



PAAI Executive Brief No 2:

Is Africa's premier continental organization, the African Union, fit for purpose?

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Thirty years after the genocide against the Tutsi, the vow of “never again” has become devoid of meaning, given how the death toll from various wars around the world has reached an unprecedented scale since the end of the Cold War. According to the Uppsala University Conflict Data Program (UCDP), “[I]n 2022, fatalities from organized violence increased by a staggering 97% compared to the previous year, from 120,000 in 2021 to 237,000 in 2022.¹ It signifies the highest death toll since the Rwandan genocide in 1994.”² The UCDP report underlines the historically high number of active global conflicts, with 55 state-involved conflicts recorded in 2022, a significant increase on the annual average recorded by UCDP between 2000 and 2013.³ Moreover, one-sided violence targeting civilians rose sharply in 2022, resulting in around 11,800 civilian deaths at the hands of 45 different states or organized groups.⁴

The African Union (AU) and its African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) were conceived at the end of the Cold War, designed and built for a unipolar, liberal constructivist international order. However, the world is experiencing a dangerous interregnum between the dying post-World War II order and the new global order yet to emerge.⁵ Global interregnums reveal an inherent tension between commitments to multilateral cooperation on the one hand and the security dilemmas and national interest imperatives of states on the other. Such periods of intensified security dilemmas create mutually assured distrust and precipitate a “race to the bottom”⁶ that undermines international law while generating instability and volatility in international cooperation. It is during such periods of uncertainty and transitional disorder that multilateral frameworks face their greatest tests, precisely when they are most critically needed.⁷

¹ Uppsala Conflict Data Program, "Armed Conflict by Year: 2022," UCDP Conflict Encyclopedia, Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University, accessed July 12, 2026, <https://ucdp.uu.se/year/2022>.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Bäckström, Elin. 2023. "Number of Deaths in Armed Conflicts Has Doubled." Uppsala University News, June 13, 2023. <https://www.uu.se/en/news/2023/2023-06-13-number-of-deaths-in-armed-conflicts-has-doubled>.

⁵ Mehari Taddele Maru, "Beyond the 'Race to the Bottom': Africa on the Global Chessboard and the Call for Renewed Pan-African Agency," UNU-CRIS Working Paper No. 11, 2023 (Bruges: United Nations University Institute on Comparative Regional Integration Studies)

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

In Africa, conflict-driven fatalities, displacement and economic destruction have reached staggering levels – and are surging. States are at the centre of the conflicts, deaths, displacement, and destruction.

Key findings

The key findings of this research report essentially reveal the stark failure of the AU and its APSA to prevent and respond effectively to tragic conflicts and their consequences. What is more, the findings raise fundamental questions about the AU's fitness for purpose, leading to the conclusion that it is inadequate when it comes to preventing wars, atrocities and displacement in the face of the global structural shifts the world is undergoing.

The data-driven graphs illustrate how state-based, interstate, intrastate, and one-sided conflicts in Africa have increased significantly, particularly in the past decade, accompanied by a sharp increase in conflict-related fatalities, displacement, and economic destruction across the continent.

Figure 1: Key Observations



The global crisis poses both risks and opportunities for Africa. This moment presents an opportunity for strategic autonomy. Africa can redefine its global engagement by investing in domestic legitimacy and local agency. By centering political processes around African constituencies, the global interregnum offers the continent an opportunity to transition from dependency to self-reliance – a long-standing continental aspiration. There are several reasons why, in its current form, the AU requires transformation to enable this transition.

Methodology

To assess the multidimensional costs of armed conflict in Africa and the failure of the AU to fulfil its core preventive and interventionist mandates, this research employs a three-tiered methodological approach, using three critical indicators that capture both the human and the economic toll of wars that the AU was intended to prevent, respond to, or resolve.

First, it provides data on the drastic surge in conflict-related fatalities, representing the most fundamental violation of human rights and the deprivation of the right to life itself and, with this, a cascade of human rights violations.

This Brief uses decadal and five-year comparative analysis of combatant and civilian fatalities as a result of fighting⁸ in Africa during two decades of the AU – the first decade after its establishment (2003–2013) and the subsequent decade (2014–2024), in particular the last five years. Recent data and figures from reputable institutions such as the International Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP), the Mo Ibrahim Governance Index (IGI), and other relevant sources underscore major trends of displacement and economic destruction due to wars and conflicts.

Second, it offers figures that show the tragic state of the displacement of people, as displaced populations are stripped of their fundamental rights to home, land, property, livelihoods, education, and numerous other civil, political, and socioeconomic entitlements – internally, within a country as IDPs, and externally, crossing international borders as refugees.

These two dimensions of human suffering reveal the immediate and direct harm inflicted upon civilian populations caught in conflict zones.

⁸ These fatality figures include only combatant and civilian deaths from direct fighting, excluding deaths from conflict-related disease and starvation. The data comes from UCDP, which provides a conservative estimation that makes it the less rejectable conflict dataset, despite typically slow and low reporting. For example, the UCDP's figures for both wars on Tigray and Sudan were grossly deflated, and fatality estimates in the media were underreported and late to be published. This reflects a broader pattern: international think tanks and media regard geopolitical conflicts in the Global South as less significant than those in the Global North, as reporting on conflicts in Ethiopia and Sudan is far lower than on Ukraine or Gaza, for example. See following pages for more details.

