**WORLD BANK GROUP** | **United Nations**

PATHWAYS FOR PEACE:FIVE YEARS ON
A joint initiative of the United Nations and World Bank

# Regional trends in conflict and prevention

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**March 2023**

**INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP**

## Background

To mark the fifth anniversary of the publication of the UN-World Bank report *Pathways for Peace*, the International Crisis Group surveyed the directors and deputy directors of its six regional programs to get a snapshot of recent developments in conflict, prevention and peacebuilding.[1] Working off a series of questions provided by the UN and Bank secretariats, we explored *(i)* overall trends in violent conflict; *(ii)* trends in prevention; and *(iii)* the relevance of exclusion, inclusion and governance challenges as factors in shaping instability and conflict region-by-region[2] We also asked our colleagues to identify likely trends in conflict over the next five to ten years.

One goal of this project was to identify commonalities and divergences between regional trends. A second goal was to test how some of the basic assumptions of *Pathways for Peace*, especially around the importance of inclusion, hold up when addressed alongside recent developments in violent conflict. Our research found that *(i)* while some trends, such as the rise of major power competition, are having an impact across all regions, there are still significant differences between the types of violence prevalent region-by-region; and *(ii)* this relates to differing perceptions on conflict prevention and the relevance of the *Pathways* analysis among our colleagues.

This paper outlines the key findings of our discussions, broadly following the framework of our interviews. We will share summaries of the individual interviews in a separate document.

## Trends in violent conflict

The challenge of violent conflict has grown worse in every region over the last five years, but in different ways. There are distinctions between those areas (such as Europe) where interstate competition is now the primary driver of conflict, and those (notably Latin America) where inter-state threats remain low but criminality and public instability drive violence. Some themes – such as the increasing internationalization of civil wars – do recur across regions. But our analysis suggests that there are reasons to be skeptical about narratives emphasizing "global trends" in violence, as specific regional and local conditions shape conflict in varying ways.

*Africa*

In Africa – where the majority of political conflicts are now located – a number of factors have driven an increase in violence.[3] These include a mix of demographic, economic and political trends. The continent's booming young population (with 60% of Africans now under 25) faces challenging economic conditions.[4] In some regions, such as the Sahel, young people with limited resources and employment options join armed groups, including jihadi organizations and insurgencies, as a survival mechanism. In other cases, as in Sudan in 2019, youth channel their

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[1] Crisis Group's regional programs cover Africa, Asia, Europe and Central Asia, Latin America, the Middle East and North Africa and the United States. In addition to interviewing the directors of these programs and their deputies, we interviewed colleagues dealing with the EU and with dialogue, early warning and gender as thematic issues. See full list in Annex 1.
[2] See the guiding questions provided by the UN and Bank in Annex 2.
[3] Therése Pettersson, Shawn Davies and Amber Deniz et al., "Organized violence 1989–2020, with a special emphasis on Syria", Journal of Peace Research, vol. 58, no. 4 (2021).
[4] "Charts of the Week: Africa's changing demographics", Brookings, January 2019.

discontent into street protests and political action, fueling instability.[5]

Simultaneously, many African states struggle to control territory and provide services to their populations. In some regions, such as the Horn of Africa, states that were previously able to exert significant control over their territory (albeit often by repressive means) have begun to fragment, with sub-state actors displaying increasing autonomy. At the same time, individual leaders have increasingly exercised power through personal connections and patronage networks rather than institutional means, further eroding state structures. In the Sahel, militaries have responded (and contributed) to public discontent through a series of coups.[6]

Transnational armed groups – including jihadi groups – have taken advantage of these conditions, becoming increasingly mobile and capable of exerting power across borders in regions such as the Sahel. Governments and security forces have responded to these expansions through military means, but these have largely proved ineffectual, underlining state weakness.

External actors – including former colonial powers, as well as China, Russia and the Gulf States – have significant roles in African conflict.[7] In some cases, they have exerted leverage by offering financial assistance to embattled leaders. In others, they have offered direct military support. This has contributed to a further internationalization of the region's conflicts with outside players (e.g. France and Russia in the Sahel, or the Gulf States in the Horn) supporting rival proxies.

