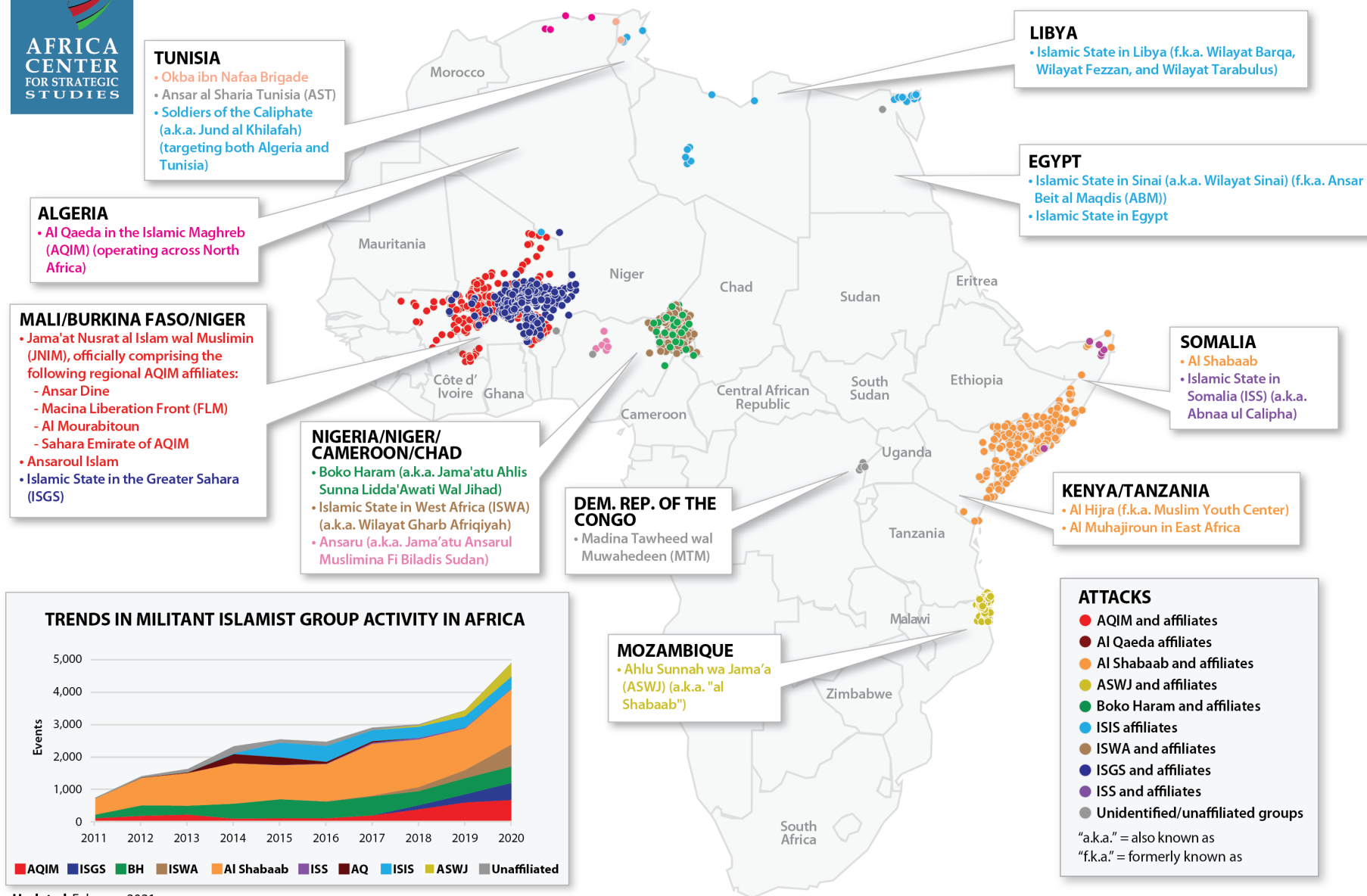


AFRICA'S ACTIVE MILITANT ISLAMIST GROUPS



Updated: February 2021

Note: Compiled by the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, this graphic shows violent events involving the listed groups over the 12-month period ending December 31, 2020. Data on attacks or fatalities does not attempt to distinguish the perpetrators of the events. Group listings are intended for informational purposes only and should not be considered official designations. Due to the fluid nature of many groups, the listed affiliations may change.

Sources: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED); Daniel Byman; HumAngle; Thomas Joscelyn; SITE Intelligence Group; The Soufan Group; Stanford University's Mapping Militants Project; Stratfor; Terrorism Research & Analysis Consortium (TRAC); and Aaron Y. Zelin.

