

II. Armed conflict and peace processes in Iraq, Syria and Turkey

IAN DAVIS AND SHIVAN FAZIL

This section reviews the complex and interlinked armed conflicts in Iraq, Syria and Turkey. During 2020 the government of President Bashar al-Assad continued to consolidate its hold in Syria, and a 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–United States tensions spilled over into Iraq. Turkey intensified its military operations in northern Iraq, while the protracted armed conflict in the south-east of Turkey also continued. 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.

Armed conflict in Iraq

Post-conflict Iraq continues to struggle to resolve its political and security challenges, the crippling economy, endemic corruption and entanglement in the tensions between Iran and the USA.¹ Despite the military defeat of Islamic State in 2017, the country continues to face security threats posed by the remnants of the militant group. Recent assessments indicate a significant increase in the number of Islamic State attacks—especially in the Sunni areas and the Hamrin mountain range (which extends across Diyala, Kirkuk and Salah al-Din provinces)—with its reach and activities almost doubling between the first quarter of 2019 and the first quarter of 2020.²

Iraq is facing its worst financial crisis in five years. It was dealt a double blow by plummeting oil prices and Covid-19-induced economic contractions, which the World Bank projected could result in an additional 5.5 million more Iraqis falling into poverty.³ The spread of Covid-19 has worsened the underlying grievances fuelling protests, especially in the poorer south. In November, after months of struggle between the government and the parliament, the latter approved a deficit law to allow the government to borrow

¹ Ibish, H., ‘The US and Iran inch toward confrontation in Iraq’, Bloomberg, 7 Apr. 2020. Also see section I in this chapter.

² Knights, M. and Almeida, A., ‘Remaining and expanding: The recovery of Islamic State operations in Iraq in 2019–20’, Combating Terrorism Center, *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 13, no. 5 (May 2020); and O’Driscoll, D. and Fazil, S., ‘The resurgence of the Islamic State in Iraq: Political and military responses’, SIPRI Commentary, 9 June 2020.

³ World Bank, ‘Covid-19 and low oil prices push millions of Iraqis into poverty’, 11 Nov. 2020.

Table 6.2. Estimated conflict-related fatalities in Iraq, 2016–20

Event type	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Battles	24 595	15 216	2 736	1 735	1 461
Explosions/remote violence	25 645	13 921	2 499	1 257	817
Protests, riots and strategic developments	319	58	57	469	115
Violence against civilians	5 755	2 823	311	240	315
Total	56 314	32 018	5 603	3 701	2 708

Notes: The first available year for data on Iraq in the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) database is 2016. For definitions of event types, see ACLED, ‘ACLED definitions of political violence and protest’, 11 Apr. 2019.

Source: ACLED, ‘Data export tool’, accessed 15 Feb. 2021.

\$10 billion to pay expenses and salaries that had been in arrears for over two months.⁴

In a sign of the growing security challenges, tensions increased among the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF)—an Iraqi state-sponsored umbrella organization composed of a number of predominantly Shia militias (some supported by Iran)—and smaller militia groups comprising ethno-religious minorities in the country’s north. Looking to separate from the Iran-backed divisions after a year-long struggle over allegiance and resources, the PMF shrine factions (20 000 active fighters linked to the shrines of Iraq’s twin holy cities of Karbala and Najaf) held a strategic planning meeting during which they emphasized a patriotic ‘Iraq-only’ discourse.⁵ One of the goals of the Iraqi Government has been integrating the PMF into the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), but progress has been slow.

Turkey’s air strikes and ground military incursions against the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (Partîya Karkerên Kurdistanê, PKK) in northern Iraq intensified in 2020. Shelling and bombing resulted in civilian casualties and wildfires, and caused the displacement of thousands of people, destroying their livelihoods and fragile ecosystems.⁶ In the Kurdistan region of Iraq there were also several skirmishes between PKK fighters and the Peshmerga of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), heightening fears of an open conflict.⁷ There was also a looming armed stand-off between the Peshmerga of the KDP and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan in April on the demarcation line that split the Kurdish region during the civil war fought in the 1990s between the two ruling Kurdish parties.⁸ Nonetheless, Iraq has been described as being in a largely post-conflict period since 2018. The available

⁴ Saadon, M., ‘Iraq increases deficit to pay salaries’, *Al-Monitor*, 23 Nov. 2020.

⁵ Malik, H., ‘Pro-Sistani “popular mobilization units” break with pro-Iran militias in Iraq’, *Al-Monitor*, 30 Apr. 2020.

