

# Conflict Trends in Africa, 1989–2018: An Update

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# 1. Introduction

This report is an update on the more extensive report ‘Conflict Trends in Africa 1946–2017’. Thus, this report mainly includes updates on conflict data up until 2018, featuring updated graphs depicting the data, with limited descriptions.

The aim of this report is to describe the conflict trends in Africa, particularly since 1990, and to compare this to the global trends. We consider three types of political violence: *state-based conflicts*, *non-state conflicts* and *one-sided violence*. In this report, we use conflict data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP).<sup>1</sup> Here, a conflict is defined as 25 battle deaths within a calendar year, where killings occur on both sides of the conflict (if not, it is considered one-sided violence). The specific definition is explained within each of the sections.

## 2. State-Based Conflicts, 1946–2018

The most common and most deadly type of conflict in the world today is state-based conflict. UCDP defines a state-based armed conflict as: “a contested incompatibility that concerns government and/or territory where the use of armed force between two parties, of which at least one is the government of a state, results in at least 25 battle-related deaths in a calendar year”.<sup>2 3</sup> This includes international conflicts, i.e. conflicts between two or more countries, as well as civil wars.<sup>4</sup>

We also estimate the intensity of conflict by looking at the number of battle deaths. Battle-related deaths are defined as “those deaths caused by the warring parties that can be directly related to combat”.<sup>5</sup> In the following, we first focus specifically on Africa for each of the types of violence (state-based, non-state, and one-sided), before presenting a global overview. This is only counting direct battle deaths, including both civilian and military fatalities; it does not take into account indirect deaths caused by factors such as illnesses, migration and loss of livelihood and food security.

### 2.1. State-based conflicts in Africa

Figure 1 shows the development of state-based conflicts in Africa between 1946 and 2018, shown on the right y-axis. From 2017 to 2018, we see an increase in state-based conflict from 19 to 21, which is the highest number in Africa since 1946, together with 2015 and 2016. In 2018, we see no intrastate conflicts in Africa.

<sup>1</sup> The Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) is available at: <http://ucdp.uu.se/>.

<sup>2</sup> Gleditsch, Nils Petter; Peter Wallensteen, Mikael Eriksson, Margareta Sollenberg & Håvard Strand (2002) ‘Armed Conflict 1946–2001: A New Dataset’. *Journal of Peace Research* 39(5): 615–637.

<sup>3</sup> Petterson, Therése and Kristine Eck (2018) ‘Organized violence, 1989–2017’. *Journal of Peace Research* 55(4).

<sup>4</sup> We define four types of conflict: 1. *Extrasystemic armed conflict* occurs between a state and a non-state group outside its own territory. These conflicts are by definition territorial, since the government side is fighting to retain control of a territory outside the state system. 2. *Interstate armed conflict* occurs between two or more states. 3. *Internal armed conflict* occurs between the government of a state and one or more internal opposition group(s) without intervention from other states. 4. *Internationalized internal armed conflict* occurs between the government of a state and one or more internal opposition group(s) with intervention from other states (secondary parties) on one or both sides.

<sup>5</sup> UCDP Battle-related Deaths Dataset Codebook Version 19.1. Available at: <http://ucdp.uu.se/downloads/brd/ucdp-brd-191.pdf>.

On the left y-axis, Figure 1 also displays the number of battle deaths in Africa since 1946, depicted by the black line.<sup>6</sup> We see a fairly sharp decrease in battle deaths since 2017, from 9,300 to 6,700, suggesting that many of the conflicts are low intensity conflicts.

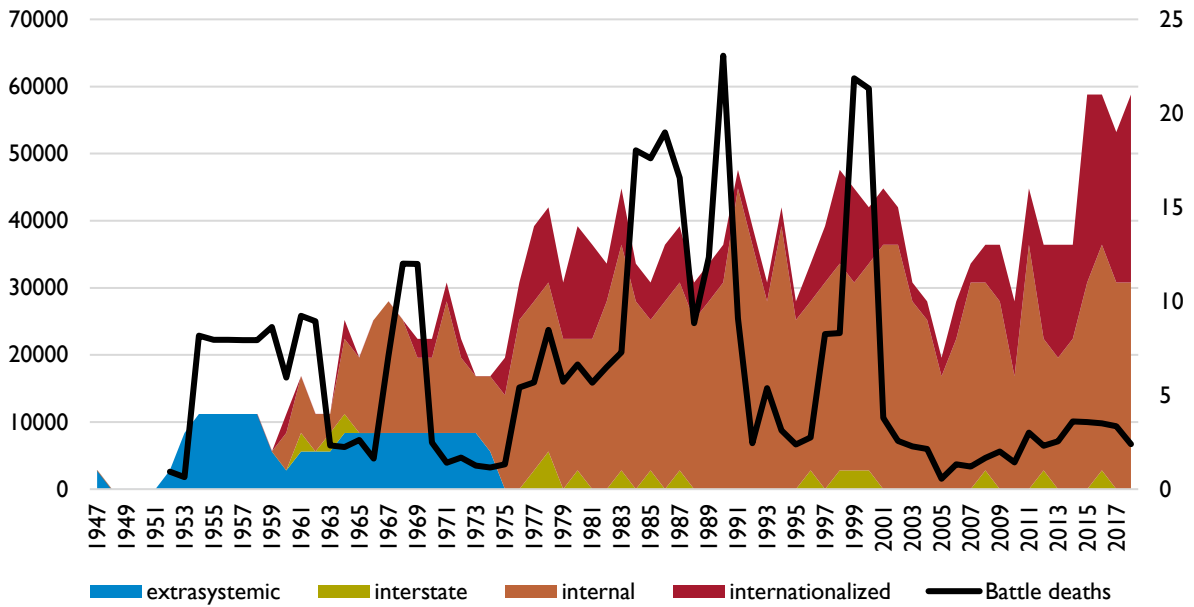


Figure 1: Battle deaths and state-based armed conflicts in Africa, by conflict type, 1946–2018

Figure 2 shows the breakdown of battle deaths in Africa in 2017 by country.<sup>7</sup> Nigeria, Somalia and DR Congo account for 70% of all the battle-related deaths in state-based conflict. Both Nigeria and DR Congo have two conflicts each, i.e. two rebel groups fighting the government. In comparison, Figure 3 shows the same breakdown for 2018. In 2018, Somalia is the country with the highest battle deaths, while Nigeria in “second place” has seen a substantial decrease. The biggest change is seen in Cameroon, which has the third highest number of battle deaths – a substantial increase from 2017.

