

Armed conflict and peace processes in the Middle East and North Africa: Armed conflict and peace processes in Iraq, Syria and Turkey

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II. Armed conflict and peace processes in Iraq, Syria and Turkey

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This section reviews the complex and interlinked armed conflicts in Iraq, Syria and Turkey. During 2019 the Assad government consolidated its hold in Syria and achieved further strategic gains, while Iraq remained a fragile, largely post-conflict state with weak institutions and growing protests. In a sign of the growing normalization between the two countries, a border crossing that had been closed since 2012 was reopened in September 2019.¹ Iran remained an influential presence in both countries. In 2019 Turkey continued its military operations in northern Iraq and carried out a new incursion of northern Syria, after United States President Donald J. Trump announced a US withdrawal. An agreement by Russia and Turkey to create a 'safe zone' in north-eastern Syria in October 2019 cemented Russia's role as a key power broker in Syria, moved Turkey further away from its Western orbit and signified a diminished US influence in the region. Overall, the Kurds—an ethnic group of about 30 million people with populations living in Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey—were the main losers in a reordering of the regional balance of power during the year (despite some political gains in Iraq).²

Declining armed conflict but growing protests in Iraq

Iraq is scarred by decades of armed conflict.³ But after the territorial defeat of the Islamic State in December 2017 Iraq appeared to be enjoying a period of relative stability. However, underlying sectarian tensions, a low-level Islamic State insurgency in remote northern parts of the country and huge post-war reconstruction, reconciliation and governance challenges remained.⁴

In another indication of the ongoing challenges, three main security actors continued to operate within the state: the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), supported by the US-led Global Coalition Against Daesh and a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) training and capacity-building mission; the Kurdish Peshmerga; and the Hashd al-Shaabi, also known as the Popular

¹ Reuters, 'Iraq to open border-crossing with Syria on Monday', 28 Sep. 2019.

² On the history of the Kurdish struggle for a state, see Özel, S. and Yilmaz, A., 'The Kurds in the Middle East, 2015', *SIPRI Yearbook 2016*, pp. 53–71; and Barkey, H. J., 'The Kurdish awakening: Unity, betrayal, and the future of the Middle East', *Foreign Affairs*, Mar./Apr. 2019.

³ See various earlier SIPRI Yearbooks. On the consequences for the health of the Iraqi people, see Lafta, R. K. and Al-Nuaimi, M. A., 'War or health: A four-decade armed conflict in Iraq', *Medicine, Conflict and Survival*, vol. 35, no. 3 (2019), pp. 209–26.

⁴ O'Driscoll, D., 'Governing the "ungoverned": Suppressing the Islamic State's insurgency in Iraq', SIPRI commentary, 12 Apr. 2019; and International Organization for Migration, 'Iraq Mission, Displacement tracking matrix', Oct. 2019.

Table 6.1. Estimated conflict-related fatalities in Iraq, 2016–19

Event type	2016	2017	2018	2019
Battles	24 595	15 216	2 736	1 710
Explosions/remote violence	25 645	13 921	2 494	1 201
Protests, riots and strategic developments	319	58	57	469
Violence against civilians	5 755	2 823	311	225
Total	56 314	32 018	5 598	3 605

Notes: The first available year for data on Iraq in the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) database is 2016. For definitions of event types, see ACLED, 'ACLED definitions of political violence and protest', 11 Apr. 2019.

Source: ACLED, 'Data export tool', [n.d.].

Mobilization Forces (PMF)—an Iraqi state-sponsored umbrella organization composed of a number of predominantly Shia militias (some supported by Iran) and Christian, Shabak, Sunni, Turkmen and Yazidi militias.⁵ Integrating the PMF into the ISF has been one of the goals of the Iraqi Government, but progress has been slow. In addition, a small European Union (EU) Advisory Mission in Iraq has been providing advice on civilian security sector reform since October 2017.⁶

In response to continuing Islamic State attacks, which included the new tactic of burning crops, the Iraqi Government launched several military and counterterrorism operations against the group during the year, some involving joint operations that included the ISF, PMF and US-led coalition air strikes.⁷ Turkish military operations against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê, PKK) in northern Iraq also continued in 2019.⁸

Since early 2018 Iraq has often been described as being in a largely post-conflict period. However, while the available data suggests a steep decline in combat-related fatalities in 2018 and 2019 (see table 6.1), they remained at the level of a high-intensity armed conflict (i.e. above 1000 combat-related deaths in the year).⁹ In addition, humanitarian conditions in the country remained challenging, with more than 1.4 million people internally displaced and 6.7 million in need of humanitarian assistance, as of December 2019.¹⁰

⁵ International Crisis Group, *Iraq's Paramilitary Groups: The Challenge of Rebuilding a Functioning State*, Middle East Report no. 188 (International Crisis Group: Brussels, 30 July 2018). The Global Coalition Against Daesh maintains a website at <<https://theglobalcoalition.org/en/>>. Details on the NATO Mission Iraq can be found on the NATO website at <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_166936.htm>.

⁶ EU, 'EU Advisory Mission in support of security sector reform in Iraq', 18 Oct. 2018.

⁷ Guerin, O., 'Isis in Iraq: Militants "getting stronger again"', BBC, 23 Dec. 2019.

⁸ Al Jazeera, 'Turkey launches operation against PKK fighters in northern Iraq', 28 May 2019; and Starr, S., 'Turkey's military interventions in Iraq hardly achieve anything', *Arab Weekly*, 31 Aug. 2019.

⁹ On definitions of armed conflicts, see chapter 2, section I, in this volume.

¹⁰ UN Children's Fund, 'Iraq: 2019 humanitarian situation report, reporting period: 1 January 2019 to 31 December 2019', [n.d.].

