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Conflict  
Trends

CONFLICT TRENDS 04 | 2023

# Conflict Trends in the Middle East, 1989–2022

For the past decade, the Middle East has been home to some of the deadliest conflicts in the world, but the region saw a de-escalation in 2022. Following ceasefires in both Syria and Yemen, the number of battle-related deaths in both conflicts was dramatically reduced. While both ceasefires have since lapsed, the level of conflict intensity remains lower than prior to the ceasefires. However, events in Israel, Palestine, and Gaza in 2023 mean that the declining trends in 2022 will not continue into 2023. This policy brief describes conflict trends in the Middle East between 1989 and 2022.

## Brief Points

- In 2022, the conflicts in Syria and Yemen decreased significantly in intensity, leading to an overall decline in the number of battle-related deaths from state-based conflicts in the region.
- In 2022, there were approximately 5,000 state-based battle-related deaths, a decline from more than 26,000 in 2021.
- In 2022, for the second year in a row, the number of battle-related deaths from non-state conflicts in the Middle East remained at the lowest point since 2012.
- Government-perpetrated one-sided violence against civilians erupted in Iran following the death of Mahsa Amini in police custody, spurring widespread protests against the government, the country's morality police, and restrictive modesty laws.

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## Conflict Severity in the Middle East

Over the past five years, the conflict landscape in the Middle East has changed dramatically. This can primarily be attributed to a decline in the intensity of the wars in Syria and Yemen. In this policy brief, I break down conflict trends in the Middle East between 1989 and 2022. The Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) distinguishes between three types of conflict: state-based conflict, which is defined as a conflict in which at least one of the actors is a government; non-state conflict, which refers to a conflict fought between two organized groups, neither of which is related to the state; and one-sided violence, defined as violence against civilians by an organized armed force, which can be a government or a non-state actor.<sup>1</sup>

The threshold for categorization as a conflict in the UCDP datasets is at least 25 battle-related deaths within a calendar year.<sup>2</sup> Battle-related deaths are fatalities caused by the warring parties that can be directly related to combat, including civilian losses. The number of battle-related deaths should be interpreted as a baseline figure, as obtaining exact data on conflict-related events is extremely difficult. The data described in this policy brief represent the best available estimates.

Figure 1A depicts trends in *conflict types* in the Middle East between 1989 and 2022, while Figure 1B displays trends in the number of battle-related deaths, as a measure of *conflict severity* in the region for the same period. Figure 1A reveals that there has been a significant increase in the number of non-state conflicts (shaded in pale blue) in the region since the beginning of the dataset in 1989.

Looking at Figures 1A and 1B together, two important takeaways can be drawn. First, while there was a significant increase in the number of non-state conflicts in 2013, we did not see a correspondingly similar increase in the number of battle-related deaths. This means that while there was a proliferation of non-state conflicts in the period from 2013 onwards, these conflicts were low intensity and resulted in a relatively low number of battle-related deaths.

Second, we saw a significant increase in the number of battle-related deaths from state-based conflicts in 2012, but the number of state-based conflicts remained the same compared to the previous year. This indicates that one or more of these conflicts increased in severity. In this case, the state-based conflict between the Government of Syria and Syrian insurgents escalated from approximately 1,200 battle-related deaths in 2011 to more than 50,000 in 2012.

## State-Based Conflict

In 2022, state-based conflicts were the most common type of conflict, as shown in Figure 1A, as well as the deadliest type of conflict. This category of conflict includes conflicts between countries, like that between the Governments of Iran and Israel, and between a government and a non-state group, for example, between the Government of Turkey and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

The number of battle-related deaths in the Middle East decreased in 2022 and was at the lowest level since 2011. In 2022, there were slightly more than 5,000 battle-related deaths from nine state-based conflicts in seven countries. Only

two countries experienced an escalation in the number of state-based battle-related deaths between 2021 and 2022: Egypt and Turkey.

The war in Yemen de-escalated in 2022, presenting the most significant change to the conflict landscape in the Middle East that year. It was a vast shift from 2021, when the Yemeni civil war claimed the second most battle-related deaths globally. With more than 23,000 deaths, 2021 was also the deadliest year in Yemen's civil war, which began in 2014. Primarily resulting from the United Nations-mediated (UN) ceasefire agreed to in April 2022, the civil war de-escalated to fewer than 3,000 battle-related deaths in 2022. Despite the de-escalation, the conflict is still classified as a war (more than 1,000 battle-related deaths per year), and is the only war recorded in the region in 2022. It is also too soon to predict whether the diplomatic opening between Iran and Saudi Arabia in March 2022 will improve the situation for Yemen's population.<sup>3</sup> While the conflict decreased in severity, the UN-mediated ceasefire later lapsed in 2022 and the humanitarian situation in Yemen remains dire.

