

Conflict environments and coverage

Clionadh Raleigh
Matt Batten Carew
Andrea Carboni

Clingendael Report



Clingendael

Netherlands Institute of International Relations



Clingendael

Netherlands Institute of International Relations

Conflict environments and coverage

Clionadh Raleigh
Matt Batten Carew
Andrea Carboni

Clingendael Report
January 2018

Disclaimer: This report was commissioned by the Netherlands' ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defence within the PROGRESS framework agreement, lot 5, 2017. Responsibility for the contents and for the opinions expressed rests solely with the authors. Publication does not constitute an endorsement by the Netherlands' ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defence.

This report is part of Clingendael's political violence program on information gathering, analysis and recognition of (data) bias by policy-makers.

January 2018

© Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael'.

Cover photo: Rural Turkey © Flickr / Chris_Parfitt

Unauthorized use of any materials violates copyright, trademark and / or other laws. Should a user download material from the website or any other source related to the Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael', or the Clingendael Institute, for personal or non-commercial use, the user must retain all copyright, trademark or other similar notices contained in the original material or on any copies of this material.

Material on the website of the Clingendael Institute may be reproduced or publicly displayed, distributed or used for any public and non-commercial purposes, but only by mentioning the Clingendael Institute as its source. Permission is required to use the logo of the Clingendael Institute. This can be obtained by contacting the Communication desk of the Clingendael Institute (press@clingendael.org).

The following web link activities are prohibited by the Clingendael Institute and may present trademark and copyright infringement issues: links that involve unauthorized use of our logo, framing, inline links, or metatags, as well as hyperlinks or a form of link disguising the URL.

About the authors


Clionadh Raleigh is a Professor of Human Geography at the University of Sussex. Her work is focused mainly on conflict, governance, and the social consequences of climate change in sub-Saharan Africa. Dr. Raleigh is director of the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), which tracks local conflict events in Africa, the Middle-East and South-East Asia.


Matt Batten Carew is a Research Manager at the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), leading a team of researchers on Iraq, Afghanistan and Turkey in the collection of data on political violence.


Andrea Carboni is a PhD candidate at the University of Sussex working on contentious politics in Tunisia, Libya and Yemen. He is a Research Manager at the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) on the Middle East leading a team of researchers on Yemen, Gulf, Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon and Iran. He was formerly responsible for the Africa desk.

The Clingendael Institute
P.O. Box 93080
2509 AB The Hague
The Netherlands

Follow us on social media

 @clingendaelorg

 The Clingendael Institute

 The Clingendael Institute

Email: info@clingendael.org

Website: www.clingendael.org

Contents

1	Introduction	1
	Sources and bias	2
	What is counted?	3
	Findings on Turkey and Tunisia	4
	Overall recommendations	5
2	Conflict data collection: the challenging case of Turkey	6
	Context: political violence in Turkey	6
	ACLED sources and methodology	7
	What sources are used to monitor Turkey?	7
	Biases in media sources on Turkey	9
	Turkey as a special case: government censorship	10
	Ways forward: increased used of non-media sources and policy options	12
3	Conflict data collection: the multifaceted case of Tunisia	14
	Context: political violence in Tunisia	14
	Tunisia as a special case: protest in remote parts of the country	15
	What sources are used to monitor Tunisia and what biases are they subject to?	17
	Highlighting ACLED's strengths in comparison to OST	20
	Ways forward: lessons learned and policy recommendations	21

1 Introduction

An estimated 1.5 billion people worldwide live in conflict-affected countries where repeated cycles of political and organised violence hinder development, reduce human security, and result in massive humanitarian suffering (World Bank, 2011). Half the world's population lives in societies beset by political or criminal disorder that poses a direct threat to their security (OECD States of Fragility Report, 2016).

For policy-makers and the public, reliable data on disorder is necessary for valuable insights into past and current conflict patterns. Practitioners require reliable information to track how security challenges manifest, the activity of state and non-state actors in conflict settings and the domestic geography of conflict. Furthermore, policy-makers can use data to make predictions about future trends in conflict activity and design comprehensive solutions to complex political problems. Consequentially, a core challenge for the design, targeting, delivery and assessment of efficient, effective, high-quality programming and policy in conflict-affected contexts is access to reliable, timely, and rigorous data on political violence which is comparable across time periods and geographic contexts.

Many conflict datasets are available for general use, and increasingly this data is 'disaggregated' in that it breaks down a larger conflict into events. This data has several promises and pitfalls. It allows for the rigorous, evidence-based assessments that are necessary for modern policy-making and programme assessment. But the pitfalls and obstacles to producing this data are formidable. Which information counts, who is counting it, and what do these data and sources tell us? Those questions need to be fully and transparently answered for users to trust in them.

The principal issues of data collection and use are magnified in conflict contexts. The thoroughness of information; the availability of source materials in difficult to access places and groups; the bias emanating from most, if not all, forms of media; and the human error in relaying information are especially difficult to handle in conflicted areas. Every complex conflict, or 'difficult' country with media restrictions, repression and suppression, has a distinct mix of these issues. Given these pitfalls, both data creators and users need to be aware of how data is created, and how robustly organisations combat changing threats to information collection and validity.

Sources and bias

Sourcing material is the central problem for complex and difficult contexts. The scale of media, its validity, transparency and availability vacillate for each context: no conflict-affected state has the same media and information environment. Best practice in these environments begins with data creators learning the ‘lay of the land’ through pilot studies which engage with local media and organisations and soliciting insight from practitioners and analysts about the respective strengths, weaknesses and threats of each country’s reporting.

This early, robust inquiry will present opportunities: a group of journalists may be communicating via social media on a closed site; a reporter in a regional newspaper may speak a dialect that allows her to report on a distinct hotspot; or a local human rights NGO may have been dutifully collecting incident information for years. Good data is identified by seeking out these opportunities, rather than relying on a static and formulaic approach across all environments.

The central sourcing question is whether the magnitude of the conflict, and all its manifestations of violence, are being captured to the best of our ability. The answer depends on how well the data provider can adapt to the context. In a ‘complex’ conflict like Somalia or the Democratic Republic of Congo, the principal sourcing issue is often access and availability. Knowing whether reliable reporters and citizen-journalists are posted in rural, contested areas, as well as cities, or whether a local radio station allows for callers to report on events that no other source would pick up, can expand the reliability of data considerably.

