I. The Middle East and North Africa: 2016 in perspective

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Introduction

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) remained at the heart of global security concerns throughout 2016. Events in the region continued to have a major impact on neighbouring areas and on the world stage, while the influence and actions of outside powers in turn had a crucial impact on the region. Because of its strategic location and natural resource wealth in oil and gas, it is an arena in which external powers compete for power, both directly and through local alliances.

The region's strategic significance for world peace and security thus remains as great and as troubling as ever. No single factor can explain its seemingly chronic insecurity and persistent susceptibility to armed conflict. A variety of factors need to be understood and addressed to help the region achieve greater stability and security for its people.

These factors include governance failures in most Arab countries and the anger and resentment this has provoked, which led to a surge of popular mobilizations in 2011 that at the time seemed set to transform the Arab world. Other factors relate to the still-unfolding consequences of the 2003 invasion of Iraq by the United States-led coalition and the complex relations and rivalries between regional powers, most notably between Iran and Saudi Arabia. There is also an increasing tendency for the regional powers to intervene in the affairs of other countries in the region. In 2016 at least 7 of the 16 countries in the region used military force in combat on their own territory, and 11 on the territory of other countries (see table 3.1). Meanwhile, the Israel–Palestine conflict came no closer to resolution in 2016 and remains a potent and dangerous conflict.

After the Arab Spring

A key element of the region's security profile is the aftermath of the 2011 popular mobilizations in many Arab countries that, taken together, became known as the Arab Spring. Five years on, it is only in Tunisia that the flowers bloom; the country's path to a stable democracy, however, will be long and remains fraught with risk. In the other major centres of popular mobilization, Libya is in chaos, Syria is torn apart by civil war, Egypt has returned to authoritarian rule, the Gulf states have reasserted the status quo ante and Yemen is riven by civil war and a Saudi-led intervention.

Different combinations of diverse factors lay behind the popular mobilizations in the countries at the forefront of the Arab Spring in 2011—Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria and Bahrain. An important underlying cause was the lack

Table 3.1. Examples of the use of military force in the Middle East and North Africa by states in the region, 2015–16

Country	Nature of force
Algeria	Combating the Islamic State in Algeria
Bahrain	Participates in intervention in Yemen
Egypt	Participates in intervention in Yemen; Combating the Islamic State in Sinai; Attacks against the Islamic State in Libya
Iran	Combating Kurdish armed groups in Iran; Intervention in Syria; Intervention in Iraq
Iraq	Combating the Islamic State in Iraq
Israel	Combating Hamas in Palestine; Combating Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria; Violence against Palestinians in Occupied Territories; Attacks against Syrian Government forces
Jordan	Participates in intervention in Yemen; Intervention in Syria
Kuwait	Participates in intervention in Yemen
Lebanon	Combating the Islamic State in Lebanon; Combating militant Sunni groups
Libya	Civil war
Morocco	Participates in intervention in Yemen
Qatar	Participates in intervention in Yemen; Intervention in Syria
Saudi Arabia	Intervention in Yemen; Intervention in Syria
Syria	Civil war
Tunisia	Combating the Islamic State in Tunisia
Turkey	Combating military units involved in rebellion; Combating Kurdish armed groups in Turkey; Intervention in Syria
United Arab Emirates	Participates in intervention in Yemen; Intervention in Syria; Intervention in Libya
Yemen	Civil war

of bright economic prospects, including a shortage of employment opportunities for university graduates. Grievances were exacerbated by citizens' lack of political voice. A common feature in these and other Arab countries is the long-term failure of governance to address and fulfil the needs and aspirations of large numbers of those countries' ordinary citizens.[1] Where the system of rule has not changed, the problem persists; other factors being equal, the long-term potential for instability remains regardless of the short-term measures taken to suppress dissent.

[1] For background information, see the Arab Human Development Reports issued by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), available at <http://www.arab-hdr.org/>. In particular, see UNDP, *Arab Human Development Report 2004: Towards Freedom in the Arab World* (UNDP: New York, 2004); UNDP, *Arab Human Development Report 2005: Towards the Rise of Women in the Arab World*; and UNDP, *Arab Human Development Report 2009: Challenges to Human security in the Arab Countries*. On the long-term social and economic background to the 2011 mobilization in Egypt, see also Shenker, J., *The Egyptians: A Radical Story* (Penguin: New York, 2016).

