



Report Launch: Conflict Trends in the Arab World, 1946-2019

Online Conference

25 August 2021

Introduction

The [Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies \(CHS\)](#), in collaboration with the [Peace Research Institute Oslo \(PRIO\)](#), had jointly release a major report analysing conflict trends in the Arab world from 1946 to 2019.

The report comes at a moment in which the Arab world continues to reel from a series of protracted conflicts and their long-term consequences. It stresses the necessity of understanding the trajectory of conflict in the region to reverse this cycle of armed conflict and set the Arab world on a path to sustainable peace and recovery. As part of the wider effort by CHS and PRIO to examine and contextualise issues related to conflict and peacemaking within the region, the report analyses conflict trends through a comparative and historical framework. It intends to act as a springboard from which to generate intellectual discussion and exchange in and beyond the Arab region.

CHS and PRIO collaboratively launched the report in a joint online conference held on 25 August 2021, whilst simultaneously publishing the report online in both Arabic and English. The conference began with opening remarks by Professor Sultan Barakat, Director of CHS, and Henrik Urdal, Director of PRIO. This was followed by a summary of the report's key findings by three of the co-authors; Siri Rustad, Research Director and Research Professor in the Conditions for Violence and Peace Department at PRIO, Mona Hedaya, Research Fellow at CHS, and Sansom Milton, Senior Research Fellow at CHS. An experts' discussion panel was then held, where Peter Wallensteen, Senior Professor in Peace and Conflict Research at Uppsala University, and Marwan Kabalan, Director of Policy Analysis at the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, delivered their remarks in a discussion panel that concluded with a public Q&A session.



The Report and the Partnership

The speakers started their introductory remarks by emphasising the close and strong relationship that had developed between CHS and PRIO since the foundation of the center, as well as acknowledging the close relationship between PRIO and the department of peace and conflict research at Uppsala University which provided the high-quality conflict data analysed in the report. It was pointed out that the two institutions' collaboration in this "*Conflict Trends in the Arab World*" report is not the first and will not be the last, and that the report is responding to the shared ambition to build high-quality and evidence-based policy advice that has transformative power to make a difference in the world. Thus, the report documents and disaggregates the rise in armed conflicts in the region as a pre-requisite for understanding their causes and dynamics, and for addressing and identifying the possible solutions. Furthermore, it unpacks conflict trends in the Arab world beyond simplistic enumeration of conflict events or occurrences, offering a more comprehensive and accurate overview.

It was made clear in the introductory remarks that one of the main concerns served by the report is to contextualise, regionalise, and localise explanations and interpretations of the data. Consequently, it takes the Arab world as its unit of analysis, rather than the more commonly used "Middle East" or "Middle East and North Africa", as an internally-generated and locally-rooted definition for the region.

The panel mentioned that the report follows the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) definition of conflict, as a case in which there are at least 25 battle-deaths per year. Finally, it was declared that the report is intended as a springboard from which to generate intellectual discussion and exchange in and beyond the Arab region, and the panel welcomed correspondence and dialogue on alternative explanations and interpretations of the data contained therein.

Captivating findings: Three violence types and two levels

Following the introductory remarks, a presentation was delivered by the report's co-authors. It shed light on selected prominent and interesting key findings. The intervention started with a presentation of trends in the Arab World, analysis, and findings, followed by a global trends overview that contextualised and compared various regional trends. Both regional and global trends were addressed, as in the report, across three types of political violence: state-based conflicts, non-state conflicts, and one-sided violence. In addition, some trends were related to conflict termination types and their geographic spread. Through different figures, it was shown that data could be analysed from several perspectives, depending on data manipulation. Each analytical perspective provides useful information that deepens the study of conflict trends and poses new question, helping deepen the analysis for local contexts.

Throughout the presentation, it was perceived that the "post Arab Spring era" has witnessed a spike in the intensity of state-based conflicts, which was concentrated in 2014. Paradoxically, while the high number of conflicts in that period remained sustained, the number of battle-deaths decreased over the same period. The panel further highlighted some possible areas for further development of the data to capture the complexities and dynamics of wars related to occupation and colonialism that continue to affect Palestine and other locations in the region. The different definitions between 'conflicts' and 'wars' were defined, revealing that non-war conflicts in region, while numerous, remained low intensity, even when considered as a whole. Furthermore, multiple qualitative explanations were offered for the multiplicity of conflicts in Arab countries in the recent period beyond what the quantitative data suggests.

Special attention was given to the increasing trend of internationalised conflicts in the Arab world, and to the fact that the year 2019 has witnessed the largest number of them since the end of World War II. The overview focused on the unique trend for the region in the notable increase in governmental conflicts (compared to territorial conflicts) since the 1980s; however, it anticipates an increase in the rate of territorial conflicts in the forthcoming period.

