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Non-State Actors in Peace Education and Conflict Management amid Ethnic Militias and Resource Competition in Africa: Implication for Regional Security

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Abstract: *This study examines the role of non-state actors in managing ethnic militias and competition over natural resources in Africa and their implications for regional security. The findings indicate that ethnic militias and resource-based competition contribute significantly to conflict escalation, state fragility, cross-border insecurity, and humanitarian crises. Non-state actors play important roles in conflict mediation, humanitarian assistance, security provision, and governance support, particularly in areas where state capacity is limited. However, their effectiveness is often constrained by weak regulatory frameworks, fragmented authority, legitimacy concerns, and insufficient coordination with state institutions. The study concludes that while non-state actors are essential in addressing Africa's security challenges, stronger institutional coordination and regulation are necessary to achieve sustainable peace and regional stability.*

Keywords: *Non-State Actors; Peace Educations, Ethnic Militias; Resource Competition; Regional Security.*

INTRODUCTION

Globally, security has shifted from a state-centric paradigm to a complex system characterised by intra-state conflicts, transnational threats, and the increasing role of non-state actors. Contemporary conflicts are largely driven by identity-based violence, terrorism, organised crime, and competition over scarce resources, with most conflicts occurring within fragile governance environments (Fjelde & von Uexkull, 2022; Ide, 2023). This transformation necessitates multi-actor approaches to security management.

In the Global South, weak institutions and socio-economic inequalities have fostered the proliferation of non-state actors, including NGOs, private security companies, vigilante groups, ethnic militias, and terrorist organisations such as Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab. These actors operate within “hybrid governance systems” where authority is fragmented between state and non-state actors (de Coning et al., 2023).

Africa remains a major hotspot of insecurity. The continent accounts for nearly 50% of global terrorism-related deaths (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2024), while ACLED (2025) reports over 25,000 violent events annually. Additionally, over 35 million people are internally displaced due to conflict (IDMC, 2024). These trends are closely linked to ethnic militias and resource competition over land, water, oil, and minerals.

Resource competition- whether driven by scarcity or abundance, continues to fuel violent conflict. Environmental stress and climate change intensify disputes, particularly in the Sahel, while resource wealth contributes to the “resource curse” (Le Billon & Lujala, 2023). These dynamics intersect with identity politics, leading to militia formation and regional instability.

Despite sustained efforts by African governments and regional organisations, including peacekeeping operations and security sector reforms, ethnic militias and resource competition continue to pose significant threats to regional security. The increasing involvement of non-state actors has created a complex and often fragmented security environment characterised by overlapping roles, weak regulation, and competing interests. While some actors- such as NGOs and community organisations, play constructive roles in peacebuilding and humanitarian assistance, others- particularly ethnic militias and extremist groups, contribute to the intensification of violence and undermine state authority (de Coning et al., 2023). Consequently, there is a pressing need to critically examine the roles of non-state actors in the management of ethnic militias and resource competition, and to assess their implications for regional security in Africa

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on secondary data from peer-reviewed journal articles, books, policy reports, and publications from the UN and African Union. This method enables broad analytical understanding of regional security dynamics across multiple African contexts. As Creswell (2014) notes, qualitative secondary research builds on accumulated knowledge to generate deeper interpretations. Johnston (2017) argues secondary data analysis is valuable for large-scale, historically grounded issues.

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Document analysis (Bowen, 2009) provides systematic review procedures, while thematic content analysis (Flick, 2018) explores meaning, context, and interaction. The reliance on peer-reviewed sources enhances validity and reliability.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Conceptual Framework

This study is anchored on three core concepts: Non-State Actors, Ethnic Militias, and Resource Competition. These concepts are fundamental to understanding the dynamics of conflict and regional security in Africa, particularly within the context of weak state capacity, identity-based mobilisation, and struggles over natural resources. Conceptual clarification is essential because these terms are often used interchangeably or ambiguously in the literature. By critically engaging with existing scholarly definitions, this section establishes precise working definitions that guide the analysis of how non-state actors influence the management of ethnic militias and resource-related conflicts in Africa.

Meaning of Non-State Actors

Scholarly definitions of non-state actors (NSAs) vary depending on analytical focus, ranging from broad governance perspectives to security-oriented interpretations.

