SWP Comment

New Wars 2.0

Massive Violence against Civilians in Ongoing Armed Conflicts Demands a Political Rethink

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The existential catastrophe faced by the population of the Gaza Strip currently looms large in the foreign policy and security debates. The plight of civilians there is particularly acute. Yet, severe crises persist elsewhere too – from Ukraine and Sudan to Myanmar, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Haiti – where protracted violent conflicts continue to cause grave suffering among civilians. This grim reality is underscored in the United Nations Secretary-General's latest annual report, released in May. At the same time, conventional mechanisms for international conflict resolution are failing in an increasing number of contexts. In light of this, it is crucial to systematically track evolving conflict dynamics and to revise approaches to the protection of civilians accordingly.

While the massive attacks on civilians in the Gaza Strip, Ukraine, and Sudan receive international attention, they are indicative of a troubling broader trend. The number and intensity of violent conflicts has increased markedly in recent years. In 2023, the world witnessed more violent conflicts than at any time since the Second World War. Fatality rates have also risen significantly. Between 2021 and 2024, conflict-related deaths reached their highest levels since the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. Excluding that singular event, this represents the largest number of deaths in violent conflicts since systematic data collection began in 1989.

After the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, armed conflicts increased significantly in the 1990s, with high numbers of casualties as well. At that time, it was widely held that the nature and course of conflicts had changed fundamentally. Although the theory of 'new wars' was based primarily on qualitative arguments, and the term remained controversial, two key points could be empirically underpinned: fighting between regular armed forces had become less frequent and violence directed against civilian populations had increased. Today, the number of conflict-related deaths is far higher than at the end of the 1990s. But does this also mean that violent conflicts are affecting civilians in increasingly severe and unprecedented ways?

The data: Violence against civilians

The main indicator for the situation of civilians in violent conflicts remains the ratio of civilian to military casualties. However, determining the exact number of civilian casualties remains difficult, despite a general improvement in available data. Precise, up-to-date figures are often hard to obtain, as political interests and propaganda make it difficult to collect objective data.

Nevertheless, there are some indications. The UN recorded at least 33,443 civilians killed in armed conflicts in 2023. This represents a 72 per cent increase within a year, mainly due to the high death toll in the Gaza Strip. Violence against children in armed conflict also reached a new record high in 2024, with 41,370 grave violations. That is the highest number since this monitoring and reporting was established twenty years ago. The Gaza Strip and the West Bank again top the list with 8,544 cases, followed by the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, Nigeria, and Haiti. As the respective reports acknowledge, the actual numbers are likely substantially higher.

Looking at a longer period, there is no doubt that the aggregate numbers of fatalities in ongoing armed conflicts have risen significantly since the 2000s. According to the Uppsala Conflict Data Programme (UCDP), the annual number has been rising since 2010, and accelerating since 2020. This is mainly due to 'state-based conflicts', most notably in Ethiopia, Syria, Sudan and Ukraine, and since October 2023 in the Gaza Strip. The figures fell in 2023, mainly due to the end of the armed conflict in the Tigray region and a decline in the number of deaths in Ukraine. They plateaued in 2024, though at a much higher level than before 2021 and about five times higher than in 2010. These figures, it should be noted, include both civilian and military casualties.

The UCDP's 'one-sided violence' category includes only violence against civilians, which almost doubled between 2010 and 2023. The number of victims rose significantly in 2024, due to attacks by the Islamic State (IS) in Africa and widespread killings by armed gangs in Haiti. However, this only includes incidents in which there are no combatants at all among the victims. The number of conflicts in the 'non-state violence' category has also increased significantly since 2015, while the aggregate number of victims has remained roughly constant. Yet, there may have been sharp increases in individual countries such as Mexico or Brazil. In such contexts characterised by criminal violence it is particularly difficult to distinguish between victims who were members of armed groups and those who were civilians. Furthermore, deaths resulting from state-based conflict — armed conflicts involving at least one government of a state — continue to account for the vast majority of fatalities. The increase in these figures is at least partly due to the availability of better data compared to the 1990s.