Third, beyond the human cost, the economic destruction of war and displacement underscores the broader destabilizing effects of conflict on national development. More than half of the total economic impact of wars is the result of displacement. This proportion reflects not only the direct costs of humanitarian assistance and emergency response, but also the profound livelihood and productivity losses, disrupted markets, strained public services, and wasted development opportunities caused by displacement.

The three indicators – fatalities, displacement and economic impact – supported by numbers, figures and graphs, provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the catastrophic consequences of Africa's contemporary conflicts, and the urgency of strengthening conflict prevention and resolution mechanisms.

In addition, the study uses secondary academic literature, and draws on earlier policy and research work with the AU and its member states to analyse the state of peace and security. These include the Ibrahim Index of African Governance (IIAG);⁹ the Human Development Index (HDI);¹⁰ the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Index;¹¹ the Global Peace Index (GPI);¹² data on IDPs,¹³ refugees, and asylum seekers (Origin);¹⁴ and the Statistical Risk Assessment for Mass Killing.¹⁵

The data and conclusions from these indices reflect the failure of the AU in its core mandate of prevention of and intervention in response to conflicts, and demonstrate how atrocious wars, mass displacement, and massive destruction undermine its legitimacy.

Fatalities

As shown in Figure 2 below, since the end of the Cold War, conflicts across Africa have claimed millions of lives. Such conflicts include the genocide against the Tutsi and, more recently, the wars in Ethiopia (particularly in Tigray), Sudan (Darfur), and the DRC (eastern provinces). Comparing the two decades reveals a marked escalation in violent

⁹ Mo Ibrahim Foundation. 2024. 2024 Ibrahim Index of African Governance. Mo Ibrahim Foundation. <https://mo.ibrahim.foundation/sites/default/files/2024-10/2024-index-report.pdf>.

¹⁰ UNDP. 2025. "Country Insights." Human Development Reports. Accessed October 2025. <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/country-insights#/ranks>.

¹¹ Sachs, Jeffrey D., Guillaume Lafortune, Christian Kroll, Grayson Fuller, and Finn Woelm. 2022. From Crisis to Sustainable Development: the SDGs as Roadmap to 2030 and Beyond. Sustainable Development Report 2022. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹² Institute for Economics and Peace, *Global Peace Index 2022: Measuring Peace in a Complex World* (Sydney: Institute for Economics and Peace, June 2022), <https://www.economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/GPI-2022-web.pdf>.

¹³ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, "Global Internal Displacement Database," IDMC, accessed 2025, <https://www.internal-displacement.org/database/displacement-data/>

¹⁴ UNHCR, *UNHCR Refugee Data Finder*, accessed October 2025, <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/>.

¹⁵ Early Warning Project and Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide, "Ranking All Countries: 2024–25 Statistical Risk Assessment for Intrastate Mass Killing," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2025, <https://earlywarningproject.ushmm.org/ranking-of-all-countries>.

conflict, especially in the Horn of Africa, North Africa, Central Africa, and the Sahel. Conflict-driven fatalities, displacement, and economic destruction have all increased substantially. The broader trend across the continent indicates that state-based conflict fatalities have increased in multiple regions. State-based conflicts rose from 39 in the early 2000s to 50 by 2024, with intrastate conflicts showing the sharpest growth since the end of the Cold War.¹⁶

Figure 2: Death due to conflicts since the end of the Cold War

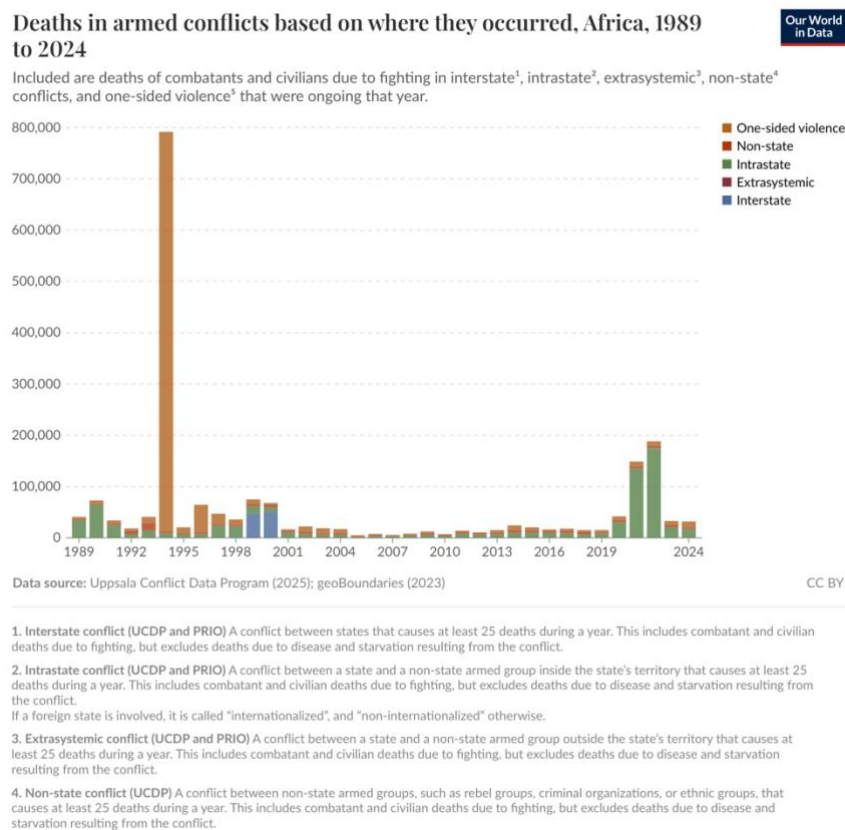


Figure 3: Fatalities in Africa 2004–2023

¹⁶ Elin Bäckström, "Number of Deaths in Armed Conflicts Has Doubled," Uppsala University News, June 13, 2023, <https://www.uu.se/en/news/2023/2023-06-13-number-of-deaths-in-armed-conflicts-has-doubled>; Shawn Davies, Garoun Engström, Therése Pettersson, and Magnus Öberg, "Organized Violence 1989–2023, and the Prevalence of Organized Crime Groups," *Journal of Peace Research* 61, no. 4 (2024): 673–693, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00223433241262912>.

