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TEN CONFLICTS TO WATCH IN 2021



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ROBERT MALLEY

GLOBAL OVERVIEW

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

If there were a contest for the 2020 event with the most far-reaching implications for global peace and security, the field would be crowded.

From the coronavirus pandemic to climate change's growing impact, the Trump administration's scorched-earth policies after Joe Biden's election, the Azerbaijani-Armenian war over Nagorno-Karabakh, and a deadly conflict in Ethiopia's Tigray region, it has been an eventful year. In 2021, the world will be dealing with the aftermath and sifting through the debris.

Start with COVID-19 and its long tail. When the pandemic first broke out, many – myself included – feared that it would have immediate, potentially devastating consequences in developing countries, especially those facing deadly conflict. Although several low-income countries were hit badly, many were not; diplomatic activity, international mediation, peacekeeping missions, and financial support to vulnerable populations suffered, but it's questionable whether COVID-19 dramatically affected the trajectory of major wars, be they in Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, Yemen, or elsewhere.

Longer-term ramifications are a different matter. The pandemic has precipi-

tated a global economic crisis without precedent since World War II, with an additional 150 million people being driven below the extreme poverty line. Although income levels do not directly correlate with conflict, violence is more likely during periods of economic volatility.

In Sudan, Lebanon, and Venezuela, to mention but a few examples, one can expect the number of unemployed to grow, real incomes to collapse, governments to face mounting difficulties paying security forces, and the general population to increasingly rely on state support at a time when states are least equipped to provide it. The lines separating economic dissatisfaction from social unrest, and social unrest from outbreaks of violence, are thin. Nor are the U.S., Europe, or other donors likely to devote the requisite amount of high-level, continuous attention or resources on regional conflicts far away as they confront economic, social, and political havoc at home.

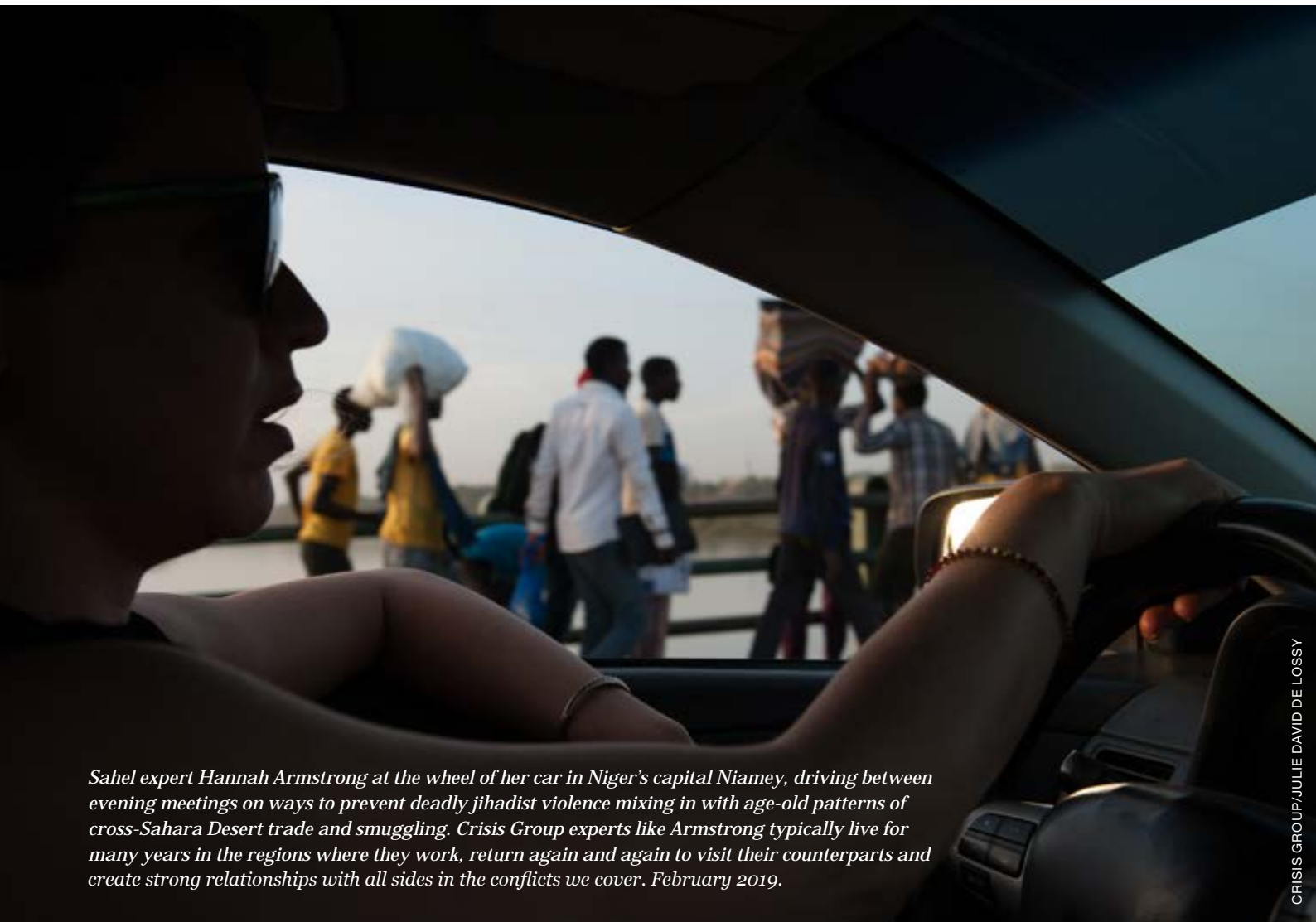
Next is climate change – hardly a novel phenomenon but an accelerating one with an increasingly discernible impact on conflict. It's true that the causal chain is circuitous, with political responses to extreme weather pat-