The number of people forcibly displaced is often used as a more comprehensive measure of the impact of violent conflicts on civilians. At the end of 2024, this indicator hit an all-time high of 123.1 million. A significant increase is also evident when measured against the world population. Statistically speaking, one in 67 people worldwide were forcibly displaced at the end of 2024. That is almost twice as many as a decade ago. The majority were internally displaced persons. In 2024, there were 73.5 million internally displaced persons attributable to conflict and violence. This represents an increase of 9.7 per cent over the previous year, around 65 per cent over five years and just under 94 per cent over ten years.

The significance of these figures is sometimes questioned due to the growing numbers who remain displaced long-term. Some do not return for a long time, or ever, even after the fighting has ended. Recently, however, there has been a striking increase in the numbers newly forcibly displaced. In absolute terms, the world's largest current displacement crisis — possibly the largest since the Second World War — is taking

place in Sudan. Between the outbreak of war in April 2023 and mid-2024, 12.8 million people had been forcibly displaced; in the Gaza Strip more than 1.9 million people have been displaced since the start of Israeli military operations following 7 October 2023. Around 90 per cent of the population in the Gaza Strip have been displaced at least once, with many having experienced multiple displacements. In Ukraine, around 3.7 million people have been internally displaced since the Russian invasion on 24 February 2022, and 6.9 million refugees have sought protection abroad. The figures for Myanmar, Haiti and the Democratic Republic of Congo have also risen significantly, and consistently high numbers of displaced persons from Afghanistan, Yemen and Ethiopia reflect the fragility of the security situation in these countries.

Data collected by the independent organisation *Armed Conflict Location & Event Data* (ACLED) also points to new peak levels of insecurity and violence. ACLED calculates how many people are close to conflict incidents — defined as being within five kilometres of battles, explosions, remote violence or violence against civilians. Although record numbers of people are fleeing violence, this ACLED estimate has risen steadily since data collection began in 2020, to reach around 745 million people exposed to conflict in 2024. In this short period, the number of incidents of such forms of organised violence has more than doubled.

There is growing evidence that more civilians are affected by violent conflict and its consequences today than at almost any time since the end of the Cold War. To assess whether this signals a broader shift in the nature of contemporary armed conflict, one needs to analyse the underlying conditions of the persistent failure to protect civilian populations.

Drivers of the protection crisis

The inadequate protection of civilians in protracted violent conflicts represents a genuine protection crisis, as various UN and EU officials have long acknowledged. This may reflect qualitative changes in the nature of conflict. Ascertaining whether this is so means identifying patterns of actors involved, means employed, and types of warfare or forms of violence affecting the situation of civilians. Although these aspects vary depending on the context, some general lines can be identified.

Fragmented and internationalised actor landscape

Since the 1990s, and even more so since the 2010s, two important developments have been observed in conflict dynamics: increasing fragmentation of armed actors and growing external involvement in internal conflicts.

In 2024, the UCDP listed 49 conflict actors as using one-sided violence: 14 governments and 35 non-state actors. This was the second-highest figure since 1989, matched only by 2022. Only actors that kill at least 25 civilians within a year are counted in the figures for one-sided violence. In general, the trend has been clearly upward since the 2000s and the figure has remained consistently above forty since 2019. In 2024 there were also over 450 armed groups of humanitarian concern worldwide, most of them in Africa (44 per cent) and the Middle East (20 per cent). So at least 210 million people live in areas with limited statehood that are completely controlled by armed groups or where control is contested. This situation affects civilians both directly and indirectly, for example by restricting access to humanitarian aid, as in the areas controlled by IS in Syria and Iraq in the 2010s. Furthermore, non-state armed actors often resort to asymmetric warfare — compensating for their militarily inferiority to their state opponents — with severe impacts on the civilian population.

The growing numbers of armed groups also create their own uncertainty, for example in identifying where front lines lie and attributing responsibility for acts of violence. In Yemen, for example, the front line

between the Houthis and the government forces is dynamic and difficult to pin down. Territorial control has also been highly fragmented in the Syrian war and the recent wars in Libya. The large numbers of actors involved in certain violent conflicts make it even more difficult to protect civilians, by complicating communication and negotiations among parties to the conflict, with their respective supporters, and with external actors such as humanitarian organisations.

