Civil wars trap countries in recurring cycles of violent conflict. About half of all conflict episodes and nearly 35% of all pairs of belligerents have recurred. In order to assess the global trends of conflict recurrence, we developed an original database. The PRIO Conflict Recurrence Database examines recurrence in terms of the actors fighting, the issues of contention, and the territory contested. This brief presents the conflict recurrence patterns that emerged, revealing that unaddressed grievances stand in the way of lasting peace.

Brief Points

- We develop a new database to study recurring conflict.
- Close to half of all conflicts show signs of recurrence.
- Close to 35% of all conflict dyads recur at least once.
- Conflicts frequently recur over the same or similar issues, which demonstrates that unaddressed grievances prevent lasting peace.
- Recurring conflicts often involve the same kinds of issues and grievances as in previous conflicts, but they also frequently see the introduction of new armed actors.

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The UN has singled out the prevention of conflict recurrence as a critical part of their peacebuilding efforts. Yet, we still lack good data on trends and patterns of conflict recurrence. To this end, we introduce the PRIO Conflict Recurrence Database. Previous research has mostly operated with a narrow definition of recurrence in terms of a threshold defined on the number of years of no conflict. We take a more holistic approach, and examine recurrence in terms of the actors involved, the issues they fight over, and the territory they fight in or over.

The conflict recurrence database offers insight into the nature of recurrent conflicts. We build on already existing data on organized violence by the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP). The database combines the temporal and geographical dimensions of conflict dynamics. The aim of this new database is to expand and deepen our understanding of when, where and under what conditions armed conflicts persist and recur, as well as when they end in stable peace.

The episodes identified in the conflict recurrence database follow the state-based conflicts identified by UCDP data, but are extended to include all violent events related to that conflict, rather than relying on the commonly used threshold of 25 battle-related deaths to define a conflict. The conflict is counted as recurring when there is at least one calendar year between the last event in the previous episode, and the first event in the following episode – where an episode is a period of uninterrupted conflict, and an event is an isolated attack or battle within that episode. This is done at the conflict level and at the dyadic level. A dyad is defined by UCDP as a conflict between two armed actors, while a state-based conflict is defined as an armed conflict over a stated incompatibility, where at least one of the actors is the government of a state. One conflict can include more than one dyad. The total number of conflict-episodes identified between 1989 and 2018 is 347, with a total of 627 dyad-episodes.

We then coded information about the type of recurrence for each episode. This includes whether the recurrence is over the same or related issues, over different incompatibility, or an otherwise unrelated conflict over the same incompatibility. The database also includes information on whether the recurring conflict involves the same, overlapping or entirely new conflict actors.

The conflict recurrence database includes information on the relationships between conflict episodes and between different actors. It does so by linking these episodes together based on a set of criteria, which includes instances where one armed group splinters, forming groups that appear as new actors, thereby creating new dyads within the database. It also includes instances where groups come together to form alliances, merging forces and thereby introducing a new actor, and a new dyad.

### Patterns of Recurring Conflict

As shown in Figure 1, about half of all conflict episodes between 1989 and 2018 have recurred. In fact, nearly 20% have recurred three or more times. Figure 2 shows the same data but instead broken down across actor dyads. In this case, nearly 35% of all dyad episodes have recurred, with just over 8% of all dyads having three or more episodes. In some cases, violence within a given dyad will stop, to recur at a later point within the same conflict episodes. This is particularly the case for conflicts with many actors, where one or more of the non-state actors will stop fighting for a period of time. This may also be the case when only some actors are involved in ceasefires or peace agreements for a period of time, while other actors are involved in continuous violence. One example of this is the conflict in Colombia, which according to UCDP has involved five different non-state groups. The conflict recurrence dataset shows that there has been continuous violence in Colombia – at different levels of intensity – from 1989 until 2018. While FARC was active from 1989 to 2016, EPL-Megateo (a splinter group from EPL) has been active several times, accounting for a total of five dyad-episodes between the years 1991 and 2016. Since the peace agreement in 2016, two groups have been active: ELN and FARC dissidents.

A more detailed examination of these recurring episodes reveals that the majority of recurring conflict episodes are over the same (64%) or overlapping issues or grievances (27%). These
are cases where the stated issues, grievances, objectives and goals of an armed opposition remain the same or similar, and the incompatibility is the same. A small minority of conflicts (3%) are identified as recurring over new incompatibility (see Figure 3). Only six of the recurring conflict episodes – accounting for less than 1% – are found to be unrelated to the previous episode in terms of the issues of contention.

