

# Arab wars: calculating the costs

by Florence Gaub

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has a well-deserved reputation for being a region plagued by war and conflict. Every decade since the end of the Second World War has seen at least 1 interstate conflict (the 1990s even saw 2); it has also witnessed 25 types of intrastate war (on average, 2 per decade), including insurgencies, civil wars and protracted terrorism campaigns. In the same timeframe, 2.3 million of its citizens have died as a result of political violence – 40% of the global total of battle-related deaths, although the region accounts for a mere 5% of the world's population. So what needs to be known about these conflicts in order to support peace in the region?

## Interstate wars: not Arab, and not long

Although the MENA (particularly its eastern flank) has seen eight interstate wars, only one, the invasion of Kuwait, saw two Arab states wage war against each other. In the seven other cases, one or more Arab belligerents fought one or more non-Arab actors such as Iran, Israel, the US, the UK or France. Granted, the 1991 war against Iraq included 9 Arab states (Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Syria, Morocco, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Oman, Qatar and

Bahrain), but they were neither diplomatically nor militarily in the lead: Arab states fielded only 13% of troops (the US, the UK and France provided 80%), flew mostly defensive sorties and engaged little in ground combat. Similarly, the Syrian invasion of Jordan in 1970 was launched in support of Palestinian fighters and therefore cannot be categorised as a classical war between Arab states. As Arab states tend to go to war against outsiders rather than among themselves, there are important implications for regional security architectures: whoever seeks to pacify the region at state level will have to include non-Arab states in their plans.

Interstate wars are on average shorter and less lethal than those involving one or several non-state actors (both in the MENA and worldwide). If the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) is excluded, the average interstate conflict in the Arab world lasts 60 days; with it, the average is pushed up to 425 days or 14 months – just 1 month shorter than the global average. The shortest war was the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq in 1990 (2 days), whereas the longest was the war between Iran and Iraq (2,980 days or 8 years). Perhaps as a logical consequence of the relative brevity of combat, interstate wars account for 28% of the region's total victims, or 666,581 people. In

terms of lethality, the average interstate war involving an Arab state leads to the death of 3.16 citizens per 1,000. Mirroring international developments, Arab interstate wars have, overall (again with the exception of the war between Iran and Iraq), declined in lethality over the last decades.

↳ As they are therefore not the most frequent or most lethal type of conflict, interstate wars and their prevention are not a policy priority – even if they still occur at regular intervals.

### Intrastate conflicts: where the trouble is

Despite their comparatively rare occurrence on a global level, interstate conflicts monopolise international regulations pertaining to the conduct, prevention of and the recovery from war. In reality – and particularly in the MENA – it is intrastate conflicts which are the most frequent, as well as the most lethal. This is especially the case when the conflict parties involve state and non-state actors: 25 of these types of conflict have claimed 1.5 million victims – 64% of the region's total direct war deaths.

Intrastate wars killed 6 out of 1,000 citizens – double the amount of interstate conflicts. By far the most lethal ongoing conflict in this category is the civil war in Syria, which has killed 23.25 people per 1,000 citizens so far. This might, at least in part, be because this type of conflict lasts longer than interstate ones: 1,376 days or 45 months, nearly 4 years, on average – and counting, as the Syrian and Yemeni conflicts are still ongoing. Adding to these casualties is terrorism (which falls into a category of its own), which only appeared in the region in earnest in the 1980s, in Egypt.

Conflicts in which there is no state actor involved are rare in the region, with the only two examples being Lebanon between 1975 and 1990, and Libya after 2013. It is worth noting that the Lebanese civil war was, in terms of mortality rate, more deadly than the current Syrian war as it killed 60 people per 1,000 citizens. Meanwhile, large-scale disorganised violence has essentially happened only once in the region, during the Arab Spring in 2011. Despite widespread reverberations across the MENA, it

led to the deaths of 1,400 people – a comparatively small number given the scale of the government crackdowns.

Ultimately, intrastate conflicts are a phenomenon resulting from bad governance and state weakness. Two elements have proven most successful in preventing them from occurring in the first place: well-established democratic systems capable of inclusiveness and conflict mediation, and stable economies which guarantee a minimum standard of living. Often, both go hand in hand: one study by the World Bank showed that had democratic transitions in the region occurred after the Arab Spring, GDP would have grown by 7.78% within 5 years rather than by 3.3% in the absence of democracy.

