



ACLED Methodology and Coding Decisions around the Yemen Civil War

After staging protests against the removal of fuel subsidies, the Houthi Movement overran the Yemeni capital Sana'a in September 2014. Shortly after, the Peace and National Partnership Agreement was signed, stipulating the formation of a technocratic government including advisors from the Houthis and the Southern Movement (Al Hirak). In a further escalation of the events, the Houthis put President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, the Prime Minister Khaled Bahah and several cabinet ministers under house arrest in January 2015, leading to their resignations and precipitating the constitutional crisis. The Houthis seized the opportunity to dismiss the government and form an executive body known as Supreme Revolutionary Committee, chaired by Mohammed Ali al-Houthi. In the following weeks, Saudi Arabia and its allies launched a military intervention to restore the government of President Hadi and prevent Aden from falling to the Houthis. These events marked the beginning of the Yemen Civil War, which has killed thousands of people and prompted a major humanitarian crisis ([ACLED, 9 February 2018](#)).

The conflict presents some important methodological challenges for the recording of political violence: violent events unfold in a number of ways, which are not replicated in other contexts; a variety of actors partake in the conflict, reflecting the highly volatile and fragmented socio-political environment; media coverage often suffers from reporting biases and little access to Yemen's most remote regions. The report aims to outline ACLED's efforts to address these challenges and accurately capture manifestations of violence during the Yemen Civil War.

ACLED's work is conducted in collaboration with the [Yemen Data Project](#), which contributes to enhance conflict monitoring and data sharing. Separately, the Yemen Data Project collates data on Saudi-led coalition airstrikes in Yemen since 2015.

What does ACLED cover in Yemen?

As of October 2018, ACLED's coverage of political violence and protest in Yemen spans from January 2016 to real time. Efforts are currently underway to extend the current coverage through 2015.

Yemen's conflict environment is known to be one of the most volatile in the region. The current civil war, with its wider implications for the region, has added complexity to an already fractured political setting ([European Council of Foreign Relations, February 2017](#)). As a result, ACLED records a wide range of violent events, including air / drone strikes and armed battles between opposing factions, as well as typically less reported episodes like



tribal or communal clashes, assassinations, bombings – either suicidal or remotely-activated – and peaceful or violent demonstrations. ACLED does not track criminal or domestic violence, nor records natural deaths from famine or diseases.

Which actors are recorded?

As a consequence of highly volatile conflict environment, **ACLED has recorded around 250 distinct conflict agents operating in Yemen between 2016 and 2018**. Many of these actors defy traditional classifications, and require further scrutiny:

- ACLED treats the forces allied with both the government of President Hadi and the Houthi-led executive bodies as **state forces**. It is important to note that the classification does not imply legitimacy, but rather acknowledges the fact that there currently exist two distinct governing authorities exercising *de facto* control over different portions of the Yemeni territory. These military or paramilitary actors often maintain no more than a formal relation with the government – such as in the case of the Security Belt Forces or the Elite Forces in Shabwah and Hadramawt ([United Nations Security Council, 26 January 2018](#)) – or may have split from their former allies – the Saleh-led Republican Guard being the most notable case. To reflect this fragmentation, they are identified by their respective regime years (2012 onwards for the Hadi government, and 2015-2016 and then 2016- for the Houthi-Saleh bodies), the police or military status and their specific name.
- Contrary to other civil war contexts like Syria, the number of actors classified as **rebels** in Yemen is relatively low. This is because the main ‘rebel group’ active in Yemen – the Houthis – turned into a state actor after the formation of the Supreme Revolutionary Committee in February 2015. The main rebel groups recorded by ACLED in Yemen include the southern secessionist forces, like the Southern Transitional Council and the Southern Movement, and Islamist armed groups like Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Ansar al Sharia and the Yemeni branch of the Islamic State.
- **Political militias** are a primary agent of violence in Yemen. They include a wide range of armed groups that operate independently, in cooperation with state forces or as the armed wing of political parties or rebel factions. Although some of them might be commonly regarded as government forces, they operate outside of the formal lines of military command. A notable example are the National Resistance Forces, a coalition of militias active along the western coast bringing together the Giants Brigade, the Tihama Resistance, and the Guardians of the Republic ([ACLED, 20 July 2018](#)). The Popular Resistance and the Southern Resistance also identify composite cartels of local actors operating across much of central and southern



Yemen, often in conjunction with, or at the behest of, state and rebel forces. Often subsumed within the abovementioned larger coalitions, armed wings of Yemen's political parties – including the General People's Congress (GPC) or Al Islah – are also recorded as political militias.

- **Tribal, clan or other communal groups** are coded when reported to be operating 'on behalf of' their communities, and not when fighting within the ranks of the army, of rebel groups, or of larger coalitions. These actors make up the vast majority of all actors recorded in Yemen, although they are typically reported to be involved in a limited number of events.
- **External forces** include both forces of foreign governments and private security operators. The Saudi-led coalition is coded using the tag name of Operation Restoring Hope, with the participating countries reportedly involved in an event recorded as associates (despite leading the coalition, Saudi forces are not directly involved in each event) ([ACLED, 31 July 2018](#)). In a number of cases, the coalition operates in conjunction with Yemeni ground forces and is therefore coded as an associated actor. The United States, which operate in Yemen with drones and ground forces, is coded as a separate actor.
- Similarly, ACLED aims to record the political, tribal or societal identity of **civilian actors**. Doing this allows users to track specific trends in civilian targeting and their exposure to the conflict. Among the civilian groups most regularly targeted, and recorded by ACLED as associate actors, are fishermen, farmers, clerics, tribal shayks, and members of political parties like the GPC and Al Islah.

