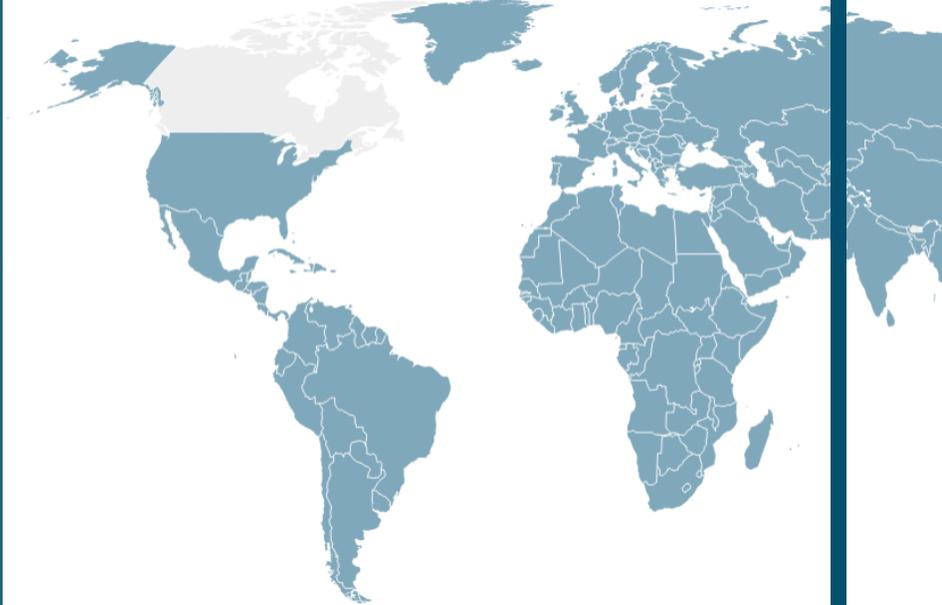# ACLED 2020: THE YEAR IN REVIEW

The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED)

March 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

One year since the official start of the pandemic in March 2020, COVID-19 has killed more than two million people and brought at least half the earth's population under lockdown ([New York Times, 11 March 2021](#); [New York Times, 3 April 2020](#)). The health crisis has had major impacts on worldwide conflict and disorder patterns, contributing to an overall decrease in political violence levels last year even as it fueled an increase in demonstration activity. And while the pandemic's effects have been global in scale, they have not been felt equally across conflict contexts: although violence declined on the aggregate level, it rose in nearly half the world's countries. As vaccine distribution accelerates and countries relax public health restrictions, conflict levels are expected to increase throughout 2021 *(for more, see ACLED's special report: [Ten Conflicts to Worry About in 2021](#)).*

Last year, ACLED expanded data collection to Latin America and the Caribbean, East Asia, the United States, and all of Europe, achieving near global coverage. Our 2020 annual report reviews the past 12 months of data on political violence and demonstration activity around the world.

Key Findings:

Overall conflict levels decreased. Political violence decreased by approximately 22% — or 24,539 events — compared to 2019. ACLED records 113,170 events in 2019, relative to 88,631 in 2020. Political violence decreased in every region of the world covered by ACLED, except for Africa. Fatalities from political violence decreased by 19%, from 145,883 in 2019 to 118,429 in 2020. Fatalities declined in every region save for Africa.

Still, political violence increased in more countries than it decreased. While political violence decreased worldwide on an aggregate level, it increased in nearly half the world's countries: violence rose in 49% of all countries covered by ACLED in 2020, whereas it declined in 48%. Political violence levels held steady in the remaining 3%.

Conventional conflicts continued to rage. The countries that registered the highest number of political violence events in 2020 are predominantly those experiencing conventional conflicts, like Syria, Yemen, Ukraine, and Afghanistan. That Mexico also tops the list reveals how the country's gang violence has created a conflict environment that rivals an active warzone. All of these countries, with the exception of Ukraine, additionally registered the highest numbers of fatalities in 2020, underscoring the continued lethality of these ongoing conflicts. At the same time, many of these countries also experienced the largest overall declines in conflict activity in 2020. That they continue to top the list of most violent countries speaks to the persistence of these conflicts amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

State forces remained the most active conflict agents. Despite the continued rise of violent non-state actors, state forces participated in over half — 52% — of all political violence last year. Three of the five most active conflict agents in 2020 were state forces operating domestically.

Identity militia activity is on the rise. Nearly all types of conflict actors reduced their activity overall between 2019 and 2020, except for identity militias. Identity militias are the only actor type that increased their engagement in violence. Identity militias — which ACLED defines as armed groups organized around a collective, common feature including community, ethnicity, region, religion, or livelihood — include the Dan Na Ambassagou ethnic Dogon militia in Mali, the Tribal Mobilization Forces in Iraq, and the Volunteers for Defense of Homeland in Burkina Faso. There was a proliferation of identity militias in Africa especially last year, with a

While both civilian targeting and civilian fatalities decreased on the aggregate level, civilian targeting events increased in half of all countries. Civilians continued to come under attack in a variety of contexts, from conventional conflicts in Syria and Yemen, to gang wars in Mexico and Brazil. In some spaces, civilians came under multiple concurrent threats, such as in India, where they faced persistent mob and communal violence as well as conflicts in Kashmir and the Red Corridor. The greatest increases in civilian targeting were recorded in Brazil, Nigeria, Iraq, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Cameroon. Overall, civilian targeting rose in 50% of all countries covered by ACLED. Anonymous or unidentified groups were responsible for the largest proportion of civilian targeting around the world last year at 46% of all events, as well as 47% of all reported civilian fatalities. Of identified actors, state forces posed the greatest threat to civilians last year, responsible for 17% of civilian targeting and 15% of civilian fatalities, followed by rioters and violent mobs, which were responsible for 13% of civilian targeting and 3% of civilian fatalities. All forms of civilian targeting decreased from 2019 to 2020, save abductions and forced disappearances, which increased dramat-ically in Nigeria (by 169%), Yemen (by 114%), Syria (by 36%), and the Democratic Republic of Congo (by 21%).

Despite the pandemic, demonstrations increased worldwide. Following an initial drop at the start of the health crisis, overall demonstration activity rose by approximately 3% in 2020 compared to 2019, with an in-crease recorded in 58% of all countries covered by ACLED. Approximately 94% of all demonstrations were peaceful, while 8% were met with some form of intervention — an increase in the proportion of demonstra-tions that were peaceful, and a decline in the proportion of demonstrations met with intervention, relative to the year prior. Demonstrations were also less deadly in 2020: ACLED records a 38% decline in the number of fatalities reported during demonstrations last year, particularly in the Middle East, driven by a decrease in the lethality of violence reported at demonstrations in Iraq and Iran. As ACLED's coverage of the United States does not yet extend to 2019, data on American demonstration trends are not included in the comparison figures above. However, in 2020, the United States registered the highest number of demonstrations in the world, with nearly as many demonstrations as the next two countries — India and Pakistan — combined.

ACLED 2020: THE YEAR IN REVIEW

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INTRODUCTION TO ACLED

The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) is a disaggregated data collection, analysis, and crisis mapping project that tracks political violence and demonstrations around the world. ACLED currently covers Africa; Latin America and the Caribbean; the Middle East; South Asia; Southeast Asia; East Asia; Central Asia and the Caucasus; Europe; and the United States.[1] *In ACLED 2020: The Year in Review*, we analyze the past year of data on political violence and demonstrations across these regions of coverage.

ACLED is an event-based data project, meaning that each engagement is recorded by date and location. Along with this information, ACLED records the actors, types of violence, and fatalities associated with each event — allowing for a multitude of ways to explore disorder dynamics.

Last year, in addition to continued real-time data coverage, ACLED launched an array of new expansions, special projects, and initiatives to enable users to more closely monitor trends in political violence and protest around the world. ACLED expanded geographic coverage to multiple new regions over the course of 2020: Latin America and the Caribbean, which includes Mexico, Central America, South America, and the Caribbean; East Asia; and the United States. In early 2021, we expanded coverage to all remaining countries in Europe. Coverage of Latin America and East Asia was also extended back to the start of 2018, allowing for comparative analysis of trends in 2019 and 2020 in this report. Coverage of the United States and remaining countries in Europe extend to the start of 2020,[2] and are therefore not included in the report's comparative analysis of 2019 and 2020. Data on these countries are included in analysis of trends for 2020 alone, however, and will be included in next year's annual report comparing trends in 2020 to 2021.

ACLED also launched a number of new special projects in 2020. The COVID-19 Disorder Tracker, for example, provides special coverage of the pandemic's impact on political violence and protest trends around the world, monitoring changes in demonstration activity, state repression, mob attacks, overall rates of armed conflict, and more. Insights from that project feed into this report, as the health crisis has played a major role in shaping global conflict and disorder patterns in 2020. Another project, ACLED's new Conflict Pulse prediction tool, allows users to track predicted trends in conflict actor behavior a week into the future and to explore historical predictions. Insights from that project are also integrated into this report.

ACLED additionally began a new initiative to establish local conflict observatories in order to improve violence monitoring and enhance data collection in hard-to-access contexts. In May, we launched the first observatory — Cabo Ligado, or 'connected cape' — in partnership with Zitamar News and Mediafax to track the insurgency in Mozambique's northern Cabo Delgado province. New observatories are slated for launch later this year.

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1   For a full list of ACLED's geographic coverage, see this list.

2   The following European countries are included in 2019 to 2020 comparisons in the report: Albania, Belarus, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, Kosovo, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Russia, Serbia, and Ukraine.

As a result of these projects, the ACLED dataset is more detailed, precise, and comprehensive than at any point in the organization's history — and the latest data shed light on key trends in global conflict and disorder during one of the world's most challenging, chaotic, and unusual years.

Disorder decreased by 9% across all regions of ACLED coverage in 2020. Political violence and associated fatalities decreased on aggregate and in every region of the world last year, except for Africa. Longstanding conflicts in Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) worsened, while new conflicts began to escalate and spread ([Mail & Guardian, 1 February 2021](#)). Entrenched conflict actors remain potent sources of disorder, with Al Shabaab again ranking among the top five most active, violent armed groups last year.

