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in



ACLED

REVIEW

The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Disorder rose.

Political violence and demonstrations increased by 13% across all regions of ACLED coverage in 2019, driven by a surge in protest activity.

Conflict rates declined overall, but political violence increased in more countries than it decreased.

ACLED records 91,448 total political violence events in 2019, a 2% decrease from 93,642 in 2018. Despite the overall decline, however, political violence was reported in 96% of all countries covered by ACLED, and the number of events actually increased in more countries than it decreased. ACLED records violent activity in over 23,000 locations last year, including nearly 9,000 new locations where events were reported in 2019 but not in 2018. Political violence increased most substantially in Ukraine, India, Libya, Myanmar, and Burkina Faso.

Most forms of political violence are on the rise.

The drop in total political violence events is driven by a 15% decrease in battles. Yet all other forms of political violence increased from 2018 to 2019: explosions/remote violence by 5%, violence against civilians by 7%, and mob violence by 47%.

Total fatalities decreased.

The total number of fatalities from political violence declined by 17% from 2018 to 2019: ACLED records 126,047 fatalities last year, down from 151,887 fatalities in 2018. Fatalities rose by 45% in Southeast Asia and 1% in Africa, however, with significant increases recorded in Myanmar, Burkina Faso, Libya, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Mozambique. ACLED records the highest fatality estimates in Afghanistan, Yemen, Syria, Nigeria, and Somalia.

Conventional conflicts continued to dominate.

The conflicts in Syria, Ukraine, Afghanistan, and Yemen generated high levels of political violence in 2019, together accounting for 61% of all violent events recorded by ACLED last year. The war in Afghanistan remained the deadliest in the world for the second consecutive year, followed by Yemen and Syria.

Although fewer civilians were killed in direct attacks, civilian targeting actually increased.

ACLED records a 2% rise in civilian targeting last year, with 20,578 events reported in 2019 compared to 20,121 in 2018. At the same time, fatalities from these events decreased by 22%, with 22,365 fatalities in 2019 compared to 28,604 in 2018. Syria remains the deadliest and most dangerous country for civilians. These numbers include civilians who were targeted or killed directly, and do not include civilians killed by 'collateral damage,' meaning that the true civilian death toll from political violence in 2019 is far higher.

State forces remain the top threat to civilians.

Governments continue to pose the greatest threat to civilians around the world, with state forces responsible for more than a quarter of all violence targeting civilians in 2019 — the largest proportion of any actor type. Of the top five actors responsible for the largest share of civilian targeting in 2019, four of them are state forces, and the fifth is a pro-government militia.

Mob violence spiked, causing more fatalities.

The total number of fatalities from mob violence rose by 22% last year. While individual mob violence events typically result in few fatalities at a time, this increase in fatalities is driven by a broader increase in mob violence more generally, particularly in India, where it accounts for 57% of all political violence events in the country last year.

Demonstration activity escalated and expanded.

ACLED records a 51% rise in the overall number of demonstrations in 2019, with demonstration activity increasing in 71% of countries covered in the dataset. Approximately 91% of all demonstrations were peaceful, while approximately 12% were met with some form of intervention. At the same time, demonstrations are increasingly deadly: ACLED records a 106% rise in the number of fatalities reported during demonstrations last year, particularly in Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia.

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 across much of the world. ACLED currently covers Africa; the Middle East; South Asia; Southeast Asia; Central Asia and the Caucasus; and Southeastern and Eastern Europe and the Balkans.¹ In *ACLED 2019: 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.²

In addition to real-time data coverage, ACLED launched multiple new initiatives in 2019 to help users look more closely at a variety of trends. In March, ACLED debuted new event types to make analysis easier and more informative, while also adding a new sub-event type variable, which disaggregates event types further to allow for more nuanced analysis. These new event types and sub-event types are used to explore trends in the report that follows.³

1 In early 2020, ACLED expanded real-time coverage to Latin America and the Caribbean, and coverage expansions are underway for East Asia and the rest of Europe, with data scheduled for release later in the year. Because the expansion to Latin America and the Caribbean was launched in 2020, data for this region will be reviewed in ACLED's 2020 annual report. For more information on current country and time period coverage, see this [list](#).

2 Data are publicly-available for non-commercial use and are published on a weekly basis. For more on ACLED data collection, see [the ACLED website](#).

3 For more information on ACLED event types and sub-event types, see [this primer](#) introducing the new features.

In May, ACLED launched an initiative in partnership with the Strauss Center at the University of Texas at Austin to capture political violence targeting women as well as demonstrations featuring women.⁴ This new component now allows ACLED to track these disorder patterns, explored in vignettes throughout this report.

New global partners have also played an important role in expanding ACLED's coverage around the targeting of specific actor types across regions. A new partnership with [Aid Worker Security Database](#), for example, has allowed ACLED to expand coverage of political violence targeting aid workers, who faced heightened risks of violence in places like Syria, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Somalia, and South Sudan last year. Likewise, new partnerships with [Front Line Defenders](#) and [ProtectDefenders.eu](#) have extended ACLED's coverage of attacks on human rights defenders around the world. In addition to global partners, partnerships with local conflict observatories — such as the Yemen Data Project, the Syrian Network for Human Rights, and Deep South Watch in Thailand — also continue to bolster the quality of ACLED data.

Lastly, ACLED completed regional expansions to Southeastern and Eastern Europe and the Balkans in spring 2019 as well as to Central Asia and the Caucasus in fall 2019, increasing the geographic scope of the dataset. In October, ACLED released the preliminary results of a three-month pilot project on the United States, tracking American political disorder for the first time. New trends from these regions are explored in vignettes throughout this report.

As a result of these projects, the ACLED dataset is more comprehensive than ever. And what the data show is stark:

We live in a world beset by multiple wars and entrenched conflicts. **Syria** continues to register the highest number of political violence events, while the war in **Afghanistan** remains the deadliest conflict on earth.

⁴ For more information on ACLED's data on political violence targeting women and demonstrations featuring women, see [the launch report](#).

A number of 'frozen conflicts' continue to claim lives largely outside international headlines. Clashes along the Artsakh-Azerbaijan Line of Contact and the Armenia-Azerbaijan Line of Contact, for example, made **Azerbaijan** one of the most active countries in 2019. Daily ceasefire violations in **Ukraine's** Donbass Region made the Ukrainian military and the United Armed Forces of Novorossiia two of the most active conflict actors of the year.

At the same time, new crises have surfaced: from expanding violence in the **Sahel** and the emergence of new frontlines in **Myanmar** to increasing insecurity in eastern **DRC**.

Everywhere civilians continue to face serious risks. ACLED data show that the number of events targeting civilians increased from 2018 to 2019. State forces pose the greatest threat, from domestic militaries like the Syrian army to de facto state forces like the Houthis in **Yemen**, and from police in the **Philippines** to pro-government militias like the Imbonerakure in **Burundi** as well as foreign state forces like the Israeli military in **Palestine**.

2019 was also a year of mass protest around the world. Approximately 71% of countries covered by ACLED registered an increase in demonstrations, contributing to an overall 51% increase in total demonstration events. Numerous protest movements — from **Egypt** to **Russia** to **Iraq** — railed against rising authoritarianism and corrupt elites. Some movements, like those in **Algeria** and **Sudan**, were successful in toppling long-reigning leaders. Yet many continue to face suppression and violence. With high levels of protest carrying over into 2020, it remains to be seen if these movements will be able to effect lasting political change.

In all, disorder increased by 13% across all regions of ACLED coverage in 2019. *ACLED 2019: 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 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*.⁵

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.

⁵ To access a curated data file capturing all political violence targeting civilians, updated on a weekly basis, visit the [ACLED website](#). While the data in this file cover all events in which civilians were the direct or only target of violence, cases in which civilians were collateral damage are not included.

Political Violence

HOW HAS POLITICAL VIOLENCE CHANGED SINCE 2018?



The number of political violence events decreased by approximately 2% from 2018 to 2019: ACLED records 91,448 events last year, down from 93,642 in 2018.⁶ Despite the overall decline, however, political violence was reported in 96% of countries currently covered by ACLED,⁷ and the number of events actually increased in more countries than it decreased. The number of fatalities from political violence also decreased, by more than 17% from 2018 to 2019: ACLED records 126,047 fatalities last year, down from 151,887 fatalities in 2018.⁸

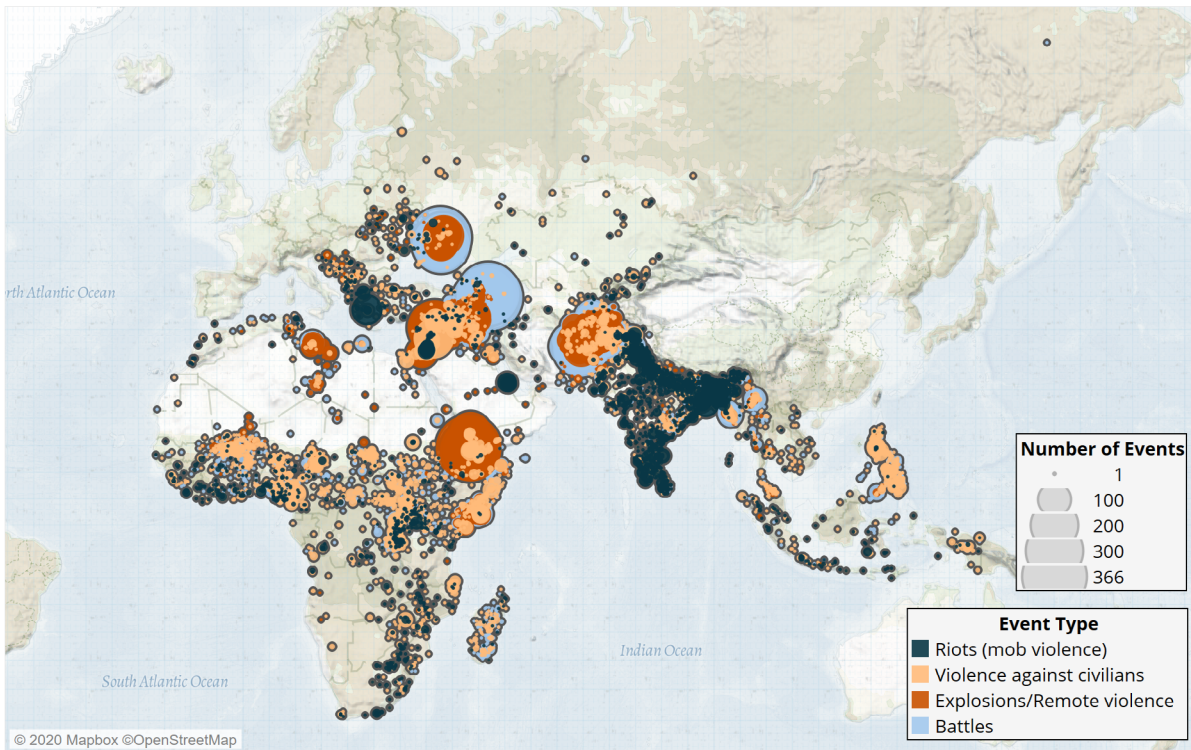
6 Political violence events are here defined as both organized political violence (battles, explosions/remote violence, violence against civilians) as well as mob violence (which is spontaneous).

7 ACLED currently covers 101 countries across Africa; South Asia; Southeast Asia; the Middle East; Southeastern and Eastern Europe and the Balkans; and Central Asia and the Caucasus.

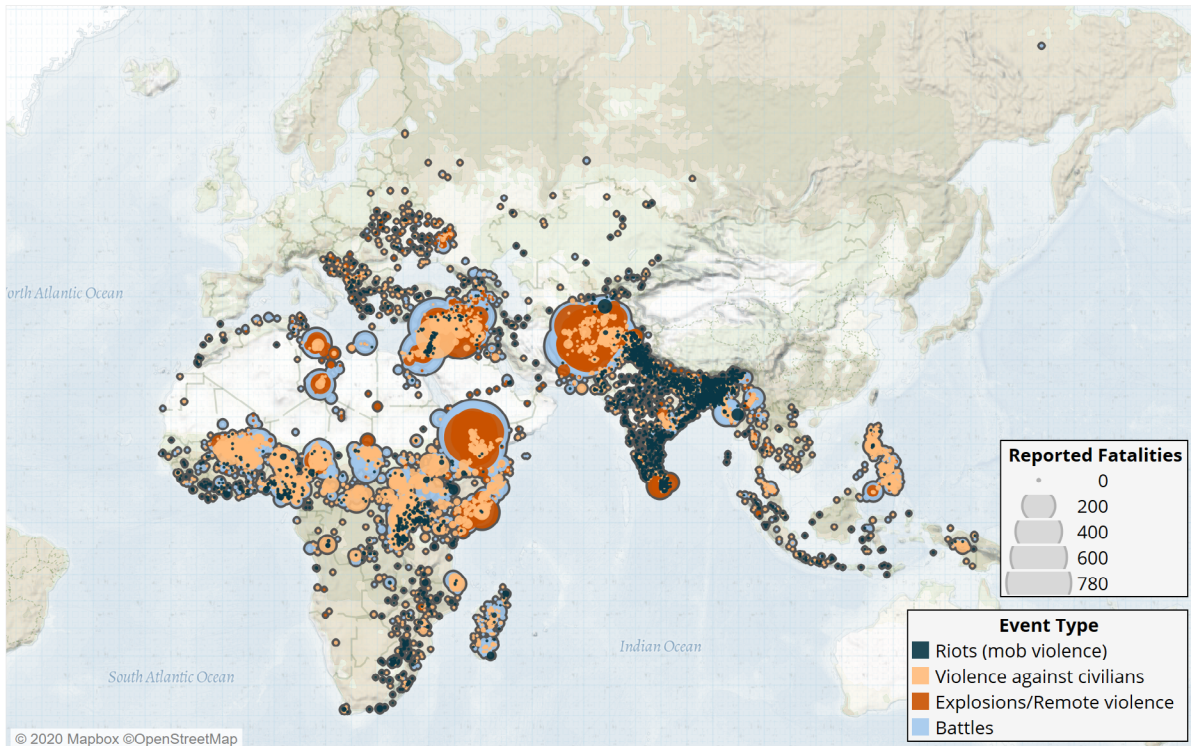
8 In addition to measuring conflict by changes in the number of political violence events, ACLED data also allow for analysis of changes in the number of fatalities reported during events across regions and time periods. While this metric has a wider margin of error than a count of political violence events, it nevertheless provides a different way to conceptualize how conflict intensifies and changes over time — and is an important estimate of the human toll of political violence. Despite discrepancies, fatality counts can still provide a valuable estimate for scales of conflict.

Figure 1.

Political violence in 2019



Reported fatalities from political violence in 2019

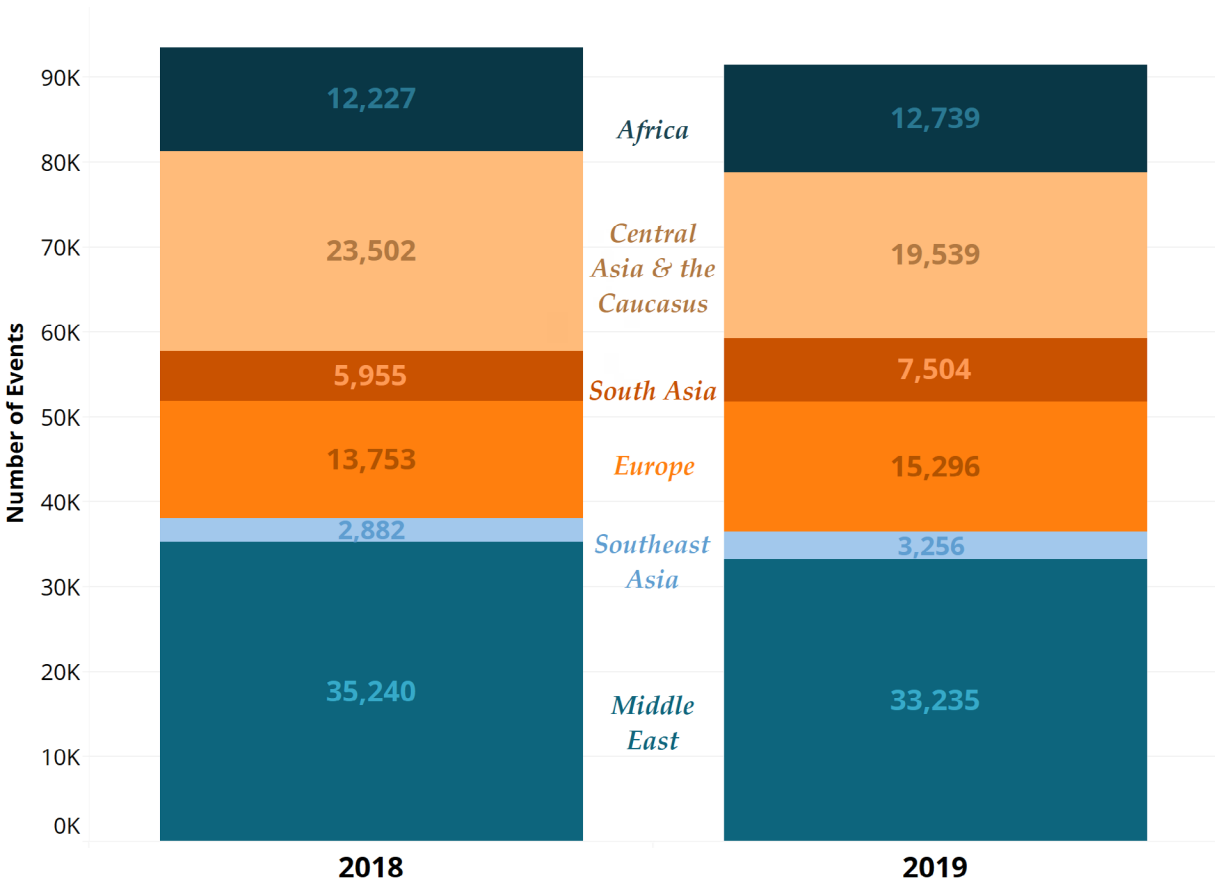


OVERALL TRENDS BY REGION

The decline in political violence from 2018 to 2019 is driven largely by a 6% drop recorded in the Middle East, particularly in Syria, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia. Violence increased in almost every other region of ACLED coverage, with the exception of Central Asia and the Caucasus (see Figure 2).

