

4. Thematic issues in armed conflict

Overview

Armed conflicts are often complex, involving multiple armed groups and the use of proxy forces by major powers and regional players (see chapter 2). This chapter explores three aspects of that complexity: the role of the Wagner Group and other Russian private military and security companies (PMSCs) in armed conflicts in 2023; food insecurity as both a consequence and trigger of armed conflict; and the linkages between climate change, conflict and insecurity in Yemen.

One of the key features of armed conflicts in recent years has been the rapid global growth of PMSCs. The fortunes of the Wagner Group, a prominent Russian PMSC with clear links to the Russian government, underwent a dramatic trajectory during 2023 (see section I). Battlefield success in Ukraine in May was achieved at high human cost by sending large numbers of recruited convicts to ‘meat grinder’ battles at the frontline. In June 2023 the Russian government formalized the involvement of these irregular and ‘voluntary units’ in the war in Ukraine by ordering their integration under the defence ministry. This led to a short-lived armed rebellion in late June—the first armed uprising in Russia in three decades. After the rebellion was quickly aborted, the Russian state moved to take more overt control of Wagner’s paramilitary activities.

In early 2023 the Wagner Group was reportedly fielding several thousands of personnel in Africa. In exchange for providing military assistance to regimes battling rebel groups and insurgents in the Central African Republic (CAR) and Mali, and to warlords or militias involved in civil war in Libya and Sudan, the Wagner Group secured access to high-value natural resources in those countries. By the end of the year the Wagner brand had faded amid the creation of a new ‘Africa Corps’ as a vehicle for Russian engagement with Africa, and the ascendance of other PMSCs to carry on some of Wagner’s operations on the continent.

The primary regulatory achievement vis-à-vis the Wagner Group and other Russian PMSCs was Russia’s decision to bring them under the defence ministry. Beyond Russia, the European Union, the United Kingdom and the United States strengthened their unilateral coercive sanctions targeting key personnel of Wagner and linked entities.

The link between food systems, violent conflict and peace is a critical global concern (see section II). Three conflicts in particular impacted global levels of food security in 2023: the Russia–Ukraine war, the Sudan civil war and the Israel–Hamas war. Warfare in Ukraine continued to devastate agricultural production

and impacted global food supply chains. But despite Russia withdrawing from the Black Sea Grain Initiative in July 2023, alternative logistical networks and shipping corridors enabled Ukrainian exports of agricultural products to reach near pre-invasion levels by the end of 2023.

Sudan experienced a sharp rise in food insecurity in 2023, driven by armed conflict, economic decline and food price inflation, while also suffering a significant decrease in aid. Refugees from the Sudanese war also impacted food insecurity levels of other countries, such as South Sudan. The Israel– Hamas war caused widespread damage to food systems in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, with famine threatening to engulf Gaza.

Amid heightened global food insecurity in 2023, Latin America stood out with an overall decrease in the number of people facing food insecurity. Despite worsening trends in some countries, such as Haiti, the region’s improvement is credited to positive labour market development and effective social protection policies. Yet, heightened levels of violence threaten this achievement. Strengthening food systems—and making them more equitable and sustainable, including by reducing environmental degradation and taking action on climate change—is paramount for breaking the detrimental link between food insecurity and conflict.

The ongoing climate crisis has consequences for peace and security, especially in conflict-affected and fragile countries, such as Yemen (see section III). The civil war in Yemen has heightened the socio-economic vulnerability of its population, while climate change has aggravated the risk of droughts and floods disrupting critical agricultural production. Food insecurity has worsened with an estimated 17 million people, or over 53 per cent of the population, suffering from acute food insecurity in 2023. The socio-economic challenges exacerbated by climate change and armed conflict undermine food and livelihood security and disproportionately affect women in Yemen.

The prolonged armed conflict is a major driver of displacement in Yemen, while extreme weather events have intensified the vulnerability of displaced populations. Climate change worsens the risk of conflicts over vital land and water resources. Water infrastructure is frequently attacked by the conflict parties who also seek to control local populations in contested territories by seizing control of farmland, fishing sites and pasture. Inter-communal disputes involving tribal militias are predominantly over land and water resources, including highly profitable groundwater-fed irrigation projects.

Humanitarian and peacebuilding efforts can contribute towards building climate resilience if they are carefully designed and executed with solutions that account for future climate impacts and the population’s vulnerability to climate change. In Yemen, however, this will first require a ceasefire and political stabilization.