



Conflict Trends in the Middle East, 1989–2019

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The Middle East is home to some of the most intense conflicts of our time. The conflicts in Syria and Yemen are protracted, deadly, and complex, and they have proven difficult to resolve. The region is also home to the Islamic State (IS), which has initiated multiple new conflicts and exacerbated several existing ones. But how have conflicts – and attempts to solve them – evolved over time in the Middle East? In this policy brief, we describe conflict trends in the Middle East between 1989 and 2019. We also present novel data on peace agreements in the region.

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Brief Points

- The Middle East experienced 10 state-based conflicts in 2019, a slight reduction from 12 in 2018.
- Compared with other regions, the Middle East has seen the largest relative increase in the number of state-based conflicts over the past six years.
- The number of battle-related deaths has decreased in recent years. Following a peak in 2014 where 80,000 battle-related deaths were recorded, 2019 saw 10,500.
- While the number of non-state conflicts began to rise from 2011 onwards, reaching a record high of 35 in 2014, such conflicts have since decreased, with eight non-state conflicts in 2019.
- Fatalities from one-sided violence increased from 2018 to 2019, with Syrian insurgents, IS, and the Government of Iran as the main actors.



Types and Severity of Conflict

The current conflict picture in the Middle East is complex. Figure 1 displays types of violent political conflicts in the region between 1989 and 2019. We distinguish between three types of lethal conflict: state-based conflict, non-state conflict, and one-sided violence. The three black lines in Figure 1 show the trends in battle-related deaths (for each conflict type), a key indicator of conflict intensity. Battle-related deaths are defined as deaths caused by the warring parties, directly related to combat (including related fatalities among civilians). Civilian fatalities stemming from one-sided violence are caused by an organized armed force (government or non-state actor). To be included in the statistics, a conflict has to reach 25 battle-related deaths within a calendar year. Obtaining precise data on conflict-related events is notoriously difficult, in part because it is in the interests of conflict parties to obscure such information. The data used in this policy brief is sourced from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP). The numbers presented in this policy brief represent the best available estimates.

State-Based Conflict

State-based conflicts are defined as conflicts in which at least one of the actors is a government. Globally, state-based conflict is both the most common and the most deadly type of conflict. As such, this conflict type tends to garner the most attention. This category includes both conflicts between states (for example, the Iran-Iraq war) and civil conflicts (such as between the Government of Syria and the Islamic State).

During the 1990s and 2000s, the level of state-based conflict in the Middle East has been relatively stable. However, from 2004 onwards, we see an increasing trend in state-based conflicts (depicted in blue in Figure 1). In 2019, the number of state-based conflicts decreased for the first time since 2007. At the same time, during the past five years, the total number of state-based conflicts stabilized at a higher level than ever before. While the number of state-based conflicts decreased from 2018 to 2019 (from 12 to 10), 2018 marked the highest recorded number of such conflicts since 1946. In 2019, the 10 state-based conflicts in the Middle East consisted of one interstate war (Iran and

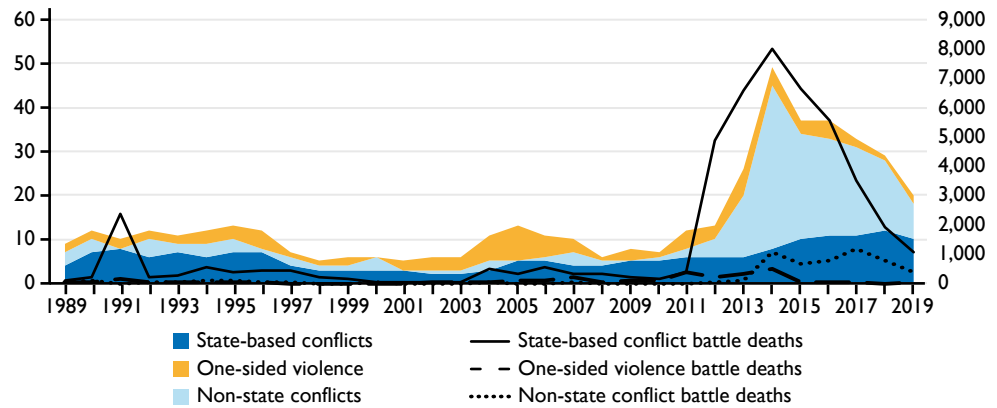


Figure 1: Types of conflict in the Middle East, 1989–2019. Sources: UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset and UCDP Non-State Conflict, One-Sided Violence and Battle-Related Deaths Datasets

Israel), five civil wars (two conflicts in Egypt between the government and IS and between the government and Harakit Sawa'id Misr; Israel, against the Palestinian Islamic Jihad Movement; Iran, between the government and the Jaish al-Adl; and in Turkey, between the government and the Kurdistan Workers' Party), and four internationalized civil wars (Syria, where both the government's conflict against IS and the Syrian insurgents receive external support, Iraq and Yemen). Note that a country can experience more than one conflict on its territory at the same time.

