

Policy Brief

15

# Foreign Fighters and Mercenaries: Implications for Silencing the Guns in Africa

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# 1 Introduction

The perennial conundrum of intra-state strife within the African continent has persisted throughout the annals of time, tracing its origins to epochs preceding the advent of colonial hegemony. The quest to combat violent conflicts on the continent motivated the African Union (AU) to adopt a Solemn Declaration on a Common African Defence and Security Policy in 2004, which was further developed in 2013 to end the 'Burden of War' by 2020. Along with its affiliated Regional Economic Communities (RECs), there have been renewed commitments to establish and refine frameworks for addressing insecurity, enhancing preventive diplomacy, managing diverse conflicts and ensuring peace and security across the continent. Yet, the landscape of war and violent conflict is in perpetual flux, marked by heightened state incapacity to safeguard lives and property, alongside a surge in foreign fighters and mercenaries. These factors compound the complexity of attaining peace and security across Africa.

Reports suggest a surge in the use of mercenaries and foreign fighters in countries such as Libya, Sudan, Mali, Mozambique, the Central African Republic (CAR), Burkina Faso, Niger, and the West African Coastal States. Lending credence to this, the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General António Guterres maintains that, "While the numerical picture may be murky, the impacts of mercenaries today are all too clear".[1] The uncontrolled proliferation of small arms and light weapons and the use of foreign fighters and mercenaries continue to sustain conflicts, exacerbate violence, fuel crimes and terrorism,

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promote cultures of violence, violate international humanitarian law, and impede political and socio-economic development, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected states. Consequently, during its 14th Extraordinary Session in December 2020, the Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the AU extended the 'Silencing the Guns' initiative from 2020 to 2030. Indeed, the attainment of this initiative is being threatened by the activities of foreign fighters and mercenaries.

To gain a deeper understanding of the implications of foreign fighters and mercenaries on the AU's agenda of 'Silencing the Guns' by 2030 and provide concrete ideas for policy development for sustainable peace and security, the AU ECOSOCC in Zambia; UJ's IPATC in South Africa; IPSS in Ethiopia; and PANAFSTRAG in Nigeria, jointly hosted a two-day E-Symposium titled 'Foreign Fighters and Mercenaries: Implications for Silencing the Guns in Africa', from the 18th to the 19th of September 2023. Over 150 key participants attended the meeting on Zoom. The meeting comprised in-depth 7-panel discussions covering West Africa and the Sahel Region; North Africa; the Horn/East of Africa; Central Africa and the Lake of Chad Basin; the Great Lakes Region; and Southern Africa. During the E-Symposium, a keynote address was given by Ambassador (Dr.) Mohamed Ibn Chambas, the AU High Representative for Silencing the Guns in Africa.

[1] See, UN Press, (2019). Mercenary activities undermine rule of law, perpetuate impunity, secretary-general stresses during security council debate, United Nations, 4 February, <https://press.un.org/en/2019/sgsm19452.doc.htm>.

## 2 Silencing the Guns

Drawn from the theme of the AU Summit in 2020, the 'Silencing the Guns' initiative is one of the core flagships of Agenda 2063, which aims at silencing all illegal weapons in Africa by 2030. Although Africa has committed itself to silencing the guns, insecurity persists in its five regions, making Africa one of the most volatile regions in the world. In the Horn of Africa, insecurity challenges are centred on protracted conflicts with enormous spillover effects, complex political transitions, and the influence of violent extremist groups. West Africa and the Sahel region are the epicentre of instability mainly due to the activities of non-state armed groups (NSAGs), particularly violent extremist groups, foreign fighters, and mercenaries. Their activities are also increasingly expanding in the coastal states, accounting for the resurgence of unconstitutional changes of government in Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad, and Niger.

In Southern Africa, northern Mozambique has become a new crisis point, illustrating the intricate nature of the underlying role of insurgents, foreign fighters and mercenaries as factors driving conflict and instability on the continent. Resolution 62/145 of the UN General Assembly, the 1977 "OAU Convention on the Elimination of Mercenaries in Africa" and the UN's International Convention against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries, have failed to curtail the threats of mercenaries and foreign fighters on the continent. The 1977 Convention has lost touch with the contemporary character of mercenaries on the continent. There remains a direct link between the quest to Silence the Guns and ridding Africa of the destructive activities of foreign fighters. Their interventions in the Sahel and other regions, including the resulting proliferation of arms across the continent, remain significant security and political threats. From the West to the North, Africa constantly faces evolving dynamics of new and re-emerging threats, spilling across joint African borderlands. While this has prompted coordinated actions from AU's foreign partners such as the European Union (EU), there is no synergy between AU and RECs in the implementation of an effective strategy to address the increasing presence of mercenaries in Africa.