A ‘difficult’ context of repression and suppression creates different problems: media are beset by threats, risks and consequences for reporting accurate information. The mainstream media, and the opposition media, may be subsumed or broken. In these contexts, data collection becomes about constructing a puzzle from many disparate pieces, each representing a small source of information of the greater whole. In a ‘complex’ conflict, the issue is capturing all of the information that may emerge, and seeking clarity on the agents, the victims and the exact events and locations; in ‘difficult’ contexts – like Turkey, Sudan, and Ethiopia – the imperative is to fill in the suspicious blanks, to follow up on disappearances, suspicious assaults on communities and groups, and the slowly creeping destruction of anti-regime messages.

Bias corrections follow access concerns. Nearly all media organisations have some element of bias in their coverage; data creators must acknowledge and mitigate systematic bias, while correcting for random bias. The best solution is to use a mix of sources, comparing the information to each other through triangulation, and enriching event information by supplementing from various sources. The mixing of sources, and the pursuance of local, traditional, social, organisational, and international media

coverage is the most robust way to mitigate the effects of information absence and information error and bias. Understanding the context of the reporting allows for a researcher to know what must be checked and questioned.

What is counted?

Data users will find that a country's disorder looks different depending on the conflict data they are using. How is this possible? Datasets prioritise the constituent events of political violence differently, leading some to emphasise threats to government sovereignty, others to focus on 'terrorism', and still others to capture the spectrum of political disorder in several stages and manifestations. The scope of a dataset is crucial for an analyst to grasp, as the sourcing, details, agents, locations, and patterns will be considerably different when observing a direct threat to a regime from a mature, armed and organised group versus how demonstrations against corruption threaten the urban areas. An analyst must be clear about what he/she believes creates contexts of conflict in order to trust that the data fully captures what are known manifestations of disorder.

These choices for data collectors must be clearly acknowledged from the outset. Decisions about how to incorporate and collect information that exists on the 'margins' of their definitions and collection techniques must also be made. Some data providers privilege consistency for stable collection. But, this approach risks missing how conflict has changed to adapt to new circumstances and realities. Other data providers require analysts to focus directly on change and volatility as an important element of conflict environments. Whatever data is used, it is necessary for the creator and the user to know how thorough the data claims to be; upon which sources it is based; what the central methodology is; how conflict is defined; how change is incorporated; and how difficult data decisions are made.

This collection includes studies of sourcing and data collection in two countries: Turkey and Tunisia. Both countries are 'difficult' contexts where different levels of state repression and suppression create alternative sourcing possibilities and environments of disorder. All data was collected by the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) which records, publishes and analyses disaggregated data on violent political conflict. The data aims to capture disorder from demonstrations to battles and mass attacks on civilians. The sourcing is based on capturing local data through media and organisations, and presenting a highly disaggregated, real-time collection. ACLED uses the same collection methodology in all countries it covers, offering users the ability to compare disorder within, across and between times, agents, conflicts and countries. All information relating to the ACLED methodology is available to the public.

Findings on Turkey and Tunisia

ACLED's coverage of political violence and protest data in Turkey has involved a deep engagement with the media landscape in Turkey. On the one hand, Turkey has a multitude of mature local sources covering the news in the country from all across the political landscape, including a number of Kurdish sources, alongside coverage from regional, international, and new media sources. On the other hand, government censorship of the press, up to and including closing down opposition and Kurdish news organisations (particularly in its conflict-affected areas), has impacted the overall objectivity of reporting in the country, with intimidation by the government which encourages self-censorship, even among sources considered largely impartial. This situation explains Turkey's fall to 155 out of 180 countries tracked by the World Press Freedom Index. With these obstacles in mind, this report puts forward several recommendations to enhance the availability of sources and the quality of data on political violence and protest events in Turkey: 1) facilitate coordination and collaboration between data aggregators; 2) support human rights and humanitarian organisations working in these conflict areas; and 3) fund capacity-building workshops for citizen-journalists and encourage the creation of local information-sharing networks.

Political turmoil continues to endure across the Arab world following the uprisings that ousted long-standing rulers and unleashed civil wars. In Tunisia, occasional violent attacks against the security forces and the civilian population, together with incessant popular protests, have marred the democratic experiment initiated in 2011. Thus monitoring conflict activity in a country undergoing a delicate democratic transition is essential to understand its political trajectory. However, this requires careful reflections on potential biases and weaknesses that can affect the data collection process. In order to address biases in conflict reporting and to improve data collection, further steps are needed: 1) Conflict monitoring should rely on a balanced mix of international, domestic and local sources which can capture the multiple forms of violence occurring across the territory; 2) Conflict monitoring should use only local sources that can benefit conflict reporting for a more effective use of resources; 3) Researchers and policy-makers should monitor and assess long-term conflict trends to address possible implicit biases and flaws of media reporting; 4) Donors should support local partners that undertake conflict-monitoring initiatives to improve coverage in countries where media reporting faces obstacles.

Overall recommendations

From ACLED's experiences across these and other contexts, the following recommendations emerge:

Capturing disorder requires an open, parsimonious taxonomy of event and agent types, but one that is flexible to suit all contexts. A user requires methodology, and the data that results, to be: (1) thorough; (2) comparable across contexts; and (3) responsive and reliable indications of what is occurring.

Data collectors should collect beyond their immediate focus and needs so they can compare how differently sources phrase or report on similar events. These intricacies within and across countries are frequent, as various source types report the same or similar events differently.

Facilitate coordination and collaboration between data aggregators.

In-country organisations or cross-country organisations can often benefit from partnerships, rather than competitive data collection. If the aim is to produce a reliable and thorough set, then producers should partner, while being clear about their comparative advantages.

Support human rights and humanitarian organisations working in these conflict areas. The best data comes from these local, embedded and targeted organisations. Yet, far too few data creators make efforts to align with them, and build their capacity.

Fund capacity-building workshops for citizen-journalists and encourage the creation of local information-sharing networks. The future of conflict reporting and information compilation will be in these citizen-journalists, crowd sourcing and local networks. To have any trust in their organisations, donors and data creators must create clear avenues to report, clear categories of risk that reflect the local environment, and develop standards with citizen-journalists about how to report.