*Asia*

A number of types of instability are widespread in Asia, such as violence against ethnic/religious minorities and the persistence of transnational jihadi groups. Nonetheless, the bulk of small and medium-scale conflicts in the region continue to take place within states and follow distinct national dynamics (even if, as in the cases of Afghanistan and Myanmar, civil violence leads to large-scale refugee flows into neighboring states). Many of the main potential flashpoints for inter-state conflict in the region - such as Kashmir and the Korean Peninsula – are the sites of decades-old standoffs, making it hard to generalize about these situations.[8]

Nonetheless, one trend that *is* common across Asia is that all actors in the region have to factor in the reality of accelerating strategic competition between China and the United States. This raises the dangers of a direct clash in the Taiwan Strait or South China Sea, and makes it harder for small and medium-sized Asian countries to balance their economic and security relationships with Washington and Beijing. Against the backdrop of Russia's war on Ukraine, some regional actors such as Japan are choosing to increase military spending rapidly. It should however be noted that, at least as of yet, this geopolitical competition has not translated into the U.S. and

[5] *Crisis Group Africa Report N°271, Bridging the Gap in the Nile Waters Dispute, 20 March 2019*

[6] *Richard Gowan and Ashish Pradhan, "Why the UN Security Council Stumbles in Responding to Coups", Crisis Group Commentary, 24 January 2022.*

[7] *Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Report N°206, Intra-Gulf Competition in Africa's Horn: Lessening the Impact, 19 September 2019; Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°185, Mali: Avoiding the Trap of Isolation, 9 February 2023.*

[8] *Praveen Donthi, "Violence in Kashmir: Why a Spike in Killings Signals an Ominous New Trend", Crisis Group Commentary, 28 June 2022.*

China fighting proxy wars in the region, in contrast to the Cold War (major power tensions have, however, complicated some conflict resolution efforts, such as in Myanmar).[9]

*Europe and Central Asia*

Europe has seen the most dramatic shift in its security environment of any region over the last five years. Although Russian tensions with NATO, the U.S. and European Union were already high following Moscow's seizure of Crimea in 2014, they have now escalated to levels not witnessed since the end of the Cold War. There is a real potential for a further escalation, although Crisis Group assesses that the risks of nuclear use remain low.[10] The renewal of hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan, rising economic and social discontent fueling protests in Central Asia and recurrent, albeit limited, turbulence in the Western Balkans point to the dangers of further inter-state and intra-state conflict in the region.[11]

Russia's aggression against Ukraine has also fundamentally changed many European states' threat perceptions. Both Russia and NATO/EU members are now likely to see future conflicts as part of a zero-sum competition, even if they have distinct local causes. The war is also driving European states to increase their defense spending in an effort to restore deterrence.

*Latin America*

In Latin America, direct inter-state conflict remains absent. It is also noteworthy that, with the end of the FARC rebellion in Colombia, large-scale political insurgency is no longer a major threat in the region. But two alternative forms of violence have become more prevalent. The first is violence by and between organized criminal groups, most brutally in Central America.

Second, many countries in the region have experienced waves of large-scale protests and instability stemming from public discontent over economic issues, including those related to the COVID pandemic. In some cases, as in Peru, these have led governments to collapse but – as of yet – they have not escalated to the level of full civil conflict.[12] There is overlap between organized crime and public discontent with state services (gangs were able to increase influence in parts of Colombia ill-served by the state during the pandemic, for example) but criminal organizations have largely avoided setting out political agendas of their own.

[9] Crisis Group Asia Report N°305, *Commerce and Conflict: Navigating Myanmar's China Relationship*, 30 March 2022.
[10] Crisis Group Europe and Central Asia Briefing N°96, *Answering Four Hard Questions About Russia's War in Ukraine*, 8 December 2022.
[11] Crisis Group Europe and Central Asia Report N°266, *Averting a New War between Armenia and Azerbaijan*, 30 January 2023.
[12] Glaeldys González Calanche, "Is There a Way Out of Peru's Strife?", Crisis Group Commentary, 15 February 2023.

