ACLED-Religion Methodology and Coding Decisions around Religious Repression and Disorder

Background

There are many mantles under which individuals and groups organize to engage in violence – for example, politics, economics, or ethnicity. Groups use common ideologies to coalesce around a cause and use violent – and at times non-violent – strategies to accomplish them. Religion is one of these ideologies. Religion is often used to legitimize political institutions, mobilize social movements, or drive support for armed conflicts. Regardless of whether the actions are truly motivated by religious ideals, religion is used by state and non-state actors as a tool for consolidating power and building support (Scorgie-Porter, 2015; Sheikh, 2012; Basedau et al, 2016). Religion-based violence has seen an increase in recent years (Toft, 2007), with some even arguing that religious conflicts are more violent than other types of conflicts (Pearce, 2005; Toft, 2006).

Religion can be used to justify violent acts (e.g. by jihadist groups), to mobilize support for religious or political causes (e.g. by religious political parties), to consolidate power by targeting or ostracizing religious minorities, or to fuel inter-ethnic tensions (as ethnicity and religion are often closely linked). This is true across religions and political systems – from the Islamist political parties of the Middle East, to Christian militias in Africa, and Buddhist or Hindu nationalist groups in Asia.

At the same time, religion and religious individuals or groups can also be the target of political violence. Religious groups – whether in the minority or majority religion of the country – can be restricted in how they practice their religion, espouse their beliefs, or in the rights they are afforded.

ACLED-Religion is an event-based dataset of political violence and demonstrations involving religion. It builds off of the more general ACLED dataset of political violence and demonstrations. It does so in two ways: by adding information about religious dynamics and actors to events already captured by ACLED, and by adding new events and event types to capture religious repression that does not fit ACLED's mandate and hence is not captured in the ACLED dataset. All event types in the ACLED dataset exist in the ACLED-Religion dataset – coded using the same methodology – making it possible to compare events across both datasets.

Still, capturing religious disorder and repression specifically presents a host of methodological difficulties, including how to determine which events are religion-related, how to identify

religion-based actors, and how to code events that are not clearly religion-related but that could be part of a larger religious dynamic or conflict in the country. This document will further expand on these decisions and how ACLED-Religion contends with these concerns.

ACLED-Religion dataset is a project carried out by ACLED. That said, references to 'ACLED' in this document refer to the original ACLED dataset, while 'ACLED-Religion' refers to the new dataset which captures trends around religious disorder and repression.

Intersection with ACLED

The ACLED and ACLED-Religion datasets have many events in common. This is because all ACLED event types are included in ACLED-Religion's event types. Further, events are largely coded based on the same rules – with the caveat that ACLED-Religion events must involve a distinct religious element.

For this reason, ACLED-Religion researchers and their ACLED counterparts are in close contact with one another during coding, discussing and sharing events that the two datasets have in common. In cases when one dataset issues a correction to an event, the event is also corrected in the other dataset, if the correction is relevant to that dataset. This synchronization means that the ACLED dataset is complementary to the ACLED-Religion dataset, and can be used by users to shed light on political violence and demonstrations that may not be related to religion yet impact the larger landscape of a country.

In cases where an event is present in both the ACLED and ACLED-Religion datasets, the ACLED-Religion version of the event will have the ACLED 'EVENT_ID_CNTY' value recorded in the 'ACLED_ID' column.

Determination of 'religion-related' events

All ACLED-Religion events occur within the larger context of the political and social environment of a country; therefore, *no event is purely religious in nature*. It can be impossible to determine whether an action was motivated by religion, especially when relying on secondary sources as ACLED-Religion does. For this reason, *ACLED-Religion does not assume that the motivation of an event is religious.* Rather, the inclusion of an event in the dataset is based on:
- Whether it has a clear religious element because of the involvement of religion-based actors,[1]
- Whether it includes the targeting of individuals engaging in religious practice or expressing their religious belief,

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[1] For more on religion-based actors, see the section '*Coding of religion-based actors'* below.

- Whether it involves the enforcement of specific religious norms to force or prevent actions, and/or
- Whether it involves actors from a designated religious cleavage.[2]

Religious disorder events

Political violence and demonstrations – also coded by ACLED – contribute to the overall religious dynamics of a country. An armed clash between the Islamic State and the military forces of a country may not be an act of direct religious repression, in and of itself. However, it provides important contextual information about religious dynamics in the country and what acts of direct religious repression may subsequently occur. ACLED-Religion categorizes these types of events as religious disorder. **Religious disorder refers to acts of political violence involving one or more religion-based actors, or non-violent events involving religion-based actors that capture the potential precursors or critical junctures of a violent conflict or repression, like protests or strategic developments.**

The key element of religious disorder events is that *they must involve a religion-based actor*. These are actors that have explicit religious goals or a religiously defined agenda or pretense for political action. Because it is impossible to assume motivations for actions that do not result in a direct act of religious repression, religious disorder events rely on the involvement of a religion-based actor to satisfy whether the event has a clear religious element. Therefore, religious disorder events do not involve acts that are directly linked to religious practice, belief, or expression. These events can be identified by the lack of a 'religious context' for the event.[3]

For example, the aforementioned armed clash between the Islamic State and the military forces of a country would be included in the ACLED-Religion dataset as a religion-related event because it involves a religion-based actor – the Islamic State. Its inclusion does not imply that the motivation behind that specific armed clash was necessarily religious. In fact, the motivation behind the armed clash may have been political or territorial in nature – it is impossible to know based on secondary sourcing alone. However, because it involves an actor with explicit religious goals as an organization, the event is considered to be religion-related and is therefore included in the ACLED-Religion dataset. Fundamentally, the event gives insight into the religious dynamics of a country where a religion-based actor is involved in armed clashes against the state.

