

# The Long Aftermath of Armed Conflicts

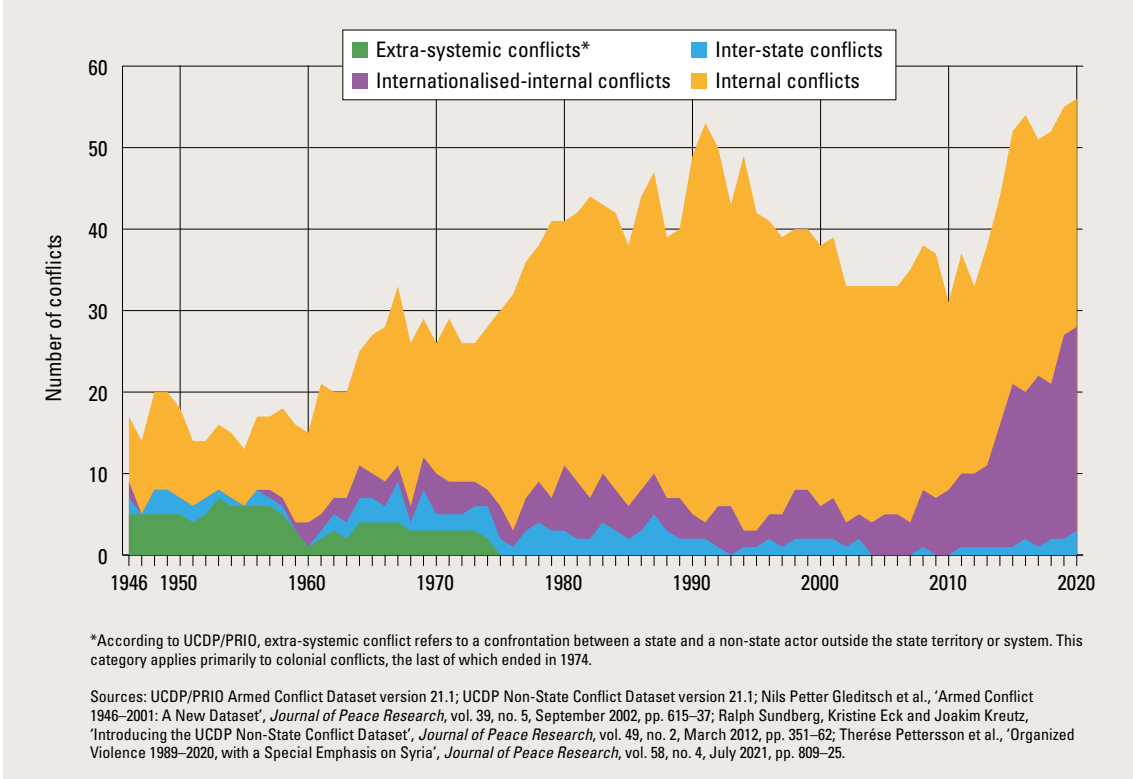
The protracted nature of internal armed conflicts is well documented: more often than not, civil wars trap countries in cyclical spirals of violence in which conflict relapse is a recurring event.<sup>1</sup> Countries are mired in ‘post-conflict’ phases for increasingly long periods; the term itself has become more difficult to define because of its overlap with active conflict and the expanded scope of post-conflict interventions. The last few decades have witnessed increasing interventions focused on post-conflict recovery and peacebuilding, often undertaken in parallel with moments of active conflict. This dynamic is evident in Afghanistan and Colombia (see Box 1), and in other long-standing wars in the Sahel, Somalia and Syria, among others.

The aftermath of war presents pressing security, development and humanitarian issues. A strategic analysis of these areas is essential to understand contemporary armed conflicts and identify appropriate responses and paths to durable peace.

