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COVID-19 and Violent Actors in the Global South: An Inter- and Cross-Regional Comparison

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Abstract

This Working Paper examines the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on state and non-state violent actors in the Global South. We provide an ACLED-based interregional mapping of trends in Latin America and the Caribbean, the Middle East and North Africa, and sub-Saharan Africa. Cross-regional case comparisons shed further light on the similarities and differences of countries characterised by long-term armed conflict (Colombia, Iraq, Nigeria) or having transitioned from authoritarianism but facing inequality and political exclusion (Chile, Tunisia, South Africa). We identify a temporal variation: Initially, state armed actors' new responsibilities to implement COVID-19–related control measures led to an increase in violence against civilians, but over time there was a decrease. We also find that COVID-19 had an early demobilising effect vis-à-vis protest and mob violence, a consequence of lock-downs and mobility restrictions. Yet, protest has quickly returned to pre-pandemic levels in many countries, underlining continued – sometimes aggravated –grievances. Moreover, different violent actors' responses to the pandemic were decisively shaped by their respective conflict histories.

Keywords: COVID-19, violence, Global South, Latin America and Caribbean, Middle East and North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa

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Article Outline

1 Introduction

COVID-19 has affected all countries worldwide – including in terms of questions of peace and security.[1] United Nations (UN) Secretary General António Guterres accordingly called for ceasefires in response to the pandemic in late March 2020, but no meaningful short-term violence reduction occurred in many long-lasting conflicts such as in Syria or Colombia. Rather, several countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, experienced an increase in violence after

1 The authors would like to thank David Kuehn for great comments on an earlier version of the text.

the onset of the pandemic. Yet, the impact of the pandemic on violent conflict appears to be more complex than these initial observations suggest. Nigeria, for example, saw a ceasefire in the local farmer–herder conflict in Benue State in response to the UN Secretary General's call to halt fighting. At the same time, clashes between Islamist insurgents and the Nigerian army also increased in the first month of the COVID-19 outbreak. The pandemic could thus contribute to shifts in the balance of power between state and non-state violent actors, but it remains unclear whether some actors "benefit" from the pandemic, and in what ways – especially in those in countries and regions of the Global South characterised by a large number and variety of violent actors. This working paper therefore addresses the following guiding question: *In what ways did the pandemic and pandemic-related policies affect state and non-state violent actors across and within different regions?*

To answer this question, we undertake a systematic inter- and cross-regional comparison of dynamics in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), and sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). First, we map changes in direct physical violence by key violent actors, most notably the state (military and police), insurgents, and mobs, using data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Dataset (ACLED) (Raleigh et al., 2010) to compare pandemic violence to a pre-pandemic baseline. Second, as such data does not account for *how* exactly different violent actors are affected by the pandemic and pandemic polices, we zoom into six case studies that cover two cases from each of the respective regions.

Our results show a variety of changes in the activities of violent actors after the World Health Organization's (WHO) March 2020 declaration of a pandemic. However, these changes vary across time and space. While the number and frequency of violent events increased in SSA after the onset of COVID-19, LAC and MENA experienced decreases. Moreover, various state and non-state violent actors were affected differently, and changes in their activities were not always linked to the pandemic per se, as our case studies highlight. Thus, the working paper helps to a disentangle the effects of the pandemic on violence. It thereby contributes to the burgeoning body of literature on the variation of violence in specific regional, national, and subnational contexts.

2 The Disaster–Conflict Nexus

There is broad debate on the impact of external shocks or disasters on armed conflict. Based on negotiation theory (Zartman, 1995; Lederach, 1997), the underlying assumption holds that cooperation to cope with a disaster or contain a health emergency can build confidence and trust between the conflict partners involved. This may be the basis for future dialogue on more difficult topics. Along similar lines, the WHO's approach of "Health as a Bridge to Peace" claims that health interventions, such as vaccination campaigns, are apolitical and can thus serve as a basis for further cooperation. A related argument is made regarding cooperation after natural disasters or in the context of civil society's increasing role in service delivery, such

as humanitarian aid during war. However, empirical evidence for the positive link beyond the emergency is weak (Percival 2017). In a study of international cooperation between Jordan, Israel, and the Palestinian Authority to fight the bird flu in 2006, Long (2011) concludes that short-term cooperation does not necessarily serve as a game-changer. Cooperation ceased after the emergency was over. Even in the case of Aceh, where the Tsunami of 2004 is often cited as a positive case for cooperation, the disaster was not the cause but an accelerator of prior peace initiatives (Billon & Waizenegger, 2007; Gaillard, Clavé & Kelman, 2008; Waizenegger & Hyndman, 2010).

In relating these findings to COVID-19, one needs to account for the very specific quality of the pandemic. COVID-19 is not a short-term exogenous shock calling for reconstruction and recovery such as earthquakes or tsunamis. The pandemic is a process unfolding over weeks, months, or even years. While the beginning of the pandemic is usually pinned as the WHO's declaration of the pandemic, the end will neither be "televised" (Robertson & Doshi, 2021) nor unfold simultaneously across the globe.

2.1 COVID-19 and Violent Conflict: An Emerging Debate

Ideal-typically, there are three basic ways in which COVID-19 could influence violent actors and their activities globally, ranging from a reduction in activities by violent actors over no effect to an increase in the frequency and/or lethality of violent events (Bank & Kurtenbach, 2020).

First, COVID-19 provides a chance for peace or at least a reduction of violence in conflict-prone areas. Pavlik (2020a) found that political violence globally decreased during the initial month of the pandemic compared to the months preceding it by approximately 10 per cent. Similarly, Bloem and Salemi (2021) observed a brief decrease in conflict, which they attribute to an initial sharp decline in violent protest activities that were undermined by social-distancing regulations during the pandemic's first months. Given that COVID-19 poses an immediate and common threat, the pandemic – like other emergencies discussed above – potentially provides a chance to overcome rivalries through cooperation against a common enemy, namely the virus (Scott, 2020). Yet, evidence remains mixed. In some conflict contexts, armed actors followed the call of the UN Secretary General António Guterres to stop fighting (Bell, Epple & Pospisil, 2020a) but overall, pandemic-induced cooperation remained limited. Only 14 countries witnessed ceasefire declarations, many of which were unilaterally declared and not by one of the key actors in the conflict (RFI, 2020). Often, unilateral ceasefires were also short-lived (Rustad, Nygård & Methi, 2020; Wiehler, 2020). Accordingly, and in line with existing studies on the limited effect of natural disasters on sustainable peace sketched above, Ide (2021) argued that the pandemic has provided few opportunities for health diplomacy and cooperation.

Second, COVID-19 may not have any significant effect on the behaviour of violent actors. Mehrl and Thurner (2020: 1) suggested in their preliminary analysis that "both the spread of COVID-19 and lockdown policies exhibit a global null effect" on armed conflict. Likewise, Pavlik (2020: 2) cautioned against attributing the initial decrease in violent events primarily to COVID-19, stressing that "this decrease is largely driven by countries with a typically high number of violent events, such as Syria and Afghanistan, where the decline in events was largely due to pre-pandemic negotiations, ceasefires, and non–coronavirus-related shifts in the battlespace."

Third, COVID-19 can increase violence by changing grievances and opportunity structures. Current research on SSA suggests that this effect may be most pronounced after an "incubation period" (Basedau & Deitch, 2021: 7; see also Censolo & Morelli, 2020). Along the same lines, the International Crisis Group warned in late 2021 that the worst effects on the pandemic on violence might still come (International Crisis Group, 2021a). Several studies on COVID-19 and armed conflict discuss how the pandemic can exacerbate root causes of violent conflict, in particular grievances and inequalities (Polo, 2020; Rohner, 2020; Ide, 2021). People living in fragile and/or war-torn areas are most affected by COVID-19, as they tend to suffer from political exclusion, insufficient health infrastructure, and overall limited state services (International Crisis Group, 2020a; Kotlik & Heffes, 2020; Young, 2020). Job losses caused by lockdown measures disproportionately affected the youth (Polo, 2020). Unemployment and school dropout rates have increased while global remittance transfers decreased by approximately 20 per cent (World Bank, 2020; ILO, 2021). Heightened socio-economic inequalities provided armed non-state groups (Basit, 2020; McElroy, 2020) and criminal gangs (Okolie-Osemene, 2021) with new opportunities for recruitment. In addition, increases in food prices caused by both major disruptions in global supply chains and lockdown measures were shown to foster grievances and unrest (Polo, 2020). A lack of trust in government negatively affects the willingness of people to follow state-imposed restrictions (Bavel et al., 2020), and people's refusal to comply with lockdown regulations led to violent clashes with the police or military (Polo, 2020). Hence, protests increased significantly, by 50 per cent compared to 2020, especially in contexts with high levels of inequality prior to the pandemic (Iacoella, Justino & Martorano, 2021).

Besides negatively affecting vulnerable groups, the enforcement of lockdowns and social distancing involves a reallocation of resources. COVID-induced strains on government spending resulted in decreasing investment in counter-insurgency efforts (Anderton, 2020). Further pandemic-related responsibilities, most notably the enforcement of lockdowns, placed another burden on militaries (Harwood, 2020). At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic provided an opportunity for security forces, especially the military and the police, to increase legitimacy and territorial control through the enforcement of pandemic policies or by providing health and food support (Kalkman, 2021). Additionally, states can use the pandemic as a pretext to strengthen their power (Mustasilta, 2020). The suppression of opposition movement by banning protests or forcing quarantines, excessive use of police violence during demonstrations,

undermining the rule of law through emergency decrees, and extending executive powers are among such measures (Mustasilta & Olar, 2020; OHCHR, 2020; Roth, 2020). Likewise, non-state armed actors have sought the opportunity created by the vacuum to increment their attacks and/or provide basic services, such as health care and food distribution (Asal, Flanigan & Szekely, 2020; Columbo, 2020). Rebel and criminal governance are important, especially in peripheral zones where the state is not present and non-state armed actors function as providers of public goods and services (Barnes & Albarracín, 2020; Furlan, 2020). Hence, violent non-state actors have sought to exploit the pandemic "both militarily and politically to gain territory and popular support" (Polo, 2020). For example, radical-Islamist rebel movements such as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, Committee for the Liberation of Greater Syria) in Syria have stepped up their political projects during the early phase of the pandemic. They can use the restrictions as a way to justify their struggle against the government, which could move individuals who are heavily affected by the pandemic to join these groups (Mercy Corps, 2021).

Furthermore, reduced international aid and engagement by traditional donor countries due to a focus on the domestic fallout of the pandemic could increase violent conflict (Rohner, 2020). Indeed, funding was shifted from long-term peacebuilding initiatives to short-term humanitarian crisis mitigation in different contexts (Bell, Epple & Pospisil, 2020b). UN peacekeeping missions were hampered by quarantine for military and police forces (Haer & Demarest, 2020), but also by the UN decision to suspend the rotation and deployment of its peacekeepers until 30 June 2020. Lockdown restrictions also undermined both local and international monitoring of human rights violations in conflict-prone settings (Bell, Epple & Pospisil, 2020b). In addition to reduced engagement, international actors also faced pandemic-related distrust. They were accused of having brought the virus to the country – for instance, in the Central African Republic and South Sudan (Bell, Epple & Pospisil, 2020b).

2.2 The Need for Temporal, Geographic, and Actor-Specific Disaggregation

In sum, existing studies have shown the various ways in which the pandemic can affect violence. Yet, certain gaps in the literature remain. First, most initial work was inherently able to cover only a limited time span. While this research has yielded important insights into the immediate fallout of the pandemic for violent conflicts, more recent studies suggest that some consequences may become visible only in the medium to long term (Basedau & Deitch, 2021); however, such analyses remain scarce and confined to specific regions. Second, existing studies point to "considerable regional heterogeneity" (Mehrl & Thurner, 2020; see also Bloem & Salemi, 2021; Ide, 2021). However, this finding is largely based on insights into cases from different world regions, whereas an in-depth inter- and cross-regional comparison of overarching similarities and differences is missing. Third, extant scholarship tends to focus on overall trends in violence. Some works distinguish various types of armed conflict, including

violent COVID-19 protests (e.g. Basedau & Deitch, 2021), but they hardly account for the impact of the pandemic on different violent actors – namely, state actors, such as the military, and various non-state actors, such as rebels, militias, and mobs (for notable exceptions, see Mercy Corps, 2021; Breslawski, 2021). Moreover, most studies focus on these actors' violent strategies. Prior research on rebel governance (Péclard & Mechoulan, 2015) has shown that violent actors also engage in the provision of governance and social services, but this phenomenon needs more detailed analysis when it comes to the current pandemic.[2]

To address these gaps and further disentangle the impact of COVID-19 across time and space, as well as on different actors, our comparative mapping of large-N data and the subsequent case studies will focus on three major aspects. First, we seek to further unravel the temporality of developments – both in terms of trends over the course of the pandemic and in terms of the respective regions' and countries' previous conflict histories. For example, lockdowns and mobility restrictions seem to have had a demobilising effect but only for some weeks. Hence, we build on initial literature suggesting that the pandemic's impact on violence has changed over time (Pavlik, 2020a; Mercy Corps, 2021: 10) to examine the time-variant impact of COVID-19 on violent actors' activities.

Second, we aim to explain the varying impact of the pandemic on violence across and within regions. Most work either focuses on a specific region (for example, Fiedler, Mross & Adaye Adeto, 2021) or zooms in to selected cases located in different world regions (Ide, 2021; Mercy Corps, 2021). We build on the latter research to systematically explain why COVID-19 did not affect LAC, MENA, and SSA alike and what role context-specific conflict trajectories in these regions have played.

