



The ethnic factor in international conflicts (a case study of conflicts in Africa)

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Received: 30- 05- 2026

Accepted: 18- 08- 2026

Published: 22- 09- 2026

Abstract:

The field of international relations is characterised by two fundamental features: the cooperative nature of international relations and their conflictual or adversarial nature. This is what makes international relations constantly dynamic and in flux, particularly in recent times, due to the diversity of conflict patterns and the variety of actors involved. Ethnic minorities may be the direct cause of many conflicts, as they seek to assert their distinctiveness and their linguistic and religious characteristics, whether through independence or integration into the states from which they originate. These ethnic minorities have come to occupy an important position in international relations, particularly in the post-Cold War era, due to the changing nature of international conflicts. Consequently, the study of the ethnic factor in international conflicts has become a significant topic. Consequently, this study focuses on the role of the ethnic factor in international conflicts, taking the African continent as a case study due to the region's significant strategic importance. However, the ethnic nature of the continent's population has led to the emergence of ethnic conflicts, which in turn have affected security and stability on the African continent.

Keywords: ethnic groups, conflict, international conflict, the African continent

Introduction :

Since the end of the Cold War, international relations have undergone profound changes, with the traditional nature of conflicts between states receding to make way for a new pattern of internal conflicts with international ramifications. Foremost among these are conflicts with an ethnic dimension. Ethnicity, defined as belonging to a human group sharing common cultural,

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linguistic or religious characteristics, is no longer merely a neutral identity factor; rather, it has become a political and social variable with a profound impact on the stability of states and the unity of societies.

Historical and contemporary experiences have shown that the ethnic factor can be a source of enrichment for cultural diversity if managed within strong institutions and fair integration mechanisms; however, it may conversely become a factor contributing to the spread of conflicts. The danger of this factor lies in the fact that it transcends national borders, as it often invites external intervention under the pretext of protecting minorities or maintaining international peace. Furthermore, ethnic conflicts are not confined to the identity dimension, but intersect with other considerations such as competition over natural resources, institutional fragility, and the weakness of international mediation mechanisms.

This makes the study of the ethnic factor in international conflicts a scientific necessity for understanding the dynamics of conflict in tense regions such as Africa and Asia

The subject of this study focus on the role of the ethnic factor in international conflicts, providing an overview of ethnicity and illustrating how it can give rise to ethnic conflict. This is achieved by examining the specific characteristics of this phenomenon, followed by an analysis of the African context to ascertain the true role of the ethnic factor in the spread of conflicts

This is achieved by posing the following question:

- **How does the ethnic factor contribute to the spread of international conflicts in Africa?**

To address this question, the study is structured as follows:

- **First Section** : the changing nature of conflicts
- **Second section** : causes of ethnic conflicts
- **Third section** : the impact of ethnic conflicts on the African Continent



THE FIRST TOPIC : The Changing Nature of Conflicts

From international conflicts between states to internal conflicts between the state and domestic actors, we will attempt to explain how ethnic conflicts can become international conflicts. We will do this by examining the demands of ethnic groups and then identifying the causes of these conflicts

FIRST REQUIREMENT: The demands of ethnic groups

Ethnicity is a complex, multifaceted and ancient phenomenon; analysing and seeking to understand it requires knowledge of the fundamental causes and motivations that gave rise to these ethnic groups. The multitude, diversity and variation of these motivations give each of these ethnic groups a particular way of expressing their demands and aspirations; some of these demands are for secession from one state to another, which transforms an ethnic conflict into an international conflict or leads to the intervention of an external party in the conflict

The problem facing most ethnically diverse societies has come to be characterised by ethnic tension and polarisation, as is the case on the African continent, which is a continent of ethnic diversity and pluralism. and there are many examples in this regard, as numerous African states suffer from this phenomenon, such as Rwanda, the Republic of the Congo, and the Republic of Mali...

There is a consensus across various research and studies on the ethnic phenomenon that ethnic groups always seek to assert and secure respect for their identity, either through representation in the political system or by being granted a special status within the country¹. They put forward specific demands on behalf of their members regarding the political system under which they live and the society to which they belong, and language, religion, customs and traditions are usually the most prominent themes in ethnic demands.

