Policy Brief

Armed Violence in the MENA Region

Trends and Dynamics[1]

Introduction

In December 2010, a popular uprising in Tunisia marked the beginning of a series of events in countries of the Arab League that sent shockwaves through the political landscape of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Rulers were removed from power in certain countries, including Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Yemen. Civil uprisings had erupted elsewhere, such as in Bahrain and Syria. These events and the subsequent violence and political turmoil drew increased international attention to the region. This report explores armed violence in the MENA region[2] and how this political turmoil might have changed the underlying dynamics.

This paper takes into consideration the multidimensional and hybrid character of armed violence in the MENA region. Armed violence, which has been defined by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) as 'the use or threatened use of weapons to inflict injury, death or psychosocial harm' (OECD, 2011, p. ii), occurs in a wide variety of situations, ranging from interpersonal violence to forms of collective violence, including among armies and militias, criminal groups, and tribes. More specific definitions of armed violence further highlight the

multifaceted dimension of armed violence. Armed violence may be intentional or unintentional. It proliferates in a wide range of contexts, including internal or interstate conflicts, and in post-conflict settings. It is manifest in terrorist and counter-terrorist operations; extra-judicial killings; criminal activities; domestic violence; and police interventions (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2011). Many types of instruments are used to implement armed violence, from heavy, conventional arms to small arms and light weapons.

Drawing from desk-based research and interviews with informed participants, this paper focuses on the proliferation of heavy conventional weapons and small arms and light weapons in the MENA region and explores the dissemination thereof in local communities. It then analyses armed violence in conflict and in non-conflict settings, by outlining the overall trends, causes, nature, and impact of armed violence, and by providing a profile of the perpetrators of armed violence and of their victims, according to available quantitative and qualitative information. To conclude, the paper describes and evaluates policies being pursued at the level of the state and by civil society in attempting to reduce armed violence. Such endeavours include procedures to monitor arms proliferation; to limit the reach of perpetrators;

and other longer-term efforts aiming to curb future armed violence.

Arms proliferation in the MENA region

Heavily militarized states

MENA states include some of the most militarized countries in the world. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), in absolute terms only one of them, Saudi Arabia, ranks amongst the largest spenders for expenditures on armed forces, defence ministries, and other government agencies engaged in defence projects. SIPRI figures must, however, be considered with caution for what they exclude—small arms and light weapons, ammunition, and military material imported for internal police operations, and illicit small arms and light weapons smuggled across international borders (SIPRI, n.d.b). Moreover, figures related to MENA country expenditures are estimates, as none of the 14 Middle East countries, nor any of the four North African countries listed, informed the United Nations about their military expenditures in 2012 (SIPRI, 2013, pp. 171–72). In certain cases, such as Saudi Arabia, expenditure figures represent budget forecasts rather than actual and possibly lower expenditures (SIPRI, 2013, pp. 194–99).

Bearing this in mind, when military expenses are calculated in relation to the national gross domestic product (GDP), MENA states from various income groups emerge among the ten largest spenders (see Table 1).

The high military expenditure of MENA states is confirmed by other databases. The Global Militarization Index (GMI)—published yearly by the Bonn International Center for Conversion (BICC)—defines the level of militarization according to a wider array of indicators, including the ratio of military-to-health expenditure, the ratio of military and paramilitary forces to physicians and population, and the ratio of heavy weapons to the overall population (Grebe, 2014, p. 4). Rankings based on scores obtained by 151 countries indicate that seven countries of the MENA region are among the 20 most militarized countries: Algeria, Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and Syria (Grebe, 2014, p. 14). The BICC report states that, apart from Qatar and Tunisia, 'all countries in the Middle East show high levels of militarisation' (Grebe, 2014, p. 6).

Between 2001 and 2013, the official military expenditure of the Middle East states increased by 37.1 per cent; and despite military expenditure having stabilized or decreased worldwide since 2010, it increased by 13.9 per cent in the Middle East, and by 32.9 per cent in North Africa (SIPRI, 2014). Such a dramatic increase over a decade may be due to the deterioration of security in several countries in the region and the corresponding fear that insecurity will spill over into neighbouring countries. Examples of such spill-over include the Palestinian uprising (Intifada) and its developments in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip since 2000; the US-led Western intervention in Iraq in 2003 and the deterioration of the Sunni–Shiite relationships since 2006; the perception of Iran as a destabilizing factor, especially in those countries populated by large Shia communities, such as Bahrain and Lebanon; and the expansion

Table 1   **Ten largest countries in terms of military expenditure as a share of GDP and in absolute terms (in USD billion), 2013**

Country	Rank of country	Income group of country	GDP 2013 (%)	Expenditure (USD billion)
Oman	1	High income	11.3	9.2
Saudi Arabia	2	High income	9.3	67.0
Afghanistan	3	Low income	6.3	1.3
Israel	4	High income	5.6	16.0
Algeria	5	Upper-middle income	4.8	10.4
Angola	5	Upper-middle income	4.8	6.1
Azerbaijan	7	Upper-middle income	4.7	3.4
Myanmar	8	Low income	4.5	2.2
Lebanon	9	Upper-middle income	4.4	1.9
Russian Federation	10	High income	4.1	87.8

Note: Expenditure, indicated in USD billion, is derived from current prices, converted at the exchange rate for the given year.
Source: SIPRI (2014)

of radical Islam (jihadist) militant activities across the region and the ongoing Arab Spring uprisings since 2011.

Since the mid-20th century, many MENA countries have been prone to internal political instability. This may be attributable to their specific state-building experiences, which have frequently been characterized by authoritarian rule, inadequate development policies, corruption, and what is referred to as 'tribalism'—here understood to be networks based on blood ties and common interests, which may be more or less organized, and the parallel systems of justice and conflict resolution which prevail among them.

MENA states as arms importers

In 2013, six of the MENA countries ranked amongst the 20 largest importers of conventional weapons. In decreasing order of their imports, they are: the United Arab Emirates (in 2nd place, USD 2.3 billion), Saudi Arabia (4th, USD 1.2 billion), Egypt (12th, USD 0.6 billion), Oman (15th, USD 0.5 billion), Algeria (19th, USD 0.4 billion), and Syria (20th, USD 0.4 billion) (see Table 2; SIPRI, n.d.a). The bulk of weapons imported into Algeria, Jordan, Morocco, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE comprised aircraft items, whereas Egypt, Iraq, Kuwait, Libya,

Syrian, and Yemen allegedly spent more on imported armoured cars, air defence, and missiles.

Traditionally, the funds allocated to importing small arms and light weapons and their ammunition have constituted one-tenth of the overall expense of MENA states on conventional weapons. Small arms also include hunting and sporting firearms. According to research conducted by the Small Arms Survey on the authorized transfer of small arms and light weapons, in 2011 Saudi Arabia was considered one of the MENA region's largest importers of such weapons (more than USD 74 million), followed by Lebanon (more than USD 48 million), and then Qatar (more than USD 28 million) (Pavesi and Rigual, 2013, annexes 8.1 and 8.2). Once again, available figures do not include the small arms and light weapons stockpiles earmarked for police or counter-terrorist operations (including rocket and grenade launchers) or weaponry smuggled over international borders into war-torn locations, such as the Gaza Strip, Iraq, the Sinai, Somalia, Sudan, and Syria. The Small Arms Survey indicated that, in 2013, seemingly no Arab states (apart from Egypt and Israel) reported their imports of light weapons to the UN Commodity Trade Statistics Database (Comtrade)

Table 2   Arms imports for MENA countries (in USD million, at constant 1990 prices), 2013 and 2014

Rank of country	Country receiving import	2013 expenditure (USD million)	2014 Expenditure (USD million)
2	United Arab Emirates	2,252	1,031
4	Saudi Arabia	1,192	2,629
12	Egypt	628	292
15	Oman	490	738
19	Algeria	374	643
20	Syria	361	10
22	Iraq	344	627
40	Libya	121	10
41	Jordan	117	166
46	Bahrain	78	10
51	Qatar	73	55
56	Kuwait	65	591
59	Morocco	55	594
67	Tunisia	38	42
74	Lebanon	24	5
75	Yemen	23	6
88	Mauritania	10	5

Source: SIPRI (n.d.a)

(Pavesi and Rigual, 2013, pp. 182–83).

