10 CONFLICTS TO WORRY ABOUT IN 2022

ETHIOPIA, YEMEN, THE SAHEL, NIGERIA, AFGHANISTAN, LEBANON, SUDAN, HAITI, COLOMBIA, AND MYANMAR

February 2022
## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GLOSSARY</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FOREWORD</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ETHIOPIA: Deep roots to a complicated conflict hinder options for peace</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YEMEN: Diplomatic efforts fail to subdue the conflict</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE SAHEL: Persistent, expanding, and escalating instability</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NIGERIA: Multiple security threats persist around the country</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AFGHANISTAN: High risk of violence targeting civilians under Taliban rule</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEBANON: At risk of heightened social unrest amid an economic and political crisis</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SUDAN: Military factions enhance their power amid spreading violence</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HAITI: High risk of intensifying gang violence amid political instability</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COLOMBIA: Continued risk of rising violence targeting civilians</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MYANMAR: Continued resistance against the military coup</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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GLOSSARY

DEMONSTRATIONS: This term is used to refer collectively to all events coded with event type protests, as well as all events coded with sub-event type violent demonstration under the riots event type.

DISORDER: This term is used to refer collectively to both political violence and demonstrations.

EVENT: The fundamental unit of observation in ACLED is the event. Events involve designated actors – e.g. a named rebel group, a militia or state forces. They occur at a specific named location (identified by name and geographic coordinates) and on a specific day. ACLED currently codes for six types of events and 25 types of sub-events, both violent and non-violent.

POLITICAL VIOLENCE: This term is used to refer collectively to ACLED’s violence against civilians, battles, and explosions/remote violence event types, as well as the mob violence sub-event type of the riot event type. It excludes the protests event type. Political violence is defined as the use of force by a group with a political purpose or motivation.

ORGANIZED POLITICAL VIOLENCE: This term is used to refer collectively to ACLED’s violence against civilians, battles, and explosions/remote violence event types. It excludes the protests and riots event types. Political violence is defined as the use of force by a group with a political purpose or motivation. Mob violence is not included here as it is spontaneous (not organized) in nature.

VIOLENCE TARGETING CIVILIANS: This term is used to refer collectively to ACLED’s violence against civilians event type and the excessive force against protesters sub-event type of the protests event type, as well as specific explosions/remote violence events and riots events where civilians are directly targeted.

For more methodological information – including definitions for all event and sub-event types – please see the ACLED Codebook.
Each year, ACLED identifies 10 conflicts or crisis situations around the world that are likely to worsen or evolve in the coming months. These 10 cases are not just hotspots, but represent areas of new directions and patterns of violence, and where there have been major shifts in conflict dynamics.

In 2021, few conflicts ended, many continued, and some got markedly worse. In 2022, we will be confronted with increased violence, demonstrations, and divisions. What explains this continued decline in global stability? There is no unifying theme that links a violent insurrection in the United States, the rise of Islamic State affiliates across Africa, demonstrations against pandemic restrictions in Europe, the anti-coup local defense forces of Myanmar, mob violence in India, increased gang activity in Haiti, and attacks targeting civilians in Colombia. These trends have emerged as elites, armed groups, state forces, and civilians have grappled with volatile domestic politics, armed competition, splintered security forces, and impunity for the perpetrators of violence. These conflicts are directed towards local, regional, and national challenges, not ideological poles or shared grievances. They represent a failure of political agents, systems, and identities to create and sustain stability and to address threats. They further expose how the international community lacks the tools, cohesion, and approach to address the world’s longest and deadliest conflicts.

Of the 10 conflicts we address here, half appeared on our list last year, and Ethiopia, Yemen, and the Sahel also appeared in our 2020 list. However, in each case, the conflicts took on new dimensions in the past year and continue to devolve. In Ethiopia, we warned that the capacity of the state would be too stretched to contend with its myriad threats: this was evident as the TPLF/TDF and OLA/OLF-Shane insurgents threatened larger parts of the country throughout the year. In a shocking turn of events, Ethiopian government forces, with regional militias, turned back the rebel advancement, but many battles lie ahead as the country forges a path that will likely entrench divisions in the short term. In Yemen, conflict has raged for seven years and it remains the world’s largest humanitarian disaster. With no central state to speak of, several fronts are frozen and fatal- ity levels are on the rise again in 2022 as the population bears the brunt of the fighting. Meanwhile, the Sahel continues to disintegrate in new ways. Going into 2022, Burkina Faso has replaced Mali as the epicenter of the violence, and both countries saw radical changes to their central governments through recent coups.

Nigeria is witnessing the opening of new fronts, reinvigorated latent fronts, and a state security structure unable to contend with rapidly diversifying violence. Only 18% of Nigeria’s violence involves Islamist militant groups, yet this conflict dominates the collective understanding of the state’s threats. Instead, most violence involves militias proliferating across the state and destroying public security as they go. Afghanistan and Colombia share a future where civilians face an increase in targeted violence as state, state-affiliated, and post-conflict armed groups continue to contest authority structures. In Lebanon, the risk of collapsing central institutions and the economic crisis has created massive needs and volatile reactions. Hundreds of violent riots broke out last year, and security challenges continue as governments form, and then fail, to deal with entrenched nepotism, mismanagement, and corruption. In Haiti, responses to government overreach and reforms, the assassination of the president, and public concerns about gang activity rocked the small state. Gangs and government forces are now battling for control of economic assets and territory, as the ‘deals’ and ‘truces’ between armed groups and elites have fallen apart. Myanmar’s military coup in February 2021 was met with overwhelming public discontent, voiced through demonstrations that were forcefully put down by the military junta. Violence against civilians has exploded, spurring the proliferation of local defense groups at an unprecedented rate. In Sudan, the military and senior elites of the governing council are responsible for a retreat from the ‘road to democracy.’ A coup, an embattled and unsupported prime minister, and a return to mass public demonstrations suggest that Sudan’s vast and functional security sector will both control the state and suppress the protesters violently.
There is enough destabilization to be worried about the collective effects of fallen democracies, aborted transitions, reinvigorated authoritarianism, and beyond. These current threats are very different from a time when concerns were concentrated on the growing specter of Islamist violence or ‘ethnic conflict’: the conflicts noted here represent competition for political, territorial, and economic authority by those in power or recently out of power. There is no evidence of contagion and diffusion of coups or other forms of destabilization (barring the very purposeful contagion in the Sahel), but it is far worse to consider how states are destroying their own governance institutions and structures with internal competition, leaving their citizens adrift in violent chaos.

A special note on Ukraine, which is not profiled in the 10 conflicts series at present: at the time of writing, the actions that precipitated current international diplomatic tensions include an intensification of posturing, threats, and military deployments. Nevertheless, despite the rise in tensions, ACLED has not recorded significant shifts in conflict trends on the ground, beyond what is typical for the state and subregion. However, should violence escalate, we will extensively cover all conflict developments in future weekly updates.

Prof. Clionadh Raleigh
February 2022
Ethiopia: Deep roots to a complicated conflict hinder options for peace

Clionadh Raleigh

Conflict between the Ethiopian federal government and the political administration of the northern Tigray region, the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), continued throughout 2021, resulting in the highest levels of political violence in Ethiopia since the end of the Ethiopian-Eritrean War in June 2000. In November 2021, Ethiopia’s civil conflict passed the one-year mark and the ‘quick victory’ promised by both sides has dragged into a second year. Daily clashes, many high-fatality incidents of violence against civilians, and an increasing number of air and drone strikes have marked a difficult year for the country.

The Ethiopian government’s attempt to dislodge the TPLF from control of the Tigray region resulted in a costly occupation, despite heavy assistance from Eritrea and a military advantage at the outset of the war. Thousands of civilians were killed, and civil infrastructure in the region was devastated by looting, shelling, and government airstrikes. The TPLF — and the later established Tigray Defence Forces (TDF) — mounted an insurgency that wrested control of the Tigray region from the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) at the end of June. The TPLF/TDF later pushed through the Amhara and Afar regions south and east with the aim of threatening the federal government in Addis Ababa.

Subsequent conflict in both the Amhara and Afar regions devastated civil infrastructure and displaced thousands of civilians (BBC Amharic, 25 October 2021). ACLED records at least 3,200 fatalities in the Afar and Amhara regions across the last six months of 2021 as a result of the conflict, although the actual death toll is likely much higher. In December, the TPLF/TDF reached as far south as Debre Sina, located 193 kilometers driving distance from the capital, Addis Ababa, before being stopped. The ENDF and its allied Amhara and Afar regional militias, special police, and Fano militias have since managed to reverse TPLF/TDF gains from earlier in the year and have re-taken most territory in the Afar and Amhara regions (Al Jazeera, 18 December 2021). Clashes remain ongoing in areas along Tigray’s regional borders with the Amhara and Afar regions.

Although the spotlight has been on northern battles, Ethiopian security forces are also currently fighting several anti-government insurgencies throughout the country. Alongside the TPLF/TDF, a coalition of eight other anti-government factions maintains aims to “totally dismantle the existing government either by force or negotiation … then insert a transitional government” (Reuters, 5 November 2021). The components of this coalition — the United Front of Ethiopian Federalist and Confederalist Forces — are variably organized, and many do not pose a substantial threat to the Ethiopian state. Of the eight factions, the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA/OLF-Shane) — operating in the Oromia region — has expanded most significantly over the past year, in part due to their alliance with the TPLF/TDF. In Oromia, both government forces and OLA/OLF-Shane fighters have been accused of perpetrating violence against civilians in 2021. Likewise, anti-government insurgents from the Benshangul/Gumuz region have been active throughout the year, despite significant attempts by the Ethiopian military to stabilize the area.

Civilians bore the brunt of conflict throughout Ethiopia in 2021. In the Oromia region, hundreds of thousands of people have been displaced by ongoing fighting, and ACLED records over 680 civilian fatalities in the region during 2021 (DW Amharic, 12 January 2022). At least 270 civilians were killed in Benshangul/Gumuz region in 2021. In the Tigray region,
UNOCHA estimates that 5.2 million people — 90% of the region’s population — are currently in need of food assistance (UNOCHA, 30 December 2021). Prior to the TPLF/TDF regaining control of the region, hundreds of people were killed by occupying Eritrean and Ethiopian soldiers, with sexual violence widespread. Civilians accused of collaborating with the federal government were also killed by TPLF/TDF forces after they retook control of the region. Ongoing airstrikes and artillery attacks have devastated infrastructure and left dozens of people dead. Communication services in Tigray have remained offline since late June 2021 (USAID, 4 November 2021). Moreover, fighting and the subsequent occupation of areas by the TPLF/TDF in the Amhara and Afar regions were also characterized by the shelling of urban areas, the execution of civilians, the destruction of civil infrastructure, and sexual violence.

In other developments, the mid-year general election prompted an intensification of demonstrations around the killing of ethnic Amhara civilians in the Benshangul/Gumuz region, Oromia region, and areas of the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region. In the Oromia region, as OLA/OLF-Shane fighters battled government troops and Oromia regional special forces, civilians were trapped in the middle. Those with suspected links to the OLA/OLF-Shane have been imprisoned, shot, and killed by federal and regional forces. Likewise, OLA/OLF-Shane combatants have been accused of targeting ethnic Amhara civilians residing in the Oromia region in a series of massacres in western Oromia. In the capital, Addis Ababa, thousands of ethnic Tigrayans were arrested and held during a declared state of emergency in November 2021 (BBC, 21 November 2021).

