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# Violent Conflicts in the Middle East: A Quantitative Perspective

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The Middle East has long been considered one of the most conflict-ridden areas in the world. The ongoing events over the past decade of the “Arab Spring” that intended to march the Middle East toward a more positive future have instead deepened regional instability, fanned existing conflicts, and sparked new turmoil. This study examines conflicts in the Middle East and the way in which they end in comparison to global trends. It offers an additional perspective on Middle East conflict research through data and quantitative analysis, and provides a preliminary foundation for further research on the question of whether the characteristics of Middle East conflicts are unique or resemble global trends. Quantitative analysis is based on data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), which includes data on 347 “conflict years” in the Middle East from 1946 to 2018. The study investigates the types of conflict, their scope, intensity, number of fatalities caused, and ways in which they ended. These conflicts are characterized by a high level of intensity and a high degree of international involvement, and therefore evince low chances of peaceful resolution. Findings show that beginning in 2003, there was a sharp rise in the scope of conflicts in

the Middle East, primarily in intrastate conflicts. However, since 2014 there has been a decline in the number of fatalities. The findings also indicate that most conflicts in the Middle East do not differ in nature from conflicts in other arenas around the world.

**Keywords:** Middle East, violent conflicts, intrastate conflicts, UCDP, civil war, conflict intensity, international involvement, conflict resolution

## Introduction

Since 1945, the Middle East has been viewed as an area afflicted by conflict and confrontation (Sørli et al., 2005), with the most prominent of those conflicts being the Arab-Israeli wars, the Iran-Iraq War, and the First (1991) and Second (2003) Gulf Wars. These were joined by conflicts and civil wars in Iraq, Syria, Algeria, Jordan, Oman, Yemen, and Lebanon, as well as border disputes such as those between Egypt and Libya, Jordan and Syria, Israel and Lebanon, Iraq and Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Yemen, and others. Many of these conflicts are the result of colonial legacies and the fragility of the countries that emerged in their wake from the early twentieth century through the 1970s. Competing ideologies, ethnic and religious tensions, competition between the powers, and the development of autocratic nation-states are some of the accepted causes of conflict in the region (Fox, 2001; Sørli et al., 2005).

The events of the “Arab Spring” that swept through the Middle East beginning nearly a decade ago have deepened regional instability and tensions that have long characterized the region and sparked new conflicts. The regional turmoil has assumed various conceptual and structural forms over the years; prominent among have been the “revolution” phase (2010–2011), which represents the uprisings that led to the downfall of four regimes—in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen—and to turmoil within Syria, which is still struggling to stabilize itself following a prolonged civil war. Other countries that did not experience turmoil directly (Iraq, Bahrain, Jordan, and Lebanon)

are characterized by ongoing instability. The rise of the Salafi-jihadists from 2014–2016 and the emergence of the Islamic State, which attempted through violent means to impose the Salafi-jihadist idea as the region’s leading ideology, as well as the increased involvement in the Middle East cauldron of regional and international actors driven by competing political and economic interests, all served to make the Middle East a fragile, chaotic, and violent arena (Valensi, 2015).

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This study examines the violent conflicts in the Middle East over the past 72 years, starting in 1946, the year following the end of World War II, through 2018, from a quantitative-statistical perspective. The purpose of this study is to enable a deeper understanding of Middle East conflicts—their various types, scope, intensity, the number of fatalities caused, and how they are resolved. This topic has been examined relatively little in quantitative research (compared to qualitative analyses). The study will also compare Middle East conflicts with conflicts in other arenas worldwide.

The findings show that beginning in 2003 there was a sharp rise in the scope of conflicts in the Middle East, primarily in intrastate conflicts.

This trend is inconsistent with events at the global level, where there has even been a slight decline in the scope of such conflicts since 2016. In addition, there is a trend both in the Middle East and globally of a gradual and continuous increase in the incidence of intrastate conflicts, as opposed to interstate disputes. A similar trend, both in the Middle East and in the global arena, indicates an increase in foreign involvement in conflicts. However, contrary to the global trend that demonstrates a decline in high intensity wars and an increase in the incidence of low intensity conflicts, the Middle East is characterized by a relatively higher rate of high intensity wars. There has been a sharp increase in the number of fatalities in the Middle East since 2011, although since 2014 there has been a decline of some 75 percent in fatalities. Finally, around 74 percent of all conflicts in the Middle East have not concluded.<sup>1</sup> Of the conflicts that ended, the findings indicate that the most common ways to end disputes are low levels of activity (conflicts that do not come to a complete conclusion); a military victory by the state over rebels; and regulation of the conflict through a ceasefire. On the other hand, the less common ways to end a conflict in the region are victory for rebels (the non-state party) or a peace agreement. That conflicts in the Middle East persist and sometimes do not end at all can be attributed to the characteristics noted above—a high level of intensity and a great degree of foreign involvement, which reduce the chances of bringing conflicts to an end, in particular through peaceful means. Therefore, in most cases conflicts in the Middle East reflect global trends.

The article includes a review of the relevant literature on conflicts in the Middle East and around the world and the ways they are terminated. The methodology is described below, including the research method and definition of variables. The empirical findings that emerged from the analysis are then discussed in detail. Finally, the main conclusions

and recommendations for future research are presented.

## Literature Review

For years, the Middle East was considered one of the most violent areas in the world. Since the Cold War, the Middle East has witnessed a series of intrastate wars that are among the most prolonged conflicts in the world (for example, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict) and bloody interstate wars (for example, the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-1988). Moreover, foreign actors are prominently involved in the region (as in Iraq in 1991 and 2003, and in Syria in 2015). This section presents some notable findings from the literature on theories and conceptualizations of conflict types, their intensity, and their termination, including from the literature on conflict research in general and the Middle East in particular.

### Conflict Types

The research literature discusses primarily two types of conflict. The first focuses on conflicts between states; the second focuses on conflicts inside states—between the regime and non-state actors (for example a rebel organization). This division is largely related to competing paradigms in international relations. The realism paradigm dominated research during the period when conflicts between states were common, and emphasized the centrality of states as well as the importance of structural factors, polarities, and the balance of forces in the global system as possible drivers for the outbreak of conflicts (Cunningham & Lemke, 2013). On the other hand, later theories such as liberalism and especially constructivism began to focus on non-state actors as influencers of political processes and on “softer” considerations that go beyond the discussion of interests, power, and influence (that are common in realism) as motivators for actors’ behavior. The non-state actors are violent and often threaten the state, or fight each other without any interference on the part of the state. These organizations

threaten national and international security as they challenge the state monopoly through the use of force, usually within defined territory, thus creating a phenomenon of intrastate conflicts (Williams, 2008). These conflicts are considered a grave threat to global peace and security, given their particularly lethal form of warfare. They are characterized by slim prospects for termination through regulation and peace agreements (Salman, 2014; Backer & Huth, 2014; Toft, 2010).<sup>2</sup>

The widespread proliferation of violent non-state actors has led to the fact that since the end of the Cold War, the most common type of conflict currently occurring in the world in general and the Middle East in particular is intrastate conflict that includes ethnic/religious conflict, revolution, and genocide (Schiff, 2018). The number of interstate conflicts, on the other hand, has remained relatively low.

### ***Conflict Intensity***

Conflict intensity is measured primarily in the number of fatalities, although the issue is sometimes examined through the number of combatants and the size of the combat area.<sup>3</sup> Clearly many factors affect the intensity of both interstate and intrastate conflicts,<sup>4</sup> and can be classified in three categories: psychological factors, internal state factors (socio-economic), and external factors. Another significant factor relates to the competing ideologies of the parties to the conflict. Political, secular, and religious ideologies often legitimize the use of violence, accentuate the differences between rival groups, and raise the level of hostility between them. Fundamental belief in ideology can lead people to sacrifice their lives in its name (Taber, 2002; Sanin & Wood, 2014; Ugarriza & Craig, 2012).

