Conflict Trends in the Arab World, 1946-2019

Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies
and
Peace Research Institute Oslo

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About the publishers

Established in 2016, the **Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies (CHS)** is an independent research center that generates scholarship and engages in policy and practice on conflict mediation, humanitarian action, and post-conflict recovery in the Arab world and beyond.

CHS research is driven by values of independence, interdisciplinarity, and intellectual rigor. By linking theory, policy, and practice in its engagement, it develops knowledge networks with constructive impact at local, national, and international levels.

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Research at PRIOS is multidisciplinary and concentrates on the driving forces behind violent conflict and the ways that peace can be built, maintained and spread. PRIOS is committed to academic excellence and strives develop theoretical insights, refine research methodologies, and communicate their research findings widely.
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Clarifications

Any views expressed in this document are entirely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect or represent the views and policies of CHS or PRIO.

This report is intended as a working document to be used as a springboard from which to generate intellectual discussion and exchange in and beyond the Arab region. Readers and scholars are encouraged to send their opinions, analysis, or additions to the corresponding author email address. All contributions shall be duly acknowledged.

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<tr>
<td>AQAP</td>
<td>Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IS</td>
<td>Islamic State</td>
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<tr>
<td>ISIS</td>
<td>Islamic State of Iraq and Syria</td>
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<tr>
<td>LNA</td>
<td>Libyan National Army</td>
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<tr>
<td>NATO</td>
<td>North Atlantic Treaty Organisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>SDF</td>
<td>Syrian Democratic Forces</td>
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<tr>
<td>SNA</td>
<td>Syrian National Army</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STC</td>
<td>Southern Transitional Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>UAE</td>
<td>United Arab Emirates</td>
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<tr>
<td>UCDP</td>
<td>Uppsala Conflict Data Program</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>UCDP GED</strong></td>
<td>UCDP Geographical Event Dataset</td>
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<td>UK</td>
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CONFLICT TRENDS IN THE ARAB WORLD
1946–2019
**PREAMBLE**

**About the Report**

The Arab world has been long afflicted by multiple forms of armed conflict, a trend that has been increasing notably in the past decade. To reverse this trend and set the Arab world on a path to sustainable peace and recovery, it is vital to have a clear understanding of the trajectory of conflict in the region. This report is part of a wider effort by the Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies (CHS) to examine and contextualise issues related to conflict and peacemaking within the region in comparative and historical perspectives.

The report was conducted and published in collaboration with the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO). The aim is to describe and analyse trends in conflict in the Arab world from 1946 to 2019, and to compare the region with regional and global conflict trends, which fluctuate throughout history. Whilst some conflict trends can be readily discerned, others require more in-depth research to observe and analyse. The report examines a range of statistical data and provides in-depth analysis and interpretations of what these data suggest. It unpacks conflict trends in the Arab world beyond simplistic enumeration of conflict events or occurrences, offering a more comprehensive and accurate overview. Crucially for the regional analysis, the report contextualises, regionalises, and localises explanations and interpretations of the data.

The report is intended as a springboard from which to generate intellectual discussion and exchange in and beyond the Arab region. We welcome correspondence and dialogue on alternative explanations and interpretations of the data contained herein.

**Why the Arab world?**

In analysing these trends, the report takes the Arab world as its unit of analysis, defined by the 22 Arab League member states: Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates and Yemen (figure 1). This definition stands in distinction to the more commonly used "Middle East" or "Middle East and North Africa". We suggest the definition and labelling of the region be generated from internal rather than external interests, as is the case with the "Middle East" (Gerges, 1991, pp. 209–210). "Middle East" was created - and the region defined -- according to the Western vision, which was shaped by colonial history and conditions of the East/West rivalry in the Cold War. In other words, the genesis of the term is Eurocentric, which shapes "a perception of the region as being defined in terms of the perspectives and concerns of others" (Sever, 2019, pp. 5–6). In this report, the 'Arab world' is preferred as a more appropriate and locally-rooted alternative. Although there are some similarities between the trends of conflicts in the two regions, there are some remarkable differences reflected by the presence of additional countries (e.g., non-Middle Eastern Arab countries like Somalia or Sudan) and the absence of others (e.g., Iran and Turkey).

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1 Some sections of the report examine conflict trends starting from more recent dates, depending on the limits of the data sets utilised.

2 South Sudan was part of Sudan until it gained independence in 2011. The analysis in the report included data on the conflict in South Sudan until 2011 as part of Sudan and the Arab region. From 2011, the report treats South Sudan as an independent state, which is no longer a part of the Arab League/Arab World. The implications of this on conflict trends is referred to throughout the report when relevant.
The Arab world is also a more appropriate nomenclature because it provides conceptual space for its strategic geographic location, rich and attractive resources, and the many other economic and political characteristics that position peace in the region as a crucial factor for global stability and security (Alsoswa, 2019, pp. 7–8). Furthermore, common historical, identity, cultural, religious and linguistic aspects unite the Arab region in its essence. As Sever writes, "perhaps no other group of states in the world has been endorsed with the same potential for cooperation, even integration, as have the Arab countries" (Sever, 2019, pp. 5–6). This unity, which remains a dream in the Arab imagination, is renewed with the occurrence of world historical events (AbuKhalil, 1992, pp. 26–27), the last of which was the outbreak of the Arab Spring. A decade on from the Arab Spring, 81% of Arabs believe that "the Arab peoples constitute a single nation", which is the highest percentage since 2011 (The 2019-20 Arab Opinion Index: Main Results in Brief, 2020, p. 47). Accordingly, we believe it is high time to highlight the issue of conflict trends in the Arab world from locally- and regionally-grounded perspectives.

Key findings

Recent years have witnessed an increasing number of countries around the world experiencing violent conflict, a growing number of external actors intervening in conflict zones, and a proliferation of armed groups involved in combat operations (United Nations and World Bank Group, 2018, p. 11). Conflicts increased in their complexity, especially as many connect to...
emergent global challenges – including disasters, transnational organised crime, and cyber-security crises (Avis, 2019, p. 1) – and as trans-national flows of information, individuals, and resources have become increasingly streamlined across the world (United Nations and World Bank Group, 2018, p. 11).

Recent decades saw the foci of violent conflict shift in terms of regional and sub-regional concentration. In previous decades, parts of Asia and Europe were major centers of conflict and the number of conflicts in those regions reduced significantly. By the 2010s, the majority of violent conflicts were concentrated in South Asia, Africa and the Middle East, including the Arab world (United Nations and World Bank Group, 2018, p. 19). The transition of this epicentre began during the Cold War, which witnessed competition between the great powers for influence and control over those regions, including through proxy wars (United Nations and World Bank Group, 2018, p. 11). The rise in Cold War competition in many countries, especially in the Arab world, corresponded with the end of colonial rule, much of which was achieved through armed struggle in anti-colonial and post-colonial conflicts (Harb, 2019, p. 19). This report shows that between 1946-2019 there have been 215 territorial state-based conflicts and 208 governmental state-based conflicts in the Arab region.

The end of the Cold War was followed by a decrease in the number of interstate conflicts that had been the norm under the bipolar international order, while the number of intrastate conflicts had been increasing since the end of World War II, constituting a greater percentage of the total number of conflicts around the world. At the turn of the 21st century, various factors, including increased peacekeeping operations and prevention efforts, reduced the number of violent conflicts globally. This trend, however, reversed around 2010, as violent conflicts began to increase once more. The report shows that the Arab world was not an exception to this trend. There was a sustained high level of civil wars in the Arab world from the early 1980s to the end of the 1990s. While the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been prominent for decades, the Arab world in the past ten years has witnessed a surge in the number of conflicts (Hiltermann, 2020, pp. 1–2). From 2008 to 2019, the level of world peace (average level of country peacefulness) deteriorated by an estimated rate of 3.78% and conflicts in the Middle East have been a major driver of that decline (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2019, p. 4).

