

# Communal conflict, civil war, and the state: Complexities, connections, and the case of Sudan

*Johan Brosché and Emma Elfverson\**

## **Abstract**

This article analyses communal conflict, which we define as *violent conflict between non-state groups that are organised along a shared communal identity*, and how such conflicts relate to state-based violence. We argue that a deeper understanding of communal conflicts, the different types of dynamics and conflict issues, as well as of the complex connections between communal conflicts and other forms of organised violence, is necessary for improving academic research as well as for better informed policy and interventions. Our arguments are illustrated through a case study of Sudan. The article makes three main contributions: first, it shows that communal conflicts often have grave consequences, and illustrates several linkages between communal conflicts and state-based conflicts. Secondly, it demonstrates that a correct analysis is necessary before any party intervenes, in order to understand in what ways the communal conflict may be entangled with other types of organised violence. Thirdly, the article underlines that communal conflicts need to be taken into account both when signing a peace agreement and in the post-conflict situation, to avoid the risk that conflict and violence merely spills over from one type to another.

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\* Both authors are Ph.D. candidates in the Department of Peace and Conflict Research at Uppsala University, Uppsala. They have contributed equally to the article, and are listed in alphabetical order.

## Introduction

Peace and conflict research arose as a field devoted to understanding the causes of war and conditions for peace by means of systematic analyses of the historical experiences of war. The concept of conflict, commonly defined as ‘a social situation in which a minimum of two actors (parties) strive to acquire at the same moment in time an available set of scarce resources’ (Wallensteen 2007:15), offers a broad general research agenda that so far has not been fully explored. As international wars are rare, the focus has shifted in the last decades towards intrastate armed conflicts. Still peace and conflict research remains firmly concerned with situations where violence is carried out by or directed against the government of a state. To nuance this state-centric view, this article focuses on communal conflicts where the state is not active as a warring party. Although yearly causing thousands of deaths, communal conflict is still an under-researched area within peace and conflict research. The ethnic violence following the 2007 Kenyan presidential election, pastoralist conflicts in the Sahel region, and the many conflicts between different ethnic groups in Nigeria, are all examples of communal conflicts. We argue that an understanding of the different types of dynamics and conflict issues, as well as of the complex connections between communal conflicts and other forms of organised violence, is necessary for improving academic research as well as for better informed policy and interventions.

The article starts with a discussion of how to define communal conflicts, and an attempt to position them in relation to other types of organised violence. After that some empirical trends are presented based on data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP). The particularities of communal conflicts and how they relate to state-based organised violence are explored through a case study of communal conflicts in Sudan. The article ends with some concluding remarks and makes a call for the importance of more research about communal conflict and its dynamics.

## Conceptualising communal conflict

### Communal conflict: A definition

In this article, we define communal conflict as *violent conflict between non-state groups that are organised along a shared communal identity*. This definition deserves some further clarification. *Violent conflict* refers to the fact that the parties use lethal violence to gain control over some disputed and perceived indivisible resource, such as a piece of land or local political power. This follows a generally accepted conceptualisation of armed conflict (Galtung 1965:348–349). The groups involved are *non-state groups*, meaning that neither actor controls the state and armed forces (although state actors may be involved as an important supporting actor in a communal conflict). Finally, the groups are *organised along a shared communal identity*, meaning that they are not formally organised rebel groups or militias but that the confrontation takes place along the line of group identities.

Some would equate the concept of *communal identity* with ethnic or religious identity, but as conceived here the definition is purposefully left more open, since group identity can be considered as socially constructed rather than a static phenomenon. Instead, communal identity is conceptualised as subjective group identification based on, for instance, a common history, a common culture or common core values (cf. Gurr 2000:4–5, 16–20). Affirming that communal identity refers to ethnic or religious identity would make the term less flexible, and unable to capture other forms of possible communal identity. For instance, in local conflicts where the dividing line is between ‘original’ inhabitants of an area (‘indigenes’) and more recent ‘settlers’, as is often the case in parts of West and Central Africa, this should be seen as a communal conflict since people very strongly identify themselves (and the ‘other’ group) along these lines. Demarcation along such lines often causes ‘sons of the soil’ conflicts where the indigenes perceive themselves as the rightful owners of the land (Fearon and Laitin 2011). Similarly, in other areas the main identification may be based on one’s livelihood, and conflict may be fought along those lines (for instance, pitting pastoralists against agriculturalists). Livelihood conflicts often parallel ethnic lines as for instance pastoralists living together are often from the same

ethnic community. However, this is not always the case. For instance, villagers often identify as inhabitants of their particular villages no matter if the village is ethnically homo- or heterogeneous. The bottom line is that what constitutes the basis for a communal identity may differ across time and space; hence, leaving the definition of this term more open allows for a broader contextual range.

### **Communal conflict contrasted to civil war violence**

In categorising different types of collective violence and analysing how they relate to each other, the level of coordination is crucial (Tilly 2003:15). We view communal conflicts as located in the middle of the coordination spectrum since the communal actors involved lack a formal military organisation but may still feature a high level of coordination. To date, most research within peace and conflict studies has focused on collective violence with a higher level of organisation than communal conflict. A significant amount of research has focused on conflicts between states, or between a state and a rebel group. However, these conflicts may feature different dynamics than communal conflicts and therefore it makes theoretical and analytical sense to study communal conflicts separately. State-based conflicts usually feature a significantly higher degree of organisation since the government side controls the formal army while rebel groups often also have access to trained troops as well as sophisticated weapons. This higher level of organisation and material strength means that state-based conflicts usually have a higher destructive potential than communal conflicts, as well as a tendency to drag on for a longer period of time. Communal conflicts are also different from state-based conflicts in that both parties are subject to a higher, national authority which controls state funds and the national army, which implies that the development and management of the conflict is affected by the government's willingness and capacity for intervention. Furthermore, while civil wars are usually characterised by asymmetry since one conflict actor controls the state, communal conflicts are generally more symmetrical (Johansson 2011:5).

