HUMAN SECURITY BRIEF 2007

This *Brief* focuses on three main issues. First, it challenges the expert consensus that the threat of terrorism—especially Islamist terrorism—is increasing. It tracks a remarkable, but largely unnoticed, decline in the incidence of terrorism around the world, including a sharp decrease in deadly assaults perpetrated by al-Qaeda's loosely knit Islamist global terror network.

Second, it analyzes the marked decline in the number and deadliness of armed conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa that have taken place in the new millennium. It attributes this decline—and the parallel but longer-term fall in coups d'état in the region—to a significant increase in international initiatives directed towards stopping ongoing political violence and preventing it from restarting.

Third, it updates the global trend data on armed conflicts, battle-deaths, coups d'état, and human rights abuses that were reported in the *Human Security Report 2005* and *Human Security Brief 2006*. It finds that there has been little net change in recent years in the number of conflicts in which a government is one of the warring parties, but that other forms of political violence, including communal conflicts, have declined.

Global Terrorism

Chapter 1, "Dying to Lose: Explaining the Decline in Global Terrorism," presents a comprehensive review of the statistical data on global terrorism to the end of 2006—domestic as well as international—and reveals that the global death toll from terrorism has fallen.

This finding will surprise many. Since the 11 September 2001 al-Qaeda assault on the United States (US), the consensus among Western experts has been that the threat of terrorism, particularly Islamist terrorism, has been increasing. This was the view held by the 2006 and 2007 US National Intelligence Estimates, by a 2007 survey of 100 foreign policy and security experts published in the US journal *Foreign Policy*, by a 2007 report on the terrorist threat to Europe from the director of the UK's Security Service, and by a 2008 report from the official US National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC).[1]

A related concern is that the incidence of terrorism is increasing. For the period under review, this concern finds support in three major terrorism datasets, all produced in the United States: one by NCTC, one by the Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism (MIPT) in Oklahoma City, and one by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) at the University of Maryland.

There is broad agreement among the compilers of these datasets that terrorism is intentional, politically motivated violence perpetrated by non-state groups against civilians and/or noncombatants.

According to NCTC, the number of fatalities from *all* terrorist attacks, Islamist and non-Islamist, domestic as well as international, increased by 41 percent from the beginning of 2005 (the first year for which the agency has complete data) to

the end of 2006. We use numbers of fatalities rather than numbers of attacks as our preferred measure because the former are the best single indicator of the human costs of terrorism and because definitions of what constitutes an "attack" vary considerably.

MIPT's data show global fatalities from terrorism increasing more than fourfold from 1998 to 2006, with the steepest increase coming after the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. START records a 75 percent increase in 2004—the latest year for which it has released data.

The rising terrorist fatality toll revealed by the MIPT and NCTC datasets to the end of 2006, coupled with the bleak assessments of Western security analysts and intelligence agencies, appears to provide compelling support for the claim that both the incidence and the threat of global terrorism have indeed increased.

In fact, the data are open to a very different interpretation—one that strongly challenges the prevailing consensus. A more critical evaluation of the evidence indicates that the global toll from terrorist violence is not increasing but decreasing.

The reason that all three datasets show global fatality tolls from terrorism rising so steeply after 2003 is that each of them counts as acts of "terrorism" a very large percentage of deadly assaults against civilians by non-state armed groups in Iraq. This counting method—and the fact that for most of the period since the invasion in 2003 the conflict in Iraq has been the world's deadliest—leads to some rather startling findings. MIPT, for example, claims that in 2006 an extraordinary 79 percent of global fatalities from terrorism were in Iraq.

This counting approach is unusual because the intentional killing of civilians in wartime is not normally described as "terrorism," but as a "war crime" or "crime against humanity." It is problematic because neither MIPT nor START is consistent in its counting practices. They both count as victims of terrorism a large percentage of the civilians intentionally killed by non-state armed groups in Iraq's civil war, but they generally count only a small percentage of the civilians similarly killed by non-state armed groups in Africa's civil wars.

