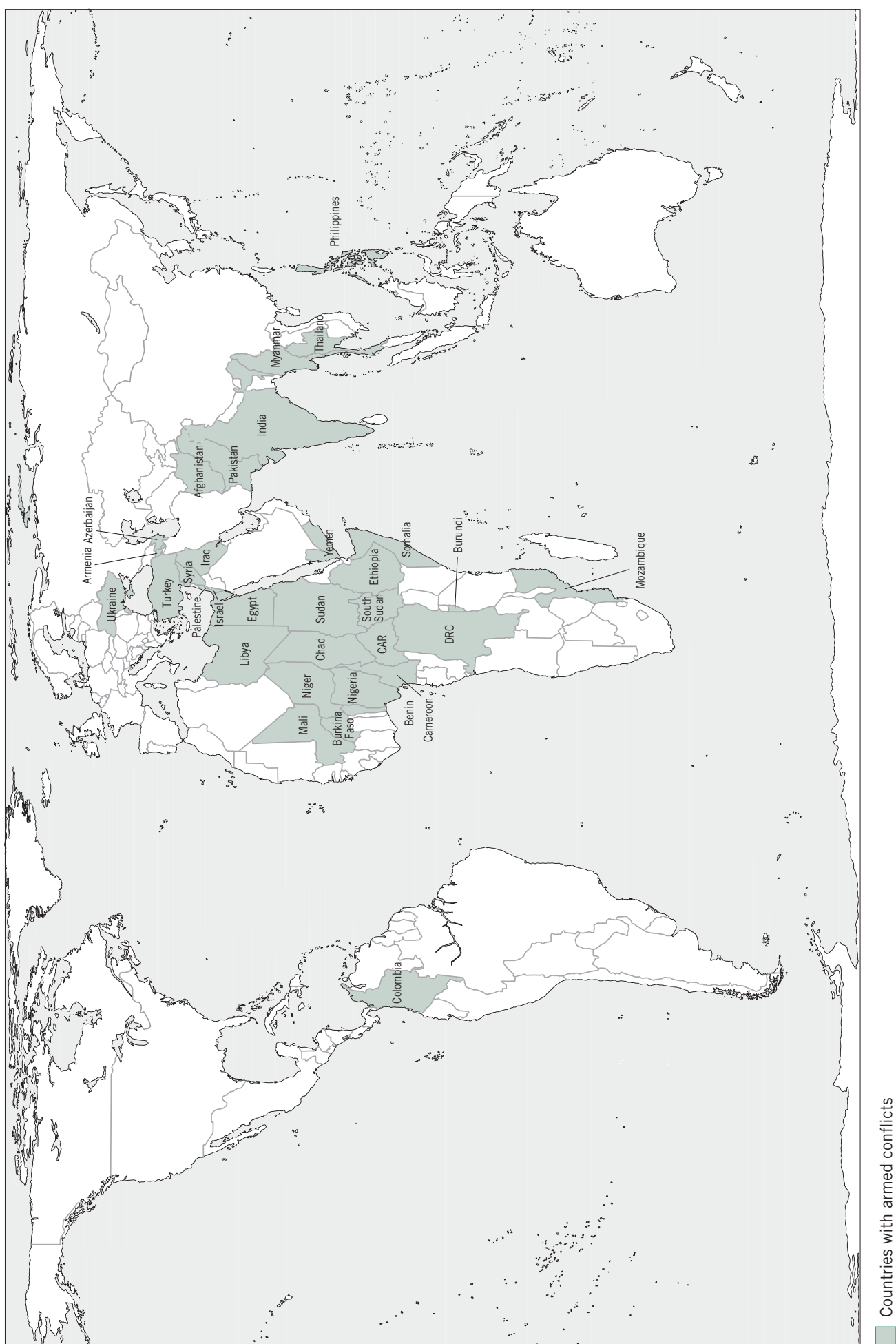


Map 1.1. Armed conflicts



1. Armed conflicts

- 34 armed conflicts were reported in 2020. Most of the conflicts occurred in Africa (15), followed by Asia (nine), the Middle East (six), Europe (three) and America (one).
- 2020 saw a significant increase in high-intensity armed conflicts, which accounted for almost half of the cases, at 47% of the total.
- In November, armed conflict broke out between the Ethiopian government and the authorities in the northern Tigray region, reportedly resulting in hundreds of deaths and serious human rights violations.
- The escalation of violence by the ADF in eastern DRC as a result of a military operation by the Congolese Armed Forces launched in October 2019 continued throughout 2020, causing hundreds of civilian casualties.
- In northern Mozambique, in Cabo Delgado province, there was a severe escalation of violence due to the actions of groups with jihadist agendas and the response of the security forces.
- Burkina Faso became the world's fastest growing forced displacement crisis during 2020, due to violence in the Liptako-Gourma region.
- The security situation in the Western Sahel deteriorated due to increased armed actions by jihadist groups, community militias and military responses by the security forces of regional countries and external allies.
- Violence in Afghanistan was reduced after the agreement signed between the US and the Taliban due to the withdrawal of foreign troops and less offensives by the Armed Forces and ISIS, although the Taliban's armed activity did not decrease.
- In line with the trend of recent years, violence in southern Thailand declined again to its lowest levels since the beginning of the conflict in 2004.
- The Armenia-Azerbaijan war over Nagorno-Karabakh resumed, with several thousand killed and tens of thousands of people forcibly displaced, the partition of Nagorno-Karabakh territory and the transfer of adjacent districts to Baku.
- Yemen remained one of the countries most affected by armed violence in the world, with an estimate of 20,000 fatalities in 2020.

The present chapter analyses the armed conflicts that occurred in 2020. It is organised into three sections. The first section offers a definition of armed conflict and its characteristics. The second section provides an analysis of the trends of conflicts in 2020, including global and regional trends and other issues related to international conflicts. The third section is devoted to describing the development and key events of the year in the various contexts. Furthermore, a map is included at the start of chapter that indicates the conflicts active in 2020.

1.1. Armed conflicts: definition

An **armed conflict** is any confrontation between regular or irregular armed groups with objectives that are perceived as incompatible in which the continuous and organised use of violence a) causes a minimum of 100 battle-related deaths in a year and/or a serious impact on the territory (destruction of infrastructures or of natural resources) and human security (e.g. wounded or displaced population, sexual violence, food insecurity, impact on mental health and on the social fabric or disruption of basic services) and b) aims to achieve objectives that are different than those of common delinquency and are normally linked to:

- demands for self-determination and self-government or identity issues;
- the opposition to the political, economic, social or ideological system of a state or the internal or international policy of the government, which in both cases leads to fighting to seize or erode power;
- control over the resources or the territory.

Table 1.1. Summary of armed conflicts in 2020

Conflict ¹ -beginning-	Type ²	Main parties ³	Intensity ⁴
			Trend ⁵
AFRICA			
Burundi -2015-	Internationalised internal	Government, Imbonerakure Youth branch, political party CNDD-FDD, political party CNL, armed groups RED-TABARA, FPB (previously FOREBU), FNL	1
	Government		=
Cameroon (Ambazonia/ North West and South West) -2018-	Internationalised internal	Government, political-military secessionist movement including the opposition Ambazonia Coalition Team (ACT, including IG Sako, to which belong the armed groups Lebialem Red Dragons and SOCADEF) and the Ambazonia Governing Council (AGovC, including IG Sisiku, whose armed wing is the Ambazonia Defence Forces, ADF)	3
	Self-government, Identity		=
CAR -2006-	Internationalised internal	Government of CAR, rebel groups of the former coalition Séléka (FPRC, RPRC, MPC, UPC, MLCJ), anti-balaka militias, 3R militia, LRA armed Ugandan group, other local and foreign armed groups, Government of France, MINUSCA, EUFOR	2
	Government, Resources		↑
DRC (east) -1998-	Internationalised internal	Government of DRC, FDLR, factions of the FDLR, Mai-Mai militias, Nyatura, APCLS, NDC-R, Ituri armed groups, Burundian armed opposition group FNL, Government of Rwanda, MONUSCO	3
	Government, Identity, Resources		=
DRC (east – ADF) -2014-	Internationalised internal	Government of DRC, Government of Uganda, Mai-Mai militias, armed opposition group ADF, MONUSCO	3
	System, Resources		↑
Ethiopia (Tigray)-2020-	Internationalised internal	Government of Ethiopia, Government of Eritrea, Tigray State Regional Government, security forces and militias of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF)	3
	Government, Self-government, Identity		↑
Lake Chad Region (Boko Haram) - 2011-	Internationalised internal	Government of Nigeria, Civilian Joint Task Force pro-government militia, Boko Haram factions (ISWAP, JAS-Abubakar Shekau, Ansaru, Bakura), civilian militias, Multinational Joint Task Force MNJTF (Benin, Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, Niger)	3
	System		=
Libya -2011-	Internationalised internal	Government of National Accord with headquarters in Tripoli, government with headquarters in Tobruk/Bayda, numerous armed groups including the Libyan National Army (LNA, also called Arab Libyan Armed Forces, ALAF), militias from Misrata, Petroleum Facilities Guard, Bengasi Defence Brigades (BDB), ISIS, AQIM, mercenaries; USA, France, UK, Egypt, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Turkey, Qatar, Russia, among other countries	3
	Government, Resources, System		=

1. This column includes the states in which armed conflicts are taking place, specifying in brackets the region within each state to which the crisis is confined or the name of the armed group involved in the conflict. This last option is used in cases involving more than one armed conflict in the same state or in the same territory within a state, for the purpose of distinguishing them.
2. This report classifies and analyses armed conflicts using two criteria: on the one hand, the causes or clashes of interests and, on the other hand, the convergence between the scenario of conflict and the actors involved. The following main causes can be distinguished: demands for self-determination and self-government (Self-government) or identity aspirations (Identity); opposition to the political, economic, social or ideological system of a state (System) or the internal or international policies of a government (Government), which in both cases produces a struggle to take or erode power; or the struggle for the control of resources (Resources) or territory (Territory). In respect of the second type, the armed conflicts may be of an internal, Internationalised internal or international nature. An internal armed conflict is defined as a conflict involving armed actors from the same state who operate exclusively within the territory of this state. Secondly, an internationalised internal armed conflict is defined as that in which at least one of the parties involved is foreign and/or in which the tension spills over into the territory of neighbouring countries. Another factor taken into account in order to consider an armed conflict as internationalised internal is the existence of military bases of armed groups in neighbouring countries (in connivance with these countries) from which attacks are launched. Finally, an international conflict is one in which state and non-state parties from two or more countries confront each other. It should also be taken into account that most current armed conflicts have a significant regional or international dimension and influence due, among other factors, to flows of refugees, the arms trade, economic or political interests (such as legal or illegal exploitation of resources) that the neighbouring countries have in the conflict, the participation of foreign combatants or the logistical and military support provided by other states.
3. This column shows the actors that intervene directly in the hostilities. The main actors who participate directly in the conflicts are made up of a mixture of regular or irregular armed parties. The conflicts usually involve the government, or its armed forces, fighting against one or several armed opposition groups, but can also involve other irregular groups such as clans, guerrillas, warlords, armed groups in opposition to each other or militias from ethnic or religious communities. Although they most frequently use conventional weapons, and more specifically small arms (which cause most deaths in conflicts), in many cases other methods are employed, such as suicide attacks, bombings and sexual violence and even hunger as a weapon of war. There are also other actors who do not directly participate in the armed activities but who nevertheless have a significant influence on the conflict.
4. The intensity of an armed conflict (high, medium or low) and its trend (escalation of violence, reduction of violence, unchanged) are evaluated mainly on the basis of how deadly it is (number of fatalities) and according to its impact on the population and the territory. Moreover, there are other aspects worthy of consideration, such as the systematisation and frequency of the violence or the complexity of the military struggle (complexity is normally related to the number and fragmentation of the actors involved, to the level of institutionalisation and capacity of the state, and to the degree of internationalisation of the conflict, as well as to the flexibility of objectives and to the political will of the parties to reach agreements). As such, high-intensity armed conflicts are usually defined as those that cause over 1,000 fatalities per year, as well as affecting a significant proportion of the territory and population, and involving several actors (who forge alliances, confront each other or establish a tactical coexistence). Medium and low intensity conflicts, with over 100 fatalities per year, have the aforementioned characteristics but with a more limited presence and scope. An armed conflict is considered ended when a significant and sustained reduction in armed hostilities occurs, whether due to a military victory, an agreement between the actors in conflict, demobilisation by one of the parties, or because one of the parties abandons or significantly scales down the armed struggle as a strategy to achieve certain objectives. None of these options necessarily mean that the underlying causes of the armed conflict have been overcome. Nor do they exclude the possibility of new outbreaks of violence. The temporary cessation of hostilities, whether formal or tacit, does not necessarily imply the end of the armed conflict.
5. This column compares the trend of the events of 2020 with those of 2019. The escalation of violence symbol (↑) indicates that the general situation in 2020 has been more serious than in the previous year; the reduction of violence symbol (↓) indicates an improvement in the situation; and the unchanged (=) symbol indicates that no significant changes have taken place.

Conflict -beginning-	Type	Main parties	Intensity
			Trend
AFRICA			
Mali -2012-	Internationalised internal	Government, CMA (MNLA, MAA faction, CPA, HCUA), Platform (GATIA, CMPFPR, MAA faction), MSA, Ansar Dine, MUJAO, AQIM, MRRA, al-Mourabitoun, JNIM/GSIM, Islamic State in the West Africa Province (ISWAP) –also known as Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)-, Katiba Macina, MINUSMA, France (Operation Barkhane), G5-Sahel Joint Force (Mauritania, Chad, Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso), USA, Takouba Task Force (Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Mali, Holland, Niger, Norway, Portugal, Sweden and the United Kingdom)	3
	System, Self-government, Identity		↑
Mozambique (North) -2019-	Internationalised internal	Government, Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP) -formerly Ahlu Sunnah Wa-Jama (ASWJ)-, al-Qaeda, South African private security company DAG (Dyck Advisory Group)	3
	System, Identity		↑
Somalia -1988-	Internationalised internal	Federal Government of Somalia, pro-government regional forces, Somaliland, Puntland, clan militias and warlords, Ahlu Sunna wal Jama'a, USA, France, Ethiopia, AMISOM, EUNAVFOR Somalia, Operation Ocean Shield, al-Shabaab	3
	Government, System		=
South Sudan -2009-	Internationalised internal	Government (SPLM/A), SPLM/A-in Opposition armed group (faction of former vice president, Riek Machar), dissident factions of the SPLA-IO led by Peter Gatdet and Gathoth Gatkuoth, SPLM-FD, SSLA, SSDM/A, SSDM-CF, SSNLM, REMNASA, NAS, SSUF (Paul Malong), SSDA, communal militias (SSPPF, TFN, White Army, Shilluk Agwelek), Sudan Revolutionary Front armed coalition (SRF, composed of JEM, SLA-AW, SLA-MM and SPLM-N), Sudan, Uganda, UNMISS	3
	Government, Resources, Identity		↑
Sudan (Darfur) -2003-	Internationalised internal	Government, PDF pro-government militias, RSF paramilitary unit, pro-government militias <i>janjaweed</i> , Sudan Revolutionary Front armed coalition (SRF, composed of JEM, SLA-AW, SLA-MM and SPLM-N), several SLA factions, other groups, UNAMID	2
	Self-government, Resources, Identity		↑
Sudan (South Kordofan and Blue Nile) -2011-	Internationalised internal	Government, armed group SPLM-N, Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF) armed coalition, PDF pro-government militias, Rapid Support Forces (RSF) paramilitary unit, South Sudan	1
	Self-government, Resources, Identity		↓
Western Sahel Region -2018-	International	Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Ivory Coast, G5-Sahel Joint Force (Mauritania, Chad, Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso), Joint Task Force for the Liptako-Gourma Region (Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso), MINUSMA, France (Operation Barkhane), USA, Takouba Task Force (Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Mali, Netherlands, Niger, Norway, Portugal, Sweden and United Kingdom), Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM or GSIM), Islamic State in the Province of West Africa (ISWAP) - also known as Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)-, Macina Liberation Front (FML), Ansaroul Islam, other jihadist groups and community militias	3
	System, Resources, Identity		↑
AMERICA			
Colombia -1964-	Internationalised internal	Government, ELN, FARC (dissidents), EPL, paramilitary groups	1
	System		↑
ASIA			
Afghanistan -2001-	Internationalised internal	Government, international coalition (led by USA), NATO, Taliban militias, warlords, ISIS (ISIS-KP)	3
	System		↓
India (CPI-M) -1967-	Internal	Government, CPI-M (Naxalites)	1
	System		↓
India (Jammu and Kashmir) -1989-	Internationalised internal	Government, JKLF, Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT), Hizb-ul-Mujahideen, United Jihad Council, All Parties Hurriyat Conference	2
	Self-government, Identity		=
Myanmar -1948-	Internationalised internal	Government, armed groups (Ceasefire signatories: ABSDF, ALP, CNF, DKBA, KNU, KNU/KNLA-PC, PNLO, RCSS, NMSP, LDU; Non-signatories: KIA, NDAA, MNDAA, SSPP/SSA, TNLA, AA, UWSA, ARSA, KNPP)	2
	Self-government, Identity		↑
Pakistan -2001-	Internationalised internal	Government, Armed Forces, intelligence services, Taliban militias, international militias, USA	2
	System		↓
Pakistan (Balochistan) -2005-	Internal	Government, Armed Forces, intelligence services, BLA, BRP, BRA, BLF and BLT, civil society, LeJ, TTP, Afghan Taliban (Quetta Shura)	1
	Self-government, Identity, Resources		↓

Conflict -beginning-	Type	Main parties	Intensity
			Trend
ASIA			
Philippines (Mindanao) -1991-	Internationalised internal	Government, Abu Sayyaf, BIFF, Islamic State of Lanao/ Dawlay Islamiyah/ Maute Group, Ansarul Khilafah Mindanao, Toraife group, factions of MILF and MNLF	1
	Self-government, System, Identity		↓
Philippines (NPA) -1969--	Internal	Government, NPA	1
	System		=
Thailand (south) -2004-	Internal	Government, BRN and other separatist armed opposition groups	1
	Self-government, Identity		↓
EUROPE			
Armenia –Azerbaijan (Nagorno-Karabakh) -2020-	Internationalised	Armenia, Azerbaijan, self-proclaimed Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh	3
	Self-government, Identity, Territory		↑
Turkey (southeast) -1984-	Internationalised internal	Government, PKK, TAK, ISIS	2
	Self-government, Identity		↓
Ukraine (east) -2014-	Internationalised internal	Government, armed groups in the eastern provinces, Russia	1
	Government, Identity, Self-government		↓
MIDDLE EAST			
Egypt (Sinai) -2014-	Internationalised internal	Government, Ansar Beit al-Maqdis (ABM) or Sinai Province (branch of ISIS), other armed groups (Ajnad Misr, Majlis Shura al-Mujahideen fi Aknaf Bayt al-Maqdis, Katibat al-Rabat al-Jihadiya, Popular Resistance Movement, Liwaa al-Thawra, Hassam), Israel	2
	System		↓
Iraq -2003-	Internationalised internal	Government, Iraqi and Kurdish (peshmerga) military and security forces, Shia militias (Popular Mobilization Units, PMU), Sunni armed groups, Islamic State (ISIS), international anti-ISIS coalition led by USA, USA, Iran, Turkey, Israel	3
	System, Government, Identity, Resources		=
Israel-Palestine -2000-	International	Israeli government, settler militias, PA, Fatah (Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades), Hamas (Ezzedin al-Qassam Brigades), Islamic Jihad, FPLP, FDLF, Popular Resistance Committees, Salafists groups	1
	Self-government, Identity, Territory		↓
Syria -2011-	Internationalised internal	Government, pro-government militias, Free Syrian Army (FSA), Ahrar al-Sham, Syrian Democratic Forces (coalition that includes the YPG/YPJ militias of the PYD), Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (formerly al-Nusra Front), Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), ISIS, international anti-ISIS coalition led by USA, Turkey, Hezbollah, Iran, Russia, among other armed parties	3
	System, Government, Self-government, Identity		=
Yemen (AQAP) - 2011-	Internationalised internal	Government, AL Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP/Ansar Sharia), ISIS, USA, international coalition led by Saudi Arabia, UAE, tribal militias, Houthi militias/Ansar Allah	1
	System		=
Yemen (Houthis) -2004-	Internationalised internal	Armed forces loyal to Abdo Rabbo Mansour Hadi's Government, followers of the cleric al-Houthi (al-Shabaab al-Mumen/Ansar Allah), armed factions loyal to former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, tribal militias linked to the al-Ahmar clan, Salafist militias, armed groups linked to the Islamist Islah party, international coalition led by Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Iran	3
	System, Government, Identity		↑

1: low intensity; 2: medium intensity; 3: high intensity;

↑: escalation of violence; ↓: decrease of violence ; = : unchanged; End: no longer considered an armed conflict

1.2. Armed conflicts: analysis of trends in 2020

This section offers an analysis of the global and regional trends in armed conflicts in 2020. This includes an overview of conflicts as compared to that of previous years, the geographical distribution of conflicts and the main trends by region, the relationship between the actors

involved and the scenario of the dispute, the main causes of the current armed conflicts, the general evolution of the contexts and the intensity of the conflicts according to their levels of violence and their impact. Likewise, this section analyses some of the main consequences of armed conflicts in the civilian population, including forced displacement due to situations of conflict and violence.

1.2.1 Global and regional trends

2020 offered no changes on the total number of armed conflicts worldwide. Following the trend of previous years, 34 cases were identified in 2020 –the same number as the previous year. In the five preceding years the figures were similar: 34 in 2019 and 2018, 33 in 2017 and 2016 and 35 in 2015. At the end of 2020, all cases remained active, unlike other years where a reduction in the levels of violence in some contexts led to these cases ceasing to be regarded as armed conflicts, i.e. Algeria (AQIM) and DRC (Kasai) in 2019. Nevertheless, there were two new additions to the list of armed conflicts. In Africa, tensions between the federal government and the government of Ethiopia's Tigray region led to a military confrontation with serious consequences. In Europe, the historical dispute around the enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh –majority Armenian and formally part of Azerbaijan– escalated into a situation of open armed conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, with severe impacts in terms of lethality and forced population displacement.

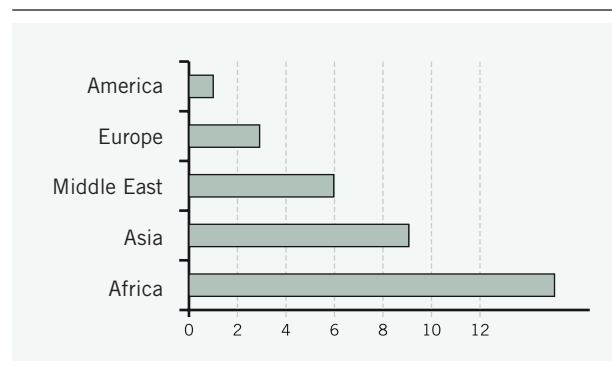
Regarding the geographical distribution of the armed conflict, as in previous years, most cases are concentrated in Africa (15) and Asia (9), followed by the Middle East (6), Europe (3) and the Americas (1). In percentage terms, therefore, the African continent accounted for 44% of total global conflicts.

The outlook for armed conflict in 2020 was also influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In a climate of worldwide alarm as a result of the spread of this disease, on 23 March, the UN Secretary General appealed for a global ceasefire in order to create the conditions necessary to respond to the coronavirus threat and ensure access to humanitarian assistance and health services for the most vulnerable populations exposed to violence. After three months of debate, in July the UN Security Council approved Resolution 2532, which formalised its support for the Secretary-General's call for a global ceasefire, and demanded a general and immediate cessation of hostilities in all military contexts, while urging all parties involved in armed conflict to implement a humanitarian armistice for at least 90 consecutive days. In his speech to the UN General Assembly on the occasion of the organisation's 75th anniversary in September, António Guterres stressed that the situation created by the pandemic provided an opportunity to give new impetus to efforts for peace and reconciliation. He also reiterated his call for a global cessation of hostilities, which since March had received the backing of 180 states, regional organisations, civil society groups and peace activists.

In practice, however, **António Guterres' appeal for a global truce received a limited and uneven response from the**

Graph 1.1. Regional distribution of the number of armed conflicts in 2020



armed groups involved in conflicts. Some welcomed the call and decreed ceasefires unilaterally –among them, the ELN armed group in Colombia and the BRN in Thailand (south), as well as the NDF and the government of the Philippines–, but in other settings the disputing parties ignored the call and intensified or continued their armed actions despite the pandemic –in Libya, for example,

armed groups stepped up their offensive after the call by Guterres, with actions that included attacks on hospitals and cuts to drinking water supplies to millions of people despite urgent health needs as a result of the pandemic. In general terms, ceasefires were short-lived and/or did not become entrenched and most of the actors involved in armed conflict continued to favour military methods.⁶ In addition, COVID-19 created

difficulties for peace processes, due to its impact on the dynamics of the negotiations –obstacles to the movement of negotiators, mediators and facilitators, delays in rounds of talks, technological difficulties in communications in certain settings– and in the implementation of agreements.⁷ For example, the EU mission to CAR to support security sector reform, as part of the 2019 peace agreement, saw its deployment in the country delayed due to the pandemic.

Many governments also took advantage of the COVID-19 situation to tighten restrictions on freedoms, curtail opposition actions and/or limit certain democratic guarantees. This was evident in cases such as Burundi, where the work of election observers was limited by appealing to the COVID-19 emergency, and in Cameroon (Ambazonia North West/South West), with human rights organisations denouncing abuses in the application of anti-terrorism legislation and pandemic-related restrictions on the right to assembly. In some contexts, the pandemic was also reported to have contributed to worsening human rights violations, as in the case of Colombia, where attacks on and killings of women human rights defenders increased. For the civilian population, meanwhile, the effects of the pandemic further compounded the usual impact of the violence and hostilities.⁸

6. For more information, see Escola de Cultura de Pau, "Altos el fuego en conflictos armados durante la pandemia del coronavirus" (Ceasefires in armed conflicts during the coronavirus pandemic) and Ceses de hostilidades en tiempos de COVID-19" (Cessations of hostilities in times of COVID-19), *Apuntes ECP de Conflictos y Paz*, No. 4 (April 2020) and No. 7 (July 2020).

7. For more information, see Escola de Cultura de Pau, *Peace Talks in Focus 2020. Analysis of Trends and Scenarios*, Barcelona: Icaria, 2021.

8. See section 1.2.2 on the impact of armed conflict on civilians in this chapter.

With regard to the relationship between the actors involved in the conflict and its context, we identified internal, international and, for the most part, internationalised internal conflicts. Along similar lines to previous years, in 2020 9% of the contexts were internal in nature, i.e. conflicts in which the armed actors involved in the conflict operated exclusively within the borders of the same state. All three internal armed conflicts were concentrated in Asia: Philippines (NPA), India (CPI-M) and Thailand (South). Three other cases, also equivalent to 9% of armed conflicts, were international and occurred on three continents: the conflict in the Western Sahel Region in Africa, the Palestinian-Israeli case in the Middle East, and the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh in Europe. The vast majority of armed conflicts were internationalised internal conflicts (28 cases, or 82%). These cases are characterised by the fact that one of the disputing parties is foreign, the armed actors in the conflict have bases or launch attacks from abroad and/or the dispute spills over into neighbouring countries. In many conflicts this factor of internationalisation took the form of the involvement of third-party actors as disputing parties, including international missions, *ad-hoc* regional and international military coalitions, states and armed groups operating across borders, among others.

In terms of the role of international missions, UN initiatives continued to be prominent in 2020, particularly in Africa. UN peacekeeping forces continued to be deployed in CAR (MINUSCA), DRC (MONUSCO), Mali (MINUSMA), Sudan (Darfur) (UNAMID, a hybrid mission of the UN and the AU) and South Sudan (UNMISS). NATO maintained its Resolute Support mission in Afghanistan. Regional organisations also continued to be involved in numerous armed conflicts in the form of military missions or operations, as in the case of the African Union (AU) –with the AMISOM mission in Somalia– or the European Union (EU) –EUFOR in CAR, EUNAVFOR in Somalia. Hybrid missions, involving regional organisations and states, also continued to operate, such as the maritime military operation in the Horn of Africa and the Indian Ocean –known as Ocean Shield–, led by the US but also involving the EU, NATO and countries such as Japan, India and Russia. The international coalition against the armed group ISIS, formed in September 2014 under the leadership of the US, which has since deployed actions in Iraq and Syria, is similar in nature. The coalition has 83 members, including states and organisations, including the Arab League and the EU. The involvement of states in armed conflicts through international coalitions in which one or two countries maintained a leading role continued to be observed during 2020. This was the case, for example, with the US-led coalition in Afghanistan or the coalition of Arab-majority countries led by Saudi Arabia –and with a prominent role also being played by the United Arab Emirates (UAE)– to intervene in Yemen.

Following the trend of previous years, the majority of armed conflicts in 2020 were internationalised internal conflicts

The internationalisation dimension and, in particular, the leading role of foreign actors in the dynamics of the conflict and the evolution of hostilities was particularly evident in contexts such as Syria and Libya. In the Syrian context, developments continued to be strongly determined by the positions, interests and actions of countries such as Russia and Turkey –backers of the regime and the opposition, respectively– which particularly influenced the course of the conflict on the battlefronts in northern Syria. In the Libyan case, the involvement of external actors in support of the warring sides increased during 2020, a trend that took the form of repeated breaches of the arms embargo; continued flows of fighters, mercenaries and military advisors; and explicit threats of more direct intervention by third-party countries if certain “red lines” were crossed. Thus, for the internationally recognised government based in Tripoli, Turkey’s support was crucial; as was support from countries such as Egypt and Russia for General Khalifa Haftar’s forces. The interests of these actors were projected onto the conflict, which was also influenced by economic and geopolitical considerations such as disputes over the control of energy-rich areas in the Eastern Mediterranean.⁹ Cases such as Yemen and Iraq were also arenas onto which

regional and international disputes were projected. Thus, the Yemeni case was directly influenced by the Saudi-Iranian standoff and also by the growing tension between Washington and Tehran. Iraq was another territory in which the growing confrontation between the US and Iran took centre stage, and in which Turkey also intervened, in the context of its dispute with the PKK.

The Western Sahel region was emblematic of the of international armed conflicts, as several military coalitions of countries in the region and external allies came together in this setting to confront the growing activity of armed jihadist groups operating across borders –organisations that, in turn, have formed conglomerates of entities linked to al-Qaeda or the Islamic state. In this sense, operations were conducted in the area by the G5 Sahel Joint Force (composed of Mauritania, Chad, Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso), the Joint Force for the Liptako-Gourma Region (composed of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso), and the Takouba Task Force (a European military mission created in 2020, led by France and composed of special forces from Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Sweden and the United Kingdom, in addition to Mali and Niger). Furthermore, French troops continued to be deployed in the region in the framework of Operation Barkhane as well as the UN forces of the aforementioned MINUSMA mission. The EU Military Assistance and Training Mission in Mali (EUTM) was also expected to extend its activities to other countries in the region involved in the conflict.

9. See the summary on Turkey – Greece, Cyprus in chapter 2 (Socio-political crises).

With regard to the causes of the armed conflicts, the vast majority were mainly motivated by opposition to the domestic or international policies of the respective governments or to the political, economic, social or ideological system of a given state, resulting in struggles to gain power or erode it. One or the other element, or both, were present in 71% of cases in 2020 (24 out of 34 cases), in line with previous years (73% in 2019, 71% in 2018 and 73% in 2017). Among these 24 cases, 18 contexts involved armed actors aiming for system change, mostly organisations claiming a jihadist agenda and seeking to impose their particular interpretation of Islamic laws. These groups include organisations such as the self-styled Islamic State (ISIS) and its affiliates or related entities in different continents –the group was present in countries such as Algeria, Libya, Lake Chad Region, Western Sahel Region, Somalia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Philippines, Turkey, Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, among others; the various branches of al-Qaeda –including AQIM (Algeria, Sahel and Libya) and AQAP (Yemen)–; the Taliban operating in Afghanistan and Pakistan and the al-Shabaab group in Somalia, among others.

