V. Armed conflict and peace processes in the Middle East and North Africa

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There were seven countries with active armed conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa in 2018: Egypt (high-intensity, subnational armed conflict), Iraq (internationalized civil war), Israel (low-intensity, extrastate armed conflict), Libya (internationalized civil war), Syria (major internationalized civil war), Turkey (high-intensity, extrastate and subnational armed conflict) and Yemen (major internationalized civil war).\(^1\) Many of these conflicts were interconnected and involved regional and international powers as well as numerous non-state actors.\(^2\) The conflicts have killed hundreds of thousands of people and displaced millions more. Security dilemmas—which occur when states attempt to increase their own security but trigger countermeasures that leave them even less secure—overwhelmed the region in 2018, shaped by three cross-cutting issues: (a) ongoing regional interstate rivalries with a shifting network of external alliances and interests; (b) continuing threats from violent jihadist groups; and (c) increasing competition over water and growing climate-change impacts.\(^3\) This section first briefly examines these three issues, and then describes developments in each of the armed conflicts and any related peace processes in 2018.

**Key general developments**

The cumulative impact of armed conflict in the Middle East today is staggering. At least 400 000 people have been killed in the Syrian civil war, which since 2011 has also generated over 5.6 million refugees and 6.6 million internally displaced people.\(^4\) In Iraq, the liberation of territories from the Islamic State came at great human and infrastructural cost. The civil war in Yemen has left much of the population at risk of starvation and disease. Libya remains a failed state. Even relatively stable states, such as Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia, are wrestling with socio-economic problems, youth protests

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1 For conflict definitions and typologies, see section I in this chapter.
and conflict spillover from unstable neighbours. In practically every country in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), the economic and political challenges that resulted in the Arab Spring were more intense in 2018 than they were seven years before.

**Shifting alliances and rivalries**

The most destabilizing and high-risk interstate rivalries in the MENA region in 2018 continued to be between Iran and an ad-hoc group of four states—Israel, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the United States—that share a common view of Iran as a destabilizing force with aspirations of becoming the regional hegemon. These four countries are committed to challenging and rolling back Iranian influence in the region. Within Iran, the perception of the regional challenges and causes of insecurity are very different. Since the Iranian Revolution in 1979, Iran has been surrounded by hostile powers and has responded with a ‘forward defence’ strategy—the use of regional allies and proxies as leverage to deter or fight Iran’s adversaries away from Iranian territory—that has evolved over time, partly in reaction to the behaviour of external actors. Today, the defence strategy is carried out by Iranian forces or proxies in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen. The power struggle between Iran and the anti-Iran group was played out in a number of ways in 2018.

For the USA, it translated into withdrawal from the 2015 Iran nuclear deal in May, reinstatement of sanctions (including secondary sanctions against countries engaged in business with Iran), more forceful rhetoric and threats of military action. The USA has also been pushing for a new Sunni Muslim security and political alliance in the region—tentatively called the Middle East Strategic Alliance, but often referred to as the ‘Arab NATO’ (comparing it to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization)—in order to counter Iran’s expanding influence. The USA hoped that this nascent security alliance, under the de facto leadership of Saudi Arabia, would include the six Gulf Cooperation Council states (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE) and Egypt and Jordan. However, the ongoing Saudi Arabian-led
blockade of Qatar remains a major obstacle—not least because this intra-Gulf rift has driven Qatar into partnership with Iran. Oman also seems unlikely to join. Nonetheless, in October, Bahrain’s Foreign Minister, Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa, announced that the proposed alliance would be formed the following year.  

Saudi Arabia—the country with the highest levels of military spending and arms imports in the region—and the UAE (and to a lesser extent some of the other Gulf states) are already actively opposing Iran in Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen. In 2016, for example, Saudi Arabia reopened diplomatic relations with Iraq (which were cut in 1990 following President Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait), and engagement has intensified since then in an attempt to counter Iranian influence.  

Israeli opposition to Iran is focused on Lebanon and Syria. Israel attacked Iranian and Iranian-aligned targets in Syria on several occasions in 2018 and threatened to target Iranian-backed Hezbollah in Lebanon. In the legislative elections in Lebanon in May 2018, the first since 2009, parties allied with Hezbollah increased their share of seats from roughly 44 per cent to 53 per cent. Hezbollah is an explicit part of Iran’s forward defence strategy, and the group’s political primacy and military power—it deploys a militia outside the national Lebanese military chain of command, with capabilities much stronger than those of the Lebanese armed forces—effectively places Iran (and a sizeable stockpile of rockets and missiles) on Israel’s border.  

Iran’s main strategy in 2018 was to seek to consolidate its influence in the region, especially in north-eastern Syria and in improved relations with Qatar and Turkey. It did so largely by continuing with its forward defence


strategy at a level presumably designed to avoid a more punitive reaction from its rivals. Thus, Iran resumed some limited missile testing and signed a maritime security agreement with Qatar in April 2018.\textsuperscript{16} According to US claims, Iran also used its Shiite proxies in Iraq to threaten the US consulate.\textsuperscript{17}

The risk of a more serious confrontation between Iran and members of the ad-hoc anti-Iran group was a constant source of tension during the year. An attack on a military parade in the Iranian city of Ahvaz on 22 September, which killed at least 25 people, raised tensions even further. Iran accused the USA of allying with an unspecified Gulf country to carry out the attack, which was claimed by both an Arab separatist group and the Islamic State.\textsuperscript{18}

The anti-Iran group was not without its own tensions, especially between the USA and Saudi Arabia. The October assassination of a Washington Post columnist, Jamal Khashoggi, in the Saudi Arabian consulate in Istanbul not only amplified criticism in the US Congress and media of Saudi Arabian foreign policy and the US administration’s seemingly unconditional support for it, but also damaged Saudi Arabia’s political credibility more widely outside the region.\textsuperscript{19} Saudi Arabia, which already faced increased international criticism of its intervention in Yemen, was involved later in the year in a diplomatic confrontation with Canada over its human rights situation.\textsuperscript{20}

Finally, Turkey’s realignment with Iran and Russia in 2018 was also important, as it rebalanced the scales in Syria against the USA and its Kurdish allies (see ‘Armed conflict in Syria’ below).

\textit{Violent jihadist groups}

Despite battlefield defeats in Iraq and Syria, an estimated 100 000 to 230 000 Salafi jihadists—including those belonging to the Islamic State and al-Qaeda—were active in about 70 countries around the globe in 2018—as much as a fourfold increase in the number of fighters since 11 September 2001.\textsuperscript{21} These numbers have been criticized for conflating jihadism with other forms of Sunni Islamist militancy; also, while the numbers of fighters

\textsuperscript{16} Fars News, ‘Iran, Qatar agree to increase sea patrols in Persian Gulf’, 12 Apr. 2018; and Erästö, T., ‘Dissecting international concerns about Iran’s missiles’, SIPRI Backgrounder, 15 Nov. 2018.

\textsuperscript{17} Gaouette, N., ‘Pompeo threatens Iran over attacks on US in Iraq’, CNN, 21 Sep. 2018.