The differences pointed out above lead to the conclusion that communal conflicts represent a type of violence that needs to be separated analytically from more organised types of ethnic violence. Of course, this does not mean

that communal conflicts have no similarities with, or cannot transform into, other types of violence. However, to clearly define and demarcate communal conflicts from other forms of violence can be rewarding, both for understanding the phenomenon in itself, and for a broader understanding of collective violence, especially the interaction between different types of collective violence. Furthermore, an improved understanding of communal conflicts may help in understanding their causes and designing strategies to resolve them before they become very deadly or transform into other forms of violence.

### **Types of communal conflicts**

Communal conflicts can take many different forms, and in order to understand the different dynamics of communal conflict, it is useful to analyse their underlying causes and the issue over which the conflict is fought. Different conflict issues may necessitate different types of interventions and conflict resolution strategies. Hence, we argue that one important imperative for future research on communal conflict is to demarcate conflict types that display different dynamics.

A first set of communal conflicts takes place in connection with local or national elections.<sup>1</sup> A core reason for this is that political allegiance in many countries follows ethnic lines and when one group's candidate loses, this group might seek revenge against the other group. This is often worsened by the patrimonial systems that characterise most countries where communal conflicts are common. Such systems include a strong patron-client relationship in which access to power becomes extremely important (see e.g. Fjelde 2009). One of the most severe incidents of communal conflict in recent years followed the Kenyan 2007 presidential election. When the result that the sitting President Mwai Kibaki had won over his main opponent Raila Odinga was announced, large areas of Kenya exploded in communal conflicts between different ethnic groups as most people viewed it as a stolen election. That the election included many inaccuracies was also confirmed by the international community. The violence that followed was mostly described in apolitical terms and as 'ethnic hatreds'. However, closer investigation of the violence shows multiple and clear political connections. Behind the different militias were often local politicians who

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1 For a thorough investigation on this issue in the case of India, see Wilkinson 2004.

provided them with weapons and shelter and directed the violence. In addition to the national political dynamics, a crucial part of these communal conflicts concerned access to land. The clashes were located in the most densely populated areas where rivalry over land is strong. In the political process leading up to the election, many politicians had promised access to land to their constituency. When certain communities then perceived the election as stolen, they also saw it as their access to land having been taken away (Human Rights Watch 2008; International Crisis Group 2008). Communal conflicts can be an effective way of gaining access to land as the number of people displaced often is huge, even when the number of deaths is fairly limited (Horowitz 2002). Thus, ruthless political entrepreneurs, who used the local populations' grievances for land, were the key actors in the Kenyan post-election communal conflicts (Human Rights Watch 2008; International Crisis Group 2008).

Land is also often at the heart of communal conflicts that centre on groups' main livelihood. One example is pastoralist conflicts, i.e. herder-farmer conflicts and conflicts between various pastoralist groups. Pastoralists and their animals move over extensive areas, often under extremely harsh conditions, and during this movement they often come into conflict with other communities that are either also on the move or more settled. Such conflicts constitute one of the oldest forms of organised violence in the history of mankind (Butler and Gates 2010:1). The eruption of such conflicts is compounded by the extreme conditions where access to grazing land or a well is often a question of survival for both animals and humans. Most often these conflicts are solved in non-violent manner, and when they do turn violent the violence is often kept at a low-scale level. However, sometimes such conflicts cause widespread human suffering (Hussein et al. 1999; Meier et al. 2007). A region particularly prone to pastoral conflicts, due to its extremely harsh living conditions, is the Sahel belt stretching from Senegal in the west to Eritrea in the East. A typical example is the conflict between the Nigerian Peulh herders and the Touaregs from Mali. The conflict is in essence a conflict over land and in 1997 the two communities fought each other over access to a well. Herders from the Peulh who travelled through Malian territory were attacked by the Touaregs and dozens of people were killed in the following clashes (Uppsala Conflict Data Program, UCDP 2011).

Similarly related to control over land, but fought along another identity dimension, are conflicts pitting the 'original' inhabitants of a locality against more recent settlers. For instance, many of the violent communal conflicts in Plateau state, Nigeria, have centred on this division. Among these are the recurrent eruptions of conflict in Jos, the state capital. Conflict flared in Jos in 2001, 2002 and 2010 with the Hausa and Fulani on one side, and the Anagutas, Afisare and Birom on the other (UCDP 2011). The latter three groups are considered indigenous to the area, while the Hausa and Fulani are more recent settlers to the area and have become a significant minority, threatening the 'indigenous' groups' dominance (Human Rights Watch 2001:5). This has led to spiralling conflict over local political power, control over land and access to public goods, all aggravated by poverty. The conflict also has religious dimensions, as most Hausa and Fulani are Muslims while the indigenous groups are mainly Christian. This has led many observers to describe the conflict mainly or solely in religious terms. While such a description fails to capture the underlying political dynamics of the conflict, it is at the same time true that the religious dimension has contributed to the escalation of the conflict in connection with the extension of Sharia law in northern Nigeria, with protagonists using religious propaganda to incite violence against the other group (Human Rights Watch 2001; Africa Research Bulletin 2010). Communal conflict has also erupted, or escalated, along religious lines in India (notably between Hindus and Muslims) and Indonesia (Christians and Muslims) (Rabasa and Hasseman 2002:91; Varshney 2002).