First, de Coning, Gelot, and Karlsrud (2023) define non-state actors as “entities operating outside formal state structures that influence governance, security, and peacebuilding processes.” While this definition is analytically useful in highlighting governance roles, it tends to overemphasise constructive contributions and underrepresents the disruptive and violent dimensions of some non-state actors, particularly armed groups. Scholars such as Ide (2023) conceptualise non-state actors as “organisations or groups independent of the state that shape conflict dynamics through political, economic, or environmental interactions.” This definition broadens the analytical scope but lacks clarity regarding the diversity of actors involved, thereby making it difficult to distinguish between benign actors (e.g., NGOs) and violent actors (e.g., militias). Recent security-oriented perspectives define non-state actors as a wide array of entities- including NGOs, corporations, militias, and criminal organisations, that operate outside state control but significantly influence national and international security outcomes. Although comprehensive, this definition is overly expansive and risks conceptual overstretch by grouping fundamentally different actors with varying motivations and capabilities under a single category. (Director of National Intelligence,

For the purpose of this study, non-state actors are defined as diverse non-governmental entities- ranging from civil society organisations to armed groups, that operate outside formal state authority and exert significant influence on security, governance, and conflict dynamics at local, national, and regional levels.

Ethnic Militia

The concept of ethnic militia is central to understanding identity-based conflicts in Africa.

Horowitz (2000) defines ethnic militias as “armed groups organised along ethnic lines to defend or advance the interests of a particular ethnic group.” While this definition captures the identity dimension, it neglects the economic and political incentives that often underpin militia activities, especially in resource-rich environments. Reno (2011) conceptualises ethnic militias as “irregular armed groups emerging in weak states, often engaging in both protection and predatory activities.” This definition appropriately highlights state weakness but tends to generalise militias as predatory, thereby overlooking cases where such groups provide local security or governance functions. More recent perspectives emphasise that ethnic militias are armed non-state actors mobilised around shared identity (ethnic, religious, or communal) and often driven by grievances, exclusion, and competition over resources (Schulenburg, 2024). Although more comprehensive, this definition may overgeneralise motivations by assuming all militias are grievance-driven, whereas some are opportunistic or externally sponsored.

For this study, Ethnic militias are defined in this study as armed, identity-based non-state groups that mobilise around ethnic affiliations to pursue political, economic, or security objectives, often operating outside formal state structures and engaging in both protective and conflict-driven activities.

Resource Competition Explained

Resource competition is widely recognised as a key driver of conflict in Africa, though scholars differ in emphasis. Fjelde and von Uexkull (2022) define resource competition as “conflict arising from environmental stress and scarcity, particularly over land and water resources.” This definition is useful in linking environmental factors to conflict but is limited by its focus on scarcity, ignoring conflicts arising from resource abundance.

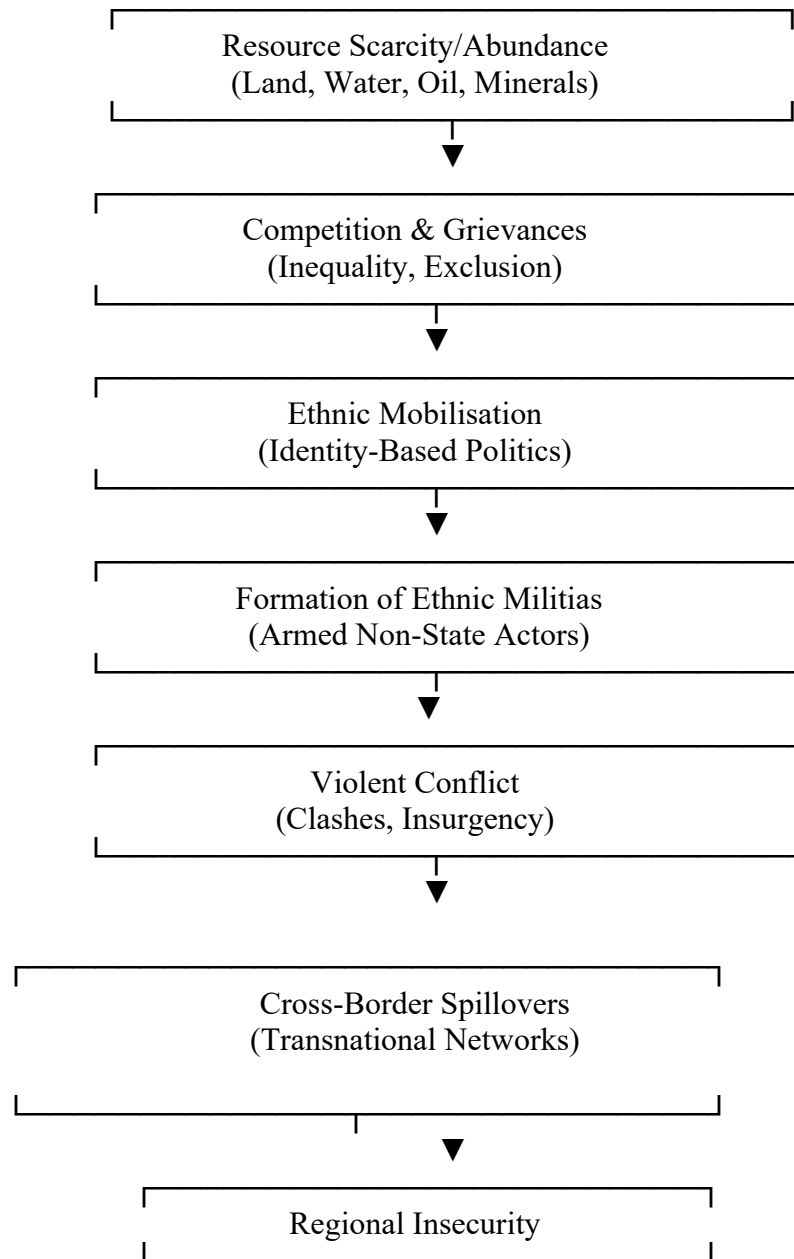
Le Billon and Lujala (2023) conceptualise resource competition as “struggles over the control, distribution, and benefits of natural resources, particularly in resource-rich conflict zones.” While comprehensive, this perspective tends to prioritise economic explanations and may underplay socio-political and identity-based dimensions. Ide (2023) provides a broader view, describing resource competition as “interactions between environmental change, governance, and social inequalities that shape conflict dynamics.” This definition is analytically rich but may be too abstract, making it difficult to operationalise in empirical studies.

