

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

SHIVAN FAZIL

This section outlines how the complex and interconnected armed conflicts in Iraq, Syria and Turkey unfolded during 2021. The situation in Syria remained volatile, with clashes particularly intensive during the third quarter of the year. Iraq remained a fragile state, afflicted by 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 parliamentary elections. Turkey's military operations in northern Iraq continued unabated, as did the protracted conflict in south-east Turkey. In Syria, Turkey and its aligned Syrian militias intensified their attacks in the Kurdish-controlled territory in the north-east. The Idlib ceasefire brokered in 2020 by Russia and Turkey—which cemented their roles as power brokers in Syria—remained in force, while the Kurdish forces in control of the territory in the north-east remained fearful of waning United States influence and the country's pivot away from the region following the Afghanistan withdrawal.

### Armed conflict in Iraq

Post-conflict Iraq remains scarred by interrelated political, economic and security challenges, weak institutions and low levels of accountability, which have penetrated the economy and hindered the performance of the state.<sup>1</sup> In 2021 the country remained caught in the middle of tensions between the USA and Iran. Unable to rein in the Iranian-backed militias targeting US assets in Iraq or stop the USA from retaliating, Iraq continued to face threats to its stability four years after the territorial defeat of Islamic State (IS). Although the number of IS attacks were lower in 2021 compared to the previous year, the group persisted with its insurgency. Several sophisticated attacks in the third quarter of 2021 indicated a higher level of operational effectiveness and ambition, with IS continuing to seek the spark for renewed sectarian conflict.<sup>2</sup> In addition, despite the improved security situation, IS carried out deadly suicide explosions in crowded Baghdad markets in January and July.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Fazil, S., 'Fixing the economy and public service provision in Iraq', SIPRI Policy Brief, Dec. 2021; and Bourhrou, A. et al., *Reform Within the System: Governance in Iraq and Lebanon*, SIPRI Policy Paper no. 61 (SIPRI: Stockholm, Dec. 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Arraf, J. 'Iraq is caught in the middle as US and Iran spar on its soil', *New York Times*, 28 June 2021; 'Islamic State down but not out in Syria and Iraq: Pentagon report', *Al-Monitor*, 26 Nov. 2021; and Offices of Inspector General, *Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress*, 1 Oct.–31 Dec. 2021, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> 'Dozens killed in Baghdad suicide bombings', *Al-Monitor*, Jan. 2021; and 'Explosion at Baghdad's Sadr City injures at least 15', *Al-Monitor*, 1 July 2021.

Iraq's economy is still recovering from the twin shocks in 2020 of the oil price plunge and the Covid-19 pandemic. While the prospects for Iraq's economy improved with the recovery in global oil prices in 2021, key stumbling blocks remain in the form of the spread of new Covid-19 variants, the growing impacts of climate change, setbacks in the security situation and the derailing of economic reform implementation.<sup>4</sup> In August Iraq resumed talks with the International Monetary Fund for loans of up to \$4 billion.<sup>5</sup> The dire economic situation saw thousands of Iraqis, mostly from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), flee the country, with many ending up stranded at the Belarus–Poland border. The Iraqi government repatriated thousands of its nationals after they had failed in their attempts to enter the European Union (EU).<sup>6</sup>

The rift continued to grow between the government and some factions among the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF)—an Iraqi state-sponsored umbrella organization composed of several predominantly Shia militias (some supported by Iran)—and smaller militias groups comprised by ethno-religious minorities in the country's north. Tensions reached a crescendo in November when Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi survived a drone attack on his residence.<sup>7</sup> Although no group claimed responsibility for the attack, suspicions fell on the Iran-aligned militias that had suffered a setback in the general elections (see below).<sup>8</sup> The attack also spotlighted divisions between the government and the Iran-backed militias, with questions raised about Iran's influence over these groups when it joined other countries in condemning the attack.<sup>9</sup> Despite the Iraqi government's attempts to integrate the PMF into the Iraqi Security Forces, progress remained slow.