### **Communal conflict, the state, and state-based violence**

This section examines the empirical trends of communal conflicts – whether there are variations over time in number or deadliness, how they are distributed geographically, and how communal conflicts relate to civil war and other political factors at the national level. Most of the empirical information is based on data compiled by the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP).<sup>2</sup>

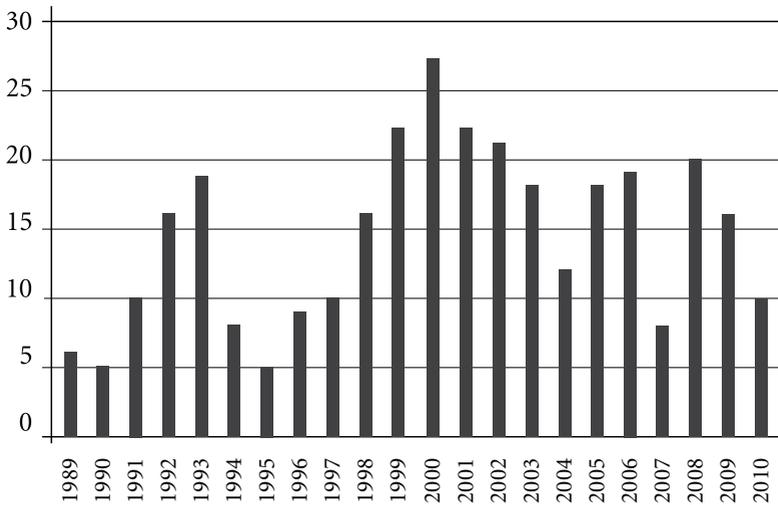
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2 The UCDP is part of the Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University. It compiles and maintains data on state-based, non-state and one-sided organised violence and related information such as conflict resolution and peace agreements. The data is made available through a number of datasets as well as a comprehensive database, accessible at <[www.ucdp.uu.se](http://www.ucdp.uu.se)>.

## Empirical trends over time and space

The UCDP collects information about non-state conflicts, defined as ‘the use of armed force between two organised armed groups, neither of which is the government of a state, which results in at least 25 battle-related deaths in a year’ (Sundberg et al. 2012). Non-state conflicts include conflicts between formally organised groups (such as rebel groups), as well as between less formally organised groups. A subset of these non-state conflicts, corresponding to our definition of communal conflicts, is used for empirical analysis here.<sup>3</sup>

**Figure 1: Active communal conflicts per year, 1989–2010**

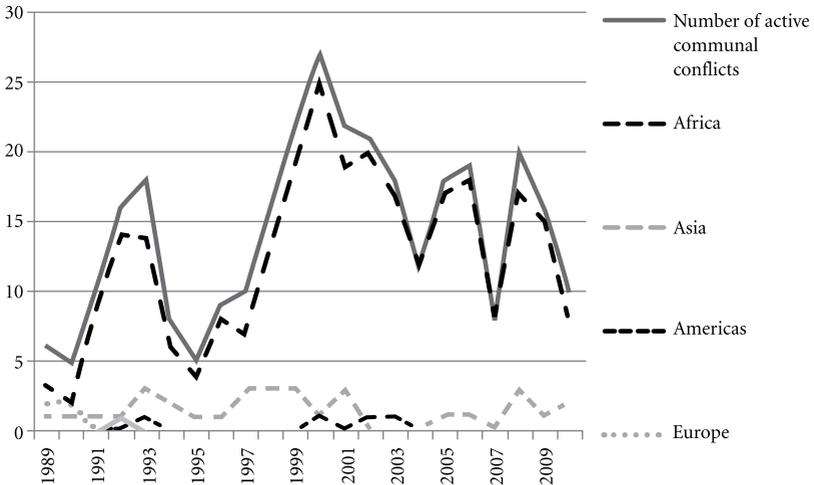


Source: UCDP Non-State Conflict Dataset v. 2.3-2011

<sup>3</sup> This category of non-state conflict is defined by the UCDP as organised violence between ‘groups that share a common identification along ethnic, clan, religious, national or tribal lines. These are not groups that are permanently organised for combat, but who at times organise themselves along said lines to engage in fighting. This level of organisation captures aspects of what is commonly referred to as “communal conflicts”, in that conflict stands along lines of communal identity’ (Sundberg et al. 2012). The most recent version of the dataset is the UCDP Non-State Conflict Dataset v. 2.3-2011, available at <<http://www.pcr.uu.se/research/ucdp/datasets/>>.

Using the UCDP non-state data, we can study trends of communal conflicts over time and space. Figure 1 above displays the number of active communal conflicts per year since 1989. As the figure indicates, communal conflicts appear to be more common in recent years than in the 1990s, but the number of active conflicts may fluctuate substantially from year to year and it is difficult to distinguish any clear trends. In contrast, the number of state-based conflicts per year tends to show more clear trends. The past decades have been associated with a gradual decrease in the number of such conflicts, followed by a slight but steady increase since 2004 (Themnér and Wallensteen 2011:526).<sup>4</sup>

**Figure 2: Active communal conflicts by year and region, 1989–2010**



Source: UCDP Non-State Conflict Dataset v. 2.3-2011

If we look at regional trends (Figure 2), it is clear that the majority of communal conflicts have taken place in Africa. However, this type of conflict should not be viewed as an exclusively African phenomenon since most years have also seen a number of conflicts in other regions, most notably in Asia. Out of the

<sup>4</sup> The number of conflicts peaked in 1992 at 53, decreasing steadily to 30 active conflicts in 2003. The number then climbed to 37 active conflicts in 2008. However, in 2010 the number was again down to 30 active conflicts.

total of 316 conflict years,<sup>5</sup> 275 were located in Africa and 32 in Asia. Europe and the Americas saw four active conflict years each, and the Middle East only one. Looking at unique conflicts rather than active conflict years (since some of the conflicts recur in more than one year), Africa saw 193 conflicts, Asia 19, the Americas 4, Europe 3, and the Middle East 1. Further research is needed to explain why Africa has been so particularly hit by communal conflict. However, it has been proposed that a few factors which generally augment the risk of communal conflict are environmental scarcity in combination with weak state structures (Barnett and Adger 2007; Kahl 2006; Raleigh 2010), patronage systems (Berenschot 2011) and politicised ethnic identity (Pettersson 2010). The potential causes of the high prevalence of communal conflict in some African countries are discussed further below.

