

I. Global trends and regional developments in armed conflict

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Armed conflict dominated headlines worldwide throughout 2023.¹ Although the number of states experiencing armed conflicts fell slightly, from 55 in 2022 to 52 in 2023 (see section III of this chapter), two major wars—between the Russian Federation and Ukraine and, from 7 October, Israel and Hamas—were the subjects of intensive media coverage and public debate.² Many analysts framed these cases, in addition to other surges of violence such as that in Sudan, as symptomatic of a broader return of armed conflict as a common feature of international affairs after decades of widespread—if far from universal—peace. While explanations for this ‘new age of conflict’ or ‘world at war’ varied, most observers associated it with shifts in the global order, including the rise of major power competition and strains on peace-making and humanitarian institutions, including the United Nations.³ Other frequently cited factors, many predating 2023, included the complexity of current conflicts—which often involve multiple armed groups, including criminal and terrorist organizations—and the use of proxy forces by major powers and regional players to pursue their agendas.⁴ Although the incidence of interstate wars remained low, some observers saw the post-cold war taboo against the seizure of territory by force waning, as Russia pursued its aggression against Ukraine despite international condemnation, Azerbaijan settled its dispute with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh by force and governments from Venezuela to Ethiopia engaged in sabre-rattling against their neighbours.⁵

¹ Armed conflict is defined here to mean the use of armed force between 2 or more states or non-state armed groups. An armed conflict is considered to be active in a given year if battle-related violence causes 25 or more deaths in that year (or exceptionally if fatalities from ‘explosions and remote violence’ exceed 100). For further details see table 2.8 in section III of this chapter.

² On the weapons used in these 2 wars and the extent to which the conflict parties complied with norms on the protection of civilians see chapter 10, section II, in this volume.

³ On the rise of conflict see e.g. Davis, S., Pettersson, T. and Öberg, M., ‘Organized violence 1989–2022, and the return of conflict between states’, *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 60, no. 4 (July 2023); Ero, C. and Atwood, R., ‘Sudan and the new age of conflict’, *Foreign Affairs*, 26 May 2023; Mia, I., ‘Editor’s introduction’, International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Armed Conflict Survey 2023* (Routledge: London, 2023); and Poast, P., ‘Not a world war but a world at war’, *The Atlantic*, 17 Nov. 2023. On the limitations of the UN see Gowan, R., ‘How the world lost faith in the UN’, *Foreign Affairs*, 9 Nov. 2023. On humanitarian strains see UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Global Humanitarian Overview 2024* (OCHA: New York, Dec. 2023).

⁴ E.g. Amani Africa, ‘Africa and peace and security diplomacy in a time of the new agenda for peace’, Policy brief, June 2023.

⁵ E.g. the opening section of Ero, C. and Atwood, R., ‘10 conflicts to watch in 2024’, *Foreign Policy*, 1 Jan. 2024; and Davis et al. (note 3).

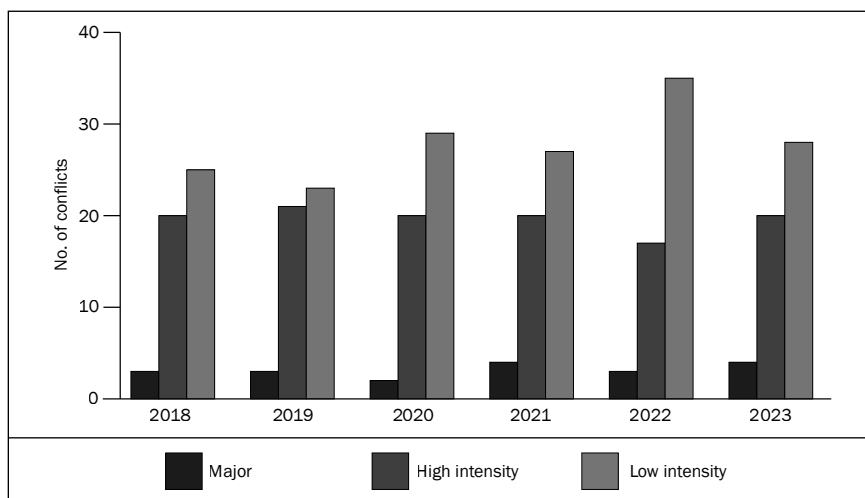


Figure 2.1. Number of locations of armed conflicts, by lethality, 2018–23

Note: With the caveat that data on conflict deaths is often imprecise and tentative, armed conflicts are categorized as major (10 000 or more conflict-related fatalities in the current year), high intensity (1000–9999 conflict-related fatalities) or low intensity (25–999 conflict-related fatalities). See section III of this chapter for more details.

Source: ACLED Dashboard, accessed 12–30 Jan. 2024.

These analytical debates took place in parallel with heated diplomatic and political arguments over certain conflicts—above all that between Israel and Hamas—in which disputes about fatality rates and other conflict data became divisive. A particularly intense row was sparked by a statement by António Guterres, the UN secretary-general, that the Israeli campaign in Gaza involved ‘killing of civilians that is unparalleled and unprecedented in any conflict since I have been Secretary-General’.⁶ Experts attempting to parse such statements highlighted the difficulty of making confident claims given the lack of fully reliable casualty data on many current and recent conflicts, including the war in Ukraine.⁷ Nonetheless, reviews of satellite imagery and other sources can help to illustrate levels of destruction.⁸ Other observers lamented the fact that the Western media failed to offer sufficient coverage of certain conflicts, such as the wars in Sudan and Myanmar, despite the fact that these also involved large-scale killing.⁹ The challenge of taking a genuinely global view of conflict has taken on additional moral and political—as well as analytical—weight in a period when many actors accuse each

⁶ E.g. Aitken, P., ‘United Nations chief slammed as Gaza death comparison fact-checked by social media: “lost moral standing”’, *Fox News*, 21 Nov. 2023.

⁷ Leatherby, L., ‘Gaza civilians, under Israeli barrage, are being killed at a historic pace’, *New York Times*, 25 Nov. 2023.

⁸ Hill, E. et al., ‘Israel has waged one of this century’s most destructive wars in Gaza’, *Washington Post*, 23 Dec. 2023.

⁹ E.g. ‘The world is ignoring war, genocide and famine in Sudan’, *The Economist*, 16 Nov. 2023.

other of adopting double standards in deciding how much attention to pay to different conflicts and how to respond to each case of violence.

In this context, the data on conflict in this volume (see section III) provides useful material both for testing analytical claims about an apparent resurgence of conflict and for measuring the human costs of different conflicts. This section summarizes global trends in armed conflict before offering surveys of each region, with particular attention to the four major armed conflicts: the Israel– Hamas and Russia– Ukraine wars and the civil wars in Myanmar and Sudan. Section II provides a brief review of notable peace processes in the year.

Global trends in armed conflict

There were some notable continuities in levels of conflict worldwide between 2023 and recent years, as tracked by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Database (ACLED). The number of states experiencing armed conflict (52) was below the figure for 2022 (55) but higher than the preceding four years (see figure 2.1). Most of these conflicts continued to take place within, rather than between, states. There were only three interstate armed conflicts, entangling six states (Armenia– Azerbaijan, India– Pakistan and Russia– Ukraine), during the year, although the Israel– Hamas war fell in a grey zone as it involved a state and an actor aspiring to statehood. The geographical distribution of countries in armed conflict was also similar to previous years, with the highest number located in sub-Saharan Africa (19), followed by the Americas (11), Asia and Oceania (9), the Middle East and North Africa (9), and Europe (4). Nonetheless, these apparent continuities obscure some significant changes in the overall lethality of conflicts and death rates across regions and conflicts.

The estimated overall number of fatalities recorded by ACLED rose from 153 100 in 2022 to 170 700 in 2023 (see table 2.1). The rise in estimated fatalities in sub-Saharan Africa (from 51 400 to 59 100) was primarily associated with the war in Sudan, and the even greater leap in the Middle East and North Africa, from 16 900 to 35 900, was tied to the Israel– Hamas war. In contrast, there were small drops in the numbers of estimated fatalities in all other regions, including Europe, despite the high intensity of hostilities in Ukraine throughout 2023. These figures should, however, be treated as tentative. In the case of Africa, for example, there is no reliable data on fatalities in the 2020–22 civil war in Ethiopia, although sober assessments suggest that it could have caused 100 000 battle deaths in 2022 and some estimates released in the course of 2023 pointed to even higher figures.¹⁰

¹⁰ Gowan, R., 'Global and regional trends and developments in armed conflicts', *SIPRI Yearbook 2023*, pp. 32–33.

Table 2.1. Estimated conflict-related fatalities by region, 2018–23

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Americas	23 812	22 915	20 671	21 213	22 354	21 641
Asia and Oceania	49 753	48 766	36 387	58 103	28 400	22 310
Europe	1 087	482	7 312	275	34 100	31 721
Middle East and North Africa	75 146	52 743	33 565	27 781	16 913	35 951
Sub-Saharan Africa	26 842	27 628	38 934	47 130	51 416	59 081
Total	176 640	152 534	136 869	154 502	153 183	170 704

Note: Fatality figures are collated from 4 event types: battles; explosions/remote violence; protests, riots and strategic developments; and violence against civilians. Figures include all conflict-related fatalities in the region, irrespective of whether the countries were classified as engaged in armed conflict. See Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), ‘ACLED definitions of political violence and protest’, 11 Apr. 2019.

Source: ACLED Dashboard, accessed 6 Feb. 2024.

In Europe, Russia and Ukraine have each avoided publishing robust figures on its casualties (while tending to inflate the other’s losses). ACLED reports about 31 000 fatalities in the Russian–Ukraine war in 2023 (see table 2.8 in section III). Yet, one journalistic investigation based on open sources (e.g. obituaries and information from cemeteries) estimates that Russia alone lost 27 900 troops in Ukraine during the year.¹¹

Despite these uncertainties, ACLED data indicates that the number of wars involving large-scale killing increased in 2023. There were four major armed conflicts in the year (i.e. involving over 10 000 reported deaths): the civil wars in Sudan and Myanmar in addition to the Israel– Hamas and Russia–Ukraine wars. This was one more than in 2022. The number of high-intensity conflicts (i.e. claiming 1000–9999 lives) also increased, from 17 in 2022 to 20 in 2023 (see figure 2.1).

The overall number of 170 700 estimated conflict-related fatalities in 2023 was the highest since 2019, when the total was 152 500. Nonetheless, it is still below the ACLED estimate of 176 600 for 2018, when the civil war in Afghanistan and conflicts in the Middle East were claiming high death tolls. Even if the estimates for recent years include significant undercounts for 2022 and 2023, it is worth keeping in mind that the argument that conflict is making a return as a feature of international affairs can downplay high levels of violence in certain countries and regions in the recent past. Even including the death toll in Israel and Gaza from 7 October, the overall estimate of 35 900 fatalities in the Middle East and North Africa for 2023 was still less than half that for 2018 (75 400). This primarily reflects a fall-off in fatalities in Syria and Yemen. The fatality rate for Asia and Oceania has also more than

¹¹ ‘More than 45,000 Russian soldiers believed killed since start of Ukraine war’, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 21 Feb. 2024.

Table 2.2. Estimated conflict-related fatalities in the Americas, 2018–23

Country	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Brazil	7 007	5 457	5 356	5 869	7 068	6 994
Colombia	1 493	1 421	1 773	2 110	2 296	1 978
El Salvador	956	889	379	423	274	57
Guatemala	799	1 113	573	661	742	511
Haiti	257	430	605	764	1 453	2 117
Honduras	793	1 018	728	708	694	647
Jamaica	224	276	261	290	380	397
Mexico	9 757	9 223	8 369	8 251	7 778	7 171
Puerto Rico (USA)	123	147	114 ^a	176	209	192
Trinidad and Tobago	243	180	162	186	278	332
Venezuela	1 739	2 413	1 960	1 392	828	622
Total	23 391	22 567	20 280	20 830	22 000	21 018
No. of countries in armed conflict	11	11	10	11	11	11

Notes: Fatality figures are collated from 4 event types: battles; explosions/remote violence; protests, riots and strategic developments; and violence against civilians. See Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), ‘ACLED definitions of political violence and protest’, 11 Apr. 2019. A country is treated as being in an armed conflict in a given year if there were 25 or more battle-related deaths in that year. The first available year for data on conflicts in the Americas in the ACLED database is 2018.

^a Battle-related deaths totalled less than the threshold of 25 in this year.

Source: ACLED Dashboard, accessed 17–18 Jan. 2024.

halved since 2021, despite the war in Myanmar. This reflects the relative lack of violence in Afghanistan since the Taliban takeover in 2021.

ACLED’s data nonetheless does offer support for the assumption that armed conflict is growing more prevalent and more lethal in other regions. The region-by-region analysis that follows also shows that, even in areas where conflict-related fatalities are relatively low, there are significant cases of violence and coercion within and between states. In some cases, the risks of conflict escalating further—whether in terms of violence or geographical scope—loomed large.