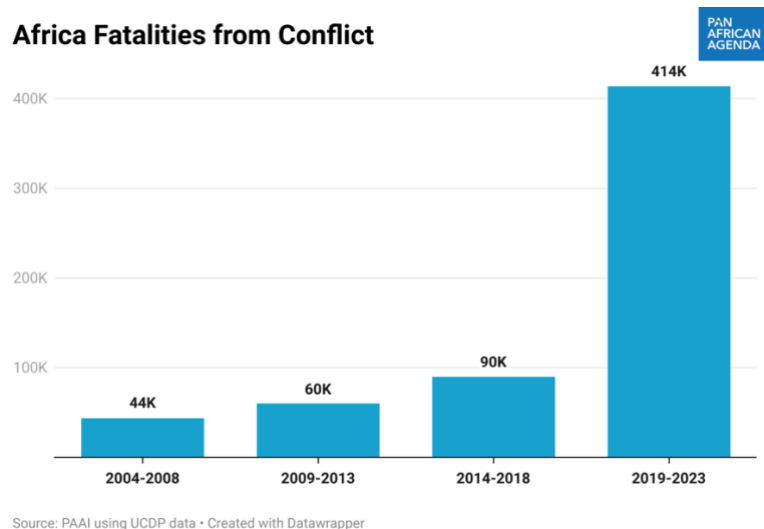
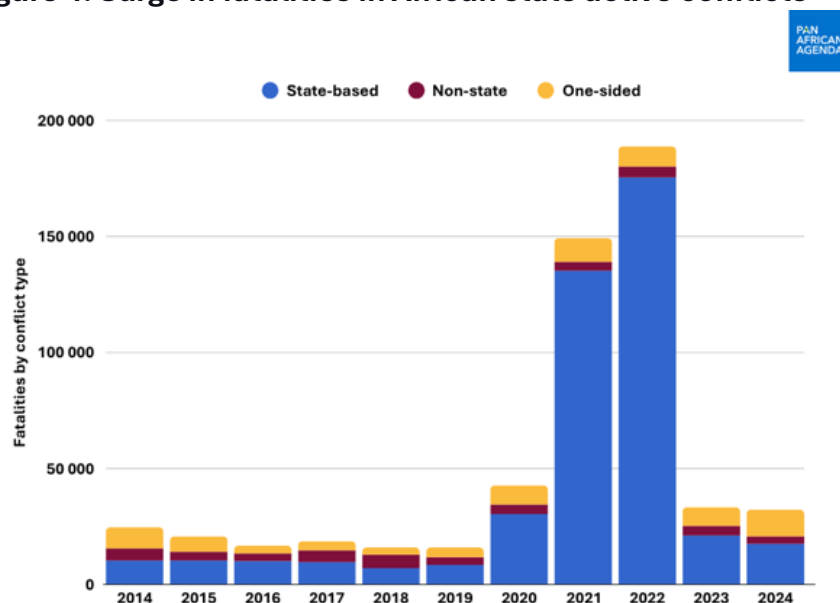


Figure 4: Surge in fatalities in African state active conflicts



Source: Compiled by PAAI, Uppsala Conflict [Data](#) Program, 2024

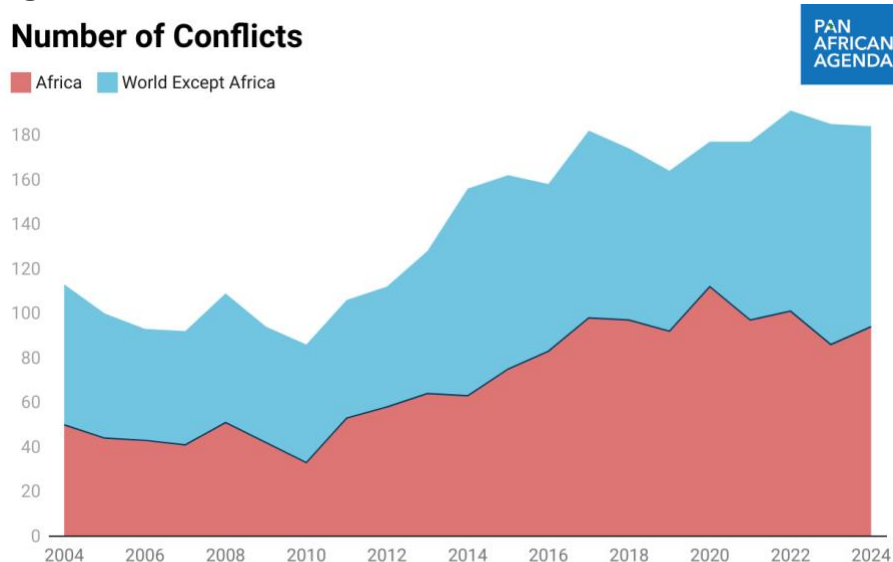
As shown in Figure 3 and 4, fatalities surged dramatically in the second decade. Between 2003 and 2013, there were approximately 122,148 conflict-related deaths, while

between 2014 and 2024, fatalities reached over 532,413.¹⁷ The 2020–2022 Ethiopia–Eritrea war against Tigray forces accounted for the largest share of these deaths.

