



Conflict
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PRIO PAPER 2020

Conflict Trends in the Middle East, 1989–2019

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www.prio.org
ISBN: 978-82-343-0151-3 (print)
978-82-343-0152-0 (online)

Design: Medicinheads.com



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The old hospital in Quneitra,
Syria. Photo: Will Da Freitas /
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Cover design: www.medicineheads.com
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Contents

List of Figures	4
1. Introduction	5
2. Executive Summary	7
3. State-Based Conflicts	8
4. Ceasefires	17
5. Trends in Peace Agreements	20
6. Non-State Conflicts, 1989–2019	23
7. One-Sided Violence	26
8. Geographic Spread of Conflict	28
9. Discussion and Conclusion	30
10. References	32

List of Figures

1. Figure 1: Battle deaths and state-based conflicts in the Middle East, by conflict type, 1946–2019	8
2. Figure 2: Number of countries with state-based armed conflict, by region, 1946–2019	9
3. Figure 3: Conflict and battle deaths split between conflicts and wars in the Middle East, 1989–2019	10
4. Figure 4: Battle deaths in the Middle East in 2018 and 2019	11
5. Figure 5: Share of battle deaths globally in 2018 and 2019	11
6. Figure 6: Total absolute number of battle deaths by country, 1989–2019	12
7. Figure 7: Battle deaths as share of population by country, 1989–2019	12
8. Figure 8: Number of conflict countries vs number of conflicts, Middle East, 1989–2019	13
9. Figure 9: Number of civil conflicts with and without international involvement, Middle East, 1946–2019	14
10. Figure 10: Incompatibility of state-based conflicts in the Middle East, 1946–2019	14
11. Figure 11: State-based conflict countries and conflict events in the Middle East in 2019	15
12. Figure 12: Location of state-based conflict countries and conflict events (2019)	16
13. Figure 13: Ceasefires per year, per region, 1989–2018	17
14. Figure 14: Ceasefires by purpose, Middle East, 1989–2018	18
15. Figure 15: Ceasefires by type: Middle East, 1989–2018	19
16. Figure 16: Peace agreements by region, 1975–2018	20
17. Figure 17: Peace agreements and conflicts in the Middle East, 1975–2018	21
18. Figure 18: Total number of non-state conflicts, by region, 1989–2019	23
19. Figure 19: Non-state conflicts in the Middle East, by type of conflict, 1989–2019	24
20. Figure 20: Non-state conflicts, conflict countries and battle deaths in the Middle East, 1989–2019	24
21. Figure 21: Share of battle deaths in non-state conflict by region, 2018 and 2019	25
22. Figure 22: One-sided violence in the Middle East, by perpetrator, 1989–2018	26
23. Figure 23: Incidents of one-sided violence, by region, 1989–2018	27
24. Figure 24: Fatalities in one-sided violence in 2018 and 2019, by region and IS	27
25. Figure 25: State-based conflict, non-state conflicts and one-sided violence events in the Middle East, 2019	28
26. Figure 26: State-based conflict, non-state conflicts and one-sided violence events globally, 2019	29

1. Introduction

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 calls on the world to achieve peaceful and inclusive societies and to significantly reduce all forms of violence and related deaths everywhere. An important first step in achieving SDG 16 is to understand conflict dynamics over time and across continents, and the types of violence employed by various actors. We take the lead in this effort by providing an overview of both global and regional conflict trends. This approach enables us to look at accumulative global trends of conflict, and also to look beyond them, uncovering regional variations. In this PRIO Paper, we provide an empirically grounded overview of trends in conflict and peace attempts in the Middle East, which we hope can help policy and decision makers, practitioners, and regional and country experts further understand the contexts they are working in.

This paper is part of a series of four PRIO Papers on Conflict Trends. In this paper, we provide data on and examine conflict trends in the Middle East, particularly since 1989, and compare them to global trends. We not only focus on trends in violence but move beyond previous reports by providing data and analysis on conflict recurrence, ceasefires, and peace agreements. Data for this paper comes from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), PRIO and ETH Zurich. The definition of conflict used in this paper is based on the UCDP's 25 battle-related deaths threshold, and we examine state-based conflicts, non-state conflicts, and one-sided violence. More specific definitions will be presented in the various sections, and in the box below. This paper need not necessarily be read from cover to cover, but should rather be considered as a work of reference on peace and conflict trends in the Middle East.

Definitions

State-based conflict: A contested incompatibility over government and/or territory, where at least one party is a state, and the use of armed force results in at least 25 battle-related deaths within a calendar year.

Non-state conflict: The use of armed force between organized groups, none of which is the government of a state, resulting in at least 25 annual battle-related deaths.

One-sided violence: The use of armed force by the government of a state or by a formally organized group against civilians, which results in at least 25 deaths. Extrajudicial killings in custody are excluded.

Battle deaths: Fatalities caused by the warring parties that can be directly related to combat, including civilian losses.

We provide PRIO Papers on conflict trends in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, as well as a global overview. We would like to note the limitations of these papers. We rely on the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) data because it is the best available global dataset when it comes to armed violence, yet some caveats remain:¹ First, we would like to emphasize that these papers present an overview of *trends in data*. As such, we neither provide causal explanations for particular trends (although we highlight existing research results), nor expand on particular cases in depth. After completing the regional papers, we sent them out for review to country and region experts and

¹ To learn more about the UCDP's data collection and coding procedure, see: www.pcr.uu.se/research/ucdp/faq/#How_are_UCDP_data_collected_.

incorporated their comments to ensure that quantitative evidence is balanced with qualitative insight. The second limitation is that we did not provide a separate regional paper on Latin America, although it is one of the most violent places in the world. Latin America experienced relatively fewer episodes of intrastate conflict, but it is plagued by social violence perpetrated by cartels and gangs.² The third limitation concerns data on one-sided violence. UCDP's data on one-sided violence faces two criticisms: coding source bias and inaccuracy in reported numbers.³ Coding is based on news reports as well as reports from human rights organizations and from the UN. Open source information can be subject to manipulation by governments and it is difficult to obtain quality data on violence in detention centers and on extrajudicial killings. UCDP one-sided violence figures are viewed by many as too low (see the above point on cartels in Latin America), but as of today this is the only source that provides comparable data over time and space.⁴ When discussing one-sided violence, we complement UCDP data with other sources for illustrative purposes. Lastly, we would like to acknowledge that this paper does not apply a gender lens to the analysis, as the data does not allow for this.⁵ We welcome comments and questions on any part of this PRIO Paper.

² These groups and the fatalities from their conflict are difficult to capture with UCDP coding criteria. UCDP needs clearly identifiable actors who commit violent acts and the conflict between the cartels “is not overt in the sense that none of the actors wish to claim ‘credit’ for their actions” (Allansson, 2020). For a comprehensive overview and data on social violence in Latin America, see for example Rivera, 2015.

³ UCDP provides fatality estimates in three different categories (best, high, low estimates). The best figure should be viewed as a baseline.

⁴ For more information on UCDP's one-sided violence dataset, see Sundberg, 2009.

⁵ For existing data on various topics related to gender, conflict, and peace, see publications from the PRIO Centre on Gender, Peace and Security.

2. Executive Summary

Conflict trends in the Middle East: Over the past decade, the bulk of the world’s deadliest conflicts have been in the Middle East, such as those taking place in Syria, Yemen, Iraq and Turkey. Syria has also been the deadliest conflict in the world since 1989. In addition, countries bordering the Middle East – Afghanistan being by far the most significant here – are also very high on the list of deadly conflicts. Overall, the concentration of armed conflicts has shifted quite dramatically through the years – and if we look at the whole period from World War II to the present, the Middle East figured very prominently during the 1980s (with the Iran-Iraq war). Other regions that had been hard hit in decades prior to the 1980s – East Asia, Latin America, even sub-Saharan Africa – do not, either because conflicts have settled, or because they are much less intense, or both.

Decrease in state-based conflicts: 2019 saw 10 state-based conflicts in the Middle East, two less than in 2018. While Asia and Africa have the largest share of the conflicts, the Middle East has seen the largest relative increase in the past six years. The seven civil wars in the Middle East between 2016 and 2018 marked an all-time high since 1996. The deadliest year in the Middle East was 1988, when more than 330,000 battle-related deaths were recorded, most of them in the Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988). Since 1991, 2014 was the deadliest year, with almost 80,000 battle-related deaths. Since 2014, battle-related deaths have been steadily declining, which is largely attributable to the de-escalation in Iraq and Syria. While there was a decrease in the number of civil wars and battle-related deaths in the Middle East, the number of internationalized conflicts has been at its highest level ever since 2015.

Humanitarian ceasefires are on the rise and peace agreements remain rare: Since 1989, the number of ceasefires in the Middle East has increased. The number peaked in 2016 when in total 48 ceasefires were recorded, all of them in Syria and Yemen. The Middle East also experienced a relatively large number of humanitarian ceasefires over time. In 2015, a record number of 25 humanitarian ceasefires were recorded in Syria and Yemen, a gruesome reminder of the severity of those conflicts. Compared to other regions, peace agreements in the Middle East are relatively rare. Conflict severity, the number of actors, and the protracted nature of some conflicts all make it difficult to reach a negotiated settlement to conflicts in the region. The highest number of peace agreements (12) concluded within one year was in 1975, all of them between the governments of Iran and Iraq. The last peace agreement in the region was concluded in 2014 in Yemen between the government, the Southern Movement, and Ansarallah.

Non-state conflicts decreased, but remain one of the most serious threats: The number of non-state conflicts skyrocketed in 2011. However, we have seen a decline since 2014, with 2019 marking the lowest number (8) since 2009. Nevertheless, the number of non-state conflicts is still much higher than before 2011. The number of battle deaths related to non-state conflict reached an all time high in 2017, followed by a sharp decrease. Still in 2019, 4,000 people were killed in non-state conflict battle-related events. The Middle East is characterized by fighting between highly organized actors. Syria has been the hardest hit country by non-state conflicts; in 2019, five different non-state conflicts were recorded in the country.

Increase in one-sided violence from 2018: There is a general downward trend in one-sided violence from 2005 onwards (except for 2013 and 2014). While in 2018, the number of fatalities (54) were the lowest since 1989, this number doubled (108) in 2019, mostly due to violence perpetrated by Syrian insurgents, the Islamic State (IS), and the Government of Iran.

3. State-Based Conflicts

Globally, state-based conflicts and especially civil wars are the most common types of conflicts, but the past decades have seen an increase in conflicts waged between non-state actors, excluding the government (we discuss these trends in the section on non-state conflicts). To be included in the data as a state-based conflict, there has to be a contested incompatibility that concerns the government (for example, the conflict between Ansarallah and the government of Yemen regarding political influence over the state as it is) and/or territory (e.g. the conflict between the Turkish Government and the PKK over the territory of Kurdistan) and where the use of armed force between two parties results in at least 25 battle-related deaths within a calendar year. Battle-related deaths account for fatalities caused by the warring parties that can be directly related to combat. This measurement is important as it provides us with information about the severity of a conflict. War is a state-based conflict or dyad that reaches at least 1,000 battle-related deaths in a specific calendar year. This measurement does not account for a significant number of indirect deaths from conflict. Such numbers of indirect deaths are difficult to verify due to the lack of reliable data.

In Figure 1, all state-based violent conflicts in the Middle East are displayed and disaggregated into different conflict types between 1946 and 2019. We distinguish between four different types of state-based conflicts: colonial wars, civil wars, interstate wars, and internationalized civil wars. Figure 1 also shows the number of battle-related deaths.

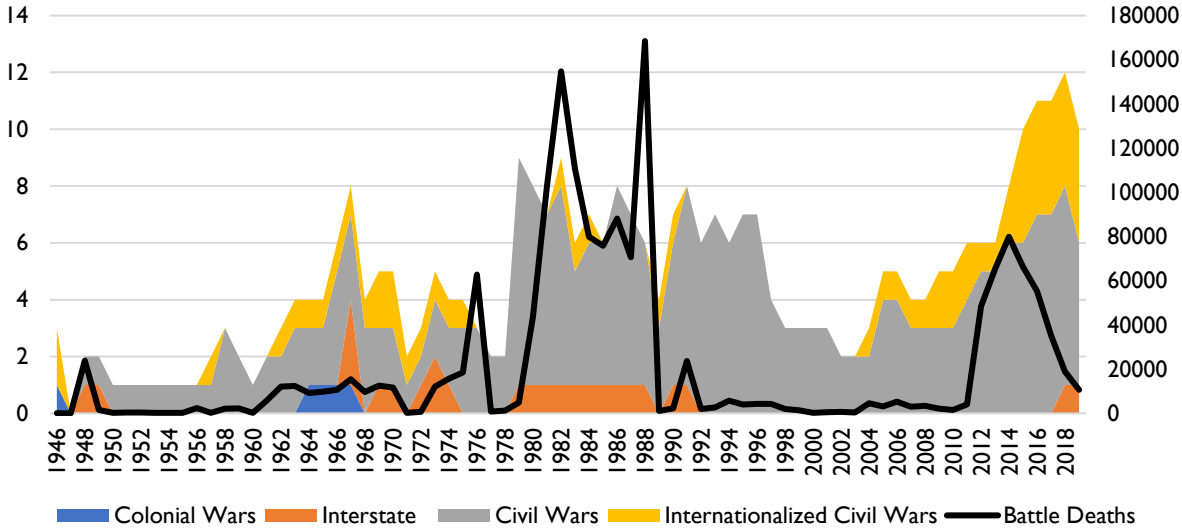


Figure 1: Battle deaths and state-based conflicts in the Middle East, by conflict type, 1946–2019
Source: UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Database, UCDP Battle Death Database (Pettersson & Öberg 2020) and Lacina and Gleditsch Battle Death Database

The figure shows that state-based conflicts peaked in the period between 1979 and 1988, followed by an overall decrease in the number of conflicts. From 2011 onwards, this downward trend has reversed, and 2019 is the first year since 2007 when there was a decrease in the number of state-based conflicts. At the same time, in the past five years the total number of state-based conflicts has stabilized at a higher level than ever before. The graph shows that by 1967, colonial wars had come to an end.

