



**GLOBAL
INITIATIVE**
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME

KILLING IN SILENCE

MONITORING THE ROLE
OF ORGANIZED CRIME
IN CONTRACT KILLINGS

#ASSASSINATIONWITNESS





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ANA PAULA OLIVEIRA**
NOVEMBER 2021

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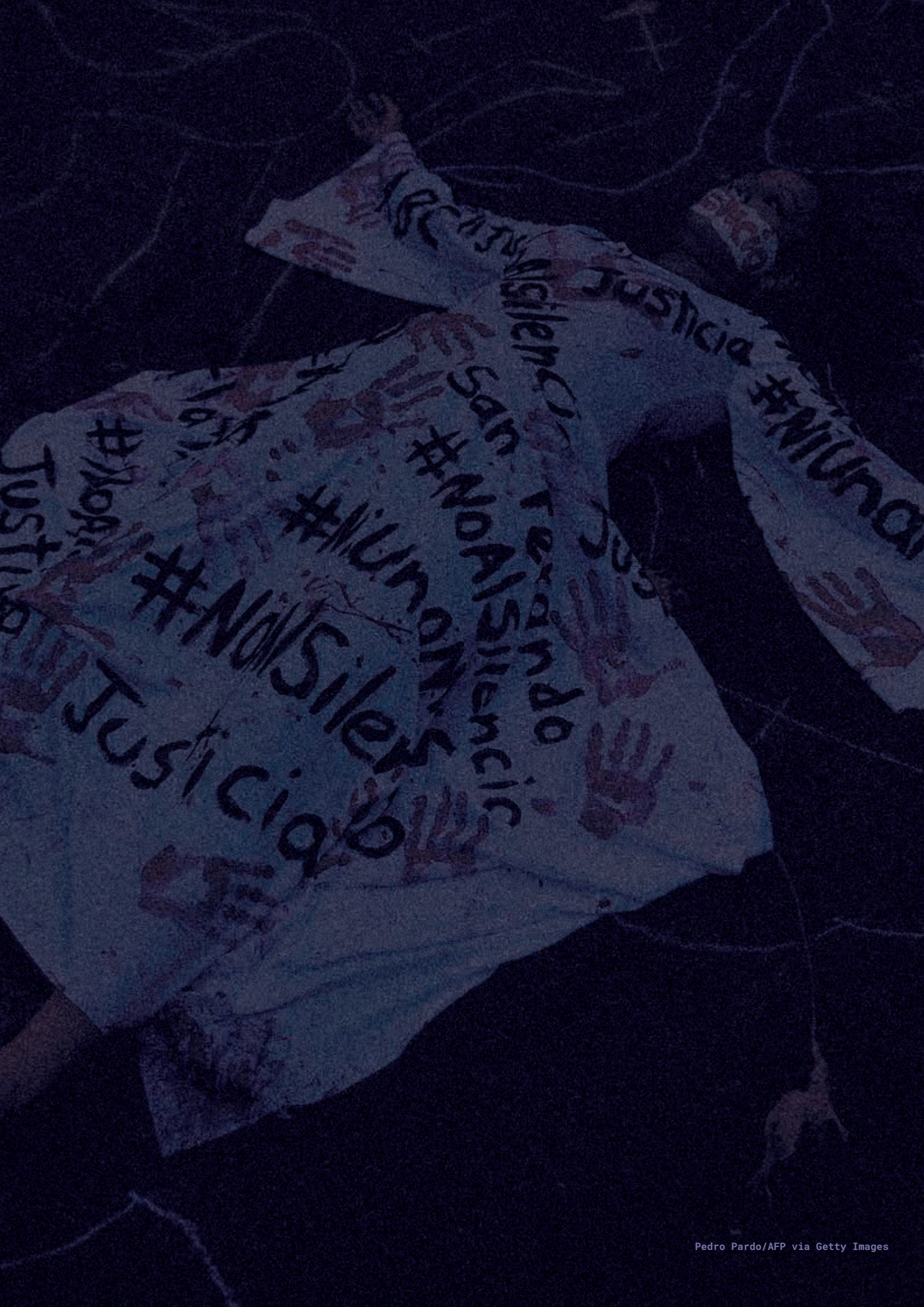
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



THE GLOBAL ASSASSINATION MONITOR CURRENTLY INCLUDES MORE THAN 2 700 RECORDED CASES IN 84 COUNTRIES

In many parts of the world, assassinations have become a daily occurrence. At least 2 700 people were victims of contract killings between 2019 and 2020 in 84 countries. Frequently executed by organized crime groups,¹ assassinations – or the threat of assassinations – are instrumentalized to create an environment of fear, allowing criminal groups to exert mafia-style control over societies.² They serve to silence not just individuals, but entire communities. Their negative impacts are severe: they weaken society and the economy, and undermine democratic processes. Despite these pernicious effects, assassination is an understudied topic, in particular how contract killings are linked to organized crime.

Providing a unique and novel database on contract killings, the Global Assassination Monitor aims to fill this knowledge gap. The Monitor, an event database, was developed by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) under the umbrella of the Assassination Witness initiative. The database includes assassinations, and attempted assassinations, that meet two criteria; first, they are targeted at individuals; second, they involve some kind of transactional contract, in other words a reward, which may be monetary or in-kind. The data draws on an extensive search of media reports. Following a standardized data-collection methodology, the database details information about the date, location, victim, perpetrator(s) and the dynamics of each recorded assassination, such as motive, method and price paid for the killing. The Global Assassination Monitor currently includes more than 2 700 recorded cases in 84 countries.³ It provides disaggregated data on assassinations on a global scale, to inform more nuanced and better policy responses to assassinations and organized crime.

Because they are clandestine in nature, information about assassinations is hard to come by. Despite their negative impact, much remains unknown about the scale and dynamics of assassinations. Disaggregated data on assassinations can therefore help to better understand the dynamics behind assassinations, and the role played in them by criminal groups. The data helps us understand how these groups operate – who they target, what illicit markets they operate in and how they connect to other groups. This information can help in the fight against organized crime.

What became clear from the study is the way in which contract killings are often intertwined with the workings of organized crime. As organized crime has become increasingly transnational, so have contract killings. Criminal groups target competitors in the fight for control over territory or illicit supply chains. They use assassinations to eliminate those who work against them or oppose them, often activists, journalists, politicians, members of the legal profession and law enforcement. Assassinations are also used to finance illicit activities: criminal groups contract out hitmen for hire to those willing and able to pay as a source of revenue. In some cases, they are perpetrated by actors such as law enforcement agents to protect criminal interests. As such, assassinations are not only a mechanism used by organized crime, but also a manifestation of interaction between the underworld and the upperworld.

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, associated lockdowns and the closure of borders, contract killings and organized crime continued unabated. It appears that the measures taken to contain the virus have in fact created opportunities for assassinations to increase, at least in some areas. This report highlights ways in which disaggregated data on assassinations can help inform some of the underlying dynamics and patterns of the phenomenon. There are, of course, some limitations to this research. For one, like all data, using media as a source comes with inherent limitations. Media reports may not cover all cases of assassinations (underreporting), or they may report more on some types of assassinations than others (biases). The information they provide may have potential shortcomings, in the form of misreporting or lack of information. In the absence of credible, and globally comparable alternative sources, media sources were carefully selected, based on the reputation and coverage of the publications.

The Global Assassination Monitor database is an ongoing data-collection effort. This report is the project's first publication, presenting two years of data: 2019 and 2020. While additional national and local sources could provide a more nuanced picture of the dynamics behind assassinations, the analysis in this report provides a first step in highlighting areas for further research. With time, the database will be expanded to cover a greater variety of sources and more countries, which will allow for more comprehensive and nuanced analysis of assassinations on the subregional and subnational level.

The report is divided into three parts. The first part discusses the purpose of the Global Assassination Monitor project, situates it within the larger framework of assassinations research at the GI-TOC, and outlines the methodology employed, as well as the variables included in the database. The second part analyzes the data from a global and regional perspective, looking at clusters and thematic cross-cutting issues, such as the main drivers of assassinations, the main methods used, the primary target groups, as well as the role of gender and prices charged for contract killings. The third part presents country case studies from three continents, using additional national sources for a more in-depth subnational analysis. The report concludes with an overall picture of the trends and impacts of assassinations globally, and recommendations to support government, non-governmental organizations, and local and international community efforts in responding to assassinations.



FINDINGS

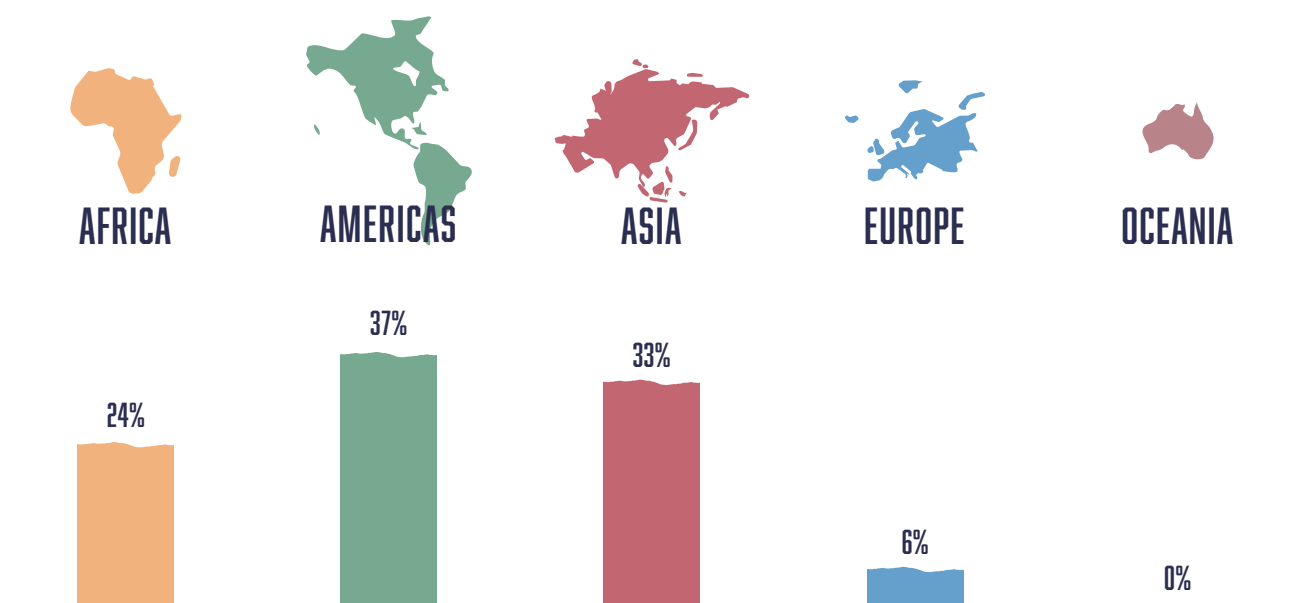
The results of this global analysis of assassinations suggest that assassinations are highly clustered in several ways. They are clustered geographically, with high concentrations in certain countries; they are also clustered around certain target groups, often activists and politicians; and they are clustered around specific drivers, or motives, often economic or political interests.

FINDING 1

ASSASSINATIONS ARE CLUSTERED GEOGRAPHICALLY

THE HIGHEST NUMBER OF CONTRACT KILLINGS WAS RECORDED IN THE AMERICAS, ACCOUNTING FOR 37% OF ALL RECORDED CASES, CLOSELY FOLLOWED BY ASIA, WHICH ACCOUNTED FOR 33%. AFRICA ACCOUNTED FOR 24% OF CASES, WHILE EUROPE ACCOUNTED FOR ONLY 6%.

Assassinations by continent



Although assassinations are a global phenomenon, some locations were found to have higher concentrations of assassinations than others. The highest number of contract killings was recorded in the Americas, accounting for 37% of all recorded cases, closely followed by Asia, which accounted for 33%. Africa accounted for 24% of cases, while Europe accounted for only 6%.⁴ Within individual continents, cases of hits were often concentrated in a few countries. In the Americas, for example, most cases were recorded in Colombia and Mexico, which together accounted for 74% of all recorded contract killings in the database for the Americas. Similarly, in Asia most cases were concentrated in South Asia, more specifically Pakistan (18%) and Afghanistan (18%). In Africa, the majority were recorded in Somalia (33%) and Nigeria (12%).

Although the reasons for assassinations differ across countries, there are some commonalities underpinning these killings. First, the presence of criminal markets and illicit flows contributes to higher levels of assassinations. For example, in Mexico and El Salvador the high number of contract killings is closely linked to the drugs trade and extortion. In Brazil, in addition to the prevalence of the drugs trade, assassinations in the Amazon basin are closely linked to illicit trade in natural resources. In this context, certain illicit markets – such as the drugs market – are more prone to violence than others, and may thus contribute to higher levels of assassinations in a particular country than other illicit markets. Furthermore, the availability of hitmen facilitates contract killings.⁵ Many hitmen are affiliated to – or are members of – criminal groups who nurture pools of hitmen, who can be hired to those who pay, outside the world of organized crime. The South African taxi industry is a case in point. As a ‘nursery of violence’, the industry has been closely linked to many assassinations in the country.⁶



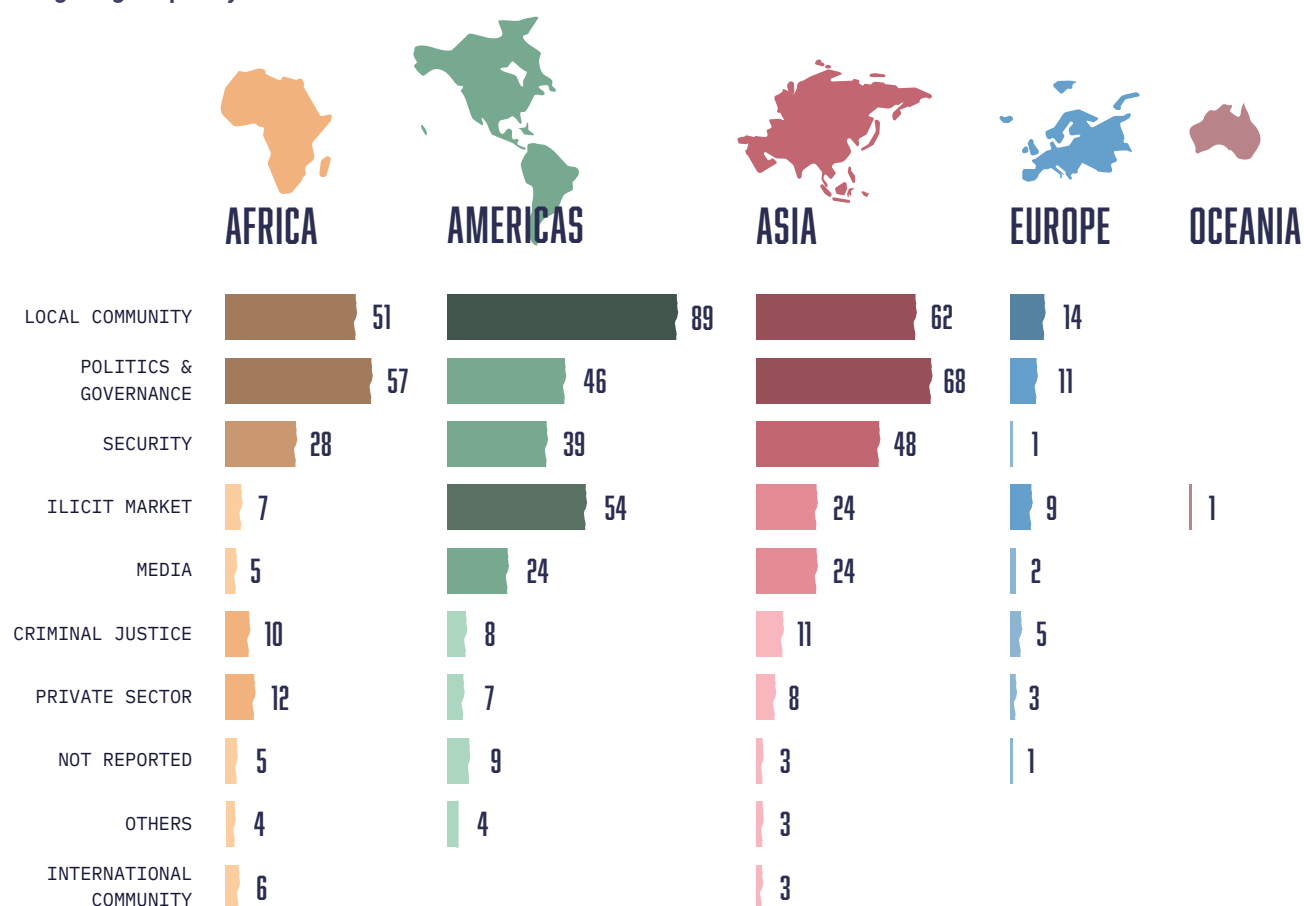
Luis Robayo/AFP via Getty Images

FINDING 2

SOME GROUPS ARE MORE LIKELY TO BECOME ASSASSINATION TARGETS

VICTIMS ARE FOUND LARGELY TO BELONG TO EIGHT OVERARCHING TARGET GROUPS: POLITICS AND GOVERNANCE; LOCAL COMMUNITY; SECURITY; ILLICIT MARKETS; MEDIA; CRIMINAL JUSTICE; THE PRIVATE SECTOR; AND THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY.

Target groups by continent



The analysis in this report also shows that some groups of people are more prone to becoming victims of assassinations than others. In the database, victims are found largely to belong to eight overarching target groups:

politics and governance; local community; security; illicit markets; media; criminal justice; the private sector; and the international community.⁷

According to the Global Assassination Monitor, members of the local community are the main target group globally, accounting for 28% of all recorded cases. They were found to be the main target group in the Americas, where they accounted for 32% of all recorded cases, and in Europe, with 30% of cases. Within this group, globally, activists were the largest victim category, followed by community leaders.

Assassinations in this category are often linked to issues of land and the exploitation of natural resources. In the Americas, for example, drug traffickers use activities such as illegal logging, land theft and deforestation to launder money obtained through the drug market.⁸ Hence, opposition to illegal logging, mining and other extractive activities in protected areas has become deadly to local

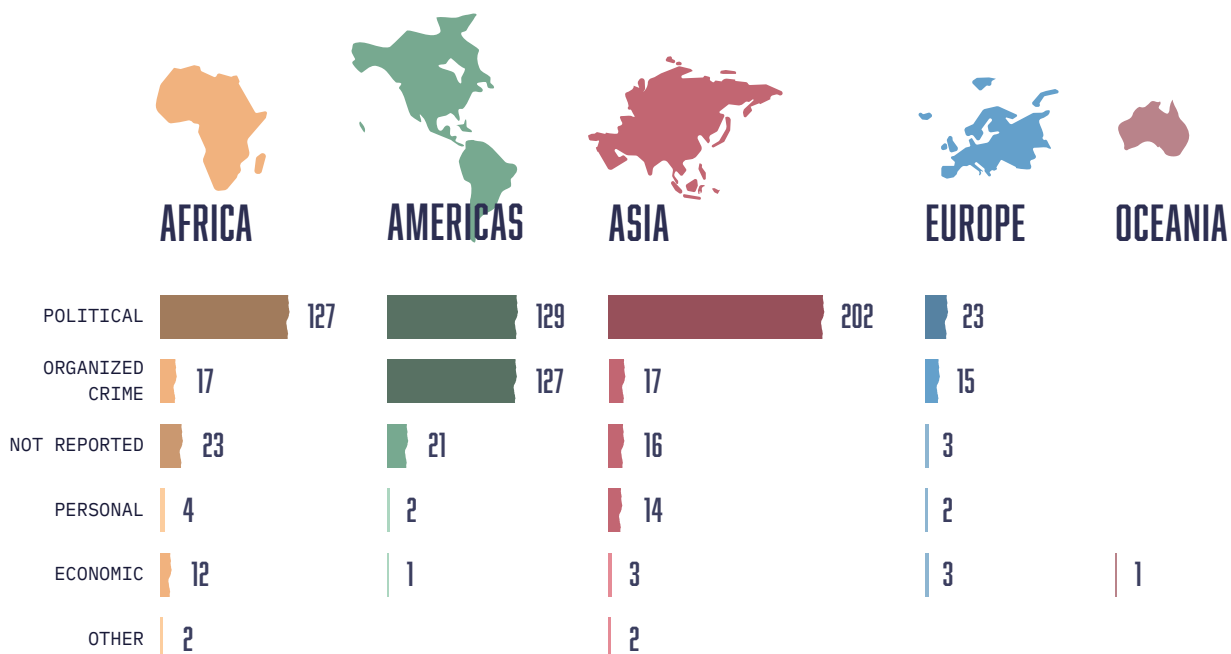
community members, including indigenous people. Those who publicly expose criminal activities are at great risk of being killed by organized crime groups.

In Asia and Africa, the main target group includes members of the politics and governance cluster. This category includes politicians, party affiliates and public officials. In Africa this target group accounted for 31% of all targeted killings, and in Asia for 27%. Globally, the same group accounted for 24% of all recorded cases. In many cases, local politicians, as well as local public officials are the main targets, who are often outside the protective system provided by government, media and the public, because of their low profile and relative anonymity. These groups are often vulnerable to criminal interests and may cooperate with criminal groups in exchange for their protection.

FINDING 3

THERE ARE FOUR MAIN MOTIVES FOR ASSASSINATIONS: POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, PERSONAL AND ORGANIZED CRIME-RELATED.

Motives by continent



Four motive categories are included in the database: political, economic, personal and organized crime-related.⁹ Political motives accounted for 63% of all recorded cases. This category includes cases where the contract killing was the result of political competition and where political activists were targeted. Political motives were the main drivers of assassinations in all parts of the world, led by Asia with 80%, followed by Africa (69%), the Americas (46%) and Europe (50%). In contrast to other regions, assassinations linked to organized crime-related motives, such as extortion, gang wars and dominance over illicit markets, were second highest in the Americas, where they accounted for 45% of cases compared to 23% of cases globally. Cases driven by personal motives played a much less prominent role

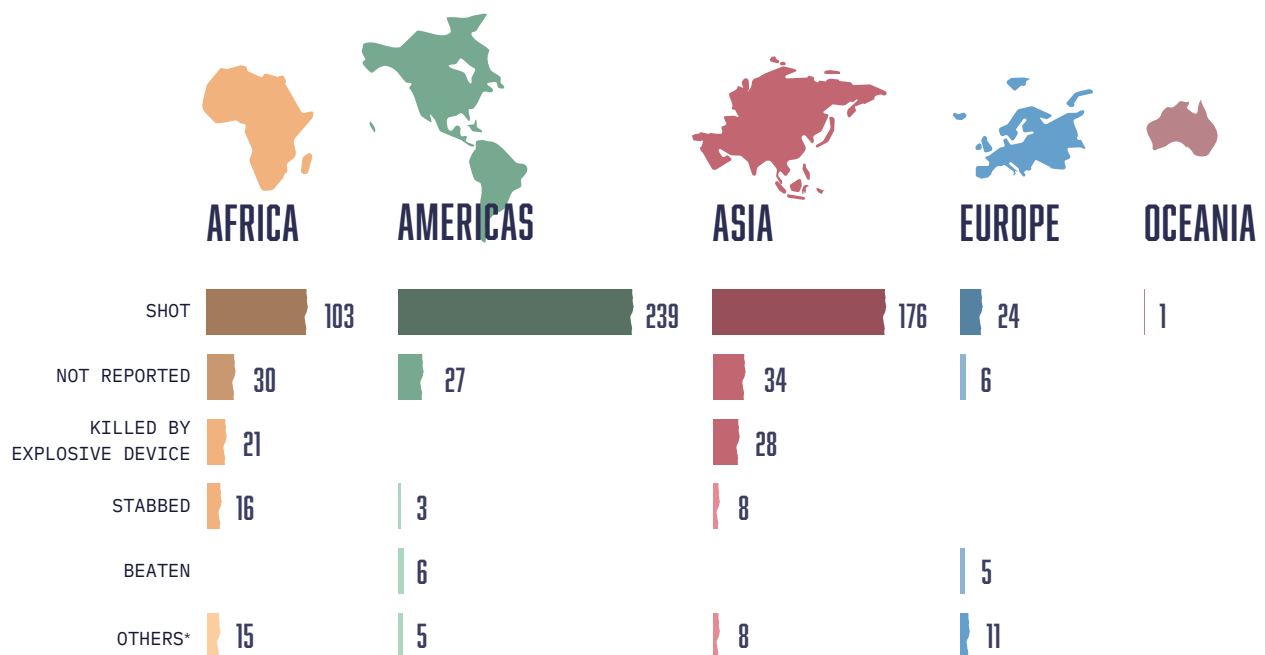
in the global database, accounting for only 3% of cases.

In many places, violence, including assassinations, is employed during the election period, for example in Mexico and Brazil, where political candidates are often targeted by their competitors. In other places, such as India and Mozambique, for example, violence is a more general feature of day-to-day party competition. In some places, activists and community leaders are targeted for their political views and political engagement. For example, in the Philippines and Colombia activists are targeted for their work in defence of human rights, and in Brazil, activists are targeted for their defence of the environment and indigenous land rights.

FINDING 4

FIREARMS ARE THE MAIN MURDER WEAPON USED IN CONTRACT KILLINGS IN ALL REGIONS.

Methods by continent



* The category 'others' here subsumes poisoned, suffocated, tortured, beheaded, burnt, and hacked, which accounted for less than 1% of the cases included in the database.

Firearms were the main murder weapon in all regions, but with variations in the proportions. In the Americas, firearms were used in 85% of all recorded cases, followed by Asia with 69%. In Africa and Europe, the share of firearms was lower, with 56% and 52% of recorded cases, respectively. The use of bombs, including improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and car bombs, accounted for the second largest share in Africa and Asia, with 12% in both regions.

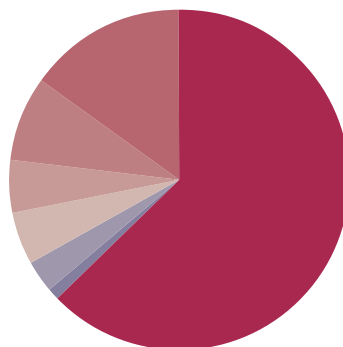
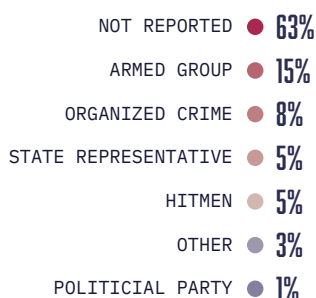
Firearms are popular not only for their ease of use, but also for the symbolic power, threat and fear they

impart. The prevalent use of firearms in some regions can be linked to widespread availability of firearms in those regions. The illicit firearms trade plays an important role here. For example, the Americas, which had the highest number of recorded assassinations, are one of the main destinations for firearms trafficking. Similarly, in conflict zones, such as Yemen and Somalia, which both recorded high numbers of assassinations, the illicit firearms trade has fuelled the conflict and created space for criminal groups to play a prominent role.

FINDING 5

IN THE MAJORITY OF CONTRACT KILLINGS, INFORMATION ABOUT THE PERPETRATORS IS NOT REPORTED.

Perpetrators and masterminds



Contract killings are inherently clandestine in nature, meaning the perpetrators often remain unknown. Many studies focus on the profiles of the victims, whereas much less is known about those behind these killings. Hitmen are paid to cover their tracks and to protect those who ordered the killing. Meanwhile, state infiltration by organized crime and corrupt state apparatuses often thwart investigations, and hinder prosecution of cases.

The data in the Global Assassination Monitor reflects this pattern of silence and secretiveness. In the majority of recorded cases (63%), information about perpetrators was not reported. For cases where information is available, the largest perpetrator category was armed groups (15%), followed by organized crime groups (including gangs), with 8% and state representatives (7%).¹⁰ The category of individual hitmen – in other words, cases where no link to an organized crime group or armed group was mentioned – accounted for

5% of cases. A geographic breakdown of the figures suggests that the dominance of armed groups is driven by data in Africa and Asia, where they were the largest known perpetrator group, accounting for 32% and 17% of recorded cases. In the Americas, the largest known perpetrator groups were organized crime-related, accounting for 15%.

Although one should bear in mind that, in most cases, the perpetrators were not reported, the prominent role of armed groups, especially in Africa, may be seen in the context of armed conflict. Illicit markets have become a main source of income for many armed groups, such as al-Shabaab in Somalia, Boko Haram in Nigeria and the Taliban in Afghanistan. These groups not only engage in illicit trade, but also make use of targeted killings to remove competitors, or to silence those who oppose their criminal activities.

KEY MESSAGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Although they display many variables, there are some commonalities among contract killings. Detailed data collection and analysis can reveal some of the underlying dynamics and patterns, and highlight ways in which assassinations can be addressed.

THE ROLE OF THE STATE

Assassinations do not occur in isolation, and the role of the state is key to understanding the dynamics of assassinations. At the same time, assassinations help to better understand how organized crime groups might be involved with the state. In many cases, perpetrators are never apprehended; in cases where they are, those who ordered the killings may never be brought to justice. Assassinations therefore reveal the extent to which organized crime has infiltrated state institutions. The level of impunity for perpetrators is often high, as criminal interests work under the protection of – or in collusion with – the state. Crime and politics can be highly intertwined, and assassinations can be used to maintain this balance of power.

STRENGTHEN CAPACITY OF THE JUDICIARY AND COOPERATION WITH REGIONAL INSTITUTIONS AND CIVIL SOCIETY

Perpetrators, in particular the masterminds behind assassinations, are often not brought to justice. This is partially linked to the nature of the crime – highly professional contract killers may not leave enough evidence for the case to be prosecutable. However, lack of police resources and capacity, insufficient victim and witness support, and lack of political will also stymie investigations.

Successful prosecution of perpetrators is closely linked to independence of the investigating bodies, law enforcement and the judiciary. Many contract killings are politically sensitive and political pressure can be wielded to influence investigative authorities to protect perpetrators. Strengthening the capacity and

independence of national institutions is therefore key to protecting them from political influence and other forms of corruption. Regional bodies can relieve some pressure from national institutions by providing support with the investigation and prosecution, especially where national capacities and political will stand in the way. Meanwhile, greater cooperation between national institutions and civil society can increase trust between the two, and encourage victims to come forward with cases, which is a prerequisite for state institutions to be able to provide protection.

STRENGTHEN TRANSPARENCY AND OVERSIGHT OF POLITICAL PROCESSES

Besides failure to investigate and prosecute assassinations, many states also fail to provide measures that could help prevent cases of assassinations. One way that criminal groups use assassinations is as a means to influence political processes, for example during elections. Criminal groups promote candidates by threatening or assassinating the competition, in return for political and economic favours, such as the procurement of tenders and protection from prosecution. One way to counter this phenomenon is to increase transparency and oversight of political processes, which can protect those targeted by organized crime groups, and prevent corruption and infiltration of politics by criminals.

THE ROLE OF ILLICIT MARKETS

As mentioned, assassinations display clusters, often linked to the existence of criminal markets or the potential of creating one. This, in combination with the presence of vulnerable target groups – mostly people opposing, uncovering, investigating or standing in the way of illicit activities – can be linked to higher levels of assassinations.

