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Governance
Security and governance

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Briefly

This section summarises general conflict trends, the drivers of intrastate violence, the impact of terrorism and the rising incidence of protests and riots.

Conflict trends

Chart 4 is an overlay of the number of armed conflicts (as measured by the Uppsala Conflict Data Program UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset) and the increase in global population from 1960 to 2022.[1]

Chart 4: Number of armed conflict events vs population in the world: 1960 to 2021

Source: UCDP Armed Conflict Dataset and UNPD World Population Prospects data
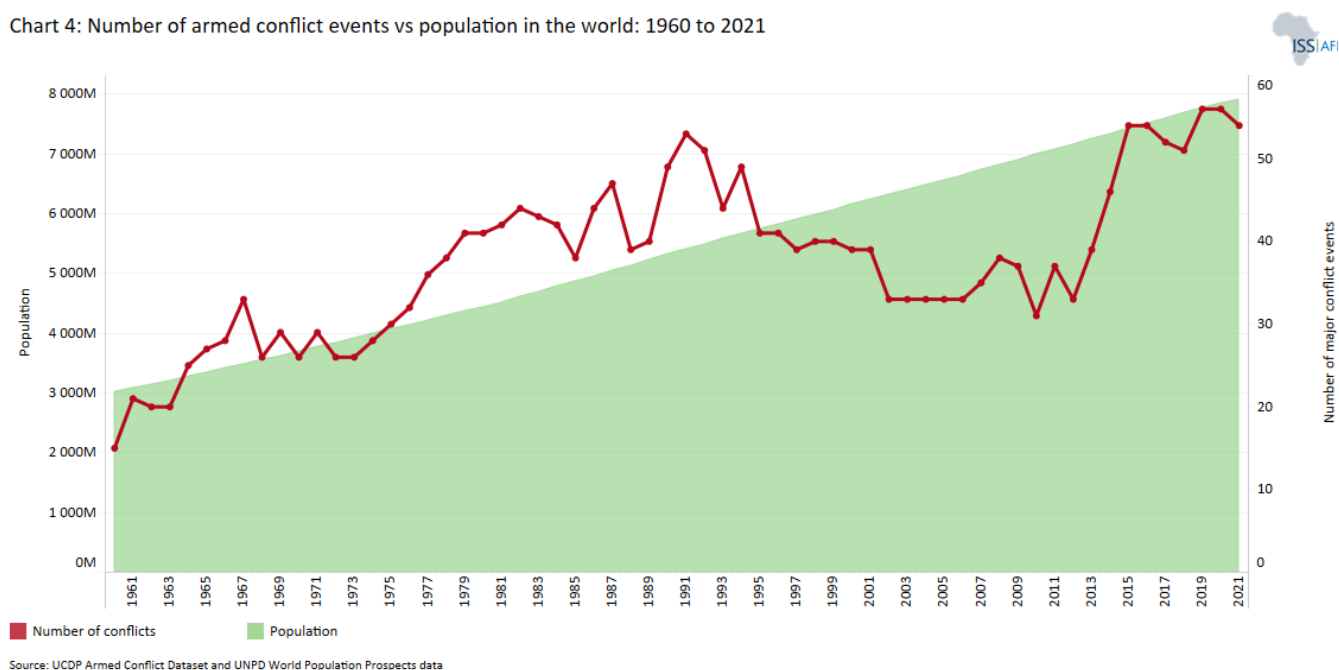
In line with global trends, reflected in Chart 4, Africa's most violent period since independence in the 1960s occurred shortly before the end of the Cold War in 1989. Levels of organised, armed violence in Africa increased faster than the global average during the 1970s and 1980s, even as death rates declined. The reason was self-evident — the continent served as a proxy battleground between the former Soviet Union and the United States of America (US) and their allies, each backing particular clients. As tension between the East and the West mounted, the burden of armed conflict increased. The collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 then removed competitive bipolarity, a significant source of conflict from the international system, with the period from 2004 to 2006 being more peaceful than any other in Africa's recent history.

The reduction in Africa's strategic relevance with the end of the Cold War, and subsequently, the end of US demand for oil and gas, the continent was now more reliant on its domestic resources to ensure stability and, inevitably, Africa's

incomplete security transition that continues to manifests itself in various violent ways.