Interstate conflict continues to be a rare event. 2019 saw 10 state-based conflicts in the Middle East (1 interstate war, 5 civil wars, and 4 internationalized civil wars). This is a decrease from 2018 when 12 state-based conflicts were recorded, the highest number since 1946. 2018 was the first year since 1991 where there was a conflict between two states (Iran and Israel) in the Middle East. This conflict is not a direct war between the two states (like it was during the Iran-Iraq war), but it took place in Syria where both governments attacked each other's positions. 2019 saw the continuation of this conflict with all attacks recorded in Syria, similarly to 2018.

The number of civil wars (as we can see from the grey area) increased from 2010 to 2018 (from 3 to 7) but decreased from 2018 (7) to 2019 (5). These five civil wars were recorded in four countries, meaning that one country experienced two distinct conflicts. It is also important to note that these are civil wars that *did not* entail the involvement of foreign governments with troops. We elaborate on such internationalized conflicts towards the end of this section. In 2019, civil wars were recorded in Egypt (there were two conflicts recorded: 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).

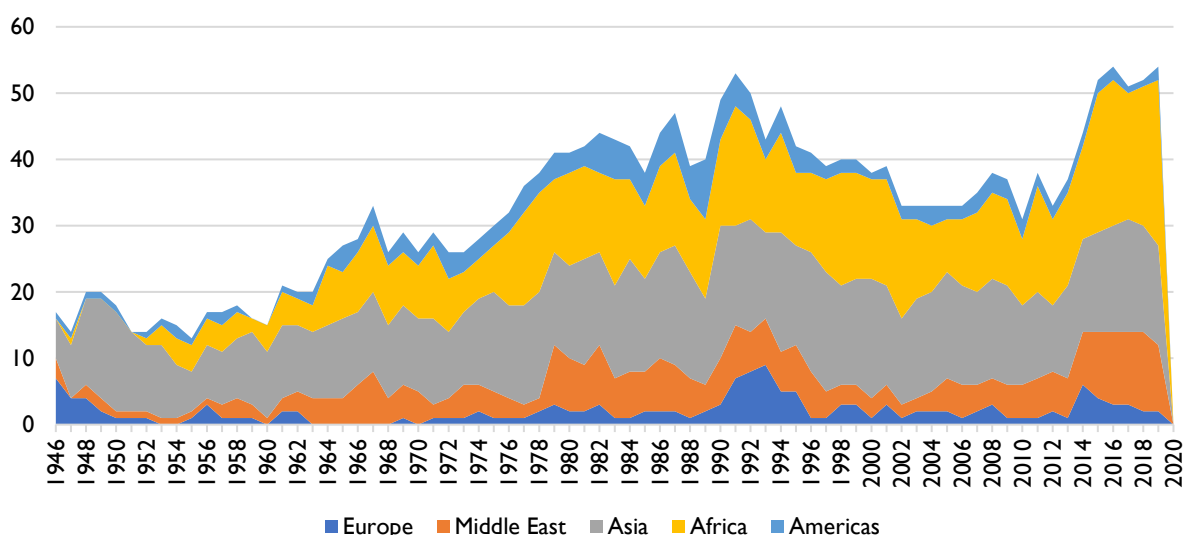


Figure 2: Number of countries with state-based armed conflict, by region, 1946–2019
Source: UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Database (Petterson & Öberg 2020)

There were four internationalized conflicts recorded (i.e. the conflict experienced the involvement of foreign governments with troops), in addition to the five civil wars discussed above. Internationalized conflicts in 2019 were recorded in Syria (two distinct conflicts experienced the involvement of external troops), Iraq, and Yemen.

The seven civil wars between 2016 and 2018 marked an all-time high since 1996. The decrease in the number of civil conflicts from 2018 to 2019 is attributable to two developments. First, in 2019, Iran experienced one civil war (against Jaish al-Adl) compared to two (against the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran and the Free Life Party of Kurdistan) in 2018. Second, in 2019, Syria fought two civil wars (against IS and the Syrian insurgents), whereas in 2018 the Syrian government fought three civil wars (against IS, Syrian Democratic Forces, and the Syrian insurgents).

The deadliest year in the Middle East, 1988, saw 331,550 battle-related deaths.⁶ The death toll in 1988 was compounded by five civil wars, but the majority of deaths were the result of the interstate war between Iran and Iraq (1980–1988). Since then, battle-related deaths have declined with the exception of a few spikes. The 1991 Gulf War claimed more than 24,000 lives. After this war, a relatively peaceful period emerged up until 2004. Since 1991, 2014 has been the deadliest year, with almost 80,000 battle-related deaths. The good news is that since 2014, battle-related deaths are steadily declining. This decline is largely attributable to the de-escalation in Iraq and Syria. Figure 1 also shows that parallel to the decrease in the number of civil wars and battle-related deaths in the Middle East, the number of internationalized conflicts reached a record number since 2015. We expand on these dynamics later in this section (see Figure 7).

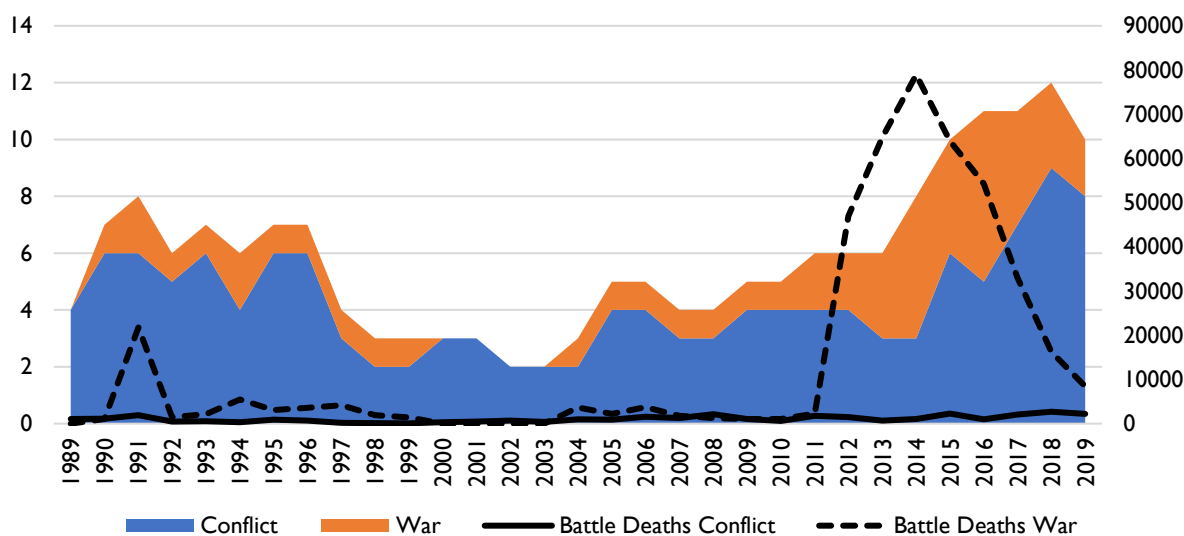


Figure 3: Conflict and battle deaths split between conflicts and wars in the Middle East, 1989–2019

Source: UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Database and UCDP Battle Death Database (Pettersson & Öberg 2020)

To gain a more nuanced understanding of the relative share of state-based conflicts in various parts of the world, we show regional variation in state-based conflict trends between 1946 and 2019 in Figure 2. As is apparent from the graph, between 1946 and 2019, Africa experienced the largest number of state-based conflicts (101), followed by Asia (77), Europe (48), the Middle East (38) and the Americas (26). While Asia and Africa have the highest number of conflicts, the Middle East has seen the largest relative increase in the past six years.

Figure 3 shows the number of battle-related deaths in state-based conflict in the Middle East, differentiating between wars (at least 1,000 battle-related deaths) and armed conflicts (25–999 battle-related deaths). As indicated earlier, since 2014, battle-related deaths have been steadily declining, a trend largely driven by de-escalation in Iraq and Syria. This decline in the number and severity of conflicts in the Middle East corresponds with global trends. As we can see, in 2019 the totality of all civil wars in the region and the interstate war between Iran and Israel claimed fewer lives than in 2018.

Figure 4 compares battle-related deaths in the Middle East between 2018 and 2019. In 2019, state-based conflicts in Syria caused more than 7,300 deaths, a significant decrease from 11,800 deaths in 2018, and 20,000 in 2017. Similar trends can be seen in Yemen and Turkey. For the region as a whole, there was an overall decrease in battle-related deaths from 18,971 in 2018 to 10,625 in 2019.

⁶ These numbers are based on the best estimate variable in the battle deaths datasets.

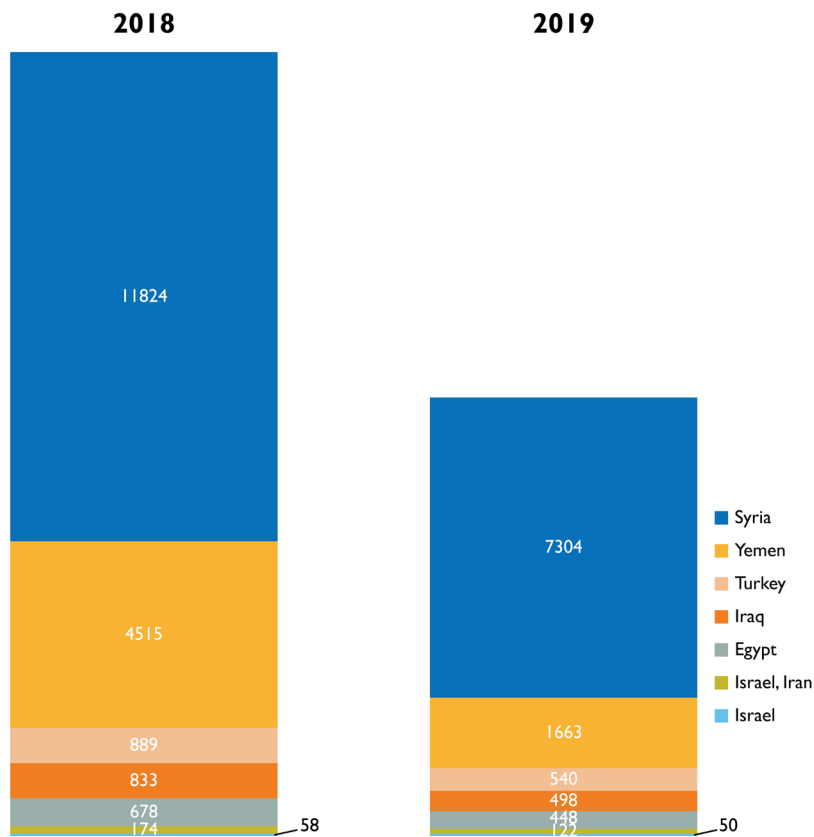


Figure 4: Battle deaths in the Middle East in 2018 and 2019

Source: UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Database and UCDP Battle Death Database (Pettersson & Öberg 2020)