⁶ ‘Violence and wildfires driving people from their lands in Iraqi Kurdistan’, *PAX*, 13 Nov. 2020; and ‘Turkey air raids kill 5 civilians in north Iraq: Local officials’, *AFP*, 19 June 2020.

⁷ Wali, Z., ‘Kurd vs Kurd: Fears of full-scale war rise in northern Iraq’, *Al Jazeera*, 2 Dec. 2020.

⁸ Tastekin, F., ‘Turkey seeks to exploit claims to Iraqi Kurdish village’, *Al-Monitor*, 23 Apr. 2020.

data indicates a continued decline in combat-related fatalities in 2020 and a marked decline in fatalities as a result of the response to anti-government protests (see table 6.2).

In October the Iraqi Government started closing internally displaced person (IDP) camps across the country, despite concerns their rapid closure could render 100 000 people without shelter during the Covid-19 pandemic and during winter. The government expects IDPs to return to their areas of origin, many of which were destroyed during the war against Islamic State and have not been rebuilt. Many IDPs do not want to return home, fearing reprisal attacks by armed militias.⁹ The Iraqi Government and the Kurdistan Regional Government also reached an agreement to normalize the administrative and security situation in Sinjar, the ancestral home town of Yezidis in north-western Iraq. The United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq hoped the agreement would accelerate the reconstruction process and pave the way for the return of the displaced Yezidis.¹⁰ Nonetheless, the humanitarian situation remained challenging, with more than 1.2 million people internally displaced and 4.1 million people in need of humanitarian assistance, as of December 2020.¹¹

Iraq was caught in the middle as tensions between Iran and the USA were heightened following a targeted US drone strike at Baghdad airport in January 2020, which killed the commander of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force, Qasem Soleimani, as well as the deputy commander of Iraq's PMF, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis.¹² Iran responded by launching ballistic missiles at Iraqi bases hosting US troops in Anbar and Erbil provinces, injuring dozens of military personnel.¹³ The US air strikes also further strained Iraqi-US relations, with the Iraq Parliament passing a resolution calling on the Iraqi Government to expel foreign troops from the country.¹⁴

The USA also started decreasing its military footprint in Iraq by handing over several military bases and reducing the number of combat troops in the country.¹⁵ In November the USA announced it would reduce its military presence in Iraq from 3000 to roughly 2500 troops, half of the initially deployed force of 5000.¹⁶ Iraq and the USA held a strategic dialogue, which

⁹ 'Iraq: Closing camps and repatriating the displaced will put their lives at risk', Euro-Med Monitor, 11 Nov. 2020.

¹⁰ 'UNAMI welcomes agreement on Sinjar: A first and important step in the right direction', Reliefweb, 9 Oct. 2020.

¹¹ International Organization for Migration, Displacement tracking matrix, Master List Report 119, Nov.–Dec. 2020; and US Agency for International Development, Bureau for Humanitarian Emergency, 'Iraq—complex emergency: Situation at a glance', 16 Dec. 2020.

¹² 'Iran's Qassem Soleimani killed in US air raid at Baghdad airport', Al Jazeera, 3 Jan. 2020.

¹³ 'Iran attack: US troops targeted with ballistic missiles', BBC News, 8 Jan. 2020.

¹⁴ 'Iraqi parliament calls for expulsion of foreign troops', Al Jazeera, 5 Jan. 2020.

¹⁵ 'Iraq military bases: US pulling out of three key sites', BBC News, 16 Mar. 2020.

¹⁶ Falk, T. O., 'What the US troop withdrawal means for Iraq', Al Jazeera, 22 Nov. 2020.

took place between June and August, amid heightened tensions over rocket attacks by Iran-backed Iraqi militias targeting the US embassy in Baghdad.¹⁷ During the dialogue, the first between the two countries since 2008, the growing capabilities of the ISF and the success in the fight against Islamic State were cited as enabling the US-led Global Coalition against Daesh to transition to a new phase focused on training, equipping and supporting the ISF.¹⁸ Nonetheless, the ISF remained dependent on the US and global coalition air power to counter the Islamic State resurgence.¹⁹

Anti-government protests

The major anti-government protests that started in October 2019 gathered pace in early 2020. Undeterred by the forceful response from official and non-official security forces, Iraqis of all backgrounds joined the movement with unprecedented inclusivity across sect, gender and class.²⁰ The protests constituted the biggest challenge to a government that owed its survival to a fragile compromise between two rival blocs (Bina and Islah) that emerged from the inconclusive 2018 elections.²¹ In demanding the overhaul of the Muhasasa Ta'ifia (an ethno-sectarian political apportionment system), protesters sought to renegotiate the social contract that had underpinned and strained state–society relations since the toppling of the regime of Saddam Hussein in 2003.²²

