In 2022, there were more battle-related deaths from state-based conflicts than in any year since 1984. While Russia’s invasion of Ukraine dominated news headlines, it was the war in Ethiopia that was the most deadly. With more than 100,000 fatalities, the war in Ethiopia alone accounts for nearly half of all battle-related deaths during 2022. We’ve also seen a shift in the conflict landscape; where previously Yemen, Afghanistan, and Syria were the conflicts with the highest numbers of battle-related deaths, the wars in Ethiopia and Ukraine have become the world’s most violent conflicts.

Brief Points

- The number of state-based conflicts has stagnated at a higher level compared to previous years.
- In 2022, state-based battle-related deaths were at the highest point since 1984.
- Two wars in Ethiopia and Ukraine accounted for 89% of more than 204,000 battle-related deaths from state-based conflicts in 2022.
- 55 conflicts were recorded in 2022, eight of which were classified as wars.
- The conflicts in Afghanistan, Syria, and Yemen declined in severity.
Two Take-Aways from 2022

In 2022 the conflict landscape shifted dramatically, both in terms of location and intensity. This is due to a combination of the de-escalation in Yemen and the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan, as well as the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The conflict in Ethiopia went from the third deadliest in 2021 to the conflict with the greatest number of battle-related deaths in 2022. In this section, we discuss the main two take-aways from conflict data in 2022.

First, 2022 saw a significant escalation in the number of battle-related deaths. As shown in Figure 1, more than 204,000 battle-related deaths were recorded in active state-based conflicts during 2022, more than in any year since 1984. Two wars accounted for 89% of the 204,000 battle-related deaths recorded in 2022: Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and the war in Ethiopia.

While the war in Ukraine gained most attention, the parallel war between the Government of Ethiopia and the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) was more lethal. The Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) estimates that about 81,500 battle-related deaths occurred because of the war in Ukraine, while more than 100,000 battle-related deaths resulted from the parallel war between the Government of Ethiopia and the TPLF. Moreover, the lack of media coverage of the conflict in Ethiopia raises doubts about this figure, as it indicates that there is likely under-reporting of human rights abuses and fatalities resulting from the conflict. This, combined with the fact that UCDP’s estimates are conservative, means that the real number of battle-related deaths in Ethiopia is likely to be much higher than the 100,200 recorded by the UCDP.

Second, the role of militant Islamist movements was overshadowed by that of other actors. Immediately after the Cold War, the dominant narrative around conflicts was linked to nationalism and ethnic identities. Following 9/11, political Islam became the focus of western military and political attention, and over the last two decades organizations like Al-Qaida and the Islamic State (IS) have been key actors in the world’s major conflicts. However, in 2022, the number of conflicts involving IS or Al-Qaida was at the lowest point since 2014.

Instead, in 2022, governments became the main antagonists, not only in active armed conflicts but also by increasingly using bellicose rhetoric, which has incited tension between states, such as between China and Taiwan or Turkey and Greece. The hope that war between states was a thing of the past appears increasingly remote.

A New Conflict Landscape?

Prior to 2022, Afghanistan and Yemen were home to the two deadliest conflicts. In 2021, for the third consecutive year, the conflict with the most battle-related deaths occurred between the Government of Afghanistan and the Taliban. In the same year, the second deadliest conflict was between the Government of Yemen and the Forces of Hadi.

In Figure 2, the area represents the severity of each conflict in 2022, and the colour indicates the change from 2021. Red is an increase in severity and blue is a decrease in severity. The plot is again completely dominated by the two large wars, but the changing conflict landscape is evident on the right-hand side as well. Seven of the top ten conflicts increased in severity in 2022: the Government of Russia – the Government of Ukraine; the Government of Ethiopia – TPLF; the Government of Mali – Jama-at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM); the Government of Burkina Faso – JNIM; the Government of Myanmar – National Unity Government; the Government of Somalia – Al-Shabaab; and the Government of Ethiopia – Oromo Liberation Army (OLA).

