A silhouette of a village at sunset. In the foreground, a person stands with their back to the camera. In the middle ground, several other figures are visible, some appearing to be in motion. On the right, a large vehicle, possibly a bus or truck, is parked with several people sitting on its roof. The background shows a line of trees and a sky with a warm, orange glow from the setting sun.

Rethinking inter-communal violence in Africa

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Three questions

- What is 'inter-communal violence', and why is the term increasingly used in analyses of African conflicts?
- What are the risks which accompany the use of the term?
- Is there an alternative way of conceptualizing such violence?

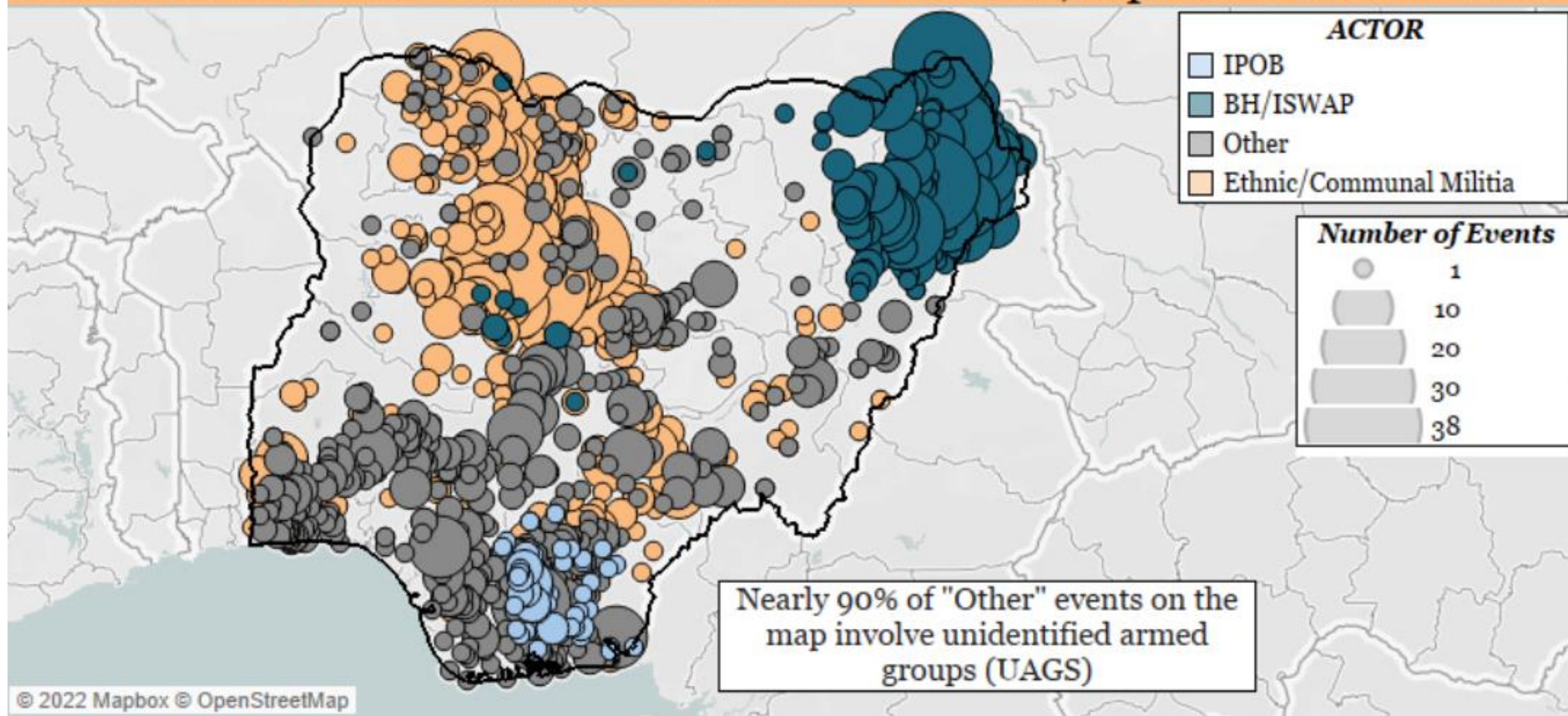
1. What is inter-communal violence?