Monitor long-term trends. Conflict is changing and disorder is rising.

But disorder is also closely adapted to a country's political environment. Researchers will need to reconsider and reframe why and how they believe conflict emerges so that these ideas reflect the reality of risk to governments and civilians.

Choose only local sources that can benefit conflict reporting and use a balanced mix of international, domestic and local sources. Conflict reporting on each scale has valued contributions. Understanding the media environment, as well as the risks within that context, is the best way to separate bias from valid, reliable data.

2 Conflict data collection: the challenging case of Turkey¹

This report explores the available sources for tracking political violence and protest events in Turkey generally, and specifically the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project's (ACLED) approach to data collection in Turkey. It begins by examining recent trends in political violence in the country, before taking a closer look at available data sources and ACLED's methodology for data collection. The report discusses observed biases in these sources, as well as the climate of repression in Turkey, which has greatly restricted freedom of the press – with clear, interconnected implications for access to and the reliability of data on political violence and protest. Finally, this report proposes several key recommendations in light of the situation to enhance the availability of sources and the quality of data on political violence and protest data in Turkey.

Context: political violence in Turkey

In the wake of the failed coup in 2016, a state of emergency was established in Turkey and the Turkish authorities began a campaign of repression including mass arrests of suspected Gulenists, Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) members, and Islamic State (IS) militants. A constitutional referendum on expanding the powers of the president was held in April 2017, leading to further repression, establishing the conditions under which political violence has increased.

In 2017, Turkey experienced many different types of conflict events, including approximately 500 battles, 300 riots and protests, 150 bombings and airstrikes, and 40 incidents of violence targeting civilians. Protest activities were concentrated in Ankara, Istanbul, and other regional capitals. Almost all battles and bombings occurred in the southeastern provinces, with a smaller proportion in the eastern and southern provinces bordering Syria and Iran. The worst affected areas include: Hakkari province, which borders Iran and Iraq; Istanbul (second); Ankara; Sirnak; and Diyarbakir (the latter two being southeastern provinces with majority Kurdish populations).

Islamist activity is currently limited. IS has perpetrated very few, but notable, incidents including the New Year's Eve (December 31, 2016) Reina night club attack which killed at least 39 people. This incident triggered a nationwide sweep for the suspect, resulting

1 Matt Batten Carew, ACLED.

in mass arrests of people suspected of having links to IS. This attack was reported to have targeted Christians specifically in response to Turkish operations in northern Syria, motivating a Turkish response against IS targets in the al-Bab area of Syria.

ACLED sources and methodology

ACLED's methodology on sourcing includes a number of standard rules and procedures which are applied across all countries where ACLED data is collected. Any searches using local languages (in this case, Turkish or Kurdish) are conducted separately from English language searches, with several searches conducted across sources ranging from local to international media. These include targeted reviews of non-media sources, such as the *International Crisis Group*, and of Kurdish sources, including the press centres of groups like the TAK and regional sources like *Rudaw* or *Kurdistan24*. Finally, information is supplemented using data from local organisations if available, such as *Turkey Purge*, and patterns across sources are reviewed by regional experts.

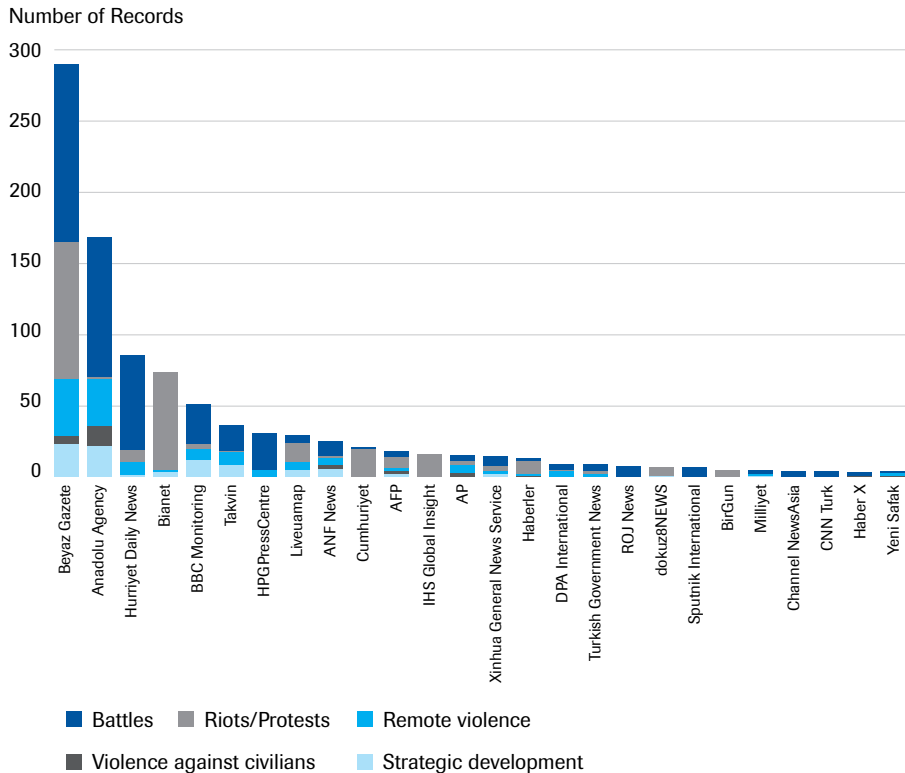
Nearly all media organisations have some element of bias in their coverage. However, ACLED's data collection methodology is designed to mitigate the overall effect of this bias. ACLED collects information on the key facts of each event: when did an event occur, where did it occur, who was involved, and what occurred (based on our nine-event taxonomy). ACLED does not expect to be always able to obtain accurate information as to the identities of perpetrator and victim, with the exception of civilians (by virtue of their inability to defend themselves). ACLED's focus on events of political violence and protest further means that criminal violence is excluded, with specific guidelines defined in the methodology and external codebook to differentiate between these two types of violence.

What sources are used to monitor Turkey?

