

## V. Armed conflict in the Middle East and North Africa

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There were seven active armed conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa in 2017: Egypt, Iraq, Israel and Palestine, Libya, Syria, Turkey, and Yemen. Many of these conflicts are interconnected and involve regional and international powers as well as numerous substate actors.<sup>1</sup> Key regional developments in 2017 included the continuing fallout from the Arab Spring; the regional rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia; and the territorial losses of the Islamic State group. This section first examines these developments and then gives accounts of each of the armed conflicts in 2017.

### Key general developments

#### *Continuing fallout from the Arab Spring*

The legacy of the Arab Spring continued to shape events in the Middle East and North Africa in 2017. The uprisings that started in Tunisia in 2010 and rapidly spread across much of the Arab world failed to flower into the establishment of peaceful democracies. Civil discord, violence and war continued in Libya, Syria and Yemen. A fragile state of stability had returned to much of Egypt, but armed conflict persisted in the Sinai peninsula and difficult socio-economic conditions continued for most of the population. The oil-producing Arab states of the Gulf continued to use their financial resources to largely resist the wave of change. In Jordan and Morocco some limited reforms took place without fundamentally altering the status quo.<sup>2</sup> Only in Tunisia have the protests triggered consensual, society-led reforms.<sup>3</sup>

#### *Regional rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia*

Iran and Saudi Arabia are locked in a power struggle that some commentators have described as a new regional cold war.<sup>4</sup> In 2017 the Iranian–Saudi Arabian proxy confrontation flared in Qatar and Lebanon (but remained confined to diplomacy, sanctions and politics) and continued in the active armed conflicts in Iraq, Syria and Yemen. In June Saudi Arabia led efforts to force Qatar to abandon its alleged support for terrorism and Iran. Together

<sup>1</sup> Hiltermann, J., *Tackling the MENA Region's Intersecting Conflicts* (International Crisis Group: Brussels, 22 Dec. 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Delegation of the European Union to Jordan, 'The European Union supports Jordan on political and environmental reforms with €115 million', Press release, 12 Feb. 2017; and Saleh, H., 'Rabat pushes modernity as Morocco's political reforms stall', *Financial Times*, 3 Nov. 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Muasher, M., 'Nascent hopes', IMF, *Finance and Development*, vol. 54, no. 4 (Dec. 2017).

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. Santini, R. H., 'A new regional cold war in the Middle East and North Africa: Regional security complex theory revisited', *International Spectator*, vol. 52, no. 4 (2017), pp. 93–111. See also chapter 1, section II, in this volume.

with Bahrain, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Yemen, Saudi Arabia broke off diplomatic ties and closed transport links with Qatar.<sup>5</sup> In October Bahrain called for Qatar's membership of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to be suspended.<sup>6</sup> In December the UAE announced the formation of a new political and military alliance with Saudi Arabia.<sup>7</sup>

Reform initiatives in both Iran and Saudi Arabia and protests in Iran in December introduced new and unpredictable variables.<sup>8</sup> Overall, however, with so many flashpoints and so little diplomacy, the risk of a broader confrontation between a Saudi Arabian-led bloc of predominantly Sunni states and groups and an Iranian-led bloc of predominantly Shia states and groups remained high at the end of 2017.

### *Territorial losses by the Islamic State*

Iraq and Syria both declared victory over the Islamic State in December 2017 after a year in which their national armies, a range of external allies and various local forces drove Islamic State fighters out of all the towns and villages that once made up its self-proclaimed caliphate.<sup>9</sup> According to the United States-led global coalition to defeat Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, fewer than 1000 Islamic State fighters remained in Iraq and Syria at the end of the year.<sup>10</sup> However, the threat from the Islamic State remains, both as a dangerously resilient force in Iraq and Syria (see figure 2.2) and more widely as a result of its geographic refocusing, in particular on its affiliates in Libya, the Philippines, Sinai and West Africa, and greater emphasis on directing, enabling and inspiring acts of terrorism.<sup>11</sup>

In order to prevent another insurgency or state failure, the military victory against the Islamic State will need to be followed up with strategies for polit-

<sup>5</sup> Hiltermann, J., 'Qatar punched above its weight: Now it's paying the price', *New York Times*, 18 June 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Khan, G. A., 'Bahrain calls for suspension of Qatar's GCC membership', Arab News, 31 Oct. 2017. For a brief description of the GCC see annex B, section II, in this volume. Its 6 members are Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

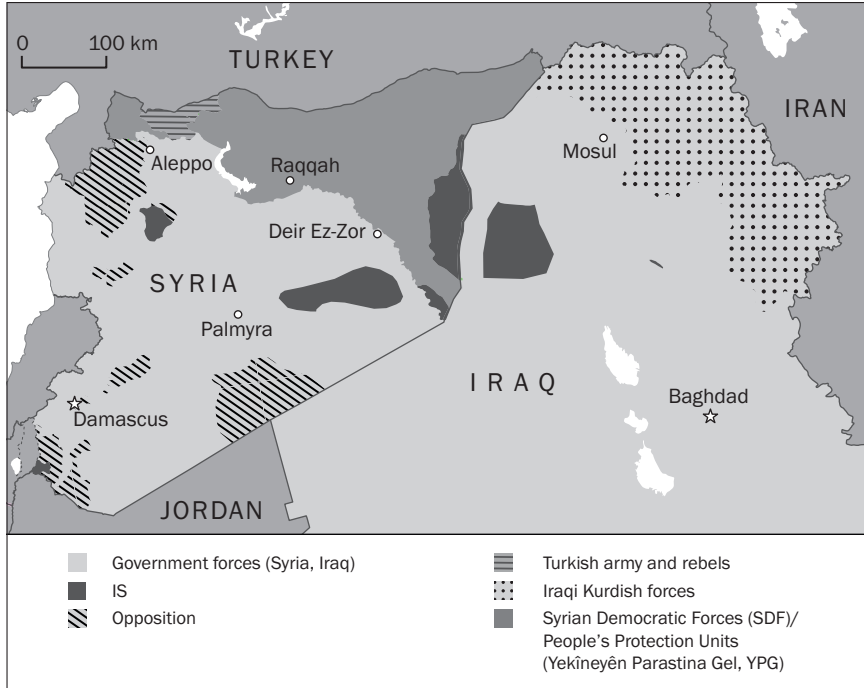
<sup>7</sup> Wintour, P., 'UAE announces new Saudi alliance that could reshape Gulf relations', *The Guardian*, 5 Dec. 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Erdbrink, T., 'Rouhani wins re-election in Iran by a wide margin', *New York Times*, 20 May 2017; 'Iran protests: Violence on third day of demonstrations', BBC News, 30 Dec. 2017; Dehghan, S. K., 'Rouhani acknowledges Iranian discontent as protests continue', *The Guardian*, 31 Dec. 2017; Chulov, M. and Borger, J., 'Saudi king ousts nephew to name son as first in line to throne', *The Guardian*, 21 June 2017; and 'Muhammad bin Salman has swept aside those who challenge his power', *The Economist*, 9 Nov. 2017.

