Death Toll in 2014's Bloodiest Wars Sharply Up on Previous Year

The body count from the top twenty deadliest wars in 2014 was more that 28% higher than in the previous year, research by the Project for the Study of the 21st Century (PS21) shows. Almost every major war in 2014 saw a significant increase in casualties.

According to analysis of a variety of data sets, 2014 saw at least fourteen conflicts that killed more than 1000 people, compared to only ten in 2013.

Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan remained the three deadliest wars, unchanged from the previous year but with all three seeing a significant spike in fatalities

Nigeria was the fourth deadliest, its number of deaths almost tripling on the previous year as the conflict with militant group, Boko Haram, intensified.

"Assessing casualty figures in conflict is notoriously difficult and many of the figures we are looking at here a probably underestimates," said PS21 Executive Director, Peter Apps. "The important thing, however, is that when you compare like with like data for 2014 and 2013, you get a very significant increase. That says something very concerning."

Many of the most violent conflicts involved radical Islamist groups – particularly Islamic State, the Taliban, Boko Haram and various Al Qaeda franchises.

Sudan and South Sudan remained amongst the world's bloodiest wars. Indeed, if the two countries had remained unified, their combined death toll would have pushed them to the number three spot above Afghanistan.

Ukraine, at peace in 2013, became the eighth bloodiest war, its death toll exceeding Somalia, Libya and Israel/the Palestinian territories.

The spike in violence appears part of a broader multi-year trend. Research published last year by the Australia and US-based Institute for Economics and Peace showed a steady decline in world peace and rise in conflict related violence every year since 2007, bucking a multi-decade improvement since the end of World War II.

Top 20 Deadliest Countries in 2014

Compared to Top 20 Deadliest Countries in 2013

Rank	2014	Death Toll	2013	Death Toll
1	Syria	76,021	Syria	73,447
2	Iraq	21,073	Afghanistan	10,172
3	Afghanistan	14,638	Iraq	9,742
4	Nigeria	11,529	Sudan	6,816
5	South Sudan	6,389	Pakistan	5,739
6	Pakistan	5,496	Nigeria	4,727
7	Sudan	5,335	South Sudan	4,168
8	Ukraine	4,707	Somalia	3,153
9	Somalia	4,447	CAR	2,364
10	CAR	3,347	DR Congo	1,976
11	Libya	2,825	India	885
12	Israel/Palestine	2,365	Mali	870
13	Yemen	1,500	Libya	643
14	DR Congo	1,235	Yemen	600
15	India	976	North Caucuses	529
16	Philippines	386	Thailand	455
17	Mali	380	Algeria	340
18	North Caucuses	341	Philippines	322
19	Thailand	330	Colombia	124
20	Algeria	242	Myanmar	62
Total		**163,562**		**127,134**
% Change		*28.7*		

Why are conflict death tolls rising so fast?

Peter Apps, Executive Director PS21

There are obviously a variety of different factors in each of these conflicts but there do seem to be some overarching themes. In a lot of theses wars, the actually killing is being done by remarkable small numbers of people - particularly members of the ultra-violent militant groups, such as ISIS, Boko Haram, etc. There's also probably the effect of the wider global rise in geopolitical tensions – both Syria and Ukraine in particular have at times resembled classics Cold War-style proxy conflicts between the West and Russia as well as within the Middle East between Iran and its enemies. It's definitely worth remembering that we are now seven or eight years into the Global Financial Crisis depending on how you measure it. That's almost certainly had an effect when it comes to popular discontent, nationalist tensions and a move towards extremes.

Although 2014 was definitely worse than the previous year, the overall trend till seems to be towards the spike in conflict being contained in a relatively small number of countries. Across most of the rest of the world, there is some evidence that violence is actually continuing to go down.

Jack Goldstone, Professor of Public Policy George Mason University. Member of the PS21 International Advisory Group

Despite many positive factors reducing the death toll of conflicts, from more automated/remote controlled military strikes to far better medical and evacuation technologies and provisions for refugees, we are seeing rising death tolls from violent conflicts in a few areas. This is NOT, as famously suggested by Samuel Huntington, due to a clash of civilizations: the biggest death tolls are from conflicts within the Muslim world, and within the Russian Orthodox world.

