

The monthly briefing | May 2015

International political and security risk updates

Open Briefing produces and publishes these briefings in collaboration with our intelligence sponsor, **Bradburys Global Risk Partners**.

Africa

Al-Shabaab resurgence possible following attack on Garissa University College in Kenya; pro-government militia seizes northern Mali town from Tuareg rebels; Muhammadu Buhari to take office as Nigerian president.

Liam McVay

Al-Shabaab resurgence possible following attack on Garissa University College in Kenya

On 2 April, gunmen targeted a Christian service at Garissa University College in Garissa, Kenya, before continuing their attack in college dormitories. The Kenyan authorities responded and reportedly trapped the armed men in one of the dormitory building before killing four of the attackers. Reports relating to numbers of attackers and equipment used are vague, with reported number of the attackers ranging from four to over 10. The Kenyan president, Uhuru Kenyatta, deployed tanks and armoured vehicles in Garissa in response to fears that the attack might have been the beginning of a series of planned assaults in the city. The Somali terrorist group al-Shabaab has claimed credit for the attack.

Al-Shabaab has a long history of conducting attack against soft targets in Kenya, such as the attack on the Westgate shopping mall in Nairobi in September 2013. Other targets have included restaurants, churches and hotels, as well as the assassination of police officers, army officials, civil servants and diplomats. The insurgent group has been significantly weakened in recent years due to the assassination of a number of the group's senior figures and the surrender of a number of high-ranking personal as part of a government backed amnesty plan. As such, al-Shabaab has increasingly turned away from conventional warfare operations in Somalia to focus on terrorist attacks across the Horn of Africa.



open briefing
the civil society intelligence agency

Open Briefing
27 Old Gloucester Street
Bloomsbury
London WC1N 3AX

t 020 7193 9805
info@openbriefing.org
www.openbriefing.org

Al-Shabaab merged with al-Qaeda in 2012, and there are deep ties between the two groups going back to the 1990s. However, recent reports suggest that a number of senior al-Shabaab members are aligning themselves more with Islamic State, though the vast majority remain loyal to al-Qaeda. The military branch of al-Shabaab is also said to be leaning more towards Islamic State. A growing al-Shabaab affiliation with Islamic State could drastically worsen the security situation in Kenya and its neighbours. The greater number of recruits and increased financial support that might come with support from Islamic State could potentially see a return to the more overt, conventional forms of violence carried out by al-Shabaab in Somalia during 2010-11. With a growing IS presence in Yemen and the security situation in Somalia and nearby South Sudan worsening, it is important that the Kenyan government prepare for the potential resurgence of al-Shabaab in the region.

Pro-government militia seizes northern Mali town from Tuareg rebels

Militants from the pro-government group Gatia seized the northern Malian town of Menaka from Tuareg rebels on 27 April, taking over 30 prisoners. The clash interpreted four months of relative calm in Mali's northern desert region. The northern Mali separatist movement have gained considerable momentum after the fall of Muammar Gaddafi's regime in Libya in October 2011, when Tuareg tribesmen who had been serving in Gaddafi's military returned home. The National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) launched its first offensive into the northern territories on 16 January 2012, assaulting the towns of Menaka and Tessalit.

Recent successes have bolstered the position of the Tuareg rebels. Reports of low morale, infighting and desertion indicate that the Malian military has lost cohesion. If the Malian government delays a counter offensive, the Tuaregs will likely secure their northern homelands during the long rainy season, which often degrades transportation infrastructure to the south. Although the rebels have indicated a willingness to negotiate with the Malian government and senior Tuareg officials have suggested publicly that they do not intend to expand their current territory, government officials are concerned over apparent links between the rebels and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. These links have further cemented widespread anti-Tuareg public opinion in the south of the country, making any real progress extremely difficult.

If the Malian government is to gain control over its northern territories it will undoubtedly have to appease elements of the northern population who have fought in the name of an independent Tuareg state. Further conflicts between the Tuaregs and other insurgent groups are a very real possibility as they vie for control over the region. Ansar Dine, which seeks the imposition of sharia across Mali, has held a fragile peace with the MNLA to this point; however, senior Tuareg officials have stated publicly that they would be willing to work with the Malian government against the militant Islamist factions in the region in exchange for a degree of devolution or independence. If the militant Islamist movements gain momentum, the Malian government may be forced to accept these terms or risk losing any control over the northern regions.

