
The Trend of War in the World

Evidence from the Arab–Israeli Dispute

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In devising foreign and military policies, policymakers can adopt one of two broad perspectives about the nature of war. One is the “war-continuity” theory. In this view, war is a constant feature of human existence, an ever-present danger. This is the perspective of the “realist” school of foreign policy, which holds that nations have always strived and will always strive to dominate each other militarily. Those who adopt this position tend to argue that preparations for war must always be pursued strenuously because one can never tell who the next enemy will be or when the next big war will occur.

Thus, for example, the prominent University of Chicago political scientist John J. Mearsheimer, a self-declared “card-carrying realist,” sees great danger for the United States in China’s continued prosperity: “Can China rise peacefully? My answer is no. If China continues its impressive economic growth over the next few decades, the United States and China are likely to engage in an intense security competition with considerable potential for war” (2006, 160). Another exponent of the pessimistic view is Colin Gray, who declares that war “will always be with us” (2005, 24).

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This perspective of ever-present danger appears to dominate thinking about U.S. security policy. The nation maintains at least 662 overseas bases in thirty-eight foreign countries, and planners work continually to develop additional sites (the latest proposals are for new bases in Australia and the Philippines). The U.S. Navy maintains a fleet with 11 aircraft carriers and a total of 282 warships. Although some categories of military spending have been reduced recently, these cutbacks are justified only in fiscal terms as part of the effort to control the federal deficit. They are not defended as strategically appropriate reductions in view of military threats to the United States or any changing probability of war in the world.

The problem with the “realism” school of military preparation is that it is not realistic. That is, it is not empirical—not based on actual measurements of the trend in the use of force. Those who have studied these trends are beginning to elaborate a second, alternative perspective, which might be called the “war-decline” theory. In this perspective, the world has been undergoing a long-term decline in the extent and severity of war; furthermore, the rate of decline has been accelerating. The broad picture indicates that warfare was highest in primitive, prehistoric societies, where some 15 percent of the population died in war. The level of fighting gradually declined over many centuries of civilization, so that by the first half of the twentieth century less than 1 percent of the population was dying in war (Keeley 1996, 90). Since 1950, the decline in violence has accelerated, so that in recent years international war has disappeared almost completely (Mueller 2009).

Political scientist John Mueller was perhaps the first to emphasize this perspective. War, he suggested in his little-noticed 1989 book *Retreat from Doomsday*, was becoming obsolete in the twentieth century. Indeed, if one studied the historical record carefully, one could discern that for certain countries, war had been in the process of becoming obsolete for several centuries. The wars of the first half of the twentieth century were not business as usual, but—for Europe, at least—a final “learning experience” about war’s horrors and disadvantages (Mueller 1989, 218).

Mueller and others have continued research on this topic, amassing considerable support for the war-decline theory (Howard 1991; Keegan 1993; Mueller 1995, 2004; Kaldor 1999; Gurr, Marshall, and Khosla 2000; Payne 2002, 2004; Human Security Centre 2005; Lacina and Gleditsch 2005; Lacina, Gleditsch, and Russett 2006; Human Security Report Project 2011; Russett 2010; Goldstein 2011; Pinker 2011).

A variety of theories and perspectives have been advanced to explain this decline in war, though perhaps in the end we shall conclude that an elaborate theory is not necessary. After all, from the standpoint of just about all human values, war is an incredibly destructive activity, so the really challenging question is why human beings ever engaged in it so frequently in the first place and why they considered war making a noble and meritorious activity for such a long time. In this respect, war may be akin to many other force-based practices that have fallen from favor—such as human sacrifice, slavery, and dueling. We do not demand elaborate explanations for why

these customs went out of style. They are seen merely as destructive practices that belonged to a benighted age.

Whatever the explanation for the declining incidence of war, this fact—if it is a fact—has far-reaching implications for the management of national-security policy. If the probability of war is declining and at an accelerating rate, this change suggests that force levels and other preparations for war, such as military alliances and foreign military bases, should be adjusted appropriately. We should not be preparing for a major war if the probability of one's occurrence is fast approaching zero.

