, where institutions that moderate conflict are weak.<sup>70</sup> Democratic mechanisms risk being manipulated or politicized, which fuels dissent among more marginalized groups; in addition, elites compete for supporters when they find their political power dwindling, even resorting to violence.<sup>71</sup> Where elections are perceived as being zero-sum and elites rely on ethnicity to rally supporters, election outcomes can consolidate power in entire ethnic group and its leading elites, to the complete exclusion of other groups.<sup>72</sup>

Other challenges include the “unacceptably high cost” of political campaigns and of electoral administration,<sup>73</sup> which lock out potential contenders, as well as the lack of internal organization and management of political parties, in particular of opposition parties, that hinders their ability to mount successful challenges.<sup>74</sup> Media and civil society have played a key role in West African countries (most notably in Nigeria, Liberia, and Ghana) in mediating between citizens and those vested with political power, while also pushing for reform and greater civil liberties. Where incumbents try to cling to political power, civil society has also played a prominent role in diffusing tensions (for instance, in Nigeria). Regional bodies such as ECOWAS, supported by the AU and international actors, have helped manage elections and to peacefully resolve disputes by establishing norms and via the development of policy instruments such as the Praia Declaration on Elections and Stability in West Africa.

**Table 3. Fatalities as a result of election-related violence in West Africa**

| Country | Election-related violence fatalities |
|---------|--------------------------------------|
|---------|--------------------------------------|

<sup>67</sup> Williams, 2011.

<sup>68</sup> Mesfin, 2008, p. 3.

<sup>69</sup> Leonard, 2010, p. 3.

<sup>70</sup> Bekoe, 2008, p. 30.

<sup>71</sup> Bekoe, 2008, p. 30.

<sup>72</sup> Bekoe, 2008, p. 31.

<sup>73</sup> Musah, 2009, p. 5.

<sup>74</sup> Musah, 2009, p. 5.

|   |   |
|---|---|
| Nigeria (National elections: 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011; Jos local elections: 2011) | Election-related violence in Nigeria has increased since its transition to civilian rule in 1999. Estimates put the death toll from violence during the 2003 national elections at 100, and at 300 in the 2007 elections, while the death toll from the 2011 elections was 800. Local elections have also been marred by violent episodes, with an estimated 700 people killed in the aftermath of 2008 elections in the Middle Belt city of Jos. |
| Côte d'Ivoire   | Côte d'Ivoire has also seen a gradual increase in election-related violence. According to the U.S. State Department, 10 people died as a result of violence related to the 1995 elections, while an estimated 500 people were killed in election-related violence in 2000. The disputed elections of 2010 resulted in an estimated 3,000 fatalities.  |
| Togo  | Togo experienced a significant upsurge in violence following a political transition after the death of President Eyadéma in 2005. Violence took place both before and after the elections, which were won by the son of the president Faure Gnassingbé. An estimated 500 people were killed in the fighting.  |
| Guinea  | Guinea too, has experienced violence around elections. Over 70 people were killed during the country's first multiparty elections in 1993 and the 2010 elections were also marred by violence. More than 50 people died in violence in the run-up to legislative elections in 2013.   |

Sources: Alemika, 2011; Campbell, 2010; Human Rights Watch, 2004; Human Rights Watch, 2011a; International Crisis Group, 2011; International Republican Institute, 1994; Knutsen, 2013; US Department of State, 1995; US Department of State, 1996; US Department of State, 2001; US Department of State, 2006.

### *Drug trafficking*

The scale of drug trafficking through West Africa became apparent between 2005 and 2007, with the seizure of more than 20 shipments involving thousands of kilograms of cocaine from South America that was destined for Europe.<sup>75</sup> Trafficking through West Africa has become a major threat to security. South American drug-producing cartels favor the coastal states as transit routes because of their porous borders, sparsely inhabited off-coast islands, state weakness and political instability, corruption, and poor surveillance, as well as their proximity to Europe.

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<sup>75</sup> UNODC, 2013, p. 9.