The Middle East, meanwhile, experienced the steepest decline in political violence in 2020 relative to 2019. Yet this decline was not uniform: Iraq registered one of the greatest increases in violence in the world last year, second only to Nigeria. This rise was driven largely by an intensification of Turkey's military operations against Kurdish forces in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Despite the overall decline, political violence actually increased in nearly half — 49% — of all countries covered by ACLED. The countries that experienced the most violence in 2020 are the same countries that topped the list in 2019: Syria, Yemen, Ukraine, Mexico,[3] and Afghanistan. While significant declines were reported across most of these countries from 2019 to 2020,[4] all — with the exception of Ukraine — registered the highest fatality totals of 2020, underscoring the continued lethality of these ongoing conflicts. While most of these countries are home to active, conventional wars, Mexico's inclusion underlines the very real 'warzone' that the country's gang violence[5] has created.

Nearly all types of conflict actors reduced their activity overall between 2019 and 2020, except for identity militias. Such groups, organized around a collective common feature like religion or community, take many forms around the world, from local security providers to ethnic and tribal militias. Identity militias, although typically relegated to the 'periphery,' pose an important and growing threat. In Africa, the number of distinct, named identity militias active in 2020 increased by 46% relative to 2019.

State forces remained the most active conflict agent in 2020, and they continue to pose a significant threat to civilians around the world. Despite the rise of violent non-state actors, state forces participated in over half — 52% — of all political violence last year. Three of the five most active, violent groups around the world were domestic state forces: the Ukrainian military, Houthi military forces,[6] and the Azerbaijani military.[7]

The threat that civilians face vary across different spaces, from the risks associated with large-scale wars — such as in Syria and Yemen — to the risks stemming from being caught in the crossfire of gang activity and turf

3   Given ACLED's Latin America coverage was not released until early 2020, Mexico was not included in [ACLED's 2019 annual report](#). However, coverage of Latin America now extends back to the start of 2018, making such comparison possible. Using data that we now have available, Mexico would have been included in the top five most violent countries of 2019.

4   ACLED is currently conducting a review of sourcing and reporting of the conflict in Afghanistan since 2020.

5   ACLED recognizes that there is a gray area between political and criminal violence. As such, the distinction as to when gang violence is political is made through methodological testing, using specific benchmarks and indicators to determine which countries should be considered to have levels of gang activity that meet the threshold of political violence or otherwise have significant political impacts . For more on this methodology, see [this primer](#).

6   ACLED treats the forces allied with both the government of President Hadi and the Houthi-led executive bodies as state forces in Yemen. It is important to note that the classification does not imply legitimacy, but rather acknowledges the fact that there currently exist two distinct governing authorities exercising de facto control over different portions of Yemeni territory. For more on ACLED methodology decisions in Yemen, see [this primer](#).

7   The Republic of Artsakh, also known as the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, is a breakaway state existing within the borders of Azerbaijan. As such, activity by the military of Azerbaijan within the *de facto* Republic of Artsakh are coded as having occurred 'within Azerbaijan' in ACLED data. For more on methodology around the coding of disorder in the *de facto* Republic of Artsakh, see [this primer](#).

wars — like in Mexico and Brazil — to spaces posing concurrent threats to civilians — as is the case in India, home to persistent mob violence and communal conflict, as well as conflicts in the Kashmir region and the Red Corridor. The greatest increases in civilian targeting were recorded in Brazil, Nigeria, Iraq, the DRC, and Cameroon. Overall, civilian targeting rose in 50% of all countries covered by ACLED. Anonymous or unidentified groups top the list of most violent perpetrators of civilian targeting, responsible for the largest proportion of civilian targeting around the world last year at 46% of all events, as well as 47% of all reported civilian fatalities. Of identified actors, state forces posed the greatest threat to civilians last year, responsible for 17% of civilian targeting and 15% of civilian fatalities, followed by rioters and violent mobs, which were responsible for 13% of civilian targeting and 3% of civilian fatalities.

Protest movements were at a high at the end of 2019. In the months immediately following the declaration of a global pandemic in March 2020, demonstrations declined by about a third amid public health lockdowns and movement restrictions. Protests soon bounced back, however — at times reaching higher levels than before the start of the pandemic. Overall, demonstrations actually increased in 2020 relative to 2019.

The largest protest movements around the world were overwhelmingly peaceful. Nevertheless, many pro-testers faced government repression, as in Belarus and Hong Kong. At the same time, sole perpetrators[8] in the United States posed the greatest lethal threat to peaceful protesters, globally, with radicalized individuals ramming cars into demonstrators on at least 100 occasions, resulting in at least four fatalities. The United States was home to multiple overlapping protest movements in 2020, leading to more demonstrations than any other country in the world last year. ACLED records nearly as many demonstrations in the United States as in the next two countries — India and Pakistan — combined.

ACLED 2020: The Year in Review explores these trends to better understand the myriad ways in which disorder manifests across countries and contexts.

TERMS

In this report, the term **political violence** refers to all events coded with event type *Battles, Explosions/Remote violence, and Violence against civilians*, as well as all events coded with sub-event type *Mob violence* under the *Riots* event type. The latter is included given that this violence, while spontaneous rather than organized, is often similar in nature to violence involving communal groups such as local security providers. In this way, *Mob violence* is more similar to other forms of political violence than it is to demonstrations (described below). Including *Mob violence* alongside political violence also has the benefit of allowing for a better understanding of the spectrum of political violence and how it may manifest differently across different spaces.

The complement to political violence in the ACLED dataset is the term **demonstrations**, which is used in this report to describe all events coded with event type *Protests*, as well as all events coded with sub-event type *Violent demonstration* under the *Riots* event type. Expanding on the point raised above, *Mob violence* is not grouped with demonstrations here because it looks less like other forms of demonstrations associated with mass social movements, and more like political violence. The events included under demonstrations here are what users may typically associate with social movements — in which groups of demonstrators advocate for a certain policy or belief. These demonstrations may be peaceful or violent.

While ACLED collects information on demonstrations, it is important to remember that these are **demonstration events**. ACLED is an event-based dataset, and therefore only records demonstration events; the number of 'demonstration events' recorded by ACLED may differ from the number of 'demonstrations' recorded via

8   Unique to the US context within ACLED coding is activity carried out by a single "lonewolf" without an affiliation to a specific named group. The actor is used when an individual is not clearly part of a group and acts alone, such as in the case of mass attacks (e.g. mass shootings, "lonewolf" bombings, car ramming attacks on crowds, etc.) or politically-motivated attacks. For more on ACLED methodology in the US context, see this primer.

other methodologies. The number of demonstrations is reliant largely on reporting and the terminology used in doing so. For example, five separate demonstrations happening in Algiers around a single topic within a few blocks of each other may be reported on in a newspaper as "demonstrations happened in Algiers" or "five demonstrations happened in Algiers." Both are correct in their terminology, but if they are coded differently as a result (1 vs. 5), this would introduce a bias. ACLED codes an event based on an engagement in a specific location (e.g. Algiers) on a specific day in order to avoid such biases. For ease of readability, these events are often referred to solely as demonstrations in this report.

The term **disorder** is then used in this report to refer to all political violence and demonstrations. This effectively includes all events in the ACLED dataset, minus *Strategic developments* — which should not be visualized alongside other, systematically coded ACLED event types due to their more subjective nature. For more on *Strategic developments* and how to use this event type in analysis see [this primer](#).

Following from these, **armed organized violence** is a subset of political violence, made up of all events coded with event type *Battles, Explosions/ Remote violence*, and Violence against civilians. The difference between political violence and armed organized violence is that *Mob violence* is included in the former; it is not included in the latter as this violence is spontaneous in nature (not organized) and often does not include armed individuals.

Both the term **conflict** and **war** refer to campaigns of events, rather than specific event types. The 'war in Yemen', for example, may include a variety of types of events — *Battles, Explosions/Remote violence*, and *Violence against civilians*. These categorizations will hence be denoted on the basis of the actors involved, the location of events (at the country or subnational level), and/or time periods. The distinction between the two terms (conflict and war) is one of scale: the latter is a more intense form of the former. For more on this categorization, see the latter portion of [this primer](#).

Civilian targeting refers to all violence which targets unarmed individuals. It is important to remember that events coded with event type Violence against civilians are only one subset of this violence. Civilians can also be targeted in events coded with event type *Explosions/Remote violence* and *Riots,* as can Protesters (i.e. unarmed demonstrators). Protesters can also be targeted through lethal forms of violence in events coded with sub-event type *Excessive force against protesters* coded under event type *Protests.*

While ACLED records **fatalities**, it is important to remember that these are *reported* fatalities. Fatality numbers are frequently the most biased and poorly reported component of conflict data. They are often debated and can vary widely. Conflict actors may overstate or under-report fatalities to appear strong to the opposition or to minimize international backlash against the state involved. Fatality counts are also limited by the challenges of collecting exact data mid-conflict. While ACLED codes the most conservative reports of fatality counts to minimize over-counting, this does not account for biases that exist around fatality counts at-large (for more, see: [Washington Post, 2 October 2017](#)). While fatality estimates are a telling indicator of how conflict intensity and lethality shift over time, they are generally less reliable than other metrics coded by ACLED, due in part to the highly politicized and varying fatality information reported by different sources. Such a metric is therefore largely used as a supplement to other modes of analysis, and is why it is treated as a measure of reported fatalities, rather than a concrete number. For ease of readability, this report often refers solely to fatalities, but please note that these are references to reported fatalities specifically. *For more on ACLED's methodology around coding fatalities, see [this primer](#).*

POLITICAL VIOLENCE

Political violence in 2020 decreased by approximately 22% — or 24,539 events — compared to 2019 (*see Figure 1*). In total, ACLED records 113,170 political violence events in 2019 and 88,631 in 2020. Political violence decreased in every region of the world except for Africa, and in 48% of all countries covered by ACLED. Political violence resulted in at least 118,429 reported fatalities in 2020, down from 145,883 in 2019 — a decrease of 19% (*see Figure 2*). Fatalities decreased in every region save for Africa.

While the coronavirus pandemic may have contributed to an overall decrease in violence last year, many countries home to active conventional conflicts continued to rank top among the deadliest places in the world. The devastation of the pandemic combined with the devastation of these conflicts created even more complex security challenges for many countries around the globe.

