Nigeria is the fourth most violent country in the ACLED dataset when measured by the number of violent events; and the seventh most fatal over the course of the dataset's coverage (1997 – March 2013). This violence has distinct temporal and spatial patterns: between 1997 – 2009, levels of both violence and reported fatalities were relatively stable. Since 2010, both have climbed sharply, with increases holding in both absolute and proportional terms as a share of overall violence on the continent and in the dataset (*see* Figure 1). Spatially, Nigeria's violence is highly regionalised: different types of violence (battles, riots and violence against civilians) are dominant in different areas, and different interactions between violent agents engaging one another in dyadic conflict are also spatially distinct. Through the collection, publication and analysis of conflict event data, the ACLED dataset is uniquely positioned to highlight the temporal evolution of conflict, the multiplicity of actors in this complex, multi-agent environment, and the role of the state in engaging in and addressing violence.

Policymakers and researchers are increasingly keen to identify opportunities to prevent crises rather than respond reactively to them. The Nigerian state is plagued by multiple, overlapping crises of marked volatility and extreme violence. While the state has shown remarkable resilience to date (since 1999) in withstanding centrifugal forces throughout the territory, it is almost unparalleled in the scale, scope, reach and intensity of the threats it faces.

In the past year alone, these include urban unrest, Islamist militancy, communal violence, violence in the Niger Delta, and Biafran secessionist claims, reviewed in turn.

Violent Islamist militancy (Northern):

Islamist militancy has been destabilising in the already economically marginalised northern area, further affecting potential for development, growth, stability and human security. The nature of this threat should be clearly understood: it includes both a highly organized insurgency by Boko Haram, and increasing action by the relatively nascent Ansaru. Boko Haram is the largest and most high-profile group in the area. Unlike Islamist counterparts in Algeria, Mali and elsewhere, Boko Haram has explicitly rejected affiliation with Al Qaeda, and has denied involvement in the targeting of foreign interests and civilian kidnapping common to other such groups. While there are reports that Boko Haram have links with Malian and Somali militants, these are difficult to verify, and even in these reports largely confined to the exchange of information, training and equipment, rather than transnational activity by militants. In this way, the likelihood of Boko Haram exporting its activity to neighbouring states, or targeting international targets either within or – even less likely, outside – West Africa, remains low. Its primary impact is on human security and civilian vulnerability within Nigeria.
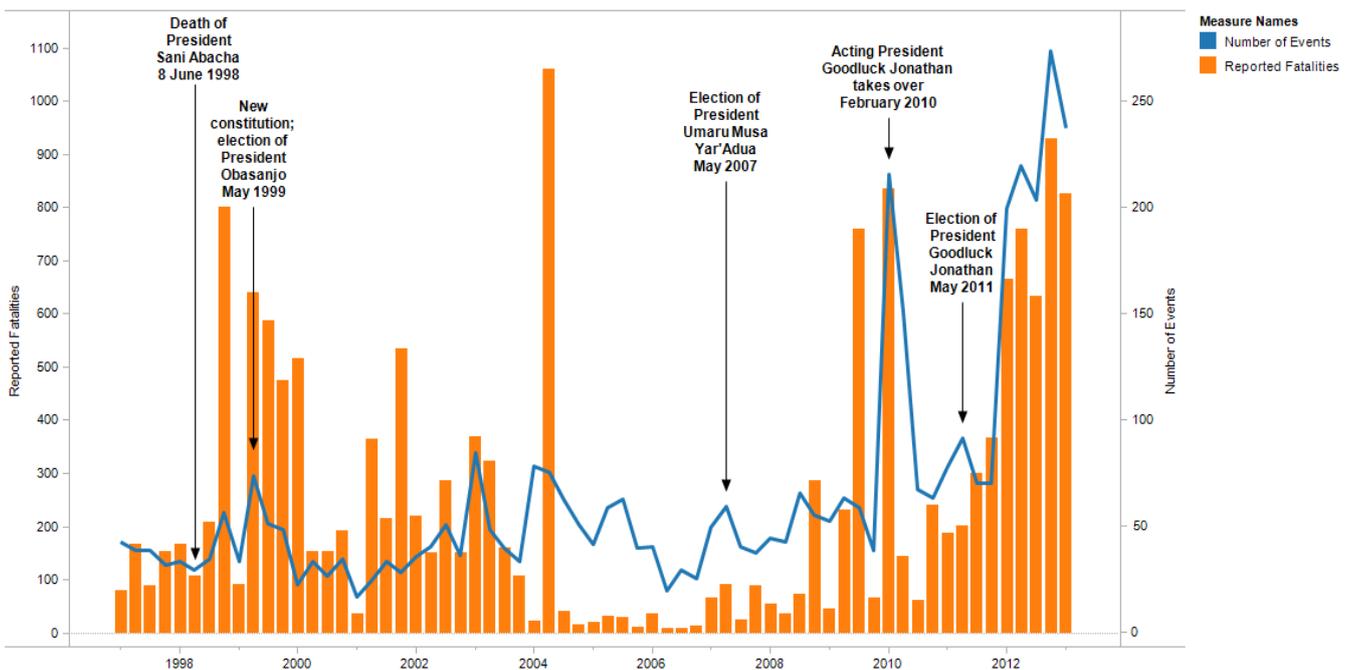

