

# WAR IS BACK

## THE INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE TO ARMED CONFLICT

David Harland

FROM the end of the Cold War until 2010, war seemed to be going away. Inter-state warfare disappeared almost completely for a while. Civil wars continued, but at an ever-lower level, and came to be seen less as an existential threat than as a policy challenge to which regular instruments of public policy could be applied. A consensus emerged as to how those public policy instruments should be used, with the elimination—or near-elimination—of armed conflict as the goal.

Since 2010, however, this has unraveled. War is back. Armed conflict has been increasing steadily: the number of wars; the number of battle deaths; the number of terrorist incidents; the number of people displaced by violence. Almost everything to do with war that can be reliably counted

has been getting worse. Not yet catastrophically so, but to a degree and at a pace that has so far defied efforts to staunch it.

The instruments that had been used in the previous decades have been applied, but have not prevented the continuing surge in armed violence. Military interventions are failing; peacekeepers are immobilized by terrorists; and traditional diplomacy struggles to accommodate the role of non-state actors, without whom most conflicts can no longer be resolved. Conflicts are evolving, but the tools for containing or resolving those conflicts have not evolved as fast. These tools, therefore, need to be re-shaped, starting from the understanding that, at least as far as armed conflict is concerned, the state is just one actor among many.

*David Harland is Executive Director of the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue. He has served as Policy Director for the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations, Chairman of the World Economic Forum Global Action Council on Conflict, and Adjunct Professor at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies.*

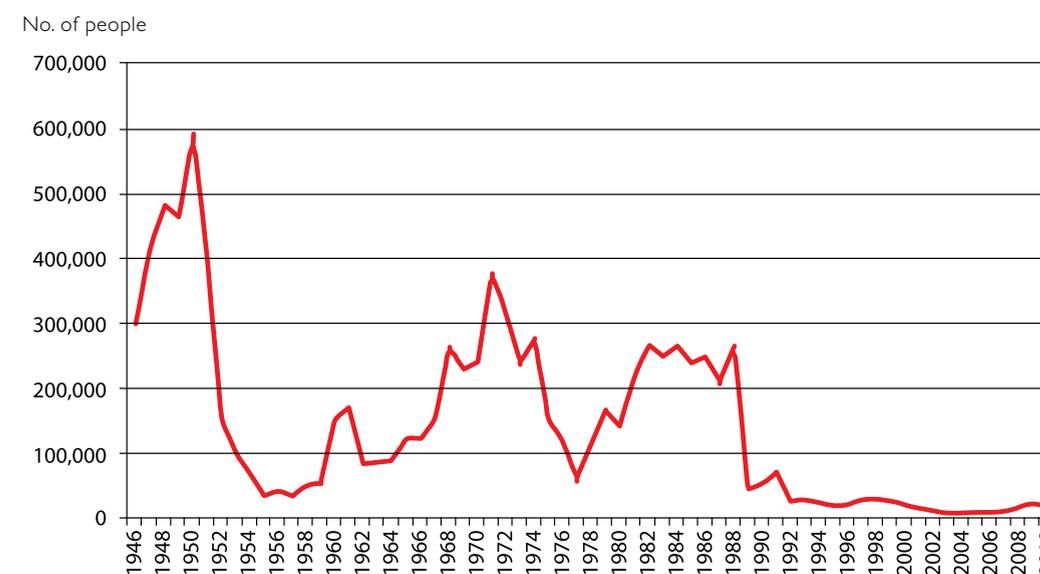


Figure 1. Battle Deaths, 1946-2010

### THE POST-COLD WAR POLICY CONSENSUS

From the end of World War II to the end of the Cold War, the annual worldwide total for battle deaths seldom fell below 100,000, with major spikes of violence taking the totals to above 200,000 for extended periods. And then, it largely stopped. The first few years after the Cold War produced localized spasms of violence—in the former Yugoslavia, Somalia, and Rwanda—but the global trend was dramatically downward. With the end of the Cold War, the world became much more peaceful (see Figure 1).

As the Cold War dust settled, war almost disappeared from the rich world, and even from middle-income coun-

tries. Serious commentators argued that “the end of history” had arrived, and that there was nothing left to fight about. Or, at least, it was argued, the epic conflicts between supporters of contending visions of how human society should be organized were over. It was felt that, with the Cold War triumph of market democracy, alternative models for human society had been discredited.

