The UCDP Armed Conflict Definition

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Definition of armed conflict in international law

• No consensus about what constitutes armed conflict. The issue is intensively debated by experts in international law.
• Examples
  – Drone strikes against al-Qaida and affiliates outside Afghanistan.
  – The Irish Republican Army in Northern Ireland.
The UCDP definition of armed conflict:

• A widely used social science definition of armed conflict. (We do not attempt to assess whether a situation meets the criteria for armed conflict in international law.)
• Developed by the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (Wallensteen 1988; Heldt 1993).
• Cited more than 5000 times in Scholar Google.

• An armed conflict is 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.
Contested incompatibility

- The stated (in writing or verbally) generally incompatible positions.
- Incompatible positions are viewed as a defining property of the concept of conflict.
- The parties to the conflict have taken a position in favor of, or opposed to, a certain outcome, and an impossibility exists with respect to the positions being simultaneously realized.
- Example 1: territory X should be an independent state vs. territory X should be part of state Y.
- Example 2: state Z should be a one-party state vs. state Z should be a multi-party democracy.
- Stated positions are used since it would be impossible to observe underlying motivations and interests.
Why include contested incompatibility in the definition of conflict?

- Makes it possible to distinguish between different conflicts, and to count them.
- Separates conflict from mere aggregates of violent deaths.
- Based on an understanding of conflict as instrumental and political.
- In line with Clausewitz’s well-known dictum that war is “a continuation of political intercourse carried on with other means”.
- In line with Lasswell’s famous definition of politics as gaining and using power to decide “who gets what, when, and how”
- Defines away phenomena that do not count as conflict. For example, if fighting between groups is ritualistic, or the expression of an innate mindless urge to fight, and hence without a political purpose, that fighting would not qualify as conflict.
Concerning government and/or territory

- Incompatibility concerning government: type of political system, the replacement of the central government or the change of its composition. A governmental incompatibility concerns the structure or distribution of authority.
- Incompatibility concerning territory: the status of a specified territory, e.g. the change of the state in control of a certain territory (interstate conflict), secession or autonomy (intrastate conflict).
- Who is to make authoritative decisions over the population in a certain territory.
- Governance and territorial control are the ultimate means for regulating any disputed issue.
Armed force: The use of arms in organized violence

• Arms: any material means, e.g. manufactured weapons but also sticks, stones, fire, water, etc.

• Why include the use of armed force in the definition of conflict?
• Conflict is very common, and in many instances a constructive driver of societal change. We want to separate out the more destructive forms of conflict, and the use of armed force is a suitable criterion for this.

• Allows for the compilation of reliable and exhaustive lists of armed conflicts since use of armed force is typically widely reported when connected to organized parties and incompatibilities concerning government and/or territory.
“…two parties, of which at least one is the government of a state…”

• Conflict involves organized collectivities, and is thereby different from disputes between individuals. Because of the organized character of conflict parties, and because of the political nature of the disputed incompatibilities (government and/or territory), armed conflict is different from aggregations of homicides.
• The state is the primary organized actor in the modern international system, and all territory is claimed by a state (or several states).
• Any incompatibility over government and/or territory by definition concerns at least one state.
• The UCDP definition of armed conflict in this sense delimits state-based conflict.
• Opposition organization: Any non-governmental formally organized group of people having announced a name for their group and using armed force to influence the outcome of a stated incompatibility concerning government and/or territory.
“at least 25 battle-related deaths in one calendar year”

- Deaths resulting from the use of armed force between warring parties in a conflict.
- Includes traditional battlefield fighting, guerrilla activities (e.g. hit-and-run attacks / ambushes) and all kinds of bombardments of military units, cities and villages etc. The targets are usually the military itself and its installations, or state institutions and state representatives. All deaths - military as well as civilian - incurred in such situations, are counted as battle-related deaths, i.e., also civilians killed in crossfire, indiscriminate bombings, etc. (sometimes referred to as collateral damage).
- Why include a threshold of 25 deaths?
- The concept of conflict denotes serious conflagrations (compare international law).
- The threshold makes it much less likely that we will overlook any conflicts.
UCDP data on armed conflict

- Published yearly in the report series States in Armed Conflict since 1987, in the SIPRI Yearbook since 1988, and in the Journal of Peace Research since 1993.
- An extension of the UCDP armed conflict data for the period 1989-2000, using the same definition, and adding 1946-1988 as a common product.
- Yearly updates by UCDP, published in JPR.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>State-based armed conflict</th>
<th>One-sided violence</th>
<th>Non-state conflict</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Who?</strong></td>
<td>Governments, rebel groups</td>
<td>Governments, organized groups, e.g. rebel groups</td>
<td>Organized groups, e.g. rebel groups &amp; communal groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What?</strong></td>
<td>Battle-related deaths</td>
<td>Violence against civilians, e.g. massacres &amp; genocide</td>
<td>Communal violence, violence between rebel groups</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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2004: One-sided Violence

- Published in the Human Security Report.
- Ten-year overview in SIPRI yearbook.
2004: Non-state Conflict

- 1989-2014
- Published in the Human Security Report.
- Ten-year overview in SIPRI yearbook 2013.
2004: Yearly fatality estimates

- For all three forms of violence, including battle deaths for state-based armed conflict.
2012: UCDP Georeferenced Event Data (UCDP GED)

- Global event data on organized violence
- Covers state-based conflicts, non-state conflicts and one-sided violence
- Georeferenced with precision scores
- Temporal disaggregation with precision scores
- Current coding covers Africa, Asia and the Middle East 1989-2014
- Completely compatible with other UCDP datasets on organized violence
Uppsala Conflict Data Program

Explore:
- UCDP database
- Conflict Descriptions
- Actor Information
- Peace Agreements

Download:
- UCDP Georeferenced Event Dataset
- UCDP/PRI D Conflict Dataset
- Other UCDP Datasets
- Generate your own Datasets
Armed Conflicts by Incompatibility, 1946-2014

No. of Conflicts

Year


Territory & Government

Territory

Government
Fatalities in organized violence, 1989-2014, with and without the Rwandan genocide
Organized Violence in the World 2015
An assessment by the Uppsala Conflict Data Program

by Erik Melander, director

Introduction

New data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) show that well over 100,000 people were and if this trend continues an already very dire situation will rapidly become much worse. On the other hand the level of violence in 2014 is still much lower than the previous peak in 1994. Moreover, in the earlier post-World War II period