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International political and security risk updates

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Africa

Nigeria experiencing instability in run up to general election despite Boko Haram suffering consecutive defeats; termination of money transfers from major US bank threatens fragile stability of newly-appointed Somali cabinet; South Sudanese parliament extends president's mandate for two years as peace looks unlikely and country faces risk of famine.

Quentin Voquer

Nigeria experiencing instability in run up to general election despite Boko Haram suffering consecutive defeats

The militant Islamist group Boko Haram has suffered consecutive defeats at the hands of the military coalition formed by Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon and Chad, who are intent on containing the group and preventing it from crossing Nigeria's borders. The coalition is mounting a counteroffensive due to take place at the end of March with the backing of Western training, intelligence and resources. Since the formal formation of the regional task force in early February (with a mandate for approximately 8,700 troops), Boko Haram has been unable to conduct significant operations and has lost control of several key towns, including Monguno and Gambaru. Despite the coalition's advancements, Boko Haram has proven that it is still capable of conducting more asymmetric forms of violence. Furthermore, for the first time Boko Haram carried out attacks in Niger and Chad, on 6 and 13 February respectively. However, Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon and Chad have mostly undertaken unilateral efforts against the insurgents to date. It is likely that the planned synchronised ground and air counteroffensive will deliver a significant blow to the operational capacity of the extremist group.

Given the ongoing security risks, Nigeria's Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) ruled that the general election originally scheduled for 14 February should be postponed for six weeks until 28 March. The opposition All Progressives Congress (APC) of former president Muhammadu Buhari described the deferment as a 'major setback for Nigerian democracy'. The postponement is seen by some as a strategic move from the incumbent president, Goodluck Jonathan, and his People's Democratic Party, PDP), designed to buy the president some time and financially exhaust the opposition. In light of Boko Haram's nearly six-year long insurgency, six weeks is an insufficient time frame within which to defeat the group.



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Regardless, the elections promise to be extremely close, with polls suggesting each party holds approximately 42% of the votes. The recent military successes may help Jonathan in the polls, but Buhari and the APC may benefit from the chaos that has characterised northern Nigeria throughout Jonathan's presidency, together with the economic slowdown and the departure from the PDP of prominent politician Olusegun Obasanjo. However, Buhari remains widely viewed as a repressive leader. As such, many Nigerians feel they must choose between a weak president (Jonathan) and a repressive one (Buhari).

Previous elections have been characterised by high levels of vote rigging, ballot box swapping and voter intimidation. Fifty civilians were killed during the 2007 election, and 800 were killed during 2011 election. High levels of corruption can be expected during this year's electoral process. It is also likely that Boko Haram will continue to carry out raids and suicide bombings with increasing frequency as the election draws near. The PDP has been in power since 1999, and Nigerians may feel it is time for a change and vote for Buhari, who is experiencing his highest levels of public support. Regardless of the outcome, the electoral process has increased instability in Nigeria, creating social strife and a greater risk of the sort of sectarian confrontation that occurred in 2011. In the worst case, this instability could provide the military with an incentive to take over the government, as it has done on multiple occasions in the past.

Termination of money transfers from major US bank threatens fragile stability of newly-appointed Somali cabinet

On 9 February, the Somali parliament approved Prime Minister Omar Abdirashid Ali Sharmarke's proposals for a new cabinet. This effectively ended the months of political stalemate that led to the resignation of former Prime Minister Abdiweli Sheikh Ahmed in December 2014. Sharmarke's first two proposals were rejected due to the presence of certain members of the former administration. A large majority voted in favour of the new cabinet – 191 in favour, with 22 against – a positive sign for the new government. The cabinet will need to focus on the Vision 2016 plan, and draft a new constitution, establish new federal institutions, and prepare for a new round of elections. Despite the positive developments, two members of parliament and the deputy mayor of Mogadishu were killed in attacks by al-Shabaab in the capital during February. The militant Islamist group has actively targeted government officials since it was driven out of Mogadishu by peacekeeping forces in 2011.

In a further blow to the government, Merchants Banks of California announced in early February that money transfers to Somalia will be stopped due to new anti-money laundering regulations and fears that the remittances contribute to financing terrorism. Merchants Bank of California was responsible for an estimated 60% to 80% of remittance outflows to Somalia. It is one of many banks that have ceased transfers to Somalia. Westpac, the only Australian bank partnering with Somali remittance companies, is also scheduled to discontinue transfer services with Somalia at the end of March. Over the past few years, most American and British banks have stopped remittance services to Somalia due to the regulations that now hold the banks accountable if funds are transferred to terrorist groups. The US Somalia diaspora is the largest contributor of remittances to Somalia (\$200 million), followed by Somalis living in the United Kingdom (\$162 million). Since the enforcement of the new regulations, cash flows to Somalia have begun to dry up. With approximately 40% of Somalis living solely off remittances, this will have grave consequences for the country, which does not have any formal banking system due to decades of conflict.

