

IV. Armed conflict and peace processes in North Africa

IAN DAVIS

Less than a decade after the Arab Spring, North Africa—here comprising Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia—is undergoing a convergence of crises, which also puts the stability of neighbouring states in sub-Saharan Africa at risk (see chapter 7).¹ The lone Arab Spring democracy in Tunisia is also at risk, sandwiched between Libya's civil war and an Algeria in transition. The protracted security breakdown in Libya has also spilled over into western Egypt, with cross-border weapons smuggling and infiltration from non-state armed groups exacerbating a complex interplay of human and internal security challenges in that country.² Returning 'foreign fighters' (individuals that have joined an armed conflict abroad) from the conflicts in Iraq, Libya and Syria, climate change and increasing water stress exacerbate underlying conflict dynamics.³ Disputes over the Nile's waters, for example, have created long-term tensions among Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan.⁴ More than 7000 foreign fighters came from North Africa, and several states, particularly Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia, now face challenges of how to deal with returning jihadists and their families.⁵

Algeria

Tens of thousands of people peacefully protesting across Algeria since mid-February 2019 prompted President Abdelaziz Bouteflika—in power since 1999 and preparing to run for a fifth term—to resign on 2 April and postpone elections scheduled for 18 April.⁶ The weekly Friday protest movement became known as the Revolution of Smiles or Hirak Movement.⁷ An interim president was appointed in April, and his mandate was extended following the cancellation of July elections. In September the Algerian military took

¹ There is no single accepted definition of North Africa. Some definitions include Sudan in North Africa. The conflict in Sudan is discussed in chapter 7, section IV, in this volume.

² Kandeel, A., 'NATO countries should help Egypt mitigate security challenge near Libyan border', Atlantic Council, 29 Oct. 2019.

³ Bryant, L., 'Climate change puts North Africa in a hot spot', Voice of America, 19 Nov. 2019. On the roots of Islamic radicalization in North Africa, see Neo, R., 'The Jihad post-Arab Spring: Contextualising Islamic radicalism in Egypt and Tunisia', *African Security Review*, vol. 28, no. 2 (2019), pp. 95–109.

⁴ Palios, E., 'Nile Basin water wars: The never-ending struggle between Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan', Geopolitical Monitor situation reports, 4 Nov. 2019.

⁵ Renard, T. (ed.), 'Returnees in the Maghreb: Comparing policies on returning foreign terrorist fighters in Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia', Egmont Institute and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, Egmont Paper 107, Apr. 2019.

⁶ International Crisis Group, 'Post-Bouteflika Algeria: Growing protests, signs of repression', Middle East and North Africa Briefing no. 68, 26 Apr. 2019.

⁷ Algeria Press Service, '26th Friday protest marches reiterate main Hirak Movement's demands', 16 Aug. 2019; and Meddi, A., 'In Algiers, the "revolution of smiles" spreads everywhere', Middle East Eye, 19 Mar. 2019.

a harder line against the continuing demonstrations and increased arrests of protest leaders.⁸ Presidential elections held on 12 December were won by former prime minister Abdelmadjid Tebboune, but with a low voter turnout following nationwide calls for a boycott.⁹ At the end of 2019 the standoff between protesters and security forces continued.

Western Sahara

The mandate of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara was extended in October 2019 for a further 12 months, but a second round of UN-mediated talks in March 2019 to resolve the 40-year conflict over Western Sahara between Morocco and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el Hamra and Río de Oro ended with no clear resolution.¹⁰ A proposed third round of talks was put in doubt when the personal envoy of the UN secretary-general for Western Sahara, former German president Horst Köhler, resigned in May. At the end of 2019 a new personal envoy had yet to be appointed.

Armed conflict in Egypt

The Sinai insurgency (2011–present) is an armed conflict between Egyptian security forces and Islamist militants in the Sinai peninsula. After militants in Sinai embraced the Islamic State in 2014 (the local affiliate is Islamic State–Al Wilayat Sinai, or Islamic State–Sinai Province) there were large-scale attacks on civilian targets.¹¹ The Egyptian military claims to have killed over 7000 militants and arrested 27 000 since July 2013, while about 1000 security personnel have been killed in the region.¹² At the end of 2018 the situation had deteriorated, with Egypt facing the worst human rights conditions in decades and open civil war in Sinai.¹³ A state of emergency has existed in northern Sinai since October 2014 and in the country as a whole since April 2017.¹⁴ Repression of civil society and opposition voices continued in 2019.

