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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine escalated the war to a level that dwarfed all other conflicts in 2022, both in the sheer scale of violence and its deadliness. It also obscured a significant overall deterioration of the security situation in most other regions worldwide. Driven by heightened levels of conflict in both new and longstanding hotspots, political violence increased substantially over the course of the year.

While 2022 saw some positive developments – including a significant reduction in total violent events in places like Afghanistan and Yemen after years of war – these gains only represent qualified improvements. Despite the aggregate decline in events in Afghanistan and Yemen, for example, they remain home to two of the most complex and severe conflict environments in the world. Globally, political violence targeting civilians became not only more common but also more deadly in 2022, underscoring the fact that it is civilian communities that are increasingly shouldering the burden of rising conflict levels around the world.

Political violence increased substantially in 2022, as demonstration activity fell. Worsening political violence levels were evident in most regions around the world, but clearest in Europe and Central Asia, where Russia's invasion of Ukraine drove a fourfold year-on-year increase. Demonstrations, meanwhile, declined in every region after multiple years of increases. Overall, political violence events rose by 27% compared to 2021, while demonstration events fell by 12%.

The civilian burden of political violence continued to worsen. Violence targeting civilians increased by 12% globally in 2022 compared to 2021. It was also more lethal: estimated fatalities from direct targeting of civilians grew by at least 16% last year.

Of identified actors recorded by ACLED, rebel forces surpassed domestic state forces as the deadliest perpetrators of violence targeting civilians, though state forces were responsible for more events. While unidentified actors still accounted for the largest share of violence targeting civilians and reported fatalities globally, at 43% of all events and 39% of all fatalities, rebel groups and domestic state forces accounted for 10% and 15% of events, respectively, with each contributing to approximately 15% of fatalities.

Conflict in 2022 was increasingly fought in the air, as on-the-ground confrontations fell, contributing to an overall reduction in the lethality of recorded political violence events. An aggregate decline in the number of armed clashes, one of the deadliest forms of political violence, precipitated a decrease in the overall lethality of reported events in 2022.

State forces used deadly violence against demonstrators in an increasing number of countries. In Iran and Kazakhstan, hundreds of demonstrators were reportedly killed by state forces, with dozens more fatalities reported in places like Chad, Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

GLOSSARY

Civilian targeting

Violence targeting civilians – or civilian targeting – is a category that encompasses all political violence events that target civilians. This includes a broader scope than the *violence against civilians* event type (which includes the *sexual violence*, *attack*, and *abduction/forced disappearance* sub-event types). It is inclusive of the aforementioned sub-event types, the *excessive force against protesters* sub-event type, as well as *explosions/remote violence* events and the *mob violence* sub-event type of the *riots* event type.

Deadliness

Deadliness represents the number of reported fatalities, which can be aggregated over a period of time or series of events.

Demonstrations

Demonstrations is an umbrella term for all *protest* events and *riot* events, excluding *mob violence* events.

Disorder

Political disorder is used to refer to all political violence and demonstrations captured by ACLED. This effectively includes all events in the ACLED dataset, with the exception of *strategic developments*.

Fatalities

ACLED distinguishes between fatalities and casualties. The use of the term fatalities always refers to reported deaths arising from each event recorded in the dataset. Casualties may refer to injuries or fatalities and, as such, any reference to casualties in ACLED analysis is qualitative and not based on the dataset itself.

Lethality

Lethality refers to the rate of deadliness: reported fatalities divided by events.

Political violence

Political violence is defined as the use of force by a group with a political purpose or motivation. In analysis, this is a category used to refer collectively to ACLED's *violence against civilians*, *battles*, *explosions/remote violence*, and *excessive force against protesters* event types, as well as the *mob violence* sub-event type of the *riots* event type.

THE STATE OF GLOBAL DISORDER IN 2022

Political disorder is widespread. It manifests in diverse ways around the world, involving a range of actors that span from demonstrators and vigilante mobs to non-state armed groups and government forces. As ACLED's efforts to track disorder have deepened and expanded, so too have the dataset's insights into the complexity of political violence patterns. The forms that conflict takes not only vary across countries, they are also ever-adaptive in the face of changing circumstances, whether they be the emergence of new actors, political aims, or technology. With this fluid and multifaceted threat comes the need to monitor conflict not only at an aggregate level, through measures of deadliness and violent incidents, but also to account for the shifting modalities of conflict.

In 2022, global political disorder grew and evolved in new directions. Once one of the least violent regions in the world, Europe has been thrust to the center of global conflict by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In Ukraine and around the world, last year saw an increase in violence involving external actors operating outside their countries of origin, as well as a greater reliance of armed groups on remote violence, particularly aerial warfare and artillery. This changing violence landscape presents new risks to civilian populations, particularly those living in the most severe conflict zones. As always, these developments were not uniform globally or even within regions, revealing the consistent complexity of disorder.

This report analyzes ACLED's 2022 dataset to explore the state of both political violence and demonstrations at the global, regional, and national levels to better understand the myriad ways in which disorder manifests across countries and contexts, and also to better understand how it may evolve in the coming years. It identifies the leading actors and actor types involved in political violence during the year, what types of violence they have employed, and where they have been most active. It draws specific attention to the surge in attacks targeting civilians, highlighting the ongoing and worsening threats that political violence poses to civilian communities around the world.

POLITICAL VIOLENCE TRENDS

A CHANGING CONFLICT LANDSCAPE

Political violence in 2022 increased by 27% – or nearly 27,000 events – compared to 2021, diverging from several years of declining violence levels. In total, ACLED records close to 100,000 political violence events in 2021 and over 125,000 in 2022.[1]

Figure 1. Political Violence in 2022

ACLED data as of 20 January 2023.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine precipitated a major increase in political violence that far exceeded all other countries in 2022. In addition to Ukraine, the countries with the most political violence events in 2022 were Syria, Myanmar, Brazil, and Mexico (*see Table 1*). That this list includes both countries suffering from large-scale conflicts – as is the case in Ukraine, Myanmar, and Syria – and countries beset by gang warfare – as in Mexico and Brazil – is demonstrative of the diversity of contexts affected by high levels of political violence. All of these countries, with the exception of Mexico, experienced an increase in political violence events in 2022.

Ukraine, Syria, and Myanmar also attest to the ongoing transformation of contemporary warfare. In these countries, armed groups increased their reliance on remote violence –

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[1] ACLED data as of 20 January 2023.

particularly shelling and, to a lesser extent, aerial warfare. Shelling, artillery, and missile strike events more than tripled in 2022 to become the dominant mode of conflict globally. Notable increases in shelling activity were also reported in Yemen, Iraq, Russia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Meanwhile, air and drone strike activity increased by 14% compared to 2021, with significant increases recorded in Ukraine, Iraq, Myanmar, and the Sahelian countries of Mali and Burkina Faso. The expansion in remote violence coincided with a global contraction in armed clash events, which decreased by 4%.