Chart 5 presents fatalities[2] relative to population growth in Africa from 1989 to 2022, including the 1994 genocide in Rwanda.[3] The chart distinguishes between state-based conflict (involving a government), non-state conflict (no involvement of government armed forces) and one-sided violence (the deliberate use of armed force by the government of a state or by a formally organised group against civilians). High levels of non-state conflict reflect the absence of effective government control and the inability of a government to exert its authority, collect taxes, enforce compliance or provide services.

Chart 5: Fatalities from all violent events in Africa, expressed as totals and relative to the population, 1989–2021

Source: UCDP GED version 22.1 and UNPD WPP data
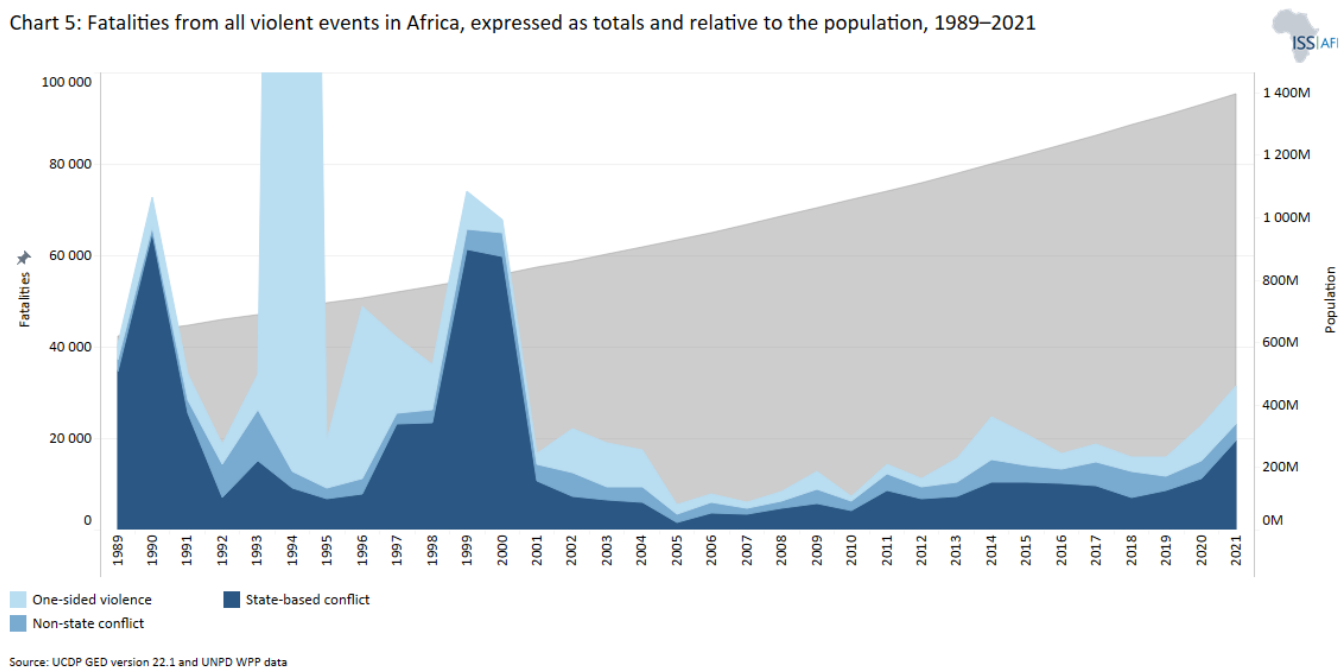
In 2023-24 concerns are mounting that the continent is again a proxy battlefield between Russia and the West, through disinformation and the deployment of the Wagner military group (since rebranded as the Africa Corps and now part of its military).