<sup>9</sup> On Islamic State, its goals, operations and affiliates and the international military campaign to defeat the group see Davis, I., 'The aims, objectives and modus operandi of the Islamic State and the international response', *SIPRI Yearbook 2016*, pp. 22–39; and Davis, I., 'The Islamic State in 2016: A failing "caliphate" but a growing transnational threat?', *SIPRI Yearbook 2017*, pp. 89–104.

<sup>10</sup> 'Less than 1,000 IS fighters remain in Iraq and Syria, coalition says', Reuters, 27 Dec. 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Coker, M., Schmitt, E. and Callimachi, R., 'With loss of its Caliphate, ISIS may return to guerilla roots', *New York Times*, 18 Oct. 2017.



**Figure 2.2.** Armed factions in Iraq and Syria, January 2018

*Credit:* Hugo Ahlenius, Nordpil.

*Sources:* Live Universal Awareness Map (Liveuamap), cited in ‘What foreign powers want from the Syrian war’, Deutsche Welle, 22 Feb. 2018.

ical and economic reconstruction in both Iraq and Syria.<sup>12</sup> Addressing the problem of the Islamic State’s foreign fighters returning to their home countries, both within and beyond the region, will be another key challenge.<sup>13</sup>

### Armed conflict in Egypt

Egypt is the most populous Arab country and has played a central role in the politics of the Middle East in modern times. In 2011, after a presidency that lasted almost 30 years, President Hosni Mubarak was toppled by the Arab Spring protests. In July 2013 his successor, President Mohamed Morsi, was

<sup>12</sup> See e.g. Culbertson, S. and Robinson, L., *Making Victory Count After Defeating ISIS: Stabilization Challenges in Mosul and Beyond* (RAND Corporation: Santa Monica, CA, 2017); International Crisis Group (ICG), *Counterterrorism Pitfalls: What the US fight Against ISIS and al-Qaeda Should Avoid*, Special Report no. 3 (ICG: Brussels, 22 Mar. 2017); and Crocker, R. (chair), *Report of the Task Force on the Future of Iraq: Achieving Long-term Stability to Ensure the Defeat of ISIS* (Atlantic Council: Washington, DC, 31 May 2017).

<sup>13</sup> ‘5,600 “have returned home” from ISIL-held areas’, Al Jazeera, 25 Oct. 2017; and Schmitt, E., ‘Defeated in Syria, ISIS fighters held in camps still pose a threat’, *New York Times*, 24 Jan. 2018.

removed from office in a popularly backed military coup, and Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, a retired field marshal and former defence minister, was elected president in May 2014.<sup>14</sup>

An insurgency erupted in northern Sinai in 2013, with attacks focused on the security forces. However, after the militants in Sinai embraced the Islamic State in 2014 (the local Islamic State affiliate is the Islamic State–Sinai Province), there were large-scale attacks on civilian targets, including the bombing of a Russian airliner in 2015 that killed all 224 passengers and crew.<sup>15</sup> A state of emergency has existed in northern Sinai since October 2014 and at the end of 2016 the insurgency in the region was Egypt's main internal security threat.<sup>16</sup>

In April 2017 the Islamic State increased its attacks, particularly against Coptic Christians. On 9 April, 48 people were killed in two separate attacks on Coptic churches, prompting the government to declare a nationwide state of emergency.<sup>17</sup> The Islamic State attacks on Christians continued in May when the group launched its first major attack in southern Egypt, which left at least 29 dead.<sup>18</sup> The Egyptian Government responded by carrying out air strikes on what it alleged were the training camps of the Islamic State attackers in Libya and by intensifying repression at home.<sup>19</sup> Reports also suggest that anti-Islamic State cooperation between Israel and Egypt in Sinai included Israeli air strikes against the Islamic State inside Egypt.<sup>20</sup>

In April and May 2017 several local tribes in northern Sinai—including the two largest, al-Tarabin and al-Sawarka—announced that they would join the fight against the Islamic State.<sup>21</sup> In July at least 23 soldiers were killed when suicide car bombs claimed by the Islamic State hit two military checkpoints in Sinai.<sup>22</sup> In November, in a further escalation of the conflict, the Islamic State killed more than 300 people in a Sufi mosque in northern Sinai.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>14</sup> 'Egypt country profile', BBC News, 6 Nov. 2017.

<sup>15</sup> 'Russian plane crash: What we know', BBC News, 17 Nov. 2015.

<sup>16</sup> Agence France-Presse, 'Egypt declares state of emergency in Sinai after checkpoint bombing', *The Guardian*, 25 Oct. 2014.

<sup>17</sup> 'Egypt's Coptic churches hit by deadly blasts on Palm Sunday', BBC News, 9 Apr. 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Michaelson, R., 'Egypt launches raids in Libya after attack on Coptic Christians kills 26', *The Guardian*, 26 May 2017.

<sup>19</sup> Aboulenein, A., 'Egypt detains ex-presidential candidate, latest in arrest series', Reuters, 23 May 2017; and El-Shimy, Y. and Dworkin, A., *Egypt on the Edge: How Europe Can Avoid Another Crisis in Egypt*, Policy Brief no. 218 (European Council on Foreign Relations: London, June 2017).

<sup>20</sup> Kirkpatrick, D. D., 'Secret alliance: Israel carries out airstrikes in Egypt, with Cairo's OK', *New York Times*, 3 Feb. 2018.

<sup>21</sup> Mikhail, G., 'Sinai tribes take up arms against IS', *Al-Monitor*, 15 May 2017.

<sup>22</sup> Associated Press, 'At least 23 Egyptian soldiers killed in attack on Sinai checkpoint', *The Guardian*, 7 July 2017.

<sup>23</sup> Walsh, D. and Kirkpatrick, D. D., 'In Egypt, furious retaliation but failing strategy in Sinai', *New York Times*, 25 Nov. 2017.

