



Watch List 2020

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Every year Crisis Group publishes two additional Watch List updates that complement its annual Watch List for the EU, most recently published in January and May 2020. These publications identify major crises and conflict situations where the European Union and its member states can generate stronger prospects for peace. The Autumn Update of the Watch List 2020 includes entries on Afghanistan, Colombia, Kosovo-Serbia, Lebanon and Somalia.

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Preventing War. Shaping Peace.

Introduction

COVID-19 is still very much with us, but it is not too soon to draw some tentative conclusions as to its implications for global peace and security.

The virus has upended millions of lives, wrecked livelihoods and sharpened disputes between government and opposition in country after country. Yet equally striking has been the pandemic's so far marginal influence on fighting in major warzones. Where there were opportunities for peace, COVID-19 hasn't derailed them. Where there weren't, it hasn't created them. Fears of a major uptick in violence as governments grew distracted by the health emergency have not materialised; hopes of coronavirus-inspired ceasefires championed by UN Secretary-General António Guterres didn't take shape, either.

As we detail below, the virus's extensive presence across Afghanistan didn't prevent intra-Afghan talks from beginning, albeit after delays. Fighting in Yemen has worsened, again notwithstanding COVID-19's dangerous spread. In Somalia, also covered in this update, the virus appears to have taken a large toll but brought no major shift in the course of the long war against Al-Shabaab or in the thorny relations between Mogadishu and the regions. Even election delays over the past year have been influenced more by discord over rules than by the pandemic.

In the Sahel, contrary to widespread worry, jihadists have not (yet) exploited governments' preoccupation with the virus to intensify their attacks. Nor was COVID-19 a major factor behind Mali's recent coup, fuelled instead by longstanding popular dissatisfaction with poor governance and the state's inability to curb armed violence. Elsewhere, from Libya to Syria to the Great Lakes, pre-COVID dynamics are in most ways of a piece with those that followed the outbreak.

True, in parts of the world – as we outline in the case of Colombia – armed groups have taken advantage of the virus to consolidate territorial control; in others, incumbents have used it to entrench their authority or repress their rivals. But thus far those appear to be the exceptions rather than the rule.

All true. And yet: if the immediate impact of the pandemic on the trajectory of armed conflicts is hard to discern, its longer-term repercussions almost certainly will be deeply felt. The economic shock – the deepest, most globally synchronised since World War II – cannot but profoundly mark the conflict landscape. It already has: Lebanon, covered below, has been especially hard hit, its economy in dire straits even before the pandemic and the horrific port explosion only amplifying the financial toll of COVID-19 restrictions and popular fury at its ruling class. As the state's reach and capacity recede, risks of localised violence mount. Add Sudan to the list of concerns: the deterioration in living conditions that fuelled its uprising last year has only worsened since and without major outside support could upset its fragile political transition.

Other states – from Algeria to Ethiopia to Bolivia – also appear vulnerable to waves of protests, potentially met with crackdowns. That leaders have tended to take decisions both necessary and unpopular without consulting their rivals or society at large compounds the challenge. More broadly, growing inequality (in access to everything from healthcare to employment to food), runaway inflation and governance dysfunctionality, traditional tell-tale signs of impending conflict, all are on the rise.

Elections – another conflict risk factor – also will be proliferating: 2021 promises to be an especially busy election year due to all the polls pushed back from 2020.

Another theme coursing through this Watch List are the enduring – and worsening – broader geopolitical trends. Most striking are tensions between the U.S. and China, heightened by the virus, reflections of the scrimmage between a declining hegemon and an impatient aspirant. Beijing sees itself the victim of U.S. attempts to hold it back, notably in the technological field; Washington, along with others, sees early signs of Chinese bullying in its dealings with Taiwan, Hong Kong, India, or in the South China Sea – not to mention Canada, whose citizen and Crisis Group colleague, Michael Kovrig, it continues to arbitrarily detain almost two years after his arrest, in a brazen act of hostage diplomacy.

Europe must navigate that particularly treacherous relationship, alongside two others. The poisoning of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny further soured Moscow's relations with most EU capitals, especially Berlin, traditionally keener than others to maintain reasonable working relations with Russia. The Belarus standoff has hardly helped. Initially a purely domestic dispute, the crisis threatens to morph into yet another front in the tussle between Russia and Europe in their shared neighbourhood. With Turkey too, Europe's relations have taken a tumble in the past few months. If Ankara feels increasingly besieged and hemmed in by an array of hostile states, many in Europe and beyond fret about Turkey's regional interventions. The result is a dangerous standoff in the eastern Mediterranean pitting Turkey against Greece and Cyprus, but also France, Egypt, Israel and the United Arab Emirates.

Europe stands at the centre of both crises, a key protagonist with imperfect tools. Its instrument of choice – sanctions – is of decreasing marginal value. It has been used to little effect against Russia; is unlikely to change Belarus President Aliaksandr Lukashenka's mind; and could backfire perilously with Turkey, risking further confrontation and prompting Ankara to allow thousands of migrants to cross its border with Europe. That leaves thankless diplomacy which, in the case of the [eastern Mediterranean](#), means pushing Ankara on the one hand, and Athens and its allies on the other, to de-escalate, return to talks, and aim to achieve understandings on gas revenue sharing, migration, and maritime delimitation.

I cannot end this introduction without mentioning an event that, perhaps as much as anything mentioned above, will have an impact on the direction the world – and its conflicts – takes. On 3 November, Americans will go to the polls to elect their president. The result may not be known on that day, it may not be known for a while, and it is not too far-fetched to fear that it may not be known without the kind of protracted political standoff, civil unrest and even violence the U.S. has become accustomed to bemoan in others rather than experience itself. Given the risks, Crisis Group is, for the first time in our quarter-century history, covering U.S. domestic politics and the build-up to November's vote. The notion of American exceptionalism has always been dubious, deserving of a quiet retirement. Few would have imagined that it would be put to rest in such a sad, distressing way.

Robert Malley

President & CEO of Crisis Group
September 2020

Keeping Intra-Afghan Talks on Track

September saw the start – at long last – of peace talks between the Afghan government and Taliban. The U.S. had been trying to kick off such negotiations for most of 2020, since signing its own agreement with the Taliban on 29 February. Yet the onset of talks stalled for months; the Afghan government resisted the release of Taliban detainees to which the U.S. had committed, while the insurgents continued to carry out acts of violence, defying President Ashraf Ghani’s long-sought request for a ceasefire before commencing peace talks. The intra-Afghan talks offer a genuine opportunity for peace although obstacles and risks abound. The continued violence first and foremost: although the Taliban scaled back attempts to seize territory and monitors reported fewer combat deaths than in previous years, targeted killings rose, and the civilian casualty toll remained among the world’s highest. On the government side, Afghan leaders have spent the year deadlocked over political appointments, rendering governance increasingly dysfunctional. As for the U.S., its approach seems guided by the desire to disengage its troops as soon as possible. Many Afghans and international observers are concerned that a hasty settlement could result in degradation of civil liberties and human rights, especially women’s rights, as well as regression into state fracture and full-fledged civil war.

