

CrisisWatch

A monthly bulletin on current and potential conflicts
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March 2015 – Trends

↓ **Deteriorated situations**
[Burundi](#), [South Sudan](#), [Yemen](#)

↑ **Improved situations**
[Colombia](#), [Guinea-Bissau](#), [Myanmar](#), [Nigeria](#)

April 2015 – Watchlist

💣* **Conflict risk alerts**
[Yemen](#)

☪ **Conflict resolution opportunities**

CrisisWatch summarises developments during the previous month in some 70 situations of current or potential conflict, listed alphabetically by region, providing references and links to more detailed sources. It assesses whether the overall situation in each case has, during the previous month, significantly deteriorated, significantly improved, or on balance remained more or less unchanged. It identifies situations where, in the coming month, there is a risk of new or significantly escalated conflict, or a conflict resolution opportunity (noting that in some instances there may be both). It also summarises Crisis Group's reports and briefing papers published the previous month.

Arrows and alerts: Up, down and side arrows signify, respectively, improved, deteriorated or unchanged situations. Conflict Risk Alerts (identified with bombs) or Conflict Resolution Opportunities (with doves) are used in addition to arrows: a bomb signifies a risk of escalated violence; a dove an opportunity to advance peace. Both bombs and doves tend to be used where events are moving fast.

Table of Contents

AFRICA	3
Central Africa	3
Horn of Africa.....	4
Southern Africa.....	6
West Africa	7
ASIA	9
North East Asia.....	9
South Asia	10
South East Asia	13
EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA	15
Balkans.....	15
Caucasus.....	15
Eastern Europe.....	16
Western Europe/Mediterranean.....	17
Central Asia	18
LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN.....	19
MIDDLE EAST & NORTH AFRICA.....	21
Eastern Mediterranean	21
Gulf	22
North Africa.....	24

Africa

Central Africa

↓ **Burundi** Increased social discontent, including 3 March general strike against high cost of living, and deepening political tensions over President Nkurunziza's potential third term. Ruling CNDD-FDD meeting 11 March exposed discontent among party members: party leaders ("Wise Men Council") 14 March opposed Nkurunziza's presidential candidacy; CNDD-FDD President Nyabenda 24 March condemned petition against Nkurunziza's third term signed by 73 of party's senior executive, ten excluded from party next day. Former CNDD-FDD party leader Hussein Radjabu early March escaped jail, rumours he was aided by party officials. Party hardliners including generals and "Imbonerakure" youth movement reportedly organising terror campaign to support Nkurunziza's candidacy: General Nshimirimana 7 March announced he would use "any means" to ensure Nkurunziza is CNDD-FDD candidate. Former intelligence chief's wife and opposition National Liberation Forces (FNL) leader Agathon Rwasa's wife survived assassination attempts 8 and 15 March respectively. Electoral commission (CENI) 21-23 March reopened voter registration.

- ["Climate of fear in Burundi's election year"](#), DW, 12 March 2015.

➔ **Cameroon** Boko Haram (BH) attacks continued at reduced rate; nine killed during first half of month. Govt 9 March announced plan to recruit 2,000 Far North unemployed youths into army as part of efforts to provide economic alternative to joining BH; rally held in support of armed forces in Maroua 14 March. Amnesty International 25 Feb accused govt forces of extrajudicial killings, violence targeting Far North villagers; Communication Minister Issa Tchiroma mid-month acknowledged 25 died of asphyxiation in gendarmerie custody in Far North but rejected other accusations. Abductions by alleged militants crossing from CAR resumed: sixteen people including local politicians kidnapped 19 March near Garoua Boulai.

- ["Cameroon says it treats Boko Haram suspects humanely despite 25 prison deaths"](#), Reuters, 14 March 2015.

➔ **Central African Republic** Security continued to improve in Bangui though criminality remained high, particularly in capital's north; MINUSCA, Sangaris and national forces conducted several operations, established checkpoints. UNSC 26 March authorised additional troops for MINUSCA: 750 military personnel, 280 police and twenty corrections officers. FPRC wing of Seleka 10 March asked international forces and govt to stop arrests of rebels after ex-Seleka rebel Mahamat Ousmane detained 9 March. Local consultations ahead of Bangui Forum completed early March; International Contact Group 16 March approved transitional parliament's draft constitution including provision forbidding armed group leaders from running for elections. EUFOR mission concluded 15 March; EU 16 March launched military advisory mission in CAR (EUMAM) with aim of supporting security sector reform.

- ["EU launches new military advisory mission in CAR"](#), DefenceWeb, 19 March 2015.

➔ **Chad** Nigerian President Jonathan 12 March asked Chadian army to stop military advance in Nigeria in fight against Boko Haram (BH); troops redeployed to Cameroon's

Far North cities, close to Nigerian border. Chadian army 21 March retook Gambaru near border from BH, killed several BH fighters. Chad and Niger 8 March launched land, air attack in Bosso and Diffa (Niger), reportedly captured Damasak (Nigeria); 31 March reportedly retook Malam Fatori (Nigeria). Popular unrest in Chad increased: one killed during student protest 9 March; police 11 March shot at crowd accompanying student's body home, EU 20 March condemned "disproportionate" use of force. Several opposition leaders late March accused Déby of using fear of BH to strengthen control.

- ["L'union européenne demande de 'faire la lumière sur les responsabilités' après les événements du 9 mars"](#), Camer.be, 21 March 2015.

➔ **DR Congo** MONUSCO mandate renewed for one year 26 March, force reduced by 2,000. National intelligence service (ANR) 15 March arrested dozens in Kinshasa including visiting Senegalese-Burkinabe activists, Congolese activists, and USAID worker. Goma-based movement Lutte pour le changement's (LUCHA) protest violently repressed 17 March; ten activists arrested, govt later claimed U.S. responsible for supporting social unrest; parliamentary mission established 28 March to investigate. President Kabila 2 March promulgated law on creation of 26 provinces from current eleven by mid-July. Tensions within presidential majority continued including 5 March request from senior party members' alliance for clarity on Kabila's candidacy. Army mid-March claimed unilateral Congolese military operation against FDLR neutralised 182 rebels.

- ["Nouvelles arrestations d'activistes à Goma"](#), Afrikarabia, 17 March 2015.

➔ **Rwanda** Court 12 March handed eleven people jail sentences ranging from ten years to life, for conspiring with DRC FDLR rebels to oust President Kagame.

- ["UK urges Rwanda to lift BBC broadcasting ban"](#), *Guardian*, 19 March 2015.

Horn of Africa

➔ **Ethiopia** Ethiopia, Egypt and Sudan 6 March signed preliminary agreement on principles of Nile water cooperation, including on Ethiopia's Grand Renaissance Dam project; deal further eased tensions between Ethiopia and Egypt over dam.

- ["Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan sign deal on Nile dam"](#), VoA, 23 March 2015.

➔ **Kenya** Al-Shabaab 17 March detonated IED in Mandera town killing three Kenya Revenue Authority officials; attack occurred three days after visit by high-level national security officials including newly-appointed Inspector General of Police. Mandera county governor's convoy attacked 13 March, four killed. Three killed in suspected Al-Shabaab attack in Wajir 17 March. Interior Ministry 23 March announced plan to build barriers along border with Somalia in bid to stem Al-Shabaab attacks. Mombasa county officials 9 March agreed to establish community policing unit in collaboration with local youths to deal with rising insecurity; followed early-March reports of youth radicalisation at Mlango wa Papa mosque. Senior police officer killed 26 March in suspected Islamist revenge attack in Mombasa, 52 suspects detained.

- ["Kenya to build a wall on Somali border to keep out al-Shabaab"](#), *Guardian*, 2 March 2015.

➔ **Somalia** Al-Shabaab attacks continued: eight reportedly killed including five militants in 12 March attack on new Interim South West State presidential building in Baidoa; clan elder assassinated in Beledweyn town 6 March. Al-Shabaab 11 March captured Wanlaweyn town, 13 March briefly occupied Jalalaqsi town in Hiraan region. At least 24 killed in Al-Shabaab attack on hotel in Mogadishu 27 March. Two suspected Al-Shabaab camps in Torato and Ambereso, Lower Shabelle, hit by drone strikes 10 March; Al-Shabaab operative allegedly involved in Sept 2013 Westgate Mall attack reportedly killed by drone strike 12 March near Bardheere, Gedo region. Somalia Federal Government (SFG) and Ahlu Sunna wal Jamaa (ASWJ) Sufi militia agreed to ceasefire after Feb clashes in Guriel and Dhusamareb, Galgaduud region; Ethiopian AMISOM forces 24 March took control of area. Al-Shabaab attacks in Puntland continued, including attack on army patrol in Bossaso city 2 March. Armed gunman 30 March attacked Juba Intelligence HQ; multiple suspects arrested. Puntland President Gaas 6 March signed MOU on regional cooperation with President of Interim Juba Administration Madobe – on natural resources, finalisation of provisional federal constitution, and National Independent Electoral Commission (NIEC). Jubaland parliament inaugurated 7 March amid continued opposition from clans in Gedo region.

