

2. The armed conflicts in Syria and Iraq

Overview

The armed conflicts in Iraq and Syria intensified in 2014. A number of jihadist movements had notable successes, with the Islamic State (IS) in particular making rapid advances. Several factors have facilitated the rise of IS: years of severe conflict of an increasingly sectarian nature, a concurrent loss of state legitimacy, and large-scale social and institutional breakdown in both Iraq and Syria. However, IS is only one of the actors operating in the wider Iraqi–Syrian zone of war, which is characterized by social disintegration and sectarian polarization. It is a crisis that is also defined by an overlapping and often unclear assortment of allegiances backed by regional and international actors and associated support structures. This chapter discusses how the interlinked conflicts in Iraq and Syria developed in 2014.

Trying to analyze and place in context important developments in these two conflicts is a formidable task, especially within the structure of a single Yearbook chapter. The sections in this chapter therefore limit themselves to specific aspects of the conflicts. In section I, the key developments in both civil wars are identified and documented, with a particular focus on Kurdish politics, IS and the US-led military intervention. Section II reviews the appalling socio-economic impact of the Syrian civil war, while section III continues a theme from previous Yearbooks on the role of arms transfers within the conflict—with a specific focus in this volume on the part played by arms transfers and the use of force against IS.

In Syria, the failure of the Geneva II talks, which took place in January and February 2014, confirmed that a negotiated solution to the conflict is very unlikely in the near future. A new United Nations negotiator, Staffan de Mistura, was appointed and began planning for a local ceasefire in Aleppo, but by the end of the year this bottom-up peace process had also stalled. Instead, the ongoing ‘enclavization’ of rebel and government territories accelerated. The presidential elections in June 2014 were neither free nor fair, but Assad was able to turn them into a show of strength, displaying his continuing ability to mobilize millions of Syrians.

US, Saudi and other state backing for the rebels has increasingly moved away from trying to topple Assad to seeking to maintain an anti-jihadi rebel force amenable to their interests, albeit with limited success. However, Assad’s long-term prospects remain uncertain: the regime’s structural and economic base continues to wither and his dependence on international allies continues to grow.

The conflict has had even more catastrophic consequences for Syrian citizens. As of January 2015, the conflict had claimed more than 206 000 lives, another 840 000 people had been wounded and more than 85 000 had been reported missing. Close to 4 million Syrians of a total population of 22 million have fled the country seeking refuge in neighbouring states, and another 7.6 million are displaced within Syria. With these population movements comes a growing humanitarian crisis that has disastrous implications for the country and the region. The widespread economic devastation and collapse in service provision in Syria mean that the future looks bleak for the millions who have lost family members, homes and livelihoods.

In Iraq, the civil war continued to show trends evident since 2011, including sectarian polarization and the shrinking remit of the central government. The Shia-dominated government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki essentially became a 'failed state' in Sunni Arab areas, leaving them vulnerable to IS, which took over several cities from June 2014. Maliki was eventually replaced by Haider al-Abadi, but the new government is not fundamentally different—the Iraqi army in particular remains heavily dependent on Iranian-backed Shia militias—and will find it hard to reconnect to Sunni Arab areas.

From January 2014, IS entrenched itself in eastern Syria with Raqqa as its 'capital' and from June 2014 captured areas in northern Iraq, including Mosul and Tikrit. This momentum led to a substantial rise in the recruitment of supporters, and greater access to captured arms and resources in both Iraq and Syria. In June, the group declared itself a caliphate claiming sovereignty over the entire Islamic world. While IS has increasingly overshadowed its former parent group, al-Qaeda, it has failed to move beyond Sunni Arab territory and remains structurally unable to sustainably govern even those areas.

Kurdish politics were another crucial ingredient in the two conflicts and the rising PKK influence in Iraq may prove of long-term significance.

The US-led air campaign that began in Iraq in August 2014 and Syria in September 2014—combined with US and other states' efforts to strengthen the Iraqi military through intelligence sharing and weapon supplies—helped to slow and then check IS's territorial advances. However, the overall experience with arms supplies to Iraq and Syria since 2003 has shown that significant volumes of weapons in both countries can rapidly change hands fuelling conflict. Considering the increased political and sectarian fragmentation in Iraq and Syria further arms supplies risk exacerbating the violence.

The military successes of the anti-IS coalition in late 2014 may yet turn out to be temporary, and the longer-term international peace and security implications of the two conflicts remain both complex and uncertain.