⁸ Al Jazeera, 'Thousands march in Algeria in first protest since election call', 20 Sep. 2019.

⁹ *The Economist*, 'An Algerian general takes over from another general', 4 Jan. 2020.

¹⁰ Guerraoui, S., 'Parties to Western Sahara conflict agree to convene for third round of talks', *Arab Weekly*, 24 Mar. 2019; and UN, 'Security Council extends mandate of United Nations Mission in Western Sahara, adopting Resolution 2494 (2019) by 13 votes in favour, 2 abstentions', SC/14003, 30 Oct. 2019.

¹¹ On the historical developments and sociopolitical causes leading to the rise of Sinai Province and its military build-up, see Ashour, O., 'Sinai's insurgency: Implications of enhanced guerrilla warfare', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 42, no. 6 (2019), pp. 541–58.

¹² The Tahir Institute for Middle East Policy, *Five Years of Egypt's War on Terror* (The Tahir Institute for Middle East Policy: July 2018); and The Tahir Institute for Middle East Policy, 'Attacks against security forces continue in Egypt's North Sinai', 11 Sep. 2017.

¹³ On developments in Egypt in 2018, see Davis, I., 'Armed conflict and peace processes in the Middle East and North Africa', *SIPRI Yearbook 2019*, pp. 87–88.

¹⁴ Egyptian Streets, 'Egypt's state of emergency is extended for the tenth time', 4 Nov. 2019.

Table 6.4. Estimated conflict-related fatalities in Egypt, 2010–19

Event type	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Battles	1	54	64	468	927	1 746	1 031	770	898	612
Explosions/ remote violence	1	29	44	89	178	660	575	347	164	346
Protests, riots and strategic developments	7	1 071	113	1 821	172	55	9	1	2	0
Violence against civilians	61	101	23	107	86	396	106	426	48	44
Total	70	1 255	244	2 485	1 363	2 857	1 721	1 544	1 112	1 002

Note: For definitions of event types, see Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), 'ACLED definitions of political violence and protest', 11 Apr. 2019.

Source: ACLED, 'Data export tool', [n.d.].

In September 2019 anti-government protests broke out in Cairo, and the government responded with mass arrests and internet shutdowns.¹⁵

The changing pattern of the armed conflict over the past seven years is reflected in the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project fatalities data in table 6.4. With access to the region restricted, independent verification of events on the ground is difficult, but human rights groups have documented widespread abuse against civilians, mainly by the Egyptian security services, including allegations of war crimes.¹⁶ The Egyptian military occasionally provides statements on its operations, claiming on 4 November 2019, for example, that it had killed 83 suspected fighters from undisclosed armed groups in the preceding month.¹⁷ Overall, however, combat-related fatalities in 2019 fell to the lowest level since 2013.

Armed conflict in Libya

There has been armed conflict in Libya since an armed rebellion, with support of a Western military intervention, deposed its leader Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 (see table 6.5).¹⁸ Under the UN-led 2015 Libyan Political Agreement (LPA), a unity government—the Government of National Accord (GNA)—was installed in Tripoli in 2016, headed by Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj. The GNA is supported by a loose alliance of militias in the capital and controls what remains of the Libyan state and its institutions in Tripoli. The GNA is opposed by a rival state institution, the Tobruk-based House of

¹⁵ Younes, A. and Allahoum, R., 'Nearly 2,000 arrested as Egypt braces for anti-Sisi protests', *Al Jazeera*, 27 Sep. 2019; and *The Economist*, 'The authorities in Egypt raid Mada Masr—and reveal their fears', 28 Nov. 2019.

¹⁶ Human Rights Watch, 'If you are afraid for your lives, leave Sinai!', 28 May 2019. On arms transfers to Egypt, see chapter 9, sections I and II, in this volume.

¹⁷ *Al Jazeera*, 'Egypt forces kill 83 fighters in Sinai, military says', 4 Nov. 2019.