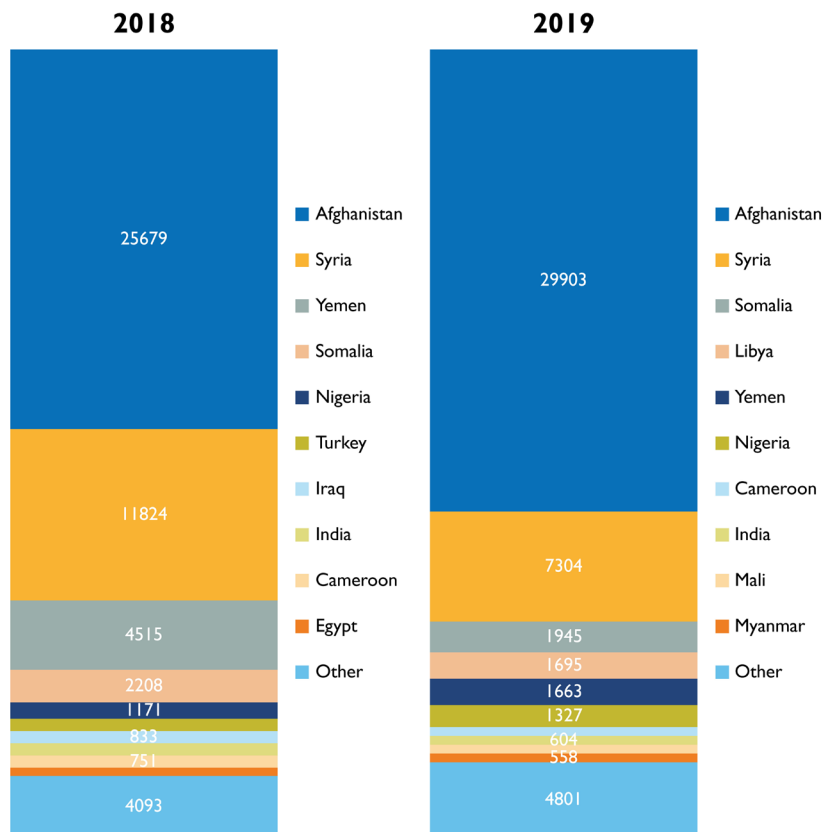


Figure 5: Share of battle deaths globally in 2018 and 2019

Source: UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Database and UCDP Battle Death Database (Pettersson & Öberg 2020)

Figure 5 shows the global distribution of battle-related deaths in 2018 and 2019. It shows that a few conflicts account for a large number of battle-related deaths. We can see that in 2019, Afghanistan accounted for most battle-related deaths. In fact, Afghanistan experienced an escalation from 2018 to 2019. Battle-related deaths increased from 25,679 in 2018, to almost 30,000 in 2019. Syria remained the second deadliest conflict in 2019 but battle-related deaths decreased from 11,824 in 2018 to 7,304 in 2019. In 2018, Yemen experienced the third largest number of battle-related deaths (4,515), but due to a considerable de-escalation in 2019 (1,663 battle-related deaths), Yemen was replaced by Somalia and Libya.

	Country	Battle Deaths
1	Syria	298126
2	Afghanistan	240759
3	Eritrea-Ethiopia	98217
4	Iraq	91189
5	Ethiopia	89206
6	Sri Lanka	61234
7	Sudan	49454
8	India	38562
9	Somalia	36288
10	Turkey	32971
11	Angola	30688
12	Pakistan	30248
13	Yemen	26094
14	DR Congo	22143
15	Russia	21999
16	Colombia	19807
17	Nigeria	19526
18	Algeria	18883
19	Philippines	18081
20	Congo	14202

Figure 6: Total absolute number of battle deaths by country, 1989–2019

Source: UCDP Battle Death Database (Pettersson & Öberg 2020)

	Country	BDs as Share of Population, 2015
1	Syria	1.59
2	Afghanistan	0.71
3	Bosnia-Herzegovina	0.38
4	Sri Lanka	0.30
5	Congo	0.28
6	Somalia	0.26
7	Iraq	0.25
8	Sierra Leone	0.16
9	Libya	0.13
10	Sudan	0.13
11	Angola	0.11
12	Tajikistan	0.11
13	Yemen	0.10
14	Eritrea-Ethiopia	0.09
15	Ethiopia	0.09
16	Burundi	0.09
17	Rwanda	0.08
18	Chad	0.06
19	Algeria	0.05
20	Turkey	0.04

Figure 7: Battle deaths as share of population by country, 1989–2019

Source: UCDP Battle Death Database (Pettersson & Öberg 2020)

However, while a country can have a large number of battle deaths in one year, the prevalence of violence over time can be equally if not more devastating. In Figure 6, we show the total number of battle deaths for the top 20 countries in the world between 1989 and 2019. Two countries stand out, Syria and Afghanistan. In addition, Ethiopia, which has both experienced a civil war, as well as an international war against Eritrea in 1999–2000, stands out.

Figure 7 indicates the ranking of countries when we take battle deaths as a share of the population into account. This is important to consider, since relatively low numbers in absolute battle deaths can be substantial for a small country. Syria and Afghanistan are still topping the list. In Syria, 1.6% of the population have been killed in conflict. The most notable difference from the list with absolute numbers is Bosnia-Herzegovina in third place, where almost 0.4% of the population were killed in the conflict in the early 1990s. In addition, we see a number of smaller countries entering this list, such as Sierra Leone, Libya, Tajikistan, Burundi, and Rwanda (note the 1994 genocide is not included here).

Figure 8 compares the number of conflict-affected countries with the total number of state-based conflicts in the Middle East between 1989 and 2019. The UCDP data counts the number of conflicts, and not conflict countries, thus a country can have several conflicts ongoing at the same time. For example, in 2018 the Syrian government engaged in three different civil wars against the IS, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and the Syrian insurgents. Until 2011, the number of conflicts and the number of conflict countries largely followed each other. Since 2007, the number of conflicts has steadily increased. However, from 2011 onwards, while the number of conflict-affected countries remained relatively stable, the total number of conflicts, in which one of the conflict parties was the government, has substantially increased. Governments in Egypt, Syria, and Iran experienced more than one conflict in their territories both in 2018 and 2019.

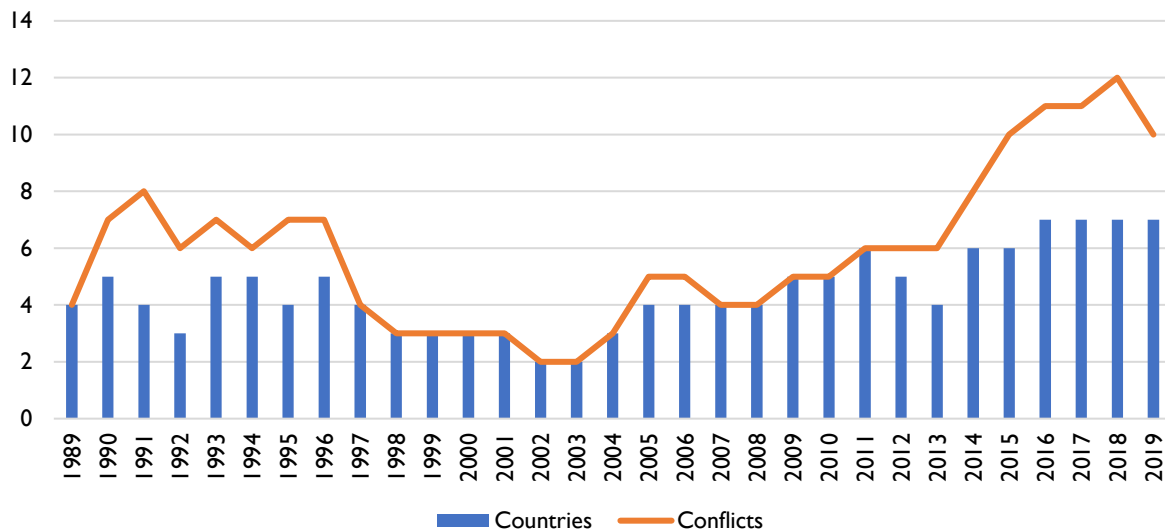


Figure 8: Number of conflict countries vs number of conflicts, Middle East, 1989–2019

Source: UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Database and UCDP Battle Death Database (Pettersson & Öberg 2020)

Figure 9 displays conflicts with and without international involvement. UCDP defines an internationalized conflict as a conflict where the government, or the opposing side, or both sides receive support from external states that actively participate in the conflict. The deployment of peacekeeping forces could also fall into this category, but does not automatically make a conflict internationalized. Generally, external actors can complicate or help to resolve conflicts. Research has shown that internationalized conflicts tend to last longer and can often be more severe. At the same time, external actors can also prevent escalation rather than exacerbate violence. In short, interveners' motivation and interest in the conflict matters.

It is often claimed that civil wars in the Middle East are severe because of the competing support conflict belligerents receive from third parties (proxy wars). Yet, the numbers here tell a different story: In the past ten years, 2014 was the deadliest year in the Middle East, yet only two civil wars out of six were internationalized that year. Since 2014, battle-related deaths have been steadily declining, while the number of internationalized civil wars increased to four. However, these trends do not imply that it was internationalization that caused the decrease in fatalities. In 2019, four out of five civil wars experienced external interventions, often by multiple actors. For example, in Yemen, the internationally recognized government of Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi is supported by a coalition consisting of Bahrain, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and the United Arab Emirates.

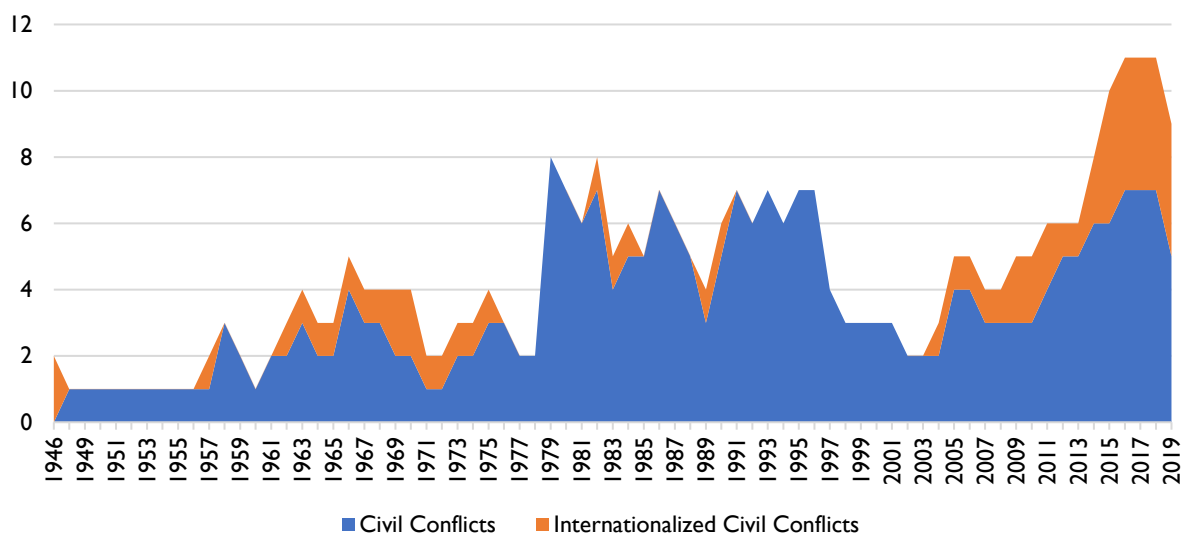


Figure 9: Number of civil conflicts with and without international involvement, Middle East, 1946–2019
 Source: UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Database and UCDP Battle Death Database (Petterson & Öberg 2020)

What are the conflicts in the Middle East fought over? Following the UCDP, we differentiate between two types of incompatibilities: conflicts over government and/or over territory. Conflicts over governments concern the type of political system, the replacement of the central government, or the change of its composition. Conflicts over territory concern the status of a territory, secession or autonomy. Figure 10 shows the number of conflicts in the Middle East fought over territorial or governmental incompatibilities, or a mix of these two categories, between 1946 and 2019.

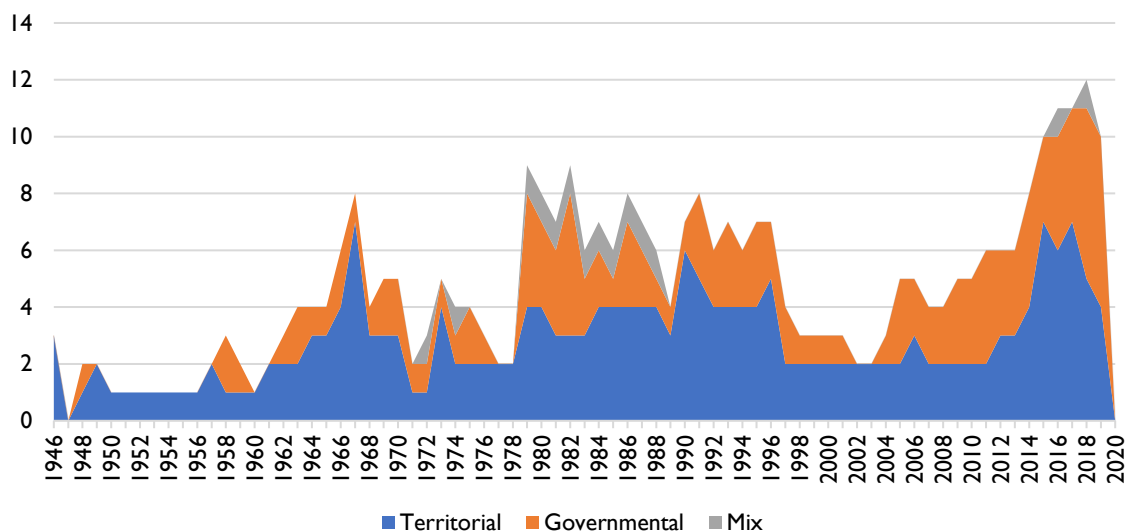


Figure 10: Incompatibility of state-based conflicts in the Middle East, 1946–2019
 Source: UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Database (Petterson & Öberg 2020)

We can see that the number of conflicts fought over government has substantially increased since 2004. One particularly vivid illustration of this trend was the 2011 Arab Uprisings, which were motivated by the culmination of decades of grievances against governments across the region. In fact, 2018 and 2019 saw the largest number (6) of wars fought over government, a number that has not been recorded since 1946.