**WHAT TO WATCH FOR IN 2022:**

Both the Ethiopian federal government and the TPLF/TDF have paid a heavy price throughout the past year of conflict. Although the ENDF achieved major victories in the last weeks of 2021, ongoing clashes in early 2022 suggest that the TPLF/TDF remains capable of exacting an unacceptable cost from the ENDF should the federal government attempt to retake control of the Tigray region. Despite ongoing hostilities, there is a glimmer of hope that peace talks could be kick-started at some point this year amid a territorial stalemate. After taking control of the Amhara and Afar regions, the Ethiopian government ordered the ENDF to halt its advances into the Tigray region, released political prisoners, and announced plans for a national dialogue (Fana Broadcasting, 23 December 2021; France24, 7 January 2022). Officials for the TPLF/TDF claim that their withdrawal from the Afar and Amhara regions was strategic and a “decisive opening for peace” (DW, 20 December 2021).

Any negotiations that could happen are likely to be highly complicated. In addition to ongoing airstrikes and daily clashes, a delicate political balance between the federal government and powers wielded by Ethiopia’s regional leaders — backed by regional special forces and militias formed during the war — will continue throughout 2022. Accommodating the interests of these regional powers could limit the federal government’s ability to negotiate with the TDF and its TPLF leaders. Contested territory in Raya and Wolkait, administered by the Tigray regional government until the start of the conflict, is currently under the control of Amhara regional forces, who have no intention of returning it to the TPLF/TDF. Any attempt by the federal government to return these contested territories to the TPLF/TDF as part of a negotiated peace would risk a fallout between the federal government and Amhara region. This is a dangerous proposition given the size and power of Amhara militias and special forces.

Similar issues are faced in the smaller conflicts throughout the country, where violence has been the chosen method of negotiating political power for Ethiopia’s elites in recent years. Conflicts over land and resources continually flare up, and are pushed by authorities who use Ethiopia’s ethno-federalist system of governance to compete for contested territory and governance rights.

There are new external dynamics at play as well, as the federal government increasingly deploys internationally sourced drones. These drones, provided by the United Arab Emirates, China, and Turkey (Reuters, 22 December 2021), highlight a new phase of international involvement in Ethiopia’s war. How these new partners continue to engage will have major repercussions on the trajectory of future conflict in Ethiopia.

Finally, grievances held by communities throughout Ethiopia will make politically negotiated settlements difficult to implement. For many in the Afar and Amhara regions, the TPLF/TDF’s destruction of infrastructure and attacks on civilians will make any negotiated settlement involving the TPLF/TDF unacceptable. Likewise, residents of the Tigray region ac-
cuse the government of serious human rights abuses, in addition to wantonly exposing them to Eritrean troops that committed massacres and looted from the region during their occupation (EHRC, February 2021). A deep mistrust of the federal government, given historical and contemporary abuses, also continues to hinder attempts at stopping violence raging in areas of the Oromia and Benshangul/Gumuz regions.

2022 is likely to be another difficult year for Ethiopia. Conflict in the country is deeply rooted and complex. While the government has announced a national dialogue, finding solutions to Ethiopia’s many conflicts will be a long and slow process requiring input from dozens of political actors with competing narratives.

FURTHER READING:

Weekly updates on all active conflicts, monthly analysis of major developments, and special reports on emerging trends and thematic issue areas are made available by our Ethiopia Peace Observatory (EPO), a new ACLED initiative to enhance local data collection on political violence and protest trends across the country.
ETHIOPIA

Deep roots to a complicated conflict hinder options for peace

In November 2021, Ethiopia’s northern conflict passed the one-year mark and the ‘quick victory’ promised by both sides has dragged into a second year. Daily clashes, many high-fatality incidents of violence against civilians, and an increasing number of air and drone strikes marked a difficult year for the country. Although the Ethiopian government and its allies in the Amhara and Afar regions managed to regain significant swaths of territory in the latter half of 2021 and Tigrayan forces pulled back in late December, no peace deals have been made and violence continues in 2022.

Conflict throughout Ethiopia, with heavy fighting in the north

While most focus is placed on the conflict in Ethiopia’s north, smaller conflicts throughout the country have also contributed to the overall high amount of violence in 2021. Insurgencies are being fought by anti-government militants in Oromia, Benishangul/Gumuz, and Amhara regions. Communal clashes between ethnic militias have also been common in areas of contested territory throughout the last year.

Political violence remained at heightened levels throughout 2021

Start of Tigray conflict (4 November 2020)
Yemen: Diplomatic efforts fail to subdue the conflict

Emile Roy

In March 2021, Yemen entered the seventh year of war since the launch of the Saudi-led military campaign against the Houthi-Saleh alliance, after the latter took over the country’s capital. The war in Yemen is multilayered and has resulted in the country’s deep fragmentation at all levels, leading some to conclude that “a unified Yemeni state no longer exists” (Arab Gulf State Institute in Washington, 8 October 2021). The internationally recognized president, Abd Rib-buh Mansur Hadi, resides in Saudi Arabia, while the Houthis control Yemen’s capital, Sanaa. The temporary capital of the Hadi government, Aden, is in the hands of the secessionist Southern Transitional Council (STC).

On the ground, Houthi forces are fighting against a mix of military and tribal pro-Hadi forces in northern and central governorates, National Resistance Forces (NRF) on the western coast (for more on the NRF, see ACLED’s report: Who are the UAE-backed Forces Fighting on the Western Front in Yemen?), and forces affiliated with the STC in the southern governorates. In the south, control is split between Hadi and STC loyalists under the November 2019 Riyadh Agreement.1 While Islamist insurgencies, led by Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the Yemeni branch of the Islamic State (IS), have also plagued the country, both groups appear considerably weakened today (for more, see ACLED’s report: Wartime Transformation of AQAP in Yemen).

Despite the country’s continued fragmentation, overall levels of political violence fell in 2021. ACLED records less political violence in Yemen in 2021 — fewer than 7,400 events — than in any year since the beginning of ACLED coverage in 2015. This sharp decrease in 2021 — a drop of 27% compared to 2020 — can be explained by the relative freezing of a number of fronts between Houthi and anti-Houthi forces. Battle events, for instance, decreased by 66% in Ad Dali governorate, 53% in Sadah governorate, and 49% in Al Jawf governorate between 2020 and 2021.

The overall decrease in political violence levels, however, belied the deadly state of conflict in 2021. Although reported fatalities decreased for the third consecutive year in 2021, the lethality of the conflict — the number of reported fatalities per event — increased sharply in 2021 compared to 2020. ACLED now estimates that more than 150,000 people have died as a direct result of the violence, including over 14,500 civilians killed in targeted attacks. In 2021, nearly half of all reported fatalities from political violence stemmed from the Houthi offensive on Marib, launched in February 2021. Political violence in the governorate increased by 34% between 2020 and 2021, with reported fatalities increasing by 75%.2

Between January and April 2021, Houthi forces advanced towards Marib city through the western districts of the governorate before their progress stalled for several months. This pause was partially due to an unprecedented engagement of international actors in support of the peace process, which saw renewed Houthi participation in negotiations (Middle East Eye, 10 June 2021). In May and June, political violence in the country dropped to its lowest levels.

1. The Riyadh Agreement was signed in November 2019 under the auspices of Saudi Arabia to resolve the conflict between the Hadi government and the STC after intense clashes erupted between the two camps in August 2019 (ACLED, 18 December 2019).

2. See the latest edition of ACLED Methodology and Coding Decisions around the Yemen Civil War for an explanation on the coding of Houthi fatalities claimed by Saudi-led coalition airstrikes since October 2021.
since the Kuwait peace talks in May 2016. However, in another failure of the diplomatic track, Houthi forces renewed their offensive in late June and captured five districts in the south of Marib governorate to reach the outskirts of Marib city in December. This advance was made possible by prior gains in Al Bayda governorate and the northwestern districts of Shabwah governorate, which Houthi forces entered for the first time since 2017.

Further significant ground developments in 2021 took place in the western coast governorates of Taizz and Hodeidah. In March, pro-Hadi forces made their most significant gains of the year against Houthi forces in Jabal Habashy and Al Maafer districts in Taizz governorate. On the other hand, Houthi forces took over a 100-kilometer coastal strip in Hodeidah governorate in November, after the NRF withdrew from positions held since the signing of the Stockholm Agreement in December 2018. This resulted in a complete reshuffling of the frontlines in Hodeidah governorate, with the NRF shifting their focus onto inland areas along the Hodeidah-Taizz border, advancing into Maqbanah district in Taizz (for more on territorial changes, see ACLED’s project: Mapping Territorial Control in Yemen).

In the southern governorates, political violence decreased by almost 50% in 2021 compared to the previous year. This was driven mainly by a decrease of more than 75% in Abyan governorate, which was the result of the STC and Hadi government forming a power-sharing cabinet in December 2020 (Middle East Institute, 1 February 2021). Yet, both parties continued to work in isolation from each other, and the STC threatened to withdraw from the agreement in November (STC, 9 November 2021). The fragility of the situation in southern Yemen was further exacerbated in 2021 by worsening living conditions amidst an unprecedented currency crisis (Sanaa Center, 10 September 2021). This led to a wave of civil unrest in the second half of the year (ACAPS, 29 November 2021).

WHAT TO WATCH FOR IN 2022:

Despite the overall decrease in political violence in 2021, developments during the latter part of the year provide rather bleak prospects for the beginning of 2022. The revived diplomatic process in the first half of 2021 faded as the military track was once again favored by the conflict parties. In his last briefing of the year to the Security Council, UN Special Envoy for Yemen Hans Grundberg acknowledged that the conflict parties’ focus remained on military options (Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen, 14 December 2021).

If all parties to the conflict persist with favoring the military track, civilians will continue to bear the brunt of the war. While overall levels of violence targeting civilians were lower last year than in the three previous years, renewed hostilities in the latter part of 2021 were accompanied by an increase in the number of events targeting civilians and associated fatalities. This is a trend that is likely to continue into 2022.

Furthermore, conflict parties might feel less restrained in their actions since the UN Human Rights Council rejected the renewal of the mandate of the Group of Eminent Experts on Yemen in October 2021. Since 2017, this body had worked on bringing accountability to the conflict by investigating violations of international law by all parties (Amnesty International, 5 October 2021). The result of intense Saudi lobbying, this historic rejection effectively put an end to official international investigations into violations and abuses committed during the war (Reuters, 7 October 2021).

Shifting frontlines and alliances are also likely to be a defining feature of 2022. In particular, the trajectories of the various components of the NRF after their withdrawal from the coastal areas of Hodeidah governorate will need to be monitored closely. In December 2021, forces from the NRF-affiliated Giants Brigades deployed to Shabwah governorate, where they regained large swaths of territory from Houthi forces and even advanced into Marib governorate.

3. In December 2018, the UN brokered the Stockholm Agreement to stop an offensive against Houthi forces along the west coast, fearing the humanitarian consequences of a battle for Hodeidah city. The agreement included a ceasefire throughout the governorate and the demilitarization of Hodeidah city.


5. Swedish diplomat and former EU Ambassador to Yemen Hans Grundberg assumed office as new UN Special Envoy for Yemen in September 2021. British diplomat and former UN envoy Martin Griffiths was appointed as UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator in May 2021.
in the first weeks 2022. A better coordination of NRF components with pro-Hadi forces in key areas, like Marib, Al Bayda, or Taizz governorates, and subsequent Houthi military defeats, could incentivize the Houthis to return to the negotiating table. On the other hand, alliances between NRF components and forces loyal to the secessionist STC could considerably weaken the pro-Hadi camp. This is all the more relevant as the withdrawal of Saudi-led coalition forces from a number of their bases inside Yemen in late 2021 suggest that coalition-backed Yemeni forces might need to become more self-reliant.