The role of the United States in Iraq

The US administration has made Iraq one of the front lines in its largely political fight with Iran (see section I), demanding that the country disband several Shiite militias with close ties to Iran.¹¹ The USA accused the militias of carrying out several rocket attacks during 2019 against US military (about 5000 US troops remain in the country at the invitation of the Iraqi Government), commercial and diplomatic assets in the country. Despite the prominent role Iran plays in key Iraqi institutions, the Iraqi Government has sought to remain neutral in the Iranian–US rivalry.¹² In December the Iranian–US conflict in Iraq heated up. Responding to a series of attacks on US assets, including one that killed a US contractor, the US launched air strikes on the Iranian-backed Kata’ib Hezbollah militia’s base in Iraq, killing at least 25 fighters. Some militia members and their supporters then attacked the US embassy in Baghdad.¹³

Mass protests in the Shia south

In recent years uprisings in Sunni areas and separatist demands of the Kurds have challenged the Iraqi Government. The 2018 regional and national elections in Iraq resulted in a government led by Prime Minister Adil Abdul Mahdi, a former oil minister and Shia politician. Although this represented Iraq’s fourth successive peaceful transfer of power, the government faced many economic and political challenges, including the Kurdish boundary question and the need to find a mutually acceptable formula for sharing Iraq’s oil and gas revenues.¹⁴ Prime Minister Mahdi managed to improve relations with the Kurds; however, he failed to implement any major changes and was unable to control the militias and their political wings. Correspondingly, his government was seen as a continuation of a political system where the elite divide Iraq’s wealth, with little development in the country.¹⁵

As a result in the Shia south, major anti-government protests demanding economic and political reforms erupted in October 2019, the largest since the end of the US occupation in 2010. Starting in Baghdad on 1 October 2019

¹¹ Robinson, L., ‘Winning the peace in Iraq’, *Foreign Affairs*, Sep./Oct. 2019; and International Crisis Group, ‘Iraq: Evading the gathering storm’, Middle East Briefing no. 70, 29 Aug. 2019.

¹² Arango, T. et al., ‘The Iran cables: Secret documents show how Tehran wields power in Iraq’, *New York Times*, 18 Nov. 2019.

¹³ Aboulenein, A. and Rasheed, A., ‘Iraq condemns US air strikes as unacceptable and dangerous’, Reuters, 30 Dec. 2019; and O’Driscoll, D., ‘Tensions on Iraqi soil likely to overshadow anti-government protest demands’, SIPRI commentary, 9 Jan. 2020.

¹⁴ International Crisis Group, *After Iraqi Kurdistan’s Thwarted Independence Bid*, Middle East Report no. 199 (International Crisis Group: Brussels, 27 Mar. 2019). On the potential for local peacebuilding in Kirkuk, see O’Driscoll, D., ‘Building everyday peace in Kirkuk, Iraq: The potential of locally focused interventions’, SIPRI Policy Paper no. 52, Sep. 2019.

¹⁵ O’Driscoll (note 13).

Table 6.2. Estimated conflict-related fatalities in Syria, 2017–19

Event type	2017	2018	2019
Battles	26 577	16 001	8 296
Explosions/remote violence	25 244	11 802	5 752
Protests, riots and strategic developments	222	18	56
Violence against civilians	2 358	2 264	1 169
Total	54 401	30 085	15 273

Notes: The first available year for data on Syria in the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) database is 2017. For definitions of event types, see ACLED, ‘ACLED definitions of political violence and protest’, 11 Apr. 2019.

Source: ACLED, ‘Data export tool’, [n.d.].

they then spread across much of southern Iraq.¹⁶ Security forces (thought to include a combination of government forces and Iran-aligned Shiite militias), using live ammunition, tear gas and stun grenades against mostly young, unarmed protesters, killed more than 110 people in the first seven days of the protests.¹⁷ By the end of 2019 it was estimated that more than 460 people had been killed and around 25 000 injured in protest-related violence.¹⁸

At the end of October 2019 Prime Minister Mahdi offered to resign on the condition that a successor could be agreed. The Iraqi Parliament accepted his resignation at the beginning of December.¹⁹ However, the largest bloc in parliament put forward two candidates that were rejected by the protesters and correspondingly were not endorsed by Iraqi President Barham Salih. As a result, Mahdi remained as acting prime minister, and the protest movement continued, with its demands remaining unanswered in 2019.²⁰

Armed conflict in Syria

Since 2011 the political power of the Alawite elite in Syria has been contested in a multi-sided armed conflict that, while initially sparked by the Arab Spring, evolved into a complex war involving regional and international powers. Since 2018 there has been a clear de-escalation in the war due to the Syrian Government’s consolidation of territorial control and the eventual territorial defeat

¹⁶ *The Economist*, ‘Iraq’s government seems powerless to halt protests in the Shia heartland’, 10 Oct. 2019; and Hassan, F. and Rubin, A. J., ‘Iraq struggles to contain wave of deadly protests’, *New York Times*, 4 Oct. 2019.

¹⁷ Fantappie, M., ‘Widespread protests point to Iraq’s cycle of social crisis’, International Crisis Group commentary, 10 Oct. 2019.

¹⁸ Abdul-Ahad, G. and Graham-Harrison, E., ‘Defiant protesters back in Baghdad square within an hour of slaughter’, *The Guardian*, 7 Dec. 2019; and Al Jazeera, ‘Iraq: Anti-government protesters denounce pro-Iran crowds’, 2 Jan. 2020.

¹⁹ BBC, ‘Iraq protests: PM Adel Abdul Mahdi “will resign if replacement is found”’, 31 Oct. 2019; and Chulov, M., ‘Iraq risks breakup as tribes take on Iran’s militias in “blood feud”’, *The Guardian*, 30 Nov. 2019.

