

The IISS Armed Conflict Survey 2015

The worldwide review of political, military and humanitarian trends in current conflicts

Press Statement

Arundel House, London
20 May 2015

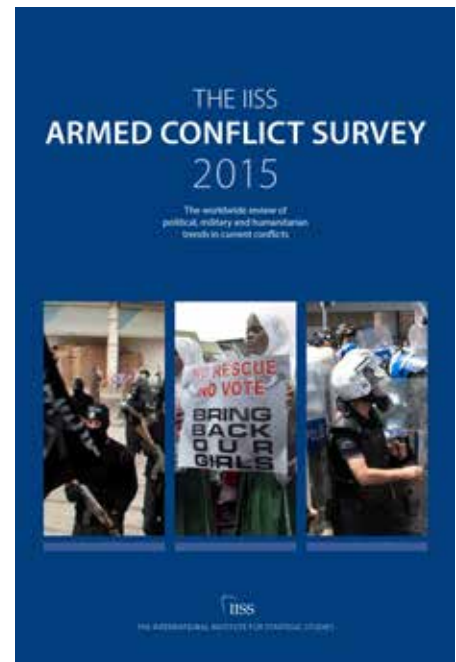
Remarks by Nigel Inkster CMG,
Director of Transnational Threats and Political Risk
and Editor of *The Armed Conflict Survey*

Welcome to the launch of the first edition of *The Armed Conflict Survey*. Joining me on the panel today to answer your questions are Ben Barry, James Hackett, Virginia Comolli, Jens Wardenaer, Antonio Sampaio and Alia Brahim.

This new IISS product is based partly on the material accumulated throughout the year in the Armed Conflict Database, a subscription online product that has since 2003 monitored armed conflicts around the world with a particular focus on the human security implications of these conflicts. The Armed Conflict Database is used as a research tool by governments, armed forces, media, academic institutions and international organisations including the World Bank, which uses the database to help it determine whether a state of armed conflict formally exists within a given country.

The Armed Conflict Survey currently provides detailed coverage of 42 armed conflicts around the world – civil wars, insurgencies and other forms of violent unrest – from a military, political and humanitarian perspective illustrated by maps, tables and charts. These include the 2015 Chart of Conflict, which from now on will be incorporated within *The Armed Conflict Survey* rather than, as in the past, *The Military Balance*, and which this year has as its *leitmotif* the issue of population displacement. At the end of the publication are some explanatory notes setting out our methodologies for determining the reliability and accuracy of key statistics such as casualty numbers, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees.

In addition to analysing the strategic implications of a year's worth of data on specific conflicts, *The Armed Conflict Survey* also seeks to add further value by looking at some of the wider trends in global armed conflicts and reflecting on the changing character of conflict. To this end *The Armed Conflict Survey* contains an editor's introduction looking at the evolution of the role of armed conflict in statecraft together with specialist essays by world-class experts, one of whom we are fortunate to have on our panel today, on the subjects of Countering Hybrid Warfare; the Evolution of Global Jihadism; Crime and Conflict; Preventing

