

# Continued Failure to End Wartime Sexual Violence

A decade after United Nations Security Council Resolution 1820, and four years after the Global Summit in London in 2014, wartime sexual violence has not abated. An update of the Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict (SVAC) dataset (Cohen & Nordås 2014) for 2010–2015 shows little sign of improvement. We also find that *state forces are still frequent perpetrators of sexual violence*. Further, a clear and worrying trend has emerged in the past decade: *an increasing number of insurgent groups perpetrate sexual violence*.

## Brief Points

- The problem of sexual violence remains severe in many conflict zones.
- An update of the SVAC dataset for the years 2010–2015 confirms that we are failing to end wartime sexual violence.
- State forces are still frequent perpetrators of sexual violence.
- An increasing number of insurgent groups perpetrate sexual violence.
- The majority of conflicts in which at least one conflict party is reported to perpetrate sexual violence are in Africa, with 17 out of 53 conflicts globally in 2015.

## Introduction

In 2008, the United Nations Security Council passed resolution 1820, which demanded ‘the immediate and complete cessation by all parties to armed conflict of all acts of sexual violence against civilians with immediate effect’. In the following two years, resolutions 1888 (2009) and 1960 (2010) further emphasized the importance of ending conflict-related sexual violence, and in 2012 the government of the United Kingdom in collaboration with Angelina Jolie launched the Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative (PSVI). However, recent reports of funding cuts suggest that the international commitment to end wartime sexual violence might be faltering. This development is concerning, as the problem of sexual violence remains severe in many conflict zones, and an update of the SVAC dataset for the years 2010–2015 confirms that we are failing to put a stop to or significantly reduce the number of armed organizations that commit such violence.

In 2014, the first iteration of the Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict (SVAC) dataset was released to facilitate quantitative studies investigating the causes and consequences of conflict-related sexual violence. Analyses of the data busted several myths and misconceptions about wartime sexual violence. For example, the data showed that sexual violence is not only, or even foremost, a problem of unruly rebels. State forces are frequent perpetrators. The data also demonstrated how there is significant variation

in sexual violence over time, across conflicts, and between different conflict actors. Not only that, the data also reaffirmed that sexual violence is not inevitable in war, as many conflict actors are able to effectively prohibit it.

*We are releasing an updated version of the SVAC dataset, covering the years 2010–2015, to see what new trends are emerging*

The original dataset included information for the period 1989 to 2009. Since then, multiple conflicts have underscored the importance of continued attention to conflict-related sexual violence. Despite the data indicating that sexual violence is very much a state problem, public attention has largely focused on sexual violence by non-state actors, such as Daesh (ISIS) or Boko Haram. Today, we are releasing an updated version of the SVAC dataset, covering the years 2010–2015, to see what new trends are emerging. The data is available at [www.sexualviolencedata.org/](http://www.sexualviolencedata.org/) and via PRIO’s website.

## States Are Still Frequent Perpetrators

The new data reaffirm that government forces are reported as perpetrators of sexual violence more often than non-state actors. Recent reports of sexual violence by government forces include active conflicts, such as the Syrian civil war, and post-conflict ‘peace’, such as the government forces in Sri Lanka.

*The new data reaffirm that government forces are reported as perpetrators of sexual violence more often than non-state actors*

The distribution of sexual violence perpetrated by government forces and rebel forces shows a clear pattern (Figure 1). In any given year between 1989 and 2015, the share of conflicts in which governments perpetrate at least some level of sexual violence is greater than the share of conflicts in which rebels perpetrate sexual violence.

*Since 2009, the number of conflicts for which at least one of the sources reported massive sexual violence by a state actor has increased substantially*

Even more concerning, since 2009, the number of conflicts for which at least one of the sources reported massive sexual violence by a state actor has increased substantially (Figure 2).