Figure 2.

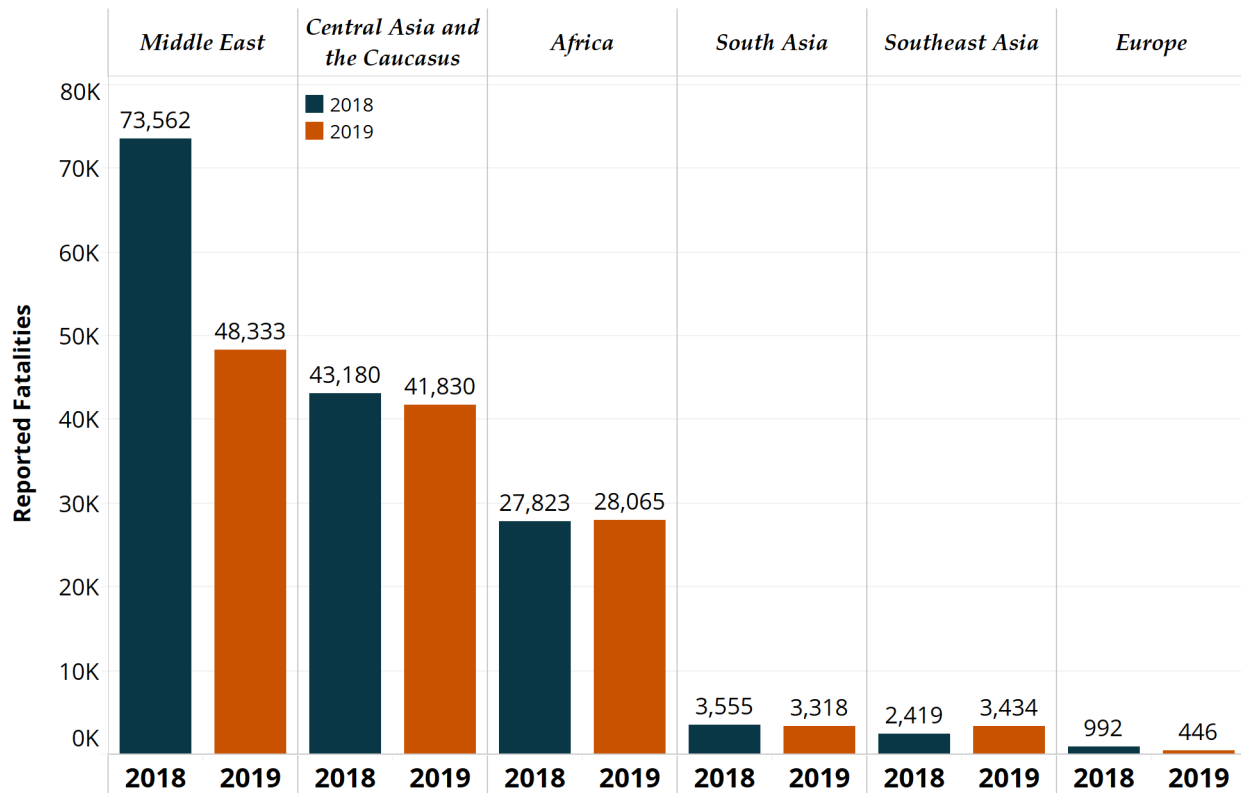
Political violence by region, 2018-2019



While the number of reported fatalities from political violence decreased from 2018 to 2019, this trend does not hold for all regions of ACLED coverage: Southeast Asia and Africa both registered increases in reported fatalities, by 45% and 1%, respectively (see Figure 3).

Figure 3.

Reported fatalities from political violence by region, 2018-2019

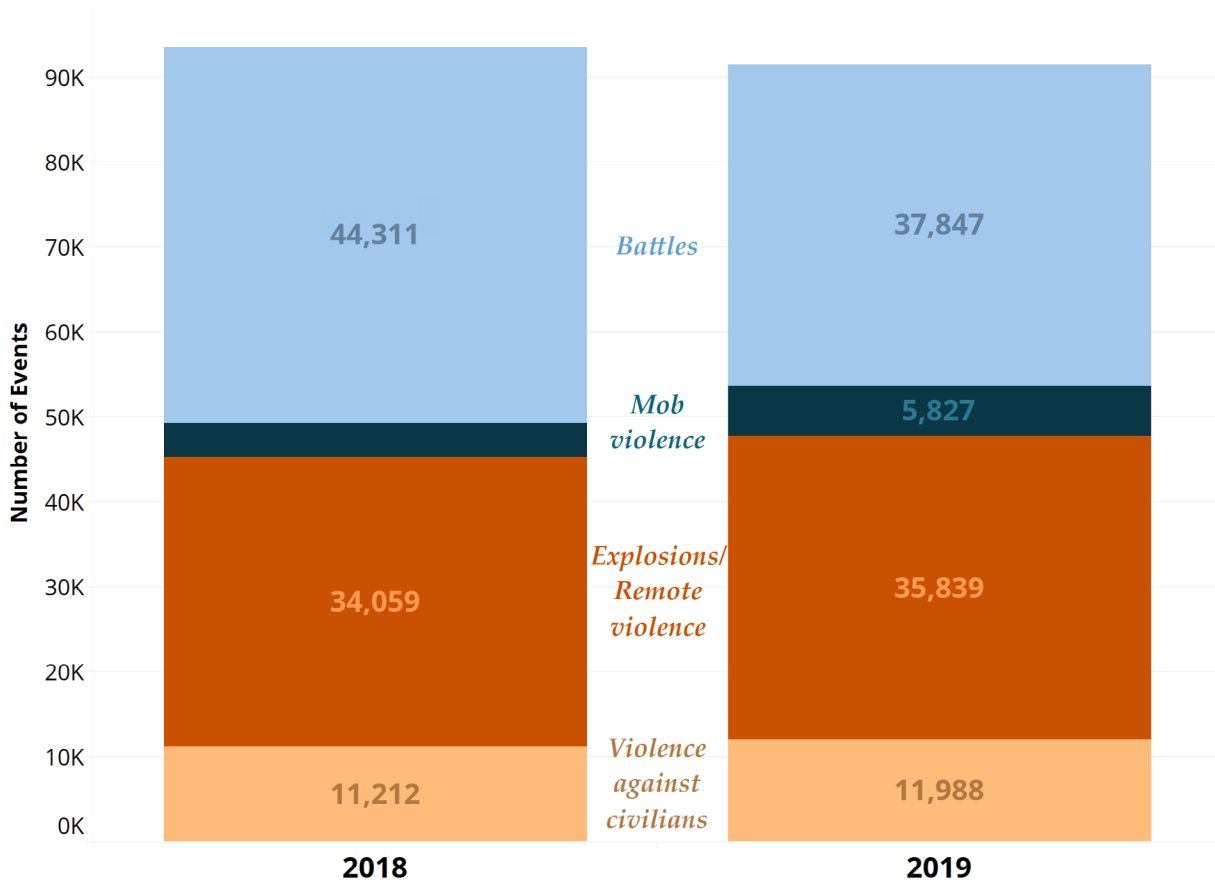


OVERALL TRENDS BY EVENT TYPE

The overall decline in political violence is also driven by a 15% decrease in the total number of battles across ACLED’s coverage areas. By region, only Southeast Asia registered an increase in battle events, with ACLED recording a 14% rise. Every other form of political violence increased overall: explosions/remote violence, violence against civilians, and mob violence (a subset of riots) all rose from 2018 to 2019 (see Figure 4).

Figure 4.

Political violence by event type, 2018-2019



While ACLED records a 22% decrease in the number of fatalities stemming from battles, a 10% decrease in the number of fatalities stemming from explosions/remote violence, and a 4% decrease in the number of fatalities stemming from violence against civilians, the number of fatalities stemming from mob violence rose by 22%, underscoring the importance of monitoring trends in spontaneous forms of political violence. While individual mob violence events typically result in few fatalities at a time, this overall increase in fatalities is driven by the broader increase in mob violence more generally.

Explosions/Remote violence



Events coded with event type **Explosions/Remote violence** are comprised of the following sub-event types: *chemical weapon, air/drone strike, shelling/artillery/missile attack, remote explosive/landmine/IED, suicide bomb, and grenade.*

Nearly all forms of **Explosions/remote violence** declined from 2018 to 2019, with the exception of *Shelling/artillery/missile attack*. This type of violence increased by 19% overall (from 16,871 events in 2018 to 20,134 events in 2019). It increased by 34% in Europe, specifically in Ukraine, and by over 14% in the Middle East, particularly in Syria and Yemen.

While other forms of **Explosions/remote violence** registered overall declines from 2018 to 2019, this pattern is not reflected across all regions. Events involving⁹ *air/drone strikes* increased by 167% in Africa, particularly in Egypt and Libya, and by 31% in Central Asia and the Caucasus, specifically in Afghanistan. The use of *remote explosives/landmines/IEDs* increased by 20% in Southeast Asia, especially in Myanmar. *Suicide bombings* nearly doubled from four to seven events in Southeast Asia,

⁹ Like event types, sub-event types are hierarchical to accommodate for concurrent tactics within the same event, in order to avoid double-counting. This means that shelling occurring simultaneously as an air strike being dropped would be coded as 'Air/drone strike' as it is higher on the hierarchy than 'Shelling/artillery/missile attack'. Or a civilian abducted and then killed would be coded as 'Attack' because it is higher on the hierarchy than 'Abduction/forced disappearance'. This means that the number of events involving suicide bombings, for example, may actually be higher than the number of events coded with sub-event type equal to 'Suicide bomb' as there may be instances of suicide bombings taking place which would be nested within other events (e.g. a suicide bombing happening within the context of a battle would be coded as an 'Armed clash' under event type 'Battles' as 'Battles' appear higher on the hierarchy than 'Explosions/Remote violence'; or a suicide bombing happening within the context of a missile attack would be coded as 'Shelling/artillery/missile attack' as that appears higher on the hierarchy than 'Suicide bomb'. It is important to keep these distinctions in mind when drawing interpretations of the data. For more on ACLED coding rules, see [the ACLED codebook](#).

specifically in Indonesia and the Philippines, and the use of grenades increased in the Middle East by over 73%, especially in Turkey and Syria.

Violence against civilians



Events coded with event type **Violence against civilians** are comprised of the following sub-event types: *abduction/forced disappearance*, *sexual violence*, and *attack*. This event type is a subset of all civilian targeting (see definitions at the beginning of this report).

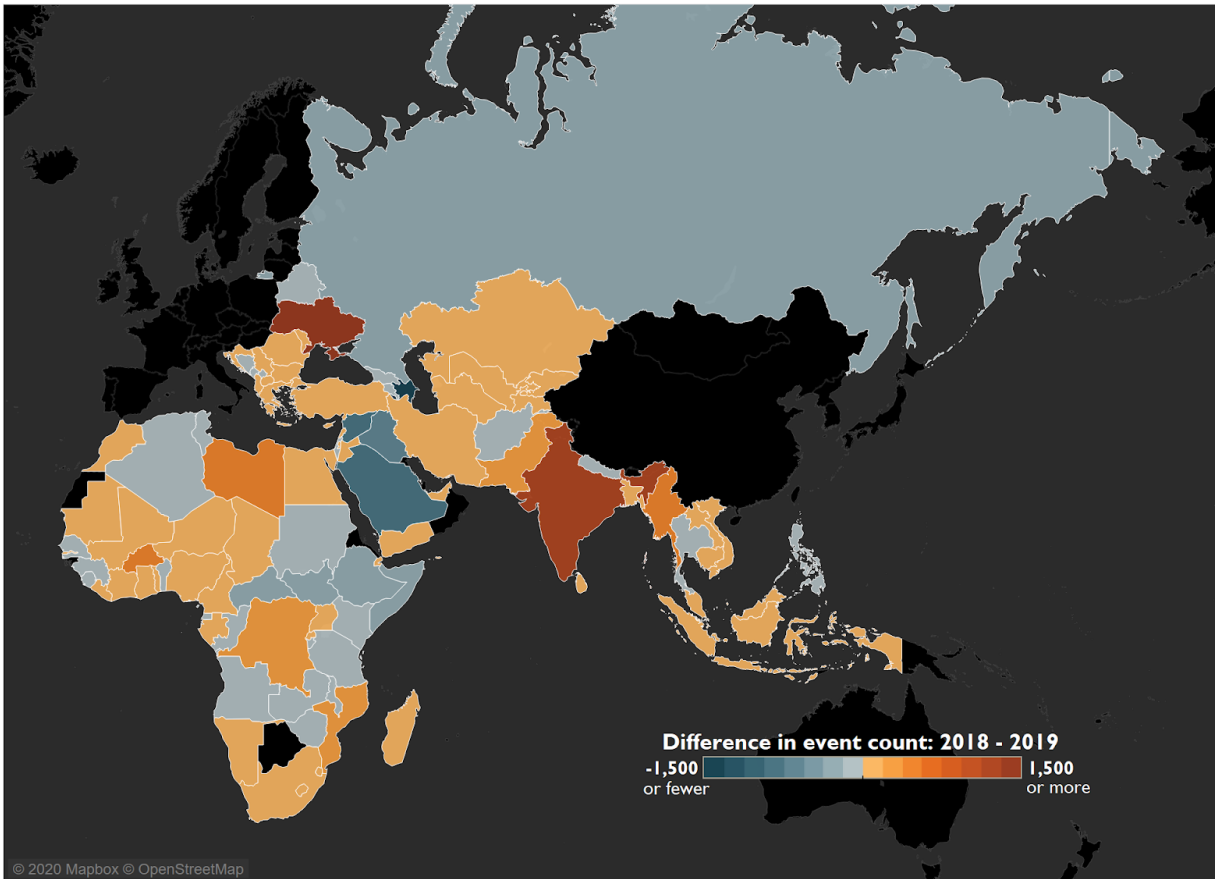
Violence against civilians increased by 7% overall (from 11,211 events in 2018 to 12,037 events in 2019). *Abductions/forced disappearances* increased by 37% from 2018 to 2019. This trend is driven by a 99% rise in the Middle East, especially in Syria and Yemen, a 73% rise in Southeast Asia, especially in Myanmar, and a 29% rise in Africa, especially in the DRC. Meanwhile, the total number of *sexual violence* events remained relatively constant from 2018 to 2019, with a difference of only one event — though trends vary substantially across regions. The greatest increase in *sexual violence* occurred in South Asia, with a 58% increase driven by a significant rise in India. All other *attacks* on civilians increased by 5% overall from 2018 to 2019, with an 18% rise in South Asia, where nearly every country experienced a significant increase, as well as a 7% rise in the Middle East, particularly in Palestine, Turkey, and Yemen.

