

## I. Key general developments in the region

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There were eight states in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) with active armed conflicts in 2021 (the same as in 2020): Egypt (low-intensity, subnational armed conflict); Iraq (high-intensity, subnational armed conflict); Israel (low-intensity, extrastate armed conflict); Lebanon (low-intensity, subnational armed conflict); Libya (internationalized low-intensity, subnational armed conflict); Syria (internationalized civil war); Turkey (low-intensity, extrastate and subnational armed conflict); and Yemen (major internationalized civil war).<sup>1</sup> Many of these conflicts were interconnected, involving regional and international powers, as well as numerous non-state actors.

Developments in Lebanon are discussed below, while the other armed conflicts and related peace processes are covered in subsequent sections: Iraq, Syria and Turkey (section II); the Israeli–Palestinian conflict (section III); Egypt, Libya and Morocco, which was on the cusp of an armed conflict as the situation escalated in Western Sahara (section IV); and Yemen (section V).

Compared with 2020, conflict-related fatalities in 2021 fell in all conflicts apart from Israel–Palestine and Lebanon (see table 6.1). Total conflict-related fatalities in the region fell for the fourth consecutive year (a situation reflected in the cases of Egypt, Iraq, Syria and Turkey), down about 75 per cent since 2017. The decrease is linked to ceasefires in Libya and Syria in 2020. As was the case in 2020, there was limited evidence in 2021 of any clear correlation between the Covid-19 pandemic and a change in the nature or intensity of armed conflicts in the region. However, the pandemic may yet increase the underlying drivers and structural factors conducive to communal tensions, and it clearly added another layer of complexity to the region's existing humanitarian challenges.<sup>2</sup>

While the war in Yemen was the region's only remaining major armed conflict in 2021, a number of tensions and post-conflict situations continued to cause unrest. Nonetheless, the conflict fatalities data not only reflected lower rates of armed violence but also a small shift towards greater regional stability. This was emphasized by increased diplomacy mitigating some regional rivalries (see below). However, with many of the underlying economic and political causes of the 2011 Arab Spring remaining unaddressed, and other

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

<sup>2</sup> Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, 'The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on terrorism, counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism', Update, Dec. 2021. On regional responses to the pandemic see Altunışık, M., 'Pandemic regionalism or not? The MENA region in the shadow of Covid-19', *International Spectator*, vol. 56, no. 2 (2021), pp. 38–55.

**Table 6.1.** Estimated conflict-related fatalities in the Middle East and North Africa, 2017–21

Country	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Egypt	1 544	1 112	1 003	626	264
Iraq	32 027	5 621	3 717	2 805	2 750
Israel–Palestine	136	344	178	47	397
Lebanon	389	36 <sup>a</sup>	25 <sup>a</sup>	48	73
Libya	1 708	1 228	2 294	1 560	115
Syria	54 391	30 134	15 638	8 211	5 861
Turkey	2 925	1 927	957	552	297
Yemen	17 589	34 269	28 056	19 766	18 454
<b>Total</b>	<b>110 709</b>	<b>74 671</b>	<b>51 868</b>	<b>33 615</b>	<b>28 211</b>

<sup>a</sup> Battle-related deaths were below 25.

*Notes:* Fatality figures are collated from four event types: battles; explosions/remote violence; protests, riots and strategic developments; and violence against civilians—see Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), ‘ACLED definitions of political violence and protest’, 11 Apr. 2019. A country is treated as being in an armed conflict if there were 25 or more battle-related deaths in a given year—see chapter 2, section I, in this volume.

*Source:* ACLED, ‘Dashboard’, accessed 8–17 Feb. 2022.

cross-cutting concerns continuing (as discussed below), this period of relative stability may be short-lived.

There were 14 operations in 2021, the same number as in 2020. None of the operations that were active started or ended during the year. The number of personnel in the MENA region decreased by 2.2 per cent, from 14 615 on 31 December 2020 to 14 289 on 31 December 2021.<sup>3</sup>

### Shifting alliances, rivalries and regional diplomacy

In MENA, interstate and intrastate fault lines intersect in complex ways, with shifting alliances and rivalries. 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 (UAE) and the United States. Saudi Arabia and the UAE (and to a lesser extent some of the other states in the Gulf) have actively been 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 was the case in 2018–20, Israel attacked Iranian and Iranian-aligned targets in Syria on several occasions in 2021, and was suspected of further sabotage attacks against Iran’s nuclear programme.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> For global and regional trends in multilateral peace operations see chapter 2, sections II and III, in this volume.

