

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

### Overview

*There were eight states with active armed conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in 2021 (the same as in 2020): Egypt, Iraq, Israel (Palestine), Lebanon, Libya, Syria, Turkey and Yemen. Compared with 2020, conflict-related fatalities in 2021 fell in all conflicts apart from Israel–Palestine and Lebanon. Total conflict-related fatalities in the region fell for the fourth consecutive year, down about 75 per cent since 2017. Yemen was the region's only major armed conflict (annual fatalities greater than 10 000 people), and aside from Iraq and Syria (high-intensity armed conflicts), the remaining armed conflicts were all low intensity (25–999 deaths). Many of the conflicts were interconnected, involving regional and international powers, as well as numerous non-state actors. The rapid fall in conflict-related fatalities in the region reflected a small shift towards greater regional stability, with the caveat that many of the underlying economic and political drivers of conflict remained unaddressed.*

*The most destabilizing and high-risk interstate rivalries in 2021 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 United Arab Emirates and the United States. However, increased diplomacy mitigated some of these regional rivalries in 2021. Four other cross-cutting issues shaped security dilemmas in the region: the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic; the continuing wave of large, sustained protest movements across many states; ongoing threats from violent jihadist groups; and increased competition over water, alongside growing climate change impacts (section I). There were 14 multilateral peace operations in the MENA region in 2021, the same as in 2020.*

*There were complex and interlinked armed conflicts in Iraq, Syria and Turkey (section II). The situation in Syria remained volatile, with particularly intensive clashes during the third quarter of the year. Turkey and its aligned Syrian militias intensified their attacks in the Kurdish-controlled territory within north-east Syria. The Idlib ceasefire brokered by Russia and Turkey in 2020 that cemented their roles as power brokers in Syria remained in force. Iraq continued to be a fragile state, with weak institutions and a growing rift between the government and some militias. Iran-backed Shia parties with links to these militias suffered a setback in early Iraqi parliamentary elections. Turkey continued its military operations in northern Iraq, while the protracted conflict in the south-east of Turkey also persisted.*

*The underlying dynamics of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict continued into 2021, with a new US presidency and a new Israeli coalition government adding additional layers of uncertainty (section III). In May 2021 the conflict in Gaza escalated again, with Israel and Hamas fighting an 11-day war, their fourth in 14 years. The conflict in Gaza also sparked unrest in the West Bank, as well as an unprecedented general strike among Palestinians across Israel, Gaza and the West Bank, and large-scale street protests and mob violence between Palestinians and Jews within Israel’s mixed cities and towns. The economic and humanitarian costs of the Israeli occupation to the Palestinian people continued to be severe, with 2.1 million Palestinians projected to need humanitarian assistance in 2022*

*North Africa (section IV) is undergoing a convergence of crises, with negative spillover impacting the stability of neighbouring states in the eastern Mediterranean and sub-Saharan Africa. Egypt’s low-level Sinai insurgency continued in 2021, with no end or decisive outcome in sight. The 40-year territorial dispute over Western Sahara between Morocco and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el Hamra and Río de Oro (Polisario Front) heated up again. While not at the level of an armed conflict in 2021, it nonetheless contributed to a rise in Algeria–Morocco tensions. In Libya an internationally backed ceasefire agreed in October 2020 largely held during 2021. Despite the establishment of a new interim unity government for the first time since 2014, postponement of the elections due to take place on 24 December 2021 provoked heightened levels of uncertainty in the peacebuilding roadmap. Moreover, it left the political reconciliation process in the balance, opening up the risk that rival armed forces in Libya may once again mobilize.*

*The civil war in Yemen continued throughout the year, further exacerbating one of the world’s worst humanitarian crises (section V). The political, security, military, economic and humanitarian situation in Yemen further deteriorated during 2021, with over half a million people on the brink of famine. Despite the new US administration committing to a more diplomatic approach, in practice it remained a staunch Saudi ally, with its ‘new’ approach appearing to have little impact on the ground. The Houthis made significant territorial gains during 2021, and despite Saudi Arabia increasingly looking for a means to exit the war, the prospects of a political settlement remained remote. At the end of 2021, following seven years of territorial fragmentation and proliferating armed groups and sub-conflicts, the United Nations Special Envoy reported that the conflict was escalating. If it continues through 2030, the total conflict-attributable death toll could reach 1.3 million people.*