Generally, a government's ability to ensure law and order, police its territory effectively, monitor borders and suppress dissent is the most important reflection of a country's stability, or the lack thereof. Many African governments, particularly in Central Africa and the Sahel, do not fully control their territories, cannot police their borders and, in extreme cases such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DR Congo), Mali or Burkina Faso, may be battling terrorists or rebel groups that effectively control parts of their territories.
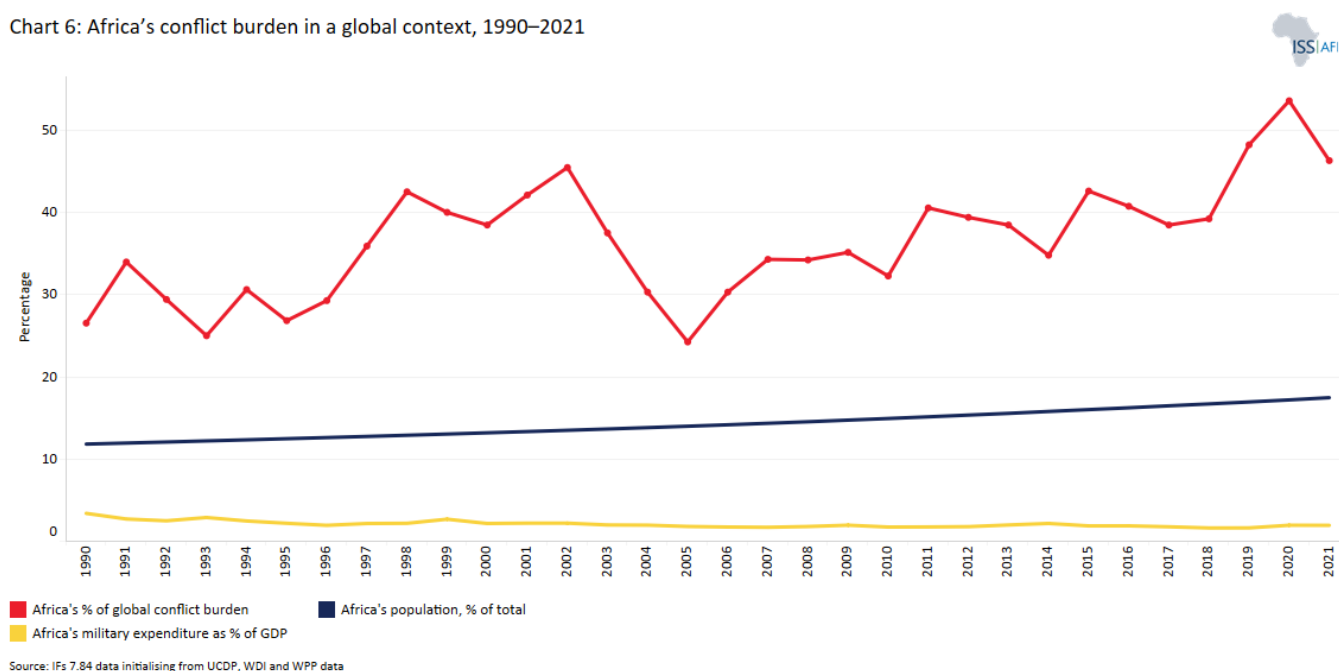
Three distinct periods seem to emerge from the data, namely a period of extremely high numbers of fatalities between 1990 and 2000, a sharp decline until 2005 and then increasing again, with an acceleration seen after the Arab Spring in late 2010. After 2005, the ratio of conflict-related fatalities (deaths to number of people) declined (excluding a peak in 2014). At this level of analysis, stability in Africa is improving, although slowly.

With states' limited capacity to impose order and often balancing numerous factions across borderlands, Africa's conflict burden (measured as mortality per thousand or million inhabitants) has declined more slowly than the global average. The African state is clearly not really in control, often because it was never established and consolidated in the first place.

Chart 6 presents Africa's population as a percentage of global population and Africa's armed conflict burden as a percentage of the global armed conflict burden (using UCDP data) and military expenditure as a per cent of the total. From

this, it is clear that Africa's conflict burden is significantly higher than the global average but the continent spends limited amounts on defence, although it is only one element of total security expenditure.

Chart 6: Africa's conflict burden in a global context, 1990–2021

Africa's % of global conflict burden
Africa's military expenditure as % of GDP
Africa's population, % of total

Source: IFs 7.84 data initialising from UCDP, WDI and WPP data

In 1989, Africa had 12% of the world's population and 39% of its armed-conflict incidents. By 2014 Africa had 16% of the world's population and 52% of the world's armed-conflict incidents, a hefty increase from just 40% the previous year.

Given its high conflict burden but low levels of defence expenditure African countries need to consider what would be 'appropriate' levels of security expenditure, as well as optimise the use and allocation of such monies.