With widespread concern and the already visible effects of the shortage of remittances, it is likely that alternatives will be researched to prevent the situation in Somalia from degrading, particularly with the a newly elected cabinet in power. The United Kingdom is currently working on safer alternatives to transfer money to Somalia. However, until alternatives are found, it is likely that there will be a worsening of the humanitarian situation in Somalia. This may benefit Somalia's organised crime syndicates and al-Shabaab, which may seek to provide an alternative to banking in exchange for services, for example, recruitment in exchange for basic provisions.

South Sudanese parliament extends president's mandate for two years as peace looks unlikely and country faces risk of famine

In early February, South Sudan's president, Salva Kiir Mayardit, and former vice president, Riek Machar, now leader of the rebel opposition, agreed to a power-sharing deal commencing on 9 July. The deal is due to last 30 months, at the end of which elections should take place. While this was a breakthrough in ending the civil war that began in December 2013, the possibility of a settlement has been significantly threatened, as parliament voted to extend Kiir's mandate by a further two years, de facto postponing the agreed elections, on the grounds that this would grant the government more time to negotiate. Losing patience with the political reconciliation process (in which seven ceasefires have failed), the United States have submitted a draft resolution to the United Nations to enforce a travel ban and asset freeze on South Sudan, as well as implementing an arm's embargo, which is favoured by many European countries.

Protracted conflict has affected agriculture in South Sudan, and the country is expected to run out of food in certain areas by March according to the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). Food insecurity levels have doubled since the onset of the conflict. In 2014, South Sudan was the largest recipient of aid in the world, with \$1.4 billion received in total. The United Nations has called for \$1.8 billion in aid, but member states have only pledged \$618 million so far. While aid organisations will benefit from the increased vehicle mobility associated with the approaching dry season, the conditions will also favour military operations, likely leading to an increase in the intensity of conflict. Unable to reach a compromise for the past 14 months, it remains to be seen whether the threat of an asset freeze and travel ban will encourage both parties to lay down their weapons and engage in further dialogue. Furthermore, the arms embargo is a double-edged sword, as it is likely to affect government forces more than the rebels, which will rebalance the current relative strengths of the warring parties, with the potential to extend the confrontation.

In a humanitarian sense, the situation is likely to degrade further if the parties fail to agree a ceasefire as the dry season provides more favourable terrain for military operations. The corresponding increase in violence, in conjunction with the historic ineffectualness of international aid in averting famine, is likely to result in food deprivation throughout South Sudan. From a political standpoint, with seven failed ceasefires to date, it is unlikely that the threat of a UN resolution on travel bans, arms embargos and asset freezing will drive the parties to compromise. Instead, it is likely that the enforcement of the resolution will aggravate the conflict and benefit the shadow economy and illicit arms smuggling.

Americas

Government oppression increases in run up to Venezuelan elections; accusations of a presidential cover up fuel Argentina's election campaign; Brazil faces economic and political crises as President Rousseff loses support.

Petr Bohacek

Government oppression increases in run up to Venezuelan elections

Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro has accused the United States and the opposition of a dubious attempted coup d'état. He ordered the arrest of several high-ranking military officers and the mayor of Caracas, Antonio Ledezma. The situation deteriorated after the killing of 14-year-old Kluivert Roa during a student protest in the traditional opposition flashpoint of San Cristobal in Tachira State, where five others were also wounded. The police have now fired live rounds on several occasions at demonstrations. In response, the Organization of American States (OAS) and Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) have so far limited their actions to calls for a democratic dialogue with the opposition.

Maduro's history of accusing foreign powers of preparing an overthrow in order to unite public support during times of economic or political crisis is infamous in Venezuela, and as such now creates little of the desired effect. Meanwhile, the opposition has further mobilised, and continues to benefit from increased popularity as a result of the suspicious arrests of opposition leaders, the violent police crackdown and the ongoing economic crisis. However, the increase in violence from the police and the more aggressive actions from the protestors is a concerning dynamic that resembles last year's confrontation that left 43 people dead. With the parliamentary elections set for May, for both the opposition Democratic Unity Roundtable (MUD) and the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), the major fight is still set to take place at the voting booths.