Trafficking, which combines the illicit character of smuggling with the illegal nature of a crime, has the potential to interlink with fragility and act as an accelerator of conflict in a number of ways.<sup>76</sup> The insidious effects of trafficking range from providing a source of funding to rebel movements and extremists, to pitting elites against each other in competition over drug-related rents, and undermining institutions and weakening governance. The evolution of trafficking into a fully-fledged criminal enterprise in West Africa has been fuelled by a combination of protracted conflicts, corruption, and weak state capacity.<sup>77</sup> As well as its location halfway between the Andean producing nations and the European consumer market, criminal networks have taken advantage of fragile political institutions while relying on coercion and patronage to build their own political capital or tap into that of local elites.<sup>78</sup> The region's integration with the global economy—through better communications, improved transportation, and access to new markets—has paradoxically also created further opportunities for international criminal syndicates to thrive.

Trafficking cocaine has particular ramifications for West Africa, constituting as it does the lion's share of narcotics transiting through the region and commanding the highest markup. With the long-term decline of cocaine demand from the U.S., the focus has shifted to the European market—where the number of users has doubled over the last decade.<sup>79</sup> Traffickers capitalize on the fact that West Africa is a viable and less monitored route to Europe than are Central America and the Caribbean, and in 2011, it was estimated that 17 percent of all cocaine consumed in Europe—or 21 tons— passed through the region, for a retail value of US\$1.7 billion (see Table 2).<sup>80</sup>

The implications and consequences of trafficking are manifold. They include the potential to compromise government officials and security agents, destabilize the government and weaken the state, erode the region's social fabric and economic development, and, as in the case of Guinea-Bissau, influence elections.<sup>81</sup> In addition, the discovery of methamphetamine labs in Liberia in May 2010 and in Nigeria in 2011 indicates that the region is no longer merely acting as a transit point but is also becoming a supplier.<sup>82</sup> Trafficking increases overall criminality and laundering, as avenues are sought to channel illicit funds. There have been reports that terrorist groups such as AQIM, rebel groups, insurgents in the Sahel, and other organized criminal groups have all exploited the instability of fragile states such as Guinea-Bissau to fund their activities.<sup>83</sup> A

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<sup>76</sup> Dechery and Ralston, 2014.

<sup>77</sup> Reitano and Shaw, 2013c.

<sup>78</sup> Cockayne, 2013.

<sup>79</sup> UNODC, 2010.

<sup>80</sup> Estimated by multiplying the size of the flow (21 tons) by the wholesale value of a kg of cocaine in Europe (\$84,000). Using the retail value would yield an even greater figure but would be inconsistent with the methodology generally used by UNODC.

<sup>81</sup> Souaré, 2010, p. 9.

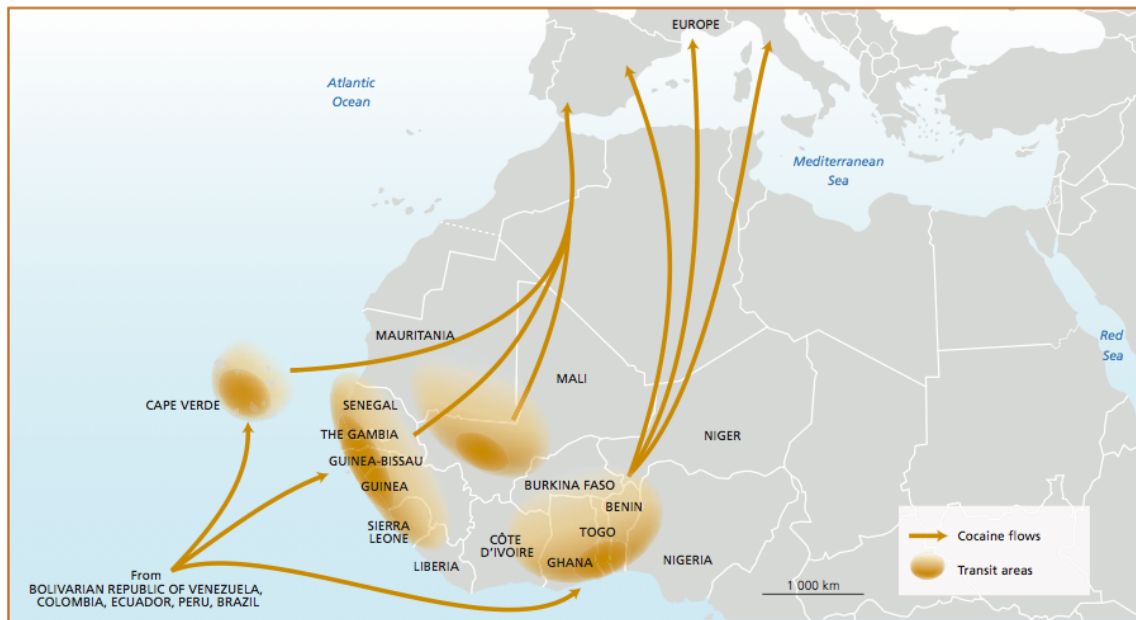
<sup>82</sup> UNODC, 2013, p. 19.