Spike in Militant Islamist Violence in Africa Underscores Shifting Security Landscape

Highlights

- There was a 43-percent spike in militant Islamist group violence in Africa in 2020. The 4,958 reported events linked to these groups represents a record level of violence, continuing an upward pattern seen since 2016.
- Reported fatalities linked to African militant Islamist groups rose by a third in 2020 over the previous year, to an estimated 13,059 deaths.
- Militant Islamist violence remains largely concentrated in five theaters, each comprising distinct actors and challenges: Somalia, the Sahel, the Lake Chad Basin, Mozambique, and Egypt. All but Egypt experienced sharp increases in violence in 2020.

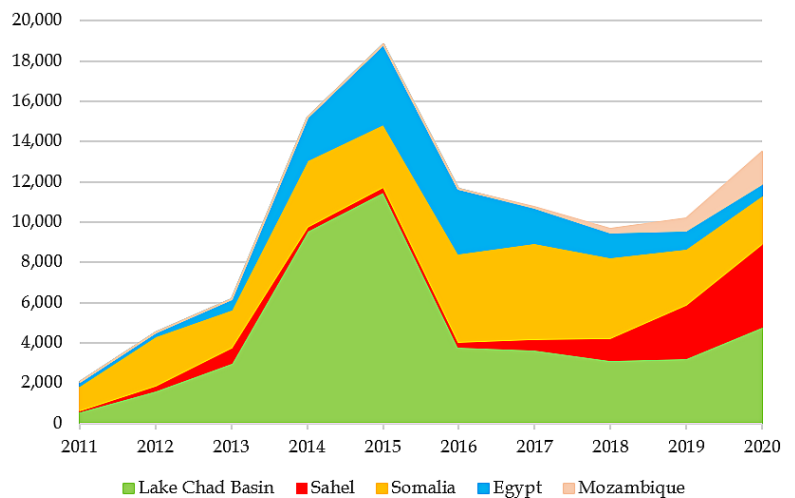
Somalia Theater

- There was a 33-percent increase in violent activity involving al Shabaab over the past year (from 1,310 reported events to 1,742) showing the enduring resiliency of arguably Africa's most entrenched militant Islamist group.
- There was a 47-percent increase in battles between al Shabaab and security forces in 2020. This escalation likely reflects a combination of [al Shabaab attempting to undermine plans for elections](#) and exacerbate tensions between national and federal member state forces.
- Battles with security forces comprise two-thirds of the violent activity linked to al Shabaab—a larger share than any other theater. Conversely, al Shabaab-targeted violence against civilians was lower in this theater (13 percent of all incidents) than all other theaters except Egypt.
- Despite this escalation, violent activity linked to al Shabaab has declined relative to that of other theaters around the continent. Somalia now represents roughly 35 percent of all militant Islamist group events in Africa as compared to an average of 50 percent over the last decade. Meanwhile, fatalities linked to al Shabaab dropped 14 percent in 2020 (from 2,763 to 2,369). This represents 18 percent of all reported fatalities linked to militant Islamist groups in Africa.
- The level of violent activity and related fatalities in the Somalia theater were matched by the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin theaters in 2020.

Sahel Theater

- The 1,170 violent events observed in the Sahel (specifically Mali, Burkina Faso, and western Niger) in 2020 represent a 44-percent increase over the previous year. This continues an uninterrupted rise in violence involving militant Islamist groups in the region since 2015.
- Two groups, the [Macina Liberation Front \(FLM\)](#) and the [Islamic State of the Greater Sahara \(ISGS\)](#) account for nearly all of these attacks. FLM is part of a consortium of groups with ties to al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb known as [Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimin \(JNIM\)](#).
- The 4,122 fatalities linked to these violent events in 2020 were 57 percent higher than the previous year, underscoring the growing lethality associated with these groups.
- Battle-related fatalities (2,902) accounted for 70 percent of all reported fatalities. This mostly reflects the escalation of clashes with national and regional security forces. Almost 21 percent of the battles, however, were between JNIM affiliates and ISGS over territory, revenues, and recruitment.
- The violence in the Sahel theater has displaced some 1.7 million people, including more than 170,000 refugees and 1.5 million internally displaced. Burkina Faso accounts for the bulk of this displacement, with roughly 1.1 million displaced. The militant violence has contributed to increased food insecurity—affecting more than 3 million in both Mali and Burkina Faso.