As can be gleaned from the number of conflict years in comparison to the number of unique conflicts, in most cases the violent phases of communal conflicts do not extend over several years. This is in sharp contrast to state-based conflicts, which usually span several years or even decades. Rather, communal conflicts tend to be brief and sporadic with a few days of intense clashes (Pettersson 2010:190–191). However, in some cases communal conflicts have taken the form of protracted violent struggles spanning several years, one example being the conflict between Hema and Lendu in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Over the course of five years, thousands of people were killed in the fighting, which initially broke out due to competition over land and valuable natural resources, but worsened as regional power actors tried to change the political balance of power between the groups (Sundberg et al. 2012; International Crisis Group 2003). Conflicts may also stretch over several years at a much lower intensity level. In India, a communal conflict between the Kuki and Naga ethnic groups was active

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5 The UCDP codes an active conflict when there is fighting leading to 25 battle-related deaths in a year. Hence, each year when a conflict is active is termed a 'conflict year', although there may have been only a few clashes in only a part of the year. To exemplify, if two communal groups clash in March 2002, causing over 25 deaths, and again in May and June 2004, again causing at least 25 deaths, this means the conflict has seen two active conflict years.

most years between 1993 and 1998, resulting in some 400 deaths (Sundberg et al. 2012).

The UCDP also collects information on the number of people killed in communal conflicts.<sup>6</sup> In most cases, communal conflicts result in significantly fewer deaths than civil wars, but there are exceptions. Figures 3 and 4 below show the total and the average number of people killed in active communal conflicts during the 1989–2010 period, according to UCDP best estimates (Sundberg et al. 2012).<sup>7</sup> These two graphs display a slightly more optimistic picture: it appears that communal conflicts have become less deadly – both the total and average number of deaths have decreased since the 1990s.<sup>8</sup> To understand the causes of this development, much in-depth research is needed. The pattern appears somewhat contradictory, since numerous reports have concluded that an increasing availability of small arms and light weapons (SALW) has led to an increasing lethality of communal conflicts (Eavis 2002; Bevan 2008; Mkutu 2008a). Presently, there are no data supporting the notion that such availability has decreased since the start of the new millennium (see e.g. Small Arms Survey 2010). This underscores the argument that the dynamics affecting the deadliness of conflicts are more complex than the mere availability of weapons, and that strategies to decrease communal violence must entail broader policies than merely disarming groups (Bevan 2008: 21–23). The decreased lethality of communal conflicts could also be interpreted as a sign that interventions to halt violence have become more effective. Interestingly, the apparent decrease in lethality of communal conflicts coincides with a similar trend regarding state-based conflicts (Themnér and Wallensteen 2011:528).

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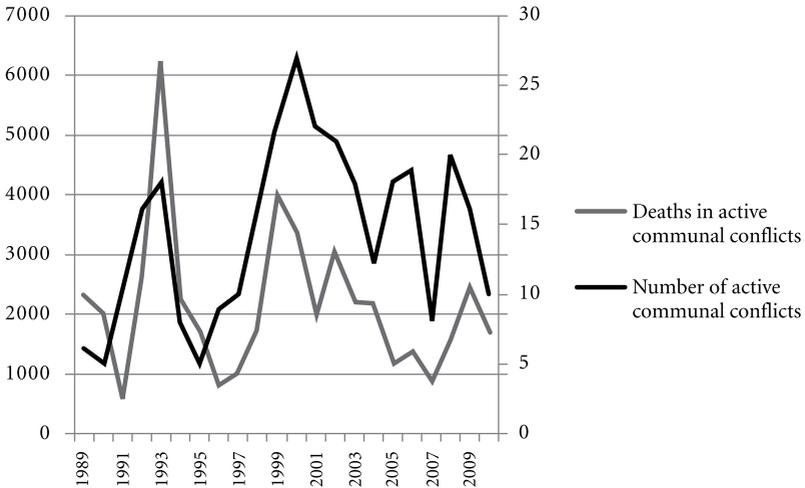
6 Indirect deaths, such as those resulting from starvation or illness, and deaths from one-sided violence, are not included in these figures; nor are deaths caused by security forces deployed to halt the violence. Rather, the UCDP codes battle-related deaths, i.e. ‘deaths directly related to combat between the warring groups’ (Sundberg et al. 2012).

7 The UCDP best estimates are based on the accounts that are seen as most credible and best confirmed; however, due to the often limited reporting on communal conflict, in many cases the real number of deaths is likely higher.

8 The same pattern emerges, in fact even more strongly, when using the high estimates reported by UCDP.

Again, however, any trends should be taken with a note of caution given the often large fluctuations in the number and deadliness of communal conflicts. For instance, as illustrated in Figure 3, there was a notable peak in the number of deaths in 1993. In particular, it was the conflict in DRC between the Hunde and Nyaga on one side and the Banyarwanda on the other that caused a very high number of deaths this year. Another extreme year was 2000, which saw the highest number of active conflicts (27) – the bulk of these in Africa, with the highest numbers in Uganda (7 active conflicts), Ethiopia (5) and Nigeria (4).

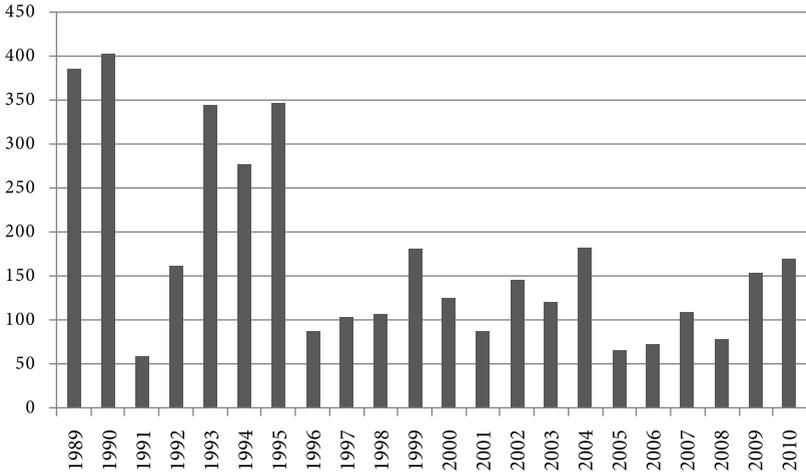
**Figure 3: Number of deaths in active communal conflicts, 1989–2010**



Source: UCDP Non-State Conflict Dataset v. 2.3-2011

Some countries seem particularly plagued by communal conflicts (see Table 1 below). The six worst-hit countries in 1989–2010, in terms of the number of communal conflicts, were Nigeria, Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan, Kenya and Uganda. Interestingly, while some of these countries were plagued by civil war during the same period, two – Nigeria and Kenya – were relatively free of state-based conflict. Nigeria, which saw the highest number of conflicts, experienced 37 unique communal conflicts (totalling 49 active conflict years) during the period.

