

ISW-CTP Synthetic Updates

April-July 2020

America's national security is threatened by the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences, which present new opportunities for US adversaries, including Russia, China, and Iran, to gain political and military advantage. The second- and third-order effects of the pandemic, including the severe global economic downturn, have also accelerated pre-existing trends toward disorder and state failure that threaten American interests.

The challenges are large, but the US still has opportunities to compete effectively while securing its vital interests. American leaders must not lose sight of what is at stake abroad even as they rightly address the challenges here at home. Where possible, the US must continue to deny strategic victories to our adversaries while standing firm with our allies.

The Institute for the Study of War (ISW) and our research partners at the Critical Threats Project (CTP) of the American Enterprise Institute launched an **exclusive, high-level analytic product line** in April to provide donors and key supporters with timely information regarding **how the national security landscape is evolving** during the COVID-19 pandemic. This weekly product includes unique insights on **key global developments** and their **implications** from ISW's National Security Fellow Jennifer Cafarella and ISW and CTP analysts.

ISW and CTP are making the first 15 issues available online. Key themes covered include:

- The growing US – China conflict creating serious new escalation risks
- The Mediterranean becoming a nexus theater, where the Syrian and Libyan wars are increasingly overlapping
- The COVID-19 pandemic temporarily disrupting Russia's operations abroad, but with Russian President Vladimir Putin beginning to recover by July
- Salafi – jihadist groups gaining even more momentum in Africa and the Middle East
- International and domestic institutions that provide resilience in the West eroding under continued pressure from Russia, China, and Iran
- Russia, China, and Iran implementing new authoritarian tools of social control under the pretext of COVID-19 responses
- The US gaining a new opportunity to advance its interests in Iraq in partnership with Iraq's new Prime Minister, Mustafa al Kadhimi
- State collapse deepening in Syria, where the regime is experiencing unprecedented internal friction due to a collapse of the Syrian economy

While the world has been preoccupied by COVID-19, **the dedicated ISW-CTP Teams have remained at their posts to monitor, track, analyze, and disseminate important developments abroad as we seek advance an international order that favors American interests, supports key US allies, and reinforces our core civic and free market values.**



We are respected for our integrity. Since we do not take government funding, we rely on the **generous sacrificial support of private citizens across the country who embrace their unique opportunity to help defend our nation. They believe in investing in the essential work ISW-CTP does to advance our national security.**

We are committed to meeting the increasing demand for independent, robust analysis as the threat environment evolves; we deeply appreciate your consideration of partnering with us to expand our outsized impact on US national security.

For further ways to get involved, including **how to gain access to this exclusive high-level analytic product line**, please contact the ISW Development Department at (202) 293-5550 EXT. 209 or email us at development@understandingwar.org or please contact the external relations team at criticalthreats@aei.org.

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ISW-CTP Geopolitical Risk Assessment #1

April 1, 2020

Compiled by Jennifer Cafarella with Frederick W. Kagan,
Kyra Rauschenbach, and Nataliya Bugayova

COVID-19 CRISIS

China, Russia, and Iran are exploiting the global COVID-19 crisis to further undermine the Western public's trust in their governments. China and Russia have won propaganda victories by conducting showy deliveries of humanitarian aid in European countries after using disinformation to inflame fear and social unrest. That said, many of the COVID-19 test kits China delivered to Western countries turned out to be faulty, tempering what would have otherwise been a clear public relations victory for China. China, Russia, and Iran are conducting mutually reinforcing information operations to suggest that the U.S. created COVID-19 as a bioweapon and to frame the American COVID-19 outbreak as significantly worse than that occurring in China or Iran. The Kremlin has also launched a disinformation campaign around COVID-19 in Ukraine in attempt to undermine trust in the Ukrainian government and fuel violent protests.

More from ISW-CTP: "[*Viral Disinformation: The Kremlin's Coronavirus Disinformation Operation in Ukraine*](#)"
March 2020

Russia and Iran are pitching a humanitarian narrative in new bid for sanctions relief. Both countries seek to reduce popular backlash from their populations regarding the COVID-19 crisis by shifting blame to the West. Russia and Iran are also probing the possibility of raising political pressure in the West for sanctions relief on humanitarian grounds, exploiting and repurposing recent statements from the UN Secretary General calling for humanitarian exemptions for "vital medical supplies." The information operation positions Russia and Iran for a win-win scenario – either advancing their goal of sanctions relief or framing the U.S. as inhumane.

RUSSIA

Russia gained a significant concession from the Ukrainian government that will, if implemented, legitimize Russia's proxies and – by extension – its illegal invasion and occupation of parts of eastern Ukraine. The Ukrainian government signed a protocol with Russia and the Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe (OSCE) on March 11 to establish an "advisory council" comprised of equally sized delegations from the Ukrainian government and Russian-controlled separatists along with representatives from Russia and other OSCE countries. This protocol marks the first time the Ukrainian government has agreed to consider negotiating with the separatist leadership, which Moscow selects and directs. The agreement reinforces the false narrative that Russia is a mediator rather than a belligerent in this conflict, despite the presence of thousands of Russian soldiers in the separatist regions. The agreement also represents a massive concession from Ukraine that, if implemented fully, will legitimize Russia's proxies and, by extension, Russia's illegal invasion and occupation of eastern Ukraine. Putin used a combination of military pressure and an effective targeted information operation to put Ukrainian President Zelensky on the defensive and coerce him to make the concessions. American and European policymakers have not reacted to this major setback.

More from ISW-CTP: [“Russia in Review: Putin Accelerates Ukraine Campaign amid Converging Crises”](#) March 2020; [“Russia in Review: The Kremlin's Fake De-escalation in Donbas”](#) February 2020

Turkey and Russia are engaged in the initial phase of a direct war in Syria that could destabilize Europe by generating another massive refugee wave and deepen the rift within NATO if the West does not support Turkey. Turkey and Russia have twice failed to implement the limited de-escalation agreement they reached on March 5 covering Syria’s northwest province of Idlib, due in part to a spoiling role by al Qaeda affiliated groups. Meanwhile, Russia and Turkey have both prepared for resumed military escalation that could include additional direct fighting between Turkish and Russian forces. Turkey continues to send military reinforcements into Idlib while Russia is reportedly negotiating with Iran to leverage more Iranian proxy militia support in Idlib. The most-dangerous scenarios in this conflict include possible Russian strikes on Turkish soil that would trigger a NATO Article 5 response; Russia will likely stay below this threshold and instead attempt to isolate Turkey from Western support. The renewed clashes between Russia and Turkey in Idlib could send a massive wave of Syrian refugees to Europe as the COVID-19 crisis continues.

More from ISW-CTP: [Testimony by Jennifer Cafarella “The Crisis in Idlib”](#) March 2020; [“Turkey Commits to Idlib”](#) March 2020

IRAN

The Iranian regime faces an existential threat that may be greater than any it has seen since the Iran-Iraq War. Protests in Iraq and Lebanon in October 2019 rapidly took on unprecedented anti-Iranian rhetoric. Protests erupted in Iran itself in November 2019 after the regime mishandled the announcement of a reduction in gasoline subsidies. The regime crushed its domestic protests rapidly and brutally while overseeing an equally brutal crackdown in Iraq. Iran simultaneously escalated its proxy attacks against American forces in Iraq. Those attacks culminated in the killing of an American in late December, which triggered a series of U.S. military responses including the one that killed Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani. Iran shot down a Ukrainian airliner in the ensuing confusion during its own military response to Soleimani’s death, triggering a brief round of additional protests. These events coupled with the spread of COVID-19 in Iran depressed participation in Iran’s parliamentary elections to the lowest levels in history. The regime has subsequently mishandled the COVID-19 crisis worse than any other state in the world, producing a devastating infection and mortality rate. All these events, particularly the COVID crisis, have increased the likelihood of regime destabilization or even collapse, but such scenarios remain highly unlikely to occur in the next 12 months.

IRAN & ISIS IN IRAQ

Iran continues to resource its regional proxy network despite – and perhaps because of – internal stressors and is escalating its campaign against American personnel in Iraq. Iran’s proxies have again escalated their campaign of rocket attacks against American bases and the U.S. Embassy in Iraq, conducting two large barrages that killed two Americans and wounded multiple others this month. Iran is likely trying to draw the U.S. into a pattern of limited kinetic strikes that kill Iraqi nationals within Iranian proxy groups, which could poison the Iraqi political environment against allowing American troops to remain in Iraq to support the fight against ISIS. These political conditions would also empower Iran’s proxies within the Iraqi parliament, which are actively opposing the formation of a new Iraqi government under PM-

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designate Adnan al Zurfi, whom the U.S. backs. Iran also likely seeks to make an American kinetic response against Iran’s proxies in Iraq or Iranian targets more difficult for the Trump Administration to justify. A new Shi’a militia group, which ISW-CTP assesses with high confidence is an Iranian proxy, has begun claiming the rocket attacks. The creation of this splinter group creates more plausible deniability for Iran which could make it politically difficult for the administration to make the case that Iran must be held accountable for the attacks on American personnel in Iraq.

More on this from ISW-CTP: “[Iranian Escalation Timeline](#)” January 2020; “[Iraq's Parliament Votes to End U.S. Troop Presence in Iraq](#)” January 2020; “[Warning Intelligence Update: Iran Increases Pressure on U.S. Forces in Iraq](#)” January 2020; “[Iran File: January 29, 2020](#)”; “[US-Iran Escalation Timeline: March 2020 Update](#)” March 2020

The risk of more significant conflict between the U.S. and Iran is rising. Iranian leaders likely perceive America’s focus on COVID-19 and growing congressional opposition to military action against Iran as an opportunity to use greater military force to drive the U.S. out of Iraq. The U.S. response to Iran’s escalations remains quite limited thus far. The inward-turn of American and the Western attention in general to deal with COVID-19 means that Westerners will likely view any major U.S. military action, even taken in self-defense or to preempt a major Iranian military operations, as aggression by the Trump Administration, since it will seem to have come out of nowhere given the dearth of Middle East coverage in Western media over the past several weeks. This misconception could therefore trigger U.S. congressional legislation blocking such defensive military actions. Iran is likely more risk tolerant as a result of its internal crisis and more likely to miscalculate the U.S. administration’s willingness to meet force with force than at any time in the recent past. Both factors make the chance of unintentional military escalation greater than it has been in years.

A quiet but significant American and coalition drawdown in Iraq is creating a major opportunity for ISIS to accelerate its resurgence during Ramadan. The U.S. and coalition partners have withdrawn from three Iraqi bases and halted training and joint operations with Iraqi counterparts, citing pre-existing drawdown plans and temporary requirements due to the COVID-19 crisis. The U.S. will likely continue to conduct airstrikes against ISIS and could resume limited raids from bases in Kurdistan and the al Assad airbase in Anbar province, but will be unable to sustain the same tempo of operations. U.S. forces will also be increasingly reliant on Iraqi intelligence at a time when the COVID-19 crisis is escalating in Iraq and ISIS is preparing for a military campaign before and during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, which begins April 23.

More on this from ISW-CTP: “[Iraq Situation Report: March 18 - 24, 2020](#),” “[Iraq Situation Report: March 11 - 17, 2020](#)”

For further questions or requests for detailed briefings on any of these topics please contact the Critical Threats Project or the Institute for the Study of War.

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ISW-CTP Geopolitical Risk Assessment #2

April 8, 2020

Compiled by Jennifer Cafarella with Frederick W. Kagan, Emily Estelle, and Nataliya Bugayova

US – IRAN COMPETITION IN IRAQ

The U.S. is exerting leverage to prevent Iran from vetoing Iraq’s latest government formation attempt but is risking the success of the counter-ISIS mission in the process. Iraqi President Barham Salih nominated Adnan al Zurfi as Iraq’s new Prime Minister (PM) on March 17 without consensus from Iraq’s political parties. Iran is marshalling Iraqi Shi’a opposition to Zurfi to reject his Council of Ministers and thereby restart the government formation process for a third time since the resignation of PM Adel Abdel Mehdi in November 2019 under popular pressure. Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps – Quds Force (IRGC-QF) Commander Ismael Ghaani traveled to Baghdad on March 31 to organize Shi’a opposition behind the Conquest Alliance led by prominent Iranian proxy commander Hadi al Ameri. The U.S. is using multiple forms of leverage to block Iran’s veto. The U.S. extended Iraq’s sanctions waiver for 30 days on March 26, ensuring it will expire shortly after the government formation deadline. The U.S. also added sanctions on multiple Iraqi entities linked to IRGC-QF operations and began to negotiate a new Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA) with Zurfi. Zurfi said the U.S. offered a 50-percent reduction in coalition forces in Iraq by the end of 2020 as part of a new SFA; Zurfi framed the negotiations as a step forward in implementing the January 5 parliament resolution demanding the expulsion of coalition forces. The U.S. has already withdrawn from five Iraqi bases to consolidate forces at better-defended positions amid escalating attacks from Iran’s proxies. The reported U.S. offer to withdraw some forces entirely may enable Zurfi to mitigate Iran’s effort to align Shi’a parties against him but represents a major U.S. concession to Iran that would also severely jeopardize the success of counter-ISIS operations in Iraq.

More from ISW-CTP: [“Iraq Situation Report: March 25 - 31, 2020,”](#) April 2020; [“Iran’s Proxies Accelerate Soleimani’s Campaign to Compel U.S. Withdrawal from Iraq,”](#) April 2020.

THE SALAFI-JIHADI THREAT IN AFRICA

Salafi-jihadi insurgencies are escalating or poised to escalate across West Africa, Mali, the Lake Chad Basin, and Somalia, deepening already dangerous instability and creating new safe havens from which to launch global attacks. In West Africa’s Sahel region, groups linked to both al Qaeda and ISIS have an opportunity to pursue large-scale governance amid deepening state failure, a major step toward the Salafi jihadi movement’s overall goal of establishing an Islamic caliphate. Salafi-jihadi insurgencies have surged in the past month. An al Qaeda-linked group in Mali disrupted parliamentary elections and has accelerated attacks on government forces to fuel social conflict and drive a wedge between Sahel governments and a French-led international counterterrorism force. Salafi-jihadi militants in the Lake Chad Basin, including an ISIS affiliate, have escalated attacks, including an assault that killed nearly 100 Chadian soldiers and has drawn Chad, a US partner, back into counter-insurgency operations. Al Shabaab, al Qaeda’s East African affiliate, conducted its first lethal attack on an American military position in Kenya in January and is working to develop extra-regional attack capabilities, including by training pilots, presumably to enable

future attacks on civilian airliners. These insurgencies will accelerate as the U.S. draws back its counterterrorism pressure on the continent, which U.S. officials suggest may occur in the coming months.