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**A SCULPTURE TITLED "NON-VIOLENCE" BY THE ARTIST CARL FREDRIK REUTERSWÄRD.**

Source: United Nations Website

Photo Credits: UN Photo/Pernaca Sudhakaran

Link: <https://www.un.org/uk/file/92337>

## 3 An Overview of Foreign Fighters and Mercenaries

In the first half of the twentieth century, Africa witnessed the presence of foreign fighters from the West, with commercial trading companies deploying private military forces to protect their interests while exploiting the continent's natural resources. Private armies reappeared in the latter half of the century as African colonies fought for independence. Thus, foreign fighters actively engaged in plundering African resources and dismantling liberation movements. In contemporary Africa, conflicts have taken on an intra-state nature, marked by mass dissents, the rise of insurgency and extreme groups, political instability, and the fragility of state institutions. Consequently, foreign fighters are sought after by both state and non-state actors to restore order, particularly when national militaries falter. Mercenaries have also been invited by military and autocratic regimes for regime consolidation, which has complicated our understanding of mercenary or foreign fighters.



**DR MOHAMMED IBN CHAMBAS: AU HIGH REPRESENTATIVE FOR SILENCING THE GUNS IN AFRICA WAS THE KEYNOTE SPEAKER DURING THE E-SYMPOSIUM.**

Image Source: United Nations Office for West Africa  
Link: <https://unowa.unmissions.org/secretary-general-appoints-mohammed-ibn-chambas-ghana>

The AU's Draft Protocol on Amendments to the Protocol on the Statute of The African Court of Justice and Human Rights of 2014 (Article 28H) defines a mercenary as an individual specifically recruited, locally or abroad, to participate in an armed conflict. Their motivation is primarily driven by the desire for private gain, with material compensation promised by or on behalf of a party to the conflict. For instance, a mercenary may earn up to 20,000 US dollars per month when on a mission. Mercenaries are neither national, residents nor members of the armed forces of a party to the conflict, and not dispatched by a non-party state on official duty as a member of its armed forces.

Furthermore, a mercenary is someone specially recruited, locally or abroad, for participating in a concerted act of violence aimed at overthrowing a legitimate government, undermining the constitutional order of a state, assisting a government in maintaining power, helping a group obtain power, or undermining the territorial integrity of a state. Thus, mercenaries, private military, and security contractors (PMSCs), and foreign fighters are non-state armed individuals with military skills intervening in foreign armed conflicts. Beyond defining mercenaries and foreign fighters, it is crucial to acknowledge the intricacies of the relationship between conflict and the mercenaries; including state institutions and the pattern of conflict; and the relationship between conflict and development.

## 4 Mercenaries and the Nature of Conflict in Africa

Conflict in Africa is motivated by several factors ranging from the resource curse in countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo and Mozambique; cultural and ideological conflicts such as in Mali;

resource-based, religious, and climate-induced conflicts in Nigeria; and ethnic conflict in Kenya. While colonial legacies remain the root causes of these conflicts, power consolidation and the inability of incumbent governments to fulfil their social contract – effective governance – led to the rise of terrorist organisations, armed local militias, and insurgency groups, as well as the resurgence of military regimes. The demand and supply of small arms and explosives from Eastern Europe are becoming nearly impossible to control, and the institutional weaknesses pose a more significant challenge as governments prefer foreign fighters over their ‘weak’ armies. During the Cold War, African governments were typically cautious of mercenaries and foreign fighters. However, African ruling elites now actively invite and utilise them to consolidate power and combat terrorism, marking a shift from past practices. Some justify hiring mercenaries to protect states from militias and terror groups, as well as to sustain civilian and military autocracies. Notwithstanding, this practice essentially outsources security sovereignty to foreign fighters, lacking accountability and offering plausible deniability, a contentious issue among stakeholders. The intertwining threads of terrorism's evolution, the rise of armed militia groups, and the reign of terror across various African nations are inseparable from the consequences of ineffective governance and poor leadership. The recurring criticism levelled at the AU and RECs for their failure to hold the African ruling elite accountable serves as a foundational issue underlying insecurity across the continent. Thus, it becomes imperative to present a region-to-region analysis of the intervention of foreign fighters and mercenaries in African conflicts.