ACLED uses a list of 72 sources to track political violence and protests in Turkey. However, not all sources produce information that can be coded as events; some are used only as references and for context. Of these 72 sources, 55 have produced directly 'codeable' information. Using these sources, ACLED researchers identify relevant events in their articles, and these events are then coded into the dataset using ACLED's methodology. Generally, the majority of ACLED's sourcing is done through Nexis, a searchable database of media sources, with all sources accessed outside of Nexis being referred to as *supplemental sources*. However, in the Turkish context the majority of our events have come from these 'supplemental' sources, primarily through directly accessing the websites of Turkish language news sources, rather than through the searchable database.

In terms of the type of sources accessed, roughly half are Turkish sources, while the rest are regional or international news sources, as well as non-media sources. The non-Turkish sources include organisations like *BBC Monitoring* and *Liveuamap*, which include articles originally reported in Turkish papers, but also draw from regional, international, and (in the case of Liveuamap) new media sources. Of the 55 sources currently producing events, 8 are considered by ACLED to be ‘Kurdish’ sources either by virtue of the language they are published in, their ownership, or their biases. These include sources like *ARA News*, *ROJ News*, and the *Kurdish Globe*, as well as the press centres of Kurdish militant groups, such as the HPG (the militant wing of the PKK), the Peoples’ United Revolutionary Movement (HBDH), and the Kurdistan Freedom Hawks (TAK). **Figure 1** below shows all sources which were used to produce more than two ACLED events in 2017 (an additional 26 are not displayed due to space constraints).

Figure 1 Turkey Events by Source and Event Type (January - September, 2017)



Biases in media sources on Turkey

Despite the problematic media environment in Turkey, the majority of the 33 Turkey-based media sources covered by ACLED do not present any obvious biases (i.e. consistently biased casualty counts, the use of loaded language), with the reporting of events being generally consistent when compared across these sources. However, there are some cases where clear biases have been observed in the reporting. Some specific examples have been outlined below:

- *Beyaz Gazete, Anadolu Agency, and Ihlas News Agency*. ACLED's most prolific source for Turkey, *Beyaz Gazete*, draws a majority of its articles from two main sources: *Anadolu Agency (AA)* and *Ihlas News Agency (IHA)*. These sources are both widely recognised as pro-government. This bias can be seen in its most obvious form in terms of the labelling of actors involved in events. For example, articles published by AA refer to PKK militants as 'terrorists'. On the other hand, news by IHA generally does not clarify the specific group involved in an event, and generally refers to all individuals in conflict with the security forces as members of the *bolucu terror orgutu* ('separatist terror organisation'). In Turkey, this term is used to capture the PKK along with other Kurdish groups like the HBDH and TAK, as well as suspected 'Gülenists'. Hence, it is not always clear who the specific actor is, with almost all individuals who come into conflict with the security services being labelled terrorists by these sources. In addition, they are generally less likely to be critical of the government's narrative and estimates of casualties provided by the government.

- *ANF News and ROJ News*. There is a notable contrast between what is reported by Kurdish news outlets in Turkey compared to sources such as AA. For example, two of the Kurdish sources, *ANF* and *ROJ News*, always use the term 'guerrilla' as opposed to 'terrorists' or 'militants' when referring to Kurdish individuals in conflict with the security forces. In their coverage of fighting between security forces and Kurdish forces, they tend to emphasise the number of casualties on the side of the security forces, and tend to de-emphasise or do not report on Kurdish casualties. This presents a known bias in the coding of these sources, which necessitates the triangulation of fatality counts across multiple reports whenever possible. As such, the number of casualties among the Turkish security forces reported by these two sources appear to be generally higher than what is covered in other sources. Additionally, in some cases the events reported in these sources cannot be found in other sources, which causes doubts about the credibility of the facts being reported.

Generally, biases in both the pro-government and pro-Kurdish sources can be mitigated if the information is considered alongside more moderate reporting by sources such as *Cumhuriyet* or *Hurriyet Daily News*. Further, with regard to fatalities counts, ACLED takes a conservative approach, selecting for inclusion in the dataset the lowest fatality total mentioned in the sources considered. However, the issue of bias continues to be an obstacle to ensuring objectivity in the data when only one source with a known bias reports on a particular event.

Turkey as a special case: government censorship

The biggest obstacle to tracking political violence and protest data in Turkey has been the effect of government censorship on the freedom of the press. Pressure has been put on media organisations critical of the government since as far back as the 2013 corruption investigations and Gazi Park protests.² This pressure increased considerably in the aftermath of the attempted military coup in July 2016.³ Since then, the government has shut down a number of news agencies for their alleged ties to the ‘Gülenist’ movement (which the government blames for the 2016 coup⁴), including the prominent *Cihan News Agency* (CNA) based in Istanbul and the Turkish daily newspaper *Zaman* which had been the highest circulation paper in the country,⁵ and put pressure on a number of others. The sum of these actions has resulted in Reporters Without Borders ranking Turkey at 155 out of 180 on its 2017 World Press Freedom Index, just below the Democratic Republic of Congo at 154 and Russia at 148.⁶

This situation presents a significant obstacle for ensuring comprehensive and objective coverage of political violence and protest data in the country. The government’s shutdown of numerous media organisations after the coup, and its willingness to prosecute journalists, has resulted in increasingly one-sided coverage of conflict and protests in Turkey as media organisations with opposing viewpoints are shut down. The credibility of those media organisations still operating is also undermined, as self-censorship becomes necessary in order to continue to operate in the country.⁷ An OHCHR report published in February 2017 on the human rights situation in Turkey’s southeastern Kurdish region further highlighted the significant impact this has had on reporting in these areas in particular, with anti-terrorism laws being used to detain Kurdish journalists without trial. This has been accompanied by ‘the closure of almost all Kurdish language local and national media outlets’,⁸ which suggests a bleak outlook for objective coverage of the conflict in the area.

