

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

Overview

There were seven states with active armed conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in 2020 (the same as in 2017–19): Egypt (low-intensity, subnational armed conflict), Iraq (internationalized civil war), Israel (low-intensity, extrastate armed conflict), Libya (internationalized civil war), Syria (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 2019. Overall, conflict-related fatalities have reduced by almost 70 per cent since 2017, and in 2020 Yemen remained the region's only major armed conflict (i.e. with fatalities greater than 10 000 people). Many of these conflicts were interconnected and involved regional and international powers, as well as numerous non-state actors. Tensions between Iran and the United States again threatened to escalate into a more serious interstate military conflict. The Covid-19 pandemic appears to have had minimal impact on the region's armed conflicts, although it clearly added another layer of complexity to the existing humanitarian challenges. Anti-government protests occurred throughout the region, with mass protests in Algeria, Iraq and Lebanon.

A ceasefire in Idlib province in Syria in March 2020 and a nationwide ceasefire agreed in Libya in October 2020 suggested both of those conflicts might be open to some form of resolution soon. However, in Yemen implementation of the 2018 Stockholm Agreement remained stalled. There were 14 multilateral peace operations in the MENA region in 2020, the same as in 2019.

There were complex and interlinked armed conflicts in Iraq, Syria and Turkey (section II). During 2020 the Assad government continued to consolidate its hold in Syria and the March ceasefire in Idlib province led to a further reduction in large-scale hostilities. Iraq remained a fragile, largely post-conflict state with weak institutions and growing protests. Iran remained an influential presence in Iraq and Syria, and Iranian–US tensions spilled over into Iraq. Turkey intensified its military operations in northern Iraq. The Idlib ceasefire brokered by Russia and Turkey cemented their roles as key power brokers in Syria, while US influence in the region continued to wane.

Casualties in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict (section III) in 2020 were at the lowest level in the past decade. A new US ‘peace plan’, the threatened annexation of parts of the West Bank and a series of normalization agreements between Israel and four states (Bahrain, Morocco, Sudan and the United Arab

Emirates) were key developments in the year. The economic and humanitarian costs to the Palestinian people of the Israeli occupation continued to be severe, and there still appeared to be little prospect of resolving the underlying Israeli–Palestinian territorial dispute.

North Africa (section IV) is undergoing a convergence of crises, with negative spillover onto the stability of neighbouring states in the eastern Mediterranean and sub-Saharan Africa. The 40-year territorial dispute over Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (Western Sahara) between Morocco and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el Hamra and Río de Oro (Polisario Front) erupted again towards the end of the year, while Egypt’s low-level Sinai insurgency continued in 2020 with no sign of an end or a decisive outcome. Egypt, Turkey and Russia’s deepening roles in the civil war in Libya complicated peace efforts and increased the risk of a direct military confrontation between Turkish and Egyptian/Russian armed forces supporting opposing sides in the armed conflict. An internationally backed ceasefire in Libya in October 2020 offered new grounds for optimism.

Despite attempts mediated by the United Nations to end the civil war in Yemen (section V) the armed conflict continued throughout the year, further exacerbating one of the world’s worst humanitarian crises. A UN panel of experts concluded the pattern of armed conflicts in 2020 had predominantly shifted to economic drivers, while in October the UN warned the country was on the brink of a catastrophic food security crisis. At the end of the year the Houthis continued to dominate the Yemeni political, economic and military landscape, controlling one third of the country’s territory and two thirds of the population. Agreeing a lasting political settlement remains fraught with difficulty as the Houthis are unlikely to stop fighting until they fully control Marib, Hodeidah and Taiz.

IAN DAVIS