These are driven by three main forces.

One is a revival of religion as the prime factor of personal and social identity, including a revival of millenarian beliefs; these have led to fierce sectarian battles among religious sects for control of lives and territory in Libya, Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Bahrain and Nigeria. This is largely Sunni vs. Shi'a but also involves fights against other religions and sects, e.g. Muslim vs. Christians, Jews, Yazidis, Bahai, and others.

Second, also driven by the revival of religion as a primary identity, is the conflict between the ideal of organizing society primarily on the basis of religious belief and holy writ, vs. the ideal of society as secular and individualist with religion limited to voluntary and private or communal activities that do not impinge on society's primary legal/organizational framework.   In Europe and North America, this conflict has played out mostly peacefully in agitation over abortion and gay marriage; but in Pakistan, Somalia, Afghanistan and Egypt the conflicts between authorities seeking to preserve a secular government and those determined to impose religion on social order have involved violence and terrorism.   This force also fuels terrorism within Europe, as those committed to religious primacy (mainly jihadists) attack those who exemplify secular freedom (e.g. Charlie Hebdo).

The third factor producing rising violence is the conflict within the few remaining multi-national empires between imperial control and repressed nationalism.   In and on the borders of the Russian Federation, this involves conflict between the Russian state and Chechens, Dagestanis, and now most notably Ukrainians.   In China the conflict is with the populations of Xinjiang and Tibet.   In Sudan the fight was at first between southern and northern Sudanese, but now fuels civil war within South Sudan. Intra-religious, secular-religious, and nationalist conflicts have been important drivers of violence in human societies for millennia; with the fading of cold war ideological conflicts, and the reduced importance of conflict over land or resources in an increasingly globalized, digital economy, it should not be surprising that these older sources of conflict should return.

Steve Killelea, founder and president, Institute for Economics and Peace. Member of the PS21 international advisory group.

If we look for the figures for deaths from terrorism up to the end of 2013 -- so slightly older -- we see a massive spike in the last three years (Institute for Economics and Peace Global Terrorism Index 2014). If you get deaths on terrorism, the lowest number this century was the year after 911. Then it begins to rise with the invasion of Iraq peaking with the surge in Iraq and Afghanistan. Then it began to fall off until the start of the Syria war when it went through the roof.

If you get deaths from terrorism, 64% of those deaths of four organisations -- Al Qaeda, the Taleban, Islamic State and Boko Haram -- that will have their roots in Wahabaist ideology of Sunni Islam. The roots of these go back 30 or so years to Saudi Arabia. What all these groups have in common in particular is that they are opposed to Western education and culture. The motivation of these groups is really contrary to our reality and the way we think.

Cutting off funding to these groups and the growth of more modern forms of Islam will probably over time have a positive effect.

Vassily Kashin, senior research fellow, Centre for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies (CAST), Moscow. PS21 global fellow.

I think the death toll in Ukraine is much, much bigger than the UN estimates suggest, possibly several times bigger. This is a very real war, not counterinsurgency warfare. You have armies with mechanised infantry, tanks. The whole systems of relations between the big powers is changing so we're in a big period of instability. This is probably just the beginning.

Ali Wyne, member of the adjunct staff, RAND Corporation. PS21 global fellow

I think we're increasingly going to see conflicts that are far less bloody, perhaps even bloodless. If you consider the maritime disputes in the Asia-Pacific, for example, China's main lever of pressure is not so much the application of military force as the exertion of economic pull. In Eastern Europe, meanwhile, Russia has been conducting a kind of slow-drip incursion into Ukraine, taking care not to dial up pressure beyond a threshold that might elicit a forceful military response from the United States and its NATO allies. It's very challenging to respond to behaviour that doesn't pose an existential threat to world order.

I'd caution against being too pessimistic, though. Even with the spike in casualties of the last few years, the landscape of global organized violence is still a far cry from what it was in the 1990s. Despite being widely criticized for saying so, President Obama was correct in observing last June that there has never been a better time to be alive for most people.

