

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES  
BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY  
*The Madame Madeleine Feher European Scholar-in-Residence Lecture*

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# **The Future of Armed Conflict**

**Nils Petter Gleditsch**

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**Dear Reader,**

**This monograph presents the 2002 annual lecture of the Madeleine Feher European Scholar-in-Residence program. Designed to bring a European scholar to Israel for a week-long research fellowship and to develop close working relations between the academic communities of Europe and Israel, the program was generously endowed by Madame Madeleine Feher of Brussels.**

Nils Petter Gleditsch, Research Professor at the International Peace Research Institute, Oslo (PRIO) and Editor of the prestigious Journal of Peace Research, reviews the future of armed conflict. Gleditsch presents a critical analysis of the literature on armed conflict up to date, discussing factors generally linked to conflict, such as poverty, according to the liberal vs. radical schools of thought, and also discusses the future prospects of armed conflict after the Cold War, according to the optimistic vs. pessimistic points of view.

Gleditsch concludes on a relatively optimistic note, with the observation that, a few years into the post-Cold War era, the number of armed conflicts, which mostly take the form of internal conflicts, dropped significantly to a level that is lower than what it was during the Cold War, and that broad trends in world development are slowly influencing the patterns of conflict, on the whole, probably, in the direction of a more peaceful world.

Prof. Efraim Inbar

BESA

MADELEINE FEHER EUROPEAN SCHOLAR LECTURE

## THE FUTURE OF ARMED CONFLICT

*Nils Petter Gleditsch*<sup>1</sup>

This lecture takes place on the first anniversary of the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. About 3,000 people perished<sup>2</sup> right in the middle of two major cities of the most powerful nation in the world. The tragedy touched all of us, directly and indirectly.

According to what in my view is the best of the annual compilations of armed conflict, from the Uppsala University Conflict Data Project, 'USA vs. al-Qaeda' was one of 34 armed conflicts active in 2001.<sup>3</sup> It was by a long shot the most momentous conflict in 2001 in terms of its political and military consequences. It was not the bloodiest – that place of dishonor is probably taken (by a narrow margin) by the Kashmir conflict.<sup>4</sup> Of course, if one adds up the casualties for the duration of the conflict, the attack on the US was much less bloody than the civil wars in Sri Lanka, Sudan, or Columbia. But the total losses are on the same level as the Northern Ireland conflict, which has gone on since 1969. As a new conflict, the USA vs. al-Qaeda obviously does not rank very highly in terms of durability; the Uppsala University list has 'Israel vs. Palestinian insurgents' active since 1949

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<sup>1</sup> The author is Research Professor at the International Peace Research Institute, Oslo (PRIO) and Program Leader of its Conditions of War and Peace program. He is also Editor of the bi-monthly *Journal of Peace Research*, and Professor of International Relations at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) in Trondheim. He heads the Working Group on Environmental Conflict in the new Centre for the Study of Civil War at PRIO, awarded status as a national Center of Excellence by the Research Council of Norway. Håvard Strand and Lars Wilhelmsen, both at PRIO, produced most of the figures. This lecture was presented on 11 September 2002, at the BESA Center, Bar-Ilan University.

<sup>2</sup> For a recent discussion of the numbers, see Lipton (2002).

<sup>3</sup> From the Department of Peace and Conflict Research at Uppsala University. For the most recent survey, see Gleditsch et al. (2002).

<sup>4</sup> Eriksson, Sollenberg & Wallenstein (2002); pers.comm. Margareta Sollenberg, Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University, 5 September 2002.

and the Karen conflict in Burma going on more or less permanently since 1948.<sup>5</sup> Of course, it remains to be seen how long the US and al-Qaeda will remain at war. It takes a great pessimist to believe that it will match the Israel/Palestine or Karen conflicts by continuing until 2051.

Of course, *optimism vs. pessimism* is a leading theme of the entire debate about the future of human conflict and an important issue underlying this lecture. At the end of the Cold War, two very distinct scenarios were promoted. On the one hand, optimists argued that the basic contradiction of world politics had been overcome, that the world was ready for peace, that the UN and other multilateral organizations would play a major role in world politics, that we would have extensive disarmament, and that we would reap a peace dividend that would enable us to eradicate poverty and save the environment. On the other hand, there was also a pessimistic scenario that said that once the bipolarity of the Cold War had ended, things would get worse. The lid would come off the pressure cooker, and old and new local conflicts would spill out. John Mearsheimer predicted that we would go 'Back to the Future', into a period of instability in Europe. He even recommended that Germany should acquire a nuclear deterrent to balance the French and that the Ukrainians should hang on to their share of Soviet nuclear missiles to deter the Russians.<sup>6</sup>

### **How Many Conflicts?**

To what extent have the pessimists or the optimists been shown to be correct? Since the end of World War II, there have been 225 armed conflicts, according to the Uppsala criteria, which require a minimum of 25 battle-deaths a year. About half of these conflicts have in at least one year exceeded the limit that is conventionally seen as the threshold for defining a war; 1,000 battle-deaths. Figure 1 shows the distribution of the conflicts by type and by year. The most striking thing about this figure is that the dominant form of armed conflict is internal conflict, or civil war. At the bottom of the figure we find the 'extrastate conflicts', mainly colonial wars, a vanishing category of war with the withering away of the traditional colonial system. Next we find the interstate war. There were never very many interstate wars going on at the same time. But in the twentieth century some

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<sup>5</sup> Only in one single year (1996) the Uppsala list does not record the minimum figure of 25 battle-deaths.

<sup>6</sup> Mearsheimer (1990, 1993).

