Imagine journeying to the past. In the present, Africa’s wars present a picture of a bewildering array of militias and rebel groups fighting faction-ridden government armies engaged in a sort of gang warfare in places like Congo and parts of Sudan. Factional strife in Guinea-Bissau reflects struggles over the control of drug trafficking and its proceeds. Family and clan politics in Chad produces outbursts of violence and political instability. Central African Republic provides a terrain over which armed groups from the region range. Then the observer arrives in Africa at the start of the 1970s. Disciplined rebel offensives in Guinea-Bissau drive out Portuguese colonial forces and the rebels govern most of the countryside. By 1973, many foreign countries recognize the rebels as the legitimate government of that country. Nigeria’s separatist Biafra rebellion has just been crushed after clashes between armies that resembled Second World War modes of fighting more than the activities of the many militias that later appear on this territory. Rebellion against minority rule in Rhodesia attracts considerable overseas aid and rebels use their liberated zones to present a vision of the politics of the future. International organizations and many foreign governments assist South Africans in their struggle against apartheid as this issue animates activists across the globe.

This chapter explains why warfare in Africa has undergone such extensive change in a relatively short period of time. The next section inspects the distinctive features of contemporary warfare in Africa. This consideration of the politics and social processes that shape the character of these conflicts sheds light on the relationships between the politics of zones of conflict and how leaders of armed groups define their goals, recruit supporters, and organize and sustain their fighting forces. The crucial feature that emerges in this survey is the growing centrality of patronage politics, both in the elite coalitions that rule the state and in the armed groups that oppose rulers, a central component of the explanation for change. This argument informs the following section in which closer examination of recent and on-going conflicts illustrates how the politics of patronage actually shapes warfare in Africa, even as numerous other agendas and motives at the level of the individual, armed groups and wider communities are involved. The final section explores the future of warfare in Africa. That section considers the sustainability of present trends and seeks out new ways of fighting that may be harbingers of more widespread change. But first it is to the distinctive features of warfare in Africa that we now turn.
The origins of distinctive features of warfare in Africa

Three principal features distinguish warfare in Africa, even if these features are not exclusive to the continent. They include the turn away from population-centric warfare on the part of many state and non-state armed groups. The second feature is the fragmented nature of state and non-state armed groups, and the third follows from the marginalization of most of Africa’s conflicts from the mainstream of global economic and political channels.

Though civilians remain important as a source of recruits and supplies, contemporary wars in Africa are not population-centric in that most combatants do not fight to mobilize and administer the civilians in areas that they control. The exceptions to this rule are ethnic militias and home guards that are created in the context of general turmoil to defend particular communities, and some new ideologically driven rebels that may present a new wave of change in the future of warfare in Africa. For the majority of armed groups, the major objective is to control the resources and commercial networks that sustain patron–client systems of authority. Patronage serves as the basis of authority in many of Africa’s most conflict-prone states. These are the countries where it has been in the rulers’ interests to undermine the bureaucracies of their own states. Even though these rulers weaken the institutions that otherwise could promote economic development and produce more revenues, this is a rational response to rulers’ fears that bureaucracies could harbor political rivals who pose serious and even lethal threats to their hold on power (Bates 2008). Africa’s record of coups d’états and other unconstitutional changes of regime underscore the seriousness of this threat. Only in Sub-Saharan Africa have coups d’états remained widespread, though now more often from the lower ranks, remaining a threat even after the wave of democratic reforms that swept the continent in the 1990s (McGowan 2006).

Rulers who undermine their own bureaucracies find greater security in using their personal authority to reward supporters with access to economic opportunities. They still need formal recognition of sovereignty, but use the trappings of formal statehood to manipulate other people’s access to markets to build political coalitions. Selective enforcement of laws against political opponents and use of the sovereign prerogative to invite foreign investors to exploit mineral resources, for example, helps rulers to coordinate the flow of resources in line with their personal discretion. In essence, rulers in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Congo (Zaire) and elsewhere in the decades after independence presided over the collapse of the bureaucratic elements of their states, yet remained in power by virtue of their control over personal networks of economic exchange. These networks eventually reached into illicit realms and their business partners came to include international criminals and shady operators who needed rulers who were willing to use the shield of sovereign authority to conceal their transactions (Bayart, Ellis and Hibou 1999). Once these networks were in place, it was not difficult for these rulers to bow to the pressure from foreign creditors in the 1990s to privatize remaining state enterprises, since these assets were simply distributed to partners in their elite coalition or simply withered away.