The Arab–Israeli Dispute

Given the policy significance, it is therefore important to study the trends in military conflicts both around the world and in different regions. I have undertaken to supplement the research about declining war trends with an examination of the trend in violence in what is probably the world's most intractable conflict today: the Arab–Israeli dispute. It would be difficult to imagine a conflict with more ingredients for lasting strife. Jews and Arabs have been contesting the area of Palestine since time immemorial. The conflict began its modern phase with the massive arrival of Jewish settlers after World War II and the establishment of Israel as a state in 1948, a move that Arabs have seen as an invasion. The two sides are divided by language, culture, and especially religion. The religious conflict is long-standing, dating back to bloody clashes between Mohammad and Jews during the founding of Islam in the seventh century. Both Judaism and Islam are religions that emphasize geographical places, creating a zero-sum aspect to the conflict. Both sides attribute religious significance to the land of Palestine, to certain towns and cities, and to a number of holy places, such as the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.

The conflict is further complicated by the number of independent actors on the Arab side. These actors include the neighboring Arab countries of Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, and Lebanon (backed in varying degree by other Arab and Muslim countries, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran); displaced Palestinian refugees living in camps in countries that surround Israel; Palestinians living in a complex patchwork of Arab-controlled towns within Israeli territory; Israeli settlements in Arab-controlled regions within Israeli territory; and Palestinian Arabs living in Israel proper. The Palestinians are organized into a number of militant groups, which include political parties, terrorist organizations, and the two quasi-governments of the West Bank and Gaza.

The upshot of this complexity is that the Arab side is not represented by a single bargaining unit, and therefore no simple resolution of the conflict is possible. In the period from 1948 to 1973, Arab neighbors Egypt and Jordan were prominently involved in the fighting. Israel signed a peace treaty with Egypt in 1979 and another with Jordan in 1994—moves that marked a reduction in these countries' involvement in hostilities. These treaties by no means ended the conflict, however; extragovernmental groups such as the Palestine Liberation Organization, Fatah, Hamas, and Hezbollah,

among others, became the main combatants. Even if all of these entities were rendered inactive, it is likely that other militant groups would emerge to carry on the dispute, drawing on the reservoir of some 5 million resentful Palestinians in Israel, the occupied territories, and the refugee camps in neighboring countries. Of course, a nearby country may also escalate the dispute.

Thus, conclusive peace in the Arab–Israel conflict is almost certainly not possible in the immediate future. But if the war-decline hypothesis is valid, peace might still be approached by degree in the form of declining casualties in the struggle.

To test this hypothesis, I collected casualty figures for both sides from some fifty published and Internet sources. The Arab side is defined to include all Palestinians, whether living in or outside Israeli territory, plus the countries of Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq. Casualties are defined as military and civilian deaths occurring in episodes of conflict, regardless of the form the violence takes. The numbers include those killed in military battles as well as those killed in reprisals, acts of sabotage and terrorism, and clashes growing out of political protests and rioting of a bipolar Arab–Israeli nature. The casualty figures include only those owing to Arab–Israeli conflict; deaths owing to Arab–Arab fighting are not included.¹

Several points should be made concerning the quality of the data. First, even though we are dealing with a modern conflict, casualty reports still disagree somewhat. These inconsistencies are especially large for Arab casualties in earlier years, for which different reports for the same episode may vary by several hundred percent. The worst discrepancy concerns the 1967 war, for which the combined battle death estimate for Egypt, Jordan, and Syria ranges from 4,296 according to one source to 20,500 according to other sources. Such discrepancies are humbling, indicating that even for modern times, we are still looking through a glass darkly in regard to casualty figures (and reminding us of the gigantic errors that almost certainly lurk in casualty estimates for conflicts a century or more ago). The data on Israeli casualties seem to be of much higher quality, and I did not encounter serious discrepancies between sources, probably because all estimates trace rather closely to official reports.

In the past twenty years, the recording and transmission of casualty data have improved greatly owing to the advent of the computer and the Internet and to the rise of humanitarian and civil rights organizations eager to record and report casualties. B'tselem, the Israeli civil rights group, now records each death and identifies the victim by name. This kind of meticulous, comprehensive public accounting did not exist forty and fifty years ago, and, as a result, some casualties in the distant past are lost from sight today. Because of this kind of “missing data” bias—which tends to crop up in all time series on casualties—the actual decline in violence will tend to be greater than the figures indicate.

