Unidentified Armed Groups

July 2012

The ACLED dataset includes actors listed as 'unidentified armed groups' when the identity of the group involved in the event is unknown or is not reported. Unidentified armed groups constitute a large share of violent actors in the dataset (11.8% of violent actors)[1] and warrant greater attention in light of their significant presence.

This working paper will proceed as follows: section 1 will outline how unidentified armed groups are defined and distinguished in the dataset; section 2 will explore the level, nature and patterns of unidentified armed group activity across the dataset; and section 3 will conclude by analysing three case study countries in more detail.

Section 1: Defining and distinguishing unidentified armed groups

Unidentified armed groups are those groups whose names or political affiliations are either unknown or unreported. The ACLED dataset distinguishes between communal and political militias, and their unidentified counterparts where data is available. There are many possible reasons for the identity of armed groups being unknown or unreported:

In the first instance, reporters may lack access to conflict-affected areas or may not have accurate information on groups in complex and shifting conflict scenarios. Additionally, reporters may feel that in highly complex conflicts, the specific identity of a group is irrelevant to intended audiences, focusing instead on the broader conflict. This may be particularly significant in the reporting of ethnic conflict in which reporters may not include details of the specific group identities in a context of multiple and complex ethnic affiliations. For the most part, this working paper is focused on unidentified political militias, as there is reason to believe that unidentified communal militias are often unnamed in reports because of the complexities associated with identifying one of multiple ethnic or communal groups in some news sources. This is supported by patterns showing that communal militias are almost exclusively active in areas where other communal violence also takes place, and that these are typically peripheral areas of the state with temporary reporting coverage. This type of group is most common in Kenya, Uganda, South Sudan, and Somalia, where arid and semi-arid areas host multiple communal militias, the identification of which may not be deemed material to news reports on their activities.

In the second instance, small, fragmented or less formalised violent groups may be unknown or their identities unreported because they seek to capitalise on an insecure environment which protects their anonymity. This same logic may also apply to newly formed groups which are yet to assert their identity. The highly volatile and dynamic setting of the Democratic Republic of the Congo might host this kind of unidentified armed group, as the large number of competing actors witnesses new formations and transformations of armed actors and groups in flux. This same logic may also apply to factions of larger, well-known groups which act with relative independence in certain

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[1] Figures based on 'violent actors' exclude civilians.

circumstances, and are thereby categorised as 'unidentified' as they act with minimal reference to a central authority.

A third reason groups are unidentified or unknown is that they are operating on behalf of larger groups or interests which seek to distance themselves from their actions because of the nature of the violence. Peaks in unidentified armed group activity in line with electoral cycles in Kenya and Nigeria, where formally unidentified groups engage in violence against opponents on behalf, or in the interests of, organised political parties, reflect this third logic of violence. As later discussed, violence against civilians constitutes a large share of the violence perpetrated by unidentified groups. This suggests there may be strategic reasons groups such as rebels, militias or governments make use of unidentifiable groups, including engaging in activity from which they seek to distance themselves or their regimes.

In each of these instances it remains critical to include unidentified armed groups in our analysis of violence. Events in which there is uncertainty surrounding the identity of the perpetrators remain relevant to analysis of the experience of violence in a given territory, the vulnerability of civilians and other groups to attacks, and the level and volatility of violence across an area. As such, the inclusion of these events is important for capturing an accurate picture of the lived experience of violence and vulnerability. Events in which actions are strategically designed to be unattributed reveal something about the topography of conflict, the interaction of interests and the nature of violent competition in a country which cannot be explored at face value alone.

Section 2: Exploring the level, nature and pattern of unidentified armed group activity across the dataset

