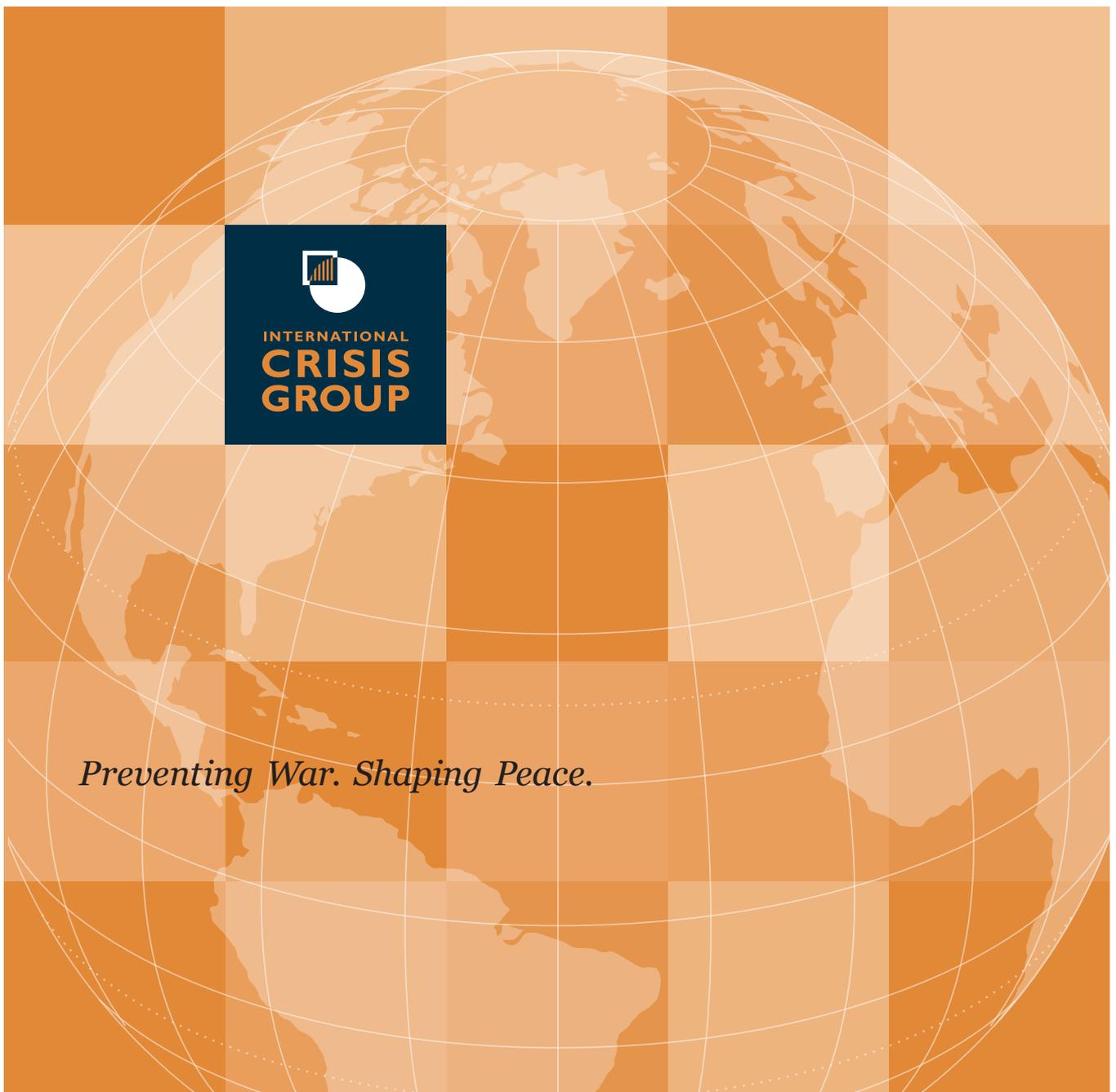


Watch List 2020

Crisis Group's early-warning Watch List identifies up to ten countries and regions at risk of conflict or escalation of violence. In these situations, early action, driven or supported by the EU and its member states, could generate stronger prospects for peace. The Watch List 2020 includes a President's Note and detailed conflict analyses on Bolivia, Burkina Faso, the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Great Lakes region, Ethiopia, the U.S.-Iranian impasse, ISIS returnees, Libya, Sri Lanka, Tunisia and Ukraine.





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International Crisis Group | January 2020

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Preventing War. Shaping Peace.

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President's Note

It can't be easy being a European these days. Put aside the years-long Brexit trauma, rise of right-wing populism, soul-searching over the nature of the European project, or internal divisions, made more salient by all the above. What remains is a Europe whose foreign policy is squeezed by three great powers, the U.S., Russia and China, each of which relates to Europe in its own way, all of whom increasingly are prone to ignore, bypass, divide, or strong-arm the continent for their own ends. Europe is struggling to find its voice amid the crush.

Coming from Moscow or Beijing, the pressure is neither surprising nor new. True, Russia has been more assertive of late, a trend exemplified by its dealings in Syria and Libya. Moscow paid lip service to the Geneva process aimed at reaching a political settlement to the Syrian conflict and in which Europe has heavily invested, even as it set up the parallel and more coldly efficient Astana channel with Iran and Turkey. It seems to be seeking a repeat in Libya. It endorsed the European-led Berlin conference, stressing the need for a broad-based political agreement, respect for the arms embargo and a halt to external interference – even as it previously came to the aid of Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar in his fight against the internationally-recognised government and even as it seeks to settle matters directly with that government's principal foreign backer, Turkey.

For its part, China, is more akin to a long-distance runner. It is less visible yet equally constant, doggedly pushing its agenda through at times coercive economic diplomacy and forcing Europe into difficult choices when it comes to balancing its ties to Washington and to Beijing.

But over the past year especially, the game changer has been American. Time and again, the Trump administration has taken decisions and adopted policies that affect Europe without taking into account its views.

Yet, in a sense, the Trump administration is performing ironic services for the EU – sharpening the case for a more sovereign European foreign policy that some of Europe's leaders have made since at least the 2003 Iraq war. Then, what was arguably the most dramatic, virtually unilateral decision by the U.S. since the end of the Cold War provoked damaging ripple effects with which Europe continues to contend. But, by turning an intermittent attitude into a systematic approach, President Trump could force a moment of reckoning.

Whether or not President Macron is Europe's most effective alarm ringer, his appeal for an EU more militarily self-sufficient (to protect its interests when

others will not), diplomatically autonomous (to stake out its own positions when America's won't do), and economically independent (to circumvent U.S. sanctions when those are aimed at prohibiting legitimate behaviour), merits a hearing. It also merits a healthy dose of realism, of course, for a more effective European foreign policy requires unity and strategic vision that often have been lacking.

On the military front, a succession of decisions by the U.S. president have highlighted Europe's vulnerability to the fluctuations of America's mood. The semi-withdrawal of U.S. troops from north east Syria, the killing of Qassem Soleimani and of an Iraqi Shiite militia leader, and U.S. plans to reduce or even zero out its force presence in West Africa all could have outsized repercussions on European security. The first two because European forces in Syria and Iraq depend on U.S. support and because any drawdown could damage the counter-ISIS campaign. The third because it affects the Sahel, viewed in Europe as a gateway for terrorism and migration flows into the continent. Yet Europe had no say in any of these.

Establishing a more autonomous European force would require overcoming prodigious political, economic and logistical hurdles. Even then it would face a reality that Washington has been slow to grasp, namely that addressing challenges like terrorism through purely military means won't work. That is not an easy lesson to learn, as political leaders feel the pull of public anxieties and thus the need to advertise strength by flexing muscles. But facts speak for themselves: in the Sahel, intensified military efforts targeting jihadists have gone hand in hand with an uptick in operations by those very groups. Autonomous force or no, Europe should better balance military operations with politics, including support for efforts to calm intercommunal divisions that underpin violence and, possibly, to engage in dialogue with certain militant leaders. Still, greater European capacity to deploy forces, whether or not in the form of the European army both Macron and Chancellor Merkel have called for, could give the continent greater ability to protect its interests.

On the diplomatic front, Europe could do plenty to stand up for itself in the face of American deficiency or malpractice. Take one example: dramatic U.S. u-turns toward Israel-Palestine, from recognising Jerusalem as Israel's capital and its annexation of the Golan Heights to decreeing that settlements do not violate international law – with far more in store as the U.S. administration unveils its long-awaited and ill-named peace plan.

Forging a united European position that clearly stands in opposition to the U.S.'s would be no small challenge, given divisions among European capitals. Nor is it clear that Europe could move from mouthing rhetorical support for an increasingly illusory two-state solution to taking a stand that, regardless of what happens in the occupied territories, all who fall under Israeli control must enjoy equal rights. Still, a countervailing European voice would be welcome, given the continent's stakes in Middle East stability.

Finally, nowhere are implications of European financial helplessness starker than when it comes to Iran. The U.S.'s withdrawal from the nuclear deal and imposition of maximum pressure on Iran has had cascading negative consequences for Europe – from Iran's gradual erosion of its nuclear commitments and uptick

in attacks in the Gulf to weakening the fight against ISIS. In response, European states have sought to provide Iran with modest economic relief to convince it to remain in the deal and moderate its behaviour. But the threat posed by U.S. sanctions – targeting Europe’s activity taken in accordance with its international obligations, no less – has hobbled those efforts. If U.S. dominance over global markets means U.S. control over swaths of European foreign policy, the challenge for Europe is to find effective ways to circumvent the current financial system and establish one immune from America’s long arm.

It is, indeed, not easy being a European these days, caught in several unenviable dilemmas. Europe can stick with the U.S. despite significant disagreement and feel impotent; challenge the U.S. despite predictable blowback and feel the pain; hedge its bets by bolstering ties with competing great powers despite profound discrepancy in values and worldviews and feel vulnerable.

Whatever it does, it should not short-change a central aspect of modern European identity – a sense of responsibility when it comes to resolving the world’s most dangerous situations, and the statecraft and resources to make a difference. As Crisis Group’s EU Watchlist this year describes, conflicts in which Europe can play a constructive role are legion – from areas of considerable geopolitical interest (such as Iran or Ukraine) to those that suffer from international neglect, like the Great Lakes, Burkina Faso or Bolivia. By throwing itself into resolving these crises, and by seeking more self-sufficient military, diplomatic and financial roles, the continent may not fully solve its identity crisis. But it could help make the world a safer place for when it finally does.

Robert Malley

President & CEO of Crisis Group

January 2020

AFRICA

Burkina Faso: Safeguarding Elections amid Crisis

2019 was a bad year for Burkina Faso. Clashes between jihadists on one side and the state and ethnic vigilantes on the other took approximately 2,000 lives according to ACLED (Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project), a six-fold increase over 2018. Security forces have been unable to stop the militants' advance on their own, relying more and more on vigilantes, or "self-defence" militias, as they call themselves, some of which are implicated in massacres. Fighting has created one of West Africa's most urgent humanitarian crises. As violence spreads from the country's north into the east and south west, it has displaced more than a half-million people, over thirteen times as many were displaced in 2018. Meanwhile, demonstrations, peaceful and otherwise, popped up across the country, especially in the capital Ouagadougou, as citizens lambasted the government for its failure to deliver socio-economic gains and its ineffective management of the conflict in the countryside.

At the outset of 2020, these problems, coupled with elite power struggles, threaten to derail the November legislative and presidential elections. In the run-up to polls, politicians are likely to seek alliances with vigilante groups whose local popularity and capacity to intimidate voters could influence results. Under tremendous strain, the authorities may be unable or unwilling to organise credible elections. They should focus on providing security in rural areas, not only to ensure that balloting is timely and proceeds with minimal disruption, but also because restoring security in the countryside is key for longer-term stability. Despite the forthcoming campaign and vote, both government and opposition should remain focused on tackling a crisis that threatens the entire political system, and thus their respective interests.

To bolster security in Burkina Faso and maximise chances for a timely and peaceful vote, the EU and its member states should:

- Help Burkinabé authorities develop a national plan to resolve communal disputes over land and natural resources, which fuel jihadist expansion; although a plan for such a sensitive issue is unlikely to be finalised and adopted before the elections, the government should not wait until after the vote to start.
- Increase humanitarian aid in cooperation with UN agencies and NGOs, especially in northern regions, where the number of displaced and food-insecure people is highest and where communal tensions could rise in overcrowded municipalities.
- Lead efforts, along with the UN Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UN-OWAS), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and

the African Union (AU), to nudge the government and opposition toward dialogue, emphasising the need for all to agree on electoral preparations and the reduction of political violence, notably communal clashes.

