

I. The Middle East: 2015 in perspective

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In 2015, the Middle East and North Africa remained a source of shattering insecurity for many of its countries and inhabitants, and of profound problems and challenges for neighbouring regions.

In Europe, eyes focused on the overflow of and spillover from conflicts in the Middle East—overflow *of* the conflicts in the form of terrorist outrages in Paris in January and November, and spillover *from* the conflicts in the form of the influx of over half a million refugees from Syria in the course of the year and almost as many again from other conflict-torn countries in or close to the region.¹ This, however, was a narrowly European perspective on the Middle East in 2015. From a broader perspective, the outflow of refugees was just one part of a complex reality of large numbers of people suffering from the effects of conflict and insecurity.

Among the key developments in the course of 2015 was the intensification of the military action against Houthi insurgents and their allies in Yemen, carried out by a coalition of countries led by Saudi Arabia.² Increasingly throughout 2015, the military campaign was identified as a critical factor in an escalating humanitarian emergency. Under the new leadership of King Salman, following the death of his brother, King Abdullah, in January, Saudi Arabia's determination to press home its campaign against the Houthis was interpreted by many observers as reflecting a new, more assertive and activist approach to international affairs and regional security.³

In Syria, against the dual background of continuing warfare and the weakening strategic and military position of the Government of President Bashar al-Assad, the entry of Russia into the war in September 2015 marked a dramatic turn.⁴ The Russian Government's justification for its bombing campaign in Syria was that it was directed against Salafist opposition to President Assad's Government.⁵ In particular, it was directed against the militant Sunni Salafists variously known as ISIS, ISIL, the Islamic State and Daesh—referred to here as the Islamic State (IS).⁶ However, Russia was

¹ On the European response to the terrorist attacks in Paris see chapter 11, section II, in this volume; on the European response to the refugee crisis see chapter 11, section III, in this volume.

² Al-Rasheed, M., 'Saudi war in Yemen impossible to win', *al-Monitor*, 2 Oct. 2015.

³ See e.g. Takeyh, R., 'The new Saudi foreign policy', Council on Foreign Relations, 17 Apr. 2015, <<http://www.cfr.org/saudi-arabia/new-saudi-foreign-policy/p36456>>.

⁴ On the conflict in Syria see chapter 4, section II, in this volume.

⁵ Cockburn, P., 'Why Russia has started bombing Syria now—and what it hopes to achieve', *The Independent*, 30 Sep. 2015.

⁶ The Islamic State was known until June 2014 variously as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)/Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)—and in Arabic as Dawlat al-Islamiyah f'al-Iraq wa al-Sham (Daesh), which translates as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant/Syria. While some of these terms (and other Arabic translations) continue to be used to describe the group, this Year-

also reliably reported to have carried out airstrikes against other opposition groups.⁷ Civilian casualties and the destruction of civilian areas were also reported—an almost inevitable result of such action. Aimed at shoring up President Assad's Government, the prospects for success of the Russian mission were unclear by the end of the year, at which time the fate of peace talks was also highly uncertain.

Elsewhere in the region, conflict and chaos continued. The Israel–Palestine issue remained unresolved, characterized increasingly by apparently random violence, including murders, appearing to both reflect and grow from pent up frustrations and tensions on both sides.⁸ Libya continued in chaos, with hundreds of autonomous militia groups operating, two opposed institutions claiming governing legitimacy and IS gaining ground at the start of the year in some eastern coastal areas.⁹ In Iraq, the Government formed by Haidar al-Abadi in September 2014 faced challenges from both the militant Sunni Salafists of IS and the separatist claims of leaders in the Kurdish region.¹⁰ At the same time, the Iraqi Government needed to establish an agenda that would win it credibility and goodwill from international backers, including investors, and domestic opinion. By the end of 2015, the al-Abadi Government was facing many of the same criticisms of cronyism and corruption that had been levelled at its predecessor.¹¹

In Egypt, the Government of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi attempted to maintain control through a rigorous clampdown on political dissent and opposition.¹² This did not prevent an escalating conflict in Sinai.¹³ The Ansar Beit al-Maqdis group has been active in Sinai since at least 2011, starting with attacks on the Egyptian oil pipeline to Jordan and Israel. Having aligned itself with IS late in 2014—declaring itself to be the Sinai province of IS—it claimed responsibility at the end of October 2015 for the in-air destruction of a Russian airliner, killing all 224 people on board. In terms of the number killed, this was a more serious outrage than the attacks in Paris in November, when 130 people died.

Against this background, the July 2015 achievement of an agreement regulating Iran's nuclear technology programme stood out as an example of

book uses the term 'the Islamic State' throughout, abbreviated as IS. However, it is also recognized that language plays an important part in shaping understanding of events, including this group's development. See e.g. Shariatmadari, D., 'Why there's no such thing as Islamic State', *The Guardian*, 1 Oct. 2014. For more on this group, see the discussion in section II of this chapter.

⁷ Stubbs, J., 'Four-fifths of Russia's Syria strikes don't target Islamic State: Reuters analysis', Reuters 21 Oct. 2015.

⁸ 'Mapping the dead in latest Israeli-Palestinian violence', Al Jazeera, 13 Oct. 2015.

⁹ Wehrey, F., 'The path forward in Libya', Testimony before the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 3 Mar. 2016.

¹⁰ On political developments among the Kurds see section IV in this chapter.

¹¹ Sayigh, Y., 'Behind Iraq's crony state', *Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, 10 Nov. 2015.

¹² Kouddous, S. A., 'Egypt's 1984', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 28 Oct. 2014.

¹³ Graham-Harrison, E., 'How Sinai became a magnet for terror', *The Guardian*, 8 Nov. 2015.

cooperative management of conflict risk. The agreement reached between Iran and the so-called P5+1—the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany, but with an important role also for the European Union—will, if satisfactorily implemented, not only allow the lifting of international economic sanctions on Iran, but also facilitate the return of normal relations between Iran and many of its potential investment and trading partners.¹⁴ Complex technical questions remain over implementation and verification along with political difficulties due mainly to Israel's and Saudi Arabia's opposition to the accord. Israel's continuing political leverage in the USA and the influence of Saudi Arabia in Europe as a major arms purchaser make their opposition no small issue. Nonetheless, by the end of 2015 it appeared that the agreement was on course for full activation in 2016.

Another reminder that conflict can be managed was the award of the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize to four Tunisian NGOs—the General Labour Union of Tunisia, the National Lawyers' Organization, the Human Rights League and the Confederation of Industry, Trade and Handicrafts—for helping to sustain peace in their country.¹⁵ This National Dialogue Quartet was instrumental in convening dialogue and brokering political compromise in Tunisia in late 2013 and early 2014. As 2015 came to an end such signs of hope were, however, both rare and much needed.

Trying to analyse and place in context important developments in the Middle East is a formidable task, especially within the structure of a single Yearbook chapter. Following this brief scan of the conflict and peace horizon in the region, therefore, this chapter is limited to four specific issues: section II provides background on IS, its goals, operations and affiliates in 2015, and reviews the international debate on how to counter it; section III discusses the implications *for the region* of the huge refugee flows from the wars in Iraq and Syria; section IV explores the important developments in the political trajectory of Kurds in Turkey, Iraq and Syria; and section V discusses Iran's core relationships with other states in the region.

¹⁴ On Iran's nuclear deal see chapter 17, section I, in this volume; on the sanctions regime applied against Iran see chapter 3 in this volume.

¹⁵ Norwegian Nobel Committee, 'The Nobel Peace Prize for 2015', 10 Oct. 2015.