Syria

War in Syria has absorbed a great deal of international political attention, in part due to its sheer scale. It is the most lethal of the current wars and has resulted in the displacement of half the population. There are no reliable casualty statistics for Syria, but as of April 2016, the United Nations Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, estimated that the death toll had passed 400 000 (see section II).[2] About 11 million Syrians had fled their homes by the end of 2016, over 4.8 million as international refugees, while over 6.3 million had been displaced internally.[3] An additional 390 000 Palestinian refugees have fled their refuges in Syria: 110 000 have become refugees again in neighbouring countries, Egypt and Europe, and 280 000 have been displaced within Syria.[4]

In addition to the scale of destruction and human suffering, the region's strategic location and the flow of refugees to Europe also help explain the focus of international attention on Syria. Some 490 280 Syrian refugees arrived in Europe by sea, surviving arduous and life-threatening voyages, in 2015.[5] By December 2015 there were 602 000 registered refugees, and 884 000 by the end of October 2016.[6] Although Syria's neighbours host many more refugees from its civil war—2.8 million in Turkey and over 1 million in Lebanon—they have been of major political concern in Europe.[7] International political concern also continues to focus on the Islamic State (IS)—the insurgent and terrorist group known by various names. While IS remained a potent force in 2016, it suffered significant setbacks (see section II).

Syria's civil war is complex: in addition to Syrian combatants, external forces have also been active (see figure 3.1). The most significant foreign intervention was the Russian air campaign in support of the Syrian Government under Bashar al-Assad, which began in September 2015 and continued throughout 2016. Hezbollah of Lebanon deployed its forces in support of the Assad regime, as did Iran. Turkey also intervened (see below) to protect its borders and to prevent Kurdish groups from becoming too powerful. US,

[2] Al Jazeera, 'Syria death toll: UN envoy estimates 400 000 killed', 23 Apr. 2016. This estimate falls within the range 312 000–437 000 for the period from the onset of war in Mar. 2011 until mid-Dec. 2016 published by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which has been widely referenced but also criticized. See Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 'About 450 thousand were killed and more than two millions were injured in 69 months of the start of the Syrian revolution', 13 Dec. 2016.

[3] Mercy Corps, 'What you need to know about the Syria crisis', 13 Oct. 2016, updated 9 Dec. 2016.

[4] Relief Web, 'Syria Crisis: IDPs, Syrian refugees and Palestinian refugees from Syria, 13 Jan. 2017', 16 Jan. 2016.

[5] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Syrian Regional Refugee Response, *Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan 2017–2018*, UN Inter-Agency programme.

[6] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Syrian Regional Refugee Response, *Europe: Syrian Asylum Applications from April 2011 to October 2016*.

[7] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (note 5), p. 28. On the issue of forced displacement and the refugee crises see chapter 7 in this volume.

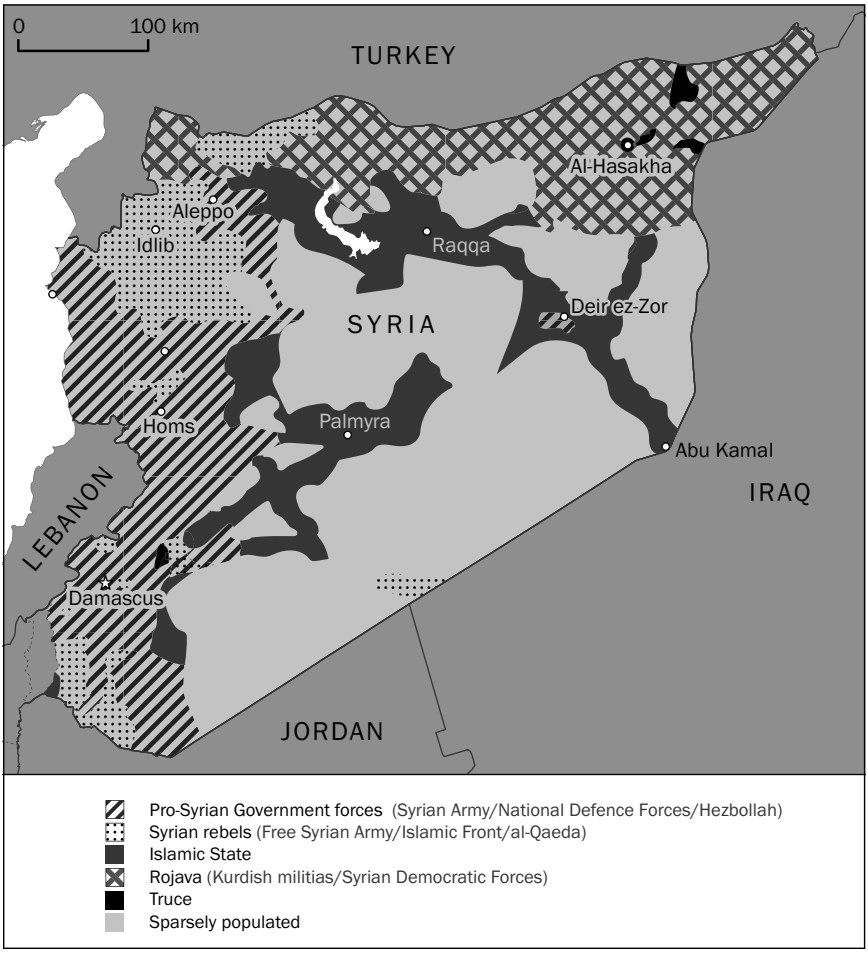

Figure 3.1. Syrian civil war, December 2016

Credit: Hugo Ahlenius, Nordpil, <https://nordpil.se/>.

