

structure. For instance, we might consider the ongoing wars in Ukraine, Gaza, Sudan, and Myanmar; the frozen but highly volatile conflicts in the South Caucasus and Korean Peninsula; and the low-level but persistent violence in various parts of Africa and the Middle East. These conflicts are similar not in terms of ideology but in terms of longevity.

However, the presence of unresolved conflicts is also intersecting with non-traditional risk factors in a more overt manner. Climate-related stress, food insecurity, demographic challenges, and digital disinformation are increasingly becoming conflict multipliers. These factors are complicating mediation processes and further extending the societal footprint of conflict beyond traditional conflict zones. These factors do not necessarily trigger wars but certainly extend the life span and consequences of conflict. The civilian population is the worst affected in these conflicts.

This commentary will explore the international landscape of unresolved conflicts through the prism of persistence rather than escalation. The argument will be made that the most immediate risk to the international system today is not the sudden onset of generalized war but the normalization of conflict without end, where violence is managed, contained, and suffered through rather than resolved.

Why Contemporary Wars Rarely Conclude

One of the central concerns of the current age is that the end of armed conflict no longer appears to follow the logic of decisive negotiation or battlefield resolution. Now wars have become extended equilibria. This is a situation in which violence is constantly contained but not conclusively resolved. This is not merely a function of the length of conflict but also how the management of contemporary wars has been institutionalized and normalized by actors both within and outside the conflict zones.

One way to make sense of this is to think about ceasefires and peace processes not as precursors to peace, but as systems of mutual endurance. The temporary halts in violence, whether between Israel and Hamas, in eastern Ukraine, or between the warring factions in Sudan, may not necessarily resolve the underlying political logjams but become regular features instead. Many ceasefires are necessarily transactional. These are aimed at alleviating short-term pain or providing a pause to facilitate humanitarian intervention but are not followed by broader frameworks of negotiation that seek to address the political grievances, power imbalances, or structural injustices

that drive the conflict in the first place. In Gaza, a ceasefire lowered civilian deaths in 2025. But fighting broke out again and reconstruction remained stalled because neither side had gained strategic clarity or political settlement.²

Another level of complexity is found in the external political economy of conflict. International players have a stake in maintaining conflicts at a manageable level of intensity. The funding of opposing factions in Sudan's civil war has extended the conflict as international sponsors have ensured that opposing factions are armed and supplied without necessarily pushing them to reach a peace agreement.³

Conflicts remain unresolved because they have multiple layers, such as ethnic conflicts, territorial disputes, governance crises, and economic marginalization. These cannot be easily disassembled by ceasefire agreements. In the case of Myanmar, for instance, the dispersal of armed groups in ethnic areas means that even local ceasefires do not necessarily lead to national peace.

Ceasefires Without Settlements

Ceasefires are often viewed as moral successes and diplomatic breakthroughs. But in the context of modern conflict, ceasefires are increasingly becoming administrative tools rather than tools of resolution. The rise in the number of ceasefires has not led to a decrease in the number of unresolved wars. It has actually led to a shift in the way conflict is suspended, framed, and politicized. The issue is not that ceasefires are not successful but that they are successful at the wrong thing.

In most instances, ceasefires have become a signal rather than a solution. They are a signal of restraint to the international community, a signal of response to humanitarian pressure, or a signal of relevance to mediators. The motivation to move towards a political compromise becomes less

² Sabbagh, Dan. 2026. "Ukrainian Civilian Casualties Surged by 26% in 2025, Say Researchers." The Guardian. The Guardian. February 16, 2026. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/feb/16/ukrainian-civilian-casualties-surged-by-26-in-2025-say-researchers>.

³ Marchal, Roland. 2025. "'Many Countries Are Helping Perpetuate the War' in Sudan." Le Monde.fr. Le Monde. November 7, 2025. https://www.lemonde.fr/en/opinion/article/2025/11/07/many-countries-are-helping-perpetuate-the-war-in-sudan_6747203_23.html.

after the signaling process is accomplished. In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the cessation of conflict has led to the stabilization of the immediate environment without addressing the issues of governance fragmentation, territoriality, and the lack of a political horizon in most cases.

Another less examined dynamic is the momentum of bureaucracy. Ceasefires create whole environments, from monitoring regimes to humanitarian coordination structures that favor continuity over closure. In Yemen, the terms of the ceasefires decreased big-picture violence but eventually became institutionalized in international bureaucracies that valued access and de-escalation over political negotiation.⁴ The conflict did not end. It simply receded into a lower-intensity steady state that was more easily administered than solved.



Brokering a Ceasefire in Yemen (Source: International Crisis Group)

Ceasefires also have a problematic relationship with the media cycles of the modern age. Temporary reductions in violence can diffuse international pressure and scatter it in ways that undermine diplomatic leverage. As the headlines pass, so too does the pressure for structural-level negotiations. This was evident following the Russia-Ukraine grain corridor agreements. It dealt with a global concern about food supply without moving the needle on any lasting resolution regarding sovereignty, security guarantees, or territorial authority.

