



# Conflict Trends in Africa, 1989–2017

The popular depiction of Africa is that armed conflict is extensive throughout the continent. Indeed, 2015 and 2016 were the two years with by far the highest number of conflicts since 1946. This policy brief reveals that, though the number of conflicts in Africa today is high, the broader conflict picture of the continent is more nuanced. We find that the increase in number of conflicts in recent years can in large part be explained by the rise of the Islamic State (IS). IS has not only created new conflicts, but also fueled existing ones. Moreover, given the high number of conflicts, we would expect the number of deaths to be at a high toll. Instead, conflict has abated in terms of battle deaths.

## Brief Points

- In the past five years, there has been an increase in the number of conflicts in Africa. This holds for state-based conflicts, non-state conflicts, and one-sided violence.
- Much of the increase in the number of conflicts can be attributed to the rise of IS.
- The number of battle-related deaths has increased in recent years, but remains relatively low compared to previous years.
- Although conflict numbers are high, it is important to note that most of these conflicts are geographically restrained: First, the number of countries experiencing conflict is much lower than the number of conflicts. Second, within conflict-affected countries, conflict takes place in limited geographical areas.

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## Introduction

During the past six decades, the African continent has seen some very severe civil wars. Some of the deadliest conflicts, such as the Biafran War in Nigeria in the 60s and 70s, the Congo Wars and the Rwandan genocide in the 90s, and the Ethiopian and Eritrean war in 1999–2000, have come to an end. Yet, in recent years, the number of conflicts has grown substantially. Below, we describe the scope of conflicts in Africa and provide some explanations for the trends we see. We conclude with some general remarks and recommendations for policy makers and practitioners.

## Types and Severity of Conflict

In Figure 1, all the violent conflicts in Africa are displayed and broken down into different conflict types. We distinguish between three conflict types: state-based conflict, non-state conflict, and one-sided violence. Figure 1 also displays the numbers of battle-related fatalities, which is another way of evaluating the extent and intensity of conflict. To be included in the data, a conflict has to reach 25 battle-related deaths within a calendar year. Battle-related deaths are defined as those

caused by the warring parties that can be directly related to combat (see [ucdp.uu.se/downloads/](http://ucdp.uu.se/downloads/)).

### State-Based Conflict

The total number of state-based conflicts, i.e. conflict where at least one of the actors is the state government, is marked with light blue. State-based conflict tends to get the most attention, as it is globally the most common and most deadly type of conflict. This category includes both conflicts between states and internal conflicts.

As is apparent from the graph, there has been a marked increase in the number of state-based conflicts in Africa over the past five years. In 2017, Africa experienced 18 state-based conflicts. While this is a decrease from the all-time high of 21 conflicts in 2016, it is substantially higher than ten years ago. What is the cause of the sharp increase?

The main driver of the increased number of conflicts is the involvement of IS in existing conflicts. For example, IS has gained traction in the area around Lake Chad, where there are already Islamic conflicts taking place. Thus, the conflict in Northern Nigeria is no longer just a conflict between the Nigerian government and Boko Haram, but also

between the Nigerian government and IS. In 2017, five of the state-based conflicts in Africa were related to IS, in Chad, Libya, Mali, Nigeria, and Niger.

Further, while the number of conflicts has increased substantially, the number of countries in which conflicts are taking place has increased only slightly. In 2007, Africa saw 12 conflicts in 10 countries. Ten years later, in 2017, the number of conflicts was 18, taking place in 13 different countries. This suggests that while the number of actors involved in conflicts within each country has increased, possibly increasing the complexity of conflict, the geographic span has not enlarged to the same extent. In Figure 1, we see that up until 2000, the number of people killed in state-based conflict corresponds to some extent with the growth in the number of conflicts. However, in the past few years, the increase in conflict numbers has not been accompanied by a corresponding growth in battle deaths. In 2017, state-based conflicts caused around 7,500 battle-related deaths. This is a decrease compared to the past three years. Moreover, as displayed in Figure 2, the majority of battle deaths in 2017 occurred in three countries: Nigeria, Somalia and DR Congo. The relatively low number of battle deaths suggests

