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Predictive Security and Early Warning: A Theoretical Critique of Conflict Forecasting, Anticipatory Intervention and the Politics of Prediction in Fragile States

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ABSTRACT

Governments, regional organisations and international agencies are investing in machine-learning systems that forecast where violence will erupt, drawing on event data, economic indicators, climate signals and news text, in order to intervene before it does. This theoretical paper offers a critique of conflict forecasting as both a scientific and a political practice. Drawing on conflict theory and the early-warning literature, on recent research on machine-learning conflict prediction and its evaluation, on the measurement scholarship on conflict event data, on the anticipatory-action literature, and on critical security studies, it distinguishes three claims that forecasting makes, that violence is predictable, that prediction enables prevention, and that prevention is what predicted violence will be met with, and examines the conditions under which each holds. It argues that the first holds well for the continuation of violence but weakly for its onset; that the second depends on institutional response capacity that forecasting cannot supply; and that the third is contingent on the interests of those who hold the forecast, who may respond with repression, abandonment or pre-emption rather than prevention. The paper derives seven propositions about forecast accuracy under data sparsity and reporting bias, about the institutional conditions under which early warning produces early action, and about the consequences of prediction for the communities predicted. The Sahel and Nigeria's North-West and North-East are the anchoring contexts. The paper closes with implications for regional early-warning systems, national security agencies, humanitarian actors and the research agenda of African peace and security studies. It concludes that a forecast is only as valuable, for those it concerns, as the institution that receives it and the purpose for which it is used, so that investment in local response capacity matters more for the security of the people forecast than further gains in the precision of the models.

Keywords: conflict prediction; early warning; machine learning; conflict prevention; fragile states

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1. INTRODUCTION

The prevention of violent conflict has always depended on seeing it coming. What has changed in the last decade is the claim that it can be seen coming by machine. Forecasting systems now produce monthly, sub-national predictions of armed-conflict fatalities for the whole of Africa and much of the world, combining event data, demographic and economic indicators, climate signals and the text of news reporting into probabilities that a given area will experience violence in a given period (Hegre et al., 2025; Mueller et al., 2024). Humanitarian agencies use similar methods to anticipate displacement and position aid before it is needed (Kjærum & Madsen, 2025; Henningsen, 2025). Regional and national early-warning systems, including those of the African Union and ECOWAS, are exploring how to incorporate machine-learning outputs into their analysis (Okonkwo & Akanji, 2025; Okonkwo & Okoi, 2026). The promise is that a world that can predict violence can prevent it (Murphy et al., 2024).

This paper examines that promise critically. It does not argue that forecasting is useless; the methodological advances are real and the humanitarian applications in particular are valuable. It argues that the promise bundles three distinct claims, each of which holds under different conditions, and that the conditions for the second and third are frequently absent precisely where forecasting is most needed. The first claim is that violence is predictable. The second is that prediction enables prevention. The third is that prevention is what predicted violence will be met with. The forecasting literature has invested heavily in the first, the early-warning literature has documented the failure of the second for decades, and the third has scarcely been asked.

The argument draws on five literatures: the machine-learning forecasting research and its evaluation practices (Hegre et al., 2025; Murphy et al., 2024; Mueller et al., 2024; Petrova & Tapsoba, 2025; Dankenbring & Ruhe, 2026); the measurement scholarship on conflict event data (Sweet, 2026; Öberg & Yilmaz, 2025; Broache et al., 2025; Shaver et al., 2023); the anticipatory-action literature in humanitarian practice (Jaime et al., 2024; Kjærum & Madsen, 2025; Easton-Calabria, 2025; Henningsen, 2025); the early-warning and conflict-prevention literature on Africa (Palihapitiya et al., 2025; Okonkwo & Akanji, 2025; Okonkwo & Okoi, 2026); and critical security studies on the politics of data and anticipation (Leese & Pollozek, 2023). From these it derives propositions about the conditions under which forecasting improves security for the people forecast.