²⁰ O’Driscoll (note 13).

of the Islamic State in March 2019.²¹ Nonetheless, Syria remained the most violent country in the world covered by the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) in 2019 and the most dangerous country for civilians. It had the highest number of political violence events in the world in 2019 (17 667 recorded events—19 per cent of the global total), the highest number of events with direct civilian targeting (3432 recorded events that resulted in the highest number of direct civilian fatalities: 4165) and the third-highest number of total reported fatalities (15 273, see table 6.2).²²

By the end of 2019 the government of President Bashar al-Assad was in control of around 70 per cent of the country, with armed opposition focused on two areas: Idlib province in the north-west and the north-east partially ruled by Kurds. The armed conflict continued to attract a complex and changing cast of combatants, including regional and global powers: Russia and Turkey in the north-west; and Russia, Turkey and the USA in the north-east—where the civil war was pushed in new directions by a protracted and unclear US military withdrawal and Turkey’s subsequent new cross-border military operations. In the south-west Iran retained an entrenched presence, and Israel continued with its campaign of air strikes on Iran-allied targets in an attempt to enforce a buffer between itself and the Iranian-backed Syrian Government.²³ Russia became a more influential player in Syria as a whole, while remnants of the Islamic State remained a threat.²⁴ Throughout 2019 there was also a risk of the Syrian conflict being widened either by the tangle of competing foreign militaries in Syria or the broader Iranian–US rivalry (see section I). There were also ongoing concerns about the Syrian Government possessing chemical weapons.²⁵

The north-west: The battle for Idlib

In the north-west of Syria, following the recapture of the Damascus suburbs (eastern Ghouta) and the negotiated surrender of rebels in Homs in 2018, the focus of government forces (backed by Iran and Russia) in 2019 was on the remaining rebel-held province of Idlib—home to 3 million civilians (including 1 million internally displaced people from other parts of Syria)

²¹ On the Syrian conflict in 2016–18 see Smith, D., ‘The Middle East and North Africa: 2016 in perspective’, *SIPRI Yearbook 2017*, pp. 77–82; Davis, I., ‘Armed conflict in the Middle East and North Africa’, *SIPRI Yearbook 2018*, pp. 76–79; and Davis, I., ‘Armed conflict and peace processes in the Middle East and North Africa’, *SIPRI Yearbook 2019*, pp. 98–107.

²² Kishi, R. et al., *Year in Review (ACLED: 2 Mar. 2020)*, pp. 19–20, 46–47.

²³ Reuters, ‘Israel says air strike in Syria sent “no immunity” message to Iran’, 25 Aug. 2019; and Specia, M., ‘Israel launches airstrikes in Syria to target Iranian forces’, *New York Times*, 20 Nov. 2019. On Iran’s role in Syria, see Juneau, T., ‘Iran’s costly intervention in Syria: A pyrrhic victory’, *Mediterranean Politics*, vol. 25, no. 1 (2020), pp. 26–44.

²⁴ See e.g. BBC, ‘Syria war: “IS suicide bomber” kills US troops in Manbij’, 16 Jan. 2019.

²⁵ Corder, M., ‘Chemical weapons watchdog members voice concerns over Syria’, Associated Press, 9 July 2019. Also see chapter 12, section I, in this volume.

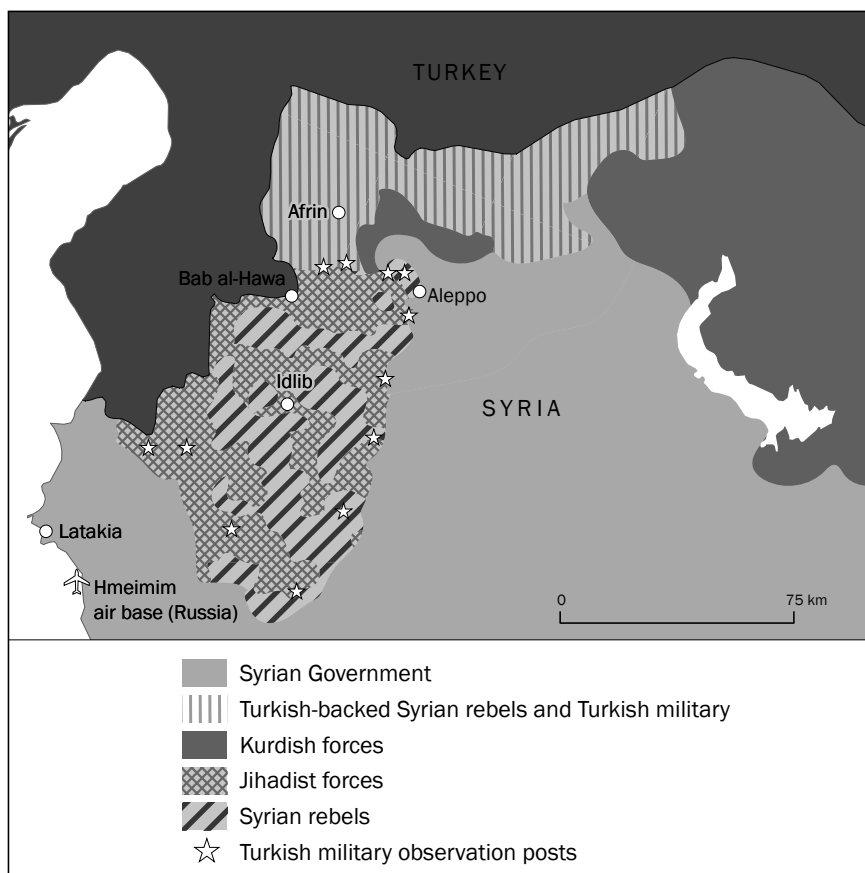


Figure 6.2. Territorial control in Idlib province, February 2019

Source: IHS Control Monitor, 25 Feb. 2019; and BBC, cited in Sinjab, I., 'Syria war: Jihadist takeover in rebel-held Idlib sparks alarm', BBC, 26 Feb. 2019.

and an estimated 100 000 armed rebels and assorted jihadists.²⁶ An assault on Idlib seemed to have been averted in September 2018 by a Russian–Turkish agreement to establish and monitor a demilitarized buffer zone to protect civilians in the province.²⁷ However, armed militant groups—including the main jihadist group with roots in al-Qaeda, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, with an

²⁶ Lederer, E. M., 'UN: Idlib offensive could spark worst humanitarian emergency', Associated Press, 28 Aug. 2018; *The Economist*, 'The battle for Syria's last rebel redoubt looms', 6 Sep. 2018; and International Crisis Group, 'Saving Idlib from destruction', Middle East Briefing no. 63, 3 Sep. 2018.

