



Non-State Conflicts

Trends from 1989 to 2018

2017 and 2018 saw the highest number of active non-state conflicts since the end of the Cold War. Simultaneously, there has been a substantial increase in the number of non-state conflict casualties worldwide since 2014. This trend is driven primarily by the conflict in Syria involving the Islamic State. The rapid growth in the number and severity of non-state conflicts increasingly threatens the UN SDGs' aim of promoting peaceful and inclusive societies.

Brief Points

- Non-state conflicts between identity groups in Africa dominate the overall picture from 1989–2018.
- The number of conflicts has increased in recent years, driven by fighting between rebel groups in the Middle East.
- Formally organized groups such as militias, rebel groups, and drug cartels claim the greatest casualties worldwide, most of them located in Syria and Mexico.
- The consequences for local communities affected by non-state conflicts are as severe as for conflicts that involve the state.

Why Non-State Conflicts?

Most of the literature on armed conflict has been state-centric, focusing primarily on intra-state conflicts where a government is one of the belligerents. But the consequences of non-state conflicts for affected communities are just as devastating as those from civil wars: loss of income, housing, and human lives. In some parts of the world thousands are killed annually by this type of violence, exceeding other forms of conflict.

And the trend is increasing: while the peak in 2000 saw 46 active conflicts, the number of non-state conflicts in the world has risen and peaked in recent years, with 74 such conflicts in 2015, 76 in 2018, and 83 in 2017. In terms of battle deaths, each year from 2014 to 2018 (ranging from 12,051 to 18,694) surpasses the previous high in 1993 (10,739 deaths).

What accounts for this sharp increase in non-state conflicts and battle deaths? What factors can explain this trend?

Defining Non-State Conflict

A non-state conflict is defined by the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) as the use of armed force between organized groups, neither of which is the government of a state, resulting in at least 25 annual battle-related deaths. The type of organization corresponds to three categories: 1) *Formally organized groups*, such as rebel groups, militias and other highly organized groups who engage in fighting with each other. These groups have an announced name and are permanently organized for combat. 2) *Informally organized supporter groups* such as supporters and affiliates of political parties, that are usually organized not to engage in fighting, but occasionally use their organizational abilities to this end. 3) *Informally organized identity groups* who 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. Thus, the definition of non-state combatants encompasses groups such as Ansarallah (Yemen) and al-Qaeda (Arabian Peninsula), the Sinaloa Cartel (Mexico), and ethnic communities such as the Pokot and Turkana in Kenya.

Trends in Conflict

Civil conflicts are complex phenomena that do not only involve fighting between a government and a rebel group. Research on the topic

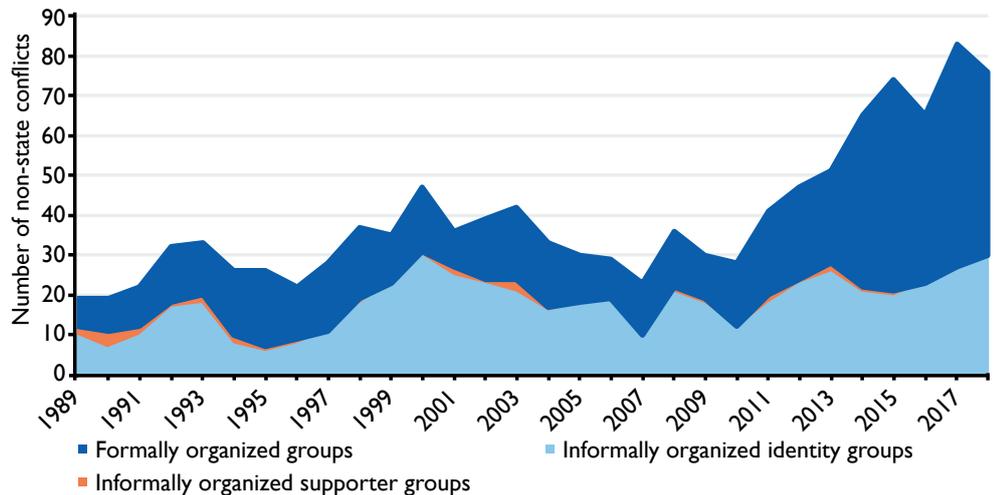


Figure 1: Number of non-state conflicts by type of organization, 1989–2018. Source: UCDP/PRIO database

of non-state violence shows that while some non-state conflicts are proxy wars between rival states, most non-state conflicts can be understood as a way to access resources in areas with antagonistic or sporadic government presence. Also, we know that in addition to weak territorial control by the government, marginalization of groups caused by factors such as increasing poverty and/or inequality is related to non-state violence.