terns often playing a greater part than the patterns themselves. Still, with more frequent heat waves and extreme precipitation, many governments are harder-pressed to deal with food insecurity, water scarcity, migration, and competition for resources. This is the first year that a transnational risk

has made it onto our top conflicts list, as climate-related violence stretches from the Sahel to Nigeria and Central America.

Meanwhile, the U.S. – polarised, distrustful of its institutions, heavily armed, riven by deep social and racial

rifts, and led by a recklessly divisive president – came closer to an unmanageable political crisis than at any time in its modern history. While the country was spared the worst, President Donald Trump has spent his final weeks in office challenging the election’s legitimacy and therefore his



Sahel expert Hannah Armstrong at the wheel of her car in Niger’s capital Niamey, driving between evening meetings on ways to prevent deadly jihadist violence mixing in with age-old patterns of cross-Sahara Desert trade and smuggling. Crisis Group experts like Armstrong typically live for many years in the regions where they work, return again and again to visit their counterparts and create strong relationships with all sides in the conflicts we cover. February 2019.

CRISIS GROUP/JULIE DAVID DE LOSSY

There is every reason to encourage better relations between Arab states and Israel; there is none to do so in a manner oblivious to international law. There is every reason to end America's endless entanglement in foreign wars; there is none to do so in a manner that diminishes the incoming president's hand and constricts his room to manoeuvre.

successor's, seemingly intent on dealing President-elect Biden the weakest possible hand to deal with the messy situation he will inherit.

Turning political spite into diplomatic art form, booby-trapping the field for the man who will replace him, Trump imposed an array of sanctions on Iran with the barely concealed objective of hindering Biden's efforts to revive the Iranian nuclear deal. He extended U.S. recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara in an unbecoming exchange for Morocco's decision to normalise relations with Israel. And he ordered a series of last-minute U.S. military drawdowns from Somalia, Afghanistan, and Iraq. By acting precipitously, without coordination or consultation with key local stakeholders, he managed to give a bad name to potentially sensible policies. There is every reason to encourage better relations between Arab states and Israel; there is none to do so in a manner oblivious to international law. There is every reason to end America's endless entanglement in foreign wars; there is none to do so in a manner that diminishes the incoming president's hand and constricts his room to manoeuvre.

Biden's election brought hope leavened with realism. Some of the damage wrought by his predecessor can be undone with relative ease. But the new team may find the impression of an erratic, unpredictable, untrustworthy giant harder to erase. By bullying traditional allies and ripping up international accords, Trump thought he was

projecting power but was in reality exhibiting unreliability. To the extent Biden intends to negotiate anew with Iran and maybe North Korea, encourage compromise in Yemen or Venezuela, or revert to a less partisan role in the Middle East, he will be hobbled by memories of the man who came before him and forecasts of what might come next – especially if power only endures as long as the next U.S. electoral cycle.

The last of 2020's legacies may be the most ominous. The final months of the year grievously injured that favorite adage of diplomats and peacemakers – that there is no military solution to political conflict. Tell that to Armenians, forced in the face of superior Azerbaijani firepower to relinquish land they had held for a quarter-century; to Ethiopia's Tigrayans, whose leadership promised prolonged resistance against advancing federal troops only to see those forces ensconced in the regional capital of Mekelle within days. Tell that, for that matter, to the Rohingya forced to flee Myanmar in 2017; to Palestinians, who have remained refugees or under occupation since the 1967 Arab defeat; or to the Sahrawi people whose aspirations to self-determination have been snuffed out by Moroccan troops and a transactional U.S. president, to mention only a handful of recent conflicts seemingly resolved by force.

It has long been a core belief among peacemakers that, absent more equitable political solutions, military gains

tend to prove brittle. Just as Azerbaijanis never forgot the humiliation of the early 1990s, so too will Armenians strive to erase the indignity of 2020. If their grievances are unaddressed, many Tigrayans will resist what they might perceive as alien rule. Israel will not know genuine safety so long as Palestinians live under its occupation. But that core belief is under assault and getting harder to cling to.

