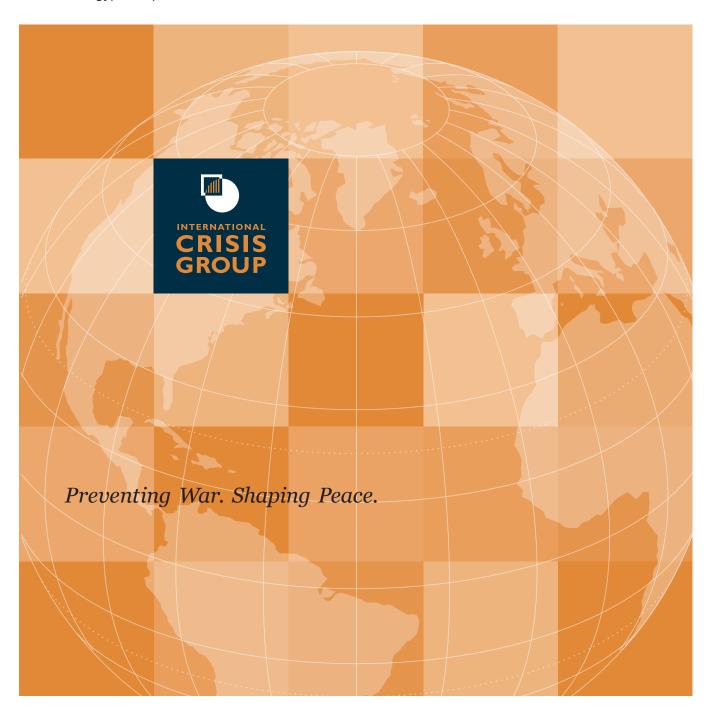# Watch List 2018

Crisis Group's early-warning Watch List identifies up to ten countries and regions at risk of conflict or escalation of violence. In these situations, early action, driven or supported by the EU and its member states, could generate stronger prospects for peace. The Watch List 2018 includes a global overview, regional overviews, and detailed conflict analyses on Afghanistan, Bangladesh/Myanmar, Cameroon, Colombia, Egypt, Iraq, Sahel, Tunisia, Ukraine and Zimbabwe.

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Watch List 2018

International Crisis Group | January 2018

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Global Overview

For Europeans who have chafed at the embrace of U.S. hyper-power, resented being relegated to the part of bankroller-in-chief, and longed for a more assertive European role on the world stage, now would seem the moment. Disengaged from some areas, dangerously engaged in others, and disconcertingly engaged overall, the U.S. under President Donald Trump provides the European Union (EU) and its member states with a golden opportunity to step up and step in. The challenge is doing so without either gratuitously antagonising or needlessly deferring to Washington.

On a first set of issues – broad policy choices and matters of values – Europe's response has offered early promise. Its reaffirmation of the Paris climate accord and the vigorous defence by the likes of French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel of a more tolerant, less nativist form of politics and a rules-based international order were the right form of push-back. Europe's internal challenges, from economic woes to the difficulties of managing migration, are far from resolved. They require European leaders to balance foreign priorities with those at home. But 2017, in some ways and with some exceptions, was the year of the dog that didn't bark: populists and anti-immigrants didn't prevail in France, the Netherlands or Germany. The threat they pose remains, yet the wave many feared was only beginning to gather force with Brexit and Trump, for now at least, appears to have crested. This has created space for several European leaders to speak out in support of norms the U.S. appears in danger of neglecting.

On a second set of issues U.S. policies directly clash with Europe's interest in stability and conflict resolution. This is most obviously the case with the Iran nuclear deal, or Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), on which Trump's ultimatum – agree with us to alter the agreement or I'll withdraw from it – requires Europe to grapple with how much it is willing to fight back. The wise response would be to simultaneously encourage Washington to stick to the deal, reject any attempt to make Europe an accomplice to its breach, while preparing for a U.S. walkout. That means immunising as much as possible economic relations between Europe and Iran from the re-imposition of U.S. secondary sanctions. Brussels could, for example, revive blocking regulations (prohibiting companies from complying with such sanctions) and adopt other measures to safeguard Iran's business ties with Europe.

[5]

A similar dynamic is at play in the Israeli-Palestinian arena. Trump's "I've-taken-Jerusalem-off-the-table" refrain, coupled with his threat to withhold funding from the Palestinian Authority should President Mahmoud Abbas ignore U.S. desiderata, are stripping Palestinians of whatever slender hope they retained in a negotiated settlement. That is reason enough for European governments – which already have moved to plug a separate gap left by the U.S. withholding its funds for the UN agency supporting Palestinian refugees – to work with the Palestinians on devising novel ways of advancing Israeli-Palestinian peace.

In the cases of both the JCPOA and Israel/Palestine, Europe's objective ought to be simple: shore up bilateral relations so that Iran and the Palestinians, despite being spurned by Washington, resist the allure of alternate and more hazardous routes – away from the nuclear deal, in one instance, and toward violence, in the other. In the two instances, there may be only so much Europeans can do. But they should do it.

The third category is trickiest, for it entails Europe at times breaking not solely with the U.S., but with some of its own habits as well. Over the past several years, European foreign policy progressively has defined itself as an extension of domestic anxieties – mostly about terrorism and migration. That's understandable. Political leaders can ill afford to come across as divorced from public opinion – however revved-up and exploited for partisan purposes its apprehensions. They must make public angst at least partly their own.

But carried too far, this runs the risk of producing a narrow and short-sighted approach. Indeed, it risks replicating in some places the U.S.'s policy flaws: too heavy a reliance on military force; unsavoury deals with autocratic leaders who pledge to counter terrorism or stem migration; a capricious human rights policy that spares allies while penalising foes; a diminished role for diplomacy; and the neglect of measures to address political or social factors that drive people to join violent groups or flee their homes.

Examples of what the EU and its member states can do to counter this trend are legion, and developed in some detail in the entries of this Watch List. But to mention a few: European leaders might use the EU's position as Africa's chief peace and security partner to work with its leaders and regional organisations to help nudge the continent's long-serving incumbents toward peaceful transitions of power. They might more critically assess the performance of strongmen who (from President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in Egypt, to President Yoweri Museveni in Uganda, or President Idriss Déby in Chad) promise aggressive counter-terrorism operations in the hope of external leniency toward their repressive behaviour at home.

Certainly, they should ensure that the African counter-terrorism force deploying across parts of the Sahel (the G5 Sahel joint force) – which is backed by European powers – comes hand-in-hand with local mediation efforts, lest it further militarise the region and empower non-state proxies whose rivalries aggravate intercommunal conflicts. More generally, they might see to it that deals cut on migration (say, with Libyan militias) and alliances forged for counter-terrorism purposes don't end up entrenching the misrule that propels the very patterns – migration and terrorism – they aim to forestall.

In other areas, Europe could give diplomacy a shot in the arm where the U.S. appears to have abandoned it. European leaders could press Saudi Arabia and Iran to open a channel of communication, even as the U.S. appears to encourage escalation. They could use the leverage provided by European forces' presence in Afghanistan to persuade Washington to pursue not military escalation alone, but a settlement with the Taliban that involves regional powers. They also should match their criticism of rivals' abuses – from President Bashar al-Assad's use of chemical weapons to the Taliban's horrific attacks on civilians – with more forceful rebukes of those of its allies, members of the Saudi-led coalition at war in Yemen first and foremost.

Standing up to the U.S., stepping in where it opts out, devising policies with or without it: all of this undoubtedly can attract Washington's ire. But the European Union and its member states ought to pay little heed. To forge a more independent and forceful European foreign policy focused on diplomacy, de-escalation and conflict prevention at a time of uncertainty and confusion in Washington is not to undermine the U.S., but to do it – and, more importantly, the rest of the world – a favour.

Robert Malley
President & CEO of Crisis Group
January 2018

Africa

In 2018, Africa faces some all-too-familiar peace and security challenges: tense winner-take-all elections that risk provoking violence; authoritarian drift that erodes institutions and generates rebellions; and low-intensity insurgencies that create humanitarian crises. Meanwhile, the spat between Gulf powers – Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, on one side, and Qatar, on the other – threatens to destabilise the Horn of Africa. 2018 also promises to be an important year for Europe's relations with Africa, particularly in the light of the Cotonou Agreement renegotiations.

Critical elections and democratic backsliding

Eighteen countries are expected to hold presidential, parliamentary or local elections in 2018. In many of these places, either politics is zero-sum, raising the stakes and risking violence around the polls; or power is heavily skewed toward the ruling party, often sowing the seeds of future conflict. Three elections to watch are in Cameroon, Zimbabwe – both covered in the entry below – and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Cameroon's contest is complicated by an insurrection in its Anglophone region and Boko Haram violence in the Far North. Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe's unexpected departure offers the chance to reverse the country's economic crisis, but significant reforms are needed to ensure a level playing field, a credible vote and thus a government with a strong mandate to begin to repair the damage of his 37-year rule. In the DRC, President Joseph Kabila's extension of his tenure in office – he should have left in December 2016 – has already provoked a political crisis; even getting to elections now scheduled for the end of 2018 will be hard, and the vote itself is likely to be contentious.

Democratic backsliding and authoritarian drift remain sources of instability. The Ugandan parliament's December decision to remove the presidential age limit will allow President Yoweri Museveni to run for a sixth term in 2021; longstanding and seemingly mounting grievances against his continued rule are feeding popular discontent. One-person or one-party rule and the closure of political space in Chad and Ethiopia risks stoking similar problems. All three governments enjoy significant Western support, related to the role their security forces play in Western-backed military operations across the continent. But if these governments are perceived as reliable security partners abroad, they increasingly deepen problems at home and behave in ways that foment rebellion.

Spillover from the Gulf

The Gulf crisis, pitting Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), on one side, against Qatar (and, indirectly, Turkey) on the other, has spilled into Africa, particularly the Horn, complicating relations among states and often

aggravating instability. Even preceding that crisis, both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, propelled partly by the Saudi-led war in Yemen, had signed military cooperation agreements with various states in the Horn – Saudi Arabia with Djibouti and Sudan; the UAE with Eritrea, Somalia and Somaliland – thus strengthening their relations and presence on the Red Sea. Eritrea, Djibouti and Somaliland allowed their airstrips and ports to be used as military logistics hubs. Both Sudan, which curtailed its ties with Iran to join the Saudi coalition, and Somalia committed forces to the Yemen campaign.

The Saudi and Emirati spat with Qatar, however, put this expansion in a new light. Most Horn of Africa states have traditionally pursued good relations across the Gulf. Now they are under pressure to pick sides. Gulf powers' competition has rekindled old hostilities and sown new tension between Sudan and Egypt, Egypt and Ethiopia, and Ethiopia and Eritrea.

Somalia may be most vulnerable. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt (which largely aligns with the Saudis and Emiratis), Turkey and Qatar are all big donors and investors. Attempts by Somali President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed "Farmajo" to steer a neutral course prompted Gulf powers, notably the UAE, to directly approach Somalia's federal states, thus bypassing Mogadishu and aggravating tension between the capital and local governments. In December 2017, Farmajo's suspicions that the UAE was actively fomenting opposition triggered a crackdown on politicians accused of receiving Emirati funds. The Gulf spat has thus split Somalia's government and institutions into two feuding camps, further eroding modest gains made to stabilise the country that, even before that crisis, were tenuous.

Even more perilous to regional stability is mounting tension between Sudan and Egypt, whose relations a disputed border region and trade quarrels had already strained. Relations have been further tested by Khartoum's willingness to allow members of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood to visit and consult with sympathetic groups in Sudan following their 2013 expulsion from Egypt after President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi came to power. Khartoum accuses Egypt of arming Sudanese rebels from Darfur now active in southern Libya, where they fight as mercenaries for the Egypt-backed Libyan National Army. Cairo strenuously denies the accusation.