\textsuperscript{20} Cecco, L., Justin Trudeau says Canada is looking to pull out of Saudi arms deal’, \textit{The Guardian}, 17 Dec. 2018.

have increased, more of them are fighting locally. In the MENA region, the fight against these groups is far from over as they pivot from territorial collapse in strongholds like Syria and Iraq to a covert network estimated to number more than 20,000. Assessing the size of their base is difficult given its covert nature and a continuing significant component of ‘foreign fighters’ (individuals that have joined an armed conflict abroad). However, the problems that gave rise to the Islamic State and al-Qaeda have not been addressed, and therefore the military victories against the groups are likely to provide only a temporary respite to the issue of Islamist militancy.

Conflict between the Islamic State and al-Qaeda also continued, especially in Egypt, Libya and Syria. On balance, al-Qaeda’s role in the region seemed to be undergoing a revival, while the Islamic State was in continued decline (see figure 2.2).  

Water stress and other climate change impacts

Linkages between environmental, climate change and security issues in the MENA region are ‘complex, multi-level and go in several directions’. Growing competition over natural resources, especially water, is adding to existing tensions within the region and creating new potential conflicts. Compared with other regions, climate impact scenarios in the MENA region are generally more serious: temperatures are projected to rise more and droughts to be longer, deeper and more frequent than the global average. Although most lakes and rivers cross national borders, the MENA region has few transboundary water agreements. Over 60 per cent of the population lives

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26 World Bank, World Bank Group Climate Change Action Plan 2016–2020 (World Bank: Washington, DC, 2016); and The Economist, ‘Climate change is making the Arab world more miserable’, 31 May 2018; and Schaar (note 25).
in areas with high or very high surface water stress (i.e. where more water is used than is replenished). This contributes to increasing food insecurity. In several cases, climate change and water stress have played direct or indirect roles in recent and ongoing conflicts in the region: the drought in Syria (combined with the dismantling of support mechanisms for farmers), rising food prices in Egypt in the run-up to the Arab Spring, and the water-related nature of most of the rural conflicts in Yemen in 2013. Using the control of water as a weapon against civilians is commonplace, including by militant groups such as the Islamic State.

Figure 2.2. Territory lost by the Islamic State between 2015 and 2018


28 UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), Arab Horizon 2030: Prospects for Enhancing Food Security in the Arab Region, ESCWA and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO), E/ESCWA/SDPD/2017/1 (ESCWA: Beirut, 2017).


In 2018, violent protests in southern Iraq were directly related to the breakdown of water and energy services.\(^{31}\) In Lebanon, the presence of Syrian refugees in the Bekaa Valley exacerbated tensions around scarce water resources.\(^{32}\) In Egypt in April 2018, water-management measures by the government led to demonstrations by farmers, and in North Africa more generally, there were hundreds of local protests against water shortages during the year.\(^{33}\) In Iran, there was also frequent unrest during the year because of failing water services.\(^{34}\) In Gaza, 97 per cent of the drinking water was contaminated.\(^{35}\)

**Armed conflict in Egypt**

Egypt is the most populous Arab country (98 million in 2018) and has often played a central role in the politics of the Middle East. In 2011, after almost 30 years in office, President Hosni Mubarak was toppled by the Arab Spring protests. His successor, President Mohammed Morsi, was removed from office in a military coup in July 2013, and Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, a retired field marshal and former defence minister, was elected president in May 2014.\(^{36}\)

An insurgency erupted in northern Sinai in 2013, with attacks focused on the security forces. However, after militants in Sinai embraced the Islamic State in 2014 (the local affiliate is Islamic State–Al Wilayat Sinai, or 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 people on board.\(^{37}\) A state of emergency has existed in northern Sinai since October 2014, and at the end of 2017 the insurgency in the region was Egypt’s main internal security threat.\(^{38}\)

In 2018, there were believed to be about 2000 active jihadists in Sinai, although the ongoing war against the Islamic State was largely hidden from

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the outside world. In February 2018, the Egyptian armed forces launched a new military campaign, Comprehensive Operation Sinai 2018, to combat the insurgency; unverified allegations have been made that the campaign has used cluster munitions. In the first attack on foreign tourists in Egypt in more than a year, a bomb attack by unknown Islamic militants killed four people in December. Egyptian security forces then killed 40 suspected militants in three separate raids.

During the first quarter of 2018, President Sisi removed five presidential challengers through imprisonment or intimidation; he was re-elected on 29 March with 97 per cent of the vote but with a voter turnout of only 41 per cent. At the end of the year, Egypt faced the worst human rights conditions in decades and open civil war in Sinai.

**Armed conflict in Iraq**

Military operations that aimed to vanquish the Islamic State in its remaining pockets of rural territory in northern Iraq continued in 2018, despite the government declaring in December 2017 that the group was defeated. Sporadic Islamic State bomb attacks in cities also persisted. According to a United Nations report released in November 2018, there were as many as 12,000 bodies in over 200 mass graves in areas of Iraq once controlled by the Islamic State. The two remaining cities under Islamic State control, Mosul and Tal Afar, were recaptured in 2017 at great human and infrastructural cost. An international donor conference in February 2018 pledged almost $30 billion (a mix of grants, loans and investment promises) towards reconstruction costs in Iraq, although the Iraqi Government was seeking...
$88 billion. The anti-Islamic State forces are themselves fragmented: in addition to the Iraqi Army, supported by the US-led Global Coalition Against Daesh, they include the Kurdish Peshmerga and the Hashd al-Shaabi, also known as the Popular Mobilization Forces—an Iraqi state-sponsored umbrella organization composed of a number of predominantly Shiite militias (some supported by Iran), as well as Sunni, Christian, Shabak, Yazidi and Turkmen militias. Nonetheless, the improving security situation in Iraq is confirmed by UN estimates of declining civilian casualties as a result of ‘acts of terrorism and conflict-related violence’—less than 1000 killed in 2018 for the first time in a decade (see table 2.4). Although Iraq appeared to be entering a post-conflict period in 2018, the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) suggested a mixed picture: while ‘organized political violence events’ fell by nearly 50 per cent compared with 2017, over 6000 conflict-related deaths were still recorded during the year. In sum, Iraq remained a fragile country with weak state institutions.

It was anticipated that the regional and national elections in 2018 would help facilitate intercommunal reconciliation, but the early signs were mixed. First, there appeared to be little progress in settling the Kurdish boundary question or finding a mutually acceptable formula for sharing Iraq’s oil and gas revenues. Second, although still highly fragmented, many Sunnis appeared to be willing to engage in the national political process in pursuit of greater devolution of power. Third, the Shias appear to have splintered into alignments with various non-Shia parties, which contributed to delays in selecting a new prime minister (a former oil minister and Shia politician, Adel Abdul Mahdi) and forming a new government. It remains to be seen if these political changes will dilute Iran’s influence over decision making in
Iraq. In late September, the USA closed its consulate in Basra—one of three US diplomatic missions in the country—citing threats from Iranian and Iranian-backed forces in Iraq. The Iranian Foreign Minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, denied that his country was responsible for the threats.

The Israeli–Palestinian conflict

The history of Israel’s occupation of the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and Golan Heights—territories it captured in the 1967 Arab–Israeli War—is extensive and complex. In December 2017, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict returned to the centre of international attention when US President Donald J. Trump formally recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel—despite widespread international objections—and announced that the US embassy would move there from Tel Aviv, triggering protests by Palestinians throughout Gaza, Jerusalem and the West Bank. In 2018, Israeli settlement expansion in the occupied territories remained a contentious issue.