¹⁸ Kuperman, A., 'Obama's Libya debacle: How a well-meaning intervention ended in failure', *Foreign Affairs*, Mar/Apr. 2015; and Hamid, S., 'Everyone says the Libya intervention was a failure. They're wrong', Brookings Institution, 12 Apr. 2016.

Table 6.5. Estimated conflict-related fatalities in Libya, 2010–19

Event type	2010 ^a	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Battles	0	2 073	458	197	2 381	1 999	2 207	972	715	1 226
Explosions/ remote violence	0	2 150	27	83	468	647	797	464	350	751
Protests, riots and strategic developments	0	818	21	83	11	19	11	0	0	0
Violence against civilians	0	491	46	76	475	336	250	227	123	97
Total	0	5 532	552	439	3 335	3 001	3 265	1 663	1 188	2 074

Note: For definitions of event types, see Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), 'ACLED definitions of political violence and protest', 11 Apr. 2019.

^aThere were no estimated conflict-related fatalities in 2010.

Source: ACLED, 'Data export tool', [n.d.].

Representatives in the east of the country, which has failed to ratify the LPA. Khalifa Haftar, head of the self-styled Libyan National Army (LNA), which is a mix of armed groups with a tribal or regional basis, supports the House of Representatives.

After Haftar announced that he would no longer abide by the LPA, new fighting broke out in mid-2018 in Libya's coastal areas and then spread to the capital. A tentative ceasefire was negotiated by the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) on 12 September 2018. The power vacuum also allowed a resurgence of Islamist militant groups, including the Islamic State.¹⁹ The armed conflict has resulted in large-scale forced displacement of civilians, across the border into Tunisia and also within Libya.²⁰ Meanwhile, in southern Libya, ethnic Toubou and Tuareg militias have been fighting for control amid general lawlessness, especially on the border with Chad.²¹

During 2019 there was a deepening internationalization of the conflict—with Egypt, Russia, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) on one side and Qatar and Turkey on the other, and an array of foreign armed groups and mercenaries on both sides.²² With the GNA and LNA receiving weapons and military support from third states, a December 2019 UN sanctions committee report concluded that the eight-year arms embargo was being systematically violated, with Jordan, Turkey and the UAE identified as the main suppliers of weapons. The presence of Chadian and Sudanese

¹⁹ On the Libyan conflict in 2016–18, see Smith, D., 'The Middle East and North Africa: 2016 in perspective', *SIPRI Yearbook 2017*, pp. 83–84; Davis, I., 'Armed conflict in the Middle East and North Africa', *SIPRI Yearbook 2018*, pp. 74–75; and *SIPRI Yearbook 2019* (note 13), pp. 94–98.

²⁰ El Taraboulsi-McCarthy, S. et al., 'Protection of displaced Libyans: Risks, responses and border dynamics', Humanitarian Policy Group and Overseas Development Institute, HPG Working Paper, Aug. 2019.

²¹ Tubiana, J. and Gramizzi, C., *Lost in Trans-nation: Tubu and Other Armed Groups and Smugglers along Libya's Southern Border* (Small Arms Survey: Dec. 2018).

²² International Crisis Group, 'Averting a full-blown war in Libya', Alert, 10 Apr. 2019; and Megerisi, T., 'Libya's global civil war', European Council on Foreign Relations Policy Brief, June 2019.

armed groups (numbering over 3500 fighters in total) was also noted in the report—with the consequent risk of conflict spillover from Libya into Lake Chad, the Sahel and Sudan.²³ The head of UNSMIL and the UN secretary-general's special representative, Ghassan Salamé, described the UN arms embargo as a 'cynical joke'.²⁴

Continuing violence in 2019

The four-month-old ceasefire in Tripoli broke down in January 2019 when clashes erupted among rival armed groups. Separately, Haftar's LNA consolidated its control over much of the south-west, including the oilfields. By the end of March 2019 the LNA controlled three quarters of the country and was preparing to attack Tripoli. About 50 000–70 000 LNA troops faced about 20 000–40 000 GNA-aligned militias and volunteers.²⁵ On 4 April Haftar's forces began advancing towards Tripoli, and the escalation of fighting between Libya's two competing governments led to the postponement of the UN-hosted national conference on Libya's political future that was scheduled to take place on 14 and 15 April.²⁶ Saudi Arabia reportedly helped to finance Haftar's military offensive, while the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, warned that the attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructures might amount to war crimes.²⁷