Ethiopia and Eritrea – the region's most intractable enemies – have been drawn in. Ethiopia's decision to construct a dam on the Blue Nile, thus affecting the flow of water downstream, has increased tensions with Egypt. In response, Cairo has strengthened ties to Eritrea and South Sudan – the latter of which Ethiopia sees as being within its own sphere of influence – deepening Addis Ababa's unease. Frequent, usually technical negotiations reduce the likelihood of a water war. But Turkish President Recep Erdoğan's visit to Sudan at the end of December 2017 risks upsetting the fragile equilibrium. Turkey, already a big player in Somalia, rival of Egypt under Sisi and supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood, signed a deal to develop the ancient Ottoman port of Suakin on Sudan's Red Sea coast. Cairo sees this move as a direct challenge to its own in-fluence. Soon after Erdoğan's visit, unverified reports emerged of an Egyptian military deployment at the Eritrean military base of Sawa, near the Sudanese border. The story precipitated an announcement by Khartoum that it had closed the Eritrea border and deployed thousands of militias east.

Whether the escalation was genuine or a means for Khartoum to distract attention from an economic crisis at home remains to be seen. Clearly, though, Gulf and Middle Eastern politics are having a profound impact on the Horn. The African Union (AU) has expressed unease at growing geopolitical tensions in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden and mooted a joint Gulf-Horn summit in 2018. These dynamics should be watched carefully in 2018. At present, with U.S. influence declining and the UN Security Council divided, the European Union (EU) is one of few actors that could help prevent inadvertent conflict escalation among these many actors, by positioning itself as an honest broker and potentially pushing for discrete confidence-building measures. Given cross-regional dynamics, the EU should redouble efforts to coordinate internally among the regional divisions of its own European External Action Service (EEAS) and between the EEAS and other services. Another war in the Horn would have disastrous humanitarian consequences and undercut Europe's efforts to counter terrorism and control the flow of migrants.

Europe's relations with Africa

2018 also will be an important year for Europe's relations with the continent. By September, the EU must begin renegotiating the Cotonou Agreement, its partnership with 79 African, Caribbean and Pacific countries, which expires in 2020. The agreement's development fund finances the African Peace Facility, which supports many of the AU's peace and security activities. Agreeing on a new funding mechanism that is predictable – to enable the AU to do more medium-term planning – but also flexible, allowing for new initiatives and adaptation to emerging threats, is vital.

Renegotiations over Cotonou and the EU's development aid come as European policy in parts of Africa appears increasingly military-centric. Motives driving European support for the G5 Sahel Joint Force, established chiefly to fight jihadists across the Sahel, are understandable: military action must be an important component of the response to such groups which pose a threat to UN peacekeepers that they cannot confront alone. But, as examined below, the force risks stirring up a hornet's nest unless accompanied by support for negotiated political settlements, local peacebuilding and steps to minimise the risk that sponsorship of militias might aggravate local conflicts. Increased Western military support also could reinforce the authoritarian tendencies of some Sahel leaders. Excessive militarisation risks worsening terrorism and migration – the very trends Europe wishes to curb.

Cameroon: Electoral Uncertainty amid Multiple Security Threats

Cameroon's governance and security problems for many years have attracted little outside attention. But the country now faces violence in three regions: the Far North, where Boko Haram continues to mount small-scale attacks, as well as the Northwest and Southwest, where an incipient Anglophone insurgency

emerged in 2017. Added to this ambient insecurity is a refugee crisis in the East and Adamaoua, to which 236,000 people from the Central African Republic have fled militia battles. Elections scheduled for October 2018 will be a major test, as will the eventual transfer of power away from President Paul Biya, now 85. 2018 is a crucial moment for the international community, and in particular the EU and its member states, to engage in early action and prevent further escalation.

Boko Haram: still a threat to a neglected region

Boko Haram, active in Cameroon's Far North since 2014, has killed about 1,800 civilians and 175 soldiers, kidnapped around 1,000 people and burned and looted many villages, while the conflict has displaced some 242,000 and badly disrupted the local economy. Some 91,000 Nigerians have fled Boko Haram-related violence in Nigeria to Cameroon. Though battered by security forces and riven by internal divisions, Boko Haram remains a threat in the Far North: in 2017 the group has killed at least 27 soldiers and gendarmes, as well as 210 civilians. It could regain strength if Cameroonian authorities neglect the crisis.

Boko Haram fighters and associates have surrendered in increasing numbers. Dozens of former militants have been sent home, after swearing on the Quran they would not rejoin the group. About 80 others are being held at a military camp in Mayo Sava. To encourage more such surrenders, authorities should avoid blanket stigmatisation and differentiate between hard-core fighters and others. The government also needs to develop a clear plan to counter the appeal of the jihadist ideas that some of the Boko Haram fighters that have given themselves up or been captured continue to espouse. Effective justice and reintegration mechanisms are lacking. Hundreds of supposed Boko Haram members are currently in pre-trial detention, a situation that risks fuelling their further radicalisation; their status should be resolved as swiftly as possible. Authorities also should seek to implement flexible, locally-informed mechanisms to facilitate the social reintegration of former Boko Haram fighters and encourage new surrenders. Leaving this to the whims of ad-hoc local efforts is inadvisable: given the destruction wreaked by the insurgency, communities are highly resentful, and poorly conceived reintegration schemes could sow the seeds of future problems. This is in contrast to neighbouring Chad, where local communities seem to be integrating former militants somewhat successfully on an informal basis. The EU should encourage national authorities, both in Yaounde and in regional capitals, to elaborate and implement their own plans to manage the demobilisation of former Boko Haram members.

The war against Boko Haram has strained local communities, given rise to humanitarian crises and highlighted the need for longer-term development. In 2018, Cameroon's international partners, including the EU, should provide further humanitarian assistance in the Far North, focused on strengthening support to displaced persons and host families as well as supporting the voluntary return of Nigerian refugees. Where required, emergency operations should continue, but humanitarian efforts should also evolve into a more sustainable development approach.

The challenge is to stimulate the local economy without filling the coffers of Boko Haram, which taxes local trade and whose recruitment efforts in the past have been facilitated in part by offering small business loans and other financial incentives. Achieving the right balance will be difficult. But European support for small businesses within the formal and informal economies could help undercut local backing for Boko Haram. Separately, while Yaounde has long controlled the Far North by co-opting local notables, Boko Haram's spread into Cameroon was partly facilitated by tapping into anger at local elites, thereby demonstrating the limits of that approach. Instead, Cameroon's partners should encourage the state to reassert its presence in the north in a participatory and inclusive manner rather than through proxies, including via development projects that boost local earning potential.
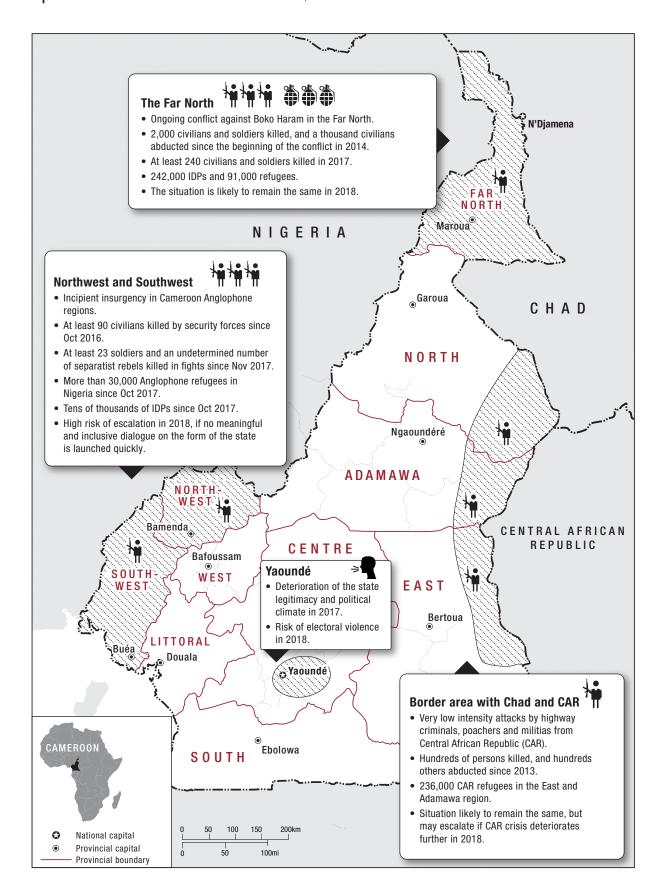
The Anglophone crisis: an insurgency in the making

The crisis in the Anglophone regions (the Northwest and Southwest), which started as a sectoral protest, is rapidly developing into an armed insurgency, following the Cameroonian security forces' violent repression on 22 September and 1 October. While there are hardliners among the militants, the government bears a large share of the responsibility for the conflict. It failed to recognise the legitimacy of Anglophone grievances; its security forces committed widespread abuses; and it imprisoned many peaceful activists in early 2017.

Several small "self-defence" groups (the Tigers, Ambaland forces and Vipers, to name a few) now operate alongside two armed militias: the Ambazonia Defence Forces (ADF) and the Southern Cameroons Defence Forces. Since November 2017, these groups have launched low-intensity attacks that have killed at least 22 and injured 25 among soldiers and gendarmes. An unknown number of separatist fighters have died in these clashes. The military crackdown also exacted a large humanitarian toll and involved significant human rights violations. The violence has left at least 90 civilians since October 2016. Around a thousand have been arrested, with 400 still in jail. More than 30,000 Anglophones are refugees in Nigeria and tens of thousands have been internally displaced.

Given that the crisis is rooted in historically grounded identity-based grievances, notably the strong sentiment among Anglophones that they have been politically and economically marginalised, there will be no easy resolution. The government will need to change course and negotiate in good faith. The government's refusal to launch a dialogue with peaceful Anglophone leaders has corroded the community's trust in state institutions and provoked escalating violence. The crisis also illustrates the limits of the country's centralised governance model, which show signs of atrophy. Discontent is still mounting in Anglophone areas. Reports suggest that some members of the security forces are joining the insurgency.

A direct dialogue between the government and Anglophone community leaders is critical to de-escalate the crisis, particularly ahead of the October elections. A wider conversation, which should include discussion of different models of decentralisation and federalism, is also important, given the failings of the current model. The EU and its member states should take advantage of

The Far North

- Ongoing conflict against Boko Haram in the Far North.
- 2,000 civilians and soldiers killed, and a thousand civilians abducted since the beginning of the conflict in 2014.
- At least 240 civilians and soldiers killed in 2017.
- 242,000 IDPs and 91,000 refugees.
- The situation is likely to remain the same in 2018.

N I G E R I A

N'Djamena

FAR
NORTH

Maroua

Northwest and Southwest

- Incipient insurgency in Cameroon Anglophone regions.
- At least 90 civilians killed by security forces since Oct 2016.
- At least 23 soldiers and an undetermined number of separatist rebels killed in fights since Nov 2017.
- More than 30,000 Anglophone refugees in Nigeria since Oct 2017.
- Tens of thousands of IDPs since Oct 2017.
- High risk of escalation in 2018, if no meaningful and inclusive dialogue on the form of the state is launched quickly.

C H A D

Garoua

N O R T H

Ngaoundéré

A D A M A W A

CENTRAL AFRICAN
REPUBLIC

NORTH-
WEST

Bamenda

SOUTH-
WEST

Bafoussam

WEST

C E N T R E

E A S T

Yaoundé

- Deterioration of the state legitimacy and political climate in 2017.
- Risk of electoral violence in 2018.

Bertoua

LITTORAL

Buéa

Douala

Yaoundé

Border area with Chad and CAR

- Very low intensity attacks by highway criminals, poachers and militias from Central African Republic (CAR).
- Hundreds of persons killed, and hundreds others abducted since 2013.
- 236,000 CAR refugees in the East and Adamawa region.
- Situation likely to remain the same, but may escalate if CAR crisis deteriorates further in 2018.

