

## **AFRICA AND THE LEGACY OF ENDEMIC WARS: RE-EXAMINING THE CHANGING PATTERNS OF ARMED CONFLICTS IN POST-COLONIAL AFRICA**

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### **Abstract**

The history of post-colonial African States has been dubbed a history of endemic warfare in some literature. Indeed, Africa's political environment is characterized by a multiplicity of threats to peace and security. Africa's leading drivers of conflict include personal rule and political authoritarianism, manipulation of identity, politics of ethnicity, marginalization of communities as well as electoral malpractices resulting in contested legitimacies and resultant violence. However, the character of armed conflicts in Africa is changing. This paper examines the trajectory of armed conflicts and dissects the changing patterns. The paper contends that "large scale political violence" in Africa is on the decline. Though small scale conflicts are springing up and exhibiting trans-border dimensions, these patterns of armed conflicts are not peculiar to Africa but emerging waves of global conflicts. The paper argues further that the shifts in the scale of warfare in Africa are a function of a multiplicity of post-cold war global contradictions. It also contends that the most persistent and prolonged wars exist in the Middle East and Asia. Therefore, the characterization of Africa as a continent of endemic wars is an erroneous overstatement. Inclusive governance, social justice and economic security are articulated as workable panaceas for mitigating warfare in Africa. Policy makers must therefore deconstruct the emerging novel trends in armed conflicts in plotting a workable plan for silencing the guns.

**Keywords:** Africa, Wars, Armed Conflicts, Patterns.

## **Introduction**

Armed conflicts have featured prominently in the political history of Africa particularly as from the 1950s; a period characterized by wars of liberation. The period between 1990 and the late 2000s witnessed a significant reduction in the number and intensity of armed conflicts. However, since 2010, the continent has been experiencing some disturbing upward conflict trends that are limiting peacemaking and peace keeping initiatives. The consequences of these emerging trends for political stability and economic development in Africa are enormous and therefore require close scrutiny. This is particularly so because conventional international approaches to conflict resolutions seem not to be working. The need to rethink effective strategies for silencing the guns in Africa requires a contextual understanding of the emerging patterns. Consequently, a couple of questions suffice for interrogation namely; is conflict endemic in Africa? Are these conflicts a continuation of old wars or are there new wars? Are there discernable patterns? Are the wars peculiar to the continent or are there global dimensions? These salient questions define the thrust of the discourse.

The paper proceeds in four parts. The first section sets the context in which violence is termed armed conflicts. The second section provides a historical context for the armed conflicts that have occurred in Africa. The third section highlights the continuities as well as the novel changes shaping the conflagrations. The fourth section contains the concluding remarks.

## **Armed Conflicts: The Context**

A meaningful discourse on armed conflicts in post-colonial Africa must necessarily situate the context in which the phrase is employed. An armed conflict is a contested incompatibility which concerns government and/or territory where the use of armed force between two parties of which at least one is the government of a State, results in at least 25 battle related death (Furley,1995:137). A number of elements in the definition suffice for elaboration. The use of armed force connotes the use of arms in order to promote the parties' general position in the conflict, resulting in a minimum of 25 battle-related deaths per year and per incompatibility. The use of the term 'party' in the definition refers to either a government of a State or any opposition organization or alliance of opposition organizations having announced a name for their group and using armed force.

International humanitarian law distinguishes broadly two types of armed conflicts, namely international armed conflicts (opposing two or more States) and non international governmental armed conflicts between governmental forces and non-governmental armed groups (ICRC, 2008). In a legal context, international armed conflicts exist whenever there is resort to armed force between two or more States. On the other hand, non-international armed conflicts are protracted armed confrontations occurring between governmental armed forces and the forces of one or more armed groups, or between such groups arising on the territory of a State. It is important to emphasize that the armed confrontation must reach a minimum level of intensity and the parties involved in the conflict must show a minimum of organization. It is equally instructive to state that armed conflicts today occur in two distinct "worlds"; those rooted in the African State system that involve governments and their challengers, fought principally over access to State power, and

those armed conflicts that occur on the margins or outside of the society of States, fought for reasons other than acquiring State power by a range of non state actors including warlord, factions, clans, tribes and various types of militias. These “two worlds” have distinct drivers and dynamics, although they can occur in the same geographical spaces and sometimes influence one another.

