

The weekly briefing | 17 February 2014

Political and security risk updates

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Africa

Al-Shabaab claims responsibility for car bomb near Mogadishu's international airport

Al-Shabaab has claimed responsibility for a remote-controlled car bomb targeting a UN convoy near Mogadishu's Aden Adde International Airport in the Somali capital on 13 February. At least seven people were killed and more than a dozen injured in the explosion. The bomb was detonated close to a checkpoint at the entrance to the airport complex, where the African Union mission in Somalia is based, together with several foreign diplomatic and UN officers. Al-Shabaab spokesman Abu Musab claimed that a number of foreign 'invaders' had been killed, though the UN states that only four security personnel were injured.

The attack highlights the persistent risk of militant activity in the capital with the extremist group also claiming responsibility for two separate bombings on 10 February. The first attack was a remotely-detonated bomb attached to a vehicle belonging to the deputy governor of the Lower Shebelle region. Later that day, a second vehicle exploded outside the Oriental Hotel in the Shibis district as government officials were inside the building.

Having been pushed out of the capital in 2011 by African Union peacekeeping troops, the Somali government and regional actors are increasingly concerned about al-Shabaab's resurgence and its attacks targeting government personnel and foreigners. As Somalia's fragile government struggles to control the situation, Mogadishu's mayor, Mohamed Nur (nicknamed 'Tarzan'), called upon security forces to execute any member of al-Shabaab that was captured. UN sources have warned of the likelihood of further attacks.



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Other developments

A leading Libyan general has called for the country's interim parliament to be suspended, with a presidential committee to be formed to govern until new elections can be held. Major General Khalifa Haftar outlined his vision of a road map on 14 February, stating that Libya's armed forces were calling for the country to be rescued from its present turmoil. Although Haftar was a leading figure in the 2011 revolution, observers doubt his present influence, especially given the powerful position of individual militias, who continue to challenge the interim government outside of the capital Tripoli. After the initial mandate of the General National Congress expired on 7 February, members agreed to extend their term to allow the drafting of a constitution, in the face of rival factions fighting over the country's future. The country's prime minister, Ali Zeidan, branded rumours of a coup linked to Haftar's statement 'ridiculous'.

African Union troops discovered a mass grave at an army camp occupied by Seleka rebels in the Central African Republic's capital, Bangui, on 12 February. A day earlier, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon had warned of the risk that the CAR could end up divided along sectarian lines as a result of the current violence. He also called for an international force to avoid the further escalation of atrocities. With a thousand people killed in a matter of weeks and a million displaced, international pressure had led to Seleka leader Michel Djotodia's resignation last month and a resurgence of inter-religious violence between Christians and Muslims. The United Nations announced it would send Assistant Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Edmond Mulet to the country to consult with the African Union on transforming the current force into a UN contingent in an effort to improve the situation. France and the EU have announced they want to boost their forces in the CAR.

Nigeria announced on 13 February that it would carry out an audit of the way in which the state oil company allocates fuel subsidies. The move is designed to end the controversy over billions of dollars of oil revenues allegedly missing from the country's treasury. This follows allegations made by the governor of Nigeria's central bank, Sanusi Lamido Sanusi, who claimed that the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation was short-changing the government by as much as \$1 billion dollars a month. The allegations contributed to concerns among investors, with controversies remaining about whether the audit will cover contentious issue such as crude oil swaps, arrangements in which high values of crude exports are exchanged for refined fuel imports and which industry experts bemoan as lacking transparency.

On the radar

- **Algeria will conduct investigations into a military transport plane crash that killed 77.**
- **The UN Security Council will consult on developments in the CAR,** while a report is due on UN peacebuilding efforts in Guinea-Bissau.
- **Nigerian government retaliation is expected after raids by Boko Haram** kill dozens in the northeast of the country.
- **MONUSCO, the UN mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo, is to investigate mass executions** after receiving reports of more than 70 civilians being killed by armed groups in the country's restive east.
- **The government of Ghana is calling for economic reform to shore up its weakening currency,** which has dropped to a record low on foreign exchange markets.