S O U T H

Ebolowa

CAMEROON

⊛ National capital
◉ Provincial capital
── Provincial boundary

0   50   100   150   200km

0   50   100mi

the government's concern about its international image and desire to preserve cooperation with them to nudge it toward direct talks and a national dialogue.

Uncertainties ahead

Most of the country's security threats stem, at least in part, from bad governance and an over-centralised political system. While the 2018 elections are likely to see the ruling party retain power, a vote perceived as manipulated or unfair could further diminish its legitimacy, making it even more remote from citizens and feeding greater levels of violence. Election season will be an especially risky time if, as appears likely, Anglophone militants attempt to disrupt the balloting in the Northwest and Southwest regions, and possibly elsewhere.

More broadly, while many local activists and international actors see an eventual transition from President Biya, whose party dominates the government, as a prerequisite for improvements in governance, they also fear that his departure could trigger instability. European and other foreign powers should start laying the groundwork for a peaceful transfer of power; the longer the situation deteriorates, the harder it will be to pick up the pieces. They have two opportunities to do so in 2018: first, by supporting dialogue between the Biya government and Anglophone leaders, as described above; and, second, by working with Cameroon's electoral body (ELECAM) and pressing the government to permit, and then deploy, election observers to protect the integrity of the vote, as best possible, and thus build confidence in the electoral system. Even small gains in these areas would help mend the frayed contract between the Cameroonian state and its citizens.

The Sahel: Promoting Political alongside Military Action

The Sahel region faces particularly acute challenges. Rural insurgencies across parts of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger are expanding. Jihadi groups exploit local conflicts to secure safe havens and win new recruits. Other militias are being formed, whether to defend communities, conduct criminal activities or both. Sahelian states, supported by Western powers, rely ever more heavily on force. The new G5 Sahel joint force (FC-G5S), encompassing army units from five Sahelian states, must avoid angering local communities and stoking local conflicts. It should be accompanied by local mediation and peacebuilding initiatives, outreach to communities and, where possible, efforts to engage militant leaders.

Mali's stalemated peace process

In Mali, the epicentre of the Sahel crisis, implementation of the June 2015 Bamako peace agreement that aimed to turn the page on the country's 2012-2013 crisis, has stalled. Having acted as chief broker of the agreement, Algiers appears to have lost interest in leading the process. No African or other actor has stepped in.

Malian leaders' attention has shifted to the July 2018 presidential election. In parts of the country, particularly central and northern Mali, a credible vote appears a remote prospect, due to insecurity and state weakness. But any attempt to postpone the vote would likely spark street protests: President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta has struggled both to restore security and stimulate development, and is increasingly unpopular even in his core constituencies of Bamako and other southern cities.

Nor have state authorities, ousted from much of the north during the 2012-2013 crisis, returned. Security continues to deteriorate in central Mali (Mopti region) and further south (Segou region), fuelling tension among communities. Jihadist groups capitalise on local disputes in rural areas, recruiting new fighters and launching attacks against national and international forces. Their reach is extending into neighbouring countries.

An expanding crisis

Northern Burkina Faso is suffering its own insurgency: notwithstanding spill-over from Mali, violence there largely obeys its own logic and feeds off local dynamics. The emergence of Ansarul Islam, a Burkinabe jihadist group that has perpetrated a string of attacks against security forces and state institutions, reflects widespread discontent with the prevailing social order in the country's north. Ouagadougou and most of its foreign partners recognise that a military campaign alone will not end the conflict, but their response needs to better factor in the deep social roots of the crisis, which means greater efforts to stimulate or facilitate communal dialogue. Ultimately, as militants operate between Mali and Burkina Faso, the crisis also requires that Mali secure its borders and both states deepen their police and judicial cooperation.

In Niger, the October 2017 killing of U.S. Special Forces and Nigerien soldiers near the border between Mali and Niger brought international attention to a long-neglected region that has become the Sahel's latest jihadist front line. An armed group claiming links to the Islamic State has repeatedly targeted Nigerien security forces. In response, Nigerien authorities briefly backed Malian armed groups as proxy counter-terror forces along the border. Such action can prove counterproductive, adding to the already vast quantities of weaponry in the region and fuelling intercommunal conflict. The large number of armed young men in the border area between Mali and Niger – frequently now with combat experience, including fighting both against and alongside jihadist groups – are a key source of instability. Their demobilisation and reintegration into society is a critical component of any effort to end violence.

Chad is vulnerable to instability in southern Libya, where Chadian rebels have found refuge, and in the Lake Chad basin, where the Boko Haram crisis has spread. President Idriss Deby has positioned his military as a bastion against jihadism. This stance has brought financial and political support from Western powers and largely spared him their criticism, notwithstanding the country's fragility, growing political and social discontent, and deep economic recession. Many businesses have gone bankrupt. Unemployment, especially among youth,

is high. The International Monetary Fund suspended budget support in November 2017 after Chad failed to reach an agreement to restructure loans granted by a mining and oil company. Mounting political and socio-economic challenges pose a grave long-term threat to Chad; left to fester, these problems would till fertile ground for violent actors of all stripes, including jihadists.

Going beyond military solutions

After considerable delays, the G5 Sahel joint force has started to deploy at the Mali-Niger-Burkina Faso border. But it is struggling with funding shortfalls and to define its role, particularly in relation to other forces in the Sahel, from UN peacekeepers to French and U.S. counter-terrorism forces. To secure the support of local populations, the joint force should respect the rights of those living in its operations zones. Efforts to de-escalate local conflicts and, where possible, open or exploit existing lines of communication with militant leaders should accompany military action.

Sahelian states remain worryingly dependent on security assistance. Indeed, foreign donor priorities, to some degree, drive the Sahelian states' security policies: the focus on curbing human trafficking and migrant smuggling in the region in good part reflects European worries about migration and terrorism. Yet overly strict security measures can upset fragile local economies and balances of power between central state and nomadic communities or between local authorities and ethnic or religious groups.

In this light, the Alliance for the Sahel, launched in July 2017 by France, Germany and the EU, and designed to address both security and development challenges in the Sahel region, could be a step in the right direction, if European short-term concerns over migration and terrorism do not trump efforts to reform local governance, especially in neglected rural areas. The EU and its member states should also support government initiatives to strengthen local law and order – again critical in rural areas – through its EU Capacity Building Missions (EUCAP) Sahel Mali and EUCAP Sahel Niger.

In particular, the EU, including its special representative for the Sahel, should warn governments against relying on militias as proxy counter-terrorism forces. It should instead encourage regional leaders to promote bottom-up reconciliation through local dialogues, especially in Mali. In Chad, the EU and its member states should not only pursue short-term security objectives but also seek to check, as best possible, the government's authoritarian impulses so that political space does not shrink further.

Zimbabwe: An Opportunity for Reform?

Amid a rise in authoritarian tendencies across parts of the continent, Robert Mugabe's resignation and the November 2017 appointment of his former deputy, Emmerson Mnangagwa, as president make Zimbabwe a potential exception, carrying fresh prospects for reform and economic recovery. Mnangagwa and

his administration have set a different tone, promising to clean up government, reach across political, ethnic and racial lines, strengthen Zimbabwe's democracy and reform its moribund economy. Re-engaging with Western partners and financial institutions is an integral component of his strategy. Questions remain, however, as to whether Mnangagwa's administration represents a genuine change or simply a reconfiguration of the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), now dominated by security sector interests and factions aligned to the new president. International actors will have an important role in encouraging the reforms that will determine whether the country can recover economically and steer a more open and democratic course.

African and non-African governments alike agree that Zimbabwe's continued isolation would be counterproductive. Following the lead of the AU and Southern African Development Community (SADC), actors including Western governments and China – most of which were happy to see the back of Mugabe – stopped short of calling the "military-assisted transition" a coup d'état, thus ensuring they could maintain diplomatic relations with and provide assistance to the government. Most also agree that the new government should be given an opportunity to demonstrate it is serious about its commitments. But while encouragement and incentives are important, Zimbabwe's partners, including the EU, should calibrate support to maintain pressure on the government to enact both political and economic reforms, particularly given ZANU-PF's long track record of backtracking on its promises.

So far, Mnangagwa has set an encouraging tone, focusing on the need to resuscitate the economy and open the political system. But doubts remain. Questions surround in particular the government's willingness to address structural economic issues through fiscal discipline, transparency and accountability. They also surround its commitment to a genuinely inclusive political system; in response, the opposition and civil society – although weak and fragmented – have united in calling for a level electoral playing field, enhanced participation, and strengthened institutional checks and balances.

A calibrated framework for EU engagement in Zimbabwe

Although relations have long been strained, the EU resumed direct development cooperation with Harare in November 2014. Since then, with member states, it has engaged in limited senior-level political dialogue. The EU set out a framework for engagement in the National Indicative Program for Zimbabwe 2014-2020, focusing on three sectors: health, agriculture-based economic development, and governance as well as institution-building.

While this framework remains relevant, Mugabe's ouster provides the EU an opportunity to adjust its approach and offer Zimbabwe the promise of a deeper relationship should certain conditions be met (a promise which is explicit in the 22 January 2018 Foreign Affairs Council Conclusions on Zimbabwe). This would require determining levels of support based on realistic deliverables and deadlines, based partly on timelines set by the new president and government themselves (such as in Mnangagwa's December presentation to ZANU-PF's extraordinary Congress, his State of the Nation address and the government's

commitments to deliverables within the first 100 days in office). Specifically, the EU could link its support to reforms in four key areas:

- *Security sector*, including initiatives to professionalise the police forces and provide for civilian supervision, improve parliamentary oversight of the defence sector and repeal legislation inconsistent with the 2013 constitution, such as the Public Order and Security Act (which curtails rights such as freedom of assembly) and the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (which allows the state to severely control the work of the media and limit free speech).

- *Elections*, including guaranteeing greater independence for the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission and credible voter rolls for Zimbabweans at home and abroad. The EU also should follow up on the president's recent offer to allow EU observers to monitor the 2018 elections.

- *Economic sector*, including organisation of a broad dialogue on the government's economic reform strategy to be led by an independent committee, including representatives from the opposition, civil society, the churches and important commercial sectors.

- *National reconciliation*, notably by bolstering the National Peace and Reconciliation Commission and extending its mandate so as to form a truly independent body able to deal with past government abuses.

In parallel, the EU should step up support for institutions such as the Auditor General, Zimbabwe Anti-Corruption Commission and Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission while continuing to engage civil society organisations, and support their efforts to track government reforms, particularly those related to security, governance, fiscal accountability and anti-corruption.

Asia

Asia's overarching security dynamic is marked by a gradual recalibration of power relations driven by China's growing influence. This shift has been long underway. But mixed signals from the new U.S. administration and its belligerence around the Korean peninsula crisis (described in two January 2018 Crisis Group Reports) bring fresh uncertainty, and have further shaken confidence in a regional security architecture that traditionally has rested on U.S. alliances. Japan and India seek greater influence – partly to offset China, partly in their own right – and have strengthened their bilateral relations and ties to other powers, notably Australia and Vietnam. Wider security in Asia will hinge upon whether these shifts and competing interests can be managed peacefully: the risk of an arms race is real and opposing claims over the South China Sea remain a flashpoint, notwithstanding Beijing's active diplomacy with other littoral states over the past year.

If Asia's big power rivalries are likely to define the future of its security, its deadliest conflicts today have other drivers. Across parts of South and South East Asia, leaders show increasing resistance to dialogue and compromise with domestic rivals, a tendency aggravated by majoritarian politics and cultural or religious chauvinism. As elsewhere, they appear increasingly ready to use force, a trend most evident in brutal operations by Myanmar forces and local militias that forced much of Myanmar's Rohingya minority to flee to Bangladesh, and in Afghanistan, where a military escalation by U.S. and Afghan forces against the Taliban insurgency looks set to provoke (indeed, already has been accompanied by) a bloody response from insurgents. The two crises, which are covered in greater depth below, have both profound humanitarian consequences and regional implications (the former feeding Bangladesh-Myanmar tensions; the latter having long involved an array of regional and major powers).