MIPT, for example, records more than 2,000 deaths from terrorism in Iraq in 2004, but not a single death from terrorism in the Sudan, despite the fact that hundreds if not thousands of civilians were being slaughtered by insurgent groups and militias in Darfur during that year. The same was true in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 1999 and in Uganda in 2002. In each case, large numbers of civilians were killed by insurgents, yet in each case MIPT failed to record a single death from terrorism.

This failure to report the deaths of civilians intentionally killed by non-state armed groups as "terrorism" is repeated in country after country throughout Africa. It is not clear why this should be the case, but the dataset compilers may have been influenced by the way the US State Department categorizes what it calls "foreign terrorist organizations."

For a terror group to be so labelled by the State Department, it must *"threaten the security of US nationals, or the national security ... of the United States."*[2] This highly US-centric definition excludes very large numbers of non-state groups in Africa and elsewhere that are guilty of perpetrating deliberate, politically motivated violence against civilians—i.e., terrorism.

Whatever the reason for these coding decisions, the effect is the same. The death tolls attributed by MIPT and START to "terrorism"—civilians intentionally killed by non-state armed groups—in Africa's civil wars are tiny compared with the reported death toll from terrorism in Iraq's civil war.

Given these inconsistencies in counting civilian fatalities between Iraq and Africa, and given that deadly assaults on civilians by non-state armed groups in civil wars are not normally described as terrorism, there is a defensible case for removing the Iraq data from the global terrorism counts.

When this is done and the trend lines are redrawn, a dramatically different picture emerges. Absent Iraq, both START and MIPT now show net *declines* of more than 40 percent in fatalities from terrorism since 2001. NCTC's fatality trend data still show an increase from 2005 to the end of 2006, but it is much less steep than when Iraq deaths are included.

In other words, the claim that the incidence of global terrorism is increasing is dependent upon accepting the unusual argument that violence intentionally perpetrated by non-state armed groups against civilians in Iraq *should* be treated as terrorism, but that similar violence elsewhere should not be counted as terrorism. If this argument is rejected, there has been a net decline in the global terrorism toll between 2001 and 2006.

In 2007, a Dramatic Change

Even if the unusual practice of counting the intentional killing of civilians in civil wars as terrorism *is* accepted, and even if the Iraq "terrorism" data *are* included, there has *still* been a substantial decline in the global terrorism toll—but this is a very recent development.

When this *Brief* was being prepared, complete annual data were only available from MIPT and NCTC to 2006 (2004 in the case of START). But in December 2007, NCTC released

new figures that revealed that global terrorism fatalities had declined by 40 percent between July and September of that year—driven by a 55 percent decline in the terrorism death toll in Iraq.

The new data showed that while the war in Iraq had been driving the global terrorism death toll *up* from 2003 to 2006, it was now driving it *down*. (New data from NCTC released as this *Brief* went to press indicated that there had been a further 20 percent decline in the Iraq death toll from October to December 2007.)

This decline in what NCTC and MIPT count as fatalities from terrorism was part of an overall decrease in political violence in Iraq in 2007. This decrease was driven by several factors:

- The ceasefire observed by the Shia Mahdi Army since August 2007.
- The decision by former Sunni insurgents to ally with US forces against their former comrades in the Islamist "al-Qaeda In Iraq" organization.
- The "surge" of 30,000 extra troops deployed from the US in the first half of 2007, coupled with a new US counterinsurgency approach that places greater emphasis on defending the population.
- "Ethnic cleansing" in Baghdad—which has meant fewer mixed neighbourhoods, more "defensible space," and less disputed territory to fight about.

Of these factors, by far the most significant for the future of the Islamist or "jihadi" terror campaigns around the world has been the extraordinary revolt of Sunni Muslims against al-Qaeda In Iraq.[3]

The reduction in casualties brought about by these changes has been dramatic, but in the absence of any major progress on the political front, the risk of a resumption of major conflict remains very real. But whatever happens, it is highly unlikely that al-Qaeda In Iraq's fortunes will be reversed.

The Decline in Islamist Terrorism

The major concern in the West is not with local terrorist organizations fighting over local issues, but with the global campaigns of al-Qaeda and its loosely knit affiliates around the world. Here too, according to NCTC, there has been a remarkable, though uneven, recent decline in fatalities from Islamist terrorism. And here too the fall has been driven primarily by changes in Iraq.

