

IV. Armed conflict and peace processes in North Africa

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A decade on from the 2011 Arab Spring, North Africa—here comprising Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia—is undergoing a convergence of crises, with negative spillover impacting the stability of neighbouring states in sub-Saharan Africa (see chapter 7) and the eastern Mediterranean (see chapter 5).¹ This section briefly discusses Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and the growing conflict in Western Sahara.

Armed conflict in Egypt

In 2021 the Egyptian government remained involved in a non-international armed conflict against the non-state armed group Wilayat Sinai (also known as Islamic State–Sinai Province) in the Sinai Peninsula. The Sinai insurgency (2011–present) deteriorated in 2014 when Islamist militants in Sinai embraced Islamic State and carried out large-scale attacks on civilian targets.² A state of emergency has existed in northern Sinai since October 2014, as well as in the country as a whole between April 2017 and October 2021.³ The government is accused of human rights abuses in its military campaign and of using counterterrorism measures to silence dissent more widely.⁴ The low-level armed conflict continued in 2021 with no end or decisive outcome in sight.⁵ Estimated total conflict-related fatalities in Egypt in 2021 (264 fatalities) fell for the fifth successive year and are at their lowest level since 2012.⁶

Armed conflict and the peace process in Libya

There has been armed conflict in Libya since an armed rebellion, supported by Western military intervention, deposed Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. Although the armed conflict began as a civil war between Libya's rival east-

¹ There is no single accepted definition of North Africa. Some definitions include Sudan in North Africa. The conflict in Sudan is discussed in chapter 7, section IV, in this volume.

² On the historical developments and socio-political causes leading to the rise of Sinai province and its military build-up see Ashour, O., 'Sinai's insurgency: Implications of enhanced guerrilla warfare', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 42, no. 6 (2019), pp. 541–58.

³ Reuters, 'Egypt's President Sisi ends state of emergency for the first time in years', *Global Times*, 26 Oct. 2021. On developments in Egypt in 2018–20 see *SIPRI Yearbook 2019*, pp. 87–88; *SIPRI Yearbook 2020*, pp. 157–58; and *SIPRI Yearbook 2021*, pp. 166–67.

⁴ Wintour, P., '“Not just Giulio Regeni”: Hundreds have died in Egyptian custody, says report', *The Guardian*, 11 Dec. 2020; Human Rights Watch, 'Egypt: Massive Sinai demolitions likely war crimes', 17 Mar. 2021; and Human Rights Watch, '“Security forces dealt with them”: Suspicious killings and extrajudicial executions by Egyptian security forces', 7 Sep. 2021.

⁵ 'Egypt: Eight soldiers killed in Sinai “anti-terrorism” operations', Al Jazeera, 1 Aug. 2021; and 'Egyptian military consolidates grip on northern Sinai', Reuters, 20 Oct. 2021.

⁶ Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), 'Dashboard', accessed 10 Feb. 2022.

and west-based political authorities, it quickly became a regional proxy war. There is a strong economic dimension to the conflict, with competition among internal and external actors for control of key economic levers such as the central bank and oil revenues.⁷ A United Nations-led peace process in 2020 offered new grounds for optimism that were largely borne out by further progress in 2021.⁸ However, the postponement of the elections due to take place on 24 December 2021 created new levels of uncertainty in the peacebuilding roadmap.

The Libyan peace process

The Libyan peace process has three tracks: economic, military and political. During 2020 there had been progress mainly along the latter two of these tracks: the political track evolved into the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF), while the military track led to a 23 October 2020 agreement on a permanent ceasefire covering all areas of Libya.⁹ The new agreement required armed groups and military units to return to their respective bases (with some earmarked for demobilization), foreign mercenaries to depart within three months, and the creation of a joint military force and a way to monitor violations.¹⁰ At the end of 2020 the UN was proposing to bring in monitors to oversee the ceasefire.¹¹

The first round of talks within the LPDF took place in Tunisia in November 2020, where it was agreed to hold elections on 24 December 2021—the 70th anniversary of Libya’s independence.¹² However, the November 2020 statement was vague on the exact terms of follow-up actions, and six rounds

⁷ Carpenter, S., ‘Waging economic war, Libyan strongman wants access to Central Bank cash’, *Forbes*, 31 Jan. 2020.