Different countries experience not only different levels of activity by unidentified armed groups, but the actions of these groups also differ depending on the political and military context in the country. Across all countries, unidentified armed groups constitute 11.8% of violent actors. This proportion ranges from 32% of violent actors in Somalia, to 1.1% in Sierra Leone. Following Somalia in order of highest proportion of unidentified actors are Nigeria, Gambia, Tanzania, Cameroon, Kenya, Botswana, Rwanda, Lesotho and Guinea.
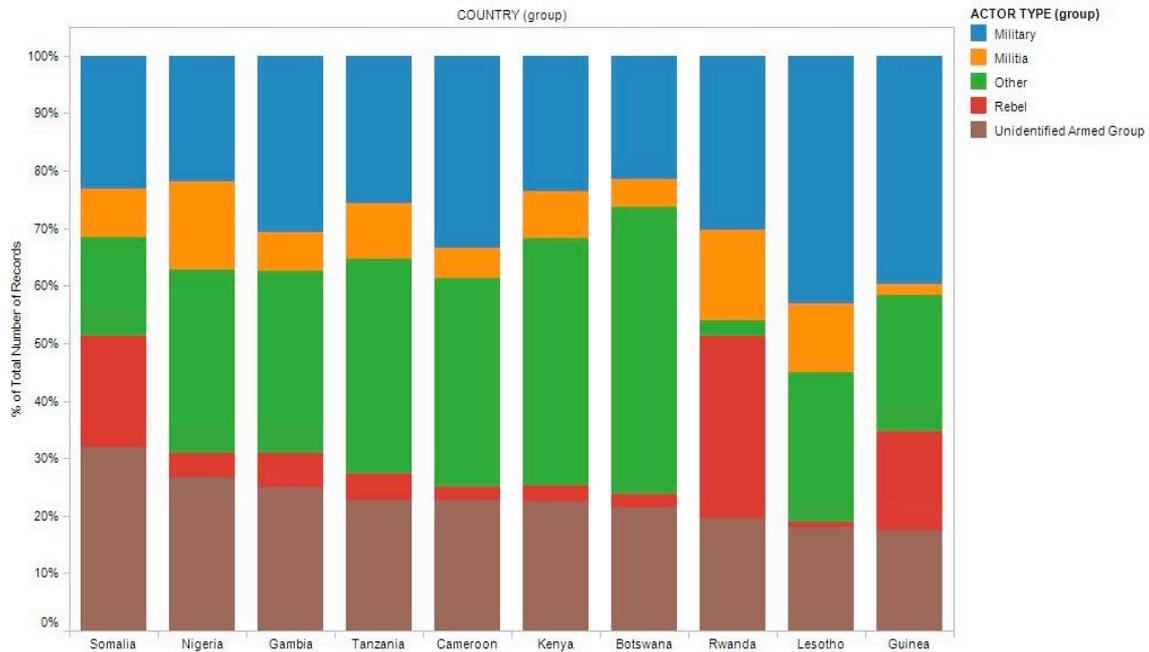
In addition to different levels of unidentified group activity across countries, there are also differences in the nature of activity across states. The table below lists countries according to whether or not unidentified armed groups engage in approximately equal levels of battles and violence against civilians (VAC), higher levels of battles than VAC, or higher levels of VAC than battles.

Approx. Equal Battles / VAC	High Battles (over 60% of UAG activity)	High VAC (over 60% of UAG activity)
Cameroon	Algeria	Angola
Central African Republic	Equatorial Guinea	Botswana
DR-Congo	Guinea-Bissau	Burkina Faso
Djibouti	Tunisia	Benin
Egypt		Burundi
Libya		Chad
Mali		Cote d'Ivoire
Mauritania		Eritrea
Niger		Ethiopia
Nigeria		Gabon
Sierra Leone		Gambia
Somalia		Ghana
South Sudan		Kenya
Sudan		Lesotho
Togo		Liberia
		Madagascar
		Malawi
		Morocco

		Mozambique
		Namibia
		Republic of Congo
		Rwanda
		Senegal
		South Africa
		Swaziland
		Tanzania
		Uganda
		Zambia
		Zimbabwe

Whether or not a country has experienced civil war during the period in question is a significant variable in determining both the level and nature of unidentified armed group activity. It is clear from the breakdown above that in most countries VAC normally constitutes more than 60% of unidentified armed group activity. The countries in which VAC and battles constitute approximately equal levels of unidentified group activity are notable for the presence of several states which have or continue to experience civil war over the period of ACLED data (1997 – 2011).