One of the factors affecting the intensity of intrastate conflict is a difference in religious, cultural, and ethnic identification between different population sectors. Such gaps and contrasting worldviews prolong the duration of the conflict and make it difficult for the parties to conduct successful negotiations (Leng & Regan,

2003; Toft, 2003). Feelings of belonging and societal and sectorial solidarity affect conflict intensity and the willingness of communities to protect their identity. Economic ability (Asal & Rethemeyer, 2008) and type of regime are other factors that influence conflict intensity and the strength and staying power of the parties. Thus, for example, democratic regimes are less violent, and therefore the intensity of conflict within democratic states will be lower (Fearon, 2004).

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Furthermore, intensity of conflict may also be influenced by external factors such as the involvement of foreign actors. Such support, usually expressed in the form of military armament and economic aid, influences the strength and spirit of the fighting forces (Saideman, 2001; Filote, et al., 2016). In fact, the longer and more violent a conflict and the higher its intensity, the harder it will be for the parties to terminate the conflict peacefully (Deitch, 2016).

### ***Termination of Conflicts***

Conflict resolution as a field of research began in the 1950s and 1960s and matured in the era following the Cold War. Conflict resolution research poses several challenges, especially in view of the rise in internal conflicts and the global war on terror that has weakened the idea of "democratic peace," whereby there is a low chance of violent conflict in democratic states (Ramsbotham et al., 2011).

A common definition of conflict termination is when there has been a significant reduction in the number of fatalities. However, it is clear



that the means of termination is an empirical phenomenon that is difficult to characterize and measure. In fact, there are a number of ways to terminate conflicts, from military victory and annihilation of the enemy to a peace agreement with the enemy. In the pre-World War II era, most internal wars ended when one party completely defeated the rival who surrendered, was annihilated, or fled (Toft,

parties, interest groups, and security bodies to the peace process, which they regard as running counter to interests. Psychological barriers are cognitive and emotional barriers, such as national narratives, values, culture, ideology, or religion, which make it difficult to change attitudes toward rivals and to the conflict as a whole. Thus these barriers may make it difficult to accept compromises and concessions, and lead to skepticism regarding a peace process and resolution of the conflict.

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2010). However, the standard assumption today is that a conflict does not necessarily end with a military victory or a peace agreement, but in other circumstances that are less sharply defined, such as fatigue on both sides (Kreutz, 2010).<sup>5</sup> In fact, the number of internal wars that have ended without a decisive military victory or peace agreement has increased significantly since the end of the Cold War (Toft, 2010).<sup>6</sup> Kreutz (2010) expanded the conventional division of termination of conflicts into four types: military victory, peace agreement, ceasefire, and “other,” with the latter category the most common end to internal disputes in 1946-2005.

The involvement of many parties can lead to difficulties in finding peaceful solutions to conflicts. According to Yaakov Bar-Simantov (2010) there are strategic, structural, and psychological barriers to a peaceful resolution of disputes. Strategic barriers arise from security risks following peacemaking and tangible concessions. These barriers also relate to the strategies implemented by the parties, sometimes due to concerns over the future, ignoring the need to construct peace. Structural barriers relate to internal, bureaucratic, and institutional constraints that create difficulties for the peace process. These barriers stem from the opposition of political elites, political

Most studies surmise that negotiations to terminate a conflict contribute to the stability of peace more than military victories (Licklider, 1995; Dubey, 2002; Fortna, 2008; Toft, 2003). However, Luttwak posits otherwise, and contends that wars lead to termination of conflict (Luttwak, 1999). In this context, Wagner’s premise (1993) supports Luttwak’s approach, arguing that negotiated settlements tend to break down due to the failure to involve rebel forces in a new government, while victory leads to the destruction of the opponent in a way that prevents recurrence of the conflict.<sup>7</sup> Similarly Kreutz (2010) finds that military victory on the whole characterizes short conflicts and reduces the chance of their recurrence. However, Hartzell (Hartzell, 2009; Hartzell, 2007) examines 108 civil wars that occurred between 1945 and 1999, and concludes that both military victories and negotiated settlements reduce the chances of conflict recurrence. Other researchers found that there is indeed no statistical significance to the means of termination and the duration of peace (Doyle & Sambanis, 2000; Walter, 2004).

### ***The Study of Middle East Conflicts***

In the most recent research on Middle East conflicts, one school of thought tends to attribute realistic explanations (cost-benefit considerations, power, and interests) to the large number of conflicts and wars in the region (Sørli et al., 2005; Milton-Edwards & Hinchcliffe, 2007). This school of thought emerged in response to scholars who rely on a substantive view and attribute a Hobbesian nature to the region

(Gran, 1998; Salamey, 2009; Hariri, 2015). These researchers surmise that the roots of the conflict in the Middle East lie in the region's economic, cultural, post-colonial, and institutional characteristics (Gran, 1998). The economic approach explains the uniqueness as a product of the failure to establish liberal economics in the region, that is, the weakness of the middle classes and poor international economic policy in the region. Cultural explanations focus on the failure of Middle East modernization processes, the predominance of Muslim codes and culture, gender superiority, and widespread cultural suspicion of Western modernization. Another cultural aspect is linked to post-colonial views, which claim that it was Western colonialism that led to the creation of fragile and dependent Middle East policy establishments and the rejection of democratic institutions and values. Institutional explanations focus on the absence of proper democratic institutions in the Middle East that work to advance political freedoms and are characterized by military and security dominance (Salamey, 2009).

In contrast, realist researchers do not see the Middle East as a unique region, and attribute the phenomenon of conflict to universal explanations, resulting from a desire for power and influence. In their book *Conflicts in the Middle East since 1945*, Milton-Edwards and Hinchcliffe analyze several conflicts in the Middle East, including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Iran-Iraq War, and clashes between the Kurds and the Iraqi government through an examination of the social, political, cultural, and religious characteristics of each of the arenas. They contend that in many cases, the roots of the conflict lie in the ongoing history of intervention by external powers motivated by strategic interests, including access to regions rich in natural resources, primarily oil, and do not result from characteristics unique to the Middle East (Milton-Edwards & Hinchcliffe, 2007).

The continued involvement of external actors in the region is usually conducted in the name of the battle against extremist religious

groups (such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State) or in the name of humanitarian intervention, whether as a justification or a pretext (such as in Libya and Syria). These accelerated clashes and proxy wars and encouraged battles for control, influence, and power (Mahdavi, 2015).

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Quantitative studies examining the causes of conflict in the Middle East in comparison to other arenas around the world have also concluded that “there is nothing mysterious or particular about conflicts in the Middle East or in Muslim countries.” The conflicts can be explained satisfactorily with general theories of civil war and conflict resolution (Sørli et al., 2005). These studies shed light on the wide range of different types of conflict in the Middle East that go beyond the classic definition of military warfare and extend to political violence, low intensity fighting, malign propaganda, economic boycotts, territorial and water disputes, resistance to occupation, and more, and maps the clashes that have occurred in the region according to several criteria (Milton-Edwards & Hinchcliffe, 2007): interstate clashes, including clashes between Arabs and Iranians, between Israelis and Arabs, and between Arabs and Arabs; regional clashes that occurred mainly as part of the Arab-Israeli conflict; and clashes between regional and external actors such as the 1956 Sinai Campaign and the 1991 Gulf War. Finally, there are intrastate conflicts and ethnic violence, including the Lebanese Civil War of 1975-1990; the tragic struggle of the Kurds—a minority spread among four countries in the region, whose demands range from recognition of their right to self-determination to political

and social rights in the countries in which they live; civil wars in Libya and Yemen; and the early stages of the fighting in Syria.