DISMANTLE ILLICIT MARKETS THAT NURTURE A CULTURE OF CONTRACT KILLINGS

Some illicit markets are more associated with violence than others. In such markets, criminal groups may create a pool of hitmen for hire, either professional contract killers or gang members who are trained to execute hits. This increases the accessibility of contract killers to those who deploy them, contributing to a culture of assassinations within a country. By targeting markets and crime groups that facilitate such a culture of contract killings, not only is the demand for contract killings reduced, but also the supply of hitmen.

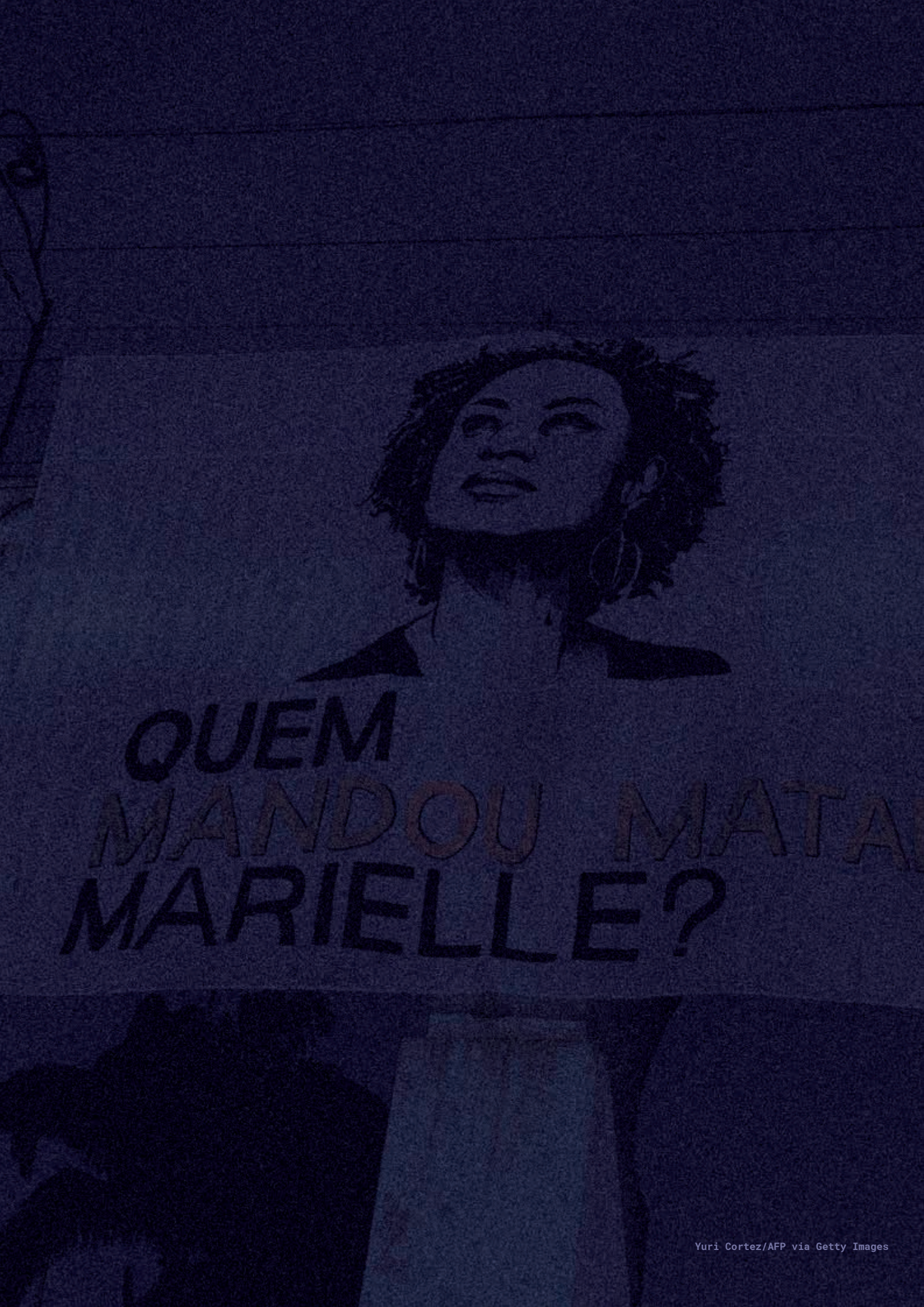
UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF THREATS

Assassinations are often preceded by threats. These are symbolic acts, intended to intimidate, with the potential of silencing before a gunshot is fired. These include death threats made directly to an individual by phone or by including a name on a hit list. Threats can also target entire communities – for example, if the perpetrators leave a message with the body of a victim, or more generally by killing a person as a warning to other members of the community.

ENHANCE SECURITY AND COMMUNITY RESILIENCE

Some groups and communities are more vulnerable to becoming victims of assassinations than others, such as land defenders in Colombia, indigenous groups in the Philippines, or journalists in Mexico or Pakistan. Taking the role of threats more seriously is important. Improving gender and ethnically sensitive mechanisms to address and to respond to threats can contribute to increased protection around vulnerable communities, and possibly help prevent assassinations. Creating an environment of openness and trust can encourage more members of society to come forward when they are threatened and help to identify illicit markets and organized crime groups of concern. This can help the police and the state to focus on these markets, groups and geographic areas.

**CONTRACT KILLINGS ARE USED STRATEGICALLY TO
INFLUENCE POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, CRIMINAL AND
PERSONAL OUTCOMES. THEY ARE CARRIED OUT
TO CONTROL OPPOSITION, OR COMPETITION, AND
TO CREATE A CULTURE OF FEAR.**



QUEM
MANDOU MATAR
MARIELLE?

1 INTRODUCTION: HITS AND ORGANIZED CRIME



Carlos Tischler/Getty Images

‘WHILE ASSASSINATIONS MAY NOT BE NEW, THE DEGREE TO WHICH THEY ARE UTILIZED, MOST NOTABLY AT LOCAL LEVEL, IS REMINISCENT OF MAFIA-LIKE VIOLENCE: THE USE OF TARGETED KILLING, OR THE THREAT THEREOF TO OBTAIN POLITICAL OR ECONOMIC GAIN.’¹¹

In July 2019, Ben Suthi, a notorious crime boss from Israel, was shot dead in broad daylight in a shopping mall in Mexico City. One of the shooters was a Mexican woman, who claimed when she was arrested that she had acted out of passion. Later investigations revealed, however, that the woman had been paid US\$260 to carry out the assassination.¹² Although initial reports pointed to Mexican crime organization the Jalisco Cartel – Suthi had been accused of drug trafficking in Mexico in 2001 and arrested in 2004 – investigations later suggested that the assassination had been commissioned by an Israeli organized crime group. At the time of the killing, Suthi was a prominent organized crime figure in Israel, and had amassed many enemies there.¹³

The case of Suthi illustrates how contract killings can transcend national boundaries: the Israeli group hired a Mexican contract killer to target an Israeli criminal on Mexican soil. The case also illustrates the ways in which organized crime groups are often involved in such killings, and Suthi was no exception. Assassinations are frequently executed by organized crime groups, and for various reasons.¹⁴ Crime groups may assassinate competitors in the fight for control over territory or illicit supply chains, or to eliminate those who pose a threat to their interests, often civil society activists, journalists, politicians, or members of the legal fraternity or law enforcement agencies. Assassinations can also be used as a commercial enterprise to finance illicit activities – criminal organizations contract out hitmen-for-hire to those who are willing to pay for the service. In this sense, organized crime monetizes the capacity for violence through pools of trained killers, or nurseries of violence.¹⁵

This report represents a global analysis of contract killings, highlighting underlying patterns and trends related to assassinations at the global, regional and national level. There are three key aspects that came to light during the research. Firstly, as mentioned, contract killings are highly clustered. Secondly, threats play a major role in the dynamics and symbolism of contract killings. The threat of death is used to intimidate and silence an individual or group. Media reports in the database frequently mentioned that a targeted person received threats prior to the actual attack. Meanwhile, assassinations themselves can also be used as a threat. For example, if a close relative of the actual target is assassinated, the assassination serves as a warning and

threat to the targeted person. Similarly, the circulation, and in some cases publication, of hit lists – stating the names of potential targets – serves as a warning not just to those included in the lists, but also to those who might fear being next on such a list. Whatever form they take, threats are aimed at influencing people’s behaviour. In the context of assassinations, threats are an understudied topic that deserve, and require, more attention.

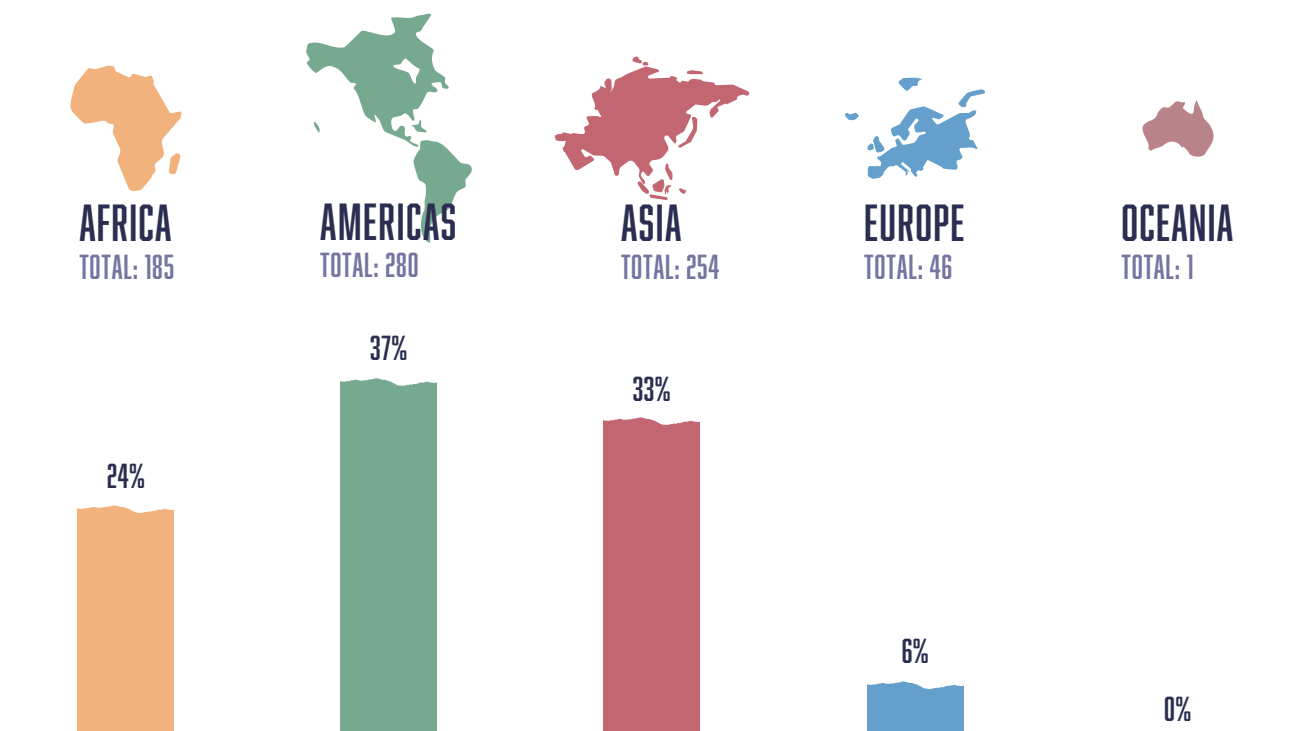
Finally, the state plays an important role in the perpetuation of a culture of contract killings. The involvement of states occurs along several tiers. On the first level, assassinations are carried out by criminal groups or other non-state actors, but they are tolerated by the state. On the second level, assassinations may be carried out by state officials in collusion with organized crime. For example, an assassination may be orchestrated by corrupt police officials to prevent the exposure of an illicit market. On the third level, assassinations may be conducted by representatives of the state without a specific direct order but in the context of a public policy

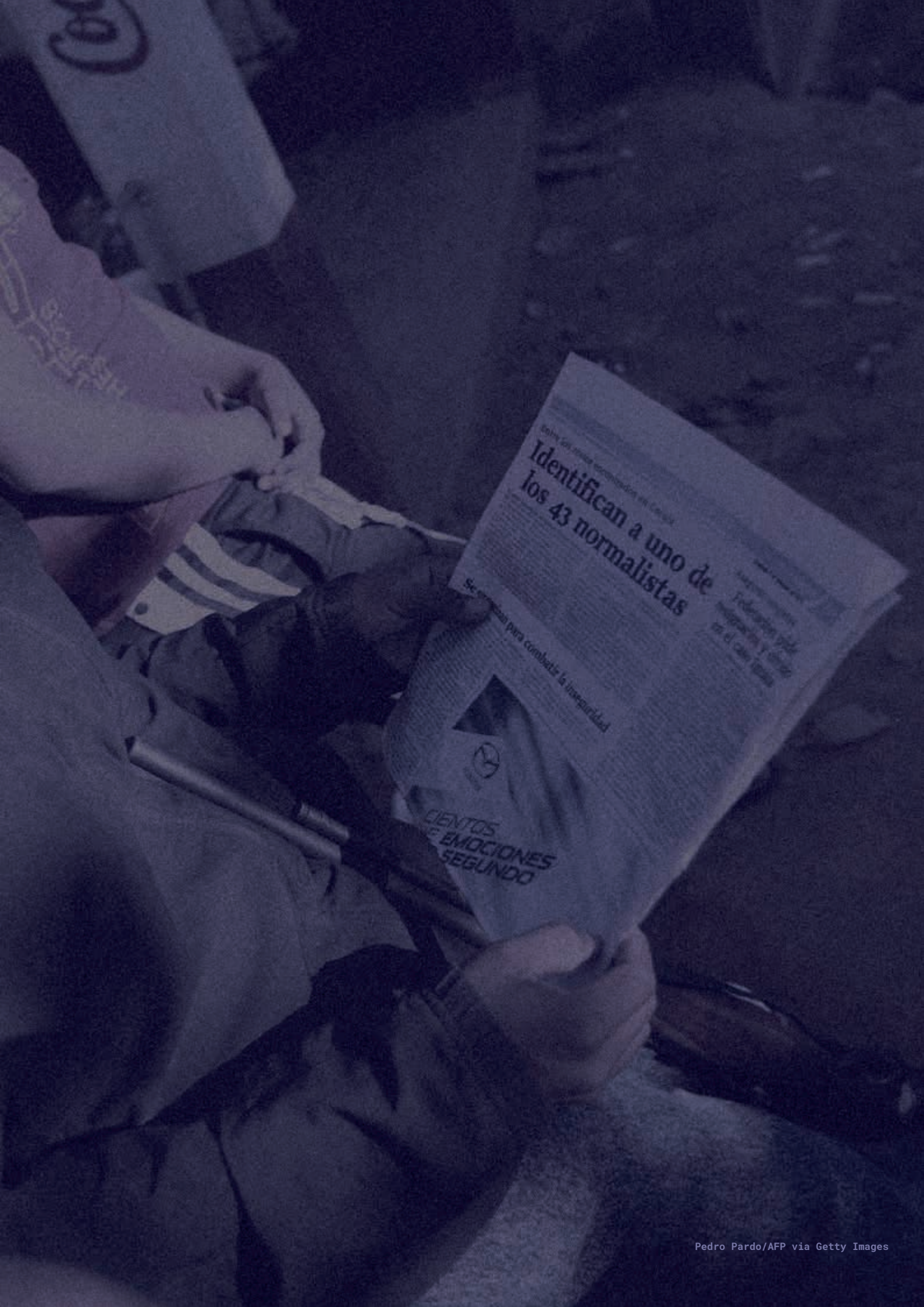
of reprisals against a group of individuals. On the fourth level, a direct order for an assassination may be given by high-level state officials. Failure to follow up and prosecute cases of contract killings is often an indication of state involvement in the crime.¹⁶

Overall, the research finds that the highest number of contract killings was recorded for the Americas, followed by Asia. Europe and Oceania recorded the lowest number of hits. Within continents, cases of assassinations were often concentrated in a few countries. In the Americas, for example, most recorded cases were in Mexico and Colombia (such countries are analyzed later in the report in detail).

The data from the Global Assassination Monitor suggests that while the overall number of assassinations decreased slightly from 2019 to 2020, the numbers rose in Asia and Europe; in Africa and the Americas they declined. This suggests that COVID-19 had a varied impact in different regions.

Assassinations, by region





1.1. CREATING A CULTURE OF FEAR: SYMBOLISM OF ASSASSINATIONS

The impact of assassinations goes beyond the loss of human lives. It also affects community resilience, creates a culture of fear and imposes silence on society. Symbolic acts, such as leaving messages with a dead body, or circulating a name on a hit list, are designed to enforce silence before the gunshot is fired. The implications of a culture of fear are harmful to society and the state.

THE THREAT THAT PRECEDES THE KILLING

Media reporting on threats is not sufficiently consistent to justify being included in the quantitative analysis for this project. There is no agreed definition on what is considered a threat, and it is a phenomenon that is largely under-reported anyway. Despite these limitations, the recorded cases can inform the analysis on a qualitative level. About 5% of the cases fall under the category of ‘planned assassinations’, where there is evidence either for an assassination plot or a threat. These include social posts, text messages, pamphlets and letters sent to the victims, or phone calls; such threat-messaging was found to be directed at individuals and groups.

Although it was difficult at times to establish whether claims of threats were just part of a political posturing game, the reported incidents do reveal some significant insights into the nature of threats and the role they play in the context of assassinations. Perhaps the most important connection between threats and assassinations is that threats are made before an assassination is executed. Particularly when directed at community members,¹⁷ a death threat is clearly intended to intimidate and impose a culture of widespread fear. Death threats serve the purpose of silencing people, and ultimately lead to the act of assassination. Death threats can also be implicitly seen in acts that do not inflict harm on the person targeted but on their relatives. In cases of extortion, the latter is very evident: groups that use the tactic of extortion do not want to cut off their source of income, so their strategy is to assassinate the relative of their target for extortion.

WHAT IS THE MEANING IN THE MESSAGE?

In some parts of the world, organized criminal groups have used methods such as beheadings and dismembering of bodies. On some occasions, perpetrators leave messages with the bodies claiming responsibility. Such execution-style killings carry a high degree of symbolism. Messages left by perpetrators, along with the sheer violence of the methods used, usually involving torture, are meant not only to threaten rival organized crime groups or authorities, but also to sow fear in the communities. Such executions make victim identification impossible, which is a violation of their dignity and an expression of social control that criminal groups seek to exert over communities.

CANDIDATE POOL REDUCTION AND BREAKDOWN OF DEMOCRATIC INTEGRITY

Studies on political violence in Italy suggest that political assassinations of local officials, such as municipal politicians and civil servants, carried out by organized crime impoverish the quality and integrity of local politics.¹⁸ Not only are these killings anti-democratic, but they also reduce the number of capable and willing individuals who may run for local office. As a result, the electoral candidate pool is diminished. Voters who live in fear of openly supporting or voting for rival political parties are often forced to vote for corrupt officials, or not to vote at all, perpetuating the cycle of violence and impunity. Investigation rates for political assassinations are very low, given that some police officers might be corrupt or lack sufficient resources to conduct investigations.

1.2. METHODOLOGY

The Global Assassination Monitor is an event database, covering assassinations reported in the press between 2019 and 2020. Following a standardized data-collection methodology, it allows for comparisons across space and over time. For each recorded assassination, data was collected according to several variables (where available), including the date, location, information about victims and perpetrators, and dynamics of the incidents, such as motive, method and price paid for the killing.¹⁹

The database draws on an extensive selection of global, regional and national news sources, available on Lexis-Nexis.²⁰ For the 10 countries where we included national sources (see section 4), it was found that global and regional news picked up only 15% of all recorded cases. These countries were chosen for their geographic distribution, political-economic relevance to the region and because of their significant incidence of organized crime.

1.2.1. DEFINITION AND SELECTION CRITERIA

The database covers assassinations that fall into the categories of targeted killings and contract killings. Newspaper reports are limited in the information they provide, thus each event was assessed according to a list of inclusion criteria and given a certainty level between 1 and 5 (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Selection criteria

1	2	3	4	5
Not a relevant case	Not enough information to determine whether relevant or not	This could be a relevant case but information is ambiguous	This is very likely a relevant case	This is definitely a relevant case
(A) not fulfilled (B) not fulfilled	Not enough information	(A) ambiguous (B) ambiguous	(A) fulfilled (B) ambiguous	(A) fulfilled / ambiguous (B) fulfilled

1.2.2. DATA COLLECTION, VERIFICATION AND VARIABLES

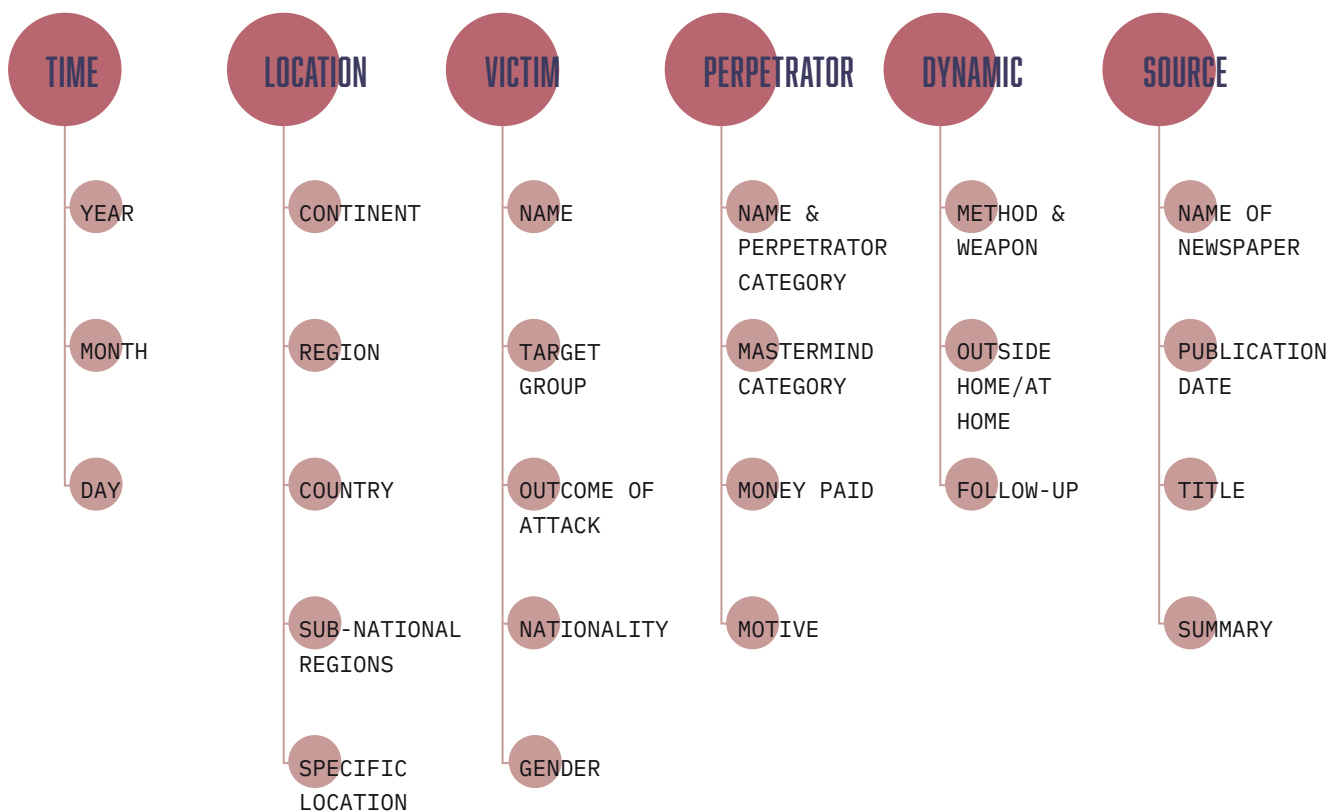
As mentioned, the cases included in the database are drawn from a search of news reports. The database has two layers. The first includes a global database that draws on 18 international and regional news sources. These sources were selected based on their global coverage and reputation.²¹ The second layer includes

a national database drawing on sources for a selected number of countries. The national database informs the country case studies in section 4 of this report, and allows for a more nuanced analysis of contract killings on the sub-national level.²²

Using a consistent search string, a team of researchers sifted through every article, extracting information about each relevant case. The approach was streamlined, following the same coding protocol, and the researchers were trained. The database went through various rounds of verification, where individual cases

were checked for their accuracy. The database records information about individual assassinations along six key dimensions: date, location, victims, perpetrators, source and dynamics of the incidents, such as motive, method and price paid for the killing.

Figure 2: Dimensions and variables



Four types of assassinations are included in the database, namely politically, economically, personally and organized-crime motivated incidents.²³ At times, the primary motive might not be clear, or motives might overlap. For example, a member of a competing gang might be killed in the context of an ongoing gang war, yet the perpetrator might have had personal reasons for the killing. The motive recorded in the database is based on the information provided in the report. In cases where the main motive is not clear, because more than one possible motive is reported, the primary and secondary motive are recorded in the database.

Politically motivated assassinations include those that most often are linked to political-party competition

or more generally aim to influence a political outcome. Most cases with a political motive target politicians or other civil servants, but this is not a requirement. Also, not all cases that target politicians fall into this category (since the motive might be personal, organized-crime related or economic).

Economically motivated assassinations aim to influence an economic outcome. Those that fall into this category are often the result of economic or business competition, and aim to avenge or eliminate economic or business competitors.

Assassinations driven by an organized-crime motive are directly linked to, or preceded by, an illicit activity. Most of these killings are perpetrated by members of

organized crime groups, such as the killing of a businessperson who did not pay extortion money, or the killing of members of a competing organized crime group as part of an ongoing turf war, for example.

Personally motivated assassinations most often involve a personal relationship between mastermind and victim. These include assassinations related to love

triangles, personal revenge or honour killings.

The database categorizes victims into eight target groups: politics and governance; local community; security; illicit market; media; criminal justice; the private sector; and the international community. Everything else falls within the category of ‘others’.²⁴

1.2.3. CAVEATS AND LIMITATIONS

Incident data drawn from news reports does not come without limitations. Some of the concerns are linked to, firstly, the source itself (i.e. reporting of cases) and, secondly, the process of data collection and coding (i.e. recording of cases).

In terms of the sources, news organizations may not cover all cases of assassinations, which may well lead to underreporting, and hence overall undercounting of cases in the database.²⁵ Yet, of greater concern for statistical analysis is potential reporting biases. Such biases may arise if cases are not equally reported within a country or across countries, or over time. For example, urban areas may be better covered than rural areas, and hence there may be an underreporting of incidents in rural areas.²⁶ Local sources might provide a more comprehensive picture than regional or international sources.²⁷ Yet, national or international newspapers may be more valid, since local news can be more subject to local pressures.²⁸ Similarly, cases involving greater levels of violence may be more likely to make the news than those with lower levels of brutality or with fewer casualties.²⁹ Over time, reporting fatigue may arise – violence loses its novelty factor after some time, and media outlets start turning to other topics.³⁰ While it is not possible to remedy all potential sources of bias, certain measures were undertaken to increase the quality of data collection:

- By considering the media environment and quality of reporting (e.g. freedom of press)
- By assessing and selecting the most reliable news sources
- By selecting a variety of news sources, including local, regional and international

Another concern revolves around recording biases. This includes limitations in terms of the search string used, and potential biases introduced by those coding the data. Using a predefined search string to comb through the LexisNexis database limits the results of the search to those articles mentioning at least one of the key words included in the search string. If the search string does not include all relevant search terms, the search can lead to potential biases in the selection of cases. The balance here is to create a search string that is broad enough to draw out all relevant reports, but narrow enough to reduce the number of irrelevant reports. For example, a search including only the term ‘contract killing’ might be too narrow; conversely, a search term including the term ‘killing’ might be too broad. After an extended period of testing, the search string included variations of the terms ‘assassin’, ‘hitmen’, as well as ‘kill’, ‘murder’ and ‘shot’, in conjunction with ‘contract’, ‘hire’ or ‘gang’.³¹

Additional biases can be introduced in the process of coding. Those involved in recording the data may have different interpretations of which cases to include and how to record their information. Recording biases can be introduced at any point in time. They may occur because researchers have different understandings of the definitions and coding rules, and thus systematically record different cases, or cases differently. They may also be introduced because the same researcher experiences ‘recording fatigue’, for example at the end of a long working day. It was therefore important that clear and precise definitions, data selection and coding rules were provided to all coders; that all coders were trained by senior staff; and, ideally, that the work of coders is tested and reviewed for potential biases. All researchers in this project were trained and provided with a coding manual, and their data was reviewed before it was used.³²

2

THE ASSASSINATION MONITOR DATABASE



The Global Assassination Monitor forms part of a wider GI-TOC initiative, the Assassination Witness project. The monitor builds on previous GI-TOC research on assassinations, and was born out of the realization that there are no globally comparable sources on the subject. It aims to fill this gap, providing disaggregated data on assassinations on a global scale, to inform more nuanced and better policy responses to assassinations and organized crime.

2.1. FILLING THE DATA GAP: TRACKING ASSASSINATIONS

Despite the vast assortment of international databases covering organized crime and violence in general, until now there has been no data collected specifically on contract killings on a global scale.³³ The Global Assassination Monitor fills this information gap by providing a database on paid assassinations that allows comparability across countries and over time.

The data is compiled from media reports of contract killings, resulting in a database with currently more than 2 700 recorded cases in 84 countries. The numbers, of course, need to be viewed with some degree of caution, as there are potential shortcomings in using media sources, such as possible undercounting of incidents and limited coverage.

Most global data-collection efforts that record violence and crime focus on homicides, political violence and terrorism. These databases undeniably help identify trends in organized-crime-related violence in specific countries, but they do not single out contract killings.³⁴ And, although some do provide insights into the dynamics of contract killings, the data, nevertheless, does not allow for global comparisons owing to methodological differences.

2.2. ADVOCATING FOR A BETTER POLICY RESPONSE

In 2020, the GI-TOC launched Assassination Witness, a multifaceted programme that contains the Global Initiative's flagship campaign and book, *Faces of Assassination*,³⁵ and the Global Assassination Monitor database. The aim of this programme is to draw public attention to the fact that, across the world, assassinations are used as a means of criminal governance, and how many who stand up for the truth, transparency and public integrity face grave threats of violence. The project aims to provide a better evidence base and to inform multilateral policymakers on the ways in which assassinations are used as a means of criminal governance, calling on the international community to provide better responses to assassinations, and to strengthen community resilience to assassinations. The project is founded on four main pillars:

MONITORING GLOBAL ASSASSINATIONS

The consolidation and expansion of a global database of assassinations is a foundation for the development of the project. The data set tracks cases of paid assassinations, also defined as contract killings or hits, to ensure that there is a reliable and regular means to monitor what is an increasingly global phenomenon. The global monitor aims to produce a better evidence base for research and analysis of assassinations, and show how the phenomenon is connected to other illicit economies.

FACILITATING A BETTER POLICY RESPONSE

The Assassination Witness project aims to increase public awareness and improve our understanding of the assassination phenomenon, and help identify gaps in the responses to assassinations. The project supports the creation of tools and processes in the hope these will improve both global and national responses to assassinations related to organized crime and contribute to the global effort to protect the work of anti-corruption activists, lawyers, journalists and human-rights defenders around the world.

ADVOCACY

Assassination Witness also highlights the human impact of organized crime, drawing attention to the individual cases of assassinations of people whose work, aspirations, and goals confront and challenge the power of organized crime. By highlighting the individual cases, the project bears witness to the victims of these killings, and pays homage to their bravery and quest for criminal justice. The #AssassinationWitness campaign was officially launched on 15 June 2020, with the book *Faces of Assassination: Bearing Witness to the Victims of Organized Crime*.

STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY RESILIENCE AND BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS

We have expanded our network, which includes organizations working across the globe to reach out to activists who are at risk and do not have anyone to champion their cause; to educate and build capacity for prevention; and to support the families of victims. Through its civil society Resilience Fund, the GI-TOC aims to fill that void and catalyze the creation of a sustainable framework in collaboration with others.

DEFINING CONTRACT KILLINGS

Most literature on assassinations refers to targeted killings of political figures and assassinations carried out for political, social or economic purposes.³⁶ Literature on contract killings specifically, on the other hand, is limited. A number of studies have tried to understand contract killings and the role of hitmen in specific contexts.³⁷ The study of contract killings on a global scale, however, is largely underdeveloped.³⁸

Based on existing literature on assassinations and previous research by the GI-TOC,³⁹ assassinations in the context of this project are defined as ‘targeted contract killings’. This includes actual, attempted and planned lethal attacks on individuals or small groups of individuals. The definition of targeted killings here includes cases where specific individuals are targeted for personal characteristics – such as identity, position or the work they do, and does not include attacks on

random members of groups. Contract killings are cases where a third party is contracted to conduct the actual attempted or planned murder. At times, this might involve the transfer of money: the contract killer is paid for his or her services; at other times, the contract killer might receive other forms of benefit, including personal favours, political favours or a change in status in a criminal gang. The killing is contracted for political, economic, personal or organized-crime-related motives. The aim of the killing is to change the status quo by eliminating somebody considered to be an ‘obstacle’. For the purpose of this report, the terms ‘assassination’, ‘hit’, ‘targeted killing’ and ‘contract killing’ are used interchangeably.

MEDELLIN, COLOMBIA - JUNE 2008: A woman who is allegedly engaged in business with local gangsters, hiding their weapons here in her home, including this shotgun.



2

DYNAMICS OF ASSASSINATIONS: GLOBAL OVERVIEW



**ASSASSINATIONS ARE
HITTING THE GLOBAL
HEADLINES MORE
FREQUENTLY, BUT DESPITE
THIS CRIME'S PERNICIOUS
IMPACTS, THERE IS NO REAL
SENSE OF THE EXTENT OF
THE PROBLEM**

The Global Assassination Monitor has recorded over 2 700 cases in 84 countries of successful and attempted hits, including those recorded in global, regional and selected national sources. However, the problem is likely to be even worse than the numbers show. Drawing on global and regional sources only, the number of cases recorded drops from over 2 700 to 766, which shows that only the most high-profile cases, politically or socially, are usually reported in the international media. To allow for more nuanced analysis of contract killings at the country level, the study included national sources from 10 countries. As a result, almost 2 000 cases from the national sources were added to the database. Based on the sample of 10 countries, global and regional news picked up only 15% of all cases. The results of the country case studies are presented in section 4 of this report. Otherwise, the analysis includes cases that draw only on the global and regional sources.

Figure 3: Global concentrations of contract killings

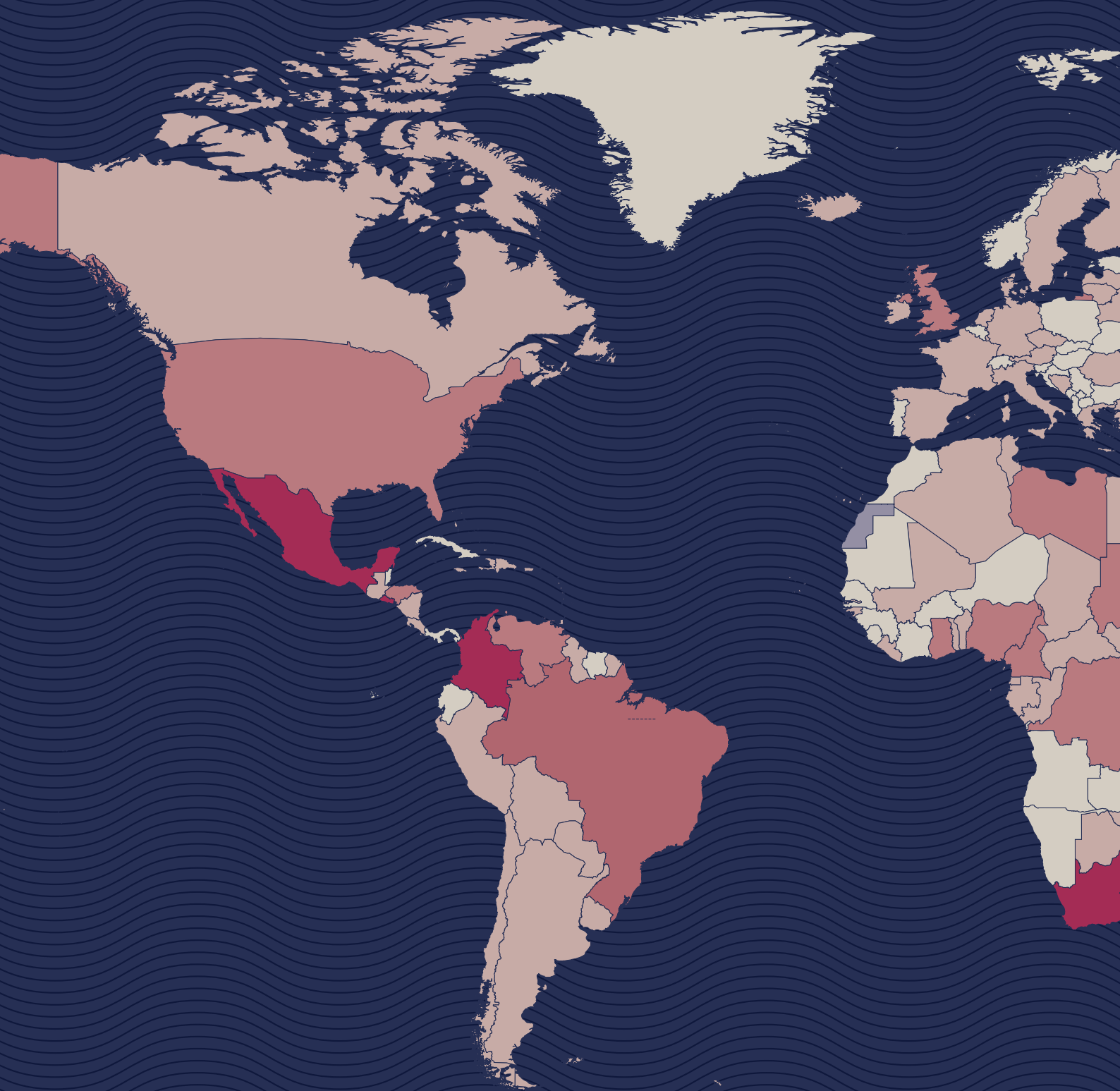
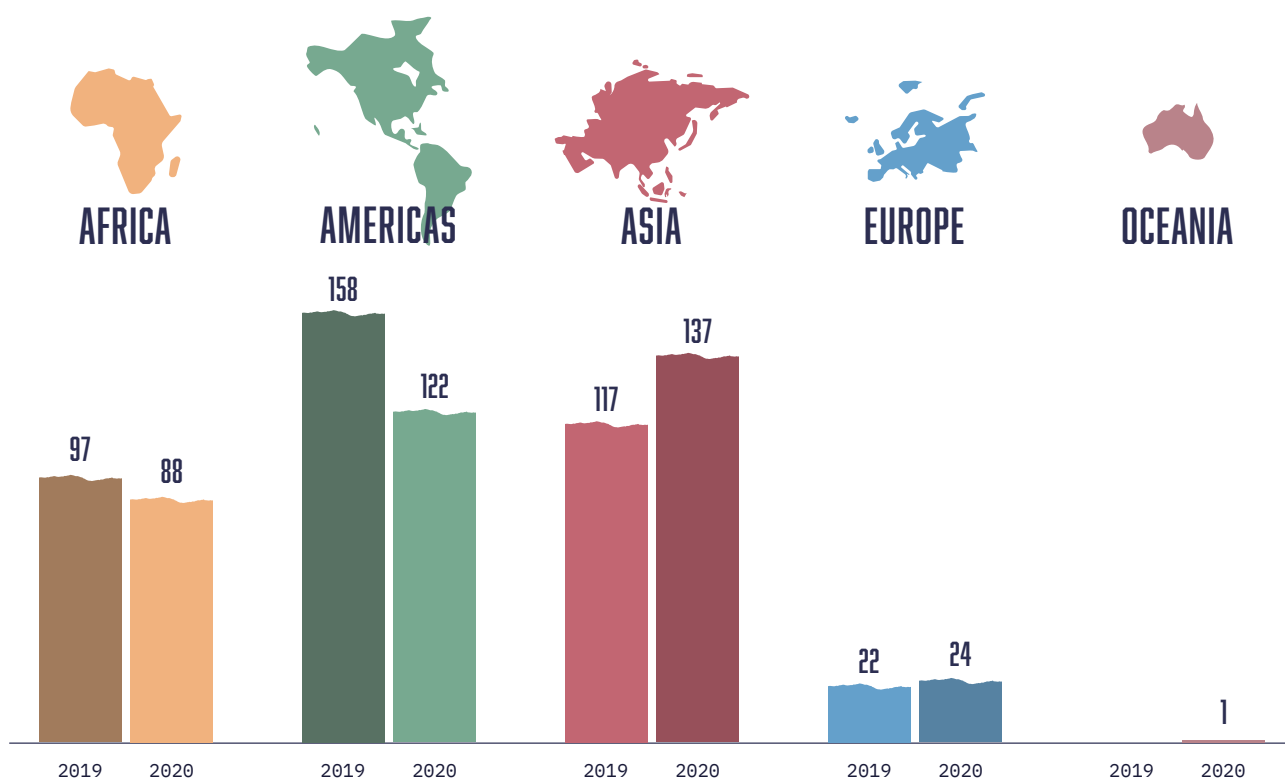




Figure 4: Assassinations, by region and year



Assassinations are highly concentrated geographically. Most of the recorded cases took place in the Americas and Asia, which accounted for 70% of all cases. Africa accounted for 24% of all cases, while Europe accounted for only 6%. Despite restrictions on movement during the pandemic in 2020, the number of cases decreased only slightly, from 394 in 2019 to 372 in 2020. This trend varied across the regions, however. In line with the global trend, the Americas and Africa saw a decline in assassinations over the two-year period, while numbers rose in Asia and Europe. These variations are not entirely surprising, given varied pandemic-related restrictions on movement in different

locations. While restrictions on movement, on one hand, can make assassinations more difficult owing to stricter surveillance, it can also make them easier because targets' movement is also restricted. In places where the state is implicated in assassinations, COVID-19 restrictions, such as lockdowns, might have made targeting of victims particularly easy.⁴⁰

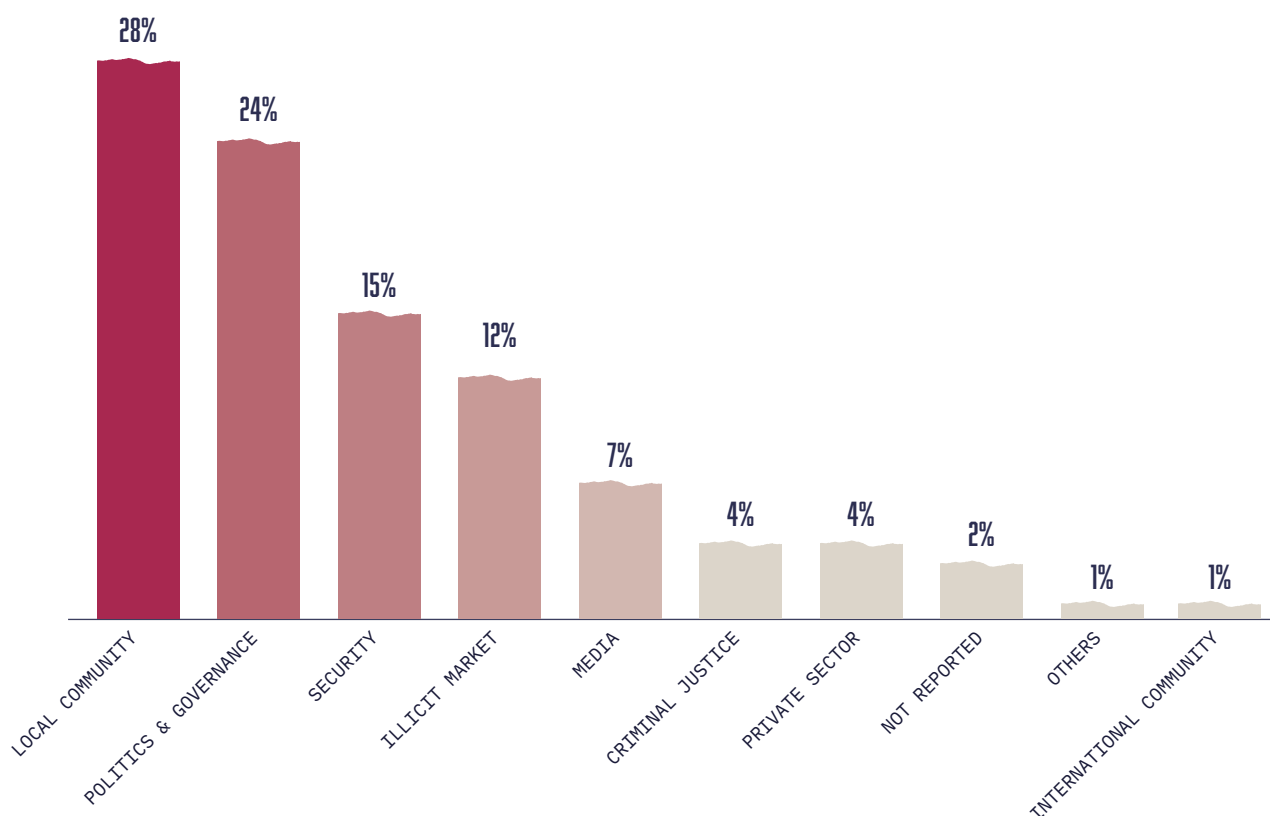
The following sections analyze the variables and trends relating to assassinations, examining the target groups, motives, method of assassination, perpetrators and prices, and how assassinations impact women and girls.

3.1. TARGET GROUPS

The global assassinations database categorizes victims into eight overarching target groups, plus cases where the target group was not reported (unknown) or did not fall into any of the eight target groups (other) – more of which in the subsections that follow. The largest target group, making up 28% of all cases, belonged to the local community. These targets include religious community leaders, scholars, activists, as well as cultural workers, among others. The second largest target group (24%) are part of the sphere of politics and governance – national politicians, members of local councils and other public officials. The security sector, especially law enforcement, account for 15% of all targets. A surprisingly small proportion of targets (12%) are from illicit markets, including criminals, and members of organized crime groups and militant organizations. Representatives of the media, who often make the

headlines as the victims of targeted killings, such as journalists and broadcasters, accounted for only 7% of all cases recorded in the database. Criminal justice, a category that includes lawyers and judges, accounts for 4% of all victims. The private sector category, which includes businesspeople and employees of businesses, also accounts for 4% of all victims, whereas victims that were included under the international community category, for example UN representatives, foreign diplomats or foreign nationals, accounted for 1%. Victims who could not be grouped under one of the eight target groups were combined under the category ‘other’. Only 1% of all recorded cases fell under that category. In 2% of all recorded cases, the target category remained unknown: these are cases where the source articles did not provide enough information.

Figure 5: Breakdown of target groups, globally

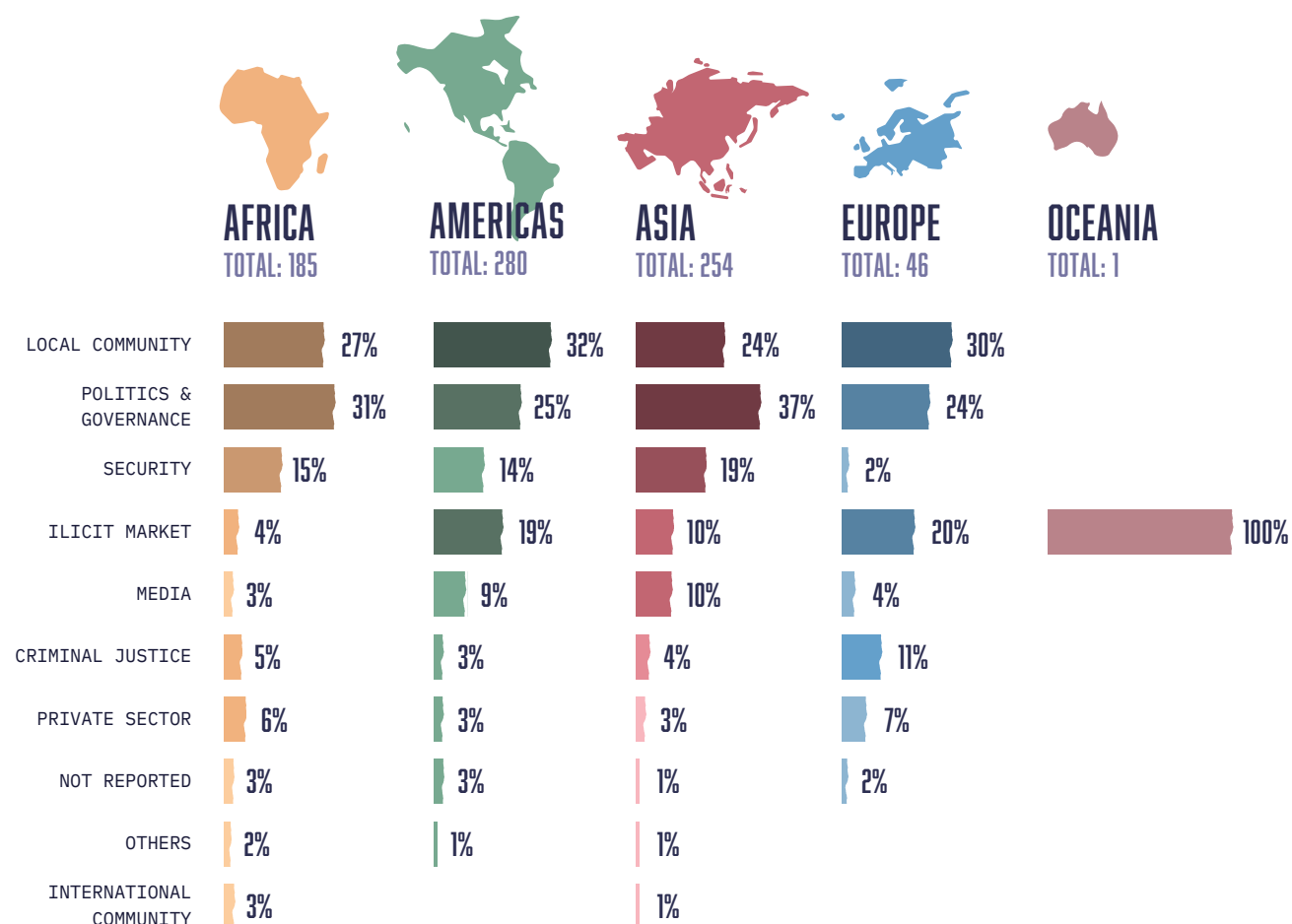


Percentage numbers don't add up to 100% due to rounding.

3.1.1. LOCAL COMMUNITY

Looking at the regional breakdown of target groups, it appears that the high figure for the local community category is driven by cases in the Americas, where they accounted for 32% of all recorded victims. A great number of these were activists, community leaders and members of indigenous communities. Members of local communities were also targeted in other regions. In Africa, 27% of all recorded victims belonged to this category, mostly community leaders, activists and farmers. In Asia, the same group accounted for 24% of all victims, with the majority being activists, followed by community leaders. In Europe, the proportion is 30%, albeit with much lower figures in accordance with lower numbers of assassinations in that continent.

Figure 6: Breakdown of target groups, by continent



A sizeable proportion of the killings in the Americas are accounted for by issues of land and the exploitation of natural resources. In some areas, exploitation of land and the trafficking of drugs are closely linked. Drug traffickers use activities such as illegal logging, land theft and deforestation to launder money obtained through the drug market.⁴¹ Hence, opposing illegal logging, mining and other extractive activities in protected areas has proven deadly to a comparatively large number of local community members who publicly expose criminal activities, including indigenous people, who are at great risk of being killed by organized crime groups.

In addition, certain conditions, such as inequality and poverty, together with controversial state policies created to address those root causes – including laws criminalizing activists or a heavy-handed militarized approach to criminal groups – can serve to support the space in which criminal groups operate. In the Americas, this often has the effect of facilitating reprisals against community members who oppose criminal interests, ‘justifying’ the trend of killings on the continent.

The Americas are not the only region that has seen high levels of killings of members of the local community.⁴² Asia has also experienced a large number of targeted killings of members of this category, especially community leaders in Southern Asia and activists in Western Asia. In Africa, activists are also frequently targeted, often linked to disputes around land and natural-resource exploitation.

COLLUSION OF GOVERNMENT, BUSINESSES AND ORGANIZED CRIME

On 22 October 2020, Fikile Ntshangase, a South African environmental activist, was assassinated in her home. She was the leading voice for people affected by opencast mining. Since 2019, tensions had surged in the KwaZulu-Natal community, when Tendele Mining voiced its intention to expand operations. There were a variety of persons with vested interests in the expansion, but Ntshangase was openly opposed to it, a possible reason for her assassination.⁴³

This is just one of many cases. Generally speaking, one of the common reasons why activists, community leaders and indigenous people around the world are assassinated is their campaigning to protect the environment and its resources.⁴⁴ In many instances, the starting point of conflict is the entry of a mega development project, sometimes backed by governments and international financial institutions. The lack of transparency around such projects and failure to consult the broader community or take into account their concerns can often ignite conflicts with local communities, in particular indigenous people.

Fikile Ntshangase was part of a group taking legal action to prevent expansion of the Somkhele coal mine in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.



Although those behind such killings largely remain a mystery, companies in collusion with politics and organized crime are often seen as responsible for threats and violence against land defenders. Some governments have taken a stance to support big extractive corporations at the expense of the lives of local communities. Organized crime capacity is often contracted by corrupt corporations and governments to carry out killings and issue threats against community members. At the same time, organized crime might also have its own interests in the conflict, for example by creating a space to pursue illegal activities around exploitation of land and natural resources. Assassinations have thus become a business model in places where natural resources are abundant and where indigenous communities seek to protect their lands, as in the case of Ntshangase.

A well-cited example of this dynamic is Honduras,⁴⁵ a country that has achieved international attention since the 2016 murder of award-winning environmental activist and member of the Lenca indigenous community, Berta Cáceres.⁴⁶ The lack of accountability for the harm caused by business-related abuses had led to systematic attacks, harassment and intimidation of land defenders in the country. Later, in December 2020, another member of the Lenca community was shot dead by unidentified gunmen. Although the motive is

still unknown, the victim, Félix Vásquez, was the leader of a group fighting for the rights of rural workers and a campaigner to protect lands in natural reserves. He had received death threats, yet protection measures had been denied him.⁴⁷

Although killings of environmental defenders and indigenous peoples are all too frequent, little or no mechanism to hold perpetrators to account has afforded defenders the protection they need. However, things are moving forward. In April 2021, a landmark agreement between Latin America countries was signed, the Escazú Agreement. This international instrument has the potential to counter the escalation of violence against defenders in the region, although two countries with a high incidence of violence against defenders, Brazil and Colombia, have not ratified the agreement and it is yet to be seen how effective it is in protecting land defenders.⁴⁸

Cases such as these demonstrate the threats that activists suffer on a global scale, but they are by no means the only local community groups around which assassinations cluster.

LIMA, PERU - 2021/09/24: A young girl paints a banner as part of the Global Climate Strike to demand action in response to the climate crisis.



Carlos Garcia Granthon/Fotoholica Press/
LightRocket via Getty Images



VICTIM CASE

ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVIST

Mexico, Americas 

Samir Flores Soberanes

In early February 2019, Samir Flores Soberanes, a Náhuatl indigenous activist and radio broadcaster in Mexico, was shot twice in the head in his home in Amilcingo, in the state of Morelos. The attack took place just a few days before a consultation process related to the Proyecto Integral Morelos, a development project entailing the installation of two thermoelectric plants and a gas pipeline that would cross the region, was due to take place.⁴⁹ Soberanes had opposed the project and, like other activists in Amilcingo, feared it would contaminate the local water supply to the detriment of the well-being and livelihood of locals, mostly indigenous people.

The Peoples in Defense of Land and Water Front, an organization of which Flores was a member, said that his killing was a political assassination – he had attended a public meeting about the project

days before his death in which he had challenged government representatives.⁵⁰ It was suspected that his murder was linked to his opposition to the pipeline project and to the consultation process.⁵¹ The prosecution on the case followed six lines of investigation, pursuing links to those in favour of the project and to organized crime.⁵²

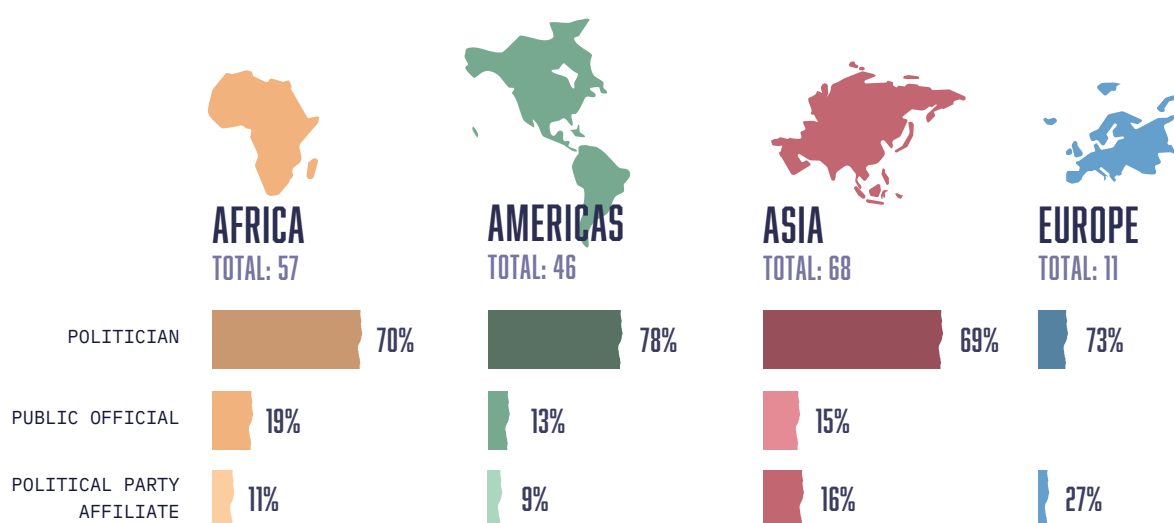
After Soberanes's death, the project was suspended by a court decision, the judge ruling that it violated local community rights.⁵³ Despite the initial victory in the lawsuit, more than a year after Soberanes's assassination, no substantial advances had been made in the investigation. Local activists, who still live in fear due the climate of impunity, believe that there is no interest in prosecuting the murder case⁵⁴ and are demanding an independent commission to investigate Soberanes's assassination.⁵⁵

3.1.2. POLITICS AND GOVERNANCE

After local communities, those working in the field of politics and governance made up the second most targeted group of victims of contract killings recorded in the data set, accounting for 24% of all attacks. Most of these occurred in Asia, with 37%, especially in Southern Asia, where the majority of victims were politicians and party affiliates. Africa accounted for the second

largest number of cases in this category, with 31%, where most victims were politicians and public officials in East Africa. Despite experiencing a high number of assassinations overall, in this category the Americas represented only 25% of all recorded cases, predominantly accounted for by politicians in Central and South America.

Figure 7: Politics and governance target group, breakdown by continent



Note: Former politicians were combined with the sub-group politicians, former public officials were combined with public officials and one case of an election observer was subsumed under public officials.

As a global phenomenon, assassinations of those tied to political institutions, and especially the killing of politicians, is an important issue, not just because of the scale of the problem, but also because of its impact on local politics, rule of law and democratic stability. The killing of politicians and political candidates has become a means to advance personal, political and economic agendas of those who are in power, of those who would like to be in power, and of organized crime groups. Because of the low risk of prosecution, assassinations are an 'easy' option.

In many of the cases recorded in the data set, electoral competition during election periods seems to be critical. Such was the case in Mozambique and Brazil, as will be discussed later in the country case study section. But these were not the only places: electoral violence is

common in many countries across the globe. In Mexico, several assassinations were reported in the pre-election year of 2020. The numbers then increased in 2021 as the national election drew near.⁵⁶

Local officials, such as municipal politicians and civil servants, are the most at-risk group of becoming the targets of assassinations. Their relative 'anonymity' means that they are often outside of the protective system that the government, media and public can provide. Lack of public awareness about the dynamics between crime and politics in some regions can leave local officials exposed to the interests of criminal groups, which makes them vulnerable to potential threats and attacks. This can also create an environment where officials collude with criminal groups in exchange for their protection.

States can play a role in fuelling assassinations of public figures. This is especially the case where electoral competition is intense and political violence normalized.⁵⁷ Governments themselves can exert their monopoly on violence⁵⁸ to rid themselves of political opposition. In these cases, organized criminals and politicians might join hands, with criminals assassinating political opposition in exchange for

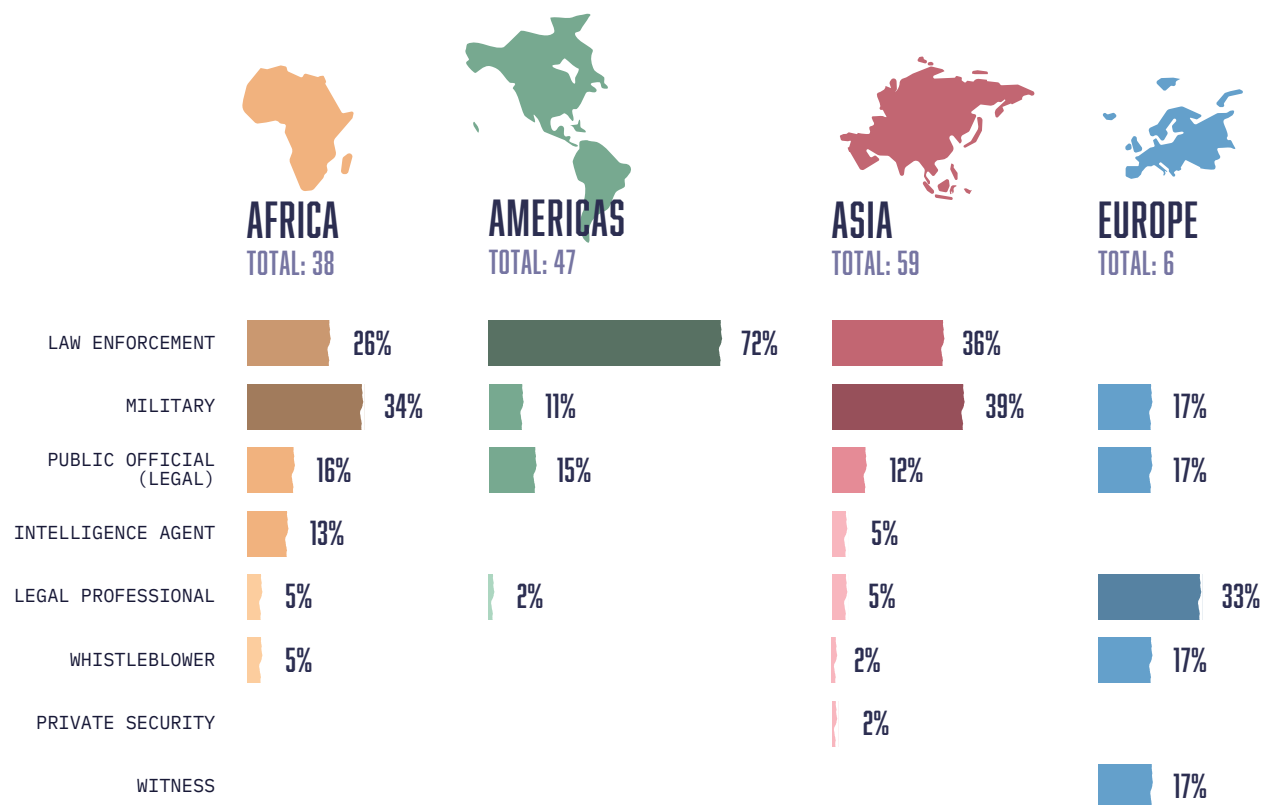
political protection. Even if state officials are not directly involved in such assassinations, where they often err is in failing to prevent or prosecute them. As a result, organized crime has the effect of removing important democratic mechanisms and impedes good governance, making it even harder for law enforcement to hold perpetrators accountable.