The frequency of recurrence clearly indicates that recurring conflicts can be attributed to many of the same issues and grievances that change and evolve over time. This indicates a failure of peacebuilding efforts to address the heart of the conflicts. This is evident in the number of recurring conflicts that are identified as having the same or overlapping issues. With few exceptions, recurring conflicts can be traced back to pre-existing issues and grievances, suggesting that failure to address these grievances fosters recurring conflict. Out of the conflicts that do recur, 90% do so within 8 years, with close to 50% recurring within 2 years.

We also examine the type of recurrence at the dyadic level, which is broken into similar categories as for the conflict episodes discussed above. For dyads, 57% of recurring episodes are over the same issue, while 17% are identified as having overlapping issues. In 17% of cases, conflict between a government and some version of the same non-state group recurs but is identified as a new dyad. This frequently happens in the context of a change in incompatibility for the conflict as described above, including groups pledging allegiance to Islamic State or combining their forces and combining territorial incompatibility. It also includes smaller groups coming together and forming alliances, and thereby being identified as a new actor.

**New and Existing Actors**

We find that close to 17% of recurring conflict episodes are identified as involving partially different actors than the previous episode of the same conflict. 3% of conflict episodes do not include any of the actors from the previous episode. Figure 4 shows the percentage of episodes with the same, overlapping or entirely new actors broken down by the type of recurrence. It shows that a significant proportion of conflicts recurring over the same or related issues see the introduction of new armed actors, with a small minority seeing recurring conflict with entirely new actors. One example of this situation is the conflicts over government in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), which has seen the involvement of a large number of different armed actors, while some of these actors are identified as existing before the conflict recurrence, none of these actors appear in the two conflict episodes prior to 2010. For recurring conflicts that appear unrelated in terms of the issues or grievances, but where the incompatibility is the same, around 40% see a partial overlap in actors.

**Geographical Dimensions**

The conflict area of a conflict-episode or dyad-episode is defined as the PRIO-GRID cells in which individual events that belong to the episode took place. The PRIO-GRID is a grid structure that divides the world into cells sized 0.5 x 0.5 decimal degrees. We include information about spatially overlapping conflicts, conflicts that occur within the same conflict area, and whether there is conflict recurrence within the conflict area of the given conflict episode.

Figure 5 maps the conflict area of recurring and nonrecurring conflict episodes. On the country-level, the light-colored countries are affected by one or more state-based conflict episode events, according to the UCDP-GED. The location of these events is given by the colored grid cells, also indicating conflict recurrence. We see clear geographical clusters of conflict recurrence in some regions of the world. These patterns add to the importance of incorporating a spatial dimension in future analyses of conflict recurrence. There is also substantial subnational variation within each country.

**Recurring Conflict or Persistent Violence?**

The conflict recurrence database also includes some preliminary data on recurrence of non-state conflict, and its relationship with state-based conflict. Groups involved in state-based
conflicts are also frequently active in conflicts with other non-state groups. There is also geographical overlap between these types of conflict. Data from UCDP shows that organized violence targeting civilians predominantly takes place in the context of state-based conflict. This raises yet another question about recurring conflicts. Even when state-based conflicts end – temporarily or permanently – this does not mean that violence in a particular area, or between particular armed actors ends. In examining the root causes of cycles of armed conflict, their recurrence, and how to facilitate sustainable peace, one also needs to take into consideration the relationship between these different forms of organized violence.

Conclusion

Behind the high reported number of recurring conflicts, there is important variation that needs to be considered both to understand the dynamics of recurrence and for designing appropriate policies to deal with it. When taking into account the way in which conflicts evolve and change over time, over similar issues or incompatibility, and within geographical areas, some of these conflicts may be more accurately described as continuously evolving, rather than recurring. In many ways, they resemble the enduring rivalries we see in interstate conflict. Mapping the recurring conflicts highlights how large populations live in cycles of recurring violence, in large part due to unaddressed grievances. Issues and incompatibility between conflict actors may change over time. New actors enter the scene, as old ones are invited to join the government through being integrated into the state army or through political participation through different power sharing agreements. Convincing certain actors to lay down their arms can only take us so far: as long as important issues and grievances are left unaddressed, there will be others to take their place. This is not to say that disarming and reintegrating members of armed groups is not important, but it must come alongside other efforts to avoid a society spiraling into a cycle of recurring conflicts that have the potential to go on for decades.

Notes


2. The question of whether the issues remain the same is particularly difficult to code. In many cases, the actors may state new issues or grievances, while there is much to suggest that these are in fact the same. There is also frequently a mismatch between what an actor claims to be fighting for and their true motivation. This will always be open to interpretation.

3. This number is based on only the most recent conflict episode and includes cases where actors have been involved in the conflict previously, but not in the most recent episode.