This division illustrates the change in the type of actors involved in the conflicts. In the past, research into regional conflicts dealt with traditional rivalries between states and competition for control of natural resources such as water and oil. From the 1990s, with the end of the superpower conflict in the framework of the Cold War, conflict research has focused on the growing role of non-state actors that began to compete with the sovereign state for power, influence, and resources.

The spread of intrastate conflicts in the Middle East, as in other arenas, especially Third World countries, is linked to the weakness of those countries and their limited ability to provide public services and security on a continuous basis, as evident in Afghanistan, Sudan, Lebanon, and Iraq. There are cases in which the regime provides basic public services in central towns but is less effective in the periphery. The government in these areas may share its sovereignty with violent non-state actors. This phenomenon, called “fragile sovereignty,” results from the friction and interface between the state and the violent non-state actors. The lack of full control by the state in a particular area is what enables the penetration by these actors and fans internal conflicts (Mulaj, 2010).

Furthermore, in some countries in the Middle East, national institutions do not reflect the will of the people, but rather the will of the ruling elite or the aspirations of a specific ethnic group. This reality leads to the rise of power elements that challenge central government, among them local leaders. Such processes can result in the emergence of sub-state entities and in some cases even lead to civil war, which can end with the collapse of the existing order.

Joel Migdal (1988) examines the question of relations between the state and civil society in Third World countries, including in the Middle East, through a model of state-society relations.

This model sharpens the struggle of the state against other social organizations. According to his findings, even though the government that emerged in these countries following the decolonization process has at its disposal resources greater than those of other social-political organizations in the country, and even though the rulers present a veneer of absolute state control over events in society, and of government and society being identical, for the most part they fail to achieve this, except for the sake of appearance. Consequently, they are weak states with strong societies (Migdal, 1988). In these countries, there is an ongoing struggle between state leaders on the one hand, who seek to mobilize residents and hoard resources in order to subordinate all and everything to one set of rules designed according to their vision, and on the other hand, traditional, social, local, and other organizations competing with them for *de facto* control. Sometimes these organizations are so powerful that they succeed in “conquering” parts of the country, as happened with Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq.

Like Migdal, Ayoob (1995) deals with conflicts in Third World countries, including in Middle East states, in the post-Cold War era. His arguments are based on two assumptions: first, these countries are characterized by a narrow legitimacy base; and second, security is rooted in the political space more than in the military space. He argues that the source of instability in these countries lies in the early stages of their creation. Namely, their late entry into the state system created the infrastructure for crises (Ayoob, 1995).

## Methodology

This study examines all violent conflicts in the geographical area of the Middle East (not including North Africa, and therefore the war in Libya is not included here) over the past 72 years, starting in 1946—the year after the end of World War II—through 2018, from a quantitative-statistical perspective. This time period was

chosen to correspond with the database through which the analysis was conducted. However, the research focuses on the past two decades and the impact of these conflicts on the Middle East system.

These violent conflicts include interstate conflicts and intrastate conflicts that occur between a state and a non-state party. The unit of analysis is 347 violent “conflict years,”<sup>8</sup> which include the total of conflict years examined in the Middle East, while making a comparison to trends in the international system. The purpose of this study is to enable a deeper understanding of Middle East conflicts—their various types, scope, intensity, number of fatalities caused, and how they are resolved. This topic has been examined relatively little in quantitative research compared to qualitative analyses.

### ***The Empirical Basis***

The study quantitatively-statistically examines 347 “conflict years” from 1946 to 2018 from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) database,<sup>9</sup> which contains a comprehensive list of 2,385 “conflict years” that occurred worldwide during this time frame. A violent conflict is defined as “a contested incompatibility that concerns government and/or territory where the use of armed force between two parties, of which at least one is the government of a state, results in at least 25 battle-related deaths in one calendar year” (UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset, 2013). The definition includes five components: first, the use of armed force: any physical weapon, including guns, but also sticks, stones, fire, water, and so on; second, at least 25 deaths in a calendar year as a result of the use of armed force between rivals; third, rivals: the government of a state or any opposition organization or alliance of these organizations. A government is defined as the party that controls the capital of a state, while an opposition organization is defined as a non-governmental organization that employs armed force in order to influence a given conflict. This database deals only with officially organized resistance, and

not with spontaneous violence. Fourth, the state: an internationally recognized sovereign government that controls a population and a defined territory; and fifth, a conflict pertaining to government and/or a disputed territory: opposing positions regarding government, i.e., opposition to the type of political system, to a change of central government, or a change of political composition. Alternatively, these disputes may be in relation to a specific territory, for example in the case of transfer of control of a specific territory to another state (international conflicts), a request for secession, or autonomy (intrastate conflicts) (UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset, 2013).

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For the purpose of the study, violent conflicts in the Middle East were coded according to selected criteria available in the framework of the database, which will be discussed extensively in the next section. A comparison will also be made between the Middle East system and the global system.<sup>10</sup> Data regarding the global arena likewise includes data for conflicts in the Middle East.

### ***Research Variables***

This study seeks to characterize conflicts in the Middle East arena and compare them to global conflicts according to five main criteria: the type of conflicts, their scope, their intensity, the number of fatalities caused, and how they are terminated.

*Type of conflict:* Coded according to the UCDP dataset as follows: (1) extra-systemic conflict: takes place between a state and a



non-state actor, with the state struggling to gain control of a territory outside of its own territory; (2) interstate conflict: takes place between two states; (3) intrastate conflict (internal): takes place within a state, where Party A is a government while Party B is a non-state actor (one or more). This type of conflict does not include foreign involvement by another government in fighting; (4) internal conflict with international involvement (internationalized internal): takes place between Party A, which is a government, and Party B, the non-state actor (one or more), together with foreign involvement by another government in the fighting.

*Scope of conflict:* The number of conflicts that take place in each given year, between 1946 and 2018.

*Intensity of conflict:* This variable relates to the level of violence, which is measured in the number of deaths in a calendar year. The variable was binary-coded by the dataset in the following way: (1) low intensity: between 25 and 999 battle-related deaths as a result of fighting between rival sides to a conflict in a calendar year; (2) war: at least 1,000 battle-related deaths as a result of fighting between rival sides to a conflict in a calendar year.

*Number of deaths:* A continuous variable of the exact number of fatalities in a calendar year, reported according to the UCDP database.<sup>11</sup>

*Termination of conflict:* According to the dataset, termination of conflict is when there are fewer than 25 deaths during a calendar year.<sup>12</sup> This variable was coded as follows: (1) peace agreement; (2) ceasefire; (3) government victory; (4) rebel victory; (5) low level of activity (due to a cause other than the above, for example, fatigue of one of the parties); (6) an actor ceases to exist.<sup>13</sup>

## Findings

Presentation of the findings will focus on conflicts that took place in the Middle East from 1946 to 2018, with reference to the five variables mentioned above.

## Scope and Trends

Figures 1 and 2 present data on the scope of conflicts (y-axis) between the years 1946 and 2018 (x-axis). Figure 1 provides a comparative view of the scope of global conflict by year (including the Middle East, 2,385 “conflict years” in total) compared to the Middle East (347 “conflict years”), while Figure 2 focuses only on the Middle East. Figure 1 indicates a significant increase of three and a half times in the scope of global conflicts between 1960 and 1991. Despite a decline in the 1990s and early 2000s, there is another increase starting in 2012, which peaked in 2016.

Figure 2 shows an increase in the number of conflicts in the Middle East from 1959 to 1967, and an additional increase from 1977 that remained relatively stable until 1995. From 2002 to 2018 there is a dramatic (sixfold) increase in the number of conflicts that occurred in the Middle East.

