ACLED
Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project

Welcome to the April issue of the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project's (ACLED) *Conflict Trends* report. Each month, ACLED researchers gather, analyse and publish data on political violence in Africa in realtime. Weekly updates to realtime conflict event data are published through our research partners at **Climate Change and African Political Stability (CCAPS)** and also on the **ACLED website**.

This month's issue focuses on the intervention of **French Military Forces** in West Africa, **Islamist Militancy and Counter Insurgency** strategies in North Africa, an analysis of violence surrounding the recent elections in **Nigeria**, and student-led **protests in South Africa** and targeted violence against foreign nationals. A special focus topic explores the **targeting of children in conflict zones.**

Elsewhere on the continent, the **Democratic Republic of Congo** witnessed a slight spike in conflict events and on-going violence continued in **Kenya** after Al-Shabab militants carried out a deadly assault on Garissa University. Fatalities decreased in **Cameroon** in March and fighting with Islamic State affiliates renewed across **Libya**.

Decreasing
Warning
Ongoing
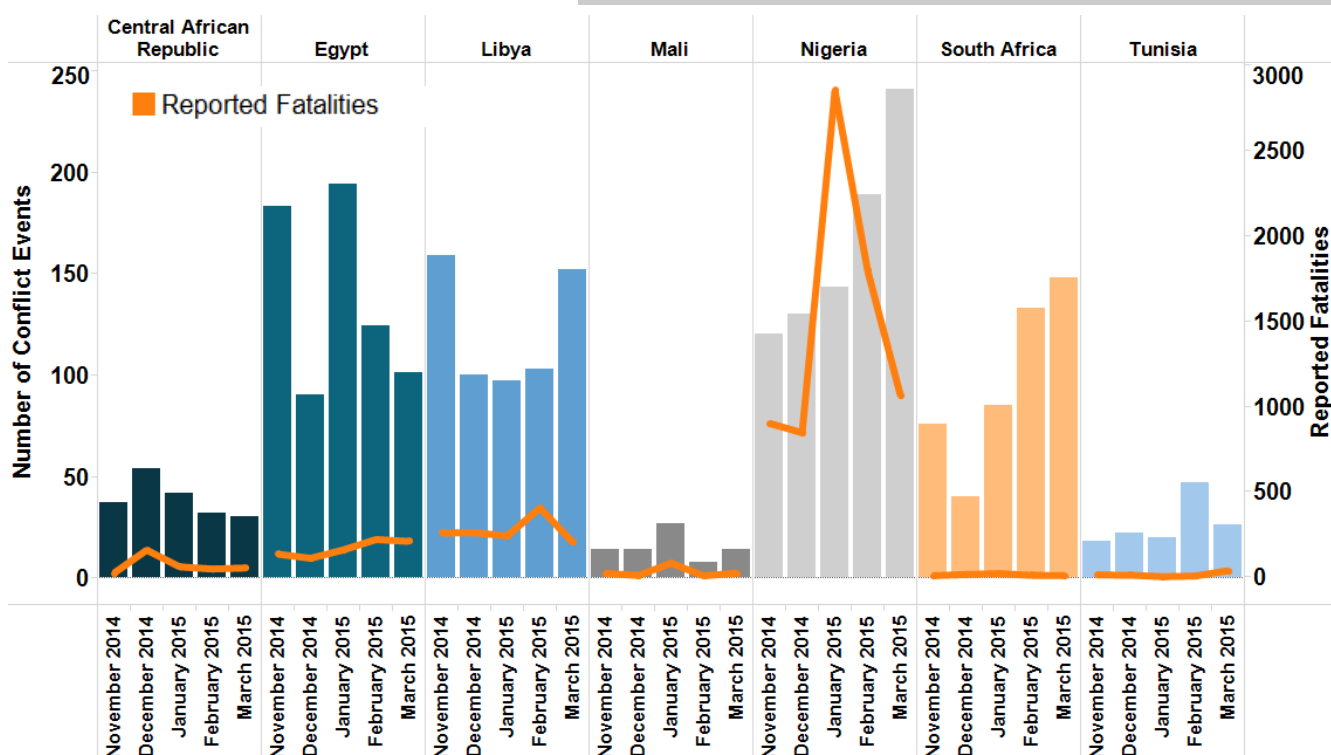Escalating

Conflict Trajectory, April 2015

Figure 1: Conflict Events and Reported Fatalities by Country, from November 2014 - March 2015.

1

French Military Interventions

Over the past several years, sub-Saharan Africa has seen an increasing number of military interventions against a backdrop of rising violence across the continent, represented within the ACLED dataset by a dramatic rise from just over 3,000 violent events in 2009 to over 12,000 in 2014. Although the increase is partially driven by the improved access to source materials reporting on political violence occurring across the continent, there is also an identifiable trend of increased localized, smaller militias operating, and non- or less fatal political action in riots and protests. The general perceived increase in instability has led to more external interventions on stabilizing and humanitarian grounds.

A notable participant—and potential driver—of military interventions on the continent is France, which currently maintains troop deployments in a number of African countries, including Burkina Faso, Chad, Central African Republic, Ivory Coast, Gabon, Mali, Niger and Senegal (**French Ministry of Defense, April 7, 2015**; and **The National Interest, August 7, 2014**). These forces represent a mix of both long-standing commitments to allies, primarily in West Africa, and more recent deployments for specific purposes.

France's connections to sub-Saharan Africa run deep, with much of West and Central Africa having at one time been colonized by France, and later part of the French Union, before the majority of these countries achieved independence in 1960. Historical, cultural and linguistic ties to France, as well as enduring political, economic and military linkages, allows for continued engagement between France and its former colonies. France has continued to play an active role in sub-Saharan Africa and West Africa in particular, and conditional on how to tally the activities, France has intervened twenty times since 1960 (**GlobalVoicesOnline, January 18, 2013**).