To help avoid those outcomes, the European Union and its member states should:

- ❑ Continue pressing for a more inclusive peace process, particularly in terms of women’s representation in the Afghan government’s negotiating team and affiliated bodies. Europeans should also provide support to civil society initiatives that complement the formal negotiation process and promote peace at grassroots level.
- ❑ Call upon all Afghan political figures to uphold the May agreement between President Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, and encourage Ghani to respect provisions specifying Abdullah’s authority.
- ❑ Ensure unified messaging among member states so as to best use Europe’s principal sources of leverage – financial assistance and economic engagement with a future government – to nudge negotiations forward.
- ❑ Avoid singling out the Taliban as responsible for threats or obstacles to peace; instead, make clear that any action destabilising the peace process, including by the government, deserves condemnation. Brussels should balance its support for the Afghan government with acknowledgment that the Taliban will be a major political force in any post-peace Afghan order.
- ❑ Reassure the Afghan government by committing to continue aid into the future. European leaders could qualify such reassurances and align them with EU principles by allowing for re-evaluation in the event of changes to the government in a peace settlement, as the EU did in its May Council conclusions.

The Hard Road to Talks

An atmosphere of nervous anticipation prevailed in Afghanistan when the U.S. and Taliban signed an agreement in Qatar's capital Doha on 29 February, laying out a timetable for the withdrawal of foreign troops in exchange for anti-terrorism guarantees and a promise to commence intra-Afghan negotiations. A historic week of reduced violence across the country preceded the accord. Though not technically a ceasefire, this period saw a significant drop in fighting between Taliban and Afghan security forces. It was the insurgent movement's first major gesture of good-will toward Kabul since its ceasefire declaration during Eid al-Fitr in 2018.

Any positive feeling quickly dissipated, however, as the Afghan government publicly rejected the terms of the prisoner exchange to which the U.S. had committed in Doha and the Taliban responded by announcing a resumption of hostilities. Fighting picked up across the country, albeit at a lowered intensity that seemed tied to the Doha agreement (although it was not spelled out in the public text). The Taliban carried out fewer high-profile attacks in cities than in previous years and limited their large-scale assaults on government forces. The insurgent group made none of its traditional annual attempts to overrun provincial capitals and did not announce its usual spring offensive. Afghan security forces maintained a largely defensive posture, which officials claimed was a demonstration of the government's commitment to peace, but almost certainly also owed to the near cessation of U.S. airstrikes after 29 February. Those strikes contributed to [record levels](#) of civilian casualties in 2019, and observers hoped that casualty figures would plummet in 2020. The war continued to take a high toll, however, as the rates of targeted killings and small bombings climbed in many parts of the country. These included two attacks on prominent women's rights activists in Kabul.

Meanwhile, the U.S. applied pressure on both sides, dragging the prisoner exchange forward, as the government and Taliban let prisoners go in small batches. The releases stretched into September before reaching the 29 February agreement's promised totals. The U.S. also waded into Kabul politics when contestation of the 2019 presidential election results escalated into full-scale dysfunction. Just days before 29 February, President Ghani was declared winner by the narrowest of margins, without official clarity on multiple vote recounts and audits. His chief challenger, Abdullah Abdullah, and allied politicians threatened to not only protest the results but also establish a "parallel government". Abdullah's staff refused to vacate Presidential Palace grounds (where they had been working as part of a power-sharing deal struck between Abdullah and Ghani after the previous election in 2014). The standoff prevented politicians from agreeing on the composition of a negotiating team to represent the government in intra-Afghan talks – which donors, including the EU and member states, had repeatedly urged Ghani to do – until late March. Perhaps in part due to acrimony over appointing the negotiators and powerbrokers' jockeying to place loyal representatives on the team, only four women ultimately were included in a team of 21. Abdullah and Ghani did not reach a governing compromise until late May. Since then, the two leaders and their allies have repeatedly disagreed on appointments of officials and delineation of authority, reminding Afghans of the disputes that plagued the power-sharing government of 2014-2019.

This deadlock coincided with the spread of COVID-19 across Afghanistan. The virus appears initially to have been transmitted primarily by migrant workers returning from the global hot-spot of Iran. The Afghan government struggled to check what became an unfettered spread. In August, health officials announced that random sampling – actual testing was minimal – suggested that the virus [had infected](#) more than 50 per cent of Kabul residents and over 30 per cent of the national population. Lack of reporting made it impossible to measure the death toll with any accuracy. The severe economic impact of lockdowns, however, was evident within weeks, leading many Afghans – including many officials – to ignore restrictions in most of the country outside Kabul. The Taliban publicised a number of COVID-19 initiatives in areas under their control, but many of these [reportedly lacked](#) enforcement or follow-up. The group continued to reject international calls for a ceasefire, even in the name of a “humanitarian pause” to enhance the public health response.

By the start of intra-Afghan talks in September, high-level sources told Crisis Group that the Afghan government was considering arming and funding new networks of militias across the country, outside the security forces’ hierarchy and only loosely controlled by the Afghan intelligence agency. Such reports, which have circulated widely among Afghans, amplify fears many already have about the potential impact of peace talks on human rights: not only could talks herald a return to political power of the Taliban, whose abuses many Afghans recall all too well, but they might also lead to the proliferation of government-affiliated militias, who have their own [terrible track record](#). Fears of predation by armed groups of all stripes are hardly new – the EU Council addressed them in its May conclusions. But they have grown amid increasing [unclaimed attacks](#) on activists, the U.S.’s announcement of further [troop drawdowns](#) and political infighting in Kabul that [some worry](#) could create space for extrajudicial action by the security forces.

Amid these many concerns, the first days of talks between the Taliban and the government-appointed negotiating team already give a taste of the hurdles that lie ahead. While negotiating the rules and procedures to govern the talks, the two sides tangled over what Islamic legal interpretation should be used to mediate future disagreements (the government team insisted on acknowledging Shia Islam and non-Muslim minorities’ existence in the framework of the talks, which the Taliban have rejected). The Taliban have yet to fully articulate what they believe a future Afghan state should look like, as Crisis Group has noted. It is far from clear that the Taliban’s vision will be acceptable to other parties and the many Afghans who fear the Taliban may wish to curtail rights and freedoms. What the insurgents have made clear is their stance on a ceasefire. They reject any discussion of a lasting and comprehensive one until, as their spokesperson said, “the root causes of the war” – ambiguous language that could mean anything from the West’s influence, to the exclusion of parts of population from power, to the abuses of government-allied strongmen – are addressed. With current levels of violence having climbed throughout 2020, this may be the most immediate potentially destabilising factor as talks progress.