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## North Africa

Since the 2011 eruption of violent conflict in Libya, more than a million people have been internally displaced, while all the belligerents have fired 5,479 strikes since 2012.[2] The crisis in Libya has destabilised the North African region, with a humanitarian crisis of nearly 400,000 Libyans having been displaced and thousands killed as of 2021. In 2011, the ousting of former President Muammar Gaddafi resulted in the evolution of rival political factions. Armed groups aligned themselves around these factions, and subsequent administrative failures during democratic transitions gave rise to numerous militia groups. Additionally, there was an influx of foreign fighters seeking to seize actual state power. The 2014 electoral dispute further exacerbated divisions within the country, leading to a split between the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA), headed by Prime Minister Fayeze al-Sarraj and recognised by the UN, with backing from various militias. On the opposing side, the rival administration in the country's east, known as the House of Representatives (HoR), was aligned with General Khalifa Haftar, who commanded the so-called Libyan National Army (LNA).

[2] For more information, see <https://airwars.org/conflict/all-belligerents-in-libya/>

## Foreign Fighters and Mercenaries: Implications for Silencing the Guns in Africa

In 2020, the conflict in Libya has transformed into a proxy war, with numerous foreign forces and mercenaries intervening to safeguard both ideological, strategic, and economic interests. Based on UN estimates, Libya hosts approximately 20,000 foreign fighters and mercenaries, constituting the largest contingent of privately contracted military personnel across the African landscape. The Government of National Accord (GNA), backed by the UN and major Western powers, has also received support primarily from Turkey, Qatar, and Italy. In contrast, General Haftar, leading the Libyan National Army (LNA), has drawn support from certain Gulf Arab states and other actors.

The increasing involvement of external powers, combined with an extended impact on military recruitment processes and intensified military-technical cooperation, has notably enhanced the combat capabilities and readiness of the factions engaged in the Libyan conflict. Consequently, these external actors have emerged as the de facto power behind the armed forces, wielding influence over military operations and obstructing any potential for a peaceful resolution of the conflict. Foreign fighters have become the driving force sustaining the conflict in Libya. Regionally, Chad, Niger and Sudan are particularly vulnerable to an uncontrollable presence of PMSCs from Libya.



**THE SECURITY COUNCIL VOTED UNANIMOUSLY IN FAVOUR OF RESOLUTION 1511 (2003) ON "PROLIFERATION OF SMALL ARMS AND LIGHT WEAPONS AND MERCENARY ACTIVITIES: THREATS TO PEACE AND SECURITY IN WEST AFRICA".**

Source: UN Photos  
Link: <https://media.un.org/photo/en/asset/oun7/oun7774061>

## West Africa and the Sahel Region

Post-colonial West Africa and the Sahel have faced significant hurdles in nation-building and post-conflict reconstruction. Poverty has also significantly altered the socio-political landscape of the regions. Despite the abundance of natural resources, the regions have grappled with a protracted history of political instability and governance challenges, particularly marked by armed rebellions, notably in Mali, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Moreover, Mali has undergone five successful military coups between 1960 and 2022, while Niger has experienced four in the same time frame. The Sahel is currently contending with Islamist insurgency groups, such as Boko Haram and Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam Wal Muslimeen (JNIM), which control substantial portions of the region, including its resources. These armed groups, many of which are affiliated with the Islamic States and al-Qaeda, have extended their operations across African states.

Originating in northern Mali and Nigeria, these violent extremist organisations have progressively expanded their presence to central and southern Mali, as well as to Niger and Burkina Faso. More recently, their influence has spread to northern Côte d'Ivoire and northern Benin Republic. Civilians often find themselves caught in the crossfire. Despite sustained international and regional efforts to counter these insurgent groups, their influence continues to grow, rendering traditional anti-terror campaigns ineffective in halting the escalating violence and addressing the humanitarian concerns due to the forcible displacement of 4.4 million Africans.

