

# The monthly briefing | April 2015

International political and security risk updates

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## Africa

*Tensions in Tunisia apparent in aftermath of terrorist attack on Bardo Museum in Tunis; al-Shabaab mount major attack in Mogadishu despite continued pressure from AMISOM security forces; Nigerian president elect's presidency will be defined by how he tackles Boko Haram.*

Liam McVay

### **Tensions in Tunisia apparent in aftermath of terrorist attack on Bardo Museum in Tunis**

The Tunisian authorities have suggested that the Okba Ibn Nafaa Brigade was responsible for the 18 March attack on the Bardo Museum in Tunisia's capital, Tunis, which resulted in the death of 22 people. The terrorist group was led by Algerian extremist Khaled Chaieb, who the authorities claim was killed in a security operation along with eight other suspects on the Algerian border on 28 March. Tunisian Prime Minister Habib Essid stated that Chaieb, also known as Luqman Abu Saqr, was the 'mastermind' behind the violence, despite claims made by Islamic State (IS) that it had planned and orchestrated the attack. News of Chaieb's death came as thousands of Tunisians marched through the streets of Tunis to protest against violence in all forms.

Terrorism in Tunisia is far from a new phenomenon. Militant groups have killed over 60 members of the Tunisian security forces since 2012. Various groups have taken responsibility for these killings, though reports in Tunisia often link them to Algerian-led groups, such as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). As a result, the Tunisian authorities have become increasingly more concerned about the potential consequences of the internecine conflicts raging in Libya and Algeria. Cross-boarder smuggling and the resulting black market has brought with it organised crime on a scale that Tunisia has not seen before. The flood of Libyan refugees has also been a source of tension. Although the influx of mainly middle class Libyan families has bolstered the wavering Tunisian economy, it has also created tension as rental rates have sky rocketed in areas of Tunis and the surrounding suburbs.



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The Tunisian public is relatively supportive of the government and its security forces. Rural residents are often most appreciative of the authorities support, as they are particularly susceptible to attacks from across the Libyan and Algerian borders. At the same time, it is often in these remote rural areas that radicalism takes root. Tunisia has produced a number of high-profile extremist figures in the conflict in Libya, such as Ahmed Rouissi, the leader of Ansar al-Sharia, who was killed shortly after 18 March in an unrelated incident near Tripoli. These divided loyalties in the Tunisian countryside mean that small towns supply both the security forces with new recruits and insurgent groups in Libya, Algeria, Iraq and elsewhere with young radicalised fighters. In a country that already suffers from the highest levels of youth unemployment in the world, the economic consequences from a sudden drop in tourism after the attacks in Tunis could be more than simply financial. A disillusioned youth, who believe they have been excluded from the benefits of a revolution that they started and whose job opportunities are almost non-existent, will need to be appeased if Tunisia is to stabilise. If the fledgling democracy fails to moderate these demographic issues, more will attempt to travel overseas to fight before returning to the politically-divided Tunisian countryside and employing what they have learnt in Iraq and Syria to devastating effect.

### **Al-Shabaab mount major attack in Mogadishu despite continued pressure from AMISOM security forces**

On 27 March, gunmen killed 24 people during an attack on the Makka al-Mukarama hotel in the Somali capital, Mogadishu. The attack began at approximately 16:30 local time when a suicide bomber detonated a car bomb at the gate of the hotel. Armed gunmen then entered the hotel and took several hostages. They occupied the upper floors of the building for the next 24 hours while engaging Somali security forces. A special forces unit eventually managed to retake control of the hotel after sustaining a number of casualties. The al-Qaeda affiliated al-Shabaab claimed responsibility for the attack shortly after the conclusion of the siege. This incident was the second hotel attack in as many months. The previous assault, on 20 February, resulted in the deaths of a number of high-ranking government officials.

Al-Shabaab frequently carries out suicide bombing, shootings and assaults in and around Mogadishu. Their targets often include employees of the Western-backed government, lawmakers and foreign aid workers. The group controlled much of the capital for four years between 2007 and 2011, before being pushed out of the capital and other populous areas in the surrounding region after a successful operation conducted by African Union forces. Despite the group being the target of many air strikes and military operations in the last year and the death of the group's leader, Adan Garar, in a US drone strike in late February, al-Shabaab remains a significant security risk for Somalia and its neighbours.

Al-Shabaab's impact on West Africa has required an international response. The movement of al-Shabaab across borders into neighbouring states allows its forces to avoid detection and capture by exploiting the low levels of security cooperation between Somalia and Kenya. The United States has provided financial and logistical support to African Union and Somali forces in an attempt to stabilise the region and prevent the spread of lawless areas in the Horn of Africa in which terrorist groups can flourish. These efforts have been augmented by a prolonged Somali amnesty period, aimed at encouraging those who wish to leave al-Shabaab. The stability of Somalia and the country's fledgling democracy will depend on the continued efforts of the Somali, African Union and Western security forces, acting cooperatively to address the threat posed by al-Shabaab. However, long-term success will ultimately depend on the ability of the Somali government to address the social, political and economic grievances that provide al-Shabaab with a steady stream of fresh recruits.

