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This article provides a broad picture of conflict in the Southern part of the Mediterranean area, including some conflicts astride with adjoining areas which seem relevant to conflict in the area concerned. In a first approximation it provides the picture of ongoing conflict, according to conventional definitions. In a second approximation, the picture is enlarged to trends including both terminated conflicts as well as minor confrontations and disputes that could give way to wider and more serious conflict complying with conventional definitions of armed conflict.

Defining conflict

To be compared, conflicts ought to be defined, analysed and ordered. The Conflict Data Project of the Swedish Uppsala University, which presents annually his main findings in a chapter of the SIPRI Yearbook, has built a set of definitions and criteria which are a solid if not simple base for analysis.

According to the Uppsala Project, an “armed conflict” is “a contested incompatibility which concerns government and/or territory where the use of armed force between two parties, of which at least one is the government of the state, results in at least 25 battle related deaths”¹.

Armed conflicts are ranked according to a double set of death tolls, those calculated on a yearly basis and those accumulated in the whole time span of the conflict. If total deaths occurred during the conflict are less than one thousand, we have a “minor conflict”. If the amount of overall deaths is greater than one thousand, that is a “major conflict”. Finally, major conflicts are divided in two other categories, on the base of yearly death toll. So, a major conflict which during a given year has totalled less than one thousand deaths is an “intermediate conflict”, while a major conflict with more than one thousand deaths in that year becomes a “war”.

The table presents a recollection of all the conflicts that have taken place in the Mediterranean area from 1989 to 1995. The table is based on the criteria adopted by the Uppsala’s group, but with the integration of the controversial cases left out by the group itself. Such integration aims at making the identification of potential conflicts possible - an aim the Uppsala team is not pursuing. In this sense, the table accounts for armed clashes who remain below the armed conflict horizon, i.e. conflicts that are under the threshold of 25 battle related deaths per year. These “below the horizon” conflicts may be very important for the scope of early warning in a perspective of conflict prevention. Furthermore, the quantitative perspective on which the Uppsala’s definitions are based may overshadow qualitative evaluations. Important cases are ignored by Uppsala’s definitions if they do not surpass the threshold of 25 yearly deaths. Such is the case of dormant conflicts, states of belligerency, conflicts with very few casualties but great likely political implications.

¹ Sollenberg M. (ed.), *States in Armed Conflict 1995* (Uppsala: Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University) (Report No. 54), 1998.

These qualitative evaluations are embedded in the table, which gives a picture of conflicts in the Southern half of the Euro-Mediterranean region combining the Uppsala's quantitative approach with a set of qualitative factors such approach leaves aside but which may make sense in a conflict management and prevention perspective.

State of conflicts in Southern Mediterranean

The table suggests a number of considerations. The positive aspect is that two wars (Chad and Lebanon) and one state of belligerency (Israel vs. Jordan) have ended, while one major/intermediate conflict (Western Sahara) is suspended. The wars in Lebanon and Chad have been bitter and long civil wars with widespread regional implications. Libya intervened actively in Chad, both with a military contingent and through the Islamic Legion. In Lebanon almost every bordering and non-bordering country of the Middle East was directly or indirectly involved in the civil war.

It should be noted that the war in Chad was closed with a resolution by juridical means of the Aozou territorial dispute between Libya and Chad. So there is ground for a durable peace. In Lebanon, the end of civil war has been granted by a new constitutional pact, sanctioning the primacy of Muslims in the old power-sharing structure, and the enduring military and political supervision of Syria. This latter element may include the germs of some instability.

The signing of the 1994 peace treaty between Israel and Jordan is important, because the end of this state of belligerency has probably made the Middle East peace process irreversible. The suspension of the conflict in Western Sahara between Morocco and Polisario is another positive aspect. In this case, while the hypothesis of the Polisario resuming armed struggle is at the moment bleak, the political solution agreed by the contenders is frozen. Without a political solution we'll have only a dormant (or terminated), not a resolved conflict.