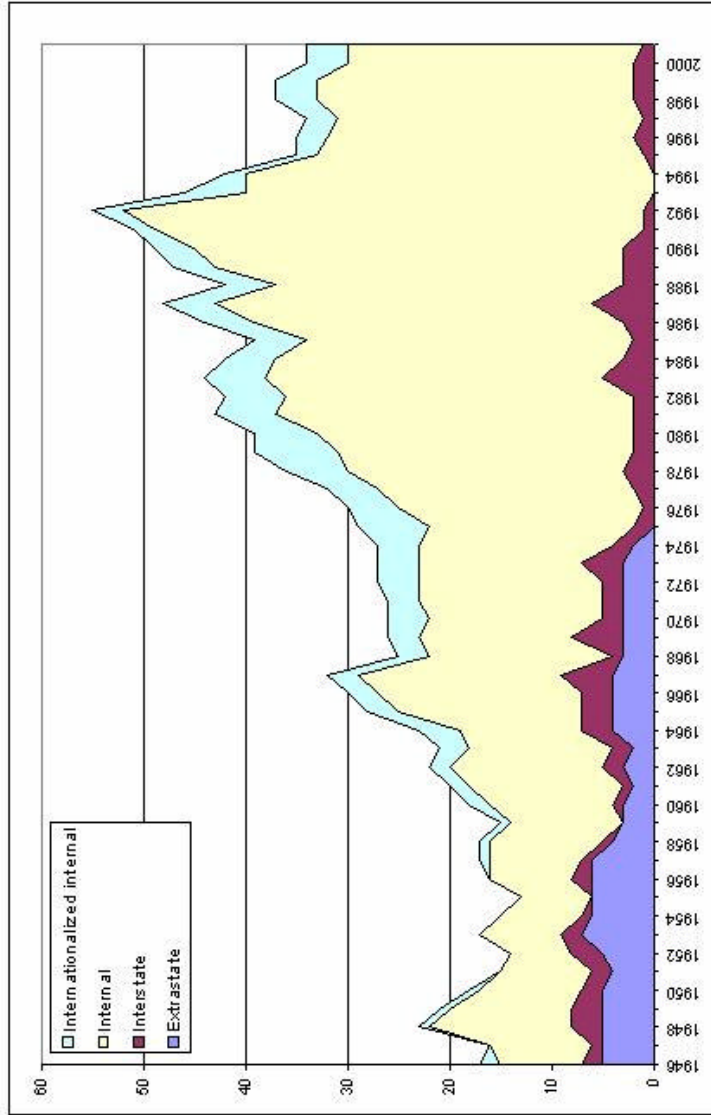
of them were extremely serious, notably the two World Wars. Even in the period after World War II, the three bloodiest wars – the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Iran-Iraq War – were interstate wars. Only in fourth place do we find an internationalized civil war, the Afghanistan war from 1978. The largest non-internationalized civil war, that in Nigeria 1967–70, is in fifth place on the ranking list of the bloodiest conflicts. Many of the international conflicts, and particularly the Korean War and the Vietnam War involved, directly or indirectly, the two superpowers. These wars were widely perceived as having a potential for escalating into global wars. In terms of the sheer number of conflicts, however, the internal conflicts have nevertheless been dominant, at least since the late 1950s. Indeed, in 1993 and 1994 not a single interstate conflict was recorded and in 2001 only two.

The other really remarkable thing about Figure 1 is the rapid rise in the number of armed conflicts from about 1960 onwards and until the early 1990s. We now see that the pessimists were right in the sense that there was an increase in the number of armed conflicts right after the end of the Cold War, notably in Europe. But of course they were wrong in two other respects: First, the rise in conflict after the end of the Cold War merely continued a trend that had been going on through most of the Cold War. And, more importantly, a few years into the post-Cold War era, the number of armed conflicts dropped significantly. In the later 1990s, the optimists were shown to be more correct than the pessimists. In the last five years, the number of conflicts has leveled out, but at a much lower number than at the end of the Cold War.

Why is it that many of us think otherwise? Why is there such a common perception that armed conflicts keep proliferating? I think the main reason is the globalization of the news that makes it very hard to sweep unpleasant news under the rug. A conflict in distant Ruritania may not get as much attention as one in our back yard, but it *is* recorded. Moreover, the conflict pattern lacks the clear structure that it had during the Cold War. The unpredictability and the diffuse nature of the threat may contribute to a feeling of uncertainty and fear.

The aggregate picture of conflict presented in Figure 1 is deceptive in two ways: First of all, the rise in conflict is to a very large extent a reflection of the expansion of the state system. In 1946 there were 66 independent states, 122 in 1964, and 187 in 1994. In Figure 2, where I have divided the number of conflicts by the number of states in the system, we see that the probability that a given country will be involved in an armed conflict in a given year rose only slowly during the Cold War and has now declined to a level matching the early 1960s. I have imposed on this

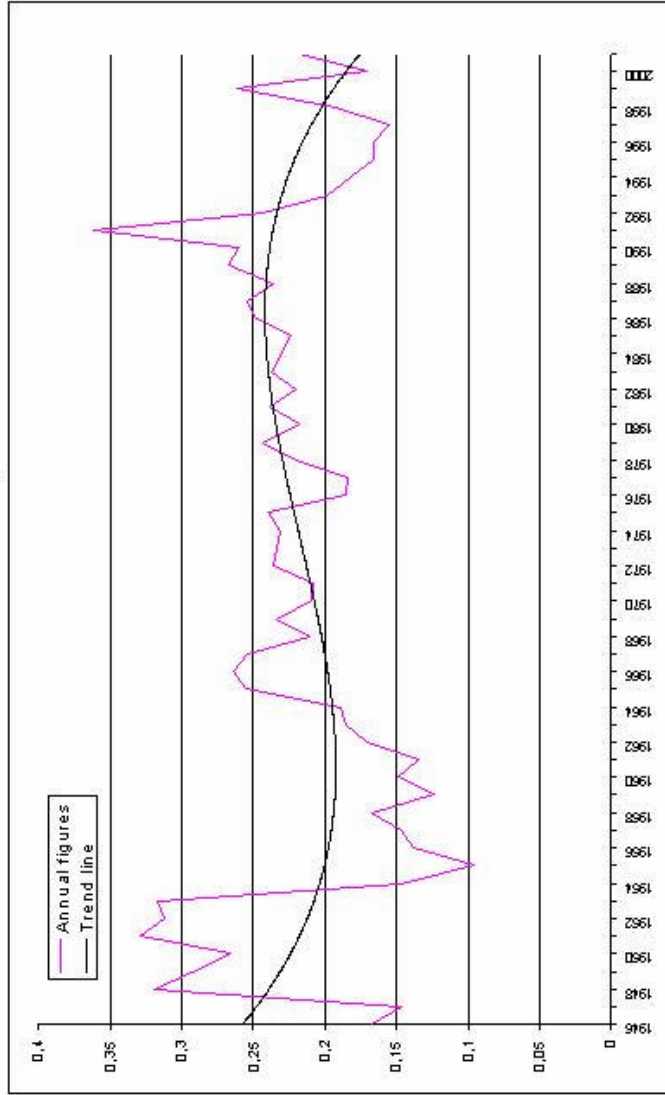
Figure 1. Armed Conflicts by Type, 1946–2001



The figure shows the number of on-going conflicts in each year. 'Extrastate' conflicts occur between a recognized state and foreign territory without political independence (mostly in colonial relationships). For detailed definitions and for descriptions of the data, see Gleditsch et al. (2002).



