

# The monthly briefing | January 2014

International political and security risk updates

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## Africa

*Increasing Boko Haram violence threatens upcoming Nigerian elections; international partners renew calls for dialogue between competing Libyan factions; ongoing operations against al-Shabaab in Somalia reach pivotal phase.*

### **Increasing Boko Haram violence threatens upcoming Nigerian elections**

With a general election due to be held in Nigeria on 14 February, Boko Haram has intensified its efforts to bring larger swathes of the country under its control. The militant Islamist group has conducted suicide operations in Damaturu (Yobe State), Kano (Kano State), Jos (Plateau State), Gombe (Gombe State), and most recently, Maiduguri (Borno State). These operations have been augmented by more conventional attacks on government and military facilities, in addition to kidnappings, most prominently throughout Borno State. On 4 January, Boko Haram launched arguably its largest attack to date, against the town of Baga, approximately 275 kilometres north of Maiduguri in Borno State. Boko Haram fighters routed the Multinational Joint Task Force based in the area, wrestled effective control of the town and displaced the bulk of the local population. Fighters then returned to Baga in a notably more violent manner on 8 January, destroying local infrastructure and housing, and slaughtering an estimated 2,000 civilians – arguably the most lethal and indiscriminate operation conducted so far by the organisation.

It is clear that Boko Haram is up-scaling its military operations in the run up to the election in February. Not only does the relatively uncontested nature of these activities appear to consolidate the failures of the incumbent government of Goodluck Jonathan, it also highlights how under-resourced and operationally pressed the Nigerian Army is. Furthermore, the severity of these events is likely to have serious ramifications in terms of the legitimacy of the Nigerian election, as the significant level of violence casts considerable doubt on the ability of the political apparatus to undertake a free and fair polling process, particularly in the northeast of the country. This is significant, as these areas will most likely constitute the bulk of popular support for the predominantly Muslim All Progressive Party (APC), which split from the People's Democratic Party (PDP) over concerns over Jonathan's decision to run for another term in office, and it is likely that the APC will seek to contest the legitimacy of a PDP victory, should it occur.



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Considering the rhetoric coming from Abubakar Shekau, Boko Haram's most vocal leadership figure, it is likely that the group will continue to intensify its operations in the run up to this crucial political juncture in Nigeria. Given the relative inability of the Nigerian Army to suppress the growth of the organisation, it is highly likely that Boko Haram will succeed in seizing further territory in the northeast of the country. As a result of these developments, the most dangerous scenario for Nigeria would be a proclamation of the illegitimacy of the February electoral process by the APC party, and a subsequent polarisation of the electorate along invariably sectarian lines. Such a scenario is becoming increasingly likely as Boko Haram ramps up its operations, and this represents a conspicuous challenge for the sovereignty of Nigeria and generates a real propensity for escalating separatist and sectarian violence.

### **International partners renew calls for dialogue between competing Libyan factions**

On 6 January, the Arab League Council proclaimed the need for 'inter-Libyan' dialogue, signalling support for the Algerian-led mediation process suggested by Libya's neighbouring states and the United Nations, and championed by the European Union. In contrast to this growing international appetite for reconciliatory dialogue, violence has continued throughout Libya, with an increasing number of foreign fighters (reportedly from Syria, Algeria, Tunisia and Egypt) taking part in the conflict. In a positive effort to facilitate political redress, Bernardino Leon, special representative and head of the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), is attempting to bring rival factions to the negotiating table, and on 9 January the United Nations announced a new round of talks to be held at their offices in Geneva next week.

The agreement of rival parties to engage in the proposed Geneva dialogue represents an encouraging paradigm shift. Given the Libyan economy's inextricable dependence on oil revenues and the considerable drop in production caused by the violence within the country and damage to critical oil infrastructure, it is likely that the severe economic consequences associated with the fighting will decrease stakeholders' propensities to engage in protracted campaigns of violence. Furthermore, these effects will undoubtedly be strengthened by the 40% decline in oil prices since June 2014. It is important to recognise, however, that previous discussions scheduled for 9 December 2014 were postponed due to escalating violence between Islamist militias (most notably Libya Dawn, who support the General National Congress in Tripoli) and forces loyal to Prime Minister Abdullah al-Thani's internationally-recognised government that operates from the east of the country. As such, while these developments may signal a more considerable motivation on both domestic and international levels to facilitate a process of dialogue between conflicting Libyan factions, it should not be assumed that the potential for these stakeholders to resort to violent solutions are lower than usual.