Figure 1. Political violence in 2020
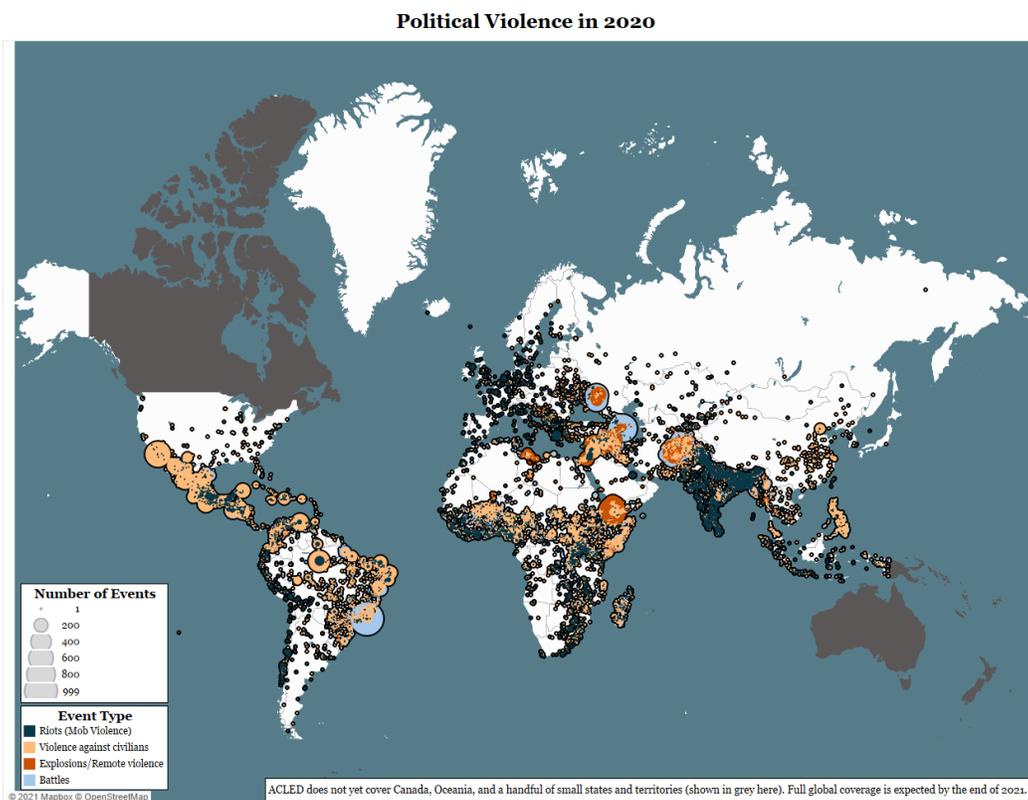
TRENDS BY LOCATION

The countries that registered the highest number of political violence events in 2020 are predominantly those experiencing conventional conflicts, like Syria, Yemen, Ukraine, and Afghanistan. (*While ACLED is currently conducting a review of sourcing and reporting of the conflict in Afghanistan since 2020 to ensure no events may have been missed, Afghanistan still manages to be amongst the countries home to the most political violence events in 2020, underlining the enormity of the war — which is also why it is included on the list here.*) That Mexico is part of the list reveals how the country's gang violence has created a conflict environment that rivals an active warzone. Table 1 describes how political violence in these countries has changed since 2019, and identifies the main driver of the violence.

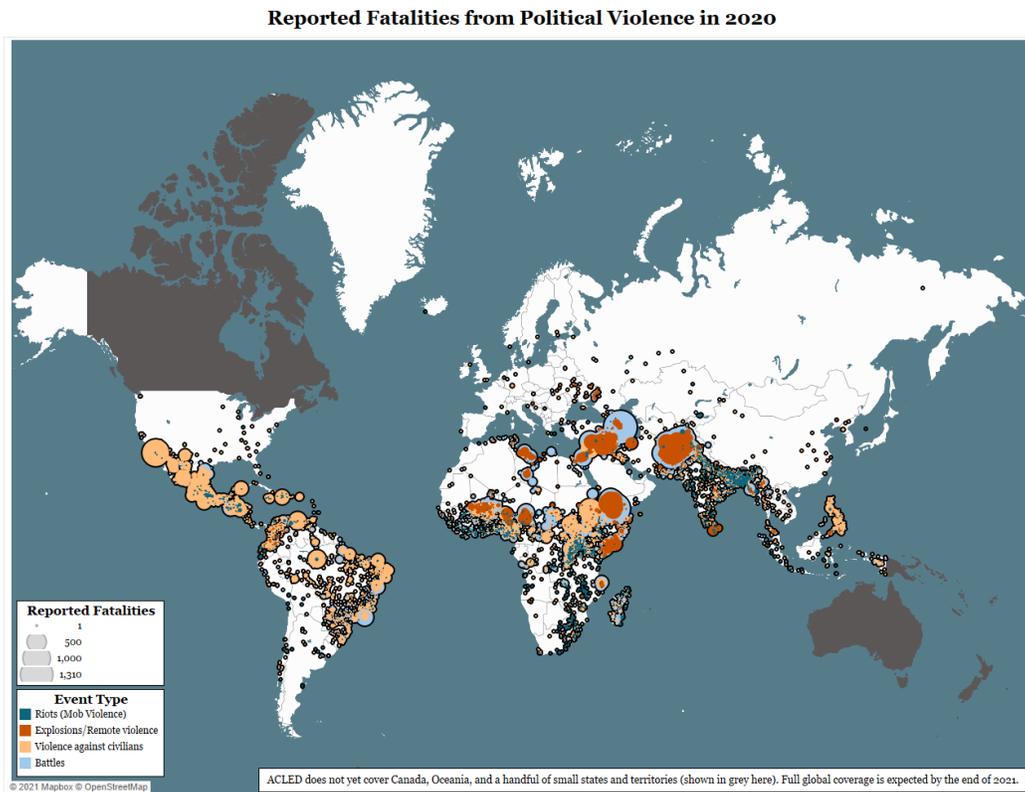Figure 2. Reported fatalities from political violence in 2020

Reported Fatalities from Political Violence in 2020

ACLED does not yet cover Canada, Oceania, and a handful of small states and territories (shown in grey here). Full global coverage is expected by the end of 2021.

Table 1. Countries with the highest number of political violence events in 2020

Country	Number of recorded events	Main event type	Main engagement type
Syria	10,046	Explosions/Remote violence	One-sided violence involving state forces
Yemen	9,915	Explosions/Remote violence	Saudi-backed Hadi forces vs. Houthi forces
Ukraine	8,416	Explosions/Remote violence	Ukrainian government forces vs. Russian-led separatists
Mexico	7,253	Violence against civilians	Gangs targeting civilians
Afghanistan[9]	7,001	Battles	Afghan military vs. Taliban

All of these countries, with the exception of Ukraine, also registered the highest numbers of reported fatalities in 2020, underscoring the continued lethality of these ongoing conflicts. The countries home to the most reported fatalities from political violence in 2020 include: Afghanistan (20,744 fatalities),[10] Yemen (19,685 fatali-

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9   While ACLED is currently conducting a review of sourcing and reporting of the conflict in Afghanistan since 2020 to ensure no events may have been missed, Afghanistan still manages to be amongst the countries home to the most political violence events in 2020, underlining the enormity of the war.

10   While ACLED is currently conducting a review of sourcing and reporting of the conflict in Afghanistan since 2020 to ensure

ties), Mexico (8,399 fatalities), Syria (7,950 fatalities), and Nigeria (7,660 fatalities).

Syria, Yemen, Ukraine, Afghanistan, and Mexico also registered the highest conflict levels in 2019,[11] though the total number of violent events has declined in many of these countries over the past year. That most of these countries had the greatest absolute decreases in violence — and yet continued to top the list of most violent countries in 2020 — speaks to the persistence of these conflicts amid the pandemic.

Table 2 presents the countries that experienced the largest decreases in political violence in 2020, outlining the changes and their contributing factors. While the United Nations Secretary-General called for a global ceasefire during the early days of the pandemic, the appeal fell largely on deaf ears *(for more, see this ACLED report)*. Nevertheless, separate ceasefire agreements did contribute to a reduction of violence in some of the world's most active conflicts, such as those in Syria and Ukraine. In other contexts, pandemic restrictions led to a decline in violence, such as in India and Mexico. In others still, like the war in Yemen, new frontlines shifted key conflict dynamics.

Table 2. Countries with largest decreases in political violence in 2020[12]

Country	Change in the number of political events since 2019	Contributing factors
SYRIA	Decrease of 7,902 events, or 44%	Ceasefire agreement. Remote violence declined significantly in Syria during 2020, driven mainly by the ceasefire agreement between the Syrian regime and the rebel factions in the country's northwest. Since then, ACLED records a significant decrease in political violence in the region, namely in Idleb and Hama governorates. Prior to the ceasefire, most events reported in northwestern Syria had been shelling by regime forces as well as airstrikes by the regime and the Russian air force. *For more on the evolving war in Syria, see ACLED's State of Syria analysis series mapping control across the country.*

no events may have been missed, Afghanistan still manages to be amongst the countries home to the most reported fatalities in 2020, underscoring the lethality of the conflict. This is despite ACLED's conservative measures for estimating fatalities in the country, described in further detail in this primer.

11   As ACLED's Latin America coverage was not released until early 2020, Mexico was not included in ACLED's 2019 annual report. However, coverage of Latin America now extends back to the start of 2018, making such comparison possible. Using data that we now have available, Mexico would have been included within the top five most violent countries of 2019.

12   ACLED is currently conducting a review of sourcing and reporting of the conflict in Afghanistan since 2020 to ensure no events may have been missed. As a result, a comparison of trends in the country from 2019 to 2020 is not included here.