Salafi Jihadi groups may achieve breakout success in Libya, Tunisia, and Algeria in coming months, which could include a surge of ISIS activity for Ramadan. Libya's civil war continues to worsen, offering renewed opportunity for groups linked to ISIS and al Qaeda. ISIS may be preparing to escalate attacks, and possibly establish new provinces, in Tunisia and Algeria during Ramadan. ISIS claimed a bombing in southern Algeria in its latest operation. ISIS resumed attacks in southern Algeria in November 2019 after more than two years of silence. ISIS-linked militants also attacked a checkpoint near the US Embassy in Tunis in early March. ISIS typically surges global attacks during Ramadan, which begins on April 23. ISIS has also historically established new provinces during Ramadan and has focused more on Africa since the loss of its territorial caliphate in early 2019.

More from ISW-CTP: "[Why the U.S. Should Spend 0.3 Percent of Its Defense Budget to Prevent an African Debacle](#)" March 2020; "[Coronavirus Will Worsen Humanitarian Crises in African Conflict Zones](#)" March 2020; "[West Africa at Risk of Becoming Salafi-jihadi Haven](#)" February 2020; "[ISIS Reasserts Global Reach for Ramadan 2019](#)" May 2019; "[Baghdadi Leaves Behind a Global ISIS Threat](#)" October 2019

RUSSIA

Very low oil prices give the U.S. an opportunity to pressure the Kremlin at a moment when Vladimir Putin is unusually vulnerable domestically. Putin was planning to legitimize a set of constitutional changes that would allow him to remain Russia's president after 2024 via a referendum in April. The COVID-19 pandemic forced him to postpone that referendum and is creating economic challenges to which he is responding poorly. Moscow is making Russian employers cover the costs of nearly a month's shut down without yet offering any stimulus package. Continuation of this policy could lead to a social outcry in Russia as companies go bankrupt. The collapse of global oil prices resulting both from COVID-19 and from the Russo-Saudi oil war will make bailouts harder as they squeeze Putin's cash reserves. Putin may have to re-evaluate how much money he can spend on foreign adventures and how much effort he can devote to disrupting Western democracies and the upcoming U.S. election if his domestic economic situation becomes serious enough.

The U.S. has an interest in keeping pressure on Putin high. It can advance that interest by not engaging in the upcoming Saudi-Russia energy talks and allowing oil prices to remain low until OPEC+ comes to an agreement. The U.S. should not overestimate the effect of low oil prices on Putin, who retains a firm grip on power, has been able to manage social unrest thus far, and has sizable cash reserves. However, low oil prices increase the cost of keeping Putin's power circle and population content and limit financing his foreign adventures. Protracted low oil prices combined with other pressures could reveal Putin's weakness and cracks in the Russian system and provide the U.S. with leverage against Russia and a window of opportunity to dampen Putin's foreign policy ambitions. Evidence of the effects of the convergence of these pressures is already emerging: Putin had to shield its energy giant Rosneft from U.S. sanctions on Venezuela by transferring Rosneft's assets in Venezuela to a company owned by the Kremlin on March 28.

Putin is trying to gain advantage by driving a wedge between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia. Putin likely tried to secure U.S. help in pressuring Saudi Arabia to cut oil output during his call with U.S. President Donald Trump on March 30. Putin and other Russian officials are trying to portray Saudi Arabia as the sole villain

in the oil price war and the U.S. as the principal loser. Putin stated that Saudi Arabia's price is an attempt to eliminate competitors, specifically the U.S., who produce shale oil. This Russian information operation is baseless. American industry is much better positioned to survive and recover from even protracted low oil prices than Russia's — the economic stimulus packages already passed by the U.S. Congress are multiples of the entire Russian GDP. In the event of a protracted global oil price slump, Moscow will be the biggest loser.

For further questions or requests for detailed briefings on any of these topics please contact the Critical Threats Project or the Institute for the Study of War.

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ISW-CTP Geopolitical Risk Assessment #3

April 14, 2020

*Compiled by Jennifer Cafarella with Frederick W. Kagan,
Nataliya Bugayova, and Kyra Rauschenbach*

OPEC+ DEAL

U.S. President Donald Trump intervened to reach an unprecedented deal to reduce global oil output by roughly 20 million barrels per day after four days of negotiations with the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), the G20, and other oil-producing nations. Global oil prices collapsed beginning in March. Saudi Arabia surged production after Russia refused a round of proposed cuts on March 6. Prices fell further due to decreasing demand resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. OPEC Secretary General Mohammed Barkindo warned on April 9 that the global surplus could reach 14.7 million barrels per day (BPD) in the second quarter. The price drop threatened U.S. jobs in the oil sector but affected Russia far more severely, threatening Russian President Vladimir Putin's domestic position as he attempts to consolidate power ahead of the end of his presidential term in 2024. Russia relies on oil exports as a major source of state revenue. International sanctions and the COVID-generated economic crisis strained Russia's finances at a critical moment for Putin. The U.S. could have tried to extract geopolitical concessions from Moscow by allowing or threatening to allow global oil prices to remain low for a long time. President Trump did not take the opportunity to do so.

President Trump brokered a deal to stabilize the market after a phone call with Putin on March 30. The deal includes a package of measures that will reduce output levels by roughly 20 million BPD, including an OPEC+ deal to cut 9.7 million BPD through June, additional cuts from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kuwait, and measures by the International Energy Agency (IEA) and U.S. to remove surplus oil from the market. Mexico initially refused to accept the deal but later agreed to a U.S. proposal for a limited cut of 100,000 BPD matched by a U.S. cut of 300,000 BPD with a promise to repay the U.S. later. President Trump stated the U.S. will achieve its reduction through "market factors" but did not elaborate. Iran, Libya, and Venezuela are exempted, although the deal counts their pre-existing production drops. Iraq did not receive an exemption and will cut roughly 1 million BPD, deepening its economic crisis. President Trump stated the deal will "save hundreds of thousands of energy jobs" in the U.S. The deal is even more important for Putin, who can now work to stabilize Russia's economy as he re-approaches consolidating his rule.

POLITICAL PROGRESS IN IRAQ

Iraq's president nominated a new consensus prime minister candidate with support from both Iran and the U.S., but the risk of conflict remains high as Iranian proxies continue to threaten U.S. forces. Iraqi President Barham Salih nominated former National Intelligence Service (INIS) Director Mustafa al Kadhimi as prime minister (PM) on April 9 after the U.S. and Iran both increased pressure in a standoff over previous PM nominee Adnan al Zurfi. The U.S. State Department and the Iranian Foreign Ministry both issued statements supporting Khadimi, who must now receive an absolute majority vote from Iraq's Parliament, the Council of Representatives, for his Council of Ministers (CoM) by May 9 in order to form a government. Tensions between the U.S. and Iran remain high, however. The CoM includes financially lucrative ministry positions that Iran's proxies seek to control and to which the U.S. seeks to limit Iran's access. Iranian proxy groups

have also continued to threaten U.S. forces in Iraq. Katai'b Hezbollah (KH) issued a statement rejecting Khadimi as PM and calling his nomination a “declaration of war” against the Iraqi people. The statement could indicate Iran intends to continue to use KH as a means of applying military pressure on both Iraqi politicians and U.S. forces. Meanwhile, the U.S. continued to increase pressure on Iran’s regional network, which will shape the next stage of negotiations for both Khadimi’s CoM and a new U.S.-Iraq Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA), for which the U.S. intends to begin serious negotiations in June. The U.S. State Department offered a reward of \$10 million on April 10 for information regarding the activities, networks, and associates of a senior Iranian proxy leader named Muhammad Kawtharani, a Lebanese Hezbollah official who handles Iraqi affairs. The reward may generate intelligence the U.S. can use to support either or both additional sanctions or military strikes.

More from ISW-CTP: “[Iraq Situation Report: April 1 - 7, 2020](#),” April 2020; “[Iran’s Proxies Accelerate Soleimani’s Campaign to Compel U.S. Withdrawal from Iraq](#),” April 2020.

UAE – ASSAD RAPPROACHMENT

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) continues to deepen its support for the Assad regime despite the threat of U.S. sanctions and may seek to use Syria to gain leverage over Turkey to advantage the UAE in Libya. The UAE pivoted to realign with Assad’s regime in December 2018 after pro-Assad forces seized opposition-held southern Syria. The UAE reopened its embassy in Damascus and invested in regime reconstruction projects beginning in early 2019, arguing that rapprochement would counter Iranian influence. UAE Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Zayed (MBZ) has since gone even further despite a new threat of secondary sanctions from the U.S. on entities that do business with the Assad regime. The UAE is increasingly working to leverage Assad to support the UAE’s interests in Libya. An unofficial UAE-backed Libyan government took over and re-opened the Libyan Embassy in Damascus on March 3, aiding Assad’s attempt to re-legitimize his regime internationally while providing the UAE a similar effect in Libya. According to unconfirmed reports, MBZ also offered Assad financial incentives to spoil the Russo-Turkish ceasefire agreement in Idlib province in early March, which could pull Turkey’s focus and constrain the resources it can allocate to Libya. While the report about the Emirati financial offer is unverified, Russia has demonstrated serious concerns about Assad spoiling the agreement. Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu traveled to Damascus on March 23 and issued Assad strict orders not to interfere in Idlib, according to local Syrian opposition sources and Middle East Eye. MBZ later held his first phone call with Assad since the start of the war on March 27, after which he tweeted that he discussed “humanitarian solidarity” with Syria, indicating the UAE may begin to provide support to Assad couched as humanitarian aid for the COVID-19 crisis. The interconnections between the wars in Syria and Libya will likely continue to grow as Turkey, Russia, and the UAE all compete in both theaters.

More from ISW-CTP: “[A Strategy for Success in Libya](#),” November 2017; “[Russia’s Dead-End Diplomacy in Syria](#),” November 2019; “[Don’t Let Russia Dominate Libya](#),” December 2019; “[Turkey Commits to Idlib](#),” March 2020

PUTIN’S DOMESTIC CONSOLIDATION

Vladimir Putin is using COVID-19 to test and implement an enhanced system of authoritarian societal control measures. Putin is tightening control over the domestic information space and expanding intelligence gathering from his population in ways that set long-term conditions for tighter domestic control. The Kremlin Institute for the Study of War | Critical Threats Project

has introduced jail time for “misinformation” about the pandemic and a federal censorship campaign of Russia’s information space. Russian security forces have already begun arresting individuals, including doctors, who speak out against the government’s poor management of the crisis. The Russian National Guard, Rosgvardia, is also preparing for a large-scale domestic deployment to fight the COVID-19 outbreak in coming weeks, their first deployment for healthcare purposes. Local Russian authorities are also testing city-wide facial recognition software and a QR code system to track all resident movement during the quarantine.

While framed as temporary measures to combat COVID-19, the Kremlin is highly unlikely to roll these policies back when the pandemic recedes. Putin was already accelerating his campaign to tighten control over the Russian population and sanitize the domestic information space before the crisis. His value proposition to the Russian people is declining as Russia’s economy continues to collapse, making controlling the narrative an increasingly existential requirement for Putin to preserve his regime and retain power beyond the expiration of his current term in 2024. He will likely repurpose these tools to suppress political dissent and popular protests in coming months. Putin commands the Russian National Guard directly, has previously used it to suppress protests, and may sustain its deployment to retain tight control after the pandemic. It will take time to test and implement the new facial recognition and QR code technology, but these tools will provide the National Guard and other units with much greater ability to identify and eliminate sources of popular resistance.

More from ISW-CTP: [“Russia in Review: Kremlin Tests Authoritarian Societal Control Measures during COVID-19 Crisis” April 2020](#)

POSSIBLE INSTABILITY IN IRAN

Iran may experience new forms of civil disorder during the COVID-19 crisis that could undermine regime stability in ways for which the regime is unprepared. Tensions between President Hassan Rouhani’s administration and hardliners, particularly the clergy and the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, have led to a wavering and indecisive response to the pandemic, including the absence of any plausible program to mitigate its economic effects. Popular unrest will likely increase in coming weeks and manifest as small-scale protests, work stoppages, and acts of sabotage – similar to what occurred after the regime’s suppression of the 2017-2018 Dey Protests. This pressure could present novel threats to regime security forces already showing new strains in the face of the pandemic. The COVID-19 crisis has also put significant pressure on Iran’s prison and judiciary systems. Government officials killed rioting prisoners on at least one occasion in Khuzestan province. The judiciary released nearly 100,000 low-level offenders in March in an effort to reduce pressure on the prison system. That release did not end prison riots and has antagonized law enforcement personnel who say that the influx of former prisoners into society is putting excessive pressure on them to maintain public order in a time of crisis.

The behavior of the Law Enforcement Forces (LEF) and of Iran’s other internal security forces, particularly high-end Basij units, will likely offer the best indicators of the likelihood of extreme scenarios including serious regime destabilization. Local LEF personnel in mid-March reportedly disobeyed orders from the Rouhani administration to permit free travel and instead supported locals who set up roadblocks to prevent civilians from leaving Tehran for homes in nearby provinces. The LEF is the regime’s first line of defense against domestic unrest. The willingness of some LEF officials to disobey direct orders suggests that regime stability might be at increased risk during the pandemic despite the low likelihood of widespread mass protests.

More from ISW-CTP: “[From Dey to Today: Iranian Anti-Regime Protest Slogans](#)” January 2019; “[Iran File: Civil Disorder Adopts New Forms in Iran during Pandemic](#)” April 2020; “[Iran File: Hardliners Promote Greater Authoritarianism amidst Mounting Crises](#)” March 2020

For further questions or requests for detailed briefings on any of these topics please contact the Critical Threats Project or the Institute for the Study of War.

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ISW-CTP Geopolitical Risk Assessment #4

April 14, 2020

Compiled by Jennifer Cafarella with Frederick W. Kagan, Emily Estelle, and Jason Zhou

CHINA, RUSSIA, AND IRAN TEST US RESPONSE THRESHOLDS

Russia, China, and Iran are testing their freedom of action as the US turns inward and pulls back. Each has undertaken provocations in recent weeks that will likely continue absent a US-led Western response.