Following the resignation of the former Prime Minister Adil Abdul Mahdi in December 2019, Iraq was left without a functioning government for over five months as successive prime minister-designates struggled to satisfy the protesters and failed to form a government. The incumbent Mustafa al-Khadimi was inaugurated as prime minister on 6 May 2020 and began his mandate by releasing detained protesters, pledging justice and compensating relatives of those killed during the protests.²³ He promised to hold early elections and pledged to curb the influence of Iran-backed militias accused of killing protesters and carrying out attacks against foreign troops in the country.²⁴ While the next general election was initially scheduled for

¹⁷ Ibrahim, A., 'US-Iraq talks promise US troop withdrawal, fall short of timeline', *Al Jazeera*, 12 June 2020.

¹⁸ 'Joint statement on the US-Iraq strategic dialogue', US Embassy in Georgia, 19 Aug. 2020. The Global Coalition against Daesh maintains a website at <<https://theglobalcoalition.org/en/>>.

¹⁹ Newdick, T., 'The Iraqi air force's F-16 fleet is on the brink of collapse despite showy flybys', *The Drive*, 7 Jan. 2021; and Williams, K. B., 'Is Iraq's military good enough for US troops to leave?', *Defense One*, 28 Oct. 2020.

²⁰ Ali, Z., 'Iraqis demand a country', *Middle East Report*, vol. 292, no. 3 (autumn/winter 2019).

²¹ 'Iraq: Adil Abdul Mahdi named prime minister', *Al Jazeera*, 3 Oct. 2018.

²² 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).

²³ Ibrahim, A., 'Mustafa al-Kadhimi ends Iraq deadlock but new PM faces hurdles', *Al Jazeera*, 11 May 2020.

²⁴ 'US sanctions senior Iraqi official for role in Iran-linked rights abuses', *Wall Street Journal*, 8 Jan. 2021.

6 June 2021, it is likely to be postponed in light of the election commission's demand for more time to complete the necessary preparations.²⁵

As demonstrations continued, activists and analysts were plagued by a deliberate campaign of intimidation and terror, highlighting the growing rift between some militias and the government. Notable was the assassination of Hisham al-Hashimi, a prominent security analyst, outside his house on 6 July.²⁶ A month later in Basra, two prominent activists were killed, while three more survived murder attempts.²⁷

Protests also took place in the Kurdistan region of Iraq in December 2020 after a period of relative calm and while anti-government protests gripped much of the rest of Iraq in late 2019 and early 2020. The protests were initially organized by teachers and civil servants demanding the release of their delayed salaries. In the ensuing days the protests expanded to the economically depressed periphery of the region and to midsized towns, and became more violent. Largely led by youth protesting about unemployment, dismal services and endemic corruption, during this second wave, protesters attacked the offices of Kurdish political parties.²⁸ The protests calmed following a forceful response and curfew, with many teachers and activists being detained in Duhok by Kurdish authorities.²⁹ Protracted revenue-sharing disputes with the Iraqi Government meant the region's 1.2 million civil servants went unpaid for months. The Iraqi Government had halted budget transfers earlier in April. Revenue sharing has been a contested issue since 2014.

In Iraq as a whole, persistent threats of violence and the Covid-19 pandemic suppressed large protest turnouts for much of 2020, and especially in the first half of the year. However, with their demands unmet, protests resumed again in October in Baghdad and other southern provinces, marking a year since they first erupted.³⁰ Moreover, Iraq's grim economic outlook looked set to spark further social and political unrest in 2021. Dwindling oil revenues have forced the Iraqi Government to introduce austerity measures, cut spending and devalue its currency by a fifth, thus adding inflation

²⁵ 'Iraq prime minister calls early elections for June 2021', Al Jazeera, 31 July 2020; and 'State media: Iraq to postpone general elections by four months', Voice of America, 19 Jan. 2021.

²⁶ 'Hisham al-Hashimi: Leading Iraqi security expert shot dead in Baghdad', BBC News, 7 July 2020.

²⁷ 'Iraq: Prominent female activist killed by unknown gunmen in Basra', Al Jazeera, 20 Aug. 2020.

²⁸ Loveluck, L. and Salim, M., 'Protests flare in Iraq's Kurdish north, adding new front in national crisis', *Washington Post*, 12 Dec. 2020.

²⁹ Wille, B., 'Kurdish authorities clamp down ahead of protests', Human Rights Watch, 19 May 2020; and Abdulla, N., 'Rattled by protests, Iraqi Kurdish leaders punish journalists', Voice of America, 5 Sep. 2020.