A number of high stakes elections in 2018 also carry the risk either of bloodshed or of entrenching incumbents little inclined to accommodate their opponents. Bangladesh is almost certain to see violence around polls scheduled for the final quarter of 2018, particularly given the ruling Awami League's rejection of the opposition Bangladesh National Party's concerns over the administration of the vote and the additional strain placed on the country by its hosting of hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees. In Cambodia, the government's arrest and shutdown of the opposition means polls this year are unlikely to be credible; the risk of violence remains, particularly if younger voters feel they have no good options at the ballot box. In Pakistan, general elections in August could bring the country's second constitutional transfer of power. Yet, those polls could be imperilled by a major political or security crisis, or disagreement over the composition of the caretaker government that is to conduct them. In Afghanistan too, delayed preparations for parliamentary elections scheduled for September 2018 have already provoked friction between President Ashraf

Ghani's government and his opponents; those polls, if they take place as scheduled, almost certainly will usher a period of heightened tension if not a full-blown political crisis.

A final risk to watch is the emergence of new forms of militancy. These might be inspired by the Islamic State (ISIS), though whether that movement will survive the loss of its self-proclaimed caliphate in Iraq and Syria and, if so, in what form, remains uncertain. In the southern Philippines, a local militant group declaring affiliation with ISIS and bolstered by foreign fighters captured the city of Marawi in May 2017 and held it for five months, before being ousted by Filipino forces. The aerial destruction of Marawi by government forces, the heavy civilian toll and the government's glacial movement on passing a law to encode its 2014 peace deal with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front – a more established insurgent group in the southern Philippines – all risk playing into jihadists' hands. So too could the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar and Bangladesh: while little suggests that ISIS or al-Qaeda will find ready recruits among Rohingya refugees, both movements have attempted to exploit the Rohingya's plight to enlist followers and inspire attacks.

A Dangerous Escalation in Afghanistan

In 2018, Afghanistan is likely to witness escalating violence and could also face political crisis. President Ashraf's National Unity Government (NUG) should work with U.S. officials to ensure Washington's new strategy has a political, not merely military, component. It also should reach out to opposition politicians and parties, advance preparations for credible parliamentary elections and counter the perception that power is being centralised along ethnic lines – all measures the EU and its member states, which retain influence in Kabul, should encourage. With the U.S. for now determined to escalate its military campaign against the Taliban insurgency, prospects for progress toward a political settlement in 2018 appear dim. Still, beyond their contribution to the training, advising and assisting of Afghan security forces, the EU and European leaders and member states should continue to emphasise the importance of such a settlement and help preserve channels of communication to the insurgency.

A military strategy with no political framework

Washington's new Afghanistan strategy involves stepping up the military campaign against the Taliban through U.S. airstrikes and mostly Afghan-led, U.S.-supported ground offensives. U.S. President Donald Trump removed deadlines for the withdrawal of U.S. forces, while increasing the number of troops on the ground by 4,000, to reach a total of 15,000 (still far below the 100,000 deployed as part of the 2011 surge). European NATO allies have committed to sending more military personnel to train and advise the Afghan security forces. Although the increase is modest – less than a thousand officers – it is a symbolically significant expression of support. U.S. officials maintain that the

goal is to reverse the Taliban's momentum and leave the group no choice but to enter into talks about a political settlement, although when such talks would take place is unclear. U.S. efforts to engage the Taliban – or at least encourage them to enter talks with the Afghan government – appear to have petered out.

Over the past year, the Taliban have stepped up their offensive, launching massive high-casualty attacks, sometimes by driving military vehicles – usually stolen from the Afghan army – laden with explosives into military and police compounds. These demoralising bombings are likely to continue. The Taliban also could continue their pattern of spectacular urban attacks to shake public confidence in the government; a 27 January attack, which saw insurgents detonate explosives packed in an ambulance on a busy Kabul street, killing more than 100 and injuring at least 200, mostly civilians, is only the latest such strike. For some years already, insurgents have used increasingly sophisticated equipment and, in some places, engaged Afghan forces in direct – as opposed to asymmetric – confrontation. The Taliban also appear to enjoy stronger connections than ever before to outside powers, not only their traditional patron (Pakistan), but also Iran and Russia. Afghan civilians are likely to bear the brunt of any escalation.

Prospects in 2018 for serious progress toward a peace process are slim. U.S. officials say their new strategy integrates diplomatic and military efforts to achieve a political settlement with the Taliban. Yet diplomacy clearly has been downgraded. The U.S. undertook only a single observable political effort in 2017, which was to pressure Pakistan to stop harbouring and supporting the Taliban and their Haqqani network allies. Even that initiative is unlikely to bear fruit, however, as cuts to U.S. military assistance almost certainly will not alter the strategic calculus of Islamabad's security establishment that drives Pakistani support for Afghan insurgents.

U.S. and Afghan officials pay increasing attention to what they describe as a growing threat from foreign terrorist groups, particularly the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-KP). In truth, however, non-Taliban groups contributed only a small percentage of the violence in 2017. Despite dramatic and shocking attacks in urban centres, the IS-KP has, for the most part, been held in check by U.S. and Afghan forces, on the one hand, and the Taliban, on the other.

Politics in crisis

National politics are likely to suck oxygen from counter-insurgency efforts as President Ashraf Ghani's unity government may well face a political crisis in the coming year. Parliamentary elections, already postponed in October 2016 and now scheduled for July 2018, are at risk of further delay while presidential elections are scheduled for 2019. Delayed reforms and preparations risk undermining prospects for clean polling, according to Tadamichi Yamamoto, UN Secretary-General's special representative for Afghanistan. Insecurity across much of the country may also obstruct a credible vote.

The government faces a political opposition that is larger and more diverse than previously has been the case during the post-Taliban era. Afghan politics may be factious and fluid, but, at least for now, several groups have aligned against the Ghani government, in part because they see stalled election prepara-

tions as evidence it is looking to manipulate the vote. Many accuse the president of tightening his grip on power and deepening ethnic divisions.

Ghani's vice president, Abdul Rashid Dostum, an Uzbek warlord who left for Turkey amid a criminal investigation into allegations (which he denies) that he abducted and raped a political rival, has formed an alliance with influential Tajik and Hazara leaders. A spat between Ghani and Atta Mohammad Noor, the powerful governor of Balkh province who is resisting the president's efforts to remove him from his post, also threatens turmoil. Atta has the support of a major part of Jamiat-e Islami, one of the largest political parties. That he seems ready to defy the central government so brazenly, even violently, sets a dangerous precedent for regional power brokers seeking to slip Kabul's grip.

Powerful politicians also are arrayed against the government. Ex-President Hamid Karzai has been mobilising to convene a Loya Jirga or grand council of tribal elders to debate the country's future. While Karzai argues a council would unite the bitterly divided Afghan polity, his critics accuse him of trying to shake up politics and regain power.

President Ghani has tried to fend off his rivals and shore up his legitimacy with the backing of Western powers. But external support is an inadequate substitute for domestic approval, particularly with elections looming. Ghani needs to invest more in building national consensus, which will be critical to manage conflict and street protests should a political crisis unfold.

Making external influence more constructive

The EU and member states have difficult tasks ahead: they must simultaneously help keep the government from unravelling; support, along with the UN, election preparations; encourage President Ghani to reach out to his opponents; and assist the U.S.-led battle against the Taliban, all the while talking to the insurgents.

In this respect, the EU continues to enjoy clout with various Afghan political actors, even if less than some years ago. Their reduced footprint in Afghanistan notwithstanding, the EU's humanitarian aid and civil protection arm (ECHO) provided €29.5 million in humanitarian assistance in 2017 to help the country's growing numbers of displaced people and other civilian victims. More broadly, over the past decade ECHO has provided some €756 million in life-saving aid. It should now use the resulting influence to push for progress toward a political settlement to the conflict. Specifically, it should press and encourage the Afghan and U.S. governments to go down this path, while ensuring that lines of communication to the insurgency remain open. If signs re-emerge that the Trump administration is planning to close the Taliban's political representation office in Doha, Qatar – which it threatened to do in 2017 but then apparently reconsidered – European leaders should actively discourage such a move. Although EU influence in Kabul suffered when it closed its special representative's office and downgraded its diplomatic presence last year, there may at some point be opportunities for Europeans to help bring the Taliban to the table. Indeed, mistrust between the Taliban and the Ghani government means credible third parties will, at some point, need to step in.

Myanmar/Bangladesh: A Humanitarian Calamity and a Two-country Crisis

Violent operations by the military, border police and vigilante groups in Myanmar have forced some 750,000 Rohingya to flee northern Rakhine for Bangladesh over the last twelve months. These numbers represent more than 85 per cent of the Rohingya population in the three affected townships. Significant bilateral and multilateral criticism – in the UN Security Council, General Assembly and Human Rights Council – has failed to temper the approach of the Myanmar government and military. The UN, as well as the U.S. and other governments, have declared the 2017 campaign against the Rohingya "ethnic cleansing" and likely crimes against humanity; some have raised the possibility that it may constitute genocide.

Several hundred Rohingya continue to flee each week. For the more than 100,000 who remain, as well as the non-Rohingya population, life is extremely difficult. Security fears, curfews and checkpoints severely restrict civilian movement, particularly for the Rohingya, making it very difficult to reach farms, fishing grounds and markets. The International Committee of the Red Cross is exerting enormous efforts to deliver aid to those in need, but the government has denied access to most other agencies, such as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, human rights bodies and media outlets. Myanmar also refused to allow a UN-appointed international fact-finding mission to visit the region and subsequently announced it would no longer grant visas or cooperate with the special rapporteur on human rights. Two Reuters journalists were arrested in Yangon on 12 December after gathering evidence of military abuse, including information about a mass grave; they are being held incommunicado and face charges under the Official Secrets Act.

Continuing violence in northern Rakhine also undermines prospects for a solution to the crisis. The Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) militant group (whose 25 August 2017 attacks triggered the crisis) claimed responsibility for a 5 January ambush on a military vehicle that injured five soldiers – the first known attack by the group since the end of its unilateral ceasefire in October. While ARSA's ability to sustain an insurgency remains uncertain, even occasional minor attacks have a major political impact, amplifying security concerns and sharpening anti-Rohingya sentiment.

Prospects for repatriation

Many observers have expressed concern that the November 2017 signing of a repatriation "arrangement" between Myanmar and Bangladesh, with a two-month timeframe for repatriations to start, could lead to the premature and unsafe return of Rohingya to northern Rakhine. For now, however, that appears unlikely, given that the process has stalled. Though Myanmar has declared its readiness to commence processing returnees through two new reception centres as of 23 January, it has yet to initiate much of the detailed logistical and policy

planning required for a successful operation on this scale; for its part, Bangladesh announced on 22 January that it was postponing the start of repatriations.

Many of the 750,000 Rohingya who fled northern Rakhine over the past year would return under the right circumstances: Myanmar is their home, where most have lived for generations, and they see no future for themselves and their children in the Bangladesh camps. But there is unlikely to be any voluntary repatriation in the near term. Many refugees are still deeply traumatised and remain fearful for their physical safety should they return. The paramilitary Border Guard Police, which operates only in northern Rakhine, and Rakhine vigilante groups remain unchecked; Rohingya blame both for brutalities. Curfew orders and other onerous restrictions on freedom of movement remain in place, making it impossible to sustain livelihoods. The prevailing political environment also gives the Rohingya little hope for a positive future in Myanmar. The authorities deny most reports of abuses and have made little effort to address fundamental issues of desegregation, rights and citizenship.