Muhammadu Buhari to take office as Nigerian president

Muhammadu Buhari, a four-time presidential candidate, will take office as the president of Nigeria on 29 May. Buhari led a military coup in December 1983, and ruled the country until he himself was deposed in a coup in August 1985. He will begin his new term with a strong mandate and the backing of a parliament controlled by his party, the All Progressives Congress (APC). However, in spite of a clear victory in the elections, which took place on 28-29 March, Buhari will need to utilise every bit of his political skill to have any chance of overcoming the challenges facing Nigeria.

The new president's main priority will be security, in particular tackling the threat of the Boko Haram insurgency in northeastern Nigeria. This will, at least initially, involve continuing the efforts started by Buhari's predecessor, Goodluck Jonathan, over recent months. These efforts will likely be widely approved of, especially in the northern regions, where the APC has its strongest support. Tackling the economic and energy issues – relating to fuel subsidies and oil sector reform – will be more politically contentious. As a result, the APC is attempting to attract defections from Jonathan's People's Democratic Party (PDP), as PDP officials – who have weight in local government – attempt to safeguard their careers by realigning themselves with the new ruling party.

Whereas Jonathan was often cautious in empowering the military to tackle Boko Haram, due to concerns over a military threat to his own position, Buhari will have no such fears. Under the new administration, the military will be more likely to continue to receive the support needed to sustain more aggressive operations against Boko Haram. As a Muslim from the northern region, Buhari will also be better suited to develop the political, social and economic relationships, particularly among the northern elite, which will be essential for a successful and cohesive counter-insurgency campaign in the north. Buhari's success will be defined by his ability to balance security concerns emanating from his political heartland in the north with the economic demands of the southern Christian population, who have more commonly supported the PDP.

Americas

New prime minister creates optimistic economic outlook for Peru; Brazil's economic recovery will be long process; new wave of violence in Tamaulipas, Mexico, signals fragmentation of cartels.

Petr Bohacek

New prime minister creates optimistic economic outlook for Peru

With the prime minister, Ana Jara Velásquez, losing the confidence vote on 31 March, Peruvian President Ollanta Humala has faced another political crisis and named his seventh prime minister since re-election in 2011. Peru has experienced its weakest ever GDP growth in the last five years, and the country, dependent on the export of metals, is facing reduced investments and continuing protests against mining projects that left one dead and numerous injured on 22 April. However, the newly-appointed prime minister, former defence minister Pedro Cateriano Bellido, has been able to attract the support of the opposition with his progressive political agenda aimed at attracting foreign investments and incentivising long-term economic growth in the country.

In spite of the negative international economic circumstances, such as the fall of commodity prices, Bellido's planned reforms promise to improve key areas. The public deficit has been decreased to 4.6% of GDP for 2015, as the Central Bank was able to lower inflation to 1.64% in the first quarter while maintaining interest rates at 3.25%. This has been mostly due to the depreciation of the Peruvian nuevo sol (PEN) against the US dollar, as the Central Bank had lowered its 2015 growth forecast from 6% to 3.5%. However, the new economic plan aims to increase competitiveness and productivity and to make the country's administrative system and business regulations more flexible to attract greater investment while investing over \$240 million in education and over a \$1 billion in infrastructure. Additionally, the Ministry of Energy and Mining has announced \$63 billion in mining investments over the next five years.

The new cabinet will continue dialogue with the opposition in order to retain their support. The key fishing and mining sectors are likely to recover in the second half of 2015, in line with the continuously growing Peruvian utilities and banking sectors. With inflation kept under 3%, the government will be able to successfully implement educational and infrastructural investments. At the same time, the cabinet will need to accommodate the demands of local rural workers over new mining projects, such as the Tia Maria copper mine project, while protecting foreign investments in the sector. Consequently, Peru can continue to be an economic driving force in the region as the rest of Latin America stagnates.

Brazil's economic recovery will be long process

After months of negotiations, President Dilma Rousseff's government has finally struck a deal with the Brazilian Democratic Movement Party (PMDB). The vice-president and one of the leaders of the PMDB, Michel Temer, facilitated the signing of a letter pledging the support of his party to proposed austerity measures. However, the chamber president, Eduardo Cunha of PMDB, denied any shift in the party's politics to accommodate the ruling Workers' Party (PT) proposals. The congress, led by the opposition and the PMDB, had dealt the PT another political defeat with the passing of an outsourcing bill, and as Cunha put it, the PT will only achieve anything if his party has 'pity'. Elsewhere, the arrest of PT's treasurer, João Vaccari Neto, for accepting donations from Petrobras executives, has resurrected public and political calls for the president's impeachment, with her approval rating dropping to 10%.

