CONFLICT, PEACE AND SECURITY CHALLENGES

Fonteh Akum: «Military solutions alone would not effectively respond to violent extremist challenges»

According to the executive director of the Institute for Security Studies (ISS Africa), the pandemic has affected the capacity of African organisations to mediate the continent's crises

Fonteh Akum, Oscar Mateos



Fonteh Akum, Ph.D. in Political Science and International Studies, is Executive Director of the Institute for Security Studies (ISS), an African non-profit organization with offices in South Africa, Kenya, Ethiopia and Senegal. The goal of the ISS is to build knowledge and

skills for Africa's future and to enhance human security as a means to achieving sustainable peace and prosperity. In this interview, Oscar Mateos, coordinator of the IDEES magazine special issue on Africa, talks with Fonteh Akum about the continent's main challenges in the field of security, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the role of African organizations in peacebuilding.

What have been the implications of COVID-19 for the African continent, especially in relation to conflict dynamics?

The first implications that we can point to have been economic. The fact that Africa is basically seeing its first recession in about 25 year cannot be ignored. This generally has implications for government revenue and its capacity to actually focus attention on key development challenges, which in Africa, were also exacerbated by the COVID pandemic. So a direct implication is that Africa has basically fallen backwards in its attempt to meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) by 2030 across almost all categories. The knock-on effects on the government's capacity to effectively respond to the pressing crises to which they are confronted is evident. While the pressures COVID has placed on the economy and governance in general are evident, the link between COVID and conflict remains rather tenuous. However vertical and horizontal inequalities on the continent have worsened, and this constitutes some of the foundational vulnerabilities that foster conflict across the continent.

That said, looking at specific conflict spots in the Sahel, Lake Chad Basin, Mozambique, the Horn of Africa conflict dynamics have become more preoccupying. Unsurprisingly, the Ethiopian crisis, though arising from political tensions, started against the backdrop of COVID-19. At the same time, it's not surprising that violent extremist groups in the Sahel, the Lake Chad basin and in Cabo Delgado (Mozambique) have used the backdrop of COVID 19 to deepen their resilient, to try to strengthen relationships with the communities and to actually put the government on the back foot. Governments in most of these spaces have been caught fighting battles on two fronts. One dealing with the COVID crisis, which affects both urban and rural spaces, and two dealing with the pressing security concerns including violent extremism and organised crime.

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Of course, the different COVID responses, which included lockdowns, also had implications for the capacity of different African organisations to mediate crises. Looking at the implications of lockdowns, for example, on effective mediation effort is an issue of preoccupation on which the verdict is still out.

One of the most debated issues has been the efficient role played by the Africa CDC, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (a specialized institution of

the African Union established to support public health initiatives), at least during the first wave of the pandemic.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the African Union (AU) used the lead time before the detection of the first COVID 19 cases on the continent to invest in prevention, response and recovery. The chairship of the AU held by the President of South Africa, Cyril Ramaphosa moved decisively. The initial act in April 2020 was to appoint AU Special Envoys to mobilise international economic support for continental fight against COVID 19 in Africa; these included Dr Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, Dr Donald Kaberuka, Mr Tidjane Thiam and Mr Trevor Manuel. However, lack of consensus between Africa's creditors at the Paris Club and the London Clubs underlines challenges in reaching debt forgiveness and debt restructuring as pathways to post-COVID economic recovery. The IMF came forward with recommendations for transformational reform that will both save lives and endure macroeconomic stability. Arguably though, not enough has been done to bridge economic positions on the continent, along the spectrum from debt alleviation to economic stimuli.

At the same time, the Africa CDC, operationally, has tried to harmonise the responses across the continent, emphasising the strengthening of the capacity to respond effectively to prevent the expansion of COVID on the continent. First, promoting early detection, which has been used to try to counter the COVID-19 pandemic and, second, to ensure sensitization for vaccinations around the continent. So on all counts, the Africa CDC has actually a pivotal role in addressing an interconnected peace, security and health emergency crisis on the continent.

Beyond the impact of the pandemic, one of the key milestones in terms of conflict management in Africa has been the AU's "Silencing the Guns" campaign, which ended in 2020 (and has been extended until 2030) and aimed to eradicate armed violence on the continent as much as possible. How do you personally assess this initiative? How does the growing problem of terrorism, which is affecting various sub-regions of the continent, fit into this initiative?

