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The International Peace Institute's (IPI) Regional Insights covers select regional and thematic developments based on information from a variety of sources. It draws on the research of IPI experts and is provided exclusively to major donors and members. Each monthly issue covers challenges and opportunities related to international peace, security, and development.

Africa

African Union Summit: The 22nd summit of the African Union took place in Addis Ababa from January 24th to 31st, with regional leaders joining in the last two days. The summit's theme was agriculture and food security in Africa. However, the crises in the Central African Republic and South Sudan, and calls for a greater AU effort to overcome persistent peace and security challenges across Africa dominated the discussions. African leaders formally operationalized the newly established African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crises (ACIRC)—a transitional rapid reaction force—with initial pledges from 12 member states. They also welcomed the AU Commission's establishment of an expert panel to assess the status of the delayed African Standby Force (ASF) and its Rapid Deployment Capacity and proposed a roadmap to ensure that the ASF attains its full operational capability by 2015.

The summit saw the readmission of Madagascar to the AU, following its peaceful presidential election in December 2013. Mauritanian President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz meeting was elected as the rotating chair of the AU and Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe as the first vice-chair of the new AU Bureau. Despite reports of vote rigging and other irregularities during the July 2013 elections in Zimbabwe, which are used to justify continuing restrictions imposed by the European Union on President Mugabe and his wife, the AU leaders' rallied behind the Zimbabwean president to impose his presence at an Africa-EU summit scheduled to take place in Brussels on April 2nd and 3rd. Also seeking to speak with "one voice" with regard to the International Criminal Court, members were reminded to comply with AU decisions and support the pursuit of amendments to the Rome Statute, which would allow for the deferral of prosecutions of sitting heads of state and government and grant them immunity. Thus, the stand-off between the AU and the ICC continues.

Mali: Competition between Algeria and Morocco for influence in Mali is adding a new layer of complexity to an already overcrowded field of regional players, further sidelining the UN-led peace effort in Bamako. A large Moroccan delegation led by King Mohammed VI arrived in Bamako on February 18th, and Algerian President Bouteflika hosted Malian President Keita and his delegation in Algiers in January. Summit meetings in Mauritania and Niger in recent days have underscored the regional concern for continued insecurity in the northern part of Mali and broader threats to the region. The Niamey meeting reiterated the commitment of ten Sahelian states and related regional organizations to work more closely together on a common security agenda. On the same weekend Mauritania's president urged his counterparts from Mali, Niger, Chad, and Burkina Faso to focus on democratic transformation, good governance, and job creation rather than limiting themselves only to a counterterrorism agenda as the only meaningful response to Islamic extremism and terrorism.

Apart from these regional discussions, the French/MINUSMA troops maintain a tenuous peace in Mali. The government, responding to popular opinion in the south, has placed its emphasis on seeking to improve security in the north, demanding that the rebel groups disarm prior to undertaking any development initiatives. President Keita held off meeting with UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General Koenders until shortly before the recent high-level UN

Security Council visit, indicating his reluctance to extend too much influence to the United Nations, which is pressing for full implementation of the Ougadougou Agreement of June 18, 2013. In the meantime, France's President Hollande has further extended the French troop presence. The north is still plagued by persistent intercommunal tensions and local violence. It remains to be seen what will happen once the French troops draw down further or leave altogether and as frustration among the northern population continues to mount. Mali is not yet out of the woods.

South Sudan: Peace negotiations aimed at finding a broader and inclusive peace agreement for the conflict in South Sudan resumed on February 11th in Addis Ababa with delegates from both sides. The rebel side demands that four remaining political detainees—out of 11 originally detained by the Juba government—be released and that the Ugandan army, which has backed President Salva Kiir, withdraw from South Sudan. Uganda has rejected calls from the international community to withdraw its armed forces from South Sudan, which could further complicate the ongoing negotiations in Addis Ababa. Moreover, there is a real risk that the situation could deteriorate beyond South Sudan's borders to affect the entire region.

Meanwhile, fierce fighting broke out between government forces and the rebels in the oil-rich town of Malakal, capital of the Upper Nile State, in the most significant violation of the ceasefire that was supposed to help end the crisis in the fractured young nation. In a separate development, fighting broke out among civilians from different ethnic groups taking shelter inside a UN base camp located in Malakal, further exposing the decline of cohesion in the nation. As the violence shows no signs of abating, the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) has had to shift its focus to prioritize protecting civilians, preserving human rights, and supporting humanitarian access. The UN Security Council authorized an increase in troop levels to approximately 14,000 to be deployed within the coming weeks as it holds consultations to discuss the existing UNMISS mandate.

Middle East

Egypt: Tourism is the latest target for terrorists operating in Egypt: a bombing that killed three South Korean tourists and an Egyptian bus driver in Taba on February 16th has sent shockwaves through the resorts in the Sinai peninsula (one of the few relatively active tourist spots in Egypt during the last three years of unrest). The al-Qaida-inspired Ansar Beit al-Maqdis took responsibility for the attack in a statement that described it as part of their "economic war against [the] regime of traitors." While Egypt faced a similar threat to its tourist industry (which accounts for over 11% of Egypt's GDP) in the 1990s, the current economic climate is not in a state to absorb more shocks (tourism revenues sank by 41% to \$5.9 billion in 2013 alone). The Taba incident indicates that violent extremists may now shift their efforts toward "soft targets" in their campaign against the state.

