

West Africa

Regional perspectives for the White Paper on Peacebuilding

Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou

Introduction

The contemporary West Africa security landscape is rapidly transforming. Over the past decade, chronic political instability, persistent societal volatility and continuous armed conflict have dominated the regional scene. These developments raise important questions for the nature and practice of peacebuilding in the coming phase. The trajectory of the West African state stands squarely at the heart of this recurring course of insecurity. The current context is one of deterioration (of conditions), density (of actors) and complexity (of vectors). A crowded, increasingly interwoven – and at times almost unreadable – space of violence-filled competition around the feeble and enfeebled West African state is the primary challenge of peacebuilding in the region.

By all accounts, the area is currently experiencing what can objectively be described as a degraded security context. Neither proactively nor reactively have regional organisations, such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), been able to effectively address the crises (Ivory Coast, Guinea-Bissau and Mali) that developed over the past few years. Whereas, economically, signs of some overall improvement can be identified in the zone (notably higher average growth rates since the mid-to-late 2000s), the rapidity of the security degradation in the region is arresting. No tangible, post-colonial progress towards stability has arguably materialised and, in 2011-2013, political systems once thought to be transitioning more or less democratically since the early 1990s – Mali and Senegal are prime examples – came to suddenly experience grave nation-wide crises, revealing a profound fragility. In the case of Mali, such abruptly-revealed conditions led in quick succession to a coup, the *de facto* partition of the country and an international armed intervention with regional implications.

If societal violence and state fragility are at the heart of these processes, the difficulty in securing lasting peace in West Africa is also due to the fact that the challenges do not (or no longer) solely limit themselves to pressing

The Geneva Peacebuilding Platform is a joint project of four institutions:



peacebuilding dimensions (i.e., the avoidance of an immediate relapse into strife and conflict). Yet, it emerges at this juncture that part of the problem is that 'the focus has been on what can be measured.'¹ As we forge ahead in the second decade of the twenty-first century, we must come to terms with the fact that the normative underpinnings of the classical peacebuilding approach (post-conflict, reconciliation, assistance) have been tested in West Africa and found to be wanting.

As it is, a widened, cross-cutting and multidimensional nature of peacebuilding is now vividly illustrated in the West African environment. (The drivers of insecurity in the region are indeed themselves often addressed in the context of *other* regions, notably the Sahel, North Africa and Central Africa.) As we go beyond the aftermath-of-conflict dimension towards that which then is measured with great(er) difficulty, the contemporary situations in West Africa therefore highlight the need to:

- Understand security threats that play out continuously and fluidly beyond the moment of conflict;
- Conceptualise peacebuilding against the context of sequences of transition; and
- Anchor that understanding and conceptualisation in a project aimed at lasting and locally owned statebuilding.

Challenges to building peace in West Africa

The primary challenge to building peace in West Africa concerns the important threat that transnational non-state armed groups have come to represent in the whole of the region. Over the past decade – steadily, quantitatively and qualitatively – transnational groups have risen to the level of a multifaceted menace that has both contributed to the deepening of existing conflicts and spawned new ones. Whereas most 1960s post-independence conflicts had been intra-state and the 1970s and 1980s rebellions were characterised by minimal and temporary spill-over effects, starting in the 1990s and accelerating throughout the 2000s, the region has witnessed the materialisation of a new type of group whose ethos and *modus operandi* by nature transcend borders.

Such newfound projection of insecurity stands today at the heart of any peacebuilding process. It does so because, on the one hand, the groups have acquired experience and muscularity, and, on the other, the tepidity and corruption of state responses has emboldened the groups' leaderships to now plan and threaten on a wider regional scale than previously. Consequently, operational opportunities are today unparalleled for the armed groups.²

Combined with the materialisation of insecurity corridors and 'ungoverned spaces',³ such augmented chances for action by the groups have also led to a complex scene whereby the groups are characterised by their transnational nature as well as by the hybridity of functions they display. As a new grammar-in-the-making featuring atomisation and acceleration, evanescence and fluidity, is playing out, the groups are also increasingly belonging

¹ I owe this notion to a remark by the former United Nations Under-Secretary General for Peacekeeping Jean-Marie Guéhenno during a discussion at a meeting in Bellagio, Italy in April 2014.