In recent years, the Middle East has been the most violent region in the world. However, 2022 saw a de-escalation of conflicts in the Middle East, combined with an escalation of conflicts in Africa and Europe. Due to this shift, Africa and Europe are now considered the world’s most violent regions. While there are still nine active conflicts in the Middle East, the level of intensity has decreased. The UCDP recorded roughly 5,000 battle-related deaths in the Middle East in 2022. Despite the decrease, the number of battle-related deaths remains above the level of fatalities prior to the Arab Spring.

Asia has 19 ongoing conflicts, but the number of fatalities – approximately 4,300 – are at the lowest level recorded by UCDP in the post–Cold War era. Myanmar has replaced Afghanistan as the most lethal conflict in Asia, followed distantly by Pakistan and India.

While there is a significant level of political violence on the American continent, this largely happens as violence between law enforcement and (or between) criminal organizations. The only active state-based conflict in the region is in Colombia, which recorded 73 fatalities in 2022.

Europe has three ongoing conflicts, all of them in what 40 years ago was the Soviet Union. The dismantling of communist states has been a source of many armed conflicts, and several post-conflict countries in Europe remain at peace due to heavy international presence. The clashes in Kosovo are a useful reminder of how far the peace process has to go.

Africa has the majority of conflicts and conflict fatalities. In 2022, UCDP recorded 32 conflicts and more than 112,000 battle-related deaths on the continent. A decade ago, the corresponding number was 17 conflicts and 6,500 fatalities. The vast majority of the fatalities in Africa in 2022 relate to the war in Ethiopia, however Africa remains widely affected by armed conflicts and wars.

The War in Ethiopia

In 2021, the war in Ethiopia’s Tigray region deteriorated. By 2022, the conflict resulted from the parallel war between the Government of Ethiopia and the TPLF. Moreover, the lack of media coverage of the conflict in Ethiopia raises doubts about this figure, as it indicates that there is likely under-reporting of human rights abuses and fatalities resulting from the conflict. This, combined with the fact that UCDP’s estimates are conservative, means that the real number of battle-related deaths in Ethiopia is likely to be much higher than the 100,200 recorded by the UCDP.

Second, the role of militant Islamist movements was overshadowed by that of other actors. Immediately after the Cold War, the dominant narrative around conflicts was linked to nationalism and ethnic identities. Following 9/11, political Islam became the focus of western military and political attention, and over the last two decades organizations like Al-Qaida and the Islamic State (IS) have been key actors in the world’s major conflicts. However, in 2022, the number of conflicts involving IS or Al-Qaida was at the lowest point since 2014.

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in more than 100,200 battle-related deaths, more than the other seven wars active in that year combined. In addition to a brutal war, the Tigray region has experienced an internet shutdown, instituted by the Government of Ethiopia. This has had several consequences. Not only has the lack of internet impeded educational and medical services, it has also made travel into the region more difficult, cutting off contact with the world beyond Tigray. Documenting war crimes and battle-related deaths has therefore become more difficult, and casualty figures should be understood as a conservative baseline. Moreover, while the world’s attention has been focused on Ukraine, battle-related deaths in Tigray have reached extremely alarming levels. In the three years since the beginning of the war, more than 110,600 battle-related deaths have been recorded by the UCDP – 100,200 of which occurred in 2022 alone.

When the conflict between the Government of Ethiopia and the TPLF began in 2020, the TPLF was isolated from Ethiopia’s political scene. The TPLF, a group formed in 1975 which continues the fight for an independent Tigray nation that dates back to the 1200s, had previously held control of the central government. However, in 2018 the TPLF was ousted from power when Abiy Ahmed was appointed prime minister. The TPLF subsequently retreated to the Tigray region until clashes broke out between the new government and the armed group. The conflict escalated in late 2022 when the government tried to position itself as the stronger party entering ceasefire negotiations in November.

**Six Smaller Wars**

In addition to Ukraine and Ethiopia, there were six armed conflicts that crossed the UCDP’s 1,000 battle-related deaths threshold and were thus classified as wars. Yemen has been at war for more than a decade, with significant contributions from regional powers, such as Iran, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. A ceasefire was in effect for much of 2022 but expired in October. Nevertheless, 2022 saw a decline in the number of fatalities by almost 90%. Despite the decline, in 2022, the conflict in Yemen was the conflict with the most fatalities in the Middle East.