To illustrate the rise in non-state conflicts around the world, Figure 1 charts the number of these conflicts between 1989 and 2018 by type of organization: dark blue refers to formally organized groups, light blue to informally organized identity groups, and orange to informally organized supporter groups.

Notably, after 2014, we see a shift in the most common type of non-state conflict from identity groups to formally organized groups. Overall, from 1989–2018, conflicts between formally organized groups comprise 51 percent of all non-state conflicts (599 of 1,174), 46 percent between identity groups (537), and the remaining 3 percent between supporter groups (33).

An early peak of 47 conflicts in 2000 was mostly driven by clashes in Ethiopia, Nigeria, Somalia, Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Together, these countries accounted for 59 percent of the total number of non-state conflicts that year.

Most of these conflicts in Africa occurred between informally organized identity groups,

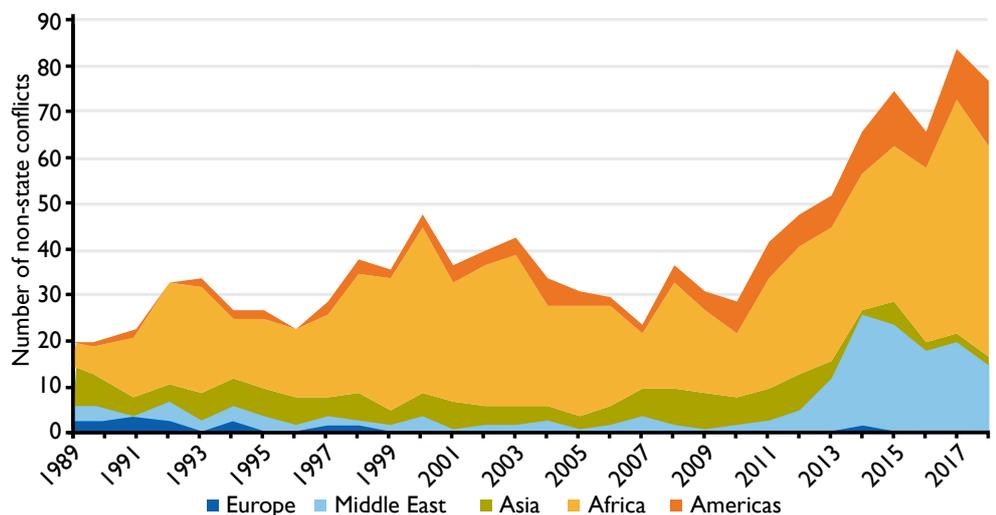


Figure 2: Number of non-state conflicts by region, 1989–2018. Source: UCDP/PRIO database

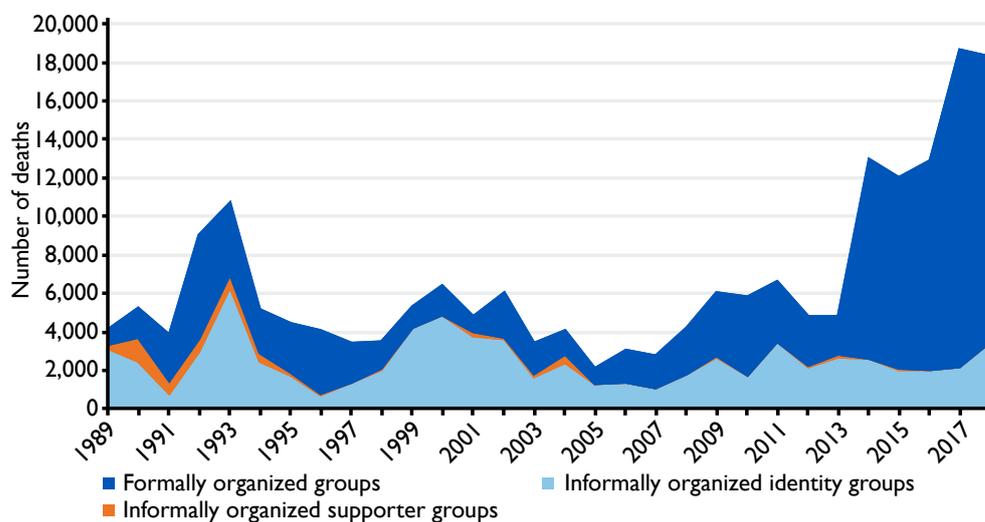


Figure 3: Battle-related deaths in non-state conflicts by type of organization. Source: UCDP/PRIO database

which are characterized by intense, short-term fighting, usually less than a year in duration. The informal organization of these groups makes them unable to sustain organized violence over time. This is shown by the sharp curve around 2000 and the much lower number of these conflicts in 1999 (35) and 2001 (36).

