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 now tend to be less deadly and 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 globally. The long-term impact on development of inter-personal violence, including violence against children, is also more widely recognized.

Separately, technological advances have raised concerns about lethal autonomous weapons and cyberattacks, the weaponization of bots and drones, and the livestreaming of extremist attacks. There has also been a rise in criminal activity involving data hacks and ransomware, for example. Meanwhile, international cooperation is under strain, diminishing global potential for the prevention and resolution of conflict and violence in all forms.

↗ ENTRENCHED CONFLICT

Globally, the absolute number of war deaths **has been declining** since 1946. And yet, conflict and violence **are on the rise**, with many 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. For example, the number of armed groups involved in the Syrian civil war has mushroomed from eight to several thousand since the outbreak of the conflict. Furthermore, the regionalisation of conflict, which interlinks political, socio-economic and military issues across borders, has seen many conflicts become longer, more protracted, and less responsive to traditional forms of resolution.

↗ ORGANISED CRIME, URBAN AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Today, crime kills far more people than armed conflicts. In 2017, **almost half a million** people across the world were killed in homicides, far surpassing the 89,000 killed in active armed conflicts and the **19,000 killed in terrorist attacks**. If homicide rates keep climbing at the current rate of 4 per cent, then **Sustainable Development Goal 16** – which includes a target 'to significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere' – will not be met by 2030.

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 per cent** of the global total in a region that accounts for only 13 per cent 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.

↗ VIOLENT EXTREMISM

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 terrorism. 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.

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. Both state and non-state actors can also use AI-enabled deep learning to create 'deepfakes,' which create seemingly real footage of people speaking words they never uttered and have the potential to fuel misinformation, divisions, and political instability.

↗ NEW TECHNOLOGIES

Technological advances are contributing to the changing nature of conflict. There are concerns about the potential for artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning to enhance cyber, physical, and biological attacks. For example, by making them more finely targeted, harder to attribute, and easier for small groups perhaps even 'lone wolfs' to carry out.

Emerging technologies are lowering the barriers to the acquisition of biological weapons – toxic substances or diseases used to harm or kill humans, livestock, and crops. There are concerns that 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.

There is also mounting international concern over the development of so-called lethal autonomous weapons (LAWs), which could 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 an ethical compass. The **UN Secretary-General** has called for fully autonomous weapons to be prohibited by international law, **as have over 30 nations**.

Perhaps the most prevalent modern-day threat is that of cyber-attacks. 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.

On the flip side, advances in AI and other technologies also provide new tools and preventive strategies for police and counterintelligence agencies to better prevent attacks and identify perpetrators. But here too there are risks. For example, predictive policing comes with its own downsides, including inbuilt racial and religious biases, which can engender radicalisation to violent extremism.

↗ THE NUCLEAR THREAT

Today, we are witnessing the unravelling of the international arms control architecture and a gradual backtracking on established arms control agreements, which have supported global stability, restraint, and transparency. The continued existence of nuclear weapons 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, nuclear weapons are more powerful today. 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.

↗ LOOKING FORWARD

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 in many ways safer, the nature of threat has evolved considerably. New, more complex and more sophisticated threats require imaginative and bold responses, and strengthened collaboration between states, as well as the private sector and civil society. Institutional boundaries must also be bridged, so that political, human rights, and development partners can work in concert.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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