UKRAINE	Decrease of 6,445 events, or 43%	Ceasefire agreement. There was a sharp decrease in political violence in Ukraine last year due to the relative success of the most recent ceasefire agreement. Ukraine's eastern Donbas region has been the site of ongoing conflict between the Ukrainian Armed Forces and Russian-led separatist formations since 2014. The frontlines of the conflict have remained frozen since 2015 and the majority of the violence involves shelling and gunfire exchanges reminiscent of the trench warfare of World War I. A July 2020 ceasefire and de-escalation agreement between the two sides succeeded in significantly decreasing the intensity of the conflict, though fighting continues. The success of this agreement points to increased war exhaustion on both sides and a lack of achievable military objectives. *For more on the July 2020 ceasefire in Ukraine, see ACLED's analysis piece: [Breaking the Pattern: The Relative Success of the Latest Ceasefire Agreement in Ukraine](#).*
INDIA	Decrease of 2,182 events, or 40%	Lockdown restrictions. The imposition of lockdown restrictions between the months of March and June 2020 coincided with a reduction in Naxal-Maoist violence when the group has historically carried out their annual tactical counter-offensive campaign. These restrictions, coupled with increased counter-insurgency efforts targeting militancy across India, reportedly weakened Naxal-Maoist operational capacity. Furthermore, at the start of the pandemic, some of the Maoist divisional commanders announced a unilateral ceasefire. Still, clashes began to increase again in the final quarter of 2020. *For more on the pandemic's impacts on violence along the Red Corridor, see ACLED's analysis piece: [Naxal-Maoist Insurgency Trends in India During the Coronavirus Pandemic](#).*
YEMEN	Decrease of 647 events, or 6%	Shifting frontlines. Despite the decrease in violence in Yemen, 2020 is among the deadliest years of the war. The decline in political violence in the aggregate is driven by a significant decrease in daily shelling around Hodeidah city. Amid the Houthi offensive on Marib, as well as Southern secessionist challenges to the internationally recognized government, the warring parties have shifted their focus away from Hodeidah. However, Hodeidah remained the most active governorate in Yemen, with shelling continuing on an almost daily basis — albeit at a lower level than in 2019. *For an overview of the war in Yemen over the past year, see ACLED's special report: [Ten Conflicts to Worry About in 2021](#).*
MEXICO	Decrease of 639 events, or 8%	Gang activity during lockdown. The confinement of Mexican citizens amid partial lockdown measures impacted gangs relying on diversified revenue sources, such as kidnapping for ransom, extortion, fuel theft, and human trafficking. Abductions perpetrated by unidentified armed groups or gangs dropped significantly last year, in addition to a decrease in gang attacks against civilians, particularly in areas most affected by pandemic-related restrictions and subsequent economic decline, such as in Ciudad de Mexico, Colima, and Quintana Roo. *For more on the pandemic's impact on gang violence, see the ACLED analysis piece: [Central America and COVID-19: The Pandemic's Impact on Gang Violence](#).*

While political violence decreased worldwide on an aggregate level, it increased in nearly half — 49% — of all countries around the world. Figure 3 depicts where the largest changes occurred.

Figure 3. Political violence declined in 2020 except in Africa
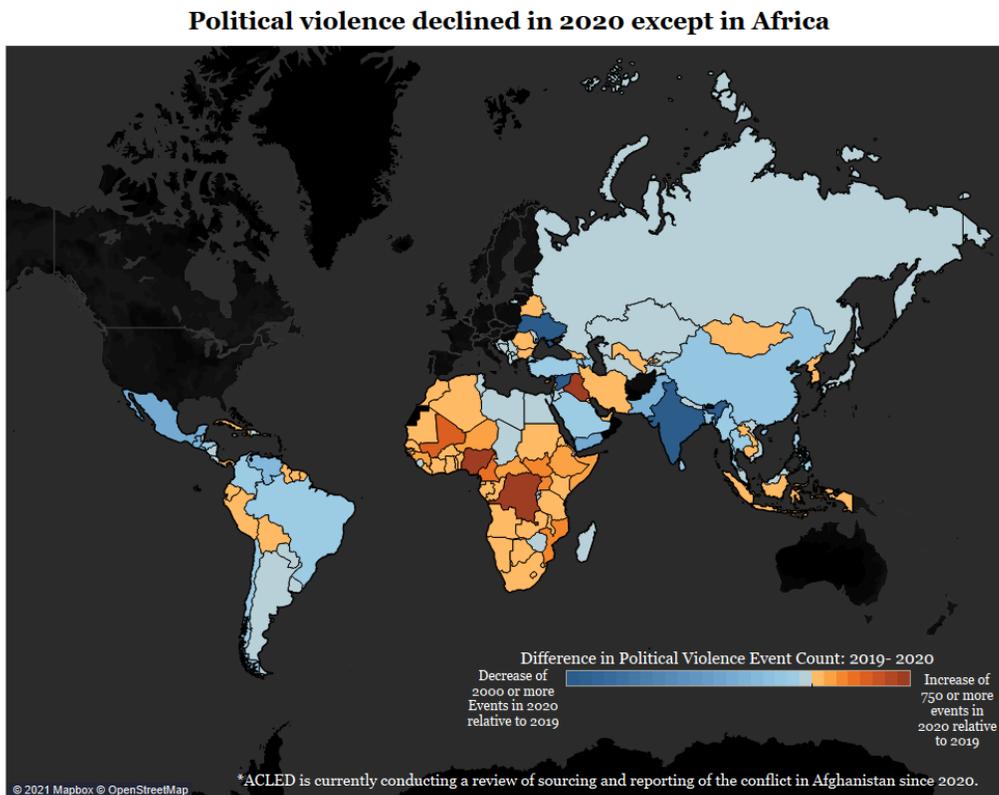
Political violence declined in every region[13] in 2020, except for Africa (*see Figure 4*), with the largest absolute decrease in the Middle East, which saw a decrease of 8,793 events, or 26%. This trend holds for reported fatalities as well. Every region aside from Africa saw a decline in fatalities, with trends again the most stark in the Middle East, where fatalities decreased by 17,275, or 36%.

In Africa, political violence rose by 4,328 events and 9,298 fatalities. This increase was driven by a variety of factors. In many African countries, political violence trends and geography remained relatively stable from previous years despite shocks like the pandemic, while in others — such as in Ethiopia, Uganda, and the Sahel — violence increased. The causes behind these increases vary from intensified subnational competition and state repression to new frontlines in the jihadi conflicts in Africa's northwest (*for more, see ACLED's piece in the* [Mail & Guardian](#)).

The reduction in violence in the Middle East is driven predominantly by decreases in battles and explosions/remote violence events, which declined by 10,127 and 12,253, respectively. An important exception, however, is Iraq, which experienced one of the largest increases in political violence in 2020. Table 3 presents the countries that registered the greatest increases in violence last year, outlining the changes and their contributing factors.

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13   ACLED is currently conducting a review of sourcing and reporting of the conflict in Afghanistan since 2020.

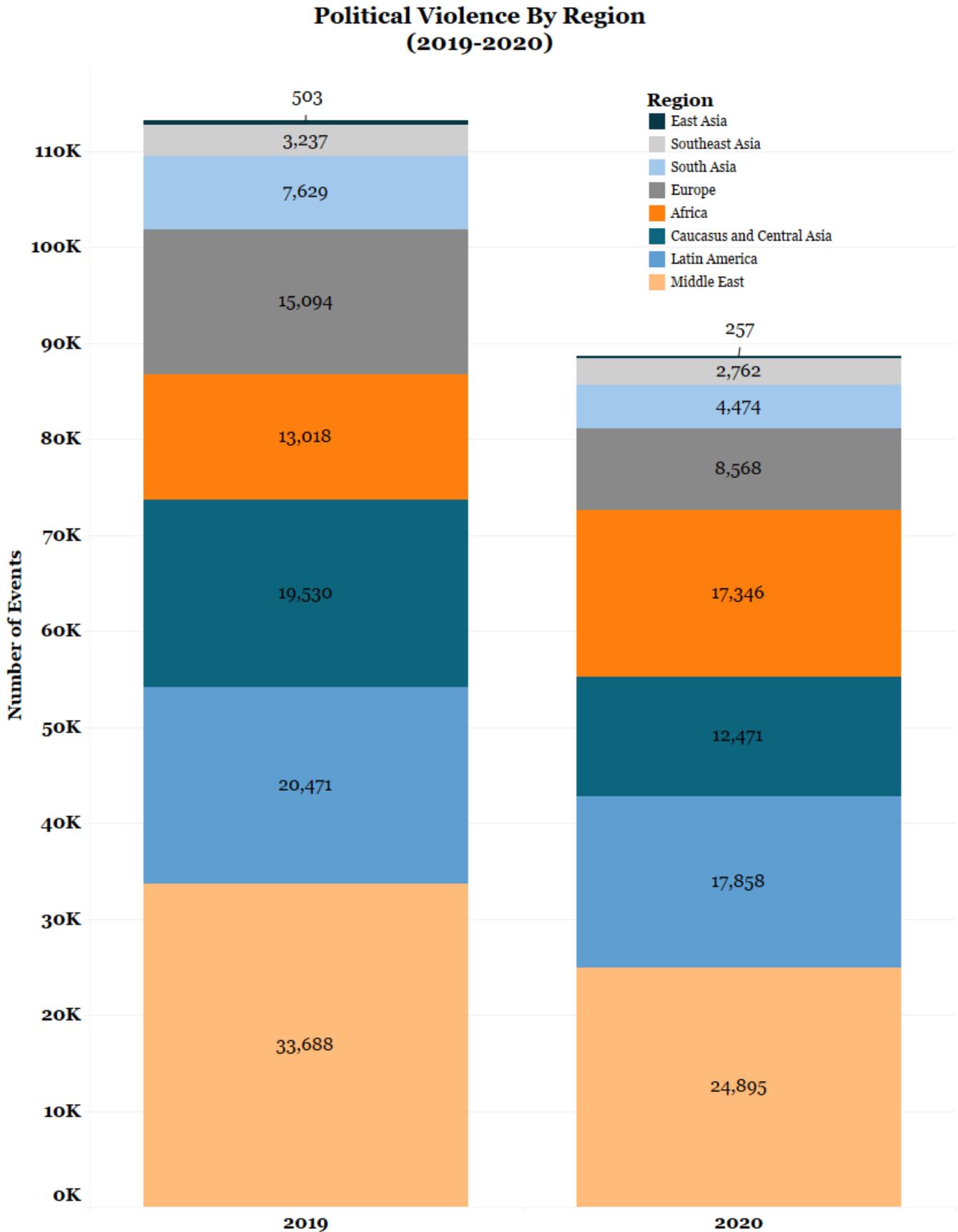## Figure 4. Political violence by region (2019-2020)

Political Violence By Region (2019-2020)

Region
- East Asia
- Southeast Asia
- South Asia
- Europe
- Africa
- Caucasus and Central Asia
- Latin America
- Middle East

2019:
- 503
- 3,237
- 7,629
- 15,094
- 13,018
- 19,530
- 20,471
- 33,688

2020:
- 257
- 2,762
- 4,474
- 8,568
- 17,346
- 12,471
- 17,858
- 24,895

Table 3. Countries with major increases in recorded number of political violence events, 2020