-
- 2 ‘Nearly 70 journalists prosecuted for covering corruption investigation’, Reporters Without Borders. Published 6 January 2015. Accessed 1 November 2017. [Link](#)
 - 3 ‘Journalism engulfed by the purge’, Reporters Without Borders - World Press Freedom Index. Published 2017. Accessed 1 November 2017. [Link](#)
 - 4 ‘Turkey coup: What is Gulen movement and what does it want?’, BBC Europe. Published 21 July 2016. Accessed 2 November 2017. [Link](#)
 - 5 Yeginsu, C., ‘Turkey expands purge, shutting down news media outlets’, New York Times. Published 27 July 2016. Accessed 1 November 2017. [Link](#)
 - 6 ‘2017 World Press Freedom Index’, Reporters Without Borders - World Press Freedom Index. Published 2017. Accessed 2 November 2017. [Link](#)
 - 7 Rubin, M., ‘Are western journalists in Turkey self-censoring?’, AEI. Published 31 October 2016. Accessed 2 November 2017. [Link](#)
 - 8 Report on the Human Rights Situation in South-East Turkey: July 2015 to December 2016, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, February 2017: pg. 4. [Link](#)

Government censorship also manifests itself in other ways, for example in a lack of specificity when it comes to determining the exact location of events of political violence in Turkey. This represents an issue not just for mapping violence. Beyond this practical concern, this issue also represents the government's success in keeping those monitoring these events at arm's length. In terms of ACLED's tracking of battles, remote violence and violence against civilians' event types, over 60% of these events have been coded at the district or provincial level due to a lack of reporting on where a particular event took place. For example, when battles between Turkish security forces and Kurdish militants are reported, it is common to have these identified as occurring in a particular district or province, rather than at a specific village, town, or city. Reports about military offensives are particularly affected, generally offering even less specific information about exact locations as they generally occur over a number of days and in a number of provinces. This type of reporting on offensives is fairly common where state forces are engaged with militants in areas which are relatively distant from major population centres, and are therefore difficult to access. This dynamic in the reporting is represented in conflicts in countries as diverse as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali, and Pakistan. These incidents also generally make specific fatality counts for events harder to determine as well, as a casualty total for the entire offensive is generally provided, rather than fatalities attributed to specific events in particular locations.

Beyond the inherent obstacle for conflict mapping created by the lack of precise locations provided, the more pertinent issue in the context of this report is that this situation highlights the fact that the military are the main source of information for these events, and they have been able to effectively keep reports vague. This monopoly over the flow of information is also reinforced by the issues related to freedom of the press discussed above, and is likewise connected to further concerns over casualty estimates.

Although ACLED's focus is on events and their locations, fatality counts also play an important role in determining whether the intensity of violence is increasing or decreasing over a period of time. As such, biased fatality counts can distort the data and make it more difficult to produce a thoroughly credible analysis of conflict trends. Similar to the issues surrounding the vague reporting of locations, the lack of independent reporting on casualty information for most events in Turkey, especially in the regions where conflict with Kurdish militants is ongoing, is a concern. Despite reporting on some events by independent and/or pro-Kurdish sources, the majority of these events are reported by pro-government sources such as *Anadolu Agency* or IHA, either directly or through *Beyaz Gazete*. This lack of independent reporting – largely due to state intervention in the media environment – undermines the credibility of the media organisations operating in the area.

Ways forward: increased used of non-media sources and policy options

ACLEd tracks news media sources to identify relevant events of political violence and protests in Turkey. However, reports published by NGOs and other organisations, such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, are an important additional component of ACLEd's research as well. These organisations often produce analyses of under-reported issues and areas. These reports are included in ACLEd's dataset if they contain information about new, discrete instances of political violence. ACLEd also pursues the development of strategic partnerships with other actors collecting data on conflict in order to mutually strengthen the collection and reporting of this data.

ACLEd is also analysing the benefits of using various new media platforms, specifically social media, to enhance coverage. In a few select cases, social media sources have already been integrated into our tracking of political violence. For example, our sourcing on Iraq includes covering a number of Telegram Messenger⁹ channels which regularly send out information on political violence. ACLEd has also considered expanding its coverage of Turkey along these lines by looking into the possibility of accessing Facebook and WhatsApp groups where information on incidents of political violence is disseminated similarly to Telegram channels. However, a number of both ethical and methodological issues present themselves in accessing these potential avenues for sourcing. The two primary issues which motivated the decision not to go down this path is the issue with gaining consistent access to them given the current political environment in Turkey, and the impermanent nature and inconsistent quality of reporting via these platforms.

With the obstacles outlined above in mind, several recommendations have been put forward below to enhance the availability of sources and the quality of data on political violence and protest events in Turkey:

- 1. Encourage/facilitate collaboration between data aggregators.** When it comes to political violence and protest data collection, coordination and collaboration are vital. Parallel or duplicate efforts waste time and resources that could be used elsewhere and miss out on the economies associated with combining efforts. Therefore, it is important for any organisation collecting this kind of data to seek to work with others collecting similar information in order to ensure that the most comprehensive list of events is compiled and efforts are not duplicated.

9 <https://telegram.org/>

- 2. Support human rights and humanitarian organisations working in the conflict areas (humanitarian law project, Turkey Purge, etc.).** This report explored a number of clear biases present in local media coverage in Turkey. However, independent reporting from human rights and humanitarian organisations can help to confront and correct these biases by providing sources whose main goal is transparency (rather than advancement of their conflict goals) which can serve to corroborate or challenge the data from these other sources. But, these organisations need material support and in some cases capacity development to serve this function.
- 3. Fund capacity-building workshops for citizen-journalists and encourage the creation of information-sharing networks.** This report mentioned ACLED's experience with forms of new media such as Twitter and Telegram in the Sahel and Iraq, other places where press freedoms are restricted and thus data on political violence and protest is limited. However, not all new media sources are created equally and it takes training and material support for these kinds of platforms to produce credible, consistent data which is reliable and adheres to international standards of ethics (e.g. Do no harm). Therefore, where these networks/platforms exist in Turkey, they should be supported and provided with capacity development and training. Where they do not, efforts should be made to catalyse and nurture their creation. In both cases, emphasis should be placed on the development of standards for reporting and guiding ethical principles.
- 4. Explore opportunities for innovative data sources to corroborate/ supplement data on key metrics such as event location or fatality counts.** As noted above, there are many challenges related to determining the locations of events of political violence, as well as the resulting fatality counts in Turkey. To confront the lack of precise location data, data collection on locations from citizen-journalists and local information-sharing networks should be pursued, as well as the exploration of new/newly available technologies (e.g. satellite or drone imagery). To address the challenge of determining unbiased fatality counts, new partnerships should be explored with non-media organisations such as medical hospitals and clinics which often already collect this data. These should be pursued with careful consideration for principles of conflict sensitivity, ethical data management and do no harm.