A Role for the EU and Its Member States

As the intra-Afghan talks proceed, the EU can exert a positive influence. First, it should expand its support for civil society. Given Afghanistan's contentious politics and its weak formal institutions, [civil society's participation](#) in the peace process will be vital to ensure the representation of popular interests and preferences. The EU has already affirmed its commitment to the protection of human and women's rights and encouraged strong representation of women in intra-Afghan talks, but it should promote efforts that go beyond the structure of formal negotiations to lay [grassroots groundwork](#) for lasting peace. Afghanistan's National Action Plan for implementing UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security is regarded by [experts](#) as a "top-down" approach, which should be balanced by EU support to local initiatives such as local councils that advocate for peace. This approach could involve greater cooperation with the UN mission in Afghanistan, with its infrastructure and networks of field offices capable of extending peacebuilding's reach. The EU should review and report on [earlier](#) civil society and development efforts in Afghanistan to support peacebuilding, some of them initiated more than a decade ago, to identify effective initiatives.

Secondly, the EU can help steady the Afghan government's negotiation approach by offering its good offices to ensure a smoother, more streamlined dialogue to implement the political compromise between President Ghani and Abdullah. Disputes between Ghani and opposition leaders have already hampered governance and they will almost certainly bleed over into the negotiating team's internal deliberations during talks. The peace process cannot succeed without genuine inclusion of a broad range of political elites in both the talks and the tasks of governance while negotiations are ongoing. Moreover, the political wrangling among elites has reportedly hamstrung civil society efforts to engage with the peace talks: different political factions are now competing for authority over every aspect of the process, which could have the effect of impeding civil society participation. By ensuring that Ghani and Abdullah continue to communicate on and implement their power-sharing commitments, the EU can help mend relations that in turn will improve the negotiators' effectiveness.

The EU should seek to ensure that member states deliver a unified message. As the EU stated in its May conclusions, it can use the prospect of financial assistance to and economic engagement with a future government to nudge negotiations forward. But that leverage is only as strong as member states' unity. Since issuing those May conclusions, European governments have diverged in their reactions to prisoner exchanges, and uncertainty lingers about their views on a major planned donor conference in Geneva. Several European diplomats told Crisis Group that although public unity on Afghanistan policy has been maintained, member states' own diplomatic engagements have softened or strayed from the common line.

The EU's influence over the Afghan peace process, and any outcome that may result, depends in large part on whether Afghan parties – including the Taliban – perceive it as a fair interlocutor. Almost any successful settlement will include the Taliban's re-entry into Afghanistan's political system. The EU's current conditions, in particular its explicit rejection of the Taliban's concept of an Islamic Emirate and its several public disapprovals of Taliban actions, without similar recognition of the

Afghan government's stalling ahead of talks, have been characterised by the Taliban as [interference](#) in Afghanistan's sovereignty. As talks proceed, the EU and European leaders should make extra effort to appear to be more open to a greater Taliban role.

Most importantly, the EU and member states should commit to continue aid and development support to the Afghan government. They should do so before the end of 2020, in spite of the uncertainties surrounding the peace process and U.S. Afghanistan policy. They could qualify such reassurances and align them with EU principles by making clear that aid would be subject to re-evaluation in the event of changes to the government as part of a settlement, as the EU did in its May Council conclusions. This pledge would be the greatest possible show of support for the Afghan government as it negotiates an end to the war, and it would demonstrate to the Taliban that Afghanistan's international partners remain invested in the post-2004 constitutional order and the gains it has won. It would be another incentive for both sides to reach an agreement.

Colombia: Peace Withers amid the Pandemic

Four years after the government's peace accord with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the country may be watching its tentative but hard-won progress toward peace start to unravel. Well before authorities detected the first COVID-19 case in Bogotá in March, armed and criminal groups were consolidating their influence in the areas hardest hit by conflict before 2016. In doing so, they took advantage of delays in fulfilling the accord's terms, especially as regards measures to remedy the sources of violence in Colombia's countryside, among other things, by stimulating the development of legal commercial activity to create alternatives to the drug trade and other illicit economies that fuel conflict. The pandemic has laid these shortcomings bare, while offering spoilers the chance to exhibit their growing power. The country's largest remaining leftist guerrilla movement, the National Liberation Army (ELN), FARC dissident groups and organised crime have all expanded their territorial reach in the past year.

A national COVID-19 lockdown has tightened the armed groups' grip and, in some places, made them quicker on the trigger. The year 2019 saw 36 massacres (ie, killings with three or more victims), the highest number since 2014. Yet 2020 had already surpassed that total by mid-August, including several mass killings of young people at social gatherings, mostly by armed groups, and at least one of which appeared to involve the enforcement of informal lockdown restrictions. As of 2 September, 225 ex-FARC combatants had been killed since the peace accord was signed (including 52 in 2020), including by armed FARC dissidents seeking to pressure ex-combatants to take up arms once again. Meanwhile, pandemic-related health concerns have slowed implementation of the 2016 accord yet further, putting on hold many grassroots peace accord projects aimed at boosting rural economies and improving public services. As conflict resurges nationwide, the border with Venezuela has also become a hotspot for clashes.

To help halt these worrying trends, the European Union and its member states should consider the following steps:

- ❑ Continue leading international efforts to push for full implementation of the 2016 peace accord, with an emphasis on tackling extreme poverty in rural areas through the Territorially Focused Development Programs (PDETs) and support for ex-combatants in developing new livelihoods.
- ❑ Press the government to encourage voluntary coca crop substitution rather than apply forced eradication. The EU could use its experience supporting legal economic alternatives to drug production to strengthen the National Integral Program for Substitution, which is fraught with delays, and help design supplementary approaches that include a wider set of coca growers.
- ❑ Work closely with Colombia's Attorney General's office to strengthen criminal investigations into killings of social leaders and ex-combatants, as well as massacres of civilians. The EU's financial support for the Attorney General's special investigation unit is vital to chipping away at prevailing impunity.

- ❑ Encourage the government to pursue a humanitarian ceasefire with the ELN aimed at alleviating pandemic-related hardships. Despite mutual distrust, the ELN in July signalled a willingness to negotiate a bilateral pause to fighting during the health crisis, following their own unilateral one-month ceasefire in April.

A New Wave of Violence

Two ominous patterns marked Colombia's start to 2020: sluggish government efforts at carrying out the 2016 peace accord, paired with the accelerated advance of armed groups into former FARC-controlled territories. Weighed down by reservations that the 2016 accord was too lenient with the former rebels, the two-year-old government of President Iván Duque has pursued its implementation at a plodding pace. The accord's primary vehicle for bringing economic growth to rural areas, the PDETs, also aims to bolster the state's feeble presence in districts that suffered most during Colombia's half-century of guerrilla warfare. Yet, according to a [congression-al oversight report](#) released in August, it will take 40 years to finish establishing the PDETs at the current rate of progress. In the south-western province of Cauca, officials told Crisis Group that municipalities where security dramatically improved as the FARC laid down its arms, and which were included in the PDETs, are today inaccessible to many state agencies due to violent feuds between various armed groups.

Indeed, many of the country's historical war zones have slid back into discord. These new conflicts for territorial control are notably more local and less ideological than the conflict with the FARC. The peace agreement ended the FARC's insurgency, but its aftermath spawned dozens of new armed groups, including nearly 30 FARC dissident factions, while also empowering the country's other main guerrilla group, the ELN. Criminal groups, which emerged from the remnants of demobilised right-wing militias fifteen years ago, have also grown in strength and number. Across formerly FARC-controlled areas, these various armed outfits exert power over residents while also seeking dominion over illicit economic activity, including coca cultivation, extortion, human trafficking, mining and logging. To corner these black markets, and to achieve monopolies in legal commerce, criminals seek to control territory and those living in it while preventing rival groups from doing the same. Most gain this control by imposing regulations on everything from movement to behaviour in public.