Taken together, these shifts in conflict modalities in 2022 have not only allowed armed actors to reach further afield without an on-the-ground presence, but also had significant effects on the lethality of conflict and the risks that conflict posed on civilian populations. These effects will be explored further in the sections below.

Table 1. Countries With the Highest Number of Political Violence Events in 2022

Country	Number of events	Change in the number of political violence events since 2021	Main event type	Main engagement type
Ukraine	34,446	*Increase* of **27,156** events, or **373%**	Explosions/ Remote violence	One-sided violence involving Russian forces
Syria	10,478	*Increase* of **1,050** events, or **11%**	Explosions/ Remote violence	One-sided violence involving state forces
Myanmar	9,317	*Increase* of **2,251** events, or **32%**	Battles	State forces vs. ethnic and anti-coup armed groups
Brazil	7,993	*Increase* of **858** events, or **12%**	Violence against civilians	Gangs and unidentified armed groups targeting civilians
Mexico	7,158	*Decrease* of **279** events, or **4%**	Violence against civilians	Gangs and unidentified armed groups targeting civilians

ACLED data as of 20 January 2023.

THE GLOBAL GEOGRAPHY OF CONFLICT

The war in Ukraine positioned the Europe and Central Asia region as the epicenter of global conflict in 2022, driving a fourfold year-on-year increase in political violence regionally – nearly 27,500 events – compared to 2021 (*see Figure 2*). While this growth led Europe and Central Asia to dwarf all other regions in 2022, it also overshadowed an aggregate rise in conflict in most other regions around the world. Both the Middle East – with an increase of approximately 2,000 events, or 8% – and Africa – with nearly 1,000 events, or 5% – experienced notable spikes in political violence, with smaller increases also recorded in Latin America and the Caribbean (more than 500 events, or 3%), and the United States and Canada (22 events, or 13%).

Figure 2. Political Violence Events by Region (2021-2022)
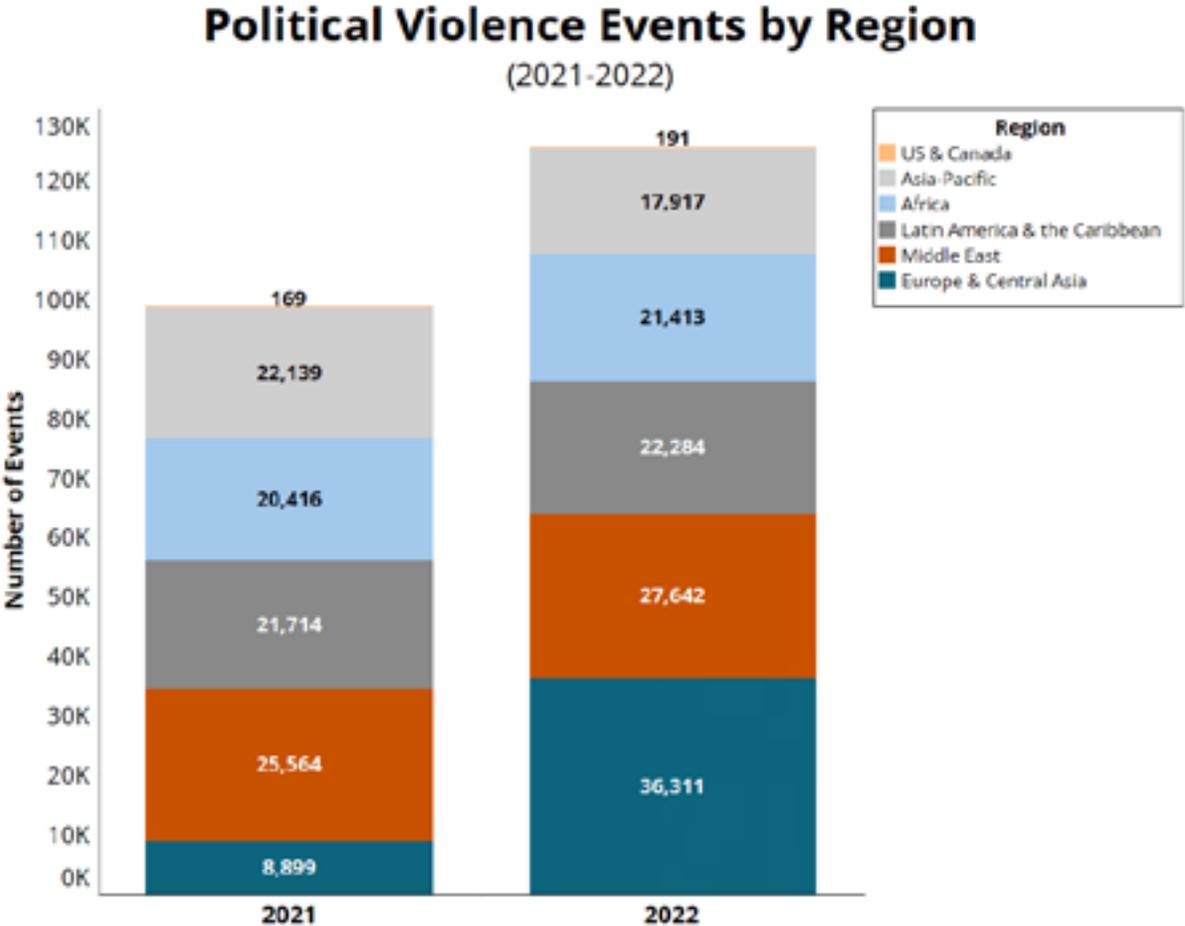
ACLED data as of 20 January 2023.

The overwhelming majority of the increase in Europe and Central Asia resulted from the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Yet, worrying increases in political violence took place in other post-Soviet countries as well. While the war in Ukraine also directly drove heightened

levels of political violence in Russia, disorder elsewhere points to increasing fragility in the region. In Kazakhstan, the outbreak of mass anti-government demonstrations in January was met with harsh repression, with the state continuing to exact punitive acts of violence against suspected demonstrators in the subsequent weeks. The uneasy resolution of the 2021 conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan has looked increasingly strained, including a notable outbreak of deadly violence coinciding with the one-year anniversary of the war in September 2022. Meanwhile, cross-border violence between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan resulted in more than 100 reported fatalities in one month alone.

In the Middle East, the growth in events was driven by heightened levels of violence in Iraq, Syria, and Palestine (*see Table 2*). Turkish operations against Kurdish armed groups, namely the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the Syrian Democratic Forces (QSD), in northern Iraq and Syria fueled large increases in political violence for the second consecutive year. Turkey launched *Operation Claw-Lock* in April 2022, yielding levels of political violence in Iraq that exceeded previously high levels associated with operations *Claw-Lightning* and *Claw-Thunderbolt* in 2021. In November, Turkey launched *Operation Claw-Sword*, extending these heightened levels of activity well beyond the traditional fighting season associated with the warmer months. *Operation Claw-Sword* came in response to a bomb attack in Istanbul on 13 November, which the Turkish government blamed on the PKK.

