



The Impact of External Actors on State Stability in the African Sahel and Its Borders

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Abstract:

Over the past decades, many African countries have faced a growing increase in internal armed conflicts and domestic instability as a result of their failure to build national states. This has resulted in the death of thousands and the displacement of millions annually. More than that, it has led to the destruction of institutions and infrastructure, causing the disintegration, collapse, and failure of numerous states. This failure stems from the inability to achieve the desired development, which has resulted in widespread corruption and the squandering of resources, as well as the mismanagement of ethnic, racial, and tribal differences. Additionally, the failure of political transition processes and the smooth alternation of power has further exacerbated instability, coinciding with the efforts of certain international and regional powers to exploit and fuel these situations to achieve their goals and serve their interests. Accordingly, this study seeks to examine the state of instability in African countries and its implications for state-building, focusing particularly on the influence of external actors – especially traditional colonial powers – and the future of the nation-state in the region.

Keywords: Failed state, external intervention, African Sahel, conflict, resources

L'impact des acteurs externes sur la stabilité des États dans le Sahel africain et ses frontières

Résumé :

Au cours des dernières décennies, de nombreux pays africains ont été confrontés à une augmentation croissante des conflits armés internes et de l'instabilité nationale en raison de leur incapacité à construire des États-nations. Cela a entraîné la mort de milliers de personnes et le déplacement de millions d'autres chaque année. Plus encore, cela a conduit à la destruction des institutions et des infrastructures, provoquant la désintégration, l'effondrement et l'échec de nombreux États. Cet échec découle de l'incapacité à atteindre le développement souhaité, qui a entraîné une corruption généralisée et un gaspillage des ressources, ainsi qu'une mauvaise gestion des différences ethniques, raciales et tribales. En outre, l'échec des processus de transition politique et de l'alternance pacifique du pouvoir a encore exacerbé l'instabilité, coïncidant avec les efforts de certaines puissances internationales et régionales pour exploiter et alimenter ces situations afin d'atteindre leurs objectifs et de servir leurs intérêts.

En conséquence, cette étude vise à examiner l'état d'instabilité dans les pays africains et ses implications pour la construction de l'État, en se concentrant particulièrement sur l'influence des acteurs externes – notamment les puissances coloniales traditionnelles – et l'avenir de l'État-nation dans la région.

Mots clés : État défaillant, intervention externe, Sahel africain, conflit, ressources



Introduction

George B. N. Ayittey wrote in the renowned American journal *The Independent Review* about what he termed “Chaos in Africa,” which summarized his experience in the conflict-ridden regions of West and Central Africa. He described the continent as presenting a model of absolute chaos, witnessing the collapse of state institutions, the spread of epidemics and crime, and the breakdown of the rule of law.

Given Africa’s increasing integration into the global economy and the inability of states and their institutions to provide basic needs to African populations—due to the collapse of raw material markets and the control of traditional colonial powers over production and marketing chains—the African state has suffered numerous crises. These include the rise of ethnic, regional, and religious movements that have challenged the state’s very existence, to the point that the survival of the African state itself has become a matter of dispute.

Civil wars and tribal conflicts are widespread phenomena across Africa, extending to most of its regions. This can be traced to a complex mixture of motives and variables, summarized in political literature as the weakness of national integration in most African countries. This weakness is largely due to the deliberate “random” demarcation of borders during the colonial period—where single tribes were intentionally divided across several states in arbitrary ways—leading to a mismatch between population boundaries and political borders in most of the continent.

Most African regimes failed to handle this situation wisely and effectively. On the contrary, their policies worsened the problem, pushing many marginalized groups to resort to armed violence, either to improve their share of wealth and political participation within the state or to secede from it.

The phenomenon of civil conflict in Africa is therefore complex—both in its origins and its consequences. Numerous variables have played a role in generating instability and civil wars, which can be categorized into two main groups:

- 1) **Internal variables:** related to the domestic environment, such as the plural nature of African societies, and economic and political factors.
- 2) **External variables:** related to the international and regional environment and the roles played by global and regional powers in these conflicts.