- [“Somali forces end Al-Shabab siege of Mogadishu hotel”](#), VoA, 28 March 2015.

➔ **Somaliland** Protests erupted in contested Sool and Sanaag regions following breakdown of latest round of Somalia-Somaliland Turkey talks 2 March. Electoral commission 6 March announced postponement of June presidential and parliamentary elections citing technical delays for voter registration. Cabinet reshuffled 9, 14 March.

- [“Opposition alliance and ruling party in elections delay standoff”](#), *Somaliland Sun*, 18 March 2015.

⚡ **South Sudan** Serious uptick in fighting accompanied 6 March suspension of IGAD-led peace negotiations after what were termed “final talks” between govt and SPLM-IO ended without agreement. IGAD chair called for future mediation led by expanded “IGAD-plus” group possibly including AU, China, EU and “troika” (U.S., UK, Norway); no date set for resumption of talks, govt 31 March said it will oppose troika’s participation in negotiations. UNSC 24 March threatened sanctions against “senior individuals”. Military operations increased: govt 6 March launched coordinated offensives in Upper Nile capturing Wadakona and advancing toward SPLA-IO HQ in Pagak; skirmishes took place in Unity state; SPLA-IO 26 March attacked Ayod in Jonglei. Army 27 March claimed 54 rebel fighters killed in clashes in Bentiu and Ayod. Govt 24 Feb offered amnesty to SPLA-IO members until 31 March. Parliament 24 March extended President Kiir and elected officials’ terms by three years; opposition said extension illegal.

- [“South Sudan Peace Talks Stall”](#), *New York Times*, 6 March 2015.

➔ **Sudan** Fighting in S Kordofan continued: SPLM-N early March claimed attack on Kalogi, north of state capital Kadugli; Sudanese Armed forces (SAF) claimed attack repulsed. SPLM-N chief Yasir Arman 14 March said attack was defensive, denied earlier SPLM-N claims that attacks were aimed at disrupting April elections. SPLM-N 28 March clashed with SAF in Habeela, S Kordofan. Violence and insecurity in Darfur continued, mainly in eastern Jebel Marra area, leaving several dead. Sudan and S Sudan 30 March resumed talks on disputed Abyei region; ruling National Congress Party 29 March rejected invitation to pre-dialogue meeting. Sudan 26 March confirmed par-

participation in Saudi-led military campaign against Yemen's Huthi insurgency. Sudan 23 March signed Nile agreement (see Ethiopia).

- [“Sudan ruling party rejects opposition talks after rebel attack”](#), Bloomberg, 30 March 2015.

New Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°108, *Sudan: The Prospects for “National Dialogue”*, 11 March 2015. President Bashir's year-old promise of national dialogue is faltering through a lack of political will, factional manoeuvring, and looming elections. Though the threat of economic and political crisis has eased, renewed commitment to substantive, structured, broad-based dialogue is vital if Sudan is to escape the cycle of war and humanitarian crisis.

➔ **Uganda** Security forces 5 March raided mosques, two primary schools in Busia, arrested 34 Muslims with alleged links to Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) rebels. Police 3 March raided mosque in Budaka district, arrested two ADF suspects. Further eleven suspected rebels arrested during month. Security officials 26 March said they will increase security at key locations following U.S. embassy warning. Senior prosecutor in 2010 Kampala bombings case killed 30 March in suspected assassination.

- [“Police, army raid Busia mosques”](#), Daily Monitor, 5 March 2015.

Southern Africa

➔ **Madagascar** Malagasy Council of Churches (FFKM)-led reconciliation talks held 20 March between former leaders Ravalomanana and Ratsiraka, and President Rajoanarimampianina; former coup leader Rajoelina and former President Zafy did not attend following their 19 Feb withdrawal from talks. Leaders present agreed to delay planned national reconciliation conference to 28 April. Opposition leader Alain Ramaroson arrested 28 March as security forces blocked planned protests in capital calling on govt to address living conditions, released 31 March.

- [“Réconciliation nationale – Un sommet à trois reporte les assises nationales”](#), L'Express de Madagascar, 21 March 2015.

➔ **Mozambique** Tensions over opposition Renamo's proposal for creation of autonomous provinces increased following 3 March shooting of constitutional lawyer Gilles Cistac, who had been working on proposal. Peaceful protest against murder 7 March blocked by armed police. Renamo 16 March submitted “Bill on Provincial Municipalities” to National Assembly, proposed provinces where party won/claimed to have won majority be governed autonomously; Renamo leader Afonso Dhlakama 14 March announced party would seize autonomy regardless of outcome of parliamentary vote. Former President Armando Guebuza 29 March resigned as Frelimo party leader, replaced by current President Nyusi. Dialogue on disarmament remained stalled.

- [“Murder in Maputo”](#), *Economist*, 14 March 2015.

➔ **Zimbabwe** President Mugabe faced series of court challenges following months-long ZANU-PF purges. Expelled party members Ruagare Gumbo and Didymus Mutasa 2 March issued challenge to High Court seeking to strike down Mugabe's reforms from Dec party congress; Mutasa and former minister Temba Mliswa 9 March brought challenge to Constitutional Court over their 18 Feb expulsion from National Assembly. Mugabe 7 March threatened to discredit judge handling Mutasa and Gumbo case, said courts have no right to interfere in internal party matters. ZANU-PF 29 March won by-

elections in Mt Darwin West and Chirumanzu-Zibagwe, latter won by VP Mnangagwa's wife Auxilia. National Assembly speaker Jacob Mudenda and Senate President Edna Madzongwe 18 March expelled fourteen MPs of MDC-R (party formed following 2014 split with opposition MDC-T) from parliament; Mugabe 28 March announced by-elections mid-June to fill vacant seats. Abduction of activist Itai Dzamara 9 March, reportedly by security forces, sparked protests and violent response by security forces.

- ["Zimbabwe President Mugabe sued by former Zanu-PF allies"](#), BBC, 4 March 2015.

West Africa

➔ **Burkina Faso** Transition continued: countrywide update to voter roll launched 3 March; anti-corruption law passed 4 March. Commission for National Reconciliation and Reform held first session 10 March, named Archbishop Paul Ouédraogo its president. Govt 16 March adopted emergency socio-economic program targeted at women, youth. Military court 24 March reopened case on former President Sankara's assassination. At National Conference on judiciary 24-28 March, President, PM, traditional and religious authorities and civil society leaders signed pact to reform, strengthen judiciary.

- ["L'affaire Thomas Sankara confiée au tribunal militaire"](#), RFI, 25 March 2015.

➔ **Côte d'Ivoire** Trial of 82 pro-Gbagbo figures ended 10 March, former First Lady Simone Gbagbo sentenced to twenty years' jail. Pro-Gbagbo hardliners 5 March expelled Ivorian Popular Front (FPI) party President Pascal Affi N'Guessan, declared Aboudramana Sangaré president; Affi 12 March challenged decision in court. Rally of the Republicans (RDR) 22 March declared President Ouattara its candidate for Oct presidential elections. "Anti-Ouattara" coalition created 18 March by four Democratic Party of Côte d'Ivoire (PDCI) dissidents and opposition figures, including Sangaré faction of FPI. ICC 11 March announced Gbagbo will be tried early-July with former young patriots chief Charles Blé Goudé. New reconciliation commission created 24 March to work on compensation for war victims.

- ["Simone Gbagbo condamnée à 20 ans de prison"](#), RFI, 10 March 2015.

➔ **Guinea** Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI) 10 March released long-awaited elections schedule: first round of presidential elections planned 11 Oct 2015, local elections first quarter of 2016. Opposition 17 March announced measures to protest elections schedule including their 51 representatives suspending participation in National Assembly; also said they ceased to recognise CENI and local authorities. Leaders of three main opposition parties 24 March signed declaration calling for resumption of street protests; President Condé responded with invitation to dialogue.

- ["L'opposition appelle à manifester contre le calendrier électoral"](#), AFP, 25 March 2015.

↑ **Guinea-Bissau** Tensions between President José Mario Vaz and PM Simões Pereira eased ahead of 25 March donor roundtable at which international partners pledged €1.15bn in aid over ten years. Agreement finally reached 6 March between President and PM on appointment of PAIGC member and former Defence Minister Octavio Alves as new minister of internal administration.

- ["Les bailleurs de la Guinée-Bissau soutiennent son plan de 'terra ranka'"](#), RFI, 26 March 2015.

New Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°109, [Security Sector Reform in Guinea-Bissau: An Opportunity Not to Be Missed](#), 19 March 2015. A legitimate civilian government, economic improvement and an army that has lost credibility are an opportunity for Guinea-Bissau. Regional and international partners meeting in Brussels should commit to finance security sector reform to help the small state move beyond its history of military coups.