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[2] For more on religious cleavages, see the '*Religious cleavages*' section below.
[3] The 'religious context' describes the element(s) of religious activity targeted or involved in the event (e.g, a form of practice, belief, expression, etc.). ACLED-Religion codes for five 'religious context' types: 'Practice', 'Belief', 'Expression', 'Political expression', and 'Imposition'. For more on the definitions of 'religious context' types, see the ACLED-Religion Codebook.

Religious repression events

Some acts, however, result in the direct religious repression of others. ***Religious repression* refers to events, violent or non-violent, which attempt to prevent an individual or group from observing, worshipping, practicing, teaching, or identifying with their religion or belief, in public or private.** This includes individuals being attacked while proselytizing or being arrested for adhering to a banned religion, for example. **Religious repression also includes violent and non-violent attempts to force or prevent an individual or group to engage in actions or behaviors conforming to the beliefs or norms of a religion (their own or otherwise).** This includes using threats to coerce certain behaviors, like threatening store owners with sanctions and fines if they do not decorate their buildings in accordance with celebrations for the birth of Prophet Muhammad, or arresting women who do not wear a hijab. While such events, especially when non-violent or when perpetrated by individuals not associated with an organized group, are not coded in the ACLED dataset, they *are* included here in the ACLED-Religion dataset.

Instances where the exercise of religion directly threatens the fundamental rights and freedoms of others, however, are excluded. In other words, not being allowed to practice one's religion because it directly challenges the fundamental rights and freedoms of others is not seen as religious repression. 'Fundamental rights and freedoms' include the right to life, liberty, health and safety, freedom from slavery and torture, and the right to work and education. For example, an individual being arrested for attempting to harm someone as part of a religious ritual would not be coded as a religious repression event. Although that individual was engaging in religious practice, that practice was directly violating someone else's fundamental right to life and safety.

In the ACLED-Religion dataset, religious repression events must involve an element of religious practice, belief, expression, or imposition. For these events, the incident must clearly target individuals engaging with their religion in some way, or must involve the enforcement of specific religious norms unto others. Unlike religious disorder events (e.g. an armed clash involving Islamist militants), the event must involve a direct religious repression outcome, such as an individual being attacked while praying, or an individual engaging in violence to enforce a religious norm. Religious repression events can be identified by the presence of a 'religious context' for the event.

In some cases, religion forms a salient cleavage between groups in a country, meaning that the targeting or persecution of a religious group is so systematic that it can be assumed to play a role in all interactions with members of that religious group. In countries with such a religious cleavage, all events involving members of those groups are included in the dataset. This is the case regardless of whether the victim was engaging in religious activity at the time of the event, if the perpetrator was clearly enforcing a specific religious norm or ideology, or if either are designated religion-based actors. For more on how religious cleavages are designated, see the 'Religious cleavages' section below.

Coding of religion-based actors

'Religion-based actors' in ACLED-Religion are defined as actors that have religious ideologies or goals that are made explicit through words or actions.[4] They include state forces, rebels, militias, identity groups, demonstrators, sole perpetrators, civilians, and external or other forces that are motivated by a religiously defined agenda for political action or by a religious ideology.

ACLED-Religion classifies actors as 'religion-based' by assessing the presence of a religious ideology or mission in their charters, statements, or writings, relying on self-proclaimed goals and aspirations when possible. This is similar to the procedure used by ACLED in categorizing non-state actors as rebels, political militias, or communal militias, for example. If primary sources are not available, the 'religion-based' quality of an actor is assessed based on reviews of published reports and scholarly literature. This information is complemented by interviews conducted with experts on religious dynamics in each country.

The list of religion-based actors is constantly re-examined in accordance with relevant political developments in the country, the emergence of new actors, and the evolution of the identity and goals of previously coded actors.

ACLED-Religion's coding rules relating to some complex actors are detailed below:

State actors

States are not monoliths; they are comprised of various organizations with distinct agendas and political purposes. For this reason, ACLED-Religion does not designate states as a whole as religion-based actors, regardless of whether that state is a theocracy (e.g. Iran) or founded on religious grounds (e.g. Israel).

Instead, certain government actors or state forces can be classified as religion-based actors if their explicit mission is to enforce religious norms, practices, or laws (e.g. morality police forces, special units of the military, etc.). For example, Zainabiyat in Yemen (coded as **Military Forces of Yemen (2016-) Zainabiyat**) is a female unit of the pro-Houthi police which enforces moral restrictions in addition to Houthi ideology; the Guidance Patrol in Iran, or Gasht-e Ershad (coded as **Police Forces of Iran (1989-) Guidance Patrol**), is the Iranian morality police.