Since 2000, France has staged three major interventions in sub-Saharan Africa where its forces have acted largely unilaterally or in concert with national forces (*see* Figure 2). The first was during the 2002-2007 Ivorian Civil War, when the French Operation Licorne was deployed to support the UN peacekeeping operation in Ivory Coast, although it became embroiled in fighting with the Ivorian military in 2004 (**Pambazuka News, March 1, 2013**). The second was the French Operation Serval, beginning in 2013, which sought to assist the Malian government take back control of Northern Mali from al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Ansar Dine, and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO). This has since evolved into the current ongoing Operation Barkhane, an expanded (both in mission and geography) version of Op-
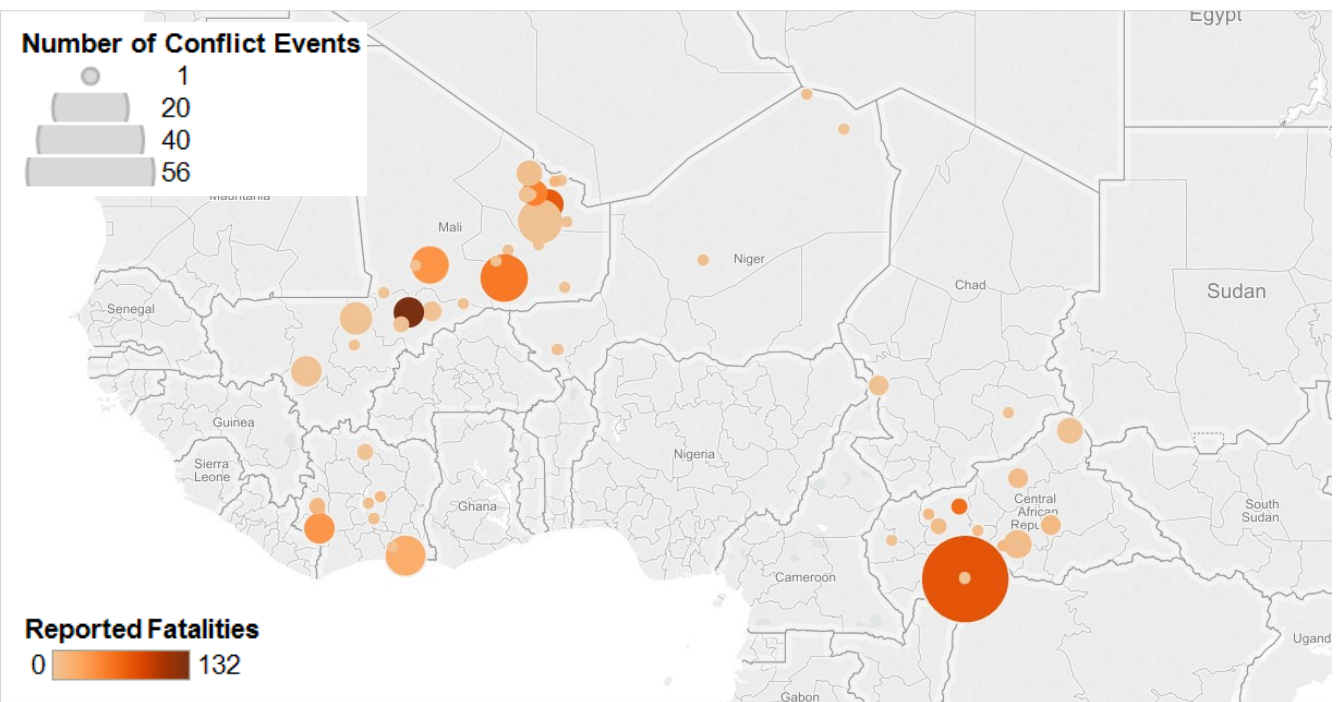

Figure 2: French Military Interventions & Associated Fatalities in Africa, from January 2000-March 2015.

French Military Interventions

eration Serval ([The National Interest, August 7, 2014](#)). The final major intervention is the ongoing Operation Sangaris in the Central African Republic, also begun in 2013, and seeking to prevent what the UN considered to be a situation with the potential to become a genocide ([Reuters, November 21, 2013](#)).

Although each of these conflicts saw French forces intervene to protect a national government, the activities they engaged in are driven by specific contexts. For example, during the first intervention in Ivory Coast and the intervention in the Central African Republic, French forces operated defensively within an enhanced peacekeeper role, while in Mali the French forces engaged in offensive operations against militant extremists. This is reflected in how Mali is the most violent of these conflicts in terms of fatalities both caused and suffered by French forces, with 492 recorded in events where French forces are a main actor. By comparison, total fatalities in events which involved French forces are 191 and 104 in the Central African Republic and Ivory Coast respectively (*see* Figure 2).

The different contexts of the conflicts are also represented in the types of violence in which French forces engage. In the Ivorian civil war, French forces were primarily involved in battles without any change of territory, although in 2002 airports were captured to allow the evacuation of foreign nationals, and later in 2006, after violence decreased generally, French forces assisted in the recapture of territory. French forces were the target of only a very few incidences of remote violence, although following an airstrike which killed 9 French soldiers and one US nation-

al, a swift response destroyed the Ivorian air force of 2 jets and 3 helicopter gunships ([BBC News, November 7, 2004](#)). However, in the Malian context, remote violence played a much bigger role as French forces conducted airstrikes against militants, primarily in 2013. Since, French forces and UN forces have come under attack from remote violence in the form of roadside bombs (*see* Figure 3). Finally, riots and protests are more frequent in the Central African Republic intervention as French forces have engaged in policing activities, particularly in and around Bangui (*see* Figures 2 and 3).

Aside from the events in these three specific interventions, French forces are deployed more widely across the Sahel region as part of the ongoing Operation Barkhane, whose mandate is to combat the trend of rising militancy which is being seen across the Sahel ([Africa Security Brief, November 2012](#)). This includes basing of forces in Chad and Niger, where France has been engaging in a variety of activities in cooperation with these countries to combat militancy, including counter-terrorism operations, setting up reconnaissance bases, and intelligence gathering and sharing ([IPI Global Observatory, September 4, 2014](#)). One such operation saw French forces carry out an airstrike against a Mourabitounes Group of Azawad (GMA) convoy traveling across northern Niger, which was then raided by special forces leading to numerous arrests.

In short, France will continue to act as the region's most willing external police force, but the question remains, 'in whose benefit does it operate'?
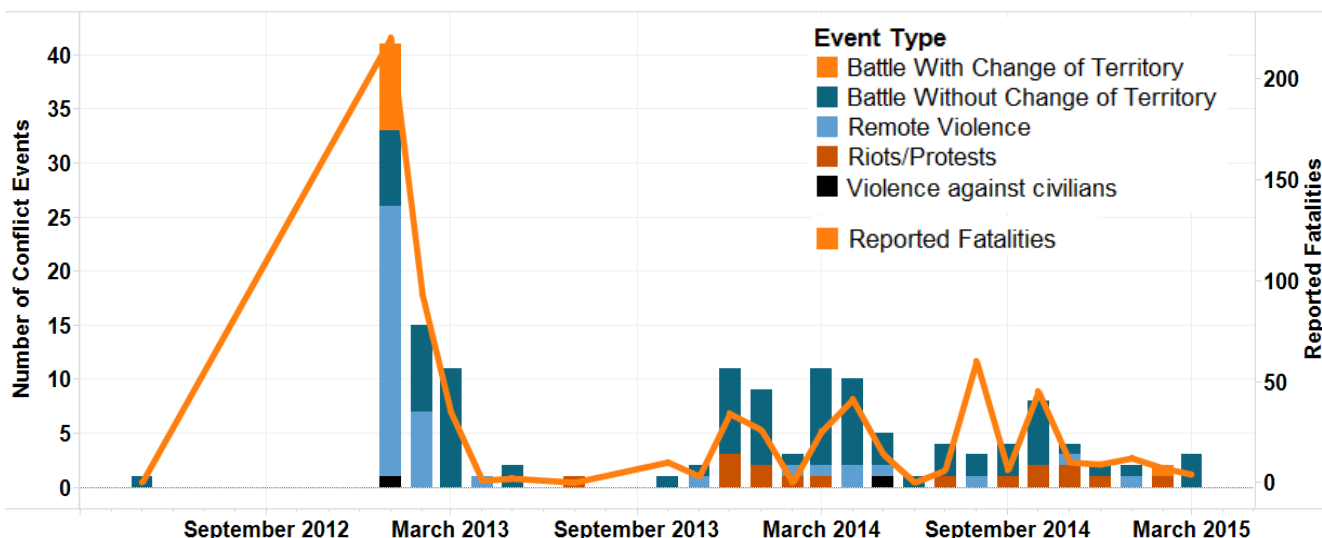

Figure 3: Number of Conflict Events by Type Involving French Forces in West Africa, from January 2010-April 2015.