➡ **Mali** Main Tuareg armed coalition Coordination of Movement of Azawad (CMA) 16 March published “Final Declaration Following Kidal Meetings”, stating refusal to sign preliminary peace deal agreed 1 March between rebels and govt, willingness to pursue further negotiations in context of international mediation. Terrorist attack in Bamako 6 March killed three Malians, one Belgian, one French citizen; claimed by jihadi group Al Mourabitoun. FM Abdoulaye Diop 9 March met French counterpart, requested support to neutralise jihadi networks. Insecurity in north continued: 8 March attack on UN camp in Kidal killed one peacekeeper, ten civilians; two soldiers killed 13 March when army vehicle hit IED on Diabaly-Nampala axis, Segou region; ICRC truck attacked 30 March on route to Niger, driver killed.

- [“Pas d'accord à Kidal, mais l'espoir de nouvelles négociations”](#), RFI, 18 March 2015.

➡ **Niger** Offensive to expel Boko Haram (BH) continued: thousands of Nigerien and Chadian soldiers 8 March pushed BH back onto Nigerian soil. Remnants of BH continued attacks in Bosso, Diffa regions: BH 1 March attacked Kui Keleha and Toumbu Buka islands, killing nineteen civilians; IED exploded 4 March 10km from Diffa, two soldiers killed. National Police 10 March said BH attacks on Nigerien soil killed 24 soldiers and police in previous month. President Issoufou 4 March met Chadian President Déby, expressed will to strengthen military cooperation against BH.

- [“Boko Haram ne prendra plus de ville au Niger, assure un ministre nigérien”](#), Jeune Afrique, 14 March 2015.

⬆ **Nigeria** Presidential and federal parliamentary elections held 28 March: President Jonathan conceded defeat even before opposition All Progressives Congress (APC) candidate Muhammadu Buhari declared winner 31 March, representing peaceful transfer of power after sixteen years of People’s Democratic Party (PDP) rule. Election-related violence continued despite President Jonathan and rival Buhari 26 March signing agreement to prevent violence: PDP, APC and sixteen other parties’ supporters clashed 10 March in Rivers state capital Port Harcourt; Governor Amaechi 16 March said at least one APC member killed a day in Rivers state; National Human Rights Commission 31 March reported over 50 killed in election-related violence. Offensive against Boko Haram (BH) insurgency continued: military 16 March reported troops fully reclaimed Adamawa and Yobe states; 27 March announced recapture of BH stronghold Gwoza, Borno state; 30 March said it foiled BH attack in Gombe state, three militants killed. BH attacks included some 74 men and twenty children killed in attack at Njaba village, Borno state, 5 March. Suicide attacks continued with some 112 killed in Borno state. BH 7 March offered allegiance to Islamic State (IS, formerly ISIL); IS accepted offer 13 March. Suspected Fulani herdsmen 15 March attacked Egba village in Agatu local govt area of Benue state, some 90 people killed.

- Nnamdi Obasi, [“Managing Nigeria’s Election Tensions”](#), In Pursuit of Peace, 24 March 2015.
- [“Nigeria election: Muhammadu Buhari wins presidency”](#), BBC, 1 April 2015.

Asia

North East Asia

➔ **China (internal)** Police shot dead seven Uighurs in Kashgar prefecture, Xinjiang, after they allegedly hacked to death four people including local police chief 8 March; police had reportedly earlier shot dead a Uighur woman. Police 12 March reportedly shot dead four Uighurs responsible for knife attack on ethnic Han group in Kashgar; 9 March shot dead up to seven Uighurs in Hotan prefecture. Senior party official in Xinjiang 10 March said some Uighurs fighting alongside Islamic State before returning to Xinjiang “to participate in terrorist plots”; several arrested on return. Three people convicted over March 2014 mass stabbing in Kunming executed 24 March. U.S.-based Uyghur Human Rights Project reported up to 700 killed in political violence in Xinjiang 2013-2014, mostly ethnic Uighurs. Supreme Court reported 712 people convicted for terrorism, separatism and related crimes in 2014, said such offences its top priority in 2015. Draft anti-terrorism law deliberated at National People’s Congress early March, criticised by rights groups.

- [“Xinjiang extremists joining the IS to fight in jihad: China”](#), *Hindustan Times*, 10 March 2015.

➔ **China/Japan** After four-year hiatus, 13th round of Japan-China Security Dialogue held in Tokyo 19 March. Japanese Deputy FM urged each side to “discuss intentions and thoughts behind each other’s defence policies”; Chinese side expressed hope Japan would stick to “purely defensive” posture. Sides agreed to speed up communications mechanism to avoid accidental clashes, did not set timeline for implementation. Former defence ministry official 2 March told Xinhua China and Japan “soon” to launch formal mechanism to manage local maritime and aerial crises, provided Japan does not offend China again. China, Japan and South Korea convened trilateral FMs meeting in Seoul 21 March, first since 2012.

- [“Will meeting of China, Japan and South Korea yield goodwill or more grumbling?”](#), *LA Times*, 20 March 2015.

➔ **Korean Peninsula** DPRK army conducted live-fire ballistic missile exercise into Sea of Japan 2 March; also live-fire surface-to-air missile exercise and Air Force exercise. ROK, U.S. and coalition allies began annual combined and joint military exercises. ROK media quoted anonymous ROK intelligence source 25 Feb saying DPRK conducting conventional high-explosive tests for nuclear weapons, would enable DPRK to conduct higher yield nuclear tests in future. DPRK’s Korean Workers Party held enlarged meeting of Central Military Commission (CMC) 23 Feb; CMC Chairman Kim Jong-un called for “full combat readiness” ahead of ROK-U.S. military exercises, stressed need to simplify and reorganise military. Seoul 17 March announced DPRK behind Dec 2014 cyber-attacks on ROK nuclear reactor operator; DPRK denied. UNSC’s DPRK Sanctions Committee Panel of Experts released report 23 Feb revealing country’s continued efforts to circumvent sanctions against its nuclear and missile programs. Russia and China discussed possible resumption of six-party talks on DPRK nuclear program late April/May. Japan 31 March said it was extending sanctions on

DPRK citing lack of progress in talks on release of kidnapped Japanese nationals. ROK and DPRK sparred over Kaesŏng Industrial Complex wages and governance.

- [“North Korea’s neighbors push to resume six-party talks”](#), Reuters, 26 March 2015.

South Asia

➔ **Afghanistan** Govt and international backers hopeful of kickstarting peace talks with insurgents: President Ghani's special representative on reforms and good governance 12 March said Taliban had shown willingness to meet officials. Ghani 14 March reportedly visited Riyadh to consult with Saudi govt on potential talks; Pakistan and China also reportedly taking steps to facilitate process. Taliban deny taking part in negotiations. Ghani visited U.S. late month, addressed Congress; President Obama 24 March announced U.S. will slow withdrawal of troops, to train and assist Afghan forces in face of increased Taliban aggression: will maintain 9,800 troops till year-end, stick to 2017 exit plan. Series of kidnappings targeting Hazaras raised concerns about sectarian conflict and extremist groups claiming to have connections with Islamic State (IS, formerly ISIL). Zabul province's police chief 3 March said at least 60 militants killed/wounded in operations to rescue 31 Hazaras kidnapped 26 Feb. Other insurgent attacks included: over a dozen killed in/around Lashkar Gar 10, 18 March; at least seven police killed in Kunduz province ambush 12 March; gunmen shot dead at least thirteen on Kabul-Kandahar highway 24 March; nine killed in two suicide attacks in Kabul late March. Govt reported army killed ten insurgents in Helmand 15 March; authorities reported U.S. drone strikes killed twenty Pakistani militants in Nangarhar province late March. Independent Electoral Complaints Commission 1 March said at least 10,000 temporary and twenty permanent officials of Independent Election Commission involved in fraud during 2014 elections. Visiting Indian FM Jaishankar reportedly reiterated plans to develop mineral resources. Deputy chairman of High Peace Council 11 March complained body being sidelined by presidential palace amid preparations for peace talks with insurgents.

- [“Ghani addresses Congress, eager to rebuild Afghan-U.S. ties”](#), *New York Times*, 25 March 2015.