Third, we aim to demonstrate how different state and non-state violent actors increase (or decrease) their activities. The pandemic provided evidence of worsening structural conditions that serve as a breeding ground for different forms of violence, among them inequalities and marginalisation (ILO, 2021; World Bank, 2021a). Extant work suggests that COVID-19 affects ongoing armed conflicts (i.e. Ide 2020), but also fragile countries that were characterised by dissent rather than major armed conflicts (e.g. Basedau and Deitch 2021). The pandemic hit at a time when protest movements around the globe were on the rise (Youngs, 2019) and repressive policing of pandemic policies had the potential to exacerbate the situation (Eck, Conrad & Crabtree, 2021). Accordingly, we assess the ways in which both armed conflict and violent protests were affected by the pandemic in both violence-prone and rather peaceful societies.

2 To investigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, we analyse the frequency and lethality of violent events – that is, direct physical harm against persons or infrastructure – undertaken by a variety of violent actors. Following ACLED definitions, we distinguish between eight groups of violent actors related to the state (armed forces, police, secret services) and collective non-state violent actors differing in their levels of organisation and their specific aims and goals (for details, see Table 1 in Section 3 on Data Description below). We refer to "violent" rather than "armed" actors, as we examine both organised armed actors such as military, police, rebel groups, and militias, as well as – often unarmed or crudely armed – vigilante mobs.

3 Data Description

To map the impact of COVID-19 on conflict dynamics and violent actors in different regions, namely LAC, MENA, and SSA, we rely on data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). ACLED records information on political violence, demonstrations, and specific non-violent, politically important events. The units of observation are political events. While non-violent events include instances such as peaceful protests, ACLED defines political violence as "the use of force by a group with a political purpose or motivation." Each event is coded with information including the designated actors involved in the event as well as date, location, description, and possible fatality rates estimated or documented as precisely as possible.

Table 1. ACLED Actor Definitions and Examples

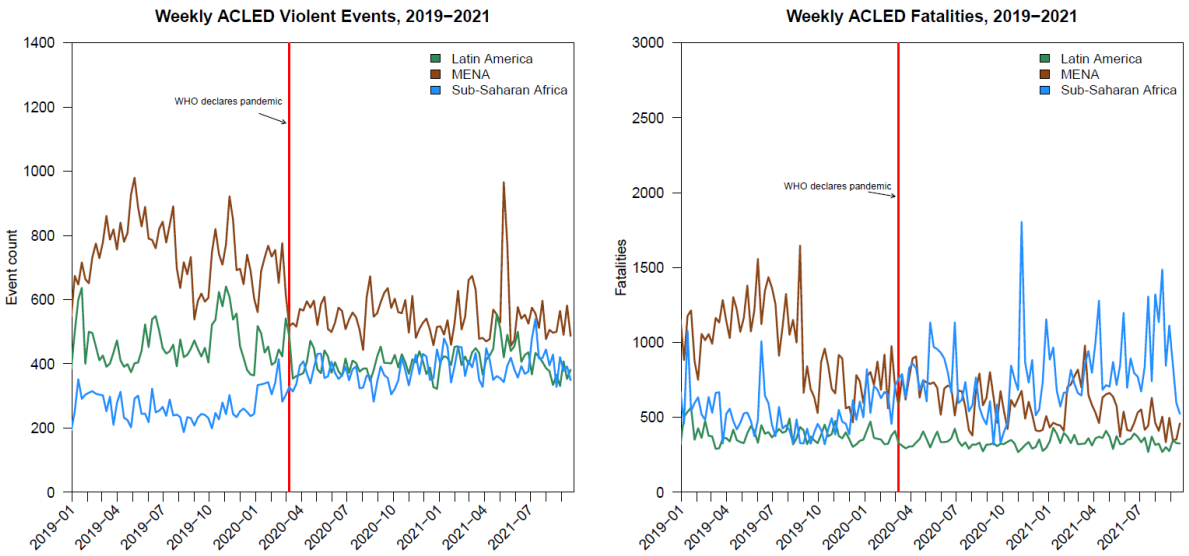
Actor (ACLED)	ACLED Definition	Examples
State actors	Collective actors recognised as performing government functions over a territory	Army, police forces, secret services
Rebel groups	Political organisations whose goal is to counter an established national governing regime by violent acts, including separatism	Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê, PKK) (Turkey), National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional, ELN) (Colombia), Boko Haram (Nigeria)
Political militias	Political goals of influencing and impacting governance, security, and policy; not seeking the removal of a national power – rather, typically supported by, armed by, or allied with a political elite acting towards a goal defined by these elites or larger political movements	Hezbollah (Lebanon), Red Command (Comando Vermelho, CV) (Brazil), Cooperative for the Development of the Congo (Coopérative pour le développement du Congo, CODECO) (Democratic Republic of the Congo)
Communal militias	Armed and violent groups organised around a collective, common feature, such as community, ethnicity, region, religion; often created out of self-defence; usually focused on local issues such as access to water or farmland	Tabu Ethnic Militia (Libya), Mapuche Indigenous Militia (Chile), Kumasi Communal Militia (Ghana)
Rioters / Mobs	Individuals or groups who engage in spontaneous acts of violence during demonstrations or other types of disorganised violence; usually unarmed or crudely armed	Rioters of a given country
Protestors	Peaceful, unarmed demonstrators	Protestors of a given country
Civilians	People, in whatever number or association, who are victims of violent acts; by definition, they are unarmed and, hence, vulnerable	Civilians of a given country
External and other	Residual category including state forces operating outside their own territory, international organisations such as the UN, private security firms, and mercenaries	Operation Restoring Hope (Yemen), United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Mission de l'Organisation des Nations Unies en République Démocratique du Congo, MONUSCO) (Democratic Republic of the Congo), Wagner Group

The data was collected through a wide range of sources, including local, national, and international media, reports from NGOs or IOs, selected social media and partnerships with local conflict observatories. We chose ACLED for a variety of reasons: First, ACLED provides global coverage for the time frame of interest. We focus on comparing situations one year prior to the pandemic with those one year into the pandemic. We chose one year to avoid capturing seasonal effects on conflict patterns. Moreover, several countries lack data prior to 2018, making the comparison of long-term trends difficult. Second, different from other commonly used databases such as the Uppsala Conflict Data Program Georeferenced Event Dataset (UCDP-GED), ACLED has no arbitrary threshold criterion for the inclusion of events, which allows us to also analyse low-scale or non-fatal violent events such as police violence, violent protests, riots, and low-intensity militia conflicts (Raleigh & Kishi, 2019). Further, different from other datasets, ACLED includes organised crime and gang violence, considered as political militias given the latter's influence on security, policies, and governance in their territories. Hence, the inclusion of these events is crucial for this analysis, as COVID-19 likely had an impact on these types of violence – for instance, through excessive police force to enforce lockdown measures, or violent protests against COVID measures, or the latter's social consequences. Third, ACLED has an actor-specific focus, as it assigns different actors to one of eight different groups, as listed in Table 1 above.

4 General Overview of Trends

Globally, violence decreased during the pandemic. However, regional differences can be detected. Whereas LAC and MENA experienced large decreases in violent events, mostly driven by regional hotspots, SSA saw an increase in violence across different actors and countries.

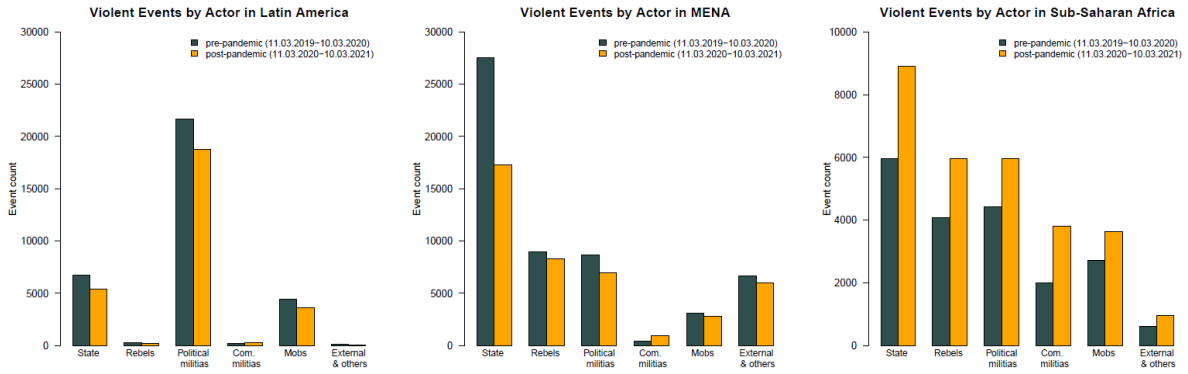
Figure 1. Weekly Violent Events and Fatalities per Region



Source: Calculation by authors based on data from ACLED.

The change in violent events prior to versus during the pandemic can be seen in Figure 1. The vertical line indicates the week of 11 March 2020, when the WHO declared the pandemic. Two trends are noteworthy: First, while the number of violent activities in LAC and MENA are on average lower during the pandemic when compared with the pre-pandemic times, SSA is the only region in which an increase in violent events occurred (see also Raleigh & Kishi, 2021). The same is true for the intensity of events, making SSA the region with the highest fatality rates during the pandemic. Second, the large decrease of violent events and fatality rates, especially in the MENA region, occurred mostly prior to the pandemic.

Figure 2. Change per Actor One Year Prior vs. One Year After the Pandemic Began



Source: Calculation by authors based on data from ACLED.

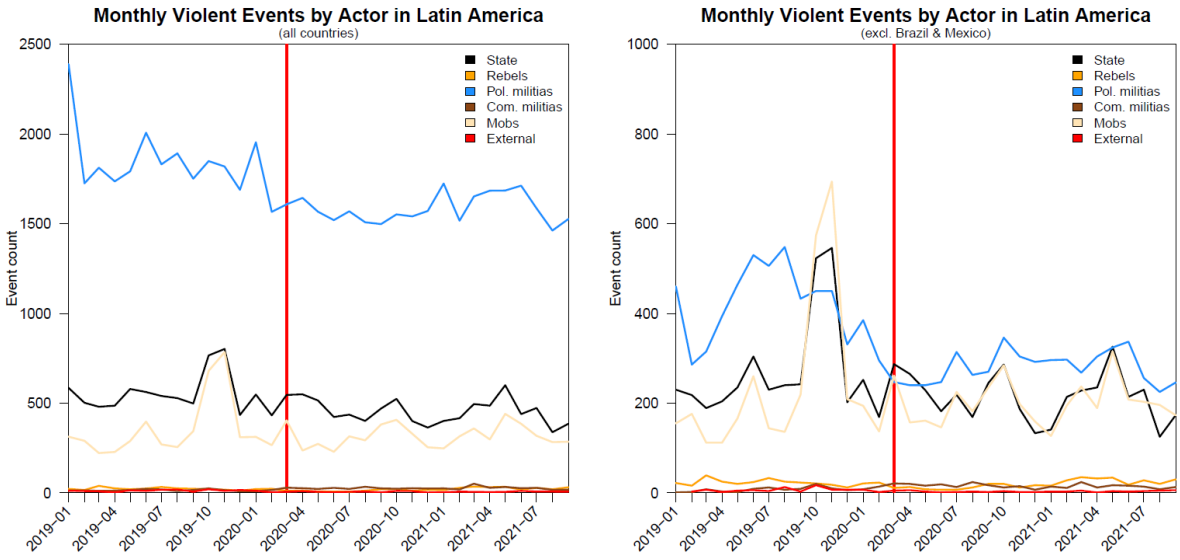
Distinguishing for different types of actors in Figure 2, two insights become apparent. First, strong differences are observable with regards to the most active actors in the regions. Whereas in each LAC (political militias) and MENA (state) one actor clearly dominates, three actors (state, rebels, and militias) are almost equally relevant in SSA due to the pluralisation of security provision on the continent (Agbiboa, 2019). This has remained essentially unchanged during the pandemic. Second, changes over time can be attributed to a decrease in the number of events by the most influential actors in LAC and MENA during the pandemic. All other actors decreased their activities slightly, except for communal militias. However, these increases occurred almost exclusively in Iraq and Libya in the MENA region, and in Chile in LAC. For SSA, we observe an increase in the number of violent events for all actors during the first year of the pandemic. In other words, the number of conflict events in SSA increased proportionally, reflecting roughly the same differences between the actors as in the pre-pandemic time – a marked contrast to the other regions.

4.1 Latin America and the Caribbean

LAC experienced a decrease in violent events over the course of the pandemic, mostly due to a reduction in activities of political militias, particularly gang violence. COVID-19 disrupted

international travel and smuggling routes, along with limiting mobility and economic activities such as extortion of local businesses, made difficult by lockdown measures. This forced gangs to find new sources of income, leading to a decrease in violence in the short term (Blattman et al., 2020; Gutierrez, Salguero & Pfadt, 2020). However, most of the gang violence occurs in Brazil and Mexico, which influence the overall violent pattern significantly. Thus, looking at the right panel of Figure 3, where Mexico and Brazil are excluded, it becomes evident that while gang violence is still a common form of violence in the region, the intensity is significantly lower. Interestingly, while the sharpest drop in violence occurred prior to COVID-19, the violence remained on a rather low level until late 2020 – almost one year into the pandemic, when several states began to ease their lockdown measures.

