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Peace and Security
In Africa

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**PEACE AND SECURITY IN AFRICA**

Gilles Olakounlé Yabi

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**Key messages**

- Africa is getting safer in a long-term perspective. The amount of conflicts and resultant deaths has been steadily decreasing for decades. But for many, daily life is still dominated by human insecurity in various forms.
- There has been a steady shift away from autocratic forms of governance towards democratic governance and respect for basic human rights. But this evolution has not been linear and political systems have not been fully stabilized.
- Though the extent of progress has varied between countries and regions, African economies have grown by leaps and bounds, and have lifted millions out of poverty. Africa has been described as the continent which offers the best prospects for economic growth in the future.
- African governments still have problems with effectively administering all of their territory, and preventing various criminal and terrorists groups from extending their presence, challenging state authority and legitimacy.
- Economic, political, and cultural integration through African Regional Economic Communities (RECs) and the African Union (AU) have been playing an important role in bringing peace and security to the continent.

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Introduction

Africa and the Middle East are the two regions of the world with the highest conflict burden. Since the mid-1990s, Africa has gradually improved across all measurements of death and war (Figure 1). These positive changes are due to several factors, including greater regional cooperation, decreased intrastate wars, economic growth, and increased democratic governance.

The types of conflicts have also changed: from wars of independence, long term civil wars, and intrastate wars, conflicts are now due to weak governance structures and state presences which are exacerbated by religious and ethnic differences as well as to transnational crime and global governance failures.

Climate change is fundamentally altering the geographic landscape, forcing groups to share previously separate resources. While Africa is no longer ravaged by the famines that characterized the continent for much of the 20th century, access to food and other basics is still precarious. It is important for the policy community to recognize the positive changes in the African security situation and to reinforce the underlying trends leading to a more peaceful Africa.

Political crises associated with transitions and the challenge of state- and nation-building are still the main sources of insecurity on the continent

Most episodes of violence in Africa in the last few years are associated with conflicts over political power at the highest level. Violence appears to be one of the tools in the battles to access power or to keep it. As reported by the Institute of Security Studies, 25% of elections were accompanied by violence. After deadly post-electoral violence in Kenya in 2007, Côte d’Ivoire also experienced a civil war in early 2011 that officially claimed 3000 victims.

Violence in many parts of the continent is primarily centered on rivalries between strong political personalities backed by their political supporters who are also often partly defined by ethnic, regional, and religious identities. The alignment of political lines of division with identity affiliation exacerbates conflicts and has been a constant threat to peace and security.

Throughout the continent, political systems have not yet been stabilized and African societies, which are characterized by their immense cultural diversity, are finding it difficult to adopt a shared vision of governing principles and values for their countries. Political crises are associated with various forms of violence that weaken states’ legitimacy and capacity to protect peaceful coexistence.

A clash of political visions, often surrounding the place and role of religion in politics, is at the heart of a number of conflicts on the continent. Violent competition over control of power, resources, and minds has to be put in a historical perspective. Most African countries have continued to struggle to find their own way after only five or six decades of existence as independent states (Figure 2).

Examples abound to confirm the profoundly political dimension of recent violence. In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), progress in political stabilization has not put an end to the killings of civilians by various rebel groups in the east. Political tensions are on the rise ahead of forthcoming presidential elections. The return of political violence in Burundi has raised deep concerns about the Great Lakes region’s possible relapse into widespread violence, igniting tensions between ethnic groups that span borders.
South Sudan, the world’s newest country, was born out of a decade-long civil war and soon after its independence it itself descended into war. This renewed war took on an ethnic dimension and was started due to an inability to successfully share power between two ex-rebel leaders. A new peace accord has been signed and it brought the power-sharing agreement back to a pre-civil war status quo. The last two years in South Sudan have been characterized by violence against civilians.