It is clear from these explanations that the meaning of armed conflict is influenced by geographical considerations and the intensity of the conflict. In Africa, both categories of armed conflicts have featured prominently. However, it is important to make the point from the onset that the nature and intensity of armed conflicts in Africa have changed over time since the colonial era. It is also important to observe that the classification of armed conflict into distinct categories is problematic when applied to contemporary intra-State wars in Africa for a variety of reasons. It is not only difficult to secure reliable statistics on battle-related casualties but these civilian-based internal warfare have also induced starvation, disease and appalling human misery, resulting in deaths. These categories are relevant to the extent that they indicate the geography and intensity of conflicts.

### **The Historicity of Armed Conflicts in Africa and the Fluid Patterns**

Human relations are potentially conflict prone. Conflict emerges when individuals or groups hold divergent opinion, express divergent interests and uphold divergent values. However, conflict is not necessarily violent, it may evince dialogue, lead to compromise, and as a result, improve mutual understanding and promote social harmony (Copson, 1994).

Much of the narratives on post-colonial Africa are colored by conflicts. Indeed, conflicts have featured prominently in the evolutionary development of African States. A reconstruction of the patterns of these conflicts would provide some reasonable template for evaluating the continuities and changes that have occurred as well as the forces driving the dynamics. This would assist a better appreciation of the forces instigating these violent outbreaks.

Beginning from the 1950s up to the 1980s, Africa was engrossed in wars of national liberation. The fundamental objective was to secure national self-determination or self-rule and end colonial domination through armed rebellion. The wars of national liberation were mainly fought against European colonial rule. The end of the Second World War and the weakness of European empires precipitated de-colonization in Africa. Whilst in the majority of Africa, de-colonization was by peaceful transfer of power, in some countries, armed struggle became the only means of ending colonial rule. These wars of national liberation included Algeria, 1954-62, Angola, 1961-74, Guinea-Bissau, 1962-74, Mozambique, 1964-75, Zimbabwe, 1965-80, and Namibia, 1966-90 (Otubanjo, 1980:38; Azaigba, 2013).

The wars of national liberation were fought differently in the continent. The severity of the wars largely depended on the nature of resistance. For instance, the British fought a bloody and protracted battle with the Mau Mau in Kenya and French in Algeria. The former Portuguese colonies of Guinea-Bissau, Angola and Mozambique fought a long drawn out war with the Portuguese government and, after the fall of Salazar’s regime in 1774, the colonies secured a rather chaotic transfer of power. In the Horn of Africa, the Somalis attempt to create a “greater Somalia” was unsuccessful. In South Africa, the national liberation wars in Zimbabwe (Rhodesia) and

Namibia (South West Africa) were affected by the former apartheid South Africa's policy of regional destabilization of the frontline States (Eberechi, 2009).

It is important to add that, the wars of national liberation were not only about self-determination, but also about fundamental grievances and complexities which in most cases, the nationalist leaders utilized as a mobilizing force against colonial rule. This had serious implications for post-independence political settlements and the nature of domestic politics. The point also need be stressed that, it is almost impossible to figure out any armed conflict in Africa particularly during this period which is without a colonial component. Most wars highlighted the ethnic composition of the African societies- a socio-political mess that "white colonialism" created. Before the entrenchment of colonial rule in Africa, most countries consisted of largely homogenous and autonomous ethnic groups, each with a distinct religion, customary values, mores and ethos shared by its members. Community of existence, facilitated by a common history, ensured that few intra-ethnic conflicts occurred, and they were resolved through a mechanism based not upon legal rules, but by adoption of traditional approaches (Eberechi, 2009). The forceful merging of hitherto relatively homogenous ethnic societies into a plural formation without a concrete integrative mechanism had dire implications for peace and security in the region. Aniagolu (1992) is therefore right to retort that;

Colonial rule, while not being, all negative, poignantly left in its wake disaster and desolation. In order to rule Nigeria, the British had to adopt certain strategies and principle. They not only adopted the wise political principle of "indirect rule" but also the vicious, divisive policy of "divide and rule". Instead of emphasizing and harnessing the richness of our cultural diversities, the British exacerbated and pitched our differences. While the ethnic groups were at each other's throats, the British reaped their economic and political harvests.