In August Iraq hosted a high-level summit aimed at de-escalating regional tensions, with several heads of states, as well as Saudi and Iranian officials, in attendance. The meeting, co-organized with France, was seen as showcasing both Iraq's efforts to become a neutral mediator in the region's crises and re-engage with the world, and its attempts to rebalance relations with its neighbours after decades of conflict.<sup>10</sup> Iraq also hosted direct talks between Saudi Arabia and Iran, signalling a possible de-escalation in tensions and rapprochement following years of rivalry, which had often spilled over into neighbouring countries.<sup>11</sup> In July Iraq and the USA held another round of strategic dialogue, agreeing to end the presence of US combat troops in Iraq

<sup>4</sup> World Bank, 'Iraq's Economic Update, October 2021', 7 Oct. 2021.

<sup>5</sup> 'Iraq says its gone back to IMF for loan of up to \$4 billion', Bloomberg, 5 Aug. 2021.

<sup>6</sup> 'Belarus: Iraq to fly migrants back to Baghdad in first repatriation flight', Euronews, 15 Nov. 2021.

<sup>7</sup> 'Iraqi PM al-Kadhimi survives drone attack on his home', BBC News, 7 Nov. 2021.

<sup>8</sup> 'Iraq PM says his would-be assassins have been identified', BBC News, 8 Nov. 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Yuan, S., 'Is Iran losing some of its grip on Shia militias in Iraq?', Al Jazeera, 12 Nov. 2021.

<sup>10</sup> 'Iraq hosts summit aimed at easing regional tensions', Al Jazeera, 28. Aug. 2021.

<sup>11</sup> AFP, 'Rivals Iran and Saudi Arabia hold talks in Baghdad', France 24, 19 Apr. 2021.

**Table 6.2.** Estimated conflict-related fatalities in Iraq, 2016–21

Event type	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Battles	24 605	15 220	2 736	1 736	1 470	1 522
Explosions/remote violence	25 654	13 926	2 517	1 272	897	859
Protests, riots and strategic developments	319	58	57	469	114	37
Violence against civilians	5 755	2 823	311	240	324	332
<b>Total</b>	<b>56 333</b>	<b>32 027</b>	<b>5 621</b>	<b>3 717</b>	<b>2 805</b>	<b>2 750</b>

*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, 'Dashboard', accessed 8 Feb. 2022.

by the end of 2021, at which point the US security relationship transitioned to an advisory role.<sup>12</sup>

Turkey's airstrikes and military ground operations against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan, PKK) in northern Iraq continued into 2021. The operations wreaked havoc, aggravating tensions between various Kurdish factions on the one hand and between Turkey and Iraq on the other. Shelling and bombing, including the targeting of a refugee camp, resulted in the destruction of homes and livelihoods, triggering the displacement of villagers.<sup>13</sup> In the KRI, there were renewed clashes between PKK fighters and Peshmerga of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in June.<sup>14</sup> The PKK accused the KDP of assisting Turkey's operations, while the latter insisted the PKK's presence in the KRI invites Turkey's attacks.<sup>15</sup> Turkey was also accused of deforestation activities in northern Iraq.<sup>16</sup> Drought and heat stress became more acute across the country in 2021 due to climate change and upstream damming by Turkey and Iran.<sup>17</sup>

In addition, Iran launched airstrikes against members of the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran, an exiled Kurdish separatist group in the KRI. Although no casualties were reported, these were the first such attacks since an Iranian missile strike in 2018. The Kurdish separatist groups from Iran

<sup>12</sup> Governments of the United States of America and the Republic of Iraq, 'Joint Statement on the US–Iraq Strategic Dialogue', US Department of State, 26 July 2021.

<sup>13</sup> 'Turkish drone attack kills three civilians in northern Iraq Kurdish refugee camp', France 24, 5 June 2021; and AFP, 'Iraqi Kurds in border zone flee Turkey's hunt for PKK', France 24, 9 June 2021.

<sup>14</sup> Glynn, S., 'Turkey's invasion of northern Iraq could lead to Kurdish civil war', openDemocracy, 2 July, 2021.