Regional developments are also likely to impact the trajectory of the Yemen conflict in 2022. Notably, Saudi Arabia and Iran acknowledged in late 2021 that they had been engaging in ‘secret’ talks, where the parties reportedly agreed to reopen consulates in their respective countries (France 24, 11 October 2021). Some suggest the Saudi withdrawal from camps in southern Yemen was a show of goodwill within the context of these talks (South24, 31 October 2021). One reported motivation is that Saudi Arabia would like to stop Houthi drone and missile attacks on Saudi territory and, more largely, to secure its southern border (Middle East Eye, 13 May 2021). Were such guarantees obtained from these talks, Saudi Arabia could potentially engage in a more extensive withdrawal from the country.

Finally, the stability of the southern governorates will be key to watch in 2022, and will likely be determined by whether or not living and economic conditions improve. As put by former Yemeni Minister of Youth and Sports Rafat Al Akhali, “Yemen’s most pressing problem isn’t war. It’s the economy” (Foreign Policy, 8 October 2021). In that regard, the end of 2021 saw some relatively hopeful developments with reforms to the management of the Aden branch of the Central Bank of Yemen, in a consensus decision between the STC and the Hadi government (South24, 7 December 2021). If the situation does not improve soon, however, a new wave of civil unrest is likely to hit the southern governorates again in 2022, with the potential as well for widespread armed conflict.

**FURTHER READING:**

The State of Yemen: Mapping Territorial Control in Yemen

Little-Known Military Brigades and Armed Groups in Yemen: A Series

The Myth of Stability: Fighting and Repression in Houthi-Controlled Territories

The Wartime Transformation of AQAP in Yemen

Yemen’s Fractured South: ACLED’s Three-Part Series

Inside Ibb: A Hotbed of Infighting in Houthi-Controlled Yemen

Yemen Snapshots: 2015-2019

Yemen’s Urban Battlegrounds: Violence and Politics in Sana’a, Aden, Ta’izz and Hodeidah

ACLED Methodology and Coding Decisions around the Yemen Civil War

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6. The importance of the economic profile of the Yemen conflict was further highlighted in a recent report by the International Crisis Group (International Crisis Group, 20 January 2022).
Diplomatic efforts fail to subdue the conflict

In March 2021, Yemen entered the seventh year of war since the launch of the Saudi-led military campaign against the Houthi-Saleh alliance, after the latter took over the country’s capital. In 2021, the total number of political violence events hit its lowest point since the beginning of ACLED coverage in 2013. Despite the overall decline in events, however, the lethality of the violence increased in 2021, driven by deadly fighting amid the Houthi offensive on Marib. With conflict parties seemingly recommitted to the military track, fighting shows few signs of stopping in 2022, and civilians will likely continue to face the brunt of the escalating humanitarian crisis.

Political violence was more lethal in 2021

Despite an overall decrease in organized political violence events, reported fatalities increased in several provinces, most dramatically in Marib (75%).
The Sahel: Persistent, expanding, and escalating instability

Héni Nsaibia

After a decade-long crisis, the Sahel entered 2022 amid escalating disorder, with levels of organized political violence increasing in 2021 compared to 2020. Conflict in the region has been largely driven by a jihadist insurgency centered in the states of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, which are most affected by the crisis. Each of these countries experienced significant instability in their own way in 2021. Spillover effects of the crisis on neighboring West African littoral states such as Ivory Coast and Benin also took on even greater proportions. Ongoing democratic backsliding and emerging competition among major powers have further complicated regional dynamics, although the overall impact remains to be seen.

Burkina Faso has replaced Mali as the epicenter of the regional conflict. In 2021, the number of organized political violence events in Burkina Faso doubled compared to 2020, while annual reported fatalities surpassed reported fatalities in Mali for the second time in three years.

The worsening violence in Burkina Faso has been largely driven by the Al Qaeda-affiliated Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), which increased activity across several regions in the country last year. The group’s engagement in political violence — including attacks on both civilians and state forces — increased over 200% in 2021 compared to 2020. JNIM-affiliated militants perpetrated multiple high-fatality attacks over the course of the year, including the deadliest attack on civilians ever recorded by ACLED in Burkina Faso. During that attack, JNIM-affiliated militants killed about 160 people in the town of Solhan, in Yagha province in June. High death tolls were also reported during militant attacks on state forces near Gorol Nyibi in Soum in August, and at the Inata gold mine in Soum in November. Similarly, Niger experienced a record year of conflict, home to the highest number of civilian fatalities in the country since the beginning of ACLED coverage. The Greater Sahara faction of the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP-GS) was responsible for more than 560 reported civilian deaths, accounting for nearly 80% of all civilian fatalities in Niger in 2021. ISWAP-GS activity led to the formation of self-defense militias in many villages in the Tillaberi and Tahoua regions. In a June 2021 report, ACLED analysis indicated that mass atrocities and the arming of communities could escalate into a communal war. Since then, dozens of militants and militiamen have been killed in tit-for-tat attacks in the Tahoua region.

Mali was the only country in the subregion that saw a decrease in conflict-related deaths last year. There are several developments and factors that, taken together, could explain this decline. Namely, civilian fatalities by Malian state forces decreased over 70% in 2021. The drop coincides with Malian forces reducing operations in 2021, having previously carried out significant attacks on civilians as part of counterinsurgency operations in 2020 (for more, see ACLED’s report: State Atrocities in the Sahel). This relative withdrawal occurred against the backdrop of mili-
military coups in August 2020 and May 2021. Instead of focusing on matters of security, the junta-led transitional government has largely focused on staying in power, prolonging the political transition, and delaying the holding of elections (AP, 7 June 2021; 2 January 2022). This has been evidenced by the limited engagement of Malian forces in joint operations alongside its neighbors.

Amid this military withdrawal, the Malian state and local defense militias have rapidly lost control of territory to JNIM and its affiliates. This is particularly pronounced in central Mali, where JNIM has waged relentless campaigns against Dan Na Ambassagou and Donso (or Dozo) militiamen. Bambara and Dogon farming communities associated with the Dan Na Ambassagou and Donso militias were targeted in three distinct areas, including Bandiagara and Djenné in the Mopti region, and Niono in the Segou region. Sustained pressure by JNIM has put the Dan Na Ambassagou and Donso militias on the defensive, with significant losses in October in Djenne and Niono, respectively. Not only were these the deadliest attacks on the Dan Na Ambassagou and Donso militiamen ever recorded by ACLED, they were also of strategic importance as JNIM forced the surrender of militiamen in both Djenné and Niono.

The worsening security situation across the Sahel has also amplified existing tensions over the ongoing presence of French forces in the region. Anti-French demonstrators in Niger and Burkina Faso have targeted French military convoys, prompting deadly interventions by French forces alongside local state forces. In Niger, French and Nigerien government forces opened fire on demonstrators when they attempted to vandalize a military convoy in Tera in November, killing three demonstrators and injuring 18. Meanwhile, coups in Mali and, more recently, Burkina Faso have further complicated French engagement in the region. The successive coups in Mali strained relations between Mali and France, and have created disharmony in the strategic military partnership (France 24, 3 June 2021). These relations have gradually deteriorated since France began reducing and reshaping its Barkhane mission, with a partial withdrawal from northern Mali (VOA, 30 September 2021). Since then, Mali has partnered with Russian military advisors or possibly the Russian private military company Wagner Group, who began accompanying Malian government forces during operations in central Mali in December 2021. The Russian deployment has stoked concerns among international actors engaged in Mali (ECFR, 2 December 2021). Diplomatic tensions have reached unprecedented levels, especially escalating after the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) imposed a new round of sanctions on Mali in January 2022 (Al Jazeera, 9 January 2022). In response, Mali denied international forces access to its airspace (DW, 20 January 2022), and expelled Danish troops deployed as part of the French-led European Task Force Takuba (Al Jazeera, 27 January 2022; Anadolu Agency, 21 January 2022). Mali also went so far as to expel the French ambassador to the country (Reuters, 31 January 2022).

The year 2021 was additionally marked by further geographic expansion of militant groups, including into West African littoral states. In mid-2020, JNIM began to establish a foothold in northern Ivory Coast (for more, see ACLED’s report: In Light of the Kafolo Attack), a presence that has evolved into a domestic problem beyond mere spillover during 2021 (ISS, 15 June 2021). Precursor activities observed in Benin also indicated a growing presence and the risk of spillover into the country (for more, see ACLED’s joint report with the Clingendael Institute: Laws of Attraction). This was confirmed by multiple armed clashes between Beninese forces and presumed militants in 2021, including militant attacks on Beninese military positions in Alibori and Atacora departments in late 2021, followed by the first two IED attacks recorded in Benin. In Togo, the first reported militant attack occurred in early November 2021, stemming from increased militant activity in Kompienga province in Burkina Faso. Similarly, the Koulpelogo and Boulgou provinces that border Ghana have experienced a sharp resurgence in militant activities following a more than two-year-long hiatus. The northernmost border areas of the littoral states host smuggling and trade routes that play an important role in the insurgent ecosystem (Clingendael, 22 December 2021). These routes ensure the logistical flow of JNIM and its affiliates, including fuel, supplies, motorcycles, gold, and ammunition. These illicit activities were reportedly disrupted prior to the recent attacks in Benin (Banouto, 1 December 2021), and may point to triggering mechanisms for this sudden shift in JNIM’s strategic calculus.

**WHAT TO WATCH FOR IN 2022:**

The Sahel is undergoing a profound and unprecedented change at the military and political levels. The ongoing diplomatic imbroglio results from the compounding effects of successive coups d’état, the
Malian junta’s collaboration with Russian forces, and the French transformation of Operation Barkhane. Combined, they have created significant fractures in the regional security project and called into question the Western-led military intervention. While Mali had largely withdrawn militarily from the fight against Islamist militant groups throughout the majority of 2021, it has again scaled up military operations since late 2021, in part alongside its new Russian partners. However, these operations have been accompanied by attacks on civilians in several regions, and there are signs that the downward trend for civilian fatalities in 2021 is now taking a turn for the worse.

France’s position is increasingly untenable in the face of growing anti-French sentiment, and France may look for more viable counterterrorism partners in Niger and Burkina Faso amid growing popular support for a French withdrawal from Mali. Meanwhile, Niger does not appear to want the French-led Takuba Task Force deployed on its soil (Le Figaro, 3 February 2022), and President Mohamed Bazoum may face internal pressure following the anti-France demonstrations that turned deadly near the town of Tera in November. In Burkina Faso, a military coup occurred in January 2022 amid a joint Burkinabe and French operation called ‘Laabingol.’ That a military junta now rules the country makes it morally questionable whether France should seek a stronger military presence there and if it would be accepted by the Burkinabes.

Despite gains in 2021, the insurgency is currently experiencing a downturn at the military level due to accumulating militant casualties in the face of ongoing campaigns by state forces. Against this military pressure, JNIM in particular has stepped up efforts to target schools and telecommunications infrastructure, with such activity increasing in November 2021 and January 2022, respectively. JNIM has also sought to expand its operations in several regions of Burkina Faso, where border areas with neighboring countries are turning into a major battleground. The recent spillover into Benin and Togo has the potential to follow a similar evolution as that which developed in northern Ivory Coast. The risk of spread and escalation could be even higher, considering the greater presence of militants in Kompienga.

If the spillover into the littoral states is indicative of a spread of militancy, it is also evident in countries primarily affected by the Sahel crisis. The need for joint military operations between the affected countries is becoming more frequent. These regular joint operations highlight the steadily deteriorating security situation, albeit in a more favorable light, and underscore that coordination and cooperation between countries in the region are improving to counter the common threat. While Burkina Faso, by necessity, maintained the highest operational tempo in the region at the military level and played a central role in joint military operations during 2021, it also struggled to contain the violence. In 2022, these efforts may eventually be overwhelmed, unless countries in the region continue to join forces and pool their resources to address the common threat or find alternative ways to contain the violence.