- **RUSSIA.** US Defense Secretary Mark Esper stated on April 15 that Russia is “trying to penetrate our airspace” after US and Canadian jets intercepted two Russian Tu-142 reconnaissance aircraft in the NORAD defense identification zone (ADIZ) in Alaska on March 9. A Russian jet buzzed a US reconnaissance asset in the Mediterranean Sea on April 15 and 19. Moscow tested an anti-satellite missile on April 15.
- **CHINA.** China may have begun testing a low-yield nuclear weapon according to details leaked from a forthcoming State Department report. China has taken multiple aggressive actions in the South China Sea since February. China formally established administrative districts covering the disputed Parcel and Spratly Islands, subordinating them to its Sansha city municipality on April 19. China has also undertaken multiple aggressive military actions in the South China Sea including lasing a US Navy surveillance aircraft on February 17, sending several combat aircraft across the median line of the Taiwan Strait on March 16, and sailing an oil survey ship accompanied by a Chinese coast guard vessel into Vietnam’s exclusive economic zone (EEZ) on April 14, a few days after a Chinese ship sunk a Vietnamese fishing boat. Finally, China has begun to use an airstrip on the Fiery Cross Reef as a “forward operating base” for reconnaissance flights, according to US military and State Department officials.
- **IRAN.** Iran conducted “dangerous and harassing approaches” near US ships in the northern Persian Gulf on April 15 according to the US naval command in the Middle East. Tehran’s proxies continue to threaten and conduct attacks against US forces in Iraq.

The US responses to these actions have been largely rhetorical and symbolic.

ISIS LAUNCHES GLOBAL RAMADAN CAMPAIGN

ISIS has begun its annual surge of operations during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, which begins on April 23. The group remains a capable global organization despite the death of its leader last year. ISIS has not yet executed a successful mass-casualty attack but has apparently planned several. Security forces have disrupted ISIS operations against Coptic Christians in Egypt on Easter Sunday – April 12, at least one US military base in Germany, public locations in two cities in southern and northwest Russia, and at least one government target in Tunisia. The attack cell in Germany reportedly had connections to senior ISIS members in both Syria and Afghanistan, demonstrating that ISIS’s global attack infrastructure remains at least partially intact. Authorities in Poland also made their second-ever arrest of an ISIS external attack plotter in Poland; the suspect was allegedly planning attacks in Western Europe with support from ISIS in Syria.

ISIS is also surging its operations in Iraq and Syria while preparing for further expansion in Africa. ISIS has increased the rate and scale of its attacks along the seam between Iraqi Kurdistan and the rest of Iraq. ISIS operations in Syria are getting bolder, now featuring daytime attacks against the US local partner in northeast Syria and a days-long assault on a regime-held urban center in Syria’s central desert. ISIS has also begun to surge operations to gain additional territorial strongholds in Africa. ISIS fighters temporarily seized

control of multiple districts in northern Mozambique in late March and announced the group’s intent to create a “caliphate” in Mozambique. ISIS previously declared a “Central Africa” province that covers both the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Mozambique and may now intend to separate Mozambique into a new province. No regional or international force is currently contesting the group’s growth in this area. Mozambique has instead hired Russian mercenaries to attempt to combat the ISIS threat, with limited success thus far.

More from ISW-CTP: [“ISIS Reasserts Global Reach for Ramadan 2019,”](#) May 2019; [“ISIS’s Second Comeback: Assessing the Next ISIS Insurgency,”](#) June 2019. [“Baghdad Leaves Behind a Global ISIS Threat,”](#) October 2019; [“Coronavirus Will Worsen Humanitarian Crises in African Conflict Zones,”](#) March 2020.

COVID-19 WILL STRENGTHEN AFRICAN SALAFI-JIHADI MOVEMENT

The COVID-19 pandemic may set off a wave of instability in Africa that dramatically expands the Salafi-jihadi movement. African nations are ill prepared to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, which is now spreading across the continent. Botched or draconian pandemic responses have begun and will increase. These policies and the resulting economic fallout will likely cause a mass legitimacy crisis that destabilizes governments across Africa. The pandemic will also derail counterterrorism efforts and heighten anti-government and inter-communal grievances that Salafi-jihadi groups exploit. Partial or complete state collapse is possible in currently stable areas. States with recent political transitions, such as Algeria and Sudan, are especially at risk. Would-be autocrats may use the pandemic as an excuse to claw back democratic reforms, setting conditions for renewed uprisings. The pandemic also threatens to cause economic catastrophe in high-population states that have previously contained instability, notably Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Nigeria. The full or partial collapse of any of these states would open a new major battlefield for the Salafi-jihadi movement and create another opportunity for a regional proxy war like Syria, Yemen, or Libya’s.

More from ISW-CTP: [“The COVID-19 Pandemic Will Strengthen the Salafi-Jihadi Movement in Africa,”](#) April 2020; [“Chaos in Sudan and the rest of North Africa threatens all of us,”](#) May 2019; [“Testimony: Ethiopia’s Strategic Importance: US National Security Interests at Risk in the Horn of Africa,”](#) September 2018.

LIBYA FACES HUMANITARIAN CRISIS UNPRECEDENTED IN ITS CURRENT WAR

American disengagement from Libya has left a vacuum that competing regional and global powers are filling in ways that link that conflict with Syria and expand openings for Salafi-jihadi penetration of Libyan society. The Libya war increasingly resembles a second Syria crisis on the Mediterranean as external players pour in military support and a dire humanitarian crisis emerges. The Libyan National Army (LNA) led by Khalifa Haftar and its backers, notably the UAE, Egypt, and Russia, escalated its yearlong effort to seize Tripoli, Libya’s capital, in early April as the pandemic drew already limited international attention away from the conflict. Fighting in the suburbs is displacing people into crowded downtown Tripoli, and LNA shelling has targeted hospitals. Libya’s economy is already collapsing under a months-long oil export blockade by LNA-aligned forces. The LNA remains far from victory, however. Turkish-backed militias aligned with the UN-backed government made several key advances in mid-April. The war is set to become a grinding urban conflict that will further fragment Libya over time, spilling instability to neighboring states, sending refugees

to Europe, and setting conditions for latent Salafi-jihadi movements to reemerge. The Libyan war continues to merge with the Syria conflict. Russia is now deploying its own Syrian proxy recruits to Libya to counter Turkey’s addition of Syrian proxy manpower in January. Russia seeks to use its role in the conflict to gain a second a Mediterranean military base in Libya to accompany the one it has in Syria.

More from ISW-CTP: “[The COVID-19 Pandemic Will Strengthen the Salafi-Jihadi Movement in Africa](#),” April 2020; “[Don’t let Russia dominate Libya](#),” December 2019; “[Russia Is Intervening in Libya. Should We Care?](#),” November 2019; “[A Strategy for Success in Libya](#),” November 2017.

WE’RE ALSO WATCHING:

- Iran’s proxies in Iraq are now threatening to attack US logistics convoys after US forces consolidated at two hardened bases, which reduced the proxies’ ability to impose casualties through rocket attacks.
- Ukraine discovered that a senior member of its intelligence service was working for Russian intelligence. Meanwhile, Ukraine’s new defense leadership appears to be disrupting the work of its reform office, which was established in 2015 to help Ukraine modernize its military to NATO standards as a step toward NATO ascension.
- Al Qaeda-affiliated forces in Syria’s Idlib province attacked Turkish troops that deployed to stop a Russian-led offensive, threatening a new spiral of violence that Russia, the Assad regime, and Iran could exploit.

For further questions or requests for detailed briefings on any of these topics please contact the Critical Threats Project or the Institute for the Study of War.

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ISW-CTP Geopolitical Risk Assessment #5

April 28, 2020

Compiled by Jennifer Cafarella with Frederick W. Kagan, Nataliya Bugayova, and Emily Estelle

RUSSIA LOSES GROUND IN THE BALKANS

Western outreach in the Western Balkans is successfully expanding the reach of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU) despite Russian President Vladimir Putin’s efforts to block it. North Macedonia joined NATO in March in a major setback for Putin in the region. Russia’s strategic partner Serbia is also increasingly vocal about its aspirations to join the EU, which announced a new enlargement plan for the Balkans in early February. A European Commission antitrust ruling forced Russia’s state-owned gas company Gazprom to cut gas prices to Bulgaria by 40 percent, significantly decreasing Russia’s leverage over Bulgaria. The Russian Orthodox Church – one of the Kremlin’s major influence tools – risks losing its reach in Montenegro after that country’s president signed a law that could strip the church of significant assets. The Kremlin’s means to reverse these setbacks under the converging pressures of COVID-19 and low oil prices will remain low unless Putin deprioritizes other efforts, which he is unlikely to do. The West thus has an opportunity to curb Putin’s ambitions in the Balkans and should double down on its efforts to reach out to the Western Balkan states.

More from ISW-CTP: “[Russia in Review: The Kremlin Faces Setbacks in the Balkans](#)” April 2020

CHINA FACES POLITICAL BACKLASH BUT ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY IN AFRICA

China risks losing influence in Africa due to its poor treatment of African laborers in China during the COVID-19 pandemic. Chinese authorities and businesses in Guangzhou Province, a manufacturing hub that hosts most of the African population in China, are implementing discriminatory policies toward African nationals citing fears of a new COVID-19 outbreak among that population. Chinese authorities reportedly began targeting African nationals for arbitrary quarantines and tests. A McDonalds store in Guangzhou hung a sign stating “black people are not allowed to enter,” an example that circulated widely on social media. Landowners have been evicting Africans from their homes according to Kenyan and Ugandan officials, who summoned the Chinese ambassadors to protest footage of evicted Africans now living on the streets in China. Multiple other African states, including Ghana, Kenya, and Nigeria, also summoned their Chinese ambassadors to condemn the discriminatory policies. This backlash undermines China’s efforts to portray itself as a responsible and generous global partner in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.

China has a strategic opportunity in Africa to seize valuable state-owned assets as African nations fail to make loan payments in 2020 but may choose not to do so to protect China’s reputation amid growing international pressure. The IMF predicts that African gross domestic product (GDP) will shrink by 1.6 percent in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The G-20 reached a non-binding agreement to suspend African loan payments from May 1 until the end of the year if African governments request forbearance, potentially freeing up \$20 billion for pandemic response. The group held out the potential to extend the suspension through 2021 for states that need additional relief. China appears to have accepted the agreement, but it is unclear whether China will implement it as the Chinese government typically makes decisions on debt relief on a bilateral basis. China owns significant African debt: it provided \$150 billion in loans across Africa from 2000-2018, according to estimates from Johns Hopkins University. Some African states report that China has begun demanding collateral if they cannot make their payments, exploiting provisions that require the surrender of state assets if countries fail to pay. Zambia is considering transferring its third largest copper mine to China in return for debt relief, for example. China may refrain from demanding asset seizures given the pushback it already faces in Africa and globally for its role in the COVID-19 pandemic, but it could still refuse to suspend loan payments. China is providing humanitarian supplies to many African nations as a propaganda tool and may surge that effort to obfuscate its predatory approach to African debt.

RUSSIAN MERCENARIES ACCUSED OF USING CHEMICAL WEAPONS IN LIBYA

The interior minister of Libya’s UN-recognized government accused a Russian private military contractor, the Wagner Group, of using “nerve gas” in the Libyan capital of Tripoli, where Wagner is fighting in support of strongman Khalifa Haftar’s Libyan National Army (LNA). The Wagner group is a proxy of the Russian Ministry of Defense. Observers reported shells emitting smoke on the Tripoli frontline and hospitalized fighters with symptoms consistent with a poison gas attack. The allegations are unconfirmed and there is no consensus among observers on the type of chemical weapon that may have been used. Such an attack in Libya could indicate a chemical weapons transfer from Syria, underscoring the deepening connections between the two conflicts. The use of chemical weapons by a Russian contractor would indicate that Russia seeks to use the Libyan theater to advance its effort to normalize chemical weapons use. If so, Russia may have decided to do so now in order to counteract new pressure in Syria after the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) attributed responsibility for a chemical attack in Syria to the Assad regime, Russia’s client, for the first time since the war began in 2011. Haftar’s forces also have possible

incentive to use chemical weapons to break an increasingly grinding stalemate that threatens the LNA's ability to sustain operations in Tripoli.

More from ISW-CTP: “[Alleged Chemical Weapons Use in Syria Since August 19, 2014](#)” October 2014; “[A Strategy for Success in Libya](#),” November 2017; “[Weak US Response to Russian Proxies Undermines Deterrence in Middle East and Eastern Europe](#),” February 2018; “[Russia Is Intervening in Libya. Should We Care?](#),” November 2019; “[Don't let Russia dominate Libya](#),” December 2019; “[The COVID-19 Pandemic Will Strengthen the Salafi-Jihadi Movement in Africa](#),” April 2020

US AND IRAN MISCOMMUNICATE IN IRAQ

Iranian officials are celebrating a perceived success in Iraq as the US offers to withdraw half of its troops by the end of 2020, but new escalation is likely this summer. The US seeks to incentivize the Iraqi government to negotiate a new Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA) to formalize US support for Iraq. The US does not have an SFA with Iraq as of April 2020. In 2014, then- Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al Abadi used his executive powers to authorize US and international support for Iraq as an urgent and limited counter-ISIS measure. The US offer for a potential force reduction as part of a new FSA appears to have changed Iran's calculus regarding escalation in Iraq, at least temporarily. Iran and its Iraqi proxies have paused their kinetic escalations in Iraq and allowed the government formation process to proceed, expecting they are on track to accomplish their objective of the withdrawal of US forces. They supported the nomination of a new, consensus Iraqi prime minister who is also acceptable to the US after vetoing a prior candidate Iran perceived as too US friendly. Iranian officials have also started publicly congratulating themselves for finally getting the US to leave Iraq, though American officials deny that there are plans for a full withdrawal. The US will likely clarify during SFA negotiations, scheduled to begin in June, that the US does not intend to leave Iraq entirely. A new round of Iranian proxy attacks against American positions or personnel in Iraq will likely resume later this summer as a result. Iran has continued to prepare its proxy network for a new phase of escalation and has created four new proxy units since January. These groups have published a consistent stream of threats against US forces and claimed at least one attack on a logistics convoy.

More from ISW-CTP: “[Iran's Proxies Accelerate Soleimani's Campaign to Compel US Withdrawal from Iraq](#),” April 2020; “[Iraq Situation Report: April 1 - 7, 2020](#)” April 2020; “[Iraq Situation Report: April 8 - 14, 2020](#)” April 2020; “[Iraq Situation Report: April 15-21](#)” April 2020

WE'RE ALSO WATCHING

- The Islamic holy month of Ramadan began on April 23 and continues for a month. Jihadist groups, including ISIS and al Qaeda, are surging their operations during this time.
- North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong-Un may still be hospitalized after a reported heart surgery earlier this year, raising the possibility of instability and/or early succession in North Korea.
- Putin seeks to convene a meeting of the United Nations Security Council to push for a lifting of Western sanctions on Russia and Iran, which have been waging a disinformation campaign with help from China to frame Western sanctions as a humanitarian crime.