## Conflict Types

Figures 3 and 4 present data on the types of conflicts from 1946 to 2018.<sup>14</sup> Figure 3 focuses on the types of conflicts in the world (including the Middle East, 2,385 “conflict years” in total), while Figure 4 focuses only on the Middle East (347 “conflict years”). Figure 3 indicates that there is a significant decline in the scope of conflicts between countries in the world, and in the number of extra-systemic conflicts. However, there is a significant rise in the rate of conflicts inside states against non-state organizations, and these constitute the majority of conflicts in the world today (around 61 percent of all conflicts in 2018). Moreover, beginning in 2012, there has been an increase in the scope of internal conflicts characterized by foreign international support.

Figure 4 indicates that similar to the global trend, along with a limited scope of interstate conflicts and extra-systemic conflicts, there is a growing trend in the Middle East (constituting 58 percent of total conflicts in 2018) of intrastate conflicts between state and non-state

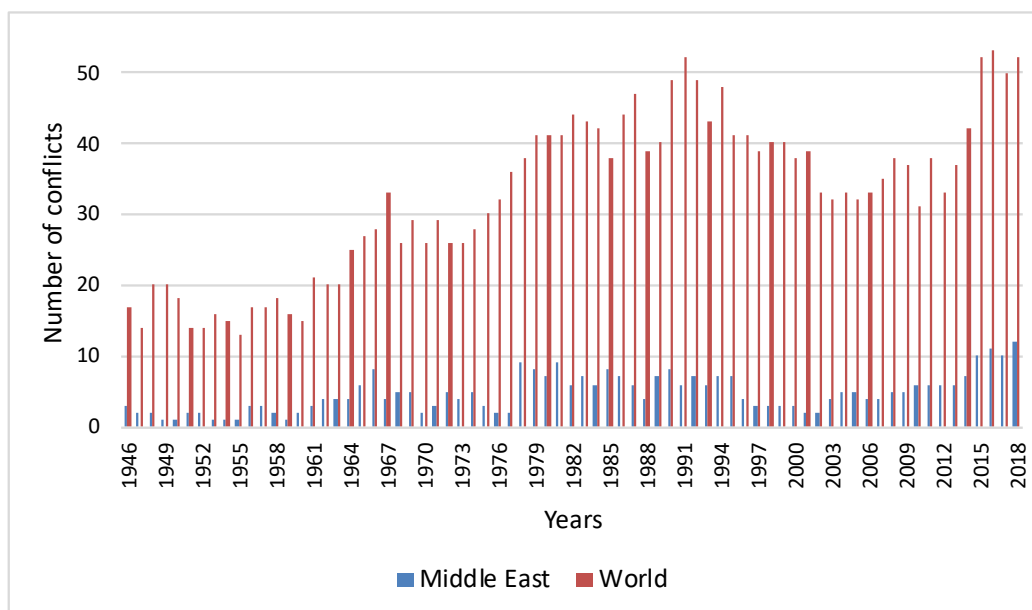


Figure 1. Scope of conflicts: global vs. regional trends, 1946-2018

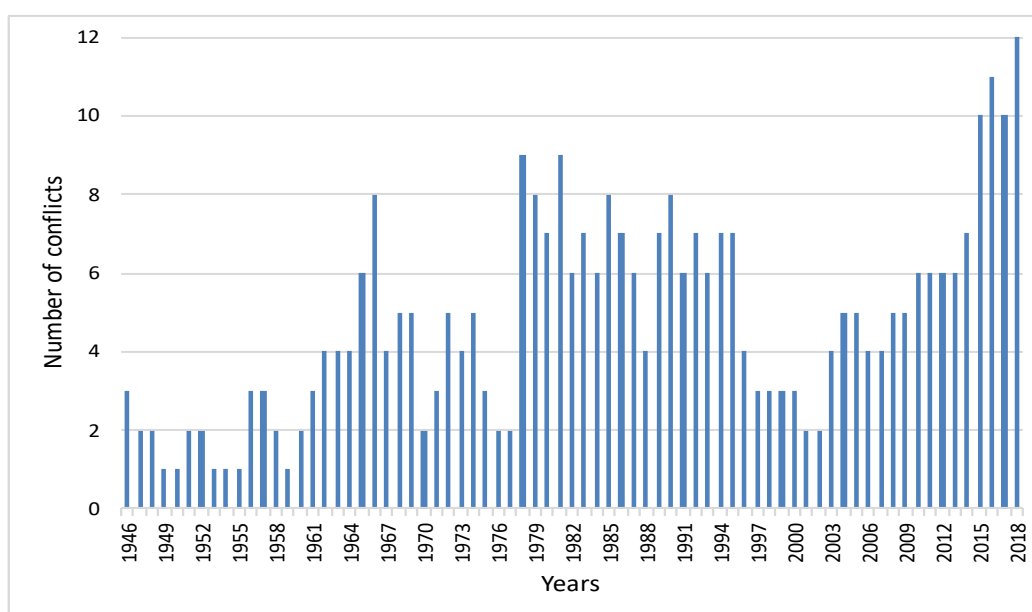


Figure 2. Scope of conflicts in the Middle East, 1946-2018

organizations. In line with the global trend there is also an increase in conflicts characterized by international involvement of foreign countries in internal fighting, in particular from 2014 onward.

### **Conflict Intensity**

Figures 5 and 6 present data on conflict intensity regarding conflicts around the world from 1946 to 2018 (including the Middle East, 2,385 “conflict years” in total), and the Middle East (347 “conflict years”), respectively. Figure 5 shows that as of

1946 there has been a consistent increase in the rate of low intensity conflicts (fewer than 999 deaths per year), alongside a relatively steady trend in the scope of wars (more than 1,000 deaths per year). Furthermore, it is evident that the incidence of wars among overall conflicts has decreased, compared to the rate of low intensity conflicts, which in 2018 accounted for about 88 percent of all conflicts in the world.

Figure 6, which focuses on the Middle East, charts a mixed trend, although for most of the