*Middle East and North Africa (MENA)*

Some conflicts in the MENA region – including those in Libya and Syria -- have significantly slowed down in recent years, although the war in Yemen has remained very bloody. Even where violence has reduced, sustainable political settlements remain impossible. Major regional players (including the Gulf States, Iran, and Türkiye) and external actors, including Russia are involved directly and/or through proxies in these conflicts. There has been a growing use of new military technologies – such as drones and cyberattacks – in conflicts across the region.

Governments are also very conscious of the social and economic forces that led to the 2011 Arab revolutions and are looking for ways to suppress any repeat of these tendencies. States in the region are using "supercharged" surveillance technologies to track signs of dissent, in the hope of preventing protestors from using social media to coordinate as they did in 2011.[13] But economic shocks have stirred up new, even if incoherent so far, protests in cases including Tunisia.

*The United States*

For the first time in recent memory, the U.S. has faced the challenge of significant political violence.[14] The chaos surrounding the 2021 transfer of power in Washington has put domestic militia activities and terrorism risk high on the national agenda. Although the midterm elections passed without further major acts of violence, this threat has not entirely evaporated, forcing U.S. policy-makers to concentrate on internal as well as external causes of conflict.

## Trends in conflict prevention, management, and resolution

Just as patterns of deadly conflict differ region-by-region, Crisis Group sees differing regional trends in conflict prevention, management and resolution. However, there are some common themes across regions. One is the reduced, although still significant, role of the U.S. as an actor in this field. This reflects a mixture of long-term factors including the relative decline of U.S. economic power, and more immediate issues such as partisan politics in Washington making it hard for the current administration to make diplomatic appointments. Given its increasing focus on strategic competition with China, U.S. officials have less "bandwidth" for prevention.

A second recurrent factor is the weakness of regional organizations. Many recent studies have emphasized the potential of regional bodies in addressing conflict, especially in situations where major power competition impedes UN action.[15] Yet in almost every region Crisis Group covers, we see regional organizations either struggling or stagnating, for reasons noted below.

Thirdly, there is a general shift away from conflict resolution towards conflict management efforts. International and regional organizations, in particular, now focus more on limiting the humanitarian

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[13] Joost Hiltermann, "New Alliances, Increased Repression Characterise Post-Arab Uprisings Middle East", Crisis Group Commentary, 8 November 2022.

[14] Crisis Group United States Report N°4, *The U.S. Presidential Election: Managing the Risks of Violence*, 28 October 2020.

[15] "The Value of Regional Approaches to Peacebuilding", United Nations University, April 2015.

fall-out of conflict – or reducing escalation risks – rather than ending wars. This may reflect the complexity of many conflicts or prevention actors' reduced leverage, or both.

*Africa*

African policy-makers and experts are dissatisfied with many of the conflict management tools available to the continent. There is a general view that large-scale UN blue helmet peacekeeping operations – which succeeded in forging peace in cases such as Liberia – cannot deal with threats like jihadi groups in Mali (although as Crisis Group has emphasized, there are no immediate alternatives).[16] This has led some African governments to look for alternative security providers, such as regional forces and private military companies.[17] There is a strong feeling that peacemaking and prevention on the continent should also be African-led.

However, both the African Union (AU) and sub-regional bodies face significant obstacles, including limited resources and internal political splits.[18] The question of how to deal with coups and other unconstitutional changes of governments has been especially divisive inside both the AU and (following coups in Burkina Faso, Mali and Guinea) ECOWAS. Compounding these problems, some regional players – including Ethiopia, Nigeria, and South Africa – which previously played a stabilizing role have become focused on internal affairs.

Finally, neither African organisations nor the UN have the resources to address the economic problems that contribute to conflict in the region. African governments have incentives to look to outside powers, including Russia and China, for security assistance and economic support. The International Financial Institutions (IFIs) could have a greater role to play in mustering the resources necessary to address issues like youth unemployment that fuel conflict.