The ultimate success of this dialogue will depend on the ability of the parties concerned to endure a sustained level of violence throughout the process, not only between parties engaged in the talks, but most prominently from the more hardline factions (such as Ansar al-Sharia) that are unlikely to accept concessions in replacement for more fundamental ambitions. These factions are likely to increase their use of violence in order to strain the dialogue process, and prevent the implementation of unfavourable reconciliation agreements. This is likely born from the perception that the longer the current fighting continues the less likely it is that political reconciliation will prove successful. Indeed, equality and unity scarcely featured within Libya's political structures prior to 2011, where competition between and marginalisation of various tribes was a prevalent feature, and to a certain degree encouraged by the Gaddafi regime. Against this backdrop of competitive Machiavellianism, escalating levels of increasingly sectarian violence, and the growing involvement of international sub-state actors in Libya, the prospects for a successful outcome to the Geneva dialogue do not appear healthy.

### **Ongoing operations against al-Shabaab in Somalia reach pivotal phase**

The National Security Agency in Somalia has confirmed the elimination of al-Shabaab's intelligence (*Amniyat*) chief, Abdinasir Hassan Barakobe, by a US drone strike on 29 December 2014. The strike followed the arrest of the militant group's former intelligence chief, Zakariya Ismail Ahmed Hersi, by African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM) forces on 27 December. Al-Shabaab responded with a series of operations, including attacks in Baidoa, Galkayo, and the capital Mogadishu on 2 January; a suicide bombing near Aden Adde International Airport on 4 January; and the execution of four men in Bardhere for alleged espionage activities. Meanwhile, the 53rd Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) meeting, held in Mogadishu, has concluded, representing the first high-level international meeting held in Somalia since 1974.

The recent successes in eliminating key al-Shabaab leadership figures represent a positive development towards weakening the operational capacity of the organisation. It is clear that the continued AMISOM operations against al-Shabaab have had a significant limiting impact upon the spectrum of operations the groups can feasibly undertake – demonstrated by the frequent utilisation of more asymmetric tactics. Furthermore, broader internal divisions are growing within the organisation as it comes under increasing military pressure. These divisions are likely exacerbated by the extended amnesty offered to low-level al-Shabaab fighters by the Somali government, which is intended to augment the effects of the reduction in leadership capacity. The aggregate effect of these actions has been a significant, yet limited, improvement in the security situation in Somalia, as demonstrated by the successful hosting of the 53rd IGAD meeting.

It is likely that both AMISOM and Somali government forces will seek to capitalise on the weakened condition of al-Shabaab; however, while the group's capacity for conventional operations has waned, the increasing adoption of asymmetric tactics is likely to represent a conspicuous challenge to those forces. Whilst progress has been made in countering the al-Shabaab insurgency, continued success in this regard, with a view towards normalising security in Somalia, will invariably rely on the ability of the Somali government to address the socioeconomic issues that have contributed to a steady flow of young recruits for al-Shabaab. Without a combination of sustained military pressure and a timely redress of socioeconomic disparities, recurrent manifestations of insurgent violence are highly likely. If the Somali government manages to effectively seize this window of opportunity, it is possible that it will be able to undermine the group's support base and weaken al-Shabaab in a more permanent manner.

## Asia and Pacific

*Dispersal of Hong Kong protests signals shifting strategy for demonstrators; Philippine military steps up counter-insurgency campaigns against Abu Sayyaf and Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters; low-intensity conflict in Burma likely to continue despite ceasefire talks.*

### **Dispersal of Hong Kong protests signals shifting strategy for demonstrators**

The Hong Kong pro-democracy movement suffered major setbacks when authorities cleared the Admiralty district protest site on 11 December and the Causeway Bay protest site on 15 December 2014. The move by authorities came after protestor fatigue saw participant numbers drop below 100, leading to minimal resistance as the camps were dismantled. In the days prior, as momentum increasingly faltered, protest leaders adopted more radical strategies, most notably a hunger strike by Joshua Wong, which he began on 1 December but suspended four days later. Although authorities declared that the protests were over on 15 December, groups of individuals have since continued to hold smaller, mobile protests in the crowded commercial districts of Causeway Bay and Mong Kok. This led to the arrest of 26 individuals on 25 December for blocking roads and failing to disperse. Furthermore, 29 activists, including Wong, appeared before the high court for a preliminary hearing on possible criminal contempt charges for blocking the police clearance of one of the main protest camps on 8 January.