Many around the globe experienced the past year as an *annus horribilis*, eagerly awaiting its conclusion. But as the list of conflicts to watch that follows suggests, its long shadow will endure. 2020 may be a year to forget, but 2021 will likely, and unhappily, keep reminding us of it.

Please browse the following pages for details on the ten countries and conflicts on our 2021 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 (Iran and Syria) are all either taken by our field analysts, or show them conducting research on the ground.

AFGHANISTAN

Despite small but important advances in peace talks, a lot could go wrong for Afghanistan in 2021.

After almost two decades of fighting, the U.S. government signed a deal with Taliban insurgents in February. Washington pledged to withdraw troops from Afghanistan in return for Taliban commitments to forbid terrorists from using the country for operations and to enter talks with the Afghan government.

Afghan peace talks took time to get underway. The government stretched out for six months a prisoner exchange the U.S. had promised to the Taliban – the release of 1,000 government troops or officials held by the Taliban in return for 5,000 Taliban fighters – which Kabul saw as lopsided. The insurgents, who had initially reduced suicide bombings and assaults on cities and towns, responded to delays by stepping up attacks and assassinations.

Negotiations eventually started in Doha in mid-September, but the two sides took until December to agree on procedural rules. Neither shows much appetite for compromise. Bloodshed has, if anything, escalated. The Taliban appear to have abandoned any

initial restraint. Recent months have seen an uptick in suicide bombings and larger offensives on towns.

One challenge lies in how the parties view talks. Kabul is publicly committed. But top officials deeply distrust the Taliban or see negotiations as potentially resulting in the government's demise. Kabul has sought to slow-roll talks without openly crossing Washington. In contrast, Taliban leaders believe their movement is ascendant. They perceive the U.S. withdrawal and the peace process as reflecting that reality. Within insurgent ranks too, many fighters expect talks to deliver much of what they have fought for.

Looming in May 2021 is the deadline set in the February deal for a complete U.S. and NATO military withdrawal. Though Washington argues that was implicitly conditional on advances in Afghan peace talks, the Taliban would likely react angrily to major delays. Since February, Trump has pulled out thousands of U.S. forces. An initial drawdown to 8,600 was mandated in the bilateral agreement, but Trump has downsized to 4,500 and pledges to reach 2,500 before he leaves office. The extra, unconditional withdrawals have reinforced Taliban confidence and government disquiet.

Afghanistan's fate lies mostly with the Taliban, Kabul, and their willingness to compromise – but much also hinges on Biden. His administration may want to condition the withdrawal on progress in talks. But it will take time for the Afghan parties to reach a settlement. Keeping a U.S. military presence in the country long past May without irreparably alienating the Taliban will be no small feat. To complicate things further, Biden has expressed a preference for keeping several thousand counter-terrorism forces in Afghanistan. He may have to decide between that and a potentially successful peace process. Neither the Taliban nor regional countries whose support would be crucial to any agreement's success will accept an indefinite U.S. military presence.

A precipitous U.S. withdrawal could destabilise the Afghan government and potentially lead to an expanded, multiparty civil war. Conversely, a prolonged presence could prompt the Taliban to walk away from talks and intensify their attacks, provoking a major escalation. Either would mean that 2021 marks the year Afghanistan loses its best shot at peace in a generation.

A precipitous U.S. withdrawal could destabilise the Afghan government and potentially lead to an expanded, multiparty civil war.

Afghanistan's long years of war have disfigured its cities with many long concrete blast walls. But as here in the western city of Herat, they have proved to be a canvas for Afghan artists seeking to express their dream of an end to war. April 2019.



CRISIS GROUP/PIERRE PRAKASH

ETHIOPIA

On 4 November, Ethiopian federal forces began an assault on Tigray region after a deadly Tigrayan attack and takeover of federal military units in the region. By November's end, the army had entered the Tigrayan capital, Mekelle. Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) leaders abandoned the city, claiming they wished to spare civilians. Much remains unclear, given a media blackout. But the violence has likely killed thousands of people, including many civilians; displaced more than a million internally; and led some 50,000 to flee to Sudan.

The Tigray crisis's roots stretch back years. Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed came to power in 2018 after protests largely driven by long-simmering anger at the then-ruling coalition, which had been in power since 1991 and which the TPLF dominated. Abiy's tenure, which began with significant efforts at reforming a repressive governance system, has been marked by a loss of influence for Tigrayan leaders, who complain of being scapegoated for previous abuses and warily eye his rapprochement with the TPLF's old foe, Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki. Abiy's allies accuse TPLF elites of seeking to maintain a disproportionate share of power, ob-

structing reform, and stoking trouble through violence.