The civil war in Syria has been one of the major conflicts of the past decade, however, it de-escalated between 2021 and 2022. The de-escalation has resulted in the war in Syria being reclassified as a conflict in 2022.

The governments of Egypt, Iraq, and Syria were all engaged in state-based conflicts with the Islamic State (IS) in 2022. While IS remains a serious threat in several countries, they are operating in fewer countries than even just five years ago. IS participated in non-state conflicts in Syria, as discussed in the next section.

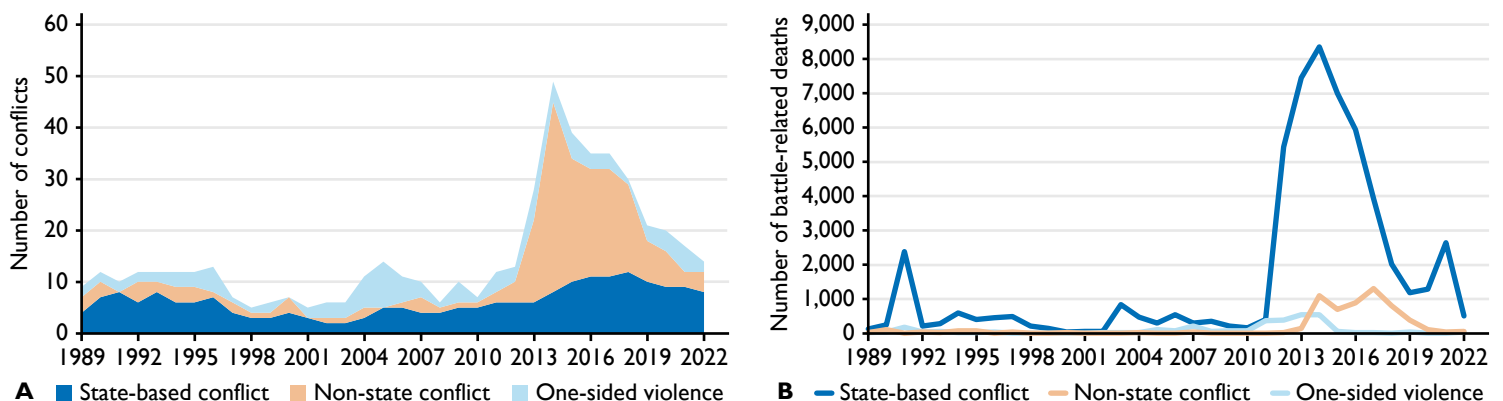


Figure 1: Number of conflicts (A) and battle-related deaths (B) in the Middle East by conflict type, 1989–2022. Source: UCDP/PRIO dataset

## Non-State Conflict

Not all conflicts involve a state actor. A significant amount of contemporary violence takes place between groups that are not linked to the government. A non-state conflict is defined as a conflict fought between two organized groups, neither of which is related to the state. Organized groups come in multiple forms: (i) formally organized groups, (ii) informally organized groups, and (iii) communal groups, which are defined as groups that have a common identity along religious, ethnic, national, tribal or clan lines.