²⁷ International Crisis Group, 'Syria's Idlib wins welcome reprieve with Russia–Turkey deal', Statement, 18 Sep. 2018; and *The Economist*, 'Turkey and Russia cut a deal over Syria', 20 Sep. 2018.

estimated 20 000 fighters—failed to withdraw from the buffer zone and began to assert control in the province (see figure 6.2).²⁸

Russian President Vladimir Putin held talks with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in January to discuss a new joint Russian–Turkish plan to stabilize the province. However, in February aerial and ground offensives by pro-government forces (mainly Syrian army troops and aircraft, Iranian-linked militias and Russian aircraft and ‘advisers’) to oust Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and affiliated armed groups escalated markedly.²⁹ Details about Russia’s ‘light footprint’ strategy in Syria, including the presence of ground and special forces, remained sketchy.³⁰ A ceasefire agreement negotiated by Russia and Turkey in June failed to halt the fighting, which intensified again in July and August.³¹ Extensive use of air strikes and artillery by pro-government forces led to rising numbers of civilian casualties, although attributing responsibility for some of the atrocities proved controversial.³² However, the United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic reported that essential infrastructure, including hospitals, markets, educational facilities and agricultural resources, were destroyed in the offensive, which also displaced more than 330 000 civilians towards the Turkish border.³³

On 27 August President Erdoğan and President Putin agreed to uphold their 2018 agreement, while remaining divided over the characterization of some of the key actors in Idlib and on whether the Syrian Government should regain control of the north-west.³⁴ In September the UN Security Council voted on competing draft resolutions on a cessation of hostilities in Idlib. Belgium, Germany and Kuwait proposed a draft demanding compliance with international law in all counterterrorism efforts, while a draft by China and

²⁸ Sinjab, L., ‘Syria war: Jihadist takeover in rebel-held Idlib sparks alarm’, BBC, 26 Feb. 2019; and International Crisis Group, *The Best of Bad Options for Syria’s Idlib*, Middle East Report no. 197 (International Crisis Group: Brussels, 14 Mar. 2019).

²⁹ Astakhova, O., ‘Russia and Turkey to act to stabilize Syria’s Idlib province—Putin’, Reuters, 23 Jan. 2019; and *The Economist*, ‘Bashar al-Assad’s ruinous campaign to retake Idlib from Syrian rebels’, 6 June 2019.

³⁰ See e.g. Jones, S. G., ‘Russia’s battlefield success in Syria: Will it be a pyrrhic victory?’, *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 12, no. 1 (Oct. 2019), pp. 1–9; Mardasov, A., ‘What are Russian special operations forces doing in Idlib?’, *Al Jazeera*, 29 Aug. 2019; and Al-Khalidi, S., ‘Syrian rebels say Moscow deploys ground forces in Idlib campaign’, Reuters, 18 July 2019. On Russian arms transfers to Syria, see chapter 9, section I, in this volume.

³¹ Reuters, ‘Russia and Turkey broker ceasefire in Syria’s Idlib: Russian news agencies’, 12 June 2019.

³² See e.g. Karam, Z., ‘Syrian activists say airstrikes kill 27 in rebel-held town’, Associated Press, 22 July 2019; and Reuters, ‘At least 544 civilians killed in Russian-led assault in Syria, rights group say’, *The Guardian*, 7 July 2019.

³³ UN General Assembly, ‘Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic’, A/HRC/42/51, 15 Aug. 2019.

³⁴ Al Jazeera, ‘Putin, Erdogan hail close defence ties as Idlib divisions remain’, 27 Aug. 2019.

Russia aimed to exempt operations against armed non-state groups.³⁵ The UN Security Council failed to reach consensus on either resolution.³⁶

In November and December Russian and Syrian forces intensified air strikes and started a ground offensive in the north-west, taking territory from rebel groups and creating a new wave of refugees. President Erdoğan vowed not to accept any of these latest Syrian refugees and called for an end to the violence.³⁷ As had been forecast earlier in 2019 Syria now faced potentially the ‘worst humanitarian disaster’ this century, with more than 235 000 people fleeing the latest fighting in the Idlib region.³⁸

The north-east: A protracted United States withdrawal triggers a new Turkish offensive

At the end of 2018 the north-east of Syria was relatively if precariously stable under the control of the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), led primarily by a Kurdish-dominated armed group, the People’s Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, YPG). However, Turkey regards the YPG as a terrorist organization due to its links to the PKK, which has waged an insurgency against Turkey since the 1980s. Turkish-backed Syrian rebels took control of the previously Kurdish-held Afrin province in March 2018, but throughout most of 2018 the main conflict was between the US-backed SDF and remnants of the Islamic State.³⁹ Under a June 2018 Turkish–US road map for governance and security arrangements in the city of Manbij, Turkey and the USA had commenced joint patrols in October 2018, and the US military had begun to establish observation posts to help Turkey secure its border.⁴⁰ However, in December 2018 President Trump announced the withdrawal of approximately 2000 US troops from Syria. Although this later turned out to be only a partial withdrawal, it left the 60 000-strong SDF/YPG potentially exposed to an attack either from Turkey and Turkish-backed Syrian forces

³⁵ UN Security Council, ‘Belgium, Germany and Kuwait: Draft resolution’, S/2019/756, 19 Sep. 2019; UN Security Council, ‘China and Russian Federation: Draft resolution’, S/2019/757, 19 Sep. 2019; and Nichols, M., ‘UN Security Council to vote on rival calls for truce in Syria’s Idlib’, Reuters, 18 Sep. 2019.

