

I. Key general developments in the region

IAN DAVIS

There were seven states in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) with active armed conflicts 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).¹ All the armed conflicts had lower conflict-related fatalities in 2020 compared with in 2019; overall the reduction was about 35 per cent as a result of fatalities being almost halved in Syria (see table 6.1). Except for Libya, this was the second consecutive yearly reduction in all of the region's conflict fatalities, which have reduced by almost 70 per cent since 2017. With conflict-related fatalities in Syria dropping below 10 000 in 2020, the war in Yemen remained the region's only major armed conflict. Developments in each of the armed conflicts and any related peace processes are covered in subsequent sections: Iraq, Syria and Turkey (section II); the Israeli–Palestinian conflict (section III); Egypt and Libya (section IV); and Yemen (section V).

Many of these conflicts were interconnected and involved regional and international powers, as well as numerous non-state actors. The regional armament dynamic includes the acquisition and growing use of long-range missiles, with 10 countries (Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Israel, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)) possessing missiles with a range of 250 kilometres or more.² Since 2011, 13 United Nations envoys—four in Syria, six in Libya and three in Yemen—have sought to defuse the three main civil wars without success.³ However, a ceasefire in Idlib province in Syria in March 2020 and a nationwide ceasefire agreed in Libya in October 2020 suggested that both of those conflicts might be open to some form of resolution soon. In Yemen implementation of the 2018 Stockholm Agreement remained stalled.

There were 14 multilateral peace operations in the MENA region in 2020, the same number as in 2019. None of the peace operations that were active in the region in 2020 started or ended during the year. The number of personnel deployed in multilateral peace operations in the MENA region decreased

¹ For conflict definitions and typologies see chapter 2, section I, in this volume.

² Erästö, T. and Wezeman, P. D., 'Addressing missile threats in the Middle East and North Africa', SIPRI Policy Brief, Nov. 2020. On international arms transfers to the region see chapter 9 in this volume.

³ 'Frustrated are the peacemakers: Why the United Nations cannot end wars in the Arab world', *The Economist*, 13 Feb. 2020.

Table 6.1. Estimated conflict-related fatalities in the Middle East and North Africa, 2017–20

Country	2017	2018	2019	2020
Egypt	1 544	1 112	1 003	626
Iraq	32 018	5 603	3 701	2 708
Israel–Palestine	131	360	166	38
Libya	1 663	1 188	2 076	1 495
Syria	54 405	30 084	15 301	7 975
Turkey	2 924	1 928	951	541
Yemen	17 618	34 247	28 030	19 757
Total	110 303	74 522	51 228	33 140

Note: Includes only countries with armed conflicts with 25 or more battle-related deaths in a given year.

Source: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, ‘Data export tool’, accessed 26 Jan.–15 Feb. 2021.

by 3.1 per cent, from 15 082 on 31 December 2019 to 14 615 on 31 December 2020.⁴

Five cross-cutting issues shaped security dilemmas in the region in 2020: (a) ongoing regional interstate rivalries with a shifting network of external alliances and interests; (b) a new wave of large, sustained protest movements across many states in the region; (c) the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic; (d) continuing threats from violent jihadist groups; and (e) increasing competition over water, and growing climate change impacts.⁵ This section examines briefly how these five issues evolved in 2020.

Shifting alliances and rivalries: Continuing Iranian–United States tensions

In the MENA region interstate and intrastate fault lines intersect in complex ways, with shifting alliances and rivalries.⁶ The most destabilizing and high-risk interstate rivalries in 2020 continued to be between Iran (and its allies in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen) and an ad hoc group of four states: Israel, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and the USA.⁷ Saudi Arabia and the UAE (and to a lesser extent some of the other states in the Gulf) have been actively

⁴ For global and regional trends in multilateral peace operations see chapter 2, section II, in this volume.

