

Editor's Introduction

Fatalities in the world's conflicts declined for a second successive year in 2016, to 157,000, from 167,000 in 2015 and 180,000 in 2014. The war in Syria remained the world's most lethal, with a further 50,000 deaths there bringing the total since 2011 to around 290,000 – more than twice the number recorded in Bosnia's four-year fratricidal conflict in the 1990s. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan claimed 17,000 and 16,000 lives respectively in 2016, although in lethality they were surpassed by conflicts in Mexico and Central America, which have received much less attention from the media and the international community. Mexico had the world's second-most-lethal conflict in 2016, with 23,000 fatalities. The number of homicides rose in 22 of Mexico's 32 states. The spike was linked to several factors. It is noteworthy that the largest rises in fatalities were registered in states that were key battlegrounds for control between competing, increasingly fragmented cartels. The violence grew worse as the cartels expanded the territorial reach of their campaigns, seeking to 'cleanse' areas of rivals in their efforts to secure a monopoly on drug-trafficking routes and other criminal assets. Amid growing security and governance vacuums, clashes among the cartels and between the cartels and state security forces became increasingly fierce and aggressive. Violence and repeated attacks resulting from such clashes and security voids greatly contributed to destabilisation across the country. Mexico's National Human Rights Commission highlighted the impact of crime on the population in the past decade, reporting in May 2016 that 35,433

people had been forcibly displaced nationwide since 2007. Around 90% of these people had fled their homes because of violence.

The combined total for Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala was almost 16,000 – with El Salvador experiencing its second-most-violent year since 1999 – despite these countries establishing new agencies and approaches to reduce criminal groups' influence. The high number of fatalities reflected the significant presence, firepower and organisational capacity of rival gangs Mara Salvatrucha and Barrio 18. Collectively, these gangs, alongside smaller ones, had between 54,000 and 85,000 members spread across urban areas in Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador, according to estimates made by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime and the US State Department in 2012. Regional cooperation was belatedly strengthened with the launch in November 2016 of a Tri-National Force against transnational organised crime, comprising around 1,500 personnel from the police and militaries, as well as the border and customs agencies, of the three countries. Yet it is unclear whether the force will be able to cope with patrolling 600 kilometres of shared land borders, especially given the long list of criminal activities they are tasked with suppressing: extortion, kidnapping, money laundering, gang violence and smuggling.

Although global conflict fatalities edged down in 2016, civilians caught amid conflict arguably suffered more than in the preceding years. Between January and August 2016, 900,000 people were internally displaced in Syria. The number of new internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Iraq and Afghanistan during the same period reached 234,000 and 260,000 respectively.

The latest figures on refugee movements to non-Western countries demonstrate that the long-term trend of refugees settling in urban centres is now being amplified by mass displacement due to the Syrian conflict. Around 90% of Syrian refugees have settled in urban and peri-urban centres in neighbouring countries, according to data published by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. This trend marks an important shift away from the more traditional pattern of hosting refugees in designated refugee camps, frequently placed along border regions. It creates new challenges by placing unprecedented pressure on socio-

economic infrastructure while increasing uncertainty for host communities, aid agencies and governments. Moreover, the trend complicates the provision of timely and equitable assistance, given that the majority of refugee communities are now more geographically dispersed.

Displacement rates have also been high in Sudan, where the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reported in June that 192,000 people had been displaced by fighting since the start of 2016 alone. Estimates suggested that by the end of 2016, there were 3 million registered and 5m–7m unregistered IDPs in Nigeria.

The capacity of international peacekeeping forces to effectively protect civilians seems to have diminished as a result of growing operational challenges, as well as threats to the security of their personnel. Indeed, 35 members of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) were killed in 2016, making MINUSMA the most dangerous ongoing peacekeeping mission over the preceding three years, with 87 fatalities since the start of 2014. By comparison, the UN–African Union Mission in Darfur had incurred 27 fatalities since 2014. In the Central African Republic, there are signs that the public's attitude has turned against peacekeeping forces.