3

Islamist Militancy and Counter Insurgency across North Africa

As Egypt responds to another checkpoint attack by the militant group Ajnad Misr (Soldiers of Egypt) **(BBC News, 5 April 2015)**, North Africa continues to be viewed as a providing a fertile environment for the organisation of 'extremist' groups. The beginning of 2015 has seen a surge in media attention towards growing terrorist activity in the region, with particular focus on the diffusion of Islamic State into countries perceived as having weak institutions. Yet the growing tendency to attribute instances of violent Islamist activity simply to groups acting under the Islamic State rubric misses the idiosyncratic nature of this type of political violence, ignores the often socio-economic dimension of the conflict, and, as a consequence, poses difficulties for policymakers to adequately respond by adapting institutions to overcome the root cause.

Owing to the renewed focus on the danger that violent Islamist groups pose to the security and stability of North Africa and the Middle East, this analysis considers the dynamics of a number of violent Islamist groups operating across Egypt, Libya and Tunisia since late 2011, with the aim of reviewing the forms that this violence takes and the processes through which it unfolds. These include: Al Jihad, Islamic State in Libya, Salafist Militias, Ansar al-Sharia (Libya), Ansar Beit al-Maqdis, February 17th Martyrs Brigade, Okba Ibn Nafaa Brigade and unidentified Islamist

militants that have carried out violent attacks. Analysts will then be able to examine how, if at all, this violence has changed and how it reflects the post-revolutionary governance practices and institutions.

The incidence of violent Islamist activity in Q1 of 2015 was over 11 times higher than Q1 of 2013, indicating the growing appeal to join violent armed groups rather than non-violently engage in the political process since the popular uprisings (*see* Figure 4). Figure 5 reveals another developing trend that may signal a change in the strategic orientation of this violence: although event counts generally rose since July, individual conflict events involving the groups under review are less lethal. Traditionally, attacks using terror tactics are carried out to create a global spectacle and in order to "generate fear that extends beyond the immediate victims of the violence" **(Lutz and Lutz 2013: 8-9)**; a large number of casualties is often the intention. In the period preceding July 2014, there were a number of weeks where fatalities vastly outstripped the number of events, however the gap between conflict events and fatalities has reduced in the last three quarters.

This may indicate a number of dynamics: the rise in absolute conflict levels could be indicative of new forms of resistance whereby Islamist insurgents engage in more routine bouts of violence with state and non-state actors due to an expansion of their organisational capacity. The
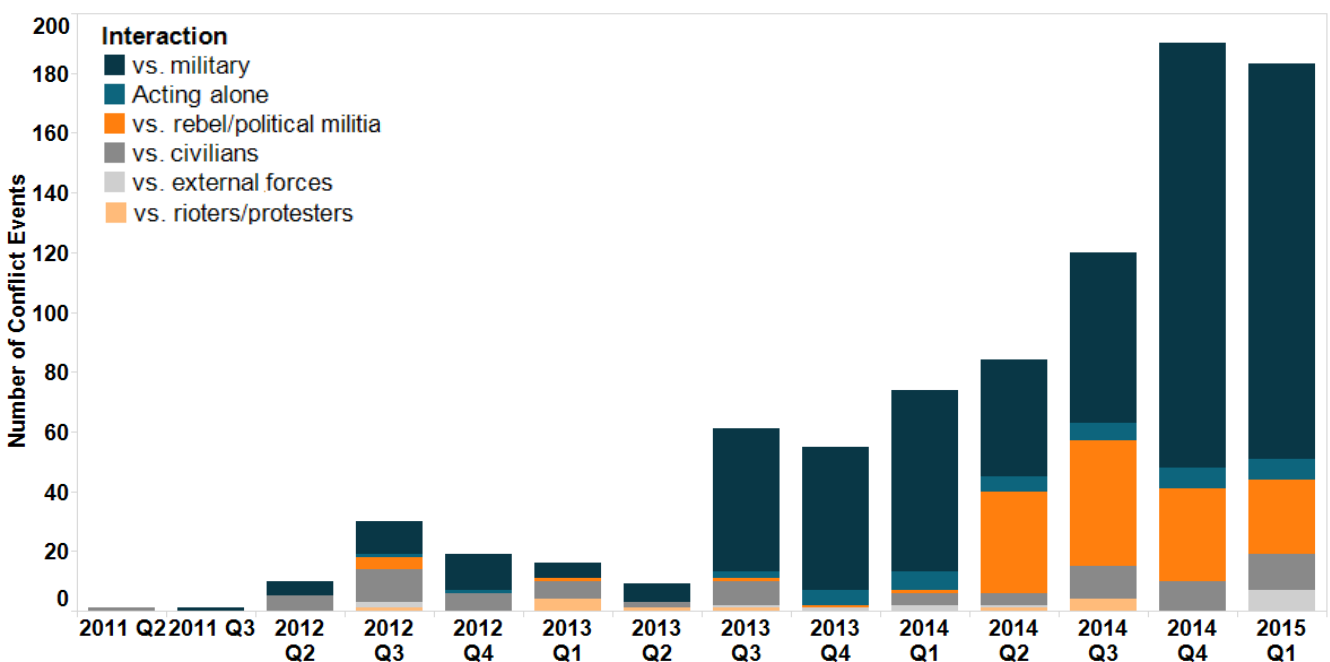

Figure 4: Number of Conflict Events by Interaction with Islamist Militants in Egypt, Libya & Tunisia, Q2 2011-Q1 2015.   **4**

Islamist Militancy and Counter Insurgency across North Africa

incentives for rebel recruitment are increased in authoritarian states with strong military suppression of collective actors and, under these circumstances, becoming a member of an armed group may compensate for the failure of governments to address socio-economic grievances.

An explanation for the reduced intensity of conflict episodes may be in the asymmetrical nature of state-non-state interactions. Marginalised groups who are unable to attain political goals through institutional means can utilise persistent unrest targeting state infrastructure to erode the power base of the government they seek to subvert. This appears to be the case in Egypt where remote bombings that result in no injuries have been especially common.

