



Trends in Armed Conflict, 1946–2015

The world reached a level of conflict deaths in 2014–2015 that is unparalleled in the post-Cold War period. The ability of the international community to contain some of the conflicts that have the greatest regional impacts determines whether we will see a long-term trend of intensified conflict, or a return to lower levels of violence.

Brief Points

- There has been a slight decline in total battle deaths from 2014 to 2015.
- Due to the conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, the number of casualties in 2014 and 2015 has risen to the highest level since the end of the Cold War.
- The number of armed conflicts in the world rose from 41 to 50 from 2014 to 2015, mostly due to an increase in rebel groups pledging allegiance to the Islamic State.

Kendra Dupuy *Chr. Michelsen Institute & PRIO*

Scott Gates *University of Oslo & PRIO*

Håvard Mokleiv Nygård *Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)*

Ida Rudolfson *Uppsala University & PRIO*

Håvard Strand *University of Oslo & PRIO*

Henrik Urdal *Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)*

Recent Trends

The number of armed conflicts in the world in 2015 was 50 according to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), the highest number since 1992. Over 97,000 people were killed as a direct consequence of armed conflicts in 2015, a slight decline from 104,000 in 2014. Yet, the number of people killed in conflict in 2014 and 2015 is higher than any other time in the post-Cold War period.

Since the end of the Cold War, the trend in armed conflict has been generally downward as seen in Figure 1. Yet in recent years, we have seen upsurges in both the number of conflicts and the severity of war. Does this portend an end to the waning of war?

The number of conflicts increased from 41 in 2014 to 50 in 2015, the highest number since 1991. The number of wars – conflicts with more than 1,000 battle deaths – went down from 12 in 2014 to 11 in 2015. The number of minor armed conflicts increased from 29 to 39.

The eleven wars in 2015 accounted for 92% of all battle deaths, whereas the 39 minor conflicts accounted for only 8% of the total. There is stability in the pattern of the largest conflicts: Of the eleven wars, nine were also categorized as wars in 2014. Yemen, Iraq, Nigeria, Syria (registered as two wars), Afghanistan, Somalia, Ukraine and Pakistan had continuations of ongoing wars in 2015. Nigeria had an additional conflict that saw over 1,000 battle deaths in 2015, while the conflict in Sudan also reached the status of full war. The conflict in South Sudan went below 1,000 deaths, while one of the two conflicts in Ukraine and the Israel/Palestine conflict are not registered as having been active in 2015. Of the ten conflicts that took the most lives in 2014, only two (Afghanistan and Yemen) became more violent in 2015. Seven of the largest conflicts (Iraq, Israel/Palestine, Nigeria, Pakistan, South Sudan, Syria, and Ukraine) became less violent, while one (Somalia) saw no major change.

Trends in Conflict

The Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), the leading provider of statistics on political violence, has identified 275 distinct armed conflicts since 1946. This includes all organized military conflict over government or territory involving one or more state government(s) and causing at

