PRIO | Conflict Trends

CONFLICT TRENDS 03|2021

Trends in Armed Conflict, 1946–2020

2020 provided ample evidence that conflict resolution is a long-term venture, as the year was dominated by many of the same conflicts that were present 30 years ago. A number of these conflicts can be traced to the demise of the Soviet Union, while another set of enduring conflicts are found across Africa. The Islamic State (IS) remains a global problem; it was involved in 16 conflicts in 2020.

Brief Points

- There were 56 active conflicts recorded during the year, up from 55 in 2019.

- The number of fatalities reported in 2020 dropped to under 50,000 for the first time since 2012.

- Afghanistan remains the deadliest conflict, with about 40% of all casualties recorded in 2020.

- There were eight wars active in 2020, up from seven in 2019 and six in 2018.

- IS was involved in 16 conflicts in 2020. These conflicts account for 13% of all casualties.

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Trends in 2020

On the whole, the global level of armed conflicts in 2020 was similar to 2019, showing approximately the same number of conflicts, wars and casualties. In Figure 1, we illustrate conflict trends from 1989 to 2020: while the number of conflicts has risen over this time period, the number of casualties is slightly down.

The data used in this policy brief were collected by the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), which records and classifies armed conflicts around the world for the period 1945–2020. The UCDP distinguishes between wars and minor conflicts: wars are defined by battle-related deaths (BRD) in excess of 1,000 per year, while minor conflicts account for BRD between 25 and 1,000 annually.

2020 recorded 56 active conflicts, which is a record-high for the period covered by the UCDP. Eight of these active conflicts were wars, compared to seven wars in 2019 and six in 2018. The increase in the number of wars is worrisome. Research shows that while minor conflicts have little impact on societies, wars cause a number of problems, often for a very long time.

Eight Wars

Of the eight wars recorded in 2020, two of these saw a decline in fatalities from 2019, one was stable, three deteriorated, and we recorded two previously inactive wars that restarted in 2020.

The war between the government of Afghanistan and the Taliban was the most fatal conflict in 2020 for the second year in a row, with more than 20,000 recorded fatalities. This number, however, was a significant decline from 29,000 fatalities in 2019. At the same time, a parallel war between the government of Afghanistan and IS continues, but was not recorded as a war in 2020.

The war in Syria over governance is among the most severe civil wars in recent decades, with 3,500 casualties recorded in 2020. However, this marks a continued and dramatic decline from the 65,000 recorded in 2014. As in Afghanistan, the Syrian government has a parallel conflict with IS, in which IS is attempting to bring Syria into a new political entity. As in Afghanistan, this conflict did not cross the 1,000 BRD threshold in 2019, but did so in 2020.
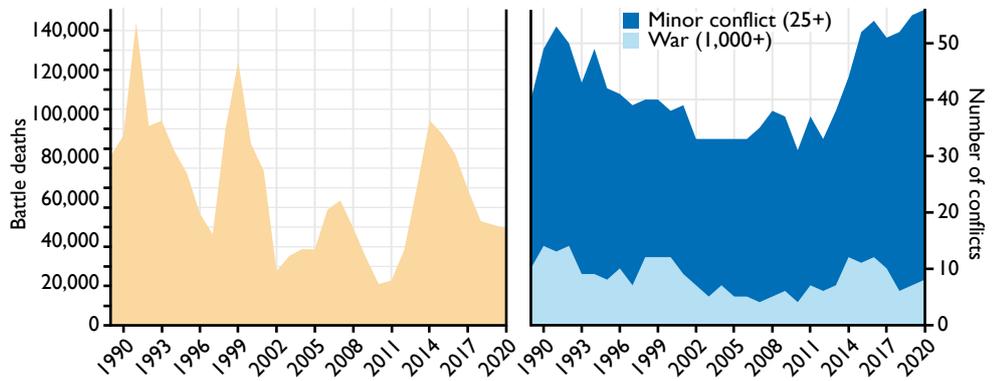

Figure 1: Number of battle deaths and conflicts, 1989–2020. Source: UCDP database (ucdp.uu.se)

The war in Somalia has been ongoing for more than 30 years and has been classified as a war every year since 2005, recording, on average, approximately 2,000 casualties every year for the last five years.