In addition to the sheer numbers of violent actors, the blurred line between state and non-state actors is also relevant. The concept of 'new wars' was based on the observation that a complex milieu of state and non-state actors — including private military companies, warlords and paramilitaries — had replaced the dominance of regular armed forces. This grey area now also characterises internationalised conflicts. Their number and complexity have increased significantly since the early 2010s, especially since the Syrian war. UCDP data shows that the number of internationalised intrastate conflicts has risen sharply since 2013 at the latest — referring to conflicts in which at least one of the parties is supported militarily by combat troops from a third state. This development is worrying for civilian populations, as such conflicts tend to last longer and have higher fatality rates.

Middle and regional powers are also intervening in violent conflicts with a relatively 'light' military footprint — whether through political, financial and military support for local allies, the provision of mercenaries or the activities of private or hybrid military companies. Deployments such as those of the Russian 'Africa Corps' (formerly the Wagner Group) in Libya, Mali, Sudan, the Central African Republic (CAR) and Syria also serve in part to conceal the involvement of outside states. This not only obscures responsibility for the fighting; the intervention also changes the financing and arming of the conflict parties.

Conflict economies and weaponry

In general terms, external state support for conflict parties declined significantly in the course of the 1990s. Non-state armed groups in particular turned to kidnapping, looting and the exploitation of and trade in natural resources such as diamonds, timber, and oil — sometimes in exchange for weapons. At times they simply taxed business activities. The diversion of humanitarian aid became another source of income, one that harmed the civilian population in multiple ways. Many analyses initially emphasised the predatory aspect of these conflict economies. Later studies stressed that illegal activities also generated political and social capital for the armed groups in certain cases, especially when the population benefited. Yet, economic motives also tend to become an end in themselves for conflict parties, making it more difficult to resolve the conflict. Today, the main question is how increases in different kinds of third country involvement will affect financing and armament of conflict parties. This is not simply the return to ideological polarisation in the sense of a Cold War—style systemic conflict.

However, it is clear that geopolitical interests are linked to tangible economic motives. These are often negotiated transactionally, with little priority placed on protecting the civilian population. The final report of the Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) research project notes that the interconnection of geoeconomic and geopolitical rivalry is making violent conflicts more protracted today. These are not proxy wars driven by two larger opposing blocs, but they do mirror the pragmatic and transactional alliances and policies that have characterised the interventions of numerous external powers.

This is also evident in the arming and equipping of parties to armed conflicts. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), global military spending rose to US$2,718 billion in 2024, after the sharpest annual increase since the Cold War. SIPRI identifies 64

countries as major arms exporters during the period 2020−2024. Today, conflict actors simply have more choice when it comes to potential supporters and suppliers. Although the United States remained the most important arms exporter in 2020−2024, followed by France, Russia, China, and Germany, new suppliers such as Turkey have gained in importance.

The list of major recipients includes several (sporadically) active conflict parties. In addition to Western arms deliveries to Ukraine and Israel, Iranian shipments to Russia and the Houthi rebels in Yemen are mentioned. The main recipients also include several countries that are indirectly or covertly involved in violent conflicts, such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), whose arms deliveries are partly carried out via ostensibly humanitarian channels. In Sudan, the UAE is supporting the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in this way. Similarly, Emirati arms deliveries contributed to the escalation and continuation of the conflicts in Yemen and Libya. This is how weapons from other countries, including Germany, came to be used in Yemen. Certain arms transfers are not listed, such as Iran's deliveries to some of its closest allies in the so-called Axis of Resistance in the Middle East as well as to the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF).

A review of reported violations of UN arms embargoes since 2015 − including prominent cases such as Libya, Somalia and the CAR − confirms that third countries have repeatedly intervened with more or less covert arms deliveries, while the international community's enforcement measures have remained inadequate.

At the same time, the technology has changed. While the 1990s and 2000s saw weaponry supplied or smuggled into conflict zones from countries of the former Warsaw Pact, combat drones now play an important role in many armed conflicts. Armed drones have attracted considerable attention in the war in Ukraine, for example with the Ukrainian 'Spiderweb' attack on targets in the Russian hinterland in June 2025. Russia, meanwhile, has been using Iranian drones against critical infrastructure and the civilian population in Ukraine. In Tigray, the Ethiopian government used Turkish Bayraktar TB2 drones in addition to Iranian and Chinese drones. Turkish drones have also claimed many civilian lives in the Sahel. In Sudan, the SAF is fighting the RSF with Iranian Mohajer-6 drones. The RSF, in turn, uses quadcopters obtained from Russia's 'Africa Corps' and from the UAE. The latter has also supplied quadcopters to Ethiopia and Yemen.

