9 Conflict in times of COVID-19

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This chapter discusses the potential impacts of the spread of COVID-19, and the restriction policies that it has triggered in many countries, on conflict incidence worldwide. Based on anecdotal evidence and recent research, we argue that imposing nation-wide shutdown policies diminishes conflict incidence on average, but that this conflict reduction may be short-lived and highly heterogeneous across countries. In particular, conflict does not appear to decline in poor, fractionalised countries. Evidence points to two potential ways in which COVID-related restriction policies may increase conflict: losses in income and magnified ethnic and religious tensions leading to scapegoating of minorities.

On 31 March 2020 the UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, cautioned that the coronavirus epidemic could lead to "enhanced instability, enhanced unrest, and enhanced conflict". The effect could be severe for the vulnerable populations – those caught up in war and persecution, or those living in densely populated areas with dismal state capacity (United Nations 2020). Critically, countries have responded with varying degree of restrictions to limit the spread of coronavirus. The policy response to COVID-19 can itself have a bearing on conflict situations.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that restrictions on mobility to flatten the epidemic curve have mixed effects on conflicts worldwide. We provide examples of both surges in violence but also ceasefires:

1. In Chad and Nigeria, Boko Haram has stepped up attacks on state forces during the COVID-19 pandemic. On 23 March, Boko Haram carried out the deadliest terror attack in Chad, when it attacked an army base and killed 92 soldiers. These events occurred a few days after the first restrictions on gatherings were implemented. In Nigeria – on March 24th, a day after the implementation of stay-at-home restrictions

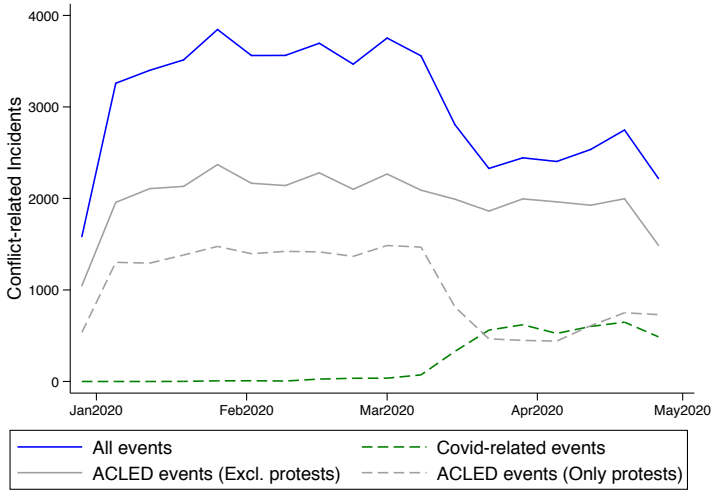
– a Boko Haram faction ambushed an army convoy, killing at least 47 soldiers[1]. These operations indicate that the Islamist group could be taking advantage of the COVID-19 crisis and of the weakening of states resources to unleash violence and recruit new members.

2. In Pakistan, protests and political violence has recently risen up to the pre-pandemic levels.[2] On 5 May, tens of thousands of factory workers launched a major agitation in the city of Sindh to protest against non-payment of wages and widespread job losses due to COVID- related restrictions.[3]
3. In India, though the lockdown has terminated nationwide protests against the mistreatment of Muslims, there has been a resurgence of incidents of physical violence against members of the Muslim minority, in addition to hateful messages on social media, since it was discovered that a Muslim religious gathering was the source of many coronavirus cases – a fact that the Hindu nationalist government publicised widely.[4]
4. The Libyan National Army (LNA) of Khalifa Haftar declared a unilateral ceasefire during the holy month of Ramadan. The move came amidst international appeals for a humanitarian truce so that state authorities could focus on dealing with the coronavirus pandemic.[5] The extent to which the ceasefire is successful depends on the international mediation between the ruling LNA and the Libyan government-in-exile.[6]
5. The COVID-19 crisis has forced Israeli and Palestinian authorities to cooperate closely in battling the pandemic.[7] The Israeli government organised training workshops for Palestinian medical teams, donated testing kits, and sent thousands of personal protective equipment (PPE) to the West Bank and Gaza. The Palestinian government also accepted US$25 million, as part of previously withheld taxes, from the Israeli government to ease the economic burden of the pandemic.

