

The Shifting Face of Violence: New Challenges

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Introduction

I want to talk today briefly about the changing nature of contemporary armed violence, and draw out some implication for policy-makers and analysts. My scope is global, and I will not concentrate on the OSCE region, since there are many global challenges – such as the current violent confrontations in Syria and Iraq – that have the potential to affect all of us in one way or another. But I want to put such events in a slightly larger perspective, so that we can see what has changed – and perhaps what has not changed – in the nature of armed violence today

Overall, I have five points to advance, which I will present briefly and a bit provocatively. The first two concern the changing nature of warfare, and the overall burden of armed violence:

- the sharp divide between organized and “dis-organized” violence is increasingly blurred, challenging our conventional categories of different types of violent conflict;
- certain forms of organized violence *might be* declining – but only in particular places and under certain circumstances – and other forms of violence might actually be increasing, posing real challenges to safety, security and well being.

The last three focus on the actors, the instruments, and the institutions:

- non-state armed groups have long played a significant role in violent exchanges, not only challenging the state, but often working with or being part of the state, and we have a weak understanding of how to deal with them.
- the *instruments of violence* – small arms and light weapons, including advanced and sophisticated weaponry - are more widely available than at any time in the past, with more lethality in the hands of more people than ever before.
- more attention needs to be focused on building effective and accountable institutions to provide security and safety – within and between states – since one of the main triggers for current armed conflicts is institutional failure: the failure to provide security, justice and representation to all the people within states and societies.

Taken together, these points raise a difficult question: do the many different forms of violence that predominate today signal the advent of a more insecure and unsafe world, or is lethal violence slowly but surely diminishing over the long-run?

The first part of my argument – regarding the shifting nature of contemporary violence – is simple. War, as we have thought of it in the 19th and 20th centuries, no longer exists, at least war “as a battle in a field between men and machinery... as a massive deciding event in international affairs” between states, such war no longer exists.” (General Rupert Smith).

Many other analysts have made similar observations about the experience of modern battle, or about asymmetric warfare, or the ascendancy of so-called “operations other than war,” “low intensity conflicts,” insurgency and counter-insurgency” in military strategy. The kinds of military engagements that we see state armies involved in are radically different, and likely to remain so, so we must rethink what armies do, how they provide security, or create insecurity.

From a numerical point of view we also have evidence of this shift, and an optimistic perspective can be taken. The Uppsala Conflict Data project reassures us that the number of wars has more or less steadily declined. It records around 30 active armed conflicts in 2013, well down from the peak of more than 50 in the early 1990s, and only seven relatively large-scale wars (with more than 1000 battle-related deaths). Not surprisingly, these wars are in places such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Nigeria, Syria, Iraq, and South Sudan. This situation is somewhat worse than in most recent years

But in a longer-term perspective there has been a more or less steady decline since the end of the Cold War, and a near-total disappearance of wars between states. The vast majority of the 30 or so armed conflicts are small-scale, with a few hundred or a few dozen deaths, internal or civil in nature, and involving one or more non-state armed groups. The number of victims of war – usually described in terms of battle deaths – has also declined, with low estimates putting it in the order of 50,000 per year. Gone are the massive conflicts such as the wars in Indochina in the 1960s and 1970s, the independence wars in Africa in places such as Angola and Mozambique, or the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s (all of which took hundreds of thousands of lives), the civil wars in Central America in the 1980s, and the relatively large post-Cold war conflicts in Southeastern Europe.

So there is some good news. It is true that the number of intensely violent conflicts has declined. It is also true that war between states has almost disappeared from the picture. And it is true that many contemporary wars are– at least relative to the 20th century – relatively small scale in terms of the number of direct victims in battle. But I want to look a little more closely and ask: “what is missing from this picture?”