Source: Al-Masdar News, 'Comprehensive map of Syrian conflict: December 2016', 18 Dec. 2016, <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/comprehensive-map-syrian-conflict-december-2016/>.

British and French special forces operated in support of Kurdish rebels who opposed both the government and IS. The USA continued to lead a multi-state air campaign against IS in Syria. Officially, the USA notes participation by 11 other states, including four Arab states and Turkey, although other sources suggest that five more states participated including two further Arab states.[8]

[8] US Department of Defense (DOD), 'Operation Inherent Resolve'. The Arab states listed by the US DOD are Bahrain, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates; other sources indicate that Morocco and Qatar also participated. Morocco World News, 'ISIS fighters shoot down Coalition

Amid this complex array of contending forces, the balance of power tilted quite sharply in Assad's favour in 2016 as a result of three important developments. The first, as mentioned above, was the Russian air campaign. Russia largely justified it as a campaign against IS and other groups with similar ideologies and methods. Russian involvement—involving the deployment of advanced air defence systems, which reportedly included the S-400—combined with ground force support from Iran and Hezbollah of Lebanon, enabled pro-Assad forces to reverse opposition gains, particularly in and around Aleppo (see box 3.1).[9] The air campaign thus registered significant successes by the end of 2016, even if the extent and durability of the achievements were still uncertain.

Russian military intervention strengthened the position of Syrian Government forces, which had lost significant territory in the multi-front civil war by mid-2015 and were severely overstretched by September 2015.[10] Russia also blocked action in the UN Security Council that would have increased pressure on the Assad regime. Although the Syrian Government's overall position has been strengthened by Russian intervention, its forces have suffered serious losses in nearly six years of combat. The loss of Palmyra to IS in December 2016 emphasized the government's lack of territorial control and dependence on external supporters for its continued viability.

A second influential development was Turkey's reconciliation with Russia and ensuing policy shift from regime change in Syria to a more narrow strategy of securing continued Turkish influence in the country, improving border security and countering the rise of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan, PKK). In August 2016 Turkey launched an offensive in northern Syria against IS and Kurdish groups including the People's Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, YPG) and the mostly Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) that the YPG set up in the previous year.[11] In combination with events in Aleppo and elsewhere, this crippled the US-backed segments of the Syrian opposition and stoked continuing

warplane in Syria', 24 Dec. 2014; and Shafer, J., 'War without end: the US may still be fighting in Syria in 2024, 2034, 2044…', Reuters, 22 Sep. 2014.

[9] Marcus, J., 'Russia S-400 Syria missile deployment sends robust signal', BBC News, 1 Dec. 2015.

[10] On the initial situation and Russia's aims at the outset of its military intervention see Kozhanov, N., 'Moscow looks for phase two in Syria', Carnegie Moscow Center, 4 Nov. 2015; Lund, A., 'Evaluating the Russian Intervention in Syria', Carnegie Middle East Center, 7 Dec. 2015; and Lund, A., 'Is Assad losing the war in Syria?', Carnegie Middle East Center, 13 May 2015. For a reading after 15 months of bombing, see *Financial Times*, 'Russia's Middle East ambitions grow with Syria battlefield success', 19 Jan. 2017.

[11] McKirdy, E., 'Turkey sends tanks into Syria to battle ISIS', CNN, 24 Aug. 2016; *New Arab*, 'Turkey shells IS, Kurdish positions in northern Syria', 23 Aug. 2016. The SDF is a predominantly Kurdish group that smaller Arab groups have joined. Its main component is the YPG militia, which has a close relationship with the PKK. The SDF was set up to bring the Arab groups under the YPG umbrella and to further distance the beneficiaries of US military support from the PKK, which the US State Department considers to be a terrorist organization. See US Department of State, Bureau of Counterterrorism, 'Designated foreign terrorist organizations'.

Box 3.1. The battle for Aleppo

At the beginning of 2016, about 150 000 civilians remained in the eastern half of the city, but by early December opposition-held Aleppo contained between 100 000 and 120 000 civilians. The civilians were caught between warring parties that all appeared to be violating international humanitarian law, not least by carrying out summary executions. One United Nations official described the situation as a 'complete meltdown of humanity'.