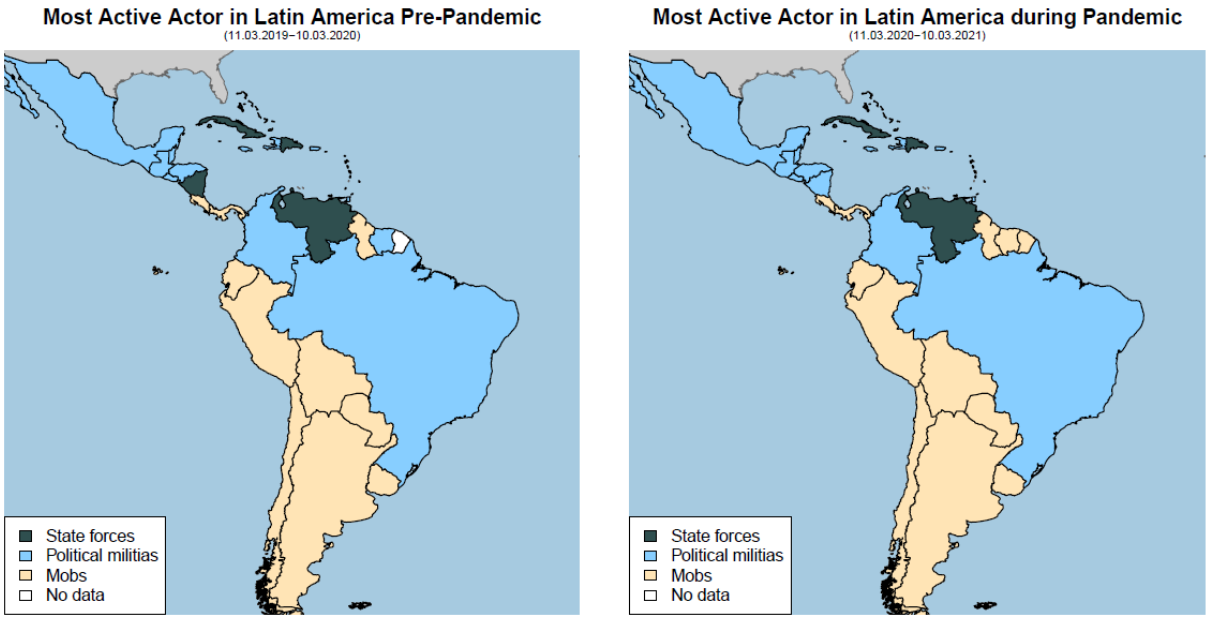
Figure 3. Monthly Violent Events by Actor in Latin America



Source: Calculation by authors based on data from ACLED.

Beyond the dynamics of gang violence in LAC, the trends of state and mob violence follow similar patterns, suggesting that violent events including the two actors consist mostly of clashes between the state forces and mobs – for instance, through violent protests with police intervention. This becomes even more evident when looking at LAC excluding the two most violent countries. Other types of violence, such as rebel violence, are rather rare and confined to certain areas – for example, ELN activities in the borderland of Colombia and Venezuela. The divide between countries primarily suffering from gang violence, on the one hand, and countries marked by mob violence, on the other hand, becomes visible in the spatial distribution of the most active actor per country prior to and during the first year of the pandemic, as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Most Active Actor per Country in Latin America Prior to vs. During the Pandemic



Source: Calculation by the authors based on data from ACLED.

Note: Most active actor is based on the count of events with involvement of a given actor, similar to Raleigh and Kinshi (2021) and Dowd (2012).

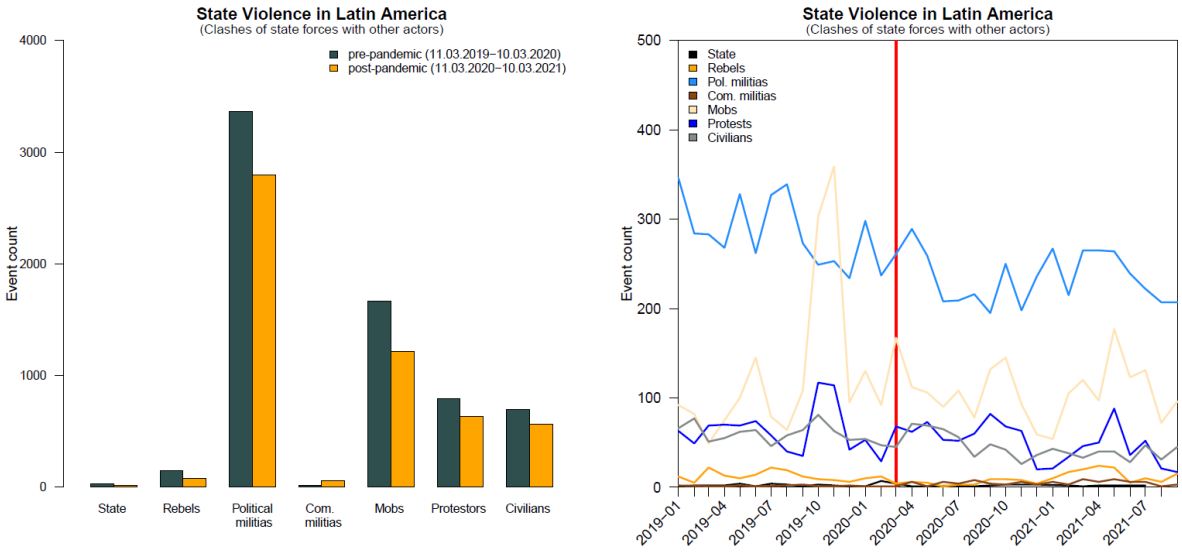
Violence in Brazil, Colombia, the northern Triangle of Central America, Jamaica, Haiti, and Mexico is dominated by political militias, whereas the Andean countries are most affected by mob violence. State actors represent the most active actor in the autocratic regimes of Cuba and Venezuela. There was little change between the time prior to and during the pandemic, with a few exceptions. In the following, we will focus on the two most relevant actor types – namely, state actors and political militias.

4.1.1 State Actors

Violent state events in Latin America revolve around two main categories: clashes with political militias (violent groups such as cartels or gangs), and repressive measures against rioters, protestors, and civilians (see Figure 5). Overall, violence between state actors and protestors decreased. As almost all states imposed strict lockdown measures during the first months of the pandemic, the numbers of protests and, consequently, mob violence declined accordingly, though country-specific differences prevailed (see case studies Chile and Colombia). In contrast to the overall regional trend, violence against civilians by state actors in Venezuela increased significantly after President Maduro declared a lockdown in March 2020. The lockdown brought mass demonstrations to a halt, but security forces used the measures to suppress civilians on several occasions (Taladrid, 2020; Van Praag & Arnson, 2020). Venezuela already experienced one of the worst humanitarian crises prior to the pandemic and food short-

age increased drastically during the pandemic. As a result of limited food supply and increasing hunger, spontaneous riots and looting spread across the country during the first months of the pandemic, which were violently suppressed by the state (Taladrid, 2020).

Figure 5. State Violence in Latin America Prior to and During the Pandemic



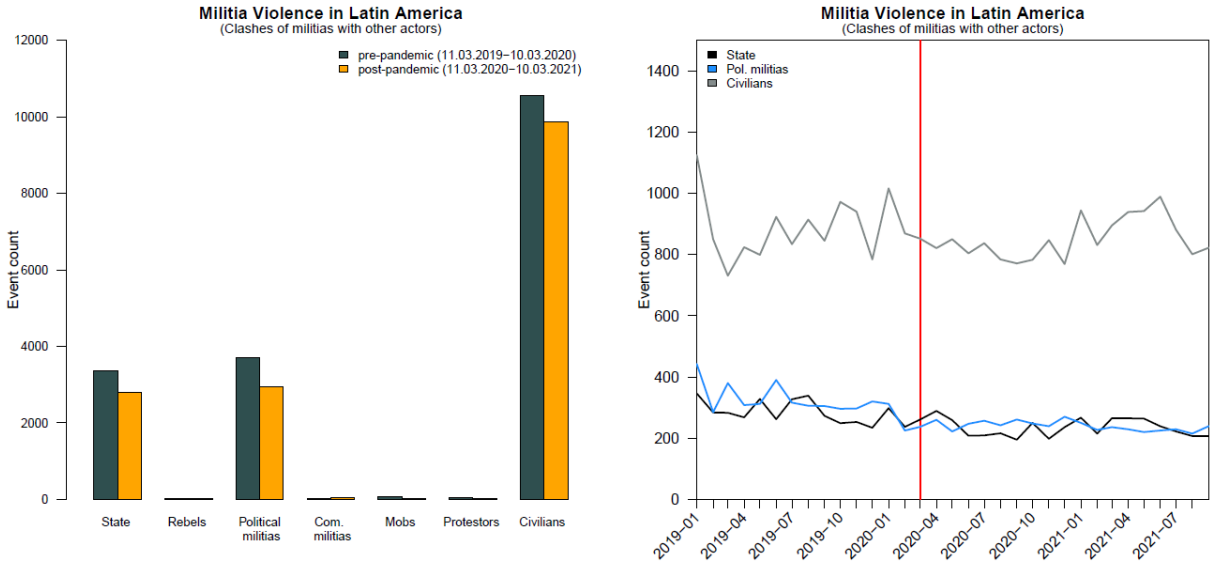
Source: Calculation by authors based on data from ACLED.

4.1.2 Political Militias

Militia violence decreased over the course of the pandemic (Figure 6), especially militias' behaviour towards civilians. Violence against civilians in pre-pandemic times was rather volatile, before decreasing somewhat steadily since the beginning of the pandemic, only to reach pre-pandemic levels by the end of 2020 when several states started to ease their lockdown measures.

During the initial phase of the COVID outbreak, there is anecdotal evidence that criminal organisations tried to use the pandemic to manifest their power in their zones of influence and to increase their acceptance by local populations through the distribution of assistance in the form of food or money, which was often accompanied by a reduction in violence against civilians (Blattman et al., 2020; Gutierrez, Salguero & Pfadt, 2020). Moreover, local gangs also took over policing duties, enforcing measures such as curfews, leading to a reduction in violence (Briso & Phillips, 2020; Gaëlle Rivard Piché, 2020; Gutierrez, Salguero & Pfadt, 2020). Furthermore, given the closure of stores in many countries, extortion rates dropped significantly, particularly in the Northern Triangle where extortion constitutes a primary form of income (Vazquez & Félix, 2020). However, once lockdown measures were lifted, the numbers started to rise again partly due to gangs trying to collect the extortion money they had postponed due to the lockdown measures (Vazquez & Félix, 2020). In contrast to the regional trend, violence in Mexico increased in the first month of the pandemic as the reduction in available smuggling routes led to an increased competition over territories (Felbab-Brown, 2020; Ernst, 2020).

Figure 6. Militia Violence in Latin America Prior to and During the Pandemic



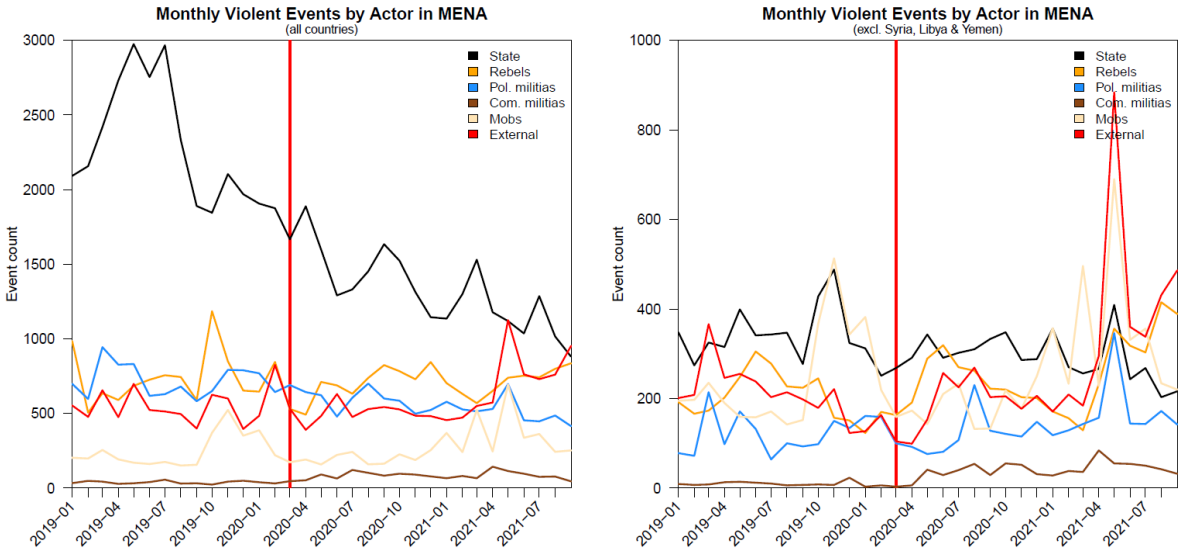
Source: Calculation by authors based on data from ACLED.

In sum, LAC saw an overall reduction in violence during the pandemic. While this is true on an aggregated level, some types of violence increased during the initial phase of the pandemic. State actors and political militias used repressive means to enforce lockdown measures, leading to a short-term increase of violence against civilians. Drug-related violence decreased in most of LAC – except for Mexico, which experienced an increase in deadly events between rivalling gangs. Mob violence remains the most common form of violence across the Andean countries and remained on a similar level throughout 2020 and 2021 despite rather strict lockdown measures in several countries.