Country	Change in the number of political violence events since 2019	Contributing factors
NIGERIA	Increase of **883** events, or **63%**	Proliferation of gang and militia activities. Nigeria has seen a drastic and continued increase in violence in the northwest region of the country as a result of the proliferation of gang and militia activities. These new actors — who have multiple agendas ranging from economic interests to political interests — have been able to sustainably engage in violent activities because of the large number of small arms smuggled into Nigeria from the Sahel, combined with the inability of state security forces to contain the escalating violence and incentives that fuel the conflict. Additionally, as a result of the slowdown in economic activity due to the country's coronavirus lockdown measures, many non-state actors resorted to kidnapping for ransom across the state. In the northeast region, both Boko Haram factions (Jamatu Ahli is-Sunnah lid-Dawatai wal-Jihad [JAS] and Islamic State West Africa Province [ISWAP]) were able to take advantage of lockdown measures and the limited presence of military personnel to expand to the northwest, as well as to escalate attacks on IDP camps and military troops stationed in garrison towns, contributing further to an increase in political violence. *For more on kidnappings by Boko Haram, see the BBC's report with ACLED data: Nigeria school kidnappings: Is Boko Haram responsible?*
IRAQ	Increase of **840** events, or **38%**	Turkish offensive against PKK. Turkey launched the largest offensive against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) to date in 2020, resulting in a spike in political violence in Iraqi Kurdistan. An increase in attacks by Iranian-backed militias against the Global Coalition and foreign forces present in Iraq also contributed to the rise in violence in Iraq. The escalation of militia attacks came in retaliation for the killing of General Qassim Soleimani in early 2020. Violence against civilians also rose significantly, driven by an increase in attacks against activists who took part in the 2019 demonstrations against government corruption and unemployment. Attacks by the Islamic State likewise account for a substantial number of civilian targeting events. *For more on the Turkish offensive in Iraq against the PKK, see the ACLED analysis piece: Turkey-PKK Conflict: Summer 2020.*

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO	Increase of **788** events, or **46%**	Increased activity by non-state armed groups. Increases in violence can be linked to three key non-state armed groups: the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), the Nduma Defence of Congo (Renewal) (NDC-R), and the Cooperative for Development of Congo (CODECO). A large operation launched by the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC) in October 2019 against the ADF triggered a surge in clashes and deadly attacks against civilians. Meanwhile, the NDC-R split in July 2020, triggering an open conflict between the rival Guidon and Bwira factions. Subsequent reductions in territorial control resulted in a vacuum around several mining sites, leading to violent clashes between rival armed groups and attacks on civilians. In Ituri, an increase in attacks against civilians by CODECO was reported, primarily in the first half of 2020. Although the signing of a peace agreement with the DRC government by some CODECO factions led to a lull in activity, the violence prompted the rise of the Patriotic Force and Integrationist of Congo (FPIC), a relatively new militia connected to the Bira community, predominantly operating in the Irumu territory of Ituri; as well as self-defense militias, like the Zaïre. *For more on civilian targeting by the ADF, see the ACLED analysis piece:* [Democratic Republic of Congo Data Update: 2018-2020](#).
MALI	Increase of **405** events, or **68%**	Counterinsurgency operations in the Sahel. Jihadi militant activities surged in 2019 as the Al Qaeda-affiliated Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) launched a simultaneous offensive in the 'tri-state border' region. France convened a meeting in January 2020 to counter the offensive. In the wake of the meeting, French and Malian forces scaled-up military operations against the two jihadi militant organizations. The operations were also accompanied by increased civilian targeting. Fatalities resulting from the jihadi conflict in 2020 were the highest they have been in Mali since ACLED began collecting data on the conflict. *For more on conflict in the 'tri-state border' region of the Sahel and counterinsurgency operations, see ACLED's special report:* [Ten Conflicts to Worry About in 2021](#).
CAMEROON	Increase of **365** events, or **53%**	Ambazonian separatist conflict. An increase in conflict in the country's North-West and South-West regions was driven by three main factors. First, the 2019 Grand National Dialogue was seen by separatists as an attempt by the government to unilaterally impose conditions for peace, resulting in an increased effort by separatists to disrupt the main solutions proposed in that dialogue. This was evidenced by attacks on those participating in the 2020 regional election. Secondly, the separatists appeared more fragmented in 2020, with rival factions engaging in internal battles, or attacks on villages considered favorable to rival factions. Lastly, separatists undertook regular actions focused on securing access to resources, via kidnapping for ransom, and looting/diverting international aid. *For more on the short-lived ceasefire in Cameroon, see the ACLED report:* [Call Unanswered: A Review of Responses to the UN Appeal for a Global Ceasefire](#).

TRENDS BY ACTOR

A wide range of actors engaged in political violence in 2020 around the world.[14] Despite the continued rise of violent non-state actors, state forces participated in over half — 52% — of all political violence in 2020. In fact, three of the five most active groups were domestic state forces: the military of Ukraine, active largely in the Donbas region of the country; Houthi military forces,[15] which control large swathes of Yemen; and the military forces of Azerbaijan, which increased their activity during the Nagorno-Karabakh war. This trend indicates that even as conventional interstate wars become less common, and non-state armed groups become increasingly sophisticated, state forces remain powerful and deadly conflict actors *(see Table 4).*

Table 4. Actors participating in the highest number of political violence events in 2020

Actor	Actor type	Primary country of operation	Number of events	Main event type
Military Forces of Ukraine	State forces	Ukraine	7,065	Explosions/Remote violence
NAF: United Armed Forces of Novoros-siya	Rebel Forces	Ukraine	6,278	Battles
Taliban	Rebel Forces	Afghanistan[16]	5,504	Battles
Houthi Military Forces	State Forces	Yemen	5,260	Battles
Military Forces of Azerbaijan	State Forces	Azerbaijan	5,042	Battles

Many of these same actors are also part of the deadliest engagements recorded last year, including the Taliban (as well as the military forces of Afghanistan);[17] Houthi military forces (as well as the pro-Hadi military forces); and the military forces of Azerbaijan.

In Azerbaijan, following a round of clashes in July 2020, the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, controlled by the *de facto* Republic of Artsakh, intensified in September, with multiple lethal armed engagements along the Armenia-Azerbaijan and Azerbaijan-Artsakh Lines of Contact (LoC). The fighting led to thousands of military and civilian casualties, the destruction of civilian infrastructure, and territorial changes as Azerbaijani forces captured territory around the Nagorno-Karabakh region that had been under the control of Armenian forces. Despite the armistice agreement signed in November 2020, the impact of the conflict continues to be felt by civilians who fall victim to landmines planted during the fighting (*for more on this conflict, see ACLED's special report: [Ten Conflicts to Worry About in 2021](#)*).

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14   In addition to named actors, anonymous and unidentified armed groups are also increasingly active across a number of countries.

15   ACLED treats the forces allied with both the government of President Hadi and the Houthi-led executive bodies as state forces in Yemen. It is important to note that the classification does not imply legitimacy, but rather acknowledges the fact that there currently exist two distinct governing authorities exercising de facto control over different portions of Yemeni territory. For more on ACLED methodology decisions in Yemen, see [this primer](#).

16   While ACLED is currently conducting a review of sourcing and reporting of the conflict in Afghanistan since 2020 to ensure no events may have been missed, the Taliban still manages to be one of the most active conflict actors in the world — underlining the persistence of the Afghan War.

17   While ACLED is currently conducting a review of sourcing and reporting of the conflict in Afghanistan since 2020 to ensure no events may have been missed, the fact that both the Taliban and the military forces of Afghanistan both still manage to be part of some of the most deadly engagements around the world underscores the lethality of the Afghan War.

The military forces of Ukraine — the actor engaged in the most political violence in 2020 — also increased its activity more than any other actor last year. Other actors that significantly increased their conflict activity are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Actors with the greatest increase in activity in 2020

| Actor	Actor type	Primary country of operation	Difference in number of events since 2019	Percent increase since 2019
Military Forces of Ukraine	State forces	Ukraine	2,539	56%
Military Forces of Turkey	Other/External forces	Iraq	514	32%
Operation Restoring Hope	Other/External forces	Yemen	502	27%
STC: Southern Transitional Council	Rebel forces	Yemen	459	268%
Al Shabaab	Rebel forces	Somalia	432	33%

That conflict actors in Ukraine and Yemen significantly increased their activity helps to explain how these countries remained among the most violent places in the world last year, despite experiencing some of the largest overall declines in violence. Meanwhile, the rise in Turkish military activity in Iraq played a substantial role in the country registering the second highest increase in violence in the world — during a year when the Middle East saw the largest decline in violence on the aggregate.

Increased violence involving Al Shabaab, meanwhile, points to the persistent — and growing — threat the actor continues to pose in Africa. Political factionalism in Somalia has emboldened Al Shabaab over the past year, as the state is unable to mount a cohesive response to the group. Battles involving Al Shabaab significantly increased in 2020. As well, the targeted assassinations of senior political and military figures in 2020 reflects the weakened state of the federal and regional governments. There are ongoing concerns that Al Shabaab might be acting for the benefit of certain government actors.

Nearly all types of conflict actors reduced their activity overall between 2019 and 2020, except for identity militias (*see Figure 5*), or armed groups organized around a collective, common feature including community, ethnicity, region, religion, or livelihood.

In the four months immediately following the start of the pandemic, identity militias increased their activity by 70% compared to the four months prior *(for more, see ACLED's special report: A Great and Sudden Change: The Global Political Violence Landscape Before and After the COVID-19 Pandemic)*. Most of this increase was attributable to violence targeting civilians, particularly in Africa. Some of the most active groups last year include ethnic militias, such as Fulani ethnic militias in Nigeria or the Dan Na Ambassagou, an ethnic Dogon militia in Mali; tribal militias, such as the Tribal Mobilization Forces (TMF) in Iraq; indigenous militias, such as those in Chile; and militias organized to provide local security, such as the Volunteer for Defense of Homeland (VDP) in Burkina Faso. Such groups, often relegated to the 'periphery,' pose an important and growing threat. There was a proliferation of such actors in Africa especially, with 46% more distinct, named identity militias active in 2020 relative to 2019.