3 Conflict data collection: the multifaceted case of Tunisia¹⁰

Countries undergoing periods of major political change pose significant methodological challenges for recording and understanding political violence and protest. Heightened political activity results in higher numbers of violent and non-violent events, while political actors resort to different and often new forms of political activism. Nowhere has this been more evident than in the uprisings that swept across several Middle East and North African states in 2010 and 2011.

This paper discusses the quantitative and qualitative challenges of conflict monitoring, and in particular explores how the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) has addressed potential biases and gaps in the monitoring of political violence in the country. The paper will first investigate the main patterns in political violence and protest recorded in Tunisia over the past few years, highlighting the challenges for monitoring conflict activity. It will then review the sources ACLED has used to track political violence in Tunisia and address potential media and territorial biases. Following this, it will compare ACLED with other existing initiatives aimed at measuring conflict activity in Tunisia in order to compare their methodologies and discuss strengths and weaknesses. Finally, the paper will discuss some policy implications, focusing on how data collection practices can be improved in order to provide unbiased and credible information to users.

Context: political violence in Tunisia

For decades, Arab leaders had managed to withstand pressures for substantial political change. Although some regimes held regular elections and tolerated, or even encouraged, opposition parties, radical challenges to their long-standing rulers were typically met with violence. As such, popular protests or other visible forms of opposition faced the recurring threat of police repression.

10 Andrea Carboni, Department of Geography, University of Sussex, Falmer, Brighton, United Kingdom.

Tunisia was no exception in the region. In his twenty-three years of rule, president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali hampered organised opposition, forcing political leaders, trade unionists and human rights activists to operate underground or in exile, as well as curtailing freedom of the press. Whilst opposition to Ben Ali and his party continued to exist, especially in the country's western and southern regions, opportunities for collective action were severely limited and only a few major protest events were reported between 1987 and 2010.¹¹

The 2010-2011 unrest and the subsequent overthrow of Ben Ali saw the opening up of the domestic political space and the renewed participation of new actors in political life. Islamist and secular movements, left-wing and liberal parties, trade unions and human rights organisations all contributed to reshaping Tunisian politics, employing various forms of political participation. Since the very beginning of the transition in 2011, a variety of political actors held demonstrations, sit-ins, marches and strikes across the country in an attempt to influence the political process. However, as the protest cycle gradually wound down, episodes of rioting and political violence began to recur more frequently, raising concerns about the fate of Tunisia's young democracy.¹²

Tunisia as a special case: protest in remote parts of the country

Tunisia presents a dynamic and multi-faceted conflict environment. It ranks third in Africa for the number of riots and protests in 2016, and has the active presence of local insurgent groups.¹³ The higher levels and the new forms of politically motivated conflict pose, nevertheless, at least two sets of challenges for conflict-monitoring projects.

A first set of challenges is that the multiplication of protest and conflict events across Tunisia requires a balanced coverage of the national territory, including the more remote areas near the Algerian and Libyan borders. Whilst the capital Tunis has been the flashpoint of popular mobilisation given the presence of major national institutions, several other regions have also witnessed high levels of political violence and protest. Islamist armed groups continue to be active in the west of the country, with armed forces struggling to defeat the insurgency. Demonstrations, either violent or non-violent, have frequently taken place in Tunisia's inner rural areas, which suffer from deep socio-economic marginalisation and are considered to have been the hotbed of the revolution.¹⁴ More recently, scarcely inhabited areas in southern Tunisia have also

11 Allal, A., 'Réformes néolibérales, clientélismes et protestations en situation autoritaire: Les mouvements contestataires dans le bassin minier de Gafsa en Tunisie', *Politique Africaine*, 117, no. 1 (2010): 107-125.

12 Carboni, A., 'The Cycle of Conflict in Post-Revolutionary Tunisia, 2011-2014', ACLED Working paper, no. 7 (2015).

13 https://www.acleddata.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/ACLED_Conflict-Trends-Report-No.55-February-2017_.pdf.

14 <http://www.crisis.acleddata.com/tunisia-may-2017-update/>

seen intense protest activity, in conjunction with long-standing political grievances and unresolved industrial crises.

These events often do not occur in large urban centres, but in small villages and even outside populated areas.¹⁵ In Tunisia, access to areas where military forces are conducting operations against insurgent groups is often restricted to non-combatants and media. This means that as more conflict locations activate and events take place widely across the country, media reporting may struggle to provide a detailed account of the events in remote regions. As such, the urban bias, which is inherent in conflict tracking, is particularly relevant for Tunisia where a large share of events takes place in rural areas.¹⁶

A second set of challenges concerns ensuring consistency in the recording of different forms of political violence and protest. The 2010-2011 uprisings attracted worldwide attention, as millions of people participated in unprecedented waves of protest across the Arab world. Since then, demonstrators have resorted to a variety of protest actions, ranging from strikes to violent riots and acts of self-immolation. However, media sources are unlikely to report all events equally, privileging more vocal and explicit expressions of protest over small-scale strikes or sit-ins.

In order to isolate collective action from individual or non-political events, the criteria of data collection should set out clearly what political violence and protest *are* and *are not*. Failing to do so is likely to provide an inconsistent recording of collective action, inflating conflict activity and including events whose political nature is unclear. Compared to broader definitions of social movements and protest activity, ACLED restricts its interpretation of riots and protests to active manifestations of protest that two or more people have participated in.¹⁷ This choice reduces the risks of including non-collective actions and of inherent biases in media reporting.

The next section will explore what sources ACLED has used to record political violence and protest in Tunisia, and how these choices seek to improve the quality and the coverage of its data collection.

15 The recent uprisings in Tataouine provide a clear example of protest activity taking place in desert areas.

See: <https://inkyfada.com/webdoc/el-kamour>.

16 <http://www.crisis.acleddata.com/urban-bias-in-media-reporting/>. See also: Kalyvas, S., 'The Urban Bias in Research on Civil Wars', *Security Studies*, 13, no.3 (2004): 160-190.