While countries engaging in interstate and internal wars may resort to the full range of heavy conventional weapons at their disposal (for instance, the Libyan and Syrian state armies in opposition to Arab Spring insurgents), the main instrument of armed violence in the MENA region remains weapons that cause more casualties than heavier, more expensive conventional weapons do: small arms and light weapons, including firearms, rocket-propelled grenades, and cold weapons (defined as arms involving no fire or explosions, such as bladed weapons). The purchase by Gulf countries and Jordan of large quantities of heavy conventional weapons—weaponry bought with funds accrued directly or indirectly from oil revenues over past decades—may serve primarily to deter their potential political enemies (such as Iran). Of these buying countries, none appears to be endowed with an army experienced enough to use such weapons fully.

The largest international exporters of weapons find good customers in the MENA region. From 2006 to 2010, US military exports accounted for 57 per cent of total military exports of conventional weapons to the region. Other major exporters over this period included, in decreasing order: the Russian Federation (11.8 per cent), France (9.5 per cent), the United Kingdom (5.4 per cent), and China (3 per cent).[3]

At a regional level, Iran has become a key exporter of weapons to certain organizations deemed to be terrorist or rogue entities, such as Hamas and Hezbollah in Syria, and the Houthis in Yemen. Weapons transfers to Syria jumped from USD 45 million in 2010 and 2011 to USD 85 million in 2012; this increase, albeit considerable, remains dramatically lower than the Russian Federation's soaring exports to Syria. Russian exports rose from USD 268 million to 376 million over the same time period (SIPRI, n.d.a).

Since the start of the Arab Spring, the transfer of conventional arms into MENA countries has become a sensitive issue to Western, exporting countries, such as France, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The armed violence exerted by state authorities against protesters during the uprisings in Bahrain, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen provoked several prominent watchdog organizations to point out the role of Western exporters in arming repressive Arab states. This involvement has taken place, at times, regardless of legislation banning arms exports to such states.

The UN arms embargo on exports to Libya, in place from 1992 to 2003, was relatively successful (AI, 2011). That said, weapons that were exported to Libya, first to the Qaddafi regime and then to rebel forces, are believed to have ended up in the hands of radical Islamists active elsewhere, such as in the Gaza Strip, the Sahara, and the Sinai. A similar pattern is said to have taken place in Syria, where weapons flows to the Free Syrian Army are likely to have ultimately reached jihadist groups (Sanger, 2012). Despite concerns about the arms trade, proliferation of arms in the region thrives.

From militarized states to armed societies

The regulation of the wide and uncontrolled dissemination of small arms and light weapons among non-state actor groups is widely recognized to be a major challenge throughout the MENA region. Small arms and light weapons are notoriously difficult to monitor. Not only are they cheap, easy to conceal and to transport, but generally citizens are allowed to own a wide range of them, from pistols and sporting guns to fully automatic rifles, depending on the prevailing legisla-

tion (Boutwell and Klare, 1998). Several considerations specific to the MENA region are key barriers to this challenge.

In the MENA region, states face considerable difficulties regarding the trafficking of weapons across their borders. Geography influences this challenge in different ways. Because many sensitive border areas are arid and sparsely inhabited, monitoring them is extremely difficult. Such sites include: Sahara and West Sahel regions; the operational area of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) that delineates Algeria, Mauritania, Morocco, and certain sub-Saharan countries; the Saudi Arabia–Yemen border rendered porous by years of conflict (of the Yemeni army supported by Saudi Arabia against Shiite rebels and al-Qaeda militants); the Egyptian–Libyan border through which Libyan weapons are smuggled into Egypt (UNSC, 2013, p. 12); and the Sinai, linking Egypt and the rest of Africa to the Gaza Strip.

Maritime borders are difficult to control, too. Vulnerable states are often unable to stem the flow of weapons being transferred in from expansionist neighbours. For example, in Lebanon, Iranian-origin weapons have been transferred to Hezbollah across the Lebanese–Syrian border; and in Iraq, groups hostile to the US presence received arms smuggled in from neighbouring Iran and Syrian (Schroeder and King, 2012, p. 328). Fifty-seven per cent of all small arms and light weapons seized between 2008 and 2009 were mortars and rounds; moreover 29 per cent of them originated from Iran, 16 per cent from the Russian Federation, and 13 per cent from China (Schroeder and King, 2012, p. 317).

Armed conflicts compound regional matters considerably. They drive up the demand for additional weapons and thereby fuel their proliferation; they cripple the authorities' capacities to manage state-owned weapons or to control their borders, which may result in them becoming porous. Various jihadist groups benefit from this scenario, such as in Somalia, where al-Shabaab received large quantities of arms smuggled in from Yemen (through the Gulf of Aden) and by air or sea from Eritrea (Black, 2009, pp. 7–8; Charbonneau, 2013; Schroeder and King, 2012, p. 313).

Since the rampant political upheaval across the MENA region, jihadist groups from Algeria, Libya, Mali, and North Sinai have obtained weapons leaked from the Libyan army arsenals, including rockets and portable land-to-air missiles, machine guns, stockpiles of plastic explosives, and anti-aircraft systems, during the 2011 civil war and thereafter. Similarly, Hamas members in the Gaza Strip, who carry out smuggling via a labyrinth of hundreds of tunnels to reach Egypt, have accessed such weaponry. Lighter small arms and light weapons from within Libya have also reportedly flooded throughout the country and into its neighbours, thus fuelling region-wide petty and organized crime (Helios Global, 2013; Kartas, 2013).

The reach of weapons in the MENA region is affected by local political, social, and cultural characteristics. In conflict-stricken or in unstable countries, when state law is likely to be overruled by the interests of local warlords, self-defence becomes critical. A further factor is the 'gun mentality' firmly entrenched in many Arab countries, which is displayed in celebrations (such as commemorations, births, and weddings), inter-community feuds, vigilante justice, or in 'honour crimes' committed against girls and women. Long condoned by authorities as tradition and a hallmark of local tribal identity, this mentality has been sustained by the associations linking gun ownership, prestige, and notions of male honour. It is further endorsed by two coexisting systems of criminal law: tribal justice and state judiciary.

Firearm ownership patterns

Table 3 provides data on the ownership of firearms present in the MENA region for 2006 and 2007. This data indicates that in most MENA countries, the number of privately owned firearms exceeds that of firearms owned by state forces (military and police). Several countries portrayed as authoritarian (also referred to as 'exclusionary' or 'bunker') for relying heavily on their security forces differ from that trend, however: Egypt under the rule of Mubarak, Syria under Assad, and Tunisia under Ben Ali. In these countries, security services (*mukhabarat*, meaning intelligence agency) generally owned *more* firearms than the army did. State-owned firearms were also more numerous than privately owned ones in two other heavily militarized countries, Iran and Israel. (Iran held 5.9 million state-owned firearms versus 3.5 million privately owned and Israel held 1.8 million state-owned firearms versus 500,000 privately owned, respectively).