The negative aspect is that, along with a persisting major/intermediate conflict going on between some Palestinian groups and Israel, new conflicts have erupted or escalated. At present the Southern Mediterranean region faces some three major and four minor conflicts.

Current trends in Southern Mediterranean conflicts

The starting point of a new wave of conflicts seems to be the year 1992. Around that period the conflict between the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) and Turkey, which was an intermediate conflict, evolved into a full war (presumably as a consequence of the 1990-91 Gulf War). In 1998 it went back to the status of an intermediate conflict, however. The second major conflict is the one between Islamist groups and the Algerian military regime. This conflict is a true son of the post-Cold War era. The conflict almost exploded: in 1991 it was non existing; in 1992 it was just a minor conflict; the following year it became a war, without even passing through the intermediate conflict stage. Casualties in 1998 resulted unabated. The third major conflict is the above mentioned one between Israel and the Palestinian religious and nationalist organisations which oppose the peace process and the Palestinian National Authority.

The 1992 turning point works as well for the four minor conflicts. In that year the armed struggle between the Islamist groups and the Egyptian government reached and surpassed the level of 25 deaths. In the following years the conflict continued, with increasing intensity, up to now. Data on casualties collected by the Uppsala's group sets at 900 the total amount of deaths caused by this conflict up to 1995². Had such trend continued, this conflict would have surpassed the threshold of one thousand total deaths, hence becoming a major conflict. In the following years its level of violence levelled off and diminished slightly. In 1993 and again in 1995, armed opposition to Libyan government - waged by Islamist groups and some central-eastern Libyan tribes - surfaced twice over the armed conflict horizon. It keeps on surfacing The third minor conflict is the one between Israel and the Hizbullah being fought in Southern Lebanon. Finally, there is the conflict between the Cypriot government and the Turkish Cypriots.

Two states of belligerency - Israel versus Syria and Israel versus Lebanon - should be added to complete the picture of the bad news. Such states of belligerency do not imply violence (in fact, many Lebanese would rather say that an outright war is being waged with Israel). However, it should not be overlooked that suppressed violence is flashing through the ongoing Hizbullah-Israel conflict.

Of these seven conflicts, three are waged by parties that deny legitimacy to the existing government and pursue the seizure of power. In other three the bone of contention is territory. In a case, that of Cyprus, both power and territory may be at stake, according to different kind of conflict resolution put forward on both sides of the island. In most of the conflicts, Islamist groups - for all their differences - are one of the parties involved in armed confrontations.

Some of these conflicts have wider regional ties and implications. The war between Turkey and the PKK is connected to a wider and branching conflict between Kurds and governments, particularly those of Iraq and Iran. The internal Egyptian conflict between the Islamist groups and the government is connected to another minor conflict between Egypt and Sudan. The latter conflict has emerged as a territorial or resource dispute, but there is more to it. The actual Sudanese government, dominated by religious leaders, shares with Egyptian Islamists the same basic judgement about the illegitimate nature of the secular Egyptian government. In a way, religious extremism connects the Egyptian-Sudanese conflict to the long and major conflict being fought in Southern Sudan between Sudan's Islamic government and the organisations as the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA).³

The outlook

To conclude with, one overall trend is clearly shown by the table: there are no inter-state armed conflicts going on, and inter-state belligerency is overall decreasing. This overall trend must be appreciated in combination with a set of emerging factors, however.

First, the possibility of peace between Israel and Syria, whose chances have definitely increased with the advent of the new Labour-based government in Israel, would represent

² Sollenberg M., Wallensteen P., "Major armed conflicts", in *SIPRI Yearbook 1996: Armaments, Disarmaments and International Security* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) 1996, pp. 15-30p. 20, fn

³ In the last years a split has emerged in the Sudanese religious camp with the oldest Islamist groups (the Ansars and the Khatmiya) joining non-Islamist opposition groups (the SPLA, the Nuba and the Beja) under the umbrella of the National Democratic Alliance.

a turning point for the region. In fact, the peace in question would entail a peace treaty with Lebanon as well as stop the conflict in Southern Lebanon between Israel and the Hizbullah. These developments would change the picture of regional conflict drastically and confirm the downgrading trend in inter-state conflict.