Indicators of violence that fell following the FARC accord have begun to rise again. Civil society groups that track killings of social leaders, for example, count nearly double the number of murders in 2020 so far as in all of 2016, when the accord was signed and ratified. New forms of violence have also emerged, such as forced confinement within "invisible borders" across which rival groups restrict movement. [Nearly 50,000 people – 65 per cent of them women and children](#) – have suffered this maltreatment in 2020 so far, up 226 per cent from the first half of 2019 according to [statistics from the state Ombudsman's office](#) (which is responsible for overseeing the protection of civil and human rights in Colombia).

The pandemic has made the strangulation of rural communities yet worse. Between 24 March and 1 September, the government prohibited inter-municipal travel, leaving residents with poor or intermittent telephone connections even more isolated and unable to share information about threats they faced. In July, three quarters

of households nationwide told the [national statistics agency](#) that their economic situation was either worse or much worse than the previous year, while unemployment rates doubled from 10 to 20 per cent. Armed groups across the board seized upon the health crisis to intensify their control, imposing additional social restrictions under the guise of quarantine regulations, and in some cases limiting movement to local supporters while harshly penalising rule-breakers. The ELN, for example, declared a “total” lockdown in its stronghold communities in southern Bolívar department from 3 to 17 August, advising the population in a 30 July communiqué that they should supply themselves for the entire period as “no type of vehicle” would be allowed to transit during the two-week period. The quest to impose similar rules at whatever cost appears to lie behind the killing of eight young people at a social gathering in [Samaniego, Nariño](#) on 15 August.

Restrictions on movement have also prevented community organisations and the government from carrying out some programs linked to the 2016 accord. Recently demobilised ex-FARC members are particularly disadvantaged by the lockdown and deep economic recession. A total of 30 per cent of former combatants have received support for livelihood alternatives, but the pandemic has disrupted half of these projects, [according to the UN](#). Of these, projects led by women in urban areas were the hardest hit of all. Coupled with the stubbornly high rate of murders of former combatants, many attributed to dissident factions seeking to coerce ex-members to take up arms again, the economic slowdown has raised questions as to the sustainability of the peace accord’s one indisputable success: the demobilisation of the vast majority of FARC fighters.

The government has responded to rising insecurity mainly by targeting armed groups with military force and forcibly eradicating coca plants. Bogotá promises to honour the peace accord, but it views the agreement as extraneous to its security strategy. It attributes the fresh violence exclusively to drug trafficking and criminality, rather than also pointing to the deep-seated rural poverty and the almost complete absence of effective state institutions across large swathes of territory, which allow illegal markets and alternative providers of law and order to thrive. There is little to suggest the government’s strategy of taking out the armed groups (which tend to proliferate in these conditions) or eradicating the coca trade (which saw an increase in [cocaine production](#) last year, notwithstanding an acreage decline, indicating new efficiencies in the refining process) will be successful unless underlying issues are effectively tackled. That is why the 2016 peace accords emphasised crop substitution as a mechanism for easing farmers away from the coca crop and building new licit economies.

But the Duque administration does not see it this way. It has [blamed the massacres](#) on a recent bumper coca crop and it has [attributed](#) the size of that coca crop to a 2015 government decision to end aerial fumigation. Rather than moving to complete crop substitution programs for around 100,000 coca-growing families that signed up, the government has stressed the need for forced eradication and vows soon to restart aerial fumigation. It has not met its promises to help coca farmers find new crops and has left the programs underfunded, even as the enrolled areas continue to suffer consistently high rates of lethal violence. While there was a roughly 15 per cent drop nationwide in homicides between March and August, coinciding with the lock-

down, largely attributable to the impact of stay-at-home orders, violence rates in conflict-affected areas remained high.

Moreover, enhanced eradication alongside additional military deployments has other downsides. For one thing, it risks exacerbating humanitarian needs. For example, in August, the UN [documented](#) severe food insecurity among 200,000 people in the traditional coca-growing hub of Putumayo; this resulted from a combination of forced confinement at the hands of armed groups and/or the loss of coca crops – their only source of income – to forced eradication. For another thing, eradication programs can erode trust and create friction between the government, on one hand, and coca farmers and the communities where they live, on the other. This was illustrated by a mid-September incident in Policarpa, Nariño, where the Ombudsman [reported](#) that FARC dissident factions pressured the community to insist that a military eradication unit leave their area.

Coca also contributes to insecurity along Colombia's 2,200km border with Venezuela, with the frontier state of Norte de Santander now hosting the country's largest concentration of coca crops [according to the UN](#), but there are also other dynamics at play. Even though official crossings between the two countries have been closed during the pandemic, with some humanitarian exceptions, contraband and people, as well as drugs, continue to move via informal crossings known as *trochas*. Control of this illegal commerce is fiercely contested. The ELN now enjoys the strongest single hold on the frontier's various illicit economies, but Crisis Group field research suggests that post-paramilitary groups and corrupt police on both sides of the border maintain lucrative niches of their own. Bogotá and Caracas frequently trade accusations that the other is stirring up bilateral hostilities by offering support to armed proxies along the border. On 19 September, for example, [clashes broke out](#) between the Venezuelan military and, reportedly, a FARC dissident faction, leaving at least four soldiers and fifteen fighters dead. With cooperation between the two states at a minimum, tensions sparked by armed group activity or other mutual suspicions could heighten rapidly.

A Role for the EU and Its Member States

The window is closing on the deep reforms promised in the 2016 peace accord. The European Union has been among the agreement's strongest proponents, and the bloc should remain focused on its implementation in spite of the health and economic emergency facing Colombia. Funding is a key area to watch. With budgets stretched by the pandemic and recession, the government might be tempted to reassign resources allocated to satisfying commitments in the peace accord. The EU and its member states should urge Bogotá to prioritise funding and implementation of territorially focused development projects, the PDETs, which are intended both to stimulate economic development and prevent conflict by easing entrenched rural poverty and isolation. In addition, targeted assistance to the Attorney General's Office – through the EU's fast and flexible conflict prevention and peacebuilding instrument – can help reduce the persistently high rates of impunity for violent crime, including massacres and assassinations of social leaders. Just 60 perpetrators of 415 such homicides have been [tried and sentenced](#) since 2016; in some cases, they are hired

guns, not the masterminds. With limited risk of prosecution, groups and interests that rely on terror are unlikely to relent.