² See Idean Salehyan, *Rebels Without Borders – Transnational Insurgencies in World Politics*, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2009.

³ See A. Clunan and H. A. Trinkunas (eds.), *Ungoverned Spaces – Alternatives to State Authority in an Era of Softened Sovereignty* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

simultaneously to different categories: drug traffickers, criminals, terrorists, militias and insurgents – all while displaying elusiveness in their ‘war’ aims.

Prospects of peace in West Africa are therefore impacted importantly by the large number of powerful armed groups active in the region. These include, notably, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), formerly the Algeria-based Salafist Group for Predication and Combat (GSPC) (throughout the region), Ansar al Din (Mali), the Mouvement pour l’Unité et le Jihad en Afrique de l’Ouest (MUJAO) (in and around Mali), Al Murabitun (throughout the region), the Mouvement National pour la Libération de l’Azawad (MNLA) (Mali), Boko Haram (Nigeria), Ansaru (Nigeria/Cameroon), the Young Patriots (Ivory Coast), the Mouvement des Forces Démocratiques de Casamance (Senegal), the Africa Marine Commando (Cameroon) and the Mouvement des Nigériens pour la Justice (Niger).

Cross-border rebel movements (e.g., from Mali into Burkina Faso, from Nigeria into Cameroon and, beyond, from Chad into the Central African Republic) combined with a so-called rising ‘nexus’ between criminality and terrorism (a phenomenon whose entangled manifestations have yet to be fully unpacked in policy terms) also end up erasing the particular genealogy of specific groups. In addition, these morph continuously from domestic organisations into regional franchises, increasingly acquiring lethality at the level of the continent.⁴ Moreover, such violence is increasingly about market control. These issues play out globally (Mexico, Asia, Niger Delta, Iraq and soon enough in Syria), but they are vividly illustrated in West Africa.

In the wide, open spaces of the region, basic exchanges (commercial, matrimonial, political and religious) between distant localities are dependent on the viability and continuity of social links. The very transport of goods relies on the presence of such social fabric. Today, the multiplying presence of outlaw groups in such a fragile environment generates insecurity but also hampers development as the destabilising patterns of the groups have set in motion illicit ways of exchange, which spell first and foremost fragility of both state and community.

How, then, can peace be built in such a deteriorating scene, one whose degeneration does not necessarily have a centre of gravity? In particular, the impact of drugs, the effect of which is profoundly corrupting politics (in Guinea-Bissau notably), is today more than ever hampering the proper functioning of security services and is further escalating armed violence.⁵ Amidst overburdened judicial systems, this, in turn, has an overall destabilising effect on society, state and region, whose full sequence is still unknown.

The second key challenge for building peace in West Africa concerns the destabilising nature of the crisis in Mali. Itself the result in many ways of the intervention in Libya, the situation in Mali has deeply impacted the security equilibrium and the peacebuilding prospects in West Africa. The consequential fact that a major country in the region experienced occupation of its northern half by armed groups from March 2012 to January 2013, that its democratisation process (haphazardly embarked on in 1992) was brought to a halt and that a large-scale international intervention took place has cumulatively impacted the fabric of the region’s outlook on peace.

⁴ See, for instance, M. Ould Mohamedou, *The Many Faces of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb*, Geneva: Geneva Centre for Security Policy, Policy Paper No. 15, May 2011.

⁵ See West Africa Commission on Drugs, *Not Just in Transit – Drugs, the State and Society in West Africa*, an independent report of the West Africa Commission on Drugs, June 2014; and United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Transnational Organised Crime in West Africa – A Threat Assessment*, Vienna: UNODC, February 2013.