Another factor prominent among the main causes of armed conflicts were disputes over identity and self-governance claims, which were present in 59% of conflicts (20 cases), the same percentage as in the previous two years. In this regard, it is worth noting that the two armed conflicts that were triggered in 2020 were motivated by such claims. On the one hand, underlying the escalation of violence in Ethiopia's Tigray region were grievances and the Tigray community's perception of a loss of power and privilege in the face of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's policies to reform Ethiopia's federal system. The Tigray region's decision to hold elections in the region despite the federal government's movement to postpone the federal and regional elections due to the pandemic and to extend the mandate of the existing authorities, together with other issues that lie at the genesis of this conflict, led to a dispute of legitimacy that ended in armed confrontation at the end of the year. On the other hand, there is the dispute between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces over Nagorno-Karabakh, an Armenian-majority enclave formally part of Azerbaijan but *de facto* independent. After several escalations of violence since the war in the 1990s, one of the most serious being in 2016, the hostilities sparked off again in 2020. The fighting subsided at the end of the year following a Russian-brokered agreement, which outlined a significant change in the territory's boundaries and ratified the partition of Nagorno-Karabakh, but left the

The Western Sahel Region was an emblematic case of international armed conflict, as several military coalitions of countries from the region, external allies and numerous jihadist armed groups operating across borders converged in this context

More than a third (35%) of the armed conflicts in 2020 saw a deterioration in the levels of violence and instability compared to the previous year

enclave's status unresolved. Dispute over control of territory –as also illustrated by the Armenia-Azerbaijan (Nagorno-Karabakh) case– and resources was one of the main causes in 35% of conflicts (12 cases) in 2020, continuing the trend of previous years. The issue of resources was a cause that was mostly present in African contexts –in more than half of the armed conflicts in the region (eight out of 15 cases)– although it is a factor that was indirectly present in many contexts in other regions, with violence being perpetuated through war economies.

Additionally, it is worth noting that **20 of the 34 armed conflicts that took place during 2020 were in countries with severe gender inequalities**, with medium, high or very high levels of discrimination.¹⁰ Gender inequalities manifested in aspects such as the gender-specific impacts of violence and the use of sexual violence by disputing parties in different armed conflicts, all within the international context of the COVID-19 pandemic that highlighted serious gender inequalities at international level.

In terms of the **evolution of armed conflicts** over the course of 2020, just over a third of the cases (12 out of 34, or 35%) saw a deterioration, with higher levels of violence and instability than in the previous year: Ethiopia (Tigray), Mali, Mozambique, Western Sahel Region, CAR, DRC (East-ADF), Sudan (Darfur), South Sudan, Myanmar, Armenia-Azerbaijan (Nagorno-Karabakh), Yemen (Houthi). The remaining cases were evenly split between those that exhibited similar levels of violence and hostilities to those recorded in 2019 and those that showed a reduction in fighting (11 cases in each category). Asia was the region that saw the largest decrease in hostilities. Two thirds of the armed conflicts in this area evolved towards lower levels of violence: Afghanistan, Philippines (Mindanao), India (CPI-M), Pakistan, Pakistan (Balochistan) and Thailand (South).

With regard to the intensity of violence in the different armed conflicts, it is possible to identify and highlight a particular feature in 2020: a significant prevalence of high-intensity cases, that is, contexts characterised by levels of lethality of over a thousand victims per year, in addition to serious impacts on the population, massive forced displacements and severe consequences in the territory. In contrast to previous years when high-intensity conflicts accounted for around a third of cases –32% in 2019 (11 cases), 27% in 2018 (nine cases)–, **in 2020 serious armed conflicts increased and accounted for almost half of the cases, at 47% of the total** (see Figure 1.2). So far, the highest figure of the decade had been recorded in

10. See Chapter 3 (Gender, peace and security).

2016 and 2017, but with a lower percentage: 40% (see Figure 1.3). The highest prevalence of severe cases in 2020 was observed in Africa, where 11 of the 15 (73%) armed conflicts on the continent were high intensity. This is much higher than in the previous year, when less than half of the cases –seven out of 16 cases, or 44%– were high intensity. With regard to other regions, in the Middle East, half of the conflicts – three out of six– were considered serious in 2020, while Asia and Europe recorded one such case, respectively. The Americas, on the other hand, did not have high-intensity armed conflicts (see Figure 1.4). The 16 cases of serious armed conflict in 2020 were: Cameroon (Ambazonia/ North West and South West), Ethiopia (Tigray), Libya, Mali, Mozambique (north), Lake Chad Region (Boko Haram), Western Sahel Region, DRC (East), DRC (East-ADF), Somalia, South Sudan, Afghanistan, Armenia-Azerbaijan (Nagorno-Karabakh), Iraq, Syria and Yemen (Houthis).

In some of these contexts, **fighting and other dynamics of violence resulted in levels of lethality that were well above the threshold of 1,000 fatalities per year**. In the Western Sahel region, for example, more than 4,250 deaths were recorded and 2020 was reported as the deadliest year since the start of the violence in 2012, due to the actions of various jihadist groups operating in the area. In Somalia, the violence, mostly al-Shabaab attacks, killed more than 3,000 people. The armed conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh resulted in more than 5,000 deaths. In the case of Syria, estimates suggest that hostilities would have caused at least 8,000 fatalities in 2020, a relative decline from the levels of lethality recorded in previous years (15,000 killed in 2019; 30,000 in 2018). By far the two bloodiest armed conflicts in 2020 were Yemen and Afghanistan. In the Yemeni case, an estimated 20,000 people were killed as a direct result of clashes and explosive attacks. In the case of Afghanistan, the armed conflict is said to have killed more than 21,000 people. Although the figure is high, it is significantly lower than the previous year's figure of 40,000 fatalities.

1.2.2. Impacts of conflicts on the civilian population

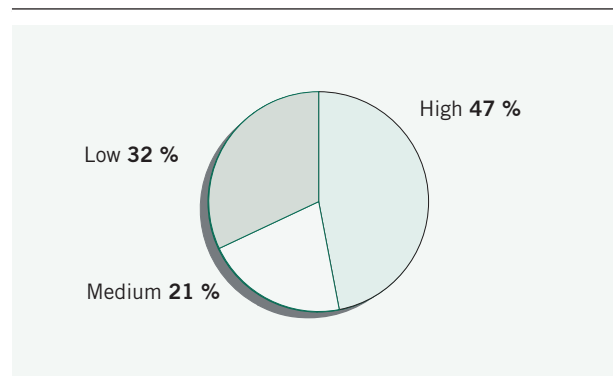
As in previous years, and as regularly denounced by the United Nations, international organisations and local entities, the civilian population continued to suffer very serious consequences as a result of armed conflicts. In 2020, the impacts of clashes between armed actors and the indiscriminate and deliberate use of violence against civilians were amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic, which further aggravated the precariousness and lack of protection of many populations affected by armed conflict. The UN Secretary-General's report on the protection of civilians in armed conflict published

in May, a few months into the pandemic, already warned of the implications of the coronavirus and the exacerbation of vulnerabilities among the most fragile groups. It should be recalled that civilians have been identified by the UN as the main victims of armed conflict.

The different armed conflicts analysed in 2020 reveal the continuation of the pattern of abuse against civilians, in the form of lethal attacks against populations, offensives against civilian targets or infrastructure, executions, kidnappings, disappearances and torture, among other practices.

2020 registered a significant increase in high-intensity armed conflicts, which accounted for almost half of the cases, at 47% of the total

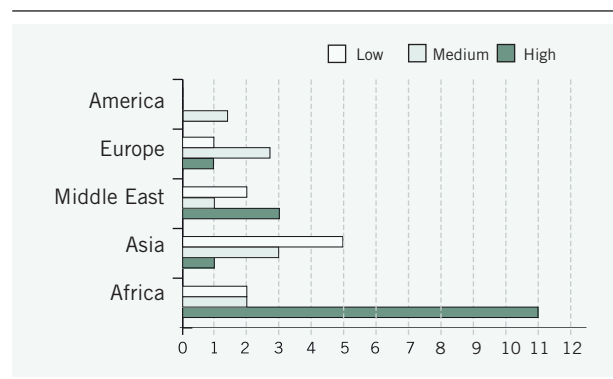
Graph 1.2. Intensity of the armed conflicts in 2020



Graph 1.3. Percentage of high intensity armed conflicts in the last decade



Graph 1.4. Intensity of the armed conflicts by region



Box 1.1. Regional trends in armed conflict

AFRICA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As in previous years, the continent recorded the highest number of armed conflicts with 15 cases, representing 44% of the global total. This percentage is slightly lower than the previous year, when African cases accounted for 47%. If in 2019 two cases in the region were no longer considered active armed conflicts –Algeria (AQIM) and DRC (Kasai)– a new case was added in 2020, following the escalation of violence in the Tigray region of Ethiopia. The most relevant trend on the continent in 2020 was the significant increase in high-intensity armed conflicts in the last five years. If in 2019 these cases accounted for 44% (seven out of 16 cases), in 2020 the percentage rose to 73% (11 out of 15 cases). Half of the cases –eight out of 15, or 53%– showed a deterioration during 2020, with higher levels of violence compared to the previous year. Only in one case was a decrease in hostilities identified –Sudan (South Kordofan and Blue Nile)– while in six other contexts the evolution was similar to the previous period. The armed conflicts in Africa were characterised by internationalisation. In almost all cases –14 out of 15 (93%)– the involvement of disputing external actors or the expansion of the dynamics of violence to neighbouring countries was observed. The remaining case was international in nature –Western Sahel Region– and did not involve primarily internal armed conflict. The armed conflicts in Africa had multiple causes, including aspirations to a change of government or system (80%) –one or both of these categories were present in 12 out of 15 of the cases– and demands for self-government or identity –detected in 60% of the cases. In half of the cases –eight, or 53%– resource control was identified as a motivation.
AMERICA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The continent was home to only one armed conflict, that of Colombia, one of the world's longest-running. Following the trend observed in the previous year, the Colombian armed conflict evolved negatively in 2020 and recorded higher levels of violence, mainly clashes involving the security forces, the ELN and dissident groups of the demobilised FARC guerrillas. Although it only recorded one armed conflict, the region was the scene of other dynamics of violence and tension and was the region most affected by homicides.
ASIA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As in previous periods, the continent ranked second in number of armed conflicts after Africa, being host to nine cases (26%). Most of the armed conflicts in Asia were of low (five cases) or medium (three cases) intensity. Only one of the region's conflicts, Afghanistan, was of high intensity and for yet another year was the world's deadliest, with death tolls exceeding 20,000. Most of the cases in Asia showed a decrease in hostilities –six out of nine cases or 67%– and a smaller percentage showed a similar evolution to the previous year –two cases, equivalent to 22%. Only one armed conflict, in Myanmar, evolved into a deteriorating situation in 2020. Asia was the only region in the world where internal armed conflicts were identified. The three armed conflicts of this type –Philippines (NPA), India (CPI-M) and Thailand (South)– accounted for one third of the cases in the region. In terms of the causes of the armed conflict in Asia, the most common were those involving system change –a motivation present in five of the nine conflicts (56%)– or those where demands for self-governance or identity were at stake (also in 56% of the cases).
EUROPE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The continent was the scene of one more armed conflict than in the previous year. The cases of Turkey (southeast) and Ukraine (east) were joined by the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The three European cases accounted for 9% of all conflicts globally. The three conflicts in the region presented different scales of intensity: Ukraine (east), low; Turkey (southeast), medium; and Armenia-Azerbaijan (Nagorno-Karabakh), high. While the first two cases saw a reduction in the intensity of violence compared to the previous year, the third was characterised by a significant escalation that led to its consideration as an armed conflict in 2020. Europe continued to be a region characterised by conflicts with causes linked to issues of self-governance and identity –motivations present in all cases in the region– and to a lesser extent causes linked to disputes over political power or control of territories. Two-thirds of the cases in Europe were of an internationalised internal nature and one was an international conflict.
MIDDLE EAST	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The region accounted for six of the armed conflicts, representing 18% of the total number of cases worldwide. After Africa, the Middle East was the area with the most high-intensity armed conflicts. Half of the cases in the region –three out of six– were of high intensity and two of them, Syria and Yemen (Houthis), were among the most severe cases in 2020, with the highest fatality levels after Afghanistan. Half of the cases in the region evolved similarly to the previous year, with two cases showing a relative reduction in levels of violence –Egypt (Sinai) and Israel-Palestine– while one saw an escalation of violence: Yemen (Houthis). In this case, although lethality levels were similar to those of the previous year, the number of battlefronts increased and the severe humanitarian crisis caused by the conflict worsened. The conflicts in the region were multi-causal, with a prominent presence of cases where the causes were linked to the struggle for a change of government or system –one or both of these categories were present in five of the six cases (83%)– or to demands regarding identity or self-government– in four of the six cases (67%). In two other cases (33%) the causes were linked to the control of resources and territories.

In the last year, several cases illustrated this reality.

In DRC, for example, the armed group ADF intensified its operations against the civilian population, expanding its attacks beyond its traditional areas of action and applying particularly damaging tactics –attacks with heavy artillery, rifles and machetes, burning down entire villages, mass abductions, among others– which resulted in hundreds of casualties. In the Lake Chad region, Boko Haram continued to perpetrate

In 2020, the impacts of armed conflict violence on the civilian population were amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic

massacres, mutilations and abductions of civilians. In Somalia, al-Shabaab persisted in its attacks on civilian targets, including restaurants, cafes and hotels, causing high numbers of casualties. In Mali, in the first half of 2020 alone, the escalation of violence had killed more than 600 civilians. In Afghanistan, although a relative decline in the number of civilian casualties from the conflict was identified, there were offensives during the year that caused particular international

consternation, such as the attack on a maternity and children's hospital in which more than 20 people were killed. The armed conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, meanwhile, caused around 500 civilian casualties, including around 100 killed and 400 wounded. In Iraq, while the number of civilian fatalities was also lower than in previous years, the number of civilian deaths remained high at around 1,000. Syria recorded a similar number and the UN continued to denounce that the parties involved in the conflict remained in breach of the basic principles of international humanitarian law, including the necessary distinction between civilians and combatants.

Armed state actors were also prominently involved in killings and abuses against the civilian population. In Cameroon, for example, the army was implicated in the killing of some 20 civilians, although human rights organisations warned that the number of victims could be much higher. In the context of the conflict in the Western Sahel region, human rights organisations denounced that in their operations against insurgent groups, the armed forces of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso had committed war crimes with a particular impact on civilians, including extrajudicial executions and disappearances. According to local organisations, the Burkina Faso army alone is said to be responsible for the deaths of almost 600 civilians. Similar allegations of human rights violations and possible war crimes against Mozambican security forces in their counter-insurgency actions in Cabo Delgado province were also reported in Mozambique. The presence of explosive weapons in conflict territories also continued to affect the civilian population, as illustrated by the cases of Ukraine – where an increase in the number of civilians killed by mines was detected – and Egypt (Sinai) – where several deaths were caused by explosives following the return of displaced populations to an area previously controlled by ISIS. The deployment of booby traps by this ISIS affiliate in Egypt followed a pattern also seen in the group's actions in Syria and Iraq. In addition to civilian deaths as a direct result of hostilities, armed operations and explosives, the impact in terms of indirect deaths, deaths from lack of access to food or health services, must also be taken into account. For example, in cases such as Yemen, UN agencies have estimated that of the total number of people killed in the armed conflict over the last five years (some 233,000 people, according to estimates), more than half (131,000) died due to lack of access to medical care or food, among other factors.

In this sense, it should be noted that **armed conflicts continued to trigger and/or aggravate humanitarian crises**. According to OCHA projections, a total of 235 million people required humanitarian assistance in 2021, an increase of 40% over the previous year's

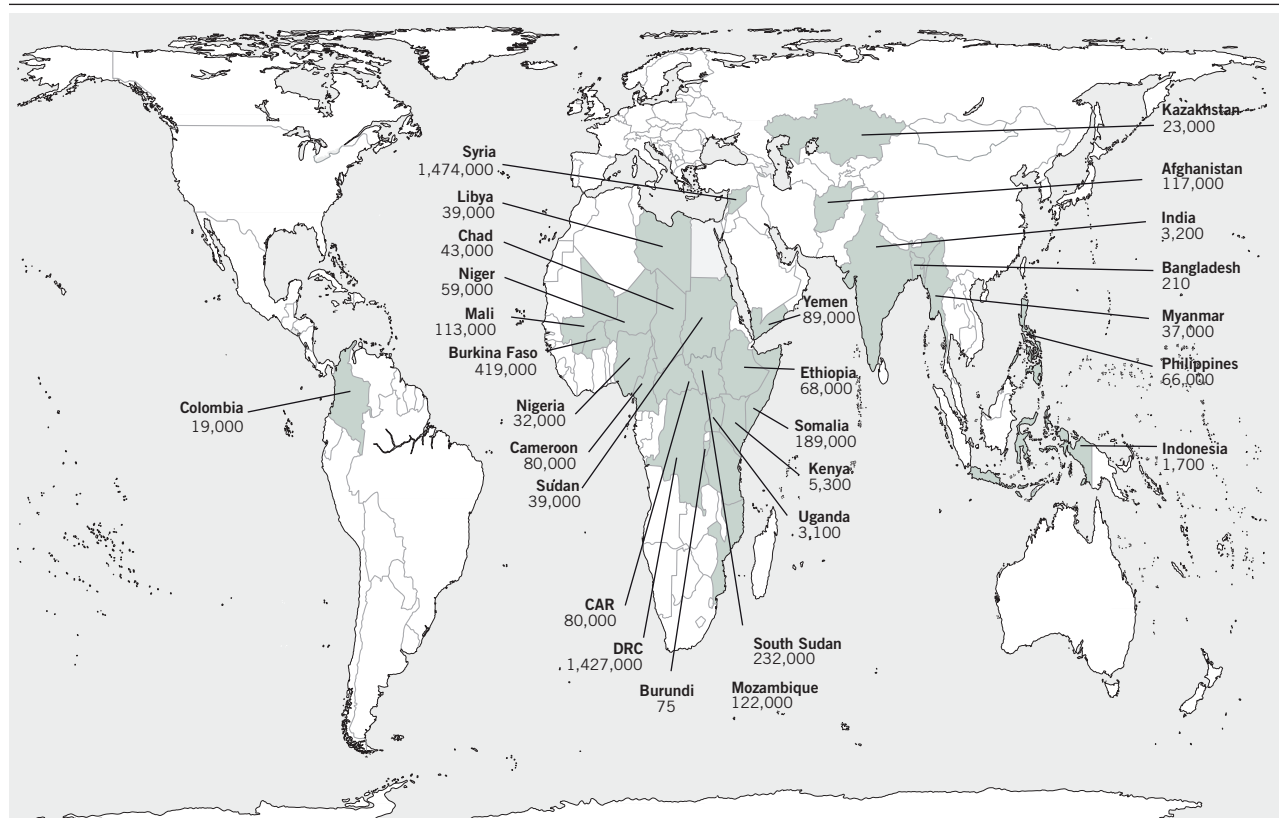
Cases such as Syria and Yemen highlighted the added burden of the pandemic on health systems severely damaged by years of violence and deliberate attacks on hospitals and health centres

estimates and mostly attributable to COVID-19.¹¹ The previous forecast –168 million– had already been highlighted as the highest figure in decades. The socio-economic impact of the pandemic exacerbated the vulnerability of populations already severely affected by conflict and violence, as illustrated by the cases of CAR, Ukraine (east), Syria and Yemen. In Ukraine (east), for example, humanitarian organisations warned that eight out of ten families in the Donetsk and Lugansk regions were suffering severe impacts on food security and livelihoods, and the UN warned that nine million people were at risk of sliding into poverty. In both Syria and Yemen, socio-economic indicators continued to plummet during 2020. In the Syrian case, the price of the basic food basket has multiplied by more than 200%. In addition, 9.3 million people were estimated to be food insecure and conflict dynamics hampered humanitarian access due to the closure of several border crossings. Yemen remained the world's largest humanitarian crisis: 24.3 million Yemenis were in need of some form of humanitarian assistance or protection, 14 million were in dire need and alarms were raised over the country's famine, the worst in the world in decades, according to the UN. Syria and Yemen also highlighted the added burden of the pandemic on health systems already severely damaged by years of violence and the saturation of their capacity due to caring for conflict victims, but also because hospitals and medical centres have been attacked by armed actors as part of war strategies, in open violation of international humanitarian law. Despite the difficulties in collecting reliable data on the actual impact of COVID-19 in armed conflict settings, reports suggested that, for example, in Yemen the coronavirus case fatality rate was five times the global average.

In addition, **armed conflict continued to have specific impacts on particular population groups, such as children**. The UN Secretary-General's annual report on children and armed conflict published in June 2020, analysing the situation between January and December 2019, again painted a picture of highly worrying trends. The UN verified more than 25,000 grave human rights violations against children in 19 contexts, more than half of them perpetrated by non-state actors and one third by government or international forces. Crossfire, the use of small arms, the use of explosive weapons in populated areas and the excessive use of force by state agents reportedly resulted in more than 10,000 child casualties, including 4,019 deaths and 6,154 children maimed. The deadliest armed conflict for children continued to be Afghanistan, which saw a 67% increase in suicide attacks and similar attacks involving children. He also highlighted the case of Mali, which recorded an unprecedented number of child casualties in 2019 –185 children killed and another

11. OCHA, *Global Humanitarian Overview 2021*, 1 December 2020.

Map 1.2. New internal forced displacements by conflict and violence – First semester of 2020



Source: Prepared by the authors on the basis of the data provided in IMDC, *Internal displacement 2020: Mid-year update*, IMDC, 2020

111 maimed– the vast majority (91%) concentrated in the Mopti region. Another area of particular concern was Myanmar, where escalating violence in Rakhine state led to a three-fold increase in child casualties in the period under review. The report also found the forced recruitment of almost 8,000 children, some as young as six years old, the vast majority of them (90%) by non-state armed actors. The UN also sounded the alarm regarding the abduction of 1,683 children in conflict contexts –95% of them by non-state actors and especially in African contexts (Somalia, DRC and Nigeria)–, and reiterated its denunciation of the continuous attacks on schools while drawing attention to the problems arising from the denial of humanitarian access to children –mostly due to restrictions imposed by non-state actors, especially in cases such as Mali, CAR, Syria and Yemen.

The use of sexual and gender-based violence, including against LGBTI people, was denounced throughout the year in numerous conflicts, including Burundi, Libya, Lake Chad Region (Boko Haram), Somalia, Sudan (Darfur), Myanmar, Pakistan, Syria and Yemen

Beyond the conclusions of the UN Secretary-General's report, the analysis of active armed conflicts in 2020 confirms the pattern of violations against children, worsened by the COVID-19 emergency. The pandemic further limited access to certain rights such as education. For example, in the case of Jammu and Kashmir in Pakistan, the closure of schools due to

the pandemic came on top of months of previous school closures due to the conflict. As part of the escalation of the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, 76 schools and pre-schools were damaged in just one month of hostilities, according to UNICEF. In Syria, armed attacks on schools continued and, according to data released at the end of the year, only 50% of the country's schools were operational. An estimated 2.1 million Syrian children were not receiving schooling. As the year drew to a close, UNICEF warned of the impact of the pandemic in increasing the risk of malnutrition for children in conflict settings and looked ahead to 2021 with particular concern for millions of children in DRC, Nigeria and the central region of Sahel, South Sudan and Yemen.¹²

State and non-state armed actors continued to perpetrate sexual and gender-based violence against civilians, especially women and girls, in contexts of armed conflict. The UN Secretary-General's annual report on the subject published in 2020, which analyses events in 2019, confirmed that sexual violence continued to be used as a tactic of war, torture and political repression, as well as an instrument of dehumanisation and to force

12. UNICEF, *COVID-19 and conflict: A deadly combination*, 30 December 2020.

population displacement.¹³ The report provides verified information on the use of sexual and gender-based violence in 19 contexts and noted the responsibility of 54 armed actors, mostly non-state actors, although it also denounced the involvement of state security forces in several countries, including DRC, Myanmar, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan and Syria. The UN Secretary-General's assessment notes that sexual violence remains under-reported and that women and girls –who constitute the largest number of victims of this scourge–continue to face numerous gender-based obstacles to accessing justice and redress. In addition, the report highlights the specific vulnerabilities that affect displaced populations in this area, both at the time of transit and at their destination, and their link to the increase in forced child marriages and the withdrawal of women and girls from labour and educational activities in countries such as Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Myanmar.

The analysis of armed conflict in 2020 corroborates the trends identified in the Secretary-General's report. Throughout the year, reports of the use of sexual and gender-based violence were identified in numerous contexts, including Burundi, Libya, Lake Chad Region (Boko Haram), Somalia, Sudan (Darfur), Myanmar, Pakistan, Syria and Yemen. LGBTI people were also victims of sexual and other violence in contexts of armed conflict, as illustrated by the cases of Pakistan or Syria.¹⁴ During 2020, the impacts of COVID-19 were also identified in this area, as the pandemic increased levels of gender-based violence globally as well as in contexts of armed conflict. For example, in forced displacement camps in South Sudan, an increase in sexual violence was detected following the implementation of mobility restriction measures to curb the spread of the coronavirus.¹⁵

Forced population displacement continued to be one of the most visible and dramatic effects of armed conflict. UNHCR's annual report published in June 2020 confirmed the trend of exponential growth of this phenomenon over the last decade: by the end of 2019 there were 79.5 million forcibly displaced people, up from 70.8 million at the end of the previous year. Of the total number of displaced persons, 26 million were refugees –20.4 million under UNHCR's mandate and 5.6 million Palestinians under UNRWA's mandate– and 45.7 million were in a situation of forced internal displacement. Another 4.2 million were asylum seekers, while 3.6 million were Venezuelans recognised by UNHCR as having special displacement status. The nearly 80 million displaced people represent 1% of the

world's population and 40% of them were children. With the exception of Venezuela, the main countries of origin of refugees were all contexts affected by armed conflicts of high-intensity –Syria (6.6 million), Afghanistan (2.7 million), South Sudan (2.2 million)–, or medium-intensity –Myanmar (1.1 million). Regarding the cases with the highest number of internally displaced people within the borders of their respective countries, most of the cases were high-intensity armed conflicts. According to data from the International Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) for 2019 –the latest annual data available– on displacement due to conflict and violence,

the countries with the highest number of people in this situation were Syria (6.5 million), Colombia (5.6 million), DRC (5.5 million), Yemen (3.6 million), Afghanistan (3 million), Somalia (2.6 million), Nigeria (2.6 million), Sudan (2.1 million), Iraq (1.6 million) and Ethiopia (1.4 million).

Despite the mobility restrictions of the pandemic, forced displacement due to conflict and violence continued in 2020 and UNHCR anticipated that by mid-year the figure of 80 million had already been surpassed

In 2020, human mobility dynamics were severely affected by COVID-19. At the end of the year, both the UNHCR and IDMC published partial reports on the situation during the first half of the year in which they warned of the consequences of the pandemic on displaced populations, which aggravated their vulnerability and restricted

access to international protection mechanisms and basic services.¹⁶ According to UNHCR data, **168 countries totally or partially closed their borders during the first wave of the pandemic, 90 of which denied access to their territories without exceptions for asylum seekers.** Thus, during the first half of 2020, there was a 33% reduction in asylum applications compared to the same period in 2019. Restrictions on mobility increased the risk that people forced to flee their homes would turn to mafias or more dangerous routes in search of guarantees for their safety and that of their families. At the same time, COVID-19 led to a deterioration in the socio-economic conditions of displaced populations, many of them dependent on the informal economy. An increase in child labour and forced child marriages was also identified, as well as an increased risk of gender-based violence against displaced women and girls. The usually precarious living conditions of displaced populations also made it difficult to implement the most basic measures to contain the spread of the virus, such as physical distancing or frequent hand washing. In addition to the problems of overcrowded housing or camps and difficulties due to lack of information, there were also obstacles to accessing health care. According to UNHCR, 85% of the refugees were living in countries with collapsed health systems and limited capacities to respond to complications from the coronavirus. IDMC highlighted

13. UN Secretary General, *Report of the Secretary General on Conflict-related Sexual Violence*, 3 June 2020.

14. See Chapter 3 (Gender, peace and security).

15. See "The COVID-19 pandemic and the worsening violence against women" in Chapter 5 (Risk scenarios for 2021).

16. UNHCR, *Mid-year trends 2020*, 30 November 2020; IDMC, UNHCR, *Report on UNHCR's Response to COVID-19*, September 2020; IDMC, *Internal Displacement 2020: Mid-year Update*, September 2020.

that measures to contain the spread of COVID-19 also limited the possibilities of obtaining information on the situation of displaced populations, especially those forced to flee within their country's borders.

Despite added mobility restrictions due to the pandemic, forced displacement as a result of conflict and violence continued in 2020, with UNHCR anticipating that by mid-year the figure of 80 million had already been surpassed. New mass population displacements occurred in the context of armed conflicts such as those in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, DRC, Mozambique, Somalia, Syria and Yemen. IDMC recorded 4.8 million new displacements due to conflict and violence in the first six months of 2020. In Syria and DRC alone, forced internal displacement in the first half of 2020 affected three million people –1,474,000 and 1,427,000 respectively. During the second half of the year, the escalation of violence in other contexts such as the Tigray region of Ethiopia or the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh led to further forced population displacements. By November, it was estimated that in less than a month of hostilities, more than 40,000 people from Tigray had sought refuge in Sudan. The conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, meanwhile, has displaced between 100,000 and 130,000 people, according to various estimates.

1.3. Armed conflicts: annual evolution

1.3.1. Africa

Great Lakes and Central Africa

Burundi	
Start:	2015
Type:	Government Internationalised internal
Main parties:	Government, Imbonerakure youth wing, political party CNDD-FDD, political party CNL, armed groups RED-TABARA, FPB (previously FOREBU), FNL
Intensity:	1
Trend:	=

Summary:

The process of political and institutional transition that got under way with the signing of the Arusha Peace Agreement in 2000 was formally completed in 2005. The approval of a new constitution (that formalises the distribution of political and military power between the main two communities, the Hutu and Tutsi) and the holding of elections (leading to the formation of a new government), represent an attempted to lay the foundations for overcoming a conflict that began in 1993. This represented the principal opportunity for ending the ethnic-political violence that has plagued the country since its independence in 1962. However, the

authoritarian evolution of the government after the 2010 elections, denounced as fraudulent by the opposition, has overshadowed the reconciliation process and led to the mobilization of political opposition. This situation has been aggravated by the plans to reform the Constitution by the Government. The deteriorating situation in the country is revealed by the institutional deterioration and reduction of the political space for the opposition, the controversial candidacy of Nkurunziza for a third term and his victory in a fraudulent presidential election (escalating political violence), the failed coup d'état in May 2015, violations of human rights and the emergence of new armed groups.

Violence and insecurity, sporadic attacks by armed actors and government counter-insurgency actions, and repression of political opposition by security forces and the Imbonerakure, the youth wing of the ruling Conseil National pour la Défense de la Démocratie-Forces de Défense de la Démocratie (CNDD-FDD), continued during the year. Elections were also held under accusations of fraud and repression against the opposition, and on 8 June President Pierre Nkurunziza died, creating a brief power vacuum.

With regard to the armed conflict in the country, the climate of violence and insecurity persisted throughout the year as a result of the actions of the security forces, especially the Imbonerakure, who acted with total impunity, committing extrajudicial executions, attacks against the civilian population, arbitrary arrests, abuses and indiscriminate violence against the political opposition, which caused 317 deaths during the year, according to ACLED. The main target were the supporters of the Congrès National pour la Liberté party (CNL, a former armed group, and later the FNL party, but now the main opposition party), actions that increased as the election approached. In this regard, on 17 September a report by the UN Commission of Inquiry was made public in which it condemned the existence of summary executions, arbitrary arrests and detentions, sexual violence, torture and ill-treatment and numerous cases of violations of civil liberties over the past few months, both before and after the elections, which was rejected by Ndayishimiye, who reiterated his demand for an end to the investigations into the human rights situation in the country. The report highlighted the shrinking political space in the country, the continued impunity and that the trend was not encouraging, and noted that Ndayishimiye had promoted senior military officers implicated in serious human rights abuses to senior civilian positions in the local administration. The UN Human Rights Council extended the mandate of the Commission of Inquiry on Burundi for one year in October, and following the EU's renewal of sanctions on Burundi in September, on 9 October Foreign Minister Albert Shingiro summoned all foreign diplomats and demanded that their respective countries suspend the sanctions. On 17 November, the Government ordered the closure of the office of the UN special envoy in the country, despite the fact that the UN Secretary General had recommended on

3 November that its mandate be extended until the end of 2021. The Government argued that the office's presence created a climate of paranoia and an artificial crisis orchestrated by foreign actors. On the other hand, the Burundian Armed Forces carried out military operations in the country in pursuit of insurgent groups, the CNL political opposition and Tutsi civilians, and conducted raids in Uvira, in the Congolese province of South Kivu, in pursuit of members of the armed group RED-Tabara, at different times during the year, causing dozens of fatalities allegedly among members of the insurgency. RED-Tabara claimed responsibility in September for several attacks in various provinces of the country between August and September. The death toll according to the group is said to be at least 15 CNDD-FDD supporters and 28 members of the security forces, with at least 40 other members of the Imbonerakure and security forces injured, three members of the insurgency killed and another captured in the course of the operations.¹⁷ In addition, there were a number of unprovoked attacks that increased rumours of the possible emergence of new armed groups in the country, according to one of the country's few independent media outlets, IWACU, in early September. Other analysts said that these actions are due to the insurgency's desire to make itself visible to the new President in order to force some kind of response. While it was stressed that it would not have the capacity to pose a real threat to the new Government, it would nonetheless have greater capacity for warlike actions than in recent years. Army sources confirmed the existence of these small armed groups in various provinces and the continuation of military operations to neutralise them. Radio Publique Africaine reported on 3 September that the security forces are said to have brought in members of the Imbonerakure to fight the insurgency and persecute political opposition. In December, in a joint report on human rights violations, 15 civil society organisations recorded 821 arbitrary detentions, 368 extrajudicial executions, 182 cases of torture and 59 forced disappearances in 2020. The report identified members of the CNL and members of the Tutsi community as the main victims, and the security forces and the Imbonerakure youth wing of the ruling CNDD-FDD party as the main perpetrators. Despite this, the Government achieved the diplomatic success of being removed from the UN Security Council agenda in December.

