West African Studies

Urbanisation and Conflicts in North and West Africa



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Urbanisation and Conflicts in North and West Africa

Under the direction of Marie Trémolières,
Olivier J. Walther and Steven M. Radil

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SAHEL AND WEST AFRICA Club Secretariat

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The Sahel and West Africa Club

The Sahel and West Africa Club (SWAC) is an independent international platform. Its Secretariat is hosted at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Its mission is to promote regional policies that will improve the economic and social well-being of the people in the Sahel and West Africa. The SWAC produces and maps data, drafts analyses and facilitates strategic dialogue in order to help policies better anticipate the transformations in the region and their territorial impact. It also promotes regional co-operation and more contextualised policies as a tool for sustainable development and stability. Its current areas of work are food dynamics, cities, environment, and security.

SWAC Members and partners include Austria, Belgium, Canada, CILSS (Permanent Interstate Committee for Drought Control in the Sahel), the ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) Commission, the European Commission, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Spain, Switzerland, the UEMOA (West African Economic and Monetary Union) Commission and the United States. SWAC has a memorandum of understanding with the University of Florida Sahel Research Group.

More information:
www.oecd.org/swac, www.africapolis.org, www.mapping-africa-transformations.org

Foreword

In 2020, the SWAC/OECD Secretariat introduced a new way of analysing the geography of conflicts in North and West Africa, based on the Spatial Conflict Dynamics indicator (SCDi). This indicator allows us to understand the intensity and concentration of violence at different levels and to map its evolution over the past quarter of a century. The indicator is currently available on the MAPTA platform (https://mapping-africa-transformations.org).

In 2021, conflict networks were the focus of analysis which found that hundreds of armed groups are as unpredictable in their relationships with one another as they are in their movements across the region. This partly explains the difficulties faced by national and international armed forces in fighting them.

In 2022, the focus was on providing a better understanding of the links between borders and violence. Indeed, our indicator confirms that border areas and their inhabitants are proportionally more affected by violence than other parts of the region. For armed groups, the border is an opportunity or a resource; for governments and their allies, it is too often a limitation and sometimes a constraint.

In 2023, this report questions the urban or rural nature of the conflicts that continue to engulf parts of the region. If, as the work of SWAC/OECD shows, Africa is experiencing urbanisation at an unprecedented rate, are we witnessing an "urbanisation" of conflicts?

There is not one, but several answers to this question, depending on whether we look at it from a regional, zonal (the Sahel, for example), national or local perspective. It also depends on the period of analysis.

The indicator of the spatial dynamics of conflicts gives us the means to understand this plurality. It invites us to nuance policy options in the light of the complex realities and dynamics of the geography of conflicts.

Laurent Bossard
Director
Sahel and West Africa Club Secretariat (SWAC/OECD)

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This work is carried out under the memorandum of understanding between the SWAC/OECD and the University of Florida Sahel Research Group.

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Abbreviations and acronyms

ACLED	Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project
AfDB	African Development Bank
AFDL	Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo
ANN	average nearest neighbour
AQIM	Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
CC	conflict concentration
CI	conflict intensity
CMA	Coordination of Movements of Azawad
CTJF	Civilian Joint Task Force
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
ESRI	Environmental Systems Research Institute
FEWS NET	Famine Early Warning Systems Network
FLN	National Liberation Front (Algeria)
GATIA	Imghad Tuareg Self-Defence Group and Allies
GHSL	Global Human Settlement Layer
GNA	Government of National Accord (Libya)
GNU	Government of National Unity (Libya)
HCUA	High Council for the Unity of Azawad
HRW	Human Rights Watch
IDP	internally displaced person
IED	improvised explosive device
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IS-L	Islamic State-Libya
ISWAP	Islamic State West Africa Province
JNIM	Group for Supporting Islam and Muslims
JTF	Joint Task Force
LGA	Local Government Area
LNA	Libyan National Army
LURD	Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy
MAPTA	Mapping Territorial Transformations in Africa platform
MINUSMA	United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
MNLA	National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad
MUJAO	Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NTC	National Transitional Council (Libya)
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SCBR	Shura Council of Benghazi Revolutionaries
SCDi	Spatial Conflict Dynamics indicator
SWAC	Sahel and West Africa Club
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UEMOA	West African Economic and Monetary Union
UN	United Nations
UNOCHA	United Nations Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs

Executive summary

Understanding the links between cities and violence

This report expands on previous efforts by the Sahel and West Africa Club (SWAC/OECD) to document how violence varies geographically across North and West Africa. Using an innovative tool called the Spatial Conflict Dynamics indicator (SCDi), the report examines the links between cities and violence and maps the region's major conflict hotspots. In a context of rapid urbanisation and unprecedented levels of violence, this report is particularly timely. It addresses the contested question of whether conflict is more urban or rural in nature. It also fills a knowledge gap for policy makers: understanding where violence emerges, spreads and eventually dissipates is key to addressing its root causes. A qualitative analysis of ten cities and sub-regions complements the indicator, to better understand the origins of conflict at the local level.

Violence has moved to rural areas even as urban populations grow

Throughout history, cities have been synonymous with warfare, insurgency and politically motivated violence. In recent years, the importance of cities and urban areas as sites of conflict attracted increasing attention, given the global trend towards urbanisation. Africa is undergoing unprecedented urban growth driven by high fertility rates, the emergence of new cities and migration. The continent's population is expected to double by 2050, and two-thirds of this growth will occur in cities. In North Africa, for the past 35 years, more people have lived in cities than in rural areas. In West Africa, the urban population will soon reach 50%.

This report shows that despite rapid urbanisation, violence remains predominantly rural, particularly in West Africa. More than 40% of all events and fatalities recorded since 2000 occurred in areas with fewer than 300 people per square kilometre. When violence does occur in urban areas, it is more frequent in small urban agglomerations of less than 100 000 inhabitants than in medium or large urban areas. Armed groups flourish in rural areas, especially if they can control the population and extract natural resources. In the Central Sahel, conflict is most likely to occur in rural areas, which are ideal places for belligerents to challenge state forces. Jihadist groups, in particular, have contributed to the ruralisation of conflicts in the Sahel.

Conflict hotspots transcend national boundaries

Political violence has reached an all-time high in West Africa and has considerably decreased in North Africa following the end of the Second Libyan Civil War. Just five countries account for 93% of the violent events and 94% of the fatalities recorded from January 2021 through June 2022: Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Mali, Cameroon and Niger, all located in West Africa. Furthermore, several clusters of violence have converged in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Nigeria, forming large conflict hotspots that transcend national boundaries. This situation is unique. Nowhere else in the world has a multistate region been

affected by so many different forms of violence, each with its own localised root causes, which converge over time.

Nigeria is the epicentre of violence in the region. From 2021-22, 40% of all violent events and more than half of the fatalities recorded in North and West Africa occurred in Nigeria alone. Central Sahel is the second major hotspot of violence, and Burkina Faso is now the second most affected country in the region after Nigeria, with violence engulfing most of its border regions. Beyond these specific hotspots, conflicts also continue to expand to previously unaffected areas. Two new hotspots that are likely to emerge in the coming years are i) between Burkina Faso and its southern neighbours, and ii) in north-western Nigeria.

Shifting patterns of violence

This study shines a light on the fact that patterns of violence are rapidly shifting across the region. Now that violence has diminished in the Gulf of Guinea and North Africa but has emerged in the still largely rural central Sahel, conflict has shifted from urban to predominantly rural areas. Patterns of violence remain largely dependent on states' ability to manage sovereignty within their own borders. They also depend on the actions of various groups that seek to challenge or somehow reconfigure states. Given the importance of cities to this process, urban areas will remain critical for place-based policies that attempt to address the origins of political violence, now and in the future.

Chapter 1

How cities shape conflict in North and West Africa

Chapter 1 examines the importance of cities and urban areas in the development of political violence in North and West Africa since 2000. Using disaggregated data on population and conflict, the chapter shows that violence is predominantly rural across the region. However, while most violence currently occurs in rural areas, the number of violent events also decreases with distance to cities, suggesting that proximity to cities is important for armed groups and their adversaries. In the last 22 years, nearly half of all violent events occurred within just 10 kilometres of an urban area. The chapter also shows that violence tends to oscillate between urban and rural areas over time. As conflict waxes or wanes in one part of the region, so too does the importance of either rural or urban spaces. Finally, the chapter highlights the key role played by jihadist organisations in the current ruralisation of violence, particularly in the Sahel, where extremist groups exploit the resources provided by rural areas.

KEY MESSAGES

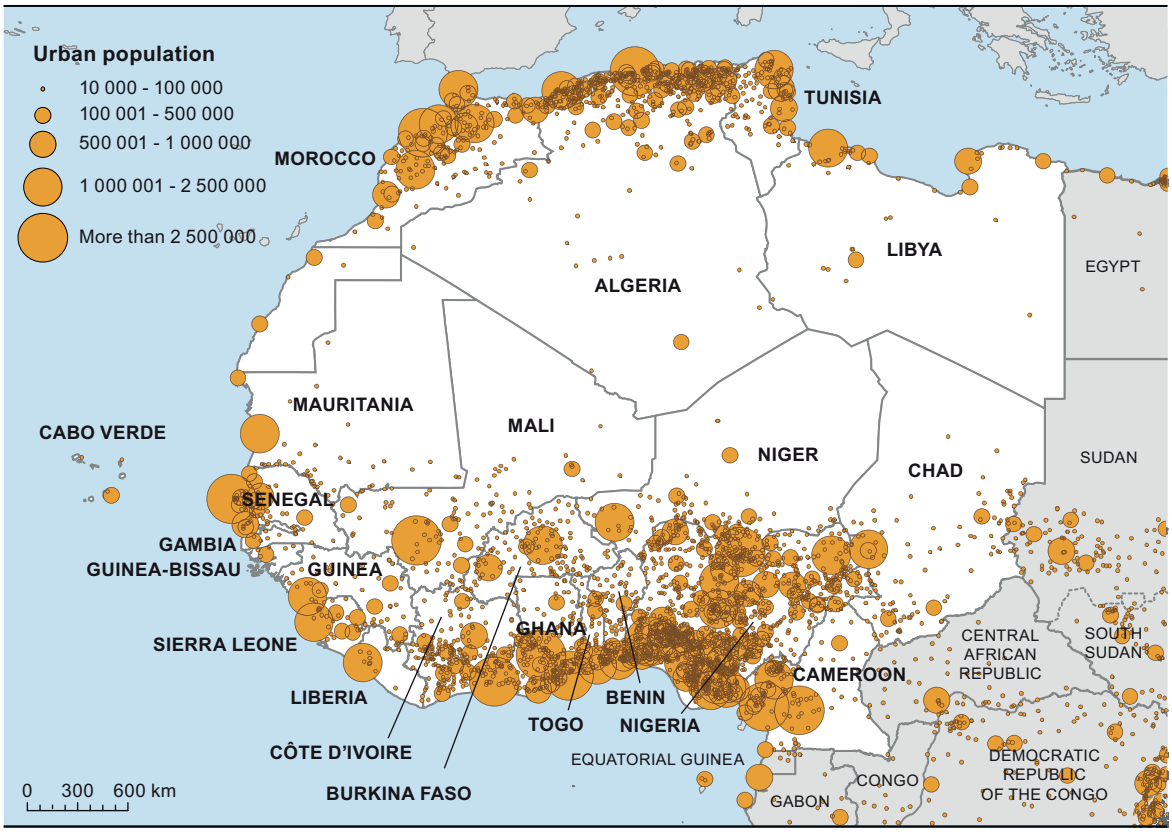
- **Violence tends to oscillate between urban and rural areas over time.**
- **Violence is currently predominantly rural in North and West Africa.**
- **When violence occurs in rural areas, it decreases as the distance from cities increases.**
- **Jihadist groups contribute to the ruralisation of conflicts, particularly in the Sahel.**

In recent years, the crucial importance of cities and urban areas in North and West Africa as sites of conflict has attracted increasing attention from policy makers. It is in cities that state power and military force tend to be visibly present and where the confluence of social, political and economic currents shapes daily life. Cities also bring together highly educated and politically dissatisfied youth who may potentially turn to violence. In June 2009, for example, Nigerian security forces asked a group of men affiliated with the Boko Haram sect to comply with a law mandating that motorcyclists wear helmets. The men refused to comply, and in the confrontation that followed, an estimated 800 people were killed in Maiduguri alone, including Mohammed Yusuf, the founder of Boko Haram. As the sect became increasingly violent, it shifted its activities from the urban areas around Maiduguri to rural areas, where security forces were less able to curb their activities.

The Boko Haram uprising is an extreme example of a more general dynamic where violent extremist organisations move between urban and rural areas in reaction to the willingness and ability of government forces to counter them. The expansion of such armed groups is taking place in a region undergoing rapid urbanisation, with population shifts from rural to urban areas and accelerated growth in cities (OECD/SWAC, 2020[1]), Map 1.1. The effect of this process on the distribution of armed conflict in North and West Africa has not received sustained examination (Chapter 2). While cities and urban areas have always been sites of conflict, given their political and economic importance, many insurgencies, rebellions and separatist movements have often been associated with rural hinterlands. It is still not clear whether increased urbanisation in North and West Africa has increased violent events in urban areas or whether political violence is predominantly rural in nature.

Map 1.1

Urban population in North and West Africa, 2015



Source: Authors based on Africapolis data (OECD/SWAC, 2020[1]), *Africa's Urbanisation Dynamics 2020: Africapolis, Mapping a New Urban Geography*, https://doi.org/10.1787/b6bccb81-en.

This study's combined use of population and conflict data allows for a close analysis of how conflicts have evolved spatially over a period of more than 20 years in the region. This opens a new window on the spatial lifecycle of conflicts, which can help to inform security policies in North and West Africa. In a region of rapidly shifting violence, understanding *where* violence emerges, spreads and eventually dissipates can help design place-based policies to address the roots of conflict.

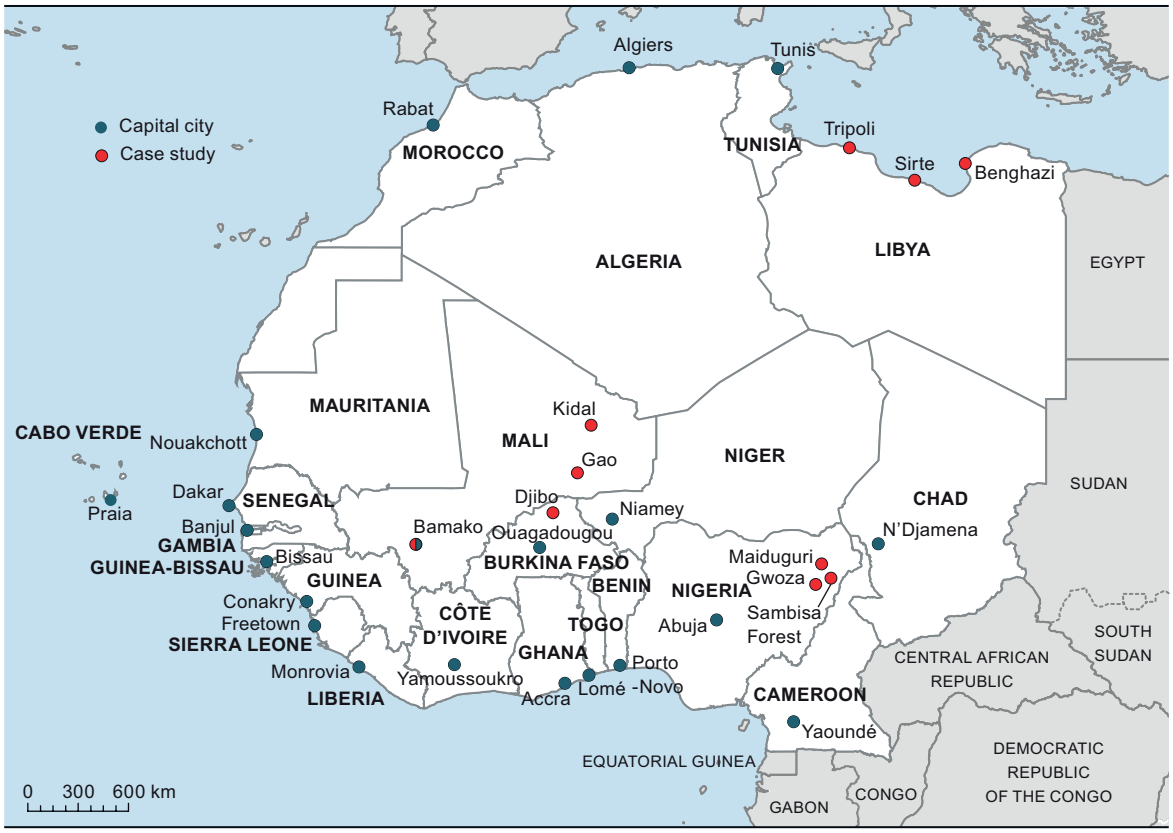
URBANISATION OR RURALISATION OF CONFLICT?

The strategic importance of cities in North and West Africa calls for spatialised approaches that can simultaneously map the long-term evolution of violence in the region and the local factors that explain why conflict tends to be concentrated in urban or rural areas (Chapter 3). This report combines a regional approach to conflict with a local analysis of cities, examining the relationship between population density and political violence in 21 North and West African countries and in ten case studies (Map 1.2).

Four fundamental questions are discussed in the report: Do conflicts affect rural hinterlands or urban areas? Have armed conflicts become increasingly focused on urban areas over time? Are larger urban areas more prone to violence than smaller ones? And in which regions and countries is political violence predominantly rural or urban? Addressing these questions helps illuminate how violent actors exploit the advantages of cities and their hinterlands to spread conflict in the region. The spatial analysis adopted in this report can also help to design policy responses that respond to different forms of localised violence, both in rural and in urban areas.

Map 1.2

Countries and case studies covered in this report



Source: Authors.

Violence tends to cluster near urban areas

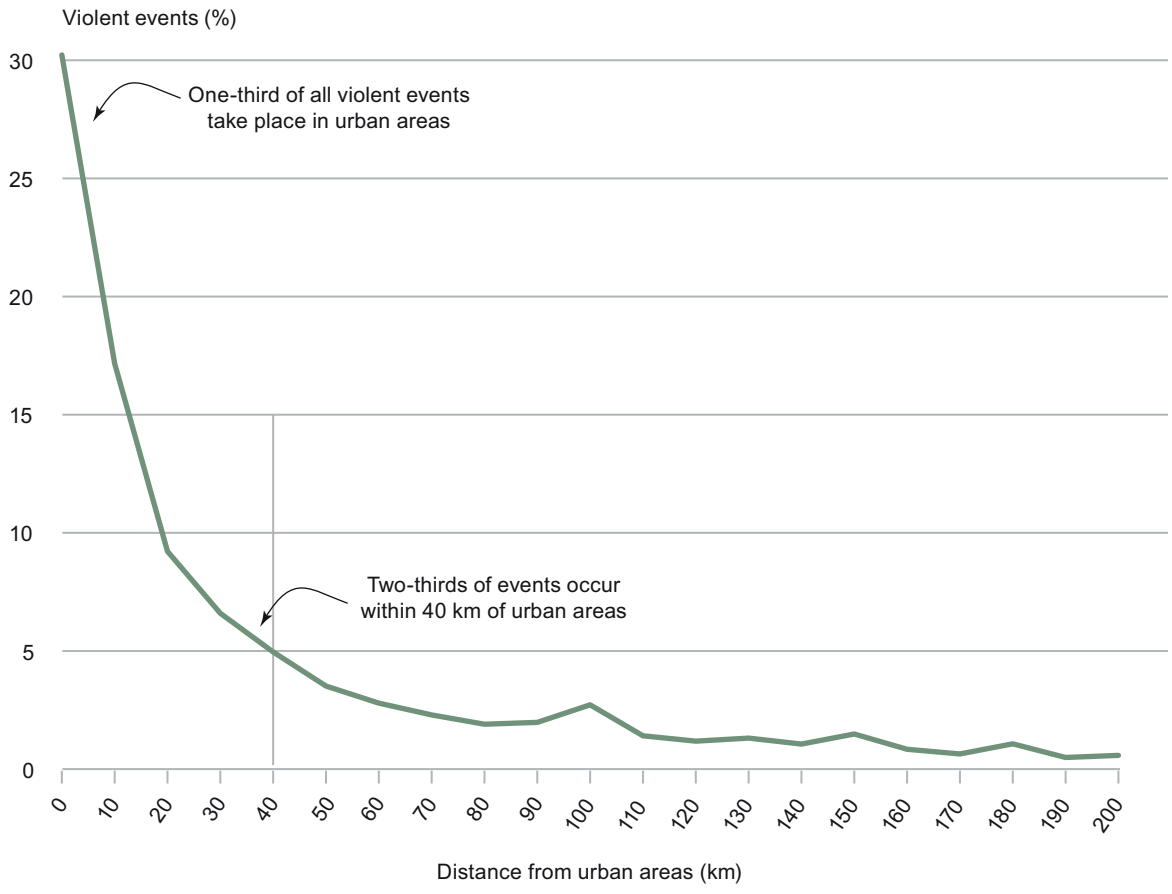
First, the report examines whether political violence is predominantly rural or urban in the region (Chapter 5). The analysis of disaggregated conflict data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED, 2022[2]) and population data from WorldPop (2022[3]) suggests that, while most of the violence has occurred in areas of lower density, political violence is spatially associated with urban areas, most frequently near cities and urbanised places. In the last 22 years, 47% of all violent events occurred within just 10 km of an urban area, and 68% occurred within just 40 km. The report also shows that the relationship between urban population and violence exhibits a classic distance-decay effect: the further from an urban area, the fewer violent events are observed (Figure 1.1). The strong relationship between urban population and violence is hardly a surprise, given the importance of North and West African cities as sites of state authority, economic importance, religious education, and political control and contestation.

Conflicts are becoming more rural across North and West Africa

The report then examines how the rural-urban geography of armed conflicts has changed in the past two decades. It shows that the regional relationship between urban areas and violence has been highly variable over time: urban violence is predominant in only half the years in the study, with peaks occurring in 2004 and 2011-12. However, while urbanisation has accelerated, violence has become more rural in character across the region (Figure 1.2). Less than 20% of the violent events recorded in 2022 in West Africa are located in urban areas, compared to just over 70% a decade ago. A similar trend can be observed in North Africa, where urban

Figure 1.1

Violent events by distance from urban areas in North and West Africa, 2000-22



Source: Authors based on ACLED (2022[2]) and WorldPop (2022[3]) data. ACLED data is publicly available.

violence now represents 40% of violent events, against a peak of nearly 80% in the early 2000s. The increase of violence in rural areas observed since the early 2010s fails to support the "urbanisation of conflict" hypothesis, which posits that the growth of cities in Africa should lead to both a decline of rural civil conflict and an increase in violent conflicts in cities.

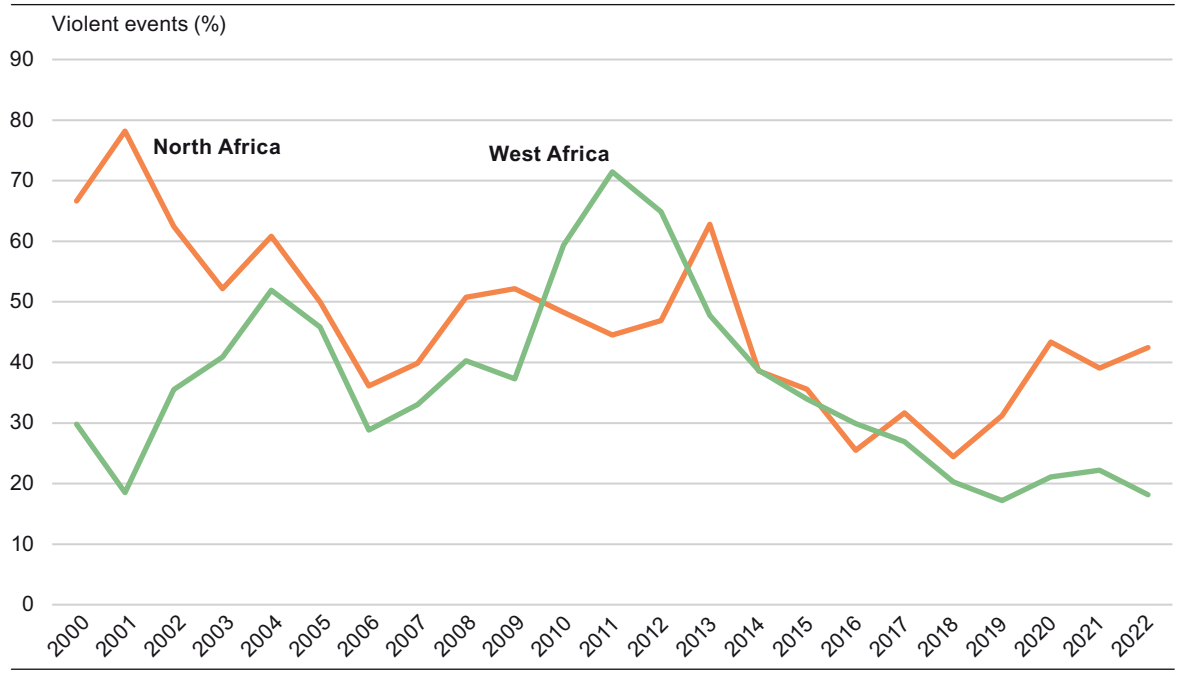
This temporal variability has to do with the spatial ebbs and flows of violence in the region. For instance, the Libyan civil wars correspond to the most recent peak in the proportion of violence occurring in urban areas, since Libya was already a highly urbanised country before the violence. Now that violence has dissipated there and emerged elsewhere, such as in the still largely rural Central Sahel, the overall locational trend in violence has shifted from urban to rural. This is not to say that cities and urban areas do not matter for these current conflicts. As the report shows, even in states with low levels of urbanisation, such as in the Sahel, a high propensity for conflict to cluster can be observed near small or peripheral cities and towns.

Violence predominantly affects small cities

The intensity of violence decreases with city size. Small cities are the type of urban settlement most affected by political violence in the region (Figure 1.3). The spatial proximity of these urban centres to the rural conflict areas explains why, in 2015, nearly 65% of the fatalities and 40% of the violent events recorded in North and West Africa cities occurred in urban areas of less than 100 000 inhabitants. The intensity of violence observed in these small centres is far greater than their demographic weight in the region (32%). Medium cities of between

Figure 1.2

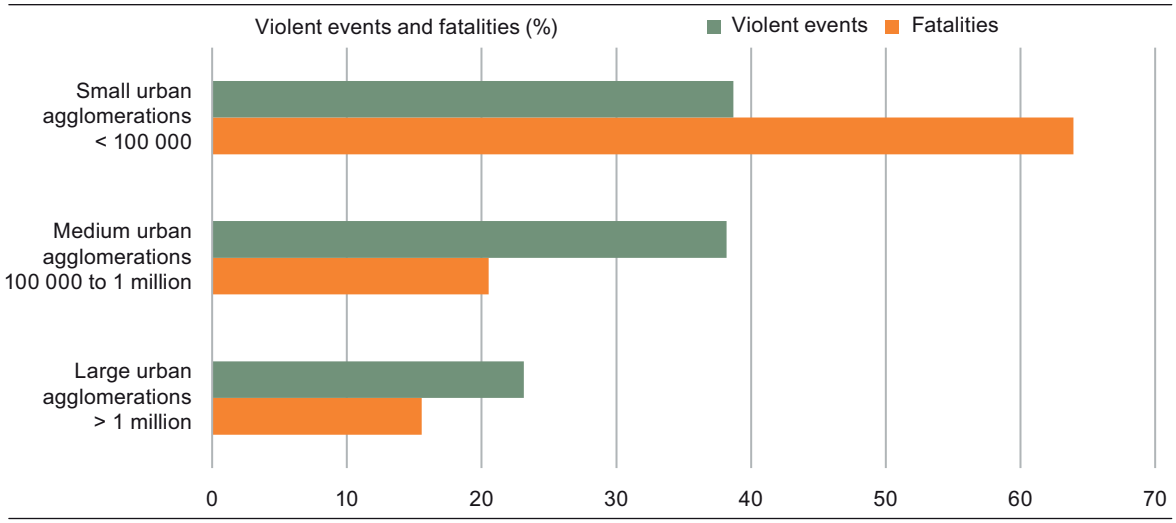
Violent events in urban areas per sub-region, 2000-22



Source: Authors based on ACLED (2022[2]) and WorldPop (2022[3]) data. ACLED data is publicly available.

Figure 1.3

Violent events and fatalities by urban categories in North and West Africa, 2015



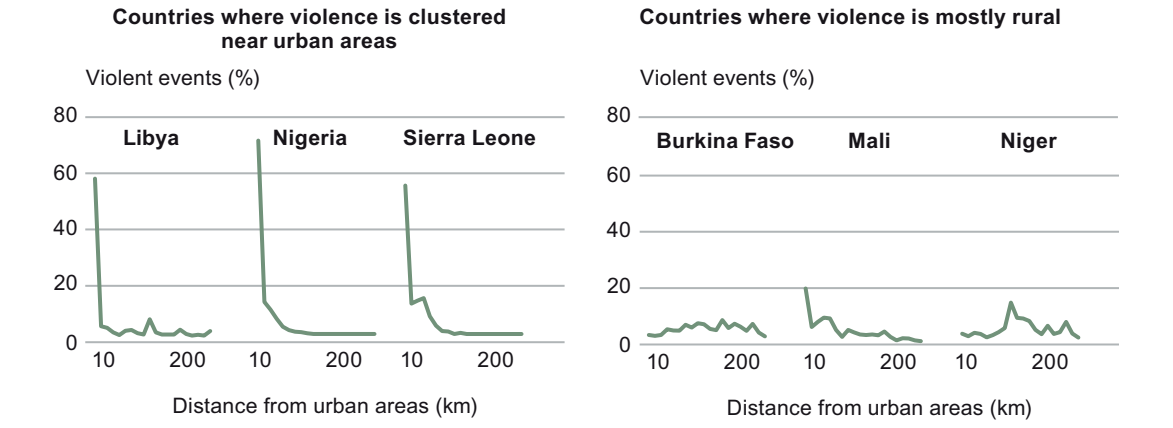
Note: These results build on the Africapolis database, which maps the perimeter of each urban agglomeration and calculates its population. Produced by the OECD, Africapolis is based on a spatial approach and applies a physical criteria (a continuously built-up area) and a demographic criteria (more than 10 000 inhabitants) to define an urban agglomeration. Africapolis population estimates in both North and West Africa are only available for 2015 (Chapter 3). An update should be available in 2023.

Source: Authors based on ACLED (2022[2]) and WorldPop (2022[3]) data. ACLED and Africapolis data are publicly available.

100 000 and 1 million inhabitants record a significant proportion of violent urban events (38%) but only 20% of the urban fatalities. Large urban centres have largely been spared from the violence, including capital centres such as Bamako, Niamey, N'Djamena and Ouagadougou that are increasingly surrounded by conflict areas.

Figure 1.4

Violent events by distance from urban areas, selected countries, 2000-22



Source: Authors based on ACLED (2022[2]) and WorldPop (2022[3]) data. ACLED data is publicly available.

Rural violence has become dominant in the Sahel

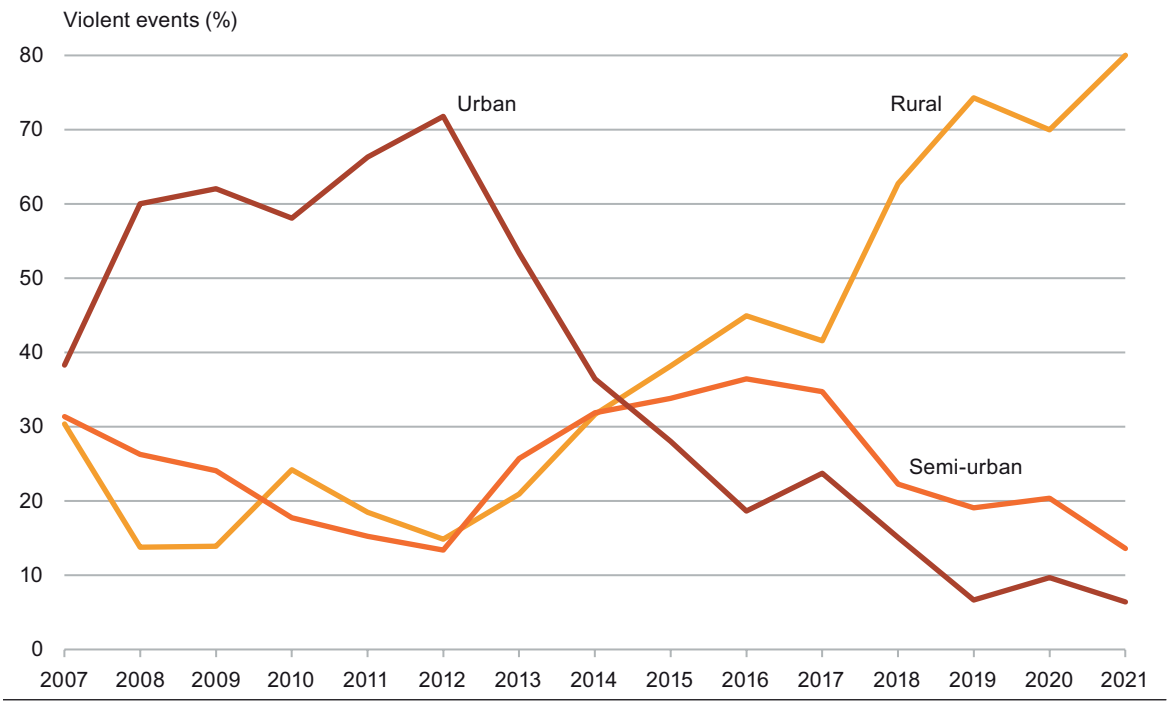
Last, the report examines the distribution of rural and urban violence across North and West Africa. It reveals that the relationship between population density and political violence varies considerably across and within states. While at the regional level, the intensity of violence clearly decays with distance from urban areas, some states show a much stronger tendency towards rural conflict than others. For example, the civil conflicts in Libya, Nigeria and Sierra Leone have consistently been highly urban, with numerous violent events in or near urban areas, while that is not the case with the recent strife in the Sahel (Figure 1.4). In Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, most of the violent events have occurred far from urban areas, in the arid regions of the Sahara, for example, but also in peripheral regions where cities are few and far apart, such as the Seno Plain in eastern Mali. In Mali, more than 80% of violent events in 2022 were in rural areas. The fact that these three countries show a similar trend is not surprising, since they are all currently facing major jihadist insurgencies.

This ruralising trend owes much to the fact that violence affecting Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger has shifted from the Sahara to the Sahel and its southern margins in recent years (OECD/SWAC, 2022[4]), making the control of cities less important than in the early years of the insurgencies. In 2012, for example, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Ansar Dine and the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) advanced very quickly across northern Mali to seize Timbuktu and Gao, two commercial and religious centres. At that time, most violent events occurred in or near urban areas, as violent organisations fought for control of cities and the roads connecting them. Since then, the proportion of violent events associated with jihadist organisations in urban areas has gradually declined, and it now represents less than 10% of the total seen a decade ago. Since 2014, it is these organisations that have been most frequently responsible for rural violence, accounting for as much as 80% in 2021 (Figure 1.5).

Today, jihadist groups do not have to physically control cities to control civilians and gain access to natural, mineral and agricultural resources. In the Inner Niger Delta, for example, they impose embargoes on rural communities that refuse to let them rule or are protected by the military, and threaten to kill traders, politicians and civil society leaders who live in cities but own property in rural areas. This strategy of intimidation has enabled groups like Katibat Macina to gain control over rural areas, impose local taxes on trade and steal cattle on a large scale, which has made the Central Sahel the area where rural violence is most prevalent. Similar dynamics can be observed in the Lake Chad region, which has recorded the highest number of violent events and fatalities since the late 2000s in West Africa. In northern Nigeria, especially, Boko Haram and

Figure 1.5

Violent events involving select jihadist organisations, 2007-21



Note: The following organisations are considered: Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Ansar Dine, Ansaroul Islam, Boko Haram, Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), Group for Supporting Islam and Muslims (JNIM), Katibat Macina. Under the United Nations (2020) definition, cells of 1 500 or more people per square km are classified as urban, those between 300 and 1 499 as semi-urban, and those below 300 as rural.

Source: Authors based on ACLED (2022[2]) and WorldPop (2022[3]) data. ACLED data is publicly available.

its splinter group the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) have exploited the human, financial and agricultural resources of both urban and rural areas, depending on the response of the four countries surrounding Lake Chad.

More generally, the evolution of the last two decades suggests that violence tends to shift between urban or rural areas depending on two opposing forces: the local strategies of non-state actors, and the military responses of government forces and their allies. The balance of power between these two forces is what eventually determines the life cycle of an armed conflict, from its emergence to its resolution. Both state and non-state actors are likely to make use of spatial features, such as distance, borders and cities, to gain access to localised resources, control the civilian population and ultimately defeat their opponents. None of them should be considered in isolation. In Nigeria, for example, the military's decision to gather its troops inside garrison towns such as Bama or Monguno has allowed Boko Haram and ISWAP to fill the void left by government forces in the countryside. In Mali, violence against civilians has increased since Western troops were replaced by Russian mercenaries in December 2021, particularly in rural areas of the Inner Delta and Dogon country.

A SPATIAL APPROACH TO CONFLICT AND CITIES

The spatial analysis adopted in this report expands previous efforts by the OECD Sahel and West Africa Club (SWAC) to document the changing geography and conflict dynamics of North and West Africa since the end of the 1990s (OECD/SWAC, 2020[5]; 2021[6]; 2022[4]). Two complementary approaches are used to understand how cities shape conflicts in the region, whether violence is becoming more urban, whether larger or smaller cities are more

Figure 1.6
The Spatial Conflict Dynamics indicator (SDCi)



Notes: The SCDi measures two essential geographic dimensions of political violence within a defined region over a year: i) the locations of violent events relative to each other (clustering/dispersion), and ii) the number of events over a given time period compared to a long-term regional average (high or low intensity). A region that experiences two or more violent events within a year can then be classified along both dimensions and mapped.

Source: Authors.

violence-prone, and which areas are the most affected by violent events (Chapter 3).

First, the report uses the Spatial Conflict Dynamics indicator (SCDi) to map recent shifts in the intensity and distribution of violence across North and West Africa. The SCDi is an innovative tool developed by the OECD/SWAC (2021[6]) to capture rapid changes in the geography of conflict (Figure 1.6). Using a grid of 6 540 "cells" of 50 km by 50 km from Dakar to N'Djamena and from Algiers to Yaoundé, the indicator measures whether politically motivated violence tends to intensify, decrease, spread or relocate to neighbouring regions (Walther et al., 2021[7]). The report shows that political violence has increased steadily since the mid-2010s, and that large transnational areas are prone to high-intensity and clustered violence (Chapter 4).

Second, the report combines population and conflict data to examine long-term trends in urban violence from January 2000 to June 2022 across the entire region. This approach aligns with previous work on the geography of violence in the region (OECD/SWAC, 2014[8]) that tends to see the northern and southern "shores" of the Sahara as two related battlefields for states and non-state organisations. It captures two of the continent's major spatial concentrations of urban agglomerations: a North African cluster that extends along the Atlantic and Mediterranean coasts and a West African cluster along the Gulf of Guinea (OECD/SWAC, 2020[5]).

To study how cities and urbanisation are related to political violence, the report uses WorldPop (2022[3]), a global gridded population dataset used to generate population density since 2000 (Chapter 5). The population densities provided by WorldPop are classified according to the recent "degree of urbanisation" categories established by the United Nations (2020[9]): urban, semi-urban and rural. The population data are then combined with disaggregated conflict data provided by ACLED (2022[2]) to study the spatial and temporal distribution of violence in North and West Africa. The analysis focuses on three types of event representative of the armed conflicts in the region: battles between armed groups and/or state forces, explosions and remote violence, and violence against civilians. The resulting data involve

nearly 51 000 violent events and 193 000 fatalities from January 1997 to June 2022.

The quantitative approach adopted in this report is complemented by a historical analysis of a selection of cities and zones that have particularly suffered from armed conflict and terrorism in North and West Africa. From Bamako to Maiduguri, and from Kidal to Tripoli, the ten case studies selected for this analysis highlight the many factors that explain why politically motivated violence emerges in certain cities, how insurgents mobilise urban populations to achieve their political objectives, and how state forces respond to the spread of violent extremist organisations in urban and rural areas.

PERSPECTIVES

The last two decades have been characterised by an unprecedented intensification and spread of political violence in North and West Africa. While violence has largely subsided in recent years north of the Sahara, since the end of the Second Libyan Civil War, several clusters of violence are now coalescing across the Sahel and its southern periphery, a situation that has had few equivalents in recent history. An increasing proportion of the violent activities observed in the last 20 years occurs near borders (OECD/SWAC, 2022[4]) and, as this report shows, in rural areas, in small cities of less than 100 000 inhabitants and around the peripheries of larger cities. The report shows that the processes that lead to this pattern of violence are anchored in the efforts of states to manage sovereignty within their own borders and in the actions of various groups that seek to challenge, supplant or somehow reconfigure the state.