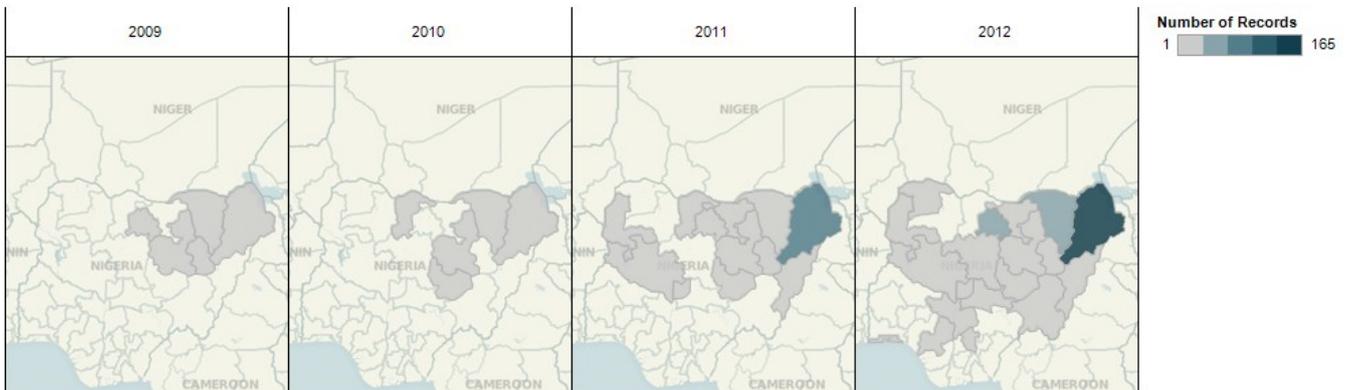Figure 1: Conflict Events and Reported Fatalities, Nigeria, 1997 - March 2013.

Figure 2: Map of Areas of Boko Haram violent activity, 2009 - 2012.

In this area, its impact is substantial and evolving: the group emerged in its current form in late 2009 as a violent organisation targeting police forces, security forces and off-duty or retired officers thereof in retaliation for the killing of former leader, Mohammed Yusuf, in police custody. Over time, it has evolved and re-evaluated its definition of the 'legitimate' enemy or target, and expanded attacks from drive-by shootings of off-duty security officers, to include local politicians, traditional authority leaders, Christian and eventually Muslim civilians (*see* Figure 3 on battles and civilian targeting).

Over time, Boko Haram has expanded its targeting from an initial focus on security forces, off-duty and retired officers, to political leaders, traditional authorities, and both Christian and Muslim civilians. Its geographic range of activity has also increased over time.

tential for peace. Figure 2, above, charts the geographic expansion of the group over time. This intra-group diversity and factionalism in themselves are reason to be cautious about generalisations about the group, as various local manifestations may evolve, transform and act in unexpected ways.