4.2 The Middle East and North Africa

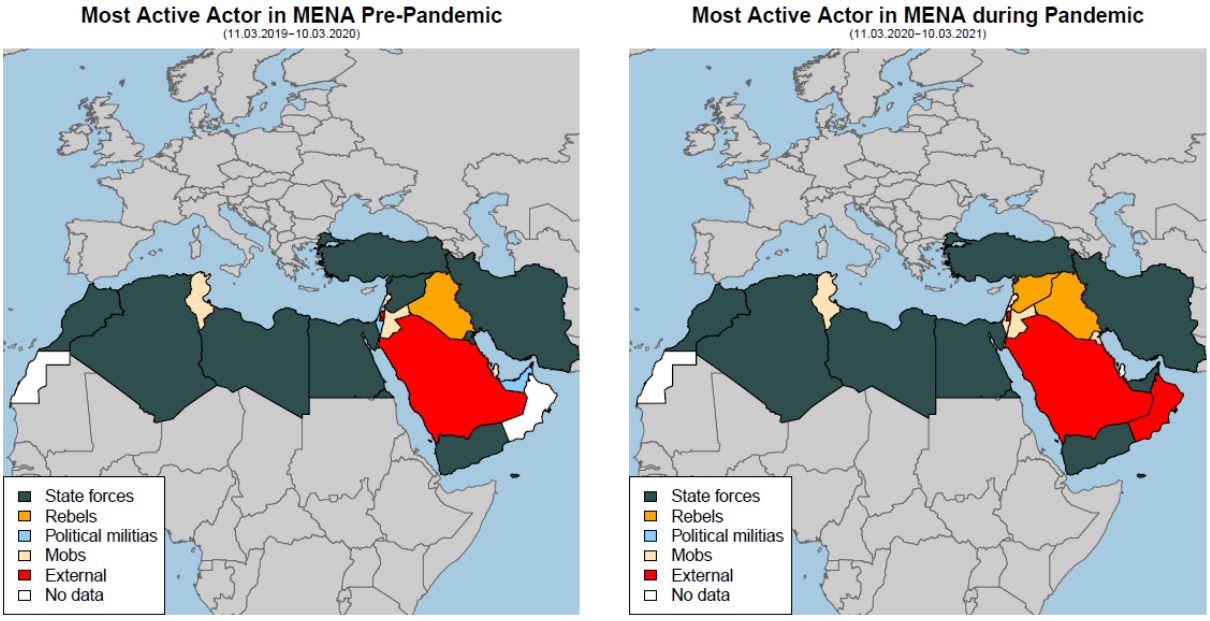
The MENA region saw the largest decline in violence across all regions, which was largely due to a decrease in events involving state forces (see Figure 7), especially in Libya, Syria, and Yemen. By contrast, rebel activities increased in the months after the pandemic began, partly through rising attacks of Islamist insurgency groups taking advantage of weakened state positions. Similarly, if we leave out the three war-torn countries in the region, rebel violence increased, as shown on the right panel of Figure 7. Moreover, state violence remains on a roughly similar level the entire time. The two spikes on the right panel can be attributed to the mass protests in Iraq in October/November 2019 and the surge in violent episodes of the Israeli–Palestinian crisis, especially around Gaza, in May 2021. The same is true for mob violence, which remained comparatively low during the first year of the pandemic with smaller oscillations, such as the large-scale protests in Tunisia in January 2021.

Figure 7. Monthly Violent Events by Actor in MENA



Source: Calculation by authors based on data from ACLED.

Figure 8. Most Active Actor per Country in MENA Prior to and During Pandemic



Source: Calculation by the authors based on data from ACLED.

Note: Most active actor is based on the count of events with involvement of a given actor, similar to Raleigh and Kinshi (2021) and Dowd (2012).

The dominance of state actors throughout the entire time frame also becomes evident when looking at the spatial distribution of the most active actor in the region, as shown in Figure 8. State activities dominate the violence in the MENA region in almost all countries, a trend that did not change during the pandemic. ACLED codes Hamas as a political militia rather than state forces, making militias the dominant actor in the Palestinian Territories. Still, we see some

notable exceptions. First, rebel actors remained and/or became the most active actor in Iraq and Syria during the first year of the pandemic. Saudi Arabia remains the only country in which external actors present the most active actor prior to and during the pandemic. Mob violence remains the most common form of violence in Lebanon, Tunisia, Israel, Jordan, and Bahrain. In the following, we will again focus on the most relevant actor types: state actors, rebels, and external actors.

4.2.1 Political Militias

State actors – which remain the dominant actors – experienced the largest decrease in violent events since the beginning of the pandemic, but it was not equally spread across the region (see Figures 7 and 8). In fact, the overall violent dynamics are largely driven by the war-torn countries of Libya, Syria, and Yemen. Syria is the country with the largest decrease in state-related violent events in MENA, which can mostly be traced back to pre-pandemic negotiations and other non–COVID-related changes on the battlefields (see Pavlik, 2020b). For instance, a ceasefire over the rebel-dominated province of Idlib on 6 March 2020, some two weeks before the first official COVID-19 case, strongly reduced direct military violence (Bank, 2020).

Aside from Syria, major reductions in state events can be seen in Libya, Turkey, and Yemen, especially regarding direct battle dynamics. Yet, these reductions are mostly not COVID-related, as in the aforementioned case of Syria. For instance, state violence in Libya decreased significantly after the intervention of Turkey in support of the national government, leading effectively to an end of the battles between the national government and General Haftar, whose forces were backed by Egypt, Russia, and the UAE (Bauer & Volk, 2020). However, while most of the direct battle dynamics were barely affected by the pandemic, the conflict experienced an unprecedented internationalisation of actors, which saw the pandemic as an opportunity to further their interests abroad (Badi, 2020). Similarly, Turkey saw a significant drop of violent state activities by roughly one quarter during the first year of the pandemic. Yemen in general experienced a drop in violent state activities during the first year of the pandemic. While the fighting between the Houthi Supreme Political Council and the pro-Hadi Government initially increased during March and April 2020, the violence decreased in the following months.[3] Increases in state-based violent events during the pandemic's first year occurred mostly in the context of mounting repression against protests, the latter of which were often motivated by the worsening economic and social situation. As such, state violence almost doubled in the Maghreb countries of Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia.

3 Given the de facto existence of two government entities reigning over different territories in Yemen, ACLED codes both the pro-Hadi government as well as the Supreme Political Council as state forces.

4.2.2 Rebel Groups

Rebel-based violence in MENA decreased during the pandemic, most notably in Syria due to non–COVID-related measures, such as the aforementioned ceasefire over Idlib (ACLED, 2021). Iraq saw the largest increase in rebel violence one year into the pandemic (see also the Iraq case study below). Besides an escalation of the conflict between Turkey and the PKK (ACLED, 2020a), the increase can in part be attributed to an increasing number of attacks by the Islamic State in Iraq and ash-Sham (ISIS) on military and civilians after the declaration of the pandemic (Abdul-Zahra, Mroue & Kullab, 2020; von Hein, 2020), fitting a larger pattern of increased activities by Islamist insurgency groups in the context of the pandemic (Jalloh, 2020).

4.2.3 External Actors

Due to the massive internationalisation of the civil wars in Syria, Libya, Yemen, and previously Iraq, external actors play a crucial role in violent dynamics of the MENA region. Some countries openly engage in military operations abroad, whereas much of the influence is exerted through the provision of weapons, mercenaries, or financial and logistical support that is not directly reflected in the conflict event data. Yemen has been the country with the highest increase of direct foreign military engagement in MENA during the pandemic. As in previous years, the combined use of Saudi cross-border artillery and airstrikes made the Saudi-led coalition "Operation Restoring Hope" one of the deadliest actors in the civil war (see Carboni, 2018). Similarly, while state violence in Turkey decreased at home, it significantly expanded its operations abroad, such as the offensive against the PKK in northern Iraq, the increased engagement in the Libyan civil war or the safe zone establishment in Syria in early 2020. None of these of these developments is a direct consequence of COVID-19: Turkey's involvement in the Libya conflict is likely related to economic interests with a post-war time in mind (Badi, 2020), whereas the deployment of Turkish ground troops in Syria and Turkish attacks on Kurdish forces in northern Iraq constitute attempts to diminish Kurdish influence in the region (Sendker, 2020; Gall, 2021).

The largest decrease of events with direct foreign military involvement can be seen in Syria, which is shifting to a conflict marked by stalemates and more static conflict lines (Yacoubian, 2021). Instead of engaging in open warfare, external powerhouses such as Turkey, Russia, the United States, and Iran compete for control of different territories (Yacoubian, 2021).

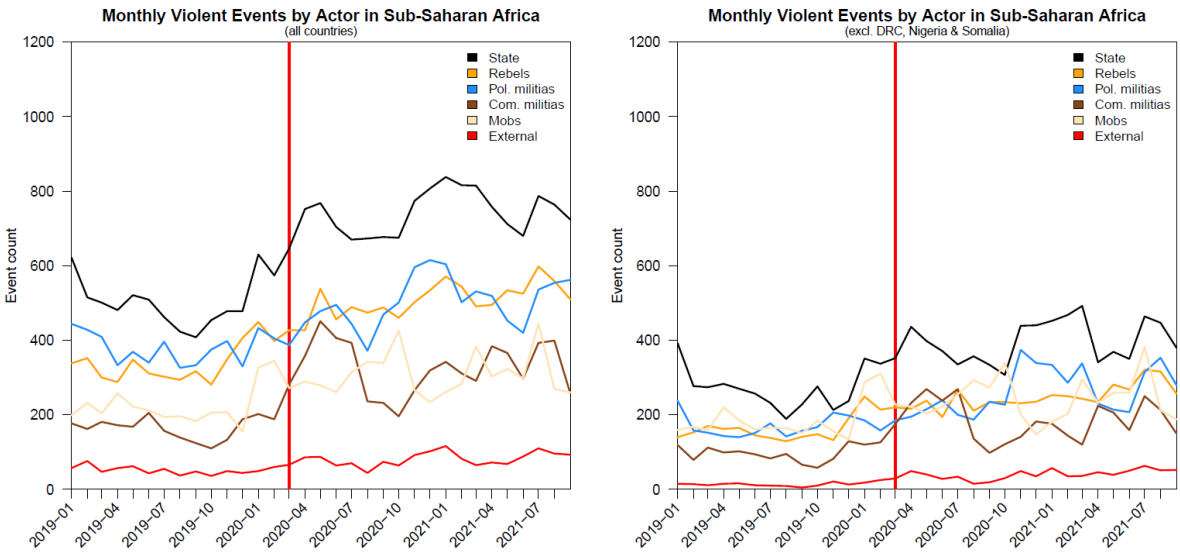
In sum, the impact of COVID-19 on overall violence in MENA is, first, rather limited and, second, varies significantly depending on the actors and country-specific contexts. Generally, clashes between state and non-state armed groups or military dynamics in the region occurred largely outside the logic of mechanisms linking the pandemic and violence. At the same time, Islamist insurgency groups stepped up their violent attacks during the pandemic by using the power vacuum left by weakened state presence and using the pandemic as propaganda mate-

rial for recruitment, albeit with limited success. Violence against civilians increased significantly in countries such as Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria, where the pandemic worked as a pretext to increase violent police measures against civilian demonstrations.

4.3 Sub-Saharan Africa

Violence in SSA increased during the pandemic more than in any other world region across all actor groups (see left panel of Figure 9). The frequency of events involving state actors, rebels, or political militias increased significantly during the pandemic. However, the largest increase by actor in the initial time after the pandemic happened for communal militias, where clashes with state actors and competition over landownership and access to resources between different groups led to an escalation of violence in several African countries. Due to the potentially disturbing impact of regional outliers, the right panel of Figure 9 excludes the conflict countries Democratic Republic of the Congo, Nigeria, and Somalia. It becomes evident that event counts are driven by the three countries in their frequency, but the overall trend remains essentially the same.

Figure 9. Monthly Violent Events by Actor in Sub-Saharan Africa

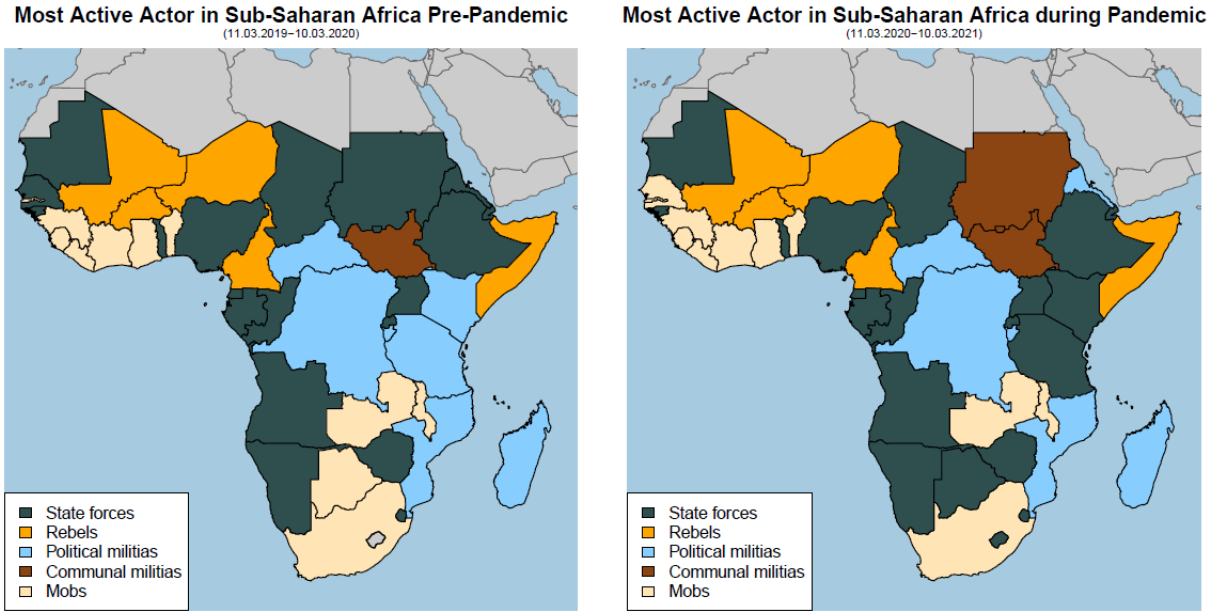


Source: Calculation by authors based on data from ACLED.

