

THE WORLD IN CONFLICT

Over the course of a journalistic career that began in the Middle East, **John Andrews** became *The Economist's* most experienced foreign correspondent, with postings in Europe, Asia and America. Before joining *The Economist*, he wrote from and about north Africa and the Middle East for the *Guardian* and NBC News, interviewing personalities such as Muammar Qaddafi, Yasser Arafat and Ezer Weizman. He is the author of two books on Asia, co-author of a book on Europe and co-editor of *Megachange: The World in 2050* (Profile Books, 2012).

THE WORLD IN CONFLICT

Understanding the world's troublespots

JOHN ANDREWS

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An explanation

THE WORD "CONFLICT" can be applied to everything from a playground squabble to the second world war. For this book it means a difference of opinion – between nations, peoples or political movements – that involves the use of deadly violence. My criterion is that the conflict, no matter how distant its origins, should still be happening today (which is why, for example, there is only a passing reference to the wars that broke up Yugoslavia at the end of the last century).

There is a sobering number of conflicts that satisfy my criterion, from the unresolved civil wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to the secessionist violence in India and the Philippines. Does the violence meted out by "organised crime" meet my criterion? Not when the criminals are the Russian mafia. But in the case of Latin America, conflicts involving the drug cartels threaten the state itself – and the violence by both cartels and state is easily extreme enough to qualify.

Nonetheless, on the basis of cause and effect, I have tried to place every conflict in its historical context. I have also tried not to "take sides": violent conflicts arouse passions, certainly among the participants and often among outsiders (the Arab-Israeli conflict is an obvious example), but I hope I have been impartial.

As Chapter 1 makes clear, conflicts can have many, often overlapping causes, which makes it difficult to catalogue them by categories such as religion, race, territory, resources or ideology. The simplest solution is surely to categorise them by geography and country, even though many conflicts, especially in Africa and the Middle East, cross national boundaries.

The best example of this defiance of national frontiers is the rise

of violent Islamism. Much of this can be traced back to the cold-war era in which the West supported Muslim *mujahideen* from the Arab world in their ultimately successful fight to expel Soviet troops from Afghanistan. As is clear from this book's chapters on the Middle East, Africa and Asia, the Islamist movements of today – whether in Algeria and Mali or Pakistan and the Philippines – often have their roots in the Afghanistan of the 1980s.

Violent Islamism also marks an upward tick in the otherwise downward trend of conflict in the wake of the second world war and, especially, the cold war. As wars between states almost disappear, civil wars and insurgencies – many with an Islamist flavour – are taking their place and so mocking our recent fantasies of universal peace and the triumph of democracy.

Should we therefore surrender to a fatalistic gloom? This guide to the world's conflicts may well bring to mind the view of Mahatma Gandhi:

What difference does it make to the dead, the orphans and the homeless, whether the mad destruction is wrought under the name of totalitarianism or in the holy name of liberty or democracy?

But Gandhi was speaking in an age horribly scarred by the first and second world wars. Though his words are still relevant, at least – as Chapter 8 shows – today's many conflicts are creating fewer corpses and fewer orphans.

Lastly, Arabic transliteration is fraught with difficulties (see Appendix 3). I hope I will not offend purists by frequently deviating from classical correctness.

John Andrews
August 2017

1 The reason why

“IF EVERY EIGHT-YEAR-OLD in the world is taught meditation, we will eliminate violence from the world within one generation.” Or so the Dalai Lama has claimed in one of those comforting quotations that go viral in a world of social media. There is, of course, no possibility that His Holiness’s condition will be fulfilled. If the present is a guide to the future, it will be one of frequent conflict – confirmation that violence is part of the human condition and that men and women will continue to take up arms in pursuit of their goals. As Carl von Clausewitz, a Prussian general with a more realistic view of humanity than the Tibetan leader, put it: “War is an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will.”