## More Rebel Groups Perpetrate Sexual Violence

A notable trend over time is that the number of reported rebel groups perpetrating sexual violence has more than tripled from 1989 to 2015. What is most disturbing given the increased attention to ending sexual violence in war is that the updated dataset shows not only an uptick in the number of insurgent groups perpetrating

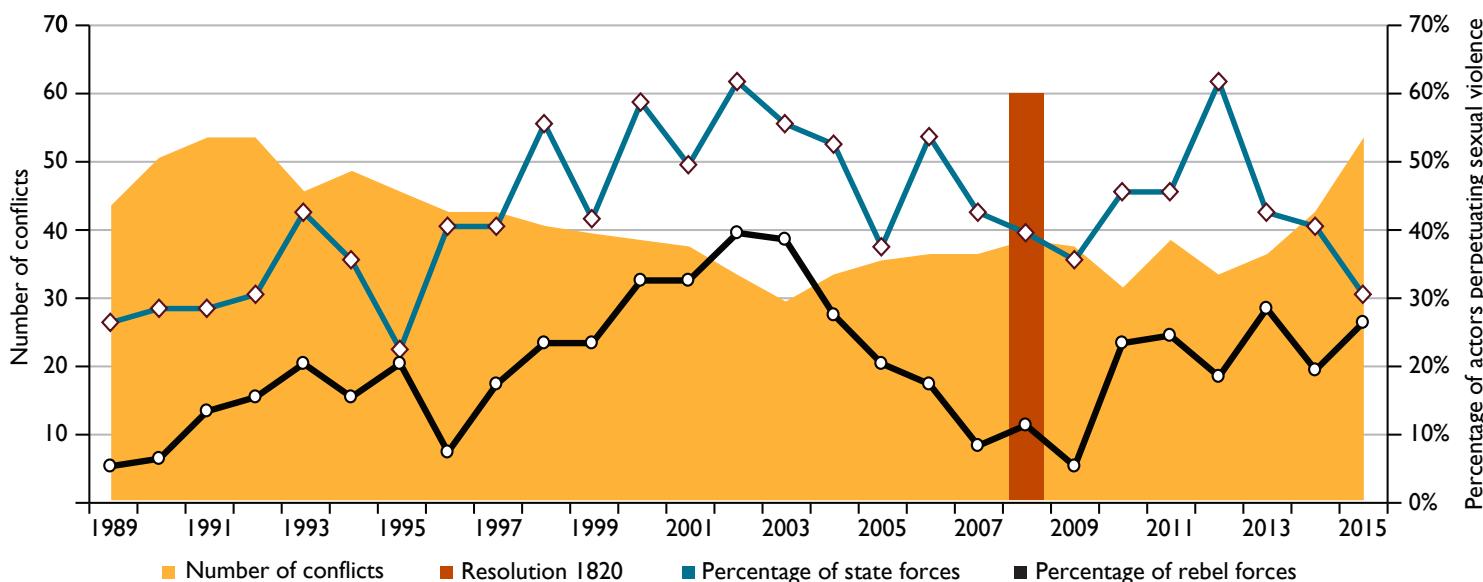


Figure 1: Number of state and rebel forces perpetrating SVAC (only active conflict years)