Americas

Student protest turns violent in Venezuela amid rise of a more radical opposition

On 12 February, an anti-government student protest in Venezuela's capital, Caracas, left three people dead and over 25 injured. The protest was initiated by Leopoldo López, head of the Popular Will (VP) party and re-emerging figure among the opposition. The 70,000 protesters were angry about a range of issues, including the scarcity of basic goods, the collapse of the health system and rising insecurity. While the opposition has accused violent pro-government groups of threatening the march, President Nicolás Maduro has accused the opposition of attempting to destabilise his government. In the aftermath of the protest, officials issued an arrest warrant for López on charges including murder.

The protest was the culmination of street skirmishes and marches that have escalated since the beginning of the month. Tensions between opposition and pro-government radical factions increased after a group of students was accused of vandalising the house of the governor of Táchira, a district controlled by Maduro's United Socialist Party (PSUV). According to the governor, José Vielma Mora, López had paid students to carry out the attack. This led to a wave of marches in Venezuela's provincial municipalities, organised by local anti-government student groups. López has called for further mobilisations.

López was the leader of the opposition under the Hugo Chávez government (1999-2013), until being sanctioned from running for public office in 2008, months before Venezuela's regional election. He is regarded as a hardliner within the opposition camp and had notably taken an active part in the opposition mobilisation that led to the failed coup against Chávez in April 2002. López's illegibility to stand for elections enabled the more moderate Henrique Capriles to head the opposition for the presidential election in April 2013. However, as López's sanction was initially set to end in 2014, he progressively rose as a direct competitor to Capriles's leadership. His return to the forefront of the Venezuelan political scene is shaping a more radical opposition. This is likely to be matched by a tougher stance from Maduro. However, there are no clear indications that the current wave of protests represents a serious threat to the PSUV's rule. Maduro will remain in a position of strength as long as he continues to manage the factions within his own party and retains the allegiance of the army.

Other developments

The assassination of a journalist in Mexico underscores the threat posed by drug cartels. On 11 February, the body of Gregorio Jiménez de la Cruz was found in a pit in the state of Veracruz in southeast Mexico. He had been kidnapped from his residence six days earlier. Prior to his abduction, Cruz was investigating a series of kidnappings in the region. This tragedy has led to nationwide marches by fellow journalists and media professionals, who urge the government to better ensure security for journalists.

Clashes between police officers and peasants have occurred in Brazil's capital, Brasilia. On 12 February, 15,000 peasants from the Landless Workers' Movement (MST) clashed with security forces in front of the presidential palace. The demonstration condemned the government for its paralysis in its agrarian reform. The MST emerged in the mid-20th century as a unified organisation that sought a fairer distribution of land. It represents the largest social movement in Latin America, with an estimated 1.5 million members. Despite its disruptive clout, the MST had until now stated that it would not stage protests during the run up to the 2014 FIFA World Cup.

Police have rescued a kidnapped congressional candidate two days after his disappearance in northern Colombia.

On 12 February, the Colombian National Police Kidnapping and Extortion Unit reported that it had found abducted politician José Gregorio Botello Ortega. Botello is a member of the conservative Independent Movement of Absolute Renovation (MIRA) party and an aspiring candidate for the 9 March congressional elections. According to MIRA, the kidnapers have attempted to use Botello's abduction to force a fellow candidate to withdraw her bid for the congressional seat. The Electoral Observation Mission has expressed its doubts regarding the authenticity of the kidnapping. Botello is due to make a statement to the police in the coming days.

On the radar

- **Further student protests to be staged by the opposition in Venezuela's capital, Caracas.**
- **The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) has rejected a possible ceasefire during legislative elections** in Colombia on 9 March.
- **The second round of the presidential elections is to be held in El Salvador** on 9 March.
- **Expect heightened security in Toluca, Mexico, during the North American Leaders Summit** on 19 February.
- **Protests against the costs of the FIFA World Cup are planned** for 22 February across various cities in Brazil.