Maduro's government will continue to flood media outlets with propaganda in an attempt to discredit the opposition and legitimise its regime. However, the insignificant economic improvements will fail to produce a sufficient dollar supply to keep up the food subsidies and social programmes that give them public support. The opposition MUD will likely be able to calm its more radical factions and select clear and strong leaders for the May election. The national assembly election is an opportunity for Venezuela's population to voice its discontent and arm the opposition with the democratic and legislative power to limit Maduro's rule and push through the basic structural economic changes necessary to attract foreign investment. As Maduro's popular support weakens, he is likely to attempt to strengthen his grip on power by cracking down hard on the opposition with more arrests. It is highly likely that these developments will produce a wave of protests that the government will try to violently suppress, resulting in renewed unrest that may surpass last year's violence. It is also likely that as the economic situation shows no signs of improving fragmentation will begin to occur within the ruling PSUV between loyalists under Maduro and reformists led by the party's vice president and president of the national assembly, Diosdado Cabello.

Accusations of a presidential cover up fuel Argentina's election campaign

The popularity of Argentina's president, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, has dropped to historical lows amid an accusation of a cover up of the 1994 terrorist attack on the Argentine Israelite Mutual Association (AMIA) building in Buenos Aires. Prosecutor Alberto Nisman accused the president of conspiring to protect Iranian officials from being held responsible for the bombing of the Jewish community centre. Days later, Nisman was found dead in his apartment with a gunshot wound to the head. On 26 February, an Argentine judge dismissed the case against Kirchner due to lack of evidence. Despite the fact that the investigation surrounding Kirchner's involvement has been dismissed, the political crisis has had a profound impact on the presidential election campaign, and continues to serve as the main driver of the growing opposition. In addition, Argentina has been facing severe economic problems, as the country suffers from a lack of investment, dwindling foreign currency reserves, an increasing deficit, and a fall in commodity prices that have exacerbated its poor relationship with international creditors.

Three front-runners have emerged for the presidential election campaign. The centre-right mayor of Buenos Aires, Marucio Macri has gained much support during the Kirchner scandal. Macri has been able to attract some important political figures, such as legislator Elisa Carrio and Peronist Senator Carlos Reutemann, which has allowed him to expand his traditionally right-wing Republic Proposal (PRO) party to the centre as he pledges alliance to Peronism. Another opposition leader, Sergio Massa, is also capitalising on Kirchner's falling popularity. Massa, a former member of Kirchner's government, has already beaten the ruling Front for Victory (FPV) party in congressional elections in 2013, and his Renewal Front party offers a left-wing Peronist alternative to Kirchner's FPV. Despite facing some internal party competition, Kirchner's handpicked successor, Daniel Scioli, has showed significant electoral support in the polls. While polls differ over who leads among these three candidates, the decisive factor will be how much support they can gain from provincial politicians and traditional parties, such as the Radical Civic Union (UCR).

As Kirchner attempts to restore her image, the main electoral battle will be conducted between left-centre Peronist Massa, supported by dissatisfied leftist voters, and Kirchner's successor, Scioli, in the second round. Macri will continue to express the need for a major change within the country, while gathering the support of more provincial politicians from the UCR. While Massa will be able to summon the traditional leftist voters, he will not be able to offer an agenda of such radical change, as his connections to the Kirchner government have become a constraint in the aftermath of the Nisman case. Eventually, it is likely that Macri will benefit from a strong alliance of various heavyweight political figures across the centre of the political spectrum to secure victory. However, as the ruling party around Kirchner senses the loss of public support, they are likely to employ all the political means available to attack the opposition and to cement their own rule. This may provoke mass protests among the dissatisfied electorate. Clashes between opposition protestors and militant government supporters, such as the La Campora group, could rapidly degrade the security situation within the country.

Brazil faces economic and political crises as President Rousseff loses support

The Brazilian government is facing both a political crisis and a severe economic slowdown, compounded by energy and water crises. Brazil's president, Dilma Rousseff, does not seem able to shake off the scandal at Petrobras, which has seen members of the ruling Workers Party (PT) accused of collaborating with dishonest executives at the semi-public energy corporation and a cartel of construction companies to cream billions of dollars in bribes from the company's projects. Rousseff has also lost majority support in congress after an election that splintered her coalition. As such, the government now struggles to pass necessary economic reforms without the support of the Brazilian Democratic Movement Party (PMDB).