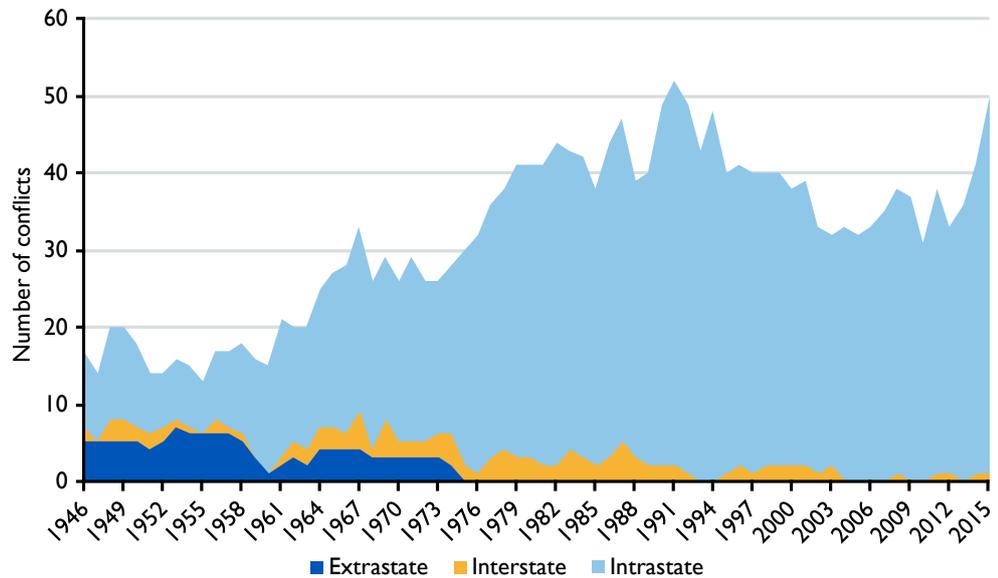


Figure 1: Number of armed conflicts by type of conflict, 1946-2015

least 25 battle-related fatalities in a year. Figure 1 displays the number of conflicts around the world by type and year since 1946. Two trends over the long term are immediately detectable.

First, colonial and interstate conflicts, which accounted for half of all armed conflict early in the period, have waned. Today, the predominant form of conflict is internal to a state, although quite often involving external state actors.

The second trend is the distinct rise in the number of civil conflicts, peaking in 1991, followed by a decline. 1991 witnessed 52 armed conflicts, in contrast to 2003 with 32. Since 2003 the number of armed conflicts has risen and fallen, ranging between 30 and 49.

This pattern of rising and falling numbers is simply due to the onset of new conflicts set against the number of conflicts that end. The steep decline in conflicts from 1992 to 2003 was due to fewer conflicts starting anew than the number ending. The accumulation of conflicts over the course of the Cold War resulted from more wars starting than ending. To further reduce the number of conflicts in the world today, we must not only work to resolve the on-going conflicts, but we must also try to prevent others from starting.

Battle casualties do not follow the same pattern as the number of armed conflicts. Figure 3 on the next page shows the number of battle deaths per million in the world (UCDP and PRIO data).

(The per capita comparison controls for the growing global population.) The number of battle casualties peaked in the early 1950s. Despite the low number of conflicts, this period contained some of the most deadly wars in the post-World War II era, notably the Chinese Civil War (1946–1949) and the Korean War (1950–1953). Wars, such as Vietnam, Iran-Iraq, Afghanistan, DRC, and Ethiopia-Eritrea account for the subsequent peaks. The general pattern is one of decline, with each peak falling short of its predecessor. The small rise in battle casualties evident today results mostly from the civil war in Syria.

Islamic Extremism

Utopian ideologies are a potent threat to peace. In the previous century, fascism and communism were the main obstacles to peace. Today, political Islam presents the gravest challenge.

Figure 2 to the right summarizes all 97,000 people killed in armed conflict in 2015. Of all casualties, 46% occurred in Syria, 18% in Afghanistan and 12% in Iraq. Together, these three countries account for 76% of the total battle deaths in 2015. Syria is the deadliest war since the end of the Cold War. Since 2012, about half of all war casualties around the world have occurred in this country.

The colors in the graph differentiate between conflicts where varieties of blue indicate that at least one party is affiliated with some strand of