<sup>15</sup> Zaman, A., 'Turkey's anti-PKK assault leaves Kurds more divided', Al-Monitor, 6 July 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Tastekin, F., 'Massive Turkey-led logging in Iraqi Kurdistan causes outcry', Al-Monitor, 11 June 2021; and 'KRG calls for an end to Turkey's deforestation of the Kurdistan Region', GOV.KRD, 31 May 2021.

<sup>17</sup> Pawson, M., "'All the trees have died': Iraqis face intensifying water crisis', Al Jazeera, 5 Nov. 2021; and 'Water crisis and drought threaten 12 million in Syria, Iraq', Al Jazeera, 23 Aug. 2021.

mostly reside inside the KRI territories, and Iran has on many occasions urged Iraq to expel these groups.<sup>18</sup>

Overall, conflict-related fatalities continued to decline in 2021, a trend that started with declared victory over IS in 2018 (see table 6.2).

In June the Iraqi government vowed to close the remaining internally displaced persons (IDP) camps despite criticism from humanitarian and rights groups that its resettlement plans for families displaced by IS fighting were inadequate.<sup>19</sup> Following a wave of camp closures that began in 2020, humanitarian agencies reported that returnees faced dire conditions, with their homes still destroyed and villages lacking basic services during winter and the Covid-19 pandemic. Unresolved tensions over affiliations to IS were reported to have triggered new waves of evictions after the IDPs were made to return to their villages.<sup>20</sup> The situation in Sinjar, the Yezidi hometown in north-western Iraq, remained volatile despite a 2020 agreement between the Iraqi government and the Kurdistan Regional Government to normalize the town's administrative and security situation. In 2021 the town remained entangled in a geopolitical competition between the two governments on the one hand, and between Turkey and Iran-backed militias on the other. In August and December, Turkey launched airstrikes against the local Yezidi armed groups it deemed to be PKK affiliates.<sup>21</sup> PMF factions refused to leave, instead bringing in more fighters to reinforce their control over the town in response to Turkey's threatened incursions.<sup>22</sup> Overall, the humanitarian situation in Iraq, including the KRI, remained challenging, with almost 1.2 million IDPs (including new displacements by a resurgent IS in Diyala) as of the third quarter of 2021.<sup>23</sup>

### *Early parliamentary elections*

In October 2021 early parliamentary elections were held: the first vote in Iraq since mass protests hit the country in 2019, toppling the then government, and also the first to be held under a new electoral law demanded by the protestors. Both the EU and the United Nations sent monitors, with the

<sup>18</sup> 'Iran launches air strikes on Kurdish separatist group in northern Iraq', Middle East Eye, 9 Sep. 2021; and 'Iran asks Iraq to expel Iranian rebels from Kurdistan region', Reuters, 10 Aug. 2021.

<sup>19</sup> Qazi, S. and Botane, K., 'Iraq: IDPs say they are being threatened to leave camp', Al Jazeera, 1 Feb. 2021.

<sup>20</sup> Al Khateeb, F., 'Returning Iraqis face dire conditions following camp closures', UNHCR, 27 May 2021; and Human Rights Watch, 'Iraq: Apparent familial feud drives illegal evictions', 11 Aug. 2021.

<sup>21</sup> Kittleson, S., 'Turkey targets PKK-linked Yazidis inside Iraq', Al-Monitor, 13 Dec. 2021; and "'Deaths, injuries" as Turkish air raid hits clinic in Iraq's Sinjar', New Arab, 17 Aug. 2021.

<sup>22</sup> Porter, L., 'Despite government promises, lives in Sinjar remain on hold', New Humanitarian, 30 Mar. 2021.