The EU should use its wealth of experience working to assist farmers in converting from illicit crops to help modify Bogotá's current focus on eradicating coca and eliminating drug trafficking. There is broad political consensus in Colombia that in its current form the crop substitution program is flawed and impossibly expensive. The EU could help authorities think of different ways to expand substitution more efficiently, while maintaining existing commitments to coca producers. For reasons of cost, participation in the program was capped despite great interest, although in a few areas – particularly where forced eradication or fumigation would prove difficult – the government is piloting local agreements with additional coca growers to trade voluntary eradication for aid. The EU should encourage Bogotá to scale up these efforts instead of relying on forced eradication and restoring aerial fumigation. More urgently, the EU can suggest that the government halt forced eradication during the pandemic so as to avoid ratcheting up humanitarian need in many rural areas.

With the same end in mind, the EU should support efforts to secure a humanitarian ceasefire by the ELN for the duration of the COVID-19 crisis. The ELN observed a unilateral ceasefire in April that significantly reduced violence, particularly in Chocó along the Pacific coast, and offered to do so again in July if the government reciprocated. Bogotá could agree to ad hoc humanitarian talks in order to rekindle the group's willingness to negotiate a bilateral pause in fighting, without guaranteeing that it would lead to formal political negotiations, which it might make subject to the guerrilla's behaviour over a certain period of time. Steps to peace by the ELN would also help calm tensions along the Venezuela frontier and might even inspire closer cooperation between Bogotá and Caracas over the shared health and security crisis in the borderlands. Having strongly backed humanitarian relief for Venezuela as well as for its migrants and refugees, the EU should support the development of confidence-building measures between the neighbours, along the lines of the communication channel established between the two countries' health ministries in April. Easing mistrust across the border will be crucial to controlling the risks of a violent flare-up or disease transmission.

Toward Compromise between Kosovo and Serbia

The unresolved dispute between Kosovo and Serbia over the former's independence is the greatest potential source of instability in the western Balkans and an impediment to the European integration of both. While Belgrade and Pristina have been at peace since 1999, and through EU-led mediation arrived at certain technical solutions that facilitate trade, border management and other shared challenges, the rift between them will persist until both sides arrive at a deal that addresses two key sets of issues. The first concerns Serbia's non-recognition of Kosovo's independence and Kosovo's concomitant refusal to recognise Serbia. The second concerns who will govern Serb-majority communities in Kosovo.

While the dispute between Kosovo and Serbia, already decades old, has no natural expiration date, there are new reasons to hope that the parties might be able to arrive at a shared vision for how to end it. Leaders in Belgrade and Pristina have in recent years begun [publicly to explore](#) the contours of a new potential deal. One path to compromise might involve recognition of Kosovo's sovereignty in exchange for important concessions such as the creation of highly autonomous districts for Serbs in northern Kosovo and Albanians in Preševo, Serbia. Another, albeit more contentious one, would see a redrawing of borders so that the governments swap jurisdiction over those two regions.

But the challenges and obstacles remain significant. Much of the public in both countries, driven by years of irresponsible political messaging, is committed to an uncompromising hard line and Serbia's constitution requires recognition of Kosovo to be approved in a referendum. On top of that, the mediators are not on the same page. In recent talks, Washington, Brussels and European capitals pursued sharply differing negotiating strategies and agendas, generating confusion and little real progress.

To help put the parties on a path to resolution, the EU and its member states should:

- ❑ Assess whether there is support for changing their common position so that it expressly focuses on achieving a final agreement based on mutual recognition (something that the five EU states that do not recognise Kosovo have resisted);
- ❑ Empower mediators to encourage a solution broadly acceptable to as many citizens of Kosovo and Serbia as possible, without *a priori* ruling out any solution to which the parties agree, including territorial exchange, so long as it is compatible with human rights and international law;
- ❑ Work with the United States to encourage the Kosovo government to develop a viable negotiating strategy, based on the understanding that recognition is possible but will require concessions;
- ❑ Help establish communication channels between the parties, including confidential and unofficial ones, to enable them to safely explore various potential solutions without fear of immediate blowback or politicisation. One goal is to encourage Belgrade to quietly convey that it would be prepared to recognise Kosovo's inde-

pendence under the right circumstances – a step it cannot take publicly at this stage; and

- Emphasise that Belgrade and Pristina should address pervasive misinformation about the dispute and prospects for resolution in both countries and communicate with their respective peoples in a more concerted way, advocating the need for realistic compromise.

A Long and Costly Impasse

The impasse over Kosovo's independence is costly to both parties and to regional stability. Following Serbia's lead, five EU member states, four NATO members and nearly half the world's nations have denied it recognition (or, in some cases, withdrawn earlier recognition). As a result, Kosovo has been frozen out of the UN, NATO and the EU. The EU has made clear that resolution of the dispute with Kosovo is a necessary (albeit not sufficient) condition for Serbia's membership.

The inability of either country to improve its international status fuels resentment in both. As long as the impasse persists, both parties may be tempted to expand their influence on the ground where they still can. Belgrade could seek to reassert some of the control it ceded over the four Serb-majority municipalities in northern Kosovo and over the border; in response, Pristina might attempt to forcibly integrate these areas, drive out Serbia's remaining institutions on its territory, question the status and security of the medieval Serbian Orthodox monuments, or encourage separatism in Serbia's Albanian-majority Preševo valley. In the long run, whatever measure of stability and security Kosovo's Serbs and Serbia's Albanians have is hostage to good relations between their respective capitals.

The main challenge is to find a compromise that rewards Serbia for extending recognition – a step it has put off in part because of the prevalent view among Serbs that Kosovo is an illegitimate breakaway – but is also acceptable to Kosovo. Because Serbia's constitution requires that sovereign recognition of Kosovo be affirmed by referendum, any deal will have to command majority popular support. Pristina does not face the same kind of constitutional requirement, but its officials also might decide to put the agreement to a vote in order to ensure its legitimacy, likewise constraining their manoeuvring room. The internationally brokered plan that led to Kosovo's independence in 2008 [sought to balance](#) benefits and concessions between both sides. Kosovo got independence, albeit with an initial period of international supervision, but had to decentralise its administration and give its Serb-majority municipalities additional rights, including receiving funding from Serbia. That leaves mediators with a difficult puzzle: to come up with a compromise that differs from that plan, which Serbia rejected, and yet strikes a deal in which everyone both gains and loses something in rough proportion.

Threading this needle will be no small task, but there are cautious grounds for hope. Some political leaders in both capitals want a deal and show signs of willingness to compromise. Serbia has one big concession to make: to recognise its former province as an independent equal. Kosovo arguably could match this move with one of two concessions. The first would be to offer its Serbian minority much broader autonomy; in that event, Belgrade should likewise offer similar arrangements to com-

munities in Preševo that house major Albanian populations. The other would be for the two states to exchange territory along their border, swapping Preševo for the northern Kosovo municipalities.

Between these options, autonomy is both the better alternative and the preferred choice of many European governments. There are several successful European models of significant local autonomy for areas in which the central government's hand is scarcely felt – for example, Finland's Åland Islands, Italy's Trentino-Alto Adige and Spain's Basque Country. By contrast, some European capitals – most prominently Berlin – believe that redrawing borders could create a destabilising precedent that would reverberate elsewhere in the Balkans and possibly beyond.