This data reveals that the largest stockpiles of privately owned firearms are often recorded in countries affected by war or undergoing post-conflict transition (such as Iraq, Sudan, and Yemen) or in countries in which a gun mentality prevails (as previously mentioned, such as in the Arabian Peninsula). The case of Yemen is striking. Despite being one of the poorest countries in the world, repeatedly war-torn, and bearing a strong tribal character, Yemen is one of the top ten countries in terms of the number of privately owned firearms. It also ranked second in terms of the rate of privately owned firearms per inhabitant, coming in just behind the United States. In comparison, wealthy oil-producing Saudi Arabia and Iraq ranked 7th and 8th (ownership per capita) respectively, and the sparsely inhabited states of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, and the UAE ranked between 17th and the 24th (Karp, 2007).

Table 3   **State-owned and privately owned firearms in certain MENA countries (2006/2007)**

Country	Military-owned firearms	Law enforcement-owned firearms	Total public, state-owned firearms	Privately owned firearms	Privately owned firearms (per 100 population)
Algeria	797,500	71,400	868,900	1,900,000	7.6
Bahrain	7,000	12,600	19,600	180,000	24.8
Egypt	2,682,500	455,000*	3,137,500	1,900,000	3.5
Iran	5,604,000	259,551	5,863,551	3,500,000	7.3
Iraq	425,000	146,020*	571,020	9,750,000	34.2
Israel	1,757,500	26,040	1,783,540	500,000	7.3
Jordan	263,000	20,843	283,843	630,000	11.5
Kuwait	30,000	8,358	38,358	630,000	24.8
Lebanon	28,500	17,697	46,197	750,000	21.0
Libya	535,200	22,022	557,222	900,000	15.5
Mauritania	16,093	4,127	20,220	50,000	1.6
Morocco	555,750	58,800	614,550	1,500,000	5.0
Oman	56,050	9,055	65,105	650,000	25.4
Palestinian Territories	-	13,371	13,371	125,000	3.4
Qatar	18,750	2,360	21,110	520,000	19.2
Saudi Arabia	324,000	90,449	414,449	6,000,000	35.0
Syria	2,010,000	66,854	2,076,854	735,000	3.9
Tunisia	76,570	182,000	258,570	9,000	0.1
UAE	110,000	15,730	125,730	1,000,000	22.1
Yemen	283,195	74,719*	357,914	11,500,000	54.8

Note: *A study from the Small Arms Survey conducted in 2012 provides updated data for law enforcement-owned firearms for selected countries; the report includes Egypt (900,000), Iraq (690,000), and Yemen (210,000) (Karp, 2012, p. 2).

Sources: GunPolicy.org (n.d.); Karp (2006; 2007; 2012)

Armed violence and its actors

Although the widespread diffusion of weapons across the MENA region almost certainly contributes to ongoing political and social instability, it does not necessarily yield corresponding numbers of fatalities; MENA countries have long recorded lower rates of violent deaths than less militarized regions have.

An overview of the scope of armed violence and its direct impact

The *Global Burden of Armed Violence* report of 2011 notes that between 2004 and 2009, the MENA region ranked 9th and 10th out of 19 regions worldwide, in terms of the average rate of (conflict and non-conflict related) violent deaths and thus fell well behind certain regions with fewer weapons, such as the Caribbean, Central America,

and Middle Africa (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2011, p. 60). Over this period, while embroiled in intense internal conflict, Iraq was the only MENA country in which violent death rates were so high as to match countries bearing the highest violent death rates globally, such as El Salvador and Jamaica (more than 50 per 100,000 population) (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2011, p. 53).

Notwithstanding the underreporting that is acute in war-torn countries, the relatively low violent death rates of the MENA region are usually ascribed to several factors. These include diplomatic or military interventions of third parties interested in promoting regional stability; the pervasiveness of state security; and the tribal nature of many MENA countries, in which solidarity networks are said to exert social control and, despite the gun mentality they may support, to mitigate the damage wrought by economic and political

crises. One such example would be the role that Libyan community leaders can take in defusing local conflict.

The events of the Arab Spring have worsened the overall situation in the region. Syria has been afflicted by devastating civil war since 2011; and in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia, the post-revolutionary period has been marked by disorganization of the state, political factionalism, armed violence, and the rise of radical Islamism. Armed violence has spilled over into Syria's neighbours, Iraq and Lebanon, where repeated clashes occur among Sunnis and Shias (and Alawites in Lebanon). In North Africa, the rampant spread of Libyan weapons released during the demise of the Qaddafi government, together with deteriorating living conditions, contribute to a rise in gun crime. Between 2011 and 2013, gun crime escalated by 250 per cent in Egypt (Daragahi, 2013). Conflicts that were rife before the Arab Spring are still thriving—between Hamas and

Israel; among Yemen and secessionist insurgents in the south, Shia militants (Houthis) in the north, or al-Qaeda jihadists in the south and east of the country.

Table 4 shows the absolute values and rates for violent deaths (per 100,000 population) in MENA countries, as recorded from 2007 to 2013. Data relates to conflict and non-conflict settings and stems from a variety of sources (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, n.d.; UNODC, n.d.). The table indicates that since 2011, Syria has recorded numbers and rates of conflict-related fatalities that overtake those of Iraq, the Palestinian Territories (mainly occurring in Gaza), and Yemen.

These countries also rank among the least peaceful countries, as defined by the Global Peace Index (GPI)[4] produced by the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP), with indicators relating to internal safety and security, the extent of domestic and international conflict, and the degree of militarization (including military expenses). According to the GPI, in 2014, out of 162 countries, Sudan, Somalia, Iraq, South Sudan, Afghanistan, and Syria occupied the last six positions, in that order (IEP, 2014, p. 6).

Egypt has been destabilized by the Arab Spring and its unfolding consequences since 2011. These include the anti-Mubarak revolution of 2011 and the tribal or jihadist insurgency in the Sinai, and clashes between the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and their opponents supported by the army, following the ousting of President Mohammed Morsi in July 2013. Consequently the number of fatalities linked to conflict or political strife has risen.

Quantifying direct conflict and non-conflict deaths

Table 4 confirms an increase in the number of violent deaths in non-conflict countries. In some countries, even if absolute figures remain comparatively low, the relative death rate is rather high. Four countries in the

region (Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen) appear among the 31 countries and territories most affected by lethal violence for 2012, with Syria worst afflicted in first place, according to the *Global Burden of Armed Violence 2015* (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2015, p. 58).

The data in Table 4 should be interpreted with caution. First, variations occur among the death tolls provided by information sources and the estimates of fatalities in Syria vary widely. Aggregated estimates from March 2011 to April 2014 total deaths in Syria at more than 191,000 (Price, Gohdes, and Ball, 2014, p. 2). Second, conflict and non-conflict deaths are difficult to differentiate from one another in protracted conflict or post-conflict settings, where fighters tend to develop multiple, simultaneously overlapping, and shifting motives (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2015). Drawing upon the integrated approach to armed violence of the OECD-DAC, the following sections of this paper explore more thoroughly the regional dynamics of armed violence by attempting to define its perpetrators and victims in conflict and non-conflict contexts. The report then considers certain institutional aspects of armed violence and evaluates the programmatic and policy responses adopted in response thus far, by governments and civil society in MENA countries.