Firstly: Cultural Demands

1- Language:

The status of language within the political system is considered one of the tools of hegemony and sovereignty; a demand for official status for a particular language in the country is a demand for official recognition that

¹ Reid Halliday. Ethnicity and the State: The Kurds in Iraq, Iran and Turkey, trans. Abdul-Ilah al-Naimi, 1st ed., Institute of Strategic Studies, Iraq, 2001, p. 20.



the group speaking that language has greater legitimacy. Alternatively, demands may concern language priority or multilingualism if the ethnic group is a minority. Language plays a role in social class dynamics, administrative competence, access to positions of power, and the state's foreign relations. Examples include the rejection of Arabisation in South Sudan and the recognition of African languages in South Africa following the end of the apartheid era.

2- Religion:

is used to mobilise support for or against the political system. Majority groups call for their religion to be the official religion, whilst minority ethnic groups demand secularism and the separation of religion from the state, as was the case in pre-partition Sudan and in Nigeria. Ethnic groups demand respect for their customs and permission for their members to practise these customs.

3- Recognition of customs and traditional leadership:

Demands for recognition of traditional customs and leadership are among the most significant symbolic demands upheld by ethnic groups, even in the most sophisticated and modernised societies. There are numerous examples illustrating the importance of such demands, perhaps the most notable being the demand by the Baganda people in Uganda for a special status for their kingdom, 'Buganda' and their king, the "Kabaka", as part of the country's independence negotiations in 1960. The Baganda threatened that, should these demands not be met, they would seek independence and refuse to join the proposed state of Uganda; this threat resulted in the group's demands being met, and their leader assuming the position of head of state. Following a series of events, King Kabaka died whilst abroad, and the new president, Idi Amin, arranged for Kabaka's body to be returned to the country for burial in Buganda, a move that revived the hopes of the Buganda people. This is what granted Idi Amin legitimacy to rule and earned him a large number of supporters².

Secondly: Political demands, the majority of which are:

1- Secession:

² Ibid., pp. 32–33.



These demands reflect the desire to establish an independent political entity that expresses the distinct identity of the ethnic group, or the desire to free themselves from the domination of a particular group, and the establishment of a new independent political entity, as in the case of East Timor, or secession to join another entity, such as the Ogaden region, which is demanding secession from Ethiopia and accession to Somalia, and Kashmir, which is demanding secession from India and accession to Pakistan

2- Administrative autonomy:

In some cases, ethnic groups do not demand secession but rather recognition of the distinctiveness of their community, such as by obtaining administrative autonomy or self-governance within a federation...

3- Public office:

Ethnic groups usually compete for control of the civil service and official positions within the state.

4- The land issue:

This issue represents the most prominent and serious of ethnic demands, particularly in societies that have experienced settler colonialism, such as Kenya, Zimbabwe and South Africa, as well as the Great Lakes region. These societies have generally been characterised by a stark disparity in the distribution of agricultural land, favouring European groups and their descendants, as well as the ethnic groups that support them.

Thirdly: Economic demands

These can be summarised as the demand for a fair distribution of wealth through the observance of the principle of equal opportunities among groups. As for the justifications for these demands, ethnic groups usually put forward historical or administrative justifications, such as being better educated, more competent and more experienced; thus, there are justifications related to merit and competence. It should be noted that the effectiveness of these demands depends primarily on the effectiveness of the group itself, its size, its cohesion, its regional concentration and the nature of that region, as well as the role of the ethnic group's political elite in mobilising, articulating and defending its



demands. However, the political system's disregard for or failure to recognise the demands of a particular ethnic group, or the inability of the system's institutions to accommodate the growing demands for political participation, leads in most cases to the radicalization of disadvantaged or marginalized groups and their resorting to unlawful means to secure their demands, and this is where violence against the system or against another group begins.

SECOND REQUIREMENT: causes of ethnic conflicts

The underlying causes of ethnic conflicts vary from case to case, but we can identify some common factors shared by most conflicts with an ethnic dimension. We shall therefore attempt to outline these causes in general terms:

Firstly: The legacy of colonialism

Before withdrawing from the African and Asian countries it had occupied for long periods, colonialism drew borders between those countries without taking into account their ethnic composition³.

The 1884 Berlin Conference, which divided the African continent amongst the major European colonial powers, represents a turning point in political and social development. Consequently, the borders inherited from colonialism led to the division of ethnic groups between two or more states; furthermore, they resulted in the coexistence of ethnic groups with a history of hostility and conflict within a single territorial boundary.