The parties do not necessarily share this perspective, however. Although there are critics of autonomy and land swaps in both Kosovo and Serbia, autonomy appears to provoke the strongest negative reactions on both sides. Crisis Group's reporting suggests that these come largely from Kosovo leaders, who view it as a prelude to secession or a recipe for the kind of gridlock that plagues nearby Bosnia and Herzegovina, where most decisions require leaders of both entities and all three main ethnic groups to agree. Absent a change of heart, this could make land swaps, which historically Serbian leaders have also seemed to prefer, the only viable route to resolution. If that is the case, European officials will face the decision whether to stand in the way of such a deal, which some have hinted they have previously done. (This is certainly plausible since, as gatekeepers to EU membership, member states have considerable leverage over aspirants such as Belgrade and Pristina.)

The EU Role

The EU can help the parties reach agreement in five ways.

First and most important, EU member states should review their common position with respect to the objectives of the Belgrade-Pristina negotiation. To date, the EU has been hindered from expressly stating that recognition is a goal by its five member states that do not recognise Kosovo's independence. Although their positions are informed by domestic politics and unlikely to change, it is nevertheless worth exploring. As the member state that has most actively sought to unlock the impasse, Germany could probe whether the non-recognisers would be willing to soften their stance in order to facilitate negotiations. Further, even while they may express a preference for a different outcome, the EU and its member states should lift any refusal to countenance a deal incorporating a border change so long as it is consistent with human rights and international law, and should make clear they will not impede the EU accession process on this account.

Secondly, the EU and its member states should convey that they read the EU special representative's mandate to allow for discussion of all potential solutions to the dispute that comport with human rights and international law. On its face, the mandate requires the special representative to seek "a legally binding agreement that addresses all outstanding issues" and to work toward a deal that encourages "regional stability" – language that is read by some to preclude discussion of land swaps. That reading, however, would seem to dismiss the possibility that mutual agreement on land swaps could lead to greater stability by resolving the main outstanding dispute

in the region, laying a foundation for good relations between Belgrade and Pristina, and removing an obstacle to integrating both Kosovo and Serbia into international organisations and institutions like the EU that put a premium on human rights protections for minority populations.

Thirdly, the EU can work with the U.S. to help Pristina consolidate a viable approach to talks. Little can be done as long as Kosovo's delegation cannot speak for a reasonably united government. But right now that is a struggle: its president is facing likely indictment for war crimes and his party is in disarray; the country's largest and most popular party is in opposition; and the governing coalition itself is divided on how to approach dialogue with Serbia. For many reasons, including the role the U.S. played in the 1999 conflict and in the 2008 declaration of independence, Pristina's elite trusts Washington more than it does any European actor, and the U.S. will likely need to play a leading role in helping Pristina clarify its negotiating platform. The EU should support this.

Fourthly, talks require a variety of safe forums, including some far from the public eye, in which leaders can explore options without fear of being accused of betraying the national interest. The rhythm of working groups and summit meetings hosted in Brussels should be supplemented by other opportunities for the parties to speak candidly in the company of trusted interlocutors. The delicacy of the main issue of recognition, as well as whatever Pristina might need to offer in return, makes this a necessity. The EU can offer diplomatic channels for parallel track discussions, as can its member states and friendly nations such as Norway and Switzerland.

Finally, the search for a final agreement is hampered by pervasive misinformation in the western Balkan public sphere, for which Belgrade and Pristina are largely to blame. For many years, both have encouraged their peoples to believe that strategic victory was possible without meaningful compromise, and that certain lines would never be crossed. But crossing those lines is the only realistic way to reach an agreement. Having repeatedly been told they can get something for nothing, Serbs and Kosovars are understandably reluctant to support compromises that are at least symbolically painful. They are also in no position to make an informed choice between the status quo and its alternatives. European and other actors have perhaps unwittingly contributed to this situation, by implying an ability to deliver a win for either party by exerting irresistible pressure on its counterpart, or by offering it inducements. The special representative should start making clear that European pressure will not resolve the dispute, and that the only way to a political settlement is through compromise between the parties.

Preventing State Collapse in Lebanon

Lebanon's socio-economic and financial crisis accelerated greatly in the first half of 2020, pushed along by the COVID-19 pandemic, dramatised by the catastrophic explosion in the Beirut port on 4 August, and marked throughout by massive job and income losses. The government resigned six days after the port blast, compounding the disarray, though it had hardly been effective in addressing the country's problems previously. At the end of August, President Michel Aoun, acting with broad parliamentary support, appointed Mustapha Adib as prime minister, but disagreement over cabinet posts has stymied efforts to form a new government. On 26 September, Adib withdrew amid apparently irreconcilable differences among political blocs, making it highly improbable that a new government can be formed soon.

The likely consequences will be three-fold. First, the enduring vacuum of political leadership will delay urgently needed reforms and external assistance, such as an agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Secondly, in the absence of an IMF bailout, large numbers of Lebanese as well as substantial portions of the Syrian refugee population (more than one million people) will slip into food insecurity and poverty. Thirdly, the state's capacity will erode, not least in the security sector. As state control recedes and ungoverned spaces expand, turf wars may break out between political groups in some areas and between criminal networks in others, and illegal migration will increase.

To meet urgent humanitarian needs, and to fend off yet another state failure in the eastern Mediterranean basin, the EU and its member states should:

- ❑ Continue providing emergency assistance that directly reaches people in need through the EU Civil Protection Mechanism and the EU Humanitarian Air Bridge. Programs could include disaster relief for victims of the port explosion (eg, "cash for work" to repair dwellings before winter).
- ❑ Prepare to extend and expand support to prevent a serious humanitarian crisis, particularly if a solution to the political stalemate remains elusive; plan for long-term assistance directed at poor communities (Lebanese and refugees) that aims to create jobs and improve infrastructure; provide equipment to upgrade public hospitals and support for Lebanese entrepreneurs to boost exports and substitute imports.
- ❑ Offer substantial assistance for revitalisation of key national infrastructure (in particular electricity generation) on the condition that the Lebanese government, once formed, establishes proper legal and regulatory frameworks for the sectors involved and transparent procurement, recruitment and planning procedures.
- ❑ Draw up a roadmap of concrete reforms that a new Lebanese government should undertake to receive EU assistance, such as reaching preliminary agreement with the IMF, legislating to safeguard the independence of the judiciary, and passing anti-corruption and public procurement laws together with necessary implementation decrees.
- ❑ Boost the capacity of Lebanese civil society organisations to participate in public policymaking and to increase government accountability.

- Distance itself from any U.S. attempt to influence Lebanon’s political processes for the sake of regional politics (eg, the U.S.’s “maximum pressure” policy aimed at squeezing Iran) and pursue an inclusive approach that enlists all major political actors in Lebanon, including Hizbollah, in the reform process.