⁴ Center, Sana'a. 2025. "What Does the Gaza Ceasefire Mean for Yemen? - Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies." Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies. October 19, 2025. <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/25617>.

In this light, ceasefires are not failed peace-building instruments but successful containment instruments. They lower the level of immediate violence while secretly propping up the shelf life of unresolved conflicts. The unpleasant truth is that ceasefires may now be part of the architecture of persistence.

External Actors and the Political Economy of Prolonged Conflict

The involvement of external parties in war is normally justified in terms of morality, such as aiding allies, upholding norms, or preventing instability. However, a less studied truth is that many modern wars continue not in spite of external involvement but because of how that involvement is organized. External parties never seek victory or a resolution. They seek influence, leverage, and risk management. This is a subtle way of transforming wars into long-term political resources rather than problems to be solved.

One of the most important changes is that the kind of outside help that is needed today is measured in such a way as to avoid both defeat and resolution. Military assistance, intelligence sharing, economic aid, or diplomatic support may be intended to keep partners afloat rather than to help them win or to help them negotiate a meaningful compromise. Such conflicts are costly enough to matter but are contained enough not to escalate. In the case of Ukraine, outside help has been carefully calibrated to prevent collapse on the one hand and to avoid escalation that might force a resolution on the other.⁵

Another factor that is not given enough consideration is the domestic role of foreign wars for foreign actors. Wars serve as a justification for military expenditure, arms sales, and the maintenance of alliances. Wars, once institutionalized, have stakeholders beyond the conflict zone. It becomes inconvenient to end them, even if it is morally the right thing to do. Wars, in this case, become a part of the normal course of governance rather than an exception.

⁵ Stein, Janice Gross. 2023. "Escalation Management in Ukraine: 'Learning by Doing' in Response to the 'Threat That Leaves Something to Chance.'" Texas National Security Review. June 22, 2023. <https://tnsr.org/2023/06/escalation-management-in-ukraine-learning-by-doing-in-response-to-the-threat-that-leaves-something-to-chance/>.

Foreign actors also alter the incentives of the local actors. If local actors depend on foreign actors for survival, then their accountability becomes foreign rather than local. Bargaining with local adversaries becomes secondary to securing foreign support. In Libya, local factions have consistently disregarded reconciliation initiatives because foreign patronage made the cost of political stagnation low.⁶

What comes to light is not conspiracy, but drift. There is no individual actor that seeks to extend the duration of war, but the system itself is one that rewards those who can handle conflict rather than resolve it. Third-party actors are then left as the guardians of instability, not the designers of peace. So, wars of long duration are not simply failures of diplomacy.

Civilian Exposure in Long Wars

When such conflicts drag on for years with no end in sight, one of the most underappreciated effects is not only the continuation of conflict but also the toll on civilians and the humanitarian systems in place to protect them. This is not a level playing field, and the current toll of conflict adds a disturbing element to the effects of war: the erosion of not only physical security but also the social and institutional frameworks that are necessary for human security.

By mid-2025, over 122 million people had been forcibly displaced from their homes because of conflict, persecution, or violence, an increase of over 2 million from the previous year.⁷ This is a decade-high level of displacement, which has nearly doubled since the mid-2010s. Of these, approximately 73.5 million are internally displaced persons, meaning they are still within their countries but cannot return to their homes.⁸

⁶“UN Warns Libya’s Reconciliation Efforts Stalled by Politicisation and Exclusion | | AW.” 2025. AW. 2025. <https://theArabweekly.com/un-warns-libyas-reconciliation-efforts-stalled-politicisation-and-exclusion>.

⁷ Farge, Emma. 2025. “Wars Have Now Displaced over 122 Million People as Aid Funding Falls, UN Says.” Reuters, June 12, 2025. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/wars-now-displace-over-122-million-people-aid-funding-falls-un-says-2025-06-12/>.

⁸ European Commission. 2024. “Forced Displacement.” Civil-Protection-Humanitarian-Aid.ec.europa.eu. 2024. https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/what/humanitarian-aid/forced-displacement_en.

Displacement, in itself, is more than just a number. It affects all aspects of civilian life. In conflicts such as the civil war in Sudan, for example, it was estimated that half of the population, required humanitarian aid by the end of 2025, and the healthcare system had broken down. In the Gaza Strip, food insecurity was at critically high levels, with more than one million people in emergency or worse levels of food insecurity.

These numbers illustrate a systemic lack of humanitarian protection. Humanitarian systems are designed to address a crisis that is time-limited, but the type of conflict that exists in the modern world is a long-term conflict that occurs over a period of years or decades. As conflict continues, the presence of humanitarians diminishes: funding ceases, access is limited due to security concerns, and infrastructure such as hospitals or schools is damaged or made non-functional.⁹ The issue is not simply unaddressed need, but rather the normalization of vulnerability. Children are left out of education for a decade or more, displaced populations fall further into poverty, mental health effects accumulate, and community capacity is diminished. Perhaps most problematically, even if conflict is alleviated, the secondary effects of war, such as starvation risk, livelihoods, and public services, can continue unchecked. In this way, conflict that is not addressed will not only fail to re-create peace, it will also create a slow-burning.