The conflict in Gaza

In 2018, the ongoing civil unrest and armed conflict between Israel and Hamas and other Palestinian organizations in Gaza rose to its highest level since the 2014 Israel–Gaza War. Hamas—a Palestinian Sunni-Islamist organization, with both a social service wing (Dawah) and a military wing (the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades)—has been the de facto governing authority

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of the Gaza Strip since the 2007 Fatah–Hamas conflict.\textsuperscript{58} Hamas and Israel fought wars in 2008–2009, 2012 and 2014. Gaza has also been subject to an Israeli and Egyptian blockade for over a decade, which has caused a growing humanitarian crisis and turned the territory into what has been called ‘the world’s largest open-air prison’.\textsuperscript{59}

The near elimination of US funding in 2018 for the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East and other humanitarian projects, in retaliation for the Palestinian leadership’s refusal to engage in a US-led political process, further increased the pressure on Gazan society (80 per cent of the population depend on foreign aid to meet daily living requirements).\textsuperscript{60} However, a number of donor countries have pledged to increase their funding in order to replace US funding for the agency.\textsuperscript{61}

On 30 March 2018, Israeli forces responded to the largest Palestinian protests in several years—labelled the March of Return (demanding the right of refugees to return to their places of origin in Israel)—at various points along the Gaza–Israel border fence, by firing live ammunition (rubber-coated bullets and tear gas) that killed 17 and wounded over 1400 unarmed protesters.\textsuperscript{62} The UN Secretary-General, the High Representative of the European Union (EU), UN human rights organizations and Gazan families called for an independent investigation into the Israeli soldiers’ use of force.\textsuperscript{63} The Israeli Defence Minister, Avigdor Lieberman, rejected these requests.\textsuperscript{64}

Palestinians kept up the protests in the build-up to the 70th anniversary of al-Nakba (or Nakba Day, commemorating the expulsion of some 750 000 Palestinians from their homes in Israel during the 1948 war) on 15 May. Earlier, on 18 April, Israelis celebrated 70 years of independence.\textsuperscript{65} Casualties continued to rise as Israeli forces persisted in using armed force to suppress

\textsuperscript{58} The 2007 Fatah–Hamas conflict, also referred to as the Palestinian Civil War, was a conflict between the 2 main Palestinian political parties, Fatah and Hamas, resulting in the split of the Palestinian Authority in 2007. Fatah, under Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, retains control of the West Bank.


\textsuperscript{61} Al Jazeera, ‘Donors to increase UNRWA support and funding despite US cuts’, 2 Sep. 2018.


\textsuperscript{64} Holmes, O. and Balousha, H., ‘Israel rejects UN and EU calls for inquiry into Gaza bloodshed’, \textit{The Guardian}, 1 Apr. 2018.

\textsuperscript{65} \textit{The Economist}, ‘Israel at 70’, 17 May 2018.
the weekly Palestinian protests. On the eve of the al-Nakba anniversary, President Trump’s daughter and son-in-law travelled to Jerusalem to open the new US embassy. That same day at least 60 unarmed Palestinians were killed and around 2700 injured in protests near the border fence. Various UN statements condemned Israel’s actions, and Palestinians called for the International Criminal Court (ICC) to launch a full investigation into alleged Israeli violations of international humanitarian law—in 2015 it had begun a preliminary examination of the conduct of the 2014 war and Israel’s relocation of its citizens to settlements in occupied Palestinian territory.

Despite the continuing violence, weekly demonstrations continued along the border until the end of the year, although the protests were scaled back in November in exchange for limited aid concessions by Israel. According to health officials in Gaza, more than 210 Palestinians were killed and more than 18 000 were wounded by Israeli forces during the protests in 2018. The wounded included around 2000 people being treated for serious gunshot injuries to the legs, with many of the wounds infected by multi-drug-resistant bacteria. One Israeli soldier was killed by Palestinian gunfire during the protests.

From July to the end of the year, frequent military exchanges between Hamas (rockets fired into Israel) and Israel (air strikes in Gaza) threatened to escalate into a new full-scale confrontation. In October, the ICC warned Israel of a possible investigation of alleged war crimes in Gaza by both Israel and Hamas. Israel criticized the ICC statement and raised doubts over the prosecutor’s impartiality. Human Rights Watch accused both the

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70 These figures cover the period from the start of the protests on 30 Mar. 2018 to 12 Nov. 2018. See Al Jazeera, ‘Gaza protests: All the latest updates’, 12 Nov. 2018.
Palestinian Authority (in the West Bank) and Hamas (in Gaza) of perpetrating abuses against opponents, in a deepening of the Fatah–Hamas feud.\footnote{Human Rights Watch, ‘Two authorities, one way, zero dissent: Arbitrary arrest and torture under the Palestinian Authority and Hamas’, Oct. 2018.}

One Israeli army officer and seven Palestinians, including a local Hamas commander, were killed after an incursion by Israeli special forces disguised as aid workers into Gaza on 11 November, triggering further Hamas rocket fire and Israeli air strikes.\footnote{Halbfinger, D. M., ‘Deadly Gaza raid by Israel threatens nascent cease-fire’, \textit{New York Times}, 11 Nov. 2018; and Harel, A., ‘Botched special ops in Gaza brings Israel and Hamas to brink of war’, \textit{Haaretz}, 13 Nov. 2018.} After Hamas had fired about 400 rockets and mortars into Israel and Israeli aircraft had attacked at least 100 sites in Gaza, another ceasefire was agreed, leading to the resignation of Lieberman.\footnote{Holmes, O. and Balousha, H., ‘Israel and Hamas agree to Gaza ceasefire after intense violence’, \textit{The Guardian}, 13 Nov. 2018; and BBC News, ‘Israel Defence Minister Lieberman resigns over Gaza ceasefire’, 14 Nov. 2018.} At the end of 2018, rising West Bank instability added to the tensions in Gaza, where the ceasefire remained fragile. In the 12 months from 6 December 2017, Israel reportedly arrested 5600 Palestinians in the occupied territories.\footnote{Halbfinger, D. M., ‘West Bank shootings raise fear that Hamas is expanding its fight’, \textit{New York Times}, 13 Dec. 2018; and Middle East Monitor, ‘Israel arrests 5600 Palestinians in year since Trump’s Jerusalem decision’, 7 Dec. 2018.}

\textit{The peace process}

Intermittent peace discussions have been held since the beginning of the conflict. Since 2003 the basis for a Palestinian–Israeli peace agreement has been a two-state solution—an independent state of Palestine alongside the state of Israel. The most recent direct negotiations between the two sides took place in 2013–14, but collapsed in April 2014.\footnote{National Public Radio, ‘Former US envoy explains why Mideast peace talks collapsed in 2014’, 8 June 2017.} In early 2018, it was reported that the US administration was preparing a new peace initiative led by Trump’s son-in-law and US Middle East peace envoy, Jared Kushner.\footnote{White House, ‘Readout of the Gaza conference at the White House’, 14 Mar. 2018.} By the end of the year, however, the long-awaited ‘deal of the century’ had not been released.\footnote{Gardner, D., ‘Trump’s “deal of the century” offers nothing good to Palestinians’, \textit{Financial Times}, 5 Sep. 2018; and Miller, A., ‘The Israeli–Palestine conflict is not a bankruptcy sale’, Lawfare, 23 Jan. 2019.}

