



# Watch List 2018

**Second Update** | 19 July 2018

Watch List Updates complement International Crisis Group's annual Watch List, most recently published in January 2018. These early-warning publications identify major conflict situations in which prompt action, driven or supported by the European Union and its member states, would generate stronger prospects for peace. The Watch List Updates include situations identified in the annual Watch List and/or a new focus of concern.

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*Preventing War. Shaping Peace.*



# Mali's Elections Are an Opportunity to Reboot the Peace Process

Only days before Mali's presidential election, large parts of the country remain wracked by violence. Jihadist insurgencies plague rural areas in the centre and north east. Predation by ethnic militias, often mobilised by local politicians and community leaders to fight jihadists and in some cases tacitly backed by the Malian authorities and the French military mission, Operation Barkhane, fuel animosity among communities. Clashes along the Niger-Mali border have claimed dozens of lives over the past few months.

Amid such volatility, the 29 July vote could reinvigorate efforts to quell violence in central and northern Mali, including by breathing new life in the June 2015 Bamako peace agreement that aimed to stabilise northern Mali after a 2012-2013 crisis that saw jihadists hold northern towns for almost a year. But if it provokes political turmoil in Bamako or aggravates insurgencies in rural areas in Mali's centre or north, the election could not only provoke intensified violence but also spell the end of that accord.

The European Union (EU) and its member states can take several steps to improve prospects for peace. Ahead of the elections, they should encourage the main contenders to pledge to pursue disputes peacefully and through the courts. To reinvigorate implementation of the peace deal, notably its provisions related to decentralisation in the north, they will have to press the next Malian president and the armed groups that signed the deal to set clear timelines for elections to regional assemblies. In central Mali, they should press Malian authorities to halt security forces' abuses of the local population and hold accountable those responsible. They also should promote a shift from the Malian state's overwhelmingly military-focused approach in the centre to one that includes efforts to address the political disputes underpinning unrest and reinforces policing and the provision of other basic services.

## *Improving Prospects for a Peaceful Election*

For the most part, the government and main opposition parties have maintained a peaceful dialogue about preparations for the forthcoming presidential vote. But clashes between police and opposition protesters on 2 June in the capital Bamako show that tensions persist and could degenerate into violence.

Twenty-four candidates – including only one woman – will contest the presidency. In reality, however, the vote will pit President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta against opposition leader Soumaïla Cissé, in a repeat of the 2013 presidential election. Other candidates, including former prime ministers and ministers, have little chance of winning. But in the event of a run-off, their support to either of the two main contenders could prove decisive.

The immediate problem is the security of the vote itself. Several districts in Mali's north and centre, where state authorities are unable to deploy, might be too unsafe for balloting. In the north, armed groups that signed the 2015 peace deal are still negotiating the conditions under which they will facilitate the vote in areas under their control. This is especially true of the Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad

(CMA) coalition, which controls the northernmost town of Kidal and surrounding areas. Central Mali suffers general insecurity, with control over terrain murkier. The authorities have announced that voting would proceed regardless. But the inability of people to vote due to insecurity could throw into question the election's legitimacy and credibility, especially given that one of Cissé's supposed strongholds is in central Mali.

In this light, the EU and its members should:

- ❑ Urge the main candidates to sign a pact committing to accept the outcome of a fair election or, if they wish to challenge results, to do so peacefully and through the court system; and
- ❑ Encourage whoever wins the presidency to focus on addressing grievances common to much of Malian society, especially the lack of job opportunities, the poor functioning of the state services and rising concerns about intercommunal violence in the countryside; without this, it is likely that an increasing number of Malians will start to believe that violent protests rather than elections can deliver change.

### *Reviving the Peace Process*

The Bamako peace agreement, and notably its main provisions on the devolution of power and economic development in the north, as well as the demobilisation of the armed groups that signed the deal, needs a reboot. Algeria, which negotiated the deal, appears to have lost appetite in pushing forward its implementation. None of the other guarantors, whether the African Union, UN or EU, has stepped up. The Malian signatory parties all dislike the deal and blame each other for its slow implementation.