FURTHER READING:

Sahel 2021: Communal Wars, Broken Ceasefires, and Shifting Frontlines

The Conflict Between Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in the Sahel, A Year On

Mali: Any End to the Storm?
Persistent, expanding, and escalating instability

At the end of 2021, conflict in the Sahel showed no signs of abating. Despite fewer overall fatalities after a record year in 2020, organized political violence increased yet again in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. In 2021, the number of organized political violence events in Burkina Faso doubled compared to 2020, while annual reported fatalities surpassed reported fatalities in Mali for the second time in three years. Though fatalities decreased in Mali, violence continued to increase, hitting record highs, alongside increased civilian fatalities. After a decade-long crisis, the Sahel is entering 2022 amid escalating disorder, and instability is likely to persist or even worsen throughout the year.

Organized political violence in the Sahel in 2021

Violence rose in Burkina Faso; fatalities rose in Niger and fell in Mali

Organized Political Violence in the Sahel (2020-2021)
Nigeria: Multiple security threats persist around the country

Elham Kazemi and Clionadh Raleigh

Nigeria continues to confront multiple security threats across its territory, with insecurity deepening in northern and southern parts of the country. While a long-running Islamist insurgency and ongoing militia activity, often labeled as ‘banditry,’ continue to impact the northern regions, the Biafra separatist rebellion has been a cause of unrest in the south. During 2021, ACLED records a 22% increase in the number of organized political violence events in Nigeria. The violence resulted in over 9,900 reported fatalities, nearly a 30% increase compared to 2020.

The threat posed by Islamist militants in the northeast shifted in 2021 and persisted, despite ongoing military operations to counter the insurgency, with the Islamic State West Africa (ISWAP) Lake Chad faction gaining more power and influence (New York Times, 15 October 2021). In 2015, when Muhammadu Buhari was elected as the new Nigerian president, he pledged to put an end to the Boko Haram insurgency (New York Times, 14 April 2015). His government has failed to do so, however (BBC News, 12 June 2021), with Islamist militants linked to more than 18% of all organized political violence in the country last year. While ACLED records an overall decrease in the number of events involving Islamist militants in 2021 relative to 2020, there was still a significant spike in militant activity, and violence has persisted and continued to evolve.

In 2021, clashes escalated between Boko Haram (JAS) and its splinter faction, ISWAP Lake Chad, in a rivalry over supremacy and control of territory in northeast Nigeria and around Lake Chad. In May, Abubakar Shekau, the JAS faction leader, was killed during fighting with ISWAP militants in Sambisa Forest, reportedly by detonating his suicide vest (BBC News, 7 June 2021). Following his death, dozens of JAS faction fighters pledged allegiance to ISWAP (Reuters, 28 June 2021), while thousands surrendered to military forces in the subsequent months (New York Times, 23 September 2021). According to the government, over 15,000 Boko Haram militants had surrendered to the military by November 2021 (The Guardian, 12 November 2021). At the same time, ISWAP has been consolidating its grip in locations around Lake Chad, despite pockets of resistance from residual JAS faction fighters. In October, the Nigerian military also announced the death of the ISWAP leader, Abu Musab Al Barnawi. His death, however, was not confirmed by ISWAP (BBC News, 14 October 2021).

While the Boko Haram insurgency has been traditionally concentrated in the northeast, particularly in Borno state, reports point to ISWAP and JAS militants overrunning several communities in Niger state in 2021 (VOA, 3 October 2021). The militants have been reported to establish camps in the state, thus expanding their operations to areas closer to the Federal Capital Territory. In November, the Niger local government confirmed the presence of Islamist militants in Shioro and Rafi local government areas (LGAs), as well as Borgu LGA near the border with Benin (Premium Times, 24 November 2021). This underscores a trend of militant expansion to territories in which they had largely not been present previously.

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Elsewhere, in Nigeria’s north-central and northwest regions, communal militia activity constituted nearly one-third of all organized political violence events recorded by ACLED across the country in 2021. Political violence involving militias, often labeled as

‘bandits,’ started in Zamfara state in 2011 and then over time spilled into neighboring states (Daily Trust, 10 September 2021). In 2021, organized political violence perpetrated by these militias increased by 50% compared to 2020, with 30% of militia activity occurring in Kaduna state. Operating from ungoverned forests in Nigeria, these groups mostly engage in cattle rustling, kidnapping for ransom, and pillaging of villages (Al Jazeera, 6 January 2022). According to ACLED data, these militias killed more than 2,600 civilians in 2021, an increase of over 250% compared with 2020. This figure also far exceeds the number of civilian fatalities resulting from the Boko Haram and ISWAP insurgencies in 2021.

Additionally, abductions and forced disappearances carried out by these groups more than tripled last year compared to 2020, as militias increasingly exploit kidnapping for ransom as an important source of income (Vox, 2 August 2021). Most prominently, militias carried out multiple mass abductions of school students: over 300 girl students were abducted in Zamfara state in February, while more than 100 students were kidnapped in Kaduna state in July (DW, 6 July 2021). In the security vacuum left by the absence of effective governance, militias have effectively taken over territories, imposing taxes and curfews and limiting people’s movement (Vanguard, 2 September 2021; 25 November 2021).

Furthermore, organized political violence involving Fulani militias continued in 2021, particularly in Nigeria’s Middle Belt. Although there was a slight drop in the number of events involving Fulani militias in 2021, they were more lethal compared with the preceding year. Nearly 800 civilian fatalities, many among farmer communities, were reported as a result of Fulani militia attacks in 2021. For instance, in December, Fulani militias launched a multi-day attack against Tiv farmers in Nasarawa state, reportedly in reprisal for the death of their kinsman in Obi LGA. The attack resulted in at least 20 fatalities and the displacement of thousands (The Punch, 20 December 2021). A lack of government measures to protect communities against these attacks has led to the formation of local vigilante groups (New York Times, 10 December 2018). ACLED data show that over 45 people were killed last year in clashes between Fulani militias and local self-defense militias.

Insecurity also intensified in the southeast, where political violence involving the separatist Indigenous Peoples of Biafra (IPOB) and its security outfit, known as the Eastern Security Network (ESN), grew significantly in 2021. ESN was founded in December 2020 as the IPOB paramilitary wing, allegedly to protect the Igbo people against Fulani militias and state-sponsored violence (Twitter @MaziNnamdiKanu, 14 December 2020). Clashes between government security forces and IPOB/ESN fighters first escalated in January 2021 following a government directive to “dismantle the formations of the ESN” in the area (Independent Nigeria, 28 January 2021). In June, IPOB leader, Nnamdi Kanu, was arrested in Kenya and extradited to Nigeria to stand trial. Since then, IPOB has imposed regional sit-at-home orders to denounce Kanu’s arrest (Al Jazeera, 9 November 2021), which have often been accompanied with violence. Although IPOB suspended the weekly Monday sit-at-home orders in August (Vanguard, 15 August 2021), sit-at-home orders have since been intermittently reapplied, with elements in the movement continuing to regularly enforce them (Vanguard, 11 November 2021). Attacks and abductions targeting traditional rulers also surged last year, particularly in the south. In December, unidentified gunmen kidnapped several traditional rulers and killed at least three, with IPOB condemning the killings and the government’s alleged indifference toward preventing and punishing these acts (Vanguard, 12 December 2021).

WHAT TO WATCH FOR IN 2022:

With the in-fighting between Boko Haram and ISWAP, as well as defections on the part of Boko Haram fighters, ISWAP is emerging as a unified force in northern Nigeria while expanding its territories further toward the center. With this major shift in Nigeria’s 12-year-old Islamist insurgency, ISWAP is likely to consolidate its control over the Lake Chad Basin and beyond in 2022.

Meanwhile, the situation in northwest and north-central Nigeria poses an even greater threat to the country’s security, with the militias outnumbering the Islamist militants. Moreover, these militias continue to develop their fighting capacity, having even shot down military jets, and have been able to relocate and operate in other states in order to evade military operations (BBC News, 19 July 2021).

Civilians are likely to continue bearing the brunt of these conflicts in 2022. In some instances, security forces have also indiscriminately targeted civilians in their fight against armed groups in the north in 2021.
For example, two airstrikes targeting Islamist militants led to dozens of civilian fatalities in September (Washington Post, 16 September 2021; Reuters, 29 September 2021). Increasing military operations in 2022 could result in similar events.

In Nigeria’s Middle Belt, there is limited prospect of diminishing inter-communal conflict in the absence of effective measures adopted by the government to address the underlying issues causing the hostilities, such as changes in land use resulting from drought and displacement (Al Jazeera, 28 November 2021). Violence involving Fulani militias is one of the gravest security challenges confronting Nigeria, resulting in hundreds of fatalities and the displacement of thousands in 2021. Although this violence decreased by over 46% in 2021 compared with the peaks of 2018, it risks escalating and further undermining Nigeria’s security in 2022.

With elections to be held in February 2023, election-related political activities have already started and will likely create additional security challenges. The last national elections in 2019 were marred by political violence, some of which was perpetrated by soldiers and police officers, while several instances of violence were also reported during the 2021 local government elections, particularly in Anambra and Ekiti states.

FURTHER READING:

Mapping Nigeria’s Kidnapping Crisis: Players, Targets, and Trends

ACLED Methodology for Coding Boko Haram and ISWAP Factions
Nigeria continues to confront multiple security threats across its territory. The threat posed by Islamist militias persisted in 2021, despite ongoing military operations. Elsewhere, in the north of the country, communal militia activity constituted nearly one-third of organized political violence across Nigeria in 2021. Further, organized political violence involving Fulani militias continued in 2021, particularly in Nigeria’s Middle Belt. Insecurity also intensified in the southeast where political violence events linked to the separatist Indigenous Peoples of Biafra (IPOB) and its security outfit, known as the Eastern Security Network (ESN), grew significantly in 2021.

Militia and Islamist violence in the north & center, separatists in the south

Nearly 90% of “Other” events on the map involve unidentified armed groups (UAGS)

Militias became more deadly than Islamists in 2021

Organized political violence involving militia groups increased by 50% in 2021 compared to 2020, with over 30% of militia activity occurring in Kaduna state. Over 2,600 civilians were killed by militia groups in 2021, higher than the number killed by the Boko Haram and ISWAP insurgents during the year.
Afghanistan: High risk of violence targeting civilians under Taliban rule

Asena Karacalti and Ashik KC

In August 2021, the Taliban regained control of Afghanistan following nearly two decades of conflict with the United States and the NATO-backed Afghan government. This regime change significantly shifts conflict dynamics in Afghanistan, driving down political violence in the second half of 2021. While overall levels of political violence fell with the Taliban takeover, violence towards civilians has persisted. Ethnic and religious minority groups, women, and members of the former government and security apparatus have faced especially high targeting. Meanwhile, armed clashes have also continued — albeit at lower levels — with the emergence of armed resistance against the Taliban and the ongoing Islamic State (IS) insurgency.

Over the course of 2021, conflict trends changed dramatically as negotiations gave way to lightning advances by the Taliban. Early in the year, amid ongoing US-initiated peace negotiations between the Taliban and the former Afghan government, the Taliban continued to launch regular attacks on Afghan state forces. ACLED records an increase in armed clashes from February 2021 onwards, as the peace negotiations entered another stalemate and the change in US administration raised questions over its future Afghanistan policy (International Crisis Group, 13 January 2021). In April, the US announced a complete withdrawal from Afghanistan by September 2021 (The Guardian, 14 April 2021), with remaining NATO forces subsequently announcing their withdrawal as well (NATO, 14 April 2021). Emboldened by diminishing NATO support to Afghan forces, the Taliban significantly increased ground offensives against Afghan forces and decreased attacks using IEDs and suicide bombers.