The intensification and diffusion of violence in rural areas tends to cut off major cities from their hinterlands. Since the mid-2010s, major urban centres such as Niamey, Ouagadougou or Bamako have been surrounded by ever-expanding areas of conflict. Largely unaffected by political violence, these centres form a shrinking archipelago in which communication and movement between secure areas become increasingly difficult. The fragmentation of national territories that results from this evolution reinforces the gap between the largest cities, the focus of most of the political institutions and economic activity, and the rest of the country. In Mali, for example, the diffusion of the conflict to large expanses of the countryside has alienated a growing proportion of the rural population from the Greater Bamako region, where more than 90% of formal businesses were located before the crisis (OECD/SWAC, 2019[10]).

The fact that government forces are only able to ensure security in a few large urban areas is not simply detrimental to national cohesion; it can potentially threaten the survival of the state, if the capital city is conquered by rebels or jihadist movements. So far, military attempts to break the encirclement of the main cities and to restore the continuity of the state's presence have met with limited success. In northern Burkina Faso and Nigeria, for example, government forces have had little success in maintaining the necessary lines of communication and mobility between urban areas, let alone providing security in rural areas. Convoys organised to resupply besieged towns are regularly attacked by jihadist groups, whose mobility in rural areas is vastly superior to government forces'. In September 2022, for example, JNIM militants ambushed a civilian convoy escorted by the Burkinabè army travelling to Djibo, killing 27 soldiers and 10 civilians and destroying 95 trucks.

The current ruralisation of violence in the Sahel does not mean that large cities have lost their strategic importance, as they will ultimately remain key locations and goals for state forces, rebels and other non-state actors. The report suggests that the growing concentration of violence in rural areas corresponds to one of the many stages conflicts pass through in their life cycle. As conflicts emerge, develop and eventually end in one part of the region, the importance for the belligerents of rural or urban spaces shifts. In the long term, urban areas are likely to remain important focal points for violent activities.

The historical analysis presented in Chapter 5 demonstrates that cities function as a battleground both for the state and for its enemies, in their struggle to redefine societies around secular or religious bases. For the state and its elites, (capital) cities are places of utmost importance, as the seat of political power from which sovereignty can be exerted on the international stage. With border regions, major cities are also vital economic sites where the formal economy can be taxed, and the profits of informal economies can be accumulated.

For the enemies of the state, and especially the jihadist groups, cities are important for similar reasons, but they also represent both a source of mass recruitment and funding opportunities, and a source of perceived moral corruption. In the Central Sahel and the Lake Chad region, reformist movements have entertained an ambivalent relationship to cities in general, considering them as laboratories that propagate new social norms, prohibitions and dress codes, and as a threat to their political agenda, due to their openness to imported values such as democratisation, women's empowerment or "Western" education.

The report has demonstrated that urbanisation across the region has not automatically led to an increase in urban violence, and cities have not necessarily become the central battlegrounds between state forces and those that challenge them. Instead, as shown by the cases of Nigeria and the Central Sahel, violence has surrounded cities and their peripheries, and rural areas adjacent to cities have become zones of profound insecurity.

Given the trajectories identified by this and previous reports (OECD/SWAC, 2020[5]; 2021[6]; 2022[4]), it is unlikely that the region's conflicts will subside in the near future. Instead, large urban agglomerations are likely to continue to be islands of state power, while rural areas and smaller cities bear the brunt of insecurity and violence. In the short to medium run, this probably means that major cities and large urban areas are likely to continue to be heavily fortified and securitised by states and their foreign partners, while rural areas are largely left in the hands of opposing forces. However, in the longer term, such cities remain clear targets of ambition for those who are challenging states. The fact that violence is not yet endemic in these cities could change quickly.

A significant part of the reason for this is the profound fragility of many states in the region, of which a lack of military capacity is only one feature. As demonstrated in previous reports, military-led solutions to state challengers in the region have repeatedly failed (OECD/SWAC, 2020[5]; 2021[6]). Individual state forces, foreign powers, multinational interventions and international peacekeeping missions have all been unable to defeat an expanding set of rebels and other challengers on the battlefield. In short, the region's status quo is the result of political crises and states' difficulties in developing the institutional capacity to withstand challenges. Political solutions are thus required to change the status quo. Until that process is launched, the region is likely to remain the world's leading example of transnational instability.

In the meantime, cities and their inhabitants in the region should be supported and protected where possible, given the circumstances. This is not simply because their population can potentially be radicalised, but because they are places of innovation, dynamism, connection with the wider world and political engagement. If the collective will to push for political solutions to the region's political challenges is to emerge, cities are the sites where such movements are likely to originate.

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Chapter 2

Cities, urbanisation and violence

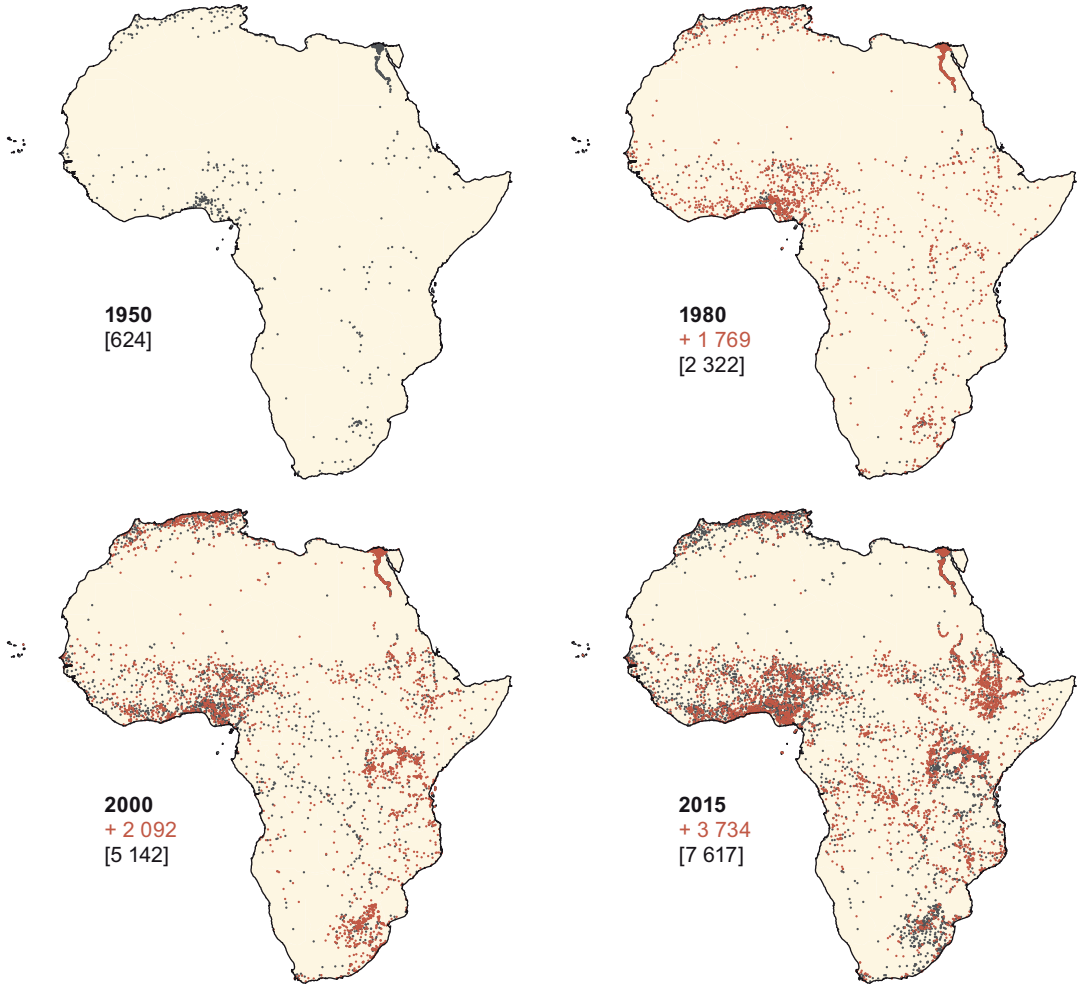
Chapter 2 examines whether Africa's urban transformations could lead to an increase in conflicts on the continent. It shows that West Africa is currently characterised by a rapid increase in the number and size of cities, a trend followed by North African countries several decades ago. The Sahel region, especially, is experiencing rapid urbanisation in conjunction with a continuous growth of its rural population. The chapter then discusses some factors that may explain the concentration of conflicts in urban or rural areas. Intra-elite competition and new models of political organisation in democratizing states are two factors that could potentially lead to more violence in cities. However, armed groups can also flourish in rural areas, especially if they can control the population and natural resources. Finally, the chapter shows that urban and rural areas play a crucial role in the life cycle of armed conflicts in the region. As conflicts start, expand and end, the locations of violent events can shift from one area to the other, depending on local dynamics.

KEY MESSAGES

- **Africa is experiencing unprecedented urban growth driven by high fertility rates, the emergence of new cities and migration.**
- **North and West Africa have followed similar urbanisation paths several decades apart from each other. In North Africa, more people have lived in cities than in rural areas for 35 years, while the urban population will soon reach 50% in West Africa.**
- **The question of the relationship between cities and violence is particularly salient in North and West Africa, given the ongoing urban transformations and deepening political crisis.**
- **While conflicts can concentrate around areas with distinctly urban attributes, rural hinterlands provide ideal resources for the belligerents to flourish and, potentially, challenge state forces.**
- **The fact that armed groups have vacillated between urban and rural areas in North and West Africa could be explained by the "spatial life cycle" followed by each conflict.**

Cities have long been synonymous with warfare, insurgency and politically motivated violence. Many of the world's cities originated in part as military sites and places of commerce and, thus have been historically fought over and within. In recent years, the crucial importance of cities and urban areas as sites of conflict has attracted increasing attention in the context of the global trend toward urbanisation. As an increasing number and proportion of people live in cities, will urban conflicts increase in number and intensity? The question of the relationship between cities and violence is particularly salient in North and West Africa, given the ongoing urban transformations and the deepening political crisis that has subsumed numerous states.

Map 2.1
Emergence of new agglomerations in Africa since 1950



Source: OECD/SWAC (2020[1]), *Africa's Urbanisation Dynamics 2020: Africapolis, Mapping a New Urban Geography*, https://doi.org/10.1787/b6bccb81-en

URBANISATION IN AFRICA

Africa is undergoing rapid urban transition in terms of the absolute size and number of cities. This process is driven by high fertility rates in urban areas, rural-to-urban migration, and an associated shift of rural into urban land use. While Africa remains the least urbanised of all regions, it has the fastest urbanisation growth rates in the world. Africa's urban population has increased from 27 million in 1950 to 567 million in 2015. The continent's population is expected to double by 2050, and two-thirds of this growth will occur in cities. More than half of Africa's population lives in cities today, up from 18% in 1960 and 31% in 1990 (OECD/SWAC, 2020[1]). The number of urban agglomerations also increased at an unprecedented rate. The continent counted more than 7 600 agglomerations of more than 10 000 inhabitants in 2015, against 5 142 in 2000 (Map 2.1).

This urban growth is a major driver of the current economic and social transformations observed in North and West Africa. As cities grow and multiply, so too does a diversification towards more perishable, more convenient to consume and higher quality products — all factors influencing agricultural production, trade and food consumption (Staatz and Hollinger, 2016[2]; Minten, Reardon and Chen, 2017[3]). The multiplication of small towns and intermediary cities also facilitates access to new markets, provides new economic opportunities, and helps disseminate innovative practices in rural areas (Banjo, Gordon and Riverson, 2012[4]). Further, urbanisation brings a wide range of social services, health infrastructure, and cultural amenities that had long been absent from rural areas and can enhance the level of human development in the region.

The benefits of urbanisation and improved accessibility also contribute to a shift from a subsistence-based economy to an economy based on regional markets (Allen and Heinrigs, 2016[5]). In southern Niger, for example, the production of onion and rice along the Niger River valley feeds local markets as well as the growing demand of the Gulf of Guinea and of Northern Nigeria, more than 500 kilometres away (Walther, 2015[6]). Finally, well-connected cities attract a growing number of entrepreneurs and service providers that explains the recent increase in non-agricultural employment observed in rural areas (Berg, Blankespoor and Selod, 2018[7]).

In West Africa, such rural-urban linkages are further encouraged by a relatively young urban network dominated numerically by small cities that play a crucial role in facilitating agricultural, commercialisation and economic diversification (Owusu, 2008[8]; Tacoli and Agergaard, 2017[9]). In northern Ghana, for example, cereals and cash crops flow through a dense network of urban markets, such as Bawku, Bolgatanga or Nyankpala, before being exported regionally or internationally (Karg et al., 2019[10]).

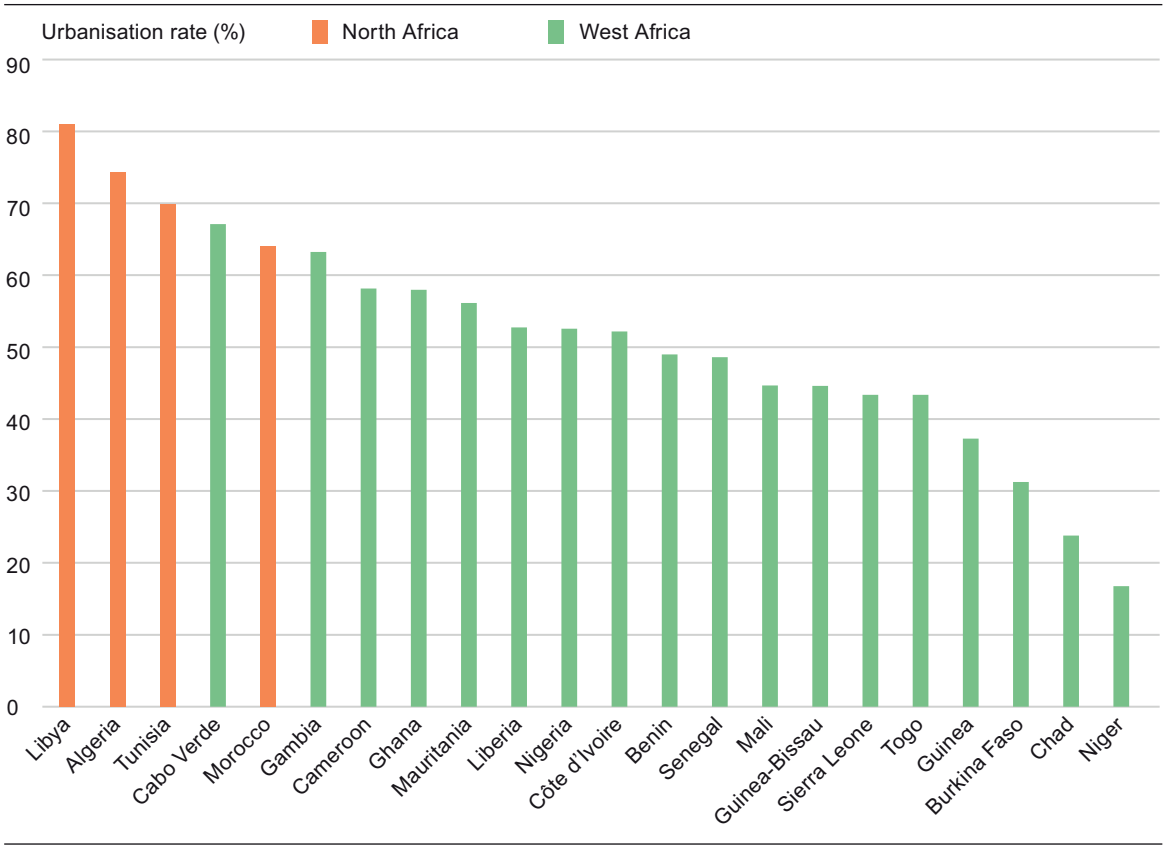
Strong urban growth

North Africa has gone through the demographic transition much earlier than West Africa, which explains why the regional urbanisation rate of the countries located north of the Sahara is 20% higher than it is in the rest of the region.[1] Since 1950, the gap between the two regions has remained relatively constant (Walther, 2021). In 2021, seven out of ten people live in cities in North Africa, while a little less than half of the West African population (48%) is urban. The least urbanised country of North Africa (Morocco, 64%) still has a higher share of urban population than the most urbanised country of continental West Africa (Gambia, 63%), excluding Cabo Verde. Cabo Verde's demographic profile is similar to North African countries, characterised by low fertility and natality rates and high urbanisation rates. More than three-quarters of the population are urban in Libya and Algeria, where most cities are concentrated along the Mediterranean coast. Significant differences can be observed within West Africa: while urbanisation rates exceed 50% in several countries such as Cameroon and Mauritania, less than 30% of the population in Chad and Niger is urban (Figure 2.1).

Over the past 70 years, the urban population has grown faster than the rural population in the region. North of the Sahara, it has been 35 years since there were more rural than urban dwellers. The urban population of Algeria, Morocco, Libya and Tunisia was close to 71 million people in 2021. In the West African countries considered in this report, the number of people living in cities now approaches 200 million, whereas the rural population is more than 238 million (Figure 2.2). Urban growth in North African countries has fallen by more than half between 1965 and 2000. West Africa is experiencing a similar evolution, but with a considerable temporal delay. In the Sahel, especially, urban growth has remained at high levels throughout the 2000s and has only recently been declining. The urban population of Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Chad is estimated at more than 19 million people in 2020 (UN, 2021[11]) Figure 2.3.

In the four North African countries covered by this report, population growth was seen mostly in cities. The annual average growth rate of rural populations has been declining sharply since the end of the 1990s. It was negative between 2000 and 2010, and zero between 2010

Figure 2.1
Urbanisation rate by country in North and West Africa, 2021



Source: (UN, 2021[11]), World Population Prospects 2019.

and 2020. The absolute number of people in rural Algeria, Morocco, Libya and Tunisia has been stagnant at about 30 million for the past 20 years. Rural growth is still high in West Africa (+1.5% in 2021) but is slowly declining. It is in the Sahel that the annual growth of the rural population is the strongest (+2.5% in 2021). The rural population of the Sahel is estimated at 46 million people in 2020, as compared with 26 million 20 years earlier (Figure 2.4).

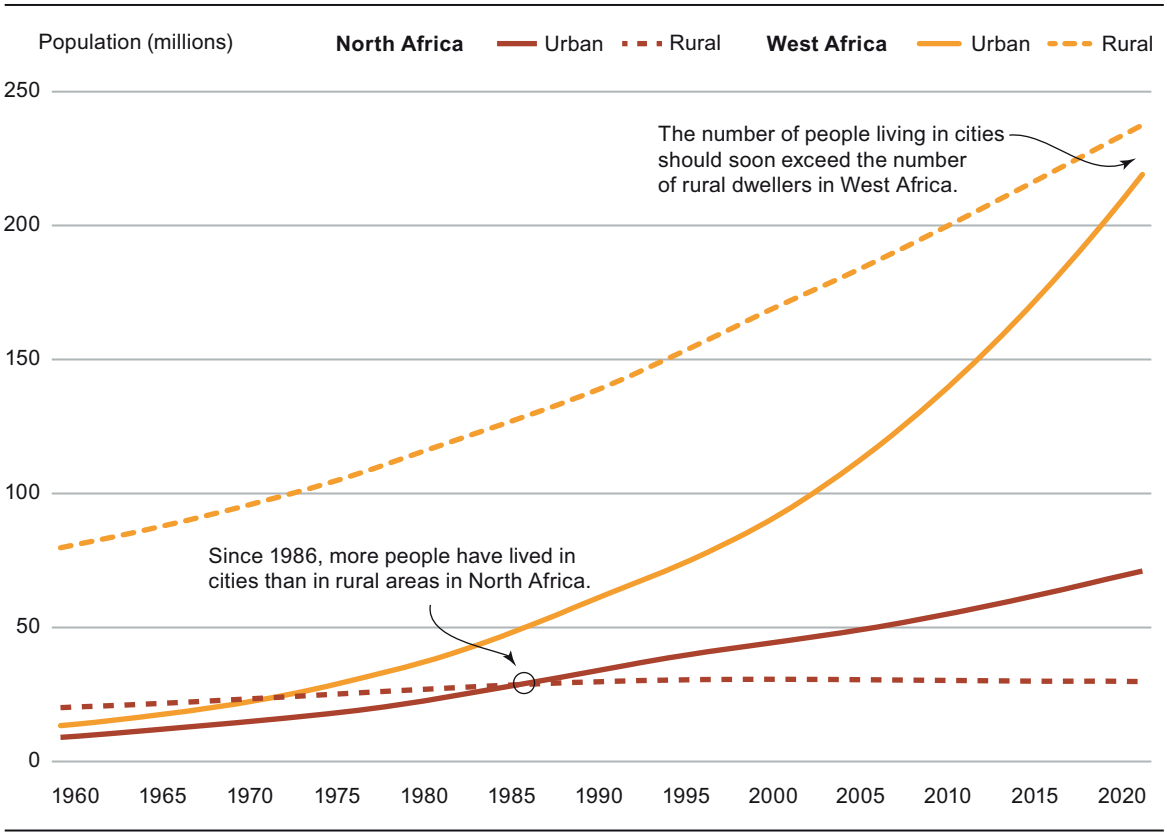
The primacy of capital cities

Many countries in the region have a macrocephalic urban network, in which most of the country's essential commercial and political functions and a large percentage of its urban population are concentrated in one urban area. This situation represents a deviation from the theoretical urban population distribution according to which the largest city is twice as large as the city with the next smallest population. If the largest city in the country has 1 million inhabitants, for example, the second will, in theory, have a population of half a million, for a ratio of 2:1. In Liberia, Guinea, Togo and Mali, the ratio between the first and second city is greater than 10, a high indicator of urban primacy for Monrovia, Conakry, Lomé and Bamako (OECD/SWAC, 2019[12]). Guinea-Bissau, Côte d'Ivoire, Mauritania, Chad and Sierra Leone also have urban networks dominated by a single large city.

Further, as countries in the region urbanise, the importance of political (or economic) capitals will continue to grow over time, as compared with the second-largest city (OECD/SWAC, 2019[12]). For example, with over 2.8 million inhabitants, Ouagadougou is 3.6 times more populous than Bobo-Dioulasso in 2020, whereas the two cities were approximately the same size in 1950. In Cameroon, Yaoundé doubled in size, from

Figure 2.2

Settlement dynamics in North and West Africa, 1961-2021



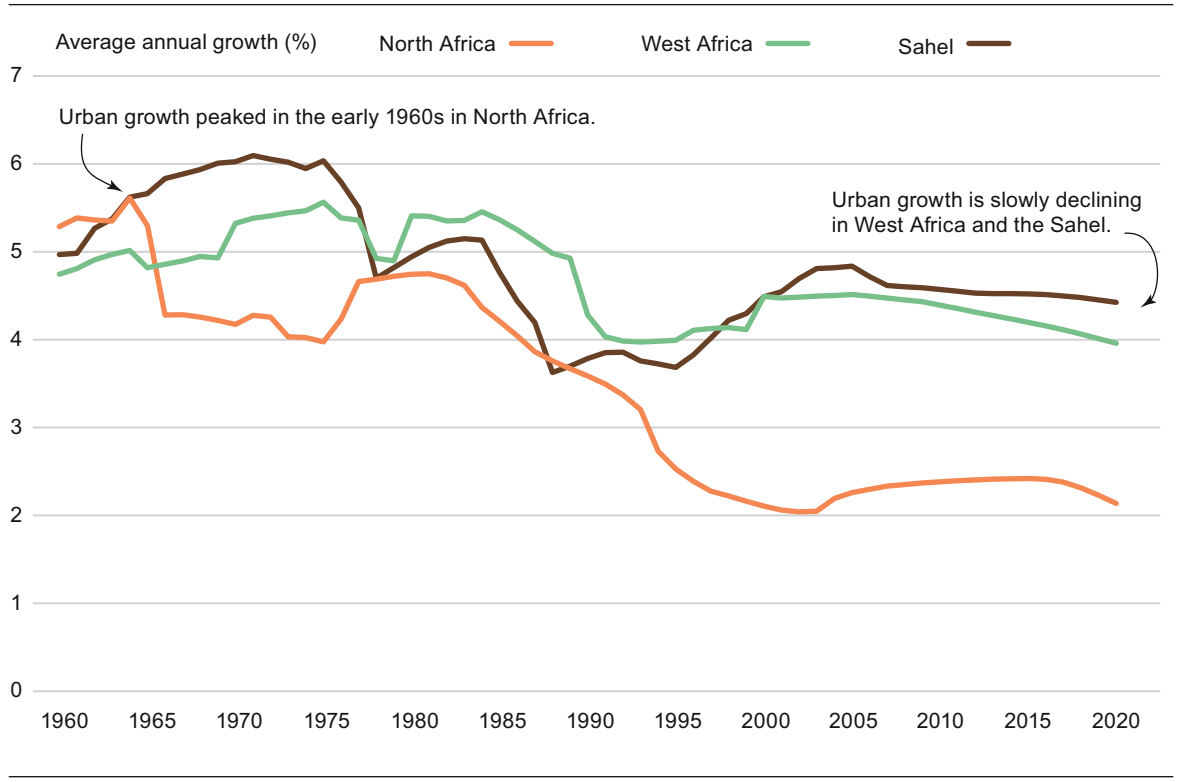
Source: (UN, 2021[11]), World Population Prospects 2019.

2.3 million to 4.6 million inhabitants between 2010 and 2020, while the population of Douala only increased from 2.2 million to 3 million.

Nigeria is the only West African country with a truly multicephalic network, in which a number of large cities occupy the upper echelon of the urban hierarchy. The metropolitan areas of Lagos, Kano and Onitsha function as *de facto* capital cities of the country's three main ethno-linguistic regions (OECD/SWAC, 2019[12]). In the southwestern part of the country, the presence of high urban densities and numerous cities of varied sizes has been documented since the precolonial era. The transatlantic slave trade fostered the urban development of the Yoruba kingdom of Oyo and the kingdom of Benin before these areas came to rely on agricultural products such as palm oil. In the north, the urban network of Hausa city-states and the Kanem-Borno empire in the Lake Chad basin owes its existence, in large part, to regional and trans-Saharan trade. In the southwest, the Igbo and Ibibio urbanisation of the Niger Delta and its hinterland has colonial origins.

Macrocephaly explains the relatively small number of large cities on the continent. In 2015, 92% of cities had fewer than 100 000 inhabitants in West Africa, for example (OECD/SWAC, 2020[1]). Africa has only 11 agglomerations with more than 5 million people: Alexandria, Cairo, Dar es Salaam, Johannesburg, Khartoum, Kinshasa, Kisumu, Lagos, Luanda, Nairobi and Onitsha. The 29 cities in the region with a population of one million inhabitants account for 80 million people, or 44% of the total urban population. That is nearly twice the population of the 182 cities with between 100 000 and 1 million inhabitants (25%) which account for some 45 million people (OECD/SWAC, 2019[12]). Cities are also quite unevenly distributed across the continent. Two countries, Kenya and Nigeria, contain 20 of the 50 largest urban agglomerations by built-up area (OECD/SWAC, 2020[1]). Close to half of West Africa's 2 469 agglomerations with more than

Figure 2.3
Urban population growth per sub-region, 1961-2021



Note: Sahelian countries include Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Senegal.
Source: (UN, 2021[11]), World Population Prospects 2019.

10 000 inhabitants are located in Nigeria, and less than 10% of them in Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana. Small countries such as Cabo Verde, Gambia and Guinea-Bissau, sparsely populated ones like Mauritania and countries dominated by one large city, like Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, have fewer than 50 cities each with more than 10 000 inhabitants.

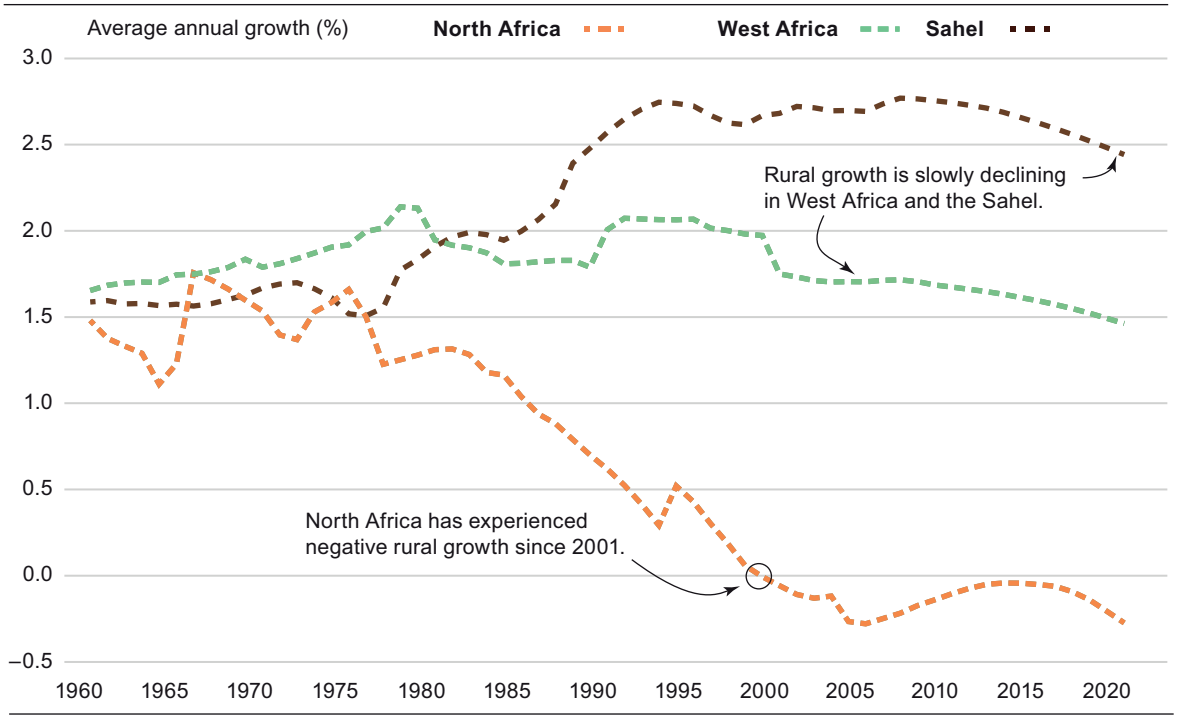
Historical evolution of cities

The distribution of the population in North and West Africa follows a well-known pattern according to which high densities are explained by human factors, such as the existence of precolonial empires or man-made oases, while low densities are explained by natural factors, particularly the absence of rainfall. Historically, the West African Sahel region has played a key role in the circulation of people, ideas and goods between the two "shores" of the Sahara. In this region, human settlement is marked by alternating sedentary cores with high-population densities and intercalary voids (Retaillé, 1989[13]) (Map 2.2). Each of the Sahelian sedentary cores is associated with a nomadic area in the Sahara. Between the Senegal and Gambia rivers, the Wolof-Serer core is connected to the nomadic space of the Moors. Further east, the Marka-Songhay core occupying the loop of the Niger River, the Mossi core in Burkina Faso, and the Hausa core located between Sokoto, Kano and Maradi are all connected to the Tuareg sphere. In the Lake Chad region, the Kanuri core is open to the Tubu sphere. The presence of these high densities is of precolonial origin and corresponds to the influence zones of the Ghana and Mali empires, the Mossi kingdoms, the Hausa city-states and the Kanem-Borno empire.

Until the colonial period, Sahelian cities occupied the political and economic centre of these sedentary cores. These cities were linked by trade routes to the Mediterranean coast through a string of Saharan oases and to precolonial

Figure 2.4

Rural population growth per sub-region, 1961-2021



Note: Sahelian countries include Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Senegal.

Source: (UN, 2021[11]), World Population Prospects 2019.

kingdoms, such as the Ashanti in today's Ghana or the Yoruba kingdom of Oyo in today's Nigeria (Map 2.3). Such Sahelian cities have been defined as "a crossroads in which the spatial structure, made up of cities and markets, could adapt to climatic variations and political crises" (Walther and Retaillé, 2021, p. 30[15]).

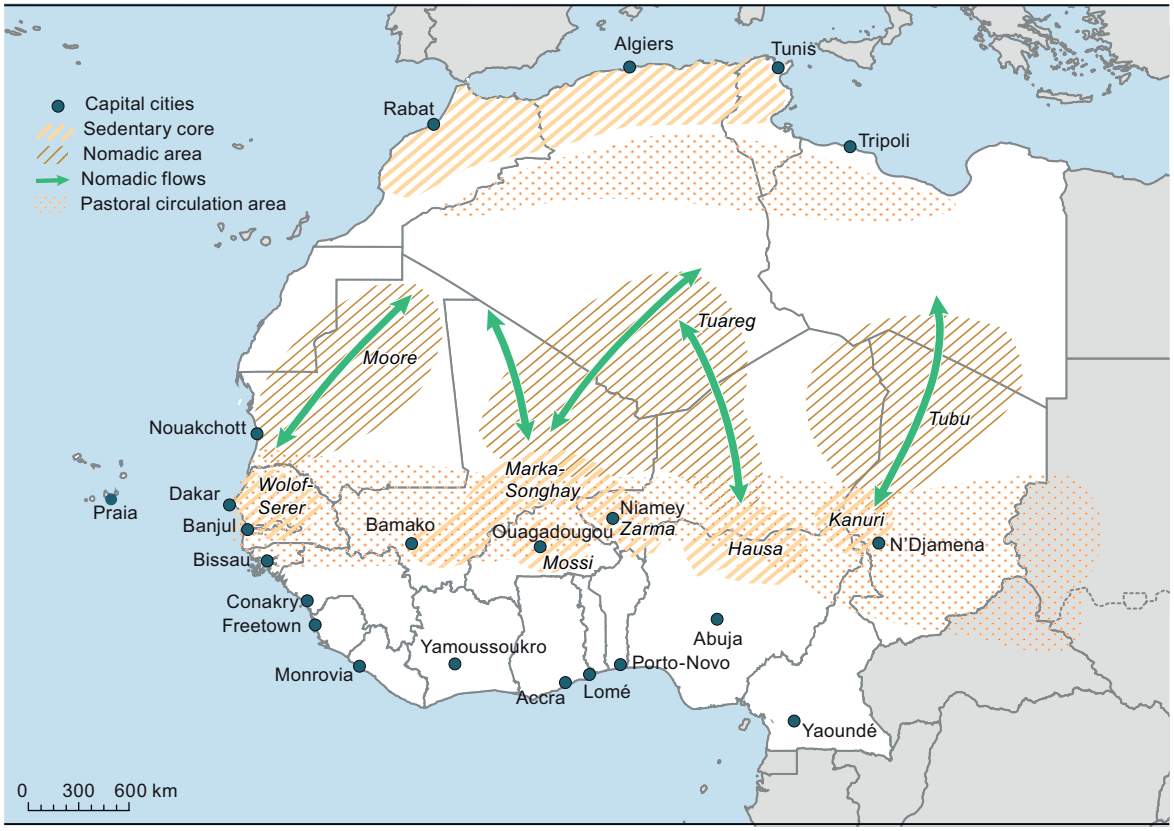
The colonial and postcolonial eras have considerably reshaped this spatial organisation, without completely erasing its specificities. While precolonial West Africa had several agglomerations located inland and not a single major city along the coast, colonial powers established and emphasised coastal cities to facilitate trade and export. The introduction of new cities, the establishment of political boundaries, and the reorganisation of trade routes toward the Gulf of Guinea considerably disrupted the regional urban network inherited from precolonial times. Precolonial urban centres such as Timbuktu and Djenné, for example, were cut from the trade networks that sustained their growth, while other centres emerged by gradually being assigned administrative functions to support an increasing colonial and post-colonial territorial organisation.

As a consequence, the growth of colonial cities has often been more spectacular than that of older urban centres. In Niger, for example, Niamey was home to less than 10 000 people in 1950, as compared with 12 000 in Zinder, the historic capital city of the Damagaram Sultanate. By 2020, the population of Niamey was estimated to exceed 1.2 million people, almost 5.5 times the size of Zinder. A similar change is taking place in Mali and Senegal, where Bamako and Dakar's population exceeded those of Kayes and Saint-Louis well before decolonisation (Figure 2.5).

In an attempt to exploit localised natural resources, colonial and postcolonial powers also contributed to oppose sedentary and nomadic livelihoods (Walther and Retaillé, 2021[15]). By dividing the region into states and assigning social groups to a particular territory, these initiatives disorganised the mobility patterns of West African societies and encouraged the development of informal trade activities that bypass formal regulations. Nowhere is the impact of the

Map 2.2

Sedentary cores and nomadic areas in North and West Africa



Sources: Adapted from (OECD/SWAC, 2014[14]) by the authors.

territorial policies of the colonial and postcolonial states more visible than in border regions (Nugent, 2019[16]). Recent research shows that border cities are smaller, grow faster and have higher density than other cities in West Africa (OECD/SWAC, 2019[12]). This rapid growth is especially visible within 50 kilometres of national borders, where the most dynamic markets are located, such as along Nigeria's borders and in the Gulf of Guinea. A third of the West African population lives within 100 kilometres of a border in 2020 (Map 2.4).

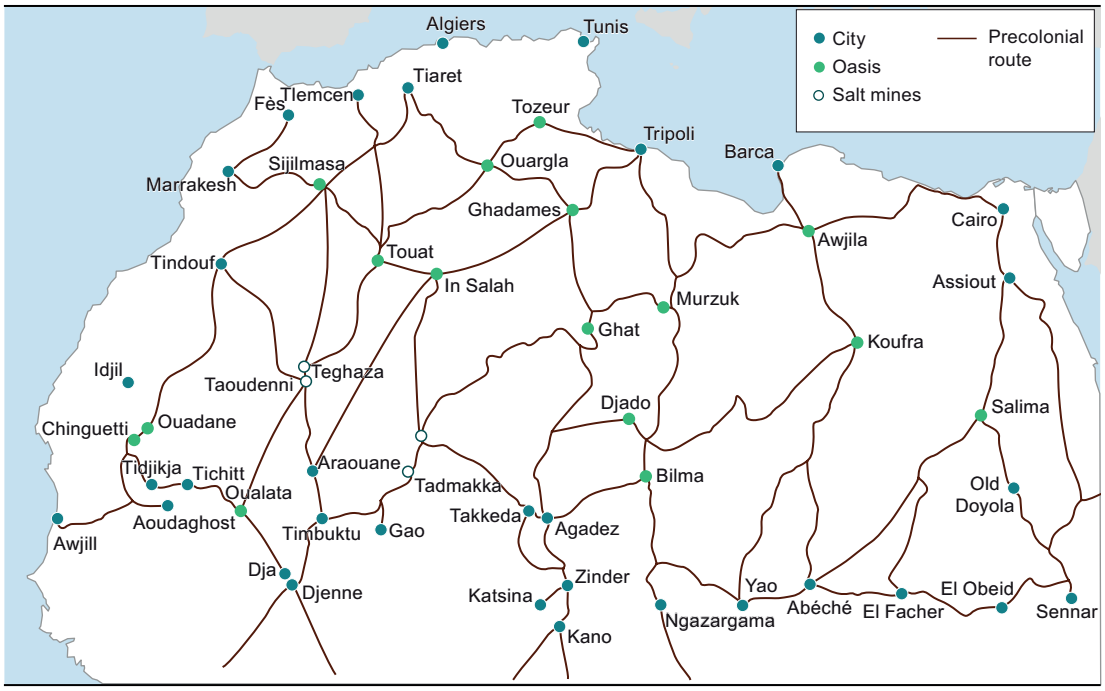
Border cities and markets play a crucial role in the transnational circulation of agricultural goods produced in the region (OECD/SWAC, 2017[17]) and of manufactured products imported from the world markets, such as used cars, cereals, petroleum, plastic materials and electronics (Walther, 2015[6]). Some of these cities are a major component of the transnational metropolitan areas that have emerged in recent decades, such as the conurbation that stretches from Accra in Ghana to Ibadan in Nigeria (OECD/SWAC, 2020[1]). The large population, high densities and as yet unexploited potential of this coastal area has led the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to identify the Abidjan-Lagos corridor as a priority for regional integration (AfDB-UEMOA, 2017[18]) (Map 2.5). Yet, the ambition to use the corridor as an instrument of regional integration faces numerous challenges, including roadblocks, high transit fees imposed on vehicles, and numerous bans of commodities Nigeria imposes on its neighbours. Thus far, regional trade remains segmented by country, and much of the investment is dedicated to the north-south corridors connecting the ports of the Gulf of Guinea to the Sahel (Nugent, 2022[19]).