As a result, the agreement's impact on the ground remains limited. Joint patrols, comprising the different armed groups that signed the Bamako deal, have started in Kidal and other northern towns, Timbuktu and Gao, which were foreshadowed in the deal. Threats of UN Security Council sanctions appear to have helped push signatory parties to be more conciliatory, including accepting the deployment of joint patrols in Kidal. But the armed groups' participation remains tenuous; the patrols have yielded little improvement in security; and in Gao tensions among the different groups' contingents in those patrols resulted in skirmishes.

Overall, international mediators and the signatories have spent too much energy on temporary security arrangements, such as the joint patrols, rather than on structural reform such as devolving power to regional assemblies and the north's economic development. The Sahel Alliance, a platform to coordinate donor support for the Sahel region launched by France, Germany, the EU and other partners in 2017, could address part of the problem, by advancing the development provided for in the peace agreement. But to do so, the projects envisaged in the Sahel Alliance should be kept separate from Malian or international military operations, to avoid stirring up resistance to them among the north's inhabitants, exposing aid workers or communities to retribution by jihadists and thus rendering projects less effective.

To help revive the peace process, the EU and its member states should:

- ❑ Encourage the next Malian government, together with other signatories to the Bamako deal, to establish a precise calendar for implementation of its key steps, notably for elections to regional assemblies in the north and elsewhere; and
- ❑ Reassess, as part of the Sahel Alliance, the linking of development projects too closely to military operations. In particular, military forces should not be involved in development work.

### *Stabilising Central Mali*

Perhaps most troubling are insurgencies in central Mali's Mopti and Segou regions, which are more heavily populated and more integral to the country's economy than the north. Thus far the government's response – which it dubs a “special plan” – has been mostly military, attempting to rebuild barracks, redeploy troops and appoint military officials as local administrators. On his 11 February visit to Mopti, Prime Minister Soumeylou Boubèye Maïga stressed the need for political solutions and seemed to open the door to dialogue with all armed groups. But his speech has been followed by few concrete results. Repeated reports suggest extrajudicial killings by Malian security forces, fuelling anger at Bamako and the military.

Animosity among communities in central Mali is on the rise. Armed groups of the Dogon and Fulani (two ethnic groups in central Mali) have clashed repeatedly. Many Fulani suspect that Malian officials are backing the Dogon militias to counter jihadists, though such allegations are unproven. Similar dynamics are at play in Menaka region, where Tuaregs and Dossaaks (two of the nomadic tribes living in the region) cooperate with Malian and French counter-terrorism operations, again fuelling both ethnic rivalries and Fulani alienation from the state, as Fulanis tend to bear the brunt of those operations (see Crisis Group's 12 July 2018 report, *The Niger-Mali Border: Subordinating Military Action to a Political Strategy*).

Priorities for the EU and its member states are to:

- ❑ Step up immediate diplomatic pressure to stop the abuses of civilians, including killings, by Malian security forces. The EU's capacity-building mission in Mali (EUCAP), which trains and advises the Malian police and gendarmerie, and the EU military training mission, which trains the Malian military, also should redouble efforts to ensure their counterparts in the Malian security forces end such abuses. Those missions also should support additional civilian oversight of, and accountability for, the security forces, including the establishment of a chain for reporting abuses; and
- ❑ Encourage Bamako to strengthen regional authorities in Mopti and Segou by sending trained specialists rather than political advisers; the Malian police and gendarmerie should focus on their traditional functions rather than be diverted to fighting jihadists. The EU also could consider expanding EUCAP's presence to central Mali to enhance the impact of the mission's advice and mentoring and help ensure that Malian national security policies and strategies developed in Bamako are implemented beyond the main urban centres in the south.