17 https://www.acleddata.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/ACLED_Codebook_2017.pdf.

What sources are used to monitor Tunisia and what biases are they subject to?

The selection of sources constitutes an essential component of collecting consistent and credible data. In order to ensure a comprehensive coverage of conflict and protest events, researchers should combine international news agencies and organisations with national and local media outlets that operate in closer contact with less accessible communities or areas. This is even more critical in Tunisia, where an exceptional political transition and major attacks against armed forces and civilians have increasingly captured international attention.

ACLED collects information on conflict activity from a multiplicity of primary and secondary sources listed under the 'SOURCE' column of the dataset; **Table 1** presents all of the main sources used in ACLED, dividing them by source type. ACLED data shows that more than one third of the total events in Tunisia between 2011 and 2017 were coded using international news agencies and media, including, but not restricted to, *Agence France Presse (AFP)*, *Associated Press (AP)*, *Xinhua News Agency*, the *BBC*, *Maghreb Emergent* and *Radio France Internationale*. This confirms how prominently Tunisia has featured in international media outlets since 2011, and is consistent with other countries that have witnessed sustained cycles of protest during the same period (international media account for around half of the total reported conflict and protest activity in Turkey over the past two years).

Table 1 Main sources used in ACLED

Type of source	List of sources
<i>International media</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Africa News African Manager Agence France Presse Al Arabiya Al Jazeera Algerie Presse Service Ansa Associated Press BBC Daily News Egypt Jeune Afrique Le Monde Leaders Libya Herald Magharebia News Maghreb Confidential Maghreb Emergent Panapress Radio France Internationale Reuters Xinhua News Agency
<i>National media</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Direct Info Inkyfada Kapitalis La Presse Le Temps Mosaïque FM Nawaat Radio Tunis Shems FM Télévision tunisienne Tunis Afrique Presse Tunisia Online Tunisie Numerique Zitouna FM

Type of source	List of sources
<i>Local media</i>	Jawhara FM Radio Kasserine FM Radio Tataouine
<i>Twitter feeds</i>	Menastream
<i>Other</i>	Alkarama Foundation Arab Trade Union Confederation Arabic Network for Human Rights Information Reporters Sans Frontières Human Rights Watch

In addition to traditional media, ACLED has also relied on alternative online news sources, including selected Twitter feeds. Covering several countries across North Africa and the Sahel, the web-based *Menastream* agency provides daily updates on conflict incidents in the region, corroborating its succinct textual reporting with videos and other material.¹⁸ Despite its transnational coverage, *Menastream* has often supplemented ACLED's coverage in the regions near the Algerian and Libyan borders where various armed groups are believed to operate.

However, a closer look at the data reveals some critical elements. First, international media were more likely to report on major conflict events or protest demonstrations and to overlook 'secondary' episodes like less participated sit-ins or limited militant attacks. Second, the incidence of international media in ACLED's sourcing has decreased over time in favour of local news sources, which made up more than 60% of the total sources used by ACLED in 2016 and 2017. This shift is consistent with Tunisia's decreased presence in the media following the successful consolidation of its democratic transition. Third, as international reporting decreased over time, it also tended to cluster around the capital's region, with most events reported by international sources taking place in Tunis. International reporting would also occasionally spike in conjunction with sustained popular mobilisation, explaining why some restive southern regions featured prominently in 2016 and 2017 in international media.

National and local media outlets have thus proven to be a valuable resource in collecting information on and supplementing the existing coverage of conflict activity in Tunisia. Their coverage is typically broader than that of international news agencies, allowing for a more regular and widespread reporting from more remote areas. Domestic sources used in ACLED include news agencies, newspapers or radio and TV stations with national distribution – *Tunis Afrique Presse* (TAP), *La Presse* or *Le Temps* papers, the Tunisian National Radio (*Radio Nationale Tunisienne*) – as well as radio stations and websites covering local news. The most notable examples are *Mosaïque FM*, *Shems FM* and *Tunisie Numerique*, which have greatly contributed to ACLED's sourcing since 2015. These stations' websites have often been the only French-language media reporting military operations and landmine blasts in the country's west and protest events in smaller villages.

18 <https://twitter.com/MENASTREAM>.

Local radio channels constitute another important resource for tracking political violence and protest outside the most densely populated areas. Often broadcasting in Arabic, the websites of media stations such as *Jawhara FM*, *Radio Tataouine*, *Radio Kasserine FM* and many others provide updated and often accurate reporting on local events that may not find their way into national media unless they assume wider significance. *Radio Tataouine* constitutes a remarkable example of how a local broadcasting channel – in this case the most important in Tunisia’s southern desert region – could provide a detailed account of the wave of protest in Tunisia’s southern region thanks to its proximity to the events, eventually serving as a primary source for other media outlets.¹⁹

Each of the above-mentioned source types is helpful in capturing different types of conflict and protest activity but, at the same time, they are all subject to implicit and explicit biases that can affect the quality of their data coverage. **Table 2** below summarises the strengths and weaknesses of the sources used in ACLED to track political violence.

Table 2 Strengths and weaknesses of sources used in ACLED

Type of source	Strenghts	Weaknesses
<i>International media</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Non-partisan and detailed coverage - Easier access to media outlets through news aggregators 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Focus on major events with international resonance - Coverage subject to international attention - Urban bias
<i>National media</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Regular reporting of protest and conflict activity - Broad coverage across the national territory 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Urban bias (reduced but often present in national outlets) - Harder and lengthier access to online news archives - Political biases
<i>Local media</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Full coverage of conflict activity in rural areas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Language barriers - Harder and lengthier access to online news archives
<i>Twitter feeds</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Full coverage of conflict activity in remote areas - Independent, well-documented reporting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Focus on conflict incidents only - Little background information

19 International online media, newspapers and think-tanks widely cited Radio Tataouine’s reporting of the protest wave between March and July 2017. See, among others, Middle East Eye (<http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/tunisia-army-fires-shots-air-disperse-gas-protesters-local-radio-1278246623>), Jordan Times (<http://jordantimes.com/news/business/tunisia-protests-hit-energy-output-two-foreign-firms-%E2%80%94-radio>) and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (<http://carnegieendowment.org/2017/08/08/kamour-movement-and-civic-protests-in-tunisia-pub-72774>).

