**8 Deadliest Wars of the 21st Century**

[**https://www.britannica.com/list/8-deadliest-wars-of-the-21st-century**](https://www.britannica.com/list/8-deadliest-wars-of-the-21st-century)

Political theorist [Francis Fukuyama](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Francis-Fukuyama) famously proclaimed that the end of the [Cold War](https://www.britannica.com/event/Cold-War) marked “the end of history,” a triumph of [capitalist](https://www.britannica.com/topic/capitalism), [liberal Western democracy](https://www.britannica.com/topic/democracy) over competing ideologies. It was believed that 21st-century humanity would be a [globalized](https://www.britannica.com/science/cultural-globalization) post-conflict society moving in [deterministic](https://www.britannica.com/topic/determinism) concert toward collective peace and prosperity. While Fukuyama’s thesis was profoundly challenged by the [September 11, 2001, attacks](https://www.britannica.com/event/September-11-attacks) and the subsequent U.S. “[war on terrorism](https://www.britannica.com/topic/war-on-terrorism),” open warfare between the armies of nation-states did, in fact, become increasingly rare in the post-Cold War environment. Instead, [terrorism](https://www.britannica.com/topic/terrorism), ethnic conflict, civil wars, and hybrid and [special operations warfare](https://www.britannica.com/topic/special-operations-warfare) (techniques used by developed nations to harass or destabilize opponents through nontraditional means) accounted for the bulk of nonstate, intrastate, and interstate violence. Although the 21st century has seen a greatly reduced battle death rate when compared with similar time spans in the previous century, these numbers nevertheless represent tens of thousands of lives lost each year.

## [**Second Congo War**](https://www.britannica.com/place/Democratic-Republic-of-the-Congo/The-Democratic-Republic-of-the-Congo) **(1998–2003)**

Far and away the deadliest war of the 21st century was a conflict that had its genesis in the 20th. The [Rwandan genocide](https://www.britannica.com/event/Rwanda-genocide-of-1994), the toppling and death of Zairean President [Mobutu Sese Seko](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Mobutu-Sese-Seko), and ethnic strife between [Hutu](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hutu) and [Tutsi](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Tutsi) peoples were direct contributing factors to the Second Congo War (also called the Great War in Africa or Africa’s First World War because of its scope and destructiveness). In May 1997 rebel leader [Laurent Kabila](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Laurent-Kabila) deposed Mobutu and renamed Zaire the [Democratic Republic of the Congo](https://www.britannica.com/place/Democratic-Republic-of-the-Congo) (DRC), but he soon found himself engaged in a civil war with some of the forces that had elevated him to power. The eastern third of the DRC became a battlefield every bit as bloody and contested as the Western Front in [World War I](https://www.britannica.com/event/World-War-I) had been. The armies of nine countries and an assortment of affiliated militias devastated the countryside. Angola, Namibia, Chad, Sudan, and Zimbabwe backed Kabila’s Congolese government forces, while troops from Burundi, Rwanda, and Uganda supported anti-Kabila rebels. Mass rapes were reported in areas of conflict, and large sections of the DRC were stripped of resources, as organized combat between professional armies gave way to brigandage and plunder. An estimated three million people—mostly civilians—were killed in the fighting or died of disease or malnutrition as a result of the conflict.