After initial successes by both sides, first by the LNA and then a counteroffensive by the GNA-aligned forces, a stalemate settled in from late April onwards.²⁸ In late June the GNA-aligned forces captured the city of Gharyan (80 kilometres south of Tripoli), the LNA's key supply base for

²³ UN Security Council, 'Final report of the Panel of Experts on Libya established pursuant to Security Council resolution 1973 (2011)', S/2019/914, 9 Dec. 2019. On the UN embargo on Libya, also see chapter 14, section II, in this volume. On the armed conflicts in the Sahel and Lake Chad, see chapter 7, section II, in this volume. On the armed conflict in Sudan, see chapter 7, section IV, in this volume.

²⁴ UNSMIL, Remarks of SRSR Ghassan Salamé to the United Nations Security Council on the Situation in Libya, 21 May 2019.

²⁵ 'Libya's conflict', *Strategic Comments*, vol. 25, no. 5 (2019), pp. x–xii. On the complex and changing make-up of the two forces, see Lacher, W., 'Who is fighting whom in Tripoli? How the 2019 civil war is transforming Libya's military landscape', Small Arms Survey Briefing Paper, Aug. 2019. On the influence of Madkhali–Salafis in the LNA and GNA, see International Crisis Group, *Addressing the Rise of Libya's Madkhali-Salafis*, Middle East and North Africa Report no. 200 (International Crisis Group: Brussels, 25 Apr. 2019).

²⁶ Elumami, A. and al-Warfalli, A., 'Battle rages for Libya's capital, airport bombed', Reuters, 8 Apr. 2019; Wintour, P., 'UN postpones Libya national conference amid fighting in Tripoli', *The Guardian*, 9 Apr. 2019; and *The Economist*, 'Khalifa Haftar, Libya's strongest warlord, makes a push for Tripoli', 13 Apr. 2019.

²⁷ Malsin, J. and Said, S., 'Saudi Arabia promised support to Libyan warlord in push to seize Tripoli', *Wall Street Journal*, 12 Apr. 2019; and UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 'Libya: Attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure may amount to war crimes, Bachelet warns', 9 Apr. 2019.

²⁸ International Crisis Group, 'Stopping the war for Tripoli', Middle East and North Africa Briefing no. 69, 23 May 2019.

its Tripoli offensive.²⁹ The indiscriminate use of explosive ordnance by both sides has been routine and widespread, including an attack on a migrant detention facility outside the Libyan capital on 2 July.³⁰ The armed conflict also expanded into the world's first 'drone war', with the two sides conducting more than 800 drone strikes from early April to the end of October.³¹

In early November it was reported that about 200 Russian mercenaries had joined Haftar's forces (with some estimates suggesting there are 1400 Russian mercenaries in the country), as part of a broader effort by Russia to shape the outcome of the civil war, drawing parallels with its intervention in Syria.³² For its part, Turkey signed an agreement in December with the Tripoli-based government on maritime border delimitations in the eastern Mediterranean. In exchange for recognizing its claims in the sea, Turkey renewed its military assistance to the GNA, including a new commitment to supply ground troops if requested by the GNA.³³

The peace process

At least 26 peace agreements and transition documents were signed in Libya between 2011 and 2018, including national-level agreements (such as the LPA), intercommunal agreements and localized ceasefires.³⁴ An UNSMIL-mandated national conference process (NCP)—a series of public consultations focusing on priorities for the national government, security, governance and the electoral process—took place between April and July 2018.³⁵ In addition, France (closely aligned with Haftar) and Italy (more closely aligned with the GNA) have been vying to influence the peace process, and each country hosted a summit in 2018.³⁶ However, with no significant breakthroughs, at the end of 2018 there seemed little prospect of a political

²⁹ Wintour, P., 'Libyan government forces capture key town from warlord', *The Guardian*, 27 June 2019.

³⁰ UN Security Council, S/2019/914 (note 23), pp. 14–15, 120–32.