- Successor to 1990s and early 2000s 'ethnic conflicts' and 'New Wars' arguments
- Most accounts deemphasize the ethnic or identity element of conflict, but retain the 'New Wars' emphasis on militias, and the supposedly apolitical and decentralized nature of the violence
- Definitions are disparate, but converge on inter-communal violence taking place between *non-state militias* over essentially *local issues*, usually at the margins of state power (for rural violence) or on occasion in urban settings (typically described as 'mob violence')

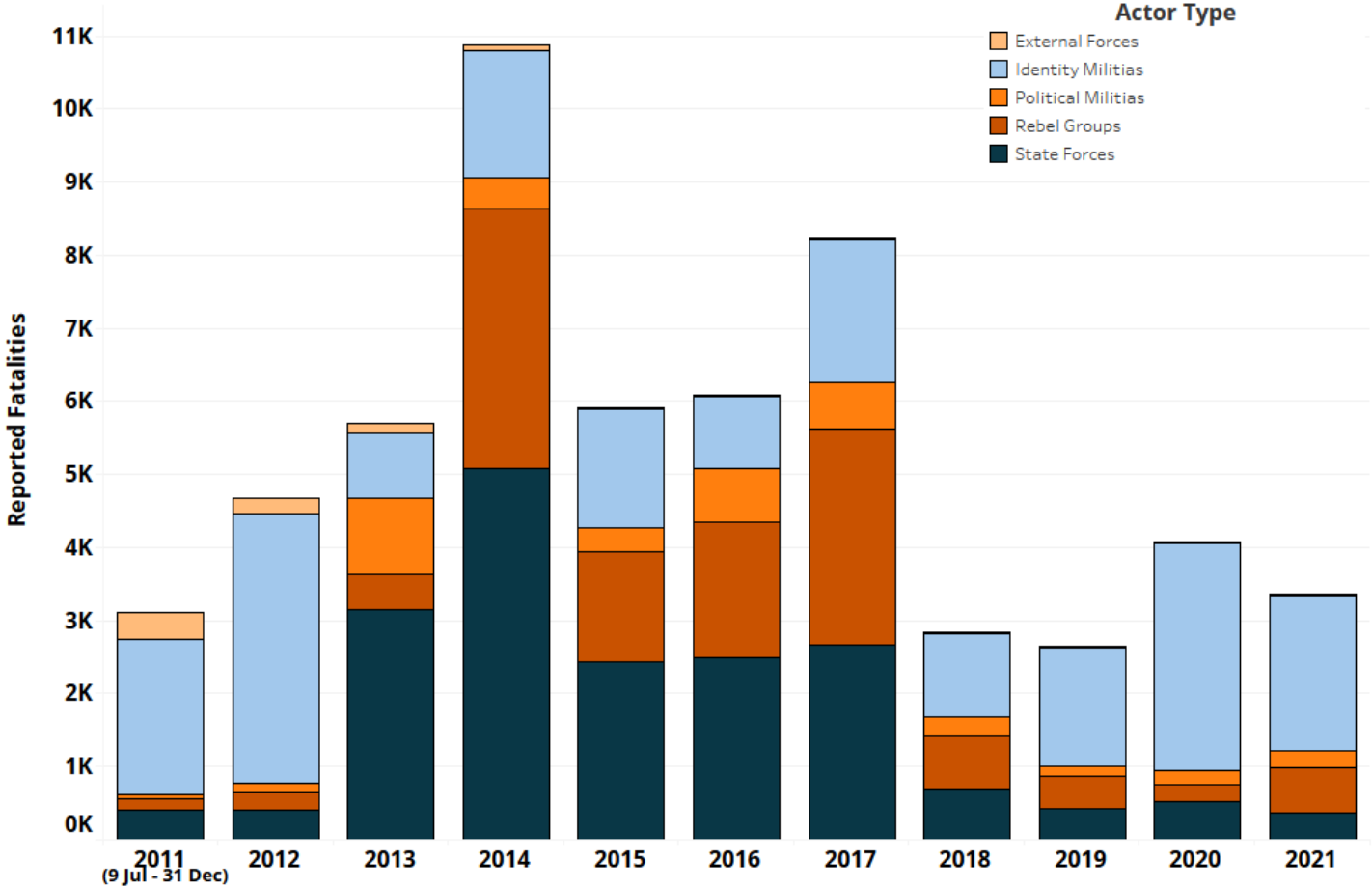
2. What are the risks of using it?

