

## I. Key general developments in the region

IAN DAVIS

There were seven countries with active armed conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in 2019 (the same as 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 (low-intensity, extrastate and subnational armed conflict) and Yemen (major internationalized civil war).<sup>1</sup> All the armed conflicts had fewer fatalities than in 2018, except for Libya (which increased from nearly 12 000 fatalities in 2018 to nearly 21 000 in 2019).<sup>2</sup> Developments in each of the armed conflicts and any related peace processes are covered in subsequent sections: Iraq, Syria and Turkey (section II); the Israeli–Palestinian conflict (section III); Egypt and Libya (section IV); and Yemen (section V).

Many of these conflicts, which have killed hundreds of thousands of people and displaced millions more, were interconnected and involved regional and international powers, as well as numerous non-state actors. Massive anti-government protests have occurred in several states in the region since 2018, including Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, the Palestinian territories and Tunisia. Some are calling this the second or new Arab Spring.<sup>3</sup>

There were 14 multilateral peace operations in the MENA region in 2019, two more than in 2018. While most of the operations have been active for many years, one was new in 2019—the United Nations Mission to Support the Hodeidah Agreement (see section V)—while the European Union (EU) Border Assistance Mission in Libya also qualified as a multilateral peace operation under SIPRI’s definition following the entry into force of its new mandate in December 2018.<sup>4</sup> One peace operation ended in 2019: the Temporary International Presence in Hebron (see section III). MENA was the only region in which there was an increase in the number of personnel that were deployed in peace operations in 2019: an increase of 5 per cent, from 14 408 on 31 December 2018 to 15 082 on 31 December 2019.<sup>5</sup>

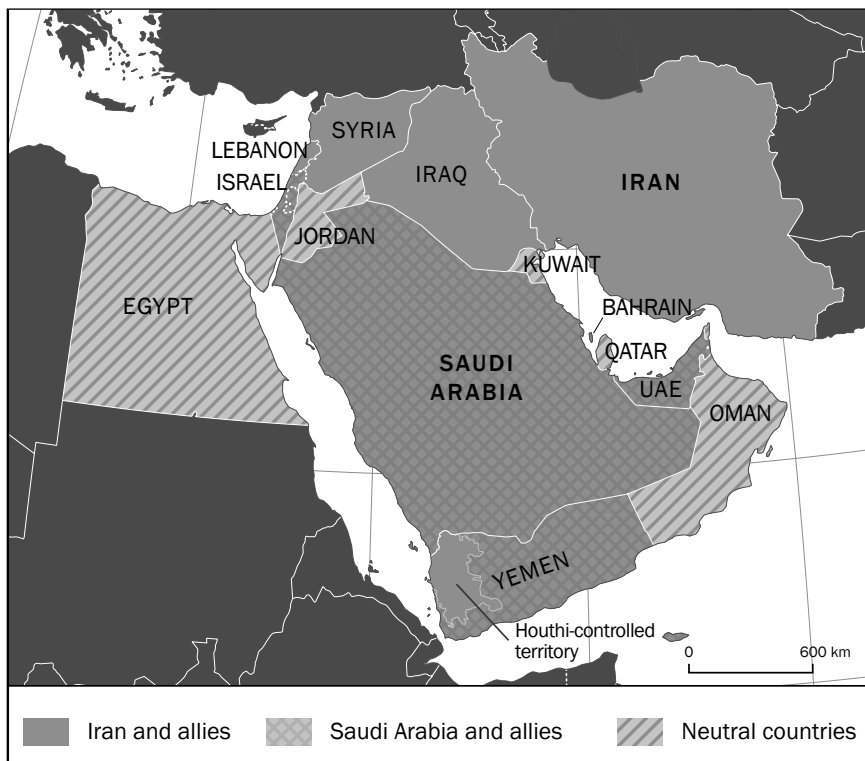
<sup>1</sup> For conflict definitions and typologies, see chapter 2, section I, in this volume.

<sup>2</sup> Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), ‘Data export tool’, [n.d.].

<sup>3</sup> *The Economist*, ‘Protests are making a comeback in the Arab world’, 21 Mar. 2019; England, A., ‘In Algeria and Sudan, a second Arab spring is brewing’, *Financial Times*, 11 Apr. 2019; and Hearst, D., ‘The second Arab Spring? Egypt is the litmus test for revolution in the Middle East’, *Middle East Eye*, 16 Apr. 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Council of the EU, ‘EUBAM Libya becomes a fully-fledged civilian CSDP mission’, Press release, 17 Dec. 2018.