It is precisely this factionalism and which has lead to the second significant, emergent organised Islamist group, Ansaru, which has targeted western civilian targets and does appear to foster international links and areas of activity beyond Nigeria. Due to the recent emergence of the group, data on patterns of activity and projections about future action are limited. However, from its activity to date, it is clear the organised Islamist threat in the region generally is evolving as new actors come onto the scene, and further violence – and more strategically significant violence – is likely.
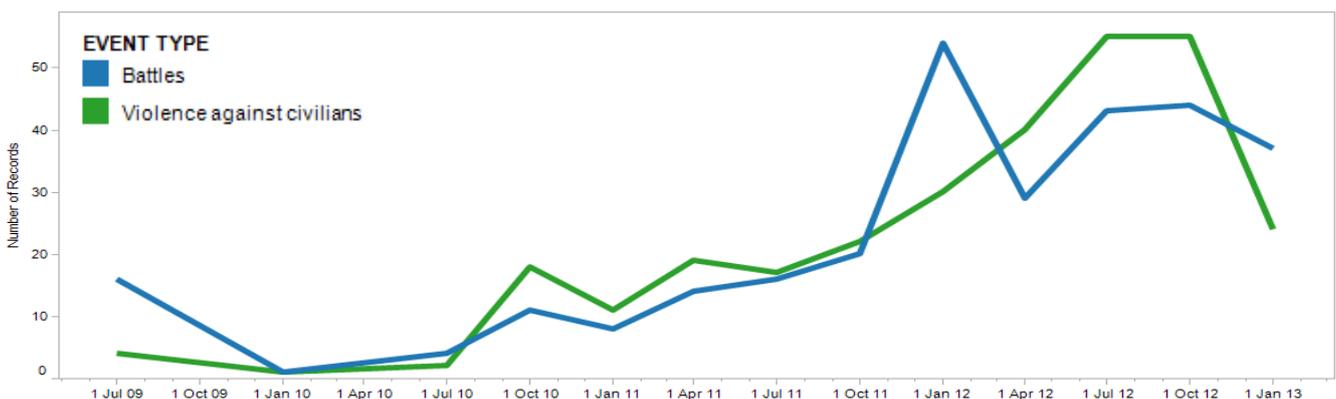
Moreover, Boko Haram is highly diverse: different areas and states host different cells or nodes of the group, and these operate in different ways, often with apparently little coordination or communication, resulting in confusing and contradictory statements and moves on the po-

Figure 3: Boko Haram violent activity by type, 2009 - March 2013.

2

Communal violence (North-Central):

Communal violence – involving communally-identified groups such as ethnic or religious militias, mobs or rioters – has the highest level of fatalities per event of all kinds of violent interaction in Nigeria (at 11.1 per event, compared to 3.3 fatalities per event when rebels or political militias engage in violent action). While communal violence constitutes only 13% of overall violence in Nigeria (*see* communal militias illustrated over time in Figure 4), this is approximately double the average continental rate in Africa. In addition, high levels of fatalities linked to this activity, a high rate of civilian-targeting (at 18% of all communal militia activity) and its wider destabilising impact on the politics of ethnic identity and power relations across the country, it is an extremely relevant category for analysis.

Communal violence has recently occurred primarily between Muslim and Christian communities (though some violence within Muslim communities themselves) and has been centred in Plateau state, although ethnically-identified violence has been prominent in Osun in previous years (late 1990s and early 2000s). Plateau state has one of the highest rates of reported fatalities per conflict event (at 6.8), almost double the national average of 3.7.

Communal violence between Muslim and Christian militias or mobs should not be treated as synonymous with Islamist violence: the former is perpetrated by communal groups without a formal structure or articulated agenda; often disorganised units or spontaneous mobs which enact violence either on communally-defined issues (for example, responding to perceived targeting by police forces; or demonstrating violently for recognition or treatment of particular communities); or against another communal group (for example, between Christians and Muslims). This kind of violence has an extremely high human cost, although it is only a small share of overall violence, it is typically extremely fatal.