**Figure 4: Average number of deaths in active communal conflicts, 1989–2010**



Source: UCDP Non-State Conflict Dataset v. 2.3-2011

A number of factors has been suggested in explaining the high number of communal conflicts in these countries. Regarding Nigeria, analysts point to tensions created during colonialisation and at independence; divide-and-rule strategies under military rule; poverty, unemployment and exploitation; political manipulation of religious and ethnic dividing lines; and the increased salience of ethnic identity and indigeneity as a consequence of the federal system (Akinwale 2010; Leith and Solomon 2001; Nolte 2002; Quaker-Dokubo 2000). Federalism and political representation based on ethnicity, together with the undermining of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, have also been argued to be one of the main reasons for the high number of communal conflicts in Ethiopia (Abbink 2006; Adeghe 2009; Pettersson 2010:196). In Kenya, political exploitation of ethnic divisions has been highlighted (Kahl 2006). The border regions between Kenya, Ethiopia and Uganda have also seen numerous pastoral conflicts, some of which have become more severe in recent years with the increased availability of small arms (Bevan 2008:20). At times these conflicts have been aggravated by uneven disarmament of involved groups by the governments of the affected states (Bevan 2008:20; Eaton 2008; Mkutu 2008b; Pettersson 2010:198; Weiss

2004). In Sudan, communal conflict has to a large extent been connected to the civil war (see further the Sudan case study below), whereas the conflicts in Somalia have often taken the form of clans and sub-clans vying for local control in the absence of a strong national government (Pettersson 2010:194–195).

**Table 1: Number of communal conflicts and deaths, 1989–2010, worst-hit countries**

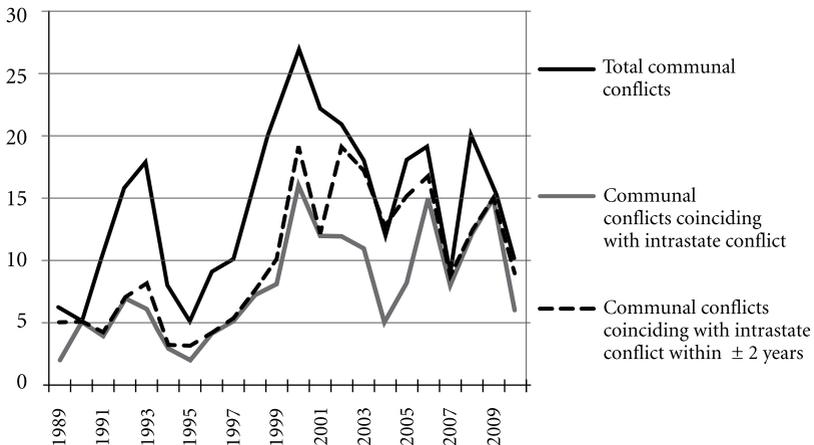
<i>Number of conflicts</i>		<i>Deaths in communal conflicts</i>	
Nigeria	37 (49 conflict years)	DRC	8131
Ethiopia	34 (49 conflict years)	Sudan	7962
Somalia	29 (33 conflict years)	Nigeria	7504
Sudan	28 (38 conflict years)	Ethiopia	5767
Kenya	25 (43 conflict years)	India	3941
Uganda	15 (21 conflict years)	Ghana	2407

Nigeria, Ethiopia and Sudan were also among the six countries that experienced the highest number of fatalities in communal conflicts. Nigeria, with the highest number of communal conflicts, saw the third highest number of deaths according to UCDP best estimates. In the DRC, relatively few conflicts have resulted in a very high number of deaths. The very deadly conflicts took place in the Ituri and Kivu regions in the east. These conflicts over local control have often pitted groups considered as indigenes against more recent immigrants, a situation aggravated by the huge number of Rwandan refugees settling in the area following the genocide (Pettersson 2010:198). The only non-African country among the six worst hit in terms of fatalities, India, has seen very deadly clashes particularly along religious lines, pitting Hindu and Muslim communities against each other. Ghana’s high number of fatalities is mainly due to the ‘Guinea Fowl War’, a conflict between the Nanumba and Konkomba (also involving the Dagomba and Gonja) which took place in the Northern Region in the mid-1990s (Kusimi et al. 2006).

### Communal conflict and state-based violence

Oftentimes, communal conflicts are connected to conflicts and power struggles at the national level. Conflict at various levels may be directly connected, for instance national elites may manipulate local conflicts in order to gain strategic advantages and to weaken opponents (Allen 1999:371; Kalyvas 2003:471). In addition, state-based conflict may fuel communal conflict indirectly, through, for instance, general destabilisation of the country, changing balances of power, or destruction resulting in aggravated scarcity of resources (Horowitz 2002:331–334; Pettersson 2010:191).