The Tigray dispute is Ethiopia's most bitter, but there are wider fault lines. Powerful regions are at loggerheads while supporters of Ethiopia's ethnic federalist system (which devolves power to ethnically defined regions and that the TPLF was instrumental in designing) are battling that system's opponents, who believe it entrenches ethnic identity and fosters division. While many Ethiopians blame the TPLF for years of oppressive rule, the Tigrayan party is not alone in fearing that Abiy aims to do away with the system in a quest to centralise authority. Notably, Abiy's critics in the restive Oromia region – Ethiopia's most populous – share that view, despite Abiy's own Oromo heritage.

The question now is what comes next. Federal forces advanced and took control of Mekelle and other cities relatively quickly. Addis Ababa hopes that what it calls its continuing "law enforcement operation" will defeat the remaining rebels. It rejects talks with TPLF leaders; allowing impunity for outlaws who attack the military and violate the constitution would reward treason, Abiy's allies say. The central government is now appointing an

interim regional government, has issued arrest warrants for 167 Tigrayan officials and military officers, and appears to hope to persuade Tigrayans to abandon their erstwhile rulers. Yet the TPLF has a strong grassroots network.

There are disturbing signs. Reports suggest purges of Tigrayans from the army and their mistreatment elsewhere in the country. Militias from Amhara region, which borders Tigray, have seized disputed territory held for the past three decades by Tigrayans. The TPLF launched missiles at Eritrea, and Eritrean forces have almost certainly been involved in the anti-TPLF offensive. All this will fuel Tigrayan grievances and separatist sentiment.

If the federal government invests heavily in Tigray, works with the local civil service as it is rather than emptying it of the TPLF rank and file, stops the harassment of Tigrayans elsewhere, and runs disputed areas rather than leaving them to Amhara administrators, there might be some hope of peace. It would be critical then to move toward a national dialogue to heal the country's deep divisions in Tigray and beyond. Absent that, the outlook is gloomy for a transition that inspired so much hope only a year ago.

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Villagers in northwestern Ethiopia displaced by chronic conflict between the Amhara and Qimant peoples talk to our researchers close to the border with Sudan. They said they were struggling and waiting for food aid from the government and its international partners. 2019.



CRISIS GROUP/WILLIAM DAVISON

THE SAHEL

The crisis engulfing the Sahel region of North Africa continues to worsen, with inter-ethnic violence increasing and jihadists extending their reach. 2020 was the deadliest year since the crisis started in 2012, when Islamist militants overran northern Mali, plunging the region into protracted instability.

Jihadists control or are a shadow presence across swathes of rural Mali and Burkina Faso and are making inroads in Niger's south west. Intensified French counter-terrorism operations in 2020 dealt the militants some blows, pummeling the local Islamic State affiliate and killing several al-Qaeda leaders. Combined with jihadist infighting, they appear to have contributed to a decline in complex militant attacks against security forces. But military strikes and killing leaders have not disrupted jihadists' command structures or recruitment. Indeed, the more foreign militaries pile in, the bloodier the region seems to become. Nor have government authorities been able to reclaim rural areas lost to militants. Even where military pressure forces jihadists out, they tend to return when operations subside.

The conditions on which militants thrive are difficult to reverse. States'

relations with many of their rural citizens have broken down, as have traditional conflict management systems. As a result, neither state nor customary authorities are able to calm increasing friction among communities, often over resources. Security forces' abuses drive further discontent. All this is a boon for militants, who lend firepower and offer protection to locals or even step in to resolve disputes. Ethnic militias mobilised by the Malian and Burkinabè authorities to fight jihadists fuel intercommunal violence.

Even beyond rural areas, citizens are growing angrier at their governments. Mali's coup in August, the result of protests provoked by a contested election but sustained by wider fury at corruption and inept rule, is the starkest evidence. Similar discontent plagues Niger and Burkina Faso.

Without more concerted efforts to tackle the Sahel's crisis of rural governance, it is hard to see how the region can escape today's turmoil. Broadly speaking, such efforts would require state actors and others to focus first and foremost on mediating local conflicts, talking to militants where necessary, and using the resulting agreements as the basis for the return of state authority to the coun-

tryside. Foreign military operations are essential, but international actors ought to emphasise local peacemaking and push for governance reform. Little suggests the military-first approach will stabilise the Sahel. If anything, over recent years it appears to have contributed to the uptick in inter-ethnic bloodshed and Islamist militancy.

Foreign military operations are essential, but international actors ought to emphasise local peacemaking and push for governance reform.

Nigerien security forces travel across the desert to Iferouane in the Agadez region. Tensions as jihadist violence tests the Sahelian state mean that travellers prefer to journey in state-protected convoys, including our own researchers. February 2019.



CRISIS GROUP/JULIE DAVID DE LOSSY

A fighter from the Joint Resistance Forces at a position overlooking Hodeida airport in Yemen. Crisis Group has gone far to talk to all possible sides in the war that broke out in 2015, and our experts have overcome many obstacles to do research in almost all key centres of the country. September 2018.



CRISIS GROUP/PETER SALISBURY

YEMEN

Yemen's war has caused what the UN still deems the world's worst humanitarian disaster. COVID-19 has exacerbated the suffering of civilians already stalked by poverty, hunger, and other diseases. Top humanitarian officials are again warning of famine.