Clearly, armed conflicts in Africa during this period had deep tap roots in this colonial complicity which made many States to become hollow entities incapable of forging national integration and stimulating participatory governance.

During the cold war era, many of the States in Africa were cut up in the ideological divide fecundated by the super powers. The scramble for spheres of influence in Africa converted her into a hostile battleground. The strategic imperative to have allies in Africa and to contain the threat of communism saw the outbreak of proxy wars orchestrated by the ideological blocs. For instance, cold war competition in Africa directly instigated conflicts in Angola in 1975 and Somalia in 1977. The war between FRELIMO and RENAMO was instigated by cold war ideological influences. Increased competition for spheres of influence invariably propelled the superpowers to lend support to client States. It was also during this period that brutal regimes that owed allegiance and sustenance in power to superpowers. It was equally during this period of ideological rivalry that tyrants like Siad Barre of Somalia and Mobutu Seseko of Zaire came to power. The cold war security dictum was based on maintaining order and stability in client States (Williams, 2011).

In other regions of Africa such as the Horn of Africa and Southern Africa, there were dramatic increases in arms supplies and military supplies. This development left adverse political and security implications on the continent. Core amongst the implications is the escalation of simmering conflicts in Africa. For instance, since 1991, the Horn of Africa and the Great lakes region were notorious for some of the deadliest conflicts. In fact, the impact of cold war weaponry is still being felt with the proliferation of freelance soldiers fueling wars in many regions in Africa.

It is instructive to recant that Africa was de-colonized during the cold war. This meant that many States had enough coercive power to repress attempts at open war by the opposition, and enough money and other resources to run an effective patronage system. But opponents could also lobby for funding from sympathetic external powers. Those opponents who did succeed in taking up arms were constrained by their great-power sponsors, in rough imitation of the formal State structures they aspired to control in due course. The most relevant effect of the ending of the cold war on Africa's armed conflicts is the deprivation of political movements of the external funding they had previously enjoyed and the externally imposed political and rhetorical disciplines that this implied (Straus, 2012; Azaigba, 2013).

The foregoing narrative on armed conflicts in Africa evokes salient interpretive inferences particularly as it relates to continuities in conflict trends and provides the basis for articulating what has changed. First is the fact that most of Africa's recent State-based armed conflicts are what Barbara Walter (2015) calls "repeat civil wars", meaning old wars restarted by the same rebels after a period of cessation. Though this repeat trend is not confined to Africa but it is clearly apparent on the continent. Secondly, many of the armed conflicts in Africa arose from contested government transitions stemming from problems of democratic deficits and often the dynamics of minority rule. The roots of contested government transitions lie in the deficit in democratic governance, the increasing militarization of Africa, the growth in political militias and various manifestations of Presidential praetorian guard units, the suffocation of free and fair electoral processes, and the willingness of populations to participate in organized protests against their governments such transitions have taken the form of coup d'etat as well as other forms of armed conflict (Reno, 2011, Kalyvas, 2001).

Thirdly, most of Africa's armed conflicts express trans-national dimensions, they are rarely confined to territory of just one State and they are all influenced, to a greater or lesser degree, by dynamics and processes at the local, national, regional and global levels. These levels interrelate in fluid ways.

Lastly, non State armed conflicts remain a prevalent feature of the contemporary landscape. Since the end of the cold war, Africa has been identified as the global epicenter of non State armed conflicts. About three – quarters of these conflicts have occurred in just seven countries- the DRC, Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan and the Sudan (Dunne and Mhone, 2003 ).