On 7 April, Vice-President Gaston Sindimwo confirmed the holding of elections on 20 May despite the COVID-19 pandemic, and on 15 April cancelled the diaspora's participation in the elections, arguing that the electoral

Elections were held in Burundi under accusations of fraud and repression against the opposition, and on 8 June President Pierre Nkurunziza died, creating a brief power vacuum

commission did not have sufficient capacity to organise overseas voting as a result of the crisis. On 20 May, presidential and legislative elections were held in Burundi, following a campaign period marked by allegations by opposition and civil society actors of violence and harassment, as well as the arrests of candidates and hundreds of CNL supporters. The opposition also denounced that its representatives were excluded from several polling stations. On 25 May, the Independent National Electoral Commission announced that retired General Evariste Ndayishimiye, the candidate of the ruling CNDD-FDD party, had won the presidential election with 68% of the vote. In the legislative elections, CNDD-FDD won 72 of the 100 seats in the National Assembly. The presidential candidate and CNL leader, Agathon Rwasa, rejected the provisional results, alleging widespread fraud and irregularities, and filed an appeal with the constitutional court on 28 May. The appeal was dismissed on 4 June. The CNL announced on 28 May that the authorities had arrested 600 of its supporters during the campaign and on election day, limiting their presence as proxies and observers on the day. The authorities applied a 14-day quarantine linked to the COVID-19 pandemic to election observers from the regional organisation EAC, thus hindering their functions.

Furthermore, on 8 June, Pierre Nkurunziza died, allegedly from a heart attack, although various analysts point to the possibility that he may have died as a result of having contracted COVID-19. The death of the historic leader of the CNDD-FDD and Burundi's President since 2005 created a power vacuum that the Constitutional Court resolved by speeding up the inauguration of President-elect Ndayishimiye, who was sworn in on 18 June. In his inaugural speech, he stressed such issues as the need to engage in dialogue with the opposition in the country, to put an end to the abuses committed by the previous Government, and to ensure the return of refugees and other Burundians in exile. However, his actions in this regard were a continuation of those of the previous Government. On 30 June, a new cabinet headed by Alain Guillaume Bunyoni was sworn in as prime minister, composed of 15 ministers and dominated by representatives of the hard-line wing of the regime. It should be noted that international sanctions have been imposed against Bunyoni and Interior Minister Gervais Ndirakobuca for their involvement in acts of repression and violence against civilians since 2015. An opposition coalition in exile condemned the lack of representation of the Tutsi minority in the new government and among the regional governors –one minister and three governors.

17. AFP, "Burundi rebel group claims attacks in new offensive", AFP, 18 September 2020.

CAR	
Start:	2006
Type:	Government, Resources Internationalised internal
Main parties:	Government of CAR, armed groups of the former Séléka rebel coalition (FPRC, RPRC, MPC, UPC, MLCJ), anti-balaka militias, 3R militia, Ugandan armed group LRA, other local and foreign armed groups, Government of France, MINUSCA, EUFOR
Intensity:	2
Trend:	↑

Summary:

Since independence in 1960, the situation in the Central African Republic has been characterised by continued political instability, which has resulted in several coups and military dictatorships. The keys to the situation are of an internal and external nature. Internal, because there is a confrontation between political elites from northern and southern ethnic groups who are competing for power and minorities that have been excluded from it. A number of leaders have attempted to establish a system of patronage to ensure their political survival. And external, due to the role played by its neighbours Chad and Libya; due to its natural resources (diamonds, uranium, gold, hardwoods) and the awarding of mining contracts in which these countries compete alongside China and the former colonial power, France, which controls uranium. Conflicts in the region have led to the accumulation of weaponry and combatants who have turned the country into regional sanctuary. This situation has been compounded by a religious dimension due to the fact that the Séléka coalition, which is a Muslim faith organisation formed by a number of historically marginalised groups from the north and which counts foreign fighters amongst its ranks, took power in March 2013 after toppling the former leader, François Bozizé, who for the past 10 years had fought these insurgencies in the north. The inability of the Séléka leader, Michel Djotodia, to control the rebel coalition, which has committed gross violations of human rights, looting and extrajudicial executions, has led to the emergence of Christian militias ("anti-balaka"). These militias and sectors of the army, as well as supporters of former President Bozizé, have rebelled against the government and Séléka, creating a climate of chaos and widespread impunity. France, the AU and the UN intervened militarily to reduce the clashes and facilitate the process of dialogue that would lead to a negotiated transition, forcing a transitional government that led to the 2015-2016 elections. After a brief period of reduced instability and various peace agreements, armed groups continued to control most of the country. Neither the reduced Central African security forces (which barely controlled Bangui) nor MINUSCA were able to reverse the situation, so new contacts were promoted by the AU and ECCAS, which contributed to reaching the peace agreement of February 2019.

The year saw an increase in the activities of some armed groups across the country, which abandoned the implementation of the 2019 peace agreement, causing hundreds of fatalities, many of them civilians. In addition, there was an increase in violence in the wake of the general elections of 27 December. According to ACLED, the death toll at the end of 2020 was 420, down from

594 in 2019, following the downward trend in previous years (1,187 recorded in 2018 and 2,011 in 2017).

The political climate was dominated by preparations for the general elections, the first round of which was scheduled for 27 December, with legislative and local elections and a possible second round of presidential elections in early 2021, and was characterised by tension and mistrust in a context of delays to the electoral calendar, as noted in the UN Secretary-General's report in October. In June, the Constitutional Court rejected the Government's proposed amendment to the Constitution to extend the terms of the incumbent President and legislature in the event of a force majeure event that would delay the holding of elections, noting that any delay with respect to constitutional deadlines should be the result of broad national consensus and consultation. Since then, certain political parties and civil society groups have called on the Government to hold national talks on the electoral calendar. In September, the President, Faustin-Archange Touadéra, organised a series of meetings on the electoral process with opposition parties, former heads of state and other political parties, civil society groups and religious leaders, among others. The Coalition de l'Opposition Démocratique 2020 (created in February and made up of 16 opposition political parties) refused to attend the meeting on 17 September and accused President Touadéra of imposing hasty and ill-prepared elections and demanded their postponement. On 23 September, the National Assembly passed a law amending the electoral code and extending the voter registration deadline by one month, owing to delays caused by insecurity and obstruction by various armed groups, including the 3R (Retour, Réclamation et Réhabilitation) group and various anti-Balaka groups. While this deadline extension did not affect the 27 December election date, several UN Security Council members expressed concern that the process could be in jeopardy if there were further delays. The National Assembly's 23 September amendments to the electoral code did not include a provision that would have allowed approximately 250,000 Central African refugees outside the country to vote in the elections, despite recommendations by the international community. President Touadéra said that allowing their participation presented insurmountable obstacles, without providing details.

The electoral commission registered 22 presidential candidates in early November, among them three women, including President Touadéra of the Mouvement des Coeurs Unis, former President François Bozizé of Kwa Na Kwa, former President Catherine Samba-Panza, as an independent, and former Prime Minister Anicet Georges Dologuélé. Regarding Bozizé's candidacy, there was controversy over his eligibility because there were doubts as to whether his return from exile complied with the electoral law that establishes a minimum of one year's residence in CAR for eligibility.

Finally, after months of uncertainty over former President Bozizé's candidacy, on December 3 the Constitutional Court rejected his application, citing an international arrest warrant and UN sanctions against him. On 15 December, a coalition of six armed groups, all signatories to the February 2019 peace agreement and some allied with Bozizé, announced a mobilisation against the government and the electoral process and in mid-December seized parts of Lobaye, Ouham, Ouham-Pendé, Nana Gribizi and Ombella M'Poko prefectures in the west, centre and south, blocking main supply routes to Bangui and conducting heavy fighting with the army and MINUSCA. The government accused this coalition of trying to perpetrate a coup d'état in favour of Bozizé.

The year saw increased activity by some armed groups throughout CAR and heightened political tensions in the wake of the 27 December general election

On the other hand, the implementation of the 2019 CAR Political Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation faced difficulties and delays, as various armed groups continued to violate the agreement and obstruct the restoration of government authority throughout the country.¹⁸ In addition, there was a resurgence of violence in northern and northwestern CAR and violence continued in other parts of the country, although the situation in the northeast stabilised after a spike in violence earlier in the year. Attacks between armed groups, acts of reprisal and executions of civilians, operations by MINUSCA and the Central African Armed Forces remained constant and even increased. There are several reasons for the recommencement of fighting. According to the ICG, it is due to certain armed groups' disappointment with the outcome of the peace agreement, as well as the inability of the guarantors of the agreement and MINUSCA to enforce the pact.¹⁹ In turn, it is also due, according to the organisation, to confrontations regarding the control of cross-border traffic and trade routes, as well as transhumance, territories and mining operations, which acquired an ethnic dimension due to the mobilisation of the respective communities.

On 25 April, seven armed groups that signed the February 2019 peace deal announced the suspension of their participation in the government and peace agreement implementation mechanisms, accusing President Touadéra of reneging on his commitments. Days earlier, President Touadéra and Prime Minister Firmin Ngrébada had met, respectively, with the leaders of the armed groups UPC and FPRC, without success. The 3R accused the government of reneging on its commitments regarding electoral preparations and threatened to interfere in the elections, and on 5 June suspended its participation in the monitoring mechanisms of the Political Agreement while stepping up actions against the security forces, MINUSCA and civilians. On 15

July, an anti-tank mine exploded as a MINUSCA vehicle passed, injuring two Blue Helmets. MINUSCA accused the armed group 3R of responsibility. This group allegedly received training and the supply of materials to install them from the Russian company Wagner, according to Central African military sources. Military sources

confirmed that this was the first time that the presence of anti-personnel mines had been detected in the country. The UPC, in a statement on 1 August, also announced that it was abandoning its commitments to the agreement, following a meeting with the Prime Minister in Bangui. On 20 April, the UN Security Council imposed sanctions (travel ban and asset freeze) on FDPC leader Abdoulaye Miskine, accused of recruiting fighters, and on 5 August imposed sanctions on 3R leader Sidiki Abbas, accusing him of involvement in arms trafficking and executions of civilians. The UN Security Council extended the mandate of MINUSCA until 15 November 2021 and also the sanctions, including the arms embargo, until July 2021. In December 2019, the EU established the EU Advisory Mission in CAR (EUAM CAR), a civilian mission to support security sector reform. The start of the mission was delayed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and entered into force in August 2020, in addition to the other existing EU mission in the country, the military EUTM CAR.²⁰

At the same time, there was growing concern regarding Russia's role in the country. According to the agency The Africa Report,²¹ in 2018 CAR reached mineral extraction agreements with the Russian company Lobaye Invest Sarlu, which by mid-2020 was already present in at least four cities. Russia began operating an airport and training Central African security forces. In March, 170 members of the Wagner Group private security company arrived in the country to help train the security forces, and another 500 turned up at the Sudanese border in July.²² The Wagner group is suspected of being financed by Russian businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin, an ally of President Vladimir Putin. This organisation is allegedly operating in total secrecy in the continent. In July 2018, the group was accused of executing three Russian journalists investigating the organisation's activities in the country. According to various sources, Russia plans to establish military bases in six African countries, including CAR and Sudan. Between 2015 and 2020, Russia has concluded military cooperation agreements with 21 African countries.

As for the humanitarian situation, it continued to be of concern, according to OCHA. Approximately 2.6 million people were in need of humanitarian assistance and 2.36 million people were suffering food insecurity. Inter-

18. See summary on CAR in Escola de Cultura de Pau; *Peace Talks in Focus 2020. Report on Trends and Scenarios*. Barcelona: Icaria, 2021.

19. International Crisis Group, *Réduire les tensions électorales en République Centrafricaine*, ICG, No. 296, 10 December 2020.

20. ZIF kompakt, New EU advisory mission operational in the Central African Republic (CAR), 27 August 2020.

21. Mathieu Olivier, "Russia's murky business dealings in the Central African Republic", *The Africa Report*, 23 August 2019.

22. ADF, Mine Attack Stokes Fear Of Russia Destabilizing CAR, 23 September 2020.

community tensions, attacks on civilians and a series of attacks on humanitarian workers hampered access. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic worsened the socio-economic situation in the country. While the total number of people infected with the coronavirus is low (as of 10 October, there were officially 4,850 cases), CAR has limited capacity to detect positives, potentially masking the true numbers. According to the WHO, CAR is one of the least prepared countries in the world to deal with the outbreak of COVID-19.

OCHA said the DRC was home to the largest number of internally displaced people in Africa, 5.5 million people, 3.2 million of whom were children

DRC (east)	
Start:	1998
Type:	Government, Identity, Resources Internationalised internal
Main parties:	Government of DRC, FDLR, factions of the FDLR, Mai-Mai militias, M23 (formerly CNDP), Nyatura, APCLS, NDC-R, Ituri armed groups, Burundian armed opposition group FNL, Government of Rwanda, MONUSCO
Intensity:	3
Trend:	=

Summary:

The current conflict has its origins in the coup d'état carried out by Laurent Desiré Kabila in 1996 against Mobutu Sese Seko, which culminated with him handing over power in 1997. Later, in 1998, Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda, together with various armed groups, tried to overthrow Kabila, who received the support of Angola, Chad, Namibia, Sudan and Zimbabwe, in a war that has caused around five million fatalities. The control and exploitation of the natural resources has contributed to the perpetuation of the conflict and to the presence of foreign armed forces. The signing of a ceasefire in 1999, and of several peace agreements between 2002 and 2003, led to the withdrawal of foreign troops, the setting up of a transitional government and later an elected government, in 2006. However, did not mean the end of violence in this country, due to the role played by Rwanda and the presence of factions of non-demobilised groups and of the FDLR, responsible for the Rwandan genocide of 1994. The breach of the 2009 peace accords led to the 2012 desertion of soldiers of the former armed group CNDP, forming part of the Congolese army, who organised a new rebellion, known as the M23, supported by Rwanda. In December 2013 the said rebellion was defeated. In spite of this, the climate of instability and violence persists.

The DRC continued to be immersed in a climate of violence and political instability resulting from tensions within the ruling coalition, which fractured in December.²³ This was compounded by continuing violence due to the presence of numerous armed groups in the east of the country. These groups continued to carry out armed actions against each

other for control of territory, communication routes and access to natural resources, engaging in clashes with the FARDC, and committing serious abuses against the civilian population. The situation in the provinces of North and South Kivu (east) continued to be marked by the presence and activities of the various Mai Mai militias, CODECO, the FDLR and its splinter groups, as well as by the extension of the Burundian armed conflict into the DRC owing to the presence of Burundian armed actors. It is worth noting the escalation of the armed

conflict resulting from the activities of the Ugandan-born group ADF, which operates especially in the northern part of the province of North Kivu, although it expanded its attacks to the province of Ituri.²⁴ In addition, the province suffered an escalation of violence as a result of attacks by the CODECO group, whose fighters are mostly from the Lendu ethnic group and are in conflict with members of the Hema ethnic group over natural resources and land ownership. This occurred despite concerted action by Congolese ex-combatants to promote disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration. Some CODECO combatants have signed a peace agreement with the Government, but several factions continue to fight.

In October, OHCHR's Michelle Bachelet presented the report on the human rights situation in the DRC, noting several episodes that could constitute war crimes or crimes against humanity, as well as noting that threats against human rights defenders, members of civil society and journalists, arbitrary detention and harassment continued. The report documented 857 human rights violations and abuses during the 12-month period beginning in May 2019. The UN Human Rights Office in the country announced on 5 August that there had been an increase in the number of fatalities by armed groups in the east of the country during the first six months of 2020, compared to the same period in 2019. In March 2020, according to OCHA, DRC was home to the largest number of internally displaced people in Africa, 5.5 million people, of whom 3.2 million were children. In areas where armed groups were active and military operations were ongoing, humanitarian access was severely hampered. Access problems, such as security-related incidents experienced by humanitarian personnel and illegal tax collection, continued to affect the delivery of humanitarian assistance. The debate surrounding the phasing out of MONUSCO and its mandated tasks also continued. Resolution 2502 of 2019 called for this strategy in preparation for the eventual phased withdrawal of MONUSCO, which envisages a concentration of the mission's activities in the provinces where the conflict continues: North Kivu, South Kivu and Ituri.

23. See the summary of DRC in chapter 2 (Socio-political crises).

24. See the summary of DRC (east-ADF) in this chapter.

DRC (east - ADF)	
Start:	2014
Type:	System, Resources Internationalised internal
Main parties:	Government of DRC, Government of Uganda, Mai-Mai militias, ADF armed opposition group, MONUSCO
Intensity:	3
Trend:	↑

Summary:

The Allied Democratic Forces-National Army for the Liberation of Uganda (ADF-NALU) is an Islamist rebel group operating in the northwest of the Rwenzori massif (North Kivu, between DR Congo and Uganda) with between 1,200 and 1,500 Ugandan and Congolese militiamen recruited mainly in both countries as well as in Tanzania, Kenya and Burundi. It is the only group in the area considered a terrorist organisation and is included on the US list of terrorist groups. It was created in 1995 from the merger of other Ugandan armed groups taking refuge in DR Congo (Rwenzururu, ADF), later adopted the name ADF and follows the ideology of the former ADF, which originated in marginalised Islamist movements in Uganda linked to the conservative Islamist movement Salaf Tabliq. In its early years it was used by Zaire under Mobutu (and later by DR Congo under Kabila) to pressure Uganda, but it also received backing from Kenya and Sudan and strong underground support in Uganda. At first it wanted to establish an Islamic state in Uganda, but in the 2000s it entrenched in the communities that welcomed it in DR Congo and became a local threat to the administration and the Congolese population, though its activity was limited. In early 2013 the group began a wave of recruitment and kidnappings and an escalation of attacks against the civilian population.

The year saw intensive military operations by the Armed Forces (FARDC) in the east of the country in an effort to dislodge armed groups from the area, in particular the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF). Since 30 October 2019, the FARDC has been leading a new and escalating offensive against the ADF, intensifying fighting that had a heavy impact on the civilian population, especially due to ADF counter-offensives. The armed movement split into small groups, some of which expanded into other areas, particularly the Irumu and Mambasa territories in neighbouring Ituri province, where the violence escalated. In December 2019, the ADF executed 97 civilians in retaliation for operations launched in October. The year began with advances by the FARDC, which managed to capture the ADF stronghold of Madina on 9 January, at the cost of the deaths of 40 FARDC militants and 30 soldiers, and increased reprisals by the group against the civilian population days later with the execution of dozens of civilians in Beni territory. Offensive and retaliatory actions by the ADF, as well as Army military operations, continued throughout the year.

In July, the UN noted that the ADF had intensified its attacks on civilians over the past 18 months since January 2019, expanding its attacks beyond its traditional areas of action. These actions have allegedly caused more than 1,000 fatalities between January 2019 and June 2020, and could be classified as war crimes and crimes against humanity, as highlighted by the report of the UN Human Rights Office in DRC.²⁵ The impacts of the abuses committed by the ADF were systematic and brutal. The assailants used heavy artillery in their attacks on villages, including mortars, as well as AK-47s and machetes; they often burned down entire villages, health centres and schools, and abducted men, women and minors. The usual modus operandi of their attacks indicated that there was a clear intention to leave no survivors. According to the report, in addition to the fatalities, the ADF reportedly wounded 176 others, kidnapped 717 people, recruited 59 minors, and a school, seven health centres and dozens of houses were attacked and looted, causing the forced displacement of thousands of people. In addition, the FARDC is also alleged to have committed serious human rights violations, particularly since the start of operations in October 2019. Specifically, the security forces are alleged to have executed 14 civilians, injured 49 others, as well as arbitrarily arresting and detaining 297 civilians. These violations are said to have reinforced the population's distrust of the security forces. Finally, it should be noted that hundreds of prisoners escaped during an attack that the police attributed to the ADF on 21 October in Beni. The armed group Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) claimed responsibility for several of the attacks committed by the ADF, but MONUSCO has yet to find any evidence of a direct connection between ISIS and the ADF.

South Sudan	
Start:	2009
Type:	Self-government, Resources, Identity Internationalised internal
Main parties:	Government (SPLM/A), SPLM/A-in Opposition armed group (faction of former vice president, Riek Machar), dissident factions of the SPLA-IO led by Peter Gatdet and Gathoth Gatkuoth, SSLA, SSDM/A, SSDM-CF, SSNLM, REMNESA, communal militias (SSPPF, TFN), Sudan Revolutionary Front armed coalition (SRF, composed of JEM, SLA-AW, SLA-MM and SPLM-N), Sudan, Uganda, UNMISS
Intensity:	3
Trend:	↑

25. MONUSCO and OHCHR, *Report on violations of human rights and international humanitarian law by the Allied Democratic Forces armed group and by members of the defence and security forces in Beni territory, North Kivu province and Irumu and Mambasa territories, Ituri province, between 1 January 2019 and 31 January 2020*, UN, July 2020.

Summary:

The peace agreement reached in 2005, which put an end to the Sudanese conflict, recognised the right to self-determination of the south through a referendum. However, the end of the war with the North and the later independence for South Sudan in 2011 did not manage to offer stability to the southern region. The disputes for the control of the territory, livestock and political power increased between the multiple communities that inhabit South Sudan, increasing the number, the gravity and the intensity of the confrontations between them. The situation became even worse after the general elections in April 2010, when several military officials who had presented their candidature or had supported political opponents to the incumbent party, the SPLM, did not win the elections. These military officers refused to recognise the results of the elections and decided to take up arms to vindicate their access to the institutions, condemn the Dinka dominance over the institutions and the under representation of other communities within them while branding the South Sudan government as corrupt. Juba's offerings of amnesty did not manage to put an end to insurgence groups, accused of receiving funding and logistical support from Sudan. In parallel, there was an escalation of violence in late 2013 between supporters of the government of Salva Kiir and those of former Vice President Riek Machar (SPLA-IO), unleashing a new round of violence that continues to this day. In 2015, a peace agreement was signed between the government and the SPLA-IO, which was ratified in 2018. However, the signatory parties' reluctance to implement it, as well as the emergence of other armed groups and community militias, have kept the war raging in the country.

During the year, the country suffered a dynamic of increasing violence compared to the previous year, due to the difficulty in implementing some clauses of the 2018 peace agreement, with multiple armed incidents related to inter-community disputes in the central region of the country taking place, as well as clashes between government troops and non-signatory groups to the Peace Agreement, mainly in the southern region of Central Equatoria. According to ACLED data, during 2020, a total of 748 episodes of armed violence were recorded in the country that cost the lives of 2,252 people, indicating a significant increase in the number of fatalities compared to the 1,499 deaths recorded in 2019. At the same time, the humanitarian emergency in the country continued. According to data provided by UNHCR in its report covering the period up to mid-2020, the country recorded 2,278,000 people fleeing violence and taking refuge in neighbouring countries (mainly Uganda and Sudan). This data ranks South Sudan as the largest refugee crisis in Africa and the fourth largest in the world, behind Syria, Venezuela and Afghanistan. In turn, the number of IDPs by mid-2020 stood at 1.6 million, of which 125,300 had occurred between January and June 2020, a period in which 107,000 IDPs also returned home.²⁶

While the signing of the *Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan* (R-ARCSS)

peace agreement in September 2018 put an end to armed clashes between the Armed Forces and the main rebel group, the SPLA-IO led by Riek Machar, new armed fronts and organisations continued to destabilise the country, mainly in the southern and central regions. During 2020, peace talks began between the Government and non-signatory groups to the Peace Agreement organised through the South Sudan Opposition Alliance (SSOMA) –which includes the rebel organisations NAS, SSUF/A, Real-SPLM, NDM-PF, UDRM/A, SSNMC. On 12 January, these negotiations, which are taking place in Rome (Italy) under the mediation of the Community of Sant'Egidio and the IGAD, achieved the signing of the **Rome Declaration on the Peace Process in South Sudan** where the parties committed to a ceasefire, to guarantee humanitarian access and to maintain an open dialogue.²⁷ However, the stalemate in the negotiations in April led to the breaking of the military truce, triggering military hostilities between government forces and the NAS commanded by Thomas Cirillo, who accused the armed forces of the SPLA-IO of attacking in the region of Central Equatoria. Military hostilities continued throughout the year, extending to the Western Equatoria region in the south of the country. In response, on 29 May the UN Security Council extended the arms embargo on South Sudan and the targeted sanctions against specific individuals until May 2021. At the beginning of June, the UN mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) and the EU unsuccessfully requested the government of Salva Kiir and the NAS to put an end to the hostilities and respect the truce negotiated in January. Armed clashes between the NAS and the SPLA (renamed the South Sudan People's Defence Forces – SSPDF) and the SPLA-IO continued during the third quarter of the year in Central Equatoria State. In early September, UNMISS deployed troops to establish a temporary base in Lobonok County following an increase in attacks on civilians and humanitarian workers, denouncing the Government's blockade. Subsequently, the rebel group South Sudan United Front/Army (SSUF/A) led by Paul Malong expanded its military hostilities to the north of the country, in Unity State.

On the other hand, armed clashes continued in the centre and east of the country, motivated by various **inter-community disputes in the context of the difficulties of governance in the country due to the weakness and internal struggles in the new Unity Government** created in February. These clashes occurred mainly in the Lakes State, Warrap State, Jonglei State and the Greater Pibor administrative area. The increase in violence in Jonglei State was interpreted by various South Sudanese organisations as a result of the ungovernable situation in the state due to the lack of agreement between the signatories to the peace agreement to establish the governor in that state. In mid-June, the Government formed a committee to ease tensions between the Dinka,

26. UNHCR, *Mid-year trends 2020*, 30 November 2020.

27. See the summary on South Sudan in Escola de Cultura de Pau, *Peace Talks in Focus 2020: Report on Trends and Scenarios*. Barcelona: Icaria, 2021.

Lou Nuer and Murle communities, and subsequently launched a nationwide disarmament programme, as well as inter-community talks initiatives to address escalating inter-community violence. However, the start of the disarmament campaign in the central region of the country in August led to heavy clashes between security forces and community militia members who refused to disarm, leaving at least 148 people dead in Tonj East County, Jonglei State. UNMISS, in response to the increased violence, sent a peacekeeping patrol to the area on 11 August and established a temporary base in the town of Tonj. The failure to contain the violence forced the Government to declare a state of emergency in Jonglei State and the Greater Pibor administrative area on 13 August. According to data provided by UNMISS, inter-community violence has left at least 800 people dead between April and June alone, constituting the main focus of violence in the country and a serious risk to the implementation of the peace agreement.

The increase in violence in several parts of the country did not prevent UNMISS from withdrawing its forces from several peacekeeping bases in the country at the beginning of September, while maintaining the humanitarian aid service. The initiation of the withdrawal plan prompted thousands of internally displaced persons to demonstrate in Juba, Jonglei and Unity, asking the agency to reconsider the withdrawal due to the violence. UNMISS subsequently announced the development of new plans to establish temporary peacekeeping bases and the deployment of patrols to stop inter-community fighting in the Jonglei region.

Inter-community violence in the central region of South Sudan became the main source of instability in the country and a serious risk to the implementation of the Peace Agreement

Sudan (Darfur)	
Start:	2003
Type:	Self-government, Resources, Identity Internationalised internal
Main parties:	Government, PDF pro-government militias, RSF paramilitary unit, pro-government militias <i>janjaweed</i> , Sudan Revolutionary Front armed coalition (SRF, composed of JEM, SLA-AW, SLA-MM and SPLM-N), several SLA factions, other groups, UNAMID
Intensity:	2
Trend:	↑

Summary:

The conflict in Darfur arose in 2003 around the demands for greater decentralization and development settled by several armed groups, mainly the SLA and the JEM. The government responded to the uprising by sending its armed forces and forming Arab militias, known as *janjaweed*. The magnitude of the violence against civilians carried out

by all the armed actors led to claims that genocide was ongoing in the region. 300,000 people have already died in relation to the conflict since the beginning of the hostilities, according to the United Nations. After the signing of a peace agreement between the government and a faction of the SLA in May 2006, the violence intensified, the opposition-armed groups started a process of fragmentation and a serious displacement crisis with a regional outreach developed in the region due to the proxy-war between Chad and Sudan. This dimension is compounded by inter-community tension over the control of resources (land, water, livestock, mining), in some cases instigated by the government itself. The observation mission of the African Union –AMIS– created in 2004, was integrated into a joint AU/UN mission in 2007, the UNAMID. This mission has been the object of multiple attacks and proven incapable of complying with its mandate to protect civilians and humanitarian staff on the field.

The Darfur region remained the epicentre of the armed violence in the country, although armed incidents were also recorded in the South Kordofan region and in the east of the country during the year. The armed

conflict in the Darfur region experienced a deterioration in the security situation compared to the previous year. According to data provided by ACLED, there were 555 deaths in the region during the year as a result of clashes, attacks on civilians and remote violence. This is an increase of almost double the number of deaths compared to those recorded in 2019 (268), although the data still shows a de-escalation when compared to the 859 violent deaths recorded during 2018, the 996 deaths in 2017 or the 2,286 deaths

in 2016. The violence in Darfur continues to be much higher than the other armed conflict in the country, located in the Blue Nile and South Kordofan, where a total of 122 fatalities were recorded during the year, according to data provided by ACLED. In turn, according to UNHCR data from mid-2020, 772,000 people in Sudan fled their homes and took refuge outside national borders, mainly due to the armed conflict in Darfur. The number of internally displaced persons in mid-2020 stood at 1.9 million. These figures place the country in eighth place globally and fourth in Africa in terms of the number of people displaced by violence. At the same time, Sudan is hosting 1,058,800 refugees from the ongoing crises in neighbouring countries –to which must be added the new unaccounted refugees from the crisis in Ethiopia at the end of the year– placing the country in sixth place globally in terms of host countries, and in second place in Africa after Uganda.²⁸

Although the Government's year-long peace negotiation process with different armed groups in the Darfur region, South Kordofan and the Blue Nile in Juba, capital of South Sudan, concluded with a historic peace agreement signed in August,²⁹ it failed to stop the violence in Darfur. This was due, in part, to the **refusal**

28. UNHCR, *Mid-year trends 2020*, 30 November 2020.

29. See the summary on Sudan in Escola de Cultura de Pau, *Peace Talks in Focus 2020: Report on Trends and Scenarios*. Barcelona: Icaria, 2021.

of the SLM/A-AW faction led by Abdel Wahid al-Nur to join the peace negotiations, as well as continuing inter-community disputes and clashes in the area. With regard to the former, although the SLM/A-AW announced on 30 March that it had ceased its violent actions in Darfur following the international appeal by United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres for a ceasefire to allow for the implementation of health measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19, it reiterated its refusal to join the peace process. Armed clashes between the al-Nur-led faction and security forces subsided for a time but resumed between October and November, mainly in the Jebel Marra area.

On the other hand, in relation to **inter-community confrontations and disputes**, various violent episodes continued to be recorded in various parts of Darfur during the year. The year began with the visit of a Government delegation, including the Prime Minister, Abdalla Hamdok, and the Vice-President of the Sovereign Council of Sudan and leader of the Rapid Support Force, Mohamed Dagalo –known as Hemedti– to El-Geneina, the capital of West Darfur. The visit took place in the context of resolving the conflict between members of Arab groups and the Masalit tribe that left more than 60 people dead at the end of 2019. The mediation, however, did not stop violent clashes between different groups, which continued throughout the year in North Darfur, West Darfur and South Darfur. Some of these attacks were aimed at stopping the return of internally displaced persons and refugees to land taken by force under President Omar al-Bashir.

In relation to the **UN-AU hybrid mission in Darfur (UNAMID)**, the UN Security Council continued with the roadmap for the reduction and completion of the mission in the country, as agreed by the body in its resolutions 2363 (2017) and 2429 (2018). During the year, in resolution 2525 (2020), the Council extended the mandate of UNAMID for two months, until 31 December 2020, the closing date of the mission. In the same resolution, the Council approved a new UN assistance mission in Sudan, the **United Nations Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS)**, which will be operational in early 2021, and whose functions will be to support the transition in the country, the consolidation of peace and the protection of civilians, especially in Darfur. The Transitional Government of Sudan made its position clear on the termination of UNAMID on 31 December, stating that it will assume full responsibility for the protection of civilians. The announcement of the end of UNAMID, deployed since 2007, led to multiple protests against its termination by people displaced by the conflict in Darfur, who requested its continuation to ensure their protection until the peace process is completed.