Generally speaking, focusing on war as a violent confrontation between two (or more) armed groups over clear political aims excludes a great deal of enormously destructive violence that has powerful implications for domestic, regional and even international security and stability. Inter-tribal and clan conflicts in Yemen, for example do not count as war even though the Yemeni government has acknowledged that perhaps as many as 4000 people per year are killed in what are called “land disputes.” These are not inter-personal or individual acts of violence and they weaken the Yemeni state, demonstrate its inability to provide security and justice, and make the entire Arabian peninsula a zone of insecurity in which other forms of violent extremism can take root. Another example would be post-election violence in Kenya that claimed more than 1000 lives in 2008, which does not count as an armed conflict, even though it was clearly linked to loosely organized groups, including some that were state-sponsored, and was not a spontaneous outburst or random individual acts of violence.

War may have disappeared, but armed violence has been transformed in many ways, and its overall burden is still large. Drawing upon the forthcoming volume of the *Global Burden of Armed Violence*, we know that *at least* 508,000 people died violently on average every year between 2009 and 2013. Only ten percent of these direct victims of violence died in armed conflicts: the overwhelming majority – 90 percent – died in so-called non-conflict settings. It is true that some of the most violent countries on the planet (measured by deaths per 100,000

population) are in war zones such as Syria, Afghanistan, or South Sudan. But there are more violent places, many of which are in Latin America and Caribbean. Honduras, Venezuela, and El Salvador are all more dangerous places to be than Afghanistan. Colombia, Jamaica, and Guatemala are all more dangerous than South Sudan. There are more than 30 countries with rates of violent death greater than 10 per 100,000, and 12 with rates greater than 30 per 100,000 – which is more or less equivalent to a war zone.

Analysts and policy-makers tend to make sharp distinctions between criminal or economically motivated violence, and political or ideological violence (either intra- or inter-communal). Yet today the lines between these different forms of violence are blurry. Many armed groups in parts of Africa pursue political as well as criminal aims, being involved in large-scale trafficking or resource exploitation. Criminal groups, such as in Mexico, conduct military-style operations, recruit their members from former armed forces personnel, and engage in battles with each other and the army on national territory. More than 40,000 people have died in Mexico's drug wars since 2009, making this one of the largest "non-wars" today. And the "in-between" categories of such phenomena as urban armed violence, which can be both political and/or criminal, or para-military violence, which is legally criminal but often sanctioned by the authorities, or state violence, or domestic terrorism, show that a neat divide between political/ideological and economic/criminal violence is unsustainable.

The three key points here are that:

- most contemporary violence is not in conflict zones;
- most of the states worst affected by armed violence are not at war;
- the levels of armed violence in non-conflict settings are higher than in most war zones.

These facts pose serious challenges to regional, national and international security, and many of our policy responses are not adequate, whether they involve mediation and conflict resolution, peacekeeping and post-conflict peacebuilding, or more robust and forceful intervention in zones of insecurity that are impossible to control. What can modern armies do against urban terrorists and gangs? Or to combat diffuse networks conducting hit and run attacks against civilians such as Boko Haram in Nigeria?

Let me turn briefly to my last three points: start with the nature of the actors involved. Most large-scale violence involves one or more non-state actors, and there are three important things to note about such groups. First, many of them are driven by economic and criminal, as opposed to political or ideological, motives. Examples abound, from the warlords of West Africa, to the vigilantes and political gangs of Nigeria, to the armed *Janjaweed* in Sudan, or the FARC in Colombia. In its most simple form, many contemporary armed groups are driven by "greed" instead of "grievances," attempting to capture or exploit natural resources, or engage in illicit trafficking of drugs, people or other illegal goods. This phenomenon is widespread, even where very few people are injured or killed, and it has a serious negative impact on social, economic and human wellbeing. Extortion and crime is a tax on economic activities, it is unproductive and it has a negative impact on foreign and local investment and trade.

Non-state armed groups are also often not coherent, rational, unitary actors. There are often significant divisions among the leadership over goals and tactics that undermine its cohesion and can lead to splintering and division. There can be divisions between the leadership and the followers (including both combatants, and the broader support base) that can also lead to strategic incoherence. And there can be divisions among the groups of combatants that can

produce tactical incoherence or dissent, with local commanders or fighters pursuing their own local goals and not part of a larger logic.