# Armenia's Change of Leadership Adds Uncertainty over Nagorno-Karabakh

Armenia has experienced political turbulence since mass demonstrations in April spurred its prime minister, Serzh Sargsyan, to stand down after a decade in power, and the Armenian parliament selected Nikol Pashinyan, the protest leader, to replace him. Pressure on Pashinyan to enact reforms he pledged on coming to power is likely to sharpen after snap parliamentary elections, which are expected in the coming months and which his party appears set to win. With a busy domestic agenda, the new government is unlikely to make any major step toward resolving the country's 30-year conflict with Azerbaijan over the disputed enclave Nagorno-Karabakh or revisit Armenia's long-held positions on that conflict. The lack of any progress toward resolving the conflict risks leading to a renewed escalation; it could further frustrate Azerbaijan and potentially boost its desire for territorial gains through the use of force.

The priority for both Armenia, Azerbaijan and their respective allies ought to be to mitigate risks of such an escalation. Incidents in the conflict zone, which have intensified since 2012, would fast destroy any hope for a reset in stalled peace talks. In the medium term, the two sides need channels for more direct communication. Their leaders should resume regular meetings, which have not taken place since October 2017 (though the two foreign ministers met in July for the first time since the Armenian leadership change). Meetings between the leaderships could help develop a shared vision for renewed negotiations.

The European Union (EU) has long sought entry points for enlarging its role in Nagorno-Karabakh talks. The uncertainty created by Armenia's change of leadership might open up some opportunities.

- ❑ In addition to supporting the conflict's only mediating body – the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group – the EU could use its bilateral ties and the engagement of its special representative for the South Caucasus to help both countries establish channels of communication, even if informal, among stakeholders including their militaries, political advisers to the two governments and Armenian and Azerbaijani civil societies.
- ❑ In 2017, Armenia and Azerbaijan agreed in principle to increase the number of OSCE observers working in the conflict zone, but the sides remain at odds over aspects of the new observers' deployment. To help resolve the impasse, the EU could offer resources and share its experiences from other conflicts, while vocally backing the increase.
- ❑ The EU should reorient its peacebuilding activities toward stimulating greater public support for a future peace deal, particularly among youth groups and people living along the front lines and the Azerbaijani-Armenian international borders.
- ❑ The EU and other international actors also might consider additional financial support, including for UN and International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) efforts to mitigate the humanitarian consequences of a potential escalation.

### *Reducing Risks of Escalation through Communication*

The new Armenian prime minister, Nikol Pashinyan, has a limited policy record on Nagorno-Karabakh. He is the first Armenian leader in two decades who played no personal role in the war, though he was born in Armenia's Tavush area, near the eastern border with Azerbaijan, which has suffered a serious economic downturn due to the conflict.

Yet while Pashinyan lacks his predecessors' links to Karabakh, he already has glimpsed in his short time in office the difficulty of policymaking toward the disputed enclave. He spent his first weeks as prime minister building trust with Nagorno-Karabakh's de facto leadership, which had been loyal to Sargsyan, including calling for its greater engagement in the peace process. Those statements were poorly received in Baku, which is wary of what it perceives as attempts to "legitimise" those authorities, and in turn insists on the participation of representatives of displaced Azerbaijanis from Karabakh.

Pashinyan and his team thus far have mainly aligned with the traditional policy lines of their predecessors. That is unlikely to change while they remain focused on domestic reforms and keeping the transition on track. But, in an environment of deep distrust between the parties, the lack of clarity regarding Yerevan's intentions toward the enclave risks increasing tensions. Some Azerbaijani officials already express frustration over the prolonged uncertainty, which, they believe, entrenches a status quo Baku desires to change.

Thus far, the two sides have prevented major incidents. But the risk remains of tactical moves by either side or inadvertent incidents spiralling out of control. Nagorno-Karabakh is among the most heavily militarised places in the world. Any escalation could create a humanitarian crisis. Around 300,000 people live in the 15km-wide zone along the Azerbaijani side of the line of contact. All of the 150,000 Armenians residing in Nagorno-Karabakh are within reach of Azerbaijani missiles and artillery shells. Renewed fighting could cause more destruction than the escalation over four days in April 2016, which led to more than 200 deaths.