This encouraged the intensification of racial and ethnic conflicts in many situations. Furthermore, the coloniser handed over power to ethnic minority elites, which constituted the primary cause of conflict between different ethnic groups who perceived this as an injustice against them and a form of collusion on the part of the coloniser, as these elites became new colonisers, as in the case of the Tutsi in Rwanda.

Secondly: Policies of discrimination

These are among the key factors causing conflicts, as some governments resort to discriminatory policies towards their citizens, dividing them on the basis of religion, language or ethnicity, and restricting their participation in politics and

³ Bachir Shaib, 'The future of federal states in Africa in the context of minority conflict Nigeria as a case study unpublished master's thesis, Algeria, University of Qasdi Merbah, Ouargla, 2010-2011, p.36



the management of public affairs. In most ethnic conflicts, this rift between two groups is fuelled by political factions, whether internal or external.

Most researchers who have studied the conflict in the Great Lakes region acknowledge that the cause of the conflict throughout the region is primarily attributable to colonial policies, which consistently sought to implement discriminatory measures between the region's tribes in order to keep the countries of the region as failed states and ensure they remained perpetually dependent on them.

Thirdly: Foreign intervention

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, and the emergence of a unipolar international order, and although non-interference in the internal affairs of states is a principle of the United Nations, this is no longer the case, the concept of

states sovereignty over their territories and their right to exercise their powers freely and without any external interference is no longer available, given the growing role of governmental and non-governmental organisations, the increasing influence and power of the media in shaping public opinion, and the emergence of waves of freedom, democratisation and human rights. What is meant by external intervention here is intervention by a third state or third party taking sides with one of the parties to the conflict, and it is certain that there is scarcely an ethnic conflict in the world that is free from external interference, whether in its causes or in the factors fuelling it.

THE SECOND TOPIC : Theoretical Foundations for Understanding International Conflicts

We shall attempt to examine the most significant theoretical approaches that can be relied upon to understand social movements, which take the form of ethnic conflicts. We shall interpret ethnic conflicts through the constructivist approach, to understand the environment in which these phenomena arise. We shall then turn to the failed state approach to understand the role of the state in the outbreak of ethnic conflicts.

FIRST REQUIREMENT: The Constructivist Approach

The term 'constructivism' emerged in the late 1980s, with the writings of Nicolas

Onuf and Alexander Wendt. Onuf was the first to use the term in his book **A World of Our Making**, noting that rules and norms play a



significant role in guiding the behaviour of international actors and shaping international life in general⁴

Constructivism falls within the constructivist school of thought in the study of international relations in the post-Cold War era, which some scholars describe as a bridge between positivist-interpretive approaches and post-positivist constructivist theories. Constructivism starts from the premise that international reality is shrouded in ambiguity and uncertainty, not as a given reality, but as the product of mutual interactions, subject to human will and thought, and capable of being changed whenever necessity demands it⁵. The fundamental strength of the constructivist approach lies in its ability to provide us with an understanding of periods of transformation in international relations, as opposed to the static understanding that characterises realist theory; this is due to proposals to study the mutual influence between structure and agent.

The constructivist perspective is based on analysing the relationship between structure and agent such that this perspective can be applied to the state as a structure and to ethnic groups comprising members or units. whilst each of these ideas tended to attach great importance to the dominant discourse in society, as it both reflects and shapes beliefs and interests. Furthermore, whilst some structuralists focus on the role of norms and standards and argue that international law and other prescriptive principles have led to a breach of traditional concepts of sovereignty, the intensity of ethnic conflicts centred on the variable of identity in the post-Cold War period has been notably greater compared to the Cold War period, due to several factors, including: a growing interest in the concept of culture, which coincided with the emergence of the constructivist approach that emphasises the importance of ideas and norms; this is partly a reaction to the escalation of ethnic conflicts since the collapse of the Soviet Union. According to constructivist analysis, interests are defined in relation to identity; so when the state fails or is unable to serve as a framework for a shared identity that shapes the character of all its citizens, they resort to alternative frameworks. At this level, the framework of kinship and ethnic affiliation is considered the least costly and most effective alternative; however, interaction between ethnic groups leads to conflict⁶.

⁴ Audie Klotz and Cecelia, *Constructivism in International Relations Theory*, translated by Rachel Bouyssovet and Marie Claude Smouts, 1999, p. 2.

⁵ Abdel Nasser Jandali, *Theorising International Relations: Between Interpretive Approaches and Constructivist Theories*, 1st ed., Dar al-Khaliduniya, Algiers, 2007, p. 310.