Table 2. Countries With Major Increases in Political Violence Events in 2022

Country	Change in the number of political violence events since 2021	Contributing factors
Ukraine	*Increase* of **27,156** events, or **373%**	Escalation of conflict following the Russian invasion in February 2022.
Myanmar	*Increase* of **2,251** events, or **32%**	Upsurge in armed resistance toward the military junta following the declaration of a 'defensive war' by the National Unity Government in September 2021.
Iraq	*Increase* of **1,307** events, or **30%**	Intensified Turkish operations against the PKK in northern Iraq.
Syria	*Increase* of **1,050** events, or **11%**	Heightened Turkish and government shelling against Kurdish and opposition forces, respectively.
Palestine	*Increase* of **868** events, or **28%**	Increased Israeli military activity in the West Bank ahead of Israeli elections in November 2022.

ACLED data as of 20 January 2023.

The regional increase in political violence in the Middle East came despite a drop in Yemen that coincided with a six-month truce between the Houthis and the coalition-backed government. The countrywide halt to offensive military operations brokered by the United Nations led to a 90% reduction in reported fatalities associated with confrontations between the warring parties compared to the six months before the truce. Concurrently, airstrikes from Saudi-led coalition fighter jets – which had caused thousands of deaths since 2015 – completely stopped. Following the non-renewal of the truce, conflict remained at low levels between October and December, with sporadic outbursts of violence involving the warring parties mostly concentrated in Marib and Taizz.

In Africa, large increases in political violence were recorded in Somalia and the Sahelian states of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, where state forces are engaged in ongoing conflict with Islamist insurgencies. Notable increases were also recorded in Kenya ahead of the national elections in August and in Nigeria as it builds toward national elections in February 2023 (*for more, see ACLED's Nigeria Election Violence Tracker, in partnership with the Centre for Democracy & Development*).

In Latin America, Brazil saw increases in political violence ahead of and during the election month of October. Similarly, worrying spikes in gang-related violence were recorded in several Caribbean countries, headlined by the ongoing deterioration of the security situation in Haiti.

The Asia-Pacific was the only region to experience an overall decline in political violence in 2022 compared to 2021, with a decrease of 19% – or more than 4,000 events. The decrease came despite escalating conflict in Myanmar (*see Table 2*) and was driven by the consolidation of the Taliban government in Afghanistan, which saw the largest decrease in total events globally, despite ongoing violence and repression under the new regime. The Taliban takeover of Kabul in August 2021 spelled an end to their long-running insurgency and precipitated a drop in conflict events that largely held throughout 2022. Nevertheless, violence continued as the Taliban grappled with a multitude of opposition forces, including the National Resistance Front alliance and the local franchise of the Islamic State. At the same time, Taliban authorities violently imposed their rule on women, the media, people with links to the former government and security forces, and the civilian population more broadly.

A DECREASE IN THE LETHALITY OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE EVENTS

Despite the total increase in political violence, there was an approximately 4% decline in the overall number of reported fatalities for events recorded in the ACLED dataset in 2022, reversing the trend from the year prior. Due to the methodological limitations of an event-based dataset like ACLED, however, in addition to the broader challenges around fatality reporting in fast-moving conflict contexts like Ukraine, these estimates pertain specifically

to those fatalities reported in connection with distinct events that meet ACLED's catchment and minimum threshold for inclusion (i.e. date, location, and actor information). This means that aggregate tallies provided by sources such as hospitals and government agencies, for example, which cannot be broken down and connected to individual conflict incidents, are not included here. ACLED fatality numbers are conservative event-based estimates, and the full death toll in such contexts is likely higher than the number of reported fatalities currently attributed to the type of distinct incidents that can be captured in the dataset.[2]

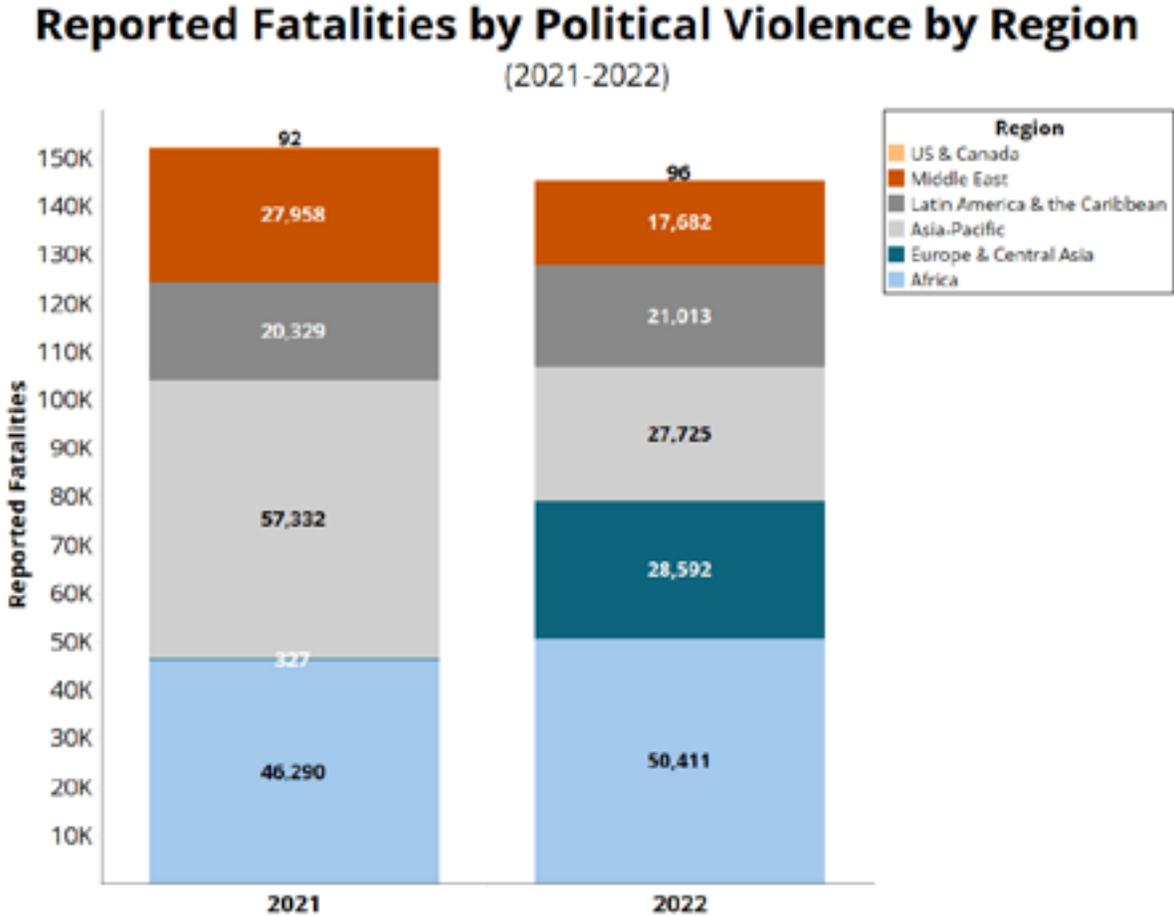*Figure 3. Reported Fatalities From Political Violence in 2022*

ACLED data as of 20 January 2023.