Brazil's Central Bank has been criticised for its optimistic forecast for 2015, with some predicting the economy will shrink by 2% with 9% inflation. Yet, with the account deficit shortened, consumer confidence has in fact increased, and Brazil surprisingly increased the number of jobs created in March after three consecutive months of unemployment growth. With the Brazilian real (BRL) hitting a 12-year low, the Central Bank has raised interest rates to 13.25%. However, any real economic revival is far off, as the economy continues to decline, inflation surges, the budget surplus remains low and public debt continues to threaten Brazil's credit ranking. Politically, the investigation of Petrobras has not led to any direct accusations or links to Rousseff, making an impeachment out of the question for now. But, as said, the ruling PT is at the mercy of the PMDB.

With the PMDB pledging support to the reforms, Brazil will be able to make the necessary changes. But while the economic orthodoxy of the fiscal reforms by Brazil's finance minister, Joaquim Levy, will preserve Brazil's credit rating, it will prevent the economy from growing in 2015. However, the weak real and increased confidence will bring back investors, together with new state-led investments to aid employment. It will be a long way back to growth, on which the PT will have to face the lack of political and public support. With the PMDB trying to make as much as it can out of the political weakness of the PT, it will continuously pressure the government to make more concessions.

New wave of violence in Tamaulipas, Mexico, signals fragmentation of cartels

In recent weeks, Mexican security forces have arrested various notable organised crime leaders in Tamaulipas state. This includes the detention of the regional leader of the Gulf Cartel, Jose Sanchez Garcia, in Matamoros on 5 April; the arrest of Gulf Cartel local leader José Tiburcio Hernández Fuentes (known as El Gafe) on 17 April; the arrest of the leader of the Juarez Cartel, Jesús Salas Aguayo (known as El Chuyin), on 20 April; and the arrest of the alleged leader of the Gulf Cartel, José Silvestre Haro Maya (known as El Chive), on 22 April. With the latest arrest, clashes broke out in the state of Tamaulipas as organised crime groups confronted the security forces, creating roadblocks and setting fire to vehicles, with sporadic exchanges of gunfire. The government has since stabilised the security situation, with the security commissioner, Monte Alejandro Rubido, and interior minister, Osorio Chong, assuring that safety in Tamaulipas had improved.

The border between the cities of Reynosa and Matamoros in Tamaulipas plays a key role in Mexican drug-trafficking routes, with the state being a traditional birthplace of many drug cartels. The latest violence in Tamaulipas was the result of two new entities: the Ciclonas, operating from Matamoros, and the Metros, based in Reynosa. While the new arrests debilitate the groups, they also contribute to the creation of offshoots and an increase in such new criminal gangs. With the success of federal forces in targeting top leaders, the cartels have become much more fragmented and decentralised, which further complicates their complete eradication. However, the fragmented cartels are also weaker.

The federal security forces have been able to quickly and effectively respond to the recent spiral of violence. This will likely continue, as the government remains focussed on targeting gang leaders and further weakening the large cartels. With increased security measures, the approaching 7 June legislative elections should not be interrupted.

Asia and Pacific

Increasing pressure from United States risks China hastening land reclamation projects to cement territorial claims in South China Sea; Vietnam continues to expand its naval capabilities in light of tensions with China in South China Sea; Armed Forces of the Philippines continues security operations against insurgent groups.

Neville Radovic

Increasing pressure from United States risks China hastening land reclamation projects to cement territorial claims in South China Sea

International claimants to the contested waters of the South China Sea have continued to consolidate their stances in the wake of China's continued assertiveness in the region. The Philippines renewed calls for China to immediately halt its land reclamation activities in disputed waters, with the chief of staff of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, General Gregorio Catapang, calling the projects the primary cause of tension within the region. Similarly, Singapore's prime minister, Lee Hsien Loong, maintained that the situation in the South China Sea had become more serious in the past year, and if not managed, could lead to tension on the ground and sea. This shared concern among claimants was reflected in a statement released by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) on 27 April, which asserted that China's land reclamation projects might undermine peace, security and stability in the region. The ASEAN statement attracted sharp criticism from China, with its foreign ministry stating on the following day that it was 'severely concerned' with the development.