³⁰ Ibrahim, A., 'Demands not met': Anti-government protests resume in Iraq', Al Jazeera, 25 Oct. 2020.

and a significant cost-of-living increase to the list of hardships facing the population.³¹

Armed conflict in Syria

The Syrian civil war is an ongoing multisided armed conflict involving regional and international powers that was initially triggered by the 2011 Arab Spring. Since 2018 there has been a clear de-escalation in the war due to the Syrian Government's consolidation of territorial control and the eventual territorial defeat of the Islamic State in March 2019.³² In 2020 there was a further relative reduction in large-scale hostilities due to a March ceasefire in Idlib province (see below) and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.³³

At the beginning of 2020 the government of President al-Assad was in control of around 70 per cent of the country, with armed opposition focused on two areas: Idlib province in the north-west, and the north-east partially ruled by Kurds. The armed conflict continued to attract a complex and changing cast of combatants, including regional and global powers: Russia and Turkey in the north-west; and Russia, Turkey and the USA in the north-east.³⁴ In the south-west Iran retained an entrenched presence, and Israel continued with its campaign of air strikes and other military operations against Iran-allied targets in an attempt to enforce a buffer between itself and the Iranian-backed Syrian Government.³⁵ Remnants of the Islamic State also remained a threat.³⁶ In the first quarter of the 2020 there was also a risk of the Syrian conflict being widened, either from an escalation in the conflict in Idlib, where Turkish-backed rebel groups were fighting Russian-

³¹ Cornish, C., 'Iraq devalues currency by a fifth as oil-price collapse hits', *Financial Times*, 20 Dec. 2020.

³² On the Syrian conflict in 2016–19 see Smith, D., 'The Middle East and North Africa: 2016 in perspective', *SIPRI Yearbook 2017*, pp. 77–82; Davis, I., 'Armed conflict in the Middle East and North Africa', *SIPRI Yearbook 2018*, pp. 76–79; Davis, I., 'Armed conflict and peace processes in the Middle East and North Africa', *SIPRI Yearbook 2019*, pp. 98–107; and Davis, I. and O'Driscoll, D., 'Armed conflict and peace processes in Iraq, Syria and Turkey', *SIPRI Yearbook 2020*, pp. 140–50. On the nature of the urban warfare in Syria see Hägerdal, N., 'Starvation as siege tactics: Urban warfare in Syria', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2020). On the roots of the conflict see Lesch, D. W., *Syria* (Polity Press: Cambridge, 2019).

³³ 'Iran's shifting posture in Syria', Cipher Brief, 4 June 2020; 'Russia-Syria cooperation affected by Covid-19', Intelligence Online, no. 852 (29 Apr. 2020); and Mroue, B., 'Hezbollah shifts attention from Syria fight to battle virus', AP News, 1 Apr. 2020.

³⁴ On the use of Russian military power in Syria see de Haas, M. et al., 'Russia's military action in Syria driven by military reforms', *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, vol. 33, no. 2 (2020), pp. 292–99. On Turkey's policy in Syria see Aydıntaşbaş, A., 'A new Gaza: Turkey's border policy in northern Syria', European Council on Foreign Relations Policy Brief, May 2020; and Kardaş, Ş., 'Turkey's mission impossible in sustaining Idlib's unstable equilibrium', German Marshall Fund On Turkey, no. 4, Apr. 2020.

³⁵ Siegal, T., 'IDF special forces carry out covert operation, destroy two Syrian outposts', *Jerusalem Post*, 14 Oct. 2020. On Iran's role in Syria see Juneau, T., 'Iran's costly intervention in Syria: A pyrrhic victory', *Mediterranean Politics*, vol. 25, no. 1 (2020), pp. 26–44.

³⁶ See e.g. McKernan, B., 'Syria: Dozens killed in Isis bus attack', *The Guardian*, 31 Dec. 2020.

backed government forces, or the broader Iranian–US rivalry (see section I). There were also ongoing concerns about the Syrian Government possessing chemical weapons.³⁷

The north-west: Armed conflict and another ceasefire in Idlib

Since the recapture of the Damascus suburbs (eastern Ghouta) and the negotiated surrender of rebels in Homs in 2018, the focus of government forces (backed by Iran and Russia) has been on the remaining rebel-held province of Idlib. It is home to about 3 million civilians (including 1 million IDPs from other parts of Syria) and an estimated 100 000 armed rebels and assorted jihadists.³⁸ The UN estimated that al-Qaeda affiliates in the province numbered around 15 500–20 000 fighters.³⁹ Despite efforts within the UN Security Council to seek a cessation of hostilities in Idlib, in November and December 2019 Russian and Syrian forces intensified air strikes and started a ground offensive, taking territory from rebel groups and creating a new wave of refugees.⁴⁰

