



Conflicts Between Countries since 1945

By Trevor Getz

The twentieth century's two world wars caused enormous suffering. Yet, that seems to have changed nothing. Wars still happen today. Why? And what can we do about it?

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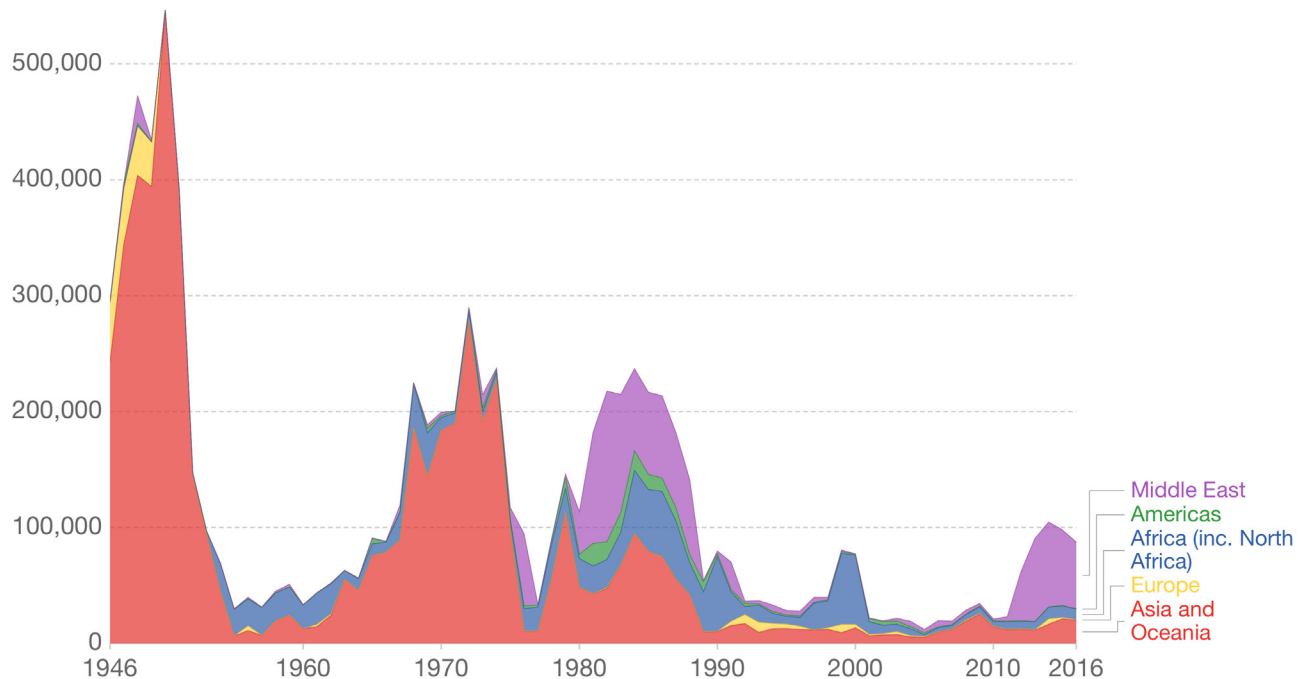
War and history

People believed that the First World War would be the “end of all wars.” Sadly, they were wrong. The Second World War happened only years later. It was even more horrifying. Since then, the world has seen many wars.

Battle-related deaths in state-based conflicts since 1946, by world region , 1946 to 2016

Our World
in Data

The region refers not to the location of the battle but to the location of the primary state or states involved in the conflict (see 'Sources' tab). Only conflicts in which at least one party was the government of a state and which generated more than 25 battle-related deaths are included. The data refer to direct violent deaths (i.e. excluding outbreaks of disease or famine).



Source: UCDP/PRIO

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[A chart showing the number of deaths directly from war, since the end of the Second World War in 1945. From Our World in Data.](#)

Why do wars happen?

Why do wars exist? Some people say war is a part of human nature. Scholars who work in the field known as *social identity theory* think that humans like belonging to groups. They say one group can dislike another group just because they are different. Think about sports teams. Some teams have long rivalries with each other. With people, these groups can be based on nationality or religion. This prejudice can easily turn to hatred. In some cases, it leads to war.