In this study, resource competition is defined as the struggle among individuals or groups over access to, control of, and benefits derived from natural or economic resources, shaped by scarcity, abundance, governance structures, and socio-political inequalities.

The concepts are inherently interconnected. Resource competition often generates grievances and inequalities that lead to the formation of ethnic militias, while non-state actors- both violent and non-violent, play critical roles in either exacerbating or managing these conflicts. Understanding these conceptual linkages provides a solid analytical foundation for examining their implications for regional security in Africa

How Ethnic Militias and Resource Competition in Africa Affect Regional Security

Figure 1: Conceptual Diagram: Ethnic Militias, Resource Competition, and Regional Security Nexus



(Source: Research survey, 2026)

conceptual diagram illustrating how Ethnic Militias and Resource Competition in Africa Affect Regional Security

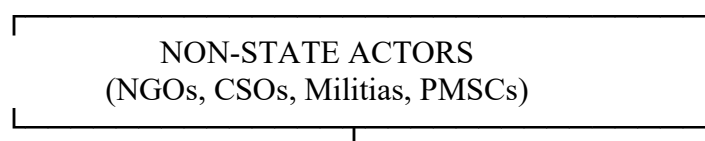
Resource Scarcity/Abundance: Ethnic militias and resource competition are deeply intertwined drivers of regional insecurity in Africa, operating through complex socio-economic, political, and environmental pathways. At the core of this relationship is the contestation over access to and control of natural resources, which often generates grievances, fuels identity-based mobilisation, and ultimately leads to violent conflict.