Recent urban transformations

As in other regions of the world, North and West African cities differ from rural areas in

Map 2.3

Precolonial routes, oases and cities



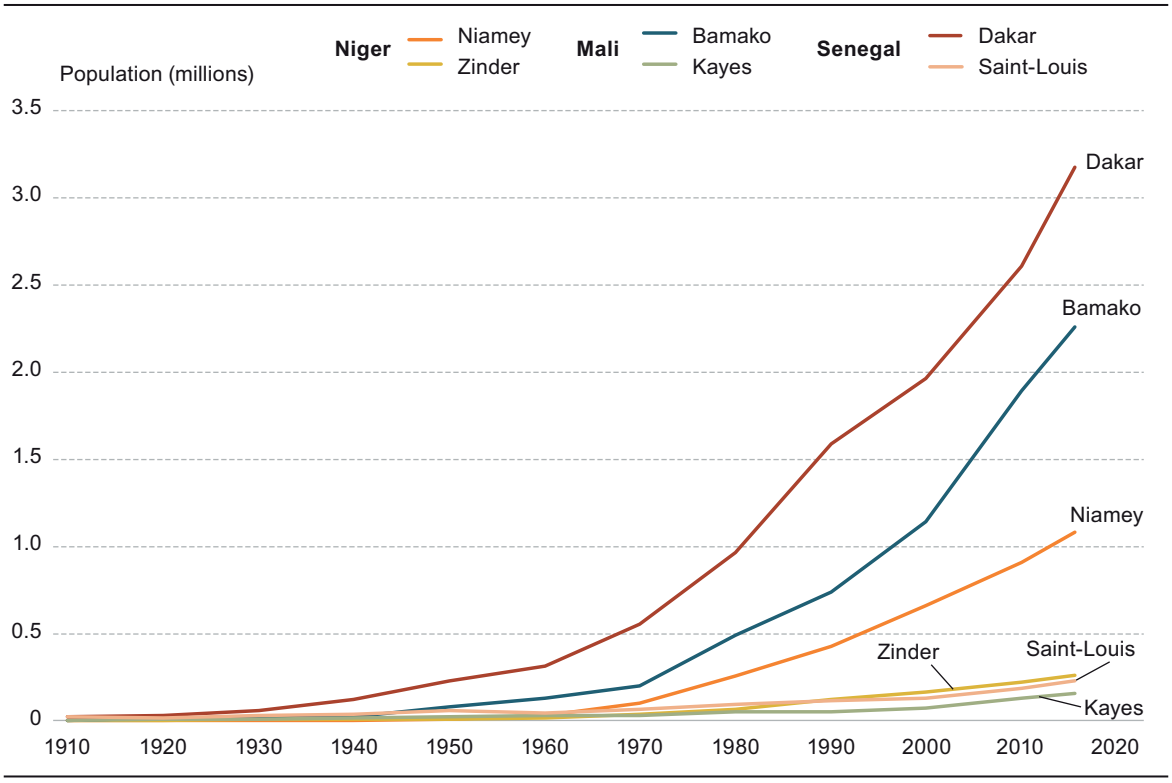
Sources: Adapted from (OECD/SWAC, 2014[14]) by the authors.

their size, density and social heterogeneity. As sites of diversification and innovation, cities are characterised by the presence of a specialised workforce employed in non-agricultural activities, such as trade, education and administration. Cities also tend to juxtapose people of different backgrounds, origin and wealth, which makes social inequalities and ostentation more visible in urban than in rural areas (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1993[20]). The social diversity created by the urban fabric encourages the autonomy of individuals from traditional social structures. In that sense, larger towns are distinguished from small villages by the fact that they allow the juxtaposition of differentiated social groups in a shared setting.

In recent years, a redistribution of population from the coast inland can be observed (OECD/SWAC, 2020[1]). These rapidly shifting and expanding urban processes have produced several notable examples of rapidly growing agglomerations, such as Onitsha in Nigeria, which has been transformed from a small urban agglomeration into one of the largest agglomerations in West Africa, with 8.5 million (2015) and a city cluster size of 28 million (OECD, UNECA, AfDB, 2022[21]). This expansion has generated cities in close proximity, creating opportunities for networks and growth through trade, knowledge and employment. Economically and socially, urban areas in Africa are much more productive, wealthy, innovative and with greater access to infrastructure than other areas: piped water, electricity access and mobile and car ownership, for example, are all higher in cities (OECD, UNECA, AfDB, 2022[21]).

Even small and medium-sized cities, which constitute the vast majority of urban centres, perform well relative to rural areas. Underemployment and the percentage of adults without jobs are both lower in urban areas, while salaries are on average more than double those in rural areas. The number of years in education is on average 2.5 to 4 years more than in rural areas, and fertility rates, while high, are more than a third lower in urban areas (Corker, 2017[22]). Proximity to a major city is one of the strongest predictors of cell phones, healthcare, education and higher wages. Yet, despite their economic role in the regional economy, African cities have long

Figure 2.5
Demographic changes in Niger, Mali and Senegal, 1910-2015



Source: Adapted from (OECD/SWAC, 2019[12]) by the authors.

suffered from low expenditure on local governments and a low degree of autonomy. Urban municipalities, for example, must contend with limited resources and poorly defined political and fiscal roles that prevent them from offering adequate social services to urban dwellers.

AN URBANISATION OF CONFLICT?

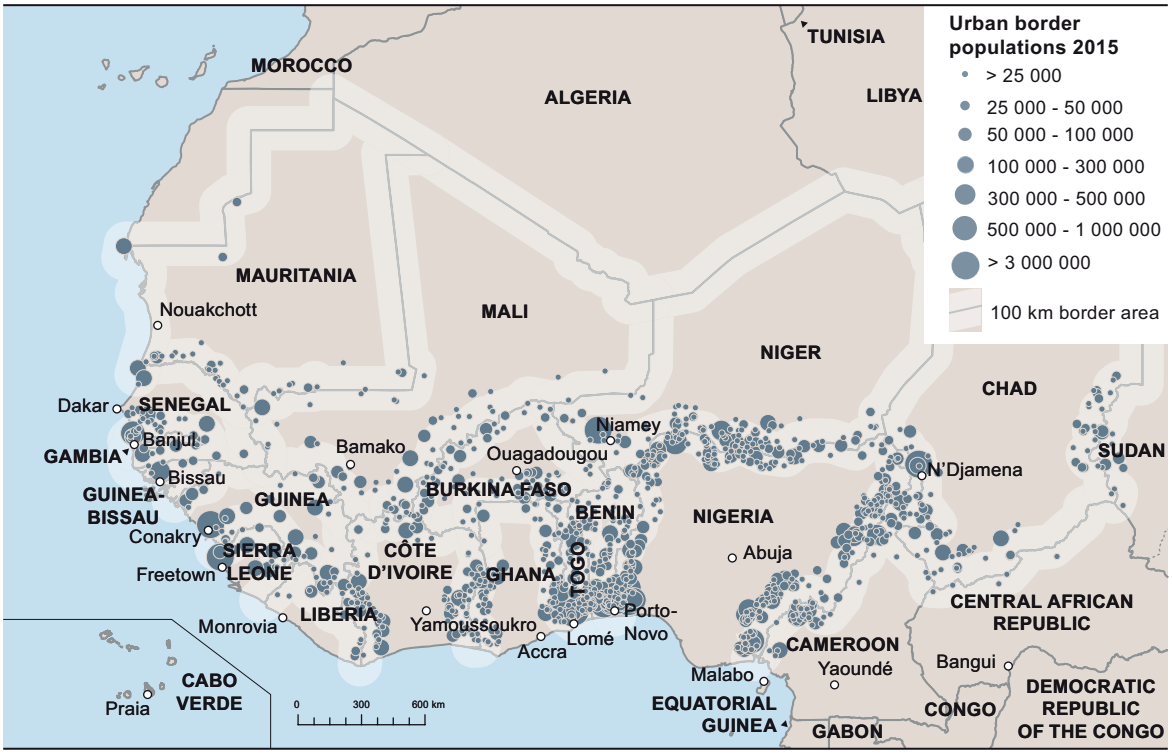
A key spatial aspect of armed conflicts is that they tend to be unevenly distributed across the world and form clusters of violence that can either be contained within national boundaries, or spread across entire regions, as in the Sahel-Sahara today. Due to the shifting strategies adopted by the belligerents and the changing nature of warfare since the end of the Cold War, the geography of such armed conflicts is a subject of lively debate. While some have argued that conflicts tend to concentrate around areas with distinctly urban attributes, including high population densities and good infrastructure (Buhaug and Rød, 2006[23]; Raleigh and Hegre, 2009[24]), others have noted that rural hinterlands provide the best resources for belligerents to flourish and, potentially, challenge state forces (Mkandawire, 2002[25]). The question whether conflict is more urban or rural in nature is still contested (Dorward, 2022[26]; Radil et al., 2022[27]).

More urban conflicts?

Recent research on the geography of violence shows that irregular conflicts are increasingly taking place in cities such as Baghdad, London, Madrid, Mumbai, Paris or Tel Aviv, and away from open fields, deserts and jungles (see Graham, 2011[28]). The idea that cities represent a new battlefield has also gained traction in the African Studies literature, where authors have documented cities' political and economic

Map 2.4

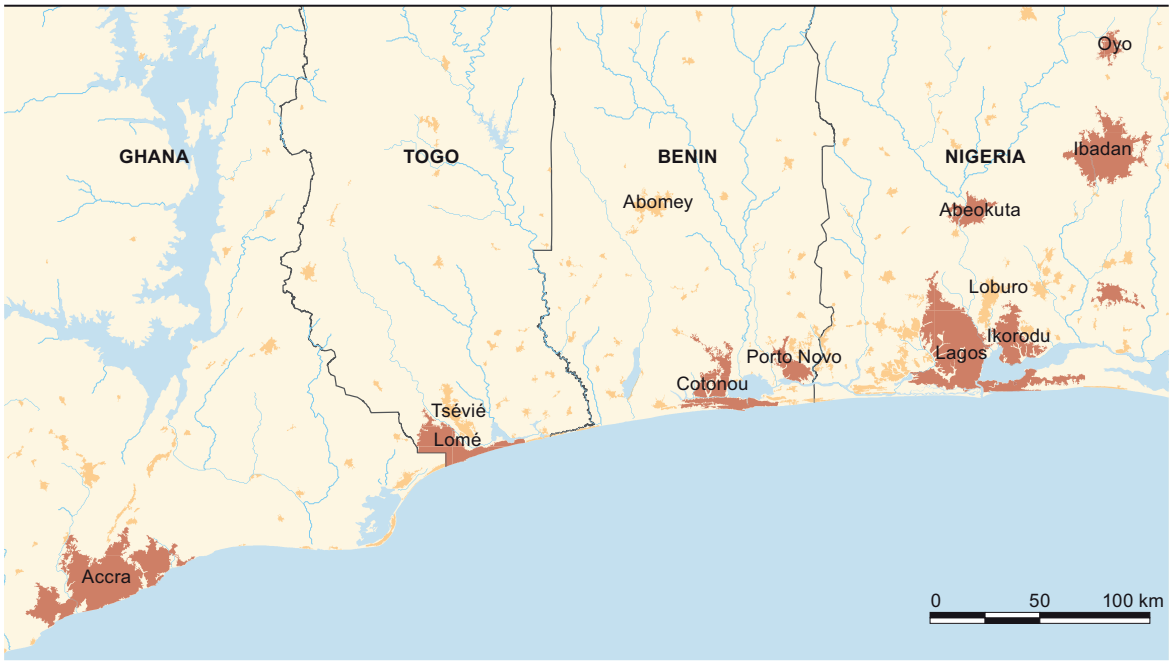
West African urban population within 100 km of a border, 2015



Source: (OECD/SWAC, 2019[12]), *Population and Morphology of Border Cities*, https://doi.org/10.1787/80dfd9d8-en.

Map 2.5

Urban agglomerations between Accra and Ibadan, 2015



Source: (OECD/SWAC, 2020[1]), *Africa's Urbanisation Dynamics 2020: Africapolis, Mapping a New Urban Geography*, https://doi.org/10.1787/b6bccb81-en.

Box 2.1
How the Malian conflict affects the city of Gao

The city and region of Gao were significantly affected by the northern Malian rebellion of 2012. Gao was captured first by the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), and later by the jihadist coalition under the control of the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) that took over northern Mali from the MNLA. Both the MNLA and the MUJAO inflicted serious human rights violations on the population of Gao, including amputations and beatings (HRW, 2012[33]).

The violence unleashed in Gao in 2012 set the stage for enduring intercommunal tensions after the town was liberated in 2013. In February and March 2013, there was more jihadist resistance against the French and Malian military presence in Gao than there was in Kidal and Timbuktu. Gao was the site of what has been called Mali's first suicide bombing, in February 2013, and of a suicide bombing in January 2017 targeting a mixed patrol of the *Coalition des Mouvements de l'Azawad* (CMA), Plateforme and Malian army personnel.

More recently, ethnic tensions flared in incidents such as the 2020 intercommunal clashes involving what appeared to be Songhai-led lynching of Arabs accused of theft. Gao has also been repeatedly targeted by jihadists, in part because the city emerged as the nexus of various security initiatives in northern Mali. Gao hosted the Malian headquarters of France's counterterrorism mission for the Sahel, Operation Barkhane, and was the last of Barkhane's bases that France turned over to Malian forces as French forces withdrew from Mali in 2021-2022. Gao is also the eastern headquarters of the United Nations' Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), and thus remains important for international security architectures.

Source: Alexander Thurston for this publication.

characteristics that make them important sites of contestation and control. Cities often represent potent symbols of state authority, while also serving as key nodes in (trans)national economic networks and sites of capital accumulation that can be fought for and captured to meaningful effect (Beall, Goodfellow and Rodgers, 2013[29]; Büscher, 2018[30]; Goodfellow and Jackman, 2020[31]). The last decade has provided numerous examples of political violence carried out both by state and non-state actors that illustrate the potential for conflict to be highly urbanised. In January 2017, for example, a suicide bomber from Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) attacked the joint French-United Nations (UN) military base in Gao, a commercial hub along the Niger river. The attack, which killed 77 and injured more than 100, was the deadliest suicide bombing to date in Mali (ACLED, 2021[32]) (Box 2.1).

The idea that African conflicts can redefine the urban landscape is now well established in the literature, given the destructive impact of civil wars and terrorist attacks on cities (Büscher, 2018[30]). While the consequences of conflict on cities are well documented, the factors that drive belligerents to urban areas are more difficult to identify. This difficulty stems from the fact that the conflicts observed in Africa take very different forms depending on the region. Since the end of the Cold War, the nature, forms and locations of conflicts in Africa have been fundamentally transformed (Williams, 2016[34]). Conventional forms of rural armed conflict have shifted towards alternative modes of political violence, including riots, demonstrations, and 'civic conflict' which result from the competition of several social groups for the resources and services offered by cities (Golooba-Mutebi and Sjögren, 2017[35]). In April 2008, for example, thousands of people marched in the streets of Abidjan, Dakar and Ouagadougou to protest against rising food and fuel prices, and at least 24 were killed in similar demonstrations in Cameroun. More recently, thousands have violently taken to the streets of Bamako in Mali to demand that President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita resign or that French forces leave the country.

The first factor that can explain why conflict may be concentrated in cities is population size and density (Table 2.1). As African cities grow, they can potentially bring antagonistic social groups into closer proximity within multi-ethnic cities, increasing the probability that disputes will turn violent (Buhaug and Urdal, 2013[36]). Rapid population growth may also generate conflict by amplifying social strain and competition surrounding access to urban resources, labour and housing (Østby, 2016[37]; Gizelis, Pickering and Urdal, 2021[38]). In Nigeria's Middle Belt, for example, the frequency of violent riots in Jos, where several ethnic and religious minorities live together, lends credibility to this view (Krause, 2018[39]). Finally, the absolute size of the urban population may also lead to increased levels of violence in urban areas. Larger cities include more disaffected youths who could be tempted to resort to political violence and protest movements (Urdal and Hoelscher, 2012[40]; Menashe-Oren, 2020[41]).

Urbanisation also encourages intra-elite competition and new models of political and civil society organisation that allow politically motivated and often highly educated urban residents to organise (Straus, 2012[43]). The urban poor population is often mobilised by political elites seeking to capture power, support and resources, which could explain the increase in urban violence. In that sense, Africa's recent transition towards multiparty politics has turned its cities into key political battlegrounds for political and religious elites (Raleigh, 2015[44]). These forms of violence are fuelled by institutional changes adopted by countries undergoing political transitions. For example, democratisation without free elections has disenfranchised a fringe of urban residents, who feel politically and economically marginalised (Golooba-Mutebi and Sjögren, 2017[35]; Harding, 2020[45]).

Another factor that could make African cities susceptible to violence is that they tend to attract an increasing number of migrants more likely to experience marginalisation and find difficulty in adjusting socially and psychologically to urban life (Buhaug and Urdal, 2013[36]). In some regions, such as the Lake Chad basin, the Great Lakes or Darfur, cities also attract numerous refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) who are victims of both government forces and violent extremist organisations. The persistence of forced displacements and insecurity has led to new urban forms that either shape existing cities or give rise to new urban patterns in previously rural areas. The strong urban growth observed in the eastern and southern part of Chad, for example, is due to the forced migration of refugees from Sudan and the Central African Republic. In this border region, conflicts tend to create dense agglomerations that expand or shrink in size on the Chadian side of the border, depending on the political context in neighbouring countries.

In addition, cities represent a symbol of state authority and a military target that armed groups must defeat if they wish to overthrow the central government. Capturing capital cities obviates the need to capture larger territories and can decide the fate of whole conflicts. In 2011, for example, the Second Ivoirian civil war ended with the capture of Laurent Gbagbo in Abidjan and the reinstallation of president-elect Alassane Ouattara. The strategic role of capital cities in Africa is so important that it often determines whether or not regional bodies and international alliances intervene in a conflict. For example, the siege of Monrovia by the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) in 2003 was a major episode of the second Sierra Leone conflict that led to the intervention of the United States Joint Task Force Liberia and the ECOWAS force.

The conflict in Mali offers yet another example of how strategic capital cities can be. If Bamako has been relatively peaceful, the city and its environs nevertheless remain vital pieces of the security mosaic in the country. Because control of Bamako is equated with control of the Malian state, even distant threats to the capital can generate dramatic responses. During 2012, for example, the jihadist takeover of the north of the country did not provoke an immediate response from regional and international actors. Towards the end of the year, jihadist advances into central Mali, which appeared to some observers to be an initial step towards an attempted takeover of Bamako, triggered a rapid French-led response in the form of Operation Serval, which reversed jihadists' territorial gains in the centre and broke their control over northern cities (Chivvis, 2015[46]).

Table 2.1

Possible reasons for the concentration of conflicts in urban areas

Potential factor	Explanation
Population size and density	Increasing population and density encourage social proximity and political mobilisation.
Intra-elite competition	Cities provide an arena for political, economic, and religious elites to compete within democratising states.
Migration	Cities attract migrants, refugees or other marginalised groups that can be recruited by armed groups.
Targets	Cities represent a symbol of state authority and a military target.

Source: Compiled by the authors from Staniland (2010[42]), Beall et al. (2013[29]), Büscher (2018[30]), Dorward (2022[26]) and Radil et al. (2022[27]).

Cities are sites where extreme wealth and extreme poverty coexist, sometimes within a few hundred meters of each other. In Lagos and Nairobi, for example, the slums of Makoko and Kibera are located a stone's throw away from affluent neighbourhoods and business districts, where many poor employees work. In the absence of affordable and reliable public transportation system, living in slums is the only option left to the urban poor. This combination of ostentatious signs of success and abject poverty, typical of large African urban centres, provides ample economic resources to those who wish to challenge or evade the state. Violent organisations may be drained into the cities, where money can be more easily obtained through criminal activities. This scenario is however relatively uncommon in North and West Africa, where jihadist organisations have focused on drug trafficking, cattle rustling and illegal gold mining to fuel their international development, training and arms purchases. None of these activities take place in cities.

Finally, rebels motivated by assuming political power in capital cities may emerge in urban areas or have an urban component, but persistent urban guerrilla movements are rare in Africa. Capturing urban areas and state institutions remains largely out of reach of Africa's violent organisations. Thus, as in Latin America since the 1970s (Holmes, 2015[47]), urban guerrilla movements often have to retreat to rural or peripheral areas, where it is easier to recruit, get resources and maintain a territorial presence.

More rural conflicts?

While conflicts are related in complex ways within urban areas, there is no straightforward association between the two. Indeed, an important strand of the literature argues that armed conflicts, especially civil wars and rebellions, have traditionally been associated with rural areas. Cities may provide potential resources for armed groups to flourish, but physical proximity can also be used by government forces to repress them more efficiently than in rural areas (Table 2.2). Urban guerrillas thus have very short lifespans and tend to relocate to areas where rugged terrain (Hendrix, 2011[48]), dense forests (Raleigh, 2010[49]) and porous borders (Radil et al., 2022[27]) can provide safe havens. This makes rural and remote areas favourable settings for asymmetric conflicts between armed groups and the state.

In some regions, cities may also remain relatively unaffected by political violence (Beall, Goodfellow and Rodgers, 2013[29]). Kinshasa, for example, fell without much resistance to the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo (AFDL) during the First Congo War in May 1997. In the Sahel, Niamey in Niger and N'Djamena in Chad have largely been spared by terrorist attacks, despite being very close to the main theatre of operation of the insurgency. In Mali, Bamako was a hub for the displaced (Sangaré and Cold-Ravnkilde, 2020[50]), including displaced local elites such as the mayors and other officials from central Mali fleeing from jihadist threat.

Table 2.2

Possible reasons for the concentration of conflicts in rural areas

Potential factors	Explanation
Safe haven	Insurgents are more easily defeated in urban areas than rural areas. Sometimes cities or urban areas can remain places of "calm" or refuge despite surrounding conflicts.
Security	Rural areas are less well defended than cities. States work hard to maintain security of urban areas.
Resources	Rural areas provide agricultural, mineral and human resources that armed groups can use to control local communities.

Source: Compiled by the authors from Beall et al., (2013[29]), Büscher (2018[30]), Dorward (2022[26]) and Radil et al. (2022[27]).

Many African states struggle to project power and authority to the rural periphery (Herbst, 2000[51]). As a result, states struggle to effectively counter insurgents in rural areas, giving rebels an advantage when operating far from the state's urban bastions of coercive power. Indeed, civil wars are more likely to be located far from a nation's capital and are typically longer in duration (Buhaug, Gates and Lujala, 2009[52]). This is particularly true of secessionist conflicts. In Mali and Niger, for example, Tuareg rebellions have typically developed in some of the most remote regions of the country, where state power had long been weak. Further east, in Chad, political power has since independence been challenged by rebel groups whose main base of operations lies more than 1 000 kilometres north of N'Djamena, in the Tibesti region.

From a demographic perspective, one could argue that the development of rebel movements in the Adrar des Ifoghas in Mali, Aïr Mountains of Niger, and Tibesti massif of Chad is less due to their rural nature than to the remoteness of the regions. After all, arid regions consistently have the highest urbanisation rates of the country, since the vast majority of the population lives in cities (Bossard, 2015[53]). In Niger, for example, the proportion of the population that lives in cities is three times higher in the Saharan region of Agadez (45%) than in the rest of the country (16%) according to the Niger Institute of Statistics (2022[54]). However, while these regions remain fundamentally more urban than the rest of the country, a significant portion of the violent events observed in recent decades are located away from cities, in rural areas where armed groups compete for the control of local resources or trade routes (Walther et al., 2021[55]).

Rural areas have a high potential for conflict, because rural scarcity can be associated with ethnic tensions over resources that central governments rarely address (Buhaug and Urdal, 2013[36]; Gizelis, Pickering and Urdal, 2021[38]). These tensions can potentially lead to two principal violent outcomes: communal clashes between native populations and settlers, and reactions by rural residents to land seizures or ecological damage caused by the state. The Ogoni uprising in Nigeria's Niger Delta, protesting land degradation by the government and the oil industry, is a case in point (Watts, 2004[56]). However, the neglect of the rural areas has rarely led to peasant rebellions in the West Africa context, unlike in Uganda and Mozambique, where rebel movements demonstrate the potential violent involvement of the countryside, often after aggressive oppression by state forces (Mkandawire, 2002[25]).

THE CONFLICT LIFE CYCLE

Rather than debating whether violence is inherently urban or rural, some have argued that conflicts are not exclusive to either setting, as they often relocate throughout the duration of a conflict in a way that exploits the strengths and weaknesses of both cities and their hinterlands.

Box 2.2

Mao and the Chinese guerrilla model

The back-and-forth nature of African insurgencies help to highlight why many conflicts in North and West Africa differ from the classic rural-to-urban trajectory theorised by Mao. Mkandawire (2002, p. 182[25]) summarised this by arguing that the "social terrain of rural Africa [is] highly unsuitable for classical guerrilla warfare" for several reasons. Primarily, unlike in China, where the rural peasantry was exploited by a landlord class, most African farmers have access to labour and land, and their activities are mediated by markets. Since the rebels have little to offer peasants in the rural areas in terms of political rights, land rights or agrarian reform, there is little incentive for this "uncaptured peasantry" to join a rebel movement. In fact, many insurgencies and armed movements have instead aggressively killed and hurt civilians, instilling fear and coercing the populace, indicating that there is little consideration of voluntary participation or widespread appeal to the rural populations.

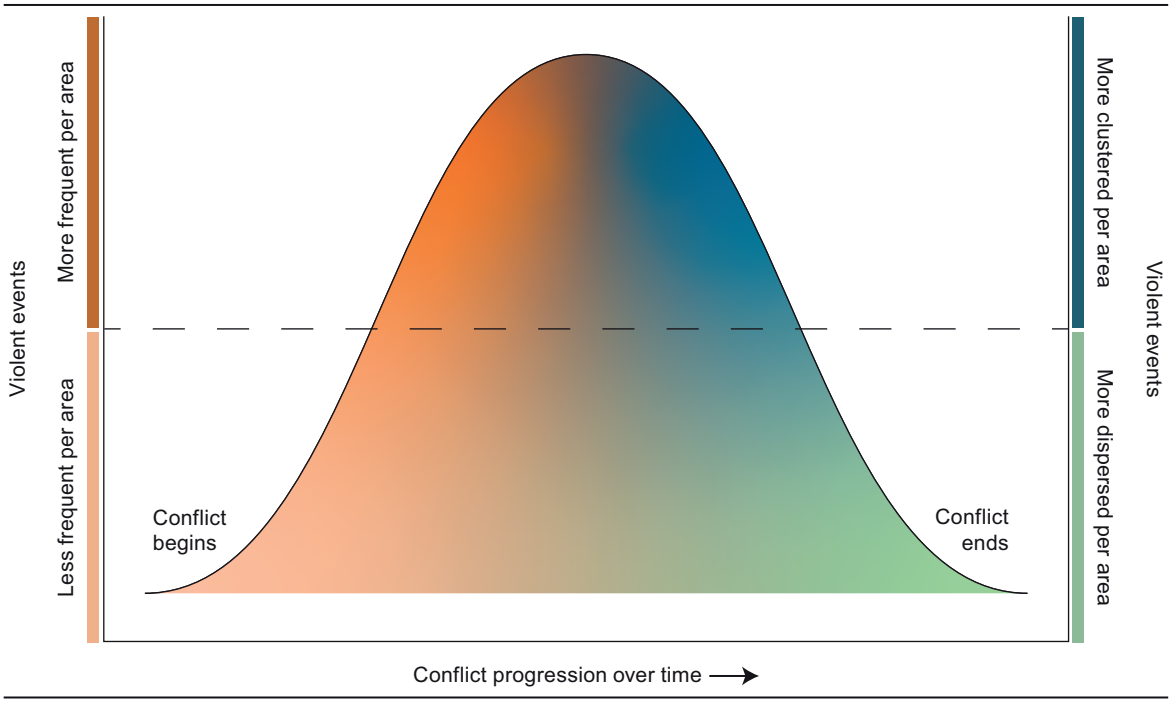
Another key difference is the limited state capacity to extract surplus goods from farmers, due to adjustment programs and informal trade networks. This means that African rebel movements are often driven more by social and religious issues such as ethnicity or implementation of religious laws than by Maoist-style economic ideology. As an implication of this shift to identity-based rather than ideology-based movements, Africa is characterised by an exceedingly large number of rebel groups, whose motivations and relationships with urban areas often differ from group to group. For example, externally supported movements returning from exile may simply pass through rural areas on their way to capture power in the capital city (Mkandawire, 2002[25]). Alternatively, rebel movements that have become rural after a defeat in an urban setting usually struggle to mobilise popular support among local populations and tend to cause enormous suffering in rural areas, as in the Sahel today. Ethnic-based regionalist and secessionist movements seeking autonomy tend to rely the most on rural populations, since one of their primary objectives is to seize territory seen as the group's homeland

Source: Authors.

One of the earliest proponents of this approach was (Tse-Tung, 1937, 2005[57]), who suggested during the Chinese Revolution that rebellions necessarily first emerge in the countryside and later try to conquer cities. Mao's theory built on his own revolutionary activity: the Chinese Communist Party initially followed the Marxist belief that the socialist revolution should be led by the urban proletariat but later moved away from the cities of Shanghai, Beijing and Guangzhou to first mobilise the rural peasantry. Mao argued that the support of the rural civilian population was key to building a territorial support base from which to launch a campaign against the central government. His theory proved highly influential in the anticolonial wars that started in the 1950s across the developing world, even though the Chinese revolutionary context differed significantly from that of Africa (Box 2.2).

In Algeria, for example, the National Liberation Front (FLN) initially launched a series of attacks against government targets and French settlers in the interior of the country that were severely repressed by colonial forces. Realising that fighting in rural areas would not gather much attention for their cause, the FLN launched a campaign of urban terrorism to coincide with the United Nations General Assembly in 1957. The FLN focused its terror campaign on the capital city, Algiers. After a brutal counterinsurgency campaign led by French forces, the FLN was eventually defeated in the city and returned to the countryside, where its guerrilla tactics increasingly targeted civilians who did not support them. The FLN ultimately gained control of the mountainous regions of Kabylie and Aurès and used neighbouring countries to launch attacks against the French (Galula, 2006[58]), before independence was declared in 1962.

Figure 2.6
The conflict life cycle



Source: Authors.

More recently, the Lake Chad area has followed a similar evolution. Until 2002, what would ultimately become Boko Haram was largely an urban movement formed around a small number of radical Islamist youth, many from the social upper class, who gathered at the Alhaji Muhammadu Ndimi Mosque in Maiduguri (Agbiboa, 2022[59]). In 2002, an offshoot of the sect led by Mohammed Ali declared the city and its social establishment corrupt and left Maiduguri for the rural community of Kanam, near the Nigerien border (Walker, 2012[60]). After a dispute with the police over fishing rights, the surviving members returned to Maiduguri in late 2003, where they established their own mosque, the Ibn Taimiyyah Masjid, near the railway station.

The following years were marked by a gradual expansion of Boko Haram to other cities in Bauchi, Yobe and Niger states that culminated in the 2009 uprising in Maiduguri, one of the most violent urban events ever recorded in West Africa. The government crackdown that followed the uprising led Boko Haram to flee to rural areas and neighbouring countries. From its strongholds in the countryside, Boko Haram started a campaign of assassinations in several cities of the northeast and in the federal capital of Abuja. Boko Haram was expelled a second time from the major cities of the region by the government and the Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF) in 2015 and fled to the Mandara Mountains, Gwoza Hills and Sambisa Forest.

The fact that armed groups have vacillated between urban and rural areas in response to government opposition suggests that conflicts in North and West Africa may differ from the Maoist pattern. Previous research into the locations of political violence in the region has identified the concept of a conflict "spatial life cycle", which may provide additional insight into why a conflict occurs where it does. The spatial life cycle theory notes that many conflicts exhibit distinct locational patterns in their early, middle and late stages (Walther et al., 2021[55]). For example, the locations of violent events tend to be dispersed from one another, with events that also occur less frequently in each area during the beginning and concluding stages of a conflict. Conversely, violent events occurring during the middle stages of a conflict are often

closely clustered together and tend to happen more frequently in an area (Figure 2.6).

What remains unknown is a fuller account of what produces the patterns summarised by the spatial life cycle theory. Urban-rural conflict patterns may indeed be related. For example, if the beginning and ending stages of a conflict tend to be more rural, that could help explain the dispersal and lower frequency of violent events common to those phases, as fewer targets are likely to be present in less populated areas (resulting in lower event frequency) with more distance between those targets that are present (resulting in more event dispersal). And if violence tends to move into urban areas during a conflict's middle stage, it could help to explain the tendency for violence to cluster and increase in frequency. From this perspective, a closer understanding of the region's urban-rural conflict trajectories has the potential to fill in some of the process that leads to the patterns of the spatial life cycle.

Note

1 This section builds on OECD/SWAC (2019[12]) and Walther (2021[61]).

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Chapter 3

Mapping urban and rural violence in North and West Africa

Chapter 3 describes the methods used to analyse whether politically motivated violence is more pronounced in urban or rural areas, how the intensity of violence has shifted between cities and their hinterland over time, and how the use of violence varies geographically across North and West Africa. The spatial and temporal relationships between cities and violence are studied using population densities from WorldPop, a global gridded population dataset that has been used for longitudinal analysis since 2000. The report also classifies density data according to the recent "degree of urbanisation" definition adopted by the United Nations, which distinguishes between three categories of human settlements and facilitates cross-national comparisons. Population data are next combined with conflict data from the Armed Conflict and Location & Event Data (ACLED) project to classify violent events as urban, semi-urban or rural, and to calculate the distance from each violent event to the nearest urban area. The report also uses the Spatial Conflict Dynamics indicator (SCDi) developed by the Sahel and West Africa Club (SWAC/OECD) to identify major clusters of violence in the region. The results of the indicator are complemented by a qualitative analysis of ten case studies that have experienced high levels of violence in the past decade, in order to identify the local roots of urban and rural conflicts.

KEY MESSAGES

- **This report combines population and conflict data to study the relationship between political violence and urban areas in North and West Africa since 2000.**
- **The "degree of urbanisation" definition adopted by the United Nations is used to classify violent events as urban, semi-urban or rural.**
- **The report applies the Spatial Conflict Dynamics indicator (SCDi) to identify major clusters of violent activities in the region.**
- **A qualitative analysis of ten case studies particularly affected by political violence since 2010 addresses the local roots of urban and rural conflicts in the region.**

HOW TO ASSESS THE URBANITY OF VIOLENCE

In North and West Africa, armed conflicts are rarely contained within the strict boundaries of a region or country. Instead, they tend to spread and relocate opportunistically, as violent actors clash over the control of strategic places, routes and local resources.[1] Assessing these patterns of mobility is critical in evaluating how and where armed conflicts emerge, develop and eventually end in the region. This report sets out to explain this shifting geography of armed conflict by focusing on the urban dimension of violence in North and West Africa. It examines whether conflicts predominantly affect urban or rural areas, how the intensity of violence has changed between such regions, and which urban areas are the most violent (Table 3.1).

Table 3.1
Questions, approaches and tools to assessing urban violence

Questions	Approaches	Tools
1. Are urban areas more violent than rural areas?	Assess the relative number of violent events and fatalities according to their distance to urban areas	Distance from each violent event to the nearest urban cell
2. Has the intensity of violence in urban areas changed over time?	Assess the changing proportion of violent events and fatalities according to their distance to urban areas	Distance from each violent event to the nearest urban cell
3. Are some urban areas more violent than others?	Identify major hotspots of violence and contextualise the relationship between cities and conflict	Spatial Conflict Dynamics indicator (SCDi) and qualitative analysis of a selection of urban areas

The goal of the first question is to examine whether violent events and fatalities observed in North and West Africa since 2000 tend to be primarily located in cities or in their rural hinterlands. In other words, is political violence more urban or rural? This is a crucial question, considering the rapid increase in the number of urban dwellers in the region in recent years. The report then examines whether political violence has become increasingly concentrated in urban areas in the past two decades. Are urban areas more violent than rural areas? The last question addresses the relationship between cities and insurgencies, reviewing the local factors that help explain why violence develops in urban or rural areas. Why are some urban areas more violent than others?

The conceptual approaches and tools used to measure the intensity of violence in urban and rural areas, their temporal variations and their spatial characteristics build on previous work on the geography of violence in the region (OECD/SWAC, 2020[1]; Radil et al., 2022[2]; Walther et al., 2021[3]). To determine whether violence is more or less urban in general, the report assesses the relative number of violent events and fatalities based on their proximity to urban areas (question 1). If violence is predominantly an urban phenomenon, the highest concentration of violent activities will be found in or very near urban centres, and rapidly decay with distance from them.

A similar approach is used to determine whether violence is becoming more urban over time, using the changing proportion of violent events and fatalities in relation to their distance to urban areas (question 2). If violence is increasingly clustered in urban areas, the proportion of violent events and fatalities located in or near urban areas will have increased in recent years by comparison with previous periods. Finally, the report uses the Spatial Conflict Dynamics indicator to identify where the major hotspots of urban violence are located and offers a qualitative analysis of the local factors that could explain why violence develops in certain urban areas (question 3).

A regional and local approach to cities and conflicts

This report examines spatial trends in urban violence in 21 North and West African countries – Algeria, Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Libya, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Togo, and Tunisia (Map 3.1). This regional approach considers the northern and southern "shores" of the Sahara as two related battlefields for states and non-state organisations. It also captures two of the continent's major spatial clusters of urban agglomerations: a North African cluster along the Mediterranean and Atlantic coasts and a West African cluster along the Gulf of Guinea (OECD/SWAC, 2020[1]).

This regional approach is complemented by a qualitative analysis of ten case studies that

Map 3.1

Regions, countries and case studies



have experienced a high number of fatalities in the Central Sahel, Lake Chad region and Libya, the three main epicentres of conflict in the past decade (Figure 3.1). In the Central Sahel, the report focuses on the cities of Djibo, Gao and Kidal, where victims of the persistent conflict between the government of Mali and Burkina Faso and violent extremist organisations are particularly numerous, and on Mali's capital, Bamako. In the Lake Chad region, the report examines three places that have been particularly affected by the Boko Haram insurgency since 2009: the Nigerian cities of Gwoza and Maiduguri, and the Sambisa Forest, a rural region used by Boko Haram and, more recently, the Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP). In North Africa, the analysis focuses on Benghazi, Sirte and Tripoli, three major cities affected by the First and Second Libyan wars, which devastated the country in 2011 and 2014-20.

The demographic size of the urban agglomerations considered in this report ranges from 2.8 million people in Bamako to less than 35 000 people in Kidal (Figure 3.2). In general, the highest number of casualties occur in agglomerations that are strategically important in a conflict, rather than in the most populated places. For example, the town of Gwoza in Nigeria was the scene of fierce clashes between the government and Boko Haram that killed nearly 900 people in the mid-2010s, although it had fewer than 70 000 inhabitants. In the Sahara, too, cities are generally small, and their size only imperfectly reflects their military importance. For example, 372 casualties were recorded in Kidal, one of the most important political centres of north-eastern Mali. In Libya, the fighting in and around the town of Sirte, the birthplace of Muammar Kaddafi, owes less to its demographic weight (less than 60 000 inhabitants) than to its key role in the first civil war.

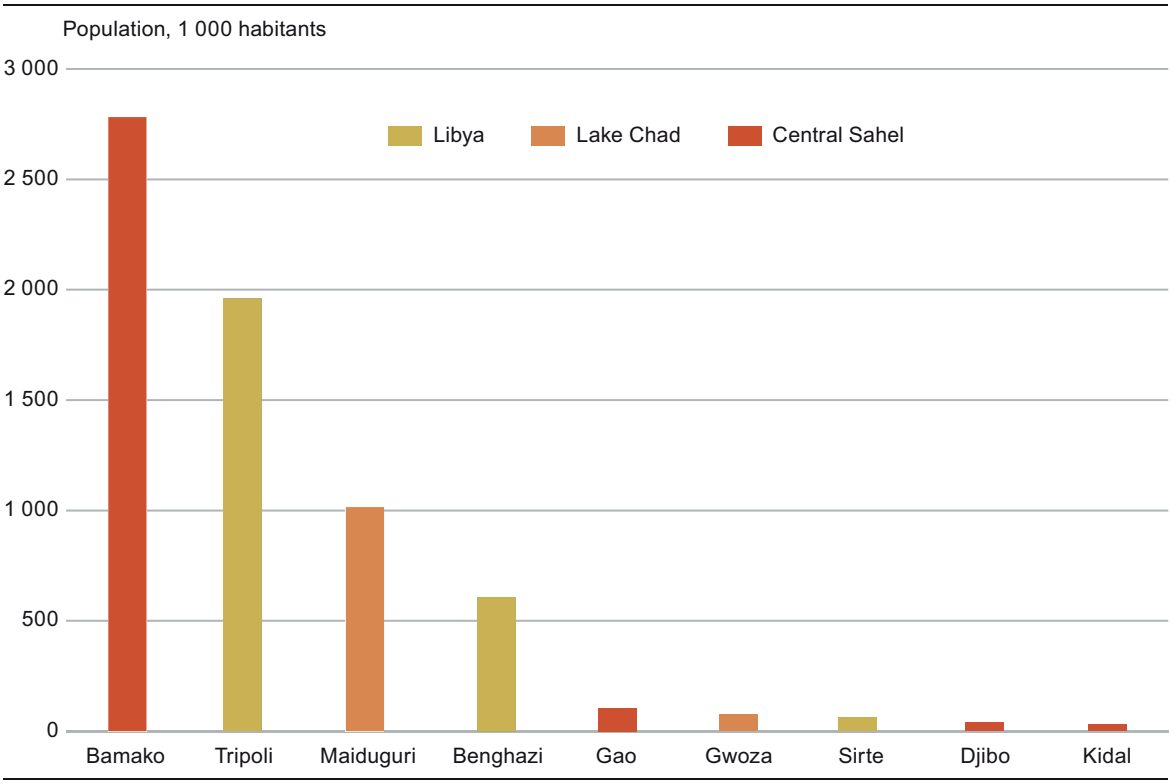
Figure 3.1

Number of fatalities by urban agglomeration, 1997-2021



Source: Authors based on ACLED (2022[41]) data. Data is available through 30 June 2022. ACLED data is publicly available.