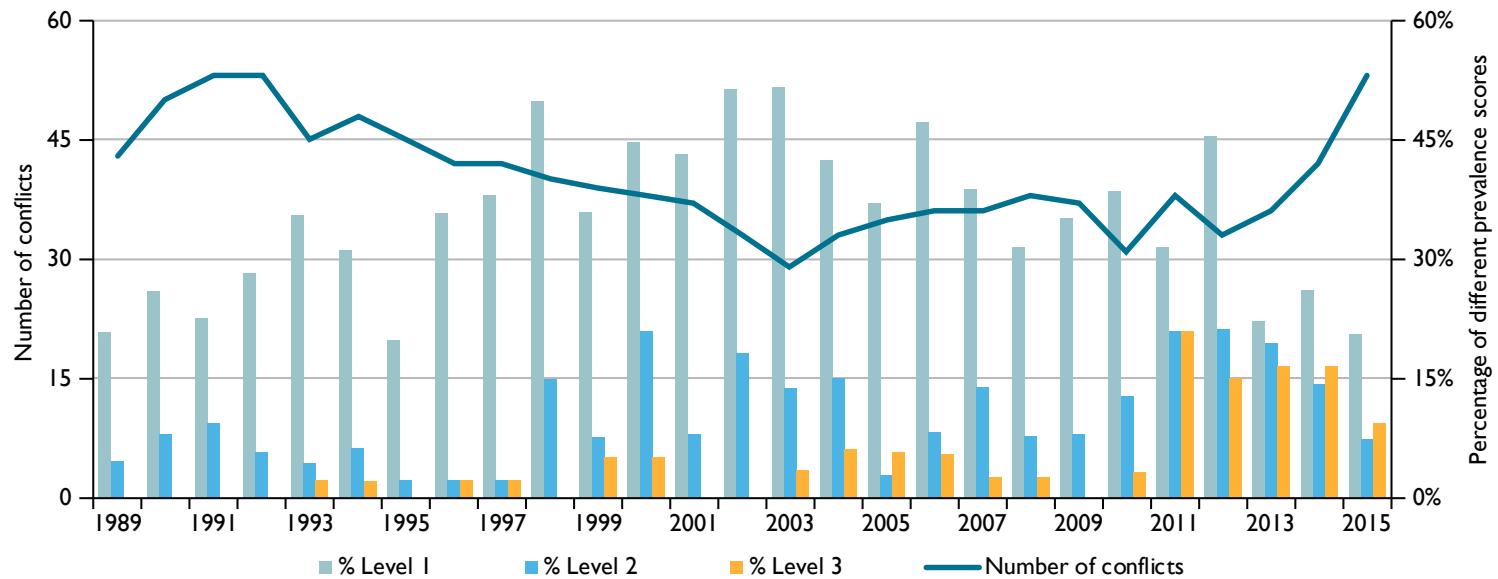


Figure 2: Percentage of different prevalence levels by state forces (only active conflict years)

sexual violence, but also in the prevalence levels. Looking only at active conflict years, we see the number of rebel groups perpetrating sexual violence rising from 2 in 2009 to 14 in 2015 (Figure 1). When disaggregating the levels of sexual violence by rebel forces, we see a concerning trend: the increase in rebel actors perpetrating sexual violence also results in more widespread and systematic sexual violence in the period after 2009 (Figure 3).

*The number of reported rebel groups perpetrating sexual violence has more than tripled from 1989 to 2015*

One potential explanation for this post-2009 trend is that increased international attention has improved reporting. In other words, the uptick in reports of sexual violence might be an example of [the information paradox](#). For example, the U.S. State Department reports on Human Rights in Colombia tended to combine

the groups FARC and ELN, simply referring to ‘guerrilla organizations’. However, in recent years, the State Department stopped this practice, and started attributing sexual violence to each organization specifically. A more pessimistic interpretation might be that [increased international attention has incentivized conflict actors](#) to use sexual violence to gain bargaining leverage. We think both explanations might be at work.