Political violence is pervasive in Africa but not to the extent that many people believe. In January 2023, the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) released its Conflict Severity Index, using four key indicators to map out how and where severe conflict occurs. The findings reflect the large category of political violence that receives little public attention given the focus of the media on armed conflict and terrorism.

At the start of 2023, 46 countries and territories globally met at least one of the four severity indicators used by ACLED. Of these, only 17 were in Africa. The four indicators are:

· **deadliness** (the fatality rate from political violence)

· the danger of political violence to **civilians** (the rate of violent events affecting civilians)

· the geographic **distribution** of events at subnational level, and

· the extent of **fragmentation** represented by a count of active armed, organised non-state political groups.

The 17 African countries include Mali (extreme severity); Burkina Faso, DR Congo, Nigeria, Somalia and South Sudan (high severity); Cameroon, Ethiopia, Libya, Mozambique, Niger and Sudan (moderate severity); Burundi, the Central African Republic (CAR), Egypt, Eswatini and Kenya (limited severity).

The associated trend analysis indicates that most countries are experiencing sustained or escalating levels of violence,

except for the DR Congo, South Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia, Sudan and Libya, all of which have experienced a modest decline in the severity index since 2018. Violence in all of these countries comes from a very high level, of course, and is driven by state weakness and violent competition for state resources and power.

Finally, those countries most affected by political violence:

- are home to multiple conflicts, often with limited overlap

- involve many active groups that often are fighting each other as frequently as they clash with state security forces

- have militias playing a leading role in the violence

- have generally failed to fully resolve or at least reduce violence (though peace agreements and post-conflict arrangements have changed the nature of the violence), and

- are lower-middle rather than in low-income countries.

Drivers of internal conflict

Historically, territories with a single government, defined borders and a shared, central administration experience only a quarter of the average death rate as states without a national government. The trends in the ACLED index confirm this general conclusion. A continent consisting of countries whose governments ensure law and order across their territories will inevitably be more peaceful and experience lower mortality of all types. For this reason it is of utmost importance for Africa's development that stability is brought to Somalia, the Sahel, the eastern provinces of the DR Congo, north-eastern Nigeria and Libya, to list a few. At the same time, it is clear that conflict in Africa is becoming more complicated (and hence more difficult to contain) with multiple insurgent groups, militias and criminal groups fighting one another and the government.

Sustained violence in several African countries in Chart 6 reflects deep (or structural) drivers of conflict, presented schematically in Chart 7, including:

- a bad neighbourhood (and the risk of spill-over or external interference)

- a history of armed conflict[4] (that has created a legacy of grievances)

- a youthful population (particularly a large cohort of 15- to 29-year-olds)

- high levels of poverty (poor countries do not have the means to invest in security or provide social services)

- inequality and exclusion (particularly if combined with improved education that does not translate into employment opportunities)

- unstable regime transitions (demonstrating regime weakness)

- mixed or anocratic (or semi-democratic) regime types (that are particularly vulnerable to violence), and

- poor governance (often associated with single commodity dependence and low levels of participation in international trade).[5]

By implication, lasting peace, or at least more stability, requires that these grievances are addressed and a government that is committed to development, which takes time, commitment and resources. But even then the proliferation of multiple conflict actors means that negotiations and peacebuilding efforts have mostly limited effect. Once violence becomes endemic, efforts at negotiating an end to it or stabilising a situation through the deployment of peacekeepers, such as in South Sudan or CAR, often need to be measured in decades rather than years.

Chart 7: Drivers of intrastate conflict
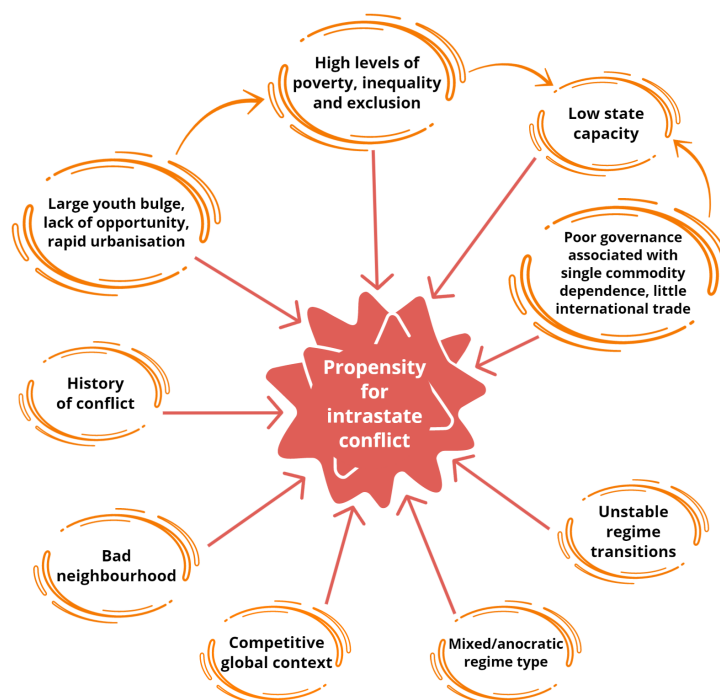
Source: Author