Asia and Pacific

China and Taiwan hold historic high-level talks

On 11 February, China and Taiwan held their first high-level talks since 1949. Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council minister, Wang Yu-chi, met with Zhang Zhijun, the director of China's Taiwan Affairs Office, during his four-day visit of the mainland. The two officials met on two occasions but the events were not open to reporters and no public statements were made, suggesting the meetings served as a confidence-building exercise. However, various observers have speculated that the two discussed a possible meeting between President Ma Ying-jeou of Taiwan and the Chinese Communist Party General Secretary Xi Jinping. Beijing and Taipei have refused to hold talks since the end of the Chinese civil war in 1949, when the ruling nationalist Kuomintang government fled to Taiwan from the communist forces. Beijing insists that Taiwan is part of the People's Republic of China and has repeatedly stated their aim of reclaiming the island. Conversely, Taiwan officially calls itself the Republic of China and claims the territory of mainland China. However, cross-strait relations have improved to the point that these official talks were possible. This is largely due to the work of Taiwan's pro-Beijing president, who was elected in 2008. Commercial cross-strait flights began in 2008, cross-strait tourism has been encouraged and trade agreements have allowed Taiwanese technology firms to invest in the mainland.

Analysts agree that these talks could open the door to a new chapter in cross-strait relations between Taiwan and China. In a news conference on 14 February, Wang outlined the agreement of a regular communication mechanism between Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council and China's Taiwan Affairs Office. Many are hopeful that this shows Beijing is becoming more flexible in dealing with Taiwan. In particular, analysts have emphasised that Wang addressed Taiwan as the Republic of China without Beijing objecting. This may indicate that Beijing is committed to Xi's stated preference for mutual dialogue.

Further developments

Thai police began to retake various protester-occupied sites on 14 February. So far, police have moved into main roads surrounding Bangkok's royal quarter and have faced little resistance. However, the police have withdrawn from a fortified protestor camp in the government complex due to fears of violent clashes. The government offered a snap election on 2 February but this was boycotted and disrupted by the opposition. Recently, opposition co-leader Thaworn Senniam has declared his organisation is ready to end protests if an interim government is established to implement national reform.

Chinese authorities have reported that they have shot and killed eight people attempting to attack police officers in Xinjiang on 14 February. Chinese officials named the attackers as terrorists who were attempting to attack a police patrol with explosive devices. Verifying the authenticity of these reports is extremely difficult as information flowing from Xinjiang is tightly controlled. Xinjiang is home to the Uighur ethnic minority who speak a Turkic language. Beijing claims to be battling Muslim separatists within Xinjiang and security measures have increased since an incident in late October 2013 when an exploding car in Tiananmen Square claimed the lives of five people. Uighur activists point to tight Chinese control as the cause of these tensions and clashes.

Thai authorities have announced that 1,300 Rohingya refugees were deported back to Myanmar in 2013. The refugees had been held in detention centres and deported in late 2013, amid criticism by human rights groups. However, Thai officials insist that the deportations were voluntary. Rohingya people face persecution in Myanmar and thousands have fled from ethnic and sectarian violence from the Buddhist majority. The worst of violence is seen in Rakhine state, in west Myanmar, where it is reported that tens of thousands have been displaced. The Rohingya are considered stateless and any more additional refugees have been rejected by neighbouring Bangladesh.

On the radar

- **A United Nations report will be released on 17 February providing an authoritative account of human rights violations by the North Korean authorities.**
- **The controversial reunion between South and North Korean families is scheduled to begin on 20 February.** This may be cancelled due to North Korean anger over the South Korean-US military drills scheduled for 24 February.
- **Australia's immigration minister, Scott Morrison, has promised to release a report to refute the Indonesian navy's claim that Australia's incursions into Indonesian waters were intentional.**
- **The nationalist Maharashtra Navnirman Sena party plan to march from Chowpatty to the Mantralaya Secretariat building in Mumbai, India, on 21 February.**
- **Protests are likely in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, on 14 March** – the anniversary of 1988 naval battle with China.

Europe

Italy to form a new government following the resignation of prime minister

Italian President Giorgio Napolitano has begun consultations with political leaders over the nomination of a new prime minister, following the resignation of Enrico Letta on 14 February. Letta announced his decision to step down the day before, after his centre-left Democratic Party (PD) withdrew their support. The mayor of Florence and leader of PD since December 2013, Matteo Renzi, is widely believed to be Napolitano's nomination for the position.