Regional conflict dynamics in the Americas

The Americas is the only region not to have had a major armed conflict in 2018–23. The recorded number of conflict-related fatalities in the Americas for 2023 (21 000) was marginally below that for 2022 (22 000; see table 2.2). The two countries that suffered the highest number of fatalities—Brazil and Mexico—largely faced criminal rather than political violence, although Brazil suffered a short-lived political shock in January when supporters of Jair Bolsonaro, the outgoing president, attacked government buildings in Brasília in a futile effort to reverse the inauguration of his successor,

President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva.¹² This was not the only election-related crisis in the region, as Guatemala endured months of uncertainty after the victory of Bernardo Arévalo in the presidential elections in August. While the authorities attempted by legal means to block Arévalo from power, his supporters took to the streets in protest and the police responded with violence. Nonetheless, Arévalo took office in January 2024.¹³

In Mexico, where criminal groups both fought among themselves and regularly targeted state forces, the government responded forcefully but faced criticism for failing to address high numbers of disappearances among civilians (which are not counted as conflict-related fatalities).¹⁴ Other governments in Central America also pursued heavy-handed approaches to criminal gangs. This was most notable in El Salvador, where a 'state of exception' that was first announced in March 2022 was renewed monthly throughout 2023 by the Congress, and security forces undertook large-scale sweeps of municipalities involving thousands of personnel to root out 'terrorists'.¹⁵ The government of Honduras also maintained a state of emergency, initiated in December 2022, as it tried to put a halt to endemic violence, including prison riots and a high rate of violence against women and LGBTQ+ individuals, although with less hard-hitting techniques than in El Salvador.¹⁶

In the Caribbean, Haiti continued to suffer severe gang violence while waiting for international assistance. After a turf war in March between two of the main gangs displaced 160 000 residents in the capital, Port-au-Prince, civilian defence groups emerged to target suspected gang members.¹⁷ The city nonetheless continued to experience severe violence. In the first half of the year, the UN Security Council searched for a country willing to lead an international mission to help the Haitian police to restore order. After Canada demurred, in July Kenya offered to send 1000 police to assist.¹⁸ The Security Council approved this measure in early October, but the Kenyan deployment was held up for the rest of the year by domestic legal challenges and the need for training.¹⁹

Although Latin America experienced no interstate war in 2023, there were concerns that Venezuela might launch an incursion into neighbouring Guyana to seize the long-disputed territory of Essequibo, which makes up two-thirds of Guyanese territory and gives it access to significant oil reserves.

¹² International Crisis Group (ICG), 'Brazil: The mob leaves its mark', Statement, 10 Jan. 2023.

¹³ E.g. AP, 'Guatemala president-elect's supporters block roads to protest party suspension', *The Guardian*, 6 Oct. 2023.

¹⁴ Shailer, D., 'The official count of disappeared people in Mexico could be an underestimate, say UN and advocates', AP, 3 Oct. 2023.

¹⁵ See monthly entries for El Salvador in 2023 in International Crisis Group (ICG), CrisisWatch.

¹⁶ See monthly entries for Honduras in 2023 in International Crisis Group (ICG), CrisisWatch.

¹⁷ 'UN urges act in Haiti displacement crisis caused by gang wars', Reuters, 21 Mar. 2023.

¹⁸ 'Kenya ready to lead multinational force to Haiti', Reuters, 29 July 2023.

¹⁹ On this peace operation see also chapter 3, section I, in this volume.

While the UN secretary-general had referred the situation in Essequibo to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in 2018 after unsuccessful efforts to mediate the dispute, on 3 December 2023 Venezuela held a referendum on rejecting the ICJ's role and calling for the annexation of Essequibo.²⁰ Guyana warned that Venezuela might resort to military force, and Brazil deployed troops to its borders with the two countries.²¹ The United States and the United Kingdom also made shows of military support to Guyana, but a group of mediators led by Dominica and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines facilitated talks in mid December at which Venezuela committed not to use force in the dispute.²²

The main peace process in Latin America involved the government of Colombia and several armed groups (as described in section II). Despite this, militant and criminal groups in Colombia continued to fight one another—and in some cases state forces—while preying on rural communities. Criminal organizations also took economic advantage of the large numbers of migrants aiming for the USA through the Darién Gap.²³

Regional conflict dynamics in Asia and Oceania

The estimated number of conflict-related fatalities in Asia and Oceania in 2023 (22 300) was below the figure for 2022 (28 100; see table 2.3). This was in part due to a continuing decline in deaths in Afghanistan following the Taliban takeover in 2021. The Afghan government continued to wage a low-level military campaign against the Islamic State–Khorasan Province group, which carried out a series of suicide bombings and other attacks targeting senior Taliban officials and members of the Hazara minority.²⁴ Another group, the Afghanistan Freedom Front, also launched a series of attacks through the year but neither set of insurgents mounted a major threat to the Taliban's rule.²⁵ The Afghan people nonetheless faced grim conditions and hunger, in part due to shortages of humanitarian funding.²⁶ The Taliban continued to place limits on girls' education and women's rights and work, earning a rebuke from the United Nations Security Council.²⁷

²⁰ Corder, M. and Garcia Cano, R., 'UN court bars Venezuela from altering Guyana's control over disputed territory', AP, 1 Dec. 2023.

²¹ Kelly, B., 'Brazil's military reinforces border with Venezuela and Guyana due to Essequibo', Reuters, 3 Feb. 2024.

²² Joint declaration of Argyle for dialogue and peace between Guyana and Venezuela, 14 Dec. 2023.

²³ International Crisis Group (ICG), *Bottleneck of the Americas: Crime and Migration in the Darién Gap*, Latin America Report no. 102 (ICG: Brussels, 3 Nov. 2023).

²⁴ See monthly entries for Afghanistan in 2023 in International Crisis Group (ICG), CrisisWatch.

²⁵ On these anti-Taliban groups see International Crisis Group (ICG), *Afghanistan's Security Challenges under the Taliban*, Asia Report no. 326 (ICG: Brussels, 12 Aug. 2022).

²⁶ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan: Afghanistan* (OCHA: New York, Dec. 2023).

²⁷ UN Security Council Resolution 2681, 27 Apr. 2023.

Table 2.3. Estimated conflict-related fatalities in Asia and Oceania, 2017–23

Country	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Afghanistan	36 607	43 264	41 608	31 359	42 659	4 035	1 127
Bangladesh	228	272	391	278 ^a	359 ^a	309	337
India	1 403	2 132	1 529	1 346	1 017	908	1 211
Indonesia	49 ^a	163	198	130	135	251	182
Kyrgyzstan	..	4 ^a	8 ^a	2 ^a	32 ^b	68 ^b	2 ^a
Myanmar	1 407	261	1 512	684	11 002	19 460	15 818
Pakistan	1 721	1 226	1 157	838	1 411	1 778	2 319
Papua New Guinea	..	..	..	..	145	227	343
Philippines	4 349	2 098	1 706	1 499	1 164	907	849
Tajikistan	..	64 ^a	66 ^a	2 ^a	20 ^b	71 ^b	6 ^a
Thailand	162	117	174	104	66	43 ^a	57
Total	45 926	49 601	48 349	36 242	58 010	28 057	22 251
No. of countries in armed conflict	7	8	8	7	10	10	9

.. = data not available.

Notes: Fatality figures are collated from 4 event types: battles; explosions/remote violence; protests, riots and strategic developments; and violence against civilians. See Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), 'ACLED definitions of political violence and protest', 11 Apr. 2019. A country is treated as being in an armed conflict in a given year if there were 25 or more battle-related deaths in that year.

^a Battle-related deaths totalled less than the threshold of 25 in this year.

^b While battle-related deaths totalled less than the threshold of 25 in Kyrgyzstan and in Tajikistan in this year, the combined total exceeded 25.

Source: ACLED Dashboard, accessed 18 Jan. 2024.

Afghanistan's relations with Pakistan were also strained, in part due to regular attacks by the Pakistani Taliban (Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan, TTP) on the Pakistani Army and security forces in border provinces.²⁸ Although Afghanistan made some gestures towards reining in anti-Pakistani militants based on its territory, Pakistan exacerbated the dispute by forcibly deporting hundreds of thousands of Afghans back to their country in the final months of the year.²⁹ In addition to the TTP attacks, protests in the run-up to the February 2024 parliamentary elections turned violent, especially after the authorities barred Imran Khan, a former prime minister, from participating.³⁰

In India there was a reduction in violence in Kashmir in 2023 and no significant clash with Pakistani forces during the year.³¹ However, there was a major upsurge of ethnic violence in the north-eastern state of Manipur. This

²⁸ Gul, T., 'Report: Terrorist attacks kill nearly 1,000 Pakistanis in 2023', *Voice of America*, 31 Dec. 2023.

²⁹ O'Donnell, L., 'Why Pakistan is pushing out refugees', *Foreign Policy*, 13 Nov. 2023.

³⁰ Naiyyar Peshimam, G., Shahzad, A. and Shahid, A., 'Pakistan cracks down on Imran Khan's supporters after violence', *Reuters*, 10 May 2023.

³¹ On dialogue opportunities in Kashmir see Davis, I. and Yuan, J., 'Armed conflict and peace processes in South Asia', *SIPRI Yearbook 2022*, pp. 122–24.

was an escalation of long-standing frictions between the Kuki-Zomi tribe and the majority Hindu Meithei. A Kuki protest against the extension of special tribal rights to the Meithei in early May turned violent, and the state quickly descended into disorder, taking the government by surprise.³² Militants on both sides attacked, abducted and murdered members of the other ethnicity, in addition to using sexual violence to intimidate their opponents. This resulted in the displacement of over 60 000 people and approximately 200 deaths.³³ In addition to the crisis in Manipur, there were sporadic attacks by Maoists guerrillas in central India.³⁴ Discussions between China and India on border issues continued, with no return to violence.

China pursued more robust policies elsewhere on its periphery. In 2023 Taiwan counted a record number—over 1700—of incursions by Chinese military aircraft into its air defence identification zone (ADIZ), a self-proclaimed zone beyond its territorial airspace.³⁵ Outside observers expressed mounting concerns over a future Chinese blockade or invasion of Taiwan.³⁶ Frictions also increased between China and the Philippines over the ownership of a number of shoals in the South China Sea, with vessels of the China Coast Guard (CCG) and the Maritime Militia regularly harassing Filipino fishing boats.³⁷ The Philippines responded by urging its mariners to visit the disputed areas, raising fears of an unintended escalation.³⁸ In the meantime, the United States strengthened its military ties to both Taiwan and the Philippines—in addition to other states in the region—as part of its efforts to counter China's influence.³⁹ Chinese-US tensions spiked after the USA identified a Chinese high-altitude balloon over US territory in January 2023, eventually shooting it down.⁴⁰ However, both sides took steps to cool tempers and engage in dialogue later in the year.⁴¹

³² 'What has spurred ethnic violence in India's Manipur?', Al Jazeera, 7 May 2023.

³³ Donthi, P., 'Ethnic clashes roiling Manipur pose test for India's Modi', International Crisis Group (ICG), 26 July 2023.

³⁴ See monthly entries for India in 2023 in International Crisis Group (ICG), CrisisWatch.

³⁵ Lewis, B., 'China is running out of lines to cross in the Taiwan Strait', *New York Times*, 26 Feb. 2024.

³⁶ For a summary of regional views see Sacks, D. M., 'Mapping the unknown and thinking the unthinkable: How US allies might respond in a crisis over Taiwan', East-West Center Occasional Paper no. 3, Jan. 2024.

³⁷ Yeager-Malkin, R., 'Explainer: The Philippines-China dispute and international law', *Jurist*, 28 Dec. 2023.

³⁸ Morales, N. J. and Hayley, A., 'Philippines urges fishermen to keep up presence at China-held shoal', Reuters, 27 Sep. 2023.

³⁹ International Crisis Group (ICG), *Preventing War in the Taiwan Strait*, Asia Report no. 333 (ICG: Brussels, 27 Oct. 2023); and Rasheed, Z., 'How an impasse in the South China Sea drove the Philippines, US closer', Al Jazeera, 30 Dec. 2023.

⁴⁰ Pierson, D., 'Balloon incident highlights fragile state of US-China relationship', *New York Times*, 4 Feb. 2023.

⁴¹ Watson, K., 'Biden announces progress on counternarcotics, military communication after Xi meeting', CBS News, 15 Nov. 2023. On the China-US strategic dialogue see also chapter 8, section I, in this volume.

Also in the Philippines, there were concerns that the long-running peace process with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) faced headwinds, but it proved resilient. The concerns stemmed from an increase in violence in the Bangsamoro region of Mindanao and delays in disarming and reintegrating MILF militants into society.⁴² Village elections—a precursor to polls for a new regional authority in 2025—were contentious. Nonetheless, the electoral process moved forward, and all sides appeared to remain committed to the process despite these tensions.

The civil war in Myanmar

By far the bloodiest conflict in Asia and Oceania in 2023 was the civil war in Myanmar, which involved an estimated 15 800 deaths (down from 19 500 in 2022). The State Administration Council (SAC)—the military junta that seized power in February 2021—made no progress towards restoring civilian government in 2023. Having promised to hold elections by August, the SAC announced in July that the polls could not take place due to ongoing violence.⁴³

Outside diplomatic actors struggled to have much impact on the war. While Indonesia, chair of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 2023, made finding a solution a priority and conducted quiet diplomacy with the junta, it achieved little progress.⁴⁴ At a summit in September from which Myanmar itself was excluded, the other ASEAN leaders issued a joint statement announcing that they were ‘gravely concerned’ by the situation.⁴⁵ The UN fared little better. Noeleen Heyzer, the UN secretary-general’s special envoy on Myanmar, stood down in June and Guterres was unable to find a replacement for her for the rest of the year, leaving the organization diplomatically sidelined.⁴⁶

The SAC faced significant military setbacks in the course of the year. Anti-government non-state armed groups in Myanmar include both long-standing ethnic armed organizations (EOs) and the People’s Defence Forces (PDFs), a loose coalition of armed groups broadly loyal to the anti-junta National Unity Government (NUG).⁴⁷ At the start of 2023 the SAC was in talks with several

⁴² International Crisis Group (ICG), *Southern Philippines: Making Peace Stick in the Bangsamoro*, Asia Report no. 331 (ICG: Brussels, 1 May 2023).

⁴³ ‘Myanmar’s military government extends state of emergency, forcing delay in promised election’, AP, 31 July 2023.

⁴⁴ Yang, A. T., ‘Indonesia pushes for peace in Myanmar’, East Asia Forum, 2 June 2023.

⁴⁵ 43rd ASEAN Summit, ‘ASEAN leaders’ review and decision on the implementation of the five-point consensus’, 5 Sep. 2023. See also Grossman, D., ‘With ASEAN paralyzed, Southeast Asia seeks new security ties’, *Foreign Policy*, 15 Sep. 2023.

⁴⁶ Cogan, M. S., ‘Heyzer’s exit marks a low point for the UN’s envoys to Myanmar’, *The Diplomat*, 26 June 2023.