<sup>5</sup> For global and regional trends in multilateral peace operations, see chapter 2, section II, in this volume.



**Figure 6.1.** Regional rivalries in the Middle East and North Africa

UAE = United Arab Emirates.

Source: *The Economist*, 'Iran was not predestined to become a regional hegemon', 9 Feb. 2019.

There are three cross-cutting issues that shape security dilemmas in the region: (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.<sup>6</sup> This section briefly examines how these three issues evolved in 2019, and pays particular attention to escalating Iranian–United States tensions.

### Shifting alliances and rivalries: Escalating Iranian–US tensions

In the MENA region fault lines intersect in complex ways with shifting alliances and rivalries (see figure 6.1).<sup>7</sup> The most destabilizing and high-risk

<sup>6</sup> See Davis, I., 'Armed conflict and peace processes in the Middle East and North Africa', *SIPRI Yearbook 2019*, pp. 81–85.

<sup>7</sup> Malley, R., 'The unwanted wars: Why the Middle East is more combustible than ever', *Foreign Affairs*, Nov./Dec. 2019.

interstate rivalries in 2019 continued to be between Iran (and its allies in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen) and an ad hoc group of four states: Israel, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the USA.<sup>8</sup> 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) have been actively opposing Iran in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen, while Israeli opposition to Iran has been focused on Lebanon and Syria, as well as on the 2015 nuclear agreement (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, JCPOA).<sup>9</sup> As it did in 2018 Israel attacked Iranian and Iranian-aligned targets in Syria on several occasions in 2019, but also extended air strikes to Iranian-backed militias in Iraq and Hezbollah in Lebanon.<sup>10</sup> There was also an ongoing Sunni–Sunni rift, with Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE competing with Qatar and Turkey (especially in the Horn of Africa and Libya), and the Islamic State carrying out predominantly Sunni-on-Sunni violence.<sup>11</sup> However, it was the action–reaction dynamic between Iran and the USA (and its Gulf allies) that came to the fore during the year, which on several occasions threatened to escalate from proxy war into a regional-wide interstate military conflict.<sup>12</sup> The geopolitical power struggle between Iran and the USA also complicated UN mediation in Yemen (see section V).

### *The ‘maximum pressure’ campaign of the United States*

Iranian–US relations have been adversarial since the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, which had its 40th anniversary in February 2019.<sup>13</sup> Relations have continued to deteriorate in recent years, with the US withdrawal from the

<sup>8</sup> For further details on the rivalries and how they played out in 2018, see *SIPRI Yearbook 2019* (note 6), pp. 82–84. On the role of geostrategic factors, see Ghoble, V. T., ‘Saudi Arabia–Iran contention and the role of foreign actors’, *Strategic Analysis*, vol. 43, no. 1 (2019), pp. 42–53. On the Saudi Arabian–UAE relationship, see Ziadah, R., ‘The importance of the Saudi–UAE alliance: Notes on military intervention, aid and investment’, *Conflict, Security & Development*, vol. 19, no. 3 (2019), pp. 295–300. On the Israeli–Saudi Arabian relationship, see Rynhold, J. and Yaari, M., ‘The quiet revolution in Saudi–Israeli relations’, *Mediterranean Politics*, Dec. 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Wezeman, P. and Kuimova, A., ‘Military spending and arms imports by Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE’, SIPRI Fact Sheet, May 2019. On the JCPOA, see chapter 11, section III, in this volume.

<sup>10</sup> See e.g. Middle East Monitor, ‘Satellite images show Iran missile factory in Syria destroyed by Israel air strikes’, 15 Apr. 2019; Reuters, ‘Israel says air strike in Syria sent “no immunity” message to Iran’, 25 Aug. 2019; and Cohen, E. T. and Huggard, K., ‘What can we learn from the escalating Israeli raids in Syria?’, The Brookings Institution, 6 Dec. 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Agha, H. and Malley, R., ‘The Middle East’s great divide is not sectarianism’, *New Yorker*, 11 Mar. 2019; and International Crisis Group, *Intra-Gulf Competition in Africa’s Horn: Lessening the Impact*, Middle East Report no. 206 (International Crisis Group: Brussels, 19 Sep. 2019). On armed conflict in the Horn of Africa, see chapter 7, section IV, in this volume.