3.1.3. SECURITY AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE

Members of the security and criminal justice sectors, including law enforcement agents, the military, judges, lawyers and witnesses, are also major target groups in many countries. When taken together, these two target groups accounted for 20% of all victims, with security targets making up 16% of all cases. The majority of these assassinations took place in Asia, which accounted for 40% of all victims, in particular mem-

bers of law enforcement and the judiciary in Southern Asia, and the military in Western Asia. The Americas accounted for 31% of the targeted attacks, mostly perpetrated against law enforcement agents and public prosecutors as well as judges in Central America. Africa accounted for 25% of the cases, where members of the military were the main targets, followed by law enforcement in East Africa.

Figure 8: Security and criminal justice target groups, breakdown by continent



Percentage numbers don't add up to 100% due to rounding.

The targeting of magistrates, prosecutors, lawyers, witnesses, including those who have been assigned to witness protection programmes, and law enforcement has been recorded for all continents covered by the Global Assassination Monitor dataset, in developing and developed countries alike. These assassinations have a severe impact on the justice system, and potentially undermine a country's rule of law and democratic process.

OBFUSCATION OF JUSTICE

Assassinations targeting members of the judiciary are often used by organized crime to obfuscate justice and to intimidate the judiciary. They are used as an attempt to enable illegal activities to continue to be carried out without enforcement and, in cases where investigations do take place, that they go unpunished. At the same time, such assassinations are designed to create an atmosphere of fear among other members of the criminal justice fraternity, who may think twice before carrying out their work for fear of becoming a target themselves.

The motive behind such killings can vary according to the position the person occupies in a particular investigation or criminal trial. Law enforcement may be targeted for investigating a criminal syndicate, for example; prosecutors for bringing a case against a cartel or a corrupt politician; and lawyers for representing a witness or a family member of victims of crime. Judges face risk of being assassinated for presiding over cases involving drug kingpins and high-profile corrupt politicians.⁵⁹ In December 2019, Alcibiades Liberos Varela, a public prosecutor, was shot in a drive-by shooting in Cali, Colombia. Varela was involved in a major investigation into a suspected gang ringleader, and in prosecuting several criminal organizations in the region, including the La Cordillera gang and its head, alias Nino Fabian.

Studies have attempted to understand the relationship between lawyers and organized crime, as, at times, the legal profession is co-opted as an enabler of criminal activity.⁶⁰ Organized crime is known to have at times a duplicitous relationship with law enforcement and criminal justice. In those instances, such compromised servants of the state become strategic 'partners' of criminal actors, placing those professionals in a deadly zone for their involvement with criminal groups.

Some lawyers might also be used as an instrument to support criminal interests. They can be used to launder money, hide evidence, intimidate witnesses and corrupt judicial officials for the client's interests – all while enjoying professional privileges that can hamper investigations.

By engaging with organized criminal groups, lawyers risk navigating very dangerous waters, risking becoming a target themselves. The assassination of Hamid Hajian, a lawyer who was known to have worked on several corruption cases on behalf of powerful Iranian businesspeople, raised suspicion about whether his killing might have been connected to his professional activity. Hours before Hajian's murder, the Iranian Special Courts for Economic Corruption had issued a verdict against a billionaire businessman who was facing charges for economic crimes and who in a court hearing had claimed Hajian had misappropriated 500 billion rials (about US\$12 million) of his money.⁶¹ Immediately after the incident, the businessman's lawyer stated no connection existed between the client's verdict and the lawyer's assassination.

A particular situation that should be highlighted while looking at obfuscation of justice is intimidation of witnesses in criminal trials. Cases of victim and witness intimidation, and ultimately their assassination, are largely seen as a tactic to force an outcome in a specific case. Threats against and targeted killings of witnesses and victims who are about to testify undermine the proper functioning of the justice system, effectively preventing police and prosecutors from building a strong case and bringing critical evidence against the perpetrator.⁶² Lack of robust evidence can lead to acquittals under the principle of 'beyond reasonable doubt' – a common legal standard used to assess the evidence in a criminal trial.

Overall, assassinations of criminal justice and law enforcement actors send out an intimidating message, the impact of which is highly destructive. Witnesses, for example, in a criminal case might be deterred from testifying or bringing information to the police because of the perceived danger. Similarly, police might become disposed to turning a blind eye to criminal activity; prosecutors and magistrates might be persuaded to avoid bringing a case or convicting a criminal network kingpin. This way, illicit groups continue to operate freely and assassinations continue. Tackling this assassination cluster is therefore critical to upholding the rule of law and the integrity of the judiciary.



VICTIM CASE LAWYER

The Netherlands, Europe

Derk Wiersum

It was early in the morning of 18 September 2019. Criminal-law practitioner Derk Wiersum was walking to his car in the residential area of Buitenveldert, Amsterdam, when he was gunned down by a young man who was seen fleeing the scene.⁶³ Well known in the Dutch criminal-law circuit, Wiersum had built his career around fighting for the underdog.⁶⁴ At that time of his assassination, Wiersum was the lawyer acting for a state witness in a case against members a group of men accused of five murders between 2015 and 2017.⁶⁵ Two of the accused in those killings are believed to be part of a drug ring that controls about a third of Europe's cocaine trade and were listed by EUROPOL among Europe's most wanted fugitives.⁶⁶

Wiersum's assassination was highly condemned, and seen as an attack on the rule of law in the country. It also prompted a broader discussion about lawyers' safety and the future of the

system of key witnesses in the Netherlands. While the police said they would intensify protection measures around such cases, the legal community questioned the risks to judicial operators, partly brought about by the transparency of the Dutch court system, in which hearings and verdicts are open to the public and media.

Following Wiersum's death, the Dutch Bar Association has set up a point of contact for lawyers and judges who fear for their safety. However, one year after Wiersum's assassination, defence attorneys⁶⁷ and the public were still shaken by this incident. In a public address, the king of the Netherlands highlighted Wiersum's murder and the need to combat organized crime.⁶⁸ In July 2021, Peter R. de Vries, a prominent crime journalist and legal advisor to the same state witness Wiersum was representing at the time of his death was assassinated in Amsterdam.⁶⁹

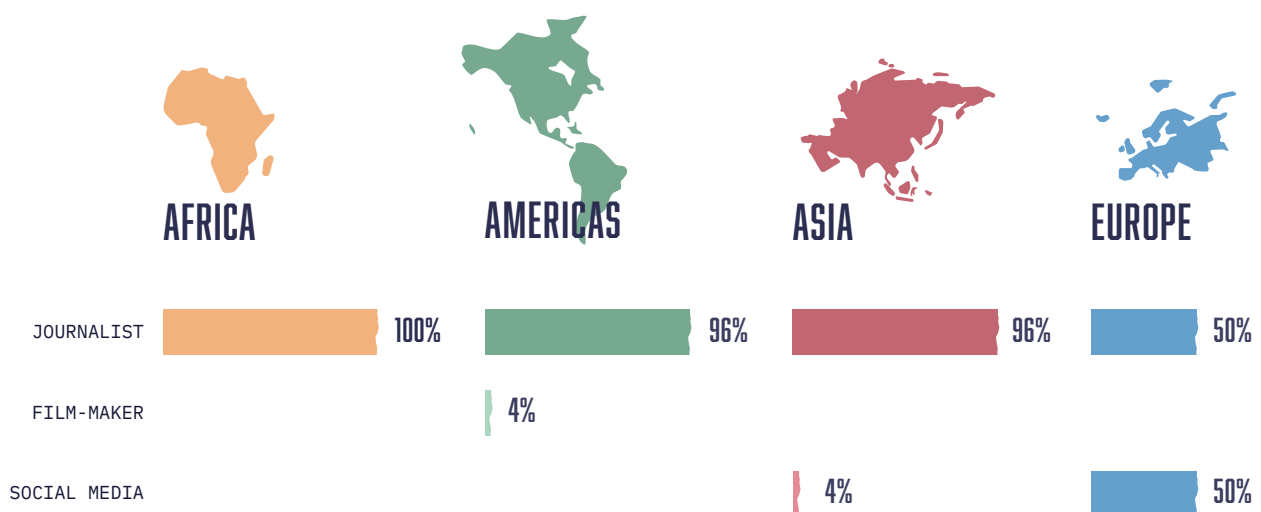
3.1.4. MEDIA

Attacks on media workers accounted for 7% of all recorded cases globally. Although this share may appear statistically relatively low compared to other target groups, the targeting of media workers has received widespread attention from the media, politics and civil society. It has been argued that media workers, and particularly journalists, face a greater risk of being victims of an assassination than being killed while reporting in a war zone. The Committee to Protect Journalists found that, in 21 cases of journalists killed in 2020, the main cause of death was in reaction to their work, and that the main suspects were criminal gangs and militant groups.⁷⁰

The cases recorded in the Global Assassination Monitor database occurred mostly in Asia (accounting

for 44% of the total) and the Americas (44%), with journalists being the primary targets. In the Americas, most of the victims were targeted in Honduras and Mexico. In Asia, most cases took place in Southern Asia, primarily in Pakistan and Afghanistan. All these are areas of either armed conflict or widespread violence. However, the killing of investigative journalists is not limited to such areas. In 2021, a prominent Greek journalist, Giorgos Karaivaz, who had a long-standing career covering organized crime, was killed in Athens. The murder was described as a professional hit, and it increased concerns about freedom of expression in Europe, as it took place just a few years after the assassination of investigative journalists Daphne Caruana Galizia and Ján Kuciak.⁷¹

Figure 9: Media target groups, breakdown by continent



Attacks on journalists are intrinsically linked to organized crime. Not only are members of criminal gangs often responsible for carrying out these attacks, but journalists are also often targeted for their investigative work against organized crime interests or on the links between organized crime and the political establishment. The killing of journalists sends a message to silence other writers.

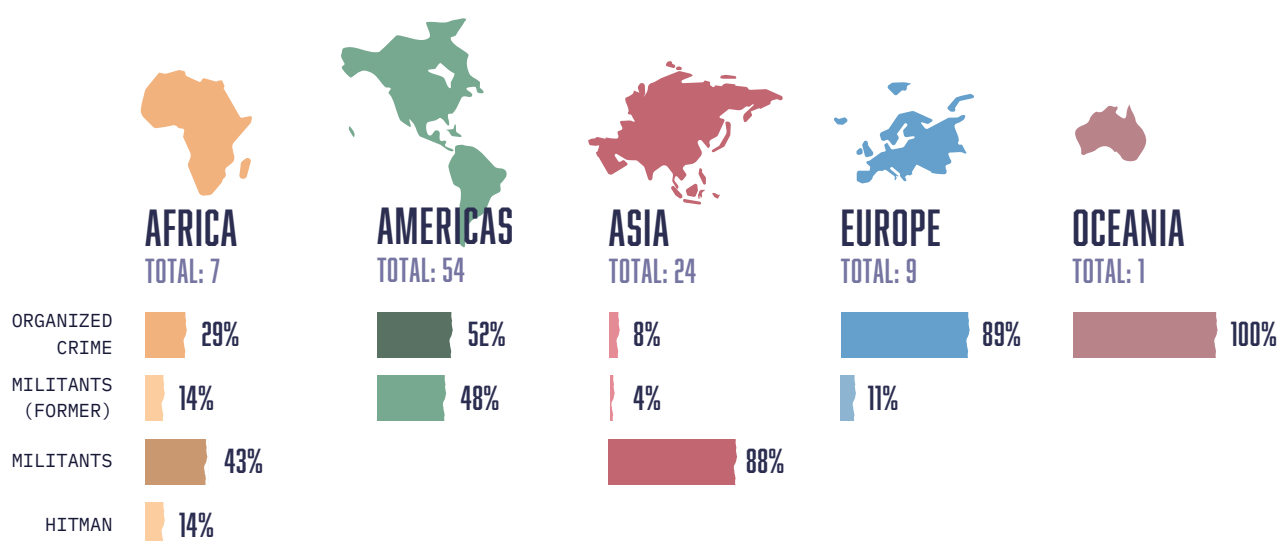
Media investigations that expose misconduct of governmental officials in collusion with organized criminal groups, including cases of corruption, human rights abuses, forced disappearances and misappropriation of financial resources, have proved fatal for some journalists, including in democratic states. Although such cases go largely unpunished, in 2020 some verdicts were handed down in Mexico and Slovakia, although, not surprisingly, it was the perpetrators or hitmen who were convicted, while those who had allegedly orchestrated the assassinations remain free.

3.1.5. ILLICIT MARKET

The target category illicit market, which includes members of armed groups and organized crime groups, and individual hitmen, accounts for 12% of assassination cases globally. The illicit market target category was most prevalent in the Americas (accounting for 57% of the global total), followed by Asia (25%), whereas Africa

and Europe each account for only 9% of such cases. In the Americas, members of organized crime groups and former armed groups were the main target groups, while in Asia the main target group comprised current members of armed groups.

Figure 10: Illicit market target group, breakdown by continent



Note: The category 'criminal' (five cases) was subsumed under organized crime for the purpose of this graph.

The numbers in the Americas are largely driven by the killing of former members of FARC-EP (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia-Ejército del Pueblo), an issue that has received great media attention in the past few years and will be explored later in this report. Killings of members of organized crime groups were most prominent in Colombia, but were also reported in other countries, such as Brazil, Mexico, Venezuela, and others. These were mostly related to the illicit drug trade and territorial disputes between organized crime groups.

In Asia, the killing of members of armed groups has been closely linked to conflict zones, such as Yemen and Syria, as well as certain regions within Pakistan and India. Although motives were not always clear

and perpetrators largely unidentified, the cases could be linked to ongoing conflicts, and victims were often members of armed groups, including separatist groups and high-profile members of armed groups. In Europe, cases were recorded across the region, albeit in small numbers, for example in Germany, Greece, Ireland, Malta, Sweden, Ukraine and the United Kingdom. Most were related to turf wars between gangs. In some cases, assassinations were carried out by gangs outside of their home territory, for example in the context of the Montenegrin gang wars.⁷² This phenomenon will be further explored in the country case study section of this report.

TARGETING HITMEN

Although the figure of the hitman usually plays a central role as the perpetrator of a contract killing, the database has also recorded some cases in which the hitman himself was the target. Some of the main factors behind assassinations of hitmen were internal fallouts within gangs and the elimination of witnesses. As Shaw has explored in the South African context, such killings reflect the ambiguous position occupied by hitmen in the criminal underworld. Although hitmen have close ties to gang bosses, being con-

tracted to kill on their behalf, other gang members become suspicious or envious of their position within the gang, and the knowledge the hitman accumulates might become too threatening to the bosses, hence the motive behind their elimination.⁷³

One example was the case of Eduardo Castillo Calles, alias 'El Limón'. Calles was shot dead in Sacacoyo, a municipality in El Salvador, while at a restaurant with two other men. The victim had been sentenced to 78 years in prison for belonging to an extermination group, and after serving 20 months in prison had been released with an electronic tagging device before he was killed.

3.2. MOTIVES

The motives category is subdivided into four components in the database: political, economic, personal and organized-crime. Politically motivated cases aim to influence a political outcome. These are often cases that are linked to political party competition and rivalry. Politicians may be the target but this is not a necessary requirement, and not all assassinations of politicians fall within this category. Economically motivated assassinations, as can be expected, aim to influence an economic outcome or purpose. These assassinations are often the result of economic or business competition, and the objective is to eliminate economic or business competitors or avenge their activities. Personally motivated assassinations are often linked to love triangles, personal revenge or deep-seated enmities between families. Organized crime-related motives include assassinations that are the result of, for example, gang wars or unpaid extortion money.

Different categories of drivers, or motives, may well overlap, however, and the distinction between them is not always clear-cut in practice. There are grey areas – a particular case might be described as political but have a strong connection with organized crime. This, for

example, is the case if a politician hires a hitman linked to an organized crime group. In other cases, criminal and political drivers merge. This is the case if there is collusion between state officials and organized crime groups. In these cases, it is difficult to pinpoint the main driver behind the assassination. In other cases, the motive is not necessarily known, and the reports captured in the database merely attributed a motive in line with the group the target belongs to. The following section showcases these overlapping dynamics between different categories of drivers, and between drivers and targeted groups.

In most cases – 63% of all incidents globally – the motive for the killing was political. In line with the global picture, political motivation appears to be behind most cases of assassinations in all regions. In Asia, 80% of cases were reportedly politically motivated; in Africa 69%; in the Americas 46%; and in Europe about 50%.

About 23% of the cases were motivated by activities related to organized crime. Attacks in this category, representing the second highest number of cases, were at their highest in the Americas, with 45%, followed by Europe (33%), Africa (9%) and Asia (7%).

Figure 11: Breakdown of motives, globally

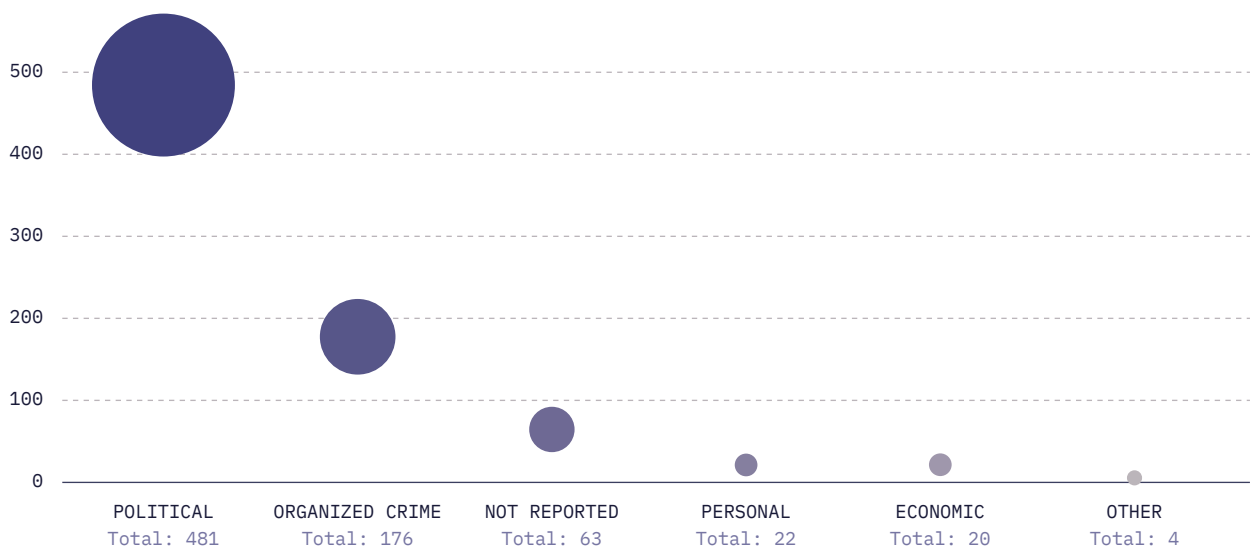
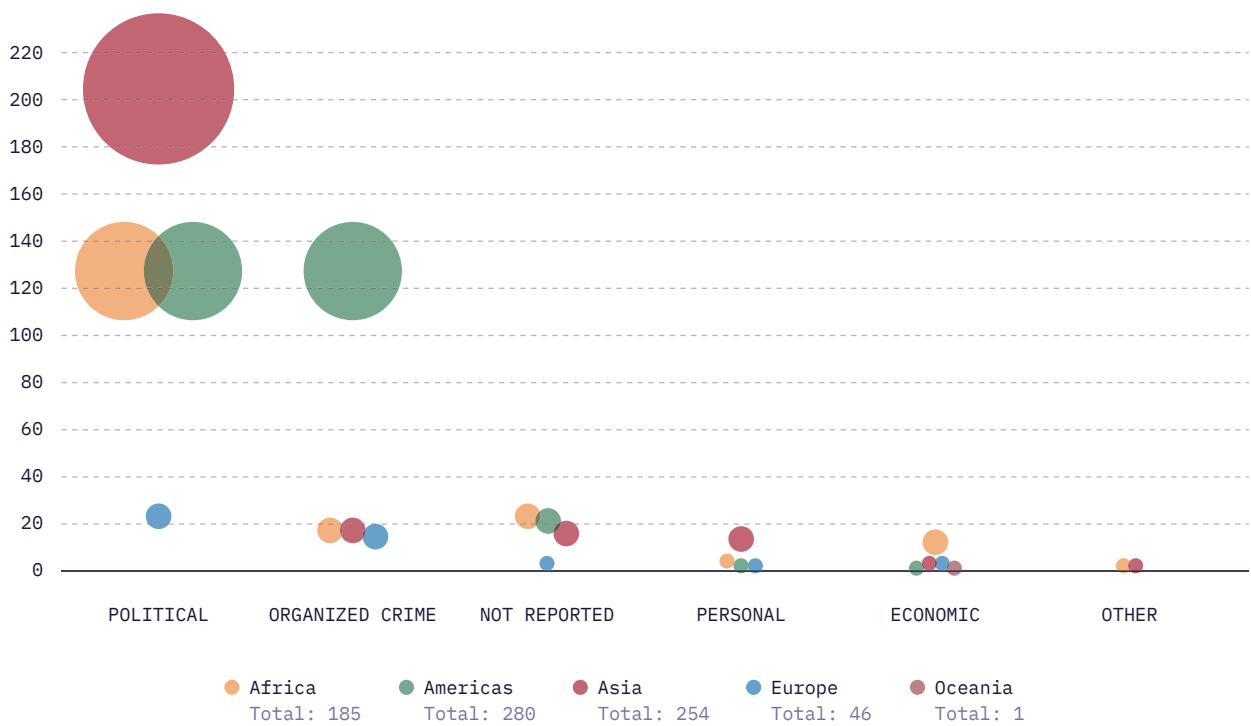


Figure 12: Breakdown of motives, by continent



3.2.1. OVERLAPPING MOTIVES: POLITICS, ECONOMICS AND ORGANIZED CRIME

It goes without saying that the motives for assassinating a person vary, but, at the same time, an assassination can be driven by more than one motive. For example, if a politician hires a hitman or gang member to eliminate a political competitor, the assassination is driven by political rivalry. In these cases, the data coding followed the reported initial driver of the killing – i.e. political rivalry. However, some other cases were not so straightforward in terms of identifying the motive. For example, in the case of a gang war, a lower-ranking gang member may eliminate a member of a rival gang, feeding into the organized-crime-related motive. However, the murder might have been fundamentally motivated by personal rivalry between the two gang members (for example, fighting over a woman). In those cases, both drivers were recorded in the database. However, the primary motive would have been the overarching organized-crime-related motive linked to the gang war.

Similarly, the assassination of political figures is not always necessarily politically motivated. In several instances, criminal groups have their own interest in carrying out such assassinations. This is largely a result

of the infiltration of the vested interests of organized crime into politics. As seen previously, organized crime can remove any politician who might not be willing to engage with them in their illicit businesses. Often, lack of public awareness of such killings, especially if they occur at the municipal level, enables organized crime, in collusion with corrupt public officials, to infiltrate politics. Hence, political and organized crime motives overlap substantially.

Organized crime motives also often overlap with economic ones, which is not surprising, as the main goal of organized crime groups is profit seeking. This is evident in cases of assassinations linked to non-payment of extortion demands, or when they are conducted to influence public procurement or tender processes.

Having said that, motive categories are fluid concepts. Although political drivers are a major category of the assassination phenomenon, they do not exclusively relate to political processes – they are also linked to high levels of state corruption and illicit infiltration of the state apparatus by corporations and organized crime.



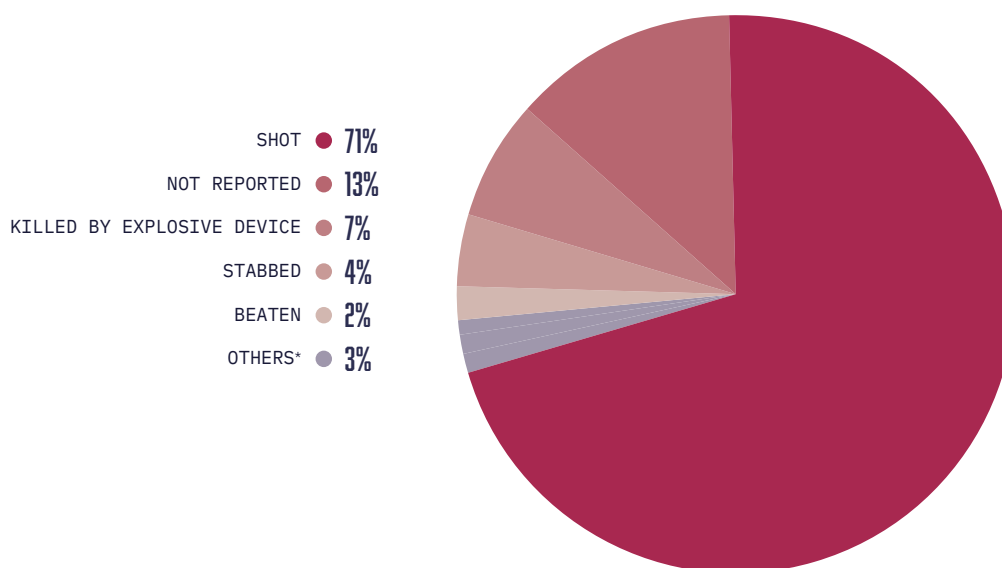
David Peinado/NurPhoto via Getty Images



3.3. METHODS

Assassinations are carried out by various means, such as shooting, stabbing, beating, suffocation, and others. The data from the Global Assassination Monitor shows that for 2019–2020, in nearly three-quarters of cases, the target was shot with a gun, rifle or other firearm. In about 7% of cases, bombs were used, a method category that includes improvised explosive devices planted outside or in cars. In 6% of all cases the target was stabbed or beaten to death. Other methods, such as poisoning, suffocation, burning and beheading, accounted for only 3% of all cases. In 13% of all cases, the method was not reported in the media coverage.

Figure 13: Type of assassination method used



* The category 'others' subsumes poisoned, suffocated, tortured, beheaded, burnt, and hacked, which all covered less than 1% of the cases included in the database.

Although firearms are statistically the preferred method used to kill targets in every region, the extent to which they are used varies from region to region. The Americas have the highest proportion of firearms use, with 85% of all recorded cases executed using a firearm over the data period. The second highest was in Asia (69%), while about half of the cases involved firearms in Africa (56%) and in Europe (52%).

The relatively high use of bombs in assassination cases, including improvised explosive devices, is

driven by incidents in Africa and Asia, where they were the preferred choice of weapon after firearms. In both regions, they accounted for 11% of cases.

The importance of attaining a better understanding of the links between firearm violence and the sources of weapons has been highlighted in previous studies.⁷⁴ The 2020 Global Study on Firearms suggested that illicit firearms trafficking is a 'hidden phenomenon', which only comes to the surface when another crime comes to light, such as an assassination.⁷⁵

3.3.1. ASSASSINATIONS AND THE ILLICIT TRAFFICKING OF FIREARMS

Homicide rates in Latin American countries are generally high, surpassing those in regions of armed conflict, and most homicides in the region are committed using firearms.⁷⁶ However, the link between firearm-related offences, such as homicides and assassinations, and the illicit firearms trade is complex, since it is not always possible to accurately trace the flow of firearms.⁷⁷

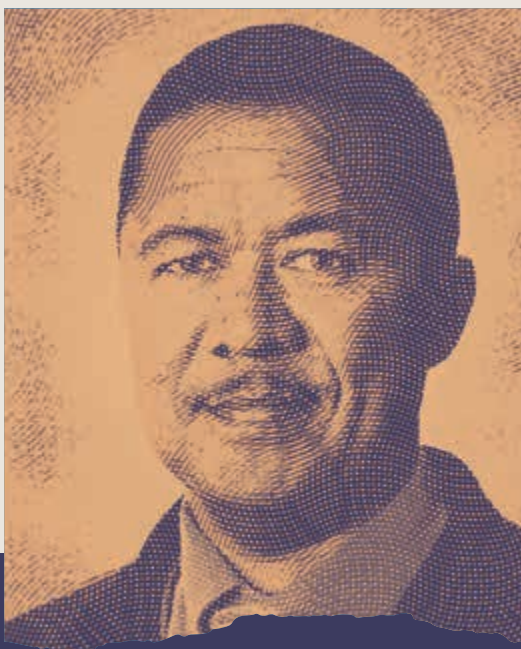
Although it is difficult to establish a definitive link between the two, it appears that Central and South America do not just see high levels of assassinations, or violent crimes in general, but are also among the main destinations of illicit arms flows.⁷⁸ The relationship between accessibility to firearms and levels of violence is not always linear, but the abundant availability of illicit firearms in these regions might play a facilitating factor in the high prevalence of assassinations that occur there.⁷⁹

Attributing high levels of firearm-related crimes in the region solely to the international trade in illicit firearms, however, would be too simplistic. National dynamics, such as civilian ownership and state leakages, as well as the subregional trade (for example, in South America) also contribute to the high number of firearm-related incidents in the region.

Analyzing the method used for assassinations is important not only for preventive purposes.⁸⁰ The use of firearms conveys a message of great symbolic power, and can be used to create an atmosphere of threat and fear. The use of firearms is also important in the context of other illicit practices, such as corruption, fraud and robbery. In some cases, law enforcement and military personnel are killed during attempts to steal their weaponry; in other cases, they are targeted because of their investigations into the illicit firearms trade.

Another link between the illicit trafficking of firearms and assassinations is the way in which organized crime groups and militant groups cooperate in the trade, and benefit from it financially, contributing to the perpetuation of armed conflict.⁸¹ The high number of assassination cases recorded in Somalia, for example, was mostly accounted for by al-Shabaab. In 2020, the GI-TOC published a study that highlighted Iranian weaponry supply to the Houthi insurgency in Yemen, with illicit arms being diverted to Somalia.⁸²

While this analysis has only touched upon the link between firearms and organized crime, it highlights the importance of further research into the subject, to bridge the information gap on how the illicit trade in firearms contributes to assassinations.