The restarting of the civil war in the Central African Republic in 2013 must be viewed through the lens of a country which has been particularly fragile, politically and economically, since its founding. The violence started with a new coup d’état and the emergence of one rebel group, which justified the formation of another one to counter the first group, with both primarily targeting civilians.

In North Africa, political change is also driving trends in peace and security. Tunisia is the sole country that underwent a regime change during the Arab Spring that has managed to stave off further violence. While Tunisia has suffered terrorist attacks and appears vulnerable, its leadership is still democratically elected and can govern legitimately. The Arab Spring led to political reforms in Morocco and Algeria, involving more accommodation to Islamist parties. The Arab Spring brought about a civil war in Libya causing the ouster and killing of Muammar Gaddafi. The various militias were not able to agree on power-sharing and now fight one another. Despite current promising political initiatives and international efforts, peace and security will be difficult to achieve.

**Figure 1 - Number of armed conflicts in Africa by type per million people 1960-2014**

Terrorist activity associated with local, regional, and global armed jihadist groups and networks has added a new dimension to political violence on the continent

According to the 2015 Global Terrorism Index, which provides detailed figures on terrorist attacks, the total number of deaths from terrorism in 2014 reached 32,685, constituting an 80% increase from the previous year. Over 78% of the death toll occurred in just five countries: Iraq, Nigeria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Syria (Figure 3). Africa’s most populated country, Nigeria, is by far the most affected by terrorism as the dominant form of violence in recent years. In 2014, Boko Haram was the most violent terrorist group in the world, killing more people than even the Islamic State in the Levant (ISIL). The two groups were responsible for half the deaths from terrorism worldwide. In March 2015, Boko Haram pledged allegiance to ISIL and called itself the Islamic State’s West Africa Province (ISWAP).

Despite a significant improvement from the second half of 2015, Nigeria is still under stress from Boko Haram. The election of a new president was partially based on his pledges to defeat the terrorist group. While Boko Haram has suffered military setbacks, it is still active and relies almost exclusively on suicide attacks on easy civilian targets in Nigeria, Cameroon, Niger, and Chad. The exact levels of interaction between Boko Haram and ISIL are unknown, but Boko Haram’s allegiance to ISIL remains a source of legitimate concern.
Boko Haram has been connecting West and Central Africa though its violent activities. The group has taken advantage of weak state control of the borders between Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon, and Chad to move fighters and weapons across countries. Boko Haram became ascendant in the region when cooperation between the concerned countries was very limited. With international assistance the countries of the Lake Chad basin have now come together to coordinate their fight, causing Boko Haram to lose significant territory. Even then, the human and economic cost of the last five years is remarkable.

**Figure 3 - Deaths from Terrorist attacks 2000-2014**

[Graph showing deaths from terrorist attacks 2000-2014]


West Africa, the Sahel, and North Africa are caught between the terrorist presence of the well-established Al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the new but quickly expanding ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and Levant). This network has taken advantage of the chaos and disorder in Libya to establish a province there. This is the most active and second largest ISIL presence outside of Iraq and Syria. Some believe that ISIL is creating a strategic fallback point so that even if it is defeated in Iraq and Syria the organization will survive. There has been an international response against ISIL in Libya, but the country is too internally fractured for any one group to take the lead.

The crisis in Mali in 2012 remains one of the main drivers of insecurity in the rest of the Sahel and West Africa. The crisis itself was the result of a combination of old internal conflicts dating back to independence and the arrival of new actors and drivers of social and economic transformations of the Sahel from the early 2000s. Terrorist groups, foreign preachers of radical Islam, as well as cigarette, human, and drug trafficking networks progressively settled in the Sahel and Sahara taking advantage of weak state governance.

African and French military intervention in 2013 followed by the deployment of a UN peacekeeping mission succeeded in preventing territorial control of northern Mali by AQIM affiliated groups. But the intervention has not eliminated them. Some of the groups and leaders managed to survive and reorganize before mounting new terrorist attacks in the north and later on
in the Malian capital city Bamako and further south in Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire in 2016. These groups have changed their tactics and now include suicide commando attacks on civilian targets in West African cities. The UN mission in Mali has also suffered heavy losses, quickly becoming the deadliest UN peacekeeping mission in the world, highlighting the specific challenge of bringing peace to an environment rife with terrorist activity.