The recent decline in Islamist terrorism reverses a steep increase that started after the invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003. NCTC's data indicate that the global fatality toll from Islamist attacks more than tripled between the beginning of 2005 and July 2007. But then came a dramatic change. Between July and September 2007 Iraqi deaths from Islamist violence dropped by more than 65 percent. This in turn drove a decline of 47 percent in the global toll.

NCTC's were not the only quantitative data showing a decline in Islamist terrorism. The US-based Intelcenter think-tank published a study in mid-2007 that examined the 63 "most significant" attacks launched by al-Qaeda and its affiliates over a period of nearly 10 years.

It is highly unlikely that al-Qaeda In Iraq's fortunes will be reversed.

The study included the major attacks most associated with Islamist terrorism—those in Bali, London, Madrid, Amman, and Jakarta, as well as 9/11 in the US. It did *not* include the Islamist violence in Iraq's civil war that has been the main driver of the global Islamist death toll recorded by NCTC, nor did it include deadly assaults on civilians by insurgents in Afghanistan or other civil wars. Intelcenter found that by mid-2007 the number of Islamist attacks around the world had declined by 65 percent from the high point in 2004, and that fatalities from such attacks had declined by more than 90 percent.

In other words, the fall in Islamist terrorist violence has been remarkable whether or not the intentional killing of civilians in Iraq is counted. But just what has driven this decline—and what it means for the future—is less clear.

Does the Decline in the Incidence of Islamist Terrorism Mean That the Threat Has Diminished?

The decline in the fatality toll from Islamist terror operations does not *necessarily* mean that the threat has diminished. It is conceivably the case that al-Qaeda, or an affiliated group, will launch another attack on the scale of the 9/11 assault on the US—or one that is even more devastating. Should such an attack occur, it could dramatically reverse the downward trend in fatalities.

However, there are several reasons for believing that the recent decline in Islamist terrorism does in fact mean that the threat is diminishing.

First, counterterrorism efforts, although they are still plagued by a multitude of problems, are more widespread,

more coordinated, and more effective today than they were prior to 9/11. Part of the reason we are seeing fewer terrorist attacks is that a greater number are being prevented from occurring before they can even be launched.

Second, there is growing evidence of bitter doctrinal infighting within, and defections from, the now largely decentralized global Islamist network. Such developments are a classic sign of organizational crisis and incipient breakdown. Given that the Islamists have failed to achieve *any* of their strategic goals, and given the humiliating recent defeats experienced by al-Qaeda In Iraq, this development is not surprising.

> Islamist terror groups confront a fundamental impasse—one largely of their own making.

Third, there has been an extraordinary drop in support for Islamist terror organizations in the Muslim world over the past five years—a decline that is driven by the increasing popular rejection of the terrorists' indiscriminate violence (that mostly targets fellow Muslims), their extremist ideology, and their harshly repressive policies.

Chapter 1 of this *Brief* focuses on this third issue. It argues that the more the Islamists attempt to impose their values and policies, and the more violence they perpetrate against their coreligionists, the more they lose support. The evidence for this is now overwhelming.

A Pew poll in July 2007, for example, revealed that Muslim support for terrorist violence against civilians had declined by half or more over five years in four countries polled: Lebanon, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Indonesia.

By late 2007 in Afghanistan just 1 percent of Afghans "strongly supported" the presence of the Taliban and foreign jihadi fighters in their country. In Pakistan, support for Islamist political parties has collapsed—dropping by some 500 percent between the 2002 and 2008 national elections. And in the North-West Frontier Province where al-Qaeda has its strongest presence in Pakistan, support for Osama bin Laden dropped from 70 percent in August 2007 to 4 percent in January 2008.

A December 2007 poll in Saudi Arabia found that Osama bin Laden's fellow countrymen had "dramatically turned against him, against al-Qaeda, and against terrorism in general." And in Iraq, where the Islamists have suffered their greatest recent strategic setback, a major poll also released in December 2007 found that 100 percent of Iraqis—Sunnis as well as Shia—found al-Qaeda In Iraq's attacks on civilians to be "unacceptable."