⁵ For earlier developments in these issues (except the Covid-19 pandemic) see Davis, I., ‘Armed conflict and peace processes in the Middle East and North Africa’, *SIPRI Yearbook 2019*, pp. 81–87; and Davis, I., ‘Key general developments in the region’, *SIPRI Yearbook 2020*, pp. 132–36.

⁶ Malley, R., ‘The unwanted wars: Why the Middle East is more combustible than ever’, *Foreign Affairs*, Nov./Dec. 2019.

⁷ For further details on the rivalries and their developments in 2018–19 see *SIPRI Yearbook 2019* (note 5), pp. 82–84; and *SIPRI Yearbook 2020* (note 5), pp. 132–34. Also see Tabatabai, A. M., ‘Iran’s authoritarian playbook: The tactics, doctrine, and objectives behind Iran’s influence operation’, *The Alliance for Securing Democracy and German Marshall Fund*, 2020; and Malakoutikhah, Z., ‘Iran: Sponsoring or combating terrorism?’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 43, no. 10 (2020), pp. 913–39.

opposing Iran in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen, while Israeli opposition to Iran has been focused on Lebanon and Syria, as well as Iran's nuclear programme. As it did in 2018–19 Israel attacked Iranian and Iranian-aligned targets in Syria on several occasions in 2020, and also continued air strikes against Iranian-backed militias in Iraq and Hezbollah in Lebanon.⁸

Russia and Turkey were influential external actors and rivals in Libya and Syria, where this Russian–Turkish proxy conflict deviated between competition and complicity during the year. It escalated to the brink of a direct military confrontation in Syria in February 2020, before being calmed again by a ceasefire agreed on 5 March 2020 (see section II).

There were also ongoing rifts and political tensions between other groups of states in the region. Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE were in competition with Qatar and Turkey (especially in the Horn of Africa and Libya).⁹ The UAE continued to adopt a softer approach towards Iran and became the first Gulf country and only the third Arab state to formally normalize its relationship with Israel (see section III).¹⁰ However, it was the Iranian–US conflict that after worsening during 2019 again threatened to escalate into a regional-wide interstate military conflict in early 2020.¹¹

The Iranian–United States conflict

Iranian–US relations have been largely adversarial since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Despite an improvement in relations during the Obama presidency, they deteriorated in recent years as a result of the US withdrawal from the 2015 multilateral nuclear agreement with Iran (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, JCPOA) and the US coercive policy of applying 'maximum pressure' colliding with Iran's policy of 'maximum resistance'.¹² In 2019 this

⁸ See e.g. 'Syria war: Israel "hits Iran-backed fighters near Damascus"', BBC News, 6 Feb. 2020; 'Hezbollah fighter killed in Israeli strike near Damascus: Death notice', Reuters, 22 July 2020; 'After Covid-19 lull, secret war gets underway again', Intelligence Online, no. 852 (29 Apr. 2020); and Kaye, D. D. and Efron, S., 'Israel's evolving Iran policy', *Survival*, vol. 62, no. 4 (2020), pp. 7–30.

⁹ Milton-Edwards, B., 'The blockade on Qatar: Conflict management failings', *International Spectator*, vol. 55, no. 2 (2020), pp. 34–48; Başkan, B. and Pala, Ö., 'Making sense of Turkey's reaction to the Qatar crisis', *International Spectator*, vol. 55, no. 2 (2020), pp. 65–78; and 'Cairo takes steps to establish Arab security front to halt Erdogan's ambitions', Intelligence Online, no. 848 (26 Feb. 2020). On armed conflict in the Horn of Africa see chapter 7, section IV, in this volume.

¹⁰ 'The United Arab Emirates has become a force in the Middle East', *The Economist*, 20 Aug. 2020.

¹¹ International Crisis Group, *The Middle East between Collective Security and Collective Breakdown*, Middle East Report no. 212 (International Crisis Group: Brussels, 27 Apr. 2020).