The analysis begins with the forecasting turn and then develops the three-claim decomposition of predictability, preventability and prevention. It examines the data on which forecasts in fragile states rest and turns to the politics of prediction before presenting the framework and the propositions that follow from it. It closes by anchoring the analysis in the Sahel and Nigeria and drawing out the implications for early-warning systems, security agencies and humanitarian actors.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Forecasting Turn

From warning to forecasting

Conflict early warning began as a qualitative practice: analysts monitoring indicators, field networks reporting tensions, and institutions charged with converting warnings into responses. The African Union's Continental Early Warning System and the ECOWAS Early Warning and Response Network were built on this model, combining indicator-based monitoring with situation rooms and reporting chains to political decision-makers. The persistent finding of the early-warning literature is that the weak link has never been the warning but the response: warnings are issued and not acted upon (Okonkwo & Akanji, 2025; Palihapitiya et al., 2025).

The forecasting turn of the last decade added a quantitative and computational layer. Machine-learning models trained on historical event data and structural covariates produce probabilistic forecasts at fine spatial and temporal resolution, evaluated against outcomes in a disciplined way. Hegre et al. (2025) report the 2023/24 VIEWS prediction challenge, in which a large community of teams forecast the number of armed-conflict fatalities with explicit uncertainty, and use the exercise to develop metrics that assess probabilistic forecasts more meaningfully than point predictions allow. Mueller et al. (2024) introduce a global dataset of conflict

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forecasts that incorporates topics extracted from news text, showing that the content of reporting carries information about future violence. Petrova and Tapsoba (2025) review the broader relationship between information and conflict, from media and public opinion to big data and forecasting, and Dankenbring and Ruhe (2026) extend forecasting to the content of peace agreements, arguing that theory retains a role that purely data-driven approaches cannot replace. Murphy et al. (2024) set out the promise of machine learning for violent-conflict forecasting while cautioning against treating it as a panacea.

From forecasting to anticipatory action

A parallel turn has occurred in humanitarian practice. Anticipatory action, releasing funds and assistance on the basis of a forecast rather than after a disaster, was developed for climate hazards and is now being extended to conflict and displacement. Jaime et al. (2024) review the knowledge gaps that must be filled to anticipate disasters in armed-conflict areas with high forced displacement, finding that the evidence base for anticipatory action in conflict settings remains thin. Kjærum and Madsen (2025) argue that machine learning can push the boundaries of anticipatory action by forecasting displacement in complex, multi-crisis settings where humanitarian needs outgrow available funding. Henningsen (2025) examines the use of big data for the prediction of forced displacement in the work of the United Nations refugee agency, from satellite imagery to news and online data, and finds that the value of such data depends on how it is integrated into planning. Easton-Calabria (2025), studying anticipatory action ahead of flooding in South Sudan, documents both its possibilities and its limits in a complex crisis where conflict, displacement and climate hazard interact.

What the turn has achieved

The forecasting turn has made the prediction of violence more rigorous, more transparent about uncertainty and more comparable across methods. It has not, by itself, closed the gap between warning and response that the early-warning literature identified. That gap is the subject of the following section.

2.2 Three Claims

The promise of predictive security rests on three claims that are usually presented as one.

Violence is predictable

The first claim is epistemic: that future violence can be predicted with useful accuracy. The forecasting literature supports a qualified version. Violence is highly persistent: places that experienced violence last month are likely to experience it next month, and models that capture this persistence, together with spatial diffusion from neighbouring areas, achieve substantial accuracy. The difficulty lies in onset, the eruption of violence where there was none, and in sudden escalation, which are rarer, less patterned and less well represented in training data. Murphy et al. (2024) note the forecasting failures that have accompanied recent conflicts, and Hegre et al. (2025) emphasise that meaningful evaluation must account for uncertainty precisely because point predictions conceal how poorly rare events are anticipated. The result is an asymmetry. Forecasts are most accurate where violence is already present and least accurate where prevention would matter most: before it begins.