This pattern has been repeated in country after country in the Muslim world. Its strategic implications are critically important because the historical evidence suggests that terrorist campaigns that lose public support will, sooner or later, be either abandoned or defeated. Without popular support, the Islamists cannot hope to create a successful political revolution—lacking any serious conventional military capacity, they cannot hope to defeat incumbent regimes by force of arms.

As Muslim publics increasingly reject Islamist policies and terror tactics, they are more likely to cooperate with official counterterror campaigns. This is precisely what happened in Iraq, where Sunni insurgents became so alienated from their former al-Qaeda In Iraq allies that they joined with the US in an anti-Islamist alliance to defeat them.

Even where terror organizations have a modest degree of support, their campaigns are still mostly notable for their failure rate. A 2005 study in *International Security* that examined 42 terrorist campaigns waged by 28 terror organizations of all types over a period of five years found that they failed to achieve their limited policy goals 93 percent of the time.

More than six years after 9/11, Islamist terror groups confront a fundamental impasse—one largely of their own making. Their indiscriminately violent terror tactics and harshly repressive policies have dramatically eroded their popular support in the Muslim world, sparked deep divisions within the global Islamist movement, and catalyzed increasingly effective counterterror campaigns around the world.

These and other changes examined in Chapter 1 of this *Brief* suggest that, although the threat posed by al-Qaeda and its affiliates is still serious and far from being eliminated, the prognosis for this loosely knit global terror network is now bleak.

Towards a New Peace in Africa?

Commenting on sub-Saharan Africa's security situation in January 1999, *The Economist* reported that "from north to south, east to west, large swathes of the continent are at war, but almost all efforts at pacification have come to naught."[4] At the time, this assessment was unsurprising. In 1999 sub-Saharan Africa was the world's most war-afflicted region, with a battle-death toll that was greater than the rest of the world's combined.

But as a guide to the future, *The Economist*'s pessimism was misplaced. Between 1999 and 2006 (the most recent year for which we have complete data), sub-Saharan Africa's security landscape was transformed. The number of armed conflicts being fought in the region fell by more than half. The number of people being killed dropped even more steeply—by 2006 the annual battle-death toll was just 2 percent of that of 1999.

This was not the only positive change. Conflicts are conventionally defined as armed confrontations between a government and another government, or between a government and an insurgent group. But this definition—one used by almost all of the major conflict datasets—completely ignores communal and other "non-state" conflicts, those in which a government is *not* one of the warring parties.

To address this omission, the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) created a new non-state conflict dataset for the Human Security Report Project (HSRP) that has revealed just how important this hitherto uncounted category of conflict is—particularly in sub-Saharan Africa.

In 2002 there were 26 of these non-state conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa—twice as many as those in which a government was one of the warring parties. But in this category, too, there has been a sharp decline in both conflict numbers and death tolls since 2002. Between 2002 and 2006 non-state conflict numbers had dropped by more than half across the region, and their death tolls had fallen by some 70 percent.

Violent campaigns waged against defenceless civilians by governments or rebel groups constitute a third type of political violence. Once again, we find a positive change taking place in the new millennium. Between 2002 and 2006 the number of campaigns of "one-sided violence" against civilians fell by two-thirds, and their death tolls fell by more than 80 percent.

Sub-Sahara African governments have also been highly vulnerable to coups d'état in the past. Indeed, the region has suffered almost half of the world's coups since 1946. But here, too, there has been a positive change. The average number of coups per year in the new millennium has been some 40 percent lower than in the 1980s—the peak decade for coups in the region.

Explaining Changing Patterns of Political Violence in Sub-Saharan Africa

In the aftermath of the Cold War, sub-Saharan Africa underwent a period of wrenching political change. In 1989 there were 36 autocratic regimes in the region; in 2000 there were just four. But few of the dictatorial regimes were replaced by inclusive democracies—a type of government that has a relatively low risk of succumbing to armed conflict. Most of the new governments were neither fully autocratic nor fully democratic, but a volatile mix of the two.

These mixed regimes—political scientists call them "anocracies"—are associated with a much higher risk of armed conflict than either autocracies or democracies. From 1988 to 1999 the number of anocracies increased fifteenfold in sub-Saharan Africa, from two to 30, a change that helped drive the steep increase in the number of state-based conflicts (those involving a government as one of the warring parties) that had started in the 1990s. The average number of new conflicts starting each year in the 1990s was *double* that in the 1980s.