⁴⁷ Gowan (note 10), pp. 38–40.

of the most prominent EAOs on ending hostilities with them.⁴⁸ These talks succeeded in some cases, but violence continued to erupt in different parts of the country through the year. The military and security forces employed crude counterinsurgency measures, including torching villages, targeting civilians and using air strikes. Their opponents used a mix of guerrilla tactics and asymmetric attacks, often targeting government convoys and isolated outposts. As the year wore on, a number of EAOs that had paused hostilities with the government accused the SAC of breaking pledges and returned to war.⁴⁹

The conflict took an unexpected turn in late October, when a group of EAOs under the banner of the Three Brotherhood Alliance launched a large-scale assault on government forces in Shan state. This part of Myanmar, in its east and bordering with China, had suffered less violence since the coup than many other parts of the country.⁵⁰ The alliance consisted of two groups that aim to hold territory in Shan state and the Arakan Army, based in Rakhine state on the west coast. This new insurgent formation scored rapid victories against the military, capturing over 100 bases and quantities of heavy military equipment.⁵¹ The armed forces responded with air and artillery strikes that caused widespread civilian displacement.⁵² Other EAOs and PDFs were quick to take advantage of the SAC's plight, launching attacks of their own on bases and cities elsewhere in the country.⁵³

This crisis drew in China, which has good ties to the EAOs on its borders.⁵⁴ China may have initially welcomed the actions of the Three Brotherhood Alliance, and the insurgents disrupted a network of computer centres used by international online scam artists—in part targeting China—that the SAC had tolerated.⁵⁵ However, China negotiated a limited and temporary truce in November that permitted civil servants to evacuate the besieged town of Laukkai.⁵⁶ This truce broke down on 23 December, and the rebels captured

⁴⁸ E.g. 'Myanmar's military groups hold election talks with armed ethnic groups', Al Jazeera, 7 Jan. 2023.

⁴⁹ See monthly entries for Myanmar in 2023 in International Crisis Group (ICG), CrisisWatch.

⁵⁰ 'What is Myanmar's Three Brotherhood Alliance that is resisting the military?', Al Jazeera, 16 Jan. 2024.

⁵¹ Horsey, R., 'A new escalation of armed conflict in Myanmar', International Crisis Group (ICG), 17 Nov. 2023.

⁵² AP, 'Myanmar's military is losing ground against coordinated attacks, buoying opposite hopes', NBC News, 1 Dec. 2023.

⁵³ United Nations, 'Fighting engulfs over two-thirds of Myanmar, fuelling humanitarian needs', UN News, 8 Dec. 2023.

⁵⁴ Clapp, P. A. and Tower, J., 'China's influence increases amid Myanmar's instability', US Institute of Peace, 20 Dec. 2023.

⁵⁵ International Crisis Group (ICG), 'Scam centres and ceasefires: China–Myanmar ties since the coup', Crisis Group Asia Briefing no. 179, 27 Mar. 2024.

⁵⁶ Jackson, W., 'Temporary ceasefire agreed after Myanmar rebel forces surround city notorious for online scam operations', ABC, 15 Dec. 2023.

Table 2.4. Estimated conflict-related fatalities in Europe, 2018–23

Country	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Armenia	6 ^a	2 ^b	27	24 ^a	217	24 ^a
Azerbaijan	47 ^a	14 ^b	7 057	33 ^a	68	570 ^a
Russia	121	46	56	26 ^b	114 ^b	249
Ukraine	885	404	113	144	33 307 ^c	30 673 ^c
Total	1 059	466	7 253	227	33 706	31 516
No. of countries in armed conflict	4	2	4	3	3	4

Notes: Fatality figures are collated from 4 event types: battles; explosions/remote violence; protests, riots and strategic developments; and violence against civilians. See Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), 'ACLED definitions of political violence and protest', 11 Apr. 2019. A country is treated as being in an armed conflict in a given year if there were 25 or more battle-related deaths in that year. The first available year for data on conflicts in Europe in the ACLED database is 2018.

^a While battle-related deaths totalled less than the threshold of 25 in Armenia in this year, when combined with Azerbaijan the total exceeded 25.

^b Battle-related deaths totalled less than the threshold of 25 in this year.

^c This figure is likely to be a severe underestimate (see table 2.8 in section III).

Source: ACLED Dashboard, accessed 12 Jan. 2024.

Laukkai and over 2000 soldiers in January 2024.⁵⁷ The SAC ended 2023 in its worst military position since the 2021 coup, but with no clear political or diplomatic pathway out.

Regional conflict dynamics in Europe

The Russia–Ukraine war

The Russia–Ukraine war ground on throughout 2023, at a high cost to both sides (see table 2.4), although the front line in eastern and southern Ukraine remained little changed by December 2023. The ground war in these regions broadly fell into three phases. For the first five months of the year, Russia pursued an offensive into the east of the country focused on capturing the city of Bakhmut, in the north of Donetsk oblast. It eventually fell in late May.⁵⁸ The following month the second phase began as Ukraine launched a much-heralded counteroffensive. Despite reported advice from its US allies to concentrate on a single thrust aimed at cutting through Russian forces in southern Ukraine and putting Crimea at risk, the Ukrainian forces attacked along a number of axes.⁵⁹ They encountered well-prepared Russian defences,

⁵⁷ Peck, G., 'Myanmar confirms a key northeastern city on border with China has been seized by an ethnic alliance', AP, 6 Jan. 2024.

⁵⁸ Aggarwal, M., 'Russian forces claim full control of Bakhmut, ending brutal battle that became a symbol of Ukrainian resistance', NBC News, 21 May 2023.

⁵⁹ 'Miscalculations, divisions marked offensive planning by US, Ukraine', *Washington Post*, 4 Dec. 2023.

including an extensive network of trenches and huge minefields and, lacking air superiority, made slow progress. It took three months for Ukrainian forces to recapture a single village—Robotyne in Zaporizhzhia oblast—about 10 kilometres from their starting positions on the southern front.⁶⁰ They did not advance further, and by November the Ukrainian commander-in-chief, General Valery Zaluzhny, stated publicly that the war was at a stalemate.⁶¹ By this point the third phase of the war in 2023 had begun, as Russia launched a new push to capture the city of Avdiivka, Donetsk oblast, on the eastern front in October.⁶²

The ground war took a heavy toll on the combatants. During the battle for Bakhmut, Russia's offensives relied heavily on troops employed by the Wagner Group, a private military and security company that had swelled its ranks with convicts recruited from Russian prisons.⁶³ Wagner's head, Yevgeny Prigozhin, became increasingly open in criticizing Russia's tactics and its poor resourcing of his fighters.⁶⁴ This discontent bubbled over in late June, when Russia set out to integrate Wagner personnel into its regular forces. Prigozhin and his forces seized the city of Rostov-on-Don, the location of the headquarters of Russia's Southern Military District, and demanded the resignation of senior defence officials.⁶⁵ A column sent by Prigozhin in the direction of Moscow clashed with loyal Russian forces but stopped short of the capital after Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko proposed a deal.⁶⁶ In order 'to avoid bloodshed', Prigozhin agreed to the deal—under which he and Wagner personnel were to relocate to Belarus and evade punishment for their actions—and remained a free man. However, he died in a suspicious aeroplane crash on 23 August, exactly two months after his uprising began.⁶⁷

While there was no similar drama on the Ukrainian side, Ukrainian soldiers frequently briefed Western media on their dissatisfaction with aspects of their counteroffensive in the second half of 2023, and General Zaluzhny's

⁶⁰ Jones, S. G., McCabe, R. and Palmer, A., 'Seizing the initiative in Ukraine: Waging war in a defense dominant world', Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Oct. 2023.

⁶¹ 'Ukraine's commander-in-chief on the breakthrough he needs to beat Russia', *The Economist*, 1 Nov. 2023.

⁶² Ebel, F. and Korolchuk, S., 'Russia and Ukraine intensify fight over Avdiivka, another ruined city', *Washington Post*, 28 Oct. 2023.

⁶³ On the role of the Wagner Group see chapter 4, section I, in this volume.

⁶⁴ Stanovaya, T. 'Man vs. myth: Is Russia's Prigozhin a threat or asset to Putin?', *Politika*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 13 Feb. 2023.

⁶⁵ 'Russian mercenary chief says his forces are rebelling, some left Ukraine and entered city in Russia', AP, 23 June 2023.

⁶⁶ 'Mutinous Russian mercenary boss turn his fighters back from Moscow to avoid bloodshed', *Reuters*, 24 June 2023.

⁶⁷ Kassim, A. and Sabbagh, D., 'Yevgeny Prigozhin confirmed dead after plane crash, Russian investigators say', *The Guardian*, 27 Aug. 2023.

‘stalemate’ comment complicated his relations with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky.⁶⁸

Away from the front lines, both Russia and Ukraine looked for ways to tip the balance of the war. In the winter of 2022–23 Russia launched repeated air attacks on Kyiv and other large cities with the goal of damaging infrastructure and morale while sapping Ukrainian air defences.⁶⁹ While Russian air attacks continued through the year, mixing missiles and uncrewed aerial vehicles (UAVs), there was a more intense barrage in December as Russia once again aimed to grind down Ukrainian defences.⁷⁰ In the course of the year, Ukraine began to reply to Russia’s air attacks in kind, although not on the same scale. Ukraine launched UAV attacks on targets deep inside Russia, including airfields and oil refineries.⁷¹ It also apparently conducted, but did not confirm, sabotage attacks on similar targets inside Russia (some Russian groups opposed to the government also claimed responsibility for sabotage).⁷² Its greatest successes came at sea, despite the near-total loss of its surface fleet in 2022. Using a mix of uncrewed surface vehicles (USVs), cruise missiles and other weapons, the Ukrainians damaged or destroyed a significant number of Russian vessels and prevented Russia’s Black Sea Fleet from operating freely.⁷³

The tempo of operations meant that both Russia and Ukraine had to look further afield for weapons and ammunition, with a particular need for artillery shells on both sides.⁷⁴ Ukrainian officials lobbied the United States and its other Western supporters for more military assistance. In the first half of the year, it focused in particular on acquiring Leopard tanks from Germany and other European allies and making the case that it should also receive advanced military aircraft.⁷⁵ In July a coalition of members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) offered to train Ukrainian pilots to fly F-16 combat aircraft and to supply these, starting in 2024.⁷⁶ This

⁶⁸ ‘Ukraine’s commander-in-chief on the breakthrough he needs to beat Russia’, *The Economist*, 1 Nov. 2023.

⁶⁹ On these attacks see also chapter 8, section IV, and chapter 10, sections II and III, in this volume.

⁷⁰ On the use of missiles see chapter 10, section III, in this volume.

⁷¹ On a UAV attack on the Kremlin in May, which Russia also blamed on Ukraine but for which Ukraine never took responsibility, see Horton, J., Robinson, O. and Palumbo, D., ‘What do we know about drone attacks in Russia?’, BBC, 1 Sep. 2023.

⁷² Gurcov, N., ‘Importing instability: How the war against Ukraine makes Russia less secure’, *Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED)*, 9 Nov. 2023.

⁷³ Savitz, S. and Courtney, C., ‘What are the takeaways from Ukraine’s fight in the Black Sea?’, *Defense News*, 30 Oct. 2023.

⁷⁴ On demand for arms production—in particular 155-mm ammunition for Ukraine—see chapter 5, section IV, in this volume. On arms supplies to Russia and Ukraine see chapter 6, section I, in this volume.

⁷⁵ Jakes, L. and Solomon, E., ‘Why tanks are tripping up the West’, *New York Times*, 19 Jan. 2023.

⁷⁶ Holland, S. and Ali, I., ‘US approves sending F-16s to Ukraine from Denmark and Netherlands’, Reuters, 18 Aug. 2023. For a brief description and list of members of NATO see annex B, section II, in this volume.

offered no immediate solution to the lack of air cover for Ukraine's counter-offensive. The United Kingdom and France made an important contribution to Ukraine's armoury with the supply of an unspecified number of Storm Shadow/SCALP-EG cruise missiles in May and July.⁷⁷ In the course of the year, Ukraine also courted Western arms firms to set up plants on its territory.⁷⁸ Nonetheless, many Western offers of assistance to Ukraine materialized slowly or not at all. In March, members of the European Union (EU) promised to send Ukraine 1 million shells over 12 months, but by the end of 2023 it seemed unlikely to meet this target.⁷⁹ While welcoming Western assistance, President Zelensky expressed frustration that NATO, at its summit in Vilnius in July, failed to extend an invitation to Ukraine to join the alliance despite intensive lobbying.⁸⁰

Ukraine found some helpful suppliers elsewhere, notably the Republic of Korea (South Korea).⁸¹ However, by November the Ukrainian military was starting to have to ration its use of shells. By this point Ukraine was also facing a more fundamental dilemma: as part of a broader political game, Republican politicians in the US Congress began to hold up agreement on \$60 billion of primarily military aid for Ukraine, threatening to cut off Ukraine's most important source of aid.⁸² This impasse was unresolved by the end of December 2023.

Russia's search for military resources pivoted on Iran and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea). During 2023 it sourced large numbers of Shahed-136 one-way-attack UAVs from Iran and artillery shells and missiles from North Korea.⁸³ However, Russian and Western officials also underlined that, despite sanctions, Russia was able to bolster its own arms production, with its Ministry of Defence claiming that it had

⁷⁷ Wright, T., 'UK to supply Storm Shadow missile to Ukraine', International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), 16 May 2023; and Irish, J., 'France to supply Ukraine with long-range cruise missiles', Reuters, 11 July 2023.

⁷⁸ Plucinska, J. and Insinna, V., 'Exclusive: Kyiv in talks with Western weapons makers about setting up production in Ukraine', Reuters 20 June 2023.

⁷⁹ Council of the EU, 'Outcome of proceedings: Delivery and joint procurement of ammunition for Ukraine', 7632/23, 20 Mar. 2023. See also chapter 5, section IV, in this volume.