The African Union's extension of the Silencing the Guns time horizon to 2030 following the action plan has allowed for the elaboration of a monitoring and evaluation framework through which to effectively assess and learn implementation lessons.

The initiative, while important, is also connected in many ways to other issues around the continent. It's connected to issues of development, gender, trade and emergencies. It is difficult to aspire to silencing the guns without looking at the governance and development well-being of societies, states and regional economic communities in Africa. Over the next decade if we make advancements in governance and development, we should see dividends in terms of silencing the guns by 2030.

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Let’s for instance look at responding to terrorism and violent extremism as one of many pathways to silencing the guns in Africa. Looking at the violent extremism map on the continent, you see that it proliferates on the geographical peripheries of states. The second observation is the predominantly cross-border nature of violent extremism, necessitating regional responses. Thirdly, the human, materiel and financial resources that sustain violent extremist groups are often supplied from spaces which might not yet be overtly affected by the phenomenon. To understand terror and conflict in the Sahel, you also have to look at the supply chains that connect terrorist groups in the Sahel to coastal states or North Africa. Supply chains feed terrorist groups with manpower, material (both with motorcycles and weapons), and with financial and economic resources. The same happens in the Lake Chad basin. These violent extremist groups operate within settings where they are able to manipulate local conflicts, either by serving as instigators or as peacemakers or negotiators to breed peace within communities and therefore either gain advantage with communities or try to increase one community’s advantage over another. These dynamics link terrorism and local conflicts.

It seems, then, that the dynamics of armed violence have intensified throughout Africa.

On the continent, despite violent extremist and local conflict dynamics, Africa has almost eliminated violent interstate conflicts. While national armies are not involved on traditional battlefields, cross-border insurgent manifestations of violent extremism and other forms of local conflicts that necessitates regionalised responses. These regional approaches must be harmonised, multi-sectoral and inclusive of actors who normally do not operationally work across sectors. These regional approaches centralise the peripheries of states as areas of intractable human security concerns, and also raise important questions about the governance relationship between centres and peripheries on the continent. These issues ought to be prioritised, if we are going to effectively deal with local conflicts and violent extremism and effectively silence the guns.

It has been 20 years since the re-founding of the African Union and the idea of “African solutions to African problems”. What have been the main achievements and problems in these two decades?

Two decades of the African Union should deliver on an assessment of the capacity and utility of existing instruments, normative constructs and principles that have undergirded African solutions to African problems, which I think is apt.

Normatively, the emergence of subsidiarity actualises the relationship between Regional Economic Communities (RECs) [regional groupings of African states] and the African Union, with RECs actually getting the primacy of response to peace and security challenges

on the continent.

The operationalisation has worked variably given RECs' differentiated capacities, capabilities and political will to effectively address some of the governance, integration, development, peace and security challenges within their respective regions. In 2007, 'African Charter for Democracy, Elections and Governance' was adopted, coming into force in 2012. This document is put forward as a foundational text to protect democratic rule and democratic transitions on the continent. Over the past year, we have seen a resurgence of coups on the continent, with two coups in Mali within the space of 12 months, one in Guinea and another in Sudan. That coup map could very well extend across the continent.

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However, beyond the coups, Constitutions have also been instrumentalised to allow certain civilian leaders to stay in power longer than the constitutionally-designated mandates. Responses to military coups and arbitrary Constitutional amendments have been different. This difference creates gap between principles and their enforcement. Largely popular coups in Mali and Guinea, have ushered in tenuous transitions, while a military power grab in Sudan, has triggered renewed popular protest. So normatively, there have been advancements in governance protocols and subsidiarity with regional economic communities as first responders to crisis. These point to Africa's capacities and willingness to manage its challenges.

In this regard, what can you tell us about the impacts of violent extremism?

Looking at the different theatres of violent extremism, in Mozambique, with Rwanda's deployment and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) mission, or the Lake Chad Basin and the Multinational Joint Task Force (a composition of Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon and Chad, including Benin) or in Liptako-Gourma, where we have the G5 Sahel Joint Force operates, this speaks to Africa's will to actually drive responses.