Conflicts multiplied in the wake of the Arab Spring in early 2011, as uprisings and wars emerged in Syria, Yemen, and Libya, as well as less severe conflicts in the region. By 2013, the Arab world witnessed a rise in the number of wars (1000 or more battle-deaths a year) for the first time since the end of the Cold War. This report disaggregates these headline trends by type of conflict. It finds that the Arab world experienced a fairly stable rate of approximately 10 non-state conflicts per year until 2014 when the number suddenly increased to 50 and then declined again 17 by 2019 (which fell in line with global trends at that time). In fact, 2014 saw the most violent state-based conflicts in the region since the end of World War II. The scale of these conflicts is growing increasingly, as they often intersect and
Conflicts in the Arab region have become prominent and notable not only in terms of their number but also in terms of the death tolls. The Arab world experiences the second-highest number of deaths from non-state conflicts (Latin America is the highest). Over 80% of non-state conflicts battle-deaths in the Arab world in 2018 and 2019 occurred in Syria and approximately 10% occurred in Yemen and Libya.

We also report on one-sided violence in the Arab world, where in contrast to the global trend, the level of one-side violence perpetrated by Arab governments is high compared to that carried out by non-state actors. Since 2011, we see continued high levels of one-sided violence conducted by governments in Bahrain, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen followed, in 2019, by a substantial decrease in both types of one-sided violence in the region. In general, the Arab world, after Africa and Asia, reported the third-highest number of incidents of one-sided violence during the reporting period (1989-2019).

In terms of geography, the report indicates that four Arab countries (Iraq, Somalia, Syria and Yemen) were clear hotspots of conflict events in 2019, a finding supported by the Global Peace Index, which reported in 2019 that five of the ten least peaceful countries in the world are located the Arab world: Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Syria and Yemen (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2019, p. 9). And many conflict-affected countries in the Arab world experienced more than one type of violence within the same year.

The report also addresses key issues about how wars end in the Arab world. It finds that from 1946-2013, approximately 1-2 conflicts ended each year with most of these conflicts terminating with a victory for the government. During that period, Arab interstate conflicts were more often resolved by ceasefires than peace agreements, while civil wars more often ended by peace agreements. These sobering findings underline the importance of analysing conflict trends to better understand long-range patterns to support more effective mediation and conflict resolution.

1. Conflict Trends in the Arab World

The report addresses both global and regional trends in three types of political violence: state-based conflicts, non-state conflicts, and one-sided violence. For most data points, the period of analysis is 1946-2019. The conflict datasets from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) are the main source of data and wherein a conflict is defined as a case in which there are at least 25 battle-deaths per year.3

2. State-based Conflicts, 1946-2019

State-based conflicts are defined as conflicts in which at least one of the conflict parties is the government (Gleditsch et al., 2002, pp. 18-19). Globally, state-based conflicts, and especially civil wars are one of the most common types of conflicts, although recent decades have seen an increase in conflicts waged between non-state actors, excluding

3 A more detailed and specific definition of conflict types are provided within each section of this report.
the government (these trends are discussed in section 2).

Depending on the determinants of the datasets, conflicts are differentiated from wars in this report. The criteria for inclusion as a conflict in the UCDP dataset is the presence of a contested incompatibility that concerns the government and/or territory and where the use of armed force between two parties resulted in at least 25 battle-related deaths within a calendar year (Gleditsch et al., 2002, pp. 18-19). The inclusion criteria for war is a state-based conflict or dyad that reaches at least 1,000 battle-related deaths in a specific calendar year (Pettersson, 2019, p. 5). Battle-related deaths are defined as fatalities caused by the fighting parties that "can be directly related to combat", including guerrilla activities, fighting in the battlefield, and aerial bombings of any target type (i.e., cities, villages and/or military bases). By this definition, the targets of these attacks may be either military forces, armed forces, or even civilian representatives for the different parties. It should be noted that 'battle-related deaths, which concern direct deaths, are not the same as war-related deaths, which includes both direct as well as indirect deaths due to disease and starvation, criminality, or attacks deliberately directed against civilians only (one-sided violence)' (Pettersson, 2019a, p. 3).

We classify state-based conflicts in four categories (Gleditsch et al., 2002, p. 619).

1. **Interstate conflict** - when the primary conflict parties include two or more states.
2. **Extrastate conflict** - one state versus any kind of non-state group based outside a state’s territorial boundary. This type of conflict also includes "colonial wars".
3. **Internal armed conflict** (a.k.a. intra-state conflict or civil war) - a conflict between a state government and one or more internal opposition groups with no external intervention.
4. **Internationalised internal armed conflict** (a.k.a. international civil war) - an internal armed conflict in which an external state intervenes in the conflict.

Below, we review and analyse trends of state-based conflicts in the Arab World through multiple indicators. We then provide an overview of the global trends to position and compare regional trends. The same approach will later be utilised in analysing other types of violent conflict and conflict-related trends.

### 2-1 State-based Conflicts in Arab World

First, we provide an overview of state-based conflicts in Arab countries between 1946-2019. In general, the conflict level in the Arab world is fairly stable, with a few extraordinary periods during which the level of battle-related deaths was quite low.
In particular, two time periods stand out here. First, between 1980-1988, we have high double spikes of battle-deaths. These were caused primarily by the Iran-Iraq war, which accounted for 70% of battle-deaths in this period in the Arab region, and 30% of all conflict-related battle-deaths worldwide. Further, we see a sustained high level of civil wars from the early 1980s until the end of the 1990s. Many African-Arab conflicts ended in this period, including the civil war in Djibouti that led to the first multiparty presidential election; the violent conflict between Morocco’s government and Polisario Front, where the UN has been monitoring the cease-fire since 1991 (MINURSO, no date); and the civil war in Somalia, which ended with the overthrow of the Barre government in 1991, resulting in a fragile state characterised by other conflicts which continue to this day (Massoud, 2020, p. 112). The Lebanese civil war was among other Arab state civil wars that ended in this period.

This trend of high severity conflict and civil wars during the 1980s and 1990s could be linked to the global trend of intrastate conflicts that followed the Cold War. The Arab region, similar to other regions, witnessed a rapid increase in conflicts driven by political, ethnic, religious, and tribal factors (Attari and Hamdo, 2016). On the other hand, the growth of peacekeeping and prevention operations may also have influenced the number of conflicts that ended during this period, and especially during the latter portion of this time frame (United Nations and World Bank Group, 2018, p. 11).
The second period that stands out begins in 2011 and continues until the present (we refer to this period as the “Post-Arab-Spring era”). The sharp rise in 2014 stands out here, a year which recorded the highest number of state-based conflicts in the Arab region since the end of World War II, due primarily to the conflict in Syria. Overall, the number of conflicts in this time period is nearly double the number of conflicts in the previous period starting in 2001 (Figure 2). This precipitous rise in conflict numbers may lead some to point to the establishment of the Islamic State (IS) as a driving factor (especially given that in 2015, seven out of the 14 conflicts involved IS). However, this explanation is not accurate and comprehensive.

This 2011-to-present period starts with the emergence of the Arab Spring protests and revolutions against authoritarian and dictatorial regimes. In most cases, these regimes responded with various levels of violence to suppress protests, which, in many cases, escalated several violent dyads and conflicts in Libya, Syria, and Yemen.

