

Annual Defence Report 2018: Middle East & Africa

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Syria has stabilised, but tensions remain on the front lines of the areas of influence carved out by external powers. Meanwhile, the war in Yemen has come into sharper focus, with the US using Iran's support for the rebels to bolster its efforts to isolate Tehran even as the growing civilian death toll threatens arms exports to the Arab Gulf countries. *Jeremy Binnie* reports

This should have been the year when the US and its allies defeated the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq and began ramping up pressure on Iran. However, the extremists still hold pockets of territory in Syria, helped by the Turkish-Kurdish conflict further to the north. The US withdrew from the Iranian nuclear deal, but faces resistance from the other world powers and the full effect of sanctions will not be felt until mid-2019.



A UAE-equipped Yemeni fighter operating a Serbian-made 12.7 mm M87 heavy machine gun in front of a mural of the UAE's president, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan, in the coastal city of Al-Makallah on 8 August. The war in Yemen moved up the international news agenda this year as its humanitarian crisis worsened and the situation in Syria improved. (Karim Sahib/AFP/Getty Images)

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Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia, which will be vital to balancing oil prices as Iranian supplies are choked off, managed to distract attention away from its arch rival. The growing civilian casualties from the Saudi-led coalition's bombing campaign in Yemen ensured rising international opposition to the war and put Western governments under pressure to curtail defence exports to the kingdom. Riyadh's room for manoeuvre looked further constrained as Ankara slowly released the details of the murder of a journalist in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul.

Elsewhere, Russia further consolidated its role as a major player in the region, bolstering Syrian air defences in a way that could curb Israel's ability to continue carrying out strikes in the neighbouring country. Russia also launched a new initiative to re-establish a credible military in the Central African Republic and developed its ties with Sudan.

Syrian stand-offs

The Islamic State was effectively wiped out as a territorial entity in Iraq by the beginning of this year, but is rebuilding its covert networks and reverting to its tactics of kidnapping, assassination, and bombings. Meanwhile, in Syria it has managed to hold on to pockets of territory, including one near the Iraqi border around Hajin in Dayr al-Zawr province.

This resilience is probably partly due to the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) that dominate the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) being distracted by the threat to their territory in northern Syria from Turkey, which considers them to be terrorists. The Turkish military and allied Syrian groups launched the inaptly named Operation 'Olive Branch' offensive against the Kurdish enclave of Afrin in January. With the main YPG forces unable to reinforce their surrounded comrades, Afrin was overrun by March, but the YPG continues an insurgency there.

Ankara made it clear that the city of Manbij, which the SDF captured from the Islamic State in 2016, was the next target in its campaign to push the Kurds back to the eastern side of the Euphrates River, prompting the US military to deploy troops close to the front to deter an imminent attack. The US then brokered a deal under which the YPG would withdraw from Manbij and joint US-Turkish patrols would be conducted around the city. The latter began in early November, but Ankara continued to insist that the YPG had not withdrawn. Meanwhile, there were exchanges of fire on the border east of the Euphrates, prompting the YPG to redeploy fighters just as a sandstorm enabled the Islamic State to launch an offensive against less-capable Arab SDF units around Hajin.

Meanwhile, Russian mercenaries also complicated the situation in eastern Syria. There was a one-sided battle on 7 February when a battalion-sized pro-government force that had crossed the Euphrates attacked an SDF position near the Al-Tabiyah natural gas plant. US soldiers embedded with the SDF called in airstrikes for more than three hours in what the state-controlled Syrian Arab News Agency described as a "brutal massacre".

During the following days sources with contacts in the Russian military contractor community began reporting that the attacking force consisted of as many as 600 Russians working for the Wagner Group and that as many as 200 were killed in the battle, although other reports suggested Russian casualties were far lower. There were claims that the attack was not sanctioned by the Russian military, but was instigated by powerful businessmen who have a contract that will reward them with

25% of the proceeds from any oil and gas fields they recapture. Nevertheless, the battle left no one in any doubt about the US military's resolve to defend its Syrian allies.

A major clash also loomed further to the northwest as forces fighting for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad looked to clear rebels – some of them Turkish backed – from Idlib province. The battle appeared imminent in September, when Russia massed an unprecedented number of warships in the Eastern Mediterranean for an exercise. At the same time Russian officials warned that rebels were preparing fake chemical attacks to justify Western military intervention. Taken together, it looked like the Russians were trying to provide their Syrian allies with pre-emptive plausible deniability for chemical attacks on Idlib and to deter any Western military response such as the one on 14 April, when the US, France, and the UK carried out a cruise missile strike as punishment for a sarin attack in Idlib five days earlier. Russia claimed that the attack was fabricated and that most of the cruise missiles were shot down by Syrian air defences.

Turkey, however, which has military observation posts in Idlib, was not going to let the province be overrun without a fight. Allied Syrian rebel commanders reported that the Turkish military had stepped up arms supplies to their groups and pledged sustained support. Moscow worked to defuse the situation, brokering a deal that established a demilitarised zone from where the rebels would withdraw by 10 October. The Russians appeared to be content with the situation, but Damascus complained that Turkey failed to ensure the rebel withdrawal by the deadline and clashes continued.

Anti-axis

Israel's attempts to prevent Iran from further expanding its influence in Syria came close to sparking a serious escalation between foreign powers. The largest Israeli-Syrian clash since 1982 took place on 10 February after an Iranian unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) entered Israeli-controlled airspace, where it was shot down by an Apache attack helicopter.

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