

# The weekly briefing | 21 October 2013

Political and security risk update

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**Africa:** Al-Shabaab threatens British Muslim leaders who spoke out following the murder of British soldier Lee Rigby in May.

**Americas:** Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro seeks new powers amid political tensions and economic crisis.

**Asia and Pacific:** String of bombings threatens Burma's reformist efforts.

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## Africa

### **Al-Shabaab threatens British Muslim leaders who spoke out following the murder of British soldier Lee Rigby in May**

On 18 October 2013, the al-Shabaab movement in Somalia posted an hour-long video online threatening British Muslim leaders who criticise those who commit violence in the name of Islam. The Metropolitan Police have warned those named in the video and offered them protection.

The video, narrated by a masked man with a British accent, refers to the murder of Drummer Lee Rigby on 22 May 2013. The narrator states that that if British jihadists were unable to use guns, 'then certainly a simple knife from your local B&Q will do the job'. The video displays al-Shabaab's military capabilities and their ability to move around freely in parts of Somalia.

The video provides further evidence to suggest that the movement has been successful in recruiting Western members. Militants with apparent links to Britain are named and the narrator claims that recruits have come from London, Liverpool, Cardiff, Bristol and Birmingham. The video appears to be directly aimed at potential Western recruits and underlines al-Shabaab's apparent shift from solely local concerns to a more global awareness.



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## Other developments

**At least 16 people were killed in a suicide attack in the Hiiraan region of southern Somalia on 19 October 2013.** The attack occurred when a suicide bomber detonated explosives inside a café in the town of Baladweyne. Three Ethiopian soldiers, the likely targets, were killed in the blast. The al-Shabaab movement immediately claimed responsibility for the attack, which targeted troops participating in an African Union peacekeeping force fighting the movement. This marks the deadliest terrorist attack to be reported in Somalia in recent months.

**On the 18 October 2013, the Pentagon outlined its plans for 3,500 US military personnel to conduct more than 10 missions in Africa over the next 12 months.** The move is aimed at training African forces to combat terrorist threats, especially in Libya and Somalia, where the United States has conducted commando raids over the past month.

**Two Somali men killed in an explosion in the Ethiopian capital on 13 October 2013 are thought to have been preparing a bomb.** The blast occurred in the Bole district of Addis Ababa, where the likely targets were people on their way to see the World Cup qualifier game versus Nigeria. There was no immediate claim of responsibility, though the Ethiopian government have placed the blame firmly at the feet of al-Shabaab. Ethiopia deployed its military in Somalia in 2011 to help that country's government fight al-Shabaab.

– *Mohammad Nur*

## Americas

### **Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro seeks new powers amid political tensions and economic crisis**

On 15 October, the Venezuelan National Assembly created a commission to enable President Nicolás Maduro to rule by decree. This occurred a week after the president called for emergency powers to 'fight corruption' and wage an 'economic war'. Maduro's mandate has been substantially weakened in past months by ongoing infighting between radical and more pragmatic factions within his United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV). The PSUV faces mounting opposition headed by Henrique Capriles ahead of the municipal elections on 8 December, further threatening Maduro's hold on power.

The current economic crisis in Venezuela has been largely blamed on Maduro's lack of action on the economic front as the model he inherited from his popular predecessor Hugo Chávez starts to break down. The lack of leadership from the current president has led to a political stalemate. As the crisis deepens, it seems that Maduro is unable to propose an alternative for the post-Chavez era.

It is likely that the Assembly will endow Maduro to rule by decree but it remains uncertain how he will use the new powers. One possibility is that he will attempt to deepen the socialist model with a view to gaining greater support in the upcoming election and then later proceed to deregulate monetary restrictions.

## Other developments

**The Colombian guerrilla group FARC bombed a train transporting coal from the Cerrejón mineral complex in the Guajira province on 13 October.** The attack came amid a stalemate in government peace talks. In the past weeks, both parties have failed to reach new agreements in the peace negotiations.

## **The Anarchist movement Black Blocs has struck again in the streets of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo.**

They hijacked a peaceful protest by teachers, students and trades unionists on 8 October. The Black Blocs first came to attention in Brazil during the June 2013 street protests. They are a diverse, decentralised youth movement protesting against many aspects of Brazilian society and government policies.

– *Tanocrède Feuillade*

## Asia and Pacific

### **String of bombings threatens Burma's reformist efforts**

A string of bombings appearing to target tourist hotspots have killed at least two people and injured several in different regions of Burma/Myanmar this week. An American tourist was injured when the luxury Traders Hotel in Rangoon was targeted; blasts in Namkham killed one person and injured two; and Myanmar's largest cities, Yangon and Mandalay, have also been attacked. An AFP news report suggests that a man detained in connection with the Rangoon bombing is a member of the Karen National Union (KNU), though the group denies any involvement.