- The Normandy Four – Ukraine, Russia, Germany, and France – will hold a video conference to advance the Ukrainian "peace processes" on April 30. Putin seeks to accelerate this process as a driver to lift Western sanctions on Russia related to its invasion of Ukraine.
- Low-level protests against COVID-19 lockdown measures occurred across the US and Europe, creating a potential opportunity for Russia, Iran, and/or China to stoke further unrest and fear in the West. Protests also erupted in the Russian-occupied Georgian region of South Ossetia, potentially signaling cracks in Putin's control as he struggles to manage the COVID-19 pandemic.

For further questions or requests for detailed briefings on any of these topics please contact the Critical Threats Project or the Institute for the Study of War.

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ISW-CTP Geopolitical Risk Assessment #6

May 5, 2020

Compiled by Jennifer Cafarella with Frederick W. Kagan, Emily Estelle, Nataliya Bugayova, Jason Zhou, and Richard DeKold

CHINA ATTEMPTS TO SILENCE WESTERN CRITICISM

China is attempting to block rising Western criticism, with mixed results. The EU softened a report detailing Chinese, Russian, and Iranian disinformation campaigns after Chinese officials pressured EU representatives in Beijing and Brussels, attempting to block the publication entirely. The EU removed the statement “China has continued to run a global disinformation campaign to deflect blame for the outbreak of the pandemic and improve its international image.” It also removed mention of Chinese disinformation in France and a pro-China bot network in Serbia. China applied similar pressure on Australia but with less success. China’s ambassador publicly threatened to halt wine and beef imports from Australia if the Australian government did not cease calling for an investigation into the origins of COVID-19. China buys 36 percent of Australia’s exports. Australia’s prime minister condemned China’s attempt at “economic coercion” and Australia announced it will support Taiwan’s return to the World Health Organization (WHO) as an observer at the organization’s upcoming assembly on May 17, a move China strongly opposes. Germany’s Interior Ministry also reported that it rejected private requests from Chinese officials for German officials to speak publicly in favor of China’s COVID-19 response.

CHINA’S XI JINGPING PREEMPTS DOMESTIC CHALLENGES

Xi Jinping is consolidating power domestically amid concerns of instability due to the COVID-19 induced recession. Top leadership within the Standing Committee of the Communist Party of China (CCP) including Chairman Xi Jinping and Vice Premier Li Keqiang have signaled increasing concerns of potential social instability as a result of the COVID-19 induced recession. The Chinese government has censored reports from private Chinese firms indicating unemployment likely exceeds 20 percent. The CCP introduced new policy priorities emphasizing the need to secure citizens’ livelihoods and urging provincial leadership to address unemployment and vulnerabilities in the food supply chain. President Xi appointed close allies, often referred to as the “Zhejiang Army,” to top positions in the CCP in February and March. These positions include top posts in Wuhan – China’s industrial center and the location of China’s original COVID-19 outbreak – and the top position in the Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office. The appointments expand the control of Xi’s faction to important industrial centers and demonstrate his enduring power despite an ongoing national crisis. Xi also conducted inspection tours in Zhejiang and Shaanxi Provinces in April to solidify political support among CCP cadres in these provinces, which are two of Xi’s key support bases. The Standing Committee passed a law giving the committee ultimate authority over the People’s Armed Police, China’s internal paramilitary police force, further strengthening Xi’s authority to handle popular protests, challenges to Xi within the CCP itself, or other domestic security challenges.

PUTIN MOBILIZES ADDITIONAL MILITARY RESOURCES FOR DOMESTIC COVID-19 RESPONSE

The Kremlin is empowering the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) as a domestic leader of Russia’s COVID-19 response. Putin is preparing for possible domestic unrest and likely perceives a need to intensify his social

control mechanisms and maintain the loyalty of security services as economic pressures mount. The Kremlin allocated an additional 2.66 billion rubles (approximately \$360 million) to the MoD, the Russian National Guard, and other security services to fight COVID-19 and is planning to give Russian law enforcement immunity from prosecution as well as new search and seizure powers. The Russian National Guard is already engaged in enforcing stay-at-home compliance throughout Russia. The MoD announced the mobilization of 30,000 new military personnel to combat COVID-19 in Russia on April 24. The new units will likely provide logistics support and medical care to supplement civilian hospitals but Putin may also use them to restrict freedom of movement of the Russian population in future. The Kremlin has already moved swiftly to suppress protests that erupted by Gazprom contractors in Yakutia, Siberia, and by civilians in North Ossetia, in the Caucasus near Georgia. Putin may face new forms of domestic unrest in coming weeks. Russians in several cities launched “online protests” on April 20, posting comments near government buildings on Russia’s equivalent of Google Maps calling for better services and the end of quarantine.

STATE FRACTURE DEEPENS IN YEMEN AND LIBYA

Powerbrokers declare self-rule in Libya and Yemen. Libyan strongman Khalifa Haftar declared military rule in areas he controls in eastern Libya and announced a ceasefire in Tripoli to allow his forces to recover after setbacks in his yearlong effort to seize Libya’s capital. Haftar, with UAE backing, now seeks to start a new political process – supplanting the UN’s framework – to solidify his position and gain access to Libya’s economic resources, including the ability to export oil. Haftar is unlikely to gain political traction and will likely only fragment Libya further. Haftar’s opponents have continued to fight and Haftar’s backers are not unified, with Russia signaling disapproval of his unilateral takeover and the UAE tacitly supporting. Yemen’s fragmentation is also accelerating. The secessionist Southern Transitional Council (STC) declared self-rule in southern Yemen in a new bid to displace Yemen’s internationally recognized government, fracturing the Emirati and Saudi-backed coalition fighting the Iranian-backed al Houthi movement. A conflict between the STC and the Yemeni government would reduce pressure on Iran and the al Houthis and could create a new opportunity for al Qaeda and ISIS to resurge in the country.

More from ISW-CTP: “[Eyes on the Other Global Crises](#),” April 2020; “[Africa File: Libya crisis deepens as warlord declares military rule](#),” April 2020; “[Yemen File: COVID-19 strain expedites Saudi Arabia’s exit from Yemen war](#),” April 2020; “[Yemen’s anti-al Houthi coalition is collapsing, and America’s Gulf partners are partially to blame](#),” August 2019.

ISIS’S RAMADAN CAMPAIGN REMAINS LOW LEVEL

ISIS is slowly ramping up its global Ramadan campaign, but so far without its typical mass-casualty attacks. ISIS inspired a low-level attack in France, may have inspired a low-level attack in Denmark, and claimed its first low-level attack in the Maldives, but has failed to carry out mass-casualty attacks in Europe. ISIS is likely plotting such an attack using more-capable operatives. Spanish authorities on April 20 disrupted a cell of three returning ISIS foreign fighters who were likely planning an attack. However, ISIS continues to gain slow traction in East Asia. Pro-ISIS militants on Indonesia’s Sulawesi Island are increasing their activity and have attacked a police officer in a town and released two execution videos since April 15. The cell has included Uyghur foreign fighters and may have links to ISIS’s East Asia Province in the southern Philippines.

ISIS is accelerating its campaign in Iraq and Syria during Ramadan, demonstrating that conditions are not set for the troop reduction the US is preparing to negotiate with the Iraqi government in June. ISIS has resumed

low-level explosive attacks including with a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED), suicide vest (SVEST), and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in Sinjar, Kirkuk City, and Raqqa City, respectively. ISIS is gaining momentum the fastest in southern Syria and in Iraq’s Diyala and Salah ad Din Provinces. In southern Syria, ISIS is exploiting deteriorating security conditions to expand its insurgency, conducting three attacks on pro-regime political figures and military officers since April 7. ISIS also disrupted electricity in six Iraqi provinces through attacks on the electricity grid in Iraq’s Diyala Province between April 27 and April 30. ISIS later conducted a complex, three-pronged attack against an Iraqi Shi’a militia position north of the Shi’a holy city of Samarra in Salah al Din province, killing ten people. ISIS may conduct prison break operations during Ramadan, which could inject thousands of additional fighters into ISIS’s military force. Iraqi officials claimed on May 3 that 500 ISIS fighters, including escaped prisoners, recently traveled to Iraq from Syria. ISIS detainees rioted in a prison in Hasakah City starting on May 2, taking full control of the prison’s interior for approximately 24 hours. Three riots have occurred at one prison since mid-March.

More from ISW-CTP: “[ISIS Reasserts Global Reach for Ramadan 2019](#),” May 2019; “[ISIS’s Second Comeback: Assessing the Next ISIS Insurgency](#),” June 2019. “[Baghdadi Leaves behind a Global ISIS Threat](#),” October 2019.

WE’RE ALSO WATCHING

- **OPEC+ oil cuts begin.** It is unclear whether the OPEC+ will hit the intended decrease of 9.7 million BPD. Officials in the Iraqi Oil Ministry reported resistance from Western oil companies in implementing Iraq’s mandated cut of 700,000 BPD.
- **Israel is scaling up its military campaign against Iran’s entrenchment in Syria.** Israel has moved from "blocking Iran's entrenchment in Syria to forcing it out," according to Israel’s Defense Minister. Iran may be responsible for a thwarted cyber-attack against Israel’s wastewater treatment plants and related infrastructure on April 24-25, possibly as retaliation for increased Israeli strikes in Syria.
- **The COVID-19 pandemic may cause mass starvation in Africa.** Acute food insecurity may double globally this year according to the UN’s World Food Programme. Africa will bear the brunt of the crisis due to new disruptions to food production and imports and a preexisting locust plague in East Africa.

For questions or requests for detailed briefings on any of these topics, please contact the Critical Threats Project or the Institute for the Study of War.

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ISW-CTP Geopolitical Risk Assessment #7

May 12, 2020

Compiled by Jennifer Cafarella with Frederick W. Kagan and John Dunford

RUSSIA’S OPPORTUNITY WITH FRANCE AT THE UNSC

Russia has an opportunity to exploit a UN initiative for a “global ceasefire” to advance its objective of discrediting Western sanctions as inhumane amid the COVID-19 pandemic. France is backing the UN secretary general’s call for a “global ceasefire” through the UN Security Council (UNSC) and is drafting a resolution calling for a “humanitarian pause” in Syria, Yemen, Libya, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Central African Republic, and Colombia. French President Emmanuel Macron stated on April 15 that he has support from the US, UK, and China and hopes to convince Russian President Vladimir Putin. Deepening US-China acrimony over the COVID-19 pandemic makes the resolution unlikely to pass. A disagreement between the US and China over whether to reference the World Health Organization (WHO) in the preamble has stalled the drafting process. The French initiative provides Putin an opportunity to redirect the discussion. Putin began pushing for a UNSC summit in January as he launched a new disinformation campaign framing Western sanctions as “inhumane” amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Putin may seek to convene a UNSC vote to condemn or possibly lift sanctions that could drive a wedge between France and the US; France would likely support the measure, while the US would almost certainly veto it. Putin could also offer to support France’s global ceasefire effort in return for a favorable re-engagement of the Normandy 4 (Ukraine, Russia, Germany, and France) process in Ukraine. The US ambassador to Russia reportedly told Russian news outlet Interfax on May 6 that US President Donald Trump “recently” sent a letter to Putin supporting his call for an UNSC summit and that scheduling discussions are underway. The UNSC reportedly scheduled a video summit for early May but has since delayed it indefinitely.

More from ISW-CTP: “[Russia in Review: Kremlin Misdirection Continues amid COVID and Peace Processes](#),” April 2020

UNPRECEDENTED RIFTS IN THE SYRIAN REGIME

A growing feud between Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Rami Makhlof, Assad’s cousin and a key powerbroker within his regime, threatens to destabilize regime-held Syria for the first time since the start of the war in 2011. Assad began to seize control of Rami Makhlof’s economic assets in August 2019 as the regime’s economy started collapsing in the wake of US sanctions and Lebanon’s economic collapse. Makhlof funds numerous pro-regime militias on which Assad’s military effort depends, and has significant influence within Assad’s core support base among Syria’s coastal Alawite community. Makhlof took his feud with Assad public in early May after Assad imposed severe fines on Makhlof’s major telecommunications company, Syriatel. Makhlof released two video statements in which he implored Assad to halt the takeover and subtly threatened new opposition from the Alawite community if he refuses. Makhlof left Assad an avenue to de-escalate by arguing he should “stop listening to” the advisors pushing him toward confrontation. Swirling rumors indicate Assad’s brother, Maher, or wife, Asma, could be driving the campaign against Makhlof, but little is clear given the characteristic opacity of the regime’s inner circle.

The acrimony within the regime may be linked to new competition between Russia and Iran, which began competing more actively in late 2018 for control over Syrian economic assets. Maher al-Assad is closely linked

to Iran and funds multiple Iranian proxy militias and financial interests that could benefit from Makhlouf's downfall. Russia may be quietly backing Makhlouf to establish leverage against both President Assad and Iran. Makhlouf has family and financial investments in Moscow. Kremlin-backed media outlets and a Kremlin-linked think tank published a series of articles framing President Assad as incompetent and his regime as corrupt beginning on April 15. Some rumors claim Makhlouf may also be the source for some of the claims cited in the articles. Russia may seek to leverage Makhlouf to test the possibility of displacing President Assad, who has repeatedly spoiled Russian initiatives to offer limited concessions in exchange for European reconstruction funds in Syria.

IRAQ FORMS NEW GOVERNMENT

Iraq's parliament approved most of Prime Minister Mustafa al Khadimi's cabinet on May 7, allowing him to form a government and ending a six-month paralysis that began after the resignation of former Prime Minister Adel Abdel Mehdi in November 2019. Parliament approved 15 out of 22 ministers, rejected five, and postponed voting on the critical oil and foreign affairs ministries. The US welcomed the vote and provided an additional 120-day extension of the sanctions waivers that allow Iraq to import gas and electricity from Iran, an essential economic lifeline. Khadimi's urgent priorities include Iraq's economy, which is collapsing under the combined strains of the global oil market and COVID-19 pandemic, and the protest movement, which is reemerging after a temporary lull due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Khadimi faces difficult decisions regarding whether to cut Iraq's substantial government payroll, which then-Prime Minister Mehdi expanded in late 2019 to mitigate the mass protests in southern Iraq. The COVID-19 pandemic has dampened but not ended that protest movement. Thus far, Khadimi has taken two key steps toward addressing protester grievances. First, he managed to gain approval for General Othman al Ghanimi as the new Minister of the Interior. Ghanimi most recently served as the US-trained chief of staff of the Iraqi military. His appointment is a major concession from Iran's proxies, which heavily penetrate the ministry and have typically occupied its leadership position. Ghanimi's appointment to the Ministry of the Interior could gain Khadimi credibility with the protesters if Ghanimi is able to decrease the violence carried out against protesters by Iranian proxy militias and infiltrated Ministry of the Interior elements. Khadimi also announced a major reshuffle in the leadership of Iraq's elite counterterrorism service (CTS) on May 9, appointing Lieutenant General Abdul Wahab al Saadi to direct the CTS. Saadi is a widely respected CTS commander who led the campaign to recapture Mosul from ISIS. Then-Prime Minister Mehdi fired Saadi from a subordinate CTS command in late 2019, which helped ignite the mass protest movement.