In July 2016 the Syrian Government under President Bashar al-Assad cut off the last remaining access point into eastern Aleppo. The offensive reportedly involved not only Syrian Government troops but also Lebanese Hezbollah, Iraqi militias and Iranian ground forces. In August, opposition groups temporarily retook territory to the south-west of the city. United States-backed opposition groups, in largely separate efforts, fought Assad's forces in the city and Islamic State (IS) militants to the east of the city. Abu Mohammad al-Adnani, the official IS spokesman, was reportedly killed by airstrikes in the surrounding area in August.

An agreement announced by the USA and Russia in early September contained provisions to ensure civilian and humanitarian access to Aleppo, but following the collapse of the ceasefire agreement Syrian and Russian forces began an intense aerial bombardment and a ground assault on opposition-held areas in eastern Aleppo. US and European officials accused Russia of using bunker-buster bombs and incendiary munitions against civilians in the city.

The battle for Aleppo ended in mid-December when Syrian Government forces took control of the city. Opposition forces agreed to a ceasefire on 13 December to evacuate civilians and opposition fighters to opposition-held territory. The evacuation was disrupted by further sporadic fighting but was eventually completed on 22 December. While the city's capture did not end Syria's long-running civil war, it marked a major defeat for the opposition movement and a significant victory for President Bashar al-Assad.

Sources: @JensLaerke (Jens Laerke, UN OCHA spokesman in Geneva), 'Civilians killed in "complete meltdown of humanity" in #Aleppo: U.N. http://nbcnews.to/2hi0WjN via @nbcnews', Twitter, 13 Dec. 2016; Loveluck, L. and Sly, L., 'Russian envoy: evacuation deal reached for last rebel zones in Syria's ravaged Aleppo', *Washington Post*, 13 Dec. 2016; Arif, M. et al., 'Key ISIS deputy and spokesman killed in Aleppo, group says', CNN, 31 Aug. 2016; *Middle East Eye*, 'Syrian forces launch mass ground assault on rebel-held Aleppo', 27 Sep. 2016; Borger, J. and Shaheen, K., 'Russia accused of war crimes in Syria at UN security council session', *The Guardian*, 26 Sep. 2016; Barnard, A. and Cumming-Bruce, N., 'Chaos and desperation as thousands flee Aleppo amid government advance', *New York Times*, 9 Dec. 2016; Bassam, L. and Barrington, L., 'Syrian government forces press attack in east Aleppo', Reuters, 9 Dec. 2016; and Bassam, L., McDowall, A. and Nebehay, S., 'Battle of Aleppo ends after years of bloodshed with rebel withdrawal', Reuters, 13 Dec. 2016.

acrimony between different factions within the opposition and their external backers.

The third key development was the defeat of the anti-government forces in eastern Aleppo in December 2016 (see box 3.1), which deprived the insurgency of effective leverage. Aleppo, Syria's most populous city, had been divided into regime- and opposition-held territory since 2012. Assad's forces taking control of the city was a highly symbolic event that led many opposition members and backers to conclude that non-jihadi rebels had become a marginal force in Syria. It provided a prism through which to view the oppo-

sition's decline in 2016, even though that decline was the product of many factors.

Diplomacy on Syria

The third ceasefire of the year was agreed on 30 December 2016. The first had been in February when Russia and the USA negotiated a ceasefire between pro-government and opposition forces (excluding IS and the al-Nusra Front). However, the ceasefire was widely violated by all sides and was criticized for lacking enforcement and accountability mechanisms.[12] The second was in September when the US Secretary of State, John Kerry, and the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, announced a new agreement designed to reduce violence and resume progress towards a political settlement.[13] While the agreement resulted in a brief reduction in violence, the ceasefire did not hold. In late September, Syrian and Russian forces launched a major aerial assault on opposition-held areas of eastern Aleppo, with Syrian troops on the ground supported by Iranian militias and advisers.[14] As noted above, eastern Aleppo was retaken in mid-December, and on 30 December a new nationwide ceasefire was declared—not a US–Russian project like the two previous attempts, but a Russian–Turkish–Iranian one. Like the previous ceasefires, this one contained humanitarian access clauses that effectively offered a trade-off between the delivery of humanitarian aid and rebel groups downing their weapons.[15]

Initially in 2016 Russia had sought cooperation with the USA to combat a range of anti-Assad groups, not just IS and its associates but any group fighting the Syrian Government. For a period in the middle of the year, this approach seemed likely to bear fruit. By late June 2016 the USA and Russia were reportedly considering cooperation to target groups such as the al-Nusra Front, which in July 2016 announced that it had split from al-Qaeda and was rebranding itself Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (Front for the Conquest of the Levant).[16] When the September ceasefire was signed, the aim was that after seven days of continuous adherence to the ceasefire and humanitarian access, the USA and Russia would establish a Joint Implementation Centre (JIC) to target IS and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham.[17] By the end of the year, however,

[12] Abboud, S., 'Syria War: what you need to know about the ceasefire', Al Jazeera, 28 Feb. 2016.

