

Mapping Political Violence

Students Detect Rise in Violence Across North and West Africa

When sophomore Natalie Mesplay started researching violence in North Africa, she felt removed from the skirmishes in Libya in 2011. Then she'd remember that the information she was gathering would help other people, powerful people, understand the growing violence in that region.

"It makes me a bit stressed. I'm like, 'This has to be good because there are people who went through this,'" said Mesplay, an international studies and history major. "I feel like I need to do them justice."

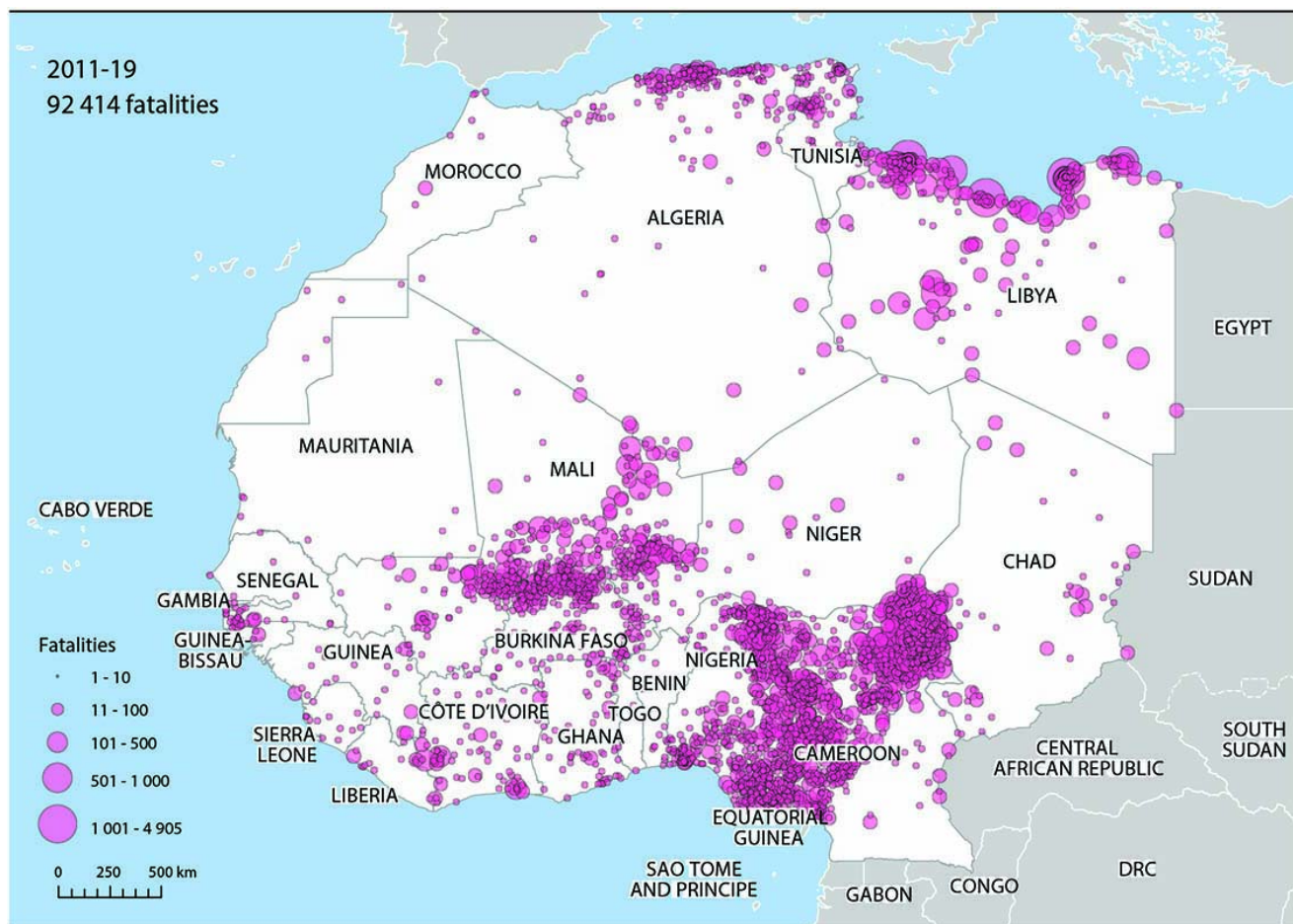
Mesplay, from Boise, is interning with political geographer Steve Radil. Radil, alongside a group of international colleagues, has been analyzing patterns of political violence in North and West Africa. Radil presented the team's report at the February 2020 Munich Security Conference, which was attended by numerous heads of state, government officials, nonprofits and international organizations like the United Nations.

The report shows that violence in North and West Africa is getting worse, especially against civilians, and has changed locations. That's a reason looking at violence through a geography lens is important, Radil said.

"The report shows that the geography of violence isn't static over time," he said. "It'll emerge in certain locations, certain countries, certain contexts."

Additional Resources

Munich Security Conference



Pink dots label the points of political violence in West and North Africa. (Source: Authors based on ACLED data, 2019)

Mapping Violence

Mesplay and senior international studies major Tenzin Nyima asked Radil if they could join his project after taking Radil's summer course on geopolitics in South Korea. Both students analyze primary data from sources such as the United Nations, the Defense Ministry and NATO to identify the different aspects of violent incidences in the region, including players, dates, locations and funding sources. Nyima's analyses are featured in the 2020 report and Mesplay's work will be in an updated 2021 report.