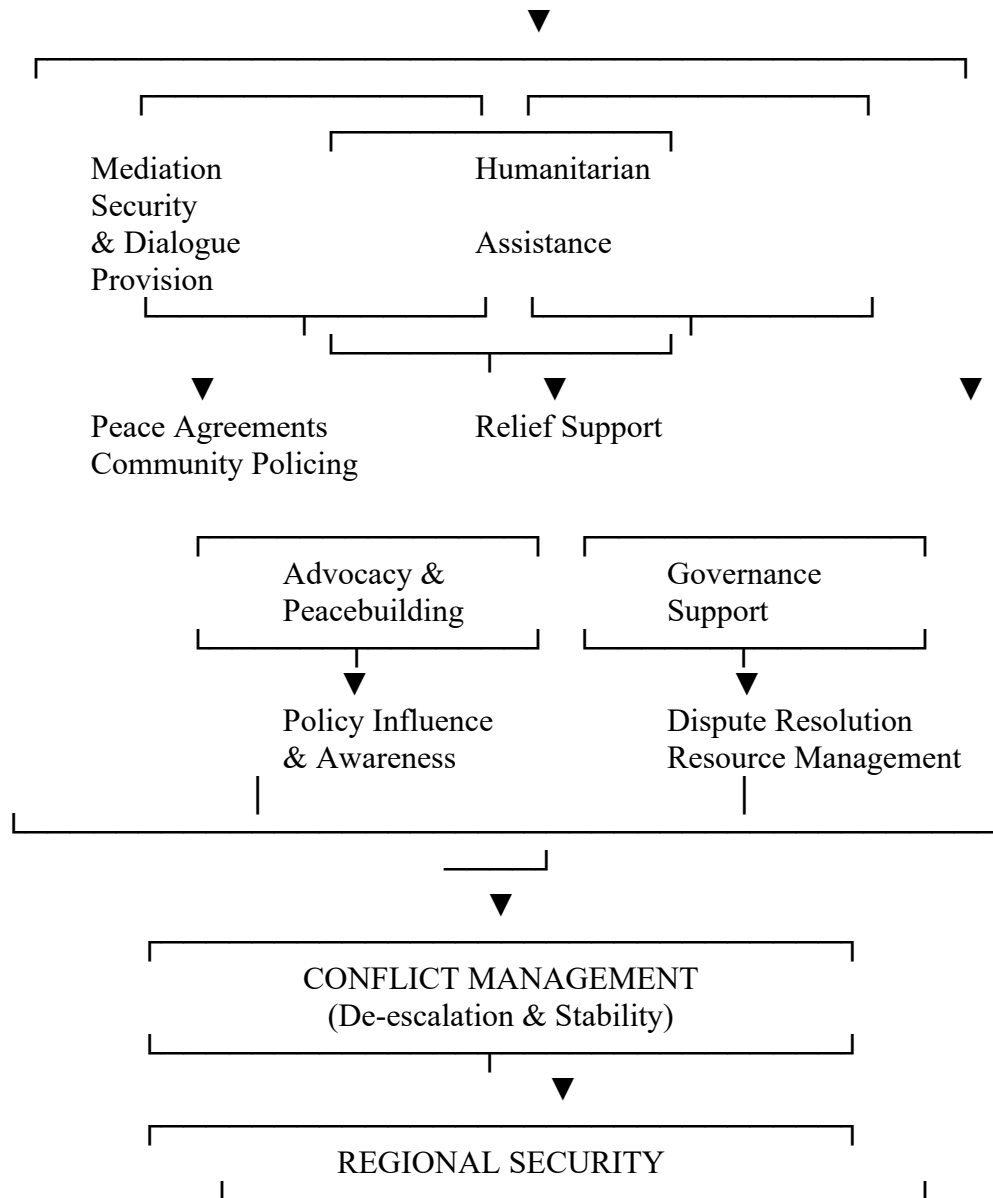
Resource competition creates structural conditions for conflict. Fjelde and von Uexkull (2022) argue environmental stress significantly increases communal conflict in sub-Saharan Africa, notably in the Sahel. Resource abundance also triggers violence; Le Billon and Lujala (2023) highlight the resource curse. Ide (2023) notes resource conflicts are shaped by social inequalities, governance failures, and identity politics. Ethnic militias escalate violence and undermine state authority. De Coning et al. (2023) describe hybrid security arrangements leading to fragmented authority.

Conflicts regionalise across porous borders. ACLED (2025) data show increasing cross-border violence in the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin. Proliferation of small arms sustains conflict. Humanitarian consequences include mass displacement (IDMC, 2024), state fragility, and governance breakdown. Overall, ethnic militias and resource competition affect regional security through conflict escalation, identity mobilisation, transnational spillovers, humanitarian crises, and institutional weakening.

Role of Non-State Actors in the Management of Regional Security in Africa

Figure 2: Conceptual Diagram: Roles of Non-State Actors in Regional Security Management





(Source: Research survey, 2026)

The conceptual diagram illustrates the central role of Non-State Actors in the Management of Regional Security in Africa