In January–February 2020 the Russian-backed Syrian Government offensive continued to make incremental gains in Idlib as civilian casualties continued to rise due to indiscriminate attacks against hospitals, schools and other civilian infrastructure.⁴¹ In February clashes between Syrian and Turkish forces (deployed in parts of Idlib to monitor an earlier ceasefire that had since collapsed, see table 6.3) became the focus of a further escalation in the conflict, which displaced nearly a million people. This was the most intense period of displacement since the start of the Syrian civil war.⁴² After 33 Turkish soldiers were killed in Idlib on 27 February 2020, Turkey launched a major counteroffensive against Syrian government forces, openly

³⁷ ‘OPCW Executive Council adopts decision addressing the possession and use of chemical weapons by the Syrian Arab Republic’, Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, 9 July 2020. Also see chapter 12, section III, in this volume.

³⁸ See Davis, *SIPRI Yearbook 2019* (note 32), pp. 101–102; and Atrache, S., ‘A crisis on top of a crisis: Covid-19 looms over war-ravaged Idlib’, *Refugees International*, 28 Apr. 2020.

³⁹ United Nations, Security Council, Letter dated 20 January 2020 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011) and 2253 (2015) concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da’esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals, groups, undertakings and entities addressed to the President of the Security Council, S/2020/53, 20 Jan. 2020, p. 7.

⁴⁰ Graham-Harrison, E. and Akoush, H., ‘More than 235,000 people have fled Idlib region in Syria, says UN’, *The Guardian*, 27 Dec. 2019.

⁴¹ United Nations, General Assembly, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, A/HRC/44/61, 3 Sep. 2020; and McKernan, B., ‘Idlib province bombing kills 21 in a single day’, *The Guardian*, 26 Feb. 2020.

⁴² AP News, ‘4 Turkish troops, 13 Syrian soldiers killed in north Syria’, NBC News, 3 Feb. 2020; UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, ‘Recent developments in northwest Syria’, Situation report no. 9, 26 Feb. 2020; and ‘Syria war: Alarm after 33 Turkish soldiers killed in attack in Idlib’, BBC News, 28 Feb. 2020.

Table 6.3. Ceasefires and other de-escalation measures in Idlib province, Syria, 2017–20

Date	Parties	Details
Jan. 2017	Iran, Russia and Turkey	Parties agreed to enforce a ceasefire between Syria Government and rebels
May 2017	Iran, Russia and Turkey	The 2017 Astana Agreement established four de-escalation zones, including one in Idlib
Sep. 2017	Iran, Russia and Turkey	Parties agreed the de-escalation zone, to cease hostilities and deploy observer force
Oct. 2017	Turkey	Turkey set up observation posts to monitor rebel compliance with agreement
Sep. 2018	Russia and Turkey	The 2018 Sochi Agreement temporarily halted the Russian-backed Syrian Government offensive
Mar. 2020	Russia and Turkey	Ceasefire agreement to be monitored by joint Russian and Turkish patrols

Source: International Crisis Group, *Silencing the Guns in Syria's Idlib*, Middle East Report no. 213 (International Crisis Group: Brussels, 15 May 2020), pp. 12–13.

fighting them for the first time.⁴³ Turkey also announced it would no longer stop Syrian refugees from reaching Europe, reversing an agreement with the European Union made at the peak of the 2015–16 migration crisis.⁴⁴

On 5 March 2020 the presidents of Russia and Turkey agreed a ceasefire (of an unspecified duration) in Idlib—the latest in several ceasefires and de-escalation initiatives since 2017 (see table 6.3)—as well as joint patrols by Russian and Turkish troops in a ‘security corridor’ extending six kilometres on each side of the M4 Aleppo–Latakia highway.⁴⁵ While the agreement failed to address the future of the main rebel groups operating in Idlib, the ceasefire halted most of the fighting.⁴⁶

Sporadic fighting between pro-government forces and insurgent groups resumed in May and June, and suspected Russian air strikes on rebel groups in October 2020 strained the fragile ceasefire.⁴⁷ The USA also continued to carry out occasional air strikes against insurgents affiliated with al-Qaeda.⁴⁸

⁴³ Gumrukcu, T. and Al-Khalidi, S., ‘Turkey, Russia face off in Syria as fighting escalates, plane shot down’, Reuters, 3 Mar. 2020; and Gall, C., ‘Turkey declares major offensive against Syrian Government’, *New York Times*, 1 Mar. 2020.

