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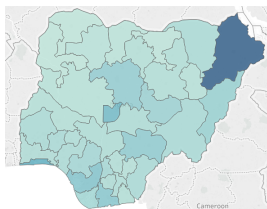


REAL-TIME ANALYSIS OF AFRICAN POLITICAL VIOLENCE, OCTOBER 2017

Elsewhere on the continent, violence spiked dramatically in **Ethiopia** with reported fatalities increasing from 49 in August to 305 in September, violence decreased modestly in the **Democratic Republic of Congo**, and escalated in **Egypt**, **Libya**, **South Sudan**, **Sudan** and **Somalia**.

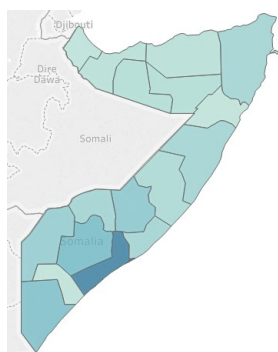


Conflict Summaries



Nigeria

Overall conflict levels in Nigeria were high throughout September, numbering 115 separate events and more than 340 fatalities. There was a 33% decrease in the number of total events and a nearly 8% decrease in the number of fatalities relative to August. The main drivers of these figures continue to be Boko Haram, mainly operating in the north-east states of Borno, Yobe and Adamawa. The sect has recently begun a focus of attacking undefended civilian targets in Borno, reportedly killing 91 in September. Following military gains in recent months, it is now widely believed Boko Haram is currently in a defensive posture. Air forces carried out a number of strikes in the Sambisa Forest and Lake Chad Regions between 1 – 10 September, killing more than 100 insurgents. A notable development in the country's south have been police and military clashes with the Indigenous Peoples of Biafra (IPOB), an Igbo separatist group functioning in Abia and Rivers States. IPOB's movements are believed to be a reaction to an early September military raid on the home of Nnamdi Kanu, the leader of the organization. The spate of violence caused the government to officially name the organization a "terrorist group" late in the month.



Somalia

Conflict levels in Somalia remain high. September 2017 saw 225 separate events with over 400 fatalities. The al Shabaab insurgency continues to be the driving force of this violence, accounting for 54% of September activity. The majority of fatalities over the period occurred in a series of al Shabaab offensives in Gedo, Lower Shabelle and the Jubaland regions. The largest of these attacks occurred on 11 – 12 September and resulted in an estimated 26 fatalities and the temporary capture of Belet Hawo. Following this incident, Kenyan Air Forces launched a series of air strikes against al Shabaab locations in the area, causing 37 civilian and combatant fatalities. Further, the United States has continued to carry out air strikes against the militants' leadership. A commander known as Abdirrahman Jarat was targeted and killed in Lower Juba on 1 September, and four other strikes throughout the month targeted unidentified personnel in the Lower Shabelle region. Mogadishu and its environs continue to be a focus of targeted attacks and assassinations by al Shabaab, primarily against government figures and other civilians. Unique to Mogadishu, vehicle-laden explosives are common in the city, as well as attacks against government and AMISOM checkpoints.

Cameroon

Riots and protests witnessed an uptick in intensity in Cameroon in September as demonstrators voiced their opposition to perceived discrimination towards the Francophone regions of Cameroon. Relatively routinized opposition to President Paul Biya's 35-year rule has coupled with calls for independence ([VOA news, 1 October 2017](#)) demonstrating the complex set of grievances that motivate citizens to take to the streets. The movement has evolved from a strike by teachers and lawyers over political and economic marginalisation but more recently other groups have weighed in to voice their dissatisfaction, including the Ambazonia separatist movement and groups opposing the detention of activists.

The months of November 2016, January and February 2017 experienced higher levels of protest than the February 2008 anti-government protests, with this trend largely driven by "dead-city" strikes in Buea and Bamenda (see Figure 2). Contention has been relatively contained to

these two cities with the exception of September where unrest spread to Kumbo.

The government has taken a number of standard steps to quell the momentum of the protests. First, internet disruption has affected many parts of the Anglophone regions ([Quartz Africa, 1 October 2017](#)) as the government seeks to make mobilisation more difficult. This comes only recently after the region experienced a 93-day blackout when protests first began in January. Second, movement was restricted in Sud-Ouest Province – one of the English-speaking regions - and gatherings of more than four people were banned reminiscent of Museveni's ban on public meetings in Uganda in 2012 ([HRW, 11 May, 2012](#)).

Third, although police dispersed protesters in November 2016 leading to clashes, repression declined in the following months. However, police repressed 60% of demonstrations in September compared to an average of 20% from December 2016 – August 2017. More unusually, the Rapid Intervention Brigade of the Cameroonian army deployed ahead of planned protests. Tensions culminated on the 1 October as seventeen people were killed nationwide, with at least eight people shot dead by Cameroonian soldiers during independence protests ([Washington Post, 2 October 2017](#); [BBC News, 2 October 2017](#)).

Security sources had justified the military presence at the protests to prevent episodes of violence, particularly "terrorist risks" as an IED exploded in Bamenda on 21 September injuring three police officers. Despite the bomb attack, fears of significant organised violence appear unfounded. Since November 2016, the majority of riot and protest events have taken place in Bamenda. Riots and protests in 2017 have concentrated in the south-west of the country, particularly in the Nord-Ouest and Sud-Ouest Provinces of Cameroon, whilst militant attacks have taken place overwhelmingly in the Extreme-Nord Province between Boko Haram militants and the Cameroonian army. Rather than overlapping conflict environments, very distinct geographies of political violence characterise Cameroon (see Figure 2). Therefore, further escalation of tensions are likely to be small-scale reactionary violence towards police force and as such are unlikely to be destabilising, though the government's preoccupation with the Boko Haram insurgency and violence against civilians could lead to a mishandling of the south-west regions concerns, threatening to prolong dissent.

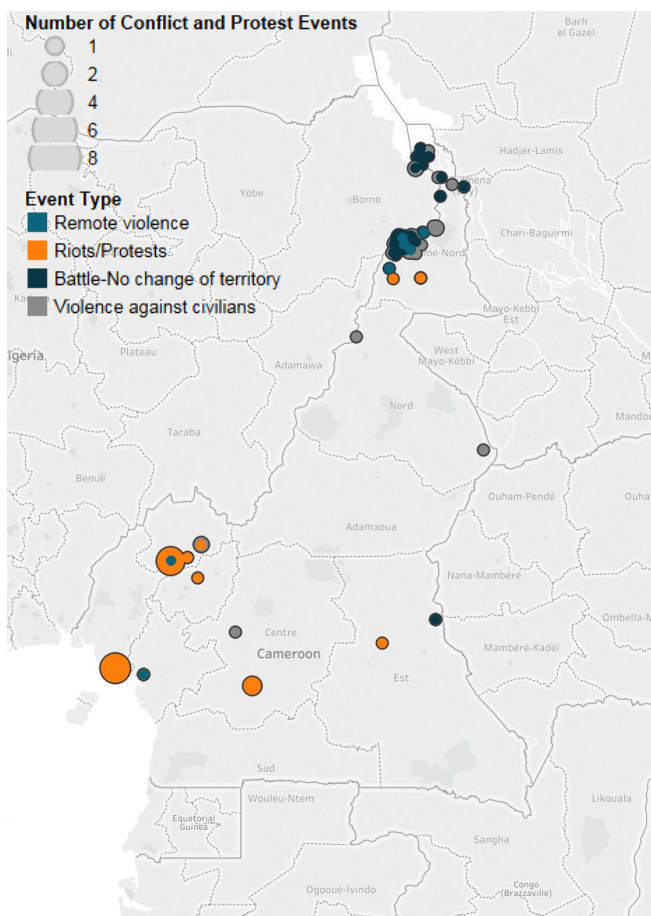


Figure 2: Number of Conflict and Protest Events by Type in Cameroon, January 2017 - September 2017.

Burkina Faso

January 2016 began a string of violence by militant Islamist groups in West Africa that moved beyond the “arc of insecurity” reaching from Mali in the north to the Lake Chad basin in the east. This first attack was carried out by the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Al-Mourabitoun group on a hotel and restaurant frequented by foreigners in the Burkinabe capital of Ouagadougou, resulting in the reported deaths of 3 militants and 30 civilians ([CNN, 18 January 2016](#)). This attack would be followed only two months later in March by an assault by Al Mourabitoun and Al-Qaeda, this time on the resort town of Grand-Bassam in Côte d’Ivoire, leaving 16 civilians and 6 militants dead ([BBC, 14 March 2016](#)).