As a result of the multidimensional complexities of conflict and its impact on citizens, the intervention of regional institutions such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and international mechanisms such as the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), have proven ineffective in preventing and combating armed conflicts. MINUSMA operates with a narrow mandate, ECOWAS is not abreast with the changing dynamics of conflicts in several member countries. While ECOWAS has attempted to curtail political instability and conflict, it seems uncertain on the best approach to ensure peace and security in the region.

Most recently, the prevailing instability and reign of terror in the Sahel region can be predominantly attributed to the recent coups in Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali, with the forced exit of France and the heightened activities of foreign fighters. The shared antipathy towards the West and France in particular results from ontological anxieties brought on by what is perceived as Western powers' violations of their sovereignty, historical vestiges of oppression, national interests, and social and economic coherence. Thus, the Wagner Group (with a direct link to Moscow) in the Sahel region

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has occupied the space to fight against armed groups, while facilitating the consolidation of political power and extraction of natural resources in the region. The Wagner Group was accused of illicit trafficking of gold from Sudan, purportedly amounting to a staggering \$130 billion annually.[3] Foreign fighters have also escalated conflicts and are partly responsible for the proliferation of arms in Africa.

In the case of Mali, Human Rights Watch reported that the purpose of hiring the Wagner Group was to fight against jihadist militants and local militias. However, their operations have gone beyond these set parameters and have been terrorising civilians through mass extra-judicial killings, abductions, and violations of their human rights. The group has also been accused of looting, arms trafficking and other war

[3] See, Shaun Kinnes and Keanen Isaacs (2023) Human rights abuses and anti-democratic disinformation are hallmarks of Wagner, other mercenary groups in Africa, Daily Maverick, 09 August, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2023-08-09-human-rights-abuses-and-anti-democratic-disinformation-are-hallmarks-of-wagner-other-mercenary-groups-in-africa/>.

crimes. The acts of lawlessness and criminality by foreign fighters and locally armed groups in the region are unprecedented and require urgent interventions from the AU. Mercenaries, otherwise called the ‘soldiers of fortune’, have allegedly engaged in disinformation during elections and fuelled the anti-West sentiments in the Sahel.

### Southern Africa

Southern Africa has witnessed the active involvement of mercenaries in countries like Angola, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Seychelles, and Mozambique. An illustrative example is the November 1981 attempt by a group of mercenaries to overthrow the Seychelles government. Over the years, several Private Security Companies (PSCs) and Private Military Companies (PMCs), such as the Wagner Group and Dyck Advisory Group (DAG), have operated in the region.

In 2019, President Filipe Nyusi of Mozambique hired about 200 mercenaries armed with Russian helicopters, including a gunship, and drones from the Wagner Group to fight against an insurgent group, the Ansar Al-Sunna WA Jamma (ASWJ), also known as the ISIS of Mozambique, in the Cabo Delgado Region. While part of the deal was for the mercenaries to train the military, tensions arose during their collaboration, with criticisms exchanged regarding readiness and professionalism. Integrating and training local forces became difficult, casting doubt on mercenaries' and PMCs' commitment to regional peace. Differing motivations—financial for mercenaries and nationalistic/ideological for Mozambican forces—proved challenging for peace efforts. The differences in motivational factors proved to be the main challenge to bringing about peace as financial gains motivated the mercenaries while nationalism and ideological inclinations motivated the Mozambique Defence Force. The failure of the Wagner Group to counter the insurgency in Cabo Delgado reveals the challenge of aligning strategies for peace and security. It highlights the complexity of conflict resolution in Mozambique, where conflicting interests among stakeholders frequently impede progress. Subsequently, the Mozambican government hired mercenaries from the Dyck Advisory Group (DAG) from April 2020 to April 2021 to combat militants in the Cabo Delgado province. DAG was ‘successful’ as its intervention claimed the lives of 129 insurgents; however, a major rebel attack was recorded in Palma shortly after the termination of DAG’s contract. Despite the presence of these foreign fighters, between October 2017 and March 2021, Mozambique's ISIS terrorised civilians and launched more than 1,000 violent attacks in northern Mozambique, accounting for the death of over 2500 people and displacement of about 700,000 people around the same period.