³⁶ The draft resolution by Belgium, Germany and Kuwait received 12 out of 15 votes, while 9 members voted against the China–Russia draft resolution and 4 abstained: UN News, ‘Security Council: Two draft resolutions, zero consensus on ceasefire in Syria’s Idlib’, 19 Sep. 2019.

³⁷ Gumrukcu, T., ‘Erdoğan says Turkey cannot handle new migrant wave from Syria, warns Europe’, Reuters, 22 Dec. 2019; and Mckernan, B. and Akoush, H., ‘Thousands flee north-west Syria amid fierce assault toy Assad’, *The Guardian*, 24 Dec. 2019.

³⁸ Graham-Harrison, E. and Akoush, H., ‘More than 235,000 people have fled Idlib region in Syria, says UN’, *The Guardian*, 27 Dec. 2019; and France 24, ‘UN warns “worst humanitarian disaster” of the century is unfolding in Syria’s Idlib’, 31 July 2019.

³⁹ Chulov, M., ‘ISIS withdraws from last urban stronghold in Syria’, *The Guardian*, 14 Dec. 2018.

⁴⁰ Rempfer, K., ‘The US military is putting new observation posts in northern Syria’, *Military Times*, 21 Nov. 2018.

or the Syrian Government.⁴¹ Throughout 2019 the USA continued to send mixed messages about its role and commitment to allies in Syria.⁴²

In January 2019 President Trump and President Erdoğan discussed the possibility of establishing a safe zone in north-eastern Syria, which might allow the return of many of the 3.6 million Syrian refugees residing in Turkey.⁴³ As the SDF/YPG closed in on the last pocket of Islamic State territory in eastern Syria in February, the USA announced it would leave ‘a small peacekeeping group’ of around 200 troops in the country.⁴⁴ France and the United Kingdom agreed to deploy additional forces to Syria to compensate for the US withdrawal.⁴⁵ In March, after capturing the last remaining Islamic State territory, the SDF called on the international community to establish an international court in north-east Syria to prosecute Islamic State detainees.⁴⁶

With Turkey threatening to attack the YPG if Turkey and the USA failed to reach agreement, a preliminary deal was finally agreed on 7 August to establish a joint operations centre to coordinate and manage the setting up of a safe zone.⁴⁷ In September President Erdoğan threatened to force out at least a million Syrian refugees, either by moving them into the proposed safe zone or by sending them to Europe.⁴⁸ A few days later, in an effort to reduce tensions with Turkey, the US military announced it was setting up joint Turkish–US reconnaissance flights and ground patrols.⁴⁹

In another major shift in US policy on 6 October President Trump announced the withdrawal of US troops from the area, but in a tweet the next day warned President Erdoğan that he would ‘destroy and obliterate’ the

⁴¹ Landler, M. et al., ‘Trump to withdraw US forces from Syria, declaring “We have won against ISIS”’, *New York Times*, 19 Dec. 2018; ‘The US withdrawal from Syria’, *Strategic Comments*, vol. 25, no. 1 (2019), pp. i–iii; and International Crisis Group, *Squaring the Circles in Syria’s North East*, Middle East Report no. 204 (International Crisis Group: Brussels, 31 July 2019).

⁴² See e.g. Landler et al. (note 41); and Associated Press, ‘Bolton: US troops will not leave Syria till ISIS beaten and Kurds protected’, *The Guardian*, 6 Jan. 2019.

⁴³ Reuters, ‘Trump, Erdogan discuss creation of secure zone in northern Syria—Turkish presidency’, 14 Jan. 2019; and Al Jazeera, ‘Erdogan: Safe zones in Syria will allow refugees to return home’, 28 Jan. 2019.

⁴⁴ Karni, A. and Gibbons-Neff, T., ‘200 US troops to stay in Syria, White House says’, *New York Times*, 21 Feb. 2019; and BBC, ‘Islamic State group: Civilians evacuated from last Syria enclave’, 20 Feb. 2019.

⁴⁵ Sabbagh, D., ‘UK and France to send further forces to Syria in aid of US withdrawal’, *The Guardian*, 9 July 2019.

⁴⁶ Kurdistan 24, ‘SDF calls for creation of international court to prosecute ISIS members in Syria’, 25 Mar. 2019.

⁴⁷ Reuters, ‘Turkey will launch operation in Syria if safe zone not established: Minister’, 22 July 2019; and Fox, T., ‘Turkey, US agree to set up operation centre for Syria safe zone’, Al Jazeera, 7 Aug. 2019.

⁴⁸ Gall, C., ‘Turkey’s radical plan: Send a million refugees back to Syria’, *New York Times*, 10 Sep. 2019.

⁴⁹ Schmitt, E., ‘US poised to send 150 troops to patrol northeastern Syria’, *New York Times*, 12 Sep. 2019.