**Figure 5: Communal conflict and state-based conflict, 1989–2010**



Sources: UCDP Non-State Conflict Dataset v. 2.3-2011 and UCDP/PRIO (Peace Research Institute Oslo) Armed Conflict Dataset v.4-2011

Combining the non-state data with UCDP’s data on state-based conflict (Gleditsch et al. 2002; Themnér and Wallensteen 2011), we see that more than half (55%) of all active communal conflicts in 1989–2010 coincided with an ongoing state-based conflict<sup>9</sup> in the country during the same year (Figure 5 above illustrates

9 The UCDP dataset includes both conflicts between a state and a rebel group, and conflicts between states, but for the purpose of comparison here, only the former are included. Conflicts between states have become very rare after the Cold War, and feature different dynamics than intrastate conflicts.

the pattern over time). 68% of all communal conflicts took place in a country that experienced state-based conflict within two years before or after the communal conflict, and a full 81% of all communal conflicts took place in a country which experienced state-based conflict at some point during the 1989–2010 period. Of course, it is not possible to tell from these numbers whether communal and state-based conflicts were causally related or whether another set of factors led to both; however, the case of Sudan will be used below to illustrate some of the ways in which communal conflict and intrastate conflict may feed into each other.

The UCDP disaggregates state-based conflicts according to the incompatibility, or the conflict issue: this is coded as concerning either territory or government power. In total, 173 active communal conflict years coincided with active state-based conflict in the country; out of these, 50% coincided with a conflict over government power, 35% with one or more conflicts concerning territory, and 15% coincided with both types of state-based conflicts (Figure 6 below). As a point of comparison, during the same time period, 58% of active intrastate conflict-country years experienced conflict over government, 31,5% conflict over territory, and 10,5% saw both. Hence, it appears that states with an ongoing conflict over territory are slightly more at risk of also experiencing communal conflict than are states with a conflict over government. This is interesting in light of the fact that land is often at the core of communal conflicts, and in relation to the recent interest devoted to ‘sons-of-the-soil’ conflicts in the literature on civil war. Such ‘sons-of-the-soil’ dynamics often fuel state-based conflicts (see e.g. Fearon and Laitin 2011) and it is feasible to believe that in many cases, the indigenes and the newcomers were involved in communal conflicts before they turned into state-based conflicts.

Previous research has shown that strong democracies and strong autocracies experience a lower risk of intrastate conflict, whereas intermediate regimes (also called anocracies) tend to be at higher risk (Hegre et al. 2001:33). Using Polity IV data (Marshall et al. 2010) we find a similar relationship between the level of democracy and communal conflicts.<sup>10</sup>

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10 Within the civil war literature, it is argued that the relative balance between grievances on the one hand, and state capacity and stability on the other, lies behind this finding (Hegre et al. 2001:33).

## **Sudan – Communal and state-based conflicts intertwined**<sup>11</sup>

This section of the article illustrates how communal conflict may be linked to national politics by investigating the relation between state-based and communal conflicts in Sudan.<sup>12</sup> Since independence in 1956, Sudan has witnessed two civil wars primarily located in the South (1963–1972 and 1983–2005), and one civil war taking place foremost in the far western region of Darfur (2003–). In all these wars communal conflicts and state-based conflicts were intertwined. Thus, Sudan offers interesting opportunities to examine linkages between communal conflicts and state-based violence.

### **Patterns of communal conflict in Sudan**

For the 1989–2010 period, the UCDP has recorded 27 communal conflicts in Sudan: 14 in Southern Sudan, 12 in Darfur, and one in Kordofan (UCDP 2011; Sundberg et al. 2012). Other areas of Sudan have also witnessed communal conflicts, but in these areas they have been much lower in intensity and have not reached the 25 fatalities threshold. The centre of attention here will be on the ones taking place in Darfur and the South as they constitute 97% of the conflicts and it is in these areas that connections between state-based and communal conflicts are most apparent.

The 27 conflicts that took place in 1989 to 2010 have in total been active for 39 years: 20 in Darfur, 18 in South Sudan, and one in Kordofan. The average length of a communal conflict in Sudan was 1,4 years and 20 of the conflicts had just been active for one year, seven for two years and two for three years (Sundberg et al. 2012). These findings are in line with the global trend that this type of non-state conflict is usually short in duration. Scrutinising the duration of the communal conflicts further shows that many of them are very brief, even during the year that they are active, i.e. the actual clashes often

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11 This section builds on more than four and a half months of fieldwork conducted by Johan Brosché in Khartoum, Juba, Malakal, Bor (South Sudan), Nyala (Darfur) and Gedarif (Eastern Sudan).

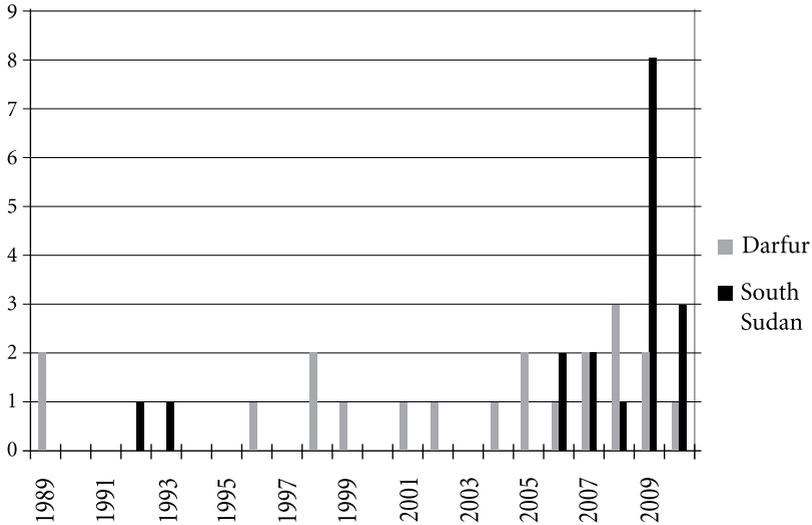
12 On 9 July 2011 Sudan was split into two countries – Republic of Sudan and Republic of South Sudan. However, this article deals with the 1989–2010 time period and therefore the entire Sudan is referred to when not stated otherwise.

last just for a few days. An example of this is the Misseriya-Reizegat Baggara fighting in 2008. All the fighting took place in one day and resulted in 67 casualties (UCDP 2011). This is the actual fighting period, but grievances and conflict issues might spread over a much longer period (sometimes even decades). Despite such conflicts having devastating effects, it is important to stress that Sudan has hundreds of ethnic groups and thus most ethnic groups in Sudan (and in the world, cf. Fearon and Laitin 1996) live in peace.