Increased activity also reflects the sustained counter-insurgency operations conducted by state forces to tackle regional instability (*see* Figure 4). **Fielding & Shortland** identify that "the combination of political repression and military counter-insurgency measures employed by the Egyptian government has the potential to exacerbate rather than reduce political violence" (2010: 433). With President Sisi advocating for the creation of a joint Arab military union **(The Africa Report, 30 March 2015)**, an increase in cross-border coordination would in the short-term act to amplify this pattern.

Although single violent events have been more pronounced in the last few months following the beheading of Coptic Christians in Sirte, the Corinthia hotel attack in Libya and the Tunis Bardo Museum attack, civilians are not the primary target of attacks. Drawing insight from Malka and Lawrence's (2013) analysis on a new wave of Jihadi-Salafism, Figure 5 supports the theory that low-level localized and targeted violence (directed towards security forces) is the tactic favoured by Islamist groups. These groups may be looking to cultivate support from local populations in order to build their capacities and one way of achieving this is to avoid indiscriminate attacks and nonviolent dissemination of ideology. As asymmetrical violence grows, "a large, entrenched mass of adherents that occasionally resorts to violence is ultimately more destabilizing to states than a hardened group of dozens or hundreds of fighters hiding out in the mountains or desert" **(Malka and Lawrence, 2013: 2)**.

A remaining question: does counter-insurgency promote reactionary violence or push marginalised Islamist groups to nonviolent strategies? If the latter is the case, how would this play out? The spate of bombings across the Nile Delta region targeting power supplies and public services may be a deliberate attempt to minimise civilian casualties whilst building ideological support locally.

This demonstrates the need to re-evaluate the tendency to understand violent Islamist groups as purely international actors and refocus attention on the local political dynamics that have largely been subsumed by the desire to categorise Salafi-Jihadi and violent Islamist activity as 'terrorist'.
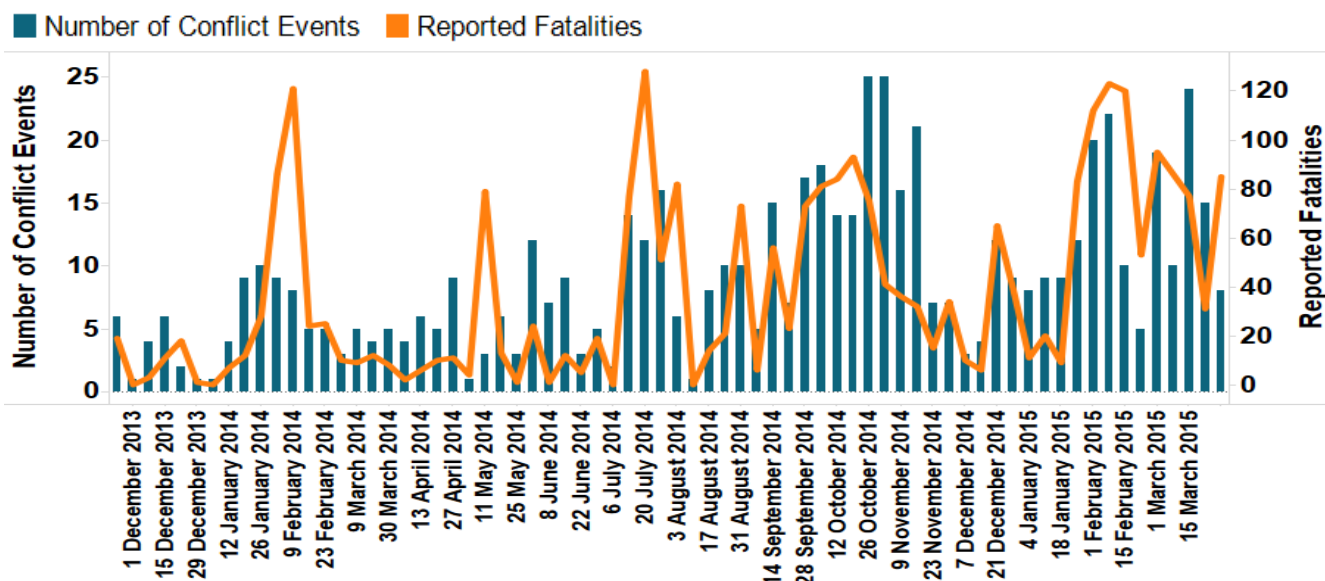

Figure 5: Conflict Events Involving Islamist Militants in Egypt, Libya & Tunisia, from December 2013-4th April 2015.

Nigeria Elections

The end of March saw the postponed Nigerian presidential elections finally take place, and incumbent PDP candidate Goodluck Jonathan concede defeat to former military ruler, Muhammadu Buhari. While undoubtedly affected by the ongoing conflict in the north-east of the country, the elections forced a refocusing of international attention on the other cleavages and conflict dynamics affecting the continent's most populous country.

Excluding Boko Haram violence from a review of conflict in Nigeria over the past twelve months reveals some interesting patterns: first, as Figure 6 shows, levels of political violence in Nigeria have grown steadily over the course of the past six months, with a particularly sharp increase in violence in March 2015. At the same time, the level of reported fatalities has fallen considerably, suggesting a decline in the intensity of violence over the same period.

Violent events involving rioters have increased the most in the same time period, from just under 10% of all non-state actors (including protesters) in April 2014, to just under 30% in March 2015. Communal militia violence, and political militia violence, have declined proportionately during this time, reflecting the informalisation of political violence in this time period: instead of organised and co-ordinated militias engaging in acts of violence, there is a greater degree of spontaneous, disorganised and generally unarmed (though violent and destructive) rioting.

The sharp increase in violence in March is driven in part by violence on or immediately surrounding election day itself: 21 discrete violent events were recorded on the 28th of March itself (polling day), and the three-day period of the 27th – 29th of March witnessed 16% of all violence recorded in the month. However, this concentration masks significant variation both in location and perpetrators of violence over time.

States in the south of country, including Anambra and Osun, witnessed the largest share of violence on polling day itself: in these states, violence was characterised primarily by clashes between groups of PDP and APC supporters, with supporters in some cases burning buildings of rival groups. Other areas, however, were more likely to record violence in the run-up to the election than on polling day itself: violence in Benue and Plateau States was concentrated in the weeks running up to elections, with inter-communal clashes, as well as more directly electoral violence with targeted attacks on supporters of political parties en route to rallies.