⁸ On the Libyan conflict and peace processes in 2016–20 see *SIPRI Yearbook 2017*, pp. 83–84; *SIPRI Yearbook 2018*, pp. 74–75; *SIPRI Yearbook 2019*, pp. 94–98; *SIPRI Yearbook 2020*, pp. 158–62 and *SIPRI Yearbook 2021*, pp. 167–73. On the complex interaction between localized and national conflicts in Libya since 2011 see Thornton, C., ‘The Libyan carousel: The interaction of local and national conflict dynamics in Libya’, ed. British Academy, *Local Peace Processes* (British Academy: London, Sep. 2021), pp. 22–29.

⁹ ‘Agreement for a complete and permanent ceasefire in Libya’ (unofficial translation), 23 Oct. 2020; United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), ‘UNSMIL statement on the resumption of intra-Libyan political and military talks’, 10 Oct. 2020; and Zaptia, S., ‘Immediate and permanent ceasefire agreement throughout Libya signed in Geneva’, *Libya Herald*, 23 Oct. 2020.

¹⁰ International Crisis Group, ‘Fleshing out the Libya ceasefire agreement’, MENA Briefing no. 80, 4 Nov. 2020.

¹¹ Wintour, P., ‘UN to bring in monitors to observe Libya’s widely flouted ceasefire’, *The Guardian*, 1 Jan. 2021.

¹² British Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, ‘Libyan Political Dialogue Forum and the Berlin Conference: Joint statement’, Press release, 23 Nov. 2020.

of online follow-up meetings in 2020 failed to reach consensus on a legal framework for moving the electoral process forward.¹³

A breakthrough occurred in March 2021 with the establishment of a unified government for the first time since 2014. In a peaceful handover of power, the Government of National Unity—headed by Prime Minister Abdelhamid Dabaiba and a three-person Presidency Council—was accepted by both the internationally recognized Government of National Accord based in Tripoli and the rival Tobruk-based House of Representatives in the east of the country. This represented an important milestone towards unifying Libyan political institutions.¹⁴ However, the new government faced several key challenges, including reunifying parallel financial institutions and the fragmented military, removing foreign military advisers and mercenaries (mainly Turkish forces in western Libya and Russian-linked private military contractors in central and southern Libya), and delivering a credible electoral roadmap.

On 23 June 2021 representatives of Libya's new interim national unity government joined foreign stakeholders at an international conference co-sponsored by the UN and Germany in Berlin aimed at renewing foreign commitment to supporting Libya's peace process.¹⁵ However, conflicting visions for the country both among foreign governments and within the Libyan delegations continued to hinder progress in the implementation of the political, military and financial tracks.¹⁶ In addition, tensions increased in June 2021 between rival armed coalitions in western Libya, while in the south IS launched its first attack since May 2020.¹⁷

In the second half of 2021 tensions increased around the electoral process. A legal framework for the election was adopted unilaterally by the House of Representatives but was rejected by other groups. Presidential candidates were disqualified and then readmitted.¹⁸ Ján Kubiš, the UN Special Envoy

¹³ International Crisis Group, 'Negotiations run aground, threatening political and economic stalemate', Crisis Group Libya Update no. 1, 11 Dec. 2020; and International Crisis Group, 'Foreign actors drive military build-up amid deadlocked political talks', Crisis Group Libya Update no. 1, 24 Dec. 2020.

¹⁴ United Nations, Security Council, United Nations Support Mission in Libya, Report of the Secretary-General, S/2021/451, 11 May 2021; United Nations, Security Council, 'Statement by the President of the Security Council', S/PRST/2021/6, 12 Mar. 2021; and 'The prospects for Libya's interim government', *Strategic Comments*, vol. 27, no. 2 (2021), pp. iv–vi.

¹⁵ United Nations, Security Council, Annex to the letter dated 23 June 2021 from the Permanent Representative of Germany to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council Second Berlin Conference on Libya, S/2021/595, 24 June 2021.

¹⁶ United Nations, Security Council, Letter dated 6 Aug. 2021 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council, S/2021/716, 9 Aug. 2021; and 'Doubts on elections multiply', *Africa Confidential*, vol. 62, no. 17 (26 Aug. 2021).