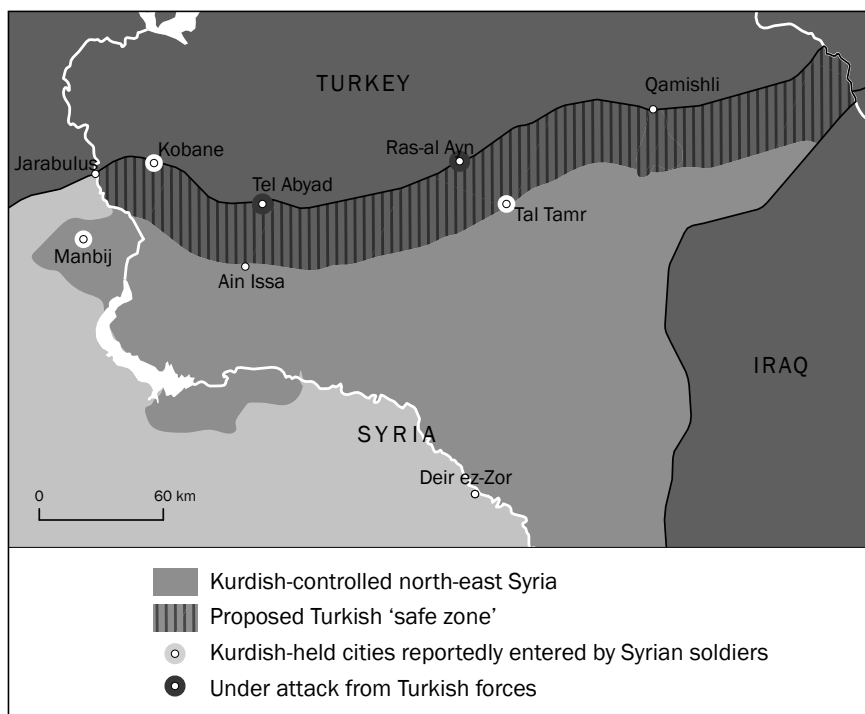


Figure 6.3. Armed conflict on the Syria–Turkey border, October 2019

Source: McKernan, B., ‘Russian troops patrol between Turkish and Syrian forces on border’, *The Guardian*, 15 Oct. 2019.

Turkish economy if any offensive went too far.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, on 9 October Turkey launched a major offensive against the Kurdish-led forces in the border area.⁵¹ The next day, with tens of thousands of civilians fleeing the area, the UN Security Council met in an inconclusive emergency closed-door meeting to discuss the situation.⁵² Several EU member states imposed restrictions on arms exports to Turkey.⁵³

⁵⁰ Schmitt, E. et al., ‘President endorses Turkish military operation in Syria, shifting US policy’, *New York Times*, 7 Oct. 2019; Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump), Twitter, 7 Oct. 2019; and Ford, W., ‘Congress on US policy toward Syria and Turkey: An overview of recent hearings’, *Lawfare*, 29 Oct. 2019.

⁵¹ Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (@RTErdogan), Twitter, 9 Oct. 2019; *The Economist*, ‘Turkey launches an attack on northern Syria’, 10 Oct. 2019; and Koseoglu, S., ‘Will Turkey succeed in creating a “safe zone” for Syrians?’, *Al Jazeera*, 8 Oct. 2019.

⁵² Rettman, A., ‘EU stands alone against US and Russia on Syria’, *EUobserver*, 11 Oct. 2019; and UN News, ‘Civilians “must not be a target”, urges UNHCR, following military escalation in northern Syria’, 10 Oct. 2019.

⁵³ Rettman, A., ‘EU countries to halt arms sales to Turkey’, *EUobserver*, 14 Oct. 2019. On attempts to impose an EU arms embargo on Turkey, see chapter 14, section II, in this volume. On arms transfers to Turkey, see chapter 9, sections I and II, in this volume.

In the wake of the US withdrawal announcement—criticized by the SDF as a ‘stab in the back’—the Kurdish-led forces initiated talks with the Syrian Government for security support to counter the Turkish offensive.⁵⁴ In a deal brokered by Russia, the SDF/YPG agreed to surrender the border cities of Kobane and Manbij (where US forces were previously stationed) to Syrian Government forces, thereby potentially widening the conflict in north-east Syria (see figure 6.3). In an effort to prevent Syrian–Turkish clashes, Russian military police began patrolling the area around Manbij.⁵⁵ There were also reports of Islamic State supporters escaping from detention camps amidst the chaos.⁵⁶ Meanwhile, President Trump announced new sanctions on Turkish government agencies and officials in response to their ‘heinous acts’ in Syria, as well as suspending negotiations on a \$100 billion trade deal with Turkey.⁵⁷ A second closed-door meeting of the UN Security Council on 16 October agreed a brief statement, but stopped short of calling for a ceasefire.⁵⁸

A five-day ceasefire negotiated by US Vice President Michael Pence and President Erdoğan on 17 October was designed to allow the YPG to withdraw from the safe zone, but appeared to do little to prevent the fighting.⁵⁹ Reports also suggested that President Trump was now considering keeping about 200 US troops in Syria to secure the oil fields.⁶⁰ However, within days the Turkish–US deal was overtaken by events.

The Russian–Turkish Sochi agreement

Presidents Erdoğan and Putin, meeting in Sochi, Russia, on 22 October, after expiry of the US-brokered ceasefire, agreed their own arrangement for territorial control and a ceasefire in the north-eastern area once patrolled by the USA.⁶¹ As a result of this ceasefire, which ostensibly ended Turkey’s offensive, President Trump removed sanctions against Turkish officials.

⁵⁴ McKernan, B., ‘Turkey–Syria offensive: Kurds reach deal with Damascus to stave off assault’, *The Guardian*, 14 Oct. 2019; and Safi, M. and McKernan, B., ‘Syrian troops enter Kurdish fight against Turkish forces’, *The Guardian*, 14 Oct. 2019.

⁵⁵ McKernan, B., ‘Russian troops patrol between Turkish and Syrian forces on border’, *The Guardian*, 15 Oct. 2019.

⁵⁶ McKernan, B., ‘At least 750 ISIS affiliates escape Syria camp after Turkish shelling’, *The Guardian*, 13 Oct. 2019.

⁵⁷ Rappeport, A. and Crowley, M., ‘Trump imposes sanctions on Turkey as Syria conflict intensifies’, *New York Times*, 14 Oct. 2019.