Between May and June 2021, the Taliban gained ground from Afghan forces at a considerable pace. During this time, ACLED records a higher number of Taliban territorial gains than during the entirety of 2019 and 2020. By July, the Taliban controlled numerous strategic checkpoints, military bases, and district centers within every province. The Taliban’s territorial advances continued throughout the first half of August, as they captured strategic provincial capitals including Kandahar, Sar-e Pol, and Helmand.

On 15 August, Taliban forces entered Kabul, seizing the state’s administrative and security headquarters, and overthrowing the government (CNBC, 18 August 2021). In the immediate aftermath, a mass exodus of Afghan and foreign nationals contributed to chaos around Kabul’s Hamid Karzai International Airport. Exploiting the chaos, IS carried out a suicide attack at the airport, killing over 180 civilians. This attack was followed by US airstrikes targeting IS, adding to the turmoil. The insecurity and confusion created by the abrupt power shift led many civilians, former government officials, and media and civil society workers to hide or flee the country (The New Yorker, 17 August 2021; USIP, 28 September 2021).

In the following weeks, demonstration events rose significantly as civilians – including those who lived through the previous Taliban government – expressed concern over Taliban rule (Afghanistan Analysts Network, 17 August 2021). Anti-Taliban demonstrations were held in multiple provinces on and around Afghanistan’s Independence Day on 19 August. These protests were dispersed by the Taliban, at times violently, with at least three protesters killed during an Independence Day demonstration in Jalalabad. Since the Taliban takeover, women-led demonstrations have featured prominently.
records over 30 protest events held by women against restrictive policies imposed by the Taliban since mid-August. Protest levels peaked in September before declining from October onward after the Taliban banned unauthorized protests (Washington Post, 12 September 2021).

While the number of battle events significantly decreased in the aftermath of the August takeover, armed resistance against the Taliban continued until the end of the year, as two main armed groups clashed with Taliban forces: the National Resistance Front (NRF) and IS. The NRF, an anti-Taliban resistance group formed in Panjshir valley in August (BBC News, 3 September 2021), has clashed with the Taliban in over 100 battles in northeastern Afghanistan. IS, meanwhile, has targeted Taliban members, mostly in Nangarhar and Kabul provinces, with over 80 attacks. Although the Taliban has long underplayed the IS presence in the country, it recently began large-scale operations in response to the group’s ongoing activities (Washington Post, 22 November 2021).

At the same time, civilians have been continuously targeted by unidentified armed groups, the Taliban, and IS since the fall of Kabul. These attacks have targeted a range of different groups, including ethnic and religious minority communities, women, and people linked to the previous government. Overall, between August and the end of 2021, ACLED records more than 290 targeted attacks on civilians accounting for over 37% of all disorder events in Afghanistan and resulting in over 420 reported fatalities. In comparison, between 2017 (the start of ACLED coverage) and 15 August 2021, targeted attacks on civilians made up over eight percent of all disorder events in the country, underlining the significant shift in the conflict environment since the fall of Kabul.

Taliban forces and unidentified groups have particularly targeted former government officials and security personnel in recent months, with attacks on these groups constituting 30% of all civilian targeting events between August and December 2021. Taliban forces have also conducted extrajudicial killings of civilians accused of being linked to IS during their operations against the group. These killings have been especially common in Nangarhar province, where dozens of people have been hanged or beheaded over alleged connections to IS (Al Jazeera, 14 December 2021; Pajhwok Afghan News, 7 October 2021). Meanwhile, IS has targeted Shiite Muslim and Hazara groups, killing over 100 people across at least five attacks during this period. Perpetrators of over 30% of violent events targeting civilians were unknown.

In addition to attacks on former security forces and ethno-religious groups, ACLED records over a dozen cases where women have been targeted for violence by either the Taliban or unknown perpetrators (GIWPS, 28 January 2022).

**WHAT TO WATCH FOR IN 2022:**

This trend in an increased rate of civilian targeting continued into January 2022, in which attacks on civilians made up 36% of all disorder events, indicating that civilians will continue to remain at heightened risk of violence under the new Taliban regime.

Additionally, although the Taliban claim to have military dominance and support from the local population (New York Times, 3 November 2021), Afghanistan’s multi-layered religious, political, and tribal structures may foster the consolidation of other armed movements. For example, in October 2021, prominent political and military figures formed an anti-Taliban coalition (distinct from the NRF), the Supreme Council of National Resistance of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, warning of military action should political negotiations fail (Hasht-e Subh, 22 October 2021). IS is also suspected to be recruiting Salafist Afghans and has continued to launch attacks, threatening to destabilize the Taliban’s position as the dominant security provider (The Diplomat, 12 October 2021). Also, internal fighting among different Taliban factions has resulted in nearly two dozen battle events since they seized control of Afghanistan. Despite an initial decline, battles now make up 41% of all organized political violence events recorded since the fall of Kabul. The rebounding number of battle events suggests that internal rifts among Taliban factions and ongoing opposition to Taliban rule from both resistance forces and IS has the potential to keep escalating. Continuing clashes are also likely to increase the risk of targeted violence against civilians, such as retaliatory killings of alleged supporters or sympathizers of rival groups.

Distrust of the Taliban regime has also led international actors to freeze Afghanistan’s assets, exacerbating ongoing economic turmoil and pushing many people into poverty (Foreign Policy, 5 October 2021). New domestic policies, like the redistribution of land
in favor of Taliban leaders, have displaced local communities, further increasing their vulnerability to the economic crisis (Gandhara, 9 December 2021).

Afghanistan entered an unprecedented phase in 2021. The country’s future largely depends on the Taliban’s willingness to reform as well as its capacity to reconcile and/or contain internal factions and ongoing armed resistance groups like the NRF and IS. Considering that the Taliban is still transforming into a governmental structure, it is unlikely that the group will significantly reevaluate its most hardline policies in the short term. Civilians will likely continue to face the brunt of continued political and economic instability in 2022.

**FURTHER READING:**

[Violence Targeting Women in Politics: Trends in Targets, Types, and Perpetrators of Political Violence](#)

[Violence Targeting Women in Politics: 10 Countries to Watch in 2022](#)

[ACLED Methodology and Coding Decisions around Political Violence and Demonstrations in Afghanistan](#)
AFGHANISTAN

High risk of violence targeting civilians under Taliban rule

In August 2021, the Taliban regained control of Afghanistan following nearly two decades of conflict with the United States and the NATO-backed Afghan government. This regime change significantly shifted conflict dynamics and political violence trends in the second half of 2021. Despite an overall decline in fighting, violence towards civilians has persisted, with ethnic and religious minority communities, women, and former government officials and security personnel facing high levels of targeted violence. Meanwhile, internal rifts, the emergence of armed resistance, and continued Islamic State activity have threatened to undermine the Taliban.

Violence targeting civilians increased after Taliban takeover

Violence targeting civilians accounts for over 37% of all disorder events in Afghanistan between the Taliban takeover in August and the end of 2021. This trend continued into the first month of 2022, with attacks targeting civilians making up 36% of all disorder events in January, indicating that civilians will continue to remain at heightened risk of violence under the new Taliban regime.

Political violence was widespread; demonstrations centered largely in Kabul

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Lebanon: At risk of heightened social unrest amid an economic and political crisis

Ameneh Mehvar

In 2021, Lebanon continued to grapple with a crippling financial and economic crisis, which the World Bank described as one of the world’s three worst crises since the mid-19th century (World Bank, 1 June 2021). With over three-quarters of the population driven into poverty (UN, 3 September 2021), deteriorating economic conditions and political instability triggered thousands of demonstrations nationwide throughout 2021.

Although the majority of demonstrations remained peaceful, hundreds of violent riots and clashes with security forces were also recorded during the year. In January, a week-long riot broke out in the northern city of Tripoli over a COVID-19 lockdown, as a large majority of the workforce reliant on day-to-day income was left without pay (Reuters, 3 February 2021). One demonstrator was killed in heavy clashes with security forces. In March, as the Lebanese pound hit all-time lows, the number of demonstration events increased to the highest point since the start of anti-government protests in late 2019 (for more on the onset of demonstrations in 2019, see the ACLED report: Breaking the Barriers). Demonstrations continued at high levels throughout the summer as the currency continued to lose value, the central bank scaled back subsidies, and widespread power blackouts hit the country.

While the overall number of demonstration events increased only slightly in 2021 compared to 2020, there was a significant increase in demonstrators barricading roads with objects, which has become a hallmark of the demonstrations (Independent, 10 March 2021). At the same time, there was a 50% drop in the number of events where security forces interacted with demonstrators. Notably, following the president’s call on the army to open blocked roads in March, the army chief voiced support for the “just demands” of the demonstrators and suggested that soldiers were also “hungry” (Arab News, 6 March 2021).

There was also a sharp increase in mob violence and armed clash events in Lebanon last year, mainly driven by disputes over fuel shortages. ACLED records more than 100 of these events, including knife fights and gun clashes over fuel, resulting in at least three reported fatalities. On several occasions, rioters stopped and confiscated fuel tankers, blaming smugglers for contributing to the fuel shortage.

As food prices registered an annual increase of more than 350% (FAO, 7 January 2022), over a dozen riots were recorded in which shoppers engaged in scuffles over basic necessities, like food supplies. On 14 April, one volunteer distributing food was killed in Tripoli when a fight broke out over a group attempting to take extra.

2021 was also marked by the deadliest eruption of violence on the streets of Beirut in years. On 14 October, supporters of the Shiite Hezbollah and Amal movements held a demonstration against the lead judge investigating the 2020 Beirut port blast. Gunmen believed to be supporters of the Christian Lebanese Forces opened fire on the gathering from rooftops, killing seven Shiites. Dozens were injured in the ensuing armed clash that evoked memories of the country’s civil war. The aftermath of the accidental explosion of a large amount of ammonium nitrate at the Beirut Port in 2020 — which killed over 200 people and exacerbated the already dire economic situation (New York Times, 4 August 2021) — has further aggravated deep divisions within the country. Dozens of demonstrations have been held calling for ac-
countability for those responsible as well as justice for the victims. Hezbollah and Amal have, however, opposed the investigation, which has seen two senior Amal members charged with intentional killing and negligence (*New York Times, 4 February 2021*).

Disagreements over the investigating judge have further paralyzed Prime Minister Najib Mikati’s fragile government, which did not convene for over three months between October 2021 and January 2022 (* Reuters, 24 January 2022*). Mikati’s government was formed in September after a 13-month political vacuum, following ex-Prime Minister Saad Hariri’s failure to form a government (*France24, 10 September 2021*). While Lebanon’s political elite have shown a lack of urgency to cooperate despite the historic proportions of the crisis — delaying negotiations with the international community over much-needed financial aid (*Independent, 15 April 2021*) — citizens have continued to take to the streets.

Several incidents of Lebanese-Israeli cross-border hostilities were also recorded between May and August. During the May fighting in the Gaza Strip, three rockets were fired from Lebanon into northern Israel. In a significant development, Israel conducted an airstrike on 5 August, marking the first time Israeli fighter jets struck targets inside Lebanon since 2014 (*Times of Israel, 12 August 2021*). This occurred a day after missiles were fired into Israel from Lebanon, likely by Palestinian factions (*Haaretz, 9 August 2021*). Hezbollah retaliated with a rocket barrage, the first such incident since the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah War (*Atlantic Council, 12 August 2021*). However, after Hezbollah indicated that the rockets were directed at open fields (*Arab Center Washington DC, 11 August 2021*), Israel showed restraint, with retaliatory artillery barrages inflicting no damage.