*Asia*

There is no pan-Asian architecture for conflict prevention comparable to that in Africa. Recent crises in the region have highlighted the limitations and/or absence of existing institutions. While ASEAN has taken a more forward approach to dealing with the coup in Myanmar than in previous crises, it has been very tentative and failed to stop violence escalating.[19] The collapse of Afghanistan has created new risks for Central and South Asia, but there is no established regional framework for handling the fall-out. It has fallen to UN agencies to coordinate efforts to assist the Afghan population and avoid state collapse in the absence of regional alternatives.[20]

In parts of the region, such as South-East Asia, prevention is often conflated with preventing or

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[16] Jean-Hervé Jezequel, Franklin Nossiter and Ibrahim Maiga, "MINUSMA at a Crossroads", Crisis Group Commentary, 1 December 2022.
[17] Pauline Bax, "Russia's Influence in the Central African Republic", Crisis Group Commentary, 3 December 2021; Nelleke van de Walle, "East Africa's DR Congo Force: The Case for Caution", Crisis Group Commentary, 25 August 2022.
[18] Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°186, Eight Priorities for the African Union in 2023, 14 February 2023.
[19] Richard Horsey, "One Year On from the Myanmar Coup", Crisis Group Commentary, 25 January 2022
[20] Crisis Group Asia Report N°329, Taliban Restrictions on Women's Rights Deepen Afghanistan's Crisis, 23 February 2023.

countering violent extremism (P/CVE).[21] This focus, which is frequently a donor-driven priority, arguably distracts from the root causes of conflict, such as economic grievances on the Korean Peninsula escalating out of control).[22] Beijing and Washington will also need to take political steps to reassure one another that their competition can stay within limits.[23]

The overarching prevention challenge in Asia will, however, be avoiding the escalation of interstate tensions between China, the U.S., and other regional powers, most notably India and Japan. Crisis Group has emphasized that this requires constructing mechanisms for military dialogue and de-confliction, to avoid miscalculations and unintended flare-ups in areas such as the East and South China Seas (similar mechanisms are also necessary to avoid the standoff.

*Europe and Central Asia*

Russia's aggression against Ukraine has caused many governments in the region to rethink their definitions of "prevention". For many, the current situation requires a return to investing in deterrence (and for Finland and Sweden, joining NATO). While there is no European consensus on exactly how to balance deterrence and diplomacy with Russia – with some significant regional actors such as France and Germany emphasizing the need for at least some diplomatic openings – there is a general agreement on enhancing military readiness. This has both boosted NATO and led to significant shifts in how the EU frames prevention, with the EU using its funds to purchase arms for Ukraine and strengthen European arms manufacturing.[24]

In parallel, parts of the post-Cold War European security architecture are crumbling. This process was well underway before Russia's all-out assault on Kyiv (as signaled by the U.S. and Russian withdrawals from the Open Skies Treaty in 2020) but the war has accelerated the process. This has been particularly obvious in the case of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) which continues to function, but has been sidelined over Ukraine, where it previously had a significant monitoring role.[25] Russia's military travails in Ukraine have also reduced its ability to manage conflicts elsewhere in its periphery: Seeing that Moscow is distracted, Azerbaijan ratcheted up pressure on Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh.

Some actors have stepped into this conflict management vacuum. Türkiye has played a significant role in efforts to mitigate the fallout from Russia's war on Ukraine, such as the Black Sea Grain Initiative.[26] Saudi Arabia has also been involved in mediating prisoner exchanges.[27] Such diplomatic initiatives cannot, however, compensate for the lack of a broader durable European

[21] *Crisis Group Asia Report N°323, Addressing Islamist Militancy in the Southern Philippines, 18 March 2022.*

[22] *Crisis Group Asia Report N°324, Risky Competition: Strengthening U.S.-China Crisis Management, 20 May 2022.*

[23] *Amanda Hsiao, "Pelosi's visit makes clear the dangers of an incoherent US policy on Taiwan", Crisis Group Commentary, 2 August 2022.*

[24] *Crisis Group Commentary, "Keeping the Right Balance in Supporting Ukraine", 31 January 2023.*

[25] *Crisis Group Special Briefing N°9, Seven Priorities for Preserving the OSCE in a Time of War, 29 November 2022.*

[26] *Oleg Ignatov, Simon Schlegel, Berkay Mandıracı, Rafael Ch Duran, Richard Gowan, Olga Oliker, Alissa de Carbonnel, "Who are the Winners in the Black Sea Grain Deal?", Crisis Group Commentary, 3 August 2022*

[27] *Crisis Group Commentary, "Toward a Common Set of Signals from the G20 about Russia's War in Ukraine", 10 November 2022.*

security architecture, especially if tensions with Russia drag on indefinitely.