The number of conflicts fought over territorial incompatibility has also increased, especially since 2011. Both in 2015 and 2017, seven conflicts were fought over territory, a number that has only been matched in 1967. While a mix of the two categories remains rare, both 2016 and 2018 saw a conflict that involved both types of incompatibilities. Both instances are from Syria, where the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) were fighting both over government and over the status of Rojava Kurdistan territory, located in northern and eastern Syria. The last time a conflict was fought over both territorial and government incompatibility was in 1988 during the Iran-Iraq war.

At the global level, many countries experienced state-based conflicts in 2019. However, this does not necessarily mean that entire countries are engulfed by conflict. In fact, conflicts are very often limited to smaller geographical areas within countries, with a few exceptions. In this section, we examine the geographical location of state-based conflict within countries in the Middle East and use the latest 2019 version of the UCDP Georeferenced Event Dataset (GED), which codes the geographical location of all conflict events (Sundberg & Melander, 2013). This dataset covers state-based conflicts, non-state conflicts and one-sided violence. The geographical distribution of the latter two types of conflict will be presented in later sections of this paper.

The map in Figure 11 displays countries that are subject to state-based conflict in grey, and conflict events with orange dots. We can see large variation between conflict countries in terms of how spread out the conflict is. Furthermore, there is also variation within each country regarding the location of conflict. We can see that Egypt and Iran have few conflict events concentrated in specific areas, while conflict events are both more numerous and more geographically dispersed in Syria, Yemen and Iraq. However, even within these countries we see a geographical pattern. In Syria, conflict events are concentrated around Aleppo and Idlib in the north west, and around Damascus in the south west. In Iraq, the conflict is situated mainly 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.

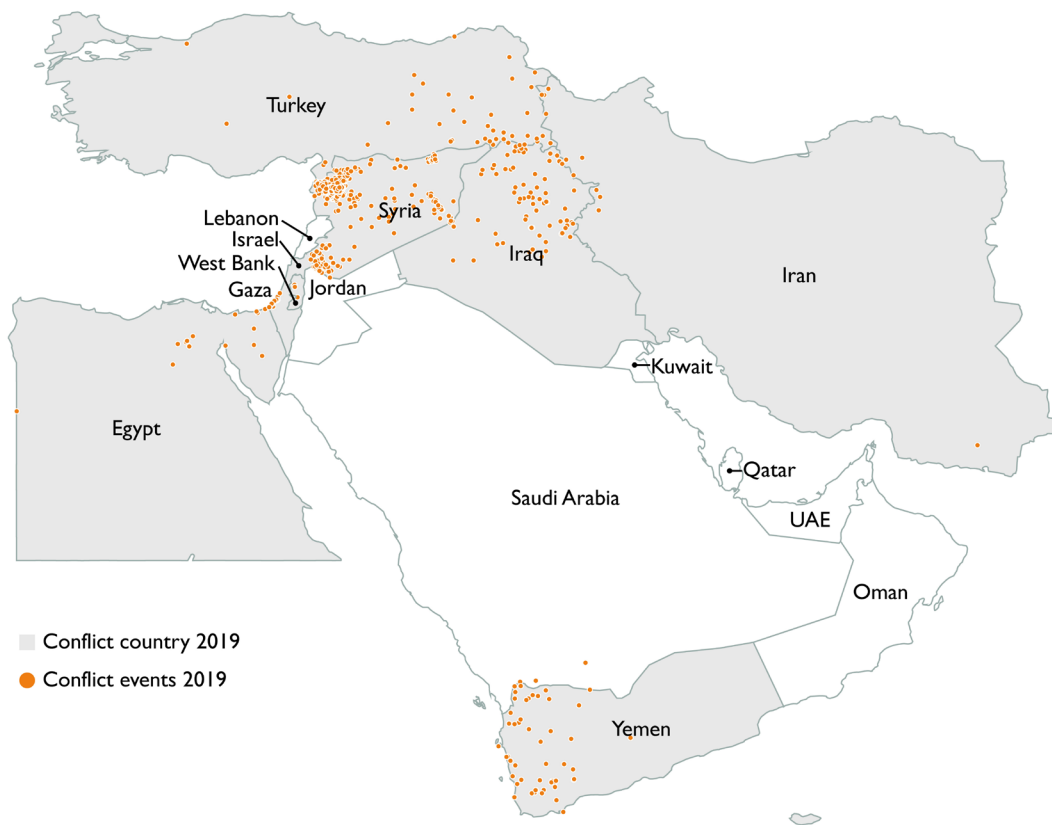


Figure 11: State-based conflict countries and conflict events in the Middle East in 2019

Source: UCDP Georeferenced Event Database (Pettersson & Öberg 2020)

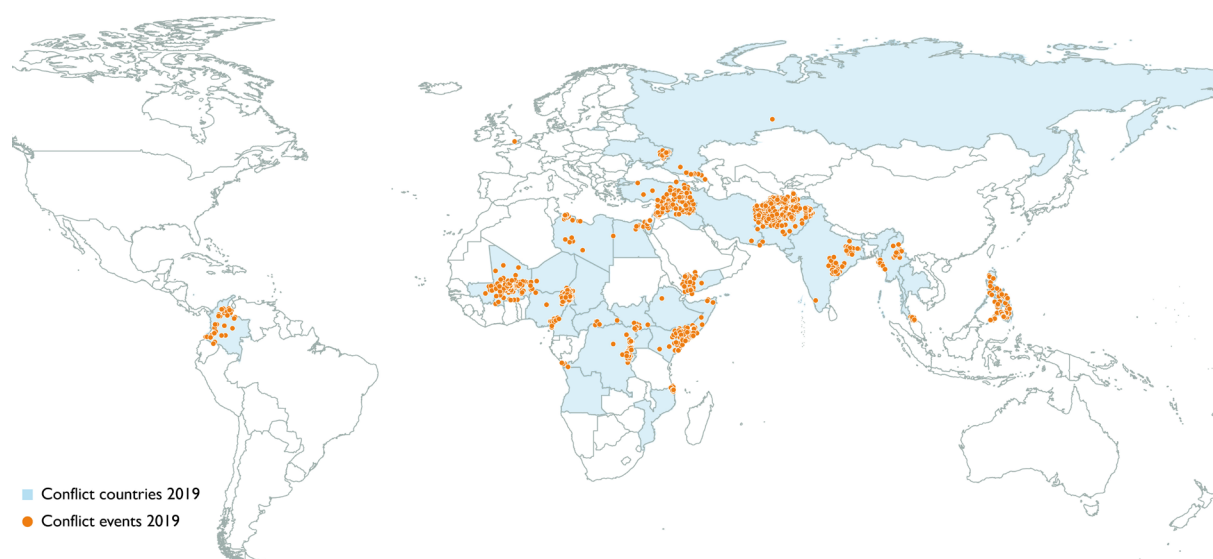


Figure 12: Location of state-based conflict countries and conflict events (2019)

Source: UCDP Georeferenced Event Database (Pettersson & Öberg 2020)

Figure 12 shows the location of all conflict events in 2019. The map indicates a few conflict hotspots in the world. In the Middle East, these hotspots are located in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. In Africa, they are in the border area between Mali and Burkina Faso, Eastern DRC and Somalia, and in Asia they are in Afghanistan and the Philippines. We can also see a cluster of conflict events in Eastern Ukraine, and another in the eastern parts of Colombia. Yet, outside of the three main conflict-affected regions, there are very few conflicts. Overall, for many of the conflict countries in the world, the geographical spread of conflict is limited to certain geographical areas, such as the north eastern part of Mozambique and the southern tip of Thailand.

4. Ceasefires

Stopping violence is one critical aim of any peace effort. Yet, violence can be halted during the lifecycle of a conflict by the parties agreeing to a ceasefire. A ceasefire however does not necessarily mean that the underlying incompatibility between the belligerents has been addressed. Ceasefires are commonplace in many armed conflicts, yet until recently research did not pay enough systematic attention to the purpose, type, and impacts of ceasefires on conflict dynamics. We use Clayton et al.'s (2019) definition of ceasefires, where “ceasefires can be defined as all arrangements by or between conflict parties to stop fighting from a specific point in time.”

In this section, our analyses build on the ETH/PRIO Civil War Ceasefire Dataset, which includes information on all ceasefires during civil conflict between 1989 and 2018. The dataset codes whether a ceasefire is unilateral, bilateral, multilateral, verbal/written, or non-implemented. It also distinguishes ceasefires by their purpose, timing, and type. Gaining a better understanding of the role and effect of ceasefires is important, because ceasefires can have different results. While ceasefires can be critical in peace processes and can provide humanitarian access to conflict-affected populations, conflict parties can also utilize ceasefires for more malign tactical reasons such as rearmament, relocation, or to improve their military position (Toft, 2010; Kolås, 2011).

Figure 13 shows all ceasefires between 1989 and 2018 across regions. Most ceasefires in this period were concluded in Asia (679), followed by Africa (626), the Middle East (364), Europe (348), and the Americas (90). Yet, the relative share of each region has undergone some important changes over time: For example, between 1991 and 1995, most ceasefires were recorded in Europe. From 1995 onwards, most ceasefires were agreed in conflicts in Asia and Africa. This development in part reflects the geographical shift regarding the location of conflicts, analysed in the previous section. The Middle East experienced the highest numbers of ceasefires in 2014 (45) and in 2016 (48), with all registered ceasefires concluded in four conflict countries: Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, and Israel. The highest number of ceasefires (49) for one year in one region was recorded in 2003 in Africa, with ceasefires in the following countries: Ivory Coast, Liberia, Nigeria, Chad, Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda, Burundi, Somalia, and Sudan.

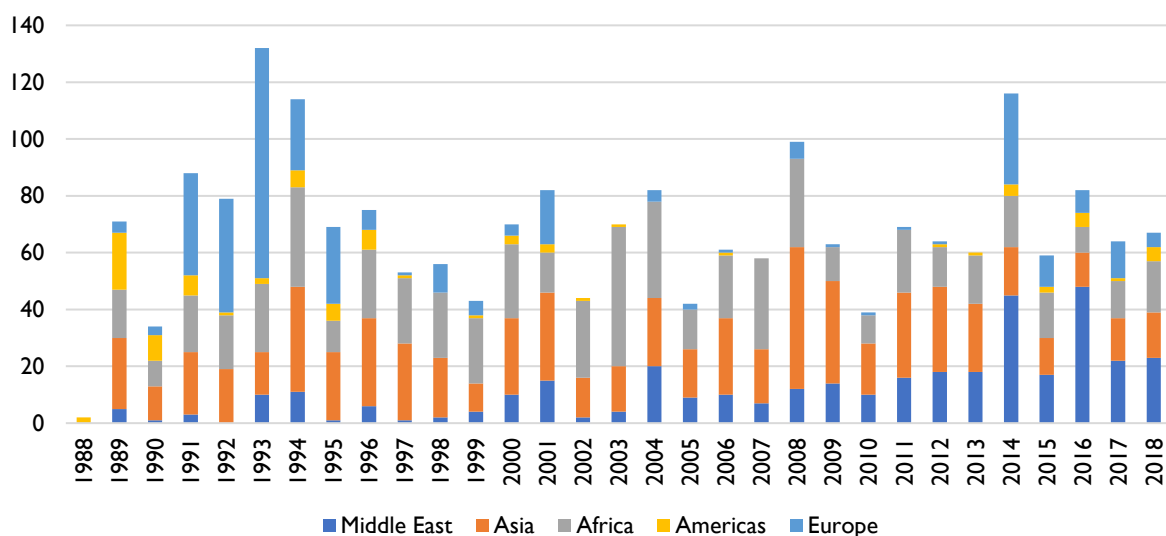


Figure 13: Ceasefires per year, per region, 1989–2018

Source: ETH/PRIO civil conflict CeaseFire dataset

Figure 14 shows all ceasefires between 1989 and 2018 in the Middle East by differentiating between the different purposes of ceasefires. The figure shows whether a ceasefire had a humanitarian-, peace process-, holiday-, election-, or other-related purpose.