The roles of different actors

Armed conflicts have occurred in the MENA region since the middle of the 20th century, yet their nature and characteristics have undergone crucial changes over the past decades. First, numerous indigenous, interstate conflicts have abated or, as in the Arab–Israeli conflict, have evolved rather into conflict between state and non-state entities. The recent large-scale military interventions of the Israeli army, those conducted beyond the country borders, have been in opposition to non-state or proto-state enti-

ties: Hamas in the Gaza Strip and Hezbollah in Lebanon. Second, internal conflicts have mushroomed. Such conflicts may set state security bodies and armies in opposition to insurgent militant groups; or rival ethnic, religious, and political entities against one other. States impaired with weak central governments are similarly affected, such as Lebanon with its dominant Shia, Sunni, and Maronite communities, and Iraq, afflicted by strife since the fall of of former President Saddam Hussein in 2003.

The Arab Spring uprisings, in turn, served to dismantle certain balances formerly maintained by authoritarian regimes via repression and co-optation, which consequently opened up a Pandora's box of competing social, political, and religious agendas. In this way, non-state actors emerged as key leaders in the regional political forums, where they bring to the fore various political, economic, and ideological ruptures.

Radical Islam (jihadism) and its affiliated groups

Jihadist groups claiming their affiliation to al-Qaeda and its creed—the establishment of an Islamic caliphate through holy war against modern states and their protagonists—have been involved in nearly all armed conflicts of the MENA region since 2000. Areas affected by jihadism include the Gaza Strip, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, the Sinai, Somalia, the southern Maghreb, Syria, and Yemen. The emergence of these groups has been further exacerbated by social and political crises, the extremely high proportion of unemployed youth in countries with burgeoning young populations (referred to as the 'youth bulge') (World Bank, 2014), and by the socio-economic and political discrimination targeting certain communities, such as the Bedouin tribes in North Sinai. For example, members of 20 Bedouin tribes—about 300,000 Bedouins forming more than half of the total Sinai population—were reported to have been marginalized by Egypt's uneven development

Table 4 **Direct conflict and non-conflict deaths (homicide), counts and rates per 100,000 population, 2007–13**

Country	Death counts and death rates	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Algeria	Non-conflict deaths count	271	328	277	254	280	492	-
	Non-conflict deaths rate	0.8	0.9	0.8	0.7	0.8	1.3	-
	Direct conflict deaths count	521	481	517	282	211	225	198
	Direct conflict death rate	1.5	1.4	1.4	0.8	0.6	0.6	0.5
Bahrain	Non-conflict deaths count	5	8	13	11	7	8	-
	Non-conflict deaths rate	0.5	0.8	1.2	0.9	0.6	0.7	-
Egypt	Non-conflict deaths count	672	793	992	1,460	1,838	-	-
	Non-conflict deaths rate	0.9	1.1	1.3	1.9	2.4	-	-
	Direct conflict deaths count	0	0	0	0	841	87	-
	Direct conflict death rate	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.1	0.1	-
Iraq	Non-conflict deaths count	-	608	-	3,212	3,212	2,628	-
	Non-conflict deaths rate	-	2.1	-	10.6	10.4	8.3	-
	Direct conflict deaths count	25,256	9,350	4,794	5,193	5,195	5,253	9,742
	Direct conflict death rate	90.0	32.5	16.3	17.2	16.8	16.5	28.9
Jordan	Non-conflict deaths count	98	100	91	109	133	153	-
	Non-conflict deaths rate	1.8	1.8	1.5	1.8	2.1	2.3	-
Kuwait	Non-conflict deaths count	77	57	59	59	-	12	-
	Non-conflict deaths rate	3.2	2.2	2.2	2.1	-	0.4	-
Lebanon	Non-conflict deaths count	108	252	81	139	157	-	-
	Non-conflict deaths rate	2.6	6.1	1.9	3.3	3.6	-	-
	Direct conflict deaths count	478	151	13	0	7	89	140
	Direct conflict death rate	11.7	3.6	0.3	0.0	0.2	2.0	2.9
Libya	Non-conflict deaths count	-	176	-	150	-	-	-
	Non-conflict deaths rate	-	3.0	-	2.5	-	-	-
	Direct conflict deaths count	0	0	0	0	16,723	717	0
	Direct conflict death rate	-	-	-	-	276.8	11.7	-
Mauritania	Non-conflict deaths count	-	485	-	167	-	191	-
	Non-conflict deaths rate	-	14.6	-	4.8	-	5.2	-
Morocco	Non-conflict deaths count	517	426	432	447	441	704	-
	Non-conflict deaths rate	1.7	1.4	1.4	1.4	1.4	2.2	-
Oman	Non-conflict deaths count	18	18	37	48	34	34	-
	Non-conflict deaths rate	0.7	0.7	1.4	1.8	1.2	1.1	-
Palestinian Territories	Non-conflict deaths count	-	-	-	-	-	312	-
	Non-conflict deaths rate	-	-	-	-	-	7.6	-
	Direct conflict deaths count	750	963	1,087	93	139	272	-
	Direct conflict death rate	20.6	25.9	28.5	2.4	3.5	6.6	-
Qatar	Non-conflict deaths count	30	13	13	-	-	-	-
	Non-conflict deaths rate	3.1	1.1	1.0	-	-	-	-
Saudi Arabia	Non-conflict deaths count	265	-	-	247	-	-	-
	Non-conflict deaths rate	1.0	-	-	0.9	-	-	-
Syria	Non-conflict deaths count	533	529	476	463	-	-	-
	Non-conflict deaths rate	2.8	2.7	2.3	2.2	-	-	-
	Direct conflict deaths count	-	-	-	-	5,646	38,979	36,111
	Direct conflict death rate	-	-	-	-	26.2	178.8	165.0
Tunisia	Non-conflict deaths count	-	117	-	210	-	-	-
	Non-conflict deaths rate	-	1.1	-	2.0	-	-	-
UAE	Non-conflict deaths count	-	-	-	61	51	59	64
	Non-conflict deaths rate	-	-	-	0.8	0.6	0.7	0.7
Yemen	Non-conflict deaths count	897	874	990	1,099	1,375	1,616	-
	Non-conflict deaths rate	4.3	4.1	4.6	4.9	6.0	6.9	-
	Direct conflict deaths count	1,000	1,050	800	470	3,000	2,295	0
	Direct conflict death rate	4.8	5.0	3.7	2.1	13.2	9.8	-

Sources: Geneva Declaration Secretariat (n.d.); UNODC (n.d.)

Note: - indicates that no data is available.

and employment policies (Pelham, 2012, pp. 1–2).

Paradoxically, political upheavals may also favour jihadism, not ideologically so much as operationally. According to Robert Malley of the International Crisis Group, the conflation of state institutions and the poor organization of security services, the increased porousness of borders, the expansion of ungoverned areas, and the proliferation of weapons have converged to provide violent extremist groups with fresh operational opportunities (Worth, 2013). The infiltration by Syrian-led Islamist opposition group, Jabhat al-Nusra, and other jihadist groups in Syria since mid-2012 is an example of these operational opportunities.

Secessionist and autonomist movements and their trends

Arab Spring events have served to allow secessionist movements in the MENA region to thrive. In the northern Saada governorate of Yemen, for example, the Zaidi fundamentalist Shiite movement is led by the Houthi tribe, which has been retaliating against central authorities since 2004. The Zaidi movement, which seeks to establish an *imamate* (the Shiite version of the Sunni caliphate), has leveraged the turmoil countrywide to extend its reach southwards into the neighbouring governorates of Jawf and Hajjah, in early 2013. This culminated in a takeover of the capital city, Sana'a, in September 2014. In the south, the popular Southern Movement that originally sought to induce secession by peaceful means (or at least to improve the status of the south governorates within the north-dominated state) is believed to have turned more violent. Regular exchange of gunfire with state security services has been noted in Aden and in other southern governorates of the country.