⁶ Soumia Belaid, *Ethnic Conflicts in Africa and Their Impact on the Course of Democracy There: The Democratic Republic of the Congo as a Case Study*, unpublished Master's thesis – University of Mentouri, Constantine- ,Faculty of Law, 2009–2010, pp. 32–34.



Since the constructivist approach drew on methodological tools derived from sociology and sought to apply them to international relations, it has been able to provide an explanation for ethnic conflicts. Constructivist research focuses on the nature of the rules governing relations between states, groups and individuals.

Consequently, when analysing the causes of ethnic conflicts, we find that it

is not possible to view the ethnic group as a whole as being driven by ethnic sentiments and emotions; constructivists argue that the conflictual orientation of ethnic identity is not a given, but rather a construct managed by leaders. In this regard, Fearon argues that the construction of identity on conflictual grounds is governed by three factors:

- the prevailing discursive logic
- Elitist tendencies
- The manner in which mass action is interpreted

We therefore argue that constructivism focuses on identity as a key element in the analysis of ethnic conflicts; however, ethnic identity is not considered the cause of such conflicts, but rather the issue concerns various discourses, behaviours and policies. In other words, ruling elites and external parties exploit the identity factor to keep minorities weak and at odds with one another, as in the case of the Tutsi-Hutu conflict.

SECOND REQUIREMENT: the failed state approach

It is, in name, a sovereign state, but it is no longer capable of sustaining itself as a viable political and economic unit; it is a state that has ~~become ungovernable and~~ lacks legitimacy in the eyes of the international community.

In recent years, a number of states have been referred to in this way, such as Cambodia, Haiti, Rwanda and Sierra Leone⁷. The concept of the failed state was first used academically in 1993, in an article published by Gerald Hillman and Stephen Rattner in *Foreign Policy* magazine, in which the

⁷ Martin Grivich, and Terry O'Callaghan, *Basic Concepts in International Relations*, Gulf Research Centre, UAE, 2008, p. 221.



researchers referred to weak states that had become incapable of fulfilling their responsibilities towards their citizens, as well as their responsibilities as members of the international community⁸.

According to Noam Chomsky, a failed state is “a state that is unable or unwilling to protect its citizens from violence and perhaps from destruction itself, and which considers itself above the law, whether domestically or internationally. Even if failed states possess democratic forms, they suffer from serious democratic deficiencies and failures that strip their institutions of any real substance. It is thus clear that a weak state is one that is incapable of fulfilling the obligations of the social contract—that is, it cannot protect and fulfil the rights of its citizens—and this model applies to most African states. The majority of African states suffer from what Bertrand Badie (Bertrand Badie) as ‘illusory sovereignty’. The state is subject to the intervention of the international system and is built on the basis of importing the nation-state model from Western societies, which was then attempted to be applied to the African context. The weakness and incapacity of the African state is the cause of violence and war, as we observe that no one adheres to national unity—neither the people nor the authorities. In this case, we should take the individual as the unit of analysis rather than the state, and the Weberian interpretative model is unsuitable for applying the principle of the ‘legitimate use of state violence’, given that the state is unable to monopolise security challenges. The problem of the African state is an expression of a particular group, as the relationship between the state and the people.

In the context of multi-national or multi-ethnic states, the power of pluralistic societies is organised on the basis of language, religion, ethnicity... which weakens the state’s monopoly on the loyalty of its citizens. Furthermore, political authority represents a specific group rather than all the units that make up society, which makes nationalism relative. Consequently, what distinguishes nationalism in these states is that it is ‘governmental nationalism’ rather than nationalism based on unity; it is merely devised by political leaders to legitimise their actions.

During the Cold War, numerous analyses emerged that sought to classify states according to their power and to provide models of their behaviour that reflected this power in one way or another. Among these classifications, we note the one proposed by Sabri Maklad in his book *International Political*

⁸ Samira Shraiti, *The Impact of Failed States on Security Stability: A Study of the Relationship between State Failure and New Security Threats*, unpublished Master’s thesis – Mohammed Khider University: Faculty of Law and Political Science, 2010, p. 54.