This study will address these dynamics by exploring the following research question:

Is instability in Africa—particularly in the Sahel region—a phenomenon specific to the continent’s internal conditions, or is it a complex issue with intertwined internal and external dimensions? Does the external role contribute to regional stability, or does it rather exacerbate instability?

For the purposes of this study, the term *African states* refers to those located south of the Sahara Desert, as they possess distinctive characteristics that qualify them as a distinct analytical unit, separate from the northern African countries. Therefore, the five North African states, as well as South Africa and its neighboring countries, are excluded. The study aims to identify the general features of the phenomenon across the countries under review, rather than focusing on each one individually, while using specific case



examples where necessary to illustrate or contrast key trends.

1. The Importance of the African Sahel Region

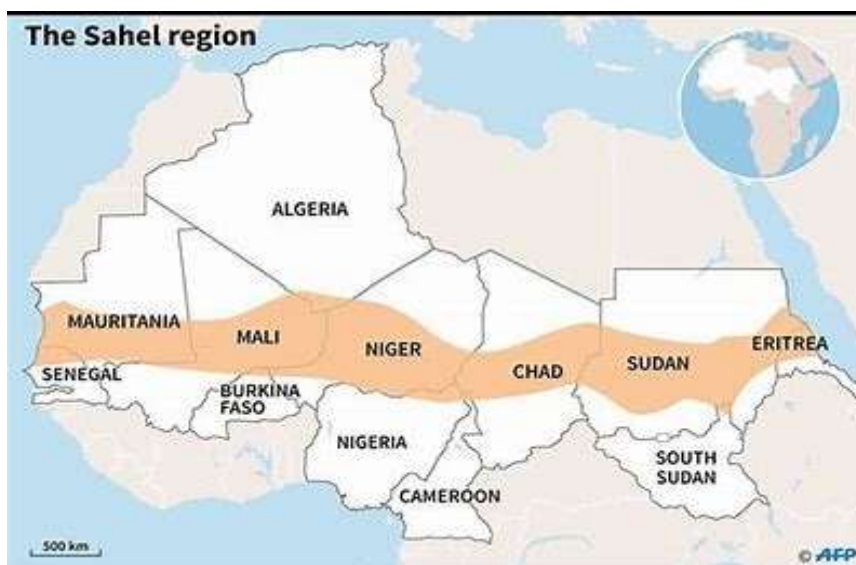
The African Sahel is a semi-arid region located between the Sahara Desert to the north and the savannas to the south, stretching from Senegal in the west through Mauritania, Mali, and Niger to the eastern borders of Ethiopia on the Red Sea. It passes through southern Algeria, Libya, Chad, and extends to Burkina Faso, northern Nigeria, and Sudan. It has become one of the key geopolitical spaces attracting international actors due to its distinctive economic and geopolitical characteristics, making it the target of what is often referred to as the “international scramble” for the region.

The African continent, which has long suffered from the scourge of Western colonialism and the resulting political marginalization and economic plunder by European powers, is now witnessing renewed interest from major powers and growing competition for influence. The United States, the European Union, and emerging powers such as China, Russia, and Turkey are all vying for a foothold in Africa, a continent endowed with abundant natural and human resources that make it highly attractive to external actors.

This competition will undoubtedly cast its shadow on the future of the entire continent. Among its few positive outcomes is that it may provide Africa with an opportunity to diversify its international relations and reduce its historical dependence on Western powers. Additionally, this renewed global attention could bring capital investments into infrastructure development projects, which

international powers (at least in theory) claim to support. However, this interest is not aimed at developing Africa per se, but rather at facilitating the exploitation of its vast resources.