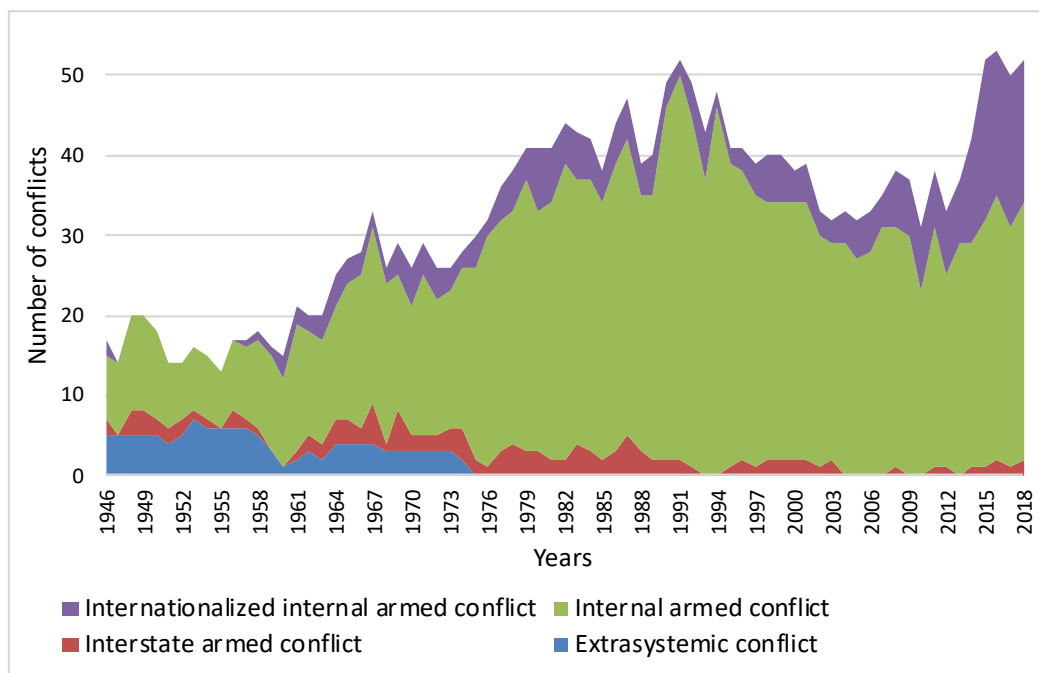


Figure 3. Conflict types: global trends, 1946-2018

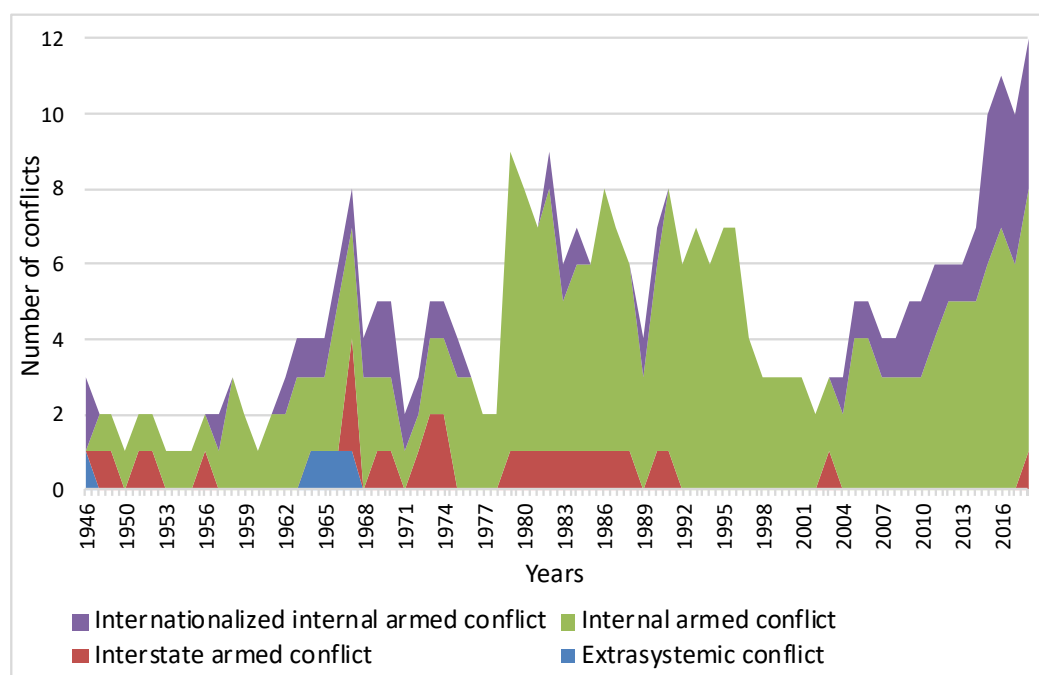


Figure 4. Conflict types: regional trends, 1946-2018

period under review, it is evident that the scope of low intensity conflicts exceeds the scope of wars. However, from 2009 and until 2015 there was an increase in the incidence of wars in this region, which influences the global trend.

### ***Number of Fatalities***

Figure 7 presents a comparison between the number of fatalities in the regional arena as compared to the global area (including the Middle East) from 1989 to 2018. The figure indicates that there is a sharp increase in the number of fatalities in the Middle East beginning

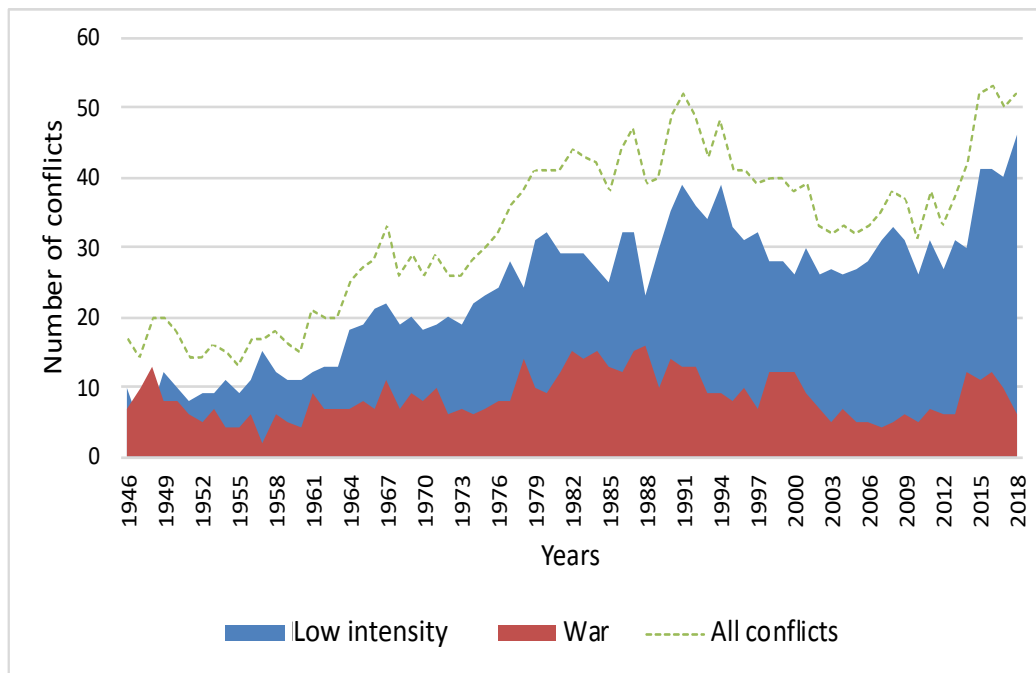


Figure 5. Conflict intensity: global trends, 1946-2018

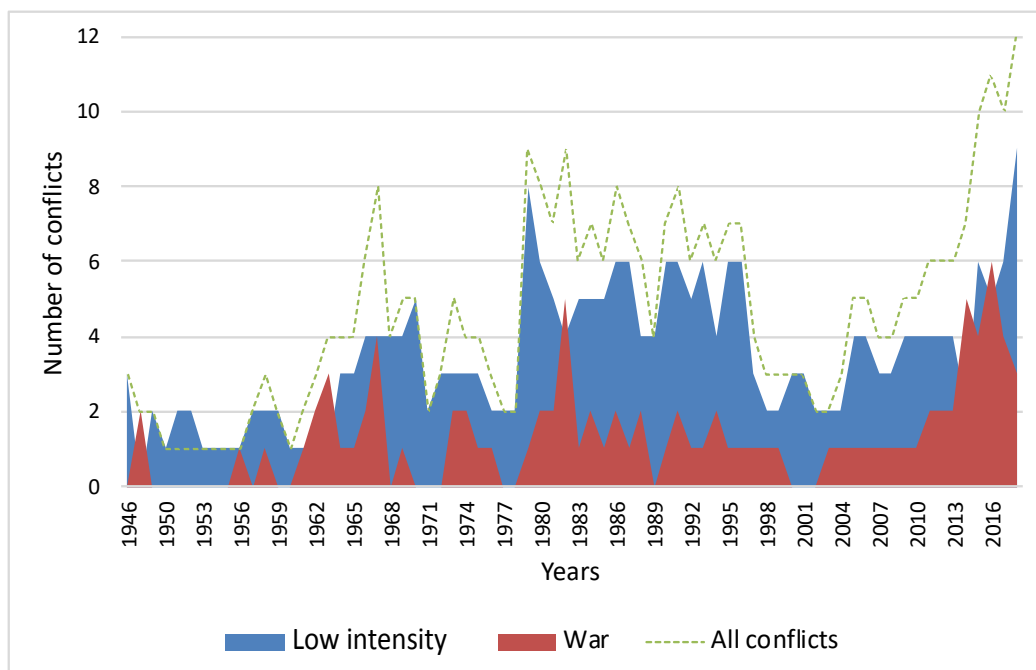


Figure 6. Conflict intensity: the Middle East, 1946-2018

from the events of the “Arab Spring” in 2011, peaking in 2014 with more than 73,000 fatalities. However, since 2014, there has been a consistent decline in the number of fatalities in the region, and they have declined by some 75 percent (some 19,000 fatalities in 2018). As of 2010 the number of fatalities has been compatible with

the global trend. A global increase in the number of fatalities in the late 1990s and from 2007 to 2009 does not characterize the regional arena.

