

Conflict, security and emerging threats

Ivan Briscoe, Conflict Research Unit, Clingendael Institute

Chapter for the Clingendael Strategic Monitor 2014

June 20, 2014

Introduction

Despite the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the emergence of a terrorist threat with global reach in the form of Al Qaeda, the first decade of the new millennium marked a low in the number and severity of armed conflicts worldwide. No phenomenon was more expressive of this trend than the decline in inter-state conflict: once the dominant pattern of war, only three such conflicts occurred in the decade (SIPRI 2012: 67). The traditional protocols of such warfare appear increasingly remote from modern battlefield realities.

Yet the past two to three years have given serious reason to reconsider the apparent gains in peace and security that followed the initial, traumatic aftermath of the Cold War, when a wave of wars spread across the Balkans and sub-Saharan Africa. Brutal, intractable, high-casualty conflict has returned, most evidently in Syria, Iraq, Libya, the Central African Republic and South Sudan. Furthermore, it has done so in a way that often eludes the efforts of mediators and military and peace operations to end conflict, bypasses the mechanisms of the international community, and underwrites new forms of threat projection and displacement.

In an otherwise optimistic account of the reduction in conflict and violence worldwide, the Human Security Report 2013 notes that “the escalating carnage in Syria meant a dramatic increase in the number of worldwide battle deaths in 2012. Indeed, the Syrian battle-death toll last year was the world’s highest since the World War I-style interstate war between Ethiopia and Eritrea in 1999.” (Human Security Project. 2013)¹

Trends in the field of conflict: old causes and new dynamics

The novelties in the most recent conflicts, which help account for its particularly lethal virulence, should not obscure the continuities in organized violence. Modern wars do not break out for reasons that are in any way historically exceptional. Ethno-political tensions, rebel separatism and armed resistance to authoritarian regimes remain the major sources of

¹ Although different research bodies use distinct methodologies to track the severity of war, the Global Peace Index offers one sobering overview: deaths due to internal conflict have increased nearly five times from 2008 to 2013, and the incidence of major conflicts has nearly tripled (Institute for Economics and Peace 2013).¹

intrastate conflict: of 136 civil wars fought since 1940, 74 aimed at gaining control of the state, and 62 at territorial separation (Hewitt et al 2012). The one possible innovation in the field of combat is that provided by armed non-state criminal groups in Mexico and Central America, whose activities are guided by a combination of territorial control and transnational trafficking and business logics (UNODC 2012), and whose extreme brutality owes much to high degrees of social atomization (Vulliamy 2011; Adams 2011).

Modern civil war's causes, in short, are recognizable. The Syrian civil war emerged from state repression of a popular uprising with a heavily sectarian component, based in large part on the regime's exclusion from power and wealth of the country's Sunni majority. Likewise, Mali's armed crisis of 2012 can be understood as the fourth Tuareg rebellion of the country's post-colonial era, as it was unmistakably connected to combatants belonging to this ethnic group who had once served in General Qadhafi's military forces in Libya, and who demanded the creation of a new country, Azawad, upon their return.

Fighting in South Sudan, Iraq, the Central African Republic and Libya can also be understood in terms of armed competition for power and resources between different, largely ethnic or religious factions, and is generally presaged in each case on the acute sense of exclusion of one group rooted in perceived historical grievances.² For the scholar Akbar Ahmed, it is the misunderstood and maltreated tribal peripheries of various states, such as Pakistan and Yemen, which are now engaged in escalating retaliation against central states, and with the Western military as a consequence (Ahmed 2013).

Inter-state war, for its part, has undergone a marked decline, driven by a rising body of global norms against such warfare, as well as increasing economic and financial ties between nations (Human Security Project 2014: 11). Even so, the far higher death-tolls that traditionally result from conflicts between the military forces of rival nations continue to make the risk of such war a compelling feature of geopolitics. Both this danger, as well as a distinct unwillingness of big states to risk military escalation, were manifested in early 2014 by the tensions between Russia and the Ukraine, and by extension between Russia and the West, over the Crimean peninsula and eastern Ukraine. A sharp increase in antagonism between Japan and China, the continuous presence of North Korea as an erratic, nuclear-armed state with a brittle leadership structure, the internationalization of African conflicts such as that of the Central African Republic (CAR), or the possibility of direct war between states affected by the widening Syrian conflict also pose real threats to international security, even if the diplomatic means to contain them are in principle available.