A similarly diverse pattern becomes evident when looking at the spatial rather than temporal distribution in Figure 10. Comparing the maps of Figure 10 with those of LAC and MENA, it is striking that there is no overarching actor dominating the violent dynamics in the region. State actors appear as the most active actor in the largest numbers of countries, which relates to clashes between state forces on the one hand and rioters on the other. Rebel groups dominate violence in several countries in West Africa whereas militias are the most active actor in

Central and East Africa. Southern Africa is primarily affected by violent confrontations between mobs and state actors. These patterns had changed only slightly one year into the pandemic. The state became the dominant actor in Kenya due to increased repression during the enforcement of COVID-19 measures, and in Tanzania due to the brutal crackdown of opposition parties and protestors after a disputed general election in October 2020. Violence by communal militias reflects the most common form of violence in Sudan during the pandemic due to an increase in herder–farmer conflicts. As state actors, rebels, and militias dominate conflict dynamics in the region, we focus on these three types of actors in the following analysis.

Figure 10. Most Active Actor per Country in Sub-Saharan Africa Prior to and During the Pandemic



Source: Calculation by the authors based on data from ACLED.

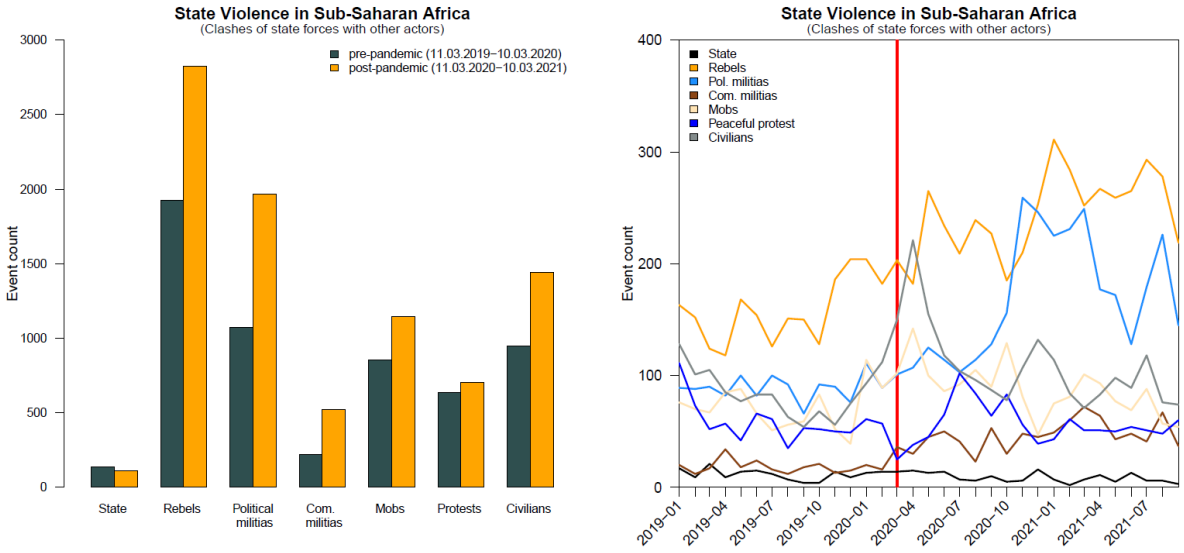
Note: Most active actor is based on the count of events with involvement of a given actor, similar to Raleigh and Kinshi (2021) and Dowd (2012).

4.3.1 State Actors

State-based violent events increased during the pandemic, especially when it comes to clashes with rebel groups, political militias, and acts of violence against civilians (see left panel of Figure 11). The increase in clashes with rebel groups stems largely from an increase in attacks by Islamist groups and is mainly concentrated in Nigeria (Boko Haram; see also Nigeria case study below) and Somalia (Al Shabaab). Moreover, violence erupted between state forces and Ambazonian rebel groups in Cameroon, where the former failed to implement a ceasefire agreement during COVID-19. Clashes with militias increased following a rise in the number of new militia groups and the escalation of existing conflicts – for example, in the DRC, the Central African Republic, and Mozambique. Yet, except for the escalation of conflict between

the Ethiopian government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front into a civil war, the increases in state clashes with political militias were rather small, suggesting that the pandemic had a rather limited effect.

Figure 11. Clashes of State Forces with Other Actors in Sub-Saharan Africa



Source: Calculation by authors based on data from ACLED.

SSA also saw a significant increase in state-based violence against civilians immediately after the beginning of the pandemic (see also Mugabi, 2020), followed by a quick decline in the following months (see Figure 11). Hotspots during the initial phase of the pandemic include countries long known for police violence such as Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda, and Kenya, with violations reaching from arbitrary arrests to murder (Grasse et al., 2021). The brutal enforcement of lockdown measures, protests against police violence, and repressive state responses led to hundreds of arrests and several deaths caused by state forces in several countries in the region throughout the pandemic (Eboh, Akwagyiram & Heinrich, 2020; Haffajee, 2020; Namu & Riley, 2020; Grasse et al., 2021) and violence remained on average higher at any given moment during the pandemic than they were prior to the spread of COVID-19.

4.3.2 Rebel Groups

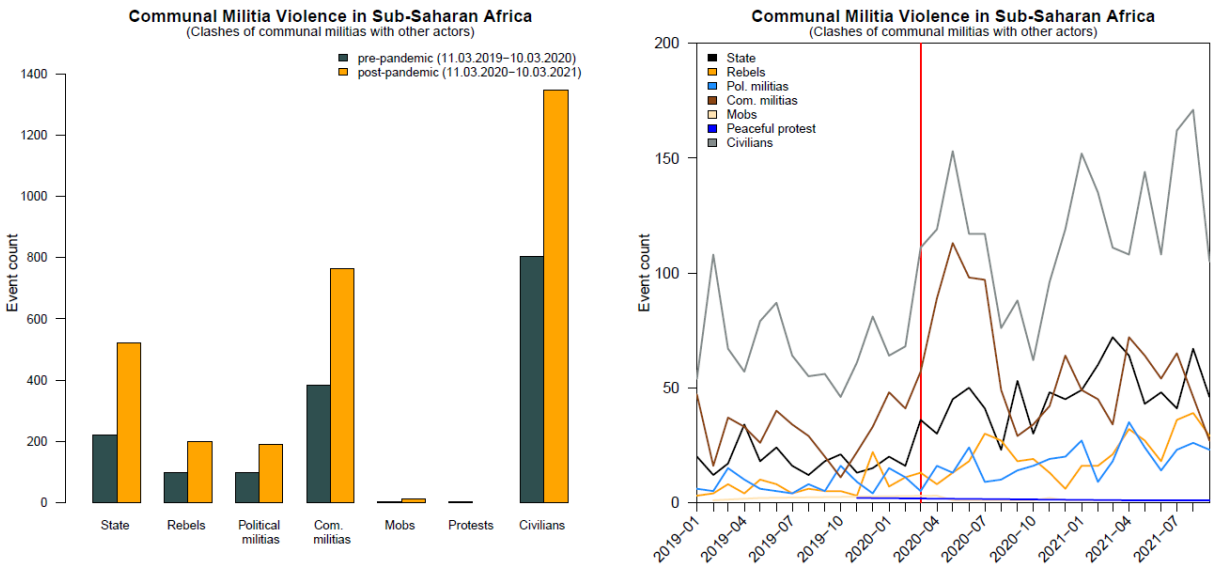
Rebel-based violence increased significantly during the pandemic. The violent dynamics were largely driven by Islamist groups, which used the COVID-19 crisis to ramp up their attacks on state actors and violence against civilians (Columbo, 2020; Jalloh, 2020). Between January 2019 and October 2021, over 70 per cent of all violent events involving rebel groups can be attributed to one of the four dominant Islamist groups on the continent, Al Shabaab, IS, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wa-l Muslimeen (Support Group for Islam and Muslims, JNIM), and Boko Haram. Islamist groups were particularly active in certain areas (Africa Center for Strategic Studies,

2020) with violence mostly occurring in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, and Somalia. Besides Islamist insurgencies, violent activities by rebels increased in the separatist conflict in Cameroon and in the eastern DRC, where the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) stepped up attacks against civilians.

4.3.3 Communal Militias

Communal militias represent a major security threat for several countries in SSA. While violent events increased across all actors during the pandemic, communal militias account for the largest increase in the number of violent groups from the previous year, leading to a multiplication of conflicts (Raleigh & Kishi, 2021).

Figure 12. Communal Violence in Sub-Saharan Africa



Source: Calculation by authors based on data from ACLED.

ACLED has recorded an increase in the number of communal violence events in almost all countries in the Sahel during the pandemic, with local hotspots in Nigeria, South Sudan, Kenya, and Mali. Clashes with state forces, other communal groups and violent acts against civilians have increased, especially during the initial phase of the pandemic (see Figure 12). This pattern fits anecdotal evidence from case studies about the impact of COVID-19 on communal violence (Mercy Corps, 2021). Given the limited state presence in some rural parts of SSA, communal or ethnic militias often take over security or policing duties (Jose & Medie, 2015), which in some cases is even encouraged by the state (Moderan, 2021). COVID-19 arguably added to this phenomenon. Anecdotal evidence points out that while states reallocated their resources to combat the pandemic, including the redeployment of police and military staff, communal militias took over policing work or were newly created to fill out the power vacuum (Mercy Corps, 2021). Communal militias also used the pandemic as a pretext to violently abuse civilians (Mercy Corps, 2021).

In a nutshell, COVID-19 did not change the overall violent dynamics across SSA substantially but rather aggravated existing trends such as an increase in attacks of Islamist insurgency groups or the proliferation of militia groups across many parts of the region. Focusing on violence against civilians, we see an increase across almost every country for different actors, which can partially be attributed to excessive state violence during the enforcement of lockdown measures and the crackdown of protest movements, but also to violent attempts of non-state actors to take on policing duties.

5 COVID-19 and Violent Actors in Different Contexts

The analysis above highlights variation not only across but also within the different regions. To identify these specific changes or continuities, we zoom in on six case studies. This also allows us to transcend an analysis of violent incidents and to reconstruct how different types of actors adjust their violent – and sometimes non-violent – activities to the pandemic and pandemic policies.

To account for the role of context factors – most notably, the respective countries' political and conflict trajectories – we undertake a paired comparison of three cases: one for each on the surveyed regions, for two sets of countries. The first set of cases is characterised by ongoing armed conflict and out-of-war transitions. Among those, we selected countries that experienced significant activities by violent state and non-state actors, such as rebels or militias, after the onset of the pandemic in comparison to similar conflict countries in the respective regions. In that sense, these are countries where we would expect that state security forces and rebels or militias have sought to capitalise on the pandemic in pronounced ways. The second set of cases is comprised of countries characterised by (fragile) transitions away from authoritarianism but not by major armed conflict, where mobs were particularly active during the pandemic compared to other regional "counterparts." For these countries, we seek to assess how mob violence has become pronounced even in previously peaceful countries.

5.1 Violent Conflicts in Formerly War-Torn Countries

From the universe of countries experiencing armed conflict, we selected those that are characterised by highly complex and long enduring armed conflict. Colombia, Iraq, and Nigeria all have a history of decades of armed conflict, and currently a multitude of armed actors are active in different subnational regions and across national boundaries. Within their regions, they are amongst the most violence-prone. In the case of Colombia, the context is shaped by fragile out-of-war transitions, in the case of Nigeria by a mélange of armed conflicts, and in Iraq by both of the above. While this contributes to the complexity of armed violence, our main focus in the following short case studies is on those intrastate armed conflicts where state security forces and non-state armed actors clash. All three countries have defective democratic

institutions categorised as not free (Iraq) or partially free (Colombia, Nigeria) by Freedom House (Freedom House 2021). Here, the room for non-violent action is limited and the expectations about the effect of COVID-19 vary between opportunities for cooperation between conflict parties, on the one hand, and increase in combat due to the aggravating effects of the social and economic consequences of pandemic policies, on the other.