A main worry is that communication between field commanders in and around Nagorno-Karabakh is non-existent. For years contacts largely have been limited to the highest levels – the two countries' presidents and foreign ministers. Multilevel communication, including between the sides' militaries, could help minimise risks of inadvertent escalation. Armenia's and Azerbaijan's leadership should show more readiness to open channels between lower-level counterparts. For its part, the EU should explore opportunities to help build new lines of communication and deliver messages between the two sides. It also could consider facilitating targeted mediation on humanitarian issues that, among other things, might stimulate progress of official talks in the OSCE Minsk Group format.

In 2017, Armenia and Azerbaijan agreed, in principle, to increase the number of conflict observers of the personal representative of the OSCE chairperson-in-office from the current six to thirteen. As yet, the sides have not carried out this important albeit limited step toward improving transparency along the line of contact. Baku fears the increase might further solidify the status quo in the conflict zone. It is reluctant to permit the deployment of the extra observers without concessions from Yerevan; Armenia's new leadership rejects making any such concessions. The EU should com-

mit to support the extra observers with funds and by sharing its ceasefire monitoring expertise.

Since the April 2016 escalation, the UN and ICRC have worked to reduce the potential human cost of a future escalation, including by supporting civilian protection initiatives and constructing bomb shelters in the conflict zone. The EU and other international actors should provide financial backing to this effort, as needed.

### *A Reset of the Peace Process*

Talks between Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders have been deadlocked since the April 2016 escalation. Armenia demands the determination of Nagorno-Karabakh's status as a precondition for accommodating Azerbaijan's key demand – the return of the territories adjacent to the Armenian-populated enclave and controlled by Armenia since 1993. The two capitals disagree on Karabakh's status, however. Yerevan advocates for its independence. Baku's starting point is that the enclave needs to reintegrate into Azerbaijan.

These positions are very close to the two sides' stances of almost a quarter century ago, when the bloody 1992-1994 war in Nagorno-Karabakh had just ended. Their intransigence today in effect sweeps aside the Madrid Principles, a formula to which the two sides agreed in 2007 for resolving issues at the core of the conflict (related to the political status of Nagorno-Karabakh, the return of the adjacent territories to Baku's control and security arrangements). Since then, both sides have been backsliding, as both have built up their armies and purchased long-range missiles and other modern weaponry.

Escaping this stalemate will not be easy. It will require commitment from Azerbaijan and Armenia's new leadership to enter talks and find a compromise solution, likely along the lines of the Madrid Principles. This also will require consistent efforts by mediators. But greater engagement between the two societies could help as well and here the EU can play an important role. The year 2019 will mark the end of its investment in two programs aimed at stimulating such dialogue: the European Partnership for the Peaceful Settlement of the Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh and the Peacebuilding through Capacity Enhancement and Civic Engagement program. The EU should consider renewing these programs after a careful review of their impact. Such programs should primarily focus on youth groups – to help develop a vision of future peace between societies that have been divided for three decades – as well as people living in the frontline regions and along the Azerbaijan-Armenia international borders. A new long-term commitment to fostering exchanges between the two countries' civil societies could start to bridge the existing gulf between the two sides and set a foundation for broader participation in discussions of peace.

# Encouraging Reform and Reconciliation in Somalia

The 16-17 July high-level Somalia Partnership Forum in Brussels, which brought together senior Somali officials, major donors and international organisations to discuss support to Somalia, came at a critical time for the country. Preparations for its first direct elections in decades, scheduled for 2020 (the parliamentary vote) and 2021 (the presidential), are underway. The African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM) is drawing down its forces and progressively transferring responsibilities to the federal government and security forces. The European Union (EU)'s decision to begin granting Somalia 100 million euros in direct budgetary support, benchmarked to revenue collection and anti-corruption measures, provides the Somali government incentives for reform.

The government's main challenge is to carry out its National Transition Plan for Security, which lays out how its forces will take over from AMISOM, and its Political Roadmap on Inclusive Politics, which calls for a constitutional review process, direct elections by 2020, and clan reconciliation. There are obstacles ahead. Mogadishu and the governments of Somalia's six federal states (or regions) have been unable to overcome their disagreements and implement reforms; the Islamist Al-Shabaab insurgency has proved resilient; a standoff between semi-autonomous federal state of Puntland and the self-declared republic of Somaliland threatens to escalate into open war; and spillover effects of the Gulf crisis have provoked a sharp deterioration of the Somali government's relations with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), roiled Somalia's already factious politics and aggravated tensions between Mogadishu and Somali regions.

