

# Transnational Conflict in Africa

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## Overview

1. This memo explores transnational conflict in Africa. Section I is concerned with the wide (and under-acknowledged) extent and pattern of conflict between states and across borders, and how it may be researched. Section II is concerned with the implications for policy.
2. The key research finding is that *most armed conflicts in Africa have a significant transnational element*. This inverts the standard trope that the vast majority of African conflicts are internal and not inter-state. Country specialists focusing on individual conflicts have made this observation for years: what is new is that the Transnational Conflict in Africa (TCA) dataset shows for the first time that this is a general phenomenon. This allows for a comparative analysis of the extent, patterns and drivers of transnational conflict, which allows us to move beyond imprecise metaphors such as conflict 'spillover', into a more systematic representation of the phenomenon, that puts transnational political rivalries at the centre of the story of conflict in the continent.
3. The memo summarises and expands upon two papers on transnational armed conflict in Africa. The first is an [occasional paper](#) that introduces a new dataset; the second is a [peer-reviewed published paper](#) that re-describes patterns of armed conflicts in Africa on the basis of this dataset. The core finding of the papers is that existing datasets have systematically under-represented the level of transnational political violence (covert war, militarised disputes, support to state and non-state belligerents in 'internal' war and sponsorship of coups d'état and the suppression of coups) to such a significant degree that we need fundamentally to reconsider the received wisdom that Africa has experienced many civil wars and very few inter-state wars. The elaborated findings focus on the patterns of transnational conflict: how it varies from one African sub-region to another, how it has changed over time, and how different states pursue their strategies for transnational conflict in different ways.
4. One important policy implication of the TCA data is that there is a mismatch between the norms and principles of inter-state relations in Africa (specifically non-interference in the internal affairs of other states) and the reality (widespread interference). Every

African policymaker knows this. Public discussion runs on a parallel track to the negotiations over 'real' political dynamics.

5. The TCA dataset project opens up a research agenda for studying the drivers, patterns and instruments of African inter-state rivalries. Several areas of policy-focused research need particular attention. These include:
  - a. Boundaries, separatism and power hierarchies;
  - b. Regional multilateralism, security communities and peace missions;
  - c. Post-conflict reconstruction and security sector reform;
  - d. Middle Eastern engagement in Africa.

## **Section I: Summary of Research Findings**

### ***'Introducing the TCA' Occasional Paper***

6. The CRP/WPF occasional paper introduces the TCA dataset, and the method whereby it was constructed. The TCA dataset covers the period 1960-2015 for the whole continent (both north and south of the Sahara). The data indicate that (i) transnationality is a major feature of armed conflict in Africa, (ii) most so-called 'civil wars' are internationalised, and (iii) the dominant definitions of 'interstate conflict' and 'civil war' are too narrow to capture the particularities of Africa's wars. The notion that Africa is a global exception, where inter-state wars are rare and internal wars are common, is not correct.
7. The TCA dataset is built by combining, augmenting, and revising existing datasets, each of which captures some elements of transnational conflict, including interstate wars, external state support in interstate wars, low-intensity confrontations between states, external interventions in civil wars, and external support to rebels or coup-makers. Principal among these are the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) which compiles data for armed conflict based on a threshold of battlefield deaths, the Militarised Interstate Dispute (MID) dataset compiled by the Correlates of War (COW) project, which focuses on low-intensity military confrontations between states, and a dataset of coups d'état. The new dataset was supported by expert inputs and some other new information that appears in memoirs, historical studies, and academic papers.
8. The foundational datapoints for the TCA are those in the UCDP. While rigorously constructed, internally consistent and valid for the purposes for which they were specifically designed, these data have several shortcomings. Notably, the reliance on contemporaneous media and NGO sources means that covert armed action, which is not reported at the time, is systematically under-represented. This information typically emerges later, in historical studies or memoirs. It would not be feasible for the UCDP (or any other dataset that seeks to be up-to-date) to constantly revisit its previous data points every time new information comes to light, but this unfortunately leads to a distortion that is highly pertinent to the study of transnational conflict. The UCDP dataset also does not adequately represent cross-border support to belligerents, in the

majority of cases that do not involve the armed forces of the supporting country actually crossing the border.

9. The TCA dataset includes 2,977 transnational conflict dyad-years in total, of which 546 are new observations (not included in the existing datasets). While conventional inter-state war remains rare, inter-state rivalry using military means is common.