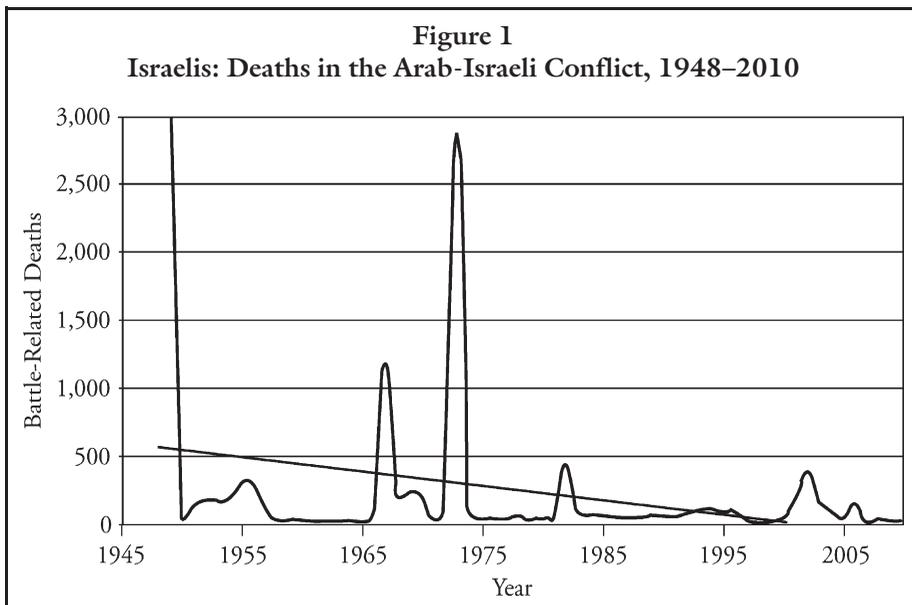
1. The worksheets, tabulations, and sources of this study are available at <http://lyttonpublishing.com/historyofforce.html>.

