

ACLED 2021: THE YEAR IN REVIEW

March 2022



Key trends in political
violence and demonstration
activity around the world

The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Few conflicts ended in 2021, and many intensified. Overall levels of political violence remained steady, while its lethality surged to new heights. Civilians bore the brunt, with increases in both violence targeting civilians and civilian fatalities. Where conflict declined last year, fragile ceasefires often obscured the growing risk of escalation – now seen in Yemen and Ukraine. Where long wars ended, such as in Afghanistan, new risks have emerged for civilians.

Against this backdrop, social unrest continued to build during the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic, with a rise in demonstrations all around the world, from rallies against public health restrictions to mass pro-democracy protest movements. Authorities responded violently in places like Myanmar and Colombia, leading to a spike in demonstrator fatalities.

As the world struggles to come to grips with a third year of the pandemic – as well as the potentially devastating consequences of [Russia's invasion of Ukraine](#) – global insecurity is likely to only deepen and evolve throughout 2022 (*for more, see ACLED's [special report](#) on 10 additional conflicts worry about in 2022*).

Over the course of 2021 and early 2022, ACLED expanded to Canada, Oceania, Antarctica, and all remaining small states and territories, bringing the dataset to full global coverage. Our 2021 annual report reviews the past 12 months of data on political violence and demonstration activity around the world. Key findings are outlined below.

Key Findings:

Political violence remained at similar levels relative to 2020. Political violence decreased by less than 2% — or 1,449 events — in 2021. In total, ACLED records 94,833 political violence events in 2020 and 93,384 in 2021. While regions like Central Asia and the Caucasus, Europe, and South Asia experienced significant decreases in violence, Southeast Asia saw an increase of 190%, driven by the military coup and ensuing crisis in Myanmar.

Reported fatalities rose significantly. Fatalities from political violence increased by 12% — or 15,740 deaths — compared to 2020. In total, ACLED records 131,370 fatalities in 2020 and 147,110 in 2021. Political violence was deadlier in 2021 in every region except for Europe and the Middle East. Fatalities in Central Asia and the Caucasus increased by more than 11%, despite a decrease in political violence events.

Civilian targeting and civilian fatalities increased. In 2021, civilians were more frequently targeted by political violence than in 2020, with far deadlier consequences. ACLED records a 12% increase in civilian targeting overall last year, with 33,331 events reported in 2020 compared to 37,185 in 2021. Civilian fatalities too increased by 8%, with 35,889 reported fatalities in 2020 compared to 38,658 in 2021. The greatest increases in civilian targeting were recorded in Myanmar, Palestine, Colombia, Nigeria, and Burkina Faso.

Anonymous armed, organized groups, as well as state forces, remained the most active perpetrators of violence targeting civilians. For the second consecutive year, anonymous or unidentified armed, organized groups top the list of most active perpetrators of civilian targeting, responsible for the largest proportion at 46% of all events reported in 2021. Of identified actors, state forces continued to pose the greatest threat to civilians last year, responsible for 16% of civilian targeting and 14% of civilian fatalities.

Despite the continued rise of violent non-state actors, including rebel groups and political militias, state forces remained the most active conflict agents. While overall state engagement in political violence fell sub-

stantially — by 18% or 10,195 events — for the second year, state forces remained the dominant conflict agents globally. State forces engaged in 46% of all political violence events in 2021.

Ceasefires obscured persistent fragility in 2021. The greatest decreases in political violence took place in contexts where ceasefires and power-sharing agreements were reached in 2020 and early 2021. These include: Azerbaijan and Armenia over the breakaway Artsakh Republic;¹ Ukraine and Russian-aligned separatists in Donetsk and Luhansk; Pakistan and India along the disputed Line of Control (LoC); and rival governments in Libya. Similarly, in Yemen, a decrease in violence in 2021 was driven by the formation of a power-sharing cabinet between the Southern Transitional Council (STC) and the Hadi government in the southern governorates in late 2020, alongside international engagement in peace negotiations on the Houthi conflict. Despite the declines in violence, each context remains deeply fragile and susceptible to further outbreaks of violence. In both Yemen and Ukraine, this fragility was readily apparent as fighting continued throughout 2021 and ultimately escalated in early 2022.

Demonstration activity continued to increase in the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Demonstrations rose by 9% — or 13,104 events — in 2021, compared with 2020. While this growth was driven by a range of movements, mass anti-government demonstrations were particularly prominent in those countries that registered the greatest increases in demonstration activity. These included mass demonstrations against health, education, social, and economic policies in Colombia; anti-coup demonstrations in Myanmar; water and wage-related demonstrations in Iran; and, demonstration movements against COVID-19 restrictions in France and Italy.

1. The disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh is internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan. ACLED refers to the *de facto* state and its institutions as Artsakh — the name by which the *de facto* territory refers to itself. For more on methodology and coding decisions around *de facto* states, see [this methodology primer](#).

GLOSSARY

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. *Mob violence* is more similar to other forms of political violence than it is to violent demonstrations (described below). Including *Mob violence* within 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.²

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

2. 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 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.

sub-event type *Excessive force against protesters* coded under event type *Protests*.

While ACLED records ***fatalities***, it is important to remember that the set includes *reported* fatalities. Fatality numbers are frequently the most biased and poorly reported component of conflict data. The totals 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](#).

ACLED IN 2021

[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 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 in multiple regions over the course of 2021, extending coverage to all remaining countries in [Europe](#), as well as 13 previously uncovered [small states and territories in Africa and Asia](#). These expansions brought ACLED coverage to more than 200 countries and territories around the world. In *ACLED 2021: The Year in Review*, we analyze the past year of data on political violence and demonstrations across these new regions of coverage, as well as prior coverage areas, including: Africa, South Asia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Latin America and the Caribbean, Central Asia and the Caucasus, East Asia, Europe, and the United States.

In early 2022, ACLED achieved [global coverage](#) with expansions to Canada, Oceania, Antarctica, and all remaining small states and territories, which extends to the start of 2021. These new areas of coverage are therefore not included in this report's comparative analysis of 2020 and 2021. However, data on these countries are included in the analysis of specific trends in 2021 and will be included in next year's annual report comparing trends in 2021 to 2022.

In addition to these geographic expansions, ACLED launched its second observatory, the [Ethiopia Peace Observatory \(EPO\)](#), to enhance local data collection and analysis on political violence and protest trends across Ethiopia. The launch of the EPO follows the launch of [Cabo Ligado](#) the year prior, in partnership with Zitamar News and Mediafax, to track the insurgency in Mozambique's northern Cabo Delgado province.

ACLED also launched an initiative to enable the monitoring of political violence targeting *women in politics* (PVTWIP) in late 2021. This built on [an initial data release](#) on political violence targeting women (PVTW) in partnership with the Robert Strauss Center for International Security and Law at The University of Texas at Austin in 2019. ACLED has now expanded the data to introduce identity types for the targets of PVTW, including further detail that specifically enables the tracking of PVTWIP for the first time. The new data and [accompanying analysis](#) show that PVTWIP has increased over time in nearly all regions of ACLED coverage.

Moreover, ACLED also launched the [Early Warning Research Hub](#) last year.³ The hub provides a suite of interactive resources aimed at supporting data-driven initiatives to anticipate and respond to emerging crises. They include: [Subnational Threat & Surge Trackers](#) to track and map subnational conflict spikes; the [Volatility & Risk Predictability Index](#) to track the frequency and intensity of conflict surges; the [Conflict Change Map](#) to identify countries at risk of rising political violence; and the [Emerging Actor Tracker](#) to monitor the proliferation of new non-state actors. As part of this hub, ACLED also expanded its existing project to [map territorial control in Syria](#) to cover [Yemen](#). With the release of quarterly updates, this project allows viewers to examine in detail the changing scope, focus, and role of various actors in the Yemen conflict.

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 new light on key trends in global conflict and disorder across 2021.

3. Following the initial beta launch in 2021, ACLED officially launched an updated and expanded version of the hub in early 2022.

GLOBAL DISORDER

Disorder increased by 5% across all regions of ACLED coverage from 2020 to 2021. This overall growth in disorder was driven by increased demonstration activity, as political violence largely held steady, with a slight decline of less than 2%. This marks the second consecutive annual decline in aggregate political violence as well as the second consecutive increase in demonstration activity.

This slight decrease in political violence, however, belies worsening conflict dynamics in many parts of the world. Several regions experienced substantial increases in violence, including Southeast Asia, Africa, and South America. Across these regions, a wide range of dynamics contributed to the worsening violence. In Myanmar, the military coup sparked a violent crackdown and widespread conflict. In Ethiopia and Nigeria, new threats continued to appear and compound existing sources of violence nationwide. In other contexts, existing conflict actors deepened activity, as was the case with Al Shabaab insurgents in Somalia and non-state armed groups in Colombia.

Moreover, political violence also became substantially deadlier in 2021. Fatalities from political violence increased by 12% compared to 2020, with increases in every region save for Europe and the Middle East. This was driven by significant increases in fatalities in Afghanistan, amid the Taliban takeover; in post-coup Myanmar; and in Ethiopia, amid the ongoing Tigray war.

The countries that experienced the most violence in 2020 once again topped the list in 2021: Syria, Yemen, Ukraine, Mexico, and Afghanistan. While nearly all of these countries — except Mexico — registered overall decreases in violence from 2020 to 2021, the fact that they remain the world's most violent countries points to the entrenched nature of their respective conflicts. In Mexico, gang violence not only continued at levels comparable to an active war zone in 2021, but actually worsened.

In a reversal of previous trends, nearly all types of conflict actors increased their activity overall between 2020 and 2021, except for state forces and external/other forces.⁴ Despite this exception, state forces remained the dominant conflict agents globally, engaging in 46% of all political violence in 2021. In 2021, three of the five most active conflict agents around the world were domestic state forces: the Ukrainian military, which regularly exchanged ceasefire violations with separatists in Donbas — also among the most world's most active groups; the defeated Afghan military; and the Myanmar military, in its attempts to suppress anti-coup resistance. A fourth, the Taliban, transformed from rebel to state forces with their takeover of Afghanistan in August.