**WHAT TO WATCH FOR IN 2022:**

The aftermath of the August brinkmanship indicated that neither Israel nor Hezbollah has an appetite for an all-out war. Rather, both sides are expected to continue a policy of deterrence (*Al Jazeera, 15 August 2021*). However, the question remains as to whether further rocket attacks by anonymous Palestinian factions from southern Lebanon into Israel could provoke an unwanted escalation.

The biggest threat to Lebanon’s stability in 2022, though, will continue to stem from internal sources. The rapidly escalating economic and financial crisis, along with rising poverty, are threatening a humanitarian crisis and severe civil unrest. Brought about by years of corruption, nepotism, and mismanagement, the worsening economic situation may provoke a spike in violence and insecurity. High levels of protests and riots are likely to continue throughout the year. Strains on the country’s security forces, underpaid and stretched ever thinner by internal unrest, could further compound instability in Lebanon.

With legislative elections scheduled for May 2022 (* Reuters, 15 May 2022*), the formation of a new government may once more take considerable time and ultimately deepen the crisis. The prospects of a new government introducing serious reforms to unlock billions of dollars in aid and loans remain slim, as elites will likely postpone any major changes to minimize damage to their personal and party interests (*ICG, 28 October 2021*). Urgent humanitarian aid — including a $246 million World Bank loan that recently enabled a cash assistance program (*Al Jazeera, 1 December 2021*) — may mitigate Lebanon’s socio-economic woes in the short term. However, without willingness from Lebanese elites to undertake thorough economic and political reforms, no amount of external assistance will be enough to overcome the country’s mounting challenges.

**FURTHER READING:**

*Breaking the Barrier: One year of Demonstrations in Lebanon*

*A New Season of Unrest in Lebanon*
Lebanon

At risk of heightened social unrest amid an economic and political crisis

In 2021, Lebanon continued to grapple with a crippling financial crisis. Deteriorating economic conditions and political instability triggered thousands of demonstrations nationwide. Violence increased significantly compared to the previous two years, with hundreds of violent riots and clashes with security forces reported around the country.

Disputes over fuel shortages have likewise resulted in a sharp increase in the number of mob violence and armed clash events. Without willingness from Lebanese elites to undertake serious economic and political reforms, the country faces the threat of escalating social unrest and a worsening humanitarian emergency in 2022.

Demonstrations involving barricaded roads increased by 81% in 2021

Mob violence and demonstrations involving barricades were widespread across the country

Mob Violence and Demonstrations involving Barricaded Roads

[Graph showing number of events from 2019 to 2021]
Sudan: Military factions enhance their power amid spreading violence

Africa Research Team

The dubious narrative that Sudan was ‘transitioning to democracy’ became increasingly difficult to sustain in 2021, as the country’s contending military factions competed and colluded to secure political power and economic assets in the capital, Khartoum. This culminated in a military coup on 25 October 2021 which saw the arrest of the beleaguered civilian Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok (for more, see ACLED’s report: Appetite for Destruction: The Military Counter-Revolution in Sudan), which ushered in weeks of unrest in urban areas across the country. Meanwhile, serious conflicts played out on the fringes of Sudanese territory, with provincial violence often reflecting the dynamics of confrontation and intimidation present in the capital (for context on the dynamics in the wake of the December 2018 uprising, please see ACLED’s report: Danse Macabre: Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Post-Oil Sudan).

On 21 November 2021, following weeks of demonstrations against the coup, and intensifying repression from military, paramilitary, and police forces (Human Rights Watch, 23 November 2021), Prime Minister Hamdok was reinstated into office. This followed an opaque negotiation with the military, which was seemingly brokered by a pro-establishment politician, Fadlallah Burma Nasir (Berridge, 2022). Hamdok now presided over a cabinet of military-approved ‘technocrats’ and JPA signatories who had backed the coup. Correctly sensing that the deal merely legitimized the military power grab, demonstrators swiftly turned against it (Alneel, 2021), with protests being organized each week in major towns and cities since the new deal was signed. Dozens of demonstrators have been killed and hundreds wounded by security forces and paramilitaries since the coup (Radio Dabanga, 9 January 2022; Radio Dabanga, 19 January 2022). Security forces have also been accused of engaging in sexual violence (Radio Dabanga, 23 December 2021a) and assaulting journalists (Radio Dabanga, 23 December 2021b). There is a high potential for Sudan’s vast and complex security apparatus to engage in escalating violence against demonstrators in the coming months, particularly if demonstrators continue to hurt the military bloc’s economic interests by shutting down critical transport corridors.

On 2 January 2022, Hamdok resigned from his position, reportedly due to the military bloc’s decision to extend the powers of the General Intelligence Service (the successor to the notorious National Intelligence and Security Service) and to block re-appointments of ambassadors who had been critical of the coup (Berridge, 2022). Since Hamdok’s resignation, the military has continued to unilaterally appoint officials to governing organs, while reviving links with select elements of the National Congress Party (the ruling party under ex-President Omar Bashir). Meanwhile, Resistance Committees and the Sudan Professionals Association9 have rejected a United Nations initiative to mediate between the civilian and military blocs, and continue to call for the military to be removed from politics altogether (Alneel, 2022; Africa Confidential, 12 January 2021). It remains to be seen whether these progressive political forces are able to successfully push for an alternate model for the Sudanese political economy. This is especially as the political economy has hitherto been dominated by an alliance of military officers and business elites

9. Resistance Committees are activist networks who have, alongside the Sudan Professionals Association (a trade union) played a leading role in opposing Bashir and contesting the subsequent attempts at consolidating military rule following the April 2019 coup.
who have violently extracted wealth from rural peripheries. Such a model would need to overcome long-standing rifts between urban and rural spheres, which have been exploited to perpetuate various forms of military rule, while somehow demilitarizing political and economic activity in both spheres (el Gizouli, 2021).

As these developments unfolded in the capital, violence continued to steadily climb in Sudan’s geographical peripheries as militias (often organized along ethnic or sub-ethnic lines) competed for political, economic, and social power. Much of this violence took place in the western region of Darfur, where predation and attacks loom over farming areas, towns (especially those hosting IDPs), and along roads connecting IDP settlements to these areas. West Darfur state in particular was the site of dramatic rounds of hybrid clashes and massacres. These often involve Arab-identifying (typically Rizeigat) militias — suspected of being backed by the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) paramilitaries — launching attacks on other ethnic groups near the border with Chad. In South and West Kordofan states (close to the border with South Sudan) the second half of 2021 was punctuated by frequent clashes among local militias. North Kordofan state — which typically experiences significantly less violence than southern areas of the Kordofan region — over 30 were killed in fighting between the Katouil and Dar Hamid ethnic groups in West Bara locality on 17 November.

While the military bloc has retained good connections to most of Sudan’s neighbors, the deteriorating relationship between Sudan and Ethiopia has remained a cause for international and regional concern, with the conflict in Al Fashaga in eastern Gedaref state continuing to simmer. This is a disputed area, with control switching between Sudan and Ethiopia for over a century (for more, see ACLED’s report: Red Lines: Upheaval and Containment in the Horn of Africa). Although western areas of Al Fashaga remained in the hands of Sudanese farmers, eastern areas had been annexed by Ethiopian settlers and militias in the mid-1990s. Following skirmishes in late May 2020, the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and paramilitary ‘Reservists’ moved into the area in November 2020 as the war in the neighboring Tigray region of Ethiopia began. Within weeks, Sudanese forces were engaging in regular clashes with Ethiopian National Defence Forces, Amhara Liyu Police, and Amhara local militia, occasionally backed by Eritrean forces. Fighting – as well as attacks and abductions by Amhara militias targeting Sudanese shepherds – have been concentrated in the southern locality of Basundah since late May, while the border between Galabat and Metema towns was officially closed for the second half of the year. The successes of SAF in reclaiming much of the territory provided a political boost to Lieutenant General Abdel Fattah Al Burhan, the commander-in-chief of SAF and head of Sudan’s Sovereign Council.

After a quiet summer, Ethiopian forces launched fresh offensives in late September and late November, with the latter attack killing at least 21 Sudanese military personnel and prompting two days of shelling between SAF and Ethiopian forces. The unpopularity of the 25 October coup may well lead to Burhan intensifying Sudan’s involvement in the border conflict, which he had used to accrue political capital earlier in 2021. Yet recent overtures from Addis Ababa (Addis Standard, 6 January 2022), alongside initial steps towards a partial reopening of the border (Sudan Tribune, 6 January 2022; Sudan Tribune, 26 January 2022; Al Sudani, 11 January 2022), suggest that some form of agreement or accommodation could be reached on Al Fashaga.

WHAT TO WATCH FOR IN 2022:

While the military bloc has been effective at both retaining and expanding its power in 2021, it is not a unified entity, and there is a high potential for a violent fall-out between its constituent parts (de Waal, 2019; Gallopin, 2020). The greatest risk remains fighting between SAF and the RSF, with different parts of the security apparatus (including ex-rebel groups) either aligning with one of these entities, or exploiting the upheaval to pursue their own interests. The most likely alternative is for a continuation of violence in the provinces, with subnational rivalries playing out under the shadow of political tension in the capital, as has been the case over the past year.

In 2022, the increasing centrality of paramilitary forces — drawn mainly from Western Sudan — to Sudanese politics, and not the stability of the power-sharing arrangement between civilian and military forces, will have the strongest bearing on Sudan’s trajectory. As Thomas and el Gizouli (2021) explain, the rise of militias and paramilitaries is both a symptom and a solution of sorts for deeply entrenched violence and exploitation in rural Sudan. The spread of irregular and semi-regular forces epitomizes the extent to which the Sudanese state has disintegrated...
amid recurrent coups, mounting debt, and perpetu-
al warfare in rural peripheries. Yet these same forces
have also supplanted that decaying system, creating
a new rural security architecture of some complexity
to oversee the production and violent extraction of
wealth from Sudan’s peripheries.

Although parts of this system have been under se-
rious strain in recent years, the RSF have been suc-
cessful in monopolizing control of rural areas, while
the leader of the RSF – Lieutenant General Mohamed
Hamdan Dagalo (a.k.a. Hemedti) – amplified his
power in Khartoum both before and after the re-
moval of Bashir. This has granted the RSF an ability
to influence patterns and levels of violence in many
rural areas, with many of the most violent episodes
in Darfur in 2021 (as well as some in South Kordofan)
linked to RSF activity. This dynamic can be expected
to continue in 2022.

Tensions between the RSF and SAF increased no-
ticeably in June 2021 (The Economist, July 15 2021),
and could easily do so once again as factional rival-
ries rise (Africa Confidential, 7 January 2022). The
RSF has expanded its presence across much of Su-
dan (notably in Khartoum; see The National, 3 Feb-
ruary 2022), and Sudan’s intersecting political and
economic crises provide continued opportunities
for the leadership of both groups to augment their
power at the expense of rivals. The current accom-
modation between the leadership of the RSF and
SAF is not guaranteed to endure indefinitely under
such conditions. The consequences of a breakdown
in the relationship between these two forces would –
in the worst case scenario – be for a violent scramble
for power to take place across urban and rural areas,
with potentially dire implications for Sudanese civil-
ians.

FURTHER READING:

Appetite for Destruction: The Military Counter-Revo-
lation in Sudan

Red Lines: Upheaval and Containment in the Horn of
Africa

Danse Macabre: Revolution and Counter-Revolution
in Post-Oil Sudan

Riders on the Storm: Rebels, Soldiers, and Paramili-
taries in Sudan’s Margin
Military factions enhance their power amid spreading violence

Violence steadily climbed in peripheral areas of Sudan in 2021 as military and militia elites competed for political, economic, and social power. Much of this violence took place in the western region of Darfur, as well as South and West Kordofan states. As the political crisis deepens in Khartoum, there is a risk that instability will intensify in these areas, as rivalries across Sudan’s vast and complicated security infrastructure flourish in the aftermath of the 25 October coup.