*Latin America*

Latin America's conflict prevention architecture has weakened in recent years. The Organization of American States has lost credibility, in part due to splits over Venezuela, and alternative regional bodies and coalitions have not taken its place. In many crises in the region, ad hoc groups of actors – ranging from the Catholic Church to the EU and Norway – have stepped in to mediate solutions to political crises and protests.[28] But such ad hoc crisis response conceals the lack of stronger regional mechanisms to engage in long -term peacebuilding.

One exception to this is Colombia, where the UN has taken on a long-term role accompanying the peace process with the FARC.[29] But neither the UN or any regional actors have the capacity to deal with violence associated with organized crime and weak economies. This is especially clear in the case of Haiti, where no international organization or coalition has volunteered to address recent gang violence, in contrast to previous international interventions in the country.[30]

Some regional leaders have pledged to engage in domestic efforts to address the causes of violence, but often reneged on these promises. The current Mexican government promised a policy of "hugs not bullets" to win over cartel members but has reverted to a highly militarized approach to organized crime.[31] Other states in the region, such as El Salvador, have also prioritized very public shows of strength to deal with gangs, rather than focusing on social ills.

*MENA*

Despite ongoing regional struggles for power, there have been significant efforts at dialogue in the MENA region in recent years. This has led to some positive results, such as the normalization of diplomatic ties between Israel and, a number of, Arab states, and the recent diplomatic opening between Iran and Saudi Arabia. In some cases, states have engaged in these dialogues to try and build up blocs against other powers (for example, Arab countries and Israel have improved ties in part to counter Iran), and they have not contributed to solving long-running problems in the region, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.[32] Nonetheless, the overall improvement in communications across the region does reduce the risks of conflict.

While the U.S. remains a significant diplomatic actor in MENA, its overall power and interest in the region has declined, and states including China, Russia and Türkiye have gained in influence. Smaller external actors (such as the Nordic countries) have also been active in the region. The UN continues to be the main institutional actor involved in MENA, given the limitations of regional bodies, although here in particular the UN's main role is to use its political and humanitarian tools

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[28] *Crisis Group Commentary, "Bolivia Plans for an Uncertain Election", 29 January 2020.*
[29] *Crisis Group Commentary, "Tackling Colombia's Next Generation in Arms", 27 January 2022.*
[30] *Renata Segura, "Haiti Needs Help", Crisis Group Commentary, 1 December 2022.*
[31] *Crisis Group Visual Explainer, "Crime in Pieces: The Effects of Mexico's 'War on Drugs', Explained".*
[32] *Anna Jacobs and Laure Foucher, "The Myth of an Emerging 'Mideast NATO'", Crisis Group Commentary, 3 October 2022.*

to mitigate the consequences of conflict, rather than end it.[33]

*The United States*

As noted above, observers in many regions see the U.S. as taking a lower profile in prevention and conflict management. This in part reflects U.S. policymakers' general sense of caution after their failure in Afghanistan, in addition to their domestic challenges and focus on countering China and Russia. It is important not to overstate American disengagement from conflict issues – evident in initiatives such as the Global Fragility Act – but they command less attention at the highest levels. The hyper-polarized U.S. political scene is likely to become more fraught prior to the 2024 presidential elections, further exacerbating Washington's "bandwidth" issues.

## Exclusion, Inclusion and Good Governance

Given the variable patterns of conflict in different regions, Crisis Group colleagues unsurprisingly have differing views on what causes conflict. *Pathways for Peace* highlights the importance of economic, social and political *exclusion* as drivers of conflict – and by extension advocates the importance of inclusion as an element of peace.[34] This emphasis on inclusion is notable in much of the work on conflict prevention and conflict resolution today. Indeed, definitions of inclusion are becoming more expansive over time. The Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) community has, for example, begun to widen its agenda to focus on LGBTQ+ individuals.