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. AFP, ‘Deadliest Israeli airstrikes on Syria in years kill 57, say observers’, *The Guardian*, 13 Jan. 2021; D’Agostino, S., ‘Alleged sabotage at Iran’s Natanz nuclear facility comes amid talks on reviving the Iran nuclear deal’, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 12 Apr. 2021; and AFP, ‘Israeli airstrike sets port of Latakia ablaze, says Syrian media’, *The Guardian*, 28 Dec. 2021.

Israel also escalated its military operations against Hezbollah in Lebanon in August 2021, supplementing artillery exchanges with airstrikes for the first time since 2014.<sup>5</sup> Russia and Turkey continued to be influential external actors—sometimes rivals—in the region, while China adopted a more prominent economic and diplomatic role.<sup>6</sup>

Several new or existing channels of high-level diplomacy helped calm regional tensions during 2021. First, Syria continued to push to normalize relations with several states that had previously supported opposition forces during Syria's civil war. Jordan, for example, reopened its border crossing with Syria in late September 2021.<sup>7</sup> Second, a three-and-a-half-year dispute between Qatar and other Gulf states—which had led to Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE imposing a blockade against Qatar—was formally ended by a reconciliation deal agreed in January 2021. Though the diplomatic breakthrough at the Gulf Cooperation Council summit led to restored relations and the blockade being lifted, foreign policy differences are likely to persist, especially in relation to the Horn of Africa.<sup>8</sup>

Third, two of the region's most interventionist states, Turkey and the UAE, sought to reduce their bilateral political tensions through increased economic collaboration.<sup>9</sup> In the wake of a peace deal in Libya (see section IV), Turkey also began diplomatic overtures towards Egypt, having broken off relations in 2013.<sup>10</sup> Fourth, and most significantly, direct talks between Iran and Saudi Arabia began in April 2021, mediated by Iraq. Several further rounds of direct talks followed, centred primarily on issues related to Yemen.<sup>11</sup> Although the prospects of significant diplomatic progress between the two countries are likely to remain modest, an incremental process of

<sup>5</sup> 'Hezbollah launches rocket fire in response to Israeli air raids', Al Jazeera, 6 Aug. 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Borshchevskaya, A., 'Russia's strategic success in Syria and the future of Moscow's Middle East policy', *Lawfare*, 23 Jan. 2022; Ghiselli, A. and Giuffrida, M. G. E., 'China as an offshore balancer in the Middle East and North Africa', *RUSI Journal*, vol. 165, no. 7 (2020), pp. 10–20; and Simon, S., 'China and the Persian Gulf in the aftermath of a US withdrawal', Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, Quincy Brief no. 17, Sep. 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Cambanis, T., 'Syria's Middle East neighbors are thawing ties with Damascus', *World Politics Review*, 4 Oct. 2021; and 'Syria's Assad calls Jordan's king amid thaw in relations', AP News, 3 Oct. 2021.

<sup>8</sup> 'Qatar crisis: Saudi Arabia and allies restore diplomatic ties with Emirate', BBC News, 5 Jan. 2021; and 'Gulf rivalries are spilling into Africa's Horn', *The Economist*, 11 Feb. 2021. For an overview and membership of the Gulf Cooperation Council see Annex B, section II, in this volume. On conflict in the Horn of Africa see chapter 7, section IV, in this volume.

<sup>9</sup> Bakir, A., 'Turkey and the UAE: Making amends and talking business in post-Trump era', *Middle East Eye*, 2 Sep. 2021; and 'Building economic ties top swift Turkey-UAE talks', *Daily Sabah*, 7 Sep. 2021. For a review of all the region's military interventions in the period 2010–20 see Petti, M. and Parsi, T., *No Clean Hands: The Interventions of Middle Eastern Powers, 2010–2020*, Quincy Paper no. 8 (Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, 19 July 2021).

