A NEW ERA OF CONFLICT AND VIOLENCE

The nature of conflict and violence has transformed substantially since the UN was founded 75 years ago. Conflicts are less deadly but longer, and more often waged between domestic groups rather than states. Homicides are becoming more frequent in some parts of the world, while gender-based attacks are increasing.

Separately, technological advances have seen the weaponization of bots, drones, and livestreaming, cyberattacks, ransomware, and data hacks. Meanwhile, international cooperation is under strain, diminishing global potential for the prevention and resolution of conflict and violence in all forms.

Globally, the absolute number of war deaths has been declining since 1946. And yet, conflict and violence are currently on the rise, with the majority of conflicts today waged between non-state actors such as political militias, criminal, and international terrorist groups. Unresolved regional tensions, a breakdown in the rule of law, absent or co-opted state institutions, illicit economic gain, and the scarcity of resources exacerbated by climate change, have become dominant drivers of conflict.

In 2016, more countries experienced violent conflict than at any point in almost 30 years. At the same time, conflicts are becoming more fragmented – the number of armed groups involved in the Syrian civil war for example has mushroomed from just eight to several thousand since the outbreak of the conflict. Furthermore, conflicts are less responsive to traditional forms of resolution today, making them longer and deadlier. This is in large part due to the regionalisation of conflict, which interlinks political, socio-economic, and military issues across borders, making them mutually reinforcing. The war in Yemen is a painful example of this.

Organised crime and gang violence vary widely across regions. Countries in the Americas have the worst homicide rates by a wide margin, accounting for 37% of the global total in a region that accounts for only 13% of the world’s population. Political instability engenders organised crime, including targeted attacks against police, women, journalists,
and migrants. Meanwhile political violence no longer affects only low-income states. In the past 15 years, more than half of the world's population has lived in direct contact or proximity to significant political violence.

For women and girls, the home remains the most dangerous place. Some 58 per cent of female homicides were carried out by intimate partners or family members in 2017, up from 47 per cent in 2012. Women bear the heaviest burden of lethal victimisation, often as a result of misogynistic beliefs, inequality and dependency, which persist globally, especially in low-income countries.

While terrorism remains widespread, its impact has been waning in recent years. Globally, the number of deaths attributed to terrorism dropped for a third consecutive year in 2018, to under 19,000. Attacks have become less lethal as governments step up counter-terrorism efforts, regional and international coordination, and programmes to prevent and counter violent extremism. In 2017, a fifth of terrorist attacks were unsuccessful, compared with just over 12 per cent in 2014.

Conflict remains the primary driver of terrorism, with more than 99 per cent of all terrorist-related deaths occurring in countries involved in a violent conflict or with high levels of political terror. The majority of deadly attacks take place in the Middle East, North Africa, and Sub-Saharan Africa, with Afghanistan, Iraq, Nigeria, Somalia, and Syria bearing the heaviest burden.

In countries with high levels of economic development, social alienation, lack of economic opportunity, and state involvement in an external conflict are the major drivers of terrorist activity. In Western Europe, terrorism-related deaths have fallen dramatically in the past few years, but the number of incidents has increased. There has been a sizeable increase in the number of attacks carried out by actors with far-right, white nationalist, or anti-Muslim beliefs in both Western Europe and North America in the past two decades. The number of incidents across the two regions increased from three in 2002 to 59 in 2017, with social media playing a crucial role in the dissemination of xenophobic speech and incitement to violence.

Technological advances are changing how conflicts play out. Advances in artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning will play a major role in this transformation, changing the nature of threat from both state and non-state actors. The use of AI is enhancing cyber, physical, and biological attacks, making them more finely targeted, while also making them harder to attribute. AI also facilitates attacks by lessening or even eliminating the need for human labour, expertise, travel, or expensive machinery, making them widely accessible, even to so-called ‘lone wolves’ or small groups.

Advances in AI and 3D printing could facilitate biological attacks, by automating the development and production of the weapons and the systems that develop them. Biological attacks seek to harm or kill humans, livestock and crops, using toxic substances or widespread illness. Existing biological programmes and data are also at threat of cyber-attack.

AI has also made possible lethal autonomous weapons (LAWs), despite widespread global opposition to their development. These weapons identify and engage a specific target without human guidance, thereby transferring responsibility over life and death from human moral systems to complex data systems, devoid of compassion or an ethical compass. Who is to blame when an autonomous weapon kills a human being? The UN Secretary-General has called for fully autonomous weapons to be prohibited by international law, as have many nations.

Malicious actors can additionally use AI-enabled deep learning to create ‘deepfakes,’ which seek to create seemingly real footage of people speaking words they never uttered. Deepfakes could fuel misinformation, divisions and political instability.
According to IBM’s X-Force Incident Response and Intelligence Services, the number of cyber-attacks doubled in the first half of 2019 in comparison with the second half of 2018, most of them targeting manufacturers, oil and gas companies, and educational institutes. Owners of critical infrastructure are especially at risk, as malicious actors seek to target airport control towers, nuclear power plants, hospitals and dams. Over the past year, more than a hundred cyber incidents with the potential to undermine international peace and security were identified. Such attacks would cause substantial damage and casualties.

Other new and emerging digital technologies are also helping non-state actors to level the playing field. Extremist groups today have unprecedented access to the general public through the internet, which allows for more efficient and effective recruitment, incitement, and propaganda, as well as the purchase of weapons and unregulated money transfers. Advances in AI also provide new tools and preventive strategies for police and counterintelligence agencies to better prevent attacks and identify perpetrators. But predictive policing comes with its own downsides, including inbuilt racial and religious biases, which can engender radicalisation to violent extremism.

Today, we are witnessing the unravelling of the international arms control architecture and a gradual backtracking on established arms control agreements, which for decades enabled global stability, restraint, and transparency. The continued existence of nuclear weapons in particular poses an ever-greater threat to the survival of humanity. While the number of nuclear weapons has dropped from more than 60,000 during the Cold War to around 14,000 today, more countries now have access to nuclear weapons, while at the same time relations between nuclear-armed states are fraying, and divisions over the pace and scale of disarmament are growing.

When the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty ended in August 2019, the UN Secretary-General deplored the loss of “an invaluable brake on nuclear war”. The New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) faces a similar demise. The total elimination of nuclear weapons can still be achieved, but it will require a renewed commitment to trust and cooperation between the world’s most powerful countries. The Secretary-General has called on states to renew fervour on outstanding and current arms control agreements.

In 1945, the UN was primarily designed as a tool to manage interstate relations as the world reeled from the horrors of two world wars. While today’s world is overwhelmingly safer, the nature of threat has evolved considerably. New, more complex and more sophisticated threats require imaginative and bold responses, and strengthened collaboration between Member States, as well as the private sector and civil society. Institutional boundaries must be also bridged, so that political, human rights, and development partners can work in concert.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- The Sustainable Development Goals
- UNODA | Securing Our Common Future 2018
- UNODC | Global Study on Homicide 2019
- UN and World Bank | Pathways for Peace 2018
- The Age of Digital Interdependence: Report of the UN Secretary-General’s High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation
- Global Terrorism Index 2018