While all international claimants are adamant about reaching a peaceful solution to the dispute, several states in the region have moved to bolster their military presence. On 9 April, US and Indonesian forces carried out a joint maritime air patrol in the waters around the Natuna archipelago involving a total of 88 personnel. An Indonesian military spokesperson stated on 13 April that Indonesia is seeking to hold regular military exercises with the United States in the future. On 20 April, the Philippines and the United States began their largest combined military exercise in 15 years, which has been widely viewed as a reaffirmation of the United States' commitment to its ally. Taiwan's defence ministry also announced on 22 April that its air force will, for the first time, dispatch the sophisticated P-3C Orion maritime patrol aircraft on surveillance missions over the South China Sea. Other non-claimants have also signalled their intention to increase their military presence.

The growing consensus among smaller claimants against China's land reclamation activities is an important development. Likewise, increasing support from the United States has greatly increased the potential costs for China if it continues with its current non-reconciliatory approach. The coming months are likely to see continued cooperation between claimants as they seek a unified front to counter China's growing assertiveness. Accordingly, the United States will increase its support to regional allies, in particular the Philippines, which has been the most vocal critic of China's territorial claims. However, as recent military drills with Indonesia indicate, the United States is likely to hold a greater number of exercises with states that feel threatened by China, regardless of whether or not they have a territorial claim in the South China Sea. However, growing international condemnation of China for its land reclamation activities in the South China Sea may result in the opposite of the desired outcome. As China shows no indication of abandoning its territorial claims, the recent increase in pressure from the United States may prompt it to hasten current land reclamation projects in an attempt to cement its claims. Indeed, as tension grows and claimants increase their military presence, the potential for miscalculation resulting in sporadic conflict rises accordingly. This threat continues to pose the greatest risk to regional peace and stability.

Vietnam continues to expand its naval capabilities in light of tensions with China in South China Sea

Late in April, reports surfaced that the Vietnamese Navy is in the process of procuring 50 anti-ship and land attack 3M-14E Klub supersonic cruise missiles, which are compatible with its growing fleet of Russian-produced SSK Kilo-class submarines. The Klub cruise missile comes in three variants: anti-ship, anti-submarine and land attack, with all three designed to destroy targets protected by sophisticated active air defences and countermeasures. Despite calls on 8 April from China's president, Xi Jinping, to 'jointly manage and control maritime disputes' and 'deepen cooperation', the procurement of a greater number of Klub cruise missiles suggests that as long as China makes no tangible progress in settling regional disputes, Vietnam will continue to arm itself.

The procurement of Klub cruise missiles will greatly enhance the capability of Vietnam's fleet of six Kilo submarines once all enter active service in 2016. The range of the missile, in conjunction with the relatively sophisticated Kilo submarine, will provide Vietnam with a considerable deterrent against any state that may seek to infringe upon its maritime domain. For Vietnam, this deterrent is of growing importance, as tension surrounding the South China Sea disputes continues to escalate in wake of mounting Chinese assertiveness in the region. The Vietnamese Navy is highly likely to continue with the modernisation of its surface and submarine fleets in the foreseeable future. As its capability and power projection increase, Vietnam will draw the ire of China, which is likely to view it as a direct threat to its South China Sea claims. Furthermore, Vietnam is likely to utilise its expanding fleet to conduct exercises and joint patrols with neighbouring Philippines, which like Vietnam, is a staunch and vocal critic of China's stance on the South China Sea.

Given that the Klub cruise missile could potentially pose a threat not only to China's navy but also to its coastal cities, relations between the two states may deteriorate further. The two navies routinely shadow one another around the disputed resource-rich Spratly Islands, and with the presence of Klub-armed Kilo submarines, the risks only increase. Furthermore, if Vietnam deploys such weaponry to the disputed region, it may serve to aggravate the situation, as China may use it as a pretext to an even greater naval presence to 'protect' its commercial vessels.

Armed Forces of the Philippines continues security operations against insurgent groups

The Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) continued with its security operations in the southern Philippines throughout April, primarily targeting Abu Sayyaf and the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF). Despite the AFP concluding its 'all out' offensive on 30 March, which inflicted significant losses on BIFF, it failed to eliminate the group completely. This was made evident on 7 April, when the AFP and BIFF engaged in fighting in Maguindanao province that lasted several hours. BIFF, however, suffered a major setback on 14 April when it was revealed that Ameril Umbra Kato, founder and leader of BIFF, died from a heart attack. BIFF announced on the following day that Ismael Abubakar (known as Kumander Bungos) was elected to be Kato's successor in leading the group.