Figure 2. Probability that a Country is Involved in Armed Conflict, 1946–2001



The figure shows the probability that a given country will be involved in an armed conflict in a given year. Thus, in 1956, about one fifth of the countries in the world were involved in an armed conflict. Data from Gleditsch et al. (2002). The trend line used here is a third polynomial.

curve a long-term trend line, which optimistically points downwards at the end. Yet, this figure is deceptive, too. It is very heavily influenced by a few wars in which the Western side built very large coalitions, for political more than for military reasons. This was true of the Korean War and the Vietnam War to some extent, but even more so of the Gulf War of 1991, the Kosovo War of 1999, and the Afghanistan War of 2001.<sup>7</sup> Only a small number of countries made significant military contributions to these three wars, and the US could have fought them alone if firepower and manpower were the only relevant variables. But the coalitions played an important political role in making these wars more legitimate. (A legitimacy that the US has found it difficult to establish for its prospective war against Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq.) If we eliminate the militarily irrelevant countries from these wars, the trend in armed conflict would be pointing downwards even more clearly.

The other deceptive point about the aggregate figures is that the change in the pattern of conflict is greater than the total number of armed conflicts indicated. The end of the Cold War was accompanied by de-escalation and frequent settlement of East-West related conflicts in Central America and Southern Africa. Whatever local conflicts had fueled these wars, the involvement of the two superpower alliances escalated them to major engagements. Again, the Korean and Vietnam Wars are particularly tragic examples of local wars fueled by superpower rivalry. But we find the same pattern in Mozambique and, although not with equally bloody consequences, in Nicaragua and Guatemala. The optimists were right in predicting that such conflicts would de-escalate or wither away with the end of the Cold War.

Yet, the pessimists were right in assuming that some old conflicts would reemerge once the strict bipolar order collapsed and nuclear deterrence no longer was credible. The break-up of former Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union are the classic examples, once again bringing armed conflict to Europe. And precisely because there was only one superpower left, neither the US nor Russia were sufficiently concerned about the evil influence of the other to clamp the lid on new local conflicts in Africa and elsewhere. So several new conflicts were allowed to develop, whereas the bipolar Cold War system might have made the stakes so high that the parties would have preferred to remain at peace.

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<sup>7</sup> These three wars are recorded by the Uppsala Conflict Data Project with 30, 20, and 13 participants respectively.

### **Where are the Conflicts?**

Where have all these conflicts taken place? Figure 3 shows the geographical distribution of the 115 conflicts of the post-Cold War period, 1989–2001. Most of the conflicts have been plotted in the main theater of operations or at the border in the case of interstate conflicts. A few nation-wide internal conflicts have been plotted in the capital. The most striking thing about this map is that we see a rather strong clustering of conflict. Three broad zones of conflict emerge: One in Central America and into South America. A second long arch of violence runs from the Balkans, through the Middle East and the Caucasus to Southeast Asia. And the third zone of conflict is Africa, where there is conflict more or less all over the continent. Conversely, we see that fairly large areas of the globe have been completely free or almost completely free of any armed conflict after the end of the Cold War. The world is indeed divided into zones of peace and zones of turmoil.<sup>8</sup>

If we limit the time perspective further and just look at the year 2000, the conflict zone in Central and South America has shrunk drastically: Only one country, Columbia, remains at war. The second zone of turmoil has also shrunk. There is also very little recorded violence in the Balkans, the internal conflict in Macedonia being the only one to exceed 25 battle-deaths in 2001. The war in Chechnya continues. Whether the Caucasus is part of Europe is a debatable point, but at least no one seems to think that this is where the EU and NATO are looking to expand in the short run. The third zone of turmoil, in Africa, does not show similar signs of contraction. Of course, when you look at just a single year, instead of five decades, there will obviously be fewer active conflicts. But in Africa in 2000 the conflicts were spread out over the continent, or at least over all of Central Africa, with an outlier in Algeria.

If we were to pronounce on the future of conflict on the basis of these geographical patterns, we might predict a bright future for the Americas, with the reservation that other groups might try to copy al-Qaeda and take the war back to the hegemon. We could also be quite optimistic about Europe, with the exception of the Caucasus, but less so about the Middle East and South Asia, and certainly not about Africa.

But of course there is a limit to how much this kind of trend projection can tell us. We need to ask what factors *cause* war, and whether these factors are improving or

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<sup>8</sup> Singer & Wildavsky (1996).

deteriorating from the point of view of conflict prevention. I will focus mainly on civil war because, as already noted, most conflicts are internal.

I will structure the discussion around six general factors, which have been the subject of a great deal of research in recent years. The order in which these factors are listed should not necessarily be perceived as a declining order of importance.<sup>9</sup>

### **Poverty and Conflict**

I start, however, with the most robust finding of the literature on armed conflict: Most armed conflicts occur within or between poor countries. In Figure 3, the conflicts have been plotted on a background of a three-partite division of the world according to the level of GDP per capita in 1995. The dark green areas are the poorest, and the light green the richest. Most of the conflicts were mainly located in the poor or intermediate countries, with the civil war in Columbia as one of the most glaring deviants. The relationship between poverty and conflict is one on which more or less everyone agrees, whether defenders of the international status quo or strong system critics.

This agreement is shattered, however, once you start asking *why* poor countries have so much conflict. In the literature about civil war, much discussion now revolves around a distinction made famous by Paul Collier of the World Bank and Oxford University, the contrast between *greed* and *grievance*. The grievance interpretation of the strong relationship between civil war and poverty starts from the traditional perspective of identification with the underdog: Armed conflict represents the rebellion of the poor against the rich, within, as well as between, nations. Poverty is seen in relative terms. The aim of the rebellion is redistribution, getting the underclass a just share of a cake that is otherwise consumed by multinational corporations, semi-colonial structures, and a corrupt domestic elite. Redistribution may be accomplished by such diverse national and international means as development aid, taxation, or the underclass assuming political power.

The greed interpretation of civil war, on the other hand, sees conflict as resulting from something akin to labor recruitment or even organized crime. A rebel group can be seen as a company hiring workers for a hazardous occupation, i.e. fighting the authorities. The worse off the country is, the greater the poverty, the higher the

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<sup>9</sup> For more extended discussions, see Sambanis (2002) and Gates (2002).

unemployment, the larger the number of candidates for employment by the rebels. Their work may be hazardous, but you get paid. The rebel group may have an ideology. But the driving force, according to this interpretation, is the need to sustain the organization. For this purpose, it is essential to acquire funding to pay the soldiers. This is why many rebels are more concerned about looting national resources than about capturing power in the nation. The rebels are prepared to use means quite as drastic as any criminal group. Their leaders are less concerned about a just distribution of resources than about stashing away funds in Swiss bank accounts. For such reasons, scholars like John Mueller argue that there is virtually no war left in the world today, just crime.<sup>10</sup>

Another important reason why wealthier countries have less civil war, according to this perspective, is that the government has a larger tax base and can afford to pay for a reliable and efficient central administration, including police and security forces.