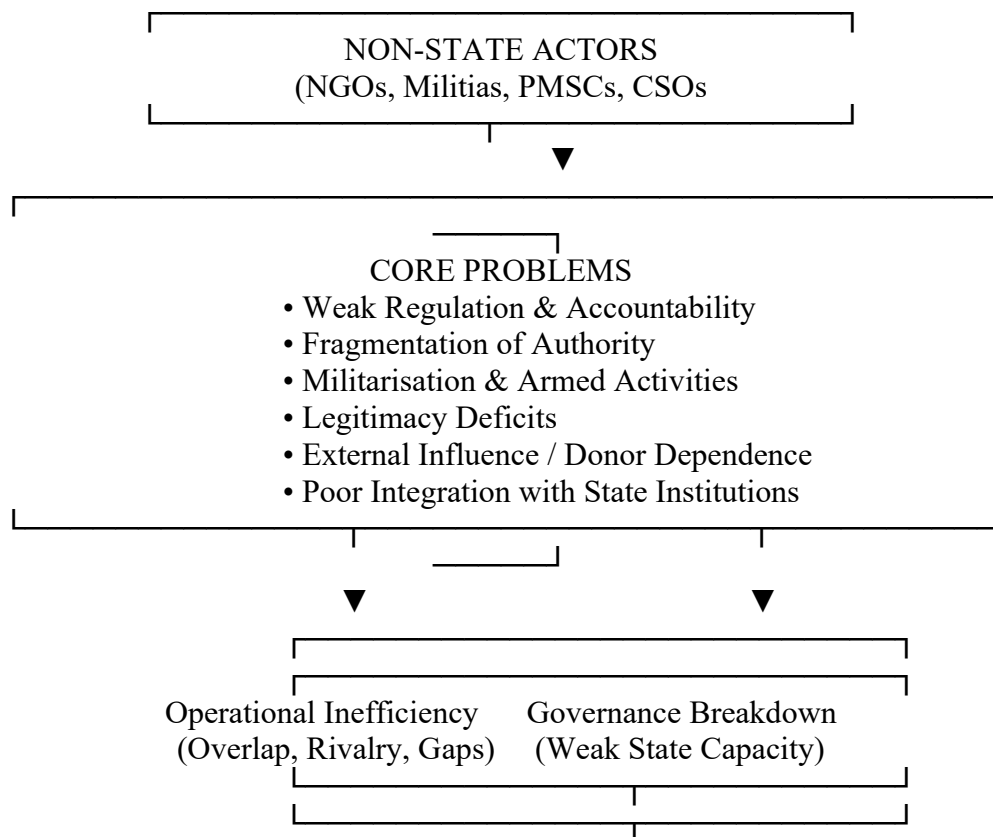
Non-state actors (NSAs) have emerged as critical players in the management of regional security in Africa, particularly in contexts characterised by weak state capacity, protracted conflicts, and complex interactions between ethnic militias and resource competition. Their roles are multifaceted, spanning mediation, humanitarian assistance, security provision, advocacy, and governance support. As contemporary conflicts increasingly involve a mixture of state and non-state actors, understanding the functions of NSAs is essential for effective regional security management.

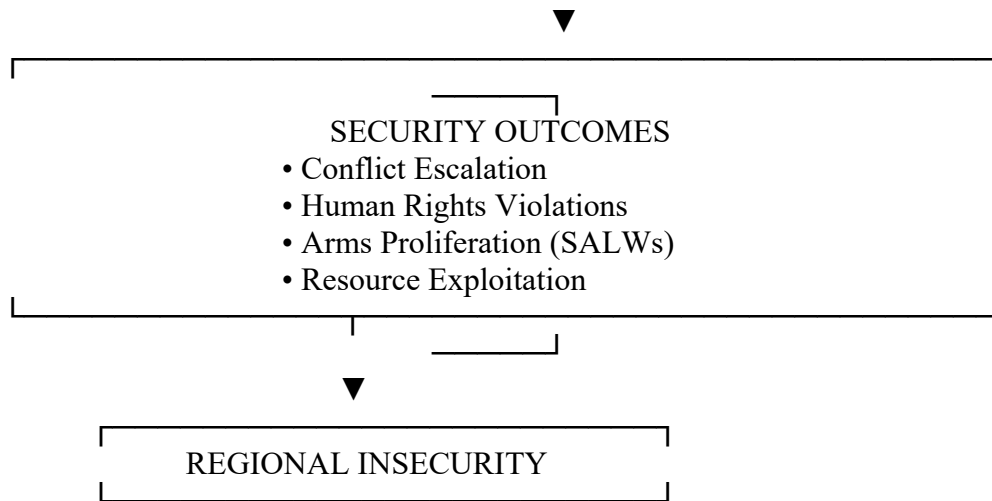
- i. Conflict Mediation and Dialogue Facilitation: Civil society, religious leaders, and community institutions act as intermediaries. De Coning et al. (2023) note local and