5.1.1 Colombia: A Fragile Post-Accord Context

When the pandemic hit Colombia in March 2020, the national as well as local governments decreed harsh lockdown measures and mobility restrictions. These measures were strict (84 out of 100 for the first six months according to the Stringency Index of the Oxford COVID-19 government response tracker). Due to the high level of informal employment leaving people without social benefits when they cannot perform work that requires physical presence, these measures were a major driver for the increase in poverty by over 7 per cent (El Tiempo, 13 May 2021). The Colombian government introduced some social support policies (*ingreso solidario*) but was unable to mitigate the social crisis in the poorest urban and rural areas, people there feeling that the government had retreated into virtuality (Mercy Corps, 2021). The response of armed actors to the pandemic varied. Some groups enforced lockdowns and COVID-19 rules such as social distancing, mask mandates, hand disinfection, and halted extortion campaigns during the first months of the pandemic. The management of incoming and outgoing mobility in the communities during the pandemic increased their control. Indigenous, Afro-Colombian, and *campesino* organisations struggled to support their communities. They, too, controlled mobility, enforced bio-security health protocols, and provided social and psychological assistance. However, many community activists report that they were approached by armed actors who were attempting either to buy land for coca production or to recruit youth into their groups. Due to the severe social crisis in the communities, these efforts did not require many threats or much violence to be successful.[4]

Lockdown and mobility restrictions declared by the national and subnational governments led to a short decline in homicide rates and conflict fatalities. Following the call of the UN Secretary General to halt fighting to combat the pandemic, the ELN declared a four-week unilateral ceasefire. The government did not reciprocate the ELN's ceasefire, so the ELN resumed fighting. As early as May 2020, all manifestations of violence returned to pre-pandemic levels. Although lockdown and mobility restrictions remained in place, most people needed to resume their normal lives due to a lack of income and food. One of the darkest chapters of pandemic violence is the fact that assassinations of social leaders, human rights defenders, and former Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, FARC) combatants increased (INDEPAZ, 2020a; International Crisis Group, 2020b;

4 Fieldwork on the impact of COVID-19 and the dynamics of violence was done by Sabine Kurtenbach and Viviana García Pinzón in October and November 2021 for a project funded by the VW Foundation. Thirty in-depth interviews were conducted in Bogotá, Cauca, and Norte de Santander.

Llorente, 2020). Leaders and other activists were unable to hide or follow security protocols due to mobility restrictions and the fact that the few personal security arrangements provided by the state stopped due to the pandemic. At the same time, war-time manifestations of violence not seen for some time, such as massacres (mostly targeting youth), resumed in rural areas (INDEPAZ, 2020b). However, there are significant variations at the subnational level: The most affected regions are those where different non-state armed actors confront both each other and civil society for territorial control of natural resources and coca plantations in the border regions (International Crisis Group, 2021b). Coca production has increased significantly during the pandemic due to the lack of implementation of the provisions on voluntary eradication and support for alternative crops by the government, the expansion of territorial control by armed groups and organised crime entities during the pandemic, and the lack of economic survival opportunities beyond coca. At the same time, the armed forces used the pandemic for forced eradication in some regions.

Many of these problems accumulate along the 2,000-kilometre-long border with Venezuela. For example, Catatumbo is a rural Colombian community where poverty, coca cultivation, the presence of a variety of armed actors, and weak social organisations leave people at the mercy of changing power dynamics and flexible alliances. The pandemic aggravated this situation. Illegal economies are not limited to coca cultivation but include a wide array of activities along the border such as human trafficking and sexual exploitation of women and children (mostly but not exclusively Venezuelan migrants). Across the country, the pandemic triggered the recurrence and intensification of protests (International Crisis Group, 2021c). Between the end of April and early June 2021, an unprecedented 1.5 million people took to the streets in urban and rural areas of the country. The peaceful protests escalated through the interaction of small groups of violent protesters vandalising shops, throwing stones, and blocking roads, which was followed by harsh repressive reactions by the police and its rapid reaction force Escuadrón Móvil Antidisturbios (Mobile Anti-Disturbances Squadron, ESMAD). Cali, in Colombia's northwest, was the centre of violence. Support for the protests declined due to a certain fatigue and increasing problems with everyday survival due to blocked streets. The government accuses non-state armed groups of having incited violence in the protests.

The pandemic had at least three consequences on violent conflict in Colombia: First, it exacerbated the fragmentation and localisation of armed conflict in the peripheral regions, increasing violence where non-state armed groups fight with each other, the state, or civilians over territorial control. Second, the high social costs and the economic consequences of the pandemic triggered more protests and served as fertile ground for the reproduction of armed conflict around illicit economies. Third, police repression led to a growing movement in favour of profound reform. Elections in March 2022 for parliament and in May and June 2022 for the presidency will decide whether Colombia is able to recover the transformative aspects of the peace agreement rather than enter a new cycle of violence.

5.1.2 Iraq: A Partial Return of ISIS and Protests

Iraq recorded its first case of COVID-19 relatively early, on 22 February 2020. One reason for this has been Iraq's proximity and cross-border ties with neighbouring Iran, the initial epicentre of COVID-19 in the Middle East. The Iraqi government quickly reacted and implemented comparatively strong anti-pandemic measures, such as stay-at-home requirements, school and workplace closures, as well as restrictions on public gatherings (a high score of 96.3 of 100 for 26 March 2020, cf. Stringency Index of the Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker). Even though many Iraqis were sceptical of the government's intentions around the COVID-19 restrictions, they largely followed them, at least in the initial weeks. In line with ACLED data, peaceful protests drastically declined after 23 February only to return to the pre-pandemic level from mid-May 2020 onwards. More broadly, public life quickly returned, even before most government measures were lifted again by August 2020, largely out of socio-economic necessity: "For too many Iraqis, staying at home meant certain death by starvation, so they decided to take their chances with the virus, which after all had a killing rate of 3% or less" (Kadhim, 2020: 62).

Contrary to most Iraqis, ISIS had denounced the Iraqi government's COVID-19 response from the very beginning. Via its various media outlets, such as the al-Hayat Media centre, the magazine *Dabiq*, Amaq news agency, as well as Telegram channels, ISIS initially also tried to frame COVID-19 as a "Western virus" and "God's just punishment for unbelievers." While these attempts at instrumentalising the pandemic for its own cause have arguably yielded not much support, it was the massive increase in attacks that brought ISIS back into the limelight of Iraqi politics. At the beginning of the pandemic, between April and June 2020, ISIS conducted 228 attacks in Iraq – a new peak compared to previous years (cf. also Almohamad, 2020: 4). These ISIS attacks also came at a time when the Iraqi government was particularly vulnerable because the oil price, on which – following rentier-state logic – it relies for over 90 per cent of its state budget, had only recently gone up after low points in April and May 2020 (Kadhim, 2020: 58). ISIS's violent resurgence in Iraq endured in 2021: On 21 January, it hit central Baghdad with two suicide bombings, killing 32 and wounding more than 100 people. From 1 January to 20 October 2021, ISIS conducted around 995 attacks in total, with a clear focus of 655 attacks in the northern areas of Kirkuk, Diyala, and Salah ad-Din – its new, dominant area of operation (Perpigna Iban, 2021). In sum, while ISIS has not directly profited from COVID-19 despite its attempts to instrumentalise the situation, it nevertheless managed to increase its fighting status in Iraq in 2020/2021 at the expense of a weakened, ailing Iraqi government and relative to the immediate pre-pandemic time.

Iraq has also witnessed the re-emergence of anti-government, mass protests in recent years, both pre- and post-pandemic. Most remarkable were the social protests in October 2019 against the government of Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi as well as the political elite more broadly. Initially led by disenfranchised Iraqi youth and characterised by spontaneity but also lack of organisation, the "Tishreen" (October) protests called for employment opportunities

and denounced corruption, economic mismanagement, and the *muhassassa* (sectarian power-sharing) system. In this way, these protests resembled those of the "October Revolution" that emerged in Lebanon at the same time. Iraqi state security forces, foremost the Shi'i Hashd ash-Sha'bi militias (Popular Mobilisation Units, initially established in 2014 to fight ISIS and later incorporated into the Iraqi state security), intervened very violently, leading to dozens of deaths and many injuries among the protestors (Kadhim, 2020: 54). The protestors attacked back and the Hashd reciprocated, leading to hundreds of deaths by 29 November 2019, when Abdul-Mahdi resigned. Still, the protests continued in the coming months.

It was the COVID-19 pandemic and the government's lockdown and curfew measures which, at first, ended the protest movement: "When the Covid-19 pandemic became a public concern, the pressure started to fade away […]. Most of the protesters were content to retreat temporarily to preserve their lives, wait for the pandemic to recede, and return later to continue the fight" (Kadhim, 2020: 60). In line with the return of social life more broadly, peaceful protests also quickly started again by mid-May 2020, almost reaching the number, if not the same mass base and degree of violence as the weeks of "Tishreen" in 2019. This protest trend for Iraq overall has continued through to today, with smaller ebbs and flows. Focal areas for the post-pandemic protests in Iraq continued to be the southern governorates of Basra and al-Muthanna as well as central Baghdad and al-Qadsiyya. In these Shi'a majority areas, many people continue to feel frustrated about the *muhassassa* system, the related corruption, and the perceived lack of prospects for a better life. In addition to these areas, there have been more localised protests in the Kurdish-dominated governorate on Sulaimaniya in the northeast (e.g. in May 2020) and in Dohuk in the north. Overall, COVID-19 and the government measures halted the peaceful protests in Iraq only temporarily: for less than three months. With the continued existence of broadly felt grievances, social protests have gone on across the country, relegating the potential negative impact of the pandemic to the background.

5.1.3 Nigeria: Increasing Violent Clashes amid a Single Ceasefire

Nigeria recorded its COVID-19 index case on 28 February 2020. Less than two weeks later, a Presidential Task Force on COVID-19 was created to coordinate Nigeria's efforts to contain the spread of the virus. Subsequently, the federal government rolled out various measures, including a travel ban and the prohibition of public gatherings of more than 50 people, school closures (19 March 2020), curfews, and the mandatory use of face masks (Dixit, Ogundeji & Onwujekwe, 2020). The Stringency Index of the Oxford Government Response Tracker shows that the Nigeria introduced measures that led to a score of 84 out of 100 by May 2020, which constitutes one of the strictest responses in West Africa. President Buhari was appointed to coordinate the COVID-19 response of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in April 2020 due to Nigeria's prior achievements in combating Ebola, but the domestic situation was grim, with a lack of testing facilities and just 350 ICU beds for the entire country.

According to the United Nations Development Programme (2020), the pandemic poses the greatest security threat in the impoverished, fragile Northeast of Nigeria where the Boko Haram insurgency dominates conflict processes. Boko Haram saw COVID-19 as "an opportunity" (Burns, 2020) to ramp up its activities while – at the same time – the pandemic has also "afforded the Nigerian Armed Forces the opportunity to gain ground over Boko Haram" (Idowu, 2020). The Nigerian army launched several operations against Boko Haram during the early phase of the pandemic when strict social-distancing regulations reduced close contact between local populations and the insurgents (Kola, 2020), leading to the killing of dozens of Boko Haram members (Idowu, 2020). However, the armed forces faced resource and capacity issues that limited their ability to "capitalise" on the pandemic. Already prior to the pandemic, the capacities had been overstretched, not least because the army often assumes responsibilities of the poorly trained police (Campbell, 2020). When the government imposed its anti-corona measures, the military was tasked with the additional duty of enforcing lockdowns – and had killed 18 civilians by April 2020 during these efforts, according to the National Human Rights Commission (Reuters, 2020). In addition, the oil price drop spurred by the global response to the pandemic constituted a heavy burden, as more than 60 per cent of Nigeria's government revenues come from oil (Burns, 2020). With expenses for medical equipment and humanitarian relief increasing simultaneously, chronic underfunding of the security forces further worsened (Campbell, 2020). Yet contrary to initial expectations that the pandemic would reduce international engagement in conflicts around the globe (for example Anderton, 2020; Coleman, 2020), Western countries' counterterrorism support in Nigeria remained largely unaffected (Campbell, 2020).

Like the Nigerian army, Boko Haram considered the pandemic as a chance to escalate violence (Polo, 2020). During the early months of the pandemic, it stepped up its attacks as the number of COVID-19 cases grew in Northern states such as Borno (Haruna, 2020; Onubogu, 2020). According to data from the Nigeria Security Tracker, April 2020 was one of the deadliest months in the Boko Haram conflict (Harwood, 2020). Akin to narratives by Al Shabaab in Somalia, jihadi rhetoric in Nigeria characterised the virus as punishment of the enemies of the Islam (Campbell, 2020). As COVID-19 is considered as a Western virus that would not hit the faithful, Boko Haram – unlike Al Shabaab (Al Jazeera, 2020) – did not invest in health governance such as the setup of COVID-19 treatment facilities. The worsening socio-economic situation provided Boko Haram with new opportunities for recruitment (Basit, 2020; McElroy, 2020). Food insecurity further drove fragility, especially in the country's North where more than 75 per cent of impoverished Nigerians live (Burns, 2020). While food insecurity is a long-standing issue, studies report an increase of up to 15 per cent of such insecurity as a result of the pandemic (Amare et al., 2021). In this situation, certain fractions of Boko Haram continued their efforts to win over the local population through aid provision (Campbell, 2020). Even prior to the pandemic, Boko Haram had "come to preach in villages and offer financial incentives" (Campbell, 2019).

Overall, the assessments of how the pandemic affected Boko Haram differ to some extent. On the one hand, former US Ambassador to Nigeria John Campbell suggests that "COVID is essentially irrelevant" to the security environment in Nigeria (Burns, 2020) and several Boko Haram factions' attempts to exploit the pandemic have not led to a breakthrough for any of them (Campbell, 2020). On the other hand, certain observers note changing patterns of violence: Idowu (2020) suggests that "lockdown, curfew and several roadblocks nationwide appear to have kept insurgents away from their local civilian targets," which initially allowed the army to gain ground over the Islamist insurgents but also meant the latter focused even more on military targets.