<sup>10</sup> Elerian, M., 'Turkey and Egypt open the door to a diplomatic thaw', *World Politics Review*, 25 Mar. 2021.

<sup>11</sup> 'Saudi and Iran held talks aimed at easing tensions, say sources', Reuters, 18 Apr. 2021; and Mabon, S., 'Yemen: Talks between Saudi Arabia and Iran offer hopes for an end to bitter seven-year civil war', *Political Anthropologist*, 10 Oct. 2021.

Saudi–Iranian détente would help lower political and strategic tensions in the region. To this end, Iraq and France co-organized a regional summit in Baghdad in August 2021, while an earlier summit in June 2021 brought together the leaders of Egypt, Iraq and Jordan.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, there were signs during 2021 that one of the most difficult regional rivalries—the Iranian–US conflict, which had threatened to escalate into a region-wide interstate military conflict in 2019–20—might enter a new period of détente. Iranian–US relations have been largely adversarial since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, deteriorating further in recent years due to the USA’s withdrawal from the 2015 multilateral nuclear agreement with Iran (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, JCPOA) and the USA’s coercive policy of applying ‘maximum pressure’ colliding with Iran’s policy of ‘maximum resistance’.<sup>13</sup> In 2019–20 this led to a series of serious military confrontations, raising the risk of a regional conflagration.<sup>14</sup> In 2021, however, despite continuing tensions, occasional naval encounters and US airstrikes against Iran-backed militias in the Iraq–Syria border region, Iranian and US diplomats met and discussed reviving the JCPOA.<sup>15</sup> Although gaps between the two sides narrowed during the early rounds of indirect talks, the election in June 2021 of a new Iranian president, Ebrahim Raisi, further complicated negotiations.<sup>16</sup> By the end of the year a renewed nuclear deal had still not been agreed, risking a return to confrontation.<sup>17</sup>

In December 2021 Israel’s prime minister and the UAE’s de facto leader met for the first time in history, amid fears that the Iran nuclear talks might collapse and concerns about the shrinking role of the USA in the Middle East.<sup>18</sup> A few days earlier the USA had announced it was ending its combat

<sup>12</sup> Republic of Iraq, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ‘Final communique of the Baghdad Conference for Cooperation and Partnership’, 28 Aug. 2021; Mamouri, A., ‘Baghdad conference to establish cooperation, partnership in region’, *Al-Monitor*, 30 Aug. 2021; and Harvey, K. and Riedel, B., ‘Egypt, Iraq and Jordan: A new partnership 30 years in the making?’, *Brookings*, 2 July 2021.

<sup>13</sup> US Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, ‘Advancing the US maximum pressure campaign on Iran’, Fact sheet, 22 Apr. 2019. On the US withdrawal from the JCPOA see *SIPRI Yearbook 2019*, pp. 381–86. On Iran’s defence posture and key foreign policy objectives see Katzman, K., ‘Iran’s foreign and defense policies’, Congressional Research Service Report R44017, 11 Jan. 2021; and Eisenstadt, M., ‘Iran’s gray zone strategy: Cornerstone of its asymmetric way of war’, *PRISM*, vol. 9, no. 2 (Mar. 2021).

<sup>14</sup> On developments in 2019–20 see *SIPRI Yearbook 2020*, pp. 5–8, 132–34; and *SIPRI Yearbook 2021*, pp. 11–12, 141–43.

<sup>15</sup> See e.g. Burns, R., ‘US ship fires warning shots in encounter with Iranian boats’, *AP News*, 10 May 2021; and Schmitt, E., ‘US carries out airstrikes in Iraq and Syria’, *New York Times*, 27 June 2021. On developments in the JCPOA see chapter II, section II, in this volume.

<sup>16</sup> Gladstone, R., ‘Khamenei adds to doubts on Iran nuclear deal talks’, *New York Times*, 28 July 2021; and International Crisis Group, *Iran: The Riddle of Raisi*, Middle East Report no. 224 (International Crisis Group: Brussels, 5 Aug. 2021).