The economic outlook of Brazil, as one of the most dynamic emerging markets, has lost its momentum. The ailing growth, estimated at 0.1%, is the result of various factors, including a decline in Chinese investment, a decrease in commodity prices and the decline of Brazil's most significant regional partner, Argentina. However, the most important factor is the faults in the country's current economic model, which has exercised hefty public and social spending and increased the budget deficit. Low growth is then causing increased unemployment, and the traditional hiring month of January saw a high number of layoffs. With inflation, growing unemployment and water and energy shortages, consumer confidence in Argentina has fallen to a historical low, further deepening the economic slowdown.

Rousseff is likely to meet with leaders of the PMDB in order to facilitate the cooperation necessary to pass the required economic reforms. The newly-appointed economic team, lead by a market-oriented economy minister, Joaquim Levy, is likely to propose measures that will increase taxes and cut spending on social programmes. While it is likely that Brazil will avoid a deep recession, levels of household indebtedness will limit improvements in consumer confidence and domestic consumption, which will ultimately block strong economic growth. Consequently, Rousseff and the Worker's Party will continue to lose public support, which will see the PMDB winning additional seats in the upcoming congressional supplemental election.

Asia and Pacific

Philippines military engages in large-scale offensives against militant Islamist groups; conflict between Kokang rebels and government forces reignites in Myanmar's northeastern Shan State; continued Chinese expansion in South China Sea elevates territorial disputes.

Neville Radovic and Liam McVay

Philippines military engages in large-scale offensives against militant Islamist groups

There has been an escalation of hostilities in the Philippines as the military continues its campaign against militant Islamist groups Abu Sayyaf and the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF). On 2 February, the Philippine military reported that BIFF had begun a serious mobilisation of its fighters in the city of Mamasapano, Maguindanao province, in anticipation of an assault by government forces. On 22 February, the military launched an operation to recapture the towns of Pikit in North Cotabato and Pagalungan in Maguindanao province. Abu Misry Mama, spokesperson for the BIFF, conceded that the group had retreated from the town after facing heavy artillery fire. The Philippine military simultaneously continued its operations against Abu Sayyaf throughout February, killing 34 militants, including a senior member, Radzmil Janatul, who was killed on 9 February. Tensions also remain between the government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in the wake of the 25 January Mamasapano clash that claimed the lives of 44 members of the police's Special Action Force.

On 24 February, the chief of staff of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, General Gregorio Pio Catapang Jr., announced that the Western Mindanao Command (WESMINCOM) had been ordered to conduct an all-out offensive against the BIFF. The offensive has already resulted in the capture of numerous villages and key transport points previously considered to be under BIFF control, while also inflicting notable casualties upon the organisation. Considering the BIFF is estimated to have no more than 500 fighters, a successful major offensive to kill or capture group members has the potential to deal a decisive blow to the organisation in terms of operational capacity and the amount of territory it is able to control. Furthermore, on 25 February, US troops who had been assisting the Philippine military departed after the deactivation of the Joint Operations Task Force Philippines (JSOTF-P) after 13 years, suggesting, that the Philippine military is now capable of fighting independently or that the remaining threat posed by militant Islamist groups is deemed to be comparatively low.

An increase in civilian fatalities as result of fighting between the Philippine military and militant Islamist groups is likely to represent the most dangerous scenario going forward. Several homes have already been destroyed as the BIFF continues its retreat. This scenario may be complicated further by a deterioration of relations between the Philippine government and the MILF, which continues to be plagued by the fallout from the 25 January Mamasapano clash, and has been accused by a number of internal observers of arming and supplying groups such as Abu Sayyaf. While the peace accord between the two sides is still intact, a breakdown would dangerously escalate hostilities in the southern Philippines. As such, it is likely that the Philippine government will continue to engage in operations against both the BIFF and Abu Sayyaf, albeit in a manner cognisant of the wider effects of the elevated levels of violence.

Conflict between Kokang rebels and government forces reignites in Myanmar's northeastern Shan State

Fighting between Kokang rebels and the Myanmar military erupted on 9 February in Laukkai in the north of Shan State near Myanmar's border with China. Reports suggest that heavy weaponry, such as anti-aircraft guns, have been deployed by the Kokang. This followed the return to the country of the rebel group's military leader, Peng Jiasheng, after a five-year absence. The minority group maintains an army of around 3,000 troops, often referred to as the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA). The organisation has adopted an aggressive and audacious strategy that has seen small successes, though has failed to dislodge government forces in strategically important areas, such as the city of Laukkai. In response to the recent fighting, President Thein Sein declared a 90-day state of emergency and the temporary military administration of the northern Kokang region, giving the military unprecedented executive and judicial powers in an attempt to bring the region back under government control. Since the conflict reignited, an estimated 30-50,000 refugees have poured across the border into neighbouring China.