Relations: A Study of Origins and Theories, in which he divided states into four categories.

the categories of strong and weak non-compliant states that engage in conflicts to change the existing international order, whilst weak compliant states avoid conflicts because they recognise the extent of their power and that they would be negatively affected. As for the strong, complacent states, if they do enter into conflict, it will be to preserve the status quo and avoid change. Holsti argues that the wars of the late 20th century were not related to foreign policy or to the state's position and power, but were relatively related to the state yet

connected to the position of nationalities and communities within the state; and consequently, resorting to war is no longer justified for the purpose of building power or seeking power; rather, it is the weakness of the state that has become the justification for war⁹

The strengthening and consolidation of the state is the reason for the disappearance of violence within and between states; hence, there is a correlation between the stage of power growth and the collapse and fall of the state. Holsti identified three characteristics of third-order conflicts, or what are known as : wars of peoples, namely:

- They are no longer organised conflicts between states (inter-state); when states engage in this form of conflict, they are medium-sized or small in power and are attempting to expand their sphere of influence.
- The absence of organised military fronts
- No distinction is made between combatants, i.e. between military personnel and civilians, and civilians are thus exposed to extreme violence and displacement.

Based on this last characteristic, we conclude that this new form of conflict exposes the civilian population to greater violence and creates mass displacement, which is the same conclusion reached by Rudolph Rummel in his thesis on state collapse, based on a comparison carried out by a number of researchers between the number of victims caused by inter-state conflicts—

⁹ Jean-Jacques Roche, **Théories des relations internationales**, Montchrestien, Paris, 2004, p. 108.



amounting to 36 million—and the number of victims caused by internal conflicts—amounting to 168 million.

This clearly demonstrates the state's inability to protect its citizens and its failure to

contain its internal crises, a situation we see to a significant degree in most African conflicts, particularly those with an ethnic dimension, such as what occurred in the Great Lakes region. The conflict began as racial discrimination between the Tutsi and Hutu tribes, and these disputes—which were primarily about who should rule the country—then escalated. However, all these events unfolded in the absence of a strong state, whether in Rwanda, the source of the conflict, or in its neighbouring countries, which are also known for the weakness and failure of their own states.

THE THIRD TOPIC : The Spread of Ethnic Conflicts in Africa

Given the history of the African continent and its experience with all forms of violence—from wars of liberation and wars against racial discrimination to the internal conflicts the continent has witnessed. Among the most significant internal conflicts that have occurred and continue to pose a major challenge to the continent are those relating to ethnic issues; these have had far-reaching repercussions across all sectors at the African level.

FIRST REQUIREMENT: The Regional Spread of Ethnic Conflicts in Africa

The international dimension of ethnic conflict has come to occupy a prominent place in the literature addressing the causes of the development of this type of conflict, and this has been regarded as an important stage in the development and regional spread of ethnic conflict; for when it arises in a particular state, instability throughout the region (in neighbouring states) becomes highly likely.

- **What are the mechanisms and factors driving the spread of ethnic conflict to neighbouring states in Africa?**

Firstly: Mechanisms of the spread of ethnic conflicts

Both Lake and Rothschild argue that there are two ways in which ethnic conflicts can spread to neighbouring states: diffusion and escalation.



Spillover occurs when a conflict increases the likelihood of it occurring in a second country; an example of this is the spread of violence from Rwanda to neighbouring Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Intervention, on the other hand, occurs when ethnic violence draws in other actors; a prime example of this is when the violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 1999 drew in seven neighbouring states, which intervened to support one or other of the opposing sides, Manus Midlarsky, on the other hand, defines diffusion as a specific type of behaviour across time and space resulting from the cumulative effect of independent events, and is the result of the interaction between an ethnic group and specific elements of its

environment, such as social and political factors. Spillover refers to the transfer of conflict from its initial location (national borders) to neighbouring states, whilst contagion refers to a single set of actions providing inspiration and support to groups in other locations

Secondly: Factors contributing to the spillover of ethnic conflicts into neighbouring states: The spillover of ethnic conflicts across borders is attributable to several factors and causes, namely:

1- Geographical proximity

The intervention of neighbouring states in ethnic conflicts leads to the spread and internationalisation of the conflict, as it encompasses both the external level, conflict between states—and the internal level, characterised by conflict between ethnic groups. This reinforces hostile sentiments between groups and is compounded by conflicting interests between states. This further complicates the situation, as geographical proximity makes states more vulnerable should a conflict arise in neighbouring regions. Many African ethnic conflicts have seen intervention by neighbouring states, with these states allying themselves either with the separatist movement with which they share ethnic ties or with the political regime, as occurred in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea-Bissau, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

2- Ethnic kinship:

This is a key factor in explaining the risk of the spread of ethnic conflict; in this regard, initial studies have emphasised the crucial importance of shared



origins and ethnic loyalties that transcend geographical distribution and groups, Furthermore, the strong symbolic significance of ethnic issues may highlight the importance of long-standing hostilities between groups or long-standing unification demands. According to this perspective, internal pressures to intervene on the side of a closely related ethnic group and to participate in ethnic conflict carry significant weight in a state's foreign policy.