The threat that civilians face varies across different spaces, from the risks associated with large-scale conflicts, such as in Syria and Myanmar, to the risks stemming from being caught in the crossfire of gang wars, like in Mexico and Brazil. In some spaces, civilians face concurrent and overlapping threats, as is the case in Nigeria, which is home to persistent mob violence and communal conflict, as well as an Islamist insurgency in the northeast and a separatist conflict in the southeast. The greatest increases in civilian targeting were recorded in Myanmar, Palestine, Colombia, Nigeria, and Burkina Faso.

Overall, civilian targeting rose by 12% across all regions covered by ACLED from 2020 to 2021. For the second consecutive year, anonymous or unidentified groups top the list of most violent perpetrators of civilian targeting, responsible for the largest proportion in 2021, at 46% of all events. Of identified actors, state forces continued to pose the greatest threat to civilians last year, responsible for 16% of civilian targeting and 14% of civilian fatalities. Rioters and violent mobs remained the next most frequent perpetrators of civilian targeting, responsible for 14% of events, though only 3% of civilian fatalities.

Despite widespread attention on the pandemic, climate change, and economic challenges, these important developments actually had little direct effect on conflict trends throughout 2021. At the same time, these chal-

4. These actors include international organizations, state forces active outside of their main country of operation, private security firms and their armed employees, and hired mercenaries acting independently.

lenges did fuel social movements and demonstrations, which increased considerably. However, there are few links between widespread social movements and violent conflicts. Protesters rarely became armed, organized violent groups, but often emerged alongside or in conjunction with these groups as they responded differently to similar challenges. A notable exception to this pattern has been the proliferation of armed resistance to the Myanmar military junta following the coup in February 2021. While anti-coup demonstration activity mushroomed in the immediate aftermath of the coup, it has since been eclipsed by acts of armed resistance. Though the scale of crossover between demonstrators and armed actors in Myanmar remains difficult to gauge, reports suggest that in at least some cases, demonstrators actively transformed their activities from peaceful to armed resistance as a result of the violent response they saw from the military ([Al Jazeera, 15 June 2021](#)).

Demonstration activity increased by 9% across all regions covered by ACLED. This growth was driven by a range of movements, including mass anti-government and anti-coup demonstrations in Colombia and Myanmar, respectively; economic-related demonstrations in Iran; and, demonstration movements against COVID-19 restrictions in France and Italy.

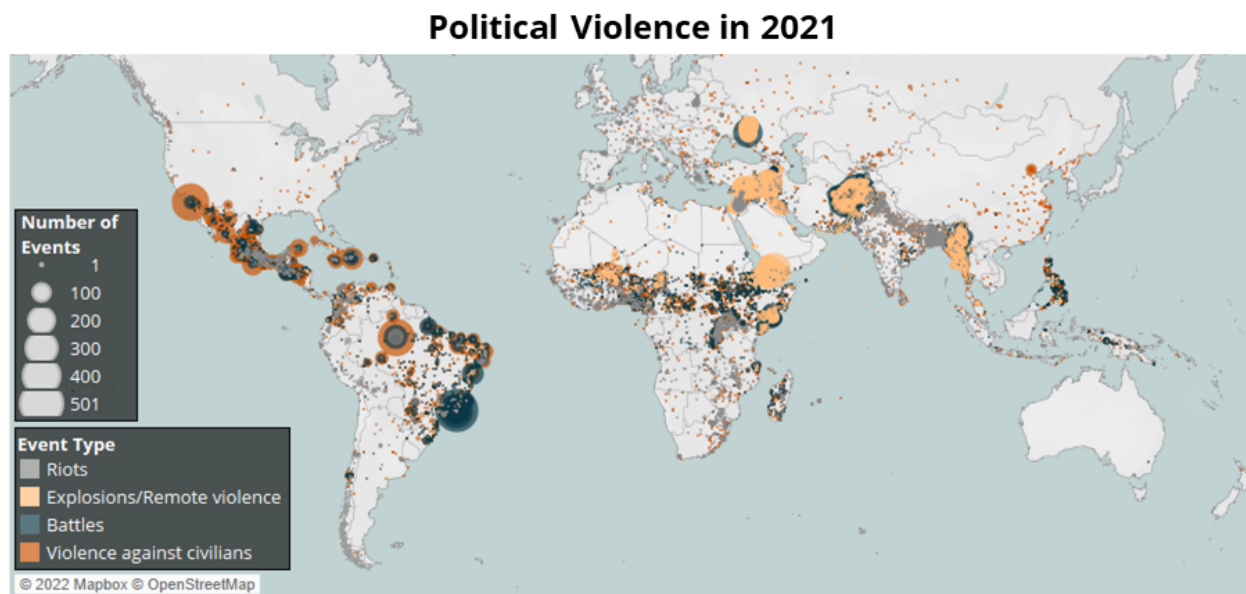
ACLED 2021: The Year in Review explores these various trends to better understand the myriad ways in which disorder manifests across countries and contexts.

POLITICAL VIOLENCE

Trends in Political Violence Patterns

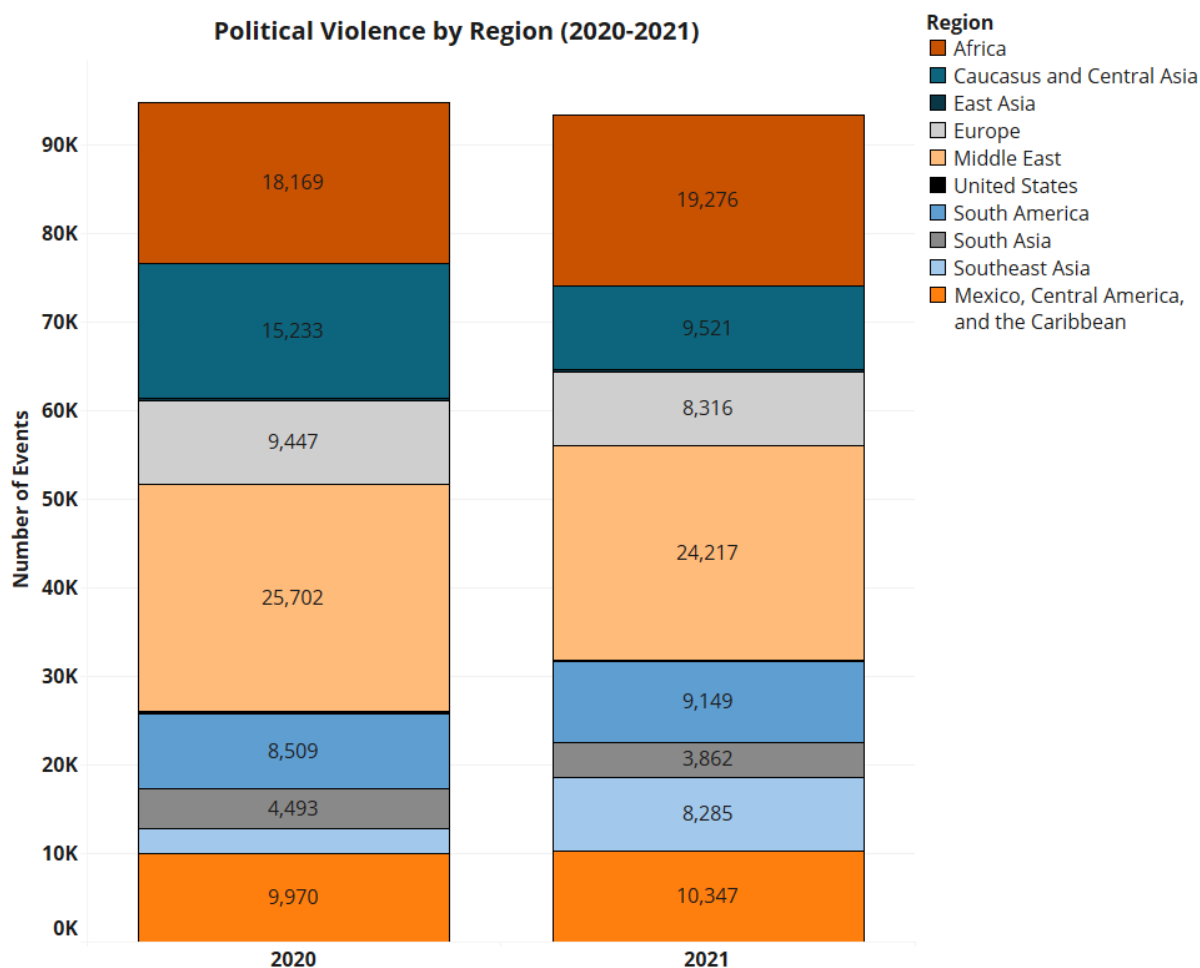
Political violence in 2021 remained at similar levels to 2020, decreasing by less than 2% — or 1,449 events. In total, ACLED records 94,833 political violence events in 2020 and 93,384 in 2021 (see *Figure 1*).

Figure 1. Political violence in 2021



While global political violence declined marginally when compared with 2020, several regions experienced significant increases in 2021 (see *Figure 2*). The largest absolute increase was reported in Southeast Asia, which saw a rise of 5,425 events — or 190% — driven by post-coup conflict in [Myanmar](#). This was followed by significant increases in Africa, amid worsening violence in [Burkina Faso](#), [Ethiopia](#), and [Nigeria](#); and South America, pushed by [increased contestation between Colombian non-state armed groups](#). In contrast, Central Asia and the Caucasus, the Middle East, and Europe experienced absolute decreases in political violence of 5,712 events (37%), 1,485 events (6%), and 1,131 events (12%), respectively.

Figure 2. Political violence by region (2020-2021)⁵



The countries home to the most political violence in 2021 remained the same as those in 2020 and 2019: Syria, Afghanistan, Mexico, Yemen, and Ukraine. While nearly all of these countries — except Mexico — experienced decreases in violence compared to 2020, their continued status as the most violent countries in 2021 point to the entrenched nature of their respective conflicts. In Mexico, not only has gang violence remained at levels akin to an active warzone, but it has in fact worsened in 2021, as gangs increased attacks on civilians in some parts of the country, like in Morelos state. Table 1 describes how political violence in these countries has changed since 2020 and identifies the main drivers of the violence.