The shift in overall event lethality may be linked to changes in the modality of violence last year, particularly in major conflicts that decreased in intensity, such as in Afghanistan and Yemen. Armed clashes, a high-lethality event type and the dominant form of political violence in recent years, declined significantly in 2022. ACLED records more than 14,000

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[2] Tracking fatalities is one of the most difficult aspects of conflict data collection in general, as fatality counts are frequently the most biased, inconsistent, and poorly documented components of conflict reporting, and this is especially true of active conflict environments impacted by high levels of mis/disinformation and severe access constraints. ACLED defaults to conservative estimates based on the best available information at the time of coding in line with our specific event-based [methodology](#) and [review process](#). ACLED estimates are restricted to fatalities reported during individual events, meaning that these estimates may be particularly conservative in comparison with sources that do not use an event-based methodology. When and where possible, ACLED researchers seek out information to triangulate the numbers from any report, but we do not independently verify fatalities. ACLED is also a 'living dataset', so all fatality figures are revised and corrected – upward or downward – if new or better information becomes available (which, in some conflict contexts, can be months or years after an event has taken place). These figures should therefore be understood as indicative estimates rather than definitive fatality counts (*for more on ACLED's approach to coding fatalities, see [FAQs: ACLED Fatality Methodology](#)*). ACLED additionally only captures fatalities that are directly caused by political violence; indirect conflict-related fatalities caused by disease or starvation, for example, are not included in these estimates. Other sources may come to different figures due to differing methodologies and catchments.

fewer reported fatalities from armed clash events in 2022 than in 2021. In contrast, shelling, artillery, and missile attack events, the most prominent form of political violence in 2022, are associated with a lower lethality rate. These changes are a reflection of key developments in the Asia-Pacific and the Middle East, which both experienced decreases in reported event fatalities in 2022 (*see Figure 4*). Significant contractions in the number of armed clashes in Afghanistan and Yemen precipitated by the Taliban's victory and the six-month UN-backed truce, respectively, led to decreased lethality in what had been two of the deadliest conflict environments in 2021.

Figure 4. Reported Fatalities From Political Violence by Region (2021-2022)

Reported Fatalities by Political Violence by Region
(2021-2022)

ACLED data as of 20 January 2023.

In contrast, the Russian invasion of Ukraine – which accounted for the largest number of reported fatalities in 2022 – drove an increase in lethality for political violence in Europe and Central Asia (*see Figure 5*). In Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean, lethality remained at similar levels in 2022 as in 2021, with reported fatalities growing in step with worsening levels of political violence.

Aside from Ukraine (with 28,000 reported event fatalities in the ACLED dataset),[3] countries home to the most fatalities from political violence in 2022 include Myanmar (over 19,000 fatalities), Nigeria (over 10,500 fatalities), Mexico (approximately 7,750 fatalities), and Yemen (approximately 6,750 fatalities). Of these countries, only Yemen and Mexico experienced declines in 2022.

Figure 5. Lethality of Political Violence by Region (2021-2022)

Lethality of Political Violence by Region
(2021-2022)
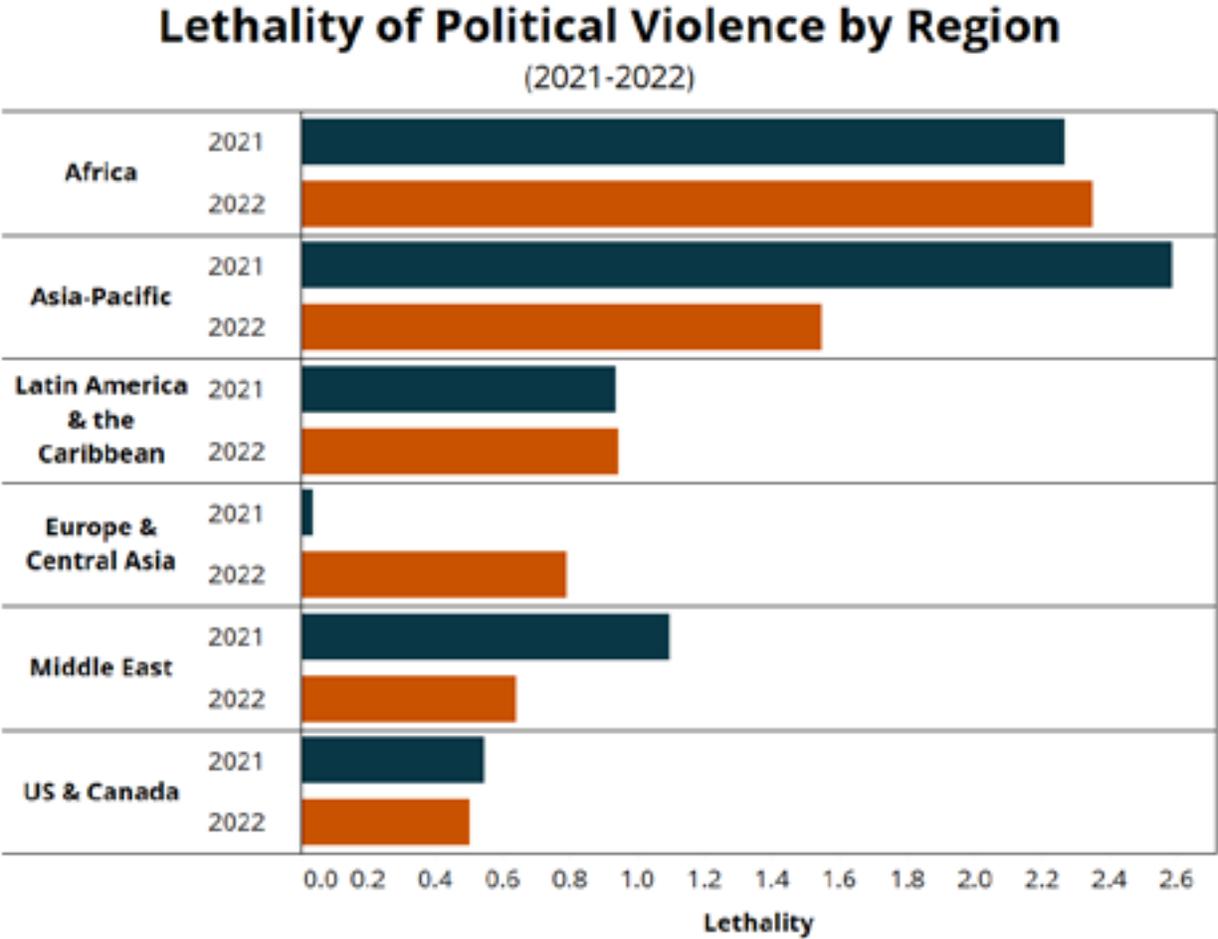
ACLED data as of 20 January 2023.