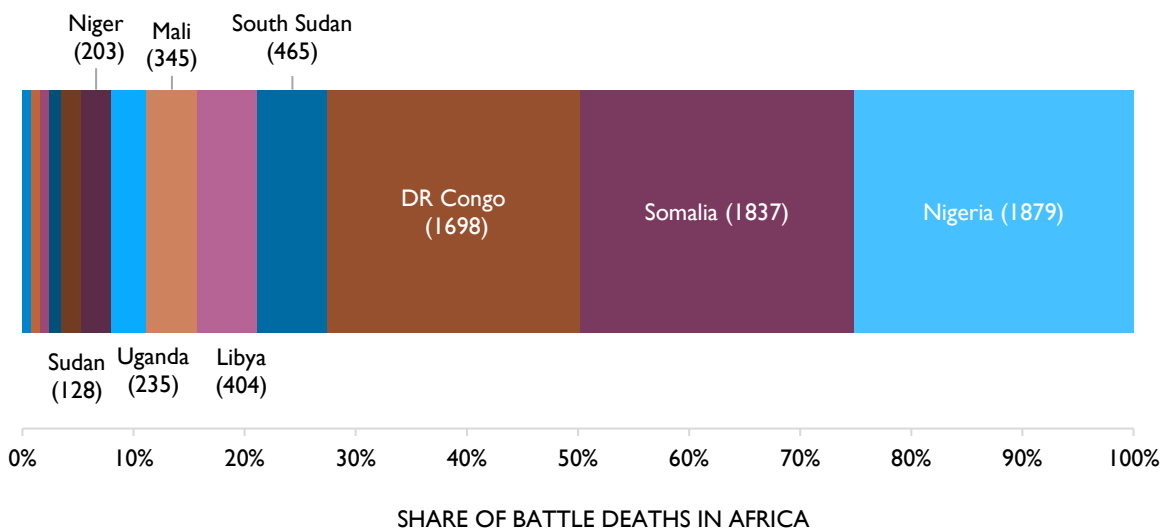


Figure 2: Battle deaths in Africa 2017

<sup>6</sup> Source: UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset version 19.1.

<sup>7</sup> Source: UCDP Battle death related dataset.

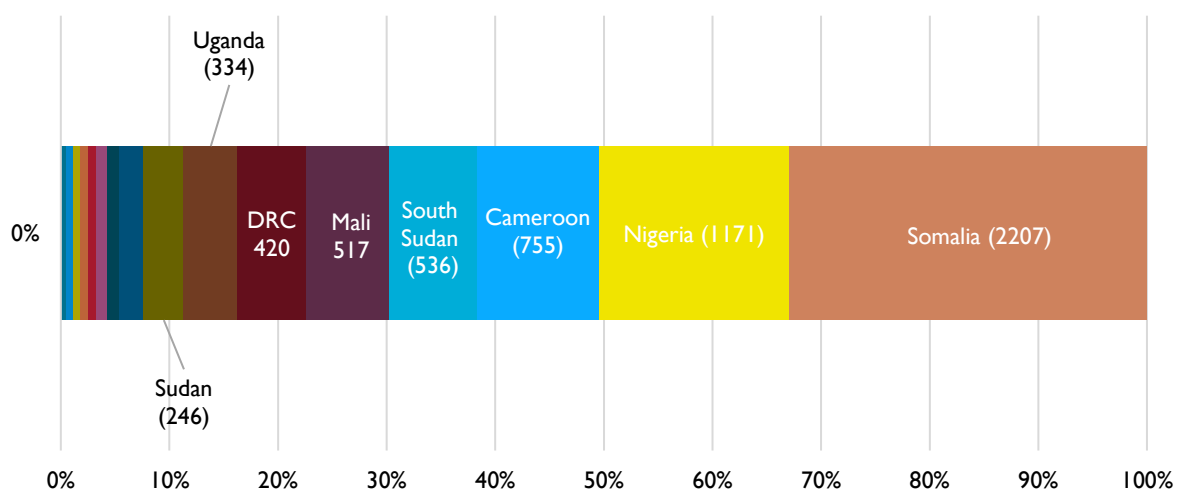


Figure 3: Battle deaths in Africa 2018

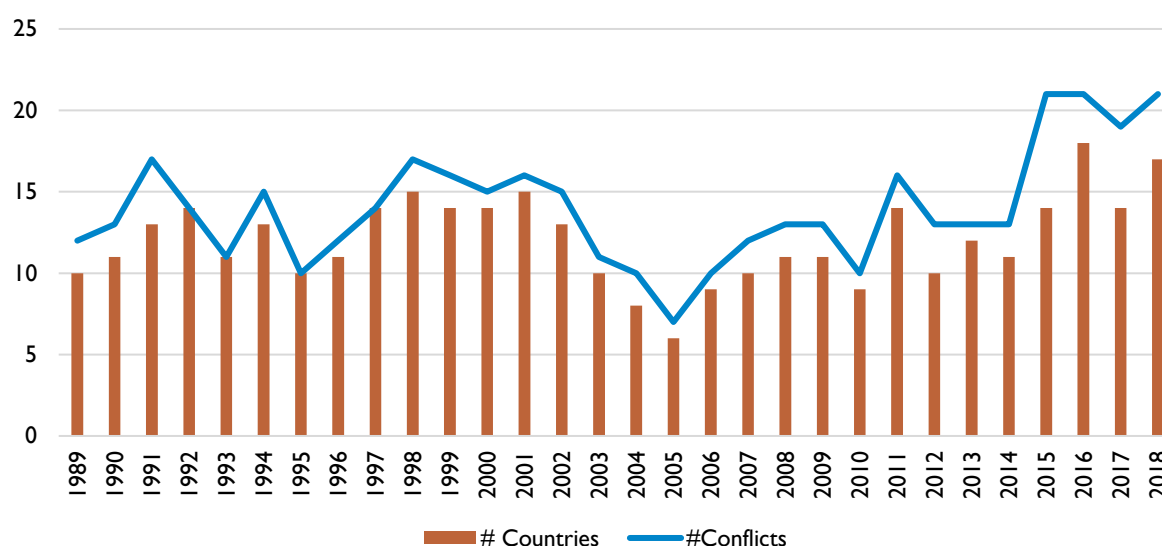


Figure 4: Number of countries with conflict versus total number of conflicts, Africa 1989–2018

Figure 4 compares the number of conflict-affected countries with the total number of state-based conflicts in Africa between 1989 and 2018.<sup>8</sup> Most of the time, these two numbers follow each other to a large degree. In the last few years, however, we see that the number of conflicts is exceeding the number of countries with conflict, suggesting that more countries have multiple conflicts. However, we also see that the increase in number of conflicts and countries from 2017 to 2018 correspond, thus suggesting that the increase in conflicts in 2018 are conflicts in “new” countries compared to 2017. In 2018, the conflict in Angola fell below the threshold, while Central African Republic, Rwanda, Burkina Faso and Mozambique were new conflict countries. All of these are low intensity conflicts. While the two first saw a continuation of recent conflicts, the latter two are experiencing new conflicts with Islamist groups who had not previously been operating in the country.

<sup>8</sup> Source: UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset version 19.1.



## 2.2. Global overview

In order to put the development of African conflict into a larger context, we also briefly discuss the global conflict trends.