Thus when our time traveler in the chapter’s introduction arrived in the past, seizing the bureaucratic arms of the state was the principal means to get hold of power. But in the present, control of the commercial networks and assets that sustain the ruler’s patronage network is the principal means to hold power. Another way of thinking about this change is to conclude that in Africa’s most politically unstable and impoverished countries, rulers had presided over the collapse of the state (defined in bureaucratic terms) as part of their strategies to promote the survival of their regimes. In this light it makes sense that rebels targeted centers of power; bureaucracies in earlier times and networks associated with patronage resources later.

The rise of patronage politics helps to explain why past decades have seen a shift in coups d’états away from army commanders and toward junior and non-commissioned officer ranks.
These officers complain that their bosses get rich though exploiting their subordinates with the ruler’s consent due to their favored positions in the ruler’s political networks. Like many civilians in the inner circles of the elite network, these junior officers may believe that they can seize critical patronage resources to create their own political networks. Seizure of state power would bring them a big step closer to this goal, since even in the most bureaucratically enfeebled state, the prerogatives of sovereignty can still be manipulated for economic gain. This is why the control and sale of timber concessions, “blood diamonds”, and other mining concessions in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Angola and Congo were preoccupations of government and rebel forces alike in those countries’ conflicts. Administering civilians, while not entirely ignored by rebels and governments, would drain valuable resources away from the imperative of accumulating as much wealth as possible with which to attract new recruits and maintain the loyalties of existing fighters. Attention to administration also would bring the risk that particularly able subordinates who provided services and protection to civilians would become popular in these communities and might take this as license to launch their own bids for power. Thus, struggles for political power are focused instead on economic resources rather than on the people.

This patronage-centric logic of warfare accounts for the fragmentation of armed groups that is another feature of contemporary wars in Africa. Patronage resources are usually distributed across a number of channels, giving potential rivals multiple bases upon which to launch their own bids for power. Since the 1996 start of conflict in Congo, for example, the multiple peace agreements feature a bewildering array of armed factions. Darfur’s rebel groups had split into dozens of factions by 2007, with little prospect for coordinated action among them (Tanner and Tubiana 2007). Even the injection of international humanitarian aid appears to play a role in fragmenting rebel group organizations. Local commanders discover that they can take credit in local communities for services that NGOs provide, and along with the skimming of supplies, can recruit their own following (Kuperman 2006).

Possessing state power confers a significant advantage in contemporary warfare in Africa. The state remains the seat of legal sovereignty, which is essential to give foreign business partners authoritative permission to operate in the country’s territory. Businesses that deal with rebels lack this protection and do business with them at their own risk. Those businesses become targets of lawsuits in their home countries and attract attention from activists if governments pursue them for theft of resources in conjunction with their rebel partners. In most countries, subsoil mineral rights are vested in the state, so one needs control of the state to be able to manipulate the application of these laws to generate the resources needed to become a superior patron. Rulers of states also are in positions to use patronage resources to divide their rebel opponents, selectively buying off commanders and even encouraging subordinate commanders to set up their own rebel groups to undermine the coalition ranged against the state. Indeed, some rebel groups originate as the attempts of members of elite coalitions to negotiate better positions for themselves and their supporters in an existing state-centric patronage network. The threat to go to war against the state increases the costs of co-optation and if situated near an international border, raises the possibility that the politicians of a neighboring state might lend support to the rebel group. This is done to aid ethnic kin (when an ethnic community straddles an international frontier) or to disrupt other cross-border rebels or as a tit-for-tat response to the neighboring state’s interference (Prunier 2004).

These prerogatives of state sovereignty are not used to consolidate the armed forces of these states. The armed forces of the globally recognized state with weak domestic institutions do not resemble the bureaucratic armies and security forces of the old colonial and apartheid states because rulers still see huge risks in delegating authority to bureaucracies, particularly those that wield violence. Thus when these states fight fragmented collections of rebels their own forces
tend to be dispersed across a range of armed groups of varying but usually low degrees of organizational capacity and discipline. This creates what Stathis Kalyvas terms symmetrical irregular warfare (2007), but one in which the state usually prevails, provided that its sovereignty still matters in international society. Sovereignty enables rulers of these states to perform better as patrons, to continue to divide and co-opt opponents, while using their privileged access to foreigners (whether foreign officials, legitimate businesses or shady operators) and their resources to sustain their positions at the apex of their political networks.