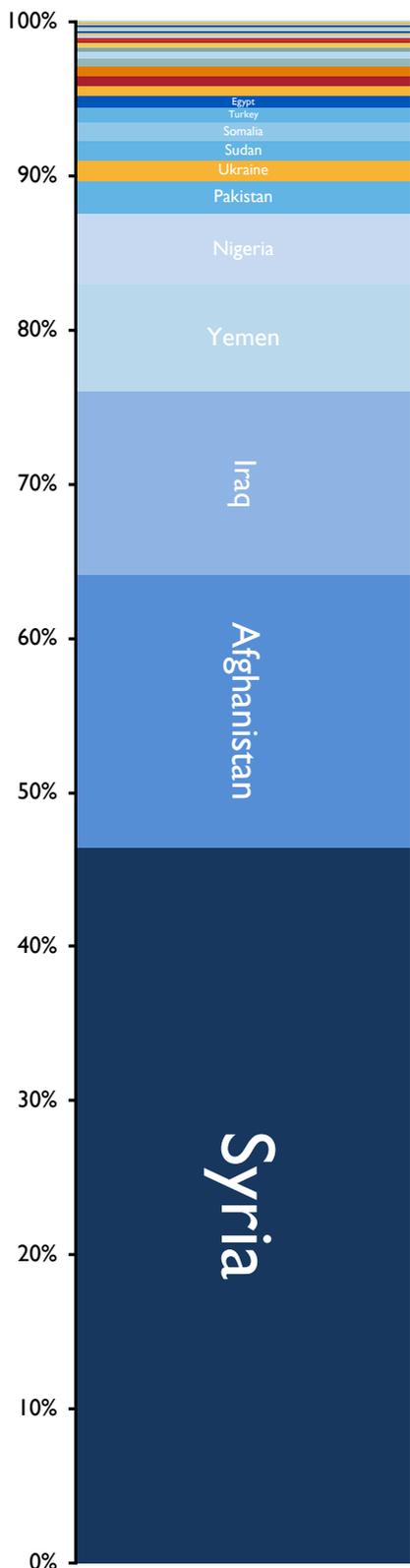


Figure 2: The most deadly conflicts in 2015

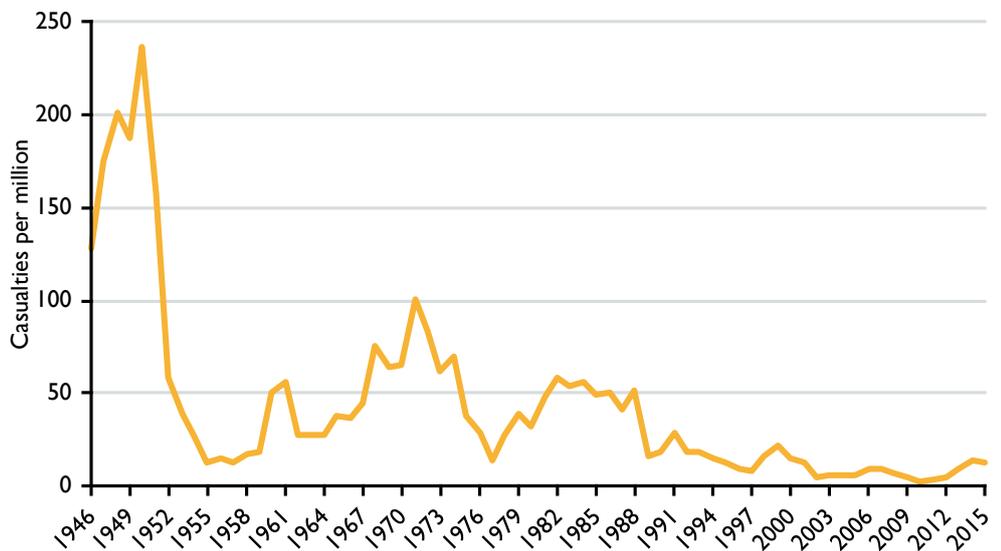


Figure 3: Battle deaths per 1 000 000 people, 1946–2015

political Islam. Looking at all conflicts around the world in 2015, about 90% of all casualties occurred in countries where this particular utopian ideology was present.

This is not the same as stating that 90% of all casualties were victims of political Islam. The blue color merely denotes that at least one of the participating organizations had this orientation.