By contrast, Rivers was the most active site of conflict throughout the whole month (with violent events in the state making up over 13% of all violence across the country), with violent events occurring throughout the month. Violence in Rivers was dominated to a greater extent than most other sites in the country by targeted assassinations,
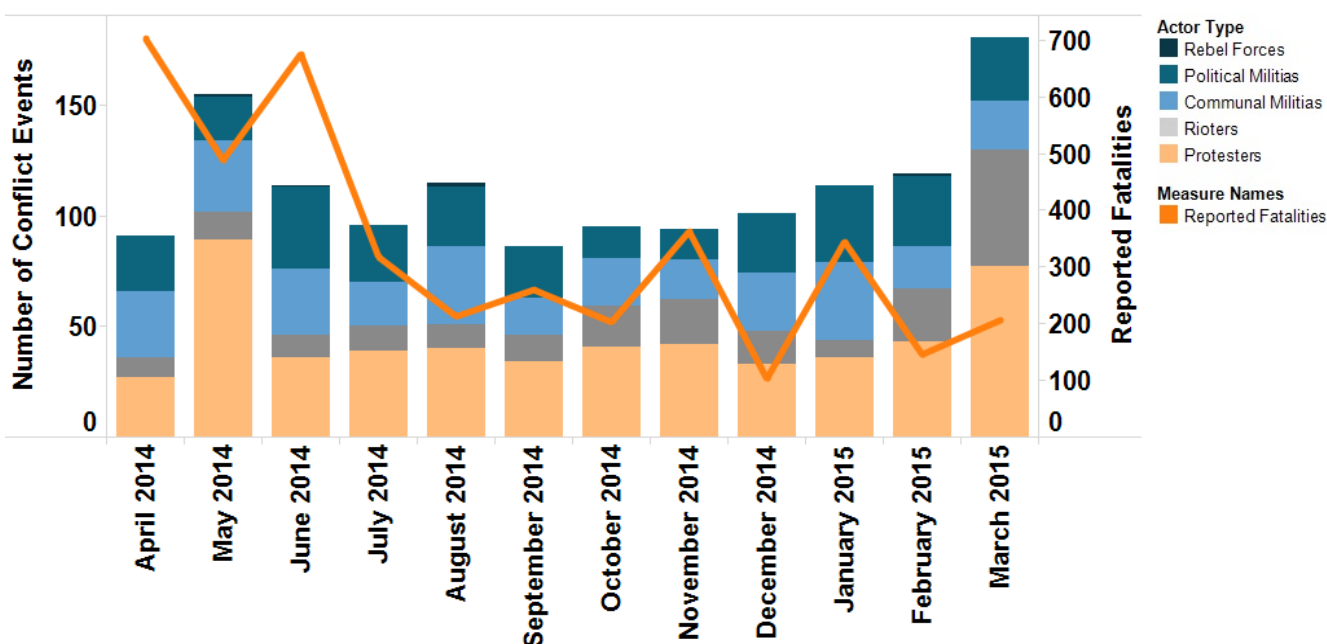

Figure 6: Number of Conflict Events & Reported Fatalities by Actor Type in Nigeria, from April 2014-March 2015.

Nigeria Elections

reportedly disproportionately targeting APC supporters or figures. This type of violence is distinct in form from less coordinated clashes among rival supporters: attacks by unidentified assailants on political party figures or supporters require a greater degree of planning and coordination, and the absence of information about perpetrators (as most attacks go unclaimed) has implications for the pursuit of justice for victims, their families, and political supporters and participants in the process more generally.

There are also temporal patterns in the type of conflict actor active over the course of the month: protesters were active throughout the month of March, with instances of demonstrations as late as the 23rd of March against the electoral commission's failure to deliver voter cards in some cases. Communal militia violence was concentrated in the earlier part of the month, corresponding to ethnic, religious and livelihood cleavages along which conflict less directly linked to the elections takes place, particularly in Nigeria's diverse, and often divided, Middle Belt region. Polling day itself was dominated by violence by political militias, including unidentified armed groups launching sporadic attacks on polling centres or voters, and rioters clashing with rival party supporters.

Considering both geographic and actor data (*see* Figure 7),

a further pattern emerges: while March witnessed conflict events across the country, there is a clear concentration of non-violent actors such as peaceful protesters in the south of the country, with rioters and political militias more evenly dispersed across the territory. Communal militias, by contrast, are most active in a band running from the south-east to the eastern Middle Belt region, with more isolated vigilante violence farther north.

These patterns speak to diverse security risks across the country: while violence is widespread across Nigeria, the scope and space for public participation, peaceful protest and non-violent demonstration is clearly variable, with the greatest space (and/or perceived need for demonstration) in the south. Meanwhile, persistent insecurity in the north would appear to limit civic participation more considerably, even where an election has been successfully conducted. Lastly, sustained violence by communal militias in parts of the country reflects the deeply divisive and divided nature of relations between communities, which can spill over into violent confrontation. With the trepidation surrounding the changeover of power, and the conclusion elections which were generally more peacefully conducted than some had feared, it is important that other drivers of insecurity and types of conflict are not neglected when political focus turns once more to Boko Haram.
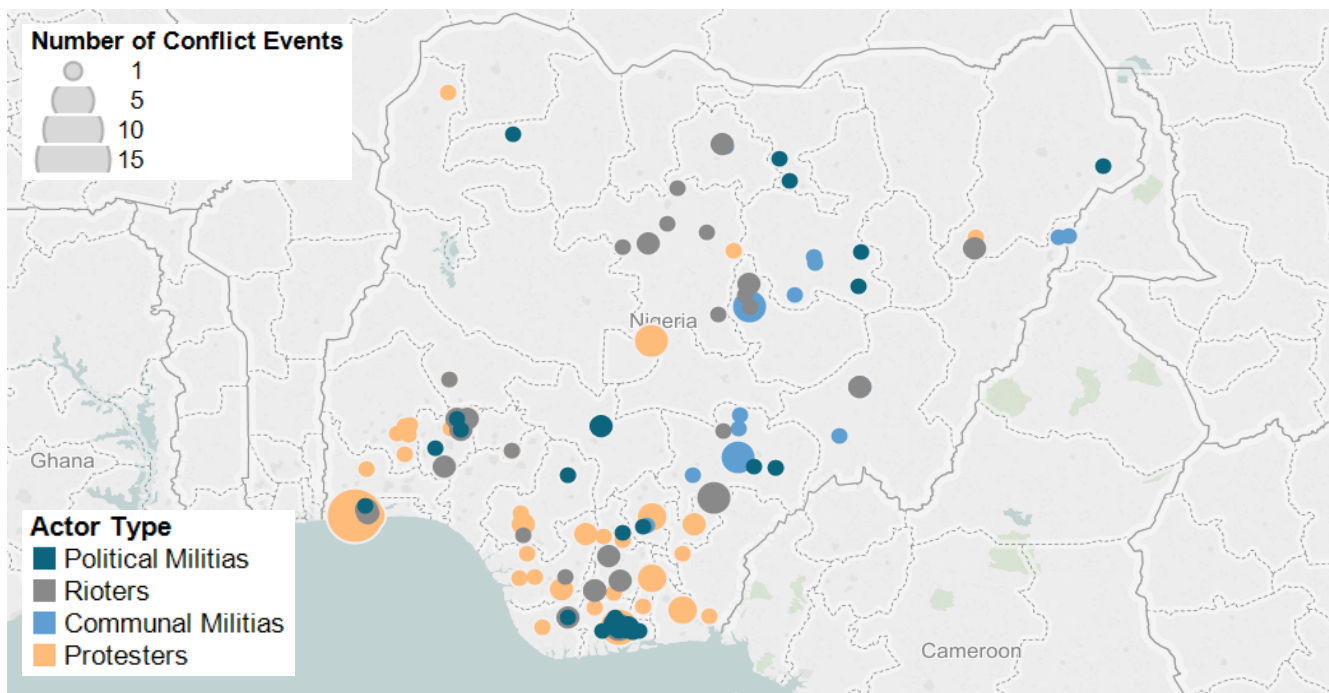

Figure 7: Number of Conflict Events by Actor Type, by Location in Nigeria, March 2015.