Meanwhile, as warfare was declining, so was poverty. Between 1990 and 2010, the number of people living on less than \$1.25 per day dropped by almost a billion. This was the biggest and fastest migration out of extreme poverty in history. With the end of the Cold War, trade barriers

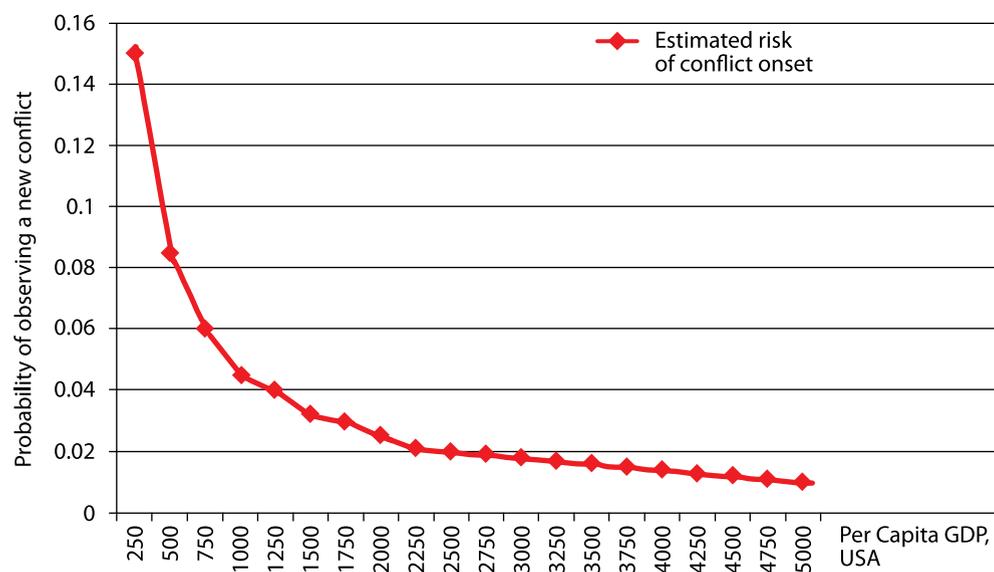


Figure 2. Poverty and War Risk

Source: Macartan Humphreys and Ashutosh Varshney, based on Collier and Hoeffler 2002

fell, paving the way for China’s entry into the international trade system, and to a doubling of the size of the world economy in 20 years. It was an unprecedented period of both peace and prosperity.

Except for those left behind. Those who missed out on one also missed out on the other: those who were still caught by war were more likely to be poor; and those who were still caught in extreme poverty were also more likely to fall victim to war. There appeared to be an irreducible minimum of armed conflict in the world, and it was closely correlated to poverty—the poorer a country, the greater the chance that it would be affected by war. The popula-

tions of these countries were trapped in a cycle of war and want (see Figure 2).

A policy consensus emerged on how to deal with the “conflict-poverty trap.” Three elements were held to be essential, and to benefit from external support: physical security, economic growth, and time. If these elements were present—as in Guatemala, Mozambique, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Timor Leste, and others—a country might gradually escape the trap. If they were not present—as in Afghanistan, Congo, or South Sudan—escape would not be possible.

Each of the elements needed to escape the conflict-poverty trap spawned an international machin-

ery. International mediators, many of whom became major public personalities, helped “the warring parties” reach peace accords. The age of absolute victory by one side or another seemed to be at an end. These accords were then often supported by growing numbers of peacekeeping troops, usually from the United Nations, but later also from the African Union, the European Union, and elsewhere. The World Bank and others sought new ways to program funds in countries emerging from conflict.

And the policy consensus seemed to be producing results. The second half of the 1990s was, by many measures, the least violent period in human history. In much of the Western world, perception of the decade beginning in 2000 were shaped by the 9/11 attacks on the United States and by the “global war on terror,” including the U.S.-led military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq.

In fact, however, these tragedies obscured the larger and more positive trends in global conflict. Both before and after the 9/11 attacks, most of those who were killed in war were not killed in conflicts connected to 9/11 and the

subsequent response. Rather, they were killed in a large number of conflicts in poor countries—mainly in Africa, and mainly unnoticed by the Western media. And in these twilight zones of forgotten conflict, a formula for escaping

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the death spiral seemed to have been found. All the major trends in violence were downward, as extensively documented in Steven Pinker’s iconic study *The Better Angels of Our Nature* (2011). This was true of large- and small-scale conflict, of long- and short-term conflict, even when factoring in 9/11 and its aftermath.

Having plotted war’s co-variance with extreme poverty, and having identified the measures needed to address both war and poverty—and having partly aligned those international interventions to conform to those measures—the Western policy establishment was optimistic. The challenge of preventing and resolving armed conflict was seen by some as comparable to the challenge of eradicating global polio or to that of eliminating commercial aircraft crashes. The goal of ending war—or of nudging it asymptotically close to zero—seemed to many to be within reach. The war against war was being won.