One year ago, there was a window of opportunity to end the war, but the belligerents squandered it. Huthi rebels were talking through back channels with Saudi Arabia, the main outside sponsor of the U.N.-recognised Yemeni government led by President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi. The Saudis were also mediating among anti-Huthi factions that were squabbling over the status of Aden, a southern city that is the government's interim capital and which has been controlled by the secessionist, Emirati-backed Southern Transitional Council (STC) since August 2019. Combined, these two negotiating tracks could have served as building blocks for a U.N.-brokered political process. Instead, fighting has escalated, particularly in Marib, the Hadi government's last urban stronghold in the north. It took a year of bad-tempered negotiations before anti-Huthi factions agreed on how they would divvy up security responsibilities in the south, move their forces away

from front lines, and form a new government. The negotiations will likely face further roadblocks over relocating the cabinet to Aden. UN peacemaking efforts have also hit a wall.

Both the Huthis and the Hadi government have reasons to stall. If they prevail in Marib, the Huthis will have conquered the north and seized the province's oil, gas, and power plant, allowing them to generate much-needed electricity and revenue. The government can ill afford to lose Marib, but it harbours another hope: the outgoing Trump administration may, in a parting shot at Iran, designate the Huthis a terrorist organisation, tightening the economic noose on the rebels and complicating negotiations with them by outside actors. Such a step would heighten risks of famine by obstructing trade with Yemen, which imports 90 per cent of its wheat and all of its rice. It might also sound the death knell for UN mediation efforts.

In any case, the UN two-party framework looks outdated. Yemen is no longer the country it was in the early days of the war; it has fragmented as the conflict raged. The Huthis and the government do not hold a duopoly over territory or domestic legitimacy. Other local actors have interests, influence, and spoiling power. The

UN should expand its framework to include others, notably the STC and Emirati-backed forces on the Red Sea coast along with tribespeople in the north, who could otherwise upend any settlement they reject. Instead of pursuing a two-party bargain, the UN should start planning for a more inclusive process that would encourage deal-making among key players.

Absent a course correction, 2021 looks set to be another bleak year for Yemen, with the war dragging on, disease and potentially famine spreading, prospects for a settlement evaporating, and millions of Yemenis getting sicker and hungrier by the day.

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VENEZUELA

Nearly two years have passed since the Venezuelan opposition, the US, and countries across Latin America and Europe proclaimed legislator Juan Guaidó interim president of Venezuela and predicted incumbent Nicolás Maduro's demise. Today, any such hopes lie in tatters. A U.S.-led "maximum pressure" campaign – entailing sanctions, international isolation, implied threats of military action, and even an abortive coup – has not toppled Maduro. If anything, these actions have left him stronger, as allies, including in the military, have rallied behind him fearing his fall would endanger them. Venezuelans' living conditions, devastated by the government's ineptitude, U.S. sanctions, and COVID-19, have hit rock bottom.

If Maduro remains entrenched, his adversaries could see their political fortunes collapse. The bases for Guaidó's presidential claim lay in the parliamentary majority that opposition parties won in 2015, combined with the argument that Maduro's May 2018 re-election was a sham. Now the opposition is weak, divided, and with barely a toehold in the National Assembly. The government won December's legislative elections, which

all but a few small opposition parties boycotted, with a thumping majority.

The opposition's malaise stems primarily from its failure to bring about change. Its strategy underestimated Maduro's capacity to survive sanctions and international isolation while overestimating Washington's willingness to make good on vague threats of force.

Backing sanctions has also lost Maduro's rivals support, given that those measures have hastened Venezuela's economic collapse and further impoverished its citizens. More than 5 million citizens have fled, many now scraping by in Colombia's cities or violent borderlands. Most families that remain cannot put enough food on the table. Thousands of children are suffering irreversible harm from malnutrition.

A new U.S. government provides an opportunity for a rethink. Support for the Venezuelan opposition has been bipartisan in Washington. Still, Biden's team could change tack, give up trying to oust Maduro, and launch diplomatic efforts aimed at laying the groundwork for a negotiated settlement with the help of both left- and right-wing leaders in Latin America.

Together with the European Union, it could attempt to reassure Maduro's allies such as Russia, China, and Cuba that their core interests in the country would survive a transition. Beyond taking immediate humanitarian steps to alleviate Venezuela's coronavirus-related crisis, the new administration might also consider resuming diplomatic contacts with Caracas and committing to gradually lift sanctions if the government takes meaningful steps, such as releasing political prisoners and dismantling abusive police units. Internationally backed negotiations aimed in particular at organizing credible presidential elections, scheduled for 2024, could come next, provided both sides show they are genuinely interested in compromise.

At present, Maduro's government shows no sign it would hold a fair vote. Most of his rivals want to overthrow and prosecute him. A settlement looks as distant as ever. But after two years spent in fruitless and harmful efforts to provoke sudden political rupture, building support for a more gradual transition is the best path forward.