There are many examples illustrating the role of ethnic kinship in the spread of ethnic conflict, regardless of whether neighbouring states are supportive or not, we find the conflict in the Kashmir region, in which India and Pakistan have been embroiled through three wars, and Africa, the focus of our study, we find numerous examples in this regard, including the Somali-Ethiopian conflict over the Somali minority inhabiting the Ogaden region, which is occupied by Ethiopia, as well as the conflict in the Great Lakes region

3- Historical accumulation:

Another factor contributing to the proliferation of ethnic conflicts is the accumulation of historical conflicts, whether relating to borders or states claiming territories they believe are rightfully theirs within other states. This encourages indirect involvement in other states' conflicts with the aim of weakening them, and indeed even seizing the territories they covet in the wake of the targeted state's failure. A state's intervention in an ethnic conflict in an enemy state may be the result of a protracted conflict; repeated conflicts over long periods

tend to spread hostile, conflictual behaviour across all areas of relations between the two states.

In addition to the aforementioned variable, there are two factors that contribute to the spread of ethnic conflicts:

Refugees:

Recent studies have shown that, under certain circumstances, refugees can pose a threat to regional stability by fuelling competition over resources such as food, land and employment opportunities on the one hand, and on the other hand, they influence ethnic relations

in the countries hosting them. One of the most famous examples of the militarisation of refugees can be found in the Great Lakes region, where refugees were a source of escalation in two of the Congo's regional wars. Another



example is the exodus of Hutus from Rwanda to the Kivu province in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, and the subsequent escalation of the situation there into a war in the region, following allegations by the Rwandan government regarding the existence of refugee training camps.

Arms trade:

Africa is considered one of the continents most affected by this phenomenon due to the spread of rebel movements against ruling regimes and the existence of other suspicious transactions whose proceeds are channelled into the purchase and trade of arms on the black market. Examples of this illicit trade include the trafficking of minerals such as diamonds and gold by ruling regimes. Another factor contributing to the free movement of arms is the demobilisation of soldiers : these weapons find their way either to the government or to the rebels' further exacerbating and escalating the situation

SECOND REQUIREMENT: The Impact of Ethnic Conflicts on the African Continent

The name of the African continent has come to be associated with a range of negative descriptions such as underdevelopment, disease, poverty and conflict; the latter is the most significant factor and the direct cause of all the aforementioned scourges and problems.

The African continent has, since time immemorial, suffered from the scourge of conflict, whether in the form of colonial campaigns or conflicts between African states for various reasons, such as border disputes and others, right through to internal conflicts of all kinds:

Firstly: the political and security sphere

Ethnic conflicts are considered one of the continent's most significant problems and a common factor among most African states; they add to identity crises other problems with regional implications that transcend national borders, including:

1- Tensions in African relations:

These relations are marked by tensions and setbacks between many African nations, most notably between Sudan and Uganda, Chad and Libya, Liberia and Sierra Leone, Uganda and Rwanda, and the Congo, Burundi and the Congo, and



Uganda – the list is long in this regard. This stems from mutual accusations between states regarding the provision of support to opposition or rebel groups demanding self-rule, secession, or other concessions with the aim of changing the status quo. Such support varies between political,

military, and economic forms, which the targeted states regard as a threat or interference in their internal affairs and as incitement to rebellion against the regime. The situation sometimes escalates to the point of declaring war, severing relations, or seizing opportunities to provide counter-support in these countries within a cycle of action and reaction¹⁰.