More from ISW-CTP: "[Iraq Situation Report: April 29-May 5](#)," May 2020

ERDOGAN BLAMES EUROPE FOR ECONOMIC COLLAPSE

Turkey is blaming Western investors for a recent crash in the Lira's value. Turkey's Lira dropped below its previous 2018 low point to 7.27 Lira to the dollar on May 7 despite Turkey's effort to stem the decline by using foreign currency reserves. Turkish state media blamed unnamed London-based financial institutions for conducting a "manipulative attack" against Turkey's economy by purchasing large amounts of foreign currency and then defaulting on Turkish Lira liabilities to weaken the Lira. Turkey then banned its banks from conducting currency trades involving the Turkish Lira with three foreign banks (UBS, Citibank, and BNP Paribas) but lifted the ban on May 11. Turkish authorities have deployed additional regulations to disrupt "manipulative and deceptive transactions in the financial market." Turkey is also attempting to

cancel discussion of the economic crash, announcing new regulations against disseminating “incorrect or misleading” financial information.

Turkey seeks, but is unlikely to receive, a bailout from the US. Turkey has requested access to dollar lending swap agreements that the US extended to multiple countries, including Mexico and Brazil, in March. The US is unlikely to grant such a bailout so long as Turkey remains committed to bringing its Russian S400 system online. Erdogan has framed the purchase of the S400 anti-air system as a matter of sovereignty and has consistently refused to reverse course despite significant US pressure. Turkey launched an effort to reset its relationship with the US in early 2020, requesting US support to defend against a Russian-led assault in Syria’s northwest Idlib Province. It has made limited progress due to the outstanding S400 issue, however.

WE’RE ALSO WATCHING

- The Maduro regime in Venezuela disrupted a coup attempt by a private American security contractor named Silvercorp, whom Venezuelan opposition leader Juan Guaidó appears to have hired despite subsequent denials. The US government denied any involvement in the plot, but US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said the US will use “every tool” to secure the release of two detained American veterans who participated.
- The US is withdrawing some military assets from the Middle East that were deployed to defend against Iranian escalation. The assets include Patriot missile systems in Saudi Arabia. Some US officials said that the decision reflects the belief that Iran is no longer an “immediate strategic threat” to the US, according to the Wall Street Journal.
- Greece is moving closer to normalizing relations with the Assad regime in Syria despite US pressure. The Greek Foreign Ministry appointed its former Syria ambassador to be a new special envoy for Syria. He is responsible for coordinating “the ongoing efforts to rebuild Syria.” Greece is the second EU and NATO country to take steps toward normalization since Hungary appointed a chargé d'affaires for Syria in September 2019.
- A disinformation campaign linked to Saudi state media falsely claimed that a coup attempt was underway in Qatar, citing apparently doctored video footage. Twitter bots possibly linked to the Saudi government helped propagate the claim.

For questions or requests for detailed briefings on any of these topics, please contact the Critical Threats Project or the Institute for the Study of War.

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ISW-CTP Geopolitical Risk Assessment #8

May 19, 2020

Compiled by Jennifer Cafarella with Nataliya Bugayova, Richard DeKold, and Nicholas Carl

China and Russia Coordinate Joint Disinformation Campaign Blaming US for COVID-19

China and Russia are coordinating an expanding disinformation campaign blaming the US for the COVID-19 pandemic. The head of the US State Department's Global Engagement Center stated on May 8 that China and Russia are likely directly communicating to coordinate their disinformation campaigns, adding "We're seeing the Chinese Communist Party adopt Russian-style tactics." Similarities include new Chinese use of twitter bots and fake text messages. China and Russia began accusing the US military of engineering the virus as a bioweapon in February and are now expanding this disinformation campaign to focus on alleged US bioweapons labs in former Soviet countries. China's Foreign Ministry echoed a longstanding Russian allegation for the first time on April 29, accusing US-sponsored labs in former USSR countries of developing bioweapons. Russia recently reinvigorated this claim. Chinese state-media began running articles calling for an inquiry into the US-sponsored labs on May 15. Russian networks began spreading disinformation that CIA-run biolabs in Ukraine might have created COVID-19 April. Russia-linked members of the Ukrainian Parliament now plan to investigate US-supported bioresearch activities in Ukraine, which are solely focused on biological threat reduction. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov broadcast the disinformation more widely on May 13, reiterating during an online meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) previous claims that the US Department of Defense has biolabs near Russia's borders throughout Eurasia. Lavrov said that US unwillingness to be transparent about its military biological activities raises questions about "what exactly the US is doing," implying US attempts to conceal development of bioweapons.

More from ISW-CTP: "[Disinformation Pandemic: Russian and Chinese information operations in the COVID-19 era](#)," May 2020

Implementation of US - China Trade Deal Unclear

The US and China are implementing phase 1 of the trade deal, which entered effect on February 14, but rising tensions over the COVID-19 pandemic could cause a breakdown in the coming weeks. Chinese Vice Premier Liu He held an initial phone call with US Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer and Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin on May 7 to discuss implementation. A US statement after the call affirmed that "both countries fully expect to meet their obligations under the agreement in a timely manner," which Lighthizer echoed. The deal commits China to purchase \$200 billion in US products, including \$36.5 billion in agricultural goods, over the next two years. Chinese purchases from January – March 2020 lagged \$7 billion behind 2017 levels (the benchmark for the deal) due to the pandemic. President Trump stated on May 8 that he is "not interested" in a renegotiation and is "very torn" on whether even to uphold the deal. He later tweeted that "100 trade deals wouldn't make up the difference" of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on May 13. China has attempted to incentivize the US to maintain the deal by accelerating the purchase of US soybeans on May 11, narrowing the gap in its 2020 purchase levels. China also waived retaliatory tariffs against 79 US products on May 12 in accordance with the deal. However, a Chinese state-media outlet also

suggested on May 11 that senior officials are considering invalidating the trade deal to discourage the US from seeking further concessions.

China is violating a separate set of terms in the trade deal regarding intellectual property rights. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) warned on May 13 that “[China]-affiliated cyber actors and non-traditional collectors” are attempting to steal US research into COVID-19 vaccines and other treatment data. The hacker units are reportedly tied to the People’s Liberation Army’s new Strategic Support Force, the Ministry of State Security, and other intelligence units. These hacker units have targeted universities, healthcare providers, pharmaceutical companies, and other research organizations.

WE’RE ALSO WATCHING

- **Iran restructured senior command posts in its national police, likely in preparation for renewed anti-regime protests.** The regime promoted the commander of the national police’s border guards, Ghassem Rezaei, to be the national police deputy commander. Rezaei has extensive experience quelling unrest in Iran’s border regions, where the regime’s marginalization of minority communities has generated anti-regime sentiment and violence. Rezaei’s promotion indicates the regime is preparing for potential civil unrest beyond minority communities as the COVID-19 pandemic’s economic toll continues.
- **The Kremlin may be testing its ability to incite anti-quarantine protests in Ukraine and the US.** The Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) reported intensified efforts from Russian bot farms to encourage quarantine violations and anti-quarantine protests on May 4. The SBU arrested three people in April attempting to incite anti-COVID-19 quarantine riots in Ukraine. The SBU claimed the suspects’ disinformation activity was coordinated with Russian actors to destabilize the socio-political situation in Ukraine. Russia could also be linked to a series of new and apparently coordinated Facebook groups that have called for anti-lockdown protests in multiple US states. These groups have also promoted pages discussing the potential for civil war; [the](#) membership of those pages doubled to a total of roughly 72.6K between late March and early April.
- **Germany is increasing pressure on Russia for a cyberattack in 2015.** German Chancellor Angela Merkel confirmed that Germany has “hard evidence” that Russia is responsible for an “outrageous” cyber-attack in 2015 after Spiegel magazine published that her account was among those targeted in a hack of the German Parliament’s computer system.
- **Cyprus is joining Greece and the United Arab Emirates in normalizing relations with the Assad regime in Syria.** Cypriot Foreign Minister Nikos Christodoulidis announced on May 12 the reopening of Cyprus’ diplomatic mission in Syria. The move undermines the Trump administration’s effort to keep the Assad regime isolated in order to apply diplomatic and financial pressure toward a negotiated settlement of the Syrian war.

For questions or requests for detailed briefings on any of these topics, please contact the Critical Threats Project or the Institute for the Study of War.

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ISW-CTP Geopolitical Risk Assessment #9

May 27, 2020

Compiled by Jennifer Cafarella with Emily Estelle, Mason Clark, Richard DeKold,
Nicholas Carl, and Kyra Rauschenbach

RUSSIA PREPARES AIR CAMPAIGN IN LIBYA AS REGIONAL WAR EXPANDS

The Libya conflict is becoming a full-fledged regional war. A Turkish military intervention struck a potentially decisive blow against the Russian- and Emirati-backed strongman Khalifa Haftar by seizing a key airbase in western Libya from his forces on May 18 while capturing and destroying multiple Russian-made air defense systems provided by the UAE. The Turkish and Russian foreign ministers called for a ceasefire on May 21, but both countries are sending additional air assets to Libya in preparation for potential renewed fighting. Turkey is sending additional aircraft to Libya to reinforce its air campaign, which has thus far relied on drone capabilities. The US Africa Command (AFRICOM) warned on May 26 that Russia is preparing to employ “Russian mercenary pilots” from the Wagner Group to wage an air campaign on Haftar’s behalf using Russian-provided aircraft. Wagner Group pilots have reportedly flown aircraft owned by Haftar since late 2019. Russia recently transferred additional aircraft to Libya from its base in Syria after repainting them to “camouflage their Russian origin,” according to AFRICOM. The number of Russian-provided aircraft in Libya is unclear from available reporting. The Turkish-Russian showdown in Libya is escalating on par with their conflict in Syria, where both actors are preparing for the likely breakdown of a tenuous ceasefire. The Libyan war will also deepen regional competition between Turkey and the UAE across Africa and the Middle East. Russia may use the conflict as an opportunity to shift additional strategic assets to Libya, including anti-access area-denial (A2AD) systems. These assets would further threaten NATO’s freedom of movement in the Mediterranean and move Russia closer to establishing a second military base in the Middle East.

More from ISW-CTP: [“Africa File: Libya will fragment further as strongman loses support,”](#) May 2020;
[“Forecast: The African Salafi-Jihadi Movement after COVID-19,”](#) May 2020.

CHINA MOVES ON HONG KONG WHILE MITIGATING WESTERN DECOUPLING EFFORTS

Xi Jinping used China’s annual legislative summit to assert unprecedented Chinese Communist Party (CCP) control over Hong Kong’s security infrastructure on May 22, accepting the risk of western financial backlash. The CCP bypassed the Hong Kong legislature to introduce a draft national security law that allows the CCP’s security agencies to operate overtly in Hong Kong and expands their power to act against national security threats. The law is an unprecedented negation of Hong Kong’s right to self-legislate in accordance with the terms of the territory’s handover from the UK to China in 1997 and further demonstrates that President Xi is prioritizing increased control and stability over economic recovery. China swiftly implemented the draft law. Authorities arrested major activist leaders, including Democratic Party founder Martin Lee and media mogul Jimmy Lai, on May 23 while launching a disinformation campaign delegitimizing other prominent pro-democracy figures and preparing to reform Hong Kong’s education system, accusing it of fueling protests. China is also using proxies in the Hong Kong legislature to increase restrictions on the population’s freedom to protest. A Pro-CCP Hong Kong lawmaker broke procedural norms to seize physical control of a key legislative committee May 17 to introduce a law criminalizing insulting China’s national anthem. The committee will vote on the law next week. The US threatened to reevaluate Hong Kong’s favorable financial status in response to the CCP’s moves and is considering sanctioning Chinese officials or restricting their visas.

China is moving to develop its domestic technology industry to mitigate the effects of US-led “decoupling” from China. The CCP announced a new initiative to enhance the domestic production of strategic technologies to reduce China’s vulnerability to widening US efforts to disrupt Chinese supply chains and decouple US supply chains from China. The initiative is part of several major economic reforms revealed at China’s annual legislative summit. China will construct 700 state tech laboratories and invest \$1.4 trillion in the Chinese economy through 2025, with substantial funds allocated to the development of artificial intelligence and 5G network technology. The CCP will likely prioritize filling gaps in Chinese tech firm Huawei’s supply chains for semiconductors to offset new restrictions from the US Commerce Department that partially restrict Huawei from accessing US technology and software to manufacture semiconductors. The US is also attempting to assert greater control over US semiconductor supply chains, an effort that threatens to further edge out Huawei and China’s semiconductor production. The DoD contracted Australian firm Lynas to build a semiconductor factory in the US and is in similar talks with the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC). The Pentagon also proposed raising US spending caps for rare earth elements, which would allow the US to rebuild an industry that collapsed in the 1980s under Chinese competition. Chinese state-media reported that top officials are considering restricting the sale of products made by US tech firms like Boeing and Apple to China in retaliation.

SALAFI JIHADI THREAT MATRIX BEGINS TO SHIFT

ISIS only managed to execute mass-casualty attacks in Afghanistan despite multiple attack efforts globally during its annual surge of operations during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan. Ramadan ended on May 23. In ISIS’s most deadly attack during the holy month, militants stormed a hospital and conducted a suicide bombing at a funeral procession in Afghanistan on May 12, killing at least 40 people. All of ISIS’s major attack attempts elsewhere failed. European authorities disrupted multiple ISIS attack cells during Ramadan. Many of these cells included returned foreign fighters, who typically conduct ISIS’s high-end and coordinated operations. Egyptian authorities foiled a likely ISIS plot to attack Coptic Christian churches around Easter. ISIS also did not establish any new provinces abroad during Ramadan, though the group’s insurgent campaigns are gaining slow but dangerous momentum in multiple theaters, including Iraq, Syria, Mali, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Mozambique. Counter-ISIS pressure remains essential to prevent the group from seizing new territorial control, which could reinvigorate ISIS’s nodes globally and draw new waves of fighters to ISIS.