Milena Rodban, independent geopolitical risk consultant. PS21 global fellow

Several of the countries where we're seeing rising conflict deaths are places that US forces have withdrawn from, and where we're seeing political vacuums. When we look at the world in general, we're not seeing a spike in violence all over. It's mainly in a relatively small number of countries that you see these tactics used to scare away investors and affect economic activity. For my business clients, the world looks like a more violent and dangerous place, particularly in cities that were recently considered promising business opportunities, such as in Nigeria.

Mike Harwood, Air Vice Marshall (retired), Former British Defence Attaché to Washington DC

Bad things have a habit of happening wherever a political vacuum exists. I've watched with increasing alarm as Libya has crumbled yet further, only to hear the erstwhile leaders of the interventionist world saying "There is no military solution". I shudder when I hear that phrase, as if it's a timeless truism and one that justifies inactivity. Meanwhile, hundreds if not thousands die and, if our supposed 'interests' are not directly threatened, we look away and let history take its course (and history has a habit of taking its time...).

My fundamental belief is that adversaries have decided to capitalise on our systemic war-weariness. And by proving that they 'love to die' and have no restraint in who or how they kill (in the case of the Islamists) or have 'a passionate sense of nationhood' (in the case of Russian separatists), those in the west have been exposed as having no such loyalty and passion. 'We' simply hope to be allowed to get on with a way of life that likes to focus entirely on trade, the economy and making money. Prosperity has become the dominant agenda without ensuring, in parallel, that our security is also husbanded with extreme care.

'We' would like to live and let live. The difference is that we now have a new generation of actors who wish to exploit that generosity of spirit, to move in and dominate any ungoverned spaces, and then to impose their own version of 'rule of law' (that starts and ends with utter intolerance of anything but their own creed).

Appendix: Notes on Sourcing

Syria – Syrian Observatory for Human Rights

For Syria, we have taken the numbers from the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, the UK-based human rights group widely used as a source by international and other media SOHR collates data from a variety of sources in and outside Syria. http://syriahr.com/en/

Iraq – Iraq Body Count

Iraqbodycount.net, which collates its numbers from local and international media reports, is generally regarded as one of the most authoritative sources for casualty numbers for the Iraq war. Because of its methodology, it is generally assumed to be an underestimate, but remains among the best sources available. https://www.iraqbodycount.org/

Afghanistan – various

Despite thirteen years of conflict, there remains no authoritative source for all conflict deaths in Afghanistan. For consistency, data on fatalities were drawn from distinct sources depending on categories: the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan for civilians, US LTG Anderson's press conference from November 5, 2014 and iCasualties.org for coalition and local forces, and the South Asian Terrorism Portal –see Pakistan- for Taliban losses.

Nigeria- Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project

We have chosen to use ACLED data for all African conflicts. ACLED collects data in real time on African and South East Asian conflicts. It includes data from a variety of sources and is frequently referenced by international media and organisations. http://www.acleddata.com/

South Sudan – ACLED

See above

Pakistan – South Asia Terrorism Portal

South Asia Terrorism Portal is run by the Institute for Conflict Management in New Delhi. It collects data on militancy across South Asia and we have used it as the primary source for Pakistan, as well as the various insurgences in India. http://www.satp.org/

Sudan – ACLED

See Nigeria

Central African Republic- ACLED

See Nigeria

Ukraine - UN Office of High Commissioner of Human Rights

For Ukraine's 2014 numbers, we have used the UN Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights. There was no conflict and therefore no data from 2013.

Somalia – ACLED

See Nigeria

Libya – Libya Body Count

For Libya's 2014 figures, we have used the relatively new website Libya Body Count, which uses a similar methodology to its Iraqi counterpart. IT was not operational in 2013, but uses an official government estimate for that year as its baseline. The Libyan government issued no estimate for 2014. http://www.libyabodycount.org/

Israel/Palestine – B'Tselem

For Israeli-Palestinian data we have used the aggregated figures used by the Israeli human rights group B'Tselem. It aggregates both Israeli and Palestinian data. http://www.btselem.org/

Yemen – International Crisis Group

Yemen has proved perhaps the hardest country to get a death toll for. We have used and estimate used by ICG. This looks just at civilian casualties and does not include – or at least does not appear to – militant or military casualties. Its data does, however, cover both 2013 and 2014, although it should be regarded as an estimate at best. http://www.crisisgroup.org/

Democratic Republic of Congo – ACLED

See Nigeria

India – South Asia Terrorism Portal

See Pakistan

Philippines – ACLED

See Nigeria

Mali – ACLED

See Nigeria

North Caucasus

For the North Caucasus, we have used the estimate from Regional activist/news website http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru. Its figures a produced from instances recounted in public sources. Kavkaz has covered conflict in the region since the early years of the Chechen War.

