



UCDP Newsletter #14

A NEW HOPE FOR PEACE IN THE MIDDLE EAST?

Iran and Saudi Arabia restore diplomatic relations

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

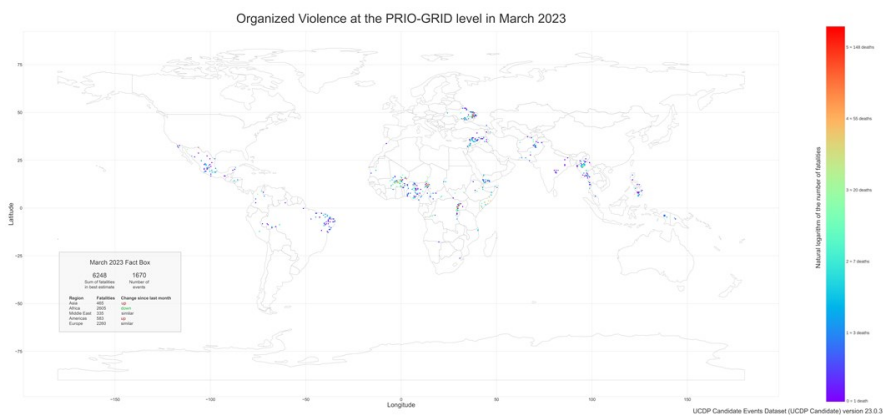
Greetings from the *Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) Newsletter!*

In this issue, we take a closer look at the trends in organized violence in March 2023 and provide an assessment of the recent Saudi-Iranian rapprochement.

The reestablishment of diplomatic ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia offers a chance to alter the conflict dynamics in the Middle East. While easing hostilities and addressing conflicting objectives in countries such as Syria and Yemen will be challenging, this rapprochement could contribute to regional stability. Improved relations have the potential to facilitate diplomatic dialogue and reduce sectarian tensions, though considerable efforts will be needed from both sides to foster joint initiatives to end organized violence. The path toward a more secure and stable region is complex and uncertain, but this development may represent a significant first step.

We always value your questions, suggestions, and feedback. Please feel free to reach out to us at ucdp@pcr.uu.se.

Warm regards,
Magnus Öberg
UCDP Director



TRENDS IN ORGANIZED VIOLENCE IN MARCH 2023

Mert Can Yilmaz, *Uppsala Conflict Data Program*

In March 2023, the ongoing conflict in Ukraine continued to claim lives, resulting in the loss of over 2,000 individuals.

During this period, there was a noticeable uptick in fatalities due to organized violence in

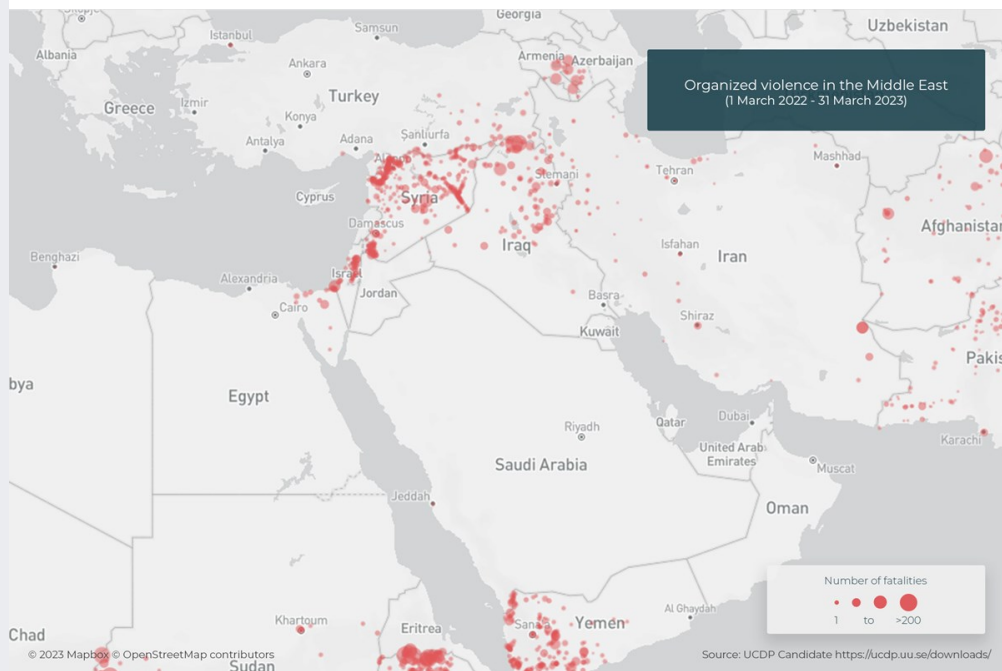
Asia and the Americas compared to February 2023, while a decrease was observed in Africa. The Middle East and Europe, however, experienced similar levels of violence intensity.