Somalia remains an epicenter of insecurity and violence in the Horn of Africa. The country has been unstable for three decades. A political vacuum opened the door for various criminal groups to exert violent control over territory and resources. Islamist groups emerged and gained ground as they initially appeared to provide a credible political alternative to chaos. As a reaction to foreign military interventions, al-Shabaab emerged as a powerful radical group resorting to terrorism. A strong international force comprised of Western and African militaries has united against jihadist combatants. While al-Shabaab has suffered significant setbacks and the internationally backed Transitional Federal Government has established control of Mogadishu, the group is not defeated and still capable of conducting significant terrorist attacks in Somalia and elsewhere in the region. Kenya has been severely hit by al-Shabaab’s exportation of violence with deadly attacks on a mall in September 2013 and on a university campus in April 2015.

According to the Global Terrorism Index 2015, statistical analysis has identified two factors which are very closely associated with terrorist activity: political violence committed by the state and the existence of a broader armed conflict. The link between these two factors and terrorism is so strong that less than 0.6% of all terrorist attacks have occurred in countries without any ongoing conflict or any form of political terror. This finding points to the importance of analysing terrorism in the context of wider political crises and violence.

Recent attacks in North Africa, West Africa, and the Horn of Africa also point to an increasing exposure of almost every country to terrorist attacks, given the transnational and global strategic objectives of Al-Qaeda or ISIL affiliated groups. The so-called jihadist groups consider their fight both global and local and have been expanding their area of operations as a response to reinforced security presence in their earlier safe havens. The shift from a localized threat in northern Mali to a wider West African threat, in the span of a few months, is a telling example of this trend.

Youth unemployment, economic pressures and transnational criminal networks nurture the fears of violent extremism

The surge of terrorist attacks in so many parts of the world, the apparent religious motivations of the most dangerous terrorist groups and their ability to recruit young combatants have led to a focus on the issue of youth radicalization and violent extremism. In North, West, and Eastern Africa particularly, unemployment and a lack of fixes to the gap between demographic growth and socioeconomic progress seem to provide terrorist groups with a large and renewable pool of recruits. In fact, socioeconomic pressures and the fragility of states make young people vulnerable to recruitment to various types of criminal activity, not only terrorism.

Increase in crime is a deep concern on the continent. Unemployed youths living in slums, with little hope for advancement, are also a source of gang violence. Increasing urbanization can further drive this trend, to the point where criminal gangs gain a chronic systemic character. Criminal gangs have seriously threatened the viability of the state in many Latin American countries and could do the same in Africa. The European market for cocaine has stimulated the creation of smuggling routes
through West Africa, adding to existing drug trafficking activities in North Africa, the Sahel, Eastern, and Southern Africa (Figure 4).

**Figure 4 - Flow of Cocaine through Africa in 2010**

Transnational crime, including human trafficking and a large number of lucrative illicit activities, have gone hand in hand with globalization. For African states, establishing complex security and judicial mechanisms to fight organized crime and associated corruption of state institutions is a challenge.

While fears of violent extremism associated with terrorism are legitimate, there are other patterns of violence involving African youths in rural areas that deserve more attention. In most of West Africa and the Sahel, tensions between herders and farmers are common and degenerate into recurrent episodes of deadly violence. The competition for scarce natural resources is generally aggravated by ethnic and religious differences in a context of violent group mobilization and limited state presence.
Increasing desertification, exacerbated by climate change, fundamentally alters the geographic landscape and pushes the pastoralists further south in search of grazing. This serves to further increase tensions between southern farmers who view pastoralists as foreign invaders. Climate change will continue to cause permanent changes to people’s lifestyles and its negative consequences can only be managed through effective governance.