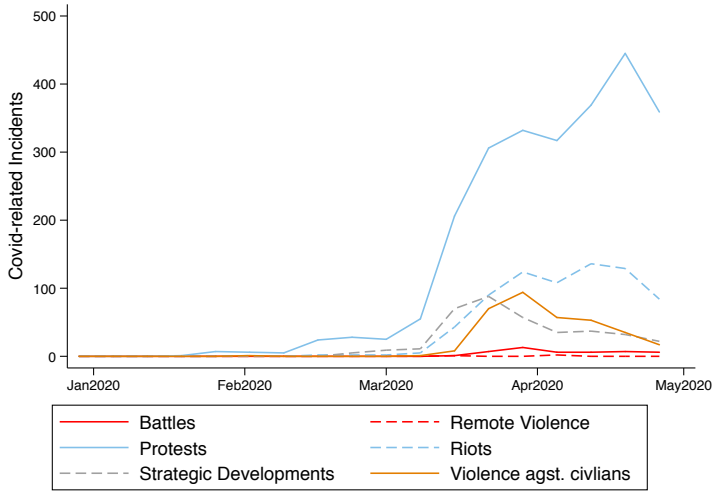
Conflict worldwide

Figure 1 Conflict-related incidents, 2020

a) Conflict



b) COVID-19 related events



Source: Authors' computations from ACLED. From 1 January 2020 to 30 April 2020.

Going beyond anecdotal evidence, the analysis of the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) project (Raleigh et al. 2020), which provides real-time information on worldwide conflict, is very instructive.[8] From March 2020 onward, the total number of events dramatically declines (Figure 1a). Mid-March 2020, it is 25% lower than the number of events at the same period of the previous year; in the first half of April 2020, it is 30% to 35% lower than in the first half of April 2019. The drop appears to be partly driven by protests, though even after excluding protests the conflict events fall by almost 25% in March-April 2020 compared to the previous year. However, starting in mid-April, protests slightly increase, as well as other violent events, for a temporary period.

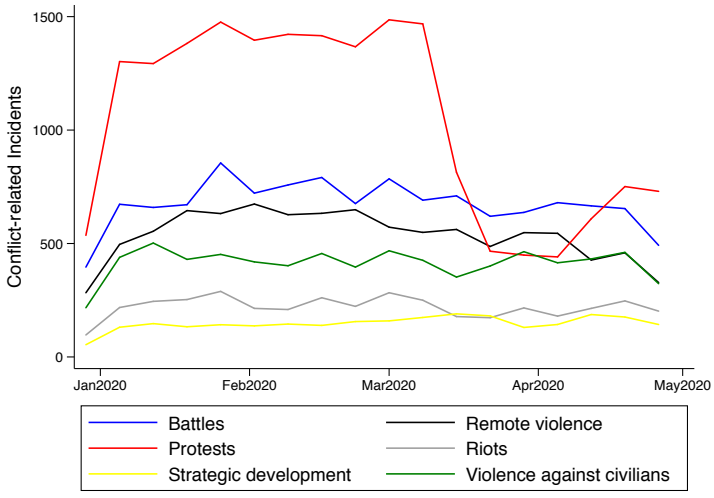
Figure 1a also plots the number of events identified as being directly related to COVID-19. In the last weeks, such events represent more than a third of the total number of observed events, with 97% of the countries affected by COVID-related events. Latin American countries – such as Mexico, Brazil, Chile and Colombia – and Asian countries – such as India and Pakistan – show the highest number of incidents, while central African countries are the least responsive. In Figure 1b, the total number of COVID-related conflictual events are separated by their nature. Demonstrations are the leading categories for which COVID-related events have arisen, with an overall share of 63% for protests and 18% for riots.

Two crucial features of the ACLED dataset shed light on the changes in the characteristics of violence since the shutdown. First, the data inform us on the nature of violence, i.e. whether the event is related to battles, remote violence, protests, riots, strategic development, and violence against civilians. Figure 2a depicts the trends for each of these types of violent incidents since the beginning of 2020. A striking pattern emerges: protests are the only category for which we can observe a large drop in the number of instances starting early March, accounting for 67% of the average number of protests between January and end of February. By April, protests display a new increase, yet not back to its mean. Other types of events do not show significant differences since January. A second important feature of the ACLED dataset is information on the different actors that are involved, such as state forces, rebel groups, political militia, identity militia, rioters, protesters, and civilians. Figure 2b depicts the trends for each of these actors involved in conflict events since the beginning of 2020. The same pattern emerges for protesters, while the number of incidents involving other actors remain quite stable over the period.