## **Nigerian president elect's presidency will be defined by how he tackles Boko Haram**

As millions turned out to participate in what was described as the most important election in democratic Nigeria's young history, Boko Haram militants attacked a number of rural towns in a series of coordinated mass killings in which whole settlements were burned to the ground and their residents either massacred or displaced. The attacks in Buratai, Biri and Dukku, came at a political crossroads for Nigeria, as the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and President Goodluck Jonathan were pushed from power by Muhammadu Buhari of the All Progressives Congress (APC) party, who had unsuccessfully contested the previous three elections. Buhari, who previously took power during a *coup d'état* in the 1980s, represents a significant departure from Jonathan and the PDP. The 72-year-old Muslim and former general had based much of his campaign on his hardline stance against extremism in the northeast and corruption in Lagos.

Jonathan had been heavily criticised for his lack of success against Boko Haram. Recently, advances had been made, and heavily publicised, in what many saw as a last minute bid to influence the presidential election. On 2 March, Jonathan ended a brief tour of liberated towns in the northeast of the country that had, until late February, been in the hands of Boko Haram and associate groups. It is clear that in spite of the limited success of these recent excursions into the northeast by the Nigerian security forces, Boko Haram is still active in the region and has continued its campaign of attacks. Although the militants have been driven from a number of population centres and substantial areas of northern Borno state, they still control large areas of southern Borno along the mountainous Cameroonian border as well as most of the Sambisa Forest and parts of southern Yobe state.

Buhari, who will be inaugurated on 29 May, won 54.55% of the votes in the general election of 28-29 March, compared to Jonathan's 45.45%. The APC is the first party to unseat the PDP since the return of multi-party politics and civilian rule in 1999. The next presidential term will be defined by the methods Buhari employs to control and isolate Boko Haram and mitigate unrest in the northeast. The forests and mountains in Borno state, into which Boko Haram retreat, are notoriously difficult to navigate. As a result, tackling Boko Haram will require bilateral cooperation with its neighbours, particularly Cameroon. Boko Haram has benefited from the dissatisfaction and disillusionment felt by a large portion of the Muslim community towards the infamously corrupt government and its associated state structures. Buhari will need to use his presidency to address some of those grievances, thus weakening the foundations on which Boko Haram base their recruitment and future growth.

## Americas

*Summit of the Americas will test US relations with Cuba and Venezuela; debt struggle to be left for new Argentine president; negotiations between Colombian government and FARC result in several important steps forward.*

Petr Bohacek

### **Summit of the Americas will test US relations with Cuba and Venezuela**

While the third round of negotiations is making little progress in the thawing of relations between United States and Cuba, companies such as Google, Apple and Netflix have begun operations in Cuba, highlighting the way diplomatic progress has lagged behind commercial advancements. With the re-establishment of charter flights between the two countries, the United States has removed 29 companies and six individuals from the Cuban sanctions list. However, the worsening relations between the United States and Venezuela, a strategic partner of Cuba, have drawn criticism from Cuban President Raúl Castro. In contrast to US-Cuba affairs, relations have soured between Washington and Caracas, with Venezuela detaining four US humanitarian workers and placing travel bans on several prominent US officials. United States President Barack Obama responded by issuing an executive order on 9 March, expanding sanctions and recognising Venezuela as a national security threat. The US rapprochement with Latin America more broadly, and the contrasting conflict with Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro's regime, will likely be an important discussion point in the fringes of the seventh Summit of the Americas to be held in Panama City, Panama, on 10-11 April 2015.

The US foreign policy towards Latin America has historically been rigid and ineffective, yet the normalisation of relations with Havana has created expectations of a new approach to the United States' traditional sphere of influence. While the thaw in US-Cuba relations has undoubtedly been slow in terms of progress, the apparent willingness may serve as a signal that the United States is becoming more open to dealing with leftist regimes in Latin America. Despite these positive signals, the divergence between Venezuela and the United States is damaging perceptions of the latter throughout Latin America, as many electorates liken stringent US foreign policy to a historically imperialist presence in the region. Obama will likely seek to subtly consolidate and realign these disparate approaches to Latin American foreign policy in order to portray a positive engagement with regional actors throughout the summit.

It is highly likely that Obama and Castro will seek to publicly demonstrate the improvement in bilateral relations between their two countries, signifying a renewed approach to US regional policy. Obama is likely to receive notable criticism during the summit over the executive order placed against Venezuela, though it is unlikely that the Latin American block will be able to exert the degree of political pressure necessary to encourage a rapid reconciliation of US-Venezuelan relations. It is also likely that a pledge for necessary dialogue between the two countries will be announced following the close of the summit in April; however, as the upcoming national assembly elections are likely to weaken the Maduro administration, the United States are highly likely to postpone any such negotiations with Caracas until after the election. So if a dialogue process does commence, it is likely to be significantly protracted. Nevertheless, the thaw in relations between the United States and Cuba will continue to portray the former's approach to Latin America as more positive and reformist.