¹² US Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, 'Advancing the US maximum pressure campaign on Iran', Fact sheet, 22 Apr. 2019; Geranmayeh, E., 'Reviving the revolutionaries: How Trump's maximum pressure is shifting Iran's domestic politics', European Council on Foreign Relations Policy Brief, June 2020; and Barzegar, K., 'The hard chess puzzle: Trump's "maximum pressure" versus Iran's "maximum resistance"', Al Jazeera, 15 June 2020. On the US withdrawal from the JCPOA see Erästö, T., 'Implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action', *SIPRI Yearbook 2019*, pp. 381–86. On Iran's defence posture and key foreign policy objectives see Ahmadian, H. and Mohseni, P., 'Iran's Syria strategy: The evolution of deterrence', *International Affairs*, vol. 95, no. 2 (2019), pp. 341–64; and US Congressional Research Service (CRS), *Iran's Foreign and Defense Policies*, CRS Report for Congress R44017 (US Congress, CRS: Washington, DC, 11 Jan. 2021).

led to a series of serious maritime confrontations in the Strait of Hormuz that raised the risk of a regional conflagration.¹³ On 3 January 2020 a US air strike targeted and killed Iranian major general Qasem Soleimani in Baghdad, Iraq. Four other Iranian and five Iraqi nationals were also killed in the air strike.¹⁴ In retaliation Iran carried out a ballistic missile attack on two Iraqi military bases hosting US forces. No serious Iraqi or US casualties were sustained, and US officials regarded the attack as having been calibrated to avoid escalation.¹⁵

Amidst the heightened tensions on 8 January Iran accidentally shot down a Ukrainian airliner shortly after take-off from Tehran airport killing all 176 people on board. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani promised a thorough investigation into the ‘unforgivable error’, as anti-government protests started in several Iranian cities linked to economic and political grievances.¹⁶ The Iranian–US rivalry reignited in March 2020 when US forces carried out retaliatory air strikes against the Iran-aligned Kata’ib Hezbollah militia in Iraq after a militia rocket attack killed two US soldiers and one British soldier.¹⁷ This military clash underscored Iraq’s centrality as a theatre for Iranian–US tensions (see section II).¹⁸

The Covid-19 pandemic provided another sphere for Iranian–US tensions, with the USA refusing to lift its sanctions on humanitarian grounds and blocking Iran’s request for \$5 billion in emergency loans from the International Monetary Fund.¹⁹ Meanwhile, in the Persian Gulf naval clashes between the two countries were narrowly avoided.²⁰ In late June 2020 Iran issued an arrest warrant for US President Donald J. Trump and 35 other US

¹³ On developments in 2019 see Smith, D., ‘Flashpoints’, *SIPRI Yearbook 2020*, pp. 5–8.

¹⁴ ‘How Iran can respond to the killing of Qassem Suleimani’, *The Economist*, 9 Jan. 2020; and Borger, J. and Chulov, M., ‘US kills Iran general Qassem Suleimani in strike ordered by Trump’, *The Guardian*, 3 Jan. 2020.

¹⁵ ‘US and Iran back away from open conflict’, *Wall Street Journal*, 9 Jan. 2020; and Ali, I. and Stewart, P., ‘More than 100 US troops diagnosed with brain injuries from Iran attack’, Reuters, 10 Feb. 2020.

¹⁶ Hafezi, P. and Dehghanpisheh, B., ‘Iran makes arrests in plane shootdown, police crack down on protests’, Reuters, 14 Jan. 2020. On the protests in Iran see O’ Driscoll, D. et al., *Protest and State–Society Relations in the Middle East and North Africa*, SIPRI Policy Paper no. 56 (SIPRI: Stockholm, Oct. 2020), pp. 17–19.

¹⁷ ‘Iraqi religious authorities say US air strike hit civilian airport’, Reuters, 13 Mar. 2020; and Schmitt, E. and Gibbons-Neff, T., ‘US carries out retaliatory strikes on Iranian-backed militia in Iraq’, *New York Times*, 12 Mar. 2020.