In this context, there are several steps the EU and its member states could take:

- ❑ Work in coordination with other international partners to press the federal government and Somali regions to implement the Plan for Security and the Political Roadmap, particularly the constitutional review process, and monitor progress;
- ❑ Encourage AMISOM in this transitional period to focus more on mentoring, joint operations and greater interaction with Somali forces rather than merely training;
- ❑ Support local and foreign mediation – notably by actors with leverage on one or more of the parties, such as the UAE and Ethiopia – to de-escalate tensions between Puntland and Somaliland; and
- ❑ Explore, together with Gulf and Horn of Africa leaders, the option of holding a conference on Red Sea security comprising outside powers whose competition for influence is fuelling instability in Somalia and elsewhere in the Horn.

## *Stuttering Progress toward Security Sector Reform and Elections*

At a March meeting of the Somali National Security Council, the government and leaders of its six federal states (or regions), agreed on a timeline to integrate local security forces into an army of 18,000 soldiers and a 32,000-strong police force. Integration along these lines would be an important step: it would help establish more representative and effective security forces while addressing concerns that they are

dominated by certain clans. Since that meeting, however, there has been little progress. Both Mogadishu and federal states appear to have failed to improve their cooperation on security matters despite repeated pledges to do so. A row between the government of the federal state of Jubaland and Mogadishu in mid-July over the replacement of the Somali National Army commander in Jubaland is symptomatic of the chronic mistrust hampering progress (a general appointed by Mogadishu to command the 43rd Division, General Ali Mohammed Bogmadow, in the city of Kismayo was refused entry after landing at the airport on 13 July and ordered back, allegedly because Jubaland authorities were not consulted).

Federal government and regional leaders discussed ways to break such logjams at a May meeting in Baidoa, the capital of South West State, one of Somalia's federal states. Although the tone of the gathering was positive, it – like its predecessors – in essence papered over key issues obstructing cooperation between Mogadishu and regions, notably how to apportion power and resources among them. While those disagreements remain unresolved, centre-periphery tensions will persist.

The EU could create incentives for the government and federal state leaders to break the deadlock. Increased European support should be tied to concrete steps on key priorities. These might include, for example, the completion of a constitutional review; agreement on legislation to apportion power and resources; and the creation of a functional and independent authority to address, arbitrate and resolve centre-periphery disputes. The constitutional review process, which started in May and envisages a final document by 2019, is particularly critical. Without a permanent constitution, efforts to build national institutions, including an army, and reforms aimed at enabling competitive elections are unlikely to endure.

There appears to be broad consensus among African troop contributors and Western donors that AMISOM will draw down, but only gradually, as the Somali government assumes responsibility for providing security. In preparation, AMISOM should move away from only training Somali forces and include those forces in joint operations, allowing for more hands on mentoring and interaction with other African armies.

### *Al-Shabaab's Resilience*

Despite intensified U.S. airstrikes, Al-Shabaab remains strong. It owes its resilience in large part to political infighting both within the government and between the government and member states, as well as to those entities' failure to govern notionally liberated areas. The lack of federal and member states' administrative control means insurgents can continue to tax and intimidate local populations. Moreover, AMISOM and Somali forces have not sustained their military pressure on the insurgency, which has allowed Al-Shabaab to regroup and rebuild in the country's vast rural hinterland.

Even in those parts of the country where security has improved somewhat, Al-Shabaab is adapting. For the first time in several years, the group did not carry out a large-scale, vehicle-borne bombing in the capital Mogadishu during Ramadan – arguably a result of the government's draconian road closures. But, instead of resorting to bombings, militants conducted a campaign of assassinations in Mogadishu and the neighbouring Shabelle valley, killing over 100 people, most of them junior officials. Even the government's tightened security measures showed their limita-

tions: on 7 July, twin car bomb attacks in Mogadishu targeted the interior ministry and killed at least fifteen soldiers, demonstrating Al-Shabaab's continued lethal reach.