- Support electoral preparations without losing sight of the importance of improving security in the countryside. The EU should learn from Mali's 2018 elections, when election deadlines monopolised the government's agenda and froze donor programs for months until a new president was sworn in.
- Press Burkinabé authorities to curb abuses by the armed forces and limit the involvement of self-defence groups (Koglweogo) in counter-insurgency efforts. Improving conditions of troops engaged near the combat zones would help. In return for increased material support from Europe, Ouagadougou should develop internal control mechanisms within defence and security forces to limit abuses.

Spreading Rural Violence

Despite counter-insurgency operations in the north and east, jihadist attacks in Burkina Faso increased throughout 2019. Militants are attempting to break overstretched security forces by targeting police stations and military posts, ambushing transport convoys and blowing up bridges to cut off access to cities, while perpetrating atrocities against civilians. The death toll last year exceeded that in Mali, long regarded the Sahel's open sore. The crisis has led to the forced shutdown of over 2,000 schools. An estimated 1.2 million people need urgent humanitarian assistance. Authorities have extended a state of emergency in virtually all areas bordering Mali and Niger, calling on France and the regional G5 Sahel Joint Force, as well as ECOWAS partners, to provide additional support.

Jihadists are the main perpetrators of civilian killings, but state security forces and vigilantes are responsible for a major share. According to human rights organisations, the Burkinabé military has killed civilians during counter-insurgency operations, while allied vigilantes (together with mobs) massacred unarmed local communities from the Fulani ethnic group in Yirgou in January 2019 and Arbinda two months later. Often the precise causes of local violence are unclear, in part because of the lack of serious investigations.

The counter-insurgency campaign risks exacerbating the very factors – breakdowns in rural social cohesion amid disputes over land and other natural resources – that plunged the country into this predicament. Local authorities have come to seem ineffectual or even predatory as disputes multiply. Amid escalating banditry and other violence, “self-defence” militias like the Koglweogo have gained traction as an alternative provider of law and order. But the Koglweogo's attempts to take justice into their own hands have led to communal clashes, especially between them and the Fulani ethnic group, roiling already tense relations. The government should find a way to manage rural conflicts if it wants to reverse the rise of vigilantism.

As violence continues, particularly in the Sahel and Centre-North regions, where 65 per cent of 2019's fatalities occurred, civilians are fleeing to municipalities. Towns in these two regions now host over three quarters of the country's

internally displaced people (IDPs) – and their resources are stretched to the limit. The EU should coordinate delivery of humanitarian aid to these vulnerable areas, lest the influx of displaced people itself precipitate further conflict.

Social and Political Contestation

As the rural conflict rages, the country is also beset by urban unrest, with over 150 protests and riots last year. Trade unions voice discontent with precarious living conditions and lack of economic reform. Civil society organisations and opposition politicians blast the government's inefficiency in containing insecurity, singling out an attack on the military post in Koutougou that killed 24 soldiers, and another on Bongou gold mine employees heading to work. The main opposition party, Union pour le Progrès et le Changement, went so far as to call for the government's resignation after the Koutougou attack.

In the face of criticism, the government has increasingly resorted to repression. In June, it introduced legislation aimed at sanctioning acts it deems corrosive of armed forces' morale. Authorities arrested without warrant the activist Naïm Touré for "demoralising" soldiers via social media, before releasing him two days later. The authorities have temporarily suspended (so banned from conducting any political activity for three months) the Patriotic Front for Renewal, a small opposition party not represented in the National Assembly, for calling on the government to resign for failing to "secure the nation". These and other government actions raise concerns that its campaign against jihadists will serve as a pretext for clamping down on all critical voices. Meanwhile, the ruling People's Movement for Progress has revived accusations against allies of the exiled former president, Blaise Compaoré, accusing them of plotting against the government.

President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré has made some attempts to build consensus, such as around the forthcoming elections, but these may be insufficient to guarantee a credible vote. In July, he launched a dialogue with opposition parties about how to address insecurity, reform the electoral code, set the electoral calendar, schedule a delayed referendum on constitutional reform and clarify voting rights for the Burkinabé diaspora. The ruling party and opposition reached consensus on security and election timing, giving rise to some optimism. But disagreements between the ruling party and opposition over a national reconciliation process, which would entail Compaoré's potential return to the country (Compaoré reportedly wants to retire in his native village), remain unresolved.

Electoral Risks and Opportunities

Amid these tensions, President Kaboré's call in November on citizens to volunteer to join the army's counter-insurgency efforts could make matters worse. First, arming untrained civilians increases the risk of abuses. Secondly, civilian mobilisation could worsen already existing cleavages between local communities. A bill establishing National Defense Volunteers passed by the Burkina parliament on 21 January limits their armament and confines their role to defensive

missions, but the state still lacks the capacity to efficiently monitor recruits and prevent abuses. Thirdly, it could fuel political tensions if parties – and notably the ruling party – try to use these volunteers for political purposes. Dialogue on this specific issue is needed between the government and opposition to avoid this outcome, but is unlikely to take place while mistrust among political parties remains strong.

The EU, in concert with UNOWAS, ECOWAS and AU, should encourage the government and opposition to continue the political dialogue initiated this summer aimed at organising legitimate and peaceful elections in 2020. For now, the EU does not appear likely to deploy election observers. Yet an observation mission could play a role in deterring violence around the election.

Even as election preparations proceed, the EU should encourage the government to devote energy to addressing the crisis in the countryside. The EU should learn from the experience of the 2018 Malian elections, when the race to meet election deadlines absorbed the entirety of the government's focus and halted international partners' cooperation programs for months. In particular, as a development actor, the EU should keep helping the government reduce the risk of communal clashes in rural areas by promoting a new approach to governance. That includes supporting authorities to engage in land reforms and to promote specific forms of governance in nomadic areas. From a security perspective, the EU could increase its material support to improve the conditions of Burkinabé troops engaged on the front, but, in exchange, should encourage authorities to develop more robust and effective accountability mechanisms to limit defence and security forces' excessive use of force against civilians.

De-escalating Tensions in the Great Lakes

Since assuming office in early 2019, the Democratic Republic of Congo's (DRC) president, Félix Tshisekedi, has stressed his determination to dismantle the dozens of Congolese and foreign armed groups blighting the troubled east of the country. He has also prioritised repairing ties with neighbouring states, which have historically both backed and fought against rebels in the eastern DRC over various cycles of war in the last two decades. Today, tensions are again mounting among the DRC's neighbours – between Burundi and Uganda, on one hand, and Rwanda, on the other – potentially compounding the country's security challenges. Alongside Tshisekedi's diplomatic efforts to calm tensions, he has floated plans to invite these three neighbours to deploy their armed forces into the DRC to conduct joint operations with Congolese forces against rebels. Yet insofar as tensions among those countries remain high, such operations could pave the way for them to step up support to allied groups even while fighting rivals, and thus fuel proxy warfare. Civilians in the eastern DRC are likely to suffer most.

In line with its December Foreign Affairs Council conclusions that lay out the EU's plans for re-engagement with the DRC, and to help President Tshisekedi de-escalate regional tensions, the EU and its member states should:

- Reinforce the International Contact Group for the Great Lakes region, an informal gathering comprising the UN (including both the UN's special en-

voy to the Great Lakes and the head of its mission in the DRC, MONUSCO), the U.S., the African Union and South Africa, as well as the EU and several European states that are important donors in the region, such as Belgium, the UK, Germany, France, the Netherlands and Sweden. The EU and European governments could designate senior EU and other European ministerial appointees to fill the group, over and above the working-level desk officers who sometimes tend to participate.

- Use the increased clout this would bring to push for a mechanism whereby each of the three neighbours airs allegations against states they believe are backing armed groups in the DRC and supports the charges with evidence. Allegations can then be investigated by the UN Group of Experts and the Expanded Joint Verification Mechanism of the International Conference of the Great Lakes Region (the ICGLR comprises regional states and is a guarantor of a 2013 regional peace agreement; its joint verification mechanism and the UN expert group already have mandates to investigate claims of support to armed groups). Their findings could inform diplomatic efforts to de-escalate tensions among neighbours and end their backing of insurgents in the DRC.
- At the same time, encourage President Tshisekedi to shelve, at least for now, his plan for joint operations with neighbours' security forces.
- Offer financial and technical support for the national disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) process, to ensure that Congolese militias linked to foreign rebels operating in the eastern DRC have a safe pathway to giving up their fight.

Security Challenges

In recent months, eastern DRC-based foreign insurgencies have escalated attacks on both the Congolese army as well as soldiers and civilians in neighbouring countries. The Burundian, Rwandan and Ugandan presidents are all rattling their sabres in response, accusing one another of proxy warfare.

On 4 October, DRC-based fighters killed fourteen people in Kinigi village in Rwanda's Musanze district. Rwandan authorities blame the Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda (FDLR) rebels. They say the FDLR is working with another DRC-based rebel group, the Rwanda National Congress (RNC), which they allege is run by one of President Paul Kagame's former generals. They also say both the FDLR and the RNC enjoy Burundian and Ugandan support. In a speech, Kagame vowed to retaliate against anyone seeking to attack Rwanda.

After the Kinigi killings, fighters crossed into Burundi from the DRC to launch two separate deadly attacks. Burundian RED-Tabara rebels, whom Burundian officials say are backed by Rwanda, claimed the first attack. No one claimed the second, but Burundian President Pierre Nkurunziza, recalling Kigali's alleged support for mutineers in a 2015 coup attempt, blamed Rwanda for both attacks, alleging that Kigali supports RED-Tabara. Ugandan officials, for their part, assert that Rwanda is collaborating with the Allied Democratic Forces, a rebel movement with roots in Uganda that is implicated in dozens of massacres in the Beni area of North Kivu since 2014.

Rwandan and Ugandan officials continue to trade accusations that each is plotting to destabilise the other. Both governments have purged their security services of suspected traitors. Rwanda has now also closed a main border crossing into Uganda, suffocating trade between the two countries. Meanwhile, Burundi and Rwanda have dispatched troops to their mutual border while Uganda has deployed troops to its western frontier facing North Kivu. Should these tensions heighten, they could fuel more proxy fighting in the eastern DRC, further threatening regional stability.

Recognising the dangers, Tshisekedi invited Rwanda and Uganda for talks in July and August hosted by Angolan President João Lourenço in the Angolan capital Luanda. They culminated in a memorandum of understanding, signed on 21 August, in which both countries promised to halt “actions conducive to destabilisation or subversion in the territory of the other party and neighbouring countries”. In addition to these diplomatic efforts, the DRC president floated plans that would involve the armed forces of Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda conducting joint military operations with Congolese forces against insurgents in the eastern DRC. Absent political de-escalation among the neighbour governments, such operations could pave the way for all three to ratchet up support to proxies opposing their respective rivals. The eastern DRC could again become the arena for a multi-sided melee.

Calming Regional Tensions

In its latest Foreign Affairs Council Conclusions on the DRC in December 2019, the EU asserted its readiness to redefine its relationship with the country. This comes after relations between Brussels and Kinshasa cooled at the tail end of Kabila’s presidency, when the EU sanctioned some of his top henchmen in late 2018. President Tshisekedi has expressed an increasing willingness to work with Brussels even as the EU renewed sanctions in December 2019 against twelve of the fourteen Kabila-era officials. In particular, the EU could help de-escalate regional tensions and lessen neighbours’ support to foreign armed groups while contributing to pathways to surrender for Congolese fighters allied to such groups.

The immediate priority is to encourage President Tshisekedi to reinvigorate diplomatic efforts to calm tensions among DRC’s neighbours while putting aside, at least for now, plans for those neighbours to conduct military operations in the eastern DRC. The EU’s best bet for pressing for an approach along these lines would be to increase its influence in the International Contact Group for the Great Lakes, the informal group to which it and a number of European states belong. Brussels and other European capitals should commit more senior officials both to the contact group itself and to liaising with the group and with regional governments. Together with the UN special envoy to the Great Lakes, Xia Huang, who has recently been instrumental in bringing together the Burundian, Congolese, Rwandan and Ugandan intelligence chiefs to discuss their deteriorating relations, the EU should use its weight in the group to prioritise the need for a political solution to tackling foreign armed groups in the eastern DRC.