In parallel, throughout the year the UN Security Council continued to support efforts to increase women's participation in mediation and conflict prevention activities, in particular through the Network of African

Women in Conflict Prevention and Mediation. UN Women continued to provide support to the Network, including the deployment of network members to Ethiopia, Sudan and South Sudan. On the other hand, the Kampala-based women's organisation, Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa (SIHA), reported that cases of sexual violence in Darfur, mainly in the IDP camps in the north, had increased by 50% between March and June since the implementation of the anti-COVID-19 measures. The organisation called on the transitional government to establish mechanisms for prevention, justice and protection of civilians, especially women.

Finally, in another significant event during the year, in June the International Criminal Court reported that the former leader of the Popular Defence Forces and Janjaweed militia, Ali Kushayb, wanted for alleged war crimes in Darfur between 2003-2004, had been arrested and handed over by the Central African Republic on 7 June and transferred to The Hague.

Horn of Africa

Ethiopia (Tigray)	
Start:	2020
Type:	Government, Self-government, Identity Internationalised internal
Main parties:	Government of Ethiopia, Government of Eritrea, Tigray State Regional Government, security forces and militias of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF)
Intensity:	3
Trend:	↑

Summary:

The appointment of Abiy Ahmed as Ethiopia's new prime minister in early 2018 brought about important and positive changes domestically and regionally in Ethiopia. However, Abiy's actions to reform the Ethiopian state led to its weakening. They gave a new impetus to the ethnic-based nationalist movements that had re-emerged during the mass mobilisations initiated in 2015 by the Oromo community that eventually brought Abiy Ahmed to power, as well as strong resistance from key actors such as the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) party, formerly the leading party of the coalition that has ruled Ethiopia since 1991, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), which established the system of ethnic federalism after he came to power. The Tigray community leadership perceived a loss of power and privilege in the changes enacted by Abiy Ahmed. The TPLF is resisting the loss of power resulting from its non-participation in the new party forged from the ashes of the EPRDF coalition, the Prosperity Party (PP), which if it joined, would lead to the dilution of its power within a new party. These tensions intensified under Abiy Ahmed's liberalising reforms. As the EPRDF tightened its grip, new opportunities, grievances and discourses emerged from regional leaders and civil society actors. This triggered an escalation of political violence throughout the country and increased tension between the federal Government and the TPLF, culminating in the outbreak of armed conflict between the Ethiopian security forces and the security forces in the Tigray region.

The Tigray region of Ethiopia was affected by an escalation of tension with the federal Government that led to a warlike confrontation with serious consequences.

On 4 November, the Ethiopian Prime Minister ordered the launch of a military operation against the authorities ruled by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in the northern Tigray region bordering Eritrea in response to an attack by forces in the Tigray region on two military bases of the Ethiopian Federal Armed Forces (EDF) and, as a result, the federal Government declared a six-month state of emergency in the region. The offensive was followed by heavy fighting and an escalation of the conflict, causing the displacement of thousands of civilians fleeing the fighting and violence. The UN warned that a large-scale humanitarian crisis was developing. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR), Michelle Bachelet, said on 24 November that the refugee population in Sudan from Tigray had risen to 40,000 people since 7 November.³⁰ Investigations revealed mass executions of civilians in Mai-Kadra, southwest Tigray region, which may be the responsibility of the TPLF, according to witness reports gathered by Amnesty International.³¹ OHCHR

warned that the facts could be considered war crimes if confirmed, and also highlighted reports of arbitrary arrests and detentions, executions, discrimination and stigmatisation of members of the Tigray community. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed blamed the massacres on forces loyal to the Tigray authorities. Numerous regional and international voices called for a halt to the spiral of violence and the promotion of talks that had been rejected by the Ethiopian prime minister at the end of the year. In turn, on 22 November, Abiy Ahmed issued an ultimatum to the Tigray authorities and to the TPLF to lay down their arms unconditionally before carrying out the offensive on the capital, Mekelle, which could lead to an escalation of violence with serious consequences for the civilian population. However, Tigray's President, Debretsion Gebremichael, rejected the surrender. Following the ultimatum, the EDF carried out the offensive on Mekelle, which resulted in numerous fatalities and hundreds of injuries, although the humanitarian consequences were minor due to the withdrawal of TPLF troops from the town to avoid confrontation in the urban centre. ACLED estimated that more than 1,400 people were killed as a result of the conflict. In the midst of the Ethiopian offensive, the TPLF bombed the airport in Asmara, the capital of neighbouring Eritrea, on 15 November. TPLF accused Eritrea of collaborating with the EDF by ceding its airport to carry out air offensives over Tigray. In turn, the TPLF carried out simultaneous air raids on 13 November in

A UN report said the Ethiopian Army is facing stiff resistance in Tigray and a protracted "war of attrition" in the region that could have regional consequences

Bahir Dar and Gondar in the neighbouring Amhara region (a region disputed by Tigray). Subsequently, humanitarian organisations, the UN and the EU have highlighted the presence of Eritrean troops in Mekelle and their active participation in the hostilities in support of the federal Government. Although the federal Government declared victory in November, fighting continued between federal and Tigrayan forces.

Numerous voices remarked on the military might and experience of Tigray's security forces and bodies, demonstrated in the war against Eritrea and in the war to overthrow the Derg regime in 1991, while also being heavily equipped during the years in which the TPLF has held power in Ethiopia's coalition government. In addition, a confidential UN report noted that the EDF was allegedly encountering strong resistance in Tigray and faced a protracted "war of attrition" in the region that could have regional consequences.³²

The decisive turning point in the deterioration of relations between the two entities that led to the outbreak of violence came in June following the federal Government's announcement that regional and federal elections due to be held in August would be postponed because of the pandemic. From that moment on, a cascade of events took place and a narrative was constructed to justify the evolution of events and the clash of authorities. In June, the federal Parliament extended the mandate of the federal Government and the mandate of the regional governments, which were due to expire in October, while the Tigray regional Parliament announced elections in September, which were deemed unconstitutional by the federal authorities. Tigray held the elections on 9 September in clear defiance of the federal Government, accompanied by threats from the TPLF, stating that any attempt by the federal Government to boycott the elections would be considered a "declaration of war". The Tigray government also pointed out that the perpetuation of the federal Government in power beyond 5 October (the date on which the Government's mandate was due to expire but was postponed in June) was unconstitutional and after that date Tigray might not accept any of the federal laws. From that moment on, a narrative took root that defended the supposed legality of one's own actions and the illegality of the adversary's. On 5 October, the TPLF withdrew its parliamentarians from the federal Government, considering its mandate to have expired. On 6 and 7 October, the federal Parliament asked the Government to sever relations with the Tigray authorities and approved the cessation of federal funding to the Tigray Executive. Despite an appeal on 9 October to both sides by Ethiopian Peace Minister Muferiat Kamil,³³

30. OHCHR, *Ethiopia: Threat of major hostilities in Mekelle seriously imperils civilian lives* – Bachelet, OHCHR, 24 November 2020..

31. Amnesty International, *Ethiopia: Investigation reveals evidence that scores of civilians were killed in massacre in Tigray state*, 12 November 2020.

32. Jason Burke, "Secret UN report reveals fears of long and bitter war in Ethiopia", *The Guardian*, 21 November 2020.

33. News: Minister of Peace Muferiat Kamil cautions federal, Tigray region governments to deescalate tension, engage in peaceful dialogue, *EthioExplorer*, 10 October 2020.

to commit to dialogue and de-escalate tensions, on 24 October the TPLF claimed that the federal Government was expelling Tigray from the federation and that the diversion of federal funds due to take effect on 4 November would be considered tantamount to a declaration of war.

Somalia	
Start:	1988
Type:	Government, System Internationalised internal
Main parties:	Federal government, regional pro-government forces, Somaliland, Puntland, clan and warlord militias, Ahlu Sunna wal Jama'a, USA, France, Ethiopia, AMISOM, EUNAVFOR Somalia, Operation Ocean Shield, al-Shabaab
Intensity:	3
Trend:	=
Summary:	
The armed conflict and the absence of effective central authority in the country have their origins in 1988, when a coalition of opposing groups rebelled against the dictatorial power of Siad Barre and three years later managed to overthrow him. This situation led to a new fight within this coalition to occupy the power vacuum, which had led to the destruction of the country and the death of more than 300,000 people since 1991, despite the failed international intervention at the beginning of the 1990s. The diverse peace processes to try and establish a central authority came across numerous difficulties, including the affronts between the different clans and sub clans of which the Somalia and social structure was made up, the interference of Ethiopia and Eritrea and the power of the various warlords. The last peace initiative was in 2004 by the GFT, which found support in Ethiopia to try to recover control of the country, partially in the hands of the ICU (Islamic Courts Union) The moderate faction of the ICU has joined the GFT and together they confront the militias of the radical faction of the ICU which control part of the southern area of the country. In 2012 the transition that began in 2004 was completed and a new Parliament was formed which elected its first president since 1967. The AU mission, AMISOM (which included the Ethiopian and Kenyan troops present in the country) and government troops are combating al-Shabaab, a group that has suffered internal divisions.	

During the year, the actions of the armed group al-Shabaab continued, as did AMISOM and US operations against the armed group, causing hundreds of deaths. On the other hand, despite the electoral agreement reached in September, tensions between the Federal Government and the federated states regarding the holding of parliamentary and presidential elections between December 2020 and February 2021 increased, in parallel with the delay in preparations for the elections and their possible postponement. Al-Shabaab remained the main threat to security and stability in a country beset by a triple crisis: the COVID-19 pandemic, desert locusts and floods.

From 2017 onwards, the UN highlighted that a further increase in al-Shabaab activity has been observed, which continued throughout 2020. The group continued to exercise effective control over large parts of rural central and southern Somalia, but none of the major urban centres. Al-Shabaab continued to carry out suicide, IED and mortar attacks, mainly targeting AMISOM and the Somali Armed Forces, military installations or heavily guarded Government buildings, but also civilian facilities such as hotels, restaurants and cafés, resulting in many civilian casualties. During the year, there were an average of 270 incidents per month, according to the UN, most of them attacks perpetrated by al-Shabaab. ACLED noted that there were 3,117 fatalities in 2020. According to the UN's office in the country (UNSOM), between November 2019 and November 2020, there were more than 600 civilian fatalities and another 700 people were injured, of which approximately one-third to one-half were the responsibility of al-Shabaab, and the rest were the responsibility of clan militias and state security forces. Large-scale AMISOM and Somali Armed Forces operations against al-Shabaab also continued. Beginning in late 2017, there was an increase in airstrikes by international forces, primarily from the US, in response to increased al-Shabaab activity. In parallel, despite international military operations against ISIS, the rivalry between al-Shabaab and ISIS and the losses suffered, the Islamic State-affiliated group in Somalia increased the number of bombings and assassinations of prominent persons. These occurred mainly in Mogadishu, Puntland and southern Somalia, where ISIS maintains a network of troops, sympathisers and training bases. Despite military advances in Operation Badbaabo (Survival), al-Shabaab has continued to attack the Somali Armed Forces and AMISOM forces in areas recaptured by the latter. As of November, the total number of airstrikes in 2020 stood at 55. On the other hand, there were no incidents of piracy off the coast of Somalia during the year, a reduction linked to maritime operations by the international community, but mainly to the reduction in global demand for goods as a result of the pandemic, which reduced the volume of cargo transported through the western Indian Ocean.

With regard to AMISOM, a plan was developed in 2018 to guide the mission's transition process, which entailed a gradual handover of its functions to the Somali security forces, with the aim of the latter assuming full responsibility for the security of Somalia by 2021 in parallel with the announcement of the withdrawal of the African mission at the end of 2021. However, experts and analysts have said the Somali Government would have serious difficulties in carrying out its duties without AMISOM's support, and the Government called on the US to rethink the decision announced by President Donald Trump to begin withdrawing its 650-800 troops from the country.³⁴ However, Trump's exit from

34. Most of these special forces, dedicated to training the Somali Army as well as clandestine counter-insurgency operations, were established in Somalia during Trump's tenure. This announcement could be conditioned by the holding of elections in the country in November, according to analysts. See Nick Wadhams and Jennifer Jacobs, "Trump Demands a Plan to Withdraw US Troops From Somalia", *Bloomberg*, 13 October 2020.

the White House in 2021 could change this decision. Numerous voices pointed out that this decision, together with the withdrawal of troops by Kenya and Ethiopia, could create a security vacuum that could be exploited by al-Shabaab. In view of the seriousness of the internal situation in Tigray, Ethiopia withdrew 3,000 of its troops stationed in Somalia, although they were not part of the 5,000 troops under the AMISOM mandate.³⁵

Kenya announced that it would make the future withdrawal of its troops contingent on improved stability in Somalia. In this sense, members of the Kenyan Armed Forces who have participated in AMISOM pointed out that a change of strategy in the war in Somalia was necessary, as military actions were proving ineffective in the face of a group that bases its strength on faith in Islam. A report by the UN Panel of Experts on Somalia noted that al-Shabaab, despite sanctions on the group, had generated around \$13 million in income between December 2019 and August 2020 via extortion and taxation in areas under its control and investments made by the group.³⁶

A number of analysts have noted that the counter-terrorism strategy of the United States and the international community as a whole, with the blessing of the Somali Government, which has focused on the securitisation of responses to threats to international peace and security, has proved to be a failure because it has not reduced the impact of al-Shabaab's activities and has resulted in numerous civilian casualties. In this regard, several voices have emerged calling for a rapprochement with al-Shabaab to promote a negotiation process similar to the one that has been held in Afghanistan with the Taliban.

Finally, regarding the impact of the crisis on civilian populations, the number of internally displaced persons increased from 1.1 million people in August 2016 to 2.6 million people by December 2019, of whom almost two thirds were minors, threatened by forced recruitment by al-Shabaab and sexual violence by all actors involved in the conflict. The main drivers of the internal displacement were conflict and insecurity, as well as drought and floods. Many internally displaced persons moved from rural to urban areas. Mogadishu and Baidoa, the capital of southwestern State, where large swathes of territory are held by al-Shabaab, hosted the largest number of internally displaced persons in the country. On the other hand, activists and journalists continued to face threats in their work. In this regard, in late 2019, women's rights activist and humanitarian worker, Almaas Elman, was shot dead in Mogadishu, a few hours after posting on social media her sister's speech at the United Nations about the importance of reconciliation.

Maghreb - North Africa

Libya	
Start:	2011
Type:	Government, Resources, System Internationalised internal
Main parties:	Government of National Accord with headquarters in Tripoli, government with headquarters in Tobruk/Bayda, several armed groups including the Libyan National Army (LNA, also called Arab Libyan Armed Forces, ALAF), militias from Misrata, Petroleum Facilities Guard, Bengazi Defence Brigades, ISIS, AQIM, mercenaries; USA, France, UK, Egypt, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Turkey, Qatar, Russia, among other countries
Intensity:	3
Trend:	=

Summary:

In the context of the uprisings in North Africa, popular protests against the government of Muammar Gaddafi began in February 2011. In power since 1969, his regime was characterized by an authoritarian stance repression of dissent, corruption and serious shortcomings at the institutional level. Internal conflict degenerated into an escalation of violence leading to a civil war and an international military intervention by NATO forces. After months of fighting and the capture and execution of Gaddafi in late October, the rebels announced the liberation of Libya. However, the country remains affected by high levels of violence derived from multiple factors, including the inability of the new authorities to control the country and ensure a secure environment; the high presence of militias unwilling to surrender their weapons; and disputes over resources and trafficking routes. The situation in the country deteriorated from mid-2014 onward, with higher levels of violence and persistent political fragmentation. Efforts to solve the situation have been hampered by this scene of fragmentation and a climate of instability has assisted the expansion of ISIS in the North African country. The dynamics of violence have been accentuated by the involvement of foreign actors in support of the various opposing sides, motivated by geopolitical and economic interests, given Libya's strategic location in the Mediterranean basin and its great oil wealth.

The armed conflict in Libya was similar in intensity to the previous year, although at year's end the signing of a comprehensive ceasefire between the main conflicting parties raised tentative hopes of a possible decrease in violence. According to the ACLED think-tank, hostilities killed at least 1,492 people in 2020, slightly less than the 2,064 people killed in 2019, but more than the 1,188 killed in 2018. With regard to civilian casualties, during the first half of the year the UN mission in the country, UNSMIL, had counted a total of 489 victims, including 170 killed and 319 wounded, mainly due to fighting, detonation of explosive remnants and

35. Simon Marks, "Ethiopia Withdraws Thousands of Troops From Neighboring Somalia", Bloomberg, 13 November 2020.

36. Letter from the Chairman of the Security Council Committee pursuant to Resolution 751 (1992) concerning Somalia addressed to the Chair of the Security Council, S/2020/949 of 28 October 2020.

airstrikes. In 2019, 287 civilians were killed and 371 injured, respectively. According to data compiled by UNSMIL, forces affiliated with Khalifa Haftar's LNA –a group that has been renamed the Arab Libyan Armed Forces (ALAF) but is often referred to interchangeably as ALAF or the LNA– were reportedly responsible for most of the attacks on civilians (around 80%). Some actions were also attributed to GNA forces, the internationally recognised government based in Tripoli. In the face of this and other continuing evidence of human rights and international humanitarian law violations in the conflict, the UN Human Rights Council decided in June 2020 to launch a year-long independent fact-finding mission to investigate abuses perpetrated by all parties to the armed conflict in Libya since the beginning of 2016, with the intention of preventing a worsening of the situation and ensuring accountability.

With regard to the evolution and dynamics of the conflict, **during 2020, the trend observed the previous year regarding the growing involvement of foreign actors in support of the main sides in the conflict continued and even increased.** This drift resulted in repeated violations of the arms embargo, the continued arrival to the country of combatants, mercenaries and military advisers, and explicit warnings of more direct intervention depending on the course of events and the interests involved. Their arrival was also felt on the battlefronts, which in 2020 were mainly concentrated in Tripoli, Sirte and other locations in western Libya. During the first half of the year, the hostilities focused on the Libyan capital and persisted despite some initiatives aimed at promoting a truce. Earlier this year, Turkey (which in January approved sending troops to Libya to support the GNA and facilitated the arrival of Syrian militiamen in the North African country) and Russia (which backs the forces of Haftar, a strongman in the east of the country) failed to encourage a ceasefire. The Berlin Conference on Libya –postponed several times in 2019 and finally held in January– also failed to lead to a reduction in violence.³⁷ ALAF maintained the siege of Tripoli, and tribes allied to Haftar also began a blockade of oil exports in January. Violence escalated from March onwards, despite the call for the parties to call a humanitarian truce to focus efforts on responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, in line with the UN Secretary-General's call for a comprehensive ceasefire. In the midst of the pandemic, there were reports of attacks on civilians, hospitals and the cutting off of drinking water supplies affecting two million people in Tripoli, attributed to ALAF. Beginning in April and with Turkish assistance, GNA-affiliated forces began to advance their positions in western Libya. After what was described as a “tactical withdrawal” of ALAF from Tripoli in May, the GNA consolidated its control over the capital in June and denounced the discovery of more than 20 mass graves in Tarhuna, until then a stronghold of militias

loyal to Haftar. By the end of the year (November), 112 bodies had been exhumed in the town, located about 100 kilometres northeast of Tripoli.

From the middle of the year, the epicentre of the fighting shifted eastwards to the vicinity of Sirte. Turkey and Russia again tried unsuccessfully to reach an agreement to stop the escalation around the city, while Egypt – another of Haftar's supporters– announced that Sirte was a “red line” that could lead to its direct intervention in the conflict. In fact, Cairo issued warnings against actions that it would consider a threat to its national security and authorised the dispatch of troops. In this context, and in response to alarm signals from UNSMIL about the destabilising potential of the events in Sirte, various initiatives were launched to try to create a demilitarised zone around the city, resume political negotiations and reactivate oil exports to alleviate the socio-economic conditions of the population, severely affected by the conflict, the pandemic and the blocking of oil revenues –a situation that led to protests against the rival authorities in Tripoli and Sirte in the middle of the year. In August, the GNA declared a unilateral ceasefire and called for the reactivation of oil production and elections in 2021. Simultaneously, the speaker of the Tobruk-based House of Representatives, Aghela Saleh –Haftar's ally, but not always aligned with his agenda– also announced a truce. Weeks later Haftar agreed to the reactivation of oil exports, although he maintained attacks on GNA positions near Sirte. **It was not until the end of October that GNA and ALAF representatives officially signed a nationwide “permanent” ceasefire agreement in Geneva,** allowing new political contacts to commence under the auspices of the UN.³⁸

Until the end of the year, the political process was moving slowly, although a roadmap was reportedly being drawn up that would include presidential and parliamentary elections on 24 December 2021, coinciding with the 70th anniversary of Libya's independence. At the same time, doubts and obstacles persisted regarding the implementation of the ceasefire agreement, which among other measures includes the withdrawal of both sides to the front lines, the expulsion of foreign fighters from the country and the suspension of foreign military training programmes until the formation of the new government. Contrary to what was stipulated, in the final months of the year there were reports of continued weapon flows, the non-withdrawal of forces from both sides, conflicting interpretations of certain provisions due to ambiguities in the text of the agreement and armed incidents that challenged the ceasefire. In December, mutual accusations continued regarding violations of the truce and the interception by ALAF of a Turkish ship that led Ankara to warn of serious consequences for those who attack Turkish interests in Libya. The Turkish Parliament also approved

37. See the summary on Libya in Escola de Cultura de Pau, *Peace Talks in Focus 2020. Report on Trends and Scenarios*. Barcelona: Icaria, 2021.

38. Ibid.

the extension of military support to the GNA for another 18 months. In this context, the leader of UNSMIL and acting special envoy, Stephanie Williams –in office following the resignation of Ghassam Salamé in March– warned of the risk posed to the country by the presence of 20,000 foreign fighters.

The ceasefire agreement did not stop attacks on activists and human rights defenders. Among them Hannan Elbarassi, a lawyer, women's rights activist and critic of armed groups operating in the east of the country, was killed in November in Benghazi. At the same time, it should be noted that **the armed conflict continued to favour very serious abuses of migrant and refugee populations** trapped in Libya and/or who had returned to the North African country after failed attempts to reach European coasts. In line with other reports by various organisations in previous years, Amnesty International denounced the wide range of abuses suffered by migrants and refugees in Libya in a climate of total impunity – executions, forced disappearances, torture, rape and other forms of sexual violence, arbitrary detention and forced labour and exploitation by state and non-state actors.³⁹ In this context, several voices called on the EU to rethink its policies of cooperation with the Libyan authorities on migration, which ignore the abuses repeatedly denounced by the UN and civil society.

Southern Africa

Mozambique (north)	
Start:	2019
Type:	System, Identity Internationalised internal
Main parties:	Government, Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP) -formerly Ahlu Sunnah Wa-Jama (ASWJ)-, al-Qaeda, South African private security company DAG (Dyck Advisory Group)
Intensity:	3
Trend:	↑

Summary:

Since late 2017, the province of Cabo Delgado in northern Mozambique has suffered an armed conflict led by Ahlu Sunnah Wa-Jama (ASWJ). The armed jihadist organisation made its first appearance in October 2017 when it attacked three police posts in the Mocímboa da Praia district in Cabo Delgado province. Since that time, Cabo Delgado has been the epicentre of rising violent activity in the country. While some reports claim that ASWJ fighters have received training in Tanzania and Somalia, which has led locals to call them al-Shabaab, alluding to the Somali jihadist group, no significant links to international jihadist networks have been established. The causes of the outbreak of violence refer rather to factors linked to the grievances and marginalisation of the Muslim minority in Mozambique (22% of the population), as well as to the extreme poverty of what is the most underdeveloped province in the

country. Poverty rates in Cabo Delgado contrast with its enormous economic potential due to its significant natural gas reserves, which have generated significant investment in the area, but this has not helped to reduce inequality and poverty among its population. Since the end of 2017, the Mozambican security forces have developed a security policy that has increased repression and retaliation in the area, influencing new factors that trigger violence. In 2018, the group intensified its use of violence against civilians and expanded the scope of its operations.

Armed violence in the northern province of Cabo Delgado escalated significantly during the year due to the actions of groups with jihadist agendas and the response of the security forces. The data provided by ACLED shows the deterioration of the security situation, which recorded the highest homicide rate in the last ten years in the country, directly related, according to analysts, to the armed conflict in Cabo Delgado. During 2020, ACLED recorded **1,639 violent deaths in Cabo Delgado**, affecting 10 of its 17 districts, which is more than double the number of deaths in the previous year –when 689 deaths were recorded– and far higher than the 126 deaths recorded in 2018, or the 119 deaths in 2017, the year insurgent activities began. Estimates by the United Nations at the end of the year indicated that violence in the region has displaced at least 424,000 people since 2017. In the first six months of 2020 alone, UNHCR recorded 125,300 internally displaced persons in the country.⁴⁰

While June 2019 saw the first **attacks in Cabo Delgado claimed by the armed group Islamic State (ISIS)**, its presence in the country was denied by the Mozambican authorities until April 2020. After the massacre of 52 people who had refused to be recruited by the insurgency, the government led by Filipe Nyussi acknowledged the presence of ISIS militants for the first time. The northern insurgency itself, known locally as “al-Shabaad”, renamed itself the Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP), proclaiming its goal to be the creation of a caliphate in the region. On 22 May, al-Qaeda also claimed to have carried out attacks in the country for the first time by conducting armed actions in the district of Mocimboa da Praia. Violence was not only concentrated in northern Mozambique, but there were also several armed incidents in southern Tanzania, bordering Cabo Delgado, during the year. During October, ISIS claimed its first attack on Tanzanian soil⁴¹.

Among the acts of violence recorded during the year, the commencement of armed actions against urban centres in March was particularly noteworthy. An example of this was **the seizure of the city of Mocímboa da Praia on three occasions in March, June and August**. On the other hand, there were multiple attacks with a high fatality rate, including two massacres perpetrated by the insurgency in Muidumbe district. In the first, on 7 April, at least 52 people were beheaded in an attack in the

39. Amnesty International, *Between life and death: Refugees and migrants trapped in Libya's cycle of abuse*, 24 September 2020.

40. UNHCR, *Mid-Year Trends - 2020*, 30 November 2020.

41. See the summary on Tanzania in chapter 2 (Socio-political crises).

community of Xitaxi; in the second, in October, another 50 people were beheaded on the football pitch in the community of Muatide, with many others kidnapped. According to various analysts, one of the reasons that helps to explain the violence against the people of Muidumbe relates to the formation of community militias to fight on the side of the Government. UN Secretary-General António Guterres condemned the massacres and urged the country's authorities to conduct an investigation into the incidents. UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, warned that the population is in a desperate situation, calling on the Mozambican government to ensure unhindered access for humanitarian agencies.

Instability and the humanitarian crisis increased in the Cabo Delgado region, northern Mozambique

Amid the worsening humanitarian situation, the media reported the emergence of community militias made up of army veterans who are fighting the jihadist insurgency. In turn, members of the Mozambican security forces were charged on several occasions for their alleged involvement in **human rights violations, torture, indiscriminate and extrajudicial killings**, which contributed to exacerbating the rebellion's anti-government stance. Several human rights bodies, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the National Human Rights Commission, called on the Government to conduct an independent and impartial investigation into torture and other serious human rights violations allegedly committed by state security forces in Cabo Delgado.⁴² Even the European Parliament condemned the disproportionate use of force on 18 September, after a video went viral showing the murder of a woman by alleged members of the Mozambican Armed Forces and Rapid Intervention Police, which the government denied, while denouncing a campaign of "disinformation" by the insurgents.

Increasing violence and instability in the region prompted a reaction from the **regional body** Southern African Development Community (SADC). In mid-May, the Governments of Botswana, Zambia and Zimbabwe urged SADC member countries to support the Government of Mozambique in the face of the insurgency. Subsequently, on 17 August, the SADC declared at its annual summit its "commitment to support Mozambique in the fight against terrorism and violent attacks". Zimbabwe's ruling ZANU-PF party stated its intention to offer assistance to Mozambique in Cabo Delgado in exchange for the US government easing sanctions on the country. In late November, the SADC held an extraordinary summit in Botswana, focusing on security issues, where it agreed to a "comprehensive regional response" to address insecurity in northern Mozambique, without elaborating on the type of response. In parallel, a week before the summit, Tanzania and Mozambique signed an agreement to join forces to fight the insurgency.

At the same time, in September, the Mozambican government asked the EU for assistance in dealing with the insurgency, and on 9 October the EU announced a programme of training, logistical support and medical services for the Mozambican forces. It should also be noted that, during the year, the South African private security company DAG (Dyck Advisory Group) replaced the Russian security company Wagner and began to operate in the war against the counter-insurgency in Cabo Delgado, mainly by training troops, deploying air operations and supplying mercenaries on the ground.

West Africa

Cameroon (Ambazonia/North West and South West)	
Start:	2018
Type:	Self-government, Identity Internationalised internal
Main parties:	The Government of Cameroon, a political-military secessionist movement including the opposition Ambazonia Coalition Team (ACT, including IG Sako, to which belong the armed groups Lebialem Red Dragons and SOCADEF) and the Ambazonia Governing Council (AGovC, including IG Sisiku, whose armed wing is the Ambazonia Defence Forces, ADF)
Intensity:	3
Trend:	=
Summary:	
After Germany's defeat in the First World War, Cameroon came under the mandate of the League of Nations and was divided between French Cameroon and British Cameroon. In 1961, the two territories that made up British Cameroon held a referendum limiting their self-determination to union with the already independent Republic of Cameroon (formerly French Cameroon) or union with Nigeria. The southern part of British Cameroon (a region currently corresponding to the provinces of North West and South West) decided to join the Republic of Cameroon, whereas the north preferred to join Nigeria. A poorly conducted re-unification in the 1960s based on centralisation and assimilation has led the English-speaking minority of what was once southern British Cameroon (20% of the country's population) to feel politically and economically marginalised by state institutions, which are controlled by the French-speaking majority. Their frustrations rose in late 2016, when a series of sector-specific grievances were transformed into political demands, which caused strikes, riots and a growing escalation of tension and government repression. This climate has led a majority of the population in the region demanding a new federal political status without ruling out secession and has prompted the resurgence of identity movements dating back to the 1970s. These movements demand a return to the federal model that existed between 1961 and 1972. Trust between English-speaking activists and the government was shaken by the arrest of the main	

42. Amnesty International, *Mozambique: Torture by security forces in gruesome videos must be investigated*, Amnesty International, 9 September 2020.

figures of the federalist movement in January 2017, which has given a boost to groups supporting armed struggle as the only way to achieve independence. Since then, both English-speaking regions have experienced general strikes, school boycotts and sporadic violence. Insurgent activity has escalated since the secessionist movement's declaration of independence on 1 October and the subsequent government repression to quell it.

The two English-speaking regions in the west of the country continued to be affected by severe violence as a result of the actions of armed secessionist actors, as well as excessive use of force and counter-insurgency operations by the Armed Forces and local militias,

including some attacks by armed groups outside the two provinces. The conflict has already claimed more than 3,000 lives and displaced more than 900,000 people in less than three years, and has left some 800,000 children without schooling. Hundreds of insurgents, members of the security forces and self-defence militias were killed in clashes and ambushes, dozens of towns and houses were burned by the security forces and several insurgent leaders were executed at different times during the year, including General Aladji (May), General Okoro (July), General Mad Dog (September) and General Mendo Ze (October). Regarding the climate of violence, the security forces and, to a lesser extent, armed separatist actors, have been accused of serious human rights abuses. In April, the Government acknowledged for the first time that the army had been involved in a massacre of civilians (three women and 10 minors according to the Government, 23 civilians, including 15 minors, according to the UN) committed in mid-February in an attack on the town of Ngarbuh. The Government eventually brought those responsible before a military tribunal. At first the Government denied the facts but the evidence and pressure from the international community (UN, USA and EU) changed the Government's position. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR), Michelle Bachelet, and Human Rights Watch (HRW) said the acknowledgement was a positive but insufficient step, while a coalition of 26 local NGOs said the truth about the facts and figures had not yet come to light, with 31 bodies (including 14 minors) having been discovered, and that at least 10 to 15 soldiers and 30 other militiamen had been involved in the attack, a figure far higher than that claimed by the Government. The leader Ayaba Cho Lucas of the secessionist group AGovC demanded an independent commission to determine responsibility. Despite this, attacks and abuses against civilians and deaths in custody (such as that of journalist Samuel Wazizi) by security forces

Despite the continuing serious climate of violence in the two English-speaking regions of Cameroon, contacts were held between representatives of the Government and the secessionist movement

persisted during the year, as did the abduction of students and teachers and executions of alleged spies by secessionist groups. HRW reported on 27 July that at least 285 civilians had been killed in both provinces since January 2020. On 24 October, an unidentified armed group attacked and executed six students at a school in the town of Kumba, an act condemned by the Government and OHCHR, although secessionist groups denied participation in the incident.