VICTIM CASE LAW ENFORCEMENT



South Africa, Africa

Charl Kinnear

On 18 September 2020, Lieutenant Colonel Charl Kinnear,⁸³ a section commander at the South African police Western Cape Anti-Gang Unit, was gunned down in his car outside his home in Cape Town. At the time that he was assassinated, he was investigating a guns-to-gangs syndicate in South Africa.

In the scheme, which was facilitated by certain police officers, guns that were the property of the state – either having been confiscated or handed in under amnesty regulations – were sold to gangs in Cape Town and elsewhere instead of

being destroyed. Irregularities in the licensing of firearms were also part of the activities developed by the group.

Kinnear's assassination – and its possible link to his investigation into firearms corruption involving elements of the police service in South Africa – has been extensively covered in the South African media. The relationship between the country's Firearms Control Act and the procurement of firearms by criminal gangs has been explored by the Global Initiative.⁸⁴

3.4. PERPETRATORS AND MASTERMINDS

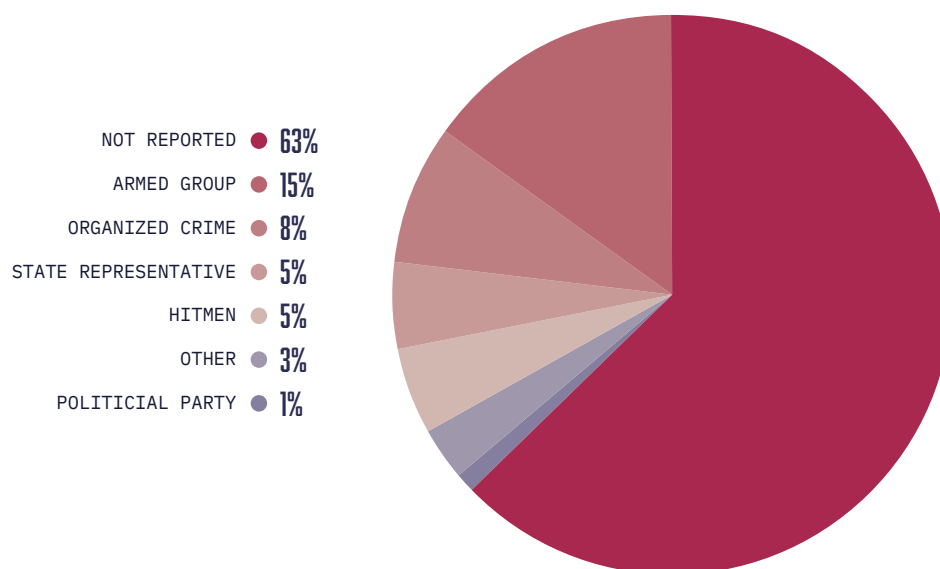
Most research studies focus on the victims of targeted killings, while much less is known about those behind such killings. Following the definition of assassinations used in this study (see above), those behind the killings can be separated into two groupings: those who perpetrate the killing (perpetrator) and those who order the killing (mastermind).

The relationship between the mastermind and the perpetrator is guided by some form of contract. The most explicit contract is based on material exchange – the payment of money to a hitman, or contract killer, by the mastermind. Other, less obvious forms of contracts include killings carried out by lower-ranking members of organized crime groups or armed groups,⁸⁵ or by members of political parties. In these cases, the ‘contract’ involves a non-monetary exchange, namely the prospect of some reward, such as advancing within the

ranks of the organization as a result of carrying out the killing. Another category also included in the database is that of killings perpetrated by state representatives, such as the police, military or intelligence agents.

Unsurprisingly, in the majority of cases (i.e. 63%), information about who was behind the assassination, perpetrators and masterminds, was not reported. For those cases where information was available, the largest category was armed groups, at 15% of all recorded cases in the database, followed by organized crime groups (including gangs) at 8%, and state representatives (5%). The category of individual hitmen, where no link to an organized crime or armed group was mentioned, accounted for 5% of all cases. Information on those behind the killing – masterminds – was even more limited than the information provided about those who perpetrated the killing.

Figure 14: Perpetrator groups, all countries



3.4.1. FAILURE TO PROSECUTE: THE DIFFICULTY OF IDENTIFYING PERPETRATORS

In many of the recorded cases, the categories of perpetrators could not be identified, since media the reports did not provide information about the background of the attackers. On one hand, this could be because there was a lack of reporting on perpetrators or insufficient media follow-up. On the other hand, failure on the part of law enforcement to follow up on cases, and therefore lack of prosecution, might be a reason for the limited information on the identity of perpetrators. In the context of the Global Assassination Monitor database, evidence was found for both scenarios.

Given the short time frame included in the database (2019–2020), the cases might be too recent to fully establish prosecution or lack follow-up by the authorities. However, previous studies on assassinations suggest that the prosecution rate in many countries is very low and the level of impunity high.⁸⁶ One reason for this is that, in many cases, such killings are politically sensitive, and the political will to promptly investigate such incidents is absent. Systemic problems within agencies that are charged with investigating and prosecuting the murders – such as corruption, and connections between high-level officials and organized crime – can contribute to high levels of impunity.

Another possible reason is the professionalism of contract killers. Experienced, professional hitmen are unlikely to leave a trail of evidence, making it difficult to prosecute the case. This is compounded by other constraints, such as limited police capacity to investigate, and lack of resources or special police units working on organized crime, as well as limited victim and witness support and protection, which all contribute to the failure of many investigations.

Limited police resources in the context of organized crime often add to the mounting backlog of unsolved cases – the police simply cannot keep up with the case

load. And at times, criminal groups leave threatening messages with their victims, intimidating the community and those responsible for investigating the case. The deterrent effect is particularly strong if the victim was a member of the police.

A pattern that emerged from the database, and which supports these arguments, is that reporting on cases falling under the personal motive category provided much more information on perpetrators – and masterminds – than was the case in other motive categories. This was particularly apparent in assassinations committed in India. This could be due to various reasons. For one, there could be a greater interest on the part of the media to report the details of these cases, out of the desire for story sensationalism. Another reason could be that the those perpetrating the hits were less professional, perhaps due to lack of experience. The absence of any political connections in these cases, and hence absence of politically adverse implications of investigating them, could be another explanation.

A key factor explaining impunity for assassination cases is political influence exerted on investigating bodies, including the police, prosecuting authorities and the judiciary. The extent to which state institutions are prepared to protect perpetrators, especially in places where such institutions lack transparency and are influenced by criminal interests, is closely linked to whether perpetrators go unpunished or whether there is successful prosecution of cases.⁸⁷ Political and criminal interests behind assassinations are therefore the main obstacles to successfully resolving these cases. Strengthening national institutions, and enhancing cooperation with civil society actors, is therefore important to create greater trust between society and the system.

3.4.2. ASSASSINATIONS AND ARMED CONFLICT

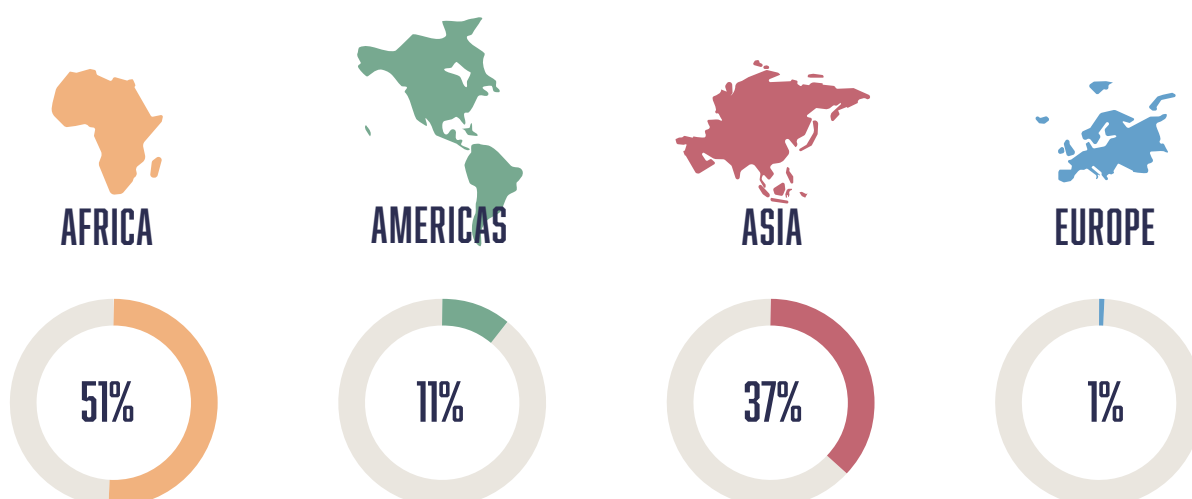
The growing convergence between criminal economies and conflict has been recognized by a series of United Nations Security Council Resolutions.⁸⁸ Some armed groups (defined as non-criminal and non-state armed groups in contexts of armed conflict) are involved in illicit activities. For example, Islamic State has made headlines for their involvement in the illicit trafficking of art and ancient artefacts.⁸⁹ In other regions, armed groups are also involved in extortion, drug trafficking and other illicit markets. In conflict areas, organized crime can benefit from assassinations perpetrated by armed groups, and organized crime then becomes a key factor in the destabilization of the state. Criminal activities, in turn, can increase levels of violence and finance armed groups.⁹⁰ However, in some cases, killings by these groups may be motivated by political and ideological interests related, for example, to maintaining influence over certain areas and as a form of ‘punishment’ for groups considered rivals in order to prevent potential adversaries from mobilizing or challenging them. Like mafia-style groups, armed groups use assassinations as a means of governance, contributing to a culture of fear and enhancing the space for their activities.

Assassinations perpetrated by armed groups were included in the database if they were targeted contract killings, meeting the two conditions outlined in the methodology section. Random attacks on civilians were not included. These assassinations illustrate the nexus between crime and conflict. The methods armed groups use are very similar to those deployed by mafia-style groups, and the assassinations are motivated by similar objectives. Assassinations are strategically instrumental, for example in the context of extortion or the elimination of an obstacle. Target groups may include political figures, journalists, civil society members and members of law enforcement, including the military.

A regional breakdown of the armed groups category clearly shows that more than half of the cases recorded (51%) were in Africa. These cases were primarily in East Africa (41%), whereas only 4% took place in central and West Africa, and 2% in North Africa.

The second highest number of recorded attacks by armed groups, with 37% of all cases, took place in Asia, in particular in Southern Asia (22%) and Western Asia (15%). The Americas recorded the third highest number of assassinations by armed groups, with 11% of cases, all of which were in South America.

Figure 15: Continental breakdown of assassinations perpetrated by armed groups



East Africa accounts for the majority of cases perpetrated by armed groups on the continent. In this region, the cases were highly concentrated in Somalia, accounting for almost 80% of incidents recorded for the continent. The majority of these were perpetrated by al-Shabaab, while a small number were perpetrated by Islamic State in Somalia, particularly in the Puntland region.

Somalia has seen long-standing armed conflict, in which al-Shabaab has played a major role and which has cost the lives of many civilians.⁹¹ Only targeted attacks, however, were included in this database. In most of these cases, the victims were representatives of the state, including members of the judiciary, high-ranking politicians and military officials. Killings of journalists, activists and clan elders in Somalia were also recorded.

Although assassinations in the context of armed conflict are frequently deployed as a military tactic, one interesting driver in the recorded cases – and one that is not unheard of in mafia-style groups – was extortion. In recent years, al-Shabaab started a ‘taxation’ system to finance its activities. In 2019, it was reported that traders described how the group had instituted ‘a simple, tiered system for taxing almost all the goods that enter Somalia through Mogadishu’s seaport, stemming from the group’s ability to get ship manifests by threatening shipping agents’.⁹² The group enforces this tax system through violence. Some cases recorded in the database refer to the extortion scheme as the driver behind assassinations. Among those targeted have been government officials. As businesses need to pay ‘taxes’ to both government and al-Shabaab, a disputed market was created. For example, in March 2020, Arab Budul, a senior federal government police official tasked to collect tax in Bakaaraha Market, was killed by al-Shabaab. In February 2019, Paul Anthony Formosa, the head of the P&O Ports operation, a company in charge of Bosaso port, was killed by two men disguised as fishermen while he headed to work. The assassination was later claimed by al-Shabaab. In a statement, the group said the attack at the port was ‘part of broader operations targeting the mercenary companies that loot the Somali resources’.⁹³

After Africa, Asia recorded the highest number of targeted killings by armed groups. Many of the cases were concentrated in Afghanistan, India, Syria and Yemen.

In Afghanistan, Islamic State and the Taliban were mostly responsible for the killings, many of which had political motives. Targets were media workers, including women, and members of the local community, including activists, NGO workers, doctors and community leaders. Notably, during this data period, media workers were attacked mostly towards the second half of 2020, coinciding with peace negotiations in Doha. Media workers were targeted by both Islamic State and the Taliban.⁹⁴ The targeting of media limits freedom of expression and was designed to threaten the sustainability of the peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan state.⁹⁵ The use of assassinations to silence the media and to spread fear is also a technique commonly used by mafia-style groups.⁹⁶

In India, the dynamics are less clear, since in most cases the name of the armed group responsible for the attack was not reported. However, armed groups operate in various parts of India where there is ongoing conflict, such as the north-east.

The cases in Western Asia were concentrated primarily in Syria, Yemen and Iraq, countries that have seen long-standing armed conflict. The attacks were committed by various armed groups, including Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, and the Houthi rebels in Yemen.

The Americas, by contrast, reported much lower levels of attacks perpetrated by armed groups. These cases accounted for only 11% of all cases where armed groups were perpetrators. They were located in South America, driven by the conflict in Colombia. Most perpetrators were members of the ELN Ernesto Che Guevara Front and FARC dissidents. The Colombian conflict hinges on land reform programmes and illegal crop substitutions, and will be explored in greater detail in the case study section of this report.

The impact that these armed-conflict-related cases have on civil society is highly detrimental. In the case of Afghanistan, for example, the targeting of media workers and activists has led to self-censorship by those who stayed in the country, and to an exodus of those seeking refuge in other countries.⁹⁷ It has also been linked to a surge in other forms of violence, such as kidnapping and armed robbery, perpetrated reportedly by the same actors.⁹⁸



VICTIM CASE

JOURNALIST AND RESEARCHER

Afghanistan, Asia 

Malalai Maiwand

In December 2020, Enikass Radio and TV journalist Malalai Maiwand was shot dead, along with her driver, in broad daylight in Jalalabad, Afghanistan.⁹⁹ The killers were suspected Islamic State gunmen and the group claimed credit for the attack. This was the third recorded killing of a journalist in Afghanistan in a month, and it sent a message to the community that reporting in the country is a dangerous activity. The string of murders of journalists have continued in 2021, when three women journalists, also from Enikass

Radio and TV, were assassinated in two separate attacks in Jalalabad.¹⁰⁰

In July 2020, Iraqi researcher and expert on Islamic State, Hisham al-Hashimi, was assassinated by gunmen who were waiting for him on a motorcycle outside his home. Although no group claimed responsibility for the attack, many believe that it may have been carried out by Iran-backed militia groups, of whom the victim had been critical a few months before his killing.¹⁰¹



Iraq, Asia 

Hisham al-Hashimi

3.4.3. STATE INVOLVEMENT

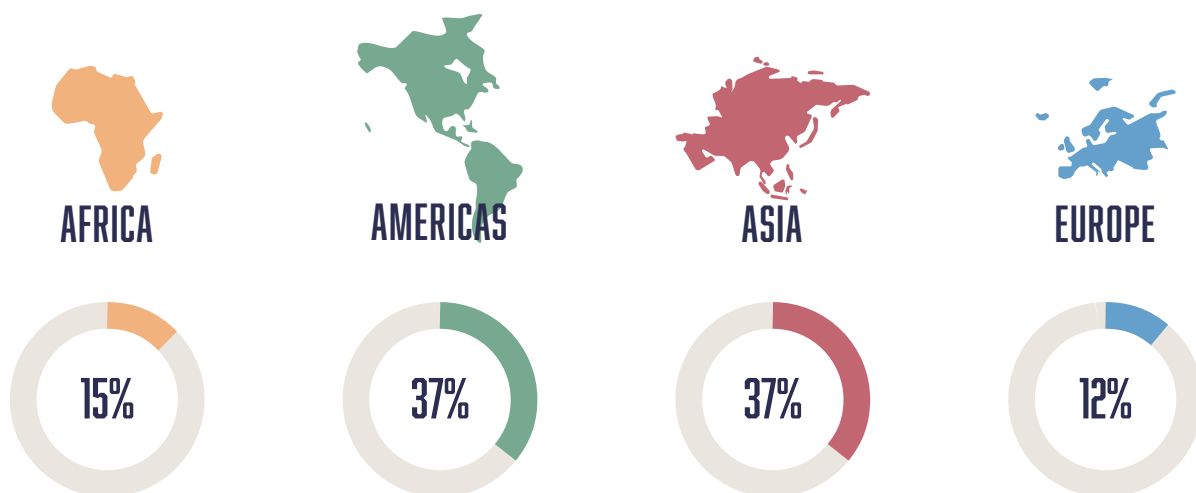
There are instances where the state may be directly involved in assassinations, ordering the execution of killings; or it may be involved more indirectly, providing the policy environment for law enforcement to conduct assassinations or extrajudicial killings. In other instances, state officials may conduct killings in collusion with organized crime, protecting illicit markets. Finally, the state's involvement might entail tolerating assassinations, by failing to investigate and prosecute cases.

From media reports or other sources, it is often difficult to distinguish between these different layers and ascertain the level of state involvement. For this reason,

the data collected for this study focused on the identity of state perpetrators rather than the masterminds, and the category here includes assassinations perpetrated by state representatives, namely members of the police, the military, intelligence units and prison guards.¹⁰²

Attacks reportedly perpetrated by such state representatives accounted for 5% of all cases. Most of these, whether perpetrated by local or foreign state representatives, happened in Asia (37%), mostly Southern and Western Asia, and the Americas (37%), where most of the cases took place in South America; Africa (15%), mostly East Africa; and Europe (12%), mostly Eastern Europe.

Figure 16: State representatives as perpetrators, by continent



Percentage numbers don't add up to 100% due to rounding.

The Philippines provides an interesting example of this category of perpetrator. Since President Rodrigo Duterte came to power in 2016, there has been an escalation of violence in the country. Duterte's 'war against drugs' policies led to a spike in extrajudicial killings.¹⁰³ Some of these have been reportedly perpetrated by the

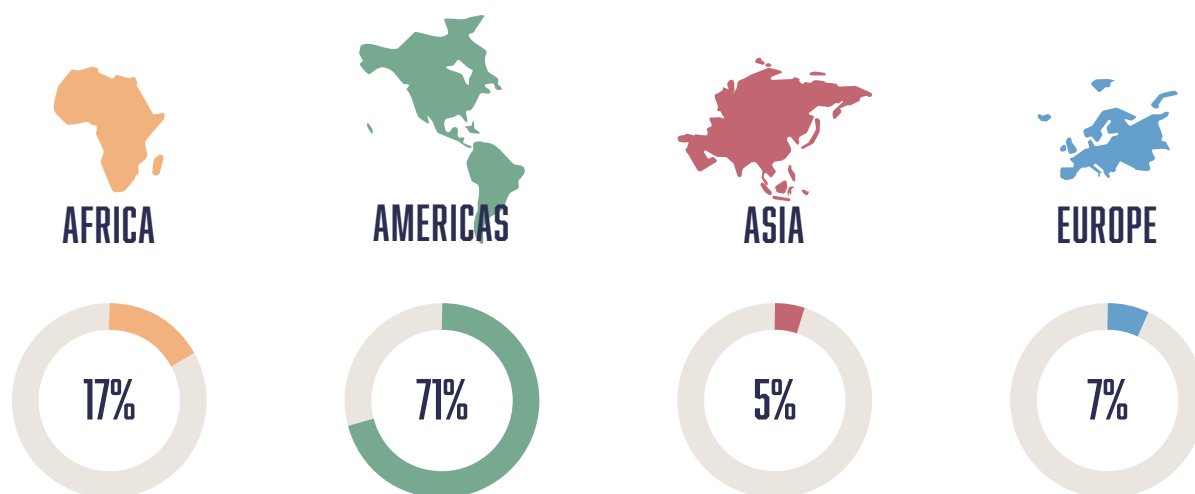
police, others by so-called death squads, or vigilante groups, which may act on behalf of the state, whereas others may have taken matters into their own hands. In either case, the extrajudicial killings would appear to take place in an enabling environment of state protection and impunity.

3.4.4. INTERNATIONALIZATION OF CONTRACT KILLINGS: THE ROLE OF TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME

Based on research the GI-TOC has undertaken over the years, it has become apparent that assassinations are intrinsically linked to organized crime in many ways. Organized crime groups use assassinations in turf wars with other gangs, establishing and defending their presence. They use them to remove obstacles to their activities, such as civil society activists working against organized crime or journalists reporting on their illicit activities. And they use assassinations as a source of revenue, providing hitmen for hire from their pool of members (the nurseries of violence referred to earlier). When deployed by organized crime groups, assassinations are therefore an instrument that empowers them in various ways, while increasing levels of violence.¹⁰⁴

A regional breakdown of the perpetrator category ‘organized crime groups’ – in other words, those cases reportedly perpetrated or masterminded by an organized crime group – indicates a very high concentration in the Americas, most notably Central and South America.¹⁰⁵ Almost three-quarters of all recorded cases that fall within this category are located in that region, followed by Africa (17%), Europe (7%) and Asia (5%). Interestingly, only in the Americas were the names of the organized crime groups mentioned in the recorded cases, such as the Sinaloa Cartel or Gulf Clan, whereas in other regions they were referred to anonymously as gangs or organized crime groups.¹⁰⁶

Figure 17: Organized crime groups as perpetrators, by continent



In line with previous studies by the GI-TOC, most recorded attacks in this category took place close to the victim’s home.¹⁰⁷ Victims were targeted in their home, outside their home, at their workplace, at the homes of relatives or friends, or on a route frequently taken. However, not all cases in the database are in line with this – some indeed point to a different pattern, including the killing of targets outside their home countries.

Organized-crime-perpetrated attacks were carried out all over the world, including in Europe. For example, a number of Chechen nationals were targeted in

Austria, Germany, France and Sweden during the data period. Some of the Chechen victims were former insurgents; others were activists or worked in the media. Alleged state involvement in ordering some of the Chechen exiles’ hits has been reported in the media.¹⁰⁸

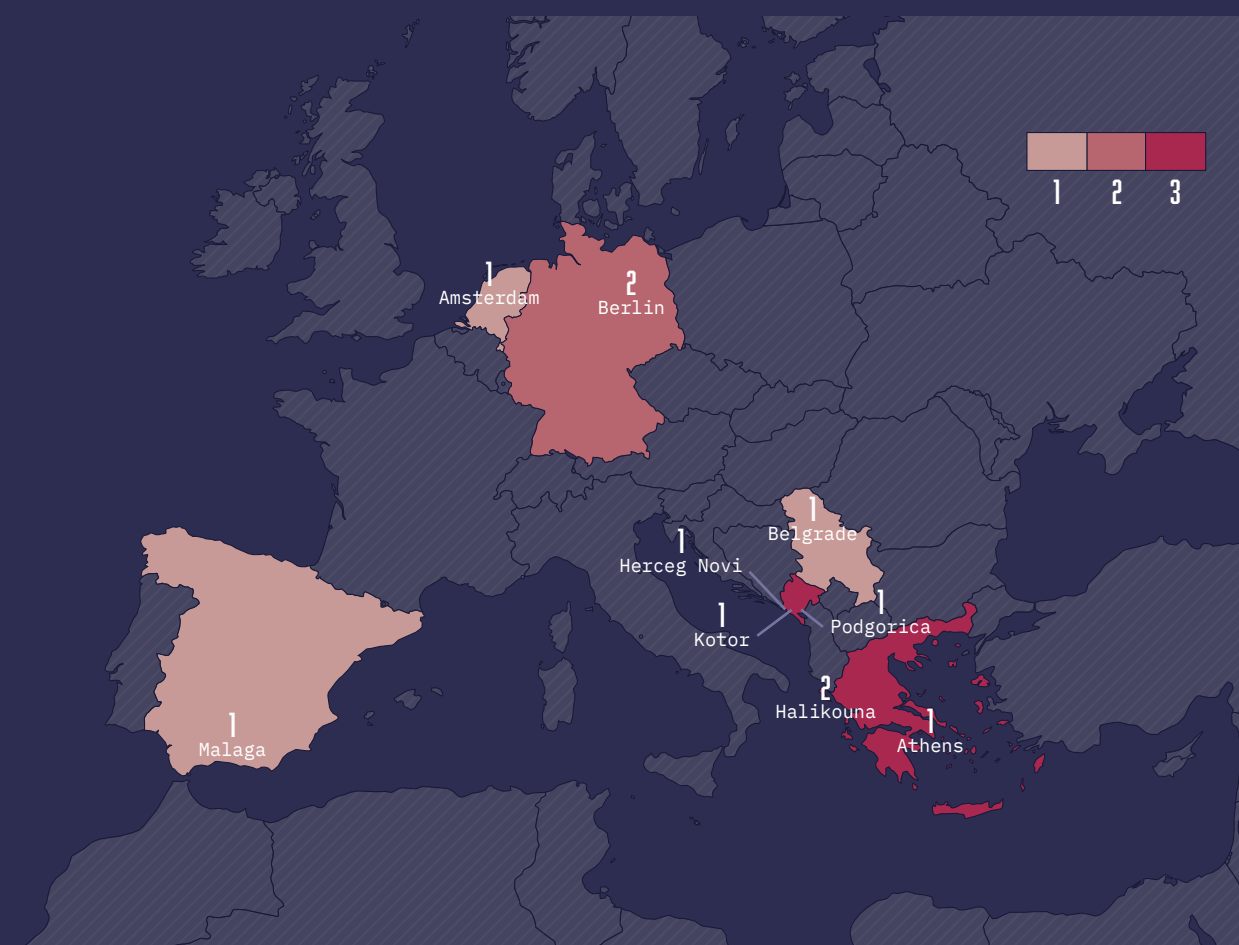
And Chechens were by no means the only targets. In Sweden, Pakistani journalist Sajid Hussein was found dead after he had been reported missing in March 2020. A Dutch lawyer was killed in Germany in an incident also reported as a targeted attack.

THE MONTENEGRIN GANG WAR

A database created by the GI-TOC, which follows targeted killings of two Montenegrin organized crime groups, the Kavac clan and the Skaljari clan, highlights the internationalization of this category of killings.¹⁰⁹ The Skaljari and the Kavac clans, named after two villages in Montenegro, have been involved in a cycle of violence since 2014, when an internal fall-out in the Skaljari clan resulted in the formation of the rival Kavac gang.¹¹⁰ Members of the two groups have since been assassinated in Montenegro as well as overseas, with one of the first incidents being reported in Vienna in December 2018.¹¹¹ According to the database, the Kavac and Skaljari clans have targeted victims in the past two years in a number of European countries, including Greece, Germany, Spain, Serbia and the Netherlands, as well as on their home turf, Montenegro.

According to a GI-TOC report, the string of assassinations, which started as a means to send a message of control but quickly escalated into revenge and retaliation killings, highlights the confidence of these clans to deploy violence outside their home territories, and thus their areas of control.¹¹² It also reveals the geographic expansion of their activities into areas outside the Western Balkans.¹¹³ In May 2020, for example, Ukrainian authorities detained four people from a gang suspected of having been involved in an assassination attempt of the alleged boss of the Kavac clan in the Ukraine earlier that year. One of the hitmen was included in an international wanted list.¹¹⁴ The Kavac clan had been at war with the rival Skaljari gang over control of cocaine supply from South America to the European cocaine market.¹¹⁵

Figure 18: Locations of assassinations associated with the Kavac and Skaljari clans



Members of European organized crime groups were targeted not only in Europe. In some cases, the geographic globalized operations of European organized crime groups led to the killing of their members in other continents. For example, Dejan Stanimirovic, a high-profile Serbian gang member known as Marcos, was killed in Colombia in early 2020. Although it is unclear why he was targeted, one line of investigation suggests that the Gulf Clan was behind it, linking the assassination to drug trafficking.¹¹⁶

Similarly, Serbian nationals have been targeted in South Africa, in what appear to be gangland-style hits. In March 2019, Yugoslav Smiljkic was killed in Johannesburg. He was known to the police in both countries and had links to other high-profile figures in South Africa, including controversial businessmen. One line of investigation suggested that the killing might have been related to a drug deal gone wrong, linking his murder to a string of previous assassinations in South Africa.¹¹⁷ Later that year, Ivan Djordjevic was shot several times in South Africa, in what was the second assassination attempt against him.¹¹⁸

The killing of Ben Suthi in 2019, an Israeli crime boss who was in Mexico at the time of his death, discussed in the introduction, is another case that illustrates the internationalization of contract killings, highlighting the cross-border links between various mafia clans.

Other such non-local cases include targeted killings by the Mexican Sinaloa Cartel in Colombia, assassinations

in the border region between Brazil and Paraguay, and the killing of an Irishman in Brazil. The border between Brazil and Paraguay is a problematic region. In 2020, Brazilian investigative journalist Léo Veras was killed at his home in Pedro Juan Caballero, in Paraguay. He was shot by unidentified gunmen in front of his wife and six-year-old son. Veras's investigative work into cross-border drug trafficking was the suspected reason for the killing, as it aggravated criminal groups operating in the region. Ten were arrested, although the group behind the killing was not revealed. In another case, Brazilian hitmen were hired by an Irish gang to eliminate a member of a rival gang, allegedly over drug money. The assassination was prevented by Irish authorities.

The internationalization of contract killings highlights that fact that criminal groups conduct their activities transnationally, and that their capacity to inflict harm and violence is not restricted to their areas of territorial control. Their operations have over the last couple of decades become increasingly globalized – much like cross-border trade. Their networks enable criminal groups to conduct or order assassinations in different regions and continents, unimpeded by international borders. It also highlights how they are fearless of prosecution, as assassinations were conducted not only in countries commonly known to provide high levels of impunity, but also in those where the judiciary is strong and more regulated.



3.5. HIRING HITMEN: THE COST OF ASSASSINATION

Previous studies focusing on the profile of hitmen revealed that in some regions hitmen are easily accessible, and criminal groups can constitute a convenient source of paid assassins.¹¹⁹ The accessibility and professionalism of hitmen is one of the key factors that influence the price paid: the more professional and experienced the hitman, the higher the price paid for the service.¹²⁰ However, experience and professionalism are not the only factors that influence the price. Another important component in determining the cost of a hit is the target, and the risks inherent in eliminating him or her. Usually, the higher the profile of the target, the greater the risks inherent in carrying out the assassination, and the higher the contract price demanded by the hitman.

Price information is hard to come by. Prices can only be established if the perpetrators happened to be caught and their details are known. The most professional hitmen and masterminds are unlikely to be apprehended, and therefore their details and information are not captured. Given the lack of reporting on perpetrators, most reports in the database did not refer to the prices paid. Yet, even in cases where details of the perpetrators were included in the media articles, information on prices was often missing or incomplete. For example, in some reports it is not always clear whether the amount paid refers to a down-payment only, or to the actual final amount agreed upon.

