

2. Global developments in armed conflict, peace processes and peace operations

Overview

This chapter describes general developments in 2021 in armed conflicts and peace processes (for detailed regional coverage see chapters 3–7), as well as global and regional trends and developments in multilateral peace operations.

Section I explores definitions of ‘armed conflicts’ and outlines some of the main features and consequences of the active armed conflicts that occurred in at least 46 states in 2021 (one less than in 2020): 8 in the Americas, 9 in Asia and Oceania, 3 in Europe, 8 in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and 18 in sub-Saharan Africa. As in preceding years, most took place within a single country (intrastate), between government forces and one or more armed non-state group(s). Three were major armed conflicts (with more than 10 000 conflict-related deaths in the year)—in Afghanistan (approximately 42 000 reported fatalities), Yemen (18 500) and Myanmar (11 100)—and 19 were high-intensity armed conflicts (with 1000–9999 conflict-related deaths): in Nigeria (9900), Ethiopia (8880), Mexico (8300), Syria (5900), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (5700), Brazil (5500), Somalia (3300), Iraq (2700), Burkina Faso (2400), South Sudan (2100), Mali (1900), Sudan (1700), Central African Republic (1700), Niger (1500), Cameroon (1400), Pakistan (1400), Colombia (1300), Mozambique (1200) and the Philippines (1100). Only three armed conflicts were fought between states: the low-level border clashes between India and Pakistan, Armenia and Azerbaijan, and Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Two other armed conflicts were fought between state forces and armed groups aspiring to statehood (between Israel and the Palestinians and between Turkey and the Kurds). Most of the armed conflicts were internationalized.

The total estimated number of conflict-related fatalities increased to about 150 000 in 2021, a 13 per cent increase since 2020. The increase was driven by significant increases in Asia and Oceania (59 per cent increase)—mostly due to increases in Afghanistan, Myanmar and Pakistan—and sub-Saharan Africa (19 per cent increase). Estimated conflict-related fatalities fell for the third consecutive year in MENA.

While conflict-related fatalities have generally shown a downward trend in recent years, other impacts of armed conflict (sometimes in combination with additional factors) appear to have increased, including population displacement, food insecurity, humanitarian needs and violations of international humanitarian law. Most peace processes either stalled or suffered serious setbacks during 2021. Nonetheless, some of the greatest decreases in armed violence

in 2021 took place in contexts where ceasefires and power-sharing agreements had been reached in 2020: in Libya, Nagorno-Karabakh and Syria. The Covid-19 pandemic had minimal impact on armed conflicts in 2021—in most cases armed conflict levels persisted or even increased.

Section II describes the trends in multilateral peace operations. There were 63 active operations in 2021—an increase of one compared to the previous year. Three ended in 2021: the North Atlantic Treaty Organization-led Resolute Support Mission (RSM) in Afghanistan; the African Union Human Rights Observers and Military Experts Mission in Burundi; and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Observer Mission at the Russian Checkpoints Gukovo and Donetsk—and four started: the United Nations Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan; the Russian–Turkish Joint Monitoring Centre in Azerbaijan; the Southern Africa Development Community Mission in Mozambique; and the European Union Military Training Mission in Mozambique.

Despite an increase in the number of multilateral peace operations, the number of personnel deployed in them decreased by 12 per cent during 2021, from 127 124 on 31 December 2020 to 111 858 on 31 December 2021. This reduction was mainly driven by the closing of two multilateral peace operations, namely the RSM and the UN–AU Hybrid Operation in Darfur, which completed its mandate on 31 December 2020. The UN remained the leading organization in the field, with responsibility for about a third of all multilateral peace operations and more than two-thirds of all personnel deployed in them. Multilateral peace operations in sub-Saharan Africa continued to account for most personnel deployed in multilateral peace operations globally.

The AU Mission in Somalia remained the largest multilateral peace operation in 2021. Ethiopia remained the top troop contributor, followed by Uganda and Bangladesh. In 2021 the fatality rate for deaths due to all causes was lower than in the previous year. However, the annual fatality rate for hostile deaths of international personnel in UN peace operations increased again after having fallen in 2020, which was likely a result of reduced activities due to Covid-19 measures. The UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali continued to be the deadliest peace operation in terms of both hostile deaths and overall fatalities.

The trend of increasing multilateral operations activity in the grey areas outside the scope of SIPRI's definition of a multilateral peace operation also continued in 2021, with the deployment of the joint international 'peacekeeping mission' to the Solomon Islands. Another trend in 2021 was the intensification of geopolitical rivalries between Western countries and Russia and China, affecting mission mandates, closures and restructuring.

Table 2.6 in section III provides further details on the different multilateral peace operations and the organizations deploying them.