

ACTION ON ARMED VIOLENCE

EXPLOSIVE VIOLENCE: PROJECTIONS FOR 2024

Chiara Torelli, lead explosive violence researcher

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The signing, in November 2022, of Ireland's Political Declaration on the protection of civilians from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas (EWIPA), raised hopes that the impact of such violence would be curbed in the years to come. However, where 2022 saw a marked rise in the use of explosive weapons against civilians, 2023 saw the levels of harm rise higher still. With at least four high intensity conflicts carrying over into 2024, the picture continues to look bleak.

Between December 2022 and November 2023, Action on Armed Violence (AOAV) recorded 6,904 incidents of explosive weapons use around the world, which caused 28,733 reported civilian casualties (11,501 killed, 17,232 injured). Civilians represented 69% of all 41,820 reported casualties in that time.

This marks a 67% increase in reported incidents compared to the same period the year prior, when AOAV picked up 4,133 incidents. Similarly, the number of civilian casualties rose by 42%, from 20,200 civilians reported killed and injured in 2022, while civilian fatalities grew by 69%, from 6,807.

Reflecting the increasing use of explosive weapons globally, the number of countries impacted by explosive violence rose by 11%, from 57 countries impacted between December 2021 and November 2022, to 63 between December 2022 and November 2023.

The standout trends in 2023 have been the considerable increase in the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, the rise in civilian casualties of explosive weapons use by state actors, and a sharp increase in the use of, and harm from, manufactured air-launched explosive weapons.

An explosive year

A number of new conflicts and contained flare ups involving state actors emerged in 2023, causing recorded incidents and civilian casualties to spike. These include Azerbaijan's offensive in the Karabakh and heightened tensions in Kosovo, as well as catastrophic escalations in Sudan and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. In Sudan, armed clashes between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and Rapid Support Forces (RSF) have [continued](#) into 2024 despite hopeful steps taken in late [December](#) and early [this year](#), while the Israeli military has [warned](#) Operation Swords of Iron will continue throughout 2024. This latter conflict has spilt over into neighbouring countries, notably Lebanon, where regular artillery exchanges between the Israeli Defence Forces and Hezbollah have claimed casualties, combatant and civilian, on both sides. Similarly, Israel has targeted Hezbollah and Iranian affiliates in Syria, while Iranian-backed groups have increased attacks on US bases in the country. In Yemen, the Houthis have been targeting ships in the Red Sea and firing missiles towards Israel. Both the Sudanese civil war and Israel's military operation are likely to loom large in the year to come. On the other hand, Armenia and Azerbaijan recently released a joint [statement](#) sharing the view that 'there is a historical chance to achieve long-awaited peace in the region,' raising hopes that explosive violence between these two states will decrease.

Other conflicts were carried over from 2022, notably armed resistance to the military government in Myanmar, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the conflict between the Ethiopian government and regional armed groups, as well as the longstanding conflicts in Syria and in Yemen, amongst others. While Myanmar's National Unity Government (NUG), People's Defence Forces (PDF) units, and allied Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs) have claimed significant successes in their battle against the military government, the junta's superior air power is likely to draw the conflict out for many more months, if not years. Similarly, the entrenched, intractable conflicts in Syria and Yemen, while witnessing decreasing incidents when compared to previous years, remain amongst the most harmful to civilians and show no signs of abating.

Of note, an emerging trend on AOA's radar has been the increasing use of explosive weapons, mainly Improvised Explosive Devices ([IEDs](#)), by organised crime groups. This was especially apparent in [Mexico](#) and [Sweden](#). While the violence remains low-level when compared to the uncountable casualties in larger-scale conflicts, it's a trend that is likely to see continued growth.

Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas

Last year, AOA noted the increasingly blurred [distinction](#) between civilians and armed combatants in warfare, a phenomenon which has continued to define conflicts in 2023. Many conflicts involve non-state actors who are embedded in local communities, as in Myanmar, or civilians who are recruited into or organise themselves into militias, for example in [Somalia](#), [Nigeria](#) or [Burkina Faso](#). Ukraine relies predominantly on an army of mobilised [citizens](#) and volunteers, while civilians have continued to play an active part by providing information to the Ukrainian army via smartphone apps. Myanmar's resistance groups are chiefly made up of civilians who mobilised in response to the 2021 coup. In Gaza, Israel claims that Hamas is present across civilian and protected infrastructure, and hides among civilian communities. These factors are all reflected in the systematic targeting of civilian infrastructure in support of the war effort, as seen in, amongst others, [Syria](#), [Myanmar](#), [Ukraine](#), [Gaza](#), and [Sudan](#).