The five deadliest state-based conflicts in March 2023 included Russia-Ukraine, Somalia: Government, Burkina Faso: Government, Nigeria: Islamic State, and Myanmar (Burma): Government.

Confrontations between the Jalisco Cartel New Generation and various rival cartels in Mexico led to at least 180 fatalities. Non-state conflicts in Nigeria and Brazil also had considerable impact.

Large-scale one-sided violence transpired in the Democratic Republic of Congo in March 2023, as organized actors deliberately killed over 330 civilians. The IS and URDPC were accountable for more than half of these deaths. IS carried out one-sided violence also in Nigeria, Mali, Burkina Faso, Syria, Mali, Iraq, Afghanistan and Niger deliberately targeting and killing nearly 250 civilians in total during this timeframe. Government forces in Myanmar also engaged in one-sided violence, causing the death of over 85 civilians.

Source: UCDP Candidate 23.0.3



A NEW HOPE FOR PEACE IN THE MIDDLE EAST?

Nanar Hawach, *Uppsala Conflict Data Program*

On 10 March, Iran and Saudi Arabia announced the reestablishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries, a development that may significantly influence conflict dynamics in the Middle East. The historical and religious rivalry between Iran, a majority-Shi'a country, and Saudi Arabia, a majority-Sunni country, has long shaped regional politics, with doctrinal differences exacerbating tensions. The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran marked a turning point in the political dynamics of the Middle East.

Recent endeavors to enhance relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia hold the potential to foster regional stability, as the hostilities and conflicting agendas of both countries have ignited conflicts throughout the area. For example, during the Syrian Civil War, Iran offered substantial military and financial support to Bashar al-Assad's government, while Saudi Arabia backed various Sunni rebel factions opposing the regime. The restored ties between Saudi Arabia and Iran might facilitate diplomatic dialogue and decrease the potential for further conflict in Syria. Moreover, Saudi Arabia has already initiated steps to normalize relations with the Syrian regime, leveraging its regional influence to encourage other Arab countries to do the same*, resulting in Syria's readmission into the Arab League.

On the other hand, the Saudi-Iran rapprochement might imply that Iran is no longer required to remove its presence from Syria, further complicating the Iran-Israel conflict with Syria as their current battleground.

The [Yemeni Civil War](#) represents yet another theater in which Iran and Saudi Arabia have supported opposing factions. Iran has provided backing to Ansarallah, adherents of a Shi'a Islam branch, while Saudi Arabia has spearheaded a Sunni Arab coalition in support of the disparate alliance of armed factions that constitute the Presidential Leadership Council, the internationally recognized Yemeni government. This conflict has engendered one of the world's most acute humanitarian crises, with millions of Yemenis confronting famine and widespread disease. The reestablishment of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran holds the potential to significantly influence the dynamics of the Yemeni conflict.

The Saudi-Iranian rapprochement has already facilitated ongoing negotiations between Saudi Arabia and Ansarallah, also known as the Houthis, representing the [Government of Yemen](#) since 2015. There has been a noticeable improvement in the situation since April 2022, though the conflict still continues, as seen from the map above. According to UCDP, the number of deaths from organized violence in Yemen was over 20 000 in 2021. From April 2022 till the end of March 2023, this figure was around 1000, indicating a significant decrease in violence.

The Ansarallah is expected to cease cross-border attacks on Saudi refineries and airfields, which have been a persistent feature of the conflict. Additionally, the improved relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran may pave the way for future discussions involving factions in the south backed by the United Arab Emirates.

Beyond the conflict zones of Syria and Yemen, the Iran-Saudi agreement may positively impact Iraq, Lebanon, and Bahrain, where it could reduce sectarian tensions, mitigate proxy competition, and encourage dialogue among opposing factions.

** With the exception of Qatar, most Arab countries are currently in the process of normalizing ties with the Assad regime.*

The Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) is the world's main provider of data on organized violence and the oldest ongoing data collection project for civil war, with a history of almost 40 years. Its definition of armed conflict has become the global standard of how conflicts are systematically defined and studied.

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For your questions or comments, please contact us at ucdp@pcr.uu.se.
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The UCDP is based at Uppsala University's [Department of Peace and Conflict Research](#).

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