South Africa

Conflict levels have steadily climbed in South Africa since the start of the New Year. March was the most active month since mid-2013. This dramatic increase in conflict events is due primarily to increasing riots and protests, fuelled by student political protest and a spate of riots targeting foreign-owned businesses and property. This has stoked fears of a repeat of the xenophobic violence that occurred in mid-2008.

Early 2015 witnessed a noticeable spike in xenophobic violence against foreign nationals and foreign-owned property. The number of events involving violence against immigrants or foreign-owned property in the first four months of 2015 surpassed the number of incidences for the entirety of 2014. The looting of foreign-owned shops and the targeting of foreign nationals started in Soweto in mid-January, after a Somali shopkeeper shot a teenage South African who was allegedly trying to steal from the property. Rioting and looting spread to other urban areas in Gauteng and into more rural areas of North West Province. Isolated incidents also occurred in other metropolitan areas with significant immigrant populations such as Cape Town and Durban. This is a similar geographic pattern to the violence in 2008 with townships within Gauteng - Alexandria in 2008 and Soweto in 2015 - serving as the origin point and central locus of the violence (*see* Figure 8). A recent survey of over 27,000 individuals in

Gauteng found that 35% of respondents believed that all foreigners should be sent home, providing some explanation for why violence against immigrants is particularly prevalent in this state **(SAPA, 2014)**.

The violence has not reached the lethality witnessed in 2008 which led to 62 deaths and the displacement of 20,000 foreigners within South Africa's borders. The recent violence has predominantly been directed against property rather than individuals. Figure 8 shows that the recent unrest has primarily taken the form of riots and protests. Service delivery protests and demonstrations tied to land ownership, shack dweller's rights and unemployment have repeatedly resulted in the looting of foreign-owned properties **(Jost et al., 2012)**.

In contrast, much of the violence that occurred in 2008 took the form of organised violence against civilians by militias and vigilantes. In 2008 organised attacks were often encouraged by community leaders offering to remove 'unwanted' foreigners in order to capitalise on local grievances and enhance their local legitimacy **(Landau et al., 2009)**. It is not currently known whether a similar dynamic is perpetuating the current cycle of violence. However, the rhetoric of senior political figures has ranged from unsympathetic, with Small Businesses Minister Lindiwe Zulu arguing that migrants should share their
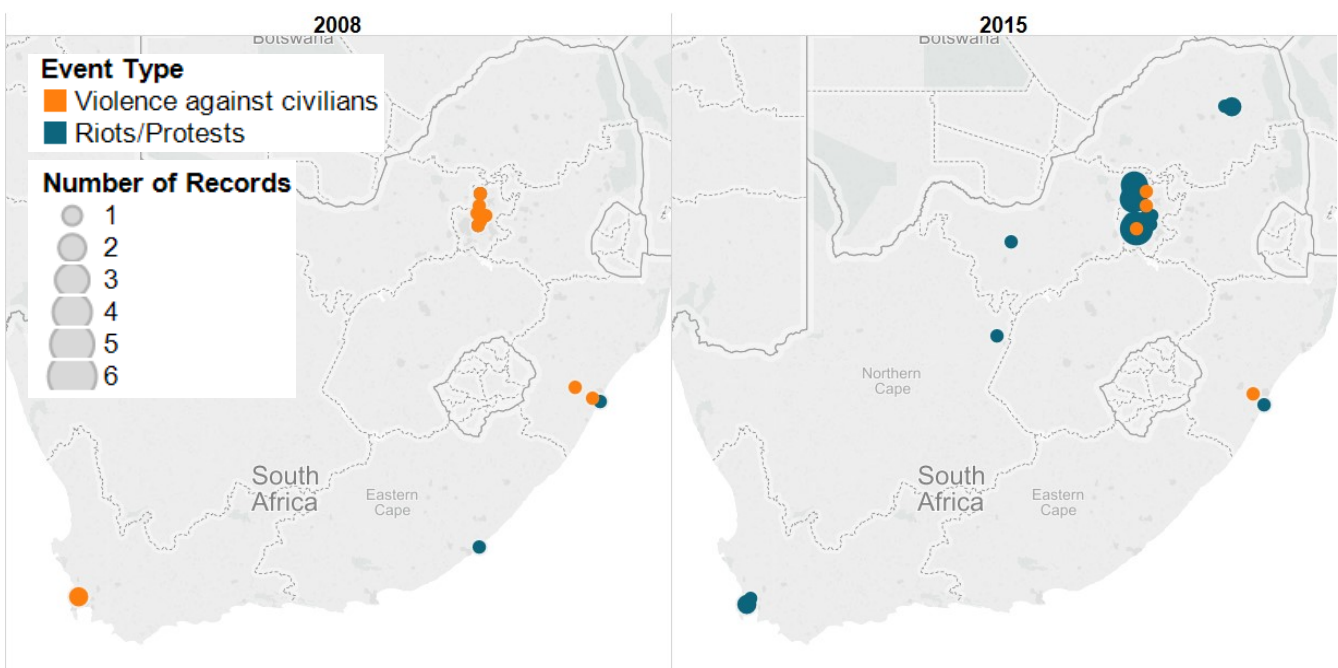

Figure 8: Events Involving Attacks on Foreign Nationals or Foreign-Owned Property in South Africa, from 2008-2015.

South Africa

business secrets to reduce local resentment, to hostile, with Zulu monarch Goodwill Zwelithini kaBhekuzulu demanding that foreigners return to their home countries **(Mbatha, 2015**; **Ndou, 2015)**.

The South African government has tried to frame these riots in criminal rather than political terms and has been reluctant to label the violence 'xenophobic' **(United Front, 2015)**. This is reminiscent of the political discourse of the government during the 2008 violence **(IRIN, 2008)**. However, in both cases the dramatic spike in anti-immigrant activity contradicts the government's interpretation of events.

South Africa has also witnessed a dramatic increase in student-led protests since the beginning of the year (*see* Figure 9). A high proportion of this increase is driven by the 'Rhodes Must Fall' movement, an ongoing campaign to remove the statue of Cecil Rhodes from the University of Cape Town campus. The campaign has been heavily charged and divided political opinion, with Julius Malema's Economic Freedom Fighters capitalising on the populist rhetoric of the campaign and the Democratic Alliance arguing that the statue should not be removed **(Jamal, 2015**; **Phakathi, 2015)**. In spite of the politicised nature of the protest, demonstrations have been largely peaceful and protesters have avoided clashes with the police.