⁸⁰ North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Vilnius summit communiqué, 11 July 2023, para. 11. See also Olorunnipa, T. et al., 'Zelensky slams NATO for omitting a timeline for Ukraine to join', *Washington Post*, 11 July 2023.

⁸¹ Choe, S., 'History turns upside down in a war where the Koreans are suppliers', *New York Times*, 14 Sep. 2023; and Michaels, D. and MacDonald, A., 'Troubled by a resurgent Russia and bickering allies, Ukraine hunkers down', *Wall Street Journal*, 8 Dec. 2023.

⁸² Goodwin, L., Caldwell, L. A. and Sotomayor, M., 'Senate lawmakers careen toward failed vote on Ukraine', *Washington Post*, 6 Dec. 2023. On military and financial aid to Ukraine see chapter 5, section II, in this volume.

⁸³ Mason, J. and Holland, S., 'Russia received hundreds of Iranian drones to attack Ukraine, US says', Reuters, 10 June 2023; and Lendon, B., 'Russia is using North Korean missiles in Ukraine, US says. That's bad news for Asia', CNN, 5 Jan. 2024. On Iranian and North Korean supplies to Russia see also chapter 6, section I, chapter 10, section III, and chapter 12, section II, in this volume.

delivered 1500 tanks (mostly reactivated from storage) by the end of 2023.⁸⁴ Western analysts also expressed concern that Russia had managed to put its economy on a war footing more effectively than Ukraine's backers.⁸⁵

There were no formal peace talks between Russia and Ukraine in the course of 2023. Ukraine's vision for peace had been as set out in a 10-point peace plan in November 2022, although this contained clauses—such as a call for an ad hoc tribunal to try Russian leaders for the crime of aggression—that some observers believed would complicate eventual negotiations.⁸⁶ At the start of the year, Ukraine hoped to organize a peace summit around the plan, possibly at the United Nations, but there was insufficient diplomatic support for this.⁸⁷ As an alternative, it organized a series of regional peace conferences—in Denmark (June), Saudi Arabia (August) and Malta (October)—to build international support for its proposals.⁸⁸ Russia was not invited to these meetings and dismissed them as irrelevant.⁸⁹

A growing number of Global South powers pushed during 2023 for a negotiated settlement to end the war. In March a Chinese paper on a possible solution to the war attempted to reflect both Russian and Ukrainian positions, but China did not put serious political capital into advancing this.⁹⁰ In April Brazilian President da Silva called for a coalition of non-Western states to mediate peace talks and in May a group of Arab leaders held separate face-to-face talks with both President Zelensky and Russian President Vladimir Putin.⁹¹ Indonesia suggested the deployment of a UN peacekeeping force and UN-supervised referendums on the futures of Russian-occupied areas in June, but Ukraine responded negatively.⁹² There were also reports of

⁸⁴ Roth, A., '“A lot higher than expected”: Russian arms production worries Europe's war planners', *The Guardian*, 15 Feb. 2024; and Abramov, N., [More than 1.5 thousand tanks received by Russian ground forces in 2023], *Lenta.ru*, 2 Jan. 2024 (in Russian). On sanctions against Russia see chapter 12, section II, in this volume.

⁸⁵ E.g. Garver, R., 'Russia's economy grew in 2023, despite war and sanctions', *Voice of America*, 8 Feb. 2024. See also the discussion in chapter 5, section IV, in this volume.

⁸⁶ E.g. Finucane, B. and Pomper, S., 'Can Ukraine get to justice without thwarting peace?', *Foreign Affairs*, 8 May 2023.

⁸⁷ International Crisis Group (ICG), 'How Ukraine can score another win at the UN', 20 Jan. 2023.

⁸⁸ 'Zelenskiy urges G20 to adopt Ukraine's plan to restore peace', *Reuters*, 15 Nov. 2022; and AFP, 'Talks on Ukraine's peace plan open in Malta', *France 24*, 28 Oct. 2023.

⁸⁹ 'Ukraine says Jeddah talks productive, Russia calls them doomed', *Reuters*, 6 Aug. 2023.

⁹⁰ Gabuev, A., 'Inside China's peace plan for Ukraine', *Politika*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1 Mar. 2023.

⁹¹ Kahn, C., 'Brazil's President Lula travels to China to find support to help end the war in Ukraine', *Morning Edition*, National Public Radio, 13 Apr. 2023; 'Six African leaders launch peace mission to Moscow and Kyiv to end “devastating” war', *North Africa Post*, 17 May 2023; and 'African leaders to propose “confidence building measures” to Russia, Ukraine', *Reuters*, 15 June 2023.

⁹² Kapoor, K., 'Indonesia proposes demilitarized zone, UN referendum for Ukraine peace plan', *Reuters*, 3 June 2023.

informal contacts between senior Russian and US figures on possible peace terms, although it was unclear how seriously the two sides took these.⁹³

The one noteworthy diplomatic success relating to the war that had been achieved in 2022—the Black Sea Grain Initiative mediated by the UN and Türkiye—unravelling in 2023.⁹⁴ While the initiative succeeded in its goal of allowing Ukraine to export its foodstuffs to global markets, thereby easing agricultural prices globally, Russia complained that its own agricultural exports still faced restrictions.⁹⁵ Having grudgingly agreed to 60-day extensions of the deal in March and May, Russia terminated the agreement in July by refusing to extend it again.⁹⁶ However, this did not have devastating consequences for exports from Ukraine, as it established a system whereby ships transited through the territorial waters of three NATO members—Romania, Bulgaria and Türkiye—to reach the Bosphorus. The UN secretary-general spent late 2023 trying to revive a version of the Black Sea deal, to no avail.⁹⁷

If the UN played a limited role in the war in 2023—with Russia and the Western powers continuing to treat the Security Council as a space to trade barbs—one international institution did make a striking intervention over Ukraine. This was the International Criminal Court (ICC), which in March issued arrest warrants for President Putin and another Russian official for their roles in the deportation of Ukrainian children.⁹⁸ This appears to have deterred Putin from attending the annual summit of the BRICS grouping (comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), which was held in South Africa—an ICC member—in August.⁹⁹ Nonetheless, by the end of 2023 Russian officials appeared confident that they had succeeded in weathering Ukraine's counteroffensive and, with US support for Ukraine in doubt, that the war might be tipping their way.

The conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh

In contrast to the stalemate in Ukraine, in September 2023 Azerbaijan secured a decisive victory in its long-running conflict with Armenia over Nagorno-

⁹³ Lederman, J., 'Former US officials have held secret Ukraine talks with prominent Russians', NBC News, 6 July 2023.

⁹⁴ Turkish–Russian–Ukrainian Initiative on the Safe Transportation of Grain and Foodstuffs from Ukrainian Ports, signed and entered into effect 22 July 2022.

⁹⁵ Partridge, J., 'Ukraine and UN chief call for new grain deal to safeguard global food supplies', *The Guardian*, 8 Mar. 2023; and Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Statement on Istanbul agreements, 17 July 2023. On the impact of the armed conflict on global food security see chapter 4, section II, in this volume.

⁹⁶ Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (note 95).

⁹⁷ Galloni, A., 'UN chief says it will be difficult to revive Black Sea grain deal', Reuters, 8 Nov. 2023.

⁹⁸ International Criminal Court (ICC), 'Situation in Ukraine: ICC judges issue arrest warrants against Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin and Maria Alekseyevna Lvova-Belova', Press release, 17 Mar. 2023; and Corder, M. and Casert, R., 'International court issues war crimes warrant for Putin', AP, 18 Mar. 2023.

⁹⁹ Sharp, A., 'Putin to miss upcoming BRICS summit to evade ICC warrant', *Foreign Policy*, 19 July 2023. For a brief description of BRICS see annex B, section I, in this volume.

Karabakh. The conflict originated in the break-up of the Soviet Union and the declaration of independence by Nagorno-Karabakh, an autonomous oblast of Azerbaijan with a predominantly Armenian population, in December 1991.¹⁰⁰ Having flared up again in 2020, the conflict was nominally ended by a Russian-brokered truce in November 2020.¹⁰¹ The six weeks of fighting had resulted in Azerbaijan regaining control of about one-third of Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as most of the adjacent territories. However, while the truce largely held in 2021–22, the situation remained unstable, with sporadic clashes and ceasefire violations.

Tensions over the disputed territory ran high from December 2022 onwards as a group of ‘activists’ supported by the Azerbaijani government blocked the Lachin Corridor, the land-bridge between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh.¹⁰² This forced the de facto authorities in the latter—styled as the Republic of Artsakh—to introduce rationing. In April 2023 Azerbaijan set up a formal checkpoint in the corridor, worsening shortages in the months that followed.¹⁰³ Despite the various efforts by the USA, the EU and Russia to alleviate the crisis, including three separate multilateral peace operations, Azerbaijan delivered its *coup de grâce*: on 19 September it launched an offensive that forced the Artsakh authorities to accept a Russian-brokered ceasefire the next day.¹⁰⁴ By the end of the month, the Artsakh administration had agreed that it would dissolve its institutions by 1 January 2024, and over 100 000 refugees had fled into Armenia.¹⁰⁵ With the collapse of Nagorno-Karabakh, by the end of the year there were concerns that Azerbaijan might use coercive means to gain direct access to Nakhichevan, an exclave of Azerbaijan lying between Armenia, Iran and Türkiye.¹⁰⁶

The conflict in Kosovo

Elsewhere in Europe, relations between Kosovo and Serbia were watched warily by NATO and EU member states. In the first quarter of the year, EU officials hoped to secure a deal on normalizing relations between the two, but tensions spiked in May when Kosovan police clashed with ethnic Serbs

¹⁰⁰ On the background see e.g. Klimenko, E., ‘Protracted armed conflicts in the post-Soviet space and their impact on Black Sea security’, SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security no. 2018/8, Dec. 2018, pp. 2–6.

¹⁰¹ Davis, I., ‘The interstate armed conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan’, *SIPRI Yearbook 2021*.

¹⁰² Gowan (note 10), p. 45.

¹⁰³ ‘Azerbaijan sets up checkpoints on the Lachin corridor’, Economist Intelligence Unit, 27 Apr. 2023.

¹⁰⁴ Roth, A., ‘Azerbaijan launches “anti-terrorist” attack in disputed Nagorno-Karabakh’, *The Guardian*, 19 Sep. 2023. On the role of the multilateral peace operations in Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia see chapter 3, section I, in this volume.

¹⁰⁵ Armstrong, K., ‘Nagorno-Karabakh state will cease to exist in Jan., says leader’, BBC, 28 Sep. 2023. On the refugees see Vartanyan, O., ‘Armenia struggles to cope with exodus from Nagorno-Karabakh’, International Crisis Group (ICG), 4 Mar. 2024.

¹⁰⁶ Ebel, F., ‘After Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan eyes a strategic strip of Armenia’, *Washington Post*, 11 Oct. 2023.

protesting against the election of ethnic Albanian mayors in the country's northern (Serb-majority) municipalities.¹⁰⁷ Ethnic Serbs also injured personnel of the NATO-led Kosovo Force (KFOR) during these protests.¹⁰⁸

In September a group of ethnic Serbs launched a well-organized ambush of Kosovan police officers, killing one and raising the spectre of a more general insurrection that could pull in Serbia.¹⁰⁹ NATO members, including the UK, Germany and Romania, pledged to send additional troops to Kosovo and there were no more major security incidents during the rest of the year, although tensions remained elevated.¹¹⁰

Regional conflict dynamics in the Middle East and North Africa

Regional trends prior to the Israel– Hamas war

There was significant instability across parts of the Middle East and North Africa prior to Hamas's assault on Israel on 7 October 2023, even if the recorded fatality rate was far below that which would follow in Gaza (see table 2.5). There were high-intensity armed conflicts (claiming over 1000 lives) in Syria, Yemen and Iraq, although the number of recorded fatalities declined in both the Iraqi and Yemeni cases. In Yemen, the Houthi movement and forces aligned with the United Nations-recognized government switched between de facto truces and periods of conflict (as described in section II).¹¹¹

In Syria the government and a variety of armed groups and outside actors clashed on multiple fronts, even though a major earthquake affecting Syria and Türkiye in February led to a brief reduction in violence.¹¹² In the north-west of the country, there were regular clashes between government forces and the Levant Liberation Organization (Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, HTS) around the HTS-controlled Idlib enclave.¹¹³ These escalated in the third quarter of the year and peaked in early October in some of the most serious violence in the area in recent years. Russia continued to support the Syrian government's military operations with air power.¹¹⁴ There were also frequent clashes in northern Syria between Kurdish-led groups and Turkish forces, plus local

¹⁰⁷ 'Kosovo clashes: NATO commander criticises "unacceptable" attacks on troops', *The Guardian*, 30 May 2023. On the long-running ethnic Serb opposition to Kosovan state structures in the northern municipalities see Gowan (note 10), p. 45.

¹⁰⁸ Edwards, C., 'Why did ethnic Serbs attack NATO peacekeepers in Kosovo? Here's what we know', CNN, 31 May 2023. On KFOR see chapter 3, section II, in this volume.

¹⁰⁹ AP, 'One Kosovo police officer killed and one wounded, raising tensions with Serbia', National Public Radio, 24 Sep. 2023.

¹¹⁰ North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), 'Additional NATO reinforcements arrive in Kosovo', 4 Oct. 2023.

¹¹¹ On the interaction of climate and security in Yemen see also chapter 4, section III, in this volume.

¹¹² Sewell, A., 'UN envoy calls for renewed Syrian political talks post-quake', AP, 8 Mar. 2023.

¹¹³ Center for Preventive Action, 'Conflict in Syria', Global Conflict Tracker, Council on Foreign Relations, 13 Feb. 2024.

¹¹⁴ Center for Preventive Action (note 113).

