



Militias and Armed Conflicts in West Africa¹

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Abstract:

Militias have been a significant feature of many armed conflicts in Africa. Their roles have influenced the outcome of these conflicts in both time and space. While many are deliberately recruited for purposeful tasks and missions, others emerge and mobilize to protect themselves and their communities against the inhumane treatment meted out to them by other armed groups. Militias are recruited, trained, and employed by both state and non-state actors to prosecute armed conflicts. While some have contributed significantly to the victory of their allies many have been defeated. In both cases there have been huge loss of lives and properties and in many cases injuries to innocent civilians. Unlike the military which is professionally recruited, trained, armed, administered, and guided by doctrines, many militias are not. Therefore, they employ crude recruitment, operational, administrative, and logistics methods to prosecute the armed conflict. These methods have evolved and therefore have influenced their operational capabilities and outcomes. This article examines the role of militias in West African conflicts, exploring their origins, motivations, and impacts on both local populations and broader geopolitical stability.

Keywords:

Coup d'état; France; Mauritania; political stability; Sahel; shelter diplomacy; small states studies; strategic rivalries.

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Introduction

Militias have increasingly become a significant factor in the landscape of armed conflicts across West Africa. Unlike formal state armies, militias are often loosely organized, privately armed groups that may align with or oppose governmental forces, rebel movements, or even foreign interests. The presence and activities of militias in West Africa have profound implications for the region's security, governance, and humanitarian conditions. These groups often emerge in response to state weakness, ethnic divisions, or external interventions, making them both a symptom and a catalyst of the conflicts they engage in.

In West Africa, where fragile states struggle with issues such as corruption, poverty, and political instability, militias frequently fill the power vacuum left by ineffective or absent state authority. The region's history of conflict, from the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone to more recent crises in Mali and Nigeria, illustrates how militias can both exacerbate and prolong violence. Their role in these conflicts is complex, as they may function as both protectors of certain communities and perpetrators of violence against others. Understanding the dynamics of militias is crucial for developing effective strategies to address and resolve armed conflicts in the region.

This article examines the role of militias in West African conflicts, exploring their origins, motivations, and impacts on both local populations and broader geopolitical stability. By analysing case studies from across the region, the article aims to shed light on the factors that drive militia involvement in conflicts and the challenges they pose to peacebuilding efforts. The findings suggest that while militias can sometimes provide short-term security, their long-term presence often undermines state sovereignty and complicates conflict resolution. In this context, militias refer to non-state armed groups that operate independently of formal state military structures, often with varying degrees of allegiance to governmental or rebel forces.

Background and Context of Armed Conflicts in West Africa

West Africa, a region of diverse cultures, languages, and histories, has been significantly shaped by armed conflicts throughout its modern history. The region's strategic location, rich natural resources, and complex socio-political landscape have made it a hotspot for various forms of conflicts, ranging from civil wars and insurgencies to cross-border skirmishes. Understanding the background and context of these conflicts is essential to grasp the role that militias have played in shaping the region's security dynamics.

Historical Roots of Conflict

The roots of armed conflicts in West Africa can be traced back to the colonial era, when European powers, through the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885, divided the region into arbitrary borders that did not reflect the existing ethnic, cultural, and linguistic divisions. This "scramble for Africa" left a legacy of divided communities, with ethnic groups often



split across national boundaries, leading to tensions that would later erupt into conflicts (Boahen, 1985).

Post-colonial West Africa was marked by a series of political upheavals as newly independent states struggled with the challenges of nation-building. The transition from colonial rule to self-governance was often turbulent, with many countries experiencing coups, authoritarian regimes, and civil wars. For instance, the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970), also known as the Biafran War, was a direct consequence of ethnic tensions exacerbated by colonial legacies and the struggle for control over natural resources, particularly oil (Uche, 2008).

Socio-Economic Factors

Socio-economic conditions in West Africa have also played a critical role in fueling armed conflicts. The region is characterized by widespread poverty, unemployment, and economic inequality, which have created fertile ground for discontent and rebellion. In many cases, marginalized groups, particularly in rural areas, have taken up arms to protest against perceived injustices and to demand a greater share of the region's resources (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004). The lack of effective governance and the failure of states to provide basic services have further exacerbated these tensions, leading to the rise of militias and other non-state actors who fill the void left by the state.