➔ **Bangladesh** Bangladesh National Party (BNP) leader Khaleda Zia failed to appear at her trial for corruption 3 March despite threat of arrest; her lawyer said she was willing to appear and surrender to police if security was guaranteed, she was allowed bail and could return to her party office. Next court hearing scheduled for 5 April. BNP 9 March suspended ongoing 48-hour *hartal* (strike) before restoring strikes 10-13 March. Zia allowed to address press conference from her office 13 March, first since early Jan; reiterated demands for fresh election under neutral caretaker setup, end to enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings, and dialogue to resolve political crisis. PM Sheikh Hasina next day ruled out fresh dialogue. Although Sheikh Hasina's Awami League (AL) and BNP remain intractable in public positions, senior party officials from both sides have expressed willingness to talk, contingent on BNP ending violent street agitation, and govt ending abuse of human rights and fundamental political freedoms. Despite lower death toll in street clashes between pro-govt supporters and BNP-led opposition, political tensions and sporadic violence continue. Police 2 March arrested alleged activist of banned Hizb ut-Tahrir as prime suspect in

murder of well-known Bangladeshi-American activist writer Avijit Roy, hacked to death on street in Dhaka 26 Feb; murder compounded public fears of extremists taking advantage of political crisis. Blogger Washiqur Rahman hacked to death in another attack in Dhaka 30 March. BNP's SG Salahuddin Ahmed disappeared after being apprehended 10 March by men identifying themselves as police; police inspector general denied any agency under his control had Ahmed in custody. Five killed in arson attacks 19 March. Chief Election Commissioner 18 March announced long-overdue Dhaka and Chittagong mayoral polls for 28 April; BNP yet to decide if it will take part.

- [“Amid political chaos, Bangladesh fears a rise in militancy”](#), *Wall Street Journal*, 23 March 2015.
- For latest report, see Crisis Group Asia report N°264, [Mapping Bangladesh's Political Crisis](#), 9 Feb. 2015.

➔ **India (non-Kashmir)** Several Maoists arrested during month including top Maoist David Marandi late March. Several killed in Maoist attacks including policeman in Dantewada district and villager in south Chhattisgarh 24 March, and three civilians in eastern Jharkhand state 22 March. Security forces on alert for ethnic clashes ahead of Bodoland Territorial Council elections in April.

- [“6 Maoist, PLFI rebels held in Bokaro, Dumka”](#), *Times of India*, 26 March 2015.

➔ **Kashmir** Indian FM Jaishankar visited Pakistan early March, met with PM Sharif and FM Chaudhry; Pakistan's foreign ministry described visit as “ice-breaking development”, Jaishankar said countries “agreed to work together to find common ground and narrow differences”. Followed 26 Feb visit by Pakistani army chief Raheel Sharif to locations in Punjab along working boundary separating Pakistan and India-administered Kashmir, during which he said “any provocation along the LoC (Line of Control) or the Working Boundary will meet a befitting response”. Six people including two terrorists, three security forces and a civilian killed in militant attack on police station in Jammu 20 March. Indian Defence Minister Parrikar 21 March said security forces had killed 26 terrorists so far in 2015. People's Democratic Party (PDP) Mufti Mohammed Sayeed sworn in as chief minister of Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir 1 March, 7 March ordered release of separatist leader and general secretary of All-Parties Hurriyat Conference Masarat Alam Bhat, provoking strong opposition from coalition govt partner PM Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party. Islamabad High Court 13 March ordered release on bail of Lashkar-e-Tayyaba operative Zakiur Rehman Lakhvi, charged with involvement in 2008 Mumbai attack, provoking strong reaction from New Delhi; Rehman detained by Punjab govt.

- [“Two terrorists 'neutralised' in Jammu, says Parrikar; 3 injured in attack on army camp”](#), *Hindustan Times*, 21 March 2015.

➔ **Nepal** As parties again failed to overcome deadlock on overdue draft constitution, specifically over issue of federalism, 30-party alliance of opposition parties led by Unified Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) announced fresh protests, nationwide strike early April. Constituent Assembly chair Subhash Nemwang extended deadline for agreement on constitution again.

- [“Another deadline looms in Nepal constitution deadlock”](#), Anadolu Agency, 27 March 2015.

➔ **Pakistan** Head of National Counter Terrorism Authority Hamid Ali Khan 8 March reportedly said govt had decided to drop three of twenty points in new counter-terrorism National Action Plan, namely actions against banned militant organisations, madrasa reform, and repatriation of Afghans; Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali refuted claim. After saying late Feb that govt plans to repatriate all Afghans, federal minister for state and frontier regions Abdul Qadir Baloch 11 March said govt instead planned to register 1.4 million unregistered Afghans. Suicide attacks on two Lahore churches 15 March killed seventeen, injured more than 70; amid countrywide demonstrations against attacks 17 March, Christian protestors allegedly killed two men by setting them on fire. Paramilitary Rangers 11 March raided Karachi HQ of Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), detaining 100 and recovering weapons it claimed were stolen from NATO shipments (denied by U.S.). MQM alleged Rangers killed one of its members in raid; Rangers denied. Four suspected Taliban killed in clash with security forces in Karachi 10 March; two police killed in bomb attack in city 27 March. Spokesperson of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) breakaway faction Jamatul Ahrar 13 March announced his group and Khyber agency-based Lashkar-e-Islam merging with TTP. Former TTP commander in N Waziristan 16 March reportedly announced his newly-created breakaway faction Jaish-e-Muttaqi had reached peace deal with govt. Army 16 March announced successful end of its operation in Khyber agency; reported scores of militants killed in airstrikes and ground offensives in area in second half of month. Two polio vaccinators and police escort shot dead 17 March in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Mansehra district; another vaccinator killed in FATA's Bajaur agency next day. Defence Minister Asif in talks with Saudi Arabia 31 March on whether to join Saudi-led military campaign in Yemen against Houthi rebels.

- [“Christians hold funerals for victims of church attacks”](#), AFP, 17 March 2015.

➔ **Sri Lanka** Govt 23 March tabled draft bill for 19th constitutional amendment, key component in President Sirisena's 100-day agenda. Amendment limits presidential powers, expands powers of PM, establishes series of independent oversight commissions. Sirisena 23 March appointed group of SLFP ministers to UNP-led govt in bid to win SLFP support and two-thirds parliamentary majority for 19th amendment. Tensions in Sirisena's broad coalition deepened over dates of parliamentary elections and introduction of new election laws. Supporters of ex-President Rajapaksa, including some SLFP MPs, held large rallies 6 and 26 March calling for his return as PM in next parliament. Indian PM Modi visited mid-March, called for full implementation of 13th amendment and “going beyond”. Sirisena visited China late March amid tension over suspension of work on key Chinese-funded development projects following corruption allegations. Sirisena visited London 8-10 March to attend Commonwealth meetings. UK PM Cameron pressed new govt to cooperate with OHCHR war crimes investigation. Sirisena promised domestic accountability mechanism, UN to play no role beyond offering advice. UN special rapporteur on transitional justice visited Sri Lanka end March. Govt 10 March released activist Balendran Jayakumari on bail, released some military-held land in north, allowed national anthem to be sung in Tamil. Multiple investigations into financial fraud by UPFA politicians underway, several corruption-related arrests made, court placed travel ban on Gotabaya Rajapaksa.

- [“Sri Lanka says Mahinda Rajapaksa officials hid more than \\$2bn in Dubai”](#), Reuters, 20 March 2015.

South East Asia

➔ **Indonesia** Govt launched military exercises in Sulawesi late month as part of response to reported threat posed by militants with links to Islamic State (IS, formerly ISIL) – blamed by police for 23 Feb chlorine bomb in Jakarta shopping centre.

- ["ISIS in Indonesia"](#), *Wall Street Journal*, 27 March 2015.

⬆ **Myanmar** Govt and ethnic armed groups 31 March agreed text of historic Nationwide Ceasefire Accord following seventh round of peace talks 17-22, 30-31 March, after hiatus of almost six months, and first-ever senior KIO delegation to Naypyitaw 16 March. Formal signing expected May at earliest, although sides need to agree which armed groups are eligible to sign. Several contentious political and military issues left for subsequent political dialogue process, including shape of future armed forces; little time for this before elections. Progress made despite serious clashes continuing in Kokang region between military and Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA). Military continues to incur regular casualties, including at least sixteen military personnel killed 18 March, but controls major roads, most hills. Attempt to retake hills from MNDAA using air force saw fighting spill across border into China 8 and 13 March; in latter incident stray bomb apparently from Myanmar aircraft killed five Chinese nationals, prompting strained relations and public warnings from China, deployment of military jets to step up patrols along border. Protests by students against Sept 2014 education law that started in Jan continued despite govt 14 Feb agreeing to all eleven of their demands; around 200 continued march from Mandalay to Yangon. Police 3 March blocked protest march at Letpadan, just N of Yangon, 10 March violently broke up protest there, arrested 127; released some 50 "genuine students" and bystanders, prosecutions underway against 69 others. Protest in Yangon in support of protestors violently broken up 5 March, first by plainclothes auxiliaries as uniformed police looked on, then by police.

- ["President attends ceremony where govt. rebels signal support for draft nationwide ceasefire"](#), *Irrawaddy*, 31 March 2015.