5. Political violence events in the United States total fewer than 300 events across both 2020 and 2021, resulting in very small representation on the map. Per the *Glossary*, ‘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 majority of violence in the United States occurs within the context of *Violent demonstrations*, which is included within ‘demonstration,’ per the *Glossary*. ACLED has recently extended coverage of North America to include countries other than the United States. The coverage for these countries spans to the start of 2021. As a result, comparisons between 2020 and 2021 here only include the United States; in next year’s annual report comparing 2021 to 2022, the North American region will be reviewed instead of the United States exclusively.

Table 1. Countries with the highest number of political violence events in 2021

Country	Number of recorded events	Change in the number of political events since 2020	Main event type	Main engagement type
Syria	9,321	<i>Decrease</i> of 1,000 events, or 10% decline	Explosions/Remote violence	One-sided violence involving state forces
Afghanistan	9,004	<i>Decrease</i> of 747 events, or 8% decline	Battles	Afghan military vs. Taliban
Mexico	7,432	<i>Increase</i> of 177 events, or 2% rise	Violence against civilians	Gangs targeting civilians
Yemen	7,346	<i>Decrease</i> of 2,671 events, or 27% decline	Explosions/Remote violence	Saudi-backed Hadi forces vs. Houthi forces
Ukraine	7,290	<i>Decrease</i> of 1,144 events, or 14% decline	Explosions/Remote violence	Ukrainian government forces vs. Russian-led separatists

Table 2 presents the countries that experienced the largest decreases in political violence in 2021, outlining the changes and their contributing factors. The most significant declines were found in conflicts in which the dominant agents implemented ceasefires in 2020 and early 2021. These include: Azerbaijan and Armenia over the breakaway Artsakh Republic;⁶ Ukraine and Russian-aligned separatists in Donetsk and Luhansk; Pakistan and India along the disputed Line of Control (LoC); and rival governments in Libya. Similarly, in Yemen, a decrease in violence in 2021 was driven by the formation of a power-sharing cabinet between the Southern Transitional Council (STC) and the Hadi government in the southern governorates in late 2020, alongside international engagement in peace negotiations on the Houthi conflict. Despite the decreases in political violence in these countries in 2021, each context remains deeply fragile and susceptible to further outbreaks of violence. In both Yemen and Ukraine, this fragility was readily apparent as fighting continued and worsened throughout the course of 2021 and early 2022. In the case of Ukraine, the progressive breakdown of the ceasefire in Donetsk and Luhansk preceded [the wider Russian invasion](#) in February 2022.

Table 2. Countries with largest *decreases* in political violence in 2021

Country/ies	Change in the number of political events since 2020	Contributing factors
Azerbaijan & Armenia	<i>Decrease</i> of 4,996 events, or 94%	Ceasefire agreement. Political violence decreased sharply in Armenia and Azerbaijan last year as both sides largely held to a ceasefire reached in November 2020. The ceasefire ended a six-week war over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh beginning in September 2020. While cross-border violence remained at relatively low levels throughout 2021, escalations in violence were reported between July and August 2021, and again in November 2021, prompting a fresh Russian-mediated ceasefire. <i>For an overview of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, see ACLED's special report: Mid-Year Update: 10 Conflicts to Worry About in 2021.</i>

6. The disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh is internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan. ACLED refers to the *de facto* state and its institutions as Artsakh — the name by which the *de facto* territory refers to itself. For more on methodology and coding decisions around *de facto* states, see [this methodology primer](#).

Yemen	<i>Decrease</i> of 2,671 events, or 27%	Power-sharing arrangement, international engagement in peace processes, and frozen fronts. A substantial decrease in political violence in 2021 was driven by several factors. The formation of a power-sharing cabinet between the secessionist Southern Transitional Council (STC) and the Hadi government in December 2020 contributed to a significant decrease in political violence in the southern governorates, particularly in Abyan. Meanwhile, the unprecedented engagement of international actors in support of the peace process in the middle of the year also saw renewed Houthi participation in negotiations. In May and June 2021, political violence dropped to its lowest levels since the Kuwait peace talks in May 2016, before picking up again in the second half of the year. Finally, there was a relative freezing of a number of fronts between Houthi and anti-Houthi forces, as most of the fighting shifted to Marib governorate. This drove substantial decreases in battle events in Ad Dali governorate, Sadah governorate, and Al Jawf governorate. <i>For more on shifting territorial control in Yemen, see ACLED's special territorial control mapping project: The State of Yemen.</i>
India	<i>Decrease</i> of 1,211 events, or 38%	Ceasefire with Pakistan and reduction in pandemic-related mob violence. The decrease in political violence in 2021 was largely driven by a precipitous fall in cross-border violence involving Indian and Pakistani state forces. This decrease followed India and Pakistan's declaration of a ceasefire along the Line of Control (LoC) on 25 February, reaffirming the oft-violated 2003 ceasefire agreement. Fears of potential spillover of militant activity from the conflict in Afghanistan have so far not resulted in any increases in fighting between India and Pakistan. Meanwhile, clashes between mobs and state forces enforcing coronavirus restrictions fell in 2021, after the imposition of nationwide restrictions in 2020. While local-level and statewide lockdowns were enforced during the course of 2021, no nationwide lockdown was imposed. <i>For an overview of tensions leading to the ceasefire between India and Pakistan, see ACLED's special report: Mid-Year Update: 10 Conflicts to Worry About in 2021.</i>
Ukraine	<i>Decrease</i> of 1,144 events, or 14%	Ceasefire agreement. A ceasefire brokered between Ukrainian state forces and Russian-backed separatists in Donetsk and Luhansk in July 2020 carried into 2021, leading to lower levels of political violence throughout most of 2021. This reduction, however, belies the worsening state of conflict in 2021. Fighting steadily worsened since the ceasefire in July 2020, with political violence peaking in November 2021, exceeding levels of political violence at the time of the ceasefire. While violence subsequently fell near the end of 2021, this coincided with the Russian military buildup in the border regions that preceded Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. <i>For more on the conflict in Ukraine, see ACLED's Ukraine Crisis hub.</i>

Libya	<i>Decrease</i> of 1,055 events, or 91%	Ceasefire agreement and political process. Since a steep reduction of clashes between the Government of National Accord and the rival General Khalifa Haftar-led Libyan National Army in June 2020, large-scale outbreaks of fighting have failed to materialize. The two competing sides formalized the cessation of hostilities with the declaration of a ceasefire in August 2020 and a planned political process, sustaining lower levels of political violence in 2021. Direct fighting in 2021 was mostly limited to communal militias and local-level armed factions. In November 2021, several key political and military figures, including Haftar, announced their presidential candidacies for elections scheduled for December 2021. Despite the subsequent delay of presidential and legislative elections until 2022, fears of a re-escalation of violence due to the enduring political vacuum failed to materialize. <i>For more on fighting in Libya preceding the August 2020 ceasefire, see this ACLED infographic: Continued Fighting in Libya.</i>
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Despite the slight overall decline in violent events last year, several countries experienced significant increases in political violence. The conflict spikes in some of these countries also contributed to the overall increase in fatalities from political violence in 2021 (*explored in further detail in the following section*). Table 3 presents the countries that registered the greatest increases in violence last year, outlining the changes and their contributing factors.

Table 3. Countries with major *increases* in recorded number of political violence events, 2021

Country	Change in the number of political violence events since 2020	Contributing factors
Myanmar	<i>Increase</i> of 5,696 events, or 494%	Anti-coup resistance. The sharp increase in political violence in Myanmar in 2021 was driven by the military's violence against civilians. Myanmar had the highest number of events of state violence against civilians recorded by ACLED in 2021. As the military carried out these attacks on civilians, local communities began to take up arms. Clashes between the military and local defense groups spread across the country. Many such groups aligned themselves with the People's Defense Force (PDF) under the National Unity Government (NUG) formed by the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), composed of lawmakers elected in the 2020 general elections and subsequently ousted by the military coup. Fighting between the military and ethnic armed groups also increased, particularly in Kachin and Kayin states, where many anti-coup activists took refuge and received combat training. <i>For more on the anti-coup resistance in Myanmar, see the ACLED analysis piece: Myanmar's Spring Revolution.</i>