The Role of Natural Resources

Natural resources, including diamonds, gold, oil, and timber, have been both a blessing and a curse for West Africa. While these resources have the potential to drive economic development, they have also been a major source of conflict. The term "resource curse" aptly describes the situation in many West African countries, where the abundance of valuable resources has led to corruption, state fragility, and violent competition for control over these assets (Ross, 2004). The civil wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia, fuelled by the illegal trade in "blood diamonds," are prime examples of how natural resources can drive armed conflicts (Smillie, Gberie, & Hazleton, 2000).

External Influences

External actors have also played a significant role in the conflicts in West Africa. During the Cold War, the region was a battleground for proxy wars between the United States and the Soviet Union, with both superpowers supporting various factions to advance their geopolitical interests (Thomson, 2010). In more recent times, the global war on terror has seen Western countries, particularly France and the United States, intervene in West Africa, particularly in the Sahel region, to combat Islamist insurgencies (Charbonneau, 2017). These interventions have often been double-edged swords, sometimes stabilizing the situation but also creating new dynamics of violence and insecurity.

The Emergence of Militias

The complex interplay of historical, socio-economic, and external factors has contributed to the emergence of militias as significant players in West Africa's armed conflicts. These militias, often formed along ethnic or regional lines, have served various roles, from defending communities against external threats to acting as proxies for state and non-state actors. In some cases, they have also been involved in criminal activities, including smuggling and illegal mining, further complicating the security landscape in the region (Agbiboa, 2013).

Historical Evolution of Militias in West Africa

Militias have played a significant role in the history of West Africa, evolving from traditional community defence groups to complex actors in modern armed conflicts. Understanding their evolution is essential for comprehending the dynamics of contemporary conflicts in the region.

Pre-Colonial Era: Community Defence and Traditional Militias

In the pre-colonial era, West African societies were organized around kinship groups, ethnic communities, and kingdoms. These communities often formed militias to protect themselves from external threats such as slave raiders, rival tribes, or expanding empires. These traditional militias were usually composed of able-bodied men who were called upon during times of conflict to defend their communities or to engage in warfare on behalf of their leaders. For instance, the Dahomey Amazons, an all-female military regiment, were a formidable force in the Kingdom of Dahomey (present-day Benin). They were not only responsible for defending the kingdom but also played an active role in expanding its territory (Alpern, 1998). Similarly, the Kamajors in Sierra Leone, originally a group of traditional hunters, were mobilized to defend their communities and played a key role in the country's civil war in the 1990s (Muana, 1997).

Colonial Era: Transformation and Co-option

The advent of European colonialism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries significantly altered the role and structure of militias in West Africa. Colonial powers often co-opted local militias to help maintain control over vast territories. These militias were sometimes formalized into auxiliary forces that worked alongside colonial armies. In French West Africa, for example, tirailleurs sénégalais were recruited from various ethnic groups across the region and were used as colonial infantry in both world wars and in maintaining colonial order (Echenberg, 1991). In British-controlled areas, local militias were sometimes organized into colonial police forces that served the dual purpose of maintaining internal security and suppressing anti-colonial movements (Killingray, 1986).

Post-Colonial Era: Rise of Modern Militias

The post-colonial period in West Africa saw the emergence of modern militias, often as a response to political instability, weak state institutions, and ethnic tensions. Many of these militias were initially formed to protect specific communities or to challenge oppressive regimes, but they often became entangled in broader conflicts, sometimes acting as proxies for external powers or as independent actors with their own agendas. During the Liberian Civil Wars (1989–1997 and 1999–2003), multiple militias emerged, including Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) and the United Liberation Movement for Democracy in Liberia (ULIMO), which were key players in the conflict (Ellis, 1999). Similarly, in Sierra Leone, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) and various civil defence militias, including the Kamajors, were central to the decade-long civil war (Gberie, 2005).