Prediction enables prevention

The second claim is practical: that a forecast, once produced, enables action that prevents the predicted violence. This claim depends on three conditions the forecast does not supply. There must be an institution with the mandate to act; it must have the capacity to act in the time the forecast allows; and the action available must be capable of preventing the violence rather than merely mitigating its consequences. The early-warning literature documents the frequent absence of all three. Okonkwo and Akanji (2025) examine the gap between early warning and response in Nigeria's political-violence economy and find that warnings do not translate into response without institutional arrangements that the warning system itself does not create. Palihapitiya et al. (2025) find critical gaps in data collection and analysis in atrocity-prevention early-warning systems and show that the burden of acting often falls on community-based and local actors with the least resources. Easton-Calabria (2025) shows that even in humanitarian anticipatory action, where the action is assistance rather than political intervention, the conditions of complex crises limit what forecasting can achieve. The more accurate the forecast, the more visible the failure to act on it, but the accuracy does not reduce the failure.

Prevention is what prediction will be met with

The third claim is political and is almost never stated: that those who hold a forecast of violence will respond to it by trying to prevent the violence.

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This assumes that the holder's interests align with those of the population forecast. In fragile states the assumption is frequently false. A government that receives a forecast of violence in a region may respond by deploying security forces whose conduct escalates rather than prevents; by pre-emptively detaining or displacing a population it regards as hostile; by abandoning a region it cannot or will not defend; or by using the forecast to justify measures it intended to take for other reasons. An external actor may respond by reinforcing borders against the displacement the forecast anticipates rather than by protecting the people who will be displaced. Leese and Pollozek (2023), examining data temporalities in law enforcement and border control, show that the speed of data-driven anticipation reshapes how institutions act, privileging rapid pre-emptive measures over deliberative ones. The forecast is information; what is done with it depends on who holds it.

The pattern

The three claims weaken in sequence. The first is partly true; the second is true only under institutional conditions that are frequently absent; the third is true only when the holder's interests align with the population's, which in contexts of state-involved violence they often do not. The investment of the forecasting field in the first claim has been rational given its scientific tractability. It has also, inadvertently, lent the authority of rigour to the second and third claims, which rigour does not establish.

2.3 The Data Problem in Fragile States

Forecasts are only as good as the data they are trained on and fed, and conflict data in fragile states is shaped by the same conditions that make those states fragile.

Reporting bias

Most conflict event data is compiled from news reports, supplemented by local partners and other sources. Sweet (2026) frames the fundamental problem: in organised violence, actors have more incentives to alter information than to report it straight, so that covert relationships, killings and illicit markets are systematically misrepresented in the data on which research and forecasting rely. Öberg and Yilmaz (2025) show that differences between the major human-coded event datasets are driven by identifiable measurement choices, definitions, sources, coding rules, rather than by noise, so that the choice of dataset shapes the picture of violence a model learns. Shaver et al. (2023) demonstrate that events are systematically under-reported in existing datasets and develop proofs of concept for expanding coverage, implying that the gaps are large and patterned rather than random.

Statist bias

A particular bias matters for the politics of prediction. Broache et al. (2025) show that data-collection and coding protocols in widely used datasets on violence against civilians privilege government narratives, so that civilian deaths caused by state forces, particularly through airstrikes and long-range bombardment, are under-counted relative to deaths caused by non-state actors. A forecasting model trained on such data learns a world in which the state is a smaller source of civilian harm than it is. Its forecasts will point toward non-state violence and away from state violence, and its outputs, delivered to the state, will reinforce the state's own account of where the threat lies.

Spatial and temporal gaps

Reporting is densest where journalists, mobile networks and international organisations are present and thinnest in remote rural areas, conflict-affected zones that reporters cannot reach, and places where communication has been cut. These are often the places where violence is most severe and least visible. A model trained on such data will be most confident where it is least needed and least informed where it is most needed, compounding the onset asymmetry identified earlier. Reporting delays add a temporal gap: events enter datasets weeks after they occur, so that a model's picture of the present is always partly the past.