Daesh Allegiance

The main reason for the strong increase in the number of conflicts in 2015 is the proliferation of local Islamic groups that now pledge allegiance to the Daesh (also known as the Islamic State). Conflicts involving Daesh in a conflict dyad took place in 12 countries in 2015, compared to only three countries in 2014: Afghanistan, Cameroon, Chad, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Niger, Nigeria, Russia, Syria and Yemen. Of the 12 conflicts in 2015 that were not active in 2014, 9 involved Daesh.

These were mostly conflicts and organizations that were active prior to 2015, so the increase in conflicts reflects primarily the shifting orientation of these groups from toppling governments to establishing ‘Islamic Caliphates’. For example, the conflict in West/Central Africa involving Boko Haram, which has now pledged allegiance to Daesh, was counted as one conflict in 2014. In 2015 it was split into six conflicts: four involving Daesh in Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria, and two involving Boko Haram in Cameroon

and Nigeria prior to the group changing its allegiance to Daesh.

Thus, while the increasing number of conflicts is concerning, we are not witnessing a spread of conflict to many new geographical areas, or a proliferation of entirely new conflicts.

Has the Waning of War Ended?

The increased number of conflicts is neither a blip nor a trend, but something in between. Only a relatively small pool of countries exhibits any significant likelihood of becoming embroiled in war. For these countries, latent conflict is ever present, ready to escalate to minor armed conflict, or to war.

Since World War II, this pool of candidates has shrunk. Every year some portion of these candidates will experience war or minor armed conflict. The portion involved in fighting thus determines the upswings and downswings in conflict trends. Whether these conflicts continue is shaped by a number of factors, including: the number of actors involved in the conflict, their relative strength, the nature of foreign intervention, and porous borders. Given these factors, we should expect to see the wars in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Ukraine, and Yemen to continue into the near future. Intervention can prolong or end conflict, depending on force balancing (leveling the strength of the fighting parties) or force preponderance (shifting capabilities in favor of one of the parties).

