

ARMED NON-STATE ACTORS: A BRIEF ATTEMPT AT A PORTRAYAL

Michael von der Schulenburg

The war in Afghanistan should serve as a warning about the degree to which armed non-state actors (ANSAs) now dominate the global peace and security agenda and how ill-prepared the West – indeed, the international community – is to respond to this threat. The 11 September 2001 attack on the United States by the ANSA al-Qaeda drew the US and NATO into this ill-fated military intervention and it is a ‘peace agreement’ between the US and the Taliban – an ANSA who as former quasi Afghan government the US came to annihilate – that will end it twenty years later. Despite their enormous military and financial superiority, US/NATO forces have lost the war against this militarily and numerically much weaker but determined local ANSA.

Afghanistan is not the proxy war we knew from the Cold War; neither al-Qaeda nor the Taliban are supported by competing global powers. Afghanistan is an example of a new era in which wars among states are replaced by armed conflicts with and among ANSAs. In 2018, the [Uppsala Conflict Data Program](#) (UCDP) listed only two minor border conflicts among states, yet fifty ongoing armed conflicts between states and ANSAs (this list

includes only politically motivated armed conflicts). So, what are ANSAs?

Although ANSAs are now central to armed conflicts worldwide, there is no agreed **definition** about who or what they are. Proposed definitions appear to focus on terrorism and security issues, ignoring the fact that ANSAs are far more complex social and political phenomena. To recapture their diversity, it might be better to define ANSAs more widely as *organized and structured groups* that: (a) replace state authorities in controlling partly or fully the lives of groups of populations; (b) challenge states’ monopolies of the use of force in pursuit of their political and/or criminal aims; (c) operate outside any international law and international conventions; and (d) are not legally recognized entities.

The underlying **aim** of all ANSAs is to shift power and/or resources in their favour; like interstate wars, armed conflicts involving ANSAs are essentially ‘distributional conflicts’, albeit at lower organizational levels. All ANSAs have both, power- and resource-seeking motives. They differ, however, by the degree of efforts to which they are seeking one or the other. Based on this difference ANSAs

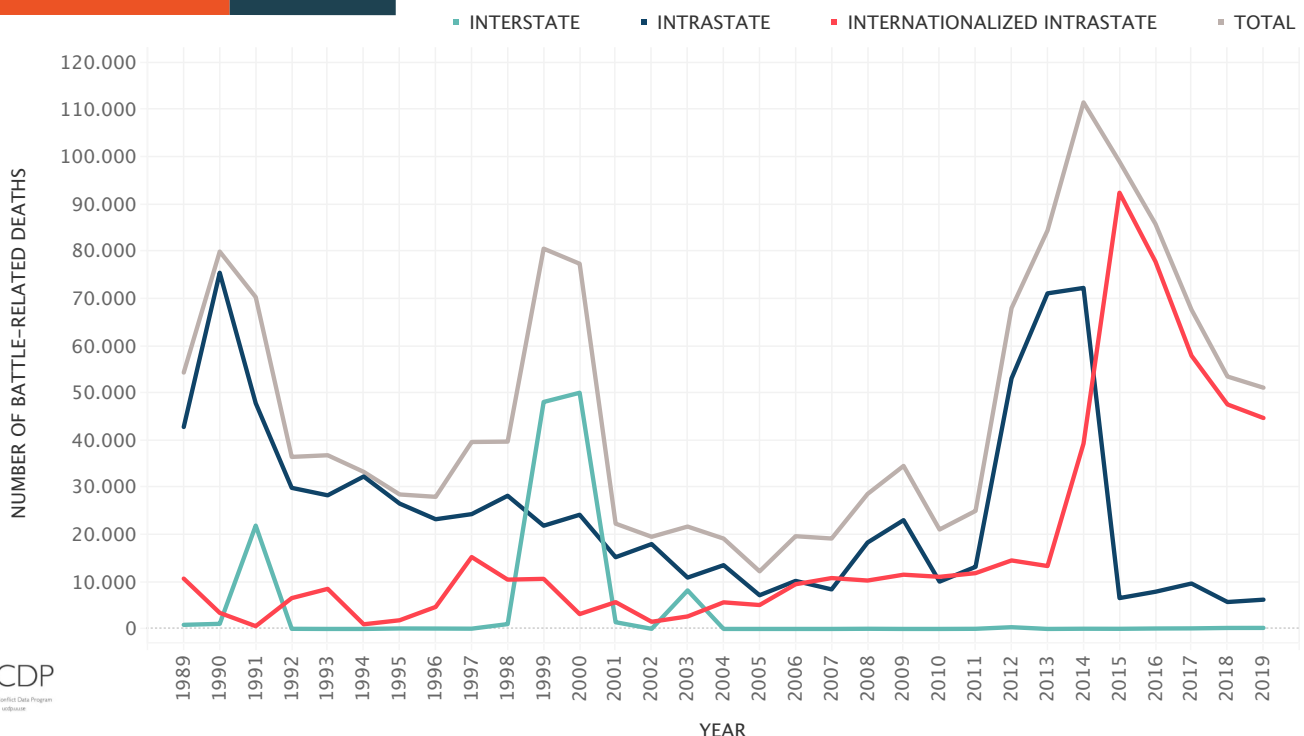
tnote

TORINO
WORLD
AFFAIRS
INSTITUTE

Battle-related death by type of conflict, 1989–2019.