Another attack on Coptic Christians outside Cairo killed at least nine people on 29 December.<sup>24</sup>

At the end of the year, Egypt was facing its worst human rights situation in decades and open civil war in Sinai.<sup>25</sup> In advance of the presidential elections due in March 2018, the government had introduced a host of repressive laws, reinstated a state of emergency and repressed all forms of dissent.<sup>26</sup>

### Armed conflict in Iraq

The mainly Shia-led governments that have held power in Iraq since 2003 have struggled to provide security amid high levels of sectarian violence. In 2014 the Islamic State seized large parts of Iraq, which it held until it was driven out of most of the country in 2016.<sup>27</sup> The armed conflict to dislodge the Islamic State from its remaining pockets of territory in northern Iraq, especially the cities of Mosul and Tal Afar, continued in 2017 (see figure 2.2). Underlying sectarian tensions in Iraq, especially between Sunni and Shia groups, and the fragmented nature of the anti-Islamic State forces added to this challenge. In addition to the Iraqi Army, supported by the US-led international coalition, other groups involved in fighting to retain territory included the Peshmerga forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF, largely Shia paramilitaries supported by Iran) and local tribal Sunni forces.<sup>28</sup>

The battle for Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, commenced in September 2016 and was estimated to involve 54 000 soldiers in the Iraqi Army, 14 000 PMF fighters, 40 000 Peshmerga and 500 US troops against an estimated 5000–9000 Islamic State fighters.<sup>29</sup> The offensive to recapture western Mosul began on 19 February 2017, but progress was slow as troops encountered fierce resistance.<sup>30</sup> The battle for central Mosul began in June and the city was finally recaptured from the Islamic State in July, and Tal Afar and Hawijah some weeks later.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>24</sup> 'Egypt attack: Gunman targets Coptic Christians in church and shop', BBC News, 29 Dec. 2017.

<sup>25</sup> Luther, P., 'Stronger EU–Egypt ties must not disregard human rights', EU Observer, 24 July 2017.

<sup>26</sup> 'Human Rights Watch, Egypt: Untamed repression', 18 Jan. 2018.

<sup>27</sup> On the conflict in Iraq see chapters on the armed conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa in *SIPRI Yearbook 2015*, *SIPRI Yearbook 2016* and *SIPRI Yearbook 2017* and on the Islamic State in *SIPRI Yearbook 2016* and *SIPRI Yearbook 2017*.

<sup>28</sup> Mansour, R. and Van Veen, E., 'Iraq's competing security forces after the battle for Mosul', War on the Rocks, 25 Aug. 2017.

<sup>29</sup> Hume, T., 'Battle for Mosul: How ISIS is fighting to keep its Iraqi stronghold', CNN, 25 Oct. 2016; and Wright, R., 'The secret eye inside Mosul', *New Yorker*, 27 Oct. 2016.

<sup>30</sup> Karimi, F., Alkhshali, H. and Atassi, B., 'Iraq starts operation to drive ISIS out of West Mosul', CNN, 20 Feb. 2017; and 'How the battle for Mosul unfolded', BBC News, 10 July 2017.

<sup>31</sup> Al Ansary, K., Abu-Nasr, D. and Alexander, C., 'Honking horns hail the liberation of Mosul from Islamic State', Bloomberg, 10 July 2017; and 'IS conflict: Iraq launches ground offensive in Tal Afar', BBC News, 20 Aug. 2017.

The UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) reported that at least 2521 civilians were killed in the battle for Mosul. Most of these deaths were attributed to the activities of the Islamic State, including executions of at least 741 people, but the report also attributes 461 civilian deaths to air strikes.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, Amnesty International, while accusing both sides of violating international law in the battle, pointed to the heavy use of explosive weapons with wide-area effects and improvised rocket-assisted munitions by Iraqi forces and the US-led coalition, and the failure of the Iraqi Government to take necessary precautions to prevent the loss of civilian lives.<sup>33</sup> There were also allegations that the Islamic State used chemical weapons in Mosul.<sup>34</sup>

Iraqi forces launched new operations in Anbar governorate in October, and in early December the Iraqi Government formally declared that the Islamic State had been driven from all the territory it had previously held.<sup>35</sup> However, having initially grown out of an insurgent movement, the Islamic State—or new offshoots from it that are yet to emerge—seems likely to continue to be a threat for many years to come. Iraq also has a daunting task of reconstruction and reintegration in the areas once held by the group—especially in Mosul, which suffered widespread destruction—and about 3 million Iraqis were still displaced as of 31 December 2016.<sup>36</sup> After the military defeat of the Islamic State, Iraq's main challenges are to achieve genuine political reconciliation between and within the Kurdish, Shia Arab and Sunni Arab communities, including the dismantlement of all militias, and to build more resilient, independent and inclusive state institutions.<sup>37</sup>

As part of the process of uniting the country against the Islamic State, the central government and the autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government signed an agreement in December 2014 to share the country's oil wealth and military resources. However, some territorial disputes between the KRG and the central government remained unresolved, especially over

<sup>32</sup> UN Assistance Mission for Iraq and Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, 'Report on the protection of civilians in the context of the Ninewa operations and the retaking of Mosul City, 17 October 2016–10 July 2017', Nov. 2017.

<sup>33</sup> Amnesty International, *At Any Cost: The Civilian Catastrophe in West Mosul, Iraq* (Amnesty International: London, July 2017).

<sup>34</sup> On the allegations see chapter 8, section II, in this volume.

<sup>35</sup> Abdul-Ahad, G., 'After the liberation of Mosul, an orgy of killing', *The Guardian*, 21 Nov. 2017; and Graham-Harrison, E., 'Iraq formally declares end to fight against Islamic State', *The Guardian*, 9 Dec. 2017.

<sup>36</sup> Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 'Iraq: Mid-year update 2017 (January–June)', [n.d.], Videmsek, B., 'Mosul was destroyed to "save" it from Islamic State: Can its inhabitants return?', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 Dec. 2017; and Westcott, T., 'Donors talk big on Iraq reconstruction, but Mosul residents go it alone', IRIN, 15 Feb. 2018.

<sup>37</sup> Sayigh, Y., 'The crisis of the Iraqi state', Carnegie Middle East Center, 23 Nov. 2017; and Mansour, R., *Iraq after the Fall of ISIS: The Struggle for the State*, Research Paper (Chatham House–Royal Institute of International Affairs: London, July 2017).

areas secured by Kurdish forces during fighting against the Islamic State in 2016, including Kirkuk, adjacent oil fields and parts of Nineveh governorate. Tensions increased at the end of 2016 as the KRG set out plans to negotiate independence for Kurdistan.

The KRG pressed ahead with a referendum on independence from Iraq on 25 September 2017, ignoring requests to delay or cancel it from within the region, the Iraqi Government and, among others, both Iran and Turkey, which have their own Kurdish minorities.<sup>38</sup> Despite the fact that over 92 per cent of the votes were in favour of independence, the Iraqi Government refused to recognize the result and threatened the region with economic and political isolation unless it was annulled. Internationally, only Israel offered unequivocal support, while most of the KRG's other Western allies—most importantly the USA—publicly supported the preservation of Iraq's territorial integrity.<sup>39</sup> Four days after the referendum, the Iraqi Government banned international flights to and from Iraqi Kurdistan and began to prepare a military offensive to forcibly take back Kirkuk and the neighbouring oil fields, as well as other disputed territories.<sup>40</sup> Despite some limited clashes between Iraqi Government and Kurdish forces, most Kurdish forces withdrew to pre-2014 positions without incident.<sup>41</sup>

With few other options, on 25 October 2017 the KRG offered to suspend its push for independence and called for dialogue. Nonetheless, the Iraqi Government continued to insist that the KRG declare the referendum null and void. On 29 October the region's president, Masoud Barzani, resigned.<sup>42</sup> Despite the KRG's statement in mid-November that it would respect a ruling by the Supreme Federal Court that no Iraqi province can secede, the KRG and the Iraqi Government remained deadlocked at the end of the year.<sup>43</sup>

### **The Israeli–Palestinian conflict**

While news of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict has been largely overshadowed in recent years by other conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa, it remained potent and dangerous during 2017. A notable display of Palestinian unity across the Green Line—the internationally recognized border separating Israel from the occupied Palestinian territories—occurred in July

<sup>38</sup> International Institute for Strategic Studies, 'The repercussions of the Iraqi Kurdistan independence referendum', *Strategic Comments*, vol. 23, no. 10 (Nov. 2017), pp. iii–v.