<sup>23</sup> International Organization for Migration (IOM), Displacement Tracking Matrix, 'Iraq Master List Report 123 (August–September 2021)'; and IOM, Displacement Tracking Matrix, 'Attacks in Muqdaya, Diyala', DTM emergency tracking.

latter enacting one of its largest ever electoral assistance projects.<sup>24</sup> Special provisions were made to register IDPs, allowing them to vote in their districts of origin.<sup>25</sup> Despite the high stakes, low turnout overshadowed a largely ‘well managed and competitive’ vote, with disillusioned Iraqis fearing it would only serve to reinforce a political system that had failed them.<sup>26</sup> The movement headed by the Shia cleric and politician Muqtada al-Sadr emerged as the biggest winner, while the pro-Iran Shia parties linked to the PMF suffered a major setback. Iran-backed parties rejected the results, mobilizing their followers to organize sit-in protests that turned violent after clashing with security forces in Baghdad.<sup>27</sup> The UN Security Council condemned the attempts to discredit the election and deplored the use of violence to settle election-related grievances, including threats against the UN mission and electoral commission.<sup>28</sup> Groups and independent candidates connected to the 2019 mass protests won a handful of seats, despite facing a campaign of intimidation that deterred many from participating.<sup>29</sup> The formation of the new government, which is expected to be completed in 2022, is a process often subject to intense negotiations and fraught with backdoor deals over the distribution of ministries. This is especially so this time around, as fractures within ethno-sectarian blocs have started to emerge, preventing the formation of large parliamentary blocs.<sup>30</sup>

### **Armed conflict in Syria**

In 2021 the Syrian civil war—initially triggered by the 2011 uprising against the regime of Bashar al-Assad—remained an ongoing multisided armed conflict involving regional and international powers and their proxies. Since 2018 there has been a clear de-escalation in war due to the Syrian government’s consolidation of territorial control and the territorial defeat of IS in 2019. Despite a further decrease in large-scale hostilities due to the Idlib ceasefire, the situation remained volatile, with intense clashes during the third quarter of 2021.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Fazil, S. and O’Driscoll, D., ‘Iraqis go to the polls on October 10. What happens next?’, Euronews, 4 Oct. 2021.

<sup>25</sup> United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), ‘Elections for Iraq’s Council of Representatives: Participation of internally displaced persons’, Oct. 2021, Fact Sheet no. 9, 3 Oct. 2021.

<sup>26</sup> Chulov, M., ‘Turnout at Iraqi national election sluggish as many boycott polls’, *The Guardian*, 11 Oct. 2021; and European Union Election Observation Mission Iraq, ‘Preliminary statement’, 12 Oct. 2021.

<sup>27</sup> ‘Pro-Iranian groups reject early Iraq election results as “scam”’, Al Jazeera, 12 Oct. 2021; and ‘Protests against Iraq election results turn violent’, Al Jazeera, 5 Nov. 2021.

<sup>28</sup> Lederer, E., ‘UN condemns attempts to discredit Iraq’s recent election’, ABC News, 15 Nov. 2021.

<sup>29</sup> AFP, ‘Iraqis head to polls for early election shunned by activists’, France 24, 10 Oct. 2021.

<sup>30</sup> Fazil (note 1); and Fazil, S., ‘Government formation in gridlock while Iraq faces an array of challenges’, LSE Blog, 17 Feb. 2022.

<sup>31</sup> Muaz, A., ‘The state of Syria: Q2 2021–Q3 2021’, ACLED.

The government of Bashar al-Assad remained in control of around two-thirds of the country, with armed opposition focused on two areas: Idlib province in the north-west, and the north-east, which is partially ruled by the Kurds. The armed conflict has attracted a complex and changing cast of fighters, including regional and global powers: Russia and Turkey in the north-west; and Russia, Turkey and the USA in the north-east. The UN-mediated peace process remained deadlocked in 2021 (see below), with key differences apparent within the Astana Group (Turkey, Russia and Iran) process: Russia and Iran support the Syrian government and the Syrian military's eventual retaking of Idlib, where Turkey-backed rebels and other armed opposition groups remain in control.<sup>32</sup> Iran continued its entrenchment in the south-west and in the east through further military build-up, while Israel continued its air strikes against Iran-aligned targets in order to maintain the buffer between itself and the Iranian-backed Syrian government.<sup>33</sup> The USA also carried out air strikes in eastern Syria's Deir ez-Zor province, along the border with Iraq, against Iran-backed militias.<sup>34</sup> In addition, IS remained a threat.<sup>35</sup>