[13] Al Jazeera, 'Syria ceasefire comes into effect under US-Russia deal', 13 Sep. 2016.

[14] Gladstone, R. and Sengupta, S., 'Unrelenting assault on Aleppo is called worst yet in Syria's civil war', *New York Times*, 26 Sep. 2016; and Toumaj, A., 'IRGC Qods force chief spotted in Aleppo', *Long War Journal*, 18 Dec. 2016.

[15] Walker, S. and Shaheen, K., 'Syria ceasefire appears to hold after rivals sign Russia-backed deal', *The Guardian*, 30 Dec. 2016.

[16] Rogin, J., 'Obama proposes new military partnership with Russia in Syria', *Washington Post*, 30 June 2016.

[17] Remarks by US Secretary of State John Kerry with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura in Geneva, Switzerland, 9 Sep. 2016. See Associated Press, 'AP Exclusive: Text of Syria cease-fire deal', 22 Sep. 2016.

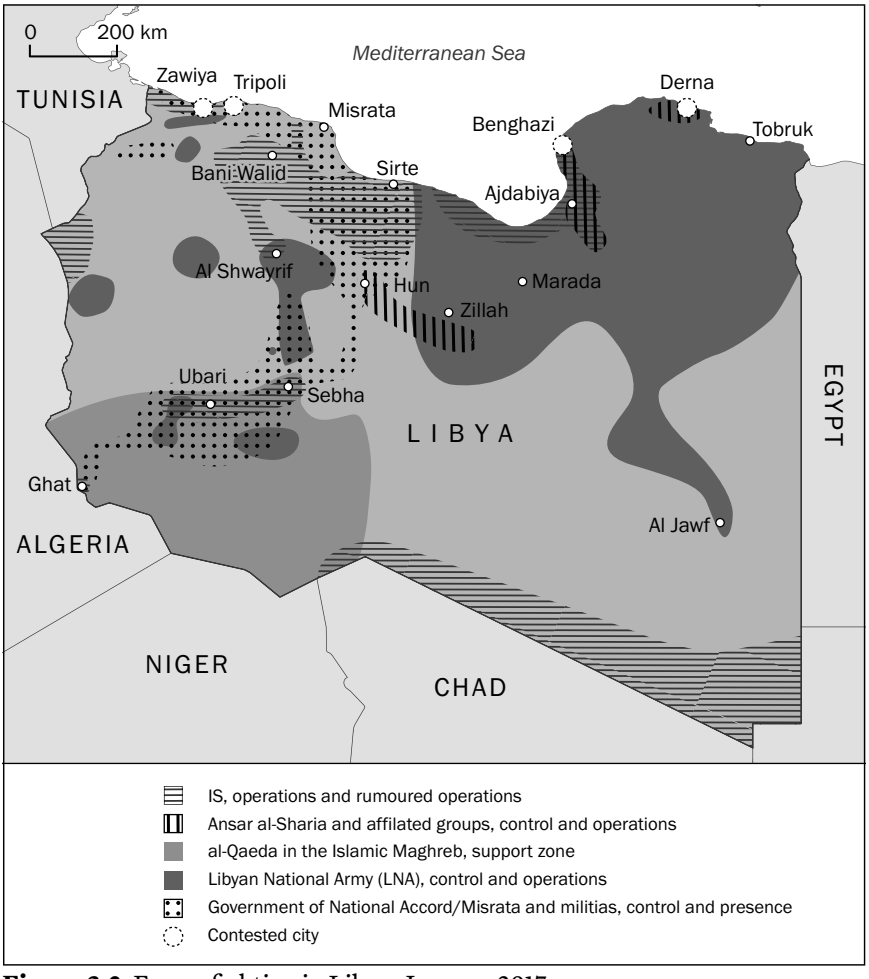

Figure 3.2. Forces fighting in Libya, January 2017

Credit: Hugo Ahlenius, Nordpil, <https://nordpil.se/>.

Source: American Enterprise Institute, 'Critical Threats: Fighting Forces in Libya, January 2017', 18 Jan. 207, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/fighting-forces-in-libya-january-2017>.

the USA had been sidelined in the regional peace talks, and Iran, Russia and Turkey were at the forefront of discussions about Syria and Assad's future.[18]

[18] Osborn, A. and Coskun, O., 'Russia, Turkey, Iran eye dicing Syria into zones of influence', Reuters, 28 Dec. 2016.