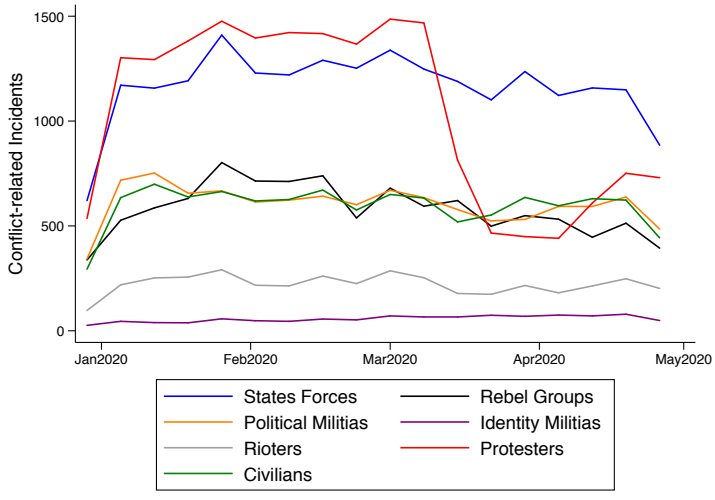
8 The data contain daily information on conflict events with specific details on the nature and the actors on both sides of the conflicts; data downloaded on 18 May 2020.

Figure 2 Evolution of conflict events across events and actors

a) Events



b) Actors



Source: Authors' computations from ACLED. From 1 January 2020 to 30 April 2020.

Shutdown policies

Based on the anecdotal and unconditional evidence on conflicts above, we go a step further (Berman et al. 2020).[9] The Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (OxCGRT) systematically assembles daily information on several policy responses governments have implemented from such as the closings of school, workplaces and public transport, travel restrictions (internal and international), limitations of public gatherings, and stay-at-home requirements (Hale et al. 2020). We restrict our attention on all COVID-related policy responses, with an emphasis on measures that restrict mobility. We construct a binary restriction measure, which switches to 1 when governments have implemented nationwide school and workplace closings as well as restrictions on internal movements.[10] We refer to this measure as 'shutdown policies' below. Using this definition, 70 out of 116 countries in the sample have enforced shutdown policies between 6 March and 28 April. Our empirical analysis generates four main results:

- First, there is a clear negative correlation between the restrictions and the incidence of conflict. The point estimate suggests that shutdowns are associated with a 7 percentage point drop in overall conflict incidence, and with 0.36 fewer events (i.e. a 8.9% drop in the total daily number of conflict events). On top of that, we find that the reduction of conflict incidence is gradual: starting a week before the governments' responses, and stronger three weeks after the policy is implemented. This indicates that actors involved in violence may already have begun adjusting their behaviour in anticipation of the policy change. However, five weeks after implementation, conflict goes down to its pre-shutdown level. This could suggest either a retaliation effect or a lack of compliance.
- Second, shutdown policies are negatively correlated to battles, protests and violence against civilians. The effect is most significant for protests which decline by 9 percentage points. The significant decline in protests is plausibly due to shutdown measures increasing the cost of individual participation in an activity where the benefit is shared by all sympathisers, irrespective of their participation.

9 The results presented below use the same methodology but with updated data. While in Berman et al. (2020) we stop on 18 April, we updated the data to be able to cover the entire month of April 2020 (data downloaded on 15 May 2020).

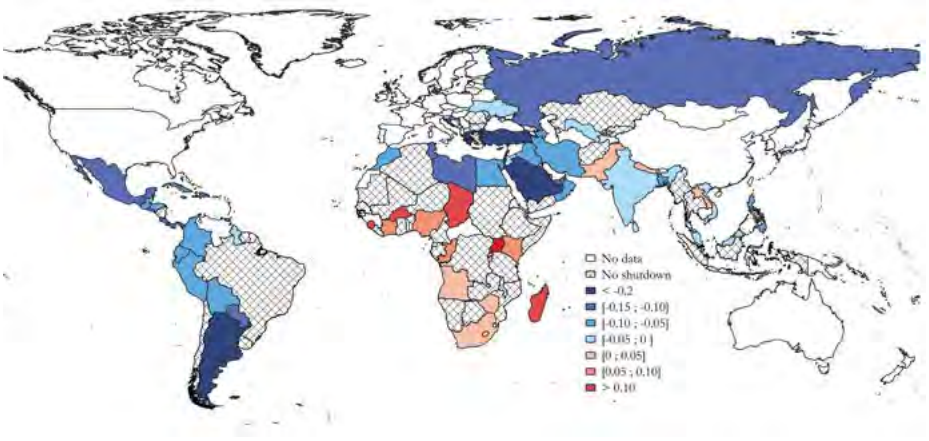
10 In Berman et al. (2020), we also consider a continuous index of restrictions, and the specific case of stay-at-home policies.