In Southern Africa, the extraordinarily high level of inequality in countries such as Namibia, Botswana and South Africa presents a potential threat to stability. In addition to the legacy of colonialism and apartheid, the informal sectors in these countries are relatively small compared to those in other countries at similar levels of development, meaning its ability to soak up unemployment and provide a means for survival is low. The extent of autocratic repression in countries such as Equatorial Guinea and Eswatini also presents a problem if left unattended, and these countries experience recurring bouts of violence. Efforts by leaders such as Obiang Nguema Mbasogo (Equatorial Guinea), Mswati III (Eswatini), Paul Biya (Cameroon), Yoweri Museveni (Uganda), Alpha Conde (Guinea) and Alassane Ouattara (Côte d'Ivoire) to extend their terms in office or effect dynastic succession present obvious challenges as pressure mounts without the prospects for either democratic change or generational succession.

Perceptions about the distribution of wealth between groups and levels of equity in society play an important role and fuel discontent. In Central Africa and a country such as Kenya, governments are unable to deliver the most basic services outside of the capital city, yet the political elite has been exceptionally creative in designing strategies to retain access to government revenues.

Terrorism in Africa

The "centre of gravity" for the Islamic State (IS) group has moved from the Middle East to Africa. Most of the countries with the largest increase in terrorism (Burkina Faso, Mozambique, DR Congo, Mali, Niger, Cameroon and Ethiopia) are in sub-Saharan Africa. Whereas in 2010, only five African countries experienced sustained activity from violent Islamist extremism (Algeria, Mali, Niger, Nigeria and Somalia), that number increased to 12 countries by 2019, with Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Egypt, Kenya, Libya and Tunisia added to the list.

Definitions of terrorism are notoriously subjective, given the political nature generally ascribed to its motivations. With that caveat, Chart 8 presents data from the University of Maryland which hosts the largest global dataset on terrorism. It presents fatalities from terrorism, distinguishing between those in Africa and the rest of the World.

Chart 8: Fatalities from terrorism: Africa vs Rest of the World from 1989 to 2021
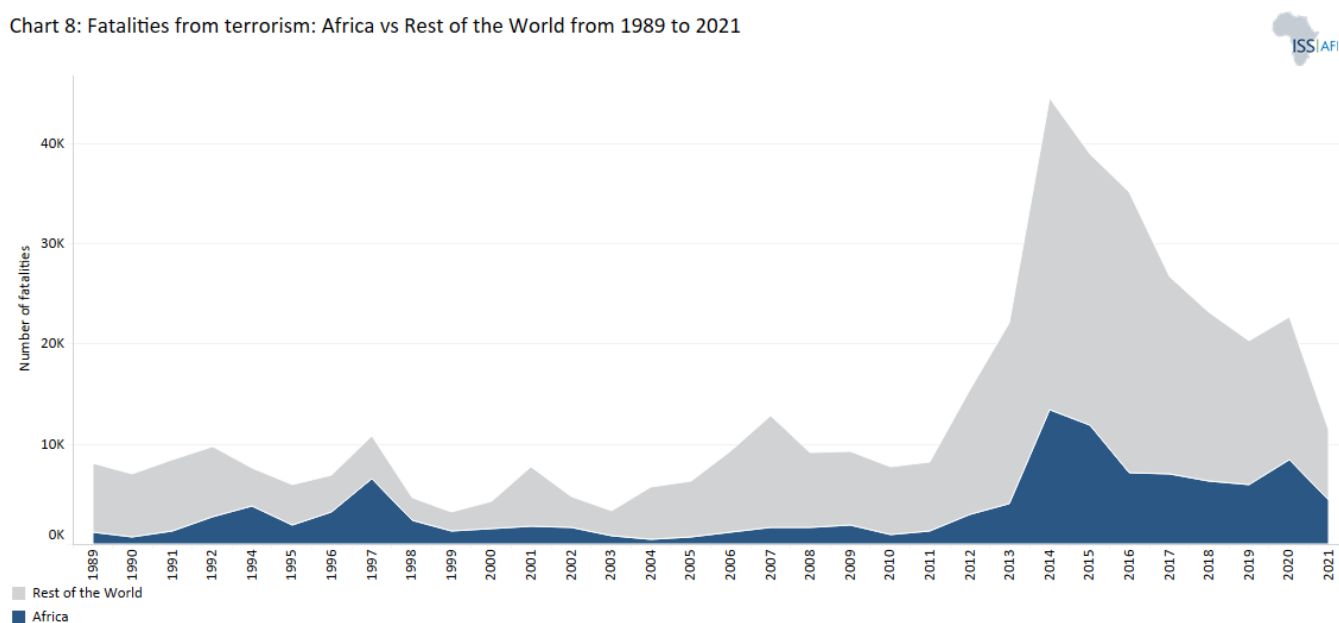
Source: Data from the GTD database compiled at the University of Maryland