Al Qaeda is shifting its attack planning away from centrally directed mass-casualty attacks in favor of lower-level operations that are more difficult to attribute. The FBI confirmed that al Qaeda’s affiliate in Yemen was behind the December 2019 attack at Naval Air Station Pensacola in Florida that killed three US sailors. The attacker, who was participating in a pilot training program, had been in contact with al Qaeda members since 2015 and had joined the Royal Saudi Air Force intending to conduct an attack. A Syrian-born US resident attempted another attack on Naval Air Station Corpus Christi on May 21, 2020. It is unclear if al Qaeda played a role in the Corpus Christi attempt, which was less sophisticated than the Pensacola attack and caused no casualties. The attacker expressed support for al Qaeda on social media.

More from ISW-CTP: [“Al Qaeda’s role in the Pensacola shooting and what it means,”](#) May 2020; [“Yemen File: AQAP did more than just inspire the Pensacola attack,”](#) May 2020; [“ISIS Reasserts Global Reach for Ramadan 2019”](#) May 2019; [“ISIS’s Second Comeback: Assessing the Next ISIS Insurgency”](#) June 2019; [“Baghdadi Leaves Behind a Global ISIS Threat,”](#) October 2019; [“Terrorism, tactics, and transformation: The West vs the](#)

Salafi-jihadi movement,” November 2018; “*Warning Update: Al Qaeda’s Global Attack Campaign*” November 2016.

WE’RE ALSO WATCHING

- **The Kremlin is trying to block Western media coverage of the COVID-19 outbreak in Russia.** The Kremlin is broadening its campaign to control the narrative on COVID-19 and is now contesting English-language Western media. The Russian Foreign Ministry accused the New York Times (NYT), Financial Times (FT), and Bloomberg News of spreading disinformation after they published reports that Russian authorities are underreporting COVID-19 death rates. Bloomberg softened its headline, but the NYT and FT refused to comply despite threats to revoke their accreditation. The Kremlin has not implemented its threat.
- **Afghanistan averted a potential imminent civil war through a power-sharing agreement between rival government leaders.** Abdullah Abdullah and his backers refused to concede to Afghan President Ashraf Ghani after the September 2019 presidential election, threatening to provoke a civil war and prompting the Trump administration to withhold \$1 billion in US aid until the dispute’s resolution. The deal places Abdullah in control of negotiations with the Taliban and allows him to appoint half the cabinet, empowering his coalition.
- **COVID-19 outbreaks expand in Africa, the Arabia Peninsula, and among vulnerable refugee populations.** Aid organizations began to report major spikes in cases in Nigeria, Somalia, and Yemen in mid-May despite limited official reports. COVID-19 cases have also begun to spike in at a Rohingya refugee camp in Bangladesh and a refugee center in Cologne, Germany. The outbreaks deepen governance and security challenges while worsening already grave humanitarian crises. The infection of vulnerable refugee populations is particularly dangerous amid growing far-right and anti-immigrant sentiment in Europe, which Russia is deliberately fueling.
- **Iran is expanding its influence in Latin America to undermine US sanctions and portray the US as a destabilizing actor.** The Iran and Venezuela agreed in April 2020 to exchange Venezuelan gold for Iranian fuel, equipment, and technical assistance repairing Venezuela’s energy infrastructure. The agreement may embolden Iran to expand its economic and security footprint in Latin America and creates a potential new point of conflict with the US, which is reportedly considering measures to block the fuel deliveries. Venezuelan naval vessels and aircraft escorted the first two Iranian tankers through Venezuela’s territorial waters; three more ships will arrive in coming weeks. Senior Iranian officials and regime-controlled media have threatened to retaliate against any US interference.

For questions or requests for detailed briefings on any of these topics, please contact the Critical Threats Project or the Institute for the Study of War.

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ISW-CTP Geopolitical Risk Assessment #10

June 2, 2020

*Compiled by Jennifer Cafarella with Katherine Lawlor,
Mason Clark, and George Barros*

RUSSIA EXPANDS SYRIAN BASES TO PROJECT GREATER REGIONAL POWER

Russia recalibrated its operations in Syria after Turkey’s intervention to halt the Russian-backed offensive against Idlib Province from February to March. Russian President Vladimir Putin is now broadening the focus of his operations in Syria to provide greater support for regional lines of effort including Russia’s deepening involvement in the Libyan war and collaboration with the UAE in both theaters. Russia rotated in a new commander of Russian forces in Syria. The rotation of Russian commanders consistently indicates a phase change in Russia’s military operations. Putin also asserted direct control over Russia’s diplomatic efforts by promoting Russia’s Ambassador to Syria, Alexander Efimov, to a new position of “Special Envoy of the Russian President for Developing Relations with Syria” on May 25, moving Efimov out of the Foreign Ministry chain of command to report directly to Putin. The move follows unprecedented internal divisions within the Assad regime and potential indicators of a deepening competition between Russia and Iran for influence over key regime powerbrokers. Efimov previously served as Russia’s ambassador to the UAE for five years before becoming the ambassador to Syria in 2018 and is thus well-positioned to navigate Russia’s complex relationships in Syria with both the Assad regime and the UAE.

Putin is expanding Russia’s military bases in Syria to further increase his global power projection. He instructed Russia’s Defense and Foreign ministries to negotiate an expansion of Russia’s basing rights in Syria on May 29. This expansion likely includes the Qamishli airport, where Russia began establishing a fixed and rotary-wing presence in October 2019 after the US reduced its presence in the area. Russia’s expanding presence in Qamishli threatens US and NATO freedom of movement in northeast Syria and northern Iraq, helps Assad project his presence to the northeast, and positions Russia to deepen its competitive relationship with the US local partner in the area. It may also enable Russia to decrease its reliance on its primary airbase in western Syria, which Russia is also using to support its expanding air operations in Libya. Putin’s order also mentioned expanding Russian access to “water areas,” suggesting that he intends to expand the presence and operations of his Mediterranean task force as he scales up his involvement in Libya.

More from ISW-CTP: [“Syria Situation Report: March 18 - 31, 2020,”](#) March 2020, [“A New Competition for Influence in Northeast Syria”](#) November 2019, [“Russia’s Dead-End Diplomacy in Syria,”](#) November 2019, [“Russia Expands Its Air Defense Network in Syria”](#) November 2018

IRAQ LAUNCHES REGIONAL CAMPAIGN TO STABILIZE ITS ECONOMY

Iraq’s new Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi is attempting to divest from reliance on Iranian energy imports with support from Iraq’s Gulf neighbors, particularly Saudi Arabia. The timing of this initiative reflects Iraq’s urgent economic crisis and Kadhimi’s condition-setting for Iraq to begin its Strategic Dialogue with the United States, which will cover US economic, military, and diplomatic involvement in Iraq. The Iraqi government has been particularly hard-hit by the simultaneous collapse in global oil prices, coronavirus lockdowns, and ISIS resurgence. Iraq relies on oil sales for over 90 percent of its government revenue. Kadhimi is incentivized to diversify Iraq’s energy imports ahead of the Strategic Dialogue talks with the US, which has provided Iraq temporary exemptions from sanctions on Iranian imports on the condition that Iraq work to reduce its reliance on Iranian energy. Kadhimi sent delegations led by

Finance Minister Ali Allawi to Saudi Arabia and Kuwait on May 21 and 24. Allawi secured new investments in Iraqi energy infrastructure that will bolster Iraq’s failing economy and may enable some divestment from Iranian energy imports. Allawi reportedly agreed to allow Saudi companies to invest in Iraq’s largest gas field, the Akkas gas field in western Anbar Province near the Iraq-Syria border. Allawi asked Kuwait to delay or cancel Iraqi reparations payments to Kuwait, which amount to \$3 billion. Saudi Arabia and Kuwait reportedly agreed to reduce their own oil production further to allow Iraq to decrease its share of cuts per the March OPEC+ deal. Kadhimi also reportedly secured a promise from Russian President Vladimir Putin to “double” Russia’s energy investments in Iraq and engaged in economic discussions with envoys from the United States, China, Turkey, Italy, Germany, and France in recent weeks.

Iran will likely attempt to prevent Iraq’s energy divestment. Iran depends on Iraqi imports of Iranian energy as an economic lifeline under US sanctions. Iranian proxy militias Kata’ib Hezbollah and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba threatened attacks against Saudi Arabia in retaliation for its expanding investments in Iraq, which the militias framed as a source of terrorism. A political representative of proxy militia Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq called for an end to Saudi-Iraqi relations. Iran’s political and militia proxies in Iraq may exert pressure through new terrorist attacks in Saudi Arabia or on Saudi assets in Iraq, as well as through parliamentary measures. The second-largest bloc in Iraq’s Parliament, Conquest Alliance, is led by Iranian proxy leader Hadi al-Ameri and may act on such measures.

More from ISW-CTP: “[Iraq Situation Report: May 20-26, 2020](#),” May 2020

WE’RE ALSO WATCHING

- **US adversaries including Russia, China, and Iran seek to inflame growing domestic unrest in the US through disinformation.** Mass protests and riots erupted across multiple US cities and remain ongoing after a police officer in Minnesota killed an unarmed African American man on May 25. Russian, Chinese, and Iranian state media exploited the opportunity to frame the US as unstable and the US government as predatory. US Senator Marco Rubio, temporary Chairman of the Senate Intelligence Community, tweeted on May 30 that “social media accounts linked to at least 3 foreign adversaries” were surging online activity related to the unrest.
- **US President Donald Trump postponed the annual G7 summit until September and intends to repurpose it to counter China, providing Russia a new opportunity to rejoin.** Trump stated that he intends to invite Russia, South Korea, Australia, and India to join the September meeting as guests. Russia will likely exploit the opportunity to reinvigorate its diplomatic and disinformation campaigns seeking full reentry. The body expelled Russia after its 2014 invasion and annexation of Ukraine’s Crimean Peninsula.
- **Russia crossed a major milestone in its effort to gain influence over Western media.** Reuters allowed Russia’s state-controlled TASS news agency to join its digital content marketplace on June 1. This access will enable the Kremlin to significantly increase the distribution of disinformation to Western audiences under the veneer of objective reporting legitimized by Reuters.

More from ISW-CTP: “[The Kremlin’s Expanding Media Conglomerate](#)” January 2020

For questions or requests for detailed briefings on any of these topics, please contact the Critical Threats Project or the Institute for the Study of War.

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ISW-CTP Geopolitical Risk Assessment #11

June 9, 2020

Compiled by Jennifer Cafarella with Richard DeKold, Emily Estelle, George Barros, and Brandon Wallace

RUSSIA STALLS FOR TIME IN LIBYA WHILE REDOUBLING PRESSURE ON UKRAINE

Russia began to negotiate a de-escalation in Libya in early June after Turkey reversed the momentum of Russian-backed Libyan strongman Khalifa Haftar. Turkey backs the internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA), which Haftar sought to overthrow. Russia pivoted to a near-term de-escalation in early June after weeks of losses to the GNA. After meeting with the GNA’s deputy prime minister in Moscow on June 3, Russia’s foreign minister demanded a GNA prisoner release as the condition for cooperation in Libya - a relatively minor demand that indicates Russia prioritizes near-term de-escalation. Russia is overstretched due to its domestic COVID-19 outbreak and deepening economic constraints and is likely buying time by pivoting to diplomacy. Russia is continuing to prepare for a military escalation in Libya by mobilizing Syrian fighters to reinforce Haftar. This pattern of cycling between diplomacy and military escalation reflects Russia’s approach to shaping the war in Syria.

Turkey is reaching out to the US and Russia instead of responding to an Egyptian ceasefire effort. Egyptian President Abdel Fatah al Sisi convened eastern Libyan leaders, including Haftar, to announce a unilateral ceasefire on June 6. Haftar’s forces withdrew from Tripoli’s front line the same day, ending a 13-month attempt to seize the capital. France and the Arab League expressed support. Turkey and the GNA are instead pressing their military advantage and continuing to advance, however. The GNA also negotiated the end of a blockade on oil production from southwestern Libya, signaling local forces’ turn away from Haftar. Turkey is prioritizing outreach to the US while balancing negotiations with Russia. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan spoke to President Trump by phone on June 8 to discuss “Syria, Libya, and the Eastern Mediterranean” according to the US readout. Erdogan said after the call that, “a new era” between the US and Turkey can begin in Libya but that he will speak to Russian President Vladimir Putin later this week.

Russia may escalate against Turkey in Syria in order to buy time and gain leverage for negotiations in Libya. Russia may be preparing to conduct a new offensive against Turkish-defended areas in northwest Syria. Russia conducted airstrikes in northwest Syria on June 3 in its first overt violation of the de-escalation agreement it signed with Turkey on March 5. Pro-regime forces are also reinforcing front lines in Idlib, possibly in preparation for a new offensive. Russia could seek to gain leverage by attacking Idlib to shape negotiations in Libya. An attack on Idlib would draw Turkish bandwidth away from Libya and possibly overstretch Turkey’s military resources. Russia and Turkey will continue to maneuver diplomatically and militarily across both theaters, deepening the connectivity between these civil wars.

More from ISW-CTP: “[Africa File: Libya will fragment further as strongman loses support](#),” May 2020; “[Eyes on the Other Global Crises](#),” April 2020; “[Testimony: The Crisis in Idlib](#),” March 2020; “[Turkey Commits to Idlib](#),” March 2020; “[Confronting the Russian Challenge](#),” June 2019

Russia is ramping up pressure against Ukraine after initial setbacks advancing a Russian-favorable peace process. Russia's efforts set conditions ahead of an unscheduled Normandy Format summit that Ukraine seeks to hold in Berlin as well as for local elections Russia hopes Ukraine will hold in occupied Eastern Ukraine in October 2020. Public backlash and the COVID-19 pandemic had caused Ukraine to backpedal on an agreement to form an advisory council that would elevate Russia's proxies in Eastern Ukraine to negotiate directly with the Ukrainian government, thereby legitimizing them. Russia used preparations for May 9 Victory Day celebrations in occupied parts of eastern Ukraine as cover to deploy additional Russian command staff and heavy weapons as well as to conduct combat-readiness training. Russia's proxies reiterated an ultimatum on May 16, stating that Ukraine must advance the advisory council dialogue or it is "not committed" to the peace process. The statement reflects Russia's ongoing effort to compel Ukraine to accept Russian-favorable terms by portraying Ukraine as unwilling to de-escalate. Russia's proxies mobilized their forces to full combat readiness on May 19. The Ukrainian president's chief of staff publicly reiterated Ukraine's openness to negotiations with occupied eastern Ukraine during a trip to Berlin on June 4, indicating that the Kremlin's pressure is moving this initiative forward.