Although neither of these countries would see any comparable follow-up attacks in 2016, by the end of the year several other militant Islamist groups had engaged in smaller attacks in Burkina Faso. These included two claimed by the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara and one by an unidentified Islamist militia from Mali on security posts in the country’s north. However, these attacks were overshadowed by an attack in December 2016 on an army post in Nassoumbou by around 40 heavily-armed gunmen, resulting in the death of at least 12 Burkinabe soldiers ([MENASTREAM, 3 January 2017](#)). This attack was claimed by a new group associated with both Al-Qaeda and Ansar

Dine, Ansarul Islam, which announced its formation along with the claim shortly after the attack ([Dakaractu, 4 January 2017](#)).

Since these attacks, Burkina Faso has seen an upward trend in the number of battle and civilian attacks attacks and fatalities. Fatality levels are at levels matched by the 2014 ouster of President Blaise Compaore in 2014, and those from the discovery of a mass grave in February 2002. Although the total reported fatalities remain fairly low (see Figure 3) when compared with monthly totals from Mali or Nigeria, the increasing number of attacks by militant Islamist groups is the driving factor behind this rise and represents a significant spread of militant activity in the country. Events involving militant Islamist groups accounted for more than 75% of all fatalities reported in Burkina Faso in 2016 (58 of 81), while in 2017 they represented just fewer than half of all reported fatalities (40 of 90). And although their share of total fatalities fell, another third of all fatalities reported are attributed to unidentified armed groups which used violence either associated with militant Islamist groups in the area, such as planting IEDs, or which heavily overlapped with the operating areas of these groups.

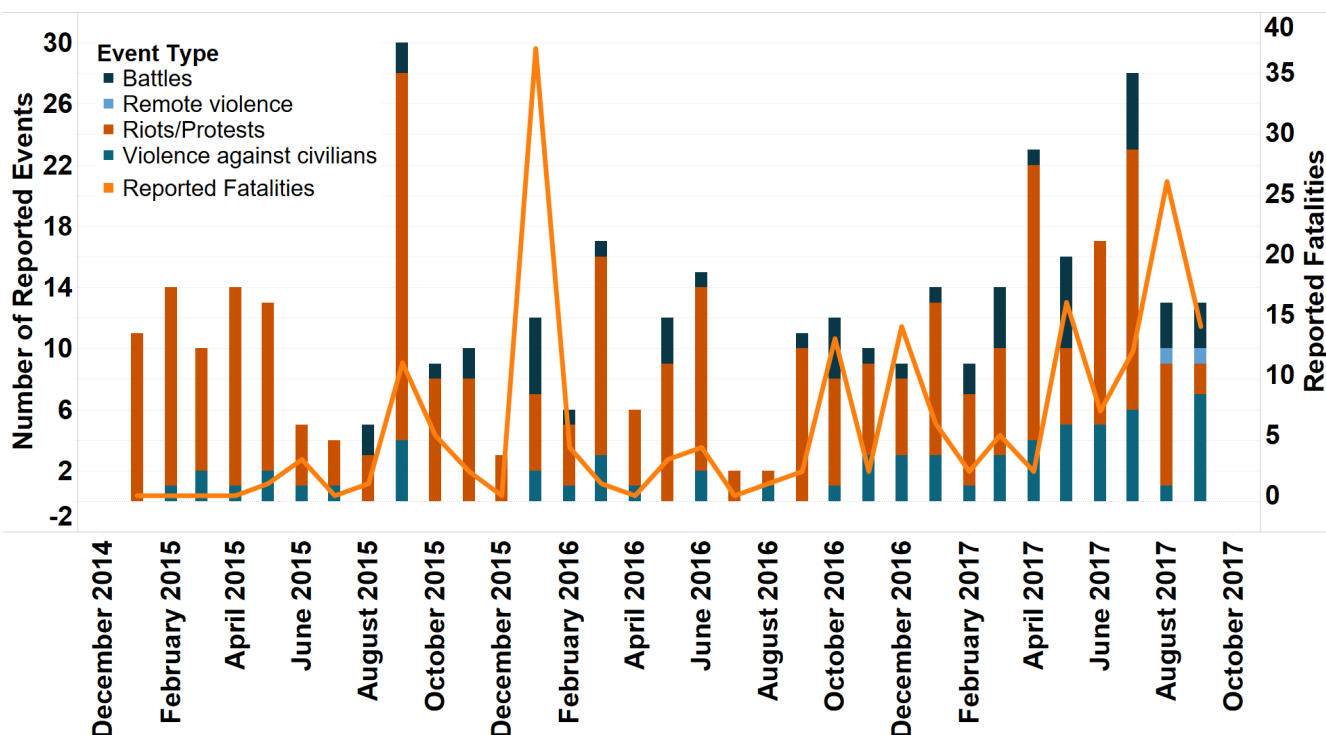


Figure 3: Number of Events and Reported Fatalities by Type in Burkina Faso, January 2015 - September 2017.

Burkina Faso

This last point is particularly important as the increasing violence recorded in Burkina Faso since the end of 2016 has largely been clustered in the northern Sahel province, with the majority of incidents occurring in the Oudalan and Soum regions bordering Mali and Niger (see Figure 4). These regions have seen almost all of the activity by militant Islamist groups and also the majority of violence by unidentified groups, suggesting that there is likely significant overlap. The clustering of these attacks on the border with Mali and Niger is not surprising given that cross-border attacks have also been relatively frequent in Niger since the beginning of the conflict in Mali. Discussions between the governments of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger to develop a regional security task force, similar to the Multinational Joint Task Force dealing with Boko Haram, were actually motivated by the increasing incidence of cross-border attack ([West Africa Brief, 6 February 2017](#)), although with little success despite more recent French efforts to revive the idea ([The National, 2 July 2017](#)).

Another perspective on this rising violence by militant Islamist groups in Burkina Faso is the form it takes. Although both battles and violence against civilians have seen a proportional increase in 2017 over 2016, there have been additional dynamics within these trends, such

as attacks on schools. Ansarul Islam's specific targeting of schools and teachers has involved the militants showing up at schools and demanding the teachers instruct their students in the Quran and stop teaching French ([France24, 20 March 2017](#)), while in others cases, militants have gone as far as killing school principals and teachers ([Xinhua, 4 March 2017](#)). Ansarul Islam has also been the only group to engage in a large-scale attack outside of Sahel province since 2016. This attack took place between August 13-14, 2017 when militants from the group imitated the 2016 attack on Ouagadougou by assaulting another hotel and restaurant frequented by foreigners, resulting in 16 civilians and 3 attackers killed ([The Guardian, 14 August 2017](#)).

However, despite the persistent violence being carried out by militant Islamist groups in Burkina Faso, the upward trend in the country may be short-lived based on dynamics in Mali and Niger. Both countries saw significant decreases in reported fatalities in September, with Mali's reported fatalities falling month-over-month from a high of 185 in June 2017 to a low of just 34 in September 2017. With overall violence levels falling in Mali, this has the potential to translate into a corresponding fall in violence in Burkina Faso based on diminished cross-border attacks.