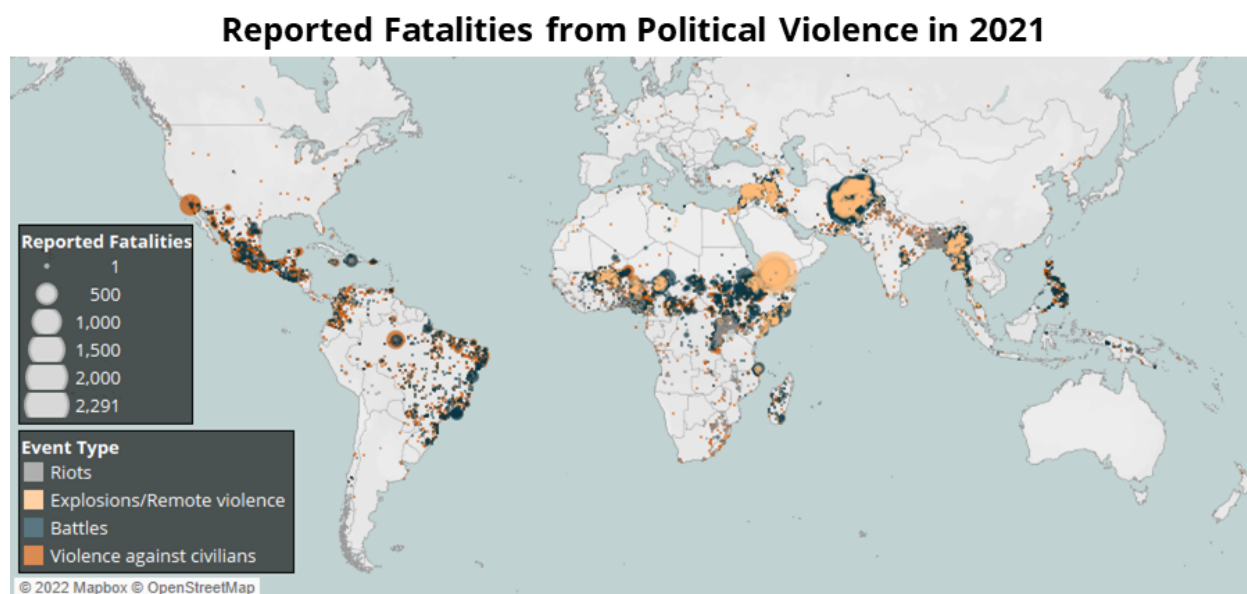
Palestine	<i>Increase of</i> 1,156 events, or 125%	May clashes. A dramatic spike in political violence across the West Bank and Gaza in May 2021 propelled Palestine to its most violent year since the start of ACLED coverage in 2016. A number of separate but interrelated incidents in East Jerusalem precipitated the May escalation: namely, Israeli restrictions on worshippers at the Al Aqsa Mosque compound during the month of Ramadan, and the scheduled eviction of Palestinian families from East Jerusalem's Shaykh Jarrah neighborhood. In response to the intervention of Israeli forces in East Jerusalem, mob violence proliferated as Palestinians clashed with Israeli military forces, as well as far-right Israelis and settler groups. At the same time, Hamas launched attacks on Israel from the Gaza Strip, claiming to operate out of solidarity with Palestinians in the West Bank. This prompted retaliatory attacks on Gaza targets by Israeli forces. <i>For more on the lead-up to the May clashes in Palestine and Israel see the ACLED-Religion report: Religious Repression During Ramadan.</i>
Iraq	<i>Increase of</i> 1,142 events, or 37%	Turkish offensive against the PKK. Turkey continued to push their fight against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) further into Iraq and out of Turkey in 2021. Turkey launched twin operations — 'Claw-Lightning' and 'Claw-Thunderbolt' — against the PKK in April 2021, resulting in a spike in political violence in Iraqi Kurdistan and the largest number of Turkey-PKK engagements in Iraq since ACLED coverage began in 2016. The offensives were driven by the greater operational presence of Turkish troops on the ground in northern Iraq, with armed clashes and shelling/artillery/missile attacks both increasing as a percentage of total armed engagements between Turkish forces and the PKK in 2021. <i>For more on the Turkish offensive in Iraq against the PKK, see the ACLED analysis piece: Turkey-PKK Conflict: Rising Violence in Northern Iraq.</i>
Ethiopia	<i>Increase of</i> 891 events, or 161%	The Tigray conflict, regional insurgencies, and ethnic violence. The outbreak of the Tigray war between the Ethiopian federal government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) — and the later established Tigray Defence Forces (TDF) — in November 2020 drove a dramatic increase in political violence in 2021. Fighting between TPLF/TDF forces and Ethiopian state forces operating alongside regional forces continued throughout the year, shifting between the Tigray, Amhara, and Afar regions. The conflict also led to the proliferation of mass killings and sexual violence targeting civilian groups by all sides. While the majority of international focus remains squarely on heavy fighting in the north, anti-government insurgencies and communal violence have also spread across the country, further driving the increase in political violence in 2021. Anti-government militants have been active in Oromia; Benshangul/Gumuz; the Southern Nations, Nationalities and People's Region (SNNPR); and Amhara in 2021, with ethnic militias active across multiple areas of contested territory. <i>For more on ongoing conflicts in Ethiopia, see ACLED's Ethiopia Peace Observatory.</i>

Burkina Faso	<i>Increase of</i> 663 events, or 100%	Resurgent Islamist insurgency and worsening inter-ethnic conflict. The breakdown of negotiations between Burkina Faso’s government and the Al Qaeda-affiliated Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) in late 2020 drove a resurgence of JNIM activity in 2021. In response, state forces increased counter-insurgency operations, further driving up political violence and triggering counterattacks by militants. At the same time, JNIM militants and Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland (VDP) fighters carried out ethnically motivated tit-for-tat attacks on civilian populations, with VDP fighters launching multiple attacks on Fulani communities. Meanwhile, resurgent military activity in Mali in the latter half of 2021 pushed militants across the border into Burkina Faso, further exacerbating political violence in the country. <i>For more on the ongoing insurgency in Burkina Faso, see the ACLED report: Sa-hel 2021: Communal Wars, Broken Ceasefires, and Shifting Frontlines.</i>
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Trends in Reported Fatalities Stemming from Political Violence

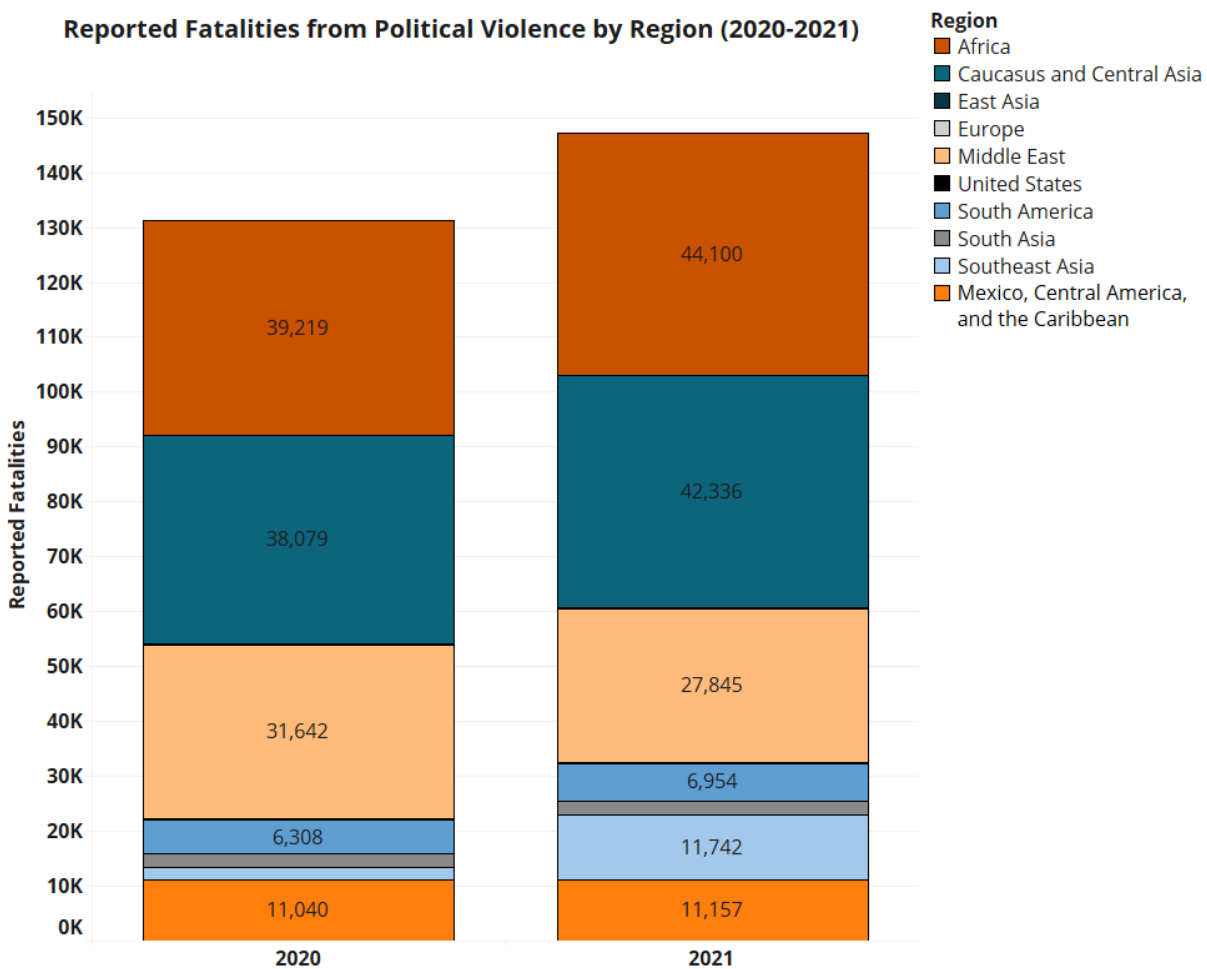
In contrast to the slight overall decrease in political violence events, reported fatalities surged in 2021, increasing by 12% — or 15,740 fatalities — compared to 2020 (see *Figure 3*), indicating that political violence became even more lethal last year.

Figure 3. Reported fatalities from political violence in 2021



When compared with 2020, political violence in 2021 was deadlier in every region save for Europe and the Middle East (see *Figure 4*). In Central Asia and the Caucasus, 4,257 more fatalities were reported in 2021 — an increase of over 11% — despite the substantial decrease in political violence events. These diverging trends were driven by the end of the six-week war between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 2020, combined with the increased lethality of fighting in Afghanistan in the lead-up to the Taliban takeover of the country in 2021.

Figure 4. Reported fatalities from political violence by region (2020-2021)



In addition to being two of the most violent countries in the world (see *Table 1*), [Afghanistan](#) and [Yemen](#) also registered the highest numbers of reported fatalities in 2021. The countries home to the most reported fatalities from political violence in 2021 include: Afghanistan (42,220 fatalities), Yemen (18,385 fatalities), Myanmar (10,387 fatalities), Nigeria (9,875 fatalities), and Ethiopia (8,513 fatalities). Of these countries, only Yemen experienced a decrease in reported fatalities in 2021, coinciding with the overall decline in political violence events in the country – underlining just how deadly the war in Yemen remains in order to continue topping these lists. [Myanmar](#) and [Ethiopia](#) saw high fatalities as a result of the significantly worsening conflict environment in both countries (see *Table 3*).

Trends by Actor

A wide variety of actors engaged in political violence in 2021, spanning state — both domestic and international — and non-state groups, anonymous or unidentified armed agents, and spontaneous mobs. Although state engagement in political violence fell substantially — by 18% or 10,195 events — for the second straight year, state forces remained the dominant conflict actors globally in 2021. State forces engaged in 46% of all political violence events last year.