## Debt struggle to be left for new Argentine president

Argentina's central bank has posted new data showing a 2014 trade deficit of \$5.07 billion, with the country's GDP growing by only 0.5%. With major debt payments scheduled for Argentina in the near future, the country continues to struggle with 'holdout' sovereign bonds investors, which a US judge has ruled Argentina must repay in order to service debts on newly-issued bonds. As Argentina battles with its debt crisis, two clear candidates have emerged in the campaign for the presidential election in October: Daniel Osvaldo Scioli, the current governor of Buenos Aires Province, now intends to defend the ruling Justicialist Party (PJ), with Mauricio Macri, leader of the centre-right Republican Proposal (PRO) party, becoming the main opposition candidate by gaining support of the Radical Party (UCR).

With the economic slowdown of Argentina's two biggest trade partners, Brazil and China, the economy, which focuses heavily on social spending (40% of the national GDP), is significantly struggling with debt and double-digit inflation. Argentina also has low foreign currency reserves, with which it must pay its debts, and is facing liquidity issues with only approximately \$15 billion of available funds. The government has enough dollars in foreign reserves to pay its debt obligations until the end President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's term; however, the next Argentinian president will be responsible for \$19.3 billion in debt payments between 2016 and 2017 alone. These impending debt obligations are exacerbated by debts due to holdout bond investors (often referred to as 'vulture funds'). The US judge's decision has effectively blocked Citibank from receiving a number of debt payments from the Argentine government, causing defaults in the past; however, a number of transactions were authorised by the US District Court for the Southern District of New York on 20 March due to a deal between Citibank and these holdout investors.

Moving forward, it is clear that a victory for the centre-right wing and market-oriented Macri is likely to completely change the country's economic model and protectionist policies. As Macri has secured the support of the UCR, he has gained the crucial local support of the radical delegates. Due to the leftist Peronist split between Sergio Massa and Scioli, Macri is likely to be better able to gather the votes of the disgruntled population. Should Macri take office, he may be able to establish a more market-friendly and Western-oriented economic regime that aims to bring Argentina back to the global financial markets to attract enough Direct Foreign Investment to alleviate some of the country's drastic deficit issues. This would likely entail an appeasement of holdout investors in order to service the debt of newly issued sovereign bonds. In contrast, should Scioli take power in the presidential elections, it is more likely that Argentina will seek to maintain the current economic model. Such a lack of reform may generate further debt and a continued economic slowdown that would invariably worsen living standards and heighten political tensions throughout the country.

## **Negotiations between Colombian government and FARC result in several important steps forward**

Negotiations between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) have realised a joint agreement on clearing Colombian minefields that was signed on 8 March. The initiative will represent the first real test of how the two sides can peacefully coexist and cooperate. Additionally, the Colombian president, Juan Manuel Santos, suspended airstrikes against the guerrilla group on 10 March and has been relatively vocal in supporting immunity for and protection of FARC members facing extradition to the United States. Such positive steps have been reciprocated to a degree by FARC. As the Defensoría del Pueblo (Colombian ombudsman for human rights) suggests, FARC did not violate the current truce between 20 February and 19 March 2015. Despite these encouraging developments, there has been a continued military effort by the Colombian government to mitigate the threat posed by the movement of group members from political to criminal entities.

By targeting criminal elements of FARC, the Colombian government is creating a judiciously dichotomous approach to dealing with criminal and non-criminal FARC members. This is likely intended to discourage a bolstering of the narcotics trade in the country. Furthermore, appropriate timescales must be adopted in order to facilitate the successful integration of the FARC members into society, as a hurried and sub-optimal arrangement may cause an unwanted movement of members towards criminal organisations in certain areas of Colombia. Despite this, the cessation of airstrikes by the Colombian government is a positive reciprocal step following the unilateral establishment of a ceasefire by the FARC in December 2014, and it may pave the way for a more complete bilateral agreement in the run up to the municipal elections in October 2015. It is likely that the FARC will seek to slow, but not significantly disrupt, this process due to the timescale required for the organisation to make a consolidated transfer towards complete political participation. As such, it is likely that the FARC will seek to intimidate and pressurise rural civilians in order to influence local voting preferences during the next electoral process.

The Colombian government is likely to continue to exert military pressure on the FARC, albeit in a more targeted approach in order to pave the way for a potential bilateral ceasefire. In particular, these engagements are likely to focus particularly on elements of the FARC with discernible links to criminal elements throughout the country. Interoperable projects such as the de-mining programme are likely to build trust between the government and the FARC and may ultimately result in further concessions from both parties. As it is unlikely that comprehensive agreement will be reached before the local elections, the FARC is highly likely to seek to degrade opposing candidates in the areas of their interest in order to facilitate a more favourable transition to future political participation.