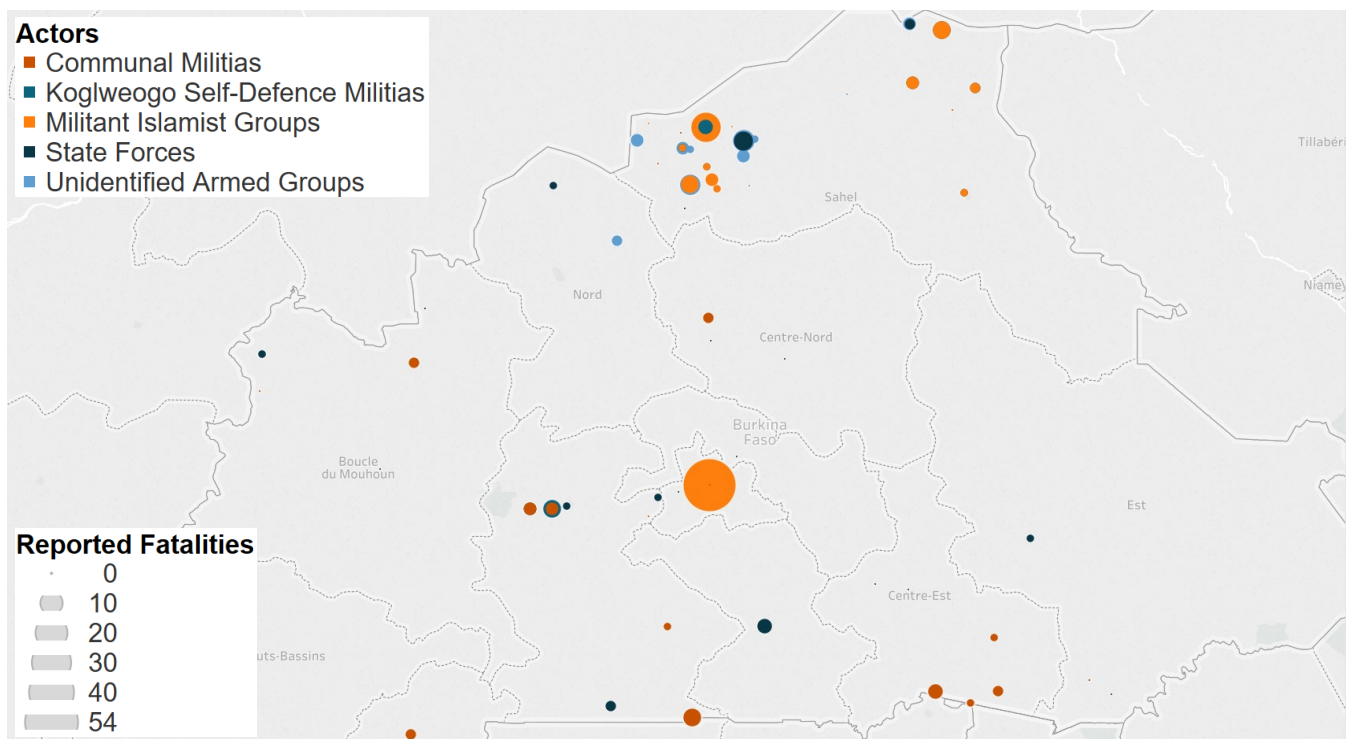


Figure 4: Armed Groups Involved in Events with Fatalities in Burkina Faso, January 2017 to September 2017.

Egypt

The last few months have seen the Islamic State's Sinai Province carry out a number of attacks on security forces in the Sinai Peninsula, including a raid on an army check-point in the Al Barth area that killed at least 23 soldiers ([The Guardian, 7 July 2017](#)), and another which targeted a police convoy in the Bir Al-Abd area, killing at least 18 police officers and a driver ([CBC, 11 September 2017](#)). These attacks, along with operations that did not make international headlines or provoke government responses, have continued the ongoing low-level insurgency which has plagued the Peninsula since weakening of the central government during the political upheavals of 2011 and 2012.

However, when examined from the longer term perspective of the last few years, the ongoing violence in the Sinai actually fits within a trend towards an overall decrease in the number of reported events in Egypt. With around 30 recorded events, September 2017 saw a combined total of conflict events and Riots/Protests at levels comparable to the relative stability witnessed in mid-2012 before the beginning of protests against the government of former President Mohammad Morsi, although still roughly double the average number of recorded events during the period preceding the Egyptian revolution in 2011.

The overall fall in numbers of events in Egypt is due to a fall in all manner of unstable events, and particularly riots and protests. There are a few different reasons for this

drop, but the effective dismantling of political freedoms by the state and corresponding contraction of the space for political dissent are an important component, as discussed in our March 2017 article on Egypt ([ACLED, March 2017](#)). September 2017 represents a culmination of this trend, demonstrated by the plummeting of riots and protests recorded (see Figure 5).

However, while events in Egypt as a whole have been falling when viewed over the long-term, two inter-connected factors complicate any attempts to draw conclusions from this trend. The first is the Egyptian government's use of the counter-insurgency campaign in the Sinai Peninsula to justify the continued need for a strong government and consequently the suppression of dissent. The second factor, which is arguably an extension of the first, is the ongoing communications blackout ([Washington Post, 15 September 2017](#)) affecting significant parts of the Sinai Peninsula, including its major cities such as Arish, Rafah, and Sheikh Zuweid ([Madamsar, 20 September 2017](#)). When combined, these factors suggest that the perception of what is going on in the Sinai is likely distorted by the government. Despite this, the overall trend towards fewer events, if not reduced fatalities, indicates a general return of stability to Egypt over the near term, but is not a positive direction for political freedoms.

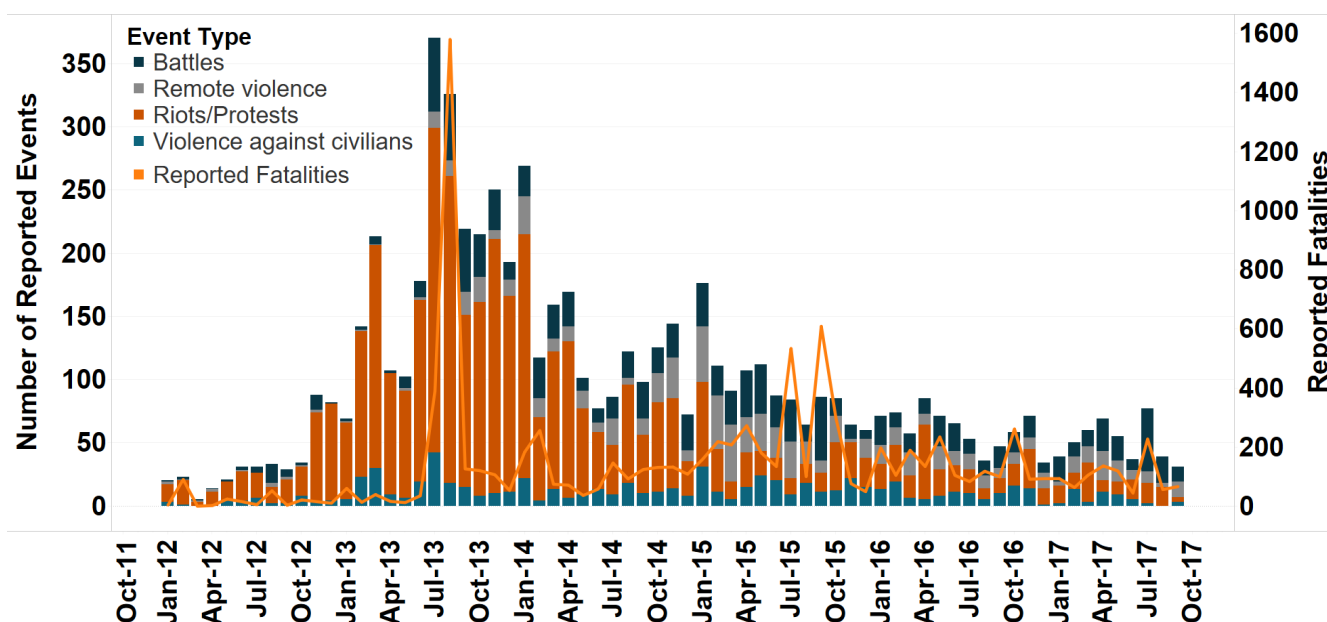


Figure 5: Number of Conflict Events and Reported Fatalities by Type in Egypt, January 2012 to September 2017.

Libya

Since August 2017, activity by the Islamic State in Libya has begun to increase with fears that they are starting to regroup and stage a comeback ([Bloomberg, 12 September 2017](#)). Militants are reported to be operational through a “desert army” that was established after being pushed out of Sirte last year by Misratan militias. If Islamic State militant activity is beginning to mount, what threat does it pose and to whom? And how do the patterns of violence compare to their most active periods of fighting in Libya?

First, their operational capacity appears to be nascent. AFRICOM estimated that fighter numbers declined from around 6,000 in 2016 to around 500 active in Libya today ([VOA News, 29 September 2017](#)). On 22 September, U.S. military forces carried out precision airstrikes against IS locations killing 17 militants. As such, remote violence made up 36% of conflict activity in August and September, compared to 29% and 28% respectively in 2016 and 2015 (see Figure 6). Remote violence was the most lethal conflict form in August and September, accounting for 60% of all fatalities involving IS. However, only one of these

events was perpetrated by IS militants as two policemen and 2 LNA soldiers were killed by a VBIED near Nawfaliya.

Ground battles have been reported, the most significant being a violent operation in which nine Libyan National Army soldiers were beheaded at the Fuqaha checkpoint in Al Jufrah on 23 August and an IS-manned checkpoint was established near Abu Grein on 29 August. At present, almost all of the activity has been reported in the Sirte region. Other activity has involved establishing checkpoints and a few instances of civilian-targeted violence against Salafists, though fatalities have remained low. So far, forces supporting the Government of National Accord (GNA) have not engaged with IS militants, with the LNA being the main targets.