As for the impact of this international rivalry on political stability in Africa, it can be said that it has produced a dual effect: while it has contributed to the resolution of certain conflicts, it has also sparked and intensified others.



However, if this competition is to provide an opportunity for the African continent to develop its infrastructure, this factor will also place Africa under the control of major foreign corporations, because these companies will exercise the utmost exploitation of the continent's natural resources to achieve the greatest possible profit. In addition to that, suspicious deals will be concluded with these companies without taking into consideration the objectives and needs of



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the peoples of the region. This explains why most oil-producing African countries suffer from conflicts over power and the distribution of wealth. Furthermore, this competition will turn the continent into a consumer market for industrial products coming from abroad, and therefore it is impossible to think positively about developing the industrial structures of African countries.

2. The Crisis of the State in the African Sahel Region:

Most African countries suffer from several crises that can be summarized as follows:

- **The crisis of national integration:** African societies are characterized by multiple forms and patterns of diversity, whether ethnic, linguistic, or religious. In terms of linguistic diversity, there are more than two thousand local languages and dialects in Africa. As for religious diversity, the African reality also shows a plurality and diversity of religions and beliefs. Alongside Islam and Christianity, there are traditional religions, which are themselves multiple and diverse, as much as the ethnic diversity across the continent. The ethnic bond in Africa is characterized by clear distinctions within ethnic groups, which explains internal conflicts and increases the complexity of ethnic plurality in Africa. Although this plurality is deeply rooted in African societies, colonialism—or rather, colonial policies—contributed to intensifying ethnic diversity to the extent that it became one of the main causes of wars and conflicts on the continent. The colonial borders drawn on European maps primarily reflected the interests of

colonial powers and ignored African interests. Consequently, colonial boundaries divided ethnic groups between two or more countries, while in other cases, they brought together groups with a history of hostility and conflict within one territorial boundary.

- **The crisis of legitimacy:** This refers to the crisis of political legitimacy and the related issues of state-building. It is clear how deeply entrenched authoritarian regimes and elites are, most of which lack political legitimacy—some to the extent of full-blown political crises—thus losing communication with their peoples. This leads to another dimension, the international legitimacy crisis, which many major powers use as a pretext to interfere in the internal political affairs of these states under the banner of political reform. The practical start of this reform, according to them, lies in accepting and implementing the principle of power-sharing, which gained approval among many peoples since it complemented internal pressures, and even, to some extent, official acceptance. Others, however, argue that the external element has no right to intervene in domestic political reform because such interference is intended to achieve a set of predetermined interests and objectives. The matter, therefore, depends on the timing and use of this intervention. Otherwise, how can we explain the involvement of companies, institutions, and even governments of donor countries—those same countries that promote political reform—in offering bribes and supporting many dictatorial regimes in Africa? This leads to



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suspicion regarding the true motives and content of external intervention.

- **Weak control:** This refers to the state's inability to monitor and exert its authority over all its territories, which has led to the sharing of power with sub-state organizations and entities such as tribes and organized crime networks (for example, in Mali and Chad). This situation necessitates strengthening the central apparatus of the state and its national branches to help build strong governments capable of controlling various regions and ethnic groups, thus forming a cohesive and powerful state.
- **Economic failure and development crisis:** African countries have sought to optimally exploit their dormant capacities and end their dependence on Europe. To achieve these goals, they have adopted various strategies, ranging from central planning to full liberal systems modeled on Western ones. After more than half a century of independence and implementing these strategies, the performance test of the state in fulfilling this role reveals the functional failure that African state institutions have suffered and continue to suffer from.

It should be noted that the countries of the Sahel region in particular suffer from an economic crisis whose danger goes beyond current hardships to its continuity, as donor countries insist that African states follow structural adjustment programs according to their own visions, without considering the social and economic realities of these countries. This forced them to abandon their social

responsibilities, such as supporting health, education, and basic goods, and to privatize companies. All this deepened poverty and deprived the state of its capacity for inclusion and persuasion.