While most of our interviewees endorsed this view, they also raised questions about what forms of exclusion are most significant, and some felt that the exclusion/inclusion debate can be used to distract from other causes of conflict – not least leaders and elites' power interests.

One pattern that is common to many regions is that elites are currently focused on maintaining exclusionary regimes, and view efforts to increase inclusion as actively threatening their interests. In a sense, many of these groups agree that exclusion is a source of conflict – but aim to solidify the divisions in their societies rather than taking a risk on greater inclusion. It is therefore necessary to understand the elite's sense of entitlement – or outright supremacism – as a factor in shaping their political decisions. There has also been a significant pushback internationally against inclusion as an idea, with right-wing politicians arguing against equality.

*Pathways for Peace* also emphasizes the importance of good governance, legitimate governments, and well-functioning state institutions in avoiding conflict.[35] While there is evidence of "democratic backsliding" in many regions, Crisis Group colleagues noted that this is not axiomatically a source of deadly conflict (although it obviously has other negative consequences, for example for human rights). Autocratic regimes can be quite efficient at avoiding or limiting conflict through repressive techniques, and some citizens will support this in exchange for

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[33] *Richard Gowan, Dareen Khalifa and Ashish Pradhan, "A Vital Humanitarian Mandate for Syria's North West", Crisis Group Commentary, 5 July 2022.*
[34] *"Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict", World Bank Group, March 2018.*
[35] *"Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict", World Bank Group, March 2018.*

stability.

*Africa*

The exclusion/inclusion framing is useful to understanding conflict in Africa, but the types of exclusion driving conflict are shifting. Traditionally analysts tended to focus on the exclusion of specific ethnic groups from power and economic activity as a source of violence. Ethnic tensions obviously remain a serious challenge in cases such as Ethiopia.[36] Nonetheless, it is increasingly clear that *economic* and *generational* factors are gaining importance. Across the continent, young people feel cut off from opportunity, leading them to challenge their governments or join armed groups to survive (see paragraph 5). Divisions are also deepening between urban and rural communities. Governments in regions such as the Sahel make tokenistic references to inclusion but follow economic policies that further alienate the very poor. Facing multiple pressures, authorities rarely want to make the sort of systemic changes that would promote real inclusion of the young and the poor in their countries' economies.

While there have been obvious examples of democratic backsliding in Africa in recent years – such as the spate of coups noted above – there have also been more positive cases. Kenya and Nigeria have, for example, recently run successful elections and avoided significant election-related violence.[37] Stop-start transitions to civilian rule are ongoing in Sudan and Chad, although their outcomes are uncertain.[38] However, in much of the region, governments of all types of struggles to provide services – or even control territory – outside major urban centers. This lack of effective governance feeds into the cycle of public discontent and disorder described above.

*Asia*

Exclusion in Asia generally takes two forms: *(i)* The marginalization of ethnic or religious minorities and *(ii)* barring parts of society from political representation. This has been clear in Myanmar, where grievances among marginalized ethnic minorities have led to conflict both before and after the coup.[39] While Burmese women have played a leading role in resistance to the coup, they are still excluded from formal politics in many cases.[40] In Afghanistan, the Taliban government is now pursuing the exclusion of women from public life as a matter of policy. Demographic frictions are also present in Asia. Young people in Thailand staged protests in 2020-21, that became violent in some cases, over their lack of political representation.

A number of Asian governments – such as Cambodia – have grown more repressive in recent years, but this has not always led to conflict. Myanmar, where the military ended civilian rule, is

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[36] *Crisis Group Special Coverage Africa, "CrisisWatch Digest Ethiopia", 14 March 2023.*

[37] *Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°182, Kenya's 2022 Election: High Stakes, 9 June 2022; Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°311, Mitigating Risks of Violence in Nigeria's 2023 Elections, 10 February 2023.*

[38]. *Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°183, Chad's Transition: Easing Tensions Online, 13 December 2022; Crisis Group Commentary, "Sudan: Rebooting an Endangered Transition", 31 January 2023.*

[39] *Crisis Group Asia Report N°319, Myanmar's Coup Shakes Up Its Ethnic Conflicts, 12 January 2022.*

[40]*Crisis Group Asia Briefing N°174, Briefing Breaking Gender and Age Barriers amid Myanmar's Spring Revolution, 16 February 2023.*

an ugly exception. In Afghanistan, the post-2001 state – always a weak democracy – failed.