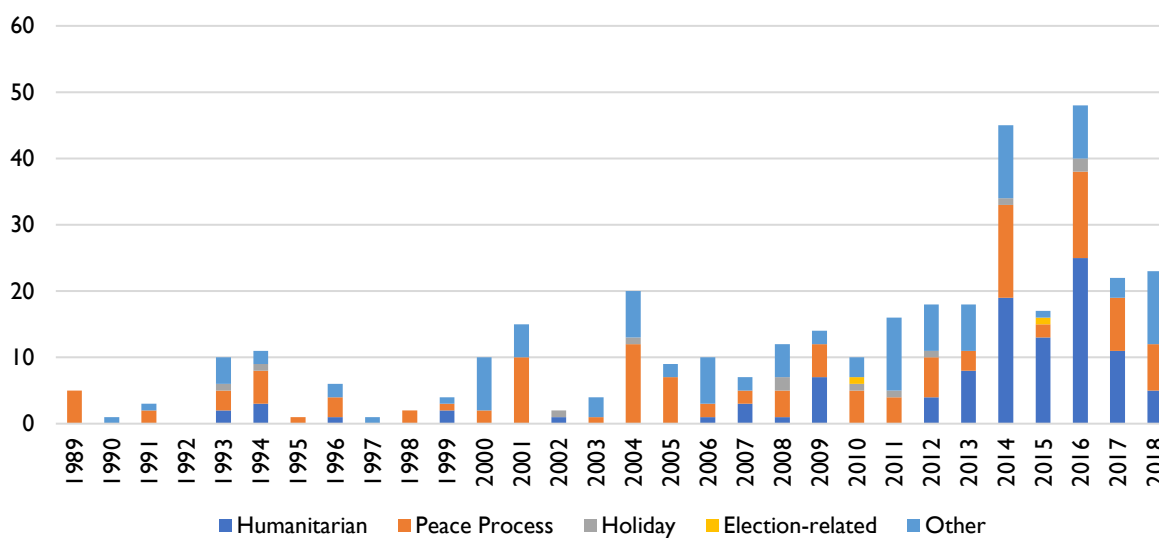


Figure 14: Ceasefires by purpose, Middle East, 1989–2018

Source: ETH/PRIO civil conflict CeaseFire dataset

Most ceasefires in the Middle East between 1989 and 2018 were related to peace processes (129), which resonates with global trends. The highest number of peace process-related ceasefires (14) in the region was recorded in 2014. We can also see from Figure 14 that over time, the number of ceasefires has steadily increased, reaching a peak in 2016 when a total of 48 ceasefires were recorded, all of them in Syria and Yemen. In 2016, Syria had the highest number of ceasefires (43), most of them between the government and the Syrian insurgents.

The Middle East also experienced a relatively large number of humanitarian ceasefires (106) over time. In 2015, a record number of 25 humanitarian ceasefires were recorded in Syria and Yemen. Holiday ceasefires are also prevalent in the region. Conflict parties frequently halt violence to observe such Muslim holidays as Eid al-Fitr, which marks the end of the fasting month of Ramadan. For instance, a 72-hour long ceasefire of this kind was declared in 2016 in Syria. Naturally, there are almost no election-related ceasefires in the Middle East, reflective of the fact that most countries in the region are autocracies/monarchies without competitive party systems. All election-related ceasefires (3) between 1989 and 2018 were recorded in Turkey. The last election-related ceasefire was declared in 2015 by the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK).

As indicated earlier, ceasefires come in many forms and can be categorized into three broad types depending on the comprehensiveness of the agreement: Cessation of Hostilities, Cessation of Hostilities including compliances, and Definitive Ceasefires. Cessation of Hostilities can be understood as informal arrangements to stop fighting but without any provisions to monitor parties' compliance to the agreement. Cessation of Hostilities including compliances are formal agreements usually linked to a peace process. These ceasefires include specific compliance measures and stipulate the monitoring and/or verification of the agreement. The third class, Definitive Ceasefires, are usually part of a peace agreement and they include a compliance mechanism. Definitive ceasefire agreements can also provide provisions to disarm and demobilize conflict parties (Clayton et al., 2019: 2). Figure 15 depicts ceasefires by class in the Middle East between 1989 and 2018.

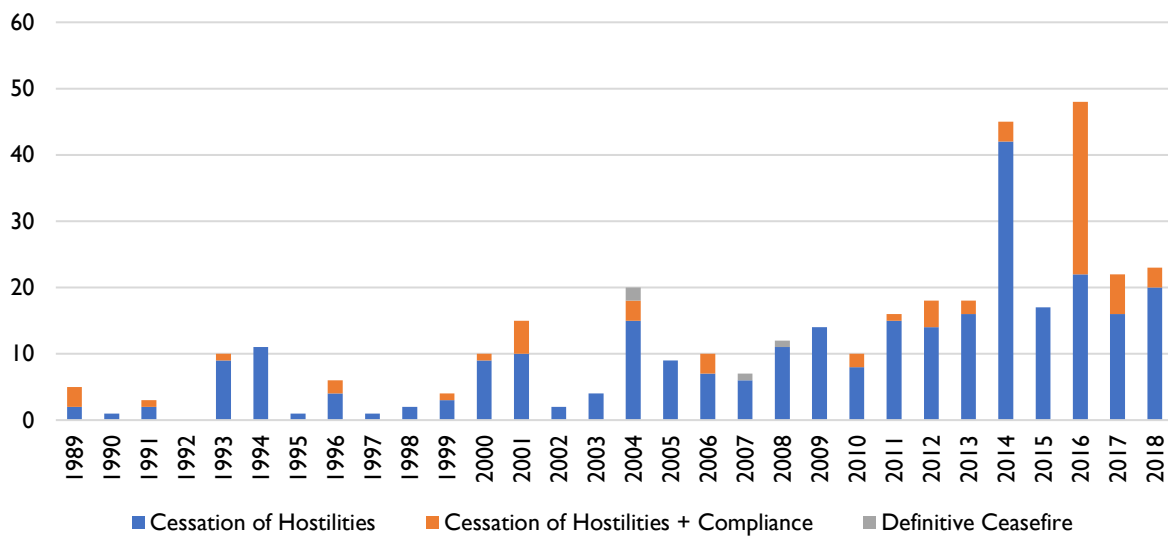


Figure 15: Ceasefires by type: Middle East, 1989–2018

Source: ETH/PRIO civil conflict CeaseFire dataset

We can see that the Middle East resembles global trends and that most ceasefires belong to the Cessation of Hostilities category (293 in total) followed by preliminary ceasefires (67), and definitive ones (4). We can also see from the graph that the year 2016 stands out because of the relatively high number of Cessation of Hostilities including compliances compared to all other years. In fact, in 2016 there were a total of 26 Cessation of Hostilities including compliances recorded, most of them in Syria between the government and the Syrian insurgents and between the government and the SDF. That same year, Yemen also saw five ceasefires between the government and Ansarallah. The last definitive ceasefire in the region was recorded in 2008 between the government of Lebanon and Hezbollah. In 2018, 23 ceasefires were recorded (20 Cessation of Hostilities and 3 Cessation of Hostilities including compliances), a slight increase from 2017 when 22 ceasefires were recorded (16 Cessation of Hostilities and 6 Cessation of Hostilities including compliances). Since 2011, neither Yemen nor Syria have experienced a definitive ceasefire, which further underlines the intractability of these two conflicts. In March 2020, Turkey and Russia agreed on a ceasefire in the Idlib region after weeks of heavy fighting. While the intensity of fighting in Syria remained high, this ceasefire has (as of time of writing) led to the most peaceful period in Syria since 2011.

5. Trends in Peace Agreements

Conflicts can end in three different ways: one side’s decisive victory, with a peace agreement, or with a cessation of violence (“other” category). Previous research has found that the majority of civil wars end without a decisive outcome (“other” termination category) (Kreuz, 2010). Between 1990 and 2005, 18.4% of all intrastate conflicts (27 out of 147) ended with a peace agreement (Kreuz, 2010). Since 2015, UCDP recorded only one peace agreement that led to conflict termination, the Final Colombian Peace Agreement between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in 2016 (Pettersson, Högbladh, and Öberg 2019: 594). This suggests that although the number of peace agreements increased significantly with the end of the Cold War, there are several challenges involved in negotiating – and sustainably implementing – a settlement to a conflict.

We use UCDP’s definition of peace agreements, which “address the incompatibility, or conflict issue, stated by the warring parties, by either settling all of it, or by clearly outlining a process for how to regulate it” (Harbom, Högbladh, and Wallensteen 2006). This section uses data from the UCDP Peace Agreement Dataset, which includes all peace agreements between warring parties active in the UCDP Dataset in the 1975–2018 period. The dataset differentiates between three different types of peace agreements, depending on how it addresses the incompatibility. *Full peace agreements* settle the incompatibility between the parties, while in *partial peace agreements*, there are still issues to be resolved. *Peace process agreements* only outline a plan or a set of procedures for addressing the core issues of the conflict (Pettersson, Högbladh, and Öberg 2019).

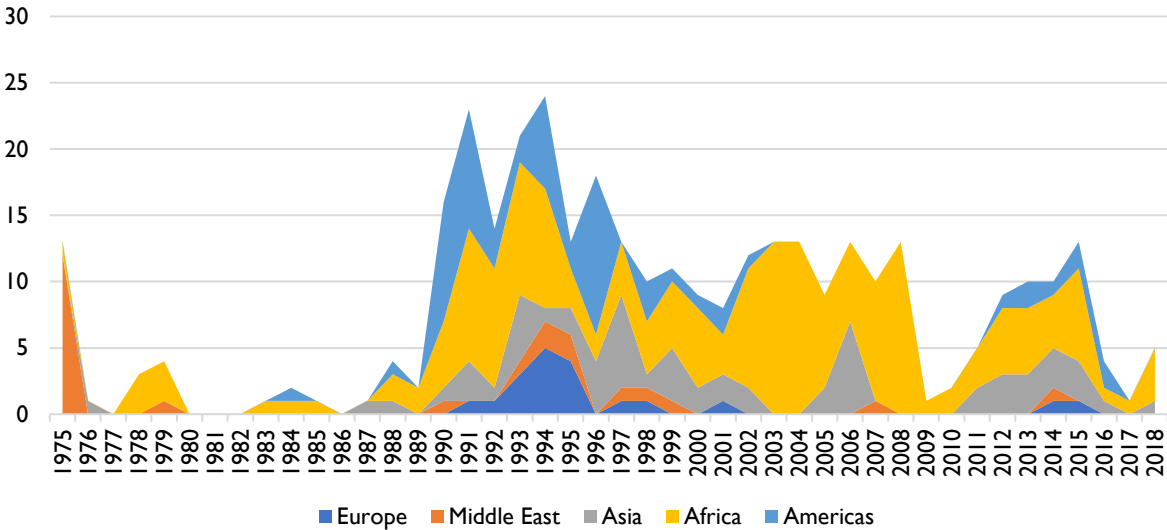


Figure 16: Peace agreements by region, 1975–2018
Source: UCDP Peace Agreement Database (Pettersson & Öberg 2020)

Figure 16 shows that the total number of peace agreements peaked in 1994 when in total 24 peace agreements were recorded, 9 of them in Africa. Over time, the highest number of peace agreements can be seen in Africa, with a total of 187 peace agreements between 1975 and 2018. Africa is followed by Asia (63), the Americas (62), the Middle East (24), and Europe (19). Compared to 2017, in 2018, three new peace agreements were concluded in Africa: between Eritrea and Ethiopia, between the government of Ethiopia and the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), and between the South Sudanese government and the SPLM/A. In

2018, Asia also had one peace agreement, between the government of Myanmar and the New Mon State Party (NMSP).

Although the Middle East is home to some of the deadliest conflicts, peace agreements are relatively rare in the region. The highest number of peace agreements (12) were concluded in 1975, all of them between the government of Iran and Iraq. The last peace agreement in the region was concluded in 2014 in Yemen between the government, the Southern Movement, and Ansarallah. One possible explanation for the relatively low number of peace agreements in the region is that if conflict parties' demands are explicitly based on religious convictions, then these demands are often perceived as indivisible, thus making it more difficult for belligerents to find a negotiated solution to their conflict (Svensson 2007).

Regional variation in the prevalence of peace agreements can be explained by different factors connected to the conflicts, such as the type of incompatibility, the number of actors involved and internationalization. Yet, it is also important to keep in mind that peace agreements are often mediated by third parties and that there is a high level of variation when it comes to the different levels of institutionalization of mediation activities across regions. In the past decades, the African region has experienced a considerable improvement in mediation capacities. Regional organizations such as the African Union (AU), ECOWAS, and IGAD frequently mediate conflicts. No similar institutionalization has taken place in the Middle East.