2- Africa: A Hotbed of International Tension:

Since the end of the Cold War, as we have seen, Africa has not been free from the phenomenon of internal wars, particularly those based on ethnic criteria, due to the existence of conditions and an environment conducive to their spread in the absence of public policies aimed at curbing them. Africa suffers from the rapid spread of war beyond the borders of the state concerned, due to commonalities between states such as the presence of the same ethnic groups, and other factors that have contributed to the outbreak of ethnic conflicts at a regional level through the intervention of neighbouring states, and thus this state becomes a source of threat, which begins with a threat to individual security and extends to a threat to regional and global security, even if this is not in the form of direct wars. However, the threat lies in the existence of a vast geographical area experiencing security instability, which becomes a source of violence being exported to regions outside Africa due to high rates of violence and crime resulting from the breakdown of security. These circumstances drive people to seek safer regions at the regional or global level, which risks the entry of suspicious individuals into these countries and has repercussions for national security in the host countries. Furthermore, instability in certain states undermines the vital economic interests of foreign investors operating there, Whether it concerns facilities or gas and oil pipelines. All this has had a negative impact on Africa, turning it into a troubled continent and marginalising it on the global stage, as its attention has been confined to these conflicts. This has affected its global standing in terms of partnership projects and its inability to fulfil its international commitments, leading the Western media to consistently link Africa with violence and regard it as a

¹⁰ Wissam Ali Al-Zubairi, State Suffering from Civil Wars, Internal Unrest and Coups, Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, Issue 9561, January 2005, p. 11.



phenomenon inherent to the. The following figure illustrates the number of African victims compared to other continents; Africa and Asia occupy the top two positions, and it is worth noting that Asia far exceeds Africa in terms of population density.

3- Child recruitment

Children are among the groups most vulnerable to the risks and consequences of civil wars; they face the risk of being killed, disabled, displaced from their homes or separated from their families. However, the impact of war on children has been exacerbated by the use of children as tools of war, with **the latest statistics (2025) indicate that Africa has the highest number of child soldiers in the world, estimated at around 120,000 children – approximately half of the world’s child soldiers – with 21,000 new cases of recruitment recorded over the past five years**^{12¹¹}

The availability of small arms has contributed to the formation of armies of children under the age of ten who are proficient in all forms of combat and torture. In Sierra Leone, the ongoing conflict has been dubbed the ‘war of the children’, as the majority of combatants are children.

4- A decline in African integration efforts:

The phenomenon of integration and convergence between states is, as we know, based on an economic principle: that of the comparative advantages and disadvantages of the parties seeking integration; However, this cannot be achieved within a framework of hostile relations dominated by mistrust between states, as cooperative relations and partnership require a secure and stable environment. Yet this is not available in Africa, which has not yet taken any positive steps in this regard.

~~On the contrary, these tensions~~ cast a shadow even over the functioning of existing African regional organisations.

¹¹ Abdul Qadir Muhammad Ali, ‘Half of the world’s child soldiers are involved in conflicts in Africa’, 8 March 2025, <https://lebanesemediacenter.com/2025/03/08/%D9%86%D8%B5%D9%81-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AC%D9%86%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B7%D9%81%D8%A7%D9%84-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85-%D9%85%D9%86%D8%AE%D8%B1%D8%B7%D9%88/>, accessed on: 28 April 2026 at 00:51



Secondly: The economic sphere

Ethnic wars have had a devastating impact on Africa's economy since the early 1999 to the present day, whether through their resurgence in Kenya, Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, or through their lingering effects, which have had a negative impact on the economy as reflected in several indicators:

1- Debt:

Africa is rife with ethnic conflicts and suffers from problems and crises, as it is witnessing an unprecedented escalation in armed conflicts; the continent is considered the world's largest hotspot for wars, with the world's largest displacement crisis and an increase in military spending, whilst its external debt stands at around \$1.1 trillion (2024)¹² which is approximately 40% of gross domestic product, compared to \$370 billion in 2003¹³. The reason for the rise in African debt is that civil wars are extremely costly due to high rates of military spending relative to GDP and the resulting implications for states' extractive policies, consequently, African states resort to borrowing, which is constantly increasing due to rising debt servicing costs

2. Poverty:

According to the World Bank's 2003 Human Development Report, 25 of the world's poorest countries at the bottom of the global rankings are in Africa, . Sub-Saharan Africa today comprises most of the countries with extreme poverty, according to the World Bank's 2024–2025 report Africa, and in particular the sub-saharan region, remains one of the poorest regions in the world, home to around 700 million people across the 49 countries with the most deteriorated economies globally, with

¹² Al Jazeera Net, Africa... A hotbed of global conflicts as aid and peacekeeping decline, 1 October 2025, https://www.aljazeera.net/politics/2025/11/1/%D8%A3%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%82%D9%_%D8%A7-%D8%AA%D8%AA%D8%AD%D9%88%D9%84-%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%A4%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%B5%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%85%D8%B9%?, accessed on: 27 April