Operations against Abu Sayyaf have also led to several encounters resulting in casualties. On 9 April, eight members of the AFP were killed in action and a further 25 sustained injuries in Patikul, Sulu province. AFP spokesperson Lieutenant Colonel Harold Cabunoc stated that security forces encountered approximately 250 militants. Abu Sayyaf has continued with its strategy of targeting local officials, with the group kidnapping Gemma Adana, the mayor of Naga, a coastal town in the southern province of Zamboanga Sibugay. It is reported that the group is demanding a ransom of \$22.4 million for her release.

The overall intensity of the insurgency in the southern Philippines has somewhat subsided since the conclusion of the AFP offensive in late March; however, clashes between the AFP and militant Islamist groups continue to occur on a frequent basis. It is likely that under the leadership of Abubakar, BIFF will increase the number of attacks in the short term as the new leader attempts to solidify his position. However, the insurgency is likely to remain at a relatively low intensity, characterised by sporadic skirmishes and kidnappings. Neither Abu Sayyaf nor BIFF possesses the fighters required to launch a counter-offensive against the AFP, which has complete superiority. The threat of terrorist attacks on civilian targets in the Philippines remains high due to increasingly asymmetric tactics being adopted by insurgent groups. The new leader of BIFF may adopt such a strategy in continuing the insurgency, which would place civilians at great risk of being targeted or caught in the crossfire.

Europe

Hungary's far-right party on the rise; US-Ukraine joint military exercise commences in western Ukraine; Parallel commemorations for Armenian Genocide and Gallipoli Campaign highlight rift between Armenia and Turkey.

Alina Yablokova, James Taylor and Roger Marshall

Hungary's far-right party on the rise

On 12 April, a candidate from the Hungarian far-right party, Jobbik, won the parliamentary by-election in Tapolca district. Lajos Rig secured the seat with 35.3% of the votes against the 34.4% share for his main opponent, Zoltan Fenyvesi from the ruling party, Fidesz. Although Jobbik won with a margin of only about 200 votes, his victory is part of a larger recent trend in Hungarian politics. Jobbik has a strong anti-Semitic and anti-Roma rhetoric. Two examples of such are one of the party's deputies spitting on a Holocaust memorial, while another suggested that people of Jewish ancestry pose a national security risk. However, the party leader, Gabor Vona, has recently announced a new direction towards the political centre for his party. This strategy partially explains the recent surge in the party's popularity. Jobbik is now the second largest party in the Hungarian parliament and, thus, the most successful nationalist party in Europe.

Jobbik's victory in Tapolca also demonstrates that the party has successfully capitalised on the declining popularity of the governing Fidesz party, led by Hungary's prime minister, Viktor Orban. In fact, an opinion poll conducted by Median suggests that Fidesz's approval rating dropped from 27% to 24% between January and March. A year ago, the ruling party enjoyed 36% support, which has since dropped by a third. At the same time, while Jobbik's support remained constant over the year (15%), 18% of the party's supporters claim they voted for Fidesz during the previous year. Allegations of corruption, brokerage scandals and a number of unpopular laws (for instance, restrictions on Sunday trading) were a significant blow to Fidesz's credibility. Therefore, within Hungary's political arena, where left and liberal parties are weak and blamed by Fidesz for the collapse of brokerage houses, Jobbik is filling the vacuum.

Although the governing Fidesz party still has the support of the majority of Hungarians, it is losing ground to the opposition. Previously, the ruling Fidesz-KDNP coalition had already lost its absolute parliamentary majority following the Veszprém district by-election. Orban may employ tax cuts in order to regain popularity. Additionally, it may be assumed that Fidesz will continue its attempt to discredit Jobbik as a neo-Nazi party. However, this strategy is unlikely to be effective. Firstly, Fidesz's own policies are increasingly converging with Jobbik's programme. Indeed, Orban has already adopted eight of Jobbik's 10 campaign promises. Secondly, Jobbik successfully addresses the daily concerns of ordinary Hungarians, while rebranding itself as a moderate centre-right party. Finally, Jobbik proved to be more skilful than Fidesz in utilising media to project a certain image of itself. While Fidesz remains the main political force in Hungary, it is currently under an intense scrutiny. Therefore, Orban needs to address the most problematic areas of his rule – namely, ensure greater transparency in financial management and promote more democratic electoral and policymaking systems. The danger is that the struggle for popularity could push the governing party into adopting counter-productive and short-lived reforms in order to win immediate support among Hungarians.