The interrelatedness of the causalities that led to the Mali crisis (Libyan conflict overflow, Algerian terrorists' invasion, Tuareg insurgency, state officials' corruption, traffickers' control, military rebellion, northern irredentism) and its scale (involvement of the United Nations (UN), the African Union and ECOWAS) have, in the wake of Operation Serval led by the French, left a soft belly whose consequences on the whole of the West African region cannot be underestimated. Most problematically, the Malian scene and by extension the whole of West Africa has now witnessed the militarisation of peacebuilding. Moreover, this is strongly impacted by the circulation and diversion of weapons. A 1990s-style large-scale transfer of weapons, in the context, for instance, of the conflicts in Sierra Leone (1991-2002) and in Liberia (1989-2006) has given way to a rapid and uncontrolled proliferation of small arms throughout the region.

Finally, a third challenge to building peace in the region is the weakness of the state. A most problematic process of de-statisation has been underway in the region undermining both the viability and continuity of processes aimed at long-term transformative efforts encompassing peacemaking, peacekeeping and peacebuilding. Wherever one turns, states in the region are arguably weaker than ever. The imperfect and loaded structure inherited from the colonial era has dissipated, wasting whatever chances it had of offering a minimal base for the architecture of modern states. In lieu, have emerged weak states whose fabric remains endemically fragile and prone to collapse in the face of any waves of protest.

The question of the state and its geographical deployment, its functioning, representativity, or lack thereof, and regulatory role are at the centre of the problem. An architecture of skewed and nepotistic redistribution mechanisms and the inability of the state to provide security for its citizens account, additionally, for the accumulation of unresolved crises.

The succession of leaders long in place (e.g., Felix Houphouët Boigny in Ivory Coast) has also opened the door to an extended period of political instability (underwritten by violent competition), which can easily spin out of control into larger threats to peace. From the electoral crisis in Ivory Coast in 2011, which led to an armed international intervention to the post-election riots in Senegal in January 2012, the connection is increasingly made between societal tensions and armed conflict, and the reason is primarily the presence of an empty vessel state. Fundamentally, this situation is the result of a deterioration of capacity. In the event, there is a deficit in the conceptualisation, organisation and practice of statehood in West Africa and this stands in the way of viable and lasting peacebuilding.

Opportunities for building peace in West Africa

In the next phase, the permanent factors of play will be a period of transition and a renewed preoccupation with statebuilding. Quintessentially, West Africa is in the midst of a period of intense transformation and these two elements are arguably constitutive of important opportunities to build peace in the region.

Defined as periods of change, transitions are both founding and formative moments. As such, they set a society on a path that shapes its subsequent political development. Today in West Africa, specific nations are transitioning from former regimes to new ones. This evolution varies, with formal (Mali, Ivory Coast, Guinea-Bissau) and less formal (Senegal, Nigeria) transitions, and is constitutive of a moment of transition impacting the political atmosphere of the whole of the

region (Burkina Faso, for instance, seems static but a closer look reveals dynamics of impending change, as attested to by riots and an attempted coup in 2011).

Specifically, the transitions in West Africa mean going beyond elections; redefining the role and place of the military; moving towards republican consent, devising constitution-making and power-sharing; pursuing institution-building; engineering economic development and societal empowerment; and enabling citizen participation. In sum, going beyond the election moment and towards *an* integrated operational framework for political transition featuring a set of operational tools and options, is a project that can constitute an opportunity to update the peacebuilding lens in the region. This is all the more important as the noted constant deterioration in the fabric of West African societies weakens the social capital of trust needed during transitional periods and facilitates the danger of relapse into a despotic demand.

Similarly, the current projects – indeed resulting precisely from the transitions – aimed at rebuilding states represent an additional opportunity to embed the peacebuilding logic into these newly (re)built states. Centrifugal logics accommodating and neutralising extremists are the interface between peacebuilding and *statebuilding*. Peacebuilding must be situated at a different level than as it was understood in the previous phase. How to go beyond militarised responses and how to generate domestically produced statebuilding? How to weave all of this in a statebuilding project built on legitimacy and stability? Such rebooting must also necessarily eschew the fatalist culturalist perspectives limited to 'endemic conflict in the South'.