It is not generally strategically destabilising on the national level – the low-grade, disorganised nature of the violence means that political and social elites are rarely implicated or involved in supporting violence directly (although there may be indirect support or promotion of particular narratives aligned with communal violence) which lowers the strategic stakes and reduces the likelihood of regime change or national destabilisation resulting from such actions.

> **Plateau has the country's highest rate of communal violence: the state witnesses 18% of all communal violence in Nigeria. Plateau also has one of the highest rates of fatalities per event of any Nigerian state, at 6.8 reported fatalities per conflict event. This is almost double the national average of 3.7.**

Niger Delta violence:

Violence in the Niger Delta is dominated by rebel activity, and for that reason its impact on national stability is higher than militia and communal group violence else-
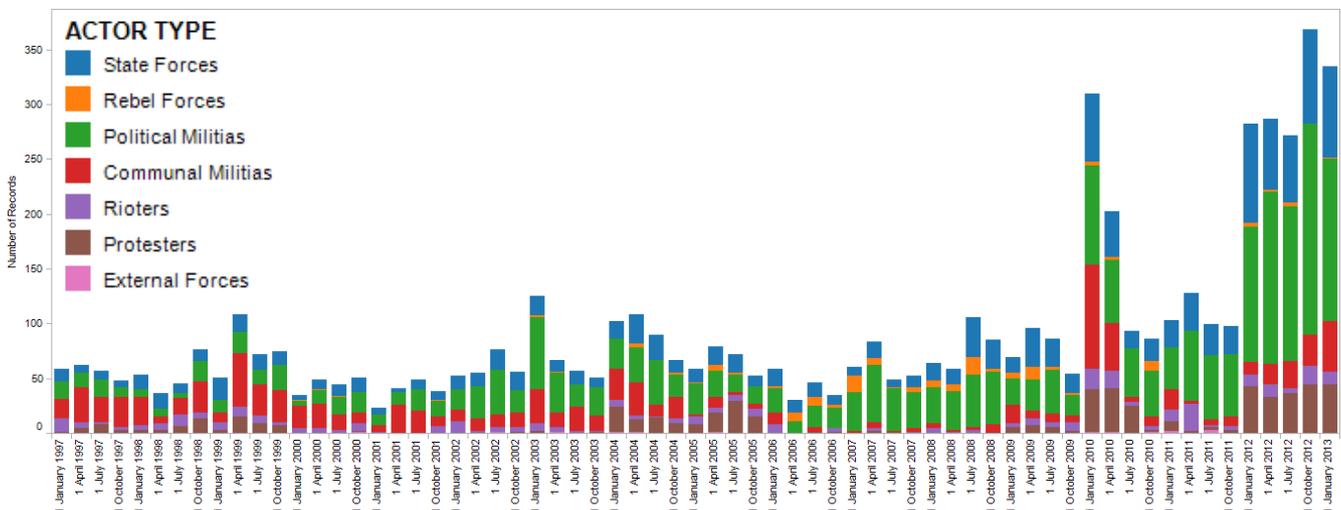

Figure 4: Conflict events by actor type, Nigeria, 1997 - March 2013.

where. This violence is persistent over the course of the dataset (*see* Figure 5), it is high-profile, and has a significant impact on strategic planning, national stability, and economic performance owing to its targeting of oil facilities, international interests in the region, international civilians, and the highly organised, well-funded nature of the militants involved (linked to the high-value resources they target).

The Niger Delta witnesses an almost even split between violence against civilians (constituting 42% of all violence) and battles between armed groups (at 41%) with occasional, but sharp, spikes in rioting and protesting (around 16% of overall violence in the area).