An intense war has raged in Yemen since 2015 when the Ansarallah group attempted a government take-over, unsettling the sitting president Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi. The Yemeni government has been supported in this war by a Saudi-led multinational alliance and the number of fatalities increased significantly between 2019 and 2020, from about 1,700 to more than 2,300.

The war in Nigeria took a turn for the worse in 2020. This is the second of two wars involving IS (which is also fighting in Syria). The conflict in Nigeria was dominated by the IS-allegiant Boko Haram, which achieved notoriety for its abduction of female school children in northern Nigeria. 1,500 fatalities were recorded in Nigeria in 2020, up 50% up from 2019 and almost twice the figure from 2018.

Several of the most severe conflicts of the last 30 years have taken place in Ethiopia, many of these involving neighboring Eritrea. In 2020, a secession conflict over the Tigray region (which borders Eritrea) was reignited and recorded approximately 1,300 BRDs.

The war in Azerbaijan over the largely Armenian-speaking enclave Nagorno-Karabakh reignited in 2020. After Afghanistan, this was the most severe war in 2020, with more than 7,600 fatalities recorded. Historically, Nagorno-Karabakh was considered part of Armenia but transferred to Azerbaijan by the Soviet Union in 1920. The political conflict resurfaced in the

late 1980s and exploded in 1992. By 1994, a truce was signed, which effectively recognized separatist control over the region, but this truce did not result in any international recognition.

Islamic State

A key reason for the increasing number of conflicts is the Islamic State, or IS. The nature of IS and their political claims are quite unique. While most insurgents are fighting to become the government of a country (as in Yemen) or striving to achieve independence for a part of a country (as in Ethiopia), IS seeks to unite all Muslims into a new political entity that spans and subsumes several countries under a new political form defined by adherence to Islam.

As such, IS tends to fight not only governments but also other rebel organizations, as we see in Syria. These conflict vectors add new layers of complexity to all conflict resolution attempts and the mapping of conflicts. A number of locations must be coded as parallel conflicts, since IS and other rebel organizations fight for very different reasons.

Figure 2 separates the trends between IS and more traditional organizations. The left panel shows the fatalities involving IS (in blue) and the orange shows all others. After the defeat of IS in Syria, we see a significant decline in the number of fatalities.

At the same time, the right panel shows the number of active conflicts involving IS. While there has been an increase in the number of conflicts not involving IS as well, it is apparent that the record level of active conflicts recorded in 2020 is largely due to the spread of IS.

New Conflicts in 2020

Among new conflicts in 2020, an internal armed conflict broke out in Tanzania for the first time. The only previous conflict involving Tanzania was an interstate conflict with Uganda in 1978, which led to the eventual demise of Idi Amin. However, in 2020, a local branch of IS was formed and began waging conflict in Tanzania that resulted in more than 25 BRDs.

Conflicts also sprung up in Algeria, Cameroon, Chad, DR Congo and Sudan, but none of these recorded more than 100 BRDs. Yemen and Ethiopia also saw smaller conflicts reignite in the wake of the larger ongoing wars.

Skirmishes between China and India resulted in 25 casualties in 2020. Obviously, armed conflict involving two nuclear powers is alarming, but these conflicts, to date, seem to be isolated and small.

Inactive Conflicts in 2020

Eleven conflicts that were active in 2019 did not cross the 25 BRD threshold in 2020. None of these were classified as wars in 2019. The most intense was the conflict between Uganda and the Alliance of Democratic Forces, with about 100 killed in 2019.

Another location is Myanmar, which has been a hot spot for a very long time with conflicts that lasted several generations. Myanmar has had a pattern of many concurrent conflicts in different regions, in addition to a conflict over government. This country only saw one active conflict in 2020, over the Arakan region. Events in 2021 may reignite the conflict over government.

IS was involved in active conflicts in Libya, Cameroon and Pakistan in 2019, but none of these crossed the 25 BRD threshold in 2020. Similarly, violence between the US and Al Qaeda did not qualify as conflicts in 2020, likely due to the negotiations about the US withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Recurring Conflicts

Recurring armed violence in 2020 was characterized by incidents that have deep and enduring roots in previous violent events.

