

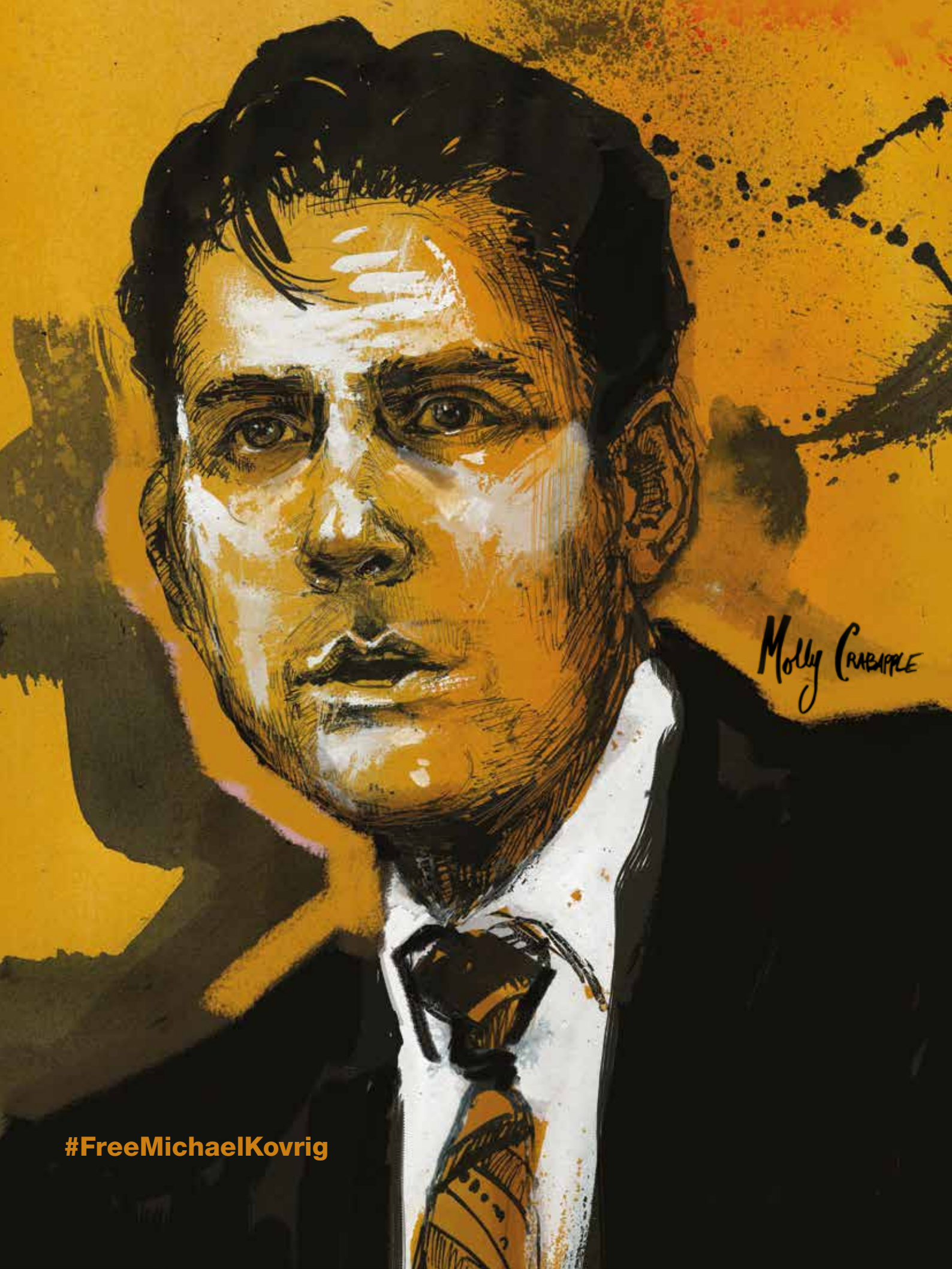


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A photograph of three women walking away from the camera on a dirt road. The woman in the foreground is wearing a light-colored tank top and dark pants, carrying a bundle on her back. The woman in the middle is wearing a colorful patterned shirt and dark pants, also carrying a bundle. The woman in the background is wearing a dark shirt and a blue patterned skirt, carrying a large cardboard box on her head. The road is surrounded by dense green foliage and trees.

TEN CONFLICTS TO WATCH IN 2020

Local conflicts serve as mirrors for global trends, telling the story of a global system caught in the swell of sweeping change. With power shifting between great powers and regional leaders both emboldened and frightened by the transition, Crisis Group's President Robert Malley lists the Ten Conflicts to Watch in 2020.



Molly CRABAPPLE

#FreeMichaelKovrig

ROBERT MALLEY

GLOBAL OVERVIEW

Friends and foes alike no longer know where the U.S. stands. As Washington overpromises and underdelivers, regional powers are seeking solutions on their own – both through violence and diplomacy.



Robert Malley is President & CEO of the International Crisis Group. He served as a special assistant for the Middle East under President Barack Obama.

Local conflicts serve as mirrors for global trends. The ways they ignite, unfold, persist, and are resolved reflect shifts in great powers' relations, the intensity of their competition, and the breadth of regional actors' ambitions. They highlight issues with which the international system is obsessed and those toward which it is indifferent. Today these wars tell the story of a global system caught in the early swell of sweeping change, of regional leaders both emboldened and frightened by the opportunities such a transition presents.

Only time will tell how much of the U.S.'s transactional unilateralism, contempt for traditional allies, and dalliance with traditional rivals will endure – and how much will vanish with Donald Trump's presidency. Still, it would be hard to deny that something is afoot. The understandings and balance of power on which the global order had once been predicated – imperfect, unfair, and problematic as they were – are no longer operative. Washington is both eager to retain the benefits of its leadership and unwilling to shoulder the burdens of carrying it. As a consequence, it is guilty of the cardinal sin of any great power: allowing the gap between ends and means to grow. These days, neither friend nor foe knows quite where America stands.

The roles of other major powers are changing, too. China exhibits the patience of a nation confident in its gathering influence, but in no hurry to fully exercise it. It chooses its battles, focusing on self-identified priorities: domestic control and suppression of potential dissent (as in Hong Kong, or the mass detention of Muslims in Xinjiang); the South and East China Seas; the brewing technological tug of war with the U.S., of my own colleague Michael Kovrig – unjustly detained in China for over a year – has become collateral damage. Elsewhere, its game is a long one.