³¹ UN Security Council, S/2019/914 (note 23), pp. 31–39; and UNSMIL, 'SRSG Ghassan Salamé briefing to the Security Council—18 November 2019', 18 Nov. 2019. On the wider proliferation of armed drones in the region, see the database: Royal United Services Institute, 'Armed drones in the Middle East, The proliferation of UAV technology and norms in the region', [n.d.].

³² Kirkpatrick, D. D., 'Russian snipers, missiles and warplanes try to tilt Libyan war', *New York Times*, 5 Nov. 2019; and *The Economist*, 'Foreign powers are piling into Libya', 12 Dec. 2019.

³³ Wintour, P., 'Turkey renews military pledge to Libya as threat of Mediterranean war grows', *The Guardian*, 15 Dec. 2019; Bulos, N., 'Libya's battlefields, already saturated with fighters, are getting more', *Los Angeles Times*, 29 Dec. 2019; and Megerisi, T. and Aydintasbas, A., 'Turkey in Libya: Filling the European vacuum', European Council on Foreign Relations commentary, 17 Dec. 2019.

³⁴ Forster, R., *A Gender Analysis of Peace Agreements and Transitional Documents in Libya, 2011–2018*, PA-X Spotlight Series (UN Women: 2019).

³⁵ Alunni, A. and Tusa, F., 'In search of a negotiated solution in Libya', Aspenia online, 13 Sep. 2018. Reports of the NCP meetings are available in Arabic at <<http://multaqawatani.ly>>.

³⁶ *The Economist*, 'Libya's feuds cross the Mediterranean', 8 Nov. 2018. On Italy's policy aims in Libya, see Varvelli, A. and Villa, M., 'Italy's Libyan conundrum: The risks of short-term thinking', European Council on Foreign Relations commentary, 26 Nov. 2019.

settlement.³⁷ This was confirmed during 2019 as the escalating violence led to the postponement of the national conference scheduled for April 2019, as well as a proposed reconciliation conference hosted by the African Union in July 2019.³⁸

At the grassroots level, UNSMIL has been supporting the development of a national network of mediators that will include tribal leaders, elders, civil society, youth and women activists, academics and businesspeople.³⁹ In July 2019 Salamé called for a truce, trust-building exercises and an international conference to push a bottom-up political process.⁴⁰ To cultivate consensus among external parties to the conflict, Germany was invited by Salamé to attempt to set the groundwork for such a process. Under this Berlin process monthly consultations took place from October among senior officials from the permanent members of the African Union, the European Union, the League of Arab States and the UN Security Council, as well as Egypt, Germany, Italy, Turkey and the UAE.⁴¹ The aim was to agree a draft communiqué that outlines six baskets of activities for ending the conflict, including: a return to the Libyan-led political process and accompanying economic reform; a ceasefire, implementation of the arms embargo and security reform; and upholding international human rights and humanitarian law. A proposed Berlin summit in early 2020 is due to be followed by a UN-led intra-Libyan political dialogue.⁴²

However, by the end of 2019 at least 1500 people had been killed (accounting for about three quarters of the total conflict-related fatalities in 2019, see table 6.5) and 120 000 displaced by the fighting around Tripoli. With the growing internationalization of the conflict, further escalation seems likely in 2020.

³⁷ Permanent Mission of France to the UN in New York, 'Political statement on Libya: Joint statement by Fayeze al-Sarraj, Aguila Saleh, Khalid Meshri, Khalifa Haftar, Paris', 29 May 2018.

³⁸ Agence France-Presse, 'African Union to host Libya "reconciliation" conference', *Mail & Guardian*, 31 Mar. 2019; and Panafrican News Agency, 'AUC Chief cancels reconciliation conference on Libya because of continued fighting around Tripoli', 20 June 2019.

³⁹ UNSMIL (note 31).

⁴⁰ Alwasat, 'Salamé hopes to achieve Eid truce, calls for an international conference followed by a Libyan meeting', 9 Aug. 2019.

⁴¹ Megerisi, T., 'Can Germany stop Libya becoming the new Syria?', European Council on Foreign Relations commentary, 24 Sep. 2019; and Wildangel, R. and Megerisi, T., 'Germany's quiet leadership on the Libyan war', European Council on Foreign Relations commentary, 20 Nov. 2019.

⁴² UNSMIL (note 31).