RESEARCH BRIEF

Africa's conflicts and natural resources: a vicious cycle

Mo Ibrahim Foundation

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INTRODUCTION: ACROSS THE WORLD, CONFLICT IS BACK

The 2025 Ibrahim Governance Weekend (IGW), was held in Marrakech, Morocco. The main focus was on the need for and the best ways to leverage Africa's domestic resources in order to finance *The Africa We Want*. A key point emerged from the strong and lively debate: there will be no efficient and sustained leveraging of Africa's own resources as long as insecurity prevails.

Insecurity heavily disincentivises any capital mobilisation by reinforcing the narrative that Africa is a risky investment destination. Africa's worsening security environment is the elephant in the room that deters investment and threatens the slow but steady progress made in governance over the decades.

Rising insecurity is not a uniquely African problem. Throughout the world, there is a resurgence in all varieties of conflict from the Ukraine-Russia war to the Israel-Gaza conflict. But what is unique to Africa is its specific link to resource competition and the fact that this growing insecurity threatens any progress on the road to economic and social development, which are still far from being achieved.

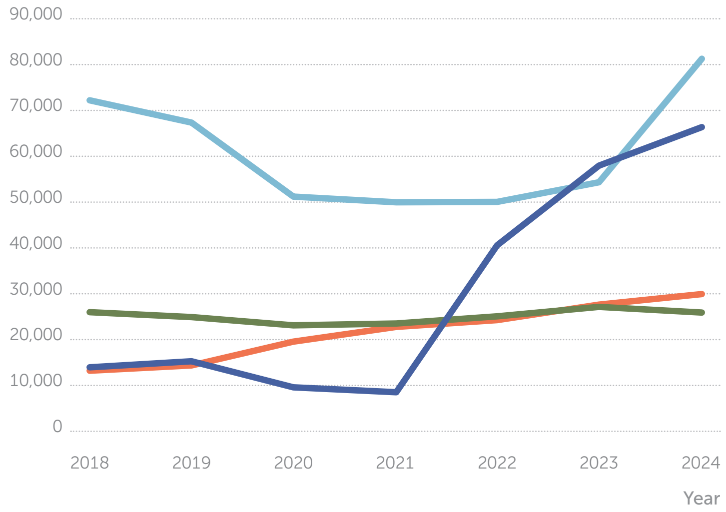
Indeed, across the continent, only 6% of the SDGs are on track to be met by the 2030 deadline in less than five years. 600 million people still lack access to energy, without which there will be no progress in education or health, no relevant job prospects and no sustainable and equitable development.[1] These security crises threaten decades of social and economic development and undermine the continent's capacity to leverage its own resources. The latest 2024 Ibrahim Index of African Governance (IIAG) clearly outlined insecurity as a major threat to overall governance progress which has been slowing down for some years and has come to a halt.

This brief aims to highlight both the role of increased resource competition in conflict and the impact of conflict on the continent's capacity to leverage its own resources.

> Africa's security environment and domestic resources are locked in a deathly grip. Many conflicts are fuelled by the fight for domestic resources which further limits the continent's ability to leverage these resources to finance its development.

Violent incidents are on the rise worldwide

World regions: number of political violence events (2018-2024)



UNDESA classifies Israel and Palestine as part of Western Asia, hence the spike in Asia's trendline from 2023.[2]

World region

- Asia
- Europe
- Africa
- Latin America and the Caribbean

Source: MIF based on ACLED (2018-2024)

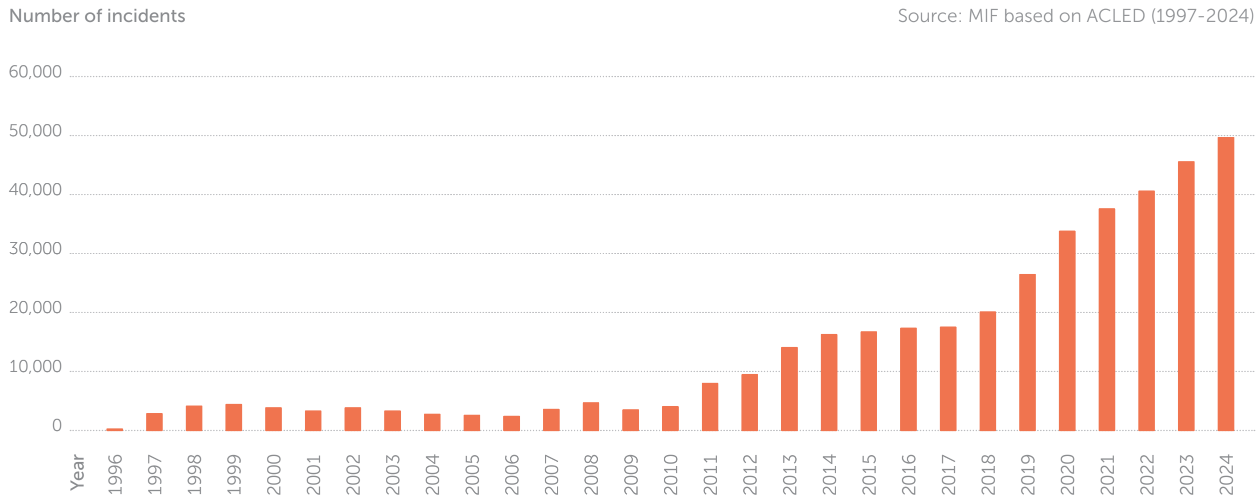
Insecurity is on the rise across the world, not just in Africa, and the dynamics are changing. Whereas in previous decades continents faced waves of instability and isolated hotspots of insecurity, in 2025 many continents face simultaneous conflict across several countries. As a result of the collapsing liberal order, the decline of the US as a hegemon and the crises within the current historical multilateral system, disorderly competition and the rise of new middle powers are opening up space for chaos and conflict. Most world regions have seen an increase in the number of violent events recorded in their countries between 2018 and 2024.

- Europe registered the largest spike in violent incidents during this period, primarily attributable to the Russia-Ukraine conflict which began in early 2022.
- Asia begins the period with a marked decline in incidents but as of 2023 enters an upward trend, mainly driven by the ongoing Israel-Gaza conflict.
- Violence levels remain largely stable in Latin America and the Caribbean throughout the period.
- Africa conforms to the trend of rising insecurity, reporting more violent incidents in 2024 than in 2018. In fact, the total number of reported politically violent incidents more than doubled in Africa, going from 13,233 to 29,760 in 2024.
- Although security conditions have deteriorated in Africa, they are not doing so at a more alarming rate than in other world regions. Although concerning, the uptick in Africa is much less severe than in Europe, or in Asia since 2023.