**THE END OF THE END OF HISTORY**

In his Preface to the *Philosophy of Right* (1820), Hegel observed that “the owl of Minerva flies only at dusk”—that we are wise about events only as those events are ending. The post-Cold War consensus on the management of armed conflict was captured in a series of important publications in 2010 and 2011. The data was showing—with greater clarity than ever before—not just how fast armed conflict was declining, but also the positive impact of efforts to break the conflict-poverty trap. Based on this data, the policy prescriptions for dealing with the residual caseload of armed conflict were refined.

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But the owl had already flown. Just as this body of literature was emerging, the trends began to go into reverse—slowly at first, and then faster in the years that followed. The first four cases to buck the trend were in the Middle East: Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and, above all, Syria. By 2014, for the first time since the end of the Cold War, global annual battle deaths had again topped 100,000. In the same year, the global total of refugees and internally displaced persons topped 50 million, a number not seen since the epic population movements at the close of World War II and during the civil war in China.

A new wave of literature emerged, focusing on the “Arab Spring,” on the particular pathologies of the Arab autocracies and the “youth bulge” in those countries, and on the unmet expectations and unrespected rights of those youthful populations. But the owl was flying again. Mali, which is not an Arab country, imploded in 2012, partly as a knock-on effect of the war in Libya, with the north of the country being lost to armed Islamist

groups. The Central African Republic, which is even less Arab than Mali, drifted perilously close to a genocide in 2013, as did South Sudan. Ukraine fell into conflict in 2014, as did Iraq after several years of much lower levels of violence. Yemen, too, erupted into open warfare in 2014.

During the same period—and partly linked to the same phenomena—terrorism reached levels never before seen. The number of attacks, and the number of casualties, almost tripled between 2010 and early 2016. Belgium, France, Indonesia, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Nigeria, Thailand, and Turkey all saw unprecedented levels of terrorist violence. While not threatening the viability of any of these states, terrorism—including in its trans-national aspects—became a global challenge.

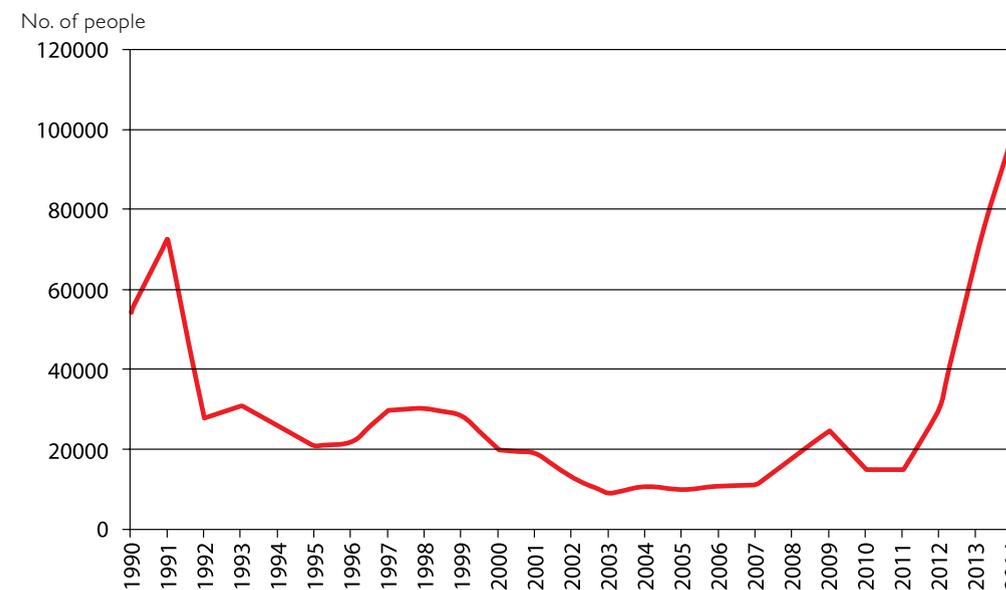


Figure 3. Battle Deaths, 1990-2014

Source: UCDF, PRIO Battle-related deaths Dataset 2015

By 2015, most of the gains in the 25-year “war against war” had been lost. The number of wars and the number of people killed were back to Cold War levels. The number of terrorist attacks and the number of refugees had surpassed the worst of the Cold War. Military interventions that had been launched with the stated aim of ending specific threats of violence—Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya—had not only failed to achieve their goals, but had lingered, spread, and facilitated the emergence of new conflicts (see Figure 3).

