

2. Trends in armed conflict

Overview

Although the number of states experiencing armed conflicts fell slightly, from 55 in 2022 to 52 in 2023 (see section III of this chapter), the estimated overall number of fatalities rose from 153 100 in 2022 to 170 700 in 2023—the highest since 2019. The rise was primarily due to four major armed conflicts in the year (one more than in 2022) involving over 10 000 estimated conflict-related fatalities: the civil wars in Sudan and Myanmar in addition to the Israel–Hamas and Russia–Ukraine wars. The number of high-intensity armed conflicts (i.e. claiming 1000–9999 such deaths) also increased, from 17 in 2022 to 20 in 2023.

The Russia–Ukraine war was the sole example of a major interstate war involving standing armies during the year (see section I). It ground on throughout 2023, at a high cost to both sides, although the front line in eastern and southern Ukraine remained little changed by December 2023. Russian air attacks continued through the year, and Ukraine began to reply in kind, although not on the same scale. Both sides sought and received ammunition and weapons from their allies: a coalition of Western states supplied Ukraine, while Iran and North Korea supplied Russia. There were no formal Russian–Ukrainian peace talks in the course of 2023 and the one noteworthy diplomatic success—the 2022 Black Sea Grain Initiative—unravelling in 2023. The International Criminal Court did make a striking intervention in March by issuing arrest warrants for Russian President Vladimir Putin and another Russian official for their roles in the deportation of Ukrainian children.

In contrast to the stalemate in Ukraine, in September 2023 Azerbaijan secured a decisive victory in its long-running conflict with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh. Outside of Europe, however, most wars continued to take place within states—or in clusters of states with porous borders—and to involve non-state armed groups ranging from transnational criminal networks to criminal gangs.

There was significant instability across parts of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) prior to Hamas's attack on Israel on 7 October 2023, even if the recorded fatality rate was far below that which would follow in Gaza. There were high-intensity armed conflicts in Syria, Yemen and Iraq, although the number of estimated fatalities only increased in Syria. Even including the death toll in Israel and Gaza from 7 October, the overall estimate of 35 900 fatalities in MENA for 2023 was still less than half that for 2018 (75 400).

Israel responded to the events of 7 October—the killing of over 1000 civilians and more than 350 Israeli soldiers and police and the capture of around

240 hostages—by declaring a state of war for the first time since 1973, announcing a ‘full siege’ of Gaza and launching a heavy air campaign on the territory followed by a ground invasion. Despite a short humanitarian pause in November and other extensive and contentious international diplomacy, by the end of the year the war showed little sign of abating. More than 22 000 Palestinians had been killed in the ensuing strikes or ground operations by Israel, two-thirds of them women and children, and international experts warned of a growing risk of famine. Underlining the level of international unease, South Africa lodged a request on 28 December for the International Court of Justice to address the charge that Israel was committing genocide in Gaza.

The war in Gaza led to regional escalations between the USA–Iran, Israel–Iran and Hezbollah–Israel, that also involved attacks in Iraq and Syria, while the Houthi forces in Yemen threatened commercial shipping in the Red Sea. Western powers dispatched warships to the area to address the threat.

Sub-Saharan Africa remained the region with the most armed conflicts, although many involved fewer than 1000 conflict-related fatalities and levels of violence fluctuated considerably. There were declines in conflict-related fatalities in countries experiencing high-intensity armed conflict, including the Democratic Republic of the Congo (down 35 per cent compared to 2022), Ethiopia (down 44 per cent), Nigeria (down 19 per cent) and South Sudan (down 47 per cent). Other armed conflicts escalated, with rises in death rates in Burkina Faso (up 100 per cent compared to 2022), Somalia (up 28 per cent) and—statistically overshadowing other cases—Sudan (up 537 per cent). The fighting that erupted in Sudan on 15 April between forces led by rival military generals triggered a humanitarian crisis and fuelled all-out civil war. In the Sahel, a coup in Niger and a decision by Mali to expel United Nations peacekeepers added to regional tensions.

The Americas is the only region not to have had a major armed conflict in 2018–23. The two countries that suffered the highest number of fatalities—Brazil and Mexico—largely faced criminal rather than political violence, and gang violence escalated in Haiti during the year. The conflict-related fatality rate for Asia and Oceania has more than halved since 2021, despite the civil war in Myanmar.

Opportunities for peacemaking were limited in 2023 (see section II). In Yemen, the UN began 2023 attempting to restart a truce between the Houthi movement and the Saudi Arabia-led coalition supporting the UN-recognized government. Despite growing regional tensions by the end of the year both sides were pledging to develop a road map for a new ceasefire. The Ethiopian government and Tigray People’s Liberation Front worked on implementing their November 2022 ceasefire with the support of a small African Union monitoring mission—while in Colombia, the government made some progress on a peace initiative with several armed groups through the course of 2023.