Such a solution could entail Xia encouraging the three states to lay out their allegations and evidence of support by their rivals to armed groups in the DRC. He could share all information received with the UN Group of Experts and the Expanded Joint Verification Mechanism of the International Conference of the Great Lakes Region. The evidence provided by regional states, and investigations conducted by the expert group and joint verification mechanism, could collectively inform diplomatic efforts to halt or diminish support to DRC-based insurgents.

By financially and technically supporting the national DDR process, the EU can also back Tshisekedi's priority of tackling the plague of Congolese armed groups. Congolese insurgents, many of whom are sucked into alliances with more powerful foreign armed groups, often lack an alternative in the absence of a fully funded DDR program. Under Kabila, the Congolese authorities gave only limited resources to DDR. Several donors pulled out, frustrated by Kinshasa's lack of commitment to funding a national program. Despite the uptick in attacks in the east, there are signs that some fighters are placing greater hope in Tshisekedi's presidency and expressing greater desire to surrender. MONUSCO's new mandate, adopted at the end of December 2019, encourages the DRC's government to appoint a senior coordinator to lead the DDR effort. The EU could consider supplying this person with the necessary funding and expertise to carry out the mandate.

Mitigating Risks Ahead of Ethiopia's Pivotal Elections

Ethiopia's federal and regional elections, now scheduled for August, will be a critical test for one of Africa's most closely watched political transitions. Since taking office in April 2018, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has brought rapid change: he has extended his predecessor Hailemariam Desalegn's policy of releasing political prisoners and welcoming back regime opponents from long exile, restored relations with Eritrea, boosted the number of women in the cabinet, accelerated modernisation of an indebted state-led economy, refreshed institutions like the electoral board and set the country on a path toward multiparty politics. Many at home and abroad have welcomed these reforms. On 10 December, Abiy collected the Nobel Peace Prize.

Yet the changes have uncorked social tensions long bottled up by an authoritarian state. Intercommunal violence has proliferated, spurring the most conflict-related internal displacement in the world in 2018. Ascendant ethno-nationalist parties are jockeying for power in urban areas, including the federal capital Addis Ababa, and the countryside. Boundary disputes between ethnically defined regions that control autonomous security forces could tip into open inter-regional conflict. Moreover, Abiy's transformation of the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) has aroused opponents' suspicions that he intends to do away with the hard-won "ethnic federalist" system that guarantees those regions self-rule. The EPRDF, whose four core parties have controlled the central state, as well as the most politically powerful

regions, for three decades, is being replaced by a single national party that also absorbs ruling parties from the five regions not governed by EPRDF parties. Ethnic federalism's future could be a divisive issue in the forthcoming vote.

The challenges of managing a competitive election – chiefly, overcoming mistrust among rival elites and strengthening electoral institutions – are formidable in themselves. In parallel, however, authorities will also need to boost an economy that has struggled to generate sufficient jobs for the country's ranks of unemployed and underemployed youth. Satisfying this constituency, whose protests between 2015 and 2018 set the stage for Abiy's ascent to power, and which now demands a better future, will be essential to keeping the transition on the rails.

The EU and its member states can help by:

- Urging authorities in Addis Ababa to convene a national conversation about how to manage the election schedule, pre-election tensions and security issues. This conversation should include politicians, activists, religious leaders and elders. All these actors should aim to set ground rules ahead of the vote and discuss ways to prevent violence, such as pledges by candidates and party leaders to avoid incendiary campaign rhetoric.
- Encouraging Abiy to reach out to rivals who fear an end to ethnic federalism, making clear to them that review of Ethiopia's constitution, if it occurs, will take place down the road and will include the opposition and civil society.
- Intensifying financial and technical support for Ethiopia's electoral board, which needs significant support to deliver a credible vote crucial to averting violence. The EU and member states should keep working with other partners to build up the board's capacity while simultaneously supporting efforts to boost voter education and preparing to deploy an election observation mission.
- Pressing Abiy to promote dialogue among political elites embroiled in territorial and power-sharing disputes.
- Working with authorities to carry out macro-economic reforms, by way of increased supplemental funding for job creation programs, welfare schemes and other safety nets.

Fault Lines

Four flashpoints pose immediate threats to Ethiopia's transition. First, in Abiy's home state of Oromia, the prime minister's rivals (and some of his erstwhile allies) accuse him of doing too little for the Oromo people and being too close to pan-Ethiopian nationalists whom they see as adversaries. Secondly, elites from the powerful northern highland regions of Amhara and Tigray are locked in a bitter dispute focused primarily on boundaries. That standoff has inflamed ethno-nationalist sentiment and could lead to widespread violence. Thirdly, Oromo nationalists are bidding for greater sway over Addis Ababa, which is both the federal and Oromia capital. Amhara factions and activists in Addis Ababa

oppose this drive for more benefits for Oromos – greater political representation, more revenue shared with Oromia, enhanced Oromo rights in education, for example – from the city. The vote for the Addis Ababa council leadership will therefore be keenly contested, and disputed results could lead to intercommunal violence in the multi-ethnic city that is Ethiopia's main commercial as well as political hub. Fourthly, the formerly dominant elites from Tigray resent their loss of power under Abiy and protest his prosecutions of Tigrayan officials for past abuses, which they see as politically driven.

Another important fault line, which Abiy's ruling party reform plays into, pits supporters of Ethiopia's ethnic federalist system against its opponents. The former camp includes Tigrayan leaders, Oromo opposition politicians and others, who view the reform as a first step toward dismantling that system, because it centralises power in Addis Ababa, thus reducing the autonomy of regional party structures. They are committed to ethnic federalism because they view its provisions for self-rule as reversing decades of domination by an unaccountable centre. Proponents of the merger tend to dislike the existing federalist system, arguing that it weakens the nation by accentuating ethnic differences. Stakes in the debate are high. On 23 October, an ardent defender of ethnic federalism, the influential Oromo politician Jawar Mohammed, posted on Facebook accusing the government of endangering his personal safety. His post brought thousands of his supporters into the streets of Addis Ababa and Oromia's multi-ethnic towns. At least 86 were killed in confrontations triggered by the protests.

Dialling Down the Tensions

Ethiopian authorities will need to take the lead in tamping down tensions, but the EU, member states and other external partners can also play a constructive role. Prime Minister Abiy has urged the country's international partners to support his government's efforts at far-reaching reforms. The EU and member state leaders who are in contact with Abiy and other key Ethiopian actors should remain engaged and urge them to prevent violence before, during and after the election, including by taking some of the steps below:

An urgent priority is fashioning a consensus on ground rules ahead of the vote including on the election date. Ethiopia's electoral board announced on 15 January that the election would tentatively be held on 16 August, saying that neither the authorities nor the electoral board would have been ready for the earlier planned date of May. That new schedule is contentious, however. Opposition leaders have complained that the new date falls in the middle of the rainy season and so campaigning may be difficult in rural areas. These concerns are reasonable, and authorities and the electoral board should reach out to the various parties to craft an agreement on the issue. Although the August date affords a bit more time to prepare, the schedule is still constrained given the challenges. The EU and its member states should urge the premier to immediately invite the main ruling party and opposition leaders from across the federation to talks aimed at ensuring that electoral campaigning does not spark conflict. This select group could discuss campaign rules and electoral procedures, including security provisions in contested districts and how complaints should be made and

handled. Aggrieved parties should be told to direct their complaints through official channels before airing them in public. Abiy could also use this forum to assure rivals that, if he plans to propose any constitutional changes, he will do that down the line and in a consultative manner.

Separately, the EU and its member states should encourage Ethiopia's electoral board to convene as soon as possible a national conversation with opposition parties and civil society, including activists, religious leaders and elders. That would be a venue for all players to express their views on issues related to election management, building on a code of conduct signed by over 100 parties in March 2019 in which all committed to peaceful campaigning. In particular, it could tackle questions such as how to ensure that state institutions and public officials do not tilt the scales in favour of the ruling party, as has occurred extensively in past elections. At this conclave, all political actors should promise to eschew inflammatory rhetoric.

A third strand of EU support should involve technical and financial backing for the electoral board. This institution won some praise for its management of a November 2019 referendum on whether to create a new Sidama federal state out of the Southern Nations region. The national vote will pose much greater difficulties, however. Initial signs of EU involvement are positive: the new European Commission president, Ursula von der Leyen, picked Addis Ababa as the site of her first official visit abroad, showing that she intends to make Ethiopia a top priority. She announced that the Commission would channel €10 million to Addis Ababa to support the election and noted that Germany would add another €10 million to the same basket of funds. The EU and member states should complement these initiatives with substantial support for voter education efforts. The EU, which has already deployed an exploratory team, should accept the government's invitation to deploy a strong observation mission as early as feasible to monitor the process from campaigning to the certification of results. The EU should coordinate closely with the African Union if that body also observes the polls.

Meanwhile, the EU and its member states should also support Abiy's continued encouragement of talks between leaders in the main hotspots of potential communal conflict: within Oromia; between Oromia and Amhara factions; and between Tigray and Amhara. The premier should urge the various leaders to signal to their constituents that negotiated settlements to disputes are the only acceptable way forward. Political actors should publicise the outcomes of their meetings and consider joint appeals for calm. All these measures are critical in light of chauvinistic appeals to ethnic sentiment, which contributed to the October unrest in Oromia and has led security forces to deploy to turbulent university campuses. The EU, through the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace, and European states are already supporting dialogue initiatives among political parties and other stakeholders. Some member states also back a separate civil society-led process to forge channels of communication across fault lines between and within ethnic groups and should encourage these non-governmental actors to step up these efforts in the run-up to the election.

In the long run, the economic front poses as great a danger to Ethiopia's transition as do political tensions. After political grievances, concerns about

the lack of economic opportunity were the second driver of the youth protests that rocked much of Oromia and, later, Amhara, between 2015 and 2018. The previous administration's state-led economic model brought advances in infrastructure, primary health care and education, but could not deliver enough jobs to meet the aspirations of the large number of youth graduating from the expanded school system. Much of the country's stability in the next few years will hinge on how many opportunities the government can foster to keep this segment of the population happy.

Abiy's administration says it needs at least \$9 billion to set the economy on a path to sustainable growth. On 11 December, the International Monetary Fund announced the outlines of an agreement to loan Ethiopia \$2.9 billion over three years, primarily to support the central bank as the government moves toward a free-floating currency, which comes on the back of a \$1.2 billion World Bank program primarily supporting economic reform that began in 2018. The administration also aims to ease businesses' regulatory burden and increase private-sector participation as it pivots away from a public investment growth model. It plans to introduce a spate of privatisations and liberalisations in state-run sectors such as energy and telecommunications and to gradually open up the financial sector. The EU and member states could backstop these efforts by ensuring that adequate support for the poor and most vulnerable is in place, including drought victims, internally displaced people and those who have recently returned home. It could also look for ways to bolster rural and urban safety nets in case the cost of living rises further as state subsidies taper off and prices rise, while encouraging member states to continue supporting government spending on basic services such as health, education, water, agriculture and roads.

ASIA

A Dangerous Sea Change in Sri Lanka

Since his election on 16 November 2019, Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and his brother, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa, have initiated fundamental changes to policies on ethnic relations, the legacy of a 26-year civil war, and the rule of law. Mahinda had previously served as Sri Lanka's president and Gotabaya as defence minister during the brutal final phase of the country's civil war, when troops under their command, as well as the separatist Tamil Tigers they fought, are credibly alleged to have committed grave violations of the laws of war. The new Rajapaksa government has reversed or announced its intention to abandon many key legislative achievements and policy commitments of the preceding United National Party (UNP) government, including promises on post-war reconciliation, accountability and inclusive governance made to the UN Human Rights Council and to the EU. The shift in policy, rooted in part in the ethno-nationalism of many among Sri Lanka's Sinhala and Buddhist majority, threatens to increase ethnic and religious tensions and dangerously weaken checks on executive and state power.