### **The Evolving Changes and Novel Trends**

Tracking changes in armed conflicts in Africa require some data analysis and inferential deductions. The Armed conflict Database from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP and the Peace Research Institute of Oslo (PRIO) categorize conflicts into three typologies that are relevant

to post-independent Africa namely: interstate armed conflict, and internationalized internal State armed conflict. The UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict data indicate that armed conflict has been a central feature of Africa's post-colonial political history. It suggests further that about thirty countries in sub-Saharan Africa- or around 65percent of all States in the region-have experienced an armed conflict since independence. The dataset indicate that starting in the early 2000s, there were on average eight to ten wars in any given year, which is about half the number of wars in Sub-Saharan Africa in the early- to mid 1990s. However, in terms of frequency and duration, the UCDP/PRIO Armed conflict data show that sub-Saharan Africa is not the most war-endemic region, and the region does not on average have the longest armed conflicts. Rather the most war endemic regions are found in Asia-India, Afghanistan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, etc. These wars have also been more prevalent and longer than in Africa. As regards duration, evidence suggests internal, internationalized and inter-state armed conflicts are longer in the Middle East and Asia than Sub-Saharan Africa (UCDP, 2017). The strong point here is to acknowledge the fact that, contrarily to common assumptions that Africa is endemically a war continent; credible evidence holds that countries in the Middle-East and Asia have had more frequent and prolong conflicts.

Though the pattern of armed conflicts in Africa is fluid, a number of discernable changes are occurring and there are also evolving novel trends. The period 1990-2010 witnessed a decline in armed conflicts in Africa but thereafter, there has been a resurgence. Notable examples of this surge are the insurrection by Boko Haram in North- Eastern Nigeria, the Civil War and NATO- led intervention in Libya, the resurgence of Tuareg rebels and various jihadist insurgents in Mali, the series of revolts and subsequent attempts at ethnic cleansing in the Central African Republic (CAR), the spread of the war against Al –Shabaab across South-Central Somalia and North-Eastern Kenya, and the outbreak of a deadly civil war in South Sudan. These armed conflicts appear to be the most lethal wars of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A further noticeable trend in these wars is that all of them generated new or reinforced peace operations or other forms of external military intervention. They also exhibited important elements of interstate contestation, where external States particularly those from the immediate neighborhood, were directly involved politically or militarily or both (Williams, 2017).

The increasing rate at which civilians are deliberately targeted is worrying. This dimension is not entirely new except in magnitude. In the 1970s and 1980s, insurgent groups in Mozambique and Angola consistently used violence against civilians as a tactic. State led mass killings took place in the same period- there was the Biafran Civil war of the 1960s, Idi Amin and Milton Obote in Uganda in the 1970s and 1980s, the Burundi genocide of 1972, and the devastation unleashed upon the populations of Southern Sudan by pro-government forces (Furley, 1995). The deliberate targeting of civilians represents a failure by the perpetrators to respect contemporary laws of war, international humanitarian law, and hence the fundamental distinction between combatant and noncombatant. This problem is worse in territories where some of the parties in conflict are propelled by an acclaimed warped version of religious beliefs. The implication of this for peace keeping has also been enormously challenging.

The most fundamental change in armed conflicts in Africa is a decline of big wars that were fought for State control, that involved insurgents maintaining territorial control for long periods of time, and that pitted well-structured armies against each other. All the big wars in which two or more large, well disciplined, well-armed, well-trained, hierarchical armies fought each other have ended. Wars of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are typically smaller, tend to have factionalized and divided armed insurgents; occur on the periphery of States; are difficult to end because of the mobile, factionalized armed groups; have strong cross border dimensions; insurgents draw funding from illicit trade, banditry, or international terrorist networks rather than principally from major external States (Williams, 2017).

