



# Trends in Armed Conflict, 1946–2017

2017 was one of the most violent years since the end of the Cold War. While violence levels decreased slightly from the all-time high of 2016, non-state conflicts and internationalized intrastate conflicts continue to challenge the international community's ability to achieve global peace.

## Brief Points

- The number of state-based armed conflicts in the world declined slightly from 53 in 2016 to 49 in 2017, with the Islamic State active in 31% of them.
- The number of non-state conflicts increased from 62 in 2016 to 82 in 2017.
- There was a significant decline in conflict casualties in 2017. 22% fewer people died in 2017 as a direct result of conflict, and 32% fewer than in 2014. Syria is still the deadliest conflict in the world. One-third of all casualties in state-based conflicts in 2017 were in Syria.
- Internationalized conflicts and non-state conflicts continue to represent major threats to reductions in violence.

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## Recent Trends

The number of armed conflicts in the world in 2017 was 49, according to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP). Nearly 69,000 people were killed as a direct consequence of state-based armed conflicts in 2017, a decline from the high of 104,000 in 2014 and 88,000 in 2016. This trend is mainly due to the reduction in violence in Syria. However, violence escalated in both Iraq and Afghanistan during 2017. Afghanistan witnessed its most violent year and Iraq its second most violent year in the post-Cold War period.

Since the end of the Cold War, the trend in armed conflict has been generally downward, as seen in Figure 1. While in recent years, we have seen upsurges in both the number of conflicts and in the severity of war, the number of conflicts and casualties now seems again to be on a downward trend. This does not, however, suggest that the threat of conflict is likely to disappear any time soon, especially given the rise in non-state conflicts and the growth of the Islamic State.

The total number of conflicts in the world in 2017 was 49, down from the post-Cold War peak of 53 in 2016. 34 countries experienced conflict in their territories, as opposed to 37 in 2016. Only one of the conflicts in 2017 was a dispute between two countries: India and Pakistan (over the disputed territory of Kashmir). The number of wars – conflicts with more than 1,000 battle deaths – also decreased, from 12 in 2016 to 10 in 2017. Levels of one-sided violence remained stable in 2017, with approximately 7,000 deaths (but more actors committing one-sided violence).

Syria represented 29% of the world's conflict-related deaths in 2017, the lowest number of fatalities in the country since 2011. While 2017 witnessed a decline in the numbers of state-based armed conflicts, conflict casualties, and countries experiencing conflict, at the same time non-state conflicts increased dramatically from 62 in 2016 to 82 in 2017. Deaths in non-state conflicts increased as well, from nearly 10,000 in 2016 to 13,662 in 2017. Syria had the most lethal non-state conflict in 2017, followed by the Central African Republic.

Many internal armed conflicts continue to be in-

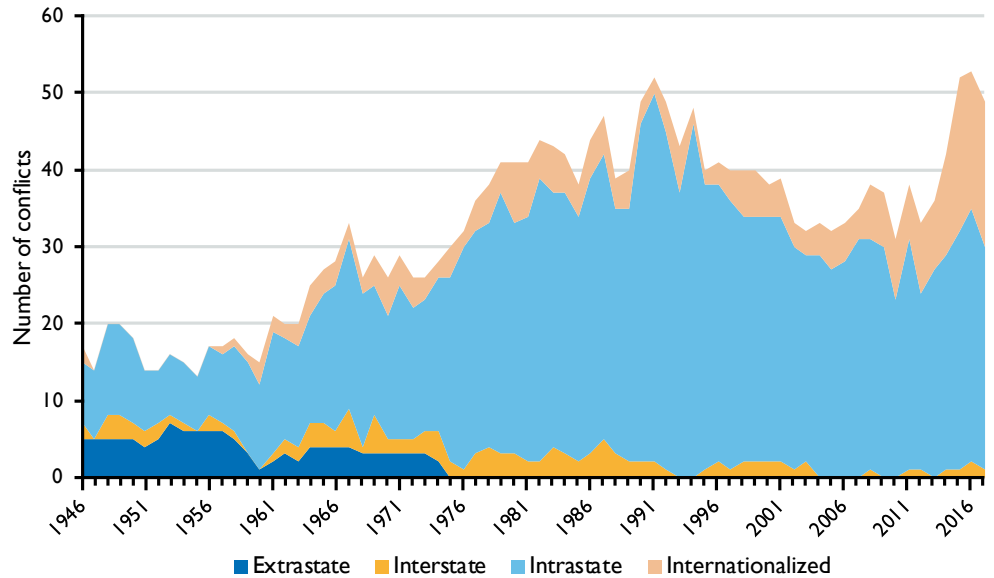


Figure 1: Number of armed conflicts by type of conflict, 1946–2017. Data source: UCDP/PRIO database

ternationalized: of the 48 intrastate conflicts in 2017, external states contributed troops to at least one of the sides in 19 of them (40%). The increasing internationalization of conflicts over the past few years is worrisome as such conflicts on average are more violent, more difficult to solve, and last longer. The country most involved in internationalized intrastate conflicts is the United States, which has troops present in seven such conflicts, all of which involve Islamist extremist groups (Mali, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Somalia, and the global fight against Al Qaeda).