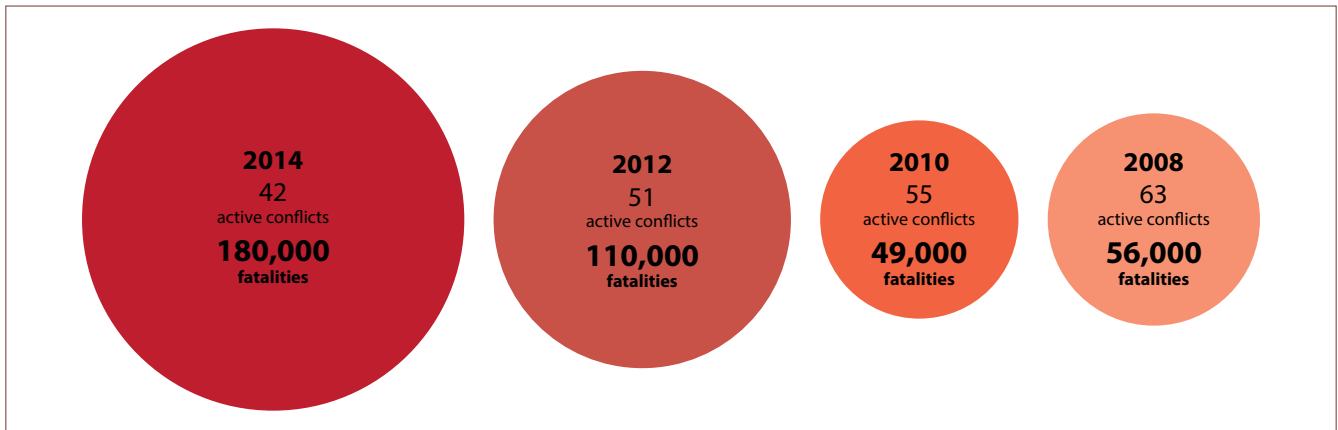


Displacement in Armed Conflict; and Peace Operations and the Responsibility to Protect.

THE CHANGING CHARACTER OF CONFLICT

If we look at the Chart of Conflict we see a swathe across the middle of the globe, running from Central America through Northern, Central and East Africa, the Levant and the Arabian Peninsula and South Asia, that is affected by different forms of armed conflict. This should perhaps not surprise us: these are areas that are both populous – and conflict happens where people are – but also in the main characterised by poor levels of economic development and weak institutions of governance. The drivers of conflict are a complex mix of the local, national and transnational. Ideology plays a significant role but so too does organised criminality either as a cause or as a significant by-product of conflict. And while the drivers for the majority of the conflicts covered are internal, some are a function of a wider regional geo-political contention. And now with the crisis in Ukraine the threat of state-on-state conflict is re-emerging.

Perhaps the most telling graphic in the entire *Armed Conflict Survey* is the one showing that in 2008 there were 63 armed conflicts taking place around the world giving rise to a total of 56,000 fatalities, whereas in 2014 there were only 42 armed conflicts producing a total of 180,000 fatalities. The number of armed conflicts around the world has been progressively declining since the Armed Conflict Database was launched and this is obviously something to be welcomed. But the decline in the number of conflicts has been more than compensated for by an inexorable rise in the intensity of violence associated with them. And of course the impact of conflict cannot simply be judged by the number of fatalities and injuries to which it gives rise. The conflicts being covered are generating ever higher levels of refugees and IDPs, leading the UN High Commissioner for Refugees to observe that 2013 was the first year since the end of the Second World War when the global number of displaced persons had exceeded 50 million. It is



civilian populations that continue to pay the price of conflicts both in terms of short-term dislocation but also in respect of longer-term impacts resulting from the collapse of government services, in particular education and healthcare, and economic development opportunities foregone, blighting the prospects of future generations. The World Bank has estimated that 1.5 billion people, roughly one-fifth of humanity, are affected by some form of violence or insecurity.

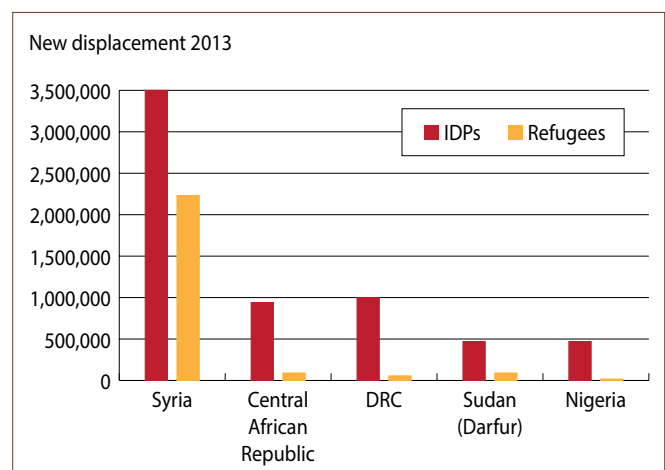
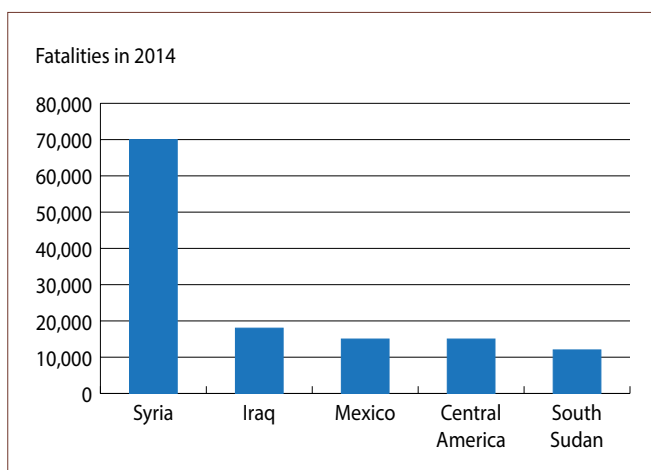
THE MIDDLE EAST