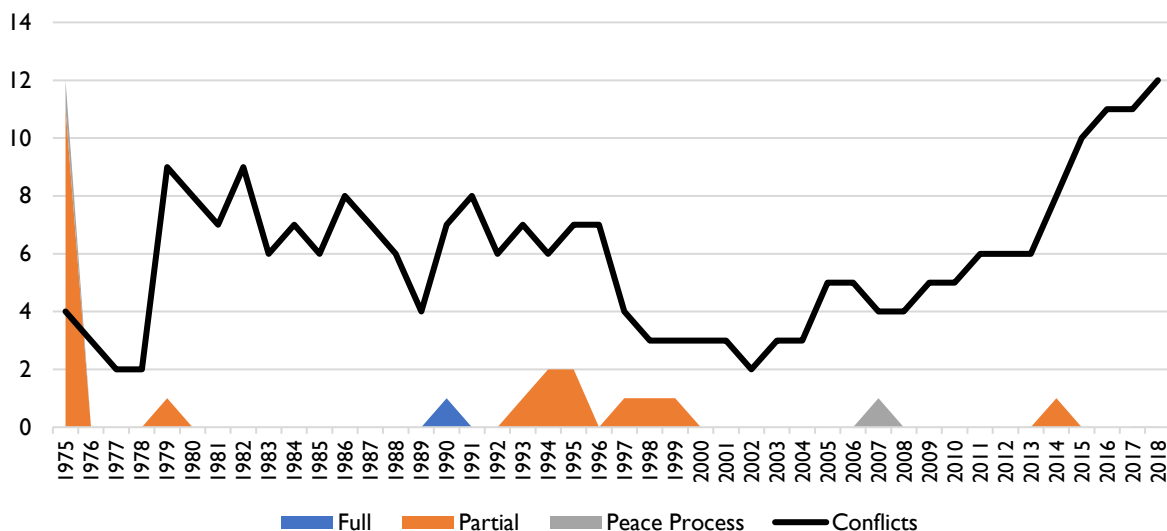


Figure 17: Peace agreements and conflicts in the Middle East, 1975–2018

Source: UCDP Peace Agreement Database (Petterson & Öberg 2020)

Figure 17 shows all peace agreements in the Middle East during the 1975–2018 period and differentiates between the different types of peace agreements. The black line depicts the number of conflicts in the Middle East. We can see some interesting trends. First, the highest number of peace agreements in this period was recorded in 1975, when in total 12 peace agreements (11 partial and 1 peace process-related agreement) were signed, all of them between Iran and Iraq. Afterwards, peace agreements became rare and never exceeded more than two in a given year. We can also see that the number of conflicts has significantly increased, especially after 1978. This increase was not accompanied by a similar rise in the number of peace agreements. In fact, there were no peace agreements between 1979 and 1990. In 1990, however, the Middle East experienced seven state-based conflicts in Iran, Israel (against Hezbollah and against Fatah), Lebanon, Iraq (against Kuwait and against the Kurdish Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan), and in Turkey.

Partial peace agreements are prevalent in the region and they cluster between 1993 and 1999, when a total of eight partial peace agreements were signed. This period was marked by a decrease in the number of conflicts: In 1993, seven conflicts were recorded in the region, while in 1999 there were three. All eight peace agreements in the period between 1993 and 1999 were concluded in Israel, between the Israeli government and Fatah, and between the Israeli government and the Palestinian National Authority (PNA). We can see that the region has very few peace agreements despite the steady rise in the number of conflicts, especially since 2002. In 2002, there were two conflicts recorded and by 2018 this number rose to 12. At the same time, in the period between 2002 and 2018, only two peace agreements were signed. In 2007, a peace process agreement was signed between the government of Israel and Fatah. The second peace agreement in the 2002–2018 period was a partial peace agreement, The Peace and National Partnership Agreement, signed in 2014 between the government of Yemen, the Southern Movement, and Ansarallah. Within this 43-year period, only one full peace agreement was recorded in the region, which is the 1990 agreement between the former South and North Yemen that unified the two countries. This agreement still holds, even though it has been contested on numerous occasions, such as during the 1994 civil war when the secessionist movement, the Democratic Republic of Yemen, unsuccessfully sought to re-establish independent South Yemen.

6. Non-State Conflicts, 1989–2019

Conflicts do not have to involve the government of a state to cause considerable human suffering. In fact, a large amount of contemporary violence takes place between groups that are not part of a state structure. UCDP defines non-state conflicts as the use of armed force between organized groups, neither of which is the government of a state, resulting in at least 25 annual battle-related deaths. Organized groups come in multiple forms: (i) *formally organized groups* are defined as any non-governmental group of people having announced a name for their group and using armed force against another similarly formally organized group, (ii) *informally organized groups* refers to any group without an announced name, but which uses armed force against another similarly organized group and (iii) *informally organized identity groups* are defined as groups which have a common identity along religious, ethnic, national, tribal or clan lines. This category includes conflicts defined as communal, where incompatibilities are based on communal identity, yet without a clear hierarchy of command or an organizational brand.

Figure 18 shows variation in the number of non-state conflicts across regions in the 1989–2019 period. Although the Middle East experienced the largest relative increase in this type of conflict, Africa is still the most severely affected by non-state conflicts. While Africa and the Middle East both feature high levels of non-state conflict, the two regions are characterized by different modes of conflict between non-state groups. The Middle East is characterized by fighting between highly organized actors, while in Africa we see a higher number of communal conflicts (for more information, see the regional papers on Africa and Asia).

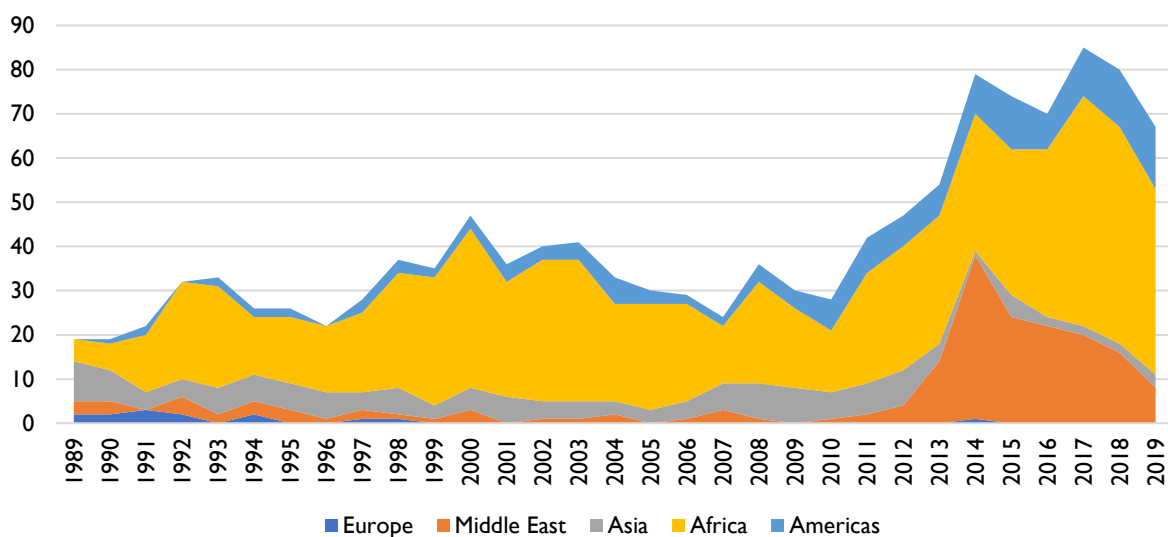


Figure 18: Total number of non-state conflicts, by region, 1989–2019
Source: UCDP Non-state conflict database. (Pettersson & Öberg 2020)

Figure 19 shows the number of non-state conflicts by their different types in the Middle East. The graph shows that since 2011, the number of non-state conflicts is at a historic high. We can also see that that an overwhelming majority of non-state conflicts in the Middle East are between formally organized groups. The relative share of supporter groups and communal conflicts is negligible compared to conflicts involving formally organized groups.

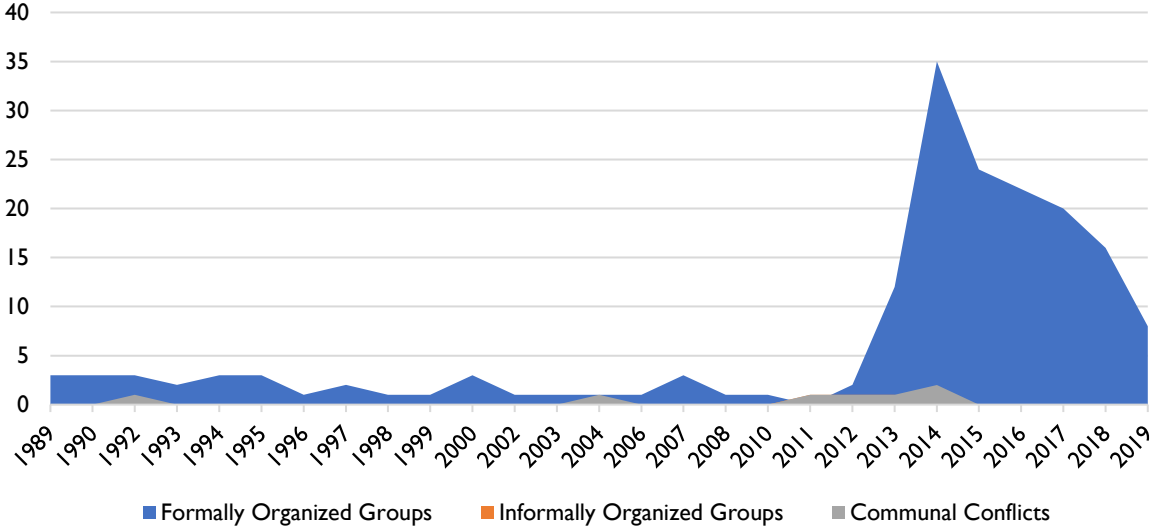


Figure 19: Non-state conflicts in the Middle East, by type of conflict, 1989–2019
 Source: UCDP Non-state conflict database. (Petterson & Öberg 2020)

Figure 20 shows trends in non-state conflicts in the Middle East between 1989 and 2019. The graph shows a sharp increase along two dimensions. First, since 2011, the number of non-state conflicts has risen to a record high. Second, the sharp increase in the number of non-state conflicts was, up until 2017, accompanied by an increase in battle deaths. Yet, after 2017, there has been a downward trend in battle-related deaths. The highest number of non-state conflicts (37) in the Middle East was seen in 2014. Since 2014, there has been a steady downward trend in the number of non-state conflicts, with 2019 marking the lowest number (8) since 2009. At the same time, these conflicts remain deadly.

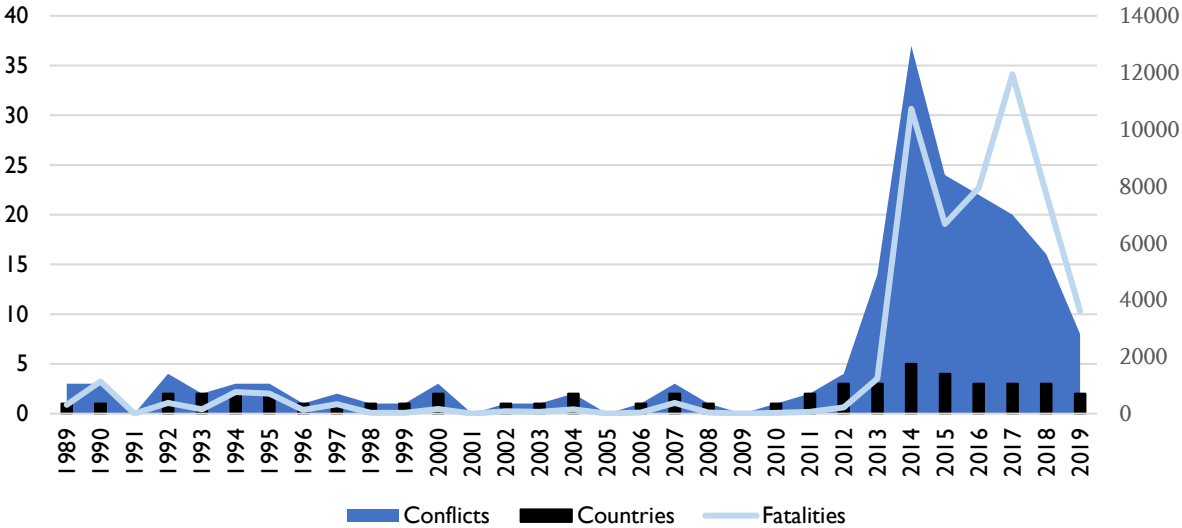


Figure 20: Non-state conflicts, conflict countries and battle deaths in the Middle East, 1989–2019
 Source: UCDP Non-state conflict database. (Petterson & Öberg 2020)

Between 2014 and 2017 the number of non-state conflicts decreased from 37 to 20, yet, the number of battle-related deaths in the same period increased to 11,943 from 10,734. In 2019, we register 3,615 battle-related deaths, a record low, the lowest since 2012. Syria has been the hardest hit country in terms of non-state conflicts. Most of the non-state conflicts in Syria are related to conflict between various Syrian insurgent groups, while at the same time they all stand against

the Syrian government. Second, a number of non-state conflicts are also related to IS. In 2019, five different non-state conflicts were recorded in Syria between IS and the SDF, between IS and the Organization for the Liberation of the Levant (HTS), between the National Front of Liberation and HTS, between the Syrian National Army (SNA or Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army) and SDF, and between the National Front for Liberation and SNA against the SDF. These inter-rebel conflicts make the Syrian conflict particularly complex.