- History of the term appears to be poorly understood
- Originates in colonial accounts of Indian riots in 1890s, which misrepresented violence as being spontaneous mob violence between evenly matched 'sects'
- The role of elites and security forces in organizing violence was obscured, whilst the violence was presented as evidence of the backward and volatile nature of Indian society
- Many of these problems have been carried over into the present-day analysis of 'communal violence' in Africa

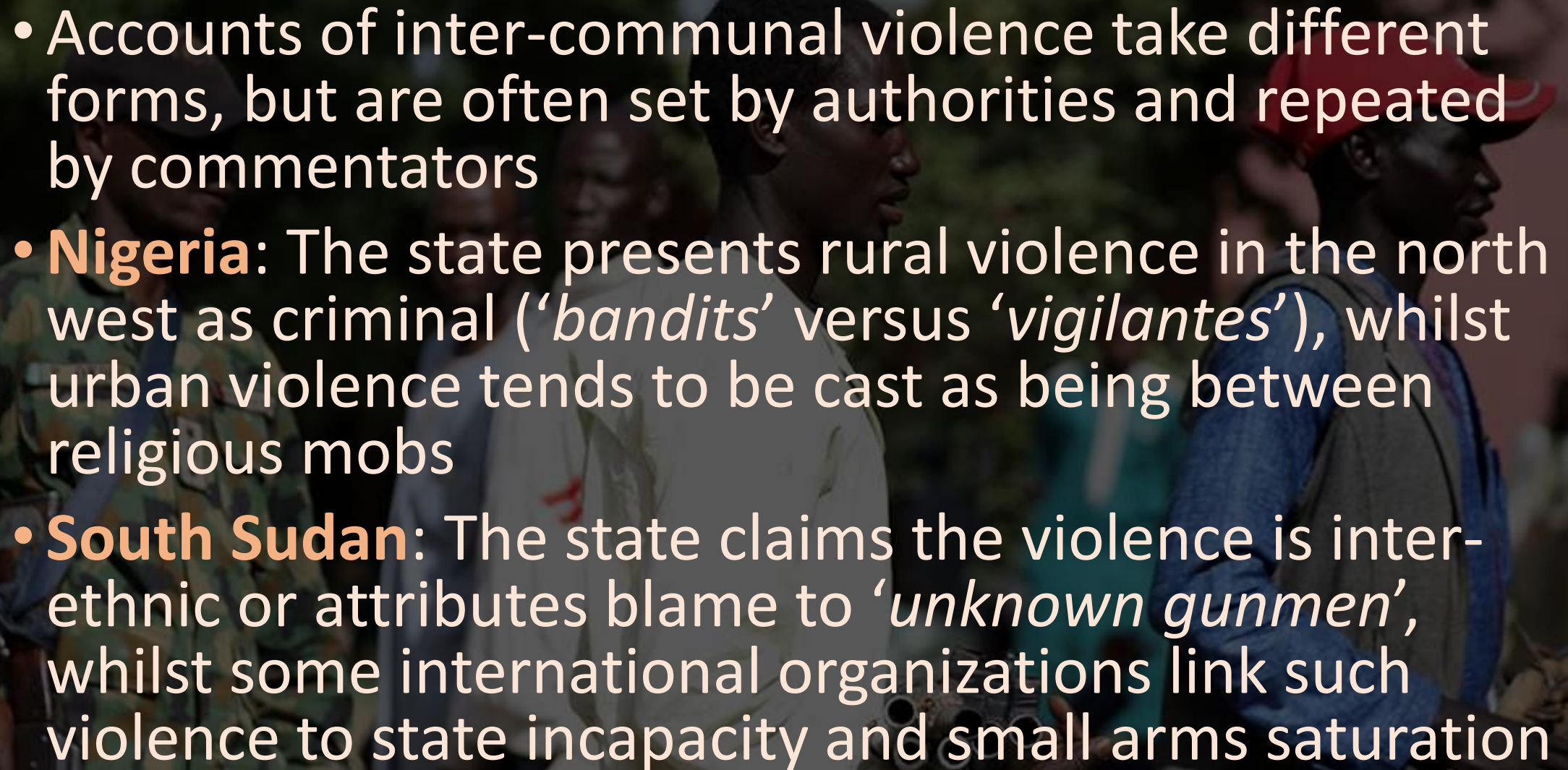
Militia and Islamist violence in the north & center, separatists in the south