Between December 2021 and November 2022, the use of explosive weapons in populated areas (EWIPA) dominated, representing 69% (2,846) of incidents, 95% (19,105) of civilian casualties, and 94% (6,428) of civilian fatalities. That trend continued into 2023: between December 2022 and November 2023, the use of EWIPA accounted for 75% (5,165) of incidents, 95% (27,362) of civilian casualties, and 96% (11,024) of civilian fatalities. On a more granular level, the use of EWIPA increased by 81% last year, with a 71% increase in associated civilian fatalities.

Perpetrators

2023 saw a notable increase in the reported use of explosive weapons by state actors when compared to the year before: between December 2022 and November 2023, AOA recorded 4,621 incidents of state-perpetrated explosive violence, which resulted in 20,993 civilian casualties of whom 8,884 were killed. Explosive weapons use by state actors consequently

accounts for 67% of all recorded incidents in that time, 73% of civilian casualties, and 77% of civilian fatalities.

The year prior, between December 2021 and November 2022, AOVAV recorded 2,476 incidents of explosive weapons use by state actors, resulting in 13,601 civilian casualties of whom 4,854 were killed. This means state use of explosive weapons increased by 87%, and civilian casualties of such violence by 54%. Civilian fatalities from state-perpetrated explosive violence increased by 83% last year. With conflicts involving state actors looking set to carry over into the coming year, it is likely the use of explosive weapons by these actors will continue to increase.

Weapons

Ground-launched weapons continued to be the dominant weapon-type recorded by AOVAV in terms of recorded incidents. Last year, these weapons accounted for 51% (3,497) of incidents, 41% (11,645) of civilian casualties, and 26% (2,967) of civilian fatalities. Comparatively, in 2022, ground-launched weapons represented 51% (2,109) of incidents, 50% (10,099) of civilian casualties, and 44% (2,992) of civilian fatalities.

In accordance with the decreased proportion of harm from ground-launched weapons, both the use of and harm from air-launched explosive weapons have increased dramatically. Last year, air-launched weapons represented 20% (1,355) of incidents, 41% (11,727) of civilian casualties, and 59% (6,782) of civilian fatalities. The rate of average civilian fatalities per air strike was therefore 5.0. The year prior, these weapons accounted for 13% (527) of incidents, 20% (4,090) of civilian casualties, and 44% (2,065) of civilian fatalities, with a rate of average civilian fatalities per air strike of 3.9.

The use of air-launched weapons consequently increased by 157% last year, and civilian fatalities of such weapons by 228%. As state actors continue to be heavily involved in conflicts, and to mobilise their air forces in populated areas, this is a trend that is likely to continue into 2024.

Zones of Conflict

AOVAV highlights several conflict zones, including both international and non-international armed conflicts, which are likely to continue to experience intense explosive weapon use over the coming year.

Gaza

While Israel carries out relatively frequent operations in Gaza, including a highly injurious operation in May 2021, Operation Swords of Iron has been one of the longest and most damaging: 2023 has so far been the deadliest year for civilians in Gaza recorded by AOVAV. Between

December 2022 and November 2023, AOAV recorded 615 incidents of explosive weapons use in Gaza, resulting in 8,610 civilian casualties of whom 5,811 have been killed. By contrast, during the same period in the year prior, AOAV recorded 30 incidents of explosive weapons use, and 159 civilian casualties of whom 37 were killed.

Of note, in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT), AOAV's analysis showed that English-language media captures only a third of the civilian deaths from specific explosive incidents in Gaza reported by the Palestinian Ministry of Health. Furthermore, the use of explosive weapons in the OPT has been so intensive that it is difficult to attribute civilian casualties to specific incidents of use, as required by AOAV's methodology. It is equally difficult to track rising injury or death tolls from specific incidents. For these reasons, AOAV's data underrepresents the extent of harm caused by explosive weapons in the OPT.