The government has insisted that these attacks are an attempt by individuals or an organisation to damage the country's image following the introduction of democratic reforms. President Thein Sein believes the ultimate aim is to scare foreign investors from revitalising Burma's economy and place doubt on the suitability of Naypyidaw chairing the Association of Southeast Asian Nations next year.

The government, which came to power in 2011, has reached tentative peace deals with major ethnic minority rebel groups as part of political reforms that have led to the lifting of most Western sanctions and prompted a surge in foreign tourists.

### **Other developments**

**The Malaysian appeals court has ruled that non-Muslims cannot use the word Allah to refer to God, even within their own faiths.** This requires Christians to, among other measures, replace their Bibles. Christians protest that the government is merely discriminating to boost their Islamic credentials with voters. This ruling overturns a previous ruling in 2009 that sparked violence and the destruction of dozens of religious buildings. Pro-Islamic discrimination looks likely to continue and this risks a backlash from non-Muslims.

**A resident of Kiribati (a low-lying Island in the Pacific) is attempting to claim asylum in New Zealand.** Ioane Teitiota claims that climate change is threatening his family's quality of life as atolls disappear under rising sea levels. Environmental degradation is the primary concern of all Pacific low-lying nations, yet their plight has been largely ignored by larger states. The court's decision is expected soon and this may set a precedent.

**The consequences of President Barack Obama's cancellation of his trip to the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation in Indonesia are beginning to be felt.** Although the Obama's visit was cancelled due to the US government shutdown, recent commentary this week is trying to paint it as another indicator of a wider power shift in the Asia-Pacific. The Chinese press, in particular, is fostering the impression that it is China, not the United States, that is now the superpower leading Asia in the 21st century.

## On the radar

- **Opposition supporters in the Maldives have staged protests** after the police recently prevented the second presidential election from taking place.
- **New emergency measures will be implemented in a bid to curb the amount of air pollution in China's major cities.**
- **The North Korean crew and ship detained in Panama** for smuggling Cuban weapons three months ago will soon be returned to North Korea.
- **The Prime Minister of Japan, Shinzo Abe, is drafting a new secrecy law** to stop governmental leaks. Many fear this as a clampdown on press freedom.

– Gary Chan

## Europe

### **Chancellor Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union and the opposition Social Democratic Party to enter into formal coalition talks**

Chancellor Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the opposition Social Democratic Party (SPD) have declared that they will enter into formal coalition talks. This puts Germany on course for a new government that will have a dominant majority in both the Bundestag and Bundestrat. The agreement will set up what will probably be weeks of negotiations between the parties over controversial issues, particularly the Social Democrats demands for new laws that benefit workers.

As the eurozone's most powerful country politically and economically, the formation of Germany's new coalition government could have important political and economic ramifications for the future of the EU. Until now, Germany has been the primary driver of austerity and structural reform in the periphery of Europe. It has sought some form of further integration, as demonstrated by efforts to move towards a banking union, including planned measures to set up a eurozone banking supervisor. Germany has also been the primary driver for a more neutral foreign policy. However, it is highly likely that eurozone policy will remain the same and no changes are expected in foreign policy given the SPD's approval and consent of the CDU's policies on these matters until now.

Key SPD demands ahead of coalition talks include a minimum wage of €8.50 per hour, equal pay for men and women, greater investment in infrastructure and education and a common strategy to boost eurozone growth and employment. It is highly likely that Merkel will accept these demands given that she has no other options after the collapse of coalition talks with the Greens. The SPD's stance is not surprising given the membership's reluctance to offer any unconditional support to Merkel after the blow that the SPD experienced in the 2009 elections following its decision to enter a grand coalition government in 2005.

## Other developments

### **Civil servants, hospital staff, transport workers and other demonstrators took to the streets on 18 October to protest the economic policies of Italian Prime Minister Enrico Letta's government.**

Letta's 2014 budget has become a focal point of discontent, with unions complaining about freezes on public sector salaries and what they say is an unfair tax burden on workers. Letta had built expectations the budget would reverse years of austerity with a cut in payroll taxes but was unable to deliver due to disagreements over how to fund them. Demonstrations continued on 19 October with protesters clashing with police and an estimated 70,000 marching through Rome to protest government cuts, unemployment and large construction projects. A general strike is being planned by the three main unions, the CGIL, CISL and UIL. It is highly likely that larger protests composed of diverse groups are likely to follow.