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This family fled hunger and poverty in Venezuela to take refuge in Colombia. When this photograph was taken they had lived for seven months in a tent in Bogotá as rubbish recyclers and on handouts. They told our field researchers that the COVID-19 lockdown made life even harder, forcing them to consider returning to the country they had fled from.

Women form an important social base for Somalia's Al-Shabaab insurgency, partly explaining the Islamist rebels' resilience. In 2019, our field researchers proposed new policies – like integrating women into the security services – to help the government steer a safer course. Mogadishu, Somalia, 2014.



CRISIS GROUP/RICHARD HORSEY

SOMALIA

Elections are looming in Somalia amid bitter disputes between President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed (also known as “Farmajo”) and his rivals. The war against Al-Shabaab is entering its fifteenth year, with no end in sight, while donors increasingly chafe at paying for African Union (AU) forces to help keep the militants at bay.

The mood ahead of the elections – parliamentary elections were scheduled for mid-December but have been pushed back, and preparations for a presidential vote planned for February 2021 are also lagging – is fraught. Relations between Mogadishu and some of Somalia’s regions – notably Puntland and Jubaland, whose leaders have long been rivals of Mohamed and fear his re-election – are tense, largely due to disputes over the allocation of power and resources between the centre and periphery. Such discord tends to pit Somalia’s communities against one another, including at a clan level, with increasingly bitter rhetoric employed by all sides.

Al-Shabaab, meanwhile, remains potent. The group controls large portions of southern and central Somalia, extends a shadow presence far beyond that, and regularly attacks Somalia’s

capital. While Somali leaders and their international partners all recognise, in principle, that the challenge from Al-Shabaab cannot be tackled with force alone, few articulate clear alternatives. Talks with militants might be an option, but thus far the movement’s leaders have given little indication that they want a political settlement.

To further complicate things, patience is wearing thin with the AU mission that has for years battled Al-Shabaab. Without those forces, major towns, potentially even Mogadishu, would be even more vulnerable to militant assaults. Donors like the EU are tired of forking out for what appears to be a never-ending military campaign. The current plan is to hand over primary security responsibility to Somali forces by the end of 2021, yet those troops remain weak and ill-prepared to lead counterinsurgency efforts. The risk of a security vacuum has been aggravated by the sudden pullout of Ethiopian forces due to the Tigray crisis and the Trump administration’s plan to withdraw U.S. troops training and mentoring the Somali army.

Much hinges on the February presidential vote. A reasonably clean election, whose results main parties accept, could allow Somalia’s lead-

ers and their foreign backers to step up efforts to reach agreement on the federal relationship and constitutional arrangements and accelerate security sector reform. A contested vote, on the other hand, could provoke a political crisis that widens the gulf between Mogadishu and the regions, potentially triggers clan violence, and risks emboldening Al-Shabaab.

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LIBYA

Rival military coalitions in Libya are no longer fighting, and the UN has restarted negotiations aimed at reunifying the country. But reaching lasting peace will still be an uphill struggle.

On 23 October, the Libyan National Army (LNA) – led by Gen. Khalifa Haftar and supported by Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Russia – and the Turkey-backed Government of National Accord (GNA), led by Fayeza al-Sarraj, signed a ceasefire formally ending a battle that had been raging on the outskirts of Tripoli and elsewhere since April 2019. The fighting had killed some 3,000 people and displaced hundreds of thousands. Turkey's direct military intervention to aid Sarraj in early 2020 reversed what had been Haftar's advantage. Front lines are now frozen in central Libya.

The ceasefire is welcome, but its implementation is lagging. The LNA and GNA committed to withdraw troops from front lines, expel foreign fighters, and stop all foreign military training. Yet both sides have backtracked. Their forces are still on the front lines, and foreign military cargo planes continue to land at their respective air bases, suggesting that outside backers are still resupplying both sides.

Similarly, progress has been stunted in reunifying a country divided since 2014. UN talks convened in November brought together 75 Libyans tasked with agreeing on an interim unity government and a roadmap to elections. But talks have been marred by controversy over how the UN selected these delegates, their legal authority, infighting, and allegations of attempted bribery. The participants have agreed to elections at the end of 2021 but not on the legal framework governing those polls.

At the heart of all the problems is a disagreement over power sharing. Haftar's backers demand that a new government place the LNA and GNA camps on an equal footing. His rivals oppose including pro-LNA leaders in any new dispensation. Foreign powers have similarly contrasting views. Turkey wants a friendly government – free of Haftar supporters – in Tripoli. Conversely, Cairo and Abu Dhabi want to reduce Ankara's influence and bolster that of pro-LNA politicians. Russia, which also supports the LNA, is keen to retain its foothold in the Mediterranean, but whether it prefers the status quo that preserves its sway in the east or a new government with LNA representation is unclear.