Many examples of instability in the region are linked to secessionist and autonomist movements. South Sudan clashed with Sudan from 2011 to 2012 over the contested, oil-rich region of Abyei, on the borders of the states of Blue Nile and South Kordofan. Despite certain agreements on demilitarization between South Sudan and Sudan, the status of the border remained unclear (Craze, 2013). Similarly, the Kurdistan province of Iraq has been distancing itself from the central authorities of Baghdad, against the backdrop of a disagreement over the control of oil fields (Nasrawi, 2012).

In Syria, an ongoing partition seems to be underway, with the civil war leading to a de facto division of the country into several entities. The rapid rise of the non-state armed group Islamic State (IS), the involvement of several international actors, the forming and disbanding of armed groups, and their rapidly changing alliances mean that the situation on the ground is fluid and volatile. It is difficult to predict the potential territorial consequences of the Syrian civil war.

Fragmentation and sectarian violence

Political turmoil across the MENA region stirred up traditional rivalries among non-state or sub-state entities. Sunni versus Shiite-Alawite conflict in Syria, brewing since 2012, spilled over into Iraq and Lebanon, whose volunteers took part on both sides of the Syrian conflict. In Lebanon, armed actors affiliated to confessional groups have clashed repeatedly countrywide since 2011, mainly in the northern town of Tripoli (with Sunnis versus Alawites) and in the southern town of Saida (Sunnis versus Shias). In Iraq, after a relative lull of nearly four years, sectarian armed violence flared up again, following the repression by Shia-dominated state security of Sunni-led 'anti-discrimination' demonstrations held in April 2013. So-called 'Sunni Muslim insurgents' and the Iraqi branch of al-Qaeda[5] conducted daily armed attacks on governmental and Shia targets. After it changed its name and expanded into Syria, armed violence flared up and, with it, the destabilization of affected neighbouring states.

More homogenous countries, such as Egypt and Libya (and Tunisia, to a lesser extent) in which transitional governments have taken over from longstanding authoritarian regimes, are not spared armed violence.

In Egypt, the first ever democratically elected president, Mohammed Morsi, was ousted in July 2013, following mounting pressures from large segments of Egyptian society supported by the country's army, regarding his alleged incompetence and his party's tendency to monopolize power. This ousting sparked anger among his followers countrywide. Beyond the death toll (with more than 1,000 fatalities), the armed clashes between Islamist (non-jihadist) actors and their opponents epitomizes the tension prevailing between secularism and Islamism not only in Egypt, but also in Tunisia, and other parts of the MENA region. Tunisia has borne two assassinations of leftist political leaders and suffers ongoing conflict among traffickers operating on its border with Libya. At the time of writing, Tunisian armed and security forces were struggling to subdue violent extremists in the Chaambi Mountains bordering with Algeria.

In Libya, the restoring of law and order has been marred by rival armed militias which formed during or after the armed conflict and persist still. Armed violence flared up in 2012 among such informal groups (or between them and the National Liberation Army) regarding disputes on local leadership, especially in Bani Walid and in the south of Libya, where the Toubou tribe clashed with the Zawiyya tribe, reportedly over smuggling routes into Mali and Sudan. With two rivalling governments, numerous factions controlling different parts of the country, and regular violent outbreaks among them, at the time of writing, Libya appeared to be sliding into civil war.

Operational considerations of armed violence

Three important features of armed violence in the MENA region, from an operational perspective, are discussed below: the effects of international interventions on local and regional stability; the unequal access to resources among different actors; and that as a state weakens, organized crime usually plays a more significant role.

International military interventions

Numerous conflicts affecting MENA countries from 2000 onwards have been characterized by internationalization, the direct involvement of external actors driven by ideological or geo-strategic interests. The attention of worldwide media has been captured by relatively small groups of radical Islamists—Arab (numbering thousands) and Western (numbering hundreds)—alongside local jihadists in the south of Algeria, in Iraq, Mali, Somalia, and Syria. Fighters are often described as young and zealous. Foreign volunteers tend to occupy lesser, secondary roles in jihadist groups (with the notable exception of their involvement in Iraq up to 2010). Yet their return to their places of origin, including the United States and several European countries, evokes grave concerns about security (Alami, 2013). Islamist foreign volunteers who may describe their engagement as a jihad, however, do not necessarily pursue purely jihadist goals; some are quietist fundamentalist or religious nationalists who strive primarily to protect their Muslim brethren from coercion.

At both state and sub-state level, military interventions have been motivated by the wish to assist ally states perceived to be compromised. In an effort to combat jihadist terrorism, the United States assisted Yemen and the African Union Mission to Somalia in their conflict with al-Qaeda-affiliated organizations by carrying out repeated air (drone) strikes on specific targets. Between 10 and 21 air strikes in Somalia from 2007 to 2012 resulted in the death of about 170 people (Woods, 2012).

Similarly, Western powers have provided decisive support to the rebel Libyan Liberation Army, with aggressive air and navy strikes against pro-Qaddafi targets from March to October 2011. Regional powers have been largely occupied with conflict between Sunnis and Shias. Iran and the Shia Hezbollah movement of Lebanon sent about 50,000 troops to support Syrian government's troops in their conflict with Sunni-dominated rebellion forces (Borger, 2013). Similarly, but in support of Shia groups, Saudi Arabia was involved in Yemen's Operation Scorched Earth, launched against the (Shia) Houthi insurgency in the north of the country from 2009 to 2010, and also sent troops to Bahrain to crack down on (mostly Shia) protesters in 2011.

Foreign military interventions have at times resulted in increased conflict among the various groups within a state. In collaboration with local allies to fight jihadists in Iraq, Somalia, and Yemen, the United States carried out repeated air (drone) attacks in Yemen, and held a prolonged military presence in Iraq. In Yemen, air strikes increased in 2012 and then waned in 2013 and 2014 (Bureau of Investigative Journalism, n.d.b; Woods, 2012). In some cases, insurgents opposed to military intervention, are strengthened by connections they build with local communities. Members of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula garnered support and integrated with certain tribal communities in Yemen, such as by marrying women in those communities (Swift, Christopher, 2012).

Israel has been unable to dismantle the military strength of its two key adversaries, Hezbollah and Hamas, despite large-scale military interventions conducted in Lebanon in 2006 and the Gaza Strip from 2008 to 2009, respectively. Both organizations foster close ties with Iran and Syria and were thus able to replenish their rocket and missiles stockpiles; simultaneously, through the war years, support for Iran and Syria grew in their own constituencies. Conversely, the military support provided by Western states to the Libyan National Liberation Armed Forces—support manifested by enforcing a no-flight zone and a naval blockade, and conducting air and sea strikes against the government army—was instrumental in the toppling of the Qaddafi regime following seven months of armed conflict. Inter-tribal and terrorist violence that ensued throughout Libya, however, highlights the adverse long-term political and military consequences that foreign interventions may catalyse.

The unequal access of actors to resources

Actors may have very unequal resources and means at their disposal. Yet this inequality does not necessarily determine their success. The proliferation of conflicts between state armies and non-state actors has generalized the notion of asymmetric warfare in the MENA region. Asymmetric conflicts may evoke the image of sophisticated state armies, equipped with heavy air, sea, and land weaponry in battle with militias who are limited to small arms and light weapons, but nonetheless comparatively skilled in guerrilla techniques. Resources can include the training and efficiency of armed forces, access to external resources, the type of intervention undertaken, and the geographic context. Yet the outcome of these asymmetric conflicts cannot necessarily be predicted according to the respective parties' access to resources, including arms and troops.