Whether the two-state solution remains part of current US thinking, or even a viable proposition, is increasingly doubtful.\footnote{Djerejian, E. P., Muasher, M. and Brown, N. J., ‘Two states or one? Reappraising the Israeli-Palestinian impasse’, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and Rice University’s Baker Institute for Public Policy, Sep. 2018.} According to a survey in March 2018, more Palestinians now oppose a two-state solution than support one, and a majority—57 per cent—said that such a solution is no longer practical because of Israeli settlement expansion. Despite this, only 28 per cent of Palestinians supported a one-state solution—a single country with an
Arab majority and equal rights for all. In July, in a further potential blow to the two-state solution, the Israeli Parliament passed a controversial law defining Israel as the national homeland of the Jewish people. The law also states that ‘the right to national self-determination in Israel is unique to the Jewish people’ and that a ‘united Jerusalem’ is the Israeli capital, and makes Hebrew the country’s sole official language, while reserving a special status for Arabic. Arab legislators described it as a form of apartheid and legalized segregation.

From July 2018 onwards, there was also a more targeted diplomatic effort by Egypt and the UN to avert another Israeli–Palestinian war in Gaza. This sought to advance twin mediation tracks: one between Israel and Hamas that revives the 2014 ceasefire agreement and anchors it in a long-term and sustainable truce, and a second between Hamas and Fatah to advance Palestinian reunification and the return of the Palestinian Authority to Gaza. However, at the end of the year, the UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process said that Israelis and Palestinians were even ‘further away’ from a resolution to the conflict.

**Armed conflict in Libya**

There has been armed conflict in Libya since an armed rebellion, with Western military assistance, deposed its leader Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. Under the 2015 Libyan Political Agreement (LPA), a UN-backed unity government—the Government of National Accord (GNA)—was installed in Tripoli in 2016, headed by the Prime Minister, Fayez Sarraj. The GNA relies on the support of a loose alliance of four large militias in the capital: the Special Deterrence Force, the Tripoli Revolutionaries Battalion, the Nawasi Battalion, and the Abu Slim unit of the Central Security Apparatus. By early 2018, these four militias controlled what remained of the Libyan state and its institutions in Tripoli. The GNA is opposed by a rival state institution, the

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86 UN News, ‘’We are nowhere closer’ to Israeli–Palestinian peace deal, than a year ago, Security Council hears’ , 18 Dec. 2018.
89 Lacher and al-Idrissi (note 88).
Tobruk-based House of Representatives in the east of the country, which has failed to approve the GNA or ratify the LPA. The House of Representatives is supported by General Khalifa Haftar, head of the self-styled Libyan National Army, which is a mix of military units and armed groups with a tribal or regional basis. Haftar has received military support from Egypt and the UAE, and political support from France and Russia.90 Meanwhile, in southern Libya, ethnic Tuareg and Toubou militias have been fighting for control amid general lawlessness, especially on the border with Chad.91 In late 2018, the three rival forces controlled different parts of the country (see figure 2.3).

Under a September 2017 UN Action Plan, the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) facilitated talks over proposed amendments to the LPA, but the parties failed to reach consensus on military command arrangements, the relative powers of different governing entities, governing mechanisms and other constitutional issues.92 At the end of 2017, Haftar announced that he would no longer abide by the LPA, raising the prospect of new fighting between the two main groups and the various militias—as occurred in mid 2018 (see below).93

Renewed violence

New fighting broke out in June 2018 in Libya’s coastal area, where most of the country’s oil export terminals are located. The Libyan National Army was forced to cede and then retake oil export terminals at Sidra and Ras Lanuf. A subsequent dispute over the management of oil sales was resolved after international pressure and concessions from the GNA—including a request to the UN Security Council to establish an international committee to oversee an independent review of the disbursement of funds by Libya’s Central Bank.94

In late August, fighting erupted in Tripoli between militias linked to the UN-backed GNA. The Seventh Brigade, a militia formed by the GNA’s defence ministry in 2017 and drawn from Tarhouna, a town 65 kilometres to the south-east of Tripoli, launched an assault on the capital. This pitted them against the alliance of militias operating under the GNA’s interior

UNSMIL negotiated a fragile ceasefire on 4 September, but by late September the fighting had intensified to the extent that the UN declared a state of emergency in Tripoli. More than 100 people were killed before UNSMIL negotiated another ceasefire, aided by a package of economic reforms introduced by the Prime Minister on 12 September.

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The power vacuum has allowed a resurgence of Islamist militant groups, including the Islamic State, which carried out more than a dozen attacks in 2018. In September 2018, for example, an attack on Libya’s state oil company killed two employees and injured 10 others, and in December an attack on the foreign ministry in Tripoli killed at least three people.98 In March, the USA carried out an air strike against suspected al-Qaeda militants in southern Libya.99

The peace process

France and Italy have both been vying to influence the peace process in Libya, and each hosted a summit in 2018. Italy’s interests are mainly in western Libya, where its Greenstream pipeline carries gas to Sicily. France’s preference has been to work with Haftar, whom it sees as more likely to stabilize the country and prevent conflict from spilling over into the adjacent Sahel region (where France has deployed large numbers of troops to fight jihadists).100 Italian and French energy companies are also competing for oil contracts in Libya.101

On 29 May, France hosted a summit in Paris that brought together the three heads of Libya’s main political institutions under the LPA—the GNA’s Prime Minister, al-Sarraj; the president of the House of Representatives, Agilah Saleh; and the president of the High Council of State (an unelected advisory body), Khaled Mishri—as well as Haftar. An eight-point declaration, which was endorsed but not signed by the four men, agreed to establish the constitutional basis for elections by 16 September 2018 and hold elections by 10 December 2018.102 All five permanent members of the UN Security Council, along with the EU, the Arab League and the African Union, backed the Paris declaration, not least because of concerns about the Islamic State and Libya’s role as a conduit for migrants and refugees heading to Europe.103

Meanwhile, an UNSMIL-mandated National Conference Process (NCP)—a series of public consultations focusing on priorities for the national government, security, governance and the electoral process—took place between April and July 2018. More than 6000 Libyans participated in more than 70 meetings convened in 43 locations across Libya, as well as with diaspora groups outside the country. Particular efforts were made to

100 On the conflict in the Sahel, see section VI in this chapter.
101 The Economist (note 90).
engage women, internally displaced people, ethnic minorities and youth. An online campaign received the attention of 131,000 Facebook users and 1,400 Twitter followers.\footnote{Alunni, A. and Tusa, F., ‘In search of a negotiated solution in Libya’, Aspenia online, 13 Sep. 2018. Reports of the NCP meetings are available in Arabic at <http://multaqawatani.ly>.} The Head of UNSMIL, Ghassan Salamé, highlighted one important point of consensus that emerged from the NCP: a broad agreement across Libya on the need for new elections.\footnote{UN Support Mission in Libya (note 95).} However, Italy, the United Kingdom and the USA, among others, as well as many Libyans, viewed the timetable agreed at the Paris summit as unrealistic given the level of violence in the country and the uncertain constitutional basis for the elections.\footnote{International Institute for Strategic Studies (note 103); and Smith, R. and Pack, J., ‘Libya’s house of cards: Elections without institutions’, Lawfare, 19 Aug. 2018.}