If the rise of IS is to continue in Libya, it could disrupt and divide the negotiating parties within the Libyan political agreement. In 2015, Frederic Wehrey highlighted the “sinister synchronization between Operation Dignity attacks on their [Misratan forces] western flank and Islamic State bombings in and around Misrata” ([Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 24 June 2015](#)). Fast forward to 2017 and efforts at establishing a constitutional referendum and timeline for elections have been time-tabled by U.N. Special Envoy to Libya, Ghassan Salame ([STRATFOR, 21 September 2017](#)). As deadlock in the fighting pushes emphasis on to institutional political developments, Gen. Haftar’s position as the head of the Libyan military is once again called into question. The LNA conducted sweeping patrols around Sirte in late August, likely to ensure protection of key oil fields. This put them within 10km of forces supporting the GNA ([War is boring, 15 September 2017](#)) and could ignite fresh tensions between the LNA and GNA-forces recently witnessed in southern Libya. Should fighting flare up around Sirte or the south again, the emergence of IS may well act to stall or divide negotiating parties and further complicate the wider dynamics of civil violence.

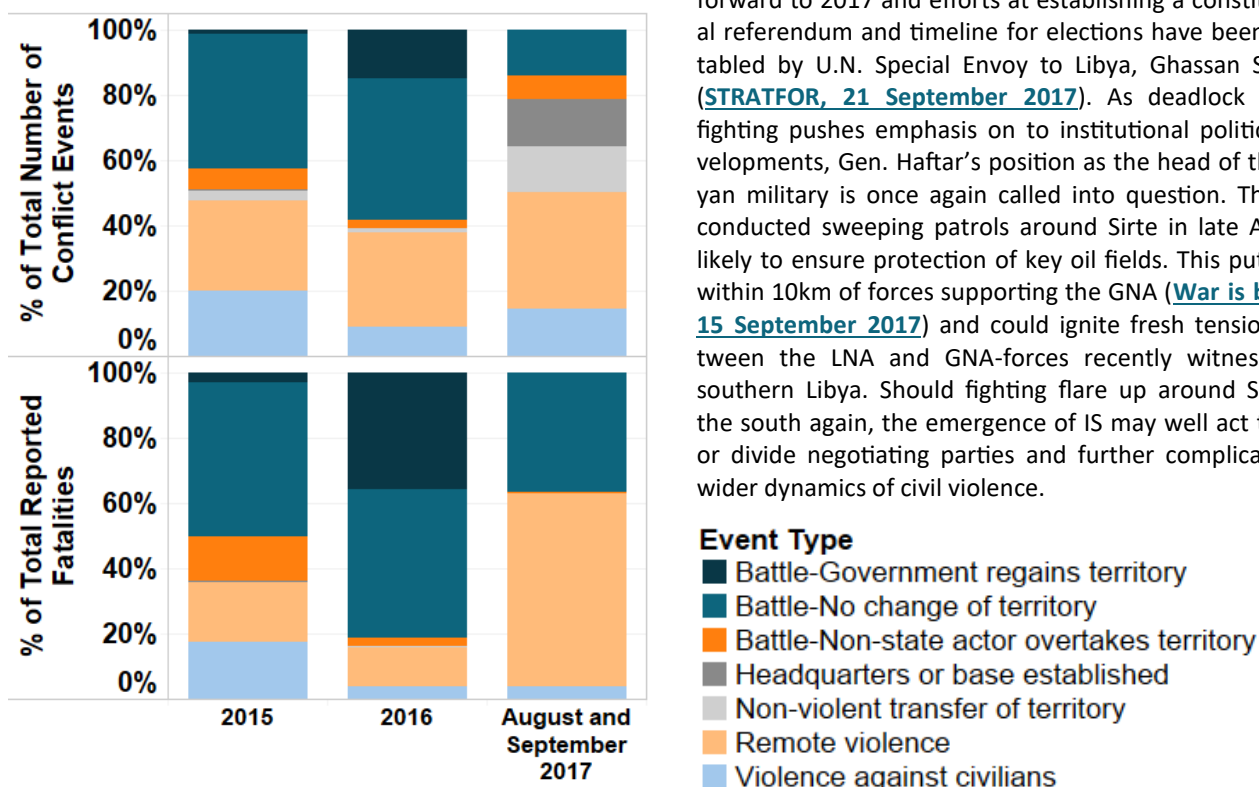


Figure 6: Percentage of Conflict Events and Fatalities by Type in Libya, 2015, 2016, and August - September 2017.

Togo

Riots and protests reached their highest levels for over two years in September as demonstrators protested the rule of President Faure Gnassingbé. Despite comparatively fewer protests to other countries in Africa, the scale of participation has been large with as many as 800,000 people demonstrating on 19 August ([BBC News, 21 September 2017](#)), though the true figure is likely to be lower. The capital, Lomé, has seen the highest level of protest activity since 2013 but it is the activity outside of the centre where developments are taking place.

The protests echo other reform-led protests that have swept the continent since the 1990s, though the thin veneer of promised change from the government has in the short term failed to convince the opposition. The opposition rejected a parliamentary vote to amend the constitution to limit presidential terms to two-terms ([BBC News, 21 September 2017](#)), demonstrating that governance reforms that pay lip service to democratic promotion will

not prevent street demonstrations from taking place. This pattern is particularly prominent in West Africa where prominent pro-democracy protests took place in Gambia in the run up to President Yahya Jammeh's electoral defeat.

August was comparatively more violent than September with reports of clashes between police forces and rioters supporting the opposition Pan African National Party (PNP). Since June, protests have spread north from Maritime Region to Sokodé in Centrale, Bafilo in Kara and Mango in Savanes Region (see Figure 7). The north has traditionally been a stronghold for the Gnassingbé family.

Two potential dynamics present themselves in the Togo protest wave: continuity and incremental alliance building for change. First, the role of the military will be important in determining whether protesters continue to rally. In August and September, 62.5% and 70% of protests were

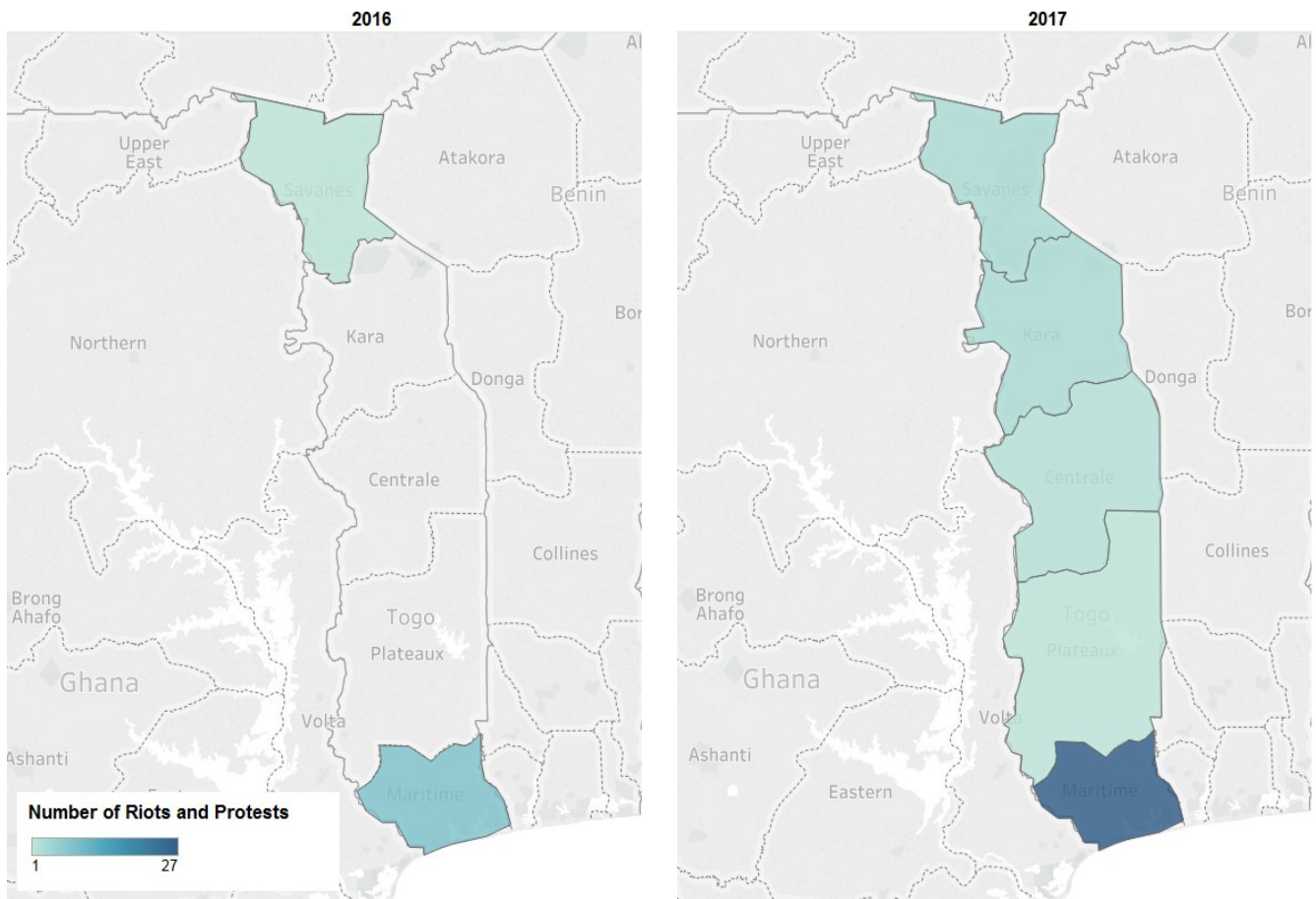


Figure 7: Number of Riots and Protests by Region in Togo, 2016 and 2017.