Depending on the information reported by sources, state actors can also be assigned a religious affiliation on an *ad hoc* basis (i.e. in the context of a single event) if they are enforcing or promoting the religious norms or laws of a specific religion. For example, if the military forces of a country arrest individuals engaging in proselytizing Christianity because they are violating the laws of Islam, then the military forces would be coded with "Islam" as their religious affiliation for that event.

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[4] Actors advocating for secularization are also classified as 'religion-based' as their goals relate to religion-related issues.

Unique religion-based actors

Religious endowments

State authorities devoted to the management of the Islamic Waqf and other religious endowments are not pre-defined as religion-based actors. Some of their mandates are purely bureaucratic in nature and do not act to enforce or promote a certain religion. However, if such actors engage in acts of religious repression or disorder, they then appear in the ACLED-Religion dataset. If they are enforcing a specific religious norm or ideology, that religion would be listed as the actor's religious affiliation. Some examples include:

Country	Actor
Bahrain	Government of Bahrain (1999-) Ministry of Justice, Islamic Affairs and Religious Endowments
Egypt	Government of Egypt (2014-) Ministry of Religious Endowments
Iran	Government of Iran (1989-) Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance
Iraq	Government of Iraq (2020-) Sunni Endowment Office
	Government of Iraq (2020-) Shiite Endowment Office
	Government of Iraq (2020-) Christian, Ezidian and Sabean Mandaean Endowments Office
	Government of Iraq (2020-) Kurdistan Regional Government - Ministry of Religious Endowments and Religious Affairs
Israel	Government of Israel (2009-) Ministry of Religious Services
Palestine	Government of Palestine (1994-) Palestinian National Authority - Ministry of Religious Endowments and Religious Affairs
	Government of Jordan (1999-) Jerusalem

	Islamic Waqf[5]
Yemen	Government of Yemen (2012-) Ministry of Religious Endowments and Guidance
	Government of Yemen (2016-) Supreme Political Council - Ministry of Religious Endowments and Guidance

Religious authorities associated with the state

Prominent religious institutions are sometimes affiliated – to various degrees – with the state through civil society organizations. Similarly, some prominent religious figures (e.g. the Islamic Grand Mufti, the head of the Islamic jurisconsults of a state) are appointed by the state. These unarmed actors are coded as Associated Actors of civilians in the data, alongside other relevant Associated Actors, such as the government of the respective country and a religious leader designation (*described in further detail below*). A few examples of these religious authorities and how they are coded when acting as the primary actor in an event are noted below:

Country	Actor	Associated Actor	Details
Egypt	Civilians (Egypt)	Dar al-Ifta al-Misriyyah; Government of Egypt (2014-); Religious Leaders (Egypt)	*Used to code fatwas issued by the Grand Mufti of Egypt and other religious scholars of Dar al-Ifta*
Egypt	Civilians (Egypt)	Al-Azhar University; Government of Egypt (2014-); Religious Leaders (Egypt)	*Used to code fatwas issued by the religious scholars of al-Azhar University*

Ethno-religious, tribal and communal groups

Ethno-religious groups are communal groups defined by several reinforcing traits (e.g. language, shared historical experience, region of residence, etc.), including religious belief and practice (Gurr, 1993).

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[5] The Jerusalem Islamic Waqf controls and manages the al-Aqsa Mosque and other Islamic endowments in the Old City of Jerusalem, yet is funded by the government of Jordan. For this reason, events involving the Jerusalem Islamic Waqf at the al-Aqsa compound are coded with an interaction code of 8, indicating a foreign state force.

If religion appears to be just one trait among others in defining the identity and boundaries of an ethno-religious group, the group is not coded as a religion-based actor by ACLED-Religion. For example, the Yazidis in Iraq are only considered as a religion-based actor when they are clearly targeted because of their religious belief or practice. In fact, Yazidi identity – which is currently undergoing a process of redefinition – is considered either as ethno-nationalist (Arab, Kurd or Yazidi) or ethno-religious (Majid, 2020).

Because the saliency of religion in defining ethnic identities varies over time, place, and in response to the political environment, ethno-religious groups may be re-categorized as religion-based actors if religion becomes the primary defining trait of their group.

Similarly, ACLED-Religion does not consider tribal/communal groups/militias as religion-based actors based solely on the religious affiliation of the majority of their members. For example, the Salah al-Din Brigade in Iraq, a "Sunni tribal militia" (Dury-Agri et al, 2017), is not considered a religion-based actor as the tribal bond is deemed to prevail over religion in defining the group's boundaries.

Coalitions and umbrella organizations

ACLED-Religion does not consider political coalitions and umbrella organizations as religion-based actors unless all of their members are themselves religion-based actors pursuing a shared religious agenda.

For example, the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) – an Iraqi umbrella organization of more than 40 paramilitary groups (ICG 2018) – are not designated as a religion-based actor. Although the majority of the militias composing the PMF are Shiite Muslim groups, the organization is also comprised of ethno-religious and tribal militias and the goals of the PMF are not religious in nature, but rather political.

Non-state armed actors

Rebels and political militias are designated as religion-based actors when they have religious ideologies or goals that are made explicit through words or actions. It is important to note that the religious affiliation of the majority of the members of a non-state armed actor is *not* a sufficient condition to designate the actor as religion-based.

