I. Tracking armed conflicts and peace processes in 2018

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In 2018, active armed conflicts occurred in 27 states: 1 in the Americas; 7 in Asia and Oceania; 1 in Europe; 7 in the Middle East and North Africa; and 11 in sub-Saharan Africa (see sections II–VI, respectively). As in preceding years, the vast majority took place within a single country (intrastate), between government forces and one or more armed non-state groups. Only one was fought between states (the border clashes between India and Pakistan), and two were fought between state forces and armed groups that aspired to statehood, with the fighting sometimes spilling outside the recognized state’s borders (between Israel and the Palestinians and between Turkey and the Kurds). Of the intrastate conflicts, three were major armed conflicts (with more than 10 000 conflict-related deaths in the year)—Afghanistan (approximately 43 700 reported fatalities), Yemen (30 700) and Syria (30 200)—and 13 were high-intensity armed conflicts (with 1000–9999 conflict-related deaths in the year)—Iraq (6200), Nigeria (6200), Somalia (5100), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC, 3000), Turkey (2000), the Philippines (1800), Mali (1800), Ethiopia (1600), South Sudan (1500), Cameroon (1500), Egypt (1200), the Central African Republic (CAR, 1200) and Libya (1100). These categorizations should be considered tentative, however; as the compiler of these fatalities data, the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), cautioned: ‘Fatality information is the most biased, and least accurate, part of any conflict report and extreme caution should be employed when using any fatality number to show patterns’. All three major armed conflicts and most of the high-intensity armed conflicts were internationalized; that is, they involved foreign elements that helped prolong or exacerbate the conflict.

This section discusses the definition of ‘armed conflict’ and related terms used in this chapter, and then highlights salient (and largely continuing) features of these armed conflicts and some of their main consequences in 2018, as well as key developments in peace processes during the year.

1 For the definition of ‘armed conflict’ and related terms used in this section and chapter, see the subsection ‘Defining armed conflict’ and box 2.1 below.

Defining armed conflict

Armed conflicts are increasingly complex and multifaceted, with multiple actors who have diverse and changeable objectives. This complexity is a major challenge to the conceptual and legal categorization of armed conflict, as well as thinking on peacebuilding and conflict prevention. Determining the existence of an ‘armed conflict’ within the framework of international law, for example, differs according to whether the conflict occurs between states (interstate armed conflict) or between a state and one or more non-state groups (intrastate armed conflict). Criminal violence poses further problems; although it can threaten the authority and capability of a state as much as an armed conflict, it falls outside of this framework of international law.

In 2018, the vast majority of armed conflicts occurred within states. While interstate armed conflicts are relatively straightforward to identify, there is often no clear dividing line between intrastate armed conflicts and usually smaller-scale incidents of internal political violence. The threshold that distinguishes these two categories must be evaluated on a case-by-case basis by weighing a range of indicative data. This might include whether explicit political goals are stated by the actors, the duration of the conflict, the frequency of the acts of violence and military operations and the degree of continuity between them, the nature of the weapons used, displacement of

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4 This complexity is captured in United Nations and World Bank, Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict (World Bank: Washington, DC, 2018).
civilians, territorial control by opposition forces, and the number of victims (including the dead and wounded and displaced people).  

This complexity also contributes to the differences between the main data sets on violence and conflict, including the two that are predominantly used in this chapter: ACLED and the Uppsala Conflict Data Program’s Geo-referenced Event Dataset, each of which has its own definitions and methodology (see table 2.1).  

This chapter offers a primarily descriptive (rather than quantitative) synopsis of trends and events in 2018 affecting key armed conflicts. It uses a loose framework to characterize and distinguish between armed conflicts within the three major categories: interstate, intrastate and extrastate (see box 2.1). It also differentiates them from other kinds of organized group violence (such as criminal violence). To define a series of violent events as an armed conflict, it uses a threshold of 25 conflict-related deaths in a year.

Significant features of armed conflict in 2018

Most post-cold war armed conflicts are fought not only by regular armies but also by militias and armed civilians. Fighting is often intermittent with a wide range of intensities and brief ceasefires, and rarely occurs on well-defined battlefields. The nature of most armed conflicts is context specific; this subsection highlights some of the most significant features of several armed conflicts in 2018.

While evidence suggests that violence is becoming increasingly concentrated in urban areas, this largely relates to political and criminal violence (issues that are largely outside the scope of this chapter). The picture regarding armed conflicts is more mixed. While many post-cold war armed conflicts tend to be fought primarily in urban areas, others retain a strong rural dimension. Civilians are at great risk from both urban and rural armed conflict, but the risks multiply in urban settings. According to one study, when explosive weapons were used in urban areas (defined in the research as ‘populated areas’), for the eighth consecutive year over 90 per cent of the casualties were civilians (compared to 20 per cent in rural or ‘other’ areas).

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7 For an overview of the major advances in the collection and availability of armed conflict data, see Brzoska, M., ‘Progress in the collection of quantitative data on collective violence’, *SIPRI Yearbook 2016*, pp. 191–200.