The recent spate of student protests is a distinct contrast to student demonstrations in 2014 which were marked by rioting. In 2014, 62.7% of student demonstrations were riots and 20.9% of student protests resulted in clashes with the police. So far in 2015, the proportion of student riots has decreased to 37.5% and only 10.7% of demonstrations have resulted in fights with the police. This transformation in the profile of student protest may be due to the source of the protest.

The main cause of contention in the 2014 student riots was the inability of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme to fund (NSFAS) all of the qualifying students entering university. The inability for NSFAS to meet its obligations is due to the high annual increases in university admission fees, with most institutions increasing their fees by 10% annually **(Phakathi, 2014)**. In this case, poor students can place blame on the decisions of the institution itself for their financial difficulties.

The Rhodes Must Fall campaign has relied on maintaining popular legitimacy in order to strengthen its bargaining position with the UCT authorities. The protest has also been successful and the statue of Cecil Rhodes has been boarded up. Whether this success will encourage peaceful protest in future student demonstrations or not remains to be seen.
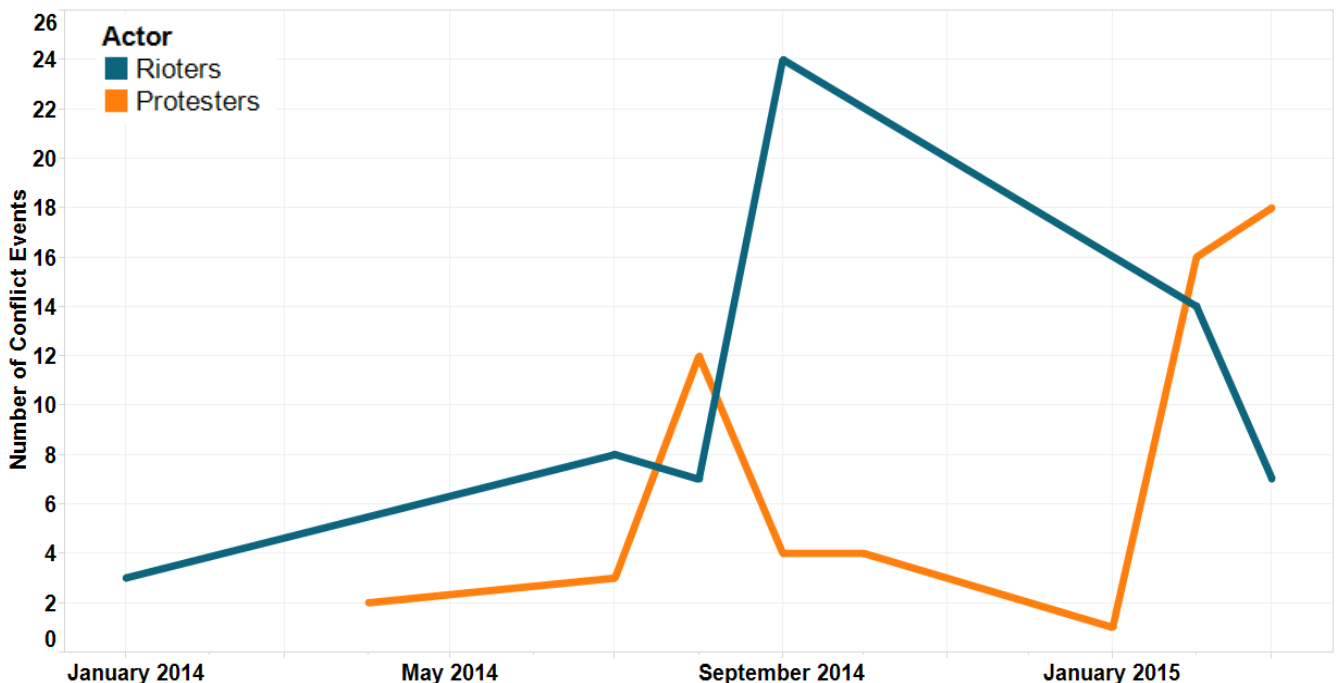

Figure 9: Riots and Protests Involving Students in South Africa, from January 2014—March 2015.

Special Focus Topic: The Targeting of Children in Conflict Zones

Violence against children is a strategy employed by armed groups within conflict often in an attempt to instill terror in populations, or to reaffirm brutality and gain (global) notoriety. The message is directed to adversaries and/or the international community at-large. In addition to attacks, there are also numerous instances in which children are abducted and forced to fight in war. "Children are deliberately targeted as they are manipulated more easily than adults and can be indoctrinated to perform crimes and atrocities without asking questions" (**SOS Children's Villages Charity, 2015**).

The indirect negative ramifications of conflict for children are also manifold – affecting every aspect of a child's development – and can have lasting effects for years to come. Within conflict environments, children can be: "uprooted from their homes and communities [becoming internally displaced or refugees]..., orphaned or separated from their parents and families, subjected to sexual abuse and exploitation, victims of trauma as a result of being exposed to violence, [and are] deprived of education and recreation... [furthermore], it is highly probable that children living in conflict areas will be deprived of basic needs such as shelter, food and medical attention.

In addition, relief for children tends to be the last priority in war, resulting in insufficient or no protection for minors. Besides, children are, due to their physical constitution and growth, most vulnerable to being deprived of food, medical assistance and education, which has a severe and lasting impact on their development" (**SOS Children's Villages Charity, 2015**).

Extracting events of violence against civilians related to children from the **ACLED** dataset, the following patterns emerge in conflict zones: these attacks have become more expansive across Africa in recent years (*see* Figure 10). The number of attacks on children has been consistently growing since late 2012. This is largely driven by the targeting of civilians (children) by political militias, though government forces, rebel groups, and ethnic militias are also responsible for this violence (*see* Figure 11). These attacks have been responsible for an increasingly large number of fatalities in recent years. Several spikes in child violence have been reported, and are noted in Figure 11. Some of these are explored below.

The latest spike in child fatalities is due to Boko Haram attacks in Nigeria earlier this year, specifically the several day-long attack in Baga in early January, in which the primary casualties of the attack were reported to be the old, women, and children.