## Trends in Conflict

The Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), the leading provider of statistics on political violence, has identified 285 distinct armed conflicts since 1946. This includes all organized military conflict over government or territory involving one or more state government(s) and causing at least 25 battle-related fatalities in a year. Figure 1 displays the number of conflicts around the world by type and year since 1946. Two trends over the long term are immediately detectable.

First, colonial and interstate conflicts, which accounted for half of all armed conflict early in the period, have waned. Today, the predominant form of conflict is internal to a state, although quite often involving external state actors.

The second trend is the distinct rise in the number of civil or intrastate conflicts, peaking in 1991, followed by a decline. 1991 witnessed 52 armed conflicts, in contrast to 32 in 2003. Since 2003, the number of armed conflicts has risen and fallen, ranging between 30 and 52.

This pattern of rising and falling numbers is simply due to the onset of new conflicts set against the number of conflicts that end. The steep decline in conflicts from 1992 to 2003 was due to fewer conflicts starting anew than the number ending. The accumulation of conflicts over the course of the Cold War resulted from more wars starting than ending. To further reduce the number of conflicts in the world today, we must not only work to resolve the on-going conflicts, we must also try to prevent others from starting.

Conflict-related casualties do not follow the same pattern as the number of armed conflicts. Figure 2 shows the number of conflict or battle deaths per million in the world (UCDP and PRIO data). (The per capita comparison controls for the growing global population.) The number of battle casualties peaked in the early 1950s. Despite the low number of conflicts, this period contained some of the most deadly wars in the post-World War II era, notably the Chinese Civil War (1946–1949) and the Korean War (1950–1953). Wars, such as Vietnam, Iran-Iraq, Afghanistan, DRC, and Ethi-