Violence continued to spread in peripheral areas

On 25 October, the army took power in a coup, igniting mass demonstrations in urban areas across the country, along with violent repression by security forces. Following a 21 November deal with Prime Minister Hamdok, regular protests were organized each week. Demonstrators call for an end to military involvement in politics, and have continued their demonstrations following Hamdok’s resignation on 2 January 2022.
Haiti: High risk of intensifying gang violence amid political instability

Sandra Pellegrini

In 2021, the security situation in Haiti deteriorated as a result of increased gang activity amid the worsening political crisis. ACLED data show the highest levels of armed clashes and violence against civilians since the beginning of coverage in 2018. Insecurity and political instability, exacerbated by the killing of former President Jovenel Moise on 7 July, continued to fuel unrest throughout the year.

The first half of 2021 was marked by strong anti-government mobilization, prompted by disagreements over the constitutional end of then-President Moise’s term. Members of the opposition claimed that Moise’s term was due to end in February 2021, five years after former President Michel Martelly stepped down. Moise, however, remained in power, asserting that his term would not expire until February 2022, five years after his inauguration (BBC, 15 February 2021). Moreover, his scheduling of a referendum to transition Haiti from a semi-presidential to a full presidential system sparked widespread unrest. The constitutional reform also included provisions to allow presidents to serve two consecutive five-year terms amid concerns that President Moise was tightening his grip on power. Against this backdrop, nearly 60% of demonstration events last year took place during the first half of 2021 (for more, see the mid-year update to last year’s special report on 10 conflicts to worry about in 2021). A large portion of demonstrations were held to oppose the government and its reforms, with frequent demands for the president’s resignation.

In the same period, a significant number of demonstration events were also prompted by insecurity driven by increased gang warfare and continuing attacks on civilians. Gang operations are often linked with political movements and, at times, are allegedly conducted in collusion with the ruling elite (France 24, 27 October 2021; Global Voice, 25 August 2020). In April 2021, ACLED records the highest levels of violence against civilians in Haiti since coverage began in 2018. In particular, abduction events that month increased by approximately 250% compared to the previous month – two months before the constitutional referendum in June. The rise of kidnapping for ransom may have stemmed from gangs aiming to gather financial resources for their own ends or to support their political allies ahead of key elections (CARDH, 11 May 2021), such as the referendum. In spite of this, the number of kidnappings dropped during May and June, as the Village de Dieu and Grand Ravine gangs reportedly observed a truce period. Some allege the government paid the gangs to pause kidnappings to show that sufficient stability had been reached for the referendum to be held on 27 June (Le Nouvelliste, 10 May 2021).

The apparent truce did not, however, affect levels of armed clashes, with clash events peaking in June. The majority of recorded clashes took place between G-9 members and police forces. The increase occurred amid a series of fatal incursions targeting police stations, as G-9 members sought to seize law enforcement assets to support their operations (Reuters, 7 June 2021; RNDDH, 11 June 2021).

Conflicts between the G-9 gang coalition and other gangs that refused to join the alliance also reignited, leading to intensified clashes, especially in the disputed neighborhoods of Bel Air, Martissant, and Fontamara in Port-au-Prince (RNDDH, 7 April 2021). According to civil society members, some of these turf wars are politically motivated. Incursions of the G-9 gang alliance siding with the government in the Bel Air neighborhood – known as an opposition hotbed
Instability in Haiti culminated on 7 July with the killing of President Moise. In the immediate aftermath of the assassination, violence declined, with armed clashes involving gangs decreasing in July and August. The political power struggle that ensued (Reuters, 10 July 2021) likely pushed gangs to a period of observation as they tried to evaluate their prospects and that of their political allies.

While gang-related armed clashes fell following the assassination, ACLED records an increase in armed clashes between October and December. During this time, gang conflict intensified over control of key economic assets, such as the Martissant fuel terminal and roads connecting the southwestern regions with the capital and rest of the country (UNOCHA, 22 June 2021). The conflict led to fuel shortages, as the G-9 gang coalition blocked access to the fuel terminal and extorted fuel transporters (Associated Press, 25 October 2021). This significantly affected all sectors of Haiti’s economy, including healthcare (UNICEF, 25 October 2021), and ultimately led to a spike in demonstrations in October amid a nation-wide general strike against insecurity and fuel shortages.

Rather than an unintended consequence of gang warfare, the blocking of the country’s key assets appears to have been part of a conscious effort by gangs to challenge the government’s authority. In October, Jimmy Chérizier, the leader of the G-9 coalition, declared an ultimatum, demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Ariel Henry in exchange for the end of the gang embargo on fuel resources (Haiti Libre, 27 October 2021). He later announced the lifting of the fuel embargo amid claims that it was orchestrated in collusion with members of the Tèt Kale party to destabilize Henry’s transitional government (Haiti Info Pro, 29 October 2021; Rezo Nodwes, 25 October 2021). The event demonstrated gang capacity to undermine the functioning of the country and to pressure the transitional administration.

Meanwhile, gangs also continued to target civilians during territorial disputes in order to assert their authority. Since the assassination of the president, levels of violence against civilians have steadily increased, peaking in November. Gangs also increased their demands for ransom to strengthen their resources, often targeting business owners, workers, or foreigners (RFI, 18 October 2021). Notably, compared to the first half of 2021, violence against civilians nearly doubled between July and December in Croix-des-Bouquets, a commune adjacent to Port-au-Prince controlled by the 400 Mawozo gang. Similarly, abductions also increased in the nearby district of Petionville, a wealthy and previously relatively safe enclave in Port-au-Prince, where politicians and business elites reside. The increase in violence in these areas is likely a consequence of the expansion of 400 Mawozo, indicating that some former tacit agreements between the ruling class and gangs may no longer apply in the post-Moise era.

WHAT TO WATCH FOR IN 2022:

With the postponement of the constitutional reform and designation of general elections by the end of 2022 (Reuters, 28 September 2021), an end to Haiti’s political crisis seems a distant prospect. Ongoing instability will likely provide fertile ground for unrest and gang violence to continue in 2022. The transitional government has struggled to secure an agreement with the opposition on a path toward restoring political stability and addressing the intensification of gang activities (Alterpresse, 18 November 2021; Reuters, 17 October 2021). Meanwhile, some civil society actors and political parties have rejected the holding of general elections until security improves (Alterpresse, 2 August 2021; Alterpresse, 13 October 2021) and have even called for the formation of a new transitional government (Reuters, 4 February 2021).

The Haitian government’s inability to curb insecurity will continue to play into the interest of gangs. As gangs gain further power, they are likely to increasingly influence Haitian politics by providing support to political actors favoring their interests, or positioning themselves as a substitute to the state apparatus altogether. This has already been demonstrated with 400 Mawozo-imposed curfews in Croix-des-Bouquets, while G-9 leader Chérizier has presented himself as an official figure in national commemorations (The Guardian, 18 October 2021). More worryingly, 2022 opened with an assassination attempt on Henry organized by the Les Revolutionaires gang during Independence Day celebrations in Gonaives, Artibonite department on New Year’s Day.
This is the second time in three months that Henry has been forced to withdraw from official celebrations under gang fire (The Guardian, 18 October 2021). Such attacks highlight the emboldening of gangs beyond Port-au-Prince and the government’s lack of authority before criminal and political opponents.

With key institutional reforms and elections yet to be organized for 2022, armed clashes between gangs will likely continue as they vie for power. New conflicts may also emerge, especially as the 400 Mawozo gang continues its territorial expansion in Port-au-Prince (Rezo Nodwes, 5 September 2021). Civilians will remain at risk as gangs seek to maintain or expand their financial resources during the political transition period. Meanwhile, sustained demonstrations are likely should high levels of violence against civilians persist unabated.

FURTHER READING:

Gang Violence: Concepts, Benchmarks, and Coding Rules
HAITI

High risk of intensifying gang violence amid political instability

In 2021, the security situation in Haiti deteriorated as a result of increased gang activity amid the worsening political crisis. ACLED data show the highest levels of armed clashes and violence against civilians since the beginning of coverage in 2018. The majority of recorded clashes took place between gangs and police, as they sought to seize law enforcement assets to support their operations and as part of the government's efforts to address rising insecurity. Gangs also continued to target civilians during territorial disputes, resulting in an increase in kidnappings towards the end of 2021. The insecurity faced by civilians has, in turn, sparked a surge of demonstrations. As the government struggles to curb instability, violence and unrest is likely to continue throughout 2022.

Gangs were involved in half of all political violence in 2021, with activity centered in Port-au-Prince.

Demonstrations and violence against civilians decreased in the immediate aftermath of the president’s assassination, but spiked again thereafter.

ACLED ANALYSIS | ACLEDDATA.COM | 35
Colombia: Continued risk of rising violence targeting civilians

Bhavani Castro

On 24 November 2021, Colombia commemorated the fifth anniversary of the 2016 Peace Agreement between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), which officially ended a decades-long conflict. During a visit to Colombia, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres highlighted advances since the agreement’s signature, such as progress in the reintegration of former FARC combatants into society (UN News, 23 November 2021). However, the government’s failure to fully implement the deal’s mechanisms continues to put civilians at increased risk of being affected by violence (Norwegian Refugee Council, 23 November 2021). These mechanisms include the protection of ex-combatants, as well as a comprehensive rural reform plan coupled with development projects. During 2021, ACLED records a 70% increase in organized political violence in Colombia compared to the year prior, with over 1,090 events recorded, over half of which were attacks on civilians. This is the highest rate of violence recorded in the country since the start of ACLED coverage in 2018.

Of the 13,000 demobilized combatants as a result of the Peace Agreement, 95% have complied with the process, and the remaining FARC dissident groups are predominantly composed of post-agreement recruits (INDEPAZ, 13 September 2021). However, Secretary-General Guterres warned of obstacles to the agreement’s long-term sustainability amid ongoing violence in the country (UN News, 24 November 2021), with an estimated 30 dissident FARC factions still active (INDEPAZ, 13 September 2021). The increasing activity of other groups in several departments, such as the National Liberation Army (ELN) and the Gulf Clan, adds further complexity to the conflict landscape in Colombia. These trends contribute to the dramatic increase in violence in the country in 2021. In addition to this increase, violence also became deadlier in 2021. ACLED records more than 1,000 fatalities stemming from organized political violence events last year, compared to fewer than 800 in 2020 – with civilians continuing to overwhelmingly bear the burden of this violence. More than 800 of the over 1,000 fatalities reported last year were civilians killed in targeted attacks, the majority of whom continued to be social leaders or members of vulnerable groups, mirroring trends seen the year prior. Armed groups often clash in rural areas near farmer villages or Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities, exposing already vulnerable groups to even more violence. Social leaders active in promoting local development projects are often targeted by armed groups due to their role in curbing criminal and violent activity, many of whom were women (GIWPS, 28 January 2022). While 2020 was a particularly deadly year for social leaders (for more, see ACLED’s joint report with the London School of Economics Latin America and Caribbean Centre, the University of the Andes, and UCL Americas: Understanding the Killing of Social Leaders in Colombia During COVID-19), the similar number of killings in 2021 indicates little to no improvement in protection measures for these groups. These targeted attacks were centered largely in the departments of Cauca Norte de Santander, Valle del Cauca, and Antioquia.