➔ **Philippines** President Aquino facing political crisis as 13 March police investigative report stated that he bypassed chain of command of "defective" anti-terrorist operation in Mamasapano 25 Jan that saw 44 commandos, seventeen MILF and at least five killed in clash; also allowed former police chief friend to participate in mission despite being under suspension over graft allegations; and involvement of U.S. officials in intelligence sharing, medical evacuation. Report called for investigation to determine criminal liability, prompted calls for Aquino's resignation. Aquino 9 March said he had been misled about details of Mamasapano operation. MILF 24 March submitted its report on Mamasapano incident to Senate, said police commando unit opened fire first and broke terms of ceasefire by not notifying MILF of operation in advance. After receiving report, Ferdinand Marcos, chairman of Senate Committee on Local Govt which will decide on Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL), scheduled resumption of BBL hearing for 13 April. MILF denied allegations that it had opened new training camp in Iligan City. Govt continued offensive against Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) in Maguindanao, said it would not affect peace process with MILF. UNHCR 20 March reported over 120,000 displaced in fighting in southern Philippines since late

Jan. Dozens of rebels and several govt soldiers killed in fighting. Military captured leader of BIFF breakaway rebel group Justice Islamic Movement mid-March, 30 March ended offensive, said over 100 insurgents killed. One year since signing of Comprehensive Agreement on Bangsamoro, Aquino 27 March announced creation of citizens peace council led by national luminaries to make independent review of BBL.

- [“Senate to hear Bangsamoro bill, discuss MILF report”](#), Rappler, 25 March 2015.

➡ **South China Sea** Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman 11 March suggested that ASEAN SG Le had damaged image of regional body with earlier comments rejecting China’s nine-dash line. Vietnamese PM Dung reiterated importance of drawing up code of conduct during visit to Australia 18 March; also called for “self-restraint” and refraining from military force. ASEAN defence ministers 16 March issued a joint declaration expressing commitment to freedom of navigation and over-flight in SCS. Philippines 26 March said it would resume repair and reconstruction works in SCS. Top U.S. official in 31 March speech in Australia said China creating “great wall of sand” in SCS, “serious questions” about its intentions.

- [“Philippines fires back at China’s South China Sea charges”](#), *Diplomat*, 31 March 2015.

➡ **Thailand** Grenade at Bangkok Criminal Court 7 March caused minor damage; two suspects arrested near scene allegedly confessed to being part of Red-Shirt conspiracy to stage multiple attacks. Lawyers for four further suspects 17 March alleged military had tortured their clients; army denied. PM Prayuth 9 March warned future general election contingent on stability. More details of draft constitution emerged late Feb indicating diminished role for elected politicians; Constitution Drafting Committee announced senate will be “indirectly elected”, PM will not be required to be elected MP nor affiliated with political party. Senior National Reform Council member 11 March said new constitution would be completed by Sept, bylaws enacted within 60 days, general election held 90 days later. Attorney general 17 March filed charges against former commerce minister and twenty others for corruption in prior govt’s rice subsidy scheme; Supreme Court 19 March announced it will decide whether former PM Yingluck was guilty of criminal negligence for failing to halt alleged graft in scheme, first hearing to be in May. PM Prayuth 27 March said he would soon lift martial law and invoke Article 44 of provisional constitution, which grants him absolute power. Several civilians and security forces wounded in insurgent attacks in deep south, including in largely peaceful Songkhla province. Families of four men killed by security forces in 25 March raid in Thung Yang Daeng district, Pattani, denied slain men were militants.

- [“The pen and the sword”](#), *Economist*, 26 March 2015.

Europe and Central Asia

Balkans

➔ **Bosnia** Three main parties of Bosnia's Federation entity, Party of Democratic Action (SDA), Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) and Democratic Front 12 March agreed on formation of new govt, following Oct 2014 elections; SDA to hold PM post. State parliament 31 March approved nine-member Council of Ministers. EU FMs 16 March activated Bosnia's Stabilisation and Association Agreement following Feb declaration by Bosnian parliament in support of EU integration. Main Bosnian Serb party SNSD and Republika Srpska President Milorad Dodik same day announced boycott of parliament over disagreement on distribution of positions in committees.

- ["Bosnia forms new government"](#), Anadolu Agency, 31 March 2015.

➔ **Kosovo** Minister for Dialogue Edita Tahiri issued report 23 March blaming Belgrade for delay in implementing April 2013 Brussels Agreement on normalisation of Kosovo-Serbia relations, by maintaining parallel structures. Kosovo, Serbia and EU late month reached agreement to dissolve parallel Civil Protection force in Serb-majority north, incorporate members into police (in line with Brussels Agreement).

- ["Kosovo accuses Serbia of delaying Brussels Agreement"](#), Balkan Insight, 24 March 2015.

Caucasus

➔ **Armenia** Gagik Tsarukian, leader of Prosperous Armenia Party (BHK), announced 5 March he was stepping down from position; follows Feb criticism against him by President Sargsyan and detention of several BHK members. Members of U.S. House of Representatives 18 March introduced resolution urging President Obama to recognise mass killing of Armenians during WWI by Ottoman forces as genocide; comes as Armenia prepares for events to mark centenary of killings.

- ["Is Yerevan doing the Kremlin's bidding to 'neutralize' NGOs?"](#), Eurasianet, 5 March 2015.

➔ **Azerbaijan** Baku court 6 March extended pretrial detention of jailed journalist Khadija Ismayilova to 24 May. Ahead of inaugural European Games being hosted by country in June, Amnesty International 4 March issued report denouncing govt crackdown on civil society. Govt freed three activists as part of 18 March pardon ahead of New Year holiday Nowrouz. EU progress report 25 March critical of "regression in the democratic transition process", situation for civil society organisations, detentions of rights activists. Authorities 4 March reported arrest of six men suspected of planning terrorist acts; also arrested four men suspected of recruiting people to fight in Syria.

- ["Aliyev decree frees three Azerbaijani activists, many still jailed"](#), RFE/RL, 19 March 2015.

➔ **Nagorno-Karabakh (Azerbaijan)** Ongoing accusations by Armenia and Azerbaijan of ceasefire violations included: N-K de facto officials accusing Azerbaijani forces of 19 March attack in which three N-K soldiers killed; Azerbaijan saying N-K forces responsible for clash, twenty Armenian soldiers killed/wounded. Azerbaijan 23 March

reported soldier with separatist N-K forces defected to Azerbaijani side; N-K de facto defence ministry confirmed. N-K soldier reported killed along contact line 30 March. EU progress report 25 March expressed concern over “unprecedented incidents and casualties” in N-K, rise in confrontational rhetoric, continued arms race. Armenia said it will participate in inaugural European Games held in Azerbaijan in June.

- [“Threat of ripple effect in Nagorno-Karabakh conflict”](#), *Financial Times*, 12 March 2015.

➔ **Georgia** De facto leader of breakaway region South Ossetia (SO) Leonid Tibilov and Russian President Putin signed “alliance and integration treaty” in Moscow 18 March, giving Russia responsibility for SO defence and security. Treaty condemned by EU, U.S. and Tbilisi; all said it amounted to annexation of occupied region. Russia early March launched large-scale air-defence drills including in breakaway Abkhazia and SO. Tens of thousands protested in Tbilisi 21 March calling for govt to step down.

- [“New date set for signing of Russia-South Ossetia treaty”](#), RFE/RL, 16 March 2015.

➔ **North Caucasus (Russia)** Five men from Chechnya, including former high ranking police official Zaur Dadayev, arrested 7-8 March and later charged over 27 Feb murder of Russian opposition politician Boris Nemtsov in Moscow; sixth man reportedly killed himself in standoff with police in Grozny. Dadayev reportedly confessed to Nemtsov killing but later retracted confession, amid reports he and other suspects had been tortured. President Putin awarded Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov Order of Honour 9 March, day after Kadyrov called Zaur Dadayev a “true patriot”. Over 100 reportedly detained, questioned in Chechnya following 23 Feb explosion near Grozny in which three people were killed. Putin signed decree 12 March creating new deputy FM for counter-terrorism, to deal with international cooperation against Islamic State (IS, formerly ISIL). Putin’s envoy to NC claimed IS recruiting students at NC universities. Seven suspected militants, including three women, killed during special operation in Makhachkala 21 March. Local official shot dead in Derbent, Dagestan 4 March.

- [“Kremlin envoy warns IS ‘recruiting North Caucasus students’”](#), RFE/RL, 23 March 2015.