¹⁷ United Nations, Security Council, United Nations Support Mission in Libya, Report of the Secretary-General, S/2021/752, 25 Aug. 2021, pp. 5–6.

¹⁸ See e.g. 'Libya election panel rejects Gaddafi's son as presidential candidate', Reuters, 24 Nov. 2021; and 'Libya court reinstates Gaddafi presidential bid amid election chaos', Reuters, 2 Dec. 2021.

Table 6.5. Estimated conflict-related fatalities in Libya, 2012–21

Event type	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Battles	458	197	2 381	2 000	2 201	972	742	1 234	802	53
Explosions/remote violence	27	87	483	715	864	509	363	948	643	44
Protests, riots and strategic developments	21	83	11	30	18	0	0	0	5	0
Violence against civilians	46	76	475	336	250	227	123	112	110	18
Total	552	443	3 350	3 081	3 333	1 708	1 228	2 294	1 560	115

Notes: For definitions of event types, see Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), 'ACLED definitions of political violence and protest', 11 Apr. 2019.

Source: ACLED, 'Dashboard', accessed 10 Feb. 2022.

for Libya who was supposed to help oversee the process, resigned in November.¹⁹ As the date of the election approached there were fears that violence would ensue. On 15 December militias briefly surrounded government offices in Tripoli.²⁰

With the election at risk of being marred by disputes that might potentially lead to boycotts, disputed results and even armed violence, it became impossible to hold presidential elections on 24 December as planned. As such, on 22 December the Libyan electoral commission officially postponed the poll. Although a new date was expected within 30 days, as of the end of 2021 it remained unclear when the election would go ahead.²¹

An improving humanitarian situation and lower conflict-related fatalities

As a result of the improving security situation in 2021, the overall humanitarian situation saw some improvements across Libya, including a nearly 25 per cent decrease in the number of internally displaced persons to 213 000 people (compared to some 278 000 at the start of 2021).²² With nearly 598 000 migrants, Libya serves as a major transit checkpoint for those hoping to reach Europe. As such, the smuggling of migrants and people trafficking in the Mediterranean Sea off Libya's coast remained key humanitarian concerns in 2021.²³ As of the end of 2021 an estimated 800 000 people still needed some form of humanitarian assistance—while this represented

¹⁹ AFP, 'Libya: UN special envoy quits a month before presidential elections', *The Guardian*, 23 Nov. 2021.

²⁰ 'Armed militias deploy around key sites in Tripoli amid mounting doubts over ballot', *Arab Weekly*, 16 Dec. 2021.

²¹ United Nations, 'Libyan elections postponed, new date expected within 30 days', UN News, 23 Dec. 2021.

²² UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA), *Global Humanitarian Overview 2022* (UN OCHA: 2021), pp. 104–106.

²³ United Nations, Security Council, Implementation of resolution 2546 (2020), Report of the Secretary-General, S/2021/767, 2 Sep. 2021; and 'UN demands Libya inquiry into shooting of escaping migrants', Reuters, 12 Oct. 2021.

a 36 per cent decrease compared to the beginning of the year, protests were growing about deteriorating living conditions.²⁴

In an October 2021 report the UN Independent Fact-Finding Mission on Libya found reasonable grounds to believe that war crimes had been committed in the country, and that violence perpetrated in prisons and against migrants might amount to crimes against humanity.²⁵ Libya remained relatively peaceful throughout 2021 as the ceasefire largely held. Although there were some limited clashes among armed groups, the total annual number of estimated conflict-related deaths fell to its lowest level since the start of the conflict in 2011 (see table 6.5).

Outlook

The political reconciliation process remains in the balance due to the postponement of the presidential elections, with the risk that rival forces in Libya could once again mobilize. Achieving consensus on the electoral framework and resolving disputes over the eligibility of some of the presidential candidates continues to be key to keeping the peace process on track.

Protests in Tunisia

Despite Tunisia's revolution in 2011 often being portrayed as the sole success of the Arab Spring, it has not led to economic or political stability, with a 2021 surge in the Covid-19 pandemic further fuelling long-standing anti-government protests.²⁶ In July 2021 Tunisian President Kais Saïed sacked the country's prime minister and senior ministers, and suspended parliament for 30 days—a move political opponents called 'unconstitutional' or a coup.²⁷ The political crisis deepened in August as President Saïed indefinitely extended the suspension of parliament, then proceeded to announce in December that it would remain suspended until December 2022. A referendum on constitutional amendments is promised in July 2022, followed by a general election in December 2022.²⁸

²⁴ UN OCHA (note 22); and Report of the Secretary-General, S/2021/767 (note 23).