### **'Re-describing Transnational Conflict in Africa' Paper**

10. The second paper examines the patterns that emerge from analysing the TCA dataset. Among the types of transnational conflict are:
  - interstate wars;
  - external state support to belligerents in intrastate wars;
  - low-intensity confrontations between states (militarised disputes);
  - trans-national insurgencies; and
  - external support to coup-makers or governments resisting attempted coups.
11. The paper finds that the patterns are broadly similar both north and south of the Sahara, though there are important regional differences within Africa that should be explored more fully.
12. Important changes have taken place over the decades. The immediate post-independence period (1960-75) was characterised by pan-African collaboration in supporting liberation fronts fighting against Portuguese colonial rule and white minority regimes and by the counterpart destabilisation activities of those regimes; by a small number of territorial disputes; and by inter-state support for coups d'état (of which there were many). The 1975-90 period saw a changed pattern, dominated by rivalries among Africa's emerging powers, including several overt interstate wars (notably Ethiopia-Somalia and Chad-Libya) and a high-level of cross-border entanglement in long-running civil wars. In the immediate aftermath of the ending of the Cold War, the number of purely internal conflicts spiked, followed by a trans-continental engagement in wars in Sudan and Zaire/Democratic Republic of Congo and regional engagement in west African wars. In the recent period, older patterns of cross-border military engagement have been supplanted, in part, by military interventions authorised by multilateral organisations under the rubric of peace support operations.
13. The last decade shows a growing trend of Middle Eastern engagement in African conflicts. Although the same exercise in re-describing the datasets has yet been undertaken for the non-African countries of the Middle East/North Africa region (i.e. the Levant, Arabian Peninsula and Persian Gulf countries), we assume that it is uncontroversial to assert that wars in the Middle Eastern region are similarly a hybrid of inter-state and internal. It may be the case that that there is no major difference in patterns of conflict between the regions on either shore of the Red Sea, or between North Africa and the Sahel.
14. Consequently, the majority of African conflicts should correctly be re-classified as internationalised *internal wars*, while other forms of interstate violent or coercive

actions are not uncommon. Under the narrow definition of a civil war—a war that is fought solely between a sovereign government and armed non-state actor within a country—there are far fewer cases of civil war in Africa than typically assumed.

## Section II: Policy Implications

15. The first policy implication is that transnational conflict in Africa is an important and neglected research agenda. The lack of comparative research on this area means that policy implications are provisional. However, this memo explores some areas of interest.

### ***State Boundaries, Separatism and Power Hierarchies***

16. The key finding here is: *the apparent stability of Africa's inter-state order masks vigorous transnational power contests.*
17. Post-colonial Africa is remarkable for the stability of its inter-state boundaries and the scarcity of successful separatist movements. This is all the more surprising given the arbitrariness of Africa's borders, drawn by the colonial powers in the 19th century without regard to local realities. There are two main prevailing explanations for the lack of border wars, separatism and inter-state conflicts. One is a legalistic explanation. It attributes the absence of African inter-state wars to the 1964 Cairo Declaration in which the OAU Member States agreed to respect colonially-inherited boundaries. A second explanation is that what matters in African politics is control over the national capital, as the seat of state power, so that administering the peripheries and controlling the frontiers does not matter much. The TCA data do not refute these explanations as such. What they do demonstrate, is that African states have routinely used force across borders, refuting the conclusion that there is an African inter-state peace.
18. In the absence of territorial acquisition by stronger powers or the fragmentation of weaker countries, contests over the inter-state hierarchy of power are manifest through other mechanisms. Some of these mechanisms are formal, such as the allocation of roles and responsibilities in the AU and regional economic communities. More powerful states assume regionally hegemonic roles—the clearest case being Nigeria with respect to Liberia and Sierra Leone. Some are informal. There are a number of *de facto* cross-border buffer zones, such as the Ethiopian and Kenyan zones of control in Somalia, and (for a while at least) the Ugandan and Rwandan security perimeters in DRC. There are also countries that have *de facto* client or tributary status *vis-à-vis* stronger neighbors; this was the case for Chad with respect to Sudan in the 1990s, and for Central African Republic with respect to Chad more recently.
19. Typically, African inter-state conflict consists *both* of sponsoring local armed groups *and also* engaging with national politics within the capital. States are highly unequal in their power, and their ability to project power either through military force or through financial patronage. Some states have seen themselves atop regional political patronage hierarchies. Libya under Colonel Gaddafi was a prime example; Burkina Faso under Pres. Blaise Compaoré a lesser case. In addition, some 'rebel' movements have proved more enduring or more capable than recognised governments. Examples include the Eritrean People's Liberation Front in the late 1980s and early 1990s, which

outlasted several Sudanese governments and was more militarily capable than them, and the Congolese Liberation Movement (MLC) headed by Jean-Pierre Bemba, which was the senior partner in a security pact with the CAR government of Ange-Felix Patassé in the 2000s. Transnational political-military dynamics are amenable to a political marketplace analysis. Political markets are typically transnationally integrated: a buyer can purchase political allegiances and services across boundaries. This can range from renting a local militia to striking a deal in which the state itself is put at the service of an external patron.

