

Peace Briefing

War prevention – what is war?

By Patrick T. Hiller

War is a term used in everyday, political and academic language without too much reflection yet with multiple different meanings. Most commonly war is understood as the armed conflict between or within nations.

In fact, much research still is confined to the examination of interstate war, that is warfare between formally recognized states (see for example the edited volume by Vasquez, 2012). With this definition often comes a true, but dangerous perspective that international warfare is declining. Rather than becoming complacent with such decline, we still must address warfare as a very serious social problem. To do so, it is important to problematize the concept of war in the current global landscape.

War is the sustained and coordinated militarized combat between groups leading to large numbers of casualties.

Especially in the contemporary highly complex globalized world, Clausewitz's descriptions of war as a "nothing but a duel on a larger scale" or the "continuation of policy by other means" are insufficient. Peace researchers extensively deal with operationalizing war and armed conflict for methodological purposes. What follows is a selective and by no means complete overview of common definitions of war and their changes.

For instance, this definition is commonly used, yet not considered specific enough:

War is commonly conceived as meaning large-scale organized violence for political purposes. The range of different situations that would fit this definition is large and rather diverse, including not only what we traditionally think of as wars like World

War II (an interstate war) or the American Civil War (an intrastate war), but also genocides and communal conflict. (Höglund & Öberg, 2011)

A more empirically observable definition by the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) is:

An armed conflict is a contested incompatibility that concerns government or territory or both, where the use of armed force results in at least 25 battle-related deaths in a year. Of these two parties at least one has to be the government of a state.

This thoughtful definition where "armed conflict" and "war" are more or less used synonymously, can be expanded by UCDP's view of "non-state conflict", where the use of armed force is between two organized groups, neither of which is the government of state. The Human Security Center uses the concept of high-intensity conflict, defined war as conflicts that reach 1,000 or more battle deaths in a calendar year.

The Heidelberg Institute for Conflict Research defines war as:

A type of violence conflict in which violent force is used with a certain continuity in an organized and systematic way. The conflict parties exercise extensive measures, depending on the situation. The extent of destruction is massive and of long duration. (Höglund & Öberg, 2011)

Anthropologist Douglas Fry (2007, based on Prostermann, 1972) warns us of using overly broad definitions of war for many forms of lethal conflict. He defines warfare as:

A group activity, carried out by members of one community against members of another community, in which it is the primary purpose to inflict serious injury or death on multiple nonspecified members of that other community, or in which the primary purpose makes it highly likely that serious injury or death will be inflicted on multiple nonspecified members of that

community in the accomplishment of that purpose.

In this definition the impersonal lethal aggression between communities is emphasized.

Mary Kaldor offers an important distinction between new and old wars:

I use the term 'war' to emphasize the political nature of this new type of violence, even though, ... the new wars involve a blurring of the distinctions between war (usually defined as violence between states or organized political groups for political motives), organized crime (violence undertaken by privately organized groups for private purposes, usually financial gain) and large-scale violations of human rights (violence undertaken by states or politically organized groups against individuals). (Kaldor, 2012)

Kaldor's understanding of new wars is covered extensively in a very powerful manner by anthropologist Carolyn Nordstrom in her book *Shadows of War* (2004). Nordstrom examines the deep politics of war in war zones but also the vast extra-legal networks that fuel war and war profiteering. Her understanding of war thus is very contextual and broad in that it encompasses multiple sites including not only the location where violence occurs but also those where weaponry and ammunition is assembled as well as the vast global trade networks.

Frank Hoffman introduces the timely notion of "hybrid wars":

Hybrid Wars incorporate a range of different modes of warfare, including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder. (Hoffman, 2007)

Rasler and Thompson succinctly describe warfare as "sustained and coordinated combat between groups" (2012).

We see that despite the changes, some continuous elements are:

- Organized / coordinated violence
- Intergroup violence
- Large-scale casualties
- Sustained combat

Without limiting ourselves to one definition and without rendering the concept of war meaningless, these four elements allow us to examine forms of armed violence through the lens of peacebuilding. In other words, the War Prevention Initiative seeks to contribute to the prevention and elimination of **sustained and coordinated militarized combat between groups leading to large numbers of casualties.**

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