Furthermore, from 2011 to present, numerous regional and international powers have intervened in conflicts, either directly or by transforming the conflict to a proxy war to serve various causes and motivations, such as economic interests, ideological reasons, protecting influence, and/or consolidating power vis-à-vis other powers. This trend is likely explained, at least in part, by the fact that high uncertainty and instability became a prominent feature in the regional balance of power in the Arab world following the 2011 revolutions and uprisings, and influenced by the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq by the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK) in 2003. Moreover, this period witnessed active competition between the US, Europe and Russia for arms supply to the region, the import of which increased significantly and served to escalate and perpetuate conflicts (Cammack and Dunne, 2018).

The rise of conflicts in the 2011-to-present period can also be partially explained the fact that many conflicts inherited sectarian, ethnic, and regional root causes of previous de-escalated conflicts (e.g., Syria and Yemen). Therefore, we can see, the emergence of IS was only one of the factors behind the density of conflicts, and, in some contexts, should be considered a consequence, rather than a cause, of conflict. Still, quantitatively, conflicts with IS increase during this period up to 2019 when the White House announced in March the liberation of ISIS-controlled territories in Syria and Iraq (National Security & Defense, 2019) and considered IS defeated territorially. Interestingly, while the high number of conflicts in this period is sustained until 2019, the number of battle-deaths decreases over the same time period, suggesting that most conflicts were low intensity since the Syrian conflict produced the largest number of battle-deaths.

Returning to a focus on interstate conflicts, we see in Figure 2 a concentration between 1948 and 1991. While the existence of this type of conflict during the 1980s was largely due to the Iran-Iraq war, the period from 1948 to 1973 was primarily populated by the Arab-Israeli conflicts that emerged in the face of the occupation of parts of Palestine, Sinai, and the Golan Heights. However, the UCDP definitions do not anywhere use the term Occupation. As a result, these wars are not classified under a special type (as is the case with wars of the colonial period) and thus do not capture the complex dynamics of wars related to occupation and settler colonialism that continue to affect Palestine and other sites in the region. Also, note that all state-based conflicts around the Sudan-South Sudan borders between 1963 and 2011 were
counted as intrastate conflicts, because they were fought over governmental power compatibility between the government and different rebel groups.\textsuperscript{6}

Spikes in battle-deaths are often caused by a few conflicts. If we split the conflicts during 1989-2019 between conflicts (25-999 killed in a calendar year) and wars (≥1000 killed in a calendar year), we see that a fair share of the conflicts have fewer than 1,000 battle-deaths. Until 2002, the number of wars comprised roughly of only one-third of all state-based conflicts in the region. In the following period, this share increased as a result of the significant decrease in the number of other types of conflict. Then, starting in 2013, the Arab world witnessed a rise in the number of wars, the likes of which had not been experienced since the end of the Cold War (Figure 3). It is also clear, from the battle-deaths trend line, that non-war conflicts, while numerous, are still low intensity even when considered in total: the cumulative number of battle-deaths for all conflicts rarely exceeds 3,000 battle-deaths each year throughout the period.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure3.png}
\caption{Conflicts defined as ‘conflict’ (25-999 battle-deaths) and ‘war’ (≥1000 battle-deaths) in the Arab world, 1989-2019}
\end{figure}

Comparing battle-deaths in Arab countries that occurred in 2018 and 2019, one can make several observations (Figure 4). First, we see a 25% decrease in battle-deaths from one year to the next and that for both 2018 and 2019, approximately half the 2011, South Sudan gained independence, followed by an interstate conflict that emerged in 2012 between the two separated countries due to territorial compatibility over the disputed, oil-rich Heglig/Panthou-area. In the meantime, the Sudanese government was also engaged in intrastate conflicts with rebel groups supported by the South Sudanese government, and vice versa. These could be counted as proxy wars (UCDP, no date b, no date a).
Conflict Trends in the Arab World, 1946-2019

Battle-deaths in the Arab world occurred in Syria (even though Syria also witnessed a substantial decrease in battle-deaths from 2018 to 2019). Yemen was the region’s second most violent country in 2018, and, like the other countries, experienced a sharp decrease in battle-deaths in 2019. Somalia remained fairly stable with approximately 2,000 battle-deaths each year. In Libya, battle-deaths rose from 44 in 2018 to 1,695 in 2019.

We may also analyse battle-deaths in a conflict country by calculating their number relative to the population of that country (battle-death rate). With this statistic, we can see that battle-death rate in Syria is more than four times the battle-death rate in Yemen in 2018 and six times higher than Yemen in 2019. In fact, we find that in several years since 2012, the death rate in Syria is far greater than any country in the world. For example, in 2013, Syria (with a population approximately 20 million) witnessed more than 65 thousand state-based battle-deaths, while Iraq (whose population is approximately 33 million) came in the second order with around four thousand battle-deaths.

Since the UCDP data is actor-based, a country can have several conflicts. For example, between 2013 and 2019, Syria had conflict with both IS and Syrian insurgents; thus, two or three conflicts are coded for Syria. In the Arab world, the number of conflicts and conflict countries are approximately the same until 2012. After 2012, the number of conflicts increases substantially due primarily to the spread of IS into the conflict dynamics of other countries. Because IS is a separate actor, these conflicts are coded as separate conflicts (Figure 5).

Overall, the multiplicity of conflicts in Arab countries in this period (1989-2019) can
be linked to some groups' exploitation of existing violent conflicts that had erupted over historical grievances between groups, struggles for power and regime control, and/or the decline of state control in these countries (United Nations and World Bank Group, 2018, p. 20). This dynamic provides the opportunity for more combat activities with different motivations and issues. Some of these additional conflicts could not have emerged and sustained without the intervention of foreign countries, which, as mentioned above, can serve to fuel the conflict with money and weapons to serve mutual interests among parties. Thus, we see that on top of the internal power struggle, some conflicts, such as the Syrian conflict, were transformed into a form of proxy war in which subnational, regional and international conflicts were waged (UCDP, no date c).

We also find an increasing number of internationalised civil conflicts (Figure 6) during 1989-2019. While many conflicts are intrastate (i.e., fought between parties within a country), we see an increasing trend for third party involvement. For example, Iran and Russia have been supporting the regime in the Syrian conflict. Figure 6 also show that 2019 witnessed the largest number of internationalised conflicts in the Arab world (seven conflicts) since the end of World War II in 1945.

The UCDP data code state-based conflict incompatibility by splitting it into three major types: 1) governmental (e.g., taking over the government by replacing the central government or changing its composition or political system type); 2) territorial (e.g., secession, countries contest to control a specific region or autonomy claims through internal conflicts); 3) or mixed (Gleditsch et al., 2002, p. 619). In the Arab world, we find only a small "mixed" category: the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s and the conflict between the Syrian Government and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) from 2016-2018.
During the period 1946-2019, there have been 215 territorial conflicts and 208 governmental conflicts to the Arab region. Whilst these numbers are in line with global trends, two points are unique in the Arab world: a notable increase in governmental conflicts in the region since the 1980s and only one territorial conflict between 1998-2005 (see Figure 7).
Several explanations help account for the trend of increasing governmental conflicts since the 1980s. Firstly, across the Arab world, new post-colonial states rode a wave of popular legitimacy rooted in anti-colonial struggle that lasted for a few decades. In some cases – such as Iraq, Syria, Tunisia, Libya and others – this wave of popularity was followed by relatively successful modernisation that accrued performance-related legitimacy. The twin processes of structural adjustment accompanied by economic crisis and growing authoritarianism have undercut legitimacy in many countries across the Arab world, especially in the late 1970s. In essence, not until the 1980s, when the social contract of full employment and improving living standards promised at independence was widely perceived to be broken did major governmental conflicts erupt in an attempt to change the political order.