Figure 5 shows the development of state-based conflict between 1946 and 2018 at the global level.<sup>9</sup> Civil war is the predominant type of conflict, increasing steadily towards the end of the Cold War, with a peak in 1992. This is followed by a substantial decrease in the number of conflicts, leading to an increased optimism that the world is becoming more peaceful.<sup>10 11</sup> While we did see a similar decrease in Africa, it came much later than at the global level. This indicates that the end of the Cold War did not have the same direct and immediate impact on the African conflict picture.

However, similarly as in Africa, at the global level in 2015 we see a dramatic increase in the number of conflicts, with 2016 witnessing 53 conflicts, the highest number of conflicts since 1946. There was a slight decrease in conflicts in 2017 (49 conflicts), but the number is still well above the average number during the period 1993–2014.

When looking closer, the graph reveals that much of the increase can be attributed to the growth in internationalized civil wars, i.e. civil wars where another country interferes. Further, in 2018, 12 of the 53 conflicts were related to IS, this is a decrease from 2017 when 16 out of 50 conflicts were IS-related. To summarize, while we have seen an increase in the number of conflicts over the past three years, it does not necessarily mean that new conflicts have arisen, but rather that conflicts in already conflict-affected areas have become more intense and complicated.

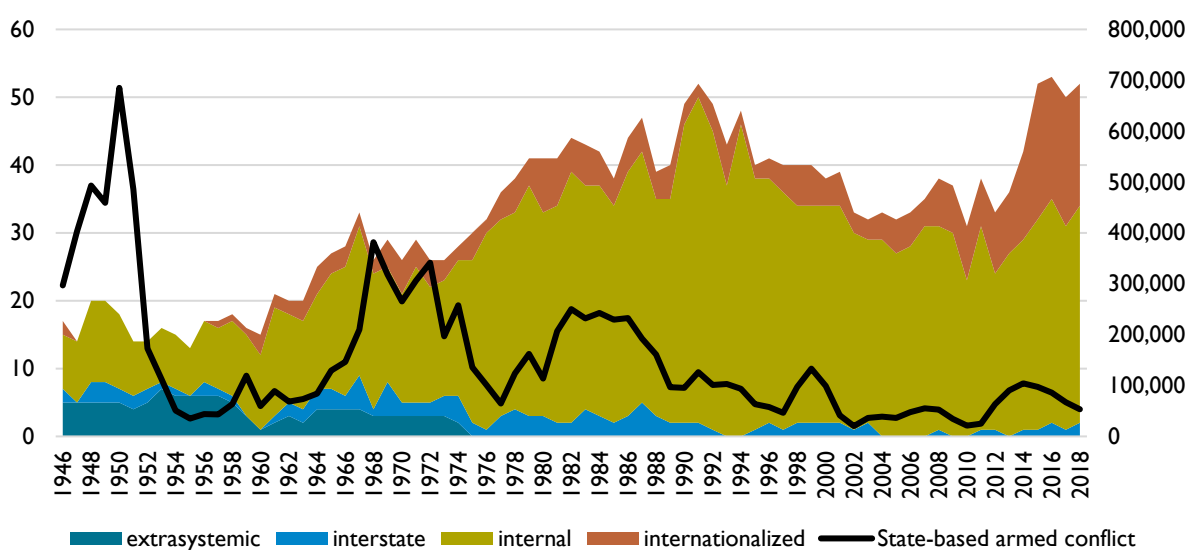


Figure 5: Number of countries with state-based armed conflicts in the world, by conflict type 1946–2018

In order to get a better comparison with Africa, we also break down the conflict graph by continent in Figure 6.<sup>12</sup> We see that Africa and Asia have the largest share of the conflicts, but the figure also indicates that the Middle East has the largest relative increase in the past five years.

<sup>9</sup> Source: UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset version 19.1

<sup>10</sup> Pinker, S. (2011) *The Better Angels of our Nature*. New York, NY: Viking.

<sup>11</sup> Goldstein, J. (2011) *Winning the War on War: The Decline of Armed Conflict Worldwide*. New York: Dutton.

<sup>12</sup> Source: UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset version 19.1.

From 2017 to 2018 there seems to have been an increase in conflict both in Africa and in the Middle East region.

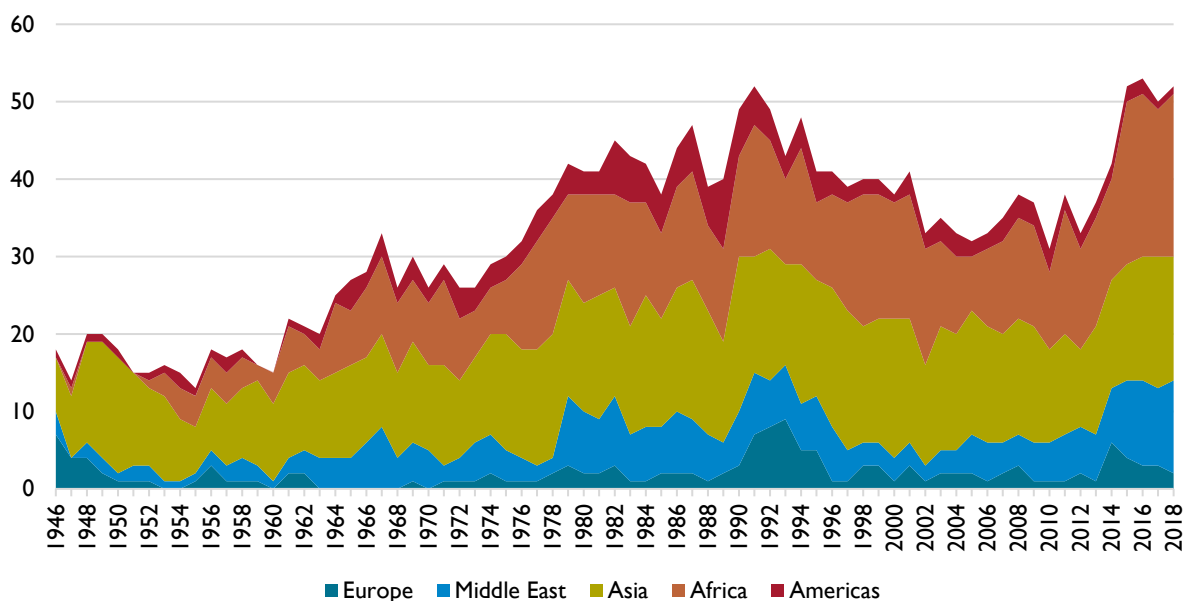


Figure 6: Number of countries with state-based armed conflict, by region, 1946–2018

Figure 7a shows the trend in battle-related deaths in 2017, showing that the conflicts in Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq represent more than 75% of all battle-related deaths in 2017.<sup>13</sup> This changes in 2018, Figure 7b: Afghanistan alone accounts for almost 50% of all battle deaths in the world in 2018, Syria counts for almost 22%, while Iraq has less than 1,000 battle deaths in 2018.<sup>14</sup> The three most bloody conflicts in the world in 2018 account for almost 80% of the total number, and none of these are situated in Africa.