The prominent role played by state forces in political violence is linked to the fact that specific state actors continued to dominate the list of most active groups in 2021 (see *Table 4*), in line with trends seen in recent years. Even as conventional interstate wars become less common and non-state armed groups become increasingly sophisticated, state forces remain powerful and deadly conflict actors. Of the five most active groups in 2021, three are state forces: the Ukrainian military forces, the Afghan military forces operating prior to the Taliban

takeover, and the Myanmar military junta. Additionally, the Taliban straddled the worlds of both rebel and state forces with their ascent to power in Afghanistan in August 2021.⁷ Of these groups, the defeated Afghan military, the Taliban, and the Myanmar military were also involved in the deadliest engagements recorded last year – the former two underlining the lethality of violence in Afghanistan in the lead-up to the fall of Kabul, and the latter pointing to the lethality of civilian targeting in Myanmar (*explored in further detail in the following section*). While most of these groups reduced their activity in 2021, the Myanmar military increased its activity more than any other actor in the world last year.

Table 4. Actors participating in the highest number of political violence events in 2021

Actor	Actor type	Primary country of operation	Number of events	Change in the number of political events since 2020	Main event type
Taliban/ Military Forces of Afghanistan (2021-)	Rebel forces/ state forces	Afghanistan	7,222	<i>Decrease</i> of 394 events, or 5% decline	Battles
Military Forces of Ukraine	State forces	Ukraine	6,156	<i>Decrease</i> of 915 events, or 13% decline	Explosions/ Remote violence
Military Forces of Afghanistan (2014-2021)	State forces	Afghanistan	5,902	<i>Increase</i> of 118 events, or 2% increase	Battles
NAF: United Armed Forces of Novoros-siya	Rebel forces	Ukraine	5,522	<i>Decrease</i> of 755 events, or 12% decline	Explosions/ Remote violence
Military Forces of Myanmar	State forces	Myanmar	3,959	<i>Increase</i> of 3,145 events, or 386% increase	Battles

Other actors that significantly increased their conflict activity last year are presented in Table 5. The increase in Kachin Independence Organization/Kachin Independence Army (KIO/KIA) activity alongside that of the Myanmar military is emblematic of [wider fighting between the military and ethnic armed groups](#), particularly in Kachin and Kayin states. Meanwhile, the sustained rise of [Turkish military and PKK clashes in Iraq](#), and a spike in Israeli military activity in Palestine, played substantial roles in these countries also registering some of the largest increases in violence in the world (see *Table 3*).

Table 5. Actors with the greatest *increase* in activity in 2021

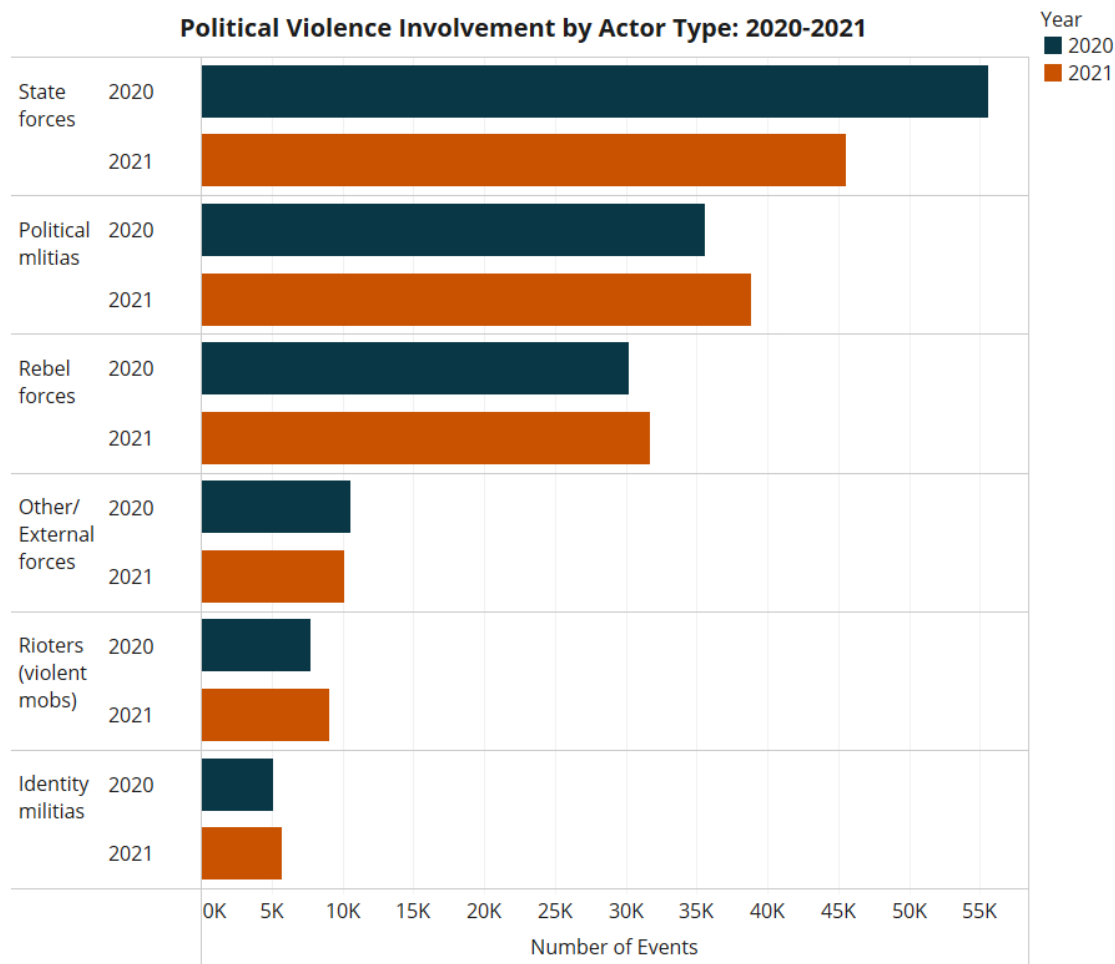
Actor	Actor type	Primary country of operation	Difference in number of events since 2020	Percent increase since 2020
Military Forces of Myanmar	State forces	Myanmar	3,145	386%
Military Forces of Turkey	Other/External forces	Iraq	905	42%

7. Since the fall of Kabul on 15 August 2021, the central Afghan government and its security forces have ceased to operate and control the country in a meaningful way. As the Taliban have been in *de facto* control of the country since 16 August 2021, they are now coded as the Government of Afghanistan by ACLED. This determination does not denote legitimacy or international legal recognition, but rather acknowledges the fact that a distinct governing authority exists and exercises *de facto* control over significant portions of territory in a country. For more on ACLED's methodological decisions in the Afghan context, see [this primer](#).

Military Forces of Israel	Other/External forces	Palestine	861	116%
PKK: Kurdistan Workers Party⁸	Rebel forces	Iraq	848	74%
KIO/KIA: Kachin Independence Organization/ Kachin Independence Army	Rebel forces	Myanmar	618	1,766%

All types of conflict actors increased their activity overall between 2020 and 2021, except for state forces and external/other forces (see *Figure 5*). Activity involving external/other forces fell by nearly 5% — or 505 events. The reduction in this activity was mostly driven by decreases in cross-border clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan, India and Pakistan, and the withdrawal of international forces from Afghanistan.

Figure 5. Political violence involvement by each actor type (2020-2021)



Contrastingly, both political militias and rebel forces significantly increased their engagement in political violence in 2021. Political militia activity rose by more than 9% — or 3,257 events. The proliferation of activity

8. ACLED does not collect information on the perpetrator of violence given the biases associated with such reporting. This means that this table includes those actors who are involved in the greatest increase in violent activity, whether or not they were the perpetrator. The PKK, for example, has been [the target of a number of new operations by Turkey](#), which contributes to its position in this table.

involving a large array of armed groups fighting against the military in Myanmar was largely responsible for this growth. ACLED records hundreds of new local defense groups or resistance forces operating in opposition to the military junta in 2021.

Rebel engagement in political violence increased by nearly 5% — 1,453 events — as a diverse range of rebel groups increased activity across significantly different circumstances. Increased rebel activity was recorded in countries suffering from fresh outbreaks of civil conflict, like Myanmar and Ethiopia, as well as countries suffering from long-running Islamist insurgencies, such as Burkina Faso and Somalia. Meanwhile, in Iraq, increased rebel activity was driven by Turkish forces launching offensives against the Kurdish PKK.

Threats to Civilians

Political violence targeting civilians increased in 2021, with deadlier consequences than 2020. ACLED records a 12% rise (3,854 events) in civilian targeting overall last year, with 33,331 events reported in 2020 compared to 37,185 in 2021. Whereas civilian targeting made up 35% of all political violence in 2020, this increased to nearly 40% in 2021. Civilian fatalities also increased — by 8% (2,759 fatalities) — with 35,879 reported fatalities in 2020 compared to 38,658 in 2021.

Civilians continued to come under attack across diverse contexts and by diverse actors in 2021: they were the targets of both belligerents in large-scale conflicts, as in Syria and Myanmar, and gangs engaging in turf wars in Mexico and Brazil. In other spaces, civilians faced multiple overlapping and concurrent threats. In Nigeria, for example, civilians were the targets of persistent mob violence and communal conflict, as well as an Islamist insurgency in the northeast and a separatist conflict in the southeast.

Civilians also continued to face a variety of different forms of violence, perpetrated by a wide array of actors in 2021, as depicted in Table 6. In many contexts, these threats remained the same as in 2020: gang violence, particularly by anonymous or unidentified gangs, accounted for the most direct attacks on civilians in Mexico last year. Similarly, anonymous or unidentified armed groups were again responsible for the majority of sexual violence events reported in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). In India, violent mobs continued to target civilians. In Syria, the threat of abductions and forced disappearances by the Syrian Democratic Forces (QSD) continued to rise,⁹ while the detonation of remote explosives, landmines, and IEDs by anonymous or unidentified armed groups remained a persistent threat. Meanwhile, unidentified or anonymous groups continued to target civilians with grenade attacks in Iraq. In Afghanistan, the military launched airstrikes against civilian targets as they fought a losing war against the Taliban.