<sup>83</sup> Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2013, p. 5.

further danger to stability is the risk that a consuming society will emerge in those West African countries that have been exposed to the drug trade.<sup>84</sup>

There are signs of narcotics trafficking and links to trafficking networks in some of the more resilient and politically stable West African countries too, including Senegal, the Gambia, and Ghana.<sup>85</sup> The institutional resilience and strong political governance of these states may better equip them to withstand the destabilizing effects of drug trafficking than weaker states like Guinea-Bissau. However, the example of Mali is telling, where cocaine trafficking helped to weaken the formerly emerging democracy and model of stability, leaving it susceptible to militia, criminal, and terrorist networks.<sup>86</sup>

**Figure 7. The flow of cocaine from Latin America via West Africa to Europe**



Source: UNODC, 2013.

### *Maritime piracy and criminality*

Maritime piracy in the Gulf of Guinea overtook piracy in the Gulf of Aden in 2012, according to the International Maritime Bureau. This threat has evolved over the last decade from initially targeting Nigerian fishing boats and local vessels to spreading along the coast to countries such as Togo, Côte d'Ivoire, and Benin, and shifting focus to the big oil tankers, according to the ACLED. Apart from Chad and Sudan, almost all of Sub-Saharan Africa's oil-producing nations are located in the Gulf of Guinea. Further, linkages have been made between piracy and armed groups, and the money flowing from these activities creates vectors of further instability and acts as a disincentive to peace talks.<sup>87</sup> The consequences of piracy are far-reaching. Directly,

<sup>84</sup> *Security Council Report*, 2011, p. 4.

<sup>85</sup> Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2013, p. 30.

<sup>86</sup> Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2013, p. 32.

<sup>87</sup> UNODC, 2013, p. 5.

proceeds can be used to arm rebels, while indirectly, piracy adversely impacts the domestic economy and political stability, as well as the flow of foreign direct investment and trade.<sup>88</sup>

Maritime piracy in the Gulf of Guinea, fuelled by a fourfold increase in the spot price of a barrel of oil between 2000 and 2012,<sup>89</sup> undermines the stability of the coastal states while compromising economic development by putting pressure on livelihood practices such as fishing and maritime trade. A number of factors have contributed to the rise of maritime piracy, including “weakness and general inadequacy”<sup>90</sup> of the maritime policies of the Gulf of Guinea states, a lack of cooperation between coastal countries, porous borders, and the opportunistic maneuvers of criminal networks that harness the needs and grievances of local communities.<sup>91</sup> The abuse of Nigeria’s subsidies on fuel has also helped boost a cash-based black market, while thriving illegal trade of refined petroleum products has created strong incentives for piracy.<sup>92</sup> The proliferation of small arms in the region has contributed to the “frequency and intensity of conflicts and criminality”<sup>93</sup> that bedevils the region, including piracy, while the neglect of maritime security forces such as navy and coast guards, means that countries are ill equipped to defend their waters.<sup>94</sup>

