PRIO | Conflict Trends

CONFLICT TRENDS 08|2020

Trends in Armed Conflict, 1946–2019

In 2019, there were 54 active armed conflicts in the world, up from 52 in 2018 and matching the post–Cold War peak in 2016. Yet, the number of recorded casualties in 2019 – at about 51,000 – were only half of the 2016 level. At the same time, the number of countries affected by armed conflict is very high, and at par with the numbers in 1991 and 2016.

Brief Points

- The number of state-based armed conflicts in the world increased slightly from 52 in 2018 to 54 in 2019.

- The number of direct casualties went down from 53,000 to 51,000. This is less than 50% of the 2016 figure, but more than twice the number of casualties recorded in 2010.

- Afghanistan remains the deadliest conflict location in the world, with about 60% of all recorded casualties.

- There were seven wars in 2019, up from six in 2018 but still lower than the 12 found in 2016.

- The seven wars account for 84% of all conflict-related casualties.

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Trends in 2019

As a whole, the global level of armed conflict in 2019 is very similar to 2018, with approximately the same number of conflicts, wars and casualties. Yet, individual conflicts differ in their contribution to the overall trend. Figure 1 displays trends in the number of conflicts and battle-related deaths from 1989 to 2019.

The data used in this policy brief are collected by the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP). They separate between wars and minor conflicts. Wars have more than 1,000 battle-related deaths (BRD) per year, whereas minor conflicts have between 25 and 1,000 BRD.

2019 saw 54 active conflicts – which is at par with the record set in 2016 – and a record high of 47 minor armed conflicts. Fortunately, there were only seven wars, and the number of casualties is trending downwards for the fifth year in a row.

The Last Five Years

In 2014, the global conflict trend was very bleak. With 104,000 casualties, this year was the third most violent year since the end of the Cold War and the number of conflicts was approaching a level not seen since the early 1990s.

The main driver behind the high number of casualties was the war in Syria, but Iraq and Afghanistan also contributed massively. Since 2014, casualty figures have gone down by about 50%, while the number of active conflicts has increased.
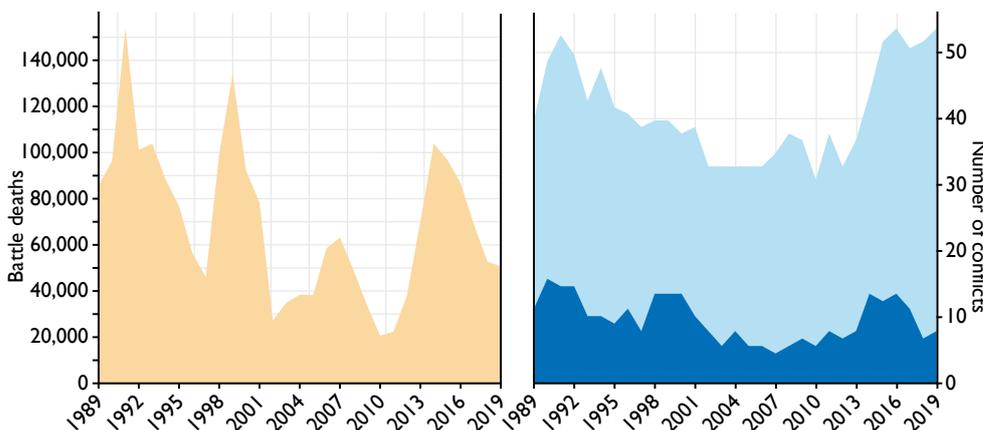
We are now at an unprecedented level of minor conflicts, which are defined as conflicts with more than 25 deaths per year but less than 1,000. While these conflicts make only a marginal contribution to the fatalities trend, their presence is troubling as many of them have the potential to erupt into full wars, defined as more than 1,000 casualties per year.

The principal reason why the number of conflicts has increased dramatically is the Islamic State (IS). From a conflict perspective, the key defining aspect of an armed political conflict is the stated aim of the challenger. IS differs from most rebel organizations, including Al-Qaeda, in that they want to establish a new political entity, the Caliphate, that transcends the current international system.

Stability and Change

In 2019, two new wars were recorded. In Libya, a conflict seen as inactive in 2018 reignited, while the conflict in Nigeria escalated above the 1,000 BRD threshold. The war in Afghanistan against the Taleban also escalated and was the most serious conflict in the world in 2019. On the other hand, four conflicts became less intense in 2019: Somalia (both Government and Somaliland), Afghanistan (IS), Yemen and Syria saw positive developments from a strictly humanitarian point of view.