On the other hand, the rapidly increasing number of conflicts since 2014 has been sustained by formally organized groups in countries such as Syria, Mexico, Nigeria, Libya and Sudan, which accounted for 63 percent of all conflicts between 2014 and 2018.

To better understand this shift in the modes of

non-state conflict, we need to look at regional variation over time.

Regional trends

Figure 2 presents the number of non-state conflicts from 1989–2018 with respect to region. Over that period, the majority of non-state conflicts have occurred in Africa, primarily between informally organized identity groups (469 of 726). Of these conflicts, 74 percent have been concentrated in six countries: the DRC, Kenya, Libya, Sudan, Nigeria, and Ethiopia. In recent years, however, we see an increase in non-state conflicts between highly organized groups in the region, particularly Mali, Libya, and the Central

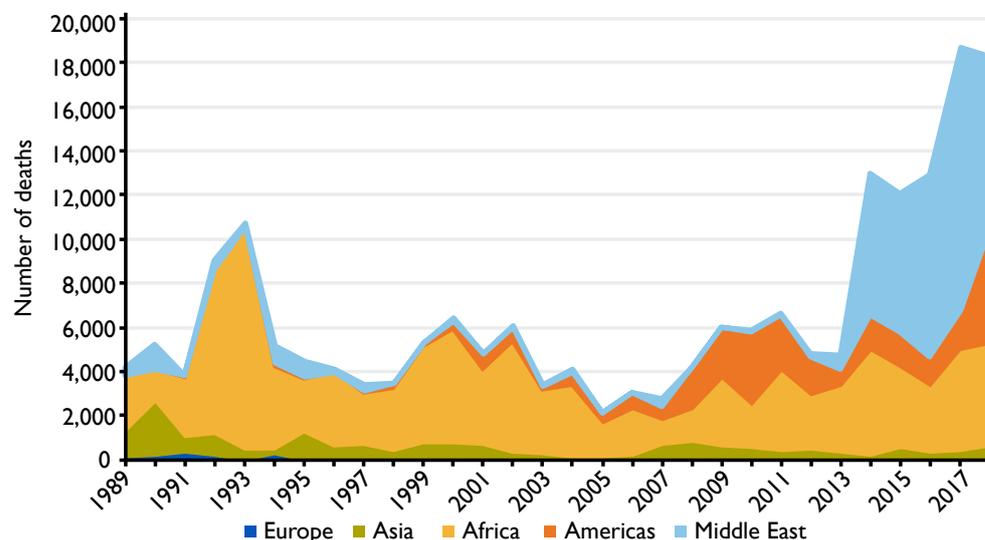


Figure 4: Battle-related deaths in non-state conflicts by region, 1989–2018. Source: UCDP/PRIO database

African Republic.

In the Middle East, we also see a rapid increase in the number of non-state conflicts since 2010, from 2 in 2012 to 19 in 2014 and 10 in 2018. This rise can be attributed primarily to ongoing clashes in Syria, but also in Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon. These conflicts consist of fighting between highly organized actors, where violence between rebel groups accounts for 93 percent (140 of 150) of all conflicts in the region for the whole period. Thus, while Africa and the Middle East both feature high levels of non-state conflict, the two regions are characterized by different modes of conflict between non-state groups.

Formally organized violence is also the most common mode of non-state conflict in Asia, Europe, and the Americas, although these regions have many fewer conflicts in number compared to Africa and the Middle East in recent years. Europe has the fewest non-state conflicts of all regions between 1989 and 2018, with a total of 14 events, of which nine were between formally organized groups. Most of these conflicts occurred in Russia and the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s.

In Asia, non-state conflicts in India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan account for 70 percent of all non-state violence (105 of 149) in the region.

The Americas feature the highest percentage of formally organized groups in conflict at 94 percent (127 of 135). These clashes include violence between rebel groups (e.g., FARC and the United Self-Defence Forces of Columbia) and criminal gangs (e.g., Rock Machine and Hells Angels in Canada). Cartel violence in Mexico dominates the scene, however, accounting for 67 percent of the total number of conflicts (90 of 135). In 2018, cartel violence peaked with 14 active conflicts.

Non-State Battle Deaths

Curiously, the trends in human casualties do not necessarily follow the same pattern as the number of conflicts. Figure 3 illustrates that the first peak in battle deaths occurred in 1993, when there were relatively fewer non-state conflicts. This aberration was mostly driven by conflict in the DRC between the Hunde, Nyanga, and Banyarwanda ethnic groups, which resulted in 3,051 fatalities.