Among those countries in which unidentified armed groups engage in high levels of VAC, Burundi and Uganda are notable outliers as countries which experienced civil war during the period of the dataset. However, when the data is broken down further by year, and countries are analysed in pre- and post-civil war periods, it is clear that there has been an increase (from 63% to 73.6%) in the level of VAC in which unidentified groups engage in Uganda. This largely fits with the overall pattern of higher levels of unidentified group violence against civilians in non-civil war states, than in those experiencing civil wars. Burundi is an unusual case, in that VAC by unidentified groups constituted 65% of unidentified violent activity, during civil war (1997 – 2005); but 47.7% post-civil war (2006 – 2011). This may be a reflection of a low level of reporting interest or coverage of the Burundian civil war, relative to the other cases.

Section 3: Case studies

In this section, the nature and role of unidentified armed groups in four case study countries is explored in order to capture the diversity of unidentified armed group activity across the dataset.

Nigeria

Unidentified armed groups constitute a significant share of violent actors in Nigeria, at 26.1%. UAGs engage in roughly comparable levels of VAC (at 57.6% of UAG activity) and battles (at 40.3% of UAG activity). The split between identified and unidentified perpetrators of VAC is also roughly equal – with 53.2% of perpetrators being UAGs.

The drivers of identified and unidentified violence against civilians are somewhat matched over time, as the graph below details. Exceptions include spikes in 2003/2004 and 2007/2008. These coincide with Nigerian elections in 2003 and 2007.
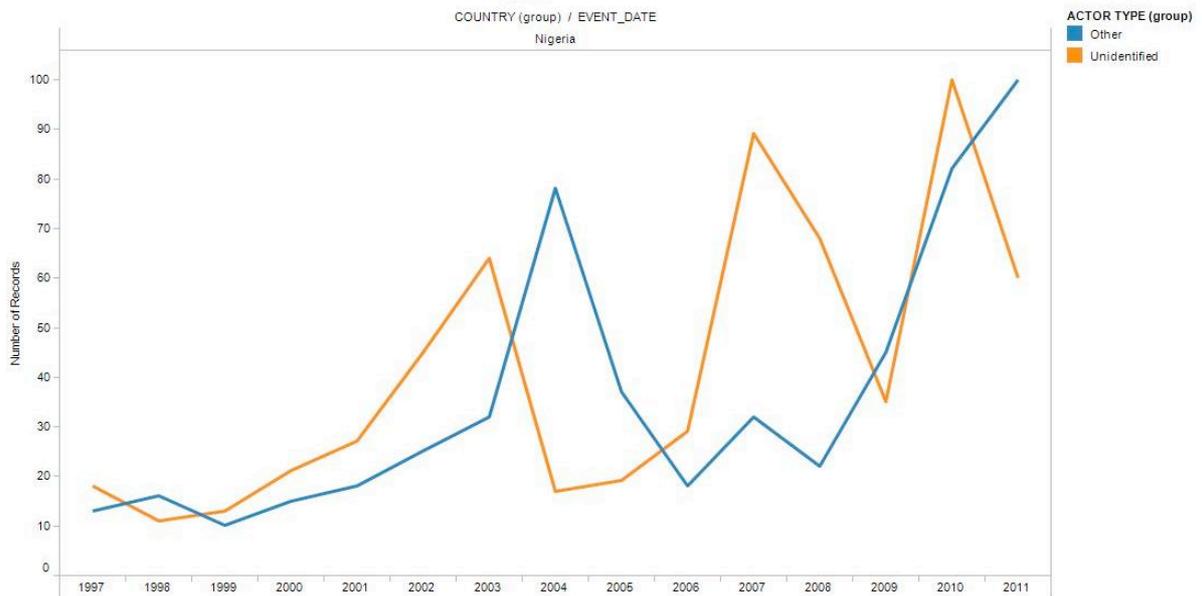
Similarly, involvement in battles by identified and unidentified armed groups is also relatively closely matched in the years 1997 – 2011.
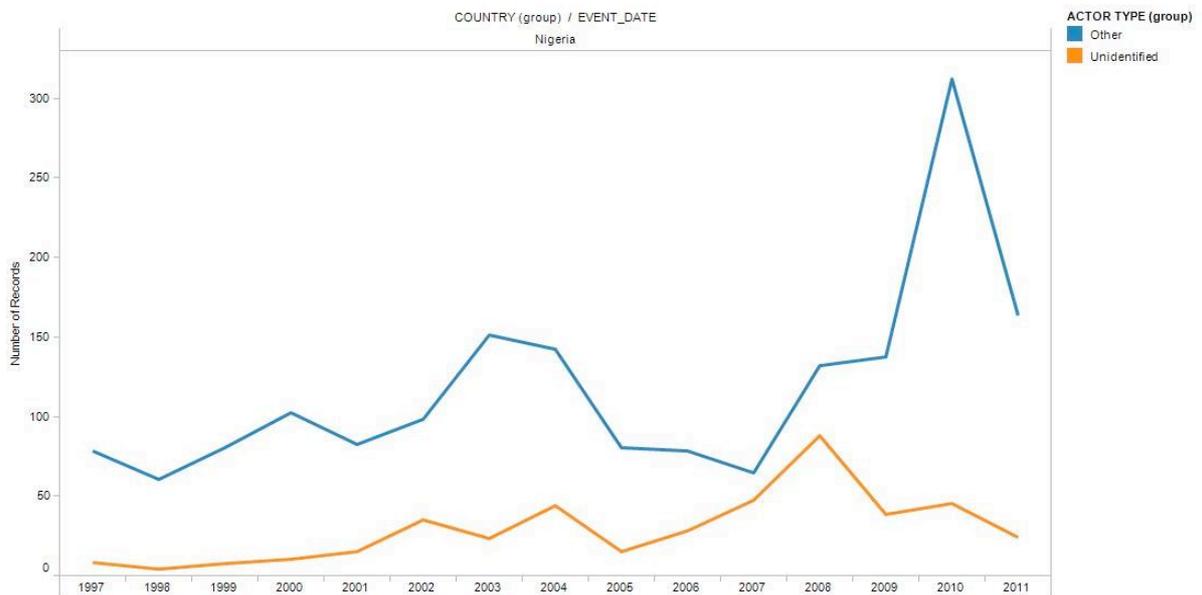