*The north-west: Turkey's quagmire despite the ceasefire in Idlib*

There were no major military operations or changes in territorial control demarcation lines in the north-west of Syria in 2021. While implementation of the 5 March 2020 ceasefire agreement between Russia and Turkey remained in force, joint Russian–Turkish patrols to monitor the agreement were suspended. Nevertheless, small-scale attacks continued in Idlib, with Syrian/Russian attacks targeting civilians described as war crimes by rights groups.<sup>36</sup> The situation remained tense despite a decrease in hostilities attributable to the redeployment of Syrian government forces to the south following renewed clashes with opposition rebels in Daraa, the birthplace of the Syrian uprising (see below). In September, prior to a Russian–Turkish presidential summit, Russia increased its airstrikes against Turkey-backed rebels and opposition-held areas in Aleppo and Idlib.<sup>37</sup> Escalating violence, concerns

<sup>32</sup> 'Erdogan makes urgent appeal to West on grim 10-year mark of Syria's war', Al-Monitor, 19 Mar. 2021.

<sup>33</sup> Dukhan, H. and Alhamad, A., 'Iran's growing network of influence among eastern Syrian tribes', Fikra Forum, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 6 Apr. 2021; and Caspit, B., 'Israel loses patience with Iranian entrenchment in Syria', Al-Monitor, 12 Nov. 2021.

<sup>34</sup> 'Biden takes first military action with Syria strike on Iran-backed militias', BBC News, 26 Feb. 2021; and 'Luce, D. and Gains, M., 'US airstrike in Syria on Iranian-backed militia killed one fighter, wounded two, Pentagon says', NBC News, 1 Mar. 2021.

<sup>35</sup> 'Oil workers killed in Islamic State attack in Syria', Al-Monitor, 3 Dec. 2021.

<sup>36</sup> 'Syria/Russia: 12 civilians dead in Idlib artillery attacks', Human Rights Watch, 8 Dec. 2021; and McLoughlin, P., 'Syrian regime, Russia guilty of 'war crimes' in Idlib over Ariha bombing: White Helmets', New Arab, 21 Oct. 2021.

<sup>37</sup> al-Kanj, S., 'Russia bombs Turkey's allies in Syria ahead of Putin-Erdogan summit', Al-Monitor, 28 Sep. 2021.

over a possible new military offensive, and attacks against refugee camps in Aleppo and Idlib provinces led to a new wave of civilian displacement.<sup>38</sup>

Turkey's involvement in the Syrian crisis has turned into a quagmire without any easy exit.<sup>39</sup> The Turkish armed forces and Turkey-backed Syrian rebels continued to battle against the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), with clashes primarily in Manbij (Aleppo), Tell Abiad (Raqqah) and Dardara (al-Hassakah). In September Turkish forces were reported to have used drone strikes against the SDF in locations further from the frontline after three Turkish soldiers were killed in Idlib, the last stronghold of Turkish-backed rebels in the north-west. Turkey also launched attacks against US-backed Kurdish forces in the north-east (see below).<sup>40</sup>

In addition, there were splits and infighting among the Turkey-backed rebels referred to as the Syrian National Army (SNA). In September several factions affiliated with the SNA merged under a new alliance known as the Syrian Liberation Front in a bid to end the infighting and power struggle between Turkey's allied factions in the north.<sup>41</sup> The merger could also be seen as part of Turkey's efforts to enhance the image of rebel forces accused of al-Qaeda affiliation, which Turkey supports against both Syrian government forces and the US-backed SDF.<sup>42</sup>

#### *The north-east: Turkey steps up its attacks*

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, which was halted only by a new Russian–Turkish agreement on 22 October 2019.<sup>43</sup> 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. As such, a challenging but fragile stalemate continued in north-eastern Syria throughout 2021. The SDF, led primarily by the People's Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, YPG), protected the autonomous administration it continued to govern in most of the north-east not held by Turkey or its Syrian allies.