For the first time since 1991, in 2018 the Middle East experienced a conflict between two states (Iran and Israel). However, this conflict is not a direct war between the states; it took place in Syria, where the two governments attacked each other's positions.

Another significant trend is the presence of the Islamic State (IS) as an actor in conflicts in the region. Although the IS was allegedly defeated in Syria in 2019, the organization is active in many conflicts around the world. In 2019, IS was involved in three out of the 10 conflicts in the Middle East, and 16 out of 54 globally.

The level of battle-related deaths in the Middle East has been relatively low, except for a peak in 1991 related to the Kuwait war. In 2011, however, there was sharp increase in battle-related deaths, mainly due to the wars in Iraq and Syria. 2014 marked the deadliest year since 1991, with almost 80,000 battle-related deaths. Since 2014, the number has declined as the wars in Syria and Iraq have become less intense. Figure

2 compares battle-related deaths in the Middle East in 2018 and 2019. The figure shows a significant decrease in battle deaths in the region, from 19,000 in 2018 to 10,500 in 2019. This marked drop can mainly be attributed to the decrease in battle-related deaths in Syria, from 11,824 registered deaths in 2018, to 7,300 in 2019. Yemen and Turkey exhibit similar trends.

Non-State Conflict

A non-state conflict is defined as a conflict fought between two organized groups, neither of which is related to the state. The number of non-state conflicts in the Middle East (depicted in grey in Figure 1) skyrocketed from 2011, reaching a peak in 2014 when 35 such conflicts were recorded. Since 2014, there has been a steady downward trend in the number of non-state conflicts, down to 8 in 2019, which marks the lowest number since 2009. The non-state conflicts in the Middle East today are characterized by fighting between highly organized actors (while in Africa, for example, non-state conflicts are mainly communal conflicts, where the incompatibilities fought over are based on communal identity, and typically lack a clear hierarchy of command or an organizational brand).

Syria is the country with the highest number of non-state conflicts. In 2019, five different non-state conflicts were recorded in the country. The non-state conflicts in Syria tend to involve the IS, as well as various Syrian insurgent groups such as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the Organization for the Liberation of the Levant (HTS) and the National Front of

Liberation. These inter-rebel conflicts make the Syrian conflict particularly complex and deadly.

Although the number of non-state conflicts in the Middle East is declining, these conflicts cost many lives. In 2019, 3,600 people were killed in non-state conflicts. Since 2014, 50,000 people have been killed in non-state conflicts in the Middle East, compared to a total of approximately 5,000 in the period 1989–2013.

One-Sided Violence

One-sided violence is defined as violence against civilians by a formally organized group, which can be either the state or a non-state actor. Extra-judicial killings are not counted as one-sided violence. Moreover, it is likely that UCDP data does not capture the full extent of government-perpetrated one-sided violence, as conflict parties have a strategic interest in hiding these numbers for reputa-

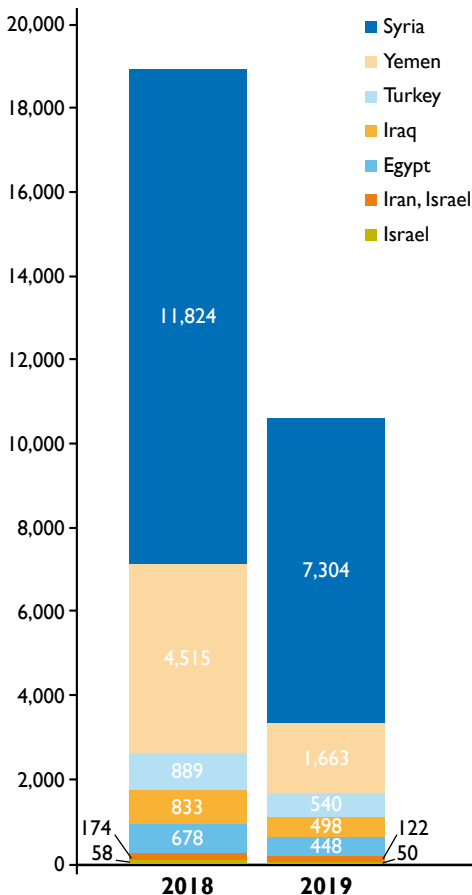


Figure 2: Battle deaths in 2018 and 2019. Source: UCDP Battle-Related Deaths Dataset