The changes pose a deep challenge to EU policy in Sri Lanka, which has supported ethnic reconciliation, human rights and political stability rooted in inclusive governance – and which now finds itself at cross-purposes with the country's leadership. Against this backdrop, the EU and member states should continue to press Colombo to honour commitments made by the prior administration to strengthen rights-respecting governance and the rule of law, while making clear that the EU will not support programs that encourage political repression or discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities. Specifically, the EU and member states should:

- Reiterate support for the reconciliation and accountability agenda agreed to by Sri Lanka at the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in Resolution 30/1 (2015) and work to build support on the council for continued UNHRC engagement beyond the resolution's expiration in 2021.
- Communicate clearly in upcoming high-level meetings with the new Sri Lankan government that the EU has begun an informal review of the Generalised Scheme of Preferences trade and tariff concessions extended to Sri Lanka (known as "GSP+") and that continued benefits are at risk if Colombo continues on its present course.
- Review funding for UN-administered Counter-Terrorism and Preventing Violent Extremism programs, avoiding support for activities with a discriminatory focus on Muslims, and avoiding any engagement with planned

“deradicalisation” or “rehabilitation” programs targeted at Muslims accused of involvement in militant activities without strict human rights protections in place.

- Launch a full review of all policies and programs in Sri Lanka, including development cooperation and contributions to the UN-administered Priority Peacebuilding Plan, to ensure they support efforts consistent with European conflict prevention and human rights objectives.

A New Government and a Sea Change in Policy

The results of Sri Lanka’s presidential election in November 2019 reflect a deeply polarised country. Gotabaya Rajapaksa campaigned on a Sinhala nationalist platform and won thanks to unprecedented levels of support from ethnic majority Sinhalese voters, while Tamil and Muslim voters overwhelmingly rejected him. Among Rajapaksa’s 54 ministers are only two Tamils, and, for the first time since the nation became independent in 1948, no Muslim minister at all; there is only one female minister. Citing opposition among the Sinhala majority, Rajapaksa has repeatedly rejected any further devolution of power to the provinces, including what is mandated in the current constitution, thereby neutralising a mechanism intended to give ethnic minorities greater self-governance. Past statements by Gotabaya calling the large Tamil majority in the north “unnatural” heighten fears of military- and state-supported population transfer designed to change the demographic picture.

The status of Muslims as full participants in the country’s social, political and economic life is also at growing risk. Following the ISIS-inspired 2019 Easter bombings – which killed more than 260, mostly Christian worshippers, and wounded many more – Muslims, especially Muslim women, whose use of face veils was briefly banned, have faced increased social discrimination and damaging economic boycotts. Radical Buddhist militants who back – and have in past had the backing of – Gotabaya Rajapaksa, have targeted Muslims for discrimination. All Sinhala suspects arrested for anti-Muslim violence have been released, with no prosecutions likely, while hundreds of Muslims remain in custody under the Prevention of Terrorism Act, many detained following the Easter bombings on questionable grounds and some reportedly suffering physical abuse and extortion.

Following a post-election statement by Mahinda Rajapaksa that indicated a desire to weaken religious and ethnic-based parties, Rajapaksa’s allies proposed a constitutional amendment that would dilute minority representation in parliament by increasing the threshold of votes needed for parties to be represented from 5 to 12 per cent. Should the government endorse the amendment and gain the two-thirds parliamentary support needed to pass it, Muslim political parties would be unlikely to obtain any seats. This would further marginalise and anger a community that already feels under siege.

The Rajapaksas have also taken dramatic steps to consolidate their family’s control of the government. A 10 December presidential decree assigned responsibility for one third of all government departments to ministries headed by

one of three Rajapaksa brothers, including, aside from Gotabaya and Mahinda, Chamal Rajapaksa, Minister of Mahaweli Development, Agriculture and Trade and State Minister of Defence. Gotabaya and other officials have announced their desire to reverse prior reforms that had reined in the presidency's power. A proposed constitutional amendment would allow the president once again to hold multiple ministerial portfolios, and unilaterally to appoint judges, the attorney general, the police chief and other senior officials, without involvement of the constitutional council.

The new government also quickly rolled back police investigations into a series of high-profile political killings and disappearances during the Mahinda Rajapaksa administration – many, according to detailed evidence submitted to courts, allegedly committed by military intelligence units at a time when Gotabaya was defence secretary. Courts have released suspects in virtually all of the so-called “emblematic cases” of serious human rights violations and political crimes. Within days of Gotabaya's election, the new government removed the lead police investigators' security details, transferred them to menial jobs, and denounced them as traitors. The most prominent investigator, Nishantha Silva, fled the country fearing for his safety. The government has launched a review of all prosecutions of Mahinda-era abuses, which the Rajapaksas and supporters have long called politically motivated, and announced a presidential commission to investigate police and other officials responsible for the alleged “witch hunt”.

Gotabaya and Mahinda have long argued that the UN Human Rights Council's Resolution 30/1 (2015) – which addresses reconciliation, accountability and human rights in Sri Lanka – infringes on the country's sovereignty and betrays its war heroes. They particularly object to the provision for a special court to investigate and prosecute alleged war crimes (something to which the UNP-led government was never fully committed). Gotabaya has made clear his government rejects the entire UN process and the commitments undertaken in that context by the previous UNP-led government. The current government's blanket denial of any violations by the military or police requiring investigation or prosecution has returned Sri Lanka to the hardline positions of 2009-10, rolling back even the modest recognition of government excesses found in the conclusions of the 2011 Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission. The Justice Ministry has announced its intention to “review” the legislation establishing the Office of Missing Persons, one of two transitional justice institutions established by the previous government; many observers expect its powers will be restricted, or the office eliminated entirely.

Recommendations to the EU and Member States

EU policies in Sri Lanka will not reverse Sinhala Buddhist majoritarianism, nor prevent the return to authoritarian rule that the Rajapaksas have already set in motion. Sinhala and Buddhist nationalism has deep roots, and challenges to Sinhala nationalism from outside Sri Lanka could further inflame nationalist sensitivities. Nonetheless, stressing the dangers posed from abandoning commitments on reconciliation and the rule of law to all Sri Lankans – and particularly about the importance of keeping open democratic space so citizens can challenge discriminatory and militarist policies, and build cross-ethnic political

alliances to counter ethnic polarisation – is important. The EU, together with Sri Lanka’s other international partners, can and should also work to ensure their funding or other support does not inadvertently help implement policies that further marginalise minorities and threaten their rights – and thereby increase tensions that exacerbate the risks of violent conflict.

The EU’s first challenge will come in late February, when the Human Rights Council considers the latest update report from the UN High Commissioner on Sri Lanka’s implementation of the 2015 resolution. Should Sri Lanka put forward a resolution to formally repudiate and reverse 30/1, European members of the Council should throw their efforts into building a coalition able to win a contested vote. If Sri Lanka does not put forward such a resolution, members should reiterate their strong support for the reconciliation and accountability agenda agreed to by Sri Lanka as an essential element of the country’s long-term stability, while working toward a council coalition for follow-up action in 2021, when the current resolution expires.

The EU’s 2016 decision to reinstate GSP+ trade preferences to Sri Lanka, which gave a significant boost to its economy, was predicated on government commitments to implement a wide range of international human rights treaties. Particularly important was its promise to repeal the Prevention of Terrorism Act and replace it with new, human rights-compliant counter-terrorism legislation – a promise the new government reversed in January. The government has also rejected or appears unlikely to advance other rule of law and governance initiatives linked to GSP+ and discussed through the EU-Sri Lanka joint committee process – including prosecutions in the “emblematic cases”. After the biannual GSP+ monitoring report due in early February – which will consider only the previous government’s actions – the next report is not due until 2022. The European Commission and European External Action Service can use the leverage that GSP+ benefits provide by communicating in its next joint commission meeting and working group on governance that an informal review is already under way, and that the continuation of benefits hinges on whether the government corrects course and begins meeting commitments underlying the EU’s 2016 decision.

With the return to power of a government whose senior officials are credibly alleged to have overseen grave human rights violations under the claimed rubric of counter-terrorism, the EU’s funding for UN-administered Counter-Terrorism and Preventing Violent Extremism programs needs to be carefully reviewed to ensure strict human rights protections are in place, including respect for women’s civil and religious rights as outlined in UN guidelines. The EU should make clear it supports the ongoing UN human rights due diligence review of its engagement with Sri Lankan security forces, and should avoid funding “deradicalisation” or “rehabilitation” programs targeted solely at Muslims accused of involvement in militant activities. The EU also should make clear to its implementing partners, UN Office on Drugs and Crime and UN Development Programme, that, if need be, they should redirect EU funding following a full review of their programs’ impact on conflict risk in Sri Lanka.

A full review of EU policies toward Sri Lanka and how they affect conflict risk and human rights probably will indicate that large portions of the UN-ad-

ministered Peacebuilding Priority Plan (PPP) – a framework for coordinating international support to transitional justice, reconciliation and good governance, which the EU supports financially – will be difficult if not impossible to implement in the current political climate. The EU should support a full review and reframing of the PPP in light of this and should consider prioritising support to human rights defenders and independent media. The EU’s conflict review should also extend to its development cooperation. Development assistance – either directly from the EU or through multilateral institutions that receive EU financing – could unintentionally support government-sponsored population transfers designed to dilute the Tamil majority in the northern province and parts of the east.

EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA

Ukraine Walks a Tightrope to Peace in the East

Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has embarked on a difficult and uncertain path to end the nearly six-year war in the eastern Ukrainian region of Donbas, but his efforts have revived a process that had seemed increasingly hopeless.

Having roundly defeated incumbent Petro Poroshenko in April 2019, Zelenskyy's first months in office have been characterised by a hard push to make good on campaign pledges to stop the bloodshed at the front lines and win over citizens living in separatist-held areas. Peace-making in Ukraine is complicated by the need to walk a tightrope between Russia's determination to keep its neighbour within its sphere of influence on one side, and well-organised nationalist constituencies in Ukraine who accuse Zelenskyy of surrendering to Moscow on the other. Though the 2014-2015 Minsk agreements (which create the operative framework for resolving the conflict) remain unimplemented, Zelenskyy's efforts have helped move the parties in the right direction.

Early wins included the successful negotiation of mutual troop withdrawals from some front-line positions, an agreement to renovate a civilian border crossing to make it less hazardous, ceasefires and a prisoner exchange. Then, in October, Zelenskyy endorsed the so-called "Steinmeier Formula", first put forward in 2016 by Germany's then-foreign minister and current president, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, under which separatist-held areas will acquire provisional "special status" (ie, autonomy) after local elections, but permanent special status only if and when those elections prove credible. Zelenskyy assured constituents that separatist and Russian troops would have to relinquish control over the territories in question prior to elections; Moscow welcomed the announcement all the same.

A December "Normandy format" meeting with Germany, France, and Moscow in Paris – the first since 2016 – brought the year to a close. It produced no breakthrough on Minsk implementation, but generated plans for cementing the ceasefire through further disengagement from front-line positions and increased monitoring of the security situation by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. Building from that foundation, 2020 also presents an opportunity for thinking about how to resolve the thorny issues that have precluded a lasting settlement.

Russia's desire to rid itself of Ukraine-linked EU sanctions gives the EU and member states a potential source of influence over peace negotiations as they proceed in 2020. France and Germany also have a platform to shape talks through their participation in the Normandy process. Issues on which the EU and member states should encourage progress in 2020 include the following:

Both parties should treat the three-zone disengagement plan that they agreed to in December as the first step toward full withdrawal from the front line in 2020. They should prepare for the latter through public dialogue, focusing on front-line civilians. Kyiv should also continue dialogue with nationalist constituencies – especially veterans and prominent civic activists – who are concerned that Zelenskyy will capitulate to Moscow’s agenda. It should look for constructive ways to account for proposals from those with tactical objections to its de-escalatory moves, while sidelining those fundamentally opposed to compromise.

To break the election impasse, the parties should develop a plan that ensures a transfer to either Ukrainian or international control of all but small sections of separatist-held territory prior to local elections in those areas. To encourage Moscow’s cooperation, the EU and member states could consider starting to develop a plan that provides for the partial lifting of EU sanctions on Russia in return for clear benchmarks toward peace. Another incentive they could offer would be to engage in discussions with Moscow on broader European security issues – something in which Russia has long expressed interest – if sufficient progress is made on resolving the conflict.

Kyiv should, with EU support, strengthen and expand existing legislation guaranteeing affordable housing, employment and psychological care to both veterans and conflict-affected civilians so they do not compete for the same scarce resources. Both groups’ vulnerabilities alienate them from the state and make them prone to resist steps to resolve the conflict.