Togo

repressed by security forces respectively (see Figure 8). “Military careers were one of the few ways of social advancement for the northern ethnic groups” (Osei, 2016: 14) under Faure’s father – Eyadema.

Key posts in the army are occupied by officers from the Kabye ethnic group and are likely to retain their loyalty rather than capitalise on the political opening of the protest wave, rendering an unexpected ouster less likely.

However, despite lacking representation in the parliament and propelling onto the political scene in 2014, the opposition protest leader has made some shrewd political

moves. Tikpi Atchadam – the protest movement leader of the PNP comes from the north of the country and offers the opportunity to bridge the historical divide between the regime-backing north and the opposition south of Togo. Attempts to combine his northern appeal base with Jean-Pierre Fabre, leader of the National Alliance for Change (ANC) that came 2nd in the 2015 Presidential election, could amplify the attractiveness of an alternative political choice to citizens (Le Monde, 7 September 2017) in weeks to come.

While the trend of popular protest is a rising occurrence across North and sub-Saharan Africa, governments appear to be employing similar techniques to insulate themselves from instability. Across the continent, states deploy internet shutdowns, arrange pro-regime protests, and use a mixture of selective concessions and police brutality under differing circumstances and with varying effect. Close attention to the organisation, strategic flexibility, fluid hierarchy of command and closeness to political elites (Tufekci in the New Yorker, 21 August 2017) may well offer important clues as to the true potential of popular protest movements to achieve their goals and/or unseat African leaders.

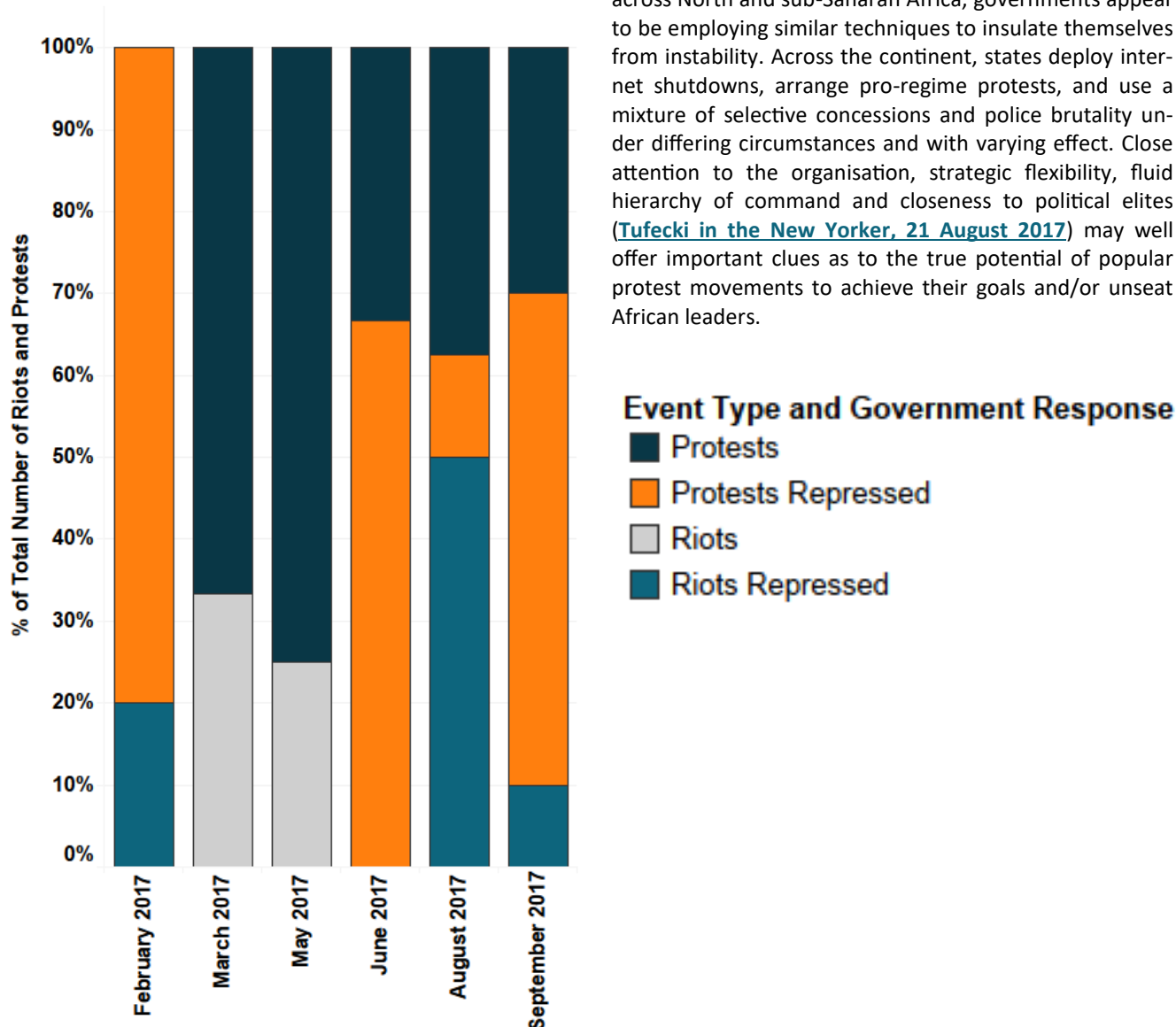


Figure 8: Percentage of Riots/Protests by Type and Response in Togo, February 2017 - September 2017.

Zambia

In the period between President Sata's death in October 2014 and Lungu's election in August 2016, Zambia saw an increase in political activity. Protest levels rose, as the declining copper prices and stalling economy affected workers across the country, and then became increasingly violent as the election approached ([ACLED Trends Report, September 2016](#)). A month before the vote, the Election Commission of Zambia suspended campaigning to limit the clashes between party supporters ([Al Jazeera, 10 July 2016](#)). Analysts feared that the close election outcome would generate further political violence ([Lusaka Times, 10 August 2016](#)).

However, after the election there was a steep drop in violence against civilians, riots and protests (see Figure 9). In 2017 thus far, there have only been 19 riots and protests across Zambia (compared to the 82 in 2016). Moreover, while 2015 and 2016 saw incidents of protest diffuse to new areas, particularly within the Southern Region ([ACLED Trends Report, September 2016](#)), the majority of the incidents in 2017 have been concentrated within the economic hubs of Copperbelt and Lusaka (50% of all incidents took place in Lusaka, 47% of all riots and protests took place in Lusaka).

This fall in political violence across Zambia is not a result of an increase in political stability, now that Zambia has elected a replacement for Sata, nor has the economy sta-

bilized ([Lusaka Times, 28 September 2017](#)). Although there have been relatively few incidents in Zambia in the past year, those incidents have been significant. After UPND leader, Hakainde Hichilema failed to stop for Lungu's motorcade, he was besieged and teargassed in his house by the police, while his servants were tortured ([Daily Maverick, 20 April 2017](#)). Another opposition leader, Saviour Chishimba, was detained for "defaming President Lungu" ([Al Jazeera, 14 August 2017](#)). Forty-eight UPND MPs were suspended from parliament for failing to attend President Lungu's speech ([BBC, 13 June 2017](#)). Finally, after a market burned down, Lungu declared a "State of Enhanced Security," enabling the security forces to prohibit public meetings, close roads, and impose curfews. Opposition supporters claim that the state deliberately burned down the market in order to generate a crisis ([Al Jazeera, 14 July 2017](#)). Another change to the violence profile is that, while police only accounted for a small portion (approximately 10%) of the violence against civilians in 2016, they were responsible for over half of all incidents of violence against civilians in 2017. Although Zambia appears more stable numerically than it was a year ago, Lungu is using the power of the state and the power of its laws to create what the government prosecutor of Hichilema accidentally called "The Government of Edgar Lungu." ([Daily Maverick, 20 April 2017](#)).

