



Violent Conflict

Definition

Conflict can be broadly defined as “any situation in which parties perceive they have incompatible goals”¹. However, violent conflict here will be narrowly defined as a form of conflict where parties engage in physical force, resulting in a loss of life, to advance their objectives. Conflicts can be intra-state, inter-state or multi-state².

Key Insight

The entrenched nature of conflict means humanitarian responses will need to be strategic in the long-term to reduce community vulnerability

Violent conflict, particularly protracted conflicts, represent great challenges for humanitarian actors. Conflicts result in urgent humanitarian needs with the necessity to provide displaced and local population with protection, food, water, education, healthcare and basic services. However, in addition to life-saving interventions, humanitarian actors will need to intervene on the long term to move beyond palliative care and address critical vulnerabilities which contribute to cause and are caused by prolonged conflict. They must be adaptable to intervene in post-conflict situations to provide a continuum of support.

Changes by 2030

➤ A global decline of conflicts

Since the 1990’s, a global decline in the amount of conflicts has been observed. Globally, interstate and societal violence have significantly decreased during the 1990s and the early 2000s³. In 1991, there were more than 50 conflicts ongoing. This figure dropped to less than 30 in 2003 and then, reached 40 in 2014. This represents a 20% decrease in less than 30 years. This trend was particularly marked for armed conflicts and high intensity conflicts. Interstate conflicts have almost disappeared, with less interstate war, genocide and

¹ Mitchel (1981) ... pg 17 in Demmers (2017) *Theories of Violent Conflict: An Introduction*, Routledge, New York pg 6

² Bugajski, J (2011) [Early warning, conflict prevention, crisis management, conflict resolution and post conflict rehabilitation: lessons learned and way ahead](#), *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, pg 5.

³ Center for Systemic Peace, [Conflict Trends](#), retrieved on 2 March 2017

terrorism throughout the period. Some long-standing conflicts such as the Arab-Israeli conflict persists. However, violent conflict has become concentrated in protracted conflicts in fragile states. Conflicts which have the potential to become violent will persist particularly in Africa, the Middle-East, Asia and Eastern Europe. Predominantly driven by intra-state conflicts between governments and non-state armed actors (including political opposition groups) such as in Syria or in Ukraine will continue. Violence surrounding the drug trade in Central America demonstrates another facet of violent conflict oriented around interpersonal violence and opposition between criminal enterprise and the rule of law⁴.

Though the overall rate of global warfare has declined violent conflict will continue to be a recourse sought by opposing parties, particularly in states with a recent history of violence that lack the process and cultural imperative to manage conflict peaceably.



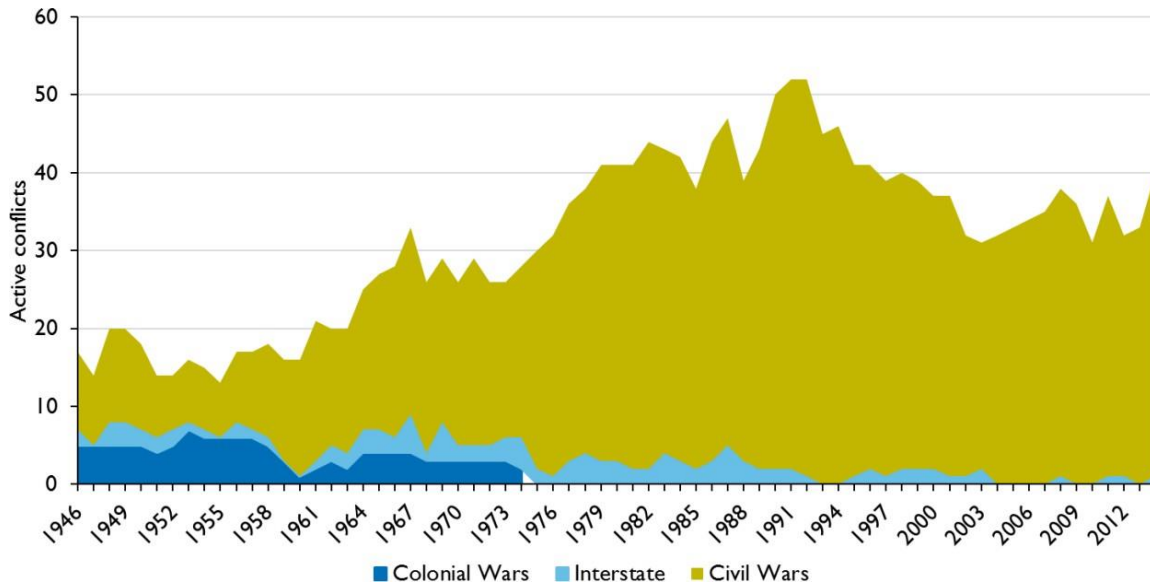
Source: Center for Systemic Peace

➤ **Though not reaching the 90s' peak, the number of civil wars is increasing**

After the precipitous decline in the 1990s, there has been an inconsistent increase in the number of civil wars. There are currently six ongoing civil wars⁵ in Yemen, Syria,

⁴ OECD (2016), [States of fragility 2016: Understanding Violence](#), OECD Publishing, Paris

⁵ Council on foreign relations, [global conflict tracker](#), retrieved on 5 November 2019



Armed Conflicts by type, 1946-2014

Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Sudan. Those civil wars are fueled by various factors, including ethnic violence, religious rivalries, political turmoil and/or economic instability.

Although they are often not as deadly as interstate wars, they have severe consequences for populations, inducing heavy migratory movements and damaging entire socioeconomic systems from which it is challenging to recover. The civil war in South Sudan has caused the death of 383,000⁶ people, whereas the death toll in the Syrian conflict, as of March 2018, has reached 511,000⁷.