Moving Toward Full Disengagement

Disengagement remains at the top of the agenda in the peace process. Zelenskyy’s fall 2019 agreement with Moscow on bilateral disengagement from three areas along the front line was controversial at home – activists from the far-right National Corps party obstructed several attempts at bilateral disengagement before being broken up by police – but it has been effectively implemented to date and proven a positive step. Today, however, there remain several spots along the 400-kilometre front line where troops are separated by fewer than 100 metres. Frequent exchanges of small arms fire kill soldiers and endanger civilians. Troops should pull back by at least one kilometre on each side of the line – placing them outside the range of each other’s sniper fire and tempering the ill-will created on both sides by reports of troops killed in action. While this remains far short of the full disarmament and withdrawal of Russian support that could bring peace, it would lay the groundwork for those further steps.

The impediment to a broader agreement on disengagement is more on the Ukrainian than the Russian side. Prior to the December meeting in Paris, Moscow made clear that it favoured disengagement along most or all of the current front line – a line that lies further west in some strategic areas than agreed in Minsk in 2014-2015. But Kyiv, apparently fearing further protests, agreed only to withdraw from an additional three as-yet-undetermined pilot zones – amounting to about three kilometres of the front line. This halting approach worries some experts who recall how, in 2016 and 2017, the parties withdrew from a

handful of zones only to later re-engage. Still, the agreement struck in Paris can succeed if the sides approach it as part of a larger process.

The EU and member states should encourage both Moscow and Kyiv to use the slow start to disengagement to develop strategies for understanding and addressing the concerns of civilians, whom the process will most affect. Many civilians who live close to the front line worry about being caught in the crossfire and are eager for troops to withdraw. Others, however, see stationing troops as a buffer against incursions from the other side. On a technical level, Kyiv will need to ensure security and meet humanitarian needs in front-line areas where residents often depend on government forces to arrange the provision of food, medicine and fuel. The coming four months should accordingly be a time not just to disengage from the three agreed zones but also for the two sides to prepare for comprehensive disengagement by better understanding and taking steps to address civilian concerns about the implications of withdrawal.

Dialogue with the Opposition

Another communications challenge for Kyiv will be to soften opposition to the compromises necessary for progress toward ending the conflict.

Zelenskyy's performance in Paris disarmed some opponents. His talk of pursuing peace through compromise and endorsement of the Steinmeier Formula had raised fears that he would capitulate to Russian interests, trading Ukraine's sovereignty for an end to the war. After Paris, many of his critics concluded that he in fact held his own.

Nevertheless, more than a few opponents of Zelenskyy's approach to negotiations remain, including some groups and individuals whom Kyiv would do well to consult as it enacts the provisions agreed in Paris. Outreach should focus in particular on security experts and military personnel angry that the government has not, in their view, adequately communicated the logic and procedures for its new disengagement plans. Kyiv can help build political support for its efforts by engaging thought leaders in these communities and making clear that it is working to address their tactical concerns and, where constructive, implement their advice.

Zelenskyy should also be clear, however, that the government will not be swayed by hardliners who believe the reintegration of separatist-held territories should come only when the Russian-backed troops there surrender directly to Ukrainian authorities (an unlikely scenario) or that the population of separatist-held areas should be punished through isolation (which, aside from its humanitarian effects, would only increase a sense of mutual grievance and make conflict resolution that much harder). While the government has been reluctant to clearly repudiate such views, given that many who hold them are respected veterans or civic activists, it should do so, making clear that it has a mandate to pursue a different path to peace even as it thanks those who have served the country. To the extent that Kyiv chooses to do this, the EU can play a valuable reinforcing role by continuing to publicly underscore its preference for an inclusive approach toward Donbas.

A Compromise to Facilitate Local Elections

In order to make meaningful progress in implementing the Minsk agreements, Moscow will need to show some flexibility on key points.

First, Moscow ought to come some distance in Zelensky's direction on the question of whether elections in separatist-controlled territory can be held before Ukraine is in control of the territory. Although Point 9 of the second Minsk agreement states explicitly that Ukraine must resume control of its eastern border with Russia only after elections, Kyiv insists that there is no way to run credible elections under Ukrainian law with Russian-backed armed groups controlling the border. It argues that these groups would sway the results, either through direct interference or simply their intimidating presence.

A possible compromise might involve Moscow pressing its separatist proxies to return control of most of the border to Kyiv – or an international force – before elections. To address Moscow's fears that separatists remaining on the Ukrainian side of the line would be subject to reprisals, agreed-upon sections could remain under Russian and separatist control so that those who wish to evacuate to Russia can do so. Moscow would not need to admit to backtracking from its previous demands. It would, however, need to press separatist authorities to submit to the new arrangement, just as it must press them to implement the agreements reached in Paris. Ideally, Moscow would also facilitate the replacement of current de facto authorities with figures more amenable to Kyiv before any substantive election preparations commenced.

To motivate Moscow to consider these options seriously, the EU and member states could consider offering new incentives. One possible albeit highly controversial step would be for Brussels and member states to develop a plan for offering partial sanctions relief contingent on progress toward peace – such as the visible withdrawal of Russian forces and proxy support. This would be a change in current EU policy, which links sanctions relief to full implementation of Minsk, and might threaten the united front that EU member states have so far maintained in the face of Russian intransigence. The status quo also has risks, however, not least that it makes it more difficult for the EU to persuasively signal to Moscow that efforts toward peace will be rewarded.

Another incentive that member states might consider is to express willingness to have preliminary discussions about other key issues on the European security landscape, which the Kremlin has long sought. Areas of discussion that could contribute to a more secure Europe might include limits on Black Sea militarisation, deployment of intermediate range missiles, and basing.

Taking Care of Conflict-affected Citizens

Kyiv should work to eliminate perceptions that its policies have left veterans and their families competing for resources – like scarce affordable housing – with persons displaced by the conflict, including many female-headed households. These perceptions could exacerbate resentment between two groups that have suffered the war's effects most directly, and privation could also sour them on the compromises that Ukraine will need to make in order to end the conflict. The

EU and member states should provide incentives – in the form of financial and other support – for Kyiv to continue strengthening and expanding legislation that governs access to affordable housing for veterans and IDPs, as well as these groups' access to psychological support.

LATIN AMERICA AND CARIBBEAN

Bolivia Plans for an Uncertain Election

Bolivians will return to the polls on 3 May 2020 to elect a new president after their congress voided the 20 October 2019 election because of suspected fraud. Following the disputed vote, deepening unrest and pressure from the military high command culminated in the resignation of former president Evo Morales, the former vice president and other senior figures in the then-ruling party, the Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS). Opposition Senator Jeanine Áñez was soon after sworn in as interim president. Amid the political tumult, protesters on both sides of the political spectrum took to the street, and election-related violence left at least 36 people dead and more than 800 injured. Mediation efforts led by the EU, the UN and the Catholic Church after Morales' resignation helped broker a new law that annulled the October election and put new polls on the calendar. This in turn helped curb the violence, but the situation remains volatile and tense.

To steer the country away from further violence, it is incumbent on Bolivia's transitional authorities to conduct a credible, transparent and legitimate election. Any suggestion of electoral fraud or manipulation risks stirring up fresh street protests. Stability in the coming months likely also depends on the government showing restraint in the policies it seeks to advance. MAS supporters fear the administration, led by a lowland politician of European descent, is overstepping its transitional duties and undermining the Morales government's fourteen-year campaign to empower indigenous communities, who make up the majority of Bolivia's population. They are similarly concerned that Bolivia's radical left-to-right switch in foreign policy, exemplified in breaking diplomatic ties with the Venezuelan government of Nicolás Maduro, outstrips Áñez's mandate.

Political tensions could also intensify if Morales returns to Bolivia in the coming months. The ex-president is currently in Argentina, where he was granted refugee status, but has spoken openly about his desire to return to Bolivia. The Áñez administration has issued a warrant for his arrest, and said he would be detained if he enters the country. But Morales remains a popular figure among his constituents, and any attempt to arrest him could spark a violent backlash.

In this context, the EU and its member states should:

- Work closely with all political parties to make sure a timely and credible presidential election takes place according to the calendar announced by the Superior Electoral Tribunal (TSE), including by committing the necessary resources to strengthen the electoral system and conduct a robust electoral monitoring mission.

- Sustain the mediation initiative that helped curtail post-electoral violence to help address political grievances and other sources of conflict, at both the local and national level, for the duration of the transitional government.
- Through diplomatic channels, encourage the transitional government to play a caretaker role, focus on elections, and leave policy decisions to elected leaders selected in the coming election.
- Discourage Evo Morales from returning to the country prior to the election given the risk that he would be arrested, touching off mass violence, while also making clear that the elected government should clear him of all politically-motivated charges and permit his return after the elections.
- To deter further abuse and provide a measure of justice for the victims, provide financial, technical or other support as needed to the forthcoming investigation announced by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) regarding the violence and abuses after the elections.

Back From The Brink

After close to fourteen years in power, Evo Morales, tendered his resignation on 10 November amid massive popular protests over electoral fraud and under strong pressure from the armed forces. Along with Morales, the upper echelons of the ruling MAS party also quit. Views on what occurred are deeply polarised: for Morales' supporters, his departure from power was a coup; his opponents saw it as restoring democracy.

In the days that followed the resignations, Jeanine Áñez – an opposition senator next in line for the presidency – asserted her claim to the interim post, saying her primary tasks would be to “pacify the country” and organise elections. But the abrupt pivot from the socialist Morales (the country's first indigenous president) to Áñez (a pro-business religious conservative) stirred further unrest. This time, MAS supporters took to the streets, where they were met by a fierce security crackdown.

Toward the end of the month, however, the situation took a more positive turn. Thanks to mediation efforts of the EU, the UN and Bolivia's Catholic Church, Bolivia's legislature unanimously approved a law on 24 November 2019 that nullified the 20 October 2019 elections, and ordered the appointment of a new governing body for the Superior Electoral Tribunal (TSE). The law also establishes two-term limits for all elected officials, thus disqualifying Evo Morales and his vice president Álvaro García Linera from taking part in the 2020 poll, while also ordering the TSE to organise a new election within 120 days. Elections are now slated for 3 May 2020. The call for a new vote, and the promise of deep reforms to the electoral process, helped bring an end to the protests and related violence. In early December, MAS appointed Morales as chief of its presidential campaign. After getting the green light from the TSE, Morales announced on 19 January that his former economy minister Luis Arce would be the MAS presidential candidate, with former foreign minister David Choquehuanca running as his vice president. Both Arce and Choquehuanca served as ministers for over a decade during the Morales administration, and are close to the former president.

Several international bodies have promised their support to ensure the transparency and integrity of the anticipated election. The OAS and the EU are negotiating with the Áñez administration details of their electoral monitoring missions. Simultaneously, the UN, U.S. Agency for International Development and IDEA International, among others, will help repair offices of the electoral authorities damaged during the November protests, and fill TSE vacancies at local and regional levels.

Navigating a rocky transition

Although the November transition plan pacified Bolivia after weeks of intensifying violence, disagreements over the interim government's mandate are an ongoing source of friction. There are no explicit constitutional boundaries on its ability to steer national policy, but the widely held view among Morales supporters is that the Áñez government should focus narrowly on steering the country toward timely and credible polls within the 120-day window established in November.

The government, however, has gone considerably further. It has fed resentment among MAS supporters by wading into issues with significant long-term implications, such as minimum wage negotiations, changes to export regulations, the possible privatisation of state enterprises, modifications to price control mechanisms for household items, and social security reform. The same is true with respect to some of Áñez's foreign policy decisions, such as breaking ties with the Maduro government in Venezuela, and expelling the Mexican ambassador and Spanish consul.

MAS supporters are understandably concerned that the Áñez government could be seeking to walk back signature Morales-era reforms – which broke new ground in promoting indigenous people's rights, economic advancement and lifted many out of poverty. In the immediate aftermath of Morales' resignation, anti-MAS protesters fanned the country's polarised politics by seizing and burning down properties owned by members of the outgoing government. Some police officers tore the indigenous wiphala flag from their uniforms. The revanchist rhetoric from interim government officials has since cooled but not disappeared: Áñez caused a stir in early January when she spoke of the importance of keeping “the savages” from returning to power, prompting Morales to suggest that the remark confirmed her “racism”.

