Conflicts & Organized Violence in the 21st Century: The Changing Faces

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Throughout history, the world witnessed phases of great transformations that marked the configuration of new global contexts, such as the transition from pastoralism to urbanization, from feudal to industrial modes of production, from traditional to rational social action, etc. The beginning of the 21st century seems to be one of these historical moments during which conflicts and organized violence are undergoing fundamental mutations. It is then a necessity to analyze these transformations in order to comprehend the mechanisms of tomorrow’s world security.

A New Environment:

Within the actual context of global interdependence, conflicts in some areas have serious economic and security impacts on other distant areas. Meanwhile, providing security seems to be an increasingly multilateral action as both states and non-state actors work together in a sort of a public-private sector partnership. This is all due to the new global environment that has paved the way to the change in nature of conflicts.

Fewer conflicts:

One of the frequently repeated narratives by the media and politicians is that today’s world is becoming increasingly violent. This might be true on the scale of unorganized violence such as crime, etc. However, that doesn’t seem to be the case for conflicts and wars responsible for large number of victims and tragedies. In fact, datasets and conflict-specialized research has been proving else wise. Most forms of organized violence have been declining around the world since the end of the Cold War and so are the battle-related deaths since 19501.

Several factors may help explain this decline. The first is related to global changes on the international relations scene. The end of the Cold War resulted into a decrease in the numbers of civil and regional conflicts based on ideological tensions and fuelled by the intervention of super powers. It was also followed by a wave of democratization in the ex-communist countries during the 1980’s & 1990’s. Yet, the rise of unstable democracies which are more vulnerable to internal conflict may have weakened the effect of such an element.

Another factor is the greater role played today by the international community through the different international organizations. On the one hand, the involvement of this latter in the peace building processes, aiming at ending armed conflicts around the world, has led to the conclusion of several peace treaties ending a group of long and short term conflicts. Although there has been a doubt about the sustainability of those peace agreements2, “8 out of 10 of those signed since the

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2 The concern regarding the sustainability of peace treaties and agreements is mainly based on the finding that the number of recurring conflicts has generally increased over time, both in absolute numbers and relative to new
year 2000 are still holding\(^3\); a figure that represents a notable success rate. On the other hand, the development of international criminal law may be relatively helping raise the accountability of state actors, who seek to preserve their image internationally or avoid aggressive reactions and pressures from the international community.

The third factor is linked with the type of actors involved in today’s conflicts. Fewer states are engaged in conflicts, while more non-state actors have been involved. When measured by death tolls, data sets show that in 1989, non-state actors perpetrated only 25% of civilian deaths. By 2008, however, non-state actors were responsible for 83% of deaths from one-sided violence\(^4\). With deaths from wars accounting for one quarter what they were in the 1980’s\(^5\), interstate and state conflicts are clearly less than they were before. They have remarkably declined since peaking in the early 1990’s.

**Security & Development:**

*In today’s growingly interdependent world, security and development seem to be strongly attached.* On the one side, different forms of conflict and violence threaten development. Many of the countries which have successfully negotiated political and peace agreements after violent political conflicts, such as South Africa, El Salvador and Guatemala now face high levels of violent crime, constraining their development\(^6\). In addition, local grievances and underdevelopment can be motives for joining international ideological fundamentalist movements such as Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan as well as criminal gangs elsewhere\(^7\). As no security can be provided without development, no development plans can be conducted without security. On the other side, organized violence is becoming more costly in a growingly interdependent world. According to a study by Gaibulloev and Sandler in 2008\(^8\), each additional transnational terrorist incident reduced the economic growth of 18 Western European countries by 0.4 of a percentage point a year. Not only do the costs caused by insecurity burden the households but also the firms. For example, firms in Sub Saharan Africa lose a higher percentage of sales to crime and spend a higher percentage of profit on security. Conflicts’ indirect repercussions are also costly. Knowing that nearly 75% of the world’s

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4 Idem, page 42.
6 Look UNDP Report 2009-2010 *Informe Sobre Desarrollo Humano para America Central*.
refugees are hosted by neighboring countries, national and regional economies are severely touched by widespread violence. A country achieving remarkable growth rates like Tanzania loses around 0.7% of GDP every year for each neighbor in conflict. Not to mention that countries providing the world with natural resources can severely affect the international economy if it witnessed internal disturbances. During the first month following the beginning of the popular uprising in Libya in 2011, oil prices worldwide increased by 15%.

**The Changing Faces:**

In such a context, it is then essential to try understanding the new properties of conflicts by asking oneself three main questions: What are the characteristics of the new conflicts? Who are the new parties engaged in conflicts? And where are the new fields of war?

1. **Non state conflicts**

As fewer states are engaged in conflicts, more non state actors have been filling the void. Such a transformation in actors implies a change in the nature of conflicts themselves. The new actors, who are basically dependant on small arms, tend to attack more civilians and avoid direct collision with their armed opponents. Conflicts are becoming less intense than before causing fewer victims—unlike the 20th century state warfare—and lasting for shorter time. According to Berghof Foundation, the vast majority of non-state conflicts last only one year. Moreover, these brief cycles of violence are becoming repetitive. Between the years 2000 and 2008, the number of recurring conflicts was three times the number of new conflicts.

The engagement of these actors was accompanied by a difficulty to categorize their actions into the traditional typologies of “war” or “peace”, or into “criminal violence” or “political violence”. They are more of repeated cycles of hybrid violence that mixes up several motives and *repertoires of action*. Apart from the tradition link between ethnic and political violence in multiracial countries, other different forms of violence are now connected. Their roots date back to the second half of the 20th century but they are witnessing a rapid growth in today’s world. For instance, political movements can be financed by criminal violence as the case in Colombia. Moreover, criminal gangs can engage in political violence as what happened in Jamaica amid the

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9 WDR team calculations based on Europe Brent spot price FOB (dollars per barrel) reported by the U.S. Energy Information Administration 2011.