Jihadist groups are generally composed of relatively few, but well trained militants: there are believed to be a few hundred fighters in the Gaza Strip, Lebanon, the Sahel region, and Yemen (BBC News, 2009; Laub and

Masters, 2015a; Malbrunot, 2007), several thousand in Iraq (2,500–10,000), and over a thousand in the Middle-North Sinai (1,500) (ANSAmed, 2012). The groups are generally equipped with small arms and light weapons and explosives; their operations include indiscriminate or targeted roadside and suicide attacks, sabotage, assassination, hostage-taking, and attacks using rapid-fire rockets and missiles.

The escalation of conflict has led jihadist groups to develop individualized strategies. In Iraq, Somalia, and Syria, such groups are numerous and have come to control large territories (IISS, 2011, p. 330). Jihadists have been estimated to number 40,000–50,000 in Syria, either within the Syrian Islamic Front (10,000–30,000) or Jabhat al-Nusra (5,000–10,000); but jihadists in Syria are outnumbered by their secular allies of the Free Syrian Army (about 100,000) and by their enemies, the estimated 400,000 active members of the Syrian (pro-Baathist) regular military and paramilitary forces.

Somalia has been an exception to this observation, where in 2011 the 7,000–14,000 jihadists of al-Shabaab outnumbered the 6,000–12,000 members of Somali armed forces who were then active (Alasow, 2011; Kwayera, 2013). An estimated 31,000 fighters were under IS command, of which 20,000–25,000 belonged to a loyal core (Lister, 2014, p. 2). Many groups acquired heavy weaponry looted from the former Libyan army, including anti-aircraft guns, surface-to-air missiles, and multi-barrel rocket launchers, and a considerable quantity of these weapons have flooded into neighbouring countries (Frykberg, 2012; *Global Post*, 2012; Pelham, 2012, p. 6).

Jihadist operations carried out on Egyptian and Israeli targets in the Sinai since 2012 indicate that those attacks that employed machine guns, rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), and anti-tank missile launchers mounted on 4x4s were generally more effective than attacks on Israeli cities

and towns implementing rockets and medium-to-long-range missiles. The Iron Dome Battery installed by Israel in 2011 has protected inhabited areas against rocket and missile attacks fairly effectively. That said, it did not dissuade Sinai- (and Gaza-based) jihadist groups from their ongoing firing of rockets on Israel. Such a strategy, the persistent firing of rockets, may be intended to trigger psychological distress among Israelis, rather than to attract media attention perse.

State armies in conflict with their ostensibly weaker opponents (often poorly armed or trained rebel militias) may find themselves at a surprising disadvantage. One such example is the experience of the 300,000-member Syrian army, equipped with air and navy forces, who were unable to overpower the Free Syrian Army (with troops of 80,000) and its de facto jihadist allies (with troops numbering 40,000–50,000). Because of the fear that government troops may desert their duties, either voluntarily or under duress, only a small portion of these troops have been involved in war operations (Gaub, 2014). This fear of desertion may have resulted in the army's inability to cover the frontline and in a series of its military defeats from 2012 to early 2013. Only the intervention of Hezbollah fighters from Lebanon in the spring of 2013 enabled government forces to reverse the trend underway and to retake strategic towns such as al-Qusayr, in the south of Syria (UPI, 2013).

Organized crime groups

When a state loses control, organized crime groups typically engage increasingly in activities tied to arms trafficking and armed violence. For example, with the Syrian civil war and the implosion of the Libyan state, arms smuggling has offered criminal networks lucrative opportunities (Global Initiative, 2015). The region remains integral to the trades of drug production and trafficking. A direct link exists between armed violence and drug consumption. For example, Cap-

tagon, an amphetamine consumed predominantly in the Middle East, is used by fighters as a stimulant and provides various armed actors with a means to an income (Henley, 2014).

Tracking the victims of armed violence

The amount of information available about victims of any conflict is directly influenced by the intensity of interest shown by international media and the coverage it grants. So while relatively little is known, for example, about the victims of conflicts occurring in places perceived as distant, such as Somalia and Yemen, several digital tools to track armed violence have emerged to document those conflicts garnering greater media coverage, such as the Syrian civil war.

The findings of these tools, however, have been queried and the tools themselves criticized for using questionable, potentially biased methodologies, in particular regarding their classification of combatants and of civilians. The fact that the institutions handling data are often associated with actors involved in the conflict further undermines their credibility. Nonetheless, the general trends that the tools provide may enable a profiling of victims, albeit an inadequate one, of the various types of armed conflicts in the MENA region.

Assessing the toll of conflict on civilians

How civilians are affected by ongoing conflict varies according to the specific type of armed conflict they endure. Civilian exposure to armed violence has been at its most severe during large-scale international interventions or civil wars that involve the use of heavy weapons and war planes.

The death toll of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict remains critical to this policy brief. During Operation Protective Edge, a major operation launched mid-2014 by Israel on Gaza, Palestinian deaths were estimated to be 2,142,

of which 1,474 were thought to be civilians. Many more people were reported injured, but not killed. By comparison, at least 70 Israelis and one foreign national were killed over the same period, and four of the total were civilians (UNGA, 2014b, p. 7). Such estimates are imprecise, however, and the distinction between combatants and non-combatants is often contested particular in relation to Palestinian victims (Reuben, 2014). It is safe to say that that a large number of fatalities are certainly people who do not participate directly in hostilities (B'Tselem, n.d.a; n.d.b; n.d.c). The ratio of Israeli to Palestinian deaths becomes even more pronounced when assessing large-scale raids on urban areas. During Operation Cast Lead in the Gaza Strip (which lasted 23 days from 27 December 2008 to 18 January 2009), of the 1,116 Palestinians killed, 68 per cent were not participating in conflict (B'Tselem, n.d.c). Since 2000, the number of fatalities on the Israeli side has been significantly lower than that of the Palestinian (B'Tselem, n.d.a; n.d.b; n.d.c); yet the toll of Israeli civilians killed (typically settlers and victims of suicide bombings) in the early years of the Intifada, is almost the same as that of Israeli security forces (B'Tselem, n.d.d).

Comparable findings may be drawn from three of the MENA's region's largest theatres of war: Iraq, North Yemen, and Syria. In Iraq, multi-layered conflict adopting different configurations—among foreign (US-led) coalition forces, state security services, al-Qaeda and local Sunni, Shiite, and Kurdish militias—resulted in about 162,000 fatalities from 2003 to 2011, of which 79 per cent were civilians (IBC, 2012). Of the more than 15,500 Iraqis killed in 2014, at least 80 per cent were civilians and 20 per cent were members of the Iraqi security forces (AFP, n.d.). During a period of political upheaval from 2011 to 2012 in Yemen, more than 2,000 people, mainly (unarmed) protesters and military deserters, were killed (Al-Haj,

2012). Since 2009, drone strikes in Yemen increased in frequency and up to 500 people died because of them. While it is uncertain how many of the deceased had participated in conflict, certain sources estimate that 24 to 71 civilians were killed over the same period (UNGA, 2014a, p. 7).

Civilian populations suffer when exposed to less severe armed violence, which is sometimes referred to by state authorities as 'disturbances' or 'police operations'. During the Arab Spring protests of 2011, however, lethal means were sometimes applied to break up protests.