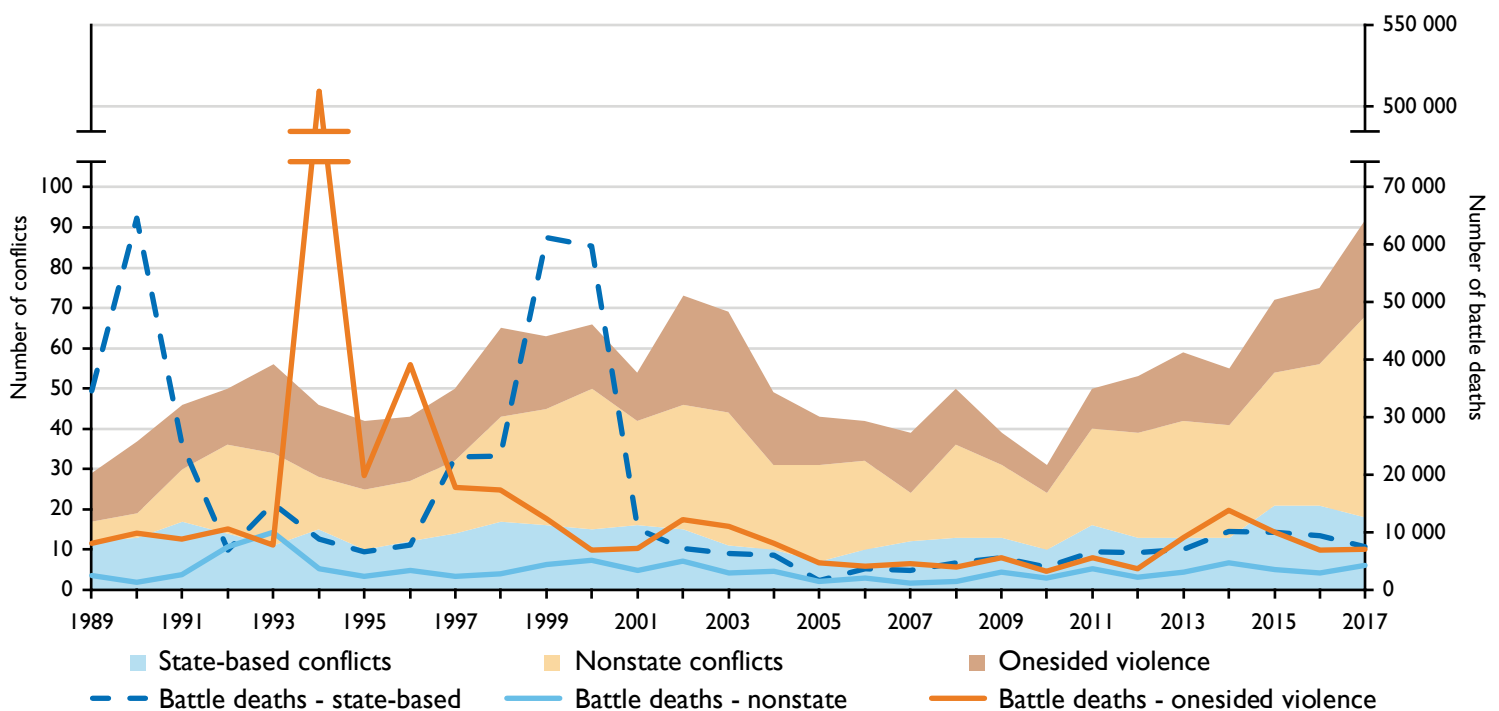


Figure 1: Conflict types and battle deaths (trends over time). Data source: UCDP database

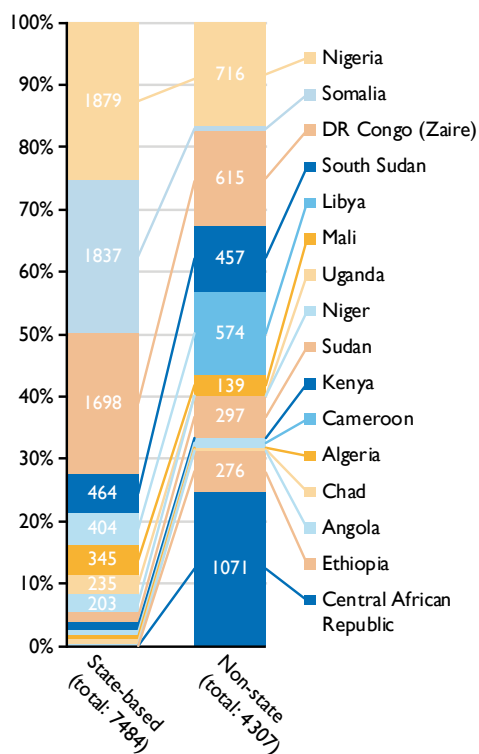


Figure 2: Share of battle deaths for state-based and non-state conflict in 2017. Data source: UCDP database

that the increase in conflicts has not led to a substantive increase in the intensity of conflict.

### Non-State Conflict

State-based violence is not the only type of conflict that is prevalent in Africa. Non-state conflict is defined as a conflict fought between two organized groups, none of which is related to the state. In Figure 1, these conflicts are marked with pale yellow.

In Africa, the number of non-state conflicts has increased dramatically in recent years, peaking in 2017 with 50 non-state conflicts, compared to 24 in 2011. This makes Africa the continent with the highest number of non-state conflicts. We also observe a relative increase in terms of intensity, with a doubling of non-state conflict battle deaths since 2011, reaching 4,300 in 2017. However, this is a rather low number considering the large amount of conflicts.