The recent discovery of offshore hydrocarbon deposits has increased the geostrategic importance of the Gulf of Guinea,<sup>95</sup> as weak maritime governance and endemic corruption have enabled piracy to flourish. Criminality and violence from the Niger Delta have spilled over and reinforced piracy, fuelled by poverty, high unemployment, inequality, and contestations around the way in which oil wealth is distributed in Nigeria, which recorded oil revenues of US\$52 billion in 2011.<sup>96</sup> In addition, seaborne-armed groups from Bakassi and the Niger Delta have resorted to kidnappings, maritime attacks, and piracy. Profit is the dominant motive, but they also have political interests.<sup>97</sup> In 2011, maritime pirates shifted their focus away from Nigeria to neighboring countries, with 22 attacks executed off the coast of Benin, many of which were aimed at vessels transporting petroleum products. As a result, Beninese waters were reclassified as “high-risk” and port traffic declined by 70 percent,<sup>98</sup> hitting taxes on trade and affecting the cost of living for citizens due to a reduction in goods imports.<sup>99</sup> In 2012, Togo became the new

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<sup>88</sup> *Security Council Report*, 2011, p. 10.

<sup>89</sup> British Petroleum, 2013.

<sup>90</sup> International Crisis Group, 2012b, p. i.

<sup>91</sup> International Crisis Group, 2012b, p. ii.

<sup>92</sup> International Crisis Group, 2012b, p. 8.

<sup>93</sup> Onuoha, 2012, p. 7.

<sup>94</sup> Onuoha, 2012, p. 9.

<sup>95</sup> International Crisis Group, 2012b, p. i.

<sup>96</sup> UNODC, 2013, p. 45.

<sup>97</sup> International Crisis Group, 2012b, p. 13.

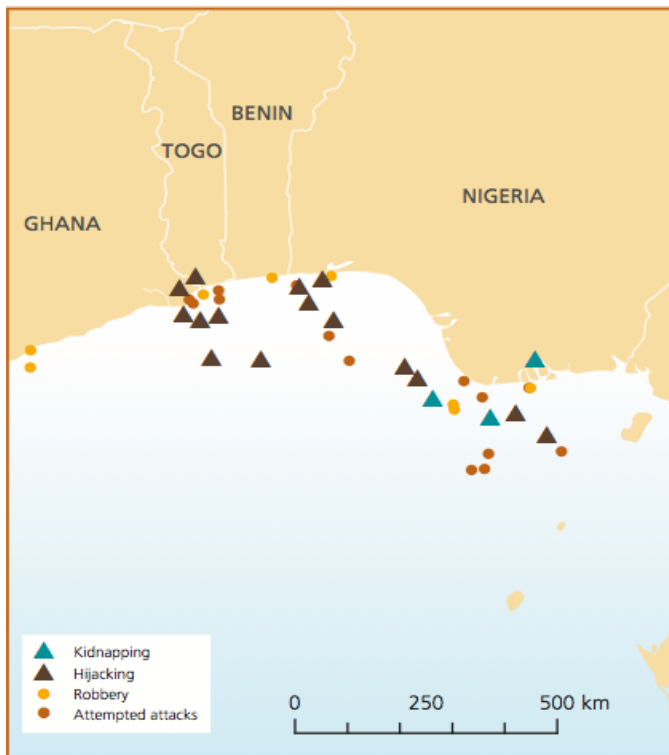
<sup>98</sup> UNODC, 2013, p. 5.

<sup>99</sup> UNODC, 2013, p. 51.

hotspot for attacks on tankers carrying petroleum products, with 18 attacks by mid-year.<sup>100</sup> Meanwhile, Ghana risks becoming a target for its newly discovered reserves.

Transnational organized crime networks have also exploited the weak border control and rule of law systems across many West African countries,<sup>101</sup> resulting in an increase in banditry, human smuggling, and cigarette smuggling. The proliferation of small arms in the region and smuggling of arms through porous borders is a further threat, and can contribute to instability on an ongoing basis as well as to an increase in criminal activity, for example in Mali.

**Figure 8. Piracy incidents in the Gulf of Guinea, 2012**



Source: UNODC, 2013.

### *Religious extremism and terrorism*

From the rise of extremist movements in the Sahel—such as Ansar Dine (Defenders of the Faith) and MUJAO—to the escalating violence of Nigeria’s Boko Haram, the emergence of religious radicalism across West Africa has presented a growing threat to the region and helped cast it as the new frontline in the “global war” against extremism. The seizure of “more than half of Mali’s land area”<sup>102</sup> by radical groups, along with kidnappings and incursions, and the mounting savagery of Boko Haram attacks, which have killed over 2,000 people in 2014 alone,<sup>103</sup> have

<sup>100</sup> UNODC, 2013, p. 5.