Figure 3 shows battle-related deaths and number of conflicts between 1993 and 2020. The yellow line represents conflicts that were active between 1989-1992 (old), and the blue line represents new conflicts since 1993.

With two exceptions, the old conflicts are more severe than the new conflicts. Of the new conflicts, the deadliest were those that broke out in the wake of the Arab Spring (chiefly in Syria). The spikes in 1999 and 2000 can be attributed to the violence between Ethiopia and Eritrea, which is considered "new" because Eritrea is a new country with strong ties to the Eritrean war of secession from Ethiopia that ended in the early 1990s.

Remarkably, to date in 2021, more people have been killed in the persistent wars that were active 30 years ago than all of the new conflicts erupting after 1991. These persistent conflicts are the main drivers of conflict fatalities, and many of them can be traced to the end of the Cold War and the massive geopolitical changes that took place after the Soviet Union's dissolution.

For example, the war in Afghanistan can be traced back to a coup in 1973, but Soviet involvement in the 1980s transformed the conflict into a war. In the wake of the Soviet withdrawal, a number of groups emerged that remain relevant today, including the Taliban.

The war in Azerbaijan is similarly linked to the demise of the Soviet Union. The conflict began when Armenia and Azerbaijan technically were part of the same country, and the 1994 ceasefire was brokered by Russia. In 2020, Turkey played

a pivotal role in supporting the victorious Azerbaijan.

The armed conflict in Ukraine did not reach the war threshold in 2020 but is also linked to the breakup of the Soviet Union and Russian efforts to keep former Soviet republics within its political sphere of influence. Similarly, the non-violent protests following the rigged elections in Belarus must be noted in this context.

The Horn of Africa is home to numerous ethnic groups with competing claims for statehood. For most of the 20th century, imperial Ethiopia dominated the area. The old regime was toppled by a communist rebellion in 1975, and followed by subsequent violent demands for independence from a large number of these groups. The only group to successfully succeed were the Eritreans, who gained independence in 1993.

Somalia contains a similar mix of groups and ambitions with a shared claim for the Ogaden region on the border with Ethiopia. The conflict between Somalia and Ethiopia was in part a proxy war between East and West during the Cold War. But as the Cold War ended, so did the political regimes in both countries.

Somalia entered a period of political chaos and remains the textbook example of a failed state. Two regions of Somalia are de facto independent countries – Puntland and Somaliland – whereas the southern part of Somalia remains mired in conflict.

Conflict trend reports from 20 years ago highlighted the predominance of African conflicts, and we see a similar picture has re-emerged in
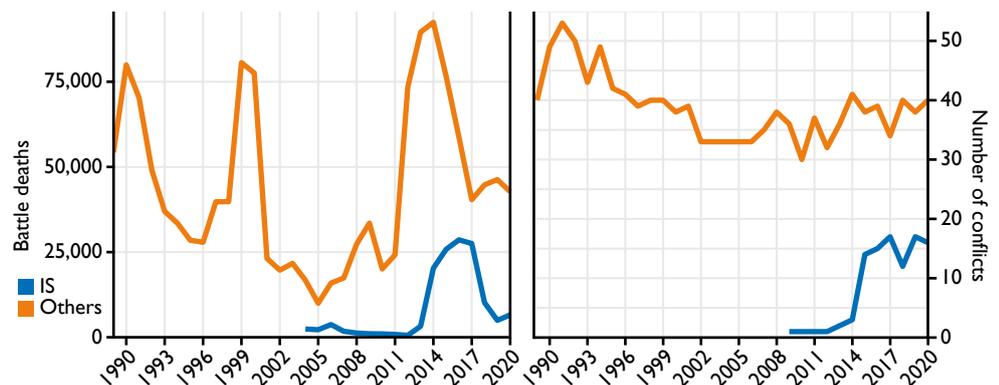