Broken social contracts between the state and citizenry, although much more amplified, account for the uptick in governmental conflicts in the Arab world since 2010. In many countries across the region, corruption, low economic opportunity, human rights violations, and dwindling faith in democracy all called into question state legitimacy. United by these factors, as well as culture and language, the unrest related to these conditions spread like contagion through the Arab world following the revolutionary uprising in Tunisia (United Nations and World Bank Group, 2018, p. 21).

However, weakened state legitimacy does not account for all cases of government conflict during this period. In the 1980s, while much of the region had supplanted colonial structures with indigenous political apparatuses, ‘some of the old problems of nation building in religiously and ethnically divided communities such as Iraq, Lebanon, and Sudan remained’ (Owen 2012, p. 22). This phenomenon may be viewed as the structural legacy of colonial governance, under which a ‘divide and rule’ strategy manipulated religious and ethnic divisions, as invading powers gave authority and special rights to particular religious or ethnic groups in exchange for their loyalty. As the invading powers retreated at the end of the colonial period, these long-festering hostilities resurfaced. We see this dynamic at work especially in Lebanon (Del Sarto 2017) and in Iraq, where governmental conflicts continued throughout the 1980s.

In some cases, modern nation states (e.g., Algeria, Libya, Morocco, Syria and Yemen) that followed colonial rule did not accommodate transnational ethnic minorities. The lack of accommodation would trigger a backlash as minority groups sought to have their rights recognised and protected under the new regime. Often their claims were met with force as new governments affirmed their exclusive Weberian right to use violence. The conflict between Kurds and the Iraqi government is a salient example (Harb, 2019, p. 20).

Finally, we note that European colonialists exported the Westphalian concept of the state to their ex-colonies. Based on this, the new regimes engaged in the processes of state building according to an imported (and foreign) political concept. Tensions would quickly emerge between the transitional identities in the region (i.e., pan-Islamism and pan-Arabism) and the Westphalian state model, which promoted singular national identities. In this context, it cannot be denied that the rise of political Islam and the increasing politicisation of sectarianism that challenge state legitimacy in the Arab world have contributed toward the long running trend of increased governmental conflict in the region.
In spite of these factors that have contributed to the increasing prevalence of governmental conflicts, land retains a special importance. Land is a necessity for identity, livelihoods and socio-economic well-being and this makes controlling land essential for most systems of government. Accordingly, it is possible to anticipate an increase in the rate of territorial conflicts in the forthcoming period.

Land is also an under-analysed facet of existing conflicts. For instance, Darfur can be viewed as related to the under-development of the country and an increasing struggle for land and resources at the local level. After the collapse of social structures and institutions during protracted conflicts, old frustrations and/or a sense of injustice regarding land and natural resources could re-emerge. In addition, territorial conflicts could emerge between returnees and new occupiers/residents of their lands, which is also observed in Darfur’s recent experience of refugee and IDP return (United Nations and World Bank Group, 2018, p. 148).

2-2 Global Overview

We start with a global overview of all state-based conflict trends between 1946-2019. Working with four categories of conflicts defined above in Figure 2 (colonial wars, interstate wars, civil wars, and Internationalised civil wars), we note four major conflict trends (Figure 8).

1. Civil conflict is the main type of conflict globally and we see a rise in these conflicts starting in the 1970, which is true for the Arab region as well. Over the same time period, we see a decrease in inter-state conflicts over the same time period. In 2019, the world experienced only two inter-state conflicts: between India and Pakistan over Kashmir, and between Iran and Israel. Both of these were relatively low-intensity conflicts. By contrast, we saw 52 civil conflicts in 2019.
2. The number of conflicts rises to a peak in 1991 followed by a substantial decrease. There are two primary factors here. First, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was an increase in the number of civil conflicts in former Soviet Union member states as internal powers scrambled to fill the void left by colonial Soviet rule. Second, and more importantly, many of the Cold War-era civil wars were proxy wars in which the warring parties received support from the superpowers, who often supported unpopular and repressive states. Thus, we see a rise in prolonged conflicts in the 1970s and 1980s. After the fall of the Soviet Union, however, superpower support dried up and most proxy wars ended in the early 1990s. This decrease in conflict continued throughout the 2000s and led many to argue (inter alia Pinker 2012) that we were moving towards a more peaceful world.

3. In counter-distinction to the rising number of conflicts worldwide, the number of conflict-related deaths steadily decreased over the past 20 years (this has only been true in the Arab world for the past 10 years). We see a few peaks in battle-deaths that are related to specific conflicts, such as the war between Eritrea and Ethiopia between 1999 and 2001, the end of the Sri Lankan civil war in 2009, and the civil war in Syria since 2013. These conflicts largely account for the difference between the global and regional trends in this period. While the number of battle-deaths in 2014 was at its highest since the end of the Cold War, and equivalent to approximately four times the rate of battle-deaths during the first decade of the 21st century, that number has decreased every year since and settled at 50,000 in 2019.

4. We see another sharp increase in the number of conflicts starting in 2013, which can be primarily explained by the expansion of IS in several countries and, to a lesser extent, the "post-Arab-Spring era" as discussed above (Figure 8). Every conflict with IS in each country is counted as a separate conflict, even if the country had been engaged in conflict prior to the expansion of IS (Figure 9). IS was first registered as a conflict actor in Iraq in 2004. By 2013-2014, IS spread to Libya and Syria. In 2015, we see a substantial increase in IS-engaged conflicts. This trend of IS conflicts concurs with the group’s declaration of a worldwide Caliphate in June 2014, which inspired Islamic groups in countries such as Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Mali and Nigeria pledging allegiance to IS over the next two years. In many of these countries, Islamic groups had already been involved in civil conflicts against the national government. For a large share of these countries, from 2014 onwards, IS effectively became an external third party to an existing civil conflict, breeding new conflicts between themselves and a particular government. As the graph shows (Figure 9), conflicts involving IS represent 25-30% of all conflicts in the past five years. Despite the fact that IS was allegedly defeated in Syria in 2019, the organisation remains implicated in conflict dynamics globally, and the number of IS conflicts increased from 12 to 16 between 2018-2019.
We can also attribute the peak in battle-deaths (from all parties) to IS conflicts between 2015-2017. Whilst the number of conflicts with IS increased slightly since 2017, the level of battle-deaths in IS conflicts reduced substantially in 2018-2019. Given the levels of battle-deaths compared to the numbers of conflicts over the same time, conflicts with IS do not appear to differ from other conflicts in terms of intensity (Figure 9).

As noted above, the number of battle-deaths are often driven by a few high-casualty conflicts. For this reason, we differentiate between 'conflicts' that experience between 25-999 battle-deaths within a year and 'wars' that are defined as conflicts with more than or equal to 1,000 battle-deaths. At the global level, the share of wars is fairly stable since 2000 (but this is not true in the Arab world for the same period). Approximately 15-20% of conflicts since 2000 registered more than or equal to 1,000 battle-deaths with a slight increase between 2014-2017. The number of battle-deaths related to conflicts is stable, and it remains rare that more than 10,000 people are killed on a global scale. By contrast, in the category of wars, only Afghanistan exceeded 10,000 battle-deaths in 2019 (Figure 10).