<sup>101</sup> Center for International Peace Operations (ZIF), 2012, p. 2.

<sup>102</sup> Østebø, 2012, p. 1.

<sup>103</sup> Associated Press, 2014.



brought the extent of the threat into sharp focus, and triggered fears of contagion and spillover to other parts of the region.<sup>104</sup>

While militant Islamist movements in West Africa have drawn some external support and doctrinal influence from the Middle East and South Asia, there is substantial evidence that the origins and character of radical groups such as Ansar Dine in the Sahel, and Boko Haram in Nigeria, are overwhelmingly homegrown. They have their roots in a combination of “real governance, corruption, impunity, and underdevelopment grievances,”<sup>105</sup> an intergenerational crisis, the disillusionment of young men, and friction between differing schools of Islamic thought. While Islamist militancy in West Africa remains interlinked with broader ideological currents of foreign influence, local circumstances have played a critical role in its emergence and trajectory.<sup>106</sup> As Gow and Olonisakin note, “domestic factors, rather than external influences, were more important in causing radicalization and violence, and external influences were only ‘excuses’ for domestic agitation.”<sup>107</sup> This marks a particularly concerning development, as Islam in West Africa has traditionally been regarded as being very tolerant due to the strong influence of the large Sufi brotherhoods such as Qadiriyya and Tijaniyya.

Nigeria has by far the highest number of documented events involving violent Muslim-identified militias in all of Africa—there were 128 such events between 1997 and 2012. Violent activity by Islamist militias increased significantly after 2010; in terms of its proportion of the overall political violence on the continent, violent activity by Islamist militias increased from 4.96 percent in 1997 to 13.54 percent in 2012, according to ACLED.<sup>108</sup>

Mali has also seen an increase in Islamist militia activity since 2011, as Ansar Dine, a domestic Tuareg-based Islamist movement, affiliated itself with the broader Al Qaeda movement. In contrast, however, AQIM has committed far less violence against civilians in Mali, Niger, and Mauritania than Boko Haram has in Nigeria. The goal of the international terrorist network in the recent war in the north of Mali was to leverage the credibility and presence of Ansar Dine and gain traction on the ground to overthrow the national regime and impose an alternative one. Boko Haram, on the other hand, tends to focus on regional or subnational goals, as it lacks the capacity to overthrow the government or even the desire to mount such a challenge and establish an alternative regime.<sup>109</sup> Despite its international profile, just 14 percent of AQIM’s overall activity in Mali constitutes violence against civilians, compared to Boko Haram’s record of over 50 percent of overall activity. Similarly, Boko Haram has a higher average fatality per event rate (5.6) than does AQIM (3.1). It even tops the rate of Al-Shabaab in the Horn and East Africa (3), according to ACLED.

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<sup>104</sup> Guichaoua, 2014.

<sup>105</sup> International Crisis Group, 2014b, p. i.

<sup>106</sup> Østebø, 2012, p. 4.

<sup>107</sup> Gow et al., 2013.

<sup>108</sup> Dowd, 2013, p. 5

<sup>109</sup> Dowd, 2013, p. 5.

Extremist groups in West Africa move with ease between states.<sup>110</sup> The fighting forces resemble “mobile armed bands” with bases in numerous territories rather than traditional, organized armies.<sup>111</sup> They also draw support and funding from international terrorist networks, such as in the case of Mali, where AQIM first appeared in 2009 and has since built up a presence. By 2013, the terrorist group had notched up higher activity rates in Mali than in Algeria, where it had a longer-established presence, according to the ACLED. AQIM has an on-and-off presence in Mali, Niger, Mauritania, and possibly part of Burkina Faso.

The inability of security institutions to fend off emerging threats such as maritime piracy, violent attacks by extremist groups, and drug trafficking comes despite domestic, regional, and international attempts to reform and reposition the subregion’s security services. Along with poor governance, the failure to effectively adapt the armed forces to new threats is in part a reflection of their unchanged mission statements, which are geared toward addressing conventional warfare threats. The focus remains firmly on external security, despite trends to the contrary. To be truly effective at managing these emerging threats, the security sector needs to be recalibrated. This necessitates revisiting and redefining mission statements,<sup>112</sup> which has clear implications for training, staffing, and the size and formation of security forces.