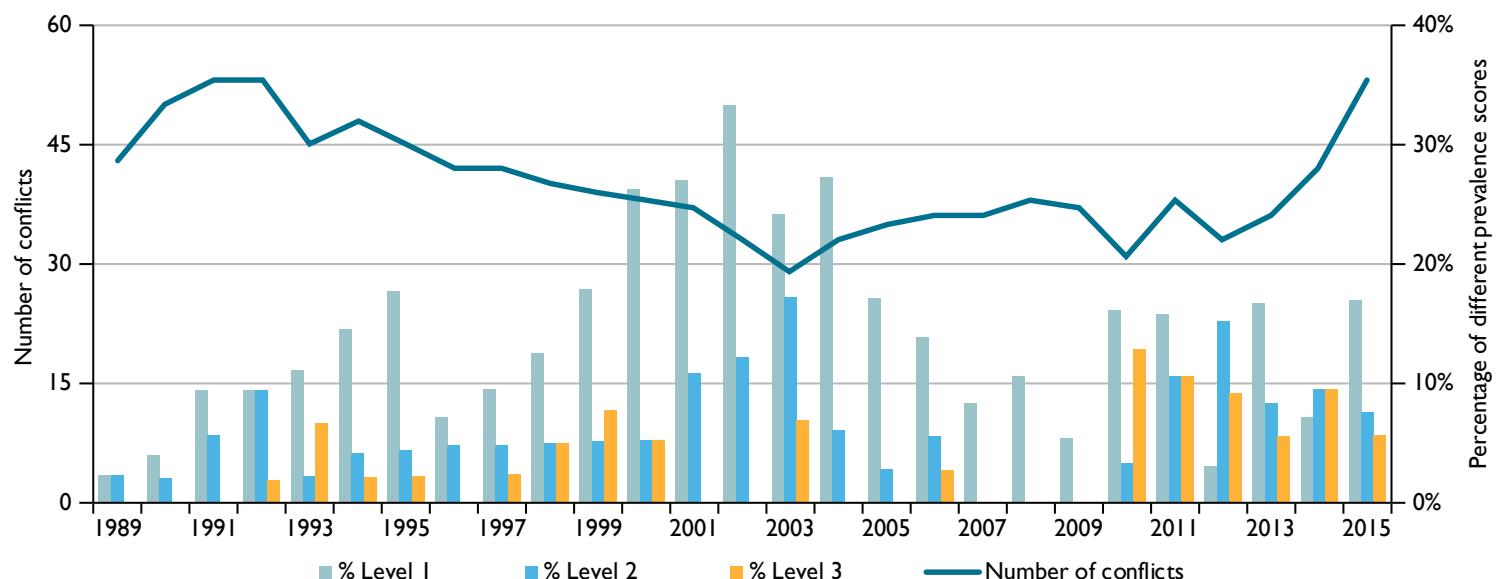


Figure 3: Percentage of different prevalence levels by rebel forces (only active conflict years)

