



PRIO

Conflict
Trends

CONFLICT TRENDS 05 | 2023

Conflict Trends in Africa, 1989–2022

The sharp increase in battle-related deaths globally in 2022 was driven primarily by the conflict between the Government of Ethiopia and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). In 2022, 58% of all state-based conflicts occurred in Africa. The extreme number of battle-related deaths made it the deadliest year for state-based conflicts in the region in the post-1989 period. That said, more non-state conflicts occurred in 2022 compared to state-based conflicts; however, these were less severe when measured by battle-related deaths. This policy brief summarizes conflict trends in Africa between 1989 and 2022, including sub-regional differences in 2022 specifically.

Brief Points

- There were 32 state-based conflicts, 42 non-state conflicts, and 30 perpetrators of one-sided violence (which included 12 governments) in Africa in 2022.
- In the post-1989 period, 2022 was the deadliest year for state-based conflicts in Africa, measured by battle-related deaths.
- In 2022, the war in Ethiopia resulted in more deaths than any state-based conflict globally since the Iraqi government's offensive against Kurdistan in 1988.

Anna Marie Obermeier
Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)

Introduction

Non-state conflicts are the most common type of conflict in Africa, and yet state-based conflicts dominate news headlines. In this policy brief, I explore trends in state-based, non-state, and one-sided violence in Africa between 1989 and 2022, using data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP).¹ Since 1989, the overall number of conflicts in Africa has increased from 34 conflicts in 1989 to 104 in 2022, driven primarily by a rise in non-state conflicts (see Figure 1A).

Using battle-related deaths as a measure, the policy brief also examines trends in conflict severity. According to the UCDP, battle-related deaths are fatalities caused by warring parties that directly relate to combat, including civilian losses. Civilian fatalities stemming from one-sided violence are caused by an organized armed force (a government or non-state actor). To be included in the UCDP datasets, a conflict has to reach 25 battle-related deaths within a calendar year and be tied to specific parties with a conflict incompatibility.² The numbers of battle-related deaths should be interpreted as baseline figures, as obtaining exact data on conflict-related events is extremely difficult. The data described in this policy brief represent the best available estimates.³

State-Based Conflict

State-based conflicts are defined by UCDP as conflicts in which at least one actor is a government. This category of conflict includes conflicts between countries, like that between the Governments of Ethiopia and Eritrea, and between a government and a non-state group, for example between the Government of Nige-

ria and the Indigenous People of Biafra. Based on UCDP definitions, a government is the party that occupies the country's capital.

The total number of state-based conflicts in Africa (depicted in blue in Figure 1A) remained relatively stable during the 1989–2022 period. However, the number of battle-related deaths from such conflicts grew markedly higher from 2019 onwards than at any other point since 1989 (see Figure 1B). This increase in fatalities was driven by the internationalized civil war in Ethiopia between the Government of Ethiopia and the TPLF, which continued for a third consecutive year in 2022 and resulted in more than 100,200 battle-related deaths that year alone. This equates to 33 times more fatalities than the second most deadly war in Africa in 2022, which was between the Government of Somalia and Al-Shabaab and resulted in just over 3,000 battle-related deaths. The war in Ethiopia, which began after the TPLF was pushed out as the ruling party in 2018, is also characterized by one-sided violence against civilians. The war was confined to the Tigray region primarily, but the power struggle between the government and the TPLF exacerbated a devastating humanitarian situation throughout Ethiopia.⁴

Looking at sub-regional trends in 2022 (Figure 2), we see that the greatest number of battle-related deaths occurred in Eastern Africa.⁵ However, this region did not have the greatest number of conflicts. This indicates that, on average in 2022, conflicts in Eastern Africa were more severe than those in other regions. As previously discussed, this is attributable to the war in Ethiopia. Conversely, there were several

conflicts in Central Africa, but they resulted in significantly fewer battle-related deaths.

Non-State Conflict

In most regions globally, state-based conflicts are the most common type of conflict. But in Africa, non-state conflicts have outnumbered state-based conflicts both on a yearly basis and cumulatively between 1989 and 2022. The UCDP defines non-state conflicts as those fought between two organized groups, neither of which is related to the state. Organized groups come in multiple forms, namely: (i) formally organized groups, (ii) informally organized groups, and (iii) communal groups, which have a common identity along religious, ethnic, national, tribal or clan lines.

