



CrisisWatch 2018

January Trends & February Alerts

January saw violence rise in Afghanistan, likely to continue in February as conflict parties compete to gain the upper hand ahead of spring offensives. Clashes look set to escalate in north-west Syria, with the regime ramping up its push against rebels and Turkey launching an assault on Kurdish-held Afrin. In Yemen, southern separatists fought government forces, their erstwhile allies, to take control of Aden city in the south. In West Africa, both Mali and Niger experienced a rise in jihadist violence, in Nigeria deadly attacks between herders and farmers spiralled, and Equatorial Guinea said it had thwarted an attempted coup.

In the Horn of Africa, Somaliland troops clashed with neighbouring Puntland's forces and both sides looked to be preparing for more hostilities. In Colombia, peace talks between the government and the National Liberation Army were suspended following a spate of guerrilla attacks. The Venezuelan government's announcement of early elections sparked a crisis of confidence in talks with the opposition. Meanwhile, peace talks between North and South Korea provide an opportunity for de-escalation, however the threat of war on the peninsula is higher now than at any time in recent history.

With peace talks stalled, **Afghanistan** experienced a rise in deadly attacks by all armed actors, at a tempo and intensity that could persist as conflict parties try to gain the upper hand ahead of spring offensives. The Afghan National Security Forces claimed to have killed about 2,000 Taliban and Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-KP) fighters since late December, while attacks by the Taliban and the IS-KP have left scores dead. In one incident in Kabul claimed by the Taliban, a bomb in an ambulance killed more than 100. Recognising that Afghanistan risks facing escalating violence in 2018, Crisis Group has stressed that diplomatic channels should be preserved and a political settlement pursued.

In **Syria's** north west, Turkey's air and land offensive against Kurdish "People's Protection Units" (YPG) in Afrin, and regime advances

against rebels in Hama and Idlib provinces, marked a severe escalation and paved the way for worse fighting in February. As we warned, Turkey's offensive among a hostile population and in difficult territory could easily become a prolonged fight against a gritty insurgency, further strain its alliance with the YPG's main backer, the U.S., and provoke Kurdish attacks at home. A deal would serve both sides better. In **Yemen's** port city of Aden, southern separatists – nominally allied with the government in its fight against Huthi rebels – routed government forces from much of the city; dozens died in the fighting.

Suspected jihadist gunmen and suicide bombers in **Mali** upped deadly attacks against the military and French Barkhane forces, especially in Ménaka region in the east. In neighbouring **Niger**, Boko Haram militants



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Trends for January

-  **Deteriorated Situations**
Afghanistan, Colombia, Kosovo, Equatorial Guinea, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Somaliland, Syria, Venezuela, Yemen
-  **Improved Situations**
Korean peninsula

Outlook for February

-  **Conflict Risk Alerts**
Afghanistan, Somaliland, Syria, Korean peninsula
-  **Resolution Opportunities**
Korean peninsula

increased attacks against the army in the south east, killing at least ten soldiers. To confront these rural insurgencies in the Sahel, in tandem with military efforts, authorities and foreign partners should promote local mediation and peacebuilding initiatives and, where possible, try to engage militant leaders. **Nigeria's** expanding conflict between herding and farming communities spiralled in January with at least 200 killed across five states. Also in West Africa, **Equatorial Guinea** said it had foiled a coup attempt; 39 mercenaries were arrested in southern Cameroon.

Tensions between **Somaliland** and Puntland state in Somalia turned violent when on 8 January Somaliland troops seized the town of Tukaraq in the disputed Sool region, pushing out Puntland forces. With fighters exchanging fire on 28 January and both sides reportedly mobilising more manpower, February could see further hostilities.

In **Colombia**, amid a climate of mistrust at the negotiating table and a general atmosphere of public scepticism and apathy, peace talks between the government and the National Liberation Army (ELN) guerrilla group were suspended on 29 January following a spate of guerrilla attacks. In **Venezuela**, the government's announcement that it will hold early

elections "before 30 April", in defiance of ongoing talks with the opposition, sparked a crisis of confidence in the talks, greatly reducing the prospects of a viable agreement to resolve the political standoff.

In **Kosovo**, the murder of moderate Serb politician Oliver Ivanovic in Mitrovica on 16 January triggered shock and condemnation within Kosovo and by the U.S., EU and others in the international community, who called for all sides to remain calm, exercise restraint and avoid dangerous rhetoric.

North and South Korea conducted multiple rounds of peace talks in January and agreed to conduct several joint activities in the coming months. This came after Seoul responded positively to North Korean leader Kim Jong-un's offer of immediate and unconditional talks with South Korea in his annual New Year's address. As Crisis Group reports state, the thaw in relations offers an opportunity to dial down tensions and reduce the immediate risk of conflict through some form of de-escalatory deal between the U.S. and North Korea. Nevertheless, the threat of catastrophic war on the peninsula is higher now than at any time in recent history, and escalation could quickly resume after the Olympics.