<sup>13</sup> Source: UCDP Battle death related dataset v.19.1.

<sup>14</sup> Source: UCDP Battle death related dataset v.19.1.

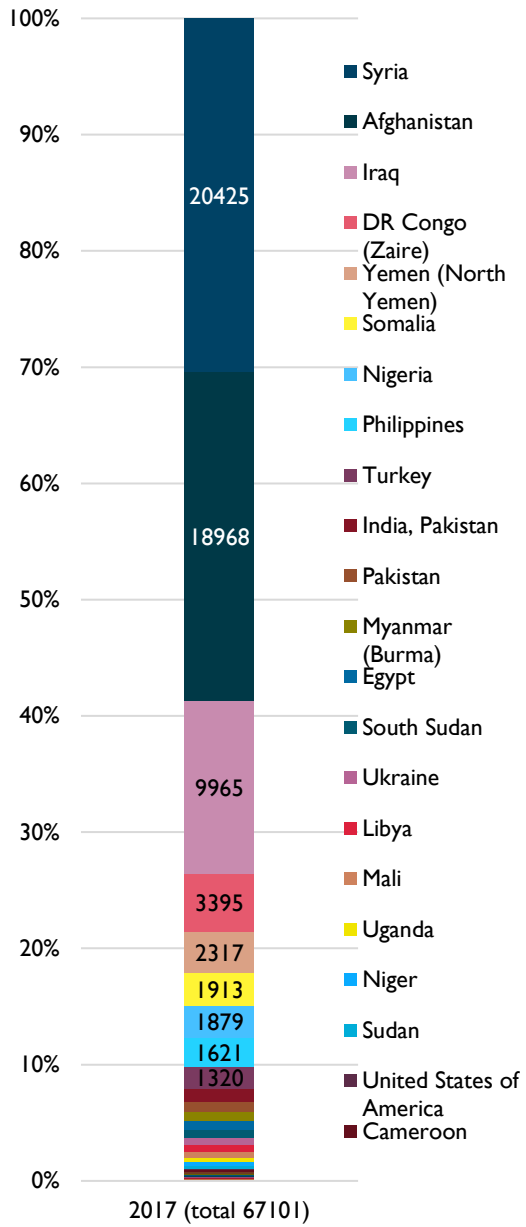


Figure 7a: Share of battle deaths in 2017

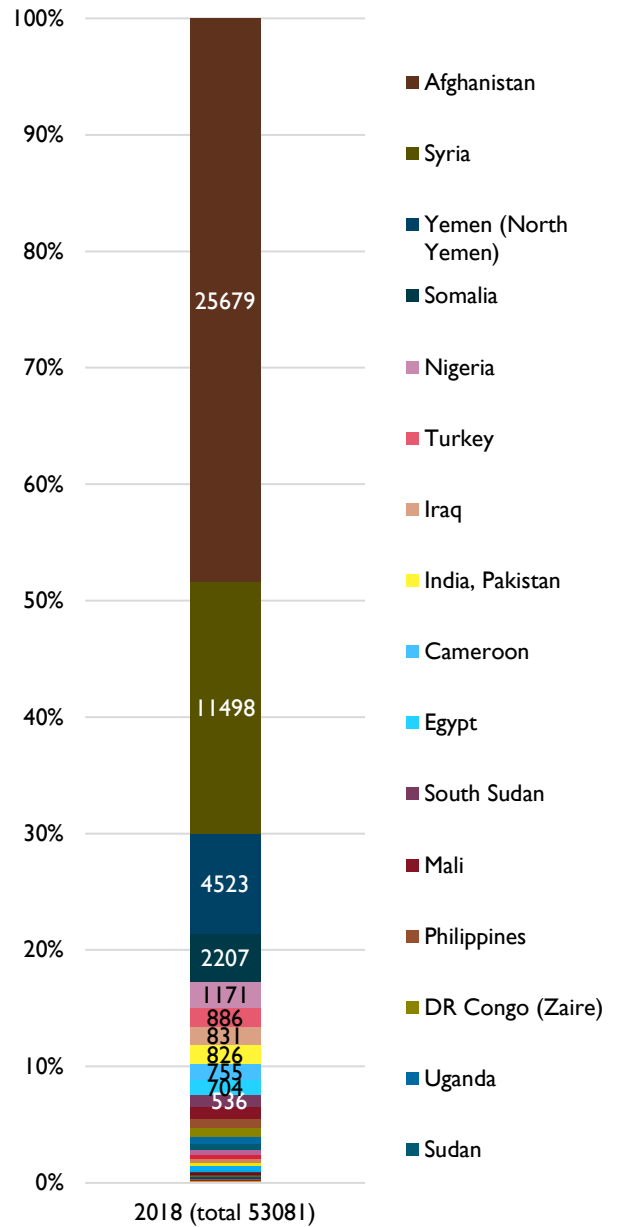


Figure 7b: Share of battle deaths in 2018

## 3. Non-State Conflicts, 1989–2018

While the media tends to focus their attention toward what we call state-based conflicts, i.e. conflicts between states or civil wars, a large number of violent conflicts occur between groups that are not linked to the state, so called non-state conflicts.

A non-state conflict is defined by the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) as “the use of armed force between two organized armed groups, neither of which is the government of a state, which results in at least 25 battle-related deaths in a year.” In this definition, organized groups consist of either (i) *formally organized groups*: any non-governmental group of people having announced a name for their group and using armed force against another similarly formally organized group, or (ii) *informally organized groups*: any group without an announced name, but who uses armed force against another similarly organized group.<sup>15</sup>