The third distinctive feature of warfare in contemporary Africa concerns the continent’s diminished influence over the decisions of the globe’s main economic and political actors and institutions, exposing its states to increasing interference from abroad. For example, sovereign states experience increased exposure to external restrictions on rulers’ capacities to arrange their domestic affairs as they prefer. Rulers who undermine their own institutions and who distribute resources according to their personal preferences fail to meet basic criteria of “good governance” as foreign donors and creditors define it and face a growing list of conditions to access foreign aid and to participate in international institutions. Rulers who use their control over informal sectors, including illicit markets to bolster their control, are labeled as corrupt. In particular, US government officials link this corruption to an expansion of illicit drug trafficking across West Africa and the possibility that international terrorist groups would become involved in the region’s drug trade (Wikileaks 2010). This link between illicit commerce, government corruption and security threats illustrates how other countries and international organizations had come to view the strategies that some regimes used to exercise authority as disruptive to international order. In parts of West Africa, this nexus of criminality and government collusion has led to the creation of what the Chairman of the African Union called “a West African Afghanistan” of organized crime networks and violent extremists (United Nations 2012).

Numerous actors in international society undermine the sustainability of patronage politics in Africa’s poorest and most unstable states. One might imagine that this pressure could lead to the collapse rather than the reform of these states as struggling leaders are cut off from the resources that they need to control their clients. This development would benefit rebels and criminal organizations left to pursue their own fortunes, most likely in violent conflict with their competitors. But as states face more interference in domestic affairs, rebels suffer an even greater decline in their international standing. Alongside the declining capacities of Africa’s worst-off states, this simultaneous marginalization reinforces tendencies toward symmetrical irregular warfare rather than a decisive shift in the balance of power either to states or to rebels.

Contemporary rebel groups are frozen out of most international diplomatic channels, aside from their periodic participation in internationally mediated peace negotiations. The situation for rebels was very different in the 1970s. The South West Africa People’s Organization (SWAPO), for example, received recognition from the UN General Assembly as the “sole and authentic representative” of the Namibian people in their struggle for independence from apartheid-era South African rule (United Nations 1973). This diplomatic and political status reinforced what by then was SWAPO’s dominant position, vis-à-vis rivals in the liberation struggle, having benefited since 1969 from official assistance from the Swedish government and the posting of a representative in 1971 to represent the rebel group to Scandinavian, West German and Austrian governments (Sellström 1999). Recognition and assistance from the UN and European countries came alongside military training and supplies from East Bloc countries, including East German assistance in tracking down internal dissidents (Andrew and Mitrokhin 2005). Mozambique’s FRELIMO found refuge in Tanzania in the 1960s and the public support of that country’s president, and organized a school to train cadres that was started with Ford Foundation funding (Sellström 2002, 41–45). Though Ford Foundation funding soon ended,
this rebel group received the approval of the Organization of African Unity’s Liberation Committee, founded in 1963 to identify and direct support to anti-colonial rebel groups that had good prospects for establishing liberated zones and for effective military campaigns to challenge colonial rule.

These diplomatic and political channels were available to other rebel groups that could convince foreign observers that they were “sole authentic representatives” of particular communities. By the 1970s and 1980s western and Soviet bloc governments often assisted competing rebel groups. Nonetheless, rebels that could dominate these international channels were those that were the most effective at rooting out and eliminating dissident factions. External funding and other support helped rebel groups to maintain this unity, both through building up the group’s capacities and through starving challengers of their own resources. Since foreign backers insisted that their favored rebels show clear signs of progress, rebels were under pressure to demonstrate their military preparation on the ground and to seize and govern their own liberated zones. African rebels of that era demonstrated some of the same tendencies toward fragmentation that became prominent later, but the structural incentives of that time pushed rebels toward population-centric campaigns—competing with the state to out-govern civilians—rather than the network-centric focus of future rebels. External support also favored hierarchical bureaucratic rebel organizations that were capable of carrying out these tasks, not the competing decentralized rebel groups that tended to dominate later conflicts.