OVERALL TRENDS BY COUNTRY

Despite the overall decline in political violence, the number of events actually increased in more countries than it decreased. The map (Figure 5) depicts where the largest changes occurred.

Figure 5.

More countries experienced more violence in 2019



WHERE DID MOST VIOLENCE OCCUR? —


Measured by total number of reported political violence events, the most violent countries covered by ACLED in 2019 were primarily those with major conventional conflicts, including Syria, Ukraine, Afghanistan, and Yemen — many of the same countries as in 2018. Together, these four countries account for 61% of all political violence events recorded by ACLED in 2019 (see Table 1). Many of the countries with the highest numbers of political violence events in 2019 also had the highest numbers of reported fatalities: Afghanistan, Yemen, and Syria. Moreover, many of these countries were also among the deadliest in 2018 (see Table

1), pointing to the persistence of violent conflict in Afghanistan, Yemen, Syria, and Nigeria.

Table 1. Countries with the highest number of political violence events and reported fatalities in 2019

Country	Number of recorded events	Main event type (& sub-event type)	Main engagement type
SYRIA	17,667	Explosions/remote violence <i>(Shelling/artillery/missile attack)</i>	One-sided violence involving state forces
UKRAINE	14,852	Battles <i>(Armed clash)</i>	Ukrainian military vs. NAF rebels
AFGHANISTAN	13,622	Battles <i>(Armed clash)</i>	Afghan military vs. Taliban
YEMEN	10,103	Explosions/remote violence <i>(Shelling/artillery/missile attack)</i>	Saudi-backed Hadi forces vs. Houthi forces
INDIA	5,373	Riots <i>(Mob violence)</i>	Mobs (e.g. vigilantes, those linked to political parties, etc.) targeting civilians

Country	Number of reported fatalities	Fatalities as a percent of total ACLED dataset	Main event type contributing to fatalities	Main engagement type contributing to fatalities
AFGHANISTAN	41,725	33%	Battles <i>(Armed clash)</i>	Afghan military vs. Taliban
YEMEN	25,702	20%	Battles <i>(Armed clash)</i>	Saudi-backed Hadi forces vs. Houthi forces
SYRIA	15,217	12%	Battles <i>(Armed clash)</i>	Syrian military vs. opposition rebels (e.g. HTS, IS, etc.)
NIGERIA	5,403	4%	Battles <i>(Armed clash)</i>	Nigerian military vs. IS and/or Boko Haram
SOMALIA	4,017	3%	Battles <i>(Armed clash)</i>	Somali military vs. Al Shabaab

 **Syria's** civil war remains one of the most devastating conflicts covered by ACLED, registering the highest number of political violence events in 2019. Syria alone makes up 19% of the total number of political violence events in the ACLED dataset last year, despite an overall decrease in the number of events recorded in the country since 2018 (see Table 4).



Ukraine's easternmost Donbass region is the site of an ongoing conflict that began in 2014 between separatist rebels and the Ukrainian government. Despite multiple ceasefire agreements, continued violations mean that the conflict is unlikely to end in the near term. Due to a significant spike in conflict activity in early 2019, Ukraine registered the greatest absolute increase in political violence events across all areas of ACLED coverage, even as fighting declined overall throughout the rest of the year. Moreover, the two actors engaged in the highest number of political violence events in 2019 operate in Ukraine: the military forces of Ukraine and the United Armed Forces of Novorossiia (NAF) (see Table 6).



In **Afghanistan**, fighting between the Taliban and state forces, backed by the US and NATO, continued through the end of 2019. While the year began and ended with hopes for a peace agreement to end the nearly two-decade war, Afghanistan remained one of the most violent countries in the ACLED dataset. In fact, more fatalities from political violence were reported in Afghanistan than in any other country covered by ACLED. Violence perpetrated by the Islamic State of Khorasan (IS-K) has exacerbated the conflict; despite the group's collapse in Nangarhar — its main stronghold — IS-K still launched some of the deadliest attacks on civilians in the country last year. Although Afghanistan experienced fewer political violence events than Syria and Ukraine, it was by far the deadliest country covered by ACLED in 2019, with more reported fatalities than Syria and Yemen combined. The war was relentless and widespread last year, once again producing the highest number of reported fatalities from any single conflict, even despite updates to ACLED methodology aimed at ensuring the most conservative fatality reports are coded (see ACLED's [Afghanistan methodology brief](#) and [fatality coding primer](#) for more details). Ultimately, Afghanistan accounts for a third of all fatalities recorded by ACLED during the year. Notwithstanding continued peace efforts, casualties on all fronts remained high, notably among civilians ([UNAMA, 17 October 2019](#)). High fatalities can be at least partially attributed to the weapons and tactics used, with reported fatalities from airstrikes alone resulting in approximately a third of the total. Moreover, battle events regularly feature a combination of weapon types in addition to small arms, including artillery, air support,

and explosives, often with particularly lethal results. One of the largest battles of the year — the Taliban assault on Kunduz city in late August — featured a multi-pronged attack alongside strategic suicide bombings, while state forces countered with small arms and airstrikes ([Al Jazeera, 31 August 2019](#)). Furthermore, while IS-K activity has declined in recent years, the group continues to affect fatality trends, both as perpetrator and victim. An IS-claimed suicide attack on a Shiite wedding party in Kabul was the deadliest of the year, reportedly killing 80 people ([RFERL, 21 August 2019](#)), while both Taliban and state forces regularly clash with the group in the provinces of Kunar and Nangarhar. For more on what to watch for in Afghanistan in 2020, see the Afghanistan feature in ACLED's special report series: [10 Conflicts to Worry About in 2020](#).



Yemen's political violence landscape is marked by a variety of interconnected local conflicts involving regional powers competing for influence: Iran-backed Houthi forces continue to combat the internationally recognized government led by President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, supported by Saudi Arabia; the secessionist Southern Transitional Council (STC) advocates for the creation of an independent state in southern Yemen; and Islamist insurgencies launched by Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the Yemeni branch of the Islamic State (IS) continuously clash with one another. For more on what to watch for in Yemen in 2020, see the Yemen feature in ACLED's special report series: [10 Conflicts to Worry About in 2020](#).



Of the most violent countries in 2019, **India** is the only one that is not experiencing an ongoing conventional conflict. Political violence in India primarily takes the form of mob violence, which makes up 57% of all political violence events in the country. In addition to mob violence, electoral violence also spiked around the general elections and legislative assembly elections held across the country in 2019. Historic political rivalries and the increasing criminalization of politics — with politicians facing criminal cases ([Economic Times, 1 April 2019](#)) — have contributed to the high levels of disorder. Violent political rivalries are entrenched in India's electoral process, and inter-party and intra-party conflicts raise the risk of election-related violence. At the same time, violent mobs with links to political

parties often engage in spontaneous violence in India, underlining the importance of monitoring disorganized violence in order to capture the full spectrum of disorder across societies. During the Indian general elections in April and May 2019, ACLED shared weekly updates through the India Election Monitor series: see [Phase 1](#), [Phase 2](#), [Phase 3](#), [Phase 4](#), [Phase 5](#), [Phase 6](#), and [Phase 7](#), culminating in a [final recap special report](#).



Although **Nigeria** is not among the most violent countries in 2019, it is among the deadliest. Despite a small decline in the number of fatalities reported in Borno state compared to 2018, the region's ongoing Boko Haram insurgency continues to result in high numbers of fatalities in Nigeria. Additionally, reported fatalities rose dramatically in the northwestern state of Zamfara, where rural populations face systematic cattle rustling, kidnappings, and killings perpetrated by groups of armed men, even as the military has increased its presence in the state.



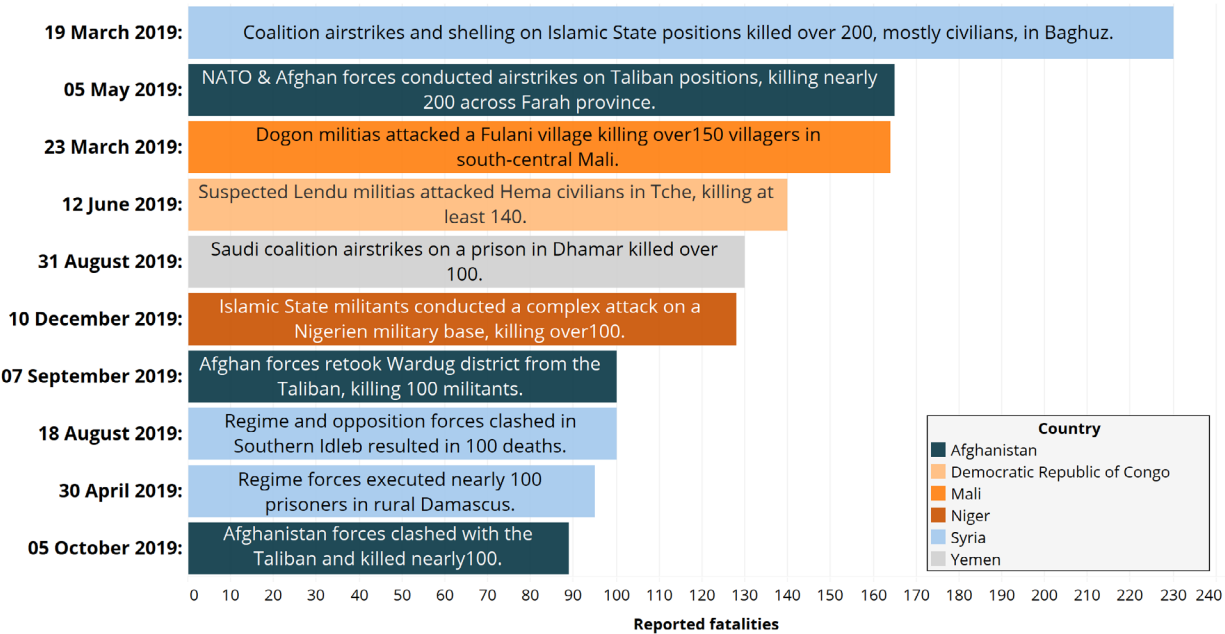
Likewise, while **Somalia** did not register one of the highest rates of political violence in 2019, it did experience one of the highest death tolls. Al Shabaab's long and ferocious insurgency against the Somali government and its international partners continued throughout the year at a high cost to both combatants and civilians. Increasingly intricate attacks involving explosives and targeted assassinations suggest that the conflict is far from over, despite increased efforts by the US and other coalition members. Additionally, Somalia's rural populations are routinely exposed to clan-based violence, with a weak state security apparatus unable to prevent clashes fought over water and pasture resources.

Many of these countries — Afghanistan, Yemen, and Syria — are also the sites of the deadliest single events reported during the year. Of the top 10 deadliest events on record for 2019 (see Figure 6), three of them occurred in Afghanistan, three of them occurred in Syria, and one occurred in Yemen. The remainder took place in Africa: in the DRC as well as in Mali and Niger in the Sahel. These events also demonstrate that IS remains capable of fatal attacks, even if it is less active than before (see the next section for more information on the most violent actors around

the world); that ethnic militias are lethal conflict actors and should not be underestimated (for example, see the next section for more information on how Jama'ah Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin [JNIM] and other militant groups co-opt local actors); and that civilians are at great risk of deadly violence, with the majority of the most lethal events being perpetrated against civilians (while the next section discusses the most violent actors around the world, the following section discusses the threat to civilians).

Figure 6.

Ten reportedly most lethal political violence events of 2019

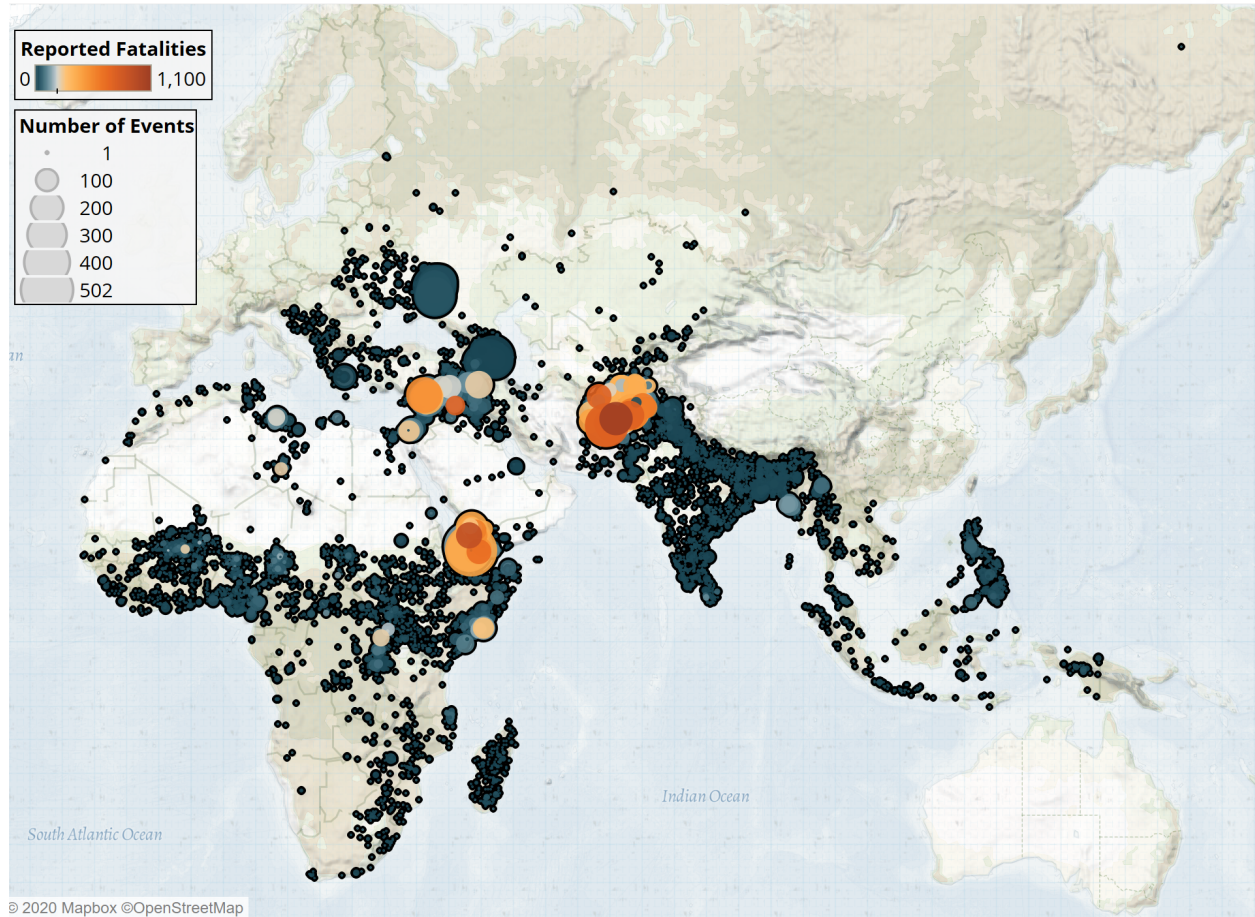


Where are the most dangerous locations?

ACLED records violent activity in over 23,000 locations in 2019. Many of the deadliest and most violent localities are in countries experiencing ongoing conventional conflict or war (see Figure 7).

Figure 7.

Most dangerous locations: 2019



Considering both the number of events and the number of fatalities, the most dangerous locations across ACLED coverage areas are listed (see Table 2). They include three locations in Afghanistan, one in Yemen, and one in Syria.¹⁰

¹⁰ This analysis includes only those locations coded with geo-precision 1 or 2. These five locations are chosen based on their 'ranking' in both number of events and fatalities.

Table 2: Most dangerous locations based on political violence and fatalities

Location	Country	Reported fatalities	Number of events
GIRISHK	Afghanistan	744 (7th across all locations)	358 (4th across all locations)
NADE-ALI	Afghanistan	575 (16th across all locations)	286 (10th across all locations)
HAYS	Yemen	406 (36th across all locations)	504 (1st across all locations)
TARINKOT	Afghanistan	1,100 (1st across all locations)	198 (37th across all locations)
KABANI	Syria	504 (22nd across all locations)	232 (23rd across all locations)

COUNTRIES WITH SUBSTANTIAL INCREASES

By country, the number of political violence events *increased* most substantially in Ukraine, India, Libya, Myanmar, and Burkina Faso.