Drones expand operational capability, in particular for non-state actors, and remain difficult to regulate. However, it cannot be said that combat drones significantly shift the military balance of power, at least for conflicts in African countries. Rather, their range makes the front lines less clear.

It would seem plausible that the use of armed drones − compared to traditional weapon systems − lowers the threshold for the use of force. In any case, the use of drones has led to an increase in civilian casualties in certain conflicts, such as in Ukraine. Since they allow areas further away from the front line to be reached and more targets to be attacked, they increase the threat to the civilian population and make it less predictable, which also has negative psychological effects.

While it is difficult to quantify the impact of developments in conflict economies and the arming of conflict parties, there are strong indications that they have increased the pressure on the civilian population.

Warfare and forms of violence

In current violent conflicts, different types of warfare and thus forms of violence against civilians overlap. These include the use of explosive weapons in populated areas (EWIPA).

According to the Explosive Violence Monitor Project, there were 34,791 recorded civilian casualties of explosive weapons in 2023 (73 per cent of the total). This was the highest level since this data was first collected in 2010. The use of explosive weapons in urban warfare poses a particular threat to civilians, both directly and through

the destruction of civilian infrastructure. In 2023, 90 per cent of those killed and injured in such attacks were civilians, compared to only 13 per cent elsewhere.

As the data shows, air strikes have resulted in significantly more civilian casualties in recent years, with the number increasing more than elevenfold since 2014. Responsibility for civilian casualties caused by explosive violence in 2024 was attributed principally to Israel (55 per cent), Russia (19 per cent), Myanmar (5 per cent) and the warring parties in Sudan (3 per cent). The extensive bombing of the Gaza Strip by Israel dramatically illustrates how devastating EWIPA can be for the civilian population. The Israeli military has also used bunker-busters in the densely populated Gaza Strip and in Beirut.

International legal doubts over the proportionality of EWIPA have also been cast aside elsewhere. In the 2010s and 2020s, the massive destruction of cities has not been uncommon — from Aleppo and Mosul to Mariupol and Khartoum. The full effects of artificial intelligence cannot be foreseen at this point. But target acquisition programmes such as *Lavender* and *The Gospel*, which Israel has deployed in the Gaza war, are raising urgent ethical and legal questions concerning the protection of civilians. It remains unclear how international humanitarian law can be meaningfully applied to such systems.

The use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) has increased dramatically since the 2000s, especially in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq where they became the main weapon of the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and later IS and its offshoots. Their use has now expanded, for example to Nigeria where they are deployed by splinter groups of Boko Haram and to Somalia where al-Shabaab employs them. The use of IEDs frequently affects civilians, as such devices are meant to spread fear and terror. The risk of falling victim to these and other types of terrorist attacks is significantly higher in conflict zones. The Global Terrorism Index 2024 shows that all ten countries most affected by terrorist attacks are simultaneously ex-

periencing ongoing armed conflict, as recorded by the UCDP. While the death tolls in Afghanistan and Somalia have recently been declining, Israel and Palestine as well as the Sahel region are facing a worsening security situation.

Sometimes violence is used deliberately against specific sections of a civilian population. Although there is no detailed annual record of mass killings of civilians, the Early Warning Project for 2023 reports the number of massacres rising to 21, the highest figure in the past twenty years. Mass killings refer to incidents when more than one thousand civilians within a country die over a year or less through deliberate actions by an armed group, because of their membership in a particular group. Such attacks often result in large numbers of casualties within a short period of time, as in the case of the RSF attack on a displaced persons camp in Ardamata in November 2023, which killed more than 1,300 people.

The number of recorded cases of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in armed conflicts has also risen significantly. Between 2021 and 2024, the number of people in conflict or fragile contexts who required support services due to SGBV more than doubled — from 3.5 to 7.2 million. The number of unreported cases can safely be assumed to be enormous.

Blockading of supply routes also has a massive impact on populations in war zones. Particularly serious recent cases include Israel sealing off the Gaza Strip, the blocking of aid deliveries in Sudan and the blockade of Tigray by the Ethiopian government. Beyond food, these may also affect water, medical supplies and fuel. Deliberately cutting off supplies is considered a war crime, but documentation and investigation are often made difficult by restricting or denying access for journalists. This is often accompanied by a lack of safe havens, including disregard of designated protection zones and safe passage for humanitarian aid workers, who are increasingly under attack themselves.