Figure 5. Political violence involvement by each actor type: 2019-2020
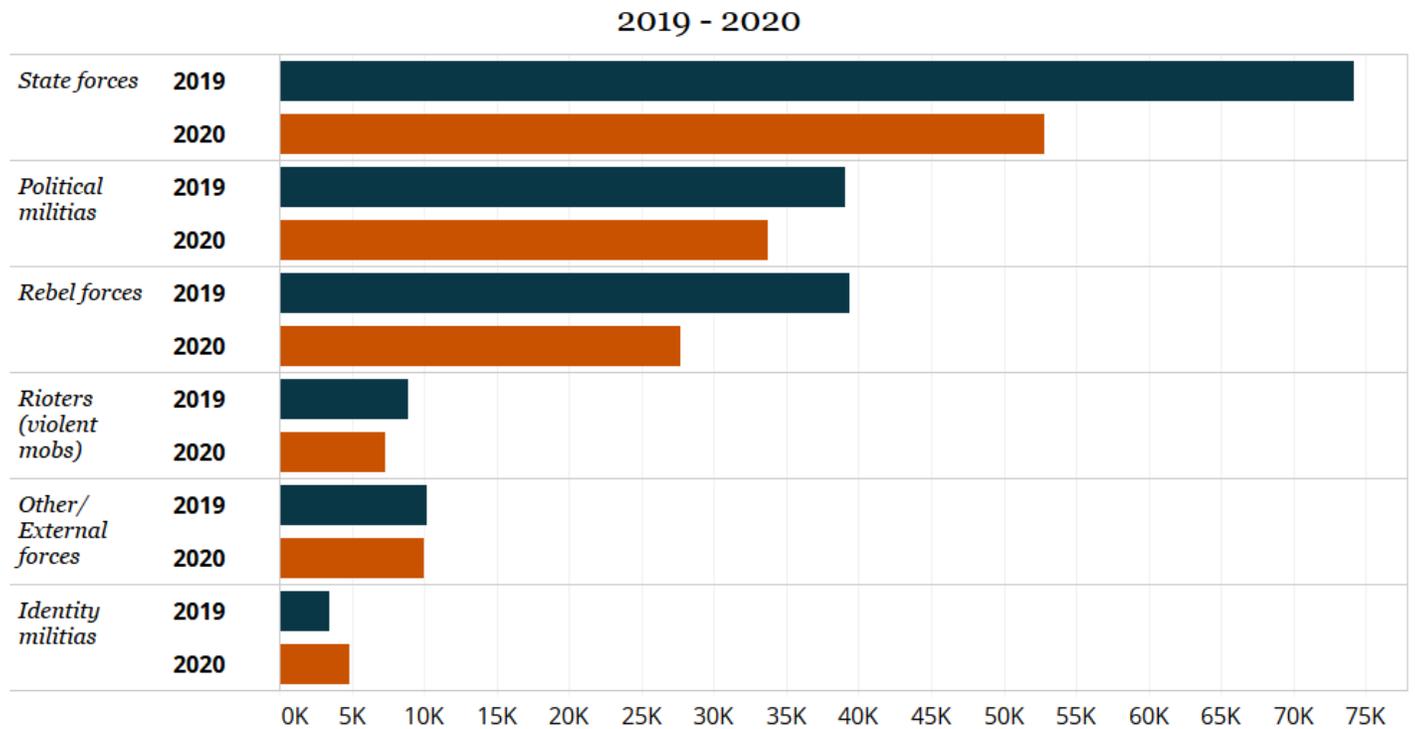
THREATS TO CIVILIANS

ACLED records a 9% decline in civilian targeting overall last year, with 34,074 events reported in 2019 compared to 30,908 in 2020. Civilian fatalities too declined by 7%, with 36,170 reported fatalities in 2019 compared to 33,790 in 2020. While civilian targeting and fatalities declined on the aggregate, civilians in certain spaces faced heightened risks, and civilian targeting increased in half of all countries covered by ACLED.

The countries home to the highest levels of civilian targeting are presented in Table 6. Civilians continued to come under attack in a variety of contexts, from conventional conflicts in Syria and Yemen, to gang wars in Mexico and Brazil. In some spaces, civilians came under multiple concurrent threats, such as in India, where they faced persistent mob and communal violence as well as conflicts in Kashmir and the Red Corridor.

Table 6. Countries home to most civilian targeting in 2020

Country	Number of events with direct civilian targeting	Number of reported civilian fatalities	Primary perpetrator of civilian targeting
Mexico	5,963	6,859	Anonymous or unidentified gangs
Brazil	2,978	2,570	Anonymous or unidentified gangs
Syria	2,141	1,957	Anonymous or unidentified armed groups
India	1,423	465	Rioters / violent mobs
Yemen	1,273	1,268	Houthi military forces

Civilians also continued to face a variety of different types of violence, perpetrated by a wide array of actors, as depicted in Table 7. Gang violence, particularly by anonymous or unidentified gangs, accounted for the most direct attacks on civilians in Mexico last year. Anonymous or unidentified armed groups are also responsible for the majority of sexual violence events reported in the DRC. Conventional warfare continued to contribute to some of the highest levels of civilian targeting: amid the war in Syria, civilians faced rising abductions and forced disappearances at the hands of the Syrian Democratic Forces (QSD); airstrikes by the Russian air force; and the detonation of remote explosives, landmines, and IEDs by anonymous or unidentified armed groups. Shelling by the Houthi military forces contributed to the high levels of civilian targeting in Yemen. Suicide bombings by anonymous or unidentified armed groups in Afghanistan likewise fueled instability and threats to civilians in the in the country.[18] Meanwhile, grenades detonated by Civil Protection Units accounted for violence against civilians involving Kurdish groups in Turkey. In India and Mexico, violent mobs and demonstrators continued to target civilians. And sole perpetrators[19] in the United States posed the greatest lethal threat to peaceful protesters, globally, with radicalized individuals ramming cars into demonstrators on at least 100 occasions, resulting in at least four fatalities last year.

Table 7. Civilian targeting by sub-event type in 2020

Event type	Sub-event type	Number of events targeting civilians across all countries of ACLED coverage	Number of fatalities stemming from these events	Countries where this violence is most common	Primary perpetrator of this violence in this country
Violence against civilians	Attack	21,092	28,271	Mexico (5,311 events, 6,808 reported fatalities)	Anonymous or unidentified gangs (2,917 events, 3,812 reported fatalities)
	Abduction/forced disappearance	2,352	0	Syria (458 events, 0 reported fatalities)	QSD: Syrian Democratic Forces (273 events, 0 reported fatalities)
	Sexual violence	300	157	Democratic Republic of Congo (68 events, 78 reported fatalities)	Anonymous or unidentified armed groups (32 events, 14 reported fatalities)

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18   While ACLED is currently conducting a review of sourcing and reporting of the conflict in Afghanistan since 2020 to ensure no events may have been missed, anonymous or unidentified ared groups still manage to be the primary perpetrator of suicide bombings around the world — underlining the heightened risk to civilians in the country.

19   Unique to the US context within ACLED coding is activity carried out by a single "lonewolf" without an affiliation to a specific named group. The actor is used when an individual is not clearly part of a group and acts alone, such as in the case of mass attacks (e.g. mass shootings, "lonewolf" bombings, car ramming attacks on crowds, etc.) or politically-motivated attacks. For more on ACLED methodology in the US context, see this primer.

Explosions/remote violence	Chemical weapon	0	0	N/A	N/A
	Air/drone strike	418	921	Syria (168 events, 420 reported fatalities)	Military forces of Russia (86 events, 229 reported fatalities)
	Shelling/artillery/missile attack	1,071	1,220	Yemen (335 events, 309 reported fatalities)	Houthi military forces (192 events, 175 reported fatalities)
	Remote explosive/landmine/IED	1,568	1,816	Syria (383 events, 387 reported fatalities)	Anonymous or unidentified armed groups (327 events, 348 reported fatalities)
	Suicide bomb	35	219	Afghanistan (11 events, 108 reported fatalities)	Anonymous or unidentified armed groups (10 events, 75 reported fatalities)
	Grenade	226	64	Turkey (33 events, 0 reported fatalities)	YPS: Civil Protection Units (13 events, 0 reported fatalities)
Riots	Mob violence	3,335	949	India (745 events, 161 reported fatalities)	Mobs (745 events, 161 reported fatalities)
	Violent demonstration	765	10	Mexico (123 events, 0 reported fatalities)	Rioters (123 events, 0 reported fatalities)
Protests	Excessive force against protesters	447	248	United States (113 events, 3 reported fatalities)	Sole perpetrator (77 events, 3 reported fatalities)

All forms of civilian targeting decreased from 2019 to 2020, save for abductions and forced disappearances. These increased dramatically in Nigeria (by 169%), Yemen (by 114%), Syria (by 36%), and the DRC (by 21%). In Syria, the QSD continued to be the primary perpetrators of abductions,[20] more than doubling such activity since last year. In the DRC, while anonymous and unidentified armed groups continued to be responsible for the most abductions in 2020, the ADF, the NDC-R, and Mayi Mayi militias all increased such activity as well. In Nigeria, anonymous and unidentified armed groups also remained responsible for the most abductions in 2020, though kidnappings by identity militias, such as Katsina communal militias or Fulani ethnic militias, as well as by Boko Haram factions, additionally contributed to this trend. In Yemen, Houthi military forces were
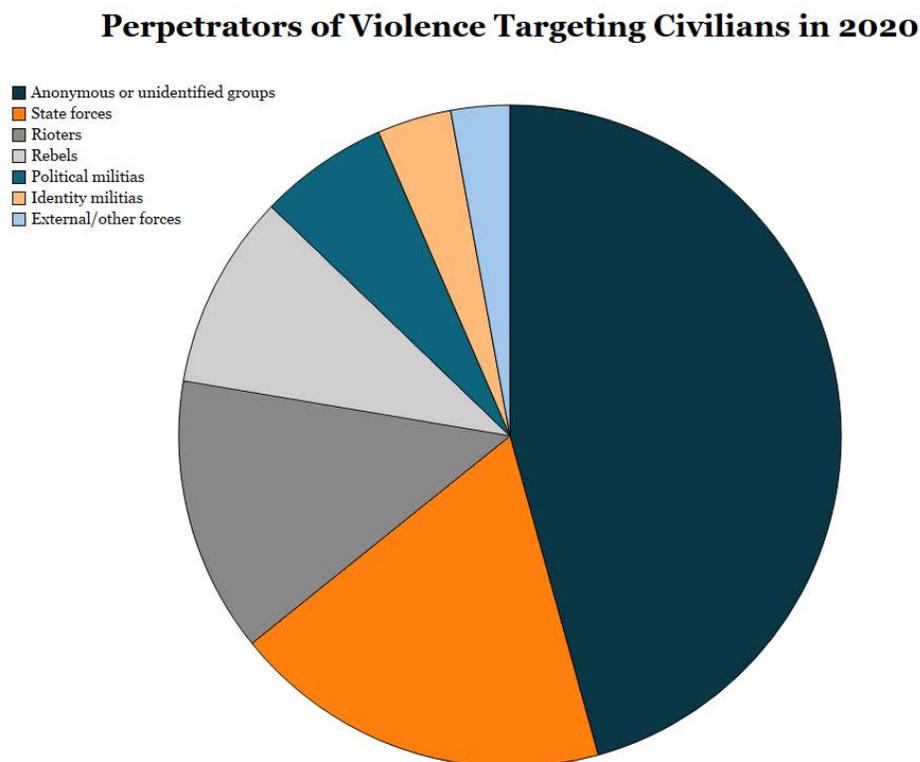
20   Unless arrests are carried out extrajudicially, they are not coded as *Abductions/forced disappearance* in ACLED data, and rather are coded with sub-event type *Arrests*. (In certain cases, state forces may carry out arrests extrajudicially; in such cases, their actions would hence be coded as *Abductions/forced disappearance*.) As such, arrests made by the Syrian regime are not included under forced disappearances here. ACLED codes at least 130 arrest events by regime forces in 2020; each event can involve the arrest of more than one person. For more on ACLED methodology, see the ACLED Codebook.

the primary perpetrators of forced disappearances, nearly doubling such activity since last year.