Evidence suggests a growing cross-border dimension to armed conflicts in Africa. Historic examples indicate that this is not entirely new; South Africa intervened directly in wars in its neighboring States. Tanzania and Uganda fought each other in 1979, and Libya forces invaded Chad in the same period. Neighboring States often provided shelter and support to rebel organizations. Chadian and Angolan insurgents had rear bases in Sudan and the DRC, respectively. The Rwandan Patriotic Front invaded from Uganda. The new development is that mobile insurgent groups now move back and forth across national borders, engage the security forces of multiple States, and inflict harm on Civilian populations across borders. The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) typifies the pattern; in recent years, the LRA has moved bands of fighters across northern Uganda, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the Central African Republic. Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb (AQIM) is another example. AQIM moves across the Sahel- in Algeria, Mali, Niger and Mauritania. Al-Shabab, which is based in Somalia, has launched operations in Uganda and Kenya- for example, the 2010 World cup bombing in Kampala- and both Ethiopia and Kenya have intervened recently in Somalia to contain the Islamists (Williams, 2017).

Another source of contemporary change has to do with the impact of environmental change on patterns of armed conflict across some parts of Africa. The growing changes in environmental realities particularly those relating to access to water and fertile land are exacerbating armed struggles. This problem has been compounded by the availability of cheap but deadly small arms and light weapons. Farmers /herders conflicts in Nigeria suffice as a ready example to figure out. Wars are always the result of the conscious decisions of groups of humans not the weather. However, in contexts of poor governance, environmental concerns can be a threat multiplier or exacerbating factor.

A further element that could be deciphered in armed conflicts in Africa is the increasing significance of religious factors in the dynamics of State-based armed conflicts. Since 2010, varied groups espousing a warped version of Islamic theology to justify their militancy have become prominent actors in Africa's conflict landscape. These developments have intensified rising levels of violent extremism, most notably across Northern Africa, the Sahel, and the Horn Of Africa. Violence connected to groups such as Al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) occurs in areas with high levels of economic, political and institutions; a history of pre-existing violent conflict in other forms in the area; and where such Muslim marginalization has been expanded and intensified through key triggering events in the respective country. The

point is that militants are increasingly exploiting local grievances by disseminating a “script” for violence that contains appeals to a particular interpretation of religion.

The increasing use of “remote violence” in some of Africa’s armed conflicts is also a relatively novel development. Especially significant are the more frequent use of IEDs and suicide bombing by a variety of non State actors. A database compiled at the University of Chicago has noted a rise in suicide bombings in 16 African countries, the first of which took place in 1995, since then, 465 of the 483 suicide attacks in Africa recorded up until June, 2016 occurred since 2007. They killed 4,822 people and wounded more than 9,000. Six African countries have suffered most from such asymmetric tactics namely; Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Mali Nigeria and Somalia (William, 2017).

## **Conclusion**

The paper examined the character of armed conflicts in Africa whilst noting the continuities and changes that are occurring. The forces shaping novel developments in the evolving pattern of insecurities in the continent were also highlighted and contextualized. Clearly, the elements of both continuity and change currently shaping the character of armed conflict in Africa pose serious challenges to peacemaking and peacekeeping initiatives in the continent. The dire consequences for economic development are enormous and require concrete efforts aimed at “silencing the guns”. The increasing emergence of extremist groups like Boko Haram, Al-Shabab and AQIM with a warped religious script has blurred attempts at deciphering a coherent political agenda which these groups gun for beyond vague demands for “Islamic rule”.

The cumulative implications of these developments for security are dire and need no gainsaying. Indeed, the character of warfare in Africa has changed, that is, it has shifted from large wars to smaller ones on the peripheries of States. But these smaller wars are generating and compounding socio-economic problems across trans-border dimensions. Though the form of the contest in most African countries changed after 1990, the fundamentally violent nature of the struggle has remained. Policy makers in Africa and International efforts at peacemaking must therefore take in cognizance the shifting character and dynamics of armed conflicts in the region towards silencing the guns and containing the triggers. A religious script geared at countering the manipulative and false narratives by religious militants operating in Africa needs to be encouraged. It is a considered view that an insurrection founded on a warped religious belief can only be effectively defeated by a counter religious narrative.

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