Figure 3.2
Population by urban agglomeration, 2015



Source: OECD/SWAC (2020[5]).

Combining population and conflict data

To study how the demographic evolution of North and West Africa is related to political violence, the report uses WorldPop (WorldPop, 2022[6]), a global gridded population dataset that has been assessed as performing the best in spatial accuracy and estimated errors (Yin et al., 2021[7]). WorldPop is a residential dataset, which estimates where people reside, and calculates population density since 2000.

Most of the global population datasets transform national census information into gridded population estimates, yet each uses different data sources, settlement definitions and area or cell sizes. WorldPop is selected over alternative datasets such as Africapolis, LandScan or Global Human Settlement Layer (GHSL) because it has a high spatial resolution, is the most comprehensive for a cross-country and longitudinal analysis and is the most temporally current (see Box 3.1, Table 3.2).

WorldPop is a gridded density dataset that divides North and West Africa into 1 km by 1 km cells and estimates how many people reside in each cell in each year. The dataset does not identify individual cities or urban areas, as for example Africapolis does. However, it offers the best mix of spatial resolution, longitudinal coverage and performance estimates.

To classify WorldPop density data in different demographic categories, the report adopts the recent "degree of urbanisation" definition established by the United Nations (UN) Statistical Commission (UN, 2020[12]; Dijkstra et al., 2021[11]). The UN definition is based on population density per square kilometre, which is also the size of the cells generated by WorldPop, obviating any additional geoprocessing that could introduce errors. Under the UN definition, cells of 1 500 or more people per square kilometre are classified as urban, those between 300 and 1 499 as semi-urban, and those below 300 as

Box 3.1

Comparing WorldPop, Africapolis, GHSL and LandScan

Produced by the OECD, Africapolis is based on a spatial approach and applies a physical criteria (a continuously built-up area) and a demographic criteria (more than 10 000 inhabitants) to define an urban agglomeration. An urban unit is defined by combining satellite and aerial imagery, official demographic data such as censuses and other cartographic sources. Population estimates in both North and West Africa are only available for 2015, which makes longitudinal analysis not possible (OECD/SWAC, 2016[8]; 2020[1]). The 2020 update should be available in 2023.

The GHSL combines population censuses with remotely sensed land-cover layers to calculate residential population density in 1 kilometre by 1 kilometre gridded cells (European Commission, 2022[9]). GHSL data use a threshold of 50 000 inhabitants to define urban centres, which is poorly adapted to the African continent, where 92% of all urban agglomerations included fewer than 100 000 inhabitants in 2015 (OECD/SWAC, 2020[1]). The temporal availability is also limited to four years (1975, 1990, 2000, 2015), which makes the longitudinal analysis less precise than WorldPop.

Like WorldPop, LandScan (Oak Ridge National Laboratory, 2022[10]) is a gridded population dataset in 1 km by 1 km cells. However, it is an ambient population estimate, calculating a 24-hour average of where people are located, depending on commuting patterns. Both datasets show similar trends for urbanisation across North and West Africa. However, LandScan's ambient population approach has the unfortunate consequence of reducing "the number and size of cities, especially in low-income countries" (Dijkstra et al., 2021, p. 15[11]), an obstacle for the analysis of this report.

Table 3.2

Comparison of four population datasets for urban areas in Africa

Population dataset	Data source	Temporal	Urban definition	Grid cell size
Africapolis	Population censuses and spatial analysis (satellite)	1950-2015 (population), 2015 (agglomeration perimeters)	Minimum of 10 000 people in a built-up area with less than 200 metres between buildings.	N/A
Global Human Settlement Layer (GHSL)	Grid cells and population censuses	1975, 1990, 2000, 2015	1 500 inhabitants/km^2 or 50% share of built-up on land and contiguous grid cells, with a minimum total population of more than 50 000 inhabitants	1 km
LandScan	Spatial data, high-resolution imagery exploitation and multi-variable dasymetric modelling to disaggregate census counts	2000-21	N/A (context-dependent)	1 km
WorldPop	Land-cover-based methods alongside national censuses	2000-20	Urban extent (Morphological Urban Area, MUA).	1 km

Table 3.3
Population density and demographic categories

Population density per km²	Category
≥ 1 500	Urban
300-1 499	Semi-urban
≤ 299	Rural

Sources: (Dijkstra et al., 2021[11]), *Applying the Degree of Urbanisation to the globe: A new harmonised definition reveals a different picture of global urbanisation*; (UN, 2020[12]), *Report of the Secretary-General on Implementation of the 2020 World Population and Housing Census Programme and the Methodology for Delineation of Urban and Rural Areas for International Statistical Comparison Purposes*.

rural (Table 3.3). WorldPop's estimate for 2020 is presented in Map 3.2, using the UN's degree of urbanisation criteria, which indicates the spatial clusters of urban populations previously described.

The geography of political violence is studied using the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED) project, which provides disaggregated georeferenced information on violent events since 1997 (Raleigh et al., 2010). Building on previous work addressing the geography of conflict in North and West Africa by the OECD/SWAC (2020[13]; 2021[14]; 2022[15]), the study identifies eight categories of actors based on their communal, ethnic or political goals and structure and, where possible, on their "spatial dimension and relationships to communities", see Table 3.4 (ACLED, 2019, p. 19[16]). Actors can either be formal organisations involved in violent activities, informal groups of people or non-combatant categories. Formal organisations include "state forces", defined as collective actors that exercise de facto state sovereignty over a given territory, such as military and police forces from the region. Another type of formal organisation is "rebel groups", organisations whose political agenda is to overthrow or secede from a given state. Splinter groups or factions that emerge from a rebel group are recorded as distinct actors. Informal groups are defined based on their social, ethnic or regional attributes, such as "Fulani ethnic militias".

ACLED distinguishes between two types of militias, those defined by identity and those that pursue political objectives. "Identity militias" are a heterogeneous group of militants structured around ethnicity, religion, region, community and livelihood. They are often named after the locality or region where they operate, like the Benue Communal Militia in Nigeria. "Political militias" are organisations whose goal is to influence and impact governance, security and policy in a given state through violent means, such as the Imghad Tuareg Self-Defense Group and Allies (GATIA) in Mali. Unlike rebel groups, political militias "are not seeking the removal of a national power, but are typically supported, armed by, or allied with a political elite and act towards a goal defined by these elites or larger political movements" (ACLED, 2019, p. 22[16]).

Several categories of civilian actors are identified by ACLED. "Rioters" are unarmed individuals or groups engaged in disorganised violence against civilians, government forces or other armed groups during demonstrations, while "protesters" are unarmed demonstrators who engage in a public event without violence. Finally, "civilians" refer to the unarmed and unorganised victims of violent events identified by their country of origin. International organisations, foreign military forces, private security firms, and independent mercenaries engaged in violent events are coded as "external" and "other forces." It is important to note that the ACLED database does not distinguish between the perpetrators and the victims of an attack, except for civilians who are, by definition, unarmed and cannot engage in political violence.

The analysis focuses on three types of event representative of armed conflict in the region: battles between armed groups and/or state forces, explosions and remote violence, and violence against unarmed civilians. Nonviolent actions such as strategic developments are not considered.

- Battles are defined as "violent interactions between two politically organised armed

Map 3.2

Population density in North and West Africa, 2020



Note: According to the UN's degree of urbanisation criteria, population densities of 1 500 per km² or greater are considered urban.

Source: Authors based on WorldPop data.

groups at a particular time and location" (ACLED, 2019, p. 7[16]). Battles can occur between any state and non-state actors and involve at least two armed and organised actors. This category is subdivided into three sub-event types, depending on whether non-state actors or government forces overtake territory or whether there is no territorial change. Battles caused almost 100 000 fatalities in the region from January 1997 through June 2022, during just under 21 500 events. Nine out of ten of these fatalities were caused by armed clashes. Battles are the deadliest type of violent event, with 4.6 people killed per event, rising to 5.4 victims when non-state actors retake territory.

- Explosions and remote violence correspond to "one-sided violent events in which the tool for engaging in conflict creates asymmetry by taking away the ability of the target to respond" (ACLED, 2019, p. 9[16]). These acts of violence can be carried out using bombs, grenades, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), artillery fire or shelling, missile attacks, heavy machine gun fire, air or drone strikes, or chemical weapons. Explosions and remote violence have killed more than 27 000 people since 1997 in more

Table 3.4

Actors involved in violence in North and West Africa by category, 1997-2022

Name	Number	Example
State forces	924	Military forces of Niger
Rebels	154	Ansar Dine
Political militias	558	Imghad Tuareg Self-Defense Group and Allies (GATIA)
Identity militias	1 972	Benue Communal Militia (Nigeria)
Rioters and protesters	11	Rioters (Senegal)
Civilians	1 044	Civilians (Cameroon)
External forces	143	United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA)
Others and unknown	13	Nigeria Petroleum Development Company
Total	**4 453**	

Source: Authors based on ACLED (2022[6]) data. Data available through 30 June 2022. ACLED data is publicly available.

than 8 000 incidents. Explosions and remote violence cause 3.3 victims per event on average, and 9.6 victims per event for suicide bombings, the deadliest form of sub-event recorded in the database.

- Violence against civilians includes "violent events where an organised armed group deliberately inflicts violence upon unarmed non-combatants. ... The perpetrators of such acts include state forces and their affiliates, rebels, militias, and external/other forces" (ACLED, 2019, p. 11[16]). Violence against civilians has accounted for 42% of the events and 35% of the fatalities recorded in North and West Africa since 1997. The vast majority of the 68 000 civilian deaths and more than 21 000 incidents observed in the region were caused by direct attacks. On average, 3.2 civilians are killed per violent event in the region (3.6 in North Africa and 3.2 in West Africa).

ACLED also tracks protests and riots, but these are highly urbanised and represent a fundamentally different political process from armed conflict. For this reason, protests or riots are not included in the main analysis of the report, despite their influence on the security situation of numerous cities in the region, as the case of Kaduna in northern Nigeria demonstrates (Box 3.2). The resulting data includes 50 822 violent events and 192 971 fatalities from 1 January 1997 to 30 June 2022 (Table 3.5). Because the WorldPop population data has only been available since 2000, the analysis of the relationship between cities and conflict is limited to the period between 1 January 2000 and 30 June 2022, in which 180 554 people were killed in 47 952 incidents.

The relationship between population and conflict is analysed using a geographic information system to associate the locations of violence with an annual population density raster. Violence for each year is overlaid on that year's corresponding WorldPop raster to capture the population density at every event location, in order to classify each event as urban, semi-urban, or rural, and to calculate the distance from each violent event to the nearest urban cell. Finally, the annual event data is used to calculate: (1) the density of the location where a violent event occurred, expressed as the number of people per square kilometre, (2) the classification of that event as urban, semi-urban or rural, and (3) the proximity of violent events to urban areas expressed in kilometres (Figure 3.3).

Box 3.2

Interreligious conflicts in Kaduna, Nigeria

The city of Kaduna in northern Nigeria has been repeatedly affected by interreligious conflicts caused by tensions over land, political office, the distribution of oil rents and the legacies of colonial policies that promoted differential treatment and unequal administration.

In Kaduna's tense political context, interreligious clashes can flare easily. In 2000, the "sharia riots" were triggered by Christian protests over the introduction of a version of religious law in Kaduna State amid a wider campaign of "sharianization" in northern Nigerian states beginning in 1999. Muslim violence against Christian protesters touched off a cycle of violence and reprisals in the city and beyond. Two years later, the "Miss World riots" were caused by a Nigerian newspaper commenter's joke about the Prophet Muhammad; Muslim demonstrators and provocateurs then reportedly attacked Christians in Kaduna, triggering reprisals.

These two incidents mark the most severe violence in Kaduna city during the 1997-2021 period, with 1 255 fatalities in 2000 and 250 in 2002 according to ACLED (2022[4]). The 2000 riots and the state of impunity that followed left enduring grievances in Kaduna on both sides of the Muslim-Christian divide. After Nigeria's return to civilian rule in 1999, the initial expectation was that, as with Nigeria's presidency, the Kaduna governorship would rotate between Muslims and Christians. If the governor hailed from one religious community, the deputy governor would be chosen from the other. Parts of this rotational agreement broke down in Kaduna, especially with Governor Nasir El-Rufai's choice of a fellow Muslim as running mate for his 2019 re-election campaign. In 2011, the re-election of then-President Goodluck Jonathan, a southern Christian, triggered riots in northern cities, which sometimes included anti-Christian pogroms. Some of the worst violence, with an estimated 180 people killed, occurred in Kaduna city and in Zaria, another city in Kaduna state. In 2012, a Boko Haram bombing in Kaduna triggered reprisal attacks on Muslims by Christians, and then the reverse.

Source: Alexander Thurston for this publication.

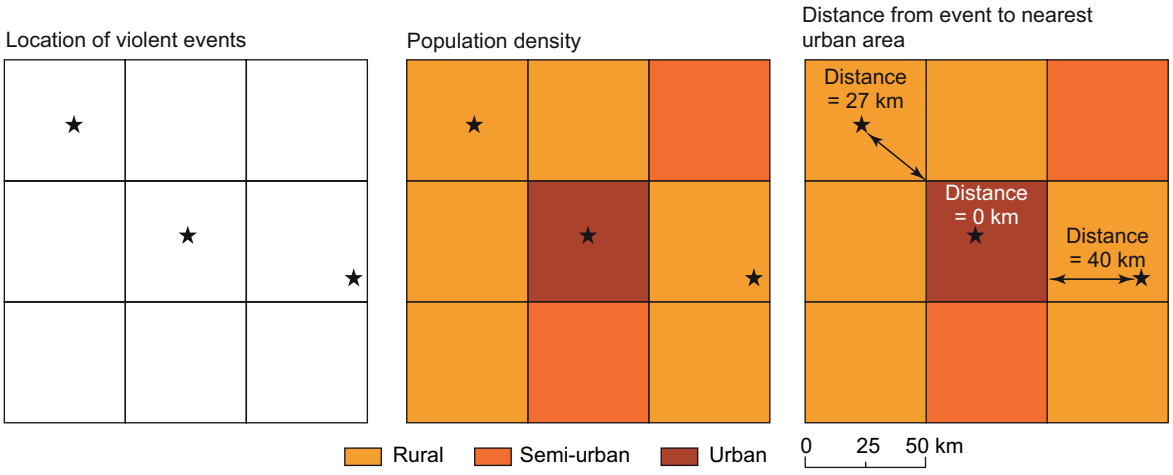
Table 3.5

Number of violent events and fatalities in North and West Africa by type, 1997-2022

Event type	Sub-event type	Events	Fatalities
Battles		21 374	97 492
	Armed clash	19 535	87 974
	Government regains territory	981	4 876
	Non-state actor takes over territory	858	4 642
Explosions/remote violence		8 314	27 372
	Air/drone strike	3 031	11 600
	Grenade	70	70
	Remote explosive/landmine/IED	3 036	8 884
	Shelling/artillery/missile attack	1 655	1 782
	Suicide bomb	522	5 036
Violence against civilians		21 134	68 107
	Abduction/forced disappearance	3 876	0
	Attack	17 007	67 146
	Sexual violence	251	961
Total		**50 822**	**192 971**

Source: Authors based on ACLED (2022[4]) data. Data is available through 30 June 2022. ACLED data is publicly available.

Figure 3.3
Measuring distances from violent events to urban areas



MAPPING CHANGING CONFLICT DYNAMICS

The report uses a geographic indicator called the Spatial Conflict Dynamic indicator (SCDi) that assesses the changing geography of violence, over space and through time (Walther et al., 2021[3]). The SCDi measures two connected but different spatial properties of violence: the intensity of conflict across a region, and the distribution of conflict locations relative to each other. The SCDi has been previously applied to all of North and West Africa (OECD/SWAC, 2020[13]; 2021[14]; 2022[15]) using a uniform grid of 50 by 50 kilometres to subdivide the study area. It has been calculated annually for each of these grid cells since 1997 and is made available to the public on the Mapping Territorial Transformations in Africa (MAPTA) platform run by the OECD Sahel and West Africa Club.[2]

Measuring the intensity of violence

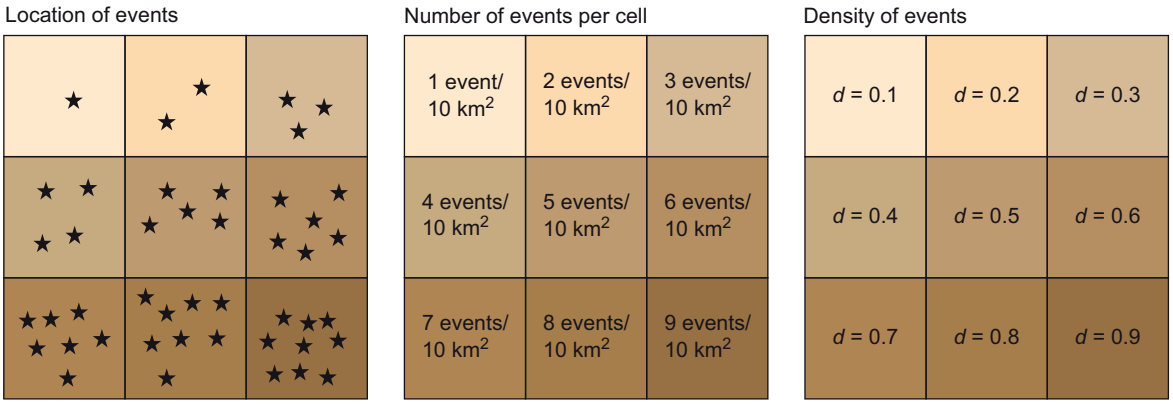
The first spatial property measured by the SCDi is conflict intensity (CI). The CI metric identifies the total number of events in a given zone, such as the 50 by 50 km grid described above, for a given duration of time, such as a year. This number of events is then divided by the area of the grid, to allow for comparisons between zones. The resulting CI metric has a lower threshold of 0 if there are no events within a given zone during a given year and no upper threshold. As the CI metric increases from 0, it reflects an increasing spatial intensity of violence within the footprint of a zone (Figure 3.4).

Using a 50 by 50 kilometre grid, most zones have a CI score of 0 in any given year, reflecting the absence of violent events. However, many zones are assigned a CI score greater than 0. In addition to calculating the raw CI score for each zone, the SCDi also classifies a zone as higher or lower than an expected CI value. The expected CI value for North and West Africa is called the CI "generational mean", the 20-year average conflict intensity between 1997 and 2016. The CI generational mean is 0.0017 events per square kilometre, or four events for a 50 by 50 kilometre cell. In this report, then, a zone is classified as high intensity if four or more events occur in a grid within a given year, and as low intensity otherwise.

Measuring the concentration of violence

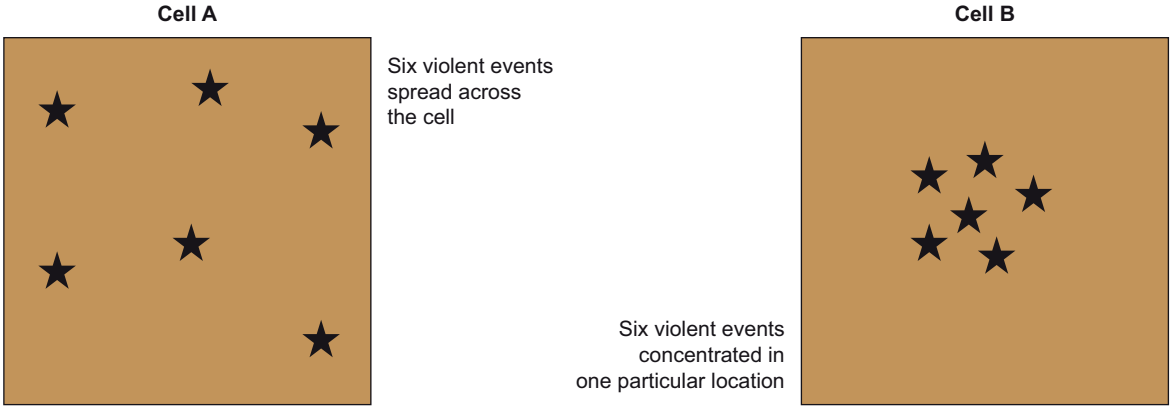
The second property measured by the SCDi is the distribution of conflict locations relative to each other within a given zone. This is called the conflict concentration (CC) metric. The CC metric divides the observed average distance between

Figure 3.4
Density of violent events



Source: (OECD/SWAC, 2020[13]), *The Geography of Conflict in North and West Africa*, https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/02181039-en.

Figure 3.5
Identical density but different distribution of violent events



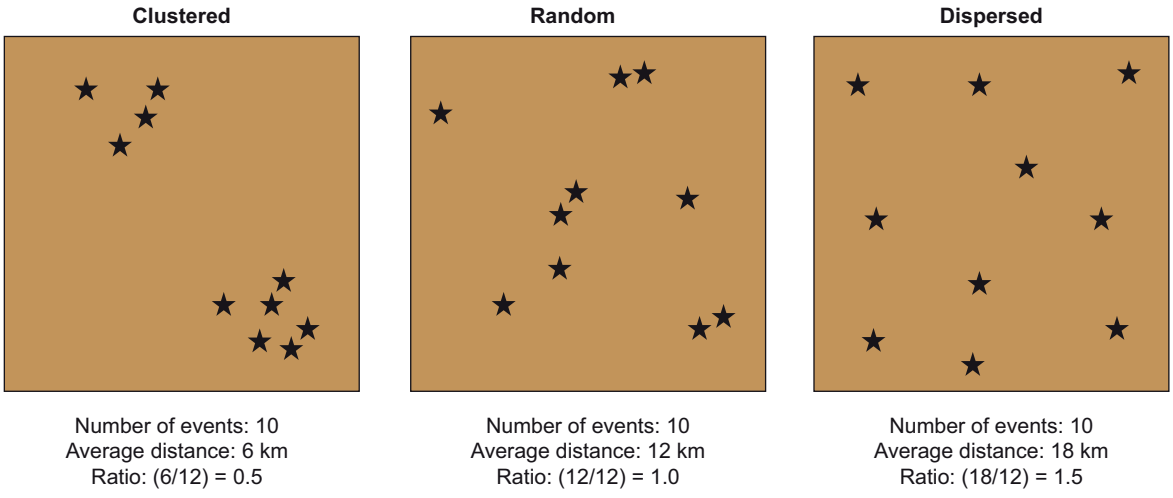
Source: (OECD/SWAC, 2020[13]), *The Geography of Conflict in North and West Africa*, https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/02181039-en.

events in a given zone within a given year by the expected average distance if the events were randomly distributed throughout the zone. As presented in Figure 3.5, the patterning of events relative to each other is a different concern from conflict intensity: two zones may experience the same number of violent events but result in very different geographical patterns.

Like CI, the CC metric has a lower threshold of 0, with no conceptual upper threshold. A CC score of 0 would represent a series of events at the exact same location, an example of extreme geographic clustering of events. A CC score of 1 would represent a random pattern of event, or no detectible locational pattern. A CC score of more than 1 would represent dispersion of events from each other, farther apart than would be expected by chance. As shown in Figure 3.6, CC scores lower than 1 in a zone are classified as clustered and scores higher than 1 are classified as dispersed.

An average nearest neighbour (ANN) ratio is calculated to determine whether the patterns of violent events exhibit clustering or dispersion. The ANN ratio is calculated as the observed average distance among violent events in a given zone, divided by the expected average distance that would have been obtained if the events had

Figure 3.6
Distribution of events as measured by the average nearest neighbour (ANN) ratio



Source: (OECD/SWAC, 2020[13]), *The Geography of Conflict in North and West Africa*, https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/02181039-en.

been distributed randomly (ESRI, 2019[17]). ANN ratios smaller than 1 indicate clustering, while ratios greater than 1 indicate dispersion. For example, the distribution of events represented on the left-hand side of Figure 3.6 is clustered, compared with a random distribution of the same number of events, as shown by its ratio of 0.5, while the distribution on the right-hand side is dispersed, with a ratio of 1.5.

Types and conflict life cycles

The SCDi combines intensity and spatial distribution to identify four different types of conflict based on whether violent events are dispersed or clustered, and are of high or low intensity (Figure 3.7).

- The first type is typical of zones that have an above-average intensity and a clustered distribution of violent events, suggesting that violence is intensifying locally.
- The second type are conflicts with a higher-than-average intensity and a dispersed distribution of events, indicating that the violence is accelerating.
- The third type applies to zones where there are fewer violent activities and most of them take place near each other, possibly indicating a decreasing range of violent groups.
- The fourth type, in which a lower-than-average intensity and a dispersed distribution of events are combined, suggests that a conflict is lingering. This situation may indicate that opponents are highly mobile or are unlikely to face protracted opposition in a given locality.

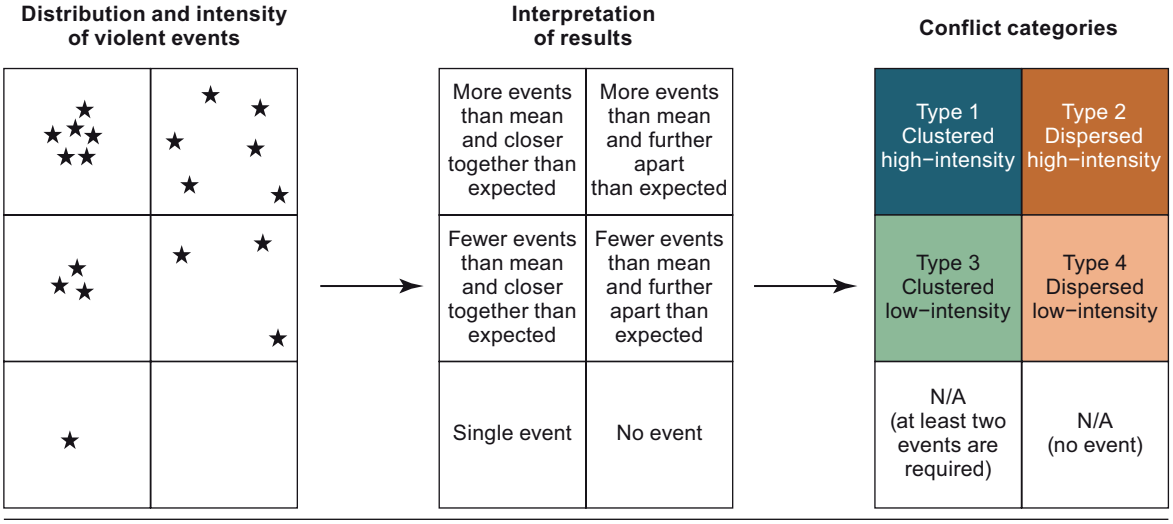
These four types are indicative of potentially different stages in the overall lifecycle of a conflict (Walther et al., 2021[3]).

Although violence has been observed to both initiate and end from all of the SCDi typologies, the dispersed categories (Type 2 and 4) are most common either at the beginning or ending of a sequence of violence in a sub-zone. Further, dispersed conflicts are unlikely to persist compared with clustered conflicts and tend to dissipate quickly once they have emerged. This suggests that zones displaying these spatial typologies are either quite near the early stages of a conflict episode or the end. Finally, conflicts most commonly end by transitioning from clustered/low-intensity (Type 3) to no conflict in the following year (nearly 60% of observed cases). This suggests that violence is often concentrated even just before it ends.

Taken together, the four spatial categories reveal insights about the dynamics of the lifecycle of a typical conflict in North and West Africa. These are general trends, however, and

Figure 3.7

Using event distribution and intensity to identify conflict categories



not all sub-zones, places or localities will exhibit the same lifecycles between the SCDi categories. Nonetheless, a predominant pathway is suggested by the event data across the zones since the late 1990s (Walther et al., 2021[3]). Emerging conflicts tend to result in clustering of either type, dispersed conflicts tend to quickly change, clustered/high intensity are more persistent, and violence most commonly ends from the clustered/low-intensity forms.

Notes

1 This section builds on Radil et al. (2022[2]).

2 Available at https://mapping-africa-transformations.org.

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Chapter 4

The changing geography of conflict in North and West Africa

Chapter 4 examines the changing geography of violent events and fatalities in North and West Africa since the late 1990s. Using disaggregated conflict data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED) project, the chapter shows that political violence has reached an all-time high in West Africa and considerably decreased in North Africa after the end of the Second Libyan civil war. In West Africa, the Spatial Conflict Dynamics Indicator (SCDi) confirms that 9% of the studied region is currently affected by violent events, compared with only 1% in 2009. Violence is still predominantly clustered and intense, but the proportion of areas that experience more diffuse forms of violence is increasing, a sign that conflicts are expanding to previously unaffected areas. Several clusters of violence have coalesced in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Nigeria, forming large conflict hotspots that transcend national boundaries. The SCDi also identifies two new hotspots of violence that are likely to expand in the coming years, one between Burkina Faso and its southern neighbours, and another in north-western Nigeria. Nowhere else in the world has one multistate region been affected by so many forms of violence, each with its own localised roots, progressively converging.

KEY MESSAGES

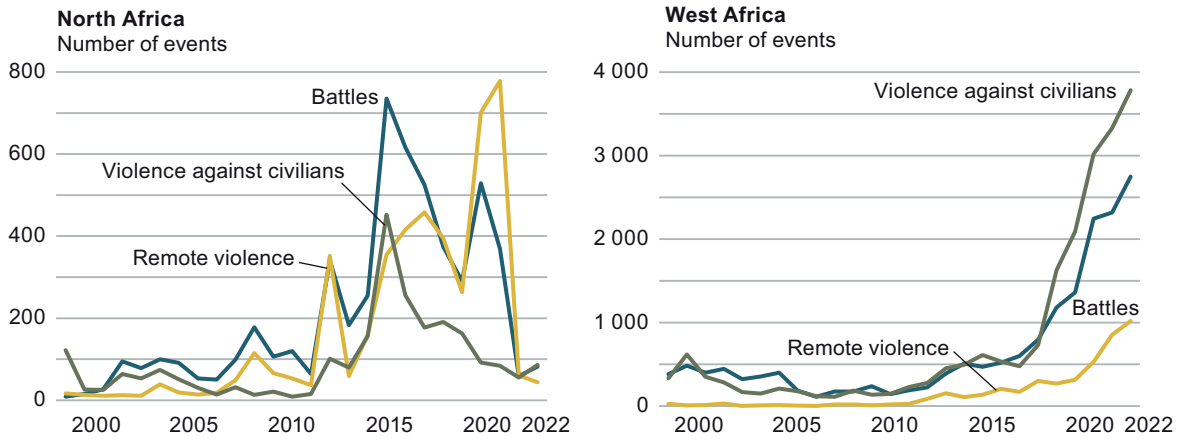
- **Each type of conflict has markedly increased in the last decade. In 2021, 9% of the territory of North and West Africa had experienced one form of conflict or another.**
- **Nigeria is the epicentre of violence, accounting for 40% of the violent events and more than half of the fatalities in the last year and a half in North and West Africa.**
- **Violence is intensifying and simultaneously becoming more dispersed, resulting in significant hotspots of violence, particularly across West Africa and the Sahel.**
- **Isolated clusters of violence are coalescing across the Sahel, a situation that is both unique in the world and worrying for the political stability of the region.**
- **New clusters of violence have emerged in the border regions neighbouring Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Benin and Togo, and in north-western Nigeria.**

VIOLENCE REACHES AN ALL-TIME HIGH IN WEST AFRICA

The intensity of violence increased tremendously in the early 2010s in both North and West Africa after the Arab Spring and the emergence of a series of rebellions and jihadist insurgencies in the Sahel and Sahara. Almost three-quarters (74%) of violent events since 1997 occurred between 2011 and 2021 and 37% between 2019 and 2021 alone. In recent years, however, the situation of the two "shores" of the Sahara has reversed (Figure 4.1 and Figure 4.2). In West Africa, the major clusters of violence that emerged more than a decade ago have expanded geographically, while the civil unrest that followed the Arab Spring in Algeria and Tunisia and the violence associated with the civil wars in Libya has considerably decreased since a cease-fire agreement was concluded in 2020 and a Government of National Unity formed in 2021. While

Figure 4.1

Violent events by type and sub-region, 1997-2022

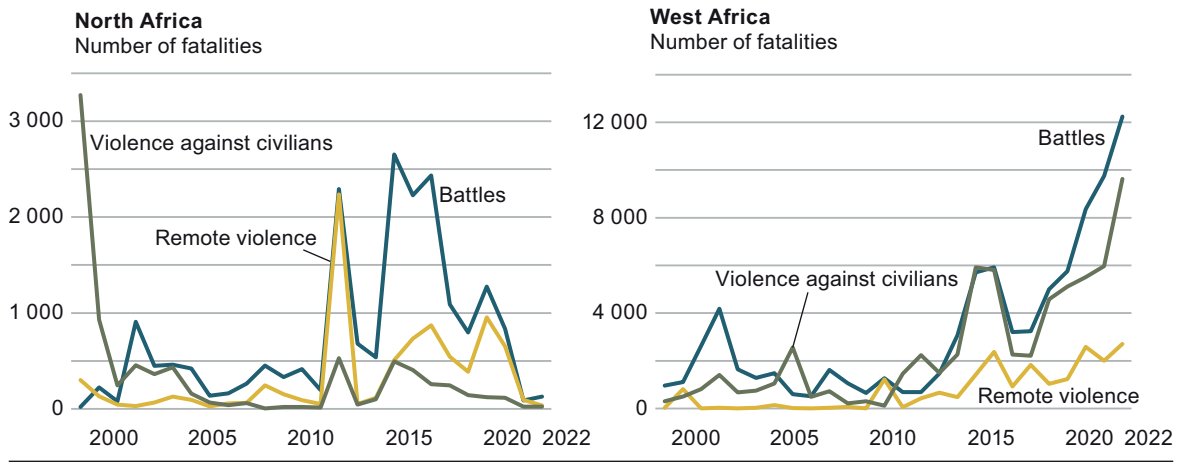


Note: 2022 data are projections based on a doubling of the number of events recorded through 30 June. These figures have different scales on the *y* axis.

Source: Authors based on ACLED (2022[1]) data. ACLED data is publicly available.

Figure 4.2

Fatalities by type and sub-region, 1997-2022



Note: Data for 2022 are projections based on a doubling of the number of events recorded through 30 June. These figures have different scales on the *y* axis.

Source: Authors based on ACLED (2022[1]) data. ACLED data is publicly available.

the number of violent events and fatalities has reached an all-time low in North Africa, the number of people killed in violent incidents in West Africa has never been higher. More than 42 000 violent events and 168 000 fatalities have been recorded in West Africa since 1997, as against 12 400 events and 37 000 fatalities in North Africa. All forms of violence have steeply increased south of the Sahara, where the number of incidents involving civilians has exceeded the number of battles since 2018. This contrasts with North Africa, where battles and remote attacks were the predominant form of warfare until the early 2020s.

This contrast can be explained by the type of warfare waged by the belligerents in each region. In North Africa, the waves of violence since the end of the civil war in Algeria in 2002 have been predominantly due to the Libyan wars (2011, 2014-20), which pitted the regular armed

forces against their allied militias for control over the Libyan state. In these conflicts, violence erupted when political factions disagreed over the distribution of resources and receded when they reached agreement. In West Africa, most violent events involve central governments opposed by a multitude of non-state actors, such as rebel groups, religious extremists, ethnic and communal militias, and self-defence groups, whose ideology, motivation and military capabilities vary widely. One of the unfortunate consequences of these asymmetric conflicts is the death of civilians: nearly 55 000 civilian victims have been recorded in West Africa since the launch of the Boko Haram insurgency in 2009. The fragmentation of the security landscape and the military weakness of both government forces and non-state actors make resolution of these protracted conflicts particularly difficult. Cease-fire and political accords are rarely followed by a durable peace and the demobilisation of fighters.

THREE MAJOR HOTSPOTS OF VIOLENCE

The geographical distribution of violence in North and West Africa is uneven, reflecting differing dynamics of violence based on a mix of rebellions, jihadist insurgencies, coups d'état, protest movements and military interventions. As indicated in Table 4.1, 93% of the violent events and 94% of the fatalities recorded by ACLED from January 2021 through June 2022 occurred in only five countries: Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Mali, Cameroon and Niger, all located south of the Sahara. Correspondingly, the 14 less affected countries of the region account for only 4% of the violent incidents and only 1% of the people killed in the last year and a half.

The increasing concentration of violence in a few states may appear paradoxical in a region where conflicts have also expanded geographically, spreading from one country to another. It is not. While the diffusion of conflict across borders is undeniably one of the key features of armed conflicts in the region, the hyper-concentration of violence is primarily explained by Nigeria. Nigeria is by far the main focus of violence, in a trend that emerged more than 30 years ago (OECD/SWAC, 2020[2]). From 2021-22, 40% of all violent events and more than half (51%) of the fatalities recorded in North and West Africa were in Nigeria alone. Nigeria has suffered a series of overlapping conflicts, including the jihadist insurgency led by Boko Haram and the Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP) in the Lake Chad region, violence carried out by armed groups in the Niger River Delta against the federal government and international oil companies, and communal violence in the Middle Belt.

Borno State is by far the most affected region in Nigeria, accounting for 26% of the fatalities recorded in the country from January 2021 through June 2022. This is not surprising, given that Boko Haram and ISWAP are the deadliest extremist organisations on the continent. However, communal violence, cattle rustling and kidnapping are becoming increasingly frequent in north-west Nigeria (Map 4.1). Often described as "banditry" by the Nigerian government and the media, these forms of violence are less politically motivated than the attacks launched by Boko Haram and ISWAP in the north-eastern portion of the country, but nonetheless extremely deadly for civilian populations. From 2021-22, nearly 4 500 people were killed in the states of Kaduna, Zamfara and Katsina (Map 4.3), including 2 153 civilians, or 37% of the total for the country. What is even more worrying is that the hotspot of violence in north-western Nigeria is now spatially connected to the Middle Belt, where communal violence between pastoral herders and farmers has been common for several decades. In this region of minority ethnic groups, the states of Plateau, Niger and Benue have been among the worst hit in the past year and a half.

The second major hotspot of violence is the Central Sahel, which is contending with a Tuareg rebellion and coups d'état in Mali and Burkina Faso. The ongoing communal strife in

Table 4.1
Violent events and fatalities by country, 2021-22

	Violent events		Fatalities		Population		Events (%) vs. population (%)	Fatalities (%) vs. population (%)
	Number	**%**	**Number**	**%**	**Number**	**%**	**Ratio**	**Ratio**
Nigeria	4 169	39.5	15 513	51.2	213 401 323	38.0	1.0	1.3
Burkina Faso	2 229	21.1	4 575	15.1	22 100 683	3.9	5.4	3.8
Mali	1 649	15.6	4 569	15.1	21 904 983	3.9	4.0	3.9
Cameroon	1 228	11.6	1 821	6.0	27 198 628	4.8	2.4	1.2
Niger	515	4.9	2 008	6.6	25 252 722	4.5	1.1	1.5
Libya	171	1.6	185	0.6	6 735 277	1.2	1.4	0.5
Chad	164	1.6	1 227	4.0	17 179 740	3.1	0.5	1.3
Others	436	4.1	400	1.3	227 959 720	40.6	0.1	0.0
Total	**10 561**	**100.0**	**30 298**	**100.0**	**561 733 076**	**100.0**	**1.0**	**1.0**

Notes: Data is available through 30 June 2022. Countries with a ratio between violence and population higher than 1 are highlighted in grey. In these countries, violence is higher than the share of the regional population would suggest.

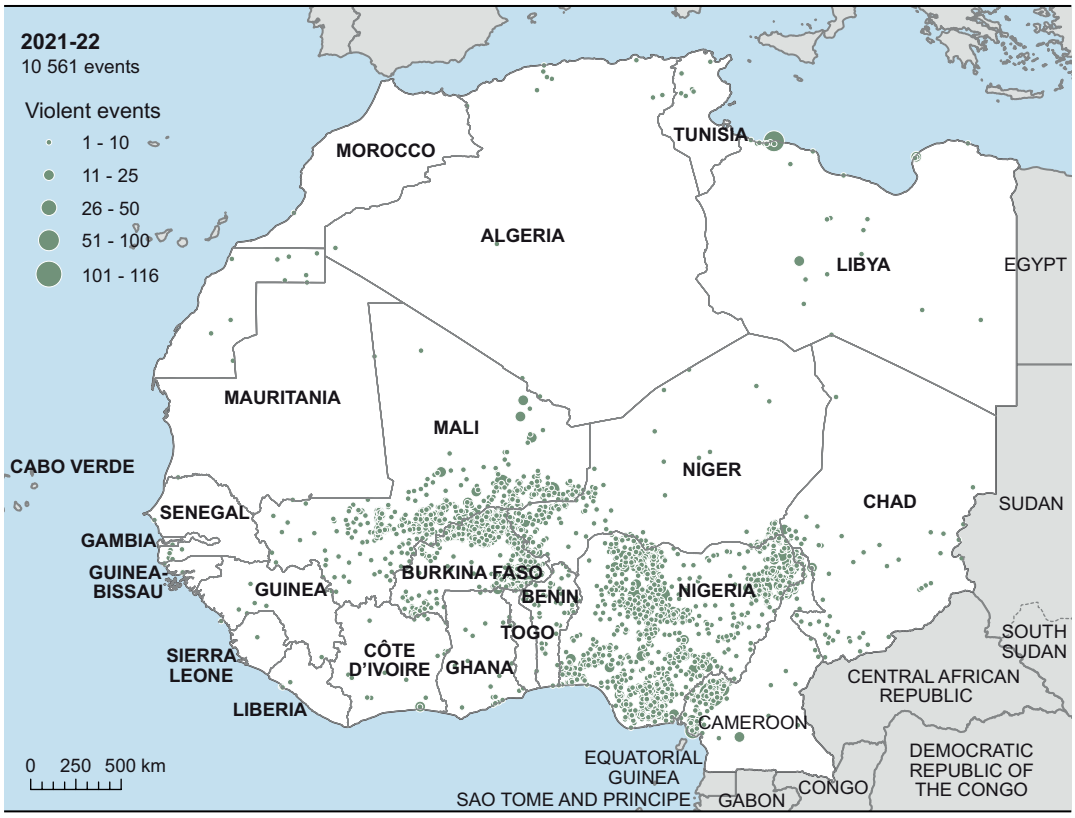
Source: Authors, based on ACLED (2022[1]) data and updated United Nations (2019) data. ACLED data is publicly available.