9. 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 108 arrest events by regime forces in 2021; each event can involve the arrest of more than one person. For more on ACLED methodology, see [the ACLED Codebook](#).

Table 6. Civilian targeting by sub-event type in 2021

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	23,881	32,500	Mexico (5,505 events, 6,723 reported fatalities)	Anonymous or unidentified gangs (5,281 events, 6,459 reported fatalities)
	Abduction/forced disappearance	3,525	0 ¹⁰	Syria (850 events, 0 reported fatalities)	QSD: Syrian Democratic Forces (591 events, 0 reported fatalities)
	Sexual violence	365	236	Democratic Republic of Congo (62 events, 63 reported fatalities)	Anonymous or unidentified armed groups (27 events, 3 reported fatalities)
Explosions/remote violence	Chemical weapon	0	0	N/A	N/A
	Air/drone strike	336	642	Afghanistan (91 events, 106 reported fatalities)	Military forces of Afghanistan (79 events, 90 reported fatalities)
	Shelling/artillery/missile attack	979	1,048	Yemen (266 events, 208 reported fatalities)	Operation Restoring Hope (121 events, 74 reported fatalities)
	Remote explosive/landmine/IED	2,106	1,979	Syria (403 events, 393 reported fatalities)	Anonymous or unidentified armed groups (358 events, 350 reported fatalities)
	Suicide bomb	22	279	Somalia (8 events, 78 reported fatalities)	Al Shabaab (8 events, 78 reported fatalities)
	Grenade	215	144	Iraq (41 events, 4 reported fatalities)	Anonymous or unidentified armed groups (36 events, 3 reported fatalities)

10. 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](#).

Riots	Mob violence	4,166	1,130	India (572 events, 102 reported fatalities)	Mobs (572 events, 102 reported fatalities)
	Violent demonstration	1,006	50	South Africa (193 events, 31 reported fatalities)	Rioters (193 events, 31 reported fatalities)
Protests	Excessive force against protesters	581	650	Myanmar (218 events, 373 reported fatalities)	Military forces of Myanmar (187 events, 358 reported fatalities)

In some cases, while threats remained the same, the consequences were far deadlier in 2021. In Somalia, for example, Al Shabaab killed more than twice as many people in suicide bombings against civilian targets in 2021 than in 2020.

In other cases, though, new threats both emerged and became dominant in 2021. In Yemen, while Houthi forces reduced shelling against civilian targets in 2021, forces that were part of the Saudi-led Operation Restoring Hope more than doubled their shelling of civilian targets.¹¹ In Myanmar, following the coup in February 2021, the military engaged in a deadly campaign targeting anyone opposed to the takeover, killing more than 300 peaceful protesters – making it the [deadliest place in the world for demonstrators](#). In South Africa, violent demonstrators targeted civilians at much higher rates than in 2020, driven by an [outbreak of violent demonstrations following the arrest of former President Jacob Zuma in July 2021](#). Dozens of people were killed during the violence, prompted by Zuma's arrest for contempt of court following his refusal to cooperate with investigations into alleged corruption during his time in office.

The countries with the highest levels of civilian targeting in 2021 are presented in Table 7. Mexico remained home to both the most violence targeting civilians and the most reported civilian fatalities in 2021, with violence targeting civilians increasing by 5% in the country compared to 2020. In fact, violence targeting civilians increased from 2020 to 2021 in all of the countries home to the most civilian targeting events.

Table 7. Countries with most civilian targeting in 2021

Country	Number of events with direct civilian targeting	Change in the number of political events since 2020	Number of reported civilian fatalities	Primary perpetrator of civilian targeting
Mexico	6,268	<i>Increase</i> of 303 events, or 5% increase	6,765	Anonymous or unidentified gangs
Brazil	3,262	<i>Increase</i> of 240 events, or 8% increase	2,863	Anonymous or unidentified gangs
Myanmar	2,564	<i>Increase</i> of 2,072 events, or 421% increase	2,240	State forces (<i>Military forces of Myanmar</i>)
Syria	2,517	<i>Increase</i> of 258 events, or 11% increase	1,628	Rebel groups (<i>including QSD: Syrian Democratic Forces</i>) ¹²

11. For more on methodology decisions in the Yemeni context, including in regard to reporting by Saudi sources, see [this primer](#).

12. 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

Nigeria	1,580	<i>Increase of 347 events, or 28% increase</i>	3,710	<i>Identity militias (including communal militias in the north-central and north-west regions)</i>
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In addition to Mexico, civilian targeting also increased in Brazil in 2021, by 8%. In both Mexico and Brazil, the increases were largely driven by gang violence, the majority involving unidentified or anonymous groups. In Brazil, the growing threat of civilian targeting has been particularly pronounced in the northern Amazonas state. [These attacks have become more common](#) as rival criminal organizations fight over control of drug-trafficking routes in the border states of Brazil.

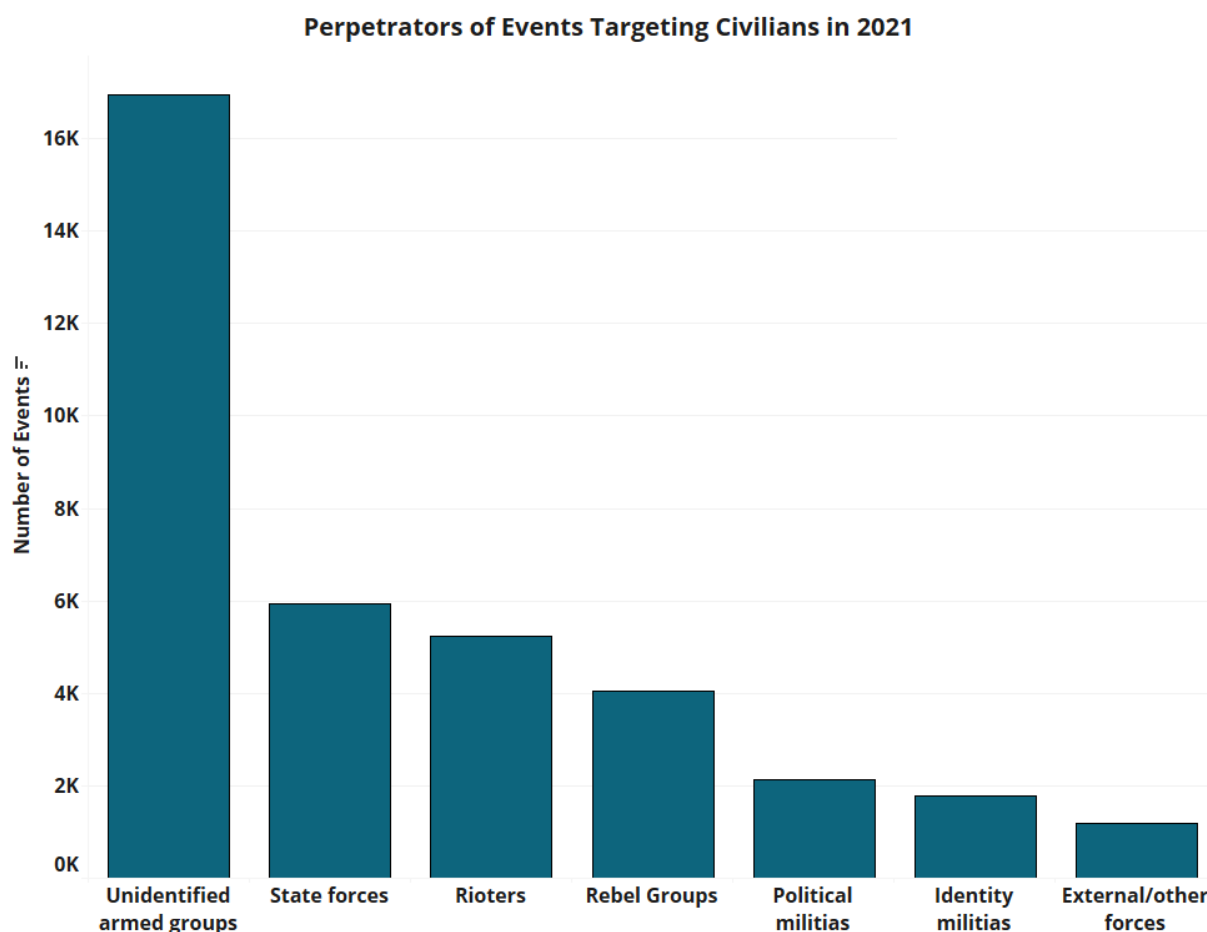
Myanmar was home to some of the highest levels of civilian targeting globally in 2021, with the number of events in the country increasing significantly from 2020 to 2021. The military was the dominant threat to civilians in 2021, [after seizing power from the elected government](#) in February. The military used deadly force against anti-coup demonstrators and also carried out attacks on civilians who were unarmed and not involved in demonstrations, including shelling civilian targets. Members of the National League for Democracy (NLD) and other anti-coup activists have been detained and killed while in military or police custody. As military violence increased, military-linked administrators, party officials, and military informers were targeted by resistance groups and unidentified assailants in both remote and direct attacks for the role they are perceived to play in supporting the junta.

The greatest increases in civilian targeting were recorded in Myanmar, Palestine, Colombia, Nigeria, and Burkina Faso. In [Myanmar](#), this was driven by the military junta and its attacks on civilians and opposition. In Palestine, civilians were heavily targeted by both rioters and Israeli forces during the dramatic escalation in political violence that hit the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in May 2021. In [Colombia](#), increased civilian targeting has coincided with intensifying contestation between numerous active armed groups in 2021; while an increasing number of attacks were reported in Norte de Santander, Valle del Cauca, and Antioquía, Cauca remains one of the areas of greatest risk for civilians. In [Nigeria](#), the worsening threat to civilians was particularly pronounced in north-central and northwest states — including in Kaduna, Niger, Zamfara, and Sokoto — where militias engage in cattle rustling, kidnapping for ransom, and pillaging of villages. In [Burkina Faso](#), civilians bore the brunt of the deepening JNIM insurgency in 2021.