## The changing nature of armed conflict

The progressive increase in the number of armed conflicts during the Cold War came to a halt with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. A cooperation momentum within the United Nations Security Council led to an intense period of conflict resolution and a parallel decline in the number of wars over the following two decades. This trend was abruptly reversed with the 2011 Arab Spring and

Figure 1: Global conflict trends, 1946–2020



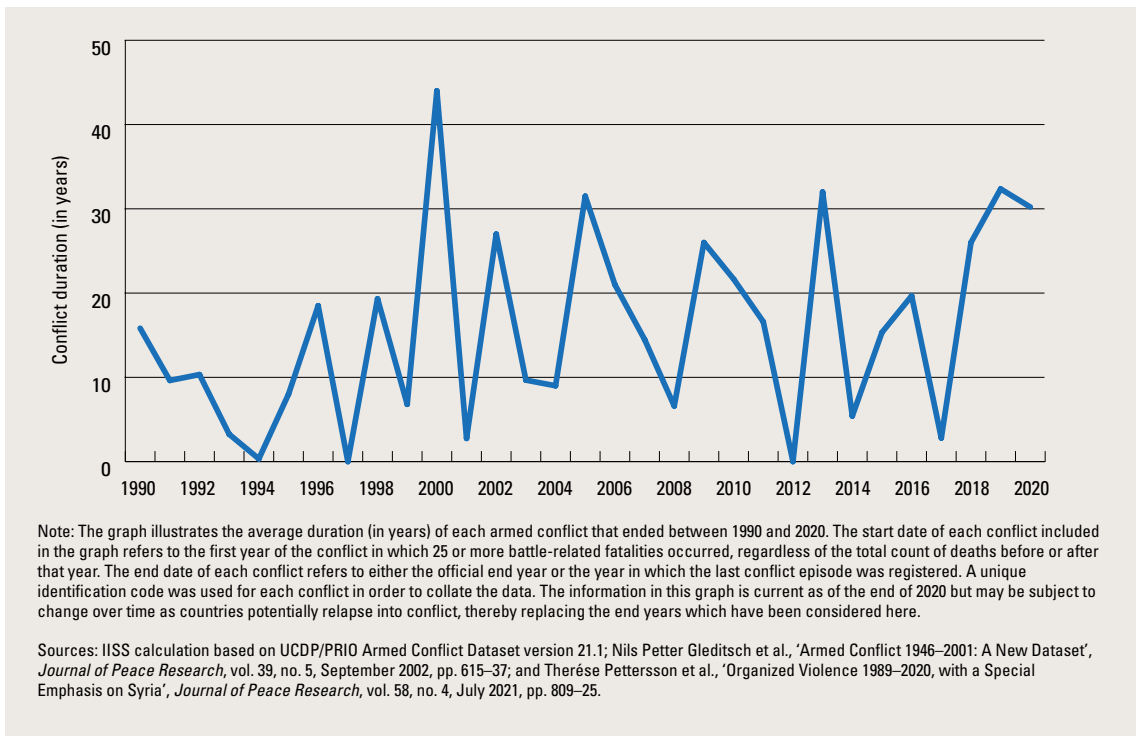


Figure 2: Average duration of armed conflict worldwide, 1990–2020

the ensuing spread of conflicts involving the Islamic State, also known as ISIS or ISIL (see Figure 1). 2020 witnessed the highest number of conflicts since 1945. The conflict landscape also evolved: intra-state confrontations became even more predominant after 2010, especially those featuring third-party interventions, which have tripled in the last ten years.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, inter-state conflicts have remained very limited since the end of the Cold War.

Today's conflict glut is caused not only by the spike in new conflicts since 2010 and their protractiveness (e.g., Libya, the Sahel, Syria, Yemen), but also by the minimal progress made in resolving old ones (Afghanistan, Africa's Great Lakes Region, Iraq, Pakistan, Somalia and Sudan, among others). The time horizon of armed conflicts has also increased, with conflicts becoming more prolonged starting from the early 1970s and particularly after the Cold War. Conflict duration nearly doubled in the space of three decades: while the average duration of conflicts that ended in 1990 was approximately 16 years, in 2020 it was over 30 years (see Figure 2). In turn, the aftermath of conflict has become more protracted as the active phases of conflicts have themselves extended.