Nonetheless, there is a distinction between these factors as drivers of local and national conflicts and the broader challenge of U.S./China strategic competition highlighted above. As of yet, the two powers have typically not tried to exploit ethnic/social conflicts in third countries.

*Europe and Central Asia*

Although ethnic and economic exclusion are present in Europe and Central Asia, colleagues focusing on the region cautioned against treating them as primary drivers of conflict. In recent years, some powers have developed narratives around ethnic/religious persecution to demonize their opponents. Most obviously, Russia has justified its assault on Ukraine with reference to Ukraine's language and religious policies affecting Russian-speaking citizens. This is a popular theme in disinformation and misinformation campaigns. However, leaders often use these arguments as cover for their actual policies – such as territorial ambitions – and it is important *not* to give these framings too much credence, as they obscure other conflict drivers.

In a number of European countries – such as Bosnia and Herzegovina and Georgia – domestic political disputes have become entangled in the broader competition between Russia and the West, sometimes raising conflict risks.[41] However, there have also been examples of challenges to democracy and the rule of law in countries inside NATO and the EU, notably Poland and Hungary, these have raised significant concern, but have not appeared to create a risk of conflict. There has also been growing awareness of the dangers of election interference, disinformation, and misinformation (especially online) as threats to the bases of democracy.

*Latin America*

There is general agreement that social and economic exclusion have been the major drivers of conflict in Latin America since the 1980s, when Cold War dynamics dissipated. It is clear that economic discontent and class-based tensions have been key to recent crises in the Andean region in particular. The links between exclusion and organized crime are more complex, but it is easy for criminal networks to recruit among the economically disadvantaged.

Some governments in the region, such as Colombia, have attempted to address the problems of exclusion. Yet the majority of authorities and elites appear to prefer to resist efforts to empower the disadvantaged. The previous, right-wing Brazilian government for example drew on support from the wealthy and those who wanted to limit the inclusivity of society.[42] In cases such as Peru, elites have moved firmly to undercut leaders promising to assist poorer citizens.

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased public discontent over their government's failures to deliver basic services. In some quarters, the perception that democratic leaders are unable to address public needs has led to a certain nostalgia for more autocratic regimes. Some leaders

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[41]*Crisis Group Commentary, "Bosnia and Herzegovina: Deterring Disintegration", 27 January 2022.*
[42]*Crisis Group Statement, "Brazil: The Mob Leaves Its Mark", 10 January 2023.*

have resorted to populist tactics – such as highly publicized crackdowns on criminal groups – to try to retain public support.[43] Nonetheless, the dangers of democratic dissatisfaction escalating into new insurgencies or civil conflicts remains relatively low for the time being.

*MENA*

While it is clear that exclusion was a key driver of the 2011 Arab revolutions, many governments in the region believe that this era demonstrated the dangers of inclusion. The Muslim Brotherhood's brief period in power in Egypt is often cited as an example of how political inclusion can upset state structures. As noted in paragraph 16, authorities in MENA are increasingly using advanced surveillance tools to monitor and block further uprisings. This authoritarian approach on political matters can, however, sometimes go hand-in-hand with social reforms aiming at raising inclusion, such as offering women economic opportunities.

There are clear signs of democratic backsliding amongst those countries in the region with open systems, such as Tunisia. In Lebanon, the state has proved unable to provide basic services, but while this has led to protests, Lebanese citizens appear to be developing coping mechanisms to navigate the crisis.[44] While recognizing the importance of exclusion and governance issues in the region, Crisis Group colleagues emphasize that much of the conflict prevention work in MENA is now focused on reducing the risks of inter-state and proxy conflicts (and in addressing unresolved wars such as in Yemen) rather than root causes.