At the heart of many communal conflicts is land, and much research about communal conflicts focuses on farmer versus herder conflicts (Hussein et al. 1999; Turner 1999). In line with these trends, the crisis in Darfur has similarly been described as originating from conflicts over land (Tubiana 2007). Land is also an important aspect of the conflicts in South Sudan. As a consequence, an interesting aspect of analysing communal conflicts in Sudan is to investigate the main livelihood of the groups involved. These conflicts are often assumed to be between sedentary farmers and nomadic herders. In Sudan, however, 22 out of 27 communal conflicts have been between different pastoralist groups and only five between farmers and pastoralists. This pattern is similar in both Darfur and South Sudan. Significantly, none of the communal conflicts in Sudan recorded by the UCDP pits farmers versus farmers, indicating that in Sudan more settled groups are less prone to end up in conflicts. At the centre of many of these communal conflicts are cattle, especially in Southern Sudan. For many ethnic groups, cattle are at the centre of life. The cattle are sacred and wealth is measured in cattle. In addition, in many communities dowry is paid in cattle and for this reason cattle-rustling is for some young men their only chance of getting married. Also, cattle-rustling is a way to prove your manhood within some societies (UCDP 2011; interview with Dr Eltayeb Hag Ateya, 8 July 2009, Khartoum).

As illustrated by Figure 6, the number of communal conflicts in Sudan has varied fairly moderately between zero and four for all years except 2009 when a full ten communal conflicts took place. The preceding years also had high numbers of communal conflicts compared with the whole period.

**Figure 6: Active communal conflicts in Darfur and Southern Sudan, 1989–2010**



Source: UCDP Non-State Conflict Dataset v. 2.3-2011

Out of 39 communal conflict years, 25 have taken place during the last five years, and thus, the period after the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) has witnessed a higher ratio of communal conflicts than the preceding period. When it comes to assessing the linkages between communal conflict and state-based violence, the start of the rebellion in Darfur in 2003 and the signing of the CPA that brought an end to the war between the government and the Sudan Peoples’ Liberation Army/Movement (SPLA/M) constitute interesting points of comparison. Until 2005, Darfur suffered to a larger extent from communal conflicts than the South (eleven in Darfur and two in the South). However, after 2005, Southern Sudan has had 15 communal conflicts compared to 8 in Darfur. Before the signing of the CPA, Southern Sudan had 0,125 active conflicts per year but after the CPA the number has sharply increased to 2,6 conflicts per year. Thus, the CPA brought an end to fighting between the government and SPLM/A but was associated with an increase in the number of communal conflicts in Southern Sudan (Brosché 2009:27–29). Despite this, the number of people being

killed in organised conflicts in South Sudan is much lower in the period after the signing of the CPA than during the war. In Darfur, however, the start of the rebellion in 2003 has coincided with an increase in the communal conflicts from 0,6 per year to 1,5 per year. Hence, the post-agreement period has witnessed an increased number of communal conflicts in the South, whilst in Darfur the start of a rebellion has seen an increased number of communal conflicts taking place there. One explanation for the increased number of communal conflicts in South Sudan since the end of the war with the North is that the end of the major South-North cleavage has unleashed local grievances. With the end of the war, the uniting factor of facing a common enemy was gone, and different communities and in particular their leaders positioned themselves against each other. This political struggle on who should control South Sudan sometimes led to communal conflicts. Also, after the signing of the CPA many refugees and internally displaced persons have returned to the South and this creates severe problems in relevance to who has the right to certain lands (International Crisis Group 2009). As noted in the overview of communal conflicts in Africa, there is some indication that the average number of deaths from such conflicts has been decreasing. However, the average number of deaths in Sudan fluctuates extensively from year to year so no clear trends can be seen.

### **Darfur – communal and state-based conflicts tangled**

To examine the linkages between communal conflicts and state-based conflicts, a further look at this relation in Darfur is warranted. The continuing crisis in Darfur is sometimes characterised as being a conflict between ‘Africans’ and ‘Arabs’. This is a simplistic viewpoint and a confusing label as all of the groups involved live in Africa and almost all of them speak Arabic. Jérôme Tubiana explores the puzzling persistence of the Arab-African division in Darfur:

The divide is not based on skin colour. It is not based on religion... all Darfur's ethnic groups are Muslim. It's not based on culture... it's not based on language... Nor does the cleavage really represent a difference in way of life... Rather the basis for the cleavage is the claim to an Arab identity that has less to do with the above criteria than it does with often-fictional patrilineal lineages that lead back to mythical Arab forbearers. There may

be little, if any, historical accuracy to these constructs. But to those who invoke them, they are fact and truth (Tubiana 2007:67).

In spite of these nuances that characterise the Arab/African distinction, and in line with the emphasis in our definition of communal identity as self-ascriptive, we will use this designation as it currently is politically significant. In Darfur half of the communal conflicts pit 'African' against 'Arabs', whilst the other half are between 'Arabs' and 'Arabs'. When investigating this dimension over time, an interesting picture emerges. Between 1989 and 2002, all communal conflicts that took place were 'Africans versus Arabs' conflicts, whilst after 2002 six out of seven conflicts can be categorised as 'Arabs versus Arabs' (UCDP 2011). The change in who is fighting who coincides with the emergence of state-based violence in Darfur.