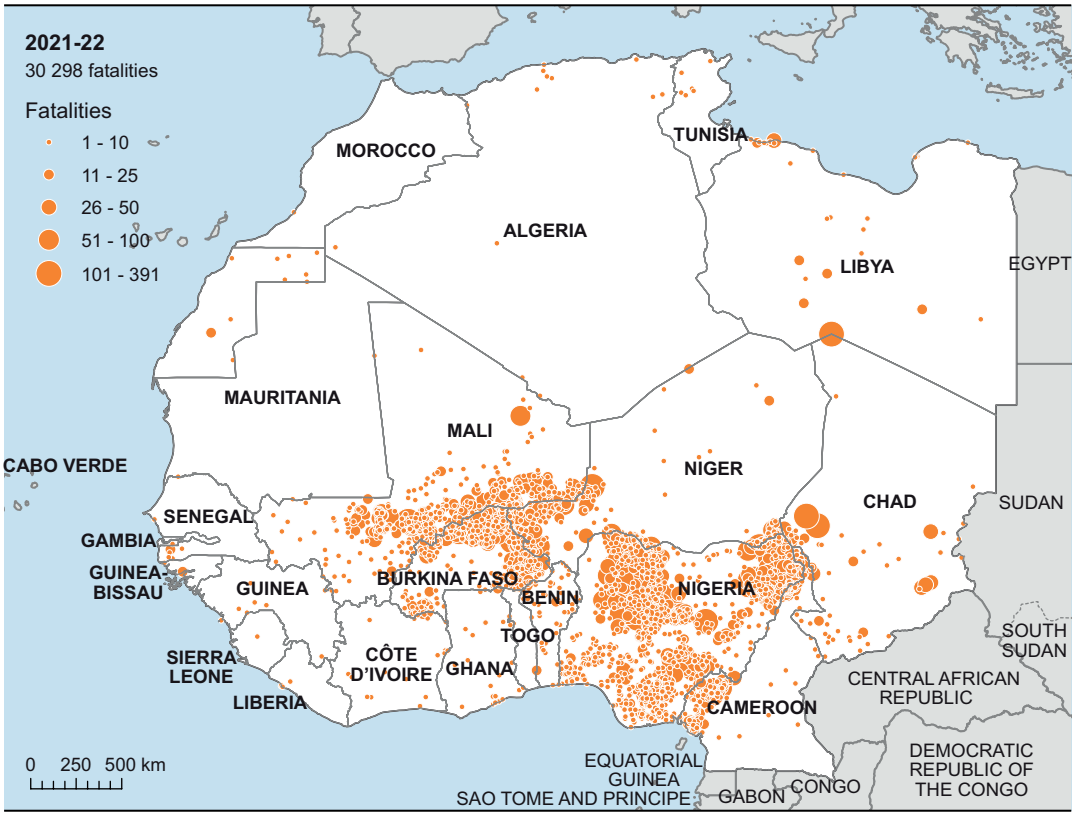
Burkina Faso and Niger has been exacerbated by Islamist extremist groups. The southern expansion of the Malian insurgency has made Burkina Faso the second most affected country in the region after Nigeria, with more than 2 200 incidents and 4 500 victims recorded between January 2021 and June 2022. Violence has engulfed much of the border regions of the country (Table 4.2). Half of the people killed in Burkina Faso were in the Sahel region neighbouring Niger and Mali, almost 16% in the East region bordering Niger and the trinational W National Park reserve, and 12% in the Centre-Nord region (Map 4.2). Ouagadougou, the capital, has so far been largely untouched by violent events, although it is relatively close to some of the areas of the country that have been most severely affected. Only 100 kilometres separate the Burkinabè capital from Kaya in the north-east, where thousands of internally displaced persons have sought refuge, for example.

Similar numbers of people were killed in Burkina Faso (4 575) and Mali (4 569) between 2021-22, although there were roughly 35% more events in Burkina Faso (Table 4.1). This may suggest that the Burkinabè insurgents' military capabilities are not as well developed as they are in Mali and that the magnitude of the Burkinabè insurgency has not yet reached its peak. In Mali, the number of events (1 649) and fatalities (4 569) has increased since 2020-21. Mopti remains by far the most violent region of the country in terms of fatalities, followed by Gao, Menaka and Segou, while the north of the country is no longer a major epicentre of conflict. The capital city, Bamako, has largely been spared from violence (Table 4.3). In mid-2022, Bamako appeared to be under greater jihadist threat than ever before. Amid the growing pace of jihadist attacks in southern Mali, an assault on 22 July by the Group for Supporting Islam and Muslims (JNIM) on the country's main military base at the town of Kati, approximately 18 kilometres northwest of Bamako, added to concerns that the capital itself was vulnerable. Shortly after the Kati attack, JNIM directly threatened more operations in Bamako (Diallo, 2022[3]). Although the fall of Bamako appears unlikely in the short term, a more sustained and intensive jihadist effort to attack the city could disrupt its status as an enclave.

Map 4.1

Violent events and fatalities in North and West Africa, 2021-22





Note: Data is available through 30 June 2022.

Source: Authors, based on ACLED (2022[1]) data. ACLED data is publicly available.

Table 4.2

Violent events and fatalities by region in Burkina Faso, 2021-22

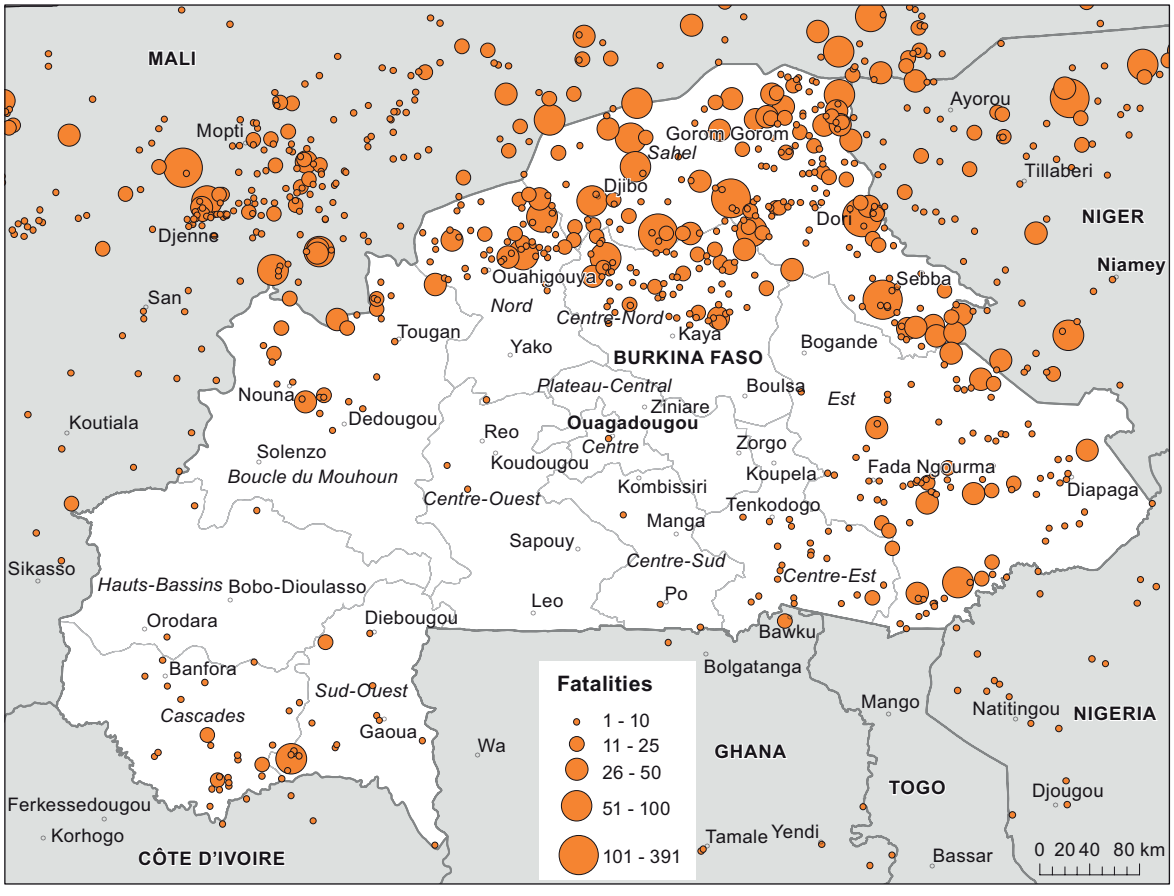
	Violent events		Fatalities	
Regions	**Number**	**Percent**	**Number**	**Percent**
Sahel	785	35.2	2 316	50.6
Est	524	23.5	713	15.6
Centre-Nord	294	13.2	555	12.1
Nord	257	11.5	387	8.5
Boucle du Mouhoun	154	6.9	238	5.2
Cascades	94	4.2	121	2.6
Centre-Est	52	2.3	80	1.7
Sud-Ouest	36	1.6	144	3.1
Hauts-Bassins	19	0.9	8	0.2
Centre (Ouagadougou)	6	0.3	5	0.1
Centre-Sud	6	0.3	5	0.1
Centre-Ouest	2	0.1	3	0.1
Total	**2 229**	**100.0**	**4 575**	**100.0**

Note: Data is available through 30 June 2022.

Source: Authors based on ACLED (2022[1]) data. ACLED data is publicly available.

Map 4.2

Fatalities in Burkina Faso and neighbouring countries, 2021



Source: Authors based on ACLED (2022[1]) data. ACLED data is publicly available.

Table 4.3
Violent events and fatalities by region in Mali, 2021-22

	Violent events		Fatalities	
Regions	**Number**	**Percent**	**Number**	**Percent**
Mopti	694	42.1	2 101	46.0
Gao	268	16.3	906	19.8
Segou	219	13.3	485	10.6
Tombouctou	136	8.2	126	2.8
Menaka	118	7.2	593	13.0
Kidal	64	3.9	69	1.5
Sikasso	57	3.5	64	1.4
Koulikoro	56	3.4	196	4.3
Kayes	31	1.9	28	0.6
Bamako	6	0.4	1	0.0
Total	**1 649**	**100.0**	**4 569**	**100.0**

Note: Data is available through 30 June 2022.

Source: Authors based on ACLED (2022[1]) data. ACLED data is publicly available.

Box 4.1
Political violence in Bamako, Mali

Bamako has been relatively peaceful, despite the wider collapse of Mali and the spread of mass insecurity in northern and central regions. The capital city registered just 158 fatalities in the period 1997-2021. Two minor peaks of violence occurred in Bamako in the period: one in 2012 (44 fatalities), a year of substantial upheaval in Mali, and a second peak in November 2015, after the assault on the luxury Radisson Blu Hotel, claimed by two factions of Al Qaeda (Lebovich, 2016[4]). Although the Radisson attack did not provoke a wave of terrorism in the capital, it was a milestone on the road to the formation of the powerful Al Qaeda-sponsored Group for Supporting Islam and Muslims (JNIM) in March 2017. In 2020, a summer of mass anti-government protests were held in the capital, followed by a coup in August that brought a third small surge in violence (25 fatalities).

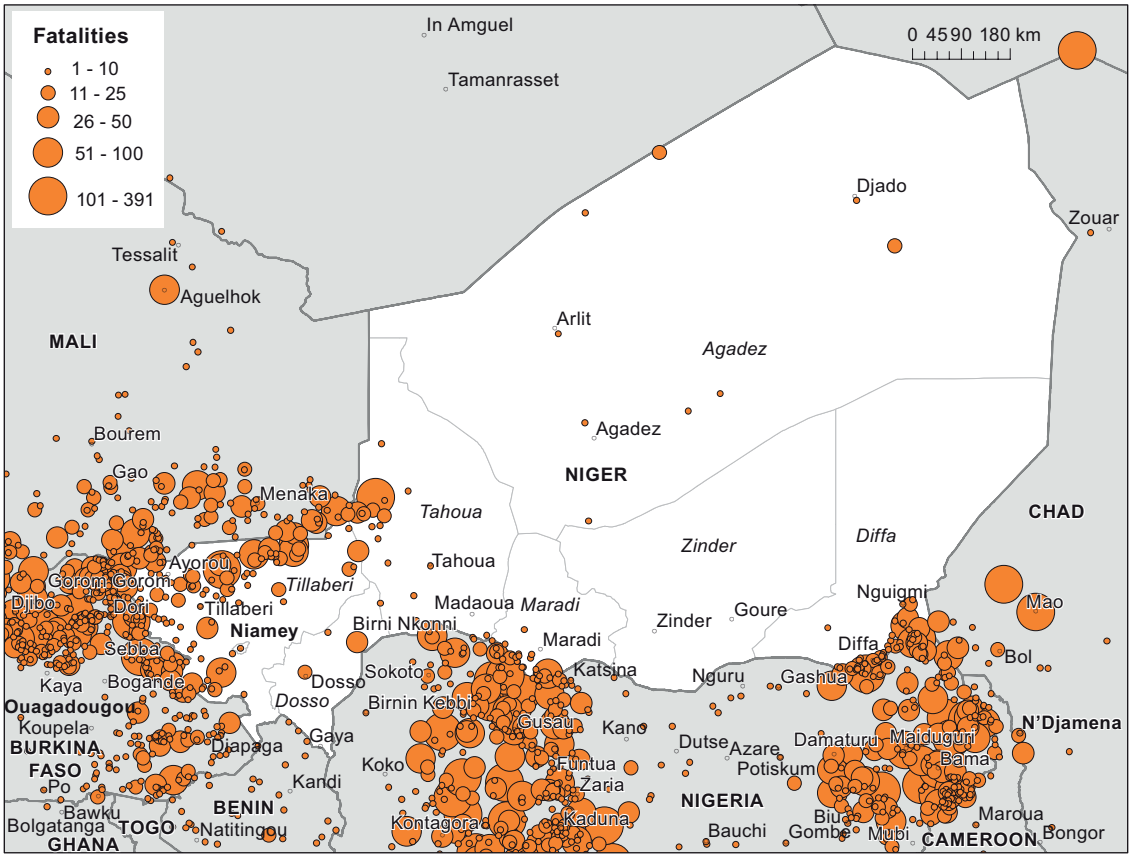
As crisis spread across northern Mali in 2012 and then into central Mali starting in 2015, Bamako functioned as a relatively safe enclave for both the Malian elite and foreign soldiers and civilians, with security deployments and NGOs multiplying, often with a Bamako-centric character. The most prominent foreign security deployments extended far beyond the city, for example the string of northern military bases operated by France's Operation Barkhane (2014-22) and the many sites in the country used by the United Nations' Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) since 2013. Yet insecurity elsewhere meant that some operations ended up headquartered in Bamako whether they liked it or not – notably the G5 Sahel Joint Force, whose initial headquarters at Sévaré was attacked by jihadists in 2018, prompting a relocation to Bamako, where the mission was greeted with mass protests.

Bamako was also a hub for the displaced and political-military elite, which had thrived within or emerged out of the conflict, as major figures from northern and central Mali began (or continued) to divide their time between their home areas and the capital. Meetings of the monitoring committee for the Algiers Accord, a 2015 peace deal aimed at resolving the causes of discontent in the north, became one venue among many for key actors in the conflict to spend considerable time in Bamako.

Source: Alexander Thurston for this publication.

Map 4.3

Fatalities in Niger and neighbouring countries, 2021



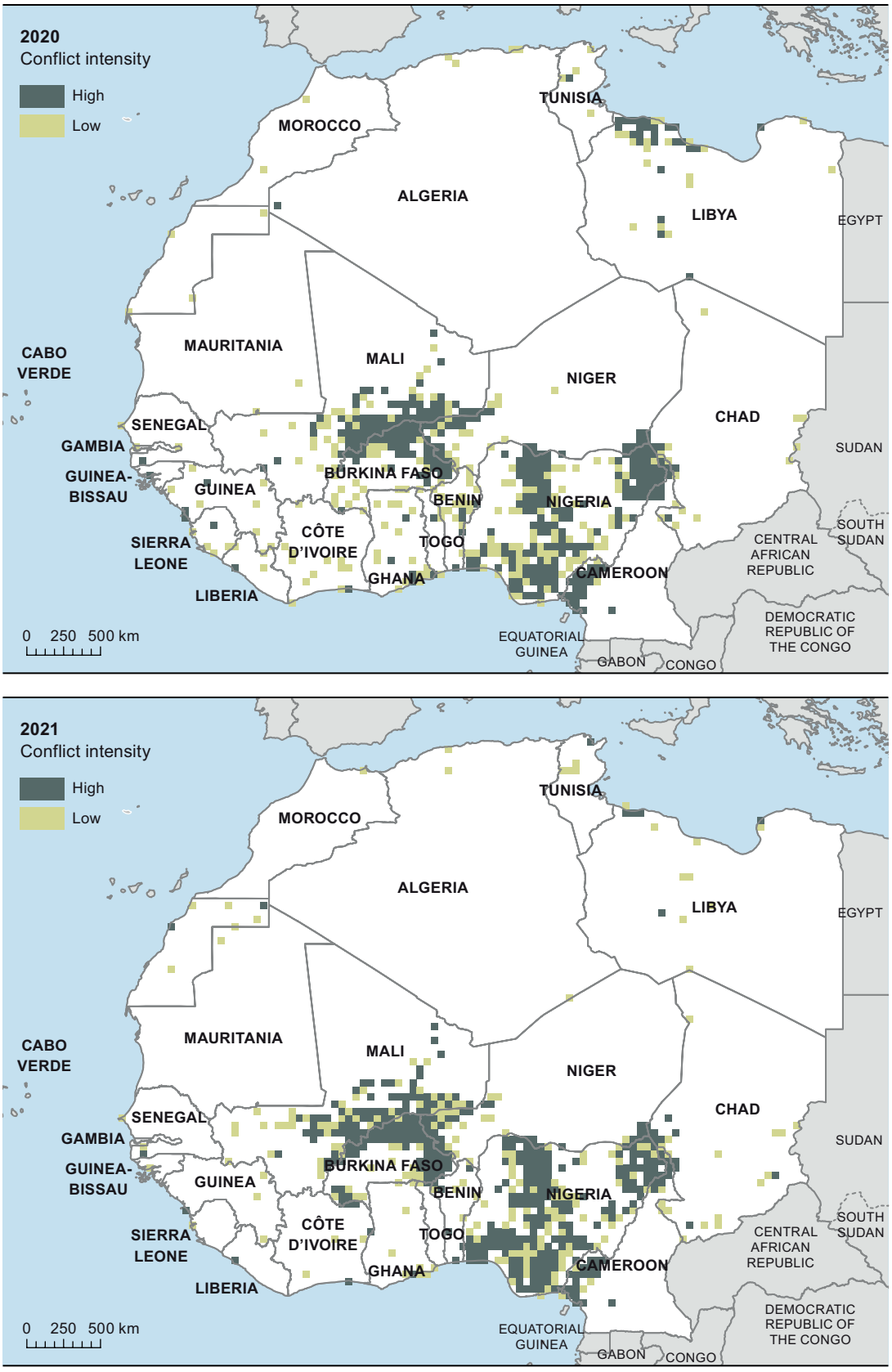
Source: Authors based on ACLED (2022[1]) data. ACLED data is publicly available.

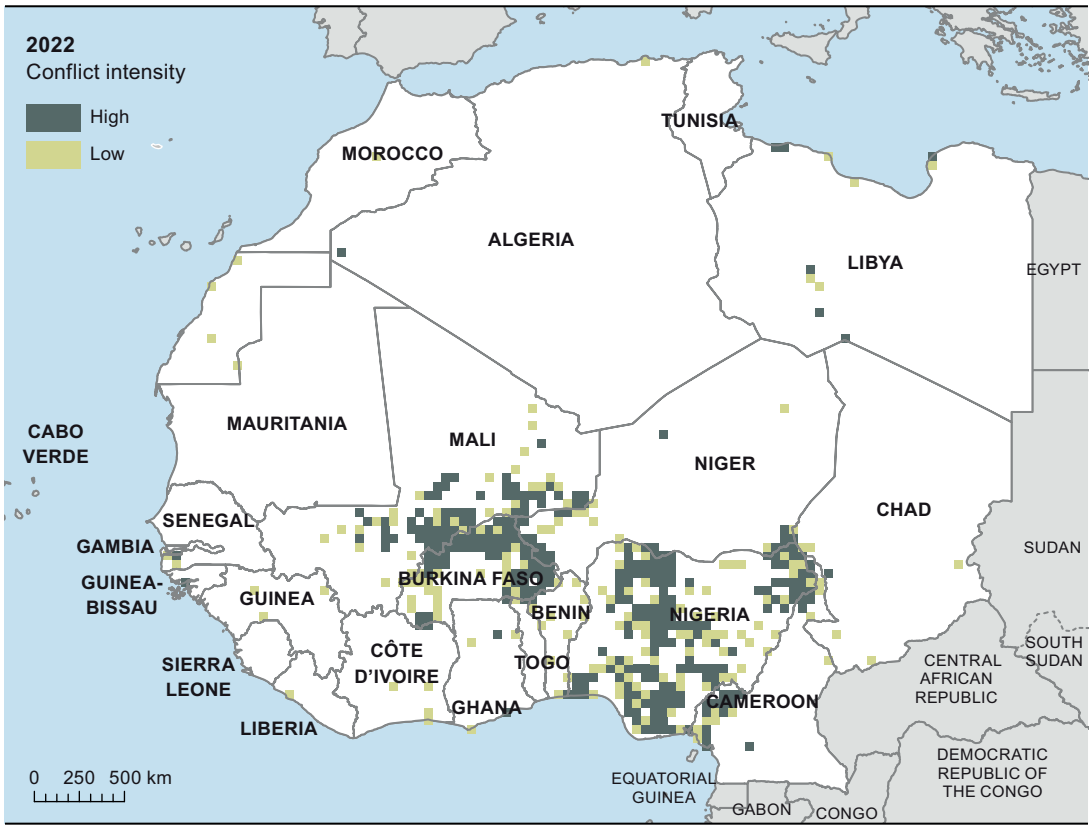
Violence in Cameroon is slightly less than in the early 2020s, thanks more to spatial shifts in the Boko Haram insurgency around Lake Chad than to a reduction in the conflict between the government and English-speaking communities in the west of the country. In Niger, violence has remained constant, with the bulk of violent events (45%) and fatalities (63%) now located in the Tillabéri region in the southwest, bordering both Burkina Faso and Mali. The Diffa region where Boko Haram and ISWAP are active is the second focus of conflict in the country, accounting for 32% of the events and 19% of the fatalities (Map 4.3). Niamey, Niger's capital, has largely been spared from political violence over the observed period. In Chad, the main sources of political instability remain the Lake region near N'Djamena and the Tibesti in the far north, where more than 300 died in clashes between miners.

All these countries have experienced more violence than the norm, as indicated by a ratio of violent events and/or fatalities per inhabitant higher than 1 (Table 4.1). For example, 51% of the victims of political violence were in Nigeria, whose population accounts for 38% of that of the area studied. This results in a ratio of 1.3, a testament to the brutality of the many subnational and transnational conflicts that continue to plague the most populous country in Africa. Based on this metric, the most affected countries are Mali and Burkina Faso, whose ratio of victims per inhabitant is close to 4, suggesting that the insurgency affects most regions of the country. Libya is the hardest-hit country in North Africa, with 171 violent events and 185 fatalities, a fraction of the violence that erupted during the First and Second Libyan civil wars.

Map 4.4

Intensity of conflict in North and West Africa, 2020-22





Note: Data is available through 30 June 2022.

Source: Authors based on ACLED (2022[1]) data. ACLED data is publicly available.

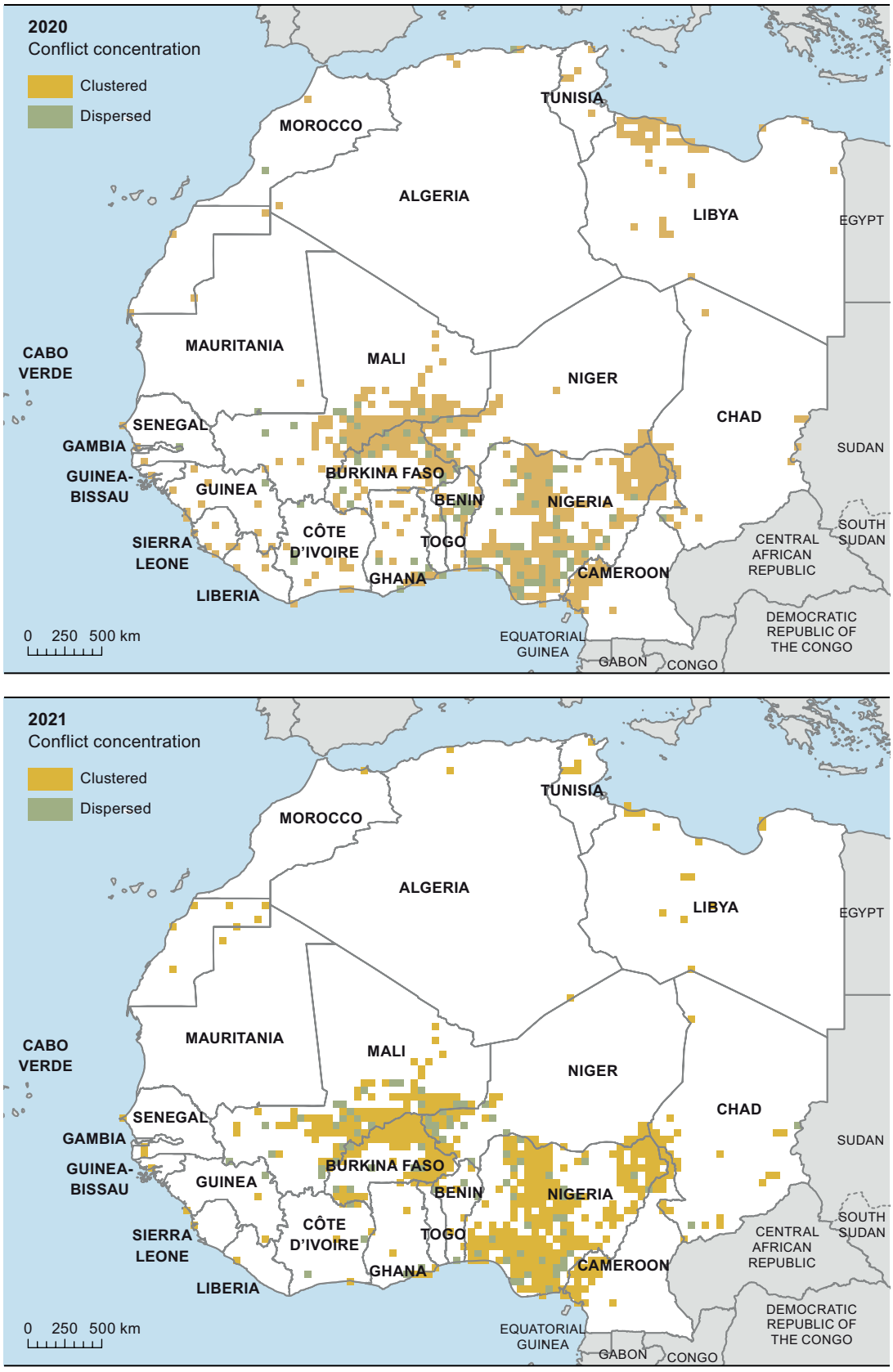
VIOLENCE INTENSIFIES AND SPREADS

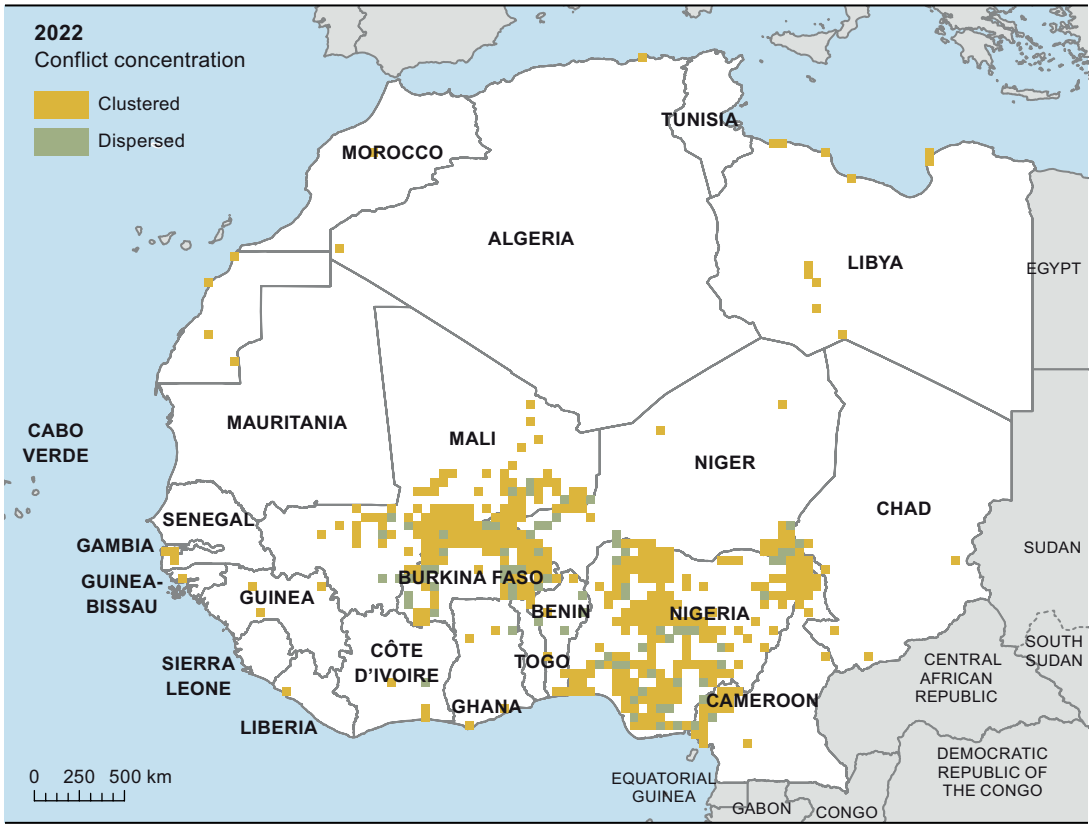
The rapidly changing geography of armed conflict in North and West Africa can be measured using the SCDi developed to monitor the evolution of violence in the region since the late 1990s (Walther et al., 2021). The SCDi measures both the intensity and spatial concentration of violence in each of the 6 540 "cells" of 50 km by 50 km that stretch from Dakar to N'Djamena and from Lagos to Algiers (Chapter 3). *Conflict intensity* calculates the number of violent events per cell, while *conflict concentration* compares the average distance between violent events in the region with the average distance that would be obtained if they were randomly distributed. Cells can experience either a low or a high intensity of conflict, as well as a clustered or dispersed spatial distribution of violent events.

Since 2019, conflicts have become increasingly intense in North and West Africa. The SCDi shows that numerous countries have experienced a rise in the number of high-intensity cells. This is particularly evident in the Central Sahel, where many regions that had experienced low-intensity violence have become high-intensity conflicts, such as in the Niger Inner Delta in Mali, in the north of Burkina Faso, and in the Tillabéri region of western Niger (Map 4.4). The indicator also confirms that previously isolated clusters of high-intensity violence have coalesced, a disturbing trend highlighted in previous studies (OECD/SWAC, 2021[5]). Nigeria is the emblematic example: a vast area of instability now connects the Delta to the Middle Belt and the north-west of the country. For 2021 and 2022 combined, 60% of the Nigerian territory (295 cells out of 494) were affected by one form of conflict or another. The expansion of the Malian conflict to Burkina Faso and western Niger has also led several insurgencies to coalesce in vast, uninterrupted areas

Map 4.5

Concentration of conflict in North and West Africa, 2020-22





Note: Data is available through 30 June 2022.

Source: Authors based on ACLED (2022[1]) data. ACLED data is publicly available.

of Burkina Faso and western Niger. This cluster of violence has also spread southward, moving towards northern Benin, Togo, Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire.

Most of the cells in conflict exhibit a clustered distribution of violent events, meaning that violence tends to occur in a few localised places within each cell (Map 4.5), for example around a particular city or along a major highway. Violence is particularly clustered in the central part of Mali and the Burkinabè peripheries in Central Sahel, in north-west Nigeria and around Lake Chad, while it has almost completely disappeared in North Africa. Even if violence remains predominantly clustered south of the Sahara, the proportion of regions with clustered violent locations has continued to decrease since its peak in 2011, when it represented 95% of all events (Figure 4.3). In the first half of 2022, 83% of all cells exhibited a clustered pattern of violence. The fact that dispersed violence can be found in the immediate vicinity of high-intensity and highly clustered regions suggests a geographical expansion of conflict.

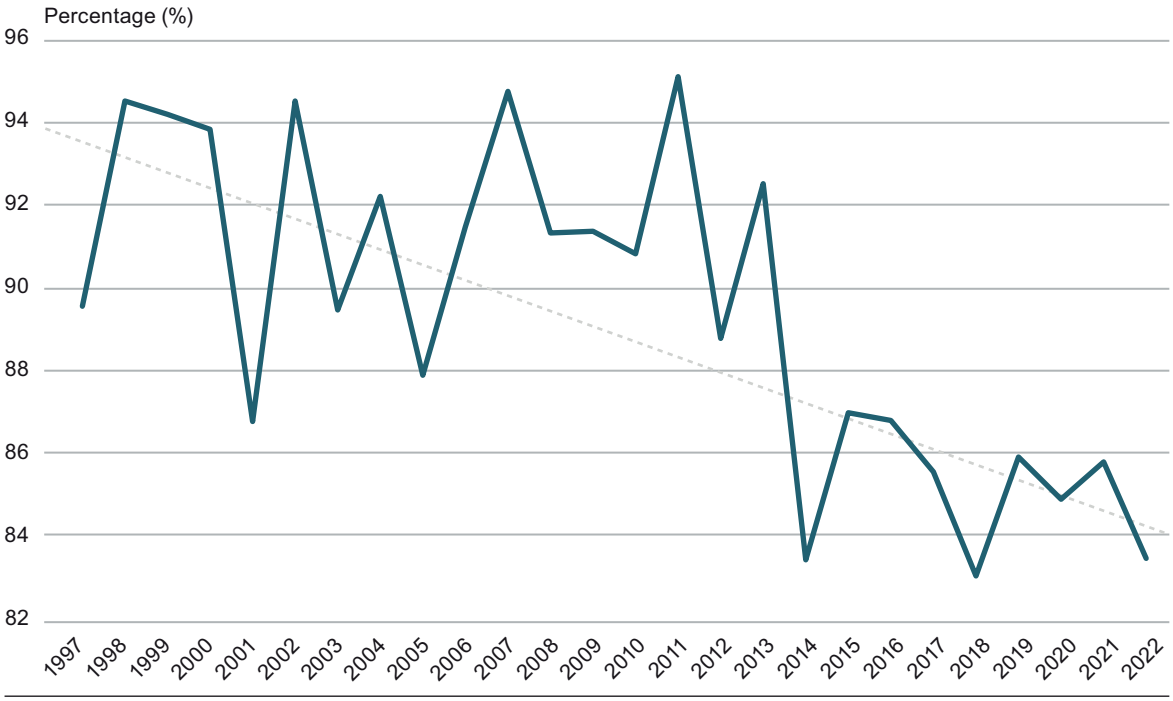
A UNIQUE GEOGRAPHY OF VIOLENCE

By combining conflict intensity and concentration, the SCDi produces a typology of conflicts that can be used to map and understand shifts in the patterns of violence in a cell, in a country, or at the regional level. Four types of conflicts can be identified, depending on whether violence is intensifying locally, accelerating, in transition, or lingering.

- Situations causing the most concern are regions where violence is both intense and clustered (Type 1). This combination of factors is likely to produce the largest number of victims, particularly among civilian populations. These regions now cover much of Central Mali and the Burkinabè borders in the Central Sahel, the region

Figure 4.3

Proportion of conflict zones in North and West Africa classified as clustered, 1997-2022



Note: Data is available through 30 June 2022.

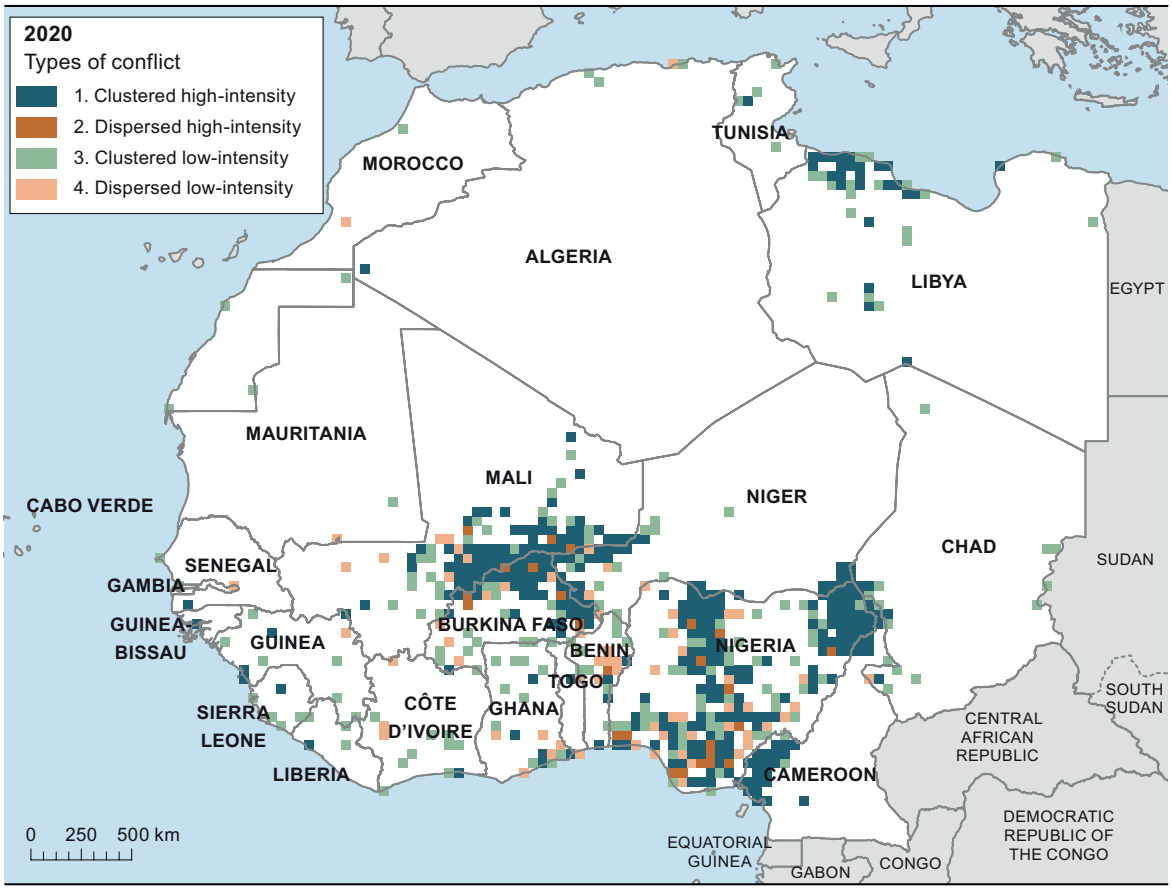
Source: Authors based on ACLED (2022[11]) data. ACLED data is publicly available.

around Lake Chad and a significant part of the Nigerian territory (Map 4.6, Map 4.7). Burkina Faso is surrounded by a continuous area of intense and clustered violence, from the border region of Bwaku in northern Togo to the Houet province north of Bobo-Dioulasso, over 1 500 kilometres. Since 2020, clustered and high-intensity violence has slightly receded from the Menaka region in eastern Mali and almost completely disappeared from Libya (Map 4.8 and Map 4.9). It has considerably increased in southern and north-western Nigeria and remained stable along the Nigerian-Cameroon border. A new isolated hotspot of violence has emerged between Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire in 2021.