## Asia and Pacific

*Relations between China and Myanmar sour as conflict with Kokang rebels continues; proposed deployment of US anti-ballistic missile system puts regional political pressure on South Korea; international claimants critical stances towards Chinese territorial claims appear to be consolidating.*

Liam McVay and Neville Radovic

### **Relations between China and Myanmar sour as conflict with Kokang rebels continues**

On 13 March, a wayward Myanmar Air Force strike killed five Chinese citizens in China's Yunnan province. Yunnan, which is situated directly across the border from Shan State, has been the flashpoint of fighting between Myanmar's government forces and Kokang rebels in recent weeks. The aircraft had been targeting the Myanmar Nationalities Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) ethnic Kokang rebels, who have been locked in conflict with government forces since fighting began on 6 February. China's vice-minister of foreign affairs, Liu Zhenmin, summoned Myanmar's ambassador, Thit Linn Ohn, to Beijing in order to express the Communist Party of China's (CPC) 'grave concerns' and to further discuss the implications of the Kokang conflict for China and for civilian ethnic-Chinese Kokangs who are caught between government and insurgent factions.

The ongoing fighting in Shan has had a notable effect on the Chinese side of the border for years, yet Chinese authorities have estimated that approximately 40,000 refugees have crossed the border since the beginning of the recent conflict in early February. The shared ethnic background of the people of Yunnan and many of the refugees from Shan State has made for a relatively accepting attitude towards this periodic mass migration in the past. However, the recent incident, the second in less than a week, marks an unwelcomed but significant change in relations between the Myanmar authorities and the CPC in Beijing. The bombing has prompted the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to intensify the Chinese air presence over the border, which will undoubtedly increase the risk of a military exchange between the PLA and Myanmar forces in the future.

The conflict posed a serious concern for the Chinese authorities long before the events of last month. China's ethnic affiliations with Kokang have led some groups within the Chinese government and the Chinese public to call for the PLA to support the Kokang rebels with military action. There is already evidence to suggest that local Chinese citizens are sending food and medical supplies across the border to the rebels. It has also been suggested that weapons assistance is becoming more frequent. The extent to which local Chinese authorities are aware of these transactions is not known. Myanmar is strategically important for China. It sees its neighbour to the south as a profitable trade partner due to its large oil and mineral reserves and access to the sea and trading routes. However, diplomatic relations with Myanmar have already soured after its emergence from decades of military rule. The new Myanmar government has begun to diversify its international affiliations in a deliberate step away from Chinese dependency, a move that could potentially jeopardise Chinese interests in the area. Beijing has limited options in response. Sealing the border and curbing any illegal flow of supplies will placate the Myanmar government but anger local ethnic populations and business owners who make large profits from trading across the border. At the same time, encouraging or hosting peace talks between the rebels and government officials could be interpreted on the wider global stage as China leaning on its newly-democratic neighbour. What is certain is that the CPC must produce a cohesive strategy soon, as it is highly likely that the conflict will spill across the border more frequently in the future.

## **Proposed deployment of US anti-ballistic missile system puts regional political pressure on South Korea**

Planned discussions over the deployment of US Terminal High-Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) missile systems on the Korean Peninsula have produced tensions in the usually amiable United States-South Korean relationship. THAAD is a mobile anti-missile platform, and a significant cog in the US air defence system, intended to intercept ballistic missiles at high altitudes and at ranges of over 2,000 kilometres (a distance that would cover most of the Chinese mainland). Since June 2014, the US government has argued that the deployment of the system is an essential part of defending both the South Korean people and US interests and military personnel. In early February, the head of the US Army's Pacific Command, General Vincent Brooks, publically stated that THAAD batteries were desperately required in South Korea due to the readiness of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un to deploy his burgeoning missile arsenal against the South. Reports in South Korean media have suggested that the US military has already identified sites that are suitable for THAAD deployment.

In recent weeks, China, Russia and North Korea have all voiced strong opposition to any deployment of THAAD in South Korea. Beijing has made a point of reminding Seoul that it is they, not the United States, who represent South Korea's major trading partner and that any escalation of tensions could see a significant economic cost for the South Korea. South Korean government officials have said little in response to the pressure from Beijing, other than stating that they 'will do what is in the national interest'. South Korea's flaccid response to the increasingly aggressive rhetoric coming from Beijing highlights the desire within South Korean defence circles to move away from its dependence on the United States and promote its impartiality in the region through continued strategic ambiguity. This has angered US representatives in Seoul, who have seen hesitation in the South Korean government as pandering to Chinese influence and interests.