<sup>39</sup> International Institute for Strategic Studies (note 38).

<sup>40</sup> 'Iraq imposes flight ban on Kurdish region after poll', Al Jazeera, 29 Sep. 2017.

<sup>41</sup> 'Iraq takes disputed areas as Kurds "withdraw to 2014 lines"', BBC News, 18 Oct. 2017.

<sup>42</sup> 'Iraqi Kurdish leader Massoud Barzani to step down', BBC News, 29 Oct. 2017; and International Crisis Group (ICG), *Oil and Borders: How to Fix Iraq's Kurdish Crisis*, Crisis Group Middle East Briefing no. 55 (ICG: Brussels, 17 Oct. 2017).

<sup>43</sup> Rasheed, A. and Jalabi, R., 'Abadi says Iraq to act soon over border areas in stand-off with Kurds', Reuters, 14 Nov. 2017.



2017. Following the killing of two Israeli policemen near the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Eastern Jerusalem on the 14 July, the Israeli authorities installed metal detectors at the entrance to the site.<sup>44</sup> However, massive demonstrations by Palestinians led to the removal of the metal detectors on 24 July.<sup>45</sup>

On 6 December 2017 the conflict returned to centre stage when US President Donald J. Trump formally recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and announced that the US embassy would move there from Tel Aviv.<sup>46</sup> All other countries recognize Tel Aviv as the capital, and none recognizes Israel's annexation of East Jerusalem. The declaration triggered protests by Palestinians throughout the West Bank, Gaza and Jerusalem. Four Palestinians were killed in clashes with Israeli security forces, rocket launches from Gaza to Israel increased and the Israeli Air Force carried out air strikes on targets in Gaza.<sup>47</sup>

Israel routinely describes Jerusalem as its 'united and eternal' capital, while the Palestinians insist that East Jerusalem must be the capital of a future independent Palestinian state. The international view, accepted by all previous US administrations, is that the city's status must be resolved through negotiations. On 13 December a meeting of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in Turkey responded to President Trump's move by formally declaring East Jerusalem the Palestinian capital, while in a speech at the meeting Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas stated that he no longer accepted any role for the USA in the peace process.<sup>48</sup>

On 18 December the USA used its UN Security Council veto for the first time in six years to block a resolution that would have indirectly criticized the US decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.<sup>49</sup> On 20 December the UN General Assembly voted 128 to 9, with 35 abstentions, for a non-binding (and therefore largely symbolic) resolution demanding that the USA rescind its recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Zalzburg, O., 'Palestinian activism reawakens in Jerusalem after holy esplanade attack', Commentary, International Crisis Group, 19 July 2017.

<sup>45</sup> Beaumont, P., 'Israel removes metal detectors from holy site in Jerusalem', *The Guardian*, 25 July 2017.

<sup>46</sup> Landler, M., Halbfinger, D. M. and Kershner, I., 'Did Trump kill-off a two-state solution? He says no, Palestinians say yes', *New York Times*, 7 Dec. 2017; and Chan, S., 'Nearly every former US ambassador to Israel disagrees with Trump's Jerusalem decision', *New York Times*, 7 Dec. 2017.

<sup>47</sup> Zalzburg, O. and Thrall, N., 'Counting the costs of US recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital', International Crisis Group, 7 Dec. 2017; 'Palestinians killed in protests against Jerusalem move', Al Jazeera, 15 Dec. 2017; and Shehadeh, R., 'The power politics behind Trump's Jerusalem declaration', *New Yorker*, 26 Dec. 2017.

<sup>48</sup> Bilginsoy, Z. and El Deeb, S., 'Palestinian president says no role for US in peace process', Arab News, 13 Dec. 2017; and Gall, C., 'Muslim leaders declare East Jerusalem the Palestinian capital', *New York Times*, 13 Dec. 2017.

<sup>49</sup> United Nations, Security Council, 'Permanent member vetoes Security Council draft calling upon states not to establish diplomatic missions in Jerusalem', SC/13125, 18 Dec. 2017.

<sup>50</sup> UN General Assembly Resolution 72/240, 'Permanent sovereignty of the Palestinian people in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and of the Arab population in the occupied Syrian Golan over their natural resources', 20 Dec. 2017, A/RES/72/240, 18 Jan. 2018; and



## Armed conflict in Libya

Libya was led by Muammar Gaddafi for 42 years until he was overthrown in 2011 in an armed rebellion assisted by Western military intervention. The power vacuum, instability and rise of Islamist militancy that followed allowed large-scale migration from Africa and the Middle East through Libya to take place, and many of these migrants were able to reach Europe. Following years of conflict, as part of the 2015 Libyan Political Agreement (LPA) signed in Skhirat, Morocco, in December 2015, a new UN-backed ‘unity government’, called the Government of National Accord (GNA), was installed in a naval base in Tripoli in 2016. However, the GNA continued to face opposition from two rival governments and many militias. The situation is further complicated by the tense relationship between Fayez Sarraj, prime minister and head of the GNA, and General Khalifa Haftar, head of the self-styled Libyan National Army (LNA)—a mix of military units and tribal or regional-based armed groups—based in eastern Libya.<sup>51</sup>

In early March 2017 the Benghazi Defence Brigade (BDB)—a coalition comprised mainly of fighters from Benghazi opposed to the LNA that includes members of Ansar al-Sharia, a Salafi Islamist militia group—took over key oil terminals at Sidra and Ras Lanuf. Within weeks, however, the LNA had recaptured them and pushed the BDB back to Jufra district to the south-west. In Tripoli, rival armed factions clashed in several neighbourhoods.<sup>52</sup> On 2 May, Sarraj met Haftar for talks in Abu Dhabi for the first time in over a year, and again in Paris in July, but further fighting between various militias in the south and in Tripoli suggested that an agreement on Libya’s future was unlikely.<sup>53</sup>

On 20 September the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) launched a UN action plan, which was endorsed by the UN Security Council, the African Union, the European Union (EU) and the League of Arab States. UNSMIL facilitated talks that generated some agreement over proposed amendments to the LPA but failed to reach consensus over military command arrangements, the relative powers and mechanisms of governing entities, and other constitutional issues.<sup>54</sup>

Gladstone R. and Landler, M., ‘Defying Trump, UN General Assembly condemns US decree on Jerusalem’, *New York Times*, 21 Dec. 2017.