### The conflict to post-conflict continuum

The intersection between conflict and post-conflict – and their seeming overlap – is primarily explained by increasing conflict recurrence. Of the conflicts that have broken out since the 1990s, a greater share have been recurrent conflicts instead of new conflicts arising in previously peaceful countries. Between 1989 and 2018, nearly half of all conflicts recurred. More than 90% of recurring conflicts concern the same or similar grievances, highlighting the failure of peacebuilding efforts to address root causes. Conflict recurrence is also explained by the fact that since the end of the Cold War negotiated settlements have become the main modality to end conflict, rather than military victory of one of the warring parties.<sup>3</sup> Although the former have been a positive development in terms of reducing human suffering and economic hardship, they seem to have been less effective in preventing conflict relapse.

Nevertheless, conflict recurrence is not a mere repetition of past conflicts. While grievances may be the same or similar, it may be more accurate to say that armed conflicts transition rather than statically recur. If war is the continuation of politics by other means, then conflicts may manifest either violently

or non-violently, and war and peace are interacting manifestations of conflict dynamics.

In this vein, the conflict to post-conflict sequence is part of a non-linear transition between war and peace, where the two may either coexist or alternate. The trajectory of armed conflicts is dotted with frequent overlaps between the pre-, during- and post-conflict phases, which are all part of the conflict cycle. While analytically useful, a division of conflict into phases should be accompanied by the concept of war-to-peace transition, if policy responses and interventions are to be well-crafted.<sup>4</sup>

### Overlapping war-making and reconstruction efforts

The non-linear transition between war and peace, including the intersection between war-making

and post-conflict measures, is typified by the armed conflicts in Afghanistan and Colombia. Civil wars of a differing nature engulfed the two countries for several decades, and both implemented peace-building and stabilisation measures in parallel (see Box 1). While in Afghanistan the reconstruction has been supported and largely financed by the international community to promote state legitimacy, good governance and development in the country, Colombia represented a laboratory for innovative security and development policy (e.g., disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR), and urban violence reduction) and legislation (e.g., post-conflict transitional justice) during active conflict.

#### Box 1: Post-conflict interventions during war in Afghanistan and Colombia

Over the past several decades, Afghanistan and Colombia have experienced protracted armed conflicts with varying levels of violence, alternating with non-linear transitions from war to peace, as well as conflict relapse. To different degrees, the post-conflict interventions have undoubtedly achieved some positive outcomes in both countries, although persistent war and violence has frustrated durable peacebuilding efforts over the years.

In post-9/11 Afghanistan, the United States-led military intervention that overthrew the Taliban was followed by protracted insurgencies opposing the Western-backed government for the following two decades. The deployment of a UN peacekeeping force – the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan (ISAF), which later became a NATO combat mission – and the US troop surge under the Obama administration did not quell the Taliban insurgency. Neither did negotiation attempts between the Afghan government and the Taliban over the years. An agreement between the Taliban and the US in February 2020 provided for the withdrawal of the latter's forces from the country during the course of 2021, opening the way for the Taliban to make strides in achieving control of Afghanistan.

The trajectory of the war in Afghanistan in the last two decades was accompanied by a parallel post-conflict reconstruction process resulting in one of the largest official development assistance (ODA) expenditures

to date: over US\$77 billion between 2001 and 2019.<sup>5</sup> The most significant and largest post-conflict development programme in the country, the National Solidarity Programme (NSP), ran between 2003 and 2016 and consisted of over US\$1.6bn to establish legitimate governance mechanisms and invest in community-driven development initiatives and infrastructure projects, aimed at generating positive economic and social impacts for rural communities. The Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), which were civilian–military teams initially set up by the US in 2002 and later taken over by NATO, brought an innovative approach to security governance and reconstruction, promoting local development and good governance with a mix of defence, diplomacy and development. The PRTs' presence at the local level and their emphasis on flexibility was proven to have a critical, if variable, impact on local dynamics.<sup>6</sup> The overall effectiveness of the PRT approach depended on security conditions, on the PRTs' ability to engage with the local population, and on the contributing states' approach and level of funding.<sup>7</sup> While in United Kingdom-controlled provinces civilian-led missions were oriented to support local governance, the US-led PRTs, mostly located in highly unstable areas, saw a predominant military component involved in both combat and reconstruction operations. In Herat province, under the control of the Italian forces, PRT activities were almost exclusively aimed at reconstruction and socio-economic development.