⁵⁸ UN Audiovisual Library, ‘UN/Syria Security Council’, 16 Oct. 2019.

⁵⁹ White House, ‘The United States and Turkey agree to ceasefire in Northeast Syria’, Statement, 17 Oct. 2019; and Khadder, K. et al., ‘Kurds say Turkey is violating hours-old “ceasefire” in northern Syria’, CNN, 18 Oct. 2019.

⁶⁰ Schmitt, E. and Haberman, M., ‘Trump said to favor leaving a few hundred troops in eastern Syria’, *New York Times*, 20 Oct. 2019; and Borger, J. and Chulov, M., ‘US deploying more troops around Syria oil fields after killing of Isis leader’, *The Guardian*, 28 Oct. 2019.

⁶¹ Al Jazeera, ‘Full text of Turkey, Russia agreement on northeast Syria’, 22 Oct. 2019; Fraser, S. and Isachenkov, V., ‘Russia, Turkey seal power in northeast Syria with new accord’, Associated Press, 22 Oct. 2019; and *The Economist*, ‘Russia and Turkey agree to carve up northern Syria’, 24 Oct. 2019.

The Sochi agreement allows Turkish forces to retain seized territory while Russian and Syrian forces will control the remainder of the Syria–Turkey border. It remained unclear whether the deal would permit the resettlement of significant numbers of Syrian refugees and how much of the existing YPG self-government structures would be preserved as the presence of the Syrian Government increased. The USA was also considering new options in north-east Syria, including leaving about 500 troops and sending dozens of battle tanks to the area.⁶²

By the end of October Kurdish fighters had withdrawn from the safe zone, clearing the way for Russia and Turkey to jointly secure the area.⁶³ In late November the remaining 500–600 US troops had reportedly resumed counterterrorism operations against the Islamic State in the area still controlled by the SDF/YPG.⁶⁴ At the end of 2019 a challenging but fragile stalemate had returned to north-eastern Syria, with the SDF/YPG-protected autonomous administration continuing to govern areas in most of the north-east not held by Turkey or its Syrian allies.

The humanitarian impact of the armed conflict

Despite the territorial focus of the armed conflict narrowing, it remains one of the most devastating in the world, with over half of the Syrian population still displaced at the end of 2019. After more than eight years of war, more than a third of Syria's infrastructure has been destroyed or damaged. Although there are no reliable casualty statistics, over 400 000 Syrians are thought to have died due to the fighting.⁶⁵ ACLED estimates that there were approximately 15 200 fatalities in 2019 (about half the number of 2018 and two thirds less than in 2017—see table 6.2).⁶⁶ In 2019 Syria also remained the country worst affected by explosive weapons such as large bombs and missiles, indirect fire weapons (mortars, rockets and artillery) and improvised explosive devices.⁶⁷

⁶² Lubold, G. and Youssef, N.A., 'US weighs leaving more troops, sending battle tanks to Syria', *Wall Street Journal*, 24 Oct. 2019.

⁶³ Rasmussen, S. E., 'Kurdish fighters withdraw from Syrian border area as cease-fire ends, Russia says', *Wall Street Journal*, 29 Oct. 2019; and International Crisis Group, 'Steadying the new status quo in Syria's north east', Middle East Briefing no. 72, 27 Nov. 2019.

⁶⁴ Schmitt, E., 'US resumes large-scale operations against ISIS in northern Syria', *New York Times*, 25 Nov. 2019; and Stewart, P., 'US military completes pullback from northeast Syria, Esper says', 5 Dec. 2019.

⁶⁵ International Crisis Group, *Ways out of Europe's Syria Reconstruction Conundrum*, Middle East Report no. 209 (International Crisis Group: Brussels, 25 Nov. 2019); and Humud, C. et al., 'Counting casualties in Syria and Iraq: Process and challenges', Congressional Research Service Insight, 12 Apr. 2016.

⁶⁶ ACLED, 'Data export tool', [n.d.].

⁶⁷ Action on Armed Violence, 'Explosive violence in 2019', 7 Jan. 2020. On the issue of explosive weapons in populated areas, also see chapter 13, section I, in this volume.

Clearance of landmines and remnants of other explosive weapons could take up to 50 years.⁶⁸

Conflict continued to be the driver of humanitarian needs with over half the population still displaced. The latest report by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, which was established by the UN Human Rights Council in 2011, highlighted how ongoing hostilities had increased the number of displaced Syrians to approximately 13 million, including 6.7 million refugees (up from 5.6 million in 2018), hosted mainly by Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, and 6.2 internally displaced people (up from 6 million in 2018).⁶⁹ The commission also reported that up to 70 000 people, mainly women and children, remained interned in inhumane conditions at Al-Hol camp in the north-east, where SDF/YPG forces guard families of imprisoned Islamic State fighters.

At the end of 2019 about 11.1 million people (down from 13.1 million in 2018) required humanitarian assistance, 6.6 million were food insecure (6.7 million in 2018) and a further 2.6 million were at risk of acute food insecurity (4.5 million in 2018).⁷⁰ Of the \$3.29 billion requested in the 2019 Humanitarian Response Plan for Syria, only \$1.9 billion (58 per cent) had been funded.⁷¹

Actual or suspected war crimes have been reported at every stage of Syria's civil war, and potential war crimes continued to be committed in 2019.⁷² There was also growing evidence of the scale of human rights abuses by the Syrian Government, including torture and enforced disappearances.⁷³

The wider Syrian peace processes

The main peace efforts in Syria have included long-standing UN-mediated talks, regular discussions by the Astana Group (Iran, Russia and Turkey), an October 2018 Quartet Meeting (France, Germany, Russia and Turkey) and a fragile patchwork of localized de-escalation agreements and ceasefires.⁷⁴ The centrepiece of UN efforts—the creation of a committee to write a new

⁶⁸ Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 'Clearance of improvised explosive devices in the Middle East, Monday 22–Wednesday 24 May 2017', Wilton Park Report WP1548, June 2017.