However, the recent years of the observation period reveals a general correspondence between the number of non-state conflicts and number of battle-related deaths. In 2017, 18,694 people

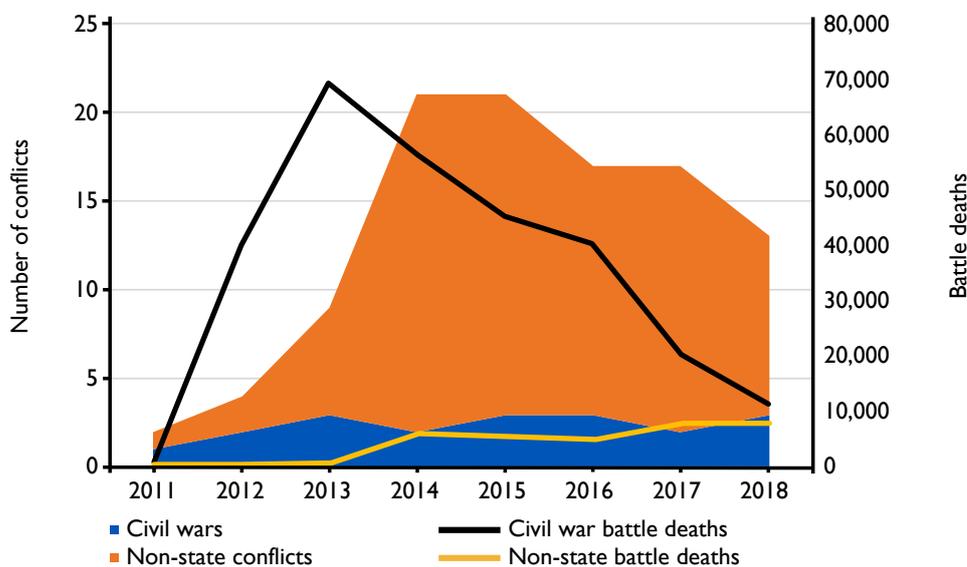


Figure 5: Number of conflicts and battle-related deaths in Syria, 2011–2018. Source: UCDP/PRIO database

died in non-state conflicts and 18,288 perished in 2018. These figures are the two highest in the post-Cold war period and they reflect the increasing percentage of rebel groups active in non-state conflicts. The single deadliest conflict occurred in 2015 between the Islamic State (IS) and the Syrian Defence Force, when 8,789 people died.

Battle deaths within regions

Looking at the number of battle-related deaths per region (Figure 4), African non-state conflicts account for 52 percent (103,972 of 199,044).

More recently, we see a downward trend in casualties after the peak in 1993, but with a reversal after 2007. This increase was driven primarily by conflicts between non-state groups in Nigeria, Libya, Sudan, and the Central African Republic. The Americas saw a sharp increase in battle deaths in 2010 and again in 2018, the result of conflict between the Jalisco cartel and the Sinaloa and Santa Rosa de Lima cartel in

Mexico, which claimed 3,922 lives. Finally, we see a dramatic increase in the number of non-state conflict battle deaths in the Middle East. Looking just at 2014 to 2018, we see that 54 percent of all non-state battle-related deaths globally occurred in the Middle East and a stunning 881 percent increase from 2013 (652) to 2014 (6,398). The battle deaths occurred in only five countries between 2014 and 2018: Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Yemen and Lebanon. 92 percent were in Syria alone.

Syria and the Islamic State

There has been a drastic increase in the number of conflicts between formally organized rebel groups in the last couple of years, due primarily to activity in Syria and the Islamic State (IS). The two deadliest conflicts in 2018 occurred in Syria and involved IS as one of the belligerents. Of the 363 non-state conflicts active worldwide since 2014, 76 occurred in Syria – by far the most of any country. IS has been involved in no fewer than 81 conflicts since 2014, and

their activities have had spillover effects in other countries such as Yemen, Lebanon, Nigeria and Afghanistan. Also, the increasing number of non-state conflicts is due to local rebel groups pledging allegiance to IS, in countries such as Mali, Niger and Libya.

Figure 5 shows recent trends in the number of conflicts and battle deaths within Syria. As we can see, although the number of battle deaths in the civil wars has declined in recent years, the number of non-state conflicts remains high and the number of casualties is increasing.

Non-state conflicts usually receive less attention than civil wars amongst policy makers and academics, as state-based conflicts dominate the overall picture. But recent developments – including the increasing number of active conflicts and battle-related deaths – emphasize the need for greater attention towards and better understanding of the occurrence and dynamics of non-state conflicts, how they relate to other types of conflict, and how to include these groups in peace processes. This understanding is central to be able to meet UN Sustainable Development Goal number 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions. ■

Further Reading

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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 will contribute to new conflict analyses within areas of public interest, and work to produce thorough and high-quality analysis for the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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.