The clearance of the two main protest sites by authorities has not resulted in the end of the protests. Protestors have altered their strategy to holding small-scale protests around major choke points, where it is possible to generate maximum publicity, as opposed to the occupation of semi-permanent camps, which inherently gives diminishing returns in terms of media impact over a prolonged period of time. Residual protests are likely to carry on throughout the coming weeks, though they are unlikely to succeed in gaining any concessions from the Hong Kong government.

The incumbent Hong Kong leader, Leung Chun-ying, has strong support from the central government in Beijing, which will only further reinforce his uncompromising stance on the issues raised by the protestors. However, if proposed electoral reforms are enacted it is highly likely that protests will significantly increase in intensity and frequency as the 2016 legislative council and 2017 chief executive elections approach. The most dangerous scenario remains the outbreak of violence; this could originate either from protestor frustration due to the lack of concessions attained by peaceful protests, or from authorities looking to permanently quell the pro-democracy movement. The former is currently most likely due to the number of active protest groups, some of which may seek more radical strategies in order to further their objectives.

## **Philippine military steps up counter-insurgency campaigns against Abu Sayyaf and Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters**

The Philippine military has continued its campaign against Islamist insurgency, particularly against the militant group Abu Sayyaf, where it has made considerable progress. On 6 December 2014, Swiss hostage Lorenzo Vinciguerra escaped from Abu Sayyaf insurgents who had been holding him captive since his kidnapping in February 2012. Vinciguerra managed to escape his captors during a clash between rebels and government troops during which five militants were killed and seven wounded. The capture of three Abu Sayyaf camps in Sulu province on 18 December dealt further damage to the group's capability and further reduced their area of operations. On 7 January, government forces captured Imran Mijal, a suspected Abu Sayyaf leader accused of organising ambushes, kidnappings and extortion rackets. In addition to targeting Abu Sayyaf, the military launched a new offensive against the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) in the province of Maguindanao on 7 January, resulting in the deaths of 20 insurgents and the capture of a training camp.

The Philippine military had elsewhere reduced the intensity of operations leading up to Christmas and ahead of Pope Francis' visit to the Catholic-majority country on 15 January. This has been in accordance with the ceasefire agreed with the National People's Army (NPA), which will be in place till 19 January. This *détente* has produced small concessions, most notably the release of two captive soldiers by the NPA on 21 December. However, the Philippine military has likely increased the intensity of its attacks on Abu Sayyaf and BIFF due to fears that Islamic State elements may emerge from within their ranks. Furthermore, the elimination of these two insurgent groups would serve to reinforce the current peace treaty with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), the country's largest Muslim rebel group. In regards to the NPA, there has been no significant change in scope despite the ceasefire. Similar ceasefire agreements have taken place in previous years over the Christmas holiday period.

The Philippine military is highly likely to continue with its offensive against Abu Sayyaf and BIFF in order to render them ineffective as rebel groups. The military will continue with its strategy of targeting senior Abu Sayyaf leaders and denying them safe havens in Sulu. Hostilities are likely to resume with the NPA with the conclusion of Pope Francis' visit on 19 January, but the emphasis will be on continuing the offensive against Abu Sayyaf and BIFF. The losses suffered by Abu Sayyaf and BIFF may prompt either group to increase its bombings of civilian soft targets, such as crowded public buses, in retaliation. This is particularly alarming considering the upcoming visit of Pope Francis to the country, which is expected to draw large crowds of worshippers. Although security will be at a maximum, the threat of terrorist operations remains high. An attack during the visit of a high profile individual would attract worldwide attention, and send a clear message that rebel Islamist groups remain a potent threat in the Philippines.