Niger Delta violence peaked in the mid-2000s, and long-awaited peace was bought at the cost of a cripplingly expensive amnesty programme which – by the laws of economics – had to compete with lucrative alternative sources of income through illicit, violent activity, including civilian kidnapping, 'bunkering' oil, and other activities.

While regional categories are useful for conceptualising violence in Nigeria, they are not independent of one an-

other: the Niger Delta militant group, MEND, has recently made threats to target Muslim populations and institutions. This is an example of two phenomena: 1) specifically, the group's attempts to reassert itself in the conflict landscape of Nigeria after several years of security priorities being focused on the northern conflict, minimising both the issues and the agents of Southern discontent; and 2) more generally, the interrelated and dynamic interaction of overlapping cleavages in Nigeria: namely, regionalism, religion, and identity power politics.

This attests to the a landscape of violence in Nigeria which is highly differentiated and concurrent, but within which actors respond to one another, as well as to the actions of the state.

Growing urban dissatisfaction:

Opposition demonstrations have increased in recent years and have expressed themselves in violence (particularly on the issue of fuel subsidies, combined with very high corruption). In Abuja and Lagos, over 40% of conflict activity is rioting or protesting, while over the course of the dataset, over one-third of riot and protest events have involved violence. The government's response to this unrest was to appease urban populations with unsustainable subsidies rather than taking steps to promote the kind of transparency, accountability and broader public ownership which might assuage some of these demands.
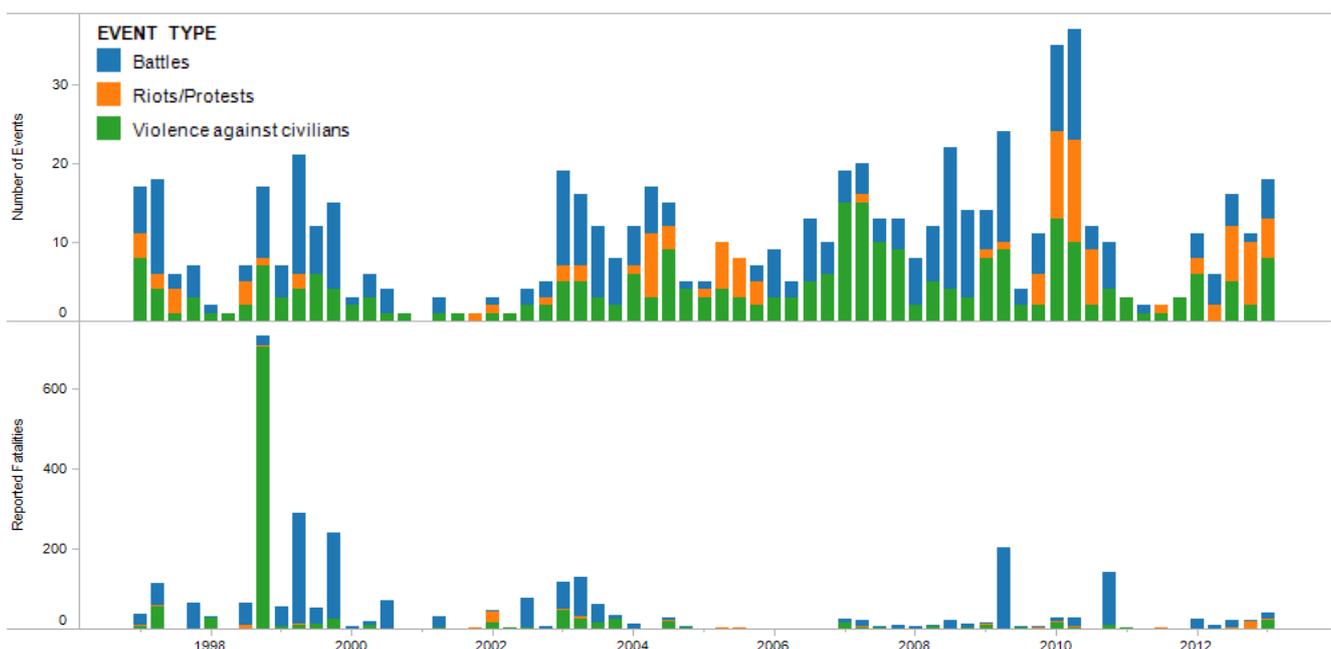

Figure 5: Conflict events and fatalities in Niger Delta region (Bayelsa, Cross River, and Delta), 1997 - March 2013.