Yet even if the generic bases of these different sorts of intrastate and interstate represent identifiable historical continuities, which in the case of intrastate conflict can be correlated with greater or lesser precision against a set of long-term "root causes" – most obviously extreme economic underdevelopment and poor or predatory governance (Fearon 2010) – something does seem to have changed in the conduct of war. In short, it is the new dynamics of the process of fighting, and the effects of these on the evolution of the objectives that

² According to Wimmer 2013, global data since 1945 shows that "an increase in the size of the politically excluded population by 30 per cent increased the chances of civil war by 25 per cent."

combatants and their leaders set themselves within the course of conflict, that have become outstanding features of recent wars. The main problems for the international community emerging from this most recent wave of conflicts – their intractability, the risk of an unpredictable spill-over of organized violence and the limited relevance of existing global security institutions – derive in large part from the evolutionary dynamic of modern organized violence, rather than the initial causes.

Mali in 2012 offered one of the starkest examples. Although the traditional Tuareg separatist impulse, re-assembled in the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), provided the trigger for war, its leadership of the rebellion was soon eclipsed by supposed allies – Islamist militants grouped in three different factions. Clarity of purpose on the battlefield was obscured even further by these groups' links to organized crime, the military coup against the Malian state, and the opaque connections between the groups and powerful neighbouring states such as Algeria (Nossiter 2013). The battlefield itself, meanwhile, saw extremely limited use once the initial three-month rebel offensive had been successfully completed. A series of tacit understandings and withdrawals ensured there was little real fighting until January 2013, when an insurgent advance to the south of Mali dissolved before a French military riposte, Operation Serval. Northern Mali was thereby “recovered.”

No conflict is quite like any other, and the efforts to stabilize Mali under the auspices of a UN peacekeeping mission have until now proved more effective than the inaction over Syria's civil war, or the drift towards chronic factionalized political violence in Libya. However, two interconnected characteristics, which are shared to a greater or lesser degree across these and other warzones, represent something of an emerging pattern. These are the drift to armed fragmentation, and the variegated internationalization of internal conflicts.

The trend to fragmentation

Studies of “new wars” in the wake of the dissolution of the Soviet bloc have sought to prise apart the make-up of hybrid conflicts, in which ethnic mobilization, various transnational connections (such as to crime) and state failure tend to be constituent elements (Kaldor 2012). But these analyses do not capture a number of the outstanding features of this latest wave of warfare.

One of these is the extreme fragmentation of armed groups, which is evident not only in the proliferation of non-state armed groups over the past decade throughout sub-Saharan Africa and the Arab world (Podder 2012), but also in the decentralized multiplication of fronts and factions engaged in conflict. Central, vertically integrated control over armed movements, particularly insurgent ones, has never been an outstanding feature of intrastate war. Armed movements have traditionally delegated significant powers to regional commanders, or established functional divisions within their organizational structures (thereby separating political, military and fund-raising wings). Even where central insurgent command does appear to have remained in place, as in Colombia, it is not far-fetched to assume that the same dynamic will apply in the near future. Already the 70 fronts of the Revolutionary Armed

Forces of Colombia (FARC) enjoy greater local autonomy than ever before, and it likely that the most lucrative among them will emerge as criminalized factions should ongoing peace talks end successfully (Battaglini and Lodola 2013).

Recent conflicts, however, have been accompanied by far greater horizontal splintering between fighting groups. Five broad fronts now fight the Syrian state,³ though each of them also seeks purely factional objectives, and are known to have battled one another (Daragahi 2014). At the extremes, both Jabhat al-Nusra and its offshoot, the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIS), are dedicated to the tenets of Islamist fundamentalism, though only the former is the recognized franchise of Al Qaeda in Syria. Other cases of conflict point to the same dynamic. Four armed groups battled the state in northern Mali. Hundreds of differently positioned militia groups exercise political violence in Libya on behalf of distinct tribal, ethnic, local, separatist and religious causes (Smits et al 2013). Meanwhile, in the Central African Republic, the dissolution of the Séléka rebel coalition in September 2013 by its leader and then president, Michael Djotodia,⁴ only confirmed the nature of the group as a largely ungovernable set of violent, criminalized factions with an increasingly sectarian bent (International Crisis Group 2013).

However, the ubiquity of the trend does not lend itself to a single, simple explanation. For various reasons, the way conflict parties attach themselves to other interest groups – their hybridity, in other words - appears to exert a powerful centrifugal force on organized violence. Part of this process may be explained by their linkages to crime, with a number of armed factions allying themselves to illicit networks that are seeking their own private “protection” force: this sort of tie-up appears to have accounted for the creation of the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) militia in Mali, and to growing numbers of ethnic militia groups in the trafficking zones of southern Libya.⁵ The trend towards smaller, flexible groups has been prominent in the field of organized crime for two decades, and fragmentation in armed conflict may well be obeying the same logic (Kenney 2007). In an asymmetric battlespace, centralized vertical leadership is a source of weakness; the need to control civilians and territory, on the other hand, favours smaller, localized organizations that are more able to co-opt or coerce the grassroots.