Figure 2 shows the distribution of fatalities in 2019 against the change from 2018. The green dots are the eight conflicts that were considered inactive in 2019 as they did not cross the 25 BRD threshold. None of these claimed

1,000 lives in 2018. The orange dots are the ten conflicts in 2019 that were not active in 2018. As noted, the number of fatalities went down slightly from 2018 to 2019. Yet, when we look closer at individual conflicts, we do see a lot of change.

Seven Wars

In 2019, there were seven wars, accounting for 84% of all conflict-related casualties. These conflicts are vastly more problematic than the lesser armed conflicts. The current wars are in Afghanistan (two parallel and intertwined wars), Syria, Yemen, Libya, Somalia and Nigeria.

The two wars in Afghanistan are separated because the stated aim of IS differs from that of everyone else. IS wants the polity of Afghanistan to enter into a larger political unit, whereas the other factions are fighting for political control over the country itself. IS is present in all current war-torn countries, but are dominant only in Nigeria. While the Taleban conflict deteriorated sharply in 2019, the IS conflict became less severe. Overall, the situation in Afghanistan did deteriorate significantly in 2019.

IS involvement in Afghanistan has failed to dominate the conflict in the manner seen in Iraq or Syria. Instead, numerous leaders have been captured or killed and the majority of casualties come from large-scale suicide attacks.

The Taleban, on the other hand, has gradually been gaining strength since their eviction in 2001. The conflict between the Taleban and numerous Afghan and international actors has steadily become more severe since 2004, and 2019 was a peak year with close to 29,000 casualties.

The Syrian Civil War can also be unpacked into several political issues. The first is the issue of who should govern Syria, the second is the issue of whether Syrian Kurdistan should be an independent country, and the third is the question of Syrian submission to the IS Caliphate.

The war in Syria is now much less intense than it was five years ago, but even in 2019, more than 7,000 were killed. The issue of government remains the most important and the only conflict dimension that reached the 1,000 BRD threshold. IS has moved from center stage to

Figure 1: Battle-related deaths and number of conflicts per year, 1989–2019. Source: UCDP database (ucdp.uu.se)
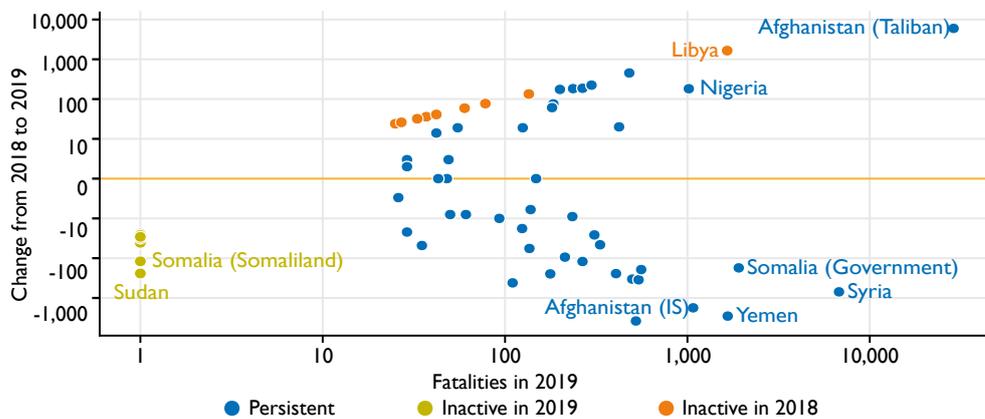
Figure 2: Battle-related deaths in 2019 vs. change from 2018. Source: UCDP database (ucdp.uu.se)

the periphery of the larger Syrian Civil War, and is for the first time since 2013 not counted as a war.

Yemen has seen intermittent armed conflict since independence, but was largely peaceful between 1995 and 2010. Over the last five years, a civil war over governance has turned regional as a Saudi-led coalition have supported the forces of former president Hadi. The war in Yemen is also split as a consequence of IS involvement, but the influence of IS has been modest since 2015, and in 2019 almost ignorable.