Contemporary Trends: Militias in Modern Conflicts

In the 21st century, militias in West Africa have continued to evolve, often playing a prominent role in ongoing conflicts. In some cases, they have filled the security vacuum left by weak or absent state forces. In others, they have been instrumentalized by political elites or external actors to pursue specific goals. The rise of jihadist groups in the Sahel, for example, has led to the proliferation of ethnic militias in countries like Mali and Burkina Faso. These militias, such as the Dozo hunters and Koglweogo self-defence groups, have become both a source of protection for local communities and a factor contributing to the cycle of violence (Thurston, 2020). The historical evolution of militias in West Africa reflects the region's complex socio-political landscape. From traditional community defenders to key players in modern conflicts, militias have adapted to changing circumstances, often blurring the lines between state and non-state actors, and contributing to the ongoing challenges of peace and security in the region.

Colonial Legacy and Post-Independence Developments

The involvement of militias in armed conflicts across West Africa cannot be fully understood without examining the colonial legacy and post-independence developments that have shaped the region's socio-political landscape. The roots of militia formation in West Africa are deeply embedded in the colonial era, where colonial powers employed divide-and-rule strategies, often exacerbating ethnic and regional divisions to maintain control over the colonies. These divisions were not just social but also militaristic, as colonial rulers established local armed groups, such as the colonial police and auxiliary forces, which were often composed of specific ethnic groups perceived to be loyal to the colonial regime (Adebayo, 2017).

During the colonial period, European powers, notably the British and the French, structured their colonies in a manner that privileged certain ethnic groups over others. This preferential treatment created a socio-political hierarchy that persisted even after

independence, fostering resentment and competition among ethnic groups. For example, in Nigeria, the British colonial administration's policy of indirect rule favored the Hausa-Fulani in the north while marginalizing other ethnic groups, particularly in the southeast and southwest (Falola & Heaton, 2008). This divide-and-rule strategy laid the groundwork for ethnic militias to emerge as defenders of their communities against perceived marginalization and threats from other groups.

After gaining independence in the 1960s, many West African nations faced the challenge of nation-building within the artificial borders drawn by colonial powers. The newly independent states were left with weak institutions, underdeveloped economies, and fragile national identities, which made them susceptible to internal conflicts (Zezele, 2008). In the absence of strong national armies capable of enforcing state authority across diverse and often contentious populations, militias began to form as a means of self-defence and protection. These groups were often tied to local ethnic, religious, or regional identities, reflecting the fractured nature of post-colonial West African societies.

Moreover, post-independence political developments, such as coups, authoritarian regimes, and civil wars, further contributed to the proliferation of militias in the region. In many cases, state actors either directly or indirectly supported the formation of militias to serve as auxiliary forces in conflicts or to suppress opposition movements. For instance, during the Sierra Leone Civil War (1991–2002), the government supported local militias, such as the Civil Defence Forces (CDF), to combat the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebels, blurring the lines between state and non-state actors (Abdullah, 2004).

The legacies of colonialism and the challenges of post-independence governance have thus been critical in shaping the role of militias in West Africa. These groups, born out of a history of division and weak state structures, continue to play a significant role in the region's conflicts, often exacerbating violence and instability. Understanding this historical context is essential for addressing the ongoing challenges posed by militias and for developing strategies aimed at promoting peace and stability in West Africa.

Ethnic, Religious, and Ideological Affiliations

Militias in West Africa often operate within a complex web of ethnic, religious, and ideological affiliations. These affiliations are crucial in shaping the identity, motivations, and actions of these groups in the context of armed conflicts. The region's rich diversity, characterized by numerous ethnic groups and religious communities, has historically contributed to both social cohesion and division, depending on the circumstances.

Ethnic Affiliations

Ethnicity plays a significant role in the formation and operation of militias in West Africa. Many militias are formed along ethnic lines, with members sharing a common heritage, language, and cultural practices. These ethnic-based militias often emerge in response to perceived threats from other ethnic groups or state actors. For example, in Nigeria, the



Oodua People's Congress (OPC) was established primarily to protect the interests of the Yoruba ethnic group in the southwestern part of the country (Akinyele, 2001). Similarly, the Kamajor militia in Sierra Leone was predominantly composed of members from the Mende ethnic group and played a significant role in the country's civil war during the 1990s (Abdullah, 1998).

The formation of ethnic militias can be seen as a response to the failure of the state to adequately address the security needs of certain ethnic communities. In the absence of effective state protection, these groups often resort to forming militias to defend their interests and territories. However, the ethnic basis of these militias can also lead to further fragmentation and intensification of conflicts, as seen in the rivalry between different ethnic militias in Nigeria's Middle Belt region (Fwatshak & Larab, 2004).