Government Crisis

In the port explosion’s aftermath, French President Emmanuel Macron stepped in to urge that Lebanon fast-track the substantial reforms necessary to unlock external assistance, in particular an IMF package and some of the funds pledged by donors at the 2018 CEDRE conference. After the government resigned on 10 August, he also pushed for the quick formation of a new government backed by all political forces. On 31 August, on the eve of Macron’s second visit to Beirut, a broad majority of the Lebanese parliament nominated Lebanon’s ambassador to Germany, Mustapha Adib, as prime minister. Macron’s initiative stalled due to a combination of domestic competition and external pressure. As distrust runs deep, Lebanese actors, in particular Hizbollah and former Prime Minister Saad Hariri, battled over nominations of ministers to secure influence in the new cabinet, making Adib miss the two-week deadline proposed by the French president. Ten days later, he resigned. In reaction, [Macron blamed all sides](#), adding he was “ashamed of Lebanon’s political leaders”, said he would give them a few more weeks to get their act together, but also pointedly criticised Hizbollah, asserting it “can’t be at the same time an army at war with Israel, an unrestrained militia against civilians in Syria and a respectable party in Lebanon”.

Uncertainty about the U.S. attitude toward Macron’s initiative – coupled with Saudi pressure on Hariri to adopt a tough stance toward Hizbollah – almost certainly further complicated the bargaining. Washington had expressed qualified support for the effort as a whole, but took exception to the French president’s explicit recognition of Hizbollah as a central and legitimate part of the Lebanese political system. The U.S. considers Hizbollah a terrorist organisation and aims to clip its wings as part of the “maximum pressure” policy against Iran and its allies. On 8 September, the U.S. Treasury imposed new sanctions on Lebanese politicians allied with the Shi’ite Islamist party, and seven days later Secretary of State Michael Pompeo warned France, while visiting Paris, that “efforts to resolve the crisis in Lebanon would be in vain without immediately tackling the issue of Iran-backed Hezbollah’s weaponry”. On the other hand, U.S. officials have indicated that their position vis-à-vis a new government may hinge on a distinction between Hizbollah [having a “presence” in it or exercising “dominance”](#) over it.

The uncertainty created by signals from Washington has been compounded by the approaching U.S. elections. Lebanese politicians may prefer to wait to see if President Donald Trump wins or whether Washington moves closer to the French position under a Biden presidency.

What is clear is that greater polarisation and renewed confrontation risks – as it has done repeatedly over the past fifteen years – provoking a breakdown in the political process and violence. Government formation, IMF negotiations and urgent

reforms – all pre-conditions for badly needed external assistance – would become impossible. The social crisis would get still worse and state capacity dwindle faster.

Social Crisis

The collapse of the Lebanese currency and economy sped up in the first half of 2020. The loss of summer tourism revenue due to the COVID-19 lockdown was a further blow, followed by the 4 August port explosion, whose resulting damage cost between \$3 and \$5 billion, according to the World Bank. Lebanese citizens had already lost access to their savings as a result of informal controls local banks have enacted since late 2019 in response to capital outflows and their own severe lack of liquidity. Now citizens have also lost a significant part of their income to runaway inflation (110 per cent annually as of July). Since early 2019, some 350,000 private-sector employees (out of a total work force of 1.8 million) have been laid off and many more have been furloughed or suffered pay cuts as businesses, facing declining purchasing power and evaporating credit, scaled down or suspended operations.

The situation is bound to deteriorate further: the Lebanese Central Bank is burning through its remaining foreign exchange reserves and its [governor has warned](#) that by year's end, he will have to stop the policy of subsidising fuel, food and medicine imports by providing foreign exchange at a highly preferential rate. Scrapping the subsidies would cause yet another huge spike in inflation. Already, [55 per cent of Lebanese live below the poverty line and 23 per cent in extreme poverty](#); Save the Children estimates that in Beirut alone, [more than 500,000 children “struggle to survive”](#). Among Syrian refugees, [some 90 per cent of households are food-insecure](#), and negative coping mechanisms, such as child marriage and child labour, are common. Without substantial external assistance, the threat of [widespread food insecurity](#) is real. As a result of the misery, migration pressure is increasing. Thousands who have legal residency elsewhere or hold foreign passports [have begun to leave](#). A Western diplomat in Beirut told Crisis Group: “Everybody I know is leaving”. Illegal migration by sea to Cyprus is [on the rise](#).

Deteriorating State Capacity and Control

With revenue collapsing and access to financial markets cut off, the Lebanese state will soon be unable to fund ministry budgets or increase salaries to make up for state employees' lost income caused by runaway inflation. Crucial state services would accordingly erode, particularly in the health sector. As public resources dry up, the capacity of some political actors to keep their constituents loyal by offering access to such resources (eg, by securing public employment) and their related ability to enforce social control will recede. Predatory and criminal networks could fill the gaps.

Overstretched and underpaid security forces might be able to prevent some such developments, but not necessarily for long, and some of their personnel might have no choice but to find additional sources of income. Their professionalism would suffer further, as would the functioning of security institutions. Turf wars among local armed groups may become a daily occurrence and could scale up once groups driven by sectarian and political motivations become involved. Some parts of the country

could turn into de facto ungoverned spaces, and some may even become safe havens for jihadists or organised crime. Security forces might also no longer be able to patrol the coastline and curb migration to Cyprus, which is less than 200km away.

A Role for the EU, with France in the Lead

European capitals have a strong interest – and a major role to play – in preventing the Lebanese state’s collapse. After the port explosion, France took the lead in mobilising support for Lebanon through two donor conferences (one held on 9 August, the second planned for October) and pushing the Lebanese leadership to adopt a [reform roadmap](#). France is uniquely positioned to spearhead this effort, as it enjoys credibility with actors across the Lebanese political spectrum. Failure to form a government represents a serious setback for the French initiative; at this point, however, there is no viable alternative to Macron’s approach and, as he recognised, any solution will need to include Hizbollah – together with its Shiite ally, Amal.

Whatever happens with the French initiative, countries like Germany, Italy and Sweden should scale up their humanitarian assistance. Lebanon needs funding and technical capacity for major infrastructure projects (such as in energy, water and garbage disposal) and reconstruction in areas affected by the port blast. Through such projects, donor countries could insist on the establishment of new governance standards (eg, transparency in planning, procurement and disbursement of funds). Donors could also expand existing programs that seek to create jobs for Lebanese and refugees alike by improving local infrastructure and agricultural production in peripheral and marginalised areas, as these places will likely be the first to experience food insecurity and the failure of already feeble state services and control. They could also boost the capacity of Lebanon’s already well-developed civil society by facilitating its inclusion in planning procedures and access to information related to projects implemented with EU participation, so as to create new mechanisms of participation and public accountability. The private sector could be another avenue to explore, as increasing domestic production would reduce unemployment and the balance of payments deficit, substituting for imports that drain foreign currency reserves and creating a source of foreign currency through exports.

Donors could better coordinate their assistance by pooling resources under a common instrument such as a dedicated EU Trust Fund. Europe should also assume a unified position vis-à-vis the U.S. and the Gulf Cooperation Council and urge that international assistance (in particular, an IMF package) be conditioned on progress on reform, and not tied to U.S. and Gulf Arab strategic considerations, such as disarming Hizbollah, diminishing the group’s influence in Lebanon and ending its activities in the region. The objective should be to prevent another failed state in the eastern Mediterranean, not to score points in a geostrategic competition.