The conflict in Colombia exemplifies an endemic civil war with a largely domestically driven post-conflict

As in Afghanistan and Colombia, most of the conflicts featured in *The Armed Conflict Survey 2021* display some post-conflict interventions aimed at reconstruction, a fact that reinforces the evidence for the tight interactions between the active phase of conflict and its aftermath.

The aftermath of war has also become politicised and contentious, as conflict parties instrumentalise the prospect of aid and support. Reconstruction often entails competing visions of how to implement peacebuilding and how to allocate resources. Incumbent governments may use post-conflict efforts as a tool to reinforce their power and legitimacy – something that typically can fuel further violence. In addition, in many cases in sub-Saharan Africa, the nature of the state is far removed from the Westphalian model promoted by Western-sponsored

reconstruction efforts: therefore, it is more a case of ‘state-building’.

### The trajectory of post-conflict intervention

The current use of the label ‘post-conflict’ and its practical application derive from a particular period in history after the end of the Cold War. The end of the systemic confrontation between the US and the Soviet Union unlocked the resolution of a series of armed conflicts around the globe. Angola, Cambodia, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Mozambique and Namibia are examples of internal armed conflicts that were inextricably tied to the bipolar international order and that, to different degrees, achieved permanent resolution after 1991.<sup>12</sup> This new era of UN Security Council activism also led to novel, but

and peacebuilding process. Violence peaked in the early 2000s with the Marxist guerrilla Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) on the brink of taking over numerous regions of the country. By then, the country was mired in historical neglect of rural areas, a dramatic surge in coca cultivation and cocaine production, and territorial disputes between guerrillas and paramilitaries. The Colombian state decided to reverse this trend by pursuing a dual strategy: uproot and defeat the FARC and, together with civil society, invest heavily in post-conflict development and transitional-justice initiatives.

The US-supported *Plan Colombia*, which consisted of US transfers of over US\$9.6bn in 2000–15, applied high military pressure against the guerrillas. While the bulk of *Plan Colombia's* budget was allocated to combat narco-trafficking and to counter-insurgency efforts, almost one-third was earmarked to improve socio-economic conditions and deliver humanitarian assistance.<sup>8</sup> Various domestically driven peacebuilding efforts with security and development components were established, aimed at recovering areas under non-state armed groups’ (NSAGs) control and reducing violence in urban and rural settings. For instance, since 1995 and for more than a decade, local-level Peace and Development Programmes have been implemented in several regions to reduce violence and build community institutions. Furthermore, in 2007–16, the policy of Territorial Consolidation included recovery, transition and stabilisation of conflict-affected areas through combined civil–

military initiatives in which counter-insurgency goals were complemented by and articulated with socio-economic development and governance.<sup>9</sup>

DDR in Colombia traditionally played a critical role in pacifying certain regions and/or achieving separate peace agreements with specific NSAGs. Since the 2000s, emphasis was placed on reintegration to ensure ex-combatants’ progress toward successful reinsertion in society. In 2003–06, over 31,000 paramilitary members from the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC) demobilised. In parallel with waging war on the FARC, since the early 2000s the Colombian government also implemented a DDR programme for FARC combatants who decided to desert. By the time a final peace agreement was reached with the group in 2016, the programme had incentivised approximately 19,000 FARC members to abandon the group.