- **The corruption crisis:** According to Transparency International’s 2009 report, more than 70% of the countries in the African Sahel region scored below 3 out of 10 on the corruption prevention index. This reflects the extent of corruption in the region, which translated into political instability and frequent changes in regimes. Even with the adoption of democratic approaches in many African countries in the mid-1990s, genuine political development and legitimacy remained far from being achieved, confirming that corruption is a fundamental element of this predicament.

Table showing the ranking of African countries under study according to various international development indicators:

Country	Rank in Global Corruption Index	Rank in Human Development Index 2023	Rank in Democracy Index 2017	Public Debt to GDP Ratio 2024
Benin	80	173	87	54.2
Ghana	80	143	52	76
Senegal	66	169	74	53.9
Burkina Faso	85	186	103	4.66
Ivory	106	157	116	34.4



Country	Rank in Global Corruption Index	Rank in Human Development Index 2023	Rank in Democracy Index 2017	Public Debt to GDP Ratio 2024
Coast				
Sierra Leone	119	185	105	50
Ethiopia	96	180	129	38
Niger	120	188	122	50
Mauritania	137	163	121	42.5
Mali	130	188	86	23.23
Cameroon	153	155	126	43.2
Uganda	137	157	98	50.2
Guinea	130	179	137	36.8
Liberia	137	177	93	54.6
Nigeria	146	164	109	48.7
Central African Republic	153	191	164	58.2
Guinea-Bissau	168	174	157	41.1
Eritrea	160	178	151	164
Burundi	165	187	153	15.9
Chad	162	190	165	32.6
D.R. Congo	168	171	163	99

Country	Rank in Global Corruption Index	Rank in Human Development Index 2023	Rank in Democracy Index 2017	Public Debt to GDP Ratio 2024
Sudan	173	176	155	260
South Sudan	178	193	Not available	Not available
Somalia	179	192	Not available	Not available

Table prepared by the researcher based on:

1. <https://hdr.undp.org/system/files/documents/global-report-document/hdr2025overviewpreliminaryar.pdf>
2. <https://shorturl.at/X4zPD>
3. <https://iej.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/IEJ-G20-Diverting-Dev-Prospects.pdf>

3. Causes of the crises in the African Sahel region:

- **Arbitrary borders:** These were imposed by colonial powers without regard for the distribution of minorities, which greatly affected state-building in the Sahel region—a human mosaic due to its great ethnic, racial, and sectarian diversity. Thus, geographically distorted countries and ethnically heterogeneous peoples emerged. Many landlocked states were created without access to waterways, hindering trade and exchanges, and isolating them from the world. This led to many border disputes and conflicts, such as those between Ethiopia and Somalia



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over the Ogaden region, between Mali and Burkina Faso over the Agacher area, between Nigeria and Cameroon over Bakassi, and between Ethiopia and Eritrea, among others. Some states were even formed during the distribution of territories and the delineation of spheres of influence among colonial powers.

- **Destruction of traditional structures:** These were originally based on tribal and noble systems. The loss of their lands and privileges to colonial powers led to conflicts between foreigners and indigenous populations, especially after independence, when foreigners became a bourgeois class difficult to eliminate.
- **Political and constitutional systems:** Most political and constitutional institutions necessary for state-building in the Sahel region have failed to perform their intended roles; instead, they became obstacles to it. The constitutions of most Sahelian states are imported and incompatible with their internal environment, people's realities, and social cultures, as they were imitations of other countries' constitutions (such as the American or French ones) and were drafted hastily, thus lacking real impact when applied.
- **Increased militarization:** The Sahel states have witnessed unstable security patterns characterized by numerous internal wars and military coups, which explain the rise in military expenditures at the expense of development programs. Major powers

exploited this situation, turning the region into the world's second-largest illegal arms market.