The evidence is everywhere. During the 21st century, which is not even two decades old, the US and its allies have invaded Iraq and Afghanistan; Russia has been at war with Georgia; the UK and France have combined to help topple a regime in Libya – which then succumbed to fratricidal anarchy. These are just a few of the more bloody conflicts pitting nations against nations. Others are less bloody, but still dangerous: for example, the nervous stand-off between India and Pakistan in Kashmir, where troops from both sides threaten each other – occasionally with fatal results – across the line of control drawn as long ago as 1972 in the snow-bound Himalayan and Karakoram mountains. In East Asia, North and South Korea may not be in direct conflict, but the nuclear-armed totalitarian north and the capitalist, democratic south have yet to conclude a peace treaty to put a formal end to a war that began in 1950. Elsewhere in the Pacific region, maritime and territorial disputes entangle China, Taiwan, Japan, the Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam and Brunei, and no one can

be truly confident that these arguments, over bits of rock or expanses of ocean, will not lead to armed conflict – whether by design or by human error.

One school of thought holds that democracy and peace go together. The American neoconservatives around President George W. Bush believed that toppling Saddam Hussein in 2003 would bring democracy first to Iraq and then to the rest of the Middle East, which would in turn lead to a genuine acceptance of democratic Israel in the Arab neighbourhood. After all, Rudolph Joseph Rummel and other political scientists have persuasively argued that democracies do not wage war on each other. Sadly, the aftermath of the Iraq war – be it sectarian bloodshed in Iraq itself or civil war in adjacent Syria – has mocked the neoconservatives' naive predictions.

But if democracies are loth to attack other democracies, they are hardly immune from armed conflicts from within, be it a case of Basque separatists in Spain or republican extremists in Northern Ireland in the UK. Nor can democracies be immune from imported violence. The attack on the Twin Towers of New York's Manhattan and on the Pentagon just outside Washington, DC, on September 11th 2001 shattered the complacent illusion that the US – the world's economic and military hyperpower – could be untouched at home by the consequences of its policies abroad. It is a bitter irony that the US-style date matches the country's emergency telephone number. It was 9/11 that provoked President Bush's "global war on terror" and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and it was the same 9/11 that has engraved Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda in the global consciousness.

Does al-Qaeda (which means the base in Arabic) introduce a new form of conflict to the world? Its choice of weapons is actually quite conventional: terrorism against civilians, 9/11 being the supreme but far from only example; light arms, notably AK-47 assault rifles and rocket-propelled grenades; and improvised explosive devices (IEDs). In other words, it is the normal resort of the relatively weak against the technologically mighty in what is now called asymmetric warfare. Nor is al-Qaeda's use of suicide bombers new: as long ago as the 1980s the Tamil Tigers were carrying out suicide attacks in Sri Lanka in their bloody and eventually abortive attempt to create an independent Tamil state in the north of the island.

But there are two areas where al-Qaeda has broken new ground. One is in its use of social media, notably videos on YouTube, to spread its message beyond the Middle East. An example was enlisting Anwar al-Awlaki, an American of Yemeni extraction, to use his fluent English to preach Islamic extremism over the internet to non-Arabophone Muslims wherever they might be in the world (Awlaki was killed by a CIA-directed drone strike in Yemen in 2011). The other innovation is to franchise the al-Qaeda name. Just as McDonald's lends its name and recipes to independent managers around the globe, so too with al-Qaeda, whose offshoots range from Iraq to Mali.

Al-Qaeda has in some ways been eclipsed by the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham (ISIS), whose other acronym is ISIL – the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (Sham is the Arabic name for greater Syria or the Levant). Whereas al-Qaeda has concentrated much of its efforts on attacks outside the Muslim world, ISIS in 2014 proclaimed a new caliphate in the Middle East, and recruited thousands of fighters from Europe and the rest of the Arab world by an internet presence, complete with slickly produced videos of beheadings and martial gore, that is far more sophisticated than that of al-Qaeda.