- Areas where violence is both dispersed and intense are usually located at the periphery of major clusters of conflict (Type 2). Violence is most likely to accelerate in these regions, which should thus be monitored closely. In 2021, dispersed and intense violence was concentrated in the Tillabéri region of western Niger, along the western and southern borders of Burkina Faso, around the Niger Delta in Nigeria, and west of Kano, in a new cluster of violence that has developed in northern Nigeria. With its numerous parks and low population densities, the border region between Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire presents conditions that encourage the proliferation of such violence (Map 4.8).
- Clustered and low-intensity violence affects areas in transition (Type 3), where violence can either intensify or dissipate. In these regions, episodes of violence are short-lived, as in much of the West African countries that are not currently affected by a civil war or an insurgency, or at the margins of larger hotspots of violence, as in Mali and Nigeria (Map 4.9).
- Areas where violence is both dispersed and of low intensity (Type 4) are usually located far from major conflict areas, as in northern Benin or on the periphery of the Liptako-Gourma in Niger.

Map 4.6

Spatial Conflict Dynamics indicator (SCDi) in North and West Africa, 2020



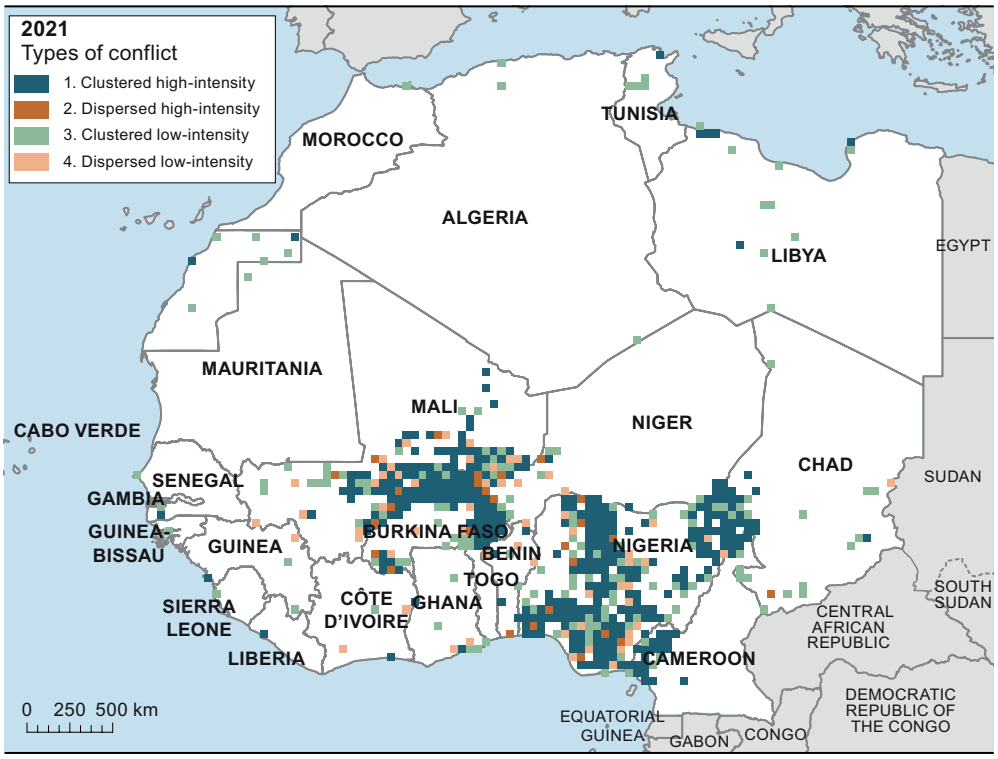
Source: Authors based on ACLED (2022[1]) data. ACLED data is publicly available.

The SCDi confirms persistent, steady growth in all types of conflicts over the last decade (Figure 4.4). In 2021, 9% of North and West Africa had experienced one form of conflict or another (597 cells out of 6 540), a considerable proportion if one considers that conflict areas represented only 1% of the region when the Boko Haram insurgency began in 2009 (80 cells) and 3% when the Malian civil war started in 2012 (167 cells). This nearly tenfold increase is a testament to the degradation of the security situation since the late 2000s. Clustered and intense conflict (Type 1) is by far the most common type of violence (60%) and has exhibited the most spectacular growth. Until 2010, fewer than 50 such cells were observed, but by 2021, more than 355 had emerged. These cells cover 5% of North and West Africa and represent 60% of all conflict areas in 2021, up from 54% in 2020. Relatively few regions exhibit dispersed and high-intensity violence in 2021 (Type 2, 27 cells) but their number has increased rapidly since the mid-2010s, when they were almost unheard of. The number of areas where violence is both clustered and of low intensity (Type 3, 156 cells) is three times higher than in 2011 (57 cells). Regions with dispersed and low-intensity conflicts (Type 4) have followed a similar evolution: while before 2010, they were almost non-existent in North and West Africa, they represent nearly 10% of the conflict areas in 2021 (59 cells) (Figure 4.5).

The combined analysis of conflict *intensity* and conflict *concentration* show that violence is both intensifying and becoming more dispersed, resulting in large hotspots of violence across West Africa and the Sahel. This spatial coalescence

Map 4.7

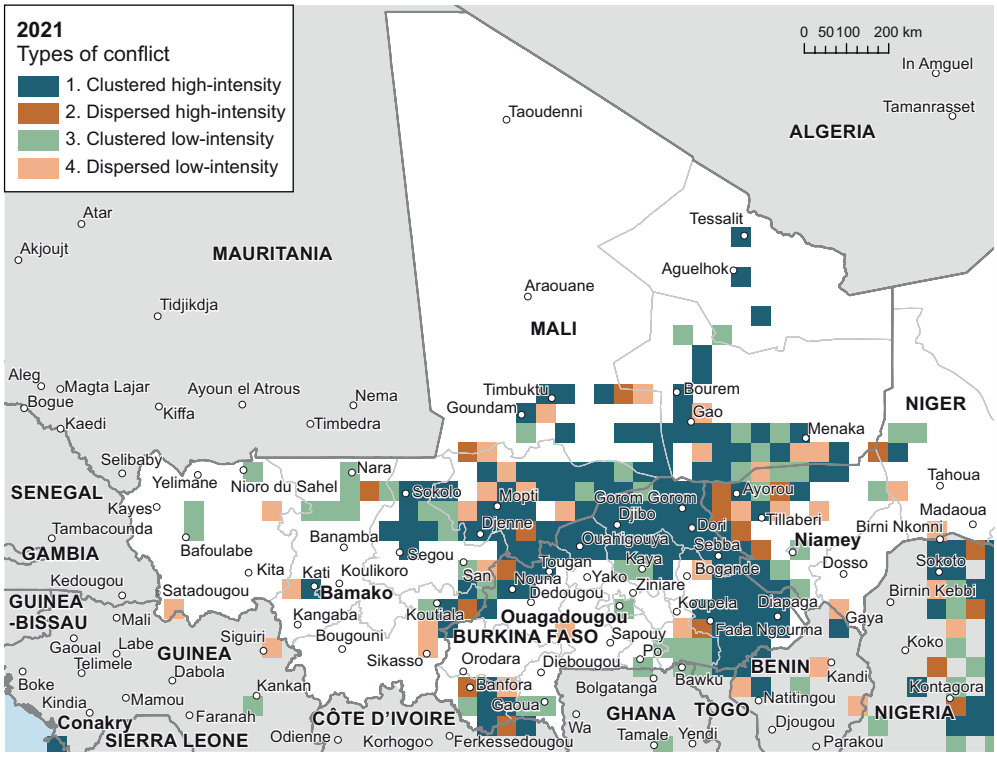
Spatial Conflict Dynamics indicator (SCDi) in North and West Africa, 2021



Source: Authors based on ACLED (2022[1]) data. ACLED data is publicly available.

Map 4.8

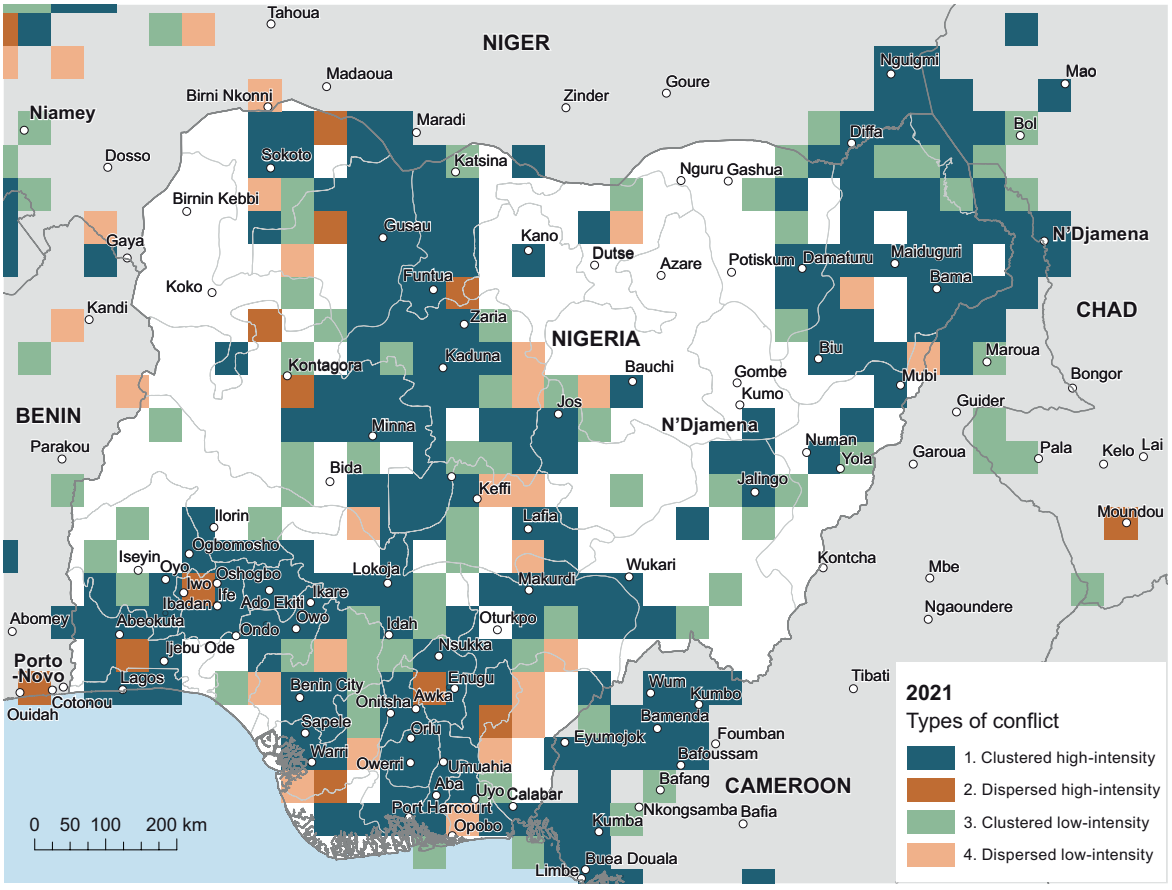
Spatial Conflict Dynamics indicator (SCDi) in Mali and Central Sahel, 2021



Source: Authors based on ACLED (2022[1]) data. ACLED data is publicly available.

Map 4.9

Spatial Conflict Dynamics indicator (SCDi) in Nigeria and the Lake Chad region, 2021



Source: Authors based on ACLED (2022[1]) data. ACLED data is publicly available.

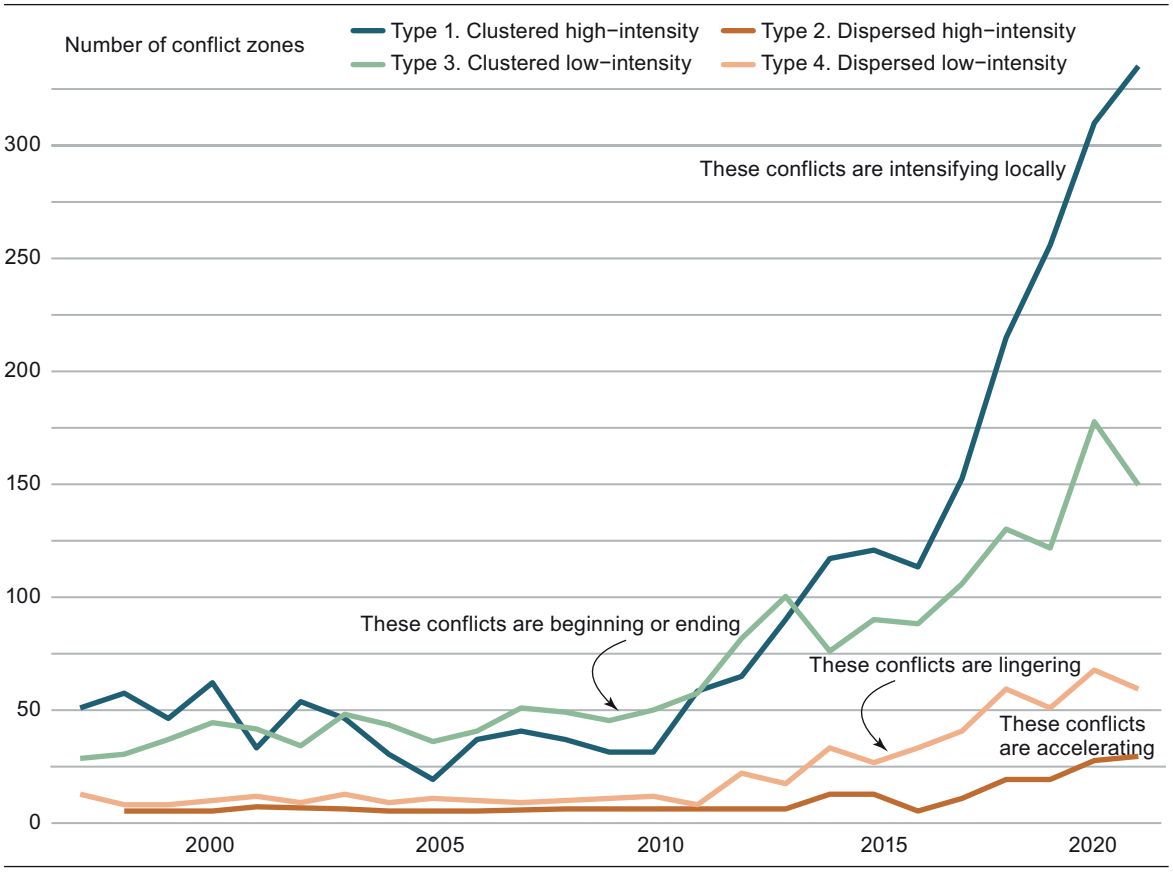
of various conflicts is unique. Nowhere else in the world has one macro region been affected by so many different forms of violence, each with its own localised roots, and progressively converging. Perhaps the most comparable instance was the violence that spread through Central and Southern Africa in the Congo Wars of the 1990s and 2000s. However, the current violence in the Sahel is fundamentally different, for two important reasons.

First, the violence in West Africa does not originate in the dynamics of state alliances and rivalries. It is mainly driven by localised, non-state violent actors, while the Congo Wars were largely driven by the involvement of regional governments pursuing their interests beyond their own borders and partnering with local non-state actors. The West African actors are quite diverse in motivations and objectives and frequently shift alliances with other groups involved (OECD/SWAC, 2021[5]). Each of the spatial conflict hotspots is a highly complex mix of issues, fault lines and dynamics that resist efforts at resolution, whether initiated in the region or from afar. This is reflected in the failure of international attempts to build a durable framework that could lead to a peace, or at least security, in the region (OECD/SWAC, 2020[2]).

Secondly, transborder violent extremist organisations have emerged that have proved to be adept at leveraging local tensions for their own gain, while using borderlands as bases and recruitment zones (OECD/SWAC, 2022[6]). Rather than trying to seize control of a state or to effect change for their cause through pressure on state elites, these jihadist groups often aspire

Figure 4.4

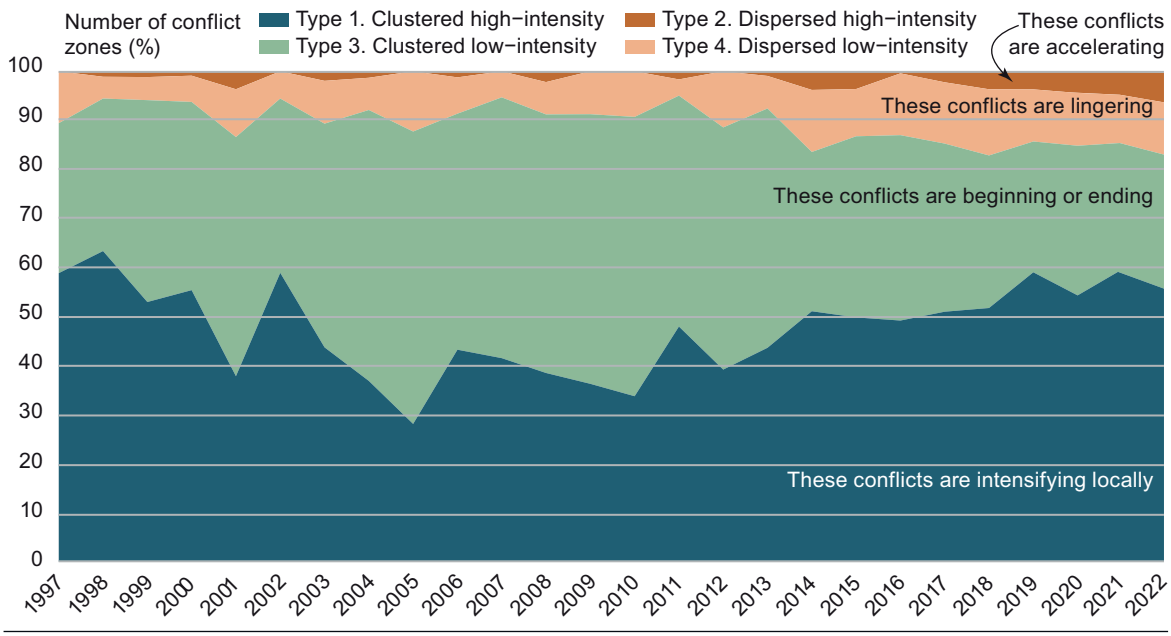
Number of conflict zones in North and West Africa by type, 1997-2021



Source: Authors based on ACLED (2022[1]) data. ACLED data is publicly available.

Figure 4.5

Proportion of conflict zones in North and West Africa by type, 1997-2022



Note: Data is available through 30 June 2022.

Source: Authors based on ACLED (2022[1]) data. ACLED data is publicly available.

to remake the political map in the region. They are largely indifferent to conventional territorial norms, crossing borders with regularity and systematically seeking to operate in multiple states at the same time. By implication, any effort to stop such groups in one state may appear to succeed initially, because the groups simply withdraw into a neighbouring state, only to re-emerge when conditions are more favourable. It also means that violence can easily continue to spread, forming large transborder hotspots. Ultimately, this means that any political solution must be regional by design rather than focused on a given state.

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Chapter 5

Is violence becoming more urban in North and West Africa?

Chapter 5 assesses the relationship between population density and political violence within North and West Africa. The chapter finds that violence is indeed spatially associated with urban areas, occurring most frequently near cities. Using disaggregated conflict data for 21 states across 22 years, the analysis shows that while only one-third of all violent events occurred in locations designated as urban, nearly half occurred within just 10 kilometres of urban areas. The chapter also notes significant differences in the way that violence has evolved in North Africa and West Africa. In West Africa, conflicts are increasingly rural, due to the emergence of jihadist organisations, while urban violence was more common overall in the highly urbanised countries of North Africa. There are also important differences in the relationship between violence and distance to urban areas across states. States with major conflicts, such as Nigeria and Libya, exhibit a clear pattern of violence increasing with proximity to urban centres, while others, such as Mali, do not. Violence tends to be predominantly clustered in small urban areas of less than 100 000 inhabitants, rather than in medium or large areas.

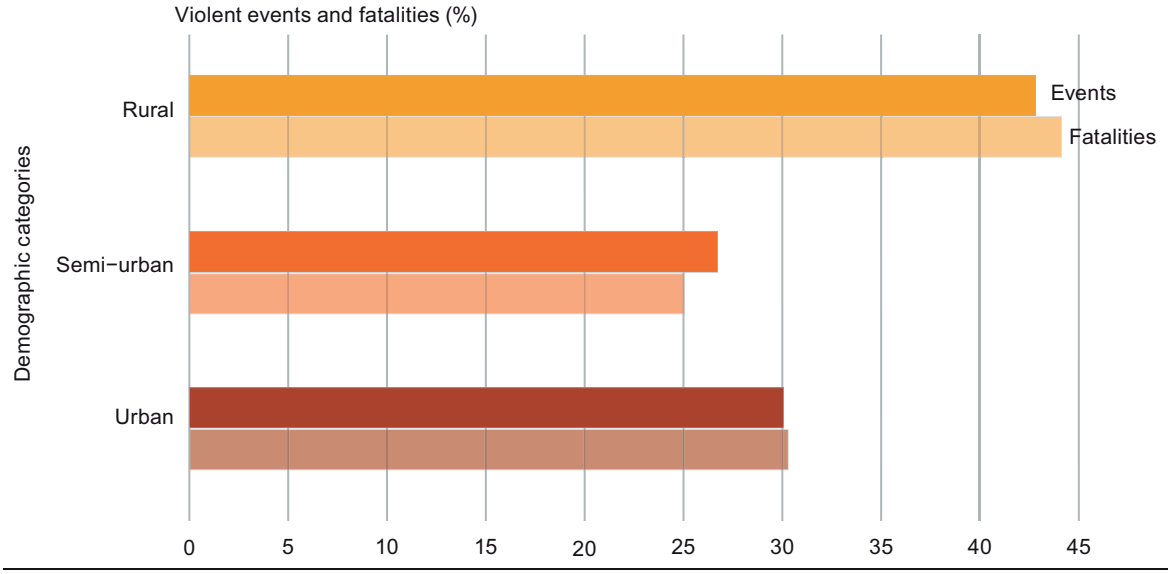
KEY MESSAGES

- **Rural areas are more violent than urban areas: more than 40% of all events and fatalities recorded since 2000 occurred in areas with fewer than 300 people per square kilometre.**
- **Violence tends to decrease with distance from urban areas. More than two-thirds of all events occur within just 40 kilometres of urban areas.**
- **Violence is more frequent in small urban agglomerations of less than 100 000 inhabitants (70% of violent events and 64% of fatalities) than in medium or large urban areas.**
- **Violence has become far more rural over time, even as urban populations continue to grow.**
- **Rural violence is particularly widespread in the Sahel, where jihadist insurgencies tend to be both attracted by cities and to reject their perceived moral corruption.**

North and West Africa have experienced unprecedented levels of violence in the last two decades. A significant proportion of the violent events and fatalities observed in the region occur near urban areas, at rates that have not been precisely measured. This chapter provides an exploratory spatial analysis of the relationship between political violence and urban areas in North and West Africa. It examines whether political violence is predominantly rural or urban, whether the intensity of violence in urban areas has increased over time, and why certain cities or their hinterland have transformed into hotspots of violence since 2000. The analysis of 22 years of disaggregated conflict data suggests that violence decreases with distance from urban areas. It is also becoming more intense in rural areas, especially in West Africa. The spatial analysis also suggests that urban and rural violence are unevenly distributed across the region, underlying the need to understand the local roots of conflicts and the specificities of jihadist insurgencies in a growing number of countries.

Figure 5.1

Violent events and fatalities by demographic categories in North and West Africa, 2000-22



Note: Data is available through 30 June 2022. Under the United Nations definition, cells of 1 500 or more people per square km are classified as urban, those between 300 and 1 499 as semi-urban, and those below 300 are rural (United Nations, 2020[1]).

Source: Authors, based on ACLED (2022[2]) and WorldPop (2022[3]) data. ACLED and WorldPop data are publicly available.

VIOLENCE DECREASES WITH DISTANCE FROM URBAN AREAS

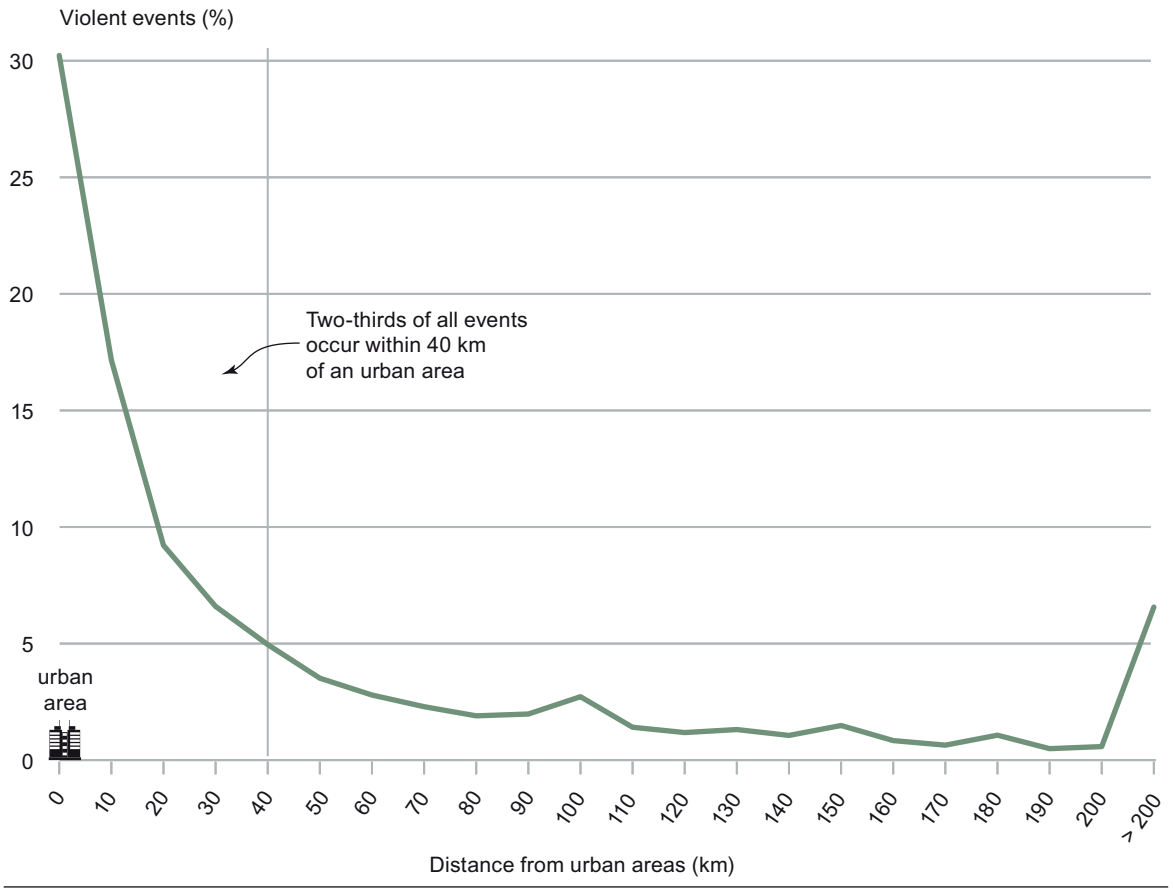
Violence is predominantly rural, across the region. The data available shows that 43% of violent events and 44% of all fatalities recorded from 2000-22 occurred in areas with fewer than 300 people per km^2 (Figure 5.1). Urban areas, or those with at least 1 500 people per km^2, accounted for 30% of all events and deaths, while semi-urban areas that transition between rural and urban population densities had the lowest proportions, with 27% of events and 25% of fatalities. Violent events are as deadly in urban areas (3.8 fatalities per event) as in rural areas (3.9) at the regional level and over a long period of time, and slightly less lethal in semi-urban areas (3.5).

The proportion of violence and fatalities per demographic category (Figure 5.1) is also consistent across two main types of violence tracked by ACLED: battles, and violence against civilians. One exception was noted, with remote violence and explosions, however. While urban areas accounted for 30% of these types of violence, they included 36% of the fatalities from these events. This was the largest gap between the proportion of events and fatalities of any event type. The relatively high population density in the vicinity of these events within an urban setting is a reasonable explanation for this difference. Battles are the most lethal type of violence, with 4.6 fatalities per event across the region since 2000, particularly in rural areas, where nearly 5 people are killed on average in such events. Explosions and remote violence, and violence against civilians, kill 3.2 people per event on average, without significant differences in event types.

Violence tends to decrease very sharply with distance from urban areas. Violence exhibits a clear distance decay from urban areas (Figure 5.2). While most of the violence did not occur in urban areas, the overwhelming majority occurred relatively close to them. More than two-thirds of all events (68%) occur within just 40 km of an urban area, and 47% within 10 km. A secondary peak can be observed at a distance of around 100 km of an urban area. In other words, the closer one gets to an urban core, the

Figure 5.2

Violent events by distance from urban areas in North and West Africa, 2000-22



Note: Data is available through 30 June 2022.

Source: Authors, based on ACLED (2022[2]) and WorldPop (2022[3]) data. ACLED and WorldPop data are publicly available.

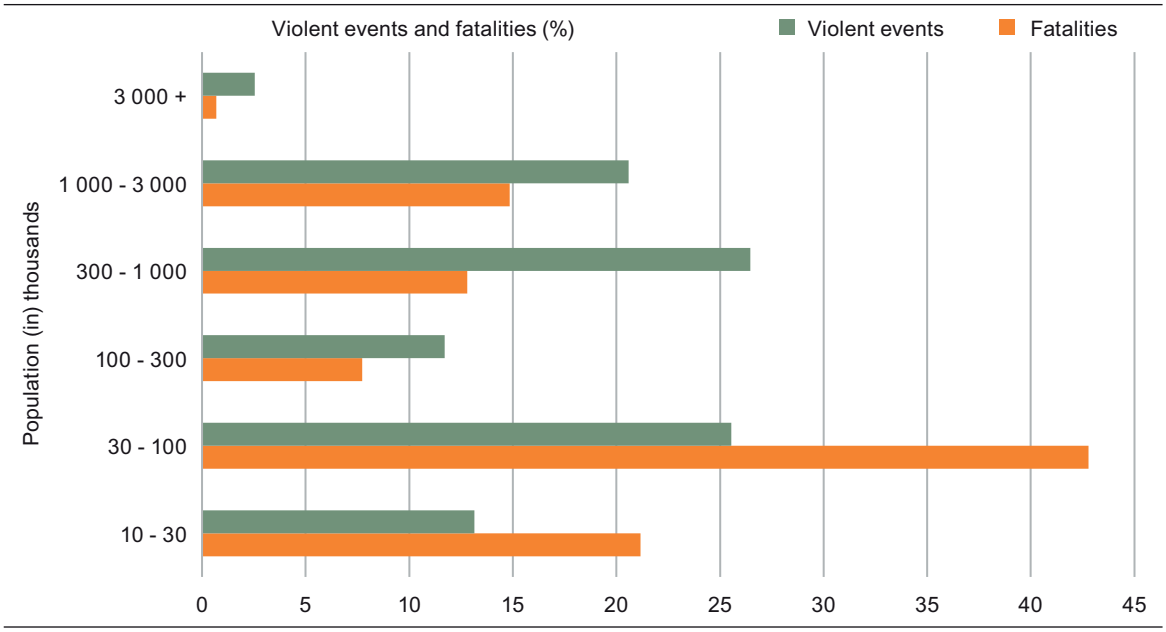
more violent events can be found, in aggregate, but these events are occurring in rural areas per United Nations (2020[1]) population density guidelines. These patterns are nearly identical for percentage of fatalities, and invariant across the main types of violence identified by ACLED (battles, violence against civilians, and explosions and remote violence).

Violence tends to be predominantly clustered in small urban areas. The proportion of violent events and fatalities varies widely according to the size of urban areas. More than half of violent events observed in 2015 occurred in urban areas of between 30 000 and 100 000 inhabitants (26%) and in urban areas of between 300 000 and 1 million people (27%) (Figure 5.3). Fatalities are far more clustered in urban areas from 30 000 to 100 000 inhabitants (43%) than anywhere else in the region. Politically motivated violence is particularly rare in large cities of more than 3 million people, where it accounts for only 3% of violent events and 1% of fatalities. Overall, violence is more frequent in small urban agglomerations of less than 100 000 inhabitants than in medium or large ones. Nearly 40% of violent events and 64% of fatalities occurred in small urban areas, which represent 92% of the cities and 32% of the population of the continent in 2015 (OECD/SWAC, 2020[4]).

The aggregate findings suggest that the rapid urbanisation of the region does not necessarily lead to an increase in urban conflict. This surprising result is due, first, to the fact that North and West Africa is a vast region that includes countries with high levels of conflict and relatively low levels of urbanisation, such as Mali and Niger, and countries with high levels both of urbanisation and conflict,

Figure 5.3

Violent events by urban categories in North and West Africa, 2015



Note: These results build on the Africapolis database, which maps the perimeter of each urban agglomeration and calculates its population. Africapolis population estimates in both North and West Africa are only available for 2015 (see Chapter 3). The 2020 update will be available in 2023.

Source: Authors, based on ACLED (2022[2]) and OECD/SWAC (2020[4]) data. ACLED and Africapolis data are publicly available.

such as Nigeria and Libya. The variations in the regional urbanisation process reduce the importance of certain urban areas. In addition, the report studies conflict over 22 years, a relatively long period, in which conflicts have ended in some places, such as Liberia and Sierra Leone, emerged or spilled over in others, such as Mali and Burkina Faso, and persisted in others, such as Nigeria.

Given the size of the region and the duration range of the study, these initial findings are reviewed in two interrelated ways. First, the conflict data provided by ACLED is disaggregated temporally, to see whether certain years exhibited an unusual annual pattern. Second, the data is spatially divided by country, to study how the outcomes in specific national contexts may differ from the general pattern.

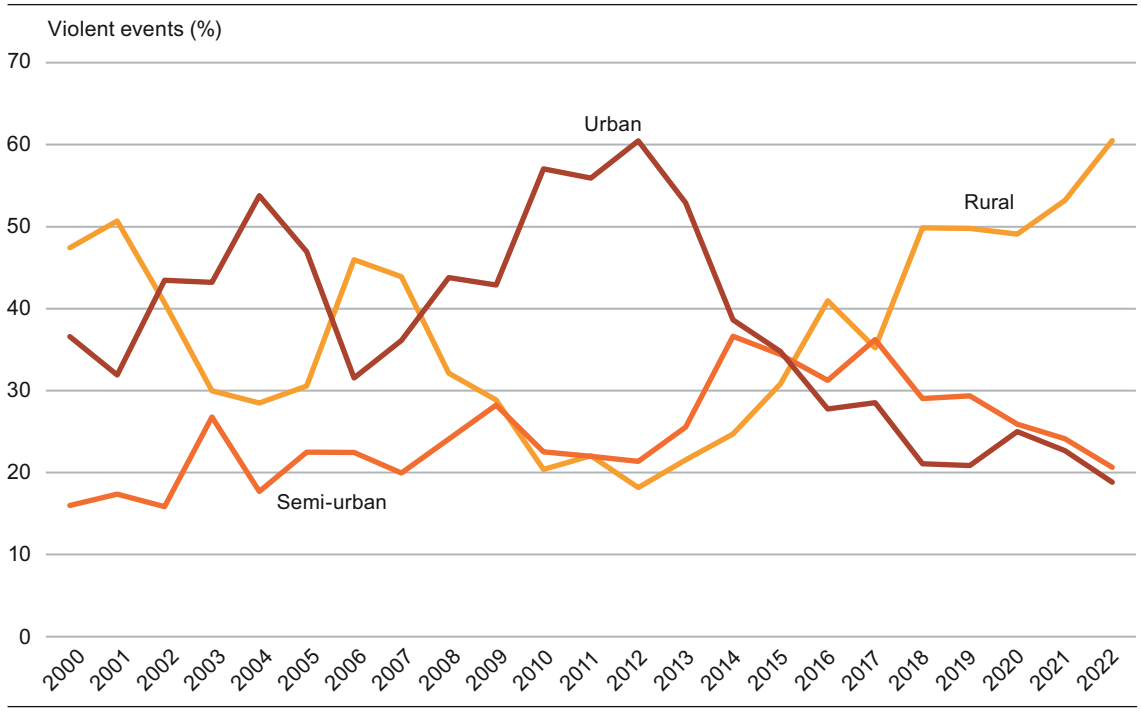
VIOLENCE IS BECOMING INCREASINGLY RURAL

Violence has become far more rural over time, despite the growth of the urban population. The relationship of violent events to urban areas has varied widely as episodes of conflict have waxed and waned in the region, some with clear rural elements (Figure 5.4). Urban violence surged in 2004 and again in 2012. During the first peak, in the First Ivorian Coast Civil War, the key cities of Korhogo, Bouaké and Abidjan suffered a high number of fatalities, and in the Nigerian cities of Yelwa and Kano, 1 700 people were killed in religious violence in May 2004.

The second peak corresponds to the beginning of the Malian Civil War in 2012, when a coalition of secessionist rebels and jihadist groups took over the key cities in the north of the country. Nevertheless, despite these peaks, in only half of the last 22 years was urban violence the most common setting. In 2012, urban violence peaked at 60% of all events, but by 2022, it had fallen sharply, to its lowest point, of just under 20%. Rural settings were the second most common, with the largest share of violence in 10 years. In 2021, 53% of all events and 56% of all fatalities occurred in rural areas. Semi-urban

Figure 5.4

Violent events by demographic categories in North and West Africa, 2000-22

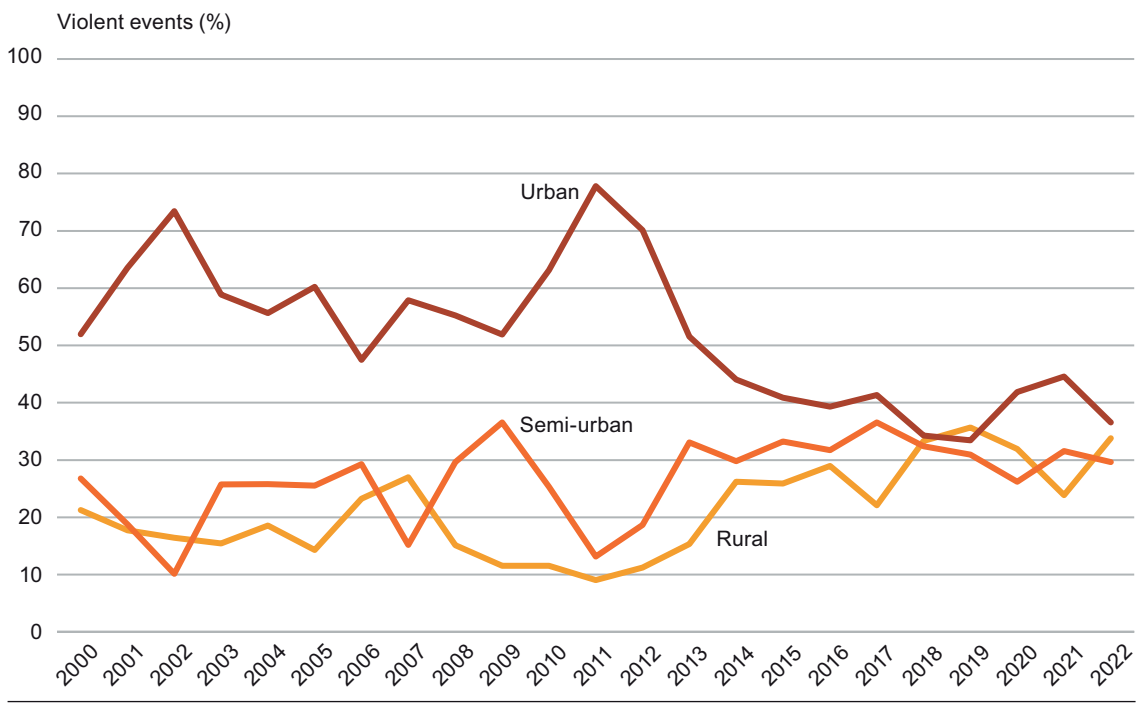


Note: The figure summarises the relationship between violent events and the United Nations' "degree of urbanisation" categories between 2000 and 2022 for the three types of violence tracked by ACLED: battles, violence against civilians, and explosions and remote violence. The data is available through 30 June 2022.

Source: Authors, based on ACLED (2022[2]) and WorldPop (2022[3]) data. ACLED and WorldPop data are publicly available.