The grievance vs. greed distinction is part of a wider distinction between a radical and a liberal view of development. The radical interpretation is that economic growth frequently involves increasing disparities, which in turn may cause grievance and conflict. They are concerned not just with absolute deprivation, but also relative deprivation. Liberals, on the other hand, interpret economic development as a form of modernization, which introduces literacy, education, and modern values, and promotes the rule of law and peaceful relations between individuals and groups, but also the creation of a viable state with a monopoly on the use of force internally and externally. The liberal view is also usually favorable to trade and economic integration, which it sees as favoring economic growth. Radicals are more skeptical of trade, which easily becomes asymmetric, and foreign direct investment, which tends to cement old dependency relationships. This debate has come to a head in the recent confrontations over globalization.<sup>11</sup> In that debate, the liberal perspective is dominant in the World Bank<sup>12</sup> and the business community, while the grievance perspective is promoted by radicals, Marxists, some environmentalists, and much of the international NGO community.

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<sup>10</sup> Mueller (2001).

<sup>11</sup> For the debate on globalization, see de Soysa & Gleditsch (2002) and other chapters in the same edited volume. Also Schneider, Barbieri & Gleditsch (2002).

<sup>12</sup> Collier & Hoeffler (1998, 2001).

The two perspectives are, of course, not completely contradictory. A rebel group can start out with a strong ideological commitment to redistribution. But it will find it necessary during its life span to consider more mundane matters like feeding its members, and may adopt crime-like measures to further this cause. There exists hardly any liberation movement that has not been accused by its opponents of being 'criminal'. Of course, we tend to ignore such statements if we share the aims of the rebels. A rebel movement may engage in robbing the rich, as emphasized by the grievance perspective. But as the greed perspective points out, only a portion of the loot will go towards redistribution, while a major share may end up in the bank accounts of the leadership. The grievance perspective has been found wanting in recent cross-national studies that look at the relationship between income inequality and civil war. These studies usually find the relationship to be non-significant.<sup>13</sup> But grievance theorists can respond that in countries where nearly everyone is poor, income inequality is low. In such countries rebels can still be motivated by a desire for a more just share of the world's wealth or a perception that people are poor because they are being robbed. Another objection is that there is a great deal of case study material that emphasizes the importance of so-called horizontal inequality.<sup>14</sup> In other words, even if the overall income inequality is not associated with conflict, income inequality between ethnic or other groups can cause grievance and conflict. This has not so far been the subject of systematic cross-national studies.

In spite of the common perception of a strong link between poverty and conflict, then, the supporters of the greed and grievance perspectives part ways in the understanding of why poverty motivates conflict as well in prescriptions for how to overcome poverty.

Finally, while poverty stimulates conflict, this may also work the other way around. War destroys physical as well as human capital, and disrupts production and trade. Thus, countries at war have lower economic growth.<sup>15</sup> Who, after all, feels comfortable investing in a war-torn area like Southern Sudan? We get a negative feedback loop between poverty and conflict.

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<sup>13</sup> Collier & Hoeffler (2001); Hegre, Gissinger & Gleditsch (2002).

<sup>14</sup> Several such studies are cited in Humphreys (2002: 3–4). This study provides a good survey of the literature on economic factors in conflict and a critique of the greed perspective.

<sup>15</sup> Murdoch & Sandler (2002).

## Politics and Conflict

In recent discussion of interstate war, there has been a great deal of focus on what is called, by friends and foes alike, ‘the democratic peace’. This is the regularity that democratic countries rarely, if ever, engage in serious violent conflicts between themselves.<sup>16</sup> Democracies participate in war as much as other countries, although they seem to initiate new conflicts less frequently, and they tend to win the wars they participate in,<sup>17</sup> but they do not fight other democracies. Is there a parallel for civil war – a democratic civil peace? I would argue yes, but there are several qualifications and controversies. Stable democracies rarely fight civil wars. The main reason presumably is that the citizens and domestic groups have nonviolent ways of handling conflict. In a sense this is what democracy is all about: rather than determining domestic disputes between two groups on the basis of who is physically stronger, recourse is made to political institutions, the courts, national elections, and other institutionalized mechanisms of conflict resolution. In the rare case where large-scale political violence does occur in a democracy, it usually relates to remnants of an undemocratic past, as in a semi-colonial situation (as in North Ireland) or the heritage of a long period of dictatorship (as in Spain).

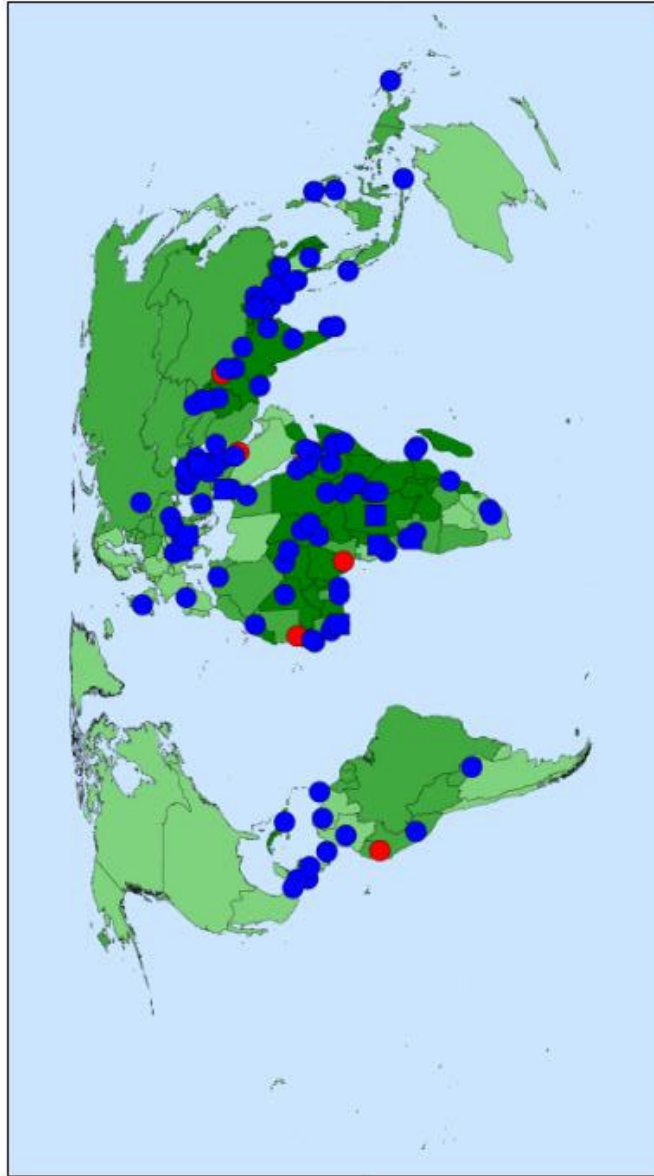
However, there are also very few civil wars in strict authoritarian countries. After the first few turbulent years of the Soviet Union, we find no civil conflicts at all until World War II destabilized the central leadership. After the end of that war a few rebel movements in the Baltic countries and the Ukraine managed to keep up armed resistance to Soviet power for a few years. When the resistance petered out there was once again ‘civil peace’ until the break-up of the Soviet Union. In the case of China, the only civil conflict recorded by the Uppsala University dataset since the establishment of the Communist regime, is the conflict in Tibet. The Chinese government did not establish full control there until about 1960. For the last forty years of this enormous, multi-ethnic political dictatorship not a single armed conflict with more than 25 battle-deaths is recorded. The reason for the autocratic civil peace is, of course, quite different from the democratic civil peace. Autocratic countries lack internal violence because the leaders have the population well under control and nip any opposition in the bud before it gathers strength.