On 13 February, at a PD leadership meeting, Renzi called for a vote on the party's support for a change in administration, thus withdrawing its support for Letta. The vote was won by 136 votes in favour and 6 against, while Letta's supporters chose to leave the meeting without voting. The Democratic Party is a major force in Italy's ruling coalition government. On 12 February, Letta had unveiled a broad reform agenda for the coalition entitled Commitment Italy, which included imposing a swifter execution of reforms and called for the full support of political forces until the reforms had been implemented. Letta had only been in position for 10 months after being appointed in April 2013 and forming a government two months after the inconclusive elections.

Renzi had argued that a new administration was needed to end a period of 'uncertainty' under Letta's premiership. In recent months, Letta had been increasingly attacked for failing to implement promised reforms to Italy's bureaucracy. The continuing decline of income, falling living standards and high unemployment in the country has also contributed to growing dissatisfaction with the government. Following the PD meeting, Renzi called for a government to be formed that would last the term until in 2018. However, despite Renzi's high popularity in the polls, it is yet unclear how he would avoid the administrative challenges that Letta faced. It is widely believed that the president will give Renzi the mandate to try and form a government and it is likely that he would seek to form a coalition with the same parties as Letta's government. Should he win the nomination, Renzi would be the country's youngest prime minister at the age of 39 years old. However, Renzi's success is uncertain. Angelino Alfano, the leader of the New Centre Right, said that he would not support a new administration whose policies were too left wing.

Other developments

On 12 February, Georgia announced its plan to join the NATO Response Force in 2015 and that the United States has been selected as the sponsor state to provide them with financial support. The announcement came on the last day of a two-day visit to the country by the NATO Military Committee. This was the committee's first visit to the South Caucasus. Topics of discussion included security, cooperation and Georgia's involvement in NATO's mission in Afghanistan. NATO had previously cancelled the original planned visit in November 2012; although no official reason was given, it is believed that they were concerned following the arrest of three senior political opponents to the new Georgian government elected in October 2012. The announcement is likely to provoke a reaction from Russia who sees the expansion of NATO as a threat to its security. It has been argued that a main motive behind the Russia-Georgia war of 2008 was the derailment of Georgia's quest to join NATO.

On 13 February, the EU Commission for Enlargement, Stefan Fule, unveiled a plan to resolve Ukraine's political crisis. The announcement came after Fule visited Ukraine this week and met with the government and opposition to discuss the crisis. Fule told reporters at a press conference that Ukraine needed to urgently carry out constitutional reforms, form a new inclusive government and hold free and fair elections. Although a main demand of the opposition is holding elections in the immediate future, Fule announced that the EU was advocating for the presidential election to be held as scheduled in March 2015. The commissioner also announced that the EU was ready to provide financial support to Ukraine if reforms were implemented. The Ukrainian government seemed to be following the EU's advice with the announcement on 12 February by the acting prime minister, Sergey Arbutov, of government plans for economic and social reforms, as well as reforms in the energy sector.

Turkish police clashed with demonstrators marching to the Turkish parliament in Ankara on 13 February. The demonstrators were protesting against a new bill, to be ratified by the president, which tightens the government's control over the internet and also over the recent jailing of army officers accused of plotting a coup. Turkish police responded with water cannons and tear gas to disperse 2,000 protesters after fireworks and stones were thrown at officers. The Turkish government has been accused of unfairly jailing army officers who had been involved in an investigation into a corruption scandal in President Abdullah Gül's government. On 14 February, Turkish MPs also passed controversial judicial reforms, which will put the Supreme Board of Justices and Prosecutors under the control of the justice ministry. The opposition has argued that the reform was destined to impede corruption inquiries into the government and to give more control to the ruling Justice and Development Party.