## [Syrian Civil War](https://www.britannica.com/event/Syrian-Civil-War)

As the [Arab Spring](https://www.britannica.com/event/Arab-Spring) swept through the Middle East and North Africa, popular uprisings toppled the authoritarian regimes in [Tunisia](https://www.britannica.com/event/Jasmine-Revolution), [Libya](https://www.britannica.com/event/Libya-Revolt-of-2011), [Egypt](https://www.britannica.com/event/Egypt-Uprising-of-2011), and [Yemen](https://www.britannica.com/event/Yemen-Uprising-of-2011-2012). In Syria, however, President [Bashar al-Assad](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Bashar-al-Assad) responded to protests with a combination of political concessions and escalating violence against his own people. The uprising became a [civil war](https://www.britannica.com/event/Syrian-Civil-War) that spread violence into neighboring Iraq and provided a fertile breeding ground for militant groups such as the [Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Islamic-State-in-Iraq-and-the-Levant) (ISIL; also known as ISIS). Rebel groups seized huge swathes of territory, and the area under government control was reduced to a small strip of land in western Syria. Assad resorted to increasingly desperate and savage measures to maintain power, dropping crude “barrel [bombs](https://www.britannica.com/technology/bomb-weapon)” on urban populations and using [chemical weapons](https://www.britannica.com/technology/chemical-weapon) on rebel-controlled territory. As regional powers and Western countries assumed a greater role in the conflict, it seemed inevitable that Assad would be forced from power. [Kurdish](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Kurd) militias advanced from the Kurdish autonomous region in northern Iraq, and the U.S. conducted air strikes against ISIL forces in both Syria and Iraq. In 2015 Russia, a longtime supporter of the Assad regime, began a bombing campaign in support of Syrian government forces that reversed the tide of the war. Cease-fire agreements failed to stop the violence, and by 2016 it was estimated that 1 in 10 Syrians had been killed or wounded by the fighting. Four million people fled the country, while millions more were internally displaced. At least 470,000 deaths were caused directly or indirectly by the war, and life expectancy at birth experienced a shocking plunge from more than 70 years (pre-conflict) to just 55 years in 2015. In 2022 the United Nations estimated that the fighting had claimed the lives of more than 300,000 civilians, some 1.5 percent of Syria’s pre-war population.

## [**Darfur Conflict**](https://www.britannica.com/place/Darfur#ref274594)

In early 2003 rebel groups took up arms against the [Khartoum](https://www.britannica.com/place/Khartoum)-based regime of Sudanese President [Omar al-Bashir](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Omar-Hassan-Ahmad-al-Bashir), igniting long-standing tensions in the [Darfur](https://www.britannica.com/place/Darfur) region of western [Sudan](https://www.britannica.com/place/Sudan). That conflict erupted into what the U.S. government later described as the first [genocide](https://www.britannica.com/topic/genocide) of the 21st century. After rebel groups scored a string of high-profile victories against the Sudanese military, the Sudanese government equipped and supported Arab militias that came to be known as [Janjaweed](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Janjaweed). The Janjaweed conducted a targeted campaign of terrorism and [ethnic cleansing](https://www.britannica.com/topic/ethnic-cleansing) against the civilian population of Darfur, killing at least 300,000 people and displacing nearly three million. It was not until 2008 that a joint [United Nations](https://www.britannica.com/topic/United-Nations) and [African Union](https://www.britannica.com/topic/African-Union) [peacekeeping](https://www.britannica.com/topic/United-Nations-Peacekeeping-Forces) force was able to restore a semblance of order to the region. On March 4, 2009, the [International Criminal Court](https://www.britannica.com/topic/International-Criminal-Court) (ICC) issued an arrest warrant for Bashir—the first time that the ICC sought the arrest of a sitting head of state—charging him with [war crimes](https://www.britannica.com/topic/war-crime) and [crimes against humanity](https://www.britannica.com/topic/crime-against-humanity). That investigation was suspended in December 2014 because of a lack of cooperation from the [UN Security Council](https://www.britannica.com/topic/United-Nations-Security-Council).

## [**Iraq War**](https://www.britannica.com/event/Iraq-War)

[Neoconservative](https://www.britannica.com/topic/neoconservatism) officials within the administration of U.S. President [George W. Bush](https://www.britannica.com/biography/George-W-Bush) had sought to topple the regime of Iraqi President [Saddam Hussein](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saddam-Hussein) prior to the events of September 11, 2001, but the deadliest terrorist attack in U.S. history would provide (at least in part) the [casus belli](https://www.britannica.com/topic/casus-belli) for the [Iraq War](https://www.britannica.com/event/Iraq-War). Citing links between the Iraqi regime and [al-Qaeda](https://www.britannica.com/topic/al-Qaeda) as well as the presence in Iraq of [weapons of mass destruction](https://www.britannica.com/technology/weapon-of-mass-destruction)—both claims that were ultimately proved false—the U.S. assembled a “coalition of the willing” and launched an attack on Iraq on March 20, 2003. The subsequent war unfolded in two distinct phases: a short one-sided conventional war, in which coalition forces suffered fewer than 200 fatalities in just over a month of major combat operations, and an insurgency that continued for years and claimed tens of thousands of lives. By the time U.S. combat forces were withdrawn in August 2010, more than 4,700 coalition troops had been killed; at least 85,000 Iraqi civilians had also been killed, but some estimates place that total much higher. The sectarian violence that wracked the country in the wake of the overthrow of Hussein’s [Baʿathist](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Baath-Party) regime gave rise to the [Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Islamic-State-in-Iraq-and-the-Levant) (ISIL; also called ISIS), a Sunni group that sought to establish a [caliphate](https://www.britannica.com/place/Caliphate) in Iraq and Syria. Between 2013 and the end of 2016, more than 50,000 additional civilians were murdered by ISIL or killed in clashes between ISIL and Iraqi government forces.