Africa's specific deadlock

Security incidents are on the rise in Africa. Numerous long-standing and multifaceted causes make it difficult to isolate one single driver. However, increased resource competition emerges as a specific and key driver of conflict. Simultaneously, these conflicts have become a major impediment in leveraging Africa's domestic resources for sustainable, equitable development.

Africa: all security incidents* (1997-2024)



* Contains Battles, Violence against Civilians, Explosions/Remote Violence, Protests, Riots. Strategic Developments.

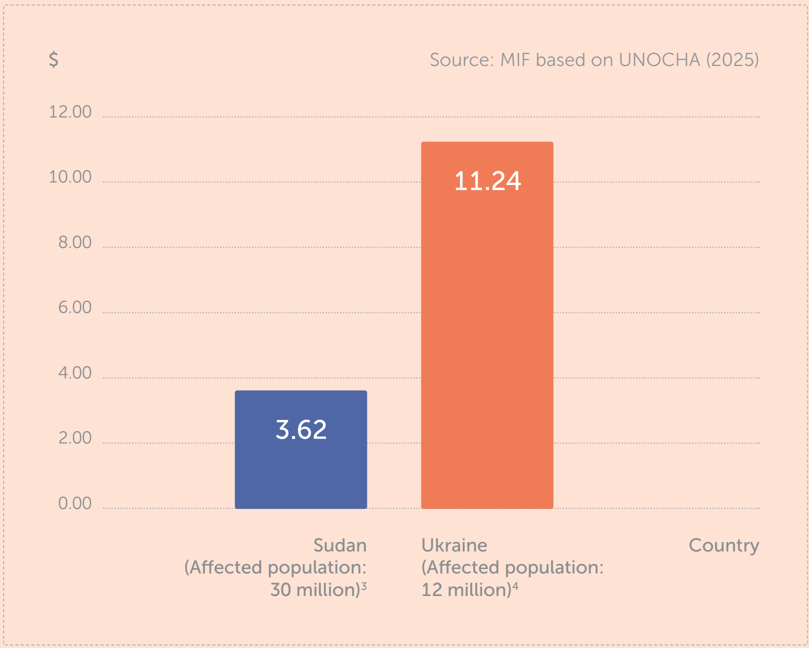
According to ACLED, the frequency of security incidents in Africa has increased significantly from 1997 to 2024, including both violent and non-violent incidents. Spikes first appeared in 2012-2018 and then again between 2019-2024, with notable spikes in security incident frequency.

Even accounting for likely improvements in ACLED data coverage, more security incidents have occurred in the continent in the last five years than in the first 14 years.

The total number of security incidents in Africa increased by 87% between 2019 and 2024

Comparing numbers: Sudan, Ukraine and Gaza

Sudan & Ukraine: estimates for humanitarian assistance received* per capita (2025)



According to UNOCHA, Sudan received $108.4 million, and Ukraine received $134.9 million in total pooled humanitarian funding in 2025[5]

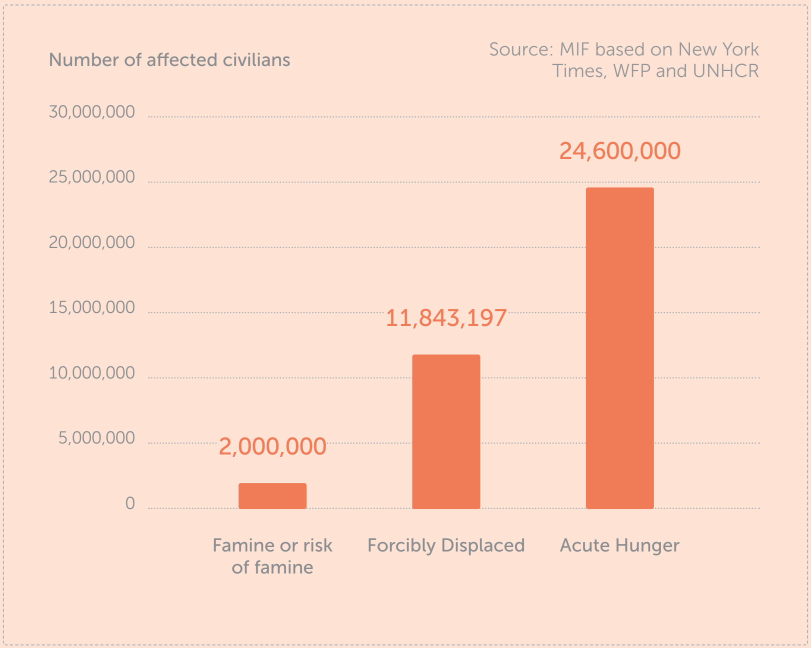
* Funding data accurate as of 10.10.2025. Funding data comprised of Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) and Country-Based Pooled Funds (CBPF)

Conflicts in Africa remain under-reported by global media and generate less attention, resulting in less aid and humanitarian assistance becoming available to governments to reduce the burden on their own resources.

Available funding data from UNOCHA suggests that Sudan and Ukraine are receiving similar amounts of humanitarian assistance in 2025 from the UN's Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) and Country-Based Pooled Funds (CBPFs), at between $110 and 135 million per year.[6] However, this masks some complexity.[7]