In the third quarter of 2021 Turkey stepped up its attacks, deploying drone strikes against the YPG across multiple fronts, including in Qamishli, Aleppo

<sup>38</sup> al-Khateb, K., 'Massive displacement wave amid fears of renewed battles in Idlib', Al-Monitor, 17 Sep. 2021.

<sup>39</sup> 'Turkey faces gathering storm in Syria', Al-Monitor, 17 Sep. 2021.

<sup>40</sup> al-Khateb, K., 'Turkish-backed Syrian forces intensify attacks on US-aligned Syrian Kurdish group', Al-Monitor, 14 Sep. 2021; and Tastekin, F., 'Turkey's blind eye to jihadis worsens its predicaments in Syria', Al-Monitor, 16 Sep. 2021.

<sup>41</sup> al-Kanj, S., 'Turkey-backed Syrian opposition groups merge under new banner', Al-Monitor, 16 Sep. 2021.

<sup>42</sup> al-Kanj, S., 'Syrian jihadist group ramps up efforts to oust rivals from Idlib', Al-Monitor, 2 July 2021.

<sup>43</sup> 'Full text of Turkey, Russia agreement on northeast Syria', Al Jazeera, 22 Oct. 2019.

and al-Hassakah. The SDF general command, which had unilaterally ceased offensive military activities in order to facilitate responses to the Covid-19 pandemic, vowed to retaliate against the attacks. Turkey also hinted at yet another military ground operation into the Kurdish-controlled territory in north-eastern Syria.<sup>44</sup> Aside from shelling and drone attacks, Turkey weaponized water supplies in its war against the Kurds in Syria.<sup>45</sup> In addition to Turkey's limited release of water from its dams into the Euphrates river, Turkish-backed armed groups blocked north-east Syria's water lifeline by cutting off the vital Khabur river, the most important tributary of the Euphrates. This exacerbated already existing climate-related risks, with severe consequences for communities dependent on irrigation.<sup>46</sup> Turkey's escalations and threats of new military ground operations raised concerns among Kurdish forces, who feel abandoned by the USA. The Afghanistan withdrawal added to their fears of a complete US withdrawal from the region.<sup>47</sup>

### *The humanitarian crisis, conflict casualties and war crimes*

The year 2021 marked the 10th anniversary of the uprising and war—a long decade of trauma that, according to various estimates, has cost over half a million lives. On top of this, more than half the country's pre-war population of 22 million have become either refugees or internally displaced. In 2021 Syria remained the world's largest refugee crisis, with 6.7 million IDPs and 6.6 million external refugees hosted mainly by the neighbouring countries of Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon.<sup>48</sup> Syria and its economy are still in ruins, with 12 million on the brink of starvation.<sup>49</sup> The deepening of the economic crisis triggered the return of street protests in the south of the country's besieged town of Daraa, known as the cradle of the 2011 Syrian uprising.<sup>50</sup> Although there are no reliable casualty statistics, a leading United Kingdom-based monitoring group estimate a death toll of over 606 000 since the start of the uprising.<sup>51</sup> In 2016 the UN envoy estimated over 400 000 Syrians had died in the war. Since then, ACLED has estimated there have been over

<sup>44</sup> al-Kanj, S., 'Syrian Kurdish parties feel abandoned by US in wake of Turkish-backed attack', Al-Monitor, 8 Sep. 2021; and Omer, Z. and Kajjo, S., '3 killed in suspected Turkish drone attack in NE Syria', VOA, 9 Nov. 2021.

<sup>45</sup> Zaman, A., 'Turkey's war of attrition against Syria's Kurds', Al-Monitor, 17 Nov. 2021.

<sup>46</sup> Zwijnenburg, W., 'Killing the Khabur: How Turkish-backed armed groups blocked northeast Syria's water lifeline', PAX for Peace, 3 Nov. 2021; and 'Water crisis and drought threaten 12 million in Syria, Iraq', Al Jazeera, 23 Aug. 2021.

<sup>47</sup> Mohammed, Z. and Majeed, R., 'Afghanistan fall renews Kurdish fears of US withdrawal in Iraq, Syria', VOA, 20 Aug. 2021.