Figure 21 shows the share of battle-related deaths in non-state conflicts across regions in 2018 and 2019. This graph displays some noteworthy trends: Although the number of non-state conflicts in Latin America was less than in Africa and in the Middle East, Latin America experiences the deadliest non-state conflicts. Latin America's relative share of battle-related deaths has also increased from 2018 to 2019. This is related to the high level of violence between drug cartels in Mexico. According to Shirk and Wallman (2015), criminal violence in the country has, since 2007, resulted in an estimated 60,000–70,000 “additional” homicides. Furthermore, even though there are countries in the region that had higher homicide rates, Mexico experienced the largest increase in criminal violence over the last decade (Shirk and Wallman 2015: 1349). Moreover, as the government ramped up efforts against criminal groups, these groups became better organized and acquired more sophisticated armaments and training, further enhancing insecurity (InSight Crime 2017). One of the most comprehensive studies on social violence in Latin America examined the period between 1980 and 2010 and found that the effect of drugs on violence depends on the nature of drug-related activity and that drug producing and/or transit countries are not systematically more prone to violence, but major money-laundering states on average experience higher homicide rates (Rivera, 2015). The Middle East experienced the second highest number of deaths from non-state conflicts, followed by the Africa, but in 2019 both continents experienced fewer deaths than in 2018.

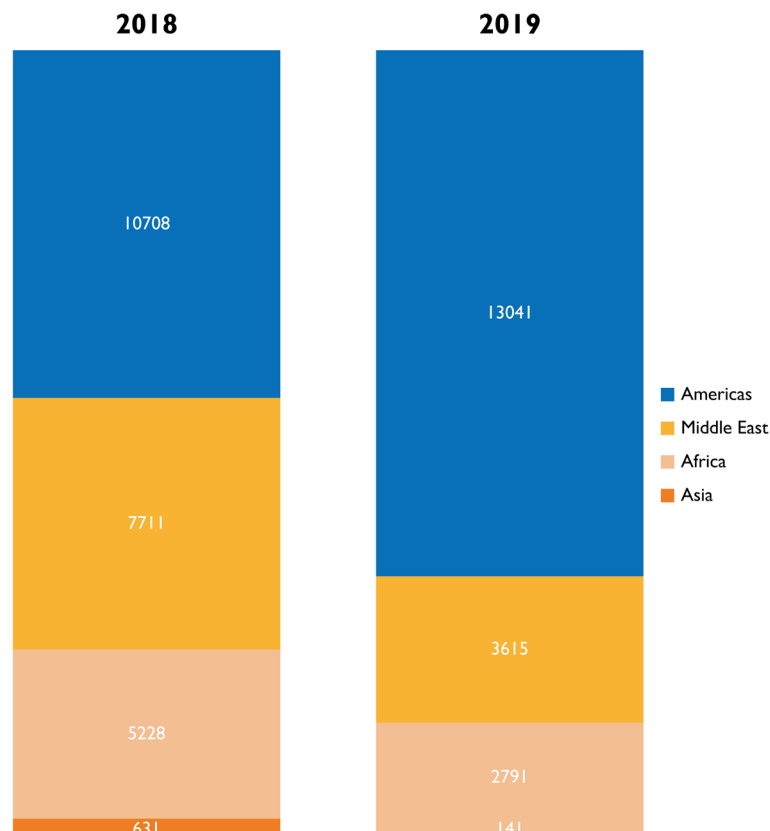


Figure 21: Share of battle deaths in non-state conflict by region, 2018 and 2019
Source: UCDP Non-state conflict database. (Pettersson & Öberg 2020)

7. One-Sided Violence

Civilians are often the hardest hit by violence in ongoing conflicts, regardless of whether it’s a state-based conflict or a non-state conflict. UCDP defines one-sided violence as “the use of armed force by the government of a state or by a formally organized group against civilians which results in at least 25 deaths. Extrajudicial killings in custody are excluded.”

Figure 22 shows trends in one-sided violence and the number of fatalities in the Middle East between 1989 and 2019, and differentiates between state and non-state violence. While there is a general downward trend in one-sided violence from 2005 onwards – apart from 2013, which saw an increase – this type of violence still claims many lives. In 2014, more than 4,600 people died from one-sided violence, the highest number since 1989. While in 2018, the number of fatalities (54) was the lowest since 1989, this number doubled (108) in 2019, mostly due to violence perpetrated by Syrian insurgents, IS, and the Government of Iran.

When we examine the actors who perpetrate one-sided violence, it becomes clear that non-state actors are responsible for most of this type of violence. At the same time, governments in Iraq, Egypt, Israel, Iran, Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain have all perpetrated violence against civilians between 1989 and 2019. It is also useful to recall that, as we highlighted in the introduction, it is reasonable to expect that the UCDP cannot capture the full extent of government perpetrated one-sided violence. Thus, the numbers below are likely to represent a fraction of the total incidents, and the number of one-sided violence events and killings conducted by government actors is likely to be higher. For additional information on extrajudicial killings and human rights violations, we recommend consulting the annual world report of Human Rights Watch, specific country reports by Amnesty International, and the Political Terror Scale dataset.

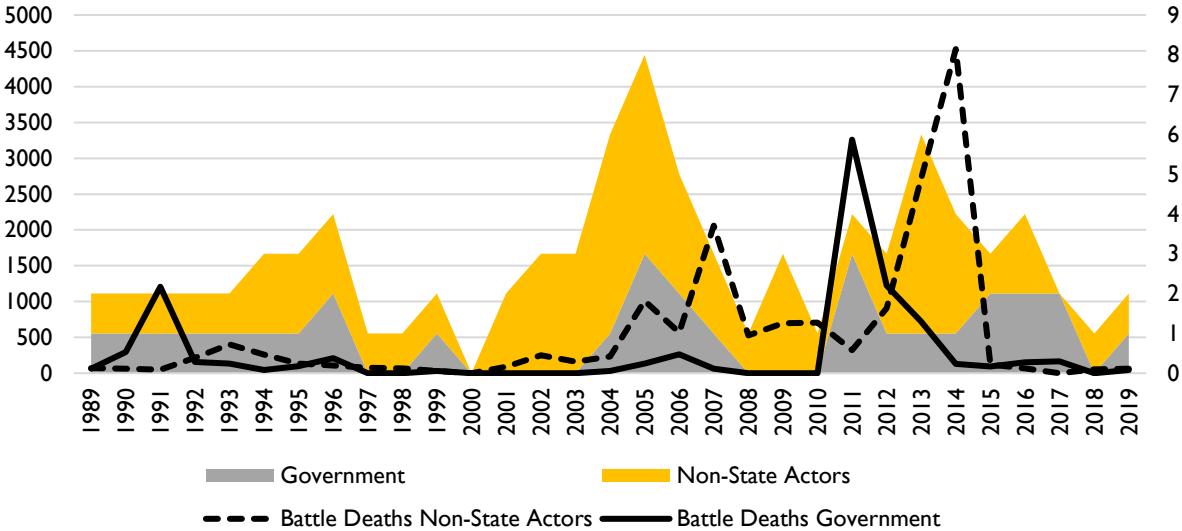


Figure 22: One-sided violence in the Middle East, by perpetrator, 1989–2018
Source: UCDP One-sided violence database (Pettersson & Öberg 2020)

Figure 23 shows the number of groups conducting one-sided violence between 1989 and 2019 across regions. We can see that, similarly to the number of non-state conflicts, Africa has the largest number of incidents of one-sided violence, followed by Asia and the Middle East.

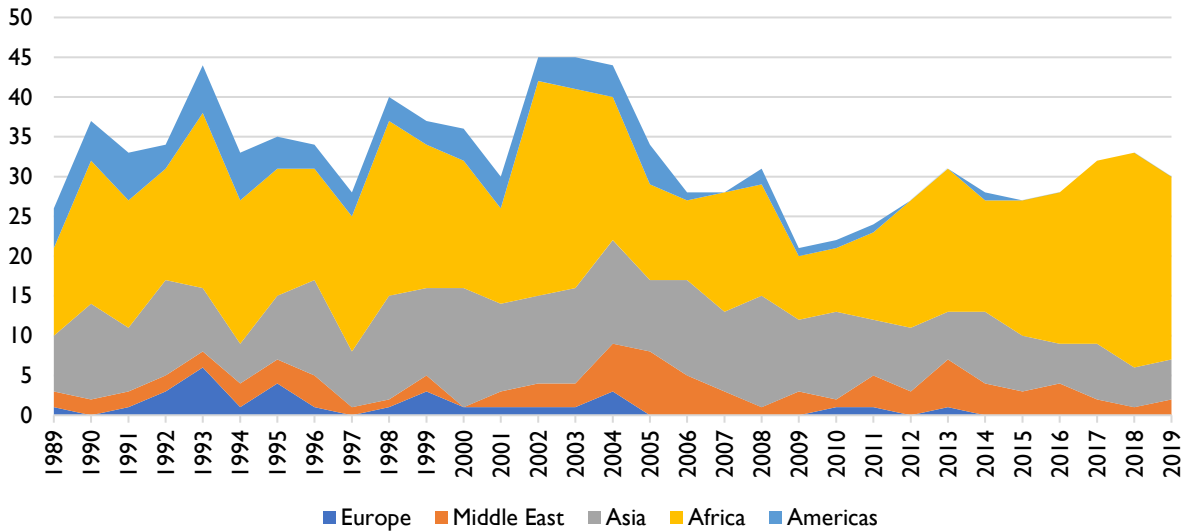


Figure 23: Incidents of one-sided violence, by region, 1989–2018
 Source: UCDP One-sided violence database (Petterson & Öberg 2020)

Figure 24 shows the number of fatalities related to one-sided violence across regions. We include IS as a separate category, because the organization is transnational in nature, and the violence it conducts is spread across many regions. Africa is also the region with the highest number of fatalities caused by one-sided violence, with the exceptions of 2011 and 2012 where the Middle East had the highest number. An extremely worrying finding is that the number of fatalities due to one-sided violence has increased in all three continents. Fatalities from one-sided violence by IS, however, have decreased.

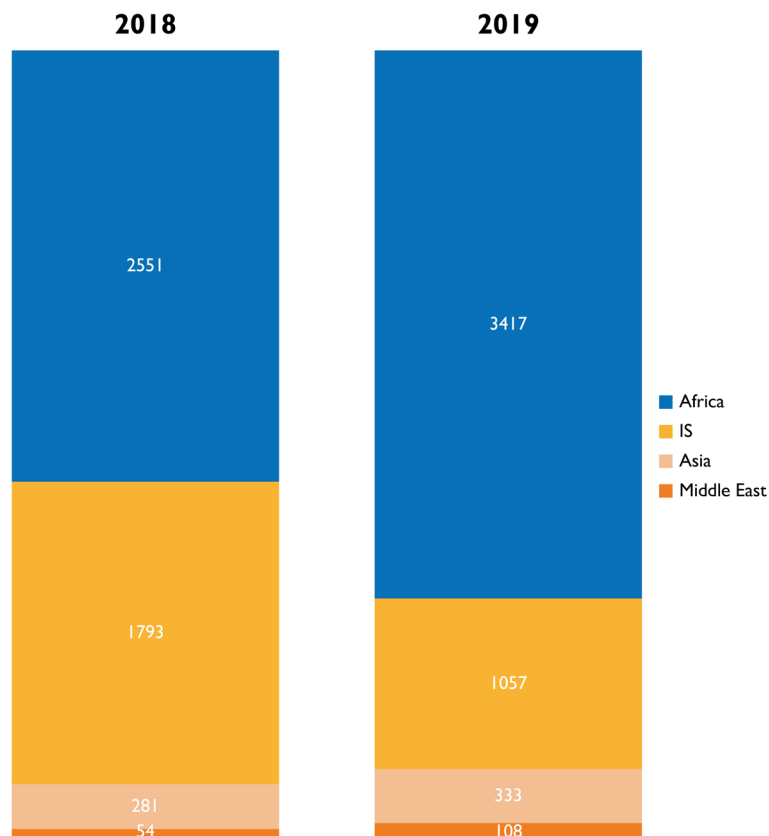


Figure 24: Fatalities in one-sided violence in 2018 and 2019, by region and IS
 Source: UCDP One-sided violence database (Petterson & Öberg 2020)

8. Geographic Spread of Conflict

The map in Figure 25 shows conflict events related to the three different types of conflict (state-based, non-state, and one-sided violence). In general, we see the same trend in the geographical location of these types of conflict as in the previous map. There are, however, some important nuances when it comes to non-state conflicts. In Syria, for example, 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. The high number of non-state conflict events is primarily linked to two conflicts. The first is the fighting between SDF and IS, where in 2019 SDF took control over the IS strongholds in the north. The second pertains to fighting between the SDF and the Turkish-supported Syrian National Army (SNA, also known as the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army), where the SNA attacked SDF, who in turn sought support from the Russian-supported Syrian government.