As shown in Figures 5 - 8, the number of conflicts has increased, while the number of state-involved conflicts is not only higher than in other regions but also on the rise. While intrastate wars remain predominant, the resurgence of interstate tensions, such as the risk of renewed hostilities between Ethiopia and Eritrea, poses new challenges. The proliferation of arms races and mutual distrust among African states – and among communities within states – reflects weakening national and regional collective security mechanisms. These dynamics, if unaddressed, threaten to further undermine continental stability.

While the AU and APSA were established in the early 2000s with the mandate to prevent armed conflict and thereby reduce fatalities, displacement, and destruction, the human and economic costs of war on the continent have reached unprecedented levels. A comparative analysis of fatalities across five-year periods (Figures 3 and 4) reveals an alarming escalation. Between the periods 2004–2008 and 2019–2023, fatalities increased eightfold from 44,000 to 414,000 (an increase of 841%), corresponding to a compound annual growth rate of approximately 12% over the two-decade span. During the first decade following its establishment in 2002, the AU and its member states went to great effort to prevent conflicts and intervene in ongoing conflicts. However, as subsequent sections demonstrate, these preventive and interventionist initiatives have diminished considerably in the organization's second decade of operation.

Figure 5: Number of conflicts in Africa vs rest of the world

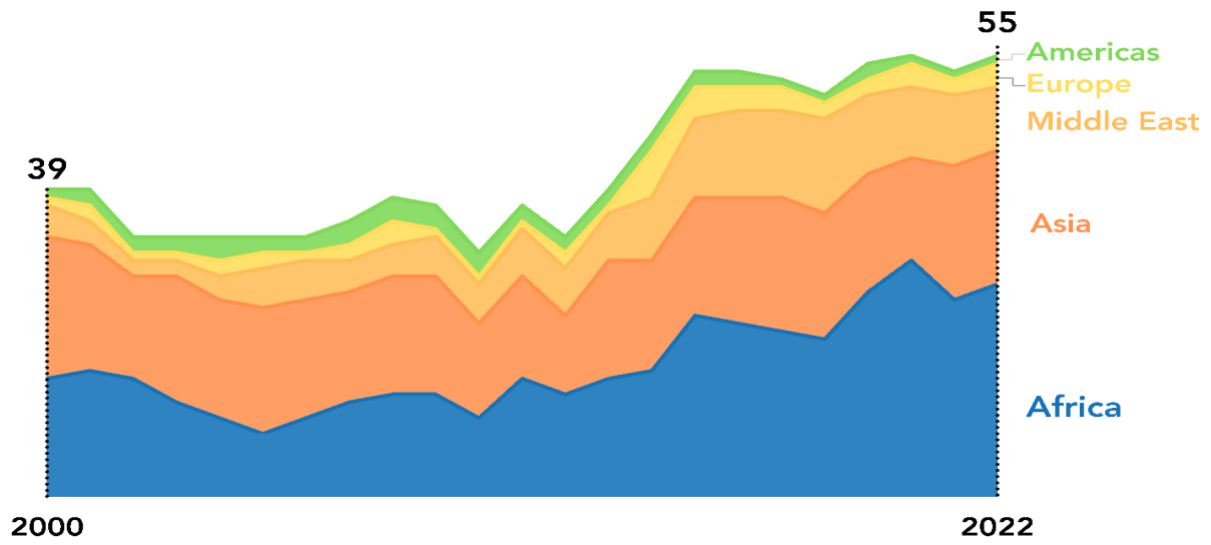


Source: PAAI using UCDP data • Created with Datawrapper

Source: Compiled by PAAI, Uppsala Conflict [Data](#) Program, 2024

¹⁷ UCDP conflict fatality data, 2003–2024, compiled by PAAI. These figures represent only confirmed deaths from direct fighting; actual fatalities are substantially higher. See Shawn Davies et al., "Organized Violence 1989–2024, and the Return of Conflicts Between States," *Journal of Peace Research* 62, no. 1 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.1177/00223433251315082>.

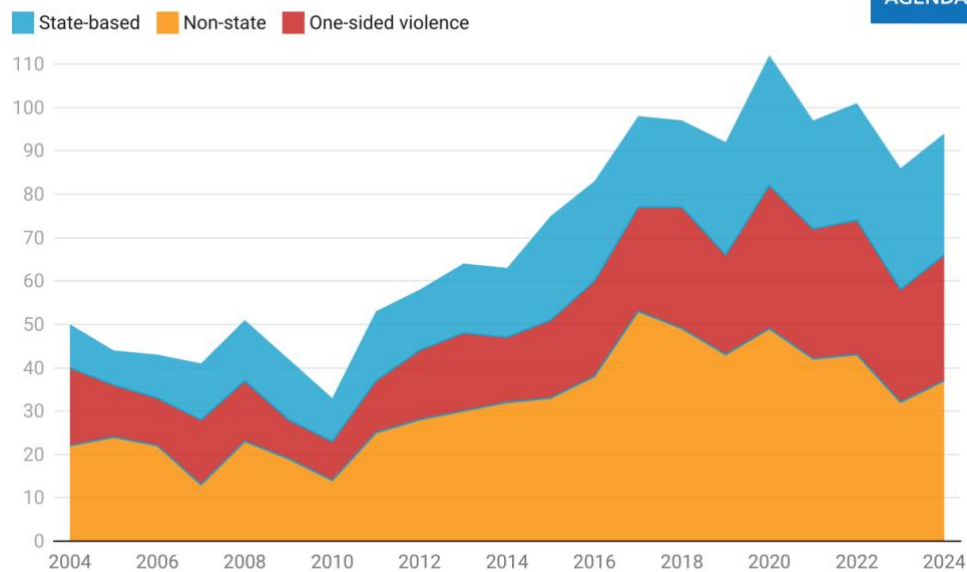
Figure 6: Africa vs other regions in number of state-involved conflicts, 2000–2022