Providing a simple explanation to the sharp increase in non-state conflicts is not easy. Nonetheless, we observe that many of the countries with

non-state conflicts also experienced state-based conflicts in 2017. This suggests that conflict breeds conflict, i.e. countries already experiencing violence, or those with a recent history of conflict, have a higher risk of conflict outbreak compared to peaceful countries.

One exception is the Central African Republic, which experienced eight non-state conflicts in 2017, but where no state-based conflict took place. As is evident from Figure 2, these conflicts accounted for 25% of all the non-state battle deaths in Africa in 2017. In countries already experiencing non-state conflicts, the state is less able to control the use of violence within the country borders, which could lead the number of this type of conflict to increase even more.

Despite the considerable number of conflicts, the number of countries in which these conflicts took place was relatively low. The 50 non-state conflicts in 2017 took place in 11 countries. Nigeria, South Sudan and the Central African Republic had the highest number of such conflicts. In sum, non-state conflicts in Africa are numerous, yet geographically restrained and of relatively low intensity.

### One-Sided Violence

Another important part of the conflict picture is one-sided violence. One-sided violence is defined as violence against civilians by a formally organized group, which can be either the state or a non-state actor.

The number of organized groups perpetrating one-sided violence is marked with brown in Figure 1. We see there has been a substantial increase in the number of actors carrying out one-sided violence since 2011. The worst perpetrator by far during this period was Boko Haram in Northeastern Nigeria.

In terms of battle deaths caused by one-sided violence, the worst year by far was 1994, when the Rwandan genocide caused the death of more than 500,000 people. 1996 and 1997 were also years marked by a high death toll, related to the conflicts in DR Congo and Burundi. During the past ten years, there was a peak in 2014 with 8,760 deaths, while in 2017, the number was 5,694. In 2017, Boko Haram in Nigeria stands out as the worst perpetrator, followed by various groups in the Central African Republic.

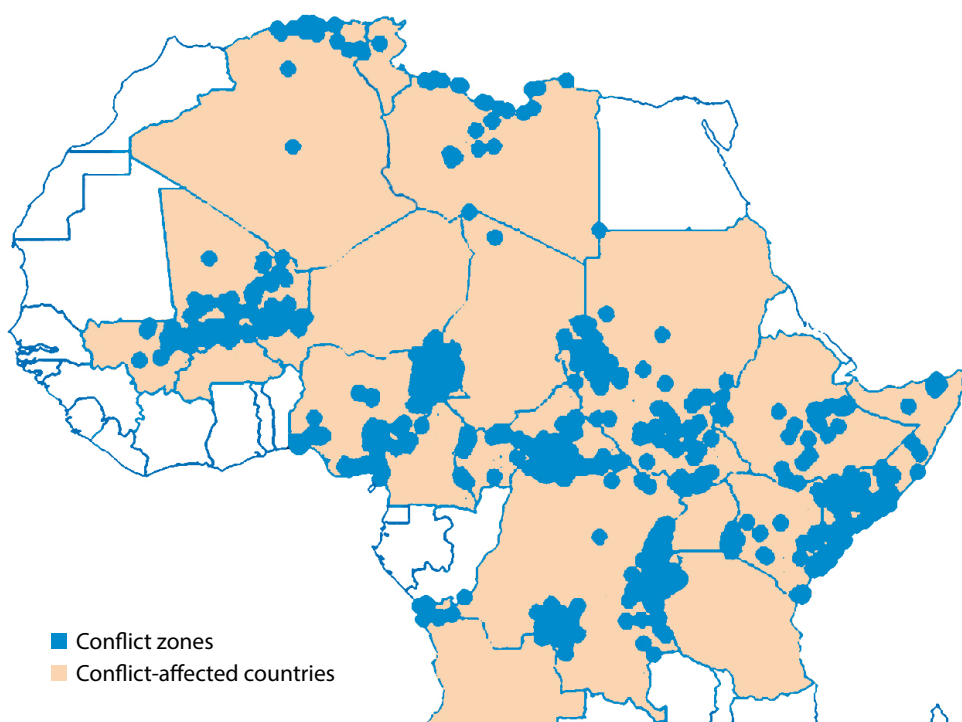


Figure 3: Geographic location of conflict in 2017. Data source: UCDP database

## The Geographical Extent of Conflict

We often talk about conflict on the national level, i.e. which countries have conflict. However, most conflicts are geographically limited, with only a small part of a country being directly affected. Figure 3 depicts the conflict-affected areas within each country. The yellow color indicates countries that experienced conflict in 2017 while the blue areas indicate conflict zones. A conflict zone is defined as a 50 km area surrounding a conflict event where at least one person was killed. The conflict events include both state-based and non-state conflicts, as well as one-sided violence. The map shows that such conflicts rarely affect the entire country but are often geographically limited to a relatively small area. Only in a few countries, like Somalia, do conflicts cover the main share of the country. In some places, conflicts are crossing boundaries, such as the conflicts around Lake Chad. Although this conflict is limited to this particular geographic area, the conflict takes place in Nigeria, Cameroon, Niger and Chad.