Since 2011 Syria has been engulfed in a complex civil war pitting Bashar Assad’s Alawite regime, with support from Russia, Iran and Iran’s proxy Hizbullah, against a range of opposition groups, most prominent among which were the al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra and Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), both of which had been the target of airstrikes by a US-led coalition. Efforts to secure a peace deal have made no progress, nor was it possible to refer the Assad regime, widely accused of using barrel bombs and chlorine gas against civilian targets, to the International Criminal Court. Thus far the Syrian conflict has resulted in 200,000 deaths, 70,000 of which occurred in 2014, and 3.4 million refugees of which 1.4 million fled to neighbouring states in 2014.

The Syrian conflict has become inextricably linked to that taking place in the Sunni heartland of Iraq where, in mid-2014

ISIS, a jihadist group originally affiliated with al-Qaeda that had exploited Sunni dissatisfaction with the sectarian policies of the al-Maliki government, occupied Mosul and seemed on the verge of advancing to Baghdad. Having seized large swathes of territory and resources contiguous with substantial base areas in Syria, the leader of ISIS Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared a caliphate, putting him on a collision course with the al-Qaeda leadership. The ISIS advance was accompanied by acts of spectacular brutality resulting in 18,000 deaths and two million IDPs. In August 2014 a US-led coalition began air attacks against ISIS, while on the ground resistance to ISIS was largely in the hands of Shia militias with significant inputs from Iranian special forces and with the land war being coordinated by Iranian Revolutionary Guard Quds Force commander General Qassem Suleimani. The ISIS advance on Baghdad has been stemmed, with ISIS also being driven out of Kurdish areas. But ISIS continues to control significant territory and resources, has attracted a substantial number of foreign fighters to its cause and remains a potent force in defining the evolution of global jihadism.

Jihadism has also played a substantial role in Libya where two separate governments and two parliaments vied for control of a rapidly disintegrating country, and in Mali where over the course of 2014 the Malian army withdrew from the main northern towns, allowing jihadist organisations to regroup there.



Jihadist violence has also led to deterioration of security in the Sinai Peninsula where the ISIS-affiliated jihadist group Ansar Bayt-al-Maqdis continued to engage the Egyptian military. Jihadist violence also migrated to the Delta region, Cairo and Alexandria. Meanwhile Yemen continued its slow disintegration as the Shia Houthis rebels, who had captured an increasing number of provinces during 2014, eventually occupied the capital Sana'a in September 2014. The Houthis faced resistance from a Saudi-led coalition but also engaged in clashes with al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which itself occupied substantial territory in the south of the country.

Conflict in Israel-Palestine reached its deadliest level since the 1967 Six-Day War. Following the collapse of the peace process in April 2014 violence escalated in June leading to the 50-day *Operation Protective Edge*, which resulted in substantial casualties and was followed by a rise in militant attacks in the West Bank and Jerusalem leading to speculation about the start of a possible third intifada.

SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

The Central African Republic continued to experience high levels of violence and population displacement as Muslim Seleka rebels clashed with the predominantly Christian anti-Balaka militias amid inconclusive efforts by a new interim government to establish a peace process and the establishment in September 2014 of a UN peace-keeping mission MINUSCA. The Democratic Republic of Congo, despite still having 54 armed groups operating in its eastern regions, experienced reduced levels of violence during 2014 with no repetition of the 2013 UN-supported operation that resulted in the demise of the M23 movement. Some three million Congolese have been displaced as a result of conflict, half of them children.