Italy proposed an alternative plan that involved postponing the elections and organizing a Libyan National Conference (as envisaged in the NCP) in January 2019. On 12–13 November, Italy held a summit in Palermo with representatives of many of the rival Libyan leaders and delegations from 38 countries to promote this agenda. Haftar attended only the second day, and then only a mini-summit with al-Sarraj on the sidelines of the main summit.\footnote{Tondo, L. and Wintour, P., ‘Italian summit on Libya in disarray as Trump and Putin stay away’, The Guardian, 12 Nov. 2018; and De Maio, G., ‘The Palermo conference on Libya: A diplomatic test for Italy’s new government’, Brookings, 19 Nov. 2018.} The summit led to no significant breakthroughs, and any support for a reconfigured UN Action Plan seemed unlikely to overcome continued disagreements, both between Libyan factions and between international actors, over several elements of the political road map, including how to distribute oil and gas revenues.

### Armed conflict in Syria

Since 2011, the political power of the Alawite elite in Syria has been contested in a multi-sided armed conflict that, while initially sparked by the Arab Spring, evolved into a complex war involving regional and international powers.\footnote{On the Syrian conflict in 2016 and 2017 see Smith, D., ‘The Middle East and North Africa: 2016 in perspective’, SIPRI Yearbook 2017, pp. 83–84; and Davis (note 9), pp. 76–79.}

While the war was far from over, 2018 saw a clear de-escalation due to both the Syrian Government’s consolidation of territorial control and the near defeat of the Islamic State.\footnote{For an assessment of why the Syrian Government was successful in the war, see Zisser, E., ‘Why has Bashar won the war in Syria?’, Strategic Assessment, vol. 21, no. 2 (July 2018), pp. 65–74.} However, as the armed opposition to the government of President Bashar al-Assad weakened, the civil war was pushed in new directions by Israel’s air strikes, Turkey’s cross-border
military operations, and Iran’s entrenched presence. Remnants of the Islamic State also remained a threat throughout the year.110

Overall, the Syrian conflict continued to be one of the most devastating in the world. Although there are no reliable casualty statistics, over 400 000 Syrians are thought to have died as a result of the fighting since the war broke out, and ACLED estimates that there were approximately 30 200 fatalities in 2018.111 The war accounted for nearly 30 per cent of all organized violence events in the ACLED dataset for 2018, the most of any single country. Syria also continued to have the highest number of civilian casualties: over 7100 killed in 2018.112 The non-governmental organization Action on Armed Violence attributes the high number of civilian casualties to the use of explosive weapons—such as large bombs and missiles, indirect fire weapons (mortars, rockets and artillery) and improvised explosive devices (IEDs)—especially in populated areas.113 Between 2011 and 2018, 79 206 people are known to have been killed or injured by explosive weapons in Syria, of which 85 per cent (67 263) were civilians; the true figure is probably far higher.114 Clearance of landmines and remnants of other explosive weapons could take up to 50 years.115

A report by the UN Secretary-General in October described ‘deeply disturbing violence against children’ in the Syrian civil war, including 12 537 verified ‘grave violations’ against children between 16 November 2013 and the end of June 2018. The grave violations covered in the report are recruitment and use in military actions, killing and maiming, rape and other forms of sexual violence, attacks on schools and hospitals, abduction, and denial of humanitarian access.116

Conflict continued to be the driver of humanitarian needs. With the end of large-scale fighting in many parts of the country, some 1.2 million internally displaced people were able to return to their area of origin in the first 10 months of 2018. In other areas, however, large-scale internal displacement continued throughout the year. Although over 42 000 refugees were known to have returned during January–November, at the end of 2018 half the

112 Kishi and Pavlik (note 50).
113 On the issue of explosive weapons in populated areas, see also chapter 9, section I, in this volume.
population was still displaced—over 5.6 million refugees (hosted mainly by Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey) and over 6 million internally displaced people. As a senior UN official said at a donor conference in April, ‘A quarter of the world’s refugees are Syrians, and a quarter of all Syrians are refugees’.

About 13.1 million people (over half the Syrian population) urgently required humanitarian assistance, 6.7 million experienced acute food insecurity, and a further 4.5 million were at risk of acute food insecurity in 2018. Other assessments suggested a slight fall in food insecurity in Syria in the latter part of the year, in line with improvements in security in many parts of the country.

After the decline of the Islamic State in 2017, underlying conflicts resurfaced in three main fronts in 2018—the north-west, south-west and north-east—with a complex and changing cast of combatants. There was also an increase in direct interventions by regional and global powers: Iran, Israel and Russia in the south-west; Russia and Turkey in the north-west; and Turkey and the USA in the north-east.

The tangle of competing foreign militaries in Syria occasionally became even more knotted, risking a widening of the conflict, especially in the use of air power: US air strikes against pro-government forces in February reportedly killed about 100 people, an unknown mix of Syrian Government troops and Russian mercenaries; on 24 July, Israel shot down a Syrian aircraft that was conducting air strikes against rebel forces near the border with the Golan Heights, claiming that it was in ‘gross violation’ of a 1974 UN demilitarization agreement; and in September, a Russian military plane was mistakenly shot down by a Syrian missile that was fired at Israeli aircraft attacking targets in Syria, although Russia initially blamed Israel.
The north-west

In the north-west, government forces (backed by Iran and Russia) fought an array of rebel groups, with a focus on the rural province of Idlib and the Damascus suburbs (eastern Ghouta). In January and February, heavy fighting took place in Idlib province between Syrian Government forces and rebel fighters, displacing more than 100,000 people, while in eastern Ghouta 400,000 civilians were trapped without access to humanitarian aid.\(^{123}\) Russian and Syrian Government air strikes resulted in hundreds of casualties, and there were allegations of chemical weapon use by Syrian Government forces.\(^{124}\) On 24 February the UN Security Council passed a resolution calling for a 30-day ceasefire across Syria, and on 26 February Russia announced that it would establish a humanitarian corridor in eastern Ghouta.\(^{125}\)

By early March the Syrian Government, with support from Russia and Iranian militias, had taken control of more than half of eastern Ghouta.\(^{126}\) Under an agreement brokered by Russia, approximately 1500 Syrian rebel fighters and 6000 of their family members were evacuated to the rebel-held Idlib province.\(^{127}\) In April, 500 Syrians were treated for symptoms consistent with gas poisoning, following an alleged chemical weapon attack by government forces on Douma in eastern Ghouta. In response, France, the UK and the USA launched air strikes against suspected Syrian chemical weapons facilities a week later.\(^{128}\) After eastern Ghouta was recaptured by government forces, rebels in Homs in the north agreed to a negotiated surrender.