The force of the faithful

In the case of the violence wreaked by al-Qaeda and ISIS, religion is an obvious factor. The invocation of a pure form of Islam; the division of the world between the *dar al-islam* (the house of Islam) and the *dar al-harb* (the house of war, populated by those yet to submit to Islam); the determination to establish a new caliphate transcending the borders of modern states: all these are as if the world had not changed in the 13 or so centuries since the Muslim faith first spread, by conquest and conversion, from the Arabian peninsula to the Atlantic in the west and the Himalayas in the east. The fundamentalist Sunni zealotry of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, scorning all other forms of Islam, especially Shi'ism, alarms even the stern Wahhabis of Saudi Arabia, but excites those who yearn for the straightforward strictures of Islamic *sharia* law and an end to corruption and decadence.

At least in terms of headlines, and quite possibly in terms of bloodshed too (for instance the 1980–88 war between Shia Iran and

the secular but Sunni-led regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq), the world's gravest source of conflict is this Muslim divide between Sunni and Shia. It provokes and threatens violent upheaval throughout the Middle East and beyond, from Lebanon in the west to Afghanistan and Pakistan in the east and south to parts of east Africa.

Yet ironically, though some scholars dispute this, the original schism had no ideological or theological cause. Instead, it was a political disagreement over who should be caliph (successor) of the Muslim community (*umma* in Arabic) on the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 AD. The Shia, meaning party or faction in Arabic, were the partisans of Ali, the prophet's cousin and son-in-law, and they believed that he should have been the first caliph. Instead, it was Abu Bakr, the prophet's father-in-law, who first succeeded, nominated by the Sunnis (the word *sunna* refers to the customs and habits of Muhammad) on the grounds that what mattered was a man's worthiness, rather than his lineage to the prophet. There were two further caliphs, Umar and Uthman, before the Sunnis in 656 AD accepted Ali as the fourth of the *rashidun* (rightly guided) caliphs.

But peace between Sunni and Shia was short-lived. In 661 AD Ali was attacked at prayer and died within days. His son Hassan was almost immediately forced to surrender the caliphate to Muawiya ibn Abi Sufyan, a long-time opponent of Ali and also a brother-in-law of the prophet. When Muawiya died in 680 AD, his son Yazid assumed the caliphate, only to be challenged by Hussein, another son of Ali. In a brief battle in Karbala, in modern-day Iraq, Hussein and his followers were defeated – and, to the lasting anger of the Shia, their corpses mutilated.

In subsequent centuries, politics has become both theological and cultural. For the Shia, Ali was the first imam or leader of the community's worship, and all later imams were his direct descendants. But how many descendants? The Shia are themselves divided into seveners (the Ismaili followers of the Aga Khan), fivers (the Zaydis of Yemen) and twelvers (the majority faction), depending on how many imams they recognise before the disappearance of the final imam – who will later emerge as the Mahdi (the guided one) to redeem the world. The similarity to the Christian and Jewish concept of the Messiah is obvious, and the Sunni, too, accept the idea of a Mahdi.

What they reject is the mysticism and philosophical flexibility that has come from the Shia heartland of what was the Persian empire. Whereas Sunni doctrine is essentially simple and straightforward (Sunni imams are local leaders in the mosque, with none of the almost papal power given to their Shia counterparts), Shi'ism has been influenced by Persian Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism – a development that serves only to deepen the traditional antipathy between Arabs and Persians and thus between the Arab world today and Iran.

Beyond religion

Religion is hardly the sole factor in creating conflict. Nations and individuals come to blows over ideology, territory and the quest for resources. They fight each other over their perceived identities. Demographic pressure, too, can play a part, when an increasing population seeks more space to live. In the 1990s Samuel Huntington, an American political scientist, famously outlined a “clash of civilisations”. The underlying cause of conflicts present and future, he argued, was the tensions between cultures: Western; Latin American; Islamic; Confucian; Hindu; Slavic-Orthodox (the Christianity of Russia and eastern Europe); Japanese; and, possibly, African. It remains a controversial theory, dismissed as simplistic by some critics, who attacked it for paying too little attention to economic pressures and the tensions within cultures. Conversely, the anti-West, especially anti-US, sentiment in much of the Muslim world and the confrontations between China and Japan have given pause to Huntington's critics. Perhaps, they reluctantly concede, there is something in the notion of cultural conflicts that transcend the conflicts brewed so often in history by bellicose nationalism.