Consequence

The data problem is not a technical inconvenience to be solved with better models. It is a structural feature of conflict information in fragile states, shaped by who has the power to report, conceal and define violence. Forecasts inherit its biases, and because forecasts carry the authority of quantification, they can launder those biases into apparently neutral risk assessments.

2.4 The Politics of Prediction

Who holds the forecast

Forecasts are produced by research consortia, international organisations, humanitarian agencies and, increasingly, commercial firms, and delivered

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to governments, regional bodies, donors and militaries. The population forecast is almost never among the recipients. This asymmetry of information is also an asymmetry of power: the holder of a forecast can act on it, and the subject of a forecast cannot. In contexts where the state is itself a party to violence, the forecast becomes an input to the state's strategy toward the population.

Four responses

The holder of a forecast of violence has, broadly, four responses available. Prevention addresses the drivers of the forecast violence: mediation, dialogue, protection, development. Pre-emption acts against those the forecast identifies as likely perpetrators: arrest, detention, military operations. Abandonment withdraws from a region whose violence is forecast to be uncontrollable. Instrumentalisation uses the forecast to justify measures, emergency powers, displacement, resource appropriation, pursued for other ends. The forecasting promise assumes the first. The incentives of many holders favour the others. Leese and Pollozek's (2023) analysis of data temporalities suggests that the speed of algorithmic anticipation itself favours pre-emption, because it delivers information at a tempo suited to rapid action rather than to the slow work of prevention.

Prediction and the predicted

Prediction also affects the predicted. A community designated high-risk may be subjected to intensified security operations, restrictions on movement, and suspicion that itself generates grievance. The forecast may thus contribute to the violence it predicts, a reflexive effect that forecasting evaluation, which compares predictions to outcomes, cannot detect because the outcome is partly produced by the prediction. Conversely, a community designated low-risk because its violence is unreported may be denied the attention that would protect it. The ethical problem is that populations are being predicted without consent, without knowledge and without recourse, and that the prediction can change what happens to them.

Humanitarian forecasting as a partial exception

Humanitarian anticipatory action is a partial exception because its action is assistance: releasing funds, pre-positioning supplies, preparing reception. The incentives of humanitarian agencies align more closely with those of the population than do those of security agencies. Kjærum and Madsen (2025) and Henningsen (2025) show its value for displacement. Even here, however, the same forecast can serve border management as readily as reception, and the same data that anticipates displacement in order to assist can anticipate it in order to prevent arrival. Jaime et al. (2024) and Easton-Calabria (2025) show that the evidence for anticipatory action in conflict settings is still thin and its implementation constrained.

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Three conditions

The framework holds that conflict forecasting improves security for the people forecast only when three conditions are met, corresponding to the three claims. The epistemic condition requires that the forecast be accurate at the scale and lead time of the action it is meant to inform, and that its uncertainty be communicated in a form decision-makers can use. The institutional condition requires that an actor with mandate, capacity and appropriate instruments exist to act within the forecast's lead time. The political condition requires that the actor holding the forecast have interests aligned with the protection of the population forecast, or be constrained by accountability mechanisms that compel such alignment.

Propositions

Proposition 1. Forecast accuracy is highest for the continuation and diffusion of existing violence and lowest for onset and sudden escalation, so that forecasting will contribute more to mitigation of ongoing conflict than to prevention of new conflict (Murphy et al., 2024; Hegre et al., 2025). Proposition 2. In fragile states, forecast accuracy will be systematically lower in remote, communication-poor and state-contested areas, because reporting bias concentrates training data where violence is most visible rather than most severe (Sweet, 2026; Shaver et al., 2023). Proposition 3. Models trained on event data with statist coding bias will under-predict state violence against civilians and over-attribute risk to non-state actors, and their outputs will tend to confirm the state's account of the threat (Broache et al., 2025). Proposition 4. Early warning produces early action only where response institutions with mandate and capacity exist at the scale of the forecast; improvements in forecast accuracy without such institutions will increase the visibility of inaction without reducing violence (Okonkwo & Akanji, 2025; Palihapitiya et al., 2025). Proposition 5. Where the forecast holder is a party to the conflict or has interests adverse to the population forecast,