However, these military deployments ought to be accompanied by policing and developmental interventions. Space also ought to be created for effective emergency humanitarian responses. Military solutions alone would not effectively respond to violent extremist challenges, particularly if they are not accompanied by harmonised governance approaches, Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) processes. Parameters for dialogue with violent extremist groups should also be seriously explored.

Looking to some of the instruments, from the African Governance Architecture (AGA), the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) to the African Peace and Security Architecture

(APSA), they are all only as effective as the political, human resource and financial investments AU member states are willing to make in them. Beyond the appointment of high level representatives for crisis response in Africa, there needs to be better mobilisation of the support that high level representatives actually require to effectively solve crises.

Based on the instruments you have mentioned, what are the most pressing challenges operationally?

Political and military deployments have faced a number of challenges in translating mandates into effective and adaptable implementation tailored to specific operational environments. With the emergence of ad hoc regional security arrangements, challenges relate to the status of forces within the countries within which they find themselves, as well as interoperability of forces whether as an interposition force or a counterterrorism force. Given the nature of crises which necessitate ad hoc security arrangements, these lines are increasingly blurred. Despite these challenges, tensions between national interests in regional collective security arrangements deployments often create additional operational gridlock. Despite those odds, an operation like AMISOM (the African Union Mission to Somalia) continues to navigate complex regional security, economic and political dynamics, which maintains a useful lever for potential transition out of the crisis in Somalia.

The next question is about the role of external emerging actors in Africa. What do you think about their increasing engagement in the security field and which is the impact on the conflict and peace dynamics?

The role of foreign actors in Africa is neither emerging nor new, even if the content of these relations is changing. Taking a long view, many different actors have been involved in Africa since prior to independence. China, for example, has had a long-standing history of engagement with liberation movements in and post-independence states in Africa and so did Russia during the Cold War. However, never since the end of the Cold War have we seen such renewed interest for engagement in Africa. While attention is often paid to the security sector, the focus needs to also address some of the interconnected economic dimensions of these engagements.

Africa is resource-rich, in human and material terms. Resources which could obviously drive the next industrial revolution. Crises in Africa also attract engagement in the area of peace and security, look to the different UN stabilisation missions on the continent.

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> economic dimensions”

The expanding use of private mercenaries, although seemingly new, has in fact been experienced before as well, creating unease in communities where they operate. This unease exists on three levels. The first level raises questions about a national security posture which depends on a hybrid configuration of state security and foreign private security actors. The second level of unease relates to rules of engagement and accountability. Private security actors often operate outside the law creating legal challenges for redress and accountability in the event of human rights violations. The third worry has to be about the social contract. The social contract, broadly speaking, is about the relationship between the State and societies. Intrinsic to the social contract is a relationship that guarantees civil protection by the state, a responsibility which cannot be ceded to unaccountable foreign security operatives. At the same time, the growing influence and presence of private mercenaries in Africa should be a preoccupation, regardless of where they are coming from. The role of mercenaries in conflict and governance situations is problematic.

In places like the Central Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin, violent groups are using economic, social, religious and political grievances in remote areas to gain local support. Under your perspective, and considering the limitations of the State structures in the mentioned regions, which instruments could be used to prevent radicalization?

Looking at specific instruments, the first would be to situate the problems where they are, by connecting the local to the regional. Reading the problem through the state prism, often is dissonant from the way the actors whom you’ve just listed as problematic violent extremist groups actually view their areas of operation as interconnected and borderless. Effective responses therefore require a regional approach which harmonises regional frameworks and adapts implementation to local contexts.

Harmonisation of frameworks in real terms implies that if one country proposes amnesty for Boko Haram associates and another proposes only prosecution, that difference has implications for defection dynamics. Mutual understanding is needed between these countries facing cross border violence about amnesty, demobilisation, disengagement, reintegration, as well as rehabilitation. Secondly, screening and prosecution mechanisms ought to equally be harmonised between these countries. These need to be accompanied by specific repatriation mechanisms of violent extremist and terrorist suspects between countries.