### ***Termination of Conflicts***

Figures 8 and 9 present data on the termination of conflicts in the Middle East from 1946 to



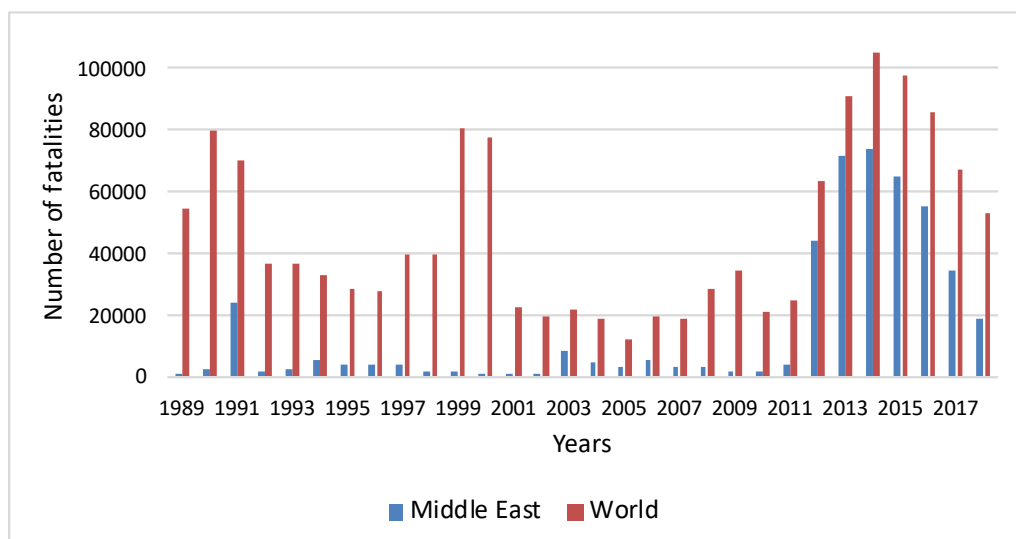


Figure 7. Number of fatalities: global vs. regional trends, 1989-2018

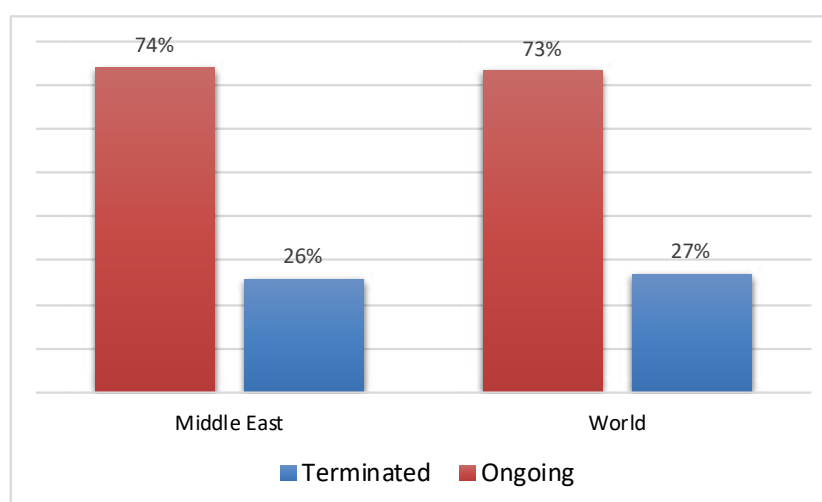


Figure 8. Termination of conflicts in the Middle East, 1946-2015\*

2015 and include 371 combat dyads.<sup>15</sup> Figure 8 shows that most of the conflicts in the region, comprising 276 dyads that constitute some 74 percent, have not been terminated and continue until the present day. However, some 26 percent of conflicts in the Middle East (composed of some 95 dyads) have terminated. Figure 9 focuses on the group of conflicts and presents distribution according to termination types. From the graph, it is evident that some 40 percent (38 dyads) of these conflicts terminated as a result of a decline in rebel activity over the years. Eighteen

percent (17 dyads) of the conflicts terminated as a result of a ceasefire between the parties. An additional 18 percent (17 dyads) terminated as a result of military victories by states. Ten percent of conflicts (9 dyads) terminated as a result of an actor ceasing to exist (for example, a rebel organization disbanding), while 8 percent (8 dyads) of these conflicts terminated as a result of a peace agreement signed between the warring parties. It is evident that only 6 percent of these conflicts (6 dyads) ended with a military victory by the rebels.

\* These figures chart each year of the conflict years, in other words, the unit of analysis is each and every year during which the conflict occurred, and not the conflict itself. For example, the conflict between Israel and Hamas is counted by the duration of years of combat. Years in which the sides reached a regulation or ceasefire are included in the category of terminated conflicts (26 percent).

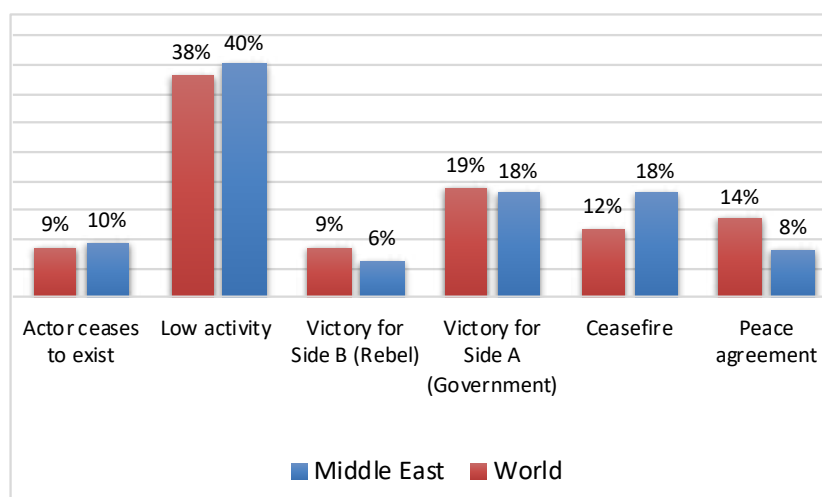


Figure 9. Type of termination of conflicts in the Middle East, 1946-2015

## Discussion

What, therefore, characterizes conflicts in the Middle East and how are they terminated?

Until the early 2000s, conflicts in the Middle East appeared to reflect trends similar to conflicts in other arenas around the world, such that the Middle East was not a more violent arena. In fact, between 1980 and 2005 there was a decline in conflicts in the Middle East relative to other areas (in the early 2000s there were more conflicts in Africa and in certain areas of Asia that also saw higher fatality figures than in the Middle East) (Sørli et al., 2005).<sup>16</sup>

However, data show that since 2003 there has been a gradual, steady increase in the number of conflicts in the region. During that year, three conflicts took place, including the US-British led coalition invasion of Iraq in March 2003 aimed at overthrowing the regime of Saddam Hussein (a struggle that continued until December 15, 2011, when the United States officially declared an end to its military involvement in Iraq); the battle against Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad within the framework of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; and the confrontation between Turkey and Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which Ankara defines as a terrorist entity.