Motives for the recent MNDAA aggression can be traced back to 2009 when the group was forced out of the Kokang self-administered zone after resisting pressure to become a de facto paramilitary border guard force under the control of the central military authorities. Many of the Kokang see conflict with the authorities as a war of liberation. However, the local government and NGOs have accused the group and their commander of being involved in the trafficking of opium and methamphetamines across the Chinese border. As such, although Jiasheng claims to be fighting for ethnic minority rights, the current struggle might be better interpreted as Jiasheng's attempt to retake control of a region that allows for lucrative illegal trade and smuggling opportunities due to its porous border with China. The conflict in Shan State has been dormant for over five years, and the reopening of old wounds represents a significant test for Myanmar's fledgling democratic government, which has been struggling to forge a stable ceasefire with a varied array of armed ethnic groups throughout the country. State media and news outlets have drawn a distinction between the MNDAA and other ethnic armed groups in an attempt to maintain the fragile peace. However, other groups, such as the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), are also beginning to express their grievances over the actions of the government, and there are reports that some KIA fighters are operating alongside the MNDAA outside of Laukkai.

If the KIA and other armed groups were to come to the aid of the MNDAA it could mark the beginning of a long and difficult struggle for the government, one that it will not be able to win through the use of force alone. In addition, the military is a powerful force in Myanmar, and may have to be appeased in order to prevent it from utilising the national security crisis in Shan as the a pretext for an attempted a coup d'état. As such, the fledgling democratic government faces potential challenges from both sub-state and state controlled entities that may prevent the new administration from governing effectively in the coming months.

Continued Chinese expansion in South China Sea elevates territorial disputes

Tensions surrounding the long-disputed South China Sea increased in February as the People's Republic of China continues with its expansive territorial claims without dialogue with other claimants. On 17 February, new satellite images revealed a significant Chinese expansion in the construction of artificial islands on reefs in disputed territory. One artificial island now covers nearly 63,000 square metres and contains infrastructure to support troops and aircraft. On 27 February, the US Director of National Intelligence, James Clapper, described this development as an aggressive attempt by China to exert sovereignty. On 28 February, the US Navy acknowledged in a statement that a P-8A Poseidon surveillance aircraft has been flown over disputed territory in the South China Sea in order to showcase its capabilities to the Philippine military.

On 5 February, the Japanese defence minister, Gen Nakatani, stated that Japan Maritime Self Defence Forces (JMSDF) patrols of the South China Sea could begin in the near future, citing land reclamation activities by China as a cause of concern. The commander of the Indonesian National Armed Forces, General Moeldoko, echoed this sentiment, stating on 28 February that joint regional commands would be established in order to counter potential flash points in the South China Sea. The regional dynamic has been further complicated by an announcement from China on 10 February that its recent gas discovery in the disputed waters could yield 100 billion cubic metres of natural gas. Henceforth, the relatively rapidly constructed artificial islands could form defences aimed at preventing other countries from accessing the contested (and lucrative) area. This could also place numerous shipping lanes within the sphere of Chinese control.

The emergence of China as a more powerful and assertive regional actor is an important factor in rising tensions, as China continues to build capacity towards a blue-water navy capable of projecting power far from its own coasts. As China aggressively pursues its territorial claims in a unilateral fashion, it is likely that it will increasingly draw the ire of other claimants and powerful regional actors such as Japan, the United States and Australia. The harassment of vessels, destruction of equipment, blockading of islets and seizure of fishing vessels and their crews in the South China Sea is likely to continue. Such heightened levels of tension will also likely intensify the South China Sea arms race as regional navies bid to procure sophisticated submarines and surface vessels to protect and enforce territorial claims.

Europe

Peace agreement now largely holding in eastern Ukraine despite several noticeable violations; Hungary balancing between the East and West as prime minister seeks strong political ties with Russia; political standoff between Armenian president and main opposition leader.

Alina Yablokova

Peace agreement now largely holding in eastern Ukraine despite several noticeable violations

The armed conflict between the Ukrainian military and Russian-backed separatists in the Donbass region of Ukraine persists. According to the United Nations, 224 civilians were killed and 545 were wounded in the three weeks to 1 February. Overall, the conflict has claimed more than 5,000 lives. Amid heavy fighting in eastern Ukraine and a growing debate within the US administration on whether to supply lethal arms to Kiev, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, French President François Hollande, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko met on 12 February to develop a package of measures for the implementation of the Minsk Agreements. According to this deal, the ceasefire came into effect on 15 February. However, fighting has continued around the strategic railway hub of Debaltseve, resulting in the capture of the town by separatists on 18 February. From 24 February onwards, both Ukrainian forces and the separatists reportedly began withdrawing troops and heavy weapons from the contact line in accordance with the provisions of the peace plan.