While neither the national transitional security plan nor the political roadmap are panaceas, effective implementation of the former, notably its security sector reforms, should help address some of the gaps the insurgents exploit, while the latter could help gain the support of communities whose wariness about Mogadishu can lead them to tacitly support Al-Shabaab.

### *War Drums in the North*

Another worry is the military standoff between the semi-autonomous federal state of Puntland and the self-declared republic of Somaliland over control of two regions they have long contested, Sool and Sanaag. The two sides have clashed repeatedly since the start of 2018, often with large numbers of casualties, and are massing forces in the contested areas.

A war in the north would undercut the improvements in governance Somaliland and Puntland have made in the last ten years, as well as the international good-will they – particularly Somaliland – enjoy. It could have enormous human costs, triggering a large-scale humanitarian crisis, and potentially contribute to instability further south. It also could exacerbate other threats in the north, with Al-Shabaab still present, a small branch of the Islamic State (ISIS) operating in pockets of Puntland and human trafficking and piracy continuing.

The EU should consider supporting efforts by the UN and Ethiopia, among others, to mediate between the two sides. The role of clan elders is especially crucial and ought to be encouraged. While the two sides seem to have calmed their hostile rhetoric, the threat of war and imperative for mediation remain.

Alongside efforts to mediate between Puntland and Somaliland, detoxifying relations between Mogadishu and Hargeisa would help reduce the threat of armed conflict in the north – given that Mogadishu risks getting pulled into the conflict behind Puntland – and improve prospects for stability in the country as a whole. The EU could use its close ties to Somali President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed “Farmaajo” and Somaliland President Muse Bihi for the resumption of talks between the Somali government and Somaliland, which broke down after the latter unilaterally signed a deal in March with the Emirati conglomerate DP World to develop and operate Berbera port, infuriating Mogadishu officials. The government's June decision to cancel Somaliland's Special Arrangement – a framework that has enabled donor engagement in Somaliland since 2013 – further worsened relations between the two. They are unlikely to improve unless it is renewed.

### *The Gulf's Impact*

The spat between Gulf powers, which in June 2017 saw Saudi Arabia, the UAE and allies break diplomatic relations with and impose an embargo on Qatar, has aggravated Somalia's instability. President Farmajo asserts that he remains neutral, but the UAE perceives his government as too close to Qatar. In response, Abu Dhabi appears to have upped support to Somalia's federal states. Farmajo, in turn, has

deepened ties with Doha and Ankara and repressed rivals, using their alleged ties to the Emiratis as a pretext.

June 2018 brought signs the Somali and Emirati governments recognise the need to re-engage. There was a marked decrease in antagonistic rhetoric and unconfirmed reports suggested backchannel diplomacy was underway. That same month, Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed visited Mogadishu, reportedly in part to sound out Mogadishu's willingness to accept his mediation.

The EU could be a potential broker of talks among the outside powers currently vying for influence around the Red Sea. Its strong role in maritime security, specifically via Operation Atalanta, the counter-piracy military initiative it launched in 2008 off the Horn of Africa coastal line and whose mandate has been extended to December 2018, gives it influence. So too do its relatively good relations with all countries involved.

EU foreign ministers and the EU special representative for the Horn of Africa have called for a forum that would bring together Horn and Gulf states to discuss ways to decrease tensions among Gulf powers, Turkey and other states. The African Union's High-Level Implementation Panel for Sudan and South Sudan also has mooted the idea of some form of dialogue among Horn and Gulf states. It is an idea worth pursuing as a means of managing competition and promoting regional stability. Bringing together such an array of rival countries and facilitating constructive debate would be no small challenge. Ambitions should be modest. But all sides should have an interest in avoiding inadvertent escalation that would harm regional peace and security as well as shipping and other commercial activity.