The most prominent increase in the number of conflicts was registered in 2010 and was connected to the Arab tremors that shook the Middle East and raised hopes of a liberal and

democratic change. Instead, the Middle East became a more chaotic and violent arena. This trend peaked in 2018, a year in which there were 12 conflicts, involving a series of clashes with the Islamic State (in Syria, Iraq, and Egypt); fighting between the forces of Bashar al-Assad and the rebels in Syria; Egypt's struggle against its rival, the Muslim Brotherhood and especially against the HASAM movement—Harakat Sawa'd Misr; Iran's ongoing struggle against the Kurdish minority in its territory,

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and specifically against the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI) and the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK), which in 2016 renewed its armed struggle against the Iranian regime; Syria against the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and Turkey against the PKK in Turkey; and the war in Yemen. Israel is listed as a party to conflicts in that year as part of the conflict with Hamas, and as part of the low intensity confrontation with Iran along the border with Syria. Despite the relatively negligible position of the Kurds in

the Middle East story, they constitute integral and consistent actors involved in the region's conflicts.

In the remaining arenas in the world there was a consistent increase from 1946 until the end of the Cold War (including a peak in 1991). From 1991 there was a gradual decline until 2006, characterized by inconsistency until 2012, when until 2016 there was a sharp and consistent spike in conflicts; this can be attributed primarily to the events of the "Arab Spring." This trend has moderated and seen a minor decline since 2017. In the Middle East, on the other hand, there has been a consistent increase in the rate of conflicts since 2003.

With regard to the types of conflict, the Middle East does not differ from the global trend of a decline in the number of wars between states, and an increase in the number of intrastate (internal) wars; in 2018 there were seven such conflicts in the region: Egypt against the Islamic State and against the Islamist HASAM movement; Iran against the Iranian Kurds (PDKI, PJAK); Israel against Hamas, Syria against the SDF; and Turkey against the PKK.

Similar to the global trend, since 2014 there has also been an increase in conflicts in the Middle East that include international involvement of foreign countries in interstate fighting (internationalized internal). In 2018, for example, there were four such conflicts: Iraq's battle against the Islamic State organization (with the support of the United States and coalition countries); the Syrian regime's battle with the Islamic State (with Russian and Iranian support); the Syrian battle against the rebels (again with Russian and Iranian assistance); and the war in Yemen<sup>17</sup> (supported by Bahrain, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and the United Arab Emirates).

Foreign state involvement in internal conflicts affects the shape of the conflict. Not only do foreign states not solve the conflict, but overall, they extend it and make it more lethal (Saideman, 2001; Filote et al., 2016). The involvement of Iran and especially Russia in

Syria since September 2015 is a perfect example. Russia led to a strategic shift in the war following a number of successes by the rebels and the capture of large areas of Syria, bringing them close to the capital, Damascus. It is widely believed that the Assad regime was close to collapse and that it owes its survival to the support of the two foreign countries, Russia and Iran—intervention that also led to the long duration of the war and its lethal outcomes (more than half a million people are estimated to have been killed in the war).

With regard to conflict intensity, the Middle East differs from the global trend whereby there is a decline in the ratio of wars compared to the total number of conflicts in the world. Most conflicts (88 percent) in 2018 were characterized by low intensity (less than 999 fatalities). In the Middle East, on the other hand, there was an increase in the number of wars from 2011 to 2014 (in 2013 the number of wars was higher than the number of low intensity conflicts) and the number peaked in 2016 to six wars: Iraq-ISIS, Syria-ISIS, Syria-rebels, Yemen (Northern Yemen against supporters of President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi), Turkey-ISIS, and Turkey-PKK. Since 2016 there has been a decline in wars in the region, and in 2018 there were three wars: Syria-ISIS, Syria-rebels, and Yemen.

In line with the rising number of conflicts in the world, the events of the "Arab Spring" increased the number of fatalities in the Middle East, with a sharp rise since 2011. In comparison, the number of fatalities before the "Arab Spring" stood at 3,800. The number of fatalities peaked in 2014 (73,501) and was probably connected to the phenomenon of the Islamic State, which, after declaring itself a caliphate in June, wielded unrestrained terror against the Syrian and Iraqi populations. With the collapse of the Islamic caliphate and the significant damage inflicted on the organization's military capabilities, as well as the termination of the main fighting phase in Syria, there has been a downward trend (some 19,000 fatalities in 2018).

Seventy-four percent of conflicts in the Middle East from 1946 to 2015 did not end in the period under review.<sup>18</sup> Of those that terminated, 26 percent ended through a settlement (peace agreement or ceasefire).<sup>19</sup> Clearly these findings do not differ from the global trend.

Most conflicts in the Middle East that terminated through peace agreements, both intrastate and interstate conflicts (five out of eight conflicts), occurred from the late 1950s to the mid-1970s and later periods. It would seem that the number of conflicts terminating this way is decreasing. Examples include the peace agreement between Iraq and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in 1970; the Algiers agreement between Iran and Iraq (1975); South Yemen and North Yemen (1972); and the peace agreements with Front for the Liberation of Occupied South Yemen (1967) and the first Lebanese civil war (1958).<sup>20</sup>

Not surprisingly, the termination of conflicts in the Middle East through ceasefires (sometimes known as *hudna* or *tahadiya*) is more prevalent than peace agreements, as they allow for more ideological flexibility in the sense that a ceasefire does not require the sides to make significant ideological concessions or unequivocal declarations. However, in many cases, this type of termination leads to a recurrence of the conflict. Examples of such terminations are the ceasefire between Turkey and the PKK in 2013; Israel and Hezbollah (2006); Iran and the Kurdistan Free Life Party (2011); Egypt and al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya (1998); and more.

Only 24 percent of overall conflicts in the Middle East terminated with a military victory. Of these, 18 percent ended as a result of the military victory by the state. For example: the victory of the Lebanese government over the forces of Michel Aoun (1990); the victory of the government of Yemen over the Democratic Republic of Yemen (1994); and more. Furthermore, it is evident that just 6 percent of these conflicts terminated as a result of military victory over rebels, for example, the Ba'ath Party

coup in Iraq (1963); the Free Officers' Movement in Egypt (1958); the Neo-Ba'ath Revolution in Syria (1966); and more.

Approximately half of the conflicts did not officially terminate and were conducted at a low level of activity, that is, the death toll remained below 25 fatalities per year, with no definite and official termination such as a settlement or decisive victory. For example, it is evident that 40 percent of conflicts terminated as a result of diminishing rebel activity over the years, and another 10 percent terminated as a result of an actor that ceased to exist or diverted its military activity to the political dimension (such as al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades in the West Bank, or the Amal organization that abandoned its military operations).

## Conclusions

Studies on the Middle East tend to emphasize its violent character and the multitude of contests, conflicts, and wars that take place in the region relative to various other arenas in the world (Hariri, 2015; Sørli et al., 2005; Gran, 1998). This article compares conflicts in the region with other conflicts in the world using a quantitative method that relies on a broad database. The comparison shows that according to most of the criteria tested, the characteristics of conflicts in

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**The comparison shows that according to most of the criteria tested, the characteristics of conflicts in the Middle East and their development reflect similarities to the characteristics and trends of conflicts in the international arena.**

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the Middle East and their development reflect similarities to the characteristics and trends of conflicts in the international arena. Thus, regarding the types of conflict, findings show that the conflicts taking place in the Middle East and elsewhere in the world reflect a gradual and continuous increase in the ratio of intrastate conflicts to interstate conflicts.



Another data item relates to an increase in involvement by a foreign country in internal conflicts, both in the Middle East and in the global arena. In this context, the findings presented here support the claim that international involvement is one of the key factors leading to more lethal conflicts, translated into a higher number of fatalities. Similarly, the number of fatalities in the Middle East over the past decade reflects similar global data.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, as in other places in the world, most conflicts in the Middle East (as of 2015) have not yet terminated. Among the conflicts that have terminated, the least common ways to terminate intrastate conflicts in the region are: victory for rebels (the non-state party) or a peace agreement. This data is especially interesting given that most of the conflicts in the Middle East today are intrastate and therefore include non-state actors/rebels. This finding significantly challenges the effectiveness of the struggle of the non-state party and therefore indicates a low chance of success or victory for that party in conflicts.