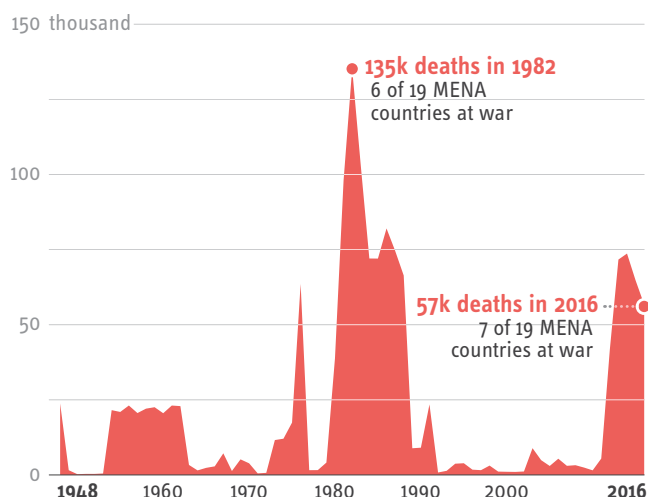
↳ The promotion of democracy and good governance therefore remains the only way to prevent outbreaks of conflict in the long run.

### Damage to body and soul

Conflict does not end, however, with victories or losses on the battlefield. Indirect deaths, injuries and psychological traumas continue to affect states and societies long after the fighting has ceased. Indirect deaths from war are, however, much harder to calculate than direct ones. By some estimates, per direct death, there are on average four indirect ones from various causes such as lack of access to clean water or medical care, disease, exposure to harmful materials (for example, metals or chemicals) or famine. In Iraq, for instance, indirect deaths from political violence in the period 2003-2007 claimed the lives of at least 200,000 Iraqis – three times the number of direct deaths. The ratio is even higher for the first Gulf war: 77% of all victims were indirect deaths as the conflict destroyed crucial infrastructure, leading to water pollution and electricity shortfalls.

As with indirect deaths, data regarding injuries is scarce. Nevertheless, there are some statistics which indicate that at least as many people were injured in Iraq post-2003 as were killed. According to other estimates which only count those injured in terrorist incidents, some 110,000 individuals were affected between 2004-2010, while for every person killed in a

## Battle-related deaths in the MENA



Data: Peace Research Institute Oslo and Uppsala Conflict Data Program. Different datasets (though closely related) with very similar definitions.

suicide attack, 2.5 were wounded. In Syria, the number of injured victims stands at 1.9 million – four times higher than the number of people killed. It is noteworthy that the majority (60%) of these victims were injured by bombing or shelling rather than firearms; as a result, many suffered from fractures. As this type of complex injury requires urgent treatment by specialists (which Iraq lacks), a quarter of these victims had to undergo amputation.

While the traumatic after effects of a conflict on survivors have slowly gained more attention in the West since the end of the First World War, they are particularly understudied and under-reported in the MENA. This is not only the direct consequence of often poor healthcare, but also a still prevalent taboo related to psychological issues. In Lebanon, for instance, one study found that only a minority of individuals afflicted by psychological disorders had received treatment, and even then 6-28 years had passed between the onset of symptoms and the provision of healthcare.

Still, existing data shows that typical consequences of war and other forms of political violence include depression, anxiety and suicide. In Lebanon, 25% of the population display life-long symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a number that increases to 29% when looking only at the population of southern Lebanon – 98% of this sample claimed to have witnessed, or heard of a war-related traumatic event. Similarly, 37% of Algerians suffered from conflict-related psychological issues after

the violence of the 1990s, as did 18% of inhabitants of the Gaza strip after the most recent conflict with Israel. Suicide is also on the rise in the MENA; in 2015, 28,695 individuals died as a result of self-harm, an increase of 100% compared to 1990 – in comparison, elsewhere in the world, deaths resulting from self-harm increased by 16% during the same period.

Needless to say, the impact of war is felt particularly strongly by children and adolescents. A study conducted in Mosul in 2010 found that 37% of children under 15 displayed some form of mental disorder; in Yemen, a 2009 study found that 15.7% of children aged 7-10 suffered from PTSD, as did 87% of children who had witnessed the Anfal campaign (which crushed a Kurdish uprising) in Iraq in the late 1980s. Palestinian children and adolescents were particularly likely to display symptoms – depending on the study, 37-40.6% were affected.

↳ When the consequences of conflicts are broadened in this way, the need to find lasting solutions becomes even more pressing.