Table 3. Countries with major increases in recorded number of political violence events, 2019

Country	Change in the number of political events since 2018	Contributing factors
UKRAINE	Increase of 1,579 events, or 12%	<p>Spike in conflict at the start of the year. Conflict in the Donbass region intensified in early 2019, though ACLED records a sporadic yet overall decline in fighting since then. Despite this drop, the number of events in 2019 was still higher than the number of events in 2018 — even as conflict continues to trend downward into early 2020.</p> <p><i>For more on ACLED's new Ukraine coverage (launched in 2019), see ACLED's analysis piece: Ukraine - Europe Date Release.</i></p>
INDIA	Increase of 1,242 events, or 30%	<p>Election-related violence. While cross-border violence between Indian and Pakistani forces in Kashmir escalated in 2019, violence related to the Indian general election held in April and May was the predominant driver of increased activity in the country last year.</p> <p><i>For more on electoral violence in India around the 2019 general election, see ACLED's analysis piece: The Indian General Election 2019: A Final Recap.</i></p>
LIBYA	Increase of 540 events, or 92%	<p>Assault on Tripoli. The assault on the western region of Tripoli by the Libyan National Army (LNA) and its allies began in early April 2019 and is still ongoing, contributing to a staggering rise in airstrikes and battles.</p> <p><i>For more on the assault on Tripoli, see ACLED's analysis piece: Push Comes to Shove: Haftar's Abrupt, and Inevitable, March towards Tripoli.</i></p>

MYANMAR	Increase of 463 events, or 61%	<p>Conflict in Rakhine State. Clashes between Myanmar’s military and the United League of Arakan/Arakan Army (ULA/AA) intensified in 2019 as the ULA/AA moved to establish a base in the region.</p> <p><i>For more on conflict dynamics in Myanmar, see ACLED’s analysis piece: Dueling Ceasefires: Myanmar’s Conflict Landscape in 2019.</i></p>
BURKINA FASO	Increase of 399 events, or 174%	<p>Increased insecurity. The use of scorched-earth tactics by state security forces has contributed to escalating violence, fast-laning recruitment to militant groups (both JNIM and ISGS) and deepening a growing insurgency. Militant groups have launched a concerted effort to expand, and self-defense organizations and community-based militias have triggered episodes of deadly inter-communal violence. Conflict in the country is mutating and becoming increasingly brutal.</p> <p><i>For more on insecurity in Burkina Faso, see ACLED’s analysis piece: Insecurity in Southwestern Burkina Faso in the Context of an Expanding Insurgency.</i></p>

In Burkina Faso, 1,895 more fatalities were reported than in 2018, or a seven-fold increase; in Myanmar, 1,263 more fatalities were reported than in 2018, or an increase of 582%; and in Libya, 876 more fatalities were reported than in 2018, or an increase of 74%.

Likewise, the DRC experienced an 18% increase, with 550 more fatalities reported in 2019 than in 2018, driven by rising political violence in the eastern provinces of North Kivu and Ituri. Ongoing militant insurgencies by the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) in North Kivu and the Cooperative for Development of Congo (CODECO) in Ituri have been symptomatic of the inability of government and UN peacekeeping (MONUSCO) forces to counter insecurity in the region.

Mozambique also registered one of the greatest increases in reported fatalities last year, with 438 more fatalities in 2019 than in 2018, or an increase of 197%. This rise is linked to the worsening insurgency in the northernmost province of Cabo Delgado. While IS has claimed attacks in the region in 2019, the deteriorating situation is underpinned by the increasing operational presence of local insurgents.

COUNTRIES WITH SUBSTANTIAL DECREASES

The number of political violence events *decreased* most substantially in Azerbaijan, Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq. Despite significant decreases in the latter countries, many of them still registered high levels of political violence — Syria, for example, remains the most violent country covered by ACLED in 2019.

Table 4. Countries with major decreases in recorded number of political violence events, 2019

Country	Change in the number of political events since 2018	Contributing factors
AZERBAIJAN	Decrease of 3,967 events, or 47%	<p>Renewed diplomatic engagement over Artsakh region. Following the December 2018 elections in Armenia, the Azerbaijani and Armenian governments resumed talks over the breakaway region of Artsakh, reducing tensions along the Azerbaijan-Armenia-Artsakh Lines of Contact. Although the efforts have not yet led to official peace talks, the number of reported ceasefire violations significantly dropped in 2019.</p> <p><i>For more on ACLED's new Azerbaijan coverage (launched in 2019), particularly in the context of Azerbaijan-Artsakh-Armenia border clashes, see ACLED's press release: ACLED Expands Coverage to Central Asia and the Caucasus.</i></p>

<p style="text-align: center;">SYRIA</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Decrease of 784 events, or 4%</p>	<p>Erosion of rebel-controlled areas and ‘defeat of IS in Syria.’ Rebel control in Syria has now been rolled back to the Greater Idleb area, a significant erosion relative to 2018, when rebels controlled Idleb, Dar’a, Rural Damascus, and Northern Homs. As a result, engagement between the rebels and the regime declined. Russia’s strategy in Syria has focused on targeting one rebel-held area at a time, while putting others ‘on hold.’ This strategy has prevented a more significant drop in the number of violent events, instead contributing to a concentration of events by area. In addition to the reduction of rebel-held areas, the so-called ‘defeat of IS in Syria’ has also resulted in a decline in events. <i>For more on the erosion of rebel-controlled areas, see ACLED’s analysis piece: The Re(Conquest) of Northern Syria.</i></p>
<p style="text-align: center;">SAUDI ARABIA</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Decrease of 718 events, or 54%</p>	<p>Partial unilateral ceasefire between Saudi Arabia and Houthi forces. The September truce, coupled with indirect negotiations between the two sides in Oman, have led to a drastic decrease in bombing and clashes along the Saudi border regions. <i>For more on conflict on the border, see ACLED’s analysis piece: The Saudi-Yemeni Border Conflict.</i></p>
<p style="text-align: center;">IRAQ</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Decrease of 709 events, or 25%</p>	<p>Distributed jurisdiction of security forces. Various Iraqi security forces were relegated to different jurisdictions in 2019, with the Peshmerga taking Kurdish territories and the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) taking Saladin, Anbar, and Nineveh provinces. This division resulted in greater security control across the country. It also largely isolated IS attacks to disputed areas between the Peshmerga and PMF, resulting in a general decrease in political violence. <i>For more on Peshmerga and PMF control in Iraq and the fight against IS, see ACLED’s analysis piece: Behind Frenemy Lines: Uneasy Alliances against IS in Iraq.</i></p>

MOST VIOLENT ACTORS IN 2019



WHO ARE THE MOST ACTIVE VIOLENT ACTORS?

A variety of actors engaged in political violence in 2019, including state and non-state groups, as well as spontaneous mobs. Despite the continued rise of violent non-state actors, state forces participated in 41% — or almost half — of all political violence events in 2019.

Across ACLED's coverage areas in 2019, three of the five most active groups were domestic state forces operating in conventional conflicts in Ukraine, Afghanistan, and Syria. This trend indicates that even as conventional inter-state wars become less common, and non-state armed groups become increasingly sophisticated, state forces remain powerful and deadly conflict actors (see Table 5).¹¹ The actors engaged

11 In the table, only named actors are included — meaning that anonymous or unidentified armed groups are excluded, as are spontaneous (and hence unnamed) violent mobs. Those *included* are state forces, rebel groups, political militias, identity militias, and external/other actors. For analysis here, the various wings of police and military units of countries are grouped together to form two distinct groups of state forces per country (e.g. events involving the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency of the Philippine police are grouped together with events involving the Counter-Intelligence Task Force of the Philippine police). The forces of countries are grouped together whether active within their home borders or not (e.g. events involving the Saudi military in Saudi Arabia are grouped together with events involving the Saudi military in Yemen). Distinct state forces, however, are not collapsed into larger entities (e.g. state forces of Jubaland or Somaliland are treated as distinct from the Somali military; the Palestinian military in the West Bank and in Gaza are not treated as the same). Different branches/units of transnational actors like IS and AMISOM are not

in the highest rates of political violence are largely also those involved in events that result in the most reported fatalities. This includes the Taliban and military forces of Afghanistan, both rival governments in Yemen, and the military forces of Syria (see Table 5).

Table 5. Actors participating in the highest number of political violence events and deadliest engagements in 2019

Actor	Actor type	Primary country of operation	Number of events	Main event type
MILITARY FORCES OF UKRAINE	State forces	Ukraine	12,874	Battles
NAF: UNITED ARMED FORCES OF NOVOROSSIYA	Rebel forces	Ukraine	11,786	Battles
MILITARY FORCES OF SYRIA	State forces	Syria	11,525	Explosions/Remote violence
TALIBAN	Rebel forces	Afghanistan	11,040	Battles
MILITARY FORCES OF AFGHANISTAN	State forces	Afghanistan	10,100	Battles

grouped together as the different branches of IS or the different units of AMISOM do not behave in unison.

Actor	Actor type	Primary country of operation	Reported fatalities
MILITARY FORCES OF AFGHANISTAN	State forces	Afghanistan	34,284
TALIBAN	Rebel forces	Afghanistan	30,243
HOUTHİ MILITARY FORCES	State forces ¹²	Yemen	26,812
PRO-HADI MILITARY FORCES	Rebel forces	Yemen	18,583
MILITARY FORCES OF SYRIA	State forces	Syria	8,236

That the primary actors engaged in conflict in Ukraine, Syria, and Afghanistan are the most active armed groups is unsurprising given that these three countries are among the most violent in 2019. Both of the

12 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. These military or paramilitary actors often maintain no more than a formal relation with the government – such as in the case of the Security Belt Forces or the Elite Forces in Shabwah and Hadramawt (*United Nations Security Council, 26 January 2018*) – or may have split from their former allies – the Saleh-led Republican Guard being the most notable case. To reflect this fragmentation, they are identified by their respective regime years (2012 onwards for the Hadi government, and 2015-2016 and then 2016- for the Houthi-Saleh bodies), the police or military status and their specific name. For more on ACLED methodology decisions in Yemen, see [this primer](#).

primary actors in Ukraine and Afghanistan rank among the most active, as the most common engagement in those countries involved battles between these two primary conflict actors. In Syria, the most common engagement was one-sided violence involving state forces, making the Syrian military alone one of the most active agents last year.

The actors involved in the deadliest engagements in 2019 are the same actors as in 2018. It is important to remember that these are fatalities stemming from violence in which the actor was engaged, and as such include both fatalities that the actor *incurred* as well as *perpetrated*. ACLED offers total reported fatality counts and does not disaggregate fatalities by actor.¹³

Note that this list only includes named, definitive actors. This means that anonymous or unidentified armed groups are not included, although these armed groups are engaged in significant levels of political violence. The countries in which these anonymous agents are most active are noted in the table below.

Table 6. Countries with the most UAG activity

Country	Number of events involving UAGs	Difference from last year
SYRIA	1,994	-660(-25%)
INDIA	604	-209(-26%)
SOMALIA	590	+105(+22%)
DRC	555	+141(+34%)
AFGHANISTAN	481	-304(-39%)

¹³ For more on how ACLED codes fatalities, see [this primer](#) on ACLED fatality methodology.

WHICH ACTORS INCREASED THEIR ACTIVITY THE MOST?

Many of the most violent actors also significantly increased their rate of activity between 2018 and 2019, including the military forces of both Syria and Ukraine, the Taliban, and the NAF (see Table 7).

Table 7. Actors with the greatest increase in rate of activity in 2019

Actor	Actor type	Primary country of operation	Difference in number of events since 2018	Percent increase since 2018
NATIONAL RESISTANCE FORCES	State forces	Yemen	2,143	212%
MILITARY FORCES OF SYRIA	State forces	Syria	1,612	16%
MILITARY FORCES OF UKRAINE	State forces	Ukraine	1,172	10%
TALIBAN	Rebel forces	Afghanistan	1,150	12%
NAF: UNITED ARMED FORCES OF NOVOROSSIYA	Rebel forces	Ukraine	996	9%

The National Resistance Forces in Yemen¹⁴ are made up of three major

¹⁴ For more on the National Resistance Forces in Yemen, see ACLED's analysis piece: [Who Are the UAE-backed Forces Fighting on the Western Front in Yemen?](#)

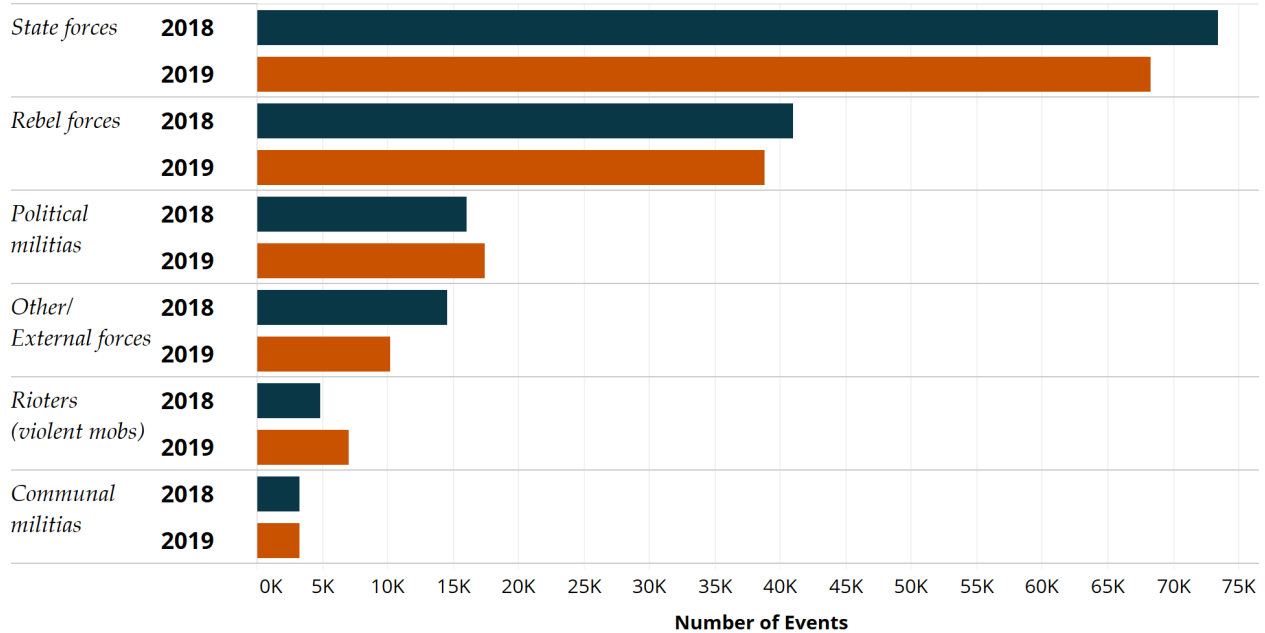
components: the Guardians of the Republic led by former President Ali Abdullah Saleh's nephew Tariq Saleh, the Salafist Giants Brigade, and the Tihami Resistance. This coalition registered the greatest increase of activity in 2019 relative to 2018. The Stockholm Agreement, initiated in December 2018, has led to a major decline in clashes, direct violence, and fatalities in and around the Yemeni port city of Hodeidah, staving off further offensives by the National Resistance Forces on the western front. Nevertheless, activity linked to the National Resistance Forces has increased drastically, as clashes and direct violence were replaced by heavy shelling and artillery attacks by both the National Resistance Forces and the Houthis. The number of shelling and artillery attacks has skyrocketed, with events reportedly taking place on an almost daily basis and in a multitude of locations around the city — driving the significant increase in activity by the National Resistance Forces.

The largest declines in activity rates were exhibited by the military forces of Azerbaijan and Artsakh, forces affiliated with Operation Restoring Hope in Yemen, IS in Syria, and the military forces of Saudi Arabia. These reflect the largest declines in political violence by country listed in Table 4: renewed diplomatic engagement over the Artsakh region contributed to the decrease in the rate of activities of the military forces of Azerbaijan and Artsakh; the partial unilateral ceasefire between Saudi Arabia and Houthi forces contributed to the decrease in the rate of activities of Operation Restoring Hope and the military forces of Saudi Arabia; and the 'defeat of ISIS' in Syria contributed to the decrease in the rate of activity of IS.

Overall, across all regions of ACLED's coverage, the rates of activity of both rebel forces and state forces declined. ACLED only records increases for three types of violent actors since 2018: political militias with a 10% rise in activity; communal militias with a 1% rise; and violent mobs (coded as rioters) with a 45% rise. The largest increase by far was that of violent mobs, which engaged in over 7,000 political violence events in 2019 (see Figure 8).

Figure 8.

Political violence involvement by each actor type: 2018 - 2019



WHICH ACTORS EXPANDED THEIR GEOGRAPHIC SCOPE THE MOST?