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[3] Amid the ongoing invasion of Ukraine, changes in the media landscape, inaccurate or delayed reporting on active fighting, access constraints, and the pullout of international monitors all present difficulties for tracking political violence events, and particularly event fatalities. As such, this fatality count is likely a significant underestimate of the actual death toll. These challenges should be taken into account when using any real-time data on such contests, including from ACLED. *For more, see the previous footnote and FAQs: ACLED Fatality Methodology.*

NEW AND EVOLVING THREATS TO CIVILIANS

The civilian burden of conflict continued to grow in 2022, with increases in political violence targeting civilians and associated fatalities.[4] ACLED records a 12% increase in civilian targeting last year, with approximately 37,800 events recorded in 2021 and nearly 42,500 events in 2022. Moreover, reported fatalities from acts of civilian targeting grew by 16%, from approximately 41,000 fatalities in 2021 to more than 47,700 fatalities in 2022, despite the overall drop in fatalities from political violence events at large.

In 2022, the countries with the greatest levels of political violence also had the highest levels of civilian targeting (*see Table 3*). That this list includes both conflict zones and countries grappling with gang violence is indicative of the multifaceted threats that civilians face, shaped by a diverse range of contexts, perpetrators, and modes of violence. Notably, the number of direct civilian targeting events reported in Mexico and Brazil was higher than in countries at war like Ukraine, Myanmar, and Syria.

Table 3. Countries With the Most Civilian Targeting Events in 2022

Country	Number of direct civilian targeting events	Change in the number of civilian targeting events since 2021	Number of reported civilian fatalities	Primary perpetrator of civilian targeting
Mexico	5,945	*Decrease* of **127** events, or **2%**	6,609	Anonymous or unidentified gangs
Brazil	4,535	*Increase* of **1,259** events, or **38%**	3,913	Anonymous or unidentified gangs
Ukraine	2,993	*Increase* of **2,913** events, or **3,641%**	4,849	External forces (*Military forces of Russia*)
Myanmar	2,703	*Increase* of **221** events, or **9%**	2,733	State forces (*Military forces of Myanmar*)
Syria	2,331	*Decrease* of **168** events, or **7%**	1,293	Rebel groups (including *QSD*)

ACLED data as of 20 January 2023.

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[4] Violence targeting civilians refers to violent events in which civilians are the direct target or main affected party. Cases where civilians are impacted by violent events involving two or more opposing armed groups, such as a battle, are not captured under this category. For this reason, combined with ACLED's conservative approach to the collection of fatality data, civilian targeting events and associated fatalities in the dataset represent a subset of all violence that civilians face, and do not capture the full scope of conflict's impact on civilian communities. Reported fatalities should be understood as indicative estimates, rather than definitive totals.

While Ukraine experienced by far the greatest increase in civilian targeting events in 2022, the next largest increases were recorded in Brazil, Kenya, Nigeria, and India. In each of these cases, civilians face multifaceted threats ranging from armed insurgencies and gang warfare to banditry and mob violence exacerbated by volatile electoral contests, rather than large-scale armed conflicts.

Globally, civilians continued to face several forms of violence, perpetrated by a multitude of armed actors (*see Table 4*). Many of the greatest threats to civilians in 2021 remained the same in 2022. The most prevalent and deadly threats to civilians were direct attacks by organized groups. This form of violence occurs throughout the world, but is most prevalent in areas with highly fragmented conflict environments. These include: Myanmar, wherein a plethora of armed groups are engaged in a rebellion against the military junta; countries with heightened levels of gang warfare, such as Mexico, Brazil, and Colombia; and countries in which multiple militant and rebel groups are simultaneously active, as is the case in Syria, Nigeria, and the DRC. Notably, in the latter grouping, these attacks coexist with heightened levels of abductions and forced disappearances, as armed groups regularly engage in this form of violence for financial gain and forced recruitment, among other motives.

Table 4. Civilian Targeting in 2022 by Sub-event Type

Event type	Sub-event type	Number of events targeting civilians	Number of reported civilian fatalities	Countries with highest civilian targeting	Primary perpetrator of civilian targeting
Violence against	Attack	27,312	38,179	Mexico (5,451 events, 6,567 reported fatalities)	Unidentified gangs (5,260 events, 6,254 reported fatalities)
	Abduction/ forced disappearance	4,263	N/A[5]	Syria (872 events, 0 reported fatalities)	*QSD* (471 events, 0 reported fatalities)
	Sexual violence	426	392	South Sudan (41 events, 235 reported fatalities)	*Military forces of South Sudan* (27 events, 192 reported fatalities)

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[5] This sub-event type is used when an actor engages in the abduction or forced disappearance of civilians, without reports of further violence. If fatalities or serious injuries are reported as a consequence of the forced disappearance, the event is coded as 'Attack' instead. Therefore, by ACLED methodological definition, no fatalities occur in such events, or else they would have been coded differently (*for more on ACLED coding decisions, see the* ACLED Codebook).

Explosions/ remote violence	Air/drone strike	451	1,893	Ukraine (177 events, 1,035 reported fatalities)	*Military forces of Russia* (174 events, 1,029 reported
	Shelling/ artillery/ missile attack	2,761	3,227	Ukraine (1,885 events, 2,431 reported fatalities)	*Military forces of Russia* (1,826 events, 2,334 reported fatalities)
	Remote explosive/ landmine/IED	1,883	1,871	Syria (310 events, 269 reported fatalities)	Unidentified armed groups (289 events, 244 reported fatalities)
	Suicide bomb	20	416	Somalia (13 events, 252 reported fatalities)	*Al-Shabaab* (13 events, 252 reported fatalities)
	Grenade	170	88	Pakistan (27 events, 10 reported fatalities)	*Baloch separatists* (15 events, 4 reported fatalities)
Riots	Mob violence	4,689	1,392	Palestine (741 events, 0 reported fatalities)	Mobs (741 events, 0 reported fatalities)
Protests	Excessive force against protesters	435	266	Sudan (173 events, 74 reported fatalities)	*Police forces of Sudan* (164 events, 66 reported fatalities)

ACLED data as of 20 January 2023.