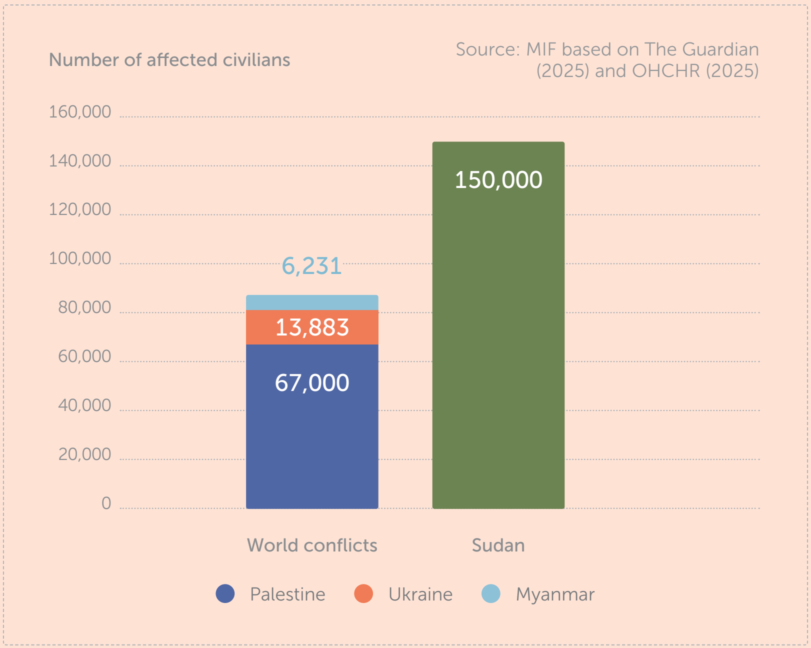
Firstly, the UN estimates that there are more than twice the amount of people classified as requiring urgent humanitarian assistance in Sudan than in Ukraine, roughly 30 million in Sudan[8] compared to 12 million in Ukraine.[9] Secondly, while the UN stated that their 2025 humanitarian and refugee response funding goal for Sudan was $6 billion,[10] only 23%[11] had been mobilised as of August 2025. Finally, this does not account for the vast differences in resources that Ukraine received in the form of military and other aid, approximately $360 billion[12], dwarfing the $1.95 billion[13] Sudan received in total in 2024.

Sudan: civilian impact estimates (2025)



Conflict in Sudan has led to an estimated 150,000[14] civilian deaths since 2023, compared to 13,883[15] in Ukraine and approximately 67,000[16] in Gaza

Civilian death toll estimates in active conflicts (2025)



The impact of insecurity on investment and the cost of conflict

Conflict in Africa carries an enormous cost, not only in human suffering but also in economic terms. Wars, insurgencies, and political instability disrupt trade, destroy infrastructure, and displace millions of people, leading to reduced productivity and long-term poverty traps that fuel the vicious cycle between lack of opportunity and conflict. Estimates suggest that African countries collectively lose billions of dollars each year due to conflict, diverting scarce resources away from development and into security expenditure. This has created a vicious cycle where instability stifles growth, and lack of growth further fuels unrest.

UNECA reports that, between 1996 and 2022, intense conflict was associated with an average 20% reduction in annual economic growth across the continent[17]

Estimated costs of security crises in African countries

Country/Region	GDP/Economic Loss Estimates
Burundi	$361 per capita or $12.8 billion over the last 20 years[18]
Central African Republic	Cumulative loss of approximately $30 billion between 2013 and 2022[19]
Eritrea	$9.18 billion over 10 years[20]
Guinea	$24.5 billion over 10 years[21]
Liberia	$897 per capita over 20 years or about $31.8 billion in total[22]
Nigeria	Around 2.6% GDP ($10.3 billion in 2020) loss[23]
Sierra Leone	$450 per capita or $16 billion over the last 20 years[24]
Sudan	GDP could shrink by up to 42%.[25] Approximately $49 billion[26] in losses have been recorded since April 2023 and another approximately $40 billion has been looted[27]

Sources: AfDB, World Bank, The Cable, CGIAR, The New Arab, Dabanga Sudan

The private sector, which plays a vital role in driving economic expansion, is particularly hard hit and discouraged. Conflict deters both domestic and foreign investors, who are reluctant to put capital into volatile environments. Businesses already operating in conflict-affected regions face higher operating costs due to disrupted supply chains, infrastructure damage, and increased security costs, and many end up leaving, often to never return.

Governments also find themselves stretched thin. Instead of channelling resources into health, education, and infrastructure, states are compelled to allocate disproportionate funding toward military and security operations. This rechannelling of funds not only hampers governance effectiveness but also erodes public trust, further destabilising political systems.

Last but not least, rising insecurity jeopardises Africa's ability to leverage its vast domestic resources, central to the 2025 IGW Forum discussions. Agricultural land lies fallow in conflict zones, mining operations are stalled or exploited, and oil and gas pipelines are frequently sabotaged. Such disruptions prevent the continent from fully harnessing its resource wealth to finance its own development agenda, leaving countries more dependent on dwindling external aid or expensive loans.

Moreover, Africa often then faces an additional layer of penalty from global financial markets. Security challenges negatively influence credit rating agency assessments, increasing borrowing costs and accelerating capital flight. While insecurity is a global issue, African countries are often disproportionately penalised by the international financial system, deepening the cost of conflict and complicating recovery efforts.

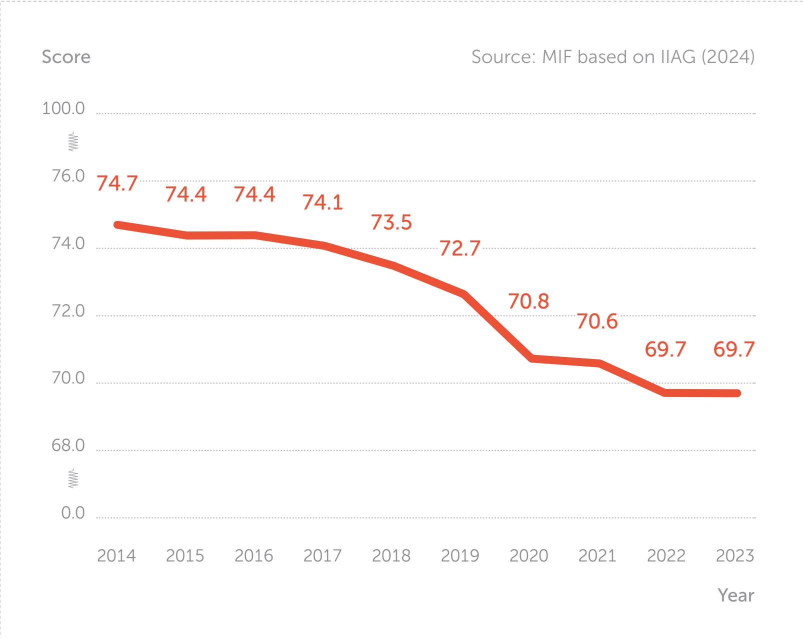
Sudan's GDP could shrink by up to 42% under the current conflict conditions[28]

THE 2024 IIAG KEY FINDINGS: GROWING INSECURITY HAS STALLED ALL GOVERNANCE PROGRESS

Insecurity exacerbates all of Africa's major challenges from resource access, climate preparedness, the quality of social safety nets, secure employment and other key development measures. It erodes Africa's global standing, resulting in various economic damages, as well as sharply downgrading credit ratings and disincentivising private investment, on top of the obvious, disastrous humanitarian consequences.