Bangladesh's government is wary of openly espousing the Rohingya's cause for fear of stirring tensions with Myanmar and losing the support of its main backer, India, and main trading partner, China, both supportive of Myanmar. It wants the refugees to return as quickly as possible. But at the same time, Dhaka is reluctant to force refugees to return given domestic political dynamics ahead of the 2018 general elections and the glare of the global media and political spotlight. The upshot is that hundreds of thousands of traumatised, hopeless Rohingya will remain confined to the Bangladesh camps for the foreseeable future, requiring a huge humanitarian operation. Most Rohingya have not been involved in violence and there is little evidence of jihadist influence in their communities. Nevertheless, their trying circumstances could create risky new dynamics for Bangladesh and the region.

Situation in Bangladesh

Bangladesh is facing the consequences of the fastest refugee movement across an international border since the Rwanda genocide in 1994. More than one million Muslim Rohingya – a figure that includes refugees from previous exoduses – now live in camps near Cox's Bazar in the south-eastern corner of the country, close to the border with Myanmar. The area is among the country's poorest. Since the influx of the Rohingya refugees, local wages have fallen while prices have climbed. Discontent among local residents – now in the minority – is rising. Camp conditions, though improving, are still desperate: it is a major challenge to procure water and fuel without depriving other residents, and the threat of disease looms. Addressing the emergency will cost around $1 billion annually – 0.5 per cent of Bangladesh's GDP – and donors are paying most of the aid bill.

While relations between Bangladesh and Myanmar are tense, there appears to be little risk of direct conflict between the two countries' armies. Likewise, in the view of Bangladeshi security forces, the possibility of the displaced Rohingya being recruited or used by Bangladeshi or transnational jihadist groups is low. Perhaps more dangerous, ahead of national elections to be held near the end of 2018, is that the presence of a large refugee population could ignite the

simmering communal conflict among Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus as well as ethnic minorities, especially in the highly militarised Chittagong Hill Tracts. It also is worth noting that these refugees – whose presence Bangladeshi politicians privately suggest could well be permanent – are located in a part of the country where the influence of Hefazat-e-Islam (Protectors of Islam), a hardline coalition of government-allied Islamist organisations, is strongest. The Hefazat was first to respond to the refugee crisis. It has since threatened to launch a jihad against Myanmar unless it stops persecuting the Rohingya. Hefazat has in recent years gained significant influence over the nominally secular Awami League, the ruling party, and now holds effective veto power over the government's social and religious policies.

The gravest security risks, though, are associated with the possibility of bungled repatriation. While no repatriation appears likely any time soon, the return of the Rohingya under the wrong conditions – notably in the absence of rights for Rohingya returning to Myanmar – would jeopardise the lives of refugees and prolong the crisis. The further suffering of the Rohingya in Myanmar itself could lead foreign jihadist fighters, notably from South Asia, to adopt the Rohingya's cause; Bangladesh itself might even lend support to a cross-border insurgency. One way to guard against this outcome is to ensure UNHCR involvement in any repatriation process, a demand many Rohingya living in camps have themselves made. But while Dhaka is not opposed to UN involvement, it continues to seek a bilateral arrangement with Myanmar knowing the Myanmar government is more likely to accept repatriation without what it would consider intrusive international oversight. Moreover, Bangladesh has traditionally refused to grant stateless Rohingya refugees rights; in fact, the government refuses to call them refugees and threatens to move some to a flood-prone island in the Bay of Bengal. Outside powers, including the EU and its member states, should not underestimate Dhaka's willingness to return the refugees if an opportunity presented itself in the future – even under conditions that are far from ideal.

Bangladesh's current short-term policies risk producing slum-like conditions in the camps, which would amount to their protracted, donor-funded confinement. The Rohingya are barred from work and their children from state-run schools, forcing many to work illegally and leaving poorly regulated religious schools as their only option. The government's approach is rooted in the belief that state support in Bangladesh for the Rohingya risks attracting more refugees. With the population now mainly in Bangladesh, this logic no longer holds; the government should take steps to allow the Rohingya to better integrate including by working and attending regular schools.

Straddling two countries and competing preoccupations

The challenge for Bangladesh and its international partners is to craft a long-term humanitarian response to provide for the refugees, while maintaining diplomatic engagement and other forms of pressure on the Myanmar authorities to create favourable conditions for their eventual voluntary, safe and dignified return. At the same time, they should start laying the groundwork for steps toward more politically sensitive policies, notably integration in Bangladesh or

resettlement elsewhere, in the most likely scenario that voluntary repatriation proves impossible. For now, Dhaka and many Western diplomats resist such discussion, not wanting to ease pressure on Myanmar; Delhi, too, rejects it, fearing that the Rohingya may end up in India. But given the slim prospects of the Rohingya's return, preparing for their potential integration in Bangladesh – a process which already is informally underway – and the possibility of resettlement elsewhere would make sense.

Regional actors have critical roles to play. China and India in particular are among Myanmar's and Bangladesh's closest international partners; neither power wishes to see a festering two-country border conflict in the Bay of Bengal. The EU and its member states should engage Beijing and New Delhi to forge a common approach to encourage Myanmar to commit to a pathway to citizenship for most Rohingya, in keeping with the recommendations of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State headed by Kofi Annan.

The EU and its members also should impress on Dhaka that botched repatriations would present the greatest security risk, even while acknowledging the enormous burden Bangladesh is shouldering. They should work closely with the government, UN agencies and humanitarian organisations to determine how best to coordinate the enormous task of providing services and relief to the Rohingya in the camps. These decisions should be made in consultation with the Rohingya themselves – including women, whose voices are even more rarely heard, in part due to cultural barriers. The EU pledged an additional €30 million at an October UN conference, but funding remains insufficient given the magnitude of what inevitably will be a prolonged crisis. Simultaneously, the EU and its member states should use their diplomatic leverage to pressure Bangladesh and Myanmar not to implement their repatriation agreement without adequate international oversight. Finally, they should continue to push for accountability, including supporting efforts to gather the detailed evidence necessary to identify those responsible for violence against the Rohingya and their forced expulsion.

Europe and Central Asia

The conflicts in Europe, notably in eastern Ukraine, Nagorno-Karabakh and south-eastern Turkey, continue to exact heavy tolls. All have local, regional and international dimensions. But the standoff between Russia and Western powers complicates efforts to settle these conflicts and prevent escalation. And other daunting challenges confronting Europe – from the refugee influx, Brexit, the Catalonia crisis and Turkey's eastward pivot to the chill in EU relations with the U.S. under President Donald Trump – pull even more attention away from the region's deadliest crises.

The Ukraine crisis, discussed in greater depth below, will soon enter its fifth year, with no end in sight. Russia's annexation of Crimea, which Kyiv, along with the U.S. and most of Europe, considers illegal, increasingly appears irreversible. In the eastern region of Donbas, much of which is controlled by Russian-backed separatists, more than 10,500 people have died since 2014, while ceasefires are regularly agreed on and just as often violated. The humanitarian fallout is dire, even as aid dwindles and the international spotlight fades. The prospects of Ukraine winning its other war – on deeply entrenched corruption – look equally gloomy unless Kyiv recommits to reform.

The conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh is an oft-overlooked tinderbox. A handful of Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) observers monitors a frequently violated ceasefire along the line of contact in one of the world's most militarised areas. Escalation could draw in outside powers: Armenia and Azerbaijan have defence and strategic partnerships and mutual support agreements with Russia and Turkey, respectively (though Moscow, along with Paris and Washington, co-chairs the OSCE Minsk Group that steers the settlement process, and is also the biggest arms supplier to both Yerevan and Baku). A bout of violence in April 2016 demonstrated that the danger remains acute, despite the resumption of talks between the Armenian and Azerbaijani presidents in late 2017.

In Turkey, the conflict between the state and Kurdish insurgent group, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), has claimed at least 3,350 lives since July 2015, when the two-and-a-half-year ceasefire in this three-decade conflict collapsed. The fighting is entwined with developments in Syria's civil war: in January, Turkey launched an offensive in Afrin, a haven in north-western Syria controlled by the Syrian Kurdish armed group, the People's Protection Units (YPG), the Syrian affiliate of the PKK. De-escalation of the PKK conflict appears improbable ahead of Turkey's 2019 presidential, parliamentary and local elections, in which the vote of nationalist constituencies is likely to be decisive.

The European periphery faces other protracted conflicts, such as those in breakaway regions of Georgia and Moldova. While prospects for resolving these conflicts are minimal, none is likely to escalate significantly in 2018.

Ukraine: An Opportunity for Reinforced European Diplomacy

Four years after the Maidan protests and the outbreak of hostilities in the eastern region of Donbas, Ukraine is at a crossroads. A war on two fronts has stalled on both. In the east, humanitarian conditions are worsening, with minimal progress made toward implementation of the Minsk agreements, which Kyiv's Western allies and Russia maintain offer the only way out of the crisis. On the other front – Ukraine's efforts to tackle pervasive corruption and misrule – the government is backsliding, neglecting many issues that brought throngs of Ukrainians into the streets four years ago. The EU, Ukraine's key political ally, should be stricter in conditioning its vast financial and technical support for the country, while stepping up its diplomatic engagement in the Donbas.

The crisis in eastern Ukraine

The outlook in the east remains bleak. Violence over the past four years has killed some 10,500 and displaced 1.6 million within Ukraine. The UN's relief efforts – 3.4 million Ukrainians require humanitarian aid – are underfunded even as cold weather sets in. While Russian interference remains the principal driver of the Donbas crisis, it is not the only problem: Ukrainian resistance to the Minsk agreements is growing. In this difficult arena, the EU and its member states should look to take advantage of even small openings.

One such opening might be Moscow's circulation in September 2017 of a draft UN Security Council resolution on peacekeeping in the Donbas. There are good reasons to be suspicious of Russia's motives, not least that the narrow mandate and lightly armed force its proposal envisages would more likely freeze the conflict than resolve it. Nonetheless, in a crisis with so few resolution opportunities, this one is worth testing.

For now, the U.S. has taken the lead, with its Special Envoy Kurt Volker pushing Moscow to accept a mission with a more robust mandate, notably including the deployment of peacekeepers along the Ukrainian-Russian border. The EU, however, largely has been missing in action on efforts to settle the conflict. It should assume a greater role and consider appointing an EU envoy or representative for Ukraine conflict issues.

Europe's participation is important. The leverage afforded by the significant assistance it provides to Ukraine means it is well placed both to advance discussions on peacekeeping and encourage Kyiv to adopt a more constructive approach to Minsk. Brussels should continue to urge Moscow to withdraw fully from the Donbas, but in parallel urge Kyiv to develop a strategy to build consensus within Ukrainian political elites and society more broadly on how to eventually reintegrate separatist-held areas.

Restoring political support for Minsk in Ukraine is critical. Opposition has become a badge of honour for many Ukrainians, who believe the agreements, signed in the wake of two disastrous military defeats, reaffirm Russian and separatist gains in the conflict rather than guaranteeing a just resolution. But

shelving Minsk does not appear to be a viable option. Instead, Kyiv should initiate a genuine debate on how, when security in the east improves, it can implement the agreements' political provisions – such as amnesty for separatists and the devolution of power – without upsetting national cohesion or stability. The EU could use its influence in Kyiv to encourage such discussion, which is currently non-existent.

Kyiv must also work to improve the lives of Donbas residents affected by the conflict. Of particular concern is the practice of tying social payments to IDP status; because a large number of displaced cannot afford the higher rents in government-controlled areas, many of them return to separatist zones, in the process either losing IDP status and social payments or making frequent, arduous journeys across the line of separation. This predicament has fanned anger at Kyiv, as well as resentment between communities. Nor does the state have a housing program specifically geared toward IDPs or, for the most part, allow those with property in separatist areas to benefit from existing affordable housing. Many civil society experts say such policies sabotage prospects for reconciliation.

