The renaissance of civil war

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After the end of the Cold War, the number of armed conflicts and wars significantly declined at first: the world appeared to be slowly but steadily becoming a more peaceful place. The recent wars in the Middle East, West Africa and Ukraine have put an abrupt end to this hope – now crises and conflicts are even considered the new global “norm” in public perception. But to what extent is there actually more civil war again? And what is behind this trend?

Number of civil wars rising again

According to data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), the number of armed conflicts and wars worldwide has indeed risen relatively sharply recently, from 32 in 2012 to 34 in 2013 and 40 in 2014 (see Figure 1). This is the highest level of armed conflict since 1999.

In 2014 some 40 wars were being fought across 27 countries. Particularly affected were Asia (14 wars) and Africa (12), followed by the Middle East (6), Europe (6) and the Americas (2). With only one exception, these were intrastate conflicts. However, 13 of these 39 civil wars were “internationalised”, i.e. other countries supported one or both of the warring factions with troops and/or weapons.

Intensity of civil wars increased dramatically

But the real news is that the intensity of the civil wars has increased significantly in the last three years. This is evident when you take the number of battle-related deaths as the benchmark: in 2011 “only” 22,614 people were killed due to combat operations globally, but this number subsequently increased to 37,992 in 2012, 70,451 in 2013 and 101,406 in 2014 (see Figure 1). There were therefore significantly more victims of war in 2014 than in any other year since the end of the Cold War.

The most deaths by far were in the Syrian civil war (53,948), but the civil wars in Iraq (12,598), Afghanistan (12,311), Nigeria (4,621) and Ukraine (3,554) involved heavy losses too. The growing intensity of hostilities is also shown by the fact that at least 11 of the 39 civil wars in 2014 crossed the threshold from armed conflict (≥ 25 dead) to civil war (≥ 1,000 dead).

Civil wars often have similar causes

Every civil war naturally has diverse, context-specific causes. However, across countries there is often a combination of very similar conflict factors involved.

Firstly, it is striking that extreme ideological motives play a key role in a growing number of rebellions. This applies especially to Islamist movements such as IS in Syria and Iraq, the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Al-Qaeda in Yemen and Algeria, Boko-Haram in Nigeria and Al-Shabaab in Somalia.

However, none of these movements can be narrowed down to Islamist backgrounds. In reality, successful mobilisation is generally only possible in the context of discrimination and repression by the state along ethnic or religious lines: for example, IS in Syria and Iraq benefited from the political marginalisation of the Sunnis, and the Islamists in Mali and Nigeria from the poverty of the northern parts of the country, etc.

In addition to sufficient grievances as a result of discrimination and repression, violent mobilisation also requires corresponding opportunities. This includes, in particular, the weakness of the government security apparatus, which has greatly promoted the emergence of many civil wars (Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Nigeria, etc.). Furthermore, as mentioned, many rebel groups also receive external support from other countries, which has proven to increase the conflict duration and intensity.

Conclusion

Crises and conflicts will remain an enormous challenge in the foreseeable future for effective development cooperation. A starting point would be a stronger focus on tackling central causes of conflict such as “horizontal” inequalities between ethnic or religious groups. Moreover, a suitable way for dealing with the “new” Islamic extremism must be found, since these ideological groups are not only difficult to combat but also make development cooperation more difficult. Furthermore, as mentioned, many rebel groups also receive external support from other countries, which has proven to increase the conflict duration and intensity.

Literature


Figure: Armed conflicts and wars, 1989-2014

Data source: Pettersson & Wallenstein (2015)