US-Ukraine joint military exercise commences in western Ukraine

In April, US paratroopers deployed to Ukraine to carry out joint training with the country's national guard. The six-month exercise, Fearless Guardian, involves 290 personnel from the US Army's 173rd Airborne Brigade, who will hold drills alongside 900 Ukrainian soldiers in Yaroviv in western Ukraine. The programme is aimed at helping three Ukrainian battalions improve combat, surveillance, small unit and individual soldier skills. Although during September 2014, the 173rd Airborne Brigade undertook an exercise with the British military and soldiers from Ukraine and other former Soviet republics in Yaroviv, the current operation is the first full-scale long-term joint training exercise. The Ukrainian president, Petro Poroshenko, said in his welcoming speech that 'This is the first Ukrainian-American programme at this level, and it shows the transition of bilateral military cooperation into a fundamentally new dimension.' Although Kiev has been hoping for some time that Washington would provide lethal weapons, the Obama administration has shown a reluctance to make the commitment in order to avoid exasperating Russia. Therefore, the training initiative is considered in Kiev as a promise to help strengthen the Ukrainian army against Russian-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine. Indeed, by sending troops to Ukraine, Washington is demonstrating its commitment, though limited, to assisting Kiev in the conflict.

The United States has previously pledged \$75 million in non-lethal aid to Ukraine, including armoured Humvees, bulletproof vests and night vision goggles. The United Kingdom and Canada have also officially expressed support to the Ukrainian army, with British military instructors already on the ground and 200 Canadian troops to be stationed within the country soon. The dispatch of Western military personnel to Ukraine has been criticised by Russian officials, arguing that this could further destabilise the situation in an already embattled Ukraine and threaten the peace process. Some have even argued that the training mission is a violation of the Minsk II agreement. Additionally, Moscow warned Washington that it could be fuelling radicalism in Ukraine by arming 'Ukrainian ultra-nationalists who wear Nazi symbols on their uniforms, who have stained themselves with the blood of women, children and the elderly during punitive operations in Donbass'. Indeed, some of the voluntary battalions that have been recently incorporated into the National Guard of Ukraine used controversial tactics while fighting in eastern Ukraine, with their war crimes being documented by Amnesty International. Therefore, the United States is deploying troops on the ground in Ukraine despite a deep antagonism, which undoubtedly provokes Russia. This may suggest that Washington is willing to step up its support to the pro-Western government in Kiev regardless of the potential reaction in Russia. This could be interpreted as a concession made by the US president, Barack Obama, in light of the vociferous demands for tougher action coming from within the US Congress.

Some analysts believe that Washington's decision to send troops to Ukraine, where the conflict remains unregulated, could be interpreted in Kiev as a green light for further military action in eastern Ukraine. Indeed, enjoying greater support from the United States and having an improved supply of military equipment and training, Poroshenko's cabinet could become more assertive. Additionally, Moscow and the Russian-backed separatists have accused the US military of deploying troops to eastern Ukraine. This could be used as a pretext for the intensification of fighting. Therefore, in the worst-case scenario, a largely symbolic training mission could lead to the large-scale escalation of violence. However, it is most likely that military confrontation between Kiev and Russian-backed separatists will continue only sporadically and around Mariupol. In order to avoid the escalation of violence, it is advisable that Kiev's Western allies urge all sides to make political concessions and to reach a diplomatic solution.

Parallel commemorations for Armenian Genocide and Gallipoli Campaign highlight rift between Armenia and Turkey

On 24 April, world leaders gathered in Armenia's capital, Yerevan, to commemorate the centennial of the Armenian Genocide, the mass killing of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire one hundred years ago. Russia's president, Vladimir Putin, and the French president, François Hollande, attended the event. The same day, Turkey's president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, invited leaders to commemorate the Gallipoli Campaign. The celebration was widely seen as an attempt to divert attention from the gathering in Armenia. Indeed, it was the first time Turkey has organised such an event dedicated to the battle. Additionally, because allied troops began landings on 25 April 1915 and were finally evacuated on 9 January 1916, there is little doubt that Erdoğan's decision to commemorate the campaign on the 24 April was not a coincidence. The Australian prime minister, Tony Abbott, the New Zealand prime minister, John Key, and the heir to the British throne, Prince Charles, and his son Prince Harry were in Turkey to celebrate the 'centennial' of the campaign. Therefore, the two events that took place on 24 April were in part a test of the political stance of the governments that attended. This once again demonstrated that the debate over the Armenian Genocide is highly politicised.