Hundreds of demonstrators were killed in Bahrain, Oman, and Tunisia, and thousands of civilian fatalities were recorded when peaceful demonstrations escalated into armed clashes in Yemen. Estimates place the death toll at 2,000 civilians, a figure higher than the related estimates of certain human rights organizations (Al-Haj, 2012). This total may include victims from other conflicts in Yemen (such as the Houthi insurrection and the south secessionist movement) and in Egypt, where 841 civilians were killed in 2011 (80 per cent of them by gunfire and 5 per cent were suffocated by tear gas; 26 members of security forces were also killed by angry crowds in the violence; and 30 victims were recorded as unrecognizable) (El Deeb, 2012). Over 1,000 more victims killed two years later were mainly MB militants protesting against the ousting of President Morsi. Clashes between anti- and pro-Morsi protestors involved the use of bladed weapons, stones, and firearms. Forty-three members of security forces also died then (HRW, 2013a).

In Libya, the state's repression of the Arab Spring led to a full civil war that resulted in more than 16,000 deaths, including fighters (many of them armed civilians) and non-armed civilians in 2011 (see Table 4). As of the time of writing, various armed groups and militias were clashing frequently in Libya, which seemed once again on the brink of civil war.

A further pertinent case study per-

tains to al-Qaeda's activities and related state anti-terrorist campaigns, which have caused thousands of fatalities, including among local and foreign civilians. Many such examples can be found. In Algeria, the hostage crisis of In Amenas, which ultimately claimed the lives of at least 39 foreign hostages and 29 al-Qaeda militants in January 2013, is one of the most noteworthy episodes of al-Qaeda militants in conflict in Sahel states (Bowcott, 2015).

In Yemen, clashes between central state authorities and al-Qaeda militants and their allied tribes escalated into war in the southern and eastern parts of the country, where jihadists then seized control of several towns in 2011. As Table 4 shows, thousands of citizens and fighters have died in this war since 2010.

Since 2011, along the Egypt–Israel border of the Sinai, hundreds of people have been killed in armed violence involving jihadist tribesmen on the one hand, and Egyptian and Israeli security forces on the other. Although security forces claimed to have killed a great number of jihadists, they suffered considerable fatalities themselves (*Economist*, 2014). Car bombings in tourist resorts of the Sinai between 2004 and 2006 had already caused the death of 130 people (Pelham, 2012, p. 4). What started as minor unrest deteriorated over three years 'into a full-blown jihadist insurgency' (*Economist*, 2014).

Insurgent jihadist groups have been under attack from Hamas since about 2007. Police operations against such groups as Jund Ansar Allah (the Army of Allah's Supporters) caused the deaths of 40 jihadist militants, 14 Hamas members, and a dozen passers-by (Barnett, 2012). Civilians were subjected to drone attacks and other covert operations carried out by the United States ostensibly targeting jihadists in Somalia and Yemen. In Somalia, from 2007 to 2015, 11–21 per cent of fatalities are likely to have been civilians (of a total of 65–249 killed, 7–52 were civilians) (Bureau of

Investigative Journalism, n.d.a). In Yemen, 17 per cent of the fatalities resulting from drone raids and other covert operations between 2002 and early 2015 were almost certainly civilians (of a total of 960–1,550 killed, 159–257 were civilians). Finally, civilians are also directly exposed to armed violence involving non-state actors, with limited army intervention. In such cases, fighters and civilians are difficult to distinguish; although civilians may not be members of organized forces, they occasionally use weapons to defend their communities. In Lebanon, despite clashes of Shiite-Alawites against armed Sunni civilians being relatively limited, they have resulted in at least 141 casualties from June 2008 to end-2013 (HRW, 2013b). Such clashes might constitute a harbinger of more serious disturbances ahead, as the situation in Libya illustrates.

Assessing the toll on girls and women

Given that women have a less than central role in political and social life in parts of the MENA region, they are affected differently by armed violence. In Iraq, of 50,000 victims for whom demographic information was available, 9 per cent were women (IBC, 2013). Similar observations can be made in the Palestinian Territories, where women have represented a fraction (3-8 per cent) of Palestinian fatalities since 2000 (B'Tselem, n.d.a; n.d.b; n.d.c) and similarly, in Syria, 9.3 per cent of the estimated 191,000 victims were female (Price, Gohdes, and Ball, 2014, p. 2). In the Palestinian Territories, during the Israeli Cast Lead Operation, female fatalities constituted 8 per cent (B'Tselem, n.d.c).

When attacks against civilians are indiscriminate, however, the proportion of women rises dramatically. In Iraq, 46 per cent of the victims of US air strikes whose gender could be determined were female (*Telegraph*, 2009). Women tend to be comparatively more vulnerable to specific

types of violence in conflict and post-conflict settings, and especially to sexual violence. While women and girls tend to be less exposed to torture and executions (over 90 per cent of such cases in Iraq concerned men), they tend to endure more sexual violence than men and boys do. In the case of the Syrian civil war, girls (defined as being under the age of 18) and women constituted 80 per cent of the victims of sexually assault (Wolfe, 2012).

Reducing armed violence and protecting societies

The spread of armed violence in the MENA region has prompted states and civil societies to set up public and civil society organizations (CSOs), or galvanize existing ones, to tackle the problem. Some of these institutions relate to arms control at local and regional levels, while others focus on the legal and cultural norms intended to reduce the use of armed violence through coercion or participatory approaches.

The understanding that arms trafficking is profoundly destabilizing to internal security has caused several MENA countries to engage in policies designed to curb it. Three such approaches are explored below: weapons collection, tightened border controls, and transnational agreements and resolutions.

Implementing weapons collection

In certain conflict and post-conflict regions, legal restrictions on weapon ownership and dealing have been accompanied by programmes to collect unlicensed firearms and by campaigns or rallies that call for a ban on firearms in towns and cities. Examples include Libya (2012), South Sudan (2012), the West Bank (as from 2007), and Yemen.

Large-scale military operations have been conducted on weapons traffickers, organized criminals, and non-state militias across the MENA region, including in areas run by

authorities deemed to be internationally illegitimate, such as Hamas in the Gaza Strip and al-Shabaab in Somalia (Shabelle Media Network, 2009). To this end, in more stable countries, authorities may employ coercive measures (such as making punishment for illicit ownership of unlicensed firearms more severe, as in Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE) and soft measures (such as an amnesty for those who surrender unlicensed arms and ammunition, as in Egypt in 2012) (Library of Congress, 2013).

An increasing number of MENA countries, starting with Jordan in the late 1990s, have been tackling firmly entrenched cultural notions, such as the pervasive gun mentality. Awareness campaigns have been run to educate the public on the damaging consequences: dozens of unintended deaths every year, the fostering of crime, and the enabling of the private rule of law (AFSC, 2002).

In war or post-war countries, only a very small proportion of the illegal weapons in circulation is likely to be collected, ultimately. In Libya, for instance, only a few hundred such weapons were collected, whereas the number of weapons in civilian hands is estimated to be high. A nationwide survey in 2013 indicated more than one-fifth of households possess one or more firearms (Florquin, Kartas, and Pavesi, 2014, p. 6).

In Yemen and other poor countries where the trade of weapons and ammunition provides a significant source of income, restrictions imposed on arms dealers have simply driven the trade underground (IRIN, 2010). Elsewhere in the region, dynamic black markets have undermined efforts to collect unlicensed weapons (Al-Zaid, 2012; *Arab Times*, 2012). Perhaps in recognition of these barriers, Saudi Arabia has chosen another approach to illegal trafficking: liberalizing the controlled sale of small arms and light weapons. This response sparked a debate about its potential consequences, including risks to the

safety of Saudi residents (Jawhar, 2009).

