

IV. Armed conflict and peace processes in North Africa

IAN DAVIS

Almost a decade after the 2011 Arab Spring, North Africa—here comprising Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia—is undergoing a convergence of crises, with negative spillover onto the stability of neighbouring states in sub-Saharan Africa (see chapter 7) and in the eastern Mediterranean (see chapter 5).¹ The lone Arab Spring democracy in Tunisia is also at risk, sandwiched between Libya’s civil war and an Algeria in transition (with mass protests demanding extensive constitutional and economic reforms continuing in 2020).² This section briefly discusses the non-international armed conflict in Egypt and the growing tensions in Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (Western Sahara), but focuses on the civil war in Libya.

Armed conflict in Egypt

In 2020 the Egyptian Government remained involved in a non-international armed conflict against the non-state armed group Wilayat Sinai (also known as Islamic State–Sinai Province) in the Sinai Peninsula. The Sinai insurgency (2011–present) deteriorated in 2014 when Islamist militants in Sinai embraced the Islamic State and carried out large-scale attacks on civilian targets.³ A state of emergency has existed in northern Sinai since October 2014 and in the country as a whole since April 2017.⁴ Human rights groups accuse the government of using counterterrorism measures to silence dissent.⁵ The economic fallout from the Covid-19 pandemic led to sporadic protests in parts of Egypt in September 2020 that were violently suppressed.⁶

¹ There is no single accepted definition of North Africa. Some definitions include Sudan in North Africa. The conflict in Sudan is discussed in chapter 7, section IV, in this volume.

² On the protests in Algeria see O’ Driscoll, D. et al., *Protest and State–Society Relations in the Middle East and North Africa*, SIPRI Policy Paper no. 56 (SIPRI: Stockholm, Oct. 2020), pp. 5–7; and ‘Algerians back constitutional reforms amid low voter turnout’, Al Jazeera, 2 Nov. 2020.

³ On the historical developments and sociopolitical causes leading to the rise of Sinai province and its military build-up see Ashour, O., ‘Sinai’s insurgency: Implications of enhanced guerrilla warfare’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 42, no. 6 (2019), pp. 541–58.

⁴ Al-Youm, A., ‘President Sisi extends Egypt’s state of emergency by 3 months’, *Egypt Independent*, 26 Oct. 2020. On developments in Egypt in 2018–19 see Davis, I., ‘Armed conflict and peace processes in the Middle East and North Africa’, *SIPRI Yearbook 2019*, pp. 87–88; and Davis, I., ‘Armed conflict and peace processes in North Africa’, *SIPRI Yearbook 2020*, pp. 157–58.

⁵ El-Sadany, M., ‘Egypt’s crackdown on EIPR: Instrumentalizing counterterrorism to silence dissent’, *Lawfare*, 15 Dec. 2020; and Wintour, P., ‘“Not just Giulio Regeni”: Hundreds have died in Egyptian custody, says report’, *The Guardian*, 11 Dec. 2020.

⁶ Magdi, A., ‘Protests still scare Egypt’s Government’, Human Rights Watch, 13 Oct. 2020; and Amnesty International, ‘Egypt: Rare protests met with unlawful force and mass arrests’, 2 Oct. 2020.

The low-level armed conflict continued in 2020 with no sign of an end or a decisive outcome.⁷ The Egyptian military occasionally provided statements on its operations, claiming in July 2020, for example, that it had killed 18 suspected Islamist militants in northern Sinai.⁸ Overall, estimated total conflict-related fatalities in Egypt in 2020 (626 fatalities) fell to their lowest level since 2012.⁹

Armed conflict in Libya

There has been armed conflict in Libya since an armed rebellion, with support of a Western military intervention, deposed Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. Under the 2015 Libyan Political Agreement (LPA) led by the United Nations, a unity government—the Government of National Accord (GNA)—was installed in Tripoli in 2016, headed by Prime Minister Fayeze al-Sarraj. The GNA is supported by a loose alliance of militias in the capital and controls what remains of the Libyan state and its institutions in Tripoli. The GNA is opposed by a rival state institution, the Tobruk-based House of Representatives in the east of the country, which has failed to ratify the LPA. Khalifa Haftar, head of the self-styled Libyan National Army (LNA)—a mix of armed groups with a tribal or regional basis—supports the House of Representatives.¹⁰ The Islamic State also remains a threat, especially in southern Libya. The armed conflict has resulted in large-scale forced displacement of civilians, across the border into Tunisia and also within Libya. It has also facilitated migrant smuggling and human trafficking into, through and from Libyan territory.¹¹ There is a strong economic dimension to the conflict, with competition among internal and external actors for control of key economic levers such as the central bank and oil revenues.¹²