### 3.1. Non-state conflicts in Africa

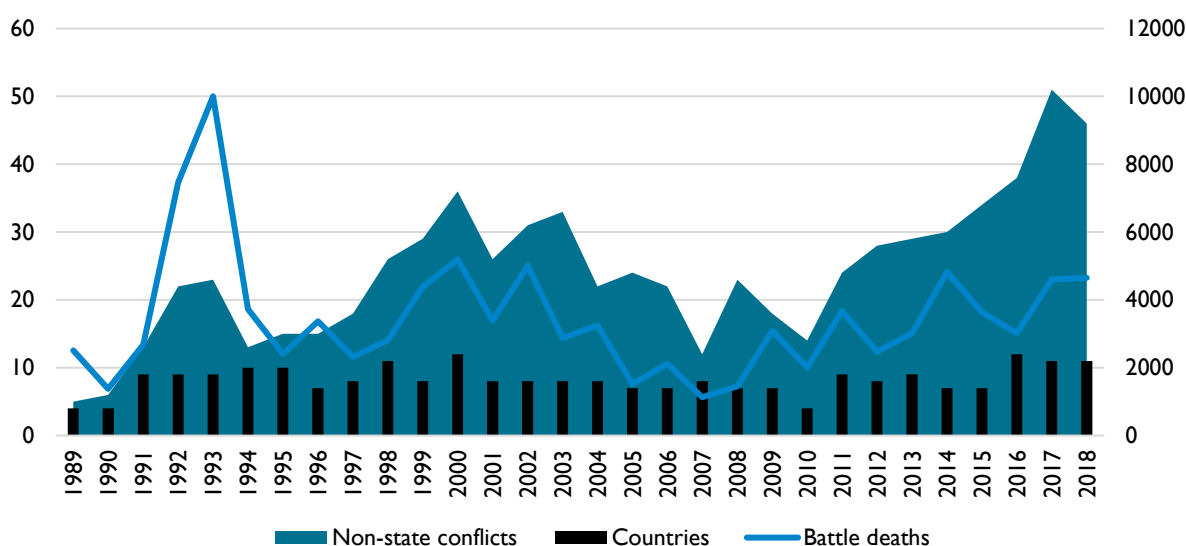


Figure 8: Number of non-state conflicts in Africa, battle deaths and conflict countries, 1989–2018

Figure 8 displays the non-state conflicts in Africa.<sup>16</sup> The number of non-state conflicts has increased dramatically over the last five to six years, peaking in 2017 with 51 conflicts, and decreasing to 46 in 2018.<sup>17</sup> Figure 8 indicates that neither the number of battle deaths nor the number of countries experiencing non-state conflict in Africa see the same substantial increase. This could be an indication that conflict is breeding more conflict, i.e. that countries already

<sup>15</sup> <http://ucdp.uu.se/downloads/nsos/ucdp-nonstate-181.pdf>. Sundberg, Ralph, Kristine Eck and Joakim Kreutz (2012) ‘Introducing the UCDP Non-State Conflict Dataset’. *Journal of Peace Research* 49(2).

<sup>16</sup> Source: UCDP Non-state conflict dataset v.19.1.

<sup>17</sup> We should be aware that some of the increase could be due to coding biases, as the data from before 2011 was backdated. This means that while conflict after 2011 was coded as they were ongoing, to code conflict before 2011 the coders had to use historical archives. Since many of the non-state conflicts are small and often receive less attention, it is more difficult to find information on these compared to state-based conflict. The consequence is that not all conflicts before 2011 have been coded. Thus, the number of non-state conflicts before 2011 could be higher than is reported here.

experiencing non-state conflicts are less able to control the use of violence within the country borders, leading the number of this type of conflict to increase even more. In 2018, only 11 (same as in 2017) countries were experiencing non-state conflict. The level of battle deaths seems to be stable.

### 3.2. Global overview

Looking at non-state conflicts at the global level, Figure 9 clearly indicates that there has been a general increase in non-state conflicts during the past three decades.<sup>18</sup> While the number of conflicts during the 2000s was stable with between 30 and 40 non-state conflicts, the number peaked in 2017 with 83 conflicts. Much of this increase is taking place in Africa and the Middle East. The number of battle deaths also peaked in 2017 with a total of 18,700, a substantial increase from 2016. The global trends for non-state conflicts resembles the trends we see in Africa. The total number of non-state conflicts decreased to 76, while the level of violence seems stable at almost 18,300 battle deaths. While we see a decrease both in Africa and the Middle East, we see an increase from 11 to 14 non-state conflicts in the Americas.

While Figure 9 indicates that Africa has by far the highest number of non-state conflicts compared to the other continents, Figures 10a and 10b reveal that the lion's share of the battle deaths occur in the Middle East.<sup>19</sup> In 2017, almost 60% of the battle deaths occurred in the Middle East, while approximately 30% took place in Africa. This suggests that while Africa accounts for a large number of the conflicts, the African non-state conflicts seem to be of low intensity with relatively few battle deaths. This is also reflected in Figures 10a and 10b indicating non-state battle deaths in 2017 and 2018. While the total for 2017 and 2018 is similar, there is a substantial decrease in the Middle East, and more than a doubling in the Americas, while Africa is very stable.

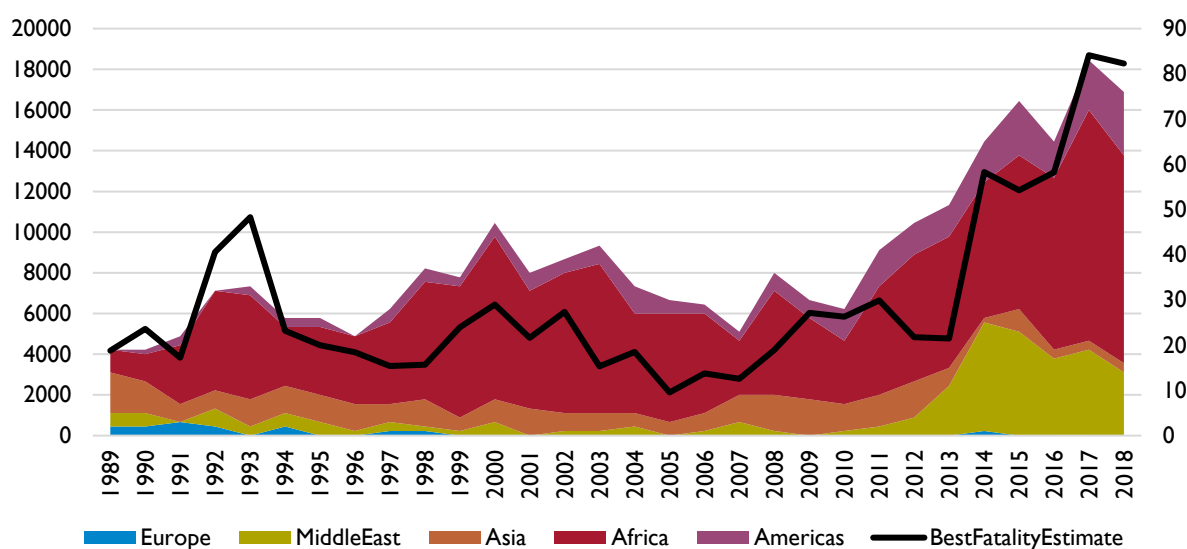


Figure 9: Total number of non-state conflicts, by region 1989–2018

<sup>18</sup> Source: UCDP Non-state conflict dataset v.19.1.

<sup>19</sup> Source: UCDP Non-state conflict dataset v.19.1.