On the radar

- **Italian President Giorgio Napolitano will nominate his candidate for the position of prime minister this week.**
- **The Basque separatist group, ETA, is believed to be announcing its plans to disarm this week.**
- **Franco-German conference will be held this week in Paris, France.**
- **Iran Nuclear Talks to be held in Vienna, Austria, 18-20 February.**
- **Angela Merkel will host Ukrainian opposition members in Berlin, Germany, on 17 February.**

Middle East

Violence in Syria peaks as latest rounds of talks in Geneva make little progress

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that at least 40 people were killed in the city of Aleppo on 13 February. On 14 February, Syrian warplanes carried out at least 20 air strikes on Yabrud, a strategic opposition-held area close to the Lebanese border and on the Damascus highway. According to the British-based human rights group, violence has escalated since the peace talks in Geneva began last month, with an average death toll of 236 people a day since 22 January. This is the highest since the civil war began in 2011.

Peace talks between the government and the opposition have failed to progress. The opposition maintain that the only way to end the conflict is to form a transitional government without President Bashar al-Assad's involvement. On the other hand, the government has dismissed any negotiations involving Assad's future and insisted that the talks must focus on bringing terrorism to an end – referring to opposition and foreign fighters in Syria. It appears that the Syrian government, together with support from Lebanese Hezbollah, has increased its military campaign in opposition-held areas since peace talks began. It is likely that the Syrian government has used the peace talks as a means to buy more time and has taken advantage of the infighting that has weakened opposition factions in recent months.

It is highly unlikely that either side will stand down and renegotiate in Geneva, regardless of attempts by the United Nations to bring the war to an end. Internationally, Russian support for Assad continues and Moscow is expected to reject a Western-Arab draft resolution on the delivery of humanitarian aid and access in Syria, claiming that it is one-sided. On the ground, high levels of violence are expected to continue as the Syrian army continues its offensive in opposition-held territories.

Other developments

Six Egyptian police officers were wounded on 7 February in the capital city, Cairo. The officers were stationed near a bridge close to Giza Square when two improvised explosive devices were detonated next to their vehicles. The explosions occurred a couple of minutes apart, echoing double-tap tactics intended to cause maximum casualties. Attacks on the military and security forces have increased since the coup that removed President Mohamed Morsi from power in July 2013. The Muslim Brotherhood has since been outlawed by the interim military government.

Yemen is to become a federation of six regions, it was announced on 10 February. Delegates from political parties involved in lengthy national dialogue talks formed a committee in late January, chaired by President Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi, to decide Yemen's new structure. The aim of the new federation is to reduce resentment towards a perceived centralisation of government in peripheral areas and to appease those who have long felt marginalised by the government in Sanaa. The country will be divided into six federal regions, consisting of Aden and Hadramawt in the south and Saba, Janad, Azal and Tahama in the north. Sanaa itself will become a neutral federal city not subject to any regional authority and the port city of Aden will also be given executive powers.

Security forces in Bahrain were deployed to disperse protestors following demonstrations that began on 14 February. The demonstrations were held on the anniversary of anti-government protests in Bahrain that were inspired by the Arab Spring three years ago. Security forces fired tear gas as anti-government demonstrators blocked roads with felled trees and ignited tyres in villages surrounding the capital, Manama. The Shia opposition party and its supporters have called for the ruling family to surrender its grip on power in favour of democratic elections.

On the radar

- **The trial of 20 journalists, including four foreigners, in Egypt is to begin on 20 February.** The defendants have been accused of aiding a terrorist organisation and endangering national security.
- **Talks between Iran and the P5+1 are set to begin in Vienna, Austria, on 18 February.** The aim of the talks is to negotiate a deal that would see Iran scale back its nuclear programme.
- **Strikes by Israeli hospital workers over salaries are to continue this week.** Employees of the Hadassah medical centres in Jerusalem announced that they would only perform life-saving operations and distribute medicines.
- **25 February marks National Day – the founding of the state of Kuwait in 1961**
- **Opposition protests and risk of violence in Bahrain** on 17 February – the 3 year anniversary of a raid on activists by security forces.

Polar regions

Alaskan senator critical of US Arctic strategy

Alaskan Senator Lisa Murkowski wrote a letter to US President Barack Obama on 11 February voicing her concerns over the Implementation Plan for the National Strategy for the Arctic Region adopted earlier in the month by the White House. The senator claimed to be 'severely disappointed' with the plan, asserting its failure to 'make the US a leader in the Arctic'. According to Murkowski, the title "Implementation Plan" is a misnomer for a document that simply pushes [US] involvement in the Arctic down the road and does nothing to advance [America's] already lagging role in the region'.