<sup>48</sup> UNHCR, 'Syria refugee crisis explained', 5 Feb. 2021.

<sup>49</sup> World Food Programme, 'Twelve million Syrians now in the grip of hunger, worn down by conflict and soaring food prices', 17 Feb. 2021.

<sup>50</sup> Dadouch, S., 'In the cradle of the Syrian revolution, renewed violence shows reconciliation is still elusive', *Washington Post*, 19 Sep. 2021.

<sup>51</sup> 'Syria war: UN calculates new death toll', BBC News, 24 Sep. 2021.



**Table 6.3.** Estimated conflict-related fatalities in Syria, 2017–21

Event type	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Battles	26 575	16 007	8 416	4 357	2 467
Explosions/remote violence	25 236	11 848	5 925	2 810	2 472
Protests, riots and strategic developments	222	18	63	21	17
Violence against civilians	2 358	2 261	1234	1 023	905
<b>Total</b>	<b>54 391</b>	<b>30 134</b>	<b>15 638</b>	<b>8 211</b>	<b>5 861</b>

*Notes:* The first available year for data on Syria 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, ‘Dashboard’, accessed 9 Feb. 2022.

100 000 additional fatalities, including approximately 5900 in 2021 (which is lower than 2020, see table 6.3).

### *The peace processes and Syria’s potential return to the Arab fold*

The main peace efforts in Syria have included long-standing UN-mediated talks, regular discussions by the more military-focused 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. In October 2019 150 delegates (50 each from the government, opposition and civil society) met in Geneva to begin drafting a new Syrian constitution—the first step in a political process expected to lead to UN-supervised elections. However, little progress was made at the three subsequent rounds of negotiations in 2019–20. Although two further rounds of negotiations were held in 2021 (25–29 January and 18–21 October), these again failed to reach any breakthrough.<sup>52</sup> The UN Special Envoy for Syria described the October session as a ‘big disappointment’, despite an earlier announcement of a breakthrough in constitutional talks between the opposition and regime negotiating teams.<sup>53</sup> With the Syrian constitutional process gridlocked, the prospects of an end to the civil war seem remote. In December Russia and Turkey urged the Kurds to engage with Damascus and underlined their support for Syria’s territorial integrity.<sup>54</sup> In May Bashar al-Assad was reelected for another seven-year term in a presidential election widely rejected by Western states as ‘illegitimate’ and ‘neither free nor fair’,

<sup>52</sup> United Nations, ‘“We can’t continue like this”: UN envoy’s grim assessment of Syria peace process’, UN News, 29 Jan. 2021; and ‘Syria: Latest round of talks on constitution begins in Geneva’, Al Jazeera, 25 Jan. 2021.

<sup>53</sup> United Nations, ‘“Big disappointment” over lack of Syria constitution agreement’, UN News, 22 Oct. 2021; and McLoughlin, P., ‘Constitutional crisis: The Syria peace talks that are going nowhere’, New Arab, 6 Dec. 2021.

<sup>54</sup> ‘Russia, Turkey press Syrian Kurds to engage with Damascus’, Reuters, 22 Dec. 2021.

given that it was held outside the framework set out in UN Security Council Resolution 2254.<sup>55</sup>

Nonetheless, external actors continued to adjust their positions vis-à-vis Syria in 2021, with the desire for regional stability seemingly stronger than that of ousting al-Assad.<sup>56</sup> Having survived a decade of war, al-Assad seemed poised to return to the world stage, despite opposition from the West. Many of the Arab states that cut him off after the outbreak of the civil war or opposed his rule by supporting opposition rebels have begun rebuilding ties, with the country making further inroads to end its isolation in 2021. In September Jordan reopened its border with Syria. Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) made concerted efforts to restore relations between Syria and the Arab world, as well as the country's membership in the Arab League.<sup>57</sup> Oman, Kuwait, Jordan, Bahrain and the UAE all reopened their embassies, with the latter exploring avenues for future cooperation and investment.<sup>58</sup> Also noteworthy was an agreement allowing the delivery of Egyptian gas and Jordanian electricity to Lebanon via Syria, which had not yet taken place by the end of 2021 due to Jordan and Egypt seeking reassurances from the USA regarding whether this would constitute a violation of Syria sanctions.<sup>59</sup> However, despite many overtures there is lack of consensus among the Arab states regarding a complete rapprochement. With the peace process gridlocked, a sustained ceasefire that freezes the conflict may have a broad consensus.