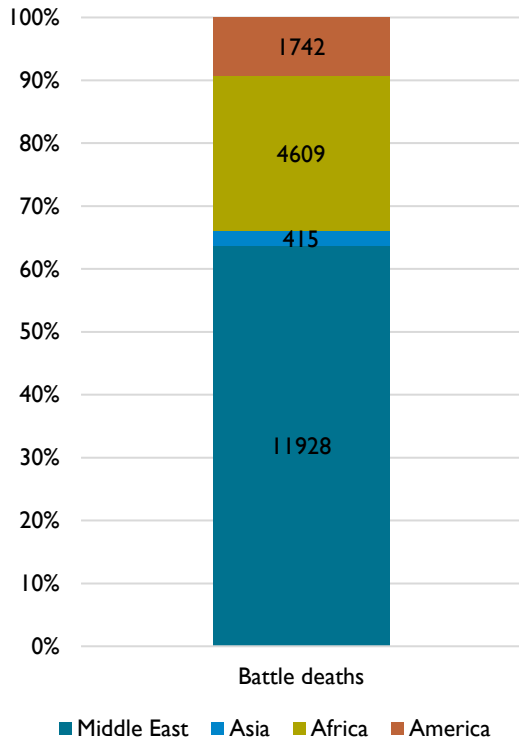


Figure 10a: Share of battle deaths in non-state conflict by region, 2017

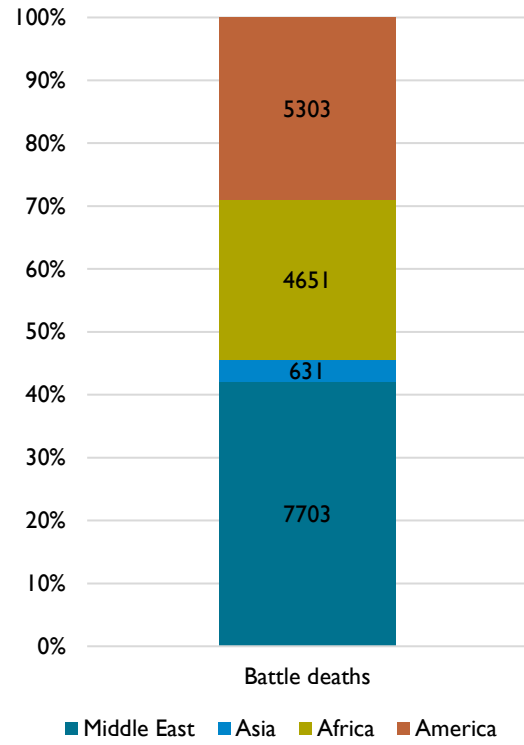


Figure 10b: Share of battle deaths in non-state conflict by region, 2018

## 4. One-Sided Violence

Another important element of the conflict picture is violence against civilians, either by the state or by non-state actors. The UCDP One-sided Violence Dataset defines one-sided violence as “the use of armed force by the government of a state or by a formally organized group against civilians which results in at least 25 deaths. Extrajudicial killings in custody are excluded”.<sup>20</sup>

### 4.1. One-sided violence in Africa

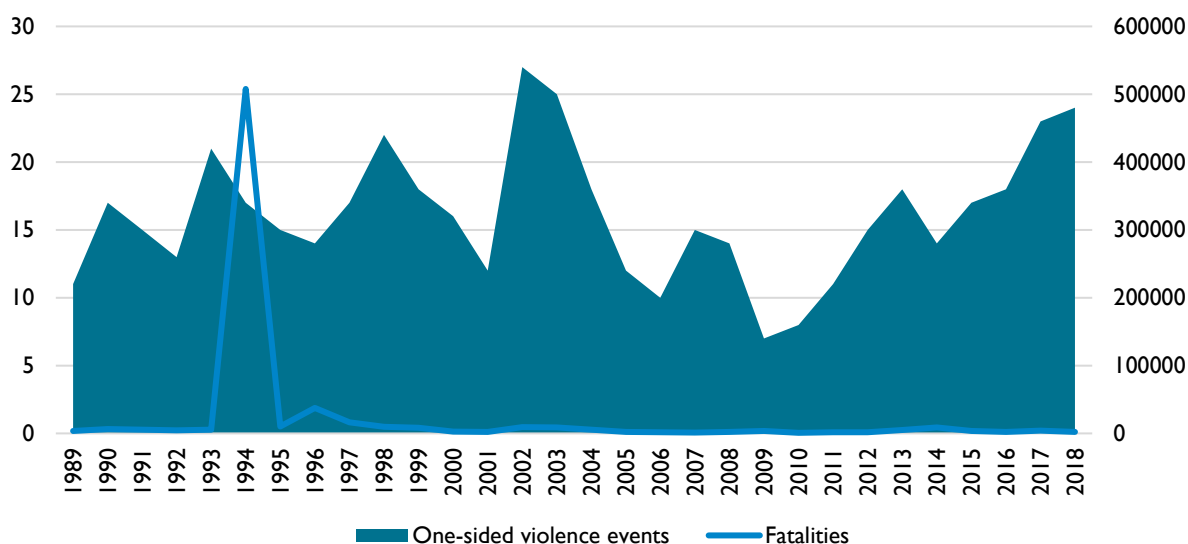


Figure 11: One-sided violence in Africa 1989–2018

Figure 11 and Figure 12 show the trends in one-sided violence across Africa between 1989 and 2018, including fatalities.<sup>21</sup> In Figure 11, we see a large peak in fatalities in 1994, which reflects the genocide in Rwanda. To be able to see the general trend in fatalities in this period, we have excluded Rwanda in Figure 12. Here, we still see a peak around 1995 and 1996, which is related to the conflicts in DR Congo and Burundi. We also see that there has been a substantial increase in one-sided violence since 2012. By far the worst perpetrator during this period was Boko Haram in Northeastern Nigeria. We see that there is a slight increase in one-sided violence events from 2017 to 2018 from 23 to 24, but a substantial decrease in people killed from 3,850 to 2,350. The largest decrease is related to less killings by Boko Haram as well as the Ali Darass Fulani in the Central African Republic.

<sup>20</sup> Eck, Kristine & Lisa Hultman (2007) ‘One-Sided Violence against Civilians in War: Insights from New Fatality Data’. *Journal of Peace Research* 44(2): 233–246.

<sup>21</sup> Source: UCDP One-sided dataset v.19.1.

