

Borderline Disorder: (De facto) Historical Ethnic Borders and Conflict in Africa

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Abstract: This research explores the effect of historical ethnic borders on conflict in Africa. We document that both the intensive and extensive margin of contemporary conflict is highly spatially concentrated in the proximity of historical ethnic borders in Africa. Using cell-level analysis at the 100 x 100, 50 x 50, 25 x 25 and 10 x 10 kilometers, our OLS estimates suggest that locations close to a historical ethnic border are between 15 and 20 percent more likely to experience conflict events. The results are robust to within-country and within-ethnicity analyses, as well as to the accounting for a large set of geographical confounders and other sources of conflict studied in the literature. Additionally, given the potential for mismeasurement of historical ethnic borders, we follow a simple instrumental variable approach, which suggests an even larger effect of historical ethnic borders on the prevalence and intensity of conflict in Africa.