As displaced people have moved into cities, so too has conflict. Approximately half of the 36 conflicts featured in the *Armed Conflict Survey 2017*, and all of the high-intensity ones, have a significant urban component. If in the past the typical insurgent fought in the mountains, forest or jungle, today she or he is as likely to be found in an urban setting.

Turkey's conflict with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), for instance, became both more lethal and more urban in 2016. The number of recorded fatalities in the conflict reached 3,000, the highest level since 1997. The PKK and the government engaged in trench warfare in southern population centres. A surge in attacks on cities and public places put civilians in greater danger. Likewise, the conflict in South Sudan touched urban areas in the southern regions of the country. In Afghanistan, the Taliban extended its strategy of carrying out suicide attacks in urban centres. The group conducted one of the deadliest of these operations in

Kabul in April 2016, killing at least 64 people and injuring 347 others. Similarly, most of the highest-casualty attacks in Pakistan, many of them sectarian in nature, occurred in urban areas.

Siege warfare also played a more prominent role in 2016, as the Iraqi state and its allies recaptured cities from the Islamic State, also known as ISIS or ISIL, and took steps towards the objective of freeing Mosul. In Libya, the operation to drive ISIS out of Sirte led to prolonged urban warfare. And, in Syria, the siege of Aleppo took a decisive turn in favour of the forces of the president, Bashar al-Assad. The tactic proved cruel but effective, taking a heavy toll on civilians. According to an estimate by independent monitor Siege Watch, by the end of October 2016 at least 1.3m people were trapped in 39 besieged areas in Syria.

Lessons of the decline of ISIS

In 2016 ISIS lost nearly one-quarter of the territory that it controlled in Iraq and Syria. Seemingly, the group lost fighters at a still-faster rate. According to one estimate, in July 2016 the group had around 12,000 members, compared to the US Department of Defense's headcount of 31,500 in 2014. The group's efforts to build a 'caliphate' with the attributes of statehood appear doomed.

The losses suffered by ISIS underline the difficulties that any insurgent group faces in challenging a state conventionally, unless it has mass support and/or powerful external backers (such as diaspora communities or other states). In the last few decades, only a few insurgent groups stand out as victorious over a state adversary: those in Kosovo (and then only because of Western military intervention), South Sudan and Eritrea – although even they had a degree of external support. As a group with a defined territory and in possession of tanks and other conventional military platforms, ISIS presented an extensive target set for the coalitions ranged against it.

Coexisting and frequently competing with a state to provide services, exercise control and inspire loyalty among the population is also challenging. Sri Lanka's Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam are a well-documented example of a non-state armed group that comprehensively engaged in state-like governance for a limited

time period. Yet despite running welfare, taxation and other services effectively, even this project cannot be considered fully successful as the group has not survived. In addition, securing the loyalty of the population requires robust social functions – a task ISIS has been and will be unable to perform in the long term, given its financial, administrative and other losses.

The shrinking of the caliphate does not, however, mean that the group is an irrelevance. Its losses and likely defeat have underscored the utility of insurgent and terrorist tactics for groups ranged against states. Furthermore, as groups fragment and multiply, the threat of brutality towards civilians increases. Wilayat Sina (Sinai Province), the Egyptian affiliate of ISIS, was the dominant anti-state force in the Sinai Peninsula in 2014–16, but in 2016 two new groups emerged with goals and rhetoric that differed quite radically from those of ISIS and its affiliates. New and particularly brutal militias have emerged in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Central African Republic. Islamist groups in the Sahel branched out in 2016, with one of them killing 19 people in an attack in the Ivorian town of Grand Bassam in March. In September, Burkina Faso became the site of the first attack by the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara. A new group that pledged allegiance to ISIS emerged in Somalia, carrying out its first attack in 2016. A Rohingya insurgent group emerged in Myanmar, carrying out several night-time raids. The frequent emergence of new militant groups in the Niger Delta region proved a major challenge for the military, largely due to a severe lack of intelligence on their capabilities and agendas.