Early 2014 saw an increase in the targeting and killing of children in South Sudan. At least seven mass graves were found and reported to UN rights experts, where at least 230 civilians were buried, including Dinka and Nuer women and children, killed during the civil war by both government and rebel forces (**Al Arabiya, 2014**). The recent abduction of hundreds of South Sudanese boys, forcibly recruited as child soldiers, sheds further light on the violent consequences that conflict can have for children (**International Business Times, 2015**; **UN, 2015; UNICEF, 2015**). This event also points to the role of political militias in the targeting of children – the group responsible for the
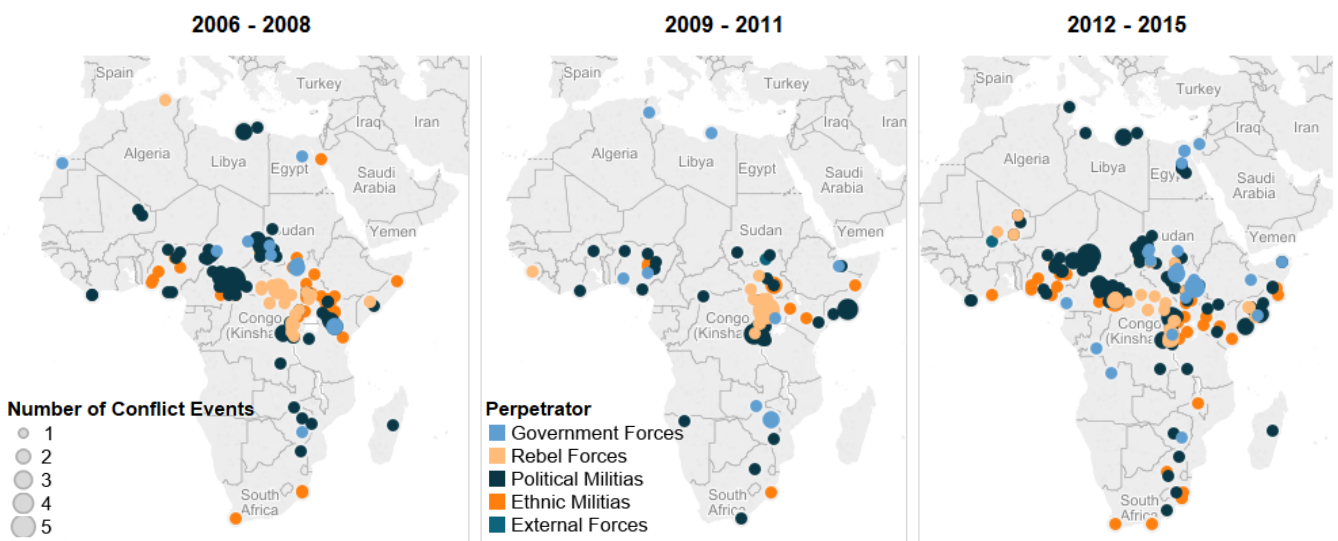

Figure 10: Violence against children in Africa, from 2006-2015.

Special Focus Topic: The Targeting of Children in Conflict Zones

abduction is believed to be a pro-government militia – though child soldiers are believed to be fighting on both sides of South Sudan's civil war (Australian Broadcasting Company, 2015).

Conflict in the Central African Republic has also fueled the targeting of civilians, including children. The Séléka Rebel Coalition/(ex-)Seleka and Anti-Balaka militias have all been responsible for targeting children, including public executions of pregnant women and children, attacks on children using grenades and machetes, slitting of throats, and burning down homes, amongst other tactics. The situation in CAR has been described as "the worst crisis people have never heard of" – by Samantha Power (2013), US Ambassador to the UN (Amnesty International, 2014; The Guardian, 2013; Human Rights Watch, 2014; Save the Children, 2013). In addition to targeting children in attacks, the use of child soldiers is also increasing in CAR at an alarming rate. A report late last year suggests that the use of child soldiers has more than doubled (possibly

quadrupled) in CAR since 2013 (The Guardian, 2014).

The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) has been active in DR-Congo (as well as other African states) since early 1999 (the group was created in the late 1980s in Uganda). A large fatality spike in late 2009 from violence against civilians including children was due to attacks by the LRA in the Orientale province of DR-Congo, where most of the group's activity is centered. Hundreds were killed and abducted, including at least 80 children (UN, 2009; Human Rights Watch, 2010). The LRA has gained global notoriety for extremely brutal attacks on civilians and for the conscription of child soldiers.

Arguably, the universal disapproval of the use of this tactic helps to draw international attention to a conflict, which may be coveted by armed actors seeking to gain notoriety. Given the relative ease of targeting children, this violent tactic is gaining increased traction amongst conflict actors, especially in recent years.
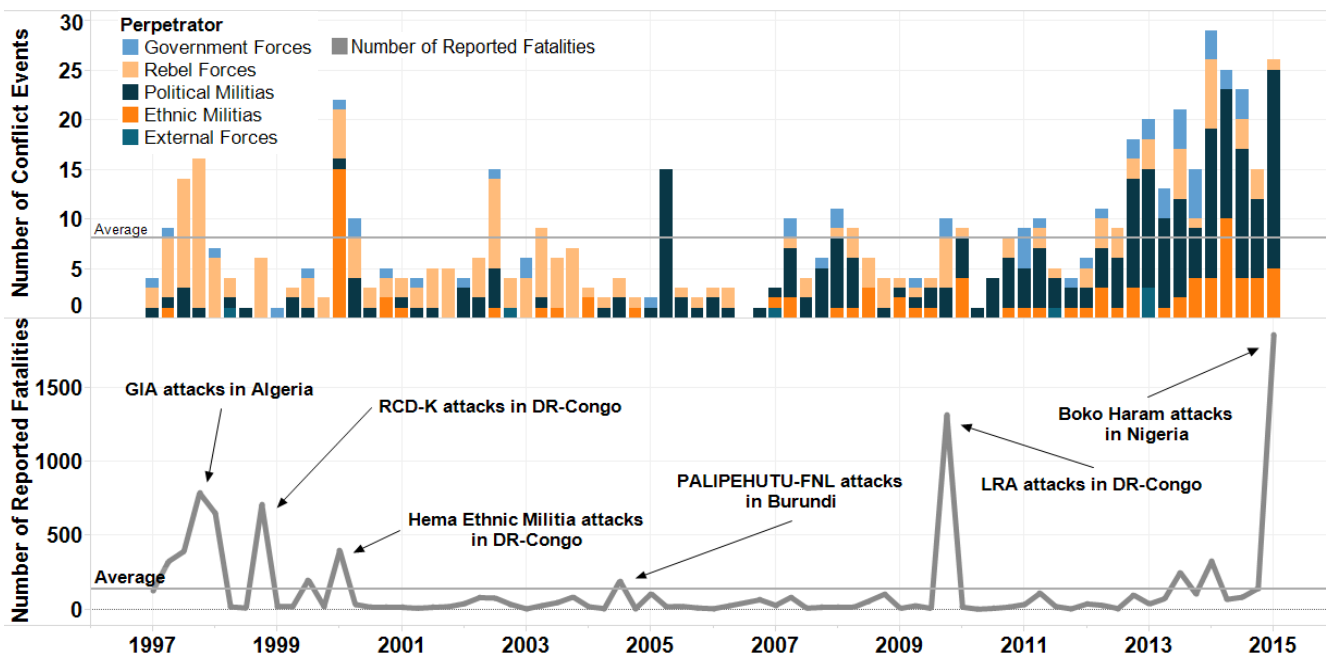

Figure 11: Violence Against Children by Perpetrator in Africa, from 1997-2015.

Sources

Conflict Trends reports are compiled from ACLED data and draw on news sources, civil society reports, and academic and policy analyses.
Full details of sources and coding processes are available online on the ACLED website.