The deepening roles of Egypt, Russia and Turkey in the civil war in 2020 complicated peace efforts and increased the risk of a direct military confrontation between Turkish and Egyptian/Russian armed forces

⁷ 'Egypt in major standoff with IS after militants occupy Sinai villages', *The New Arab*, 28 July 2020; al-Anani, K., 'Egypt's counterterrorism strategy in Sinai: Challenges and failures', Arab Center, Washington, DC, 28 Aug. 2020; and 'Shifting militant tactics curb development in Egypt's North Sinai', *Reuters*, 9 Nov. 2020.

⁸ 'Egyptian army says it killed 18 Islamist militants in North Sinai', *France 24*, 22 July 2020.

⁹ Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, 'Data export tool', accessed 29 Jan. 2021.

¹⁰ On the Libyan conflict in 2016–19 see Smith, D., 'The Middle East and North Africa: 2016 in perspective', *SIPRI Yearbook 2017*, pp. 83–84; Davis, I., 'Armed conflict in the Middle East and North Africa', *SIPRI Yearbook 2018*, pp. 74–75; *SIPRI Yearbook 2019* (note 4), pp. 94–98; and *SIPRI Yearbook 2020* (note 4), pp. 158–62.

¹¹ See e.g. United Nations, Security Council, 'Implementation of Resolution 2491 (2019)', Report of the Secretary-General, *S/2020/876*, 2 Sep. 2020.

¹² Carpenter, S., 'Waging economic war, Libyan strongman wants access to Central Bank cash', *Forbes*, 31 Jan. 2020.

supporting opposing sides in the armed conflict. An internationally backed ceasefire in Libya in October 2020 offered new grounds for optimism.

Internationalization of the armed conflict and the Berlin Process

Although the armed conflict in Libya started out as a civil war, it quickly became a regional proxy war. In recent years there has been a deepening internationalization of the conflict—with Egypt, France, Russia, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) supporting the LNA, and Qatar and Turkey (and to some extent Italy and the European Union) supporting the GNA, as well as an array of foreign armed groups and mercenaries on both sides.¹³ Russian mercenaries joined Haftar's forces in late 2019, while Turkey made a commitment to supply ground troops to the GNA if required.¹⁴ The conflict has also been fuelled by the systematic violation of a UN arms embargo.¹⁵

In early January 2020 Turkey announced it was deploying military advisers and an estimated 2000 allied Syrian fighters to Libya to counter the LNA offensive on Tripoli and the central coastal city of Sirte.¹⁶ Amid mounting international pressure for a ceasefire, the GNA and LNA agreed to a Russian–Turkish brokered ceasefire on 12 January, but it was sporadically broken almost immediately.¹⁷ Talks between al-Sarraj and Haftar in Moscow on 13 January 2020 failed to achieve a commitment to a permanent ceasefire.¹⁸

Since September 2019 Germany has been tasked (under the Berlin Process) with cultivating consensus among external parties to the conflict for the three-point peace plan devised by UN Special Representative Ghassan Salamé: a ceasefire, an international meeting to enforce the arms embargo and an intra-Libyan political process of reconciliation under the

¹³ McKernan, B., 'Gaddafi's prophecy comes true as foreign powers battle for Libya's oil', *The Guardian*, 2 Aug. 2020; Rondeaux, C., 'Libya's expanding proxy war may be the ultimate test of NATO's resilience', *World Politics Review*, 17 July 2020; and Kausch, K., 'Libya: How Europe failed to end the war', *Middle East Eye*, 26 May 2020.

¹⁴ 'Foreign powers are piling into Libya', *The Economist*, 12 Dec. 2019; and Wintour, P., 'Turkey renews military pledge to Libya as threat of Mediterranean war grows', *The Guardian*, 15 Dec. 2019.

¹⁵ See e.g. UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), 'UNSMIL statement on continued violations of arms embargo in Libya', 25 Jan. 2020; United Nations, Security Council, 'Implementation of Resolution 2473 (2019)', Report of the Secretary-General, S/2020/393, 15 May 2020; Walsh, D., 'Waves of Russian and Emirati flights fuel Libyan war, UN finds', *New York Times*, 3 Sep. 2020; Michaelson, R., 'Turkey and UAE openly flouting UN arms embargo to fuel war in Libya', *The Guardian*, 7 Oct. 2020; and chapter 14, section II, in this volume.