Russia, in contrast, displays the impatience of a nation grateful for the power these unusual circumstances have brought and eager to assert it before time runs out. Moscow's policy abroad is opportunistic – seeking to turn crises to its advantage – though today that is perhaps as much strategy as it needs. Portraying itself as a truer and more reliable partner than Western powers, it backs some allies with direct military support while sending in private contractors to Libya and sub-Saharan Africa to signal its growing influence.

To all of these powers, conflict prevention or resolution carries scant inherent value. They assess crises in

terms of how they might advance or hurt their interests, how they could promote or undermine those of their rivals. Europe could be a counterweight, but at precisely the moment when it needs to step into the breach, it is struggling with domestic turbulence, discord among its leaders, and a

singular preoccupation with terrorism and migration that often skews policy.

The consequences of these geopolitical trends can be deadly. Exaggerated faith in outside assistance can distort local actors' calculations, pushing them toward uncompromis-

ing positions and encouraging them to court dangers against which they believe they are immune. In Libya, a crisis risks dangerous metastasis as Russia intervenes on behalf of a rebel general marching on the capital, the U.S. sends muddled messages, Turkey threatens to come to the government's



The Chief of Staff of the Burkina Faso army, Oumarou Sadou, walks downstairs in his Ouagadougou headquarters with Crisis Group's Project Director for West Africa, Rinaldo Depagne in October 2017. They had just discussed the deteriorating security situation in the Sahel with other high-level staff officers.

CRISIS GROUP/JULIE DAVID DE LOSSY

Europe could be a counterweight [to the U.S.], but at precisely the moment when it needs to step into the breach, it is struggling with domestic turbulence, discord among its leaders, and a singular preoccupation with terrorism and migration that often skews policy.

rescue, and Europe – a stone’s throw away – displays impotence amid internal rifts. In Venezuela, the government’s obstinacy, fuelled by faith that Russia and China will cushion its economic downfall, clashes with the opposition’s lack of realism, powered by U.S. suggestions it will oust President Nicolás Maduro.

Syria – a conflict not on this list – has been a microcosm of all these trends: there, the U.S. combined a hegemon’s bombast with a bystander’s pose. Local actors (such as the Kurds) were emboldened by U.S. overpromising and then disappointed by U.S. underdelivery. Meanwhile, Russia stood firmly behind its brutal ally, while others in the neighbourhood (namely, Turkey) sought to profit from the chaos.

The bad news might contain a sliver of good. As leaders understand the limits of allies’ backing, reality sinks in. Saudi Arabia, initially encouraged by the Trump administration’s apparent blank check, flexed its regional muscle until a series of brazen Iranian attacks and noticeable U.S. nonresponses showed the kingdom the extent of its exposure, driving it to seek a settlement in Yemen and, perhaps, de-escalation with Iran.

To many Americans, Ukraine evokes a sordid tale of quid pro quo and impeachment politics. But for its new president at the center of that storm, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, a priority is to end the conflict in that country’s east – an objective for which he appears

to recognise the need for Kyiv to compromise.

Others might similarly readjust views: the Afghan government and other anti-Taliban powerbrokers, accepting that U.S. troops won’t be around forever; Iran and the Syrian regime, seeing that Russia’s newfound Middle East swagger hardly protects them against Israeli strikes. These actors may not all be entirely on their own, but with their allies’ support only going so far, they might be brought back down to earth. There is virtue in realism.

There’s another trend that warrants attention: the phenomenon of mass protests across the globe. It is an equal-opportunity discontent, shaking countries governed by both the left and right, democracies and autocracies, rich and poor, from Latin America to Asia and Africa. Particularly striking are those in the Middle East – because many observers thought that the broken illusions and horrific bloodshed that came in the wake of the 2011 uprisings would dissuade another round.

Protesters have learned lessons, settling in for the long haul and, for the most part, avoiding violence that plays in the hands of those they contest. Political and military elites have learned, too, of course – resorting to various means to weather the storm. In Sudan, arguably one of this past year’s better news stories, protests led to long-serving autocrat Omar

al-Bashir’s downfall and ushered in a transition that could yield a more democratic and peaceful order. In Algeria, meanwhile, leaders have merely played musical chairs. In too many other places, they have cracked down. Still, in almost all, the pervasive sense of economic injustice that brought people onto the streets remains. If governments new or old cannot address that, the world should expect more cities ablaze this coming year.

Please browse the following pages for details on the ten countries and conflicts on our 2020 early warning list. Some are selected for their inherent levels of violence, some because Crisis Group sees a chance that a campaign might advance their resolution and some simply to bring back into focus a war that has fallen off the usual global agenda.

The photographs, with two exceptions (Afghanistan and Kashmir) are all either taken by our field analysts, or show them conducting research on the ground.

AFGHANISTAN

More people are being killed as a result of fighting in Afghanistan than in any other current conflict in the world. Yet there may be a window this coming year to set in motion a peace process aimed at ending the decades-long war.

Levels of bloodshed have soared over the past two years. Separate attacks by Taliban insurgents and Islamic State militants have rocked cities and towns across the country. Less visible is the bloodshed in the countryside. Washington and Kabul have stepped up air assaults and special-forces raids, with civilians often bearing the brunt of violence. Suffering in rural areas is immense.

Amid the uptick in violence, presidential elections took place in late September. Preliminary results, announced on 22 December, give incumbent President Ashraf Ghani a razor-thin margin over the 50 per cent needed to avoid a run-off. Final results, following adjudication of complaints, aren't expected before late January. Ghani's main opponent, Abdullah Abdullah, whose challenge to results based on widespread fraud in the 2014 election led to a protracted crisis and eventually a power-sharing deal, is crying foul this time too. Whether the dispute will lead to a

second round of voting is unclear, but either way it will likely consume Afghan leaders into 2020.