Herder–farmer conflicts have also continued during the pandemic. However, the number of casualties and incidents was lower during the first weeks of the outbreak of COVID-19. While farming season was not in full swing at that time, the initial reduction in violent clashes between farmers and herders has also been attributed to the fact that the lockdown restricted movements and kept farmers at home (Idowu, 2020). In Benue State, a ceasefire was even declared for the local farmer–herder conflict (Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2020), but this remained the exception. The initial decline in communal violence was short-lived, as ACLED data shows – not least because COVID-19 intensified conflict over land use in the context of increased food insecurity. A survey conducted in Ondo State, for example, showed that a high number of the respondents saw violence as a means of attaining food security during the pandemic (Adebayo & Oluwamayowa, 2021). Corruption further undermined trust in the government to address the issue of food insecurity when several reports about the government hoarding COVID-19 palliative foodstuffs during the initial lockdown became public (Owonikoko, 2021).

In Nigeria, counter-insurgency efforts and human rights abuses by security forces are intertwined (Akanni, 2019). While not related to security forces' anti-terrorism efforts, atrocities committed by Nigeria's Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) have attracted particular attention in the struggle against police brutality. While the origins of the #EndSARS movement date back to 2016 (i.e. before the pandemic), it was a viral video of a SARS police officer shooting a young Nigerian that eventually triggered nationwide street protests in October 2020 (Iroulo, 2021). In response, the Nigerian government sought to violently repress the protests, and several demonstrators were killed.

5.1.4 Comparative Trends for Countries Experiencing Armed Conflict during COVID-19

From a comparative perspective, COVID-19 was not a game changer for armed conflict in either Colombia, Iraq, or Nigeria. In all three countries, state and non-state actors tried to capitalise on the pandemic to increase their influence and control. While this enabled increasing territorial control in some conflicts, general pre-pandemic dynamics remained in place. Nigeria is the case in our sample that has experienced the largest increase in the total number of

violent events targeting civilians after the onset of the pandemic because the pandemic exacerbated the long-standing conflict between Boko Haram and the army while also worsening triggers of farmer–herder conflicts. Similarly, the COVID-19 pandemic has not altered the dynamics of violence in Iraq, at least in the short term. The radical-Islamist group ISIS attempted to politically instrumentalise the immediate fallout and lack of coherent state response in spring 2020 but without much success. In Colombia, a short reduction in violence was soon followed by a return to prior, or even higher, levels of combat. Like before the pandemic, violence is highly localised, and the state is just one of a variety of violent actors. Despite a few signs of hope in the form of pandemic-related ceasefires in Nigeria and Colombia, they did not significantly alter conflict dynamics. After a short break, violence resumed in Colombia as the government did not reciprocate the ceasefire and the ELN exploited it to restructure and improve upon its strategic position.

Nevertheless, the pandemic affects social and economic triggers such as poverty and unemployment in all three countries. The lack of state social policies will probably further feed into discontent and mistrust towards the respective governments. However, it remains to be seen if, and to what extent, armed actors will be able to capitalise on these problems to increase mobilisation and societal support. Across the cases, political protest prior to the pandemic initially came to a halt due to pandemic policies such as stay-at-home orders, lockdowns, and mobility restrictions, but this decline was only temporary.

5.2 Violent Protests in Post-Authoritarian Transition Countries

There is growing concern about democratic backsliding in the context of the pandemic (Edgell et al., 2021). Democracy is a form of processing conflicts in a society without the use of violence (Przeworski, 2011); democratisation could – at least theoretically – provide the means to ease deeply engrained social and economic conflicts (Kinsella & Rousseau, 2009). Yet deficits in conflict-processing occur even in the countries often seen as models of non-violent democratic transition in their respective regions: Chile, Tunisia and South Africa. These countries have all been rated as free by Freedom House (Freedom House, 2020). At the same time, they share high levels of social and economic inequality (Gini coefficient in Chile 2017: 44.4; South Africa 2014: 63.0; Tunisia 2015: 32.8 (World Bank, 2021b)), which is often described as a threat to democratisation and a driver of backsliding (among others, Haggard & Kaufman, 2012). Moreover, all three countries are characterised by a decrease of trust in government. In Chile, those having no or little trust in government doubled between 1995 and 2020, to over 80 per cent (Latinobarómetro, 2021); in South Africa those having no or little satisfaction with democracy increased from 42.8 per cent in the period 1999–2001 to 57 per cent in the period 2016–2018 (Afrobarometer, 2020). In Tunisia, there is no comparison to pre-pandemic surveys but in 2020, 62 per cent of respondents had no trust in government at all (Afrobarometer, 2021). All countries experienced some of the highest levels of mob violence in a regional comparison a year

into the pandemic (Chile 629 (Ø104); South Africa 609 (Ø78); Tunisia 368 (Ø157)). Moreover, according to the Stringency Index of the Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (OxGRT) (Hale et al., 2021), rather strict measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 were applied in all of these countries. At the same time, transitions to democracy were based on certain elements of continuity and path dependency regarding, among other things, authoritarian constitutions and the persistence of powerful economic, often neoliberal elites (Robinson, 2010; Alexander, 2016; Morales-Olivares, 2016; Albertus, 2019). The following case studies illustrate the impact of the pandemic on the unresolved historical conflicts, with a focus on public protests.

5.2.1 Chile: Prior Protests Initially Put on Hold[5]

At the beginning of March 2020, the first COVID-19 cases were recorded in Chile. Two weeks later, the Chilean government implemented extensive policies such as school closings, workplace closings for all but essential sectors, curfews, restrictions on public gatherings, and limits on public transportation use. According to the OxGRT Stringency Index, these measures led to a score of 73 out of 100 by the end of March. The stringency of the measures remained at a score varying between 73 and 85 until July 2021, when some schools and universities reopened, public transportation became accessible for more people again, and curfews were loosened. The measures were among the strictest and longest-lasting in LAC. Chile is an interesting case to analyse the impact of COVID-19 on prior massive protest movement.

On 18 October 2019, massive social turmoil started to rock Chile. Triggered by a rise of prices for public transportation in the capital, protests soon expanded towards the general topic of social inequality. One prominent slogan clarified: "It is not about 30 pesos, it is about 30 years" (The New York Times, 2019). The protests were driven by a broad informal coalition of labour unions, health workers, teachers, and student organisations (ACLED, 2021). The state responded to these protests with massive repression by the police. At the end of 2019, at least 26 people had been killed and more than 11,000 injured, including 2,000 police officers (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

Luna (2021) identifies three main reasons for the social unrest in Chile. First, social inequality is one of the biggest challenges for Chilean society. Even though some socio-economic inequalities have been reduced in Chile since the beginning of the 2000s (CEPAL, 2019), health-related and educational disparities are particularly tremendous. Second, various corruption scandals starting after the turn of the millennium exposed how business elites gained political influence over legislative and regulatory processes by financing political campaigns. Hence, the political system and its institutions lost trust (Latinobarómetro, 2020). Third, the consensus-oriented party system demobilised civil society and depoliticised prevailing conflicts. The

5 We thank Ronja Grimmer for research assistance on Chile during her internship at the GIGA's Institute for Latin American Studies.

massive protest movement of 2019 including the aforementioned organisations as well as a broad spectrum of civil society among the youth, lower strata, and middle class was successful as it led to an agreement on a new constitution in November 2019. The agreement set out a plan for a constitutional reform process including a set of referenda and elections to de-escalate the situation in the country. Yet, protests continued in 2020: In January, thousands of protesters gathered in the Providencia community in Santiago de Chile, demanding an end to state and police repression. The police increasingly responded with disproportionate force, thereby reducing trust in the institution (Dammert, 2019). Moreover, the state also reacted violently in its interventions regarding other conflicts, exemplified by actions such as Operación Huracán, which targeted Mapuche activists.

Due to COVID-19, the referendum about the new constitution had to be postponed from April 2020 to 25 October 2020. A total of 78.8 per cent of the voters approved the plan to draft a new constitution in a referendum that saw one of the highest voter turnouts since compulsory voting was abolished in 2012 (BCN 2020). Nevertheless, protest and riots resumed in 2020. The socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 restrictions intensified existing patterns of inequality (ACLED 2020). Youth unemployment increased from 18 per cent in the second quarter of 2019 to 26.7 per cent in 2020 and 21.8 per cent in 2021 (OECD 2021). Food insecurity doubled across all categories between 2017 and 2020 (Ministerio de Desarollo Social y Familia 2020). Government support policies were mostly directed towards the business sector and employers. Only when the pandemic hit the economy severely were separate transfers to independent workers, along with the so-called "middle-class bonus," approved (Blofield, Giambruno & Filgueira 2020).

Police brutality in confrontations with protesters is common and at high levels in Chile. During the protests in 2019, the government declared a state of emergency. In August 2020, the Office of the Attorney General reported 8,575 cases of "institutional violence"; 3,342 of these cases were people injured by firearms. On the first anniversary of the unrest in October 2020, over 100,000 people protested nationwide. Military and police forces enforced lockdown regulations with the same high level of repression used during the protests. During the first five months of COVID, 163,957 persons were detained for "crimes against public health" (McGowan & Larsson, 2020).

The historic conflict around the recognition and participation of the Mapuche also gained traction in the second half of 2020, when the number of organised political violence events by indigenous militias increased. They seized the opportunity to attack rural areas, while state forces enforced pandemic-related curfew and quarantine regulations in urban areas. Different to the years before, some attacks by the armed Mapuche militias resulted in causalities that involved forest workers as well as other civilians. The increase in violent events is related to the claim for constitutional reforms ahead of the plebiscite in October 2020, including demands for more participation in the political processes of the country (Gonzalez, 2020). The outgoing

government of Sebastián Piñera declared a state of emergency for the country's southern provinces on 12 October 2020.

The results of the parliamentary and presidential elections in December 2021 were clearly influenced by the pandemic and the protests. Chile saw an unprecedentedly high voter turnout. Despite a very successful vaccination campaign by the right-wing government, the pandemic made the structural problems of inequality obvious and raised fears of social downward mobility in the fragile middle classes. The new parliament mirrors the historic divisions of Chile's society – one-third hardcore rightist, one-third centre, and one-third leftist parties. In the presidential elections, the right gained the first round but was unable to win the run-off. Elected president Gabriel Boric is a former leader of the student protests who ran on a left-wing ticket of structural reform. During the run-off campaign, he moderated his discourse and was thus able to beat the right-wing candidate by a considerable margin. However, time will tell if Boric is able to moderate the conflicts between the different groups and construct majorities in a split parliament. The constitutional assembly – where the left has a majority – will finish the draft of the new constitution by July 2022, which needs to be approved by a referendum by way of an obligatory vote whose outcome is uncertain.

5.2.2 Tunisia: Three Waves of Protests and a Coup

While protests in Tunisia in recent years have had diverse triggers, the structural reason behind them has typically been the government's failure to deliver on the promises of the 2011 revolution, especially in terms of improving living conditions for large parts of the population. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these tensions: In order to combat the virus, the government implemented restrictive measures such as lockdowns, curfews, and border closures, which negatively affected the already troubled economic situation, in particular the tourism and industrial sectors (Dridi, 2020). Consequently, many Tunisians lost their jobs or were put on unpaid leave, mostly without access to social protection (Yerkes, 2021).

Even though there was widespread acceptance of the lockdown measures at the beginning of the pandemic (Mezran et al., 2020) and protests dropped significantly in Tunisia in March 2020, demonstrations started to increase again in April and more than doubled once the initial measures were eased at the beginning of May (ACLED, 2020b). Hotspots of the protests were energy production sites in marginalised areas as well as the mining basin of Gafsa, which was already the epicentre of protest against Ben Ali after the turn of the millennium (ACLED, 2020b). Here, Tunisian workers, with the help of the Tunisian General Labour Union (Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail, UGTT), Tunisia's largest association of trade unions, led the protests. As a direct consequence, oil and gas extraction at several sites were put on halt for months (Siebert, 2021). Moreover, people started to breach the lockdown rules due to limited trust in the government's ability to manage the crisis (Gani, 2021).

From 15 January to 4 February 2021, Tunisia experienced a second wave of violent protests against the economic downturn, corruption, and the excessive police violence and impunity

that led to the death of a protestor, many injuries, and several hundred arrests (BBC, 2021; HRW, 2021). The protests erupted after a video circulated on social media of the police humiliating a shepherd in the western governorate of Siliana (HRW, 2021). Excessive police violence is a recurring issue in Tunisia, as almost all beatdowns, harassments, and even killings by the police are met with impunity, with essentially little to no change compared to before 2011 (Amnesty International, 2019). The protests during the second wave dominated by mostly disenfranchised youths were much less organised compared to the workers' demonstrations – and more violent.

The third protest wave since the beginning of the pandemic hit Tunisia in the summer of 2021, when a drastic increase in new COVID-19 infections[6] led to a quasi-collapse of the country's health system (Cherif, 2021). The pandemic thereby exacerbated an already glaring problem: As early as 2013, health professionals were bemoaning the rapid decline in public health spending; a mass exodus of skilled medical doctors followed (Guetat, 2020). Tunisia's health system has thus been ill equipped for the pandemic, with a total of only 331 ICU beds nationwide, corresponding to roughly three beds per 100,000 inhabitants (Guetat, 2020)[7]. Additionally, the country had a particularly low vaccination rate, at only 15 per cent by 25 July 2021 (Grewal, 2021). The national vaccination day on 20 July 2021, which was billed as great progress for the vaccination campaign, ended in disaster, with huge lines and clashes between people to compete for limited supply (Aliriza, 2021). In this context, protests by Tunisians from all walks of life picked up again, putting massive pressure on the already ailing government under Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi. On 25 July 2021, President Kais Saied directly intervened in this tense situation, invoking article 80 of the Tunisian constitution to gather all executive powers in his own hands. This amounted to a massive presidential power grab or, as many observers hold, a coup, which the president justified with the necessity to immediately tackle the triple health, economic, and political crises (Grewal 2021b). While the Tunisian anti-vaccination campaign picked up steam in the immediate aftermath of Said's intervention, the structural features that led to most of the (violent) protests over the last decade continue to exist largely unaddressed as of the beginning of 2022.