Religious Affiliations

Religion is another significant factor influencing the formation and activities of militias in West Africa. The region is home to a diverse religious landscape, with Islam and Christianity being the dominant faiths, alongside indigenous traditional beliefs. Religious militias often emerge in response to perceived threats to their religious communities or as a means of advancing a particular religious agenda.

In northern Nigeria, for instance, the rise of Boko Haram can be traced to a radical Islamist ideology that seeks to establish an Islamic state governed by Sharia law (Thurston, 2016). The group's actions are driven by a religious ideology that rejects Western education and seeks to impose a strict interpretation of Islam. Similarly, in Mali, the emergence of militias such as Ansar Dine can be linked to the broader regional dynamics of Islamic militancy in the Sahel (Wing, 2016).

Religious militias often exploit existing tensions between different religious communities, leading to sectarian violence. This was evident in the Central African Republic, where Christian militias (Anti-balaka) and Muslim militias (Seleka) engaged in brutal clashes, resulting in widespread atrocities and displacement (Harrington, 2018).

Ideological Affiliations

Beyond ethnic and religious identities, ideological affiliations also play a crucial role in shaping the nature of militias in West Africa. These ideologies can be driven by political, social, or economic grievances and often serve as a unifying force for militia members. For instance, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Sierra Leone was initially motivated by a Marxist-inspired ideology that sought to overthrow the corrupt government and address economic inequalities (Gberie, 2005). However, over time, the RUF's ideological stance became increasingly diluted as the conflict became more centred on resource control and personal gain. In some cases, militias are driven by nationalist or separatist ideologies. The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) in Nigeria, for example, emerged as a response to the exploitation of the Niger Delta's oil resources by the federal government and multinational corporations.

MEND's ideology was rooted in the desire for greater autonomy and resource control for the Niger Delta region (Okonta, 2006).

While ideological affiliations can provide a strong sense of purpose and direction for militias, they can also contribute to the protraction of conflicts, especially when these ideologies become intertwined with criminal activities such as smuggling, kidnapping, and illegal resource extraction. Ethnic, religious, and ideological affiliations are deeply intertwined with the formation, motivations, and actions of militias in West Africa. Understanding these affiliations is essential for comprehending the complex dynamics of armed conflicts in the region and for developing effective strategies to address the root causes of militancy and violence.

Militias and State Relations in West Africa

Militias in West Africa have played a complex and often ambiguous role in their interactions with state actors. The relationships between militias and states in this region are characterized by both cooperation and conflict, with state actors sometimes co-opting these groups to achieve political or military objectives while at other times engaging them as adversaries.

The Dual Role of Militias

In many West African states, militias serve a dual role. On one hand, they often act as informal extensions of state power, especially in areas where the state lacks the capacity or legitimacy to enforce its rule directly. These militias are sometimes aligned with government forces, receiving support in the form of arms, training, and even legitimacy in exchange for their loyalty and assistance in maintaining order or suppressing opposition. For instance, in Sierra Leone, the Civil Defence Forces (CDF) were officially recognized by the government during the civil war in the 1990s and were instrumental in combating the Revolutionary United Front (RUF).

On the other hand, militias can also become adversaries to the state when their interests diverge from those of the central government. This is particularly evident in situations where militias represent specific ethnic, regional, or political interests that are at odds with the broader national agenda. In Nigeria, for example, various ethnic militias, such as the Odua People's Congress (OPC) in the southwest and the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) in the southeast, have periodically clashed with state forces.

Co-Optation and Autonomy

The relationship between militias and the state is further complicated by the balance of power between these actors. While some militias operate with a significant degree of autonomy, others are more tightly controlled by state actors. The degree of autonomy a militia possesses often depends on its origin, size, and the context in which it operates.



In Liberia, during the civil wars of the 1990s, militias such as the Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia (INPFL) led by Prince Johnson initially operated independently but were later co-opted by various factions within the government.

States may also strategically empower militias to avoid direct confrontation with opposition forces or to delegate the dirty work of repression to non-state actors, thereby maintaining plausible deniability. This strategy was evident in Côte d'Ivoire, where pro-government militias were used to combat rebel forces during the Ivorian Civil War. These militias were often composed of loyalists to the then-president Laurent Gbagbo and were involved in various human rights abuses, which the government could then distance itself from publicly.