In 2018 and 2019, a few conflicts account for a large number of battle-related deaths. For example, in 2019, Afghanistan accounted for the most battle-related deaths. Afghanistan experienced an escalation from 2018 to 2019, when the battle related deaths increased from 25,679 in 2018 to almost 30,000 in 2019. Syria, meanwhile, remained the second deadliest conflict in 2019, recording a decrease in battle-related deaths from 11,824 in 2018 to 7,304 in 2019 - the lowest annual death toll in nine years of war. In 2018, Yemen experienced the third largest number of battle-related deaths globally (4,515), but due to a considerable de-escalation in 2019 (1,663 battle related deaths), Yemen was replaced by Somalia and Libya (see Figure 11). This corresponds
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To the fact that Syria, Afghanistan and Yemen are, respectively, according to the Global Peace Index 2019, among the least peaceful countries in the world, followed by South Sudan and Pakistan (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2019, p. 12).

Figure 10: Global conflicts split between conflict (25-999 battle-deaths) and wars (≥1000 battle-deaths), 1989-2019

To gain a more nuanced understanding of the relative share of state-based conflicts in the Arab world, we examined the regional variation in state-based conflict trends between 1946-2019. Over time, it is clear that Asia has the largest share overall and is stable in the number of conflicts. Non-Arab African countries form the second largest category, recording a substantial increase since 2012. While Asia and Africa have the largest share of conflicts, the Arab world has seen the largest relative increase over the past six years (see Figure 12).

As in the previous section, we examined civil conflicts at a global level (i.e., excluding interstate conflicts) by the involvement of third parties (Figure 13). The description of this figure can be read in conjunction with the description of Figure 6, which reported on this trend in the Arab world. According to the UCDP definition:

An internal conflict is regarded as internationalised if one or more third party governments are [sic] involved with combat personnel in support of the objective of either side. UN or regional Peace Keeping Operations could count as such, depending on their mandates, but do not automatically make a conflict internationalised (Strand et al., 2019, p. 3).

In most cases, the third-party interferer supporting the government’s side but this is not always the case as seen in Ukraine (Russia is supporting rebels) and in Libya (Egypt and Russia were supporting the Libyan National Army). Furthermore, the involvement of IS in a conflict is not counted as internationalisation, despite the fact that the intervenor constitutes an external third-party interfering in the conflict as a non-governmental actor.
Figure 11: Share of state-based conflicts battle-deaths globally in 2018 and 2019

- Afghanistan: 1945, 693, 1327, 604, 603, 558, 4801
- Somalia: 11824, 1663, 1663, 1327, 693, 604, 558
- India: 4093, 4515, 2208, 1171, 889, 833, 827
- Turkey: 751, 678, 4093, 4515, 2208, 1171, 889, 833, 827
- Yemen: 25679, 11824, 4515, 2208, 1171, 889, 833, 827
- Myanmar: 29903, 7304, 1945, 1695, 1663, 1327, 693, 604, 603, 558
- Nigeria: 4093, 4515, 2208, 1171, 889, 833, 827
- Mali: 2208, 1171, 889, 833, 827
- Cameroon: 1171, 889, 833, 827
- Libya: 4093, 4515, 2208, 1171, 889, 833, 827
- Egypt: 25679, 11824, 4515, 2208, 1171, 889, 833, 827
UCDP data indicate a sharp increase in internationalised civil conflicts since 2014, which corresponds with the increase of IS-related conflicts. While approximately half of IS conflicts are also internationalised civil conflicts, this factor alone does not explain the sharp increase in the internationalisation of conflict. The "post-Arab Spring era", and its ripples throughout the region, also partially explain the trend, as well as the instability of power in some regions and the competition of various international alliances for influence and strategic interests.

We can also see that in the past five years, the share of battle-deaths related to internationalised civil conflicts surpassed the number of people being killed in "regular" civil conflict, or non-internationalised conflicts (Figure 13). This circumstance is likely due to the increasing intensity of internationalised conflicts or because more intense conflicts are more likely to become internationalised. Some claim that the rationale for the intervention in Libya, for example, was aimed at preventing escalation, while others believe that international interventions led to the continuation and escalation of that conflict (Strand et al., 2019, pp. 3–4).

Lastly, we study global state-based conflicts by incompatibility type. As indicated earlier, an insurgent group is coded as aspiring to topple a national government (e.g., Libya or Yemen) or to seek greater regional autonomy or secession (e.g., the Bangsamoro sub-national separatist insurgency in the Philippines). Since the 1990s, the share of territorial and governmental conflicts has been approximately the same. However, in 2015, we see an increase in territorial conflicts (Figure 14) largely explained by the rising motivation of IS to include all Islamic areas under their Caliphate. Thus, they are not challenging the governments in countries where they fight; rather they engage in a conflict over Muslim territories. For example, the Nigerian government has conflict with IS and Boko Haram. Boko Haram challenges the Nigerian government, so their conflict is coded as a governmental conflict. The conflict with IS is coded as a territorial conflict. This type of mixed incompatibility type, however, is scarce.
Figure 13: Global trends in civil conflicts by Internationalised involvement, 1946-2019, and battle-deaths 1989-2019

Figure 14: Global trends in incompatibilities, 1946-2019

In recent years, the number of non-state armed groups has increased globally. Whereas the number of armed groups in a civil war was eight in 1950, the figure jumped to 14 in 2010 and has increased steadily since then. These statistics include violent extremist groups, militias, rebels, and illegal trafficking groups. Concurrent to this trend, non-state armed groups have also been increasingly engaged in conflicts (United Nations and World Bank Group, 2018, pp. 14–15).

Conflicts do not necessarily involve the government of a state. The number of contemporary violent conflicts between non-governmental groups is substantial and this dynamic is a major source of frustration to the hopes for a more peaceful world in the aftermath of the Cold War. Since the 1990s, other types of conflicts have started to emerge, based on resource competition, or identity, ethnic, or cultural/ideological differences. In 2005, the Human Security Report cited non-state conflicts and one-sided violence as contributing to the shift in traditional discussions about global peace away from a focus only on state-based conflicts (Holmqvist, 2006, pp. 77–78).

We use the UCDP definition of non-state conflict: “the use of armed force between organised groups, neither of which is the government of a state, resulting in at least 25 annual battle-related deaths”. This definition suggests that, unlike state-based conflict, UCDP data do not require a clause regarding non-state conflict incompatibility (Sundberg, Eck and Kreutz, 2012, pp. 352–353). In that definition, ‘organised groups’ come in three forms:

1. **Formally organised groups** are defined as “any non-governmental group of people having announced a name for their group and using armed force against another similarly formally organised group”;

2. **Informally organised groups** are “any group without an announced name, but who uses armed force against another similarly organised group”; and

3. **Informally organised identity groups** have a common identity along religious, ethnic, national, tribal, or clan lines. This category includes conflicts defined as communal, where incompatibilities are based on communal identity (Pettersson, 2019b, p. 4,7).

It is important to note that the UCDP data do not distinguish between armed groups in terms of causes or objectives and do not separate militias affiliated with the government from non-state armed groups (even though they may be recruited primarily, if informally, by those governments).

3-1 Non-state Conflicts in Arab world

The level of non-state conflicts in the Arab countries was fairly stable after 1989, averaging approximately 10 conflicts per year until 2014 when the number jumped to 50 and then swiftly declined again to 17 by 2019 (Figure 15), a trend line that matches global figures (Figures 17 and 18). The main increase can be attributed to Syria, where various rebel groups maintain internal rivalries while also fighting IS. Furthermore, we see a sizeable share of non-state conflicts in Libya, Sudan and Yemen. In the early 2000s, Somalia also had a significant number of non-state conflicts (see Figure 15). The patterns we see in non-state conflicts is reflected in Figure 16, which breaks down battle-deaths of non-state conflicts by country. Over 80% of battle-deaths in 2018 and 2019 occurred in Syria and roughly 10% in Libya and Yemen.