The demise of colonial and apartheid rule ended the era of coordinated international support for African rebels. Nonetheless, many African rebels continued to receive support from neighboring states. Libya’s ruler Moammar Qaddafi supported a stunning array of African rebel groups before his own bloody demise in his country’s 2011 rebellion. But this and other assistance did require demonstrations of unity in rebel ranks and effective control on the ground. The lack of coordination of this aid—Qaddafi himself even supported competing rebel groups—also undermined rebel unity as subordinate commanders sought out their own backers.

The criminalization of African rebels in the eyes of the international community since the 1990s has played a major role in limiting their access to external resources beyond whatever they can acquire through illicit commercial transactions. Possibly this process has played a role in the decisions of rebels to pursue network-centric strategies in warfare rather than engage in the more difficult task of convincing (now more skeptical) foreigners that they are fighting for a just cause. Rebel criminalization in this context means the widespread acceptance of the view that African rebels fight for personal economic gain; that they loot and pillage because they think that this is a good way to improve their individual situations. An early statement of this view of African rebels appeared in Robert Kaplan’s 1994 article in Atlantic Monthly in which he warned that conflicts in West Africa were “the symbol of worldwide demographics, environmental, and societal stress, in which criminal activity emerges as the real ‘strategic’ danger” as the breakdown of order unleashed armed predators to terrorize these societies (1994: 45). Mary Kaldor saw forces of globalization at work in wars that

involve a blurring of distinctions between war (usually for political motives) organized crime (violence undertaken by privately organized groups for private purposes, usually financial gain) and large-scale violations of human rights (violence undertaken by states or politically organized groups against individuals).

Kaldor 2006: 2

Economists privileged personal incentives, and identified the promise of loot for personal gain as a major factor shaping rebel motives and behavior (Collier 2000a).
The criminalization of rebels took a more concrete form with the development of sanctions regimes. This began with the growing awareness that commerce in resources such as “blood diamonds” was providing resources to rebels that engaged in massive violations of human rights. Rebels in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Angola were focusing on mining and selling diamonds to support their organizations, and they were committing numerous violations of international humanitarian law and war crimes. They also were fighting to control the resources that were integral to the support of the capital-based patronage networks that claimed the mantle of state sovereignty, on occasion recruiting the same legitimate and illicit firms that did business with the state to support them instead. The Fowler Report, released in 2000, detailed how Angola’s UNITA rebels colluded with businessmen to mine and export diamonds in defiance of UN sanctions. This report highlighted the link between commerce and war in Africa. The report was the product of an investigative panel of experts that identified numerous individuals and firms involved in this commerce (United Nations 2000). Commerce in timber and other natural resources came under increased scrutiny too, and with the start of widespread conflict in Congo in 1996, concerns about the pillage of natural resources and its connection to human rights abuses took center stage in international responses to rebel activity in many of Africa’s wars.

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, multilateral sanctions against rebels and state actors have appeared in most African wars. State officials, however, enjoy more means to evade and manipulate sanctions. Angola and Sudan, for example, both export oil and can threaten critics that they will seek other investors and customers for their oil. Once Chinese firms entered the market, this strategy of playing foreign rivals off one another became easier. Meanwhile, rebels remained an easier target for pressure, since any firm that did business with them would face much greater risks of retaliation from states and condemnation in the international community for engaging in criminal activities in collusion with rebels.

These developments have had dramatic impacts on the nature of warfare in contemporary Africa. The next section examines what this nature of warfare means for the conduct of war, and for the relationship between state politics and rebel politics.