This upsurge of conflict onsets (some were old conflicts that had restarted) ensured that sub-Saharan Africa was the world's most violent region in the 1990s. What prevented the total number of conflicts being fought each year from being even higher was that the average number of conflict terminations each year also increased dramatically during the decade.

The doubling of new conflicts starting in the 1990s indicates that whatever conflict prevention initiatives were being attempted during this period were having a negligible impact. This was bad news for policy-makers at the United Nations (UN) and elsewhere, where the idea that "prevention is better than cure" has become widely accepted—though much less widely practised.

> The number of armed conflicts in the region fell by more than half.

But the fact that the average number of conflicts ending each year in the 1990s was more than twice that of the 1980s, and that a much greater percentage of these terminations was made up of negotiated settlements, was good news. It indicated that what the UN calls "peacemaking"—initiatives designed to bring conflicts to an end—was meeting with growing success.

In the new millennium, the security situation in sub-Saharan Africa underwent a second remarkable change. Not only did outbreaks of warfare drop sharply but there were appreciably more conflicts stopping than there were conflicts starting. As a consequence of these changes, conflict numbers shrank from 13 in 2000, to only seven in 2006.

For policy-makers, it is critically important to understand why both the number and the deadliness of conflicts of all

types have dropped so dramatically throughout sub-Saharan Africa since 1999.

The most robust finding on the causes of war by researchers is that the higher the per capita income a country enjoys, the lower its risk of armed conflict. This is why most wars take place in very poor countries. The evidence for this war-poverty association is overwhelming.

But while economic growth is clearly associated with reductions in the incidence of both conflicts and coups over the long term, it cannot explain the steep recent decline in the number of armed conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa. Since 2000, income levels have not risen high enough, or over a long enough period, to explain the reduction in new outbreaks of conflict. This is also true of all the other "structural" explanations that researchers have focused on—those stressing the impact of other slow-changing risk factors, such as "youth bulges," population size, dependence on primary commodities, and so on. The explanation for the radical improvement in sub-Saharan Africa's security climate in the new millennium must lie elsewhere.

The HSRP's research suggests that the drivers of this remarkable decline in armed conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa are to be found not in long-term structural change, but in the post-Cold War surge of policy initiatives designed to stop wars ("peacemaking") or prevent them from starting again ("post-conflict peacebuilding"). Relatively little effort has been put into conflict prevention.

These peacemaking and postconflict peacebuilding initiatives—which include third party mediation efforts to end ongoing conflicts, humanitarian missions, and peacekeeping and peacebuilding operations—have all greatly increased in number since 1990.

Non-state conflict numbers have undergone a marked decline.

The success rate of individual initiatives has often been modest, and critics have been quick to point to the failures, particularly of UN peace operations. The criticisms are accurate enough but too often miss the important truth that the *net* effect of this upsurge of security-related initiatives has been highly positive, notwithstanding the lack of success in individual cases.

As we noted in the *Human Security Report 2005*, if these sorts of results can be achieved by peacemaking and peacebuilding missions that too often suffer from inadequate resources, ineffective coordination, inappropriate mandates, and lack of political support, then the potential for improvement—via better designed, resourced, and implemented policy initiatives—is clearly very large.

Global Trends in Human Insecurity: An Update

The *Human Security Report 2005* found that armed conflicts involving a government as one of the warring parties had declined by more than 40 percent around the world from the end of the Cold War to 2003. The most severe conflicts—and the number of genocides—had declined by some 80 percent. Coup d'état numbers were down by 60 percent from the high point in 1963.

The *Report* also found that the number of battle-deaths in state-based armed conflicts had declined even more steeply than the conflict numbers—though over a much longer period. The average number of battle-deaths per conflict per year—the best measure of the deadliness of warfare—had fallen from 38,000 in 1950, to just 600 in 2002. By 2006 the estimated global battle-death toll had declined further, but only very slightly. Moreover, uncertainty about fatality numbers in Iraq and elsewhere has meant that while we can be confident about the long-term trends, no conclusions should be drawn from minor year-to-year variations in reported death counts.