Somalia

Unidentified armed groups constitute a large share of violent actors in Somalia, at 31.6%. Unidentified armed groups engage primarily in VAC, which constitutes over 42% of UAG activity. As a proportion of perpetrators of VAC, they make up 63.2% of violent actors. UAGs also constitute a significant share of violent actors involved in battles, at 25.9%.

There is evidence that similar processes drive violence by identified and unidentified groups, as rates of activity by both types of group are extremely well matched when viewing battles (below).
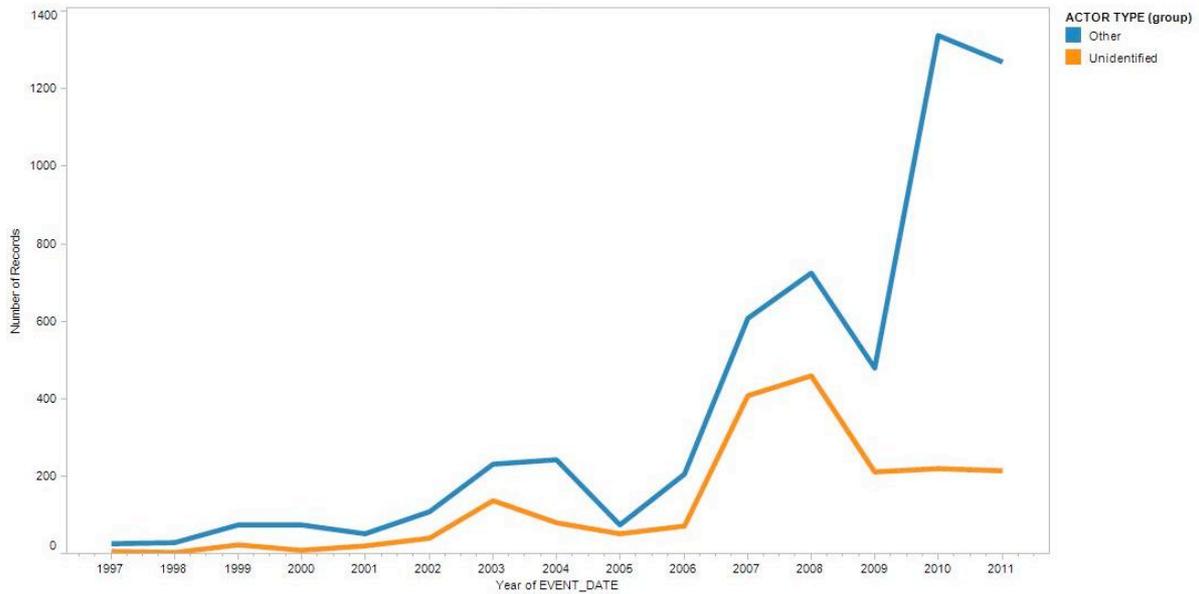
By contrast, there is a significant discrepancy in activity levels when only VAC is considered, as detailed in the chart below. 2003 and 2007 witnessed pronounced increases in violence by unidentified groups, while 2010 (which experienced ongoing battles for control of Mogadishu in which victims were recurring casualties) sees the most marked increase in violence by identified groups.