Actors expand by not only increasing their rate of activity, but also by enlarging their geographic scope. Agents that are active in more locations may have moved onto new battlefronts, shifted to different areas of operation, or extended current operations to include new strategic areas. The actors whose activity expanded the most in 2019 (i.e. are active in many more locations than previously) are outlined in Table 8.

Table 8. Actors with the greatest increase in active locations from 2018 to 2019¹⁵

Actor	Actor type	Primary country of operation	Difference in number of locations in 2018 and 2019	Percent increase since 2018
MILITARY FORCES OF MYANMAR	State forces	Myanmar	192	246%
ULA/AA: United League of Arakan/ Arakan Army	Rebel forces	Myanmar	139	695%
JNIM: Group for Support of Islam and Muslims	Rebel forces	Burkina Faso, Niger, Mali	120¹⁶	87%
QSD: Syrian Democratic Forces	Rebel forces	Syria	115	52%
JTW: National Liberation Front	Rebel forces	Syria	85	139%

The list above only includes named, definitive actors. This means that anonymous or unidentified armed groups in Nigeria are not included, though they appeared in 155 more locations in 2019 relative to 2018 — second only to the Myanmar military. The same holds true for unnamed armed groups in the DRC, which were active in 118 more locations in 2019 relative to 2018, and in Myanmar, where they were active in 92

¹⁵ Only actors which were active in 2018 are included here; Operation Peace Spring, for example, was active in 145 ‘new locations’ in 2019, though this is because this operation was not active in 2018.

¹⁶ Actual number even higher given “JNIM: Group for Support of Islam and Muslims and/or Islamic State (Greater Sahara)” also saw an increase of 145 more locations in 2019 relative to 2018.

more locations in 2019 relative to 2018. While some events may be attributed to unknown agents due to insufficient reporting, some agents may remain unidentified as a result of strategic anonymity: actors may outsource violence to such agents to avoid responsibility (for more, see [Kishi, 2015](#)).

Both the Myanmar military and the United League of Arakan/Arakan Army (ULA/AA) are among the actors with the greatest expansion in activity. While the two have clashed intermittently since 2015, ACLED records a sharp increase in fighting between the groups in 2019 as the ULA/AA moved to establish a base in Rakhine state. The conflict spread southwards within Rakhine state to townships in which battles had not been previously recorded, including Mrauk-U, Sittwe, Myebon, Minbya, and Ann. The largest number of battles were recorded in Mrauk-U township, an area notable for its historical importance as the capital of the old Arakan (Rakhine) Kingdom ([Transnational Institute, December 2019](#)).

In the Sahel, the Al Qaeda-affiliated JNIM was active in 120 more locations in 2019 relative to 2018. Several factors could explain the rise in JNIM activity. In 2018, JNIM suffered multiple tactical defeats — namely, the elimination of multiple JNIM commanders, including some of the closest associates of the JNIM emir, Iyad Ag Ghaly — at the hands of the French forces of Operation Barkhane. In fact, France indicated that 2018 was the operation's most successful year in terms of militants killed or captured since 2014 ([Le Point, 27 February 2019](#)). However, paradoxically, 2018 was also a year in which JNIM significantly expanded its operations in the region, especially in Burkina Faso, where it opened up new fronts in the East and South-West regions as well as in the Centre-North. And if 2018 was a year of militant expansion, 2019 was a year when jihadi groups cemented their presence and stepped up their activities. While the Centre-North region had previously only experienced sporadic militant activity, it soon became the epicenter of the insurgency and an unprecedented humanitarian crisis that led to mass displacement. Militants started 2019 with a suicide bombing campaign, including the first bombing targeting the EU training mission, EUTM-Mali, in Koulikoro, 50 kilometers northeast of Bamako. The campaign also included the deadliest attack ever against

the UN peacekeeping mission, MINUSMA, in Aguelhoc, Kidal, which reportedly killed at least 11 Chadian peacekeepers and wounded 25.

2019 also began with mass atrocities perpetrated by the Koglewogo against the Fulani community in Koulogon, Mali, and in Yirgou, Burkina Faso. Both JNIM and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) have recruited broadly amongst the Fulani community.¹⁷ JNIM and ISGS also conducted an offensive, in tandem, in the borderlands of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger in 2019. This offensive forced all three national armies into tactical withdrawals from military outposts in the tri-state border area. Several of the attacks carried out as part of this campaign are among the deadliest ever recorded in these countries.

Simultaneously, amid tensions between JNIM and ISGS — and within JNIM — many JNIM fighters have defected to ISGS. As a result, many events in the Sahel cannot be definitively attributed to JNIM and/or ISGS. Such events are hence coded by ACLED as “JNIM: Group for Support of Islam and Muslims and/or Islamic State (Greater Sahara).” Events involving either or both of these actors were reported in 145 more locations in 2019 relative to 2018.¹⁸ This point makes the expansion of events attributed

17 JNIM in particular has explicitly framed itself as a ‘protector of the Fulani community’ while increasing its derogatory rhetoric against Dozos (fraternities of traditional hunters that now make up the bulk of pro-government militias in the regions of Mopti and Ségou in central Mali). Since the massacres of Fulani, JNIM — or its local constituents Katiba Macina and ally Ansaroul Islam — have either signed accords with, coerced, or targeted the Bambara and Dogon communities. However, the situation evolved according to a different trajectory in Bankass, Bandiagara, Koro, and Douentza, also located in the Mopti Region. There, fighting took place between jihadi militants and Fulani militiamen on one side and Dan Na Ambassagou and Dogon militiamen on the other side, as well as increased targeting of civilians. Similarly, fighting has increased in neighboring Burkina Faso between jihadi militant groups and Koglweogo and Dozos. However, the Koglweogo’s involvement is more central than that of Dozos to the conflict in Burkina Faso. Thus, jihadi groups have engaged in a broader effort in eradicating pro-government militias in areas under their influence in both Mali and Burkina Faso.

18 ISGS reconnected to Islamic State Central (ISC) in early 2019 and was consequently incorporated into Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). Currently, ISGS constitutes what could be described as Islamic State’s flagship as part of its campaign

to solely JNIM even more stark. Both groups are major contributors to the intensity, deadliness, and increased brutality of the region's ongoing conflict.

The two actors with the fourth and fifth highest increases in active locations from 2018 to 2019 are both present in Syria: the Syrian Democratic Forces (QSD) and the National Liberation Front (JTW). In northwest Syria, JTW played a key role in the fight against pro-regime forces during their offensive in the Greater Idlib area, which ultimately resulted in significant territorial gains by the latter. Meanwhile, the uptick in QSD activity is linked to the Turkey-led Operation Peace Spring east of the Euphrates: the group's increased activities coincided with official Turkish announcements prior to the launch of the offensive and the eruption of fighting.

ACLED records political violence in nearly 9,000 new locations in 2019. These are locations where political violence was not reported in 2018, but where it was reported in 2019. Despite the overall reduction in political violence by state forces between 2018 to 2019, they were active in the highest number of these new locations, indicating that such agents expanded their activity most greatly. Nevertheless, all types of agents engaged in political violence in new locations in 2019, indicating that political violence is expanding across all actor categories.

on the African continent. A step-change in ISGS capabilities has altered the power relationship between Al Qaeda and IS affiliates in the Western Sahel. If the groups before operated according to a logic of coexistence, cooperation, and coordination—tension and competition are now apparent, with potential for further destabilization of the Sahel.



THREATS TO CIVILIANS IN 2019

The conflicts covered by ACLED do not only impact armed groups and warring parties, they also have devastating effects on civilians. Civilians can be directly targeted by political violence as an operational strategy, or may be indirectly harmed as collateral damage in ongoing conflict.

To explore civilian targeting trends, this section analyzes: all events coded with event type *Violence against civilians*; events coded with event type *Explosions/Remote violence* or *Riots* in which civilians or unarmed protesters were the primary victim; and events coded with sub-event type Excessive force against protesters, under event type *Protests*. Note that while ACLED includes civilian fatalities that occur as collateral damage within the total fatality count for each event, civilian fatalities are not uniquely disaggregated in these counts. However, in events in which civilians are directly targeted, we can assume that the vast majority of fatalities stemming from such events are indeed civilian fatalities.¹⁹

OVERALL TRENDS BY EVENT TYPE

ACLED records a 2% rise in civilian targeting last year, with 20,121 events reported in 2018 compared to 20,578 in 2019. At the same time, fewer fatalities were reported in connection with these events, with 28,604 fatalities in 2018 compared to 22,365 in 2019, or a 22% decrease.

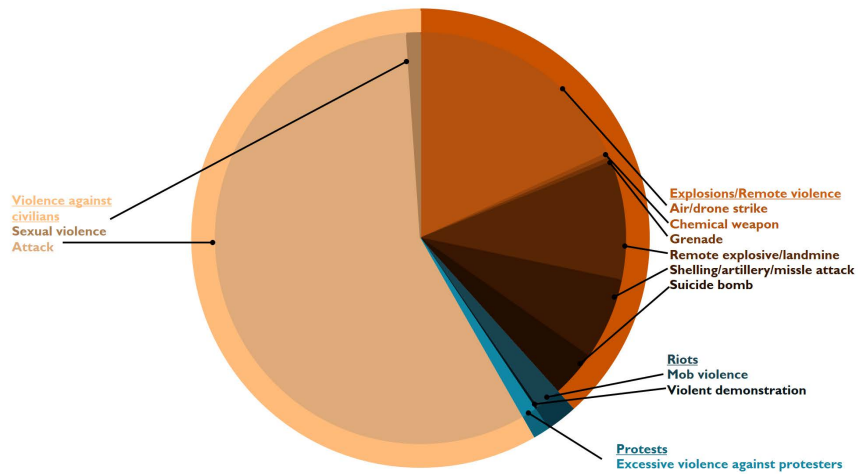
Civilians do not face uniform threats, meaning that not all civilians are at equal risk of targeting. In some contexts, civilians from certain ethnicities, religious groups, or other identity markers may be at heightened risk of violence.

¹⁹ The sole exception here are in suicide attacks in which the perpetrator fatality is also included in the total fatality count of the event.

The multiple forms of violence targeting civilians are captured by distinct sub-event types in the ACLED dataset, as seen in Table 9. Figure 9 helps to depict the prevalence and deadliness of these different types of violence.

Figure 9.

Reported civilian fatalities in 2019



Events Targeting Civilians in 2019

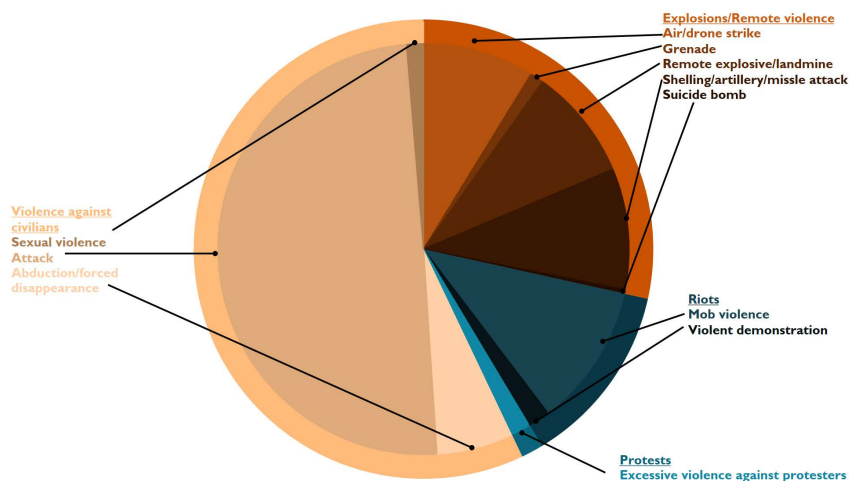






Table 9. Types of violence targeting civilians in 2019

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	10,362	14,413	India (1,053 events, 536 reported fatalities)	Anonymous or unidentified armed groups (349 events, 185 reported fatalities)
	Abduction/forced disappearance	1,413	0	Syria (336 events, 0 reported fatalities)	QSD: Syrian Democratic Forces (116 events, 0 reported fatalities)
	Sexual violence	262	114	DRC (65 events, 44 reported fatalities)	Anonymous or unidentified armed groups (40 events, 24 reported fatalities)
EXPLOSIONS /REMOTE VIOLENCE	Chemical weapon	0	0	N/A	N/A
	Air/drone strike	1,283	2,438	Syria (853 events, 1,570 reported fatalities)	Military forces of Syria , including air force (659 events, 1,053 reported fatalities)

EXPLOSIONS/ REMOTE VIOLENCE (CONT.) 	Shelling/artillery/ missile attack	1,709	1,310	Syria (898 events, 631 reported fatalities)	Military forces of Syria (755 events, 439 reported fatalities)
	Remote explosive/ landmine/IED	1,620	2,234	Syria (484 events, 764 reported fatalities)	Anonymous or unidentified armed groups (323 events, 473 reported fatalities)
	Suicide bomb	39	657	Afghanistan (11 events, 252 reported fatalities)	Anonymous or unidentified armed groups (6 events, 95 reported fatalities)
	Grenade	196	67	Ukraine & India (27 events each, 6 reported fatalities in Ukraine and 11 reported fatalities in India)	Anonymous or unidentified armed groups (24 events and 5 reported fatalities in Ukraine; 20 events and 3 reported fatalities in India)
RIOTS 	Mob violence	2,960	658	India (1,734 events, 195 reported fatalities)	Mobs (1,734 events, 195 reported fatalities)
	Violent demonstration	445	82	India (196 events, 2 reported fatalities)	Rioters (196 events, 2 reported fatalities)
PROTESTS 	Excessive force against protesters	289	392	Sudan (74 events, 187 reported fatalities)	Police forces of Sudan (46 events, 32 reported fatalities)

Direct, close-range attacks — coded as sub-event type Attack — continue to be the primary way in which civilians are targeted and killed: this violence accounts for 50% of all civilian targeting recorded in 2019 and 65% of all civilian fatalities. While **Mob violence** poses the next greatest threat to civilians — making up 14% of all civilian targeting — this violence tends to be less lethal, responsible for 3% of all civilian fatalities. In contrast, while **Air/drone strikes** and **Remote explosives/landmines/IEDs** are not among the most common ways in which civilians are targeted, they are particularly lethal and account for large proportions of civilian fatalities: 11% and 10% of all civilian fatalities, respectively. In fact, the decline in the number of civilian fatalities recorded in 2019 relative to 2018 is driven largely by a 64% drop in fatalities stemming from air/drone strikes targeting civilians, from 6,829 in 2018 to 2,438 in 2019.

OVERALL TRENDS BY COUNTRY

The places where civilians are most often targeted vary from the sites of conventional conflicts — such as Syria and Yemen — to countries experiencing other forms of violent disorder outside the context of war — such as India and the Philippines. While civilian targeting increased last year, these events are not always fatal. ACLED data show that reported fatalities from civilian targeting decreased in 2019. Moreover, the countries with the highest rates of civilian targeting do not necessarily have the highest numbers of reported civilian fatalities (see Table 10).

Table 10. Countries with the highest number of civilian targeting events and highest number of fatalities stemming from such events in 2019

Country	Number of events with direct civilian targeting
SYRIA	3,432
INDIA	3,154
YEMEN	1,207
PHILIPPINES	993
DRC	918

Country	Number of direct civilian fatalities
SYRIA	4,165
NIGERIA	2,206
DRC	1,623
AFGHANISTAN	1,506
BURKINA FASO	1,322

It can be difficult to compare scales without understanding the size of local populations in these countries. For example, while Nigeria registered twice the number of civilian fatalities in 2019 compared to Burkina Faso, the latter’s much smaller population of roughly 19 million, relative to Nigeria’s population of roughly 200 million, means the number of civilian fatalities per capita in Burkina Faso is higher (see Vignette 1).

Syria remains the most violent country covered by ACLED (see Table 2), and it is also the most dangerous country for civilians. Despite experiencing one of the greatest decreases in political violence events in 2019 (see Table 4), Syria still registered nearly 3,000 more political violence events than the next country, Ukraine. Syria is also among the deadliest countries in terms of total reported fatalities in 2019 (see Table 2). Likewise, the Syrian military is one of the top five most active armed groups, its engagements generate some of the highest fatality counts (see Table 5), and it is one of the top five actors in terms of increased activity rates (see Table 7). The QSD and JTW, two of the top five actors that geographically expanded their activity the most in 2019, are also active in Syria.

The same is true of Yemen: it registered one of the highest levels of political violence events in 2019 and one of the highest numbers of reported fatalities, second only to Afghanistan (see Table 2).