### **According to a Harris survey for the *Financial Times*, over 70% of respondents favour restrictions on welfare benefits for EU migrants as well as support for fewer powers to Brussels.**

There have been attempts by countries including as the United Kingdom and Sweden to curb migration from the south without success. But the economic crisis and the flow of migration it effected to the north, has helped the rise of far-right and Eurosceptic parties in Britain, France, Norway and Austria. In France, for example, the National Front has won a major victory in local elections. Such developments form a trend that according to EU officials will prompt a rethink of EU immigration policies.

### **Germany is to drop its opposition to Turkey's EU candidacy.**

Berlin reacted to Ankara's heavy-handed crackdown on protests earlier this year by blocking further talks on Turkey's ascension to the EU. However, the European Commission's recent annual progress report on aspiring members recommended breathing new life into Ankara's bid. The leader of Germany's SPD opposition, Sigmar Gabriel, voiced his support for Turkey's full membership of the EU.

## On the radar

- **European Parliament, Commission and Council to discuss migration** on 24 October.
- **Protests in Portugal** look set to continue.
- **EU Foreign Ministers to discuss Egypt and Syria** on 21 October.

– *Stelios Papadopoulos*

## Middle East

### **Talks on Iran's nuclear programme conclude in Geneva**

Representatives of the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Russia and China (the P5+1) held bilateral talks with Iranian representatives and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) as they met in Geneva, Switzerland, to discuss Iran's nuclear future on 15-16 October. These are the first negotiations since the election of President Hassan Rouhani in June of this year and coincide with renewed diplomatic efforts between Tehran and the West. Potentially, these initial talks represent the beginning of future diplomatic discussions and proposals regarding international concerns on Iran's nuclear ambition, the lifting of economic sanctions and the recognition of Iran's right to pursue uranium enrichment.

Iranian foreign minister, Mohammed Javad Zarif, outlined proposals for increased cooperation between Iran and the international community. Although the initial proposal understandably lacks any concrete solutions, it suggests a willingness to engage with the IAEA and to build trust by allowing unrestricted inspections (the Additional Protocol) and limiting uranium enrichment. In return, sanctions imposed on Tehran would be eased. The significance of this proposal cannot be underestimated. Any effort by Tehran to build a mutual trust with a cautious international community is unprecedented and encourages further negotiations.

Iran's positive impression may be lauded amongst pro-reformists. On the other hand, more conservative Iranians resentful of US enforced sanctions may view the negotiations as a weakness in their new president. Furthermore, the region's only nuclear power, Israel, will be watching any developments with unease. These initial talks appear to have served their principle purpose, to engage in diplomacy, with more senior figures expected to attend further discussions in November. It will not be until the next round of discussions that it will become clear whether these talks are a new start for relations with the West or will simply result in a return to a stalemate.

### **Other developments**

**The Muslim holiday of Eid al-Adha was marred by a number of sectarian attacks in Iraq.** On 15 October, a bomb exploded at a mosque in the northern city of Kirkuk. Twelve Sunni worshippers were killed and a further 24 were injured as they attended morning prayers. On 17 October, Iraq's Shi'ite population were targeted as 10 bombs ripped through predominantly Shi'ite areas in Baghdad, leaving 44 people dead. These are the latest incident in a string of sectarian attacks this year, claiming the lives of some 5,000 people. Sectarian violence has increased dramatically in Iraq since April after security forces stormed a Sunni anti-government camp.

**Saudi Arabia announced on 18 October that Riyadh would turn down their non-permanent seat at the UN Security Council because of its double standards over the current conflict in Syria.** Saudi Arabia, a key supporter of the Syrian opposition groups, accused the Security Council of failing to act in Syria and its failure to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict over the decades. Saudi Arabia's unprecedented move comes at a time when the Kingdom's future position in the region is unclear given recent changes to US policies towards Egypt, Syria and Iran.

**The Lebanese government has called on the international community to help deal with the influx of Syrian refugees to their country.** Lebanon has seen its population rise by over 20% since the start of the Syrian civil war and hosts an estimated 790,000 of the two million Syrian refugees in the region. The Lebanese government has not built official refugee camps and refugees have been forced to seek shelter in abandoned buildings and makeshift camps. Concerns about conditions and the winter months have seen the UN pledge \$74 million in humanitarian aid to Lebanon and the EU has pledged a further \$95.8 million. The influx of Syrian refugees in Lebanon has placed additional pressure on infrastructure, increasing food prices and demands on access to clean water. Moreover, sectarian divisions in Syria have spilled over into Lebanon resulting in violence between Shi'ite and Sunni communities.

