

[Understanding Contemporary Conflicts in Africa: A State of Affairs and Current Knowledge](#), by Michel Ben Arrous, geographer, University of Rouen, France and Robert Feldman, FMSO analyst. This article was originally published in *Defense and Security Analysis*, January, 2014.

Abstract

Understanding contemporary conflicts in Africa remains directly dependent on the approaches employed to decipher or interpret them. This article first examines the bias of conventional approaches (inherited from the Cold War) and then those of a series of supposedly “newer” approaches. Relying primarily on West African examples, it offers a brief overview of current knowledge, issues, and avenues for research, based on three apparent characteristics of a “new generation” of conflicts: the regionalization of wars, the privatization of violence and security, and the recourse to extreme forms of brutality. These three major trends bear witness to a rapid transformation of war and armed violence over the past 20 years, but they are not sufficient to establish a radical historical break between “old” and “new” conflicts in Africa. By concealing elements of continuity a priori, the most influential “new” approaches actually make it impossible to ponder their own limits. To that end, fashionability and struggles for influence within the Africanist field play a major role in perpetuating dominant, sensationalistic, or simplistic (and invariably incorrect) portrayals of African conflicts.