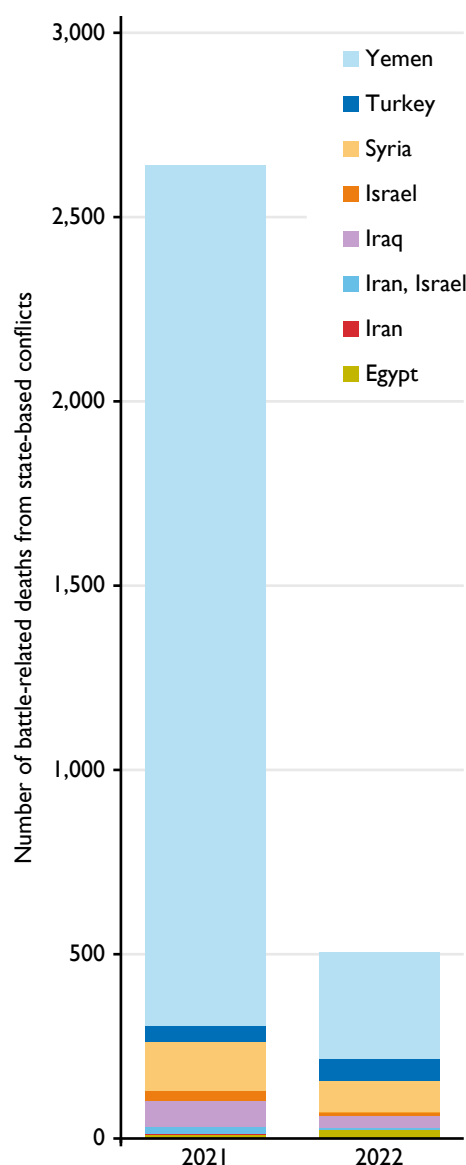


Figure 2: Battle-related deaths, 2021 and 2022

In 2022, there were four non-state conflicts in the Middle East: two in Syria and two in Yemen. All four were classified as conflicts, meaning they had fewer than 1,000 battle-related deaths within a calendar year. Compared to other regions, the Middle East experienced the largest relative increase in the number of non-state conflicts in the 2010s but has since seen a sharp decline, as shown in Figure 1A. The explosion of non-state conflicts in the mid-2010s is primarily a result of the spread of IS and instability in Syria. For example, in 2015, IS was engaged in nine different non-state conflicts in Syria alone.

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) were involved in both non-state conflicts in Syria in 2022, against IS and against the Syrian National Army (SNA). The SDF is a coalition of Kurdish, Arab, Assyrian, Armenian, and Turkmen militias engaged in the Syrian Civil War and is supported by the United States (US). The group is highly influential within the country, operating primarily in the north and east. The group aims to establish democratic and federal governance structures in northern Syria and achieve international recognition for the autonomous region.<sup>4</sup> However, the SDF have suffered territorial losses as a result of Turkish military interventions in 2018 (Afrin region) and 2019 (northern Hasakah). In 2022, Turkey's President Erdoğan once again threatened military action inside of Syria. This was followed by drone attacks and airstrikes over northern Syria and Iraq. A consequence of Turkish aggression against northern Syria and the fluctuating strategies of US administration is that the SDF is being pushed closer to Damascus and Syrian President al-Assad.

In Yemen, two low-intensity non-state conflicts were reported in 2022. One conflict, between the AQAP (Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula) and the Forces of the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) has been active every year since 2015. While the UCDP views the PLC as a non-state actor because it does not occupy the capital, it is the internationally recognized government of Yemen. The second conflict, recorded for the first time in 2022, saw the Giants Brigade and the Southern Transitional Council (STC) joining forces to fight against Islah, a Muslim-Brotherhood aligned movement.

Clashes occurred in August 2022 when the STC-aligned forces attempted to assassinate an Islah commander. When Islah, a Muslim Broth-

erhood aligned movement, attempted to seek revenge, the Giants Brigade supported the STC's defense, using drones provided by the United Arab Emirates to force Islah out of the southern region of Shabwa. The conflict resulted in a reported 54 battle-related deaths. Just prior to the skirmish, the STC and Giants Brigade successfully executed a coup against the Islah-aligned governor of the 2nd Military Region.<sup>5</sup>

## 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 group. In 2022, two groups used one-sided violence against civilians that resulted in more than 25-battle-related deaths in the Middle East: the Government of Iran and IS. This is a decrease from the previous year, when four governments – those of Iran, Iraq, Yemen, and Eritrea (in Ethiopia and Yemen) – and one non-state group, IS, were responsible for one-sided violence.

In 2022, protests erupted across Iran following the death of 21-year-old Mahsa Amini while in custody of the country's morality police in September. Women and students led the peaceful protests, which were characterized by women removing their hijabs. In doing so, women demonstrated their opposition to Iran's morality police and laws requiring women to cover their heads. One-sided violence occurred across most of the country but was concentrated in the west, as shown in Figure 3.

Tens of thousands of protestors were detained or arrested. The more than 340 deaths resulting from one-sided violence against Iranian civilians by the government during the protests does not account for executions. At least 350 people were executed between January and June 2023, some of whom for the participation in the protests. This is an increase of 36% compared to the number of executions in the first half of 2022 before protests erupted.<sup>6</sup>

## Where are Conflicts Located?

Most conflicts are concentrated in specific regions, and do not transgress the entire country. Figure 3 shows state-based, non-state, and one-sided conflict events in 2022 across the Middle East. The grey shading indicates that the country experienced conflict in 2022, while the dots in-

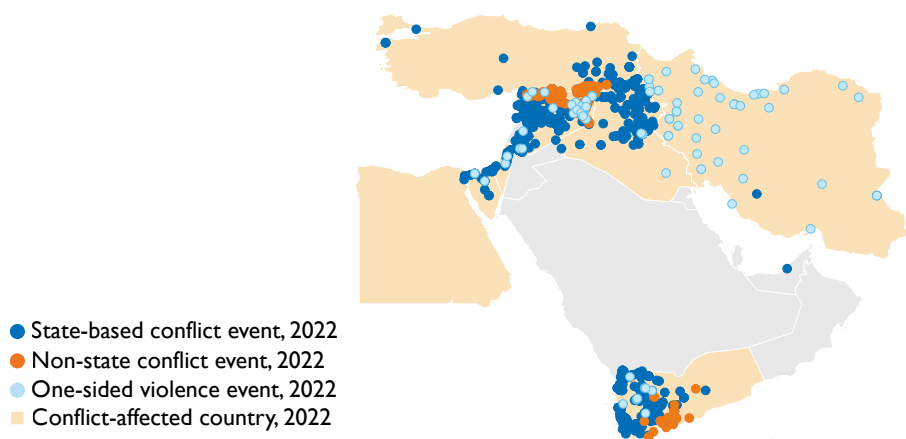


Figure 3: Conflict events and conflict-affected countries in the Middle East, 2022. Source: UCDP GED