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forecasts will be used for pre-emption, abandonment or instrumentalisation more often than for prevention, and the harm to the predicted population will rise with forecast precision. Proposition 6. Humanitarian anticipatory action will improve outcomes for forecast populations more reliably than security-oriented early warning, because the action available is assistance and the holder's interests are more closely aligned with the population's, but the advantage depends on firewalls between humanitarian and security uses of the same forecasts (Kjærum & Madsen, 2025; Henningsen, 2025). Proposition 7. The reflexive effects of prediction, intensified security attention to high-risk designations, neglect of low-risk designations based on unreported violence, will bias forecast evaluation toward apparent accuracy, because outcomes are partly produced by the responses forecasts provoke.

Using the framework

The framework is intended for those who produce forecasts, those who receive them and those who govern their use. For producers, it implies that accuracy is necessary but not sufficient, and that the design of a forecasting system should include an account of who will receive its outputs and what they are likely to do with them. For recipients, it supplies a checklist against which to assess whether a forecast can responsibly inform action. For governance, it identifies the need for rules on the use of forecasts that protect the populations forecast.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 The Sahel and Nigeria

The setting

The central Sahel and northern Nigeria are among the most heavily forecast regions in the world and among those where the conditions of the framework are least met. Jihadist insurgency in the Lake Chad Basin and central Sahel, armed banditry and mass kidnapping in Nigeria's North-West, and intercommunal violence in the Middle Belt produce conflict that is persistent, diffusing and lethal, and that is fought over territory where the state's presence is partial. Ojewale (2025) traces the evolution of a triad of violence in north-west Nigeria in which conflict, terrorism and banditry intertwine and armed groups adapt to state responses, and Ojo et al. (2023) analyse armed banditry as a force of terror whose dynamics outpace the state's security apparatus. Okpaleke et al. (2023) document the turn to armed drones in counter-insurgency across the West African Sahel, a turn that makes the targeting implications of forecasts more direct.

The epistemic condition

Forecasting systems capture the persistence and diffusion of violence in these regions with considerable accuracy; Proposition 1 predicts that they will be most useful for anticipating where existing violence will spread. They are less able to anticipate onset in new areas, and Proposition 2 predicts that their accuracy will be lowest in precisely the rural spaces of the North-West and the Lake Chad islands where reporting is thinnest and violence is most severe. Proposition 3 is directly relevant: civilian deaths from military airstrikes in northern Nigeria and the Sahel are the category that Broache et al. (2025) show is most under-counted, so that models trained on standard data will represent the threat as overwhelmingly non-state.

The institutional condition

Nigeria has invested in early-warning infrastructure, including a decentralised national component of the ECOWAS system, and Okonkwo and Okoi (2026) propose a framework linking early-warning monitoring to peace education for preventing political violence. Okonkwo and Akanji (2025), however, find that the gap between warning and response persists. Proposition 4 predicts that more accurate forecasts will not close it unless response institutions, at local government, state and federal levels, in security and in mediation, are given the mandate and capacity to act at the speed and scale forecasts allow. In the North-West in particular, where local government and traditional authority have been weakened by violence, the institutions that could act on a village-level forecast of a bandit attack frequently do not exist.

The political condition

The political condition is the most fraught. Nigerian and Sahelian security forces are parties to the conflicts forecast, and their conduct, including mass arrests, collective punishment and airstrikes with civilian casualties, is itself a driver of violence and grievance. Proposition 5 predicts that forecasts delivered to such forces will be used for pre-emptive operations more often than for prevention. The juntas that have taken power in several Sahelian states have expelled international partners and restricted reporting, which worsens the data problem and narrows the set of actors who might act on forecasts preventively. Humanitarian

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anticipatory action, which Proposition 6 favours, operates in these regions under severe access constraints and under pressure to share information with security actors that would breach the firewall the proposition requires.