More than 1,000 battle-related deaths have been recorded in Somalia each year since 2008, making the war between the government and Al-Shabaab one of the most durable wars. The conflict is over
control of the central government of the country and pits an internationally backed coalition against the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Al-Shabaab group. A government offensive in August led to the highest number of recorded casualties since 1991.

Burkina Faso used to be characterized by relative stability under the rule of authoritarian President Compaore. The current conflict between the Government of Burkina Faso and the rebel group MNJIM has spread from Mali. MNJIM is affiliated with Al-Qaida but is intermittently joined by IS-affiliated groups.

The war in Mali is subject to intense internationalization. Several international actors operate within the country, including the African Union, the European Union, the United Nations and French-led Operation Barkhane, as well as other transnational rebel groups including IS. The conflict with MNJIM was first recorded in Mali in 2017 and escalated in 2022 to the greatest number of battle-related deaths in the conflict’s duration. Mali’s conflict landscape is complicated by multiple coup d’états over the past two years, as well as the presence of non-state and one-sided violence.

Several conflicts escalated after the military coup d’etat in Myanmar in February 2022. As a result of the coup, several ceasefires or truces failed, reshaping the country’s conflict landscape alongside the civilian resistance movement- turned-war between the Government of Myanmar and the NUG. The NUG’s goal is to end military rule in Myanmar and it has mobilized local People’s Defense Forces to join the fight against the military junta. The Sit-Tat, or military junta, has committed widespread one-sided violence against civilians, with one report by Min Zaw Oo and Stein Tønnessen reporting more than 6,000 civilians killed in the 20 months since the coup at the hands of the military junta and its collaborators. In 2022, six conflicts were recorded in Myanmar, one of which was classified as a war.

In Nigeria, IS has established itself as a dominant non-state actor. After a series of victories, followed by territorial expansion, IS increased its control throughout the country and the Lake Chad region in 2021. The governments of Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria have formed an alliance to counter the expansion of IS throughout the region. However, each government also faces other conflicts throughout their territories. In Nigeria, the government is also engaged in low-intensity conflicts with the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and Jama’atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda’awati wal-Jihad, also known as Boko Haram.

In 2022, five conflicts that were recorded in 2021 did not cross the 25 battle-related death threshold in 2022: the Government of Cameroon – IS; the Government of Somalia – IS; the Government of Chad – Front for Change and Concord in Chad (FACT); the Government of Iran – PJAK; and the Government of Myanmar – Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA). All five were classified as minor conflicts in 2021 and, due to a reduction in violence, ceased to be categorized as active conflicts in 2022. The most intense of these conflicts in 2021 was between the Government of Chad and the FACT, a splinter group of the Union Force for Democracy and Development (UFDD). Both groups have fought under the Forces of the House of Representatives in Libya in previous years.

The Islamic State’s involvement was registered in two conflicts in 2021 that were not registered in 2022: in Cameroon and Somalia. While IS is still active across multiple regions, the number of battle-related deaths from IS-related conflicts declined for the second consecutive year and remains at the lowest point since 2013.

### Future Trends

The level of violence in Ethiopia appears to have reduced dramatically following the ceasefire two years after the outbreak of the civil war. If this situation continues, there is good reason to believe that the casualty numbers will be lower in 2023. The war in Ukraine remains active and is characterized by gridlock. The current stalemate is not a viable solution, but is likely to see far fewer casualties compared with the situation in 2022 when armies were on the move.

Violence in Myanmar has continued into 2023, with more than 6,000 civilians killed in the 20 months since the coup. We are yet to understand the full scale of the 2023 conflict in Sudan since its sudden outbreak and high intensity has made assessing the impact difficult. Since the assassination of Haitian president Jovenel Moïse, the country has been in a political standstill, allowing non-state gang violence to flourish. A keen eye should be kept on Pakistan, as electoral violence may characterize the August 2023 general elections.

Research into the consequences of conflict has revealed that while wars have extremely detrimental consequences, minor conflicts are not as dangerous. The main cause for worry with the current high number of armed conflicts is the risk of escalation.

### Notes