Covering the decade 2014-2023, the 2024 IIAG provides a bleak overview of Africa's security trajectory. The *Security & Safety* sub-category is the most declined of the IIAG's 16 sub-categories, deteriorating by -5.0 points over the decade between 2014 and 2023 at the continental average level.

Africa: *Security & Safety* score (2014-2023)

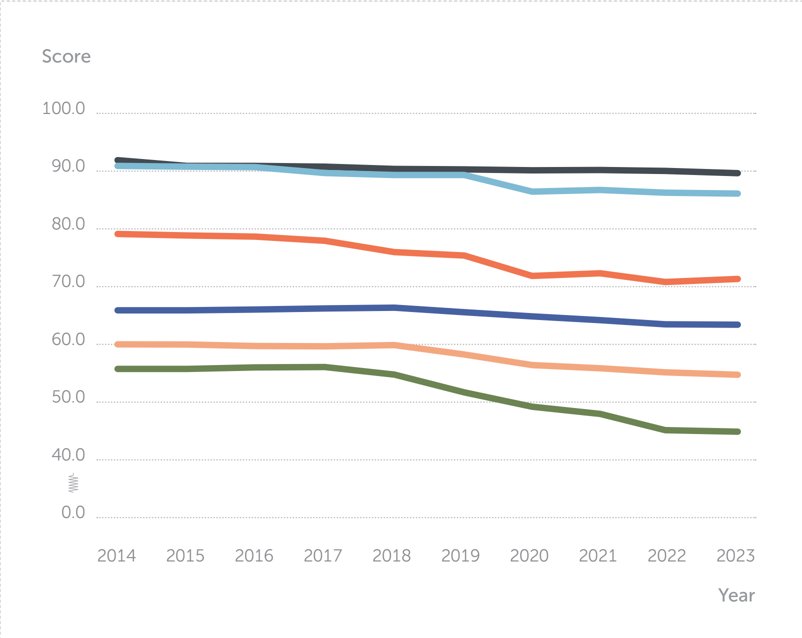


Security & Safety is the most declined sub-category in the 2024 IIAG, declining by -5.0 points over the 2014-2023 decade

Between 2014 and 2023, 43 countries registered a decline in *Security & Safety*, compared to only 11 countries that registered progress. While the African average score for the *Security & Safety* sub-category remained relatively stable between 2014 and 2017. The majority of the steep -5.0 point decline reported over the decade was registered from 2018, highlighting that it is only since then that the security environment began to strongly deteriorate.

This recent worsening security trend across the continent threatens decades of vital progress in governance.

Africa: *Security & Safety* indicators, scores (2014-2023)



Every indicator within the *Security & Safety* sub-category has declined since 2018

Indicators

- Absence of Forced Migration
- Absence of Armed Conflict
- Absence of Violence against Civilians
- Absence of Crime
- Absence of Human Trafficking & Forced Labour
- Public Perception of Security & Safety

Source: MIF based on IIAG (2024)

Among the 11 countries that reported progress in the sub-category: Algeria, Central African Republic, Egypt, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, Tanzania, and Zambia, most of these did so from a low score base.

For example, the continental average for *Security & Safety* was 74.7 in 2014 – these countries, particularly Libya, South Sudan and Central African Republic remained at a very low score base at the end of the decade, scoring 43.0, 40.8 and 40.6 respectively in 2014.

THE LINK BETWEEN RESOURCE COMPETITION AND CONFLICT: SUDAN, THE SAHEL AND DR CONGO

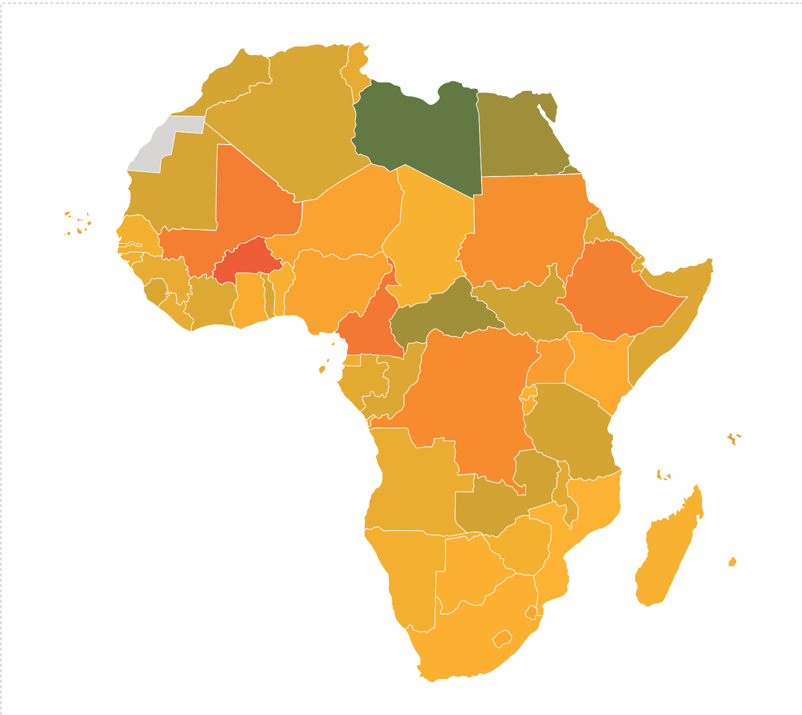
African conflicts are often linked to the continent's vast resource wealth and a renewed interest from non-African stakeholders in these resources. This resource competition acts as a driver of conflict which then becomes a major impediment to the continent's ability to leverage its domestic resources.

The definition of resource conflict in Africa is extremely broad, ranging from pastoralist conflicts over land, livestock and water access to foreign actors vying for influence over governments to gain preferential access to critical minerals and other valuable resources. These conflicts encompass a range of state and non-state actors, a spectrum of motivations from terror groups to armed criminals to large foreign corporations. All act as destabilising forces on a country's ability to control and leverage its resources.