Biafran secessionist claims:

While currently engaging in minimal levels of violence, MASSOB's low-grade activity draws on historically significant issues which resonate with the population in the south-west, owing to the perceived brutality of the Biafran war. While this is unlikely to present a pressing priority in Nigeria's current state of play, should a dramatic deterioration of security occur, or a play be made by one of the other secession / autonomy-oriented actors in the country, this has the potential to be reignited through moments of opportunism by the group in response to other violent activity within the state.

Underlying instability:

Underscoring each of these regionalised violence profiles, is Nigeria's volatility which is compounded by a history of military engagement in politics. Nigeria has tried and failed at the democratic experiment in the past, indicating that the spectre of military involvement in politics is ever-present in a country and region in which this is part of a cultural understanding the military – and some civilians – hold of the security forces. This is all the more relevant at this point in time, with growing concern of the potential impact of 'Mali syndrome,' whereby the military grows tired of the central government's failure to contain a destabilising insurgency in the north, moves to replace the regime, and sets in motion a chain of events which dramatically changes the nature of the entire conflict and political landscape. There are multiple reasons why this simplistic, direct comparison does not hold and should not be used as a blueprint or prediction for Nigerian politics; however, there are also similarities in the context, and the reinforcing dynamic of violence, and the ways in which violent agents interact with one another, indicate that the potential of military involvement is a cause for concern.

All this is taking place against a background of Nigeria's changing strategic importance in the world: as more energy resources become available in the near future in Sub-Saharan Africa (Mozambique, Uganda, expansion in South Sudan), international interests' investment in any single one will likely wane, as they diversify in order to reduce the impact of instability in any single country. At the same time, developments in the US domestic economy and en-

ergy sector will see a gradual reduction in its reliance on international energy resources more generally, thereby further reducing the strategic significance of Nigeria to this hitherto pivotal regional influence. In light of these international and regional trends, policy makers facing the drawing down of resources domestically in western countries may prioritise other countries, or may make the mistake of subsuming Nigeria's importance within a global narrative of Islamist extremism and the threat this is understood to pose.

Doing so would be a mistake which misjudges and mischaracterises the nature of multi-faceted violence in Nigeria: even within the organised, violent Islamist militancy, the simple alignment of such groups with global terrorist networks does not hold, and attempts to explore whether Nigeria is a 'breeding ground' for terrorism have largely failed to produce evidence or persuasive arguments for the potential export of Nigerian Islamist militancy beyond its borders.

> **Violence in Nigeria has profound implications for Nigerian civilians, politics, stability and development nationally. Regional consequences include the potential impact of instability on Nigerian contributions to continental peacekeeping and the possible expansion of militancy into neighbouring states.**

Further, attempts to subsume Boko Haram's activity within a global narrative of Islamist terrorism obscure the complexity of the grievances of northern Nigerian populations, among which include the allegation that President Jonathan's regime has abrogated the established rotation of power between northern and southern rulers (itself, a distinct characteristic of the institutional and national fragility of the Nigerian state), and allegations that the violence in the north by groups such as Boko Haram is permitted and even tolerated because it is largely confined to northern areas, and serves multiple strategic purposes in the violent machinations of Nigerian politics (see *Africa Confidential*, 'How Politicians Help Insurgents,' 30 November 2012, for an excellent overview).

Violence in Nigeria has profound implications for Nigerian civilians, politics, stability and development nationally. There may be direct regional implications of domestic stability in the potential reduction of Nigerian troop forces in continental peacekeeping missions; while indirect implications include the destabilisation of economic interests, the potential expansion of activity of militant factions, and the ongoing human cost of communal and identity-based conflicts.

2