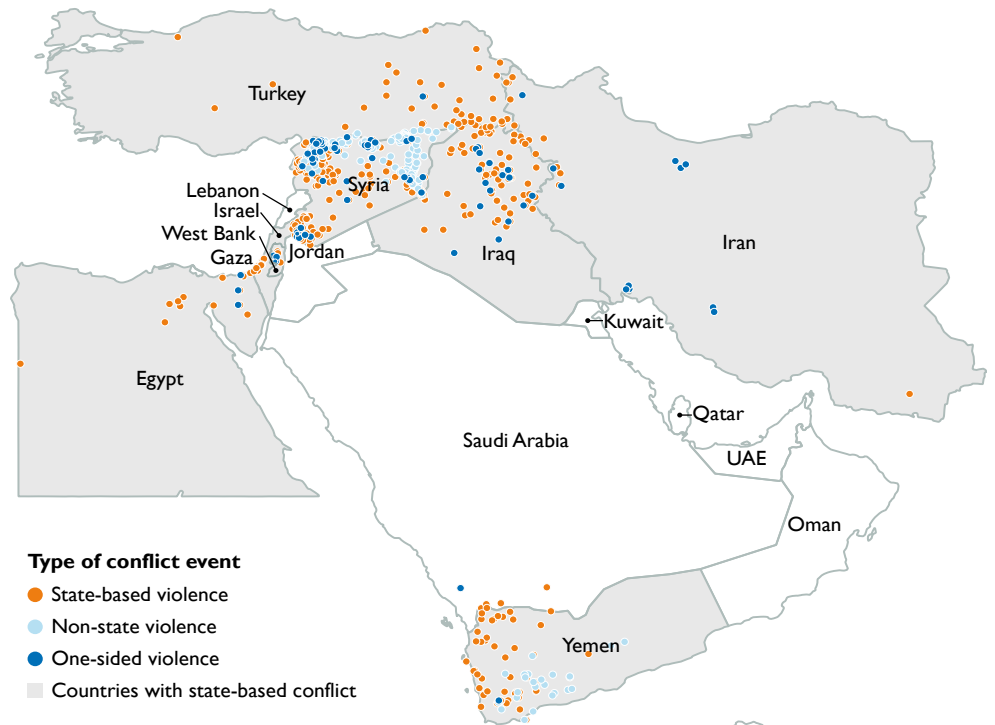


Figure 3: State-based, non-state, and one-sided violence events, 2019. Source: UCDP GED Dataset

tional concerns and to avoid sanctions from the international community. The Middle East is characterized by a general downward trend in one-sided violence from 2005 onwards, except for the years 2013 and 2014 where we see a spike that can be attributed to IS. As can be seen in Figure 1 (marked in orange), one-sided violence peaked in 2014, when more than 4,600 fatalities were recorded. In 2018, the number of fatalities (54) represented the lowest since 1989. This number then doubled (108) in 2019, mostly due to violence perpetrated by Syrian insurgents, IS, and the Government of Iran. While our data indicates that non-state actors are responsible for most of this type of violence, governments in Iraq, Egypt, Israel, Iran, Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain have all perpetrated violence against civilians between 1989 and 2019.

Where Are Conflicts Located?

Most conflicts are geographically concentrated, with only a small part of a country directly affected. Figure 3 depicts the conflict-affected areas within each country in the region. The grey color indicates countries that experienced conflict in 2019, while the dots depict where

the conflict events took place. The conflict events include both state-based and non-state conflicts, as well as one-sided violence. Egypt and Iran have very few conflict events, while the larger number of events in Syria, Yemen and Iraq remain highly concentrated. However, even within these countries we see a geographic pattern. In Syria, state-based conflict events are located around Aleppo and Idlib in the northwest, and around Damascus in the southwest. In Iraq, the conflict is situated in the north, particularly towards the Turkish border. In Yemen, the entire state-based conflict is situated in the more populated areas in the west.

There are also important differences when it comes to non-state conflicts. In Syria, we can see that there is a much larger number of non-state conflict events, compared to state-based conflict events, towards the Turkish and Iranian border. This is related to fighting involving the SDF and the Turkey-supported Syrian National Army. In Yemen, the non-state conflicts are mainly concentrated in the south, fought between the Southern Transitional Council (STC) and Forces of Hadi (the internationally recognized president of Yemen).