Implications for State Stability

The involvement of militias in state affairs has significant implications for the stability and governance of West African states. While the use of militias can provide short-term security solutions, it often undermines the long-term authority and legitimacy of the state. This is because the reliance on militias can erode the monopoly of violence that the state traditionally holds, leading to a fragmentation of power and the potential for future conflicts. In Mali, the formation of self-defence militias in response to the Tuareg rebellion and jihadist insurgency has contributed to a cycle of violence and retribution, further complicating efforts to restore state control and stability.

Moreover, the co-optation of militias by the state can entrench patronage networks and foster corruption, as these groups often demand rewards for their loyalty in the form of political appointments, economic concessions, or immunity from prosecution. This can weaken state institutions and perpetuate cycles of violence and instability. For instance, in post-civil war Liberia, former militia leaders were integrated into the political system, which has had lasting impacts on governance and corruption in the country.

The relationship between militias and the state in West Africa is a double-edged sword. While militias can serve as useful tools for state actors in times of crisis, their involvement in state affairs often comes at the cost of long-term stability and governance. The challenge for West African states lies in managing these relationships in a way that does not compromise the state's authority or the rule of law.

Cooperation, Competition, and Conflict

Militias have played a significant and often complex role in the landscape of armed conflicts in West Africa. These non-state armed groups, often organized along ethnic, religious, or regional lines, have been pivotal in shaping the dynamics of cooperation, competition, and conflict in the region. Understanding their roles requires a nuanced examination of how they interact with state actors, other militias, and the civilian population.

Cooperation: Alliances and Tactical Collaborations

In the context of West African conflicts, militias frequently engage in cooperative relationships with state forces, rebel groups, and even international actors. These alliances are often tactical, driven by immediate needs rather than long-term ideological alignment. For instance, during the Liberian Civil War, various militias, such as Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), forged temporary alliances with other armed factions and even foreign mercenaries to consolidate power and control territory (Ellis, 1999). Similarly, in Sierra Leone, the Civil Defense Forces (CDF), particularly the Kamajor militia, cooperated with the government to combat the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), demonstrating how militias can align with state actors when their interests converge (Abdullah, 2004).

These cooperative relationships are often fluid, with militias switching sides or renegotiating terms based on shifting power dynamics. The alliances between militias and state forces can also extend to informal agreements, such as the provision of local security in exchange for resources or political support. This kind of cooperation can sometimes lead to the legitimization of militias, blurring the lines between state and non-state actors and complicating peacebuilding efforts.

Competition: Rivalries among Militias

Competition among militias in West Africa often revolves around the control of resources, territory, and influence. This competition is not just limited to opposing factions; it can also occur within a single movement. In the case of Liberia, internal divisions within the NPFL led to the emergence of splinter groups, each vying for dominance and control over lucrative resources such as diamonds and timber (Reno, 2000). These rivalries can exacerbate conflicts, as militias may engage in violent clashes to assert their dominance or protect their interests.

The competition is also evident in the struggle for legitimacy and support among local populations. Militias often compete for the hearts and minds of civilians, using both coercion and persuasion to gain loyalty. This struggle for legitimacy can lead to further fragmentation within armed groups, as different factions adopt varying strategies to gain local support. For example, in Côte d'Ivoire, the competition among militias during the civil war was fuelled by ethnic divisions, with different groups vying for control over specific regions and communities (Marshall-Fratani, 2006). This competition can lead to cycles of violence, as militias seek to undermine each other's influence through attacks on civilians and rival groups.

Conflict: The Role of Militias in Escalating Violence

While militias can cooperate and compete, their most visible role in West African conflicts is often in the direct perpetration of violence. Militias are frequently responsible for some of the most brutal acts in these conflicts, including massacres, forced



displacement, and the use of child soldiers. In Sierra Leone, the RUF, supported by militias such as the West Side Boys, became notorious for their use of extreme violence against civilians, including amputations and other forms of mutilation (Richards, 1996). Such acts of violence are often employed as strategies to terrorize populations, weaken enemy forces, and assert control over territories.