**Policy options and prospects**

- Africans almost uniformly support democracy but are also increasingly demanding efficient governance systems that can respond to their core economic, social and security needs. Significant diversity of current political situations across the continent will continue to be reflected in the trajectories of individual countries in the coming decades but there are common trends as discussed above.

- African countries are a complex stew of differing ethnicities, identities, and languages and it is up to governments and civil societies to find the most appropriate institutional responses to the challenge of managing diversity and ensuring equitable ways of sharing resources. The recent advances in the quality of governance are palpable and should lead to decreased violence in the long-term. If sustained and more diversified and inclusive, economic growth in Africa should also lead to a more peaceful continent.

- A key trend that has been shaping African peace and security is an increase in multilateralism. Coinciding with the drastic decrease in armed violence and conflict on the African continent, there has been an increase in the amount of peacekeeping operations. In 2000, the UN deployed less than 25,000 peacekeepers in Africa; in 2010 that number had increased to over 103,000 and is still around 102,000 in 2016. The UN has peacekeepers that are present in almost all of the hot spots on the continent.

- But African regional organizations such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have been deploying large efforts to resolve conflicts for a long time despite their military and financial limitations. African leaders have also stepped up and served as mediators between warring groups in other countries. The African Union has been trying to embrace many of the roles that the UN had previously occupied. Its African Standby Force is an illustration of AU ambitions. Delays in its full operationalization illustrate the gap between ambitions on the one hand and current capacities on the other.

- Africa’s international partners have been particularly active, multiplying peace and security interventions and initiatives, in response to new crises and also providing long-term support to national and regional mechanisms. The European Union is a key supporter of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) through the African Peace Facility. The EU deployed a training mission in Mali whose mandate involves the training and advising of the Malian military. Another mission focuses in both Niger and Mali on assisting reform of the non-military security sector. Other EU assistance is oriented towards preventing violent extremism through various programs and implementing partners, including civil society organizations.

- The United States and France are also actively involved on the continent. France has launched Operation Barkhane which in partnership with host nation forces in the Sahel region is fighting against terrorist groups. The United States created a military command, AFRICOM in 2008 to coordinate US forces on the continent. AFRICOM manages the US Trans-Saharan
The Counterterrorism Initiative (TSCTI) and the Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA). The wave of spectacular terrorist attacks in 2015 and 2016 in the heart of Europe and in West, North and Eastern Africa should not lead to a reduction of the international security presence on the continent. There is no more doubt about the importance of peace and security in Africa for peace and security in Europe.

- The analysis of trends offers a range of policy options for partners of the African continent. While mechanisms and funding for quick reactions to outbursts of violent conflicts remain essential, long-term initiatives aiming at strengthening African states’ capabilities, formal and informal conflict-prevention institutions, as well as regional and continental mechanisms, are equally needed. Given the complex current challenges and those ahead, platforms of dialogue between African policy-makers and their international partners might be the best way to constantly discuss priorities and adjust resource allocations accordingly.

**Key questions for discussion**

- What can be done to increase the presence of the African states in regions where their relative absence or perception of limited legitimacy offered too much space for actors of violent extremism to settle and win hearts and minds?

- How should the UN security architecture be reformed with a view to more effectively support political stabilization efforts across Africa? How should the UN and the African Union cooperate on security issues?

- What are the risks of misallocation of resources in peace and security initiatives in Africa, which could result from the current global focus on terrorism and violent extremism?

- What are the possible long-term implications of increased international military presence in Africa on peace and security on the continent and in Europe?

- How will increasing urbanization change the human security landscape and what lessons can Africa learn from other continents to prevent a surge of criminal violence in its major cities?

- Due to demographics, resource presence, youth entrepreneurship and large infrastructure development initiatives, Africa is expected to experience an economic boom in the medium term. Are there economic development options that could deliberately reinforce peace and security prospects?

**References and reading**