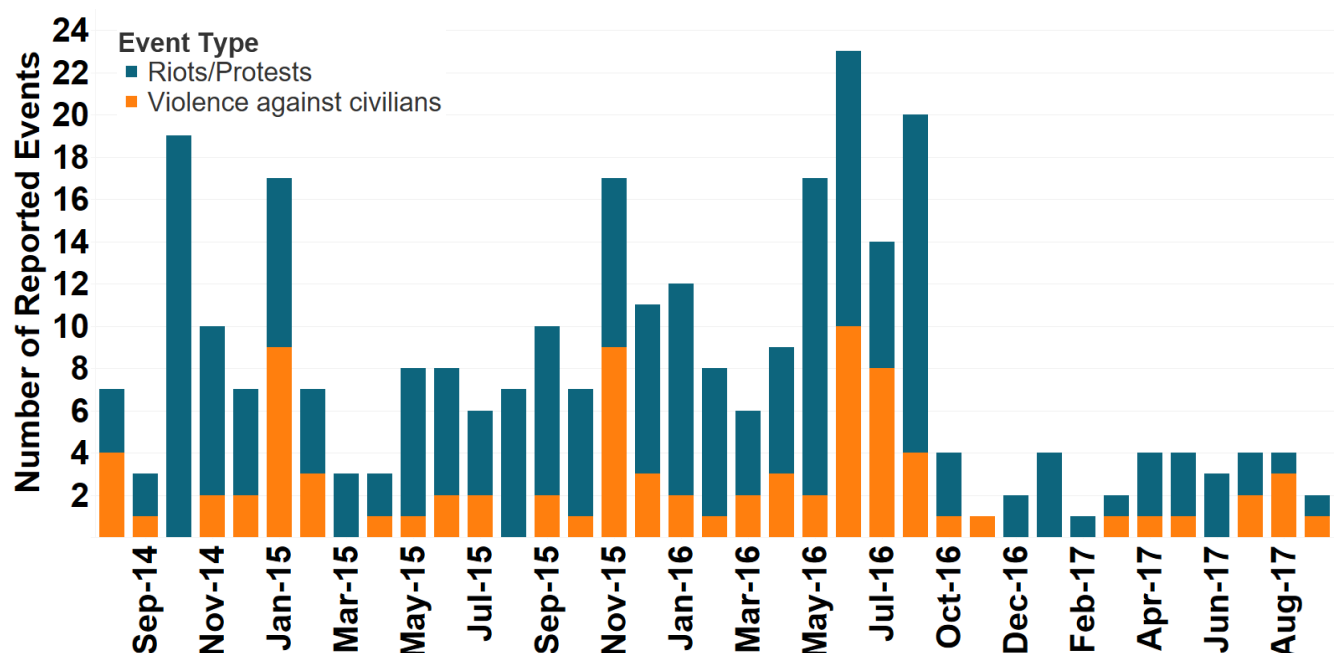


Figure 9: Number of Riots/Protests and Violence against Civilians Events in Zambia, August 2014 - September 2017.

Special Focus Topic: Al Shabaab and Boko Haram: Patterns of Violence

Which group is the most violent in Africa? A recent [report](#) exploring Africa's active militant Islamic groups aimed to tackle this question. The report, produced by the Africa Center for Strategic Studies (ACSS), argued that Somalia's Al Shabaab has eclipsed Nigeria's Boko Haram, to become "Africa's deadliest group". The claim was supported with data drawn from [ACLED](#).

While this superlative has been cited by a number of news outlets (including [Quartz](#), [Vice News](#), and [Newsweek](#)) since it was published in April 2017, its foundation was recently challenged by an [article](#) by Salem Solomon and Casey Frechette. Solomon and Frechette argued that ACSS' conclusions are the result of choices made during their analysis of ACLED data, which, they argue, are not robust. They assert that, when considered in terms of who did *what* and *to whom*, it is Boko Haram, not Al Shabaab, who has killed far more people.

A closer look at the ACLED dataset reveals that: both are correct. This is not simply a semantic discussion, or one based on academic definitions: it reminds us that it is important to recognize what conflict data *can* and *cannot* do before drawing conclusions from them. This is especially true, given the impact these conclusions may have on foreign policy, as Solomon and Frechette accurately note.

So, how can both groups be considered the "deadliest", a label that is normally afforded to only one? A closer look at the data for both groups can help to shed some light. According to ACLED data, in 2016, Al Shabaab was involved in the most violent events (911) in Africa, resulting in a total of 4,282 reported fatalities for those events. Boko Haram was the 6th most violent armed organized group in Africa in 2016: involved in 419 events resulting in 3,500 reported fatalities. However, the ratio of events to reported fatalities suggests that while over 4 people were killed in every Al Shabaab attack, more than 8 people were killed in each Boko Haram attack. To further complicate matters, on average, twice as many people are killed (on both sides) during battles involving Al Shabaab than when they target civilians, whereas reported fatalities associated with Boko Haram do not significantly vary depending on what type of event they engage in. Finally, Boko Haram has certainly declined as a force in the past eighteen months: they are smaller, weaker, scattered and

often operating on foreign soil (Cameroonian events are included in this analysis). In contrast, Al Shabaab has gained significant strength and territory during the same period.

In determining "Africa's deadliest group", the authors of both pieces assumed that ACLED data identifies who killed whom. But, they do not, and no data reliably do. In studies of conflict and violence reporting, the "who, what, where, and when" is often correct and easily confirmed and corroborated. Problems often emerge when people want to know "why?" or "how many?". Conflict reports come in from rural frontlines, urban slums, border regions, private property and many other types of locations.

Reporters are not there to relay the details; they must rely on sources that — more often than not — are involved in some way in the conflict and, therefore, are biased to a certain degree. Indeed, even studies that are based on police records, hospital admissions, cemeteries, etc. fall victim to this phenomenon. Effectively, conflict data can tell us what happened, but not much more.

Unfortunately, for researchers, policymakers, and those affected by conflict alike, what conflict data cannot tell is considerable, and consequential: it has real world impacts that must be understood and factored into our analysis and commentary accordingly.

Fatalities and Casualties

Fatality numbers are the most biased, poorly reported component of conflict data, making them, overall, the most susceptible to error. They are [often debated and can vary widely](#). With exceptions, such as events where unarmed civilians are killed, there is no way to reliably discern which armed, organized group kills more or fewer members of the group(s) they fight using ACLED data. There are incentives for conflict actors to over- or under-report fatality numbers. In some cases, over-reporting of fatalities may be done as [an attempt to appear strong to opposition](#), while in others, [fatalities perpetrated by state forces may be under-reported and those by rebels over-reported, in order to minimize international backlash against the state involved](#). There may also be a sys-

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Special Focus Topic: Al Shabaab and Boko Haram: Patterns of Violence

tematic violence bias in mainstream news reports where fatalities are over-reported in order to increase media attention. There are contexts, too, in which [fatalities may be under-reported as a function of the difficulties of collecting information in the midst of conflict](#).

While ACLED codes the most conservative reports of fatality counts to minimize over-counting, this does not account for the biases that exist around fatality counts at large. Furthermore, the true cost of conflict cannot be measured by deaths on a “battlefield”. Conflicts that may result in fewer deaths on the battlefield still contribute to instability and fragility. For example, conflict can impact food security, which can in turn result in large numbers of fatalities – [as seen recently in South Sudan](#). Conflict can also damage health infrastructure which can result in future vulnerability to health pandemics – [as seen in Liberia](#), where over half of its medical facilities were de-

stroyed during the Liberian Civil War, leaving the country extremely vulnerable to the Ebola epidemic, which resulted in thousands of deaths.

Moreover, counting deaths on the “battlefield” is necessarily [“biased towards men’s experiences of armed conflict to the detriment of those of women and girls”](#) as Bastick, Grimm, and Kunz point out in a report. This is because while more men may be killed while fighting, women and children are often the victims of other forms of violence during conflict (e.g. sexual violence).

And so, while it is certainly important to report the death and destruction imposed by armed groups, it is wrong to gauge the impact of these groups based on numbers that data providers explicitly acknowledge as both questionable and inadequate to capture the true impact of conflict.