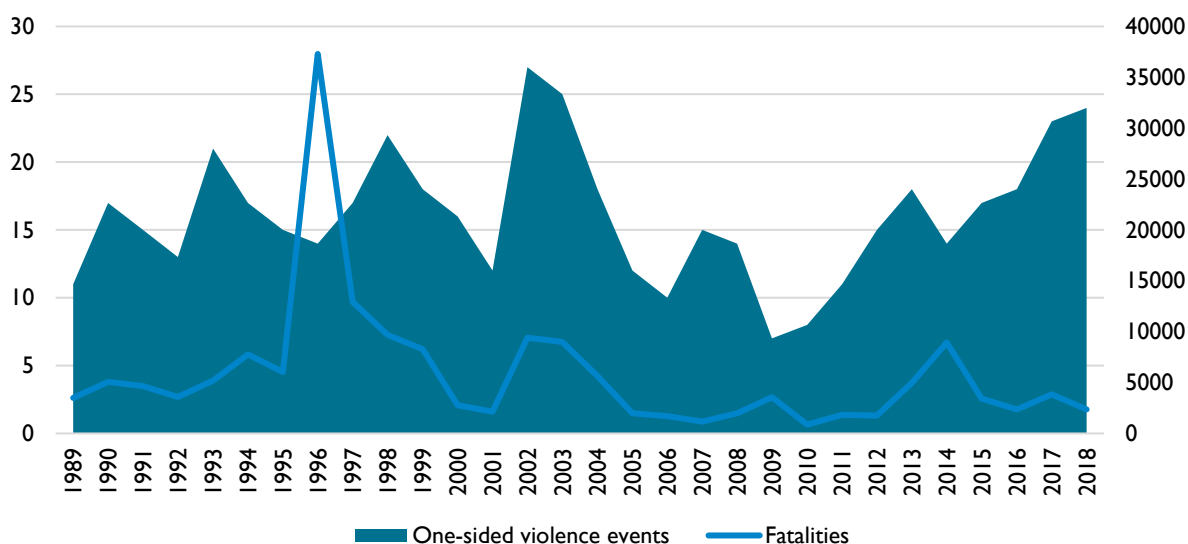


Figure 12: One-sided violence in Africa 1989–2018, without Rwanda 1994

#### 4.2. Global overview

Figure 13 shows the number of incidents of one-sided violence between 1990 and 2018 at the global level.<sup>22</sup> There is a clear decrease throughout the 2000s, before we see a substantial increase from 2011. It seems that both the increase and decrease can be attributed to changes in Africa. The other regions seem to be more stable throughout the period. Globally there is a slight decrease from 2017 to 2018, but overall the numbers are quite stable.

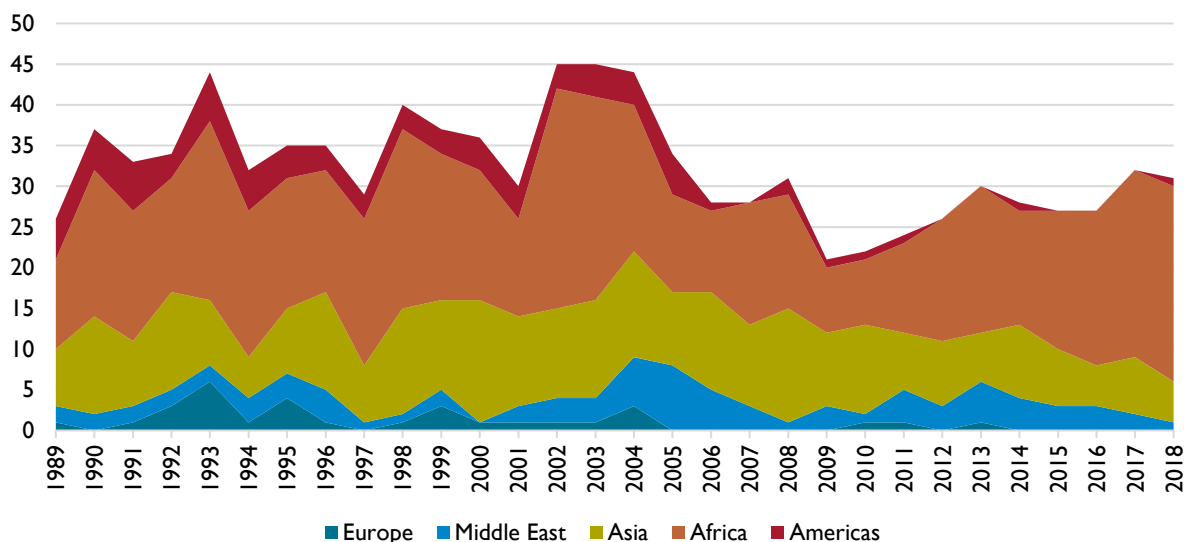


Figure 13: Incidents of one-sided violence, by region, 1989–2018

Also, in terms of fatalities related to one-sided violence, Africa has by far the highest share. Figure 14 shows a breakdown of fatalities by region, but also includes a specific category for fatalities that are directly related to IS, which cuts across both Africa, the Middle East and Asia. This category is in fact the second largest. But as we can see from Figure 14, there has been a sharp decrease in one-

<sup>22</sup> Source: UCDP Non-state conflict dataset v.19.1.



sided violence globally from 2017 to 2018 – particularly in Asia, but also in all other regions and by IS.<sup>23</sup>