Below is a non-exhaustive list of how ACLED-Religion treats the coding of some specific non-state actors:

Houthi Movement - Ansar Allah

The Houthi movement (or Ansar Allah) upholds an ideology which combines an anti-imperialist narrative with a strong religious stance grounded in the revivalism of Zaydi Islam. As such, it is defined as a religion-based actor and assigned "Islam (Zaydi Shiite)" as its religious affiliation in the ACLED-Religion dataset.

Ansar Allah is the majority shareholder of the Supreme Political Council (SPC), the political body which rules most of northern Yemen. In addition, the leadership and structures of Ansar Allah are increasingly merging with formal state ([ACAPS, 2020](#)). On account of this broad overlap between Ansar Allah and state authorities, secondary sources often refer to the SPC and its military and security apparatuses as 'Houthi' forces or militias. Against this backdrop, it is extremely challenging to discern between the acts of Ansar Allah as an autonomous political group and the acts of SPC-controlled state authorities.

Therefore, as a general rule, ACLED-Religion codes the Supreme Political Council[6] as the main actor whenever secondary sources mention the involvement of pro-Houthi forces, militias, or state authorities in an event. ACLED-Religion only codes **Houthi Movement - Ansar Allah** as an Associated Actor of the SPC in the following cases: a) when a Houthi supervisor (*mushrif*) is explicitly mentioned by the sources, as supervisors hold a formal position in Ansar Allah; b) when sources clarify that state forces are enforcing Houthi ideology; or c) when sources clarify that a decision enforced by the state was initially approved by the leadership of the Houthi movement. For example, **Houthi Movement - Ansar Allah** would be coded as the Associated Actor of an event where the Political Bureau of the Houthis and its leader, Abd al-Malik al-Houthi, issues a directive to prohibit New Year's Eve celebrations, in an effort to preserve "true Islamic religion" against "Western invasion".

Salafi militias (Yemen)

Since the beginning of the Yemeni war (2015), militias led by Salafi leaders have participated in numerous military operations, mostly in support of the Arab coalition. Salafi leaders have justified the violence waged against Houthi Zaydi revivalists in sectarian terms, as a means to counter Shia influence in Yemeni society. In line with this interpretation, they have organized Salafi militias around a common religious ideology ([Bonnefoy, 2020](#)). ACLED-Religion codes Salafi militias as religion-based actors when the Salafi identity of the militia's leadership is the basis for the militia's formation. Some examples of Salafi militias categorized as religion-based actors (non-exhaustive) include:

- Al Usbah Brigade

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[6] Pro-Houthi state actors are coded as 'Military Forces of Yemen (2016-) Supreme Political Council', 'Police Forces of Yemen (2016-) Supreme Political Council', and 'Government of Yemen (2016-) Supreme Political Council'.

- Hashem al Sayyid Brigade
- Militia (Abu al Abbas)
- Militia (Abu Hamza)
- Militia (Al Mihdhar)

Settlers (Israel)

Israeli settlers in the West Bank and Golan Heights cannot be considered a unitary and cohesive group. Some settlements are secular, while others were founded on a religious basis. Accordingly, ACLED-Religion does not necessarily consider settlers to be religion-based actors. Settlers are only designated as religion-based actors in the following cases when: a) sources provide information on their settlement of origin and it is a religious or ultra-Orthodox settlement; b) they are performing religious rituals or stressing their religious belief; and/or c) they target Muslim believers in and around the al-Aqsa complex. Settlers from secular settlements, mixed settlements, or when their settlement is unknown are not assumed to be religion-based actors.

When the settler is a religion-based actor, their settlement is noted in the respective Associated Actor column as **[Name of Settlement] Settlement**. For example, if a group of settlers from the religious Beit Orot settlement attack a Muslim praying at al-Aqsa Mosque, the Associated Actor would be coded as **Beit Orot Settlement** to indicate that the settlers came from a religious settlement.

The list of religious settlements is reviewed and updated periodically to account for newly built settlements.

Zionists

ACLED-Religion codes religious Zionist groups as religion-based actors (e.g. Meimad or Jewish Home Party in Israel). Non-religious Zionist groups (like nationalist or cultural Zionist groups) are not considered to be religion-based actors because their motivations for creating a Jewish state are not primarily religion-based (e.g. HaAvoda (Israeli Labour Party)).

Shiite militias (Iraq)

Following the collapse of Iraqi security forces in 2014, most Shiite militias were assembled in a paramilitary umbrella organization – the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) – with the aim of fighting the Islamic State. The Shiite units of the PMF can be divided in three main groups affiliated with 1) Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, 2) Najaf-based Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, and 3) the Iraqi cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. They are at times associated with political parties

or with religious seminaries (*hawza*). Though the PMF as a whole is not designated as a religion-based actor because it is comprised of a variety of actors, the specific Shiite militias in Iraq are designated as religion-based actors and assigned "Islam (Twelver Shiite)" as their religious affiliation.

The specific PMF militia involved in the event is included as an Associated Actor whenever that information is provided in reporting. Events involving Shiite militias – a religion-based actor – are included in the ACLED-Religion data. Otherwise, the event is included only if it involves another religion-based actor (e.g. Islamic State).