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<sup>16</sup> Gleditsch & Hegre (1997).

<sup>17</sup> Reiter & Stam (2002).

Figure 3. Armed Conflicts 1989–2000



A symbol on the map shows that an armed conflict has been active in at least one year of the post-Cold War period. Blue symbols are interstate conflicts, while red are internal conflicts. Blue squares are internationalized civil conflicts. The background shows three levels of GDP per capita as of 1995. The darkest green areas are the poorest. The map was created by Jan Ketil Rød (cf. Rød, Gleditsch & Buhaug, 2002).



Civil wars tend to occur, then, in the semi-democratic countries (or semi-authoritarian, if you will). Such countries are sufficiently free that the opposition can engage in organized resistance, but insufficiently free to satisfy the population that nonviolent means will suffice. These in-between countries also experience regime change more frequently.<sup>18</sup>

Some prominent work in the ‘greed’ tradition tends to discount the importance of political factors. Collier & Hoeffler do not find democracy to be a significant factor in preventing civil war. A weakness of their analysis is that they analyze civil war by five-year periods. Democracy is measured at the beginning of each five-year period. This is a common approach for economists, since economic variables generally do not change drastically from one year to the next. But a democratic government can be overthrown instantaneously by internal or external intervention. If civil war erupts after the change of government, this approach would fail to pick it up.

### **A History of Violence**

Probably the second most robust finding in the literature on civil war, as well as interstate war, is that violence tends to breed violence. The longer the time elapsed since the last civil war, the smaller the probability of a new conflict erupting. Again, there may be many different reasons for this, although these have not been the subject of as much discussion as the relationship between poverty and conflict. Renewed conflict may represent an attempt at revenge from the losing side in the previous engagement. The Hutus and the Tutsis have been fighting each other in tit-for-tat fashion for decades, just as the French and the Germans did in Europe for 75 years. But repeated violence may also result from a general deterioration of norms against violence, as well as easy availability of arms and combat experience from the earlier conflict, as in Afghanistan. The relative importance of these various explanations largely await to be explored in cross-national research on civil war.

Yet, some countries manage to put an end to violence and some manage to put the past behind them very quickly. Once South Africa abolished apartheid, the traditional battle lines based on color largely disappeared. That does not mean that South Africa has solved all its problems or indeed eliminated all internal violence.

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<sup>18</sup> Fearon & Laitin (2003), Hegre et al. (2001).

But the old fault line seems to be all but irrelevant to armed conflict. This is a very different situation than in former Yugoslavia, where the parties are re-fighting the battle of the Kosovo plain and other confrontations of hundreds of years ago. Fortunately, not all neighbors are as unforgiving as Serbs, Croats, and Muslims. For instance, Swedes and Norwegians have long since stopped battling each other over major portions of territory lost or gained in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, or over the Norwegian secession in 1905 from the Union between the two countries. Unfortunately, we do not have a good theory to explain why some people are able to forgive while others cannot.

### **Ethnicity**

'Ethnic conflict' is one of the most common epithets for contemporary violence, particularly in the Third World. Even in Europe the Balkan, Northern Ireland, or Basque conflicts are commonly described as 'ethnic' in a broad sense, encompassing racial, cultural, linguistic, or religious differences. The pessimistic school of thought after the Cold War built in no small measure on the prospect of ethnic war. The most dramatic version of this scenario is represented by Samuel Huntington's portrayal of present and future 'clashes of civilizations'; armed conflict along the fault lines of the world's major six or seven civilizations.<sup>19</sup>

Such scenarios, at least in their less dramatic variants, have considerable current appeal. The al-Qaeda network and its extremist supporters in many countries target the 'infidels'. Some see elements of a similar religious crusade in the unilateralism of US foreign policy. Clearly, Serbs, Croats, and Bosnian Muslims have committed more violence across than within these 'ethnic' boundaries. There are, however, two main problems with most of the work that identifies ethnic differences as a serious cause of violence:

The first is methodological. Analysts take a list of conflicts and look for the ethnic element. Since very few countries are ethnically homogenous, an ethnic dividing line can usually be found. But selection on a particular value of the dependent variable may produce spurious results. In order to understand war, we must also study peace, i.e. all the cases of ethnically divided countries that did *not* erupt into war. Why is Catholic Bavaria not fighting protestant Nordrhein-Westphalia? After

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<sup>19</sup> Huntington (1993, 1996). For a critique, see Russett, Oneal & Cox (2000).

all, the 30-year war in Germany in the 17<sup>th</sup> century was fought along religious lines, at considerable cost.

When we do look for the ethnic factor in studies that systematically compare civil war with the non-war cases, we find that it is not ethnic fragmentation in itself that predicts conflict.<sup>20</sup> Rather, it is ethnic polarization. In a highly fragmented country, it is difficult for a single ethnic group to capture political power except in coalition with others. In countries where one ethnic group is overwhelmingly dominant, ethnic rebellion is also less likely, because it is doomed to failure. In a country more evenly divided between two ethnic groups, each party may have genuine fear of the possible dominance of the other, and both may hope to be able to win on the battlefield. This is what some studies find, although the strength of the relationship is not dramatic.

There is an additional reason to be skeptical of the media rhetoric about ethnic wars. Visible and audible differences between people are convenient ways of distinguishing between enemies and friends and thus of organizing for battle. Racial and linguistic differences are easily perceived and so are religious differences when they are expressed in clothing and behavior. In former Yugoslavia, some considered themselves to be 'Yugoslavs' rather than Serbs, Croats, etc. prior to the breakup of the Union.<sup>21</sup> But once several republics had left the union and armed conflict had broken out, ethnic suspicions increased and polarized many communities that had hitherto been peaceful. Regardless of what first triggers a conflict in an ethnically divided society, ethnic polarization is likely to occur, particularly if there is a history of inter-ethnic violence.