Figure 2: Number of battle deaths and conflicts with and without IS, 1989–2020. Source: UCDP database (ucdp.uu.se)
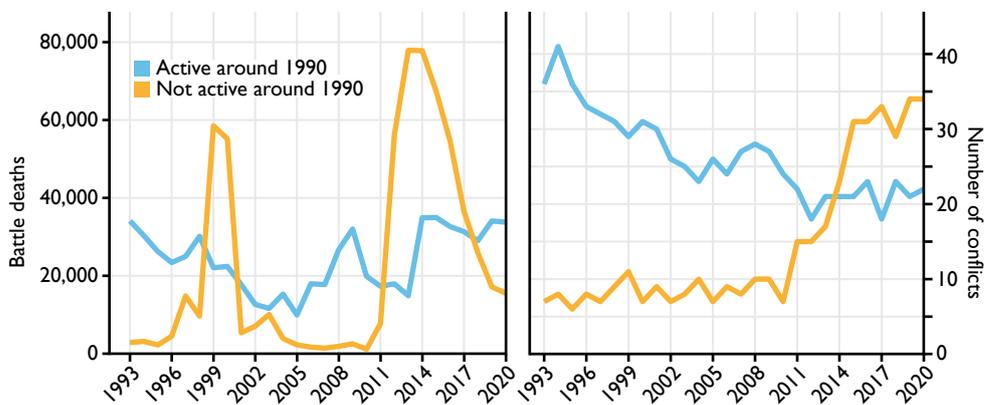
Figure 3: Number of battle deaths and conflicts by origin, 1989–2020. Source: UCDP database (ucdp.uu.se)

recent years. Many current African conflicts are new, and many involve IS, but there are also a range of low-level conflicts that can trace their roots back to the early 1990s.

Some very prolific African conflicts from the 1990s remain inactive, in particular in West Africa. Armed violence in Sierra Leone and Liberia were among the best-known conflicts of the period, while several other countries in the region experienced violence less covered by international media. Nigeria's regional power has been a key stabilizing influence.

Throughout the mid-1990s and 2000s, we see very few new conflicts, a trend that changes abruptly in 2011. The decline in global conflict levels in this period overall was largely due to the low number of new conflicts. Since 2011, that trend has changed, and a clear majority of current conflicts started after 1992.

The peaceful period that ended a decade ago was driven by the fact that many conflicts ended, prior to 2011, due to strong international pressure and an effective UN Security Council. At the same

time as the number of new conflicts sky-rocketed, the decline in the number of old conflicts ended.

Latent Conflicts

Several multi-ethnic countries were dissolved or experienced large-scale conflicts in the 1990s, but remain peaceful in 2020. For example, Indonesia had several armed conflicts in its periphery in the 1990s, such as Aceh, West Papua and East Timor. East Timor would go on to gain independence, while Aceh earned a level of autonomy. The conflict in West Papua remains unresolved but has not seen recent significant violence.

The post-Soviet era breakup of Yugoslavia resulted in a series of wars, in particular the Bosnian civil war. While some ex-Yugoslav republics have gained EU membership, Bosnia-Herzegovina remains a tense region and the core political conflict has not been resolved.

An aborted transition to democracy in Algeria led to a severe civil war in the 1990s, and this conflict remains active through a branch of Al Qaeda known as Al Qaeda in the Maghreb

(AQIM). The roots of this conflict can be traced back to the fractious influence of French colonialism – which we also find to be the case in the Ambazonian region of Cameroon.

Future Trends

The current trends in armed conflicts underscore the long-term view necessary to plan and execute effective conflict resolution. We know this because many intractable conflicts of today have roots at least 30 years old. We draw two lessons: 1) past armed conflicts remain high risk for a very long period of time, and 2) we must address the record number of small conflicts currently active as we know, based on our experience from the 1990s, that several of these could escalate into long-term organized armed violence.

Based on predictions from the ViEWS conflict early-warning system, we can say something about which of the many current minor conflicts that are most likely to join the group of protracted conflicts. The ViEWS system uses advanced machine-learning algorithms applied to data on geographic and demographic features, political institutions, economic conditions, and past conflict history to produce forecasts that have proven to be accurate and precise.

The most remarkable thing to note from the prediction map for a time almost three years into the future is that the high-risk areas are very similar to the current conflict map. The conflicts in Algeria, Sudan, South Sudan, Eastern DRC, and Somalia reach back decades in time. Conflicts in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, North Nigeria, and northern Mozambique have emerged since the 1990s, but have already established themselves as new, persistent hotspots of violence. Without any measures to address these situations, a prediction map for 2030, the target year of the SDGs, will look depressingly similar. ■

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