Many of Murkowski's criticisms have been raised previously by analysts and commentators. Murkowski's claim that Arctic neighbours Canada to the east and Russia to the west are pushing ahead with ambitious plans of investment in coastal infrastructure and icebreaker fleets is, at least in comparison with the United States' more lukewarm efforts, difficult to dispute. The Implementation Plan, rather than following the US Navy's recommendations and estimates for the construction of 10 new icebreakers, merely calls for the drafting of yet another assessment to be completed by the end of 2017. This 'unambitious timeline' will, according to Murkowski, 'be sorely late in addressing [US] needs in the region'. Murkowski further criticises the plan for ignoring a number of existing studies detailing threats to infrastructure in coastal communities and, most seriously, for failing to call for an aggressive timeline for the construction and deployment of a deep water port in the Arctic, which many analysts consider essential if the United States is to improve its communications and emergency response capabilities.

Meanwhile, local politicians and experts in Alaska finally released on 30 January a preliminary report, which details the 'strengths, gaps and opportunities' in federal and state Arctic strategy, and presents an alternative set of policy recommendations. The authors assert that the report is aimed not only at providing recommendations for federal Arctic strategy but also at countering the perceived threat of a 'top-down' approach that ignores local expertise and would 'be counterproductive, inefficient and lack legitimacy'. Yet ultimately, the question of whether the implementation of the US National Strategy for the Arctic Region will be executed primarily at the federal or state level will be irrelevant unless the White House takes the difficult decision to allocate more federal funds to the project. With the United States still deadlocked under a national debt debate that has become the alpha and omega of American politics, it seems that a serious Arctic policy, financed by Washington and executed by Anchorage, will not be implemented soon.

Other developments

Nordic states are to expand the scope of foreign and security policy cooperation, according to a joint statement issued in Reykjavik, Iceland, by the foreign ministers of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. Among the target areas laid out for deeper and broader cooperation are crisis management, dealing with climate change and Arctic issues. The foreign ministers stated that cooperation should also be pursued to counter threats caused by terrorism, infectious diseases, organised crime, drug and human trafficking and cyber-attack.

There are apparently major problems with the construction of the floating production unit for the Goliat field. Production at Goliat, which will be the northernmost oil field on the Norwegian shelf, is planned to begin in late 2014. However, a source at Hyundai Heavy Industries, which was awarded the contract to construct the unit, has described the struggle to bring the field online in time as 'chaos', admitting that the company has taken a number of shortcuts that ultimately might lead to reduced technical standards.

Plans for the development of gas production on Russia's Yamal Peninsula continue at a brisk pace, with a number of developments last week continuing the trend. Head of national oil giant Rosneft, Igor Sechin, announced on 11 February that the company has started examining the possibility of the construction of a liquefied natural gas (LNG) plant. The announcement followed rapidly after private natural gas producer Novatek, which is already developing one LNG plant on the peninsula, started planning a second plant with its foreign partners. Meanwhile, both the government and energy companies are attempting to present an assured stance on the commitment to environmental protection, with Russian energy minister Kirill Molodtsov telling a press conference on 13 February that the government will enforce strict environmental regulation, and Gazprom and Lukoil earlier in the month announcing their intention to pool crisis management resources together.

On the radar

- **Canadian soldiers will be conducting a military training exercise in the Arctic territory of Nunavut**, which began on 15 February and is scheduled to continue for 10 days.
- **An interdepartmental workgroup tasked with developing Russia's Arctic strategy will meet on 26 February** to discuss the final draft of a list of Arctic territories to be considered for extra state funding.
- **The 5th Polar Shipping Summit will be held on 26-27 February in London** to discuss technological, operational and logistical challenges faced by ship owners in harsh Arctic conditions.
- **An 'International Arctic Investment Summit' on 27 February** will invite international investors to consider the theme of the 'Northern Sea Route: Infrastructure and Transport-Communication Systems in the Arctic'.
- **Travellers to all Russian cities are advised on extra security precautions** which are to remain in place until 21 March in response to the heightened threat of terrorism during the Sochi Olympics.

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