Somalia has been ravaged by armed conflict since 1991 over governance. The current phase has been dominated by the Islamist group Al-Shabaab, which became a central actor in 2008. With the narrow exception of 2013, Somalia has recorded more than 1,000 battle-related casualties every year since 2006. 2019 was mostly similar to the previous three years.

Libya has been a failed state since the overthrow of Gaddafi in 2011. Political violence has been rife for the last ten years, but the weakness and sometimes absence of a government means that much of the violence has been between non-governmental forces. In 2015, the Libyan Political Agreement laid out a power-sharing arrangement aiming to align the Government of National Accord (GNA) and the House of Representatives.

The conflict in Libya between GNA and the House of Representatives was a renewed conflict in 2019, as no casualties were recorded between these groups in 2018. However, the presence of IS in Libya meant that there was an armed conflict in Libya in 2018 as well.

From 2009 onwards, Boko Haram has been fighting the Government of Nigeria in one of the most brutal conflicts of the last decade. In 2015, the group announced that they would join

IS, but a conflict over leadership meant that the group split and that the name Boko Haram again was used. In 2019, IS overshadowed Boko Haram by a wide margin.

New Conflicts

In 2019, ten new conflict entries were recorded that were absent in 2018. Of these, three were new conflicts and seven were old conflicts that reignited in 2019. The resurgence of Libya is by far the most disturbing new entry. The remaining nine are: Angola, Burundi, Cameroon, Burkina Faso, Somalia, Mozambique, Ethiopia, Pakistan and the conflict between the us and Al-Qaeda, which goes back to 9/11.

Two worrisome trends are apparent among these 10 conflicts. First, eight of them are in Africa. Second, IS is involved in five.

Figure 3 compares the number of fatalities and the number of conflicts in Africa with the rest of the world. There are two simultaneous trends. In terms of severity, Africa has recently been much less violent than the rest of the world, *and* compared with the first decade after the Cold War. However, the two peaks in the African curve are both large wars involving Ethiopia and Eritrea, and the Rwandan genocide is not included in the data.

The right-hand side of Figure 3 paints a more disturbing picture. The number of conflicts in Africa has steadily increased from a historical low in 2006. If the current trend continues in 2020, half of all conflicts in the world will be in Africa.
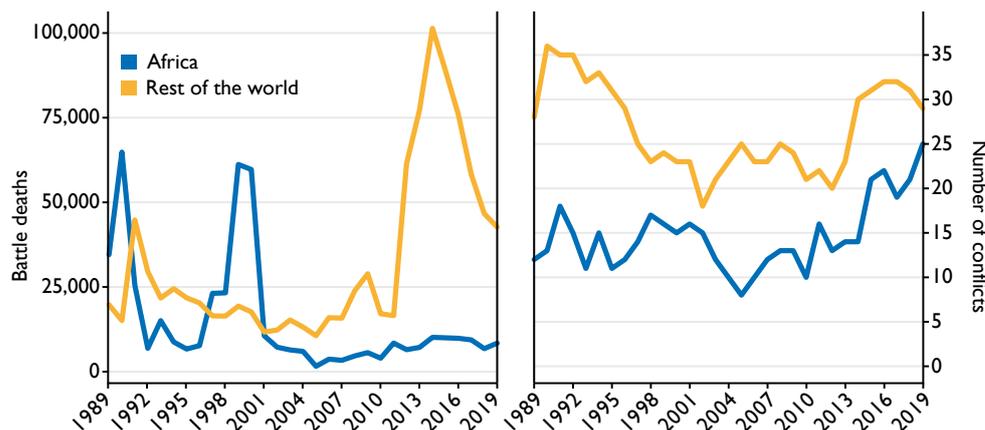
The main cause for caution is that many of these minor conflicts have the potential to escalate into a major conflict, and a single eruption of that kind will send the red curve on the fatality graph straight up.

IS is another major explanation of the recent number of active conflicts. As IS has a unique political project which almost never aligns with any other group, the presence of IS usually means that there is more than one active conflict in a location.