## On the radar

- **Syrian Deputy Prime Minister, Qadri Jamil, announced that peace talks could be held** in late November or early December in an attempt to resolve the civil war.
- **Pakistani Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif, will visit Washington this week** in an attempt to strengthen US-Pakistani relations. It will be the first visit of a Pakistani prime minister to Washington in five years.
- **Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, is expected to meet Pope Francis at the Vatican this week** and is due to discuss Iran's nuclear programme alongside US Secretary of State John Kerry.

– Daniel Taylor

## Polar regions

### Angela Merkel calls for swift resolution of Arctic 30 crisis

German Chancellor Angela Merkel told Russian President Vladimir Putin of her concerns over the continuing detention of 30 international environmental activists and journalists on charges of piracy, calling for a swift resolution of a case. Russian authorities began investigating the Greenpeace activists after they staged an environmental protest on the Pirazlomnoye oil rig in the Pechora Sea on 18 September. The Russian investigative committee is currently preparing to extend the detention of the activists beyond the November deadline originally set by the court in Murmansk, the far-northern Russian city where the environmentalists are currently being held. Investigators have also threatened the defendants with drugs charges after allegedly finding narcotics on the Dutch registered Arctic Sunrise that the activists used in their protest.

Merkel's condemnation supports efforts by the Dutch government to seek the release of the activists and file legal action against Moscow at an international maritime dispute court. Merkel's official statement, released following a conversation between the German and Russian leaders, is far more diplomatic in tone than the current heated exchange between Amsterdam and Moscow. Nevertheless, German pressure is likely to be far more effective at obtaining the release of the activists; Germany is Russia's number one trading partner and a country that has traditionally exercised great influence over Moscow.

The seizure of the Arctic Sunrise was unlikely to have been ordered due to a genuine fear of any threat posed by Greenpeace's activities in the region. More probable is that it is an attempt by Moscow to flex its muscles and demonstrate that it will accept no challenge to its asserted sovereignty over large swathes of the Arctic Ocean. The dramatic raid on the Greenpeace ship, the nationalistic posturing of Russian politicians and the already month-long detention of the activists have undoubtedly already achieved this aim. Russia thus has little more to gain from handing out prison sentences. With the addition of Merkel's voice to the growing wave of international outcry it now has more to lose. Putin certainly understands this, and will be cautious about causing further scandal before the 2014 Olympic Games in Sochi, a project that has come to symbolise his presidency. However, it is unclear whether he will be able to rein in the excesses of the investigative committee, the powerful branch of the Russian security apparatus investigating the activists, which has demonstrated growing political initiative and independence since Putin's return to the presidency in 2012.

## Other developments

**The United Kingdom and India have expressed ambitions in the Arctic.** A British Foreign Office strategy paper published on 17 October envisages a larger role for the country in the opening up of the Arctic to exploration by oil and gas companies, which is likely to accelerate as technology advances and climate change causes the retreat of polar icecaps. The United Kingdom is the latest of a number of non-Arctic countries which have recently expressed greater interest in the region's massive energy reserves. On 14 October India, which received observer status in the Arctic Council in May of this year, opened an AsiArctic conference in New Delhi, where academics and policymakers discussed the potential for growing involvement in the region along with delegates from China, Japan, Korea and Singapore.

**Moscow is reportedly claiming to have discovered a new island in the Franz Josef Land archipelago on 18 October.** This discovery was part of a Russia-led effort to chart in greater detail the new ice free Northeast Passage that has formed to the north of the country as a result of retreating polar icecaps. The announcement will be of particular interest to China, which is relying on Russia to provide accurate surveys of new shipping channels that will have the potential to cut the journey time of cargo vessels between East Asia and Europe by a third.

**Regional Development Minister Igor Slyunyayev outlined Russian plans to spend \$63 billion by 2020 on a strategic programme to develop the Arctic.** While the programme made reference only to economic and social projects, the announcement is likely to be simultaneously intended as a further statement of Russia's strategic and military interests in the region, following the jealous protection of Russia's perceived sovereignty in the Arctic Sunrise case and Putin's 3 October pledge to expand the country's military presence in the Arctic.

## On the radar

- **Senior officials of the Arctic Council will hold their first meeting under the current Canadian chairmanship** in Whitehorse, Canada, on 22-23 October.
- **The Washington Homeland Security Roundtable will meet with senior officers of the US Coast Guard** to discuss national priorities for Coast Guard missions including border security in the Arctic on 28 October.

– Patrick Sewell



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