There is a specifically concerning vicious cycle of resources fuelling conflict and conflicts affecting government's abilities to leverage their resources effectively, either because it diverts existing resources to security or because it deters investment in these regions.

The following three case studies offer brief examples of conflicts that are exacerbated, fuelled or triggered by a combination of increased resource competition and poor governance. As the map highlights, these three areas have seen some of the largest deteriorations in their *Security & Safety* scores over the decade covered by the latest IIAG (2014-2023).

Africa: *Security & Safety*, 10-year change (2014-2023)



Declines in *Security & Safety* scores: Burkina Faso (-37.6), Mali (-25.2), DR Congo (-19.5), Sudan (-18.5), Niger (-11.3) and Chad (-4.9)

Source: MIF based on IIAG (2024)

Sudan

The conflict in Sudan, which broke out in its current intensity in April 2023, has led to one of the largest humanitarian disasters in recent history, resulting in over 150,000 estimated deaths and over 12 million displaced people.[29] What began as a power struggle and consensus collapse between rival military factions has escalated into state collapse, famine, sexual violence and the resurgence of long-standing nationwide ethnic conflict dynamics, vying for control over people, land and resources. The destabilising spillover effects on the wider regions have also been significant, with hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing into neighbouring South Sudan, Chad, Central African Republic, Egypt and Libya, placing pressure on already stretched resources.

The outbreak of the conflict in Khartoum specifically is another key factor as by beginning in the capital, this prompted the flight of the educated and wealthy business elite, leaving behind a war economy capable of taking advantage of Sudan's oil and gold wealth.

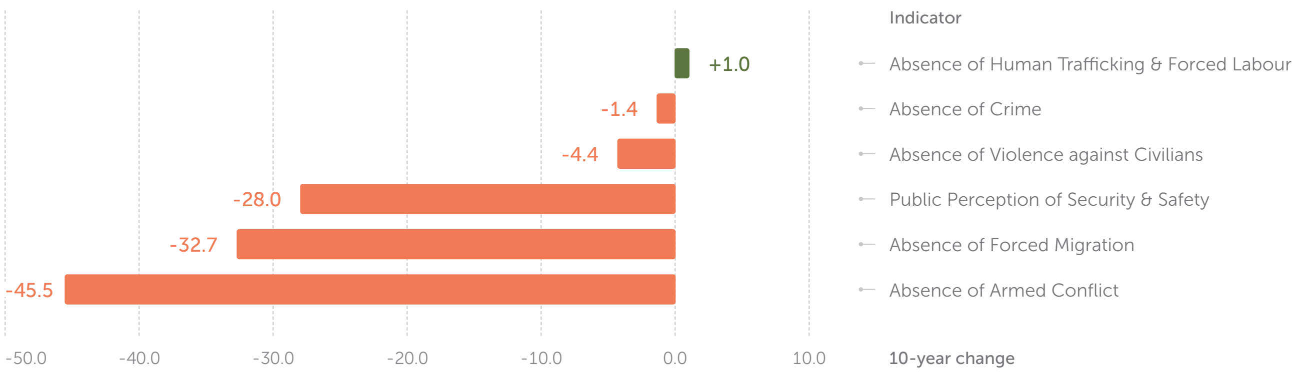
These dynamics have been exacerbated by the involvement of various foreign actors, including Egypt, the UAE and Russia. All of which have an interest in gaining regional influence as well as access to Sudan's gold and oil. Both of these resources act as major funders of the conflict supplying all sides with capital. Competition for control of gold mines and oil fields has fuelled violence against local communities, displacement, and atrocities, as both the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) have access to revenues from the gold economy.[30]

- The impact of the conflict on Sudan's ability to govern itself has been severe. All of its indicators within *Security & Safety* declined over the period, with three declining by more than -25.0 points.
- Further, according to ACLED, there were over 7,000 incidents of violence against civilians in the period of 2014 to July 2025, with the majority occurring in the last two years.[31]

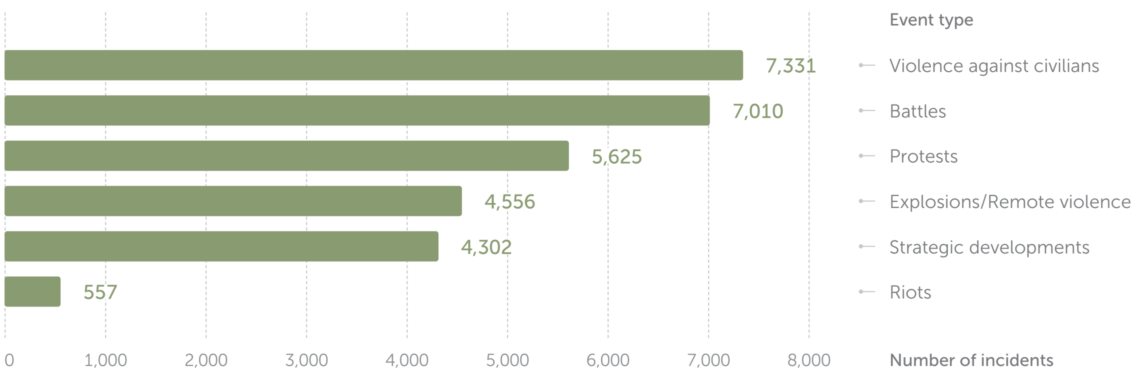
Sudan produced around 70 tonnes of gold in 2024, making it 16th in the world[32]

Since November 2020, the price of gold per kilo has more than doubled[33]

Sudan: *Security & Safety* indicators, 10-year change (2014-2023)



Sudan: violent incidents by event type (2014-2025 (July))



Source: MIF based on IIAG (2024) and ACLED (2014-2025)

IFFs thrive in conflict countries: Sudan's gold

Illicit financial flows (IFFs) are still estimated to cost Africa around $90 billion annually, according to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD).[34] This effectively means the continent is a net creditor to the rest of the world despite all the financing challenges the continent faces. With the breakout of conflicts around the continent, most notably in Sudan, the conversation around combatting and tracking IFFs has never been more urgent.