Economic and social challenges: Despite the considerable potential of the Sahel states, they are classified as very poor in human development reports, and their wealth has become more of a curse than a blessing, as revenues are used to buy social peace.

With the advent of the 1990s and the end of the bipolar system, major changes began to appear across Africa in various political and economic dimensions. In this context, most African countries adopted liberalism and multiparty systems as models for progress. These changes introduced new concepts and mechanisms such as political democracy, freedom of expression, free-market economy, and encouragement of individual initiatives. However, instead of achieving democracy and socioeconomic progress, African countries remain characterized by authoritarian regimes, deteriorating economic and social infrastructure, and worsening security conditions. This led to two key outcomes:

- The first was the resolution—or attempted resolution—of some international conflicts.
- The second was the eruption of a new type of conflict marked by its ethnic and communal nature, i.e., conflicts between ethnic groups within states, often acquiring an international dimension. Ethnic cleansing wars also emerged—wars aimed at eliminating an ethnic group from a particular region.

At the beginning of the new millennium, the global political scene witnessed profound structural changes. Far from certainty and the end of conflict, the world became more complex, ambiguous, and dangerous due to two



specific trends: globalization and fragmentation. While powerful or major states move toward integration and acceptance of cultural pluralism, other states or groups within states resist such processes, resulting in widespread instability and growing threats to regional and global peace. Most of these countries are described as failed or on the path to failure.

This term, which first appeared in Western writings and studies and was later adopted by Western media, became widely used to denote that “failed states” represent a threat to international and regional peace, stability, and global development. This means that the major powers did not intend to describe states that fail to perform their duties toward their societies, but rather to emphasize the danger such failed states pose to their own stability, interests, and presence in different regions of the world. From this premise arises a strategy to deal with these “dangerous” states. However, these powers have yet to complete the sentence – the essence of the whole game – which will later be: such danger must be confronted. Accordingly, new colonial mechanisms of control will be proposed under various names, similar to those used during past “colonial” periods, such as mandate and trusteeship.

4. External engagement and the conditionality of aid - “The new guardianship”:

Due to worsening economic conditions, African states rushed to obtain loans and aid from external sources of funding, whether from countries or international organizations, to cope with economic crises. Over time, these debts became a burden that exhausted the economies of

most African countries due to poor economic management, low savings rates, mismanagement of external debt, and the growing ratio of loans and their accompanying conditions and dictates.

In April 1990, *Herman Jay Cohen*, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, stated that, in addition to economic reform and human rights, democratic transition had become a third condition for receiving American aid. In June of the same year, British Foreign Secretary *Douglas Hurd* confirmed the same idea, declaring that “British aid will be granted to countries moving toward pluralism, respecting the law, human rights, and market principles.” At the same time, during the Franco-African Conference held in June 1990, French President *François Mitterrand* stated that “French aid in the future will be given to countries moving toward democracy.”

Undoubtedly, Western pressure—through bilateral relations or international donor institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund—aimed at promoting democratic transformation has come to be known as the *political conditionality* of aid and loans. Some view this as a new form of Western domination over African countries.

The use of aid as a tool by Western countries has proven an effective means of influencing the process of democratic transformation in Africa. Granting aid and assistance to imported regimes strengthens the grip of ruling elites against their peoples, while withholding such aid weakens them—all according to the will of the donor countries.

How does a state fail? Is failure always the result of external planning? How can we protect ourselves from the



infiltration of destructive operations upon which unconventional wars rely?

Conflict leads to the emergence of factions, each attracting a segment of society. As discord and division persist, groups begin to imagine scenarios about potential dangers if another faction dominates and controls the general scene. Fear spreads—fueled by forces seeking to destroy the state—and as fear grows, people align themselves with those they perceive as protectors, whether groups or individuals.

At that point, sectarian, regional, and factional identities are reinforced and begin to dominate decision-making. Conditions deteriorate further as external parties feed the conflict, turning it into a war for control of positions and decisions. Decision-makers become tools manipulated by strategists seeking to dominate the largest possible share of the public sphere, whether economically or politically, driven by factional motives.