South Korea is attempting to act as the fulcrum maintaining the balance between the United States and China in the Asia-Pacific region. The United States is South Korea's greatest ally and its most significant military partner; however, China represents Seoul's largest trade partner, and a significant part of the South Korean economy is dependent on its relations with China. This leaves South Korea in an understandably difficult strategic position. Ultimately, the power to resolve this issue lies with the Chinese. The public support for THAAD in South Korea only exists as a response to the apparent threat from the North. China, as North Korea's largest trading partner and its main security and economic patron, is in a unique position to mediate talks and diffuse the ongoing situation between North and South Korea. A formally recognised agreement of de-escalation, mediated by the Chinese, may ruffle feathers in Washington; however, it would go some way to reassuring the South Korean government and its citizens that THAAD is an unnecessary development.



## **International claimants critical stances towards Chinese territorial claims appear to be consolidating**

Senior US Navy officers and senators have taken a more critical stance on China's land reclamation activities and lack of cooperation with other claimants. On 4 March, US Navy Admiral Harry Harris, Jr., commander of the US Pacific Fleet, stated that China's land reclamation activities are provocative and could result in increased tensions within the region. This sentiment was also voiced by Vice Admiral Robert Thomas, Jr., commander of the US Seventh Fleet, who expressed interest in the establishment of a combined maritime force comprised of various South Asian states in order to patrol the contested region. Furthermore, on 19 March, leading US Senators John McCain, Bob Corker, Jack Reed and Bob Menendez urged the US Secretary of State, John Kerry, and defence secretary, Ash Carter, to develop a new comprehensive strategy in order to address the growing threat to regional stability in Southeast Asia posed by China's policy towards the South China Sea. There has also been increased bilateral cooperation between claimants, arguably in response to China's recent activities, with the Philippines and Malaysia agreeing to strengthen defence ties during a meeting between the Philippine defence secretary, Voltaire Gazmin, and his Malaysian counterpart, Hishammuddin Hussein, on 11 March.

The growing concern among leading US Navy officers and senators represents the greatest change of scope for the disputed South China Sea. China's lack of desire for dialogue with other claimants and constant reiteration of its view that its activities in the South China Sea are lawful and justified seems to have prompted calls for a sterner approach from both Republican and Democrat senators in the United States. The strengthening of bilateral relations between claimants is also an important development, as it suggests that other claimants may be increasingly likely to cooperate with one another in the face of growing Chinese assertiveness.

Although tensions in the South China Sea are constantly evolving, China's current lack of compromise will likely see continued tension between itself and other claimants, who could potentially form a multinational maritime patrol force aimed at countering the coercive actions of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy and Coast Guard. The United States and its close regional ally Japan are likely to assist heavily with such a patrol force. As such, it is in the interest of weaker claimants to cast aside their differences and deepen defence cooperation in order to counter the larger, more powerful, China. The outbreak of a direct conflict involving China and other claimants remains the most dangerous scenario. A miscalculation between opposing naval vessels could trigger an exchange of fire, leading to further military action. Despite the United States being a non-claimant, its treaty obligations with the Philippines could see it being quickly embroiled should the country be involved in a conflict with China or another claimant. As claimants continue to procure advanced weaponry and develop their naval capabilities with the intention of having a greater presence in the contested waters, the risk of an exchange of fire increases accordingly.

## Europe

*Lithuania bolsters military capacity over concerns surrounding a Russian invasion; stalling diplomatic solution to Ukrainian conflict is resulting in dangerous stalemate; murder of former Russian deputy prime minister places Kremlin under scrutiny.*

Alina Yablokova

### **Lithuania bolsters military capacity over concerns surrounding a Russian invasion**

Late in February, the Lithuanian president, Dalia Grybauskaitė, announced plans to reinstate compulsory military service within the country. The measure is allegedly intended to address the geopolitical situation in the region and to prevent a spill-over of the Ukrainian conflict into the Baltics. The country's leadership has pointed to Lithuania's strategic location between mainland Russia and its exclave of Kaliningrad on the Baltic Sea as the impetus for the growing security concerns. As such, the Seimas (parliament) voted overwhelmingly in favour of the bill on 19 March – with 112 votes for, three against, and five abstentions. The bill will reintroduce military conscription for a five-year period, commencing in September, and legislates for the enlistment of 3,000 men, aged between 19- and 26-years old, to serve nine-month terms of service. Although the Lithuanian military force is presently one of Europe's weakest, the country is a full member of NATO and is protected by the collective defence provision. The alliance recently reaffirmed its commitment to provide support to its members in order to bolster security and has recently intensified its training operations in countries neighbouring the Russian border. Despite this protection, Lithuania appears committed to bolstering its domestic capacity in order to create an immediate response force capable of repelling a potential incursion, as NATO forces would require time to mobilise.

Fierce anti-Russian and anti-Putin rhetoric in Lithuania and other Baltic states is often associated with Russia's support of separatists in the Donbass region of Ukraine, and its capacity to destabilise neighbouring countries. Although the recent discourse from the Lithuanian capital, Vilnius, can be partly explained by these concerns, similar iterations have systemically been used as a rallying call for prominent political forces throughout the Baltics since post-Soviet independence. Despite this historical paradigm, recent expressions of concerns over a Russian invasion have been more vocal, and have significantly contributed to the decision to intensify NATO military operations within the region. In response, Russia has also increased the scope of drills and airborne exercises over the past month. These increasingly large and frequent military demonstrations represent a dangerous deterrence game between Russia and NATO, and if poorly managed, could bring about an unwanted military clash.

