



## **ACLED Methodology and Coding Decisions around the Conflict in Afghanistan**

The current main conflict in Afghanistan began in 2001, following the post-9/11 US-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) invasion and the subsequent overthrow of the Taliban government. In 2003, the Taliban announced it had officially regrouped, and a year later announced it had begun an insurgency under Mohammed Omar against both foreign forces and the US-installed Transitional Islamic State of Afghanistan, and later the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. The Taliban's goal is to regain political power over the country and to push out foreign forces. As of 2018, the conflict between the Taliban and joint domestic and international forces is at a relative stalemate, with all parties controlling a number of districts while many others continue to be contested ([Long War Journal, 2018](#)). However, the war is extremely active, with a consistent counter-insurgency campaign across the country. The Taliban's numbers are often bolstered by fighters coming from countries such as Pakistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, though the majority of them still identify as Pashtun ([Foreign Policy, 15 June 2016](#)). The group's allies include both local and international groups such as Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the Haqqani Network, and Al-Qaeda, in addition to a number of other smaller militant groups. The group allegedly receives financial support from a number of countries, and also heavily relies on profits from the opium trade; airstrikes by both government and international forces often target drug facilities with this in mind.

In addition to the ongoing contest with the Taliban, the Islamic State announced the formation of an Afghanistan/South Asia affiliate which refers to itself as Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant – Khorasan Province (ISIL-KP) in 2015. Its membership is composed of a number of foreign fighters in addition to those formerly affiliated with the TTP, Taliban, and other militant groups. The group pledged allegiance to the ISIS leader al-Baghdadi, and its goal is to incorporate "Greater Khorasan" (an historical region encompassing parts of Central Asia, Afghanistan, and Pakistan) as a province of the imagined Islamic Caliphate declared by the Islamic State. For this reason, ACLED refers to the group as Islamic State (IS), following the standard name in all other countries we cover with the group's activity. The presence of IS has added a new element to the conflict as a common enemy for both the Taliban and Afghan security forces (and NATO) to combat. While the Taliban's goal requires them to gain the trust of the people, IS will often carry out suicide attacks in crowded areas resulting in high civilian casualties (for more on that, see this [ACLED analysis piece](#)). As of December 2018, Taliban and Afghan/NATO operations against IS have pushed the group back to its original stronghold of Nangarhar province – the group formally having a significant presence in both Kunar and Jowzjan.

Afghanistan presents some unique methodological challenges for the recording of political violence. These primarily concern media coverage, which often suffers from reporting biases and little access to Afghanistan's most remote regions, or regions controlled by insurgent groups. We conclude that these biases lead to both inflation and deflation of fatalities, depending on who is reporting the events.



Additionally, reports of conflict events are often vague, using general terms such as “security forces” and non-descript “militants” or “terrorists”, in addition to aggregating what may be several distinct events into single provincial or district overviews. This report aims to outline ACLED’s efforts to address these challenges and accurately capture manifestations of political violence in Afghanistan.

### **What does ACLED cover in Afghanistan?**

As of January 2019, ACLED’s coverage of political violence and protests in Afghanistan spans from January 2017 to the present, with continued weekly real-time data releases. Efforts are currently underway to expand and improve the current coverage through additional sourcing.

### **Which armed actors are recorded?**

• **Government Forces** constitute a number of state-sponsored security organizations, including the military and police forces, in addition to a third group known as the **Afghan Local Police (ALP)**, which are a government-supplied paramilitary, local police force which acts as support to the Afghan National Police. For general “security forces” where the source neither specifies police nor military forces, **Military Forces of Afghanistan (2004-)** is selected as the default. Military and police forces have been further broken down into popular sub-actors for more advanced actor analysis. For police, these include wings such as:

- **Police Forces of Afghanistan (2004-) National Directorate of Security:** the primary intel agency in Afghanistan. Often the target of bombings. NDS is a common acronym.
- **Police Forces of Afghanistan (2004-) Sangorians:** special forces designed to infiltrate Taliban cells with support from NDS.
- **Police Forces of Afghanistan (2004-) Special Forces:** police commandos/SWAT.