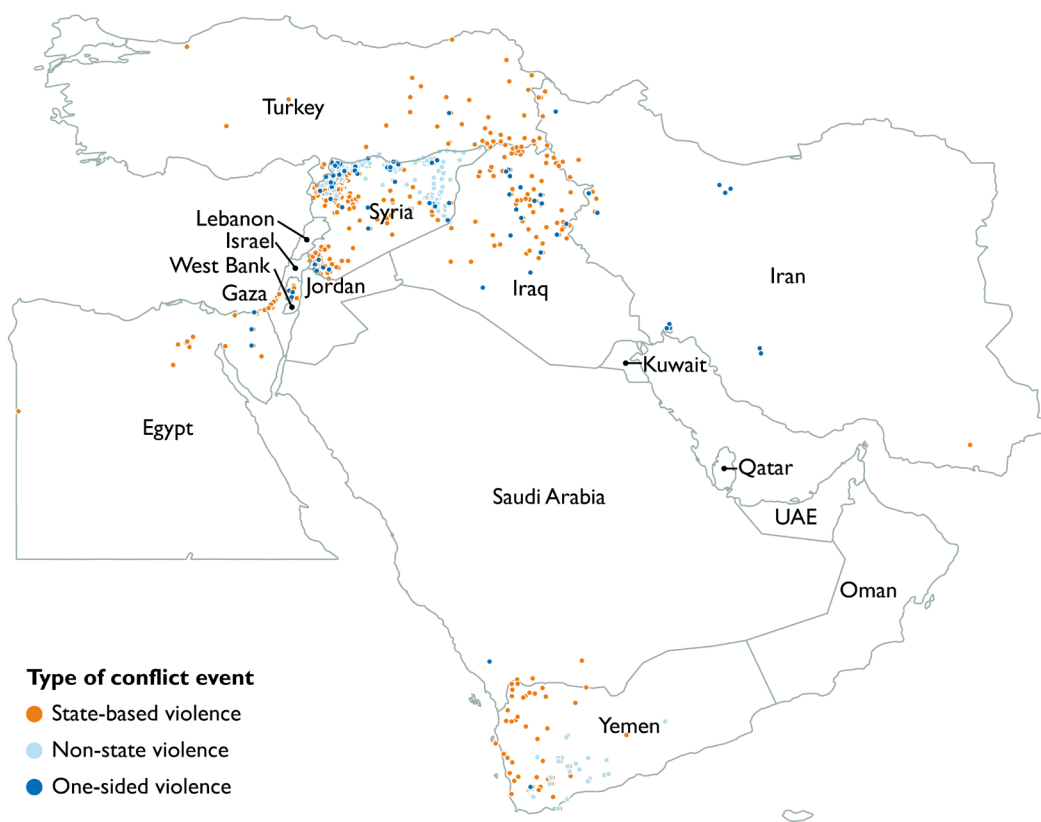


Figure 25: State-based conflict, non-state conflicts and one-sided violence events in the Middle East, 2019

Source: UCDP Georeferenced Event Database (Pettersson & Öberg 2020)

In Yemen, the non-state conflicts are mainly concentrated in the south between the Southern Transitional Council (STC) and Forces of Hadi (the internationally recognized president of Yemen). Note that since the 2015 Houthi takeover of Sanaa, UCDP codes Forces of Hadi as a non-state actor and Ansarallah (Houthis) has been coded as the Government of Yemen. The STC is a secessionist organization, formed by a faction of the Southern Movement which has been calling for an independent South Yemen since 2007, and backed by the United Arab Emirates. Early on

in the Yemeni conflict, STC was part of the Saudi Arabia-led anti-Houthi coalition, but later on it denounced the internationally recognized president of Yemen and took over the city of Aden. In 2020, STC gave up on its demands regarding independence and agreed to rejoin forces with the government.

One-sided violence occurs in all the conflict countries in the region, but is quite prominent in Syria and is conducted both by rebels and government forces. IS is related to one-sided violence events in several countries in the Middle East.

The map in Figure 26 shows conflict events related to the three different types of conflict (state based, non-state, and one-sided violence). We can see that non-state conflicts are much more common in the Americas and Africa, compared to Asia and the Middle East. Mexico stands out quite clearly here, with a large number of non-state events, but no state-based violence. Non-state violence in Mexico is mainly related to the fighting between drug cartels. One-sided violence seems to be quite widespread in conflict areas in Africa, the Middle East and Asia, while in the two latter regions one-sided violence, in most cases, unfolds in the same geographical areas that experience state-based conflicts. In Africa, one-sided violence more often occurs in areas that do not experience state-based violence (for more information on the other regions, see the regional papers).

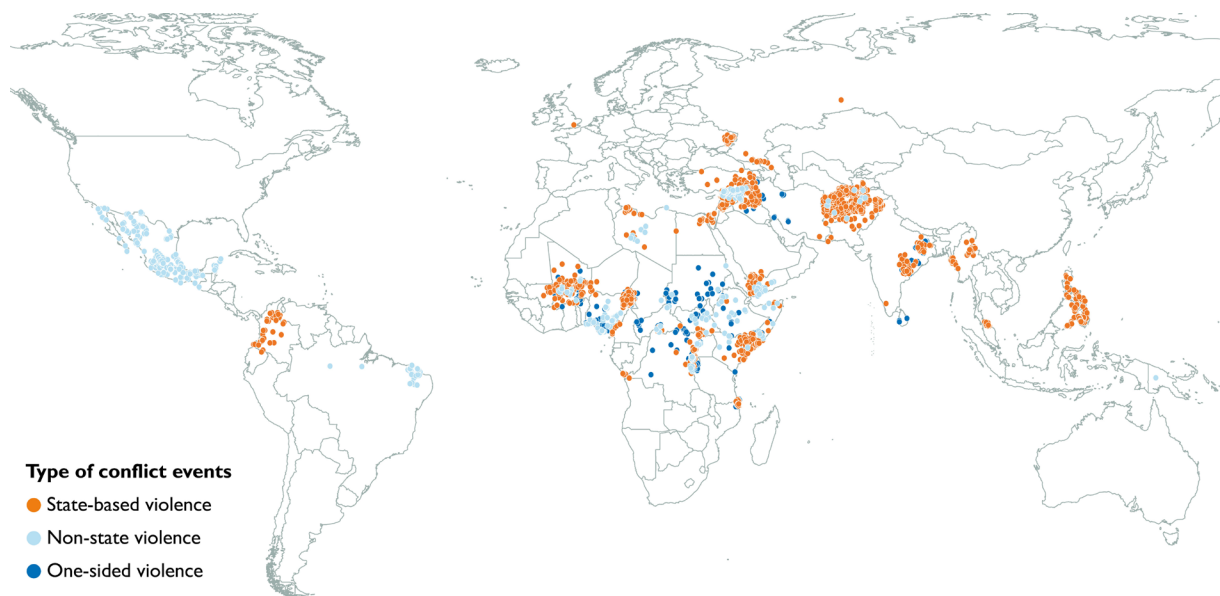


Figure 26: State-based conflict, non-state conflicts and one-sided violence events globally, 2019

Source: UCDP Georeferenced Event Database (Pettersson & Öberg 2020)

9. Discussion and Conclusion

In this paper, we have presented an overview of conflict trends in the Middle East over time (1946 to 2019), across conflict types. We have also provided novel insights into trends in ceasefires and peace agreements in the region. The findings have a number of important policy implications, which we summarize at the end of this section.

What does the data tell us, and what are the policy implications of conflict trends? While the analyses in this paper do little to identify the *causes* of each conflict, they do establish a clear picture of what the trends look like. Through these trends, we can learn more about how the global picture changes, and give some indications of what we can expect in the future. The analyses in this paper also point to important areas for further research; in order to better understand these shifting conflict trends, we need to uncover the driving mechanisms behind them.

For the most part, the Middle East follows the global patterns. The numbers of civil wars and battle-related deaths are declining. At the same time, in a regional comparison, the conflict in Syria remained the second deadliest conflict, with more than 7,000 recorded battle-related deaths in 2019. Syria was only preceded by Afghanistan, where more than 30,000 battle-related deaths were recorded that year. War between states remains rare; however, the war between Iran and Israel in Syria, which started in 2018 and continued throughout 2019, reminds us that interstate war remains a possibility. When it comes to the geographical location of conflict, we have shown that conflict events are concentrated in a few hotspots in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen.

The Middle East is particularly susceptible to external involvement. In 2019, the number of internationalized civil wars was at a record high. In that year, four civil wars experienced external interventions, often by multiple actors. Some countries are particularly severely hit by conflict and experience multiple civil wars in their territories, such as Syria, Egypt, and Iran. 2018 and 2019 saw the largest number (6) of conflicts fought over government incompatibility, a number that has not been recorded since 1946. This development is not surprising in light of the Arab Uprisings.

Ceasefires in the Middle East peaked in 2016, when 48 of them were recorded, all in Syria or Yemen. In 2015, a record number of humanitarian ceasefires was recorded in these countries, which is an important indicator of the severity of conflicts. One of the most interesting insights is that despite the relatively high number of conflicts, peace agreements in the Middle East are rare. Between 1989 and 2018, there was only one full peace agreement: the 1990 agreement, which led to the unification of former South and North Yemen.

We have also examined non-state conflicts and found that the Middle East experienced the largest relative increase in this type of conflict, while Africa is still the most severely affected by non-state conflicts. The majority of non-state conflicts in the Middle East are between formally organized groups, while in Africa we see a higher number of communal conflicts. The highest number of non-state conflicts (37) in the Middle East took place in 2014, but since then there has been a steady downward trend in the number of non-state conflicts, with 2019 marking the lowest number (8) since 2009.

One-sided violence in the Middle East is most often perpetrated by non-state actors. While in 2018, the number of fatalities (54) was the lowest since 1989, this number doubled (108) in 2019, mostly due to violence perpetrated by Syrian insurgents, IS, and the Government of Iran. Syria

again shows some interesting variation because there is a much larger number of non-state conflict events compared to state-based conflict events towards the Turkish and Iranian border. Although the highest number of fatalities related to one-sided violence was recorded in Africa, in 2011 and 2012 the Middle East saw the most one-sided violence.

The conflict in Syria serves as a worrisome example of all the above trends: a particularly severe conflict in which multiple groups fight against the government and each other and have also experienced external involvement. Halting the violence in the form of ceasefires and finding a negotiated solution to the conflict in the form of a peace agreement is thus becoming more and more difficult. In addition, one-sided violence perpetrated by IS claimed thousands of lives and IS is far from being defeated.

The Middle Eastern conflict scene is challenging; thus, many policy makers face a complex environment in the Middle East when it comes to conflict resolution. First, there is a need for a solid investment in early warning systems in the region to prevent the eruption of new conflicts and to halt the escalation, as well as the geographical expansion, of already ongoing conflicts. Such systems are in place in Africa and it would be desirable to strengthen them in the Middle East.

Second, efforts should be made to strengthen the peacemaking capacities of regional organizations in the Middle East. A particularly striking conclusion of this paper is the relatively low number of peace agreements in the region, both when compared to other regions, and compared to the number of conflicts. Bolstering the peacemaking capacities of regional organizations is one potential policy avenue through which to address these challenges. Africa is once again a useful reminder in this regard. This will require close cooperation with the UN and significant mediator training. Middle Eastern regional organizations, due to their cultural proximity, would be well suited to mediating ongoing conflicts, but inter-organizational disputes and the lack of peacemaking capacity remain significant barriers.

Third, past instances of one-sided violence, irrespective of the perpetrator, should be investigated and addressed. The implementation and strengthening of national reconciliation and transitional justice processes should start during ongoing conflicts and will require close monitoring. Well-defined reporting and monitoring procedures during ceasefires and peace agreements are important, as well as third party guarantors.

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Conflict Trends in the Middle East, 1989–2019

Over the past decade, the bulk of the world's deadliest conflicts have been in the Middle East. To examine this, this PRIO Paper takes a closer look at trends in conflicts in the Middle East between 1989 and 2019 and compares them to global trends, using data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP). In addition, the paper analyzes trends in ceasefires and peace agreements during the same period.

In comparison with other regions, the Middle East has seen the largest relative increase in the number of state-based conflicts over the last six years. In 2019, the number of state-based conflicts decreased for the first time since 2007. Battle-related deaths are also declining, yet internationalized conflicts have skyrocketed. While non-state conflicts have declined since 2014, they are still at a considerably higher level than in the years before 2011.

Although the Islamic State (IS) was allegedly defeated in Syria in 2019, the number of IS-related conflicts increased from 2018 to 2019 globally and remains high in the Middle East. Fatalities from one-sided violence increased in the Middle East from 2018 to 2019, mostly due to violence perpetrated by Syrian insurgents, IS, and Iran. The number of ceasefires in the region has increased, but peace agreements remain rare.

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