

# WAR & CONFLICT IN AFRICA

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*Paul D Williams*

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Almost forty years after the end of the Cold War (CW), many developing countries have witnessed a decrease in the number of armed conflicts. However, Africa has earned a reputation of being the world's bloodiest continent, with different kinds of wars ripping the continent apart. Scholars, think-tanks and policy makers are still trying to understand the wars and conflict in Africa. Williams goes straight to the fundamental questions that continue to keep militants and strategists busy, namely how many conflicts has Africa suffered, what are the causes of conflict, why has conflict in Africa increased when other developing countries undergo peaceful developmental times, and what have governments done in response to these conflicts? Paul Williams, in his book titled *War and conflict in Africa*, addresses these questions.

Williams makes known two intentions of the book: firstly, to understand why Africa has experienced so many armed conflicts since the end of the CW, and secondly, to draw our attention to the efforts by the international community in response to the conflicts. This comprehensive study, which makes use of both qualitative and quantitative methods of study, looks at armed conflict between 1990 and 2009, focusing on Africa in its entirety. With over four hundred wars in this period, the author makes it clear that a combination of factors can be attributed as causes of armed conflicts in the continent. He sets the stage by addressing the effect of colonialism. Many scholars lean towards the belief that the main reason for conflict in Africa is limited to the legacy of colonialism, but Williams dismisses this notion. He highlights that, while social and economic inequalities and ethnicity are but just some of the causes, the nature of conflict in Africa is the result of a complex dynamic system. In support of the complexities, one can draw from the writings that many African states in pursuit of political strategies that ensure survival, will manipulate, create or simply dismiss rules and laws they swear to uphold. Therefore, in an attempt to understand conflict in Africa, one must remain open-minded, and this book attempts to open the reader's mind about

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conflict and war in Africa. The book comprises three sections. The first section addresses the patterns of armed conflict, the second section summarises the causes of conflict, and the third section highlights the responses and efforts made by major international players towards African conflicts.

In the first section, titled “Counting Africa’s conflicts”, Williams gives an account of the number of conflicts that have taken place between 1990 and 2009 by providing a comprehensive database. The author also mentions the difficulty of obtaining reliable data within the continent. Before this, however, he sketches the political terrain, which guides the reader to understand the struggle of Africa’s political landscape by giving a bird’s eye view. By outlining the number of conflicts on the continent, the book gradually identifies recurring patterns of conflict. The description of the political terrain helps the reader to understand the main arguments of the first section of the book. The first argument brought forward in this case is that, among the number of major reasons that have contributed towards the political landscape of Africa, many African states are willing to protect their regimes as well as their ‘personal regimes’ even if it requires a high level of violence and force. Ironically, however, in an attempt to protect their regimes, leaders fail to prioritise matters that may threaten the survival of the state; hence, the author refers to weak and failing states. In the latter case, the military is often used to protect these regimes by increasing funding for a small portion of the military. At the same time, favoured by the ruler, other sectors of the military are underpaid and unhappy, thus creating a vacuum for violence, greed and grievance and the creation of rebel groups. With the lack of the patronage from the CW, both rebel groups and the military have since had to support themselves, using violence and disruption of normal day-to-day activities. Both the military and rebel forces then turn to looting, seizing key economic points and, as a result, they end up owning all natural resources and means of production.

The second section of the book, titled “Ingredients”, goes on to address the ongoing debate on the causes of conflict in Africa. The metaphor of a recipe and ingredients is used to outline the interlink between relevant factors that result in conflict in Africa. The five main ingredients referred to are the government systems and the role of neopatrimonialism, ethnic identity, sovereignty and self-determination, natural resources, and religion. In terms of neopatrimonialism, Williams puts forward the argument that neopatrimonialism is not the only element that leads to conflict. However, in order to try and understand conflict in Africa, it is imperative to understand governments and their colonial, historic and cultural associations, especially those inherited during colonialism and during the period of CW and the victory that the West had won in terms of propelling democracy. In a

government that is based on a neopatrimonial system, a large-scale war can be avoided only if there is astute leadership and sufficient resources, which in the latter is unlikely. With that being said, this does not mean that inherent factionalism may not result in political disorder. In addition, deliberate strategies made by neopatrimonial governments may increase economic and political crises, Sierra Leone being a case in point. When a marginalised group reaches its frustration peak and decides to rebel, such actions ignite external support and the use of force and threatens security. Marginalised groups are sidelined, not only on matters related to administration powers but also when it comes to matters related to the distribution of resources.

The next point Williams turns to as a contributing cause of conflict in Africa is resources. The author discusses this element extensively and further links up the different entities that are considered resources in Africa. One can only imagine why resources are an issue of contestation. Two matters arise from this thought: African natural resources are either scarce or they are abundant. But the author does not forget to mention that on their own, resources are not necessarily factors of conflict. Resources, according to Williams, are socially constructed enablers. According to Williams, resources are a means not an end, but this has not deterred African states from engaging in conflict over resources. It is pointed out that, when resources are in the hands of an autocratic administration, such resources may act as a catalyst for conflict, marginalisation and grievance. But then again, if resources are placed in the hands of people, and all of society benefits from them, then resources could give birth to economic growth and development. The author then concludes that resources are not the central ingredient to conflict, but rather resource conflicts should be understood as the formation of statehood and preceding events. Most African wars are classified as or titled 'resources wars', mainly because it is not ideologies that drive African states towards conflict but rather wealth, which results from natural resources. The fact that these kinds of wars are likely to fall into a relapse after reconciliation does not put Africa in a better space. When society feels aggrieved and frustrated by a government that refuses to take into account its problems, society – and specifically those who are marginalised – turns to other options, such as self-determination and succession.