Although Vilnius is on high alert, Moscow is highly unlikely to launch a military strike on Lithuania. Kaliningrad has been a Russian exclave since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, and despite the logistical difficulties associated with this arrangement, Russia does not appear to have the desire to engage in overt confrontation with Lithuania in order to create a corridor to Kaliningrad. Thus, fears surrounding the potential for such an incursion are largely based on speculation resulting from heightened regional tensions. Furthermore, Moscow is not prepared for a war with NATO, which would be inevitable in case of such an invasion. It is highly likely, however, that both Russia and NATO will continue to implement training missions along the border as a result of these heightened tensions, which are likely to remain a reality of European politics for some years to come.

## **Stalling diplomatic solution to Ukrainian conflict is resulting in dangerous stalemate**

The situation in Ukraine improved somewhat after the signing of a peace accord between the Ukrainian President, Petro Poroshenko, and Russian-backed separatist leaders in Minsk, Belarus, on 12 February. Although sporadic violent confrontations have continued, the ceasefire has been largely respected along major sections of the contact line in the Donbass region of Ukraine, with both the Ukrainian army and Russian-backed separatists recently announcing the successful completion of a heavy weapons withdrawal on 7 March, though the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) has not been able to independently confirm this withdrawal. Despite this lessening in the intensity of the conflict, the peace process is failing to bring about a lasting diplomatic solution to the crisis – the central objective of the Minsk agreement. The agreement has come under renewed strain following Ukraine's pledge to grant special status to rebel-controlled eastern regions, giving them limited self-rule, under the condition that local elections are held according to Ukrainian law. The Verkhovna Rada (Ukrainian parliament) approved the bill on 17 March; however, the separatists argue that Kiev's proposition implies that the regions they control would therefore be placed under de facto Ukrainian control in exchange for preferential treatment at an undefined future date.

Russia backs the separatist position, and claims that Kiev is attempting to re-write the Minsk agreement. This argument is largely supported by the document, which does not define the provision of the arrangement as conditional on local elections implemented by Ukraine. The resolution adopted in Kiev does not therefore fully comply with the Minsk agreement and may significantly hamper the peace settlement. This demonstrates that whilst the Ukrainian government desires to appease its Western partners, it is reluctant to recognise the rebel-held regions under their current leadership. Furthermore, the deadlines for the first three stages of the peace plan have all been missed, suggesting that the implementation of the Minsk agreement is likely to be more complex than initially expected. In March, Kiev continued to strengthen its military and to seek foreign weapons contracts, while reports suggest that Russia has continued to reinforce the separatists. As fighting continues, with both sides reporting military and civilian casualties, the United States is still assessing the option of sending lethal weapons to Kiev. The amalgamation of these factors suggests that the implementation of the peace agreement is in peril, and its enforcement has been inefficient.

In the short term, these recent developments are likely to produce another diplomatic stalemate between Ukraine and Russia, while European leaders remain reluctant to demand a more flexible approach from Poroshenko towards the status of the rebel-held regions. As long as there is little compromise, there is no guarantee of peace in Ukraine, and further negotiations will be required to facilitate a more amicable arrangement, despite the general unwillingness of the 'Normandy Four' (France, Germany, Russia and Ukraine) to facilitate such dialogue. Should the current diplomacy fail out right, the civil war in Ukraine risks becoming a frozen conflict. It is less likely, but not inconceivable, that the largely unresolved conflict could escalate. If this happens, it will be more likely that the United States will supply lethal weapons to Kiev, increasing the probability of the conflict escalating and increasing the potential spill-over into neighbouring countries.

## **Murder of former Russian deputy prime minister places Kremlin under scrutiny**

Boris Nemtsov, a former deputy prime minister under President Boris Yeltsin and in recent years an outspoken opposition activist, was shot dead in central Moscow on 27 February. His murder provoked much speculation surrounding the reasons and perpetrators of the crime. The Kremlin dubbed the killing a 'provocation' in which the opposition sacrificed one of their supporters in order to discredit the Russian president, Vladimir Putin. The opposition itself appeared divided, with some members vocally accusing the government, while others blamed the general atmosphere of intolerance to dissidence in Russia. In response, Western leaders have placed Russian authorities under increased political pressure, calling for a fair and transparent investigation. At present, five individuals are currently suspected, two of which have been charged with murder motivated by religious hatred. The detained are all of Chechen origin and have links to the Chechen leader, Ramzan Kadyrov, a close friend of Putin who enjoys pervasive autonomy in governing the republic. As such, Nemtsov's murder has once again highlighted Moscow's uneasy relationship with Chechnya.