Around the world, anonymous or unidentified groups were responsible for the most violence targeting civilians last year, accounting for 45% of all events and all reported civilian fatalities (see *Figure 6*). Tracking only the violence perpetrated by known, named agents would therefore obscure the full scope of threats faced by civilians, especially in contexts where unnamed groups are responsible for large proportions of civilian targeting. In many cases, [anonymity allows for groups to act on the behalf of elites](#) who stand to benefit from such violence. Anonymous or unidentified actors in Mexico, Brazil, Syria, and Myanmar, specifically, perpetrated the highest number of civilian targeting events last year.

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 108 arrest events by regime forces in 2021; each event can involve the arrest of more than one person. For more on ACLED methodology, see [the ACLED Codebook](#).

Figure 6. Perpetrators of violence targeting civilians in 2021



Of identified actors, state forces were the dominant perpetrators, responsible for 16% of all civilian targeting and 14% of all reported civilian fatalities last year. They were followed by rioters and violent mobs, which were responsible for 14% of all civilian targeting but only 3% of all civilian fatalities. Contrastingly, rebel groups were responsible for 16% of all civilian fatalities, despite only accounting for 11% of civilian targeting. This is indicative of the differing risks to civilians presented by different actors. While rioters and violent mobs may target civilians more frequently, rebel groups pose a much more lethal threat.

Among named actors, the perpetrators responsible for the most civilian targeting in 2021 include the Myanmar military, the QSD in Syria, the Houthis in Yemen, the former military of Afghanistan, and the Al Qaeda-affiliated JNIM in the Sahel. Some of these groups — including the Myanmar military, QSD, and JNIM — were also among those that most increased their targeting of civilians over the past year.

Political Violence Targeting Women in Politics

Physical violence targeting women in politics has been [increasing in most regions of the world](#). Women in politics include women politicians, candidates for office, voters, political party supporters, government officials, and activists/human rights defenders/social leaders. Such violence poses an obstacle to women's participation in political processes.

Numerous countries saw an increase in such violence last year, including many of the countries home to significant levels of political violence more generally. Mexico, for example, is where civilians continue to face the greatest risk – and is also where women in politics face the most significant threat. Like civilian targeting, which further increased last year, targeting of women in politics also increased in 2021. [Women candidates for office face particularly high risks of violence](#), especially at the hands of anonymous armed agents, who often target candidates and politicians as a means to influence local politics, especially in cases where a candidate might pose a threat to lucrative criminal activity, such as drug trafficking.

Myanmar, home to the greatest increase in civilian targeting last year, is now one of the most dangerous places for civilians in the world. [Attacks on women engaged in the political sphere also rose last year](#), especially attacks on government officials and political party supporters. State forces have also targeted women leaders of the anti-coup protest movement, who were often on the front lines of the demonstrations – despite [the military junta's violent crackdown on protesters](#).

Colombia, also home to one of the greatest increases in civilian targeting last year, is another country where [women in politics are at high risk of violence](#) – and where such targeting increased in 2021. There, women [activists, human rights defenders, and social leaders are under threat](#), especially in the departments of Norte de Santander and Cauca, with attacks often carried out by anonymous armed agents. [Such targeting has increased since the start of the pandemic](#).

In short, the risks that women in politics face around the world vary in form, perpetrator, and targets, underscoring [the importance of country-specific approaches in combating this targeted violence](#). While this violence may be impacted by the local political and conflict environment, it [does not always mirror the threats faced by the civilian population at large](#).

DEMONSTRATIONS

Trends in demonstration patterns

Demonstration activity increased by 9% — or 13,100 events — in 2021. In total, ACLED records 145,769 demonstration events in 2020 and 158,869 in 2021. The countries home to the most demonstrations include India, the United States, France, Italy, and Pakistan (see *Table 8*).

Table 8. Countries with the highest number of demonstration events in 2021

Country	Number of recorded events	Change in the number of demonstration events since 2020	% of demonstrations involving intervention by authorities	Primary driver(s)
India	14,600	<i>Increase</i> of 56 events or less than <1%	7%	Anti-farm law and labor demonstrations
United States	13,121	<i>Decrease</i> of 9,196 events or 41%	2%	Anti-coronavirus restrictions/right-wing mobilization
France	8,446	<i>Increase</i> of 3,189 events or 61%	2%	Anti-coronavirus restrictions/anti-vaccine demonstrations
Italy	7,444	<i>Increase</i> of 1,886 events or 34%	1%	Anti-coronavirus restriction/anti-vaccine demonstrations
Pakistan	6,904	<i>Decrease</i> of 1,257 events or 15%	2%	Labor demonstrations

ACLEDD records the highest number of demonstrations last year in India — 14,600 events — with approximately the same number of demonstrations as reported in 2020. The farmer-led anti-farm law demonstrations remained one of the dominant drivers of demonstration activity in the country throughout 2021. The [farmer movement](#) developed in 2020 in opposition to a series of government agricultural reforms aimed at deregulating the sale and pricing of farm produce. Farmers feared it would erode state subsidies and would leave farmers exposed to potential vulnerabilities under free-market conditions. On 9 December, Indian farmers announced an end to the demonstrations following the government's repeal of the reforms — a rare successful outcome to a protest movement.

The United States continues to be home to numerous demonstrations, despite a significant decline in demonstration events in 2021 relative to 2020. A number of drivers contributed to this sustained mobilization, often involving the same protesters assuming new purposes or agendas: shifting from the 'Stop the Steal' movement, which punctuated the beginning of the year with the 6 January storming of the United States Capitol building; to [opposition to vaccines and other pandemic-related policies](#); to challenging [access to abortion](#) or [critical race theory](#). An increasing proportion of these demonstrations also [continue to be armed and take place on legislative grounds](#) – a worrying trend given the higher risk of these demonstrations [turning violent or destructive](#).

France and Italy are included on this list as a result of significant increases in demonstrations driven in both countries by opposition to coronavirus-related restrictions (*explored in further detail below*). In Pakistan, labor demonstrations were the main driver in 2021, as labor groups responded to [worsening inflation and unemployment, as well as rises in the prices of basic commodities](#).

India was also home to the highest number of demonstrations met with intervention by state forces in 2021. The other countries to top that list include Myanmar, Colombia, Russia, and the United States. In [Myanmar](#), the large number of state intervention events was driven by the military junta's violent crackdown on anti-coup demonstrators. In [Colombia](#), state forces intervened regularly against nationwide anti-government demonstrations, employing at times lethal force. In [Russia](#), state intervention spiked in response to anti-government demonstrations related to the arrest and declining health of prominent dissident Alexei Navalny in [January](#) and [April](#), respectively. While the United States remains on this list by virtue of the sheer number of demonstrations that continue to take place in the country (see *Table 8*), state intervention fell considerably: by 1,024 events (or 76%) compared to 2020, when the United States topped this list. While American state forces intervened in 6% of demonstrations in 2020, this figure fell to only 2% in 2021. This decline coincides with a dramatic fall in the number of Black Lives Matter (BLM) demonstrations in 2021 – a subset of demonstrations that were [three times more likely to face intervention by law enforcement](#) relative to other demonstrations. Meanwhile, right-wing demonstrations¹³ in the United States continued to see a decline in intervention by law enforcement, from 4% in 2020 to 2% in 2021. The decrease comes even as these demonstrations already saw more [limited intervention from law enforcement](#) relative to the BLM movement in 2020 (4% of the time compared to 10% of the time for BLM-linked demonstrations during the same time period).

Most significant increases in demonstrations

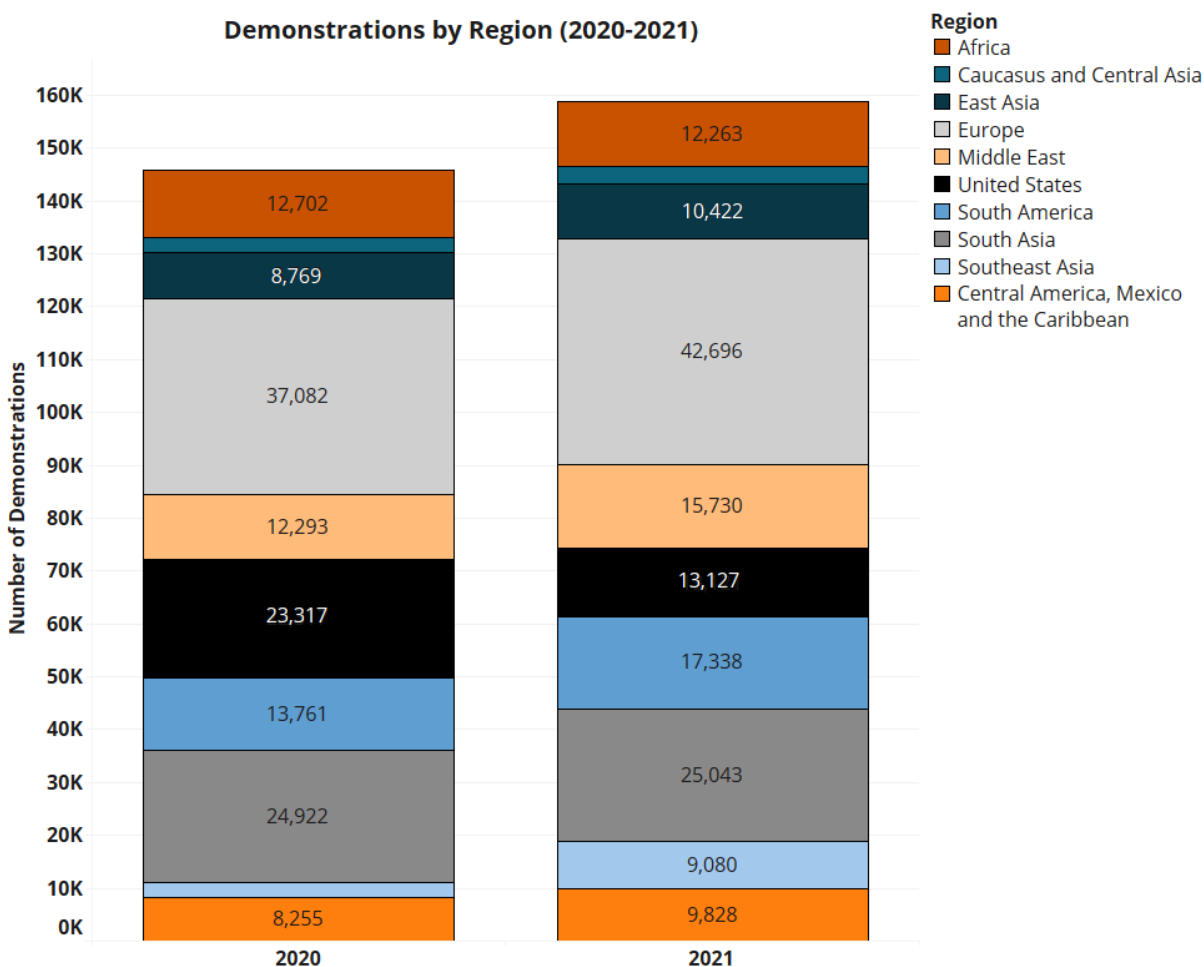
Increases in demonstration activity were recorded across every region save the United States¹⁴ and Africa, which decreased by 41% and 3%, respectively (see *Figure 7*). In the United States, demonstration levels fell dramatically in 2021 — by more than 9,100 events — as previously active [movements such as BLM](#) held fewer demonstrations. Similarly, [the 'Stop the Steal' movement](#), which challenged the results of the November 2020