7 Note that non-state conflicts in South Sudan are not counted in the regional trend from 2011.
There is clear overlap between the most prominent countries that have witnessed state-based conflicts and those that have experienced non-state conflicts. Both types of conflicts in each of these countries are almost equal in terms of severity perhaps best explained by the fact that wars raging in these countries increases the state’s fragility and reduces government control, which gives way to the proliferation of non-state armed groups, struggles for local control in fragmented territories, and proxy wars.
3-2 Global Overview

Similar to the Arab world, there was an increase in global non-state conflicts over the past 10 years. However, the number of such conflicts globally was already relatively high prior to 1989, which makes the trend less dramatic. In 2019, there were a total of 67 non-state conflicts globally, a slight decrease from 2017 and 2018 with 85 and 80 non-state conflicts, respectively. Nonetheless, the number of non-state conflicts stabilised at a considerably higher level compared with a decade ago. This increase is largely linked to non-state conflicts between formally organised groups. The level of communal conflicts has been quite stable over time and there are very few informally-organised group conflicts throughout this period (Figure 17).

![Figure 17: World non-state conflict by conflict type, 1989-2019](image)

Exploring how non-state conflicts vary across regions in the 1989-2019 period, one finds that although the Arab world experienced the most significant relative increase in this type of conflict, non-Arab Africa is still the most severely affected by non-state conflicts. 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 non-state group fighting is characterised by conflict between highly organised actors, while in Africa we see a higher number of communal conflicts (Figure 18).

In non-state conflicts, nearly 19,600 people were killed in 2019. While this figure marks a decrease from 2018, it is still among the top three highest battle-death counts since 1989 and attributable to the involvement of formally organised groups. The number of people killed in communal violence is quite stable over time but slightly higher in the 1990s than today (Figure 19).
Figure 18: Total number of non-state conflicts by region, 1989–2019*

*Note: Iran is coded as Asia and Turkey as Europe in this graph

Figure 19: Share of world battle-deaths in non-state conflict by type of conflict, 1989-2019
Reviewing the share of battle-related deaths in non-state conflicts across regions in 2018 and 2019, we see that although the number of non-state conflicts in Latin America was fewer than in Africa and the Arab world, that continent experienced as a whole the deadliest violent non-state conflicts as its relative share of battle-related deaths increased significantly from 2018 to 2019. This rise was related to the high level of violence between drug cartels in Mexico. The Arab world experienced the second-highest number of deaths from non-state conflicts, followed by non-Arab Africa. In 2019 both regions experienced fewer deaths than in 2018 (see Figure 20).

Figure 20: Share of battle-deaths in non-state conflicts by region, 2018 and 2019*

4. One-sided Violence, 1989-2019

Civilians are often the hardest hit by violence in ongoing conflicts regardless of whether that violence is state-based or a non-state based conflict. UCDP defines one-sided violence as "the use of armed force by the government of a state or by a formally organised group against civilians which results in at least 25 deaths. Extrajudicial killings in custody are excluded" (Eck and Hultman, 2007, p. 235). While our report depends on this dataset as an indicator, it is important to note that it only counts direct and intentional killing (Eck and Hultman, 2007, p. 233) and does not include civilian victims caught in crossfire (Eck and Hultman, 2007, p. 235) or the wider incidence of indirect deaths due to humanitarian crises caused by conflict, even where tactics such as siege and starvation are used as weapons of war or collective punishment.

The direct and intentional killing coded in this data set also includes acts of genocide and those types of incidents that are "terrorist" incidents, including, for example, bombs placed in public places (Eck and Hultman, 2007, p. 235). However, we also find that the dataset excludes incidents such as the Norwegian attacks when a right-wing extremist killed and injured more than 100 people on 22 July 2011. Although this is a terrorist act, it does not exist in UCDP because that extremist individual is not considered an "organised group" and does not represent a state government (Ritchie et al., 2013).
4-1 One-sided Violence in Arab world

One-side violence in the Arab world fluctuates significantly. In the early 1990s, the small peak is driven by conflict in Sudan where one-sided violence was carried out by the government and non-state actors. In addition, the government in Iraq also conducted considerable one-sided violence in this period related to the Gulf War. We see a peak in the 2000s, which is tied to perpetrators in Sudan and Iraq, and the Second Intifada in Palestine. During this period most perpetrators of one-sided violence are non-state actors.

From 2011, there is a peak of government perpetrated violence linked generally to the various conflicts of the Arab Spring. After 2011, we see a continued high level of one-sided violence conducted by governments in Bahrain, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen.\(^8\) While the number of perpetrators from 2011 onwards is not lower than levels in the 2000s, the number of people killed is much higher. For example, the high death rates in 2013 and 2014 is due to one-side violence conducted by IS in Iraq and Syria (Figure 21). Compared to the global level (Figure 23), the level of government-conducted one-sided violence is quite high compared to non-state actors.

The same dataset also indicates a substantial decrease in both types of one-sided violence in 2019. This may give some optimism about the near future, but it may also mean that governments have eliminated and suppressed dissent, and that several countries have turned to more authoritarian regimes. In contexts where the opportunity for protests and civil disobedience is eliminated by effective authoritarian control, there is no need for one-sided governmental violence.

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\(^8\) One-sided violence in South Sudan is not counted in the trend from 2011.
The breakdown of people killed in one-sided violence in 2018 and 2019 shows that only three Arab countries (Somalia, Sudan, and Syria) experienced this type of violence during these two years with relatively low average fatalities not exceeding several hundreds (Figure 22).

![Figure 22: Arab world fatalities in one-sided violence in 2018 and 2019, by country](image)

Given how the UCDP counts killings in events of one-sided violence (see above), we analyse several potential examples in the Arab region that are not coded in their dataset. The Arab world has experienced some examples of one-sided violence, in particular in the past ten years that have not been counted in the while UCDP, for example, the Rab'a square sit-in dispersal in Egypt in 2013 when state security forces forcibly broke up a peaceful protest. Human Rights Watch reported more than 1,150 killings by the government in that incident (Shakir, 2014), UCDP counted nothing for that year.

Iraq presents another interesting case. The country experienced extremely high levels of ‘post’-conflict violence following the 2003 invasion and, in particular, for the next five years. The UCDP’s total count of fatalities, by all three types of violence, during this period is around 122,000, but includes fewer than 24 one-sided violence deaths, none of which are linked in the dataset to the United States government or Coalition Forces. The very low number of one-sided violent deaths is incongruent with the many media reports from the period that described attacks on schools, mosques, markets and many other civilian targets.

The low number of one-sided deaths in the UCDP data stems from the requirement that ‘the group responsible for the deaths be reliably identified’. In Iraq during this period, there was much sectarian violence and multiple insurgencies perpetrated by shadowy paramilitary armed groups linked to various political factions. In many of these attacks, there were no claims of responsibility and, due to the general breakdown of the rule of law during this time, very few perpetrators could be identified let alone brought to
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justice. This example highlights the fact that the broader trend of proliferation of non-state and quasi-state armed groups, often in the context of internationalised and proxy wars, creates situations in which identifying perpetrators of one-sided violence can be challenging. This situation is further complicated by hyper-politicised media narratives in the post-Arab Spring contexts, and counter-allegations of "fake news" which sow doubt about various claims to identify perpetrators.