Political Turmoil ahead of Somalia's Elections

Somalia is headed into an electoral season that promises to be heated. If not carefully managed, politicking could spiral into violence. Centre-periphery tensions, which have grown markedly during incumbent Mohamed Abdullahi “Farmajo’s” administration, have cast a shadow over electoral preparations and doubt upon the prospects of a smooth poll. Parties made significant progress in the third week of September when they [agreed](#) upon the outlines of an electoral framework, but details remain unclear and timely implementation will be a challenge. With pre-electoral manoeuvring among the politicians dragging on, clan militias appear to be arming while Al-Shabaab militants seek to leverage the political bickering to their advantage. Averting trouble will require an inclusive approach by President Farmajo in particular, rather than a reversion to the unilateral decision-making that has marked his rule thus far.

To support Somalia at this critical juncture, the European Union and its member states should:

- ❑ Maintain pressure on all Somali stakeholders to implement the consensus-based electoral model in a timely fashion.
- ❑ Provide technical electoral assistance, including for the purposes of developing clear post-election dispute resolution mechanisms in conjunction with other partners such as the UN.
- ❑ Keep up assistance to the Somali security sector and the African Union’s peace-keeping mission (AMISOM) ahead of the latter’s planned drawdown by the end of 2021, as the elections (and their aftermath) pose clear dangers of deadly unrest.

Elections Will Test Newfound Consensus

Somalia’s chronic centre-periphery tensions have been on vivid display in the tussle over electoral preparations, threatening to turn the vote into a trigger for a wider crisis. The constitution mandates that parliamentary and presidential elections take place by November 2020 and February 2021, respectively, but given delayed technical preparations, these timelines look increasingly ambitious. The key obstacle that blocked consensus for much of 2020 on the most divisive issue – the voting system for the forthcoming polls – is pervasive distrust between the federal government in Mogadishu and Somalia’s regions, or member states. Although that distrust has blighted Somali politics for years, the Farmajo administration has widened rifts with its often-combative approach to these relationships over the past three and half years, particularly its attempts to replace federal member state leaders.

The third round of direct talks in September 2020 over the forthcoming election did, however, yield a breakthrough, as President Farmajo and all member state presidents agreed to shelve one-person-one-vote elections in favour of an indirect voting system. Under the terms of the deal, delegates from different parts of the country will form electoral colleges that in turn will select parliamentarians. Parliament will then vote for the president. This is similar to the model used in 2016, albeit with a

slightly expanded number of delegates, a provision aimed at addressing international demands to demonstrate progress toward eventual universal suffrage. This outcome, which effectively closes the door on a one-person-one vote election this time around, may disappoint many of Somalia's external partners. But the reality is that political bickering among rivals and inadequate preparations meant that such a vote was unattainable in either 2020 or 2021. The Somali politicians who promoted it for the most part were more interested in extending their mandates with an election delay than making the country's politics genuinely inclusive and participatory. The indirect voting system should allow the polls to take place in a more timely manner.

The agreement is a positive step but big challenges remain. The deal unblocks an impasse between the federal government and Puntland and Jubaland member states in particular, whose relations with Famaajo are particularly strained and whose leaders boycotted a previous round of talks, accusing the president of not negotiating in good faith. Yet many details remain unclear and implementation within the given timeframes will be fraught. Mogadishu and member state leadership, in tandem with other stakeholders, still need to agree on the precise roles and responsibilities of the federal and state-level electoral bodies that will manage the election, on the final determination of voting locations in each member state and, perhaps most crucially, on the selection process for the electoral college delegates.

Still, the agreement charts a potential way forward to end the grinding political crisis over the vote. It also contains some progressive elements. The process by which delegates will be selected is yet to be finalised, with Mogadishu and member state presidents continuing discussions on the subject. But the newly agreed model hands civil society an enhanced role in electoral delegate selection – an improvement on past elections. It also envisages women constituting a minimum of 30 per cent of the electors. That said, the key test will be whether this provision will be implemented. In 2016, Somalia enacted a similar quota but ultimately fell well short of the threshold, as some regions failed to send sufficient female delegates.

Clear Dangers

Electoral preparations are taking place in a fluid and fraught security environment. In recent months, opposition to the Famaajo administration mounted, including among powerful clans whose leaders suspected the incumbent planned to put off elections in order to extend his administration's mandate. Concrete evidence is hard to come by, but Mogadishu residents told Crisis Group that clans in the capital have been arming themselves in case disputes over the polls escalate into violence, portending a return to the clan-based fighting that damaged the country so badly in the 1990s. Major groupings like the Mudulood, part of the Hawiye clan – one of Somalia's most politically dominant – have held large [conferences](#) warning about the possibility of delays in the electoral calendar. In principle, the recent electoral agreement should diminish such tensions, but delays in implementation would give them oxygen.

For its part, Al-Shabaab's Islamist insurgency has stepped up its attacks, a sign of its ability to exploit political infighting in the capital. Al-Shabaab's burst of activity is all the more concerning given that AMISOM is scheduled to hand over primary responsibility for the country's security to Somali agencies by the end of 2021. The

insurgents seem to be preparing for a scenario of prolonged electoral standoff – Crisis Group interviews indicate that the group has recently established new training camps and launched recruitment campaigns. Already, the group has hit Mogadishu hard, including a siege at the Elite Hotel on 16 August, when it conducted the first complex attack in Somalia’s capital in 2020. There have been at least eight suicide attacks in the city since June. Al-Shabaab has also stepped up violence in such outlying areas as Gedo, Lower Juba, Bay and Mudug.

The potential for clan-based opposition and the Al Shabaab campaign present clear challenges in the run-up to the elections. The risks are high that Somalia could descend into further conflict should the electoral process be mismanaged.

What the EU Can Do

The EU has long championed efforts to stabilise Somalia and deepen state capacity in the country. Today, pressure from Somalia’s partners, including the EU, but also the UN and U.S., appears to be the main factor keeping electoral discussions on track. Following the broad agreement on the electoral model, Brussels should urge the federal government and member states to embrace the same spirit of consensus as they discuss details on electoral management. In order to keep the elections on track, the EU should lean on Farmajo and all the member state presidents to speedily implement the electoral agreement.

The EU should continue to provide technical assistance to support discussions over implementation. Both the federal government and member states harbour concerns about possible manipulation of voting procedures. The selection process of electoral college delegates by elders, civil society and member states will be highly contentious: whoever has influence over these delegates will be well positioned to choose the next president. The EU can press Somali politicians to use methods that reduce the potential for corruption in the selection process, such as ensuring civil society can play the envisaged oversight role in delegate selection, and developing clear and timely dispute resolution mechanisms to address grievances around that selection. The EU should also push for Somalis to fulfil the quota of 30 per cent woman electors this time around.

Security is also key, especially as the number of voting locations in Somalia will expand. The EU has extended support for AMISOM until December 2020. This step is welcome, but present trends indicate Somalia will still need security assistance in the aftermath of the elections. The EU will thus need to renew its funding for the mission throughout 2021.