The murder has raised renewed concerns in the West about the undemocratic nature of the Russian political system. Nonetheless, the incident has also created hopes that the opposition will consolidate and strengthen, though this has not occurred so far. While approximately 100,000 people attended the 1 March procession in commemoration of Nemtsov, the police force argued that only 16,000 attended. The killing has, however, highlighted the Chechen impunity and the deficiencies of the Russian investigatory authorities, as the information suggesting that Kadyrov's men are responsible for Nemtsov's death did not prevent the government from awarding the Chechen leader with a state medal. In addition, reports suggest that the suspects allegedly confessed to the crime under physical duress. There is a clear lack of transparency in Russia's investigatory proceedings, and as such it is likely that the individuals behind the murder will remain unpunished while the trigger men take full responsibility for the crime.

The killing of Nemtsov, a staunch critic of the Kremlin's foreign and economic policies, has occurred within the context of Russia's growing political isolation and economic recession; however, it has not mobilised the population against the current establishment. Indeed, according to a poll conducted by the Levada Centre, the Russian population has generally remained indifferent to Nemtsov's murder. The opposition is, therefore, unlikely to gain significant support to disturb the political status quo in Russia. Despite this, the incident and the ongoing investigation are likely to exacerbate critical perceptions of the Putin administration in the long run, and further incidents may have a more significant impact in terms of providing greater support for the political opposition. Should such events occur, there is a low likelihood that a consolidated opposition could threaten the stability of Putin's political regime.

## Middle East

*Israeli election result shaped by domestic and regional issues; Iran and P5+1 reach outline agreement on Tehran's controversial nuclear programme; Yemen's civil conflict escalates with involvement of neighbouring Saudi Arabia.*

Sophie Taylor

### **Israeli election result shaped by domestic and regional issues**

Despite challenges, the Likud party leader, Benjamin Netanyahu, secured his fourth presidential term in Israel's national elections on 17 March. However, unlike past elections, the outcome was far from a predictable one, with opinion polls suggesting the right-wing Likud were neck-and-neck with the newly established centre-left Zionist Union party – a coalition of the previously independent Israeli Labor and Hatnuah parties, led by Isaac Herzog and Tzipi Livni. Prior to the elections, Likud had faced significant internal challenges, including the dismissal of two senior ministers, which prompted Netanyahu to dissolve the coalition government on the grounds of no confidence and call for a new public vote – a move that was criticised by some on the left as a means to simply resolve inter-party disputes over salient policy issues, such as security and the economy. As a political structure that runs on proportional representation, the 120-seat Israeli Knesset relies on strong coalitions in order to pass legislation. So, while Likud secured 30 seats, the Zionist Union secured 24, a three-seat gain on the combined Labor and Hatnuah total from the 2013 election, meaning the right-wing party will still face considerable opposition within the house.

While the increased popularity of left-wing parties was largely attributable to their focus on the country's economy and housing crisis, Likud's distancing from the ultra-nationalist ideology of their former coalition partners, Yisrael Beiteinu (or Israel is Our Home), in the run up to the elections, appears to have worked to their favour. Due to the country's electoral system, despite the relative closeness of the vote, Likud and Netanyahu were able to secure a parliamentary majority due to their popularity among smaller party lists. In recent years, the Israeli electorate has increasingly indicated that social policies are again beginning to take precedent over security issues, perhaps owing to the technological development of the Iron Dome defence system; however, the issue of Palestinian statehood has remained central to many party campaigns. It is worth noting that in the weeks leading up to the election, a number of regional actors and Western states had brought the issue of statehood to the UN Security Council. Moreover, throughout March, relations between Israel, the Palestinian Authority (PA) and the Palestinian Central Council (PCC) were strained, with the PCC suggesting that all security cooperation with the Israeli Defence Force in occupied territories should be suspended. While President Mahmoud Abbas did not sanction the PCC's demands, it was a provocative suggestion nonetheless.

Going forward, Netanyahu may have addressed the issue of tax revenues to the territories, yet the issue of Palestine's enlistment to the International Criminal Court will remain. Moreover, Likud must ensure that the Knesset and the PA remain in positive dialogue in order to safeguard against the rise of armed militancy in the form of Hamas, al-Qaeda and Gazan Salafists. In a region where Islamist militants have been making considerable ground, both militarily and politically, the Knesset's attitude toward domestic minorities will no doubt be calculated and significant. Moreover, the electorate has demonstrated that Israeli politics needs to move beyond its status quo of security and defence to include typically left-wing issues of housing, employment and healthcare. Problematically, if armed groups operating within Gaza or the West Bank seek to challenge the parliamentary coalition, renewed Israeli spending on defence and a complete suspension of any peace talks should be expected.