- Third, political militia, protesters and civilians are the actors for which there is a decrease of violence (7.2, 9.1 and 4.7 percentage points, respectively). For the other categories of actors – state forces, rebel groups, identity militia and rioters – restrictions have a negative but statistically insignificant effect on the level of conflict.
- Fourth, our results suggest that how violence react to shutdown policies is strongly correlated to specific-country characteristics. Conflict does not appear to significantly decrease post-restrictions in countries with low GDP per capita, while it does in countries with relatively high income per capita. This difference appears to be mostly driven by a stronger drop in protests in the latter case. On the other hand, and consistent with the scapegoating narrative mentioned above, we find that conflict does not decrease in countries with high religious or ethnic fractionalisation. This effect is mostly driven by events involving civilians, political militia and state forces. These results suggest that the negative effect of mobility restrictions on conflict could be tempered by a rise in violence against minorities – especially religious ones.

What about a world without shutdown?

Here we perform a counterfactual exercise where we estimate the average change in conflict incidence compared to a hypothetical 'no shutdown' situation, based on the data and methodology from Berman et al. (2020). We take into account a set of country-specific characteristics, in particular ethnic and religious fractionalisation and income per capita, which are found to significantly influence conflict responses. We find that most countries which imposed a shutdown would have experienced higher levels of conflict in the absence of a shutdown (Figure 3). The conflict response exhibits some heterogeneity across countries, however, and two patterns emerge. First, the steepest decline in conflict incidence appears in European and Latin American countries. Second, shutdown policies are predicted to have actually increased conflict probability in many African countries, in particular in countries of the African Great Lakes region such as Uganda, Kenya and Rwanda, as well as in Western and Central African countries such as Nigeria and Chad, echoing the anecdotal evidence mentioned previously.

Figure 3 Contribution of shutdown policies to conflict incidence



Note: This figure plots estimated effect of shutdown policies on average conflict incidence, by country, compared to a counterfactual situation where no policy would have been implemented. Source: Authors' computation from ACLED data from 1 January 2020 to 30 April 2020. See Berman et al. (2020) for more details.

Underlying mechanisms and concluding remarks

Overall, the results in Berman et al. (2020) point to several potential mechanisms through which COVID-related restrictions might be impacting conflict. First, by reducing mobility, such restrictions impact individual mobilisation capacity, which explains the decline in the protests worldwide. However, this reduction in the number of protests is not observed in countries with very low income, which suggests that the economic effect of shut- and lockdown policies might trigger additional (mostly peaceful) conflict. This effect might also relate to the fact that shutdown policies limit the capacity of low-income states to fight against the opposition (Berman et al. 2011). Second, we find consistent evidence that shutdown policies have an ambiguous effect on violence against civilians in more fractionalized countries. This indicates that the negative effect of mobility restriction on violence could be tempered by a rise in inter-religious and inter-ethnic violence. This result is in line with the literature which suggests that epidemics can intensify underlying ethnic or religious tensions and lead to scapegoating of minorities (Jewab et al. 2019, Voigtländer and Voth 2012).

Given the preliminary nature of the data, and the short time span currently available, more work is surely needed. For instance, future research could try to further explore cross-country heterogeneity in conflict responses, and consider within-country characteristics, such as urbanization and local income levels. Given the current collapse in many commodity markets, how natural resources rich regions will react to the spread of the virus is surely an important question as well. For instance, the chapter by Rabah

Arezki, Rachel Yuting Fan, and Ha Nguyen in this volume shows how countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) are currently hit by a dual supply and demand shock, the latter being partly driven by the collapse in oil prices. Meanwhile, the Gulf Cooperation council (GCC) countries, which are large providers of bilateral aid and investment, may have more limited resources to finance operations, which could worsen the conflict situation in the region.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated conflict in already fragile states. In parts of Western Africa and in the greater Sahel region, rebel groups have used the state preoccupation with COVID-19 crisis to escalate violence and step up recruitment. The state counter-insurgency operations have resulted in rising violence against the civilians, which can fuel further unrest. A unilateral ceasefire at the local level is unlikely to be credible. The current crisis calls for a unified response in form of a global ceasefire that is wholeheartedly endorsed by the UN Security Council.

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