Sole Perpetrators

The **Sole Perpetrator** actor is used by ACLED-Religion when a violent activity is carried out by a single individual (e.g. a 'lone wolf'), unaffiliated with a specific named group, but whose actions may be inspired by a specific named group or ideology. Sole perpetrators are coded in two scenarios. First, they are coded when they attempt to enforce religious norms or impose their own religious identity on a victim. In such cases, they are assigned a religious affiliation. For example, if a Muslim man attacks a woman for not wearing a hijab, he is coded as a **Sole Perpetrator** with the religious affiliation of "Islam". Secondly, sole perpetrators are coded when they target a victim because of their religious belief, practice, or expression. In such cases, they may or may not have an assigned religious affiliation. For example, if an unidentified individual attacks a man while he is praying, the primary actor is coded as **Sole Perpetrator** with no religious affiliation listed.

Violent acts carried out by sole perpetrators are coded with the sub-event type 'Attack' or 'Assault,' depending on the severity of the act. For example, a murder would be coded as 'Attack', while shoving would be coded as 'Assault'. In some cases, property destruction by groups smaller than a mob are coded with the **Sole Perpetrator** actor (e.g. two unidentified men break into a church and smash the stained glass windows).

Generic associated actors

ACLED-Religion uses generic Associated Actors to code religious roles that are common across countries. For example, **Religious Leaders (Country)** is used when an individual with a specific religious function is coded – such as an imam, priest, rabbi, religious singer (raddud, nashshad, etc.), religious scholar, etc. **Religion Students (Country)** refers to students of a religious school, such as Yeshiva students in Israel, seminary students in Iran, etc.

Religious affiliations

An actor's religious affiliation describes their self-ascribed adherence to a religious denomination. By definition, all religion-based actors have an assigned religious affiliation. Whenever information is available concerning the religious affiliation of an actor, it is specified in the actor's respective 'RELIG_AFFIL' column (*for more, see the [ACLED-Religion Codebook](#)*). If there are multiple actors involved on one side of the event (i.e., there is a primary actor as well as an associated actor), the religious affiliations of each actor (if known) will be listed in the 'RELIG_AFFIL' column, respectively, even if the affiliations are the same. For example, an event coded in Yemen with the actor **AQAP: Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula** and the associated actor **Ansar al Sharia (Yemen)** will have "Islam (Salafi); Islam (Salafi)" as the religious affiliation to denote the Salafi affiliations of both actors.

It is important to note that 'null' religious affiliations are not captured in the 'RELIG_AFFIL' columns. For example, an event coded in Iraq with the actor **Military Forces of Iraq (2020-) Popular Mobilization Forces** and associated actor **Kataib Hezbollah (Iraq)** will have "Islam (Shiite)" listed as the religious affiliation representing the affiliation of **Kataib Hezbollah (Iraq)**. The 'null' affiliation of **Military Forces of Iraq (2020-) Popular Mobilization Forces** is not coded.

As noted above, most state forces are not considered to be religion-based actors, and thus they are not necessarily assigned a religious affiliation. However, when the context of an event clearly suggests that state forces are acting in accordance with the belief and/or interests of a religious denomination, a religious affiliation will be contextually assigned. For example, a teacher imposing the hijab on a student in Egypt will be coded with the primary actor **Civilians (Egypt)** and the associated actor **Government of Egypt (2014-); Teachers (Egypt)**, with "Islam" as the religious affiliation. This will allow users to single out incidents of religious repression where the state is overtly imposing the ideology of a specific religious denomination.

The list of religious affiliations coded by ACLED-Religion is not predetermined. Rather, it is constantly updated as new affiliations are captured by researchers. When applicable, the sub-group of a religion may be added in parentheses (e.g. "Islam (Shiite)" or "Christianity (Protestant Evangelical)"). Denoting as such has two main consequences for users: 1) it allows for grouping affiliations by their primary religious group (i.e. "Islam" for "Islam (Shiite)") so users can analyze trends of activities across religions broadly; and 2) it allows for more specific comparisons of intra-religious interactions between sub-groups.

Religious affiliation is always assigned following the actor's self-identification. In determining an actor's affiliation, statements and documents produced by the actor itself are prioritized. If those are not available, the religious affiliation is determined based on scholarly literature, reports, and interviews conducted with area experts. In assigning sub-groups, a conservative approach is

applied. In cases of a lack of clear information, the more generic denomination is selected. For example, Shiite militias in Iraq are assigned "Islam (Shiite)" as the religious affiliation, given the challenges of testing the adherence of each militia to the more specific "Islam (Twelver Shiite)" denomination.

In a few cases, events are included in the dataset even though the religious affiliation of the actor(s) involved is not explicit. This can occur when an actor's behavior is sanctioned or repressed because it is deemed generically 'immoral' by the perpetrator. For example, a woman may be arrested for posting 'immoral' photos online. In these cases, a religious motivation is suspected, but not made explicit and the event is flagged with the '[Morality]' tag in the beginning of the Notes.[7] Additionally, this can occur when an actor is persecuted because they are demonstrating a lack of religious belief or practice. For example, a blogger may be fined for blasphemy for writing a post critical of the Prophet Muhammad.