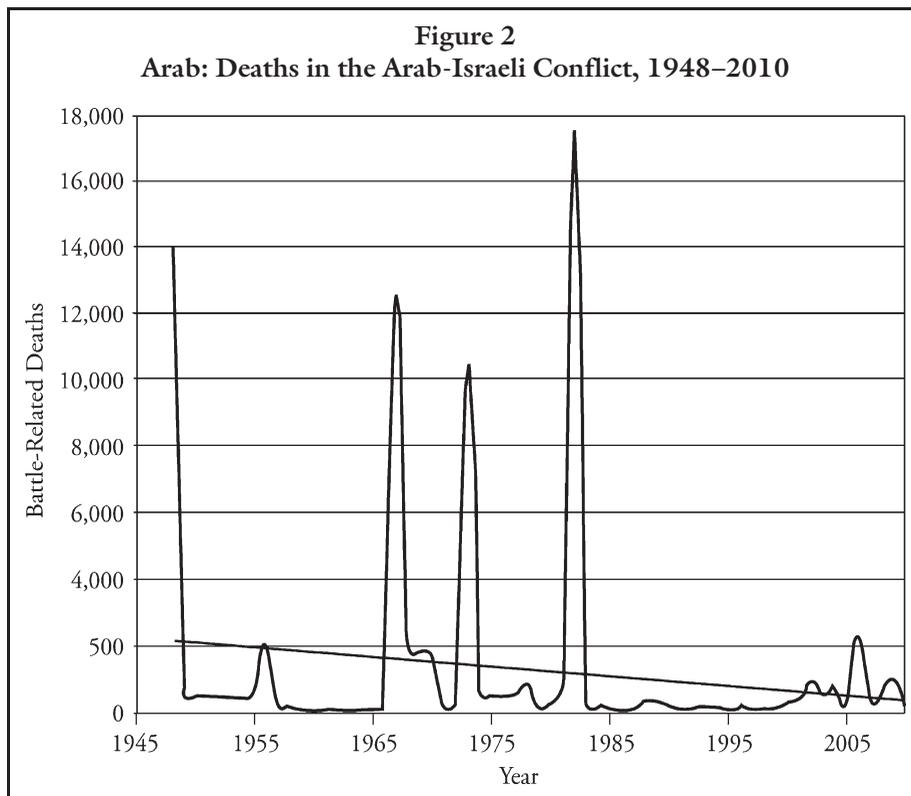
Results

The tabulation of casualties for the entire period 1948–2010 produced a fatality total of 80,006 for the Arab side and 15,625 for the Israeli side. Alongside the dozens of wars in history that have racked up a million-plus fatalities, these figures reveal the Arab–Israeli dispute to be—in spite of its bitterness and intractability—a relatively low-cost conflict. In recent years, media coverage of episodes of the conflict—suicide bombings, rocket attacks, Israeli military actions both in Lebanon and in Gaza—gives the impression of extensive violence, but the overall casualty rate has actually been rather low. For Israel, in the decade 2001–10 the death rate in the conflict was 2.33 deaths per 100,000 population, about one-third Israel’s death rate in traffic accidents (6.84) over the same period.

The trend in yearly deaths on each side is shown in figures 1 and 2. The yearly numbers are quite irregular, reflecting the onset of major escalations, especially the wars of 1948, 1967, 1973, and the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982. As the linear trend line indicates, however, for both the Israelis and the Arabs the absolute number of deaths declined over the period 1948–2010.

Two adjustments seem appropriate in order to make a fair test of the war-decline hypothesis. First, the figures should be adjusted according to population to produce a death *rate* because a valid measure of human suffering must take into account the size of the affected population. Because the population of both sides grew very rapidly during the period of the conflict, expressing losses as a per capita rate (deaths per 100,000 population) reveals a steeper decline in the level of violence. (As noted previously, the Arab side is defined to include all Palestinians, whether living inside or outside Israeli territory, plus the populations of Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq.)





Second, any measurement of a trend is affected by the choice of the starting point. It is therefore important to make the choice of starting point arbitrary, not linked to the pattern in the numbers themselves. The founding of Israel and the associated war of independence (or war of invasion, from the Arab point of view) in 1948–49 was an unusual event that could be expected to produce an unusual number of casualties. To start the time series with these numbers, it might be said, makes it easy to find a pattern of declining violence. Therefore, it seemed appropriate to use the more arbitrary starting point of 1950 for the time series.

Figures 3 and 4 incorporate both these points, showing the trend in the death rate and using 1950 as the first year in the series. As the linear trend line shows, this more refined test confirms the hypothesis of a decline in violence for both the Israeli side and the Arab side.²

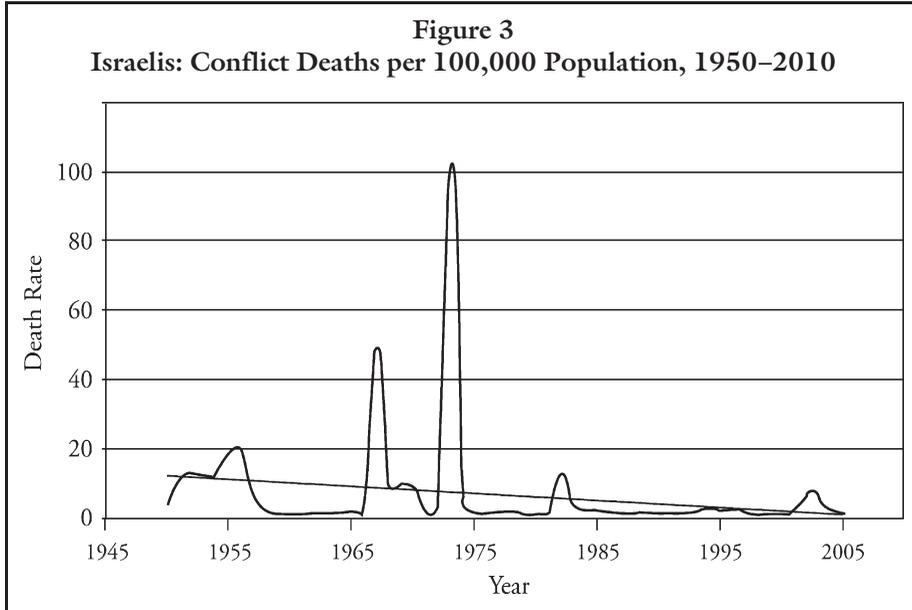
2. The parameters of the trend lines shown in the four figures are as follows:

Figure 1: $C = -10.5(\text{Year}) + 20,926$; Standard Error = 4.25, $t = -2.46$

Figure 2: $C = -27.3(\text{Year}) + 55,208$; Standard Error = 23.17, $t = -1.18$

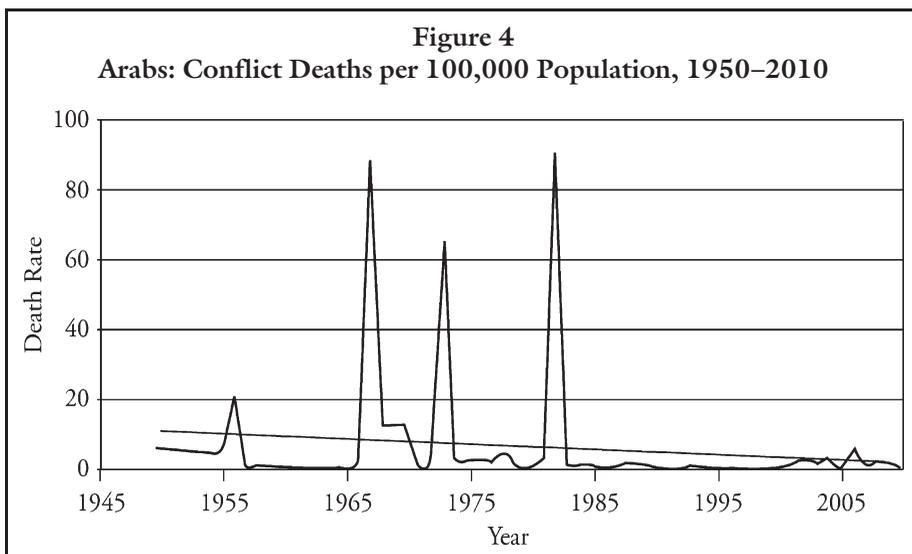
Figure 3: $DR = -0.188(\text{Year}) + 377$; Standard Error = 0.106, $t = -1.78$

Figure 4: $DR = -0.035(\text{Year}) + 71$; Standard Error = 0.032, $t = -1.09$



Implications for Policy

No single study can fully validate the war-decline hypothesis, of course. These results merely add to the findings of other studies, further supporting the plausibility of this thesis. They document that the casualty rate in the Arab–Israeli conflict has been declining and that therefore the most plausible prediction is that it will continue to decline. Of course, history is complex and full of unexpected turns. Policymakers,



therefore, cannot take the violence-decline idea as a *guarantee* of any future state of affairs. This idea can be only one factor influencing their thinking.

However, at present there is little sign that the possibility of a decline in war has been incorporated even slightly into policymaking. Policymakers and commentators speak about the danger of war—with China, North Korea, Iran—as if this danger were a strong probability that will *not* diminish over time. They overlook the fact that many conflicts, especially conflicts in modern times, have petered out to a peaceful ending. One of those conflicts was the Cold War, a conflict that the “realist” professor of international relations Hans Morgenthau predicted in 1979 would end in major war: “In my opinion the world is moving ineluctably toward a third world war—a strategic nuclear war. I do not believe that anything can be done to prevent it” (quoted in Mueller 1995, 192).

It behooves military planners and policymakers to undertake studies of trends in the incidence of violent conflict like the one presented here. The issue of war decline is especially important given the long lead times that apply in the realm of weapons acquisition. One notes, for example, that the Pentagon is now setting procurement plans for a sixth-generation air-superiority fighter to become operational in 2025. The U.S. Navy is scheduling the production of ten new aircraft carriers, with production continuing to 2058. When such long intervals are involved, it becomes imperative that military planners thoughtfully assess the trend in the incidence of war so that armaments acquired for the far future match the dangers of war at that remote time.

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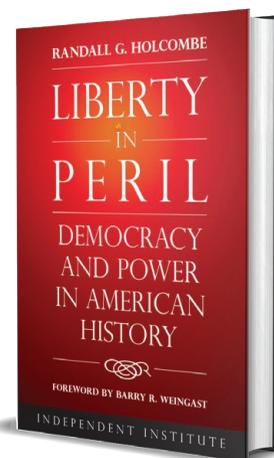
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