Armed and insecure

An overview of arms transfers and armed violence
in the Horn of Africa (2010-2015)

Executive Summary

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Contents

Introduction

In early 2016 UN experts concluded that transfers of Mi-24 attack helicopters from an Ukrainian company to South Sudan "have facilitated the expansion of the war and have emboldened those in government who are seeking a military solution to the conflict at the expense of the peace process".[1]

Sadly, South-Sudan is not an exception in the Horn of Africa. Large swaths of the region have suffered from prolonged armed violence. The abundance of weapons and the continued flow of weapons to and within the Horn of Africa are certainly not the sole cause of the violence, but their wide availability and poor arms trade controls clearly aggravate the level of conflict.

This report gives an overview of the how armed conflict and the arms trade are interrelated in the Horn of Africa. Sustained security and stability may often seem like a mirage in the region, as conflict, armed violence and terrorism have become tragically commonplace. Civilians unacceptably bear the brunt, with thousands of deaths and hundreds of thousands of people displaced in recent years as a direct consequence of armed violence. Somalia for example topped the 'Fragile States Index' for six years – leaving that position to South Sudan in 2014.

'Armed and insecure' provides a look at the transfer and use of arms between 2010 and 2015 in eight nations: Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan and Uganda. There are, of course, major differences between these countries and very few of the armed conflicts in the Horn of Africa are purely national phenomena. Most have a regional dimension, sometimes with countries militarily involved in others. As for other sub-regions, the very notion of the 'Horn of Africa' is, of course, in some ways abstract and artificial. Countries in the region share as much with neighbours outside the Horn as they do with those within. Nonetheless, the eight countries have many shared obstacles.

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[1] UNSC, 'Final report of the Panel of Experts on South Sudan', January 2016.

1. Armed conflicts and armed violence

Most Horn of Africa states face enormous security challenges. The Global Peace Index 2016, for example, shows that none of the countries under consideration are in the top 100 of the world's most peaceful nations. If the Horn of Africa were a single nation, it would rank 135th out of the 163 countries listed, thanks to its best-positioned country, Uganda, at 101. Sudan, Somalia and South Sudan are in the bottom nine globally, with South Sudan only deemed safer than Syria.

In several countries, internal or trans-national conflicts continue to cause civilian casualties on a daily basis, despite their relative invisibility in terms of global media coverage and political attention. The 'calm' areas or countries within the Horn of Africa are only so in comparison to their more troubled neighbours. According to the most recent estimate available (2007-2012) for the eight nations under consideration, an average 35,336 people are killed annually in the region, whether in conflict situations or homicides.[2] Rough estimates of those who died in the civil war that started in South Sudan in late 2013 – up to 100,000 people – indicate the average annual figure for the years beyond 2012 is likely to have increased. Moreover, the numbers of those wounded, traumatized or forced to flee their homes or countries dwarf the number of those killed.[3]

Many conflicts in the Horn of Africa are between the state and armed groups, for example Al-Shabaab in Somalia (including attacks in Kenya and Uganda) and the SPLA-North in Sudan. There has also been a marked increase in social conflict, as seen for example in a rise in protests and riots since 2011.

Of course, armed violence in the Horn of Africa is not self-contained. Arms, and the violence they facilitate, often migrate sub-regionally. Military stockpiles can quickly spread through national borders into the hands of various armed forces and actors. Likewise, trafficking lanes often operate in both directions. The trans-border dimension is also strengthened by the fact that many ethnic groups populate areas across borders; especially pastoralist groups migrate to pastures for their cattle.

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[2] Everybody Counts, 'Global Burden of Armed Violence 2015', May 2015, http://www.genevadeclaration.org/measurability/global-burden-of-armed-violence/global-burden-of-armed-violence-2015.html
[3] UNHCR, 'Refugees in the Horn of Africa: Somali Displacement Crisis', http://data.unhcr.org/horn-of-africa/regional.php

2. Weapon use

Looking at the weapons used in the Horn, Sudan's bombing campaigns in Darfur and South Kordofan and the Blue Nile ('the Two Areas') stand out as gruesome examples of how populations suffer under continuing violence. According to leaked minutes of a July 2014 meeting of the entire leadership of Sudan's armed forces, including President al-Bashir, the Defense minister claimed to "have instructed the Air Force to bomb any place, whether it is a school, hospital, or a non-governmental humanitarian organization operating in rebel-controlled areas without permission from the government", referring to South Kordofan.[4] Over 4,000 bombs have been dropped "on civilian targets" in the Two Areas according to data collected by Nuba Reports since April 2012.[5] The aerial attacks often use unguided munitions dropped from Antonov aircraft at high altitudes. Amnesty concludes "that many of the attacks targeted civilian areas and objects without warning, and without legitimate military targets" and that such attacks "amount to war crimes".[6]