20. Disruptions or challenges to the inter-state hierarchy create conflicts. For example, if a regional hegemon is massively weakened by internal strife, then the governments of nearby countries may seek to challenge the declining power, or one another. This happened in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The potential for conflict may also not arise from governments but from former proxies which have lost their sponsor. An example would be the repercussions of regime change in Libya in 2011 for neighbouring countries such as Mali, which were destabilised by Tuareg armed groups that had long been armed and controlled by Libya, which were suddenly cut adrift when their sponsor was overthrown. Alternatively, a state that was formerly a junior or client, which is rising to a point at which it can challenge its former senior or patron, may pursue its ambition by renegotiating the status of client groups in their mutual borderlands. An example would be the rise of Chad *vis-à-vis* Sudan. From 1990 to 2004, Chad was a client state of Sudan. In the mid-2000s, as Chad built up its capacity through oil revenues, it saw the potential of parity with its erstwhile sponsor. This culminated in a proxy war in 2008-09, resolved with agreement on equal status thereafter.
21. Another implication is that, politically marginalised groups within state boundaries have a credible call on engagement from neighbouring states, using well-established informal precedent and established military-political links. The obvious dangers arising from these situations can be managed through regional multilateral mechanisms, and are increasingly so managed.

### ***Regional Multilateralism, Security Communities and Peace Missions***

22. The key finding is that *the informal power hierarchies within Africa's regional multilateral organisations (the AU, Regional Economic Communities and Regional Mechanisms) reflect the same hierarchies and rivalries that previously drove transnational armed conflicts.*
23. In the academic literature, 'security communities' are defined as groupings of states, among which it is unthinkable to use force to settle disputes. Clearly, Africa has no security communities in this conventional sense—indeed the TCA data refute the idea that the continent as a whole represents such a security community. However, the complex and overlapping structures of the African peace and security architecture indicate that a norm has developed (since the 1990s at least) of resolving conflicts by diplomatic means, with overt use of force prohibited by the rules of the club. Hence, African interstate organisations are a special form of 'security communities' in which

political disputes are managed by political bargaining, which includes informal elements coercion.

24. The norms of non-use of force between states and respecting boundaries are routinely violated by covert military activities. All African leaders are well aware of this. But the norms are still espoused. This double standard—or, to use a phrase drawn from scholars of sovereignty, ‘organised hypocrisy’—means regional peace-related exercises are always dual track exercises. This is manifest in formal meetings and summits, in peace negotiations, and in Africa peace support operations.
25. *Formal interstate meetings.* The utility of meetings and summits at the African Union, ECOWAS and IGAD lies in the combination of the formal agenda alongside the informal discussions and negotiations that can be conducted in parallel by virtue of the fact that so many leaders have congregated in one place. The current reform process of the AU, based upon organisational templates drawn from international consulting companies, wholly misses this essential point. African interstate organisations cannot be junior versions of the UN or OECD: their value lies precisely in the manner in which they provide a forum and norms that allow for informal political bargaining to be brought into alignment with the formal institutions and principles of the Pax Africana.
26. *Peace negotiations.* Every peace negotiation must have both an informal track in which the neighbouring or intervening countries manage their interests, alongside a formal one in which the domestic belligerents negotiate their interests *vis-à-vis* one another and in the country concerned. This can be seen in the management of peace negotiations by (for example) ECOWAS and IGAD. Crucial to the efficacy of the informal interstate track is the extent to which the leaders of the neighbouring countries are bound by the same norms and principles of that underpin the domestic peace process. This puts several issues at the forefront. For example, whether frontline states through their regional mechanism should be mediators of a particular conflict while at the same time they among themselves are negotiating in pursuit of their interests? Where should responsibility for mediation lie in such circumstances of conflict of interest?
27. *Peace support operations.* The AU and African regional mechanisms have doctrines and modalities for peace support operations that are distinct from those of the UN. In particular, neighbouring states are usually involved, and are ready to undertake combat operations involving casualties, and there are clear political stakes for the troop contributing countries. In short, the interventions are not neutral or impartial, and may be very robust. Such robust interventions by neighbours, driven by national interest, might at times contend with the objectives of a peace support mission as defined by the agreement that underpinned the mission, and its domestic signatories and international guarantors. One of the notable findings of the TCA data is that neighbourhood peace missions replicate many of the same geographical and political patterns of prior decades’ unilateral covert interventions and proxy wars. In short, what more powerful African states previously pursued through direct (covert) or proxy military activities, they now pursue under the umbrella of internationally-mandated peace support operations.