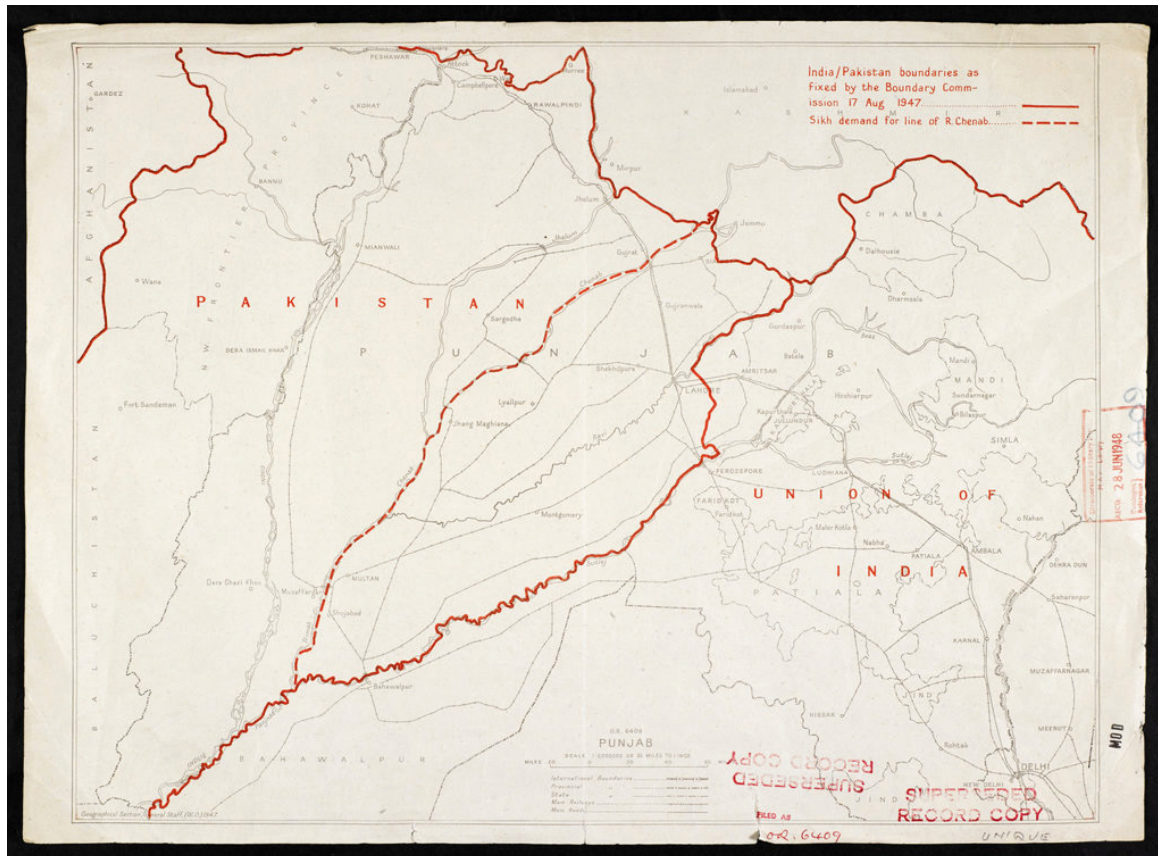
Wars also happen when people are unable to work together. A conflict might occur between two sides. These sides might then need to work on a new solution. Bargaining helps states work out their differences. But when nobody can agree, one result can be war.

Wars also have specific explanations. They might begin for economic reasons. For example, one nation might attack another to take its resources. Wars are also fought because of disagreements over key ideas, like religion. Or, they may be fought to take territory.

Let's look at a couple of late-twentieth-century conflicts to try to understand why they happened.

India-Pakistan

India and Pakistan are two neighboring states that became independent together from 1947 to 1948. Both were once part of the same British colony. When activists drove out the British, that colony broke into several parts. Pakistan was majority-Muslim and India was majority-Hindu. As a result, their populations had religious differences. In addition, they disagreed over who should control a region lying on their border, called Kashmir.



Map of India and Pakistan upon independence, August 17, 1947. © British Library.

The conflict between the two states broke out again in 1965. Rising feelings of nationalism in both countries led to this war. Nationalism is the feeling that your country is the best. Another issue was a disagreement over who controlled an important resource: the water coming from mountains along the border.

Today, many of the issues remain the same, especially the question of who should control Kashmir. The two countries have managed to avoid a full-scale war. Nationalist feelings have continued to grow on both sides of the border. So has the mistreatment of religious minorities in each country.

Iran-Iraq

Two other countries that have frequently been in conflict are Iran and Iraq, which share a 1,000-mile border. The two countries have religious differences. Iran's population is mostly Shi'ite Muslims. Iraq was governed by Sunni Muslims for most of the twentieth century. Even in Iraq, though, the majority of the population are Shi'ites.