More from ISW-CTP: "[Russia in Review: Kremlin Escalates in Ukraine while Playing Peacemaker](#)," June 2020

US-TALIBAN DEAL DRIVES NEW COMPETITION BETWEEN ISIS AND AL QAEDA

New evidence from the UN demonstrates that the Taliban does not intend to break with Al Qaeda, nullifying the core assumption of the US-Taliban peace accord. Al Qaeda was quietly involved in the Taliban's negotiations with the US ahead of the February accord, according to a new UN report released on May 29. The Taliban consulted with al Qaeda leader Aymen al Zawahiri regularly and promised to "honor [the Taliban's] historical ties" to al Qaeda. The report also states that at least 400 al Qaeda operatives are active across 12 Afghan provinces, demonstrating the extent of the enduring terror threat in Afghanistan. These facts contradict Taliban guarantees that Afghanistan will not be used as a staging ground for external attacks thus invalidate the terms of the accord signed in February.

Al Qaeda seeks to replicate its success in Afghanistan in Mali. Al Qaeda publicly praised the US-Taliban agreement as a victory and now seeks to replicate it in other theaters. Al Qaeda-linked militants in the Sahel expressed willingness to negotiate with the Malian government on the condition that French forces withdraw, mirroring the Afghanistan deal. A French airstrike killed the emir of al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb in Mali on June 5, but his death is unlikely to derail al Qaeda's ongoing effort in Mali.

ISIS launched a reinvigorated global campaign against al Qaeda and condemned Qatar for its role facilitating the US-Taliban deal, which ISIS opposes. ISIS seeks to discredit any notion of negotiations with the US or European actors and drive defections from the Taliban and al Qaeda. ISIS's spokesperson commended the US-Taliban deal at length, incited attacks against Qatar for the first time, and promised that ISIS's Wilayat West Africa will retaliate against al Qaeda in West Africa in an end-of-Ramadan message on May 28. ISIS has asserted greater control over its affiliate militias in West Africa since early 2019 and has been fighting with al Qaeda for dominance in the Sahel region in 2020, disrupting a regular pattern of deconfliction and occasional cooperation between the groups. ISIS likely views al Qaeda's pursuit of an Afghan-modeled deal in Mali as a strategic threat.

More from ISW-CTP: [“Al Qaeda Global Tracker: AQAP attack on Florida naval air station inspired copycat attack in Texas,”](#) June 2020; [“Al-Qaeda’s Return,”](#) June 2020; [“Forecast: The African Salafi-Jihadi Movement After COVID-19,”](#) May 2020; [“Salafi-jihadi ecosystem in the Sahel,”](#) April 2020; [“Africa File: February 11,”](#) February 2020

CHINA TAKES RISKS ABROAD TO ADVANCE SOVERIGNTY CLAIMS

China is aggressively asserting its claims of sovereignty beyond its borders despite growing international pressure. Chinese President Xi Jinping is taking risks with moves against Taiwan, India, and Hong Kong as well as to assert control in the South China Sea. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) removed the word “peaceful” from its official policy statement on China-Taiwan reunification in an annual report for the first time, indicating an increasing potential for Chinese military action against Taiwan. Chinese leaders reinforced the deliberate change during China’s annual legislative summit on May 22. The move follows China’s adoption of an increasingly confrontational force posture toward Taiwan in the first quarter of 2020. China has conducted increasingly provocative operations, including China’s first nighttime incursion into Taiwanese airspace on March 16. China is also pressing its territorial claims along the un-demarcated China-India border. The Chinese military launched an incursion into Indian claimed territory in early May and are reportedly fortifying positions in the area, prompting India to deploy reinforcements and resulting in low-level clashes. Finally, satellite imagery indicates China is likely preparing the establishment of a second Air Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the South China Sea.

China is expanding its naval force projection to the Middle East. The People’s Liberation Army’s (PLA) National Defense University (NDU) and Defense White Papers have outlined the need to establish naval bases and supply points globally to secure China’s interests, including trade, through a “strategic prepositioning” that extends Chinese naval force projection. China is modifying its naval base in Djibouti, its first overseas base, to accommodate China’s two functional aircraft carriers. One of those two, and China’s only domestically built carrier, departed a Chinese shipyard on May 22 after its commissioning in December 2019. The Djibouti Port is China’s only overseas naval base, but China has used its Belt and Road Initiative to invest in and acquire use rights for multiple additional ports worldwide, including Cambodia (Dara Sakor) and Pakistan (Gwadar).

GERMANY SPLITS WITH EU TO PURSUE INCREASED TRADE WITH CHINA

Germany broke with the EU to signal support for an investment treaty with China despite growing European backlash against Chinese aggression. The chairman of the European Parliament’s Delegation for Chinese Relations stated the EU will likely refuse to sign the EU-China Investment Treaty in retaliation for China’s passage of a law allowing Chinese security services to operate in Hong Kong and rising concerns of Chinese influence within the EU. China and the EU began negotiating the treaty in 2014. The EU’s foreign policy chief called for a more robust strategy to confront a “more powerful and assertive China” in a letter to the EU’s foreign ministers on May 23. Nonetheless, German Chancellor Angela Merkel announced continued support for the treaty during an address to the EU on May 27. Germany takes control of the EU’s rotating presidency in July and intends [to sign the treaty during a planned China-EU summit](#), which has been ostensibly postponed due to COVID19. Germany prioritizes enhancing access to Chinese markets, as 47.4 percent of Germany’s GDP is exports.

The United States is scaling back its military deployment in Germany, decreasing US leverage and creating more opportunity for Russia and China to gain influence. US President Donald Trump has ordered the Pentagon to [reduce the US troop presence](#) in Germany by roughly a third by September, according to leaks from unidentified officials on June 5. The troop reduction will weaken NATO's deterrent posture against Russia, which seeks to divide and weaken NATO and has gained German support for its Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline despite US pressure. The completion of the pipeline from Russia to Germany will allow Russia to significantly increase its gas exports to Europe, providing a financial windfall and a new source of leverage. The US troop withdrawal will also signal US disengagement from Europe and, in doing so, could weaken the Trump Administration's attempt to marshal European support for measures to contain Chinese aggression.

WE'RE ALSO WATCHING

- **ISIS is expanding its formal province structure in East Asia.** ISIS's official province in the Philippines, Wilayat East Asia, claimed responsibility for an [attack](#) on a local police station in Indonesia on June 1, its first claim outside Filipino borders. The claim indicates that ISIS's commander of Wilayat East Asia is likely asserting greater control over ISIS cells in Indonesia and possibly elsewhere in the region.
- **OPEC + extends oil cuts through July to strengthen growing market stability.** OPEC+ countries met virtually on June 6 and agreed to a partial [extension of production cuts](#), totaling [9.6 million](#) barrels per day, through July 31, 2020.

Key upcoming dates:

- June 11: Start of US-Iraq Strategic Dialogue
- July 1: Germany takes rotating EU presidency
- July 1: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's intended start date to annex the Jordan valley in the West Bank
- July 1: Putin's referendum
- September: EU-China Summit
- September: G7 Summit
- October: Local elections in Russian-occupied eastern Ukraine
- November 30: OPEC+ meeting in Vienna, Austria

For questions or requests for detailed briefings on any of these topics, please contact the Institute for the Study of War or Critical Threats Project.

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ISW-CTP Geopolitical Risk Assessment #12

June 16, 2020

*Compiled by Jennifer Cafarella with Nataliya Bugayova, Mason Clark, John Dunford,
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PUTIN RESUMES BID TO RETAIN POWER IN RUSSIA PAST 2024

Russian President Vladimir Putin is resuming his bid to retain power past his presidential term, which ends in 2024, after a two-month delay due to COVID-19. Putin rescheduled a national referendum on constitutional amendments for July 1 after delaying the original vote in April as Russia's COVID-19 outbreak spiked. One amendment would allow Putin to run for a fifth term as president in 2024. The referendum will most likely pass, legitimizing Putin's continued rule, but the setback he experienced due to COVID-19 will continue to constrain him. The crisis damaged his value proposition to the Russian people, resulting in record-low approval ratings. Putin's January 2020 promise of large-scale social spending, which he intended to use to shore up support for his referendum, will also be difficult to maintain due to Russian economic setbacks from COVID-19 and low energy prices. Putin will face a sustained requirement to shore up enough domestic support to prevent large-scale protests.

The referendum presents a public health risk that could jeopardize Putin's effort to regain some popularity. COVID-19 transmission rates remain high in Russia. The World Health Organization (WHO) called on Russian authorities to explain their method for counting COVID deaths due to the Kremlin's suspiciously low official death count as Russia reached over 500,000 confirmed infections last week. The Kremlin is falsely claiming it has overcome the COVID-19 outbreak and began lifting lockdown measures early to generate public support for and participation in the referendum. Putin ordered Moscow's mayor to reopen on June 9, roughly three weeks ahead of schedule.

The Kremlin is tightening its social control to consolidate power and decrease the threat of future protests. Putin approved a law that requires the creation of a new unified database of personal information of Russian citizens on June 8. The database will be accessible by the Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Internal Affairs, and local security authorities and will leverage information gathered through the QR-code system Putin introduced to enforce lockdown measures. Russia's National Guard remains deployed in many cities, despite the lifting of quarantine restrictions, and will be able to use this information to suppress popular protests in the future.

SYRIAN ECONOMY COLLAPSES FURTHER AHEAD OF NEW US SANCTIONS NEXT WEEK

President Bashar al-Assad is taking more extreme measures to mitigate his economic collapse as unprecedented unrest begins in loyalist communities. Assad replaced his prime minister on June 11 after the Syrian pound devalued to its lowest-ever rate of over 3,000 Syrian pounds per 1 US dollar. Assad is likely deflecting blame for his own inability to manage the economy. Assad removed the governors of three southern provinces on May 30 to reassert his authority amid deteriorating economic and security conditions in those provinces. The economic collapse is leading to food and commodity shortages across regime-held Syria. Druze civilians in Suwayda Province held multi-day protests against the regime's failure to resolve the economic crisis from June 7 to 10 and June 13 and 15. Protesters chanted slogans calling for the fall of the regime and signaled solidarity with ongoing protests in the neighboring former opposition stronghold of Deraa Province, an

unprecedented level of resistance from within the regime’s camp. Syria’s Druze population remained largely loyal to Assad throughout the war in return for limited autonomy over their internal affairs. Unspecified pro-regime security forces violently dispersed demonstrations and began limited arrests on June 15, which could provoke Druze militias into reprisals. Assad intends to hold parliamentary elections in July and will likely frame the seating of a new parliament as a fresh start to buy time to mitigate the economic collapse.

The regime does not have access to a viable economic lifeline and will face even more financial pressure in coming weeks. Additional US sanctions on Assad’s regime are likely to take effect this week and are already contributing to the regime’s economic collapse ahead of their implementation. US President Donald Trump approved the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act in December 2019, which authorizes sanctions against Assad and any Syrian or foreign entity providing military, economic, or other forms of support to his regime or its military. Greater US financial pressure will worsen the regime’s economic collapse and could generate further instability within the regime itself and among its traditional support base. US financial pressure will also further constrain Iran’s campaign in Syria while denying Russia the opportunity to attract international investment to Syria to offset its own costs.

More from ISW-CTP: [“Assad’s Economic Desperation Causes Cracks in Syrian Regime”](#) (podcast), June 2020

THE PHILIPPINES REORIENTS AS CHINA REINVIGORATES SOVEREIGNTY CLAIMS

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte walked back on a threat to revoke basing rights for US forces as China becomes more aggressive in the South China Sea. China seeks to court the Philippines away from the US through economic incentives, signing 27 deals worth \$24 billion in 2016. China has prioritized the Philippines to mitigate any possible future risk of a US and allied naval blockade of Chinese sea lanes of communication (SLOCs), which could disrupt much of China’s international trade and militarization efforts in the South China Sea. Duterte announced his intent to allow the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) with the US, which is up for renewal in August, to expire in order to “protect Philippine sovereignty” and “reduce US influence” on February 11. The VFA permits US forces to operate in the Philippines. Duterte reversed course on June 3 after China conducted a surge of aggressive activity in the South China Sea, including establishing two new administrative zones over disputed islands. Duterte submitted a formal diplomatic protest against China’s action before reversing his decision to allow the VFA to expire. Duterte will likely seek to gain concessions from both the US and China. Chinese President Xi Jinping quickly re-engaged Duterte on June 10, promising the Philippines priority receipt of China’s COVID-19 vaccine.

CHINA POSTURES FOR LEVERAGE IN AFRICA

China expanded its effort to posture as a humanitarian leader in Africa. Many African countries face a devastating combination of famine conditions and a resurgence of communicable diseases like malaria as lockdowns cause economic crashes and hospitals pivot to treating COVID-19 outbreaks with limited resources. China announced it will provide bilateral debt relief to a total of 77 developing countries in Africa and other regions on June 7. The move is a concession to growing Western pressure after the G20 announced debt relief for African countries from May to December 2020 and called on China to follow suit with bilateral loans. China is now integrating debt relief into a wider effort to posture as a humanitarian leader in Africa after similar efforts in Europe failed. President Xi pledged \$2 billion in independent humanitarian support to COVID-19 responses in Africa during a speech at the annual WHO summit on April 19. Xi stated that China

will create a global humanitarian response hub to help guarantee healthcare supply chains. China will likely focus this effort on gaining control over elements of health infrastructure and associated supply chains in Africa and possibly elsewhere. China has not made the terms or targets of its debt relief plan public and may demand concessions regarding infrastructure or other assets in return.

WE'RE ALSO WATCHING

- **Hardliners within Iran's regime consolidated further domestic power via Parliament, which will enable more authoritarian domestic control and further sideline President Hassan Rouhani's moderate administration.** Hardliners took control of Parliament from the previous relatively moderate majority in Iran's February parliamentary election after regime interference. The new parliament elected a senior Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) officer, Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, as speaker on May 28. Iran's parliament speaker is an ex officio member of the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), which advises the supreme leader on foreign and security policies. Hardliners will use their growing control in Parliament and the SNSC to approve greater funding for the IRGC and enable crackdowns against anti-regime protests. Protests are likely to resume due to the compounding effects of economic pressure and the regime's mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **Iraq and the US began virtual negotiations over a new framework for US support for the Iraqi government.** During the first round of talks on June 12, the US promised to continue a gradual withdrawal of forces from Iraq and to provide economic advisors and support as Iraq works to reduce its dependence on Iranian energy exports. In return, the Iraqi government promised to provide protection for US forces, which Iran's proxies repeatedly attacked between December 2019 and March 2020. The US seeks to strengthen the Iraqi government while dampening the risk of a major US-Iran conflict escalating in Iraq. However, three rocket attacks targeted facilities hosting US forces or diplomats in the first half of June, including a rocket attack on Camp Taji, north of Baghdad, on June 13 after the first round of US-Iraq talks. This resumption of small-scale attacks indicates that Iran is either prepared to escalate to achieve a complete and rapid US withdrawal or that Iran does not have full control over its militia proxies. The next round of US-Iraq talks is expected to take place in person in Washington, DC, sometime in July 2020.