Cauca remains one of the departments most affected by violence in Colombia, home to over 160 fatalities in 2021 stemming from organized political violence, with two-thirds of those fatalities being civilians. This makes Cauca the most dangerous place in Colombia for civilians (for more, see ACLED’s infographic: Attacks on Civilians in Colombia). While Cauca has been a hotspot of armed conflict for decades, the area now serves as a coca production hub.
and access point to the Pacific coast, from where drugs are distributed to the United States, further exacerbating violence in the department. ACLED records over 50 armed clashes in Cauca in 2021, more than double the number of clashes recorded in 2020. Civilians and members of vulnerable groups are often caught in the crossfire, as the department has a strong presence of Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities (Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca). These groups are also often targeted, as they denounce the presence of armed groups on their lands due to their proximity to drug trafficking routes.

Along with Cauca, Norte de Santander was also home to particularly high levels of political violence in 2021. The department shares a border with Venezuela and is one of the central coca-producing regions, home to several drug trafficking routes (Colombia Reports, 14 October 2021). In 2021, the number of civilians killed in Norte de Santander almost doubled compared to 2020, with more than 100 fatalities. The department also saw a record number of organized political violence events in 2021, over 160 – second highest in all of Colombia, second only to Cauca. This increase in violence has been driven by the presence of several armed actors in the department, including the Gulf Clan, the 33rd FARC Dissident Front, the ELN, and drug trafficking gangs that operate on the border with Venezuela.

These groups have actively targeted government figures and state forces in Norte de Santander. On 25 June, suspected members of a FARC Dissident Front fired at a helicopter transporting President Iván Duque as it landed in Cúcuta municipality. Armed engagements between state forces and non-state armed groups have increased markedly in the department. In 2021, ACLED records 81 battle and remote violence events involving state forces, compared to 21 in 2020, which includes a number of bomb attacks.

Meanwhile, Colombia was also home to mass anti-government demonstrations last year, driving a significant increase in overall demonstration levels in 2021. In late April, nationwide demonstrations began in response to proposed tax reforms before expanding to encompass wider discontent with government policies on health, education, and other social issues. Many demonstrations were led by young people, students, and Indigenous groups, who call for greater protection of social leaders and the full implementation of the 2016 Peace Agreement. Mass demonstrations lasted until July, although every month after that, smaller groups continued to gather in the main cities of the country with the same demands. At the peak of the unrest in May, more than 900 demonstration events were reported across the country, 80% of which were peaceful with no reports of violence nor destructive activity by protesters. Nevertheless, the government’s response to the demonstrators was deadly. Security personnel — most notably, the Mobile Anti-Disturbance Squadron Police Force (ESMAD) riot squad — employed lethal force to suppress anti-government riots and peaceful protests, resulting in Colombia being one of the deadliest places in the world for demonstrators (for more, see ACLED’s infographic: Deadly Demonstrations). Over 100 demonstrators reportedly suffered eye injuries after being hit by police projectiles during the rallies (Amnesty International, 26 November 2021). Multiple bystanders were also killed by state forces amid the turmoil (Human Rights Watch, 9 June 2021). Although the Duque government only recognized 24 deaths directly connected to the demonstrations, ACLED records more than 80 fatalities during the unrest.

WHAT TO WATCH FOR IN 2022:

Presidential elections are scheduled to take place in Colombia on 29 May 2022, with a runoff scheduled for 19 June if no candidate obtains more than 50% of the vote. While the current right-wing government of President Duque has a historically high disapproval rating (Bloomberg, 1 October 2021), it is unclear who might emerge from a range of candidates to challenge the incumbent president (AS/COA, 13 October 2021). Any new leader will have to grapple with chronic issues that remain unaddressed in the country, such as implementing comprehensive rural reform. The need to guarantee the presence of state institutions in rural areas where armed groups are most active will be particularly important amid increasing violence.

The government’s ongoing inability to fully implement the changes outlined in the 2016 Peace Agreement may also foment further civil unrest in 2022. Without reforms to the ESMAD riot squad, repression of opposition movements and protests led by civil society organizations will likely continue apace.

In addition to these challenges, violence in departments bordering Venezuela, such as Norte de
Santander, will likely also continue unabated. 2022 began with an outburst of violence on 2 January, with deadly clashes between the ELN and dissident forces of the FARC on the border between Apure state in Venezuela and Arauca department in Colombia. Tensions between the Venezuelan and Colombian governments, and their unwillingness to have open talks to address the border clashes, will only aggravate the threat of violence in both countries.

FURTHER READING:

Understanding The Killing Of Social Leaders In Colombia During COVID-19

CDT Spotlight: Attacks On Civilians In Colombia

Violence Targeting Women in Politics: 10 Countries to Watch in 2022
Continued risk of rising violence targeting civilians

November 2021 marked the fifth anniversary of the signing of the 2016 Peace Agreement between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). However, the failure to fully implement the peace agreement has severely impacted civilians. In 2021, ACLED records over 800 fatalities resulting from violence targeting civilians – a nearly 30% increase from 2020. Colombian demonstrators also faced a high level of violence, with state intervention in protests and the use of excessive force increasing throughout the year. Without significant reforms, including the full implementation of the 2016 Peace Agreement, ongoing fighting and violence targeting civilians may only escalate in 2022.

Organized political violence continues to plague Cauca and Norte de Santander

Mass anti-government mobilization drove massive increases in demonstration events and interventions involving state forces

Demonstrations with State Intervention in Colombia (2018 - 2021)
Myanmar: Continued resistance against the military coup

Elliott Bynum

As the National League for Democracy (NLD) was preparing to start a second term on 1 February 2021, the military seized power in Myanmar. Demonstrations erupted across the country in opposition to the coup. The military responded violently, leading to the deaths of hundreds of demonstrators. As the crackdown intensified, many communities began to take up arms to defend themselves, leading to the formation of local defense forces. Elected lawmakers ousted in the coup eventually established the National Unity Government (NUG), which subsequently declared a “defensive war” on the military in early September (Guardian, 7 September 2021).

Demonstrations in opposition to the military coup in 2021 were large-scale and widespread. ACLED records over 6,000 anti-coup demonstration events throughout the year. While the demonstrations remained largely peaceful, the military frequently responded with deadly violence, in many cases firing live rounds at demonstrators’ heads (Human Rights Watch, 2 December 2021). Women have played a key role in the movement (Al Jazeera, 25 April 2021), often standing on the front lines at demonstrations (Time, 31 May 2021); in turn, they have been met with targeted violence (GIWPS, 28 January 2022). According to ACLED data, Myanmar was the deadliest country in the world for demonstrators in 2021 (for more, see ACLED’s infographic: Deadly Demonstrations). Despite the crackdown, demonstrations have continued, often taking the form of flash-mob style events.

The degree of violence against civilians by state forces since the coup has been particularly severe, with a 620% increase in such events recorded in 2021 compared to 2020. Multiple cases of civilians being burned to death have been reported (Myanmar Now, 14 December 2021). On 24 December, for example, more than 30 people, including two aid workers, were burned to death by the military in Hpruso township in Kayah state. Earlier in December, in Done Taw village in Sagaing region, 11 villagers were burned to death by the military. As well, amid mass arrests of people accused of expressing opposition to the coup, the military has tortured detainees and committed acts of sexual violence against women and men (Myanmar Now, 3 January 2021).

Hundreds of local defense forces have emerged across the country in response to the ongoing military violence. Several groups were formed independently of the People’s Defense Force (PDF) under the NUG. However, the NUG has moved to consolidate the activity of local defense groups under a central command structure (Irrawaddy, 29 October 2021). Local defense groups have aimed to make the country ungovernable by the military junta. In some locations, where local defense groups have gained an advantage, such as in areas of Sagaing and Magway regions, ousted lawmakers and other activists have set up alternative governing systems (Myanmar Now, 12 November 2021). As well, many civil servants have continued the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), refusing to work for the military junta and thus further denying the military the capacity to govern at the local level.

In an effort to further threaten civilians opposed to its rule, the military junta has supported the formation of local militias called Pyu Saw Htee (Frontier Myanmar, 14 June 2021). These militias have targeted civilians and have engaged in clashes with local...
defense forces. In 2021, ACLED records the most activity by Pyu Saw Htee groups in Sagaing region. Aside from the formation of military-backed militias, amid defections and a paucity of new recruits, the military has also ordered family members of soldiers to attend military training (Irrawaddy, 7 December 2021).

The response of ethnic armed groups to the military coup has been mixed. Notably, though, groups like the Kachin Independence Organization/Kachin Independence Army (KIO/KIA) and Karen National Union/Karen National Liberation Army (KNU/KNLA) have supported anti-coup activists who fled to their areas along the border. Battles in Kachin and Kayin states, which had been relatively limited in 2020, thus increased significantly in 2021. At times, troops from these groups have fought alongside local defense forces. For example, clashes between the military and the KIO/KIA have expanded into Sagaing region as the KIO/KIA has supported local defense groups. Sagaing region has been home to over one-fifth of all organized political violence recorded nationally since the coup.

WHAT TO WATCH FOR IN 2022:

While the military staged its coup under the pretense of combating electoral fraud, and has since claimed it will hold new elections in 2023 (The Diplomat, 2 August 2021), it has subsequently set about systematically dismantling the NLD. NLD members have been detained on politically motivated charges. NLD offices have been destroyed, and members’ homes seized and sealed (Development Media Group, 2 December 2021). Further, the military and its militias have tortured and killed NLD members (BBC, 8 June 2021). The military looks poised to continue this campaign of violence against its main electoral opposition before holding any elections.

The military’s ongoing use of violence means that local defense forces are likely to continue to emerge in the coming year, while existing groups move towards forming alliances to strengthen their operating capacity. Alliances with ethnic armed groups are also likely to persist, despite the challenges of bringing such groups under the formal command of the NUG. The ability of local defense groups to gain and maintain control over territory – or at least prevent the military from being able to govern – will be critical to the success of the anti-coup movement. Coordination between armed and unarmed elements of the resistance movement will also be key in consolidating its gains (Myanmar Now, 21 January 2022). In 2022, resistance to the junta will continue, with the military unlikely to succeed in quelling a population so deeply opposed to its rule.

FURTHER READING:

Deadly Demonstrations: Fatalities From State Engagement on the Rise
Myanmar’s Spring Revolution
Violence Targeting Women in Politics: 10 Countries to Watch in 2022
MYANMAR

Continued Resistance Against the Military Coup

As the National League for Democracy (NLD) was preparing to start a second term on 1 February 2021, the military seized power in Myanmar. Demonstrations erupted across the country in opposition to the coup. The military responded violently, leading to the deaths of hundreds of demonstrators. As the crackdown intensified, many communities began to take up arms to defend themselves, leading to the formation of many local defense forces. Elected lawmakers ousted in the coup eventually established the National Unity Government (NUG), which subsequently declared a “defensive war” on the military in early September.

Violence Against Civilians By State Forces Increased in 2021

Violence against civilians by state forces increased significantly in 2021. The military junta has tortured and killed hundreds of civilians. Whereas in past years state violence against civilians has been concentrated largely in Myanmar’s borderlands, in 2021, it was concentrated in the Myanmar heartland. ACLED records the highest level of violence against civilians in Sagaing, Mandalay, Yangon, and Magway regions, respectively. Violence against civilians in ethnic minority areas along the border continued as well. The maps show events of state violence against civilians who were unarmed and not engaged in demonstrations at the time of the violence.

Organized Political Violence Concentrated in Sagaing Region

Sagaing region was home to over one-fifth of organized political violence recorded nationally since the coup last year. Anti-coup local defense forces clashed with the military across many townships in the region. Military-backed militias emerged in the region as well, engaging with local defense forces and targeting civilians alike. Additionally, clashes between the military and the KIO/KIA expanded into Sagaing region as the KIO/KIA supported local defense groups in the region. These trends have continued into 2022.