Against this backdrop, MAS supporters have demanded the transitional government stay true to a caretaker role, limiting its focus to organising elections, and honouring commitments made by the preceding administration in the 2020 budget, particularly local infrastructure projects and welfare programs that benefit poor communities. Almost 50 per cent of Bolivians benefit from welfare programs created by Morales targeting the eradication of extreme poverty.

MAS supporters also express concern that the transitional government may be taking actions prejudicial to regions where the party has a strong presence – especially indigenous-dominated areas foundational to Morales' political power such as El Alto, Chapare and Sacaba – including actions that may affect the coming vote. In Chapare, where MAS supporters looted and burned down police stations in protest against Morales' ouster, the police have withdrawn from the region. Members of the current government have warned that, if conditions

do not improve so that the police can promptly return, it will be impossible to hold a vote there.

The tense dynamics between the interim government and MAS supporters could well come to a head if Morales seeks to return to the country before the election. Still very popular among his constituents and the unquestioned party leader, despite the emergence of divisions within the MAS, he has been weathering the political storm in Argentina, where he arrived on 12 December, after a month's stay in Mexico and Cuba. Bolivian authorities charged him and MAS leader Faustino Yucra with rebellion and terrorism-related offenses, and issued a warrant for his arrest. The charges are based on a video of Morales in conversation with Yucra, in which the former president said he was determined to return to his country, and discussed his strategy of blockading several cities and halting their food deliveries to that end.

It is not clear whether Morales intends to test the authorities' resolve by returning to the country. Should he do so, and should the authorities arrest him, the consequences could be dramatic. Jailing Morales would in all likelihood trigger massive protests, provoke clashes between MAS militants and state forces, and end the fragile equilibrium that has curbed the violence since late November.

Recommendations

Having played an important role in brokering the November arrangements that de-escalated the crisis in Bolivia, Europe's focus should now be on ensuring that the upcoming elections are timely and credible, and on helping the country reach 3 May without further violence. The EU and member states should make sure that La Paz has all the technical or financial support it requires to hold such elections and Brussels should continue preparations to mount an electoral monitoring mission alongside the Organization of American States. This monitoring mission will be central to reassuring Bolivians that the polls are conducted fairly and the results are legitimate.

The EU and member states should also work with all political parties to anticipate and tamp down crises that could upset the country's delicate status quo. They should encourage the interim government to hew to a caretaker role, steering well clear of policies that suggest an undoing of Morales' legacy accomplishments or that would reset Bolivia's international relations. As for Morales, they should encourage him not to attempt to return to the country prior to the election, which would risk his arrest and a corresponding surge of violence, even as they make clear that the newly-elected government should review the charges against him and drop those that are politically motivated, enabling his eventual return to the country. As a safeguard in the event disputes arise, Brussels and member states should also support keeping in place the mediation initiative created by the EU, the UN and the Catholic Church.

Finally, the EU and member states should offer financial and technical support to a forthcoming investigation by a group of experts under the auspices of the IACHR into the violence that took place in the last four months of 2019. In addition to developing a factual record that may help victims and their families attain a measure of justice, the investigation – which La Paz has agreed to with the IACHR – may have some deterrent effect on would-be perpetrators as the election draws near.

MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

A Way Out of the U.S.-Iranian Impasse

As 2019 faded into 2020, the U.S. and Iran careened up to the brink of war. In late December, a series of U.S. airstrikes on Iranian-backed Iraqi militias, in response to militia attacks on U.S. assets in Iraq, brought crowds of Iraqis with a battering ram to the doors of the U.S. embassy in Baghdad. On 2 January, reportedly stinging from the embassy assault and determined to restore what he considered to be eroded U.S. deterrence, President Donald Trump ordered a drone strike on Qassem Soleimani, head of the Quds Force, the expeditionary unit of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps. Vowing revenge for the general's death, Iran fired ballistic missiles at U.S. bases in Iraq, killing no one there, but in the aftermath inadvertently downing a Ukrainian passenger jet outbound from Tehran with 176 people on board. Both the exchange of attacks and the airline disaster seemed to close this particular chapter of the conflict between Tehran and Washington. But the danger of broader confrontation has not passed.

At the origin of these events lies the Trump administration's exit from the 2015 nuclear deal, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Under the JCPOA, Iran accepted limits on its nuclear program in return for integration into global trade. Since May 2018, when it withdrew from the pact, the U.S. has been exerting "maximum pressure", mostly through unilateral sanctions, to compel Iran to negotiate a more stringent, comprehensive deal and curb its regional behaviour. Sanctions have inflicted great harm upon Iran's economy. In light of the failure of the JCPOA's remaining signatories to provide Tehran economic respite, Iran took retaliatory measures of its own. It ramped up its regional activities, notably in the Gulf, and started loosening its compliance with the nuclear deal as of May 2019, shedding all restrictions on its uranium enrichment program by January 2020. That last move in turn led France, Germany and the UK, the so-called E3, to trigger the deal's dispute resolution mechanism, which could ultimately resuscitate UN sanctions on the Islamic Republic. The JCPOA is closer than ever to collapse, and any small incident could fuel escalation, by either the U.S. or Iran.

To help ease tensions, the EU and its member states should:

- Seek to salvage the nuclear deal by delivering some economic benefits to Iran in exchange for its compliance with the JCPOA. Triggering the dispute resolution mechanism could backfire if failure to reach a settlement leads the E3 to restore UN sanctions – a step that Tehran has warned would prompt it to withdraw from the deal and perhaps the non-proliferation treaty as well. The E3 should seek to stretch the timeline provided by the mechanism as much as possible;

- Ensure the Iranian people's access to humanitarian goods, via the Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges (INSTEX);
- Encourage a partial drawdown of U.S. forces from Iraq and a reaffirmation of the fight against ISIS as Western militaries' sole objective in Iraq, which would remove an immediate source of U.S.-Iranian friction. As part of the drawdown, European states and other members of the International Coalition to Counter ISIS should take over some of the more visible military tasks from U.S. forces in Iraq.
- Explore possible ways of lowering regional tensions, such as a deconfliction channel.

Salvaging the JCPOA

As the smoke cleared after the Soleimani killing and the Ukrainian airliner catastrophe, both Washington and Tehran were sticking to the strategies that produced the present impasse. The Trump administration boasted of having “restored deterrence” against Iran, claiming that by responding to Soleimani's death with restraint, Tehran was tacitly admitting that “maximum pressure” works. Economic sanctions, notably those limiting oil exports, have indeed drained the Iranian state's coffers, forcing it to enact deeply unpopular spending cuts, and hurt the living standards of Iranian citizens. To date, however, “maximum pressure” has failed to deliver on the goals laid out by the U.S. administration itself. Far from curtailing nuclear ambitions, it has led Iran to wriggle out of the JCPOA's handcuffs; rather than stop Iranian meddling in the Middle East, it has prompted Tehran to redouble it. Meanwhile, and despite recurrent eruptions of mass discontent, the Islamic Republic appears firmly ensconced in power.

For its part, Iran is continuing to pursue parallel paths: escalating on the nuclear front while leaving a door open to diplomacy. On 5 January, Iran breached its nuclear commitments for the fifth time, announcing that it would cease observing JCPOA limits on centrifuge quantities – the last restriction it still faced. It stopped short of quitting the accord, however, and it did not say what practical steps it might take. The diplomatic part of its strategy suffered a blow on 15 January, when the E3 triggered the deal's dispute resolution mechanism, which could result within 65 days in reimposition of the UN sanctions in place before the 2015 deal – an outcome that the Trump administration appears to be keen on, if only because it would stop removal of the UN arms embargo on Iran that the JCPOA says should be lifted on 18 October 2020. U.S. Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, in his statement welcoming the E3's move, said he “expect[s] that the UN sanctions will snap back into place”, though E3 officials were at pains to say they have no such intention. Should there be no resolution within the coming months, U.S. pressure on the E3 to take the next step – snap-back of sanctions – inevitably will grow.

As renewed UN sanctions would signal the nuclear accord's demise, the E3 should do all they can to ward off this outcome. In the short term, their best option is to extend the timeline for dispute resolution – something the JCPOA

allows – so that they can assemble an economic relief package that might persuade Iran to reverse its breaches and stay in the deal. They also should accelerate efforts to meet humanitarian needs in Iran, ensuring that the INSTEX mechanism gets fully up and running.

The E3 could also help broker other means of rescuing the nuclear deal. One option that had previously been mooted would be for the U.S. to reissue limited oil waivers for key Iranian importers and restore civil nuclear waivers, in return for Iran's full compliance with the JCPOA, de-escalation in the region and, possibly, its agreement to initiate negotiations with the U.S. and others over a new nuclear arrangement, but also regional security and ballistic missiles. In a narrower version, the U.S. would suspend key non-oil sanctions (eg, on Iran's metals and petrochemical sectors) and restore civil nuclear waivers, in return for Iran agreeing not to ramp up its nuclear program beyond its current status and, possibly, reversing one or more of its breaches, as well as halting aggressive behaviour in Iraq and the Gulf. A third party would almost certainly be required to facilitate either of these bargains.

Sparing the Region from Further Harm

From the outset of the U.S.-Iranian standoff, Crisis Group has warned that it could take its deadliest form in third countries where both powers have strong interests. Particularly in the wake of the Soleimani killing, the country at highest risk of becoming a battleground is Iraq.

The circumstances surrounding the killing – the preceding bombing of Iraqi militia bases without notice to Baghdad, the targeting of the Quds Force leader on Iraqi soil, the death of militia commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis alongside Soleimani – have greatly angered many Iraqis and not just those close to Iran. Many Iraqi politicians are calling upon the government to expel U.S. troops from the country. The result is a triple challenge: first, the demand, while popular with many, is nevertheless liable to be so divisive that it paralyses Iraqi political institutions. Secondly, some of the factions opposed to the U.S.-led troop presence will resort to violence, particularly if attempts to end that presence through parliamentary and diplomatic means fail. Thirdly, a full U.S. withdrawal would likely put paid to the mission of the International Coalition to Counter ISIS, perhaps giving the jihadist organisation a new lease on life.

To mitigate the attendant risks, the EU should encourage the U.S. to partially draw down its military forces in Iraq and to transfer some military tasks to other members of the International Coalition to Counter ISIS, while continuing to provide logistical and other forms of support. The EU should also encourage the Coalition to reaffirm the fight against ISIS as its sole objective in Iraq.

In addition, the EU and its member states should expand existing cooperation with Iraq, in particular in, but not restricted to, the security sector. While calling for foreign troops to leave the country, Iraqi authorities have affirmed that the EU's civilian Advisory Mission to Iraq is welcome to stay for the purpose of security sector reform support. In order for this mission to be effective, the EU should make sure that all its personnel return to Iraq, with adequate resources and security guarantees to maintain a full presence. Iraq desperately

needs more security forces that are committed to the state, rather than various factions, and that can handle challenges such as public protests in a professional manner. At the same time, the EU ought to send unambiguous signals that it respects Iraqi sovereignty above all else, as the contrary impression created by the U.S. attacks and dismissal of calls for its departure threatens the very basis of any cooperation. The High Representative has received the acting Iraqi prime minister in Brussels to demonstrate the EU's support for the country's stability and reconstruction, which is a good start.

The EU also needs to urgently impress on the U.S. and Iran the need to refrain from turning Iraq into an arena for their rivalry. The contestation between Tehran and Washington is already polarising the Iraqi political system, rendering reform impossible and creating a real risk of backsliding to the partial state collapse that pertained in 2014. The EU should clearly convey this message to Washington, while it should tell Tehran that it, too, would be harmed were the Iraqi government to weaken further and the resulting vacuum to allow ISIS to re-emerge.

Outside Iraq, the EU and its member states should seek to expand possibilities for engagement between U.S. regional allies, in particular Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, with Iran, either bilaterally or through other Gulf countries, such as Kuwait and Oman. European states could establish a core group to encourage Gulf states to set in motion an inclusive regional security dialogue on issues of dispute in order to open up new channels of communication, gradually build trust among these governments and thus reduce risks of inadvertent conflict. A deconfliction channel through a mutually acceptable third party – perhaps Oman – could also diminish such risks by relaying messages between the U.S. Central Command and Iran's general staff.