In 2022, there were 42 non-state conflicts in Africa compared to just five in 1989, the first year recorded in the UCDP non-state dataset. However, as the line in Figure 3 shows, there has not been a similar increase in the number of battle-related deaths resulting from these conflicts. This means that, while there have been more non-state conflicts over time, they have been less severe on average than in the 1990s, when fatalities peaked at over 11,000 as a result of the conflict between the Government of Angola and National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA). The increase in the number of non-state conflicts may point towards weak national governments, poor conflict resolution or justice mechanisms, or a lack of alternatives to joining or complying with a rebel group.

In 2022, Sudan experienced the greatest number of non-state conflicts compared to any other

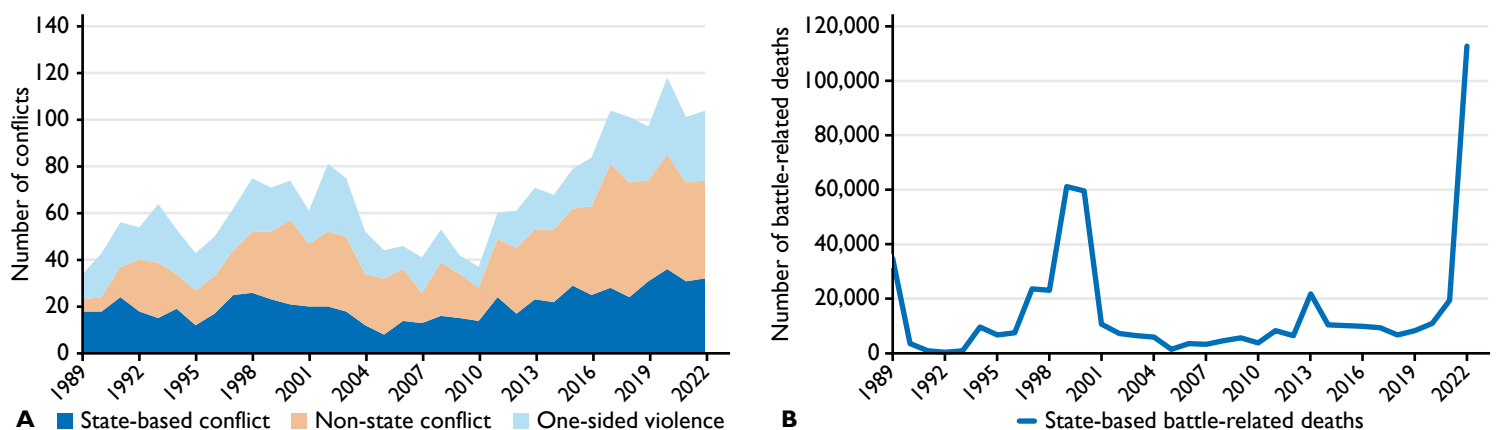


Figure 1: Conflicts by conflict type (A) and battle-related deaths from state-based conflicts (B) in Africa, 1989–2022. Source: UCDP/PRIO dataset

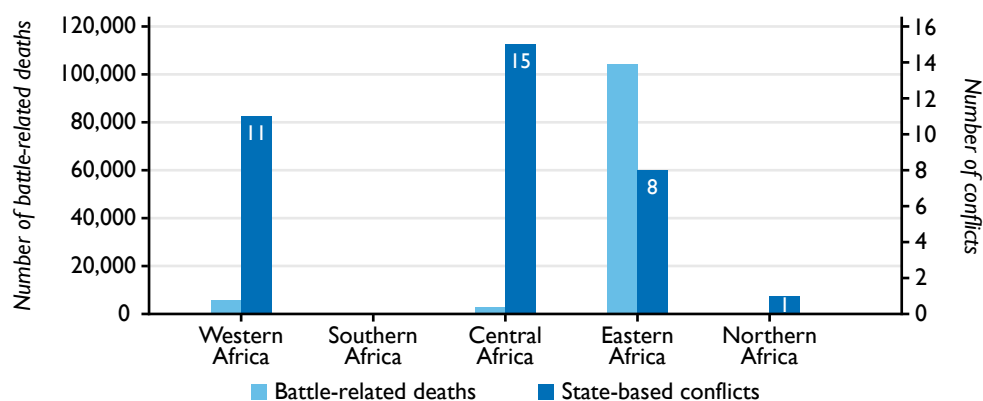


Figure 2: Number of battle-related deaths and state-based conflicts per sub-region in Africa, 2022

country in Africa (10 in 2022). The conflict between the Hausa and the indigenous Funj in Sudan's Blue Nile State resulted in nearly 400 battle-related deaths and the displacement of thousands of civilians. While the Hausa have been recorded by the UCDP as participants in several non-state conflicts, this was the first time the Funj were recorded as participants. Funj oppose the establishment of a Hausa *Nazarah*, or chiefdom, which would lead to increased economic and political influence in the regional administration.⁶

One-Sided Violence

The UCDP defines one-sided violence as violence perpetrated against civilians by a formally organized group, which can either be the state or a non-state group. It differentiates between civilians targeted by governments or non-state groups (which it considers one-sided violence) and civilians who are killed in the course of a state-based or non-state conflict (which it counts in the battle-related deaths associated with the respective conflict).