Merkel and Hollande visited Kiev and Moscow to bring Ukraine and Russia to the negotiation table shortly after the United States expressed their willingness to arm Kiev. It is clear that the prospect of further escalation in the conflict has the European leaders working towards a diplomatic solution. Although fighting continued following the ceasefire, the intensity reduced notably and has been largely concentrated around Debaltseve. In conjunction with the recent withdrawal of forces and equipment, it appears that both Kiev and the separatists are disposed towards ending the armed confrontation in eastern Ukraine. It is likely that the purported willingness of the United States to supply arms to Ukraine has achieved a degree of success in encouraging the rebels to soften their position. Additionally, as the Russian economy has already suffered greatly from EU and US sanctions, compounded by historically low oil prices, talks of further sanctions against Moscow should the peace process lapse in eastern Ukraine may be exerting sufficient pressure upon the Russian government to force a greater degree of compliance.

Although Ukraine seems to be edging towards a peaceful resolution of the conflict, the degree of mutual distrust between belligerent actors remains high. Indeed, the separatists have still not expressed full preparedness to allow Donbass to exist as part of Ukraine. Furthermore, Poroshenko is actively seeking military assistance from abroad in attempts to reinforce the Ukrainian army, recently signing a memorandum of understanding on military-technical cooperation with the United Arab Emirates, in addition to constant negotiations with the US leadership to facilitate potential weapon deliveries. Additionally, the Ukrainian leadership is not willing to negotiate directly with its opponents. Thus, the danger is that the agreement reached in Minsk in February may not represent a genuine reconciliation between both parties in conflict. Therefore, although the peace is holding, persistent mutual antagonism could trigger another outbreak of violence.

Hungary balancing between the East and West as prime minister seeks strong political ties with Russia

Hungary found itself at the centre of European politics during February, with the Russian President Vladimir Putin visiting Budapest less than two weeks after German Chancellor Angela Merkel's official visit. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban stated that his main foreign policy goals were to maintain good ties with Germany and to enhance cooperation with Russia, a potential market for Hungarian products and a major supplier of energy respectively. Both high profile visits took place amid protests against a perceived growing Russian influence and Orban's illiberal domestic politics. In late February, the discontent with the Hungarian prime minister was revealed when the incumbent Fidesz party lost its supermajority in parliament following by-elections.

Orban has become increasingly supportive of Putin and simultaneously more critical of the European Union. At the same time, his domestic policies are becoming progressively more conservative and unpopular among Hungarians. According to a Tarki opinion poll, Fidesz is now supported by only 24% of the electorate. Orban has signed a new gas deal with the Russian leader, and now strongly opposes the Energy Union that is at the heart of the European energy policy. In turn, the gas deal with Russia will allow Fidesz to continue with household utility bill cuts, the policy that helped the party win the 2010 elections. This would suggest that Orban deems strong political ties with Putin as essential to his popularity.

Although Orban insists that he acts in Hungary's national interest, his policies are meeting with growing resistance from the political opposition, the Hungarian population and European leaders. Moreover, a jostling for leadership is occurring within the ruling party, with Orban's close friend and prominent businessman Lajos Simicska openly criticising the prime minister in early February. If Orban continues with the same policies, Hungarian society and the political apparatus is likely to grow increasingly dissatisfied, providing a momentum that would embolden opposition with a growing potential to challenge the current status quo.

Political standoff between Armenian president and main opposition leader

In late 2014, the president of Armenia, Serzh Sargsyan, proposed a project of constitutional reform intended to transform Armenia into a parliamentary republic. The proposal sparked a political standoff between the president and the opposition. In early February, Gagik Tsarukyan, leader of the Prosperous Armenia Party (PAP), Sargsyan's main political rival, called on the population to support early parliamentary and presidential elections. This deadlock was further exacerbated when Tsarukyan travelled to Moscow, which was seen by the government as an attempt to seek support from the Kremlin in unseating the president. Sargsyan then announced that Tsarukyan would be excluded from the National Security Council due to absenteeism. An almost week-long political confrontation between Sargsyan and Tsarukyan ended on 18 February after one-to-one talks. Tsarukyan subsequently shifted his rhetoric, urging for the resolution of political disputes 'through peaceful, lawful and political means'.