²⁵ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent Fact-Finding Mission on Libya, A/HRC/48/83 (advance and unedited version), 1 Oct. 2021.

²⁶ On the protests in Tunisia see O' Driscoll, D. et al., *Protest and State–Society Relations in the Middle East and North Africa*, SIPRI Policy Paper no. 56 (SIPRI: Stockholm, Oct. 2020), pp. 29–31.

²⁷ 'Tunisia's PM sacked after violent Covid protests', BBC News, 26 July 2021; and Foroudi, L., 'Ennahda calls for dialogue to resolve Tunisia's political crisis', Al Jazeera, 27 July 2021. Also see Rivera-Escartin, A., 'Tunisia's democratisation process: When "consensus democracy" undermines democratic consolidation', *Third World Quarterly* (2021).

²⁸ 'Tunisia's president extends suspension of parliament until further notice', Africanews, 24 Aug. 2021; and Reuters, 'Tunisia's president calls constitutional referendum followed by elections in 2022', *The Guardian*, 14 Dec. 2021.

Escalating tensions in Western Sahara

In November 2020 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) erupted once more when the Polisario Front ended a 1991 ceasefire and launched attacks on Moroccan forces. The attacks followed a military operation by Moroccan forces in the buffer zone monitored by the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara.²⁹ Morocco controls about 80 per cent of Western Sahara, with the Polisario Front controlling the remainder of the territory.³⁰ At the start of 2021, with the peace process stalled, the risk of military escalation was growing.

In May–July 2021 Morocco was involved in separate diplomatic disputes with Spain, Germany and Algeria, although all were linked in some way to Western Sahara.³¹ In August 2021 Algeria (which supports the Polisario Front) cut diplomatic ties with Morocco, then a month later closed its airspace to all Moroccan aircraft.³² It was hoped that Staffan de Mistura's appointment as the UN Secretary-General's new personal envoy for the region, after a two-year search to fill the position, could re-energize the peace process.³³ However, ahead of a UN Security Council meeting on Western Sahara on 28 October, Polisario Front leader Brahim Ghali vowed to continue hostilities against Morocco unless it agreed to organize a referendum on self-determination.³⁴

Although low-level clashes between the Polisario Front and Moroccan security forces continued in 2021, battle-related fatalities (12 in total) remained below SIPRI's threshold for an armed conflict. However, there were also 33 fatalities from 'explosions and remote violence', indicating that an armed conflict may already have resumed, although Morocco denied this was the case.³⁵

²⁹ Dahir, A. L., 'Western Sahara independence group ends truce with Morocco', *New York Times*, 14 Nov. 2020.

³⁰ 'Things are heating up in Western Sahara', *The Economist*, 6 Nov. 2021.

³¹ 'New diplomatic tension between Algeria and Morocco', Africanews, 19 July 2021; Green, A., 'Morocco is weaponizing migration to punish Spain on Western Sahara', *World Politics Review*, 21 May 2021; and Holleis, J. and Driouich, H., 'Tensions rise between Morocco and Germany', *Deutsche Welle*, 8 May 2021.

³² 'Algeria cuts diplomatic ties with Morocco over "hostile actions"', Al Jazeera, 24 Aug. 2021; and 'Algeria closes airspace to Moroccan aviation as dispute deepens', Reuters, 23 Sep. 2021. On military spending rivalry between Algeria and Morocco see chapter 8, section II, in this volume.

³³ United Nations, 'Secretary-General appoints Staffan de Mistura of Italy personal envoy for Western Sahara', Press release, 6 Oct. 2021; and International Crisis Group, *Relaunching Negotiations Over Western Sahara*, MENA Report no. 227 (International Crisis Group: Brussels, 14 Oct. 2021).

³⁴ 'Western Sahara: Polisario Front leader vows attacks on Morocco will continue', Africanews, 17 Oct. 2021.

³⁵ ACLED, 'Dashboard', accessed 17 Feb. 2022; and *The Economist* (note 30).