Figure 5.5

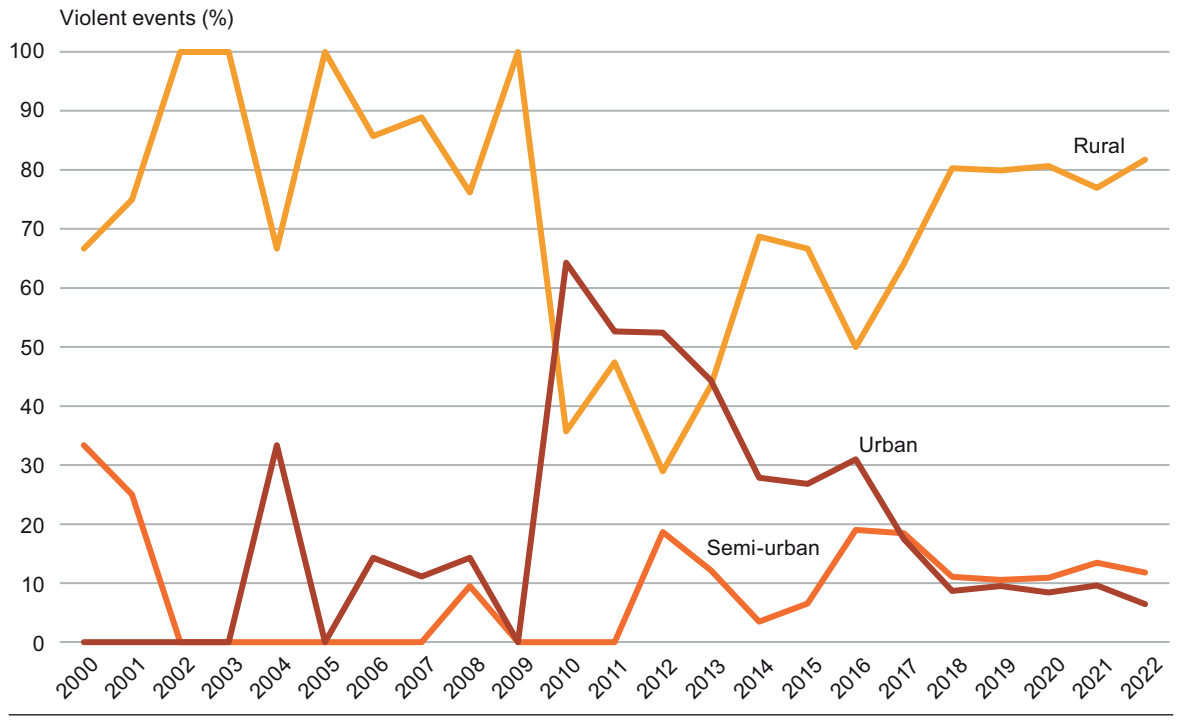
Violent events by demographic categories in Nigeria, 2000-22



Note: Data is available through 30 June 2022.

Source: Authors based on ACLED (2022[2]) and WorldPop (2022[3]) data. ACLED and WorldPop data are publicly available.

Figure 5.6
Violent events by demographic categories in Mali, 2000-22



Note: Data is available through 30 June 2022.
Source: Authors, based on ACLED (2022[2]) and WorldPop (2022[3]) data. ACLED and WorldPop data are publicly available.

settings were the most common only once, in 2017, and even then, narrowly so. This was true for each type of violence and for fatalities.

The temporal variability of urban violence is also connected to the shifting geography of conflict over time. For example, in Nigeria, urban violence is the predominant category in all but a single year since 2000. The proportion of violent events in rural areas of Nigeria, however, has slowly increased since the early 2010s, when the Boko Haram insurgency emerged around Lake Chad (Figure 5.5). Rural violence was predominant in Mali, except for just three years between 2011 and 2013, the peak years of the most recent Tuareg rebellion (Figure 5.6). It thus seems likely that as conflict waxes or wanes in one area of the region, so too does the importance of either rural or urban spaces to the belligerents. This suggests that not only the temporal but the spatial variability of these regional patterns may play a role.

URBAN VIOLENCE VARIES ACROSS STATES AND SUB-REGIONS

Urban violence is more common in North Africa than in West Africa, but its share is declining in both. To understand where political violence is predominantly rural or urban, the data is first disaggregated into two sub-regions, North Africa (comprised of Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco) and West Africa (the remaining states). In each sub-region, the report examines the changing proportion of urban violence over time. North African states tend to have higher urbanisation rates (70% in 2021 according to the United Nations) than those in West Africa (48%), suggesting that violence may be more urbanised north of the Sahara.

Urban violence has indeed been more common overall in North Africa in the past two decades (Figure 5.7). However, the rates closely tracked each other from 2003 to 2009 and again from 2013 through 2018. The latter period is particularly telling, given the simultaneous

Figure 5.7

Violent events in urban areas by sub-region, 2000-22



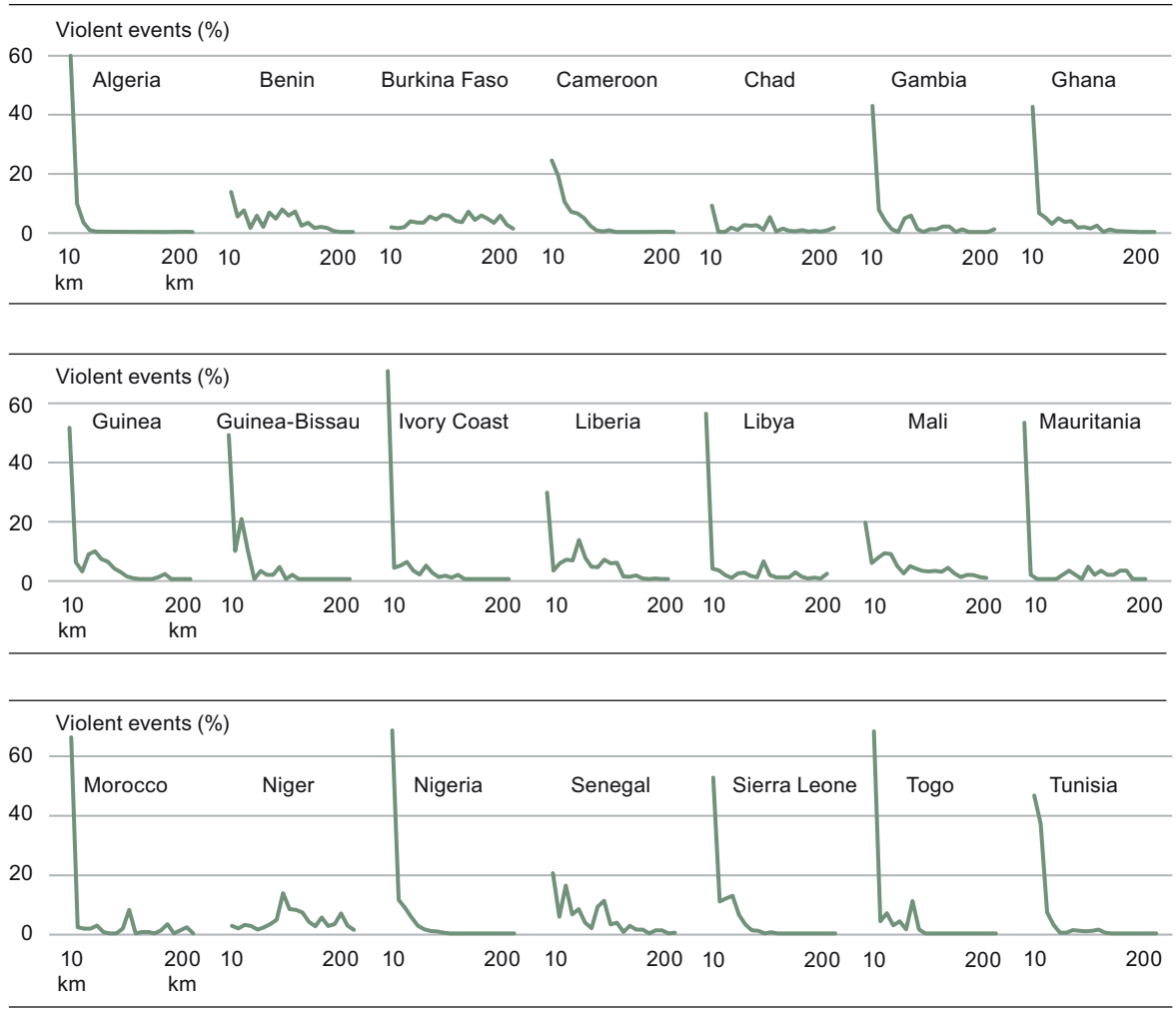
Note: Data is available through 30 June 2022.

Source: Authors, based on ACLED (2022[2]) and WorldPop (2022[3]) data. ACLED and WorldPop data are publicly available.

occurrence of major conflicts in both areas: the Libyan Civil Wars (2011, 2014-20) started only two years after the Boko Haram insurgency in 2009, and only a year before the Malian conflict (2012-present). Each sub-region's conflicts were urbanised, with violent events affecting a larger share of urban areas in West Africa between 2010 and 2012. This suggests that the notable sub-regional differences in urbanised population between North and West Africa cannot fully explain why conflict in both regions would similarly affect urban areas.

Figure 5.8

Violent events by distance from urban areas and by state, 2000-22



Note: Data is available through 30 June 2022.

Source: Authors, based on ACLED (2022[2]) and WorldPop (2022[3]) data. ACLED and WorldPop data are publicly available.

States vary significantly in the relationship between violence and distance to urban areas. Reviewing the distance to urban areas in each of the 21 states in the region separately (Figure 5.8) reveals wide variations. Several states exhibit a clear distance decay pattern, including many with major conflict episodes in the past 22 years, such as Algeria, Cameroon, Libya, Nigeria and Tunisia. The general pattern is observable, if less marked, in several additional states, such as Cameroon, Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire. In a few other states, both with and without episodes of conflict, the relationship between violence and distance to urban areas was inconsistent. Notably, in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, the current overlapping conflicts are largely rural. For all three countries taken together, the highest proportion of events occurred between 90 and 100 km from the nearest urban area.

The next section examines the geography of urban violence by mapping violence and its relation to urban areas in three of the most affected areas of North and West Africa: the Central Sahel, the Lake Chad region and Libya. In each region, the analysis focuses on a detailed analysis of places that have experienced a high number of fatalities since 2000: Djibo, Gao, and Kidal in the Central Sahel, Gwoza, Maiduguri and the Sambisa Forest around Lake Chad, and Benghazi, Sirte, and Tripoli in Libya. The case studies confirm that much of the violence in urban areas has occurred since the early 2010s,

and that the number of fatalities observed in urban areas of the Lake Chad region and Libya has been consistently higher than in the Central Sahel, with major peaks corresponding to uprisings by violent extremist organisations and corresponding military counter-offensives.

RURALISATION OF CONFLICT IN THE CENTRAL SAHEL

The Central Sahel is the zone of North and West Africa where violence is the most likely to occur in rural areas.[1] The region is confronted with a myriad armed groups whose primary activities take place in rural hinterlands. Only 23% (1 050 out of 4 732) of violent events in 2020 and 2021 occurred within 40 km of an urban area. The fact that violence predominantly affects rural areas does not mean, however, that urban areas and their immediate peripheries are immune to violent events. Event concentrations are associated with many urban areas (Map 5.1). The string of urban settlements running from northwest to southeast, between Mopti in Mali and Ouahigouya in Burkina Faso, saw 440 events within 40 km in 2020 and 2021. Smaller event clusters have occurred near Maradi in Niger, and Douentza, Gao and Niono in Mali. Notably, even as violence has intensified recently, it has not clustered near the national capitals of each country (Box 4.1). To the extent that some evidence of conflict urbanisation appears within an otherwise mostly rural context, it has been associated with smaller and perhaps more marginal cities, including several near international borders.

Saharan and Sahelian cities such as Kidal, Gao and Timbuktu have played a strategic role at the beginning of insurgencies that have emerged in northern Mali and progressively affected neighbouring countries in the past decade. In such a sparsely populated region, capture of territory is fruitless, given the impossibility of garrisoning it. This principle was formulated more than a century ago by T.E. Lawrence (1920[5]), who famously wrote that desert warfare is comparable to naval war, in the sense that insurgents are mobile, ubiquitous, independent of military bases and relatively indifferent to the constraints of their environment. This is true, of course, of many irregular forces. What makes Saharan insurgents peculiar is that, like seafarers, they have developed a conception of space in which strategic areas, fixed directions and localised resources matter less than tribal allegiances, networks of cities and control of roads (Walther, 2015[6]). In the Sahara-Sahel, the control of movement has historically proved the most efficient way to defeat regular forces and control the local population, which explains why so much of the violent activities observed in the first stage of the Malian civil war occurred in or around urban areas, as well as along strategic trade corridors (Retaillé and Walther, 2013[7]).

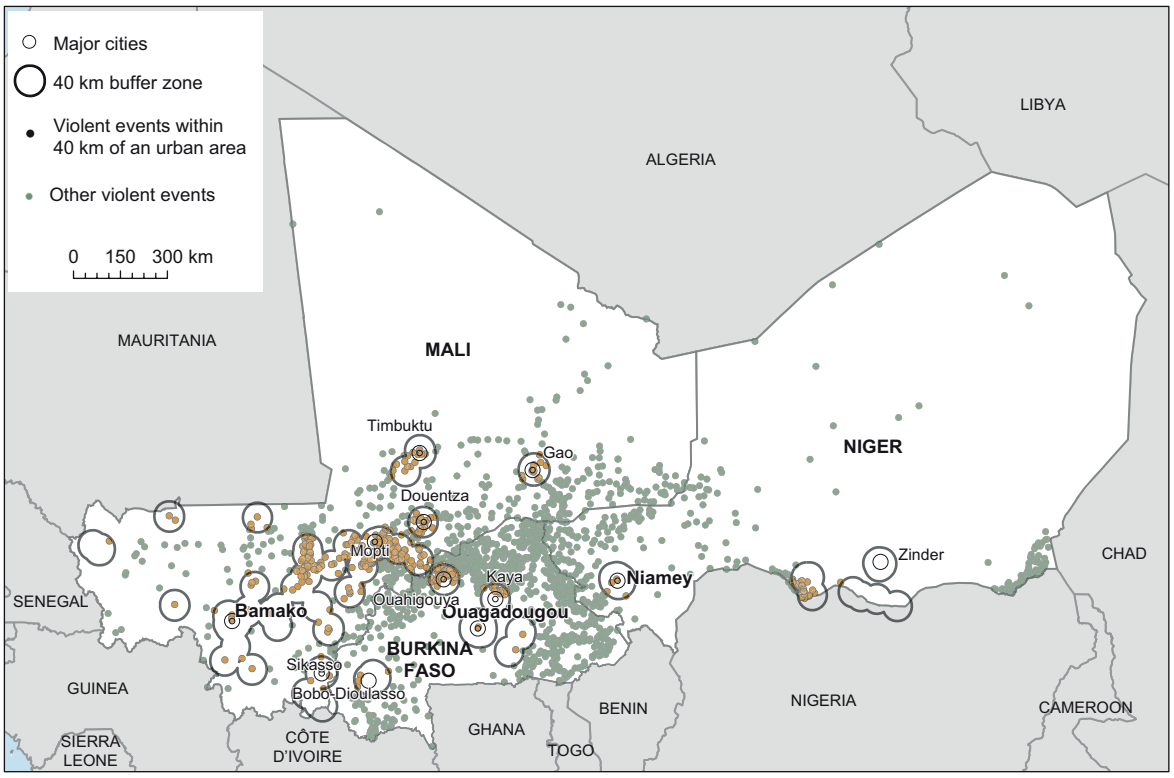
Kidal, the political centrality of the margins

Kidal is one of the most important cities of the heartland of the Kel Adagh Tuareg confederation in remote north-eastern Mali. Despite its small size, of only 31 800 inhabitants in 2015, Kidal was the launching pad for four major rebellions in Mali in 1963-64, 1990-96, 2006-09 and 2012-13. The first of the rebellions was brutally repressed in Kidal by the Malian military, while the other three each ended with peace agreements that ultimately proved unable to prevent resumption of the conflict.

In the 2012 rebellion, Kidal was controlled first by the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), a Tuareg-led separatist movement, and was then taken over by a jihadist coalition that included Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), and Ansar Dine (Defenders of the Faith), which became the dominant faction in Kidal (Map 5.2). In January 2013, the French military and its coalition partners launched Operation Serval, to frustrate a southward advance by jihadists and expel them from northern cities. The dynamics of the recapture of Kidal from jihadists have proven enduringly controversial. On 28 January 2013, the MNLA and a group of high-level defectors from Ansar Dine, calling themselves the Islamic Movement of Azawad (later renamed the High Council for

Map 5.1

Violent events and urban areas in the Central Sahel, 2020-22



Note: Data is available through 30 June 2022.

Source: Authors, based on ACLED (2022[2]) and WorldPop (2022[3]) data. ACLED and WorldPop data are publicly available.

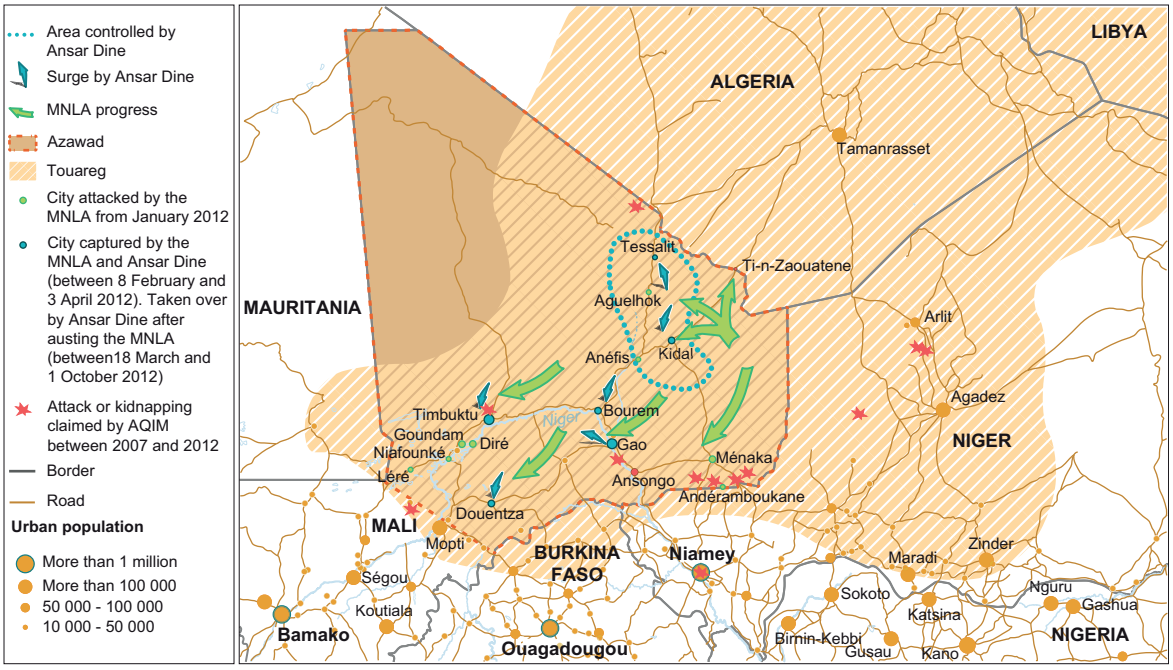
the Unity of Azawad, or HCUA), announced that they had taken control of Kidal. On 30 January, French forces captured Kidal airport, and Malian authorities complained publicly that they had not been informed or included. Chadian troops entered the city on 5 February, and Kidal was the last major northern Malian city to fall to Operation Serval.

The MNLA and the HCUA then formally shared control of Kidal with Malian government forces in a tense arrangement. In May 2014, the visit of then-Prime Minister Moussa Mara to Kidal triggered direct fighting between the MNLA and Malian forces, a conflict the MNLA won. The same year, the MNLA, the HCUA and a segment of the Arab Movement of Azawad formed a coalition called the Coordination of Movements of Azawad (CMA), which became one of three signatories to the 2015 Algiers Accord, along with the Malian government and a coalition of anti-rebel militias called the Plateforme. The CMA consolidated political and military control of Kidal and much of the surrounding region, beating back challenges from the Plateforme's leading component, the Imghad Tuareg Self-Defence Group and Allies (GATIA).

Despite its political centrality in the Malian conflict, Kidal has been strikingly free of violence by comparison with other zones of conflict, with 372 fatalities in 1997-2021. The major peak of violence in the city came in 2013 (101 fatalities) and 2014 (108), reflecting the turbulence of Serval and its immediate aftermath, along with the violence of the May 2014 clashes and of the CMA's overall efforts to consolidate control of the city. Subsequent violence involving the CMA has often been in the Kidal region rather than in Kidal city itself. For example, July 2017 clashes between the CMA and GATIA concerned control of the city of Kidal, but the fighting took place 50 km south-east of the city. In addition to the relative peace that the CMA brought to Kidal, the city is also the hometown of the top Malian jihadist leader, Iyad ag Ghali, who has headed the Al Qaeda-linked Group for Supporting Islam and Muslims (JNIM) since its creation in 2017.

Map 5.2

The early stage of the Malian conflict, 2012



Source: OECD/SWAC (2014[8]).

Although JNIM has conducted numerous attacks in the Kidal region, the group's violence is primarily directed at central Mali and northern Burkina Faso.

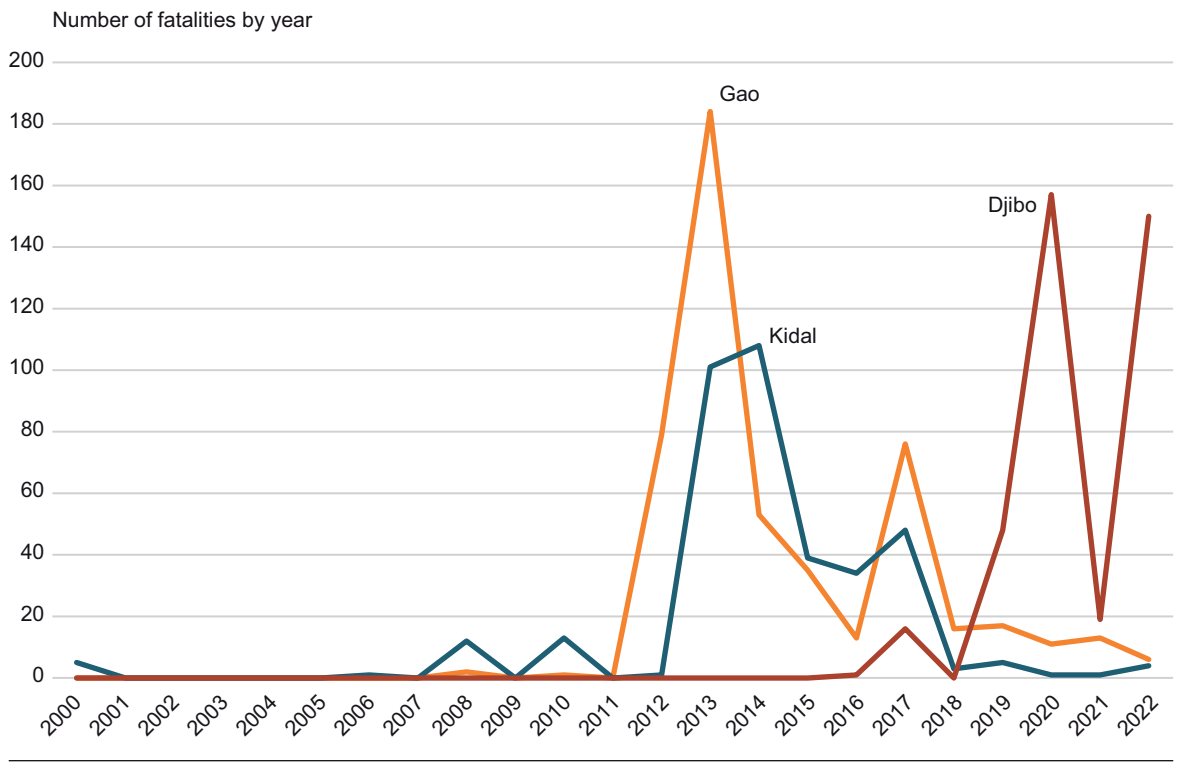
Gao, epicentre and target of jihadist violence

With an estimated population of 105 900 in 2015, Gao is an important political and cultural centre in north-eastern Mali. The city was badly affected by the northern Malian rebellions of 1990, 2006 and 2012. In 2012, the city was captured first by the MNLA, and later by the jihadist coalition that took over northern Mali. The MUJAO came to control Gao. Both the MNLA and the jihadists inflicted serious human rights violations on the population of Gao. Notably, the Tuareg-led MNLA may have been willing to inflict greater predatory violence on multi-ethnic Gao, where there are Songhai, Arabs, Tuareg, Fulani and others, than in Tuareg-dominated Kidal. MUJAO and the jihadists perpetrated harsh corporal punishments in line with the jihadist interpretation of Islamic law, including amputations and beatings (HRW, 2012[9]).

The violence unleashed in Gao in 2012 set the stage for enduring intercommunal tensions after the town was liberated from MUJAO and the jihadists in 2013 (Figure 5.9). Ethnic tensions flared in incidents such as the 2020 intercommunal clashes involving what appeared to be Songhai-led lynching of Arabs accused of theft. Further complicating the picture is the alleged widespread activity of Arab-dominated drug trafficking networks in the Gao region from the mid-2000s on. Journalists wrote exposés of the "Cocainebougou" neighbourhood in the city (Dreazen, 2013[10]). The town of Tarkint, in the Gao region, was the site of the infamous 2009 "Air Cocaine" incident, in which a plane was discovered laden with cocaine, implicating various businessmen and local officials (Tinti, 2020[11]). More recently, key Gao-based politicians, such as Mohamed Ould Mataly, have been accused of involvement in drug trafficking and in political sabotage and placed under United Nations sanctions (United Nations, 2019[12]).

Meanwhile, Gao remained a target for jihadist violence even after the city's liberation. In February and March 2013, there was more jihadist resistance against the French and Malian

Figure 5.9
Fatalities in the Central Sahel by urban area, 2000-22



Note: 2022 data are projections based on a doubling of the number of events recorded through 30 June.
Source: Authors, based on ACLED (2022[2]) data. ACLED data is publicly available.

military presence in Gao than there was in Kidal and Timbuktu. Gao was the site of what has been called Mali's first suicide bombing, in February 2013. Gao was also the location of the deadliest suicide bombing of the entire Malian conflict, targeting a mixed patrol of CMA, Plateforme and Malian army personnel in January 2017. Gao has been repeatedly targeted by jihadists, in part because the city emerged as the nexus point of various security initiatives in northern Mali (Traoré, 2017[13]). Gao hosted the Malian headquarters of France's counterterrorism mission for the Sahel, Operation Barkhane, and is also the eastern headquarters of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA).

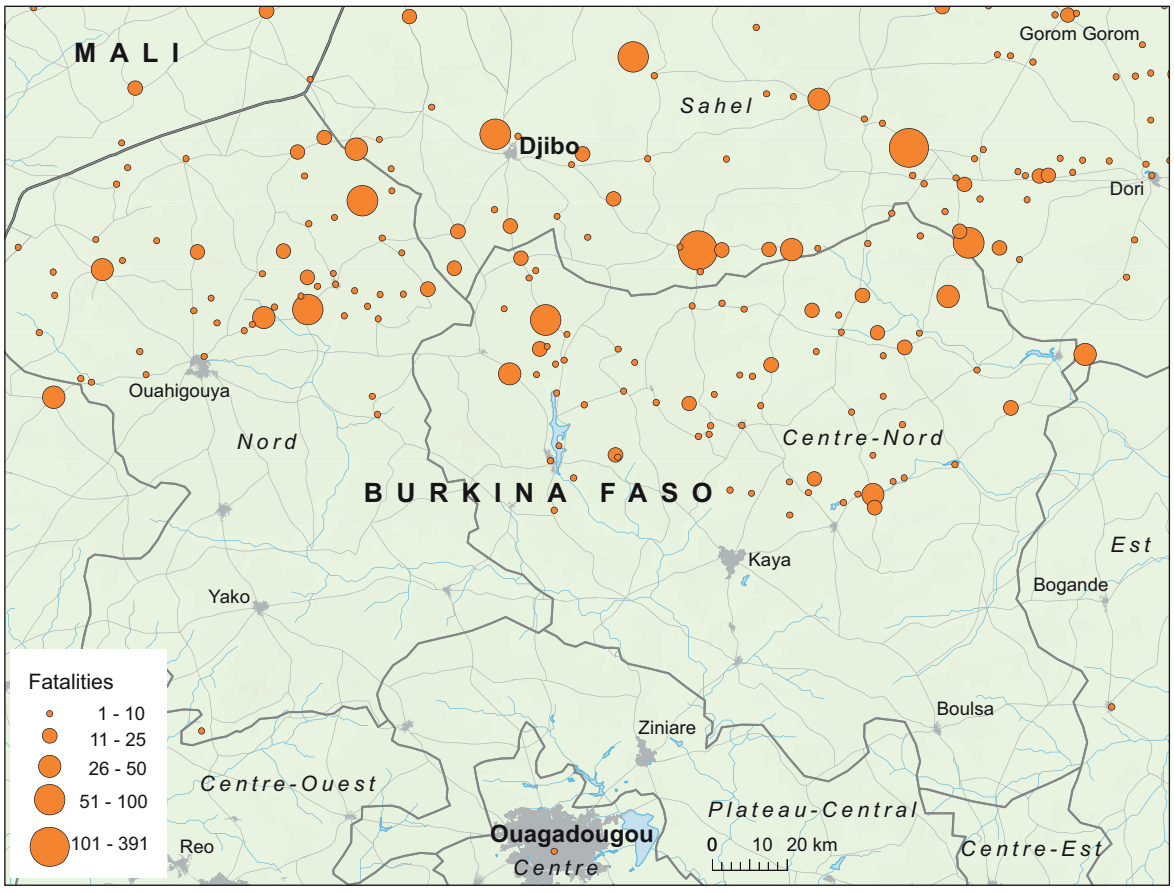
In recent years, violent activities have largely shifted from Saharan to Sahelian regions, and further south. The Kidal region is one of the least affected regions of Mali, with fewer than 70 fatalities recorded from January 2021 to June 2022, compared with more than 2 100 in the Mopti region and 906 in the Gao region (see Chapter 4). As armed groups move south, Burkina Faso has become the most violent country of West Africa after Nigeria, with more than 4 500 fatalities recorded by ACLED from January 2021 to June 22. Accordingly, Burkinabè cities such as Djibo, Dori and Ouahigouya, have been new hotspots of violence for the region.

Djibo, point of origin for a wider insurgency

Djibo is the capital of Soum Province, one of four provinces in the Sahel region, the northernmost part of the country. The city is approximately 210 km north of Burkina Faso's capital, Ouagadougou, by road and lies less than 70 km by road from the border with Mali. Soum is adjacent to some of the most violence-prone areas of central Mali, a zone engulfed by crisis since 2015 (Map 5.3).

Map 5.3

Fatalities in Djibo and northern Burkina Faso, 2021



Source: Authors, based on ACLED (2022[2]) data. ACLED data is publicly available.

Within Burkina Faso, Soum Province became the point of origin of a wider insurgency initially conducted by the Burkinabè jihadist group Ansaroul Islam. Ansaroul Islam's founder, Ibrahim Dicko, was born in a village in Soum, and in the 2000s and 2010s, he built a career centred in Djibo, leading Friday prayers at a mosque there, speaking regularly on two Djibo-based radio stations, marrying into the family of a prominent local imam, and creating an Islamic association called al-Irchad (from the Arabic *irshad*, meaning "guidance"). After Dicko's contacts with Mali-based militants increased and had a radicalising effect on him and segments of his following in al-Irchad, his local acceptance in Djibo slipped (Thurston, 2020[14]). Ansaroul Islam conducted its first major attack in December 2016 at a military outpost at Nassoumbou, a Soum town approximately 35 kilometres north of Djibo. Ansaroul Islam, first under Dicko and then under his brother Jafar, has had a close relationship with JNIM in Mali.

The city of Djibo itself has experienced relatively low levels of violence, with 241 fatalities over the period 1997-2021. The peak year for violence in Djibo was 2020, with 157 fatalities recorded. Yet Djibo has been profoundly affected by the crisis in Soum and beyond. From an early point in the insurgency, poor infrastructure, rivalries within the local elite and accumulated neglect by successive central Burkinabè governments all combined to leave Djibo vulnerable and isolated (ICG, 2017[15]). Violence escalated in areas surrounding the town, including violence inflicted not just by jihadists, but also by the security forces and by self-defence militias known as Koglweogo. For example, in 2019-2020, residents reportedly

discovered graves around Djibo containing a total of 180 bodies, with the security forces the prime suspects in the killings (HRW, 2020[16]). The violence on all sides created dynamics that put civilians in the position of being accused by each armed faction of collaborating with the enemy (Koné, 2020[17]).

As the crisis in Burkina Faso escalated and spread across the north and then the east of the country, mass displacement ensued, starting in 2019. The number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) grew from 87 000 in January 2019 to over 1.9 million as of 30 April 2022, including over 574 000 in the Sahel region (UNOCHA, 2022[18]). Many of the displaced flocked to Djibo, whose population had soared above 200 000 by the first quarter of 2022 (Solidarités International, 2022[19]), compared with 38 300 in 2015, according to Africapolis. As of that period, Djibo housed 17% of Burkina Faso's IDPs. Meanwhile, endemic violence has caused the closure of numerous health centres and schools in Djibo itself, especially from 2018 on.

Starting in 2020, jihadists blockaded Djibo, and assassinated the deputy mayor and the chief imam when they tried to leave; other areas in the north were also blockaded (Koné, 2020[17]). Such blockades appeared designed to reinforce control over key transportation routes, deprive the state of a major administrative centre in the north, and contribute to a wider pattern of intimidation and jihadist shadow governance. In the intervening years, the city has been repeatedly cut off from its surroundings by jihadists. Due to its strategic importance, meanwhile, Djibo has also been the site of complex efforts at negotiating truces with jihadists conducted by local and even national authorities. In late 2020, the government of then-President Roch Kaboré reportedly brokered a truce near Djibo with JNIM (and, presumably, Ansaroul Islam) with the aim of allowing national elections to go forward that year. Those talks appeared to succeed at that limited objective (Mednick, 2021[20]) but proved fragile and temporary, as demonstrated by the resumption of the blockade on Djibo later.

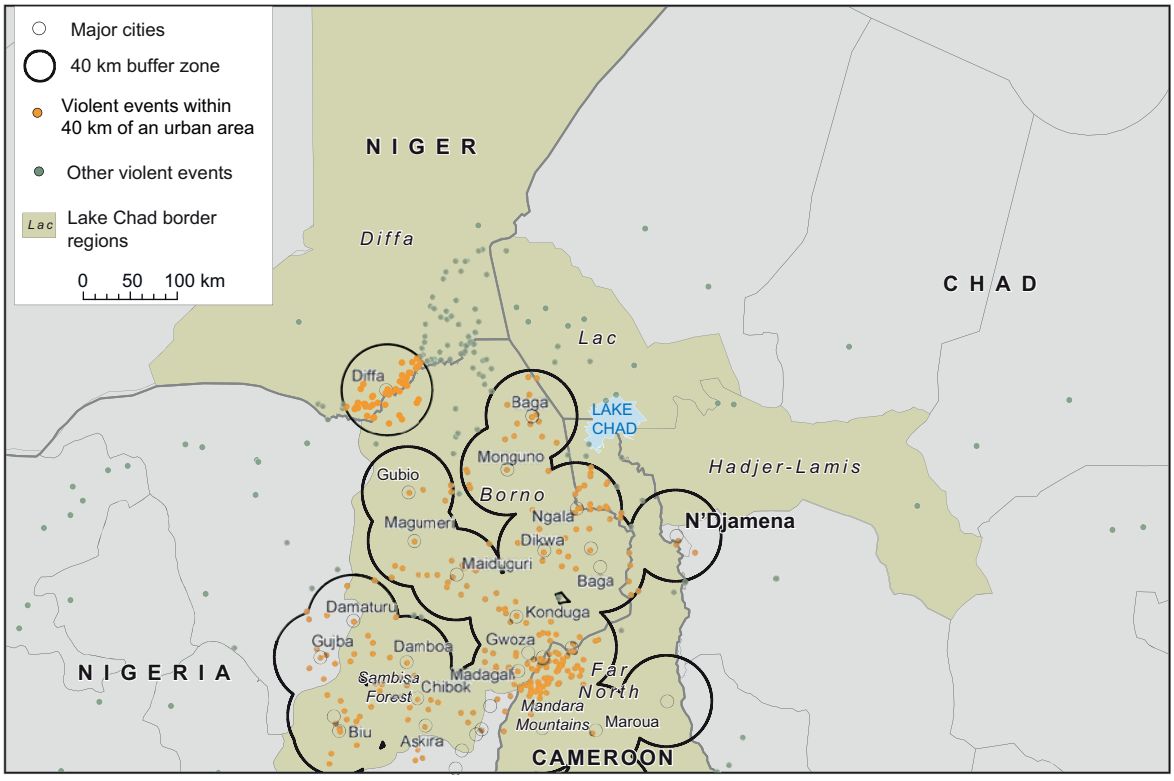
INTENSIFICATION OF VIOLENCE IN THE LAKE CHAD REGION

The Lake Chad region has recorded the highest number of violent events and fatalities since the late 2000s in West Africa. Twice as many people have been killed in the worst affected regions of the Lake Chad basin (Adamawa, Borno, Diffa, Extreme North and Yobe) than in the whole of Mali and Burkina Faso from January 2012 to June 2022. The four states bordering Lake Chad are facing one of the most violent insurgencies ever recorded in West Africa, led by Boko Haram and its splinter group, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) (Map 5.4).

These groups entertain a conflicting relationship with cities. In the early 2000s, the first members of the Boko Haram sect were radical youths from the Alhaji Muhammadu Ndimi Mosque in Maiduguri (Agbiboa, 2022[21]). After declaring the city establishment corrupt, a hard-line offshoot attempted to establish a kind of commune or training camp near the village of Kanama in neighbouring Yobe State, but the hard-liners' short-lived uprising against authorities was crushed in late 2003 (Thurston, 2017[22]). The survivors returned to Maiduguri and established their own mosque near the railway station (Chapter 2). In 2009, Boko Haram launched a series of spectacular uprisings in Maiduguri, Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Yobe, Kano and Katsina. The group was eventually expelled from urban areas and expanded in rural areas. In 2015, as a result of a series of major offensives by the Nigerian military and its regional allies, Boko Haram lost much of its territorial gains and retreated to rural and remote areas such as the islands of Lake Chad or the Mandara Mountains in Cameroon. In recent years, the strategy of the Nigerian government to move its troops (and some civilians) to fortified camps has encouraged Boko Haram and ISWAP to expand their activities in rural areas and along major transport axes (Figure 5.10).

Map 5.4

Violent events and urban areas in the Lake Chad region, 2020-22



Note: Data is available through 30 June 2022.

Source: Authors, based on ACLED (2022[2]) and WorldPop (2022[3]) data. ACLED and WorldPop data are publicly available.

Maiduguri, the most violent city in West Africa

Maiduguri, the capital city of Borno, Nigeria's second-largest state, is the most populous city in far north-eastern Nigeria, with an estimated population of 1 012 100 in 2015. Given the extent of Borno State and the large distances between Maiduguri and other major metropolitan areas in Nigeria, Maiduguri is a key economic node linking Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon and Chad.

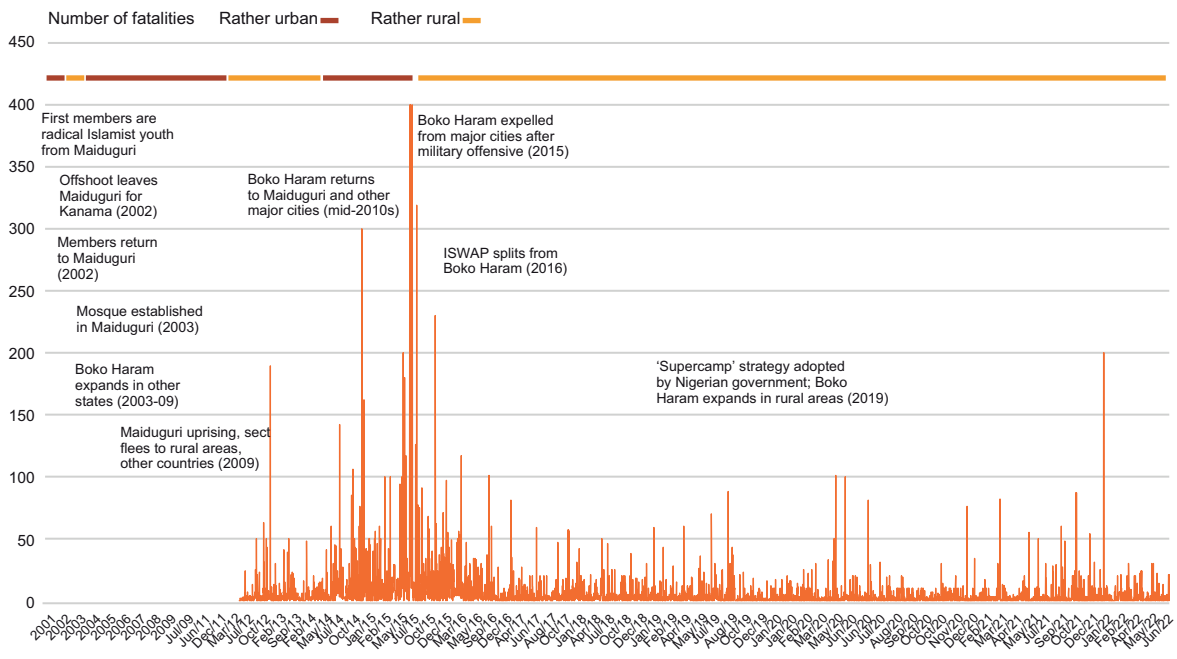
Maiduguri has played a central role in the Boko Haram conflict. The city is the most violence-prone urban agglomeration in West Africa (5 483 fatalities during the period 1997-2021). According to most accounts, Boko Haram emerged in Maiduguri between the late 1990s and the early 2000s under the charismatic leadership of the preacher Muhammad Yusuf (1970-2009), himself a migrant to Maiduguri from Yobe State (Bukarti, 2020[23]). Yusuf built a large following in Maiduguri and beyond during the 2000s, treating the city as his base and establishing a network of mosques and centres there. Maiduguri was the epicentre of Boko Haram's violent mass uprising in 2009, in which Yusuf was killed. That uprising proved to be the most decisive turning point in the group's history, transforming it from a dissident anti-systemic movement with violent elements into a full-blown insurgency.