What would help

The framework suggests three priorities for the region. First, invest in data coverage in the spaces forecasts cannot see, through community-based monitoring of the kind Palihapitiya et al. (2025) show is already carrying the burden, while recognising that such data is itself a target for armed actors. Second, invest in response institutions at the local level, especially mediation and protection capacities, before investing in forecast precision. Third, establish rules on the use of forecasts by security forces, including prohibitions on their use as the sole basis for targeting and requirements that state violence be included in the data on which forecasts rest.

4.2 Implications

For regional early-warning systems

The African Union and ECOWAS early-warning systems should treat machine-learning forecasts as inputs to analysis rather than as substitutes for it, should audit the event data on which forecasts rest for statist and spatial bias, and should invest in the response side of the warning–response link before the warning side. They should develop guidance on the use of forecasts by member-state security forces that protects populations from pre-emptive harm.

For national security agencies

National agencies that receive forecasts should recognise that forecasts are least reliable where their operations are most intense, that the data may under-represent their own forces' contribution to violence, and that pre-emptive action on forecasts can generate the grievances that sustain conflict. Forecasts should not be used as the sole basis for targeting, detention or displacement.

For humanitarian actors

Humanitarian agencies should expand anticipatory action for conflict-induced displacement, where the evidence is thin but the logic is strong, while maintaining firewalls between humanitarian forecasting and security uses of the same data. Partnerships with forecasting consortia should include agreements on downstream use.

For forecasting research

The forecasting community should extend its evaluation from accuracy to consequences: who received forecasts, what they did, and what happened to the populations forecast. It should report accuracy separately for onset and continuation and for high- and low-coverage areas. It should incorporate corrections for statist bias of the kind Broache et al. (2025) identify. And it should engage with the populations it forecasts, whose knowledge of their own situation is the data source forecasting most lacks and whose interests are most affected by its use.

Limits

The paper is conceptual and does not evaluate any particular forecasting system's effects. It treats forecast holders as unitary when governments and agencies contain actors with divergent interests. It draws its African evidence largely from Nigeria and the central Sahel. And it does not address the use of forecasting by armed non-state groups, which also anticipate and exploit patterns of state response.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Conflict forecasting has become rigorous, probabilistic and continental in scope. It can tell governments and agencies, with measurable accuracy, where existing violence is likely to continue and spread. It is weaker at anticipating where violence will begin, weakest where data is thinnest, and biased in ways that reflect who has the power to report and define violence. Its outputs are delivered to actors whose capacity to act is often limited and whose interests do not always align with those of the people forecast. This paper has decomposed the promise of predictive security into three claims, predictability, preventability and prevention, shown that they weaken in sequence, examined the data and political conditions that determine whether each holds, and derived propositions that make the framework testable. Through the Sahel and Nigeria, it has shown that the conditions are least met where forecasting is most intensively applied.

The conclusion is not that forecasting should be abandoned. It is that a forecast is only as good for the forecast as the institution that receives it and the purpose for which it is used. The investment that would make predictive security serve the people of the Sahel and northern Nigeria is less in the precision of the models than in the capacity of local institutions to act on what the models say, in the inclusion of state violence in the data, and in rules

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that ensure prediction is met with protection rather than pre-emption. Without those, better forecasts will mean only that the violence was better foreseen.

6. CONTRIBUTION TO EXISTING KNOWLEDGE

The paper contributes a decomposition of the promise of predictive security into three claims, that violence is predictable, that prediction enables prevention, and that prevention is what predicted violence will be met with, and shows that they weaken in sequence, so that forecasting contributes more to the mitigation of ongoing conflict than to the prevention of new conflict.

It further contributes a framework linking forecast accuracy to data sparsity and reporting bias, and the consequences of prediction to the interests of those who hold the forecast, giving early-warning systems, security agencies and humanitarian actors a basis for judging when a forecast can responsibly inform action and when it will be used for pre-emption rather than protection.

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