The discussion about culture clashes has also raised the issue of whether some religions tend to promote violence more than others. Only about one quarter of the world's population are Muslims. But in the countries directly affected by armed conflict in 2001, about half were countries where Muslims were in the majority or in a significant majority. That in itself does not prove that Islam is a violent religion. We cannot draw too many conclusions either from the fact that the only country in the world with a majority of Jews has been continually at war since its foundation. Even countries with dominant religions widely believed to be peaceful, such as Burma and Sri Lanka, have been troubled by lengthy armed conflicts. Rather than putting the blame on particular religions, we might ask if there is

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<sup>20</sup> Collier & Hoeffler (2001), Ellingsen (2000), Fearon & Laitin (2003).

<sup>21</sup> Urdal (2001).

anything about fundamentalist religion, in the sense of religion that interferes in political life. Religion is at cross-purposes with democracy in the sense that it decrees that a higher being may dictate a course of action that is different from that favored by the majority of the population. In highly secularized countries, religion has little influence on politics, including war and peace issues. In fundamentalist countries, religion does place restraints on politics. Such restrictions may be for good or for bad, but if the religion is exclusive and missionary, then it is likely to stimulate conflict and to decrease the possibility of compromise. Having said this, I hasten to add that as far as I know there is as yet little if any systematic research on the topic of fundamentalism and war.

### **Resource and Environmental Conflict**

Another line of argument that has gained in popularity after the end of the Cold War is that resource scarcity and environmental degradation is likely to cause conflicts. This is by no means a new argument; Thomas Malthus argued 200 years ago that the discrepancy between population growth and food production would produce starvation, pestilence, and war.<sup>22</sup> Neomalthusians make essentially the same argument, but for a wider variety of resource factors, ranging from oil over freshwater to clean air. The growth of environmental concerns has stimulated this kind of thinking.<sup>23</sup> Several past wars have been ascribed to competition over scarce energy resources, particularly oil,<sup>24</sup> and water scarcity has been predicted as a major source of future conflict.<sup>25</sup>

The resource wars literature suffers from precisely the same problem as the ethnic conflict literature, that of selection on the dependent variable. If you look at a list of wars, it is usually not difficult to locate some scarce resource that can be hypothesized to account for the outbreak of war. Regardless of how many times the elder President Bush said that he launched Desert Storm in order to get the Iraqis out of Kuwait and reverse a violation of international law, there will be those

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<sup>22</sup> Ohlsson (1999), Gleditsch (1998, 2001).

<sup>23</sup> To simplify the argument, I assume here that any environmental problem can be defined as a problem of scarce resources (made increasingly scarce by human actions).

<sup>24</sup> Klare (2001).

<sup>25</sup> For a review of the 'water conflict' literature and an empirical study, see Toset, Gleditsch & Hegre (2000).

who say that he was really thinking of US oil interests in the Middle East. Such an argument cannot be proved or disproved. Of course, when historians get access to the most sensitive inner sources of the first Bush administration in thirty years time or so, they will have a better basis for evaluating such claims. Meanwhile, we must insist that in order to understand war, we also have to study peace. How many countries have potential problems of water scarcity or energy scarcity and why are some of them at war while others are not?

Systematic studies confirm that most wars are fought over territory, so in that sense most wars are resource wars. But just as ethnic differences provide a convenient way of organizing a war, most wars are also fought on the basis of territorial control. Even in guerrilla warfare, where takeover of the entire territory is only a distant goal, there is an urgent need for a territorial base of some sort, be it in a cave or a tunnel or in a neighboring country. Obviously that piece of territory is not the cause of the war but a tool for conducting it.

Cross-national studies of resource scarcity and conflict provide ambiguous results. Some studies have found that the probability of internal armed conflict increases slightly when countries face resource problems like water scarcity, soil erosion, and deforestation.<sup>26</sup> Others – including the major effort of the official US State Failure Commission<sup>27</sup> – do not find a significant relationship. Some work that I have been involved in myself indicates that sharing a river increases the probability of conflict between two countries, over and above simply being neighbors.<sup>28</sup> But we do not have good enough data to know whether this is a result of the upstream/downstream conflict that is generally assumed in the water wars literature. Alternatively, the conflict could stem from the fuzziness of boundaries running along (rather than across) a river. Moreover, sharing a river also seems to increase the cooperation level; this may possibly be a result of the need to respond to the potential for conflict and to develop institutional mechanisms for dealing with the conflict peacefully. Major European rivers like the Danube and the Rhine are covered by multiple treaties and have well-functioning river commissions. Even the countries on the Jordan River watershed are collaborating to some extent, despite the amount of war that has gone on in the region.

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<sup>26</sup> Hauge & Ellingsen (1998).

<sup>27</sup> Esty et al. (1998).

<sup>28</sup> Toset, Gleditsch & Hegre (2001).

The neomalthusian argument is essentially a variant of the grievance school of thought. While there is some, but not overwhelming, support for it, the question of natural resources has come to figure prominently in 'greed' theories of conflict. Such theories see rebel movements as organizations hiring people for hazardous work or crime. The question of how to remunerate the members is critical. An abundance of natural resources that are easily lootable and can be sold on international markets – like alluvial diamonds or hardwood timber – makes it easier for the rebel movement to secure that income. Oil companies or mining operations can be held to ransom by rebel groups that demand pay-offs. Foreign governments or even companies can be attracted to the side of the government or the rebels by being promised a stake in the income from future exploitation of the natural resources. Ideology may provide a starting-point, but the looting becomes increasingly important to the continuance of the fight. Drug trafficking is also a feature of many violent organizations, for instance in Columbia.

But the availability of natural resources stimulates civil war not just because it stimulates looting and extortion from rebel groups. Many governments in poor countries are not much better. Such governments do not have to build a functioning tax system or public administration; they can buy sufficient support selling raw materials while the country is falling apart. The Angolan government is frequently mentioned as one that uses the oil revenue to fight the rebels.

### **Bad Neighborhoods**

I have already noted the clustering of conflicts in the maps of conflict distribution (Fig. 3). Some of this clustering may be due to contagion and spillover effects. Groups suffering from a grievance in one country may get inspiration from a rebel movement that is doing well in a neighboring country. Ethnic minorities may have ethnic brethren living across the border and may capitalize on that relationship for sanctuary and for financial support. Many governments also intervene in civil wars. Indeed, in many cases it is difficult to say whether we are dealing with an internal or an interstate war, as in all the wars in former Yugoslavia. You might even say that this is what the wars were fought over: the Slovenian, Croat, and Bosnian governments claimed a right to secede from the union and when Yugoslavia attacked or supported the rebels, they were engaging in interstate warfare. For the Serbs, this was all a domestic affair, of course, since they did not recognize the legality of leaving the union in this way.