The year 2014 was in focus when presenting non-state conflicts. As per the authors, it has witnessed a dramatic increase compared to the average since 1989, where the number of the conflicts jumped from an average of 10 to 50. The report here sheds light on conflicts in Syria, which accounted for over 80% of the region's battle-deaths in 2018 and 2019, and the sizeable share of non-state conflicts in Libya, Sudan and Yemen.

Trends focused on regional one-sided violence were addressed via an analyses of the cases of asymmetrical conflicts and the War on Terror. The trend of increasing government perpetrated violence was discussed. It was highlighted that while the number of perpetrators from 2011 onwards is not lower than levels in the 2000s, the number of people killed is much higher. Nevertheless, the authors were optimistic about the near future because of the substantial decrease seen in both forms of one-sided violence in 2019, regardless of negative explanations linked to governments' elimination and suppression of dissent and increasing authoritarianism.

Concerning geographic spread, an overview of the key findings showed that there are conflict events occurring in Arab countries that were not considered conflict countries in 2019, such as Sudan and Algeria, suggesting that these conflicts were low intensity. As a result, it was recommended that these countries be followed closely to monitor further developments, especially as both countries are in a transitional period.

In regard to conflict termination, several interesting findings were presented. For example, from 1946-2013, most terminated conflicts ended with a victory for the government (or side A), while a few ended with victory for side B (or insurgent/rebel groups, or in the case of interstate conflict, another state). In the time period, approximately 38% of terminated conflicts ended in a settlement by either a peace agreement or a cease-fire. More interestingly, the data revealed that civil wars in the Arab world are most likely to end by low activity for other conflicts, but not for international civil wars. On the other hand, governmental conflicts are much more likely to end with a victory for the government, while territorial conflicts are more likely to end with settlements.

Concerning global overviews, it was underlined that Afghanistan experienced the most violent conflict in 2019, followed by four Arab countries. The slides delivered a comparison of concentration of IS-related conflict events in the Arab region and globally. For the non-state conflicts, the most notable finding was the very high rates of battle-deaths in Arab region compared to battle-deaths in other regions and the conflicts' increasing rates in Arab countries since 2011, where the closest region's rates were Non-Arab Africa's. While Africa and the Arab world both exhibit high levels of non-state conflict, the two regions are characterised by different modes of conflict between non-state groups. The Arab world's non-state group fighting is characterised by conflict between highly organised actors, while in Africa we see a higher number of communal conflicts.

Globally, the total of the two conflict types and violent events is much broader than state-based violence alone, and it is a trend to see more than one type of violence in a particular country. At the end, it was pointed out that recently released data for the year 2020 shows no significant change or development one year following the period covered by the report.

Expert's endorsement, questions, recommendations, and academic community interventions

An experts' discussion panel, moderated by Professor Sultan Barakat, CHS Director, emphasized the uniqueness and importance of the report and how it enriches literature and research in this area through its localised deep analysis, informative comparisons and valuable and reliable data presented, especially that it deals with conflict in the Arab world as a multi-faceted dynamic and changing phenomena. Likewise, it was indicated that the report fills an important gap in research and is Arab owned and led. It was agreed that using the definition of the Arab world was much more accurate than it's 'Middle East' counterpart. Nonetheless, it was questioned whether the concept could be further developed to include the outer limits of the Arab world, beyond the boundaries of Arab League member states. The accuracy of language and terminology of the report was another positivity the panel focused on.



Panelists highlighted some of the interesting findings from their experience, including the trends of increasing international intervention in the region’s civil wars and how this helped explain why it was so difficult to deal with such conflicts, and findings on the spread of conflict and how the three categories relate to each other. Multiple questions were raised which could be turned into research questions for future studies. For example, various questions were raised including on the relation between conflicts in Arab countries that witnessed all three types of violence/conflicts in a particular year. Is it that it started with non-state conflicts, then developed into one-sided violence and then into armed state-based conflicts or were they all simultaneous? How does each type of conflict usually start? How do they escalate into wars and how do conflicts de-escalate?

Recommendations were put forward to develop the report or as ideas for future work. One was to deeply study the causes, origins, and drivers of conflict to predict when and where conflict can occur and to prevent, manage, and solve them. Another suggestion focused on the issue of environmental dynamics as a cause of conflict in the Arab world. In addition, a further recommendation suggested a deeper focus on clarifying the changing forms and natures of conflicts in the region over the last seven decades.

A Q&A session followed with multiple questions and comments from interested an audience through Zoom and CHS social media platforms. The interventions focused on natural phenomena and resources (water, oil, etc) acting as a contributing factor to conflict in the region, the methodology of UCDP data and the launched report, the comparisons between regional and global trends and the roles that religious identity and ethnicity play in community-based conflicts.