The role of internationalized local wars

At the same time, not all of this fragmentation comes down to illicit linkages, or to a close similarity with the behaviour of criminal groups. In fact, it is the variegation and intensity in transnational involvement in intra-state wars which are the most compelling aspects of modern conflicts, and which drive much of the process of armed group fragmentation.

³ These are the Free Syrian Army, the Islamic Front, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS), Jabhat al-Nusra and armed groups affiliated with the Democratic Union Party of the Kurds (PYD). Each of these in turn is divided into numerous fronts and units, over which central control is not always assured.

⁴ Djotodia resigned in January 2014, and was replaced by Catherine Samba-Panza

⁵ According to Lacher 2014, “rivalry over the control of smuggling routes has led to a spillover of armed activity into the border areas of northern Niger, where clashes related to smuggling convoys are increasingly common.”

International economic ties, including links to the arms trade, have long been connected with the entrenchment of armed conflict in countries with large natural resource endowments, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo or Angola. In the more recent case of Syria, the battlefield owes its extreme fragmentation largely to linkages between armed groups and a transnational support network based on shared ideological or sectarian affinities, or as a result of ties with supportive foreign governments in the Gulf States, Turkey or the West. Criminal and oil revenues have certainly been captured by rebel groups, but are of lesser significance in accounting for the high levels of factionalization. Instead, the three years of conflict have been marked by splintering into numerous groups on the rebel side, each with their respective foreign backers, illicit revenue sources and volunteer recruits. On the government side, the war effort has been marked by ever closer reliance on foreign states or quasi-states for military support (Iran, Iraq and Hizbollah in Lebanon), or for diplomatic protection and support (Russia, Venezuela).

The current condition of Syria's war fits the category of "internationalized intrastate conflict," whereby an internal battle has become dependent on weapon, troop and financial contributions from foreign states, and is now expanding into Iraq through the actions of ISIS. Indeed, by 2011 there were nine such conflicts recorded across the world, more than at any time since the end of World War II (Human Security Project 2013). Conflict analysts tend to regard this class of conflict as one of the most deadly (with examples including the "long wars" in the DRC since 1998 and in Afghanistan since 1979), although the precise causal chain that would explain its lethal character is hard to establish (Human Security Project 2012; SIPRI 2013).

However, internationalization has many other forms aside from direct military implication by foreign parties in support of a conflict partner. Globalized Islamist extremism has prompted the emergence or consolidation of new fronts for armed violence, such as that of Boko Haram in Nigeria. Yet unlike the early days of Al Qaeda as a centrally controlled transnational terrorist network, the organization has been restructured into a franchise operation, handing out its blessing and insignia to preferred local groups (Zimmerman 2013). While this may have diminished the ability to project violence into the highly securitized developed world, including Europe, it has made the extremist cause much more responsive to local grievances and discontents, exactly as intended by the Al Qaeda's leaders according to internal correspondence (Combating Terrorism Center 2012).

Franchised jihadist activity has thus grown ever closer to zones of existing conflict and tension, and particularly to populous lower to middle income countries, including India, Nigeria, Russia and Thailand (Institute Economics and Peace 2012). Its mobility and flexibility has made it highly responsive to weak spots for international security, in precisely the same ways that narco-trafficking has managed to adapt to successive waves of law enforcement by decamping to new and accessible routes. Moreover, the emergence of various sub-groups competing in the Islamist eco-system has also seemingly furthered state linkages to these groups, particularly where these groups are active in poorly governed cross-border territories, and can be controlled and exploited for national strategic purposes. The case of Pakistani intelligence support for the Taliban, Yemeni regime links to Al Qaeda in the

Arabian Peninsula, and foreign backing for insurgent and Islamist forces operating in the Sahel (Galy 2013) all suggest that internationalization of current terrorist activity may take on many different forms.

Understanding new threats and risks

As mentioned above, many conflicts continue to stem from deep rooted ethnic grievances or territorial tensions. Both the conflict in South Sudan, and the friction between Russia and Ukraine, are easily recognizable within these classical paradigms of war. But at the same time, there is evidence to suggest that a number of recent conflicts have assumed a more decentralized, fragmented structure, in which cross-national influences operating along various dimensions have been accentuated.