8 For more on events in 2018 related to armaments, disarmament and international security, see annex C in this volume.


The use of explosive weapons in urban areas—especially explosive weapons with a large destructive radius, inaccurate delivery system or capacity to deliver multiple munitions over a wide area—is a growing concern and the focus of some humanitarian arms control efforts.11

The number of armed groups involved in conflict has been increasing over the past few decades, from an average of 8 per intrastate conflict in 1950 to 14 in 2010, according to a joint United Nations–World Bank study.12

Some armed conflicts, such as in Syria and Libya, were thought to involve

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12 United Nations and World Bank (note 4).
over 1000 armed groups.\textsuperscript{13} While differences between methods of identifying conflict actors or armed groups make comparisons between such studies difficult or impossible, the trend towards increasing numbers of armed groups appeared to continue: ACLED recorded 2271 distinct, named armed actors in 2018, an increase of 23 per cent compared to 2017. Despite the growing numbers of non-state armed groups, state forces remained the most powerful and violent actors in 2018 and were responsible for the largest number of civilian fatalities, according to ACLED.\textsuperscript{14}

Organized violence, as measured by ACLED, decreased overall in 2018, but spread to more places. Three armed conflicts—in Afghanistan, Syria and Yemen—had the highest rates of organized violence and highest casualties, with a combined total of nearly 100,000 fatalities in 2018.\textsuperscript{15}

The forced recruitment and use of child soldiers continues to be a feature of contemporary armed conflict. In 2017, the last year for which data is available, more than 8000 children were recruited into the ranks of non-state or state-affiliated armed forces (an increase of 3 per cent over 2016). The number of verified cases quadrupled in the CAR, doubled in the DRC, increased significantly in Somalia, and remained high in Nigeria, South Sudan, Syria and Yemen.\textsuperscript{16}

Sexual violence is widely perpetrated in armed conflict. The two main international policy responses have been UN Security Council Resolution 1820, which acknowledges the systematic and prevalent use of rape as a war tactic, and the 1998 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, which promises to prosecute those most accountable for ‘unimaginable atrocities that deeply shock the conscience of humanity’ and explicitly criminalizes rape and other forms of sexual violence under international law.\textsuperscript{17} In his annual report on conflict-related sexual violence, the UN Secretary-General listed the rise of violent extremism, arms proliferation, mass displacement and the collapse of the rule of law as critical triggers for this violence, which in 2017 (the year covered by the report) took place in the conflicts in Afghanistan, the CAR, Colombia, the DRC, Iraq, Libya, Mali, Myanmar, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria and Yemen.\textsuperscript{18} In 2018, the Nobel Peace Prize was


\textsuperscript{15} Kishi, and Pavlik (note 14), pp. 18–20.


awarded to Denis Mukwege and Nadia Murad for their efforts to end the use of sexual violence as a weapon in armed conflict.\textsuperscript{19}

During many of the armed conflicts, especially the major and high-intensity conflicts, other violations of international human rights and humanitarian law were also committed, including the use of starvation to achieve military ends, the denial of humanitarian aid, forced displacement, and attacks on aid workers, hospitals and schools. It is unclear whether such violations are on the increase, but the rules that are meant to protect civilians in war are clearly being broken regularly and systematically.\textsuperscript{20}

\section*{Consequences of armed conflict in 2018}

Armed conflicts result in loss of life and life-changing injuries, displacement of civilian populations and destruction of infrastructure and institutions. They also have long-term economic, developmental, political, and social consequences.

Children appear to disproportionately suffer the consequences of armed conflicts: in 2017 (the latest year for which figures are available), 420 million children, almost one-fifth of children worldwide, were living in areas affected by armed conflict—142 million in high-intensity or major armed conflict zones (i.e. those with 1000 or more conflict-related deaths in a year).\textsuperscript{21} Hundreds of thousands of children die every year as a result of the indirect effects of conflict, including malnutrition, disease and the breakdown of healthcare, water supply and sanitation. The UN Secretary-General’s annual report on children and armed conflict documented more than 25 000 incidents of ‘grave violations’ against children in conflicts around the world in 2017—the highest ever recorded. The six categories of grave violations covered in the report are: killing and maiming of children, recruitment and use of children as soldiers, sexual violence against children, abduction of children, attacks on schools and hospitals, and denial of humanitarian access.\textsuperscript{22}

Conflict deaths have been steadily declining, with battle deaths in the last 25 years accounting for only 3 per cent of the battle deaths in the last 100 years, or 7 per cent if World War II is excluded.\textsuperscript{23} In recent years the picture has been more mixed. Total deaths from organized violence, as

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{22} See Save the Children (note 16), pp. 19–21; and United Nations (note 16).
\item \textsuperscript{23} Institute for Economics & Peace, ‘Global Peace Index 2018: Measuring peace in a complex world’, June 2018, p. 36.
\end{itemize}
measured by the Uppsala Conflict Data Program, reached a 15-year high in 2014 with about 103,000 deaths. Uppsala’s most recent data, for 2017, showed almost 92,000 deaths, a decrease for the third successive year to a level 32 per cent lower than the latest peak in 2014.24 More limited in its geographic coverage (for 2018 it covered Asia, the Middle East and Africa, but not Europe or the Americas) but broader in scope in the forms of violence and conflict events covered, ACLED reported a 23 per cent reduction in fatalities from political violence from 2017 to 2018, seemingly confirming a continuation in the downward trend.25 According to ACLED, reported fatalities decreased most substantially in the Middle East in 2018, and particularly across Iraq and Syria.