Last year did, however, see some light in U.S.-Taliban diplomacy. For the first time since the war began, Washington has prioritised reaching a deal with the insurgents. After months of quiet talks, U.S. Envoy Zalmay Khalilzad and Taliban leaders agreed on and initialed a draft text. Under the deal, the U.S. pledged to pull its troops out of Afghanistan – the primary Taliban demand – and, in return, the insurgents promised to break from al-Qaeda, prevent Afghanistan from being used for plotting attacks abroad, and enter negotiations with the Afghan government as well as other key power brokers.

Hopes were dashed when Trump abruptly declared the talks dead in early September. He had invited Taliban leaders to Camp David, along with Ghani, and when the insurgents declined to come unless the agreement was signed first, Trump invoked a Taliban attack that killed a U.S. soldier as a reason to nix the agreement his envoy had inked.

After a prisoner swap in November appeared to have overcome Trump's resistance, U.S. diplomats and Taliban

representatives have started talking again, though whether they will return to the same understanding remains unclear. In reality, the U.S. has no better option than pursuing a deal with the Taliban. Continuing with the status quo offers only the prospect of endless war, while precipitously pulling U.S. forces out without an agreement could herald a return to the multifront civil war of the 1990s and even worse violence.

Any deal should pave the way for talks among Afghans, which means tying the pace of the U.S. troop withdrawal not only to counter-terrorism goals but also to the Taliban's good-faith participation in talks with the Afghan government and other powerful Afghan leaders. A U.S.-Taliban agreement would mark only the beginning of a long road to a settlement among Afghans, which is a prerequisite for peace. But it almost certainly offers the only hope of calming today's deadliest war.

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During a rare ceasefire in 2018 in Andar, a district badly hit by years of fighting, young Afghan men and boys fly both the flags of Afghanistan and of the Taliban. In several provinces, Crisis Group researchers witnessed Taliban fighters celebrating alongside their enemies.



Night scene in the streets of Sanaa, capital of Yemen, photographed during a Crisis Group research and advocacy assignment in July 2019. The war has directly killed an estimated 100,000 people and pushed the Arab world's poorest country to the brink of famine.



CRISIS GROUP/PETER SALISBURY

YEMEN

In 2018, aggressive international intervention in Yemen prevented what UN officials deemed the world's worst humanitarian crisis from deteriorating further. 2020 could offer a rare opportunity to wind down the war. That chance, however, is the product of a confluence of local, regional, and international factors and, if not seized now, may quickly fade.

The war's human cost is painfully clear. It has directly killed an estimated 100,000 people while pushing a country that was already the Arab world's poorest to the brink of famine. Yemen has become a critical fault line in the Middle East-wide rivalry between Iran on the one hand and the U.S. and its regional allies on the other. Yet a year after it briefly grabbed international headlines, the five-year-old conflict is at risk of slipping back out of international consciousness.

The loss of focus is the flip side of recent good news. A December 2018 deal known as the Stockholm Agreement, fostered a fragile ceasefire around the Red Sea port city of Hodeida between the internationally recognised government of President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi and the Huthi rebels who seized the capital, Sanaa, from him in September 2014. The agreement likely prevented a famine and effectively froze fighting between the two sides. Since then, the more dynamic aspects of the conflict have been a battle within the anti-Huthi front pitting southern secessionists

against the Hadi government, and a cross-border war that has seen the launch of Huthi missiles and retaliatory Saudi airstrikes.

Today's window of opportunity reflects movement on these latter two fronts. First, fighting between loyalists of the Southern Transitional Council (STC) and the government in August 2019 pushed the anti-Huthi bloc to the point of collapse. In response, Riyadh had little choice but to broker a truce between them to sustain its war effort. Second, in September, a missile attack on major Saudi oil production facilities – claimed by the Huthis, but widely suspected to have been launched by Tehran – highlighted the risks of a war involving the U.S., its Gulf allies, and Iran that none of them seems to want. This helped push the Saudis and Huthis to engage in talks aimed at de-escalating their conflict and removing Yemen from the playing field of the regional Saudi-Iran power struggle; both sides have significantly reduced cross-border strikes. If this leads to a UN-brokered political process in 2020, an end may be in sight.

But the opportunity could evaporate. A collapse of the government's fragile deal with the STC in the south or of its equally vulnerable agreement with the

Huthis along the Red Sea coast would upend peacemaking efforts. The Huthis' impatience with what they consider the Saudis' sluggishness in transitioning from de-escalation to a nationwide ceasefire, coupled with their access to a stockpile of missiles, could rapidly reignite the cross-border war. Heightening U.S.-Iranian tensions could also spill into Yemen. The lull in violent conflict in the second half of 2019, in other words, should not be mistaken for a new normal. The opportunity for peace should be seized now.

Yemen has become a critical fault line in the Middle East-wide rivalry between Iran on the one hand and the U.S. and its regional allies on the other.

ETHIOPIA

Perhaps nowhere are both promise and peril for the coming year starker than in Ethiopia, East Africa's most populous and influential state.

Since assuming office in April 2018, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has taken bold steps to open up the country's politics. He has ended a decades-long standoff with neighbouring Eritrea, freed political prisoners, welcomed rebels back from exile, and appointed reformers to key institutions. He has won accolades at home and abroad – including the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize.

But enormous challenges loom. Mass protests between 2015 and 2018 that brought Abiy to power were motivated primarily by political and socio-economic grievances. But they had ethnic undertones too, particularly in Ethiopia's most populous regions, Amhara and Oromia, whose leaders hoped to reduce the long-dominant Tigray minority's influence. Abiy's liberalisation and efforts to dismantle the existing order have given new energy to ethno-nationalism, while weakening the central state.

Ethnic strife across the country has surged, killing hundreds, displacing millions, and fuelling hostility among leaders of its most powerful regions. Elections scheduled for May

2020 could be violent and divisive, as candidates outbid each other in ethnic appeals for votes.

Adding to tensions is a fraught debate over the country's ethnic federalist system, which devolves authority to regions defined along ethno-linguistic lines. The system's supporters believe it protects group rights in a diverse country formed through conquest and assimilation. Detractors argue that an ethnically-based system harms national unity. It is past time, they say, to move beyond the ethnic politics that has long defined and divided the nation.

Abiy has generally sought a middle ground. But some recent reforms, including his merger and expansion of the ruling coalition, the Ethiopia People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), move him more firmly into the reformers' camp. Over the coming year, he'll have to build bridges among Ethiopian regions, even as he competes with ethno-nationalists at the ballot box. He'll have to manage the clamor for change while placating an old guard that stands to lose.