Eastern Europe

➔ **Ukraine** Drop in civilian and military casualties following Feb Minsk agreement, though implementation of deal still behind schedule, clashes continue in some areas including near Mariupol. Kyiv and separatists early month said they withdrew heavy weaponry from line of contact, but accuse each other of moving weaponry back to former positions after observers’ inspections, and renewed troop build-ups. Separatist commentators alluding with increasing frequency to new, possibly major offensive; suggest 10-13 March visit by Russian Defence Minister Shoigu to Rostov (Russian oblast adjoining self-proclaimed Donetsk People’s Republic, DNR) connected to planning for offensive. MPs in Kyiv approved changes to “special status” law for separatist areas, which will now only come into force after local elections; separatists and Moscow claim changes breach Minsk deal. Reshuffle of senior officials continues in DNR, along with reports of purges and crackdowns on what separatist leaders describe as organised crime and military groups which have not accepted central control; President Putin admitted in 8 March TV interview that Russia’s March 2014 annexation of Crimea was planned weeks in advance. At European Council meeting 19-20 March EU leaders decided to extend sanc-

tions on Russia until year-end; also confirmed EU's support for OSCE mission, called for third financial support package, action plan on strategic communication. UK announced plan to supply Ukraine with non-lethal military equipment, sent personnel to provide military advice and training. U.S. also plans training, non-lethal military aid, placed sanctions on several separatists. Several officers and junior commanders who took part in Debaltseve campaign published open letter mid-March alleging serious failings by high command during operation, calling for those responsible to be dismissed. President Poroshenko 25 March fired powerful oligarch Ihor Kolomoisky as governor of eastern Dnipropetrovsk, after armed men loyal to him stormed offices of state-owned oil company. Two senior officials arrested for graft during televised cabinet meeting 25 March.

- ["Ultra-nationalist Ukrainian battalion gears up for more fighting"](#), Reuters, 25 March 2015.

New Crisis Group Europe Briefing N°73, *The Ukraine Crisis: Risks of Renewed Military Conflict after Minsk II*, 1 April 2015. Danger of renewed fighting in Ukraine's east is mounting. Crisis Group's new briefing shows that neither side is looking to compromise or able to win outright. Our accompanying statement sets out a new Western strategy with Russia to defuse one of the greatest post-Cold War threats to European stability and global order.

Western Europe/Mediterranean

➔ **Cyprus** With reunification talks stalled, Turkish PM Davutoğlu 5 March called on UNSG Ban to come up with plan to reunify Cyprus before his term ends in 2016. Turkish Cypriot leader Eroğlu 25 March said talks could resume in May, following 19 April elections in Turkish Cypriot north. As Republic of Cyprus pulls back its vessel conducting seismic research off Cypriot coast, Turkish Cypriot FM Nami 30 March said Turkey also pulling back its vessel. UNSG's Special Adviser Espen Barth Eide said sides would be in a position to accelerate talks in spring 2015.

- ["Turkey calls on UN chief to present plan to reunify Cyprus"](#), Today's Zaman, 6 March 2015.

➔ **Turkey** Jailed PKK leader Öcalan's message read out on 21 March Nowrouz celebrations; called on PKK to hold congress to discuss ending armed struggle. Ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) deputy Yalçın Akdoğan 18 March said govt agreed to setting up third-party monitoring committee for Turkey-PKK peace process. President Erdoğan 20 March opposed monitoring committee, 22 March said he did not accept agreement between govt and HDP on Öcalan's ten-point framework for talks announced 28 Feb. AKP spokesman 21 March said govt will go ahead with monitoring committee. Military involved in clashes with PKK in SE: 24 March launched operation against PKK hideouts in Mazi Dağı, 25 March deployed artillery fire following mortar shell attack on military position in Dağlica district near Iraqi border. Govt 27 March passed security law increasing police powers to fire on protesters, search and detain suspects. Prosecutor investigating March 2014 death of anti-govt protester Berkin Elvan taken hostage 31 March by leftist armed group Revolutionary People's Liberation Party-Front, demanding that police officer who shot Elvan be arrested, publicly confess guilt; prosecutor and hostage-takers killed in shoot-out with police. Turkish soldiers 17 March opened fire on vehicle travelling in forbidden zone in Kilis province on border with Syria, killing driver. Ankara and EU officials 18 March agreed to update Turkey's Customs Union with EU.

- ["Turkey military, Kurdish clashes test peace process"](#), AFP, 26 March 2015.

Central Asia

➔ **Kazakhstan** Ahead of 26 April presidential elections President Nazarbayev, in power 25 years, announced candidacy 11 March. Electoral commission 25 March registered two other candidates: Communist party leader Turghyn Syzydyqov and head of Kazakh Unions Federation Abdelghazy Husainov.

- [“One last time for Nazarbayev”](#), *Diplomat*, 16 March 2015.

➔ **Kyrgyzstan** Ongoing ethnic tensions in south exacerbated by officials singling out Uzbek community as members and supporters of Islamic State (IS, formerly ISIL). Parliament 10 March passed bill similar to Russian law on foreign agents, restricting non-commercial organisations. Patriotic group Kalys 18 March announced formation of El Namysy paramilitary group, claiming to protect state against homosexuals, paedophiles and people who attend NGO meetings. Govt considered launching inquiry into why President Atambayev travelled to Moldova by private jet en route to Moscow to visit President Putin. Rights groups called on EU leaders to raise rights issues during Atambayev’s EU visit.

- [“Two revolutions, but still no prosperity”](#), *Deutsche Welle*, 31 March 2015.

➔ **Tajikistan** President Rahmon’s party 1 March won parliamentary elections which OSCE said “failed to meet basic democratic standards”. Atmosphere of harassment against opposition intensified: alleged Group 24 opposition party member sentenced to 17.5 years’ jail 4 March; Group 24 leader Umarali Kuvatov murdered 5 March in Istanbul; two men jailed for 16.5 years 13 March for having offensive pictures of president, attending Group 24 meeting. President’s son Rustam appointed head of anti-corruption agency 16 March. Large scale military exercises held along Afghan border 11-14 March; Russian news agency 18 March claimed 1,000 militants, including Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan Islamic State supporters, only 60-80km from Tajik border.

- [“Shaken and stirred”](#), *Economist*, 9 March 2015.

➔ **Turkmenistan** Nine people arrested 8 March for allegedly planning terror attacks; suspects reported to have links with Afghanistan insurgents. Ethnic Turkmen living in Afghanistan claim Turkmen security services abducted three people during standoff over land rights 15 March. At least four ethnic Turkmen Afghans shot by Afghan police 16 March while protesting in Qarqeen, Afghanistan. Head of Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) Bordyuzha 16 March said regrettable that neither Turkmenistan nor Uzbekistan will accept CSTO assistance to strengthen borders. New law passed allowing peaceful protest, dismissed by observers as window dressing.

- [“Turkmenistan keeping aloof from Afghan Turkmen”](#), RFE/RL, 6 March 2015.

➔ **Uzbekistan** Head of National Security Service Rustam Inoyatov 19 March claimed Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) joined forces with Islamic State Oct 2014, due to financial difficulties; not confirmed by IMU. President Karimov re-elected 29 March with over 90% of votes; OSCE criticised lack of genuine opposition, legal and organisational shortcomings in vote.

- [“Why Islam Karimov will win Uzbekistan’s elections”](#), BBC, 23 March 2015.

Latin America and the Caribbean

↑ **Colombia** 33rd round of talks between govt and FARC ended 7 March with agreement on joint humanitarian demining scheme; implementation initially to focus on Meta and Antioquia. President Santos 10 March ordered 30-day suspension of bombardments on guerrilla camps; move helped bolster FARC's unilateral ceasefire amid ongoing counter-insurgency operations, including 9 March killing of José David Suárez alias Becerro, leader of 57th Front. Five high-ranking members of armed forces 5 March joined "technical sub-commission" tasked with preparing bilateral ceasefire, FARC disarmament. 34th cycle of govt-FARC negotiations ended 27 March with discussion focused on transitional justice. In nod to FARC, Santos 6 March denied extradition to U.S. of paramilitary leader Julián Bolívar, citing his collaboration with truth telling, reconciliation, justice; also suspended extradition of Manuel Pérez Martínez alias El Cura, brother of FARC negotiating team member Fabían Ramírez. In response to recent spate of attacks, Santos 10 March announced intensified operations against ELN; group blamed, inter alia, for 12 March bomb attack on police in Bogotá that left seven wounded. ELN 16 March accused govt of violating confidentiality rules governing ongoing exploratory talks; in positive gesture, liberated four kidnapped geologists 10 March. Two leading figures from Conservative Party, Andrés Pastrana and Marta Lucía Ramírez, accepted Santos' invitation to join newly created Peace Advisory Commission early March. Constitutional Court president Jorge Pretelt 4 March temporarily vacated position amid growing scandal involving allegations he had requested money in return for influencing court decision; also alleged to own land that is part of restitution claim by victims of paramilitary displacement. Santos 24 March proposed wide-ranging judicial reform in light of scandal.

- Christian Voelkel, "[Demining the Path to Peace in Colombia](#)", In Pursuit of Peace, 10 March 2015.
- "[Lo bueno, lo riesgoso y lo incierto de la nueva reforma a la justicia de Santos](#)", La Silla Vacía, 25 March 2015.

➔ **Guatemala** U.S. VP Biden 2 March met with presidents of Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras to discuss aid package aiming to stem undocumented migration to U.S.; stressed support for extending mandate of International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG). President Pérez Molina 4 March said govt would not accept "impositions" in return for additional funding. Three journalists killed in SW 10 and 13 March, underscoring insecurity in region. Director of Prensa Libre 12 March said Danilo López, one of slain journalists, had received threats related to his reporting on municipal corruption.