The *Human Security Brief 2006* found that the global decline in state-based conflict numbers had more or less levelled out, and this *Brief* revealed that this situation changed little between 2005 and 2006. But at the regional level there have been major changes since 2002. While sub-Saharan Africa has witnessed a major decline in political violence, two other regions—Central and South Asia, and the Middle East and North Africa—have seen sharp increases in both conflict and fatality numbers.

As reported in Chapter 2, the HSRP now has five years of data on "non-state" conflicts—those fought between communal or rebel groups or warlords, but in which the government is not a warring party.

Five years is long enough to detect trends, and we can now report that worldwide, non-state conflict numbers have undergone a marked and consistent decline since data were first collected in 2002. In fact, they declined by a third—from 36 to 24—between 2002 and 2006. Reported battle-deaths from these conflicts declined by 60 percent over the same period. Much of this global reduction in the number of non-state conflicts and associated fatalities has been driven by the improvements in sub-Saharan Africa.

When we look at the combined global total of state-based and non-state conflicts, we find that there has been an 18 percent decline—from 68 in 2002, to 56 in 2006.

A third type of political violence involves deadly campaigns against defenceless civilians. Campaigns of "one-sided violence"—which can be perpetrated by either governments or non-state armed groups—often take place during civil wars, with sub-Saharan Africa having the lion's share.

Campaigns of one-sided violence, like armed conflicts, have to result in at least 25 fatalities a year to be counted as such. In 1989 there were 19 such campaigns, but their number grew unevenly throughout the 1990s—lending support to the view that targeting civilians had become an increasingly prevalent element of the post-Cold War security landscape. In 2004, the peak year, 38 campaigns of one-sided violence were being perpetrated around the world, but since then there has been a sharp drop. In 2006 there were just 26—a net decline of 32 percent from 2004.

> Political violence also involves deadly campaigns against civilians.

This *Human Security Brief* also provides new data to update global and regional trends in core human rights abuses—primarily imprisonment and physical violence. But measuring such abuse is both difficult and controversial. It is difficult because there is no single, accessible, and objective yardstick to measure human rights violations. It is controversial because many human rights organizations reject the very idea of quantifying abuses of rights, on both methodological and moral grounds.

The UN's Human Rights Council has no mandate to collect comprehensive data on human rights abuse, and any attempt to secure one would almost certainly be frustrated by member states. So, the international community finds itself confronting a critically important human security issue with no official data to determine whether or not its policies are having any impact.

The HSRP relies on the Political Terror Scale (PTS), a composite index compiled annually by researchers at the University of North Carolina, Asheville. The PTS uses data on core human rights violations in individual countries around the world that are drawn from the annual reports of Amnesty International and the US State Department.

The three regions that have had the worst human rights records between 1980 and 2006 are sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and North Africa, and Central and South Asia. The Americas, Europe, and East and Southeast Asia and Oceania score best. But the starkest differences in levels of rights violations turn out to be those between rich and poor countries.

There are a number of important methodological challenges associated with the rights violation data that are reviewed in Chapter 4, but reporting practices today are more extensive and consistent than they were in the past, and dataset compilers are more sensitive to coding challenges and political biases that may have distorted the trend data during the Cold War years.

Conclusion

The long-term statistical data on human *insecurity* reviewed in this *Brief*—on terror attacks, and on the global and regional incidence of wars, coups, and core human rights abuses—can be useful to policy-makers in several ways.

First, the data can help them better understand the drivers of political violence of all types.

Second, the data can provide insights into which policies may be most useful in forestalling such violence, in halting violence that cannot be forestalled, and in preventing violence that has been halted from starting up again.

Such information and analysis is a necessary—though not sufficient—condition for the "evidence-based policy" that increasing numbers of international organizations and donor governments are demanding.

The recent changes reported in this *Brief* provide grounds for modest optimism—not least because the evidence clearly indicates that efforts to stop violent conflicts and to prevent them from starting again can be remarkably effective. But few of the "root cause" drivers of warfare and deadly assaults against civilians—from poverty to group inequality—have improved, and some have worsened. Given this, and with 56 armed conflicts still being waged around the world, there are certainly no grounds for complacency.