

6. Armed conflict and peace processes in the Middle East and North Africa

Overview

There were seven countries with active armed conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa in 2019 (the same as in 2018): Egypt (high-intensity, subnational armed conflict), Iraq (internationalized civil war), Israel (low-intensity, extrastate armed conflict), Libya (internationalized civil war), Syria (major internationalized civil war), Turkey (low-intensity, extrastate and subnational armed conflict) and Yemen (major internationalized civil war). All the armed conflicts had fewer fatalities than in 2018, except for Libya. Many of these conflicts, which have killed hundreds of thousands of people and displaced millions more, were interconnected and involved regional and international powers, as well as numerous non-state actors.

There are three cross-cutting issues that shape security dilemmas in the region: (a) ongoing regional interstate rivalries with a shifting network of external alliances and interests; (b) continuing threats from violent jihadist groups; and (c) increasing competition over water and growing climate change impacts (see section I). On several occasions during 2019 tensions between Iran and the United States (and its Gulf allies) threatened to escalate into a more serious interstate military conflict. Massive anti-government protests occurred in Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, the Palestinian territories and Tunisia. There were 14 multilateral peace operations in the MENA region in 2019, two more than in 2018.

The complex and interlinked armed conflicts in Iraq, Syria and Turkey are discussed in section II. Turkey continued its military operations in northern Iraq and carried out a new incursion of northern Syria, after an announced US withdrawal. Russia and Turkey subsequently created a 'safe zone' in north-eastern Syria in October 2019, while the Assad government consolidated its hold in most of the country and achieved further strategic gains. Iraq remained a fragile, largely post-conflict state—although available data suggests that combat-related fatalities remain at the level of a high-intensity armed conflict—with weak institutions and growing protests.

The Israeli–Palestinian conflict (section III) continued with rising instability in the Golan Heights and the West Bank adding to tensions in Gaza. The USA unveiled the economic part of its proposed Israeli–Palestinian peace plan, but at the end of 2019 there appeared to be little prospect of resolving the underlying conflict.

In North Africa (section IV) there is a convergence of crises, which also puts the stability of neighbouring states in sub-Saharan Africa at risk. In Libya the fighting escalated between the two competing governments. There was also a deepening internationalization of the conflict—with Egypt, Russia, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates on one side and Qatar and Turkey on the other, and an array of foreign armed groups and mercenaries on both sides. In Libya the fighting escalated between the two competing governments. There was a deepening internationalization of the conflict—with Egypt, Russia, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates on one side and Qatar and Turkey on the other, and an array of foreign armed groups and mercenaries on both sides.

The humanitarian crisis in Yemen (section V) remained the worst in the world in 2019. While initial steps were taken to implement the December 2018 Stockholm Agreement, in Yemen's fractured south, fighting intensified and the rivalry within the anti-Houthi coalition risked escalating into a fully fledged civil war within a civil war, until a peace deal was concluded in Riyadh in November 2019. The Stockholm and Riyadh agreements provide a potential path towards a political settlement of the Yemen civil war, but many challenges remain with continued inter- and intra-coalition fighting.

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