Third, look to different violent extremism-affected spaces from a national perspective. The presence and utility of the state are key to stabilisation, recovery and resilience. While in some parts the Lake Chad Basin and the Central Sahel some States have maintained a presence in areas where terrorist groups seek to operate, others do not. In order to enhance state presence, authority and utility, military responses ought to be accompanied

by civil protection, social cohesion and development responses. There's the necessity to engage on the humanitarian front to cater for displaced and host communities and win the hearts and minds. Collectively these interventions would address the reasons why individuals join violent extremist groups that continue to coexist with stabilisation interventions.

Development assistance in these spaces where these could either contribute to the resilience of violent extremist groups and criminal elements; or where development interventions could become the targets of entrepreneurs of violence is an even thornier issue

Finally, military responses need to also be accompanied by civil protection mechanisms. Upon the completion of military operations civil protection and the restoration of administrative and other basic services is essential.

You advocate for a mediated dialogue and inclusive crisis management as promising instruments for local peacebuilding and conflict prevention. How do you think these strategies can be implemented?

It takes work, it takes effort, it takes an understanding of the anthropological basis of the societies within which conflict occurs and it takes connecting different scales of intervention. Firstly, naming conventions for actors in conflict settings is important. The labelling of a conflict actor as "a terrorist" limits the space for political dialogue and engagement. Local peace initiatives can benefit from inclusivity which centralises the issues and interests at the centre of discontent.

The second factor is a mapping of key influential actors. These are individuals who over time have developed the social capital (including in building networks and relationships) to actually play local conflict resolution roles. Operating in non-official or track two levels, they can contribute to different levels of mediation processes without jeopardising their social stature.

Thirdly, is to map the government's capacity and political will to engage in local peacebuilding and conflict prevention efforts. Local administrators hold constituted authority to actually mediate local disputes and they should be able to interact with their peers across borders to understand the extent and implications of conflicts and tap into the capacity of regional configurations to effectively address some of the cross-border crises. Obviously, when they expand and scale up to include international actors and when crises garner enough international interest, such as with herder-farmer conflicts, the ability to link different skills of intervention is primordial.

Overall, using evidence-based approaches to inform policy, programmatic, and practice of local peacebuilding and conflict prevention reflexively is the bigger challenge. Given the time resources necessary to address the root causes of conflict, engage with actors on what they want and how their interests could actually be mediated within legal parameters, whether constituted or customary expectations have to also be carefully managed.

> “Promoting local peacebuilding requires work and effort; it takes an understanding of the anthropological basis of the societies within which conflict occurs, as well as connecting different scales of intervention”

If indigenous knowledge and local actors drive local peacebuilding and conflict prevention in collaboration with national, regional and international partners there will be opportunities to engineer sustainable peace outcomes in the borderlands of states. The Malabo protocol or the African Charter on the Values and Principles of Decentralisation, Local governance and Local Development –which yet again provides a strong basis for decentralisation as a spur for local development with the potential of promoting local peacebuilding– still faces ratification and implementation challenges.



Fonteh Akum
Fonteh Akum is Executive Director at the Institute for Security Studies (ISS Africa), where he previously headed the Lake Chad Basin Programme. Before joining the ISS in 2017, he worked in research, research management and policy communication at the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), the Africa Programme of the United Nations University for Peace and also at the International Monetary Fund headquarters in Washington DC. He has published on the future development trajectory of the CEMAC region, and violent extremism, governance and human security in the Lake Chad Basin. Fonteh has a PhD in Politics and international studies from the University of London’s School of Oriental and African Studies.



Oscar Mateos
Oscar Mateos is coordinator of the research group on Globalization, Conflict, Development and Security (GLOBALCODES) at the Faculty of Communication and International Relations of Blanquerna - Ramon Llull University, where he is an Associate Professor of International Relations. Since 2019, he has been the Rector’s Delegate for the 2030 Agenda. Mateos is a member of the governing board of the International Catalan Institute for Peace (ICIP) and an associate researcher at CIDOB. He has a degree in Political Science and Administration, a postgraduate degree in Culture of Peace and a PhD in International Relations with a European degree from the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB). His research focuses on the analysis of armed conflicts and post-war peacebuilding processes on the African continent, especially in the West African region. He has worked at the UAB School of Peace Culture and has collaborated with organizations such as Médecins Sans Frontières in South Sudan and Conciliation Resources in Sierra Leone. He was a visiting professor at the University of Sierra Leone (Fourah Bay College) between 2006 and 2008, and a visiting researcher at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London.