## **Low-intensity conflict in Burma likely to continue despite ceasefire talks**

Burma/Myanmar experienced increased volatility during December 2014 due to the outbreak of fresh clashes between government forces and rebel factions. On 15 December, clashes between government forces and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) in Kunlong township, located near the border with China, resulted in the deaths of seven soldiers. In response, the government suspended UN aid convoys to refugee camps located in territories controlled by rebels on 19 December, citing security reasons. The increase in hostilities is arguably a result of the killing of 23 rebel cadets by government shelling on 19 November. Despite the relative escalation of violence, ceasefire talks went ahead on 22 December, though it should be noted that senior rebel leaders and Burma military representatives were absent.

On 10 January, the US embassy in Burma announced that a meeting aimed at promoting human rights in Burma is to be held in the country on 11-15 January. It is expected to address the provisions made to internally displaced persons and recent accusations of human rights violations. Despite this, the escalation of hostilities and lack of progress during ceasefire talks indicates that there is no significant change in position or intent from either rebel factions or the government, and the conflict is likely to remain at a relatively low intensity, characterised by sporadic skirmishes and occasional shelling.

As Burma continues to democratise, the leadership may be more inclined to meet rebel demands such as greater autonomy for Kachin State. Such an agreement could be similar to the accord reached between the Philippine government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), which has established an autonomous entity in exchange for the cessation of its insurgent activities. The failure to establish a lasting ceasefire and further escalation of the conflict represents the most dangerous scenario. The recent move by the government to halt UN aid convoys to refugee camps within rebel controlled territories may trigger a humanitarian crisis and worsen the conditions of the estimated 372,000 internally displaced individuals. However, such a crisis is not in the interest of the government, which is expected to resume UN aid convoys once tensions diminish.

## **Europe**

*Attacks in Paris risk further polarising French populace and increasing prejudices against Muslims; Azerbaijan cracks down on NGOs, human rights activists and media outlets; intense fighting in eastern Ukraine follows December's reinforced ceasefire accord.*

### **Attacks in Paris risk further polarising French populace and increasing prejudices against Muslims**

On 7 January, two brothers, Said and Cherif Kouachi, with apparent ties to Yemen's al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), attacked the offices of French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*. Armed with Kalashnikov automatic rifles and a grenade launcher, the brothers killed 12 people, including four journalists and two police officers, and injured six. On 9 January, a third individual, Amedy Coulibaly, who had connections with the Kouachi brothers and Islamic State, entered a kosher supermarket in the Porte de Vincennes area of Paris, killing four individuals and taking a number of hostages. By this time, the Kouachi brothers had taken refuge in a print warehouse in Dammartin-en-Goele, approximately 35 kilometres northeast of Paris. At approximately 16:00 GMT, French police conducted two simultaneous operations, killing all three terrorists and ending both sieges. The French police continue to search for a female accomplice, Hayat Boumeddiene, Coulibaly's wife, though she is now thought to be in Syria according to media reports.

The magazine was targeted for its controversial cartoons, and the editor of the magazine, Stephane Charbonnier, was known to be on AQAP's hit list. On 9 January, AQAP formerly claimed responsibility for the attack, and warned that France was at risk of further terrorist attacks until the country ceased waging 'war' against Islam – a claim reinforced in a video released by the group on 14 January. However, it remains unclear to what extent the French security services have identified links between the three attackers or between the Kouachi brothers and AQAP and Coulibaly and Islamic State. Overall, coordination between all the parties is highly unlikely given the high level of operational security that would have required and the ongoing rivalry between al-Qaeda and Islamic State (if indeed either group was directly involved in the planning and execution of the attacks). US, French and Yemeni intelligence services had tracked the movements of the Kouachi brothers; however, to what extent the brothers were identified as serious threats is unclear, though Cherif was imprisoned between January 2005 and October 2006 for being part of a network that helped send would-be jihadists to fight for al-Qaeda in Iraq. On 10 January, French Prime Minister Manuel Valls declared France was at war with radical Islamists. Valls' statement underlined the rising security concerns of Western European governments over imminent jihadist attacks, and other European countries have bolstered their security measures in response to the incidents in France. Rallies against the attacks have been taking place in France and across Europe.