<sup>51</sup> ‘A quick guide to Libya’s main players’, European Council on Foreign Relations, Dec. 2016. On the Libyan conflict in 2016 see Smith D., ‘The Middle East and North Africa: 2016 in perspective’, *SIPRI Yearbook 2017*, pp. 83–84. On the UN arms embargo on Libya see chapter 10, section II, in this volume.

<sup>52</sup> Gazzini, C., ‘New Libyan militia’s oil strike risks wider conflagration’, International Crisis Group, 10 Mar. 2017.

<sup>53</sup> Gazzini, C., ‘Libya: No political deal yet’, International Crisis Group, 11 May 2017; and International Crisis Group, ‘CrisisWatch: Tracking conflict worldwide’, May 2017.

<sup>54</sup> Blanchard, C. M., *Libya: Transition and US Policy*, Congressional Research Service (CRS) Report to Congress RL33142 (US Congress, CRS: Washington, DC, 8 Jan. 2018), p. 3.

In early October fighting escalated in the west. The Libyan Revolutionaries Operations Room, an anti-Islamic State militia, said it had taken control of the coastal city of Sabratha, a major hub for irregular migrants crossing the Mediterranean to Europe.<sup>55</sup> Forces sympathetic to the LNA captured other strategic areas in western Libya. Meanwhile, the UN-led talks aimed at renegotiating parts of the LPA faltered.<sup>56</sup> The USA, which had carried out intermittent air strikes against the Islamic State in Libya in August and December 2016, resumed those air strikes in late September 2017 and again on 17 and 19 November. These targeted militants in Fuqaha, south of the former Islamic State stronghold of Sirte.<sup>57</sup>

In 2017 at least 118 064 migrants arrived in Italy by sea, 34 per cent fewer than in 2016. At least 2832 died on the central Mediterranean route from Libya, 39 per cent fewer than in 2016.<sup>58</sup> In November the GNA launched an investigation into an alleged slave trade in Libya, following the broadcast of a video apparently showing migrants from elsewhere in Africa being sold to Libyans as slaves.<sup>59</sup>

On 17 December 2017, the second anniversary of the LPA, General Haftar announced that he considered the agreement to have expired and that related institutions, most notably the GNA and the Presidency Council headed by Serraj, were now 'void'.<sup>60</sup> Haftar said that the LNA was now the 'sole legitimate institution' in Libya and rejected the authority of any government or parliament until new elections. The move raised the prospect of new fighting in the west between his allies and forces aligned with the UN-backed GNA.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Elumami, A. and Lewis, A., 'Armed force claims victory in Libyan migrant smuggling hub', Reuters, 6 Oct. 2017; and Mannocchi, F., 'After Sabratha battle, scramble for Western Libya is on', Middle East Eye, 25 Oct. 2017.

<sup>56</sup> International Crisis Group, 'Restoring UN leadership of Libya's peace process', Statement, 18 Sep. 2017.

<sup>57</sup> Joscelyn, T. and Roggio, B., 'US resumes airstrikes against Islamic State in Libya', FDD's Long War Journal, Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD), 30 Sep. 2017; and Babb, C., 'US launches new airstrikes against Islamic State in Libya', Voice of America, 21 Nov. 2017.

<sup>58</sup> International Organization for Migration, 'Mediterranean migrant arrivals reach 168,314 in 2017; deaths reach 3,115', Press release, 19 Dec. 2017; International Organization for Migration, Missing Migrants Project; and Walsh, D. and Horowitz, J., 'Italy, going it alone, stalls the flow of migrants. But at what cost?', *New York Times*, 17 Sep. 2017.

<sup>59</sup> Cascais, A., 'Slave trade in Libya: Outrage across Africa', Deutsche Welle, 22 Nov. 2017; and Jacobson, S., 'EU-African Union summit to debate alleged Libyan slave trading', *The National* (Abu Dhabi), 29 Nov. 2017.

<sup>60</sup> 'Haftar: Libya's UN-backed government's mandate obsolete', Al Jazeera, 18 Dec. 2017.

<sup>61</sup> El Amrani, I., 'New risks in Libya as Khalifa Haftar dismisses UN-backed accord', Commentary, International Crisis Group, 21 Dec. 2017.

## Armed conflict in Syria

Political power in Syria has long been dominated by an Alawite elite. Since 2011 that power has been contested in a multi-sided armed conflict that, while initially sparked by the Arab Spring, has evolved into a complex war involving regional and international powers. Conflict continued to be the driver of humanitarian needs in Syria. As of 7 December 2017 the war had resulted in the displacement of half the population—over 5.4 million refugees and over 6.1 million internally displaced persons, nearly 3 million of whom were in ‘hard-to-reach and besieged areas’.<sup>62</sup> As of November 2017, 13.1 million people, over half the Syrian population, urgently required humanitarian assistance, 6.5 million people had acute food insecurity and a further 4 million were at risk of acute food insecurity.<sup>63</sup> Although there are no reliable casualty statistics, over 400 000 Syrians are thought to have died as a result of the fighting.<sup>64</sup>

Amid the complex array of contending forces in Syria, by the end of 2016 the balance of power had tilted sharply in favour of President Bashar al-Assad.<sup>65</sup> According to Amnesty International, the Syrian Government used local agreements—presented as a ‘reconciliation effort’—reached between August 2016 and March 2017 to force the mass displacement of civilians and reclaim control of territory. Amnesty International has claimed that the sieges, unlawful killings and forced displacement carried out by government forces constitute crimes against humanity.<sup>66</sup>

UN-sponsored peace talks on Syria took place in Geneva between 23 February and 3 March 2017, but they failed to make a breakthrough. In April an escalation in violence by Syrian forces and external interventions by Turkey and the USA eroded prospects for a political settlement. On 4 April an attack with chemical weapons on the opposition-held town of Khan Shaykhoun killed at least 80 people. The USA, among others, held the Assad regime responsible for the attack.<sup>67</sup> Three days later the USA launched a cruise mis-

<sup>62</sup> UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), ‘Syria emergency’, 7 Dec. 2017.

<sup>63</sup> Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO), *Global Early Warning—Early Action Report on Food Security and Agriculture January–March 2018* (FAO: Rome, Jan. 2018), p. 18.

<sup>64</sup> Kleinfeld, R., Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, ‘Why is it so difficult to count dead people?’, BBC News, 12 Oct. 2017; and Humud, C., Margesson, R. and Chesser, S., ‘Counting casualties in Syria and Iraq: Process and challenges’, CRS Insight, Congressional Research Service (CRS), 12 Apr. 2016.