On the other hand, municipal and legislative elections were held on 9 February after seven years and after having been postponed twice. Despite the delays, the election campaign was marred by multiple acts of violence and clashes, according to human rights organisations such as Amnesty International. Armed separatist groups had called for a boycott of the elections and even threatened citizens not to vote in the two regions. The main opposition parties did not have a common position on participation in the elections, and while both the MRC and the SDF criticised the electoral law and the Government's control of electoral processes, the MRC announced an election boycott and the SDF rejected it. Nevertheless, election day passed almost without incident but with a low turnout, which favoured the ruling party, according to various analysts. According to various reports, President Paul Biya continued to use state machinery to ensure his one-party rule.⁴³ By-elections in the English-speaking regions were held again at the end of March following a decision by the Constitutional Court. The ruling party, Biya's RDPC, won all 13 seats up for election in the 11 constituencies contesting the elections. The victory further strengthened the RDPC's parliamentary majority, holding 152 of the 180 seats. The opposition SDF party, representing the English-speaking community, challenged the by-election results, but the constitutional court rejected its demand for a re-run.

Notably, on 2 July, a round of contacts was held between representatives of the Government and the secessionist movement led by the imprisoned leader Sisiku Julius Ayuk Tabe.⁴⁴ This announcement was welcomed by many social and political actors in the country, as well as by part of the international community, although the Government's silence and subsequent denials revealed an internal struggle between sectors in favour of a negotiated solution to the conflict and others seeking a military solution. This struggle is linked to the succession of Paul Biya as head of the country after 37 years in power, according to different sources.⁴⁵ In an attempt to unify the armed secessionist groups, on 15 October

43. Paul-Simon Handy and Fonteh Akum, "Cameroon holds elections in a time of crisis", *ISS*, 5 February 2020.

44. See the summary on Cameroon in Escola de Cultura de Pau, *Peace Talks in Focus 2020. Report on Trends and Scenarios*. Barcelona: Icaria, 2021.

45. R. Maxwell Bone, "Political Infighting Could Obstruct a Nascent Peace Process in Cameroon", *WPR*, 22 September 2020.

Ayuk Tabe appealed to the different insurgent leaders to collaborate with the AGovC.

Decisions taken in September by the Government showed the prevalence of the militarist line. All demonstrations were banned, with the decision being justified on the grounds of the Covid-19 pandemic and in application of the 2014 law against acts of terrorism, to which HRW replied that the Government was using the pandemic and the counter-terrorism law as a pretext to ban the right to assembly. In response to the killing of a police officer in Bamenda, the capital of the North West region, the army banned the use of motorcycles and launched an unprecedented military operation in the town on 8 September to capture possible members of armed groups.

The operation included indiscriminate arrests, shootings and deaths of civilians, an action justified by the army as a response to various attacks, lootings and robberies of banks and stores committed by armed groups. In addition, on 17 September, an appeals court in Yaoundé upheld Sisiku's life sentence on terrorism and secession charges. The day after this decision, Maurice Kamto, leader of the MRC, called for social mobilisation to demand a ceasefire with the secessionist insurgency and electoral reforms following the government's decision to hold regional elections in December. The MRC announced that hundreds of people had been arrested in Douala and Yaoundé during the mobilisations and in the days leading up to them, including party members and activists from the group Stand Up for Cameroon. Following the protests, Kamto's home was guarded by security forces, placing him under *de facto* house arrest, according to statements made by Kamto himself to RFI on 29 September. The house arrest was still in place at the end of the year.

This situation was compounded by the growing climate of political tensions between supporters of the current President, who was ratified in the 2018 elections, and supporters of the opposition politician Maurice Kamto, as noted by the International Crisis Group (ICG) in December. Kamto continued to question the results of the 2018 presidential election and supporters of both sides fuelled the climate of hatred and violence on social networks, which has now taken on an ethnic dimension, posing a new threat to the country's fragile stability, already affected by the severe violence in the English-speaking provinces, as well as the continued attacks by Boko Haram in Far North province. The ICG proposed that the Government should correct the shortcomings in the electoral system that undermined the credibility of the 2018 elections and combat ethnically-motivated persecution on social media. In this regard, the MRC and SDF parties announced a boycott of the regional elections held on 6 December, in which Paul Biya's RDPC swept to victory in 9 of the 10 regional councils.

Lake Chad Region (Boko Haram)	
Start:	2011
Type:	System Internationalised internal
Main parties:	Government of Nigeria,, Civilian Joint Task Force pro-government militia, Boko Haram factions (ISWAP, JAS-Abubakar Shekau, Ansaru, Bakura), civilian militias, MNJTF (Benin, Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, Niger)
Intensity:	3
Trend:	=

Summary:

The Islamist sect Boko Haram demands the establishment of an Islamic state in Nigeria and considers that Nigeria's public institutions are "westernised" and, therefore, decadent. The group forms part of the fundamentalist branch initiated by other groups in Nigeria following independence in 1960 and which, invariably, triggered outbreaks of violence of varying intensity. Despite the heavy repression to which its followers have been subjected—in 2009, at least 800 of its members died in confrontations with the army and the police in Bauchi State—the armed group remains active. The scope of its attacks has widened, aggravating insecurity in the country as the government proves incapable of offering an effective response to put an end to the violence. International human rights organizations have warned of the crimes committed by the group, but also on government abuses in its campaign against the organization. In 2015 the conflict was regionalized, also affecting the countries bordering Lake Chad: Chad, Niger and Cameroon. Since mid-2016 Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Cameroon have developed a regional strategy of military pressure on BH through the implementation of a regional joint military force (MNJTF), which has highlighted the group's resilience and also the unwillingness of the Nigerian political and military authorities to deal with the situation, in addition to the shortcomings of the Nigerian Armed Forces, which have serious internal corruption problems. BH has split into four factions: The Jama'atu Ahlus-Sunna Lidda'Awati Wal Jihad (JAS) faction, led by Abubakar Shekau, leader of BH since 2009; Ansaru, which aligned with al-Qaeda in 2012 and had not committed any military actions since 2013 until early 2020; Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), which split from JAS in 2016; and finally Bakura, an ISWAP splinter group that emerged in 2018 and subsequently moved closer to Shekau in opposition to ISWAP.

The security situation was characterised by the continued activities of Boko Haram (BH), despite counter-insurgency operations, causing further population displacement and compounding the existing humanitarian crisis. Ongoing military operations by the Nigerian security forces, pro-Government militias and the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), mainly against the two BH factions – Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) and Jama'atu Ahlus-Sunna Lidda'Awati Wal Jihad (JAS) led by Abubakar Shekau– did not affect the evolution of the two groups' activities. They continued to pose a serious threat, resulting in a protracted humanitarian crisis and widespread human rights violations, including massacres of civilians, the maiming and abduction of children and sexual violence against them. BH also continued its campaign of abductions and summary executions of humanitarian

workers, as well as suicide attacks against the population. Of particular note is the resurgence of the armed group Ansaru, which in January claimed responsibility for its first action since 2013. Military sources pointed to evidence of the resumption of the group's activities, which increased its actions mainly in Kaduna State. Regions in countries bordering northeastern Nigeria, namely, Extrême Nord in Cameroon, Diffa in Niger and the Lac province of Chad, were also affected by persistent armed attacks by different factions of the group. The death toll of BH's actions and the clashes between BH factions and security forces since the start of the conflict in 2011 sits at 39,708 fatalities, according to the Nigeria Security Tracker (NST) database. The death toll in the Nigerian states of Borno, Yobe and Adamawa was very similar to the previous year (2,603 in 2020 compared to 2,607 in 2019), compared to 2,243 in 2018 and 1,907 in 2017, with the increasing trend in previous years beginning to stabilise. If we add to this figure the fatalities from the conflict in the surrounding areas of the Lake Chad region, the total rises to 3,770. Borno and Lac, with 2,335 and 1,088 fatalities respectively, were the worst affected regions.

Moreover, since its emergence in 2016, the ISWAP BH faction has launched more attacks and caused more security force fatalities than the JAS BH faction, both of which are allied to the armed group Islamic State (ISIS), ICG noted in October.⁴⁶ In this sense, and as the think-tank highlighted on the basis of interviews with BH defectors, the relationship with ISIS has been beneficial for both parties, since on the one hand it has helped to keep the armed group's brand alive, despite losses in Syria and Iraq, while on the other the BH factions have received ideological, technological, military and logistical training and resources that have served to strengthen the group's discipline and effectiveness. In addition, ISIS is attempting to exert greater control over ISWAP, which has led to internal tensions and even to the purge and execution of some ISWAP figures, such as Mamman Nur in 2018, and Idris al-Barnawi (Ba Idrissa, who had replaced Abu Musab al-Barnawi in March 2019) and two of his commanders –Abu Maryam and Abu Zainab– in February 2020, which has allegedly led to ISIS exerting authority more directly over the group. According to local sources, these latest executions were also the result of their fighters allegedly questioning their leaders over decisions not to execute retreating or captured soldiers.⁴⁷ In parallel, notable was the killing by the MNJTF of the leader of the Bakura faction of BH, Malam Bakura, a faction that broke away from ISWAP in 2018, whose group was active in southern Niger and on certain Lake Chad islands. The emergency situation caused by the conflict is affecting 17 million people in the four countries, and has led to the forced displacement of 2.87 million people, according to OCHA. In the Lake Chad region, one in three families is food insecure and one in two people are in need of urgent humanitarian assistance.

In December, the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC), Fatou Bensouda, submitted his conclusions ten years after the opening of the preliminary investigation of the human rights violations in Nigeria and possible crimes against humanity and war crimes committed in the Niger Delta, in the states of the Middle Belt and in the context of the conflict between BH and the Nigerian security forces. The conclusions state that there are reasonable grounds to believe that members of the BH insurgency and its splinter groups, as well as members of the security forces committed war crimes and crimes against humanity. While the prosecution argued that the vast majority of the crimes are attributable to non-state actors, the addition of ICC investigations into the actions of the security forces is a positive step forward in the quest for justice and an end to impunity. The prosecution will investigate both parties for crimes including murder, rape, torture and cruel treatment; attacks against personal dignity; intentional attacks against the civilian population and against individual civilians not directly involved in the hostilities; unlawful imprisonment; conscripting and enlisting children under the age of fifteen into the Armed Forces and using them for active participation in hostilities; political and gender-based persecution; and other inhumane acts. In addition, in the case of the insurgents it also adds: sexual slavery, including forced pregnancy and forced marriage; slavery; hostage-taking; intentional attacks against personnel, facilities, material, units or vehicles involved in humanitarian assistance; intentional attacks against buildings dedicated to education and places of worship and similar institutions. And in the case of investigations against the security forces, accusations of forced disappearances and forced population displacement are also included.

Mali	
Start:	2012
Type:	System, Self-government, Identity Internationalised internal
Main parties:	Government, CMA (MNLA, MAA faction, CPA, HCUA), Platform (GATIA, CMPFPR, MAA faction), MSA, Ansar Dine, MUJAO, AQIM, MRRA, al-Mourabitoun, JNIM/GSIM, Islamic State in the West Africa Province (ISWAP) –also known as Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)–, Katiba Macina, MINUSMA, France (Operation Barkhane), G5-Sahel Joint Force (Mauritania, Chad, Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso), USA, Takouba Task Force (Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Mali, Holland, Niger, Norway, Portugal, Sweden and the United Kingdom)
Intensity:	3
Trend:	↑

46. Vicent Foucher, *The Islamic State Franchises in Africa: Lessons from Lake Chad*, International Crisis Group, Commentary / Africa, 29 October 2020.

47. Timileyin Omilana, "ISWAP kill own leaders as Borno fasts, prays", *Guardian (Nigeria)*, 24 February 2020.

Summary:

The Tuareg community that inhabits northern Mali has lived in a situation of marginalisation and underdevelopment since colonial times which has fuelled revolts and led to the establishment of armed fronts against the central government. In the nineties, after a brief armed conflict, a peace agreement was reached that promised investment and development for the north. The failure to implement the agreement made it impossible to halt the creation of new armed groups demanding greater autonomy for the area. The fall of the regime of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya in 2011, which for a number of years had been sheltering the Malian Tuareg insurgency and had absorbed a number of its members into its security forces, created conditions that favoured the resurgence of Tuareg rebels in the north of the country, who demand the independence of Azawad (the name which the Tuareg give to the northern region of Mali). After making progress in gaining control of the area by taking advantage of the political instability in Mali in early 2012, the Tuareg armed group, National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), was increasingly displaced by radical Islamist groups operating in the region which had made gains in the north of Mali. The internationalisation of the conflict intensified in 2013, following the military intervention of France and the deployment of a peacekeeping mission (MINUSMA) in the country. Although a peace agreement was signed in 2015 in the north of the country between the Arab-Tuareg groups (CMA and Platform), the exclusion of groups with jihadist agendas from the peace negotiations has kept the war going and extended the dynamics of the war to the central region of the country (Mopti).

For yet another year, there was an increase in violence in much of Malian territory, due to armed actions by jihadist groups in the north and centre of the country, clashes between militias of the Fulani, Dogon and Bambara communities in the central region of Mopti and parts of the southern region of the country, armed clashes between the two coalitions of jihadist groups in the region, as well as the responses of the security forces. According to data from the ACLED research centre, 2020 was the year with the most deaths recorded in the country since the last wave of violence broke out, with around a thousand violent events concentrated in the northern, central and southern regions, which have left a toll of at least 2,731 deaths. This is a significant increase from the 1,702 deaths recorded in 2019. The reason for this is the increase in violence in the central region of the country, as well as the struggle for expansion by jihadist coalitions linked to al-Qaeda –Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (GSIM), otherwise known as Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM)– and to Islamic State –Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) or Islamic State in West African Province (ISWAP). Similarly, with regard to forced displacement, according to UNHCR data, at the end of the year 138,659 persons were refugees in neighbouring countries, while another 201,429 had been internally displaced.

The outbreak of open warfare between the armed jihadist coalitions that make up JNIM and ISWAP has led to an increase in violence in Mali

In the centre of the country, the main focus of the violence, multiple clashes and attacks between community militias made up of members of the Fulani, Dogon (Dozos) and Bambara communities were reported throughout the year in the Mopti region. Violence also escalated due to the new offensive strategy adopted by the Malian Government to expand military operations against jihadist organisations in Mopti. This strategy was also accompanied by an increase in counter-insurgency actions by the French operation Barkhane, which expanded its military presence in Sahelian territory and increased the number of troops deployed from 4,500 to 5,100. While protests against the French military presence in the country were registered in Bamako earlier this year, Malian President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, at a meeting in France between the heads of state that make up the G5 Sahel counter-terrorism operation and French President Emmanuel Macron, agreed to intensify military cooperation with France to counter the jihadist threat in the Sahel. On 29 January, Mali's Prime Minister Boubou Cissé pledged to increase the size of the country's armed forces by 50% by 2020.⁴⁸ The increased militarisation and counter-terrorism strategy in the area also produced a number of allegations of human rights violations directed against the security forces. In one of them, on 30 April, the UN mission in the country (MINUSMA) released a report claiming that Malian and Niger security forces carried out 135 extrajudicial executions between 1 January and 31 March in Mopti. MINUSMA maintained that the data are documented and that the Malian authorities have opened an investigation. **Between January and June, according to UN figures, the intensification of violence resulted in the killing of around 600 civilians.** In June, the UN Security Council extended MINUSMA's mandate for another 12 months, maintaining the number of troops deployed at 13,289 soldiers and 1,920 police officers.

At the same time, at the beginning of the year the Malian government announced its intention to open channels for dialogue with the jihadist leaders Amadou Kouffa (Macina Liberation Front) and Iyad ag Ghaly (JNIM). Iyad ag Ghaly announced that he was open to exploring negotiations provided that the French forces from Operation Barkhane and MINUSMA withdrew from the country. JNIM's stance led to internal divisions in the organisation and defections of some members who joined the ranks of ISWAP.

This scenario also gave way to an **open war between the armed coalitions comprising JNIM and the ISWAP** that raged throughout the year in northern and central Mali, as well as in the border triangle formed by Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. According to ACLED data, these clashes left an estimated 415 people dead during the year. In turn, the French forces of the Barkhane operation announced multiple counter-terrorism actions against

48. See the summary on the Western Sahel Region in this chapter.

jihadist organisations throughout the year, which, among other results, cost the life of the veteran AQIM leader, Abdelmalek Droukdel, in an operation carried out on 3 June in Talhandak, Kidal;⁴⁹ as well as the senior JNIM commander, Bah ag Moussa, in another operation carried out on 13 November in Ménaka.

Finally, the deterioration of the security situation in the country was exacerbated by the **political crisis in which the country was immersed throughout 2020**. After months of demonstrations and protests, a coup d'état took place in August that led to the fall of the government, ushering in a new executive led by the military junta known as the National Committee for the Salvation of the People (CNSP). From the outset, the CNSP stated that all past security arrangements, which included support for MINUSMA, Operation Barkhane, the G5 Sahel force, as well as the European special forces of the Takuba initiative, would be respected.⁵⁰ Although the military coup caused many states involved in military actions in the country to freeze their support until constitutional order was restored, in October, following the formation of the transitional government with civilian participation, the EU announced the resumption of its military training and capacity building activities in Mali through EUTUM. The new interim Government announced on 8 October the release of 200 prisoners, including leading JNIM figures, in exchange for the release by JNIM of four hostages, including opposition leader Soumaïla Cissé.

Western Sahel Region	
Start:	2018
Type:	System, Resources, Identity Internacional
Main parties:	Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Ivory Coast, G5-Sahel Joint Force (Mauritania, Chad, Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso), Joint Task Force for the Liptako-Gourma Region (Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso), MINUSMA, France (Operation Barkhane), USA, Takouba Task Force (Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Mali, Netherlands, Niger, Norway, Portugal, Sweden and United Kingdom), Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM or GSIM), Islamic State in the Province of West Africa (ISWAP) - also known as Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)-, Macina Liberation Front (FML), Ansaroul Islam, other jihadist groups and community militias
Intensity:	3
Trend:	↑

49. See the summary on Algeria in chapter 2 (Socio-political crises).

50. See the summary on Mali in chapter 2 (Socio-political crises).

51. See the summary on Mali in this chapter.

52. Africa Center for Strategic Studies, *Islamic State in the Greater Sahara Expanding Its Threat and Reach in the Sahel*, 18 December 2020.

Summary:

La región occidental del Sahel (norte de Malí, norte de Burkina Faso y noroeste de Níger) se ve afectada por una situación de inestabilidad creciente que tiene un origen multicausal. Se combina la existencia de redes de criminalidad transfronteriza en el Sahel y la marginación y subdesarrollo de las comunidades nómadas tuareg en la región, entre otros factores. Esta marginación se manifestó en las rebeliones tuareg que tuvieron lugar en los años sesenta, en los años noventa y, más recientemente, entre 2007 y 2009, cuando se configuraron sendas rebeliones contra los respectivos Gobiernos de Níger y Malí que pretendían alcanzar un mayor grado de autonomía en ambos países y revertir la pobreza y el subdesarrollo de la región. En el caso de Malí se produjo un resurgimiento de estas demandas en 2012, espoleadas por la caída del régimen de Gaddafi en Libia en 2011⁵¹. A todo esto se une la expansión de las actividades de los grupos armados de Malí a la región fronteriza con Níger y Burkina Faso conocida como Liptako-Gourma, relacionada con la situación de inestabilidad derivada de la presencia y expansión de la insurgencia yihadista de origen argelino AQMI, su fragmentación y configuración en otros grupos armados de corte similar, algunos alineados a al-Qaeda y otros a ISIS, que en la actualidad operan y se han expandido por la región. Esta expansión ha contribuido a una mayor desestabilización de la zona y a la configuración de diferentes iniciativas militares transfronterizas regionales e internacionales para intentar controlar esta situación, que también han contribuido a internacionalizarla. A todo este panorama se suman las vinculaciones del conflicto que afecta a la región del Lago Chad como consecuencia de la expansión de las actividades del grupo Boko Haram a raíz de la intervención militar transfronteriza.

The security situation in the Western Sahel deteriorated further due to increased armed actions by different groups with jihadist agendas, community militias and military responses by the security forces of countries in the region and external allies. According to the African Centre for Strategic Studies (ACSS), 2020 was the deadliest year for jihadist groups in the Sahel, which reportedly caused some 4,250 deaths, an increase of 60% compared to 2019. This increase is mainly the result of the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) –also known as Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)– and, to a lesser extent, the coalition of the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims – Jama'at Nusrat al Islam walMuslimin (JNIM or GSIM).⁵² **While violence continued to affect all border areas of the Liptako-Gourma region –eastern Mali, northern Burkina Faso and southwestern Niger– its impacts were different in each country.** According to data provided by ACLED, between January and mid-December, in Burkina Faso 620 episodes of violence were recorded, leaving a total of 2,263 fatalities; in Mali there were about 900 violent events concentrated in the region of action of jihadist groups (Gao, Mopti, Segou, Sakasoo and southeast of Timbuktu) that have cost the lives of 2,669 people; while in Niger, in the southwest of the country, in the regions of Tillabéri –the main area affected by violence–

Dosso and Tahoua, 176 violent events were reported, causing at least 685 deaths.

In turn, the violence continued to worsen the humanitarian crisis and **forced population displacement** UNHCR, in its report on forced displacement that collects data up to mid-year, highlighted the Western Sahel region as the most affected area globally.⁵³ By mid-2020, around two million people were forcibly displaced across the region, an increase of 43% since the end of 2019. Of these, 574,600 were internally displaced persons in the first half of the year alone. Nearly two-thirds of the new internally-displaced persons were registered in **Burkina Faso** (361,400), making the country the **fastest growing population displacement crisis in the world, with more than one million people displaced within the country**. According to the UN agency, the number of people facing acute levels of hunger in Burkina Faso alone has tripled in the last year to 7.4 million. The scale of the crisis during the year prompted affected countries to seek ways to strengthen regional response capacities. Among them, the Governments of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger in October 2020 launched the so-called Bamako Process, an intergovernmental platform to promote rapid action, strengthen coordination among humanitarian and security actors and ensure humanitarian access, protection and assistance to affected populations. In turn, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Filippo Grandi, called on the international community to take urgent and sustained action to meet the growing humanitarian needs in the region, pointing to the need for more funding and international cooperation, and calling for a more strategic approach and the need for a “Marshall Plan”, urging the EU to take the lead.

As for the most significant episodes of violence recorded during the year, the start of armed clashes in the Sahel region between the jihadist coalitions represented by the JNIM and the ISGS should be highlighted. These clashes are reported to have occurred mainly in Mali and Burkina Faso. In **Niger**, in early January, suspected ISGS militants attacked a military base in Chinégodar, Tillabéri region, killing at least 89 soldiers, the deadliest attack on security forces in the country’s history, and coming just four weeks after an attack that killed 71 other Nigerien soldiers in the same region. On the other hand, the year also saw the first jihadist attack on **Ivorian** soil since March 2016. The attack, attributed to JNIM, occurred on 10 June against a border post in Kafolo, Côte d’Ivoire, on the border with Burkina Faso, killing 14 people. In response, the Government of Côte d’Ivoire announced on 13 July the creation of a special military zone in the north of the country.

Burkina Faso became the fastest growing forced displacement crisis in the world during 2020, due to the impact of continued violence in the Liptako-Gourma region

On the other hand, regarding the **security measures** implemented in the region, the year began with the meeting on January 13 between the governments of the G5 Sahel Joint Force (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger) and the French President, Emmanuel Macron, in France. It was decided to concentrate all the forces in the region of the three borders under a single command structure for the regional and French troops, prioritising the fight against the ISGS. The French Government pledged to increase its military presence in the Sahel from 4,500 troops to 5,100 under Operation Barkhane. In February, the African Union (AU) announced the temporary deployment of 3,000 additional troops to improve security in the Sahel, while in June the UN Security Council extended MINUSMA’s mandate for another 12 months, maintaining the number of troops deployed at 13,289 soldiers and 1,920 police officers. The EU also extended its role in the area and a new military mission called Takouba Task Force – “blade” in the Tuareg language– comprised of special forces from Mali and Niger and 11 European countries (Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Holland, Norway, Portugal, Sweden and the United Kingdom) joined the counter-terrorism actions in the Liptako-Gourma region. On the other hand, the EU Military Training and Assistance Mission in Mali (EUTM Mali) reported that it will extend its work to neighbouring countries, while the so-called Alliance for the Sahel, led by Spain, will continue to work on improving social and economic aspects in the area.

At the same time, **several reports were published accusing the security forces of the three countries of committing human rights violations in the context of the war on terror**. In January, Burkina Faso’s Parliament passed controversial legislation, the “Law on Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland”, which allows the army to use civilian volunteers in the fight against armed groups. The measure was questioned by a large number of Burkinabé civil society organisations, as well as by international organisations such as Human Rights Watch (HRW), due to the various allegations against the Burkinabé army in terms of abuses and human rights violations in the context of the war against jihadist groups. After the approval of the law, there were different episodes of violence perpetrated by “vigilantes” –known locally as “koglweegos” (“guardians of the jungle” in the Moore language)– who were denounced by human rights organisations for alleged killings and executions. Burkinabé security forces were also denounced by HRW for an alleged execution of 31 detainees in the northern town of Djibo on 20 April. They were also accused in June of the extrajudicial execution of 180 people found in a mass grave in northern Burkina Faso.⁵⁴ **The Observatory**

53. UNHCR, *Mid-Year Trend, 2020*, November 2020.

54. Human Rights Watch, “Burkina Faso: Security Forces Allegedly Execute 31 Detainees”, 20 April 2020; Human Rights Watch, “Burkina Faso: Residents’ Accounts Point to Mass Executions”, 8 June 2020.

for Democracy and Human Rights (ODDH) in Burkina Faso said in June that the armed forces had been responsible for the deaths of 588 civilians. Separately, MINUSMA said it had evidence that Malian and Nigerian security forces allegedly carried out 135 extrajudicial executions in Mopti, central Mali, between 1 January and 31 March. On 4 September, Niger's independent National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) accused "uncontrolled" elements of the Niger Army of the forced disappearance of more than 100 people in the Inates and Ayorou areas of the Tillabéri region between March and April. In June, Amnesty International published a report accusing the armies of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso of committing war crimes during their operations, particularly against civilians. The report states that the violations included at least 57 cases of extrajudicial executions and 142 cases of forced disappearances.⁵⁵

1.3.2. America

Colombia	
Start:	1964
Type:	System Internationalised internal
Main parties:	ELN, FARC (dissidents), paramilitary groups
Intensity:	1
Trend:	↑
Summary: In 1964, in the context of an agreement for the alternation of power between the Liberal party and the Conservative party (National Front), which excluded other political options, two armed opposition movements emerged with the goal of taking power: the ELN (made up of university students and workers, inspired by Guevara) and the FARC (a communist-oriented organisation that advocates agrarian reform). In the 1970s, various groups were created, such as the M-19 and the EPL, which ended up negotiating with the government and pushing through a new Constitution (1991) that established the foundations of a welfare state. At the end of the 1980s, several paramilitary groups emerged, instigated by sectors of the armed forces, landowners, drug traffickers and traditional politicians, aimed at defending the status quo through a strategy of terror. Drug trafficking activity influenced the economic, political and social spheres and contributed to the increase in violence. In 2016, the signing of a peace agreement with the FARC led to its demobilisation and transformation into a political party.	

The conflict in Colombia remained active during the year, with armed clashes between ELN guerrillas, state security forces and various paramilitary groups, as well as dissident groups of the demobilised FARC guerrillas. The pandemic

led the ELN to declare a one-month ceasefire in April, which was not extended in the face of the Government's refusal to respond positively.⁵⁶ Numerous voices expressed concern over the escalation of violence in the country. An analysis by Fundación Ideas para la Paz (FIP) noted that this escalation of violence had certain characteristics such as the decentralisation and fragmentation of armed groups, the multiplication of conflicts at the local level while at the same time communities' capacity to de-escalate the violence had been reduced.⁵⁷ The FIP noted that in the fourth year after the signing of the peace agreement with the FARC, clashes between the security forces and armed groups tripled, while those between the armed groups themselves increased sixfold. Most of these clashes took place between the ELN and the Clan del Golfo. According to figures compiled by the CERAC research centre, 46 people were killed in the country as a result of armed clashes involving the ELN, the security forces or other armed groups.⁵⁸ In addition, 173 people were killed in the country as a result of political violence, especially against social leaders and human rights defenders.⁵⁹ The Indepaz research centre, in its report, stated that 340 people were killed in 79 massacres during 2020.⁶⁰ The United Nations also echoed the violence in the country and in December the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights noted that 255 people had been documented to have been killed in the country in 66 massacres, highlighting the seriousness of the situation of the Nasa indigenous people, with 66 people being killed during 2020. In addition, the UN verification mission in the country noted that since the signing of the peace agreement, 244 former FARC fighters have been killed. This prompted protests in November in Bogotá by former combatants.

Armed clashes between the different armed groups and with the security forces led to the forced displacement of thousands of people. According to a report submitted by members of Congress from the Alianza Verde, Polo Democrático, Cambio Radical, Liberal, Colombia Humana and 'la U' parties, during the first six months of 2020 more than 16,000 people were displaced as a result of the violence, an increase of nearly 97%, despite the restrictions on mobility imposed by the pandemic. In the department of Cauca, disputes over control of territory between the ELN and FARC dissidents such as the Carlos Patiño or "Segunda Marquetalia" Front, caused numerous deaths and forced the displacement of thousands of people. With regard to the gender impacts of the conflict, the organisation Sisma Mujer highlighted that the pandemic worsened the situation for women human rights defenders, with violence increasing against them through attacks and murders.⁶¹

55. Amnesty International, *They Executed Some and Brought the Rest with Them: Civilian Lives at risk in the Sahel*, 10 June 2020.

56. For further information please see the summary on the peace process with the ELN in Escola de Cultura de Pau, *Peace Talks in Focus 2021. Report on Trends and Scenarios*, Barcelona: Icaria, 2021.

57. Fundación Ideas para la Paz, *Un nuevo ciclo de violencia organizada a cuatro años de la firma del Acuerdo de Paz*, 24 November 2020.

58. CERAC, *Reporte del conflicto con el ELN*, Monthly report number 8, 29 January 2021.

59. CERAC, *Monitor de Violencia Política en Colombia*, Monthly Report number 18, 11 December 2020.

60. Indepaz, *Informe de Masacres en Colombia durante el 2020*, 06 de diciembre de 2020.

61. Sisma Mujer, *Líderesas y defensoras durante la pandemia: entre la violencia sociopolítica de género y el COVID-19 (Sisma Mujer, female leaders and defenders during the pandemic: between socio-political gender violence and COVID-19)* Bulletin No. 24, 29 November 2020.

1.3.3. Asia and the Pacific

South Asia

Afghanistan	
Start:	2001
Type:	System Internationalised internal
Main parties:	Government, international coalition (led by USA), NATO, Taliban militias, warlords, ISIS (ISIS-KP)
Intensity:	3
Trend:	↓

Summary:

The country has lived with almost uninterrupted armed conflict since the invasion by Soviet troops in 1979, beginning a civil war between the armed forces (with Soviet support) and anti-Communist, Islamist guerrillas (Mujahideen). The withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1989 and the rise of the Mujahideen to power in 1992 in a context of chaos and internal confrontations between the different anti-Communist factions led to the emergence of the Taliban movement, which, at the end of the nineties, controlled almost all Afghan territory. In November 2001, after the Al-Qaeda attacks of 11 September, and the refusal of the Taliban government to hand over Osama bin Laden and other al-Qaeda leaders (on Afghan territory) the US attacked the country aided by a contingent of British forces. After the signing of the Bonn agreements, an interim government was established, led by Hamid Karzai and subsequently ratified at the polls. Since 2006 there has been an escalation of violence, motivated by the rebuilding of the Taliban militias. Following the 2014 presidential and provincial elections, the country was plunged into a crisis sparked by allegations of electoral fraud after the second round in which the two most voted leaders, Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, kept the results in the air for months. In September, an agreement was reached to create a two-headed government with Ghani as president and Abdullah as chief executive. In 2011, the international troops began their withdrawal, which was completed at the end of 2014, although the mission "Resolute Support" was deployed on the ground, with a NATO mandate to train Afghan forces and another force to carry out training and counterterrorism operations, made up of US soldiers, "Freedom Sentinel" mission.