Data: PAAI, 2025, data from Uppsala Conflict [Data](#) Program

Figure 7: Types of conflicts

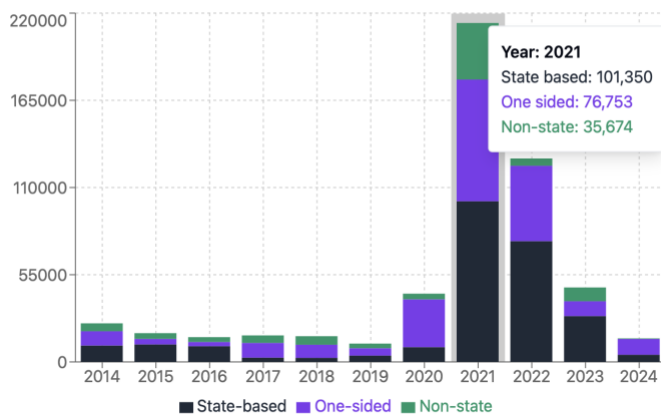
Number of conflicts by types in Africa



Source: PAAI using UCDP data • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 8: Surge in fatalities in state-based conflicts

Fatalities by Conflict Type



Key Findings

Peak Period

2021-2022: 329,105 fatalities (61.8% of total)

Highest Single Year

2022: 185,115 fatalities

Sharp Decline

2023-2024: 83% drop from peak

Source: Compiled by PAAI, Uppsala Conflict [Data](#) Program, 2024

Mass displacement and devastating economic impact

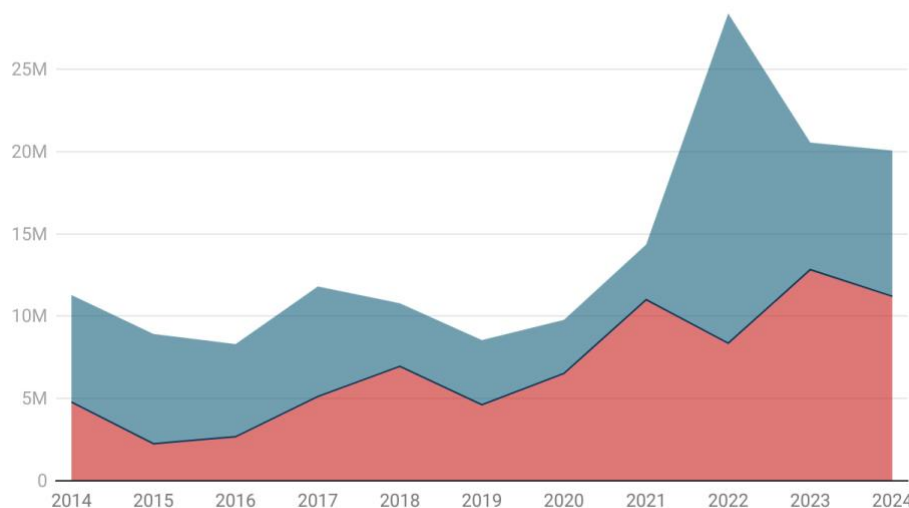
Displacement trends show a concerning trajectory, as evidenced by data from the IDMC and the UNHCR. Furthermore, the IEP has documented escalating economic destruction attributable to armed conflicts across the continent.

Countries facing conflict experience large-scale population movements, with people becoming IDPs or refugees. Of the 153 million IDPs globally in 2014–2024, 76.3 million originate from Africa, constituting 50% of the global total. Between 2014 and 2024, Africa also produced 81 million refugees and asylum seekers. Although non-African displacement has declined somewhat since 2022, Africa's displacement remains substantially elevated compared to pre-2020 levels. By 2024, Africa accounted for over half of the global IDP population. In 2024 alone, of the 73.6 million people internally displaced by conflict and violence across the world, well over 45% were in Africa. In the same year, out of 46 million global refugees and asylum seekers¹⁸ 9.9 million (22%) were from Africa. Sudan alone had over 15 million IDPs and refugees, representing nearly one-third of its population.¹⁹ These numbers indicate a high vulnerability to state fragility and risk of atrocities. In 2024, nine of the global top 20 countries facing a heightened risk of atrocities and large population displacement were in Africa, with Chad, Sudan, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, and Guinea among the top 10 high-risk countries with recently reported incidents of mass killings.