But the clustering of conflict does not occur just due to contagion, but also because the causes of conflicts cluster in that area. If one African country is poor or badly governed, chances are that its neighbor suffers from the same problems.

Some studies have asked whether there are regional differences over and beyond the fact that their background characteristics are different. Collier & Hoeffler's study of conflicts in Africa, however, argues that there is nothing special about Africa, except that it has in abundance those factors that make for a high level of conflict everywhere.<sup>29</sup>

### **What about the Future?**

Can we foresee what the level of armed conflict will be in the future by looking at the development of the different causes of conflict that we have talked about? Let us review the six factors again very briefly:

First, poverty. The eradication of poverty world-wide is very high on the agenda of international organizations like the World Bank and several specialized agencies of the United Nations. This is a goal in itself, so to speak, in order to give people a decent life. But recently this goal has taken on added significance because it also has a potential for conflict prevention. If everyone were non-poor, there would be fewer armed conflicts, and this would contribute to further economic progress. So the thinking goes. A recent study on economic factors in conflict has calculated, for example, that a country with a GDP per capita just over \$250 has a predicted probability of a civil war breaking out in the next five years of some 15 percent. If the GDP per capita is doubled, the probability of armed conflict is reduced to half and if we double the income once again we get down to a 4 percent probability of war in the next five years.<sup>30</sup> Based on these figures, many countries have economic growth that would permit them to significantly reduce the risk of conflict over a ten-year period. In fast-growing countries like the four Asian tigers, for instance, disaffected groups seem to have a lot more to gain by joining the economic progress than to try to improve their lot in armed rebellion.

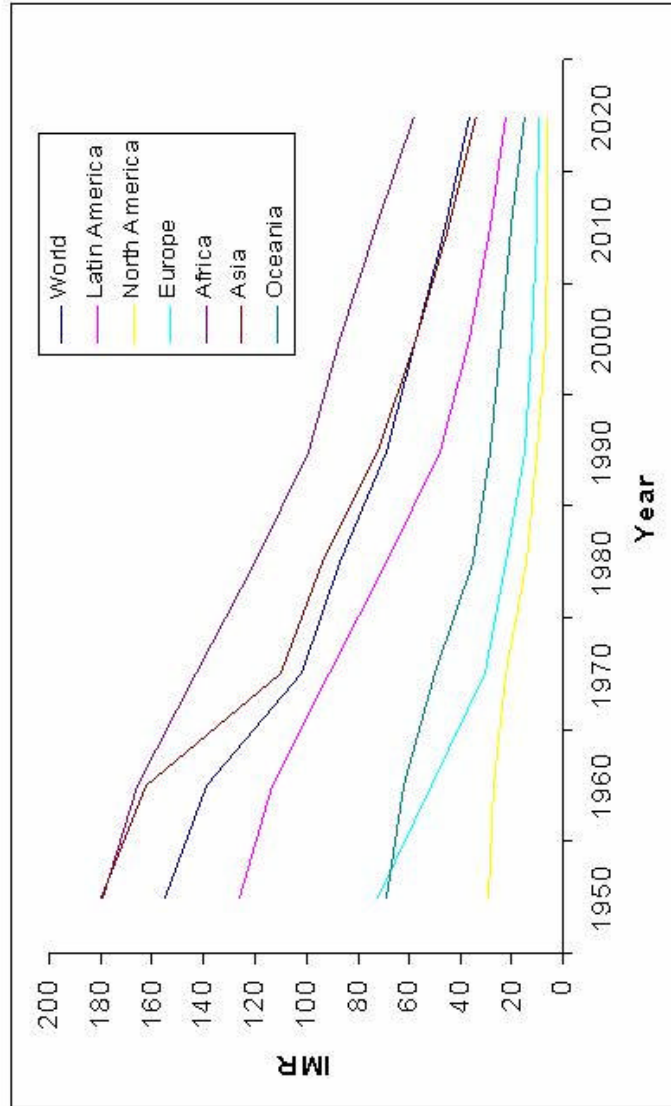
However, this calculation suffers from one major weakness: It assumes that conflict relates to absolute poverty rather than relative poverty. In other words, the

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<sup>29</sup> Collier & Hoeffler (2002).

<sup>30</sup> Humphreys (2002).

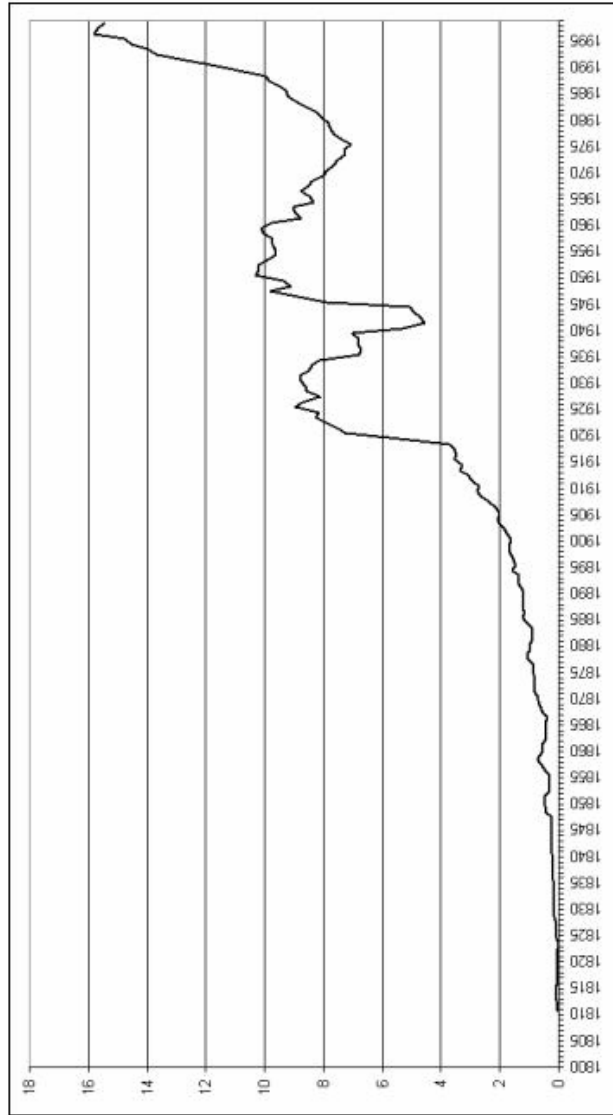
Figure 4. Infant Mortality Rates by Region



The Infant Mortality Rate is defined as the number of live-born children per 1000 that die in their first year. The figure was compiled by Henrik Urdal on the basis of data in UN (1999).