Ethiopia's transition remains a source of hope and deserves all the support it can get, but also risks violently unraveling. In a worst-case scenario,

some warn the country could fracture as Yugoslavia did in the 1990s, with disastrous consequences for an already troubled region. Ethiopia's international partners need to do what they can – including pressing all the country's leaders to cut incendiary rhetoric, counselling the prime minister to proceed cautiously on his reform agenda, and offering multiyear financial aid – to help Abiy avert such an outcome.

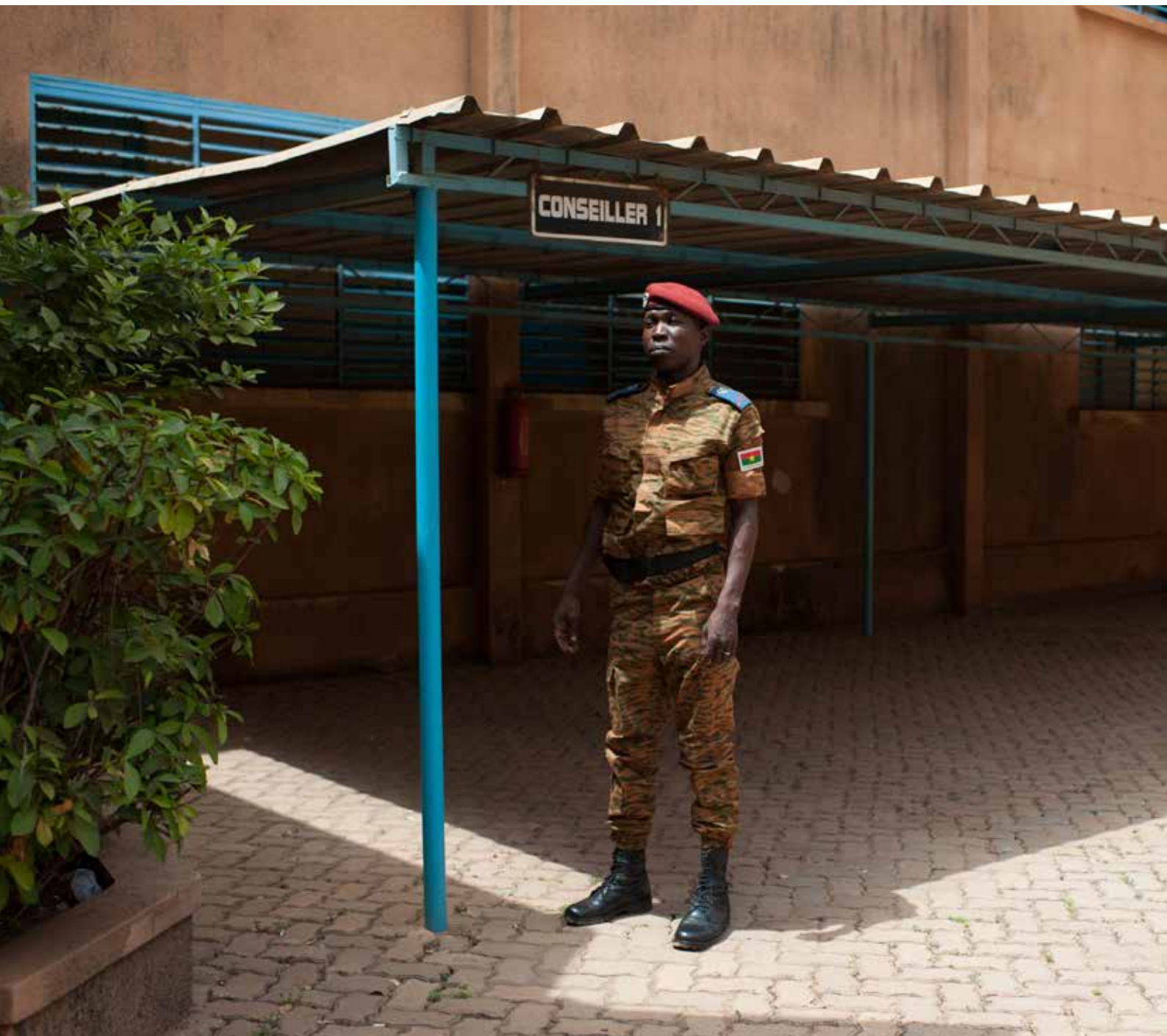
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Crisis Group's Senior Analyst for Ethiopia William Davison (right) and Researcher Meron Elias (second from right) talking to Qemant people in Ethiopia's Amhara region in November 2019. Ethiopia's transition has stirred hope at home and abroad, but has also unleashed dangerous and divisive forces.



CRISIS GROUP

A soldier stands guard outside the army Chief of Staff's headquarters in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, in October 2017. Violence blights much of the north and east of the country, displacing about 500,000 of the total population of 20 million people, and is threatening to destabilise new regions.



CRISIS GROUP/JULIE DAVID DE LOSSY

BURKINA FASO

Burkina Faso is the latest country to fall victim to the instability plaguing Africa's Sahel region.

Islamist militants have been waging a low-intensity insurgency in the country's north since 2016. The rebellion was initially spearheaded by Ansarul Islam, a group led by Ibrahim Malam Dicko, a Burkinabé citizen and local preacher. Though rooted in Burkina Faso's north, it appeared to have close ties to jihadis in neighbouring Mali. After Dicko died in clashes with Burkinabé troops in 2017, his brother, Jafar, took over but reportedly was killed in an October 2019 airstrike.

Violence has spread, blighting much of the north and east, displacing about half a million people (of the country's total population of 20 million) and threatening to destabilise regions further afield, including the south west. Precisely who is responsible is often murky. In addition to Ansarul Islam, jihadi groups based in Mali, including the local Islamic State and al-Qaeda franchises, now also operate in Burkina Faso. Militant strikes can be intermingled with other sources of violence, such as banditry, herder-farmer competition, or all-too-common disputes over land. Self-defence groups that have mobilised over recent years to police rural areas fuel local intercommunal conflicts. Old systems to manage disputes are breaking down, as more young people question the authority of traditional elites loyal to a state that itself is dis-

trusted. All this makes fertile ground for militant recruitment.