Out of all recorded cases in the database, only 68 referred to the amount of money paid for the assassination.¹²¹ The majority of those cases were in Southern Asia, with 47 in India and six in Pakistan. For all other countries, only one to four price points were available. While the reported prices can be seen to vary quite considerably from country to country, price data for most countries is too limited to allow for clear cross-country comparisons. Focusing on the price data for India only, however, suggests great variation in prices in different locations in the country.¹²² The lowest recorded price for India was US\$94, while the highest recorded price was US\$68 232. Variations in prices within countries could be linked to two factors: firstly, accessibility to hitmen – on the basis that the larger the pool, the lower the price, and, secondly, the skills profile of the hitmen, who may have different levels of professionalism depending on the location. Most of the cases with price data also fall under the personal motive category. One possible reason could be the lack of professionalism of mastermind and perpetrator in many personally motivated cases, and hence, a higher likelihood of getting caught.

Even though in most cases a middleman is involved, literature has referred to two other ways in which masterminds may find contract killers. One is by directly approaching a well-known contract killer; the other is by approaching someone with a violent background with the intention to persuade him or her to carry out the murder.¹²³ Once the contact is established, the negotiation of the contract begins. Most payments for contract killings have been made in cash. Recent evidence, however, suggests a potential shift of payments to online platforms. Some studies have found that, in a number of cases, cryptocurrencies were used to pay for contract killings.¹²⁴ If this trend continues, then tracing money paid to contract killers might become even more difficult.

3.6. WOMEN, GIRLS AND GANGS

Most of the victims recorded in the Global Assassination Monitor database were male, especially in the target groups linked to illicit markets. However, in a few cases, women were also reported as victims of assassinations. A more granular analysis of the relationship between women and organized crime highlights their varied role in the context of assassinations.

Women and girls may be associated with criminal gangs in different ways. Some are girlfriends or have children with gang members.¹²⁵ Women, however, also have a more instrumental role in criminal activities, for example by taking care of the finances, collecting extortion money or acting as ‘lures’. Although there is not much data on women’s participation in gangs, a study on youth in gangs in England suggests that girls make up to 34% of gang membership in that country.¹²⁶ A shift in the role played by women was observed in Central America, in particular in the context of extortion, where women and girls are increasingly seen as central to the collection of extortion money and the execution of violence, including killings.¹²⁷

As mentioned, although it is difficult to draw definitive conclusions on perpetrators from the Global Assassination Monitor database owing to the very small number of reports that detail perpetrators, the role of women has been highlighted in a number of reports.

And, in 2016, it was reported that a squad of hitwomen carried out contract killings in the context of the Philippine war on drugs.¹²⁸ In Colombia, criminal gangs have also reportedly contracted female assassins.¹²⁹ Women are expected to raise less suspicion than men, as they are normally perceived as less violent.¹³⁰ Research for the Global Monitor suggests that it is not just men who commission hits, but also women, though in fewer, and mostly personally motivated cases.

The association of women and girls with gangs and the roles they occupy in gang hierarchies expose them to different types of risks, including assassinations. The data set includes a few cases where women were targeted for their links to organized crime. For example, in 2019, Évelyn Carolina Méndez Hernández, daughter of a member of the Salvadoran civil national police service, was assassinated. Méndez was romantically involved with a gang member and the police were investigating whether she oversaw the collection of extortion money on behalf of the gang she was allegedly affiliated to.¹³¹ In South Africa, gang ‘godmother’ Simone Jasmin, who had entered the drug business because of a previous romantic relationship and climbed the ranks of the criminal underworld, was assassinated in October 2020 in Durban.¹³²



4 NATIONAL ASSASSINATION TRENDS: CASE STUDIES FROM THREE CONTINENTS



Juan Barreto/AFP via Getty Images

The Global Assassination Monitor database draws on global and regional news sources only. Recording cases for all countries, this database attempts to limit reporting biases, to allow for cross-regional and cross-country comparison of cases. However, the global database is limited in its reach. Most local contract killings do not make it into global or even regional news. Only the most high-profile cases, politically or socially, are usually reported in the international media. As a result, the global database largely under-reports the number of cases. To allow for a more nuanced analysis of contract killings at the country level, national sources were therefore added to complement the global and regional media sources for a select number of countries (see Figure 19).¹³³

These case study countries were chosen for their geographic distribution, political-economic relevance to the region and because of their significant incidence of organized crime. The quality of national media reporting varies greatly between them, however. Therefore, a direct comparison of the number of cases between countries is not recommended here. Having said that, it was deemed appropriate to undertake a relative comparison of the importance of different variables and categories across the countries within each continent.

Figure 19: Countries where national media sources complement the Assassination Monitor database



4.1. REPORTING RATES: INTERNATIONAL VS NATIONAL NEWS

Adding national sources to the global and regional sources led to an increase in the recorded number of targeted killings in each of the ten selected countries. However, the extent to which the number increased varies from country to country. In El Salvador, for example, the figure increased by 513 cases, from just two reported internationally to 515 cases when national news sources were included. In Mozambique, on the other hand, national news added just five more cases, bringing the total to 14. The difference in reporting rates between countries may be linked to a number of factors, such as international relevance of cases, quality of reporting of national media, research language and the number of national sources chosen.

As mentioned, adding national sources to the global and regional sources led to an increase in the recorded number of targeted killings in each of the 10 selected countries. For these, global and regional sources picked up only 15% of all cases.

There is likely to be a similar phenomenon if we were to include national sources in more countries - national-level media reporting tends to provide more granular cases in the particular countries where they are located. However, the extent to which the number increased varies from country to country. In El Salvador, for example, the figure increased by 513 cases, from just two reported internationally, to 515 cases when national news sources were included. In Mozambique, on the other hand, national news added just five more cases, bringing the total to 14. The difference in reporting rates between countries may be linked to a number of factors, such as international relevance of cases, quality of reporting of national media, language and the number of national sources chosen. While it would be difficult to extrapolate to a global scale due to differences in reporting across countries, it is safe to conclude that international media considerably under-reports - even in areas considered hotspots for assassinations.

Figure 20: Assassination cases reported in global and regional news vs national news

COUNTRIES	GLOBAL & REGIONAL NEWS	NATIONAL NEWS	ALL NEWS
 MEXICO	97	448	545
 EL SALVADOR	2	513	515
 COLOMBIA	110	344	454
 SOUTH AFRICA	15	261	276
 INDIA	35	236	271
 PAKISTAN	48	40	88
 BRAZIL	15	56	71
 PHILIPPINES	4	61	65
 KENYA	7	11	18
 MOZAMBIQUE	9	5	14
TOTAL	342	1 975	2 317

4.2. AMERICAS: BRAZIL, COLOMBIA, EL SALVADOR AND MEXICO

Organized crime poses a considerable challenge for security, development and human rights in the Americas. It also costs many lives. As mentioned, of all the continents, the Americas presented the largest number of recorded hits in the global database. Countries in the region face similar problems deriving from illicit economies such as drug and human trafficking, illegal logging and mining, as well as of criminal governance through extortion, violence and assassinations. However, the reasons why numbers are high in individual countries and subregions might differ.

Although some trends identified in the international media sources were also evident in the national sources, such as assassinations of local community

members in Colombia and law enforcement agents in Mexico, a picture of other trends emerged from the national sources. In Brazil, cases of assassinations of politicians arising from the local influence of militias and drug traffickers in elections were found in national media sources. Killings related to gang violence and extortion were also seen in El Salvador's local media. Following the global and regional trend, firearms are reported locally/nationally as the main assassination method used in the four countries.

The following section analyzes the variables and trends relating to assassinations, as reported in national and regional media, in the Americas.

4.2.1. DATA TRENDS

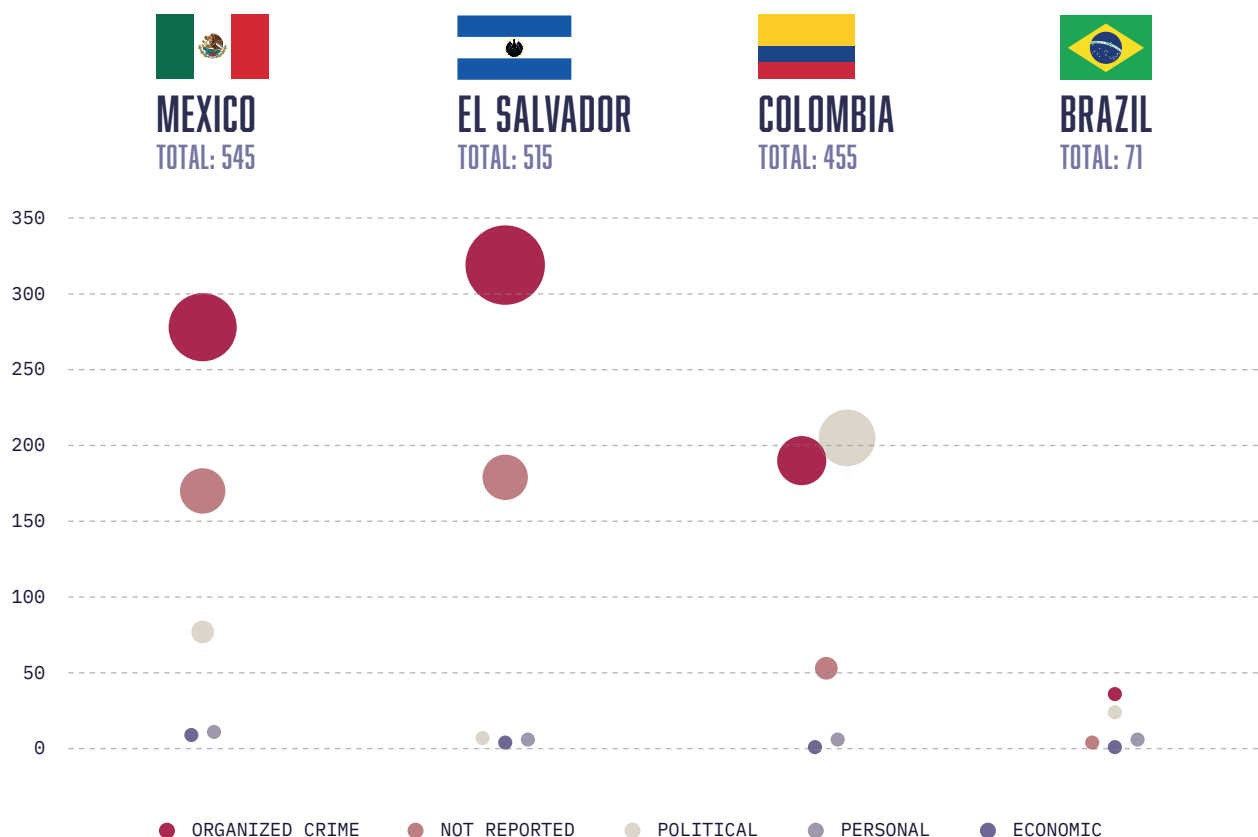
Across the region, a large proportion of the cases are motivated by organized-crime-related issues – such as disputes over territory, extortion and drug trafficking markets, illegal logging and mining, and land grabbing, among others. In El Salvador, Mexico and Brazil, organized crime motives are the main driver of contract killings, accounting for 62%, 51%, and 51%, respectively, of cases (Figure 21). In El Salvador, the country with the largest share of this driver, the majority of organized-crime-motivated cases were attributed to gang-related disputes, in particular involving Barrio 18 and Mara Salvatrucha 13 (MS-13), well-armed street gangs that concentrate on 'street-level drug sales, extortion, arms trafficking, murder for hire, carjacking, and aggravated street crime'.¹³⁴

Besides gang disputes, extortion is one of the main drivers for the killings in El Salvador, particularly when the targeted group is the private sector – the second largest targeted group in the country (illicit market being the largest). Extortion is a long-standing societal scourge in Central America, and local businesses,

informal street sellers and public transport drivers are commonly targeted by criminal gangs, with often lethal consequences when they fail to comply with the extortionists' demands.

What stands out for El Salvador and Mexico is the unusually high number of cases where the motive is not known: 35% of all cases in El Salvador and 31% in Mexico. This is largely due to the number of cases in which hits are reported without identifying the victim. In several cases, perpetrators leave messages with the bodies, usually accusing the unidentified victims of belonging to a rival group or cartel, or accusing them of being rapists, thieves or extortionists. While the content of most of the messages is not disclosed by authorities, some of them threaten a specific group of people. Such messages, along with the sheer violence of the methods used, usually involving torture, are not only meant to threaten rival organized crime groups or authorities, but also to spread fear in the communities and exert control over them.

Figure 21: Breakdown of motives in Brazil, Colombia, El Salvador and Mexico



In Brazil and Colombia meanwhile, the proportion of politically motivated assassinations stands out as very high, especially compared with the contexts of El Salvador and Mexico. In Colombia, politics is the main driver for assassinations, accounting for 45% of the cases recorded, followed closely by organized crime motive (42%). This is partially due to the killings of local community members in the defence of rights and the environment, as well as in the context of implementation of peace agreement policies (mainly involving the land restitution and crop substitution programme). In Brazil and Mexico, countries in which politically motivated hits are the second largest known category (34% and 14%, respectively), the driver is largely killings of politicians during pre-election and election periods. As mentioned above, in practice the two drivers of politics and organized crime overlap in many instances in the Latin American context.

In terms of targeted groups, distribution varies substantially from country to country in the region. In Brazil the largest share is the politics and governance category,

which is mainly driven by a string of killings of politicians in 2019 and 2020, which were pre-election and election years. The cases reflected the intrinsic connection between crime and politics in the country, particularly in the state of Rio de Janeiro. The state's militias – a type of criminal group largely formed by former military police officials, which made the headlines in 2020 for compelling local businesses to remain open during the pandemic so that they could continue collecting extortion money – is intrinsically connected with many of the cases. One report stated that accusations of interference by the state's militias and drug traffickers in the elections were received in 14 municipalities of the state in 2020.¹³⁵ Sometimes groups would act in collusion.

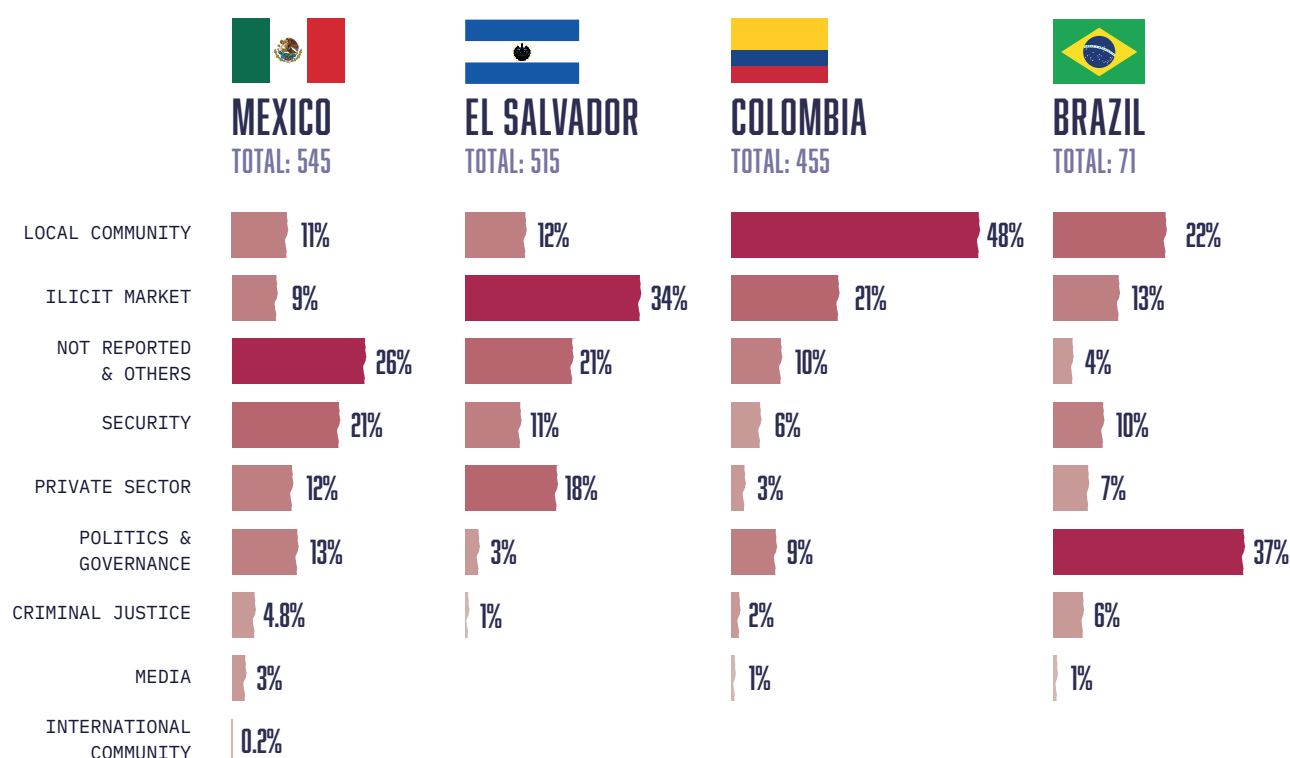
During the investigation into the murder of journalist and pre-candidate for councillor Leonardo Soriano Pereira Pinheiro in May 2020, the police concluded that a military police officer had the support of drug traffickers to elect his wife as a councillor. The police concluded that Pinheiro was challenging the election of the mastermind's wife, who was also running for office.

According to a witness statement, before he was killed, Pinheiro had received threats from drug traffickers in the area who claimed that ‘only one pre-candidate could be active in the neighbourhood’.

The militias might also be indirectly involved in assassinations in Brazil by supplying hitmen from a death squad, most notoriously known as the ‘Crime

Bureau’ (Escritório do Crime in Portuguese), that frequently operates in close cooperation with the militias. Many political assassinations in Rio de Janeiro are believed to have been carried out by the Crime Bureau, including of Rio de Janeiro councilwoman and human rights defender Marielle Franco, who was assassinated in March 2018 in Rio de Janeiro.

Figure 22: Breakdown of target groups in Brazil, Colombia, El Salvador and Mexico



In Colombia, the situation was different, where by far the largest proportion of victims belonged to the local community group (48% of the cases). This reflects the large number of community and social leaders, rights defenders and activists who are killed in the country. The second biggest cluster of assassinations in Colombia was the illicit market, which is largely driven by the killings of former FARC-EP members.

As is the case with motives for targeted killings, the proportion of cases where the target group of the victim is not known is also unusually high in El Salvador and Mexico. For El Salvador, unknown cases account for 21% of all cases; for Mexico, the figure is even higher, at 26%, making it the largest targeted group. These figures are explained for the reasons mentioned above: cases

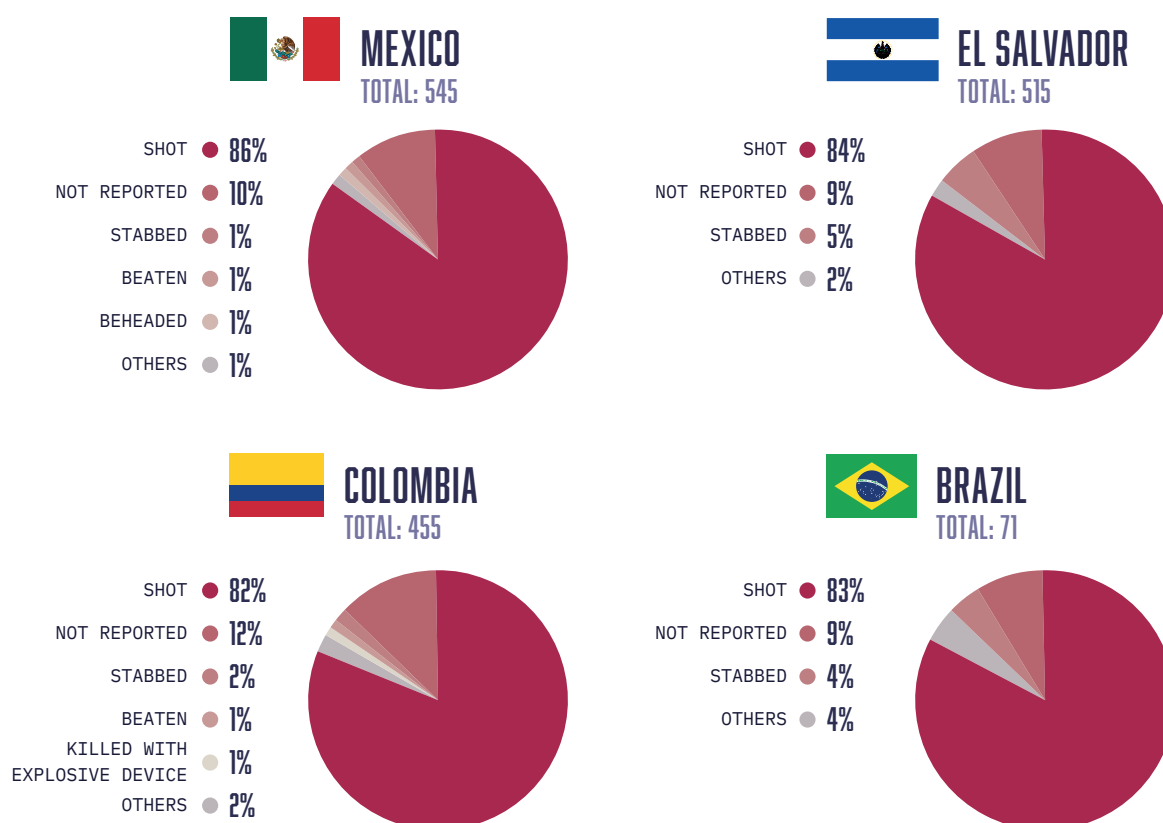
of assassinations are reported in which the victim is not identified. It also seems that due to the high number of assassinations, neither the media nor authorities have the capacity to identify and follow up on those cases. However, the circumstances and methods used by perpetrators usually leads authorities to believe with some certainty that an assassination was a targeted killing and the motives related to organized crime.

Leaving unknown cases aside, the target group with the highest number of recorded cases in El Salvador is the illicit market, with 34% of the cases. Many of the killings reported in this category involved gang members both as perpetrators and victims, often killings targeting members of rival gangs, or internal gang purges. For example, in May 2019, Vladimir Alexander López Méndez, a

Barrio-18 gang member from the Revolucionários faction, was shot dead at his parents' home in San Salvador. He had left prison a few weeks before after serving a ten-year sentence. Authorities reported that the assassination was most likely perpetrated by members of the same gang.¹³⁶ In Mexico the largest target group is the security sector, which reflects the high number of killings of law enforcement personnel in that country.

As with other countries in the Americas, in all four countries, the main method of assassination was shooting (Figure 23). It is widely known that the illicit trade in firearms – which in Latin America is of great concern, as seen earlier in the report – has contributed to high rates of homicide, which also applies in cases of targeted killings.

Figure 23: Breakdown of methods in Brazil, Colombia, El Salvador and Mexico



North America has contributed greatly to illicit flows of firearms in Central and South America. In Mexico, for example, it is estimated that around 200 000 firearms illegally enter the country each year – 70% of which come through the border with the US.¹³⁷ Half of the firearms in El Salvador are also estimated to be US-sourced and they are then relatively easily traded within other countries of the Northern Triangle.¹³⁸ In a recent joint police operation involving 13 South American countries, including Brazil and Colombia, thousands of illicit firearms trafficked into the subregion, largely from Europe, Asia and North America, were seized.¹³⁹

Firearms were also reportedly used as currency for drug traffickers from Brazil, Colombia and Mexico. Media reports claim that powerful criminal organizations from Brazil and Mexico, such as the Red Command (Comando Vermelho in Portuguese) and the Sinaloa Cartel, were trading firearms for drugs with Colombian criminal and armed groups.¹⁴⁰ Besides militarizing these groups, the firearms would reportedly be sold, including to hired assassins.¹⁴¹

FARC-EP AND COMMUNITY LEADERS: DRIVERS OF ASSASSINATIONS IN COLOMBIA

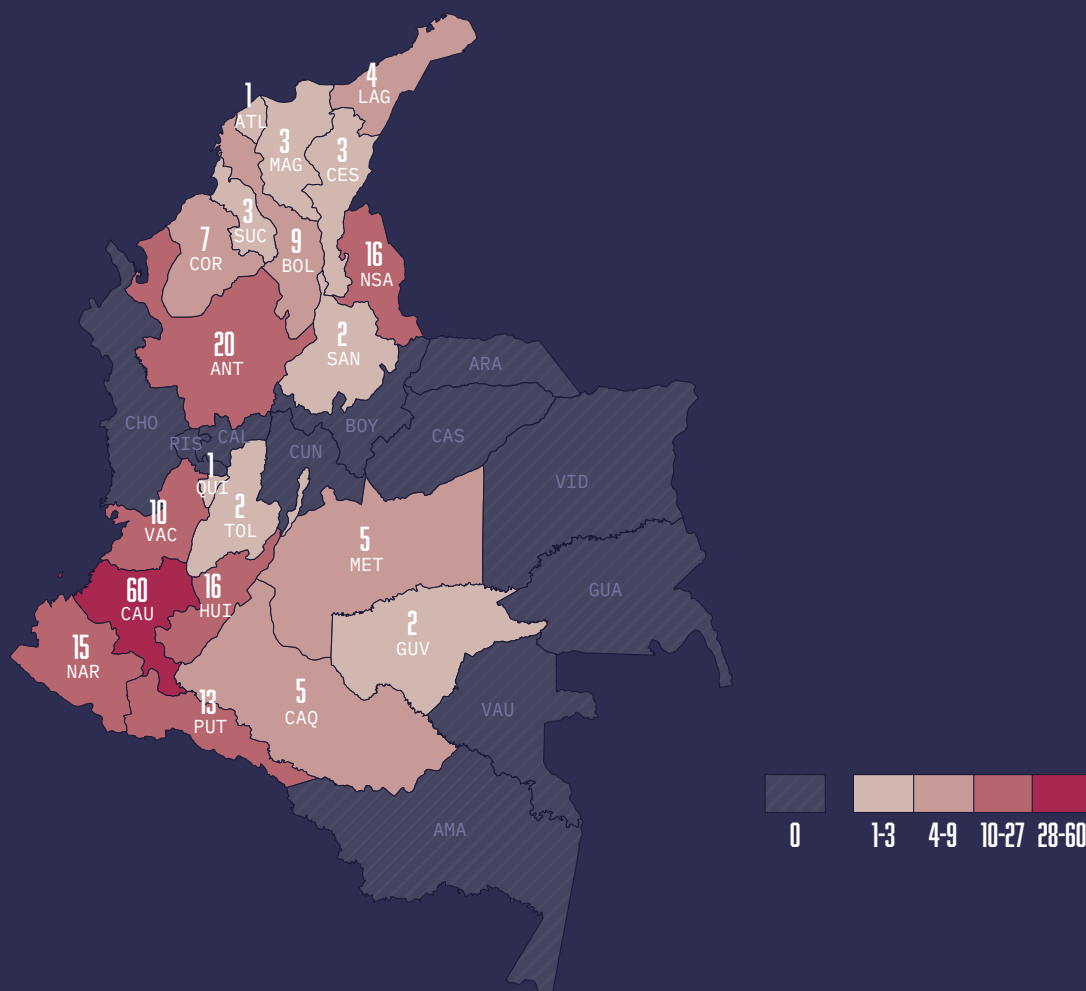
Although levels of violent crime, including homicide, have declined in Colombia in the past years, the pattern of killings of members of these two groups has conversely increased since the signing of the peace agreement between former FARC-EP and the Colombian government in 2016.¹⁴²

Given the evolving nature of the situation in Colombia, it is not possible to identify the exact reasons for the phenomenon as a whole. In the case of community and social leaders, the factor that stands out the most is the implementation of the peace agreement policies (mainly the land restitution and crop substitution programme).¹⁴³ This can largely be explained by the fact that social leaders are involved in the participatory design and implementation phases of those policies,

increasing their visibility among illegal criminal organizations that responded violently to the threat they represented to their criminal governance.

In the case of former combatants, one of the main factors behind these killings is their commitment to peace agreement policies implying challenges to local governance structures. In addition, the location of some of the killings is related to the presence of FARC-EP dissidents and other organized crime actors, who occasionally dispute control over illicit territories and markets. Organized crime actors are motivated to kill former combatants who are seen as cooperating with the government or who opposed their recruitment. A region that is particularly affected is Cauca, and this is true for both targeted groups.

Figure 24: Attacks on FARC and community leaders in Colombia, by department



For both groups, the perpetrators are still largely unknown. However, it is believed that groups from demobilizations are potentially behind them. Heirs of paramilitary groups and FARC dissidents are the most probable perpetrators in cases of community leaders as well as of former FARC combatants. For cases of leaders working in crop substitution programmes, state security forces appear also to be involved, in connection with death squads.

The targeted killing of community leaders and former combatants has an enormous impact on the country. First, it has shown communities that the peace agreement with FARC-EP has not diminished the direct

violence. Secondly, the state is still unable to provide security either to former combatants who laid down their weapons and are fulfilling their commitment to the peace agreement or to communities suffering from armed confrontation. Thirdly, and perhaps most relevant, targeted killing of a community leader stifles the community's voice and hope, and helps organized criminal groups to exert control over communities. It is a situation that poses a grave risk for the country's transition from armed conflict to peace, validates organized crime governance in certain regions of the country and kills the hope of communities that believed in a peaceful way out of more than 50 years of armed confrontation.



Javier Torres/AFP via Getty Images

MEXICO'S LAW ENFORCEMENT CRISIS

In Mexico the main targeted group was the security sector, accounting for 20% of all cases, and within this target category, law enforcement made up 95% of the cases. Police officers of all ranks are frequent targets of organized criminal groups in Mexico. Such groups deliberately target police officers, usually while off duty, and often for their investigative work. However, killings of police officers include not only targeted killings but a broader context of attacks. It is estimated that more than one police officer is assassinated every day in the country.¹⁴⁴

In December 2019, a decorated commander of the city of Irapuato, in the state of Guanajuato, María Sonia Arellano Mendoza, was kidnapped and later found dead along with a message signed by the New Generation Jalisco Cartel.¹⁴⁵ According to reports, Mendoza played a key role in the fight against local drug trade and oil theft in Irapuato.¹⁴⁶ At the time of writing, the head of the Sinaloa state police forces, Joel Ernesto Soto, was assassinated while driving his private car in Mazatlán. Soto was head of operations to control organized crime in the state of Sinaloa. He had survived previous assassination attempts by organized crime.¹⁴⁷

In many cases, however, officers are targeted because of their involvement in illicit activities. Reports show that members of the police in Mexico are highly vulnerable to corruption and association with the criminal underworld, lured to the opportunity for extra revenue given poor working conditions, low wages, lack of training and high levels of impunity.¹⁴⁸

Especially at the local level, police forces are often understaffed, underpaid and ill-equipped to carry out their tasks, making it easy for organized crime to collude with vulnerable elements within law enforcement.¹⁴⁹ Reports ranging from internal corruption to incidents of bribery to attain promotions within police forces, to entire police units that act like organized crime groups, are widespread.¹⁵⁰ This blurring of the lines between some police officers and organized crime is likely to explain some of the assassinations of police officers, including those included in the Assassinations Monitor.



Alfredo Estrella/AFP via Getty Images

4.3. ASIA: INDIA, PAKISTAN AND THE PHILIPPINES

In the global database, Asia accounted for the second highest number of recorded assassination cases, after the Americas. Most of these were concentrated in Southern and Western Asia. The chosen case study countries for this region are India, Pakistan and the Philippines, where contract killings and failure to prosecute these crimes are a serious concern. Despite these commonalities, each of the three countries has very different dynamics underlying contract killings.