Fighting seems unlikely to flare back up in the immediate future because outside actors, while keen to consolidate their influence, do not want another round of open hostilities. But the longer the ceasefire terms go unfulfilled, the higher the risk of mishaps provoking a return to war. To avoid this outcome, the UN must help forge a roadmap to unify Libya's divided institutions and de-escalate tensions among regional foes.

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A key prize in the war between rival administrations in east and west Libya is control of the country's oil exports. Our Libya expert is one of the few people able to travel to meet leaders on both sides and took this picture of a tanker in the capital Tripoli's port in December 2018.



Pro-Iranian demonstrators in Iraq seek a U.S. withdrawal from the country during a protest in Baghdad in November 2020. The picture threatens to light up the struggle against U.S.-backed forces just like Iran-aligned forces did in Yemen.



AFP/AHMAD AL-RUBAYE

IRAN–UNITED STATES

In January 2020, the U.S. killing of Iranian commander Qassem Suleimani brought U.S.-Iran tensions close to a boiling point. In the end, Iran's response was relatively limited, and neither side chose to escalate, though the temperature remained perilously high. The new U.S. administration could calm one of the world's most dangerous standoffs, notably by returning to the 2015 nuclear deal, also known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). But doing so quickly, managing relations with Saudi Arabia and Israel – both bitterly opposed to Iran – and then moving to talks about broader regional issues will be no mean feat.

The Trump administration's Iran policy has entailed what it calls maximum pressure. That has meant exiting the JCPOA and imposing harsh unilateral sanctions on Iran in the hope of forcing greater concessions on its nuclear program, tempering its regional influence, and – some officials hoped – even toppling the government in Tehran.

Sanctions devastated Iran's economy but achieved little else. Throughout Trump's presidency, Iran's nuclear program grew, increasingly unconstrained by the JCPOA. Tehran has

more accurate ballistic missiles than ever before and more of them. The regional picture grew more, not less, fraught, with incidents – from Suleimani's killing on Iraqi soil to attacks on Saudi energy industry targets widely attributed to Tehran – triggering multiple brushes with open war. Nothing suggests that the Iranian government, despite periodic outbursts of popular discontent, is in danger of collapse.

Even in its dying days, the Trump administration has been doubling down. The waning weeks of its tenure saw it impose more sanctions designations. The killing of a top Iranian nuclear scientist, which was attributed to Israel, further inflamed tensions and prompted Iran to threaten to expand its nuclear program further still. Washington and some allies appear determined to inflict maximum pain on Iran and restrict the incoming Biden administration's room for manoeuvre. Risks of a confrontation before Trump leaves office remain alive as pro-Iran Shiite militias target Americans in Iraq.

Biden has signalled that he will shift course, agree to rejoin the JCPOA if Iran resumes compliance, and then seek to negotiate a follow-on deal tackling ballistic missiles and regional

policy. Tehran has signalled that it, too, is prepared for a mutual adherence to the existing nuclear deal. That seems the safest and swiftest bet, although even then obstacles will abound. The U.S. and Iranian governments will need to agree on a sequencing of steps between sanctions relief and nuclear restraints and also on which sanctions should be lifted. The window could be short, with presidential elections in Iran scheduled for June and a more hardline candidate predicted to win.

But if they return to the JCPOA, the larger challenge will be to address the regional tensions and polarisation that, left to fester, will continue to jeopardise the deal and could trigger conflict. European governments are exploring the possibility of prompting Iran and Gulf Arab states to engage in a dialogue to reduce regional tensions and prevent an inadvertent outbreak of war; the Biden administration could put its full diplomatic weight behind such an effort.

The U.S. and Iranian governments will need to agree on a sequencing of steps between sanctions relief and nuclear restraints and also on which sanctions should be lifted.

U.S. soldiers stand near a Russian military vehicle in the north-eastern Syrian town of al-Malikiyah (Derik) close to the border with Turkey, Crisis Group experts regularly visit northern Syria, and are based in Turkey and Russia too. June 2020.



AFP/DELIL SOULEIMAN

RUSSIA-TURKEY

Russia and Turkey are not at war, often in cahoots, yet frequently backing opposing sides – as in Syria and Libya – or competing for sway, as in the Caucasus. They often see one another as partners, compartmentalise discord on one issue from discussions on others, and cooperate even as their local allies battle it out. Yet as Turkey’s 2015 downing of a Russian jet near the Turkey-Syria border and the 2020 killings of dozens of Turkish soldiers in airstrikes by Russian-backed Syrian forces show, the risk of unexpected confrontations is high.

The contradictions of Ankara-Moscow relations are clearest in Syria. Turkey has been among President Bashar al-Assad’s fiercest foreign antagonists and a staunch backer of rebels. Russia, meanwhile, threw its weight behind Assad and, in 2015, intervened to decisively turn the war in his favour. Turkey has since given up on ousting Assad, more concerned with battling the People’s Protection Units (YPG), the Syrian offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), which has waged an insurgency against Turkey for nearly four decades and which Ankara (and the U.S. and Europe) considers a terrorist organisation.