The UCDP data show that the number of fatalities from one-sided violence has fluctuated from year-to-year. Fatalities spiked in 1994 when the Hutu-led Government of Rwanda committed genocide primarily against members of the Tutsi minority group, which resulted in more than 760,000 fatalities. This is categorized as one-sided violence because the government directly targeted civilians, who the UCDP defines as unarmed people who are not active members of the security forces of the state, or members of an organized armed militia or opposition group. However, the genocide occurred within the larger context of the conflict between the government and the Rwanda Patriotic Front.

While one-sided fatalities were not as high in 2022 as they were in the mid-1990s, the recent increase is worrying. Particularly troublesome is the number of governments responsible for one-sided violence. In 2022, 30 groups in Africa perpetrated one-sided violence that resulted in more than 25 battle-related deaths during the calendar year, of which 12 groups were governments. One such case is the Government of Eritrea, which targeted civilians alongside being party to the conflict between the Government of Ethiopia and the TPLF. Its actions resulted in more than 1,000 fatalities during 2022, primarily in Ethiopia. The Government of Ethiopia was also responsible for one-sided violence, which resulted in more than 350 fatalities.

The remaining 18 perpetrators of one-sided violence in 2022 were non-state groups responsible for violence against civilians. Of these, violence perpetrated by the Union of Revolutionaries for the Defense of the Congolese People (URDPC), also known as CODECO, resulted in the most fatalities: nearly 600. The URDPC is an agro-

religious armed group in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) made up primarily of the Lendu ethnic group. The URDPC occupies territory in the Ituri province and, in 2022, commanders claimed to have more than 30,000 fighters.⁷ According to the UCDP, the URDPC was previously engaged in a non-state conflict with the Hema, a pastoralist ethnic group. Between 1999 and 2002 this conflict resulted in nearly 4,500 battle-related deaths, while between 2017 and 2019 it resulted in almost 1,000 fatalities. In 2022, the Lendu increasingly committed indiscriminate attacks against civilians and largely operated with impunity in the remote north-eastern region of the country. Continued violence may renew non-state conflicts with rival groups, such as the Hema or Alur.

Where are Conflicts Located?

Most conflicts are geographically concentrated, with only a small part of a country directly affected. Figure 4 depicts the conflict-affected areas within each country in Africa. Countries that have experienced at least one type of conflict in 2022 are depicted in yellow, while the dots depict the specific locations of conflict events, disaggregated by conflict type.

In 2022, the Central African Republic (CAR) experienced state-based conflict in most of the country, while in Somalia conflict events occurred primarily south of Puntland State. A few other hotspots are evident: the Lake Chad region (Niger, Chad, Nigeria, and Cameroon), eastern DRC, and eastern Kenya have been affected by conflict for several years. In Mali, all three types of conflict were prevalent south of the Sahara Desert in 2022. In Ethiopia, there were several state-based events as well as one-sided

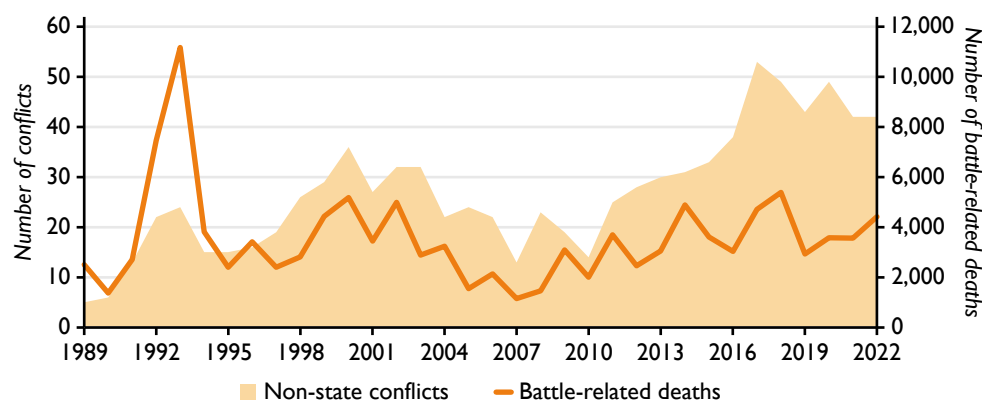


Figure 3: Number of non-state conflicts and battle-related deaths in Africa, 1989–2022