⁴⁴ Evans, D. and Coskun, O., ‘Turkey says it will let refugees into Europe after its troops killed in Syria’, Reuters, 27 Feb. 2020. On the migration crisis in 2015–16 see Grip, L., ‘The global refugee crisis and its impact in Europe’, *SIPRI Yearbook 2016*, pp. 439–52; and Grip, L., ‘United Nations and regional responses to displacement crises’, *SIPRI Yearbook 2017*, pp. 280–82.

⁴⁵ Higgins, A., ‘Putin and Erdogan reach accord to halt fighting in Syria’, *New York Times*, 5 Mar. 2020.

⁴⁶ ‘Fifteen killed in clashes in Syria’s Idlib despite ceasefire—monitor’, Reuters, 6 Mar. 2020; and United Nations, A/HRC/44/61 (note 41).

⁴⁷ United Nations, General Assembly, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, A/HRC/45/31, 14 Aug. 2020; and ‘Air raids in northwest Syria camp kill dozens of rebel fighters’, Al Jazeera, 26 Oct. 2020.

⁴⁸ Schmitt, E., ‘US commandos use secretive missiles to kill Qaeda leaders in Syria’, *New York Times*, 24 Sep. 2020; and Schmitt, E., ‘Al Qaeda feels losses in Syria and Afghanistan but stays resilient’, *New York Times*, 27 Oct. 2020.

At the end of the year the ceasefire continued to hold. However, the truce remained extremely fragile, with Russia and Turkey continuing to have divergent interpretations of their commitments and opposing positions on Idlib's future as well as on how to deal with armed groups operating there.

The north-east: A fragile stalemate endured

In 2019 a protracted, but ultimately partial, withdrawal of US forces from the north-eastern area of Syria led to a new Turkish military offensive in October. The offensive was halted only by a new Russian–Turkish agreement on 22 October 2019, which set out new arrangements for territorial control in north-east Syria.⁴⁹ Turkish forces retained seized territory while Russian and Syrian forces were expected to control the remainder of a 'safe zone' on the Syria–Turkey border. Therefore, at the beginning of 2020 a challenging but fragile stalemate had returned to north-eastern Syria. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), led primarily by a Kurdish-dominated armed group—the People's Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, YPG)—was protecting an autonomous administration that continued to govern areas in most of the north-east not held by Turkey or its Syrian allies. On 24 March 2020 the SDF announced it would cease all offensive military activity to facilitate responses to the Covid-19 pandemic, but no other actor indicated a similar commitment.⁵⁰ However, the fragile stalemate largely endured until the end of 2020, punctuated by sporadic outbreaks of armed violence among the various parties.⁵¹

The humanitarian crisis, casualties and war crimes

Despite the territorial focus of the Syrian armed conflict narrowing, it remains one of the most devastating in the world, with around 6.7 million people internally displaced, a further 5.6 million refugees (hosted mainly by Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey) and 11 million in need of humanitarian assistance.⁵² During 2020, 9.3 million people (46 per cent of the population) were food insecure (up from 6.6 million in 2019) and a further 2.2 million were at risk of acute food insecurity (2.6 million in 2019).⁵³ China and Russia attempted to cut UN cross-border humanitarian aid from Turkey to Syria—they argued many areas in Syria could now be reached with humanitarian assistance from within the country. However, on 11 July 2020 after weeks of discussions and on its fourth attempt, the UN Security Council authorized

⁴⁹ 'Full text of Turkey, Russia agreement on northeast Syria', Al Jazeera, 22 Oct. 2019.

⁵⁰ 'SDF calls for humanitarian truce in Syria amid coronavirus crisis', Al-Monitor, 24 Mar. 2020.

⁵¹ See e.g. AFP, 'Fuel truck bomb kills more than 40 in northern Syria', *The Guardian*, 29 Apr. 2020; and 'Syria war: US deploys reinforcements to Syria after Russia clashes', BBC News, 19 Sep. 2020.

⁵² Toume, V., 'Help needed to meet "urgent humanitarian needs" in Syria, Grandi says', UN High Commissioner for Refugees, News release, 20 Sep. 2020; and World Food Programme, 'Regional Syrian refugee crisis overview', Nov. 2020.

⁵³ World Food Programme, 'WFP Syria country brief', Nov. 2020.

Table 6.4. Estimated conflict-related fatalities in Syria, 2017–20

Event type	2017	2018	2019	2020
Battles	26 580	16 001	8 299	4 206
Explosions/remote violence	25 245	11 806	5 764	2 751
Protests, riots and strategic developments	222	18	57	21
Violence against civilians	2 358	2 259	1 181	997
Total	54 405	30 084	15 301	7 975

Notes: The first available year for data on Syria in the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) database is 2017. For definitions of event types, see ACLED, 'ACLED definitions of political violence and protest', 11 Apr. 2019.