In August, the Syrian Government and its allies prepared for an offensive on rebel-held Idlib province, home to 3 million civilians (including 1 million internally displaced people from other parts of Syria), as well as about 100,000 armed rebels and assorted jihadists. The UN warned that an attack on Idlib could create a humanitarian emergency ‘on a scale not yet seen’ in


the seven-year Syrian civil war.\textsuperscript{129} An assault on Idlib seemed to be averted on 17 September by a Russia–Turkey agreement (which was endorsed by Iran and the USA) to establish and monitor a demilitarized buffer zone to protect civilians in the province.\textsuperscript{130} However, although heavy weapons were removed ahead of time, armed militant groups—including jihadists with roots in al-Qaeda—failed to meet the 15 October deadline for withdrawal from the buffer zone, increasing the risk of continued violence.\textsuperscript{131}

Another alleged chemical weapon attack in Aleppo in November affected more than 100 people. Its origins and the substance used were unclear, but Russia and Syria accused rebel forces of carrying it out.\textsuperscript{132}

\textit{The south-west}

In mid June, Syrian Government forces backed by Russian air power increased their efforts to retake territory in south-western Syria, displacing more than 270,000 people after two weeks of heavy fighting.\textsuperscript{133} The area had been covered since July 2017 by a de-escalation agreement negotiated by Jordan, Russia and the USA, although the agreement was never developed from an initial ceasefire into a more lasting solution to the conflict. After Jordan held talks with Russia, a new ceasefire was agreed in the south on 7 July, with Russian military police deployed to help guarantee the agreement.\textsuperscript{134} Despite the reopening of a key border crossing with Jordan in October, most refugees and displaced people were reluctant to return due to the lack of functioning infrastructure, services and employment as well as continuing security concerns.\textsuperscript{135}

Israel has sought to maintain a buffer between itself and the Iranian-backed Syrian Government, and in 2018 it steadily escalated air strikes on what it
describes as Iranian assets inside Syria. During air strikes on Iranian-backed forces at the T-4 air base in central Syria, an Israeli F-16 was shot down by a Syrian anti-aircraft missile, prompting further air strikes against Syria's air defences. In September 2018, the Israeli Intelligence Minister, Israel Katz, claimed that ‘in the last two years Israel has taken military action more than 200 times within Syria itself’.

The north-east

Compared to the other two conflict theatres, the north-east remained relatively stable under the control of the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), led primarily by a Kurdish-dominated armed group, the People’s Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, YPG).

In March, Turkish-backed Syrian rebels took control of the previously Kurdish-held Afrin province, two months after Turkish troops had crossed the Syrian border to attack the city.

Throughout most of 2018, the US-backed SDF fought to retake the last territory held by the Islamic State. Despite occasional Islamic State counter-attacks and threats from Turkey against the Kurdish-led force in October, which hampered the campaign, the SDF continued to regain territory; and in mid December it captured Hajin, the last Islamic State-controlled town in eastern Syria, near the Iraqi border.

On 19 December, the Trump administration announced the withdrawal of approximately 2200 US troops from Syria—against the wishes of the US Defence Secretary, James Mattis, who resigned in protest—although later reports suggested that this might only be a partial withdrawal. Both France and the UK also have troops in Syria. However, the US withdrawal leaves the SDF/YPG potentially exposed to an attack either from Turkey (which

138 Williams, D., ‘Israel says struck Iranian targets in Syria 200 times in last two years’, Reuters, 4 Sep. 2018.
143 France has around 1000 troops in Syria, while the UK has not disclosed troop numbers on the ground. See Wheeldon, T., ‘As US withdraws troops from Syria, France and UK remain in the back seat’, France 24, 23 Feb. 2019.
threatened an imminent military operation against the Kurds in northern Syria on 12 December) and Turkish-backed Syrian forces or by the Syrian...
Government as it seeks to reassert control over the whole country. The SDF has also indicated that it may have to release up to 3200 local and foreign Islamic State prisoners as a result of the US withdrawal.

The control of territory

At the end of 2018, the complexity of the war in Syria was mirrored in the control of territory by various forces (see figure 2.4). Syrian Government forces controlled southern and western Syria (about 60 per cent of the country), and Hezbollah operated in some government-controlled areas near the Lebanese border. The SDF/YPG controlled the north-east, but territory west of Manbij was contested by Syrian Government forces and Turkish-backed Syrian opposition forces. Turkey and Turkish-backed forces controlled Afrin and territory north of Manbij. Syrian rebel groups, as well as the al-Qaeda-affiliated Hayat Tahrir al Sham and Islamic State, remained in pockets of Aleppo, Hamah and Idlib provinces. The Islamic State was also present in a small part of the desert territory around Hajin.

The peace processes

Just as the conflict changed in 2018, so did the peace efforts. The UN had previously been the lead actor in peace talks, latterly in parallel with the Astana Group (Iran, Russia and Turkey). At the end of 2018, a fragile patchwork of agreements and ceasefires remained in place (mainly mediated in 2017 by the Astana Group) and the leaders of France, Germany, Russia and Turkey were involved in a new round of peace talks (the Quartet Summit).

UN-sponsored peace talks between the Syrian Government and opposition forces in 2017 had failed to make a breakthrough, but further talks were held in January 2018. These talks and the efforts of the UN Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, made no progress towards a political transition in Syria. The centrepiece of UN efforts—the creation of a committee to write a new Syrian constitution—was still not in place at the end of the year. Similarly, there was no progress in the Astana process. The eighth round of

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147 France 24, ‘Does the UN’s Syria peace process still have a purpose?’, 25 Sep. 2018; and UN News, ‘Syrian Government’s “different understanding” of UN role, a “very serious challenge”—special envoy’, 26 Oct. 2018.
talks in Astana in December 2017 had ended with an agreement to hold peace talks in Sochi, Russia in late January 2018. However, most of the opposition groups refused to attend the congress, and there was no breakthrough in the negotiations. Further rounds of the Astana process in 2018 also failed to make any significant progress. More successful were local ceasefire and de-escalation initiatives.

In May 2017, four ‘de-escalation zones’ had been created in western Syria in an agreement between Iran, Russia, Syria and Turkey. By the end of December 2018, only the one in the north-western province of Idlib remained, reinforced by the 17 September agreement between Russia and Turkey (see above). Between March and July 2018, the other three (in Homs province, eastern Ghouta and the southern border with Jordan) were recaptured by the Syrian Government with the help of Russia, using a mix of military force and negotiated surrenders. Under the terms of an earlier de-escalation agreement (announced jointly in September 2017 by Iran, Russia and Turkey in Astana), between October 2017 and May 2018 Turkey deployed troops to 12 observation points in Idlib province along the front line separating rebel forces from Syrian Government forces. These observation posts were subsequently matched by 10 Russian and 7 Iranian posts on the Syrian Government side of the line.

In April, Iran, Russia and Turkey met in Ankara to discuss the crafting of a new Syrian constitution and ways to enhance security in the de-escalation zones. Meanwhile, the USA was reported to be working to assemble an Arab force to replace the remaining US forces in north-eastern Syria. As the US administration sought to balance support for the SDF and rehabilitation of relations with Turkey, its policy messages were often ambiguous. Nonetheless, on 4 June 2018, the USA and Turkey announced a road map for defining and implementing governance and security arrangements in Manbij. In October Turkey and the USA commenced joint patrols, and in November the US military began establishing observation posts in northern

154 Hafezi, P. and Erkoyun, E., ‘Russia, Iran and Turkey struggle to find common ground’, Reuters, 3 Apr. 2018.
Syria to help Turkey secure its border. However, the planned US troop withdrawal, announced in December, suggested that these initiatives might not continue into 2019.