The armed conflict in Afghanistan saw a decline in levels of violence as a result of progress in the country's peace process, although violence remained high throughout the year. Regarding the impact on civilians, the records of the UNAMA show that during 2020, a number of 3,035 civilian victims was registered, the lowest figure since 2013 and a reduction of 15% compared to 2019. The ACLED research centre's database reported 21,067 deaths as a result of violence, half the number of the previous year. Despite the peace agreement between the US government and the Taliban insurgency and the start of the intra-Afghan

talks process between the US government and the Taliban insurgency, armed clashes and serious attacks took place throughout the year, resulting in numerous deaths and injuries. These skirmishes and attacks were used as a form of pressure to condition the various talks processes and to define positions at the negotiating table. In parallel, important turning points in the peace process were also accompanied by significant reductions in violence, in some cases as a consequence of the agreement and in others as a sign of political will and trust-building measures. This was the case during the week prior to the signing of the agreement between the Taliban and the US on 29 February in Doha. A seven-day de-escalation period began on 22 February, a prerequisite for signing the agreement. In May, during the Eid al-Fitr holiday, a brief three-day ceasefire was announced by the Taliban and followed by the government. In August, coinciding with the Eid al-Adha holiday, there was a further announcement of a three-day ceasefire, which also received a positive government response. In addition, there was a more significant reduction in violence in cities during the year, while rural areas were the scene of more constant armed clashes. Prior to the signing of the peace agreement between the US and the Taliban, there were several US airstrikes that caused fatalities, some of them civilians. According to the Afghanistan Analysts Network, the main cause of the reduction in civilian deaths was less involvement in the conflict by ISIS, as well as the beginning of the withdrawal of US forces and fewer offensives by Afghan security forces, rather than a reduction in armed actions by the Taliban.⁶²

May saw one of the most serious attacks of the year, with the raid on a maternity hospital run by the NGO Médecins Sans Frontières, in which 24 people died, including several mothers, some of whom were about to give birth. In November there was another serious attack at Kabul University claimed by ISIS, in which 22 people were killed, most of them students. The attack coincided with a visit to the university by Iran's ambassador to the country and took place a day before the US presidential election. Days later, at least 30 members of the security forces were killed in a car bomb explosion in Ghazni province. Shortly afterwards, security forces announced that they had carried out an air operation against those responsible for the attack in which seven people were killed, including the Taliban leader and alleged mastermind, Hamza Waziristani. On 22 December, an attack in Kabul killed five people, four of whom were doctors.

The reduction of violence in the country was due, according to Afghanistan Analysts Network, to a lower involvement by ISIS, the beginning of the US withdrawal and fewer offensives by Afghan forces, rather than to a reduction in armed actions by the Taliban

Deborah Lyons, the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Afghanistan and head of UNAMA, noted in December that despite significant progress in the peace process, the months of October and November had seen a significant increase in violence, with 60% more civilian casualties

62. Kate Clark, "Behind the Statistics: Drop in civilian casualties masks increased Taleban violence", *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 27 October 2020.

as a result of improvised explosive devices, as well as a 25% increase in child casualties during the third quarter of 2020, with a severe increase in attacks on schools.

In parallel with the armed conflict, there were months of political crisis following the presidential elections held in September 2019. In February the Independent Electoral Commission proclaimed President Ashraf Ghani the winner with 50.64% of the vote, with Abdullah Abdullah, his main rival, obtaining 39.52%. The result was rejected by Abdullah and two parallel inauguration ceremonies took place in March, although Ghani received majority international backing. The crisis was finally resolved in May, when Abdullah agreed to lead the peace negotiations with the Taliban and appoint half of the ministers, with Ghani assuming the presidency.

India (Jammu and Kashmir)	
Start:	1989
Type:	Self-government, Identity Internationalised internal
Main parties:	Governments, Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT), Hizb-ul-Mujahideen, Jaish-e-Muhammad, United Jihad Council, JKLF
Intensity:	2
Trend:	=

Summary:

The armed conflict in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir has its origin in the dispute over the region of Kashmir which, since the independence and division of India and Pakistan, has confronted both states. On three occasions (1947 to 1948; 1965 and 1971) these countries had suffered from armed conflicts, with both of them claiming sovereignty over the region, divided between India, Pakistan and China. The armed conflict between India and Pakistan in 1947 gave rise to the current division and creation of a de facto border between both countries. Since 1989, the armed conflict has been moved to the interior of the state of Jammu and Kashmir, where a whole host of rebel groups, in favour of the complete independence of the state or unconditional adhesion to Pakistan, confront the Indian security forces. Since the beginning of the peace process between India and Pakistan in 2004, there has been a considerable reduction in the violence, although the armed groups remain active.

Armed conflict in Jammu and Kashmir remained active throughout the year. According to figures on deaths linked to armed violence compiled by the South Asia Terrorism Portal, 320 people were killed during 2020, which was a slight increase from 2019, but the death tolls of previous years were not revisited. On the other hand, the ACLED research centre pointed to a higher number of fatalities, with 455 deaths during 2020. For its part, the Jammu and Kashmir Coalition of Civil Society stated that during the first six months of 2020, 229 people died as a result of the conflict, and they denounced the extrajudicial execution of 32 civilians.

Throughout the year there were armed clashes between Indian security forces and armed insurgent groups, in parallel with the impact of the tensions with Pakistan in the border area between the two countries. In addition, civil society human rights organisations denounced serious human rights violations –such as extrajudicial executions and the simulation of armed confrontations with alleged insurgents who were in fact civilians–, arbitrary detentions of social and political activists, and significant restrictions on the use of the internet in the state. With the closure of schools due to the coronavirus pandemic, restrictions on internet access had a serious impact, impeding children's right to education. Prior to the pandemic, schools had been closed for seven months after the withdrawal of autonomy. Among the reported arrests were those of former state chief ministers Omar Abdullah and Mehbooba Mufti under the Public Security Act, which allows for detention for two years without charge or trial.

On the other hand, during the year there were several episodes related to the climate of violence in the area. In February, the armed opposition group JKLF called for a strike, which led to a total shutdown of the Kashmir Valley and parts of Jammu. **In April, legislation was passed easing the requirements for the establishment of permanent residency in Jammu and Kashmir, which was described by Kashmiri sectors and the Government of Pakistan as an attempt to alter the demographic composition of the state.** In June, Indian security forces escalated military operations against the insurgency. Eight members of the armed groups were killed in separate gun battles during joint operations by the police and the Armed Forces on the same day in the Shopian and Pampore areas. As violence in the state and armed clashes intensified, security forces were reported to be using civilians as human shields during counter-insurgency operations and clashes with armed groups. Several members of the ruling BJP were shot dead in attacks by Kashmiri armed groups. In August, coinciding with the anniversary of the withdrawal of autonomy and statehood from Jammu and Kashmir, the Indian government imposed a curfew and appointed BJP leader Manoj Sinha as commanding governor. In addition, he ordered the withdrawal of 10,000 members of the security forces because of the improved security situation in the territory. The major Kashmiri parties issued a joint statement calling for the restoration of Jammu and Kashmir's constitutionally guaranteed status. December saw the holding of the first elections since the end of autonomy in 2019 and its loss of status as a state, instead becoming a Union Territory. The local polls were held amid allegations of a lack of democracy and were reportedly won by the People's Alliance for Gupkar Declaration coalition, which brought together several Kashmiri parties under a joint demand for the restoration of autonomy and statehood to Jammu and Kashmir.

India (CPI-M)	
Start:	1967
Type:	System Interno
Main parties:	Government, CPI-M (naxalites)
Intensity:	1
Trend:	↓
Summary: The armed conflict in which the Indian government confronts the armed Maoist group the CPI-M (known as the Naxalites, in honour of the town where the movement was created) affects many states in India. The CPI-M emerged in West Bengal at the end of the sixties with demands relating to the eradication of the land ownership system, as well as strong criticism of the system of parliamentary democracy, which is considered as a colonial legacy. Since then, armed activity has been constant and it has been accompanied by the establishment of parallel systems of government in the areas under its control, which are basically rural ones. Military operations against this group, considered by the Indian government as terrorists, have been constant. In 2004, a negotiation process began which ended in failure. In the following years there was an escalation of violence that led the government to label the conflict as the main threat to national security. Since 2011 there has been a significant reduction in hostilities.	

Armed conflict with the Naxalite insurgency remained active throughout the year, although the number of people killed as a result of armed violence and clashes between security forces and the insurgency declined slightly. According to figures compiled by the South Asia Terrorism Portal a total of 239 people were killed in the conflict, including 61 civilians, 44 members of the security forces and 134 members of the armed opposition group CPI-M, the lowest death toll in the conflict since 2015. According to information released by the Ministry of the Interior, the Government considers 90 districts in 11 states to be affected by the presence of the Naxalite insurgency, although violence was reported in only 46 of these districts during the first half of 2020, down from 61 in 2019. The interior minister noted that between 2015 and August 2020, 350 members of the security forces, 963 civilians and 871 insurgents had died as a result of the armed conflict. The Ministry also highlighted the joint operations that had been carried out in the border area between the states of Andhra Pradesh and Odisha by the security forces of the two states in a coordinated manner, which had resulted in numerous arrests of insurgents. **The most serious clash of the year took place in March, when at least 17 security forces personnel were initially reported killed in clashes with the Naxalite insurgency in Chhattisgarh and 14 others were injured during an operation involving 600 police personnel, who were attacked by some 200 insurgents. However, in September, the police updated the casualty figures, stating that 23 insurgents and 17 members of the security forces had been killed.** In August, four CPI-M members were killed in Sukma district, Chhattisgarh state, in clashes with police during an operation by Indian security forces. Furthermore, CPI-M

denounced that the security forces continued to carry out extrajudicial executions, noting that the deaths of several insurgents were not the result of armed clashes, but rather that they had been executed. According to the armed group, two of its members were killed in this way in December in Odisha. CPI-M also complained that security forces are setting up camps in tribal areas, with very negative consequences for the Adivasi population. In terms of the gender impact of the armed conflict, notable was the arrest of activist VS Krishna, active in seeking justice for 11 Adivasi women who were victims of sexual violence by the police in Andhra Pradesh in 2007 and who was due to participate in the trial against these acts. The activist was accused of forcing the survivors to give false testimony against the police and her arrest was allegedly to prevent her participation in the trial.

Pakistan	
Start:	2001
Type:	System Internationalised internal
Main parties:	Government, Pakistani Armed Forces, intelligence services, Taliban militias, foreign insurgents, USA
Intensity:	2
Trend:	↓

Summary:
The armed conflict affecting the country is a result of the intervention in Afghanistan in 2001. Initially, the conflict played out in the area including the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa Province (formerly called the North-West Frontier Province). After the fall of the Taliban in Afghanistan, members of its Government and militias, as well as several insurgent groups of different nationalities, including Al-Qaeda, found refuge in Pakistan, mainly in several tribal agencies, although the leadership was spread out over several towns (Quetta, Lahore or Karachi). While Pakistan initially collaborated with the US in the search for foreign insurgents (Chechens, Uzbeks) and members of al-Qaeda, it did not offer the same cooperation when it came to the Taliban leadership. The dissatisfaction of various groups of Pakistani origin who were part of the Taliban insurgency led to the creation in December 2007 of the Pakistani Taliban movement (Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan, TTP), which began to commit attacks in the rest of Pakistan against both state institutions and civilians. With violence rising to previously unknown levels, and after a series of attacks that specifically targeted the Shiite, Ahmadiyya and Christian minorities, and to a lesser extent Sufis and Barelvis, public opinion turned in favour of eliminating the terrorist sanctuaries. In June 2014 the Army launched operation Zarb-e Azb to eradicate insurgents from the agencies of North and South Waziristan.

The armed conflict in Pakistan remained active throughout the year, but the declining trend in the violence stabilised and the intensity was once again at lower levels than in the previous year. According to violence-related mortality figures compiled by the Centre for Research and Security Studies in Pakistan, there were 600 deaths in the country as a whole during the year. However, according to figures

recorded by the South Asia Terrorism Portal, there was a slight increase from the figures compiled by the same centre the previous year, with 506 fatalities. **Khyber Pakhtunkwa province was the most affected by violence as a result of security operations against the Pakistani Taliban insurgency, as well as armed clashes and attacks that resulted in multiple fatalities.**

There were also attacks on healthcare workers administering the polio vaccine, which the Taliban oppose. Several operations by security forces in January and February against the Taliban insurgency in Dera Ismail Khan and Bajaur districts and near Peshawar in Khyber Pakhtunkwa resulted in the deaths of several Taliban fighters. In March, seven insurgents and four soldiers were killed in gun battles in North Waziristan district, according to official sources. Another similar episode occurred in late April, when nine insurgents and two soldiers were killed in gun battles in the same district, the district most severely affected by violence in the province. In July, a bomb attack in a commercial area in Parachinar in Kurram district left 20 people injured, including a minor. Another extremely serious attack took place in October in the city of Peshawar in which an explosion at a religious seminary killed at least eight people and injured 136 others. Many of those gathered were students from Khyber Pakhtunkwa and Balochistan who were attending a lecture by Afghan cleric Rahimullah Haqqani, the alleged target of the attack. A few days earlier, six members of the Armed Forces had been killed in the North Waziristan district as a result of an explosion in the military convoy in which they were travelling. In November and December, several attacks were carried out against elderly tribal leaders in Bajaur and North Waziristan districts, killing at least five. These types of attacks are repeated as a consequence of the different agreements reached with the Pakistani authorities to prevent Taliban action. In terms of the gendered impacts of the conflict, the TransAction Alliance Khyber Pakhtunkhwa denounced the shooting death of trans activist Gul Panra in Peshawar, noting that in the last five years 1,500 trans people have been victims of sexual violence and 68 have been killed. Human Rights Watch reported that there were 479 attacks against trans women in 2018. In addition, threats against women and girls by the Taliban insurgency for accessing formal education continued.

Pakistan (Balochistan)	
Start:	2005
Type:	Self-government, Identity, Resources Internationalised internal
Main parties:	Government, Pakistani Armed Forces, intelligence services, BLA, BRP, BRA, BLF and BLT, civil society, LeJ, TTP, Afghan Taliban (Quetta Shura), ISIS
Intensity:	1
Trend:	↓

Summary:

Since the creation of the state of Pakistan in 1947, Balochistan, the richest province in terms of natural resources, but with some of the highest levels of poverty in the country, has suffered from four periods of armed violence (1948, 1958, 1963-69 and 1973-77) in which the rebel forces stated their objective of obtaining greater autonomy and even independence. In 2005, the armed rebel forces reappeared on the scene, basically attacking infrastructures linked to the extraction of gas. The opposition armed group, BLA, became the main opposing force to the presence of the central government, which it accused of making the most of the wealth of the province without giving any of it back to the local population. As a result of the resurgence of the armed opposition, a military operation was started in 2005 in the province, causing displacement of the civilian population and armed confrontation. In parallel, a movement of the civilian population calls clarifying the disappearance of hundreds, if not thousands, of Baluchi at the hands of the security forces of the State.

The armed conflict in Balochistan remained active throughout the year, but there was a marked decrease in armed violence and associated fatalities. According to figures compiled by the Centre for Research and Security Studies in Pakistan, 138 deaths were recorded in the province during the year and, according to the South Asia Terrorism Portal, the death toll was 215. **However, Baloch nationalist armed groups and other armed organisations such as the Taliban and ISIS continued to be active and carried out various violent actions and clashes with Pakistani security forces. There were also attacks on infrastructure.** In January a suicide bombing claimed by ISIS against a mosque in Quetta during Friday prayers killed at least 15 people and wounded 20 others. Security forces said the mosque was run by the Afghan Taliban. In the days prior to this attack, two people had been killed and four others injured in a market attack by a dissident TTP faction called Hizbul Ahrar. Another major attack occurred in February, when an explosion near the Quetta press club killed 10 people and injured 35 others. The attack targeted members of the outlawed anti-Shia Ahlesunnat Wal Jamat organisation and may have been carried out by ISIS. Days later, the Baloch armed group BLT claimed responsibility for an attack on security forces in Singsila, Dera Bugti district, in which 16 members of the Pakistani security forces were reportedly killed. In July, an attack by BRAS (an alliance of four Baloch armed groups, BLF, BLA, BRA and BRG) in Kech district killed five soldiers. A few days later, four more soldiers were killed in a BLF attack in Awaran district. The same group claimed to have killed 190 members of the Pakistani security forces in a series of bombings and armed attacks during the first nine months of the year, although the figures could not be independently corroborated. In September, prominent journalist and women's rights advocate Shaheena Shaheen Baloch was shot dead in Kech district. Although the armed group BLA was initially accused of being behind the murder, subsequent investigations pointed to gender-based violence, highlighting the significant impact on women

in this province of what are known as “honour killings”. Another BRAS attack in October killed seven members of the security forces and seven private security guards in an attack on an Oil and Gas Development Company convoy in Gwadar district. On the other hand, human rights organisations continued to denounce the ongoing disappearances at the hands of Pakistani security forces, especially of young social activists and students.

South-east Asia and Oceania

Myanmar	
Start:	1948
Type:	Self-government, Identity Internationalised internal
Main parties:	Government, armed groups (Ceasefire signatories: ABSDF, ALP, CNF, DKBA, KNU, KNU/KNLA-PC, PNLO, RCSS, NMSP, LDU; Non-signatories: KIA, NDAA, MNDAA, SSPP/SSA, TNLA, AA, UWSA, ARSA, KNPP)
Intensity:	2
Trend:	↑

Summary:

Since 1948, dozens of armed insurgent groups of ethnic origin have confronted the government of Myanmar, demanding recognition of their particular ethnic and cultural features and calling for reforms in the territorial structure of the State or simply for independence. Since the start of the military dictatorship in 1962, the armed forces have been fighting armed groups in the ethnic states. These groups combined demands for self-determination for minorities with calls for democratisation shared with the political opposition. In 1988, the government began a process of ceasefire agreements with some of the insurgent groups, allowing them to pursue their economic activities (basically trafficking in drugs and precious stones). However, the military operations have been constant during these decades, particularly directed against the civil population in order to do away with the armed groups' bases, leading to the displacement of thousands of people. In 2011 the Government began to approach the insurgency and since then there has been a ceasefire agreements with almost all of the armed groups.

The armed conflict remained active throughout the year and, as was the case throughout 2019, the epicentre remained in Rakhine State, with constant clashes between government security forces and the armed opposition group Arakan Army (AA). According to figures compiled by ACLED, 646 people were killed during 2020 as a result of armed clashes between the security forces and the various armed opposition groups operating in the country. Most of the clashes and violence resulting in deaths took place in Rakhine State, which experienced the most intense violence. Violence also occurred in Chin, Shan and Kachin States. The Chinese government denied that it was providing weapons to armed groups operating in the border area between the two countries, in response to accusations

that it was arming insurgent groups to increase their ability to exert pressure on the country. One of the most serious episodes took place in February, when an attack on a school in Rakhine State injured 21 students. In March, 21 people were killed and more than 20 injured as a result of airstrikes by the Armed Forces in Chin State, which were trying to prevent the seizure by the AA of a military base. Thousands of people were displaced as a result of the violence, which had a particularly severe impact on the civilian population. In addition, the Government declared the AA a terrorist organisation. In May the government decreed a unilateral ceasefire that was to be extended until August (in response to the UN secretary general's call for worldwide ceasefires during the course of the COVID-19 pandemic) but which excluded the areas that served as a base for terrorist organisations and therefore left out the areas affected by the armed conflict with the AA. In July, the United Nations, four diplomatic missions in the country and 21 international humanitarian organisations (including Oxfam, the Norwegian Refugee Council and Save the Children) called for a ceasefire in Rakhine State to end the escalating violence in the north of the state and protect civilians. Between August and October, more than 36,000 people were forcibly displaced, according to the Rakhine Ethnic Congress, and in October joint air, land and sea military operations by the Armed Forces against the AA took place. In addition to clashes with the armed group AA, there were also clashes with ARSA. In June, two members of the group were killed in clashes with security forces near the border with Bangladesh. In Shan State, there was renewed fighting between the Myanmar Army and the armed opposition group RCSS. In July, the civilian population reported that civilian deaths were occurring as a result of military operations against the RCSS, which had led to hundreds of people being forcibly displaced to flee the violence. There were also clashes between the Armed Forces and the SSA-N, forcing the displacement of more than 200 people.

In November, Aung San Suu Kyi's party, the NLD, won the country's general election and obtained a parliamentary majority sufficient to form a government. International observers such as the Carter Centre certified that the elections were generally free and transparent, although they were preceded by a climate of violence that led to their cancellation in much of Rakhine state, as well as in parts of Shan and Kachin states that had been the scene of violence in the previous weeks. In October, armed clashes between the AA and security forces had escalated, resulting in dozens of casualties, according to the International Crisis Group. Following the elections and the release of the results, although the AA was in favour of allowing elections to take place in Rakhine State during December and an informal ceasefire was announced to facilitate this, they did not take place.

In terms of the gendered impacts of the armed conflict, the complaint of a woman in Rakhine State against sexual violence by three soldiers brought the use of

sexual violence in the conflict back to the agenda, which has been noted and denounced by multiple human rights organisations. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights noted that impunity for sexual and gender-based violence remained widespread.

Philippines (NPA)	
Start:	1969
Type:	System Internal
Main parties:	Government, NPA
Intensity:	1
Trend:	=
Summary:	
The NPA, the armed branch of the Communist party of the Philippines, started the armed fight in 1969 which reached its zenith during the 1980s under the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos. Although the internal purges, the democratisation of the country and the offers of amnesty weakened the support and the legitimacy of the NPA at the beginning of the 1990s, it is currently calculated that it is operational in most of the provinces in the country. After the terrorist attacks of 11th September 2001, its inclusion in the list of terrorist organisations of the USA and the EU greatly eroded confidence between the parties and, to a good degree, caused the interruption of the peace conversations with Gloria Macapagal Arroyo's government. The NPA, whose main objective is to access power and the transformation of the political system and the socio-economic model, has as its political references the Communist Party of the Philippines and the National Democratic Front (NDF), which bring together various Communist organisations. The NDF has been holding peace talks with the government since the early 1990s.	

Although the Armed Forces did not provide fatalities data associated with the armed conflict between the Government and the NPA, **the levels of violence were similar to those of the previous year.** However, the dynamics of the conflict ran alongside a clear deterioration of trust between the Duterte government and the NDF and the complete paralysis of the peace process, especially from May onwards. As it is, at the end of the year, Duterte himself said that under his term there would be no resumption of negotiations with the NDF and there would be no further ceasefire with the NPA, including the ceasefire traditionally declared by the two sides for the Christmas holidays. For its part, the NDF also closed any option of dialogue with the current government and stated its intention to engage in talks with the opposition to discuss the possible resumption of negotiations in a post-Duterte scenario. In these circumstances, both the Government and the Armed Forces declared that the State's counter-insurgency strategy involved an intensification of military operations against the NPA and an increase in so-called direct local peace negotiations with NPA combatants and violence-affected communities. Under Executive Order No. 70 and the implementation of the so-called Whole-of-Nation Approach, the National Task Force to

End Local Communist Armed Conflict (a body made up of several state agencies) has conducted hundreds of direct talks with NPA fighters in the provinces where the group operates (more than 30, according to the NPA itself). According to the government, such direct negotiations with the fighters are based on the idea that there is a growing disconnect between the NPA fighters and the leadership of the communist movement (mainly with the NDF negotiating panel, which has been resident in the Netherlands for decades). According to Duterte himself, these local talks, which also include local governments and address the demands of communities in conflict areas, are leading to a high number of combatants turning themselves in and deciding to enter a process of disarmament and reintegration into civil society. **The Armed Forces believe that at the current rate of NPA surrenders and defections, the NPA will become an irrelevant group in the near future.** For its part, the NDF criticised these direct negotiations at the local level as a counter-insurgency strategy that seeks more to demobilise the insurgency than to resolve the armed conflict and address its structural causes. According to the NDF, this strategy of offering housing and jobs to combatants has been practised since the time of dictator Ferdinand Marcos, without succeeding in dismantling or eroding the communist movement.

In terms of the dynamics of the armed conflict, it is worth noting that the unilateral truce that both the Government and the NPA had decreed at the end of 2019 on the occasion of the Christmas holidays, which ended on 7 January, opened the door to the resumption of peace negotiations at the end of that same month with the facilitation of the Norwegian government, but in the end no new round of negotiations took place. **Shortly after the spread of the pandemic caused by COVID-19 in March, both the government and the NDF unilaterally declared the suspension of offensives** (the government, between 19 March and 15 April, arguing the need to concentrate the efforts of state security forces on containing the coronavirus; and the NDF, between 26 March and 15 April, in response to the call for a global ceasefire by UN Secretary-General António Guterres). On 15 April, the NDF extended the ceasefire until 30 April, but the Government decided not to do so, citing numerous ceasefire violations by the NPA (according to Manila, 26 soldiers were killed between 15 March and 23 April in 36 NPA attacks in 23 provinces). Similarly, the Communist Party of the Philippines stated that 18 NPA combatants and 31 soldiers were killed in the 36 days of their ceasefire. Following the end of the cessation of hostilities, the Government announced its intention to increase its counter-insurgency operations against the NPA, threatening to impose martial law if the NPA continued to obstruct the delivery of emergency aid and its attacks on military personnel engaged in humanitarian tasks, and publicly stated that it would not meet with the NDF again. As a result of the intensified violence, in the first 10 days of May, 17 NPA combatants were killed in clashes with State security forces and agencies, while

at least 26 other combatants were killed between 13 and 19 May in clashes in the provinces of Agusan del Norte and Surigao del Sur. The levels of violence during the following months until the end of the year were relatively stable. It is worth noting that in October the PCF ordered the NPA to step up its attacks on Chinese companies involved in infrastructure projects, which it accuses of polluting the environment and damaging the ancestral territories of several national minorities in the country of militarising the regions in which they operate, including those historically inhabited by indigenous peoples (Lumad); or even of eroding the marine resources of the East Philippine (or South China) Sea, in violation of Philippine sovereignty. In December, after the Armed Forces advised Duterte not to call the traditional Christmas ceasefire, the President declared that there would be no more ceasefires under his rule.

While Duterte stated his intention to weaken the NPA by encouraging surrenders and defections, during the year he also acknowledged that terrorism remains the country's main threat, identifying the NPA as the actor with the greatest capacity to destabilise the country (ahead of the armed opposition group Abu Sayyaf). According to data made public by the Government in July, **the number of military personnel killed in clashes with (or attacks by) the NPA from 1975 to mid-2020 was more than 13,300, more than four times the number of military casualties inflicted by the MNLF and MILF.** Some media estimated the number of people who may have died in the armed conflict to be around 53,000.

Philippines (Mindanao)	
Start:	1991
Type:	Self-government, Identity, System Internationalised internal
Main parties:	Government, Abu Sayyaf, BIFF, Islamic State of Lanao/ Dawlah Islamiyah/ Maute Group, Ansarul Khilafah Mindanao, Toraike group, factions of MILF and MNLF
Intensity:	2
Trend:	↓

Summary:

The current situation of violence in Mindanao, where several armed groups are confronting the Government and, occasionally each other, is closely linked to the long-lasting armed conflict between Manila and the MNFL, and later the MILF, two organizations fighting for the self-determination of the Moro people. The failure to implement the 1996 peace agreement with the MNLF meant that some factions of this group have not fully demobilized and sporadically take part in episodes of violence, while the difficulties that emerged during the negotiation process between the MILF and the Government encouraged the creation of the BIFF, a faction of the group that opposes this process and was created in 2010 by the former commander of the MILF, Ameril Umbra Kato. On another front, since the 90s, the group Abu Sayyaf has been fighting to create an independent Islamic state in

the Sulu archipelago and the western regions of Mindanao (south). Initially this group recruited disaffected members of other armed groups like the MILF or the MNLF, but then moved away ideologically from both of these organizations and resorted more and more systematically to kidnappings, extortion and bomb attacks, which lead the group to be included on the USA and EU lists of terrorist organizations. Finally, it is important to note that the emergence of ISIS on the international scene lead to the emergence of many groups in Mindanao that swore allegiance and obedience to ISIS. In 2016, this group claimed authorship for the first large attack in Mindanao and announced its intentions to strengthen its structure and increase its attacks in the region.

of the peace agreement between the government and the MILF and the institutional deployment of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), the levels of violence in certain regions of Mindanao experienced a certain reduction from previous years. **In 2020, as in previous years, there were clashes between the Armed Forces and several groups operating in Mindanao that have pledged allegiance to ISIS (such as the Abu Sayyaf, the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters, the Maute Group or Ansarul Khilafa), but there were also episodes of community and clan violence (known locally as rido), mainly over land issues; as well as skirmishes between factions of the MILF (which is in the process of demobilisation and reintegration), between factions of the MNLF, or between these groups and local militias.** While dozens of people were killed in communal clashes or by MILF or MNLF factions, most of the violence in the south of the country was part of counter-insurgency operations against armed groups close to ISIS, in which the Armed Forces used airstrikes on a recurrent basis. In October, the Armed Forces stated that between January and September more than 100 ISIS-linked fighters had been killed, 227 had surrendered and around 30 had been arrested. Most of the fatalities were from the Abu Sayyaf (55), while the rest were from the BIFF (28) or the Maute Group (24).

In February, a spokesman for the Armed Forces stated that they expected to defeat the Abu Sayyaf militarily –in recent years the main armed group in Mindanao– by the end of March. However, the dynamics of the conflict in the months that followed seemed to belie this assertion. In fact, **the US Department of Defense released a report in August noting that despite Washington's uninterrupted support for the Armed Forces and Police of the Philippines, increased counter-insurgency operations from Manila, and the declaration of martial law in Mindanao between May 2017 and 31 December 2019, both the operational and warfare capabilities of armed groups in the south of the country and their recruitment capacity had remained relatively unchanged since the end of the siege of Marawi City in late 2017.** It should be recalled that in that siege, in which the city was practically destroyed after five months of high-intensity fighting and 98% of its population had to be forcibly displaced, a large part of the structure of the armed groups that participated in it was decimated

and most of their leaders were killed. The Government stated that it expected the reconstruction of the city to be completed by 2021 or the first quarter of 2022, but by the end of the year some 127,000 people had still not been able to return to their homes. According to some analysts, this offers several armed groups (especially the Maute Group) strong recruitment capacity.

As for the Abu Sayyaf, the group was at the centre of some of the major violence during the year. These include, for example, an attack in Patikul (Sulu province) in mid-April in which 11 soldiers were killed and 14 others injured, or the attack in the town of Jolo in late August in which two people blew themselves up with explosive devices that detonated consecutively, killing 15 people and injuring 74 others. According to the Government, this attack was in retaliation for the killing in a battle in July of Hatib Hajan Sawadjaan, leader of one of the most active Abu Sayyaf factions. According to some sources, Sawadjaan took control of the group after the 2017 death of Isnilon Hapilon, recognised as the ISIS emir in the southern Philippines. According to some sources, Sawadjaan was considered the *de facto* leader of ISIS in Mindanao, and had promoted new forms of action such as suicide bombings, a practice that had not been used in Mindanao since the beginning of the conflict in the 1970s. Shortly after the attack in Jolo, the government stated that since the consolidation of ISIS in the region, and most especially since the aforementioned siege of the city of Marawi, there have been five such attacks, the largest in January 2019 (23 people were killed and 109 injured after the explosion of two devices in the cathedral of Jolo), orchestrated by Sawadjaan himself. Following Sawadjaan's death, the faction he commanded in Sulu (also known as Ajang-Ajang, and operating in Sulu, Tawi-Tawi and even the Malaysian state of Sabah) is believed to have been led by his nephew, Mudzimar "Mundi" Sawadjaan (several of his family members were killed in combat during the year). The Abu Sayyaf is a group with little hierarchical structure in recent years and with an internal organisation very much determined by the insular nature of the area in which it operates, with the other two factions of the group being led by Furuji Indama in Basilan and by Radullan Sahiron in Sulu. The Sawadjaan and Indama factions declared their allegiance to ISIS, while the Sahiron factions (who fought with group founder Abdurajak Janjalani and received Abu Sayyaf leadership from Khadaffy Janjalani after his death in 2006) preferred to keep their distance from the growing ISIS-driven articulation of armed groups in Mindanao.

During the year the government declared that the group was being seriously degraded by counter-insurgency operations, the neutralisation of some of its leaders (such as Sawadjaan himself or Abduljihad Susukan in Davao in mid-August) and the surrender of its fighters (in October alone the government declared that a hundred members of the Abu Sayyaf entered

a demobilisation and reintegration programme), but at the same time acknowledged that it remains one of the main threats to national security. According to Manila, 83 people have been killed (20 soldiers and 63 civilians) and more than 500 people (70 police or military personnel and 435 civilians) have been injured since 2009 in the 47 bombings carried out by the Abu Sayyaf in the provinces of Sulu, Basilan and Zamboanga. Similarly, the Government highlighted the group's increased piracy activities in the Sulu Sea and in the waters near the Malaysian state of Sabah. While the group has focused its activities on kidnapping (it has abducted 39 Indonesian nationals between 2016 and 2019 alone) and attacking small vessels, it has also on occasion carried out attacks on larger merchant vessels sailing between China and Australia. In this regard, in view of the increase in these types of activities during the year, the Governments of Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines reiterated their intention to strengthen counter-terrorism cooperation in the region. In addition, the Government also highlighted the group's ability to recruit foreign fighters. Several analysts pointed out that many of the suicide attacks in recent years were carried out by foreign nationals (Egypt, Indonesia or Morocco). Thirty-nine non-Filipino fighters were killed in the siege of Marawi City, and in 2018 the government identified around 100 foreign fighters in the region, mostly from Indonesia and Malaysia, but also from Arab countries, Europe and China's Xinjiang region.