Anonymous or unidentified groups were responsible for the most violence targeting civilians around the world last year, accounting for 46% of all events and 47% of all reported civilian fatalities *(see Figure 6)*. Tracking only the violence perpetrated by known, named agents would obscure the full scope of threats faced by civilians, especially in contexts where unnamed groups are responsible for large proportions of civilian targeting, and in many cases, anonymity allows for groups to act on the behalf of elites who stand to benefit from such violence (*for more, see this ACLED analysis piece*). Anonymous or unidentified actors in Mexico, Brazil, and Syria, specifically, perpetrated the highest number of civilian targeting events last year.

Of identified actors, state forces were responsible for 17% of all civilian targeting and 15% of all reported civilian fatalities last year, followed by rioters and violent mobs, which were responsible for 13% of all civilian targeting and 3% of all civilian fatalities.

Figure 6. Perpetrators of violence targeting civilians in 2020

Perpetrators of Violence Targeting Civilians in 2020

Legend:
- Anonymous or unidentified groups
- State forces
- Rioters
- Rebels
- Political militias
- Identity militias
- External/other forces

Although Mexico experienced one of the greatest declines in violence in 2020, it was home to the most violence targeting civilians as well as the most reported civilian fatalities. In correlation with the overall decrease in violence in the country, violence against civilians also declined — though these trends were not uniform across all Mexican states. In nine states, violence targeting civilians perpetrated by gangs increased — sometimes drastically, like in the state of Zacatecas where violence increased by 172% from 2019 to 2020. Zacatecas has become a strategic area for the trafficking of fentanyl to the United States. The state is crossed with the main highways connecting the US border to the port of Colima — where the chemical precursors necessary for the production of fentanyl arrive from Asia. In addition, the state of Zacatecas has limited law enforcement capacity, making the state a prolific area for drug traffickers ([Infobae, 3 March 2020](#)). The Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG) has been seeking to challenge the Sinaloa Cartel which has been leading the fentanyl trade ([The

Guardian, 20 December 2020) (*for more on how the pandemic fueled gang violence in parts of Mexico, see this spotlight infographic from ACLED's COVID-19 Disorder Tracker*). The vast majority of violence targeting civilians in Mexico is perpetrated by gangs. Most incidents — nearly half , or 49% — are not attributed to a named group. In fact, the vast majority — 94% — of gang violence targeting civilians in Mexico is attributed to anonymous or unidentified gangs. This is both a function of the conflict landscape, the prioritization of anonymity, and a lack of more detailed reporting. Though Mexico is home to a large media landscape, reporting on political violence and unrest poses a serious threat to journalists.[21]

Meanwhile, in Brazil, major drug trafficking and militia groups effectively ruled over neighborhoods and communities in several urban areas, continually clashing over territorial control. In 2020, attacks against political candidates and politicians increased. The number of attacks reached its peak in the months leading up to the municipal elections on 15 November. Municipal officials wield substantial power over cities and are often targeted by criminal groups, including militias and drug traffickers (*for more on attacks targeting municipal candidates in Brazil, see this ACLED infographic.*)

In India, rioters involved in mob violence are responsible for most violence targeting civilians. Despite a nationwide shutdown at the end of March, attacks on civilians continued and were in many cases fueled by misinformation about the pandemic. Health workers, people suspected of spreading the coronavirus, and members of the minority Muslim community were frequently targeted by mobs motivated by conspiracy theories and rumors linked to the health crisis (*for more on how the pandemic fueled violence against health workers and Muslims in India, see this spotlight infographic from ACLED's COVID-19 Disorder Tracker*).

Of named actors, the perpetrators responsible for the most civilian targeting in 2020 include the Houthi military forces in Yemen, the Afghan military,[22] the QSD in Syria, the Philippine police, and Islamist insurgents in Mozambique. Some of these groups — including the QSD and Islamist insurgents in Mozambique — were also among those that most increased their targeting of civilians over the past year. Others on that list include ISGS in the Sahel, Fulani ethnic militias in Nigeria, and CODECO in the DRC. Some of these groups are also among the named actors responsible for the most reported civilian fatalities in 2020: these include the Houthi military forces in Yemen and Islamist insurgents in Mozambique. Others on the list include the ADF in the DRC, the Taliban in Afghanistan,[23] and Samri Youth militias alongside the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in Ethiopia.

In Mozambique's northern Cabo Delgado province, an increasingly sophisticated Islamist insurgency has contributed to worsening insecurity and an increasing threat to civilians. The rising violence can be attributed to an unexpected escalation in the insurgency's sophistication, coordination, and capabilities accelerated by the occupation of Mocimboa da Praia. Allowing the sustained occupation of Mocimboa da Praia, along with the government's unwillingness to accept direct military support, has played into the insurgency's hands. *Cabo Ligado* — or 'connected cape,' ACLED's Mozambique conflict observatory — has provided enhanced monitoring of these trends, and ACLED's *Conflict Pulse* conflict prediction tool has forecasted increased violence against civilians by the insurgents throughout the past year (*for more on the Cabo Delgado insurgency in Mozambique, see ACLED's special report: Ten Conflicts to Worry About in 2021*).

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21   For more on ACLED's sourcing strategy in Mexico, see this primer.

22   While ACLED is currently conducting a review of sourcing and reporting of the conflict in Afghanistan since 2020 to ensure no events may have been missed, the Afghan military still manages to be one of the primary named perpetrators of civilian targeting around the world — underlining the heightened risk to civilians in the country.

23   While ACLED is currently conducting a review of sourcing and reporting of the conflict in Afghanistan since 2020 to ensure no events may have been missed, the Taliban still manages to be one of the deadliest named perpetrators of civilian targeting around the world — underlining the heightened risk to civilians in the country.

DEMONSTRATIONS

At the start of the pandemic, demonstrations declined significantly across all regions covered by ACLED amid lockdown measures to control the spread of the virus (*for more on the global decline in protest activity at the start of the pandemic, see this spotlight infographic from ACLED's COVID-19 Disorder Tracker*). Governments around the world banned large gatherings, including protests, and many demonstrators stayed off the streets as the pandemic's death toll skyrocketed. In the first four months following the declaration of the pandemic, demonstrations fell by over a third, or 35%, In other contexts that had not seen large-scale mobilization in 2019, new movements emerged over the course of 2020 as can be seen in Figure 7 (*for more, see ACLED's special report: A Great and Sudden Change: The Global Political Violence Landscape Before and After the COVID-19 Pandemic*). In some contexts new forms of protest began to emerge — such as pot-banging protests in Brazil, balcony protests in Spain, and car protests in South Korea — though overall the restrictions imposed in early 2020 stifled many of the large-scale social movements of 2019 (Foreign Policy, 21 July 2020). ACLED tracked these trends as part of the special COVID-19 Disorder Tracker project.

Figure 7. Demonstrations in 2020
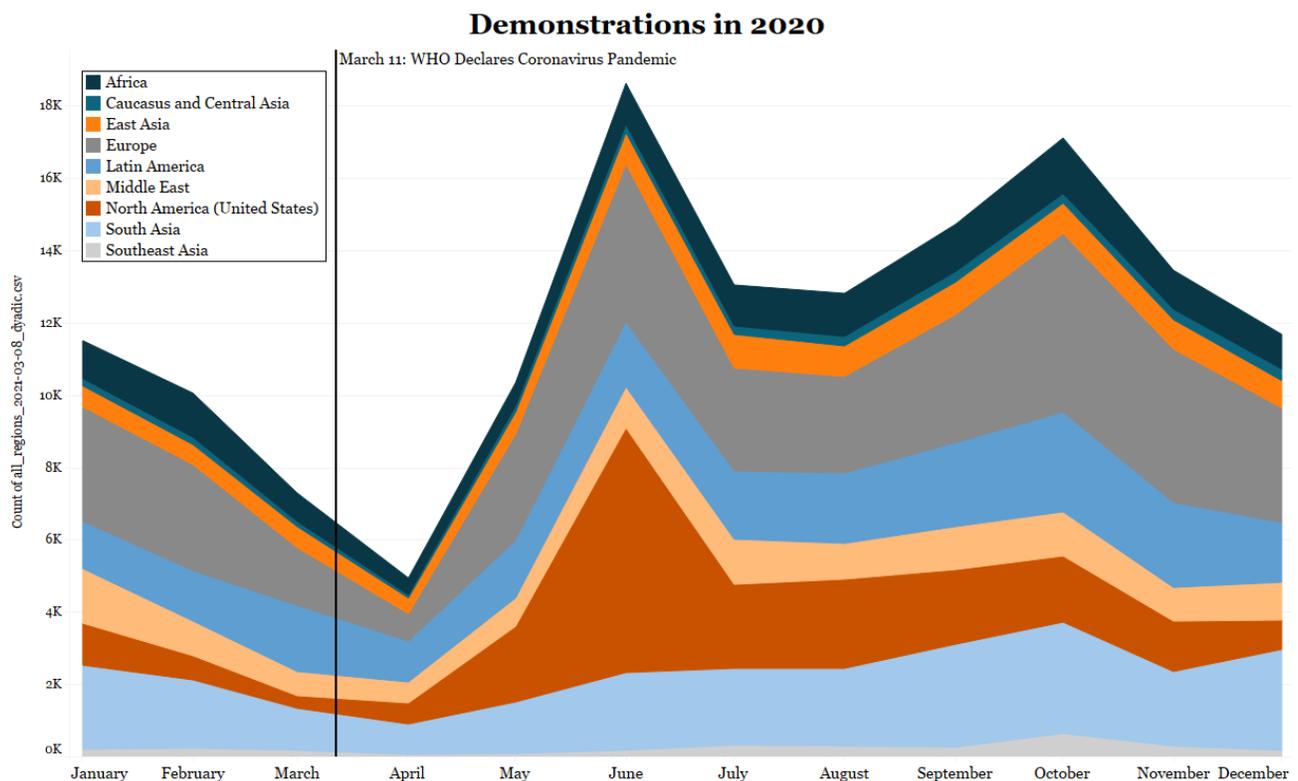
However, after several months, demonstration rates in many regions began to increase again, at times even more rapidly than they decreased. In some cases, demonstration activity increased to even higher levels than before the pandemic. Many of the social movements of 2019 were driven by mistrust of political leaders and dissatisfaction with the government *(for example, see ACLED 2019: The Year in Review)*. Government failures to adequately address the health crisis have served to exacerbate many of the grievances that were already fueling unrest before the pandemic. As a result, these movements soon resurfaced, and often with a vengeance. For example, Iraq, which had seen an explosion of demonstrations in late 2019 over anger at government corruption and the poor provision of public services, saw demonstrations plummet from a high of 372 events in November 2019 to a low of 41 events in March 2020, directly following the start of the pandemic. And yet, Iraq

ultimately experienced one of the largest increases in demonstration activity by the end of 2020. The pandemic's economic fallout contributed to unemployment and delays in salaries, which, together with an electricity crisis, drove demonstrators to the street to express further dissatisfaction with the government (*for more on Iraq's October Revolution, see this* [ACLED report](#).)