*United States*

Since President Trump's surprise election in 2016, there has been much analysis of the need for greater social and economic inclusion in America. The Black Lives Matter movement has also refocused attention on the persistence of racial injustice. However, questions of exclusion and inclusion have also become deeply entangled in partisan politics. Meanwhile, there are clear limits to how far some political actors – such as right-wing militias – can be brought into regular politics. It may be necessary to see that some actors *need* to be excluded from national life.

## Predictions and priorities

In conclusion, Crisis Group colleagues outlined some broad- brush priorities for strengthening conflict prevention, resolution and response in their respective regions in the next five to ten years. It is notable that in most cases, colleagues emphasized two priorities (i) strengthening or revitalizing regional security frameworks; and (ii) investing in reducing economic grievances.

- In *Africa*, external actors should focus on strengthening the AU and sub-regional organizations like ECOWAS to address the institutional weaknesses noted above. In economic terms, the IFIs, UN and other donors should invest in developing infrastructure and service provisions to reduce inequalities and focus on youth employment. African

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[43] *Tiziano Breda, "Latin America Likes Bukele's 'War on Gangs.' That's a Problem", Crisis Group Commentary, 15 December 2022.*
[44] *Crisis Group Video, "Lebanon: A State on the Brink", 27 January 2022.*

democracies should also coordinate more closely to resist foreign interference and reduce the risk of further coups destabilising the continent.

- In *Asia,* the U.S. and China will have to work out how to manage their differences, as other actors have only limited influence over Beijing and Washington. The IFIs and donors should invest in developing infrastructure and livelihoods in poorer areas to reduce grievances and focus less on P/CVE projects. External actors should also encourage ASEAN and other regional bodies to invest more in conflict prevention.

- In *Europe and Central Asia*, the overarching priority –beyond somehow finding a just peace for Ukraine – is to reduce the incentives for Russia and other regional actors to engage in further military adventures and destabilizing activity. This includes raising "incentives for peace" (Crisis Group has, for example, argued that Russia should see a pathway to sanctions relief if it ends its war on Ukraine) and also developing new regional security arrangements that could mitigate a prolonged standoff with Moscow.

- In *Latin America*, regional states and external actors should focus on rebuilding regional cooperation to compensate for the decline of existing regional organizations. Donors and IFIs should focus on reducing entrenched inequalities and poverty.

- In *MENA*, the immediate conflict prevention priority is to keep building up channels for inter-state communications to avoid the risks of new conflicts. In economic terms, donors should continue to look for ways to address still-deep economic grievances.

- For the *United States*, immediate priorities are to avoid a further uptick in domestic political violence, and to develop frameworks for avoiding escalation with China.

## Annex 1: International Crisis Group Staff Interviewed

Alissa de Carbonnel, Deputy Program Director, Europe and Central Asia

David Lanz, Representative for Dialogue Promotion

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## Annex 2: UN and World Bank Guiding Questions

1. What are the conflict trends and conflict-related risks broadly in your region and how do they compare to the picture in 2018 when Pathways was published?

2. Arc of prevention: Do you see any greater focus on prevention in your region compared to five years ago? Do you see attention to the need for a prevention lens at the level of specific countries and/or a regional lens? What does prevention (or preventive activities) actually look like?

3. Exclusion and grievances: In Chapter Two, "Why people fight", the report highlighted new emerging research on the importance of "inequality, exclusion and a sense of injustice". This marked a new WB and UN emphasis on real and perceived grievances – especially marginalisation and discrimination by state institutions along a various of group-based identifies (religious, ethnic, geographic, gender, etc.). How much does a sense of exclusion and/or grievances matter in your region; would you say they serve a primary role in explaining "why people fight"?

4. Inclusion: Looking at the flipside of inclusion, have you seen any increased attention (over the past five years) given to the need for governments to adopt a more inclusive posture in the formulation of public policies, in the beneficiaries of public policies, etc.? Is this in the realm of political, economic or social inclusion? What does meaningful inclusion look like in the countries where you work, and for whom?

5. Governance and State legitimacy: Pathways emphasized the critical importance of state legitimacy and yet, globally, democratic backsliding has accelerated since the publication of this report in 2018. What trends or reflections do you see in your region?

6. Thinking about effective conflict prevention in your region, in the short to medium-term, what would you suggest the most important issues or areas to focus on would be?