5.2.3 South Africa: COVID-19 and Non–Pandemic-Related Protests Turning Violent

Even prior to the pandemic, South Africa had faced some of the highest numbers of violent protest incidences globally (De Juan & Wegner, 2019; Visage, Turok & Swartz, 2021). The country has experienced a steady increase in the number of violent protests over the past decade in response to massive inequality, corruption, and widespread police violence (Lancaster, 2018). COVID-19 served as a magnifying glass that exacerbated these previously existing tensions.

6 Tunisia experienced the highest increase of daily infections worldwide during the week beginning 11 July 2021.

7 The average in OECD countries is 12-14 beds per 100 K, see https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/en/data-insights/intensive-care-beds-capacity) and Hospital beds and occupancy | Health at a Glance 2021 : OECD Indicators | OECD iLibrary (oecd-ilibrary.org).

Security forces deployed to repress protest against harsh social-distancing regulations – and to enforce lockdown measures more generally – have used excessive force, thereby triggering a spiral of mob and police violence.

The first case of COVID-19 in South Africa was reported on 5 March 2020. Subsequently, on 27 March 2020, the government announced the first wave of lockdown measures, including strict curfews and a prohibition on travelling or even leaving home for reasons other than grocery shopping or medical emergencies (Trippe, 2020). By the end of March, the anti–COVID-19 regulations reached a stringency of almost 88 out of 100, according to the Oxford Coronavirus Government Response Tracker – the second-most restrictive in Southern Africa at that time. These measures disproportionately hit the poor and vulnerable, predominantly Black population, which almost exclusively relies on informal jobs that require physical presence and could not be carried out during the lockdown. The resulting job loss caused major distress in poorer communities, as most of the people did not qualify for any type of unemployment benefit (Graham, 2020). As a consequence, approximately 45 per cent of households ran out of food in the initial phase of the pandemic due to access problems and high prices (Linebaugh, Williams & Steinhauser, 2021; see also Chutel, 2020; Tau et al., 2020). This mounting tension around food insecurity, exacerbated by the failure of aid delivery and the pre-pandemic lack of access to basic services, led to incidences of people looting stores and attacking food deliveries as well as to protests against COVID-19 measures as such (Trippe, 2020). Resulting mob violence was characterised by a complex interplay of long-standing grievances and pandemic-related triggers, as exemplified by an incident in July 2020 when a mob burned a newly established COVID-19 facility in response to both the government handling of the pandemic and underlying land issues (Lali, 2020).

Security forces answered with excessive use of violence (Faull, 2020; Trippe, 2020). To enforce the lockdown, over 7,000 soldiers had been deployed by the end of June 2020 (BBC, 2020; Harrisberg, 2020) – a move criticised by civil society and the UN, as military personnel lacked adequate training to deal with civilians (Farge, 2020). Violence against civilians by state perpetrators indeed more than doubled during the initial three months of the first lockdown (Pavlik, 2020a).[8] It increased largely due to security forces violently responding to the breach of lockdown rules (Burke, 2020; Pavlik, 2020b): 230,000 arrests for violations of lockdown regulations and 11 deaths due to police violence were reported by early June 2020 (Haffajee, 2020; Trippe, 2020). The mass detentions, deaths, and violence fomented new protest against police violence. Protests were also fuelled by several corruption scandals about the alleged mismanagement of funds meant to tackle the pandemic (Mengnjo, 2021). In July 2020, protests reached the highest number recorded in a single month since 2013 (Lancaster & Mulaudzi, 2020). But while the frequency of protests and the level of violence on both sides was considerably higher

8 Interestingly, robberies and homicides decreased significantly during the said time period (Burger & Zinn, 2020), which also saw a massive drop in alcohol-related acts of violence as the sale of alcohol was banned (Pavlik, 2020b).

in the first half of 2020 compared to recent years,[9] the protest patterns did not significantly change during the pandemic (Fiedler, Mross & Adaye Adeto, 2021). Both the steady increase in the number of violent protests and the main issues of contestation – socio-economic grievances, corruption, and police brutality – remained largely identical.

Frustration about the economic and political situation remained pronounced in 2021, and almost 80 per cent of South Africans now believe that the country is heading in the wrong direction (IPSOS, 2021). Yet, the focus of protests has – to some extent – moved away from the fallout of the pandemic[10] even though the economic situation worsened in 2021: unemployment rates reached a new high of 34 per cent (Naidoo, 2021), and the government stopped the payment of emergency assistance in April 2021 (van der Berg, Patel & Bridgman, 2021). But the major issue of contestation in the year 2021 was former president Zuma's arrest for failing to appear in front of a court investigating corruption under his presidency (Gevisser, 2021). This caused the most violent unrests since the end of Apartheid in 1994 (Bax, 2021). Zuma's arrest triggered major violent protests by his supporters, particularly in his home region of KwaZulu-Natal, which soon turned into massive – and oftentimes opportunistic – looting. After the government's initial failure to control what has been widely described as "mob violence," vigilante groups and private security firms began to patrol the streets (Burke, 2021a; Egwu, 2021). In response, the government eventually deployed thousands of soldiers to quell the unrest (Burke, 2021b). In the end, more than 300 people died and several thousands were arrested (Bruce, 2021). While the trigger was related to intraparty conflict, underlying causes of the violent escalation closely hew to long-standing patterns of reasons for violent protests in South Africa, including racial tensions (Bax, 2021; Harding, 2021) and economic grievances (Van der Berg & Patel 2021).

5.2.4 Comparative Trends for Transition Countries during COVID-19

Overall, the three (post-)transition countries of Chile, Tunisia, and South Africa have all been characterised by a dominant disconnect: the gradual increase in political liberties and formal democratic rights for large parts of the population over the last decade(s) did not go hand in hand with equal chances for socio-economic participation and the opportunity to live a "good life." Rather, in the pre-pandemic years, the gap between the rich and poor in South Africa, Tunisia, and Chile had widened, contributing to increased social protests. While these mass demonstrations displayed country-specific differences in the dominant social groups leading the protests, in the protest's locations and in the concrete trigger events, they share two overarching features: First, the protesters' demands strongly focus on the unfulfilled socio-economic promises of the political transition, criticising the respective governments for having

9 During the second half of 2020, protest levels remained higher than before the pandemic, but decreased compared to the first half of 2020.

10 However, protest against COVID-19 measures – including anti-vaccination and anti-mask demonstration – continued in 2021 and often turned violent (allAfrica, 2021).

betrayed earlier promises. Second, despite formal democratic governments, the level of violence exerted in protest policing by state security agencies has been high and relatively increasing in recent years, leading to high numbers of casualties and further escalation.

It was in these contexts that COVID-19 emerged in early 2020. After around two years, it can be observed that, overall, the pandemic and its political, economic, and social effects have not been a game changer for violence dynamics in Chile, Tunisia, and South Africa. Still, the pandemic has certainly contributed to exacerbating the already dire socio-economic situation in general, and the degree of inequality in these societies in particular. In this sense, it is likely that COVID-19's indirect effects might be stronger in the medium term than in the immediate short-term period. At the same time, there is a difference in the relative importance that the COVID-19 pandemic has had for each of the three countries: In Tunisia, the government's pandemic-related measures contributed to certain protest waves, which either turned particularly violent (in January/February 2021) or possibly served as the decisive pretext for President Said's coup on 25 July 2021. In Tunisia, the pandemic's implications are likely stronger than "merely" exacerbating socio-economic disparities. In South Africa, some protests also emerged as a direct response to the lockdown measures put in place by the government. Still, most other mass protests in the rainbow nation in 2020 and 2021 were not directly related to COVID-19. In Chile, societal mobilisation in the form of mass protests also continued during the pandemic. Yet here, the diverse protests typically happened without much linkage to the pandemic.

6 Conclusions: The Time-Variable and Context-Specific Effects of COVID-19 on Different Violent Actors

In this study, we have examined the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and related measures on different violent actors in the Global South. We have analysed both the immediate pre-pandemic time (the year 2019) and the pandemic's first two years, from early 2020 and to late 2021, in order to differentiate short-term effects from potential medium-term consequences. With the ACLED-based interregional mapping of crucial trends in LAC, MENA, and SSA, we specified the "considerable regional heterogeneity" (Mehrl & Thurner, 2020; also Bloem & Salehi, 2021; Ide, 2021) found in earlier research. The two cross-regional comparisons of three cases from LAC, MENA, and SSA, respectively, shed further light on the similarities and differences among countries that either have been characterised by long-term armed conflict (Colombia, Iraq, Nigeria) or have transitioned from authoritarianism but face challenges of socio-economic inequality and political exclusion (Chile, Tunisia, South Africa). Moreover, we differentiated between and among various state and non-state violent actors to move beyond extant research's still dominant focus on overall trends in violence. Zooming in on the activities of state military or police forces as well as rebels, militias, and mobs allowed us to provide more nuance on variegated patterns of violence.

In the following, we return to these three main objectives and discuss them in light of our main findings. Both in the regional mappings and in all six case studies, we can confirm the temporal variation between an initial phase following the first COVID-19 infections and a later period. First, for the initial period, we find both on the regional level and in all six country cases that armed state actors' new responsibilities to implement COVID-19-related social control measures increased violence against civilians. While the breadth and depth of the respective measures differed, it was high to very high in all case studies, suggesting a largely shared perspective that state forces had to act decisively. Yet, evidence from Colombia, Iraq, and Nigeria shows that this finding needs to be further differentiated subnationally, since COVID-19 measures were not implemented equally across the territory. As expected, the relative empowerment of state military and police forces has decreased over time for a host of different reasons: They range from armed resistance by insurgents (e.g. ELN in Colombia, ISIS in Iraq, Boko Haram in Nigeria) to mass social protests against the negative economic fallout from the state's COVID-19 measures (e.g. in Chile, Tunisia, South Africa) to a quiet encroachment upon the rights of people preoccupied with socio-economic challenges. Overall, our findings add to extant research that observes a temporal differentiation between an initial period of state actors' gain in influence and a subsequent gradual decline, while further specifying these insights.

Second, we take into account the respective country's conflict history and political trajectory. Regarding the countries with ongoing armed conflict, we observe that violent state and non-state actors – including Boko Haram and the military in Nigeria as well as ISIS in Iraq – sought to instrumentalise the pandemic for their own causes. Even the ELN in Colombia, which declared a unilateral ceasefire in April 2020, eventually used the fighting pause for strategic restructuring. In other words, both state armed actors and non-state rebels tried to capitalise on pandemic-related measures to increase their political influence. Comparing the effects of COVID-19 in the post-authoritarian countries of Chile, Tunisia, and South Africa, we find that, indeed, societal expectations vis-à-vis state actors were articulated clearly during 2020 and 2021 – and they most often revolved around the dire economic situations and unfulfilled promises of socio-political participation. At the same time, ACLED data and the case studies alike point to an already strong social mobilisation in the years prior to the pandemic. Seen against this backdrop, we detect variation in the degree to which protests and mob activities are related to COVID-19: While there have been only very few protest–pandemic linkages in Chile despite continued mobilisation, these were more pronounced in South Africa, where some demonstrations were direct responses to pandemic policies, and particularly strong in Tunisia, where the government's COVID-19 measures contributed to several waves of mass protest and possibly served as both background and pretext for the 25 July 2021 coup. In sum, we see support for the importance of conflict histories and political trajectories.

Third, we differentiate diverse violent state and non-state actors. First, we examine the roles of the state military and police in both the overarching regional trends for LAC, MENA,

and SSA and in our six cases studies. Given the overall high stringency of COVID-19-related measures by different state governments in the three regions, it is not surprising that the role of state security was generally strengthened. While this has been most clearly valid for spring 2020 when most of the social distancing measures were implemented and enforced, we observe some differences even in this early phase: In the countries characterised by armed conflict, the state security forces had the shared interest to weaken insurgents/rebels, most notably in Colombia and Nigeria. By contrast, the Iraqi military and associated militias did not fight as intensely against the radical-Islamist ISIS, because security forces were preoccupied with protest policing. In the countries having transitioned from authoritarianism, state armed actors generally played a large role in protest control. Here, the police and other specialised security forces often reacted violently vis-à-vis protests. The high level of police violence also contributed to increased escalation and mob activities in Chile, South Africa, and Tunisia. Rebels also sought to capitalise on the pandemic militarily, but we could not identify evidence that either Boko Haram or the ELN implemented (health) governance in their respective areas of control.

Finally, we examine protest and mob dynamics as well as their linkages with COVID-19 with regard to overarching regional trends for LAC, MENA, and SSA as well as in our six cases studies. Here we found a demobilising effect of lockdowns and mobility restrictions during the initial phase of the pandemic. Yet, protest had returned to pre-pandemic levels by April, May, or June 2020 in many countries, including Chile, Colombia, Iraq, South Africa, and Tunisia. There are strong indications that the majority of protests continued to revolve around broader political and socio-economic issues, among them authoritarianism, corruption, and the lack of socio-economic prospects, especially for the younger generations.

In all countries, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the fore structural problems, including a lack of state capacities regarding public services in the health sector, a lack of prospects for youth, and increased levels of inequality. These make for a toxic mix and a breeding ground for armed actors to flourish and challenge democratic and authoritarian governments. The worst consequences of the pandemic might still be in the making.

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