Table 2.5. Estimated conflict-related fatalities in the Middle East and North Africa, 2017–23

Country	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Egypt	1 544	1 115	1 003	626	264	273	24 ^a
Iraq	31 945	5 221	3 458	2 368	2 150	1 919	1 342
Iran	185	258	478	435	220	737	214
Israel–Palestine	136	420	195	52 ^a	352	257	24 053
Lebanon	389	36 ^a	25 ^a	48	74	53	247
Libya	1 708	1 226	2 294	1 563	115	166	90
Saudi Arabia	1 432	1 514	1 043	54	20 ^b	89 ^b	193
Syria	54 386	30 034	15 629	8 214	5 872	5 949	6 245
Türkiye	2 659	880	448	284	183	175	140
Yemen	17 605	34 271	28 017	19 800	18 406	7 160	3 214
Total	111 989	74 975	52 590	33 444	27 656	16 778	35 762
No. of countries in armed conflict	10	9	9	9	9	9	9

Notes: Fatality figures are collated from 4 event types: battles; explosions/remote violence; protests, riots and strategic developments; and violence against civilians. See Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), ‘ACLED definitions of political violence and protest’, 11 Apr. 2019. A country is treated as being in an armed conflict in a given year if there were 25 or more battle-related deaths in that year.

^a Battle-related deaths totalled less than the threshold of 25 in this year.

^b Battle-related deaths and deaths from explosions/remote violence totalled less than the respective thresholds of 25 and 100 in this year.

Source: ACLED Dashboard, accessed 19–20 Jan. 2024.

groups aligned with Türkiye.¹¹⁵ The Islamic State group mounted frequent terrorist attacks, including its first on Damascus since 2021.¹¹⁶

Efforts to agree a political settlement to end Syria’s long period of strife stuttered during 2023. In May Syria resumed membership of the League of Arab States, from which it had been suspended in 2011.¹¹⁷ There were signs that existing international frameworks for managing the war were losing steam. In July Russia vetoed the UN mandate for aid agencies to deliver cross-border assistance to the Idlib enclave.¹¹⁸ In June Kazakhstan announced that, after six years, it wished to stop chairing Astana Group talks on the war—a mechanism favoured by Russia that also involves Iran and Türkiye.¹¹⁹ UN peace efforts made little progress.

¹¹⁵ Butler, D., Gumrukcu, T. and Kilo, ‘Turkey steps up strikes on militants as conflict escalates in Syria’, Reuters, 6 Oct. 2023.

¹¹⁶ Lister, C., ‘Normalizing Assad has made Syria’s problems even worse’, *Foreign Policy*, 31 July 2023.

¹¹⁷ ‘Arab League brings Syria back into its fold after 12 years’, Al Jazeera, 8 May 2023. For a brief description and list of members of the Arab League see annex B, section II, in this volume.

¹¹⁸ Nicols, M., ‘Russian veto signals end of Turkey-based UN aid operation in Syria’, Reuters, 11 July 2023.

¹¹⁹ Mohamad, F. A., ‘The Astana process six years on: Peace or deadlock in Syria?’, Sada, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1 Aug. 2023. Kazakhstan would reverse its position and host a further meeting in Jan. 2024.

In parallel with its operations in Syria, Türkiye's forces and proxy groups launched attacks against the Kurdish Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê, PKK)—an armed Kurdish separatist group—throughout 2023 in both Iraq and south-east Türkiye itself.¹²⁰ Islamic State also continued to launch terrorist attacks in Iraq, although at a lower rate than in Syria.¹²¹ The United States maintained military presences in both north-east Syria and Iraq, although it engaged in talks with the Iraqi government about recalibrating or downsizing its forces after the end of its main campaign against Islamic State.¹²² An attack by Iranian-linked militias on a US base in Syria in March 2023 led the USA to retaliate with air strikes on a number of sites linked to Iranian-backed forces in the country.¹²³ Iran was also involved in an ongoing naval stand-off in the Gulf with the USA and other regional powers despite agreeing in March to normalize diplomatic ties with Saudi Arabia in a deal facilitated by China.¹²⁴

Elsewhere in the region, there were sporadic outbreaks of fire prior to October between Israel and Hezbollah—a Lebanese Shia Islamist political party and militant group.¹²⁵ There was also an upsurge of fighting between Palestinian armed groups in refugee camps in Lebanon in the third quarter of the year.¹²⁶ In Libya there were violent incidents between political factions—including clashes in Tripoli—as the UN attempted to break a political deadlock and negotiate a unity government.¹²⁷ The UN spent 2023 trying to forge agreement on the terms for national elections and the creation of a unity government that could bring together the Tripoli-based High Council of State and the Benghazi-based House of Representatives. Violent episodes did not escalate into extended bouts of conflict, and the number of fatalities involved was dwarfed by the loss of over 20 000 Libyans in floods in September.¹²⁸ Elsewhere in North Africa, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia

¹²⁰ Butler, D. and Hayatsever, H., 'Turkey strikes Kurdish militants in Iraq and Syria', Reuters, 16 Jan. 2024.

¹²¹ al-Lami, M., 'What happened to IS in 2023?', BBC, 26 Dec. 2023.

¹²² Ali, I. and Stewart, P., 'Why US troops are in the Middle East', Reuters, 3 Feb. 2024; and Garamone, J., 'US, Iraq examine new strategic relationship', US Department of Defense, 8 Aug. 2023.

¹²³ Stewart, P. and Ali, I., 'US strikes Iran-backed facilities in Syria after drone kills American', Reuters, 24 Mar. 2023.

¹²⁴ Gambrell, J., 'US and allied naval commanders in Mideast transit Strait of Hormuz, in show of force against Iran', AP, 19 May 2023; 'Iran–Saudi deal to strengthen peace, stability in Persian Gulf and beyond: Spokesman', PressTV, 13 Mar. 2023; and Hafezi, P., Abdallah, N. and El Yaakoubi, A., 'Iran and Saudi Arabia agree to resume ties in talks brokered by China', Reuters, 10 Mar. 2023.

¹²⁵ Mroue, B. and Chehayeb, K., 'Israeli forces shell southern Lebanon border village after rocket lands near disputed territory', AP, 6 July 2023.

¹²⁶ Tawil, F. and Chehayeb, K., 'Islamist factions in a troubled Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon say they will honor a cease-fire', AP, 11 Sep. 2023.

¹²⁷ McDowall, A., 'UN Libya envoy urges "unified government" for election in apparent shift', Reuters, 22 Aug. 2023.

¹²⁸ Loveluck, L., Dadouch, S. and Fahim, K., 'In Libya's flood-shattered east, a disaster of "mythic proportions"', *Washington Post*, 14 Sep. 2023.

el Hamra and Río de Oro (Polisario Front) launched occasional rocket and bomb attacks on Moroccan forces in the fight for Western Sahara.¹²⁹

Israel, the West Bank and Gaza

Tensions between Israel and the Palestinians were high throughout the first three-quarters of the year. Continuing operations that were already under way in 2022, Israeli forces launched hundreds of raids each month into the West Bank.¹³⁰ There was also an increase in the number of Palestinian shooting attacks on Israeli civilians, including attacks in Jerusalem, and a jump in settler violence against Palestinians in the West Bank.¹³¹ An Israeli raid on the Al-Aqsa Mosque in East Jerusalem in April sparked a flurry of rocket attacks on Israel from both Gaza and Lebanon.¹³² There was also a brief flare-up of fighting in Gaza in May, after the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) group launched over 100 rockets from there into Israel in response to the death in Israeli custody of one of its leaders. The Israelis responded with air strikes but agreed to a ceasefire arranged by Egypt after less than a week of hostilities.¹³³ Despite this episode, Israel's military and political leadership appeared relatively complacent about threats from Gaza throughout much of the year, concentrating military efforts on trying to subdue the West Bank and protect settlers, while the government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu also focused on an extended struggle to pass legal reforms that brought large numbers of Israelis onto the streets in protest.¹³⁴

Hamas-led armed groups took advantage of this inattention to launch an assault on southern Israel on 7 October, killing over 1000 civilians and more than 350 Israeli soldiers and police and capturing around 240 hostages. The attackers also committed sexual violence against civilians, although the scale of these acts was a source of extensive dispute in late 2023 and into 2024.¹³⁵ Israel responded to this shock by declaring a state of war for the first time since 1973, announcing a 'full siege' of Gaza and launching a heavy air campaign on the territory.¹³⁶ On 13 October Israel ordered 1.1 million civilians to

¹²⁹ Prada Bianchi, A., 'Decolonization's last stand in the Sahara', *Foreign Policy*, 24 June 2023.

¹³⁰ Hatuqa, D., 'The new Palestinian resistance', *Foreign Policy*, 29 Mar. 2023.

¹³¹ Kingsley, P. and Abdulrahim, R., 'In West Bank, settlers sense their moment after far right's rise', *New York Times*, 5 Feb. 2023; UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 'Protection of civilians report, 8–21 Aug. 2023', 28 Aug. 2023; and Williams, D., 'Two Hamas gunmen open fire at Jerusalem bus stop, killing three', Reuters, 30 Nov. 2023.

¹³² McKernan, B. and Chulov, M., 'Rocket fire from Lebanon and Gaza hits Israel after second al-Aqsa mosque raid', *The Guardian*, 6 Apr. 2023.

¹³³ ACAPS, 'Palestine: Escalation of violence in Gaza', Briefing note, 18 May 2023.

¹³⁴ Zwigenberg, O., 'Protests against Israel's judicial overhaul kick off at Supreme Court a day before crucial hearing', AP, 11 Sep. 2023.

¹³⁵ E.g. Ioanes, E., 'What the UN report on October 7 sexual violence does—and doesn't—say', Vox, 8 Mar. 2024.

¹³⁶ Israeli Prime Minister's Office, [The Security Cabinet approved the state of war], 8 Oct. 2023 (in Hebrew); and Bubola, E. and Hubbard, B., 'What does a "complete siege" of the Gaza Strip mean?', *New York Times*, 10 Oct. 2023.

evacuate northern and central Gaza.¹³⁷ From early in the war, humanitarian workers warned that Israeli operations and the comprehensive restrictions on aid allowed to enter Gaza were not only claiming thousands of civilian lives directly, but also driving up rates of hunger and disease.¹³⁸ After a series of initial raids, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) launched its main ground invasion of Gaza on 27 October, cutting off communications between the north and south of the territory within days. Allegations that Israel deliberately targeted hospitals and UN compounds were shrouded in misinformation from both sides.¹³⁹ Israel argued that Hamas had deliberately used these installations as bases and as access points to the extensive networks of tunnels underneath Gaza, which give its fighters freedom of movement, while Hamas rejected these claims.¹⁴⁰

There was a temporary relief from 24 November, after Israel and Hamas agreed to a pause in hostilities arranged by Qatar.¹⁴¹ This allowed for the return of over 100 hostages and the remains of 30 others in exchange for the release of over 200 Palestinian women and children from Israeli prisons.¹⁴² Although this humanitarian pause achieved the release of more hostages than Israel initially expected and was extended to a full week, Israel relaunched operations at the start of December.¹⁴³

In the last weeks of the year, international experts warned of a growing risk of famine in Gaza. Whereas the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees (UNRWA) estimated that 500 trucks of aid per day were needed in Gaza, the number of vehicles entering the territory was typically around 50 at

¹³⁷ Bhandari, A., Kumar Dutta, P. and Zafra, M., 'Israeli military orders Gazans to leave northern half of territory', Reuters, 13 Oct. 2023.

¹³⁸ World Health Organization, 'Risk of disease spread soars in Gaza as health facilities, water and sanitation systems disrupted', 8 Nov. 2023; World Food Programme (WFP), 'Gaza faces widespread hunger as food systems collapse, warns WFP', 16 Nov. 2023; and Graham-Harrison, E., 'UN warns of Gaza starvation as concerns rise about safety in the south', *The Guardian*, 17 Nov. 2023.

¹³⁹ Human Rights Watch, 'Gaza: Unlawful Israeli hospital strikes worsen health crisis', 14 Nov. 2023; Jamal, U., 'Why does Israel target Palestinian hospitals? Psyops, say analysts', Al Jazeera, 20 Nov. 2023; and United Nations, 'As Israel's aerial bombardments intensify "there is no safe place in Gaza", Humanitarian affairs chief warns Security Council', SC/15564, 12 Jan. 2024. On the rules of war, the impact of the fighting on civilians and the use of 'human shields' in Gaza see chapter 10, section II, in this volume.

¹⁴⁰ Kusovac, Z., 'Analysis: Israel's "war on hospitals" vs Hamas military exaggerations', Al Jazeera, 15 Nov. 2023; and Baker, G. and Greenall, R., 'Israel-Gaza war: US says Hamas has command centre under Al-Shifa hospital', BBC, 14 Nov. 2023.

¹⁴¹ Qatari Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'The State of Qatar announces that a humanitarian pause has been agreed in Gaza', Statement, 22 Nov. 2023. On the imprecise meaning of terms such as 'ceasefire', 'pause' and 'corridor', all of which can be designated 'humanitarian', see Gillard, E.-C., 'Humanitarian pauses and ceasefires—What are the differences?', Chatham House–Royal Institute of International Affairs, 6 Nov. 2023.

¹⁴² Bisset, V., Helier C. and Sammy W., 'How many hostages remain in Gaza since Hamas attack on Israel? What to know', *Washington Post*, 30 Nov. 2023.