Unrest in the capital, Ouagadougou, hinders efforts to curb the insurgency. People regularly take to the streets in strikes over working conditions or protests over the government's failure to tackle rising insecurity. Elections loom in November 2020, and violence could affect their credibility and thus the next government's legitimacy. The ruling party and its rivals accuse each other of preparing vigilantes to mobilise votes. The country appears close to collapse, yet elites focus on interne-cine power struggles.

Burkina Faso's volatility matters not only because of harm inflicted on its own citizens, but because the country borders nations along West Africa's coast. Those countries have suffered few attacks since jihadis struck resorts in Côte d'Ivoire in 2016. But some evidence, including militants' own statements, suggest they might use Burkina Faso as a launching pad for operations along the coast or to put down roots in the northernmost regions of countries such as Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, or Benin. In May 2019, Ivoirian authorities report having disrupted planned attacks in the country's largest city, Abidjan. Coastal countries exhibit

weaknesses militants have exploited in their northern neighbours, particularly neglected and resentful peripheries. Some – notably Côte d'Ivoire – also face contentious elections this year. This both distracts their governments and means any crisis would make them more vulnerable still.

In Burkina Faso itself, the government's response to the expanding insurgency, relying overwhelmingly on force, has tended to make matters worse. Soldiers are often abusive, fuelling anger at the state. As is the case elsewhere in the Sahel, officials often tarnish the Fulani ethnic group, particularly some nomadic subtribes, as jihadi sympathisers. Operations targeting Fulani then force them to seek protection from militants, feeding a cycle of stigmatisation and resentment.

Cooperation between Burkina Faso and its neighbours thus far has focused mostly on joint military operations. Coastal states may be gearing up to do the same. Yet governments in the region would be better off focusing as much on intelligence sharing, border controls, and policies aimed at winning over villagers in areas affected. Without those, the turmoil appears set to spread further.

Old systems to manage disputes are breaking down, as more young people question the authority of traditional elites loyal to a state that itself is distrusted.

LIBYA

The war in Libya risks getting worse in the coming months, as rival factions increasingly rely on foreign military backing to change the balance of power. The threat of major violence has loomed since the country split into two parallel administrations following contested elections in 2014. UN attempts at reunification faltered, and since 2016 Libya has been divided between the internationally recognised government of Prime Minister Fayeze al-Sarraj in Tripoli and a rival government based in eastern Libya. The Islamic State established a small foothold but was defeated; militias fought over Libya's oil infrastructure on the coast; and tribal clashes unsettled the country's vast southern desert. But fighting never tipped into a broader confrontation.

Over the past year, however, it has taken a dangerous new turn. In April 2019, forces commanded by Khalifa Haftar, which are backed by the government in the east, laid siege to Tripoli, edging the country toward all-out war. Haftar claims to be combating terrorists. In reality, while some of his rivals are Islamists, they are the same militias that defeated the Islamic State, with U.S. and other Western support, three years ago.

Libya has long been an arena for outside competition. In the chaos after former leader Muammar al-Qaddafi's 2011 overthrow, competing factions sought support from foreign sponsors. Regional rivalries overlaid the split between the two rival governments and their respective military coalitions, with Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) backing Haftar-led forces and Turkey and Qatar supporting western armed groups loyal to Sarraj.

Haftar's latest offensive has found support not only in Cairo and Abu Dhabi but also in Moscow, which has provided Haftar military aid under the cover of a private security company. U.S. President Donald Trump, whose administration had supported the Sarraj government and UN-backed peace process since coming to office, reversed course in April 2019, following a meeting with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. Turkey, in turn, has upped support for Tripoli, thus far helping stave off its fall to Haftar. Ankara now threatens to intervene further.

As a result, the conflict's protagonists are no longer merely armed groups in Tripoli fending off an assault by a wayward military commander.

Instead, Emirati drones and airplanes, hundreds of Russian private military contractors, and African soldiers recruited into Haftar's forces confront Turkish drones and military vehicles, raising the specter of an escalating proxy battle on the Mediterranean.

The proliferation of actors also stymies efforts to end the bloodshed. A UN-led attempt in Berlin to bring the parties back to the table appears to be petering out. Whether the peace conference that the UN and Germany hoped to convene in early 2020 will take place is unclear. For their part, Europeans have been caught flat-footed. Their main concern has been to check the flow of migrants, but disagreements among leaders over how to weigh in have allowed other players to fuel a conflict that directly undercuts Europe's interest in a stable Libya.

To end the war, foreign powers would need to stop arming their Libyan allies and press them into negotiations instead, but prospects of this happening appear dim. The result could be a more destructive stalemate or a takeover of Tripoli that could give rise to prolonged militia fighting, rather than a stable single government.

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Continuing violence between the main two local forces competing for power in Libya has locked the conflict in a stalemate that has no immediate end in sight. This image taken by our analyst during field research in Zliten, 160km east of Tripoli, in April 2019 shows damage to the city's Abdelsalam al-Asmar mosque.



THE U.S., IRAN, ISRAEL AND THE PERSIAN GULF

Tensions between the U.S. and Iran rose dangerously in 2019; the year ahead could bring their rivalry to boiling point. The Trump administration's decision to withdraw from the 2015 nuclear agreement and impose mounting unilateral sanctions against Tehran has inflicted significant costs, but thus far has produced neither the diplomatic capitulation Washington seeks nor the internal collapse for which it may hope. Instead, Iran has responded to what it regards as an all-out siege by incrementally ramping up its nuclear program in violation of the agreement, aggressively flexing its regional muscle, and firmly suppressing any sign of domestic unrest. Tensions have also risen between Israel and Iran. Unless this cycle is broken, the risk of a broader confrontation will rise.

Tehran's shift from a policy of maximum patience to one of maximum resistance was a consequence of the U.S. playing one of the aces in its coercive deck: ending already-limited

exemptions on Iran's oil sales. Seeing little relief materialise from the nuclear deal's remaining parties, President Hassan Rouhani in May announced that his government would begin to violate the agreement incrementally. Since then, Iran has broken caps on its uranium enrichment rates and stockpile sizes, started testing advanced centrifuges, and restarted its enrichment plant in its Fordow bunker. With every new breach, Iran may hollow out the agreement's nonproliferation gains to the extent that the European signatories will decide they must impose their own penalties. At some point, Iran's advances could prompt Israel or the U.S. to resort to military action.