For military forces, the only sub-actor coded thus far in the data is:

- **Military Forces of Afghanistan (2004-) Special Forces:** often described as “commandos”. When engaging in airstrikes, they are accompanied by Military Forces of Afghanistan (2004-) as an associate actor since it is the Airforce providing the planes. There is no sub-actor for the Airforce since analysis on this group can be done by simply sorting on airstrikes made by Military Forces of Afghanistan (2004-). NATO are the only other group with airplanes in the current Afghan conflict, and they will be mentioned specifically when known to be involved in an event.



The actor **Militia (Pro-Government)** – often described as “arbakis” – which is a word that loosely translates to “militia” – are used to describe militia groups unofficially sanctioned by the Afghan government / NATO. While some sources place ALP under the “arbaki” term, others (including ACLED) have chosen to represent them as a distinct unofficial version of the ALP (untrained, non-officially sanctioned). These are separate from **Communal Militias**, which do not necessarily work with state forces and instead are armed communities/groups defending their larger communities and localities.

- **Militant/Insurgent Groups:** By far the most active insurgency in the country is led by the **Taliban**. Due to the size of the group, ACLED also records a sub-actor for this group called **Taliban - Red Unit**, which is a special forces/commando unit. Despite the group’s prevalence, ACLED does not make assumptions that unidentified militant groups mentioned in sources are the Taliban, unless the events occur in areas where known Taliban operations are occurring at the time (for example, during the siege of Ghazni city). This is because other insurgent groups are active in Afghanistan during the current period of coverage. Among these is the Khorasan branch of IS – referred to as **Islamic State (Afghanistan)** – which is also often the target of both Afghan security and NATO operations. While the Taliban is active throughout the country, the Islamic State’s presence is less widespread, with the majority of events involving them occurring in the provinces of Nangarhar, Kunar, and Jowzjan. Because both groups have similar goals, they often battle for supremacy in areas where their control overlaps.

For Ministry of Defense (MOD) press releases, the actor **Taliban and/or Islamic State (Afghanistan)** is often used for general “military operations” where the specific group is not mentioned. This is because we know that these large-scale operations are targeting one of these groups. **Unidentified Armed Group (Afghanistan)** is used for all other cases where the armed group is not specifically named, since there are other groups operating within the country on a smaller scale.

Smaller groups operating throughout the state include:

- **Haqqani Network:** an offshoot of the Taliban which operates both independently and in support of other Taliban groups. Active in the eastern provinces of the country.
- **Al-Qaeda:** Global network of jihadists which formed as a response to the Soviet war in Afghanistan. Were targeted by the US-led invasion of Afghanistan on the pretense of being harbored by the Taliban government. Currently, they are active in provinces that border Pakistan, although their presence appears to be significantly lessened. They are allied to the Taliban.

To a lesser degree, small groups from Pakistan occasionally make an appearance within Afghanistan – possibly as a result of using the country as a base of operation. The most prominent of these groups is **Lashkar-e-Islam (LeI)**, who often clash with IS. Lastly, several political party militias are also present to a very small degree, including **Jamiat-e Islami** and **Hezbi Islami**.



• **External Forces:** There are a number of other state military forces which operate within Afghanistan, all of which can be sorted in the data by their interaction code (8) – a cross-ACLED code used for ‘other’ forces, including state forces operating outside their own countries. By far, the most prominent foreign force in Afghanistan is **NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organization**, which is a joint force made up of several individual international militaries. They are often described by name, or simply as “foreign” forces. Occasionally, sources will refer to a specific NATO member (example: “supported by US airstrikes”), in which case the specific country’s military forces is represented as an Associate Actor to NATO; for example, **Military Forces of United States**. If NATO is supporting Afghan military forces, either NATO, or NATO *and* the specific country, are represented in the appropriate Associate Actor column. This format is also used for other coalition forces operating in other countries, such as the Global Coalition Against Daesh or Operation Restoring Hope. For more information, refer to this [ACLED piece](#) on NATO in Afghanistan.

Pakistani state forces occasionally fire shells across the border (Durand Line) into Afghanistan, especially into the provinces of Kunar and Nangarhar, which border the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Shells are often fired by both **Military Forces of Pakistan (2008-)** and **Police Forces of Pakistan (2008-) Frontier Corps**. Although the sources rarely mention targets, and casualties are also rare in these events, it is assumed that the shelling acts as a deterrent for cross-border militant activity. In a few events, Pakistani and Afghani border forces have clashed.