IS was very successful in Syria and Iraq, and in 2016 about one in three casualties globally occurred in a conflict involving IS. In 2019, that

Figure 3: Battle deaths and number of conflicts: Africa vs. rest of the world, 1989–2019. Source: UCDP database (ucdp.uu.se)
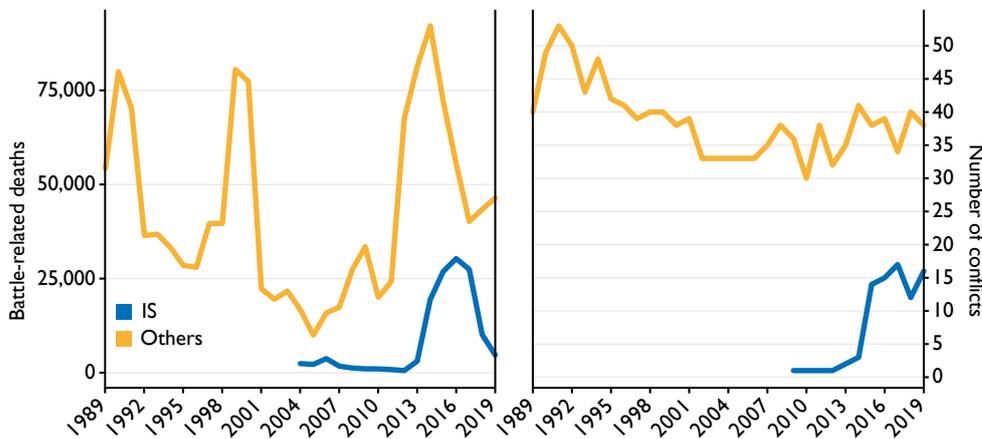
Figure 4: Battle deaths and number of conflicts: IS vs. all other rebels, 1989–2019. Source: UCDP database (ucdp.uu.se)

ratio is closer to one in ten. While the number of casualties has been reduced, the number of active conflicts involving IS has been fairly stable over time. Most of these are low-intensity conflicts, but the risk of escalation is unknown.

Inactive Conflicts

Eight conflicts ended in 2019, of which the most severe were in Sudan and Somalia. One of the conflicts in Syria was discontinued as the Kurdish rebels in question signed an alliance with other organizations with the aim of capturing the government as opposed to fighting for an independent Kurdistan. The five other conflicts that became inactive in 2019 were very minor in 2018 and did not meet the 25 BRD threshold in 2019. These conflicts were found in Algeria, Chad, India, Indonesia and Iran.

All of these five are old conflicts that have ceased to meet the violence criteria, but have never been properly resolved. The Islamist uprising in Algeria has its roots in the aborted 1991 election. The Government of Chad has been violently challenged frequently, rarely with any form of success. East of Bangladesh, a small region of India has seen numerous uprisings by representatives of a wide range of ethnic groups. None of these conflicts have ever been close to the 1,000 BRD threshold, and in 2019, the region did not see 25 BRD. The Kurds in Iran have also fought long for independence, at least back to 1946. The conflict was active in 2016 and 2018, but not in 2015, 2017 or 2019.

Indonesia's active conflict is also a futile attempt to overcome massive historical injustices. The region West Papua remained under Dutch control until 1962, when Indonesia was tasked with overseeing the region until a referendum could be held over the question of independence or joining Indonesia.

The referendum was never properly held and one colonizer was replaced by a much more brutal successor during the Suharto dictatorship. As a response, the Free Papua Movement was established and started a violent uprising, which has been periodically active ever since. In the late 1970s, the conflict was coded as a war, but has over the last 30 years seldom met the 25

BRD threshold. In 2018, the conflict did exceed 25 BRD, whereas 2019 saw a return to the normal level of very few deaths.

Future Trends

The last decade started as the most peaceful period in recorded history, but this relative peace ended with the Arab Spring and its aftermath. Since then, Islamist organizations have been dominant in the global conflict picture, and remain so in 2019. IS stands out as the most prolific of these, and has dethroned Al-Qaeda.

In the near future, we would hope for a continuation of the reduction in conflict-related fatalities. Key to achieving this is reversing the development in Afghanistan, while avoiding large-scale escalation in any of the existing minor conflicts.

In the next couple of years, we will learn the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on political stability and organized violence. At this moment, we have little evidence to suggest which way the current situation will be affected.

The African trend towards more conflict is also worrisome. In 2005, there were eight conflicts on the continent, while in 2019 there were 25. Many of these conflicts fit within the Islamist conflict pattern, but there are also many that are rooted in more traditional ethno-political issues.

Finally, in a longer time perspective, it is possible that a further deterioration of US-Sino relations could lead to a "Cold War"-like situation and the return of proxy wars. We see these on some regional levels, where local powers are involved on different sides in Africa and the Middle East. ∎

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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.