More controversially, there is a widely-held perception in the Arab world that at least some of what is categorised as ‘indiscriminate violence’ in military operations is, in fact, more akin to one-sided violence targeted at civilians. This perception has increased since the ‘War on Terror’ when the term ‘collateral damage’ as used by the U.S. and others was interpreted by many affected communities in the region as direct attacks on civilian populations. We see this same dynamic in several epicentres of political violence in the Arab world, such as Somalia where a secretive U.S. bombing campaign has caused unacknowledged civilian casualties in recent years. While the UCDP data includes some one-sided violence related to the shadow of terrorism, much of the civilian death toll attributable to the so-called ‘War on Terror’ is not counted.

This dynamic can be further illustrated in the context of highly asymmetric conflict in the Gaza Strip, which has been subject to four wars since 2008. All four wars involved the targeting of civilian buildings, causing the deaths of more than 1,650 civilians. The wars resulted in no military gain that would be commensurate with the level of casualties (HRW, 2014). Many of the deaths are the result of indiscriminate violence perpetrated by a regional power with highly advanced military technology that allows it to target precisely (Aljazeera, 2014). The Israeli claim is that civilian deaths are collateral damage and that airstrikes are selected based on military objectives and deaths should thus be classified as battle-related deaths.

However, several attacks, such as the Jabaliya school attack in 2014, are prima facie cases of one-sided violence intentionally targeting young Palestinian lives in a civilian setting. More recently, the 2021 war saw an even more pronounced targeting of civil society and civilian objects, including schools, charities, mosques, and independent media (Barakat, Milton & Elkahlout 2021). UCDP codes the deaths of civilian protestors shot and killed by Israeli snipers in the Great March of Return from 2018 as one-sided violence but not the deadly attacks on civilians during the four wars. As a result, UCDP’s data are accurate with regard to one-sided violence when reliable information is available. But in cases of asymmetrical conflict, these statistics are less accurate because the more powerful party can frame civilians, discursively, as potential military targets.

4-2 Global Overview

Looking at the number of groups globally that have perpetrated one-sided violence towards civilians in cases that have produced more than 25 battle-deaths in a year, we find that overall, there has been a decrease in the number groups conducting this type of violence since the mid-2000s and this is true for the Arab world as well. Figure 23 indicates that the biggest share of one-side violence is perpetrated by non-state actors, and we see a slight decrease in the number of governments perpetrating one-side violence compared to 30 years ago; however, we do not see this decrease in the Arab region.

It is difficult to detect a trend within the number of people killed in one-side violence but the numbers hover between 4,000-8,000 people each year with occasional spikes
related to specific groups and incidents, such as the ethnic cleansing in Srebrenica in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1995, Afghanistan under Taliban rule in 1998, various non-state actors in DR Congo in 2002, and IS in 2014 and 2015 (Figure 23).

Figure 23: Incidents of one-sided violence, by perpetrator, 1989–2019*

*Excluded the 1994 genocide in Rwanda due to the magnitude of the one-side violence. The UCDP one-side violence data registered 522,600 people killed by the Rwandan Government.

Figure 24 provides global context, presenting the number of groups conducting one-sided violence between 1989 and 2019 by region. We can see that Africa has the largest number of incidents of one-sided violence, followed by Asia then the Arab world. Non-Arab Africa is the only region where we see an increase of one-sided violence in the most recent decade.

The number of fatalities related to one-sided violence across regions is displayed in Figure 25. IS is included as a separate category because much of the one-sided violence conducted by this organisation is spread across many regions. Africa contains the highest number of fatalities related to one-sided violence except for 2011 and 2012 - the early Arab Spring - when the Arab world recorded the highest numbers.

By comparing the number of fatalities due to one-sided violence in 2018 and 2019 across regions - and including a special transnational category - we notice that territories under IS control cut across both Africa (non-Arab), the Arab world, and Asia. Here again, non-Arab Africa accounts for the highest number of deaths, followed by IS, Asia, and the Arab world. While the number of fatalities due to one-sided violence increased in all three regions, fatalities from one-sided violence where IS was involved decreased (Figure 26).
**Figure 24: Incidents of one-sided violence by region, 1989-2019**

*Here Iran is coded as Asia and Turkey as Europe*

**Figure 25: One-side violence fatalities by region, 1989-2019**

*Here Iran is coded as Asia and Turkey as Europe*
5. Geographic Spread of Conflict 2019

At the country level, in places like Syria and Afghanistan, it is clear that conflict affects nearly all the national territory. However, in some places, the conflict is restricted to small zones as is the case for Tripoli, Libya. In other cases, the geographic location of conflict moves within a country. Thus, to gain a better understanding of conflict dynamics and trends, it is imperative to set dates on the locations where conflict actually occurs. The UCDP Geographical Event Dataset (UCDP GED) codes all conflict events with a geo-location, allowing us to see exactly where in a country an event happens. UCDP defines an event as “an incident where armed force was used by an organised actor against another organised actor, or against civilians, resulting in at least 1 direct death at a specific location and a specific date” (Stina, no date, p. 4). UCDP’s geo-codes are used for all types of conflict (state-based, non-state and one-sided violence) but applied at the conflict event level, which means that one location point does not necessarily mean that this specific place witnessed a UCDP-registered conflict.

5-1 Geographic Spread of Conflict in Arab world

We see significant intra-country variation in countries that have experienced conflict, including the Arab world (Figure 27) In Iraq, for example, the southern parts are much less affected than the north, while in Yemen, fighting is concentrated in western governorates. Even in Syria, where conflict is much more widespread across the country, the Idlib region and areas around Damascus are much harder hit than other areas. In Somalia, conflict
events are more concentrated in the south. Figure 27 also shows that there are conflict events occurring in countries that were not considered conflict countries in 2019, such as Sudan and Algeria, suggesting that these conflicts were low intensity (less than 25 battle-deaths in a calendar year). Nonetheless, this means that these countries should be followed closely to monitor further developments, especially as both countries are in a transitional period.

**Figure 27: Map of State-based conflict countries and conflict events in the Arab world in 2019**

The UCDP geo-data also indicate the locations of different types of violence. The map in Figure 28 shows conflict events categorised by state-based conflicts, non-state conflicts, and one-sided violence. While we see that many of the conflict countries have all three types of violence, there are types of conflict that predominate by country or region. In Syria, we see a high concentration of non-state violence events in northern areas along the Turkish border. Most of these events are conflicts between SDF and the Syrian National Army (SNA) or IS. In Yemen, non-state conflicts are concentrated in the southwestern areas and are most often related to Al-
Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), IS, Southern Transitional Council (STC) and Forces of Hadi. In Sudan, we see a limited number of state-based and non-state conflict events but a significant level of one-sided violence. Most of these latter events entailed violence from the government of Sudan towards civilians - which is a concerning trend for the country’s democratic transition.

5-2 Global Overview

A global overview shows that conflict-affected countries cover a large share of the earth’s surface, but the geographical location of the fighting is quite limited and specific. We see some clear hotspots, in Syria, Iraq, Somalia, Yemen, Afghanistan, Mali, and the Philippines (4 of them are Arab countries). In Nigeria, for example, we see conflict concentrated in northeastern regions around Lake Chad. Nearby fighting in Cameroon, Chad and Niger suggest the unrest in Nigeria may be spreading across borders (Figure 29).

Figure 30 shows that many countries with state-based conflicts also have non-state and one-sided violence. However, this map also shows that the total of the two conflict types and violent events is much broader than state-based violence alone. For example, in Nigeria, where state-based violence was quite geographically concentrated, non-state
violence in this context relates primarily to rival ethnic groups and is scattered throughout the country. Meanwhile, in Mexico, which has no state-based violence, the country endures the highest levels of non-state conflict in the world due primarily to violence between drug cartels. We also observe a high concentration of non-state violence in Brazil.