Source: ACLED, 'Data export tool', accessed 26 Jan. 2021.

the continuation of cross-border aid into north-west Syria.⁵⁴ Syria's economic crisis deepened during the year, leading to a return of street protests in the south of the country where the uprising against President al-Assad started in 2011.⁵⁵

Although there are no reliable casualty statistics, in April 2016 the UN envoy to Syria estimated over 400 000 Syrians had died in the war.⁵⁶ Since then the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project estimated there have been over 100 000 additional fatalities, including approximately 8000 in 2020 (about half the number of 2019 and 85 per cent less than in 2017, see table 6.4).

Actual or suspected war crimes have been reported at every stage of Syria's civil war, and potential war crimes continued to be committed in 2020 by nearly every conflict actor controlling territory in Syria.⁵⁷ Having previously condemned indiscriminate air strikes on civilian targets carried out by Russia in 2019, the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (established by the UN Human Rights Council in 2011) said the Syrian Government and its allies were continuing to use these tactics in Idlib province in 2020.⁵⁸ A separate UN investigation into attacks on humanitarian sites in Syria in 2019 concluded the Syrian Govern-

⁵⁴ Nichols, M., 'Russia fails again at UN ahead of last-ditch vote on Syria cross-border aid', Reuters, 9 July 2020; and United Nations, Security Council, 'After several failed attempts, Security Council authorizes one-year extension of mechanism for cross-border aid delivery into Syria', Press Release SC/14247, 11 July 2020.

⁵⁵ Bowen, J., 'Syria war: Assad under pressure as economic crisis spirals', BBC News, 15 June 2020; and McKernan, B. and Akoush, H., 'A second revolution? Syrians take to streets under Russia's watchful eye', *The Guardian*, 13 July 2020.

⁵⁶ 'Syria death toll: UN envoy estimates 400,000 killed', Al Jazeera, 23 Apr. 2016. Also see Humud, C. et al., 'Counting casualties in Syria and Iraq: Process and challenges', Congressional Research Service Insight, 12 Apr. 2016.

⁵⁷ United Nations, A/HRC/45/31 (note 47).

⁵⁸ United Nations, General Assembly, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, A/HRC/43/57, 28 Jan. 2020 (published 2 Mar. 2020); and United Nations, A/HRC/44/61 (note 41). Also see Human Rights Watch, 'Targeting Life in Idlib: Syrian and Russian Strikes on Civilian Infrastructure' (Human Rights Watch: Oct. 2020).

ment or its allies had committed most of them.⁵⁹ In April 2020 the first trial in the world on state torture in Syria began in Koblenz, Germany, where two former Syrian security officers faced charges of crimes against humanity committed in the early days of the civil war.⁶⁰

The Syrian peace processes

The main peace efforts in Syria have included long-standing UN-mediated talks, regular discussions by the Astana Group (Iran, Russia and Turkey), an October 2018 Quartet Meeting (France, Germany, Russia and Turkey) and a fragile patchwork of localized de-escalation agreements and ceasefires.⁶¹ In October 2019, 150 delegates (50 each from the government, opposition and civil society) met in Geneva, Switzerland, for the first time to begin drafting a new Syrian constitution—the first step in a political process expected to lead to UN-supervised elections.⁶² However, little progress was made at three subsequent rounds of negotiations (25–29 November 2019, 24–29 August 2020 and 30 November–4 December 2020), although a fifth round was scheduled for 25–29 January 2021 in Geneva.⁶³

With the Syrian constitutional committee process seemingly deadlocked, an end to the civil war still seemed some way off. Post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation among the various conflict parties is likely to be an even longer-term processes.⁶⁴ However, as some of the external actors seemed to be adjusting their posture in Syria, to deal with their own domestic eco-

⁵⁹ UN Secretary-General, 'Summary by the secretary-general of the report of the United Nations Headquarters Board of Inquiry into certain incidents in northwest Syria since 17 September 2018 involving facilities on the United Nations deconfliction list and United Nations supported facilities', 6 Apr. 2020; and Hill, E., 'UN inquiry into Syria bombings is silent on Russia's role', *New York Times*, 6 Apr. 2020.

⁶⁰ Hubbard, B., 'Germany takes rare step in putting Syrian officers on trial in torture case', *New York Times*, 23 Apr. 2020.