How does ACLED use the sources?

Each week, ACLED and YDP researchers review hundreds of local, national, regional and international media outlets and news agencies to provide the most comprehensive database on political violence in Yemen. Selected Twitter accounts are monitored to obtain information in hard-to-access contexts, while reports produced by reputed international institutions and non-governmental organisations can supplement the regular coding process. The latter have included Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, New America Foundation, The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, Mwatana and many others.

As of October 2018, **around 300 distinct sources have been used to record over 23,000 events between January 2016 and September 2018 in Yemen**. This extensive monitoring effort has allowed ACLED and YDP to provide the most comprehensive coverage of political violence across Yemen, reducing the inherent urban bias of most international media sources and including regions that typically enjoy limited media attention.



Researchers are aware that the credibility of the information varies according to the source. Where and when possible, they will corroborate the information by triangulating multiple sources in order to reduce reporting biases.

Where does violence take place, and how are locations recorded in Yemen?

The coding of locations in Yemen reflects the irregular natural and physical geography of the country. Violent events were recorded in both **urban and rural spaces**, with significant regional variations within the country. The variety of the recorded locations reveals the composite subnational geography of the conflict, which bears further implications for the conduct of the conflict.

As of October 2018, **around 23,000 events were georeferenced to over 2,000 distinct locations in Yemen**. These include towns (and neighbourhoods in major cities like Sana'a, Aden, Hodeidah and Ta'izz) villages and other populated places, as well as natural locations like the Red Sea islands, the desert areas in the north-east of the country spanning across the border with Saudi Arabia, rugged mountainous areas and valleys. Depending on the accuracy of the sources and the size of the recorded location, researchers will select the appropriate GeoPrecision code to reflect the precision of the geocoding.

How does ACLED record fatalities?

Fatality data are typically the most biased, and least accurate, part of any conflict report as they are particularly prone to manipulation by armed groups, and occasionally the media. As such, all figures should be treated as 'reported fatalities'. In Yemen, **ACLED has recorded over 50,000 reported fatalities between January 2016 and September 2018**. These estimates include both combatants and non-combatants.

ACLED does not code fatality figures according to which group suffered casualties because most source reports do not offer this level of detail, and instead report on the total number of deaths arising from a conflict event. The only exception to this is in incidents involving civilians: because ACLED treats civilians as unarmed, non-combatants, the number of fatalities reported for each event involving civilians – typically coded under “Violence against civilians” or “Remote violence” is taken to be the reported number of civilians killed (unless the perpetrator dies as a result of his action, like a suicide bomber). As such, **estimates of civilian fatalities do not include civilians that may have died during fighting between armed groups or as a result of the remote targeting of armed groups** (e.g. an airstrike hitting militant positions but that also kills civilians)¹.

¹ ACLED is currently developing a tool that will allow users to download all events involving anti-civilian violence automatically from the website. The tool will collate all VAC and RV events targeting unarmed protesters and civilians in a single file, which will be available for download.



Fatality counting in the Yemeni civil war faces several obstacles, which make any effort to provide reliable estimates highly difficult ([Washington Post, 3 August 2018](#)). Scarce or biased reporting, as well as limited media access to the sites of violence, may indeed result in substantially different fatality estimates arising from the same event, uncertain figures, or one-sided coverage of conflict events in certain areas. This partially explains why official estimates, which rely on selected data from health facilities, tend to be significantly lower compared to what is perceived to be the real impact of the conflict in Yemen ([The Guardian, 16 January 2017](#)).

To avoid artificially increasing the number of reported fatalities, ACLED has taken several steps to ensure that fatality estimates during the Yemen Civil War are the most accurate possible and least subject to media biases:

- researchers triangulate reported fatality counts to always select the most conservative available, unless more recent or verified information is released;
- high fatality estimates reported by only one source are verified thoroughly, and discarded if they are not confirmed by multiple sources;
- if 'casualties' are reported, ACLED assumes that there have been injuries, but not fatalities;
- if fatality estimates are unknown – and this happens often as many reports tend to be vague and only mention the occurrence of “deaths and injuries” or “losses” – ACLED uses a standard estimate of 10, or 3 when the event is known to have caused less than 10 fatalities (e.g. the bombing of a motorcycle resulting in *some* fatalities). Additional intermediate estimates are used to capture other inaccurate reported figures (e.g. dozens, scores, etc.)

Although the use of a discretionary fatality estimate can result in artificially increasing the number of fatalities, we can easily assume that there are several cases where fatalities go under reported or no reported at all. In the end, these expedients help control the inherent bias and avoid inflating fatality counts significantly while ensuring consistency within the country and across other regions.