Armed conflict is also a major driver of displacement.26 The number of forcibly displaced people worldwide at the end of 2017 was 68.5 million (including more than 25 million refugees), and it seems likely that these record numbers continued into 2018 (for which figures were not yet available at the time of publication).27 An existing displacement crisis in the Americas worsened in 2018, with over half a million people escaping political violence and a collapsing economy in Venezuela (see section II)—taking the total to more than one million Venezuelans who had crossed into Colombia since 2015. Protracted displacement crises also continued in many other places, including Afghanistan, the CAR, the DRC, Myanmar, Somalia, South Sudan, Syria and Yemen. Many displaced people crossed international borders in search of protection and assistance as refugees, although the majority were displaced within their own countries.28

In response to the large and protracted movements of migrants and refugees, two parallel global agreements were adopted in December 2018 after nearly two years of consultations and negotiations: the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM); and the Global Compact on Refugees. Neither agreement is legally binding. The GCM was adopted on 10 December 2018 by 164 UN member states during an intergovernmental conference and is the first comprehensive international agreement to address global migration.29 It provides a cooperative framework for states to promote measures to strengthen regular migration pathways, tackle irregular migration and protect migrants’ human rights. On 19 December it

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28 UN High Commissioner for Refugees (note 27).
was endorsed by the UN General Assembly: 152 countries voted in favour, 5 countries voted against (Czechia, Hungary, Israel, Poland and the United States), 12 countries abstained and 24 did not vote. The GCM was rejected mainly by countries with strong opposition to migration.

The Global Compact on Refugees, which builds on existing international law on the treatment of refugees, was adopted by the UN General Assembly on 17 December. It aims to achieve more equitable sharing of the responsibility for hosting and supporting the world’s refugees and has been more widely accepted than the GCM, with only the USA and Hungary voting against it.

In 2018, acute food insecurity as a result of protracted armed conflicts affected seven countries—Afghanistan, the CAR, the DRC, Somalia, South Sudan, Syria and Yemen—and one geographical region—the Lake Chad Basin (bordered by Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria). Around 56 million people needed urgent food and livelihood assistance in those countries. Three of those cases (the Lake Chad Basin, Somalia and Syria) saw improvements in food security in the latter part of 2018 in line with improvements in security. In the other five cases, however, food insecurity increased in the latter part of the year.

Finally, armed conflict also imposes substantial economic costs on society in both the short and long term. One study calculated the global cost of violence at $14.8 trillion in 2017, or 12.4 per cent of the global gross domestic product (GDP)—the highest level in the last decade. The economic impact of violence in the 10 most affected countries was equivalent to 45 per cent of their GDP; the economic cost of violence in Syria, Afghanistan and South Sudan in 2017, was equivalent to 68, 63 and 49 per cent of GDP respectively. In the last decade, GDP growth has been seven times higher among countries that became more peaceful than among countries that became less peaceful.


Peace processes

Like the conflicts they address, peace processes are also increasingly complex and multidimensional, with a wide range of actors, activities and outcomes. In 2018, they included a peace agreement ending the conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea and the formal disbanding of the Basque separatist group Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA, Basque Homeland and Liberty) in Spain. Peace processes in several of the most protracted and complex armed conflicts also showed signs of promise—especially in Afghanistan, with diplomatic engagement between the USA and the Taliban, and in South Sudan and Yemen, where new peace accords were agreed.

Peacebuilding efforts typically include disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of former combatants; ceasefire negotiations; signing of peace agreements; multilateral peace and stabilization operations; power-sharing arrangements; and state-building measures—all designed to bring about sustainable peace between parties to a conflict. There has also been more effort in recent years to make peace processes more inclusive, especially by promoting the increased representation of women.

However, not all peace processes lead to a sustainable peace. Inconclusive political settlements, failure to address the root causes of a conflict, and ongoing insecurity and tensions have often led to a recurrence of armed conflict. Many contemporary peace processes are long, drawn-out affairs. In some, agreements break down and hostilities resume (as in South Sudan since late 2013), whereas others achieve a relatively stable ceasefire but not a sustainable conflict settlement (such as the unresolved armed conflicts in the post-Soviet space, see section IV). Even relatively successful peace agreements, such as the 2016 agreement in Colombia, face continuing challenges (see section II).

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Since the mid 1990s, most armed conflicts have been new outbreaks of old conflicts rather than conflicts over new issues. According to one study of 216 peace agreements signed during 1975–2011, for example, 91 were followed by a resumption of violence within five years.\(^{39}\) This indicates both that peace processes are difficult, complex and multifaceted, and that more peace agreements succeed than fail. With the boundary between war and peace seemingly ever more blurred, identifying and conceptualizing the end of an armed conflict is also increasingly difficult.\(^{40}\)