## [**Afghanistan War**](https://www.britannica.com/event/Afghanistan-War)

Within weeks of the September 11, 2001, attacks, the United States began carrying out air strikes against the [Taliban](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Taliban) regime in [Afghanistan](https://www.britannica.com/place/Afghanistan). The Taliban, an ultraconservative Islamist faction that seized power in the vacuum left after the [Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan](https://www.britannica.com/event/Soviet-invasion-of-Afghanistan), provided a safe haven for [al-Qaeda](https://www.britannica.com/topic/al-Qaeda) and its leader, [Osama bin Laden](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Osama-bin-Laden). The [war in Afghanistan](https://www.britannica.com/event/Afghanistan-War) became, for a time, the most obvious manifestation of the U.S.-led “war on terrorism.” By December 2001 the Taliban had been forced from power, but both the Afghan Taliban and its Pakistani counterpart would recover strength in the tribal areas that straddle the border of those two countries. Revising its tactics to reflect those used by insurgents in Iraq, the Taliban began employing [improvised explosive devices](https://www.britannica.com/technology/improvised-explosive-device) (IEDs) on military and civilian targets, to great effect. The Taliban boosted poppy cultivation in areas under its control, and the international [opium](https://www.britannica.com/science/opium) trade funded much of its military and terrorist activities. Between 2001 and 2016 an estimated 30,000 Afghan troops and police and 31,000 Afghan civilians were killed. More than 3,500 troops from the NATO-led coalition were killed during that time, and 29 countries were represented among the dead. In addition, some 30,000 Pakistani government forces and civilians were killed by the Pakistani Taliban.

## [**The War Against Boko Haram**](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Boko-Haram)

The Islamist militant group [Boko Haram](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Boko-Haram) (a name that means “Westernization is sacrilege” in the [Hausa language](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hausa-language)) was founded in 2002 with the goal of imposing [sharia](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Shariah) (Islamic law) on [Nigeria](https://www.britannica.com/place/Nigeria). The group was relatively obscure until 2009, when it launched a series of raids that killed dozens of police officers. The Nigerian government retaliated with a military operation that left more than 700 Boko Haram members dead. The Nigerian police and military then conducted a campaign of extrajudicial killing that inflamed what remained of Boko Haram. Beginning in 2010, Boko Haram struck back, assassinating police officers, staging jailbreaks, and attacking civilian targets across Nigeria. Schools and Christian churches in the country’s northeast were especially hard-hit, and the kidnapping of nearly 300 schoolgirls in 2014 drew international condemnation. As Boko Haram began to assert control over more territory, the character of the conflict shifted from a terrorist campaign to a full-blown insurgency that recalled the bloody [Nigerian Civil War](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Nigerian-civil-war). Whole cities were destroyed in Boko Haram attacks, and troops from Cameroon, Chad, Benin, and Niger eventually joined the military response. Although the area under Boko Haram control had been eroded significantly by the end of 2016, the group still retained the ability to carry out deadly suicide attacks. At least 11,000 civilians were killed by Boko Haram, and more than two million people were displaced by the violence.

