The world is becoming less war-prone. The number of civil wars dropped by three-quarters from 1992 to 2005. And the number of international conflicts has been falling since the mid-1970s – the most sustained decline in two centuries.

The 1945 United Nations Charter promised “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war.” Today, the UN collects statistics on everything from schools and hunger to measles and coal mines. But on war, it has no official figures. Why not?

The short answer is politics. In 2005, all armed conflicts were being fought within states, not between them. Many governments believe that internal violence is a domestic matter, and no business of the UN. So they will not provide details.

Existing global statistics on wars, conflicts and genocides come from a handful of research institutes. Each uses different methods, and few update their figures annually. This atlas draws on data from the Human Security Report 2005 and the Human Security Brief 2006.

The main types of armed conflict are described overleaf. Some individual conflicts are a hybrid of different types of violence. The 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, for example, started as an inter-state conflict but soon became an internationalized intra-state conflict. Iraq also suffers from non-state conflicts between sectarian militias.

Worldwide, the number of state-based conflicts increased steadily from the early 1950s until the end of the Cold War. 1992 marks the beginning of a sharp decline. But this trend was not the same across all regions. On the one hand, the Cold War had frozen many tensions, which in some regions exploded into violence. And on the other hand, the post-Cold War era reduced superpower sponsorship of civil wars and allowed a surge of international peacemaking. These various causes of war and peace are explored in the final section of the atlas.

Overall, the trends in state-based conflicts are remarkably encouraging. The next section of this atlas examines the two other main forms of organized political violence: non-state conflicts and one-sided violence.
Europe: The Cold War was associated with four decades of uneasy peace from the 1950s until the end of the 1980s. Violence in the Balkans followed the breakup of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

Middle East & North Africa: Armed conflicts increased unevenly from the 1940s to 1980, but with growing political repression they have since declined by nearly 40%.

Regional Trends

Americas: Armed conflicts, driven in part by Cold War politics, increased from the 1960s to the end of the 1980s, especially in Central America, and then fell significantly.

Sub-Saharan Africa: Conflicts rose unevenly during the post-colonial period from the mid-1960s to the end of the century, but have been falling since 1999.

Europe: The Cold War was associated with four decades of uneasy peace from the 1950s until the end of the 1980s. Violence in the Balkans followed the breakup of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

Middle East & North Africa: Armed conflicts increased unevenly from the 1940s to 1980, but with growing political repression they have since declined by nearly 40%.

Central & South Asia: The region’s conflicts were mainly in South Asia until the 1970s. The 1991 breakup of the Soviet Union triggered fresh conflicts in Central Asia (including the Caucasus).

East & SE Asia & Oceania: Conflicts have dropped by 46% since 1978, a decline associated with rising prosperity, democratization, and the end of large-scale foreign military intervention.

Definitions

Wars are high-intensity armed conflicts. Whether a conflict qualifies as a war depends on the number of battle-deaths that occur in a year.

Battle-deaths include civilians caught in the crossfire as well as combatants, but not deaths from war-induced disease and starvation, nor the deliberate killing of unarmed civilians.

An armed conflict with over 1,000 battle-deaths in a year is called a war. When the number of battle-deaths in an armed conflict falls below 25 per year, it is no longer counted as a conflict.

There are two main types of armed conflict. This section of the atlas covers state-based conflicts: those that involve at least one national government. Non-state conflicts, fought between militias, warlords, or ethnic groups, without the involvement of the national government, are covered in the next section.

There are four forms of state-based conflict (called wars if they cause more than 1,000 battle-deaths a year):

- Inter-state conflicts are between states. Few in number, these have declined unevenly since the late 1980s.
- Extra-state conflicts are between a state and an armed group outside the state’s own territory. These are mostly colonial conflicts.
- Intra-state conflicts (which include civil wars) are between a government and a non-state group. In 1946, 47% of conflicts were intra-state. By 2005, the figure was 100%.
- Internationalized intra-state conflicts occur when the government, or an armed group opposing it, receives military support from one or more foreign states, as in Afghanistan since 2001.
Since 1946, Chad has been involved in international conflicts with or against: Algeria, Republic of Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Libya (twice), Nigeria, and Sudan.

Seven of the nine most conflict-prone states are former colonial powers or Cold War superpowers.
Three-quarters of countries have had one or more state-based armed conflicts within their own borders since 1946.

India’s 13 home-soil conflicts include war with Pakistan, and insurgencies in Punjab, in Kashmir, and in five states in the north-east.

Apart from Israel, these are all developing countries with large, multi-ethnic populations. Most of these conflicts have involved insurgents seeking secession or greater autonomy.

The previous map counted all international wars. For colonial states and for the “great powers,” many of these were fought abroad. This map only counts conflicts involving government forces fought wholly or partially on a state’s home soil or in its territorial waters. It excludes non-state conflicts — those between rival warlords and militias — and genocide and other acts of one-sided violence. Of the nine most conflict-prone states identified in the previous map, three (Australia, Netherlands and Portugal) have had no home-soil conflicts at all; France had one and the UK had two.

Most Home-soil Conflicts
Countries that have fought the highest number of conflicts at home 1946–2005

- India: 13
- Myanmar: 9
- China: 8
- Ethiopia: 8
- Indonesia: 7
- Israel and West Bank & Gaza: 7
- Nigeria: 6

Number of armed conflicts involving government forces fought within a country or its territorial waters 1946–2005

- 13
- 7 – 9
- 1 – 3
- 0
- no data

State-Based Conflicts on Home Soil
YEARS IN CONFLICT
Total number of years in which a country has been involved in at least one conflict 1946–2005

- 30 or more
- 15 – 29
- 5 – 14
- 1 – 4
- 0
- no data

Countries with the highest number of years in conflict 1946–2005

Israel: 58
Myanmar: 57
Philippines: 50
UK: 49
India: 48
Ethiopia: 44
Colombia: 43
Indonesia: 41
Iraq: 41
Chad: 39

STATES MOST OFTEN IN COMBAT
Countries with the highest number of years in conflict 1946–2005

- Israel has been engaged in armed conflict for every one of the 58 years since its creation in 1948.
- The UK has been engaged in an armed conflict, at home or abroad, for four years out of every five since 1946.
- As with other struggles for independence, Algeria’s nine years of anti-colonial warfare are not shown on the map.

In spite of the worldwide decline in armed conflict, the overwhelming majority of human beings aged over 60 have lived through at least one period in which their government was actively engaged in armed conflict. The countries shown in red on the map have spent more years in conflict than at peace. Only conflicts involving government forces have been counted, and counts started only when a state became independent, so the sometimes bitter years of fighting for independence from colonial rule are not included.

These figures capture the experience of a state’s armed forces, but not necessarily of its people. In many countries in conflict, most citizens live a long way from the fighting.

Only 21 of the world’s states have been entirely free from state-based armed conflicts since World War II.