Second, peace with Syria, Lebanon and the Hizbullah may diminish, however, the interest of concerned parties in settling with the Palestinians and thus increase internal violence in both the Occupied Territories and Israel. This would exacerbate upgrading trends towards domestic violence in the region. Third, there is no doubt that the Kurdish issue will continue to create intra- as well as inter-state tensions in the areas comprised between the Levant and Transcaucasia, linking up with post-Cold War conflicts and tensions in the latter. Whenever confirmed, this trend would represent a shift of basic instability from the traditional Middle East to a new, northward zone.

New trends to conflict in the areas between the Middle East and Transcaucasia involve important international factors, namely Western policies towards the Gulf countries and European security policies towards the European East and Russia. A more effective Western policy towards the so called rogue states in the Gulf, Iraq and Iran, as well as Turkey's gradual inclusion in the European Union and its acceptance of the Copenhagen principles would help preventing emerging conflict in these areas.

On the other hands, increasing and enduring domestic conflict in North Africa and the Levant require more effective policies for building Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and consolidate good governance, economic development and respect for human rights. These policies should be evolved by reinforcing and giving appropriate focus to the process of Barcelona.

Table - The Conflict Picture in Post-Cold War Southern Mediterranean and adjoining areas, 1989-98

<i>main party</i>	<i>other parties</i>	<i>incompatibility</i>	<i>beginning/end</i>	<i>intensity</i>
ongoing conflicts				
Algeria	Islamist groups	government	1992	major conflict
Egypt	Islamist groups	government	>/1992 ⁽¹⁾	minor conflict
Israel	Palestinians, Islamist and Nationalist groups	territory	>/1993 ⁽²⁾	major conflict
PLO	Islamist and some Nationalist groups	government	1993 ⁽²⁾	minor conflict
Israel	Hizbullah, Syria, Iran	territory	>	minor conflict
Israel	Lebanon	territory	>	state of belligerency
Israel	Syria	territory	>	state of belligerency
Libya	tribes and Islamist groups	government	1993 ⁽³⁾	minor conflict
Cyprus	Turkish Cypriots, Turkey, Greece	territory/government	>	minor conflict
Turkey	Kurds (PKK), Syria	territory	>	major conflict
related conflicts				
Kurds	Turkey, Iran Iraq	territory	>	major conflict
Egypt	Sudan	territory	1992	minor conflict
Sudan	National Democratic Alliance ⁽⁷⁾	territory/government	>	major conflict
dormant conflicts				
Algeria	Morocco, Polisario	territory	>/1989	major conflict
terminated conflicts				
Lebanon	all-out civil war	government	1989 ⁽⁴⁾	major conflict
Israel	Jordan	territory	1994 ⁽⁵⁾	major conflict
Libya	Chad	territory	1989 ⁽⁶⁾	major conflict

Source: Istituto Affari Internazionali, Rome

Notes:

> = conflict begun before 1989

/ plus year = significant event occurring in the mentioned year and explained in a specific footnote

(1) In this year what S. E. Ibrahim [1996] defines as “the third wave of Islamic activism” took its worst turn to date, then greatly reduced after a couple of years

(2) The Oslo-1 agreements of 13 September 1993 are here interpreted as the beginning of violent opposition to the Israeli-Palestinian track of negotiations

(3) Attempted coup at Beni Ulid by members of the Warfalla and Qadhadhfa tribes

(4) Taif Accords, 12 October 1989

(5) Peace Treaty, Jerusalem, 18 October 1994

(6) Algiers, 31 August 1989

(7) SPLA, Nuba, Beja, Ansars, Khatmiya