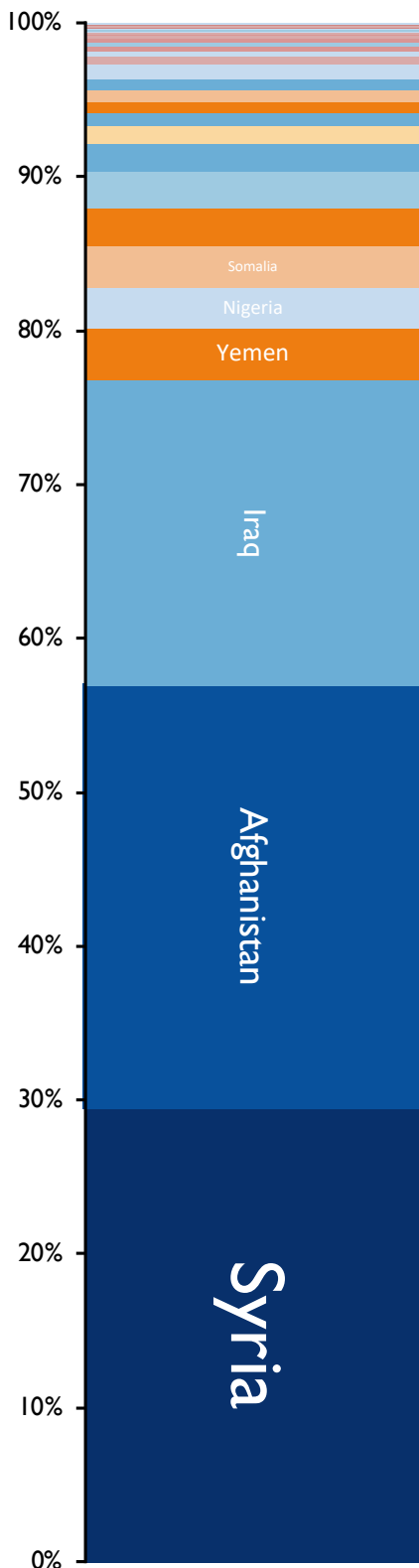


Figure 3: The most deadly conflicts in 2017. Data source: UCDP/PRIO database

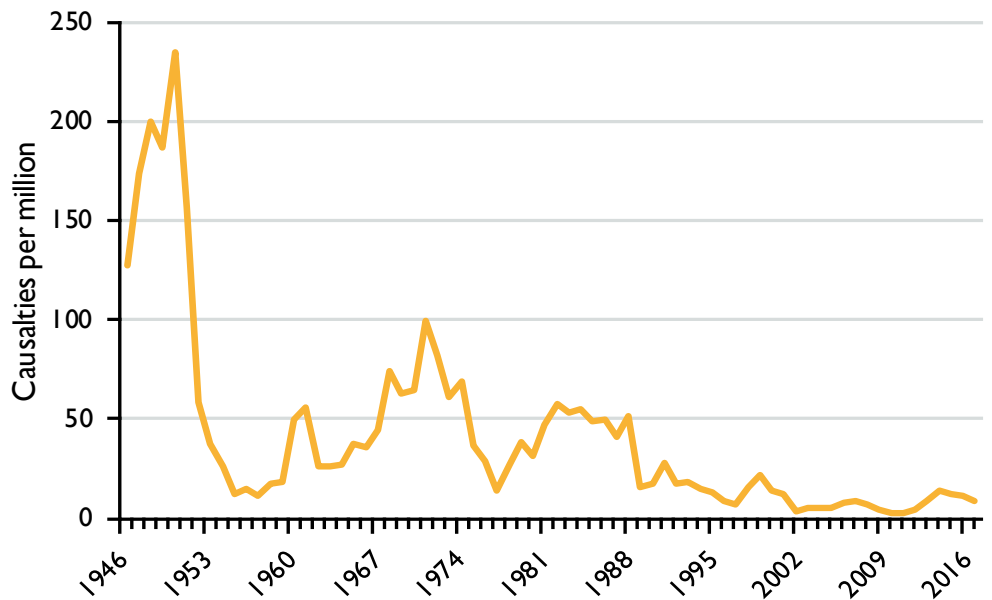


Figure 2: Battle deaths per 1,000 000 people, 1946–2017. Data source: UCDP/PRIO database

opia-Eritrea account for the subsequent peaks. The general pattern is one of decline, with each peak falling short of its predecessor. The small rise in battle casualties evident in recent years results primarily from the civil war in Syria.

### Islamic Extremism

Utopian ideologies are a potent threat to peace. In the previous century, fascism and communism were the main obstacles to peace. Today, political Islam presents the gravest challenge.

Figure 3 summarizes the total of 69,000 people killed in armed civil conflict over the past year in both state and non-state conflicts. The colors in the graph differentiate between conflicts, with varieties of blue indicating that at least one party is affiliated with IS. A large proportion of conflict-related casualties are occurring in conflicts involving the Islamic State (IS), including Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq. IS was involved in 16 conflicts during 2017, 31% of the total number of conflicts. State-based violence across all IS-related conflicts decreased slightly from 33,400 in 2016 to 31,400 in 2017. In addition, in 2017 alone, the most deadly non-state conflict was between IS and the Syrian Democratic Forces, causing nearly 5,000 deaths in the Raqqa area.

### Islamic State Allegiance

The main reason for the strong increase in the number of conflicts over the past few years is the proliferation of local Islamic groups that now pledge allegiance to the IS. Conflicts involving IS in a conflict dyad took place in 15 countries in 2017, down from 16 in 2016. Four conflicts involving IS started or re-started in Chad, Lebanon, Mali, and Iran. The earlier IS conflicts in Jordan, Cameroon, and Tunisia did not continue in 2017. In addition, we see IS move as far away as Bangladesh and the Philippines. IS was also responsible for the largest proportion of one-sided violence in 2017, around 35% of total deaths.

### Non-State Violence

Non-state violence increased dramatically in 2017, as did fatalities from this type of violence. All world regions experienced an increase, with the most lethal and largest number of non-state conflicts occurring in the Middle East. Africa also saw a large increase with fighting erupting in the Democratic Republic of Congo over President Kabila's failure to hold national elections, and in the Central African Republic between and within religious communities. Non-state violence increased in Mexico and Brazil, largely due to gang violence.