13. Right-wing demonstrations refer to demonstrations such as those that are pro-Donald Trump, anti-vaccine, anti-access to abortion, pro-police, or have a far-right militia or militant social movement in attendance.

14. ACLEDD has recently extended coverage of North America to include countries other than the United States. The coverage for these countries spans to the start of 2021. As a result, comparisons between 2020 and 2021 here only include the United States; in next year's annual report comparing 2021 to 2022, the North American region will be reviewed instead of the United States exclusively.

presidential election, lost momentum following the 6 January Capitol siege. While both movements have continued, their demonstration rates have declined considerably since summer 2020 and winter 2020/2021, respectively.

Figure 7. Demonstrations by region (2020-2021)



The largest absolute increases in demonstration activity between 2020 and 2021 were recorded in Southeast Asia, where anti-coup demonstrations in Myanmar drove an increase of 6,142 events, or 209%. This was followed by Europe, with an increase of 5,614 events (15%); South America, with an increase of 3,577 events (26%); and the Middle East, with an increase of 3,437 events (28%).

In Europe, the increase in demonstration activity was largely the result of the proliferation of coronavirus-related demonstrations, which grew more than 30% in 2021 compared to 2020. This trend was particularly pronounced in western Europe, where anti-coronavirus restriction and anti-mandate movements gained prominence in France, Italy, and Germany. In these countries, a series of pandemic-related measures — including compulsory vaccination passes for access to public spaces — prompted multiple waves of demonstration activity in 2021. While the majority of these demonstrations remained peaceful, dozens of violent demonstration events were reported in December following [the German government's decision](#) to increase restrictions in response to the spread of the Omicron variant. Despite most other regions experiencing declines in coronavirus-related demonstrations in 2021, these demonstrations continued to make up 16% of all demonstration events globally, down from 19% in 2020.

Table 9 presents the countries that registered the greatest increases in demonstration activity from 2020 to 2021, outlining the contributing factors. Increases in these countries were driven by a range of anti-govern-

ment movements, including mass demonstrations against health, education, social and economic policies in Colombia; anti-coup demonstrations in Myanmar; water and wage-related demonstrations in Iran; and demonstration movements against pandemic-related restrictions in France and Italy.

Table 9. Top five countries with the greatest increases in demonstrations in 2021

Country	Number of events (difference relative to 2020)	% of demonstrations involving peaceful protesters	% of demonstrations involving intervention by law enforcement	Protest movement
Myanmar	6,046 (+5,864)	99%	12%	Anti-coup demonstrations. Demonstration events increased in Myanmar in 2021 as communities around the country rejected the military coup. Anti-coup demonstrations were reported in every state and region, including the capital, Nay Pyi Taw. Despite most demonstrations remaining peaceful, the military responded with violence, making Myanmar the deadliest country in the world for demonstrators in 2021. Despite the constant threat of violence, anti-coup demonstrations have continued. <i>For more on the military crackdown against anti-coup demonstrators in Myanmar, see this ACLED infographic: Deadly Demonstrations.</i>
France	8,446 (+3,189)	98%	2%	Demonstrations against coronavirus restrictions. Beginning in early July, following the introduction of vaccine mandates for multiple professions, including health workers and firefighters; and a compulsory vaccination pass for access to public spaces, demonstrations opposed to the coronavirus restrictions surged. Despite some outbreaks of violence, these demonstrations have remained mostly peaceful. These demonstrations follow other coronavirus-related demonstrations more largely, which took place early in the year in which teachers, students, and union groups led multiple waves of demonstrations focusing on a range of coronavirus-related issues, including working conditions, the closure of cultural venues, and demands for changes to high school assessments. <i>For more on global coronavirus demonstration trends, see ACLED's special report: A Year of COVID-19.</i>

Iran	4,002 (+2,005)	97%	4%	Water and wage demonstrations. Severe water shortages and worsening economic conditions prompted multiple waves of demonstrations in 2021. In Khuzestan and Isfahan, demonstrators took to the streets against the government's handling of water shortages in July and November, respectively. Meanwhile, worsening economic conditions driven by ongoing sanctions and high inflation — exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic — prompted a rise in wage-related labor demonstrations throughout the year. Notably, teachers' unions organized a wave of demonstrations beginning in September to press for the advancement of legislation that would increase teachers' wages. Demonstrating teachers call for the introduction of salary ranking legislation and the rapid adjustment of pensions. Between September and December 2021, teacher demonstrations spread across all provinces, making up nearly half of all demonstration events in the country. <i>For more on teacher demonstrations in Iran, see this ACLED infographic: Surging Teacher Demonstrations in Iran.</i>
Colombia	2,746 (+1,977)	82%	16%	Anti-government movement. Months of popular anti-government demonstrations began in April 2021 in response to proposed tax reforms. While initially focused on these proposed reforms, demonstrations expanded to encompass wider discontent with government policies on health, education, and other social issues. The movement came as the coronavirus worsened existing inequality in the country. In response to the massive increase in demonstration activity, authorities often employed violence to suppress demonstrators, including the use of deadly force. <i>For more on the state response to demonstrators in Colombia, see this ACLED analysis infographic: Deadly Demonstrations.</i>

Italy	7,444 (+1,886)	99%	1%	Demonstrations against coronavirus restrictions. A series of anti-coronavirus restrictions in Italy prompted waves of demonstration activity in 2021. Demonstrations remained at heightened levels throughout the first quarter of 2021, peaking in late March, as demonstrators demanded the reopening of schools. Further spikes were recorded with the announcement of mandatory proof of vaccination passes for access to public venues, facilities, or events in July, and workplaces in October. <i>For more on global coronavirus demonstration trends, see ACLED's special report: A Year of COVID-19.</i>
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CONCLUSION

For the second consecutive year, demonstration activity surged in 2021. While this aggregate growth in demonstration events was motivated by a diverse range of conditions around the world, anti-government sentiment featured prominently amongst its main drivers. These included prominent anti-government movements, including mass demonstrations against health, education, social, and economic policies in Colombia; anti-coup demonstrations in Myanmar; water and wage-related demonstrations in Iran; and demonstration movements against COVID-19 restrictions in France and Italy. As many countries begin attempts to 'return to normal' and ease pandemic-related restrictions, COVID-19 continues to directly and indirectly fuel significant unrest around the world.

Meanwhile, political violence levels largely remained the same, with a slight decrease in total events in 2021 for the second consecutive year. In many important ways, however, conflict and insecurity only worsened: most notably, despite the slight decline in events on aggregate, political violence was far deadlier in 2021 – resulting in over 15,000 additional deaths in 2021 compared to 2020. Political violence was also far more likely to be directed at civilians last year, driven by a multitude of actors operating across diverse contexts. Civilians were the targets of state forces cracking down on dissent, belligerents in large-scale conflicts, gangs engaging in turf wars, violent mobs and rioters, communal actors engaging in local conflicts, and militant insurgencies. Both attacks on civilians and civilian fatalities increased.

There was also significant variation in the state of political violence across regions in 2021. Large decreases in violence were reported in Central Asia and the Caucasus, the Middle East, and Europe. And yet, these regions continue to be home to some of the world's worst conflicts, such as in Yemen and Syria, as well as a new rapidly evolving crisis in Ukraine. Other regions experienced significant increases in violence overall, such as in South-east Asia, driven by post-coup conflict in Myanmar; Africa, amid worsening violence in Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, and Nigeria; and South America, pushed by increased contestation among Colombian non-state armed groups.

To interpret and respond to the increasing complexity in political violence patterns, there is a need for more dynamic tools to track, anticipate, and respond to emerging crises. This need is all the more imperative as the risks of rising political violence, and the early warning signs to predict these risks, are multifaceted and evolving. The introduction of ACLED's [Early Warning Research Hub](#) presents an important step in that direction by offering an array of interactive and interconnected tools, allowing users to track a variety of different risk factors, across a range of contexts, in a way that meets their distinct needs. It will be critical to monitor these risk factors for signs of new and worsening conflicts in 2022.

In short, the aggregate number of political violence events may have declined slightly last year, but if one were to come to the conclusion that the world has become less violent based solely on that metric, they would be mistaken. Disorder, in fact, took a turn for the worse in 2021, with political violence becoming more lethal, more focused on civilians, and more deadly when directed at protesters. This discrepancy highlights the complexity of disorder in 2021 – which becomes even more apparent when accounting for dramatic variations across and within geographic regions. Reliance on a multitude of data-driven metrics to assess the global conflict landscape is therefore more important than ever.

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