¹⁸ Mazzetti, M. and Schmitt, E., ‘Pentagon order to plan for escalation in Iraq meets warning from top commander’, *New York Times*, 27 Mar. 2020; and Wintour, P., ‘Iraq’s prime minister says country on tightrope between US and Iran’, *The Guardian*, 22 Oct. 2020.

¹⁹ Fassihi, F., ‘Iran says US sanctions are taking lives. US officials disagree’, *New York Times*, 1 Apr. 2020; and Talley, I. and Faucon, B., ‘US to block Iran’s request to IMF for \$5 billion loan to fight coronavirus’, *Wall Street Journal*, 7 Apr. 2020.

²⁰ Faucon, B. and Said, S., ‘Iranian navy temporarily seizes vessel, sparking Persian Gulf alert’, *Wall Street Journal*, 14 Apr. 2020; Neuman, S., ‘Iranian speedboats conduct “dangerous and provocative” maneuvers near US warship’, NPR, 16 Apr. 2020; and Hafezi, P., ‘Guards chief: US warships will be destroyed if they threaten Iran in Gulf’, Reuters, 23 Apr. 2020.

officials on charges relating to the January killing of Qasem, while the UN special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions called the assassination a violation of international law.²¹ Several unexplained incidents in June and July caused significant damage to Iranian nuclear and missile infrastructure, including a large-scale explosion at Natanz, one of Iran's primary nuclear facilities.²² Iran accused Israel or the USA of sabotage operations against the Natanz nuclear facility, as well as the assassination of a high-ranking Iranian nuclear scientist on 27 November 2020.²³ Neither Israel nor the USA commented officially on these attacks.

For the last quarter of the year most Iranian–US tensions focused on sanctions related to the JCPOA. Despite the US administration seeking to prolong the UN-imposed arms embargo on Iran, it expired in October.²⁴ In December Iran passed a new nuclear law that could significantly increase its nuclear activities if certain sanction relief measures were not met.²⁵ At the end of the year, while the incoming Biden administration was expected to engage with Iran and potentially rejoin the JCPOA, the outgoing Trump administration doubled down on its maximum pressure strategy by imposing new sanctions on Iran.²⁶

Protest movements

The MENA region has the highest proportion of undemocratic states in the world, and anti-government protests have occurred in many states in the region since 2018.²⁷ Based on the number, intensity and durability of protests

²¹ 'Iran issues warrant for Trump over killing of top general', Reuters, 29 June 2020; and Human Rights Council, 'Extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions', Report of the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, A/HRC/44/38, 29 June 2020, annex, pp. 22–39. On the legality of the US drone strike also see Corn, G. S. and Jenks, C., 'Soleimani and the tactical execution of strategic self-defense', *Lawfare*, 24 Jan. 2020; and Cronin, A. K., 'The age of open assassination', *Lawfare*, 19 Jan. 2020.

²² Sanger, D. E., Schmitt, E. and Bergman, R., 'Long-planned and bigger than thought: Strike on Iran's nuclear program', *New York Times*, 10 July 2020; and 'What to make of a series of odd explosions in Iran', *The Economist*, 9 July 2020.

²³ Hafezi, P., 'Iran official says sabotage caused fire at Natanz nuclear site—TV', Reuters, 23 Aug. 2020; and Wintour, P. and Holmes, O., 'Iran vows retaliation after top nuclear scientists shot dead near Tehran', *The Guardian*, 27 Nov. 2020.

²⁴ Rashad, M., 'Saudi, US officials call for extending UN arms embargo on Iran', Reuters, 29 June 2020; 'Iran nuclear deal: UN rejects US bid to "snapback" Iran sanctions', BBC News, 26 Aug. 2020; and Motamedi, M., 'Arms embargo on Iran expires despite US opposition', *Al Jazeera*, 18 Oct. 2020. On the UN arms embargo on Iran see chapter 14, section II, in this volume.

²⁵ Masterson, J. and Davenport, K., 'Iran passes nuclear law', Arms Control Now blog, Arms Control Association, 10 Dec. 2020. On the JCPOA see chapter 11, section II, in this volume.