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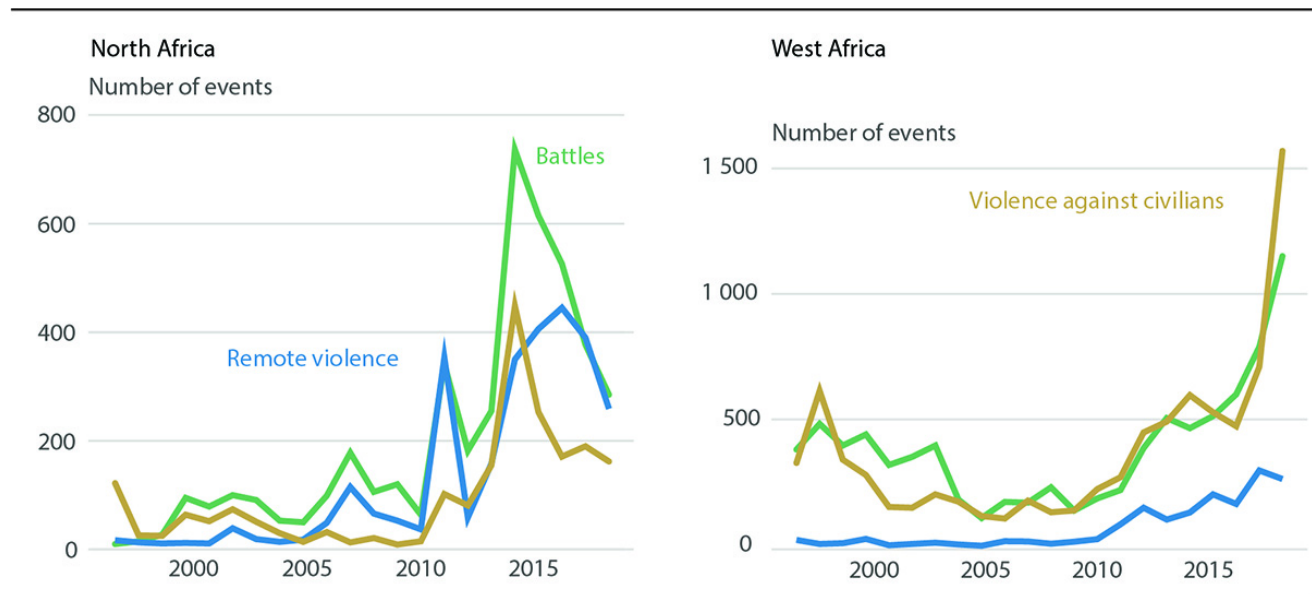
“Researching these conflicts is so different than classwork,” Mesplay said. “The project was kind of intimidating for me at first, but it gave me enough freedom to research what I want. It's given me the confidence to do more research in the future. I've never enjoyed a job more than this.”

Using data from 1997 to 2020 and across 21 countries, the team's computer program maps the exact location of incidences of political violence instead of lumping all incidences in one country together.

The geographers found that the number of violent events increased by nearly 250% between 2011 and 2019 across North and West Africa. The last five years were the most violent ever recorded with more than 16,000 violent incidents and 60,000 fatalities. Over the last five years, that's the equivalent of every man, woman and child in

Moscow, Pullman, U of I and Washington State University. And that's not counting the people who were wounded, displaced or had their lives disrupted forever, Radil said.

"This is a story about how human politics works," said Nyima, a Coeur d'Alene native headed to University of Denver for his master's. "Being able to understand how these incidents develop and people respond, it's easy to see how wars start so abruptly. Our job is to tell the story to the international community, because those are the people who largely have the resources to provide relief."



Evolution of violent events by type in North and West Africa, 1997-2019. (Source: Authors based on ACLED data 2019.)

Exploring the Cause

Much of the rise in violence is due to increased attacks on civilians. Radil thinks the switch to targeting civilians is a chosen strategy for these armed groups.

"They're changing tactics because it's effective," Radil said. "It draws attention to them, which results in increased support and funding. The other reason is it's just easier. This type of violence consumes fewer resources and involves less risk for these armed groups. And it still produces the kind of political outcomes that they would like to see."

They also found the lion's share of fatalities are occurring within roughly 60 miles of international boundaries. Border regions are often only lightly controlled by governments, Radil said. They are ideal places for armed groups to operate without governmental oversight, to challenge each other for supremacy and to move goods, money and people. Border zones are also locations where the international community could focus its efforts and make a difference, Radil adds.

Funded by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the team wanted to create tools that the international community could use to ask questions about trends in political violence at different geographic or time scales. The team will continue to update the map, focusing on how armed groups are connected across the region and what's happening at borders.

"Nobody's taken a geographic approach to studying violence in this area before, and when you do this, you can start to ask questions about the proximity to other features in the landscape such as populated places or international boundaries," Radil said.

Article by Leigh Cooper, University Communications and Marketing

Photos provided by Steve Radil

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