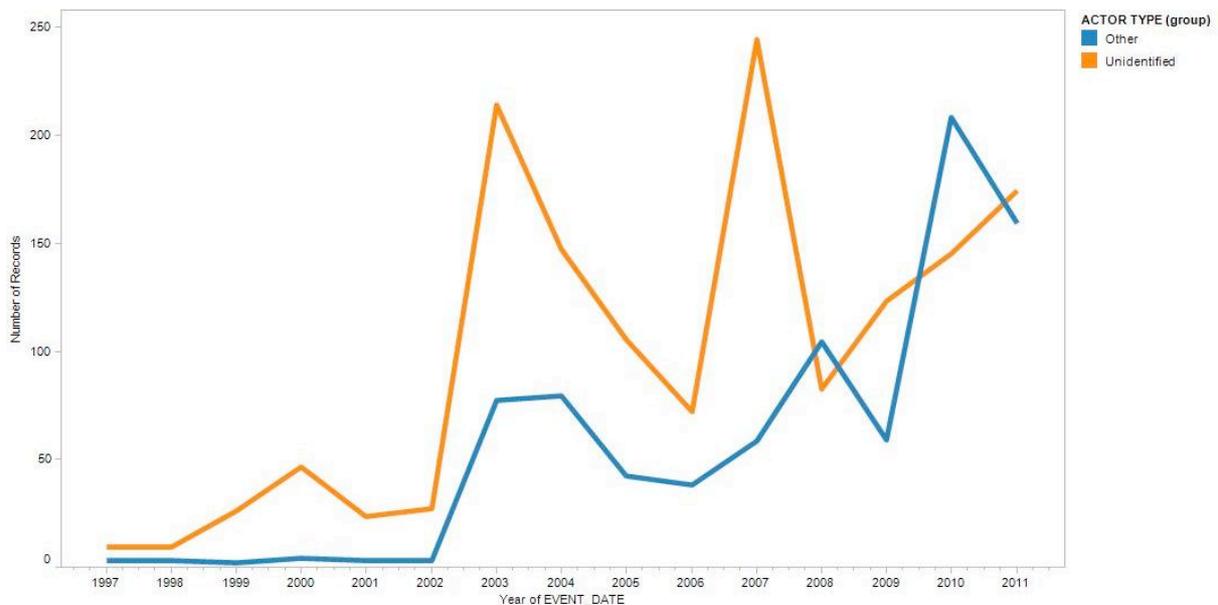
Zimbabwe

Unidentified armed groups constitute a relatively low share of violent actors in Zimbabwe, at just 5.6%. They are almost exclusively engaged in VAC, which makes up 89.6% of UAG activity. As a proportion of perpetrators of VAC, however, they make up just 6.5% of violent actors. They also constitute a low proportion of actors involved in battles, at just 11.1% of actors.

While overall unidentified activity is low, it is not particularly well matched to broader violence patterns in the country. The chart below details violence by unidentified and identified counterparts over the period 1997 – 2011. With the exception of 2002, during which time both types of actor witness a sharp increase in activities surrounding that year's election, unidentified activity is relatively poorly matched to broader violence. In particular, the sharp spike in activity by identified groups at the time of 2008's election was not matched by a concomitant increase in unidentified activity.