¹⁴³ Salem, S. and Al-Mughrabi, N., 'Scores reported killed in Gaza as fighting shatters Israel-Hamas truce', Reuters, 1 Dec. 2023.

best, due in significant part to Israeli restrictions.¹⁴⁴ There was also mounting concern about the level of violence in the West Bank, where over 300 people died in the last three months of 2023 during Israeli military raids.¹⁴⁵ At the end of 2023, talks on further hostage releases were at only an early stage.¹⁴⁶

The war was immediately the focus of extensive and contentious international diplomacy. The USA aimed to position itself as the central diplomatic player from an early stage, while supplying arms and ammunition to Israel to retain maximum influence over its government.¹⁴⁷ This quickly created tensions with other powers that played out in a series of fractious debates in the UN Security Council and General Assembly. In mid October Brazil (holder of the presidency of the Security Council for the month) proposed a resolution condemning Hamas and calling for time-limited humanitarian pauses.¹⁴⁸ The USA vetoed this, arguing that the resolution did not affirm Israel's right to self-defence strongly enough.¹⁴⁹ In response, the Arab group of UN members, led by Jordan, tabled a resolution in the General Assembly calling for a truce. This passed on 27 October by a majority of 121 votes in favour to 14 against (including the USA), although unlike a Security Council resolution it was not legally binding.¹⁵⁰ In November the Security Council did manage to agree a resolution calling for the protection of children and humanitarian access to Gaza.¹⁵¹ Yet, after the end of the November truce, the USA vetoed a Council resolution demanding an immediate ceasefire that was proposed by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and co-sponsored by over 90 other UN members.¹⁵² Once again the General Assembly met and passed a resolution of its own calling for a ceasefire, this time with 153 states in favour.¹⁵³ The

¹⁴⁴ International Crisis Group (ICG), *Stopping Famine in Gaza*, Middle East Report no. 244 (ICG: Brussels, 8 Apr. 2024).

¹⁴⁵ Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 'The human rights situation in the occupied West Bank including East Jerusalem 7 October–20 November 2023', Flash report, Dec. 2023. See also Tétrault-Farber, G. and Lubell, M., 'UN report deplors "rapid deterioration" of rights in West Bank', Reuters, 28 Dec. 2023.

¹⁴⁶ Borger, J., 'Hamas insists on end to Israel's offensive in Gaza before hostage talks can begin', *The Guardian*, 21 Dec. 2023.

¹⁴⁷ On US arms supplies to Israel see chapter 6, section I, in this volume.

¹⁴⁸ United Nations, Security Council, Draft resolution, S/2023/773, 18 Oct. 2023.

¹⁴⁹ Nichols, M., 'US vetoes UN Security Council action on Israel, Gaza', Reuters, 18 Oct. 2023.

¹⁵⁰ UN General Assembly Resolution ES-10/21, 'Protection of civilians and upholding legal and humanitarian obligations', 27 Oct. 2023; and United Nations, 'General Assembly adopts resolution calling for immediate, sustained humanitarian truce leading to cessation of hostilities between Israel, Hamas', GA/12548, 27 Oct. 2023.

¹⁵¹ UN Security Council Resolution 2712, 15 Nov. 2023. See also Nichols, M. and Psadedakis, D., 'UN Security Council calls for pauses in Gaza fighting for aid', Reuters, 15 Nov. 2023.

¹⁵² United Nations, Security Council, Draft resolution, S/2023/970, 8 Dec. 2023; and Lederer, E., 'US vetoes UN resolution backed by many nations demanding immediate humanitarian cease-fire in Gaza', AP, 9 Dec. 2023.

¹⁵³ UN General Assembly Resolution ES-10/22, 'Protection of civilians and upholding legal and humanitarian obligations', 12 Dec. 2023; and United Nations, 'General Assembly adopts resolution demanding immediate humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza, parties' compliance with international law, release of all hostages', GA/12572, 12 Dec. 2023.

year culminated in drawn-out negotiation over another Security Council resolution with a focus on humanitarian coordination—but no call for an end to hostilities—which the USA eventually allowed to pass by abstaining on 22 December.¹⁵⁴

At no point in 2023 did Israel articulate a detailed political vision for the future of Gaza, beyond the destruction of Hamas. Some outside observers, citing inflammatory remarks by Israel politicians, inferred that the government hoped to push a large proportion of the population of Gaza into Egypt.¹⁵⁵ US officials informally tested the notion that a coalition of Arab or Muslim countries could mount a multilateral operation to provide stability in Gaza. However, potential troop contributors such as Jordan rejected the idea for fear of being seen as an ‘enemy’ by the population.¹⁵⁶ António Guterres, the UN secretary-general, also expressed opposition to the idea that the UN could take on Gaza as a ‘protectorate’.¹⁵⁷ In the meantime, the war took a heavy toll on the existing UN architecture for assisting Palestinians. Between 7 October and 31 December, 142 UNRWA staff died in the fighting.¹⁵⁸ Israel was also highly critical of the UN for, in its view, failing to sufficiently condemn Hamas, and it called on Guterres—who repeatedly demanded a ceasefire—to resign.¹⁵⁹ By the end of the year, the war showed little sign of abating and the potential framework for restoring normal life in Gaza, let alone achieving the long-standing goal of a two-state solution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, was uncertain. Underlining the level of international unease about this situation, South Africa lodged a request on 28 December for the International Court of Justice to address the charge that Israel was committing genocide in Gaza.¹⁶⁰

The regional implications of the Israel–Hamas war

The war in Gaza had immediate knock-on effects for other conflicts and countries in the region. US officials signalled concerns that the war could expand to become a full-scale regional confrontation between the USA and

¹⁵⁴ UN Security Council Resolution 2720, 22 Dec. 2023. See also Nichols, M., ‘UN Security Council acts to boost aid to Gaza after US abstains’, Reuters, 22 Dec. 2023.

¹⁵⁵ Parker, C. and Birnbaum, M., ‘Egypt under growing pressure as displaced Gazans crowd the border’, *Washington Post*, 19 Dec. 2023.

¹⁵⁶ Wintour, P., ‘Arab forces will not go to Gaza, says Jordanian minister in rebuke of Israel’, *The Guardian*, 18 Nov. 2023.

¹⁵⁷ United Nations, ‘Gaza: “Thousands of children killed” within a few weeks, says UN’s Guterres’, UN News, 20 Nov. 2023.

¹⁵⁸ United Nations, ‘Nearly 600 attacks on healthcare in Gaza and West Bank since war began: WHO’, UN News, 5 Jan. 2024.

¹⁵⁹ Farge, E., ‘Israel “let down” by UN and its agencies, envoy says’, Reuters, 30 Oct. 2023; and Fassihi, F., ‘Cease-fire calls dominate fiery UN Security Council session’, *New York Times*, 24 Oct. 2023.

¹⁶⁰ International Court of Justice (ICJ), ‘The Republic of South Africa institutes proceedings against the State of Israel and requests the Court to indicate provisional measures’, Press Release no. 2023/77, 29 Dec. 2023; and Corder, M., ‘South Africa launches case at top UN court accusing Israel of genocide in Gaza’, AP, 29 Dec. 2023. On these proceedings see also chapter 10, section II, in this volume.

Iran.¹⁶¹ The greatest single source of concern in the early months of the war was Lebanon, as Hezbollah launched a series of rocket attacks on Israel starting on 8 October, and the IDF responded with air strikes and shelling.¹⁶² Although both sides incurred casualties and Israel evacuated civilians from vulnerable areas near Lebanon, both sides also sent explicit and quiet signals that they wanted to avoid entering a full-scale war of their own.¹⁶³ Complicating matters, Hamas also claimed to launch some attacks from Lebanon.¹⁶⁴ The USA attempted to deter escalation by sending an aircraft carrier to the eastern Mediterranean Sea in early October.¹⁶⁵ Hezbollah paused operations in late November in parallel with the Israel–Hamas truce, but both sides resumed hostilities in December.¹⁶⁶ Israeli politicians and the public expressed strong fears that Hezbollah could launch a 7 October-style attack at a later date, and demanded that Hezbollah move back from border areas with Israel—patrolled by UN peacekeepers—or face military action.¹⁶⁷

In Syria armed groups associated with Iran launched rocket attacks on Israel and the Golan Heights in parallel with Hezbollah. Israel responded with air strikes and killed a senior Iranian officer in Damascus on 25 December.¹⁶⁸ Iran threatened retaliation but avoided major escalatory steps. However, Iranian-linked groups launched almost 100 attacks on US outposts in Syria and Iraq between 7 October and the end of the year.¹⁶⁹ In late November and early December, US forces retaliated with UAV and air strikes on Iranian-linked militants in Iraq, although this did not deter one militant group from launching missiles at the US embassy in Baghdad in mid December.¹⁷⁰

The Houthi forces in Yemen gained particular attention by threatening commercial shipping in the Red Sea in response to events in Gaza.¹⁷¹ In October they fired missiles aimed at Israel that were intercepted by a US

¹⁶¹ Baker, P. and Fassihi, F., 'Fearing escalation, Biden seeks to deter Iran and Hezbollah', *New York Times*, 18 Oct. 2023.

¹⁶² Kim, V. and Cassandra V., 'Hezbollah fires more than 100 rockets into Israel, drawing retaliation', *New York Times*, 12 Mar. 2024.

¹⁶³ Arraf, J., 'Why Hezbollah and Israel haven't plunged into all-out war', National Public Radio, 19 Dec. 2023.

¹⁶⁴ 'Hezbollah, Hamas claim attacks on Israel from Lebanon', Reuters, 10 Oct. 2023.

¹⁶⁵ McKernan, B. and Michaelson, R., 'US deploys second aircraft carrier as Israeli ground invasion of Gaza nears', *The Guardian*, 15 Oct. 2023.

¹⁶⁶ 'Israel, Hezbollah trade fire for second day after Gaza truce ends', Reuters, 2 Dec. 2023.

¹⁶⁷ Keller-Lynn, C. and Nissenbaum, D., 'Israel warns Hezbollah to pull back forces to avert war', *Wall Street Journal*, 11 Dec. 2023. On the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) see chapter 3, section II, in this volume.

¹⁶⁸ 'Israeli airstrike in Syria kills senior Iranian Revolutionary Guards member', Reuters, 25 Dec. 2023.

¹⁶⁹ Chehayeb, K. and Abdul-Zahra, Q., 'Iraq scrambles to contain fighting between US troops and Iran-backed groups, fearing Gaza spillover', AP, 11 Dec. 2023.

¹⁷⁰ Abdul-Zahra, Q., 'A rocket attack targets the US Embassy in Baghdad, causing minor damage but no casualties', AP, 8 Dec. 2023.

¹⁷¹ Nereim, V. and Almosawa, S., 'Amid Gaza war and Red Sea attacks, Yemen's Houthis refuse to back down', *New York Times*, 20 Dec. 2023.

warship.¹⁷² In mid November they threatened to attack vessels in the Red Sea unless Israel allowed medical supplies into Gaza.¹⁷³ While the Houthis launched a series of UAV attacks on shipping, Western powers dispatched warships to the area and in mid December the USA announced the creation of a multinational task force—primarily involving European states—to address the threat.¹⁷⁴

Regional conflict dynamics in sub-Saharan Africa

While sub-Saharan Africa remained the region with the highest number of armed conflicts, levels of violence fluctuated considerably in different cases in 2023. ACLED's figures point to declines in conflict-related fatalities in countries experiencing high-intensity armed conflict, including the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC, down 35 per cent compared to 2022), Ethiopia (down 44 per cent), Nigeria (down 19 per cent) and South Sudan (down 47 per cent). Other armed conflicts escalated, with rises in death rates in Burkina Faso (up 100 per cent compared to 2022), Somalia (up 28 per cent) and—statistically overshadowing other cases—Sudan (up 537 per cent, see table 2.6).

The civil war in Sudan

At the start of 2023 Sudan appeared to be moving towards a transition to civilian rule after a period of turbulent civil–military relations following the ousting of President Omar al-Bashir in 2019 and the military coup on 25 October 2021.¹⁷⁵ By March 2023 civilian political leaders were proposing the creation of a new transitional government as early as mid April.¹⁷⁶ But on 15 April fighting broke out in Khartoum between members of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), a paramilitary organization associated with the Janjaweed militias that had wrought large-scale violence in the Darfur region in the 2000s.¹⁷⁷ The proximate cause of the new fighting was the SAF's efforts, as part of the transition, to incorporate the RSF. This followed a loss of trust between General Abdel Fattah Burhan, commander-in-chief of the SAF and head of state, and the RSF chief, General

¹⁷² Ali, I. and Pitas, C., 'US Navy warship near Yemen intercepted projectiles, Pentagon says', Reuters, 19 Oct. 2023.

¹⁷³ Gambrell, J., '2 attacks launched by Yemen's Houthi rebels strike container ships in vital Red Sea corridor', AP, 15 Dec. 2023.

¹⁷⁴ Austin, L. J., US secretary of defense, Statement on 'Ensuring freedom of navigation in the Red Sea', US Department of Defense, 18 Dec. 2023; and Stewart, P., Latona, D. and Amante, A., 'US allies reluctant on Red Sea task force', Reuters, 28 Dec. 2023.

¹⁷⁵ Gowan (note 10), p. 51.

¹⁷⁶ 'Sudan factions agree to form a transitional government on April 11', Reuters, 19 Mar. 2023.

¹⁷⁷ Peltier, E. and Dahir, A. L., 'Who are the Rapid Support Forces, the paramilitaries fighting Sudan's army?', *New York Times*, 17 Apr. 2023.