The Turkish leadership refuses to classify the events of 1915 as genocide. Turkey's prime minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, said accepting such terminology would downplay the suffering of Muslim Turks in World War I, and could risk inciting hatred towards other non-Christian religious groups. However, with the approach of the centennial of the Ottoman-era mass killing of Armenians, more and more prominent political and cultural leaders started to recognise the Armenian Genocide. The pressure by the international community to admit that the genocide of Armenians took place provoked strong antipathy in the Turkish capital, Ankara. For instance, after Pope Francis called the killing of Armenians 'the first genocide of the 20th century', Turkey recalled its Vatican envoy. Similar reaction followed the recognition of the Armenian Genocide by the Austrian parliament. Ankara also condemned the European Parliament for passing a resolution that uses the word 'genocide' to describe the 1915 mass killing of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire.

In the preparation for the centennial of the Armenian Genocide, the Armenian government and the Armenian diaspora successfully captured the attention of the international community and raised the awareness of the mass killing of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire in 1915. As Ankara experiences a growing pressure to recognise the Armenian Genocide, it is becoming increasingly resistant to making any concessions. This is because recognition of the genocide will give way to Armenia's repatriation demands. Moreover, due to a strong revisionist Armenian camp, the government could even push for a territorial restitution. For Armenian government, reconciliation with Turkey is conditional on the recognition of the genocide, as Armenia's pull-out from the US-mediated settlement process suggests. Therefore, the normalisation of relations between Turkey and Armenia in current circumstances is unlikely. Reconciliation could be achieved if Germany, Turkey's main trading partner, and other Western states exerted pressure on Ankara to recognise the Armenian Genocide. However, there is a risk that Turkey would resist recognising the Armenian Genocide even at a high price and would grow increasingly hostile to Armenia and other states who acknowledge the genocide. Therefore, a genuine reconciliation is desirable and should not be based on the resolution of the dispute over the Armenian Genocide. Rather, the international community should encourage Ankara and Yerevan to work on closer economic, diplomatic, technological and cultural cooperation.

Middle East

Houthi rebels and pro-Saleh fighters now cut off from supply lines in southern Yemeni port city of Aden; Iraqi forces retake control of Tikrit from Islamic State with support of coalition airstrikes; Syrian rebels make significant gains in government territory but Islamic State poses looming threat.

Liam McVay

Houthi rebels and pro-Saleh fighters now cut off from supply lines in southern Yemeni port city of Aden

The battle for the southern Yemeni port city of Aden is becoming increasingly desperate for the remaining Houthi and Saleh-aligned forces on the peninsula. Fighters from the ardently anti-Houthi Youth Resistance made a significant push from the Mansoura district of Aden towards the airport. Houthi rebels and fighters loyal to former president Ali Abdullah Saleh are now completely cut off from their supply lines, though they still control the Badr Air Force Camp south of the airport, along with the control tower and surrounding buildings. In spite of these significant losses, Houthis were able to recover territory along the eastern coastline of the Aden peninsula, including a key disputed seaport. By blocking essential supplies, the fight for Aden has transformed into a war of starvation. Houthi forces are isolating fighters loyal to deposed president Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi in several districts, while also taking control of the banking sector in order to prevent the local population from accessing essential funds and salaries. Taking advantage of the chaos in Yemen, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has also been pressing its advantage. Al-Qaeda fighters successfully took control of the Mukalla seaport, Riyan air base and the al-Dhaba oil export terminal on 16 April.

At least 1,200 people have been killed in fighting in Yemen since 19 March, and thousands more have been wounded. The United Nations estimates that at least 300,000 people have been displaced by the conflict. The Saudi-led coalition against the Houthi rebels has been using airstrikes to assist aid deliveries in Yemen. The Saudi army has forces massed on Yemen's northern border, where skirmishes are ongoing. These forces could surge into Yemen with the intent of liberating the northern town of Sanaa. However, such an operation would be very costly. How the Saudis manage the coalition of forces they have amassed behind them will be a critical aspect in shaping the overall strategy and the levels of commitment that members of the coalition will accept.

The conflict in Yemen is also in danger of becoming a proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The Saudis have blocked the port of Aden in an attempt to prevent Iran supplying Houthi rebels in the region. Iran denies supporting the rebel factions; however, an increased presence of Iranian naval and air support has been noted by Saudi and American military personnel. Unless the insurgency is defeated in the immediate future, Yemen may fall further into collapse, which would encourage non-state actors, such as Islamic State and al-Qaeda, to accelerate their already growing presence in the ungoverned regions in the north and west of the country. The presence of these Sunni terrorist groups could provoke Shia Iran into overtly committing more resources and, potentially, armed forces to the conflict, which would undoubtedly mean a much wider sense of instability in an already war-torn Middle East.