This back-sliding was not for want of trying. The United States spent an estimated \$3 trillion in an effort to stabilize Afghanistan and Iraq. The UN Security

Council entered into almost permanent session, adopting, among many others, the resolution that was used as the basis for the Western-led military intervention in Libya. The UN deployed more “Special Envoy” mediators than ever before, even bringing back former Secretary-General Kofi Annan to mediate on Syria. The number of UN Blue Helmets rose steadily, from 20,000 in 2000 to over 100,000 in 2015.

**WEAKNESS OF TOOLS TO PREVENT AND RESOLVE ARMED CONFLICT**

There have only ever been a limited number of tools for preventing or resolving armed conflict. Across history, six major instruments have dominated these efforts.

*Norms:* Despite claims to the contrary from the ill-named “realist” school of international relations, there is ample evidence that norms have significantly constrained the use of violence in the international system. Norms have, for example, contributed to a steady decline in the number of inter-state invasions.

*Information:* The use of information—both real and invented—has been an essential element in starting wars, preventing them, and stopping them.

*Deterrence:* The likelihood of a party going to war is reduced by the reasonable expectation that force can be deployed to prevent that party from attaining its goals.

*Force:* When deterrence fails, the use of force is the normal means by which an act of armed aggression is ended.

*Economy:* Tribute, trade, sanctions, and, more recently, economic development assistance, have all been used to encourage nations on the path to peace, and to otherwise shape their behavior.

*Diplomacy:* Negotiation and mediation have been the means by which alternatives to armed conflict have been sought.

**WEAKENED TOOLS**

The fundamentals of these tools do not change much. What changes most is the extent to which they are adapted to a particular context. The peculiarity of our own age is that all six of the tools have been honed with the state remaining the basic unit of reference. Armed conflict, however, has been evolving in precisely the opposite direction, partly due to the way technology has evolved.

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Below the state level, social media technology has enabled large, leaderless groups of people to express their grievances as never before, and even to remove repressive regimes, as in Tunisia, Egypt, and Ukraine. At the trans-boundary level, the internet abets the radicalization and recruitment of terrorists from one country for action in other. Web technology also enhances the trans-boundary trafficking that underpins many of the world’s armed conflicts. Supra-national conflict, such as resurgent Sunni-Shia conflict, is likewise enhanced by “new media.”

Technology is not the only reason for the feeble impact of traditional tools for managing conflict in our time. Without attempting to enumerate all the new and emerging drivers of

armed conflict in our world, it is still possible to identify some of the factors that have diminished these tools.

The framework of “*universal norms*,” for example, is now subject to robust challenge, and is presented by challengers as a framework of “Western norms.” Geopolitics is back on the international scene, after a hiatus of some 20 years, and political ideas are one of the battlegrounds.

Exacerbating this, Western countries have been distinctly less-than-attentive to norms such as non-interference in the internal affairs of states, and to respect for the territorial integrity of states. If this laxity has not actually weakened the international security architecture, it has, in the context of renewed geopolitical competition, provided a convenient rationale for Russia’s interventions in Ukraine and elsewhere.

The role of *information*—and misinformation and disinformation—in shaping the perception of key constituencies has never been stronger, and the balance has tipped away from the world’s status quo powers. The Great Firewall of China, Russian troll factories, and the gory spectacles of ISIS’s al-Furqān media production all shape perceptions about issues of war

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and peace, and the traditional Western state actors have so far produced no effective answer.

Nor are *military deterrence* and the *use of force* as effective as in earlier contexts. No effective deterrent to terrorist action in an open society has yet been found. And with American-led military interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya widely perceived as both expensive and unsuccessful, the use of expeditionary military operations as a tool for maintaining peace and stability in the international system has declined—at least for the time being. The reluctance of the United States to intervene in Syria reflects, in part, dissatisfaction with the results of previous interventions.

The UN’s peacekeeping efforts have also run into trouble, for some of the same reasons. The original peacekeepers of the late-1940s and 1950s were neutral observers positioned between the front lines of regular armies. As conflicts became steadily more complex, so too did the operations themselves, thus culminating in “robust peacekeeping operations” that had elements of counter-insurgency or “spoiler management.” The latest such operation, in Mali, has already taken a large number of casualties from Islamist terrorist operations, and the viability

of the UN model is being questioned, including in the UN itself.

Efforts to shape the international security system through *economic* measures do work. The emergence of robust market democracies in East and South-east Asia correlates very strongly with peace. American efforts to hasten the collapse of the Soviet economy by forcing it to over-invest in armaments were effective. Economic sanctions can also work. The agreements signed between Iran and the P5+1 group of nations explicitly links constraints on the development of Iran’s nuclear program with the easing of economic sanctions.

