2. Armed conflict in the Middle East

Overview

In 2015, the Middle East remained a source of major insecurity for many of its countries and inhabitants, and of profound problems and challenges for neighbouring regions, most notably in the form of terrorist attacks in Paris and elsewhere, and the displacement of huge numbers of refugees.

The key developments in the year are reviewed briefly in section I: the intensification of military attacks against Houthi insurgents and their allies in Yemen by a coalition of countries led by Saudi Arabia; continuing warfare in Syria and the entry of Russia into the war in September 2015; continuing violence between Israel and Palestine; a worsening civil war in Libya, with the Islamic State (IS) gaining ground in some eastern coastal areas; challenges to the Iraqi Government from both IS and the separatist claims of Kurdish leaders; and in Egypt an escalating conflict in the Sinai.

Section II provides background on IS, its goals, operations and affiliates in 2015, and reviews the international debate on how to counter the group. In order to defeat IS, it will be necessary to defuse the Sunni Muslim revolt that has been building across the Arab world since 1979, cool the competition for influence and supremacy between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shiite Iran, and address the social and cultural background to radicalization.

Section III discusses the implications for the region of the huge refugee flows from the wars in Iraq and Syria, which have displaced around 4 million Iraqis and 12 million Syrians. In Lebanon and Jordan, refugees have settled in the poorest regions of both countries, triggering a growth in vulnerable populations. If left unaddressed, the fallout of identity-based polarization in the region and the expansion in vulnerable populations will have further profound repercussions for regional and international stability.

Section IV explores the important developments in the political trajectory of Kurds in Turkey, Iraq and Syria during 2015. The estimated 30 million Kurds generally held their own both politically and militarily, and will continue to be an inseparable and difficult to ignore part of the region's politics.

The July 2015 agreement regulating Iran's nuclear technology programme stood out as an example of cooperative management of conflict risk. However, complex technical and political questions remain over implementation and verification. Section V discusses Iran's core relationships with other states in the region in the light of this nuclear deal and the lifting of sanctions. Overall, however, the geopolitical order is in deep flux.

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