¹⁶ McKernan, B. and Akoush, H., 'Exclusive: 2,000 Syrian troops deployed to Libya to support regime', *The Guardian*, 15 Jan. 2020; Reuters, 'Libyan general Khalifa Haftar's forces seize key city of Sirte', *The Guardian*, 6 Jan. 2020; and International Crisis Group, *Turkey Wades into Libya's Troubled Waters*, Europe Report no. 257 (International Crisis Group: Brussels, 30 Apr. 2020).

¹⁷ 'Libya ceasefire: Both sides accuse each other of breaking truce', *Deutsche Welle*, 12 Jan. 2020; and 'UN envoy to Libya briefs Security Council on violations of ceasefire', *Libya Observer*, 30 Jan. 2020.

¹⁸ 'No breakthrough in Moscow talks for Libya ceasefire deal', *Al Jazeera*, 14 Jan. 2020.

auspices of the UN.¹⁹ A Berlin Conference on Libya on 19 January 2020, co-chaired by the UN and Germany, therefore adopted a 55-point paper in which the participants committed to refrain from interfering in the armed conflict and to support the work of the UN special representative.²⁰ More concretely, the GNA and the LNA agreed to appoint five representatives each for a UN-mediated ceasefire dialogue (known as the 5+5 Joint Military Commission), an International Follow-Up Committee of senior officials was tasked with monitoring implementation, and four thematic working groups were established on security, political, economic and international humanitarian law and human rights issues.²¹ However, none of the external powers withdrew existing military support, and there remained strong differences of opinion among some of the participating states, especially France and Turkey.²²

UN Security Council Resolution 2510 (2020), adopted on 12 February 2020, endorsed the outcomes of the Berlin Conference.²³ In addition, on 17 February 2020 European Union foreign ministers agreed to renew a naval mission in the Mediterranean Sea to monitor the UN arms embargo: Operation Irini (a successor to Operation Sophia) was launched on 31 March 2020.²⁴ The deputy head of the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), Stephanie Williams, became UN acting special representative after Salamé resigned in early March 2020 due to ill health.²⁵

Renewed hostilities

In March 2020 concerns about the spread of Covid-19 provided added impetus to international efforts to halt the violence. Shortly before the UN global ceasefire appeal, the GNA and LNA welcomed international calls for a humanitarian ceasefire to address the Covid-19 pandemic (on 18 and 21 March 2021, respectively), although neither party agreed to a formal

¹⁹ UNSMIL, 'Remarks of SRS G Hassan Salamé to the United Nations Security Council on the situation in Libya 29 July 2019', 29 July 2019.

²⁰ German Federal Foreign Office, 'Key to a resolution of the conflict: Libya Conference in Berlin', 20 Jan. 2020. Eleven countries participated—the permanent UN Security Council members (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States), regional actors (Egypt, Italy, Turkey and the UAE) and regional mediators (Algeria and the Democratic Republic of the Congo)—as well as representatives from the African Union, Arab League and the European Union.

²¹ For the full text see Zaptia, S., 'The Berlin Conference on Libya: Conference conclusions', *Libya Herald*, 19 Jan. 2020. Also see German Federal Foreign Office (note 20).

²² 'Faltering international steps in Berlin towards peace in Libya', *Libya Herald*, 19 Jan. 2020; 'Views from the capitals: The Libya conference in Berlin', European Council on Foreign Relations, 23 Jan. 2020; and 'Libya civil war: Macron accuses Erdogan of meddling in conflict', BBC News, 29 Jan. 2020.

²³ UN Security Council Resolution 2510, 12 Feb. 2020.

²⁴ Rankin, J., 'EU agrees to deploy warships to enforce Libyan arms embargo', *The Guardian*, 17 Feb. 2020; and Council of the European Union, 'EU launches Operation Irini to enforce Libya arms embargo', Press release, 31 Mar. 2020.

²⁵ Wintour, P., 'Libya peace efforts thrown further into chaos as UN envoy quits', *The Guardian*, 2 Mar. 2020.