Nigeria continued to be afflicted by high levels of criminality in the Delta region but with no sign of a return to insurgent activity. The Islamist group Boko Haram was however responsible for significant levels of violence in the north of the country including the April 2014 abduction of 276 schoolgirls in Chibok. This incident focused global attention on Boko Haram, putting pressure on the Nigerian government to orchestrate a more effective national and regional response. But throughout 2014 Boko Haram continued to gain territory, occupy towns and cities in northern Nigeria and expand into Cameroon, Niger and Chad. Despite receiving offers of military and intelligence support from numerous foreign governments the response of Nigeria's military remained reactive and heavy-handed.

In Somalia the Islamist al-Shabaab movement continued to suffer setbacks with some of its leaders being killed in US drone strikes and coordinated ground offensives that drove the movement out of many towns and cities. Al-Shabaab however continued to launch attacks against Somali security forces and undertook numerous attacks in Kenya along the Swahili coast and in Nairobi.

South Sudan came close to the brink of an all-out civil war between political rivals divided broadly on tribal lines. Repeated

efforts to achieve a political solution and meaningful cease-fire were inconclusive and repeated clashes led to substantial casualties and the displacement of 1.5 million civilians. In Darfur sporadic talks between the government and rebel groups yielded no results while violence escalated as pro-government Janjaweed militias increased their operations attacking numerous villages, pillaging and raping. The Sudanese government continued to put pressure on the international humanitarian effort in Sudan including the expulsion of a number of senior UN aid officials.

SOUTH ASIA

Although some parts of South Asia continued to suffer significant levels of violence, the overall picture somewhat improved. The establishment of a national unity government in Afghanistan (after a disputed presidential election), the signing of a bilateral security agreement with the United States and a status-of-forces agreement with NATO set the conditions for a greater period of stability. The Afghan Taliban showed no interest in reconciliation, and was responsible for some of the highest levels of violence in the preceding 13 years. Nevertheless, the group was unable to consolidate territorial gains in the face of sustained and effective Afghan National Army and Police resistance. Afghanistan still faces formidable security, economic and governance problems. However, dire forecasts that the 2014 drawdown of NATO/ISAF troops would inevitably lead to a Taliban military victory are a long way from being realised.

In India a Naxalite insurgency that not so long ago seemed likely to take over substantial swathes of the north of the country appears to have been successfully contained, with a significant increase in the number of guerillas surrendering to government forces and a corresponding reduction in territorial gains. By contrast the security situation in Assam deteriorated to the point where at the end of 2014 the Indian army was obliged to launch a major assault against the National Democratic Front of Bodoland–Songbijit. India's other border conflicts have all registered a continuing decline in levels of violence. In Kashmir, however, progress towards a negotiated peace remained elusive with artillery exchanges between Indian and Pakistani forces and two major terrorist attacks on Indian army bases.

ASIA-PACIFIC

Levels of armed conflict in the Asia-Pacific region remained relatively low. China, however, experienced an increase in terrorist attacks by Uighur separatists, not just in Xinjiang but also in locations such as Kunming in southwest China, resulting in some 400 fatalities, mainly civilians. China's response was two-fold: an aggressive hard security response – 'strike hard' – and an emphasis on ambitious economic development plans – One Belt, One Road. Neither seems likely to address the causes of instability in China's strategically critical western border region.

Although conflict continued at a medium intensity in Myanmar's eastern and northern border regions, a peace process between Naypyidaw and the majority of Myanmar's armed ethnic-minority groups resulted in significant progress until the

end of 2014 when an increase in armed clashes was registered. A Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement appeared to be within touching distance. In Rakhine State the Rohingya minority was the victim of several instances of mob violence.

The Philippine government signed a Comprehensive Agreement on Bangsamoro in March 2014. The accord allows for a greater degree of autonomy and income from natural resources than in previous negotiations and requires the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) to disarm. The accord faced some opposition in the Philippine Congress and a MILF splinter group the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) continued fighting for an independent Muslim state. Meanwhile the Philippine security forces continued operations against the Abu Sayyaf Group, some of whose members declared allegiance to ISIS.