If cultures are not confined to national frontiers, the same is also true of ideologies. The 20th century was marked by four great contests: between fascism and communism; democracy and totalitarianism; capitalism and socialism; imperialism and decolonisation. The confrontations included the bloodiest in history: the death toll from the first world war (ironically termed the war to end all wars) was at least 16 million; some experts, by including war-related deaths from

disease and famine, put the total death toll from the second world war at over 80 million. And then there was the cold war, pitting the US and the West against the Soviet Union for the following four decades.

The confrontation was cold in the sense that in this ideological struggle neither the West nor the Soviet Union came directly to blows (thankfully, given the nuclear warheads on both sides); instead, their conflict expressed itself by proxy, notably in the third world, where the colonies of the Western powers were demanding (and eventually obtaining) their independence. In the Middle East the cold-war division was almost a caricature: the US supported Israel and the conservative monarchies of Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf; and the Soviet Union supported the socialist republics of Syria, Egypt and Iraq. Traces of that caricature survive even today – an example is Russia’s refusal to countenance the US call for a change of regime in Syria after the winds of the Arab spring provoked first a popular uprising in 2011 and then full-scale civil war.

The ideological stand-off divided Europe, too: the iron curtain, as Churchill termed it, separated the continent between Western and Soviet camps, and even on the western side of this curtain there were strong pro-Soviet communist parties, particularly in France and Italy. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the unification of Germany at the end of the 1980s and start of the 1990s, Francis Fukuyama, an American political scientist, famously declared “the end of history”, writing:

What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the cold war or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalisation of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.

If only that were so. Fukuyama has since modified his views, acknowledging that American neoconservatives, in whose camp he had been a leading figure, had been proved wrong by the tragic reality of the war in Iraq. Sadly, the triumph of Western liberal democracy might have to wait.

Just how long, if not for ever, is a tricky question. As Freedom

House, a US think-tank, has noted, though democracy (rather broadly defined) spread impressively in the late 20th century, it has now stalled. The wonks at Freedom House reckoned that by 2000 there were 120 democracies in the world – an impressive gain on the 11 that could be counted in 1941 – but 2016 was the eleventh year in a row in which they also calculated that global freedom had declined.

The basic building blocks of democracy – free speech, free assembly, free elections and an independent judiciary – might seem at first glance a perfectly adequate deterrent to violence. In practice, they fail time and time again. The US, which often asserts it is the world's oldest continuous democracy (Iceland's claim is weakened by a 45-year break in its parliamentary sessions in the 19th century), has regularly had to confront domestic dissidents who have preferred terrorism to the ballot box. Groups such as the Black Panthers, the Symbionese Liberation Army, the Aryan Brotherhood and the Weathermen have all carried out violent attacks on the federal government; and dozens of militia groups today emphasise their willingness, if need be, to take up arms against a tyrannical government. Europe's democracies have had similar problems: Germany, for example, with the Baader-Meinhof group (also known as the Red Army Faction); Italy with the Brigade Rosse; France with Action Directe. So too has democratic Japan: in the 1970s and 1980s the Japanese Red Army carried out deadly attacks in both Japan and – in support of Palestinian groups – abroad; in 1995 the Aum Shinrikyo cult carried out a sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway.

Those groups, be they in the US, Europe or Japan, were all motivated by a fervent ideological determination to change some of the world's richest societies. The same impulse exists in poor countries, too. Corruption in politics and business, usually allied to extreme disparities in wealth, is almost certain to lead to social unrest – and so to violence with an ideological flavour. Al-Qaeda in the Arab world is an obvious example; so too the Marxist FARC guerrillas in Colombia (who signed a peace deal in late 2016 after more than 50 years of conflict).