# Syria: From One War to More

Bashar al-Assad's regime has gained a firm upper hand in the Syrian war. With sustained support from Russia and Iran, it has restored its control in the heart of the country's heavily populated western corridor. Now the Syrian leadership is turning its sights toward remaining areas outside its control. In the south west, a regime offensive now underway risks causing considerable loss of life, displacement and human suffering. It also could provoke tensions between Israel and Iran. The north west (held by an array of rebel factions, ringed by Turkish military observation points) and north east (controlled by the U.S.-backed, Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces) appear better protected from attack for the moment. Yet, there as well, the war may re-escalate.

In all three areas of Syria that the regime is seeking to recapture, the European Union (EU) and its member states have an important role to play in averting the worst-case scenario, in the medium term, and aiding physical and political reconstruction, in the long term. In the meantime, the EU and its member states should continue to provide humanitarian assistance to civilians in need everywhere and, by virtue of their diplomatic ties with all sides, facilitate communication and diplomatic understandings among warring parties.

## *The South West*

In late June, Syrian forces backed by Russian air power launched an offensive to re-take opposition-held areas in the south west. The attack marked the effective end of the "de-escalation" agreement negotiated among the U.S., Russia and Jordan, which had significantly reduced violence in this part of the country since July 2017, although Russia denied it had withdrawn from the deal. (It made the dubious claim that it was fulfilling the agreement's counter-terrorism provisions by eliminating southern jihadists, which the U.S. and Jordan had failed to do.)

After a swift advance down the south west's rebel-held eastern countryside, the Syrian regime and Russia forced the negotiated surrender of most local rebels. Only the western countryside remains unresolved, including a basin occupied by a local Islamic State (ISIS) affiliate and rebel-held sections adjacent to the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. As many as 234,500 people had been displaced as of 11 July. Many who had sheltered along the Jordanian border have returned home since the reimposition of regime control, but according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), around 160,000 are currently camped out along the Israeli-occupied Golan.

Once the Syrian military and aligned paramilitaries advance on these last areas next to the Golan, the human cost will rise substantially. So will the risk of a regional escalation.

Israel has provided various forms of support (including small arms) to opposition factions and local communities along the 1974 armistice line, seeking to maintain a friendly buffer between itself and a Syrian regime which has enlisted the help of Iranian forces and various Iran-linked militias. Israel rejects the presence of such groups anywhere in Syria, and views areas alongside the occupied Golan as especially sensitive. In 2018, it has steadily escalated strikes on alleged Iranian assets as far away as the Syria-Iraq border. A dangerous series of tit-for-tat cross-border rocket

attacks and airstrikes took place in May. How Israel will react to regime advances toward the Golan remains unclear, but the response almost certainly will be a function of the degree of perceived Iranian involvement. Israel may step up arms supplies to local rebels, or hit pro-regime forces directly, risking an escalatory spiral if Iran and/or Hizbollah decide to retaliate.

There are indications that Israel may have reached an understanding with Russia whereby the latter has committed to block the participation of Iran-backed foreign fighters in the offensive. Still, even an offensive that excludes Iran-linked militias will be complicated and risky. The regime's military will face serious obstacles clearing a demilitarised zone holding not only tens of thousands of displaced people, but also militants fighting with the Israeli military at their back. And even if the offensive proceeds without a major regional escalation, it is not clear how long Iran-linked elements will keep their distance from the Golan.

Israel should appeal to Russia for preferential terms for the last rebel pockets near the Golan, and it should encourage rebels with whom it has collaborated to negotiate constructively. A conditional, non-violent return of the Syrian state would be better for these areas' civilians and mitigate the risk of escalation that any chaotic, bloody offensive would entail. Meanwhile, the EU and its member states should continue to support humanitarian relief to the south west, including pushing the regime for open humanitarian access via Damascus. They should also support Jordan, which will need continuing assistance to house hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees already there. Many of those refugees will not be able to return safely to regime-held Syria. As their stay in Jordan extends, the country's economy and institutions will need European help.

### *The North West*

Idlib and adjacent districts of the rebel-held north west hold nearly three million Syrians, roughly half of whom are internally displaced persons. The area is controlled by a range of competing rebel factions, the strongest of which is the jihadist Hei'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a former al-Qaeda affiliate. Conditions in the north west are chaotic, and would become truly hellish in the event of a major pro-regime offensive.