The nature of contemporary warfare in Africa

Cries of patronage politics play significant roles in most contemporary wars in Africa. These conflicts reflect numerous proximate causes and involve an array of motives and goals among armed groups, such as the protection of one’s family and community, personal ambitions or fears, grievances over land disputes with neighboring communities, local power struggles, and so forth. This contention occurs in the context of challenges to the central control of state regimes over the distribution of patronage and the manipulation of other people’s access to economic opportunities. Their loss of central control over the distribution of patronage occurs through two principal mechanisms, the introduction of competitive elections and the sudden addition or withdrawal of resources. These problems are much less likely to appear in states like Ghana, Tanzania and South Africa where formal institutions and rules are much more dominant in the governance of these countries. They appear instead in territorially large “hard to govern” countries such as Mali, Niger, Chad, Sudan, Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire), and the Republic of Congo (Congo-Brazzaville) and elsewhere where conflicts have been endemic (Herbst and Mills 2006). These states have low institutional capacities, but more important for understanding the nature of contemporary conflicts are shocks and pressures that undermine rulers’ capacities to monopolize the distribution of patronage resources. This loss of central control empowers ambitious members of these networks to grab resources to advance their fortunes or forces them to defend their positions; the start of network-centric warfare.
The link between patronage politics, political violence and elections is especially apparent in conflict in Chad. This country was among the many in Africa that underwent transitions to multiparty democracy in the early 1990s. This was particularly destabilizing in Chad and elsewhere that these political changes provided new opportunities for subordinate members of patronage networks. Competitive elections at first seemed to provide a framework for recognizing militias as political parties as a way to civilianize their leadership and bring them into the political process. Two rebel groups, the Comité de Sursaut National pour la Paix et la Democratie and the Forces Armeé pour la République Fédérale were recognized as political parties in the 1990s. This was what Andreas Mehler calls “politicomilitary entrepreneurship in its purest form”, as leaders of political factions slipped in and out of the presidential patronage system, organizing new rebel movements to extract “violence rents” to finance the construction of their own patronage networks (2007: 207–208). The prospect of coalition governments attracted foreign donors who funded disarmament and resettlement programs, further contributing to the incentives for the political entrepreneur to threaten violence as a way to gain access to more resources and renegotiate their positions in the country’s political networks (van Dijk 2007). Though Chad’s politics was factionalized and violent well before the 1990s, the appearance of the institutional façade of formalized political competition shaped ongoing conflict as subordinate members of these networks identified new opportunities to advance their interests.

Political violence in Kenya illustrates the close link between elections and instability in patronage-based political systems. As in many other African countries, communal land tenure prevails in much of rural Kenya. This put decisions about individuals’ access to land in the hands of local ethnic political bosses who could acquire access to more land if they and their supporters backed the right politicians. Once reforms introduced electoral competition starting with the 1992 poll, contending parties armed their followers in efforts to punish their opponents and reward their supporters with promises of access to more land (Boone 2011). Elections led to the displacement of about a quarter of a million people in 1992 and more than half a million displaced and a thousand killed in 2007 (Human Rights Watch 2008). The relative absence of violence in the 1997 election reflected the success of the ruling party’s efforts to crowd out the opposition through monopolizing this distribution of patronage resources and to reduce people’s choice at the polls through intimidation and electoral fraud. Kenya’s electoral violence points to the more general problem of electoral choice in patronage-based political systems where formal institutions are weak. The more uncertain the outcome, the more violent the contention for supporters, with the focal point of the violence directed at the control of the main patronage resource base.

The association between patronage politics, competitive elections and violence appears also in Congo–Brazzaville in the 1990s. Electoral competition in 1992 energized contending factions in what had been a broad, if fractious coalition under the previous authoritarian single-party regime that used revenues from oil exports to reward supporters. The prospect that a separate faction could win control of the state and direct oil revenues for its benefit led politicians to arm youthful supporters in personal militias to fight in the three-way 1992 campaign. Violence surrounding this election and its aftermath killed about 2,000 people and displaced up to 300,000 more. The 1997 election was even more contentious, with 10,000 to 15,000 deaths (Bazenguissa-Ganga 1999: 38–40). The return of a dominant party by the 2002 elections succeeded in recentralizing control over patronage resources. The elimination of a viable alternative choice, as in Kenya’s 1997 election, had the effect of reducing the incentives for politicians to arm followers to contend for resources directly.

Competitive elections are not the only shocks that upset the centralized distribution of patronage. Reforms in Mali that decentralized the country’s administration initially appeared to
provide a means to co-opt ethnic Tuareg community leaders during an uprising that began in 2006. A sizeable proportion of the real rewards for this local control, however, came from Libya’s leader Moammar Qaddafi, whose investments in local development projects boosted the political value of occupying local offices. Qaddafi also played a role in Mali’s multiparty local elections, bankrolling candidates who he preferred in the increasingly expensive competition for votes. Qaddafi’s regime also recruited young men to come to Libya to work. Since these foreign migrants were dependent upon their hosts’ favor, some were recruited to serve in Qaddafi’s security forces. This intermingling of political networks across the Sahara desert absorbed some of the leaders of earlier Tuareg rebellions against the governments of Mali and Niger.