Table 2.6. Estimated conflict-related fatalities in sub-Saharan Africa, 2017–23

Country	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
<i>West Africa</i>	6 490	8 836	10 956	15 190	16 873	21 339	23 300
Benin	15 ^a	31 ^a	37 ^a	64	93	182	218
Burkina Faso	117	303	2 216	2 304	2 374	4 244	8 499
Côte d'Ivoire	43 ^a	16 ^a	46 ^a	151	38 ^a	45	21 ^a
Ghana	89	25 ^a	47 ^a	70 ^a	45 ^a	142	167 ^a
Guinea	47 ^a	40 ^a	45 ^a	146	28 ^a	38 ^a	64 ^a
Mali	946	1 747	1 875	2 856	1 913	4 863	4 320
Niger	240	506	729	1 126	1 498	990	1 149
Nigeria	4 949	6 162	5 952	8 459	10 880	10 754	8 759
Togo	44 ^a	6 ^a	9 ^a	14 ^a	4 ^a	81	103
<i>Central Africa</i>	6 147	6 326	6 289	9 084	10 361	9 024	6 108
Angola	67	41 ^a	23 ^a	74	150 ^a	108	90 ^a
Cameroon	741	1 663	1 302	1 762	1 457	1 001	1 061
CAR	1 832	1 171	596	449	1 711	873	583
Chad	296	259	567	738	831	742	264
DRC	3 211	3 192	3 801	6 061	6 212	6 300	4 110
<i>East and Southern Africa</i>	15 072	11 337	9 925	14 167	19 184	20 456	29 026
Burundi	285 ^a	327	305	330	305	261	200
Ethiopia	1 355	1 579	670	4 373	9 155	6 893 ^b	3 851
Kenya	740	458	329	355	501	701	1 014
Madagascar	210	142	351	358	303	341	515
Mozambique	129	212	691	1 781	1 165	922	303
Somalia	6 122	5 703	4 839	3 341	3 437	6 521	8 367
South Sudan	4 861	1 716	1 801	2 382	2 160	2 390	1 262
Sudan	1 304	1 054	776	959	1 651	2 064	13 147
Uganda	66	146 ^a	163	288	507	363	367
Total	27 709	26 499	27 170	38 441	46 418	50 819	58 434
No. of countries in armed conflict	18	16	17	21	18	22	19

CAR = Central African Republic; DRC = Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Notes: Fatality figures are collated from 4 event types: battles; explosions/remote violence; protests, riots and strategic developments; and violence against civilians. See Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), 'ACLED definitions of political violence and protest', 11 Apr. 2019. A country is treated as being in an armed conflict in a given year if there were 25 or more battle-related deaths in that year.

^a Battle-related deaths totalled less than the threshold of 25 in this year.

^b This figure is likely to be a severe underestimate.

Source: ACLED Dashboard, accessed 23–30 Jan. 2024.

Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo (known as Hemedti).¹⁷⁸ While the capital descended into chaos, and United Nations and diplomatic staff rapidly evacuated, hostilities soon spread to other parts of the country.¹⁷⁹ Fighting

¹⁷⁸ Stigant, S., 'What's behind the fighting in Sudan?', US Institute of Peace, 20 Apr. 2023.

¹⁷⁹ International Crisis Group (ICG), 'Sudan: A year of war', Statement, 11 Apr. 2024.

continued in Khartoum and its environs for the rest of the year, although the RSF succeeded in forcing Burhan to flee the city in August.¹⁸⁰

While there was combat in many parts of the country, the most serious violence beyond Khartoum centred on Darfur in the west of the country, where armed conflict had first erupted in April 2003. In the years that followed, hundreds of thousands of people were killed, and millions more displaced as the war in Darfur raged between rebel forces and the military. In this latest phase of the conflict in Darfur, the RSF launched a brutal military campaign to control the region. While there were allegations that the Arab-majority RSF committed atrocities against non-Arab ethnic groups, the breakdown of law and order sparked more widespread inter-communal violence as different tribal groups targeted their rivals.¹⁸¹ In October and November the RSF won a series of victories in Darfur and seized most urban centres in the region, again allegedly committing widespread atrocities.¹⁸² In mid December the RSF scored a further major success by capturing Wadi Medani, a major city in Gezira state in the east of Sudan, giving the paramilitaries momentum going into 2024.¹⁸³

In addition to the widespread atrocities, the war sparked a dire humanitarian situation. More than 7.4 million people were displaced between April 2023 and the end of the year.¹⁸⁴ The UN and the World Food Programme (WFP) calculated that 18 million Sudanese people faced acute hunger in 2023, twice as many as in 2022.¹⁸⁵ In a year when aid agencies struggled to secure funds for many crises, they received only one-third of what they needed in Sudan.¹⁸⁶

Efforts to end the war were complicated by divisions among outside powers. A number of external players backed the warring parties, with Egypt backing the SAF and the UAE supporting the RSF.¹⁸⁷ There were also allegations of the RSF receiving support from the Wagner Group and of Ukraine deploying special forces to target Russian personnel in Sudan.¹⁸⁸ Furthermore, there were significant splits among a variety of actors that aimed to mediate in the

¹⁸⁰ Tanios, C., 'Sudan Army chief Burhan appears to leave army HQ for first time—Video', Reuters, 24 Aug. 2023.

¹⁸¹ Burke, J., 'Communal violence and civilian deaths in Sudan fuel fears of widening conflict', *The Guardian*, 12 May 2023.

¹⁸² Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), 'Sudan: The Rapid Support Forces (RSF) gains ground in Sudan', 12 Jan. 2024.

¹⁸³ Houreld, K., 'Paramilitary force takes city in heart of Sudan's breadbasket', *Washington Post*, 19 Dec. 2023.

¹⁸⁴ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 'Sudan: Nine months of conflict—Key Facts and Figures', 15 Jan. 2024.

¹⁸⁵ World Food Programme (WFP), 'Emergency: Sudan', [n.d.].

¹⁸⁶ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 'Sudan: Humanitarian update', 12 Oct. 2023. See also chapter 4, section II, in this volume.

¹⁸⁷ Mohammad, T., 'How Sudan became a Saudi-UAE proxy war', *Foreign Policy*, 12 July 2023.

¹⁸⁸ Butenko, V. et al., 'Exclusive: Ukraine's special forces "likely" behind strikes on Wagner-backed forces in Sudan, a Ukrainian military source says', CNN, 20 Sep. 2023.

conflict. While the African Union (AU) and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) attempted to take the lead in resolving the conflict—with South Sudan championing a regional diplomatic initiative—Saudi Arabia succeed in bringing SAF and RSF representatives to Jeddah in June with the support of the United States.¹⁸⁹ The USA suspended these talks later in the month due to a lack of progress but relaunched them in October, this time involving the AU and IGAD.¹⁹⁰ This did not succeed. While Burhan participated in an IGAD summit in Djibouti in December, he rejected a ceasefire proposal by Hemedti, citing RSF atrocities.¹⁹¹

The UN's role in this complex diplomacy was marginal, in part due to Burhan's decision to declare Volker Perthes, the special representative of the UN secretary-general to the country and head of the UN Integrated Transitional Assistance Mission (UNITAMS), to be *persona non grata* as the conflict escalated.¹⁹² UNITAMS was reduced to a rump presence in Port Sudan after the outbreak of fighting in Khartoum, and in November the government demanded its complete closure.¹⁹³ The Security Council complied.¹⁹⁴ The secretary-general, Guterres, who had defended Perthes, attempted to open a new chapter by appointing Ramatane Lamamra, a former Algerian foreign minister, as his personal envoy for Sudan. However, Lamamra was not in a position to launch any new initiative before the end of 2023, while other mediation efforts continued to drift.¹⁹⁵

Other conflicts in East and Southern Africa

Among Sudan's neighbours, those most immediately affected by the fallout from its descent into chaos were Chad (see below) and South Sudan. An influx into South Sudan of refugees and returnees from the north in April and May strained the capacities of the authorities and humanitarian agencies. Violence broke out in some already overcrowded camps as they tried to accommodate the newly displaced.¹⁹⁶ In the last months of the year inter-ethnic clashes increased in the Abyei Area (disputed between Sudan and South Sudan) and Warrup state in South Sudan.¹⁹⁷

¹⁸⁹ International Crisis Group (ICG), 'Time to try again to end Sudan's war', Statement, 21 July 2023. For brief descriptions and lists of members of the AU and IGAD see annex B, section II, in this volume.

¹⁹⁰ 'Sudan warring sides resume peace talks in Saudi Arabia', Al Jazeera, 26 Oct. 2023.

¹⁹¹ 'Sudan's army chief al-Burhan says "no reconciliation" with paramilitary RSF', Reuters, 5 Jan. 2024.

¹⁹² 'Sudan declares UN envoy Volker Perthes "persona non grata"', Al Jazeera, 9 June 2023.

¹⁹³ On the role of UNITAMS in Sudan see also chapter 3, section I, in this volume.

¹⁹⁴ UN Security Council Resolution 2715, 1 Dec. 2023.

¹⁹⁵ Security Council Report, 'Sudan: Briefing and consultations', What's In Blue, 6 Mar. 2024.

¹⁹⁶ United Nations, 'Influx of returnees, escalating violence thwarting progress in implementing South Sudan's peace accord, special representative tells Security Council', SC/15329, 20 June 2023.

¹⁹⁷ Wudu, W. S., 'Ethnic fighting kills 32 in disputed region straddling Sudan, South Sudan', Reuters, 20 Nov. 2023.

Ethiopia continued to implement the 2022 peace agreement between the government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF; see section II). There was, nonetheless, significant violence in other parts of the country. Government forces clashed throughout the year with the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), a non-state armed group based in Oromia, Ethiopia's most populous and largest region.¹⁹⁸ The violence occurred as on-off peace talks were held in Tanzania in the second quarter of the year and again in November. At the end of 2023 this conflict was intensifying after the second round of talks failed.¹⁹⁹ The government also faced an ongoing insurgency in Amhara, which flared up in August as rebels briefly seized towns in the region.²⁰⁰ In late 2023 there were also fears, as yet unfulfilled, that Ethiopia could launch an interstate war to open up a route to the Red Sea through Eritrea.²⁰¹

In Somalia a government offensive against al-Shabab (Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahideen) was under way at the start of the year, making some slow progress. This had stalled by May, and al-Shabab undertook a series of terrorist attacks against government targets and the AU Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS).²⁰² In August a Somali Army push in the centre of the country collapsed, allowing al-Shabab to retake territory in a counteroffensive, although by the end of the year the government was claiming new progress.²⁰³ Al-Shabab also launched cross-border attacks into Kenya from Somalia throughout the year.²⁰⁴ Meanwhile, in the de facto independent region of Somaliland in the north of Somalia, there was an upsurge of fighting with an ethnic militia around the city of Las Anod. This largely petered out in the second half of 2023.²⁰⁵

Elsewhere in East Africa, Uganda faced a series of attacks by the DRC-based jihadist group the Alliance of Democratic Forces (ADF).²⁰⁶

In Mozambique, the Islamic State Mozambique (ISM) group launched a series of offensives—punctuated by periods of relative calm—in Cabo Delgado province in the north of the country. ISM also appeared to adopt a new strategy of engaging peacefully with civilians in an effort to win their

¹⁹⁸ Biryabarema, E., 'Ethiopia talks with rebel group OLA end without deal', Reuters, 22 Nov. 2023.

¹⁹⁹ Center for Preventive Action, 'Conflict in Ethiopia', Global Conflict Tracker, Council on Foreign Relations, 19 Dec. 2023.

²⁰⁰ Acharya, B., 'Ethiopia extends state of emergency in Amhara', Reuters, 2 Feb. 2024.

²⁰¹ Kheir Omer, M., 'Are Ethiopia and Eritrea on the path to war?', *Foreign Policy*, 7 Nov. 2023.

²⁰² On ATMIS see also chapter 3, sections I and II, in this volume.

²⁰³ Center for Preventive Action, 'Conflict in with al-Shabaab in Somalia', Global Conflict Tracker, Council on Foreign Relations, 14 Feb. 2024.

²⁰⁴ Holland, W., 'Kenya to delay re-opening Somali border over "wave of attacks"', Reuters, 5 July 2023.

²⁰⁵ International Crisis Group (ICG), 'Time for Somaliland and the Dhulbahante to talk', Statement, 19 May 2023.

²⁰⁶ Houreld, K., 'In Congo's forests, Islamic State money makes an insurgency more lethal', *Washington Post*, 5 June 2023.

goodwill.²⁰⁷ An offensive by government forces and troops of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM) culminated in the killing of ISM's alleged leader in September.²⁰⁸ However, this led to only a brief reduction in violence, and by the end of the year ISM was on the offensive.²⁰⁹

Conflicts in Central Africa and the Great Lakes

The countries of Central Africa suffered persistent armed conflict through 2023. Chad faced the dilemma of absorbing hundreds of thousands of refugees from Sudan, while there were clashes between the military and ethnic rebels in the north of the country and unrelated outbreaks of inter-communal violence in the south.²¹⁰ Chadian forces launched cross-border attacks on rebels based in the Central African Republic (CAR), which was also affected by spillover from the conflict in Sudan.²¹¹ CAR as a whole continued to suffer from widespread violence by rebel groups. The government ignored UN proposals for a national dialogue in November.²¹²

In Cameroon an apparently promising initiative to mediate the long-running anglophone–francophone conflict lost steam in January, as the government pulled back from discussions.²¹³ The army and separatists in the English-speaking North West and South West regions continued hostilities for the rest of the year, while jihadist insurgents were active in the north of the country.²¹⁴ While Gabon did not face similar levels of conflict, the army launched a coup in August to stop President Ali Bongo Ondimba securing a third term after elections that many observers saw as flawed.²¹⁵

In the Great Lakes region the DRC continued to search for solutions to militia violence in the east of the country, in particular North Kivu province.

²⁰⁷ See e.g. the entries for Mozambique in International Crisis Group (ICG), *CrisisWatch*, June 2023 and Aug. 2023.

²⁰⁸ See the entry for Mozambique in International Crisis Group (ICG), *CrisisWatch*, Sep. 2023.

²⁰⁹ ACLED, Zitamar News and MediaFax, 'Cabo Ligado update: 11 December 2023–7 January 2024', Cabo Ligado Conflict Observatory, 10 Jan. 2024. On SAMIM see also chapter 3, section II, in this volume.

²¹⁰ Walsh, D. and Latif Dahir, A., 'War in Sudan: Who is battling for power, and why it hasn't stopped', *New York Times*, 19 Dec. 2023; UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 'Chad: Humanitarian situation in the South', Oct. 2023; and 'Chad rebel group threatens military-led government', Reuters, 22 Aug. 2023.

²¹¹ Picco, E., 'The fallout in Chad from the fighting in Darfur', International Crisis Group (ICG), 10 Aug. 2023.

²¹² United Nations, 'Security Council renews mandate of UN mission in Central African Republic, adopting Resolution 2709 (2023)', SC/15493, 15 Nov. 2023.

²¹³ International Crisis Group (ICG), 'A second look at Cameroon's anglophone special status', Crisis Group Africa Briefing no. 188, 31 Mar. 2023.