A string of incidents in the Gulf in the past year, culminating in the 14 September attack against Saudi energy facilities, underscored how the U.S.-Iranian standoff reverberates across the broader region. Meanwhile, recurrent Israeli military strikes against Iranian and Iran-linked targets inside Syria and Lebanon – as well as in Iraq and the Red Sea basin, according to Tehran – present a new, dangerous front. Any of these flash points could explode, by design or by accident.

Recognition of the high stakes and costs of war has nudged some of Iran's Gulf rivals to seek de-escalation even as they continue to back the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" approach. The UAE has opened lines of communication with Tehran, and Saudi Arabia has engaged in serious dialogue with Yemen's Huthis.

The potential for conflict has also prompted efforts, led by French President Emmanuel Macron, to help the U.S. and Iran find a diplomatic off-ramp. U.S. President Donald Trump, eager to avoid war, has been willing to hear out his proposal, and the Iranians are also interested in any proposition that provides some sanctions relief.

But with deep distrust, each side has tended to wait for the other to make the first concession. A diplomatic breakthrough to de-escalate tensions between the Gulf states and Iran or between Washington and Tehran remains possible. But, as sanctions take their toll and Iran fights back, time is running out.

◀ *The escalating string of incidents in the Gulf in 2019 underscored how the U.S.-Iranian standoff is an increasing danger to the broader Middle East. During an advocacy trip with Crisis Group Middle East Program staff, President and CEO Robert Malley walks through the streets of Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, in September 2019.*

Tehran's shift from a policy of maximum patience to one of maximum resistance was a consequence of the U.S. playing one of the aces in its coercive deck: ending already-limited exemptions on Iran's oil sales.

U.S.-NORTH KOREA

The days of 2017, when U.S. President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un hurled insults at each other and exchanged threats of nuclear annihilation, seemed distant during most of 2019. But tensions are escalating.

The dangers of 2017 yielded to a calmer 2018 and early 2019. The U.S. halted most joint military drills with South Korea, and Pyongyang paused long-range missile and nuclear tests. U.S.-North Korea relations thawed somewhat, with two Trump-Kim summits. The first – in Singapore in June 2018 – produced a flimsy statement of agreed principles and the possibility of diplomatic negotiations. The second – in Hanoi in February 2019 – collapsed when the gulf between the two leaders on the scope and sequencing of denuclearisation and sanctions relief became clear.

Since then, the diplomatic atmosphere has soured. In April 2019, Kim unilaterally set an end-of-year deadline for the U.S. government to present a deal that might break the impasse. In June, Trump and Kim agreed, over a handshake in the demilitarised zone that separates the two Koreas, to start working-level talks. In October, how-

ever, an eight-hour meeting between envoys in Sweden went nowhere.

The two leaders have at times floated the idea of a third summit, but they have backed away at least for the time being. That may be for the best: another ill-prepared meeting could leave both sides feeling dangerously frustrated.

Meanwhile, Pyongyang – which continues to seek leverage to obtain sanctions relief and an end to joint military drills – stepped up short-range ballistic missile tests, which are widely understood not to be covered by the unwritten freeze. North Korea seemed to be motivated by both practical reasons (tests help perfect missile technology) and political ones (those tests appear intended to pressure Washington to propose a more favourable deal). In early December, Pyongyang went further, testing what appeared to be the engine for either a space-launch vehicle or a long-range missile and related technology, at a site that Trump claimed Kim had promised to dismantle.

Although Pyongyang's warning of a "Christmas gift" for Washington if the U.S. does not propose a way forward it

deems satisfactory had not materialised at the time of writing, prospects for diplomacy seem to be dimming.

Yet both sides should think about what will happen if diplomacy fails. If the North escalates its provocations, the Trump administration could react much like it did in 2017, with name-calling and efforts to further tighten sanctions and by exploring military options with unthinkable consequences.

That dynamic would be bad for the region, the world, and both leaders. The best option for both sides remains a confidence-building, measure-for-measure deal that gives each modest benefits. Pyongyang and Washington need to put in the time to negotiate and gauge possibilities for compromise. In 2020, Trump and Kim should steer clear of high-level pageantry and high-drama provocations, and empower their negotiators to get to work.

In 2020, Trump and Kim should steer clear of high-level pageantry and high-drama provocations, and empower their negotiators to get to work.

Like the cycles of rapprochement and hostility between North and South Korea, relations between Pyongyang and Washington careen to and from antagonism and détente. Here, Crisis Group's Senior Adviser for North East Asia & Nuclear Policy Duyeon Kim addresses this complex, multipolar standoff during an EU Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Conference in December 2019.



Indian security force personnel stand guard in front of closed shops in a street in Srinagar, the chief city of Kashmir, in October 2019. Separatist insurgents are lying low, but are still active. The gravest danger is the risk that a militant attack sets off an escalation in the disputed territory between nuclear-armed India and Pakistan.



REUTERS/DANISH ISMAIL

KASHMIR

After falling off the international radar for years, a flare-up between India and Pakistan in 2019 over the disputed region of Kashmir brought the crisis back into sharp focus. Both countries lay claim to the Himalayan territory, split by an informal boundary, known as the Line of Control, since the first Indian-Pakistani war of 1947–1948.

First came a February suicide attack by Islamist militants against Indian paramilitaries in Kashmir. India retaliated by bombing an alleged militant camp in Pakistan, prompting a Pakistani strike in Indian-controlled Kashmir. Tensions spiked again in August when India revoked the state of Jammu and Kashmir's semi-autonomous status, which had served as the foundation for its joining India 72 years ago, and brought it under New Delhi's direct rule.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government, emboldened by its May re-election, made the change in India's only Muslim-majority state without any local consultation. Not only that: before announcing its decision, it brought in tens of thousands of extra troops, imposed a communications blackout, and arrested thousands of Kashmiris, including the entire political class, many of whom were not hostile to India.