Vignette 1. Civilian fatalities in Burkina Faso

2019 was a dramatic year in Burkina Faso — replacing Mali as the epicenter of the Sahel crisis — when measured in terms of human loss due to conflict and heightened levels of violence perpetrated by jihadi groups such as JNIM and ISGS. Militants have strengthened their hold on several regions in 2019 after opening new fronts during the previous year. These groups have exploited cleavages along ethnic fault lines while self-defense groups, vigilantes, and community-based militias have become increasingly involved in counter-militancy efforts, triggering lethal episodes of intercommunal violence and tit-for-tat killings between jihadi militant groups on one side and Koglweogo, Dozos, and newly formed militias — e.g. village self-defense — on the other.

Government forces have further contributed to the violence by stepping up military operations across several regions: Otapuanu in the east (Est and Centre-Est regions); and Doofu in the north (Nord, Centre-Nord, and Sahel regions). These operations are reportedly accompanied by human rights abuses and summary executions, following a pattern observed since the insurgency began in earnest in late 2016. Nevertheless, the conflict is mutating and becoming increasingly brutal, and the insurgency is growing. The scorched-earth tactics deployed by state forces have significantly aggravated the continuously deteriorating situation, fastlaning militant recruitment and contributing to the “radicalization” of the insurgency, as evidenced by the rapid advance of the Islamic State in the Western Sahel in general, and Burkina Faso in particular.

While the overall number of fatalities in 2019 increased seven-fold compared to 2018 in Burkina Faso, civilian fatalities alone rose over six-fold, underscoring the heightened risk to civilians posed by the ongoing crisis.

Both the Houthis and the Saudi-backed military forces of Yemen are two of the top five actors involved in events resulting in the most reported fatalities (see Table 5), as are the National Resistance Forces, which increased their rate of activity more than any other group last year (see Table 7).

India registered one of the highest numbers of political violence events in 2019, and it had the second highest number of civilian targeting events. Most of this activity takes the form of spontaneous violence carried out by mobs, often with links to political parties. With India’s 2019 elections,

electoral violence — especially involving mobs — spiked, and civilians faced high levels of targeting. In addition to mob and election-related violence, the protest movement around the controversial Citizenship Amendment Act led to mass demonstration events. 900 protests, or approximately 5% of protests, in India were met with intervention (*Protest with intervention*) and/or excessive force (*Excessive force against protesters*) in 2019. The use of force against peaceful protesters contributed to the heightened levels of civilian targeting in the country last year.

Civilians in the Philippines face a multitude of threats, from the ongoing ‘Drug War’ and the ‘red-tagging’ of opposition to attacks targeting former and current government officials. For more on these concurrent threats, see Vignette 2.

The DRC was home to one of the greatest increases in total reported fatalities in 2019, driven by political violence in the eastern provinces of North Kivu and Ituri. Ongoing militant insurgencies by the ADF in North Kivu and the CODECO in Ituri contributed to the rise in overall fatalities and the increase in civilian targeting.

OVERALL TRENDS BY ACTOR

All types of actors engage in civilian targeting, ranging from state forces to identity militias. Armed non-state actors will often inflict violence on civilians in areas they seek to bring under their control, particularly in more conventional conflicts, such as in Syria and Yemen. Communal groups or mobs, within and outside the context of war, may target civilians of different ethnic backgrounds, languages, castes, or genders, or they may target civilians to punish perceived crimes, defend their community, pursue livelihoods, or for a variety of other reasons. State actors target civilians as a form of repression against dissent, as punishment for transgressions against the state, or as a demonstrative show of force, and may often contract out such violence to pro-government militias or other deniable agents.

Vignette 2. Civilian targeting in the Philippines

Civilians face a multitude of threats in the Philippines. President Rodrigo Duterte assumed office in the Philippines in June 2016 and shortly thereafter declared a 'War on Drugs'. This 'war' refers to the drug policy of the Philippine government, aimed at "the neutralization of illegal drug personalities nationwide" ([Rappler, 2017](#)). The campaign has resulted in the deaths of thousands of Filipinos at the hands of anti-drug 'vigilantes' — likely supported by or under the control of the government, despite their unofficial status — as well as state forces. The 'war' has continued through 2019 and into 2020, with extrajudicial killings of alleged drug suspects by state forces and anti-drug vigilantes accounting for two-thirds of all civilian targeting in the country.

Civilians also continue to face attacks stemming from "red-tagging;" this refers to the government practice of accusing human rights groups, opposition activists, and other critics of supporting or acting as front organizations for communist rebels. These groups or individuals are subsequently targeted for judicial harassment and violence. Likewise, land and environmental activists also face targeting as a result of state counterinsurgency operations against these same rebels ([Mongabay, 10 December 2019](#)).

Finally, former and current government officials make up the second largest civilian group targeted after drug suspects, reflecting the deadliness of political rivalries in the country. In the lead up to the midterm elections in May 2019, the senate positions up for election in the Philippines were slated to go exclusively to Duterte's supporters and allies, as were the races for the 238 congressional seats elected by district and the thousands of local government races ([The Diplomat, 22 May 2019](#)). As a result, multiple pro-Duterte candidates were forced to vie for these positions, fostering an environment of intense competition against both opposition parties and other pro-Duterte politicians for one of a limited number of positions. This contributed to the rise in violence against politicians across the Philippines, especially at the hands of unidentified or anonymous agents. Many of those targeted were politicians at the 'barangay' or municipal levels of government ([New Mandala, 5 March 2019](#)).

For more on violence against civilians in the Philippines, see ACLED's Press Release: [Data Confirm Wave of Targeted Attacks in the Philippines](#). For more on the 'War on Drugs,' see the ACLED analysis piece: [Duterte's War: Drug-Related Violence in the Philippines](#). For more on violence around the May 2019 midterm elections, see the ACLED analysis piece: [Midterm Elections in the Philippines: Power Consolidation at Its Finest](#).

Table 11. Actors responsible for the most civilian targeting and the most civilian fatalities in 2019

Actor	Type of actor	Primary country of activity	Number of civilian targeting events	Most common form of civilian targeting
MILITARY FORCES OF SYRIA	State forces	Syria	1,624 total	Shelling / artillery / missile attack
HOUTHİ MILITARY FORCES	State forces	Yemen (also active in Saudi Arabia)	556 total (551 in Yemen)	Shelling / artillery / missile attack
POLICE FORCES OF THE PHILIPPINES	State forces	Philippines	471 total	Attack
MILITARY FORCES OF ISRAEL	State forces	Palestine (also active in Israel, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon)	365 total (355 in Palestine)	Attack
CNDD-FDD-Imbonerakure: National Council for the Defence of Democracy (Imbonerakure faction)	Political militia (specifically, pro-government militia)	Burundi	290 total	Attack

Actor	Type of actor	Primary country of activity	Number of civilian fatalities	Deadliest form of civilian targeting
MILITARY FORCES OF SYRIA	State forces	Syria	1,903 total	Air/drone strike
POLICE FORCES OF THE PHILIPPINES	State forces	Philippines	579 total	Attack
TALIBAN	Rebel forces	Afghanistan	511 total	Remote explosive/landmine/IED
HOUTHİ MILITARY FORCES	State forces	Yemen (also active in Saudi Arabia)	480 total (479 in Yemen)	Attack
AL SHABAAB	Rebel forces	Somalia (also active in Kenya)	465 total (425 in Somalia)	Attack

'Terrorism' is defined here as the use of 'terror tactics' by non-state actors against civilians. These acts are often touted as the largest threat to civilians, with attacks by transnational militant groups regularly making headlines. However, the data indicate that it is governments that continue to pose the greatest threat to civilians around the world, with state forces responsible for the greatest proportion of violence targeting civilians. Of the top five actors responsible for the largest share of civilian targeting in 2019, four of them are state forces, with the fifth a pro-government militia (see Table 11). And many of these same actors are also responsible for the most civilian fatalities: the military forces of Syria, the police forces of the Philippines, and the Houthi forces in Yemen. The Taliban and Al Shabaab are also among the deadliest groups targeting civilians despite the fact that they are not among the groups that perpetrated the highest number of events, pointing to the lethality of the violence in which they do engage (see Vignette 3 for more on violence involving Islamist groups).

With Syria and Yemen among the top three countries with the highest number of civilian targeting events in 2019, it is unsurprising that the military forces of Syria and the Houthis, active primarily in Yemen, are the two actors responsible for the highest number of civilian targeting events. Both countries have large-scale conventional conflicts, and 'shelling, artillery, and missile attacks' are the primary means by which civilians are targeted.

The Philippine police, on the other hand, are not in a conventional war zone. The primary means in which they target civilians is through close-proximity attacks, with 'drug suspects' at highest risk of being targeted. For more on civilian targeting in the Philippines, see the Vignette 2.

Civilian targeting by the Israeli military consists exclusively of attacks on Palestinian civilians. These attacks occurred equally in Gaza and the West Bank. In Gaza, these events are typically cases of military forces opening fire on Palestinian fishermen or farmers, who often approach the border while fishing or tending to their crops.

Vignette 3. Islamist actors around the world

Islamist groups are those who aim to establish a state governed according to Islamic law or principles, or who seek to gain independence for Muslims living under non-Islamic states. ACLED records 19,434 political violence events involving Islamist actors in 2019. Political violence involving Islamists took place in every region covered by ACLED. One region — Central Asia and the Caucasus, which includes Afghanistan — experienced more Islamist activity in 2019 than in 2018. As in 2018, Afghanistan had the highest number of political violence events involving Islamists last year, with over 10,000 more events than the next country, Syria. This is largely due to the ongoing insurgency waged by the Taliban, one of the world's most active armed groups and the single most active Islamist group. Continued expansion by Al Shabaab made Somalia the country with the third highest level of Islamist activity.

Mozambique had the greatest increase in the number of events involving Islamist actors - 237% - largely because of the expansion and growing strength of insurgents in Cabo Delgado province. On the other side of the continent, Islamist activity in Burkina Faso increased by nearly 142% from 2018 to 2019 as part of a larger expansion by Islamist groups across the Sahel.

The kind of activity Islamist groups engage in depends on the country or regional context in which they operate. Some Islamist groups — such as the Taliban — engage in conventional asymmetric warfare and battles. Such groups also perpetrate remote violence/explosions, and are often the target of drone and airstrikes launched by domestic and international state forces. Other groups focus on targeting civilians and perpetrating 'spectacular,' highly lethal attacks. In general, roughly 64% of political violence activity involving Islamist groups consists of battles, while close to 30% are remote violence/explosions. Violence targeting civilians accounts for 8% of all political violence perpetrated by Islamist militants, resulting in nearly 6% of all reported fatalities linked to these groups. This varies drastically from the activity of non-Islamist groups, in which 26% of political violence is civilian targeting, resulting in 21% of all reported fatalities stemming from violence linked to these actors.

Curated data files capturing all political violence involving Islamist actors will be updated on a weekly basis and made available on the ACLED website in 2020. For additional ACLED analysis of different Islamist groups and their patterns of behavior, see: [Endgames & Affiliations: Explaining Differing Patterns of Behavior between Islamist Groups](#).

Due to the dire economic situation in Gaza, fishermen and farmers are often forced to move near the border to maximize what they are able to gather, prompting gunfire from Israeli guards. Israeli forces often indiscriminately fire on farmland within range of the border, presumably to discourage Gazans from approaching. While these events are common, they often do not lead to casualties. After an agreement was reached in June for Israel to extend the fishing zone around Gaza to 15 miles in exchange for the end of incendiary balloon incursions, these events decreased. Civilian targeting is more varied in the West Bank, including attacks on workers at the borders and checkpoints, as well as raids on refugee camps. Military activity generally occurs most frequently in areas where Israeli settlements are close to Palestinian towns and villages, in areas where Israeli authorities are confiscating land, and in refugee camps. In 2019, ACLED records an increase in shootings at the border or at checkpoints in the West Bank. These attacks target Palestinians trying to enter Israel for work, either legally or illegally.

The Imbonerakure in Burundi is the armed wing of the ruling National Council for the Defence of Democracy (CNDD-FDD) party, and has long acted as a pro-government militia carrying out repressive functions on behalf of the regime. In 2019, violence targeting civilians largely took place in the context of the approaching presidential elections scheduled in 2020, as the influence and activities of other political parties rose. In response, there were numerous reports of the Imbonerakure destroying party offices, party monuments, and crops, as well as preventing supporters from attending rallies or meetings. The Imbonerakure primarily target supporters of the National Congress for Freedom (CNL), demanding they switch support to the CNDD-FDD or provide contributions to the ruling party's 2020 election campaign.²⁰

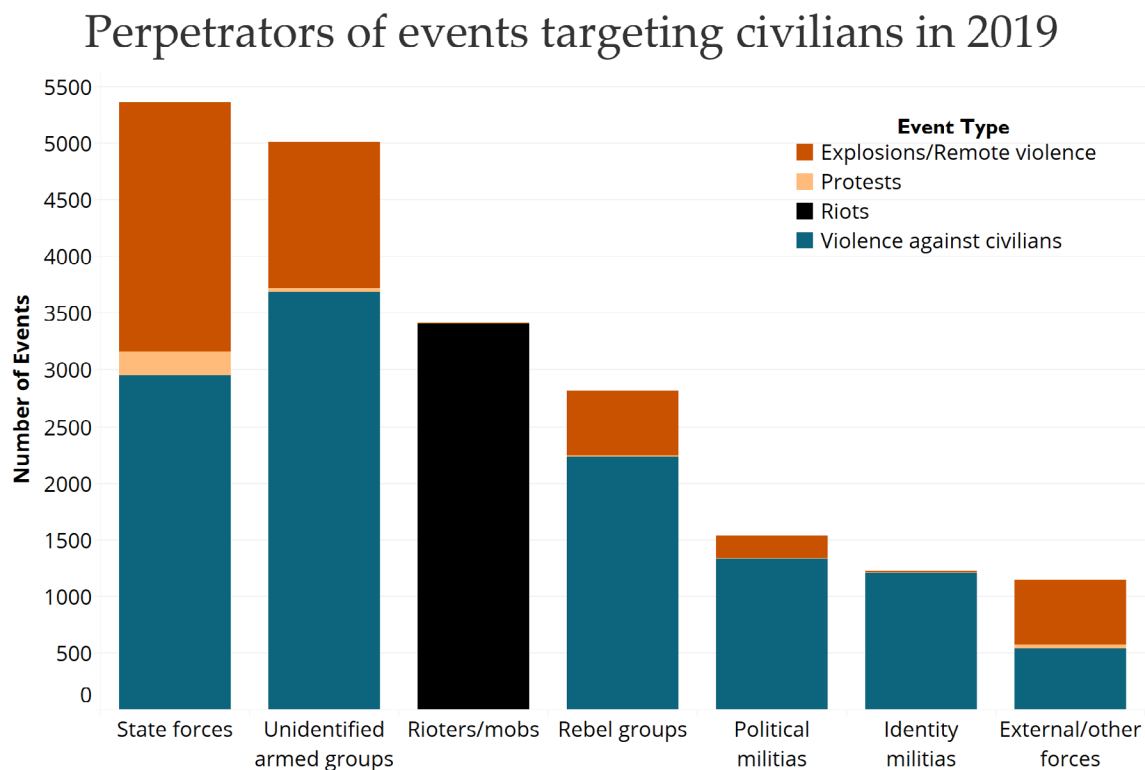
20 Pro-government militias (PGMs) are armed, political organizations that assist regime and state elites through illicit violence" ([Raleigh and Kishi, 2018](#)). These groups have (purposefully) indirect links to the state. As such, some Imbonerakure receive military training and small arms from the state, often partnering with state forces in civilian attacks, arrests, and abductions. However, not all violence against civilians carried out by the Imbonerakure is coordinated by the ruling party or other state forces. *Curated data files capturing all violence involving pro-government militias will be available on a weekly basis on the ACLED website in 2020.*

Many events in West Africa cannot be definitively attributed to Boko Haram and/or the Islamic State West Africa, and are therefore coded by ACLED as “Islamic State (West Africa) and/or Boko Haram - Jamatu Ahli is-Sunnah lid-Dawatai wal-Jihad.” These group(s) were responsible for 322 civilian targeting events in West Africa last year.

Note that this list only includes named, definitive actors. Most importantly this means that spontaneous, violent mobs in India are not included, as they are not an organized and unified actor. If they were, it would be evident that violent mobs pose a major threat to civilians in India, as they are responsible for 1,933 civilian targeting events in 2019 — more than any other actor in the ACLED dataset.

This also means that anonymous or unidentified armed groups are not included. Such armed groups are responsible for a significant proportion of civilian targeting (see Figure 10).