Sudan is no exception to the IFFs pattern around the continent, Global Financial Integrity (GFI) estimated the Sudanese government lost around $5.7 billion[35] in revenue trade mis-invoicing between 2012 and 2018. This measures the difference in value of exports which were declared by Sudan versus the value of imports declared by trading partners mostly in the gold and oil sector.[36]

Rampant during the three-decade rule of Omar al-Bashir (1989-2019), IFFs have persisted with the breakout of civil war since 2023. It is speculated that one of the prompts of the 2021 coup by the SAF and RSF was the reform policies by the civilian-led cabinet to phase out legal loopholes for exorbitant levels of diversion of state resources such as through IFFs.[37]

Between 2011 and 2022, Sudan saw a $28 billion value gap in gold exports

Sudan lost $28 billion in gold exports between 2011 and 2022[38]

Gold production, exports & value gap (2011-2022)

Year	Total production (tonnes)	Total exports (CBoS) (tonnes)	Quantity gap	Value of production (estimated) ($ million)	Value of exports (CBoS) ($ million)	Value gap ($ million)
2011	38.0	28.2	9.8	1942.7	1441.7	501.0
2012	40.0	32.5	7.5	2656.0	2158.0	498.0
2013	70.0	24.8	45.2	2959.2	1048.4	1910.8
2014	73.3	30.4	42.9	3065.3	1271.3	1794.0
2015	82.3	19.4	62.9	3077.8	725.5	2352.3
2016	93.4	26.4	67.0	3692.8	1043.8	2649.0
2017	107.3	37.5	69.8	4459.4	1558.5	2900.9
2018	93.6	20.2	73.4	3856.1	832.2	3023.9
2019	100.0	21.7	78.3	5634.8	1223.0	4412.0
2020	93.0	25.2	67.8	5459.9	1480.0	3979.9
2021	84.0	51.2	32.8	4672.8	2848.2	1824.6
2022	87.0	34.5	52.5	5098.7	2021.9	3076.8
Total	961.9	352.0	609.9	46575.6	17652.3	28923.3

Source: MIF based on Sudan Transparency (2024)

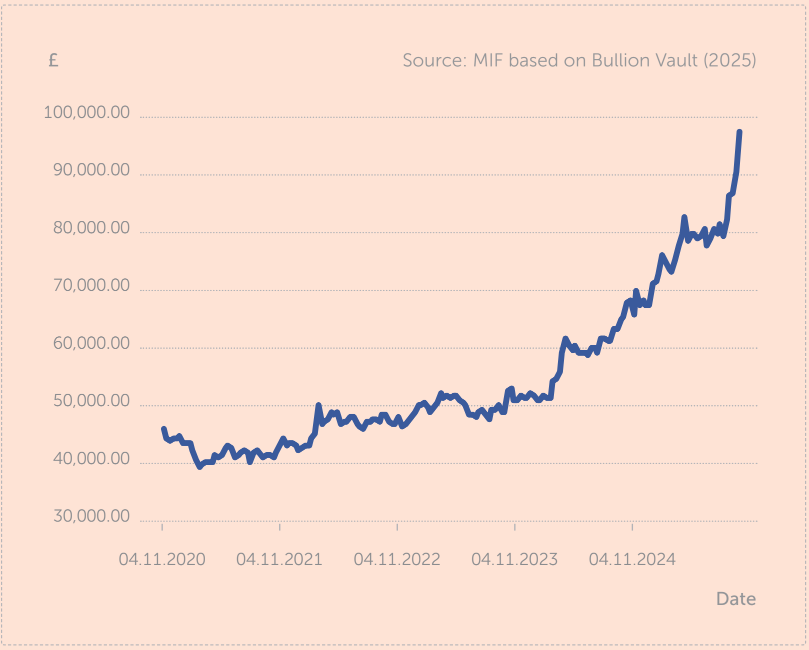
Alarmingly, trade mis-invoicing and subsequent value gaps in gold have increased from around $500 million in 2011 to $3 billion in 2022 while reaching a peak of $4 billion in 2019, the year of the ousting of former President Omar al-Bashir.

Main challenge to curbing IFFs in Sudan: controlling the gold economy

1. Significant business interests of both the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) are generated by the gold sector.
2. Difficulties tracking and reporting on IFFs which are worsened by the ongoing conflict.
3. The RSF controls Darfur gold production while the SAF controls mines in northern states.
4. The gap between exports reported and imports reported by trading partners indicates internal smuggling, tax evasion and deliberate underreporting.
5. Gold is one of the most significant commodities and is the top export[39] for Sudan but it is currently controlled by armed groups.
6. Despite official gold exports grinding to a halt since the start of the war in 2023, it is projected that 57% of Sudan's gold production has been smuggled in 2023.[40]

There is no doubt that the war in Sudan has exacerbated an already complex IFFs landscape. Conflict has always been pervasive in the gold sector, with gold producing areas tending to experience more conflict than non-producing regions.

Gold: price of gold per kg (2020-2025)



The $3 billion value gap reported in Sudan's gold industry in 2022 is comparable to the $4.2 billion required to address the humanitarian crisis in Sudan[41]

Gold is one of Sudan's most significant commodities and is now currently controlled by armed groups

Sudan produced approximately 73.8 tonnes[42] of gold in 2024, and is the fifth largest producer of gold in Africa[43]

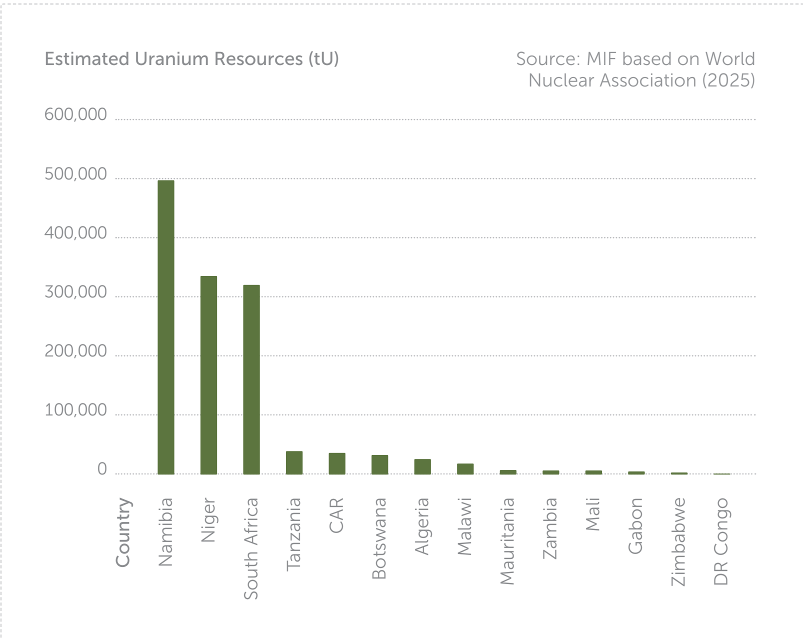
Conflict in the Sahel is complex. The narrative that the conflicts can be distilled into state vs non-state jihadists dynamics oversimplifies the role of vast and nebulous local grievances that have been weaponised in various ways. Grievances over land and resource control, fuelled by frustration with the government and ethnic or tribal disputes often act as more powerful motivators than extremist ideology.