<sup>65</sup> See Smith (note 51), pp. 77–82. On the threat to impose a UN arms embargo on Syria see chapter 10, section II, in this volume.

<sup>66</sup> Amnesty International, *We Leave or We Die: Forced Displacement under Syria’s ‘Reconciliation’ Agreements* (Amnesty International: London, 2017).

<sup>67</sup> Chulov, M. and Shaheen, K., ‘Syria chemical weapons attack toll rises to 70 as Russian narrative is dismissed’, *The Guardian*, 5 Apr. 2017; and ‘Syria chemical “attack”: What we know’, BBC News, 26 Apr. 2017. See also chapter 8, section I, in this volume.

sile strike on the air base it believed to be the source of the attack.<sup>68</sup> In other escalatory developments in late April, Turkey bombed Kurdish fighters of the People's Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, YPG) in north-eastern Syria, while the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), led primarily by the YPG, prepared to attack the city of Raqqah, the last stronghold of the Islamic State.<sup>69</sup>

On 6 May, four 'de-escalation zones' in western Syria were created in an agreement between Iran, Russia, Syria and Turkey.<sup>70</sup> This partial ceasefire allowed the Assad regime to shift resources to the east, where it was competing against the US-led coalition and SDF to capture territory from the Islamic State. In June the US-backed SDF forces began their assault on Raqqah, and on 18 June the USA shot down a Syrian Government Su-22 combat aircraft and carried out several strikes on pro-regime forces that were advancing towards an SDF-controlled town.<sup>71</sup> In addition, Turkey deployed troops to its border with Syria in preparation for an offensive against Kurdish-held Afrin in the north-west.<sup>72</sup>

Russia has supported the Syrian Government since the beginning of the conflict in 2011, both politically and with military aid, and since 30 September 2015 also through direct military participation in the armed conflict.<sup>73</sup> According to the Russian Ministry of Defence, 41 of its troops had been killed in Syria between October 2015 and December 2017.<sup>74</sup> Reports suggest that at least 73 Russian mercenaries have also been killed there.<sup>75</sup> Although Russia announced a drawdown of forces in December, it will keep its naval facility at Tartous (which was first established in 1971) and the Khmeimim airbase in Latakia governorate (which first became operational in September 2015).<sup>76</sup> In a new treaty with Syria signed in January 2017, Russia's lease

<sup>68</sup> Ackerman, S., Pilkington, E., Jacobs, B. and Borger, J., 'Syria missile strikes: US launches first direct military action against Assad', *The Guardian*, 7 Apr. 2017.

<sup>69</sup> International Crisis Group (ICG), *Fighting ISIS: The Road To and Beyond Raqqa*, Crisis Group Middle East Briefing no. 53 (ICG: Brussels, 28 Apr. 2017).

<sup>70</sup> Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Memorandum on the creation of de-escalation areas in the Syrian Arab Republic', 6 May 2017.

<sup>71</sup> Binnie, J., 'Tensions increase in Syria after Su-22 shoot-down', *IHS Jane's Defence Weekly*, 26 June 2017.

<sup>72</sup> Bonsey, N., 'The post-Caliphate gauntlet in eastern Syria', *War on the Rocks*, 3 July 2017.

<sup>73</sup> On Russia's involvement in the conflict see Smith (note 51), pp. 77–82; and Trenin, D., *What is Russia up to in the Middle East?* (Polity Press: Cambridge, 2018).

<sup>74</sup> 'Heroes of war: Casualties among Russian servicemen in Syria', TASS, 7 Mar. 2018; and Vasilyeva, N., 'Thousands of Russian private contractors fighting in Syria', Associated Press, 12 Dec. 2017.

<sup>75</sup> Vasilyeva (note 74); and Tsvetkova, M., 'Death certificate offers clues on Russian casualties in Syria', Reuters, 27 Oct. 2017.

<sup>76</sup> Pinchuk, D., 'Russia will keep bases in Syria to strike at insurgents—Kremlin', Reuters, 12 Dec. 2017; and Roth, A., 'On visit to Syria, Putin lauds victory over ISIS and announces withdrawals', *Washington Post*, 11 Dec. 2017.

for both facilities was extended by 49 years, with the option of extending that arrangement for 25-year periods.<sup>77</sup>

The Islamic State suffered major reversals in eastern Syria with the liberation of Deir Ez-Zor and Raqqah. The SDF captured Raqqah, the symbolic capital of the Islamic State, in October 2017. Raqqah's infrastructure was destroyed during the campaign and the city will have to be demined.<sup>78</sup> The Assad regime retook Deir Ez-Zor in November, but the level of destruction there was severe and most of the population was displaced.<sup>79</sup> Continuing instability and unpredictability in both Deir Ez-Zor and Raqqah governates is likely to prevent any large-scale return by refugees.<sup>80</sup>

In November President Assad met with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Sochi, Russia. Putin then met with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who agreed to coordinate their military operations against the Islamic State in Syria.<sup>81</sup> On the sidelines of an Asia-Pacific summit, Russia and the USA also agreed in a joint statement to continue their efforts to fight the Islamic State, while also noting that there was no military solution to the conflict in Syria.<sup>82</sup> Nonetheless, fighting continued even in the de-escalation zones and humanitarian assistance was limited. On 13 November air strikes on a market in Atareb, Aleppo governorate, in northern Syria, which were thought to have been carried out by either the Syrian Government or Russia, killed at least 53 people.<sup>83</sup>

UN-mediated peace talks between the Syrian Government and opposition forces resumed in Geneva in late November, but they made little progress. The UN mediator, Staffan de Mistura, said that he 'did not see . . . the Government really looking to find a way to have a dialogue and negotiate'.<sup>84</sup> Nonetheless, further talks were proposed for January 2018.<sup>85</sup> Parallel negotiations backed by Russia, Iran and Turkey took place periodically in Astana, Kazakhstan. The eighth round of talks in Astana on 21–22 December ended with agreement to hold a peace congress for Syria in Sochi in late January

<sup>77</sup> 'Moscow cements deal with Damascus to keep 49-year presence at Syrian naval and air bases', TASS, 20 Jan. 2017.

<sup>78</sup> Barnard, A. and Saad, H., 'Raqqah, ISIS "capital", is captured, US-backed forces say', *New York Times*, 17 Oct. 2017.

<sup>79</sup> Loveluck, L. and El-Ghobashy, T., 'Syrian army declares victory in Deir al-Zour as Islamic State territory crumbles', *Washington Post*, 3 Nov. 2017.

<sup>80</sup> Khaddour, K., 'Back to what future? What remains for Syria's displaced people', Brief, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Jan. 2018.