European Challenges in Confronting the Fate of ISIS Returnees

For nearly a year, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), an umbrella force including Kurds, Arabs and Assyrians led by the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), have guarded roughly 13,500 detained foreign women affiliated with ISIS and children in makeshift camps in Syria's north east. A smaller number of male foreign fighters – perhaps 2,000 – are held in a separate prison network. These individuals wound up in the camps and prisons of north east Syria in the aftermath of the battle of Baghouz in early 2019, when thousands of ISIS-affiliated families and fighters fled or were captured following the militant group's defeat at the hands of the SDF and the U.S.-led counter-ISIS coalition. Nationals of EU member states account for roughly 1,450 men, women and children within this population, with the largest numbers from France, Germany, and the Netherlands. The majority resides in the squalid al-Hol camp, lacking basic health services and suffering sexual abuse and endemic violence.

Although Turkey's incursion into north east Syria in October 2019 has not caused as much upheaval with respect to these camps and prisons as some feared, it demonstrated how precarious security is in the region. The SDF retains

control of the facilities for now, but that could change. If renewed Turkish attacks compel the SDF to redeploy its forces, Damascus could press into SDF-held areas, including camps and prisons, seizing them or possibly agreeing to manage them jointly with the SDF. This could make conditions for camp residents yet worse; the regime is notorious for its abuse of prisoners.

Notwithstanding humanitarian and security concerns, European governments have tended to deal with their nationals detained in north east Syria by looking away. Given the potential implications of allowing the situation to fester, EU member states should shift their approach, take responsibility for their nationals, and begin bringing them home, with support and encouragement from EU leaders and institutions as appropriate. Rather than allowing the political sensitivities surrounding repatriations to keep them from moving forward:

- Member states that are politically hamstrung when it comes to bringing home nationals who are male fighters should start instead with women and children, whose repatriation is likely to be less controversial. Women form a diverse group of detainees – some have renounced militancy and are far from being high threat individuals – and children appropriately benefit from a presumption of innocence. Both groups are also highly vulnerable to abuse while they remain in detention.
- Until they are ready and able to bring their nationals home, member states should take all feasible steps to provide for them to be housed in humane and secure conditions in the region, a task that has only become more difficult with the Turkish incursion and a new UN resolution restricting aid delivery.
- With the long view in mind, member states and the European Commission should also work with humanitarian agencies, the UN and the SDF to facilitate eventual repatriation and, in the meantime, protect vulnerable detainee women and children from trafficking, including by preserving relevant documentation proving identity and family relations.

Squalor, Risk and Repatriation

As Crisis Group has separately reported, conditions at al-Hol camp – by far the largest of the holding facilities for women and children in the north east – are abysmal. Violence is rife, with regular breakout attempts and confrontations among women living in the camp, and between women, camp officials and aid staff. Women who now reject militancy are forced to live intermingled with committed jihadists in conditions that enable abuse and intimidation. Accounts of disappeared and detained male children taken away to separate “deradicalisation” facilities persist, and aid groups have documented sexual abuse of women and sexual violence against children. The situation, if anything, has become worse since the Turkish incursion, which saw a pullout of cross-border aid groups operating there and a steep decline in already limited services. Some of these groups are now exploring the return of their expatriate staff to the area, as most will be making up for lost time and major gaps in service provision to a vulnerable population whose needs have grown more acute in the interim.

Proponents of repatriation argue that, beyond the humanitarian responsibility that European governments bear for removing their nationals from the squalor and dangers of north east Syria's camps and prisons, there is a security rationale for doing so. French judge David De Pas, who works on antiterrorism cases, has argued that it would be safer for France to bring French national fighters home where Paris would have them "on hand" rather than leave them in the field – where presumably they could escape or be freed and pursue their designs outside government control.

On the whole, however, European governments are much less sanguine. Among other things, they are concerned about the challenges of prosecuting foreign fighters who return – including the difficulty of gathering the evidence required to win a conviction for crimes committed on a foreign battlefield. Moreover, even for those fighters who are convicted, European sentencing regimes may deliver prison terms of seven years or less. Officials worry about a scenario in which returned fighters first head for short stints to prisons where they can propagate jihadist ideology and network with other inmates, and then are released, unreformed, into the general public – creating a major burden for overtaxed security services.

Linked to these security concerns are political ones. Some European officials fear that allowing returns would galvanise far-right and populist groups, which are likely to exaggerate both the threat posed by returnees and the burden they impose on state resources. Additionally, on the international front, many European states are reluctant to deal with the SDF or its political wing, the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC). In exchange for facilitating returns, the SDF and SDC have pushed for meetings and photo opportunities with visiting foreign officials to intimate a degree of European political recognition of SDC-led autonomy. Europeans are wary of according them legitimacy that outstrips their status as a non-state actor and alienating Turkey – which regards the SDF's leading Kurdish faction as an extension of its nemesis, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

Against this backdrop, member states have resisted pressures, including from families and sometimes from within their governments, to accept even the lowest risk returnees. Although some courts (in the UK, Germany and Belgium) have weighed in to require governments to repatriate children, these narrow decisions have not changed overall policy.

Taking Responsibility

Notwithstanding the formidable challenges involved with repatriation, EU member states cannot responsibly wash their hands of their nationals in north east Syria. They should start the process of repatriating their nationals in earnest, communicating to their publics the combination of humanitarian and security considerations that underlie their actions, and starting with the most vulnerable. They should emphasise that turning away from the situation gives short shrift to governments' obligations toward their citizens – including innocent children held in horrific conditions at al-Hol – while also deflecting the burden of protecting, providing for, and securing their nationals onto others. To do so

would be irresponsible under any circumstances, but particularly in a region that is already bowed under the costs of a long-running war.

In cases where member states consider it politically impossible to agree on the return of individuals who have a violent or militant past, that should not become a pretext for inaction. For purposes of making quick progress, governments should start by focusing on repatriating women and children, who are likely to be less controversial than male fighters. Taking into account the political tumult in Norway that accompanied the recent repatriation of an ISIS-affiliated mother and her children, they should make clear to their publics that they are focusing on highly vulnerable children and women who pose the least security risk, working to identify this subset based on their own often considerable information about their nationals, and cooperating with others to close gaps in their intelligence.

What to do about the remaining group of women with operational experience and male combatants is a more vexing problem. Governments that refuse to repatriate these individuals – so far, nearly all of them – will need to develop other options to provide for both the short- and longer-term needs of these individuals. The longer-term options that European authorities seem to prefer do not appear promising. A nascent deal some European officials have discussed with Baghdad, under which Iraqi courts with European assistance would try foreign fighters, appears to have stalled. Prospects for overcoming European legal and policy requirements relating to the non-application of the death penalty, humane treatment of detainees, and fair trial safeguards do not seem high, and the chaos that has unfolded in Iraq since October 2019 cannot have helped. Another idea that has been discussed – supporting the construction of new or improved facilities inside Syria – also seems fraught, including that it would likely encounter obstacles tied to Western governments' refusal to undertake new construction in Syria absent a political solution to the wider conflict. It would also require faith that the territory on which any new facility sits will not change hands as dynamics among the SDF, Ankara and Damascus ebb and flow.

Against this backdrop, it will be important for European governments, supported by EU humanitarian institutions, to find ways to assure that their nationals are being held in safe, humane conditions while they develop a longer-term solution. They will in particular need to focus on ensuring the flow of resources to UN and humanitarian groups, whose aid provision has already been severely disrupted by Turkey's incursion, and will be further hampered by the UN's updated resolution on cross-border aid delivery to the north east, which carries new restrictions that will impact delivering crucial medical services. They should also support steps that will facilitate repatriation if and when other options prove unworkable, including family tracing and genetic testing for children, and the orderly preservation at the camps of European nationals' civil documentation (identity cards and passports). The latter is also important for the protection of women, who are at particular risk of human trafficking, and who may gain a measure of protection through access to copies of their documentation.

Honouring Commitments to End Libya's Civil War

Since April 2019, forces led by Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar have been battling units loyal to Libya's internationally recognised government for control of the capital Tripoli. The fighting on the city's outskirts has been terribly destructive, claiming over 2,000 lives and driving 200,000 residents from their homes. As weapons flow into Libya from the two sides' foreign backers, and Turkish-backed Syrian militiamen land in Tripoli to fight alongside government units, the conflict threatens to deepen – and to expand into a full-fledged proxy war.

Outside efforts to de-escalate this latest phase of Libya's civil war were slow in coming. On 19 January, however, international stakeholders took an important step forward, convening in Berlin to seek agreement on measures to de-escalate the conflict. Although the conference failed to produce a ceasefire, it succeeded in bringing together these competing stakeholders, not a few of whom have helped stoke the conflict, and got them to issue a pledge to work to end it. It also extracted from both Haftar and Faiez Serraj, prime minister of the Tripoli government, a promise to send emissaries to ceasefire talks in Geneva. Now the imperative is to turn all these words into action.

Europe can be central to that task, though to date it has struggled to develop an effective policy. Stemming migration too often has featured as the predominant objective while internal divisions – notably between France and Italy, the former aligned more closely with Haftar, the latter with Serraj – in the past have limited the EU's manoeuvring room. Turkey's growing involvement, as well as Russia's, underscored Europe's bystander role and helped spur it into action. The EU and its members should now build on the momentum generated by the Berlin conference to intensify their efforts along the following lines:

- Seeking a UN Security Council resolution calling for an immediate cessation of hostilities and resumption of UN-led negotiations along three tracks (military, financial and economic);
- Strengthening the UN arms embargo on Libya by pressing the Security Council to request more regular monitoring reports from the UN Panel of Experts, reactivating the EU maritime operation in the Mediterranean and fully equipping it;
- Pressing both Haftar and the Tripoli government to participate in the Geneva ceasefire talks and any subsequent UN-backed negotiations; and encouraging the two sides' foreign backers, notably Russia and Turkey, who before Berlin had attempted to corral their respective allies into a truce, to strongly support the Geneva process;
- If the two sides reach agreement on a ceasefire and the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) is called upon to monitor that ceasefire, being ready to commit greater resources to that mission;
- Urging Haftar to restart production at oil facilities his forces have shut down and calling on the authorities in Tripoli to take concrete steps to resolve banking disputes with their rivals in the east.

The Berlin conference was a welcome if belated acknowledgement of international responsibility to help end Libya's conflict. The EU, along with the U.S., UK, France, Russia, China, Italy, Germany, Turkey, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Algeria and Congo-Brazzaville, as well as the UN, Arab League and African Union, committed in a 55-point declaration to pursue three objectives: "to redouble their efforts for a sustained suspension of hostilities, de-escalation and a permanent ceasefire"; to "unequivocally and fully respect and implement" the UN arms embargo; and to facilitate the renewal of UN-backed negotiations with military, political and financial tracks. Neither Haftar nor Serraj signed the statement, but both were present at the gathering and reportedly agreed to appoint representatives to a joint military commission scheduled to meet in Geneva in late January to explore a ceasefire. These commitments were another sign of progress.

As a signatory to the Berlin conference declaration, and given that several member states enjoy close ties to one or the other protagonist, the EU can help ensure that all parties honour their commitments. The first step in this direction could be a UN Security Council resolution that endorses the Berlin declaration and calls for a cessation of hostilities and the launch of UN-led negotiations.

Secondly, they should bolster enforcement of the UN arms embargo by pressing in the Security Council for a change in the UN Panel of Experts' mandate to ensure more frequent reporting. At the same time, member states should help enforce the arms embargo by reactivating the naval mission in the Mediterranean (EUNAVFOR MED Operation Sophia). That mission currently lacks vessels due to rifts between member states, deriving from bitter opposition in some European countries to the resettlement of migrants coming from Libya and saved at sea. A reactivation of a fully equipped Operation Sophia would re-enable the renewed deployment of EU naval and aerial assets to monitor and intercept Libya-bound weapons shipments; this measure would still be valuable even if transfers by plane and across the Egyptian border would lie beyond its scope.

Thirdly, European leaders should step up diplomatic efforts to ensure that the Geneva talks take place, using their ties to Libyan factions to encourage them to compromise. Both sides have remained attached to maximalist demands, including concerning prerequisites for a ceasefire. The Serraj government insists that Haftar's forces withdraw completely from western Libya prior to any such accord, though at a recent meeting in Moscow it seemed slightly flexible on this point. The field marshal, for his part, has told interlocutors that he seeks preconditions – the surrender of Tripoli, progress in forming a new government and resolution of outstanding financial disputes – that the Serraj government will surely reject. Finding middle ground will not be easy. To the extent possible, European leaders should press home that sticking to current demands risks cementing a destructive conflict around the capital.