## Democratic Development

The transfer of power is also an important factor for understanding the conflict picture in Africa. The number of successful coups d'état has been at a stable low during the 2000s. However, we observe a higher rate of coup attempts. Coup attempts peaked around 1990; it has gradually reduced, but remains at around two to four each year.

Coups are unconventional and undemocratic regime changes. However, elections can also be associated with unfairness. In Figure 4, the number of national elections in Africa is displayed. The figure shows that the number of fair elections seems to have increased since the 1990s until today. Moreover, multiparty elections are starting to become the rule in Africa; since 1990, almost all

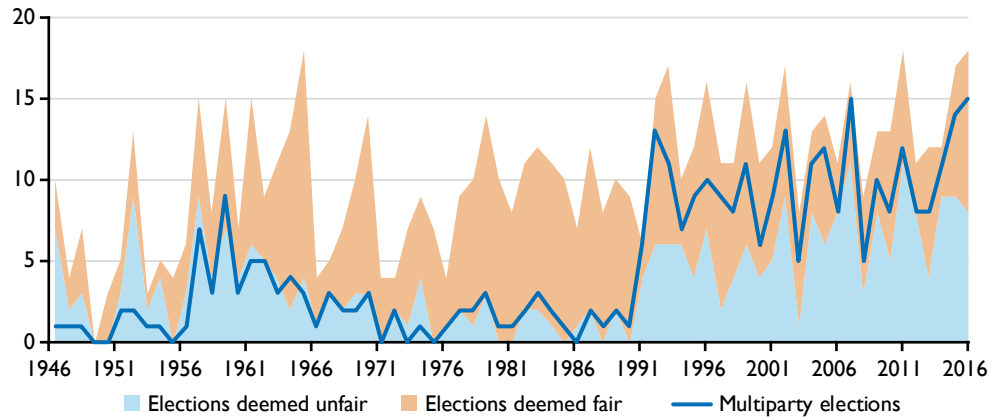


Figure 4: Democratic development (election trends over time). Data source: Varieties of Democracy, University of Gothenburg

elections were characterized by allowing several parties to run.

Both the trends in coups and elections seem to point in the direction of more democratic transition of power in Africa over the past 20 years.

## Conclusion

This policy brief has given an overview of the major conflict trends in Africa from 1989 to 2017. We have shown that there has been an increase in recent years in the number of conflicts, when considering state-based conflicts, non-state conflicts, and one-sided violence. Yet, the number of countries with conflict has not increased proportionally to the number of conflicts; rather, already conflict-affected countries have experienced more conflict. Moreover, many of the new conflicts can be attributed to the involvement of IS in already ongoing conflicts. As such, the increase in conflicts does not necessarily imply an increase in the geographical extent of conflict. Similarly, the high number of conflicts has not been followed by a substantial increase in the number of battle-related deaths, suggesting that the level of intensity remains relatively low.

In sum, many countries on the African continent struggle with several parallel conflicts, yet there is reason not to paint in black when describing these trends. Importantly, policy makers, scholars, and media should avoid simplifying, and be aware of the nuances when discussing recent conflict trends. On a positive note, the findings suggest that if states succeed in solving some of the most severe state-based conflicts that cut across borders, such as the conflicts including IS, the total number of conflicts may decrease substantially. This may in turn enable states to solve and prevent other types of conflict. ■

## References

Data source, Figure 1: UCDP Armed Conflict Dataset v.18.1; UCDP One-sided Violence Dataset v. 18.1; UCDP Non-State Conflict Dataset v.18.1 and UCDP Battle-Related Deaths Dataset. Available at: [ucdp.uu.se/downloads/](http://ucdp.uu.se/downloads/)

Data source, Figure 2: UCDP Armed Conflict Dataset v.18 and UCDP Non-State Conflict Dataset v.18.1.

Data source, Figure 3: UCDP Georeferenced Event Dataset v. 18.1.

## THE AUTHORS

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## THE PROJECT

The *Conflict Trends* project aims to answer questions relating to the causes, consequences and trends in conflict. The project will contribute to new conflict analyses within areas of public interest, and works to produce thorough and quality based analysis for the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

## PRIO

The Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) is a non-profit peace research institute (established in 1959) whose overarching purpose is to conduct research on the conditions for peaceful relations between states, groups and people. The institute is independent, international and interdisciplinary, and explores issues related to all facets of peace and conflict.