Incessant air strikes and a prolonged ground incursion have characterised Operation Swords of Iron, launched on October 7th in response to the massacre perpetrated by Hamas across Israel. From October 7th to the end of November 2023, AOAV recorded 587 incidents of explosive weapons use in the context of Operations Swords of Iron, and 8,483 civilian casualties of whom 5,783 were killed. While air strikes have dominated the explosive violence landscape in Gaza in that time, accounting for 95% (555) of incidents and 95% (8,047) of civilian casualties, the use of ground-launched weapons has increased as the ground-invasion, which began on October 27th, progresses. AOAV has recorded Israeli artillery shelling (51 civilian casualties), non-specific shelling (48), and tank shelling (40) in the enclave, as well as Hamas mortar and rocket shelling, and rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) attacks. In early 2024, Israel [announced](#) a shift in strategy, pulling troops out of Gaza in a move US officials have [interpreted](#) as reflecting a transition to lower intensity operations. The use of ground-launched weapons is therefore likely to decrease in line with reduced ground operations, while air strikes might be expected to take up the slack.

Operation Swords of Iron has divided nations. Protests, violence, and rising anti-semitism and Islamophobia have accompanied governments across the globe coming down in support of one or the other party. While initially support for Israel from Western governments, in particular the United States and United Kingdom, was relatively unequivocal, criticism regarding the high civilian death toll and catastrophic humanitarian crisis has been growing, with calls for a ceasefire gaining in intensity. Allegations of violations of International Humanitarian Law have been raised against all parties to the conflict, in particular Israeli military tactics that seem to subject the civilian population of Gaza to collective punishment. Israel has repeatedly stated that it would not bow to international pressure as it pursues the stated goal of eliminating Hamas, while Hamas demands a full cessation of Israeli operations in Gaza before a second truce can be negotiated.

Ukraine

Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which began on 24 February 2022, has carried on well into its second year with no signs of abating, although levels of reported harm to civilians have been decreasing. Between December 2022 and November 2023 AOAV recorded 2,765 incidents of

explosive weapons use in Ukraine, and 8,399 civilian casualties, of whom 1,831 have been killed. While this represents a 66% increase from 1,666 incidents recorded in the same period the year prior, civilian casualties have dropped by 12% from 9,557, and civilian fatalities by 47% from 3,477. This could reflect a multitude of factors, including the evacuation and migration of civilians away from conflict zones, or reporting fatigue, which would result in less of the granular reporting on which AOA's methodology relies.

As well as reporting fatigue, Ukraine is growing vulnerable to donor fatigue, with stakeholders becoming frustrated by the lack of progress, and other conflicts moving into focus. Weapons for Ukraine were [diverted](#) to Israel in October, and in the US, Republican leaders have made their support for further aid to Ukraine conditional on a [substantial](#) tightening of US immigration policy. Biden, one of Ukraine's major supporters, was unable to reach a compromise with Senate leaders, who announced that any military support to Ukraine will be [deferred](#) until early 2024. European Union members have continued to be vocal in their support of Ukraine and their pledges of aid, although European artillery production is not set to [meet](#) their goals. The shortage of weapons and funds is being [felt](#) on the frontlines.

State actors were responsible for the majority, 98% (2,708), of explosive weapons use in Ukraine last year, with the Russian armed forces accounting for 92% (2,544) of reported incidents and 91% (7,621) of civilian casualties. The Ukrainian armed forces were the reported perpetrators of 4% (111) of recorded explosive violence incidents and 7% (599) of civilian casualties. This represents a 74% increase in state actors' use of explosive weapons in Ukraine, from 1,560 incidents recorded the year prior, and in particular a 70% increase in Russian explosive weapons use (from 1,497 recorded incidents), and a 109% increase in explosive weapons use by the Ukrainian armed forces (from 53). With the reported use of explosive weapons by both states party to the conflict increasing significantly, the mutual unwillingness to engage in negotiations reflects the likelihood of ongoing hostilities.

Sudan

The current war in [Sudan](#) finds its roots in the country's long history of coups, in particular the 2019 ousting of Omar al-Bashir, following which the military and pro-democracy movement agreed to share power. In October of 2021, General Abdel-Fattah Burhan dissolved this agreement, temporarily detaining the civilian Prime Minister and effectively taking control of the country. He has since acted as Sudan's de facto ruler, with the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), a paramilitary group led by General Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo, working alongside the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) to maintain the military's ascendance. However, growing tensions between the two armed forces coalesced into an intractable power struggle, and on April 15th 2023, a full-scale armed conflict broke out between Burhan and Dagalo. The resulting insecurity and armed violence have spread far beyond the capital to other cities, displacing thousands and exacerbating Sudan's existing humanitarian challenges, as well as compounding the challenges of an eventual transition to civilian, democratic rule.