- international NSAs play crucial roles in hybrid peacebuilding, facilitating dialogue and trust.
- ii. Humanitarian Assistance and Protection: NGOs provide food, healthcare, shelter. IDMC (2024) highlights humanitarian actors as primary responders in conflict zones, reducing grievances.
 - iii. Security Provision: Private Military and Security Companies (PMSCs), vigilante groups fill gaps where state capacity is limited. Abrahamsen and Williams (2011) argue non-state security providers are central to security governance in Africa.
 - iv. Advocacy, Peacebuilding, and Norm Promotion: Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) promote human rights, inclusive governance, equitable resource distribution. Ide (2023) notes Non-State Actors (NSAs) shape policy debates on resource competition and climate change.
 - v. Governance Support and Service Delivery: In limited statehood areas, Non-State Actors (NSAs) engage in dispute resolution and resource management. De Coning et al. (2023) emphasise their role in hybrid governance systems.
 - vi. Non-State Actors (NSAs) are indispensable but their effectiveness depends on coordination with state institutions, regulatory frameworks, and political environment.

Problems Associated with Non-State Actors in Regional Security in Africa

Figure 3: Conceptual Diagram: Challenges of Non-State Actors in Regional Security





(Source: Research survey, 2026)

The conceptual diagram presents a structured visual explanation of the problems associated with Non-State Actors in Regional Security in Africa

Despite their significant contributions to peacebuilding and conflict management, non-state actors (NSAs) present a range of structural and operational challenges that can undermine regional security in Africa. These challenges arise from the complex and often unregulated nature of their involvement in conflict environments shaped by ethnic militias and resource competition.

- i. **Lack of Accountability and Weak Regulatory Frameworks:** NSAs often operate outside legal structures. De Coning et al. (2023) argue hybrid governance lacks clear accountability lines, enabling abuses.
- ii. **Fragmentation of Authority and Coordination Challenges:** Multiple actors create overlapping mandates. Ide (2023) notes multiplicity leads to fragmented responses and reduced policy coherence.
- iii. **Risk of Militarisation and Conflict Escalation:** Ethnic militias perpetuate violence. Fjelde and von Uexkull (2022) highlight communal conflicts intensified by armed groups mobilised around identity and resources.
- iv. **Legitimacy Deficits:** Local actors may enjoy community support but face contested legitimacy at national/regional levels (de Coning et al., 2023).
- v. **External Influence / Donor Dependence:** International funding may misalign with local needs. Ide (2023) observes externally driven agendas reduce effectiveness and sustainability.
- vi. **Poor Integration with State Institutions:** Weak integration results in parallel governance systems, undermining state authority (de Coning et al., 2023).

While non-state actors are indispensable in addressing security challenges in Africa, their involvement is accompanied by significant problems, including accountability deficits, fragmented authority, militarisation risks, legitimacy concerns, external influence, and weak institutional integration. The diagram above illustrates how these challenges interact to

produce operational inefficiencies and governance breakdowns, ultimately contributing to regional insecurity. Addressing these issues requires robust regulatory frameworks, improved coordination, and stronger collaboration between state and non-state actors.

CONCLUSION

The reviewed literature demonstrates that ethnic militias and resource competition remain central drivers of insecurity in Africa, with far-reaching implications for regional stability. These conflicts are sustained by structural factors such as weak governance, socio-economic inequalities, environmental pressures, and identity-based grievances, which collectively facilitate the emergence and persistence of armed non-state actors. The evidence further shows that conflicts linked to resource control and ethnic mobilisation increasingly transcend national boundaries, contributing to the regionalisation of insecurity through arms proliferation, forced displacement, and transnational criminal networks.

The study also finds that non-state actors play a dual and complex role in regional security management. On one hand, actors such as civil society organisations, humanitarian agencies, and community groups contribute positively through mediation, peacebuilding, and service delivery, particularly in areas where state capacity is limited. On the other hand, certain non-state actors- including ethnic militias and unregulated security groups, exacerbate violence, undermine state authority, and complicate coordinated security responses.

However, the effectiveness of non-state actors in managing regional security is constrained by significant challenges, including weak regulatory frameworks, lack of accountability, fragmented authority, legitimacy deficits, and poor integration with state institutions. These limitations often result in operational inefficiencies and, in some cases, contribute to the escalation rather than resolution of conflicts.

The literature underscores that while non-state actors are indispensable in addressing the complex security challenges posed by ethnic militias and resource competition in Africa, their roles must be carefully structured and regulated. Achieving sustainable regional security therefore requires a balanced and coordinated approach that strengthens state capacity while effectively harnessing the contributions of non-state actors within a coherent governance framework.

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