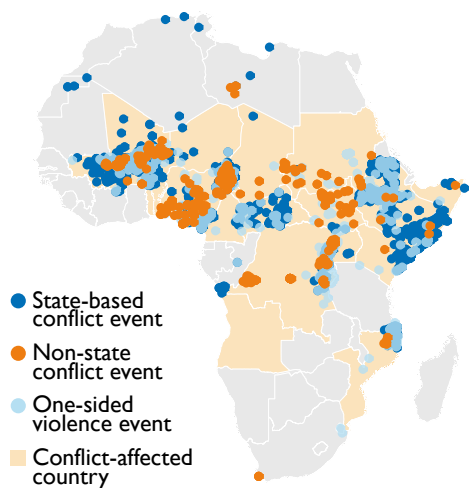


Figure 4: Conflict events in Africa, 2022

violence events that year. While the majority were limited to the Tigray and Oromia regions and are attributable to the civil war, several conflict events occurred in other regions of the country too.

All three types of violence defined by the UCDP occurred in Mozambique in 2022, but this violence was located primarily in the Cabo Delgado region. Non-state violence was recorded in the country in 2022 for the first time since 1991. The conflict between Islamic State (IS) and the Naparama began when the local population lost their trust in the government due to the latter's inability to protect them from the spread of IS. Thus, in November 2022, Naparama took up arms against IS. IS has presented a serious threat within Mozambique since the groups' significant escalation of activities in mid-2019. The conflict between the Government of Mozambique, IS, and IS-aligned Ahlu al-Sunna wa'l Jama'a was the first state-based conflict since the civil war with the Mozambican National Resistance (RENAMO).

Future Trends

Between 2020 and September 2023, there were six military coups in Central and West Africa.⁸ In August 2021, Malian colonels removed President Keita from power following wide-spread anti-government protests. A second coup was executed in May 2021 by the same coup leaders who disagreed with the interim president, Bah Ndaw. In April 2021, Chad's armed forces took power after President Deby was killed during a visit to forces deployed in the north of the country. In the event of a president's death while in office, the speaker of parliament should become president. Instead, in Chad, the army dissolved parliament and took power. In September 2021, the commander of Guinea's special forces ousted President Conde just a year after Conde changed the Constitution to allow him to maintain presidential power for a third term. In January 2022, the Burkinabè army removed President Kabore from power, citing the president's failure to address increasing violence and the spread of Islamist militants in the country. In July 2023, Niger's President Mohamed Baxoum was detained and removed from power by the presidential guard.

The prevalence of coup d'états across Africa is extremely worrying, especially given that these can destabilize fragile conflict contexts and lead to a resurgence in previously dormant conflicts. Myanmar is a case in point since the military coup there in 2021. While we may see a resurgence or increase in state-based conflicts in Central and West Africa in the coming years, it is unlikely that the extreme number of battle-related deaths recorded in 2022 will continue. ■

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. The UCDP dataset begins in 1989, hence the start year for the present analysis.

2. All data in this policy brief come from the UCDP. See also: 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. For more information on UCDP data, visit ucdp.uu.se.
4. For a more extensive discussion of the conflict, see Obermeier & Rustad (2023).
5. We use the UN's delineation of sub-regions; notably Mozambique is considered Eastern Africa rather than Southern Africa. Available at: unstats.un.org/unsd/methodology/m49/#geo-regions.
6. Abdualmoniem Elfaki (2022) What is behind the tribal violence in Sudan's Blue Nile State? *Al Jazeera*, 19 July. Available at: www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/7/19/whats-behind-tribal-violence-in-sudans-blue-nile-state-explainer.
7. AFP (2022) Researchers brave relentless violence to work in DR Congo, *France24*, 9 February. Available at: www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220209-researchers-brave-relentless-violence-to-work-in-dr-congo.
8. Marie Sandnes (2023) Security implications of the 2023 coup in Niger: How can peace and conflict theories inform our understanding? Trial lecture, Doctoral defence, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway, 4 September.

THE AUTHOR

Anna Marie Obermeier is a Research Assistant in the Peace and Conflict Dynamics department at PRIO.

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.