The EU should continue to push for stronger internally displaced person (IDP) rights protection and support for conflict-affected residents, including delinking social payments from IDP status. It should also scale up funding of affordable housing in conflict-affected areas, which would ideally be made available to both the most vulnerable IDPs and other disadvantaged residents.

Anti-corruption and civic engagement

Kyiv has made significant strides since Maidan, notably in macro-economic stabilisation, ongoing decentralisation reform and the creation of several new anti-corruption bodies. Yet much remains to be done, as domestic reformers and donors – including the EU – acknowledge. Lack of clear progress fighting corruption is exemplified by the late 2017 moves – led by the general prosecutor's office and deputies from the ruling party – to undermine the National Anti-Corruption Bureau (NABU). It has provoked deep cynicism among many reform-minded Ukrainians, who question not only their leaders' commitment to change but also the determination of Western governments to hold them accountable.

In this light, the EU was right – from a political, technical and public relations standpoint – to withhold the last tranche of its €1.8 billion Macro-Financial Assistance (MFA) package in December 2017, due to Kyiv's failure to meet four conditions placed on those funds. The EU should adhere to strict conditionality in 2018, especially regarding anti-corruption reforms. In this regard, a recent EU report, which reviewed Ukraine's and other countries' fulfilment of their EU visa liberalisation requirements, called on Kyiv to take urgent steps to sustain anti-corruption reforms and recommended an independent and specialised anti-corruption court, was a welcome step.

Decentralisation can be important in the fight against corruption, by opening opportunities for greater citizen political engagement and ushering in more

accountable local leaders. The EU has several tools it can deploy in this respect. Along with member states, it should continue to fund the Ukraine-Local Empowerment, Accountability and Development Programme (U-LEAD), which provides material and training support to oblast-level decentralisation efforts. Brussels also should encourage Kyiv to overcome remaining roadblocks to decentralisation, including by clarifying procedures municipalities need to follow to merge administratively with neighbouring constituencies. The still-centralised locales include poor rural towns that would benefit from increased funding and latitude for budgetary planning if authority were decentralised. More broadly, the EU should consider supporting further outreach and training in oblasts that have been slower to decentralise.

Removing unnecessary barriers to reform should also be a priority. These obstacles include Kyiv's refusal to greenlight local elections in areas near the conflict zone, ostensibly due to security concerns. While in many places concerns are real, local residents and experts claim officials also invoke them to avoid holding polls in areas where pro-Russia parties enjoy support. Locally elected and empowered municipal administrations with greater control over budgetary planning could more effectively identify and target local needs, such as repairing war-related infrastructure damage. By appearing to impede such efforts, Kyiv amplifies anti-Western voices.

Latin America and Caribbean

2018 is a year of Latin American transitions. Its largest democracies – notably Brazil, Colombia and Mexico – will hold elections. Venezuela and Cuba, the continent's two most authoritarian states, will, in the former's case, hold a presidential vote, and, in the latter's, look to transfer power from the Castro family that has ruled for more than half a century. The political calendar presages uncertainty, especially in a climate of slow economic growth, virulent polarisation and international turbulence, given the unpredictability of U.S. policy under President Donald Trump.

The backdrop to Colombia's presidential elections, held from May to June, epitomises Latin American political conditions. The outgoing president, Juan Manuel Santos, is deeply unpopular while both the Senate and Supreme Court are tainted by corruption scandals. Over 30 contenders have joined the presidential race, with outsiders and opponents of the 2016 peace deal with the FARC guerrilla ascendant.

Capturing and channelling public discontent need not drive politics to extremes: Ecuador's government remains centre left; Argentina's centre right. But corruption and rising violent crime contribute to the perception that elected leaders serve the interests of elites, not ordinary citizens (indeed, 73 per cent of Latin Americans say political elites serve the powerful). This belief paves the way for candidates pledging to upset the status quo and disrupt political convention.

Left-leaning candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who currently leads polls in Mexico, has vowed new vigour in the fight against corruption, mooted an amnesty for drug traffickers and could bring new hostility to U.S.-Mexican relations. Brazilian leaders are almost universally soiled by the Petrobras and Odebrecht scandals. Despite featuring numerous contenders, the contest seems to be narrowing to a choice between a return to an established political leader, likely with a diminished stature (possibly ex-President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who is still popular but struggling to elude potentially disqualifying criminal charges) and draconian anti-crime populism (Jair Bolsonaro).

Low trust in state institutions not only shapes campaigns but also could undermine the integrity of the entire electoral process. A disputed vote count in Honduras at the end of 2017 provoked nationwide protests and, in turn, a security crackdown. Were Mexico to face another post-electoral deadlock – such as that provoked in 2006 by López Obrador's rejection of results and the authorities' refusal to conduct a recount – the country would run the risk of political convulsion. The danger would be all the greater given historically high levels of criminal violence.

In Venezuela, with Latin America's most overtly partisan electoral system, public contestation of this sort seems improbable. Voter suppression, the disqualification of opposition candidates and outright fraud enabled the government to win regional and local elections in 2017, survive mass protests and

prepare for a presidential contest this year, which President Nicolás Maduro currently looks unlikely to lose. Appalling economic conditions and tensions with neighbouring states, however, indicate that the government's political hegemony will continue to be corroded by emigration, sporadic outbreaks of unrest and border tensions.

Volatile border areas illustrate the difficulties of securing many Latin American hinterlands without stable cooperation among states. With Venezuela and Colombia at loggerheads, these countries' common frontier is a hotbed of contraband, drug trafficking and militia activity. President Trump's "America First" policy has imperilled security cooperation along the Mexico-U.S. border, which the Mexican government has explicitly conditioned on an outcome to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) negotiations that does not jeopardise commercial interdependence between the two countries. Decisions in Washington could threaten Central American countries, too: the termination in January 2018 of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for close to 200,000 Salvadoran residents in the U.S. displayed indifference to both El Salvador's extreme insecurity and the uptick in violence triggered by past deportations.

Faced with this degree of uncertainty, the EU should continue its support for clean and transparent elections, notably through its observation missions, as well as for anti-corruption efforts. Of particular concern are the likely challenges posed by electoral results and intra-regional tensions to the Colombian peace process, a negotiated solution to the Venezuelan crisis, and humane treatment of migrants in the Americas. European solidarity, diplomatic engagement and financial backing may well be needed to defend endangered parts of the Colombian peace process. EU humanitarian support remains essential to addressing the worsening conditions in Venezuela and the continued exodus from the country following deadlocked talks between government and opposition, and the likely re-election of President Maduro. Meanwhile, the EU will remain a vital source of support for efforts to defend migrants' well-being in the highly insecure transit routes from Central America through Mexico, and support a coordinated regional response to forced displacement.

Security and Electoral Perils for Colombia's Peace Accord

Colombia's 2018 presidential and congressional elections can be understood in part as a second plebiscite on the government's peace agreement with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and a crucial test of that deal's resilience. Although voters narrowly rejected the accord in October 2016, it was then amended to include opposition proposals and approved two months later by Congress.

The outgoing government of President Juan Manuel Santos (who is ineligible to run for a third term) is deeply unpopular. High-level corruption scandals within both the government and the judiciary, as well as anaemic economic growth, have eroded not only Santos' support, but the legitimacy of the po-

litical system as a whole. Partly as a result, about 30 contenders have entered the presidential race, the majority campaigning as independents outside formal political party structures. Opinion polls reveal highly fragmented voting preferences revolving around a group of six to eight main candidates. Sergio Fajardo, a centre-left former mayor who supports the peace agreement, has been leading the polls, followed by Iván Duque, from former President Álvaro Uribe's party, who staunchly opposes it. Far-left candidate Gustavo Petro and right-wing Germán Vargas Lleras, in favour of and against the peace accord, respectively, are jostling for third place, although the latter has the advantage of a large patronage network.

The peace deal may be the dominant issue in a possible second round of presidential voting. Government supporters rightly point to the accord's achievements: the FARC's handover of arms and the establishment of a new, legal political party by guerrillas. Most importantly, violence has clearly decreased since peace talks began in 2012. But implementation of the rest of the agreement has advanced more slowly than expected in a climate of guerrilla mistrust and opposition hostility. Former combatants doubt the government's commitment and ability to make new institutions effective, or pass about 30 more laws needed to implement the agreement. The government had only been able to get the Congress to approve ten of them by the end of 2017. Congressional resistance to the agreement, above all its transitional justice provisions, has grown with the approach of legislative elections in March 2018.

Disappointment with the peace agreement is understandable given the scope of its ambitions. It promised to resolve the underlying causes of the five-decade war through rural reform, offer redress for victims through transitional justice, open up the political system and introduce incentives to reduce cultivation of illicit crops. Following the FARC's demobilisation, the army, navy and police were expected to quickly establish state presence and stabilise territories where the guerrillas had operated for decades. Instead, other armed groups have seized the opportunity to establish control over rural communities and criminal rackets. These groups are suspected in most of the 170 killings of community leaders during 2017.

These groups include the remaining guerrilla force, the National Liberation Army (ELN), present mainly along the Venezuelan border and Pacific coast; approximately ten FARC dissident fronts in several regions; and armed bands linked exclusively to drug trafficking activities, such as the Gaitán Self-Defence Forces (AGC), based principally in the north-western Urabá region. In Tumaco, a poor city in south-west Colombia and a hub for cocaine exports via the Pacific, three FARC dissident groups are vying for control, killing suspected rivals or anyone refusing to make extortion payments. Twelve people were murdered there in the first three days of January 2018, most of them killed along main roads in broad daylight.

Challenges to implementing the accord

To implement the peace accords in coming months, authorities face three main challenges: providing security in many rural areas, reintegrating former FARC fighters and convincing farmers to substitute licit for illicit crops.

The government initially planned to improve security with mobile army and police operations, but this half-measure allowed armed groups simply to retreat and wait for state forces to leave. The army announced a new plan in December 2017 (Plan Orus) that would send security forces on a permanent basis to over 500 prioritised villages throughout the country.

In the meantime, peace negotiations with the ELN have been hampered by lack of trust at the negotiating table and a general atmosphere of public scepticism or apathy. The government recently reshuffled its negotiating team to speed up progress, though attacks by the ELN on other armed groups have undermined public support for talks. On 9 January, the ELN failed to extend the ceasefire in place since October, and resumed a campaign of violence including oil pipeline bombings, kidnappings and the killing of members of state forces, principally in the eastern department of Arauca. Efforts to renegotiate the ceasefire are now afoot.

Meanwhile, former FARC fighters must be reintegrated into society to prevent them from reverting to organised violence, but the process has advanced at a snail's pace. There is still no national reintegration plan, which means that progress generally depends on the initiative of local FARC commanders. There is also no national-level education program for former fighters, except one financed and implemented by the international community. Part of the government would prefer to shift FARC ex-combatants into the highly successful individual reintegration program, which has been used previously for demobilised paramilitary combatants and guerrilla deserters. The FARC, however, wants to pursue a collective integration model, as outlined under the accords. It has set up an economic cooperative, but still has not put any business projects into action.

The government is beginning to implement the peace agreement's crop substitution program, which provides farmers who stop growing coca with up to $12,000 in financial and technical assistance. Some 123,000 coca-growing families have signed agreements to take part in the program, including about 30,000 who have already received their first financial assistance payment. But the program requires funding beyond what the Colombian state is likely to provide: it would cost about $2 billion to offer assistance to 170,000 families. For international donors, including the EU, to support this program, robust donor coordination around its objectives and methods will be crucial.

Crop substitution should allow the state to establish a presence and legitimacy in remote rural areas. But the effort is undermined by continued forced eradication, which reduces cultivation only temporarily. These coercive efforts sparked protests in Guaviare and Catatumbo in September 2017, and violent clashes in Tumaco, where police reportedly killed seven farmers in October. Neither effort appears to be curbing coca production, which is booming. According to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, there were 146,000 hectares under cultivation in 2016, up from 96,000 in 2015.