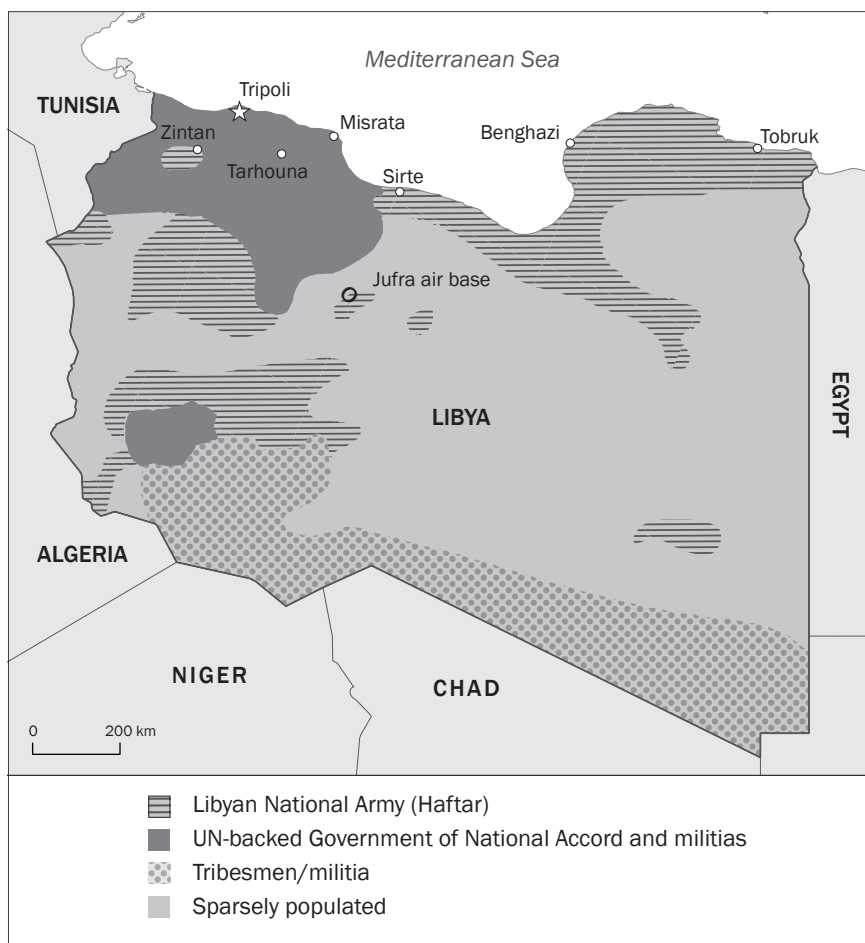


Figure 6.1. Areas of control in Libya, June 2020

Source: 'A warlord retreats: Libya's government regains control of western Libya', *The Economist*, 11 June 2020.

ceasefire.²⁶ On 24 March 2020 numerous Libyan civil society actors signed a call for national unity to address the Covid-19 pandemic, but with no apparent effect on the armed conflict.²⁷ At least 39 peace agreements and transition documents were signed in Libya during 2011–19, including national-level agreements (such as the LPA), intercommunal agreements and localized ceasefires. Given this extensive back catalogue of failed peace attempts, it

²⁶ 'UN welcomes response by Libyan parties to calls for humanitarian pause', UN News, 21 Mar. 2020. On the UN global ceasefire call, also see chapter 2, section I, in this volume.

²⁷ 'Call for united efforts against the new coronavirus pandemic', Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 24 Mar. 2020; and 'A thousand Libyans sign call to unite against the Covid-19 pandemic', Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 25 Mar. 2020.

was hardly a surprise when clashes between rival Libyan forces for control of Tripoli escalated in late March, with the reported participation of foreign forces and international arms deliveries to both sides.²⁸

The battle for Tripoli intensified in April–June 2020. Following an increase in Turkey’s military support for the first time in months, the GNA achieved military successes across western Libya and in areas surrounding Tripoli.²⁹ Despite these significant military gains, much of eastern and southern Libya remained in the control of the LNA. Overall, the external military support was unable to provide a decisive outcome. A further 30 000 people were displaced in the latest rounds of fighting, bringing the number of internally displaced persons in Libya to over 400 000.³⁰

As fighting intensified around Sirte and nearby oil fields Egypt’s President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi initiated a new round of ceasefire talks.³¹ After al-Sisi’s plan for a ceasefire was rebuffed, Egypt threatened direct military intervention in support of Hafter’s forces, as a counterweight to Turkey’s backing of the GNA.³² Although these forces were not deployed, the threat further entrenched the sense of a stalemate (see figure 6.1) in the armed conflict, and a de facto halt in the fighting ensued across Libya from August 2020. Total conflict-related fatalities for the year declined by nearly 30 per cent compared to 2019 (see table 6.6). The threat to civilians from explosive remnants of war, including from the suspected use of cluster weapons, was a growing concern, while potential war crimes and other human rights violations by LNA forces continued to be investigated.³³