Thailand – Deep South Watch

For Thailand we have used Depp South Watch, and NGO monitoring the conflict in Southern Thailand

Algeria – ACLED

See Nigeria

Colombia/Myanmar – International Crisis Group

We have used ICG estimates for both countries. In 2014, both countries fell out of the top 20 most violent conflicts.

Top 10 Deadliest Countries in 2014

Compared to Top 10 Deadliest Countries in 2013

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1	Syria	76,021	Syria	73,447
2	Iraq	21,073	Afghanistan	10,172
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5	South Sudan	6,389	Pakistan	5,739
6	Pakistan	5,496	Nigeria	4,727
7	Sudan	5,335	South Sudan	4,168
8	Ukraine	4,707	Somalia	3,153
9	Somalia	4,447	CAR	2,364
10	CAR	3,347	DR Congo	1,976
Total		**152,837**		**122,304**
% Change		***25.1***		

Top 15 Deadliest Countries in 2014

Compared to Top 15 Deadliest Countries in 2013

Rank	2014	Death Toll	2013	Death Toll
1	Syria	76,021	Syria	73,447
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9	Somalia	4,447	CAR	2,364
10	CAR	3,347	DR Congo	1,976
11	Libya	2,825	India	885
12	Israel/Palestine	2,365	Mali	870
13	Yemen	1,500	Libya	643
14	DR Congo	1,235	Yemen	600
15	India	976	North Caucus	529
Total		**161,883**		**125,831**
% Change		***28.7***		

Top 10 Deadliest Countries in 2014

With Comparable 2013 Statistics

Rank	Country	2014 Death Toll	2013 Death Toll	2013 Ranking
1	Syria	76,021	73,447	1
2	Iraq	21,073	9,742	3
3	Afghanistan	14,638	10,172	2
4	Nigeria	11,529	4,727	5
5	South Sudan	6,389	4,168	7
6	Pakistan	5,496	5,739	4
7	Sudan	5,335	6,816	11
8	Ukraine	4,707	N/A	NR
9	Somalia	4,447	3,153	8
10	CAR	3,347	2,364	9
Total		**152,982**	**120,328**	
% Change		***27.1***		

Top 15 Deadliest Countries in 2014

With Comparable 2013 Statistics

Rank	Country	2014 Death Toll	2013 Death Toll	2013 Ranking
1	Syria	76,021	73,447	1
2	Iraq	21,073	9,742	3
3	Afghanistan	14,638	10,172	2
4	Nigeria	11,529	4,727	6
5	South Sudan	6,389	4,168	7
6	Pakistan	5,496	5,739	5
7	Sudan	5,335	6,816	4
8	Ukraine	4,707	N/A	NR
9	Somalia	4,447	3,153	8
10	CAR	3,347	2,364	9
11	Libya	2,825	643	13
12	Israel/Palestine	2,365	46	10
13	Yemen	1,500	600	11
14	DR Congo	1,235	1,976	16
15	India	976	885	12
Total		**161,883**	**124,478**	
% Change		***30.0***		

Top 20 Deadliest Countries in 2014

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1	Syria	76,021	73,447	1
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3	Afghanistan	14,638	10,172	2
4	Nigeria	11,529	4,727	6
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11	Libya	2,825	643	13
12	Israel/Palestine	2,365	46	21
13	Yemen	1,500	600	14
14	DR Congo	1,235	1,976	10
15	India	976	885	11
16	Philippines	386	322	18
17	Mali	380	870	12
18	North Caucus	341	529	15
19	Thailand	330	455	16
20	Algeria	242	340	17
Total		**163,562**	**126,994**	
% Change		*28.8*		

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