These attacks are the most significant terrorist attacks carried out in Western Europe following a recognisable increase in European fighters returning from Syria and Iraq. The French defence ministry has stationed 1,250 military forces around the greater Paris area in response to the incidents, and heightened security measures will be maintained throughout Europe, especially in Western capitals. It is likely that there will be a series of high-level meetings between EU counterparts in order to tackle the issue of European nationals returning home from fighting in the Middle East. There is also a danger that the high media prominence of these attacks may encourage similar terrorist attacks in Western Europe. Ultimately, though, the most dangerous outcome of these attacks would be the further polarisation of the French populace, with a corresponding increase in prejudices against Muslims through a false conflation between Islam and violent Islamist extremism in the public's mind. Such a development would likely exacerbate internal divisions, and win groups such as Islamic State greater credibility for their cause.

### **Azerbaijan cracks down on NGOs, human rights activists and media outlets**

Since December 2014, Azerbaijani authorities have ramped-up crackdowns on media outlets critical to the regime, as well as on the activities of NGOs and human rights lawyers. On 5 December, the investigative journalist Khadija Ismayilova was arrested in the capital, Baku, on charges of inciting a man to suicide, and currently remains in custody on two months' pre-trial detention – a term that could be extended while the government prosecutors develop their case. Ismayilova claims that the charges are fabricated and that she is being harassed for her investigative reports on corruption within the government, including those involving President Ilham Aliyev and his family. Also in December, the Azerbaijan Collegiate of Lawyers disbarred attorney Xalid Bagirov, a prominent human rights lawyer, preventing him from representing Leyla Yunus, a leading human rights activist who has been held in pre-trial detention since July 2014. Then on 26 December, state officials raided the Baku offices of Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), seizing the station's computers. Journalists were subsequently detained and questioned for 12 hours before being released. A court in Baku then ordered additional journalists to present themselves for questioning on 5 January, though no charges have been filed.

Ismayilova's arrest is one of the most high profile among a broader crackdown on civil society by the Azerbaijani government. Its human rights record has been poor in recent years, but in 2014 there was a marked increase in the number of arrests of journalists and activists and court proceedings brought against independent media outlets and civil society organisations. The government has defended these actions, claiming that 'some international forces' are interfering in Azerbaijan's internal affairs through NGOs and media outlets – a claim very much similar to those made by the Kremlin.

The increase in crackdowns has also provoked the US government to voice a series of concerns. The Council of Europe, the European Union, the US assistant secretary of state, and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) have all called for the release of Ismayilova. It is likely that mounting international pressure on the Azerbaijani government, as well as a significant number of protests against Ismayilova's arrest in Baku and in neighbouring countries, may exert enough pressure upon the Azerbaijani government to result in Ismayilova's release. However, it is unlikely that overall attempts to suppress the media, NGO activities and human rights activists will cease. This may result in a number of journalists and activists wishing to seek asylum abroad. Given the increasing number of protests in response to recent government actions, draconian responses to these protests by the Azerbaijani government may result in a moderate outbreak of violence.

### **Intense fighting in eastern Ukraine follows December's reinforced ceasefire accord**

Fighting between separatists and government forces in Ukraine has intensified since the new year. On 9 January, four Ukrainian soldiers and two civilians died in clashes around Donetsk airport, with a higher number of mortar and rocket attacks launched than previously. The airport is a significant strategic location for both sides. The press office for military operations in eastern Ukraine reported that army outposts were under attack approximately 50 times a day by small-arms fire, mortar shells and rockets. Officials claimed that the spike in the number of attacks was linked with the arrival of a Russian aid convoy in the region on 8 January. However, separatists accused the army of carrying out dozens of rocket attacks on 8-9 January and of shelling residential areas of Donetsk indiscriminately.

The increase in clashes between the rebels and the Ukrainian army comes after a marked lull in violence since 9 December, when both sides agreed to a reinforced truce deal that later calmed tensions in eastern Ukraine. The increased violence in the eastern region also occurred days before the planned international talks organised by President Petro Poroshenko, in which the Ukrainian president will hold rare talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Astana, Kazakhstan, on 15 January. Both Germany and France have raised doubts regarding whether the summit will in fact take place.