These moves have exacerbated an already profound sentiment of alienation among Kashmiris that will likely further fuel a long-running separatist insurgency. Separately, the Indian government's new citizenship law, widely regarded as anti-Muslim, has sparked protests and violent police responses in many parts of India. Together with the actions in Kashmir, these developments appear to confirm Modi's intention to implement a Hindu nationalist agenda.

New Delhi's claims that the situation is back to normal are misleading. Internet access remains cut off, soldiers deployed in August are still there, and all Kashmiri leaders remain in detention. Modi's government seems to have no roadmap for what comes next.

Pakistan has tried to rally international support against what it calls India's illegal decision on Kashmir's status. But its cause is hardly helped by its long record of backing anti-India jihadis. Moreover, most Western powers see New Delhi as an important partner. They are unlikely to rock the boat over Kashmir, unless violence spirals.

The gravest danger is the risk that a militant attack sets off an escalation. In Kashmir, insurgents are lying low but still active. Indeed, India's

heavy-handed military operations in Kashmir over the past few years have inspired a new homegrown generation, whose ranks are likely to swell further after the latest repression. A strike on Indian forces almost certainly would precipitate Indian retaliation against Pakistan, regardless of whether Islamabad is complicit in the plan. In a worst-case scenario, the two nuclear-armed neighbours could stumble into war.

External actors should push for rapprochement before it is too late. That won't be easy. Both sides are playing to domestic constituencies in no mood for compromise. Resuming bilateral dialogue, on hold since 2016, is essential and will necessitate concerted pressure, particularly from Western capitals. Any progress requires Pakistan taking credible action against jihadis operating from its soil, a non-negotiable precondition for India to even consider engaging. For its part, India should lift the communication blackout, release political prisoners, and urgently re-engage with Kashmiri leaders. Both sides should resume cross-border trade and travel for Kashmiris.

If a new crisis emerges, foreign powers will have to throw their full weight behind preserving peace on the disputed border.

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VENEZUELA

Venezuela's year of two governments ended without resolution. President Nicolás Maduro is still in charge, having headed off a civil-military uprising in April and weathered a regional boycott and a stack of U.S. sanctions. But his government remains isolated and bereft of resources, while most Venezuelans suffer from crushing poverty and collapsing public services.

Juan Guaidó, who as National Assembly head laid claim to the interim presidency last January, attracted huge crowds and foreign backing for his demand that Maduro, re-elected in a controversial poll in 2018, leave office. Yet the unpopular government's survival has offered Guaidó, as well as the U.S. and its Latin American allies such as Brazil and Colombia, harsh lessons. No one can rule out the government's collapse. Still, hoping for that is, as one opposition deputy told my Crisis Group colleagues, "like being poor and waiting to win the lottery".

For a start, Maduro's rivals underestimated his government's strength – above all, the armed forces' loyalty. Despite hardship, poor communities remained mostly unconvinced by the opposition. U.S. sanctions heaped stress on the population and decimat-

ed an ailing oil industry, but were circumvented by shadowy actors working through the global economy's loopholes. Gold exports and cash dollars kept the country afloat and enriched a tiny elite. Many of those left out joined the mass exodus of Venezuelans, now numbering 4.5 million, who in turn funneled remittances back home to sustain their families.

The crisis is having other ripple effects. The UN estimates that 7 million Venezuelans need humanitarian aid, many of them in border areas patrolled by armed groups, including Colombian guerrillas. Though sharing more than 1,300 miles of criminalised, violent, and largely unguarded border, the Colombian and Venezuelan governments no longer talk to each other, instead trading insults and blame for sheltering armed proxies. The border has become Venezuela's primary flashpoint. In the meantime, the split between those Latin American countries backing Guaidó and those supporting Maduro has aggravated an increasingly polarised regional climate.

With the U.S. seemingly downplaying the possibility of a military intervention – even as Venezuelan opposition hardliners pine for one – the issue is now whether Maduro's obstinacy and

the opposition's and Washington's lack of realism will mean a deepening crisis and possible flare-up, or whether more pragmatic voices can find a path to agreement. The omens are not overly promising. Government-opposition talks facilitated by Norway were suspended in September.

But there is still a negotiated way out of the turmoil. It would entail compromise from all sides: the opposition would need to drop its demand that Maduro leave now; the government would have to accept steps ensuring a credible and internationally monitored parliamentary election in 2020 as well as an early – and equally credible – presidential poll in the near future; and the U.S. government would need to incrementally relieve sanctions as progress is made toward a resolution. This would be an acceptable price for Venezuela's peace and stability, and to avoid a far worse calamity.

Maduro's rivals underestimated his government's strength – above all, the armed forces' loyalty. Despite hardship, poor communities remained mostly unconvinced by the opposition.

An image from June 2019 of the village of Pacaraima, Brazil, which shares a border with Venezuela and is struggling to cope with a growing influx of refugees. The crisis in Venezuela has resulted in hyperinflation, rising crime and food shortages, persuading some three million citizens to flee the country.





A member of the Ukrainian armed forces looks out toward Donetsk city from the top of an abandoned apartment block in the front-line town of Avdiivka, Ukraine, in April 2019. If peace seems slightly more plausible than it did a year ago, it is far from a sure thing as disagreements run deep between Kyiv and Moscow.

UKRAINE

Ukraine's comedian-turned-president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, elected in April 2019, has brought new energy to efforts to end Kyiv's six-year-old conflict with Russia-backed separatists in the country's eastern Donbas region. Yet if peace seems slightly more plausible than it did a year ago, it is far from preordained.

Zelenskyy's predecessor, Petro Poroshenko, negotiated the 2014–2015 Minsk agreements, which aim to end the Donbas conflict; they call for the separatist-held areas' reintegration into Ukraine in exchange for their autonomy, or "special status". But the agreements remain unimplemented as Kyiv and Moscow disagree on their specifics and sequencing.

Zelenskyy pledged while campaigning to make peace. He interpreted his and his party's landslide wins in 2019 elections as mandates to do so. He started by negotiating mutual withdrawals from front-line positions and a ceasefire with Russia and its proxies. In September, he cut a deal with Russian President Vladimir Putin on a prisoner swap. The following month, he endorsed the so-called Steinmeier Formula put forward in 2016 by Frank-Walter Steinmeier, then Germany's foreign minister and

now its president, which proposed that elections in separatist-held areas would trigger first provisional, and then, if the vote was credible, permanent special status and reintegration into Ukraine.