<sup>17</sup> Wintour, P., ‘US and Israel exploring “plan B” for if Iran does not resume nuclear talks’, *The Guardian*, 13 Oct. 2021.

<sup>18</sup> Grove, T., Kalin, S. and Said, S., ‘Fear of Iran, shrinking US role in Middle East push rivals together’, *Wall Street Journal*, 13 Dec. 2021.

mission in Iraq, instead shifting its armed forces in the country (numbering roughly 2500) to a training and advisory role (see section II).

### Other regional cross-cutting issues

Three other cross-cutting issues shaped security dilemmas in the region in 2021: (a) the continuing wave of large, sustained protest movements across many states; (b) ongoing threats from violent jihadist groups; and (c) increased competition over water, alongside growing climate change impacts.<sup>19</sup>

Anti-government protests have occurred in many states in the region since 2018 (as part of a second wave of protests following the 2011–12 uprisings).<sup>20</sup> Key reasons driving the protests include extreme levels of inequality, economic austerity and corruption, as well as calls for broader political and democratic rights.<sup>21</sup> With the exception of Tunisia, such rights remain largely unfulfilled (and even Tunisia took a backward step in July 2021 when the president invoked emergency powers and suspended parliament—see section IV).<sup>22</sup> The wide-ranging socio-economic consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic and the declining status of oil-based economies have exacerbated some of these grievances.<sup>23</sup> Government responses have combined repression with compromise in order to maintain the status quo and avoid social and political reforms. External actors, with their focus on mitigating threats to regional and international security, have also contributed to preservation of the status quo.<sup>24</sup>

Although the Salafi-jihadist threat in MENA and globally has become fractured and localized, the Islamic State (IS) in particular continued to drive or influence a number of disparate groups in Iraq and Syria.<sup>25</sup> Western coalition forces continued to attack the groups with sporadic airstrikes, while

<sup>19</sup> For earlier developments in these issues see *SIPRI Yearbook 2019*, pp. 81–87; *SIPRI Yearbook 2020*, pp. 132–36; and *SIPRI Yearbook 2021*, pp. 139–46.

<sup>20</sup> 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); and 'Identity crisis: The Arab world', Special Report, *The Economist*, 28 Aug. 2021.

<sup>21</sup> See e.g. Gambrell, J., 'Protests spread across once-quiet Oman as economy flounders', AP News, 25 May 2021; Chehayeb, K., 'Lebanon's PM-designate Saad Hariri resigns as crisis escalates', Al Jazeera, 15 July 2021; and 'Iraq Kurdish police fire warning shots as students protest', France 24, 23 Nov. 2021.

<sup>22</sup> Fabiani, R., 'Tunisia's leap into the unknown', International Crisis Group, 28 July 2021.

<sup>23</sup> Bourhrour, A., 'Trust and coercion in times of emergency: COVID-19 and structures of authority in North Africa', SIPRI Essay, 13 Aug. 2020; and Mann, Y., 'Oil—A factor promoting or undermining stability in the countries of the Middle East?', *Comparative Strategy*, vol. 40, no. 5 (2021), pp. 455–67.

<sup>24</sup> O'Driscoll et al. (note 20), pp. 50–59.

<sup>25</sup> United Nations, Security Council, 'Thirteenth 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/2021/682, 27 July 2021; and Clarke, C. P., 'Twenty years after 9/11: What is the future of the global jihadi movement?', *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 14, no. 7 (Sep. 2021), pp. 91–105.

thousands of individuals suspected of belonging to IS remained in detention camps.<sup>26</sup> In Syria, new locally oriented jihad movement Hayat Tahrir al-Sham gained supremacy, achieving control over parts of north-west Syria.<sup>27</sup> In Yemen, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula remained a threat despite having been weakened by fragmentation into local factions.<sup>28</sup>

Linkages in MENA between water scarcity, climate change and insecurity issues are ‘complex, diverse and multi-directional’.<sup>29</sup> Most states in the region are facing medium to high exposure to ecological threats, such as food insecurity and water stress, which is exacerbating forced displacement and rural to urban migration.<sup>30</sup> Climate change and water stress have played a role—whether direct or indirect—in the region’s recent and ongoing conflicts and protests.<sup>31</sup>