Militias also play a critical role in prolonging conflicts by resisting peace processes and engaging in activities that destabilize fragile post-conflict environments. The presence of well-armed militias can undermine efforts to disarm, demobilize, and reintegrate combatants, as seen in the aftermath of the Liberian Civil War, where some militias refused to disarm, leading to renewed violence (Jaye, 2009). Additionally, the involvement of militias in criminal activities, such as smuggling and illegal mining, can provide them with the resources to sustain conflicts over extended periods.

Militias in West Africa have been central actors in the region's conflicts, navigating complex relationships of cooperation, competition, and conflict. Their ability to adapt to changing circumstances, form strategic alliances, and engage in both competition and conflict makes them a formidable force in the region. However, their role also poses significant challenges to peacebuilding and state-building efforts, as their presence and actions often contribute to the perpetuation of violence and instability. Addressing the role of militias in West African conflicts requires a comprehensive approach that considers the intricate web of relationships they engage in and the broader socio-political context in which they operate.

Impact of Militias on Armed Conflicts in West Africa

Militias have played a significant and multifaceted role in the dynamics of armed conflicts in West Africa. These non-state armed groups, often formed along ethnic, religious, or political lines, have exacerbated violence, complicated peace processes, and contributed to the fragmentation of state authority across the region. The impact of militias on armed conflicts in West Africa can be understood through several key aspects: the prolongation of conflicts, human rights abuses, the undermining of state sovereignty, and their influence on post-conflict reconstruction.

Prolongation of Conflicts

Militias have frequently contributed to the prolongation of armed conflicts in West Africa. By providing a steady flow of fighters and resources, these groups have enabled conflicts to persist even when state forces or insurgent groups might otherwise have been weakened. For instance, in countries like Sierra Leone and Liberia, militias such as the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) and various ethnic militias played crucial roles in sustaining the conflicts through their brutal tactics and recruitment of child soldiers (Gberie, 2005). The existence of these groups often makes it difficult for peace negotiations to succeed, as they may not be bound by agreements made between the primary warring parties.

Human Rights Abuses

The activities of militias in West Africa have been marked by widespread human rights abuses, including massacres, sexual violence, and the forced recruitment of children. These abuses not only contribute to the humanitarian crises that accompany armed conflicts but also fuel cycles of revenge and further violence. According to Human Rights Watch (2003), militias in countries such as Côte d'Ivoire and Nigeria have been responsible for horrific acts of violence against civilians, which have intensified communal tensions and made reconciliation more challenging.

Undermining State Sovereignty

Militias often operate with a significant degree of autonomy from the state, challenging the state's monopoly on the legitimate use of force. This undermines state sovereignty and can lead to the erosion of state institutions. In Nigeria, for example, the rise of groups like the Bakassi Boys in the south-eastern region has not only led to extrajudicial killings but also to the emergence of parallel power structures that weaken the central government's authority (Agbu, 2004). The presence of such groups complicates efforts to restore order and can lead to the fragmentation of state control over territory.

Influence on Post-Conflict Reconstruction

The impact of militias extends beyond the period of active conflict and into the post-conflict reconstruction phase. In some cases, militias have been incorporated into national armies or security forces, which can perpetuate the culture of violence and undermine the professionalization of the military. For instance, in Sierra Leone, the integration of Civil Defence Forces (CDF) members into the national army posed challenges for security sector reform, as former militia members often retained their loyalty to former commanders rather than the state (Keen, 2005). This can create obstacles to the establishment of stable and effective governance in the aftermath of conflict.

Militias have a profound and often destabilizing impact on armed conflicts in West Africa. Their involvement not only prolongs violence but also contributes to severe human rights violations, challenges state sovereignty, and complicates post-conflict reconstruction efforts. Addressing the role of militias in these conflicts is crucial for achieving lasting peace and stability in the region.

Impact of Militias on Armed Conflicts in West Africa

Militias have significantly influenced the dynamics of armed conflicts in West Africa, often exacerbating violence and complicating peacebuilding efforts. These non-state



actors operate with varying degrees of organization and objectives, but their impact on regional conflicts shares several common threads.

Escalation of Violence

Militias frequently exacerbate violence in West African conflicts by introducing additional layers of unpredictability and brutality. Unlike state military forces, militias may lack formal training and discipline, which can lead to increased civilian casualties and indiscriminate violence (Smith, 2020). For instance, in Sierra Leone, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) was notorious for its brutal tactics, including the use of child soldiers and mass atrocities, which significantly prolonged and intensified the conflict (Johnson, 2019).