Resources do have a critical role in all Sahelian conflicts. Although the region is one of the world's most climate-stressed regions, resulting in rising desertification, drought and shrinking pastures, it remains home to considerable mineral wealth. Mali, Burkina Faso and particularly Niger have considerable uranium reserves, with Niger among the top countries with some of the largest reserves in the world.[44] While oil remains a dominant sector for Chad, the country also has unexploited bauxite and uranium reserves.[45] Mali is also home to gold as well as unexploited bauxite, uranium and lithium reserves.[46] Burkina Faso has diamonds, bauxite, nickel and vanadium reserves yet to be fully utilised.[47] Competition between armed groups both extremist and criminal, local communities and foreign actors over the control of these resources[48] continues to exacerbate many of the conflicts, particularly as local communities pressure their governments to ensure they retain access to the benefits amid worsening scarcity.[49]

Access to and control of these resources incentivises terror groups and armed criminals as they offer avenues to purchase weapons and recruit fighters, fuelling a vicious cycle. With local communities seeing little benefit from their country's resources, this can deepen grievances that armed groups are able to exploit across the region. A final layer of complexity comes from foreign actors who often stand to benefit more from the Sahel's resources than local populations, including Canadian, Australian and South African gold mining firms in Mali, France's contracts with Nigerien uranium, Russia's paramilitary capture of Burkina Faso's gold mines and growing influence in Niger's uranium economy.

Niger has around 300,000 tonnes in total identified uranium reserves, the seventh largest in the world[50] and both Mali,[51] and Central African Republic[52] have identified smaller, unexploited reserves

Various African countries: estimated uranium reserves (2025)



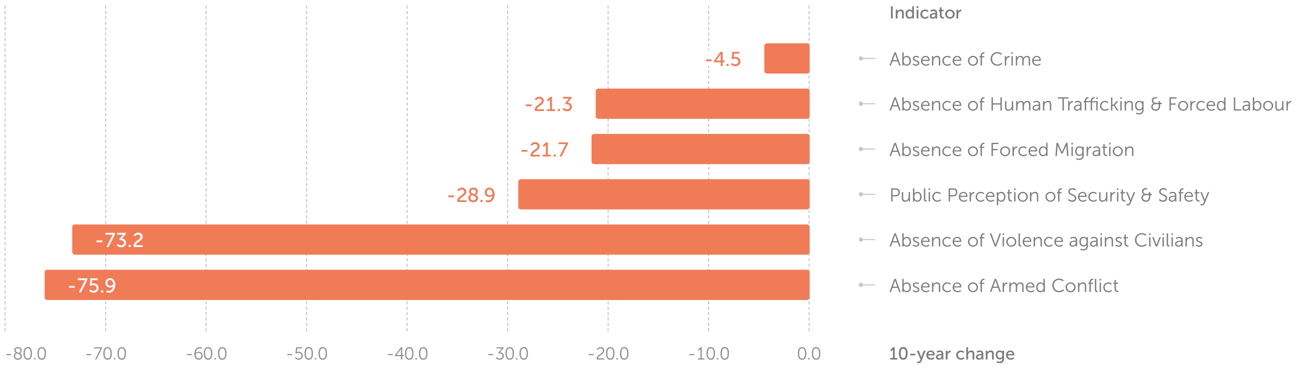
Uranium has been identified in several Sahelian countries: Niger, Mali, Mauritania and Chad. Niger has the second largest reserves in Africa, behind Namibia

Burkina Faso is the most declined country in *Security & Safety* over the 2014-2023 decade

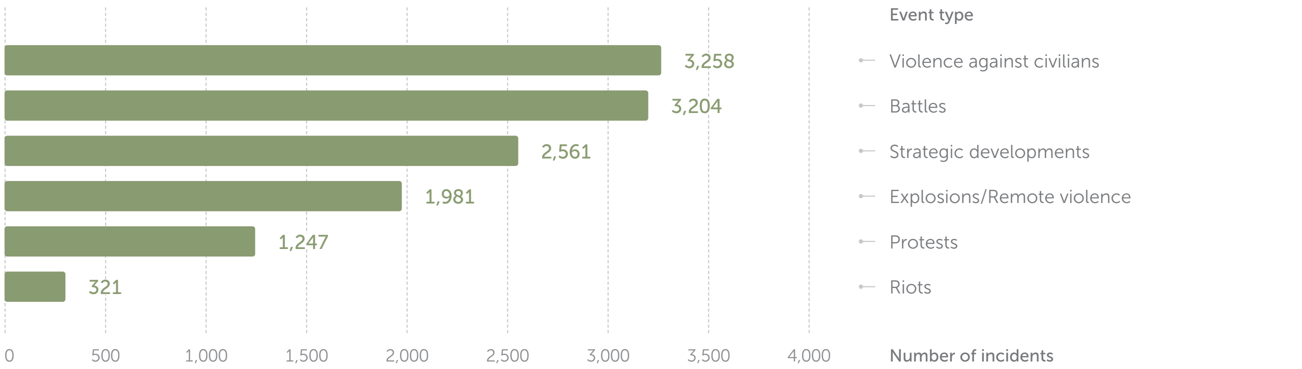
Burkina Faso has undergone several coups in recent years and reconfigured its security environment by ending old partnerships and negotiating new ones under leader Ibrahim Traoré. The results from the 2024 IIAG highlight the extent of the security challenges it faces.

- Every indicator within *Security & Safety* declined for Burkina Faso, with five out of six declining by more than -20.0 points between 2014 and 2023.
- Burkina Faso was the most deteriorated country within *Absence of Armed Conflict* between 2014 and 2023, declining by -75.9 points. Within this, a decline of -50.9 occurred between 2019 and 2023.