The fall of Qaddafi’s regime in Libya in 2012 upset this balance and empowered multiple contending political networks. Hundreds of thousands of migrants returned to their old homes, cut off from their old patron and unable to find new means of support. The presence of illicit commerce in smuggling and the lure of ransoms from kidnappings drew some of these migrants and members of politically marginalized communities to join with separatist militias. Others built connections to al-Qaeda in the Lands of the Maghreb on a pragmatic basis to pursue “violent upward mobility” with the benefit of the group’s control over territory through which smugglers shipped cigarettes and illicit drugs (Boás 2012: 125). This fragmentation of political power created the context for Mali’s March 2012 coup and the collapse of central government control over the northern two-thirds of the country and the subsequent conflicts between rebel factions.

This is not to say that struggles to control patronage resources explain the totality of the conduct of warfare in contemporary Africa. These struggles do, however, weigh heavily in shaping the kinds of armed groups and agendas that occupy the field of battle. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, for example, communal struggles to control land explain the origins and behaviors of a range of armed groups, from those of ambitious regional politicians who recruit armed supporters to contend in internationally mediated elections to local home-guard militias that are organized to protect communities from the predations of other armed groups. Many of these alignments are traceable to the strategies of former President Mobutu (1965–1997) in the 1990s as he faced severe declines in the resources that he could use for patronage and increasing pressures from the international community to democratize his regime. In response, he manipulated local conflicts over land to reward supporters and punish opponents, much as contending politicians did in Kenya. These cleavages and the focus on obtaining resources with which to buy the support of communities persisted from the start of widespread fighting in 1996, and through the war that led to the deaths of up to three million people by the mid-2000s.

An explanation of the character of contemporary warfare in Africa that privileges patronage does not exclude other influences such as the role of external intervention. The military forces of Uganda, Rwanda, Zimbabwe and Angola intervened in Congo’s conflict in the 1990s. The courses of these interventions and the behaviors of each army, however, reflected the nature of regime politics in their home countries. Where institutions were weak compared to the personal authority of the leader, as in Zimbabwe and Uganda, army commanders were more likely to be selected on the basis of political criteria rather than expertise, and their conduct in the field was more likely to involve commercial relationships with armed Congolese groups for mutual private benefit.

More generally, regimes that rely most heavily on the manipulation of people’s access to economic opportunities and the distribution of patronage as the basis for exercising authority usually lack the political will or means to sustain militaries around bureaucratic hierarchies that are the foundations of military effectiveness. The border war between Ethiopia and Eritrea in 1998–2000 that featured defined front lines, heavy weaponry and mass maneuvers more in the image of the clash of national militaries than the more common pattern of symmetrical irregular
warfare provides a stark contrast that illustrates this rule. Regimes in both of these countries came to power in 1991 after long guerrilla war campaigns; on the part of the Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front in Ethiopia and the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front in Eritrea. As rebel groups, both were able to sustain tight discipline over field commanders through systems of political commissars and to isolate ambitious colleagues who challenged this bureaucratic centralization. This crucial difference in the nature of a regime’s basis of political authority shaped the difference in how it fought in war.

In any event, most states in Africa, particularly the larger and more socially heterogeneous among them, have regimes that face considerable scarcities of resources, very weak formal institutions, and elite coalitions with histories of violent intra–elite competition. Thus it makes sense that rulers in these circumstances would adopt strategies that are hostile to building up bureaucratic institutions and instead would concentrate on fragmenting as much as possible the exercise of violence.

The future of warfare in Africa

Warfare in Africa will remain network-centric and will feature fragmented rebel and state forces so long as patronage politics and weak formal institutions prevail in the continent’s worst-off and most unstable states. The persistence of an international regime in which warfare in Africa is seen as a criminal affair will do little to change this pattern of conflict, as this kind of engagement provides no rewards for ideological or programmatic motives for fighting. As one peers into the future of warfare in Africa, two broad developments suggest possibilities for the escalation of crises besetting patronage-based political systems. The first is the intensification of global economic and cultural exchange, which tends to be most disruptive in regions that are already unstable and lack effective government institutions. The second is increased external pressure on Africa’s states to institute bureaucratic reforms. Recent developments show that these pressures, often accompanied with massive amounts of aid (relative to local resources) to address underlying structural factors that promote conflict, often produce disappointing results.