- "[Guatemalan president waves off Biden's counsel to keep UN impunity commission](#)", *Tico Times*, 5 March 2015.

➔ **Haiti** President Martelly 13 March approved election calendar proposed by Provisional Electoral Council (CEP). Despite criticism from opposition parties, some 192 parties and movements 16-20 March registered to participate in parliamentary elections to be held 9 August, local and presidential elections 25 Oct, possible run-off elections 27 Dec. Ambassador of Haiti to UN Denis Régis 18 March expressed concerns over renewed insecurity as threat to election process, requested reassessment of

MINUSTAH's timetable for withdrawal of military troops, set to be reduced by half by summer, although some additional police and helicopters have been authorised but not deployed. Organisation of American States (OAS) SG José Miguel Insulza 24 March reiterated willingness to deploy election observation mission. Platform of Haitian Human Rights Organisations 24 March expressed concern over increased insecurity amid spike in attacks targeting Catholic nuns and churches. FM met with Dominican Republic counterpart 27 March to discuss temporary program to legalise at least 200,000 Haitians, but fears remain about impact of discriminatory legislation against Dominican nationals of Haitian origin.

- [“Elections: Next step registration of legislative candidates”](#), Haiti Libre, 22 March 2015.

➔ **Mexico** President Enrique Peña Nieto 2 March said capture of Knights Templar cartel leader Servando “La Tuta” Gomez in Michoacán state late Feb confirmed gov't's security policies were working. Violence in region continued: councilman from leftist Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) found 1 March in municipal garbage dump, two weeks after disappearing; navy admiral killed 4 March in port city Lázaro Cárdenas. Judge 11 March ordered release of two rival vigilante group leaders arrested Dec 2014 in Michoacán state; both vowed to keep fighting if attacked by rival group. Federal forces 4 March captured Omar Treviño aka Z-42, leader of “Los Zetas” drug cartel, in wealthy Monterrey suburb. Govt troops 5 March arrested some 14 federal police officers on charges of kidnapping in Ciudad Victoria, capital of Tamaulipas state. PRD leader running for mayor of Ahuacutzingo, Guerrero, found decapitated 10 March, day after kidnap by armed group. Five members of elite gendarmerie unit killed 19 March in ambush in western Jalisco state. Hundreds of farmworkers arrested in clashes over ongoing strike for better conditions in border state Baja California. UN report published early-March concluded use of torture to obtain confessions remains widespread among Mexican security forces. Senate approved nomination of Eduardo Medina Mora to Supreme Court; critics said appointment of controversial former intelligence chief would undermine judicial independence.

- [“Mexican police grab latest Zetas leader in wealthy suburb”](#), AP, 4 March 2015.
- For latest report, see Crisis Group Latin America Report N°54, [Back from the Brink: Saving Ciudad Juárez](#), 25 Feb. 2015.

➔ **Venezuela** U.S. President Obama 9 March signed executive decree declaring Venezuela “exceptional threat” to U.S. national security; announced sanctions against seven officials including senior military officers. President Maduro same day appointed one of seven, director of National Intelligence Service (Sebin) Maj. Gen. Gustavo González López, interior minister; launched “anti-imperialist” campaign, including extensive military exercises; and demanded revocation of Obama's decree, which he claimed is prelude to invasion. UNASUR 14 March issued statement requesting derogation of U.S. decree, describing it as “threat of interference against sovereignty”. National Assembly 16 March passed law enabling Maduro to legislate by decree until 31 Dec, purportedly to defend country against foreign intervention. Former Spanish PM Gonzales announced he will advise Leopoldo Lopez and Antonio Ledezma during their prosecutions.

- [“Maduro asks for special powers to ‘defeat US imperialism’”](#), El Pais, 10 March 2015.

Middle East & North Africa

Eastern Mediterranean

➔ **Israel-Palestine** Ruling Likud party declared winner of Israeli legislative elections 17 March with 30 of 120 parliamentary seats; PM Netanyahu 26 March began negotiations to form what is expected to be right-wing new govt, with Likud likely to retain defence ministry. Speaking on election day Netanyahu said Arabs going “in droves” to ballot box, sparking accusations of racism; observers anticipate increasing tensions between Arab Israelis and govt. Day before polls Netanyahu stated impossibility of Palestinian statehood under his rule, making prospect of renewal of peace process recede further. Amid continued salary crisis in Gaza and W Bank, Palestinian Authority forced to cut employee salaries, introduce emergency budget. Israeli govt March 27 announced it will resume payment of Palestinian tax revenues; PLO Central Council 5 March had voted to suspend all security cooperation with Israel. Despite focus on election campaign Israel took some measures to ease tensions in W Bank and Gaza, introducing increased numbers of work permits to W Bank residents, permitting limited exports of Gaza produce, meeting Qatari representatives to facilitate development projects in Gaza. France preparing draft resolution for UNSC for early April, calling for pre-1967 frontier as reference for border talks, while allowing for territory swaps; Jerusalem to be designated capital of both Israel and a Palestinian state; and fair solution for Palestinian refugees.

- Ofer Zalberg, [“How Hertzog and Israel's dwindling left can fix their election blunder”](#), *Times of Israel*, 29 March 2015.
- [“Netanyahu victory casts doubt on future of peace talks”](#), *Al Jazeera*, 25 March 2015.

➔ **Lebanon** Amid ongoing fight against Syrian militants along Lebanon’s north-eastern borders, regional and international powers stepped up scale and pace of assistance to Lebanon’s military, including Iran, Saudi Arabia, U.S., France, Russia. Observers emphasise need to reach out to Syrian refugees and Sunnis alienated by military’s heavy-handed campaign against extremists. Parliament 11 March failed to elect president for 20th consecutive time, after ten months without head of state; political factions remain divided over conflict in Syria. Despite divisions and ongoing stalemate, cabinet maintained semblance of stability amid mounting security threats. Hizbollah and Future Current continued new dialogue after hiatus of more than three years, reportedly to defuse Sunni-Shiite tensions, including talks 18 March Lebanese army involved in clash near Syrian border 27 March; seven suspects reportedly attempted illegal entry into Lebanese territory, one reported killed, two arrested.

- [“As snow melts, questions remain over border battles”](#), *Daily Star*, 25 March 2015.

➔ **Syria** As country entered fifth year of conflict, ongoing offensives by regime and allied forces against rebels yielding mixed results. Regime campaign backed by Hizbollah and Iran aiming to reverse months of rebel gains in south slowed, but pro-regime forces maintain control of newly-gained territory SW of Damascus. Offensive on rebel-held areas north of Aleppo continued: regime forces suffered heavy casualties, dozens of fighters captured; lost most of the ground seized in 16 Feb attack. Following relative success

against regime, rebel confidence in Aleppo further boosted by signs of weakness among Islamic State (IS, formerly ISIL) forces east of city, following string of IS losses in Kurdish areas surrounding Kobani at hands of Turkish Armed Forces (PYD) and rebels. U.S.-led coalition airstrikes against IS also continued: five airstrikes hit IS positions in Kobani and Raqqah 25-26 March. Al-Qaeda-linked Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) continued expansion west of Aleppo, following capture late-Feb of last-remaining stronghold of Western-backed rebel group Haraket Hazm, which disbanded itself 1 March after JN defeat and issued statement suggesting remaining members will join Levant Front, leading alliance of non-jihadi rebels in Aleppo. Hazm's defeat leaves U.S. without clear partner in northern Syria. Amid continued efforts to broker "freeze" of Aleppo fighting, rebels reiterated refusal to work with UN Syria Envoy de Mistura. Coalition of rebels 24 March launched major offensive to capture NW city of Idlib from govt; succeeded in doing so within five days. Rebels 25 March captured historic town Busra al-Sham in Daraa province, south.

- Peter Harling and Sarah Birke, ["The Islamic State Through the Looking Glass"](#), *Arabist*, 3 March 2015.
- ["Syria rebels seize ancient town of Busra Sham"](#), *Middle East Online*, 25 March 2015.

Gulf

➔ **Bahrain** Trial of opposition al-Wefaq head Sheikh Ali Salman, charged with incitement to overthrow govt, adjourned 25 March to 22 April. Protests against his detention and intensifying regime repression continued. Bahrain late month joined Saudi Arabia-led operation in Yemen (see [Yemen](#)). Public Prosecutor 28 March announced secretary general of political society arrested for spreading "lies and rumours" aimed at undermining Yemen operation. Explosion west of Manama wounded two policemen 19 March. Eleven jailed for fifteen years 22 March for Oct attack on police station in Shiite village Aalay, near Manama.

- ["Explosion in Bahrain wounds 2 policemen"](#), AP, 20 March 2015.