Continuing negotiations, protests and a new ceasefire agreement

In June and July UNSMIL resumed separate talks with the GNA and LNA delegations within the framework of the 5+5 Joint Military Commission, but the political position of the parties continued to be determined by military

²⁸ PA-X, ‘Peace agreements database and access tool, version 4’, Political Settlements Research Programme, University of Edinburgh, accessed 10 Jan. 2021; Burke, J. and Wintour, P., ‘Suspected military supplies pour into Libya as UN flounders’, *The Guardian*, 11 Mar. 2020; and Wintour, P., ‘Libya fighting intensifies as rival forces defy UN call for global ceasefire’, *The Guardian*, 27 Mar. 2020.

²⁹ McKernan, B., ‘Idlib to Tripoli: Turkey moves to dominate eastern Mediterranean’, *The Guardian*, 26 May 2020; and ‘A warlord retreats: Libya’s government regains control of western Libya’, *The Economist*, 11 June 2020.

³⁰ United Nations, Security Council, Letter dated 10 July 2020 from the President of the Security Council addressed to the Secretary-General and the permanent representatives of the members of the Security Council, S/2020/686, 13 July 2020, p. 3.

³¹ Graham-Harrison, E., ‘Egyptian president announces plan for ceasefire in Libya’, *The Guardian*, 6 June 2020.

³² El Tawil, N., ‘Possible Egyptian “direct” intervention in Libya becomes legitimate: President Sisi’, *Egypt Today*, 20 June 2020; and ‘Averting an Egyptian military intervention in Libya’, Statement, International Crisis Group, 27 July 2020.

³³ Ahmed, K., ‘Unexploded bombs pose rising threat to civilians in Libya’, *The Guardian*, 17 Feb. 2020; and ‘Libya: Apparent war crimes in Tripoli’, Human Rights Watch, 16 June 2020. On efforts to regulate explosive remnants of war and cluster munitions see chapter 13, section I, in this volume.

Table 6.6. Estimated conflict-related fatalities in Libya, 2011–20

Event type	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Battles	2 073	458	197	2 381	1 999	2 207	972	715	1 226	802
Explosions/ remote violence	2 150	27	83	468	647	797	464	350	752	595
Protests, riots and strategic developments	818	21	83	11	19	11	0	0	0	5
Violence against civilians	491	46	76	475	336	250	227	123	98	93
Total	5 532	552	439	3 335	3 001	3 265	1 663	1 188	2 076	1 495

Note: For definitions of event types, see Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), ‘ACLED definitions of political violence and protest’, 11 Apr. 2019.

Source: ACLED, ‘Data export tool’, accessed 1 Feb. 2021.

developments and the control of oil resources.³⁴ Discussions also continued within the International Follow-Up Committee with online meetings on 13 May, 22 June and 23 July 2020, as well as additional virtual discussions within the four thematic working groups in an effort to build consensus.³⁵ On 21 August 2020 the GNA and LNA, in separate statements, called for a ceasefire across the country, the demilitarization of Sirte, the resumption of oil production and exports, and parliamentary and presidential elections in March 2021.³⁶ Follow-up meetings took place in Montreux, Switzerland, on 7–9 September and Bouznika, Morocco, on 11 September 2020.³⁷

During this period (August–October 2020) protests over corruption and economic austerity broke out in GNA- and LNA-controlled cities, prompting the leader of the GNA (al-Sarraj) to indicate he would step down at the end of October to facilitate a new transitional administration.³⁸ However, he was later asked by UNSMIL to remain in office for the duration of the negotiations.³⁹ On 20 September 2020 senior officials from the GNA and LNA reached a Russian-brokered agreement to end the blockade on oil installations and to establish a joint committee to oversee oil revenue disbursement. Oil production resumed across the country from October.⁴⁰

³⁴ UN Secretary-General, ‘Remarks to the Security Council on Libya’, 8 July 2020; United Nations, S/2020/686 (note 30); and ‘UN Libya mission says warring sides have engaged in truce talks’, Reuters, 10 June 2020.

³⁵ United Nations, S/2020/686 (note 30).

³⁶ United Nations, S/2020/686 (note 30), p. 2; and Walsh, D., ‘Libyan rivals call for peace talks. It may be wishful thinking’, *New York Times*, 21 Aug. 2020.

³⁷ UNSMIL, ‘Statement on the HD-organised Libyan consultative meeting of 7–9 September 2020 in Montreux, Switzerland’, 10 Sep. 2020; and ‘Libya rivals reach deal to allocate positions in key institutions’, Al Jazeera, 11 Sep. 2020.