Finally, these groups are also seldom genuinely “non-state” actors. They do not always operate in opposition to the state, and are often supported by external states in a practice of “mutual intervention” in each other’s affairs. In addition, in many cases, armed groups have their origins in state-sponsored militias, and self-defence groups, and are otherwise tolerated or indirectly supported by the state. Obvious cases include para-military groups, that do the dirty work of state institutions or political elites, through social cleansing, targeted assassinations, and campaigns of terror, or politicized street gangs that perform similar functions for different political factions.

This kind of activity has real-world implications for strategies of engagement with armed groups, including in particular the scope for negotiation, the potential for restraint in the use of violence, and post-conflict strategies for dealing with ex-combatants. How does one negotiate with Islamic State in Syria in Iraq, or Boko Haram? How does one defeat them? What does one do with the ex-combatants after the fighting ends, mostly made of men who often have no other skills than violence? How does one tackle large-scale and violent criminal gangs that have close ties to political elites and are embedded in the state, corrupting and weakening it?

The instruments of violence – small arms and light weapons – are also more widely available than at any time in the past. As research by the Small Arms Survey has pointed out, there are approximately 990 million small arms and light weapons in the world today. Of these, about 200 million (or less than one-quarter) are in the hands of national armed forces, about 765 million (almost two-thirds) are in civilian possession, about 26 million (less than three percent) are in the hands of police forces, and less than 1 percent are in the hands of insurgent groups. At least in terms of “ordinary lethal force” the state’s monopoly of violence is purely a legal, and not a practical, one in most parts of the world, and more lethal firepower is more readily available to more people than at any time. One useful index of this is the average price of an AK-47 (or its many variants) on markets around the world: in places with porous borders such as Africa and the former Eastern bloc, prices are relatively low (an average of 156 USD in Africa and 303 USD in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union), compared to an average of 520 USD in the Americas and 927 USD in Western Europe.

This does not only concern unsophisticated small arms and individual weapons – but such things as advanced man-portable air defence systems that pose a threat to civilian as well as military aviation. There are many reports of advanced shoulder fired air defence systems now in the hands of rebel groups across North Africa and the Middle East, after the widespread looting of arsenals in Libya and Syria. Given the rapid collapse of the Iraqi army in the face of the Islamic State onslaught – and the massive quantities of weapons that fell into their hands- we can question the wisdom of supplying such weapons to volatile regions.

The spread of large quantities of military-style automatic weapons to the four corners of the world has overturned the delicate balance between force and negotiation in many places (especially in traditional communities), and increased the destructiveness of conflicts when they do break out. These facts have some direct practical and policy implications.

- we need to minimise the risk of armed groups gaining access to large quantities of weapons, by restricting the transfer of weapons to non-state armed groups;

- we need to make sure that weapons that are delivered to states and authorized users are securely stored and stocked, and that good physical security and stockpile management policies exist;
- we need to mop up the surplus of weapons that exist when states change their military or strategic policies – these guns should be collected and destroyed, not sent elsewhere where their use (and misuse) is more likely.

Let me conclude with saying a few words about institutions. One of the primary functions of the modern state is to provide security to its citizens, from external threats through national defence and armed forces, and from internal threats through police and the justice system, designed to provide public order and safety, and to ensure peaceful and legal means of resolving conflicts and disputes. In many cases, the failure of the state to fulfil these functions is at the heart of contemporary conflicts and armed violence. Groups take up arms and get organized where there is no force to stop them, and no means of addressing their real or imagined grievances through appropriate channels.

The lessons for policy makers are many and I have only highlighted a few. In simple terms, strategies for ending conflicts and reducing armed violence and insecurity have to focus on building effective, accountable and representative institutions that simultaneously help to make the state's legal monopoly on organized violence a reality, and to ensure that this monopoly is not abused.