Recommendations

Given an electorate that remains divided over the 2016 peace agreement, Colombia may elect a leader in 2018 who opposes implementing the accord in whole or in part. Avoiding such a scenario depends on, first, whether the government can communicate peace dividends to a predominantly urban society unaffected in recent years by conflict; second, whether the FARC accepts transitional justice mechanisms in good faith; and, third, whether pro-peace agreement candidates are able to address other public concerns, especially corruption.

The EU and its member states have long supported Colombia's peace process, both financially, through the EU Trust Fund for Colombia, and diplomatically, with the EU special envoy. It now needs to adjust to a more adverse political climate. EU engagement with opposition leaders, highlighting the costs of not implementing the accord, would be important, as would EU readiness to adapt its financial support to shore up those parts of the accord that risk being neglected or downplayed by a new government.

Peace talks with the ELN in Quito have so far advanced little and are now at a standstill, which means the next president could halt the process without incurring much political cost. For negotiations to progress, the ceasefire needs to be renegotiated and preferably last at least until the presidential elections. Of the eleven countries accompanying the process as guarantors or "friends", four are EU members: Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Sweden. They should use their influence to encourage the ELN – which appreciates the legitimacy they bestow on the talks – to negotiate a new and improved ceasefire. A complete cessation of violence by the ELN might also shift Colombian opinion in favour of the process and prompt the next government pressured to continue it.

Lastly, the Colombian government has considered creating "judicial submission" processes. These would allow other armed groups – such as the neo-paramilitary Gaitán Self-Defence Forces, which has offered to lay down its arms and imposed a unilateral ceasefire with surprising levels of compliance – to surrender to the courts in exchange for more lenient sentences and, potentially, development programs for the regions in which they were based. Congress has yet to draft and pass a law for the voluntary surrender of such groups, which would have to be flexible enough to fit each one's particular internal hierarchy and interests, while also guaranteeing improved security and economic conditions in the areas where these groups operate.

Colombia has endured armed conflict since 1948. It still has the opportunity to make historic advances toward peace by implementing the agreement with the FARC; negotiating with the ELN; and creating a "judicial submission" process acceptable to other armed groups. But to do so, it needs international support, including EU resources and diplomatic engagement. This will be especially important in 2018, when Colombians will cast votes in elections that could determine whether and how the peace process survives.

Middle East and North Africa

The MENA region is in deep crisis. Instability, state fragmentation and armed conflict remain the dominant trends. The Islamic State's territorial defeat does not appear likely to usher in a new era of stability. Wars in Syria, Yemen and Libya, as well as the Israeli-Arab conflict, are likely to escalate, spread and intersect. Rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia will continue to be fought mainly by proxy. The possibility of direct or indirect violent conflict between U.S. and Iranian forces cannot be excluded, particularly if the Trump administration keeps trying to undermine the nuclear deal between the P5+1/E3+3 (the UN Security Council's five permanent members plus Germany) and Iran. Potential conflict triggers – in the Gulf and Strait of Hormuz, Iraq, Yemen and Syria – are aplenty.

Multiplying and escalating conflicts are increasing fragmentation in the region, while states that have so far withstood internal pressures are becoming more fragile as effective governance – and with it, political legitimacy – declines. As states weaken, non-state actors rise, stepping into security vacuums, seizing territory and gaining legitimacy by providing a modicum of stability to subject populations. These actors also frequently fuel ethnic and sectarian sentiment that generate future conflict.

The EU and member states should take palliative steps, especially given the threat to their own stability posed by migrant flows and jihadist attacks. The first rule should be to do no further harm by avoiding overly securitised responses. Arms sales to allies who commit serious violations of the laws of war should end, as should unconditional military assistance to proxies that, seeking to advance their own interests, further polarise societies in conflict.

Instead, the EU and member states should coordinate their approach toward MENA, and work within the framework of the EU rather than as individual competing states. They should support the Iran nuclear deal and protect enterprises doing business with Iran that are threatened with U.S. sanctions; reinforce UN-led mediation efforts, including by both increasing funds and nudging conflict actors to the negotiating table; provide assistance to states that reinforce the rule of law; and, as best possible, encourage Iran and Saudi Arabia to engage in dialogue.

Egypt's Expanding Jihadist Threat

Egypt's security situation has deteriorated considerably in 2017 with local jihadists perpetrating attacks that have targeted civilians and claimed hundreds of lives. This trend is likely to continue in 2018, given the government's inadequate efforts to protect vulnerable groups, its counterproductive habit of labelling political dissidents as terrorists, and its ineffective counter-terrorism and, in the

Sinai, counter-insurgency policies. The EU and member states should encourage the Egyptian government to change its approach while adjusting their security cooperation to address these issues.

Rising jihadist threat against civilians

Egypt has experienced numerous jihadist attacks in recent years, especially in the Sinai peninsula where an insurgency has raged since 2013. But there was a qualitative and quantitative change in the nature of major attacks carried out against civilians in 2017. Two religious groups – Christians, who account for 10-15 per cent of Egypt's population, and Muslims who follow Sufi practices – increasingly are targeted by local affiliates of the Islamic State (ISIS), which had initially focused almost exclusively on security forces.

Since December 2016, terror attacks on churches and the Christian community have killed over 100 civilians and injured hundreds more. In northern Sinai, Christian residents have been almost entirely driven out due to attacks and threats by the ISIS branch there. The attacks have sparked anger at the government for failing to protect houses of worship, particularly as they followed explicit ISIS threats that Christians would be a major target of its violence.

Sufi Muslims also appear to have become a priority civilian target in 2017, with ISIS/Sinai killing several local religious figures. Most significantly, on 24 November 2017, jihadists believed to be affiliated with the group attacked al-Rawda Mosque in Bir Abed in North Sinai, killing over 300 worshippers and their families who had gathered for Friday prayers – the deadliest terror attack in Egypt's history. Because of the mosque's gender segregation, most victims were men, meaning the village lost much of its male population. The mosque is associated with a Sufi order and most residents in the surrounding area hail from a tribe that is collaborating with the military against ISIS.

Fragmentation and disarray among jihadists
may make them more dangerous

Why ISIS has changed its tactics remains unclear. Authorities attribute the shift to the return of Egyptian foreign fighters from Iraq and Syria; the suicide bomber who carried out the December 2016 attack on a Cairo cathedral, for instance, was a former student activist who had been jailed after the 2013 coup and later travelled to Syria. Another probable cause is the desire to foment sectarian strife and undermine the regime's credibility both within Egypt and abroad. The focus on civilians may also reflect a loss of clarity and purpose among ISIS members in Egypt – a "lashing-out" resulting from the failure to reproduce the territorialisation strategy pursued elsewhere.

ISIS also faces challenges and attacks from jihadist groups claiming allegiance to al-Qaeda (such as Jund al-Islam and Ansar al-Islam). An al-Qaeda affiliate claimed responsibility for the October 2017 ambush of a security convoy in the Western Desert, which killed at least sixteen security officers. The location of the ambush suggests that a new theatre of operations linked to Libya may be emerging. Furthermore, attacks on security personnel by smaller groups, such

as Liwaa El Thawra and Hassm, have increased mostly in urban areas, particularly within the Cairo and Giza governorates. These organisations have a more political, anti-regime agenda, and have not yet adopted jihadist rhetoric.

The post-2013 crackdown on researchers, journalists, academics, civil society actors and dissidents continues, which means there is little independent information about the jihadist threat available. Journalists have been effectively banned from reporting anything beyond official statements. Stories that contradict the state narrative can result in accusations of terrorism or supporting terrorist activity, charges that now carry the death penalty. Access to the most insecure areas (such as North Sinai and parts of the Western Desert) is nearly impossible, primarily due to the establishment of militarised zones that bar civilian entry.

Despite the considerable threat from jihadist groups, Egypt's counter-terrorism approach has evolved tactically (mostly through improvements in military operations in Sinai, particularly in countering improvised explosive device, IEDs) but not strategically. The government continues to conflate terrorism and political opposition, particularly in the case of the Muslim Brotherhood, which it has declared a terrorist organisation, exacerbating the polarisation that resulted from the 2013 coup. Together with repression and poor prison conditions, this conflation of dissent with terrorism helps drive people toward violence.

The government has also enacted legislation that enables it to bring charges of terrorism for any criminal act, using this authority to arrest civilian dissidents, including thousands of students who protested during the 2013/2014 academic year. At the same time, as the 2017 attacks suggest, authorities have responded inadequately to genuine and known threats. Authorities ignored numerous specific threats prior to the al-Rawda Mosque attack; when it occurred, nearby security units were slow to react.

What the European Union can do

The EU recently agreed on new partnership priorities with Egypt in accordance with the EU-Egypt-Association Agreement. Priority Three – Enhancing Stability – includes a focus on Security and Terrorism. In addition, the EU's new Single Support Framework with an indicative allocation of €432-€528 million for the 2017-2020 period aims to promote stability by supporting socio-economic development and improved governance in Egypt. But there is little discussion among EU's policymakers, or between Brussels and Cairo, of the dangers in Egypt's counterterrorism strategy.

The EU should improve collaboration with Egyptian intelligence and law enforcement agencies even as it remains criticising their deficiencies and counterproductive policies. It should raise with Egyptian counterparts the government's labelling of its political opponents as terrorists and levelling of terrorism charges against them. The European External Action Service (EEAS) should pursue plans to place a counter-terrorism/security expert at its Cairo delegation to monitor such issues. It should also push for greater access for independent journalists, aid organisations, civil society groups and foreign partners to the

Sinai and other areas of jihadist activity, to better understand both the threat and the government response.

The EU should push for improved access to prisons for organisations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, which could provide valuable insight into both prison conditions and jihadist recruitment. More generally, it should encourage the Egyptian government to allow greater freedom to report on and research these issues.

The EU should also urge Egypt to address the security of Christians and other groups that are potential jihadist targets, including Sufi and Shiite Muslims. Security precautions around churches outside of Cairo appear highly inadequate. The EU should push for improved and consistent security for places of worship, as part of a more civilian-centric approach to counter-terrorism.

Timeline of major attacks on civilians

11 December 2016
ISIS attack on St. Mark's Coptic Orthodox cathedral in Cairo kills 29.

January-February 2017
Hundreds of Christians evacuate north-eastern Sinai city of Rafah for 30 days after ISIS kills seven Christians in area.

9 April 2017
Twin ISIS attacks on churches in Alexandria and Tanta kill 47.

26 May 2017
ISIS attack on bus carrying Christian pilgrims near monastery in Minya kills 29.

26 November 2017
Unclaimed attack on al-Rawda Mosque in Sinai kills 311.

29 December 2017
Attack by lone gunman on Christians in Cairo suburb of Helwan, claimed by ISIS, kills nine.

Iraq's Pre-election Turmoil

Iraq has won the battle against ISIS, but will it win the post-ISIS peace? This is the question the government of Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi faces as it heads into the election season. Rather than providing a reprieve, the parliamentary and governorate elections scheduled for 12 May 2018 threaten to perpetuate instability. If the past is any guide, Iraq will see several months of pre-election posturing, alliance formation and inflamed political rhetoric, followed by a prolonged and turbulent period of post-election government formation.

It may not be the best time, therefore, for external actors such as the EU and its member states to work toward intra-Iraqi reconciliation, reconstruction, and the demobilisation and integration of militia members – all of which are desperately needed. Yet there are steps Iraq's international partners can take

to help it navigate this period, given that some important matters have been settled – though not necessarily to everyone's satisfaction – and that ISIS' defeat has generated hope that post-2003 Iraq has finally turned a corner.