Finally, while still in conflict, Colombia invested in a transitional-justice process to bring justice for victims, hold perpetrators to account and advance reparation and reconciliation. The Justice and Peace Law (2005) was established to guarantee the right to truth, justice and remedy for more than 238,000 war events committed by the AUC – even though few paramilitaries were sentenced.<sup>10</sup> In 2011, the landmark Victims’ Law 1448 mandated the legal responsibility of the Colombian state for the recognition, attention and remedy of war victims since 1985. Under this law, over nine million victims have been identified, 88% of which were internally displaced persons (IDPs).<sup>11</sup>

then standardised, approaches to rebuilding countries after war.<sup>13</sup>

The post-Cold War emergence of peacebuilding (led by multilateral institutions) resulted in an overarching policy focus on addressing the physical and human consequences of conflict. This focus targeted the immediate phase after violence halted, which policymakers labelled 'post-conflict'. The term 'reconstruction' was added to signal the set of actions to be prioritised during this phase. 'Post-conflict reconstruction'<sup>14</sup> was then adopted as an overall formula for economic, social, institutional and security activities to be implemented with the support of international actors.<sup>15</sup> While politics was purposefully left out of this equation – out of respect for sovereignty concerns – the post-conflict reconstruction approach implied that technocratic solutions and the successful execution of programmes in key areas would translate into successful and durable outcomes. The presumption that reconstruction could move forward successfully without considering the dynamics of the concluded war (and the political implications of the aftermath of war) has proven overly optimistic.

A fundamental disconnection took hold between international (i.e., Western) peacebuilding proponents and national elites in recipient conflict-affected countries, especially in Africa. While the former perceive reconstruction efforts as a new social contract, local elites see reconstruction as a discrete phase of war politics. Conflict-affected countries lack the capacity to implement peacebuilding policies and tend to perceive them as disconnected from the country's social and political systems. Furthermore, local elites in countries with endemic state fragility (i.e., where the post-colonial state is perceived as alien and sovereignty is anchored in pre-existing and pre-colonial institutions) may see peacebuilding as just another opportunity for resource extraction and maximisation of political power.<sup>16</sup> Notably, this has been the case for sub-Saharan African elites in conflict-affected countries, who would maintain an interest in preserving some level of state fragility or armed conflict.<sup>17</sup>

The 9/11 attacks on the US marked an inflection point. The ubiquity of transnational terrorism led to the adoption by state actors of a security paradigm anchored on counter-terrorism strategies, to which international institutions also adapted. For over a decade, the fight against al-Qaeda was the

prism through which the US and its allies viewed many internal conflicts. With its emphasis on security, the war on terror overran reconstruction and development goals, grossly simplifying them with dangerous consequences. The post-conflict debacle in Iraq that followed the 2003 US–UK invasion was the tipping point of a post-conflict 'fantasy'<sup>18</sup> in which many post-conflict countries pursued the sudden but unrealistic establishment of pro-market-liberalisation institutions and multi-party democracy.

At the same time, multilateral actors (such as the UN and the World Bank) dedicated increasing attention to the sources of state fragility and the scope of post-conflict interventions. The progressive expansion of UN peacekeeping operations to include more robust security mandates and capacity-building functions, among others, is the clearest evidence of this trend. Other actors (including donors, development banks and civil society) spearheaded approaches to address war through integrated diplomatic, security and development efforts. While many of these initiatives are nascent, interventions to address conflict and post-conflict have become more intertwined than ever. Standard approaches that may have been considered 'best practice' were shown to be inadequate in particular cases, while the blurring of the line between conflict and post-conflict also challenged the putative impartiality of international actors in implementing peacebuilding programmes. As a result, expectations are now at a historic low regarding what can be achieved by external actors to address the ravages of war where it has become endemic.

### **Whither post-conflict?**

The last decade witnessed an upward trend in the number and lethality of internal armed conflicts, reaching a record high in 2020. Therefore, there is urgent need to reappraise the different types of interventions that take place in the aftermath of conflict, as well as the timing of these interventions. The current international system is characterised by US–China global competition and there are tensions in several regional theatres: the recent trend of third-party intervention in internal armed conflicts by state actors includes Russia, the US, Turkey, Israel, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, among others. While internal conflicts become more complex, the post-war phase too is characterised by a proliferation of state actors with their own interests.