Required support for building peace and the role of the UN

The fast-transforming West African security landscape translates primarily into a change from an earlier emphasis on development to a vastly militarised scene. Lawlessness is the new threat in the region. Thus, to build peace in West Africa, transitions must be steered efficiently and their aim should be a viable and lasting, domestically-produced statebuilding.

As the region transitions and launches anew comprehensive statebuilding projects, there is undeniably much room for support from external actors. Both specific international partners beyond the region and the United Nations can play a key role in this process. The architecture of such support is already in place. If, as argued, one of the main threats to the region's peace is the post-conflict scene in places such as Mali and Ivory Coast, then major UN-led international operations (the United Nations Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI) and the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA)) are already on the ground and liaising actively with local and regional actors.

What must be understood, however, is that current engagement faces expectations of a changed approach, away from paternalism and control. If, helpfully, in headquarters there are increasingly calls for "doing different things" and for "doing things differently"⁶ in fragile states, locally and regionally those aspects are regarded as necessary for viable engagement. Specifically, as fragility propels violence, it is ownership and assertiveness constitutive of political commitment and capacity that are needed and in need of bolstering by accompanying

⁶ Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), *Fragile States 2013*, p. 105.

partners. To be certain, there is an argument to be made that 'locals' remain to a large extent an underexploited peacebuilding resource.⁷

In light of the prevailing situation in West Africa, the necessary support to build peace in the region means therefore delving deeper into the fact that the slate is not blank and that peacebuilding has developed in the context of sequence of transitions in the 1990s-2010s period and that during this same timeframe, West Africa has undergone key transformations. Rethinking that linkage means pursuing environmental stability through a de-politicised aggregation of capacity, cohesiveness and consistence.

About the author: Dr. Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou is Deputy Director and Academic Dean of the Geneva Centre for Security Policy and Visiting Professor at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva and at Sciences Po Paris. Previously, Professor Mohamedou was Associate Director of the Harvard University Programme on Humanitarian Policy and Conflict Research and served as Minister of Foreign Affairs of Mauritania. He is the author of several books, including *Iraq and the Second Gulf War* (2002) and *Understanding Al Qaeda – Changing War and Global Politics* (2011). In 2013-2014, he was a Commissioner in the Kofi Annan-appointed West Africa Commission on Drugs.

About this Paper: This paper is part of a series providing regional peacebuilding perspectives for the White Paper on Peacebuilding. The authors' task was to provide an authentic, original and honest analysis about three questions: (1) What are the main challenges for building peace in your region? (2) What are the key opportunities for building peace in your region over the next one or two years? (3) What would be the key support necessary to build peace in your region over the next one or two years? Is there any specific role for the UN?

Disclaimer: All views expressed in this article are the views of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs and the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform, or the four Platform partners: the Graduate Institute's Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding (CCDP); the Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP); Interpeace; and the Quaker United Nations Office, Geneva (QUNO).

About the White Paper on Peacebuilding: The White Paper on Peacebuilding is a collaborative, multi-stakeholder process initiated by the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform and supported by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. It has the objective to situate UN peacebuilding within the broader peacebuilding universe and to articulate visions for the future for building peace in violent and fragile contexts. The White Paper places peacebuilding within the changing characteristics of armed violence and security, and within the practical evidence of engagements in peacebuilding contexts emanating from a diversity of fields. Ensuring a better relationship between UN peacebuilding and the broader peacebuilding field is a complementary effort to the existing work surrounding the 10-year review of the UN peacebuilding architecture and an effort to take stock of the nature and evolution of the broader peacebuilding universe.

© Geneva Peacebuilding Platform, 2015
<http://www.gpplatform.ch>

⁷ T. Donais, 'Empowerment or Imposition? Dilemmas of Local Ownership in Post-Conflict Peacebuilding Processes,' *Peace and Change*, 34, 1, January 2009, p. 11.