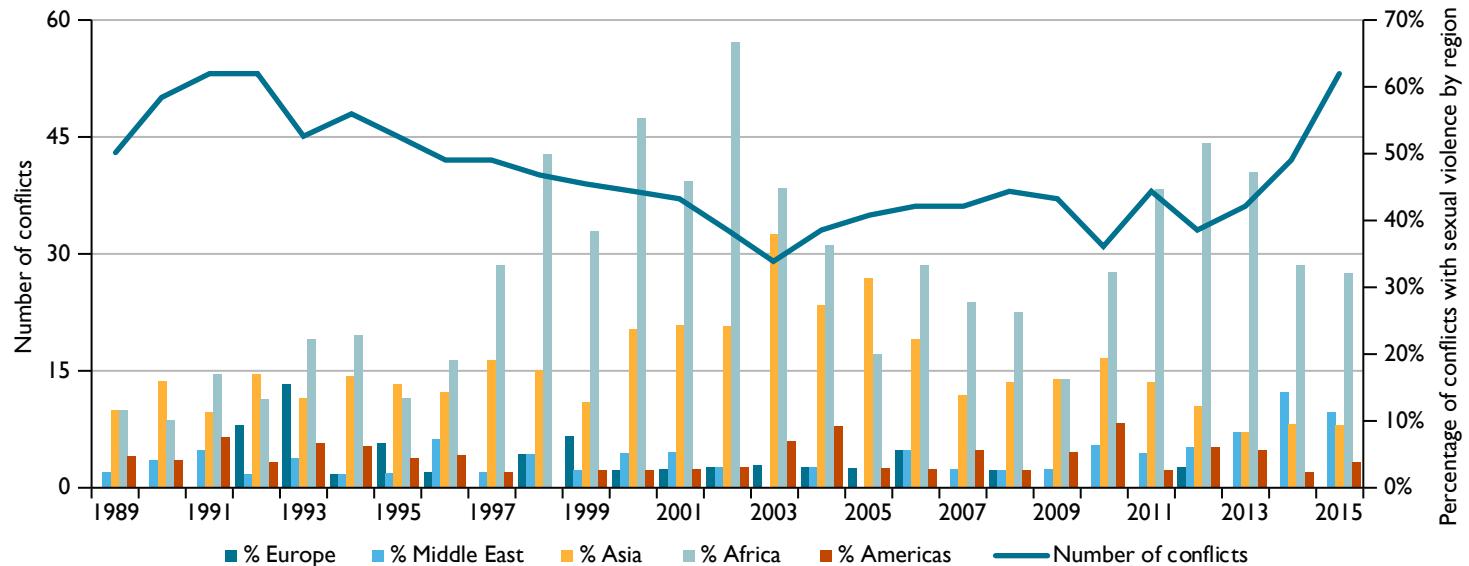


Figure 4: Regional distribution of conflicts featuring SVAC (only active conflict years)

### Current Hotspots in Africa and Middle East

Previous studies have shown that sexual violence is not simply an African problem but a global concern. The SVAC data confirms this. Despite variation over time in where the hotspots are, sexual violence has been, and continues to be, a problem in conflicts on all continents.

Currently, the majority of conflicts in which at least one conflict party is reported to perpetrate sexual violence are in Africa, with 17 out of 53 conflicts globally in 2015. Although the updated data also show the global nature of conflict-related sexual violence, one of the most noticeable features of the updated data for 2010–2015 is that the problem is more prominent on the African continent than in the years prior. The data cannot tell us whether the number of victims of such violence is on the increase. Yet, in terms of the number of armed groups and state forces known to be

perpetrating sexual violence, the time trend is discouraging.

#### *Sexual violence has been, and continues to be, a problem in conflicts on all continents*

The updated data also show how the Middle East has become a new hotspot for wartime sexual violence. The increase in conflicts featuring sexual violence in the Middle East from 2011 onwards coincides with the onset of the Syrian civil war, in which the Assad government *systematically perpetrated sexual violence* throughout the conflict, as well as the emergence of Daesh.

#### *The Middle East has become a new hotspot for wartime sexual violence*

In 1989 and for several years in the early 1990s, conflicts in Asia featuring sexual violence matched or outnumbered such conflicts in all other regions (Figure 4). In the mid-2000s, the number of conflicts in Asia featuring sexual

violence reached its peak in 2005, which was driven in particular by Myanmar fighting multiple insurgencies. In the most recent time period covered by SVAC 2.0, 2010–2015, the reported prevalence in Asia dropped. Unfortunately, however, this might turn out to be a passing phase, as the *Rohingya crisis* (not in our updated dataset) in particular has again put a spotlight on widespread sexual violence by government forces in Myanmar.

The data and *ongoing crises* clearly indicate that more research on this topic and further data collection efforts are crucial. Most importantly, it is essential that prevention and mitigation efforts such as the PSVI continue to receive funding and political attention. ■

### THE AUTHORS

Ragnhild Nordås is a Senior Researcher at PRIO and an Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Michigan.

Robert Ulrich Nagel is a PhD candidate in International Conflict Analysis at the University of Kent.

### THE PROJECT

This brief and the update of the Cohen & Nordås (2014) SVAC dataset are part of the project ‘Dynamics of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence’, funded by a Young Research Talent grant from the Research Council of Norway. SVAC data can be found at: [www.sexualviolencedata.org](http://www.sexualviolencedata.org)

### Further Reading

Cohen, Dara Kay, and Ragnhild Nordås (2014) ‘Sexual violence in armed conflict: Introducing the SVAC dataset, 1989–2009’, *Journal of Peace Research* 51(3): 418–428.

### PRIO

The Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) is a non-profit peace research institute (established in 1959) whose overarching purpose is to conduct research on the conditions for peaceful relations between states, groups and people. The institute is independent, international and interdisciplinary, and explores issues related to all facets of peace and conflict.