10 According to the Uppsala & HSRP datasets, the average war in the 1950s killed some 10,000 people per year while today’s average war kills one tenth of that number.

operation to arrest Christopher Coke in May 2010. It’s a hybrid violence that interlinks local political conflicts, ethnic tensions, organized crime, and internationalized disputes.

2- **The New actors:**

a- **Private Military Contractors:**

A US military census in 2006 counted 100,000 government contractors operating in Iraq, not counting subcontractors, a total that is approaching the size of the U.S. military force there\(^{12}\).

As the role of security actors has extended from conflict periods to post conflict reconstruction and transition, this became an entry point to several private actors in the security sector. The newly involved actors aren’t only humanitarian but also private security firms that serve sometimes as a lead-agency for operations\(^{13}\). The reluctance of military institutions to assume the responsibility for security in urban zones in stabilized and post conflict zones, led to an increasing dependence on private security agencies and mercenaries. This comes in accordance with the privatization logic followed by states, allocating some of the services needed by the defense departments to private military contractors. Not to mention that the couple of military campaigns (Afghanistan & Iraq) that took place during the last decade has witnessed the involvement of costly great force armies, yet less satisfactory results. They have been facing a double transformation challenge: transformation in order to achieve battlefield success against conventional enemies, and transformation focused on stabilization operations, intelligence, and homeland security. Armies involved in operations like those of the United States, Great Britain have been obliged to live these changes under fire. Hence, referring some training services to private security forces was a solution to optimize resources and avoid losses.

Some threats have also been out of the mandate of some states or urgent –beyond the pace of the international community coordination-, such as piracy in international waters. Corporations sought the services of international private security agencies to protect their commercial shipping lines off the Somali coasts and the Gulf of Aden\(^{14}\) and elsewhere.

b- **Engagement of the civilians:**

During certain moments, such as chaos and civil wars in remote regions where the state fail to assume its responsibilities, the mass of citizens is becoming more frequently engaged. The Arab Spring was a flagrant example of public engagement in security and under different forms. For instance, the formation of public committees guarding local neighborhoods during chaos in

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Tunisia and Egypt, following their popular uprisings earlier this year\textsuperscript{15} was one of these forms. Yet, some other cases were more radical. In Libya, the citizens formed militias who became a warring party in the civil war that started in early 2011 following Tunisia’s and Egypt’s revolutions and that ended with the killing of Colonel Kaddafi by the militia of the people of Misrata. The Libyan case is an example of the complexity of such an engagement resulting into a series of violence even after the termination of the conflict. In addition, transition periods also include coordination with and increased involvement of local citizens such as the case of the “Arrow Boys” vigilante group in South Sudan\textsuperscript{16} which is extensively involved in fighting the Ugandan LRA attacking border villages.

3- **New war fields: The Cyber Sphere**

Insecurity isn’t only related to the human security in real world but can be extended to private and institutional security in the cyber world. The year 2011 has been marked by a series of cyber attacks that shocked various organizations. Some of the existing conflicts started to extend to the cyber sphere such as the Israeli-Arab conflict, making Israeli government institutions and public figures a target for Arab hackers. The Iranian-Israeli conflict has also witnessed the same developed but under the supervision and responsibility of both states. Since 2008, hacking attacks started to acquire a new momentum mixing up ideology with cyber attacks and giving birth to the new phenomenon known as “hacktivism”. Furthermore, new modes of attacks have lately been used extensively. Instead of the traditional defacing of websites by a single or group of notorious hackers, DDOS attacks are now frequently used to bring sites down by a group of amateur internet users. User friendly programs like LOIC made collective hacking action very easy to launch by a group of amateur internet users. While such new tools (LOIC, proxy servers, pirate pads and digital currency “bit coin”, etc) as well as the politicized arguments and publicity are being used by the modern cyber “rebels” such as Anonymous, old school elite hacker groups such LulzSec, Teampoison & Black Hat have developed in a different way. They have more tendencies to depend now more frequently on data leaking on a “pastebin”, in a way that corresponds much to the Wikileaks concept.

As the cyber space is now a new battlefield, contracting security firms is also extended to cyber security. On the one hand, websites are no longer a simple interface for governments and organizations, but an integral base of its services, due to the fast advancement of e-governance practices and the rising usage of networks. It’s the same case for the international ideological extremist movements who have been, for the last decade, widely present over the internet using internet banking and digital media tools. On the other hand, cyber security is not only threatened by the professional hackers, but also by a collective mass of amateurs launching DDOS attacks at

\textsuperscript{15} The uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt caused a withdrawal of police forces resulting into insecurity and chaos. Public committees were set in each neighborhood to protect the habitants from the attacks of thugs and criminal gangs.

the same time. Quantity based attacks are proving to be as vocal as quality based ones. The presence of governments and organizations on the internet made cyber security firms a necessity to protect its cyber outlets and its virtual services. Meanwhile, the presence of extremist and terrorist groups on the internet made it necessary to develop monitoring and analysis divisions in the security apparatus that would be concerned with cyber information gathering, in order to track transactions or analyze media productions of extremists.

In correspondence to the new trends of conflicts, security actors are witnessing a double transformation challenge; developing their roles and tools at the same time. Hence, our understanding for the new characteristics of conflicts and violence shall pave the way towards the elaboration of new security concepts, techniques and tools. Such an understanding wouldn’t only help us build and maintain world peace, save organizations’ and states’ interests, but most important save human lives.

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