A state can also experience what might be called *self-failure*, which occurs when such concepts take over without external intervention. What is this strategy?

This strategy aims to dismantle and transform resource-rich countries into zones of tension, where warring political factions divided along ethnic, sectarian, national, or religious lines emerge. These groups control weak territories, none of which are strong enough to dominate others. Thus, major powers ensure the safety of their companies and the continuity of raw material exports through limited military presence to protect installations and supply routes, while the rest of the country sinks into war, and its population lives in poverty, driven by survival instincts to seek protection under warring militias.

5. “State failure”: a plan or a term?

This new term is not truly new except in form, as it merely re-describes a stage that many states experienced at the beginning of the colonial era when modern states had not yet been established. It also provides a means to measure state effectiveness according to the post-World War II international system, in which the state became the fundamental unit of the international order. The United Nations was founded on the inclusion of independent states, sovereign over their territories, airspace, and seas, and responsible for their citizens and actions both domestically and internationally, within specific constitutional, political, and economic frameworks.

The meaning here is that this is an attempt to reintroduce the idea of the right to independence and to question whether some “states” meet the criteria of statehood under international law – or, conversely, to argue that such states have failed to fulfill their roles as states according to the standards upon which states are founded and continue to function in the world.

Secondly: the specialist now observes a new cycle of “colonial” periods, as the failure of failed states stems from a systematic “colonial” plan, or that the deliberate destabilization of states is part of a “colonial” scheme that has further objectives. The colonial cycle that turns states into failed ones begins by activating internal disintegration factors through multiple mechanisms, while simultaneously undermining state efforts to confront these factors. These plans often include isolating and besieging target states politically, diplomatically, and economically, until their capacities erode internationally and they reach a state of



total failure – what is now referred to as the fourth-generation warfare.

Matters usually begin modestly, through actions and developments that appear ordinary or unintentional: festivals are organized, cultural works are produced under the pretext of heritage protection and studying ancient languages, or about previous systems of customs and traditions. All of this connects with other activities concerning the rights of minorities, ethnicities, nationalities, and independent cultural and linguistic structures within a single country. Later, figures and representatives of these languages, cultures, and ethnicities are invited abroad to attend conferences; upon their return, they establish associations and organizations under the cover of civil society to carry out seemingly simple, innocent, and marginal activities.

Eventually, it surprises everyone that such organizations have amassed extensive intellectual, cultural, and informational resources concerning the distinctiveness of those linguistic, ethnic, or national groups within society. At this point, international pressure begins to mount on governments, demanding that minorities be allowed to express themselves. Consequently, there is an accelerated movement toward reviving these entities, which start gaining international recognition through offices, representatives, and supportive organizations. These once-marginal groups grow internally through their external networks, gaining access to official international bodies, human rights organizations, satellite channels, and others. Thus, they move from playing a marginal role to becoming mass mobilizers, leading to a sequence in which their

strength and popularity rise at the expense of state unity, while Western plans are activated to paralyze the national state's sovereignty.

“Colonial” powers then intensify pressure on targeted governments, accusing them of oppressing minorities and ethnic groups, which later develops into accusations of displacement, ethnic cleansing, and repression, etc.

At this point, matters transform from mere cultural or ethnic differences into mass internal and political conflicts, sometimes escalating into violent confrontations when external powers decide to support such movements financially and militarily. This shift turns diversity and richness into deep political turmoil.

The media then intervenes, fueling the disintegration process and spreading the discourse of failed states, which is soon followed by direct “colonial” intervention under various pretexts: international conferences on the situation of these countries, “Friends of the People” meetings, “dialogues between factions,” and so forth.