In the late twentieth century, the biggest cause of tension between these two countries was not religion, however. It was competition for control over land and resources. Both Iran and Iraq have large deposits of oil. Both rely on the same river, the Shatt al-Arab, to get their oil out into the ocean and to markets. The two countries disagreed over who owned the region in which the river falls. Iraq also wanted control of a region where oil was produced. Iraq attacked Iran in 1980. This was known as the Iran–Iraq War. The war ended in 1988 when Iran pushed out the Iraqi invaders.

More than half a million soldiers died in the conflict. Many ordinary people were also killed. Despite a new government in Iraq today, tensions between the two countries remain high.

China–Taiwan

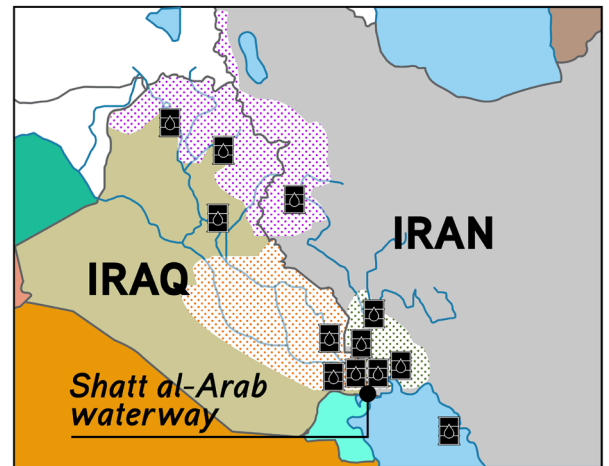
Tensions also remain high between Taiwan and China. The island country of Taiwan was once part of China. However, it became independent after a civil war in 1949. The war was fought between the Guomindang, which controlled the government, and the Communist Party of China. After the Guomindang lost, they moved to Taiwan. Today, China's communist government still does not recognize Taiwan's independence. China claims Taiwan as part of its territory.

The conflict between China and Taiwan has some of its roots in differences of ideas. Taiwan has mainly been in favor of capitalism and democracy, at least since the 1980s. Meanwhile, the People's Republic of China is communist and very much a one-party state.

Since 1949, this conflict has never turned into outright war. Taiwan has been protected by its ally, the United States and its navy. However, there is always the danger that fighting could break out in the future.

Can wars be avoided?

It is sad to think that wars may be partly a result of human nature, or that we have not learned to bargain well enough to avoid war. But that does not mean we should give up hope. Lasting peace is possible. Wars will decrease if we humans can learn to be less prejudiced and more able to work out our differences.



- Kurdish area
- Ethnic Arab area
- Shia area
- Oil centres

A map of the Iran-Iraq War, 1980-1988, showing oil fields that were one of the causes of the dispute. At the bottom of the map is the Shatt al-Arab waterway that both sides wanted to allow their oil tankers to get to the ocean and to markets. By WHP, CC BY-NC 4.0.



Taiwan and the east coast of China, with the Taiwan Strait in between. Map produced by the US Central Intelligence Agency, and held by the Perry-Castañeda Library. Public domain.

Sources

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Trevor Getz

Trevor Getz is a professor of African and world history at San Francisco State University. He has been the author or editor of 11 books, including the award-winning graphic history *Abina and the Important Men*, and has coproduced several prize-winning documentaries. Trevor is also the author of *A Primer for Teaching African History*, which explores questions about how we should teach the history of Africa in high school and university classes.

Image credits

Cover image: A damaged Iraqi tank sits abandoned in a Kuwaiti desert. In the distance burn oil wells ignited by Saddam's retreating forces. © Peter Turnley/Corbis/VCG via Getty Images.

A chart showing the number of deaths directly from war, since the end of the Second World War in 1945. From Our World in Data. <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/battle-related-deaths-in-state-based-conflicts-since-1946-by-world-region?year=latest>

Map of India and Pakistan upon independence, August 17, 1947. Courtesy of the British Library. <https://blogs.bl.uk/a/6a00d8341c464853ef0278800f7112200d-pi>

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Taiwan and the east coast of China, with the Taiwan Strait in between. Map produced by the US Central Intelligence Agency, and held by the Perry-Castañeda Library. Public domain. https://maps.lib.utexas.edu/maps/middle_east_and_asia/taiwan_strait_98.jpg



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