## **Iran and P5+1 reach outline agreement on Tehran's controversial nuclear programme**

On 2 April, following 18 months of negotiations, Iran and the P5+1 (United States, United Kingdom, China, France, Russia and Germany) reached an agreement on the framework for the final deal on Iran's nuclear programme. Although the agreement does not represent the final deal, it is seen as a historic move towards a nuclear accord. While officially, Iran and the P5+1 have achieved some successes in negotiating Iran's nuclear future under the Joint Plan of Action (JPA) or the Geneva Interim Agreement of 2013, a number of significant stumbling blocks have remained. The framework agreement entails a steady lifting of the economic sanctions against the Islamic republic in return for a two-thirds cut in the number of Iranian centrifuges. This would reduce the number of centrifuges from approximately 19,000 to 6,000, and leave Iran with only its earliest generation centrifuges capable of enriching weapons-grade uranium. Moreover, Iran will keep its enrichment programme below levels necessary for nuclear weaponisation (i.e. under 3%) and will reduce its stockpile of enriched uranium by 97%.

Tehran's long-standing position has been that its enrichment of uranium and plutonium has been for peaceful processes, to address the country's ongoing energy crisis. However, the international community has viewed the state's nuclear aspirations with caution following the announcement by a dissident group in 2002 that Iran had covertly installed two nuclear plants without the involvement or observation of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Since then, a number of significant events, negotiations and trust-building mechanisms have been in place, resulting in numerous extensions and multilateral conventions. However, the controversial open letter from 47 Republican US Senators to the leaders of Iran, warning the future of any deal reached with the United States would be constitutionally limited to President Barack Obama's term, served to disrupt the lead-up to March's final round of talks. By 12 March, however, senior level talks between UN Security Council members and Iranian state officials had begun, aimed at developing international resolutions that would take precedent over domestic legal clauses.

Several factors have limited the progress of the negotiations to date, and one should expect the issues of enrichment, centrifuges, stockpiles, sanctioning and observation to remain key debating points. Unofficial sources have indicated that Iran's nuclear programme will be monitored for 10 years – two years longer than Iran had been willing to accept, and 10 years less than the United States had desired. Such concessions will no doubt prove to be effective in demonstrating the political will of the United States and international community to reach a lasting deal and build trust with Iranian diplomats in order to minimise their proposed nuclear 'breakout time' to under 12 months. Yet the challenge remains that regional actors, such as Israel and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), have openly rejected the possibility of negotiating with Iran and have warned against granting Tehran any nuclear capability that would coincide with relief in economic sanctioning. A worse case scenario for these actors is not simply that there would be an influx of crude oil and natural gas into the world market, but perhaps more importantly, that the agreement would risk dangerous regional nuclear proliferation.

## Yemen's civil conflict escalates with involvement of neighbouring Saudi Arabia

The civil conflict in Yemen between supporters of the Shia Houthi movement and the internationally-recognised Sunni president, Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, and his now Aden-based government intensified throughout March. On 12 March, Houthi rebels opened fire on a public demonstration against the group held in al-Bayda'; on 19 March, Hadi's presidential compound in Aden was targeted by airstrikes; and on 20 March, suicide bombers killed at least 137 Shia Muslims in twin attacks on mosques in Sana'a. Islamic State (IS) claimed the latter attack, which further complicates the dynamic in Yemen. Southern Yemen has long been known as an operational base for al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), yet little has been known about the status of Islamic State within the country. The United States has been quick to denounce the group's involvement in the Sana'a mosque attacks, stating there were no clear or credible operational links that tied Yemeni militants to IS in Syria and Iraq.

Houthi fighters seized control of the central city of Taiz on 22 March. In a live televised speech, Houthi leader Abdul-Malik al-Houthi vowed to mobilise domestic factions to oust Hadi and gain control of the state and its political mechanisms. On the same day, the UN Security Council met with the UN special adviser on Yemen, Jamal Benomar, to discuss Yemen's rapidly deteriorating security situation. While it was conceded that Houthi rebels lacked the material capacity to defeat Sunni tribesmen, pro-government supporters and AQAP, it was recognised that the prolonged southern advance of the rebels could potentially collapse the state into a full and largely irreconcilable civil and sectarian war. While much of the international community and UN involvement has focused on facilitating reconciliatory political dialogue between the rival parties, neighbouring Gulf states have rejected the notion of Houthi legitimacy, denouncing the movement as an Iranian proxy.

In light of the decision of Hadi's government to request military aid from the GCC, and the view of the GCC that Yemen's domestic troubles represent a larger military and political conflict, Saudi Arabia began reinforcing its borders before conducting airstrikes within Yemen on 25 March. It remains unclear if the GCC coalition in support of Hadi will prove successful. Furthermore, should the Saudi-backed campaign fail to defeat the Houthi militia or inflict mass casualties on militant groups, such as AQAP or Ansar al-Sharia, Saudi Arabia and its valuable state infrastructure may find itself targeted in revenge terrorist attacks. In terms of a proxy war, however, it appears unlikely that Iran will intervene in the conflict while negotiating its nuclear future.

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