Emerging Risk Multipliers: Climate Stress, Food Insecurity, and Digital Manipulation in Conflict Zones

Today's wars are no longer fueled by weapons alone. Wars now continue because non-military factors operate in the background to extend them, making it even more difficult to end them even when the fighting dies down. Climate-related stress, food insecurity, and cyber manipulation do not cause wars in the classical sense. However, they create the environment in which wars refuse to end. The strength of these factors is in distortion, not destruction.

Climate-related stress is one such factor. Between 2024 and 2025, climate-related shocks impacted regions prone to conflict disproportionately. In the Sahel, for example, climate change-related erratic rainfall and desertification led to a 20-40% reduction in agricultural production in some

⁹ Nations, United. 2025. "Humanitarian Coordination | United Nations Annual Report 2025 | United Nations." United Nations. 2025. <https://www.un.org/en/annualreport/2025/humanitarian-assistance>.

regions.¹⁰ This was a direct weakening of livelihoods. When people's survival is at stake, armed groups have leverage because they provide economic benefits, security, or access to resources. Conflict is then embedded in people's lives. Peace talks become difficult in such a scenario because economic need keeps the recruitment pipelines open even during ceasefires.

Food insecurity further entrenches this cycle. Worldwide, more than 280 million people were acutely food insecure in 2025, and nearly 70% of these people lived in conflict-affected countries.¹¹ Food insecurity alters political outcomes. In food-insecure areas, people are less capable of resisting force, less likely to risk peace, and more concerned with survival than settlement. In Somalia, food insecurity has derailed stabilization efforts not in spite of negotiations but because hunger made them irrelevant on the ground.

Digital manipulation introduces a new, hidden level of conflict. In protracted conflicts, the realm of information is a battlefield. Belligerents use social media to inflate threats, sow fear, or delegitimize peace. In Haiti, gang violence has been fueled by social media disinformation, sowing distrust in institutions and making peaceful outcomes seem dangerous or pointless. Even when violence subsides, sentiment remains hostile.¹²

The important thing to understand is that peace initiatives often focus on what the fighters want, but not on what the societies are being forced to survive. Climate pressure, hunger, and information manipulation are the silent multipliers of conflict environments, turning wars into self-reinforcing processes. Without them, conflicts can cease fire, but they will not cease to exist.

¹⁰ Moussa, Moussa Hissein. 2025. "Between Climate Change and Sustainable Resilience: How Can the Sahel Resist the Growing Threat of Desertification?" AKEM. November 25, 2025. <https://www.akem.org.tr/post/between-climate-change-and-sustainable-resilience-how-can-the-sahel-resist-the-growing-threat-of-de>.

¹¹ World Food Programme. 2025. "A Global Food Crisis." World Food Programme. 2025. <https://www.wfp.org/global-hunger-crisis>.

¹² Reuters Staff. 2025. "Haiti Gangs Set Fire to Building Once Home to Nation's Oldest Radio Station." Reuters, March 13, 2025. <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/haiti-gangs-set-fire-building-once-home-nations-oldest-radio-station-2025-03-13/>.

Way Forward

In the coming future, it is expected that most of the ongoing wars will not be concluded with comprehensive peace agreements. Instead, a more realistic scenario will be the reduction of violence with phases of calmness followed by phases of tension. Wars like the ones in Ukraine, Israel and Palestine, Sudan, and Myanmar are characterized by deep-rooted political differences, international intervention and a lack of trust between the two sides. As long as the main parties feel they can maintain the war at an acceptable level, it will be difficult for them to reach a complete solution.

At the same time, it is possible to make some progress through small steps rather than grand peace initiatives. Rather than seeking to reach final solutions, it may be possible to seek to reach small agreements that can improve living conditions. Local ceasefires in exchange for humanitarian access, the return of basic services, or economic engagement may decrease the incentives for conflict. Over time, small gains may build up enough pressure for a political compromise. In some conflicts, it may be possible to make progress by reducing the benefits of conflict, such as access to resources or arms, rather than seeking to solve all political issues at once.

However, policy responses must also be more consistent and realistic. Third-party interveners must link military and financial assistance to specific political and humanitarian goals, rather than making unconditional offers. Humanitarian policies must focus on safeguarding critical infrastructure such as healthcare and education, ensuring that societies remain functional even as conflict continues. Mediation efforts must also extend beyond national governments to involve local authorities, social groups, and economic interests, who may have more compelling stakes in stability. Nonetheless, only through persistence and pressure, rather than rapid diplomatic solutions, it might be possible to reduce the disasters made by conflicts of today.