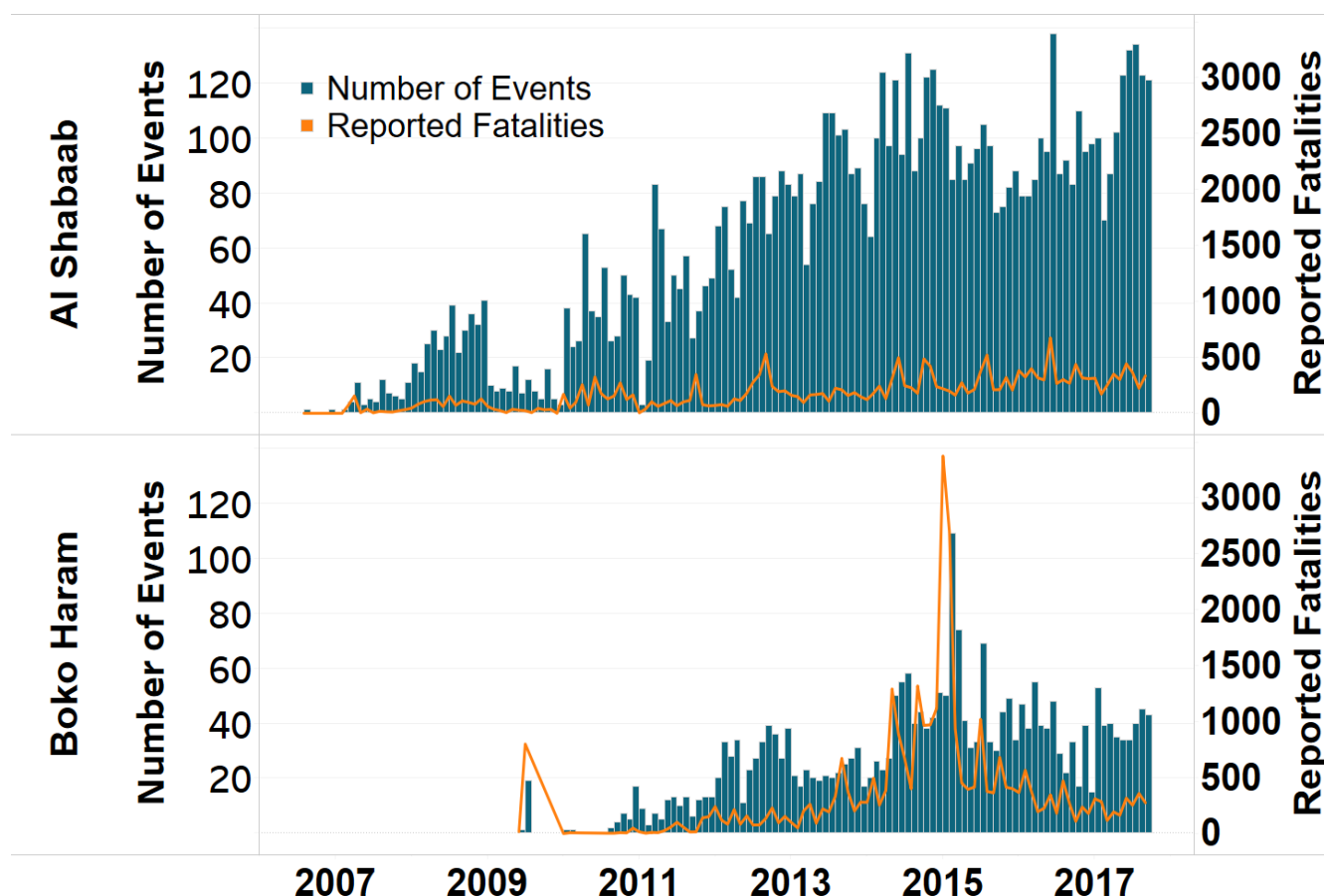


Figure 10: Al Shabaab and Boko Haram Conflict Activity, August 2006 - September 2017.

Special Focus Topic: Al Shabaab and Boko Haram: Patterns of Violence

Group labels and motivations

Some research treats the perpetrators of violence differently. Labelling groups with mantles such as “terrorist” or “insurgent” presumes a distinct goal, motivation, modality and target. We think that labels often legitimize or delegitimize activity, and strongly believe that [terrorism](#) is an event where people are killed who are not expecting to be risking their life at that time. But, because beliefs, intentions and expectations are not possible to parse in our quantitative data, to use such labels would distort, rather than inform, the debate. Further, who is considered a terrorist, and who is not, is a discussion that is pointedly political and has no basis in data. For example, [many limit the definition of a terrorist attack to those carried out by a non-state actor](#); however, many governments kill their

citizens with greater frequency and in higher numbers than any non-state organization. Are these “terrorist” governments? Where you stand on that depends on where you sit politically.

Risk to whom?

Determining how “deadly” a conflict group is essentially a proxy to assess the risk that a group poses. Yet the risk associated with a conflict group is multi-faceted and cannot be reduced to the number of fatalities they are allegedly responsible for. This is because, not only are fatality counts unreliable as discussed above, but also they fail to capture a number of important dimensions of risk.

The ‘risk’ associated with a group can be gauged by observing a wide range of indicators including, how much

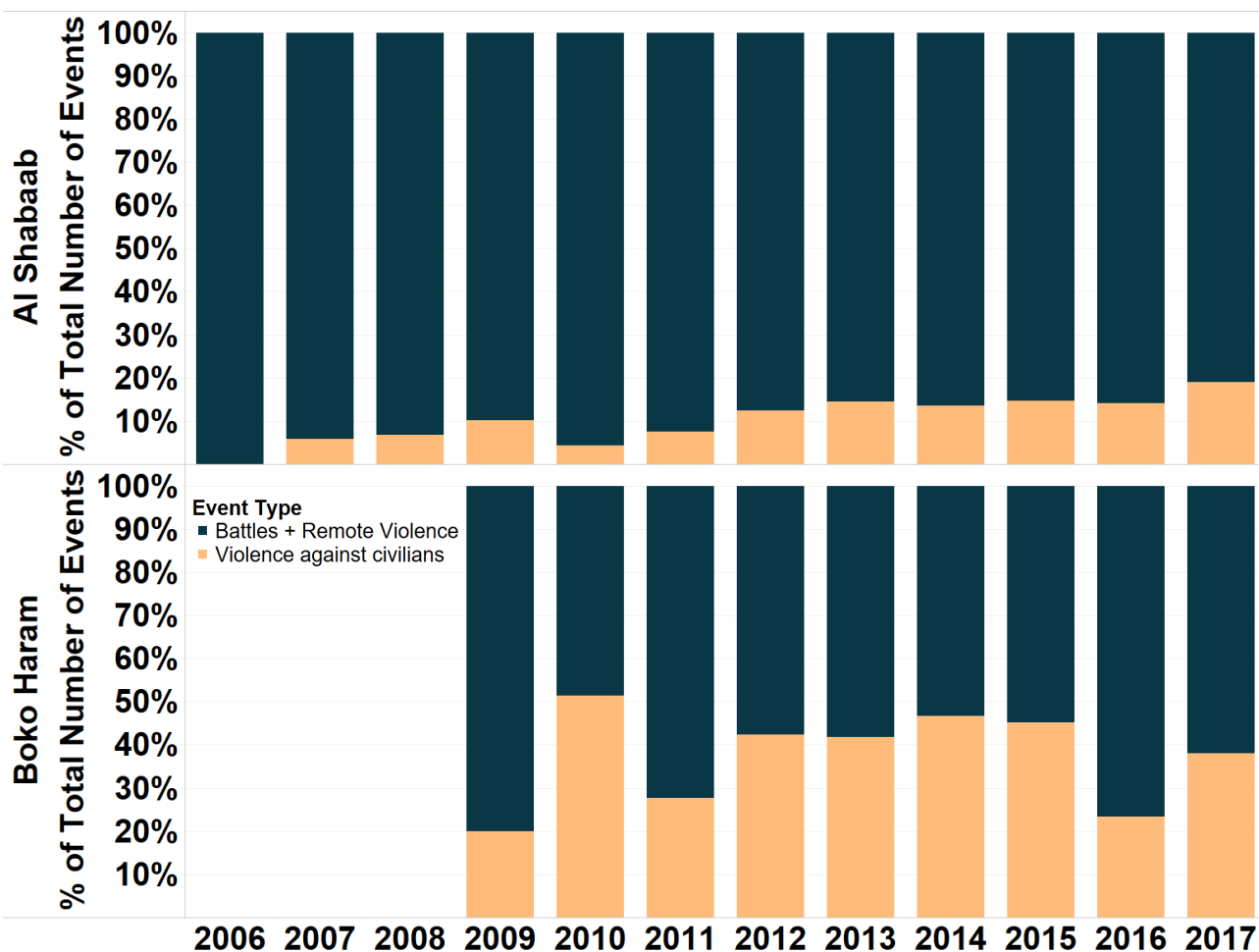


Figure 11: Al Shabaab and Boko Haram Proportions of Conflict Activity, August 2006 - September 2017.