Despite growing discontent from Armenians towards the leadership amid a situation of economic hardship, Sargsyan enjoys the strong support of the national assembly. Therefore, the political standoff that occurred in February and its swift resolution both indicate that the conflict is more personal than political. Despite this, the incident caused a divide in the opposition trio that consists of the Prosperous Armenia Party, the Armenian National Congress (ANC) and the Heritage party, which collectively represent the strongest rival force to the ruling party and the president. Tsarukyan's political disputes with Sargsyan and his management of the situation have generated tensions within his own party, with some of its members announcing their resignation.

A lack of common agenda within the triumvirate has been illuminated by this political dispute. The sudden change in rhetoric by Tsarukyan, who has previously acted as the figurehead for the Armenian opposition, is likely to damage the legitimacy of the parties involved. As such, it is likely that the opposition will be forced to identify and bolster a new key leader if they wish to present a strong rival force to the ruling party. Given this weakened opposition, it is likely that Sargsyan will have an easier job proceeding with the constitutional reform. However, the political situation is increasingly volatile in Armenia, and there is some degree of social discontent that has intensified with the economic meltdown. Although highly unlikely, the opposition may seek to capitalise on this discontent in order to pursue the change of the leadership called for throughout the political standoff.

Middle East

Yemen's political factions threaten to destabilise what remains of fragile state unity; Jordan redoubles its efforts in fight against Islamic State in Syria following pilot's murder; fighting continues for control of key Syrian cities as Islamic State kidnaps hundreds of Assyrian Christians.

Sophie Taylor

Yemen's political factions threaten to destabilise what remains of fragile state unity

Yemen experienced a number of significant U-turns and further developments that threatened to divide social and political alliances throughout the country's north and south during February. On 2 February, Houthi rebels announced that they would seize control of essential state apparatus and political infrastructure should domestic rivals fail to cooperate with the Shia movement and form a new presidential council. However, the group later withdrew the ultimatum following international pressure that emphasised the need for reconciliatory dialogue. Mass demonstrations occurred throughout central Sana'a and the city of Taiz, with protesters denouncing the Houthis' legitimacy and calling for the release of former transitional president Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, who was being held under house arrest in Sanaa.

Following the Houthi takeover of Sanaa in September 2014 and the forced resignation of Hadi in January 2015, rival political groups and militias have sought to exploit the country's power vacuums. Moreover, as the Houthi have sought to extend their political control southward beyond Sanaa, violent clashes have occurred between the movement and Sunni tribesmen and militant groups, such as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and its affiliated Ansar al-Sharia. On 12 February, al-Sharia fighters stormed the al-Beyhan army base in Shabwa province, seizing control of the compound and its weaponry. Later, 26 people died in clashes between the Shia group and Sunni tribesmen in the southern al-Bayda province. A day later, state security forces were attacked close to the Wadi Dawan oilfield in Hadramawt, killing four. Despite these disruptions, the United Nations' appointed mediator, Jamal Benomar, announced on 20 February that rival factions had agreed, in principle, to a further round of peace talks aimed at establishing a new transitional council. However, on 21 February, Hadi emerged in the southern city of Aden and reclaimed his presidency – a move that has largely been accepted, as Yemen's parliament was yet to accept his resignation the previous month. The reinstatement of Hadi from Yemen's south has prompted condemnation from the Houthi, who claim his presidency is illegitimate.

Going forward, it is difficult to determine the shape of Yemen's political future. The country is one of the region's poorest, and relies heavily on Saudi Arabia for financial aid. Given the accusation that Houthi rebels are proxy agents of Iran, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has loudly rejected the Houthi takeover, portraying it as no more than an illegal military coup. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia redeployed its diplomatic staff to Aden following their evacuation from Sanaa on 12 February. The movement of key political actors to the south will have done much to stir up the country's regional divisions, including the issue of southern separatism. Problematically, as the Houthi continue to push southward, the moderate Sunni parties may put aside their opposition to the Islamist militancy of groups such as al-Sharia and AQAP and move closer to those organisations in order to form a more powerful opposition.

Jordan redoubles its efforts in fight against Islamic State in Syria following pilot's murder

On 3 February, Islamic State (IS) released footage of the brutal murder of abducted Jordanian fighter pilot First Lieutenant Muath al-Kaseasbeh. Al-Kaseasbeh's F-16 fighter jet had been shot down on 24 December 2014 close to the Syrian city of Raqqa while conducting airstrikes against IS targets. The footage, different from previous execution films released by the group, shows al-Kaseasbeh being burned alive in a cage and, later, the flames being extinguished by rocks and sand. The shocking nature of al-Kaseasbeh's murder has drawn international outcry and regional military reprisals.