The contribution of Islamic terror to Africa's conflict burden has waxed and waned since the 1960s, but it is generally accepted to have its origins in Algeria's bloody independence struggle with France, to have gone through various stages and name changes, and to have shifted allegiances until the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (*Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat*, GSPC), which had spread to Chad, Sudan, Libya, Mali and Mauritania, changed its name to al-Qaeda in the land of the Islamic Maghreb in 2007.

Together with the impact of the Arab Spring (which weakened state capacity in North Africa to combat terror), the 2003 US intervention in Iraq revitalised Islamic terror globally and facilitated the growth of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISIS).[6] US troops left Iraq in 2011, even as the impact of the Arab Spring washed across the MENA region, which eventually forced President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia to flee, initiated changes in the Egyptian regime and led to the deposition of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya. However, the momentum of the Arab Spring was insufficient to replace the pre-existing order in key authoritarian states. Instead, it effectively facilitated the Islamic State's expansion from Iraq to Syria and destabilised large parts of the Maghreb, particularly the Sahel.

The intervention of NATO in Libya led to the collapse of central authority and provided a space for Syrian combatants from al-Qaeda and the Islamic State to relocate. It also facilitated the looting of the giant arms supplies that Gaddafi's regime had built up over the years, serving as the primary source of arms in the region. The weapons and Tuareg fighters from Libya subsequently stoked conflict in Mali and Nigeria, igniting a war in the Sahel. French military intervention (Operation Serval in 2013) narrowly averted the capture of Bamako, but neither a subsequent UN peacekeeping mission nor regional efforts have been able to restore stability.

In addition, developments in Africa's largest economy and most populous country, Nigeria, are particularly worrisome. Although not initially linked to violent Islam, successive bouts of widespread and intense instability have plagued Nigeria since independence from Britain in 1960, including the effort at secession by the Eastern Region as the Republic of Biafra (1967–1970) and ethnic violence for control over the oil-producing Niger Delta from 1992 to 2009.

Recent violence in Nigeria's north-east has, however, been closely linked to politically violent Islam. The dominant narrative remains that a Christian government in the south caused deprivation and poverty in the north. Most victims are Muslim, however, as the first priority is to consolidate its power base. In 2015, a faction of Boko Haram (which means Western education is forbidden), named itself the Islamic State West Africa Province.

Beyond Egypt and Algeria, terrorism in Africa is also generally associated with Somalia, where it spread after the collapse of the Siad Barre regime in 1991, allowing Al-Itihaad al-Islamiya (AIAI) to spread its influence. Members of AIAI fought with the mujahideen in Afghanistan in the late 1990s and subsequently planned and conducted both the US embassy bombings in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam in 1998 and attacked an Israeli hotel and an airliner in Mombasa in 2002.[7]

Hardliners in the AIAI eventually joined forces with an alliance of sharia courts, known as the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), and gained control over the Somali capital, Mogadishu. That event triggered intervention by Ethiopia in December 2006, eventually driving al-Shabaab and the ICU from Mogadishu.