Zelenskyy's take on the formula required Ukrainian control in those territories before the vote. He nonetheless faced immediate domestic backlash from an unlikely coalition of military veterans' organisations, far-right groups, and public intellectuals. In contrast, Moscow and separatist leaders welcomed Zelenskyy's acceptance of the formula, despite his conditions.

In December, Zelenskyy and Putin met in Paris with Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel. The leaders failed to agree on Minsk sequencing but left with plans for a more comprehensive ceasefire, further disengagement at front-line positions, increased Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe monitoring, and new crossing points for civilians at the line of contact separating Ukrainian and separatist forces.

Zelenskyy's detractors at home appear satisfied he did not sell out in Paris. This gives him more room for maneu-

ver. If things go as planned, the next meeting in France, set for spring, should tackle other components of the Minsk agreement, including amnesties, further troop withdrawals, and a path to reintegrating separatist-held areas into Ukraine.

Much could go wrong. Ceasefire and disengagement plans might collapse and fighting could escalate. Even if they hold, Zelenskyy needs Moscow to compromise for peace to stand a chance. So far, however, although Moscow has been more amenable to deals with Zelenskyy than with his predecessor, its core positions remain unchanged: it denies being party to the conflict it initiated, fought in, and funded. It insists Kyiv should negotiate Donbas' self-rule with separatist leaders.

Peace would offer clear dividends for Ukraine and carry benefits for Russia: it could bring sanctions relief and remove the burden of financial and military support to separatist-held areas. From his Western allies, Zelenskyy needs all the help he can get as he continues his charm offensive in eastern Ukraine and outreach to Moscow.

[Ukraine, Russia, France and Germany] should tackle other components of the Minsk agreement, including amnesties, further troop withdrawals, and a path to reintegrating separatist-held areas into Ukraine.

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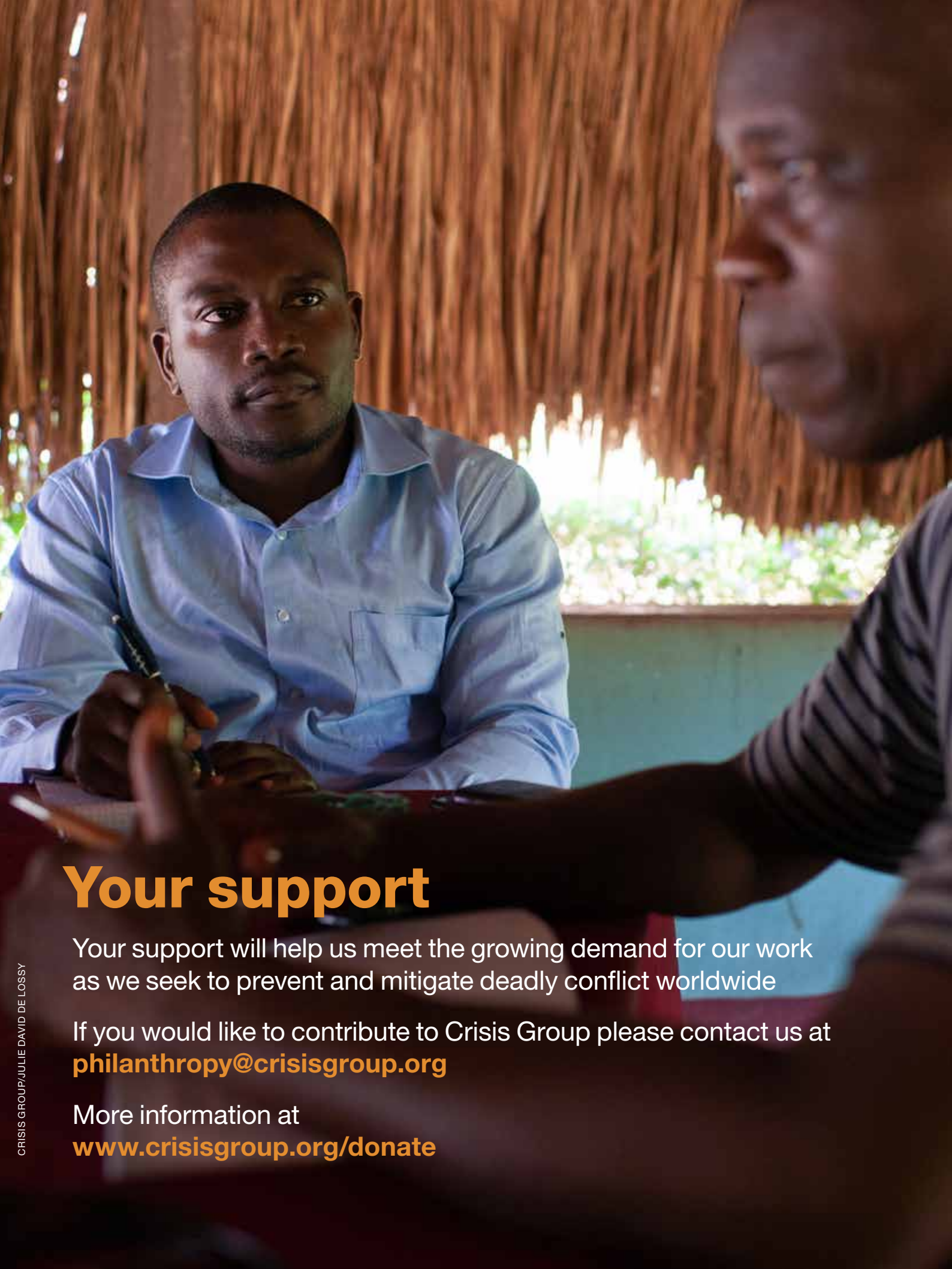
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INSIDE FRONT COVER: Molly Crabapple’s portrait of Michael Kovrig, Crisis Group Senior Adviser, North East Asia, detained by Chinese security officers 10 December 2018 in Beijing. **INSIDE BACK COVER:** Hans de Marie Heungoup, Crisis Group Senior Analyst, Central Africa, discussing in November 2019 our recommendations to minimise election violence with a senior official of Central African Republic’s Ministry of Territorial Administration.

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