²⁶ Schmitt, E. et al., 'Trump sought options for attacking Iran to stop its growing nuclear program', *New York Times*, 16 Nov. 2020; and Psaledakis, D. and Pamuk, H., 'US imposes sweeping sanctions on Iran, targets Khamenei-linked foundation', Reuters, 18 Nov. 2020.

²⁷ See e.g. 'Taking stock of regional democratic trends in Africa and the Middle East before and during the Covid-19 pandemic', International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, *The Global State of Democracy in Focus*, Special Brief, Jan. 2021.

in this new wave of uprisings, the protests in MENA countries can be divided into four categories: mass protests (Algeria, Iraq and Lebanon), sporadic protests (Egypt, Iran, Israel, Jordan, Morocco, the Palestinian territories and Tunisia), scarce protests (Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and the UAE) and highly suppressed protests (Bahrain and Saudi Arabia).²⁸ In Lebanon in August, for example, following a massive explosion in the capital Beirut that killed more than 200 people, violent anti-government protests led to resignation of the government.²⁹

Key reasons for the protests in the region include extreme levels of inequality, austerity and corruption, as well as calls for broader political and democratic rights. The probable wide-ranging socio-economic consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic are likely to exacerbate these grievances.³⁰ Government responses have combined repression with compromise in order to maintain the status quo and avoid social and political reforms. External actors in the region, with their focus on mitigating threats to regional and international security, have also contributed to preservation of the status quo.³¹

Impact of Covid-19

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. In response to the UN secretary-general's March call for a Covid-19-related global ceasefire, the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces in north-east Syria supported the call (see section II), as did the main protagonists in Libya. In Yemen the coalition led by Saudi Arabia fighting against the Houthis and their allies declared a two-week ceasefire that was extended on 23 April for another month.³² However, the fighting in Libya and Yemen continued (see sections IV and V), including attacks against healthcare facilities and personnel.³³

²⁸ O'Driscoll et al. (note 16), pp. 1–4. On the protests in Iraq see section II in this chapter; on the protests in Israel and Palestinian territories see section III in this chapter; and on the protests in Algeria, Egypt and Morocco see section IV in this chapter.

²⁹ Qiblawi, T. et al., 'Lebanon's government steps down in wake of Beirut blast', CNN, 11 Aug. 2020; and O'Driscoll et al. (note 16), pp. 13–15.

³⁰ Assouad, L., 'Inequality and its discontents in the Middle East', Carnegie Middle East Center, 12 Mar. 2020; Bourhrou, A., 'Trust and coercion in times of emergency: Covid-19 and structures of authority in North Africa', SIPRI Commentary, 13 Aug. 2020; and 'The Middle East is fighting a second wave of Covid-19', *The Economist*, 13 June 2020.

³¹ O'Driscoll et al. (note 16), pp. 50–59.

³² 'SDF calls for humanitarian truce in Syria amid coronavirus crisis', *Al-Monitor*, 24 Mar. 2020; 'UN welcomes response by Libyan parties to calls for humanitarian pause', *UN News*, 21 Mar. 2020; and 'Covid-19 in Yemen: Saudi coalition ceasefire declared in bid to contain coronavirus', *UN News*, 9 Apr. 2020. On the UN global ceasefire call, also see chapter 2, section I, in this volume.

³³ See e.g. 'Aid security and Covid-19', *Insecurity Insight Bulletin* no. 6, 22 May 2020.