Sexual violence, though less reported, also presents an ongoing threat to civilian populations living in fragmented conflict environments. For example, in South Sudan and the DRC, state forces, rebel groups, and militias employed sexual violence during raids on villages in 2022. The overall prevalence of sexual violence is, however, difficult to gauge, with chronic underreporting exacerbated by concerns related to potential retaliation and cultural norms. As such, mass attacks, as in the case of South Sudan, are more likely to be reported than events involving a single victim.

Less common and more geographically restricted than direct attacks, explosive and remote violence targeting civilians nonetheless became an increasingly present and deadly threat in 2022. Most notably, shelling and airstrikes were deployed with far greater regularity in 2022, and with far deadlier consequences. In Ukraine, in particular, the Russian military used shelling as well as air and drone strikes to devastating effect, killing thousands of civilians and crippling critical infrastructure. Similarly, Myanmar's military significantly increased its use of shelling and airstrikes against civilian targets throughout the year.

Where shelling and airstrikes largely posed a threat to civilians in areas with significant active fighting, other forms of remote violence – such as IEDs, landmines, and other explosive remnants of war – continued to present deadly risks to civilians following the cessation or reduction of hostilities. In Yemen, higher mobility during the six-month ceasefire in 2022 saw civilians increasingly coming into contact with explosive remnants of war in former conflict areas, including landmines, IEDs, and unexploded ordnances. Elsewhere, in areas of ongoing insurgent activity – such as Somalia, Afghanistan, and the Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces of Pakistan – armed groups engaged in mobile explosive attacks, such as suicide bombings and grenade raids. Suicide bombings had particularly lethal consequences: in Pakistan, an Islamic State suicide bomber reportedly killed more than 60 people at a Shiite mosque in Peshawar in March; in Afghanistan, dozens of civilians were reportedly killed during a series of bombings in September and October; and more than 100 people were reportedly killed in Somalia when al-Shabaab detonated explosives at the Ministry of Education building in Mogadishu in October.

Mob violence also formed a significant, though far less lethal, threat to civilians in 2022, accounting for 11% of all civilian targeting but only 3% of reported fatalities. Palestine, India, and Kenya – home to the largest number of mob violence events – all experienced significant growth in activity. Increased activity in Palestine and Kenya coincided with election periods: Israeli legislative elections in November and Kenyan general elections in August, respectively. In India, election-related spikes also coincided with local-level votes, particularly ahead of elections in Odisha state in March.

STATE FORCES AT HOME AND ABROAD LEAD IN CONFLICT INVOLVEMENT

Domestic state forces remained the dominant agents of political violence globally in 2022, increasing their engagement by 9% – or nearly 4,000 events (*see Figure 6*). Nevertheless,

the overall increase in political violence levels meant that they only engaged in 39% of total events in 2022, down from 46% in 2021. Their falling share of political violence is part of a long-term shift toward increased activity by other actor types like non-state armed groups.

Figure 6. Political Violence Involvement by Actor Type (2021-2022)

Political Violence Involvement by Actor Type
(2021-2022)
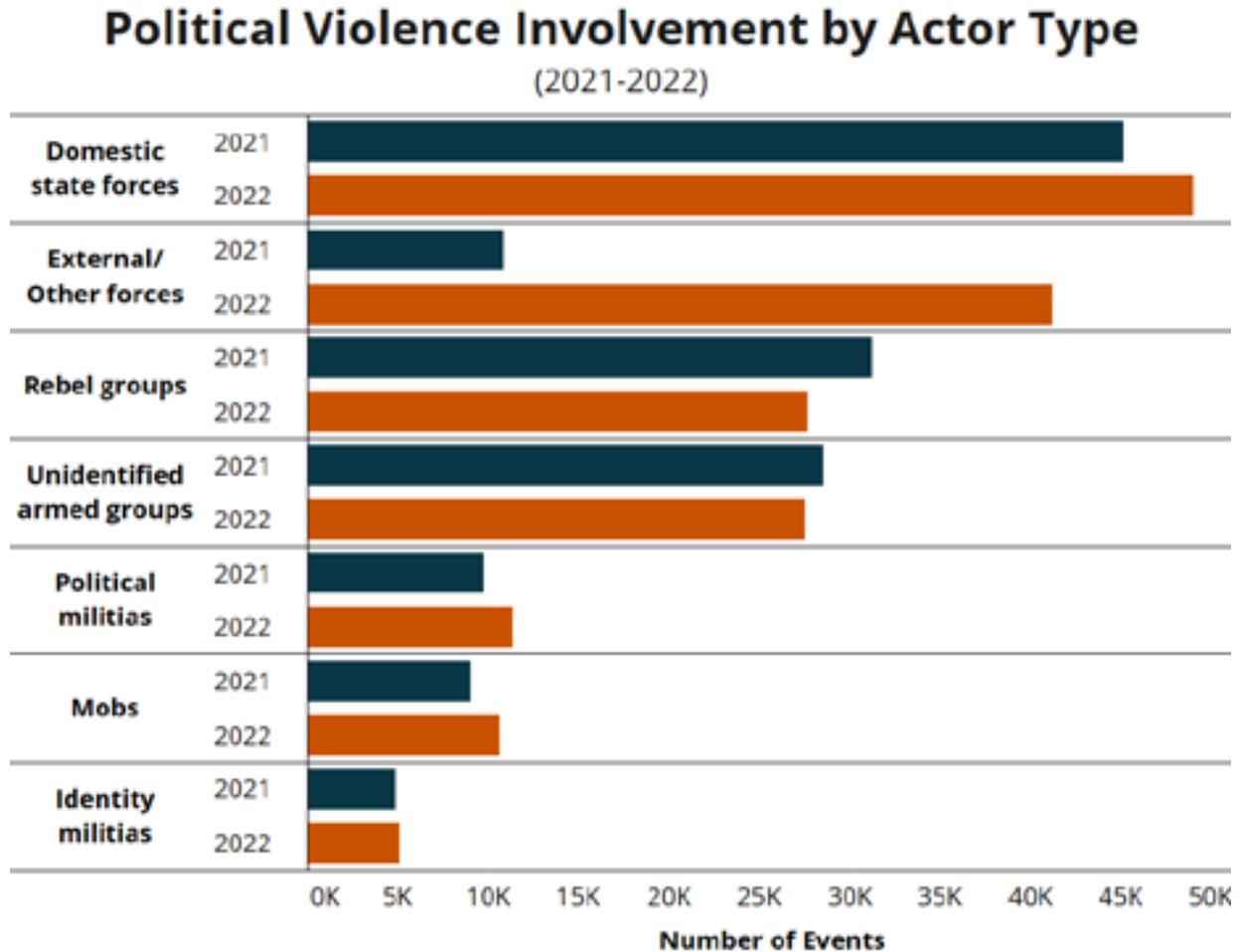
ACLED data as of 20 January 2023.