Remarkably, these disintegration plans are not carried out solely by “colonial” powers or through their capacities alone. These states actively open the door for regional powers willing to take part in these schemes — either to destabilize neighboring countries or to achieve personal gains by intervening in their internal affairs — until the state eventually collapses into failure, unable to face such levels of turmoil and foreign (regional and international) interference.

Thus, everything occurring in Africa clearly reflects the ambitions of major powers on this continent. This has been evidenced by numerous events over past decades in different forms, such as the U.S. deployment of a force in Uganda under the pretext of combating local extremist



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movements – later revealed to be a means to secure oil pipeline routes from Sudan through Uganda and Kenya.

6. The Future of the African Sahel Region:

Some African writers, drawing on the reality of internal conflicts and wars as Africa entered the third millennium, have proposed different visions and solutions to achieve stability and prosperity for African peoples, among them:

Scenario One: “Re-Alignment”

This time, however, not behind the traditional colonial powers but behind the Africans themselves. The idea is to reconsider Africa’s political map and assign a leading regional role to certain major entities, such as Egypt and Algeria in the north, Nigeria in the west, Ethiopia in the east, and South Africa in the south. The thinker Ali Mazrui suggested that the ethnic divisions in many African regions – which have led to wars and destructive violence harming Africa’s economy and infrastructure – could be mitigated by placing them within broader regional frameworks. Though ambitious and somewhat unrealistic, this view emphasizes the importance of continental regional integration as an approach to addressing ethnic conflicts and civil wars across Africa.

Scenario Two: “African Renaissance”

Some thinkers argue that the increasing marginalization Africa has faced may, in the long term, lead to an African renaissance based on a self-reliant perspective. The late Nigerian thinker Claude Ake was one of the main advocates of this view, maintaining that the current crisis will

inevitably strip Africa of the externally imposed model of economic development – which only deepens underdevelopment and dependency – while also freeing it from the model of political liberalism that produces fake democracies.

Scenario Three: “A New Africa”

This scenario envisions Africa as the continent of the future – the continent of the 21st century – with a need to begin redrawing existing borders according to natural and human realities. The goal is to ultimately establish a balanced modern nation-state. However, the question remains: can today’s African political elites possess the will and ability to plan for such a future, or will the interests of major powers continue to stand in their way?

Conclusion and Findings:

Internal and civil wars are among the most prominent African phenomena; nearly every region of the continent has witnessed violent conflict or civil war, deeply affecting not only political life but all aspects of existence.

These civil conflicts in Africa are highly complex – both in their causes and their consequences. Regarding causes, many factors have played roles in triggering them, which can be grouped into two main categories: internal factors (such as the pluralistic nature of African societies, and political and economic factors), and external ones (linked to the involvement of international and regional powers in African conflicts).

As for consequences, civil wars in Africa have led to the collapse and erosion of states, the spread of political violence



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and the culture of conflict, the rise of refugees and child soldiering in armed conflicts, and other phenomena that further exacerbate instability.

The external factor has played the most significant role in promoting instability. Africa's strategic location and immense resources have made it a target for the ambitions of major powers, which use various methods to interfere and ignite internal wars – all to secure a foothold for exploiting these riches.

- Most African countries have inherited numerous disputes rooted in deliberate colonial policies.
- External interference in African affairs has intensified, especially after the Cold War, exacerbating instability. Key factors fueling internal conflicts and wars include:
- The colonial map that marginalized certain forces while empowering elites dependent on colonial interests.
- Foreign corporations seeking control over resources.
- The political manipulation of minor tribal disputes, combined with the proliferation of weapons, fostering corruption and violence. Foreign and regional powers perpetuate and inflame such conflicts, making external dimensions interact with internal ones – thus increasing complexity and inviting internationalization, rendering the region unstable.
- Identity issues and conflicts, as seen in Sudan, Ethiopia, and much of West Africa.

Therefore, everything happening in Africa results from deliberate, well-programmed policies serving clear strategic

objectives – all centered on controlling the vast wealth of this resource-rich continent.

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