The pace of some armed conflicts was temporarily slowed by the pandemic (e.g. in Syria in March), but over time the violence escalated again, driven more by long-standing conflict dynamics than by Covid-19. In addition, some armed groups appeared to take advantage of the disruption caused by the pandemic to regroup. As the US-led coalition in Iraq scaled back its counterterrorism activities in response to Covid-19, for example, the Islamic State appeared to be slowly recovering and rebuilding in rural Iraq.³⁴ With infection rates in Iraq reported to be the highest in the Arab world, the pandemic has also added to the growing unrest in the country more generally (see section II).³⁵ There was cooperation between the Palestinian Authority and Israel in the first months of the pandemic to contain the spread of Covid-19 (see section III), and some states and organizations provided support beyond their borders, such as the UAE supplying Iran with humanitarian aid despite their strained relations.³⁶

Violent jihadist groups

The Salafi-jihadist threat in MENA and globally has become fractured and localized, but with the Islamic State and/or al-Qaeda continuing to drive or influence a number of disparate groups.³⁷ Assessing the size of the remaining jihadi base in the region remains difficult, given its covert nature and a continuing significant component of ‘foreign fighters’ (individuals that have joined a non-state armed group in an armed conflict abroad). The UN estimated more than 10 000 Islamic State fighters remained active in Iraq and Syria.³⁸ In Yemen, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula remained a threat despite being weakened by fragmentation into local factions.³⁹

³⁴ Tlozek, E. and Gosh, F. A., ‘Islamic State never needed a caliphate to keep menacing the world. Now it’s regrouping’, ABC News, 10 July 2020. Also see Basit, A., ‘Covid-19: A challenge or opportunity for terrorist groups?’, *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism*, vol. 15, no. 3 (2020), pp. 263–75; and United Nations, Security Council, ‘Eleventh report of the secretary-general on the threat posed by ISIL (Da’esh) to international peace and security and the range of United Nations efforts in support of member states in countering the threat’, S/2020/774, 4 Aug. 2020.

³⁵ ‘Iraq is too broken to protect itself from Covid-19’, *The Economist*, 3 Oct. 2020.

³⁶ Farmanfarmaian, R., ‘Iran, sanctions, and the Covid-19 pandemic’, European Leadership Network Commentary, 23 July 2020.

³⁷ On the future of violent radical Islamism see Clarke, C. P., *After the Caliphate* (Polity Press: Cambridge, 2019). On the Islamic State, its goals, operations and affiliates, and the international military campaign to defeat it see Davis, I., ‘The aims, objectives and modus operandi of the Islamic State and the international response’, *SIPRI Yearbook 2016*, pp. 22–39; and Davis, I., ‘The Islamic State in 2016: A failing “caliphate” but a growing transnational threat’, *SIPRI Yearbook 2017*, pp. 89–104.

³⁸ United Nations, S/2020/774 (note 34). On the Islamic State resurgence in Iraq and Syria also see Knights, M. and Almeida, A., ‘Remaining and expanding: The recovery of Islamic State operations in Iraq in 2019–2020’, *Combating Terrorism Center, CTC Sentinel*, vol. 13, no. 5 (May 2020); and Pavlik, M. et al., ‘A sudden surfacing of strength: Evaluating the possibility of an IS resurgence in Iraq and Syria’, ACLED, 24 July 2020.

³⁹ Johnsen, G. D., ‘Khaid Batarfi and the future of AQAP’, *Lawfare*, 22 Mar. 2020.

Water stress and other climate change impacts

Linkages among water scarcity, climate change and insecurity issues in the MENA region are 'complex, diverse and multi-directional'.⁴⁰ Most states in the region are facing medium to high exposure to ecological threats, such as food insecurity, water stress and food insecurity.⁴¹ Climate change and water stress have played direct or indirect roles in recent and ongoing conflicts in several cases in the region. For example, all actors in the Syrian conflict have used water systems as a strategic asset to be controlled or targeted by military strikes.⁴²

⁴⁰ Schaar, J., 'A confluence of crises: On water, climate and security in the Middle East and North Africa', SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security no. 2019/4, July 2019.

⁴¹ Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP), *Ecological Threat Register 2020: Understanding Ecological Threats, Resilience and Peace* (IEP: Sydney, Sep. 2020).

⁴² Daoudy, M., 'Water weaponization in the Syrian conflict: Strategies of domination and cooperation', *International Affairs*, vol. 96, no. 5 (2020), pp. 1347–66.