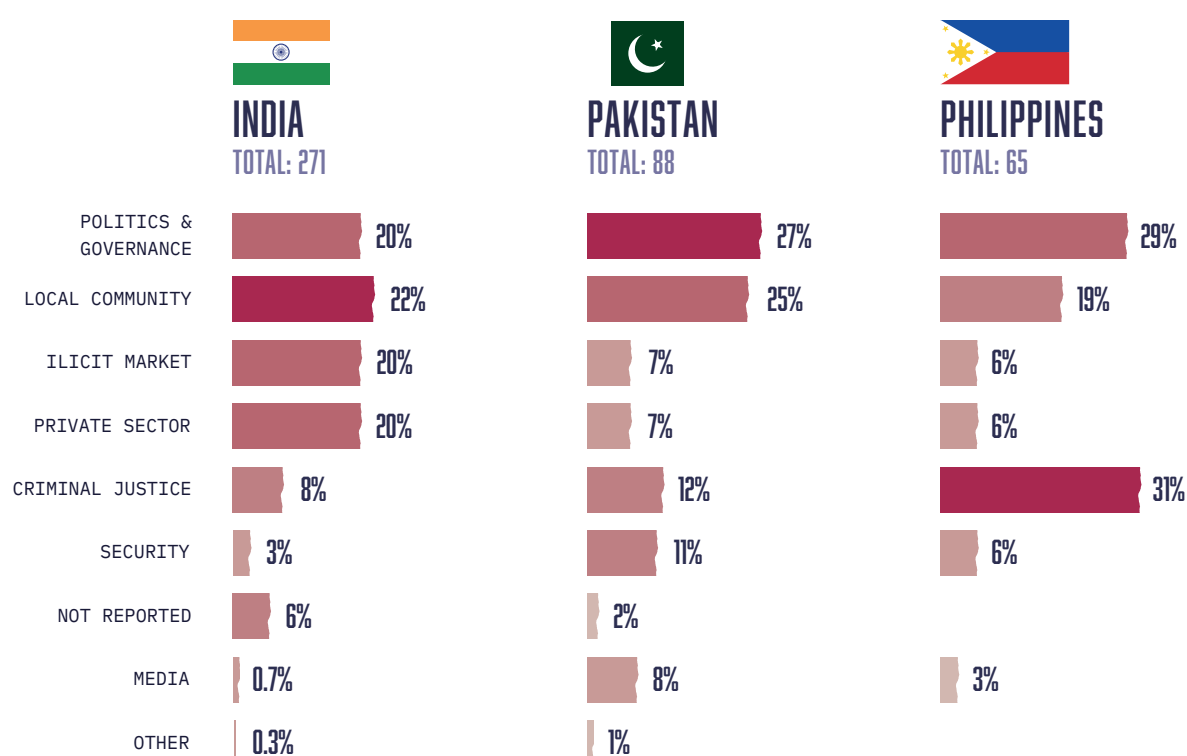
4.3.1. DATA TRENDS

In the global database for 2019 to 2020, Asia accounted for 33% of all recorded cases. Many countries in the continent have a long-standing history of contract killings. For India, Pakistan and the Philippines, data from national news sources was collected to provide a more nuanced analysis of the dynamics of contract killings at the national and sub-national level.

The main target groups differ widely between the three countries. In the Philippines, most victims

belonged to the criminal justice sector (31%); in Pakistan, most belonged to the category of politics and governance (27%); in India, meanwhile, most were in the local community category (22%). Although the illicit market, including members of organized crime groups, does not account for the largest proportion of cases in any of these three countries, it does account for one-fifth of all cases in India, but only for 6% of cases in the Philippines and in Pakistan.

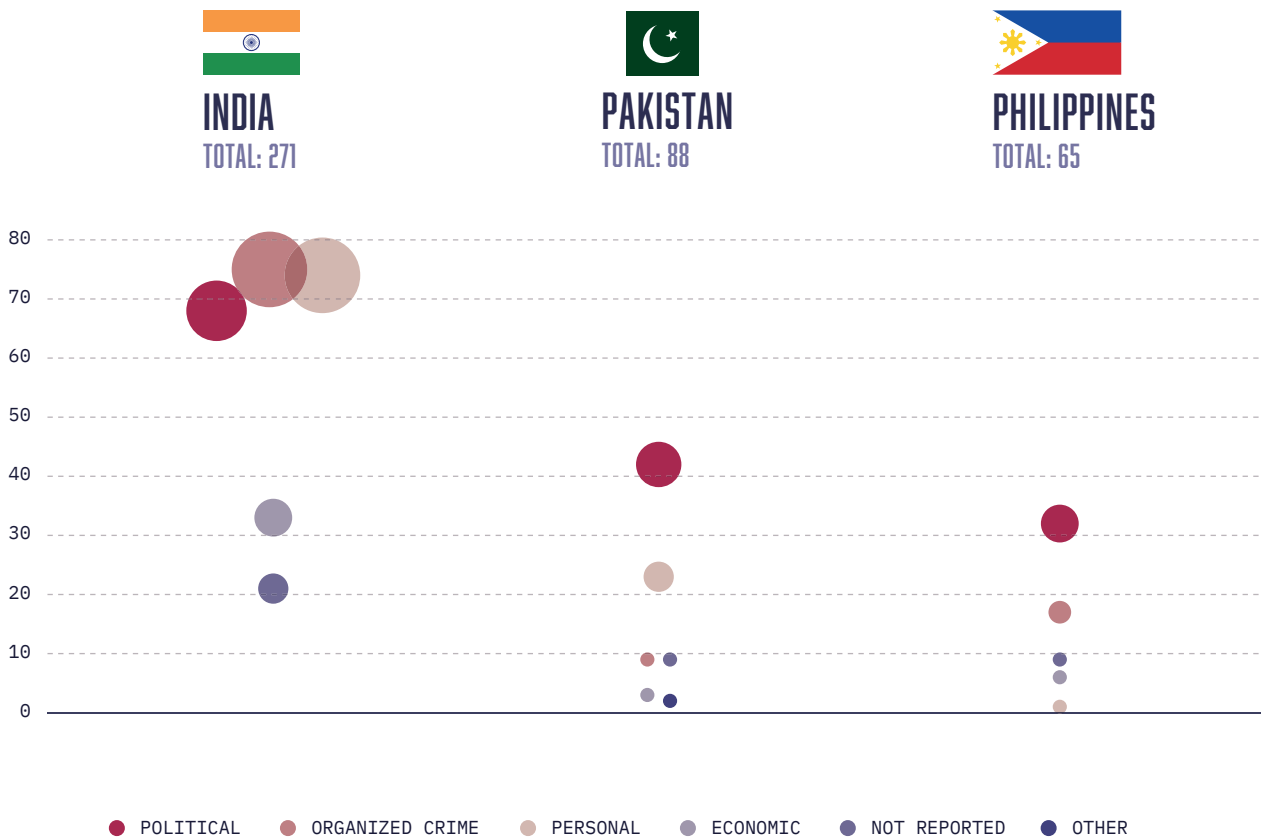
Figure 25: Breakdown of target groups in India, Pakistan and Philippines



Despite their geographic proximity, motive patterns of assassinations differ across the three countries. In Pakistan and the Philippines, political motives were reported as the predominant driver for contract killings, with 48% and 49%, respectively. In India, on the other hand, personal motives, such as love triangles or family disputes, were along with organized crime-related motives, the primary reasons for hiring a

contract killer, accounting for 27% of all recorded cases. Organized-crime-related motives were the second highest category in the case of the Philippines (26%), which includes, for example, extortion, gang wars and rivalry, and the elimination of those opposing criminal activities (e.g. activists, police, judges, etc). In Pakistan, however, personal motives came second, with 26% of all cases.

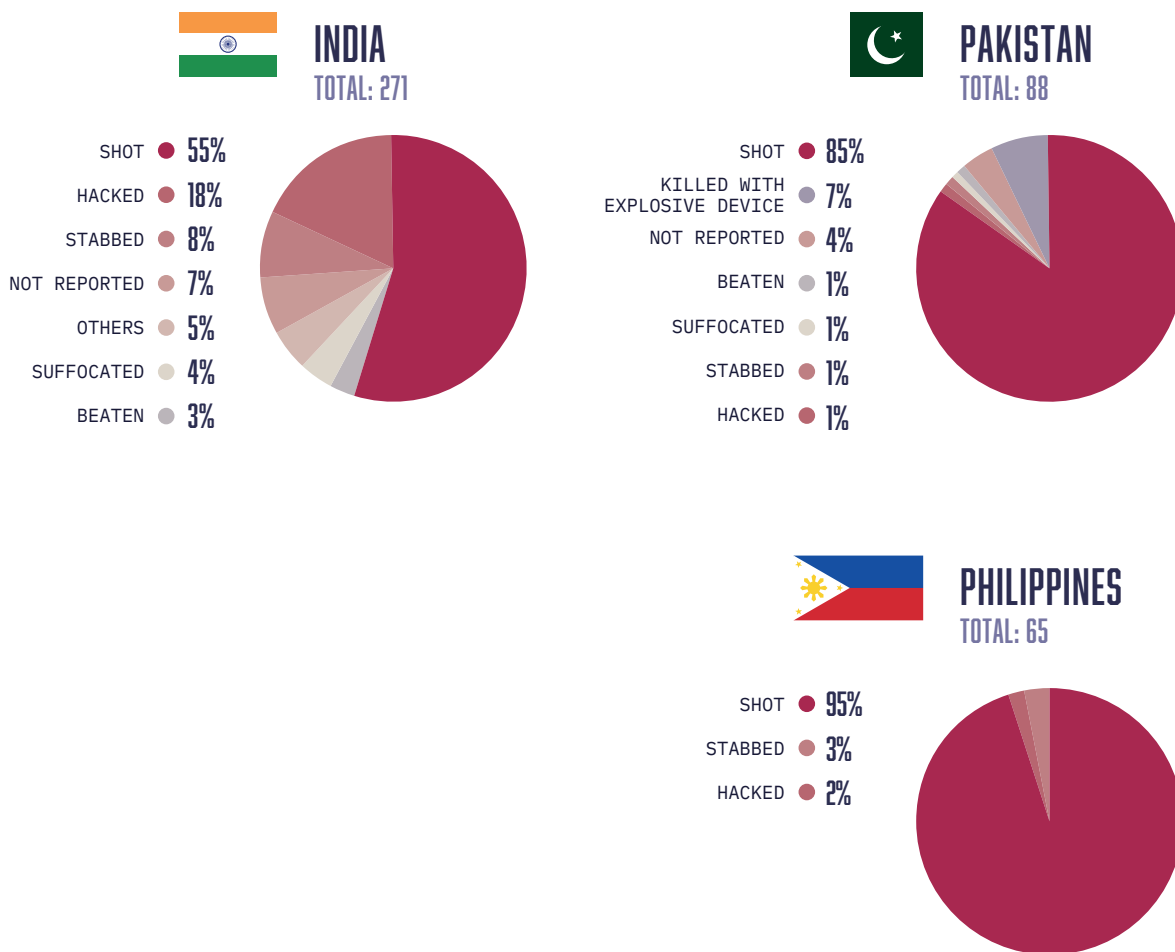
Figure 26: Breakdown of motives in India, Pakistan and Philippines



Generally, firearms are the most commonly used weapon in the context of contract killings, and this is also confirmed by the data for India, Pakistan and the Philippines. Nevertheless, the extent to which firearms are used as the weapon of assassination varies quite considerably across the three countries. Firearms were used in an overwhelming 95% of recorded hits in the

Philippines, but only in 55% of cases in India (where weapons such as knives and axes were used in 25% of cases), and in 85% of cases in Pakistan. Regardless of which kind of weapon was used, the success rate of hits was very similar across the three countries, with 92% in the Philippines, 91% in Pakistan and 87% in India.

Figure 27: Breakdown of methods in India, Pakistan and Philippines



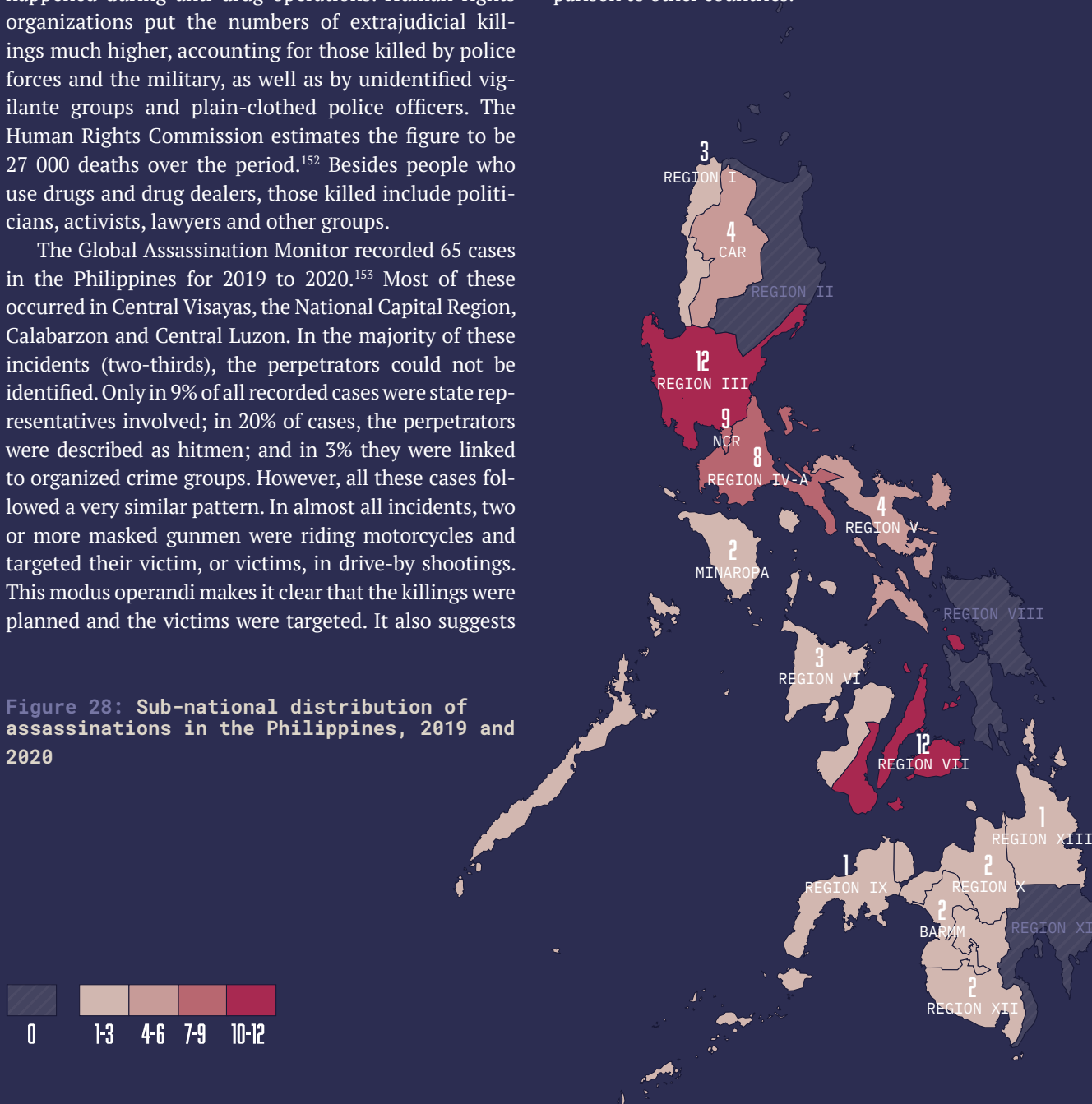
KILLING POLITICIANS, LAWYERS AND ACTIVISTS IN THE PHILIPPINES: THE 'WAR ON DRUGS'

Since President Duterte came to power in June 2016, the Philippines has seen a spike in extrajudicial killings, meted out under the banner of the war against drugs. Between 2016 and 2020, more than 5 810 people were killed by the police and military.¹⁵¹ These are the official figures, however, and include only deaths that happened during anti-drug operations. Human rights organizations put the numbers of extrajudicial killings much higher, accounting for those killed by police forces and the military, as well as by unidentified vigilante groups and plain-clothed police officers. The Human Rights Commission estimates the figure to be 27 000 deaths over the period.¹⁵² Besides people who use drugs and drug dealers, those killed include politicians, activists, lawyers and other groups.

The Global Assassination Monitor recorded 65 cases in the Philippines for 2019 to 2020.¹⁵³ Most of these occurred in Central Visayas, the National Capital Region, Calabarzon and Central Luzon. In the majority of these incidents (two-thirds), the perpetrators could not be identified. Only in 9% of all recorded cases were state representatives involved; in 20% of cases, the perpetrators were described as hitmen; and in 3% they were linked to organized crime groups. However, all these cases followed a very similar pattern. In almost all incidents, two or more masked gunmen were riding motorcycles and targeted their victim, or victims, in drive-by shootings. This modus operandi makes it clear that the killings were planned and the victims were targeted. It also suggests

that those involved in the killings were professionals, or semi-professionals, with previous experience and training in how to target their victims.¹⁵⁴ The success rate of recorded assassinations in the Philippines was 92% for the two years covered by the data period. In 95% of cases, firearms were used. Both these figures are high in comparison to other countries.

Figure 28: Sub-national distribution of assassinations in the Philippines, 2019 and 2020



Politicians became targeted from the beginning of the Duterte regime. In August 2016, Duterte published a 'narco list', which included the names of more than 150 officials from the judiciary, local government and the police, who were supposedly involved in the illicit drugs trade. He warned those civil servants to stop their illicit business; and, if not, he threatened to kill them. In 2018, he expanded his 'narco list', including the names of another 600 people. According to reports from Human Rights Watch and others, the list was a means to silence Duterte's political opponents, or anybody who did not agree with his approach.¹⁵⁵ The Global Assassination Monitor database has recorded assassinations, or attempted assassinations, of 15 persons from the politics and governance target category, mostly politicians, but also party affiliates and a public official. In some of these cases, links to Duterte's narco list were explicitly reported. For example, in February 2020, Abdulwahab Sabal, former mayor of Sultan Sumagka, was attacked by gunmen outside of the Mannra Hotel in Manila. Sabal was one of the local politicians named on Duterte's list, reportedly suspected of being involved in the illicit drug trade.¹⁵⁶ In another case, in July 2020, Pablo Matinong Jr., mayor of South Cotabato, was shot dead by assailants on motorbikes. He was another politician on Duterte's 2016 narco list.

While politicians have been a target for assassinations from the beginning of the Duterte regime, members of the criminal justice sector were the main category of victims between 2019 and 2020, according to the cases recorded in the database, albeit by a very small margin. Most of the victims were lawyers, but also prosecutors and judges.¹⁵⁷ In most of these cases, the perpetrators were unknown; in five of the cases, state representatives were the perpetrators, including, reportedly, policemen in two of the cases. Most legal professionals were targeted because of their work – either because they became targets of the war on drugs, for example they were on Duterte's narco list, or were defending a drug-related case, or because they were defending victims of human rights abuses. Many of those who were attacked were members of the National Union of Peoples' Lawyers, a legal organization that defends victims of human rights abuses and left-leaning activists.¹⁵⁸

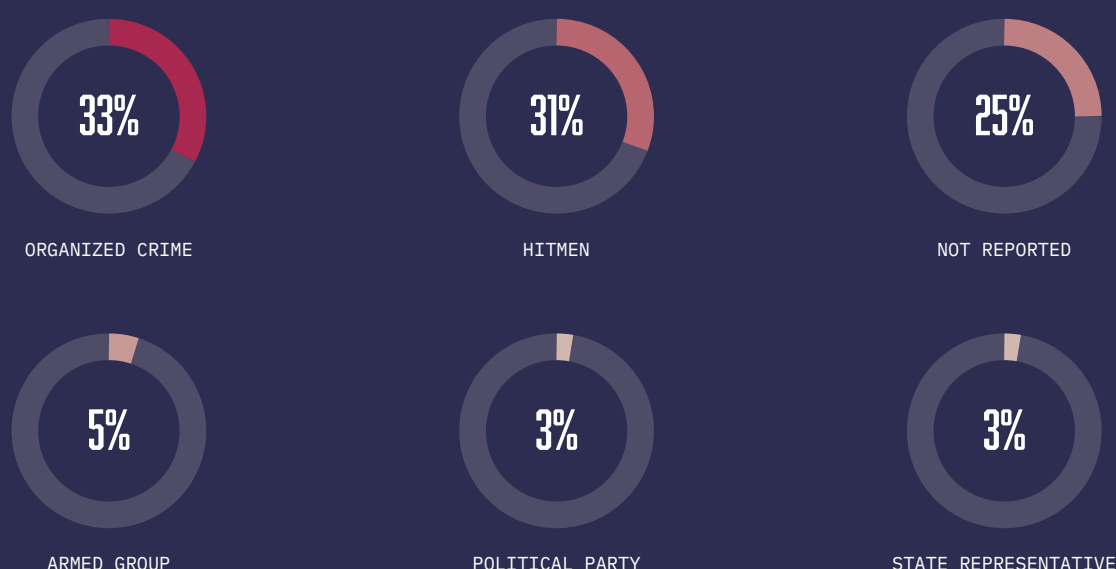
The targeted killing of activists has seen a surge as of late. On 3 July 2020, the Duterte administration passed the controversial Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020, which led rights groups and some lawmakers to raise concerns that the bill would worsen human rights abuses, including killings, in the country.¹⁵⁹ In a country where mining concessions are given in ancestral domains, pressure on natural resources, and on those indigenous communities protecting them, is exacerbated. This has become particularly apparent in Negros Island, where activists are continually targeted. According to some reports, 90 people have become victims of extrajudicial killings in Negros between 2016 and 2020. Those included farmers, lawyers and civilian officials. Negros has been a hotspot of activism and tensions for a long time, fuelled by stark inequalities in wealth and land ownership. Those challenging the system of neo-feudal land ownership are targeted; and those defending the rights of activists are branded supporters of a communist insurgency. The new terrorism act has given the Duterte regime increased powers to target those labelled as communist insurgents. The Global Assassination Monitor database records a number of cases where people were targeted in the context of Negros activism. For example, in August 2020, Zara Alvarez, a human rights activist monitoring abuses in the area, was targeted in Bacolod City. A man wearing a face mask and a cap shot her repeatedly as she was walking. She had been documenting the killing of farmers, lawyers and activists on Negros Island and supporting the victims' families. In another case, in June 2019, Lito Itao, a motorcycle-taxi driver, auditor of a Drivers Association and activist, was gunned down by two motorcycle-riding gunmen in Negros Oriental.

Most of the extrajudicial killings in the Philippines take place under the umbrella of the war on drugs and on communist insurgents. Whether these killings are commissioned by the state, state sanctioned or tolerated by the state, in most cases, the assassins know that they enjoy a high level of impunity and protection. Lack of investigation and follow-up, almost all cases remain without prosecution.

PASSION, LOVE AND REVENGE: PERSONAL MOTIVES FUEL THE BUSINESS OF CONTRACT KILLERS IN INDIA

In India, reporting on contract killing is often quite detailed, especially compared to other countries. In the majority of cases, it was possible to establish the perpetrator category. In only 25% of all recorded cases, does the perpetrator category remain unknown. Many reports refer to the names of perpetrators, and provide other details about them.

Figure 29: Perpetrator categories, India



Most data on prices in the database come from India. Out of 68 cases where price data was available, 46 were in India. Similarly, the motives for contract killings are more frequently reported than in other countries. Personal motives, such as a passionate attachment, long-standing family dispute or personal enmities, accounted for the largest proportion of recorded cases (27%), closely followed by motives linked to politics (25%). Economic motives accounted for the smallest number of cases, at 12%.

Interestingly, when analyzing motives in conjunction with perpetrator categories, it becomes clear that the high level of information in the Indian database is linked to the large number of personally motivated cases, as most of the detailed information about perpetrators was derived from cases categorized as personally motivated. In 59% of these cases, the reports referred explicitly to the hiring of contract killers. This stands in contrast to other motive categories. For example, killings with organized crime as the motive explicitly referred to the involvement of hitmen in only 13% of cases, but referred to the involvement of gang members in most cases (in 72% of recorded cases).

Contract killings – or supari killings as they are commonly referred to in India – have existed for a long time in the country. Most of the killers are young and hired by gangs for the killings. They are supplied with photographs of their target and with weapons. They often kill for very little money.¹⁶⁰ Of course, there are also more experienced, and more expensive, contract killers in India.¹⁶¹ Yet, according to some reports, the trend of hitmen has been towards the unprofessional, inexperienced first-time offender.¹⁶² Another trend has been a shift from the hiring of outsiders to the use of locals. In the past, about 15 years ago, supari killers were usually ‘outsiders’ – in other words, they were

hired from different states, mostly Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.¹⁶³ This has changed in the past decade. Supari killers are now mostly locals. They intimately know the area where the killing has been contracted, and can navigate their way around the area. They can easily be found by those seeking their help. Some of them are first-time offenders, with little to lose. This change in the contracting pattern has meant that access to supari killers has become easier. And, at the same time, prices have dropped. Easy access to contract killers and low prices might help explain the high levels of reporting of personally motivated killings.¹⁶⁴

TANAY, RIZAL, PHILIPPINES – Family members mourn as they attend the wake of Puroy and Randy Dela Cruz, who were killed by state forces on 16 March 2021.



Photo by Jes Aznar/Getty Images

4.4. AFRICA: KENYA, MOZAMBIQUE AND SOUTH AFRICA

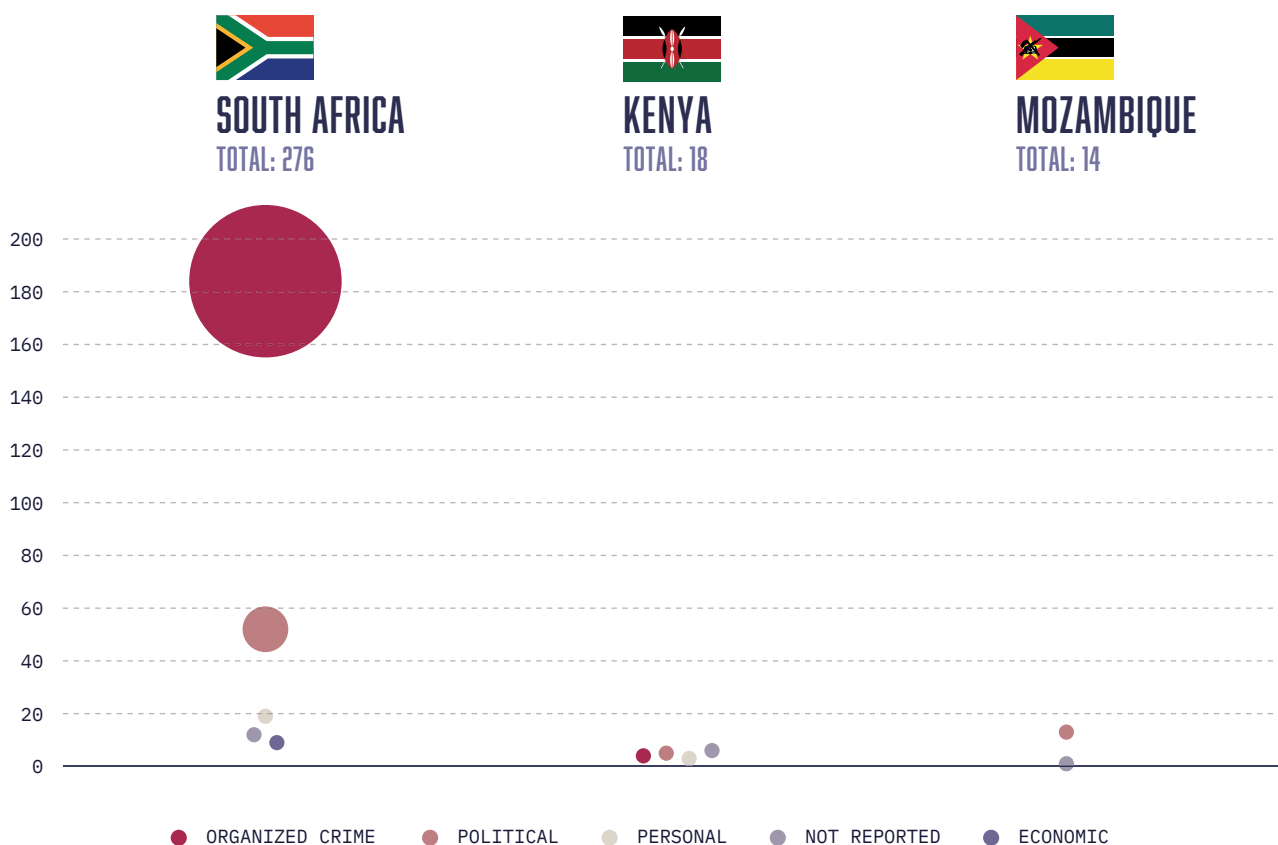
Studies on South Africa have shown how assassinations play an important role in the regional organized crime environment. The countries chosen for the case studies in this report were Kenya, Mozambique and South Africa.¹⁶⁵ Although the drivers for crime and violence differ across these countries, contract killings have a common ground, in that they represent a major challenge.

4.4.1. DATA TRENDS

The main motive for assassinations differed considerably across the three countries. In Mozambique, the main motive was political, driving 93% of the recorded cases. In Kenya and South Africa, politically motivated

cases accounted for far smaller a proportion – 28% and 19%, respectively. Political motives accounted for more than three times more cases in Mozambique than in Kenya and South Africa.¹⁶⁶

Figure 30: Breakdown of motives in Kenya, Mozambique and South Africa



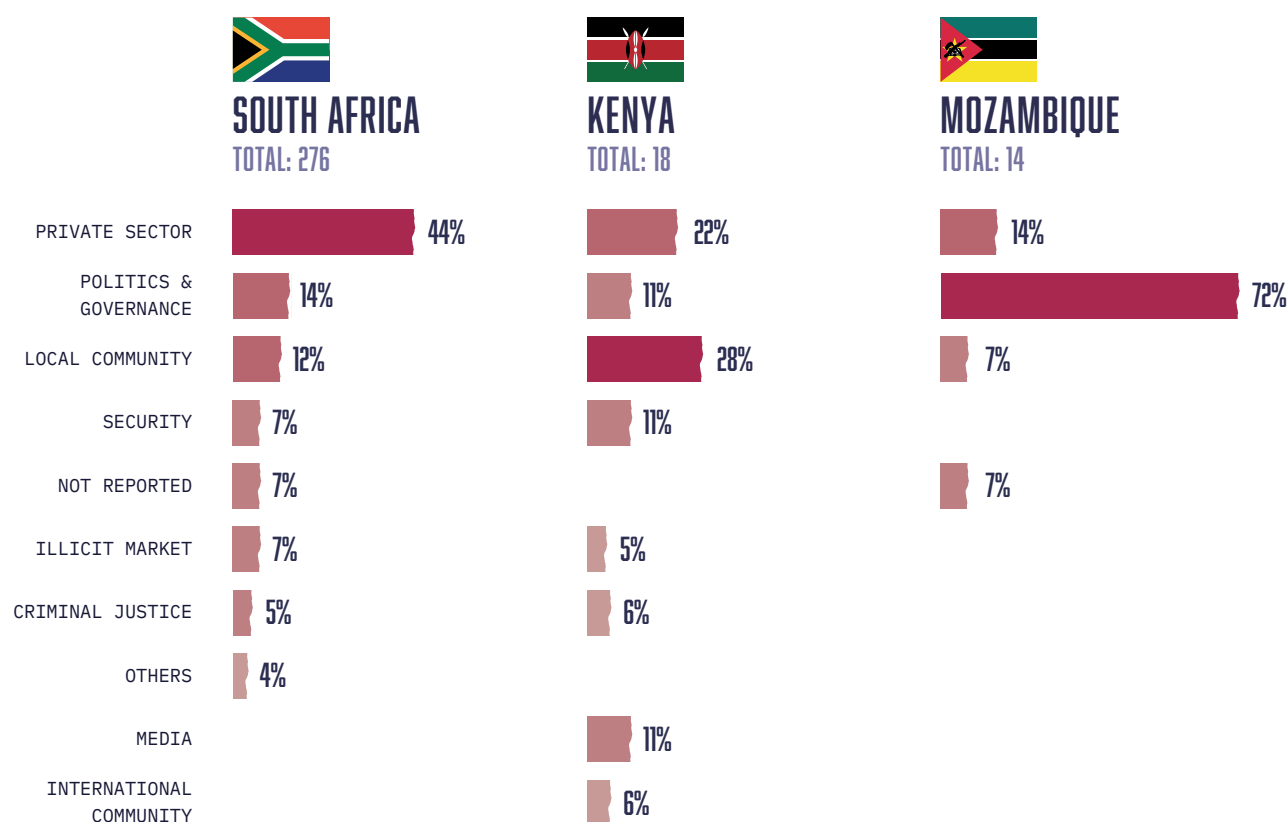
The data for Mozambique suggests that most contract killings were perpetrated in the context of power struggles between the three main parties in the country: the Liberation Front of Mozambique or FRELIMO (from the Portuguese Frente de Libertação de Moçambique); the opposition party, Mozambican National Resistance or RENAMO (from the Portuguese Resistência Nacional Moçambicana); and the MDM (from the Portuguese Movimento Democrático de Moçambique). Most of the cases took place in 2019, during the presidential, legislative and provincial electoral period.¹⁶⁷ In fact, 2019 accounted for almost 90% of all recorded cases in the Global Monitor dataset and cases were recorded all across the country in the provinces of Gaza, Inhambane, Sofala, Maputo, Tete and Zambézia.