Africa's mixed picture

Conflict fatalities in sub-Saharan Africa fell markedly in 2016, to 15,000 from 24,000 one year earlier. The decline was so sharp that the region recorded a lower fatality count than Central and Southern Asia for the first year since 2012. The main driver of the decline was a near-70% fall in fatalities relating to Nigeria-based insurgent group Boko Haram, which previously accounted for almost half of all conflict fatalities in sub-Saharan Africa. Among the areas affected by Boko Haram, Borno State continued to experience high-intensity

conflict. Conflict intensity in other Nigerian states diminished, while the group's capacity to launch large-scale attacks in major cities decreased. Nevertheless, the group was able to perpetrate a series of attacks in Cameroon and the wider Lake Chad region, resulting in approximately 800 fatalities outside Nigeria. Despite the quantitative fall in fatalities, Boko Haram still had significant manpower; it continued to conduct hit-and-run assaults, raids and suicide attacks even in and around areas that had purportedly been cleared by the military, albeit at a significantly lower rate than in 2015. Militant cells remained in these territories, as remote terrain and a lack of personnel, materiel and surveillance capacity prevented the armed forces from holding and building there.

Nigeria's Delta region, however, saw a proliferation of attacks, predominantly against oil and gas pipelines, on a scale unseen since 2009. While the more than 100 attacks there in 2016 did not result in significant casualties, civilians frequently suffered human-rights abuses in the Nigerian military's security operations.

Conflict developments in eastern Africa were less positive. Fatalities rose in Sudan's internal conflicts, to around 3,350. As the under-reported war in South Kordofan and Blue Nile entered its fifth year, continued aerial attacks on civilians and severe fighting between the Sudan Armed Forces and armed groups caused hundreds of fatalities. Entering its thirteenth year, the conflict in Darfur generated persistent reports of killings, rapes and aerial attacks, especially in the Jebel Marra region. The violence followed an established pattern: fighting intensified in the dry season and lapsed in the rainy season, when it became difficult to travel on roads and in rural areas.

Meanwhile, the situation in South Sudan deteriorated significantly in the second half of 2016. Any cautious optimism about the implementation of the peace agreement signed in 2015 disappeared. There was a progressive polarisation among the population, largely incited by political leaders. This exacerbated insecurity and strengthened the pre-existing, if less visible, ethnic dimension of the conflict. State and non-state armed groups increasingly targeted civilians based on their ethnicity.

Al-Shabaab's battle for territory continued, particularly in the southern part of Somalia. Although the Somali government was largely able to maintain the pattern it had established in 2015 of driving al-Shabaab out of towns and cities while holding on to territory, progress was slow and sometimes only temporary. Even weakened, the group remained capable of conducting effective attacks and did not capitulate. Several times in the year, reports of al-Shabaab's imminent defeat circulated only for the government or the African Union Mission in Somalia to request thousands of additional troops to help in the fight shortly thereafter.

Many of the world's active conflicts have been running for decades. Colombia's conflict began in 1964, the Philippines' (with the New People's Army) in 1969, southern Sudan's in 1983 and Turkey's in 1984. India's internal conflicts, as well as Myanmar's and Eritrea's conflicts, have been running for several decades too. Some more recent conflicts, including those in Mali and Ukraine, seem to be developing the characteristics of protracted struggles. In Mali, Ukraine and the north of India, the failure to implement peace deals has not resulted in a significant increase in violence, but has weakened the prospects for the agreements to deliver lasting peace and stability. Although these conflicts underwent no major escalation in 2016, they have failed to move towards resolution due to the growing inability and, sometimes, apparent unwillingness of political actors to substantively address persistent rule-of-law and security problems. Moreover, they are best understood as 'simmering conflicts' rather than 'frozen conflicts', with potentially explosive characteristics such that violence could escalate at any moment.