Overall, despite the initial decline, demonstrations rose in 2020 relative to 2019.[24] This trend was not uniform, however: in East Asia and South Asia, the total number of demonstrations declined. Still, even within these regions, trends are again varied: India, Pakistan, and South Korea were among the countries with the highest numbers of demonstrations in 2020.

Table 8 presents the countries that registered the greatest increases in demonstration activity from 2019 to 2020,[25] outlining the contributing factors. In many cases, the pandemic served to exacerbate existing grievances, particularly in countries like Iraq, Pakistan, Argentina, and Mexico where dissatisfaction over government corruption or poor economic performance persists. As well, the pandemic did not stop demonstrators in Belarus from taking to the streets after a rigged election ensured the continued rule of President Alexander Lukashenko. The protest movements driving the biggest increases in demonstrations have been largely peaceful; nevertheless, some faced repression at the hands of government authorities. This was especially true in Belarus where 16% of demonstrations were met with intervention.

Table 8. Top five countries with the greatest increase in demonstrations in 2020

Country	Number of events (difference relative to 2019)	% of demonstrations involving peaceful protesters	% of demonstrations involving intervention by law enforcement	Protest movement
PAKISTAN	8,209 (+1,843)	99%	<1%	**A range of movements**. Journalists in Pakistan organized almost daily nationwide protests against the arrest and detention of the owner and editor-in-chief of a prominent media outlet in March 2020. The arrest is believed to be an attack on media freedom. Additionally, protests took place throughout the year against India's policies in Jammu & Kashmir. Lastly, a new alliance of opposition parties — the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) — started an anti-government protest movement focusing on inflation. *For more on demonstrations in Pakistan, see this [spotlight infographic](#) from ACLED's COVID-19 Disorder Tracker.*

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24   This trend looks only at trends across countries for which ACLED coverage extends to both 2019 and 2020 — meaning that the United States as well as a number of countries in Europe are not included here. For more on ACLED's temporal coverage across countries, see [this regularly updated list](#).

25   This trend looks only at trends across countries for which ACLED coverage extends to both 2019 and 2020 — meaning that the United States as well as a number of countries in Europe are not included here. For more on ACLED's temporal coverage across countries, see [this regularly updated list](#).

ARGENTINA	2,863 (+1,671)	96%	3%	**Anti-government demonstrations.** Opposition groups in Argentina demonstrated over a broad variety of demands, including the rejection of a controversial judicial reform bill and the decision to nationalize one of the largest grain exporter companies, the Vicentín. Argentinians also took to the streets against President Alberto Fernández's handling of the coronavirus pandemic and the imposition of strict quarantine measures. The pandemic exacerbated the economic crisis in the country, leading labor groups to demand increased salaries and the reinstatement of dismissed workers. Additionally, an abortion bill approved by the Senate on 30 December sparked widespread demonstrations both for and against the bill at the end of the year. *For more on demonstrations in Argentina in 2020, see this [spotlight infographic](#) from ACLED's COVID-19 Disorder Tracker.*
BELARUS	1,755 (+1,585)	99%	16%	**Anti-Lukashenko. Demonstrations spiked in Belarus in the run-up to the fraudulent August 2020 elections.** Demonstrators demanded the resignation of President Alexander Lukashenko, who has ruled the country since 1994. They have also called for the prosecution of members of the security service who have engaged in crackdowns on demonstrators. Lukashenko's government has floated sham reforms in an effort to assuage demonstrators. He continues to maintain power with the support of Russia. *For more on the movement against Lukashenko, see this ACLED infographic: [Lukashenko Versus Belarus: The State Against the People](#).*
IRAQ	2,226 (+1,097)	81%	10%	**Political and economic turmoil.** From December 2019 to May 2020, Iraq was without a prime minister and government. This led to an initial increase in demonstrations during the first half of 2020. The second half of 2020 was dominated by the economic ramifications of the pandemic. Most demonstrations revolved around unemployment and salary delays. Demonstrations in the Iraqi Kurdistan region also increased significantly in 2020. *For more on demonstrations in Iraq, see this ACLED analysis piece: [Iraq's October Revolution: Six Months On](#).*

MEXICO	5,968 (+833)	95%	2%	**Coronavirus-related demonstrations.** The government's slow and ineffectual response to the coronavirus pandemic sparked demonstrations beginning in March 2020. Demonstrations were initially spearheaded by health workers who demanded stricter government policies and access to personal protective equipment. However, demonstrations progressively shifted to a more economic focus, involving labor groups and demands the resumption of business activities, as well as increased government support. *For more on demonstrations in Mexico, see this [spotlight infographic](#) from ACLED's COVID-19 Disorder Tracker.*

ACLED records the highest number of demonstrations last year, by far, in the United States. In total, the US registered almost as many demonstrations in 2020 as the next two countries — India and Pakistan — combined. The US is also home to the highest number of demonstrations met with intervention by law enforcement. Other countries that top that list include India, Chile, Turkey, and Belarus.

The US was home to multiple overlapping protest movements in 2020. The resurgence of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement sparked by the police killing of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, began at the end of May and triggered a surge of demonstrations organized around victims of police violence and racism that quickly spread from Minneapolis, the site of Floyd's death, throughout the country and the world (*for more on demonstrations associated with the BLM movement in the US, see [this ACLED report](#).*) Counter-demonstrators and groups opposed to the movement, like right-wing militias, gathered at protests — often armed — throughout the summer with the stated goal of 'keeping the peace' and supporting law enforcement, at times prompting clashes (*for more on right-wing militias in the US, see [ACLED's joint report](#) with MilitiaWatch*). While the BLM movement has been overwhelmingly peaceful, it has been met with a heavy-handed response by law enforcement. The police response to BLM stood in stark contrast to the muted approach to right-wing demonstrations, including the 'Stop the Steal' movement, which challenges the results of the November presidential election, backing former President Donald Trump's unfounded allegations of mass voter fraud (*for more on the 'Stop the Steal' movement, see [this ACLED report](#)*). 'Stop the Steal' mobilization culminated in a deadly riot at the US Capitol in January 2021. In addition to the BLM and 'Stop the Steal' movements, the coronavirus pandemic also fueled demonstrations across the country during the year, with opposition to COVID-19 restrictions ushering in a wave of 'reopen' protests often linked to broader right-wing and far-right militia organizing (*for more on the pandemic's impact on protest patterns in the US, see [this ACLED report](#)*).

CONCLUSION

The data on disorder in the pandemic year paint a complex picture, underlining the importance of measuring threats across multiple indicators. Even as political violence declined overall, it increased in more countries than it decreased. Many of the countries home to the most violence and fatalities were also home to the biggest declines in violence, indicating that violence reduction alone cannot resolve entrenched conflicts. Not all wars look the same — from the struggle for a monopoly on power, like in Yemen; to those where the frontlines of the conflict have remained frozen since 2015, like in Ukraine; to those where criminal gang violence has begun to challenge public security and state authority, like in Mexico.

While civilian targeting and reported fatalities declined from 2019 to 2020, civilian targeting increased in half of all countries covered by ACLED. Certain populations faced a range of heightened and distinct risks — from the

threat of conventional war and gang violence to communal conflicts. The risk of abduction and forced disappearance increased for civilians, especially those in countries like Syria, Nigeria, and Yemen.

A variety of conflict agents remain active around the world. State forces continued to be the most active, involved in over half of all violent events recorded globally. Violence involving identity militias — like ethnic and tribal militias, or local security providers — is rising. And these agents have proliferated in regions like Africa. Tracking the activity of anonymous or unidentified armed groups is also integral: these groups pose the greatest threat to civilians, and are responsible for over half of all reported civilian fatalities around the world. Tracking only the violence perpetrated by known, named agents would do much to obscure the threat that civilians face, especially in contexts where unnamed groups are responsible for high proportions of civilian targeting

Lastly, not even a global pandemic could stop protesters from taking to the streets — and in some cases it fueled rising unrest. Demonstrations increased around the world last year, in some cases to higher levels than before the health crisis. While restrictions on movement did much to diminish protest activity in the early days of the pandemic, government mismanagement of the public health response further exacerbated the existing grievances of dormant social movements. The result: many of these movements returned with a vengeance, while a number of new movements were born in reaction to government failures amid the crisis. While some protest movements have seen a heavy-handed response from law enforcement and government authorities — such as those in Belarus in opposition to the Lukashenko administration, or those in support of the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States — both intervention into demonstrations and fatalities stemming from demonstrations declined overall from the year prior, and demonstrators less frequently resorted to violent or destructive activity.

In all, 2020 was an unprecedented year, one that posed new security challenges for much of the world. While the pandemic initially served as an obstacle to protest, demonstrations are resurging. And while violence declined in the aggregate, conflict is likely to increase significantly in the wake of the pandemic — potentially to a higher point than in either 2019 or 2020. A flexible understanding of disorder patterns, coupled with the ability to look at trends granularly to grasp how distinct dynamics play out in local contexts, is critical in understanding our world — especially if we are to reflect on the past year's trends in order to shape our expectations for the future.

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