The Syrian leadership has repeatedly signalled such intent. A de-escalation deal negotiated in late 2017 and early 2018 between Russia, Turkey and Iran has averted a showdown for now and enabled the establishment of twelve Turkish observation points surrounding rebel-held areas. But the durability of this arrangement is questionable; it could shatter if and when gains in southern Syria encourage the regime and its backers to shift their focus toward regaining control of the north west. A humanitarian disaster is all but certain in the event they attack. The resulting surge of hundreds of thousands of displaced toward the Turkish border would create a new humanitarian crisis, as well as a political one, as Turkey has indicated it cannot absorb more refugees and may try to prevent them from crossing the border, or let them in only to push them to exit again on a dangerous and uncertain journey toward Europe.

Whether an offensive will take place rests largely with Russia, whose active support (especially air power) would be essential for the regime to gain and hold ground in this rebel stronghold. Though it has upheld the de-escalation deal with Ankara thus far, Moscow has indicated that it will not tolerate continued HTS control in the north

west; if the jihadist faction remains ascendant and/or attacks on regime forces resume from rebel territory, an eventual Russian-backed offensive cannot be excluded.

To avoid such an outcome, Turkey should accelerate its efforts to isolate and weaken hardline jihadists, while bolstering non-jihadist alternatives within the northern armed opposition that could absorb any pragmatic, potentially reconcilable HTS elements and eventually confront the remaining jihadist hard core. The EU and its member states, alongside the United States, should appeal to Turkey to accept their help, so they can ensure that a Turkish-led counter-terrorism effort in Idlib is intelligence-driven and properly targeted, coordinated and resourced. They should also continue to support humanitarian assistance to Idlib's millions of civilians, to avoid both a humanitarian crisis and an additional burden on Turkish relief bodies.

### *The North East*

Compared to the south west and Idlib, north-eastern Syria today enjoys relative stability, under the control of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and its dominant faction, the People's Protection Units (YPG). Yet the durability of the present situation appears largely dependent on decisions to be made within the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition. In this context, President Donald Trump's stated desire for a quick U.S. withdrawal from Syria, if carried out, could expose the north east to a dangerous free-for-all.

The U.S. military presence on the ground appears to have played a key role in deterring external attack on the north east from Turkey, which views the YPG as an affiliate of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) – an organisation it (as well as the U.S. and European states) considers a terrorist group, one that it has battled on its own territory for decades. Once the YPG-dominated areas are no longer protected by a U.S. security umbrella, Turkey could decide to launch an attack to dislodge the organisation just as it did in the Afrin enclave in north-west Syria. The Syrian regime, too, has telegraphed its intention to restore its authority throughout the north east. If the U.S. withdraws without a negotiated arrangement mutually tolerable to the YPG, Damascus and Ankara, a fight for control of territory and resources could well ensue, and jihadists would seek to exploit any resulting opportunities.

In the meantime, the U.S. decision to freeze \$200 million of stabilisation support – including essential programming to restore basic services in Raqqa and other areas liberated from ISIS – could cause a serious decline in living conditions and heighten simmering local tensions.

The EU and its member states, along with fellow members of the anti-ISIS coalition, should immediately and substantially increase their own support for restoring services in the north east. Priorities include demining, providing health services and restoring water and electricity supplies, with particular emphasis on sectors and areas directly affected by the U.S. funding freeze. The EU and its member states should do so in order to compensate for potential U.S. cuts, and to demonstrate that Washington's allies will share the costs of stabilisation as long as the U.S. military continues to supply the protection necessary for them to do so.

### *Conclusion*

The regime's attempts to restore its authority over the entirety of the country are liable to cause further humanitarian suffering and attendant waves of displacement, while potentially heightening tensions between Israel and Iran. The EU and its member states should continue their humanitarian assistance to the Syrian people, and expand stabilisation assistance in areas beyond Damascus's control where possible. They should use member states' collective access to all sides of the conflict to continue to play a mediating and diplomatic role, from support for Syria's ongoing peace process in Geneva down to negotiations with Damascus over humanitarian access to hard-to-reach or newly accessible areas.