Figure 9: Displacement of Africans vs the rest of the world

Total Internal Displacement

Africa World Except Africa

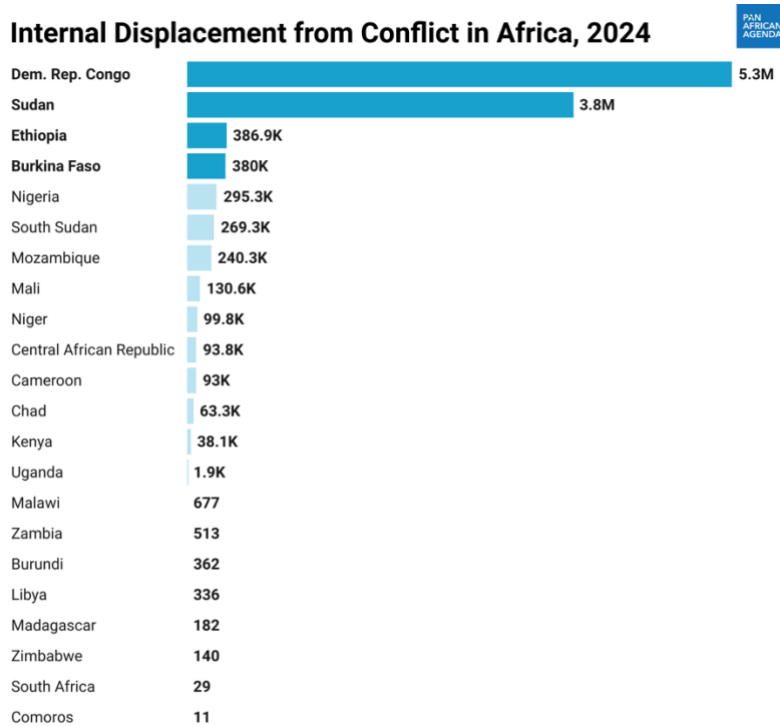


Source: PAAI using UNHCR data • Created with Datawrapper

¹⁸ UNHCR, *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2024* (Geneva: UNHCR, June 16, 2025), <https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends-report-2024>.

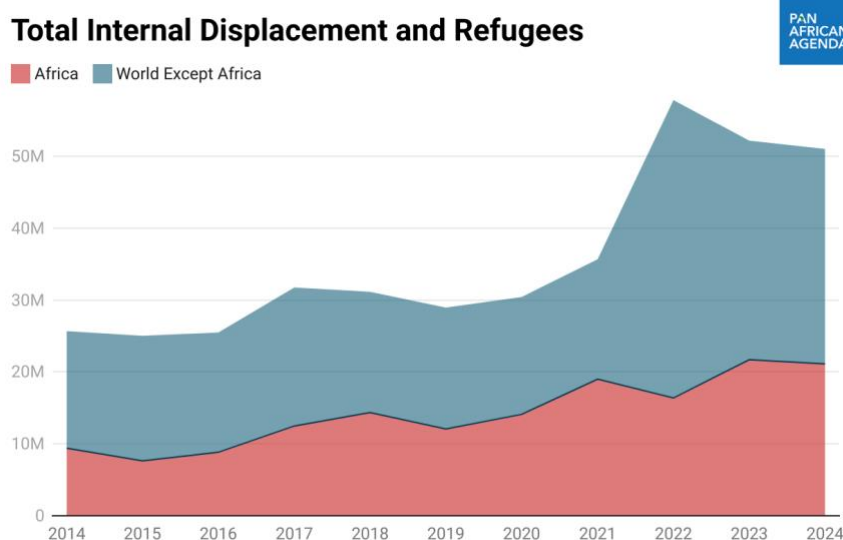
¹⁹ UNHCR, "Sudan Situation," Operational Data Portal, last updated June 2025, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/sudansituation>.

Figure 10: African countries with the largest internal displacement



Source: PAAI using UNHCR • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 11: Total internal displacement in Africa vs the rest of the world



Source: PAAI using UNHCR data • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 12: African Refugees and Asylum Seekers vs the Rest of the World