### Longstanding ethnonational conflicts persist

Despite the major shift in the nature of violence, longstanding ethnonational conflicts are still present in the region. The unresolved issue of the economic marginalization and political exclusion of the Tuareg people has been a bone of contention and a cause of violence in the Sahel since colonial times. French-drawn national boundaries interrupted caravan routes and cut off access to traditional pasture grounds<sup>113</sup> Tuaregs and Arabs were grossly under-represented in postindependence cabinets, the army, and in senior civil service positions.<sup>114</sup> Perceptions of injustice run high in the north of Mali, which has experienced economic marginalization and neglect and unequal access to health and education provision.<sup>115</sup> This has been reinforced by environmental stresses including desertification, drought, and the scarcity of land and water, as well as the weakening of traditional institutions that helped to mediate conflict among members of these groups.

Although the crisis in Mali in 2012 caught observers by surprise, the long history of Tuareg rebellion<sup>116</sup> in the Sahel dates back to the 1890s, when French colonial incursions into the northern areas of present-day Mali were met with armed resistance.<sup>117</sup> Numerous further violent uprisings have taken place since, including against the French colonial state in 1916, and

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<sup>110</sup> Straus, 2012, p. 181.

<sup>111</sup> Straus, 2012, p. 190.

<sup>112</sup> Kandeh, 2004b; Ouédraogo, 2014.

<sup>113</sup> Bakrania, 2013, p. 9.

<sup>114</sup> Bakrania, 2013, p. 10.

<sup>115</sup> Bakrania, 2013, p. 9.

<sup>116</sup> Antil and Mokhefi, 2014.

<sup>117</sup> Thurston and Lebovich, 2013, p. 9.

again in 1963 following independence, and then in 1990. A further outbreak occurred between 2006 and 2009, which gave momentum to the notion of a Tuareg homeland. The most recent uprising in 2012 that led to the collapse of the state was distinguished by its strong Islamist overtones. Tuareg uprisings cumulatively comprise the longest-running insurgency in West Africa, and while it remains limited in terms of casualties, it represents a major source of fragility for the Sahel.

There are a number of other low-intensity conflicts in the subregion that are based on ethnicity and issues of inclusion, and access to land, that could flare up any time. These include the conflict in Casamance, the tension with the Diola in Sierra Leone and Liberia, stresses around land in Western Côte d'Ivoire, unrest in Nigeria's Middle Belt, and the ethnic polarization of politics in Guinea, as well as polarization between different socioeconomic groups in Mauritania.<sup>118</sup> Any of these could ignite and create a precarious situation in the region.

## Conclusion

Trends in conflict and violence in West Africa can be divided into distinct periods. The death toll from conflict in the immediate post-independence period—the consequence of the Biafran War and Guinea-Bissau's armed struggle for independence—tapered off and hit a low after 1970, before climbing again after 1989 due to the devastating civil wars of the Mano River Basin countries. With the turn of the century, the death toll from conflict began to fall once again until 2007, when a spike in violence in Mali and northern Nigeria interrupted the downward trajectory. Despite the Biafran War and the violence that affected the countries of the Mano River Basin in the 1990s, it is important to note that West Africa remains among the continent's subregions that have experienced the fewest fatalities due to violence and conflict. In addition, West Africa is home to some of Africa's most stable countries, such as Senegal and Ghana, and has witnessed successful transitions from war to peace in countries such as Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Côte d'Ivoire.

However, a change in the nature of conflict, and the emergence of a new generation of threats, could overshadow the political and economic gains seen across the subregion since the beginning of the new millennium. The specter of narco-trafficking, maritime piracy, and religious extremism risk undoing the progress of the last decade and require the countries of the subregion to transform their security institutions to respond appropriately and effectively to these new threats. Overcoming violence and fragility in the subregion's most vulnerable areas is probably its most daunting challenge if it is to sustain the last decade of impressive progress regarding the consolidation of democracy and the improvement of economic development.

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<sup>118</sup> Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2014.

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