Burkina Faso: *Security & Safety* indicators, 10-year change (2014-2023)



Burkina Faso: violent incidents by event type (2014-2025 (July))



Source: MIF based on IIAG (2024) and ACLED (2014-2025)

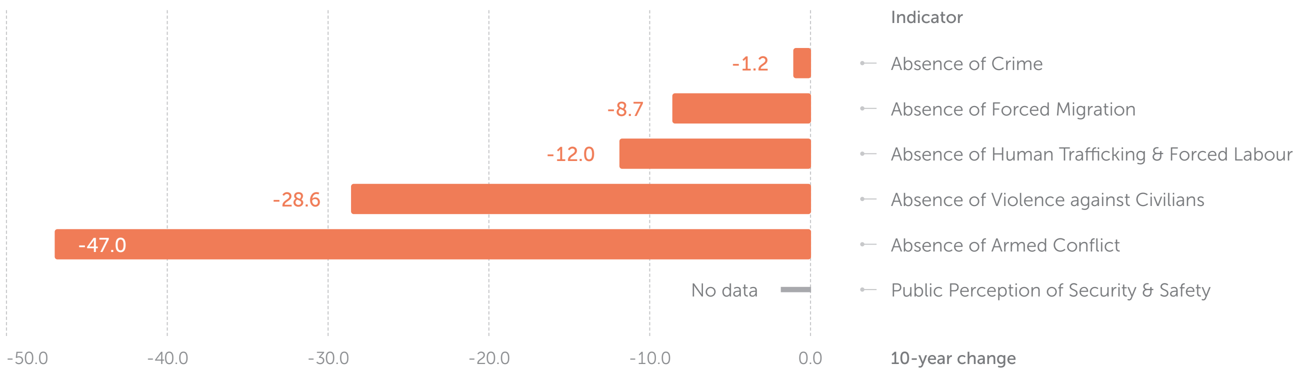
DR Congo

No country appears more emblematic of increased resource competition driving conflict in Africa than DR Congo. Home to around 75% of the world's cobalt production[53] as well as a sizeable diamond economy, the country's mineral wealth is central to many of the world's most valuable industries, particularly the electric vehicle (EV) sector. This has led to intense competition to corner access to these resources, from the state itself to international actors such as China, the United States and Gulf countries, as well as a complex array of armed groups who also compete for control of resource-rich territories.[54]

- Every indicator within DR Congo's *Security & Safety* sub-category declined between 2014 and 2023, the most severe of which was in *Absence of Armed Conflict* (-47.0 points over the decade) driven by various armed group activity, all of whom have reported upticks in their activity over the decade.
- ACLED data shows that violence against civilians was the most frequently reported type of security incident between 2014 and 2025 with 9,293 separate events registered. Over roughly the same period, the IIAG recorded a decline of -28.6 points in the *Absence of Violence against Civilians* indicator, highlighting the deteriorating security conditions for civilians often caught between factions fighting over access to DR Congo's resources.

According to a 2025 state audit, mining companies in DR Congo failed to report $16.8 billion in revenue between 2018 and 2023[55]

DR Congo: *Security & Safety* indicators, 10-year change (2014-2023)



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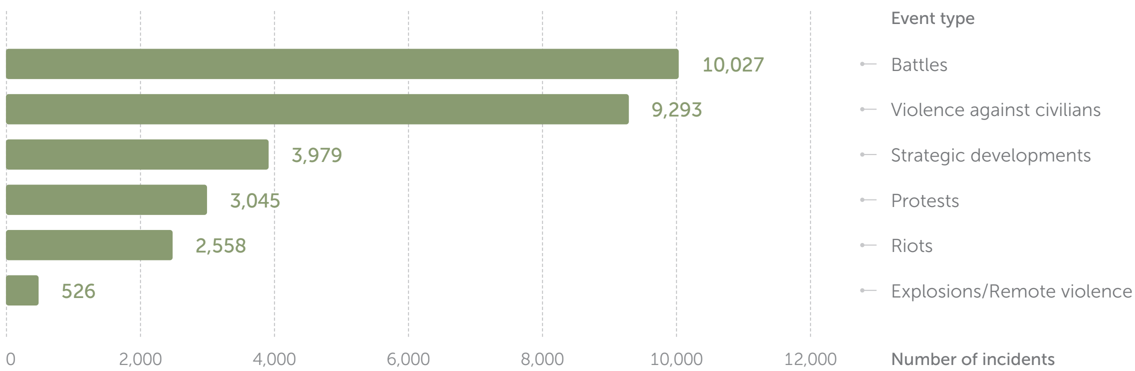

Source: MIF based on IIAG (2024) and ACLED (2014-2025)

Gulf countries continue to increase its investment in Africa and its resources

Increased interest in Africa's critical minerals has led to increased investment from Gulf countries who offer quick, liquid financing for African countries more so than traditional IMF funding, allowing African countries to diversify away from Eurobonds and other traditional creditors. For example, in 2025 alone, the UAE extended a $1.5 billion loan[56] to Kenya as well as a similar $3 billion in budgetary support to Ethiopia.[57]

Gulf investment in Africa's critical minerals sector specifically has risen sharply in recent years, with several multi-billion-dollar deals. One of the largest single transactions took place in late 2023, with Abu Dhabi's International Resources Holding (IRH) acquiring a 51% stake in Zambia's Mopani Copper Mines for $1.1 billion.[58] IRH has continued to expand aggressively, purchasing a 56% stake in the DR Congo's Bisie tin mine for approximately $367 million in June 2025, securing access to one of the world's highest-grade tin deposits.[59] The UAE struck a $1.9 billion agreement in 2023 with DR Congo's state-owned miner Sakima to jointly develop four critical-mineral mines.[60] Since the start of 2025, Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, have committed an estimated $2.2 billion to African mining projects.[61]

Beyond individual deals, Gulf governments are also setting long-term capital commitments. Saudi Arabia, through its joint venture vehicle Manara Minerals, has announced plans to invest $15 billion in African critical-mineral projects over the coming years.[62]

CONCLUSION

Conflict is back worldwide and Africa is no exception. While it is impossible to isolate single causes for these conflicts, the combination of a declining global world order, the rise of new middle powers, the continued impact of poor governance and the lasting perception on the continent that "force delivers" are all working together to destabilise various regions. Heavily driven by intensifying resource competition, this insecurity jeopardises any further progress in development and threatens the ability of Africa to leverage its own resources to finance sustainable, equitable development.

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