### Armed conflict and prospective state collapse in Lebanon

Since Lebanon’s 15-year civil war ended in 1990, stability within the country has remained elusive due to rival militias, sectarian tensions, corruption and deep-rooted socio-economic inequalities. Hezbollah, which is by far the strongest faction in Lebanon, is better equipped even than the national army.<sup>32</sup> The economic, political and humanitarian crises in the country worsened in 2021, leading to further low-level armed clashes.<sup>33</sup>

Lebanon had been operating under a caretaker government since August 2020, when Prime Minister Hassan Diab resigned along with his ministers following the catastrophic explosion at Beirut’s port that killed more than 200 people. In September 2021 a new government led by Prime Minister Najib Mikati was formed. However, the investigation into the port explosion widened divisions in government, sparking violence in October 2021 be-

<sup>26</sup> Sabbagh, D., ‘RAF engaged in 10-day attack on ISIS in Iraq this spring’, *The Guardian*, 8 Apr. 2021; and Altier, M. B., ‘Lessons for reintegrating Islamic State detainees’, *Lawfare*, 7 Mar. 2021.

<sup>27</sup> Thomson, M., ‘IS brutality returning to Syrian towns’, *BBC News*, 7 Feb. 2021; and Lister, C., ‘Twenty years after 9/11: The fight for supremacy in Northwest Syria and the implications for global jihad’, *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 14, no. 7 (Sep. 2021), pp. 44–62.

<sup>28</sup> Kendall, E., ‘Twenty years after 9/11: The jihadi threat in the Arabian Peninsula’, *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 14, no. 7 (Sep. 2021), pp. 63–75.

<sup>29</sup> 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.

<sup>30</sup> Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP), *Ecological Threat Register 2020: Understanding Ecological Threats, Resilience and Peace* (IEP: Sydney, Sep. 2020).

<sup>31</sup> See e.g. Ide, T. et al., ‘Pathways to water conflict during drought in the MENA region’, *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 58, no. 3 (2021), pp. 568–82; and Motamedi, M., ‘Violence escalates in water-shortage protests in Iran’s Khuzestan’, *Al Jazeera*, 21 July 2021.

<sup>32</sup> Saab, B. Y., ‘Hezbollah amid Lebanese collapse’, *Lawfare*, 21 Feb. 2021.

<sup>33</sup> International Crisis Group, *Managing Lebanon’s Compounding Crises*, Middle East Report no. 228 (International Crisis Group: Brussels, 28 Oct. 2021); and ‘A year after the Beirut blast: Still no bottom to Lebanon’s crisis’, *The Economist*, 5 Aug. 2021. On the work of the World Food Programme in Lebanon see Tschunkert, K., *The World Food Programme’s Contribution to Improving the Prospects for Peace in Lebanon* (SIPRI: Stockholm, Sep. 2021).

tween, reportedly, supporters of Hezbollah and the Lebanese Forces party.<sup>34</sup> The situation remained unstable, with estimated battle-related deaths from sporadic clashes keeping it above SIPRI's threshold for an armed conflict. According to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) there were 73 conflict-related deaths in 2021 (29 battle-related), compared to 48 in 2020 (40 battle-related).<sup>35</sup> At the end of 2021 Lebanon was on the verge of state collapse.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>34</sup> 'How an investigation led to a gun battle in Lebanon', *The Economist*, 23 Oct. 2021; and 'Lebanon: Hezbollah, Lebanese Forces trade blame over deadly protests', Deutsche Welle, 14 Oct. 2021.

<sup>35</sup> Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), 'Dashboard', accessed 8 Feb. 2022.

<sup>36</sup> Bourhrous, A. et al., *Reform Within the System: Governance in Iraq and Lebanon*, SIPRI Policy Paper no. 61 (SIPRI: Stockholm, Dec. 2021); Bourhrous, A., 'Fixing the economy and public service provision in Lebanon', SIPRI Policy Brief, Dec. 2021; and Wimmen, H., 'Lebanon: A journey to the end of the state', International Crisis Group, 24 Nov. 2021.