The overlapping international and domestic dimensions of civil wars – exemplified by Colombia and Afghanistan – invite further reflection on the scope of post-conflict interventions and highlight the need for a conceptual and operational clarification of the ‘post-conflict’ label. The expansion in scope and mandates of peacekeeping operations has also seen them endure for far longer periods,<sup>19</sup> itself an indicator that the approach to peacekeeping needs to be adapted if it is to offer a proper solution to conflict.

Four factors in particular need to be considered more carefully. Firstly, timing: a prolonged and unstable conflict aftermath can be disaggregated into a short-term or immediate post-conflict phase (for example, following a peace settlement or a military victory), and a more long-term and protracted post-conflict. The policy and operational implications are different for each moment, and the short- versus long-term distinction should be a guiding principle when interventions are conceived. Secondly, a taxonomy of post-conflict typologies may be based on if and how the conflict ended and what is needed next. Conflict and post-conflict phases are often simultaneous, while some conflicts have seen post-conflict

interventions take place only once violence definitively ceased. Thirdly, the way a conflict ends (i.e., either by military victory or by peace agreement) has profound implications for the politics of the post-conflict phase. Finally, the type of investments needed during post-conflict is a key variable for which different strategies must be implemented. For example, the geographic scope of post-conflict may be limited to specific regions or areas, or peacebuilding may need to be implemented at the national level.

Post-conflict is commonly considered a discrete phase – separate from war – in which reconstruction occurs in the absence of violence. Yet contemporary conflicts feature frequent overlap between active conflicts and post-conflict. In turn, the quest for sound policy solutions to stabilise countries and regions and promote development depends on a reassessment of the boundaries and tenets of what post-conflict is and implies. The long aftermath of war requires its own special study that does not borrow too heavily from the classic understanding of peacekeeping and reconstruction policies but instead appreciates that ‘peace’, like ‘war’, has its grey areas.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See, for example, United Nations and World Bank, *Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict* (Washington DC: World Bank, 2018); Lise Morjé Howard and Alexandra Stark, ‘Why Civil Wars Are Lasting Longer’, *Foreign Affairs*, 27 February 2018; and Julie Jarland et al., ‘How Should We Understand Patterns of Recurring Conflict?’, *Conflict Trends*, Peace Research Institute Oslo, 27 May 2020.
- <sup>2</sup> See ‘Interventions in Armed Conflicts: Waning Western Dominance’, in IISS, *The Armed Conflict Survey 2021* (Abingdon: Routledge for the International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2021), pp. 16–21.
- <sup>3</sup> Adam Day and David Passarelli, ‘Governing Uncertainty’, UN University Centre for Policy Research, March 2021, p. 37. See also Sebastian Von Einsiedel, ‘Civil War Trends and the Changing Nature of Armed Conflict’, Occasional Paper 10, United Nations University Centre for Policy Research, March 2017; Jarland et al., ‘How Should We Understand Patterns of Recurring Conflict?’, Paul D. Williams, ‘Continuity and Change in War and Conflict in Africa’, *Prism*, vol. 6, no. 4, 16 May 2017, pp. 33–45; and Barbara F. Walter, ‘Why Bad Governance Leads to Repeat Civil War’, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 59, no. 7, 31 March 2014, pp. 1242–72.
- <sup>4</sup> See Philippe Bourgois, ‘The Continuum of Violence in War and Peace: Post-Cold War Lessons from El Salvador’, in Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Philippe Bourgois (eds), *Violence in War and Peace: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004); Mark Duffield, *Global Governance and the New Wars: The Merging of Development and Security* (London: Zed Books, 2014); Robert Muggah (ed.), *Security and Post-Conflict Reconstruction: Dealing with Fighters in the Aftermath of War* (New York: Routledge, 2009); and Michael Pugh (ed.), *Regeneration of War-torn Societies* (London: Macmillan Press, 2000).
- <sup>5</sup> World Bank, ‘Net Official Development Assistance and Official Aid Received (Current US\$) – Colombia, Afghanistan’.
- <sup>6</sup> See US Department of State, US Agency for International Development and US Department of Defense, ‘Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan: An Interagency Assessment’, PN-ADG-252, June 2006.
- <sup>7</sup> William Maley, ‘Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan – How They Arrived and Where They Are Going’, NATO Review, Autumn 2007.
- <sup>8</sup> Colombia, National Planning Department, SINERGIA, ‘15 Años del Plan Colombia’ [15 Years of Plan Colombia], 4 January 2016.
- <sup>9</sup> Juan Carlos Palou et al., ‘Balance de la Política Nacional de Consolidación Territorial’ [Stocktaking of National Policy of Territorial Consolidation], Ideas for Peace Foundation (FIP), Report Series no. 14, September 2011.
- <sup>10</sup> Juan David López Morales, ‘Las deudas y aciertos de Justicia y Paz, a 15 años de su creación’ [Failure and Success of the Justice and Peace Law, 15 Years After Its Adoption], *Tiempo*, 28 July 2020.