Jordan had entered into negotiations with IS in Syria and, in an unprecedented political move, had openly stated its willingness to participate in a hostage swap for al-Kaseasbeh. Islamic State previously issued demands for the release of Iraqi prisoners Sajida Mubarak Atrous al-Rishawi and Ziad Karbouli, who had been detained in Jordan for their roles in the al-Qaeda organised suicide attacks in Amman in 2005. IS initially offered to swap Japanese hostage Kenji Goto for the two prisoners, and later included the release of al-Kaseasbeh alongside Goto. Ultimately, the IS-imposed deadline for al-Rishawi and Karbouli's release passed, and footage of Goto's and al-Kaseasbeh's executions were circulated online. The failure of the organisation to provide any proof of life for the young Jordanian pilot prompted many to believe his murder had taken place the previous month, only days after his capture, and that IS were simply attempting to bluff their bargaining position. Following the confirmation of al-Kaseasbeh's death, Jordan hung both al-Rishawi and al-Karbouli on 4 February, and vowed to double its military efforts against Islamic State.

Concerns had been raised over the Kingdom's ability to sustain its operations against Islamic State, given the high cost of military intervention. But by 8 February, General Mansour al-Jbour, head of the Jordanian air force, announced the Kingdom had conducted 56 airstrikes against IS targets in Raqqa and Deir Al-Zor, destroying a number of strategic assets and arms depots. The United Arab Emirates, who had previously suspended its strike capacity role in the US-led coalition against IS, delivered a squadron of F-16 fighter jets for the Kingdom to use in its missions on 7 February, and itself re-joined the air campaigns by 10 February. During the same day, Jordan announced the deployment of thousands of troops to the porous Jordan-Iraq border. Jordan's King Abdullah II visited Riyadh and the newly appointed Saudi King Salman on 24 February to discuss improving bilateral relations. Given that Saudi Arabia and the ruling al-Saud family are heavily invested in keeping IS at bay and preventing the spread of the Caliphate to Mecca, it is likely that the Gulf Cooperation Council will direct financial and military aid towards Jordan. Arguably, though, Jordan's most significant threat comes from the domestic unrest ignited by al-Kaseasbeh's death and the division in public opinion over the Kingdom's role in the international coalition.

Fighting continues for control of key Syrian cities as Islamic State kidnaps hundreds of Assyrian Christians

Airstrikes conducted by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's air force in the eastern rebel-held areas of Damascus killed at least 200 people according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. The airstrikes came as pro-government forces and Hezbollah fighters attempt to secure the capital, where rebel groups the Army of Islam and al-Nusra Front currently operate. Beyond Damascus, over 100 people have been killed and many more injured as rival forces clashed throughout Aleppo and its neighbouring districts. Despite claims made by Assad's forces that they are complying with demilitarisation within Aleppo's high-density areas, 17 February was one of the city's most violent days. Aleppo remains strategic for both pro- and anti-government forces due to its proximity to key supply links with neighbouring Turkey, and has experienced widespread violence and destruction since its fall in 2012.

By 23 February, it was announced that Islamic State (IS) had kidnapped up to 220 Assyrian Christians fleeing their homes in the largely Kurdish held territories of Al-Hasakah Governorate. It is believed the abductions were a direct response to the Kurdish gains made throughout the month in the country's northeast. The international coalition against Islamic State responded with airstrikes on 25 February, with the area of Tel Tamer in particular coming under heavy fire according to the Observatory for Human Rights. A day later, the prominent British IS executioner dubbed 'Jihadi John' was named by US intelligence sources as Mohammed Emwazi – a Kuwaiti-born Briton from London, who had previously studied at the capital's Westminster University. British Intelligence had originally refused to confirm or refute Emwazi's identity, stating that he was part of an ongoing investigation. Media attention has since turned to the failure of Britain's MI5 intelligence agency in allowing Emwazi to travel to the region from the United Kingdom, given that he was already known to the security services and had been prevented from entering Kuwait in 2010. Moreover, the nature of his upbringing and level of education has prompted Western government's to look more closely at the issue of domestic radicalisation.

Within Syria, clashes will continue between pro- and anti-government forces in Aleppo as Kurdish fighters tackle IS in Al-Hasakah and sites along the Khabur River. Problematically, a number of Syrian minorities, such as Assyrian Christians and Arab Bedouins, have flocked to the region seeking Kurdish protection, placing them at greater risk. Although Islamic State has previously used hostages to negotiate the release of its members from prison, the abducted Assyrians are a religious sect and their fate remains unclear.

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