### **Armed conflict between Turkey and Kurdish insurgent groups**

Turkey's military operations in northern Syria and Iraq are driven by decades-long armed conflict in the south-east of Turkey between Turkish armed forces and the PKK. However, since the outbreak of the Syrian conflict, Turkey's efforts have focused on preventing the Syrian Kurds from achieving a degree of political autonomy inside Syria following their US-supported military and political gains. As noted above, Turkey also continued its military incursions into northern Iraq in 2021, and in October threatened to launch a

<sup>55</sup> 'Assad wins Syrian election dismissed as farce by critics', BBC News, 27 May 2021; and 'Syria elections: Polls open as Western countries slam "illegitimate" vote', Deutsche Welle, 26 May 2021.

<sup>56</sup> Joint op-ed by 18 foreign ministers on the fight against impunity for crimes committed in Syria', Government Offices of Sweden, 31 Mar. 2021.

<sup>57</sup> Saied, M., 'Egypt steps up efforts to "restore Syria's position in the Arab world"', Al-Monitor, 30 Sep. 2021.

<sup>58</sup> Sherlock, R., 'Arab nations that opposed Assad's regime have begun rebuilding ties with Syria', NPR, 14 July 2021; and 'UAE foreign minister meets Syria's Assad, US slams visit to "dictator"', France 24, 10 Nov. 2021.

<sup>59</sup> 'Egypt, Jordan, Syria agree to export gas to crisis-stricken Lebanon', Al-Monitor, 8 Sep. 2021; and Harris, B. and Joyce, K., 'Arab states get cold feet over Egypt-to-Lebanon gas deal', *The National*, 22 Feb. 2022.

**Table 6.4.** Estimated conflict-related fatalities in Turkey, 2016–21

Event type	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Battles	3 650	2 303	1 638	765	413	214
Explosions/remote violence	1 370	521	253	174	118	64
Protests, riots and strategic developments	14	4	8	4	1	1
Violence against civilians	166	97	28	14	20	18
<b>Total</b>	<b>5 200</b>	<b>2 925</b>	<b>1 927</b>	<b>957</b>	<b>552</b>	<b>297</b>

*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, ‘Dashboard’, accessed 9 Feb. 2022.

new military offensive in the Kurdish-controlled autonomous administration in northern Syria.

The armed conflict between Turkish armed forces and the PKK inside Turkey continued in 2021, with two independent sources estimating fatalities in the range of 300–350. According to International Crisis Group 344 people were killed in 2021 (25 civilians, 268 PKK rebels and 51 state security forces), compared to 341 in 2020, taking the total number of deaths to 5731 since the resumption of hostilities in July 2015.<sup>60</sup> ACLED, meanwhile, estimated there were 297 conflict-related fatalities in 2021, indicating a continuous decline in fatalities since 2016 (see table 6.4).

Resolution of this protracted conflict is predicated on the Turkish peace process with the Kurds (also known as the resolution process, which collapsed in July 2015) resuming, as well as the establishment of peaceful relations between Turkey and the YPG in Syria, which Turkey views as an extension of the PKK. However, the prospect of either seems remote given Turkey’s continuing crackdown on the pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party, which is battling for its political survival in the Turkish courts. Moreover, its former co-leader remains in prison despite calls for his release, including from the European Court of Human Rights.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>60</sup> International Crisis Group, ‘Turkey’s PKK conflict: A visual explainer’.

<sup>61</sup> Cupolo, D., ‘Top Turkish court accepts revised indictment to ban pro-Kurdish party’, *Al-Monitor*, 21 June 2021; and Kucukgocmen, A., ‘European Court of Human Rights says Turkey must free Demirtas’, *Reuters*, 22 Dec. 2020.