Libya

In 2011, a multi-state coalition intervened in the civil war in Libya. France and the United Kingdom were the effective leaders of the action, with the USA in a supporting role. For a time it was generally depicted as a brief, relatively restrained and successful military intervention.[19] In 2016 it was reappraised. US President Barack Obama criticized the lack of follow-up by the UK and France, and effectively disowned the intervention.[20] A British parliamentary report was more comprehensive. As well as the lack of follow-up, it noted inadequate political analysis and understanding of the Libyan situation in the preparatory period. It also noted a shift in focus from protecting civilians to 'an opportunist policy of regime change', with no strategy for supporting long-term change in Libya.[21]

This less favourable retrospective view of the 2011 intervention reflected a mixture of disillusionment and shock at the instability, chaos and conflict that ensued. While there are no precise statistics, a widely used estimate at the start of 2016 was that there were some 2000 militia groups of differing sizes and shifting loyalties operating in Libya.[22] Many of these groups were part of larger coalitions (see figure 3.2).

Nonetheless, by some measures 2016 showed some progress towards normality: a UN-supported Government of National Accord was formed, oil production restarted and, due in part to US airstrikes, IS had been ousted from its main base in Sirte by the end of the year.[23] However, political allegiances remained unstable and the country dangerous.[24]

During 2016, three groups claimed to be the government.[25] This chaotic situation was created when the General National Congress (GNC), which was elected in 2012, refused to disband following the election of the Council of Deputies (COD) in June 2014. The latter elections were characterized by a voter turnout of only 18 per cent and later declared invalid by the Supreme Court. Following the June 2014 elections, the GNC and the COD

[19] See e.g. Spencer, R., 'Libya: David Cameron and Nicolas Sarkozy receive heroes' welcome in Tripoli', *Daily Telegraph*, 15 Sep. 2011; and Denyer, S., 'Sarkozy, Cameron vow to support Libya, help find Gaddafi', *Washington Post*, 15 Sep. 2011.

[20] Kamm, N., 'Obama blasts Cameron, Sarkozy for Libya "mess"', France24, 7 Mar. 2016.

[21] British House of Commons, House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, Libya: Examination of Intervention and Collapse and the UK's Future Policy Options, Government Response to the Committee's Third Report of Session 2016–17, HC 834, 25 Nov. 2016.

[22] BBC News, 'Guide to Libyan militias', 11 Jan. 2016.

[23] Razzouk, N., 'Libya's oil production set to reach three-year high by December', Bloomberg, 12 Oct. 2016; Libya Channel, 'US launch bombing campaign at request of GNA to defeat IS in Sirte', 2 Aug. 2016; Al Arabiya, 'US air strikes pound Libya's Sirte to oust ISIS militants', 17 Oct. 2016; and Khadder, K., Karadsheh, J. and Sterling, J., 'Libyan forces grab last ISIS swath in Sirte', CNN, 6 Dec. 2016.

[24] See Muntasser, E. Z., 'The coming fall of Libya's GNA', *Foreign Affairs*, 6 Sep. 2016.

[25] Toaldo, M., 'Political actors', *A Quick Guide to Libya's Main Players*, European Council on Foreign Relations.

both established 'governments', seated, respectively, in Tripoli and Tobruk. Their unresolved rivalry fostered national chaos. Protracted negotiations between them with UN support led in December 2015 to the Libyan Political Agreement (LPA) to form the Government of National Accord (GNA). The LPA was backed by the UN Security Council, which adopted Resolution 2259 that 'explicitly delegitimized all parallel institutions' outside the LPA.[26] The GNA came into being in March 2016, but the COD also remained in existence, supported by effective military forces in the form of the Libyan National Army. For a brief period, a GNC group that had not supported the LPA became the third claimant for government status, forming the Government of National Salvation under the former prime minister. It disbanded the following month in favour of the GNA.

Soon after its creation, and despite success against IS growing more likely, the GNA faced political and economic crises. In July, four GNA ministers—all former COD figures—resigned.[27] In October, the World Bank warned of imminent economic collapse. The USA and the UK, both strong supporters of the GNA, convened economic crisis talks in November.[28] In December, fighting escalated between forces loyal to the GNA and the Libyan National Army.[29] At the end of 2016 Libya was still mired in the chaotic aftermath of the civil war and international intervention of 2011, and still seeking a pathway to stability and security for its citizens.

Regional relations: the Iranian–Saudi relationship

The interstate relationship that is the highest profile, the most complex and the most dangerous in the MENA region is between Iran and Saudi Arabia. It is noteworthy that although the Israel–Palestine conflict remains unresolved, and could at some point return to the centre of regional preoccupations, Israel's relations with neighbouring Arab states are no longer central issues in the major regional conflicts. Another remarkable development is the displacement of Egypt, which was once the predominant Arab power, by the much wealthier Saudi Arabia.

The Iranian–Saudi relationship that is now the key dividing line in the region's international politics is often interpreted as a product of the division of Islam into its Sunni and Shia branches. Grounds for this interpretation

[26] United Nations Security Council Resolution 2259, 23 Dec. 2015; and United Nations, Security Council, Final report of the Panel of Experts on Libya established pursuant to resolution 1973 (2011), 9 Mar. 2016, S/2016/209.