Meanwhile, Egypt is witnessing the beginning of its presidential election process. Only one candidate has officially announced his candidacy: longtime Nasserist politician Hamdeen Sabahi, who came third in the 2012 elections that brought Mohammed Morsi to power. While there is much speculation about Defense Minister Field Marshal Abdel-Fattah El Sisi's candidacy, an official announcement has yet to be made. On a visit to Russia in which he signed a \$2 billion arms deal, El Sisi won an endorsement from President Putin—a telling indicator of Egypt's closer ties with Russia and a commitment toward a more "pluralistic" foreign policy stance. Other potential candidates in the race include Lt. Gen. Sami Anan, who retired soon after Morsi came to power and first alluded to a potential return to the political scene in October 2013. Should both men run, Egypt would witness a rare phenomenon as two military men—old guard and new guard—go head to head in a presidential race.

Lebanon: On February 15th, Lebanon ended its 10-month political vacuum by forming a compromise government. The so-called "unity government" is led by Tammam Salam, a Sunni moderate politician, and divides the 24 ministerial portfolios into three groups: eight ministries for the March 8th Alliance (Hezbollah and its constituencies), eight to the March 14th coalition (Harriri's bloc), and the final eight to candidates viewed as neutral. That the Harriri bloc is back in the political limelight in coalition with its rival Hezbollah is a telling change for Lebanese politics: it indicates both parties' desire for compromise as the country finds itself at the brink while also creating a space for competing Sunni and Shiaa factions to confront each other in a formal, unified political arena. The measure of the new government's success will lie in its ability

to restore a semblance of stability and lay the necessary political groundwork—from reinstating a national dialogue to organizing a presidential election.

The optimism surrounding the end of the deadlock was served a sobering blow when a double suicide car bombing targeted an Iranian cultural centre in Beirut on February 19th, killing at least four. The incident served as a rude reminder of the cabinet's massive political challenges, which have become more acute since the country became a shadow operating theater for the neighboring crisis in Syria. Of particular concern for this government will be how to deal with Hezbollah's active participation in the war next door.

Iraq: Two months before legislative polls, Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr—the leader of a powerful political constituency—announced his withdrawal from political life. Sadr cited “Islamic law” and “preserving the honorable reputation” of his name and lineage, which has occupied a role in Iraqi politics for generations, as reasons for his exit. Previously, however, he has “left” politics only to return to the political arena. His move coincided with the resignation of various other Sadrist MPs. Sadr's bloc currently holds six cabinet posts and over 10% of the 325-member parliament. The move has been interpreted as a “gift” to his rivals—namely, Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki and his Shiite Fadhila party—just before the elections. Indeed, if the Sadr bloc loses any votes in April, they are likely to go to Fadhila. Meanwhile Iraq continues to be rocked by the worst level of violence since 2008: 10 car bombs (including five in Baghdad) killed at least 19 people on February 18th. The amalgamation of the spillover from Syria with Iraq's deep-rooted sectarian tensions does not bode well for 2014: already 1,450 people have been killed since the start of the year.

Yemen: On February 10th, President Hadi and the National Dialogue Conference committee announced that Yemen will become a federal state with six separate regions, four in the north and two in the south. While these regions are said to reflect the demographic and political map, reactions about the divisions varied, with many worried that this new map will only exacerbate protracted unrest. Immediately following the announcement, separatist factions in the south and the Houthis in the north rejected the new divisions, with the Houthis claiming that this map creates artificial boundaries between “rich and poor.” Further, as the capacity of security forces in the provinces diminishes and insurgent groups better coordinate their efforts and acquisition of weapons, insecurity continues to rise. Indeed, on February 15th, Doctors Without Borders decided to temporarily suspend its support in the southern area of Aden due to an increase in insecurity and a recent prison break that resulted in the release of over two dozen Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) members in the capital of Sana'a.

As Yemen struggles for stability following the conclusion of the NDC, support from the international and regional community, both politically and financially, is increasingly seen as crucial for the future unity of the country. It's also of interest to regional power brokers, as both Saudi Arabia and Iran (through the Houthi rebels) vie for increased influence in the embattled area. A conference of the Yemen Friends Group is said to be held next March in Riyadh in support of the NDC.

Central and South Asia

Afghanistan: Seemingly focused on facilitating the Afghan High Peace Council's efforts at talks with the Taliban, the Karzai government has distanced itself from its US allies over the past few weeks. This was most recently exemplified by its decision to release 65 Afghan Taliban detainees (described as “dangerous” by the US and “innocent” by Afghanistan) on February 13th. This latest disagreement between the two allies played out while Karzai was in Turkey for a trilateral summit with his Turkish and Pakistani counterparts, which gave him an international platform to define his actions as those of a sovereign leader. Skepticism about the viability of any such talks runs deep in and outside Afghanistan, given the Taliban's continual public refusal and denial of direct talks.

Pakistan: The much-anticipated talks between the Pakistani Taliban (Tehreek-e-Taliban) and the Pakistani government announced by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif on January 29th have stalled due to attacks by the Taliban against police in Karachi on February 13th and a Taliban faction's “execution” on February 17th of 23 Frontier Corps soldiers held hostage since 2010. Skepticism about the talks in Pakistan parallels the skepticism surrounding talks with the Afghan Taliban (see above). In this mix of efforts by both Afghanistan and Pakistan, Western and regional press are carrying reports of US

diplomatic, military, and intelligence efforts to arrange a deal for the release of US Sgt Bowe Bergdahl held since 2009 and presumed to be in the tribal area of Pakistan.

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