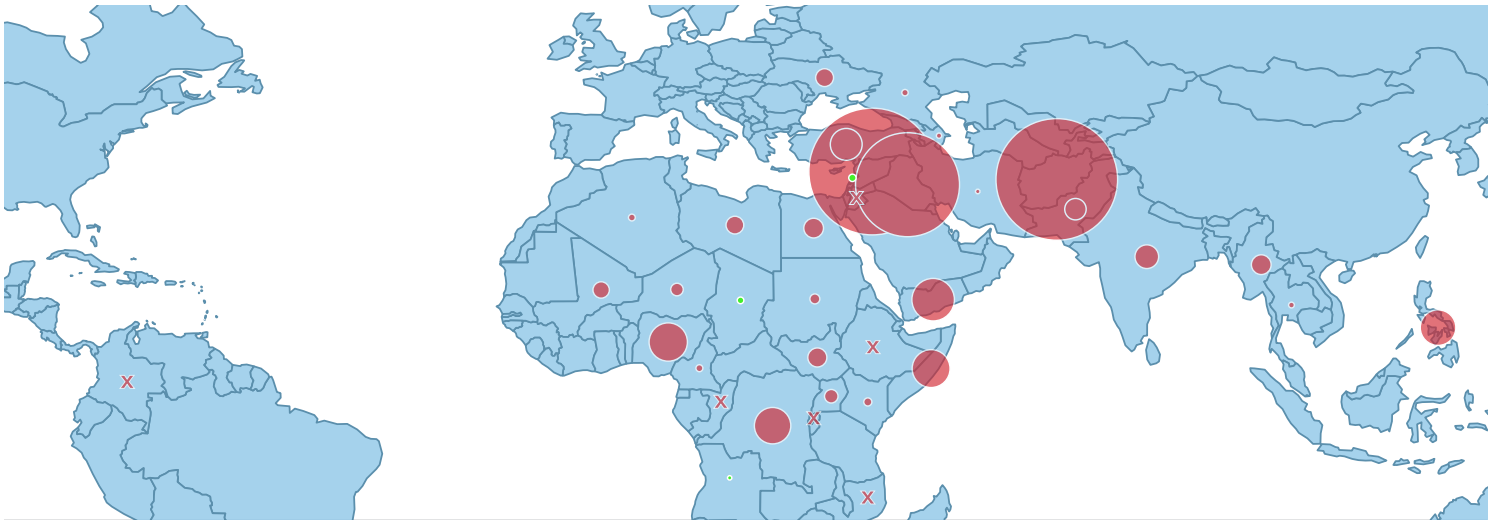


Figure 4: Bubble map of battle deaths in 2017. Data source: UCDP/PRIO database

### Threats to Global Peace

The apparent rise in the number of conflicts over the past five years is neither a blip nor a trend, but something in between. Only a small pool of countries exhibits any significant likelihood of becoming embroiled in war. For these countries, latent conflict is ever present, ready to escalate into minor armed conflict, or to war.

Since World War II, this pool of candidates has shrunk. Every year, some portion of these candidates will experience war or minor armed conflict. The portion involved in fighting thus determines the upswings and downswings in conflict trends. Both the severity of these conflicts and the likelihood of whether or not they will continue are shaped by a number of factors, including the number of actors involved in the conflict, their relative strength, the type of warfare, the nature of foreign intervention, and porous borders. Given these factors, we should expect to see the wars in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Ukraine, and Yemen continue into the near future.

The bubbles on the map in Figure 4 show where most deaths due to civil war occurred in 2017.

Large bubbles represent substantial battle casualties associated with civil war. Small dots represent armed conflict with low levels of battle casualties. Several large red overlapping bubbles can be seen in the Middle East. Given the number of actors involved in these wars, plus foreign intervening powers, the porous borders, and relative force levels of belligerents, the wars in Syria and Iraq are likely to continue to take their toll in years to come. The green dots represent conflicts that were not active in 2016, and the red crosses represent conflicts that ended in 2016.

Despite these negative trends, there are signs of hope for some of the most long-lasting, intractable conflicts. The Basque separatist group ETA finally ended their armed struggle for independence in early 2018, while movements are currently afoot on the Korean Peninsula that may bring more stability to that region.

For the next five years, we should expect to see the number of conflicts in the world remain somewhere between 35 and 45. Tensions continue to run high in the Middle East, the Sahel region of Africa and in central Africa, as well as in Afghanistan, Myanmar, and in Venezuela. It will be particularly interesting to see how the decline of IS in Syria will affect their involvement in other conflicts around the world.

Since the 1950s, the number killed in warfare has generally declined. Just after the end of the Cold War, the number of armed conflicts in the world fell continuously. Starting in 2013, we have seen a rise and then a fall in both the number of conflicts and in battle casualties. Nationalism, democratic recession, and religious extremism lie behind much of this up-tick. In the short run, we should not see significant changes in conflict trends. But the long-term, general decline of conflict since the end of the Second World War suggests that the slow progress of democratization and development is likely to persist and trigger a long-term decrease in conflict. ■

### THE AUTHORS

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### THE PROJECT

The *Conflict Trends* project aims to answer questions relating to the causes, consequences and trends in conflict. The project contributes to new conflict analyses within areas of public interest, and works to produce thorough and quality-based analysis. The Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the World Bank funded the research presented here.

### PRIO

The Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) is a non-profit peace research institute (established in 1959) whose overarching purpose is to conduct research on the conditions for peaceful relations between states, groups and people. The institute is independent, international and interdisciplinary, and explores issues related to all facets of peace and conflict.