[27] Middle East Eye, 'Libya's unity government suffers blow as four ministers resign', 1 July 2016.

[28] *Deutsche Welle*, 'World Bank warns Libya faces economic collapse', 19 Oct, 2016; and Wintour, P., 'Libya's government faces forced currency devaluation', *The Guardian*, 20 Nov. 2016.

[29] Ali, J., 'Libya: Haftar's forces bomb militia group loyal to GNA', Middle East Confidential, 9 Dec. 2016.

are to be found in the religiosity of both states.[30] Iran is a theocratic democracy with a constitution that ensures that the Supreme Leader will be a Shia Muslim Ayatollah. The ruling Saud family in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has a long and close relationship with the Wahhabi interpretation of Sunni Islam and the Saudi kingdom has the role of the guardian of Mecca, the birthplace of Islam. Nonetheless, the Iranian–Saudi relationship should be understood to at least an equal degree as a relatively straightforward contestation for regional power. While the form the relationship takes and the alliances that are possible for each state to generate are to a considerable extent shaped by religiously defined allegiances, they are also culturally, historically and nationally defined (e.g. Arab against Persian as much as Sunni against Shia)—while strategic objectives and trajectories are determined by interests. Thus, Iran's major regional ally is Syria, which is governed by an elite group of Alawi, who are neither part of mainstream Shia Islam nor of the majority Sunni branch of Islam. Indeed, many Sunnis would deny that the Alawi are Muslim at all, an issue that has been a part of domestic opposition to the Syrian Government for over 50 years. Iran has also had what might be thought of as straightforward interest- and security-based reasons for a close alliance with Syria, however, both during the years of Saddam Hussein's rule in Iraq and in the light of the civil war and chaos since his overthrow.

While the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran remained difficult and tense in 2016, there were no dramatic increases in tensions. Concerns about the direction of Iran's nuclear technology programme were addressed by the July 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), commonly known as the Iran nuclear agreement; the agreement reached 'implementation day' in January 2016 when the International Atomic Energy Agency verified that Iran had carried out the nuclear-related measures it had agreed to.[31] The JCPOA nonetheless remained politically controversial, openly opposed by the government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel and contentious in US politics, as the presidential primaries and election campaign showed. Saudi Arabia's policy appeared to shift towards pragmatic acceptance of a done deal, but if the agreement is weakened by incomplete implementation the Iran nuclear issue could easily re-emerge as a problem in regional security.

Yemen

From Saudi Arabia's perspective, one major issue that exacerbates poor Saudi–Iranian relations is Yemen's civil war, which has been fought intermit-

[30] On the role of Islamist claims in conflict see chapter 2, section III, in this volume.
[31] On JCPOA implementation see chapter 12, section IV, in this volume.

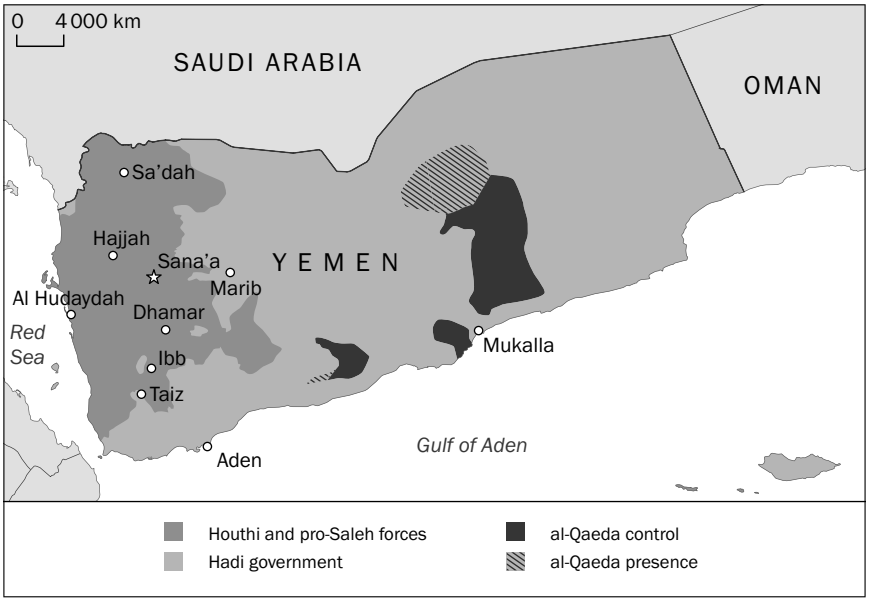

Figure 3.3. Yemen, areas of control, October 2016

Credit: Hugo Ahlenius, Nordpil, <https://nordpil.se/>.