Stigmatized affiliation

If a perpetrator assigns a religious affiliation to a victim to justify an act of repression or discrimination – and the victim's self-ascriptive religious affiliation remains unknown – the imposed religious affiliation is coded generically as "Stigmatized Affiliation". This occurs when a group labels a religion's beliefs or practices as 'deviant', and thus misrepresents that group or individual's religious affiliation (e.g. folk Islam and folk Christianity are often misrepresented as 'witchcraft'). Additionally, this may occur when an entire religious denomination is banned and/or specifically targeted by state forces, and citizens are arrested on suspicion of being associated with the religion with no evidence of their actual affiliation (e.g. individuals in Iran being arrested on suspicion of being 'Satanists').

It is important to note that the use of a generic "Stigmatized Affiliation" marker (rather than reporting the accused affiliation itself) serves to *not* reinforce the imposition of stigmatized religious affiliations on victims. Accordingly, whenever the self-ascribed religious affiliation of a victim is known, it is reported in addition to the "Stigmatized Affiliation" marker. For example, if the source indicates that a Baha'i man was arrested on accusations of being an atheist, the religious affiliation is reported as "Stigmatized Affiliation; Baha'i"). This allows users to analyze trends of repression based on the imposition of stigmatized religious identities while also being able to track which religious groups are frequently accused of being part of a stigmatized affiliation. The 'NOTES' of each event will report details concerning the specific stigmatized affiliation.

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[7] For more on the use of the '[Morality]' tag, see below.

Religious cleavages

Certain dynamics within countries are designated as a 'religious cleavage', which indicates that religion forms a salient cleavage among groups in that country. In countries with a designated religious cleavage, all events involving members of those groups are included in the dataset, *regardless of whether the target was engaging in religious activity at the time of the event or if the perpetrator was clearly enforcing a specific religious norm or ideology.* This makes these events distinct from other repression events, where a clear religious element must be present in the event for it to be coded. It also prevents undercounting events involving certain actors that may be religion-related yet do not explicitly involve religious practice or expression. The religious cleavage designation allows for the assumption that religion played an underlying role in the event. For example, in Egypt there is a salient religious cleavage between Coptic Christians and Muslims. As such, an attack against a Coptic Christian civilian in Egypt would be coded regardless of whether the target was engaging in activity that would have made it clear they were being targeted for their religion, such as praying or preaching. This is because it is assumed that the Coptic Christian identity in Egypt is one that is targeted frequently and systematically, and that incidents involving a Coptic Christian being attacked are likely related to that religious identity in some way.

When applicable, religious cleavages are limited to certain time frames or geographic locations where they are most salient, and only events occurring in those locations and/or time periods are coded as such. For example, if Shiite Muslims in the northwest region of a country are systematically targeted by state forces during an ongoing conflict, then events involving Shiite Muslims as the victims that are coded based on religious cleavage rules would only include incidents occurring in the northwest region during the active years of the conflict. In rare cases, events are included as part of a 'temporary' religious cleavage. These are cases where there is short-lived yet systematic persecution of certain religious groups or enforcement of religious norms. For example, a heightened number of state arrests of Shiite Muslims during Arbaeen commemorations indicates a temporary religious cleavage between state forces and Shiite Muslims. These arrests would be coded as 'Judicial harassment' events, even though the victim may not have been engaging in a religious practice or espousing a religious belief at the time. The context of the event indicates that the arrest was part of a crackdown on a specific religious group during a limited time period – which is a 'temporary' religious cleavage.

Because of the inherent assumptions being made about motivations in these types of events, the religious cleavage designation is assigned very sparingly. It is used only in cases where a religious group is systematically and repeatedly targeted by the state or members of society, or when a religious group systematically engages in enforcing specific religious norms or ideologies. For this reason, *the absence of a religious cleavage designation in a country does not indicate that other groups are not persecuted or targeted in a country.* Indeed, there may be many forms of religious tension present in a country and those events will be captured if they include a clear religious dimension. The religious cleavage designation is reserved for cleavages that are so pervasive that the religious element of the event can be assumed even in cases where the victim is not engaging in religious practice or expression.

The existence and salience of a cleavage is assessed based on reviews of recent religious freedom reports, including publications by the US Department of State, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, Minority Rights Group International, and Freedom House. These reports are chosen because they are published and updated regularly, and take a 'global' view of religious freedom issues inside these countries as opposed to a detailed, localized approach. While the latter is the preferred approach for sourcing events, religious cleavages need to be determined based on broad trends in the country. In other words – what religious dynamics are so systematic and pervasive that they would be captured in a broad analysis of a country's religious landscape? Information retrieved from published reports is complemented by interviews conducted with experts on religious dynamics in each country. Religious cleavages are constantly re-examined in accordance with relevant political developments in the country.

The table below lists some of these religious cleavages. The *Opposing Actor(s)* column in the table below indicates additional actors that must be involved in events that fall within the religious cleavage. For example, if the salient religious cleavage involves the state forces of a country against a religious minority group, the state forces would be indicated in the *Opposing Actor(s)* column and only events involving *both* state forces *and* the religious minority group would be included as part of the religious cleavage. If the *Opposing Actor(s)* column is blank, it indicates that the group(s) is targeted by both state and societal actors, and no specific actor needs to be the main perpetrator. Similarly, the *Location* and *Time Period* columns indicate specific locations or time periods when the cleavage is salient, if applicable.