Kenyan troops crossed into Somalia in 2011 to fight al-Shabaab and, like the Ethiopians, later joined the African Union (AU) peacekeeping force in its mission in Somalia. In subsequent years, a string of ruthless and high-profile attacks, mostly in neighbouring Kenya, continued to keep al-Shabaab in the news, even as a rival organisation, the Islamic State in Somalia, mounted regular well-publicised operations.

Domestic grievances primarily drive terrorism, which is then contextualised and animated within a broader religious or political framing. This remains valid even as several copycat insurgencies have recently emerged, such as in the eastern DR Congo and northern Mozambique. Although people's decisions to join armed jihadist groups reflect marginalisation, poverty and poor governance, the decision to engage in violence is typically related to personal experiences at the hands of authorities rather than ideology such as radical Islam. Eventually, a specific incident mobilises locals and leaders, who then frame the reasons for the situation and the need for action within a broader political, ideological or religious context.
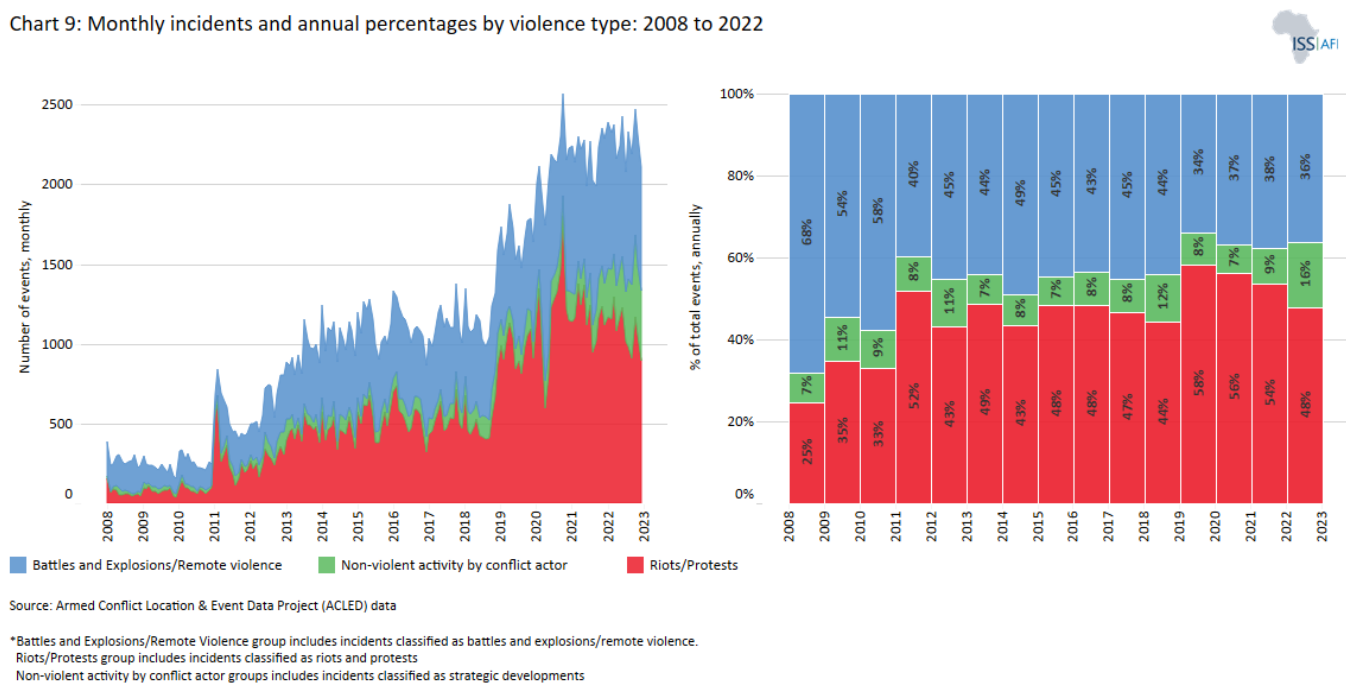
Protests and riots

Similar to terrorism, and in sharp contrast to the gradual decline of armed violence (if viewed over long time horizons), Africa is experiencing increased anti-government riots and violent protests. Protests have become a more acceptable public behaviour in many countries, initially associated with democratisation and, since 2020, the hardships that followed lock-down measures to combat COVID-19.