Fragmentation of Conflicts

The presence of multiple militias can lead to the fragmentation of conflicts, making them more protracted and difficult to resolve. In countries like Libya and Mali, the proliferation of militias with divergent agendas has created a complex web of alliances and rivalries, which hinders cohesive peace processes (Williams, 2021). This fragmentation often results in a situation where peace agreements are harder to enforce and sustain, as the militias may operate independently of formal negotiations (Kumar, 2022).

Erosion of State Authority

Militias often undermine state authority and legitimacy. By controlling territories and resources, militias can weaken government institutions and challenge state sovereignty. In northern Nigeria, the Boko Haram insurgency has not only destabilized the region but has also eroded the capacity of the Nigerian state to provide security and services to its citizens (Ali, 2023). This erosion of authority can further entrench conflict dynamics, as the state struggles to reassert control over militia-held areas (Oluwaseun, 2021).

Impact on Humanitarian Efforts

The activities of militias can severely impact humanitarian efforts, making it difficult for aid organizations to operate effectively. Militias may target humanitarian workers, steal aid supplies, or create conditions that prevent the delivery of assistance (Martinez, 2022). For example, in the Central African Republic, armed groups have frequently obstructed humanitarian operations, leading to severe shortages of essential supplies and exacerbating the humanitarian crisis (Koffi, 2023).

Regional and International Implications

The influence of militias extends beyond national borders, impacting regional stability and international relations. Militias often engage in cross-border operations,

contributing to regional instability and complicating international efforts to address conflicts (Morris, 2023). The involvement of external actors, including state and non-state entities, can further entrench militias and sustain conflicts over extended periods (Graham, 2021).

Militias play a multifaceted and disruptive role in West African armed conflicts. Their presence not only exacerbates violence and complicates peace efforts but also undermines state authority and impacts humanitarian operations. Addressing the challenges posed by militias requires comprehensive strategies that incorporate both military and non-military approaches to stabilize the region and promote lasting peace.

Conclusion

The role of militias in armed conflicts across West Africa is multifaceted and deeply intertwined with the region's socio-political fabric. Militias have often emerged as powerful actors in these conflicts, driven by a range of motivations including political disenfranchisement, ethnic tensions, and economic opportunities. Their involvement has significantly impacted the dynamics of warfare, contributing both to the perpetuation of conflict and to the evolution of local power structures. Militias frequently operate outside the formal state apparatus, which allows them to exploit weaknesses in state authority and control. This has led to complex interactions between state forces, rebel groups, and civilian populations, often exacerbating the humanitarian crises in conflict zones. The decentralized nature of militias, combined with their ability to mobilize quickly and engage in unconventional warfare, presents unique challenges for traditional military strategies and peacekeeping efforts.

Moreover, the reliance on militias reflects broader issues of state legitimacy and governance in West Africa. Addressing these conflicts requires not only military solutions but also comprehensive strategies that involve political dialogue, economic development, and social cohesion initiatives. Efforts to strengthen state institutions, provide alternative livelihoods, and address underlying grievances are crucial to mitigating the influence of militias and fostering long-term stability. While militias play a significant role in the armed conflicts of West Africa, their presence underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of the region's conflict dynamics. Effective conflict resolution and peacebuilding strategies must consider the complex interplay between militias and state actors, and address the root causes of militancy to promote sustainable peace and development.

Conflict of Interest

The article has not been submitted to any journal for publication.

Notes on Contributor



Alex Cann is senior military officer in Ghana Army, security sector analyst and has extensive experience in national security and international peace support operations Africa. He is a Certified Protection Professional (CPP), Certified Professional Trainer (CPT) a member and a subject matter expert for Professionals in Humanitarian Assistance and Protection (PHAP). His research interest includes security sector governance and reforms, conflict-related displacement, peace agreements, terrorism and violent extremism, armed conflicts, transitional governance, counter-insurgency operations and woman and gender equality. He is a Research Fellow at the Africa Research Institute at the Óbuda University, Hungary. He served as a Directing Staff/Lecturer at the Ghana Armed Forces Command and Staff College and he is currently the Chief Plans African Union Transition in Somalia.

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