

Decrease in the number of fatalities, but great power involvement worries researchers

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According to new data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), the number of fatalities in organized violence decreased for the second consecutive year in 2016. However, the large share of conflicts with external involvement is a source of concern.

In 2016, a little over 102 000 people were killed in organized violence. The previous year, this number was just below 119 000. This means that the number of deaths has decreased by over 20 % since the peak year 2014 with 131 000 fatalities, which was the bloodiest year since the Rwandan genocide. Despite the positive trend observed over the past two years, 2016 was the fifth worst year seen over the entire post-Cold War period.

'It is too early to tell whether this will turn out to be a lasting trend back toward the low levels of conflict that prevailed in the world in the beginning of the 2000s. In that period the number of fatalities was below 40 000 almost every year', says Marie Allansson, who is a project leader in UCDP.

The trend is largely driven by developments in Syria. The temporary ceasefire between the government and some of the rebel groups meant that the level of intensity in the fighting diminished during parts of the year. This, in turn, contributed to the fact that the year as a whole saw fewer fatalities in Syria, despite the dramatic siege of Aleppo and the intense fighting that pushed the Islamic State from some of its strongholds.

'The involvement of external actors in the conflict is especially worrying', says Lotta Themnér, who is a project leader in UCDP, says. 'We know from previous cases that smaller conflicts tend to escalate into major wars especially when great powers are involved with troops, and in particular, when they support different sides in the [conflict](#).'

Given this, it is very worrying that the share of conflicts with external troop involvement was on the highest level seen since 1946, both in 2015 and 2016. Almost 40 percent of the armed conflicts in the world are now internationalized in the sense that they involved at least one external actor. The three conflicts with the most fatalities in 2016, namely Syria (more than 40 000 fatalities), Afghanistan (18 000 fatalities), and Iraq (11 500), are all internationalized with extensive foreign involvement over the years.

Total [fatality](#) numbers hide that some conflicts became less violent whereas violence escalated in others. Several very serious conflicts decreased in intensity in 2016, notably in Ukraine, Pakistan and Nigeria. However, the total number of fatalities inflicted in the different conflicts involving the Islamic State increased.

The importance of great power involvement is clearly seen in the dramatic development in East Asia. During the Cold War, East Asia was the primary battlefield, with the Korean War, the Vietnam War and many other conflicts becoming parts of the global super power rivalry. However, the 1970s saw a change, when China and the United States ceased fighting each other through wars by proxy, and instead became de facto allies against the Soviet Union. This meant that the main battlefield of the Cold War shifted elsewhere, above all to Afghanistan and several wars in Africa, but also to Latin America.

'Even though some conflicts are still fought in East Asia, it is remarkable how few people are killed in organized violence in the region nowadays,

especially given the fact that such a large part of the population of the world live there', UCDP Director Erik Melander notes. 'The East Asian peace is a significant success that we tend to forget when we are rightfully worried about problems in other regions, such as the Middle East. Furthermore, one should recall that there are a number of serious risks in East Asia, among others several territorial disputes, and in the worst case they could escalate quickly into major wars', Melander points out.

A six-year research program on the East Asian Peace, financed by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond, is now coming to an end at Uppsala University, with numerous findings being published.

The results will be published in *Journal of Peace Research* at a later date.

Provided by Uppsala University

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