As illustrate by past trends⁸, civil wars are likely to remain the main type of conflict over the outlook with an accumulation of ongoing protracted civil conflicts and the emergence of new ones.

⁶ Megan, S (2018) 383,000: [Estimated Death Toll in South Sudan's War](#), *New York Times*, retrieved on 5 November 2019

⁷ Human Rights Watch (2019) Syria. [Events of 2018](#), retrieved on 5 November 2019

⁸ Gates, S, Nygard, H, Strand H, Urdal, H, (2016), [Trends in Armed Conflicts – 1946-2014](#), Peace Research Institute Oslo, pg 2



➤ **Interstate Conflicts, though rare, are still deemed likely and impactful**

Since the 1980s, there has been a significant and continued decline in interstate conflicts⁹. Out of 53 conflicts in 1991, 48 were civil wars, whereas they represented only 50% of the 20 ongoing wars in 1949. This is mostly due to the promotion of multilateral peace negotiations and the promotion of regional economic and industrial cooperation. Though direct interstate conflict reduced, wars between great powers continued under the form of proxy wars, throughout the Cold War era and to the present day for instance, the war in Syria¹⁰.

However, in spite of this trend, there is concern that there could be a resurgence in direct interstate conflict¹¹. Interstate conflict in Asia and Eastern Europe is increasingly likely and would be highly impactful in the South and East China Seas, for instance. In those areas, conflicts appear as another step in a process that could ignite from incident to full scale war: even though few powers have an interest in waging an interstate war, such an event could result from actions legitimated by unprecedented events.

➤ **Conflicts are increasingly concentrated in world's poorest regions**

Since the end of the Cold War, conflicts are increasingly concentrated in a few regions of the world. Sub-Saharan Africa accounted for only 13% of all the countries experiencing renewed civil war in 1960s. This figure has increased to 35% at the beginning of the 21st century¹². This can be explained by the fact that less economically developed countries are more fragile states and therefore present socioeconomic and political conditions making violence a more prominent form of conflict particularly in Sudan, Mali, and Central African Republic. These countries often also face ethnic, religious and economic rivalries between communities which are sources of greater tensions. Tackling issues making civil wars and other conflicts less likely to happen in world's poorest regions means agreeing to significant, long-term investments in basic services including education, infrastructure and, environmental protection.

⁹ Gates, S, Nygard, H, Strand H, Urdal, H, (2016), [Trends in Armed Conflicts – 1946-2014](#), Peace Research Institute Oslo, pg 4

¹⁰ Dearden, L. (2017), [Russian, Turkish and US commanders meet to calm worsening Syrian 'proxy war'](#) The Independent, March 8, 2017

¹¹ Interstate Conflict was the new top concern for Global Risks (in) 2016. See: Coburn, A (2016) [Interstate Conflict is the new top concern for Global Risks 2016](#), Center for risk studies viewpoints, University of Cambridge, Judge Business school, 19 January 2015

¹² Walter, B, (2011) [Conflict Relapse and the Sustainability of Post-Conflict Peace](#), Graduate school of international relations and pacific studies University of California, San Diego and World Bank, world development report 2011, pg 41



The concentration of conflicts in world's poorest areas is more likely to continue as in those areas, the circumstances of fragility that increase the risk of conflict are perpetuating engendering a vicious circle.

➤ **Conflicts are mostly protracted crisis**

90% of civil wars happens in countries which have a conflictual past. Civil wars, that have become the dominant form of armed conflict in the world today, have a high recidivism rate. Of the 103 countries that experienced some form of civil war between 1945 and 2009, only 44 avoided a subsequent return to civil war¹³. The chart below suggests that most of those conflicts categorized as new civil wars are in fact a continuations of previous one.

Such **protracted conflicts** tend to have a significant socioeconomic and political impacts and can permanently damage a country's infrastructure. This create an environment where cyclical violence can flourish, each violent action reinforces the dynamics that could lead to further violent conflict. Protracted conflicts also often result in forced, protracted displacement, which poses the risk of regionalization of crises. 57% of the global displaced population

Civil War Onset by Decade		
Decade	Onset in a country with no previous conflict	Onset in a country with previous conflict
1960s	57%	43%
1970s	43%	57%
1980s	38%	62%
1990s	33%	67%
2000s	10%	90%

come from three countries, Somalia, Afghanistan and Syria, two of them have been unstable for decades¹⁴.

Uncertainties

➤ **A Risk of Rising Interstate Tensions**

¹³ Uppsala Conflict Data Program, Peace Research Institute Oslo, (2009) [Armed Conflict Dataset version 4-2009](#), retrieved on 3 March 2017

¹⁴ The UN Refugee Agency UNHCR (2019), [Figures at a Glance](#), retrieved on 5 November 2019



Increasing geopolitical instability and rising diplomatic tensions between great powers is putting more pressure on already fragile areas. For instance, the situation in the South China Sea where China is opposing neighboring countries regarding their territorial claims over local islands has deteriorated. Similarly, in Ukraine the rise of separatist movements sustained by Russia in the eastern parts is pitting Russia against the government of the Ukraine and their allies. These conflicts are very unlikely to turn into open interstate wars, but the incidents of conflict with the potential for violence are increasing in frequency¹⁵. Such conflicts regularly either escalate or decrease in intensity resulting in a highly unstable situation.

¹⁵ Watkins, D, (2016) [What China Has Been Building in the South China Sea](#), The New York Times, 29 February 2016