Two other developments point to the possibility of a decisive shift in the nature of future warfare in Africa. The first is the appearance since the mid-1990s of effective multilateral African interventions in conflicts in West Africa and more recently in Sudan and Somalia. The second is the appearance of more significant ideological components in the motivations and behavior of rebel groups. Violent religious extremists in Somalia, the Sahel region of Mali and Niger, and in northern Nigeria draw upon external financial contributions that reach beyond the narrow social confines of Diaspora community support. Some accept and even recruit foreign fighters into their ranks, signaling a further move away from the parochialism and marginality in global terms that characterizes so many contemporary conflicts.

Two developments that point to the intensification of current trends exacerbate problems of maintaining order and stability that face patronage-based regimes. Increases in global transactions of illicit drugs, for example, has wrecked havoc in Guinea-Bissau. The country’s ruling party split into two factions with the introduction of multiparty rule and fought a civil war in the late 1990s. Then South American cartels began using the country as a transshipment point to supply the European market with cocaine and other illicit drugs. Narco-corruption fueled factional tensions as politicians fought turf wars over control of the proceeds from drugs. In 2009, members of the military killed President João Bernardo Vieira in the context of the struggle for control of the country’s US$2 billion drug trade—more than twice the country’s reported GDP. A military coup in April 2012 prevented the second round of a presidential poll that seemed likely to elect the Prime Minister who promised to reform the security forces (Anonymous 2012).
Political violence in places like Guinea-Bissau supports analyses that link political violence and rebellion with criminality. The appearance of drug shipments in impoverished West African coastal countries inject resources that incite scrambles among politicians, former rebel leaders, and other enterprising people who see in this wealth their own routes to power (Johansen 2008). In 2008 in Sierra Leone, for example, police impounded an airplane loaded with 700kg of cocaine, with a value equivalent to the entire annual expenditure of the country’s government. In this case the traffickers were prosecuted and the drugs destroyed. In other instances, struggles to control this new source of wealth has destabilized already factionalized governments, raised the stakes of elections, and attracted members of security forces who would use their agencies and weapons to control this source of wealth for themselves.

Drug shipments through coastal West Africa appeared to decline after 2006–2007, but this may have signaled a shift toward the Sahel region where armed groups challenge government control (UNODC 2011). A possible connection between rebel groups in the Sahara and Sahel emerged with the November 2009 discovery in northern Mali of a partially burnt Boeing 727 that had traces of cocaine. In June 2012, the Chairman of the African Union wrote to the UN’s Secretary-General that “the collapse of the army and the removal of all State structures has created the conditions for Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQMI), along with various organized crime networks, to control the entire North” (United Nations 2012).

Closer links between international drug trafficking and armed groups destabilize patronage systems because they challenge the ruler’s monopoly over the distribution of economic opportunities. The diversification of points of access to resources in this political context gives license for junior partners to split from patronage networks to control these resources directly. Rulers also find that their inability to monopolize this distribution of economic opportunity diminishes their capacities to co-opt rebels and other armed groups, leading to more fragmentation and contention over the control of networks, intensifying a key characteristic of most contemporary warfare in Africa.

Overseas pressures on regimes to undertake further reform in some instances undermines centralized patronage networks and contributes to increased armed contention. Prior to the 2012 coup and disintegration of government control, Mali was held up as a good example of foreign-assisted democratization and state-building. Administrative decentralization and elections for local councils, however, created a new market for votes (Languille 2010). Huge increases in campaign expenses gave Libya’s Moammar Qaddafi an entrée into northern Mali’s patronage system as a provider of campaign funds and business opportunities. The collapse of his regime and the return from Libya of armed Malians and others across the Sahel contributed further to this fragmentation of political control. Foreign intervention and state-building projects in Liberia and Sierra Leone from the late 1990s in many years cost more than these countries’ entire GDPs if peacekeeping and military training is taken into account. Yet reforms show clear signs of dispersing rather than ending struggles over resource networks.