Figure 10.



Vignette 4. Political violence in the US

During the summer of 2019, ACLED conducted a three-month pilot project collecting data on political violence and demonstrations in the US. The findings speak specifically to trends in political violence — not all forms of violence — but they provide a snapshot of disorder across the country.

The data show that while political violence is limited in the US, it is lethal: almost 50 fatalities were reported during the pilot period from July to September 2019, primarily due to mass shootings and excessive force by police. Further, and importantly, the data show that the threat of anti-civilian violence varies across geography and across communities. Over 40 acts of political violence were recorded during the ACLED pilot period. Of these attacks, eight targeted members of the black community, seven targeted women, four targeted members of the Latinx community, and another four targeted adherents of minority religions such as Judaism, Hinduism, and Sikhism. Members of the LGBT+ community – and especially transgender women – faced particularly high levels of targeting, often overlapping with the categories above. These trends underline the fact that civilians face different risks within countries and contexts, and that vulnerable communities often face the brunt of violent political disorder.

For more on the risk of political violence in the US in the lead up to the 2020 election, see the US feature in the ACLED analysis series: [10 Conflicts to Worry About in 2020](#). To read more about ACLED's US pilot, see the associated report: [Assessing Political Violence & Demonstrations in the United States](#).

Aid workers²¹ are a subset of civilians that operate in particularly high-risk spaces. For the second year in a row, Syria, the DRC, Somalia, South Sudan, and Yemen are the countries in which aid workers face the greatest threat of political violence. The Syria Civil Defense, known as the White Helmets, face many of the attacks on aid workers in Syria, particularly explosions and remote violence. In the DRC, health workers,

21 ACLED's coverage of political violence targeting aid workers benefits from a partnership with the [Aid Worker Security Database](#). Not all violence that aid workers face is captured by ACLED; being the victim of criminal violence like theft and looting, for example, is not political violence and hence falls outside of ACLED's mandate. Curated data files capturing all political violence involving aid workers will be available on a weekly basis on the ACLED website in 2020.

especially Ebola response workers, are chief targets of political violence, and they increasingly face attacks from violent mobs. In Yemen, aid workers affiliated with international NGOs — for example, Oxfam, the IRC, the WFP, MSF, and UNICEF — face particularly high levels of political violence. In South Sudan, violent mobs and communal militias play a significant role in violence targeting aid workers.

Women are also at heightened risk of targeted political violence around the world. ACLED data show that political violence targeting women is not limited to sexual violence, and it is common even outside of war-time contexts. Likewise, women are often targeted for showing political support for certain policies or platforms, even outside of election periods. They face violence related to land disputes or other livelihood-based confrontations. Women can be targeted for engaging in public demonstrations around policies across countries and time periods. The motives behind these varied forms of political violence targeting women are many: to create a high-risk political space; to humiliate and oppress women; to prevent the effective political participation of women; and to generally perpetuate an environment of high instability with violent consequences.²²

India and the DRC are two of the countries with the highest levels of political violence targeting women. In India, violent mobs — such as those with links to political parties, religious groups, or castes — are responsible for the majority of political violence targeting women, accounting for more than half of all events. In the DRC, Mayi Mayi militias, as well as anonymous or unidentified armed groups, remain the primary perpetrators of this violence.

22 ACLED launched coverage of political violence targeting women in 2019 — the seminal report is titled *[‘Terribly and Terrifyingly Normal’: Political Violence Targeting Women](#)*. For those interested in such events, ACLED provides a curated data file capturing all political violence targeting women (along with all demonstrations featuring women) on a weekly basis on [the ACLED website](#).

Demonstrations

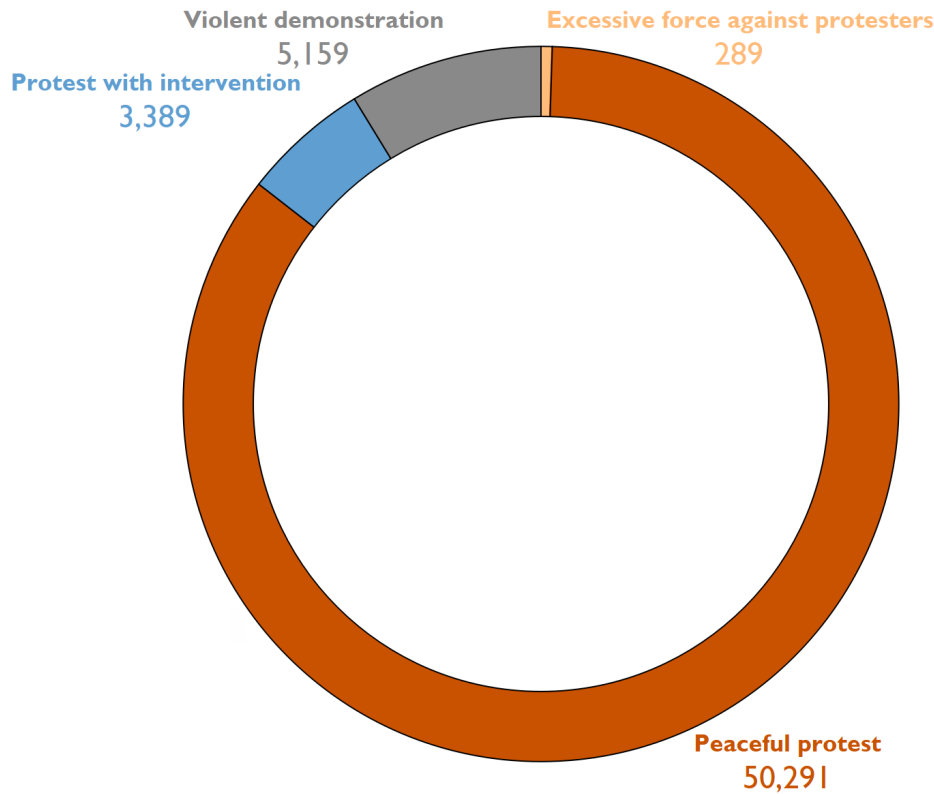
2019 was a year of demonstrations, with protest movements spanning nearly every continent. Compared to 2018, ACLED records a 51% rise in the overall number of demonstrations last year. More countries experienced demonstrations than political violence, with 71% of countries registering an increase from 2018 to 2019. From democracies to autocracies and everything in between, protests spread around the world, with movements bringing down leaders — some democratically elected, others dictators long in power ([Wright, 2019](#)).

Demonstrations were largely peaceful: in 91% of demonstrations recorded by ACLED, the participants did not engage in violence or vandalism, meaning that events were coded with event type Protests (see Figure 11). However, regardless of whether demonstrators remain peaceful or not, demonstrations are regularly faced with intervention. In 12% of all demonstrations, demonstrators were met with engagement — most often by state forces, like the police — meaning that they were not ‘one-sided events.’ These include the sub-event types *Protest with intervention* and *Excessive force against protesters* under the event type Protests, as well as events coded with sub-event type *Violent demonstration* under the event type Riots. The countries with the highest rates of demonstrations are in Table 12.

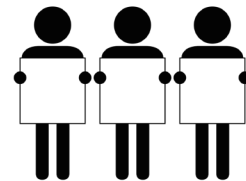
Demonstrations featuring women also occurred across every region of ACLED coverage, with women playing a key role in protest movements ranging from Sudan to Kazakhstan. These include demonstrations which are made up of predominantly women, involve women’s groups, and/or are organized around women’s rights. These trends are explored in further detail in Vignette 5.

Figure 11.

Demonstrations in 2019



HOW HAVE DEMONSTRATION RATES & THEIR LETHALITY CHANGED SINCE 2018?



While ACLED records a 51% increase in the number of demonstrations from 2018 to 2019, the data show a nearly 14% decrease in *Excessive force against protesters*. *Peaceful protests*, *Protests with intervention*, and *Violent demonstrations*, however, all increased by 57%, 32%, and

23%, respectively.

Table 12. Five countries with highest number of demonstrations in 2019

Country	Number of demonstrations
INDIA	18,198
PAKISTAN	6,368
IRAN	2,424
LEBANON	2,138
ALGERIA	2,090

Vignette 5. Demonstrations featuring women

Demonstrations featuring women occurred across every region of ACLED coverage. These include demonstrations that are made up predominantly of women (e.g. the Saturday Mothers gathering for weekly protests in Istanbul to demand justice for people who went missing in detention [[ANF News, 2 February 2019](#)]), involve women’s groups (e.g. the National Federation of Indian Women held a protest in Jaipur against the Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019 and National Register of Citizens [[The Hindu, 30 December 2019](#)]), and/or are organized around women’s rights (e.g. Tunisian women performing the Chilean chant against rape — “The Rapist Is You” — in front of the seat of government in Tunis [[Al Arabiya, 15 December 2019](#)]). ACLED records the highest number of demonstrations featuring women in India — which is unsurprising as the country is home to high levels of overall demonstration activity and a large population — followed by Turkey and Pakistan.

Relative to all demonstrations at large, demonstrations featuring women are more likely to be peaceful protests — 88% of all demonstrations featuring women, compared to 85% of all demonstrations — and less likely to be violent demonstrations — 4% of all demonstrations featuring women, compared to 9% of all demonstrations. Demonstrations featuring women are also more likely to be met with engagement — 8% of all demonstrations featuring women, compared to 6% of all demonstrations — as well as excessive force — 0.6% of all demonstrations featuring women, compared to 0.5% of all demonstrations.

The overall increase in demonstrations is driven by a rise across all regions of ACLED coverage. Demonstration activity increased by 98% in Africa, particularly in Algeria and Egypt, which experienced increases of 269% and 112%, respectively; by 24% in Central Asia and the Caucasus, particularly in Kazakhstan, which experienced an increase of 865%; by 64% in Southeastern and Eastern Europe and the Balkans, particularly in Russia, which experienced an increase of 57%; by 76% in the Middle East, particularly in Lebanon, which experienced an increase of 1,743%; by 52% in Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia, which experienced an increase of 41%; and by 31% in South Asia, particularly in India, which experienced an increase of 35%.

Demonstrations were also more deadly in 2019. Overall, ACLED records a 106% increase in the number of fatalities stemming from demonstrations last year. This trend is driven by rising lethality in Africa, which registered a 21% increase in the number of fatalities; the Middle East, which registered a 300% increase in the number of fatalities; and in Southeast Asia, which registered a 283% increase in the number of fatalities.

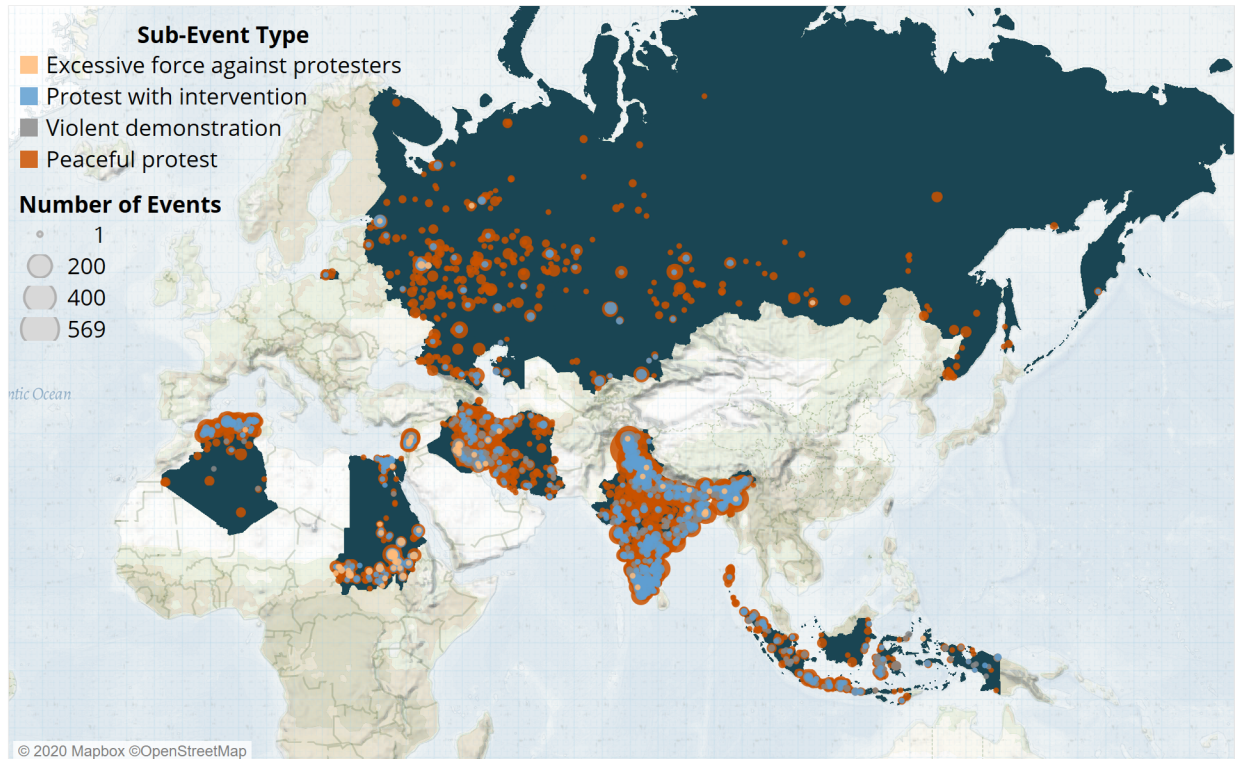
SPOTLIGHT ON PROTEST MOVEMENTS

Multiple protest movements emerged around the world in 2019, playing key roles in driving overall demonstration trends. These movements arose in some of the most demonstration-prone countries in the world, as well as in countries that typically register lower levels of protest activity, signaling seismic political shifts all around the globe. This section spotlights 10 major protest movements in 2019: Algeria, Egypt, and Sudan in Africa; Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon in the Middle East; Russia in Europe; Kazakhstan in Central Asia and the Caucasus; India in South Asia; and Indonesia in Southeast Asia (see Figure 12).²³

23 ACLED will launch data covering 2018 and 2019 for Latin America (including Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Haiti, and Venezuela), East Asia (including Hong Kong), and the rest of Europe (including the United Kingdom, France, Spain, Italy, and the Czech

Figure 12.

10 key protest movements in 2019



The majority of these movements share a common theme: discontent with authoritarianism and elites who have too long enjoyed impunity for their actions. Movements ranging from those in Russia to Egypt to Iran are challenging entrenched ruling classes, corruption, and ineffective governance. While some movements toppled long-reigning leaders — like those in Algeria and Sudan, as well as in Kazakhstan indirectly — not all movements have as yet seen tangible results. However, even in cases where demonstrations have led to the removal of leaders or have pushed regimes to make concessions, it is unclear whether many of these movements will effect lasting structural political change.

Republic) in 2020, allowing users to track protest movements in countries of those regions as well.

In other cases, such as in India and Indonesia, new legislation has sparked outrage. Leaders in both countries have enacted conservative policies that have engendered opposition from the other side of the political spectrum. With nationalism on the rise around the globe, it is likely that similar legislation will be introduced in other contexts as well, and just as likely that these moves will be met with unrest and opposition.

PROTEST MOVEMENTS IN AFRICA



In **Algeria**, the ongoing Hirak protest movement aims for the broader removal of entrenched ruling elites, known as 'Le Pouvoir.' Initially prompted by former President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's decision to announce his candidacy for a fifth term as president, the movement was successful in forcing his resignation. However, the movement has failed to push additional reforms, with widely boycotted presidential elections in December resulting in victory for political insider Abdelmadjid Tebboune, himself a former prime minister. The protest movement remains ongoing and is unlikely to conclude without further political change.



In **Sudan**, the popular uprising initially began in early December 2018 in response to inflation, shortages, and an overnight tripling of bread prices. By the end of the month, however, the demonstrations had morphed into outright anti-government protests. The protest movement formalized around an alliance of civil society groups, the Sudanese Professionals Association, and political parties known as the Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC). By April 2019, long-reigning President Omar Al Bashir was ousted in a military coup d'état. The FFC has since reached an agreement with the military government on a transitional power-sharing government, though not before the massacre of protesters by Rapid Support Forces paramilitaries in June 2019. Although the FFC successfully brought a mass protest movement into a power-sharing arrangement with the military government, it still suffers from many internal fault lines between its constituent parts. It has also largely failed to evolve beyond its urban origins and to effectively engage with rural, conflict-affected, and marginalized areas.