These measures work, but not fast. At least until updated to reflect the speed of the modern economy, their efficacy in the face of short term security challenges will remain limited.

Which leaves *diplomacy*, including *mediation*. Those who dislike its transactional nature enjoy referring to diplomacy as “the world’s second-oldest profession.” It is indeed an old profession—there is not a lot that modern diplomats could teach the Warring States’ emissaries of Sima Qian’s *Histories*, while Krishna’s epic mediation in the *Mahabharata* has never been

surpassed. But the failure of contemporary diplomacy to provide a framework for preventing and managing armed conflict—and its failure to manage a slew of violent crises—is not a failure of its distant past.

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Current diplomacy around violent conflict is a prisoner of its *recent* past—it is excessively wedded to the interactions between states at a time when fewer and fewer conflicts can be

resolved exclusively within that matrix. This weakness is exemplified by the UN Security Council, whose deliberations exclude almost entirely non-state, private sector, and civil society actors that are essential for any effective response to armed conflict.

**ADAPTATION OF EXISTING TOOLS**

What to do? The natural policy choice would be to do nothing. Little attention is paid to the rise of armed violence as a general phenomenon, requiring systemic responses. Security threats are mostly considered within their immediate political context. Terrorist attacks by adherents of ISIS in France or Belgium are routinely considered within the framework of the crisis in Iraq and Syria. Russian intervention in Ukraine is considered within the framework of Russia’s efforts to

re-establish a sphere of influence, or to re-establish itself as a major world power. Tensions in the South China Sea are considered within the framework of China’s efforts to establish security domination in its region.

Some consideration is given to the policy responses needed to what might be termed “mid-range” security challenges: “the Arab Spring,” “hybrid warfare,” or counter-terrorism in the

context of the recruitment of citizens of EU states for terrorist attacks in the EU itself. These lead to limited adjustments to security budgets and security posture, and even to some adjustments to social and economic policies. Policies for “countering violent extremism” or “preventing violent extremism” are examples of policy responses to these mid-range threats. So far, however, these measures have not reflected a general willingness to engage with the broader issues of preventing and resolving armed conflict.

A broader effort to improve global capacity to manage security threats would start with a recognition that, irrespective of the specific political factors at play in each crisis, the traditional tools for the management of armed conflict are now poorly aligned with the threats. The tools must be

adapted to contexts in which states are only one of a number of actors.

Some movement in this direction is perceptible. The mediation of armed conflict, for example, has evolved to accommodate actors other than states. As early as 1994, the Community of Sant’Egidio mediated the peace agreement ending the civil war in Mozambique. The Geneva-based Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue,

of which I am Executive Director, mediated the first Cessation of Hostilities between the Government of Indonesia and rebels of the Free Aceh Movement. The former President of Finland, Martti Ahtisaari, was able to take this one step further with the 2005 Memorandum of Understanding that ended that war.

Private mediation actors have also developed a capacity for “multi-stakeholder” and “multi-level” processes. In Tunisia, for example, local and international actors were able to broker a series of agreements between Islamist and secular political forces that helped keep Tunisia stable following the 2011 ouster of long-time dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. The Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet won the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize for its role in this effort, and Tunisia remains the only “Arab Spring” country to have undergone a successful

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transition—though that stability is being challenged by instability in neighboring Libya and other factors.

Nor is it just the field of diplomacy and mediation that is slowly adapting to the less state-centric world of modern conflict. ISIS leads the way in the effective use of information to shape the battlefield, and the most effective responses now also come from non-state actors—albeit of a very different kind. As Kenya tipped towards civil war in 2008, it was civil society's Ushahidi crowd-sourced information that was able to provide the most effective real-time counter-mobilization.

**B**ut these are exceptions, and they are still relatively minor. The tools for managing armed conflict remain overwhelmingly dominated by states; and they are failing. State-based norms on the use of force gain little

traction with individuals and non-state actors at a time when power continues to move from the former to the latter. Business is now a major actor in many of the world's most conflict-prone arenas, but plays only a very limited direct role in the prevention and resolution of armed conflict. Illegitimate business interests are actively sustaining conflict, but the countervailing efforts of "corporate social responsibility" are marginal.

Armed conflict is surging, and is now largely unconstrained by the traditional state system. Efforts to contain this new generation of warfare will, likewise, need to reach beyond the traditional repertoire of statecraft. Many of the next generation of tools are already available, and have been tested. What is so far lacking is the political will to deploy them systematically and at the required scale. ●