In many developing countries, however, ideology tends to rest on the foundations of demography and the quest for resources. In 1950 the population of Egypt was just over 21 million, but by 2015 it had

grown to more than 84 million – and the projection for 2025 is that another 10 million will by then have been added to the total. Cairo has become a choking megalopolis with some of Africa's biggest slums, while the countryside, relying on the Nile for its fertility, can no longer feed all the hungry mouths. Given that demographic reality, even the most efficient and benevolent government in the world (and Egypt's is neither) would find it hard to provide enough education, healthcare, housing and jobs to cope with such a population increase. It is hardly surprising, then, that in 2011 the famed docility of the Egyptian people gave way under the pressure of the so-called Arab spring to revolution, with both the regime and its opponents resorting to deadly violence.

The situation in Yemen is perhaps even worse. The country had around 4.3 million people in 1950, but by 2015 it had 26 million. As the population has increased, so has its need for water. Yemen's aquifers are draining at such an alarming rate that its capital, Sana'a, could soon run out of water. When aquifers are depleted, farms go dry, leaving the ground fertile only for rebellion. One of al-Qaeda's strongholds is in the Radaa Basin, the site of one of Yemen's most vulnerable aquifers. Near the northern border with Saudi Arabia, jobless workers have forsaken the now-arid fruit farms and taken up arms with the pro-Iran Houthi rebels. The Houthis are Zaydi Shia, which means that there will always be a sectarian element, originally latent but now increasingly overt, in their rebellion against the Sunni central government – which can rely on Sunni Saudi Arabia for support against its Shia adversaries.

Demographic pressure affects much of sub-Saharan Africa, too. Lagos now has more residents than Cairo and Kinshasa is catching up. But it is not so much demographic pressure as greed that fuels some of Africa's conflicts. Blood diamonds is an evocative term (rather more so than the alternative conflict diamonds) for the trade that both finances conflicts and, all too often, causes them. The list of African countries that have suffered conflicts fuelled by the quest for diamonds is depressingly long: Angola, Côte d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire under a dictatorial president, Mobutu Sese Seko), the Republic of Congo, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Zimbabwe. Nor are diamonds the only bounties of nature to attract violence. There are plenty of conflict minerals too, from the gold that

will adorn fashionable women from New Delhi to New York, to the columbite-tantalite (coltan) that goes into hearing aids and laptop computers. Their value is such that they have condemned millions in central Africa to years of vicious wars in which children are forced to carry out killings and women are raped with impunity.

The deadly combination

It is futile to ascribe any single cause to a conflict. Invariably, it is a combination of factors that leads to violence. Al-Qaeda and ISIS are motivated by a particular religious zealotry, but their fighters may also have other incentives: an ideological antipathy to the imperialist West, for example; or a desire to avenge a friend or relative already lost in battle; or in some cases an urge to escape poverty – or even boredom. There is no doubt that the Pakistan Taliban have gained recruits because US drone attacks in north-western Pakistan have all too often killed and injured the innocent. The Naxalites in eastern India are conventionally described as Maoist, yet it is clear that local grievances over tribal rights, landownership, mining and forest management are as important as any Marxist doctrine in attracting support. In Nigeria the Islamist militants of Boko Haram (“Western education is forbidden” in the Hausa language) are motivated not just by an extreme interpretation of Islam but also by their frustration with their own poverty and with corrupt authorities allegedly favouring their Christian neighbours.

By contrast, the fighters of the Free Papua Movement (Organisasi Papua Merdeka) are reacting to a less complicated impulse: their war is an attempt to secede from an Indonesia that is culturally and ethnically quite different from what used to be called Western New Guinea. Yet Indonesia is one of the world’s most diverse nations, and the doctrine of *pancasila* (five principles), formulated by President Sukarno when the country gained its independence after the second world war, is a deliberate attempt to create unity from diversity. Arguably, if Indonesia had lived up to its principles, the Free Papua Movement would have disappeared. Instead, it is encouraged by the example of East Timor, a former Portuguese colony which resisted a quarter-century of Indonesian occupation before, in 2002, becoming the first new sovereign nation of the 21st century.