

2. Armed conflict

Overview

During 2011 the sudden and dramatic popular uprisings in parts of the Middle East and North Africa, which together constituted the Arab Spring, produced diverse patterns of conflict. From the street protests that led to the flight into exile of Tunisia's president, to the serious armed confrontations that developed in Libya and Syria, the emergence of mass opposition to the region's ruling regimes was the precursor to dynamic and complex forms of violence (see section I in this chapter).

The events of the Arab Spring in 2011 were not, however, isolated in terms of contemporary conflict trends. Rather, developments across the region served to underline some of the long-term changes that have occurred in armed conflict over recent decades. This has involved important shifts in the scale, intensity and duration of armed conflict around the world, and in the principal actors involved in violence. Together these changes point to the emergence of a significantly different conflict environment than that which prevailed for much of the 20th century.

Since 1988 the SIPRI Yearbook has, in cooperation with the Uppsala Conflict Data Program, published data on armed conflict that has reflected a focus on 'major armed conflict' as the predominant type of conflict around the globe. This form of conflict, like all types of state-to-state conflict, has been in long-term decline, even while other forms of violent conflict have emerged as a key issue shaping international security. The data suggests that new approaches are needed to capture empirically and convey effectively the nature of modern conflict, which is increasingly moving beyond established definitions.

In order to gain a fuller picture of the nature of contemporary conflict, the 2012 Yearbook presents for the first time data on three broader types of organized violence: armed conflict (involving one or more states), non-state conflict and one-sided violence (against civilians). While all three types of violence decreased over the decade 2001–10, the sharpest fall was in the number of the most intense armed conflicts—those with at least 1000 battle-related deaths in a year (see section III).

The shift to non-state conflicts and a decline in the scale of conflicts has been matched by a substantial long-term decline in the deadliness of warfare, with the number of battle-related deaths in the average conflict continuing to fall. At the same time, there have been falling rates of successful conflict termination, resulting in more recurring or protracted conflicts. Such situations of 'hybrid peace' involve low levels of near continuous or recurring violence.

The dynamic, multidimensional and fluid nature of contemporary violence was particularly highlighted in 2011 by the active conflicts in Afghanistan, Côte d'Ivoire, the North Caucasus and Turkey. In Afghanistan, the confrontation involving the armed forces of the United States and its allies, the Government of Afghanistan, and violent non-state actors—notably the Taliban and the Haqqani network—with support from Afghanistan's neighbours, principally Pakistan, continued into its 10th year.

In Côte d'Ivoire, armed violence erupted in March 2011 between forces loyal to President Laurent Gbagbo and supporters of the internationally recognized president-elect, Alassane Ouattara. Following months of unsuccessful negotiations and sporadic violence, United Nations and French forces intervened, resulting in the arrest of Gbagbo and his eventual extradition to face trial at the International Criminal Court.

In the North Caucasus, a broad insurgency continued despite the official end of the decade-long Russian counterterrorism operation in Chechnya in 2009. While violence was largely confined to the republics of Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia and Kabardino-Balkaria, Russian authorities were unable to make substantial progress in bringing to an end the set of conflicts underpinning the insurgency. Similarly, in southern districts of Thailand an insurgency that has resulted in over 5000 deaths entered its eighth year.

The long-running conflict involving Turkey and various Kurdish insurgent groups resumed in 2011 following a partially observed ceasefire from the summer of 2010. A series of clashes and mass protests took place across the country and, in October, 26 Turkish soldiers were killed in fighting with armed rebels of the Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan (PKK, Kurdistan Workers' Party).

Finally, the many ongoing and long-running conflicts in the Horn of Africa point to the interaction of different forms of violence and state and non-state actors, as well as regional factors in shaping the form of conflict in the area (see section II).

The emergence of new patterns and dominant forms of armed violence, as the conflict incidents during 2011 highlight, constitutes a major challenge to the international community. Effective policy responses require clear understandings of both the nature of and trends in contemporary violence. The steady decline in the number of state-based conflicts, even while conflict has continued in different forms, has opened a growing debate about the scope and significance of armed violence in society. Boundaries between political, criminal and gender-based violence have become blurred, as has the distinction between war and peace, with significant violence occurring in conditions defined conventionally as peace or at least an absence of war.

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