Country	Actor(s)	Opposing Actor(s)	Location	Time Period
Yemen	Baha'i		Houthi-controlled territories	March 2015 - present
Iran	Baha'i; Islam (Sufi); Islam (Sunni); Christianity; Judaism; Zoroastrianism; Yarsanism; Atheism; Mandaeism	State forces of Iran (1989-)		
Egypt	Christianity (Jehovah's Witness); Baha'i; Islam (Quranist)	State forces of Egypt (2014-)		

Egypt	Christianity (Coptic)	Non-state actors (e.g. members of other religious groups, organized armed groups, communal militias)		
Egypt	Muslim Brotherhood	State forces of Egypt (2014-)		19 December 2020 - present

Coding of unique events

Arrests performed under terrorism charges

State actors have been known to use terrorism charges as an instrument of repression against religious groups. In these types of cases, religious group members are accused of being part of "terrorist organizations" (e.g. al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, etc.) despite a lack of evidence connecting them to these groups.

Generally, the arrest of a religion-based actor for reasons not directly related to religious practice is coded as event type 'Strategic developments' and sub-event type 'Arrests'. It is subject to a threshold for inclusion in the dataset: the arrest must be of 25 or more individuals, or the arrest must be of a significant individual(s). When civilians are arrested because of their religious belief, practice or expression, the event is coded as event type 'Non-violent harassment' and sub-event type 'Judicial harassment' and it is *not* subject to a threshold for inclusion in the dataset. This is because the latter is a form of 'religious repression'. In light of this distinction, arrests conducted under terrorism charges are scrutinized with heightened attention, with the aim of flagging the potential usage of 'terrorism' as an instrument of religious repression.

For example, if a source says "the Prosecutor for State Security in the district of Kafr Saqr reportedly renewed the detention of Rida Abd al-Rahman, a blogger with Quranist views, under charges of 'being a member of the Islamic State, adopting takfiri ideas and promoting them'", but there is no other evidence of his affiliation with the Islamic State, then it can be deduced that the

affiliation with the Islamic State is being used as a pretext to target the victim's affiliation with a religion.[8] The event would be coded as "Judicial harassment" with the target coded as **Civilians (Egypt)** and the religious affiliation recorded as "Stigmatized Affiliation; Islam (Quranist)". The alleged affiliation with the Islamic State would be referenced in the 'NOTES' of the event. This approach allows the user to analyze how a "terrorist affiliation" may be imposed on the self-ascriptive religious affiliation of a victim.

Enforcement of moral norms overlapping with religion

Repression conducted in the name of 'moral norms' can be a precursor of religious repression. In many cases, state and non-state actors systematically repress behaviors generically labelled as 'immoral', including sex work, alcohol consumption, immodest dress code, and inappropriate content published on the Internet.

When the enforcement of moral values is not clearly motivated by religion but is suspected to be informed by a religious bias of the state, the event is marked with the tag "[Morality]" in the 'NOTES'. Trends related to these events can provide important contextual information about religious dynamics in the country and can serve as precursors of increased religious repression.

'Morality' events follow the same coding rules as other events. For example, if a civilian is arrested on morality grounds, the event is coded as event type 'Non-violent harassment' and sub-event type 'Judicial harassment', and marked with the '[Morality]' tag in the 'NOTES'.

In cases when the source specifies that the offended moral is religious in nature (e.g. "Islamic moral", "Christian moral", etc.) the '[Morality]' tag is not added and a religious affiliation is assigned to the actor enforcing the norm instead.

Religious opinions and policies

Relevant changes in religious policies or laws decreed by religious institutions (e.g. the Anglican Church of the Province of Alexandria, al-Azhar University, etc.) are coded as event type 'Non-violent harassment' and sub-event type 'Change to religion law/policy'. These are changes that indicate a notable change in religion policy or law, or that impact a specific group disproportionately. For example, it would include the establishment of a new office to monitor the conduct of lawyers to make sure they adhere to Islamic standards. Significant Islamic religious opinions (i.e. fatwas) are also coded as 'Change to religion law/policy' if they are issued by a relevant religious institution (e.g. Dar al-Ifta, al-Azhar) or by the Grand Mufti of the country. This is because of their potential impact on religious repression in the country.

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[8] In these cases, whether the political context of the country and whether the state has been known to use "terrorism" as a pretext for arresting members of religious communities are taken into account.

When the primary actor is a non-violent non-state actor, it is coded as **Civilians (Country)** with the name of the religious institution as the Associated Actor. If a specific audience is potentially affected by the new religious law or policy, this audience is coded as the target of the event. For example, a source may say, "the Anglican Church of the Province of Alexandria has reportedly issued a decree legislating the principles of personal status law regarding marriage and divorce for the members of its church." Such an event would have **Civilians (Egypt)** as the primary actor, **Anglican Church of Alexandria (Egypt)** as the Associated Actor, and **Civilians (Egypt)** as the secondary actor with **Christianity (Episcopalian/Anglican)** as its religious affiliation.