<sup>12</sup> See e.g. International Crisis Group, *Averting the Middle East’s 1914 Moment*, Middle East Report no. 205 (International Crisis Group: Brussels, 1 Aug. 2019); and *The Economist*, ‘The brewing conflict between America and Iran’, 9 May 2019.

<sup>13</sup> Jahanpour, F., ‘Iran at crossroads on 40th anniversary of its Islamic revolution’, *The Transnational*, 11 Feb. 2019; and *The Economist*, ‘Four decades after its revolution, Iran is still stuck in the past’, 9 Feb. 2019. On the deep-rooted cultural and ideological dimensions of the conflict, see Chitsazian, M. R. and Taghavi, S. M. A., ‘An Iranian perspective on Iran–US relations: Idealists versus materialists’, *Strategic Analysis*, vol. 43, no. 1 (2019), pp. 28–41.

JCPOA in 2018, and also due to the US coercive policy of ‘maximum pressure’ by which the USA hoped to force Iran back to the negotiating table in a weaker position.<sup>14</sup> In turn, Iran seemed convinced that by securing ‘forward deterrence’ and threatening to resume its pre-JCPOA nuclear activities, the USA and its allies would be forced to reassess their policy options.<sup>15</sup> In an early sign of this action–reaction dynamic the USA designated the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a ‘foreign terrorist organization’, and Iran subsequently declared US Central Command and related forces in the Middle East to be terrorists.<sup>16</sup> However, it was the maritime confrontations in the Strait of Hormuz from May through to July 2019—including Iran shooting down a US surveillance drone in June and the US responding with cyberattacks against Iran—and a series of alleged Iranian attacks on Saudi Arabian oil facilities in September that raised the risk of a regional conflagration (see chapter 1, section I).<sup>17</sup>

Despite a further incident involving an Iranian oil tanker in the Red Sea in October, Iranian–US tensions eased somewhat in October and November, while Iran and Saudi Arabia were reported to be working through intermediaries to establish a dialogue.<sup>18</sup> However, despite an exchange of prisoners between Iran and the USA in early December, a series of military clashes in Iraq between Iran’s allies and the USA later in the month (see section II) suggested further escalation would be likely in 2020.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Katzman, K. et al., *US–Iran Tensions and Implications for US Policy* (Congressional Research Service: 23 Sep. 2019), p. 1; and US Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, ‘Advancing the US maximum pressure campaign on Iran’, Fact Sheet, 22 Apr. 2019. On the US withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal, see Eröstö, T., ‘Implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action’, *SIPRI Yearbook 2019*, pp. 378–86.

<sup>15</sup> On Iran’s forward deterrence posture and key foreign policy objectives, see Ahmadian, H. and Mohseni, P., ‘Iran’s Syria strategy: The evolution of deterrence’, *International Affairs*, vol. 95, no. 2 (2019), pp. 341–64; and Watling, J., ‘Iran’s objectives and capabilities: Deterrence and subversion’, Royal United Services Institute, Occasional Paper, Feb. 2019.

<sup>16</sup> US Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, ‘Designation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’, Fact Sheet, 8 Apr. 2019; and Galvin, C., ‘A threat to Jus in Bello: Legal implications of Iran’s designation of the US Central Command as a Terrorist Organization’, Royal United Services Institute commentary, 15 May 2019.

<sup>17</sup> Landler, M. et al., ‘US puts Iran on notice and weighs response to attack on oil tankers’, *New York Times*, 14 June 2019; Deeks, A. and Andersen, S. R., ‘Iran shoots down a US drone: Domestic and international legal implications’, *Lawfare*, 20 June 2019; Shear, M. D. et al., ‘Strikes on Iran approved by Trump, then abruptly pulled back’, *New York Times*, 20 June 2019; Barnes, J. E. and Gibbons-Neff, T., ‘US carried out cyberattacks on Iran’, *New York Times*, 22 June 2019; Kirkpatrick, D. D. et al., ‘Who was behind the Saudi oil attack? What the evidence shows’, *New York Times*, 16 Sep. 2019; and International Crisis Group, ‘After the Aramco attack: A Middle East one step closer to its “1914 moment”’, Commentary, 20 Sep. 2019. On the proliferation of unmanned aerial vehicles in the Middle East, see *The Economist*, ‘The growing appetite for armed drones in the Middle East’, 9 Mar. 2019; and Balas, A., ‘UAVs in the Middle East: Coming of age’, Royal United Services Institute commentary, 10 July 2019.