A March 2020 deal cobbled together by Moscow and Ankara halted the

Paradoxically, just as Moscow and Ankara compete on an increasing number of battlefields, their ties are stronger than they have been in some time.

latest bout of fighting in Idlib, the last rebel-held pocket in north-western Syria. But the Syrian war is not over, and another Russian-backed offensive in Idlib remains possible.

In Libya, too, Russia and Turkey back opposite sides. Russian contractors support Haftar’s LNA, while Turkey supports the Tripoli-based GNA. A fragile ceasefire has held since October. But it is far from clear that a deal can guarantee Turkey the friendly Libyan rulers it wants while also giving Russia the foothold it seeks.

Russia and Turkey were also enmeshed in the recent war over Nagorno-Karabakh. Russia has a military alliance with Armenia but avoided picking sides and eventually brokered the ceasefire that ended fighting. Turkey lent Azerbaijan diplomatic and military support, with Turkish (and Israeli) drones helping to suppress Armenian air defences. Despite their competition in the South Caucasus, both Moscow and Ankara gained this time around. Russia deployed peacekeepers and dramatically upped its influence in the region. Turkey can claim to have played a significant part in Azerbaijan’s victory and will benefit from a trade corridor established by the ceasefire deal.

Paradoxically, just as Moscow and Ankara compete on an increasing number of battlefields, their ties are stronger than they have been in some time. Their “frenmity” is symptomatic of broader trends – a world in which non-Western powers increasingly push back against the U.S. and Western Europe and are more assertive and more willing to enter into fluctuating alliances.

Russia has seen tensions with the West mount against the backdrop of wars in Ukraine and Syria, charges of election interference and poisoning of opponents on foreign soil, as well as U.S. and European sanctions. Turkey chafes at U.S. support for the YPG and refusal to extradite Fethullah Gülen – the cleric Ankara accuses of masterminding an attempted coup in 2016 – as well as European critiques of its democratic backsliding and alleged bias in the Cyprus conflict. Sanctions imposed by Washington in response to Ankara’s purchase and testing of the Russian S-400 missile defence system encapsulate these tensions. By cutting bilateral deals in various conflict zones, both Russia and Turkey see the potential for gain.

Still, ties born of opportunity don’t always last. With their respective forces so close to multiple front lines, potential flash points abound. A downturn in their relations could spell trouble for both nations and more than one warzone.

Glaciers are receding as the climate changes in the mountains of Central Asia. This is adding to conflict tensions between the region's bigger countries in the arid, cotton-growing plains and smaller, weak upland countries that have the big dams. Kyrgyzstan, 2016.



CRISIS GROUP/JULIE DAVID DE LOSSY

CLIMATE CHANGE

The relationship between war and climate change is neither simple nor linear. The same weather patterns will increase violence in one area and not in another. While some countries manage climate-induced competition well, others don't manage it at all. Much depends on whether states are governed inclusively, are well equipped to mediate conflicts over resources, or can provide for citizens when their lives or livelihoods are upended. How much climate-related violence 2021 will see is uncertain, but the broader trend is clear enough: without urgent action, the danger of climate-related conflict will rise in the years ahead.

In northern Nigeria, droughts have intensified fighting between herders and farmers over dwindling resources, which in 2019 killed twice as many people as the Boko Haram conflict. On the Nile, Egypt and Ethiopia have traded threats of military action over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, partly due to Cairo's fears the dam will exacerbate already serious water scarcity. For now, Africa arguably sees the worst climate-related conflict risks, but parts of Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East face similar dangers.

In fragile countries worldwide, millions of people already experience record heat waves, extreme and irregular precipitation, and rising sea levels. All this could fuel instability: for example, by exacerbating food insecurity, water scarcity, and resource competition and by leading more people to flee their homes. Some studies suggest that a rise in local temperature of 0.5 degrees Celsius is associated, on average, with a 10 to 20 per cent heightened risk of deadly conflict. If that estimate is accurate, the future is worrying. UN scientists believe that man-made emissions have warmed the Earth by 1 degree since pre-industrial times and, with the pace accelerating, predict another half-degree as soon as 2030. In many of the world's most unstable areas, it might happen faster still.

Governments in at-risk countries need to peacefully regulate access to resources, whether scarce or abundant, within or among states. But developing nations at risk of conflict should not face the pressures of a changing climate alone.

There is some cause for optimism. The new U.S. administration has put the climate crisis atop its agenda, and

Biden has called for faster action to mitigate associated risks of instability. Western governments and companies have pledged to provide poorer countries \$100 billion annually for climate adaptation starting in 2020. They should live up to these commitments: developing nations deserve increased support from those whose fossil fuel intemperance has caused the crisis in the first place.

How much climate-related violence 2021 will see is uncertain, but the broader trend is clear enough: without urgent action, the danger of climate-related conflict will rise in the years ahead.

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