➔ **Iran** Nuclear talks ongoing as 31 March deadline for preliminary accord missed, broad agreement reportedly reached but details still under negotiation. Discussions focussed on issues of research and development, and schedule for UNSC sanctions relief. 47 U.S. Republicans attempted to sabotage talks by writing open letter to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei warning any deal could be reversed by next U.S. president. Hardline conservative Mohammed Yazdi 10 March defeated former president and moderate Rafsanjani, to be elected Chairman of the Assembly of Experts, group responsible for choosing next Supreme Leader.

- ["How the Senate Republicans' letter gave Iran a boost in nuclear talks"](#), *Reuters*, 15 March 2015.
- ["Missing the point on Iran's nuclear breakout time"](#), *Al Jazeera America*, 2 March 2015.
- ["Iran nuclear negotiations have reached broad understanding, says UK"](#), *Guardian*, 1 April 2015.

➔ **Iraq** Iran-backed Shiite militias 2 March launched ambitious operation to retake Tirkrit, central Iraq, from Islamic State (IS, formerly ISIL): operation involves 20,000-30,000 Shiite fighters directed and armed by Iran's Revolutionary Guard; role of Iraqi

state security forces marginal. Militias 11 March entered al-Alam district, SE Tikrit, progress slowed by IS fighters and IED cordon. U.S. 25 March initiated strikes against IS targets in Tikrit, reportedly to aid Iraqi army forces though in practice helping militia-led operation; PM Abadi 31 March said Tikrit back under govt control. Draft legislation discussed in parliament 3 March proposed merge of Shiite militias into National Guard prompting fears militias will be given cover of regular force without addressing larger issue of their sectarian nature.

- [“Defeating the Iraqi State, One Victory at a Time”](#), Crisis Group, 26 March 2015.
- [“Clearing the Landmines from Iraqi Kurdistan’s Future”](#), In Pursuit of Peace, 24 March 2015.
- [“Iraq resumes offensive in Tikrit after U.S. airstrikes”](#), *Wall Street Journal*, 28 March 2015.

📌🔴* **Yemen** Violence increased as tensions tipped over into all-out war and UN human rights chief Zeid warned country “on the verge of total collapse”. Saudi Arabia and ten other (mostly Arab, Sunni) countries 26 March launched “operation decisive storm”, countrywide air campaign against Huthis and allied military units loyal to former President Ali Abdullah Saleh; goal is to restore President Hadi’s govt, but operation risks pulling Yemen further into Saudi-Iranian regional struggle, augmenting sectarian divides, closing any hope of negotiated political solution. Political crisis continued to deepen as violence overtook UN-brokered negotiations. Fighting broke out in earnest between Hadi and forces associated with Huthis and former President Saleh in Aden 19 March. Huthis 19-20 March bombed presidential residence in Aden, moved northern military units and other forces southwards. Clashes ongoing between Hadi-aligned groups in Aden, backed by Saudi-led airstrikes, and Huthi/Saleh forces. Over 40 refugees killed in air raid on refugee camp in Haradh area near Saudi border 31 March. Al-Qaeda 18 March assassinated Abulkarim al-Khaywani, journalist and liberal voice within Huthi movement; 20 March captured security and local govt buildings in southern Lahj governorate. Islamic State (IS, formerly ISIL) claimed responsibility for 20 March suicide bombings on Zaydi mosques in Sanaa that killed over 130.

- [“Yemeni ports blockaded while coalition airstrikes target Houthi rebels”](#), AP, 30 March 2015.

New Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°45, *Yemen at War*, 27 March 2015. Yemen is now at war. Fuelled by Saudi-Iranian rivalry and a violent jihadi upsurge, fighting is fragmenting the country and could spread if parties do not immediately de-escalate and – with the support of Gulf neighbours – return to negotiations on a compromised, power-sharing leadership.

➡ **Saudi Arabia** Govt 8 March offered to hold talks on Yemen crisis in Riyadh, 26 March launched airstrikes in Yemen (see [Yemen](#)). New King Salman 10 March said he would tackle corruption, create jobs and maintain stability in first major public speech since taking power in Jan.

- [“Saudi Arabia threatens ground invasion of Yemen”](#), *Telegraph*, 26 March 2015.

North Africa

➔ **Algeria** Govt began talks with oil-producing countries on reversing decline in oil prices. Trial began involving former officials of state oil company concerning massive corruption discovered in 2009; adjourned after several witnesses did not appear. Govt 19 March announced shale gas exploration to continue despite protests against project in south. Three militants reportedly killed by army in Tagara area near Algiers.

- [“Ex Algerian oil execs on trial over corruption charges”](#), *Reuters*, 15 March 2015.

➔ **Egypt** Supreme Constitutional Court early March ruled two of three election-related laws decreed by President Sisi unconstitutional, effectively cancelling parliamentary elections scheduled to begin 22 April. Ruling welcomed by several political parties who had criticised laws; Sisi criticised for rushing legislation. Sisi 5 March announced small cabinet reshuffle, replaced eight ministers including controversial Interior Minister Mohammed Ibrahim, moved to deputy PM position. Crackdown on political dissent continued: fourteen outlawed Muslim Brotherhood (MB) members sentenced to death 16 March; 41 judges reportedly sacked for supporting MB. State media 29 March revealed MB leader Mohamed Badie and seventeen other top members listed by public prosecutor as terrorists. Army continued major military operations in Sinai: eight security force members killed during month, govt claimed at least 160 54 militants killed. Several bomb attacks against police stations and courts early March, particularly in Cairo area and Nile Delta. Sisi mid-March hosted investment conference in Sharm al-Sheikh, attended by over 1,700 investors and several world leaders; several billion USD in investments pledged including toward building new capital, notably from Gulf states. U.S. 31 March said would end weapons freeze imposed in 2013. Deal on Nile waters signed with Sudan and Ethiopia (see Ethiopia).

- [“Egypt names new interior minister to combat religious extremism”](#), *Guardian*, 5 March 2015.

➔ **Libya** UN-led political dialogue continued, with two rounds of talks in early March and third beginning 24 March; UN unveiled six-point proposal aimed at ending violence at parallel meetings of political party leaders held mid-March in Algiers. Another round of talks between municipal council leaders held 23 March in Brussels; fourth track focused on tribal leaders planned in Cairo. Despite this, no agreement reached on new National Unity Govt (NUG) to unite Tripoli and Tobruk factions: Tobruk-based House of Representatives (HoR) continued to insist it should be sole institution to vote on NUG, position rejected by Tripoli-based General National Congress (GNC). GNC leader Omar al-Hassi reportedly ousted from PM position following complaints from ministers. Tobruk authorities mid-March attempted to secure deal with UAE petroleum group authorising export of crude oil from Ras Lanuf terminal; deal, which fell through, countered previous agreements establishing Tripoli-based National Oil Corporation (NOC) as sole entity allowed to authorise oil sales. Military confrontation continued, with attacks by Misrata-Tripoli coalition on Zintan and Sidra port area, and aerial strikes by Hafter-led forces on Tripoli airport and Misrati positions in Sidra area. Islamic State (IS, formerly ISIL) affiliated militants early March carried out series of attacks on oil fields in Sirte basin area, late March targeted brigades from Misrata. UNSC Resolution 27 March called for immediate ceasefire, approved extension of

UNSMIL mandate and reaffirmed arms embargo; second resolution urged member states to support Libyan govt in fight against IS.

- [“Libya rivals in first direct talks on unity government”](#), Al Arabiya, 7 March 2015.
- For latest report, see Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Report N°157, [Libya: Getting Geneva Right](#), 26 Feb. 2015.

➔ **Morocco** Security services 22 March announced terrorist cell dismantled, weapons seized in Agadir.

- [“Morocco says IS cell busted, arms seized”](#), AFP, 22 March 2015.

➔ **Tunisia** Militants 18 March attacked Bardo Museum in Tunis, killing 23, mostly European tourists. President Essebsi stressed need for national unity, Islamist An-Nahda party called for more counter-terrorism efforts; security forces 29 March said commander of group responsible killed with eight other militants in south; some twenty arrested in connection with attack. Divisions within ruling Nida Tounes party between former members of Ben Ali-era ruling RCD party and leftists or anti-Islamists lessened after attack. Hundreds of thousands marched in Tunis against terrorism, including Essebsi and other world leaders. Social tensions in south continued, spurred by fears of attacks by Libya-based jihadis. Security forces 6 and 9 March discovered three weapons caches near Libya border, including dozens of small arms, grenades and bullets. Interior Ministry 29 March announced nine suspected terrorists killed in security operation in Gafsa governorate. Security forces expanded arrests of alleged terrorist sympathisers throughout month after mass arrests in Feb.

- [“Tunisia’s Grand Compromise”](#), *In Pursuit of Peace*, 19 March 2015.
- [“Tunisian and French Presidents attend unity rally after Tunis museum attack”](#), *Guardian*, 29 March 2015.