There has been a significant shift since the 1990s and early 2000s concerning dis-

information and hate speech. While such tactics have long been part of warfare, their algorithmic amplification by platforms such as X, Facebook, TikTok, and Telegram today enables much more rapid dissemination of hostile narratives and agitation. Social media are increasingly used to legitimise violence, cover up war crimes, and discredit 'unwelcome' actors. The latter increasingly affects UN peace operations.

Step up protection: Approaches and options

The need to protect civilians in violent conflict is growing, while the international provision of protection is dwindling. Even before Donald Trump began his second term, multilateral efforts for peace were coming under increasing pressure. Political deadlock in the UN Security Council hinders the targeted use of peacekeeping, sanctions and mediation. The importance of minilateral formats and ad hoc coalitions has grown, but they are often uncoordinated and sometimes compete with each other. On the other hand, no new multidimensional UN peacekeeping mission with a protection mandate has been established since 2014. Despite the continuing or even increasing need, many peace operations have been scaled back or withdrawn altogether, including MINUSMA in Mali and UNITAMS in Sudan in 2023, partly due to pressure from the respective host countries.

In any case, the 'new wars 2.0' are more difficult to end through negotiations. Although the number of armed conflicts was particularly high in the 1990s, the PA-X database on peace agreements and peace processes shows that that decade also saw the conclusion of the most peace agreements, averaging 75.4 per year. Between 2020 and 2024, there were on average only 42 per year, the lowest annual number since records began.

Although the UN has become a rather marginal player in certain cases, its instruments, above all its peace operations, remain relevant, even more so as regional

organisations also struggle to take effective action. The UN Secretariat's current review of peace operations — under the 2024 Pact for the Future — offers an opportunity to accelerate change. However, that will not be enough to respond effectively to the current protection crisis, especially given the dramatic decline in financial resources for non-military assistance in the area of peace and security.

Elements of 'old wars' are also re-emerging. This does not mean a revival of battles in the classic sense, if only due to technological innovations. Nevertheless, regular armies are once again facing each other directly whether in internationalised internal conflicts, interstate wars or outbreaks of violence between states — as recently seen in the escalation between Thailand and Cambodia. During the 1990s and 2000s violent conflicts were often dismissed as remnants of pre-modern (dis)order or expressions of state collapse. Today, more and more states seem to regard military action and violations of international humanitarian law as an option, sometimes even as a demonstration of power.

In the Pact for the Future, the UN member states have once again committed themselves to protecting civilians in armed conflicts — as they are already obliged to do under international law. Concretely, the pact calls for conflict parties to refrain from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas and to strengthen accountability for serious crimes and gross violations, such as the use of sexual violence and hunger as weapons of war. As a co-facilitator of the Pact, Germany has a particular interest in its implementation, and a responsibility to ensure follow-up.

Last but not least, the German government must restore the credibility of its commitment to the 'rules-based order'. This includes re-affirming its support for the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court. In view of spending cuts impacting protection of civilians, Germany should also endeavour to form coalitions of the 'willing to protect' with countries that are prepared to respond

quickly and effectively in concrete cases (potentially outside the UN and EU frameworks).

The loss of effectiveness of established instruments means that structural developments in protracted conflicts must be analysed in greater detail. Improving prevention and response demands more accurate and reliable data, especially on isolated and remote areas. Crowdsourcing apps and local NGO networks, for example, can contribute to early warning. However, NGOs need financial and logistical support as well as training. The same applies to civil society actors organising mutual aid and protection on the ground, even without ceasefires, as is the case in Sudan.

Responsibility for protecting civilians, however, cannot be shifted solely to the local level. Instead, support for states involved in violent conflicts should be made consistently conditional on protection of civilians, for example through serious do-no-harm audits. That would include reviewing proposed arms exports as well as greater use and better implementation of sanctions. A political rethink is required to lay the foundations for tackling the challenges of the 'new wars 2.0' more effectively. This must involve a thorough and open debate on improving the protection of civilians. It must address both the motivations of the actors involved and their means and methods.

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