<sup>18</sup> Fassihi, F. and Hubbard, B., ‘Saudi Arabia and Iran make quiet openings to head off war’, *New York Times*, 4 Oct. 2019.

<sup>19</sup> Crowley, M., ‘In prisoner swap, Iran frees American held since 2016’, *New York Times*, 7 Dec. 2019.

## Violent jihadist groups

The Salafi–jihadist threat in the MENA region and globally has become fractured and localized, but with the Islamic State and/or al-Qaeda continuing to drive or influence a number of disparate groups.<sup>20</sup> The Islamic State lost its last territorial foothold in Iraq in December 2017 and in Syria in March 2019, and its caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was killed by US forces in Syria in October 2019.<sup>21</sup> Assessing the size of the remaining jihadi base in the region remains difficult, given its covert nature and a continuing significant component of ‘foreign fighters’ (individuals that have joined an armed conflict abroad).<sup>22</sup> One estimate puts the Islamic State’s current strength in Iraq and Syria at around 18 000 fighters.<sup>23</sup> Despite its setbacks and visible weakening, the Islamic State remained active throughout 2019 in Iraq and Syria.

## Water stress and other climate change impacts

Linkages among water scarcity, climate change and insecurity issues in the MENA region are ‘complex, diverse and multi-directional’.<sup>24</sup> In several cases climate change and water stress have played direct or indirect roles in recent and ongoing conflicts in the region. The World Economic Forum’s 2019 annual meeting in Davos, Switzerland, ranked the threat of a water crisis

<sup>20</sup> On the likely future direction of violent radical Islamism, see Clarke, C. P., *After the Caliphate* (Polity Press: Cambridge, 2019); Byman, D., ‘Does Al Qaeda have a future?’, *Washington Quarterly*, vol. 42, no. 3 (2019), pp. 65–75; and Almohammad, A., ‘Seven years of terror: Jihadi organisation’s strategies and future directions’, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism Research Paper, Aug. 2019. On divisions and competition between al-Qaeda and Islamic State, see Bacon, T. and Grimm Arsenault, E., ‘Al Qaeda and the Islamic State’s break: Strategic strife or lackluster leadership?’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 42, no. 3 (2019), pp. 229–63.

<sup>21</sup> *The Economist*, ‘Islamic State after the death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’, 2 Nov. 2019; Chulov, M., ‘Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s death comes as new order takes shape in Middle East’, *The Guardian*, 27 Oct. 2019; and White House, ‘The United States and our global partners have liberated all ISIS-controlled territory’, 23 Mar. 2019. On the Islamic State, its goals, operations and affiliates, and the international military campaign to defeat it, 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>22</sup> No estimates were given e.g. in the UN secretary-general’s ninth report on the Islamic State threat: UN Security Council, Ninth report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL (Da’esh) to international peace and security and the range of United Nations efforts in support of member states in countering the threat, S/20197612, 31 July 2019. On the historical impact of foreign fighters, see Cragin, R. K. and Stipanovich, S., ‘Metastases: Exploring the impact of foreign fighters in conflicts abroad’, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 42, no. 3–4 (2019), pp. 395–424.

<sup>23</sup> Rogers, P., ‘The ISIS comeback is happening—but the west isn’t learning any lessons’, *openDemocracy*, 22 Aug. 2019.

<sup>24</sup> Schaar, J., ‘A confluence of crises on water, climate and security in the Middle East and North Africa’, *SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security* no. 2019/4, July 2019.

as the biggest single risk facing the MENA region.<sup>25</sup> For example, in Libya during 2019 there were repeated attacks and interruptions to the water and energy infrastructure.<sup>26</sup> Large parts of the population in the Persian Gulf are dependent on desalination for their drinking water—there are 30 major desalination plants in Saudi Arabia and 70 in the UAE—and the desalination infrastructure would be highly vulnerable in an armed conflict.<sup>27</sup> In contrast in March and April 2019 half a million Iranians were temporarily displaced due to severe flooding.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Middle East Business Intelligence, 'How the GCC is tackling its looming water crisis', 28 Mar. 2019.

<sup>26</sup> Wintour, P., 'Water supply restored for millions in Libya, averting crisis', *The Guardian*, 21 May 2019.

<sup>27</sup> Salacanin, S., 'How drinking water has become a major conflict deterrence factor in the Gulf region', *New Arab*, 21 Aug. 2019.

<sup>28</sup> International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 'Iran floods: Two million people in need of humanitarian aid', Press release, 15 Apr. 2019.