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violence it commits or the lethality of these events (see Figure 10); however, it is not limited solely to these factors.

The risk associated with a particular group, especially vis-à-vis others, can also be gauged by considering in how many distinct places they commit violence, over what period of time they are active, with whom they interact, and what their activity is relative to other armed, organized actors. Using all of these measures concurrently, a researcher can assess whether a certain group is a larger threat to the state or civilians than other groups. Fatalities, or incidents of violence, alone do not paint the full picture.

When considering these many facets of risk, the difference in the risk profiles of Al Shabaab and Boko Haram is clear. Al Shabaab has had, over its active period, a relatively low rate of civilian targeting, when compared to other groups in similar positions (see Figure 11). (That being said, for many years, ACLED analysts have suspected that [Al Shabaab employs unidentified armed groups to kill civilians for them, and to perpetrate many of the less popular acts which take place in the insurgency.](#))

Rather than target civilians, their strategy is to be the Al Shabaab that is simultaneously the business innovator, the local militia, the job creator, the dealmaker, the negotiator and the parallel government (read: taxing force).

Somalia is “functioning” as a system where violence is an accepted reality. This may be due, at least in part, to the relatively low rate of violence against civilians as a proportion of Al Shabaab’s overall violent activity: at 11%, it is 20% lower than the average rate of civilian targeting (as a proportion of activity over time between battles, remote violence, strategic developments, and civilian targeting). Further, civilian targeting has never been a large part of Al Shabaab’s repertoire (an average of 11% of total activity and over 14% in 2016).

In contrast, nearly 31% of Boko Haram’s activity this year has been directed towards civilians, reaching a nearly 47% high in 2014 and decreasing to less than 24% in 2016.

By accounting for the multidimensionality of risk in assessments about groups, one can better understand the nature of a threat. So, for example, while civilians may be at higher risk of death at the hands of Boko Haram relative to Al Shabaab, Al Shabaab may pose a higher risk to stability in the region given the nature of its activity. This instability may in turn result in a severe negative impact on

civilians. Limiting analysis to purely fatality numbers would miss these important dynamics.

How do groups shape the conflict environment?

The trends and statistics noted above are informative, but Al Shabaab and Boko Haram are two very different groups and contrasting them and the conflict environments they create may not be so useful. Both Nigeria and Somalia would be very dangerous places without Boko Haram or Al Shabaab, respectively. Both groups have helped to create political environments where violence is dominant, and the state appears unable to prevent it.

In Nigeria, the threat of Boko Haram to the population is reduced when considering the large size of Nigeria’s population and hence the population at risk ([the one-in-a-million \[or micromort\] risk of conflict-related death to civilians in Nigeria in 2016 \[at the hands of any armed actor\] was 0.03](#)). However, their influence is vastly increased when considering what this violence, and the Fulani violence in the Middle Belt, says about the administration of the state: that the state does not, in fact, have a monopoly on violence in Nigeria.

In Somalia, Al Shabaab has not been successful in preventing the formation of a state, but the fact that 128 armed organized groups were active last year in Somalia suggests that non-state groups have yet to be convinced of the benefits of having a state.

While far fewer civilians were reportedly killed in Somalia versus Nigeria last year (894 versus 2,086, respectively), when accounting for the fact that the population of Nigeria is almost 13 times larger than Somalia, this difference is not so stark. In fact, [the one-in-a-million \(or micromort\) risk of conflict-related death to civilians in Somalia in 2016 \[at the hands of any armed actor\] was 0.17](#) – which is over 5 times higher than that seen in Nigeria, suggesting that the average civilian is at higher risk of conflict-related death in Somalia than in Nigeria.

One key difference between these two groups comes down to effectiveness: Boko Haram is not very good at challenging the state and offering itself as an alternative government option, while Al Shabaab has excelled at this. The scope of their activities also differs. While reported fatalities involving Boko Haram have been spatially limited to north-eastern Nigeria near the country’s borders, reported fatalities involving Al Shabaab have taken place across the majority of Somalia (see Figure 12).

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Statements about the “most” or “least” *anything* when it comes to conflict should always be made with caution as they, by definition, only point to one dimension. Furthermore, employing fatality counts to support these kinds of unqualified statements is inherently problematic due to the shortcomings of these metrics, as explored here.

Beyond the potential biases of fatality counts, however, is the fact that they represent only one perspective on risk. Even if fatality data were “perfect”, they still would not illuminate the true risk that a group may have for populations in the areas in which it is active. Focusing on these tallies ignores a wide range of indicators, which can help us to gauge the risk associated with a particular conflict group, and how their activity compares to other armed,

organized actors. Finally, these points have particular bearing outside of academia and specialized conflict research in so far as fatality counts are used to support claims about “deadliness”, danger or risk of particular conflict actors, especially relative to others, which are in turn consumed by the media, and policymakers as a result.

An abridged version of this report, in collaboration with ACSs, was featured in the [Washington Post’s Monkey Cage](#) on 2 October 2017.

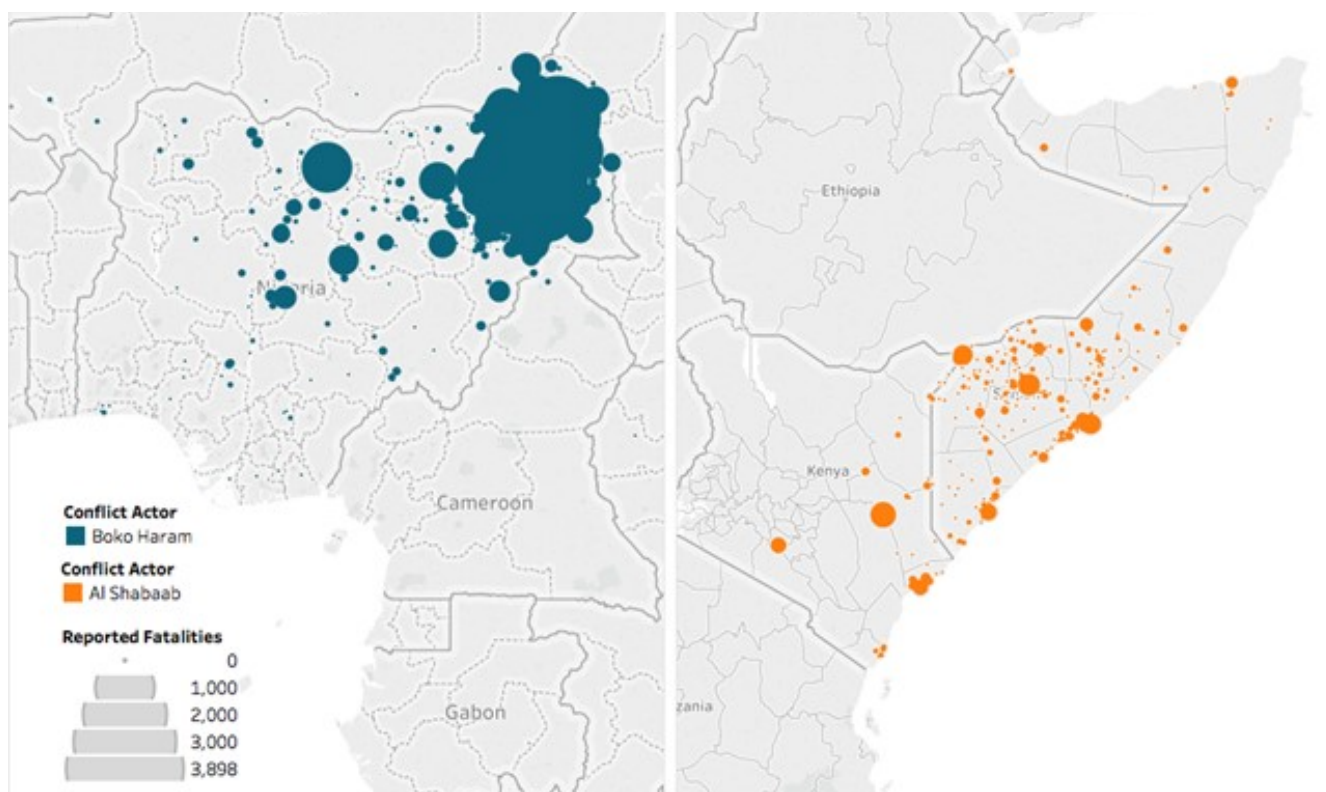


Figure 12: Reported Fatalities from Conflict Involving Al Shabaab and Boko Haram, August 2006 - September 2017.

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Sources

Conflict Trends reports are compiled from ACLED data and draw on news sources, civil society reports, and academic and policy analyses.

Full details of sources and coding processes are available online on the [ACLED website](#).