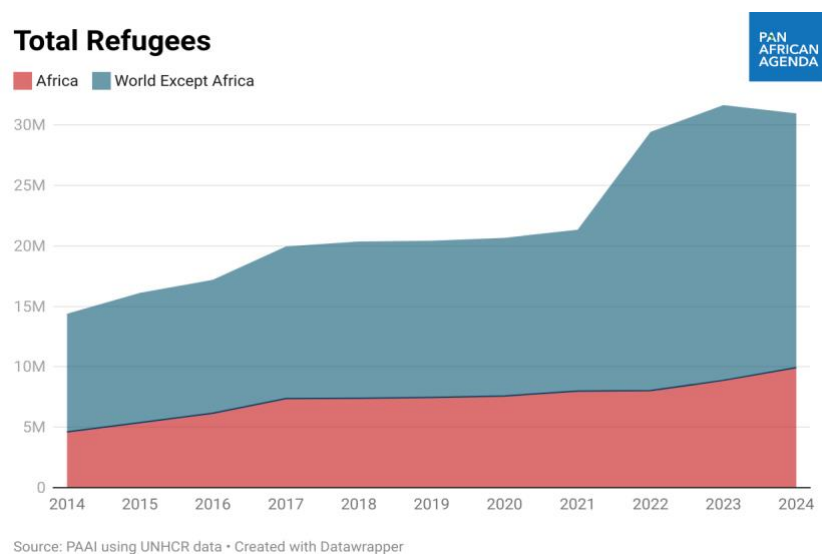


Figure 13: Top 10 African countries affected by the economic impact of violence

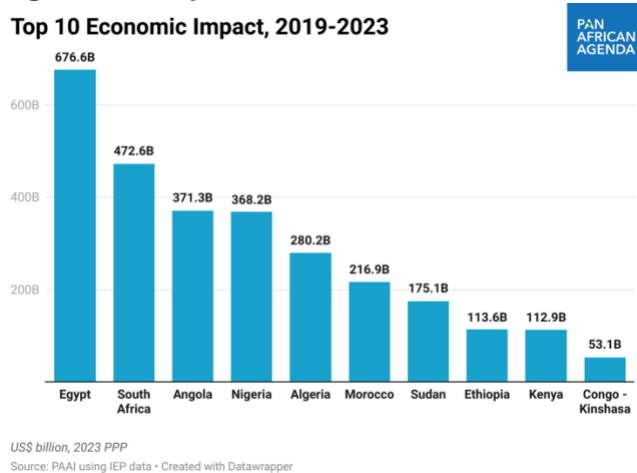
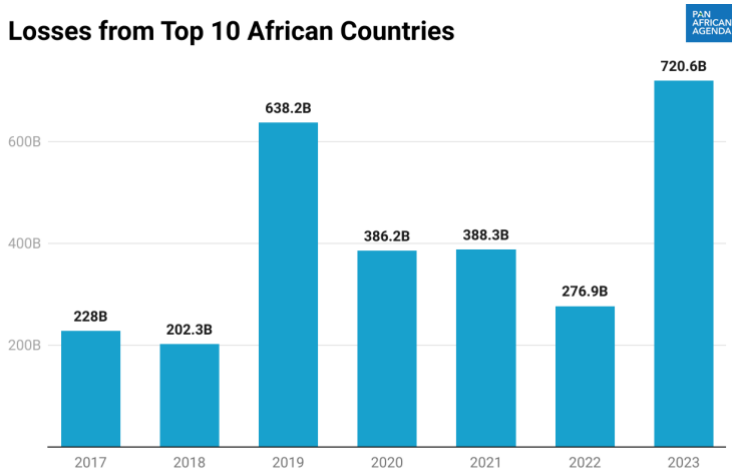


Figure 14: Total economic impact, 2017–2023

Losses from Top 10 African Countries



Source: PAAI using IEP data • Created with Datawrapper

Displacement as a result of violence carries the heaviest economic impact. According to data from the IEP, the composition of the economic impact of violence in 2023 shows that refugees and IDPs accounted for the largest share, representing approximately 56% of the total impact.²⁰ This was followed by GDP losses from conflict, which made up around 34%. The economic impact of violence in Africa in 2023 stands at US\$929 billion, constituting 5% of the total global impact of violence (US\$19.1 trillion).²¹

Prescription

The mandate of the AU could be summarized as: prevention, intervention, integration, and representation of Africa in the international arena. These core mandates are captured in the AU's Vision Statement²² and Agenda 2063,²³ which envisions "an integrated, prosperous, and peaceful Africa, driven by its citizens and acting as a dynamic force in the international arena and under the Constitutive Act of the AU".²⁴

The main focus of the Brief is on the preventive, interventionist and, to a limited extent, representation mandates. On the first two – i.e., preventive and interventionist mandates – it argues that the AU is no longer fit for purpose and requires an urgent overhaul, including revising its level of ambition. Third, for the AU to be an impactful representative of Africa worldwide, it is essential for its member states to align on common existing and emerging African positions and faithfully uphold them in relations with external actors.

²⁰ Institute for Economics and Peace, *Global Peace Index 2024: Measuring Peace in a Complex World* (Sydney: Institute for Economics and Peace, June 2024), <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/GPI-2024-web.pdf>.

²¹ Ibid.

²² African Union, "Vision and Mission," African Union, accessed June 2026, <https://au.int/en/about/vision>.

²³ African Union, *Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want* (Addis Ababa: African Union Commission, 2013), https://au.int/Agenda2063/popular_version.

²⁴ African Union, *Constitutive Act of the African Union* (Lomé: African Union, July 11, 2000), https://au.int/sites/default/files/pages/34873-file-constitutiveact_en.pdf.

Four bold proposals

Addressing critical shortcomings in African peace and security frameworks during a precarious transition in the global order requires bold and rapid adjustments. Employing an “opportunity lens”,²⁵ this paper advances four bold proposals for transforming ongoing challenges into opportunities.

1) Transforming the AU

The AU must revisit its baseline assumptions and reconsider how comprehensive, realistically, its mandate can be in order to be effective. This requires reassessing the original mandates of the APSA, formulated in the very different context of the post-Cold War unipolar era.

A recalibration may mean scaling down ambitions and refocusing on critical core mandates that can be delivered within the available will of the states and their determination to provide funding and human resources. This would give the AU more credibility and, in the long term, enable it to expand and avoid excessive reliance on external funding for its operations. Such a revision of ambition would require negotiation and communication so that all stakeholders clearly understand the updated goals and align their expectations accordingly. Concrete goals, milestones, and resourcing must be defined, with monitoring frameworks updated to measure progress against the new level of ambition.

Such a revision of mandate would also require leaving other responsibilities to Regional Economic Communities (RECs), member states, and subnational entities, focusing instead on core mandates that are transnational in nature. To this effect, strengthening AU-REC institutional linkages – including clearer protocols governing AU-REC relations, enhanced coordination mechanisms, and joint monitoring and evaluation frameworks – is essential.²⁶ A formalized division of labour with RECs, supported by clear, binding agreements delineating AU and REC responsibilities, would reduce duplication, enhance coordination, and enable both levels to concentrate resources towards their respective comparative advantages. Such arrangements would enable RECs to function not merely as regional forums but also as practical conduits for transforming continental norms into tangible institutional and policy change.