According to ACLED, non-violent protests and violent riots in Africa have increased elevenfold in the decade since the start of the Arab Spring, compared with the population increasing only by a factor of 1.3.[8]

The continent generally seems to be becoming more politically aware and restless (although better reporting and access to social media probably accentuate the increase), reflected in Chart 9. The increase in the number of riots and protests also reflects the impact of increased levels of education on Africa's youth amidst limited job opportunities, slow growth in recent years, together with rapid urbanisation and the impact of social media and Internet access. In Kenya, youth protests were triggered by the government's attempts to introduce punitive tax increases, while those in Mozambique in 2024/5 followed elections in October 2024. In Nigeria calls to disband the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) that were accused of police brutality subsequently widened to raise citizen concerns relating to corruption, maladministration, and inequality.

However, riots and protests appear to have become less deadly over time, with fewer fatalities per event. For example, while Africa experienced an average of eight deaths per event between 2001 and 2003, the average declined to three between 2015 and 2017. Widespread access to the Internet, smartphones and the subsequent public reporting of abuses by security forces may also have contributed to the decline.

Chart 9: Monthly incidents and annual percentages by violence type: 2008 to 2022

Source: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) data

*Battles and Explosions/Remote Violence group includes incidents classified as battles and explosions/remote violence.
Riots/Protests group includes incidents classified as riots and protests
Non-violent activity by conflict actor groups includes incidents classified as strategic developments

As sub-Saharan Africa is less urbanised than other regions in the world, more rapid urbanisation in the future could prove to be politically destabilising in the region, especially as riots and protests may increase because of democratisation and changes in regime type being experienced here. With many people living in towns and cities, population density can facilitate the kind of crowd and mass dynamics that eventually ejected Ben Ali from his presidency in Tunisia, forcing a rotation in the governing elite in Egypt and culminating in a civil war in Libya. Democracy can absorb much of this turbulence, but only if it is substantive.

Endnotes

1. UCDP captures minimum casualties of between 25 and 999 and 1 000 or more battle-related deaths per year, which are coded at intensity levels 1 and 2, respectively. UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset Codebook, Version 4-2015, Uppsala Conflict Data Program: 8.

2. Data on fatalities is from UCDP, which defines an event as 'an incident where armed force was used by an organised actor against another organised actor, or against civilians, resulting in at least 1 direct death at a specific location and a specific date' (H Stina, UCDP Georeferenced Event Dataset Codebook Version 20.1, Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2020). However, events are only included in the UCDP data when fatalities amount to 25 deaths per year and per group. In this way, the dataset tries to exclude individual murders and deaths from crime but includes most organised, armed actors such as rebel groups.

3. Population data is from the UN Population Division, reflecting an increase from 621 million people in 1989 to 1.328 billion in 2019.

4. Recurring conflicts are a massive problem in Africa and cycles of war tend to repeat themselves in the same countries, such as Sudan, South Sudan, Ethiopia and Somalia. As a result, the best predictor of future instability is past instability.

5. Being heavily involved in international trade requires respect for the rule of law and low levels of corruption. Low participation levels in international trade likely see groups distorting trade and other economic activity for their benefit, making internal conflicts more likely.

6. ISIS later changed its name to the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant.

7. A Weber, Al-Shabaab: Youth without God, in G Steinberg and A Weber (eds.), *Jihadism in Africa: Local causes, regional expansion, international alliances*, Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2015.

8. ACLED and UCDP are the largest publicly available data providers that comprehensively cover Africa. ACLED defines a protest as follows: 'A non-violent, group public demonstration, often against a government institution. Rioting is a violent form of demonstration' (ACLED, Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) Codebook, Oslo: International Peace Research Institute, 2019).

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About the authors

Dr Jakkie Cilliers is the ISS's founder and former executive director. He currently serves as chair of the ISS Board of Trustees, head of the African Futures and Innovation (AFI) programme at the Pretoria oce of the Institute, and is an extraodinary professor at the University of Pretoria. His 2017 best-seller Fate of the Nation addresses South Africa's futures from political, economic and social perspectives. His three most recent books, Africa First! Igniting a Growth Revolution (March 2020), The Future of Africa: Challenges and Opportunities (April 2021), and Africa Tomorrow: Pathways to Prosperity (June 2022) take a rigorous look at the continent as a whole.

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