*Figure 29: World map over state-based conflicts and state-based conflict events in 2019*

*Figure 30: World map over conflict events by type of violence in 2019*
6. Conflict Termination, 1946-2013

It is important to understand how conflicts end or terminate to help us predict the possibility of renewed conflict in the future in post-conflict environments and to draw lessons for effective resolution of similar active conflicts. The manner in which conflict ends shapes the aims and strategies of post-conflict reconstruction.

In this section, we analyse conflict termination using the UCDP Conflict Termination Dataset, which is complete through 2013. The dataset answers, from a procedural point of view, the question of how and why a conflict goes below the 25 battle-related death threshold from one year to the next.

In other words, “the focus is specifically on the outcomes that bring the parties to lay down arms” (Kreutz, 2010, p. 244). The dataset has six categories: 1) peace agreement, 2) cease-fire, 3) victory to the government, 4) victory to the rebel, 5) the conflict has low activity, and 6) one of the parties ceases to exist. Key terms for this dataset are defined as follows (Kreutz, 2010, pp. 244–245):

Victory: “[W]hen one side in an armed conflict is either defeated or eliminated, or otherwise succumbs through capitulation, surrender, or similar public announcement. In ideal cases, a victory is easily identified, as military developments coincide with claims of victory by one side and the other admitting defeat.”

Peace agreement: “[A]n agreement concerned with the resolution of the incompatibility signed and/or publicly accepted by all, or the main, actors in a conflict. The agreement should address all, or the central, issues of contention”. In this dataset, peace agreements included herein are the only ones that led to ending the military behaviour of the conflict parties, as the agreements "were signed during the last year of conflict activity or the first year of inactivity that follows".

Cease-fire: "[A]n agreement between all of the main actors in a conflict that terminates military operations", which means that it does not deal with conflict incompatibilities or issues, but does regulate a cessation of mutual hostilities.

For the remaining outcomes categories (5&6), conflicts terminate without agreements or victory of any side. For instance, it could be only that battle-deaths are fewer than 25 a year, or one of the conflicting parties withdrew for different strategic, tactical, or loss-related reasons.

6-1 Conflict Termination in Arab world

In Arab countries, approximately 1-2 conflicts end each year (Figure 31). From 1946-2013, most of these 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). The victories for side B were recorded in Yemen in 1948, Comoros in 1989 and 1997, and for the Kuwait Coalition in the Gulf War in 1991. In the time period, approximately 38% of terminated conflicts (26 conflicts) ended in a settlement by either a peace agreement or a cease-fire (Figure 32). However, please note that this does not necessarily mean that these settlements were successful beyond one year following conflict termination.

Dataset coding of conflicts outcomes is "based on the final year of activity and first year of non-activity", not on long term results. The data do not monitor other developments after that point, such as conflicting parties' developments, even if an armed group, for example, was actually joined by another group and fought with them. And the data do not follow if agreements were completely applied and had a sustainable effect. Also, the same conflict could have renewed the next year, which means it may have more than one termination point. See: (Kreutz, 2010, pp. 244-246, 2016, p. 2)
Figure 31: Conflict termination in the Arab world between 1946-2013

Figure 32: Distribution of conflict termination categories in the Arab world, 1946-2013
Figures 33 and 34 provide a breakdown of conflict termination type by conflict type and by conflict incompatibility, respectively. In the former, we do not see any victories by side B or by cease-fires internationalised civil conflicts (Figure 33), but for incompatibility, no clear patterns emerge (Figure 34). Further, we see that civil wars in the Arab world are most likely to end by low activity for other conflicts, but not for international civil wars. Governmental conflicts (Figure 34) are much more likely to end with a victory for the government, while territorial conflicts are more likely to end with settlements.

From Figure 33, we can also see that interstate conflicts were more often resolved through a ceasefire than a peace agreement, while civil wars were more frequently resolved by a peace agreement than a ceasefire. The high number of ceasefires resolving interstate wars were, in part, driven by the Arab-Israeli conflicts, which involved ceasefires for most belligerents and peace agreements for Egypt and Jordan. For colonial wars and civil wars, there are instances of conflicts that ceased to exist but this type of resolution did not occur in the case of interstate wars and international civil wars.
6-2 Global Overview

At the global level, we see that low activity is the most common reason for why a conflict ends or stops, followed by government victory. These two categories make up about 60% of all outcomes registered. Approximately 29% of terminated conflicts between 1946-2013 (128 conflicts) ended in a settlement, through either a peace agreement or a cease-fire (Figure 36). Looking across the timeline we see clearly that the high number of conflicts (and relative few terminations) around 1990 correlate to the breakup of the Soviet Union. In the following decades, terminations rise again, primarily through peace agreements and ceasefires (Figure 35). These terminations may be plausibly linked to the end of the Cold War, as a new era for cooperation between international powers to resolve disputes peaceably began (United Nations and World Bank Group, 2018, pp. 35-36).

Over the last 20 years, we see a larger share of conflicts end due to low activity which suggests an increase in low-level conflicts that can simmer for a year or two before returning to the 25 battle-death threshold (a dynamic that correlate with previous findings in this report). We also note that many of the intrastate conflicts since 2007 (which constitute a significant share of global conflicts) share common characteristics that make it difficult to reach negotiated settlements, especially in situations where several non-governmental groups and deep-rooted societal divisions hinder international conflict resolution mechanisms (United Nations and World Bank Group, 2018, pp. 36-37). The use of negotiated settlements in the 2000s were still higher than during the Cold War and before, but this may reflect the different number of conflicts in each period.
Figure 35: Conflict termination globally, 1946-2013

Figure 36: Distribution of conflict termination categories globally, 1946-2013
When termination is divided by conflict type (Figure 37) and incompatibility (Figure 38), we see that for civil wars, in particular, the conflict ends with low activity or victory by the government. This trend holds true in the Arab world. In the Arab world, peace agreements are the next most common category of conflict termination, whereas cease fires are the second-most common termination type globally. For other types of conflicts, the terminations are more or less equally distributed over types.

The literature indicates that internationalised conflicts are usually more protracted and less likely to be resolved through political settlements (Strand et al., 2019, p. 4). Figures 33 and 37 support that claim. This trend may be attributed to the complexity of the conflict itself, but it may also be due to the increase in the number of actors involved in the conflict, which complicates the processes used to build consensus on resolution deals. Certainly in Yemen, we can see the grave consequences of an internationalised conflict (Strand et al., 2019, pp. 3-4).

For incompatibility (Figure 38), it is clear that territorial conflicts around the world are most likely to end due to low activity (unlike Arab world trend where the victory of the government ranks first) but they are also likely to end in settlements (peace agreements or cease fires). Government conflicts are more likely to end with both governmental and side B victory, which suggests that governmental conflicts might be tougher to resolve.
7. Conclusion

This report has provided a wide-ranging overview of conflict trends in the Arab world and globally from 1946 to 2019. It surveyed key global and regional trends in state-based conflict, non-state-based conflict, one-sided violence, and conflict termination. It is clear from the analysis that the Arab world increasingly accounts for a major proportion of conflict at a global level. The incidence of highly destructive conflicts in the region is also apparent.

The trend analysis highlights the urgent need to focus the efforts of academics, policy-makers, and other experts on the causes of - and most effective responses to - conflict in the Arab world. The report is intended also to initiate further analysis and reflection within the Arab world, focusing on the translation and contextualisation of global trends and approaches to conflict analytics towards regional specificities and contextual dynamics. We invite and encourage constructive engagement with the report and its findings as part of ongoing collaborative knowledge production.


UCDP (no date c) Syria, Uppsala Conflict Data Program. Available at: https://ucdp.uu.se/country/652 (Accessed: 24 June 2020).

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