dictate conflict events. In many cases, except for that of Iran, two or three types of conflict overlap. This can be seen particularly in the cases of Yemen, Israel, Palestine, and the West Bank.

While the number of battle-related deaths decreased significantly in Yemen in 2022, the war continued at a high-intensity level. All three types of conflict were recorded this year, but conflict events were primarily recorded in Houthi-controlled territory or contested areas (at the time of writing).

The Government of Egypt continued to counter the expansion of IS and its local affiliate, Wilayat Sina', for the eighth year straight. Conflict events, however, are limited to North Sinai in the north-eastern part of the country. As part of their counter offensive, the Egyptian military razed hundreds of homes and the majority of the farmland in North Sinai governorate, resulting in civilian fatalities. Human Rights Watch have stated the military's actions amount to war crimes given that it was not a military necessity to destroy homes and farmland, displacing thousands who lived in the region.<sup>7</sup>

## Conclusion

In this policy brief, I examined conflict trends in the Middle East between 1989 and 2022. In previous years, the Middle East was home to some of the deadliest conflicts. However, ceasefires in Syria (in 2020) and Yemen (in 2022) significantly decreased the number of battle-related deaths in 2022. Despite the ceasefires, civilians in both countries continue face extreme hardships at the hands of their government. Moreover, one-sided violence recorded in Iran increased dramatically in response to widespread peaceful protests. The number of non-state conflicts in the Middle East declined, yet the spread of IS remains a serious threat. Moreover, a resurgence of extreme violence in Israel, Palestine, and Gaza in 2023 means that the decline in battle-related deaths in the region will not continue and that the status of other conflicts in the region remain increasingly fragile. ■

## Notes

1. This policy brief is part of a broader series on conflict trends. For more information,

see Anna Marie Obermeier & Siri Aas Rustad (2023) *Conflict Trends: A Global Overview, 1946–2022*, *PRIO Paper*. Oslo: PRIO. Available at: [www.prio.org/publications/13513](http://www.prio.org/publications/13513).

2. All data in this policy brief comes from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP). For more, see: Bethany Ann Lacina & Nils Petter Gleditsch (2006) *Monitoring Trends in Global Combat: A New Dataset of Battle Deaths*, in Helge Brunborg; Ewa Tabeau & Henrik Urdal (eds) *The Demography of Armed Conflict*. Berlin: Springer, 145–165, and Shawn Davies; Therese Pettersson & Magnus Öberg (2023) *Organized violence 1989–2022, and the return of conflict between states*, *Journal of Peace Research* 60(4): 691–708.
3. Jonathan Fenton-Harvey (2023) *Can renewed Saudi-Iran diplomacy lead to peace in Yemen?* *The New Arab*, 24 March. Available at: [www.newarab.com/analysis/can-renewed-saudi-iran-diplomacy-lead-peace-yemen](http://www.newarab.com/analysis/can-renewed-saudi-iran-diplomacy-lead-peace-yemen).
4. Wladimir van Wilgenburg (n.d.) *Syrian Democratic Forces (Syria)*, in *Guns and Governance: How Europe should talk with non-state armed groups in the Middle East*. European Council on Foreign Relations. Available at: [ecfr.eu/special/mena-armed-groups/syrian-democratic-forces-syria](http://ecfr.eu/special/mena-armed-groups/syrian-democratic-forces-syria).
5. For more information, see the UCDP Encyclopaedia page on the Giants Brigade, STC – Islah. Available at: [ucdp.uu.se/nonstate/17346](http://ucdp.uu.se/nonstate/17346).
6. VOA (2023) *Rights Group Says Iran Executed 354 People in First Half of 2023*. *Agence France-Presse*, 3 July. Available at: [www.voanews.com/a/rights-group-says-iran-executed-354-people-in-first-half-of-2023-/7165987.html](http://www.voanews.com/a/rights-group-says-iran-executed-354-people-in-first-half-of-2023-/7165987.html).
7. Human Rights Watch (2022) *Egypt: Events of 2021*. *World Report 2022*. Available at: [www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/egypt](http://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/egypt).

## THE AUTHOR

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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 contributes to new conflict analyses within areas of public interest, and works to produce thorough and high-quality 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.