<sup>81</sup> Chulkovskaya, Y., 'Have Russia, Turkey reached Syrian simpatico yet?', *Al-Monitor*, 15 Nov. 2017; and Wintour, P., 'Putin brings Iran and Turkey together in bold Syria peace plan', *The Guardian*, 22 Nov. 2017.

<sup>82</sup> 'Trump, Putin agree "no military solution" in Syria', *Al Jazeera*, 11 Nov. 2017.

<sup>83</sup> 'Syria war: Air strikes on Atareb market "kill more than 50"', *BBC News*, 13 Nov. 2017.

<sup>84</sup> UN Office at Geneva, 'Transcript of press conference by UN special envoy for Syria, Mr Staffan de Mistura', 14 Dec. 2017.

<sup>85</sup> Cumming-Bruce, N., "'Golden opportunity missed": Syria peace talks falter, again', *New York Times*, 14 Dec. 2017.

2018.<sup>86</sup> Around 40 opposition groups rejected the proposed congress, alleging that Russia was trying to bypass the Geneva process.<sup>87</sup>

### **The armed conflict between Turkey and the Kurds**

Since the start of the armed conflict in Syria in 2011 there have been increased tensions along the border between Turkey and Syria, and a huge influx of refugees into Turkey. An attempted military coup in Turkey in July 2016 led to a further consolidation of power by President Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP).<sup>88</sup> In August 2016 Turkey launched a military offensive in northern Syria against the Islamic State and Kurdish groups.

While Turkey declared the military offensive to be complete in March 2017, it continued to provide cross-border support to non-Kurdish Syrian opposition forces.<sup>89</sup> In October 2017 Turkey deployed troops in Idlib governorate, one of the four de-escalation zones in Syria announced in May 2017 (see above), and there was regular speculation that Turkey might expand operations into other Kurdish-held parts of Syria.<sup>90</sup> In May 2017 the USA decided to continue military cooperation with the SDF, which is led by the Kurdish YPG, including enhanced training and providing arms. This aggravated tensions between the USA and Turkey that had been brewing since the US administration of President Barack Obama initiated this cooperation in the fight against the Islamic State in 2015.<sup>91</sup>

Turkish military action against Kurdish forces in northern Syria, and Turkey's sensitivity to proposals to strengthen Kurdish forces or support some degree of Kurdish political autonomy in the area, have to be understood in the light of the conflict inside Turkey's predominantly Kurdish south-eastern region. This region has been the focus of an almost relentless armed confrontation between Turkish security forces and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê, PKK) since 1984, punctuated by occasional ceasefires. The collapse of a 2013 ceasefire agreement in July 2015 led to a new cycle of violence.<sup>92</sup> According to the OHCHR, as well as 2000 people

<sup>86</sup> 'Russia, Turkey and Iran agree Syrian peace talks for January', France 24, 23 Dec. 2017.

<sup>87</sup> Associated Press, 'Syria rebels, opposition reject Russia-proposed talks', *Wall Street Journal*, 26 Dec. 2017.

<sup>88</sup> On events in Turkey in 2016 see Sahlin, M., 'Turkey's search for stability and legitimacy in 2016', *SIPRI Yearbook 2017*, pp. 151–62; see also chapter 1, section II, in this volume.

<sup>89</sup> 'Turkey "ends" Euphrates Shield campaign in Syria', BBC News, 30 Mar. 2017.

<sup>90</sup> Lister, C., 'Turkey's Idlib incursion and the HTS question: Understanding the long game in Syria', War on the Rocks, 31 Oct. 2017; and 'Turkish military's Idlib operation almost completed, next is Afrin: Erdoğan', *Hürriyet Daily News*, 24 Oct. 2017.

<sup>91</sup> Gordon, M. R. and Schmitt, E., 'Trump to arm Syrian Kurds, even as Turkey strongly objects', *New York Times*, 9 May 2017.

<sup>92</sup> On the role of the Kurds in Turkish politics see Özel, S. and Yilmaz, A., 'The Kurds in the Middle East, 2015', *SIPRI Yearbook 2016*, pp. 53–71.

killed and potentially thousands more detained, 350 000–500 000 people were displaced by the fighting between July 2015 and December 2016.<sup>93</sup>

The violence continued in 2017. According to Turkish Government figures, which tend to overstate successes against the PKK, over 2500 PKK militants were killed and over 7200 were detained in 2017, while 148 members of the security forces and 32 civilians were killed.<sup>94</sup> Ending the conflict with the PKK in Turkey is inextricably linked to the creation of peaceful relations between Turkey and the YPG in Syria, but at the close of the year there seemed little prospect of peace talks between the parties towards such an end.

### **Armed conflict in Yemen**

The roots of the current conflict and humanitarian crisis in Yemen are complex and contested.<sup>95</sup> The country was created after the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen) and the Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen) merged in 1990. Ali Abdallah Saleh, who had been president of North Yemen since 1978, served as Yemen's first president. However, tensions continued between north and south. A southern separatist movement was defeated in a short civil war in 1994. The Houthi insurgency began in 2004 when Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi, the leader of the Zaidi sect, launched an uprising against the Yemeni Government. Although he was killed in that uprising, since then the insurgents have been known as the Houthis (although their official name is Ansar Allah). Several years of intermittent warfare in the north, which killed hundreds and displaced more than 250 000 people, was ended by a ceasefire agreement in 2010. However, further protests in 2011 inspired by the Arab Spring and a major armed attack by opposition forces on the presidential compound forced President Saleh to resign. Yemen also became a base for affiliates of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, AQAP, and the Islamic State–Yemen Province, respectively), which added to the instability in the country.

In 2014, after several years of growing violence, the country descended into the next phase of a civil war between the internationally recognized government of President Abdo Rabu Mansour al-Hadi and an uneasy alliance of Houthis and forces loyal to former president Saleh, which controlled the capital, Sana'a, and large parts of the country. In March 2015 a Saudi

<sup>93</sup> Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), *Report on the Human Rights Situation in South-East Turkey: July 2015 to December 2016* (OHCHR: Feb. 2017).

<sup>94</sup> Anadolu Agency, 'Over 2,500 PKK terrorists neutralized in Turkey in 2017', *Yeni Şafak*, 4 Jan. 2018. For an alternative account of casualty figures see Mandıracı, B., 'Turkey's PKK conflict kills almost 3000 in two years', *Commentary*, International Crisis Group, 20 July 2017.

<sup>95</sup> See e.g. Royal Institute of International Affairs (RIIA), *Yemen: Drivers of Conflict and Peace*, Workshop summary, 7–8 Nov. 2016 (Chatham House–RIIA: London, 2017); and Orkaby, A., 'Yemen's humanitarian nightmare: The real roots of the conflict', *Foreign Affairs*, Nov/Dec. 2017.