While political militias and rebel forces were more prominent in 2021, government forces operating outside of their countries of origin emerged as some of the most prolific agents of political violence globally in 2022. These external forces almost quadrupled their engagement in political violence in 2022, from nearly 11,000 events in 2021 to more than 41,000 events in 2022. The prominent role played by external forces saw specific state actors – the Russian and Turkish militaries – move into the list of the most active groups in 2022 (*see Table 5*). No external state actor ranked on this list in 2021.

Table 5. Actors Participating in the Highest Number of Political Violence Events in 2022

Actor	Actor type	Primary country of operation	Number of events	Change in the number of political violence events since 2021	Main event type
Military Forces of Russia	External forces/State forces	Ukraine	27,437	*Increase* of **26,765** events, or **3,983%**	Explosions/Remote violence
Military Forces of Ukraine	State forces	Ukraine	13,377	*Increase* of **7,221** events, or **117%**	Explosions/Remote violence
Military Forces of Myanmar	State forces	Myanmar	7,138	*Increase* of **2,746** events, or **63%**	Battles
Military Forces of Turkey	External forces/State forces	Iraq	6,341	*Increase* of **2,865** events, or **82%**	Explosions/Remote violence
United Armed Forces of Novorossiya	Rebel forces	Ukraine	5,351	*Decrease* of **171** events, or **3%**	Explosions/Remote violence

ACLED data as of 20 January 2023.

Rebel groups were the most active non-state actors in 2022, despite a 12% fall in rebel activity due to the end of the Taliban's insurgency with their takeover of Kabul in August 2021. Most prominent among rebel groups were Russian-aligned rebels, which have been active since 2014 and continued to fight alongside Russian forces in the Donbas region of Ukraine in 2022. Significant rebel activity was also present in Syria, Iraq, Somalia, and Burkina Faso.

Political militia activity remained relatively stable compared to 2021, increasing by less than 2% – or approximately 700 events. Political militias were more active in Myanmar, where non-state groups escalated their armed resistance to the military junta. Engaging in only 4% of political violence globally, identity militias – including communal and ethnic-based militias – nonetheless dominated the conflict landscape in certain contexts. In Nigeria and Sudan, the countries reporting the greatest levels of identity militia activity, identity militias engaged in 39% and 57% of total political violence, respectively. Farmer-pastoralist conflicts constituted a significant threat in Nigeria, where this violence intersects with ongoing jihadist and separatist insurgencies and armed banditry.

In addition to known actors, anonymous or unidentified armed groups – including criminal gangs – continued to play a prominent role in the global political violence landscape last year. They were particularly active in countries with complex conflict environments where a multitude of armed actors operate, such as Brazil, Mexico, Syria, and Colombia. Although identification challenges may result from reporting limitations in some cases, anonymity is also deliberately cultivated by groups to allow them to operate with impunity. In particular, these groups featured heavily in the perpetration of violence targeting civilians (*explored further in the section below*).

Leading Perpetrators of Violence Targeting Civilians

Of identified actors, domestic state forces remained the leading perpetrators of civilian targeting in 2022, accounting for 15% of events globally. State forces engaged in the highest number of civilian targeting events in Myanmar, Afghanistan, Yemen, Syria, and Sudan. Notably, though they are not among the top actors by event count, Ethiopian, Malian, and Burkinabe state forces perpetrated some of the deadliest actions against civilians in 2022, alongside the Myanmar military and the Taliban.

In the cases of Mali and Burkina Faso, deadly civilian targeting increased as part of an escalation in state violence in 2022. Malian forces engaged in attacks on civilians on an unprecedented scale as part of an intensified anti-insurgency campaign alongside Wagner Group mercenaries, while Burkinabe operations, including accompanying air and drone strikes, left scores of civilians dead. Both Mali and Burkina Faso also saw large increases in rebel targeting of civilians in 2022, with both main jihadist groups active across the Sahel and West Africa – Jamaa Nusra al-Islam wa al-Muslimin and the Islamic State Sahel Province – responsible for hundreds more civilian deaths compared to 2021. A near fourfold increase in rebel targeting of civilians in Mali saw it jump from seventh to second on the list of countries with the highest levels of such activity, behind only the DRC.

Increases in rebel activity above all other groups have particularly dire consequences for civilian populations due to the high lethality of their attacks. In 2022, rebels surpassed state forces as the deadliest identified perpetrators of violence targeting civilians, despite engaging in far fewer civilian targeting events overall.

While much civilian targeting can be attributed to specific actors, anonymous or unidentified groups remained responsible for the most civilian targeting globally in 2022, accounting for 43% of all events and 39% of all reported fatalities. The overwhelming majority of these events were recorded in Latin America and the Caribbean, most notably in Mexico, Brazil, and Colombia, where the presence of a wide array of criminal and armed insurgent groups helps obscure the identities of perpetrators. In these countries, unidentified armed groups regularly engage in targeted attacks against prominent civilians, including journalists, activists, and local administrators. Their anonymity often allows them to operate with impunity and create distance from elites that benefit from their activities.

DEMONSTRATION TRENDS

Demonstration activity decreased overall in 2022 following multiple years of increases. In 2022, ACLED records fewer than 147,000 demonstration events compared to more than 166,000 in 2021. This trend was felt across the globe, with decreases in every region (*see Figure 7*). Countries home to the most demonstrations include India, the United States, Pakistan, France, and Mexico. In line with the global reduction in demonstration activity, all of these countries experienced declines in 2022 compared to 2021.

