

A review of the previous 12 months shows that 167,000 people died in armed conflict around the world. This is one of the key findings of the 2016 Armed Conflict Survey published by the London based International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). The Survey also notes that 2015 was the year when the state struck back in many of the world's largest armed conflicts, making territorial gains in the face of considerable resistance. Nick Watts reports.

The Survey reflects upon the interconnectedness of events in the Middle East. The situation in Syria no longer seems to be only about replacing the Assad regime. While the authors of the Survey do not foresee the Middle East situation spiralling into a major inter-state war, the calculations of the various actors in the region (Iraq, Iran, Syria, Russia, Saudi Arabia and the US) are clearly complicated by the multi-dimensional nature of the situation.

The asymmetric advantage that states enjoy against insurgents is the availability of air power, which can be harnessed to attack key personnel and installations. The use by Western allies of Intelligence Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) platforms helps to give effect to precision strikes. The Insurgents wish to hold ground is now being turned to a disadvantage. The use of 'conventional' military force against insurgency is most effective where Western air power and ISR assets enable local forces to gain ground. However, the insurgents still retain the ability to mount attacks, often using suicide forces to achieve devastating effect. Against this type of operation conventional forces can only have limited impact, blunting the full effect. The insurgents claim any attack as a propaganda victory, despite their losses.

The authors of the Survey do not expect to see either China or Russia involved in a major war; albeit that they are both engaged in 'probing' operations. The authors note that the absence of any state on state war does not negate the validity of being prepared for it.

Of the 167,000 people who died in armed conflict in the past year, the Survey notes that one-third of these were in Syria (55,000); this figure is lower than 2014. The largest year on year increase was in Afghanistan (15,000) which is an increase from 2013 (3,500) the last year of ISAF operations. The Survey also notes that the number of refugees and Internally Displaced Persons has surged from 33 m in 2013, 43 m in 2014 to 46 m in mid-2015.

The Survey notes the terrorist attacks which have taken place against EU nationals in the past year. Since 2010 the conflicts in Syria and Iraq have attracted more foreign fighters than the anti-Soviet Jihad in Afghanistan. Of the 30,000 foreign fighters estimated to be in the ranks of ISIL, some 5,000 are estimated to be westerners. Those who return to their homelands still radicalized pose a serious threat to their societies.