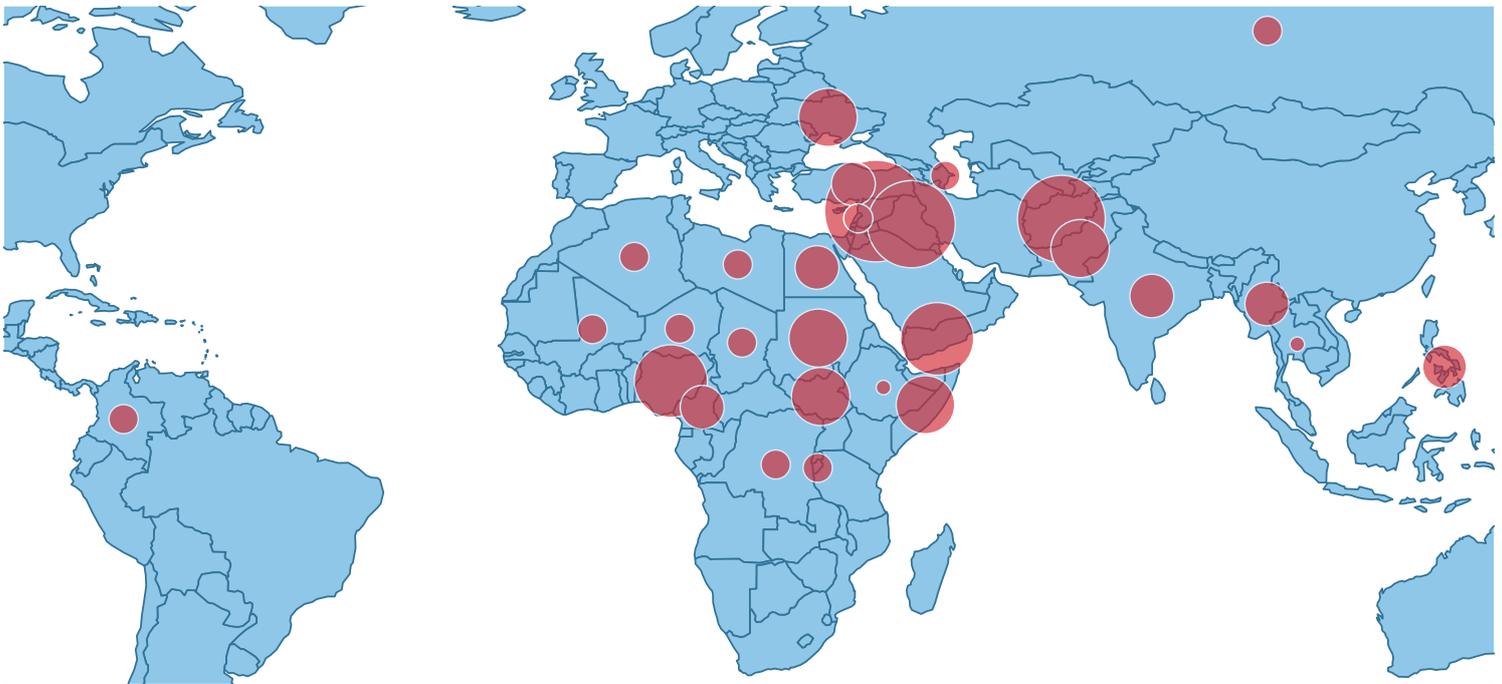


Figure 4: Bubble map of battle deaths in 2015

War severity is a function of similar factors: the number of actors, state and rebel strength, the type of warfare, and outside intervention. A common measure of severity is battle deaths, and the bubbles on the map above show where most deaths due to civil war occurred in 2014. The bubbles are proportional to the number of battle-deaths per 100,000 inhabitants. Presently, this is one of the indicators proposed to track progress along target 16 of Sustainable Development Goal number 16: “Significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere”.

Large bubbles represent substantial battle casualties associated with civil war. Small dots represent armed conflict with low levels of battle casualties. Several large red overlapping bubbles can be seen in the Middle East. Given the number of actors involved in these wars,

plus foreign intervening powers, the porous borders, and relative force levels of belligerents, the wars in Syria and Iraq are likely to continue to take their toll in years to come.

In contrast, peace processes at work in Colombia and the Philippines may finally succeed in 2017. We may see these two small dots disappear from our map. The ending of these long-lasting conflicts will also possibly lead to a small dip in the number of armed conflicts in 2017. For the next five years we should expect to see the number of conflicts in the world to remain somewhere between 30 and 40. Since the 1950s, the number killed in warfare has generally declined. Since 1992, a couple of years after the end of the Cold War, the number of armed conflicts in the world fell continuously. Since 2013, we have seen a rise in both the number of

conflicts and in battle casualties. Nationalism and religious extremism lie behind much of this up-tick. In the short run we should not see big changes in conflict trends. In the long run, however, the slow progress of democratization and development will persist and in its wake will be the waning of war. ■

Sources

Figure 1: Gleditsch et al (2002) and UCDP (Melander, Pettersson & Themnér, 2016).

Figure 2: Melander, Pettersson & Themnér (2016).

Figure 3: Lacina & Gleditsch (2005) and UCDP (Melander, Pettersson & Themnér, 2016).

Figure 4: Melander, Pettersson & Themnér (2016).

THE AUTHORS

Kendra Dupuy is Senior Researcher at PRIO and Researcher at CMI. Scott Gates is Research Professor at PRIO and Professor of Political Science at UiO. Håvard Mokleiv Nygård is Senior Researcher at PRIO. Ida Rudolfson is a Doctoral Researcher at Uppsala University. Håvard Strand is Associate Professor at UiO and Senior Researcher at PRIO. Henrik Urdal is Research Professor at PRIO.

THE PROJECT

The Conflict Trends project aims to answer questions related to the causes of, consequences of 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, which together with the World Bank funded the research presented here.

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.