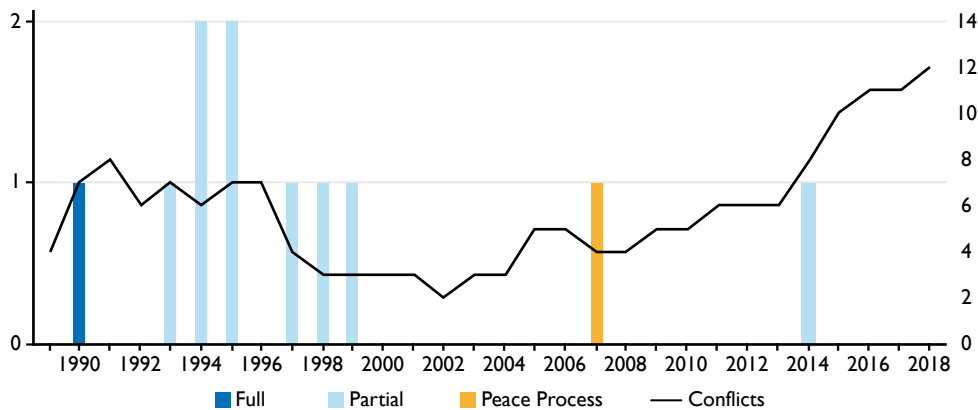


Figure 4: Peace agreements by type, 1989–2019. Source: UCDP Peace Agreement Dataset

Peace Agreements

Sustainable Development Goal 16 calls on the world to achieve peaceful and inclusive societies and to significantly reduce all forms of violence and related deaths everywhere. Ending conflicts through a negotiated settlement is one important tool for the international community to build peaceful societies. We look at three different types of peace agreements: *full peace agreements*, which settle the incompatibility between the parties; *partial peace agreements*, where there are still issues to be resolved; and *peace process agreements*, which outline terms for the negotiations.

Figure 4 shows all peace agreements in the Middle East during the 1989–2018 period and differentiates between the different types of peace agreements. The black line depicts the number of conflicts. While the Middle East is home to some of the deadliest conflicts, peace agreements are relatively rare in the region. During the period 1989–2019, peace agreements have never exceeded two in a given year. As Figure 4 shows, the number of conflicts increases towards the end of the period, in part

due to the lack of peace agreements that could resolve the underlying incompatibility between the belligerents.

Only one full peace agreement was signed in the region in this period. This was in 1990, between the former South and North Yemen, when the two countries were unified. The last recorded agreement was a partial peace agreement – The Peace and National Partnership Agreement – signed in 2014 between the Government of Yemen, the Southern Movement, and Ansarallah. There are multiple reasons for the low number of peace agreements in the region. The conflicts in the Middle East are complex: they are often internationalized, and any government involved tends to be fighting more than one group at the same time. Non-state groups also often fight against each other as well against the government. Lastly, in the Middle East, the mediation and peacemaking capacities of regional organizations are poorly institutionalized when compared to other regions (for example, Africa). All these factors can make it more difficult to find a negotiated solution to the conflict.

Conclusion

In this policy brief, we present conflict trends in the Middle East over time and across conflict types. We also provide novel data on peace agreements in the region. For the most part, the conflict picture in the Middle East mirrors global trends. The numbers of civil wars and battle-related deaths have been on the rise in the past eight years, but these declined in 2019. Nevertheless, the conflict in Syria remained the second deadliest conflict in the world in 2019, following the conflict in Afghanistan. Since 1989, the conflict in Syria has been the deadliest conflict in the world. ■

Notes

This policy brief is a summary of the following PRIO Paper: Palik, Júlia; Siri Aas Rustad; Kristian Berg Harpviken & Fredrik Methi (2020) 'Conflict Trends in the Middle East, 1989–2019', *PRIO Paper*. Oslo: PRIO. Available at: www.prio.org/Publications/Publication/?x=12474.

For a more detailed overview of these trends and a richer understanding of the topics covered here, we recommend reading the full paper.

Further Reading

Palik, Júlia; Siri Aas Rustad & Fredrik Methi (2020) 'Conflict Trends: A Global Overview, 1946–2019', *PRIO Paper*. Oslo: PRIO.

Palik, Júlia; Siri Aas Rustad & Fredrik Methi (2020) 'Conflict Trends in Africa, 1989–2019', *PRIO Paper*. Oslo: PRIO.

Palik, Júlia; Siri Aas Rustad & Fredrik Methi (2020) 'Conflict Trends in Asia, 1989–2019', *PRIO Paper*. Oslo: PRIO.

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 will contribute to new conflict analyses within areas of public interest, and works to produce thorough and quality based 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.