TRENDS IN FATALITIES LINKED TO MILITANT ISLAMIST GROUPS IN AFRICA BY THEATER



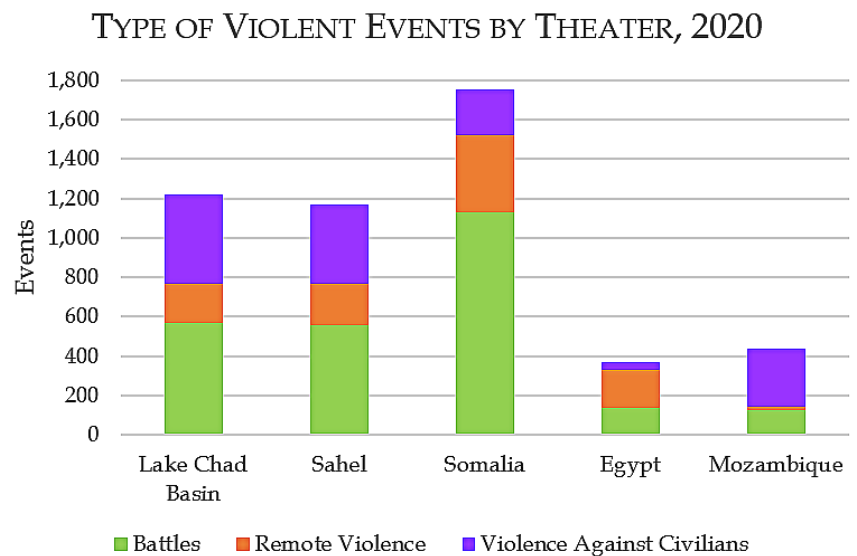
Lake Chad Theater

- The Lake Chad Basin (straddling four countries: [Nigeria](#), [Cameroon](#), [Chad](#), and southeastern Niger) saw a roughly 60-percent increase in militant Islamist violence in 2020 (1,223 events vs. 766 in 2019). This surge of activity is linked to two groups, Boko Haram and its offshoot the Islamic State in West Africa (ISWA).
- The upturn in militant Islamist violence in the Lake Chad Basin is, in part, due to an escalation in battles with state security forces and aligned militias. There was a 73-percent increase in such battles over the previous year, which accounted for 46 percent of all violent activity linked to militant Islamist violence in the theater.

- Attacks against civilians saw a 32-percent increase, accounting for 37 percent of violent activity linked to these groups.
- With 4,801 reported fatalities, this theater has the highest death toll linked to militant Islamist groups in Africa. This figure represents a 45-percent increase over 2019. Battles accounted for 59 percent of all 2020 fatalities.
- Within the Lake Chad Basin, Nigeria remains the locus of militant Islamist group activity where more than half of reported events occurred in 2020. Cameroon experienced a third of all violent activity in the theater.

Northern Mozambique Theater

- The number of reported violent incidents linked to militant Islamist groups in Cabo Delgado province in northern Mozambique rose 129 percent in 2020 to 437, surpassing activity in the Egypt theater. Northern Mozambique is distinguished by the fact that over two-thirds of those events targeted civilians.



- The reported 1,600 associated fatalities mark a 169-percent leap from the year prior. This escalation in violence has quickly transformed this conflict into one that is approaching the levels of bloodshed observed in the other more established theaters.
- The factors driving the violence in Mozambique are [complex and remain murky](#). Ahlu Sunnah wa Jama'a (ASWJ), or "al Shabaab" as they refer to themselves (though no relation to the group in Somalia), is linked to much of this violence. ASWJ has been endorsed by the Islamic State (ISIS), though it appears to be largely tapping into [multiple layers of local grievance in this region](#).

Egypt Theater

- The 371 violent events involving ISIS in North Africa in 2020 represent the fourth consecutive year that incidents of violence have remained at a plateau under 450. Virtually all the reported activity was in Egypt (about 95 percent). The 574 fatalities

linked to these events represent a roughly 35-percent drop from 2019—continuing a downward trend since 2015.

- This theater is characterized by the longstanding conflict between the Egyptian military and militant Islamist groups mostly in the Sinai. Remote violence (e.g., IEDs, shelling, airstrikes) accounts for 53 percent of violent events and 34 percent of fatalities reported in the theater, while battles account for 37 percent of violent events and 59 percent of fatalities. Violence against civilians makes up a relatively small portion of events (11 percent) and accounts for 6 percent of the reported fatalities in the theater.
- Despite 7 years of effort, ISIS has been unable to expand across North Africa in a significant way.

Takeaways

- Levels of militant Islamist violence in Africa continue on a steep upward slope.
- This violence is now relatively evenly distributed across Somalia, the Sahel, and the Lake Chad Basin.
- Militant Islamist activity in Africa continues to be driven by locally based groups, reflecting context-specific realities in each theater rather than a monolithic threat across the continent.
- Incidents of battles involving militant Islamist groups rose 60 percent in 2020. This reflects a rise in clashes with state security forces in every theater.
- Violence against civilians also rose steeply in 2020 (by 29 percent), with increases concentrated in northern Mozambique, the Lake Chad Basin, and the Sahel.
- The surge in militant Islamist violence demonstrates the steady growth in capacity among groups in each of the respective theaters over the last several years. Among other factors, this is seen in their willingness to take on state security forces, as well as these groups' increased sophistication to tap revenue streams as part of what often amounts to organized criminal activity.