In early 2003, SLA/M (Sudan Liberation Army/Movement) and JEM (Justice and Equality Movement) attacked government positions and stated their political goals to overturn the government. Partly, the rebellion can be seen as a continuation of the preceding communal conflicts that pitted different 'Arab' groups against three different ethnic groups with a more African identity: Fur, Zaghawa and Masalit. The SLM/A emerged as a rebel group with their main support base in these three groups, and the leadership was taken from self-defence groups that were involved in fighting against different 'Arab' groups. The importance of tribal affiliation is shown in that the SLM/A manifesto states that the top positions should be divided on a tribal basis. The chairman should be a Fur, the military commander a Zaghawa and the vice-chairman a Masalit (De Waal and Flint 2008:95). The onset of the state-based conflict was connected to the government supporting the 'Arabs' in the preceding communal conflicts. As this support became more and more evident, the non-Arab groups started to see the government as their real enemy and as the root of their problems. The link between the communal conflicts and the start of the rebellion can be seen in the conflict between Awlad Zeid 'Arabs' and Zaghawa:

Clashes with Arab nomads – most seriously the Awlad Zeid – were escalating in Dar Gala, especially around the Bir Taweel wells near Abu

Gamra, the most important water source in the area for all tribes. In May 2001, Awlad Zeid killed more than 70 Zaghawa at the wells.... After the clash the army deployed in the area and kept the Zaghawa away. Weapons captured at Bir Taweel included some that were made in Government factories in Khartoum. 'After Bir Taweel we knew for sure that the government was against us' says one of the first Zaghawa to join SLM/A. 'All the people in the area knew that they had to do something to respond' (De Waal and Flint 2008:80).

Apart from the Khartoum regime's support to various 'Arab' groups, this view also stemmed from the severe neglect and marginalisation that Darfur had suffered from the government for a long time. As part of its counterinsurgency, the government of Sudan armed the infamous Janjaweed militia. Recruitment to this militia was primarily done from 'Arab' groups that did not have their own land. As land is of such importance in the region, many joined the Janjaweed because government promised access to land to those who joined the militia. In 2004 and 2005 the government and Janjaweed carried out ethnic cleansing that primarily targeted the Fur, Masalit and Zaghawa ethnic groups. Especially targeted were fertile areas and this campaign led to many areas being deserted by the 'Africans'. Thus, the Arab-African conflicts transformed into state-based conflicts and one-sided violence. As a result, the period after the rebellion saw a decrease in communal conflicts between 'Africans' and 'Arabs'. However, communal conflicts between ethnic groups both having an 'Arab' identity increased after the start of the rebellion. These have mainly concerned control over the land abandoned after the ethnic cleansing. The government's promises of access to land in return for joining the Janjaweed were unfulfilled and left many groups still without land holdings of their own. Thus, the abandoned land became a valuable asset and different groups fought over control over the land. Hence, the rebellion transformed one type of communal conflict into other forms of organised violence at the same time as it increased another category of communal conflict (Brosché and Rothbart 2013, forthcoming: chapter 3).

As illustrated by the case of Darfur, communal conflicts, state-based violence and one-sided violence can all be interlinked in complex manners. Communal conflicts are clearly connected to the outbreak of the civil war, and the civil war has led to the emergence of another type of communal conflict. Thus, communal conflicts are one out of many important factors that have created one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world, in which the UN estimates that 300 000 people have been killed (Reuters 2010). This indicates the importance for further studies of communal conflicts and their connections to other types of organised violence.

### **Conclusions**

This article has conceptualised communal conflicts and positioned these conflicts in relation to other forms of organised violence, making a first attempt to investigate the complex interlinkages between communal and state-based violence. Using UCDP data, global empirical trends of communal conflicts have been outlined – and the interaction of communal conflicts, state characteristics and civil war has been investigated both globally and in the case of Sudan. A number of important conclusions arise that can act as guidelines for policymakers and researchers alike.

First and foremost, this article seeks to increase the focus devoted to communal conflicts, which has so far been very low in comparison with intra- and interstate wars. Communal conflicts can directly cause enormous human insecurity in the form of deaths, injuries, displacement, and lost livelihood. Moreover, communal conflicts can lead to further suffering as they can pave the way to other forms of organised violence. In Darfur, communal conflicts preceded the rebellion and the ethnic cleansing that followed. If the communal conflicts could have been addressed and resolved at an early stage, hundreds of thousands of lives might have been saved. Of course this is easily said with the disastrous result in our hand, but there were warnings about this scenario years before the rebellion in 2003 (Interview with Sudanese academic, 20 March 2011, Khartoum). This shows that communal conflicts are often an important aspect of wider conflicts and an understanding of these complexities is often a necessity in order to bring

about peace. A correct analysis of the conflict is therefore needed before any party intervenes. Understanding that a conflict often consists of several conflict types combined into one can be useful in properly apprehending any particular situation. An example of a situation being misread by the international community was the Darfur Peace Agreement Process, where the negotiations did not address all the types of conflict going on (Mohamed 2009).

Moreover, and relatedly, the findings suggest that communal conflict may arise when other conflicts are resolved. Hence, communal conflicts need to be taken into account both when signing a peace agreement and in the post-conflict situation. The Sudanese CPA led to an end of the state-based conflict in Sudan but unleashed several communal conflicts (Brosché 2009:27–29). These grievous conflicts currently endanger the peace both within South Sudan and between South and North Sudan. Could these have been prevented if addressed in the CPA? Could the international community have been more prepared for the upcoming problems? This is not the place to scrutinise these issues, but again the propensity of a certain type of organised violence affecting another is clear. In this case, the end of state-based conflict saw an upsurge in communal conflicts.

To conclude, the arguments outlined above suggest that understanding communal conflicts is extremely important and we therefore make a call for further research into the field of communal conflicts. Core dynamics of communal conflicts are still not understood by the research community. Numerous anthropological studies have revealed detailed knowledge about some cases of communal conflict. Insights from such studies should be used to carry out comparative studies as well as large-N studies within the field of peace and conflict research. Furthermore, this article underlines the fact that theoretical knowledge benefits from disaggregating conflict types. Research based on a clear understanding of the different types and causes of conflict will be better able to provide theoretically coherent and policy relevant results. Finally, it is important to allocate resources to attempts to prevent or limit the scale of communal conflicts, and much more policy-oriented research in how to do this in the best manner is needed.

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## Communal conflict, civil war, and the state: Complexities, connections, and the case of Sudan

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