In addition to the fighting between the Armed Forces and the Abu Sayyaf in the Sulu Archipelago and the Zamboanga Peninsula, other groups were also very active in other regions of Mindanao. In the Maguindanao and North Cotabato region, the BIFF faction known as the Toraife Group (led by Esmael Abdulmalik, alias Commander Toraife) saw some significant violence during the year (in March, for example, 14 BIFF fighters and four soldiers were killed in a clash in Maguindanao), but the other two factions of the group (led respectively by Imam Minimbang, alias Major Karialan, and Esmael Abubakar, alias Major Bungos) also carried out several armed actions in the region. In Lanao del Sur province, and especially in Marawi City, the so-called Maute Group also staged several episodes of violence and, according to the Government, continued to recruit fighters from among the tens of thousands of people still displaced by the 2017 battle for Marawi. Following the death of the Maute brothers and their successor, Abu Dar, the group is now led by Ker Mimbantas (alias Commander Zacarias). Finally, it is worth noting that in the regions of South Cotabato, Sarangani or General Santos, the most active insurgency was Ansar Khilafa, even though a military operation in September led to the death of its leader Jeoffrey Nilong (alias commander Momoy), while in the central areas of Mindanao the armed group led by Salahuddin Hassan (who was among the first to pledge allegiance to the new ISIS caliph, Al-Qurashi) was also operational.

Thailand (south)	
Start:	2004
Type:	Self-government, Identity Internal
Main parties:	Government, secessionist armed opposition groups
Intensity:	1
Trend:	↓

Summary:

The conflict in the south of Thailand dates back to the beginning of the 20th century, when the then Kingdom of Siam and the British colonial power on the Malaysian peninsula decided to split the Sultanate of Pattani, leaving some territories under the sovereignty of what is currently Malaysia and others (the southern provinces of Songkhla, Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat) under Thai sovereignty. During the entire 20th century, there had been groups that had fought to resist the policies of political, cultural and religious homogenisation promoted by Bangkok or to demand the independence of these provinces, of Malay-Muslim majority. The conflict reached its moment of culmination in the 1960s and 70s and decreased in the following decades, thanks to the democratisation of the country. However, the coming into power of Thaksin Shinawatra in 2001, involved a drastic turn in the counterinsurgency policy and preceded a breakout of armed conflict from which the region has been suffering since 2004. The civil population, whether Buddhist or Muslim, is the main victim of the violence, which is not normally vindicated by any group.

Levels of violence in the south of the country fell substantially from previous years and reached an all-time low in recent decades. According to sources at the Deep South Watch research centre, 110 people were killed and 160 injured in the southern provinces of Yala, Pattani, Narathiwat and Songkhla in 2020. These fatality figures are a clear decrease from the 180 fatalities recorded in 2019 and previous years (218 in 2018, 235 in 2017, 307 in 2016, 246 in 2015, 341 in 2014, while in the previous four years fatalities were always above 450). According to some analysts, this decline in conflict-related mortality is mainly due to the effects of the pandemic caused by COVID-19 and, in particular, to the decision of the BRN, the armed group with the largest territorial presence and war capacity, to begin direct peace talks with the Government in January. On several occasions during the year, the Government stressed the need for a reduction in the levels of violence in order to create an atmosphere conducive to addressing the substantive aspects of the negotiations between the two sides. In this connection, it should be noted that **on 3 April the BRN declared a cessation of all its offensive armed actions, citing humanitarian reasons and emphasising the need to prioritise the containment of the COVID-19 pandemic.** BRN's statement came on the same day that the UN Secretary-General António Guterres, made a new appeal to all parties involved in conflicts around the world to declare a ceasefire. However, the communiqué issued by the BRN stated that the cessation of hostilities would be in force as long as there were no armed actions

against them by the State security forces. Shortly after the BRN communiqué was made public, the Armed Forces announced their intention to continue their actions to preserve legality and stability in the south of the country. During the month of April there was a substantial reduction in military hostilities between the parties, although at the end of the month tensions between the government and the BRN increased again after the armed forces killed three alleged insurgents accused of organising attacks during Ramadan. Two days later, two soldiers were killed in the district of Nong Chik (Pattani province), an episode that was considered an act of revenge by the Armed Forces and, according to some media, symbolised the end of the truce by the BRN. According to some media reports, civil society organisations such as The Patani and the Islamic Medical Association were instrumental in the BRN's decision to declare a cessation of hostilities on humanitarian grounds. The head of the Government's negotiating panel, Wanlop Rugsanaoh, welcomed the BRN ceasefire, but also indicated that the reduction in mortality during the ceasefire period could also be due to other factors. Another aspect that could denote BRN's increased commitment to the negotiated conflict resolution process was its decision to sign a Deed of Commitment for the Protection of Children from the Effects of Armed Conflict with the Swiss NGO Geneva Call. After several years of joint work with Geneva Call, the signing of this commitment took place in mid-February, shortly after the start of negotiations with the Government. BRN pledged to continue to work for better compliance with international humanitarian law and international child protection and education standards. It should be recalled that historically in southern Thailand there have been attacks on schools and teachers.

Despite the reduction in violence and the start of direct talks between the Government and BRN (which held two rounds of negotiations in January and March, but maintained remote communication throughout the year), **the Government again extended the emergency decree that has been in place in southern Thailand for 15 years and has been extended more than 60 times.** As in previous years, this decision was criticised by congressmen and national and international human rights organisations for encouraging impunity for the Armed Forces in containing the insurgency. In August, however, the Army recommended that the Government withdraw emergency measures from four districts in the southern provinces on the grounds that the security situation had improved markedly in recent years. According to data from the Armed Forces made public in that month, the number of fatalities compared to the previous year had decreased by 70%. In terms of conflict dynamics, some of the most notable violence of the year occurred in February, when six combatants were killed in Narathiwat in clashes with the army; in mid-March, when 30 people were injured after an explosive device exploded in front of the headquarters of the Southern Border Provinces Administration Centre; in late April, when a military

operation killed three combatants and triggered the end of the BRN truce; in mid-July, when two bombs exploded in Pattani, in which 10 people were injured; and in mid-September, when clashes took place between the Armed Forces and a group of insurgents that ended with the death of six of the latter in Pattani province.

1.3.4. Europe

Eastern Europe

Ukraine (east)	
Start:	2014
Type:	Government, Identity, Self-government Internationalised internal
Main parties:	Government, armed actors in the eastern provinces, Russia
Intensity:	1
Trend:	↓
Summary: Considered in transition since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 and a country of great geostrategic importance, Ukraine is undergoing a major socio-political crisis and armed conflict in its eastern regions as the scenario of the most serious crisis between the West and Russia since the Cold War. Preceded by a cluster of hotspots across the country (mass pro-European and anti-government demonstrations, the fall of President Viktor Yanukovich and his regime, the annexation of Crimea by Russia, anti-Maidan protests and the emergence of armed groups in the east), the situation in eastern Ukraine degenerated into armed conflict in the second quarter of 2014, pitting pro-Russian separatist militias, supported by Moscow, against state forces under the new pro-European authorities. Over time, issues such as the status of the eastern provinces were added to the international geostrategic dimension (political, economic and military rivalry between Russia and the West in Eastern Europe and Russia's demonstration of force for the benefit of its own public opinion, among other issues). Affecting the provinces of Donetsk and Luhansk, the war has had great impact on the civilian population, especially in terms of forced displacement. The war runs parallel to a peace process with negotiations at various levels and formats.	

Violence in eastern Ukraine declined, especially in the second half of the year, with the renewal of the ceasefire at the end of July. However, the conflict continued to have human security impacts, some of them exacerbated in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Around one hundred people died in 2020, according to the ACLED research centre's database, compared with about 400 in 2019. In the first half of the year, the OSCE Special Monitor Mission identified numerous ceasefire violations, with periods of both increases and decreases in incidents in various areas of the conflict zone. Of the three areas designated in previous years as areas for the withdrawal of forces (Stanytsia Luhanska, Zolote and Petrivske), ceasefire violations were recorded in Petrivske and, more occasionally, also in

Zolote. Ceasefire violations intensified in February and early May, as well as during periods in May and June. Incidents in early May, with air raids in several locations amid the pandemic and confinement measures, resulted in six minors being injured –in addition to adult civilian casualties– prompting UN demands for compliance with international humanitarian law and support for the UN Secretary-General's call for a global ceasefire. UNICEF gave a balance of nine attacks on schools between the beginning of the year and May, five of them in April, despite Ukraine's 2019 accession to the Safe Schools Declaration, which commits to the protection of education in conflicts. The OSCE mission also observed throughout the year the presence of weapons in violation of withdrawal line restrictions, including next to populated areas and civilian crossing points, as well as the presence of mines and unexploded ordnance, which caused a number of casualties. According to OSCE, more civilians were killed by mines than in the previous year. **Within the framework of the Trilateral Contact Group, the parties to the conflict reached an agreement on 23 July on measures to strengthen the ceasefire, which entered into force on 27 July.** Following the agreement, the levels of violence and ceasefire violations were significantly reduced. The ceasefire was generally respected, despite incidents. Among them, in November the OSCE reported that 44% of ceasefire violations since the agreement occurred in areas around the Donetsk water filtering station. December saw a spike in ceasefire violations.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact on the security of the population affected by the conflict. There were closures of the crossing points of the Line of Contact (line of separation of forces established by the 2015 Minsk Agreement), which impacted elderly people in particular, who were unable to cross to receive their pensions and allowances. Between mid-March and June all crossings were closed, in June two were partially reopened, and in December only two were still open. In 2020, 3 million individual crossings were recorded at the crossing points (only 22% of the 2019 total). Disagreements and the pandemic blocked discussions on taking additional steps. The Norwegian Refugee Council warned in September that **the economic consequences of the pandemic negatively impacted eight out of ten families in the Donetsk and Lugansk regions in terms of food security and livelihoods** through increased prices of food and hygiene products, additional transport costs and loss of household income in the quarantine months. OHCHR also warned that the pandemic had exacerbated the difficulties faced by the conflict-affected population in eastern Ukraine, especially the impact of freedom of movement restrictions on economic and social rights, including loss of access to health care, education, pensions and livelihoods.⁶³ The pandemic led Ukraine into the worst recession in decades, according to another study by several UN agencies, which warned of the risk of nine million people sliding into poverty.⁶⁴ Although it did not include separate data for

63. ACNUDH, *Impact of COVID-19 on Human Rights in Ukraine*, December 2020.

64. UN WOMEN, FAO, UNDP, *Analytical report COVID-19 in Ukraine: Impact on Households and Businesses*, October 2020.

the eastern areas, OCHA warned that the consequences would be devastating for the population in the conflict zones. Some analysts also warned of the risk of a serious humanitarian crisis in the eastern regions and that this could affect the course of the conflict. By the end of the year, 3.4 million people were in need of humanitarian assistance because of the conflict. Civil society organisations and international agencies also warned of the increase in domestic violence against women in the country as a whole.

Russia and the Caucasus

Armenia – Azerbaijan (Nagorno-Karabakh)	
Start:	2020
Type:	Self-government, Identity, Territory International
Main parties:	Azerbaijan, Armenia, self-proclaimed Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh,
Intensity:	3
Trend:	↑
Summary: The conflict between the two countries regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh region, an enclave with an Armenian majority which is formally part of Azerbaijan but which enjoys de facto independence, lies in the failure to resolve the underlying issues of the armed conflict that took place between December 1991 and 1994. This began as an internal conflict between the region's self-defence militias and the Azerbaijani security forces over the sovereignty and control of Nagorno-Karabakh and gradually escalated into an inter-state war between Azerbaijan and neighbouring Armenia. The armed conflict, which claimed 20,000 lives and forced the displacement of 200,000 people, as well as enforcing the ethnic homogenisation of the population on either side of the ceasefire line, gave way to a situation of unresolved conflict in which the central issues are the status of Nagorno-Karabakh and the return of the population, and which involved sporadic violations of the ceasefire. Since the 1994 ceasefire there have been several escalations of violence, such as the one in 2016 which led to several hundred fatalities. In 2020, armed conflict broke out again.	

The war over Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces resumed in September, with more than 5,000 people being killed, mostly military personnel, and tens of thousands of displaced persons, mostly Armenians. The war ended in November with a tripartite agreement between Azerbaijan, Armenia and Russia –brokered by the latter– that marked a complete reversal of the pre-war status quo: it ratified the partition of Nagorno-Karabakh, assigning to Azerbaijan the areas within Nagorno-Karabakh seized by Baku since September and declared the recovery by Azerbaijan of all areas adjacent to Nagorno-Karabakh, while leaving the status of the region unresolved. The agreement was welcomed in Azerbaijan as a victory

The war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh resumed, with several thousand casualties and a complete shake-up of the status quo in the region

for the country and Armenia's capitulation, while the Armenian and Nagorno-Karabakh authorities presented it to their populations as inevitable and a means to avoid the loss of the entire territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. **The war was preceded by a military escalation of several days in July on the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan, with the use of heavy weapons and more than a dozen deaths.**

The armed conflict between Armenian and Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijani forces started on 27 September, with mutual accusations regarding its initiation. The Government of Azerbaijan launched a large-scale offensive that day, according to Baku, in response to attacks by Armenia on its armed forces and civilian settlements. Meanwhile, Armenia accused Azerbaijan of starting the war with its offensive. In the background, among other elements, analysts pointed to Azerbaijan's weariness with the status quo –due to the fact that the seven districts adjacent to Nagorno-Karabakh and from which its Azerbaijani population was forcibly displaced by the 1990s war had remained under Armenian control ever since. With the outbreak of war both states declared martial law and military mobilisation. Hostilities took place in various areas around the Line of Contact, which was broken by Azerbaijani military forces, extending to districts around Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as to the Nagorno-Karabakh region itself, including frequent air raids on the capital, Stepanakert. Some towns in Armenia and Azerbaijan close to the conflict zone were also affected by attacks, such as the Azerbaijani towns of Ganja (12 killed and 40 wounded in air raids in mid-October according to Azerbaijan) and Mingachevir and Barda (with some 30 killed and more than 80 wounded in air raids between 27 and 28 October), as well as areas around the town of Vardenis in Armenia.

The resumption of the war triggered international calls for a ceasefire. Turkey, for its part, expressed its support for Azerbaijan and pledged to support it in every way, opening the door to military resources. Armenia accused Turkey of involvement in the conflict, including the sending by Turkey of fighters from Syria to fight alongside the Azerbaijani forces. Media reported the presence of fighters from the Syrian war in Azerbaijan in support of Baku. Turkey and Azerbaijan denied the allegations. Turkey provided military support through training and the supply of weaponry, including armed drones. There were several attempts at a truce that failed. Two days after the announcement of the military seizure by Azerbaijan of the city of Shusha/Shushi –the second largest city in Nagorno-Karabakh and of great symbolic and geostrategic importance, from which the seizure of Stepanakert could be undertaken at any moment– **the parties announced an agreement, which entered into force on 10 November and contained**

nine points, including a full ceasefire and cessation of hostilities, the division of Nagorno-Karabakh, the deployment of Russian peacekeepers, Azerbaijani control of all adjacent districts –except the Lachin corridor connecting Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia, which was to be taken over by Russian forces– the return of the displaced population to Nagorno-Karabakh and adjacent areas, and the unblocking of transport links, among others.⁶⁵ The truce mostly remained in force, although some ceasefire violations were reported on several days in December in the Hadrut region in mid-December. The handover of the Kelbajar district to Azerbaijan was delayed to 25 November, while those of Agdam and Lachin took place on the scheduled dates of 20 November and 1 December. In December, in turn, several prisoner exchanges took place.

The war resulted in more than 5,000 military fatalities and more than one hundred civilian fatalities. Azerbaijan reported 2,783 military and 94 civilian fatalities, as well as 1,245 military casualties and more than 400 civilian injuries. For their part, Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh put the number of military deaths in their ranks at 2,718, with 54 civilian fatalities. The civilian casualties included minors. Several hundred servicemen were missing –one hundred from Azerbaijan, and several hundred from Armenia. **Several tens of thousands of Armenians –100,000 according to some media figures, 130,000 according to UNICEF– were displaced by the war.** Amnesty International verified and denounced the use of cluster bombs by Armenia and Azerbaijan, as well as other types of projectiles against densely populated areas. UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet denounced indiscriminate attacks in populated areas in and around Nagorno-Karabakh and called for investigations into possible war crimes. HRW noted and reported ill-treatment by Azerbaijani forces of Armenian military prisoners. The war resulted in damage to civilian infrastructure, including extensive damage to residential buildings, as well as to cultural and religious heritage. According to UNICEF, 76 schools and kindergartens were damaged between the end of September and the end of October. As of mid-December, the main humanitarian issues according to the ICRC included locating missing persons, access to all prisoners of war, food supplies and winter items for the displaced or returning population, shelter support, mental health and psychosocial support, civilian infrastructure repairs, addressing the increase in coronavirus cases, among others.

The November ceasefire agreement created a political and social crisis in Armenia, with a strong rejection of the pact, protest demonstrations and the storming of government buildings by demonstrators. The mobilisations continued in the weeks that followed. Opposition sectors issued an ultimatum to Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinian to resign, and activists

launched a campaign of civil disobedience and street blockades following Pashinian's rejection of the ultimatum. Several ministers (Defence, Foreign Affairs, Economy) left their posts in the weeks following the agreement.

South-east Europe

Turkey (southeast)	
Start:	1984
Type:	Self-government, Identity Internationalised internal
Main parties:	Government, PKK, TAK, ISIS
Intensity:	2
Trend:	↓
Summary:	
The PKK, created in 1978 as a political party of a Marxist-Leninist nature and led by Abdullah Öcalan, announced in 1984, an armed offensive against the government, undertaking a campaign of military rebellion to reclaim the independence of Kurdistan, which was heavily responded to by the government in defence of territorial integrity. The war that was unleashed between the PKK and the government particularly affected the Kurdish civil population in the southeast of Turkey, caught in the crossfire and the victims of the persecutions and campaigns of forced evacuations carried out by the government. In 1999, the conflict took a turn, with the arrest of Öcalan and the later communication by the PKK of giving up the armed fight and the transformation of their objectives, leaving behind their demand for independence to centre on claiming the recognition of the Kurdish identity within Turkey. Since then, the conflict has shifted between periods of ceasefire (mainly between 2000 and 2004) and violence, coexisting alongside democratisation measures and attempts at dialogue (Democratization Initiative in 2008, Oslo Dialogue in 2009-2011 and the Imrali process in 2013-2015). In 2015 the war was restarted. The armed conflict has caused around 40,000 fatalities since the 80s. The war in Syria once again laid bare the regional dimension of the Kurdish issue and the cross-border scope of the PKK issue, whose Syrian branch took control of the predominantly Kurdish areas in the country.	

The conflict continued to be active in southeastern Turkey and especially in northern Iraq, where Turkey stepped up its attacks against the PKK at various times during the year in a regional scenario in which tensions between Kurdish actors increased. **The death toll fell.** According to International Crisis Group, 292 people died in 2020 (compared to 468 in 2019), of which the majority (217 people) were PKK members. ACLED counted 538 fatalities in 2020 (up from more than 970 fatalities in 2019).

Turkish Army operations continued in areas of eastern and southeastern Turkey, including parts of the provinces of Agri, Van, Bitlis, Hakkari and Sirnak. However, in 2020, the bulk of the conflict-related fatalities occurred

65. See the summary on Armenia-Azerbaijan (Nagorno-Karabakh) in Escola de Cultura de Pau, *Peace Talks in Focus 2021. Report on Trends and Scenarios*. Barcelona: Icaria, 2021.

in northern Iraq. In March, Turkey announced the death of one of the members of the PKK Executive Committee and co-founder of the women's branch of the guerrilla army, Nazife Bilen (alias Hacer Hilal), in an intelligence operation in the Qandil region. Turkey launched Operation Eagle Claw against the group in June around the Qandil Mountains, Sinjar and the Makhmur district, all in northern Iraq and strategic areas for the PKK. This was followed by Operation Tiger Claw –ground, with air support– in Duhok province (northern Iraq). Turkey claimed its right to attack those who attacked it. For its part, the PKK claimed responsibility for numerous guerrilla attacks against the Turkish army in the area of Haftanin (Dohuk), claiming to have caused more than 200 military casualties between the end of June and July alone. Murat Karayilan, a member of the PKK Executive Committee, stated that the situation in Haftanin showed that the PKK could cope with Turkey's modern military technology. He further stated that **the group demanded recognition of Kurdish identity and rights relating to culture and language and self-rule, with a solution within Turkey.**

On the regional level, tensions increased between the PKK and the KDP, the ruling Kurdish party in the Kurdish region of northern Iraq, and between the PKK and the Iraqi government. The KDP deployed forces in April west of the Qandil Mountains, as well as in October northeast of Dohuk, and established checkpoints around localities surrounding Gare Mountain –an area with PKK camps. The armed group warned that deployments of Kurdish forces linked to the KDP in areas where PKK bases are located resembled preparations for war. Furthermore, in October the Iraqi government and the KRG reached an agreement on the status of Sinjar (Nineveh governorate), which shared jurisdiction between them in administrative, security and reconstruction matters, among other aspects, and which included the expulsion of PKK forces. The PKK criticised the agreement. As part of that agreement, Iraqi troops were deployed in November to the Sinjar district. In mid-December, there were clashes between Kurdish forces linked to the KDP and the PKK in the area of Amedi (Dohuk province), resulting in two deaths and several injuries. Two days later there were clashes between members of the PKK and YPG (Syrian Kurdish guerrillas linked to the PKK) forces on the one hand, and the Peshmerga on the other, around the Fish Khabur border crossing (Dohuk, bordering with Syria), sending alarm bells ringing on the risk of intra-Kurdish conflict.

In the political and social arena in Turkey, **mass arrests of Kurdish political representatives and civil activists continued, as well as the dismissal of elected Kurdish mayors.** Of the 65 municipalities in which the pro-Kurdish HDP party won the mayoralty in the 2019 elections, it was ruling in only five of them in October 2020, due to their forced ouster by the Turkish authorities. Several dozen co-mayors remained in prison. The HDP called on the Council of Europe and the EU Committee of the

Regions to take action. The new Deva Parti party, led by former AKP economy minister Ali Babacan, described the arrests of the HDP mayors in May as arbitrary. Some press reports indicated that Babacan would be in favour of greater linguistic freedom and autonomy for the Kurdish population. On the other hand, Mithat Sancar was appointed new co-leader of the HDP, while his co-leader, Pervin Buldan, saw his post renewed and called for a new constitution with guarantees for all identities and beliefs. **In March, the government also authorised a visit to imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan by his brother, Mehmet Ocalan,** in the context of tensions following a forest fire on the island where the prison is located. It was the first visit from a family member for seven months, while his lawyers continued to be denied visitation rights (the last was in 2019, after eight years without a visit).

1.3.5. Middle East

Mashreq

Egypt (Sinai)	
Start:	2014
Type:	System Internationalised internal
Main parties:	Government, Ansar Beit al-Maqdis (ABM) or Sinai Province (branch of ISIS), other armed groups (Ajnad Misr, Majlis Shura al-Mujahideen fi Aknaf Bayt al-Maqdis, Katibat al-Rabat al-Jihadiya, Popular Resistance Movement, Liwaa al-Thawra Hassam), Israel
Intensity:	2
Trend:	↓
Summary:	The Sinai Peninsula has become a growing source of instability. Since the ouster of Hosni Mubarak in 2011, the area has reported increasing insurgent activity that initially directed its attacks against Israeli interests. This trend raised many questions about maintaining security commitments between Egypt and Israel after the signing of the Camp David Accords in 1979, which led to the withdrawal of Israeli forces from the peninsula. However, alongside the bumpy evolution of the Egyptian transition, jihadist groups based in the Sinai have shifted the focus of their actions to the Egyptian security forces, especially after the coup d'état against the Islamist government of Mohamed Mursi (2013). The armed groups, especially Ansar Beit al-Maqdis (ABM), have gradually demonstrated their ability to act beyond the peninsula, displayed the use of more sophisticated weapons and broadened their targets to attack tourists as well. ABM's decision to pledge loyalty to the organisation Islamic State (ISIS) in late 2014 marked a new turning point in the evolution of the conflict. Its complexity is determined by the influence of multiple factors, including the historical political and economic marginalisation that has stoked the grievances of the Bedouins, the majority population in the Sinai; the dynamics of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict; and regional turmoil, which has facilitated the movement of weapons and fighters to the area.

The armed conflict between the Egyptian security forces and the affiliate of the armed group ISIS, which operates mainly in the North Sinai area, continued to produce periodic acts of violence throughout 2020, although at a lower intensity than in previous years.

Although the death tolls were difficult to determine due to difficulties in accessing independent sources and the disparate data provided by the parties, informal counts based on press reports suggest that at least 150 to 200 people died as a result of the hostilities during the year, lower than in 2019, when at least 500 people were estimated to have lost their lives.

The data provided by the think-tank ACLED differ in the totals, but confirm the downward trend in the lethality of the conflict. According to the research centre, the conflict caused 626 fatalities in 2020, compared to 1,000 in the previous year. As in previous years, the violence took the form of direct confrontations, ambushes, sniper actions, attacks with explosives, offensives against gas pipelines and aggressions against civilians –including assassinations and kidnappings.

With respect to the evolution of the conflict, it should be stressed that **the most significant events took place during the summer, in July and August, and that the main scene of confrontation was the town of Bir al-Abd, in the northeast of North Sinai province, where ISIS managed to temporarily occupy several localities.** In the first half of the year, the most serious incidents occurred at the end of April in this same area. The armed group ISIS –also calling itself Sinai Province– claimed responsibility for the attack on a military vehicle that killed 10 soldiers. Egyptian authorities announced in early May that operations against the armed group killed 18 suspected ISIS militiamen, while another 21 were reportedly killed in clashes in Bir al-Abd at the end of the month. From the second half of July, this area –80 kilometres from the North Sinai capital, al-Arish– was again the scene of clashes after ISIS fighters launched an attack on military installations. Within the framework of these hostilities, the ISIS affiliate managed to take control of four localities in the area –Qatiya, Iqtiya, Ganayen and Merih– leading to the forced displacement of their inhabitants.

According to the balance offered by the Egyptian authorities, between 22 July and the end of August, the violence in the area caused the death of 70 alleged ISIS militiamen and seven military personnel.

In August, ISIS was also reported to have executed four civilians in Bir al-Abd for allegedly collaborating with the army. Egyptian security forces reportedly managed to regain control of the area in September, but skirmishes and incidents continued in the following months. The violence also affected the towns of al-Arish, the largest city in North Sinai province, and Rafah, on the Gaza border. At least 40 suspected ISIS militants and eight Egyptian soldiers had been killed in various incidents between September and early December. Abdel Qader Sweilam was reportedly among the militants killed in al-Arish, one of the leaders of the armed group involved in the attack on a mosque that killed more than 300 people in 2017.

It should be noted that at least 15 civilians had been killed in localities around Bir al-Abd by explosives left in the area and detonated during the return of displaced persons to the area since October. Authorities reported that in the last quarter of the year

they had destroyed 437 weapons caches and some 30 vehicles, deactivated 159 explosive devices and confiscated several dozen weapons as part of their campaign against the group. **Some expert voices stressed that the deployment of booby traps by ISIS in Sinai follows the precedent of similar actions by the group in Iraq and Syria.** The Sinai dispute coexisted with other tensions that had a greater media presence and visibility on the Egyptian security and diplomatic agenda.

These include Cairo's growing concern and involvement in the evolution of the armed conflict in neighbouring Libya (in the middle of the year Egypt warned of a possible direct military intervention if the clashes reached the strategic Libyan town of Sirte; conducted military exercises in the border area; approved a possible troop deployment and strengthened ties with allied countries in an informal anti-Turkey front –Cyprus, France, Greece, UAE–, including naval exercises in December) and for the conflict between Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia over the construction of a dam on the Nile river –which led to a series of unsuccessful negotiations during 2020.⁶⁶ In addition, the situation of internal tensions linked to the repression of dissidents, human rights violations and the reinforcement of authoritarianism by the regime continued.⁶⁷ Despite this outlook and the economic crisis in the country, the regime continued to increase its arms purchases, with Russia, the US and France as the main suppliers. Reports indicate that Paris has allegedly supplied 35% of the weapons demand to the regime between 2015 and 2019.⁶⁸

The armed conflict between Egyptian security forces and the ISIS affiliate operating mainly in the North Sinai area continued to provoke violence in 2020, although at a lower intensity than in previous years

66. See the summary on Libya in this chapter and “The Nile Basin: cooperation or conflict?” in chapter 5 (Risk scenarios for 2021).

67. See the summary on Egypt in chapter 2 (Socio-political crises).

68. Maged Mandour, *Dollars to Despots: Sisi's International Patrons*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 19 November 2020.

Iraq	
Start:	2003
Type:	System, Government, Identity, Resources Internationalised internal
Main parties:	Government, Iraqi and Kurdish (peshmerga) military and security forces, Shia militias (Popular Mobilization Units, PMU), Sunni armed groups, Islamic State (ISIS), international anti-ISIS coalition led by USA, USA, Iran, Turkey
Intensity:	3
Trend:	=

Summary:

The invasion of Iraq by the international coalition led by the USA in March 2003 (using the alleged presence of weapons of mass destruction as an argument and with the desire to overthrow the regime of Saddam Hussein due to his alleged link to the attacks of the 11th September 2001 in the USA) started an armed conflict in which numerous actors progressively became involved: international troops, the Iraqi armed forces, militias and rebel groups and Al Qaeda, among others. The new division of power between Sunni, Shiite and Kurdish groups within the institutional setting set up after the overthrow of Hussein led to discontent among numerous sectors. The violence has increased, with the armed opposition against the international presence in the country superimposing the internal fight for the control of power with a marked sectarian component since February 2006, mainly between Shiites and Sunnis. Following the withdrawal of the US forces in late 2011, the dynamics of violence have persisted, with a high impact on the civilian population. The armed conflict worsened in 2014 as a result of the rise of the armed group Islamic State (ISIS) and the Iraqi government's military response, backed by a new international coalition led by the United States.

Levels of violence in the armed conflict in Iraq remained high, although relatively lower than in previous years.

According to data compiled by the ACLED research centre, the conflict claimed the lives of at least 2,500 people, mostly as a result of explosions and remote attacks, followed by clashes between various armed actors operating in the country. In 2019, the total number of fatalities rose to 3,232, according to the same organisation. Hostilities in the country continued to have a serious impact on the civilian population. According to preliminary data from Iraq Body Count (IBC), the number of civilian casualties from the armed conflict is expected to rise to at least 848 in 2020, compared to 2,392 in the previous year. The outlook in the country continued to be heavily influenced by the prominence of the US-Iran dispute, as well as ISIS's continuation of its activities, calling into question the Iraqi government's declaration of "victory" over the armed organisation in 2017. Between 2014 and 2017, the escalation of violence in the country led to the forced internal displacement of more than six million people. According to OCHA data, as of October 2020, a total of 1.3 million people remained displaced in extremely precarious conditions, a vulnerability that

Levels of violence in Iraq remained high and the armed conflict was affected by the dispute between Iran and the US and the continuing activities of ISIS

was accentuated by the COVID-19 pandemic. It is worth mentioning that by the end of 2020 a total of 2,800 women and minors of the Yazidi minority abducted by ISIS after its offensive in Sinjar in 2014, remained unaccounted for.

As for the evolution of the armed conflict, **the year began with the shock news of the assassination in Baghdad of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani in a US operation.** The prominent Iranian military officer, leader of the Revolutionary Guard's al-Quds brigade and head of Iranian efforts in the region, was killed on 3 January in a drone strike that also killed the deputy commander of the Shiite militia coalition Popular Mobilisation Units (PMU), Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. **The offensive, which triggered warnings of the potential for destabilisation in an already highly damaged region, prompted retaliatory actions by Tehran against US positions** in the form of air attacks on US bases located in the provinces of Anbar and Erbil and offensives by pro-Iranian militias operating in Iraq. Washington's offensive also encouraged demonstrations and new demands for the withdrawal of US troops by various Iraqi actors, who insisted on this demand throughout the year. In the months that followed there were periodic attacks against US targets, including the US embassy in Baghdad, the so-called Green Zone in the Iraqi capital, bases of the US-led military coalition, companies such as Halliburton, as well as diplomatic personnel. Although responsibility for some of the acts was not acknowledged, the role of pro-Iranian militias in the offensives –especially the Kataib Hizbollah group– was notable. By mid-year it was estimated that since Soleimani's assassination some ten new armed organisations of this type had been activated with the aim of expelling US troops from the country. Washington offered a million-dollar reward for information leading to the capture of Muhammad Kawtharani, a senior Kataib Hizbullah official responsible for coordinating Tehran-backed militias in Iraq.