After Boko Haram re-emerged in 2010 under the leadership of Yusuf's deputy, Abubakar Shekau, Maiduguri was initially the most frequent target of the group's violence. Boko Haram staged assassinations, bombings and other attacks there, including the assassination of a major gubernatorial candidate in January 2011 and the targeting of a beer garden in June 2011. That year, the deployment of a new military Joint Task Force (JTF) contributed substantially to the escalation of violence in Maiduguri, with the JTF accused of systematic human rights violations and collective punishment (Amnesty International, 2011[24]).

In June 2013, the emergence of a government-backed vigilante force called the Civilian

Figure 5.10

Fatalities involving Boko Haram and ISWAP, 2001-22



Note: Data is available through 30 June 2022.

Source: Authors, based on ACLED (2022[2]). ACLED data is publicly available.

Joint Task Force (CJTF) further changed the dynamics of the conflict. The CJTF recruited thousands of volunteers, with its centre of gravity in Maiduguri and a substantial presence elsewhere in northern Nigeria. CJTF members' local knowledge helped to root out Boko Haram cells in Maiduguri, but the CJTF was accused of summary justice and harsh treatment for accused Boko Haram members, many of whom did not receive any due process (Agbiboa, 2022[21]). These abuses then became further triggers for Boko Haram reprisals. One particularly severe Boko Haram attack during this period came in March 2014 at Giwa Barracks, a military prison in Maiduguri.

Boko Haram's physical presence in Maiduguri appeared to weaken starting in 2013-2014, amid the rise of the CJTF, yet the group nevertheless repeatedly targeted the city. Violence in Maiduguri has had two peaks during the Boko Haram crisis: 2009 and 2015. The 2009 peak represents Boko Haram's mass uprising (818 fatalities, although some estimates are much higher). 2010 was a low point in violence in Maiduguri (40 fatalities) as Boko Haram recovered, and then violence ticked upwards each year until 2015 (1 177 fatalities). A substantial portion of the violence represents casualties inflicted on Boko Haram and on civilians accused of being Boko Haram supporters; for example, the Nigerian Army reportedly killed an estimated 600 people in crackdowns after the 2014 Giwa Barracks attack.

In 2014-2015, Boko Haram carved out a "proto-state" in north-eastern Nigeria that partly encircled Maiduguri. Although Boko Haram never captured Maiduguri, the group inflicted numerous attacks on the city during and after that period. The most infamous attacks, although not always the ones with the highest casualties, were a spate of suicide bombings often involving women and girls as bombers under varying degrees of coercion and manipulation (Warner and Matfess, 2017[25]). Another, more recent trend is rocket attacks on the city. The area around the city has also been a site of serious violence, for example a November 2020 massacre that killed an estimated 110 agricultural workers in the village of Koshebe near Maiduguri.

Maiduguri has also seen an influx of displaced persons during the Boko Haram crisis, with the relative safety and denser humanitarian

infrastructure of the city providing some relief to those fleeing Boko Haram and ISWAP attacks in smaller towns and in the countryside. As of April 2022, Borno State had over 1.6 million IDPs (IOM, 2022[26]). Nigerian authorities, however, have consistently and often controversially tried to promote resettlement of IDPs (and refugees), including controversial plans announced in 2020 to resettle an estimated 1.8 million people from camps in Maiduguri, with a wave of closures affecting camps in late 2021 (HRW, 2021[27]). As of April 2022, Borno State had 1.8 million returnees (IOM, 2022[26]), although returnees often faced dangerous conditions in their hometowns and villages.

Gwoza, a key flashpoint of the Boko Haram insurgency

Gwoza is the administrative centre of a Local Government Area (LGA) of the same name in Borno State, also in far north-eastern Nigeria. As of 2015, the Gwoza urban agglomeration had an estimated population of 69 600. Gwoza lies at the foot of the Mandara Mountains, a range along the Nigeria-Cameroon border, and the rugged geography around Gwoza has compounded both counterinsurgency and humanitarian access challenges there.

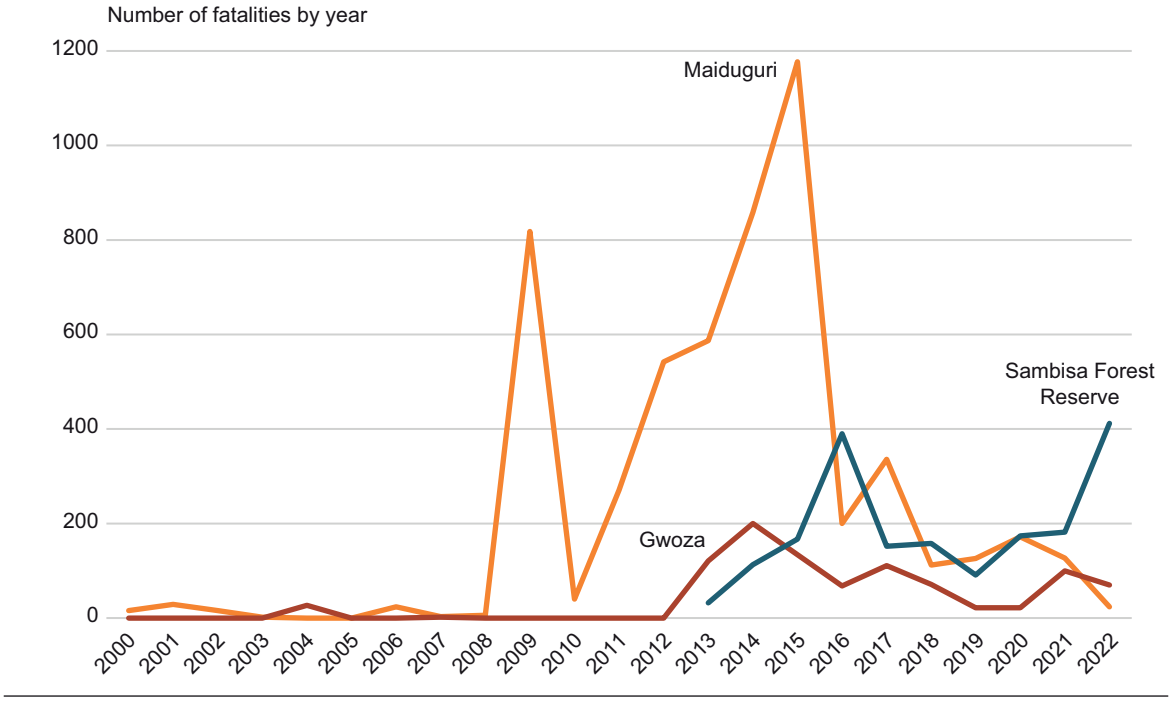
Gwoza has been a key flashpoint in the Boko Haram conflict. An early source of Boko Haram recruits, it was a site where members and fighters attempted to regroup after facing setbacks in other parts of the north-east in 2003. In Boko Haram's formative period in the early 2000s, a segment or offshoot of the group – dubbed the "Nigerian Taliban" by the media – was involved in violence in Yobe and Borno States, including a September 2004 attack on Gwoza's police station and a police station in Bama. After crackdowns on Boko Haram in Maiduguri by the military starting in 2011, and by the government-backed CJTF starting in 2013, some Boko Haram members again fled to the area around Gwoza, including the nearby Sambisa Forest. Boko Haram then launched a rapid series of assaults on schools and civilians in Gwoza, and southern Borno more broadly, which has a significant Christian population. Boko Haram preyed on civilians in general, and frequently killed Muslims it labelled apostates and enemies, but some of the violence in Borno, including in Gwoza, was specifically anti-Christian.

Boko Haram's violence around Gwoza in 2013-2014, and in south-central Borno during that period, set the stage for Boko Haram's overt territorial conquests beginning in summer 2014. Boko Haram began seizing towns, such as Damboa in July 2014, in part to deprive the CJTF of bases. Gwoza became the de facto headquarters of Boko Haram's "proto-state" from August 2014 to March 2015. It was one of the last towns held by Boko Haram to fall to a multinational campaign, although areas around Gwoza remained under Boko Haram control even after the formal liberation of the town itself (HRW, 2016[28]).

Overall, 2013-2015 brought significant violence to Gwoza, with 121 fatalities in 2013, 200 in 2014 and 134 in 2015 (Figure 5.11). The surrounding area has been even more violent, and several villages in the Gwoza LGA saw one of the worst massacres of the conflict. Almost 1 700 people were killed within 20 km of Gwoza from 2011-2021 and nearly 8 500 within 50 km, according to ACLED. The town of Pulka, approximately 18 kilometres north of Gwoza and within Gwoza LGA, has also suffered heavily in the crisis (UNOCHA, 2020[29]).

Boko Haram's predatory and destructive occupation of Gwoza caused long-term challenges for residents and returnees, with an estimated 70% of the town "razed" by occupiers (Caux, 2016[30]). In the years after 2015, Gwoza and its region faced severe and persistent food security challenges. Through the time of writing in 2022, much of Gwoza LGA was classified as "hard to reach," and the limited data available to humanitarian groups indicated that people were dying of hunger in Gwoza and other nearby LGAs, as they exhausted coping strategies, such as foraging (REACH, 2020[31]). As of the 2022 lean season (June-September), the worst food insecurity in Borno was in far northern LGAs – classified as level 4, "emergency," on a widely used five-point scale – but Gwoza and much of the rest of the state were at level 3, "crisis" (FEWS Net, 2022[32]).

Figure 5.11
Fatalities in the Lake Chad region by (urban) area, 2000-22



Note: 2022 data are projections based on a doubling of the number of events recorded through 30 June.
Source: Authors, based on ACLED (2022[2]) data. ACLED data is publicly available.

After its recapture by the Nigerian military in 2015, Gwoza became one of the military's "garrison towns" with a "super camp" – part of a strategy the military began implementing in the north-east and particularly in Borno in 2017 (Carsten and Lanre, 2017[33]), with the idea of defending strategic towns against Boko Haram and ISWAP. The disadvantage of the "garrison towns" strategy was that it effectively meant ceding the countryside to militants, as occurred in the area around Gwoza, with significant disruption to farming activities (Ugoh, 2021[34]). The arrival of Nigerian soldiers also brought its own risks for residents, including reported patterns of sexual violence by soldiers. Some "garrison towns," moreover, have been overrun by ISWAP, such as Dikwa in March 2021.

The Sambisa Forest as an enduring safe haven

The Sambisa Forest is a former colonial-era game preserve that is part of Nigeria's Chad Basin National Park. The forest covers a band of forestation and scrubland in south central Borno State, of approximately 518 square kilometres. It became an integral part of the Boko Haram conflict from approximately 2013 on, as the group sought refuge in rural areas and medium-sized north-eastern Nigerian towns, amid a military and vigilante campaign against it in Maiduguri (Marama, 2014[35]). The safe haven Sambisa offered allowed Boko Haram to inflict mass violence in a swath of south-central Borno. Some of its most infamous attacks occurred in the vicinity of Sambisa, particularly the April 2014 kidnapping of 276 girls from the Government Girls Secondary School in Chibok, many of whom were held in Boko Haram hideouts in Sambisa.

Some urban agglomerations around Sambisa have been among the most violence-prone areas in northwest Africa in the period 1997-2021, including Damboa (1 490 fatalities), Konduga (1 122), and Gwoza (891). From its base in Sambisa, Boko Haram was eventually able, in

Box 5.1
Internal struggle within the Boko Haram insurgency

The group's top leader from 2009 to 2016, Shekau's power was dramatically challenged in 2015-2016, in what became an enduring split. The internal conflict within Boko Haram concerned Shekau's authoritarian ruling style and expansive use of violence both against outsiders and internal dissidents. This conflict intersected with internal disagreements over how to manage the relationship with the Islamic State, to which Boko Haram pledged allegiance in March 2015, despite some reluctance by Shekau. Boko Haram's territorial losses in early 2015, and the desperate conditions the group found itself in during 2015-2016, as it regrouped in Sambisa, widened the internal tensions.

In August 2016, Boko Haram split, and the Islamic State shifted its patronage to a faction formally headed by Abu Musab al-Barnawi, reportedly a son of Boko Haram's founder, Muhammad Yusuf. The breakaway faction, ISWAP, took most Boko Haram fighters with it, and concentrated its operations in northern Borno and the wider Lake Chad Basin. Shekau's faction of Boko Haram kept on fighting, under the name Jama'at Ahl al-Sunna li-l-Da'wa wa-l-Jihad or JAS. The split left Sambisa and parts of southern and eastern Borno to Shekau's rump Boko Haram faction, although discerning whether ISWAP or Shekau's Boko Haram/JAS was responsible for any given attack in the period 2016-2021 could be difficult.

In May 2021, an ISWAP offensive on Sambisa ended in the death of Shekau and an exodus of Boko Haram/JAS fighters to Nigerian military surrender programs. That it was ISWAP that was responsible for Shekau's death – rather than the military – spoke to Nigeria's long-running inability to curtail Boko Haram's activities, including within Sambisa. As of 2022, Boko Haram/JAS persists in some form.

Source: Alexander Thurston for this publication.

2014-2015, to temporarily conquer some towns in the area at the edges of the forest, including Damboa, Gwoza and Bama, although its proto-state reached far beyond the forest. The 2014 apex of violence in areas around Sambisa reflects Boko Haram's territorial conquests and almost indiscriminate violence at the height of its power.

The forest has also been the target of recurring air and ground campaigns by the Nigerian military, including in 2015, when Nigeria, Chadian and Niger joined forces to dismantle Boko Haram's proto-state. In December 2016, partly to fulfil campaign promises made in 2015, Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari announced that Boko Haram's last camp inside Sambisa had been destroyed. Nevertheless, the forest remained the key stronghold for Boko Haram, especially the faction of Abubakar Shekau (Box 5.1).

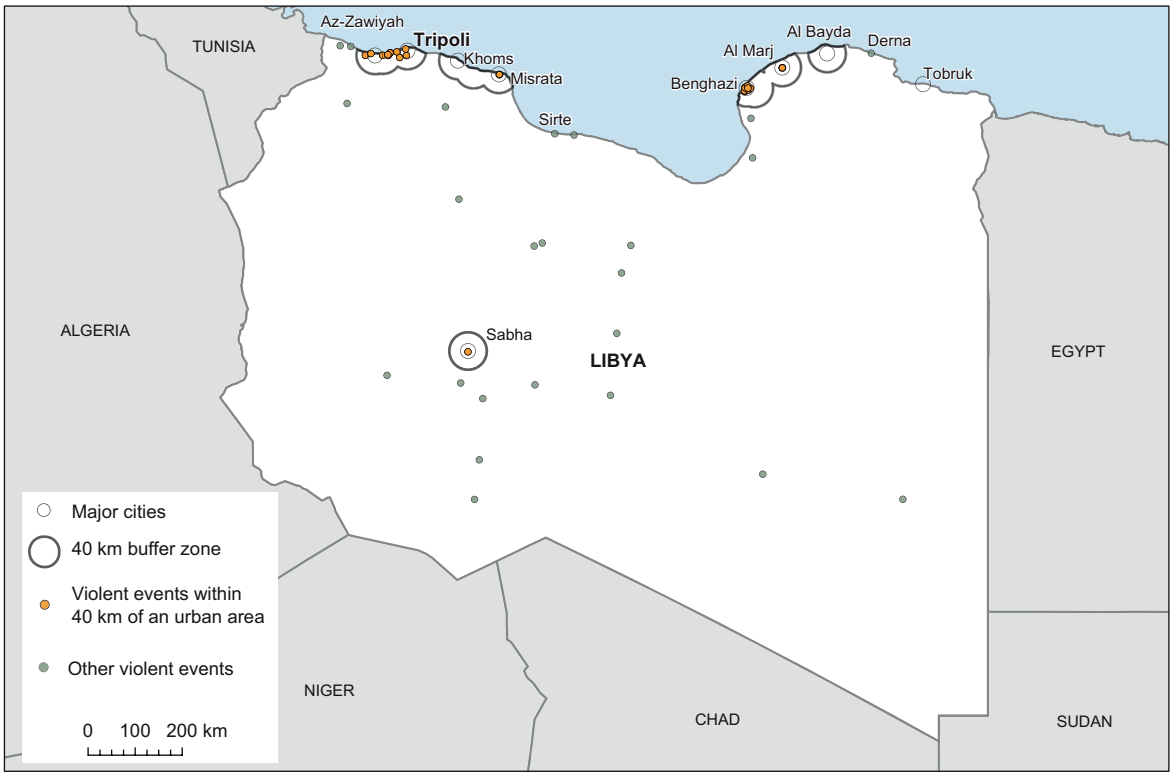
Nigerian authorities and vigilantes continue to mobilise to fight Boko Haram in the Sambisa Forest, and not just from the air. In 2019, Borno State's new governor, Babagana Zulum, backed an initiative to organise traditional hunters to chase Boko Haram to its remote hideouts, with the goal of mobilising as many as 10 000 hunters (Umar, 2019[36]). Hunters' efforts have reportedly resulted in some disruptions to Boko Haram's activities in and around Sambisa, killing Boko Haram fighters and seizing their supplies.

DECLINING URBAN VIOLENCE IN LIBYA

Libya has experienced more than a decade of political instability since popular protests against the regime of long-time ruler Muhammar Gaddafi (in power 1969-2011) started in February 2011. The First Libyan Civil War ended after nine months of intense battles between the government and various rebel forces. This first conflict was marked by the military intervention of NATO's Operation Unified Protector, which ultimately resulted in a bombing campaign to destroy government forces and enforce the United Nations-mandated no-fly zone.

Map 5.5

Violent events and urban areas in Libya, 2020-22



Note: Data is available through 30 June 2022.

Source: Authors, based on ACLED (2022[2]) and WorldPop (2022[3]) data. ACLED and WorldPop data are publicly available.

The First Libyan Civil War was followed by a second conflict initiated with the launch of Operation Dignity in May 2014 by Khalifa Haftar, a retired military officer. Tensions rose further in 2014 with disputed parliamentary elections in June, which split the country's political class into two main rival governments. One government was the internationally recognised House of Representatives, based in Tobruk and aligned with Haftar and what came to be called the Libyan National Army (LNA) or Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF). The other government was the National Salvation Government, supported by a coalition of anti-Haftar militias called Operation Dawn.

After a lengthy military campaign essentially focused on urban areas, the Second Libyan Civil War ended with the signature of a permanent ceasefire between the LNA and the Government of National Accord (GNA) in October 2020, and the formation of a Government of National Unity (GNU) in March 2021. Unlike in the Central Sahel and Lake Chad region, where violence is intensifying and becoming more rural, violent events have reached historic lows in Libya in recent years and remained urban in character (Map 5.5).

Tripoli as site of both local and national contestation

Tripoli is Libya's most populous city, with an estimated population of 2 million in 2015. The urban agglomeration has been the most violence-prone in North and West Africa, with 6 045 fatalities during the 1997-2021 period, virtually all from the beginning of the First Libyan Civil War, according to ACLED. This violence reflects the political prize that Tripoli represents amid the severe fragmentation of post-Gaddafi Libya. Tripoli is a site of local contestation between different locally based militias as well as national contestation between different major factions.

The three peaks of violence in Tripoli correlate with moments of national upheaval. First was the 2011 revolution, which brought intense

violence to the city and its suburbs (2 035 fatalities) as Gaddafi loyalists sought to hold the capital against the revolutionaries. NATO-backed rebels captured the city from the Gaddafi regime in August. Second, in the 2014 civil war (857 fatalities in Tripoli), intense fighting took place in the agglomeration between Operation Dawn-affiliated militias and their rivals in July and August. In this period, a battle for Tripoli International Airport pitted Operation Dawn against militias from the city of Zintan, who had controlled the airport until then. The fighting at the airport spilled over into densely populated civilian neighbourhoods, with many casualties from shelling, land mines and street fighting (United Nations, 2014[37]).

The third peak of violence in Tripoli came amid Haftar's unsuccessful 2019-2020 campaign to capture Tripoli (1 173 fatalities in Tripoli in 2019, and 725 in 2020). The campaign, which pitted Haftar's LNA against forces of the United Nations-backed GNA, also involved substantial outside interventions by a range of actors sponsoring different sides of the conflict; the Republic of Türkiye's intervention was ultimately key in repulsing Haftar's forces (Pack and Pusztai, 2020[38]). In March 2021, the GNA was dissolved and subsumed into the GNU, an internationally recognised structure meant to unify the GNA and the Tobruk-based House of Representatives. The compromises underlying the GNU, however, broke down after interim Prime Minister Abdulhamid al-Dbeibah announced, in November 2021, that he would run for president in the anticipated 2022 elections. The fracture between Tripoli and Tobruk re-emerged, with the House of Representatives seeking first to oust Dbeibah in February 2022 and then to create (or resume) its own parallel government (Mcdowall, 2022[39]). Conflict between Dbeibah and the parliament's new choice for prime minister, Fathi Bashagha, started fighting in Tripoli in March 2022.

Amid national-level contestation, Tripoli has also been a key site for local militia activities. Libya's early post-revolutionary authorities sought to tame the many militias formed during and after the revolution. However, the decision to pay and legitimate some militias inadvertently incentivised the further spread of militias as a political force in many cities, including Tripoli. Hybrid government-militia initiatives such as the Libya Shield Force and the Supreme Security Committees failed to generate a cohesive security structure for the country (Wehrey and Cole, 2013[40]). In the capital, the number of major militias fell over time, as a few groups consolidated power. By 2018, the city had a "big four", made up of the Tripoli Revolutionaries Battalion, the Abu Salim Battalion, the Nawasi Battalion and the Special Deterrence Forces.

These militias reflected a mix of personalistic, ideological, geographical and political interests. All of them came to a degree of accommodation with the UN-backed GNA after its establishment in 2016 (Eaton et al., 2020[41]). For example, the Special Deterrence Forces of Abd al-Ra'uf Kara, which have a Salafi character, developed affiliations with the GNA's Ministry of the Interior in 2018 and later with the GNA's Presidential Council in 2020. Relations between militias have been unstable; for example, in June 2022, there was fighting in Tripoli between the Nawasi Battalion and the Stability Support Authority, a successor structure to the Abu Salim Battalion, as the militias aligned themselves with Dbeibah and Bashagha. The way that national rivalries reverberate in Tripoli has been particularly lethal for civilians there. All of Tripoli's major militias have committed human rights violations (Amnesty International, 2021[42]).

Benghazi, the initial epicentre of the 2011 revolution

Benghazi is Libya's second most populous city, with an estimated 594 300 people in 2015. The city is the political hub of eastern Libya, a region sometimes referred to as Cyrenaica, which was the political base of the Libyan monarchy from 1951 to 1969. Under Colonel Gaddafi, however, Benghazi and Cyrenaica faced marginalisation and repression. Partly because of these longstanding grievances in the east, Benghazi was the initial epicentre of the 2011 revolution beginning in February, amid the Arab Spring revolutions. Concerns that Gaddafi was planning to massacre protesters in Benghazi became a key justification cited for NATO's intervention in Libya starting in March. French, British and American airstrikes were instrumental in

repulsing Gaddafi's offensive against Benghazi that month (Abbas, 2011[43]). Holding Benghazi then allowed rebels to advance, link up with other rebelling cities and, with continued NATO support, capture Tripoli and topple Gaddafi. Benghazi was also the first headquarters of the National Transitional Council (NTC), which became Libya's interim government in 2011-2012.

Benghazi is the third most violence-prone urban agglomeration in this study, with 3 842 fatalities recorded in the period 1997-2021, per ACLED data. The city has remained a key site of violence through successive iterations of civil war. As militias proliferated in post-Gaddafi Libya, Benghazi was initially home to numerous militias, including a branch of the jihadist-leaning group Ansar al-Sharia (Supporters of Islamic Law). An idiosyncratic figure loosely affiliated with Ansar al-Sharia, Ahmed Abu Khattala of the Abu Obeida bin al-Jarrah Brigade, played a leading role in the 2012 violence that led to the deaths of four Americans at the United States consulate in Benghazi (United States Department of Justice, 2018[44]). Meanwhile, the early years after the 2011 revolution saw waves of assassinations in Benghazi, amid a murky competition for power. The assassinations often targeted civil society activists and media personalities. Several of the most visible victims have been women (HRW, 2014[45]), such as the lawyer and human rights activist Salwa Bughaighis, who was shot on election day, 25 June 2014.

In May 2014, the retired Libyan officer Khalifa Haftar launched Operation Dignity, an ostensible counterterrorism operation but with political goals. Haftar, from the eastern Libyan city Ajdabiya, made the east his base. In 2015, Libya's eastern-based government, the House of Representatives, appointed Haftar head of the LNA. Haftar has received support at various points from outside powers such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt, Russia, France and the United States.

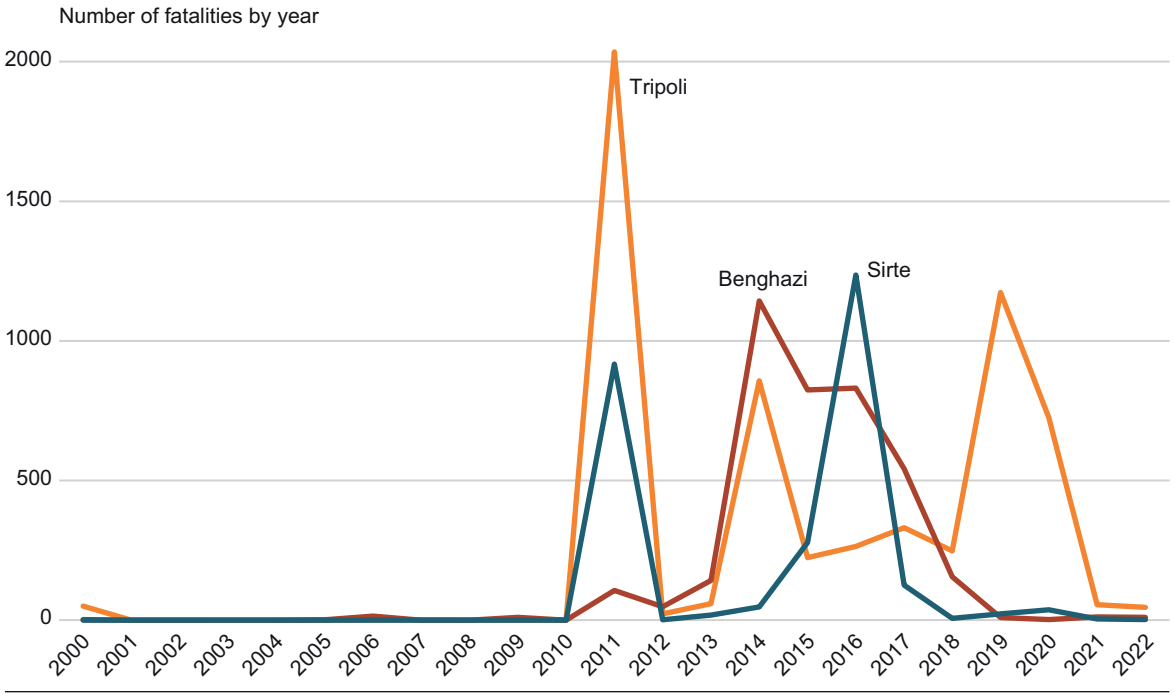
After launching Operation Dignity, Haftar began seeking to consolidate control over Benghazi as part of his eastern Libyan power base. He clashed with Islamist and jihadist militias, especially the coalition called the Shura Council of Benghazi Revolutionaries (SCBR), which included Ansar al-Sharia as well as more mainstream rebel and Islamist groups. Such fighting made 2014 the most violent year in Benghazi, with 1 143 fatalities, and the three following years also saw substantial fatalities (824 in 2015, 831 in 2016 and 542 in 2017, according to ACLED (Figure 5.12). The fighting over individual neighbourhoods in Benghazi, such as Ganfouda, was often protracted and fierce, with substantial casualties on both sides and with significant use of LNA airstrikes. In July 2017, Haftar announced the "liberation of Benghazi", which in turn allowed him to focus on capturing other eastern Libyan cities, such as Derna, and then prepare his (ultimately unsuccessful) bid to capture Tripoli in 2019-20.

Haftar's forces committed massive human rights violations amid their campaign to control Benghazi and conquer other eastern Libyan cities. The International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants in 2017 and 2018 for one of Haftar's top lieutenants, Mahmoud Al-Warfalli, after evidence emerged of summary executions by him and his forces in Benghazi and elsewhere. The case was dropped when Al-Warfalli died in 2021. Outside observers also charged that Haftar's rule produced "a half-ruined city beset by corruption, where security agents trailed foreign journalists, residents cowered in fear of arbitrary arrest, and pro-government militias answered to no one" (Kirkpatrick, 2020[46]). There have been periodic anti-Haftar protests in Benghazi and elsewhere, for example in September 2020. Haftar's own coalition, meanwhile, included diverse factions: loyalists, former revolutionaries, eastern secessionists, certain tribes and certain Salafi; this coalition proved fractious at times (Eaton, 2021[47]).

Sirte, the Islamic State's longest-lasting urban base

Sirte is a mid-sized city on Libya's Mediterranean coast, with an estimated population of 59 100 in 2015. Sirte was the adopted hometown of Colonel Gaddafi and his last stronghold during the 2011 revolution. Gaddafi was captured and killed in October by a militia of fighters from the Libyan city Misrata, a key revolutionary bastion, as he was attempting to flee Sirte. Misratan militias were accused of committing serious human

Figure 5.12
Fatalities in Libya by urban area, 2000-22



Note: 2022 data are projections based on a doubling of the number of events recorded through 30 June.
Source: Authors, based on ACLED (2022[2]) data. ACLED data is publicly available.

rights violations in Sirte, including extrajudicial killings, which targeted not just Gaddafi and his fighters but also perceived Gaddafi loyalists more broadly (HRW, 2012[48]). Residents of Sirte accused Libya's new authorities of blocking compensation and reconstruction efforts there in the aftermath of the revolution (Westcott, 2018[49]).

Revolutionaries' harsh treatment of Gaddafi's perceived support bases helped set the stage for a backlash. Beginning in 2014, Islamic State fighters began circulating in Sirte. In 2015-16, Sirte formally fell under the control of the Islamic State's Libyan affiliate (IS-L) and proved to be the group's longest-lasting urban base, especially after IS-L fighters were driven from the city of Derna in 2015 by rival jihadists and militias. In Sirte, IS-L took advantage of the way the city fell between the emerging zones of control for the two main rival governments in Libya, and assembled a coalition of jihadists, former Gaddafi loyalists and tribes, while inflicting substantial violence and human rights violations on ordinary residents. IS-L abuses in Sirte included summary executions of alleged spies and apostates, as well as a broader system of intimidation, looting, hoarding of basic supplies and interference with education and other elements of daily life (HRW, 2016[50]).

In May 2016, Libya's then-GNA, based in Tripoli, launched Operation Bunyan Marsus ("Solid Structure") to defend Misrata against creeping IS-L incursions and to crush IS-L in Sirte, using fighters from Misratan militias (Wehrey, 2016[51]). The United States carried out an estimated 495 air and drone strikes on Sirte to support the campaign (Bergen and Sims, 2018[52]). The campaign to dislodge IS-L was successful, and Sirte was recaptured from IS-L in December 2016 by GNA forces. However, it also showcased rivalries between the GNA and the forces of Khalifa Haftar, with both factions vying for the anti-jihadist mantle.

The violence inflicted by IS-L, Bunyan Marsus and the airstrikes made 2016 the most violent year in Sirte (1 236 fatalities, even higher than the 917 fatalities during the revolution in 2011) and helped make Sirte the fifth-most violent urban agglomeration included in this study (2 691 fatalities during the period 1997-2021). Two-thirds of Sirte residents fled the

city due to the combination of IS-L abuses and the violence of the anti-IS effort, and at least 19 000 families were displaced between June 2015 and December 2016 (Zargoun, 2016[53]). The campaign left Sirte in "utter destruction" (Westcott, 2018[49]). Politically and militarily, the GNA left Sirte awkwardly governed by rival militias, such as the Misratan-staffed Protection Force and the tribal-based, Salafi-leaning 604th Infantry Brigade. After its defeat in Sirte, IS-L conducted some attacks in nearby areas, with Haftar's forces targeting the jihadists, and concentrated its efforts in more remote areas of southern Libya, where IS-L and rival jihadists in Al Qaeda were repeatedly targeted by American airstrikes (Salyk-Virk, 2020[54]).

Since the fall of IS-L in Sirte, the city has periodically played major roles in Libyan politics and warfare. Amid Haftar's campaign to capture Tripoli, his LNA targeted Sirte from September 2019 on. In January 2020, the LNA announced that it had captured Sirte in a "lightning" offensive. Haftar's forces displaced the GNA-aligned Sirte Protection Force, which abandoned the city without a serious fight. Haftar also secured the defection of the 604th Infantry Brigade and other key Sirte-based factions (Al-Hawari, 2021[55]). Indeed, 2020 fatalities were relatively low (37) in the city. Amid GNA efforts to advance eastward and push back Haftar's LNA, Sirte became a bargaining chip in the negotiations over a ceasefire, in part due to its strategic location near key oil fields and terminals in Libya's "oil crescent." Ultimately, the October 2020 agreement included a provision that the parties would guarantee the reopening of a coastal highway linking Tripoli and Benghazi, running through Misrata and Sirte (United Nations, 2020[56]). In March 2022, amid a breakdown of efforts at a national unity government, one of Libya's rival prime ministers, Fathi Bashagha, based his government in Sirte after he was blocked from taking over Tripoli.

JIHADIST INSURGENCIES AND CITIES

This study suggests that the relationship between cities and political violence varies considerably across and within states in North and West Africa. While most violent events tend to occur in close proximity to urban areas at the regional level, some states, such as Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, seem to involve more rural conflict than others. The fact that these three countries follow the same trend is hardly surprising, since all of them are currently confronted with major jihadist insurgencies.

Since they emerged in the region in the 2000s, jihadist organisations have maintained an unusual relationship with cities. Some jihadist groups began as urban movements – notably Boko Haram, whose epicentre was Maiduguri until 2009, but also Burkina Faso's Ansaroul Islam, whose founder, Ibrahim Dicko, initially used Djibo as a base. Other jihadist groups, such as AQIM, deliberately sought out remote hideouts during the 2000s, raiding military outposts and kidnapping Westerners and others in the deep Sahara. Jihadists also sometimes adduce moral reasons for preferring the countryside, condemning cities for their alleged vices, the financial and moral corruption of urban elites, and the visibility and prevalence of Western values in fashion, culture, education and politics. Cities in the region have also sometimes been denounced by jihadists as bastions of secularism.

When the opportunity arises, however, jihadist organisations have sought out urban footholds, as AQIM and its allies did during the 2012 crisis in northern Mali. In some cases, these movements also reshape the physical and moral landscapes of cities, for example by destroying the religious manifestations of older religious orders, like the shrines in Timbuktu destroyed by Ansar Dine and allies in 2012. Sporadic terrorist attacks on capitals and other major cities, meanwhile, can have serious propaganda value for jihadists, temporarily capturing the attention of national governments and making national and even global headlines. Some jihadist groups have oscillated between urban and rural orientations, meanwhile, depending on the opportunity structures and levels of repression.

Such oscillation reflects, in a loose way, broader patterns in the relationship of Islamic reformist movements and cities. Islam has been called a fundamentally urban religion, given its origins in Mecca and Medina and the constellation of cities and garrison towns – Damascus, Kufa, Fustat and elsewhere – that anchored the early Islamic empire. In north-west Africa, Islamisation was a heavily urban phenomenon as well, as traders and scholars clustered in sites from Fez in present-day Morocco to the Hausa city-states in present-day Nigeria (Last, 2013[57]). In some rural areas of West Africa, mass Islamisation in the countryside only occurred in the twentieth century, partly due to the unplanned consequences of colonialism and the attendant rise in the circulation of people and ideas due to forced labor, migration, military service and other factors (Peterson, 2011[58]).

At the same time, the spiritual pull of rural areas and more limited interaction with the mass of humanity has been strong since the earliest moments of Islam, starting with the Prophet Muhammad's retreats to the cave of Hira immediately preceding the advent of his prophethood, and continuing with the social withdrawal of ascetic-minded Companions such as Abu Dharr al-Ghifari. In north-west Africa, too, major spiritual figures and reformers have sometimes sought out retreats in desert and rural areas, like Muhammad bin Ali al-Sanusi in what is now Jaghbub, in present-day Libya, and Usman dan Fodio in Gudu, the launching point of his 1804 jihad, in today's northern Nigeria. The idea of making a religious emigration (*hijra*) from a corrupted city to a new destination, urban or rural, is a core Islamic concept, and one that reformers have repeatedly used to link their own careers to that of the Prophet Muhammad and his hijra from Mecca to Medina in CE 622. Jihadists, too, have played on those early Islamic vocabularies, depicting their own withdrawal from mainstream society as a form of hijra and depicting foreign fighters as "Ansar," or helpers, a reference to the Medinan Muslims in the time of the Prophet.

Colonial and postcolonial reformist movements in north-west Africa, which have had a major impact on Muslim religiosity on the continent (Loimeier, 2016[59]), have also had a complex relationship with cities and the countryside. On the whole, Islamic reformism in the region has had an urban orientation, from the "Wahhabiyya" of late colonial Mali and Guinea, whose network spanned cities such as Ségou, Bamako and Kankan, to the Izala movement of northern Nigeria and southern Niger, whose centres include Jos, Kano and Maradi (Grégoire, 1993[60]; Kane, 2003[61]; Ben Amara, 2020[62]). Cities are connected to each other through trade routes, moreover, allowing reformist movements to spread from one location to another.

Not only have cities provided bases for mass recruitment and for the funding opportunities represented by an urban merchant elite, but they are also laboratories where reformist movements try out new social norms, prohibitions and dress codes, especially those for women (Masquelier, 2009[63]). The cosmopolitan character of cities has allowed reformists to recruit along ethnically diverse lines and to benefit from generational fault lines that sometimes predispose youth to challenge traditionalism. Cities also provide arenas where reformists can demonstrate their political and social relevance in mass mobilisations and protests, for example amid the protests against revisions to the family code in Mali in 2009-12. The sharia movement in northern Nigeria, partly driven by reformist activism, was also predominantly urban.

The importance of cities in the spread and the life of religion means that the current ruralisation of conflict in the Sahel can only be temporary. If reformist or jihadist movements wish to achieve their goal of profoundly reforming Sahelian societies, recruitment from rural populations cannot be sufficient. Moreover, the weakening of Sahelian and other West African states could widen opportunities for jihadists to make renewed bids for conquering urban areas. The evolution of jihadist tactics can also be seen in the blockades set up around Djibo and other Sahelian cities in recent years; jihadists are developing approaches that apply profound pressure to major towns without bidding for overt governance there. It can therefore be expected that conflicts over the control of cities will intensify.

PERSPECTIVES

This report suggests how varied the importance of cities and urban areas are over the duration of a conflict. Urban settings may prove to be crucial to a deeper understanding of the overall life cycle of conflict, as noted in Chapter 2. The spatial conflict life cycle theory holds that conflicts in the region tend to be more spatially diffuse and less intense as a conflict emerges, more intense and concentrated as it matures, and then again more diffuse and less intense near its end. Interrogating the relationship of certain typologies of political movements would be a productive way to assess the role of urban areas in this broader notion of a conflict life cycle.

As a consideration of jihadist movements suggests, certain types of movements and groups will have distinct relationships, motivations and overall goals related to urban areas, which can produce spatial patterns of violence. For instance, Boko Haram's ambivalence about urban contexts has led to a proliferation of more diffuse, although still quite intense, violence in rural and semi-urban locations. Conversely, the early stages of the MNLA's revolt in Mali led to concentrated and intense episodes of attacks on major cities, thanks to its objective of seizing key sites of political and economic control. Similar dynamics have played out throughout the Libyan Civil Wars.

More work is needed to unravel the complexities surrounding the importance of cities and urban areas in the conflict life cycle, but starting with an interrogation of the kind of violent non-state groups involved and the different motivations that underpin their efforts would be a good way to begin. For example, it remains unclear whether secessionist rebels and jihadist groups share the same strategic objectives when it comes to attacking urban areas. From this perspective, it is reasonable to expect that urban areas are likely to remain strategic places to conquer or control for a given conflict episode, but that they should also be expected to matter differently, and at different moments in time, from state to state and conflict to conflict within North and West Africa.

Note

1 This section and the rest of the chapter build on an original draft prepared by Dr. Alexander Thurston.

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West African Studies

Urbanisation and Conflicts in North and West Africa

North and West Africa are undergoing rapid urbanisation. While cities and urban areas have always been sites of conflict, given their political and economic importance, many insurgencies, rebellions and separatist movements are associated with rural areas. Has increased urbanisation led to increased conflict in cities or do conflicts stay predominantly rural? Combining a regional and local perspective, this report examines and maps the rural-urban geography of conflict in North and West Africa since the late 1990s. A qualitative analysis of ten cities helps to illuminate the local sources of conflict. At a time of increasing violence in West Africa, the report lays out a solid foundation for policy makers, experts and researchers to develop more security and development place-based policies.

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