⁶⁹ UN General Assembly, A/HRC/42/51 (note 33).

⁷⁰ World Food Programme, 'WFP Syria situation report no. 11, November 2019', Jan. 2020.

⁷¹ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 'Humanitarian response plan, January–December 2019, Syrian Arab Republic', Aug. 2019; and OCHA, 'Humanitarian update, Syrian Arab Republic', no. 7, 23 Dec. 2019.

⁷² See e.g. UN General Assembly, A/HRC/42/51 (note 33); Amnesty International, 'Syria: Damning evidence of war crimes and other violations by Turkish forces and their allies', 18 Oct. 2019; and Broches, E., 'An accountability update for crimes committed in Syria', *Lawfare*, 13 Jan. 2020.

⁷³ Barnard, A., 'Inside Syria's secret torture prisons: How Bashar al-Assad crushed dissent', *New York Times*, 11 May 2019.

⁷⁴ On the Syrian Government using ceasefires to forcibly reassert its authority, see Sosnowski, M., 'Ceasefires as violent state-building: Local truce and reconciliation agreements in the Syrian civil war', *Conflict, Security & Development* (2019).

Table 6.3. Estimated conflict-related fatalities in Turkey, 2016–19

Event type	2016	2017	2018	2019
Battles	3 648	2 294	1 640	742
Explosions/remote violence	1 365	526	255	165
Protests, riots and strategic developments	14	4	8	4
Violence against civilians	166	97	28	14
Total	5 193	2 921	1 931	925

Notes: The first available year for data on Turkey in the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) database is 2016. For definitions of event types, see ACLED, 'ACLED definitions of political violence and protest', 11 Apr. 2019.

Source: ACLED, 'Data export tool', [n.d.].

Syrian constitution—was still not in place at the end of the 2018, and there had been no significant progress in the Astana process.⁷⁵

However, at the end of October 2019, 150 delegates (50 each from the government, opposition and civil society) met in Geneva, Switzerland, for the first time to begin drafting a new Syrian constitution—the first step in a political process that will lead to UN-supervised elections under UN Security Council Resolution 2254 adopted in 2015.⁷⁶ Almost 30 per cent of the delegates were women, and decisions have to be taken by consensus, where possible, or a majority of 75 per cent, so that no bloc can decide the outcomes.⁷⁷

At the end of 2019 an outline of how the fighting might end was becoming clearer. An eventual Turkish withdrawal from the north-east will likely be facilitated by disarming the SDF/YPG and re-establishing Syrian Government authority in those areas. Similarly, some of the rebels in Idlib are likely to accept a deal with the Syrian Government, while the Salafi–jihadist groups are likely to disperse or be killed or captured. However, reconstruction will take a long time, and reconciliation among the various conflict parties is likely to be an even longer-term process.⁷⁸

Armed conflict between Turkey and the Kurds

Turkish military action against Kurdish forces in northern Syria, and Turkey's sensitivity to proposals to strengthen Kurdish forces or support some degree of Kurdish political autonomy in either Iraq or Syria, have to be understood in the light of the conflict inside predominantly Kurdish

⁷⁵ On the key developments in the peace processes in 2018, see *SIPRI Yearbook 2019* (note 21), pp. 105–107.

⁷⁶ Bibbo, B., 'Long-awaited Syria constitutional committee meets for the first time', Al Jazeera, 30 Oct. 2019; and UN Security Council Resolution 2254, 18 Dec. 2015.

⁷⁷ BBC, 'Syria war: UN backed talks on new constitution begin in Geneva', 30 Oct. 2019.

⁷⁸ Samaha, N., 'Can Assad win the peace?', European Council on Foreign Relations policy brief, May 2019; and Barnes-Dacey, J., 'The geopolitics of reconstruction: Who will rebuild Syria', European Council on Foreign Relations commentary, 16 Sep. 2019.

south-eastern Turkey. This area has been the focus of an almost continuous armed confrontation between Turkish security forces and the PKK since 1984, punctuated by occasional ceasefires. The collapse in July 2015 of the Kurdish–Turkish peace process (also known as the resolution process) led to a new cycle of violence.⁷⁹

The armed confrontation continued in 2019. Two independent sources gave differing estimates of fatalities in 2019: according to the International Crisis Group, 482 people were killed (27 civilians, 369 PKK militants and 86 state security forces), down from 563 in 2018, with nearly 4800 deaths in the conflict in total since July 2015, while ACLED estimated that there were 925 conflict-related fatalities in 2019 (representing a continuous decline in fatalities since 2016, as shown in table 6.3).⁸⁰

Ending this conflict is inextricably linked to the creation of peaceful relations between Turkey and the YPG in Syria, but at the close of 2019 there was no prospect of peace talks between the parties.

⁷⁹ On the role of the Kurds in Turkish politics, see Özel and Yılmaz (note 2); and Christofis, N., ‘The state of the Kurds in Erdoğan’s “new” Turkey’, *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, vol. 21, no. 3 (2019), pp. 251–59. On the transformation of Turkey under President Erdoğan, see Hakan Yavuz, M. and Erdi Öztürk, A., ‘Turkish secularism and Islam under the reign of Erdoğan’, *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, vol. 19, no. 1 (2019), pp. 1–9. On the collapse of the peace process, see Toktamış, K. F., ‘(Im)possibility of negotiating peace: 2005–2015 peace/reconciliation talks between the Turkish government and Kurdish politicians’, *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, vol. 21, no. 3 (2019), pp. 286–303.

⁸⁰ International Crisis Group, ‘Turkey’s PKK conflict: A visual explainer’, [n.d.]; and ACLED, ‘Data export tool’, [n.d.].