Finally, with the USA increasingly sidelined, new peace talks involving the leaders of four countries—President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey, President Emmanuel Macron of France, President Vladimir Putin of Russia and Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany—took place at a summit in Istanbul on 27 October 2018. The participation of Germany and France, two countries not actively involved in previous attempts to resolve the Syrian crisis, added a new dimension to the talks, but it was unclear whether this commitment would be followed through. The final statement of this so-called Quartet Summit called for ‘an inclusive, Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political process’ and reiterated the UN’s call for the convening of the constitutional committee by the end of the year. However, disagreements over key details remained, not least as a result of the wider regional tensions and differing perspectives of both external and internal actors. At the end of 2018, a substantive resolution of the crisis remained elusive.

Armed conflict between Turkey and the Kurds

Since August 2016, Turkey has been involved militarily in northern Syria. Having deployed troops in Idlib province in October 2017 (as part of the Astana agreement with Iran and Russia), Turkey expanded operations into Kurdish-held Afrin province in north-western Syria (see above) in January 2018. Calls for restraint from the USA and NATO allies were dismissed by President Erdoğan, who stated that he intended to stay in Syria until ‘the business is done’.

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 predominantly Kurdish south-eastern Turkey. This area has been the focus of an almost continuous armed confrontation between Turkish security forces and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê, PKK) since 1984, punctuated by occasional ceasefires. The collapse in July 2015 of the Kurdish–Turkish peace process (also known as the Solution process), which included a de facto ceasefire that

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159 President of Russia, ‘Joint statement by the Presidents of the Republic of Turkey, the French Republic, the Russian Federation and the Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany’, 27 Oct. 2018.
had been ongoing since 2013, led to a new cycle of violence.\textsuperscript{161} According to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, between 350,000 and 500,000 people were displaced by the fighting between July 2015 and December 2016.\textsuperscript{162}

The violence continued in 2018. According to Turkish Government figures, which tend to overstate successes against the PKK, just under 1300 PKK militants were killed in thousands of security operations during 2018.\textsuperscript{163} Two independent sources gave widely differing estimates of fatalities in 2018: according to the International Crisis Group, 563 people were killed (17 civilians, 420 PKK militants and 126 state security forces), with at least 4200 deaths in the conflict in total since July 2015, while ACLED estimated that there were 1975 fatalities from political violence in 2018 alone.\textsuperscript{164} Ending this conflict is inextricably linked to the creation of peaceful relations between Turkey and the YPG in Syria, but at the close of the year there was no prospect of peace talks between the parties, especially with power in Turkey now concentrated in a strategic partnership between President Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi) and the Nationalist Movement Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi).\textsuperscript{165} The imprisonment since November 2016 of the co-chair of the Kurdish People’s Democratic Party, Selahattin Demirtas, also harmed any chance of peace.\textsuperscript{166}

\section*{Armed conflict in Yemen}

The roots of the current conflict and humanitarian crisis in Yemen are complex and contested.\textsuperscript{167} In 2014, after several years of growing violence, the country descended into a new phase of civil war between the internationally recognized government of President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi and an uneasy alliance of Iran-backed Houthis and forces loyal to former president Ali Abdallah Saleh, which controlled the capital, Sanaa, and large parts of the country. The Houthi insurgency had begun in 2004 when Hussein Badreddin

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{161} On the role of the Kurds in Turkish politics, see Özel, S. and Yilmaz, A., ‘The Kurds in the Middle East, 2015’, in \textit{SIPRI Yearbook 2016}, pp. 53–71.
\item \textsuperscript{163} Avundukluoglu, M. E., ‘100 senior terrorists neutralized in 2018: Turkish min.’, Anadolu Agency, 15 Nov. 2018.
\item \textsuperscript{166} Al Jazeera, ‘Turkish court keeps Selahattin Demirtas in jail despite ECHR’, 30 Nov. 2018.
\item \textsuperscript{167} See Davis (note 9), pp. 80–82. See also e.g. Royal Institute of International Affairs, ‘Yemen: Drivers of conflict and peace’, Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House, Workshop summary, 7–8 Nov. 2016; and Orkaby, A., ‘Yemen’s humanitarian nightmare: The real roots of the conflict’, \textit{Foreign Affairs}, Nov/Dec. 2017.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
al-Houthi, the leader of the Zaidi sect, launched an uprising against the Yemeni Government. Although al-Houthi was killed in that uprising, the insurgents have been known as the Houthis since then (their official name is Ansar Allah).

In March 2015, a Saudi Arabian-led coalition intervened militarily on the side of President Hadi. Later, the coalition itself became divided by conflicts and rivalries. In addition to the UAE, the coalition has included Bahrain, Egypt, Kuwait, Jordan, Morocco, Qatar (until 2017), Senegal and Sudan, either supplying ground troops or carrying out air strikes. Various peace initiatives and ceasefire attempts have failed to stop the fighting, and by the end of 2017 the coalition’s partial blockade of Houthi-controlled territories was having devastating humanitarian consequences.

In addition to this civil war, mainly located in the north, there were two other separate but interlinked conflicts in Yemen. First, another civil war was taking place between the central government and the Southern Movement, a fragile coalition of separatist groups operating in Aden, Hadramaut and Shebwa in the south. In January 2018, for example, the Southern Movement fought government forces in the port city of Aden, where the Yemeni Government has been based since 2015. The Southern Movement is represented politically by the Southern Transitional Council, which was founded in May 2017 by a former Aden governor, Aydrus al-Zubaydi, after he was fired by President Hadi. Second, a nationwide counterterrorism campaign continued against radical Islamist groups, including al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. The USA has been carrying out regular air strikes against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (or its antecedents) in Yemen since at least 2009. From 2014–18, the USA carried out at least 238 air strikes causing between 16 and 41 civilian deaths.

The humanitarian crisis

The humanitarian conditions in Yemen worsened in 2018 and, according to the UN, remained the worst in the world. In addition to a cholera epidemic—more than 1.36 million suspected cases between late 2016 and December 2018, and nearly 2800 associated deaths—an estimated 80 per cent of the population (24 million people) required some form of humanitarian or protection assistance, including 14.3 million in acute need (i.e. at risk from famine). In 2018 the number of people in acute need increased by 27 per

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168 On the role played by the UAE, see Abdul-Ahad, G., ‘Yemen on the brink: How the UAE is profiting from the chaos of civil war’, The Guardian, 21 Dec. 2018.
171 Bureau of Investigative Journalism, ‘Drone strikes in Yemen’, [n.d.].
cent compared with 2017, and the UN warned that the Yemeni crisis ‘could become the worst famine in 100 years’. One aid agency estimated that 85,000 children under five years old had starved to death in Yemen since 2015. An estimated 3.3 million people remain displaced, up from 2.2 million in 2017, including 685,000 people who fled fighting in Houthi-controlled Hodeidah, the fourth largest city in Yemen and its principal port on the Red Sea, and in other areas on the west coast from June onwards (see below).