The impact of the conflict is stark: 2023 was the most harmful year AOAV has recorded in Sudan since 2010. Between December 2021 and November 2022, AOAV recorded three incidents of explosive weapons use in Sudan, and 30 resulting civilian casualties of whom five were killed. Between December 2022 and November 2023, the number of recorded incidents rose by 4,167% to 128; civilian casualties of explosive violence rose by 7,193% to 2,188; and civilian fatalities increased by 18,420% to 926.

It has been consistently challenging to attribute particular incidents to either the SAF or the RSF, the two major parties to the conflict, with around 63% (81) of incidents attributed to unknown actors, or to both state and non-state actors during clashes. However, state actors, specifically the SAF, are reportedly responsible for 23% (29) of incidents and 24% (534) of civilian casualties, while non-state actors, specifically the RSF, reportedly caused 14% (18) of incidents and 14% (316) of civilian casualties.

The SAF has predominantly made use of air strikes, which account for 79% (23) of incidents attributed to Burhan's forces, and 65% (349) of civilian casualties ascribed to them. SAF air strikes also account for 75% (229) of all 305 civilian fatalities attributed to the SAF. On the other hand, the RSF has chiefly relied on ground-launched weapons, in particular non-specific shelling and artillery shelling. Such weapons account for 89% (16) of incidents attributed to the RSF, and 88% (279) of resulting civilian harm. Ground-launched weapons represent 85% (104) of all 122 civilian fatalities attributed to the RSF.

In early December, mediators had indefinitely [suspended](#) talks between the SAF and RSF, but in mid-December Burhan [agreed](#) to a one-on-one meeting with Dagalo. The meeting was supposed to take place on December 28, but was [postponed](#) for 'technical reasons' to January 2024. With neither side having gained the upper-hand militarily, 2024 is likely to bear witness to further escalations between the two if the scheduled meeting fails to bear fruit.

Myanmar

In February of 2021, [Myanmar's](#) military imposed a year-long state of emergency, and arrested Aung San Suu Kyi, as well as other senior government officials. The coup quickly devolved into a non-international armed conflict as civilians rose to protest, then mobilised into civilian defence forces loosely allied under the National Unity Government (NUG). In 2022 and 2023, these defence forces increased their attacks against the military junta and suspected collaborators, demonstrating the ability to adapt their military strategy and score significant military successes with improvised and makeshift weaponry. Established Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs) also intensified their attacks against the military government, and alliances between EAOs and various People's Defence Forces (PDF) units have held and borne military successes. The military junta, in response, has continued its tried-and-trusted 'Four Cuts' strategy, targeting the civilian networks which support the opposition. Towns and villages, schools and hospitals, have borne the brunt of the junta's operations.

Last year saw a significant escalation in the number of recorded incidents of explosive weapons use in Myanmar, and in civilian casualties. Between December 2022 and November 2023, AOVAV recorded 932 incidents of explosive weapons use in the beleaguered country, and 2,014 civilian casualties of whom 687 were killed. This is up from 525 incidents the year prior, which resulted in 957 civilian casualties of whom 309 were killed - a 78% increase in incidents, 110% increase in civilian casualties, and a 122% increase in civilian fatalities.

The use of explosive weapons by the military junta accounted for 43% (400) of incidents last year, 84% (1,695) of civilian casualties, and 87% (598) of civilian fatalities. Conversely, non-state actors account for 53% (496) of recorded incidents, 9% (174) of civilian casualties, and 7% (45) of civilian fatalities.

Accordingly, air-launched weapons account for a small proportion of incidents, 14% (130), but the majority of civilian harm: these weapons represent 47% (946) of civilian casualties, and 54% (374) of civilian fatalities. As non-state actors continue to escalate their resistance, and the military junta escalates its own established strategies in response, air strikes will likely continue to target civilians and civilian infrastructure in the coming year, remaining responsible for the bulk of civilian harm from explosive weapons in the country.