One insightful account of the ways in which war has been transformed in certain contexts in the early years of the 21st century has been offered by the former British army officer Emile Simpson (Simpson 2013). His interpretation of modern conflict, grounded in his campaign experience in Helmand, Afghanistan, underlines the use of organized violence as part and parcel of ongoing political competition in contexts where state legitimacy is contested. In particular, he draws attention to two crucial developments. Armed factions in a “kaleidoscopic political configuration” may adhere to a broader insurgency, though their choice to do so may simply be a temporary calculation based on self-interest (as appears to have been the case in the Taliban’s support network).

And, second, the need for rebels, the state and foreign forces to appeal to fragmented “strategic audiences” in multiple domains and countries challenges the notion that military victory followed by peace can now be achieved in a straightforward way, since not every audience will be satisfied with a domestic political settlement. This is above all the case for “audiences” of religious extremists or transnational crime.

In combination, armed fragmentation and the variety of international linkages in current conflict make calculations regarding military or peacekeeping interventions by foreign governments much tougher and riskier. As mentioned above, three particular risks stand out for the international community, and have become highly visible in the cases of Syria, Libya and the Sahel.

The first of these is the intractability of conflict. Statistics point to the way conflicts tend increasingly to reignite in territories previously affected by warfare, although there is some debate over whether these second or third generation conflicts are anything more than residual wars (Human Security Project 2012: ch. 6). However, there is little doubt that regions where transnational armed or criminal groups currently operate are more liable to witness the recurrence of conflict, albeit in different places. One reason is that armed activity may easily be displaced to areas away from the initial epicentre of conflict if security conditions for insurgents change. No better example came in the response of an offshoot of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) to the French offensive in northern Mali, in the shape of a mass

hostage-taking in the In Amenas gas facility in neighbouring Algeria. Islamist elements from the Malian conflict since appear to have regrouped in Niger, southern Libya and remote areas of Mali.

This “balloon effect” in certain vulnerable regions – particularly the Sahel, although the phenomenon is also apparent among Syria’s neighbours - is facilitated by the difficulties in establishing peaceful norms for political competition, and the opportunistic way violent entrepreneurs step in to exploit the grievances of marginalized groups across a number of countries. Libya now provides the clearest illustration of a bumpy and violent post-conflict transition, which has been upset by the historically grounded fears of tribal, ethnic and ideological groups (particularly the Muslim Brotherhood) that they will be excluded from the spoils of power. One reaction has been to extort the state, as the Zintani militia and federalist groups did in blocking oil pipelines in 2013. Eastern Islamist groups such as Ansar al-Sharia and southern tribes, for their part, appear to be forming closer strategic ties with the regional jihadist cause.

A second concern derives in part from this transnational mobility, and the way it can be exploited in mediatized asymmetric warfare. The attack in September 2013 on a shopping mall in Nairobi carried out by al-Shabaab marked the latest of a series of such transnational projections from a conflict zone – in this case Somalia – to a major urban centre that provides a local support network, global media coverage, and a patently infidel target. As in previous terrorist actions in Mumbai, Istanbul, Kampala, and more recently Volgograd and Karachi, these attacks deft conventional battle logic, granting no gain in territory nor a victory over enemy combatants, but instead propagating amorphous civilian fear; in this respect, they may be distinguished from the more focalized attacks on enemy targets led by organizations such as Abu Nidal, whose fighting methods in the 1970s and 1980s were otherwise not dissimilar. Suicidal attacks under conditions of displaced warfare, whether on major cities or economic infrastructure, remain extremely unpredictable risks. Evidence suggests they will also encourage states at risk of such violence to back proxy groups in the source conflict, thereby aggravating internationalized civil war.

Lastly, it is questionable whether the current institutional mechanisms for dealing with extremely fragmented and internationalized internal conflicts fall short of what is required. The sheer variety of stakes in the Syrian conflict, whether this involves the end of the Assad regime, the future of Arab democracy, the regional rise of extreme Islamism, the geo-strategic footprint of major powers or the future of Sunni-Shia or other ethnic relations in numerous countries, is overlaid by a complex geometry of foreign parties, among them neighbouring states, superpowers, non-state organizations and volunteer fighters. The multiplicity of interests and actors do not seem so far to have been able to agree on any solid basis for negotiation, nor shown much wish to do so, beyond the minimal commitment not to use chemical weapons or to provide limited humanitarian access. As a result, a genuine risk exists in Syria, as well as in other internationalized civil wars, that unresolved internal conflict might eventually expand into even more lethal interstate war.