Source: UCDP

BATTLE-RELATED DEATHS BY TYPE OF CONFLICT, 1989–2019



Based on UCDP 20.1 data

can be classified into groups who predominantly:

- seek *political change*, such as Islamist groups; pro-communist groups; and rebel, dissident, insurgency and secessionist movements;
- seek *political preservation*, such as government-supported militias, paramilitary vigilantes, counter-insurgency forces, private security companies and armies for hire;
- seek *economic survival* in hard circumstances, such as warlords, pirates, clans, and gangs;
- seek to *accumulate wealth* internationally, such as international crime syndicates, mafia-type organizations, drug cartels and human traffickers.

ANSAs' **identities** differ greatly. Ideological, social, religious, and ethnic identities – or simply family/clan connections and 'brotherhood' rituals – give them the common purpose and common language that create group loyalties. These identities are like 'uniforms' that help others to recognize ANSA members. Respective identities influence how ANSAs operate and how they justify their actions. Identities must not be mistaken for underlying motives; these are always real or perceived social and economic injustices.

In the **conduct of armed conflicts**, ANSAs differ most from traditional interstate wars. They are largely amorphous organizations with covert leaderships that easily fragment. ANSAs operate within communities, often with considerable local support. There are no clear front lines, and areas of control shift constantly. Most importantly, ANSAs use low military technologies and rely on intimidation and terror rather than on open battles. That makes it difficult to dislodge them militarily, and conflicts involving ANSAs can last for decades.

With the shift from interstate wars to armed conflicts with ANSAs, **battle-related deaths** have declined dramatically. The chance of being killed in wars/armed conflicts today is less than 2% of what it was in the 1950s. In fact, ANSAs kill relatively few people; most of the battle-related deaths are the consequence of foreign military interventions. According to UCDP, between 2015 and 2018 almost 90% of battle-related deaths occurred in the relatively few armed conflicts with foreign military involvements. It is the introduction of sophisticated weapon systems they bring into armed conflicts such as airstrikes that kills the most people. It also seems easier to escape armed conflicts with ANSAs than interstate wars, resulting in the highest numbers of refugees and internally displaced people since WWII.

Today, ANSAs, and not enemy states or supranational organizations, present the greatest **security challenge for states**. ANSAs are not 'anti-state' per se but rather erode states by seeking to change political systems, replace states' political leaderships, or simply create subversive social and economic (criminal) structures, or by aiming to alter state borders or gain control over parts of states' territories. Increasingly, ANSAs tend to provide some forms of security, justice, and even social services that are usually associated with states, while states tend to adopt forms of violence and lawlessness that are usually associated with ANSAs. In the reality of armed conflicts, legitimacies of states and non-state actors become blurred.

The erosion of state authority and the increase in ANSAs' powers undermine the **international order** and will make the world progressively ungovernable. It will make it impossible to promote economic and social development or respond to climate change, pandemics, economic inequalities, uncontrolled urbanization and large population movements. The effects would be felt mostly among the masses of poor and small-income earners throughout the world who depend on functioning states for their security, justice, health and education services, job security and social services. The real peril for all of us is that this could lead to a world drifting into chaos and anarchy.

“
Armed non-state actors (ANSAs) are today's new front lines of global peace and security. To deal with this, we will need political rather than military solutions. And we will need greater international cooperation – not another Cold War.
”

“ Obsessed with renewed great power competition, we may overlook the dangers emerging from within states and the fact that ANSAs are now key players in virtually all ongoing armed conflicts. They are expressions of deep social fault lines within societies and of weak and dysfunctional states, ones that mounting military expenditures and the development of ever more powerful weapon systems will not solve. To respond to a changing global security environment dominated by ANSAs, we will need political rather than military solutions. And we will need greater international cooperation – not another Cold War.

Michael von der Schulenburg worked for the United Nations, and for a short period the OSCE, including as Assistant Secretary-General, in long-term assignments in Haiti, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq and Sierra Leone, and more briefly in Syria, Somalia, the Balkans and the Sahel. In 2017, he published the book On Building Peace.