Sources: Risk Intelligence, 'Military Situation Map of Yemen', 10 Oct. 2016, <https://twitter.com/riskstaff/status/785817894525345793>; and BBC News, 'Yemen crisis: Who is fighting whom?', 28 Mar. 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29319423>.

tently since 2004.[32] In early 2015 Saudi Arabia launched air attacks against the Houthi insurgents. It has been supported throughout 2015 and 2016 by a coalition in which the United Arab Emirates has played the second-largest role, with further contributions from (in descending order of the number of aircraft committed) Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar and Sudan, and probably Egypt.[33] The USA provided military support in the form of targeting intelligence, munitions and in-air refuelling, and conducted 32 confirmed drone strikes in 2016, as well as further actions that were reported but not confirmed.[34] The drone strikes were mostly part of a separate campaign against al-Qaeda, rather than part of the anti-Houthi intervention.

The aim of Saudi Arabia's intervention was to weaken the Houthi insurgents and strengthen the government under President Hadi, which had by

[32] Al Batati, S., 'Who are the Houthis in Yemen?' Al Jazeera, 29 Mar. 2015.

[33] Al Jazeera, 'Military action in Yemen: who's for, who's against?', 27 Mar. 2015; and Gambrell, J., 'Here are the members of the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen and what they're contributing', *Business Insider*, 30 Mar. 2015.

[34] See Mazzetti, M. and Schmitt, E., 'Quiet support for Saudis entangles US in Yemen', *New York Times*, 13 Mar. 2016; Mazzetti, M. and Almosawa, S., 'Support for Saudi Arabia gives US direct role in Yemen conflict', *New York Times*, 24 Aug. 2016; Kerr, S., 'US reviews support for Saudi-led coalition in Yemen after 140 killed', *Financial Times*, 9 Oct. 2016; and Bureau of Investigative Journalism, 'Yemen: reported US covert actions 2016', [n.d.].

then been forced out of the capital, Sana'a. President Hadi's position is also assailed by forces loyal to former President Saleh and, separately, by the forces of al-Qaeda Emirate in Yemen, formerly known as al-Qaeda in the Arabian peninsula, which have established predominance in much of the sparsely populated Yemeni hinterland.[35] The conflict in Yemen is largely fought out in the western part of the state (see figure 3.3).

While the Saudi authorities apparently expected a quick victory, Saudi Arabia's motives and objectives for the intervention were unclear.[36] Indeed, it was not clear that the civil war and instability in Yemen constituted a clear or present danger to Saudi Arabia. Yemen is a low-income country with widespread poverty and acute water insecurity. It faces a series of problems that have hampered socio-economic development, including rivalries between political groups.[37]

By the end of 2016, the Saudi intervention had become associated with a major humanitarian crisis but had not brought peace or stability to the country—or inflicted decisive setbacks on the Houthi forces.[38] Saudi authorities and some commentators attribute this failure to Iranian support for the insurgents; the phrase 'Iranian-backed Houthis' entered the political vocabulary. Yet there is little evidence of major Iranian military support for the Houthis, which would be hard to deliver in the form of either military personnel or equipment.[39] The Zaydi Shia of northern Yemen, who form the Houthi insurrection, are of a different sub-branch of Islam from the Shia of Iran. While Iran may be providing some support to the Houthis, it is unlikely to be on anywhere near the scale provided to the Syrian Government.

The focus shifts

Conflicts in the MENA region have consistently been high-priority items on the international political agenda since the end of World War II, but during that time the focus of concern has shifted. Israel was a major focal point for many years: first because of the Arab–Israeli wars and then because of the Israel–Palestine conflict. Lebanon was a key conflict in the 1970s and 1980s, as was the Iran–Iraq War in the 1980s. From the end of the latter war in 1988 and into the 21st century, conflict with (and in) Iraq was a major focus. There were also other wars that received less international political attention, such as in North Yemen in the 1960s and the war for Kurdish autonomy in northern Iraq from the 1960s through to the 1990s.

[35] South Front, 'Military situation in Yemen on January 10, 2017 (map update)', 10 Jan. 2017.
[36] Al-Rasheed, M., 'King Salman needs total victory in Yemen', *Al-Monitor*, 8 May 2015.
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At the end of 2016, Israel–Palestine is less of a priority for international diplomacy, let alone intervention, than several other conflict arenas. None of the issues in the Israel–Palestine conflict has been resolved. Meanwhile, fighting continues in Iraq, but that country has also moved below Syria in the hierarchy of immediate international concern. Although Iran and the USA have wholly incompatible views about the Syrian conflict and fight actively on opposite sides of the complex war, in Iraq there has been tacit and sometimes explicit cooperation on the effort to destroy IS and, more broadly, to bring peace and security to the war-torn country. Whether this will survive the new US administration is unclear. The region remains full of issues and conflicts that are of major concern for international peace and security.