## **State Fragility, Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Security Sector Reform**

28. Key finding: *neighbourhood security dynamics are a determining factor in state fragility, post-conflict reconstruction and security sector engagement.*
29. The re-characterisation of most African conflicts as internationalised internal conflicts, rather than internal conflicts, has far-reaching policy implications for those engaged in diagnosing state fragility, designing post-conflict reconstruction programmes, and engaging in security sector reform (SSR). All of these fields of policy are premised on the assumption that the state, its territory and institutions, are essentially self-contained. If this is not correct, policies need to be rethought.
30. *State fragility indicators.* The measurement of state fragility is based on domestic indicators of politics and governance, although it is notable that fragile and failing states often cluster together geographically. The TCA data imply that we need to be much more attentive to neighbourhood effects.
31. *Post-conflict reconstruction.* In designing post-conflict programmes, policymakers focus on internal institutions and processes, and tend to neglect the importance of neighbouring countries, cross-border relations, and the foreign policy of the country concerned. The findings of the TCA dataset imply that all these elements should be given a much higher priority.
32. *Security sector reform/security arena stabilisation.* The basic framework for SSR is the establishment of a national security architecture with a unified military, police and security institutions. The assumption, inter alia, is that all armed groups are either exclusively domestic political actors or that any external sponsorship they may have enjoyed has come to an end with the peace agreement. These assumptions do not hold: the transnationally integrated political marketplace and the high prevalence of transnational military engagement mean that armed groups will not relinquish their autonomous access to separate sources of support. Conventional SSR is not likely to be possible.
33. An alternative framework is 'security arena stabilisation', which consists of negotiating an allocation of security roles and responsibilities among diverse autonomous actors, including of necessity their external sponsors. This needs to be a regional exercise, involving neighbouring countries and their links to domestic security actors.

## **The Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa**

34. Key finding: *the pattern of cross-border military engagement in Africa is similar to that of the Middle East and becoming more so, as Middle Eastern states become actively engaged in African conflicts.*
35. The TCA dataset indicates that patterns of interstate conflict in Africa have been much more similar to those in the Middle East—where cross-border conflict is the norm—than would have been supposed from the conventional story of lack of interstate conflict in Africa.

36. A comparison with the Middle East highlights some of the key institutional and normative aspects of the sub-Saharan African experience. In the Middle East, cross-border interventions are more commonly overt, and the region lacks a multilateral peace and security architecture.
37. The Middle East (including North Africa) is characterised by two major differences. *First, MENA interventions are much more commonly overt.* This draws attention to the double standards in SSA. It also means that when a Middle Eastern country intervenes across its border, it needs to justify it to domestic publics and the regional community. This may be one reason why so much transnational military intervention in MENA is support for sectarian groups based on shared identity between sponsor and client. The 'real' rationale for engagement may be narrow security, political or commercial calculus, but the public justification is identity politics. This public rationalisation generates a dynamic of its own. By contrast, in SSA the public façade of non-intervention gives the intervening powers more freedom of action.
38. *Second, the Middle East lacks a regional peace and security architecture.* In SSA, many current day cross-border military interventions are legitimised as peace support operations of various kinds. Although there are valid complaints that peacekeeping is being politicised, this places such missions under at least modicum of regional and international scrutiny. The African mechanisms are rarely enforced in North Africa (the failure of the AU efforts in Libya in 2011 are emblematic of this). Without these mechanisms, MENA interventions tend to be framed in more narrowly security terms.
39. The increasingly assertive engagement of Middle Eastern states in African politics and security appears to be associated with changing patterns of transnational conflict and clear disregard for the norms, principles and institutions of the African peace and security architecture. *In short, the MENA pattern is penetrating into SSA.* For example, when Gulf states (Qatar, Saudi Arabia, UAE) engage in the Horn of Africa, they do so overtly without reference to the AU norms, principles and institutions. In the 1970s, Saudi Arabia supported Eritrean independence movements and Somali irredentism. Today, Saudi Arabia and the UAE appear ready to back military rule in Sudan regardless of AU principles and decisions. Morocco and Egypt, as members of the AU, make a limited accommodation to these norms when dealing with SSA, but not when dealing with other North African states such as Libya.

## Conclusions

40. The TCA dataset captures what observers of African politics and conflict have long known, namely that African states frequently intervene militarily in one another's affairs, and most conflicts are internationalised-internal. What is new is that the TCA dataset provides a basis for moving this observation from the specific to the general, and providing a basis for comparative or general study of transnational conflict in the continent.
41. This opens up a neglected research agenda, making the study of conflict in Africa more similar to the study of conflict elsewhere in the world. It focuses attention not on the

purported absence of inter-state conflict, but on the unusual ways in which such conflicts are manifest.

42. Bringing transnational armed conflict into focus, as an established feature of Africa's political and military landscape, demands a number of adjustments to policy. Several of these have been summarised in this memo. Most important is a change in policymakers' awareness: in structuring peace negotiations, designing peace support operations, planning post-conflict reconstruction including SSR, and engaging with Middle Eastern countries' security policies towards Africa, the transnational dimension to African conflicts should be borne in mind.

## References

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