The findings that are inconsistent with the global trend (but not significantly contradictory) relate to the scope and intensity of the conflict. Thus there was a drastic increase in the scope of intrastate conflicts in the Middle East from 2003 to 2018. At the global level, on the other hand, there is a moderation and even a slight decline in the scope of conflicts since 2016.

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**The violent reality and multiplicity of conflicts will continue to be a part of the Middle East landscape in the coming years, and hence the need to deepen the understanding of the issue is growing.**

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Furthermore, contrary to the global trend that demonstrates a decline in wars and an increase in the number of low intensity conflicts, it is evident that since 2003, and especially since the events of the “Arab Spring,” the Middle East is more violent than in previous years, and is characterized by a higher ratio of wars

in comparison to the global arena. In line with the level of clashes, it is evident there has also been a sharp increase in the number of fatalities in the Middle East since 2011, although since 2015 there is a decline of about 75 percent in fatalities.

These findings indicate on the one hand a more positive trend in the Middle East, whereby since 2015 there has been a decline in the number of wars and the number of fatalities in the region. On the other hand, data do not indicate the beginning of a period of peace, reconciliation, or agreement, but rather “fatigue” of one of the parties as a result of being worn down by the other party (usually the state party), especially since there is not a linear decline.

A further conclusion from the findings is that the widespread conflicts in the Middle East over the past decade reflect the broad spectrum existing in conflict classification in a way that undermines the conventional binary classification in quantitative research and in general research. Conflicts in the present era constitute a combination of a number of categories. Thus, for example, the civil war in Syria, which began as a local uprising, became a wide scale civil war to which a regional aspect was added with the growing involvement of Sunni states—Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey—on the one hand, and by Shiite elements headed by Iran and its proxy Hezbollah on the other. American involvement, especially since the establishment of the international coalition against the Islamic State in September 2014 and the entry of Russia into the Syrian maelstrom a year later, shaped the international nature of the conflict. This phenomenon, in which an intrastate crisis becomes a broad conflict with regional and international dimensions, is known in the literature as “cross and integrated conflicts” (Kriesberg, 1980). Thus, the conflict in Syria can be perceived as an intrastate conflict and an interstate conflict (the regime against Turkey). This complex reality undermines to some measure the validity of unequivocal

categories prevalent in quantitative research, and their ability to provide a comprehensive and complete explanation for complex political phenomena.

Finally, the Middle East in 2019 was rife with conflicts and clashes. The ongoing wars in Libya, Yemen, and to a lesser extent in Syria; the confrontation between Iran and its proxies and between Israel, which for the time being has been limited to disruptive and preventive actions in Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria, and containment actions in Gaza; the struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which has recently become a direct confrontation; the potential for escalation to a conflict between Iran and the United States; and the growing ferment of anti-regime sentiment among sectors of the public in their countries (Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt) that could translate into rebellion, clashes, and internal wars—all these suggest that the violent reality and multiplicity of conflicts will continue to be a part of the Middle East landscape in the coming years, and hence the need to deepen the understanding of the issue is growing.

This paper has focused on an initial attempt to characterize the conflicts in the Middle East on the basis of a number of parameters and with reference to a broad database, and to compare them to other disputes in the international arena. The use of theoretical statistics leads to a number of interesting initial conclusions that may constitute the foundation for further studies that will deepen the comparison between conflicts in the Middle East and those around the world through the use of additional criteria (for example, the duration of the conflict, the number of combatants, or the area affected as additional indices for conflict intensity). Furthermore, beyond description and characterization of the conflicts, the way that conflicts have been characterized in this paper indicates the potential for further research to address the factors that lead to the outbreak of conflict (including regime type, economic growth, natural resources, religion,

ethnicity, and more) using methods, tools, and methodologies of deductive statistics.

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## Notes

- 1 The UCDP database defines termination of conflict as a year in which there are fewer than 25 battle-related deaths.
- 2 Salman (2014, p. 163) notes that according to one estimate, between 1945 and 1990, approximately 3.3 million people were killed in 25 international wars that included the participation of 25 states, and in which mediation efforts to stop the conflicts lasted on average three months. On the other hand, during the same period some 16.2 million people were killed in 127 civil wars that took place in 73 countries, and in which mediation efforts went on for six years on average.
- 3 See: Political Instability Task Force dataset.
- 4 The article does not discuss the factors affecting conflict intensity, but only descriptive data.
- 5 However, Balcells and Kalyva (2014) determine that in the past decade there has been a trend showing an increase in the number of military victories of the state, compared to victories by rebels (the non-state party).
- 6 For more, see Fortna (2009), which examines why the date of change differs in both types of wars. In the last decade there has been an upward trend in the number of state victories compared to rebel; see Balcells & Kalyvas (2014). However, Carroll (1969) referred to international wars involving two or more countries, and claimed that most of them end with

peace agreements or ceasefire agreements. Civil wars, wars of independence and imperial wars, on the other hand, for the most part do not end with an agreement, but in other fashions.

- 7 See also Licklider (1995, p. 681) who supports his assumption, but only in wars based on identity.
- 8 The unit of analysis in the database is a “conflict year,” that is, one conflict containing several units/rows of analysis in the database, as per the number of years the conflict continued. The choice of this unit of analysis is necessary in order to obtain numerical data by years.
- 9 The Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) database is available online at: <http://ucdp.uu.se/#/>.
- 10 The coding is conducted through the use of a “geographic region” variable that was coded by the UCDP database as follows: (1) Europe; (2) the Middle East; (3) Asia; (4) Africa; (5) North and South America.
- 11 This variable was coded by the dataset for conflicts that began in 1989 and up to 2018 only.
- 12 For more see Kreutz (2010, p. 244).
- 13 This variable was coded by the dataset for conflicts that began in 1946 and up until 2015, with the dyad as the unit of analysis.
- 14 In contrast to other variables (scope of conflict, number of fatalities, and termination of conflicts), for variables consisting of multiple categories (conflict types and conflict intensity), two separate graphs were presented rather than one comparative graph. However, a comparison was made and the choice was solely for the sake of presentation.
- 15 Until now, the unit of analysis focused on two rivals only (for example, the Syrian conflict includes Rival A, the government of Syria, while Rival B includes all the organizations fighting against it). In this section, the analysis focuses on the dyad level, which refers separately to the different organizations fighting each country (for example: Syria-ISIS, Syria-al-Qaeda, etc.) in order to characterize in the best possible way termination of conflicts.
- 16 The only exception was the Iran-Iraq War, which made the region the world’s most bloody area during the 1980s.
- 17 The conflict in Yemen is different from the conflicts noted, as the involvement of the powers (American and Russia) is limited. However, there is greater involvement of regional actors.
- 18 See Note 16.
- 19 According to Deitch (2016) some 50.6 percent of violent intrastate conflicts in the world terminate with a settlement, as compared to 49.4 percent of conflicts that end with a military victory.
- 20 However, many of the conflicts that terminated with a peace agreement broke out anew in later years, but the dataset does not offer data on these conflicts. Furthermore, in the Israel context, the Oslo Accord did lead to an end of the conflict (namely, less than 25 deaths per year) and therefore was not coded in this category. In addition, the conflict between Israel and Egypt terminated in 1974 and therefore was not coded as termination as a result of a peace agreement (which was signed later on, in 1979, when the conflict was no longer active).
- 21 However, a global increase in the number of fatalities in the late 1990s and from 2007 to 2009 does not characterize the regional arena.