2026 at 23:59

¹³ Othman Awad, 'African Problems Between Two Summits', International **Politics Magazine**, Cairo, Issue 152, April 2003, p. 215



approximately 50% of the population living on less than \$125. a day. Rwanda, for example, is one of the world's poorest countries due to factors still stemming from the civil war between 1990 and 1994, with the poverty rate standing at 27.4% in 2024¹⁴ down from 39.8% in 2017. Nor should we forget Burundi, which is among the world's poorest countries; the latest estimates (2025)

indicate that the national poverty rate exceeds 70% of the population, whilst more than half the population lives below the new international poverty line (US\$3 per day), with a per capita share of GDP not exceeding US\$490 per year¹⁵

Thirdly: The humanitarian and social sphere:

The main repercussions of the phenomenon of ethnic wars in this sphere are:

1- The problem of refugee flows:

Africa is experiencing a staggering influx of refugees, as countries are forced to open their borders in the face of the influx of war refugees, creating difficulties for the local population in adapting to them. Some may question whether there is a link between refugees fleeing conflicts and the outbreak of such conflicts in the countries to which they have fled, as the history of African wars shows that opposition groups often use host countries as a base from which to attack their countries of origin. This has caused numerous inter-state problems, particularly when political regimes are forced to strike against dissidents within host countries.

2- The spread of epidemics and diseases:

Wars provide the ideal environment for the spread of epidemics and diseases due to the various uses of many weapons, and what increases the

¹⁴ Africa News Agency, Rwanda: Poverty rate drops sharply in seven years, 19 April 2025, <https://africa.sis.gov.eg/%D8%A3%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%82%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%88%D9%85/%D8%A3%D8%AE%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%A3%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%82%D9%8A%D8%A7/%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AF%D8%A7-%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%B9-Al-Mashhad-Al-Aqsa-Al-Aqsa-Al-Aqsa-Al-Aqsa-D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B3%D8%A8%D8%B9%D8%B3%D9%86%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AA>, accessed on: 28-04-2026 at: 00.37

¹⁵ Burundi Economy, <https://time.luft.co.jp/ar/economy/africa/burundi/poverty-rate?utm>, accessed on 28 April 2026 at 00:40



likelihood of this is the presence of huge, unmonitored population clusters, whether they are displaced persons or refugees, due to the weak absorption capacities of African states and the poor provision of care resulting from poverty and the deterioration of African economies and the international community's slowness in addressing the situation. Among the most significant diseases affecting the continent, with high prevalence rates, are AIDS, with alarming rates, and malaria, as 90% of malaria-related deaths worldwide occur in Africa¹⁶

Conclusion:

A study of ethnic conflicts in Africa clearly reveals that the ethnic factor goes beyond being merely a cultural or linguistic difference, becoming a political and economic tool exploited in the context of state fragility and weak institutions. The African continent, with its vast ethnic diversity, demonstrates that the absence of sound management of this diversity leads to the spread of conflicts, as occurred in Rwanda, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where ethnic identity became a cause of civil wars and genocide.

However, analysis shows that these conflicts cannot be explained by ethnicity alone, but are intertwined with other factors:

- Economy and natural resources: Competition over wealth (diamonds, oil, gold) intensifies conflicts and gives them an international dimension.
- Foreign intervention: International powers often exploit ethnic divisions to justify their intervention or to bolster their influence.
- Weak governance: the absence of strong institutions capable of integrating different ethnic groups into a unified national project.

Consequently, Africa provides a model illustrating that the ethnic factor in international conflicts acts as a multiplier of crises, rather than a sole cause. A range of solutions can be proposed, the most important of which are:

¹⁶ Tassadit Mesih al-Din, The Specificities of African Conflicts and Their Implications for Governance Mechanisms: The Case of Mali , paper presented at the First National Forum on Peace and Security in Africa, Faculty of Political Science, 12 December 2013, p. 9



- Building participatory democratic institutions that give every group a voice in governance.
- Adopting inclusive policies that promote a shared sense of citizenship rather than conflicting identities.
- Developing regional and international mediation mechanisms that prevent the exploitation of ethnicity as a pretext for external intervention.

The fundamental conclusion is that managing ethnic diversity is not a secondary option, but a prerequisite for stability and peace in Africa. When identity is a source of enrichment rather than a tool of division, ethnic diversity can be transformed into a driving force for development and integration rather than a source of conflict.

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