²¹⁴ Kindzeka, M. E., 'Cameroon says military deployed after new militant attack kills at least a dozen', *Voice of America*, 3 Aug. 2023; and 'Separatist gunmen kill at least 20 on Cameroon', *Al Jazeera*, 6 Nov. 2023.

²¹⁵ Obangome, G. W., 'Gabon officers declare military coup, President Ali Bongo detained', Reuters, 30 Aug. 2023.

The stakes were raised by the prospect of presidential elections in December. Although numerous armed groups were active in eastern DRC, the most prominent was the 23 March Movement (Mouvement du 23 mars, M23), which has significant military capacity and is widely alleged to be associated with Rwanda.²¹⁶ The situation was the focus of twin political processes launched in 2022: the Nairobi and Luanda processes. The Nairobi process is a regional peace initiative led by the East African Community (EAC).²¹⁷ It focused on armed groups and ending intra-DRC hostilities. The Luanda process focuses on the DRC–Rwanda political dimensions, including Rwanda’s alleged sponsoring of M23.²¹⁸ Although M23 briefly withdrew from some occupied towns in January 2023 as part of the Nairobi process, the ceasefire fell apart in October.²¹⁹

In the first half of the year, Congolese President Félix Tshisekedi persuaded SADC to commit forces to fight M23 alongside the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO) and a separate EAC Regional Force (EACRF-DRC) launched in 2022.²²⁰ While Tshisekedi accused the EACRF-DRC of being insufficiently bold and MONUSCO faced widespread public criticism for failing to quash the rebels, M23 cut back its operations in the second quarter of the year.²²¹ In the meantime, the Congolese government redoubled its demands for MONUSCO to withdraw in 2024, which the UN Security Council initiated in December.²²² President Tshisekedi won a second term in December, despite protests from his opponents that the polls were rigged.²²³

In neighbouring Burundi, preparations for parliamentary elections scheduled for 2025 also triggered violence and political repression.²²⁴

²¹⁶ Imray, G., ‘Why aid groups are warning of a new humanitarian crisis in eastern Congo’, *News Hour*, PBS, 19 Feb. 2024.

²¹⁷ For a brief description and list of members of the EAC see annex B, section II, in this volume.

²¹⁸ AFP, ‘RDC–M23 : Accord de cessez-le feu à Luanda’ [DRC–M23: Ceasefire agreement in Luanda], *Jeune Afrique*, 24 Nov. 2022; and Hoinathy, R., ‘Eastern DRC peace processes miss the mark’, *Institute for Security Studies (ISS)*, ISS Today, 8 Feb. 2023.

²¹⁹ East African Community (EAC), ‘Meeting between H.E. Uhuru Muigai Kenyatta, former president of the Republic of Kenya and facilitator of the EAC-led DRC peace process and the leadership of M-23’, Press release, 14 Jan. 2023.

²²⁰ On peace operations in the DRC see also chapter 3, section I, in this volume. For a brief description and list of members of SADC see annex B, section II, in this volume.

²²¹ Security Council Report, ‘Democratic Republic of the Congo’, *Monthly Forecast*, June 2023.

²²² ‘DR Congo President Tshisekedi seeks withdrawal of peacekeepers this year’, *Al Jazeera*, 21 Sep. 2023; and UN Security Council Resolution 2717, 19 Dec. 2023. See also chapter 3, section I, in this volume.

²²³ Kasongo, A. A., ‘Congo President Tshisekedi re-elected after contested poll’, *Reuters*, 31 Dec. 2023.

²²⁴ UN General Assembly, Human Rights Council, ‘Situation of human rights in Burundi’, Report of the special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Burundi, A/HRC/54/56, 11 Aug. 2023.

Conflicts in the Sahel and West Africa

The security situation in the Sahel continued to deteriorate throughout 2023. While groups affiliated with Islamic State and al-Qaeda caused havoc, a coup in Niger—following military takeovers in Burkina Faso and Mali in recent years—challenged the ability of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to defend democratic norms among its members. The Malian government demanded the withdrawal of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) despite warnings of an increase in violence. The G5 Sahel, a regional grouping focused on counter-terrorism operations, fell apart in the last months of the year. The insecurity in the Sahel also continued to threaten to spill over into the coastal countries of West Africa.

The highest level of conflict-related fatalities in the Sahel was in Burkina Faso, where the government pursued a heavy-handed campaign against jihadist groups, declaring a ‘general mobilization’ in April and cracking down on dissent.²²⁵ The jihadists, the military and pro-government paramilitary forces alike were accused of massacres. Civilians typically incurred the highest casualties at the hands of all sides.²²⁶

In Mali, as the government moved to confront Tuareg armed groups such as the Coordination of Azawad Movements (Coordination des mouvements de l’Azawad, CMA) in the north, its relations with the UN worsened. Ties between MINUSMA and the Malian government grew strained over alleged human rights abuses by the latter, especially after a UN human rights official released a report in May accusing the Malian Army and the Wagner Group of massacring 500 people in 2022.²²⁷ In June the Malian foreign minister surprised the UN Security Council by demanding the closure of MINUSMA.²²⁸ Russia indicated that it would back this up, using its Council veto if necessary, and the UN acquiesced to the demand.²²⁹ MINUSMA’s withdrawal process was a difficult one due to logistical obstacles, jihadist attacks on UN personnel, and the outbreak of fighting between government forces and the Permanent Strategic Framework for Peace Security and Development (Cadre stratégique permanent pour la paix, la sécurité et le développement, CSP-PSD), an alliance between the CMA and the Platform of

²²⁵ “‘General mobilisation’ declared in Burkina Faso after series of terrorists attacks’, France 24, 14 Apr. 2023.

²²⁶ Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, ‘Central Sahel (Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger)’, 29 Feb. 2024.

²²⁷ United Nations, ‘Moura: Over 500 killed by Malian troops, foreign military personnel in 2022 operation’, UN News, 12 May 2023; and Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, ‘Rapport sur les événements de Moura du 27 au 31 mars 2022’ [Report on events at Moura from 27 to 31 March 2022], May 2023.

²²⁸ Nichols, M., ‘Mali asks United Nations to withdraw peacekeeping force’, Reuters, 16 June 2023. On the closure of MINUSMA see also chapter 3, section I, in this volume.

²²⁹ UN Security Council Resolution 2690, 30 June 2023.

Self-Defence Movements.²³⁰ Islamic State and Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin, JNIM) were also active in the centre and north of the country. MINUSMA sped up its exit from endangered areas while in November the Malian Army and Wagner seized Kidal, the main urban centre in the north and a CSP stronghold.²³¹ However, at the end of the year, both the CSP-PSD and jihadist groups were attacking and blockading northern army bases.²³²

Prior to 2023 Western powers, including France and the USA, had seen Niger as a relatively stable partner in the Sahel, despite ongoing jihadist activities there. But in July 2023 President Mohamed Bazoum was overthrown by his own presidential guard.²³³ On 30 July ECOWAS imposed sweeping economic sanctions on Niger and threatened to launch a military operation against it if the coup plotters did not back down.²³⁴ It ultimately balked at an intervention but kept sanctions in place.²³⁵ The junta meanwhile reached out to counterparts in Mali and Burkina Faso and put pressure on France to withdraw its troops from the country.²³⁶ The Nigerien junta gradually prevailed in this battle of wills. In September France announced that it would pull its troops out of the country (although the USA initially kept a base there) and in December ECOWAS shifted to engaging the junta, although it continued to call for a transition back to civilian rule.²³⁷ Jihadist attacks in Niger continued throughout the constitutional crisis.

Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger aligned more closely in the second half of 2023, forming a new defence pact, the Alliance of Sahel States, in September.²³⁸ In December Burkina Faso and Niger announced that they would also quit the G5 Sahel, a counterterrorist coalition that France had fostered in the 2010s and from which Mali had already withdrawn in 2022.²³⁹ Chad and

²³⁰ Maïga, I. and Ibrahim, I. Y., 'Northern Mali: A conflict with no victors', International Crisis Group (ICG), 13 Oct. 2023.

²³¹ AFP, 'UN mission leaves 9 of 12 bases in forced withdrawal', Voice of America, 18 Nov. 2023; and Ochiend, B., 'Mali Army seizes key rebel northern stronghold Kidal', BBC, 14 Nov. 2023.

²³² See the entry for Mali in International Crisis Group (ICG), CrisisWatch, Dec. 2023.

²³³ Aksar, M. and Balima, B., 'Niger soldiers say President Bazoum's government has been removed', Reuters, 28 July 2023.

²³⁴ ECOWAS Authority of Heads of States, Extraordinary summit on the political situation in Niger, Final communiqué, 30 July 2023; and Adombila, M. A., 'West African bloc says "D-Day" set for possible Niger intervention', Reuters, 18 Aug. 2023. For a brief description and list of members of ECOWAS see annex B, section II, in this volume.

²³⁵ Obasi, N., 'ECOWAS, Nigeria and the Niger sanctions: Time to recalibrate', International Crisis Group (ICG), 5 Dec. 2023.

²³⁶ Bryant, L., 'French departure from Niger underscores fading influence', Voice of America, 28 Dec. 2023.

²³⁷ Onuah, F., 'West Africa bloc to negotiate with Niger on return to democracy', Reuters, 10 Dec. 2023.

²³⁸ AFP, 'Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso military leaders establish security alliance', France 24, 16 Sep. 2023.

²³⁹ Ross, W., 'G5 Sahel: Niger and Burkina Faso leave anti-Islamist force', BBC, 3 Dec. 2023. For a brief description and list of members of the G5 Sahel see annex B, section II, in this volume.

Mauritania, the remaining members of the group, then declared that it would dissolve.²⁴⁰

The danger of jihadist violence spilling over from the Sahel into some of the littoral West African states was a concern for the region's governments, which aimed to bolster security on their northern borders throughout the year. In most cases, actual jihadist violence remained fairly limited (Togo, for example, lost an estimated 30 lives in such cases).²⁴¹ The largest and most powerful state in the region, Nigeria, nonetheless continued to face multiple forms of violence, including attacks on the state and civilians by Boko Haram and the Islamic State–West African Province (ISWAP) group. Towards the end of the year, there was also evidence of increased violence between Boko Haram and ISWAP, and within Boko Haram itself.²⁴² This jihadist violence was, however, only one element of insecurity in Nigeria. Other persistent threats included kidnapping for ransom, farmer–herder violence, a Biafran separatist campaign in the south-east and rampant criminality.²⁴³ While there were also violent incidents in the run-up to presidential and parliamentary elections in February, there was little bloodshed around the polls themselves.²⁴⁴

Conclusions: Worse to come?

This summary of 2023 shows that many armed conflicts did escalate during the year, and that the regional and global mechanisms meant to resolve armed violence were unable to contain them. But as ACLED data suggests—with caveats—some regions still experienced lower violence than in relatively recent times. The narratives of individual conflicts above also underline the fact that different regions, and different countries within regions, experienced strikingly different types of conflict. Efforts to capture all these trends as evidence of a ‘world at war’ should, therefore, be balanced by an awareness of the diversity of the conflicts involved.

However, as 2023 ended, it is fair to say that many analysts and policy-makers were not only focused on the current state of conflict, but on the risks of escalation. Some of these risks were region-specific, as in the threat of a general confrontation with Iran in the Middle East or a jihadist breakout from the Sahel to littoral West Africa. Others had global implications. Fears

²⁴⁰ ‘Chad, Mauritania pave way for dissolution of G5 Sahel alliance’, Al Jazeera, 6 Dec. 2023. See also chapter 3, section II, in this volume.

²⁴¹ AFP, ‘Togo reports 30 deaths from ‘terrorist’ incidents this year’, Barron’s, 28 Nov. 2023.

²⁴² International Crisis Group (ICG), ‘JAS vs. ISWAP: The war of Boko Haram splinters’, Crisis Group Africa Briefing no. 196, 28 Mar. 2024.

²⁴³ E.g. Takambou, M. M. and Maidawa, A., ‘Nigeria: Farmer–herder conflict exposes government inaction’, Deutsche Welle, 29 Dec. 2023.

²⁴⁴ Fund for Peace, ‘Why was violence lower in Nigeria’s 2023 election: Implications for peace-building?’, Aug. 2023.

of Russia using a nuclear weapon in the Russia–Ukraine war were perhaps lower in 2023 than in 2022, but prominent Russian specialists still floated the possibility.²⁴⁵ The spread of the war to Moldova via the Trans-Dniester conflict or to the Baltic states or another neighbouring NATO member state also remained a serious concern.²⁴⁶ US observers in particular focused throughout the year on the dangers of escalations with China (especially in relation to Taiwan) and Russia and the need to adapt to warfare with peer or near-peer competitors.²⁴⁷ But this was not solely a US concern. In his report *A New Agenda for Peace*, released in July, the UN secretary-general highlighted the dangers of major power competition and weapons of mass destruction, calling for states to reinvest in peace diplomacy.²⁴⁸ An account of armed conflict in 2023 must, therefore, conclude that 2023 was not a high watermark of violence between and within states, but rather a potential precursor of considerably worse years to come.

²⁴⁵ On Russia's nuclear forces see chapter 7, section II, in this volume.

²⁴⁶ E.g. Lister, T., 'Secret document reveals Russia's 10-year plan to destabilize Moldova', CNN, 18 Mar. 2023; Sytas, A., 'Russian threat to Baltic security rising—Estonian intelligence report', Reuters, 8 Feb. 2023; and Ruffino, G., 'Russia threatens Moldova and Baltic states, warns Belgian Army chief', Euronews, 20 Dec. 2023.

²⁴⁷ E.g. Michta, A. A., 'US isn't ready for a war of great powers', Politico, 31 Oct. 2023; and Mitchell, A. W., 'America is a heartbeat away from a war it could lose', *Foreign Policy*, 16 Nov. 2023.

²⁴⁸ United Nations, *A New Agenda for Peace*, Our Common Agenda Policy Brief no. 9 (United Nations: New York, July 2023).