³⁸ Zaptia, S., ‘Shooting at Tripoli demonstrations: MoI identifies shooters, will investigate and reveal results’, *Libya Herald*, 24 Aug. 2020; ‘Anger in Libya’s Benghazi over power cuts, living conditions’, Al Jazeera, 11 Sep. 2020; and ‘Head of Libya’s GNA says he wants to quit by end of October’, Al Jazeera, 17 Sep. 2020.

³⁹ German Federal Foreign Office, ‘Three milestones along the path to peace in Libya’, 10 Nov. 2020.

⁴⁰ Cohen, A., ‘Libya set for strong comeback to global oil markets’, *Forbes*, 2 Oct. 2020.

The intra-Libyan political and military negotiations chaired by UNSMIL also continued, including a successful meeting of police military officers from the GNA and LNA in Egypt in late September.⁴¹ The political track evolved into the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF), while the military track led to a 23 October 2020 agreement on a permanent ceasefire covering all areas of Libya.⁴² The new agreement required armed groups and military units to return to their respective bases (with some earmarked for demobilization), foreign mercenaries to depart within three months and the creation of a joint military force and a way to monitor violations.⁴³ The ceasefire was welcomed by the UN Security Council, and UN Secretary-General António Guterres described it as a ‘critical step’ in reaching a solution to the conflict.⁴⁴ At the end of the year the UN was proposing to bring in monitors to oversee the ceasefire.⁴⁵

The first round of talks within the LPDF took place in Tunisia on 7–15 November 2020, and it was agreed to hold elections on 24 December 2021—the 70th anniversary of Libya’s independence.⁴⁶ However, the November 2020 statement was vague on the exact terms of follow-up actions. Six rounds of online follow-up meetings failed to reach consensus on a legal framework for moving the electoral process forward, while the September agreement on the management of oil revenues also seemed to be unravelling.⁴⁷ The sustainability of the fragile consensus for the peace process among external powers and the deep fissures the war has inflicted on Libyan society are additional challenges to a political settlement.

Tensions in Western Sahara

In November 2020 the 40-year territorial dispute over Western Sahara between Morocco and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el Hamra and Río de Oro (Polisario Front) erupted again when the Polisario

⁴¹ UNSMIL, ‘Security and military direct talks between Libyan parties in Hurgada, Egypt conclude with important recommendations’, 29 Sep. 2020.

⁴² ‘Agreement for a complete and permanent ceasefire in Libya’ (unofficial translation), 23 Oct. 2020; UNSMIL, ‘UNSMIL statement on the resumption of intra-Libyan political and military talks’, 10 Oct. 2020; and Zaptia, S., ‘Immediate and permanent ceasefire agreement throughout Libya signed in Geneva’, *Libya Herald*, 23 Oct. 2020.

⁴³ International Crisis Group, ‘Fleshing out the Libya ceasefire agreement’, MENA Briefing no. 80, 4 Nov. 2020.

⁴⁴ United Nations, Security Council, ‘Security Council press statement on Libya’, SC/14339, 27 Oct. 2020; and UN Secretary-General, ‘Opening remarks at press encounter on Libya’, 23 Oct. 2020.

⁴⁵ Wintour, P., ‘UN to bring in monitors to observe Libya’s widely flouted ceasefire’, *The Guardian*, 1 Jan. 2021.

⁴⁶ British Government, ‘Libyan Political Dialogue Forum and the Berlin Conference: Joint statement’, Press release, 23 Nov. 2020.

⁴⁷ International Crisis Group, ‘Negotiations run aground, threatening political and economic stalemate’, 11 Dec. 2020; and International Crisis Group, ‘Foreign actors drive military build-up amid deadlocked political talks’, 24 Dec. 2020.

Front ended a 1991 ceasefire and launched attacks on Moroccan forces. The attacks followed a military operation by Moroccan forces in the buffer zone monitored by the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara.⁴⁸ With the peace process stalled by the end of the year the risk of a military escalation in Western Sahara was growing. A deal brokered by the United States in December to normalize relations between Israel and Morocco (see section III), which included US recognition of Morocco's claim to sovereignty over Western Sahara, added to the tensions.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Dahir, A. L., 'Western Sahara independence group ends truce with Morocco', *New York Times*, 14 Nov. 2020.

⁴⁹ 'Moroccan Islamist groups reject normalising ties with Israel', *The Guardian*, 13 Dec. 2020.