### **How does ACLED use sources?**

Each week, ACLED researchers review approximately 60 sources in English and Dari/Farsi, in order to provide the most comprehensive database on political violence in Afghanistan. These include:

- Local, national, regional, and international media outlets such as Khaama Press, Tolo News, and Pajhwok Afghan News.
- News agencies such as Agence France Presse, Associated Press, and Deutsche Presse-Agentur.
- Media aggregates like BBC Monitoring, which covers sources such as Helmand Radio, Afghan Channel One, and the Islamic State’s Sedai Khelafat radio channel.
- Reputed international institutions and non-governmental organisations such as the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, and the Bureau of Investigative Journalism.
- Press releases from groups such as the Afghan Ministry of Defense, Taliban’s Voice of Jihad, and NATO’s Operation Resolute Support.

Researchers are aware that the credibility of 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. Reports by local sources, reputed human rights organizations, and the United



Nations (UN) are considered less biased in these cases and conflicting details from these sources are given preference.

### **Where does violence take place, and how are locations recorded in Afghanistan?**

Political violence in Afghanistan is country-wide; however, the geography of the Hindu Kush Mountains and their extending ranges means that the majority of events occur in the crescent surrounding the central mountainous area. Conflict events are also heavily clustered in provinces through which the highway linking Jalalabad-Kabul-Kandahar-Lashkargah passes, in the east of the country.

As of December 2018, around 14,500 events were georeferenced to over 1,050 distinct locations in Afghanistan. These include cities, towns, villages and other populated places, as well as natural locations like mountains and valleys. Depending on the precision of the sources and the size of the recorded location (town, district, or province), researchers will select the appropriate GeoPrecision code to reflect the precision of the geocoding. Due to the remoteness of many parts of Afghanistan, in addition to varying levels of government presence in the rural areas of the country, the majority of sources will only identify the district or province in which an event has occurred (which are coded at GeoPrecision 2 or 3, respectively).

A GeoPrecision code of 2 is also used when sources give the name of a village or general area, yet our researchers are unable to find coordinates for this specific location; in these cases, we code at the district capital and mention the village/area name in the event notes, unless further identifying information is provided to use in coding at a more natural location. Various tools, including GeoNames and OCHA atlases, are used in an attempt to find these specific locations; however, a wide range of transliterations and the presence of colloquial names for locations makes this a difficult process. With this in mind, appropriately using GeoPrecision codes can help to control for any urban bias in the data, especially during any analysis on conflict in rural versus urban settings.

Additionally, multiple unknown locations within the same district or province are combined into a single event if all other details are the same. For example, “On August 7, 2018, 13 Taliban militants were killed by Afghan security forces in the Balakhel and Paeen areas of Kot district, Nangarhar” would be coded as two events in Balakhel and in Paeen. However, if for any reason we are not able to specifically locate the Balakhel and Paeen areas (due to different spelling, local slang, name changes, etc.), a single event would be coded in Kot district (GeoPrecision 2), as opposed to coding two identical events, each aggregated to Kot district to denote these events.

Along those lines, in an effort to code conservatively, similar events involving the same actors in the same location (with the same GeoPrecision) on the same day are considered to be the same event, even if casualties differ (due to the wide discrepancy in reported fatalities; for further info, see *How does*



**ACLED record fatalities?** below). Events coded with GeoPrecision 1 or 2 take precedence over events with GeoPrecision 3 (where geographic information is fuzziest and only the province is known). For example, if one report states that “21 Taliban militants were killed in military operations in Ghazni province”, and another report says that “18 Taliban militants were killed by soldiers in Ab Band district of Ghazni province” on the same day, the latter will be assumed to be the same event and chosen due to its more specific location given that the former “21 militants killed” event *could in fact be* the “18 Taliban militants killed” event occurring in Ab Band specifically, with fatality numbers not matching. This is not a stretch given the nature of fatality estimates (again, see **How does ACLED record fatalities?** below for more information).