Williams refers to sovereignty as one of the most valuable resources over which African states are fighting. The concept of sovereignty cannot be fully analysed in the absence of other concepts closely associated with it. These other concepts include secession and self-determination, all of which are contributors to modern conflict, according to Williams. The chapter begins with an analysis and summary of the meaning of sovereignty, secession and self-determination. As it

stands, with most social studies, meanings and definitions are sometimes overly wide or overly narrow, making it difficult to use them. This is a challenge outlined in the book. The focus then turns to Eritrea/Ethiopia, Somaliland/Somalia, Western Sahara/Morocco and finally Cabinda/Angola as classical examples of states that were and often are perceived as conflicts of contestation of sovereignty, succession and self-determination. But whether or not secession is a prime cause of conflict, identity politics seems more significant in African conflicts.

But what does it mean to speak of a conflict that is ethnic in nature? The answer to the question lies in the explanation of the description given by Williams when he addresses ethnic identities and ethnicities and war. Outstanding in this chapter, is that even before the end of the CW, there have been numerous so-called 'ethnic wars' and today one may refer to a number of cases that are described as 'ethnic wars'. However, Williams also points out that many of these kinds of wars are not necessarily ethnic in nature but are driven by a small elite group who seeks to have power and control in government. Leaders who are already in power play the ethnic card to win over support and at the same time discredit opponents. In essence, therefore, wars that are considered ethnic in nature are not solely caused by ethnic differences but also include the greed and self-benefit of a certain elite group. The same, according to the author, applies to the matter of religion as a cause of conflict. Leaders deliberately invoke religion as and when it suits them.

In the final section of the book, before providing a conclusion, Williams turns to the reaction and responses of the international community towards African conflict. South Africa is praised for the sterling intervention during the conflict in Burundi but not all Western states are ready to assist countries that are involved in conflict in Africa. Even though some non-state actors, such as the Neutral International Force (NIF), had ideas that many states voted for, such an organisation was never established. Instead, a small number of states contributed troops towards the United Nations (UN) peacekeeping missions. However, deliberate attention is then turned towards the African Union (AU) and its efforts. In particular, the author discusses strategies and institutions adopted by the AU. One of the institutions that Williams makes reference to is the African Peace Security Architecture (APSA), which is a body designed to address matters of security within the continent. This internationally recognised body has committed itself to peacemaking, peacekeeping and other initiatives that are supposed to assist weak and failing African states but this has not been the case in all states. In fact, Williams argues that such bodies have further intensified the restrictive requirements for the recognition of sovereignty. Towards the end of this chapter on responses, it becomes more and more evident that Williams views international responses in a pessimistic manner. He criticises

the efforts that have been made by the international community, outlining how insufficient funds and the 'one-size-fits-all' approach have not really benefited and assisted many African countries in curbing violence and conflict. As a result, the international community continues to struggle in its efforts to keep conflicts from erupting. The author then suggests that more initiatives, resources and prompt responses be dedicated towards developing early warning systems. Early warning systems should be inclusive of techniques used to interpret data and implementation strategies that will not only reduce the likelihood of conflict but also include the skills for conflict management in the future. Before he concludes, Williams, makes the assertion that conflict is a mixture of all the ingredients elaborated on in the second section of the book, namely neopatrimonialism, resources, sovereignty and religion, but imperative to note is that actors continue to play a very instrumental role in the outbreak and continuation of war and conflict.

Williams has done an admirable job in what he set out to do. He extensively fulfilled the two main intentions of the publication, firstly to answer the question on understanding the reasons why Africa has experienced so many armed conflicts since the end of the CW, and secondly, to draw our attention to the efforts that have been made by the international community in response to the conflicts. The author has done a sterling job with the data collection and further used the data purposefully. More than two thirds of the book concentrates on understanding conflict and the reasons why conflicts occur. This approach is impressive, given the dynamic wars that occur and continue to take place. Even though Williams criticises the international community for its failures he also places much emphasis on ideas and suggestions that could help end the bloody conflicts in Africa. The debates presented in the book are analytical and critical and, in order to aid the reader, Williams provides current and relevant examples. He extends his arguments well to highlight the complexity of the topic. The book provides valuable contributions towards the debate over peace, conflict and security in the continent. The book serves as a constant reminder of the sad realities that African states have witnessed. Should this book be used for undergraduate students, the systematic approach and the in-depth knowledge could form a fundamental foundation for students. *War and conflict in Africa* contributes significantly to the body of knowledge regarding peace, security and conflict studies. It speaks to scholars, policymakers and novelists alike.

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