In Somalia countless suicide attacks by Al-Shabaab have caused thousands of casualties over the past years. Another feature of the violence is the use of armed drones by US forces operating both from Somalia and neighbouring countries. Some estimates assert that the US launched at least 26 drone attacks on Somalia's territory since 2011, with 11 taking place in 2015 and eight in 2016 up to the end of May.

A US Marine Corps helicopter prepares to land at Camp Lemonnier, Djibouti, 2012. US DoD/Staff Sgt. Joseph Araiza

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[4] War is Boring, 'Leaked Documents Alleges Sudan Planned Mass Murder', February 2015, https://medium.com/war-is-boring/leaked-document-alleges-that-sudan-planned-mass-murder-b08175f8e843.
[5] 4,082 as of 15 July 2016, as shown on its homepage: http://nubareports.org/.
[6] Amnesty International, 'Don't we matter – Four years of unrelenting attacks against civilians in Sudan's South Kordofan State', July 2015, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr54/2162/2015/en/.

3. Military spending and holdings

High military spending generally means that less budget is available to provide basic services for their citizens, such as education and health care. Even where military budgets look relatively small, arms purchases can put a significant burden on these states, in particular they may exacerbate debts. "Unnecessary arms imports may be caused by inadequate military planning and budgeting processes or by corruption", according to SIPRI.[7]

Notably, most of a military budget is spent on personnel (salaries, pensions) and military equipment (purchases, operational costs). However, for only a few Horn of Africa countries reliable estimates can be made; others are unavailable due to a lack of governmental transparency. For example, SIPRI has been unable to make credible estimates for Eritrea and Somalia for the entire period of 2005-2015. Clearly, it is important to make more concerted efforts to increase transparency in order to overcome the lack of reliable, publicly available data.

South Sudan's spending was already high by all standards, but after the war started in late 2013 and with the oil-dependent economy in freefall, its military spending was estimated to make up nearly 14% of the country's GDP by 2015 – among the highest globally. By way of comparison: global military spending is estimated at 2.3% of the world's GDP.

South Sudan artillery in military procession at independence commemoration*, 2012* Enough/Amanda Hsiao

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[7] SIPRI, 'Arms Transfers to East and Southern Africa', December 2009, http://books.sipri.org/files/misc/SIPRIBP0912.pdf

4. Arms transfers

Likewise, regarding arms transfers, the opacity of data and lack of reporting is a major obstacle to ascertaining the actual level of weapon influx into the region. Moreover, while imports into the Horn are small compared to top importers such as India, Saudi Arabia and China, they are certainly significant, particularly given how often they are used. Especially considering their socio-economic standing, prominent positions for Sudan, Ethiopia, and Uganda are therefore certainly worrisome.

Both importing and selling countries have big responsibilities to this end. Important exporting nations, especially Russia, Ukraine, China and the US in the context of the Horn of Africa, should make thorough risk assessments, whereas importing governments need to compare the perceived benefits of arms to their opportunity costs. For arms exporters it will mean exchanging short-term financial profit for long-term enhanced global stability: lesser levels of violence, humanitarian needs, refugee flows, and other consequences of major armed violence.

China has been "portrayed as a supplier of last resort, willing to supply any state that is not subject to a UN arms embargo and with whom it has positive relations",[8] but also intra-African trade and trafficking is an important aspect of flows of small arms and light weapons (SALW).

Easily dismissed as 'lesser' weapons in a trade in which units of major weapon systems can cost millions and include cutting edge technology, a few relatively cheap guns can wreak major havoc. Additionally, these weapons are used in most of the daily clashes and killings that comprise the thousands of annual deaths in the Horn of Africa; often they are the only weapons used by armed non-state groups.

5. Arms embargoes

Further, the report argues that arms embargoes are often insufficient in their present implementation. Though they clearly have a positive impact in preventing some transfers of arms to the region's worst conflicts, stronger terms, more robust enforcement and indeed more political will are needed. Some UN sanctions appear effective in bringing major arms supplies to a near stop, such as in Eritrea, while others, such as in the case of Somalia, make arms transfers rather tightly controlled. Conversely, the Sudan/Darfur embargo appears only marginally effective and of no use to the people in South Kordofan and the Blue Nile.