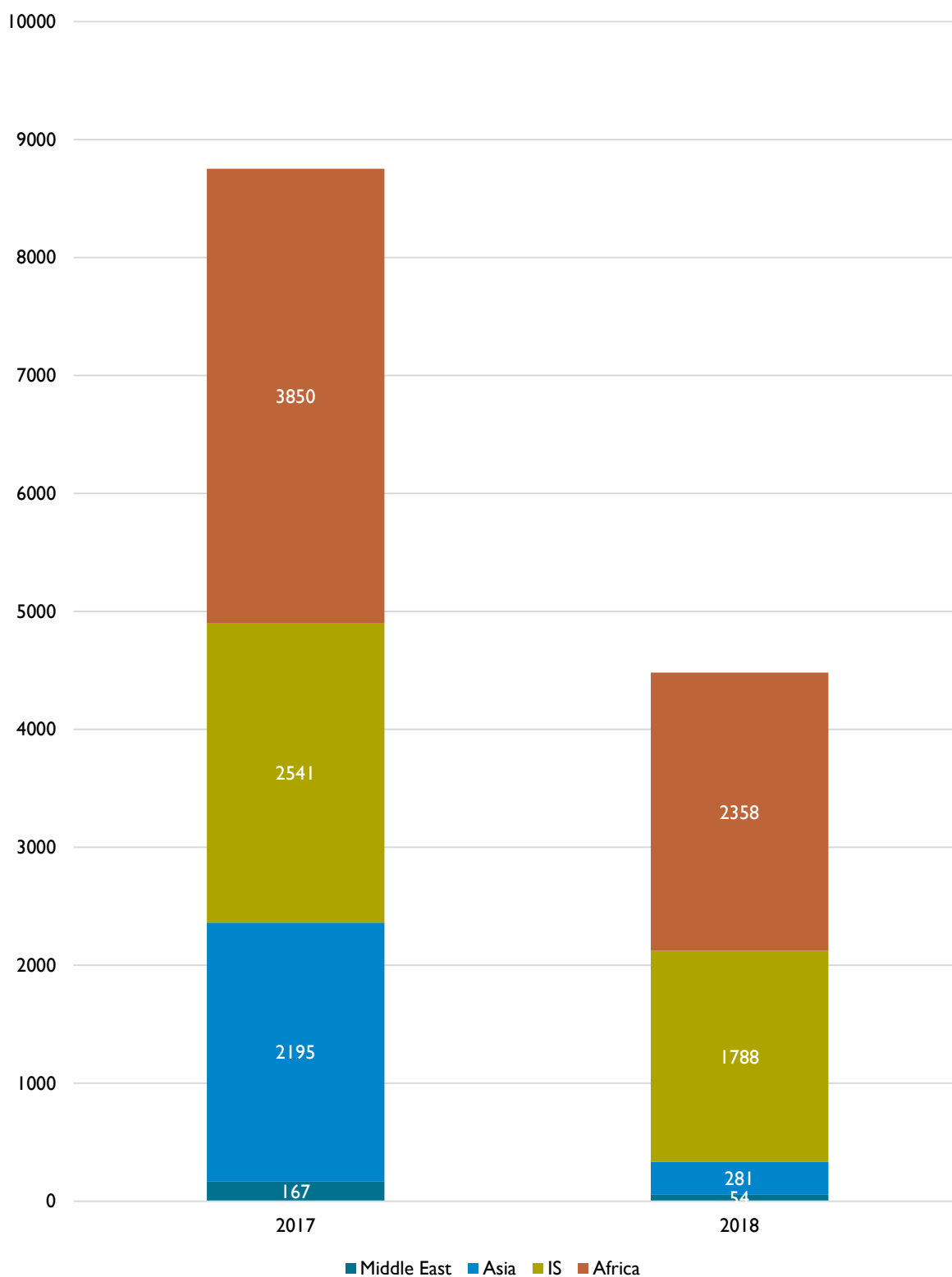


Figure 14: Fatalities in one-sided violence in 2017 and 2018, by region and IS

<sup>23</sup> Source: UCDP Non-state conflict dataset v.19.1.

## 5. Geographic Extent of Conflict

While we often talk about conflict on a national level, we know that most conflicts are geographically limited. In fact, in most cases, only a small part of a country is directly affected by conflict. In Figure 15, we show which areas within each country are affected.<sup>24</sup> The beige color indicates which countries experienced conflict in 2018, while the red dots indicate where the country saw conflict events. Each dot represents a conflict event. These events include both state-based and non-state conflicts, as well as one-sided violence. The takeaway from this figure is that conflicts do not affect the entire country, and are often geographically limited to a relatively small area. But we also see that there are certain “hot spot” areas that also cross country boundaries, like the Lake Chad area, the Great Lakes area, and the border between Mali and Burkina Faso.



Figure 15: Conflict countries and conflict zones in Africa, 2018

<sup>24</sup> Source: UCDP Georeferenced Event Dataset (GED) Global Version 19.1.

## 6. Conflict Incompatibility in Africa

What are conflicts fought over in Africa? Figure 16 is based on the UCDP/PRIO data, which includes information on the conflict incompatibility, as stated by the conflicting parties.<sup>25</sup> We distinguish between two types of incompatibilities: conflicts over *government* and conflicts over *territory*. Conflicts over government concern the type of political system, the replacement of the central government, or the change of its composition. Conflicts over territory include disagreement over the status of a territory, e.g. the change of the state in control of a certain territory (interstate conflict), secession or autonomy (internal conflict).

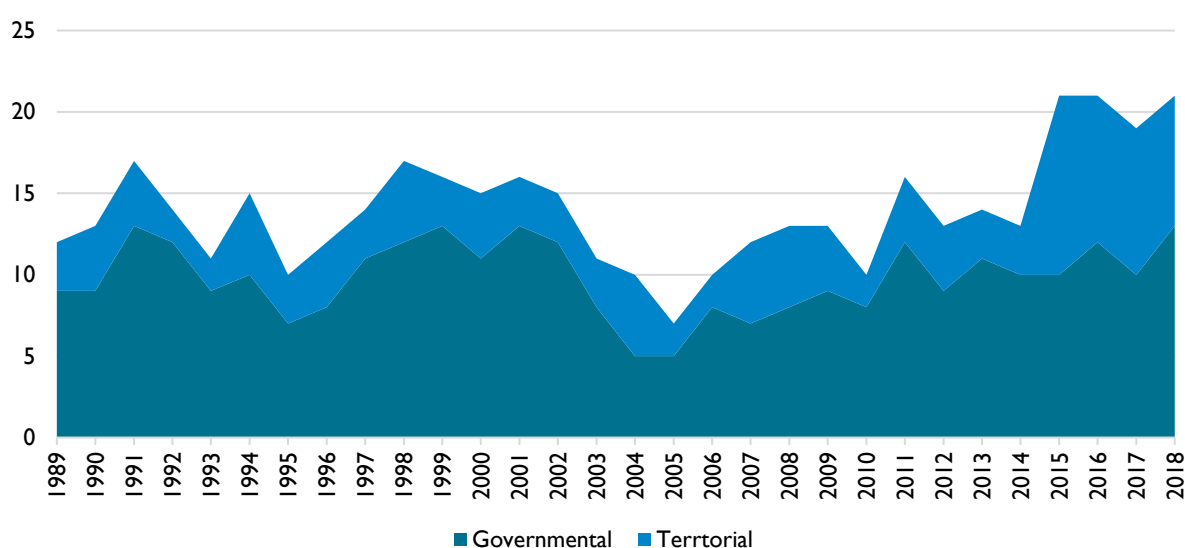


Figure 16: State-based armed conflicts in Africa, by incompatibility, 1989–2018

Figure 16 shows that the number of territorial conflicts was relatively stable from 1989 to 2014. Until 2015, the share of governmental conflicts was higher than the share of territorial conflicts in most years. In recent years, however, we see a sharp increase in territorial conflicts, and the share of territorial conflicts compared to governmental conflicts is approximately a 1:1 relationship. As mentioned earlier in this paper, the increase in conflicts in Africa can in large part be attributed to the involvement of IS in several already ongoing conflicts. Since the goal of IS is to establish an Islamic state, these conflicts are coded as territorial conflicts. We also see that the number of territorial conflicts are fairly stable in the past 4 years, and that the decrease in 2017 and the increase in 2018 is mainly due to governmental conflict.

<sup>25</sup> Source: UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset version 19.1.

## 7. Discussion and Conclusion

This paper has presented an overview of the major conflict trends in Africa from 1946 until today. Africa is following the global patterns, and we see that there has been an increase in the numbers of conflicts in the past few years, with an all-time high in 2018. However, as has been discussed throughout this paper, many of these conflicts are conflicts involving IS in areas with already existing conflicts, such as in Nigeria, Libya and Mali. Thus, while the number of conflicts has gone up, the geographical spread of conflict has not increased in the same way. On the other hand, the level of battle deaths has decreased substantially in 2018. The level of non-state conflicts is high in Africa, but is stable comparing 2017 and 2018. Finally, one-sided violence has decreased substantially both in Africa and globally.

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The aim of this paper is to describe the conflict trends in Africa, particularly since 1990, and to compare this to global trends. This paper considers three types of political violence: *state-based conflicts*; *non-state conflicts*; and *one-sided violence*. It uses conflict data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP).

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