Figure 7. Demonstrations by Region (2021-2022)
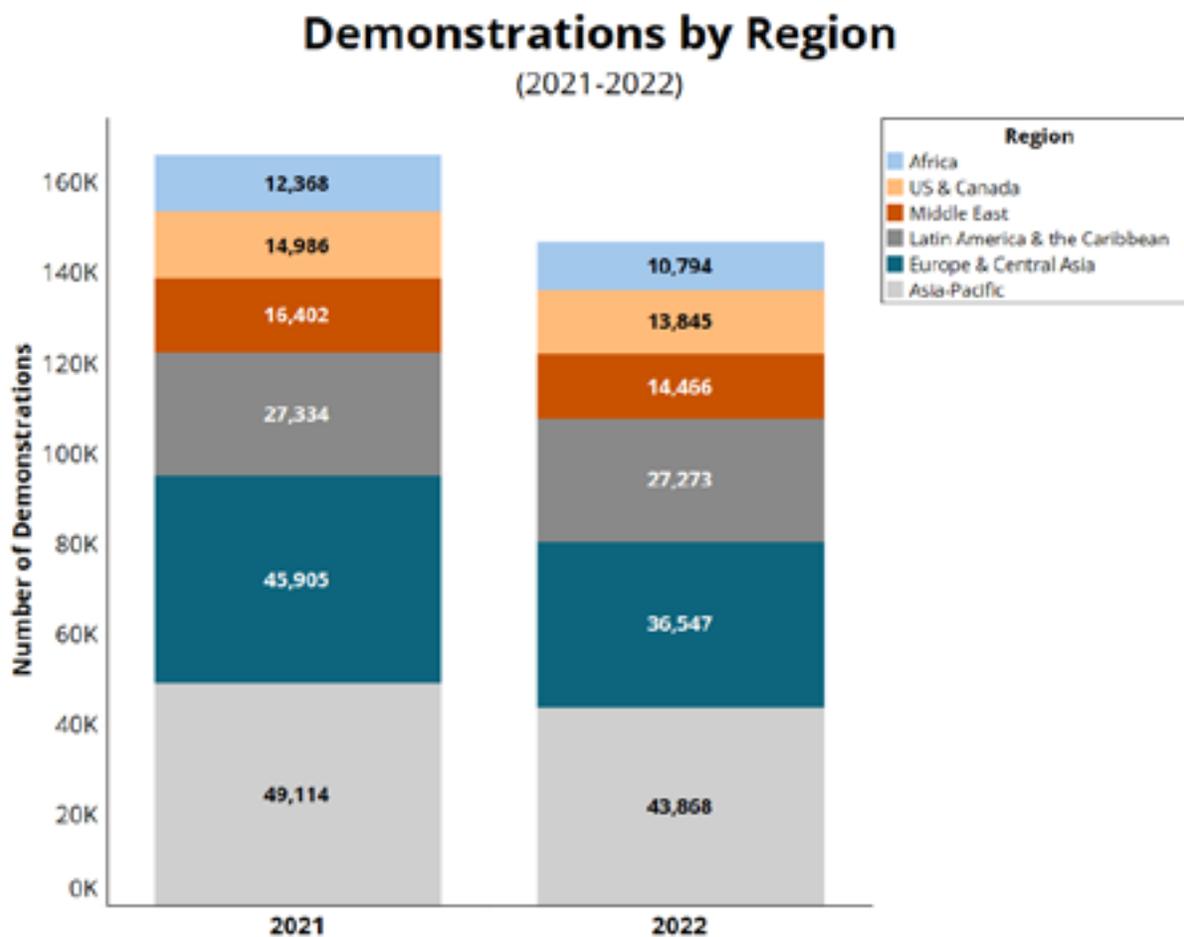
ACLED data as of 20 January 2023.

Despite the overall decrease, new hotspots of demonstration activity also emerged in 2022, frequently with deadly consequences (*see Table 6*). State forces used lethal violence against demonstrators in more countries in 2022 than in 2021. In Iran, the death of a young Kurdish woman, Mahsa Amini, from injuries sustained during her arrest in September 2022,

precipitated a spike in demonstration activity that was met with deadly state repression. As a result, Iran became the deadliest country in the world for demonstrators in 2022, with hundreds of reported fatalities. Similarly, heightened levels of deadly state violence against anti-government demonstrators were reported in Kazakhstan, Sudan, and Chad.

Table 6. Countries With the Deadliest Demonstration Events in 2022

Country	Number of reported fatalities	Number of recorded excessive force against protester events	Number of recorded violent demonstration events
Iran	331	23	427
Kazakhstan	200	6	8
Sudan	84	173	49
Chad	69	4	21
DRC	61	12	107

ACLED data as of 20 January 2023.

In Sudan, the state's use of deadly force fueled further demonstration activity, as demonstrators questioned the military's legitimacy to rule amid an increasingly difficult economic situation as well as insecurity outside the capital. Elsewhere, in Peru, the removal and arrest of former President Pedro Castillo in early December after he attempted to dissolve Congress set off nationwide demonstrations. Demonstrators called for new general elections, the resignation of Castillo's replacement, Dina Boluarte, and Castillo's release. The demonstrations have seen clashes between demonstrators and police, leading to numerous reported deaths. Despite the state being increasingly willing to use deadly force – much like Sudan – this has done little to suppress demonstration activity, which remains ongoing in early 2023.

In contrast, increased state intervention was largely effective in suppressing demonstration activity in Russia, leading to an overall decrease in events in 2022. Russian state forces were more likely to intervene in demonstrations last year, engaging in 31% of events in 2022 compared to 26% of events in 2021, as they worked to repress demonstrations in opposition to the invasion of Ukraine.

In other countries around the world, worsening economic conditions exacerbated by rising costs directly drove increases in demonstration activity, including in Indonesia, Ecuador, and Turkey. As the global economic situation continues to worsen, it is likely that this will push further national-level increases in demonstration activity in 2023.

CONCLUSION

Around the world, political violence increased significantly in 2022. While the Russian invasion of Ukraine dominated the global conflict landscape, violence also surged in most other regions throughout the year. Fighting intensified in places like Myanmar and the Sahel, as did gang warfare in Latin America and the Caribbean, and domestic unrest escalated in places like Iran and Sudan.

A review of ACLED data for 2022 also underscores how conflict is changing. While warfare predominantly took the form of ground clashes between opposing armed groups in 2021, in 2022 it was increasingly fought in the air, with a combined increase in shelling, artillery, missile, airstrike, and drone strike events. Despite these shifts in the modalities of conflict, civilians continued to bear the brunt of political violence in 2022.

In Ukraine, where the increase in remote violence has been highest, air and drone strikes by Russian forces have been used with devastating effect against civilian areas, allowing them to target critical infrastructure beyond the immediate reach of ground forces, such as hospitals, schools, and power stations. And the Russian military was not alone in ramping up the use of air and drone strikes during the year: Yemen's Houthis and the military forces of Myanmar and Turkey, among others, increasingly used artillery and air power against their opponents, often with deadly consequences for civilians.

Meanwhile, in contrast to political violence, demonstration activity declined in 2022. The overall decrease in demonstration events obscured worrying national-level trends, however, as the number of countries in which state forces were prepared to use deadly force against protesters increased. In Iran and Kazakhstan, hundreds of demonstrators were killed by state forces, with dozens more killed in Chad, Sudan, and the DRC. Moreover, the worsening state of the global economy in 2022, as well as country-level economic downturns, present a likely driver for heightened demonstration activity in 2023.

In looking beyond simple event counts and fatality measures, this report underscores the importance of changes in the modality of conflict, the fragmentation of actors, and state repression of demonstration activity in shaping political disorder patterns around the world.[6] Together, analysis of these trends not only presents a more accurate picture of the state of global disorder, but also exposes the multifaceted threats that political violence presents to civilians – and provides a glimpse at how these threats may continue to evolve in 2023.

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[6] For a new approach to evaluating these factors and their combined influence on the complexity and severity of conflict, see the ACLED Conflict Severity Index.

ACLED is the highest quality and most widely used real-time data and analysis source on political violence and protest around the world.

Please contact admin@acleddata.com with comments or queries regarding the ACLED dataset.

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