

2. Armed conflict and peace processes

Overview

This chapter reports on recent trends in armed conflict and peace processes. In section I the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) provides an overview of the past ten years of active armed conflicts, with a focus on 2016. The number of active armed conflicts decreased from 52 to 49 in 2016. Despite this reduction, 2016 is part of a trend towards a significantly larger number of conflicts in the past three years compared to the period 2007–13. Compared across a longer period, the number of armed conflicts in recent years has been equivalent to the period 1990–92. The periods 1990–92 and 2014–16 constitute two distinct peaks in the post-cold war era. Much of the increase in the number of conflicts in 2014–16 stems from the spread of the Islamic State (IS), which has often transformed already active conflicts, leading to them being recorded as new conflicts in the UCDP data.

Of the 49 active conflicts in 2016, two were fought between states (India–Pakistan; Eritrea–Ethiopia). The remaining 47 conflicts were fought within states and concerned government (22), territory (24) or both (1). There is a clear recent pattern for a larger share of intrastate conflicts to be internationalized (i.e. to involve troops from other states on the side of one or both of the warring parties). Just over one-third (38 per cent) were internationalized in 2016. The majority of these (13 out of 18) were fought against Islamist organizations.

Developments in recent years have been discouraging, not the least in the Middle East, but the numerous changes have not all been negative. While many conflicts have been initiated or escalated, many others ceased to be active or de-escalated. The reduction in the number of conflicts in Latin America is particularly noteworthy. With the 2016 peace agreement with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia–People’s Army in Colombia, discussed in section II, and ongoing negotiations with the only guerrilla group that is still in conflict with the Colombian Government, the National Liberation Army, it is possible that this region will soon have no active conflicts recorded at all.

Section III explores regional patterns of Islamist armed conflict. About one-third of the world’s Islamist armed conflicts are taking place in the Middle East and North Africa, another third in sub-Saharan Africa and the final third largely in Asia. In some cases, an escalation over time can be observed from not necessarily religiously framed opposition into explicit Islamist grievances, which are then transformed into transnational Islamist aspirations. The need to constructively manage and resolve these types of conflict at each step of the escalation has important implications for policies on conflict prevention. South

East Asia stands out as a region that has gone against the abiding empirical trends over time, and where the proportion of Islamist armed conflicts seems to be decreasing.

An armed conflict that results in 1000 battle-related deaths in one year is classified as a ‘war’ and 12 wars were recorded in 2016—one more than in 2015. Three of the wars listed in 2015 had de-escalated to the level of a minor armed conflict in 2016 (Nigeria, Pakistan and Ukraine), while four previously recorded conflicts escalated to the level of war (Afghanistan: IS; Libya: IS; Turkey: IS; and Turkey: Kurdistan). Africa was the region with the highest number of conflicts in 2016 (19 conflicts). Asia was second with 15 active conflicts. Ten conflicts were recorded in the Middle East, three in Europe and two in the Americas.

Section IV presents the annual Global Peace Index (GPI), which uses 23 indicators to rank 163 nations and territories by their relative states of peace. The overall GPI score improved in 2016 but the average country score is less peaceful now than it was in 2008. The largest deterioration in peacefulness occurred in North America, while there were smaller deteriorations in sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East and North Africa. The largest improvements in peacefulness occurred in South America, Russia and Eurasia, and the Asia-Pacific. The impact of terrorism increased in 2016, continuing a decade-long trend. Sixty per cent of countries included in the GPI have experienced an increase in terrorism since 2007, and the impact of terrorism more than doubled in 22 countries.

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