## The price of war

War is not only a humanitarian disaster, it is an economic one, too. Conflict, the preparation for and recovery from it has an actual price tag attached. This begins with increased defence budgets but also ends with the destruction of infrastructure and lost economic opportunities, among others.

In terms of military expenditure, the MENA has been consistently home to some of the world's top spenders. This trend is unlikely to change: by 2020, the region is projected to spend \$180 billion a year, up from \$120 billion in 2013. Saudi Arabia has the largest defence budget in the region, spending \$51 billion in 2016, while Algeria spent \$10.6 billion, and Iraq \$6 billion (largely on its fight against Daesh) in the same year. But the real cost of this spending is not to be measured in currency, but in economic growth: when states overspend on defence, growth slows and exports shrink. The 'peace dividend' (i.e. the diversion of resources to non-military investments) can result in a 3% increase in GDP – the actual cost of spending

could therefore be considered much higher, as opportunities for development are missed.

Of course, the most visible cost of war is the destruction of infrastructure: in Syria, this is currently estimated to stand at \$137.8 billion (most of which will go to housing, and the energy, education, and health sectors), in Iraq, at \$100 billion, and in Yemen, more than \$20 billion. In Libya, some estimates put the costs as high as \$200 billion over the next ten years – the reconstruction of the city of Benghazi alone, where General Haftar fought Islamist militias, is projected to cost more than \$7 billion. The costs of reconstruction are related to the way a war is fought: when artillery and airpower, rather than special forces and precision-guided weapons, are deployed in urban centres, destruction is indiscriminate and widespread.

↳ At the very least, Arab states could improve urban warfare tactics to reduce casualties and large-scale destruction.

## War (dis)economies

War has another higher, hidden cost: the stifling of economic activity. Syria's GDP is less than half of what it was before the conflict broke out in 2011, while Iraq's GDP shrank by 28% after the fall of Saddam Hussein. Elsewhere, Libya's GDP has shrunk to half of its pre-revolution level, while Yemen lost 25-35% of its GDP in 2015 alone – 80% of the population are (by World Bank standards) now considered poor, an increase of 30% since before the conflict started. On average, Arab countries suffer GDP losses of 6-15% after 3 years of conflict – this is higher than in other war-torn countries in the world, which lose around half of that figure. The Arab Spring also had an actual cost as demonstrations and violence paralysed the economies of Egypt and Tunisia. The growth rate of Egyptian GDP shrank by two-thirds in 2011, and has not managed to return to pre-2011 levels; Tunisia's shrank by one-third, managed to recover in 2012 but has since dipped again.

Neighbours are economically affected, too: countries bordering a warzone in the MENA will lose nearly 2% of their GDP in comparison to 1.4% elsewhere in the world. The Levant as a whole has foregone \$35 billion in lost output or growth because of the Syrian war – the equivalent of

Syria's entire GDP in 2007. Refugees are a part of the problem, but they are, of course, not solely responsible for economic difficulties: Jordan, for example, spends 6% of its GDP and a quarter of its annual revenues on hosting Syrian refugees. Moreover, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict alone has cost the region \$12 trillion – if direct and indirect costs are combined.

Economic recovery also takes time: Lebanon took 20 years to recover from its 15-year civil war, while Kuwait took 7 years to repair the damages resulting from the Iraqi invasion and occupation. Although oil-exporting countries find it easier to rebound, their recovery depends on volatile (and currently low) oil prices, as well as on the state's capacity to control exports. In Libya, for instance, this is not the case: since 2011, Libya's oil output has consistently declined and now stands at 25% of its pre-war levels.

↳ In these cases, foreign investment is crucial to repair infrastructure and relaunch the economy.

## A region of 'fightaholics'?

Most importantly, several of the ongoing conflicts in the region are part of a larger conflict cycle rather than isolated crises. In the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the spill over into Lebanon in the 1970s first resulted in a civil war and later led to the emergence of Hizbullah, which fought a war with Israel in 2006 and is now propping up the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria.

Daesh has its roots in several conflicts, starting first in Afghanistan, and continuing with the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the Syrian civil war. Likewise, Yemen's situation today is linked to its civil war in the 1960s; and even violence in Libya and Egypt stems from long-standing conflicts and poor governance preceding 2017.

↳ Conflicts will continue to produce other conflicts unless they are properly solved using a long-term approach.

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