Arabian-led coalition intervened militarily on the side of the Hadi government. Officially the intervention was at the request of Hadi, now living in exile in Saudi Arabia, but by the end of 2016 it was seen by many analysts as part of a wider proxy war with Iran.<sup>96</sup> Various unsuccessful peace initiatives and ceasefire attempts failed to stop the fighting and left 1 million people on the brink of famine.<sup>97</sup>

In January 2017 the Saudi Arabian-led coalition and Yemeni troops loyal to Hadi launched a new military offensive against the Houthi–Saleh forces in the south-west and north of the country. The UN estimated that the conflict had killed more than 10 000 people, mostly civilians, and displaced 3 million since March 2015 and that more than 10 million people needed ‘urgent assistance’.<sup>98</sup> Intensive fighting continued throughout March and escalated again in July, especially in Ta’iz governorate in the south-west.<sup>99</sup> On 22 July Houthi forces claimed to have launched a ballistic missile into Saudi Arabia, the latest of many attempts to hit targets in Saudi Arabia with long-range ballistic missiles.<sup>100</sup>

On 24 August Saleh conducted a large rally in Sana’a, increasing tensions within the Saleh–Houthi alliance, and air strikes by the Saudi Arabian-led coalition increased in the period afterwards.<sup>101</sup> There were 5676 air strikes in the first six months of 2017, up from 3936 in all of 2016.<sup>102</sup> In response to a missile fired at Riyadh on 4 November, the Saudi Arabian-led coalition again stepped up its bombing campaign.<sup>103</sup> In a bid to stop alleged weapon shipments to the Houthis from Iran, Saudi Arabia also temporarily closed all entry ports to Yemen. This tightening of the blockade on Houthi–Saleh-controlled territories aggravated the already severe humanitarian crisis in the country.<sup>104</sup> The number of suspected cholera cases reached

<sup>96</sup> Blasina, N., ‘Saudi Arabia and Iran: Four proxy conflicts explained’, *Wall Street Journal*, 8 Dec. 2017.

<sup>97</sup> Duncan, C., ‘The conflict in Yemen: A primer’, *Lawfare*, 28 Nov. 2017; and Smith (note 51), pp 85–87; and ‘How Yemen became the most wretched place on earth’, *The Economist*, 30 Nov. 2017. On the UN arms embargo on Yemen see chapter 10, section II, in this volume.

<sup>98</sup> ‘Death toll in Yemen conflict passes 10,000’, *Al Jazeera*, 17 Jan. 2017; and UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF), ‘Yemen humanitarian situation report’, Mar. 2017.

<sup>99</sup> Dearden, L., ‘Yemen civil war: 20 civilians including women and children “killed in Saudi-led air strike,” UN says’, *The Independent*, 19 July 2017.

<sup>100</sup> Carlino, L., ‘Incremental improvements in Houthi militants’ ballistic missile campaign increase risk to assets in central Saudi Arabia’, *IHS Jane’s Intelligence Weekly*, 26 July 2017. See also chapter 10, section II, in this volume.

<sup>101</sup> Al-Mujahed, A. and Raghavan, S., ‘Tens of thousands rally in support of Yemen’s former president amid growing rifts’, *Washington Post*, 24 Aug. 2017.

<sup>102</sup> Protection Cluster Yemen, ‘Protection cluster: Update’, Aug. 2017.

<sup>103</sup> Longley Alley, A., ‘A Houthi missile, a Saudi purge and a Lebanese resignation shake the Middle East’, *Commentary*, International Crisis Group, 10 Nov. 2017; and Carlino, L., ‘Houthi missile fired at Riyadh indicates intent to engage targets deep in Saudi Arabia, despite escalation risk’, *IHS Jane’s Country Risk Daily Report*, 6 Nov. 2017.

<sup>104</sup> Erickson, A., ‘Saudi Arabia lifted its blockade of Yemen: It’s not nearly enough to prevent a famine’, *Washington Post*, 1 Dec. 2017; and Miles, T., ‘Famine survey warns of thousands dying daily

1 million in December, in what is the largest and fastest-spreading outbreak of the disease in modern history.<sup>105</sup>

On 30 November armed clashes broke out in Sana'a between Houthi and Saleh forces, culminating in the killing of Saleh on 4 December. Saleh was reportedly seeking dialogue with Saudi Arabia and its allies.<sup>106</sup> His death left the Houthis as the strongest power in northern Yemen and continuing deadlock in the civil war.<sup>107</sup> A second ballistic missile fired at Riyadh on 19 December was reportedly intercepted by Saudi Arabian air defences. Saudi Arabia and the USA claimed that the missile was supplied by Iran.<sup>108</sup> This was followed by a further intensification in the Saudi Arabian-led coalition's air strikes.<sup>109</sup>

On 20 December the USA confirmed that 'multiple ground operations' involving US troops were taking place in Yemen, in addition to the roughly 125 US air strikes in 2017—more than in the previous four years combined—targeting both AQAP and the Islamic State–Yemen Province, mainly in the south of the country.<sup>110</sup>

At the end of the year, the Saudi Arabian-led coalition was maintaining its partial blockade of Houthi-controlled territories with devastating humanitarian consequences. At least 17 million people, or 60 per cent of the population, faced acute food insecurity.<sup>111</sup> In a joint statement on 29 December, on reaching the milestone of 1000 days of war in Yemen, the heads of three UN agencies reiterated calls for parties to the conflict to immediately allow full humanitarian access and to stop the fighting.<sup>112</sup>

in Yemen if ports stay closed', Reuters, 21 Nov. 2017.

<sup>105</sup> International Rescue Committee, 'Yemen hits 1 million cases of cholera as even more preventable diseases wreak havoc on Yemeni children', Press release, 21 Dec. 2017. See also World Health Organization, Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, 'Cholera outbreak response', Weekly cholera bulletins.

<sup>106</sup> Dehghan, S. K., 'Killing of Ali Abdullah Saleh changes dynamics of Yemen's civil war', *The Guardian*, 5 Dec. 2017.

<sup>107</sup> Longley Alley, A., 'The killing of former President Saleh could worsen Yemen's war', Commentary, International Crisis Group, 6 Dec. 2017.

<sup>108</sup> Hubbard B. and Cumming-Bruce, N., 'Rebels in Yemen fire second ballistic missile at Saudi capital', *New York Times*, 19 Dec. 2017.

<sup>109</sup> Wintour, P., 'Saudi-led airstrikes kill 68 civilians in one day in Yemen's "absurd" war', *The Guardian*, 28 Dec. 2017.

<sup>110</sup> Purkiss, J. and Fielding-Smith, A., 'US counter terror air strikes double in Trump's first year', Bureau of Investigative Journalism, 19 Dec. 2017; and Nichols, H. and Gains, M., 'Pentagon confirms US ground operations in Yemen', NBC News, 20 Dec. 2017.

<sup>111</sup> Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (note 63).

<sup>112</sup> UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), 'Joint statement: WHO, WFP and UNICEF: Yemen's families cannot withstand another day of war, let alone 1,000', 29 Dec. 2017.