- <sup>11</sup> Government of Colombia, Unidad Para Las Víctimas, 'Registro Único de Víctimas' [Registry of Victims]; See also Colombia, Ministry of Justice and Ministry of The Interior, 'Ley de Víctimas Y Restitución de Tierras', [Victims' Law and Land Restitution], 2011.
- <sup>12</sup> The end of the Cold War did not result in these internal conflicts concluding at once or in a similar manner. While some were permanently settled (e.g., Cambodia, Mozambique, Namibia, Nicaragua), some relapsed almost immediately (e.g., Afghanistan, Angola) and others morphed, taking on different dynamics (e.g., El Salvador, Guatemala, the Great Lakes Region, Somalia) and/or entering new phases (e.g., Colombia, Indonesia, Peru, Sudan). Finally, a series of conflicts unraveled in former Soviet territories or spheres of influence (e.g., the Balkans, Chechnya, Nagorno-Karabakh, Tajikistan).
- <sup>13</sup> The RAND Corporation was among the first proponents of standard approaches to post-conflict reconstruction. See James Dobbins et al, *America's Role in Nation-Building: from Germany to Iraq* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2003).
- <sup>14</sup> The term 'reconstruction' as associated with the aftermath of war traces back to the American Civil War. Subsequently, it was embedded in the post-1945 international order through the establishment of the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (World Bank). However, it is only after the Cold War that 'reconstruction' became a 'hegemonic strategy'.
- See Colin Flint and Scott Kirsch, 'Introduction: Reconstruction and the Worlds that War Makes', in Colin Flint and Scott Kirsch (eds), *Reconstructing Conflict: Integrating War and Post-War Geographies* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011).
- <sup>15</sup> Barnett et al compile a list of the all the terms coined and adopted by different donors and multilateral organisations to define their engagement to sustain peace. See Michael Barnett et al, 'Peacebuilding: What Is in a Name?' *Global Governance*, vol. 13, no. 1, January–March 2007, pp. 38–41.
- <sup>16</sup> It is indicative that Cambodia and Mozambique – both reputedly good examples of practices of transition to peace – have high levels of corruption and impunity, a trend that shows the power of elites in capturing state resources. See Christopher Cramer, *Civil War Is Not a Stupid Thing: Accounting for Violence in Developing Countries* (London: Hurst & Company, 2006).
- <sup>17</sup> See Jean-Francois Bayart, 'Africa in the World: A History of Extraversion', *African Affairs*, vol. 99, no. 395, April 2000, pp. 217–67; and Pierre Englebret and Denis M. Tull, 'Postconflict Reconstruction in Africa: Flawed Ideas About Failed States', *International Security*, vol. 32, no. 4, pp. 106–39.
- <sup>18</sup> Cramer, *Civil War Is Not a Stupid Thing: Accounting for Violence in Developing Countries*, pp. 245–78
- <sup>19</sup> Von Einsiedel, 'Civil War Trends and the Changing Nature of Armed Conflict', p. 4.