## [**Yemeni Civil War**](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Houthi-movement#ref1300932)

The civil war in [Yemen](https://www.britannica.com/place/Yemen) had its genesis in the [Arab Spring](https://www.britannica.com/event/Arab-Spring) and the [uprising](https://www.britannica.com/event/Yemen-Uprising-of-2011-2012) that toppled the government of [Ali Abdullah Saleh](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ali-Abdullah-Saleh). As Saleh struggled to maintain his grip on the presidency, he recalled the military from outlying areas to [Sanaa](https://www.britannica.com/place/Sanaa), the Yemeni capital. Houthi rebels in the country’s north and [al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula](https://www.britannica.com/topic/al-Qaeda-in-the-Arabian-Peninsula) (AQAP) militants in the south were quick to exploit the power vacuum. Fighting between government forces and opposition tribal militias intensified, and on June 3, 2011, Saleh was the target of an assassination attempt that left him seriously injured. Saleh left Yemen to receive medical treatment, a move that ultimately led to the transfer of power to Saleh’s vice president, Abd Rabbuh Manṣur Hadi. Hadi failed to reassert an effective government presence in regions under Houthi and AQAP control, and his violent response to protests in Sanaa sparked sympathy for the antigovernment cause. In September 2014 Houthi rebels entered Sanaa, and by January 2015 they had occupied the presidential palace. Hadi was placed under house arrest, but he escaped and fled to the southwestern port city of [Aden](https://www.britannica.com/place/Aden). A force composed of Houthis and troops loyal to the deposed Saleh then laid siege to Aden, and Hadi fled the country in March 2015. That month the conflict was internationalized when a coalition led by [Saudi Arabia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Saudi-Arabia) moved to drive the Houthis from power and restore the Hadi government. It was widely believed that Iran was providing material support to the Houthis, and numerous arms shipments from Iran were seized en route to the conflict zone. By the end of 2021 the United Nations estimated that more than 375,000 lives had been lost as a result of the war; indirect causes, such as hunger and easily treatable diseases, were responsible for more than half of that total. In addition, more than three million Yemenis had been displaced by the war.

## [**Russia-Ukraine War**](https://www.britannica.com/event/2022-Russian-invasion-of-Ukraine)

In February 2014 [Ukraine](https://www.britannica.com/place/Ukraine)’s pro-Russian president, [Viktor Yanukovych](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Viktor-Yanukovych), was swept from power after months of popular demonstrations and a failed violent crackdown on protesters. Yanukovych fled to Russia and, within days of his departure, disguised Russian troops invaded the Ukrainian autonomous republic of [Crimea](https://www.britannica.com/place/Crimea). Russian President [Vladimir Putin](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Vladimir-Putin) announced the illegal annexation of Crimea in March, and weeks later disguised Russian troops invaded the Ukrainian regions of Donetsk and Luhansk. By early summer in 2014, pro-Russian forces had overrun a sizable swathe of territory, and in July [Malaysia Airlines flight MH17](https://www.britannica.com/event/Malaysia-Airlines-flight-17) was shot down over rebel-controlled territory by a Russian-supplied [surface-to-air missile](https://www.britannica.com/technology/surface-to-air-missile). Nearly 300 passengers and crew were killed. A cease-fire was signed in February 2015 that slowed but did not stop the bloodshed, and the [Donbas](https://www.britannica.com/place/Donbas) remained in a state of frozen conflict for the next seven years. By 2021 more than 14,000 people had been killed in fighting in eastern Ukraine. On February 24, 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Although Russian forces made significant gains in the first days of combat, Ukrainian defenders rebuffed attempts to seize [Kyiv](https://www.britannica.com/place/Kyiv) and other major cities and were soon launching counterattacks at Russian positions. The Russian invasion was characterized by indiscriminate artillery bombardments and air strikes on Ukraine’s cities, and an estimated 40,000 Ukrainian civilians were killed in the first year of fighting. Perhaps 100,000 Ukrainian troops were killed in combat and more than a third of Ukraine’s population was displaced by combat. Russia also conducted an [ethnic cleansing](https://www.britannica.com/topic/ethnic-cleansing) campaign in the territory that it occupied, and as many as 1.6 million Ukrainian citizens were forcibly transferred to Russian territory. Putin had hoped to complete his conquest of Ukraine in a matter of days, but, after a year of sanguinary combat, an estimated 200,000 Russian troops had been killed, and Russia’s conventional military capability had been significantly degraded.