#### MERCENARY SOLDIERS

Source: United Nations News

Link: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2010/07/345782>

The evolution of ASWJ in Cabo Delgado is directly linked to the extraction of natural gas in the region. Since 2017, international companies such as ExxonMobil and Total have major stakes in the 60 billion worth of natural gas. The root causes of the insurgency in Cabo Delgado lie in the government's neglect and mistreatment of the resource community, rising poverty and dislocation between the government and its people, and widespread illegal trafficking of natural resources along the coast. The persistent engagement of mercenaries and foreign fighters in African conflicts poses a significant challenge to the AU's goal of silencing the guns. The issues discussed above underscore regional challenges, particularly the inadequate management of borders between neighbouring countries, leading to the unrestricted flow of arms, weapons, and foreign fighters by both state and non-state actors. As the Mozambican government mobilised the mercenaries to crush insurgency in the resource areas, the insurgent groups also hired foreign fighters from neighbouring countries for reinforcement. Consequently, safeguarding the well-being of civilians must take precedence as the foremost priority for every African country.



**THE GOVERNMENT OF TOGO AND THE UN REGIONAL CENTRE FOR PEACE AND DISARMAMENT IN AFRICA (UNREC) DESTROYED 2,000 SEIZED AND OBSOLETE WEAPONS AND 10,000 ROUNDS OF AMMUNITION TO MARK THE INTERNATIONAL DAY OF PEACE.**

Credits: UNREC

Source: United Nations News

Link: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/06/1137542>

## 5 Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

**The following key policy recommendations emerged from the meeting in September 2023:**

1. Given the evolving political and security dynamics in Africa and the changing character of mercenaries, the AU needs to reassess its stance on mercenaries. While considering alignment with global norms, Africa's unique context necessitates bold AU action to safeguard its populace.
2. Reviewing legal frameworks like the 1977 Convention on Mercenaries and cross-border agreements has become more urgent. Strengthening the partnerships between the AU and RECs and enhancing political and security institutions via bilateral and multilateral platforms, real-time data exchange and interconnected databases is crucial for effective cross-border operations and pragmatic interventions.
3. At the heart of conflict and insurgency in Africa is the unresolved governance question. Thus, the AU should endeavour to be an effective instrument for good governance by facilitating the formulation and implementation of inclusive socio-economic development programmes that empower citizens. This can stem the proliferation of insurgency groups and military coups in Africa.
4. The AU needs to design an innovative programme, such as the UN's Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) to disengage both local and foreign fighters from conflict and integrate them back into the society.
5. CSOs should actively participate in peacebuilding efforts, engage in lobbying and advocacy, and raise awareness about the implications of the proliferation of foreign fighters and mercenaries. Integration of the CSOs, think tanks, and the Diaspora into the African peace and security framework is essential for silencing the guns in Africa.
6. African states should invest in security sector reform. This is required to address both old and emerging security dynamics, especially considering the worsening security situations in Africa.
7. A vicious cycle of violence is created when alleged members of insurgency groups are arbitrarily imprisoned or killed extrajudicially. Hence, it is essential to ensure that everyone is subjected to the rule of law, and individuals serving jail sentences should undergo rehabilitation programs aimed at improving their well-being and equipping them with skills for human capacity building.
8. Mechanisms for targeted sanctions on governments or organisations that use foreign fighters and mercenaries must be implemented for deterrence, as the cost of hiring them has proved to outweigh the benefits.
9. Regular recalibration of Africa's conflict dynamics and peace processes is imperative, necessitating reprioritisation and strategic re-evaluation. This ensures better outcomes in curbing violence and insecurity.



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The Institute for Pan-African Thought and Conversation (IPATC) Policy Briefs are a series of reports from the Institute's research-based and policy-oriented seminars on relevant themes, intended for policy practitioners and decision makers in foreign policy, Pan-African issues, security, governance, aid and development. They aim to inform public debate and generate input into the sphere of policymaking. The perspectives expressed are outcomes from strategic engagements and those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Institute and the University of Johannesburg.



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### About the Institute

IPATC was established at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) in 2016 as one of nine flagship centres of excellence to conduct research. It provides a forum for scholars, practitioners, and civil society actors across Africa and its Diaspora to dialogue and contribute to the rigorous production and dissemination of Pan-African knowledge and culture. The Institute seeks to promote original and innovative Pan-African ideas and critical dialogue in pursuit of global excellence in research and teaching, and to contribute actively to building an international profile for UJ on Pan-African issues.