Accidental desecrations

If mosques, churches, or any other places of worship are shut down, or ritual practices are interrupted because of health restrictions (e.g. coronavirus-related restrictions), the event is coded as event type 'Non-violent harassment' with the sub-event type 'Prevention of practice'. For example, "Israeli police forces reportedly dispersed an Orthodox wedding held in violation of coronavirus restrictions in the city of Bnei Brak (Tel Aviv), and subsequently closed the celebration hall in which the event was taking place for a week, and fined the owners of the place." The religious activity conducted here (holding a wedding) was not directly violating the fundamental rights and freedoms of others, and thus the prevention of such an activity meets the threshold for being coded as a religious repression event. The motivations of the perpetrator (in this case, Israeli police forces) may not have been to prevent religious activity, but rather to enforce coronavirus restrictions. Still, ACLED-Religion codes events based on the *outcome* of the event, not the motivation. The prevention of a religious activity – regardless of the motivation for doing so – is what is taken into consideration. The only exception is in instances where the exercise of religion directly threatens the fundamental rights and freedoms of others. In the example above, despite the health benefits intended with coronavirus-related restrictions, violating such restrictions is not seen as a *direct* threat to the fundamental rights and freedoms of others. A direct threat would have an immediate consequence (e.g. a physical assault would immediately and directly violate one's right to safety) while in this case the actions will not necessarily lead to a violation of one's right to health.

If the members of a specific religious denomination refuse to abide by such restrictions (e.g. not congregating at church) for reasons related to their beliefs or while exercising religious practices, and they are sanctioned or arrested for this reason, the event is coded as sub-event type 'Judicial harassment'. For example, "Israeli police forces reportedly raided a synagogue in open violation of coronavirus restrictions, closed it, and arrested two worshippers." This event would be captured as a 'Judicial harassment' event because the victims were arrested while engaging in religious practice.

Similarly, the motivation of the perpetrator is not considered when a place of worship or a religiously relevant place or monument is destroyed. In all such cases, the event is coded as event type "Non-violent harassment" and sub-event type "Religious property desecration". If the event involved explosives or remote violence, then the event is coded as event type "Explosions/Remote

violence" and the 'HARASS_SUB_EVENT_TYPE' column will be "Religious property desecration" to indicate that religious property was impacted.

For example, "Houthi forces reportedly fired anti-aircraft guns and/or artillery shells at residential neighborhoods in the northwest of Taizz city, striking the women's prayer hall of the Imam Shafai mosque." This event would be coded with "Explosions/Remote violence" as the primary event type and would have "Religious property desecration" as the harassment sub-event type.[9] This is because it resulted in the desecration of a prayer hall and mosque, regardless of whether the Houthi forces' intention was to target those locations.

Civilians (Country) are coded as the 'ACTOR2' in 'Religious property desecration' events, regardless of whether that is the primary sub-event type or the harassment sub-event type. This is because the outcome of the property desecration impacts a civilian religious community. That community's religious group is noted in the 'RELIG_AFFIL_2' column.

Sourcing

ACLED-Religion builds on [the sourcing strategy used by ACLED](), capitalizing on the well-tested sourcing used to capture political violence and demonstration events across different countries. Still, all sources used by ACLED were assessed for relevance before being included in regular coverage for the ACLED-Religion dataset. In addition, a number of new sources were added to the ACLED-Religion source list that report on religion-related events and issues specifically. These include international sources such as the *Baha'i International Community*, *OpenDoors International*, and *Shia Rights Watch*; national non-governmental organizations and expatriate organizations like *Americans for Human Rights & Democracy in Bahrain* and the *Egyptian Commission for Rights and Freedoms*; national and local news outlets focusing on religious communities, such as *Sunni News* in Iran or *Kikar HaShabbat* in Israel; and, in some cases, the websites of religion-based actors themselves, like those of Hamas and the Islamic Jihad Movement in Palestine. The use of social media sources is very selective and limited to accounts of verified journalists, activists and organizations. Like ACLED, ACLED-Religion does not crowdsource.

All sources have biases. Whenever possible, the details of an event are cross-referenced across sources to reduce bias. Reports by advocacy organizations especially have incentive to focus on certain trends or incidents that promote their cause or draw attention to the persecution of the group(s) for whom they advocate. At the same time, these organizations can provide in-depth information about specific trends or incidents, especially relative to traditional media sources, given their focus on identifying and reporting on such specific incidents. Such sources are used when they are known to provide reliable information, despite these biases. The same process is used with the integration of such sources as with all other sources: researchers test whether the source provides credible information by cross-referencing trends with insights from expert

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[9] For more on 'Harassment' sub-event types, see the [ACLED-Religion Codebook]().

interviews, engaging with local partners to see if these trends are consistent with what they are monitoring, and/or by triangulating large or unusual events with other sources, as the latter are events that other sources are expected to have also reported.

ACLED-Religion source lists are not fixed and are constantly evolving to address gaps in coverage and changing religious dynamics in countries. When new sources are identified and assessed, they are added to the source list. However, such significant sources are first back coded to ensure that false trends or artificial spikes are not created with the sudden introduction of a new source.