As the conflict intensified in 2018—ACLED recorded a 25 per cent increase in the number of organized violent political incidents during the year compared with 2017—there was an increase in indiscriminate attacks and potential violations of international humanitarian law, which created large numbers of civilian casualties. ACLED estimates that over 60,000 people have been killed in the Yemeni war since 2016, including approximately 30,700 fatalities in 2018. A UN Human Rights Office monitoring programme verified more than 17,700 civilian casualties (6872 killed and 10,768 injured) in Yemen between 26 March 2015 and 8 November 2018. All of these estimates almost certainly undercount the true extent of casualties and exclude deaths from disease, malnutrition and other consequences of the crisis.

**Armed conflict in 2018**

Four years into the current conflict, the focus shifted to two theatres: (a) the Red Sea coast, where government forces backed by the UAE pushed up from the south and threatened Hodeidah, through which over 70 per cent of the country’s food is imported; and (b) the Saudi Arabian–Yemeni border, where conflict intensified, including increased Houthi missile strikes targeting cities in Saudi Arabia, especially the capital, Riyadh.

Allies of the Yemeni Government have received substantial international support. US special forces were deployed to Saudi Arabia in December 2017 to help it locate and destroy Houthi ballistic missiles and launch sites. US assistance has included intelligence, training and arms sales. France,

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174 UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (note 172).

175 Kishi and Pavlik (note 50).

176 Kishi and Pavlik (note 50); and Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), ‘Yemen war death toll now exceeds 60,000 according to latest ACLED data’, Press release, 11 Dec. 2018.

177 UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, ‘Bachelet urges states with the power and influence to end starvation, killing of civilians in Yemen’, News release, 10 Nov. 2018.


the UK and other European countries have also been key suppliers of major weapon systems to Saudi Arabia and the UAE.\textsuperscript{180}

Houthi forces had been carrying out ballistic missile attacks on targets in Saudi Arabia since late 2016. Four ballistic missile launches were confirmed in 2017 and at least 11 in 2018—albeit in the first half of the year.\textsuperscript{181} In April, the conflict intensified: the Saudi Arabian-led coalition increased its air strikes, and Houthi forces increased missile attacks on Saudi Arabian targets.\textsuperscript{182}

In June, the UAE, Saudi Arabia and other Yemeni Government allies launched an offensive to take Hodeidah, with the USA providing intelligence to coalition forces for air strike targets.\textsuperscript{183} The coalition forces reportedly seized Hodeidah airport on 16 June, although fighting around the airport was ongoing four days later (and commenced again in November).\textsuperscript{184} On 23 June, the UAE announced a pause in the assault on Hodeidah to allow for UN-brokered talks, which were to culminate in a meeting between the two sides in Geneva, Switzerland in September.\textsuperscript{185} In the meantime, fighting continued at key locations on the outskirts of the city, with air strikes by the Saudi Arabian-led coalition causing widespread civilian deaths. On 2 August, for example, at least 30 people were killed in air strikes, and on 9 August, 51 people, including 40 children, were killed in an air strike that hit a school bus.\textsuperscript{186} The 500-pound laser-guided MK82 bomb used in the 9 August attack was manufactured by the US company Lockheed Martin.\textsuperscript{187}

The coalition had created a mechanism for investigating such incidents in August 2016—the Joint Incidents Assessment Team—but, in an August 2018 report, Human Rights Watch criticized it as falling short of international standards and lacking credibility. The organization also warned France, the
UK and the USA that they risked complicity in unlawful attacks in Yemen by continuing to supply arms to Saudi Arabia. In another report in August 2018, the UN Group of Regional and International Eminent Experts on Yemen accused the military coalition of committing or enabling war crimes in Yemen. While noting that numerous crimes were also committed by the Houthis, the report (covering September 2014 to June 2018) singled out Saudi Arabian and UAE air strikes as causing the most civilian casualties.

The UN-mediated talks collapsed on 9 September, the Houthis having failed to attend for three consecutive days. After that, fighting escalated again and continued through October. At the beginning of November, the coalition deployed approximately 10,000 additional troops in a new offensive. On 14 November, there was another temporary pause in the coalition’s advance on Hodeidah, following increasing international pressure and intense UN shuttle diplomacy. Nonetheless, sporadic fighting continued until a UN-brokered ceasefire was agreed on 13 December.

The peace process

Yemeni peace talks had stalled since the collapse of negotiations in Kuwait in 2016. The UN Special Envoy to Yemen, Ismail Ould Sheikh Ahmed (Mauritania), presided over three rounds of unsuccessful talks in February 2018 and then stepped down to be replaced by Martin Griffiths (UK). Meanwhile, the focus was on the international humanitarian response, and in April a pledging conference in Geneva convened by the UN Secretary-General raised $2 billion in pledges for humanitarian action (about half from Saudi Arabia and the UAE).

From June 2018, intermittent efforts to revive the peace talks took place in parallel with the military advance on Hodeidah described above. The UN Special Envoy sought to get the Houthis and the internationally recognized

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Yemeni Government of President Hadi to agree to a new framework plan in September, but the Houthis failed to turn up to pre-peace talk consultations in Geneva. The murder of a Saudi Arabian journalist, Jamal Khashoggi, in October (see ‘Key general developments’ above) produced a backlash against Saudi Arabian policies and prompted Western powers to begin applying political pressure on the Gulf coalition. In late October, the US Secretary of Defence, James Mattis, the US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, and the British Foreign Secretary, Jeremy Hunt, all separately called for a de-escalation of hostilities and a resumption of talks. On 9 November, the USA suspended aerial refuelling for coalition aircraft conducting air raids in Yemen, although the decision fell well short of a goal with growing bipartisan support in the USA of ending all support for the war. The UN Special Envoy, Griffiths, used this momentum to reschedule peace negotiations, which finally took place in Stockholm, Sweden from 6–13 December. The Houthis agreed to attend the peace talks after the coalition approved the medical evacuation of some of their wounded.

The negotiations culminated in the Stockholm Agreement between the Houthis and the Yemeni Government, which included several confidence-building measures: a commitment to exchange almost 5000 prisoners, an immediate ceasefire across the governorate of Hodeidah, demilitarization of the Red Sea trade corridor, transfer of Hodeidah port to UN management, and the reopening of a humanitarian corridor linking Hodeidah with Sanaa. A small UN monitoring mission is expected to oversee the ceasefire, which came into effect on 18 December after a brief delay. The Redeployment Coordination Committee, a Houthi–Hadi working group formed to implement the Hodeidah part of the Stockholm Agreement, met for the first time in late December.

The parties were due to meet again in January 2019 to discuss the contested city of Taiz and a framework for negotiations to end the war. Despite cautious optimism after the talks in Sweden, the way forward remained fraught with risk as the parties sought to bridge their significant

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differences on issues ranging from disarmament and demobilization to the terms of a post-war settlement. Extending the peace process to include the Southern Transitional Council is another challenge. The support of external powers in restraining their proxies on the ground will be crucial. To this end, the US Senate passed a motion (by 56 votes to 41) on 13 December calling for an end to US military support to the Saudi Arabian-led coalition in Yemen. While the resolution still faced serious obstacles to becoming law, it marked a potential sea change in US policy towards the conflict. A British-sponsored UN Security Council resolution on the conflict, under consideration since October, was expected to be voted on early in 2019 and to provide international support for the Stockholm Agreement.

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