It is clear that both the potential for a decrease in violence in eastern Ukraine, as well as the possibility of an easing of EU and US sanctions against Russia depend on the talks occurring. Should the violence continue to escalate, it is unlikely that meaningful dialogue will occur, and a corresponding delay in reaching a compromise agreement between Russia and Ukraine will likely cast significant doubts upon the potential for the successful implementation of the Minsk protocol. In this case, there is a high risk of a complete departure from the unsteady ceasefire agreement between the rebels and Ukraine, and a significant increase in overt violent confrontation between the two sides. Despite this risk, it is apparent that the sanctions imposed on Russia for its suggested involvement in the current crisis are having a profound impact upon the Russian economy. This may generate a corresponding shift in the preferences of the Kremlin, and may signal a paradigm of greater cooperation in mediating dialogue.



## Middle East

*Yemen's security situation continues to deteriorate following number of violent incidents and kidnappings; US demands for democratic reform in Egypt likely to take backseat to national security concerns; Political tensions re-emerge in Bahrain as anti-regime protests escalate following arrest of Shia opposition leader.*

### **Yemen's security situation continues to deteriorate following number of violent incidents and kidnappings**

Shabwah province, 474 kilometres east of the Yemeni capital, Sana'a, found itself drawn back into the international public eye following the failed rescue attempt of US and South African hostages, Luke Somers and Pierre Korkie, on 6 December 2014. Both Somers and Korkie, held by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) since September 2013 and May 2014 respectively, died during the US-led rescue mission. AQAP have claimed responsibility for a number of attacks throughout the country in recent months, and are believed to be behind further ambushes of Houthi strongholds and government forces. Among the incidents were dual suicide attacks on a military compound in Seyon, eastern Hadramout province, which claimed the lives of seven security officials on 9 December; a car bombing of a military checkpoint in Rada'a in the central al-Bayda governorate, killing 30 civilians, including schoolchildren, on 16 December; and dual blasts killed a further 10 people in the western port city of al-Hudaydah on 18 December. Furthermore, a number of improvised explosive devices have been detonated, and abductions have taken place throughout Sana'a.

Yemen faces many internal difficulties, and the latest offensives launched by AQAP, Houthi militia and southern separatist fighters threaten to destroy what remains of the already fragile unity of the Yemeni republic. Having inherited the presidency following the forced resignation of kleptocrat leader Ali Abdullah Saleh in 2012, President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi has struggled to politically engage rival parties towards achieving any sustained peace or reconciliation. Houthi rebels seized control of Sana'a in September 2014, and have since continued to erode and undermine Hadi's political legitimacy and power. As the Houthi expand their territorial control to include vital state-owned infrastructure, the bleaker the national picture appears. In a somewhat murky battle for power, Yemeni tribesmen located throughout the capital and northern districts, who were instrumental in the 2011 uprisings, have found themselves embroiled in battles with Houthi rebels. Similarly, the country's south is subject to a number of political rivals in the form of secessionists, who reject the terms of the 1990 national unification, and AQAP, who have been able to elude national security forces thanks to the region's mountainous terrain. The presence and strength of these rival parties, in a country that lacks both strong state apparatus and political cohesion, suggest that Yemen may be close to civil war.

As the poorest country in the region, such developments naturally impact the country's economic security. On 21 December, the Canadian oil and gas company Nexen announced the closure of its operations at the Block 51 oilfield and BAK processing facilities amid heightened security concerns. Both Houthi rebels and AQAP fighters continue to use kidnap for ransom to gain financial and political advantage throughout the country. Those that speak out against the Houthi movement have been targeted throughout the month, and such incidents are likely to continue in the months to come. Al-Qaeda is an organisation known to collect resources through the abduction of prominent figures and expatriates. While the United Nations have placed sanctions on those deemed to be actively contributing to the destabilisation of Yemen, it is highly likely that the president will be backed with militarily means by a number of Western actors in order to prevent the security situation deteriorating further and Yemen collapsing.