Iraqi forces retake control of Tikrit from Islamic State with support of coalition airstrikes

On April 2, the Iraqi prime minister, Haidar al-Abadi, announced that Iraqi troops aided by Shiite paramilitaries had driven Islamic State (IS) militants out of the city of Tikrit, which had been under IS control since June 2014. The battle for Tikrit was the first that brought together the full spectrum of anti-IS forces. Sunni tribal elements, Shiite militias, Iranian advisers and US-led coalition aircraft carrying out precision bombing missions all played a significant role in the victory alongside Iraqi security forces. This is as close to cooperation that the fragmented anti-IS coalition have come so far. While all elements have the same goal – the destruction of Islamic State – they have refused to actively support each other on the battlefield for political or sectarian reasons.

Though successful, the Tikrit operation was costly for Iraq. Rapid gains were made in the first two weeks of the battle, but the attack stalled as fighting reached the city. Coalition airstrikes against IS strongholds broke the stalemate and allowed ground forces to regain momentum. The Iraqi military is still recovering from its dramatic and well-published collapse last year. Only through the incorporation of Shiite militia fighters was Baghdad able to compensate for this shortfall. The militias provide ground power, but their loyalties are unclear and tend to shift between following the word of religious leaders coming from Tehran and orders from the Iraqi security forces. This split is a potential concern for the Iraqi authorities, who realise that an end to the occupation of its northern territories in the hands of Islamic State will lead to more problems in trying to piece the country back together while also appeasing the demands of Shiite militia members.

There are far more significant battles than Tikrit on the horizon for the Iraqi government, namely Fallujah, Ramadi and Mosul. Baghdad must continue to build and equip its army, relying heavily on the US-led coalition to fund, supply and train this force, while also desperately needing coalition air power to support Iraqi ground forces. Those ground forces are stretched to their limit by protecting the Shiite core in southern Iraq, clearing out Islamic State positions north and west of Baghdad along the river valleys and holding any reclaimed territories. Ultimately, numerical superiority is massed against Islamic States; if the fragmented coalition of forces can continue to unite when necessary, the reduction of IS power is a near certainty.

Syrian rebels make significant gains in government territory but Islamic State poses looming threat

Syrian rebels made significant advances into government territory during the week starting 27 April. The gains have propelled the rebel forces into a favourable position in Idlib and northwestern Hama provinces. The biggest gain occurred when the rebels managed to seize the critical Idlib town of Jisr al-Shughour, before pushing southward and seizing large portions of the al-Ghab plain, cutting off the two roads from the south and isolating the remaining loyalist forces. This recent push is representative of the momentum that the fragmented rebel groups have gathered in the past month.

Although these recent losses represent an unmitigated disaster for loyalist fighters, the battle is by no means an indicator of the imminent downfall of the government of Bashar al-Assad. What it does illustrate is the increasing difficulty the government encounters as it becomes overstretched, fighting on multiple fronts across the country. However, the rebels will continue to lack unity, even as they set up joint command centres to coordinate the numerous and diverse units. They will also face more difficulties as they seek to advance into areas where the Sunni populations are smaller and conditions are more unfavourable to the rebel cause.

The fight ahead will be a long one. Rebel forces will rely on external support, which they continue to vie for with competing factions. The looming threat of Islamic State is also a concern. Reports of unofficial truces between government forces and IS insurgents, contingent on gas and oil trading, is disastrous news for the rebel movements of the northeast. If Islamic State are pushed out of northern Iraq, it is possible that they will attempt to compensate for ground lost in northern Iraq by surging westwards and targeting the weaker rebel groups, who until this point have managed to avoid confrontation with IS. The fate of the Syrian government and the success of the rebel movement may be contingent on the rate of future moves on the part of the Iraqi government and the US-led coalition in northern Iraq. Further victories there will have potentially unforeseen implications across the border in Syria.

Published with intelligence support from
Bradburys Global Risk Partners | www.bradburys.co.uk

Bradburys
Global risk partners

Open Briefing is the world's first civil society intelligence agency.

We produce actionable and predictive intelligence on defence, security and foreign policy matters. We tell you what has happened and what is likely to happen next. Most importantly, we tell you why.

We do this so that better informed citizens can more effectively engage in peace and security debates and civil society organisations can make the right advocacy choices. Together, we can influence positive policy decisions by our governments.

Open Briefing is a bold and ambitious not-for-profit social enterprise. We are a unique collaboration of intelligence, military, law enforcement and government professionals from around the world.

Challenge the status quo. Take intelligence into your own hands.

www.openbriefing.org