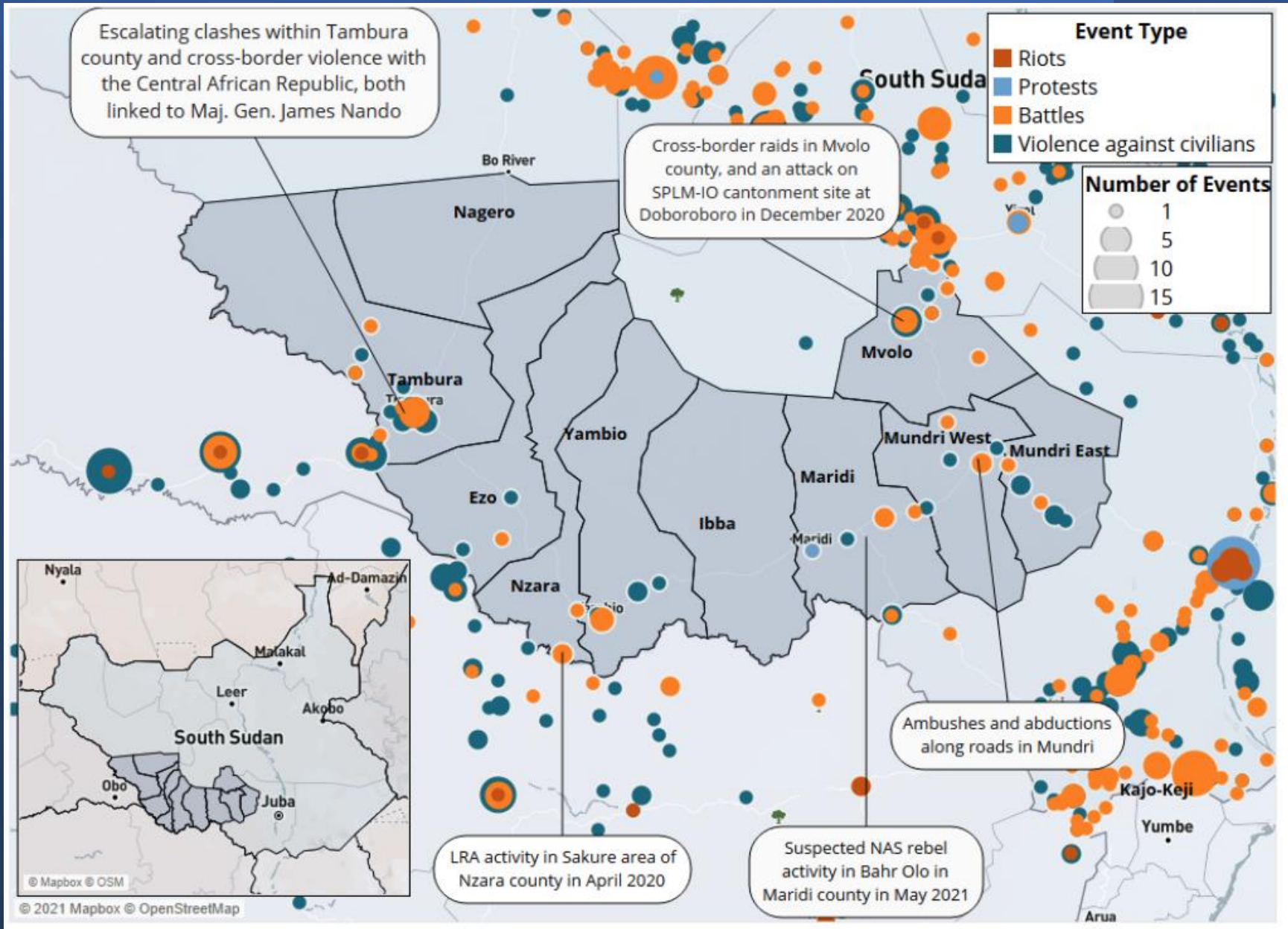


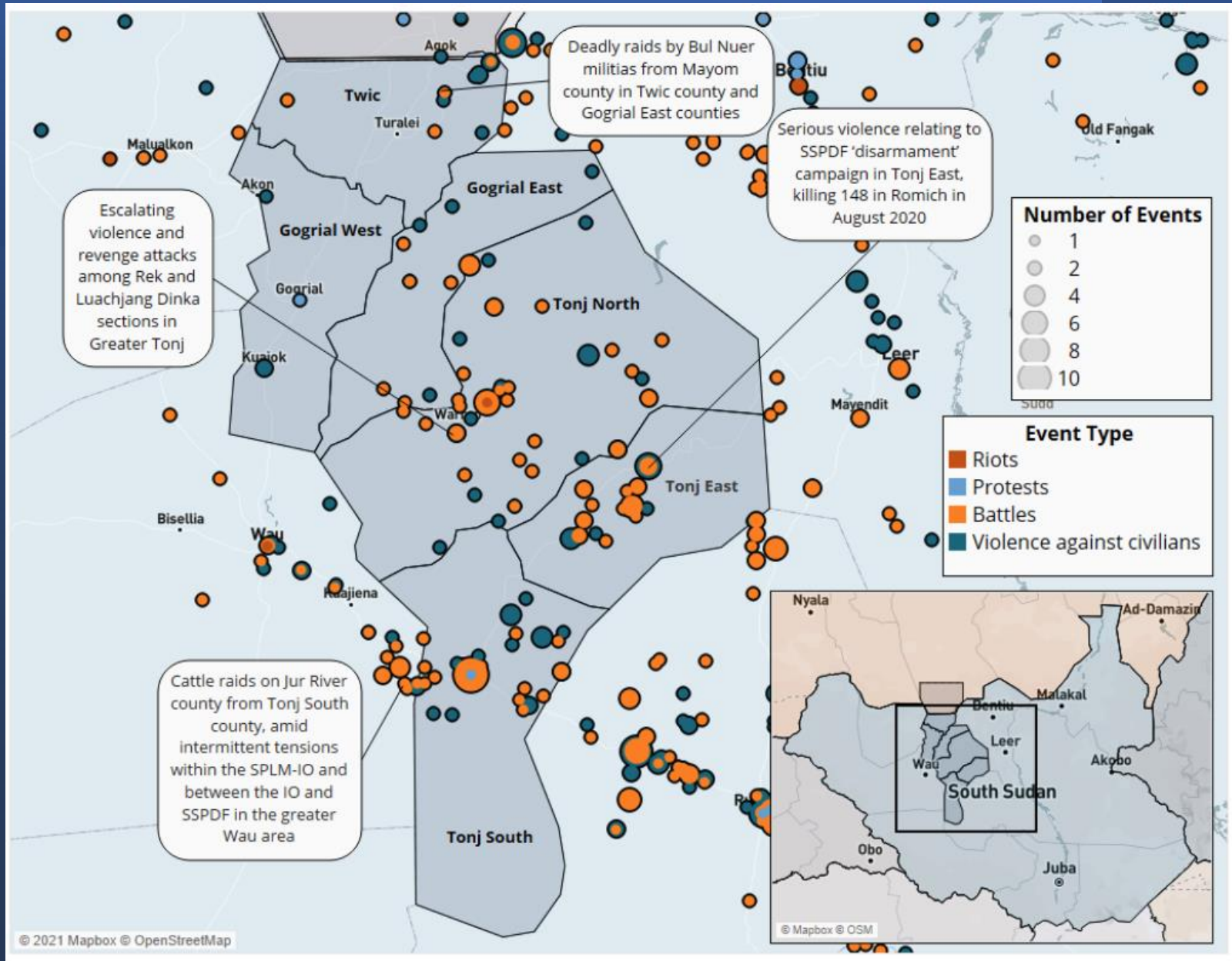
Fatality Aggregations in South Sudan by Actor Type (9 July 2011 - 31 Dec 2021)



*To create this visualization, each actor type has been assessed for the number of fatalities from aggregated events in which they were at least one agent. This visualization is not suggesting that each type of actor is responsible for, or suffered, the annual tally of fatalities, but that it engaged in action in which the aggregated fatalities occurred over the course of each year.

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- Accounts of inter-communal violence take different forms, but are often set by authorities and repeated by commentators
 - **Nigeria:** The state presents rural violence in the north west as criminal (*'bandits'* versus *'vigilantes'*), whilst urban violence tends to be cast as being between religious mobs
 - **South Sudan:** The state claims the violence is inter-ethnic or attributes blame to *'unknown gunmen'*, whilst some international organizations link such violence to state incapacity and small arms saturation





3. Rethinking inter-communal violence

- Acknowledging the central role of elites
- Situating militia violence alongside political and military systems
- Understanding the role of militias can change over time, and become more *integrated* or *disintegrated* from these systems at different times

Communal violence in South Sudan