Reinvigorating European diplomacy also means engaging both sides' foreign backers. Dialling down outside intervention in Libya's war or weaning local parties from their conviction that foreign support can carry them to victory will not be easy. According to local sources, some 2,000 pro-Turkish Syrian fighters have arrived in Tripoli, along with dozens of Turkish officers who have installed air defence systems. Officials in Tripoli believe that Turkish support could

help them push Haftar's forces out of the capital's vicinity, while Arab tribes across Libya have responded with calls of resistance to what they call Turkey's "colonial ambitions" and named Haftar as their champion. Arab states, such as Egypt and the UAE, which together with Russia back Haftar, are also incensed by Turkey's moves. Yet Russia and Turkey did, even before the Berlin meeting, attempt to force their respective allies to stop fighting and discuss what an eventual settlement might look like, bringing Haftar and Serraj to Moscow in early January. Serraj signed a truce prepared by Russian diplomats; Haftar did not, but he did scale back military operations immediately afterward. Ideally, Moscow and Ankara would throw their weight behind the Geneva talks and a new ceasefire deal.

Fourthly, if the two sides formally agree to a ceasefire, the EU and its member states could help monitor and enforce it. They should start by ensuring that UNSMIL is appropriately resourced and staffed to follow up military talks in Geneva. The EU could also review the mandate and resources of its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions that are already deployed, so they are better able to support ceasefire monitoring in coordination with the UN if requested by Libyan parties. Engagement by those missions in ceasefire monitoring would require EU member states to significantly ramp up their security to ensure their personnel can operate beyond Tripoli and are authorised to engage with all warring parties.

Lastly, the EU and European governments should maintain their efforts to address some of the underpinnings of the crisis and in particular continue to press both sides to tackle financial and oil sector disputes. Most urgently, they should ratchet up condemnation of the recent closure of Libya's oil fields and terminals by pro-Haftar tribes; Europe's criticism thus far has been striking for its mildness. At the same time, they should insist that the Central Bank authorities in Tripoli solve an outstanding banking dispute with their eastern rivals. The two crises are related: the oil facilities' shutdown, which occurred immediately prior to the Berlin conference, was to a large extent Haftar's response to the continued failure of successive financial dialogue sessions (hosted by the U.S. embassy in Libya and by UNSMIL) to accommodate his demand that the Tripoli Central Bank's senior management be replaced (banking disputes largely stem from the recognition by pro-Haftar authorities in the east of a parallel central bank in Benghazi). Ending the oil sector closures, which have decreased crude oil production from 1.2 million barrels per day to 300,000 and caused a shortfall of some \$60 million per day, is critical.

Tunisia Looks to Reset with the West

In the September-October 2019 elections, Tunisian voters chose to punish the ruling government coalition and reward a fresh crop of political actors. The new president, Kaïs Saïed, and his supporters have declared that their top priority is tackling deteriorating socio-economic conditions, which could entail renegotiating Tunisia's relationship with key international partners, notably the EU. Three scenarios could heighten tensions and foment instability: a clash between

the president and the new parliament, which emerged from the elections without a clear majority; paralysis due to competition among parties that form the next government; or a divisive round of early elections in the next few months. Tunisia can avoid these outcomes if political leaders coalesce around a pragmatic agenda to boost economic activity, reduce unemployment and strengthen Tunisia's hand in negotiations with Western financial institutions – in keeping with President Saïed's political outlook.

As Tunisia's main trading partner, and in line with its European Neighbourhood Policy through which it provides important financial support, the EU should:

- View the new president's concern for greater economic self-determination as an opportunity to reset its relationship with Tunisia by adjusting its assistance programme to new political realities. Accordingly, it should focus on areas where it is already providing support and that the new president and government may find less controversial (eg, public administration reform, anti-trust efforts, boosting domestic competition and investment opportunities, and developing Tunisia's peripheral regions);
- Quietly engage with the government to support the development of a Tunisian-owned macro-economic plan that focuses on stimulating investment, employment and growth, and which international financial institutions and creditors can in turn support;
- Work with President Saïed and the government to establish what Tunisians refer to as a National Economic Intelligence Agency, which would harmonise efforts by local and international actors to support economic investment and development;
- Reopen negotiations on the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) to explore areas of convergence and, in the event of fundamental disagreement, shelve the DCFTA proposal and focus diplomatic and political efforts on dialogue with the president and government on the abovementioned areas;
- Support, through political dialogue and technical assistance, the new parliament in its efforts to fully implement the constitution, putting special emphasis on the need to elect the new constitutional court.

The Rise of a New Elite

The September-October 2019 legislative and presidential elections produced a political earthquake in Tunisia. The polls empowered new personalities and movements that pledged to strengthen state institutions, reduce the country's dependence on international financial institutions and protect its "Arab-Muslim identity" – by which they mean defending Tunisia's political, economic and cultural sovereignty. In doing so, these new actors are responding to demands for radical change and greater protection of the country's interests after years of worsening economic conditions and institutional paralysis.

The electoral results arose out of the perceived failure of Tunisia's difficult post-2011 democratic transition. By punishing the ruling coalition at the ballot box, Tunisians expressed their rejection of the country's political stalemate, corruption, patronage networks, rising unemployment and stagnant economic activity. In addition, many voters blame the EU and International Monetary Fund (IMF) for eroding Tunisia's sovereignty by imposing fiscal austerity measures and other conditions on loans, while failing to help revive a struggling economy.

This rejection of the ruling class and the role of Tunisia's international partners has been long in the making. The dismal results of Tunisia's post-2014 consensus politics sparked several conversations within the ruling coalition, political opposition and civil society about the need to strengthen state institutions and protect the country's economic self-determination and Arab-Muslim identity. Indeed, conservative and religious Tunisians, as well as some opposition parties, share a sense that several of the last president's initiatives – such as reforming inheritance laws to protect women's rights – reflected Western pressure and constituted an attack on Tunisian culture. The convergence of these parallel debates on political, economic and cultural sovereignty fuelled widespread desire for change and new personalities who could represent these demands, particularly on behalf of disillusioned youth.

Saïed offered a vision that seems to meet these emerging demands, which largely explains his 73 per cent landslide in the second round of voting. Running as an independent contributed to his electoral success, but this also means he will struggle to get his agenda through parliament. The new president is an academic and political outsider who aspires to complete the process that began in 2011 by upending the country's institutions and replacing them with a form of direct democracy based on local assemblies which, in his view, would re-legitimise and strengthen the state. His personal frugality and social conservatism helped him present himself as the candidate most capable of representing these demands.

In turn, the legislative elections produced a significantly different parliament. They reduced the secularist Nida Tounes (the assembly's largest party, which gained 86 of 217 seats in 2014) to a handful of representatives and the Islamist An-Nahda from 69 to 52 seats – with both parties weakened and unable to form a majority coalition in the new parliament. They also brought to the fore a host of new parties. The secularist Heart of Tunisia, led by media mogul Nabil Karoui, gained 38 seats, followed by the Democratic Current, which jumped from three to 22 seats, thanks to its anti-elite platform harking back to the spirit of the 2011 uprising. The Dignity Coalition, a merger of Islamist, conservative and revolutionary groups, secured 21 seats. Finally, the Free Destourian Party (fuelled by nostalgia for the Ben Ali era) secured seventeen representatives; the Arab nationalist People's Movement grew from three to fifteen seats; and a smaller conservative movement, Ar-Rahma, made its entry into the new parliament, gaining four seats.

Whether these new leaders and parties will be able to work together or, instead, allow their disagreements to fuel a new cycle of nationwide tensions is an open question. Negotiations to form a new government have yet to produce results, stymied by numerous divisions in a fragmented parliament and follow-

ing appointed Prime Minister Habib Jemli's failed attempt to win a confidence vote in parliament on 10 January.

This delicate phase carries three major risks. Although the rise of the new elite has superseded the old cleavage between Islamists (represented by An-Nahda) and secularists (mainly Nida Tounes), a novel form of polarisation could paralyse institutions as newly-elected representatives try to outbid each other to appease widespread public anger and frustration with the status quo. Some of them could, for example, launch biased and selective anti-corruption campaigns or pursue an antagonistic, populist foreign policy toward Tunisia's European partners and international financial institutions. This in turn could accentuate latent anti-Western sentiment and thus damage relations with the EU and IMF, jeopardising Tunisia's ability to service its foreign debt and threatening a balance of payments crisis.

Another risk stems from possible conflict between parliament and the presidency. In November, parliament elected An-Nahda leader Rached Ghannouchi as speaker. Ghannouchi is keen to revitalise parliament with the support of his party, the largest bloc, and is more pragmatic on economic and foreign policy than the president. However, this may put him on a collision course with Saïed, who believes in a strong presidency – within constitutional limits – and enjoys a strong popular mandate. A conflict between them, or with Tunisia's foreign creditors, could encourage Saïed to mobilise his supporters against parliament and Tunisia's party system and in favour of amending the constitution to introduce a system based on direct democracy. Alternatively, if he proves unable to satisfy popular demands for change, his failure may rekindle popular discontent and social tensions.

Finally, should parliament and the presidency fail to agree on a government and a majority coalition to support it, Saïed could dissolve parliament and call early elections. This scenario risks producing another fragmented parliament without a majority coalition, or heightened polarisation around the figure of the president, who could be tempted to break the impasse by attacking other parties and establishing his own.

There is a potentially positive scenario as well, under which these new political forces agree on a reform agenda aimed at improving front-line public services and breaking up business monopolies and patronage networks. With the support of the largest non-governmental institutions, such as employers and labour unions, the president and new government could prioritise public administration reform, ease access to credit for local entrepreneurs and establish an investment program for Tunisia's least developed regions. While this scenario would still involve renegotiating the economic reform agenda with the EU and IMF, tangible results would pre-empt or offset any criticism for engaging with these institutions.

A Pragmatic EU Stance Toward the New Government

The EU should view this newfound Tunisian concern for greater economic self-determination as an opportunity to reset their relationship. After years of generous funding that failed to yield the comprehensive political and economic

reform European officials had expected – and for which Tunisians had hoped – the EU should now focus its cooperation on smaller projects that could coincide with the new leadership’s priorities. Such an approach in turn could guide the Tunisian government toward a more pragmatic outlook that avoids the twin pitfalls of prolonged populist sentiment and parliamentary one-upmanship. The EU could aim for significant progress in areas where it is already providing support to Tunisian efforts to reform public administration, break up business monopolies (which would open up opportunities for small and medium-sized enterprises), boost local businesses’ access to credit and increase investment in peripheral and underdeveloped areas. This approach could be even more productive if the EU stressed the importance of creating opportunities for local companies in addition to stimulating competition and foreign investment – traditional EU goals.

With a supportive diplomatic stance and by continuing to provide financial aid, the EU has the potential to help shape Tunisia’s political and economic trajectory over the next few years. Tunisians have long debated the need for their country to regain its political, economic and cultural sovereignty vis-à-vis this key partner. The rise of a new elite demanding greater autonomy could prove a turning point in Tunisia’s relationship with the EU, as the new powers-that-be are under pressure to break with the past and more assertively defend the country’s interests. For their part, EU officials have expressed doubt about the efficacy of the economic reforms and fiscal austerity they have been supporting, which have had only limited impact on socio-economic conditions.

As for macro-economic reform, the EU should try to bypass the new elites’ resistance to foreign mandates by quietly engaging with the government to back development of a Tunisian-owned plan. Tunisia’s foreign financing needs will have to be reconciled with domestic demand for an economic revival, investment and job opportunities. The EU should discreetly encourage key economic ministers to elaborate a plan for stimulating investment, employment and growth that international financial institutions and creditors can support.

The EU should also approach controversial projects, such as the DCFTA, with care and flexibility. If negotiations break down, the EU should shelve the DCFTA for the time being and prioritise cooperation in other fields (such as the reforms outlined above), where the president and government might be more receptive. Likewise, offering support for the creation of a National Economic Intelligence Agency, as suggested by Tunisian experts, would be wise as it could improve coordination among the country’s multiple economic actors, decision-making centres and international donors. President Saïed and Parliament Speaker Ghannouchi might look favourably on an EU offer of technical support. Finally, the EU could highlight the importance of implementing the constitution (for example, establishing a constitutional court and electing its members).

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