The argument here is not that political liberalization is inherently destabilizing. Instead it is that liberalization disperses points of access to resources, which in patronage-based regimes is destabilizing. In countries with stronger institutions—in Ghana, for example—liberalization can further strengthen institutions. Where reforms have been undertaken as part of an indigenous political process, such as in Nigeria, they show greater signs of durability. The political establishment there has experienced some of the same problems of linkages between increased political violence and electoral and administrative reforms. But Nigerian officials have undertaken effective measures to depoliticize security forces, shrinking the military and professionalizing its officer corps. Responses since 2010 to attacks of the Boko Haram rebels in Nigeria’s north exhibit relatively effective state control over the exercise of violence compared to the government’s
Indigenous reforms to strengthen bureaucracies in two of Africa’s largest countries—Nigeria and Ethiopia—point to vectors of change in the future of warfare in Africa. Both of these countries have militaries that participate in conflicts beyond their borders. Nigeria’s armed forces took the lead in regional peacekeeping forces in Liberia and Sierra Leone from the mid-1990s and in Guinea-Bissau and Côte d’Ivoire in the 2000s. In 2004, Nigerian forces deployed to Darfur. Ethiopian forces acted unilaterally, most significantly on several occasions in Somalia from 2006. Ethiopia’s high growth rates since the mid-1990s, doubling the GDP on the average of every nine years, and the country’s large population base has increased Ethiopia’s capabilities out of proportion to its neighbors. Though closely coordinating with many western countries, Ethiopia’s government has increased its capabilities through policies that often directly contradict the advice of its non-African partners.

These developments in both countries create the possibility to act as regional hegemons, provided that their militaries continue to professionalize and economic conditions improve. This future scenario presents a continent of greatly varied state capacities, with islands of strong institutions and economic dynamism in a few large countries, and political instability and turmoil in surrounding regions. This will change the calculus of armed groups in zones of turmoil, as they will find large African neighbors for whom their conflicts are not marginal. Ethiopia’s government must concern itself with developments in neighboring Somalia and South Sudan. These countries have very poor prospects for stability in the coming years and decades. Policy makers in stronger, more stable countries will seek out proxies that they believe will advance their interests and create political outcomes more to their liking. If stability is their patrons’ preference, it is possible that rebel groups will again have to demonstrate competence in administering areas that they control as a condition for receiving external assistance, a sign of the return of population-centric warfare.

The reemergence of global ideological narratives among rebel groups presents another future scenario. The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet bloc diminished the appeals of Marxism-Leninism as a narrative of rebellion and a blueprint for rebel organization (Kalyvas and Balcells 2010). Now violent Islamist Internationalism appeals to rebel groups in the Sahel, including Ansar al Dine in Mali and al-Qaeda in the Lands of the Maghreb. Somalia’s al Shabaab advertises its internationalist credentials too. Though these groups incorporate illicit commerce into their strategies and build upon local ethnic and other parochial tensions, they propose a political program beyond conquest of the resource base of the existing political system. They go to lengths to administer areas and people that they control. Both of these characteristics highlight the population-centric approaches of these groups. Though not immune from fragmentation, their ideological and programmatic agendas provide them with vehicles for recruiting and disciplining members across ethnic and other social divides. Their appeal to foreign financiers who wish to advance their political agendas reduces their global marginality, compared to most other rebel groups in Africa.

Violent religious extremists encounter considerable obstacles in this future scenario too. They intentionally narrow their bases for recruitment, excluding women, for example. They engage in sectarian battles that offend local communities against them. Those that live under their administration experience the harsh realities of inflexible theocratic governance that is intolerant of local custom. This does not rule out the possibility that other broad narratives will appeal to people who resent the rule of their corrupt and violent governments. Africa has a long history of state-building Islamic armed movements, from the jihads across the Sahel in the nineteenth century, the Mahdist state in Omdurman that resisted colonial intrusion for thirteen years to
1898, the twenty years resistance in Somaliland to British colonial rule in the early 1990s, for example. These armed religious movements combined broad-based nationalism with promises of the renewal of governance, a combination that contemporary armed groups may yet master.

In sum, the future of warfare in Africa is bound to be linked closely to the nature of governance in African states. The real signs of change in warfare will come with structural change in African governance. Then Africans in the future will look back on Africa of the twentieth century and the first part of the twenty-first century much as contemporary Chinese citizens look back on their country’s history. A long period of decline, stretching over generations, created conditions for the collapse of state authority and the rise of warlords who competed for political authority. But as China shows, this condition is likely to be a temporary one.