### **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 the government, armed groups, and occasionally the media. This is true across all contexts and as such, all figures should be treated as ‘*reported fatalities*’. In Afghanistan specifically, fatality counts are even more unreliable given the ambiguities with reporting as a function of remoteness compounded by the reporting of aggregate figures by many of our sources. As a result, fatalities in Afghanistan may be overcounted, even despite ACLED’s conservative fatality estimating. *The unreliability of fatality estimates generally, and in the Afghan case in particular, cannot be overstated.* ACLED has recorded over 84,000 reported fatalities between January 2017 and December 2018. These estimates include both combatants and non-combatants.

Fatality counting in regards to the Afghan insurgencies faces several obstacles, which make any effort to provide reliable estimates even more difficult. 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. Both the Taliban and Ministry of Defense have reason to avoid reporting their own losses while also inflating the losses of the other side; the war they are fighting is protracted and requires the continual support of the population and ongoing recruitment ([NY Times, 21 September 2018](#)). As such, fatality counts reported by independent or local sources take precedence when determining how many fatalities to code.

To avoid artificially increasing the number of reported fatalities, ACLED has taken several steps to ensure that fatality estimates related to the conflict in Afghanistan 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. For example, Khaama Press reports that “On October 13, 2018, 12 civilians were killed by a NATO airstrike in Ghazni city”, while Agence France Presse reports that 10 were killed in the same incident. Here, we would choose 10 as the more conservative



estimate between the two sources. However, if the UN sends a team to investigate and reports that 11 civilians were killed, the event will be updated to include this seemingly more reliable report;

- in cases where two armed group sources report on the same event but avoid mentioning their own fatalities, the smallest number of fatalities from each side are combined into a single battle total. This method is only used when no independent, total fatality numbers are available. For example, “Taliban sources reported that on August 17, 2018, 2 Afghan soldiers were killed during a battle in Waghez district of Ghazni province” while the Afghan Ministry of Defense reported that “3 Taliban were killed, and no soldiers were hurt during a battle in Waghez district on August 17.” In this case, fatalities would be coded as 5 – assuming 2 Afghan soldier fatalities and 3 Taliban fatalities, while assuming each source has failed to report their own losses;
- if “casualties” are reported, ACLED assumes that there have been injuries, but not fatalities (as ‘casualties’ means ‘injuries and/or fatalities’) and hence reports zero fatalities (the more conservative estimate);
- 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, such as dozens, scores, etc. (see page 29 of the ACLED Codebook, available for download [here](#), for more information).

Although the use of a discretionary fatality estimate can result in artificially increasing the number of fatalities, we assume that there are several cases where fatalities go under reported or not 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.

**Fatalities by Actor:** ACLED **does not** code fatality figures according to which group suffered fatalities because many source reports do not offer this level of detail, and when they do, this information may be biased; instead, ACLED reports on the total number of deaths reported 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 only civilians as Actor 2 – typically coded under “Violence against civilians”, or under “Remote violence” – is taken to be the number of civilians killed (with the exception of events like suicide bombings where the perpetrator’s death will also be included in the total fatality count). As such, **aggregate estimates of “civilian**



**fatalities<sup>1</sup> do not include civilians that may have died as ‘collateral damage’ 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). These collateral damage fatalities are still recorded in both the Fatalities and Notes columns – meaning that any analysis of the total impact on civilians, including battles, will require additional modification on the part of the user, along with a number of assumptions as to how to attempt to disaggregate these total event fatality numbers.

**Splitting Fatalities:** Many sources will release a single fatality total referring to events occurring across a number of locations; for example, “On Dec 2, 33 Islamic State militants were killed during NATO airstrikes in the Rodat, Kot, and Khogyani districts of Nangarhar”. In this case, the fatalities are split equally over three events (in Rodat, Kot, and Khogyani), 11 fatalities for each location. Odd number totals will be split as evenly as possible; for example, 34 fatalities over three events would be split into 11, 11, and 12. The notes will be the same for each event and will state that the fatalities have been split. ***It is important to remember that though the Notes column entries may match across these events, these are not ‘duplicates’ but rather are unique events with unique locations coded.***

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<sup>1</sup> ACLED has developed a data box that allows users to download all ‘violence against civilians’ and ‘remote violence’ events targeting unarmed protesters and civilians into a single file. It is available for download at the bottom of the page [here](#).