For South Africa, most of the recorded incidents, about 67%, were driven by motives linked to organized crime, where the notoriously violent mass transport minibus-taxi industry plays a major role in these killings. Taxi-related killings normally involve disputes

over lucrative route allocations and power struggles between taxi associations (industry bodies that represent taxi owners). In contrast, organized-crime-related hits accounted for only 22% of all cases in Kenya, and for no recorded cases in Mozambique.

The main target groups also differ in the three countries. In Kenya, the main target groups belonged to the local community and the private sector, accounting for 28% and 22% of recorded cases, accordingly. In South Africa, most of the targets were from the private sector, accounting for 44%, including business owners and employees, including taxi drivers. In Mozambique, most of the victims belonged to the target group politics and governance, which also reflects the prevalence of politically motivated killings, linked to political competition between the three parties, described above. In 71% of cases registered by the Global Monitor in Mozambique, politicians, party affiliates and electoral observers from the three main parties were targets in incidents across the country.

Figure 31: Breakdown of target groups in Kenya, Mozambique and South Africa

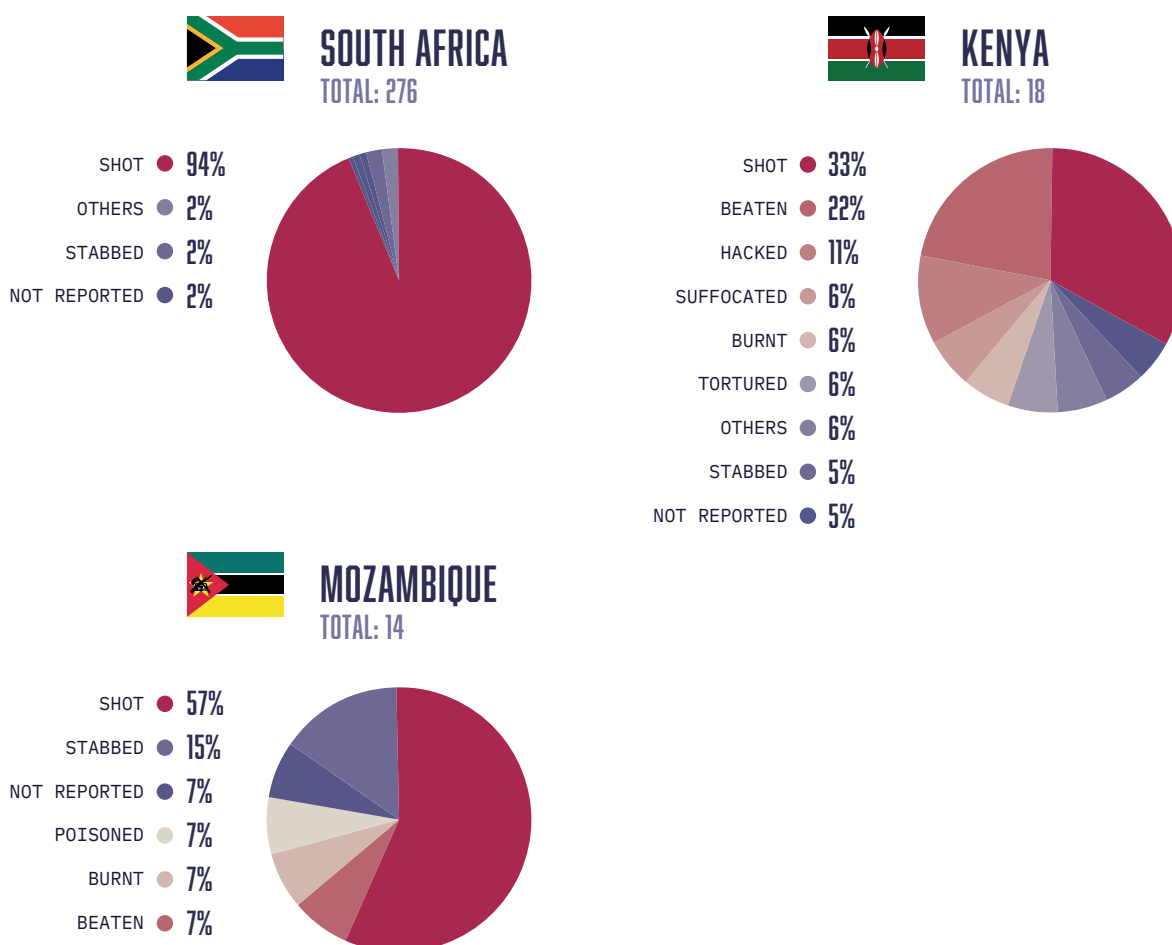


In South Africa and Kenya, the increasing trend for targeted killings saw a sharp decline in 2019 and 2020, which to some extent can be attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁶⁸ In the same period, a trend of killings of high-level law enforcement personnel in South Africa emerged, of which the case of Lieutenant Colonel Charl Kinnear, mentioned previously in this report, is just one example. Most killings of police personnel were recorded in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, followed closely by the Western Cape.¹⁶⁹

While small arms and firearms were the most commonly used means of killing in all three countries, the proportion was highest in South Africa by far, at 94%. In Kenya, firearms were used in 33% of all recorded cases; in Mozambique, the number was 57%. One possible

explanation for the prevalence of firearms in South African hits, which has been put forward in the literature on South Africa, is the close link in that country between hits and the taxi industry, and the easy access the taxi industry has to firearms.¹⁷⁰ The taxi industry contributes to a large number of assassinations recorded in the database, and is a source of hitmen that are hired for other types of assassinations. It is therefore not surprising that for most of the cases recorded for South Africa firearms were used. Another contributing factor could be the failure of South Africa's firearms control system, a feature that has been highlighted in other work by the GI-TOC. The guns-to-gangs syndicate scandal in South Africa reveals the ways in which criminal gangs have easy access to firearms and ammunition.¹⁷¹

Figure 32: Breakdown of methods in Kenya, Mozambique and South Africa



Kenya, on the other hand, had the lowest number of recorded assassinations using firearms. This seems counter-intuitive given that the country has one of the highest rates of civilian firearms possession in East Africa – with over 740 000 unregistered firearms circulating in 2017.¹⁷² Although the numbers of shootings in Kenya are relatively low, it is still the main method used in the context of assassinations, and there are reports that the level of firearm and ammunition smuggling in Kenya is high.¹⁷³ It has been reported that one of the drivers of the conflict in Kenya's Marsabit region, for example, has been arms trafficking, including by

groups such as al-Shabaab.¹⁷⁴ The country also shares borders with conflict areas, notably Somalia and South Sudan, which has contributed to the presence of illegal gun markets in Kenya.¹⁷⁵ Once firearms enter the country, they can be readily transported to other areas. Therefore, arms control policies need to take a holistic approach in order to prevent assassinations and to control the creation of geographic hotspots of symbolic violence and other illicit economies that are fuelled by the use of firearms.



© Shaun Swingler

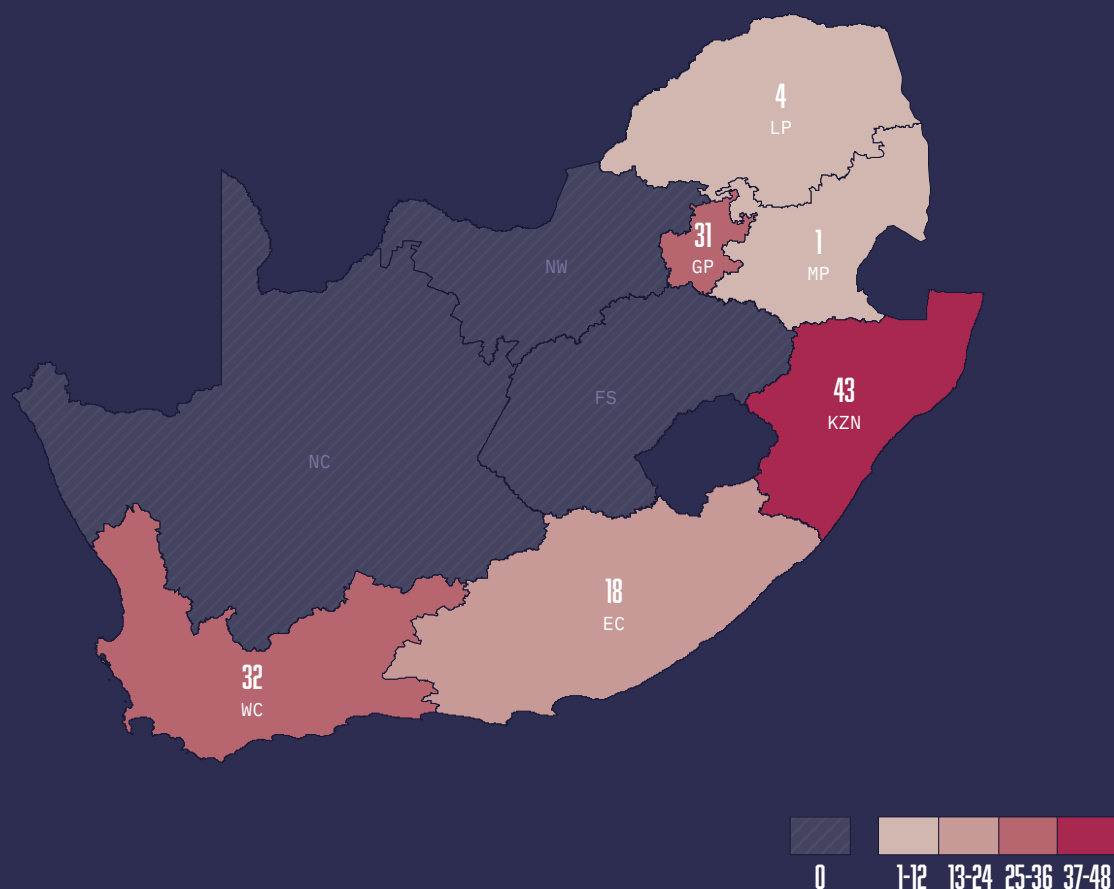
SOUTH AFRICA'S TAXI INDUSTRY – A NURSERY OF VIOLENCE

The private sector accounts for the largest proportion of all target groups in South Africa. One factor that explains the high recorded number of assassinations in this sector is the link between assassinations and the minibus-taxi industry in South Africa. The taxi industry accounted for nearly 50% of all recorded hits for 2019 to 2020, confirming a trend that has been analyzed in detail by the GI-TOC.¹⁷⁶

In terms of geographical distribution, the province of KwaZulu-Natal accounts for the highest number of

recorded contract killings in total, at 33%. However, although KwaZulu-Natal has the highest absolute number of taxi killings compared to all other regions in South Africa, the majority of contract killings in the province are not linked to taxi violence – only 42% of all recorded contract killings were related to the taxi industry. In Gauteng, on the other hand, taxi-related hits were much more prevalent, accounting for almost two-thirds of recorded hits, while in the Western Cape roughly 55% of hits were related to the taxi industry.

Figure 33: Sub-national distribution of taxi industry cases in South Africa, 2019 and 2020



Violence associated with the taxi industry in South Africa is a fairly recent phenomenon, marked by intense competition and a high degree of political connections.¹⁷⁷ The industry evolved during apartheid and, later, the country's transition to democracy. It is the largest consumer-transport system in South Africa, and used by millions of people each day. As a consequence of the Transport Deregulation Act 1988, the private taxi industry, which offered business opportunities to South Africans who had previously been marginalized, was allowed to grow – albeit in a manner that was largely unregulated and informal.¹⁷⁸ Lack of regulation is one of the factors that contributed to the violence that is now inherent in the industry.¹⁷⁹ With the aim of self-regulation, and to strengthen their capacity to secure key competitive routes, taxi associations formed strategic alliances, with political partners and key players. They also deployed violence to secure their commercial interests and to resolve disputes.¹⁸⁰

The types of hits conducted in the taxi industry range from shoot-outs at taxi ranks to targeted and strategic hits on allegedly influential figures within the industry.¹⁸¹ It seems that the violence in the taxi industry has evolved over time, from an open violence setting, which attracts a lot of attention from law enforcement, to more specialized targeted hits.¹⁸²

The taxi industry also plays an important role more broadly in the assassinations 'market' in South Africa, by providing a pool of hitmen for hire.¹⁸³ Taxi hitmen are often seen as part of a network behind assassinations and other types of violent crimes that occur outside of the taxi industry.¹⁸⁴ In the past few years, the taxi industry has started to form affiliations with organized crime groups and gangs, and these alliances seem to reinforce each other.¹⁸⁵ For example, the taxi industry offers drug trafficking gangs a channel to launder their money by investing in the taxi industry.¹⁸⁶

Members of the South African Communist Party (SACP) sing and dance around the coffin of their fallen comrade Mhlengi Khumalo during his funeral ceremony. Khumalo, a local politician, was shot dead on 12 February 2019, in what was an allegedly politically motivated assassination.



Rajesh Jantilal/AFP via Getty Images

4.4.2. POLITICAL DISPUTES IN MOZAMBIQUE

In September 2019, the mayor of Quelimane and candidate for governor of Zambézia province, Manuel de Araújo, became the victim of an assassination attempt. His mother's house was set on fire by armed men. Witnesses state that Araújo was the target of the attack. He survived only because he happened not to have been home. The attack did not come without a warning. Earlier that year, in July 2019, Amnesty International had reported death threats against him.¹⁸⁷

In Mozambique, 2019 was a particularly contentious year from a political perspective. It was the first time that the offices of governor would be filled by direct vote, rather than by presidential appointment.¹⁸⁸ Political tensions were running high, and the recorded cases of hits during the period correlate positively with this. The conflictual situation during the electoral period was aggravated by the killing of Anastácio Matavel, an electoral observer and activist assassinated in a drive-by in Xai-Xai one week before the elections. It turned out that members of law enforcement were behind the murder.¹⁸⁹ Following Matavel's murder, and just one day before the election, the president of the Women's League of RENAMO and candidate for the provincial assembly in Tete, Babula Francisco, was also assassinated.

Political violence between RENAMO and FRELIMO has deep historical roots in Mozambique. Since 1976, the two parties were locked in a protracted civil war that ended with the negotiated 1992 General Peace Agreement (also known as the Rome Agreement).¹⁹⁰ However, following attacks on government locations by RENAMO

in 2013, the FRELIMO government retaliated with an assault on the base of the opposition party. The conflict escalated after FRELIMO's electoral victory in 2014.

Looking at the dataset for Mozambique collected in the context of another research project by the GI-TOC, a series of politically motivated assassinations is evident between 2015 and 2020.¹⁹¹ Assassinations have been largely reported by the media as being used as a means to curtail civil and political rights, and are seen as a pattern that has been imposed to silence critical voices.¹⁹² One such notable case was the killing of constitutional lawyer Gilles Cistac, who was targeted on 3 March 2015 by four men who intercepted him as he was leaving a café in Maputo.¹⁹³ While the investigation did not uncover the architects behind the killing, it did reveal the apparent friction between the lawyer and the ruling party, FRELIMO. The lawyer had proposed ways of decentralizing the government, giving more power to the opposition RENAMO.¹⁹⁴ A decentralized political system has been one of RENAMO's demands in the wake of the escalation of conflict in recent years.¹⁹⁵

These political assassinations in Mozambique, and the pervading atmosphere of violence and contestation in the aftermath of the elections in 2019, with the two defeated parties, RENAMO and MDM, rejecting the results and claiming manipulation and fraud,¹⁹⁶ have undoubtedly contributed to a climate of instability. Such assassinations are also detrimental to the endurance of the peace agreement and peace process in the country.¹⁹⁷



Election campaign posters
in Maputo, Mozambique.

Gianluigi Guercia/AFP via Getty Images

CONCLUSION



Contract killings are closely linked to the prevalence of organized crime and the strength of criminal groups. They reveal ways in which organized crime is embedded in political and economic institutions. They are a means of criminal governance, and thus the prevalence of assassinations in a particular country or region can provide an understanding of the level of control criminal groups exert in those locations. Disaggregated data on assassinations can help us better understand the dynamics behind these modes of killings, and the role played by organized crime in them. Data on assassinations can highlight ways in which criminal groups operate – who they target, what illicit markets they operate in and how they connect to other groups. This, in turn, can help in the fight against organized crime. The Global Assassination Monitor database allows for the identification of patterns of assassinations globally, and to identify geographic areas where more nuanced, local level analysis is required.

The analysis in this report highlights some of the underlying patterns and dynamics of assassinations. Some groups in society are more prone to becoming victims of assassinations than others; some geopolitical contexts are more conducive to high levels of assassinations. The combination of power struggles, corruption in the public and private sectors, and widespread violence contributes to the prevalence of assassinations. But the impacts of assassinations are the same regardless of the context: they create an environment of fear, which helps organized crime groups to exercise control

and pursue illicit activities. They silence communities, destabilize societies and contribute to other forms of violence. High levels of impunity for perpetrators make assassinations an easy option. Remedial measures are lacking, and there is very little focus on prevention, including around the important role of threats. While some countries have established mechanisms to protect particular groups, such as journalists and human rights defenders, they are often under-resourced and lacking in political will.

To break this cycle of violence, political will and better enforcement are needed, as well as policies that tackle the root causes and enablers of assassinations. Assassinations do not occur in isolation. To find solutions, a holistic approach needs to take into consideration the political-economic context in which assassinations occur, and their link to organized crime. These contexts can differ across, or even within, countries. The data collection in the context of this project is a first step in providing a global picture of contract killings. In-depth data collection from a wider variety of national and local sources for a larger number of countries helps to reveal in greater detail national and local dynamics underlying contract killings, and their links to organized crime and state institutions. While tailor-made policy solutions need to take country-specific considerations into account, there are some general recommendations that can be made based on the research for this project.

IMPROVE DATA COLLECTION ON ASSASSINATIONS

The Global Assassination Monitor provides disaggregated data on assassinations on a global scale, based on news reporting. However, media reporting has shortcomings (e.g. underreporting and biases), and information on threats is limited. Data from official sources is not available, at least not for most countries. To improve information on assassinations, and to be able to triangulate information from the media, governments and the international community need to invest in creating data on the subject.

ENHANCE KNOWLEDGE ABOUT LINKS BETWEEN THE ILLICIT FIREARMS TRADE AND ASSASSINATIONS

There is a need for a better understanding about the links between the illicit firearms trade and organized crime to inform arms control policies. Build a better knowledge base on how criminal groups procure firearms and use the illicit firearms market to finance their activities, as well as the most common weapons used by each criminal group. This should be considered as part of an effort to prevent lethal outcomes, including assassinations, by breaking the chain between the illicit firearms trade and assassinations.

STRENGTHEN INVESTIGATORY AND ADJUDICATORY CAPACITIES

The successful investigation and acquittal of a high-profile case can set an important example of accountability by demonstrating that neither perpetrator nor mastermind are immune to prosecution. To improve investigations on assassinations, some measures can be taken, such as legislative reforms, the strengthening of investigative capacities, and the creation of specialized units and witness protection programmes. Simultaneously, judiciary capacity and integrity need to be strengthened as a means to address corruption and the capture of judicial bodies by corrupt interests.

BOLSTER CORPORATE RESPONSIBILITY

Corporate interests are at times the drivers of assassinations, especially when the protection of the environment is involved. Activists and indigenous groups who oppose corporate interests are constantly at risk of being subjected to harassment, physical attacks and assassinations. Legal and regulatory frameworks that offer efficient and regular monitoring of the environment where corporations operate, that demand due diligence and state a clear zero-tolerance policy on reprisals against defenders can help to increase corporate responsibility and protect civil society members from human rights abuses, including violations to the right to life.

ENGAGE WITH CIVIL SOCIETY TO BUILD A RELATIONSHIP OF TRUST

The participation of civil society organizations and activists is crucial in the fight against organized crime, especially where organized crime has infiltrated state institutions. Civil society can support judiciary and law enforcement efforts. At the same time, policies should focus on addressing socio-economic conditions that contribute to an environment conducive to high levels of assassinations.

PROVIDE PROTECTION FOR ACTIVISTS

Often, activists are the targets of contract killings. One way for governments to protect activists is to change the narrative around assassinations and to combat hate speech, so that assassinations are not legitimized at the municipal level. Furthermore, governments need to invest in security – for example training of staff in digital security and evidence collection – and resilience training for vulnerable communities. Phone apps can help to reduce isolation among activists, and create channels of communication between activists within countries and across countries, as well as between activists and relevant national and international organizations.



APPENDIX: NEWS SOURCES

GLOBAL SOURCES

- BBC Monitoring: international reports; CNN International; *The New York Times* International Edition; *The Guardian* (UK); Associated Press International; Thomson Reuters ONE

REGIONAL SOURCES

- Asia – *Daily Regional Times*; *National Herald Tribune*
- Latin America – EFE Newswire; CANA News; *Caribbean Today*
- North America – *The Washington Post*
- Europe – EuroNews; Baltic News Service
- Middle East – *Arab Times*
- Africa – AllAfrica Web Publications

NATIONAL SOURCES

ASIA

- India – *Times of India*
- Pakistan – *Dawn*
- Philippines – *Philippines Daily Inquirer*

AMERICAS

- Colombia – *El Espectador*
- Mexico – *La Prensa/Reforma*
- Brazil – *O Globo*
- El Salvador – *La Prensa Gráfica*
- USA – *The Washington Post*

EUROPE

- Malta – *Malta Today*
- Ukraine – Intellinews, Ukraine Today

AFRICA

- Mozambique – Agencia de Informacao de Mocambique (AIM English); AIM (Portuguese); Major World Publications; Mozambique News Agency
- South Africa – *Beeld*; *Die Burger*; *Business Day*; *Cape Argus*; *Cape Times*; *Citizen*; *Citizen Saturday*; *City Press*; *Daily Despatch*; *Daily Maverick*; *Daily News*; *Daily Sun*; *Diamond Fields*; *Advertiser*; *Ditsem Vrystaat*; *Financial Mail*; IOL; News24; *Mail & Guardian*; *Pretoria News*; *Pretoria News Weekend*; *Rapport*; *Saturday Argus*; *Saturday Beeld*; *Saturday Dispatch*; *Saturday Independent*; *Saturday Star*; *Saturday Volksblad*; *Sowetan*; *Star*; *Sunday Argus*; *Sunday Independent*; *Sunday Sun*; *Sunday Times and Time*; *Sunday Tribune*; *Sunday World*; *The EP Herald*; *The Mercury*; *The New Age*; *The Times*; *Volksblad*; *Weekend Post*; *Weekend Witness*; *Natal Witness*
- Kenya – *Africa Review (Al Bawaba)*; *Business Daily (Nairobi)*; *Business Daily (Nairobi ANPAK)*; *Daily Nation*; *The East African (Nairobi)*; IRIN (English); IRIN Middle East Service; *The Nation (Nairobi)*; *News Bites - Africa: Kenya*; *PlusNews (English)*; *ScienceAfrica*; *The Star (Nairobi)*; *Sunday Nation*; *Sunday Trust*; UN Integrated Regional Information Networks (Nairobi); Major World Publications

NOTES

- 1 Assassinations in the context of this project refer to targeted contract killings, subject to the exchange of material or non-material benefits.
- 2 Previous research by the GI-TOC on assassinations in South Africa has found two ways in which assassinations are instrumentalized: through the commercialization of violence (or hitmen for hire) and through the symbolism of killings (in the sense that assassinations create fear). See Mark Shaw and Kim Thomas, The commercialization of assassination: ‘Hits’ and contract killing in South Africa, 2000–2015, *African Affairs*, 116, 465, 8–9.
- 3 The database consists of two parts. The global database includes cases reported in global and regional news only. For a select number of countries, however, national news sources were consulted for a more nuanced picture of assassinations in the country. The 2 800 cases refer to the entire dataset. The global database includes 778 cases.
- 4 Only one case was recorded for Oceania.
- 5 Mark Shaw, *Hitmen for Hire: Exposing South Africa’s Underworld*. Cape Town: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2017.
- 6 Mark Shaw and Kim Thomas, The commercialization of assassination: ‘Hits’ and contract killing in South Africa, 2000–2015, *African Affairs*, 116, 465.
- 7 Everything else falls under the category of ‘others’.
- 8 For the links between organized crime and deforestation, see, for example, the case of Chihuahua, Mexico, in *People and forests at risk: Organized crime, trafficking in persons and deforestation in Chihuahua, Mexico*, April 2020; Deborah Bonello, How drug cartels moved into illegal logging in Mexico, *InSight Crime*, 18 September 2020, <https://insightcrime.org/investigations/drug-cartels-illegal-logging-mexico/>.
- 9 Motives for a particular contract killing may overlap across these categories. However, the database records the main motive as reported in the media.
- 10 Assassinations perpetrated by armed groups are included in the database if they meet the two selection criteria (i.e. targeted and contract killing), and if the groups are engaged in organized crime-related activities for profit.
- 11 Mark Shaw and Kim Thomas, The commercialization of assassination: ‘Hits’ and contract killing in South Africa, 2000–2015, *African Affairs*, 116, 465, 8.
- 12 Jon Martín Cullell, *Una peluca, la mafia israelí y un doble asesinato: un crimen a sangre fría en Ciudad de México*, *El País*, 27 July 2019, https://elpais.com/internacional/2019/07/26/mexico/1564154621_723799.html.
- 13 Israeli crime boss shot dead in Mexico was underworld ‘legend’, *The Times of Israel*, 27 July 2019, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israeli-crime-boss-shot-dead-in-mexico-was-underworld-legend/>.
- 14 Assassinations in the context of this project refer to targeted contract killings, subject to the exchange of material or non-material benefits.
- 15 Mark Shaw and Kim Thomas, The commercialization of assassination: ‘Hits’ and contract killing in South Africa, 2000–2015, *African Affairs*, 116, 465, 9.
- 16 Admittedly, in practice, differentiating between the second and third layers can be difficult or impossible based on media reporting. For the purpose of this study, the focus was on the first two types of assassinations.
- 17 For an assessment of the situation of death threats and killing of human rights defenders, see the Report of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders: Final warning: death threats and killings of human rights defenders, A/HRC/46/35.
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- 20 LexisNexis is a data-mining platform that provides access to a large database of media reports. The database is searchable with the use of key terms.

- 21 The international news sources are BBC Monitoring: International Reports, CNN International, The New York Times – International Edition, The Guardian, Associated Press International, Thomson Reuters ONE. Regional sources Daily Regional Times and National Herald Tribune (for Asia); EFE Newswire, CANA News, Caribbean Today (for Latin America); The Washington Post (for North America); EuroNews, Baltic News Service (for Europe); Arab Times (for Middle East); AllAfrica Web Publications (for Africa).
- 22 The countries included in the national database are Kenya, Mozambique and South Africa; Brazil, Colombia, El Salvador, Mexico, and the US; India, Pakistan and the Philippines; and Malta and Ukraine. However, since the searches for Malta, Ukraine and the USA yielded very limited results, these three countries are not included in the case study analysis in this report.
- 23 The variables and categorisation described here draws on Mark Shaw and Kim Thomas, The commercialization of assassination: ‘Hits’ and contract killing in South Africa, 2000–2015, *African Affairs*, 116, 465., but has been expanded and adjusted to allow for data collection on a global scale.
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- 31 The exact search string that was used for all searches was: assassin! OR hitm?n OR hit m?n OR ((kill! OR murder! OR shot!) AND (contract OR gang OR hire OR politic! OR lawyer OR activist OR judge OR extrajudicial)).
- 32 However, an element of human error is part of any large-scale data collection project. Please contact us at assassination@globalinitiative.net for any corrections of the data.
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- ³⁴ Barring some country-specific attempts, such as studies conducted in the United Kingdom and Australia. The GI-TOC has done data collection on incidents in South Africa, Kenya, Mozambique and Nigeria.
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a culture of fear in communities are not different from the tactic used by mafia-style and criminal gangs in places such as Mexico, considered the most dangerous place in the world for journalists to work. A study analyzing the rationale behind targeted killings of journalists by ETA and ISIS found that both organizations would target journalists for their reporting work – they would portray journalists as collaborating with ‘enemies’ and spreading ‘false’ information on their activities.

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- 105 Since there is such a high number of cases where the actors are unknown, the figures here could be driven by differences in reporting rather than actual differences on the ground. For example, in Central and South America, organized crime groups might be more likely to claim responsibility for a killing or leave a note, or news sources might be more aware of gang wars in an area, and know the names of the various gangs and organized crime groups.
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¹²⁰ The literature commonly categorizes hitmen according to levels of professionalism. See Mark Shaw and Kim Thomas, The commercialization of assassination: 'Hits' and contract killing in South Africa, 2000–2015, *African Affairs*, 1–24: 'Highly sophisticated professional hits, which are seldom solved; 'middle level' killing, often conducted by relatively proficient killers, generally drawn from criminal gangs or bouncers and debt collectors; and low-level once-off killings, paid for, but contracted out in an ad hoc way to individuals who have little experience of murder, but something to gain by carrying it out.'

¹²¹ Most price data was reported in national sources, rather than global or regional ones. In the case of India, for example, 46 of the 47 cases with information on prices were reported in national news only.

¹²² A few studies have attempted to understand the prices of contract killings and there is substantial variation on how much a hit costs. In Australia, for example, costs were estimated at between \$500 and \$100 000 (equivalent to about US\$ 368 and US\$73 620); the average was \$16 500 (equivalent to about

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