Highlighting ACLED's strengths in comparison to OST

Heightened conflict activity in Tunisia has generated renewed interest in monitoring initiatives and measuring political conflict. Currently there are two databases focusing on protest and political violence in Tunisia: the Tunisian Social Observatory (*Observatoire Social Tunisien*, OST) and ACLED.

Promoted by the Tunisian Forum of Economic and Rights (*Forum Tunisien des Droits Économiques et Sociaux*, FTDES),²⁰ the OST produces monthly reports surveying social movements' activity since December 2013.²¹ The OST is concerned with protest events only, reporting monthly figures on individual protests, suicide attempts and collective action, disaggregating by governorate, the sector of grievance and the presence of violence. Published in Arabic and French, the OST reports include brief descriptions of the recorded events and further details surrounding the violence, including the profile of self-immolating protesters in extreme cases.

By contrast, ACLED constitutes the largest public collection of political violence and protest data for African countries, including Tunisia.²² The dataset includes events from 1997 to the present, and are disaggregated by type, date, the actors involved, location and the number of fatalities.²³ ACLED records public and collective manifestations of protest (such as demonstrations or sit-ins) as well as various forms of political violence, including violence against unarmed civilians, battles between organised armed groups and instances of remote violence. For each event, the dataset notes the original source that reported the event and a short text describing the event's dynamics.

Several differences exist between these two conflict-monitoring projects. First, ACLED and OST measure distinct forms of political violence and protest. While OST is only concerned with social movements and protest activity, ACLED also includes political violence. However, OST adopts a wider definition of social movement that includes individual actions and suicide attempts, even when their political motivations are clear-cut. This results in a higher number of monthly events recorded by OST, which seems to capture more events across the national territory (and particularly in inner regions) than ACLED.

Second, different methodologies partially explain discrepancies in the figures. In ACLED, two or more events occurring on the same date and in the same location, and involving

20 <https://ftdes.net/>.

21 <https://ftdes.net/ost/>.

22 <https://www.acleddata.com/>.

23 Raleigh, C., A. Linke, H. Hegre and J. Karlsen, 'Introducing ACLED-Armed Conflict Location and Event Data', *Journal of Peace Research*, 47, no. 5 (2010): 651-660.

the same actors, are counted as one. In other words, two peaceful protests that occur in the same town on a given date will be merged into a single row of data, thus grouping separate instances into a single event. These procedures are more unclear in OST – for the reasons explained below – but nothing seems to preclude that different forms of protest activity (individual or collective actions, and suicide attempts) occurring on the same place and on the same date are counted separately. Yet, this raises questions about how OST singles events out and ensures consistency across time and space.

A third difference concerns the public availability of the methodology used by the two projects. While ACLED's methodology is available online outlining the process of data coding and cleaning,²⁴ the absence of a publicly accessible OST methodology prevents users from understanding the criteria OST uses to record protest activity. Whilst differences between event types may seem intuitive, OST does not clarify disaggregation criteria, the definitions of each event category and when an event is considered to be violent. Additionally, raw data is not disclosed to the public, nor data collection practices and the sources used (either primary or secondary), raising further doubts about potential territorial biases and methodological flaws.

Ways forward: lessons learned and policy recommendations

ACLED's experience with tracking, coding and measuring political violence and protest across Africa and Asia, and in Tunisia in particular, offer important insights into how to improve data collection and to interpret this data. Despite lower absolute numbers than similar initiatives, ACLED constitutes a solid, viable option to record conflict activity on Tunisian territory. Its methodology is subject to public review, and its publicly available data allows users to monitor events on a real-time basis.

How can conflict-monitoring initiatives be supported and improved? There are a number of steps that researchers and donors can take to further improve data quality.

- 1. Use a balanced mix of international, domestic and local sources.** The selection of several sources is critical to providing comprehensive and consistent coverage of conflict and protest activity in a country. Limiting sourcing to international news agencies or to national newspapers is likely to reinforce urban biases given their relatively weaker coverage in rural or remote regions. Local media outlets thus become an essential resource to supplement data collection in less accessible contexts and to reduce inherent biases in reporting. The Tunisian case shows that when global attention on a country is high, international media are more likely to provide more comprehensive, and less biased, reporting. However, when that attention decreases, relying largely on those sources will negatively affect the coverage and artificially lower the total number of recorded events.

24 <https://www.acledata.com/methodology/>.

- 2. Choose only local sources that can benefit conflict reporting.** While popular news aggregators such as LexisNexis or Factiva allow an easier access to global news databases, searching for relevant reports published in local news media may present more obstacles. Local sources' websites do not always allow for keywords to be used to filter relevant articles only, but may require lengthy searches through their online archives. This process thus requires time and resources, which are typically limited especially when data collection is conducted on a real-time basis. As such, it is important that, when selecting what media are to be monitored, the number of sources is limited to those that can provide reliable and unique access to less covered regions.
- 3. Monitor long-term trends.** A problem that is common to all conflict-monitoring initiatives is the extent to which unknown biases may affect data collection. Variations in conflict activity may be linked to actual changing conflict patterns, as well as to flawed sourcing (e.g. a media outlet that has stopped its publications) or a media blackout as a result of government repression. Although it is difficult to address something that is unknown, there are ways to ensure that what is reported in the data is reasonably consistent with what is largely understood to be happening. An option is to update source sets regularly in order to address emerging potential biases. An alternative is to compare one's dataset with other data collection initiatives, addressing any striking differences that may result from comparing the sets.
- 4. Support local partners.** Collaboration with local conflict-monitoring organisations may indeed significantly contribute to improving data collection in conflict-stricken or non-democratic countries. While media pluralism has dramatically improved in Tunisia since 2011, local organisations in countries where media reporting faces restrictions are often an effective means to gain access to difficult contexts and to improve data coverage. It is important to note, however, that in highly divided societies conflict monitoring can suffer from partisan biases as local organisations may be inclined to support a political group or advance a political agenda. Donors should therefore carefully scrutinise their local partners to avoid that partisan affiliations may affect reporting.