Conclusions

The national and regional displacement of conflict, the use of potent symbolic attacks on urban and economic centres as a means to wage asymmetric warfare, and the proliferation of stakes and actors in key conflicts, such as that of Syria, together represent a complex array of security threats. Although these are not characteristic of all current and emerging conflicts, they stand out as threats for which conventional, institutionalized responses are largely absent.

At the root of these new threats are trends that have become a distinctive feature of intrastate conflicts in the Sahel, the Middle East and North Africa, as well as the Horn of Africa and in the criminalized zones of extreme violence in Latin America. Fighting groups are growing more dispersed and fragmented, seeking local territorial control as a primary means of exerting influence on the course of conflict, and over their own prospects of political leverage and economic accumulation. At the same time, various dimensions of external influence, whether through illicit business, Islamist ideology, proxy influence from nearby states or cross-border sectarian alliances, are internationalizing a rising number of civil wars. In such contexts, without organized national counterparts to negotiate with, and in the face of risks of contagion of violence or instability along various transnational transmission routes, the international community appears to be facing the toughest tests for its mediation and peacekeeping architecture.

Bibliography

- Adams, Tani. 2012. *Chronic Violence and its Reproduction: Perverse Trends in Social Relations, Citizenship and Democracy in Latin America*. Washington DC: Wilson Center
- Ahmed, Akbar. 2013. *The Thistle and the Drone. How America's War on Terror Became a Global War on Tribal Islam*. Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press
- Battaglino, Jorge and Lodola, Germán. 2013. "Negotiations and possible spoilers in the Colombian peace process." Norwegian Peacebuilding Resources Centre
- Combating Terrorism Center. 2012. *Letters from Abbottabad: Bin Laden Sidelined?* West Point: CTC.
- Daragahi, Borzou. 2014. "A gathering force". *The Financial Times*, February 13.
- Fearon, James D. 2010. "Governance and Civil War Onset." World Development Report 2011 background paper. Washington DC: World Bank
- Galy, Michel (ed). 2013. *La Guerre au Mali. Comprendre la Crise au Sahel et au Sahara. Enjeux et Zones d'Ombre*. Paris: La Découverte.
- Hewitt, Joseph J., Wilkenfield, Jonathan and Gurr, Ted Robert (eds). 2012. *Peace and Conflict 2012*. University of Maryland
- Human Security Project. 2012. *Human Security Report 2012: Sexual Violence, Education and War: Beyond the Mainstream Narrative*. Vancouver: Human Security Press
- Human Security Project. 2013. *Human Security Report 2013: The Decline in Global Violence: Evidence, Explanation and Contestation*. Vancouver: Human Security Press.
- Institute for Economics and Peace. 2012. *Global Terrorism Index*. Sydney: Institute for Economics and Peace.
- Institute for Economics and Peace. 2013. *Global Peace Index 2013*. Sydney: Institute for Economics and Peace.
- International Crisis Group. 2013. *Central African Republic: Better Late than Never*. Nairobi/Brussels
- Kaldor, Mary. 2012. *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era* (third edition). Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Kenney, Michael. 2007. *From Pablo to Osama. Trafficking and Terrorist Networks, Government Bureaucracies and Competitive Adaptation*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.

- Nossiter, Adam and MacFarquhar, Neil. 2013. "Algeria Sowed Seeds of Hostage Crisis as it Nurtured Warlord." *New York Times*, February 1.
- Simpson, Emile. 2013. *War From the Ground Up. Twenty First Century Combat as Politics*. London: Hurst & Company
- Smits, Rosan, Janssen, Floor and Briscoe, Ivan. 2013. *Revolution and its discontents: state, factions and violence in the new Libya*. The Hague: Conflict Research Unit, Clingendael.
- Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. 2012. *SIPRI Yearbook 2012. Armaments, Disarmament and International Security*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. 2013. *SIPRI Yearbook 2013. Armaments, Disarmament and International Security*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. 2012. *Transnational Organized Crime in Central America and the Caribbean*. Vienna: UN.
- Podder, Sukanya. 2012. "From spoilers to statebuilders: Constructive approaches to engagement with non-state armed groups in fragile states." Working paper, Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
- Vulliamy, Ed. 2011. "Ciudad Juárez is all our futures." *The Guardian*, June 20.
- Wimmer, Andreas. 2013. "States of War. How the Nation-State Made Modern Conflict." *Foreign Affairs* November
- Zimmerman, Katherine. 2013. *The Al Qaeda Network. A New Framework for Defining the Enemy*. American Enterprise Institute.