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[8] SIPRI, 'China's Exports of Small Arms and Light Weapons', October 2013, http://books.sipri.org/files/PP/SIPRIPP38.pdf

Regional embargos, such as the EU embargos against South Sudan and Sudan, do indeed stop arms transfers from that region and are an essential cornerstone to a global architecture of greater restraint, but are easily circumvented by others with less qualms.

6. International arms control mechanisms

The magnitude of the problems facilitated by weapons is huge. While certainly no panacea, introducing and improving arms control mechanisms – licensing policy, border control, stockpile management and transparency in reporting – can contribute to confidence building, especially in a region characterized by conflict, porous borders and arms transfers shrouded in secrecy.

Stockpile security and management are basic but essential aspects of governance over the instruments of violence; diversion to unauthorized groups or individuals can be an indicator of how well a state performs. Regional mechanisms, including work done by the African Union, IGAD, RECSA and UNREC,[9] as well as numerous civil society initiatives, are important to raise further awareness about the need for strict arms control in the Horn, and assist in its implementation.

Where no embargoes prevail the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) could make a difference, if implemented strictly – and provided that supplying states are parties to the treaty or at least adhere to its norms in practice. However, major suppliers to the Horn, such as Russia, the United States, China, and Ukraine, have not acceded to the ATT so far.[10] Restraining national arms export policies could make a big difference in the meantime.

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[9] Intergovernmental Authority on Development in Eastern Africa (www.igad.org); Regional Centre on Small Arms in the Great Lakes Region, the Horn of Africa and Bordering States (www.recsasec.org); and Regional Centre for Peace and Disarmament in Africa (www.unrec.org).
[10] The United States and Ukraine have signed but not ratified the ATT.

ATT compliance among state parties remains a serious issue, as recent UK arms transfers to Saudi Arabia have shown. Despite an arguably "overriding" risk that they "could be used to commit or facilitate a serious violation of international humanitarian law" in Yemen, London has continued to license their export.[11] Adherence to a strong international norm must become more commonplace for such transfers to become a thing of the past.

7. Governance

Governments in the Horn of Africa must shift from a focus on 'national security' to prioritizing 'human security', improving the wider security perception by ensuring basic socio-economic preconditions such as personal and food security, an accessible labour market, as well as education and health systems. This is of crucial importance in order to significantly reduce levels of armed violence. With so many people in the region used to armed conflict and major violence, it is imperative that efforts be made to better control the trade of arms, thereby preventing lethal instruments from ending up in the hands of those violating human rights or involved in war crimes. Likewise, efforts must be made at the local level, with successful programs at the community, cultural and awareness-raising level already in place being scaled-up and supported by the international community.

Nations in the Horn of Africa must also increase their levels of governance, transparency, rule of law and democracy. Though often ignored in discussions of armed violence and arms control, issues such as corruption, freedom of the press, and the existence of political opposition parties and competitive elections may be as important to the future of conflict and armed violence in the Horn of Africa as any other factor.

With good governance the exception rather than the rule, feeble democratic institutions and precarious rule of law feed a sense of insecurity. Moreover, corruption and conflict go hand in hand: in terms of perceptions of corruption, Somalia, South Sudan and Sudan rank among the five worst places in the world, with Afghanistan and North Korea. Eritrea is deemed to have the least free press in the world, with Somalia, Sudan and Djibouti also in the bottom fifteen globally. All countries are considered 'low human development' according to the UN; military expenditures often displace social investments.

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[11] ATT, article 7

In the military sector corruption is leading to insecurity and instability, as it weakens the institutional capacity and effectiveness of the armed forces. As per Transparency International's 2015 Government Defense Anti-Corruption Index, of the countries analyzed herein Kenya has the 'best' marks with 'high' risk of corruption, while Ethiopia and Uganda are deemed 'very high' and Eritrea, Somalia, South Sudan and Sudan are considered 'critical'.

In the absence of meaningful reforms to issues of political representation and electoral process, latent conflicts in the Horn of Africa could become increasingly violent. Proper channels for political debate and democratic alternation in power must be nourished and protected.

Ugandan soldiers on patrol in Central African Republic to fish out LRA leader Kony, 2012 Yannick Tylle

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