In **Egypt**, a protest movement against President Abdel Fattah Al Sisi arose in September 2019, after an exiled former military contractor Mohamed Ali released videos online that detailed claims of corruption against the military and president. Although the movement was able to mobilize thousands, Egyptian state forces employed force to put down the protests and launched a campaign of mass arrests against government critics. The protest movement failed to foster political change in the country and has yet to re-emerge since September.

PROTEST MOVEMENTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST



In **Iran**, mass demonstrations erupted in more than 100 cities and towns across the country following a sharp hike in fuel prices in November 2019. Demonstrators called for the overthrow of the government and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. In many places, demonstrations turned violent, with reports of Iranian security forces killing hundreds of demonstrators in less than a week and arresting thousands more under the cover of an internet blackout. With internal politics partially eclipsed by tensions with the US following the killing of Iranian military commander Qasem Soleimani in early 2020, reports of protests in Iran are currently more sparse and sporadic. However, as the country's economic situation continues to worsen, protests are expected to reignite once again, especially if tensions with the US die down.



In **Iraq**, the popular movement has primarily focused on government corruption, failing infrastructure, and unemployment. The movement has faced curfews, an internet blackout, and violence by security forces — resulting in hundreds killed in the first 20 days of demonstrations. Despite some concessions by the government, they have not been enough to end the movement. The rising death toll will only further inflame demonstrators, posing a serious threat to Iraq's stability in the near future.



In **Lebanon**, the ongoing protest movement was initially triggered by a proposed tax increase, yet quickly grew into a country-wide condemnation of the sectarian ruling elite, as well as failing infrastructure, widespread corruption, and the mismanagement of the economic crisis. The movement has been met with arrests by the police and military forces. Despite intermittent clashes, protests remained remarkably peaceful until late January 2020, with indications that violence will escalate in the absence of major government reforms. *For more on demonstrations in Lebanon and their risk of devolving into organized political violence, see the Lebanon feature in the ACLED special report series: [10 Conflicts to Worry About in 2020](#).*

PROTEST MOVEMENTS IN EUROPE²⁴



In **Russia**, one of the largest protest movements in recent years emerged in August 2019, after the government prevented independent opposition candidates from registering in Moscow's local elections. Opposition parties staged mass demonstrations demanding fair and open elections, resulting in clashes with police and mass arrests. While the most popular opposition candidates were still denied registration, several others were allowed to stand. Opposition parties managed to gain ground in the local elections, despite electoral irregularities. While mass demonstrations have subsided, scattered protests over election fraud and political repression are ongoing. Protests may reignite over new incidents of political repression, but with the legislative election scheduled for a year out in 2021, such a triggering event is as yet unknown.

²⁴ Current ACLED coverage of Europe includes Eastern and Southeastern Europe, the Balkans, Ukraine, and Russia. Data covering the rest of Europe will be launched in 2020.

PROTEST MOVEMENTS IN CENTRAL ASIA & THE CAUCASUS



In **Kazakhstan**, in February 2019, a spike in women-led protests calling for better living conditions — such as increased social services and subsidies, and guaranteed civil freedoms — led to the resignation of Kazakhstan’s cabinet. While the number of protest events decreased in the following months, the resignation of longtime authoritarian ruler Nursultan Nazarbayev in March and the election of his handpicked successor, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, in June, revived demonstrations, particularly because Nazarbayev continues to exercise significant influence on the Kazakh government. Protest activity steadily increased throughout the summer over civil rights concerns, political repression, and corruption. The state crackdown resulted in public outcry, forcing the new government to allow peaceful protests in August, at which point demonstration activity skyrocketed. Although recent reforms loosened restrictions on public protests and establishing political parties, it remains to be seen if protesters will make any further gains in 2020. (For more on demonstrations in Kazakhstan, see the ACLED Press Release: [ACLED Expands Coverage to Central Asia and the Caucasus](#).) Additionally, China’s economic influence in Central Asia has resulted in an anti-China movement in Kazakhstan, heightened by the repression of ethnic Turkic minorities in China’s Xinjiang province. Towards the end of the year, the country was roiled by a wave of mass protests demanding the reduction of Chinese involvement in Kazakhstan, and calling on the government to take action against China’s repression of minorities in Xinjiang. Anti-Chinese sentiment remains high in 2020, with reports of mob attacks against Chinese nationals.

PROTEST MOVEMENTS IN SOUTH ASIA



In **India**, demonstrations surged in January 2019 against the controversial Citizenship Amendment Bill when it was approved by the Indian Parliament’s lower house. Significant demonstration activity against the bill resurfaced in the final

quarter of 2019 and erupted following the passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019 (CAA). The law grants citizenship rights to undocumented non-Muslim immigrants, explicitly precluding citizenship rights for Muslim migrants. Major opposition to the CAA revolves around two key issues. First, the law is widely criticized for being discriminatory towards Muslims. Second, others in India's northeast region, historically a gateway for immigration through Bangladesh, contend that legitimizing undocumented immigrants would threaten the ethnic identity of the region. The ongoing anti-CAA movement has faced opposition from right-wing groups backed by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the form of counter-protests and attacks. Going forward, the movement poses potential security challenges as tension surrounding the law is expected to rise with its inevitable implementation. *For more on disorder that may stem from the plans and actions of the Modi administration in India, see the India feature in the ACLED special report series: [10 Conflicts to Worry About in 2020](#).*

PROTEST MOVEMENTS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA



In **Indonesia**, opposition to several pieces of new legislation, including bills that would limit personal freedoms, sparked demonstrations in 2019. When a bill aimed at weakening the respected Corruption Eradication Committee (KPK) passed in September, many students took to the streets in large-scale demonstrations that had not been seen in the country since the 1998 protests that led to the fall of Suharto. After winning re-election earlier in the year, President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo refused the demonstrators' calls to repeal the new law. While the demonstrations subsequently declined, there is continued dissatisfaction over Jokowi's apparent move towards appeasing conservative forces in the country. While demonstrations were widespread and at times violent, demonstrators were not necessarily unified or organized as a movement. Additionally, discrimination faced by Papuans in Indonesia also continued to fuel unrest in 2019. When word spread that Papuan students had been subject to racial taunts in East Java, it led to deadly rioting and demonstrations across Papua and West Papua provinces. The region continues to experience disorder as

Papuans often face violence from state forces when expressing their support for a free West Papua.

The protest movements explored in this section are presented in the table below (Table 13), in line with key statistics.

Table 13. Spotlight on protest movements

Country	Protest movement	Number of demo. events in 2019	Number of demo. events in 2018	% change	% peaceful protests met with intervention or excessive force
ALGERIA	Arising in response to former President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's decision to announce his candidacy for a fifth term as president, the so-called Hirak protest movement has continued with calls for a broader overhaul of the country's political system.	2,090	567	269%	3.6%
EGYPT	The protest movement calling for the removal of President Abdel Fattah Al Sisi arose in response to claims of corruption against him and the Egyptian military.	161	76	112%	18.0%

SUDAN	The protest movement — which began initially in response to inflation, shortages, and an overnight tripling of bread prices — morphed into an outright anti-government movement, with the goal of ending decades of authoritarian rule and state-sponsored violence in Sudan.	1,148	193	495%	22.3%
IRAN	The mass protest movement demanding the removal of the government and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei arose in response to the adjustment of fuel prices, unemployment, and corruption.	2,424	2,216	9%	3.1%
IRAQ	The popular protest movement arose primarily in response to claims of government corruption, a failing infrastructure, and unemployment.	1,069	348	207%	4.5%
LEBANON	In response to the government's alleged mismanagement of the economy, failing infrastructure, and claims of widespread corruption, the popular protest movement emerged calling for systemic change.	2,138	116	1,743%	2.5%

INDIA	The contentious CAA 2019 sparked significant demonstration activity across India. The law was met with mass opposition as it grants citizenship rights to undocumented non-Muslim immigrants, while explicitly precluding citizenship rights for Muslims.	18,198	13,435	35%	5.4%
INDONESIA	Demonstrations emerged in the wake of proposed legislation that would curb personal freedoms and weaken the respected KPK. Additionally, discrimination faced by Papuans also continued to fuel unrest.	1,030	730	41%	5.7%
KAZAKHSTAN	Protests were held calling for a variety of social and political reforms and expressing disagreement with the authorities, especially following the presidential election in June 2019.	299	31	865%	20.4%
RUSSIA	The Moscow protests for free and fair elections were sparked by the government's refusal to register several independent opposition candidates for local elections.	2,029	1,296	57%	20.4%

Even beyond these countries, demonstrations increased in 2019. ACLED records a 42% rise in demonstration events in 2019 relative to 2018 even when *excluding* the 10 countries and protest movements listed. In fact, more demonstration events were reported in 2019 than in 2018 in over 71% of countries covered by ACLED. In addition to the aforementioned protest movements, such increases occurred in countries ranging from Serbia, which registered a 403% increase, to Turkey, which registered a 198% increase, to Bangladesh, which registered an 80% increase — countries with varied regime types and population sizes.

The US was the site of one of the most active demonstration environments in 2019. ACLED conducted a three-month pilot for the US during the summer of 2019 (see Vignette 6), during which 3,147 demonstration events were recorded. Although the pilot spanned only a quarter of the year, the US still ranks third for the highest number of demonstration events in any country *for the totality of 2019* — indicating a remarkably robust protest landscape.

Vignette 6. Demonstrations in the US

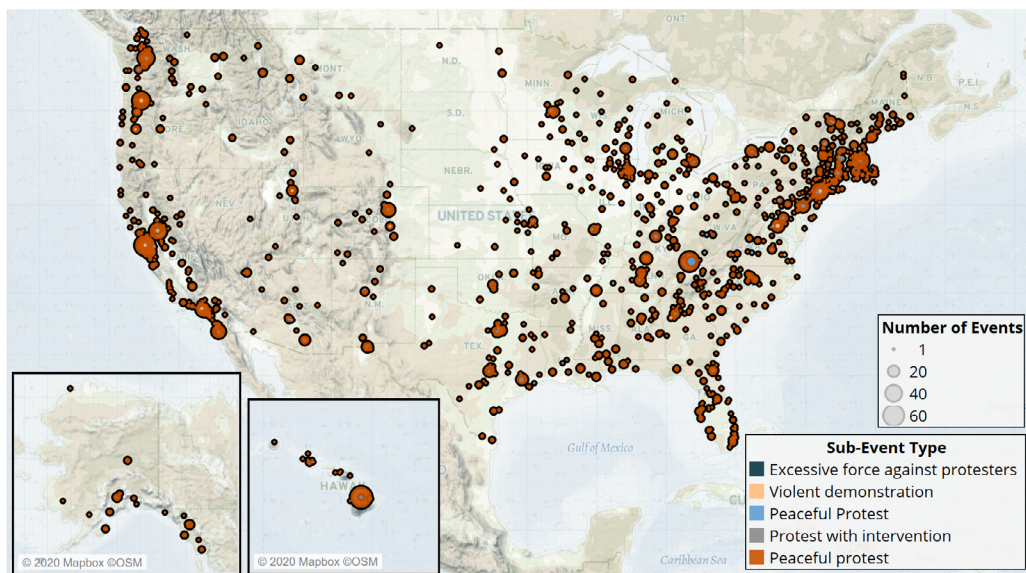
In the summer of 2019, ACLED launched a pilot project to systematically track all forms of political violence and demonstration activity across the US in real-time. Over three months from July through September, ACLED collected data on approximately 3,200 events. The vast majority of these events were peaceful protests, pointing to a vibrant protest environment (see map below). Demonstrations were reported in all 50 US states, ranging from a minimum of three in Wyoming to a maximum of 580 in California. ACLED recorded at least one demonstration event in over 700 counties — nearly a quarter of all counties in the US.

During the pilot period, more demonstration events were recorded in the US than in almost any other country in the ACLED dataset — second only to India. That the US has two-thirds as many demonstration events as India during the pilot period is staggering when considering that India's population of 1.353 billion people is over four times the US population of 327.2 million people.

For more on what to watch for in 2020, as the US enters election season, see the US feature within the ACLED special report series: [10 Conflicts to Worry About in 2020](#). To read more about ACLED's US pilot, see the associated report: [Assessing Political Violence & Demonstrations in the United States](#).

Demonstrations in the US

July - September 2019



Conclusion

Disorder in 2019 paints a complex picture, and underlines the importance of measuring threats across multiple indicators. Political violence declined overall — but it increased in more countries than it decreased. In fact, almost every form of violence rose across almost every region of ACLED coverage. Reported civilian fatalities declined overall — but the number of civilian targeting events increased, further proof that rates of violence and fatality measures are not always directly linked.

Although Syria registered one of the greatest declines in rates of political violence and reported fatalities from 2018 to 2019, it remains the most violent country and the deadliest place to be a civilian. The Syrian military is one of the most active armed groups in the ACLED dataset, while other Syrian actors like the QSD and JTW are among those that have most expanded their geographic scope in 2019.

Entrenched conflicts show few signs of ending. Ukraine registered the largest increase in political violence from 2018 to 2019, and it is home to the Ukrainian military and the NAF, two of the most active armed groups in the world. The war in Afghanistan continues to be the deadliest by far — with more reported fatalities in 2019 than the conflicts in Yemen and Syria combined. The Afghan military and the Taliban are both among the most active and deadly actors of the year. And the war in Yemen continues as well, with some of the highest levels of political violence, reported fatalities, and civilian targeting in the dataset.

Yet, while large-scale conventional wars persist, elsewhere new crises are emerging. Insecurity in the Sahel continues to grow: Burkina Faso experienced one of the largest increases in political violence from 2018 to 2019, the single greatest increase in reported fatalities, and it is now one of the deadliest places to be a civilian. JNIM continues to expand its

geographic scope. At the same time, new frontlines are forming in spaces already wracked by conflict, such as Myanmar, which experienced one of the greatest increases in both political violence and reported fatalities from 2018 to 2019. The Myanmar military and the ULA/AA are among the actors that most expanded the geographic scope of their activities in 2019. And rising insecurity in the DRC's eastern provinces has made it one of the most dangerous and lethal countries for civilians, while simultaneously resulting in one of the greatest increases in reported fatalities from 2018 to 2019.

Other countries face high levels of political violence yet remain largely ignored by the international community. India experienced one of the greatest increases in political violence from 2018 to 2019, making it one of the most violent countries covered by ACLED and one of the most dangerous places to be a civilian — especially for women. This trend is driven largely by spontaneous, violent mobs. Because it is disorganized, this violence often goes overlooked, but it is the primary means by which political violence manifests in contexts like India, and mobs are often linked to political parties, religions, or castes. It is the only event type recorded by ACLED that resulted in more fatalities in 2019 than in 2018.

Civilians remain at high risk in the Philippines, with the Philippine police topping lists of most active and deadly perpetrators of violence towards civilians. The Imbonerakure in Burundi — the armed wing of the ruling party — continues to be one of the most active perpetrators of violence targeting civilians, especially as presidential elections approach. The Israeli military is responsible for the highest level of violence outside of its home state, targeting Palestinian civilians. These actors were involved in more events targeting civilians than non-state militant groups like the Islamic State or Al Shabaab, which regularly dominate headlines.

Yet, despite the violence, 2019 will largely be known as a year of protest movements. Demonstrations increased in the majority of countries. Movements emerged around the world, with some successfully toppling long-standing leaders. Even beyond the countries featuring large-scale protest movements, demonstrations still increased by 51%, as did demonstrations featuring women. Across contexts, protest movements

called for change as patience with authoritarianism and impunity wore thin, while others combatted discriminatory legislation amid growing nationalism. And with this rise in protest movements, ACLED also records a rise in the deadliness of demonstrations.

In all, political violence and demonstrations increased by over 13% across regions of ACLED coverage in 2019, with disorder manifesting in multiple forms. A flexible understanding of these 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 year to come.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Selection of ACLED resources

ACLED Codebook: The codebook is for coders and users of ACLED to better understand the data and methodology

Terms of Use and Attribution Policy: Guidelines for proper use and citation of ACLED material

ACLED Country and Time Period Coverage: A list of countries and time periods covered by ACLED

Quick Guide to ACLED Event Definitions: A discussion of how ACLED defines political violence and protest

Quick Guide to ACLED Data Columns: A brief guide explaining each column in ACLED datasets

FAQs on ACLED Fatality Methodology: A primer on ACLED fatality methodology

FAQs on ACLED Sourcing Methodology: A primer on ACLED sourcing methodology

Coding: Indirect Killing of Civilians: A brief discussion on the ACLED coding of events where civilians are killed indirectly

For more information on ACLED methodology, including discussions of specific event types and country case studies, see the resources collection, Methodology, on our website: <https://www.acleddata.com/resources/methodology/>

