

While the world anxiously watches the Korean peninsula, or the South China Sea for signs of incipient war, the level of armed conflict around the world has continued to exact a deadly toll. Just ten conflicts accounted for more than 80% of the fatalities worldwide, according to this year's Armed Conflict Survey, produced by the London based International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). Nick Watts was at the launch for us.

Syria's conflict was the world's most lethal conflict for the fifth year running. The second-most lethal conflict, by comparison, has received scant attention ♦ Mexico's battle with criminal cartels, which accounted for 23,000 deaths. The ten most lethal conflicts were: Syria, Mexico, Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen, Somalia, Sudan, Turkey, South Sudan and Nigeria. The research, published by IISS, shows deaths from conflict worldwide fell to 157,000 last year compared to 167,000 in 2015. Yet the IISS noted in parallel a rise in the number of intractable conflicts that have the potential to flare at short notice.

Although there have been no state on state wars, the conflicts reported come under the beguiling headings of civil war, ethnic conflict or narco-terrorism. All of these have an impact on the lives of citizens in strife torn countries. Civilians caught in conflict continued to suffer on a huge scale. Increasingly, refugees and conflict itself are gravitating towards towns and cities rather than following the traditional pattern of settling in dedicated refugee camps or in border areas. In Sudan, 192,000 people have fled violence since the start of 2016. The UN seems to be just about managing to protect civilian populations, although there is evidence that UN forces themselves have come under attack.

The conflict in Syria seems to be as intractable as ever, with the reappearance of siege warfare as a tactic used by the regime to gain control over urban areas. In the south of Syria there seems to be a side war going on between the forces of the regime and the Free Syrian Army (FSA) which had been fighting ISIL. The attack on the FSA has enabled ISIL to seize the opportunity to re-group. Much attention has focussed on the north of Syria, close to the Turkish border, where the presence of the Kurds has added a further complication to what is to all intents a three way conflict.

The Survey notes that in 2016 ISIL / ISIS lost one quarter of the territory it had controlled in Iraq and Syria, as well as losing fighters through desertion or disillusionment. The idea of a Caliphate is fading on the ground, even as ISIS inspired attacks occur in European cities. The Survey draws attention to many of the unreported conflicts around the world; in the Philippines (since 1969), Turkey (since 1984) and Southern Sudan (since 1983); all of which it says may be 'frozen' or which are simmering, but which have the capacity to flare up.