Figure 5. Average Democracy Score, 1810–1998



Following Vanhanen (1997, 2000), democracy is defined as the product of competition and participation. Competition is the fraction of the votes not given to the largest party and participation is the total number of votes cast divided by the total number of inhabitants. Thus, a country with 50% of the population voting and 50% voting for the largest party gets 25% on this index. The figure shows the average value of this index for all countries in a given year. Data from Vanhanen (2000), available from [www.prio.no/jpr/datasets.asp](http://www.prio.no/jpr/datasets.asp). Similar figures derived from alternative measures of democracy show basically the same development over time.

liberal, or the greed, perspective is taken for granted. However, if we adopt the radical, or grievance perspective on poverty, the increase in GDP per capita may not be relevant. By the time the poorest have improved their lot from \$250 to \$600, those who were previously at \$600 have also moved up. This may fuel resentment internally as well as externally, unless the incomes distribution becomes less skewed. Thus, if the grievance perspective is right, we cannot automatically infer that greater wealth will give less conflict. Liberals will argue that absolute poverty is reduced, but radicals will insist that it is still relative poverty that matters. Liberals will, however, also insist that the statistical studies that demonstrate the link between poverty and conflict have a temporal element as well as a cross-sectional one. This argument is not as easily answered by the radicals.

A slightly different take on this is found in a study of internal conflict that makes use of the infant mortality rate as the measure of development. Infant mortality, like life expectancy, is an interesting measure of development in that the mean value is not as strongly influenced by extremely high values as is national income per capita. No one inflates the average value of life expectancy by living to one thousand years. And no one is perfectly safe from infant mortality. While the issue of internal inequality is not irrelevant, it is much less pressing than in the case of economic measures of development. In a recent study of civil conflict, Henrik Urdal found that a country with mean values on all the variables in his model had a probability of 2.3 percent of experiencing an outbreak of conflict in any given year.<sup>31</sup> By following the medium projection of the UN Population Division, he then assumed that the world would improve from the current level of 57 children out of 1,000 who would die before the age of one, to 46 in 2010 and 36 in 2020. This would, according to his model, reduce the overall conflict propensity to 1.85 percent in 2010 and 1.7 percent in 2020. In other words, just the expected level of welfare improvement would reduce overall conflict propensity by one and about one quarter. This assumes no improvement or deterioration as a result of changes from any of the other variables in his model. For Sub-Saharan Africa, on the same assumptions, conflict propensity in percent declines from 2.9 over 2.5 to 2.1, i.e. a reduction by over a third in two decades. This is a significant improvement. Figure 4 shows the decline in infant mortality over a 50-year period in different regions. Clearly, this is an encouraging picture in several respects.

What about political democracy? Figure 5 graphs the average democracy score for all nations between 1800–1998 using a measure of democracy developed by a

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<sup>31</sup> Urdal (2002) and pers.comm.

Finnish political scientist, Tatu Vanhanen. We see very clearly the three waves of development described by Samuel Huntington in his 1991 book.<sup>32</sup> First, a long period of democratization peaking after World War I. Then a reversal following the emergence of the two totalitarian ideologies in Europe, Communism and Fascism. A second peak in the world level of democracy follows after the defeat of Fascism and the end of most colonial rule around 1960. The second reversal involves the failure of democracy in many of the new states and the replacement of democratic governments by military juntas in older states in Latin America and even in Greece. The third wave of democratization started with the fall of the junta in Portugal in 1974 and was followed by further democratization in the Mediterranean, in Latin America, in Asia, eventually in a major way with the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe, and finally to a limited extent even in Africa. While the third wave may have peaked, and many have pointed to weaknesses in the new democracies, a third reversal has not yet taken place.

If stable democracy helps to prevent civil war, then, the growth of democratic government might give us grounds for some hope. However, recall that the propensity for civil conflict is highest in semi-democracies. The democratization of the third wave will also involve a lot of movement from authoritarian to semi-democratic government, and thus an increased risk of conflict. For the world as a whole, there is little question that the continuing democratization is good news. For certain countries, however, greater instability and more conflict may be a result in the short term. The hope must be that the level of democracy increases further and that the democracy stabilizes. Democracies tend to cluster geographically, and regional democratization is therefore very relevant to the question of improving your neighborhood, which should further reduce conflict propensity. In regions with many stable democracies, as in Europe, further democratization should lead to more peace. In regions with few democracies, such as the Middle East or Central Africa, democratization may in the short run be a source of instability and turmoil.

Wealth, democratization, and an improved neighborhood are the three main factors that lead me to be relatively optimistic about the future of armed conflict. These factors are also likely to reinforce each other. We know that economic development encourages democratization, and since both of them cluster regionally, we get improved neighborhoods as a bonus.

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<sup>32</sup> Huntington (1991).

Other factors are likely to change more slowly or not at all, and are therefore less likely to have much significance when we speculate about the future of conflict. Ethnic composition, for instance, rarely changes drastically in a short time. However, in certain countries waves of refugees from neighboring countries can upset the ethnic balance. Immigration to Northern European countries has certainly changed their cities, and has led to unrest and individual acts of violence. But this is still very far from organized ethnic warfare, and I do not think such a development is very likely.

Finally, a word about intervention. One of the great changes in the post-Cold War era is that military intervention is increasingly used for purposes defined by the international community and with a view to settling conflict, rather than making a national gain. Most of the several hundred military interventions after World War II were unilateral interventions by the great powers, designed to serve their national interest. The Gulf War, the Kosovo War, and the Afghanistan War, however, were wars that were carried out with the approval (more or less explicit) of the international community with a view to ending illegal occupation, political repression, and terrorism. If this continues, assuming it does not backfire, it may have the effect of constraining the actions of particularly aggressive regimes and reducing the level of conflict, over and above the reduction due to development and democratization. That is a hopeful prospect of today's world.

What about the Middle East? For nearly 30 years, from the mid-1960s to the mid-1990s, the conflict propensity of countries in the Middle East clearly exceeded the world average. This is no longer the case. The conflict propensity of the Middle East is now exactly at the world average level, a level that is lower than what it was during the Cold War. I realize that in a country where civilians are daily affected by violence, this may be a small consolation, but I offer it as a minor sign of optimism nevertheless.

We cannot predict single events like September 11 or a bomb going off in a shopping center. But we can say with some confidence that broad trends in world development are slowly influencing the patterns of conflict and probably, on the whole, in the direction of a more peaceful world.

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