## **US demands for democratic reform in Egypt likely to take backseat to national security concerns**

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi introduced a presidential decree in October 2014 that sought to bring those accused of acts of violence, material damage against public facilities or affiliated to banned groups to trial before military rather than civilian courts. Criminal prosecutors referred some 340 alleged supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood to military trial on 15 December, and sentenced a further 40 supporters of former President Mohamed Morsi to various terms of imprisonment on 18 December. Five civilians accused of disrupting state facilities were again referred to military courts on 30 December, and if found guilty, they may face the death penalty.

The latest in a number of mass-trials held under al-Sisi's presidency have attracted the attention of international human rights bodies, which accuse the judiciary of procedural irregularities that are in breach of international law. Significantly, the trials remain an essential component of al-Sisi's stabilisation efforts and crackdown against the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood. Furthermore, the trials follow the United States' congressional announcement on 16 December that military aid provision (to the tune of \$1.4 million) will be linked to al-Sisi's commitment to democratic reform. The revised bill stipulates that the release of funds must follow an open parliamentary election, demonstrable commitment to internal minorities and a process of law compliant with international standards. However, the bill also entails that in circumstances pertaining to national security, democratic focus may be abandoned in favour of domestic or regional stabilisation.

While the US Congress's decision to include a national security clause in the provision of aid to the country has attracted widespread condemnation from human rights activists, conservative lawmakers view al-Sisi and the Egyptian state as a significant regional actor and an ally against Islamist extremism. Given the current security climate, it appears likely that international financial and political support will favour al-Sisi and the waiver of national security. Problematically, an asset freeze on military aid may allow domestic groups to fill power vacuums in the country's most challenging regions. Thus, it remains to be seen how effectual the US aid stipulation for democratic reform will be; particularly as Egypt has experienced a number of terrorist incidents in recent months, including the targeting of key gas lines within Sinai on 23 December and the shooting of police officers in Giza and Alexandria on 27 and 28 December respectively.

## **Political tensions re-emerge in Bahrain as anti-regime protests escalate following arrest of Shia opposition leader**

On 28 December 2014, Sheikh Ali Salman was summoned by Bahraini police, and accused of legal violations relating to his leadership of the banned Shia opposition group al-Wefaq. News of his arrest sparked demonstrations demanding his immediate release in Salman's home village of Bilad Al Qadeem, later spreading to Shi'ite towns. Currently, Salman remains in police custody accused of inciting sectarian hatred, defamation of a statutory body and promotion of political violence. Abdullah al-Shamlan, Salman's lawyer, announced that he had been prevented from legally defending his client.

Bahrain has witnessed a number of sporadic uprisings against the ruling Sunni al- Khalifa family since the Arab Spring of 2011. The Shia majority of Bahrain accuses the al-Khalifa family of human rights abuses and oligarchical control. A national dialogue between rival factions was previously instigated in February 2013; however, it has remained on hiatus following constitutional disagreements in January 2014. Al-Wefaq withdrew its parliamentary members in 2011 following the killing of pro-democracy protesters by national forces, yet continues to be instrumental in the organisation of anti-regime rallies against the lack of Shia representation. Among the latest demonstrations were those aimed at the boycott of November's general elections and increasing dominance of the al-Khalifa family. Opposition groups have criticised the lack of transparency throughout electoral campaigns.

While Bahrain remains a stable Gulf state, the potential for Salman's detention to exacerbate political tensions and reignite the violence witnessed in the 2011 uprisings ought not to be understated. The decision of al-Khalifa to involve the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and enlist the support of the neighbouring Saudi military to disperse protesters is not one likely to have been forgotten by a politically disenfranchised Shia youth. Street protests continue against Salman's arrest, yet it remains to be seen if numbers will reach the thousands seen in Manama in 2011. Social media has indicated that the Bahraini Public Prosecution intends on detaining Salman for the duration of January, though this is yet to be confirmed. UN and US spokespeople have criticised the arrest, warning that it may exacerbate domestic tensions and risk intensifying the country's political and sectarian divisions. With international attention placed on the kingdom, dialogue may be possible between rivals and the crown prince and deputy prime minister, Salman al-Khalifa.

***Apologies for the lack of Americas and Polar regions analysis this month.***

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