2) Transforming the nature of states: Towards states with multiple systems

²⁵ UNDP Regional Bureau for Africa, *UNDP's Renewed Strategic Offer in Africa: Africa's Promise* (New York: UNDP, January 2020), <https://www.undp.org/africa/waca/publications/undps-renewed-strategic-offer-africa-africas-promise>.

²⁶ Mehari Taddele Maru, *Framework for Cooperation Between the African Union Commission and Regional Economic Communities on the Implementation of the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance* (Addis Ababa: African Union Commission, March 2017).

With rising state fragility, especially in countries emerging from or trapped in wars, PAAI calls for reimagining the African state through a governance model of “states with multiple systems”. It addresses the long-standing challenge of governing diversity in Africa by maintaining overall state integrity while allowing distinct governance, legal, and economic systems to coexist within state boundaries.

The new paradigm of “states with multiple systems” acknowledges the path of dependency created by colonial borders, while embracing Africa's continuing quest for integration. The “states with multiple systems” framework helps to address these vulnerabilities and offers a pathway that emphasizes the value of indigenous, customary, hybrid and poly-governance models, particularly where centralized states have failed to serve their populations.²⁷ What is needed is a fundamental reimagining of the African state, one that recognizes multiple centres of power and legitimacy. Instead of a single, unitary system of authority, states might embrace layered governance, where formal institutions, laws, bureaucracies, and elected officials are hybridized with non-state actors such as chiefs, elders, religious leaders, militias, traditional and modern civil society, and community councils.

By accommodating varied identities under a common national framework, this model provides a mechanism for integrative (con)federalism, reducing the risk of fragmentation and protracted conflict. More essentially, it offers alternatives to separatism by embedding autonomy within an overarching national framework. Decentralization will not only address longstanding challenges related to peace and development, but may also engender a fundamental change in the role of district- and county-level administrations by bringing powers and responsibilities closer to the citizenry.

With diminishing external financial aid and shrinking multilateral support for peace operations, the continent faces both a challenge and an opportunity: to pursue self-reliance and strategic autonomy through local action, resource mobilization and strengthened political legitimacy.

3) Ensuring the primacy of domestic politics

This proposal emphasizes the urgent need to strengthen domestic political processes and local governance mechanisms as the primary means of addressing political differences and ongoing wars and preventing violent conflict. Rather than relying on external actors for its peace and security, Africa must invest in and employ domestic and local political processes to resolve political differences peacefully. Because they are close to and understand local contexts, local constituencies have expertise and legitimacy in representing the needs and aspirations of their populations, offering context-specific solutions to local manifestations of global disorder. This also enables

²⁷ Volker Boege, Anne Brown, Kevin Clements, and Anna Nolan, "On Hybrid Political Orders and Emerging States: State Formation in the Context of 'Fragility'," *Berghof Handbook Dialogue*, no. 8 (Berlin: Berghof Research Centre for Constructive Conflict Management, 2008), https://berghof-foundation.org/files/publications/dialogue8_boegeetal_lead.pdf; James S. Wunsch and Dele Olowu, eds., *The Failure of the Centralized State: Institutions and Self-Governance in Africa* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990; repr. London: Routledge, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429310799>.

innovative African-led approaches that transcend traditional state-centric models of governance and security. Localization thus strengthens both the credibility of governance and the effectiveness of problem-solving.

In light of Africa's unique demographic advantage as the youngest continent, Gen Z represents the most potent strategic asset for building strong constituencies and achieving sustainable progress on all the above proposals. As increasingly connected, vocal and diverse generations enter the electorate, political contestations and protests over livelihoods, employment and governance are becoming more pronounced.²⁸

4) Employing a triple geopolitical strategy

By reaffirming the primacy of domestic politics and empowering local voices, Africa can better shape its own future, anchored in accountability, inclusivity, and self-reliance. This moment calls for a Pan-African agenda of self-sufficiency and constituency-building from local to continental levels. Rethinking sovereignty not merely as territorial control but also as a responsibility to the people means embracing governance models that allow multiple systems to coexist within states and encourage cooperation across borders.

By fostering Africa's agency through collective action, the continent can promote its own interests, forge beneficial partnerships with other states and alliances, and assume its proper role in the development of a more inclusive and stable international order.

Conclusion

The evidence presented in this brief clearly indicates that the African Union, in its current form, is fit neither for its intended purpose as stipulated under the 2002 Constitutive Act, nor for the current and future challenges and opportunities that Africa must seize. The eightfold increase in conflict-related fatalities from 2004–2008 to 2019–2023, the displacement of over 76 million Africans, and the annual economic cost of violence amounting to US\$929 billion collectively serve as an assessment of the AU's first two decades of operation. This assessment highlights not a lack of ambition, but rather a deficiency in effective implementation. The AU's structural framework was conceived for a world that has since evolved.

The four proposals presented in this brief, transforming the AU's mandate, reimagining the African state through multiple governance systems, centering domestic political processes, and deploying a coherent triple geopolitical strategy, are not mere aspirational abstractions. They represent the minimum adjustments needed to make Africa's premier continental institution relevant to the scale of suffering its member states' citizens currently endure. The global interregnum is not a crisis to be survived; it is an opportunity to be seized. Whether the AU rises to this opportunity will define the next chapter of African peace and security.

²⁸ UNFPA, *8 Billion Lives, Infinite Possibilities: The Case for Rights and Choices — State of World Population 2023* (New York: UNFPA, 2023), <https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/swop23/SWOP2023-ENGLISH-230329-web.pdf>.

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