Iraq faces major challenges ahead of the elections. It needs to find a way for displaced persons (IDPs) to participate without fear of intimidation, diminish – without provoking local instability – the role of sub-state actors such as the Iran-backed Popular Mobilisation Units (PMUs), and reconnect damaged localities to the state. It must also lay the groundwork for post-election negotiations between the federal government in Baghdad and the Kurdistan regional government (KRG) in Erbil over the core issues that have vexed their relationship: the dividing and sharing of political control and oil revenues in the disputed territories. These priorities are interconnected; the EU and its member states can help Iraq make progress, however limited, on all of them through the deft use of reconstruction funds. As for the Kurdistan region, it is undergoing its own post-referendum upheaval, and the EU and its member states can do much to assist the Kurdish polity organise credible regional assembly elections and carry out a much-needed political transition.

Rule by PMUs

The decision by Masoud Barzani, president of the Kurdish region and leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), to press ahead with the Kurdish independence referendum on 25 September 2017 aimed in part to strengthen his hand in independence negotiations with Baghdad. That decision boomeranged badly. Near-unanimous international opposition to the referendum enabled Abadi to deploy his security forces in the disputed territories, retaking most of them from the Kurdish peshmerga, including Kirkuk and its oil fields. The military action was performed by U.S.-trained elite military units, but victory was claimed by the auxiliary militias known as PMUs, backed by Iran. Baghdad's show of strength should not conceal its enduring weakness: it still lacks the capability to hold territories it has taken, making PMU rule a reality in many localities.

While it is difficult to generalise about the PMUs' ties to Iran and their relations with local communities, to the extent that they pursue objectives consistent with an Iranian strategic agenda and are recruiting fighters from among the local population to help secure those interests, they are creating a parallel model of rule. This model, familiar from Iran itself during the early years of the Islamic revolution, as well as from Iran's role in Syria and Lebanon, is bound to keep the federal state weak or erode it further.

Abadi, who like his predecessors has tried to balance Iran's interests with those of the U.S., Turkey and Saudi Arabia, faces a serious challenge: the PMUs have sprouted political parties primed to compete in the national elections, and are co-opting local tribal and minority leaders, giving them an advantage in local elections. To prevail in the elections and create a governing majority, Abadi will have to work with some forces that oppose Iran's spreading influence, including former rivals and adversaries such as Kurdish parties and Sunni politicians; exploit intra-Shiite divisions; and solicit the support of the Shiite religious

establishment headed by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. In addition, he will need to try to reduce the PMUs' role in the disputed territories by reinserting state security forces that recruit manpower from among the local population, and luring back skilled government administrators who fled these areas after ISIS arrived, many of whom found shelter in the Kurdish region and became co-optation targets for the Kurdish parties.

Another reason to reduce the PMUs' role, especially in Sunni-populated areas, is that their presence may reignite local grievances and trigger a resurgence of anti-government, or even jihadist, sentiment and activism.

An unravelling communal fabric

The proliferation of sub-state actors during the fight against ISIS triggered rival co-optation efforts on the premise that he who provides security earns the right to govern. Such governance is highly unstable, because there is no central arbiter, and usually short-lived. Hence the need for state institutions to reassert control. This ambition was long thwarted by the Kurdish claim to many of the disputed territories, but since the ill-conceived Kurdish referendum and its aftermath, meaningful dialogue and negotiations between Baghdad and Erbil should again become possible after the formation of a new government.

The federal state needs to return as a central arbiter willing to allow significant decentralisation of administrative power. The National Reconciliation Commission should lead an effort to promote intercommunal reconciliation. The agency best placed to assist such efforts is the UN Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI), whose 2009 report on the disputed territories remains fundamental for understanding how to address the territories' status and resolve the conflict between Baghdad and Erbil over sharing and dividing political control and oil revenues.

Society's militarisation

ISIS's 2014 onslaught militarised Iraqi society, giving young men little option but to fight or find a way to leave the country. Militias that battled ISIS eventually will need to be demobilised and their members reintegrated into society. The obvious solution would be to use this manpower in a major reconstruction effort but pervasive corruption within a largely dysfunctional state poses serious challenges to this project. Reconstruction funds are controlled by a handful of actors and channelled through preferred parties to benefit only a few. The PMUs seem to have an advantage in the competition for funding through the influence of associated politicians in Baghdad. The international community should ensure that the reconstruction funds they provide are "colour-blind" to the extent possible: spread evenly to communities in need, regardless of the recipients' ethnic or religious identification; and channelled through legitimate state agencies rather than through sub-state actors such as the PMUs.

Troubles in the Kurdish region

Fallout from the Kurdish independence referendum was not limited to loss of the disputed territories. It also shook the Kurds' faith in their leadership, its decision-making and its legitimacy. Anti-KRG protests broke out in Suleimaniya governorate in December 2017, in part because the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which dominates the area, had been weakened by the death of its leader, Jalal Talabani. It is too early to predict where the Kurdish region is headed, but there is no doubt that it needs to refresh its leadership. The best way forward is to allow the emergence of new parties and guarantee free and fair elections to the Kurdish parliament, tentatively planned for April 2018.

An EU role in helping Iraq to stabilise

The EU and its member states have an abiding interest in seeing Iraqis reconcile and the country stabilise. Reconstruction funds are the best instruments at their disposal. Therefore, they need to carefully implement their new Strategy for Iraq, based on a detailed understanding of the country's shifting political landscape, to disburse these funds without making matters worse. To shape a political outcome that promotes reconciliation and stability, the EU and its member states should prioritise the following actions in the implementation of their Iraq strategy over the next year:

- Continue to provide humanitarian aid to IDPs, and assist the government in facilitating their voluntary return home;

- Financially support UN-led reconstruction efforts;

- Provide reconstruction funds to the government, not to non-state actors, and ensure that they are disbursed in an equitable manner to communities most in need;

- Encourage the demobilisation of militias and reintegration of fighters as part of a larger effort to reform the security sector;

- Encourage the Abadi government to reassert federal sovereignty in the disputed territories by deploying locally recruited security forces and restoring local government using skilled administrators brought back from their areas of displacement;

- Ask UNAMI to develop a strategy and update its important 2009 study on Iraq's "internal disputed boundaries" as soon as possible, and to help jump-start Baghdad-Erbil negotiations once a new federal government and a new Kurdish regional government are formed;

- Encourage the leading Kurdish parties to assure free and fair KRG assembly elections in 2018, and allow new political parties to emerge and participate.

Strengthening Institutions in Tunisia

While Tunisia's democratic transition continues, socio-economic unrest driven by rising costs of living and laggard economic growth, combined with the government's struggles to strengthen institutions, puts the country at risk of sliding back into authoritarianism or instability. The EU should focus on helping promote economic growth and supporting institutional reform, notably persuading Tunisian authorities to establish and protect the integrity of those bodies mandated by the January 2014 constitution.

Socio-economic unrest contributing to nostalgia for a strong state

As the protests that rocked parts of Tunisia in mid-January showed, socio-economist discontent remains high as the cost of living steadily rises. Those protests were triggered by opposition to tax and tariff hikes intended to balance public finances. The economy has deteriorated since 2016: growth is slow (between 1 and 2 per cent), inflation seems to be rising faster than the official rate of 6.3 per cent and the trade deficit remains high despite a depreciating currency. As Tunisia enters an electoral cycle with municipal elections in May 2018 and parliamentary and presidential elections expected in 2019, economic grievances are moving to centre-stage in national politics.

A weak economy increases the danger of riots, which could force Tunisian policymakers to find short-term solutions akin to those of the old regime: repression of protesters and dissidents, marginalisation of civil society forces such as trade unions, and centralisation of power in the hands of a strong executive. The harshness of daily life and the deterioration of public infrastructure (transport, health and education) means ever more Tunisians believe that only a strong, ideologically homogeneous executive authority – a hyper-presidency, in other words, similar to that of former President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali – can save the country. They consider the institutions created in the wake of the 2010-2011 revolution artificial, ill-suited to Tunisian political culture and dysfunctional. A commonly held view is that democracy has not taken root; instead, power is dispersed, corruption rampant and political debate useless. Many Tunisians are focused on coping with their daily lives, evincing no interest in politics. Several polls suggest there could be record abstention rates in the forthcoming municipal elections. Nostalgia for the old regime is spreading, as is a discourse that claims the revolution has impoverished the population, while politicians divide the country's wealth among themselves.

A constitution awaiting effective implementation

The current order has been made more fragile still by the government's foot-dragging in implementing vital elements of the 2014 constitution. The Constitutional Court, the only institution constitutionally mandated to declare the temporary or definitive vacancy of the presidency, has not yet been established. Its absence means that were the president, who is 91, to become unable to fulfil his functions

or pass away, any transfer of power would be unconstitutional, perhaps opening the door to an authoritarian takeover. President Béji Caïd Essebsi has pledged to establish the body before the end of 2018.

Likewise, independent bodies conceived in the wake of the 2010-2011 uprising as checks on poor public administration (including the Independent High Authority for Audiovisual Communication, the Authority for Human Rights, the Authority for Sustainable Development and the Rights of Future Generations, the Authority for Good Governance and the Authority for the Fight against Corruption) still do not exist. Nominally independent administrative bodies that are in place lack autonomy from the government and political parties. For example, pressure from Tunisia's ruling coalition on the Independent High Authority for the Elections has already led to postponement of municipal elections. More generally, government officials and political leaders have blocked the process of decentralisation mandated by the constitution from starting in earnest.

The gap between constitutional principle and political reality is widening. But a renewed debate on the revision of the constitution, a step that President Essebsi and several political figures have suggested, would be a mistake. Amid the country's political and economic turmoil, such a debate would be akin to reopening hostilities between the parties over core political and social issues.

What the EU can do

The EU has influence in Tunisia, where it is already supporting anti-corruption and decentralisation efforts. It should go further, both in helping the country's economy and in developing incentives for the government to counter the short- and medium-term danger of authoritarian drift. This should be done as part of its Privileged Partnership with Tunisia, and during its review of political priorities ahead of the EU-Tunisia Association Council, expected to take place in the first half of 2018.

A first priority are measures to diminish risks of potentially destabilising socio-economic unrest. In this context, the EU should encourage the government to urgently address regional inequalities, putting this question at the centre of economic reform efforts. In particular, short-term measures to deliver economic relief should be paired with longer-term efforts to encourage investment and job creation in Tunisia's southern and interior provinces.

At the same time, the EU should continue to encourage the Tunisian government and parliament to establish the Constitutional Court and speed up the restructuring of the electoral authorities. If those bodies were firmly ensconced, they could fulfil their mandates in the event of a presidential vacancy and in accordance with the constitution. The EU should discourage any attempt to alter the constitution before the 2019 legislative and presidential elections.

While a return to the past is not the most probable scenario, outside actors could make it likelier, especially if the internal situation continues to deteriorate. The United Arab Emirates promotes a polarising anti-Islamist political discourse in the Tunisian media, which could gain resonance if additional jihadist attacks occur. Neighbouring Algeria, which considers Tunisian stability a matter of national security, has supported the ruling coalition between Islamists

and secularists in place since 2014. But more recently it has appeared to waver from this course, and could be tempted to back a tougher regime – one with greater presidential power, more intrusive intelligence gathering and harsher repression – to prevent public rioting, terrorist attacks or a political crisis. The EU should play a more active diplomatic role to counterbalance these influences and promote the more inclusive and open polity to which the Tunisian uprising gave birth.

Talk of the "Tunisian exception" should not give rise to complacency. Tunisian leaders must find the political will to implement the reforms necessary to strengthen institutions and peacefully deal with unforeseen events. European leaders should seek to dissuade political elites from attempting to rebuild the hyper-presidential regime that existed before 2011. That revanchist project would destabilise the country, spark resistance and provoke political polarisation likely more violent than that of 2013, when a range of opponents to the government sought its removal from power. The conflict resolution channels created during the national dialogue that helped end that crisis have weakened considerably since then, making it harder for Tunisian democracy to weather another political storm.

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