

14. Conventional arms control

Overview

The Geneva Conventions are an international benchmark for behaviour during armed conflict. In 2011 the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) initiated a multi-year project to update a series of commentaries that provide guidance to states on how to interpret and implement the conventions. The first update is on the Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armed Forces in the Field, and is part of a series of commentaries that will consider changes in the nature of armed conflict. As discussed in section I, one of the most important issues addressed in the updated commentaries is how to apply the Geneva Conventions in non-international armed conflicts. Other key issues are how to safeguard the impartiality of humanitarian relief, attacks on healthcare workers and the increasing use of military force and violence in populated areas.

The use of explosive weapons in populated areas (EWIPA) is one of the ICRC's growing concerns, and has featured in ongoing humanitarian arms control efforts, as discussed in section II. In 2016 close to 42 000 civilians were reported as killed or injured by explosive weapons, with the bombardment of the city of Aleppo the nadir of this form of warfare. The 1981 Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW Convention), in particular, was designed to protect civilians and combatants in situations of armed conflict, but the Fifth Review Conference to update the convention failed to effectively address issues related to EWIPA, incendiary weapons and new technology in warfare. However, ongoing efforts to expand the scope of existing humanitarian arms control regimes included discussions on lethal autonomous weapon systems and some fledgling efforts by the outgoing US administration to regulate the international transfer and use of armed unmanned aerial vehicles and to increase transparency in their use. In addition, states met to discuss implementation of the United Nations Programme of Action on small arms and light weapons (SALW) and agreed strong language on the gendered aspects of SALW proliferation and violence and the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Although Europe is the only region that has created an integrated conventional arms control system, as discussed in section III, there is a consensus that this framework (created in the 1990s) no longer delivers the results expected from it. Deep divisions between Russia and the West over causality were played out during discussions within the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in 2016. Nonetheless, following a German-led initiative, the OSCE agreed to launch a structured dialogue on current and future challenges

and risks to security in the OSCE area, with a particular focus on conventional arms control.

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