Southern Thailand continued to suffer violence from separatist groups on an almost daily basis. Drive-by shootings and remotely detonated improvised explosive devices (IEDs) resulted in some 350 deaths. Thailand's military government sought to renew peace talks engaging all the main insurgent groups with Malaysia playing the role of facilitator. Both the insurgents and Thai security forces have been accused of carrying out atrocities.

EUROPE AND EURASIA

The Europe and Eurasia region was dominated by the conflict in eastern Ukraine. After separatists captured portions of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in April 2014, the Ukrainian military launched a counter-offensive. The conflict escalated throughout the summer as Russia increased its assistance to the separatists. A ceasefire was negotiated in Minsk in September but violence persisted albeit at lower levels of intensity. By the end of 2014, 4,700 were dead and one million displaced. Bombings in Odessa and Kharkiv – areas well outside separatist control – signalled the potential for instability to spread to other regions of Ukraine.

Beyond Ukraine, the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh was the subject of increased tensions with a level of armed clashes and casualties not seen for many years.

In Russia's North Caucasus region the Caucasus Emirate jihadi group struggled to reorganise under a new leader as Russian security forces intensified their counter-terrorism operations. Although its operational capacity appeared much diminished, the jihadi group carried out a complex assault in Grozny, the regional capital of Chechnya, in December 2014. Central Asian states faced threats from their radicalised citizens returning from jihad in the Middle East.

LATIN AMERICA

Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador continued to suffer from significant levels of violence from criminal gangs involved in the narcotics trade. Levels of homicides declined somewhat

in Honduras and Guatemala during 2014 as the respective governments introduced new security responses with an enhanced military component. But in El Salvador a truce between the main criminal gangs, Mara Salvatrucha and Barrio 18, which had contributed to a marked decline in violence, collapsed. Faced with continuing instability, an increasing number of families in all three states sent unaccompanied minors to the United States, some 70,000 of whom were detained at the US southern borders.

In Colombia, peace talks with the main insurgent group the FARC continued, with the FARC announcing a unilateral ceasefire, a move not reciprocated by the Colombian government. Despite the ceasefire insurgent violence continued, mainly in the form of attacks on oil pipelines and electricity pylons. Criminal groups – *bacrim* – however continued to pose a significant threat to peace and security.

Mexico continued to suffer high levels of violence from criminal gangs associated with the narcotics trade. In September 2014, following the murder of 43 students in Iguala, Mexico's 1,800 municipal police forces, many of which had been corrupted by the narcotics gangs, were closed down and their personnel integrated into a national force. A national gendarmerie, originally planned to be 40,000-strong but in fact comprising just 5,000, began operations. However, the Mexican state continued to rely heavily on its armed forces to deal with the criminal gangs. Violence in Mexico remains unevenly distributed with almost 70% of the violence concentrated in the ten states situated along the main drug-trafficking routes to the United States.

CONCLUSION

The picture for 2014 is mixed. Some intractable conflicts – Colombia, the Philippines – appeared to be on the way to resolution. In other cases, notably that of Afghanistan, there were tantalising signs of hope of improvement even as levels of violence continued unabated. But large swathes of the Arab world were afflicted by chronic violence and instability with the phenomenon of jihadism providing a powerful accelerant and with little prospect of resolution. Humanitarian responses to conflict were in the main effective though resource constraints, limitations on access and harassment by some regimes had an adverse impact. Peace-keeping operations were also in the main effective with encouraging signs that in some regions, notably Sub-Saharan Africa, regional powers were both more willing and able to exercise decisive impact. Humanitarian intervention by western states is currently at a low ebb and it remains to be seen whether better economic circumstances and a progressive distancing from the memories of Afghanistan and Iraq will result in greater enthusiasm for such operations – or whether newly emergent powers will discover any enthusiasm for such activities.

However matters turn out, IISS will continue with its mission of charting and analysing the evolution of conflict. To that end we hope *The Armed Conflict Survey* will quickly establish itself as an indispensable tool for researchers and policymakers alike.