In June, the US and the new Iraqi government led by former intelligence chief Mustafa al-Khadimi as prime minister, established what were described as "strategic talks". Pro-Iranian groups, especially Kataib Hizbullah, expressed their rejection of al-Khadimi's nomination, accusing him of involvement in the deaths of Soleimani and al-Muhandis. The assassination in July of a prominent security adviser to the prime minister and critic of the actions of pro-Iranian militias in Iraq led to new tensions. The contacts between the Washington and Baghdad authorities following a second edition of the "strategic talks" led, in

September, to the announcement of the reduction of US troops in Iraq from 5,200 to 3,000 in exchange for a commitment to protect Iraqi forces and trade agreements aimed at reducing Tehran's influence in the country. Although Iranian-backed militias announced a unilateral truce conditional on the effective withdrawal

of US forces, incidents and acts of violence continued to occur in the final months of the year.

At the same time, **ISIS actions continued and intensified during the year. The armed group clashed with security forces, PMU militia, Kurdish forces and also carried out explosive attacks, suicide bombings and other offensives against civilians, as well as acts of sabotage.** Hostilities reached the provinces of Diyala, Nineveh, Kirkuk, Salah al-Din, Erbil and Anbar. In May, Iraqi security forces launched Operation Desert Lion in an attempt to root out ISIS militiamen in the adjoining areas of Anbar, Nineveh and Salah ad-Din regions bordering Syria. Operations against ISIS and the armed group's actions were ongoing at the end of 2020. It is worth mentioning that **throughout the year there were also tensions between the governments of Ankara and Baghdad over Turkey's incursions into northern Iraq against PKK positions**, in actions that the Iraqi authorities denounced as an infringement of their sovereignty. There were also tensions between Kurdish groups.⁶⁹ In addition, it should be noted that during 2020, there was a continuation of the protests and mobilisations that began at the end of 2019 against the authorities by sectors of the population.⁷⁰

Israel – Palestine	
Start:	2000
Type:	Self-government, Identity, Territory International ⁷¹
Main parties:	Israeli government, settler militias, PA, Fatah (Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades), Hamas (Ezzedin al-Qassam Brigades), Islamic Jihad, FPLP, FDLP, Popular Resistance Committees, Salafist groups
Intensity:	1
Trend:	↓

Summary:

The conflict between Israel and the various Palestinian actors started up again in 2000 with the outbreak of the Second Intifada, favoured by the failure of the peace process promoted at the beginning of the 1990s (the Oslo Accords, 1993-1994). The Palestinian-Israeli conflict started in 1947 when the United Nations Security Council Resolution 181 divided Palestinian territory under British mandate into two states and soon after proclaimed the state of Israel (1948), without the state of Palestine having been able to materialise itself since then. After the 1948-49 war, Israel annexed West Jerusalem and Egypt and Jordan took over control of Gaza and the West Bank, respectively. In 1967, Israel occupied East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza after winning the "Six-Day War" against the Arab countries. It was not until the Oslo Accords that the autonomy of the Palestinian territory would be formally recognised, although its introduction was to be impeded by the military occupation and the control of the territory imposed by Israel.

Following the trend of the past three years, direct violence linked to the Israeli-Palestinian armed conflict declined during 2020, despite increased tensions over the Israeli Government's plans and actions to consolidate its *de facto* annexation of occupied Palestinian territories.

According to OCHA, as of December, a total of 30 people had been killed in various acts of violence linked to the conflict, of whom 28 were Palestinians and two Israelis. The figure is the lowest in the last three years, considering that there were 144 people killed in 2019 and 313 in 2018. In addition, a total of 2,579 Palestinians were injured during 2020, compared to 57 Israelis. The most lethal violence was concentrated in the first quarter of the year and generally occurred in the Gaza Strip, along the Gaza-Israel barrier, in the West Bank –in towns such as Hebron, Jenin– and in Jerusalem. The incidents included Israeli airstrikes, launches of rockets and incendiary devices from Gaza, shootings by Israeli forces against the Palestinian population and repression of demonstrations and a number of assaults by Palestinians on Israeli soldiers. OCHA also highlighted the impact of demolitions and confiscations of Palestinian property, at its highest levels since 2016. Between January and November this Israeli policy had affected 776 infrastructures, forcing the displacement of 946 Palestinians, including 488 minors. Throughout the year, the Israeli Government continued to announce new permits and plans for the construction of thousands of housing units in different areas of the occupied territories.

Regarding the evolution of events, it should be noted that **at the end of January the US finally presented –after continuous postponements in recent years– its so-called "final peace plan" for the region**, officially confirming the Donald Trump administration's support for and alignment with the positions of the Israeli extreme right. The plan, detailed in a 180-page document and presented by Trump at the White House in the company of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, includes, among other measures, the recognition of Israeli settlements in occupied Palestinian territories, the rejection of the right of the Palestinian refugee population to return and the offer of forming a Palestinian State with a capital outside Jerusalem, in addition to economic investments. The plan led to demonstrations and a show of rejection among the Palestinian population and activists and was labelled a conspiracy by the PA. At the same time, efforts continued during the first quarter to try to implement an informal truce around the Gaza Strip, brokered by Egypt in February. In this context, the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic from March onwards encouraged some cooperation between the PA and the Israeli Government. Several voices warned about the potential impact of the virus in the Gaza Strip, due to the fragility of its health infrastructures because of the attacks

69. See summary on Turkey (southeast) in this chapter.

70. See summary on Iraq in chapter 2 (Socio-political crises).

71. Despite the fact that "Palestine" (whose Palestinian National Authority is a political entity linked to a specific population and territory) is not an internationally recognised state, the conflict between Israel and Palestine is considered "international" and not "internal" because it is an illegally occupied territory with Israel's alleged claim to the territory not being recognised by international law or by any United Nations resolution.

and the blockade imposed by Israel in recent years. Hamas and PA representatives also raised the need to release Palestinian prisoners to prevent their exposure to the virus and warned of Israel's responsibilities as an occupying power for the impact of the disease on the Palestinian population.

The following months were marked by the electoral climate in Israel and the outcome of the elections, which led to the formation of a coalition government between Netanyahu's Likud and Benny Gantz's Blue and White party. According to the agreement, the two would rotate the position of prime minister, with Netanyahu holding the first rotation. The agreement also endorsed –although without detailing the mechanisms for its implementation– the **Likud leader's proposal to formally annex a third of the occupied West Bank, including 235 settlements and most of the strategic and fertile Jordan Valley, bordering Jordan.** The prospect that the plan could begin to be implemented as of 1 July, as announced by Netanyahu, raised the level of tension with the Palestinian authorities, encouraged new protests and violence, and prompted international criticism and warnings. The PA denounced the plan and suspended cooperation agreements with Israel in May, while Hamas considered it a “declaration of war”. Various voices insisted that the measure violated basic principles of international law, undermined the prospects for a two-state solution –considered moribund or already totally impracticable by many actors–, could aggravate the suffering of the Palestinian population and further destabilise the region. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights warned of the illegality of any annexation of the West Bank. More than 1,000 European parliamentarians from 25 countries signed a declaration demanding an EU response to the plan, and several European countries on the UN Security Council –France, Belgium, Germany, Estonia, Ireland, the United Kingdom and Norway– jointly warned that they would not recognise the annexation. Several analysts stressed the need to put the policy announced by Netanyahu into context and view it as a measure that only makes explicit a *de facto* situation that already exists.⁷² As for reactions in the Palestinian territory, in view of the increase in hostilities, a new intervention by Egypt and the UN re-established the informal truce between Hamas and Israel in August, which was still in force at the end of the year –albeit with sporadic incidents.

In this scenario of international criticism, and amid internal divisions within the Israeli government over the form and timetable for implementing the plan, the initiative was temporarily suspended and gave

way to a series of agreements on the normalisation of relations with Arab-majority countries promoted by the US. The normalisation of relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) was announced at the

end of August, with Bahrain following in September and Sudan in October. Later, in December, Morocco joined the list and in return Washington made a declaration recognising Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara.⁷³ The US insisted on presenting them as peace agreements despite the fact that, in practice, they formalised already existing relations between Israel and these states, not involved in direct hostilities with Israel in the past, with the exception of Sudan. Although the normalisation of relations was defended by these countries as a way to stop the annexation plan, Netanyahu assured

that the proposal was still on the table. Palestinian protests against these agreements failed to gain political backing even among the Arab League, which in September failed to pass a resolution condemning them. This situation was considered by the Palestinian prime minister as a symbol of Arab inaction. Despite this, in November, the PA resumed security cooperation with Israel, underlined its readiness to resume peace talks after the inauguration of a new US government and proposed holding an international peace conference to address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the first half of 2021. As for Israel, it is worth mentioning that during the year there were massive demonstrations against the government for its handling of the COVID-19 crisis, the economic situation and the corruption cases involving Netanyahu. In December, amid tensions in the government coalition, the Israeli executive failed once again in its attempt to approve the budget, which led to a call for new elections –the fourth in two years– for March 2021.

Syria	
Start:	2011
Type:	Government, System, Self-government, Identity Internationalised internal
Main parties:	Government, pro-government militias, Free Syrian Army (FSA), Ahrar al-Sham, Syrian Democratic Forces (coalition that includes the PYD/YPJ militias of the PYD), Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (formerly al-Nusra Front), Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), ISIS, international anti-ISIS coalition led by USA, Turkey, Hezbollah, Iran and Russia
Intensity:	3
Trend:	=

72. For more information, see Escola de Cultura de Pau, Centre Delàs, IDHC, *A decisive moment? The importance of halting Europe's arms trade with Israel*, July 2020.

73. Please see the summary on Morocco - Western Sahara in chapter 2 (Socio-political crises).

Summary:

Controlled by the Ba'ath party since 1963, the Republic of Syria has been governed since the 1970s by two presidents: Hafez al-Assad and his son, Bashar, who took office in 2000. A key player in the Middle East, internationally the regime has been characterised by its hostile policies towards Israel and, internally, by its authoritarianism and fierce repression of the opposition. The arrival of Bashar al-Assad in the government raised expectations for change, following the implementation of some liberalising measures. However, the regime put a stop to these initiatives, which alarmed the establishment, made up of the army, the Ba'ath and the Alawi minority. In 2011, popular uprisings in the region encouraged the Syrian population to demand political and economic changes. The brutal response of the government unleashed a severe crisis in the country, which led to the beginning of an armed conflict with serious consequences for the civil population. The militarisation and proliferation of armed actors have added complexities to the Syrian scenario, severely affected by regional and international dynamics.

During 2020, the armed conflict in Syria continued to be one of the most serious in the world, characterised by the involvement of numerous local, regional and international armed actors; by hostilities and other acts of violence that affected different areas of the country, with their own dynamics on various fronts; and by a very serious and persistent impact on the population, aggravated this year by a sharp deterioration in the economic situation and by the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the difficulties in performing a detailed monitoring of the impact of violence in the country, the available data confirm the high levels of lethality. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), the death toll from the conflict in 2020 was around 6,817. This would be the lowest death toll in the country since the start of the revolt against the al-Assad regime almost a decade ago. Data from the ACLED research centre point to a higher death toll of some 7,974 people in the same period. The total number of fatalities is lower than 2019 (15,000 people) and 2018 (30,000 people), according to ACLED data. Regarding civilian casualties, the UN Secretary General's bimonthly reports provided a non-exhaustive count. They concluded that at least 1,164 civilians had been killed in conflict-related incidents between December 2019 and November 2020, 42% of whom were women and minors –145 and 343, respectively. According to UN data, civilian casualties were mainly caused by air and ground attacks, explosive ordnance and explosive remnants of war. The periodic UN reports underlined that the ongoing casualties among the population indicated that the parties involved in the conflict continue to fail to respect fundamental principles of international humanitarian law, such as the necessary distinction between civilians and combatants.

Along these lines, the UN warned of other actions perpetrated by armed actors, among them arbitrary detentions (together with numerous reports of deaths in government custody), torture, sexual violence, confiscation

of property and land, attacks on health centres and schools. According to data released at the end of the year, only 50% of the country's schools were functioning and 2.1 million children were out of school. This was compounded by the very serious humanitarian situation in the country. **According to UNHCR, Syria remained the largest source of refugees and the second largest internally displaced population in the world.** 80% of the displaced population are women and minors and 28% of displaced women have some degree of disability. The plight of the Syrian population was also compounded by the worsening economic situation –the basic food basket increased in price by more than 200% in one year and 9.3 million people were estimated to be food insecure–, by severe fires in various parts of the country (more than 35,000 hectares of crop fields were reported burned in 2020, with severe long-term consequences for food production) and by increasing access barriers for humanitarian aid – several key border crossings for aid inflows were closed during the year. In this context, several voices warned of the added impact of the pandemic, due to the growing number of cases, although it remained difficult to determine the extent of the outbreak in the country. The appeal to parties to heed the UN Secretary General's call for a global ceasefire to focus efforts on the pandemic was not received by the vast majority of Syrian armed actors.

Regarding the evolution of the conflict and its main protagonists, **on the northwestern front, high levels of violence and massive forced displacements were recorded in the first months of the year**, following the decision by the regime and Russia to intensify their campaign on Idlib, an opposition stronghold, in December 2019.

Turkey, the main supporter of rebel groups in the region, criticised Moscow for violating previous agreements to establish a “de-escalation zone” in Idlib. Amid increasing artillery exchanges between Turkish and Syrian forces in this area, with casualties on both sides, alarms were raised about an escalation in the confrontation. At the end of February an air offensive attributed to the Syrian regime and Russian forces against a Turkish military convoy in Balyun (Idlib) killed 34 soldiers –the incident with the

highest number of Turkish deaths since its involvement in the war in Syria– and prompted Ankara to launch Operation Spring Shield, increasing its military activity on all front lines. **It was not until early March that Russia and Turkey agreed to a new truce around Idlib, motivated in part by Ankara's desire to prevent a new mass influx of refugees.** By then the humanitarian situation in the region had deteriorated dramatically: in just three months one million people had fled the hostilities, more than half of whom were located in a narrow strip parallel to the Syrian-Turkish border that was already home to hundreds of thousands of displaced people. Turkey temporarily opened its border with Greece and allowed migrants and refugees to leave in an attempt to put pressure on the EU and gain support for its positions in the Syrian conflict. In the following months, Russia and

The armed conflict in Syria continued to be characterised by the involvement of numerous local, regional and international actors and by high levels of lethality

Turkey initiated –albeit with difficulty– joint patrols in Idlib. At the same time, violence persisted as a result of clashes between Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and groups close to al-Qaeda such as Hurras al-Din and between these groups and regime forces. Russian airstrikes resumed in Idlib in June, shortly after an attack that wounded several Russian and Turkish soldiers, with responsibility being claimed by a group called Kataib Khattab al-Sistani, allegedly composed of militiamen from the Caucasus. During the second half of the year, there were also reports of HTS attempts to consolidate its position in Idlib by intensifying its crackdown on rival groups. As the year ended, the ceasefire was holding formally in broad terms in the northwest, according to the UN, but amid repeated violations and with near-daily artillery exchanges and increasing clashes along the lines of control in Idlib and Aleppo.

The year also saw intermittent clashes between Ankara-backed forces and the SDF, led by Kurdish YPG/YPJ forces, around the dividing lines between the Turkish operation “Euphrates Shield” and Manbij, and the more recent Ankara operation “Spring of Peace” and the SDF-controlled area in the northwest. The year also saw several bomb incidents that left dozens dead in Afrin and a drone strike that killed three Kurdish activists in an action blamed by the SDF on Turkey. In March, the SDF responded to the UN Secretary General’s call for a truce during the pandemic and announced a suspension of its military activities. Clashes continued, however, with fighting around Ain Issa, north of Raqqa, being particularly prominent in the second half of the year. **On the northeastern front ISIS also increased its actions against both the SDF and government forces.** Clashes between ISIS and regime forces in a desert area of Homs province resulted in some forty deaths in April. The second half of the year saw more ISIS clashes with regime forces leaving dozens of fatalities in a wider area, including Raqqa, Aleppo, Deir Ez-Zor and Hama, encouraging speculation about the group’s possible resurgence. Remnants of the group are reportedly coercing the local population through roadblocks and extortion, and training new recruits in the nominally regime-controlled desert area of Syria. As for the US, after the announcement of its withdrawal and accusations of abandoning its Kurdish allies in the face of Turkey’s incursion at the end of 2019, its forces concentrated in the northeast and during 2020 continued on their tasks of supporting the SDF in the protection of oil wells, engaging in some actions against ISIS militants. In this area, it is also worth mentioning that towards the end of the year the SDF declared an amnesty for ISIS fighters and alleged ISIS collaborators who were reportedly not involved in blood crimes and had disavowed their involvement with the group. The measure resulted in the release of more than 600 ex-combatants –all of them Syrian. Of particular concern

in the northeast was the situation in the al-Hawl camp, where displaced persons and families of suspected ISIS fighters are being held. By the end of the year it housed almost 64,000 people, 94% of whom were women and children –53% of them under the age of 12.⁷⁴

In the southwest, popular unrest intensified during the year. Although they also occurred in other areas of the country, **in this area targeted killings –whose responsibility was not always claimed– were particularly notable, mainly against members of government or pro-government forces and former members of armed opposition groups that had reconciled with the regime.** More than 400 cases were reported between April and May alone. Throughout the year, there were several Israeli attacks on Syrian regime, Iranian and Hezbollah positions, resulting in the deaths of several dozen people.⁷⁵

Finally, it should be noted that in June 2020 the Caesar Act came into force, the US law that punishes the Syrian regime, including its leader Bashar al-Assad, for war crimes perpetrated against its population and punishes individuals, entities and countries that negotiate with the government in Damascus. The law gets its name from the so-called “Caesar files,” a reference to the thousands of images that a Syrian photographer managed to get out of the country in 2014 documenting torture and abuse in the regime’s prisons.⁷⁶ The initiative received the support of most European countries, but was rejected by Russia and China, which denounced the unilateralism of the measure and considered it a violation of Syrian sovereignty. This issue influenced their actions at the UN Security Council in July, where both countries vetoed the resolution on cross-border humanitarian assistance to Syria and argued that the regime should be the exclusive distributor of aid. Resolution 2533 was eventually passed, but the humanitarian aid operation was limited from two to one crossing in northwestern Syria –the Bab al-Salam crossing– significantly hampering assistance efforts. Two other border crossings had already been closed in January.

The Gulf

Yemen (AQAP)	
Start:	2011
Type:	System Internationalised internal
Main parties:	Government, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula AQAP/Ansar Sharia, ISIS, USA, international coalition led by Saudi Arabia, UAE, tribal militias, Houthi militias
Intensity:	1
Trend:	=

74. Please see chapter 3 (Gender, peace and security).

75. Please see the summary on Israel - Syria, Lebanon in chapter 2 (Socio-political crises).

76. US Department of State, *Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act, Fact Sheet*, 17 June 2020.

Summary:

With a host of conflicts and internal challenges to deal with, the Yemeni government is under intense international pressure –mainly the USA and Saudi Arabia– to focus on fighting al-Qaeda's presence in the country, especially after the merger of the organisation's Saudi and Yemeni branches, through which al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) was founded in 2009. Although al-Qaeda is known to have been active in Yemen since the 1990s and has been responsible for high profile incidents, such as the suicide attack on the US warship USS Cole in 2000, its operations have been stepped up in recent years, coinciding with a change of leadership in the group. The failed attack on an airliner en route to Detroit in December 2009 focused the world's attention on AQAP. The group is considered by the US government as one of its main security threats. Taking advantage of the power vacuum in Yemen as part of the revolt against president Ali Abdullah Saleh, AQAP intensified its operations in the south of the country and expanded the areas under its control. From 2011 the group began to carry out some of its attacks under the name Ansar Sharia (Partisans of Islamic Law). More recently, particularly since mid-2014, AQAP has increasingly been involved in clashes with Houthi forces, which have advanced their positions from the north of Yemen. AQAP has taken advantage of the climate of instability and the escalation of violence in the country since March 2015 in the framework of the conflict between the Houthis and the forces loyal to the Government of Abdo Rabbo Mansour Hadi. The al-Qaeda branch has faced both sides. Yemen's conflict scenario has also favoured the rise of ISIS, which has begun to claim various actions in the country.

In line with what has occurred in recent years, in 2020 the dynamics of violence that have gained prominence in Yemen over the last five years⁷⁷ reduced the visibility of the conflict led by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), al-Qaeda's affiliate in the country. This trend has been reinforced by a decline in the group's activities as a result of a number of factors, including the impact of the US campaign of attacks on the group's leaders and troops and the consequences of its rivalry with other armed groups operating in Yemen. The total number of people killed or injured as a result of this conflict is difficult to determine. The incidents with the highest media visibility resulted in a death toll of about ten people. These include the organisation's leader in Yemen, Qassim al-Rimi, killed in a US drone strike in January; one person killed and crucified in August by AQAP in al-Bayda after being accused of spying for the government and guiding US drones into the group's positions; three AQAP militiamen killed in an offensive by government forces in the western province of Mahra; five members of the Security Belt Forces that are part of the STC killed by AQAP in an attack on the outskirts of Lawdar, in Abyan province; and a university professor critical of radical Islamist extremism killed in Dhale province (south).

In late February, AQAP announced that the group's new top leader would be Khalid bin Umar Batarfi, until now al-Rimi's number two and the group's spokesman. The death of al-Rimi prompted a number of analyses of its impact on the future of the organisation. Trained in Afghanistan

and one of the founders of AQAP in 2009, al-Rimi was the group's first military chief and became its leader in 2015 following the execution of his predecessor, Nasir al-Wuhayshi, in another US air offensive by drone. Some experts pointed out that although his death was a blow to the organisation because he was one of the group's historic leaders, the consequences would not necessarily be drastic or significant, taking into account that during his time at the helm of the organisation the group had already seen a significant decline, especially in the last three years. According to specialists, AQAP's priority was now to regroup, reduce infiltrations –which led the group to suspend the recruitment of new fighters– and maintain its internal cohesion.⁷⁸ In the same vein, an analysis by the think-tank ACLED published at the end of the year highlighted that from the early 2020s the group was allegedly in an “entrenchment” phase, after a brief phase of expansion taking advantage of the general escalation of violence in Yemen (2015-2016) and a phase involving the relocation of the group to the province of al-Bayda and combat with the ISIS affiliate (2017-2019). This new entrenchment phase of the al-Qaeda affiliate was influenced not only by the death of al-Rimi but also by the defeats of AQAP and ISIS in their clashes with Houthis and the assassination of the group's propaganda head, also in a US drone attack, which allegedly diminished its ability to publicly claim responsibility for its actions. Allegedly, AQAP had once again attempted to prioritise its anti Houthis rhetoric –above its dispute with ISIS– to present itself as the leader of the fight against the group, a strategy it had used in the past and which it had supposedly returned to in the face of the new Houthis advance on al-Bayda in 2020 and the possibility of exploiting the grievances of local tribes. According to ACLED, in 2020, half of AQAP's interactions were with al-Houthi forces, while the struggle with ISIS has reportedly subsided in the last year. The US continued to offer financial rewards for information leading to the whereabouts of the organisation's new leaders.

Yemen (Houthis)	
Start:	2004
Type:	System, Government, Identity Internationalised internal
Main parties:	Armed forces loyal to Abdo Rabbo Mansour Hadi's Government, followers of the cleric al-Houthi (al-Shabaab al-Mumen/Ansar Allah), armed factions loyal to former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, tribal militias linked to the al-Ahmar clan, Salafist militias, armed groups linked to the Islamist Islah party, separatists under the umbrella of the Southern Transitional Council (STC), international coalition led by Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Iran
Intensity:	3
Trend:	↑

77. See the summary on Yemen (Houthis) in this chapter.

78. AFP, “Questions about the impact in Yemen from killing of AQAP chief”, *The Arab Weekly*, 10 February 2020; Saeed al-Batati, “Al-Qaeda suffers heavy losses in Yemen conflicts”, *Arab News*, 7 March 2020.

Summary:

The conflict started in 2004, when the followers of the religious leader al-Houthi, belonging to the Shiite minority, started an armed rebellion in the north of Yemen. The government assured that the rebel forces aimed to re-establish a theocratic regime such as the one that governed in the area for one thousand years, until the triumph of the Republican revolution in 1962. The followers of al-Houthi denied it and accused the government of corruption and not attending to the northern mountainous regions, and also opposed the Sanaa alliance with the US in the so-called fight against terrorism. The conflict has cost the lives of thousands of victims and has led to massive forced displacements. Various truces signed in recent years have been successively broken with taking up of hostilities again. As part of the rebellion that ended the government of Ali Abdullah Saleh in 2011, the Houthis took advantage to expand areas under its control in the north of the country. They have been increasingly involved in clashes with other armed actors, including tribal militias, sectors sympathetic to Salafist groups and to the Islamist party Islah and fighters of AQAP, the affiliate of al-Qaeda in Yemen. The advance of the Houthis to the centre and south of the country exacerbated the institutional crisis and forced the fall of the Yemeni government, leading to an international military intervention led by Saudi Arabia in early 2015. In a context of internationalisation, the conflict has acquired sectarian tones and a regional dimension. The conflict has been acquiring a growing regional and international dimension and has been influenced by tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia and between Washington and Tehran.

The armed conflict in Yemen continued to be one of the most serious in the world, with extremely high levels of lethality, the involvement of numerous armed actors, overlapping disputes and severe impacts on the civilian population that were further exacerbated during the year by violence, the critical humanitarian situation and the impact of COVID-19. According to data from the ACLED research centre, the armed conflict killed nearly 20,000 people in 2020 (19,740), most of them in explosive attacks or as a result of clashes. This figure is similar to the previous year when around 23,000 fatalities were recorded, and lower than in 2018 when around 30,000 were recorded. However, several voices, including the UN humanitarian agency, stressed the need to take into account the indirect deaths caused by the armed conflict. According to OCHA, in the last five years the war in Yemen has left 233,000 people dead, of which 131,000 are allegedly the result of indirect causes such as lack of food or access to health care. By the end of the year, 24.3 million Yemenis were in need of some form of humanitarian assistance and protection, and there were increasing warnings about the famine in the country, the worst in the world in decades, according to the UN

The armed conflict in Yemen continued to be one of the most serious in the world, with extremely high levels of lethality, the involvement of numerous armed actors, overlapping disputes and severe impacts on civilians

secretary-general. The violence also continued to cause massive population displacement: more than 100,000 people had fled their homes between January and June 2020 alone. According to UNHURT data, Yemen was among the countries with the largest internally displaced population globally, with a total of 3.7 million –mostly women and children– in fourth place after Colombia, Syria and the DRC. Food insecurity, increased poverty, difficulties in accessing humanitarian aid and the destruction of health infrastructures in the context of the conflict exacerbated the risks of expansion and the impacts of the pandemic. Without the possibility of collecting comprehensive data, partial information pointed to a disease case fatality rate up to four times higher than the global average.

In this context, it is worth noting that **the UN Group of Experts on Yemen submitted a new report on the armed conflict in which it points out the responsibility of all parties in the countless abuses committed against the Yemeni population.** Based on its findings, at the end of the year the group called on the UN Security Council to extend sanctions and refer the Yemen case to the International Criminal Court.⁷⁹ In its report, the group analyses the situation in the country between July 2019 and June 2020, insisting that armed actors involved in the conflict have continued to commit violations of human rights and international humanitarian law and that these abuses form a pattern that is repeated during hostilities and beyond the battlefield.⁸⁰ Violations include killings of civilians in indiscriminate attacks, forced disappearances, arbitrary detentions, gender-based violence including sexual violence, torture, recruitment of children, denial of due process, violations of fundamental rights, and attacks on activists, journalists and human rights defenders, including women's rights defenders. The expert group insisted on the need for third-party States to suspend the transfer of arms to the warring parties and stressed the urgency of a full ceasefire, which did not materialise in 2020.

With regard to the evolution of the conflict, during the year the situation ranged between declarations of a truce and a resurgence of violence, but overall the hostilities between the various armed actors continued and intensified. In fact, if at the beginning of the year there were 33 battlefronts, at the end of October, 47 had been identified, according to OCHA data. The hostilities –which ran parallel to mediation and facilitation initiatives– developed mainly along two lines of confrontation. Firstly, the dispute between the Houthis and the Government of Abdo Rabbo Mansour

79. UN Human Rights Council, *UN Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts on Yemen Briefs the UN Security Council Urging an end to impunity, an expansion of sanctions, and the referral by the UN Security Council of the situation in Yemen to the International Criminal Court*, 3 December 2020. 79. AFP, "Questions about the impact in Yemen from killing of AQAP chief", *The Arab Weekly*, 10 February 2020; Saeed al-Batati, "Al-Qaeda suffers heavy losses in Yemen conflicts", *Arab News*, 7 March 2020.

80. UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, *UN Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts on Yemen releases their third report Yemen: A Pandemic of Impunity in a Tortured Land*, 9 September 2020.

Hadi, supported by the Saudi-led military coalition. Despite certain expectations of a partial reduction in violence at the end of 2019 –in the framework of informal contacts between Riyadh and the Houthis– the intensification of the fighting has been evident since the beginning of 2020. From the first months of the year, violence progressively affected Sanaa, al-Jawf, the Red Sea coast and Marib –the latter oil-rich and the last major urban centre in Hadi's hands. Following the UN Secretary-General's call for a global ceasefire due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the parties expressed support for the initiative, but only rhetorically, as hostilities continued. In April, Saudi Arabia formally declared a unilateral truce that raised some expectations, but the initiative was rejected by the Houthis who demanded a broader Saudi commitment, including an end to the blockade in areas controlled by the armed group –considered by Riyadh to be a “proxy” of Iran.⁸¹ In practice, the violence escalated, extending to the al-Bayda region and with increased exchanges of fire in the area bordering Saudi Arabia. In a context of deadlock in the negotiations promoted by the UN and criticism and accusations of bias against the special envoy to Yemen, Martin Griffiths –by both the Houthis and the Hadi government– the increase in violent incidents in the port of Hodeida raised fears for the continuity of the Stockholm Agreement, signed by the parties at the end of 2018. However, diplomatic efforts allowed progress to be made in the implementation of the agreement with regard to the exchange of prisoners. In October, Houthis and the Hadi government released a thousand prisoners.

The second line of confrontation was within the anti Houthis camp, between Hadi's forces and the Southern Transitional Council (STC), a conglomerate of southern separatist forces supported by the United Arab Emirates (UAE). After the escalation of violence in 2019 and the subsequent signing of the Riyadh agreement, the

difficulties in implementing the pact became evident in 2020 and the fighting continued –peaking at certain points throughout the year. The main theatres of violence were Abyan and the strategic island of Socotra. The crisis intensified in April, when the STC decided to decree an autonomous administration in the south, amid accusations that the Hadi government was preparing to launch a new offensive on Aden, its area of influence. In June, STC forces seized the capital of Socotra –incidents had already been reported on the island in February– but tensions subsided following an agreement brokered by Saudi Arabia. In July, the STC rescinded the declaration of autonomy and contacts to try to reduce tensions continued, albeit amid threats and continuing armed incidents. Another scene of clashes during the year was Taiz, where there were clashes between forces of the Islamist Islah party and UAE forces and nearby militias.

Finally, in December, the Hadi government and the STC announced the formation of a new government –one of the key points of the 2019 Riyadh agreement to unblock the process that the UN is attempting to push forward. The new cabinet does not include any women among its members –for the first time in two decades– a fact that was denounced by Yemeni women's organisations. **At the end of the year, a bomb attack at Aden airport just as the new cabinet was disembarking from its plane highlighted the volatile security situation. The offensive did not cause deaths among the ministers, but it did kill 26 other people and wounded around a hundred.** At the end of the year, the prospects for the evolution of the conflict also depended on the possible classification of the Houthis as a terrorist group by the US, following threats by Donald Trump's administration in this sense. A measure that –according to various analyses– could encourage retaliatory actions by the armed group and make the delivery of humanitarian aid even more difficult.⁸²

81. See the summary on Yemen at chapter 6 (Peace negotiations in the Middle East) in Escola de Cultura de Pau, *Peace Talks in Focus 2020. Report on Trends and Scenarios*, Barcelona, Icaria, 2021.

82. Human Rights Watch, *Yemen: Houthi Terrorist Designation Threatens Aid*, 10 December 2020; Martin Chulov, “Classifying Houthis as terrorists will worsen famine, Trump is warned”, *The Guardian*, 13 December 2020.