Tightening border controls

The regional spillover of Libyan weapons has driven North African states to tighten security along their borders. For example, with sophisticated monitoring devices and increased border patrols, the Algerian army covered wider areas of its borders and reduced arms smuggling across its border with Libya (Ramzi, 2012). On Libya's eastern borders, Egyptian armed forces are said to have successfully thwarted the trafficking of dozens of machine guns (Aswat Masriya, 2013). Tunisian authorities rely on local groups to secure the border, by offering border regulations and investment in exchange for a commitment to refrain from dealing in drugs and arms (Kartas, 2013, p. 43). Further eastwards, Egypt and Israel have tried to close down the tunnels built by inhabitants of the Gaza Strip for smuggling weapons and other goods (ANSAmed, 2012).

Establishing transnational agreements and resolutions

In recognition of the international dimension of the problem of illicit arms trafficking, several MENA countries have engaged in formal or informal agreements that aim to tighten restrictions on the trafficking and carrying of guns. Such agreements include the UN Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects (PoA), which has been in place since 2001. The PoA has been endorsed by the Arab League, and most Arab countries have, at least once, made public reports on their implementation, with the exception of Kuwait and South Sudan (Parker and Green, 2012). Conversely, from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Bahrain has been the biggest regional contributor to a worldwide campaign initiated in

2008, which did not succeed, calling for stricter government control on arms trade.

At the regional level, certain countries signed the Khartoum Declaration on the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons across the Neighbouring Countries of Western Sudan aimed at strengthening cooperation and coordination efforts in order to control the spread, flow, misuse, and illegal circulation of small arms and light weapons within and across borders. The five signatory countries in 2012 were the Central African Republic, Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Libya, and Sudan. International pressures are being exerted on Algeria and other Sahel countries, namely Libya, Mauritania, and Morocco, for them to better control arms proliferation in the region and set up an efficient coalition against IS. Numerous security summits have been held in Maghreb countries on pertinent topics, including the dissemination of Libyan arms, illegal immigration, and cooperation against terrorism (Magharebia, 2011; 2013). More coercively, the international community has placed pressure on Hezbollah and Palestinian groups to disarm themselves through UN Security Council resolutions, such as resolutions 1559 and 1701 (UNSC, 2004, 2006).Yet such steps have been relatively ineffective.

In part, the failure of local arms control initiatives may be because CSOs are largely absent or excluded from discussions on the regulation of the arms trade. CSOs tend to have limited human and financial resources and opportunities (Chasles, 2012). Furthermore, CSOs and state authorities may focus more on the illicit circulation of weapons itself, rather than on the underlying causes thereof (LAS, 2005). These causes remain highly sensitive, topical issues. Despite numerous awareness campaigns, weapons are still widely believed to bestow qualities of dignity, power, and masculinity upon those who bear them. Where state structures have col-

lapsed, owning a firearm is integral to the sense of personal safety (IRIN, 2010; *Kurdish Globe*, 2011).

International cooperation agreements and instruments have borne mitigated results. The UN Security Council's resolutions on the disarmament of non-state militias in Lebanon, for example, have been ignored by Hezbollah on the grounds of war with Israel, and by Palestinian factions because of their vulnerability inside and outside the camps of Lebanon (Galey, 2010). Finally, the implementation of cross-border security agreements is hindered by rivalries that prevail among affected states. Many MENA countries are somewhat compromised, as they feel heavily dependent on imported weapons to defend or maintain internal stability. This complex set of considerations makes it more difficult to acquire full support for the adoption of an international, human rights-based treaty on the arms trade (Wood, 2012, p. 12).

Prioritizing armed violence on governmental agendas

Violence has become an increasingly pertinent item on the agenda of MENA governments, primarily since the onset of turmoil in 2011. Certain debates ensued on previously unmentionable topics, yet which CSOs had in fact been exploring and raising from around 2000 onwards. Such controversial matters include violence in the family, the vulnerable position of women, tribal values, the rule of law, the lack of accountability of certain elite groups, and human rights violations committed by the security services. While these topics matter, the practical impact of raising them has been limited. At present, with the rise of jihadism and insurgencies of all types threatening great swathes of the MENA region, non-conflict violence is deemed to be of secondary importance.

Non-conflict violence has to date been regarded primarily as an indicator of social malaise, to be addressed

with employment policies and poverty-fighting strategies. This approach effectively enables authorities to avoid confronting powerful tribal and traditional segments of society on two contentious matters: weapons ownership and customs.

A public survey carried out by Cambridge University on the attitude of Jordanian teenagers' towards honour crimes revealed how challenging changing traditional attitudes may be. Despite longstanding efforts by the Government of Jordan and CSOs to improve the personal and socio-economic status of women, almost half of boys (46 per cent) and one in five girls (22 per cent) interviewed in the capital, Amman, confirmed that they believed, irrespective of their religious views, that it is morally right to kill a daughter, sister, or wife who has 'dishonoured' or 'shamed' her family. The survey found that male teenagers with low levels of education were the main supporters of honour crime, but a considerable minority of girls and well-educated teenagers justified it, too (University of Cambridge, 2013).

Conclusion

As of the time of writing, four years after the first uprisings in the Arab world, countries in the MENA region are suffering political instability and the severe toll of increased lethal violence. With the demise of former, traditional centres of power, new and different institutions and actors (such as tribal networks, armed groups, and jihadists) arose to seize the opportunity. Armed conflicts in the area are beset with a plethora of armed actors supporting divergent political ideologies and agendas. In a part of the world with a significant and growing youth bulge, such generations are growing up in an environment that is riddled with insecurity, violence, and armed conflict. The impact of ensuing, persistent armed conflict and violence extends beyond regional borders and will be evident for years to come.

Because numerous states are

highly militarized, political turmoil prevails, and weapons are in abundant supply, these weapons carry consequences for armed violence in the region. The instability in many countries has affected the trade, availability, and demand for weapons through the MENA region and beyond. Soon after the initial political unrest, weapons from government stockpiles began to enter the market and, simultaneously, trafficking increased as border controls weakened.

Having recognized how the proliferation of arms ultimately foments violence, several countries in the MENA region have begun to take measures against trafficking, to reduce the flow of weapons across borders, and to better control those firearms that are privately owned. These measures are likely thus to reduce the violence that is linked more typically with the trafficking and ownership of illicit weapons. However, several ongoing armed conflicts in the region will continue to attract the trafficking of arms and ammunitions.

Furthermore, several key factors need to be addressed to reduce armed violence and promote security sustainably: above all, state institutions need improved capacity to provide security and justice and to stem the illicit proliferation of small arms and light weapons. For efforts to be successful, they need to be integrated and cross-national. The impact of the wide availability of small arms in the region, compounded by political instability, appears to have raised awareness of other, related problems and consequently about the need for cooperation, to limit and better control the dissemination and trafficking of small arms and light weapons. Such much needed measures should be accompanied by additional steps in an integrated approach to tackle conflict and violence in the region.

Endnotes

1   This policy brief is based on the first draft of a background paper, prepared in December 2014 by Jalal Al Husseini, an

independent consultant based in Amman, Jordan. Ali Arbia at the Small Arms Survey also contributed to it. Data cited in the text and tables ranges primarily from 2006 to 2014. Fact-checking was conducted by Natacha Cornaz.

2   For the purposes of this paper, the following countries fall under the MENA region: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestinian Territories, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Yemen.

3   A non-exhaustive list of such exporters includes: Austria, Belarus, Belgium, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Canada, Czech Republic, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Serbia, Slovakia, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, and Ukraine (Bouveret, 2012).

4   The index gauges global peace using three broad measures: the level of safety and security in society; the extent of domestic or international conflict; and the degree of militarization (IEP, 2014, p. 1).

5   The Iraqi branch of al-Qaeda, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), changed its name to Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (referred to both as IS and ISIS). This name change and absorption of other groups led to a greater reach.

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