⁶¹ On the interactions between humanitarian negotiations and international peace negotiations in Syria see Dieckhoff, M., 'Reconsidering the humanitarian space: Complex interdependence between humanitarian and peace negotiations in Syria', *Contemporary Security Policy*, vol. 41, no. 41 (2020), pp. 564–86. On the impact of ceasefires see Karakus, D. C. and Svensson, I., 'Between the bombs: Exploring partial ceasefires in the Syrian civil war, 2011–2017', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 32, no. 4 (2020), pp. 681–700; and Sosnowski, M., 'Ceasefires as violent state-building: Local truce and reconciliation agreements in the Syrian civil war', *Conflict, Security & Development*, vol. 20, no. 2 (2020), pp. 273–92.

⁶² Bibbo, B., 'Long-awaited Syria constitutional committee meets for the first time', Al Jazeera, 30 Oct. 2019; and UN Security Council Resolution 2254, 18 Dec. 2015.

⁶³ "Substantive" talks on new constitution bring hope of forging path out of Syria's near decade-long conflict', UN News, 18 Sep. 2020; Shaar, K. and Dasouki, A., 'Syria's Constitutional Committee: The devil in the detail', Middle East Institute, 6 Jan. 2021; United Nations, Security Council, 'Upcoming Constitutional Committee meetings offer hope for advancing Syria peace process, deputy special envoy tells Security Council', 25 Nov. 2020; and 'Syrian opposition document submitted in Geneva calls for establishing a "pluralistic republic"', Asharq Al-Awsat, 6 Dec. 2020.

⁶⁴ Asseburg, M., 'Reconstruction in Syria: Challenges and policy options for the EU and its member states', German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Research paper no. 11, July 2020.

Table 6.5. Estimated conflict-related fatalities in Turkey, 2016–20

Event type	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Battles	3 648	2 296	1 638	759	402
Explosions/remote violence	1 365	527	254	174	118
Protests, riots and strategic developments	14	4	8	4	1
Violence against civilians	166	97	28	14	20
Total	5 193	2 924	1 928	951	541

Notes: The first available year for data on Turkey in the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) database is 2016. For definitions of event types, see ACLED, ‘ACLED definitions of political violence and protest’, 11 Apr. 2019.

Source: ACLED, ‘Data export tool’, accessed 29 Jan. 2021.

conomic impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, a sustained ceasefire that freezes the conflict may have broad appeal.

Armed conflict between Turkey and the Kurds

Turkey’s operations in Syria and Iraq are driven by decades-long conflict in the south-east of Turkey between Turkish security forces and the PKK. More recently Turkey’s efforts have focused on preventing Syrian Kurds from achieving a degree of political autonomy following their gains in the Syrian conflict. Turkey intensified its military incursions in northern Iraq in 2020. In addition to shelling and bombing, it also set up new bases and outposts.⁶⁵ Turkey threatened to carry out a new incursion in northern Syria in October 2020, if the Kurdish forces linked to the YPG did not retreat from the border area. The threat came after a Russian air strike killed a dozen Turkish-backed Failaq al Sham rebels in Idlib, north-western Syria.⁶⁶ Despite the established safe zone in north-eastern Syria (see above), Turkish-backed Syrian militias intensified their attacks against US-backed SDF over the flashpoint town of Ain Issa in December 2020.⁶⁷

The armed conflict—almost four decades long—between Turkish security forces and the PKK inside Turkey continued in 2020. Two independent sources tracking the conflict provided different estimates of fatalities in 2020. According to the International Crisis Group, 341 people were killed in 2020 (35 civilians, 265 PKK rebels and 41 state security forces), down from 482 in 2019, with nearly 5229 deaths in the conflict in total since July 2015. ACLED estimated there were 541 conflict-related fatalities in 2020 (indicating a continuous decline in fatalities since 2016, see table 6.5).

⁶⁵ Coskun, O., ‘Turkey plans more military bases in north Iraq after offensive: Official’, Reuters, 18 June 2020.

⁶⁶ Najjar, F., ‘Russian strike on Syria’s Idlib fighters a “message” to Turkey’, Al Jazeera, 27 Oct. 2020.

⁶⁷ Kajjo, S., ‘Turkish-backed rebels intensify attacks on Syrian town’, Voice of America, 6 Dec. 2020.

Resolving this protracted conflict is intertwined with resumption of the Turkish peace process with the Kurds (also known as the resolution process, which collapsed in July 2015), as well as the creation of peaceful relations between Turkey and the YPG in Syria, which Turkey views as an extension of the PKK. However, neither prospect seems likely soon, with Turkey set to continue its crackdown on the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ McKernan, B., 'Turkey: The rise and fall of the Kurdish party that threatened Erdoğan', *The Guardian*, 27 Dec. 2020.