Key upcoming dates:

- July 1: Germany takes rotating EU presidency
- July 1: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's intended start date to annex the Jordan valley in the West Bank
- July 1: Putin's referendum
- July: Next session of the US-Iraq Strategic Dialogue in Washington, DC
- July: Syrian parliamentary elections
- September: G7 Summit
- October: Local elections in Russian-occupied eastern Ukraine
- November 30: OPEC+ meeting in Vienna, Austria

Postponed indefinitely:

- EU-China Summit originally scheduled for September 14

For questions or requests for detailed briefings on any of these topics, please contact the Institute for the Study of War or Critical Threats Project.



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ISW-CTP Geopolitical Risk Assessment #13

June 23, 2020

*Compiled by Jennifer Cafarella with John Dunford, George Barros, Brandon Wallace,
Katherine Lawlor, Kyra Rauschenbach, and Emily Estelle*

IRAN BEGINS IMPLEMENTING CHINESE SURVEILLANCE TECHNOLOGY

The Iranian regime is preparing for additional brutal crackdowns against its population as its economic situation worsens. The regime has perceived a growing existential threat since 2017, when the regime's core support base, religious and impoverished Iranians, began taking to the streets to protest poor and worsening economic conditions. Regime security forces used unprecedented violence to crush a wave of nationwide protests in November 2019, killing 1,500 people. The regime is preparing for future crackdowns at greater scale, expecting another round of nationwide protests as economic grievances continue to worsen due to poorly implemented policy during the COVID-19 pandemic and escalating US sanctions. The regime rotated non-local provincial commanders into key positions in likely protest areas in May in order to mitigate the risk that police will sympathize with future protests. The Defense Ministry also signed an agreement with Iran's national police to boost their operational capabilities on June 6th, signaling an increased willingness to use lethal force.

Iran is beginning to implement advanced surveillance technology likely acquired from China. Iran's police force announced a pilot program to implement facial recognition technology on June 15, shortly after announcing a new drone surveillance project. The regime claims these projects are oriented on traffic policing, but it could be preparing to use drones to collect imagery the facial recognition technology could process to improve tracking of anti-regime dissidents. If successfully implemented, these measures would increase the regime's ability to suppress protests violently when they occur and could enable the regime to pre-emptively stifle future resistance through earlier, more targeted interventions. Iran likely received the facial recognition technology from China. The head of Iran's police force met with the Chinese ambassador to Iran in September 2019, possibly to facilitate new acquisitions of Chinese technology.

LIBYAN WAR ESCALATES AS NATO DIVIDE WIDENS

Egypt is preparing a military intervention to block further Turkish-backed gains in Libya. Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi ordered his military to prepare to intervene in Libya on June 20 after Turkey ignored his proposal for a ceasefire. Turkey supports the Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA) and helped it repel an offensive against the Libyan capital by the Egyptian and Russian-backed Libyan National Army (LNA) in May. Sisi intends to block the GNA's Turkish-backed push to seize Sirte and the Al Jufra airbase, which would allow GNA-aligned forces to threaten the LNA's control over Libya's oil crescent region. The LNA welcomed Egypt's plan to intervene and quickly announced a no-fly zone over Sirte. Russia is likely backing Egypt's intervention as a means of imposing costs on Turkey while Russia continues to struggle to re-engage in Libya under the combined pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic and the oil market crash. Russia is postured to support Egypt's intervention with air support and private military contractors already deployed to Libya. Russian mercenaries had begun to fly air sorties from the al Jufra airbase prior to Egypt's decision and may now support the LNA's no-fly zone in Sirte and subsequent Egyptian operations.

Tensions within NATO are rising, complicating a coherent response in Libya while advancing Russia's wider goals in the Mediterranean. Turkey is edging closer to military confrontation with Greece and France in the Mediterranean Sea as Turkey widens its role in Libya, where it is pursuing the use of two military bases as well as a greater role in oil infrastructure and exports. Turkish frigates intervened to prevent the Greek and French Navies from inspecting a cargo ship suspected of transporting weapons to the GNA in violation of the UN arms embargo on three separate occasions in May and June. France described the events as an "extremely grave matter" and condemned Turkey for aggression, including repeated radar targeting of French naval vessels. NATO is investigating the incidents. In response, Turkey accused France of violating the embargo by providing weapons to the LNA, which France supports alongside Russia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Turkey's aggressive actions in the Mediterranean and effort to normalize and protect violations of the arms embargo advance Russia's efforts to divide NATO and erode international embargos and economic pressure campaigns generally.

Russia faces its own growing regional friction with Iran. Iran is leveraging closer cooperation with Turkey in Iraq and Libya to gain limited economic benefit and possibly rebalance its relationship with Russia amid growing friction in Syria. Iran began supporting Turkish operations in Iraq and Libya in mid-June, an inflection in their relationship that signals a growing Iranian effort to court Turkish support. Iran's foreign minister announced support for the Libyan GNA on June 15 during a meeting in Istanbul with his Turkish counterpart, during which they also discussed economic issues including a resumption of commercial flights. Iran and Turkey then coordinated to target Kurdish insurgents in northern Iraq with air and artillery attacks, respectively, on June 17. At minimum, Iran seeks an improved economic relationship with Turkey to mitigate the impact of US sanctions. Iran may also intend to reset the terms of negotiations with Russia. Iran and Russia are competing over access to limited economic resources in Syria and may be backing different regime powerbrokers who are engaged in an economic power struggle amid rising US financial pressure. Russia has also continued to allow Israel to scale up its attacks on Iranian positions, equipment, and personnel in Syria.

More from ISW-CTP: "[Africa File: Libya will fragment further as strongman loses support](#)," May 2020; "[Don't Let Russia Dominate Libya](#)," December 2019; "[Russia Is Intervening in Libya. Should We Care?](#)" November 2019

THE UNITED STATES CONSTRAINS RUSSIA'S MOVE INTO NORTHEAST SYRIA

US diplomatic engagement has blocked Russian efforts to siphon Kurdish support away from the US in northeast Syria. The US achieved a political breakthrough that will help stabilize northeast Syria and deny Russia opportunities to expand its footprint. The US local partner, the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and its Kurdish political rival, the Syrian Kurdish National Council (KNC), agreed to cooperate on governance and security in northeast Syria on June 16. The move follows months of US diplomatic engagement and is a major step toward de-escalating with Turkey, which backs the KNC and invaded SDF-held areas in northeast Syria in October 2019. The new agreement also disrupts Russia's effort to coopt the SDF into a political accommodation with the Assad regime. The agreement is fragile and could break down, but is an important constraint on Russia's efforts nonetheless. Russia has also failed to recruit local Kurdish support for an expanded Russian ground presence near the Turkish border. Kurdish civilians rejected Russian offers of humanitarian aid and forced Russia to abandon efforts to establish small forward bases east of Qamishli on three separate occasions in June.

More from ISW-CTP: "[Assad's Economic Desperation Causes Cracks in Syrian Regime](#)," (podcast) June 2020; "[Syria Situation Report: May 27 – June 9, 2020](#)," June 2020; "[Russia Expands Air Presence in Northeast Syria](#)," November 2019; "[A New Competition for Influence in Northeast Syria](#)," November 2019

US-CHINA TRADE DEAL MOVES FORWARD

China resumes implementing trade deal after US-China meeting, possibly indicating the Trump Administration does not plan to take action against China over Hong Kong. China had suspended the deal's implementation after the US threatened to impose sanctions on Chinese officials involved in China's move to assert direct control over Hong Kong in April. China agreed to resume implementation of the deal during a meeting between US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and a Chinese Communist Party Politburo member on June 17 in Hawaii. China's readout of the meeting stated that the two parties discussed Hong Kong, Taiwan, and "the situation of Muslim Uighurs in the far western region of Xinjiang." President Trump signed a bill imposing sanctions on Chinese leaders responsible for the imprisonment of roughly one million Uighurs in Xinjiang the same day. China's willingness to move forward with the trade deal despite President Trump's action on Xinjiang suggests China does not expect wider US retaliation. After the meeting, China's legislative body added a discussion of next steps with the Hong Kong National Security Law to the agenda for its June 18-21 summit. Meanwhile, President Trump attempted to mitigate domestic pressure for a harsher stance on China, stating via Twitter that "the US certainly does maintain a policy option, under various circumstances, of a complete decoupling from China."

WE'RE ALSO WATCHING

- **The Trump administration increased financial pressure on the Assad regime but kept the door open for near-term deal with Russia.** The administration imposed new sanctions on Syrian President Bashar al Assad, numerous Iran-linked individuals within his regime, businessmen facilitating Emirati investment, and others on June 17. The Trump administration hopes Assad will accept a diplomatic process as the sanctions worsen his country's economic collapse. Most of the sanctions use existing executive authority that allows President Trump to remove the sanctions at will rather than the Caesar Act, which permits removal only after demonstrable progress to address major human rights issues. Russia will likely use this opportunity to reinvigorate efforts to provide superficial diplomatic progress in return for sanctions relief.
- **Salafi-jihadi groups in the Sahel are targeting troop-contributing countries on the West African coast.** Al Qaeda-linked militants are likely responsible for an attack on a Côte d'Ivoire military position that killed 12 on June 12 in the deadliest Salafi-jihadi operation in the country since a 2016 assault on a beach resort. The latest attack may be a retaliation for Ivorian forces' role in joint counter-terrorism operations with neighboring Burkina Faso intended to stop the expansion of Salafi-jihadi groups toward the Gulf of Guinea.

More from ISW-CTP: "[Salafi-jihadi ecosystem in the Sahel](#)," April 2020; "[Warning from the Sahel: Al Qaeda's Resurgent Threat](#)," September 2016

- **Russian President Vladimir Putin continues to lose ground abroad while temporarily hindered by the combined effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and oil market crash.** The Kremlin-favored Moldovan president lost his parliamentary majority on June 17 after a critical mass of his coalition defected to a new party, making him and his prime minister vulnerable to a no-confidence vote and weakening his position in upcoming presidential elections in November 2020.

More from ISW-CTP: "[Russia in Review: The Kremlin Reverses Setbacks in Moldova](#)," December 2019

- **Escalation between China and India spikes to the highest level since 1975 war.** Chinese soldiers killed 20 Indian soldiers during a clash on June 16 in a disputed region along the India-China border. The number of Chinese

casualties is unclear from available information. Chinese forces previously established three new positions in the area on May 5 after India began creating a paved road to a forward base. China is using the clash and subsequent anti-China demonstrations in India to stoke nationalist sentiment, although both countries agreed to de-escalate tactically.

- **North Korea reversed steps toward diplomatic engagement with South Korea that it had made during President Trump’s outreach in 2018.** North Korea blew up its inter-Korean liaison office north of the demilitarized zone on June 16. State media reported that North Korea would reinforce its artillery units along the border and deploy forces into areas it had agreed to demilitarize, including the Kaesong industrial zone where the liaison office was located.

Key upcoming dates:

- June 27: US-mediated talks between Serbia and Kosovo
- July 1: Germany takes rotating EU presidency
- July 1: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's intended start date to annex the Jordan Valley in the West Bank
- July 1: Putin's referendum
- July: Next session of the US-Iraq Strategic Dialogue in Washington, DC
- July 19: Syrian parliamentary elections
- September: G7 Summit
- September: Hong Kong legislative elections
- October: Local elections in Russian-occupied eastern Ukraine
- November 30: OPEC+ meeting in Vienna, Austria

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ISW-CTP Geopolitical Risk Assessment #14

June 30, 2020

Compiled by Jennifer Cafarella with Richard DeKold, Eva Kahan, Kyra Rauschenbach, and Jason Zhou

INTRA-AL QAEDA RIFT ESCALATES IN SYRIA AS ISIS AFFILIATES STRENGTHEN

Al Qaeda’s central leadership intervenes to defuse rising tensions between two major al Qaeda-affiliated groups in Syria. Hay’at Tahrir al Sham (HTS), the successor of al Qaeda’s Syrian affiliate Jabhat al Nusra (JN), and a smaller and more “hardline” al Qaeda affiliate named Hurras al Din (HaD) agreed to a de-escalation framework in northeast Syria on June 26 after a sharp increase in tensions. HTS and HaD compete for resources and recruits and are at odds over numerous issues, including whether to partner with Turkey in Idlib – which HaD opposes. HaD is plotting attacks in the West, while HTS claims to have abandoned such operations. The HTS-HaD conflict escalated in mid-June, when HaD formed a new coalition that elevated former HTS officials and competed with HTS for fighters in Idlib. The move provoked HTS into damage-control measures that included arresting prominent commanders and forbidding fighters from joining HaD or other jihadist groups. HaD mobilized its forces and clashed with HTS in multiple locations in response, threatening a widening military conflict between the two al Qaeda-affiliated groups. Al Qaeda’s central leadership called on both to de-escalate and emphasized that fighters should be free to choose their group, reflecting al Qaeda’s longstanding approach to cultivating a diverse jihadist network in Syria. HaD appears to have agreed to HTS’s terms to back down. HaD has scaled back its military positions in Idlib in return for HTS’s participation in a mediation process. The adherence – at least so far – of both groups to al Qaeda’s directive to de-escalate demonstrates that they remain responsive to al Qaeda’s central leadership.

ISIS is returning to areas under Turkish control in northern Syria and could exploit intra-al-Qaeda tensions. ISIS claimed two attacks near the Turkish border, demonstrating a reconstitution of the group’s attack networks after it went dormant in the area in January 2018. The first attack was an assassination of a Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) general near Azaz on June 23. The second attack used an improvised explosive device (IED) to strike a Turkish military vehicle in the vicinity of al Bab on June 24. ISIS established freedom of movement in portions of Turkish and opposition-controlled northern Syria by at least May 2020. The US responded to the ISIS presence in northern Syria by resuming airstrikes targeting the group in the area. A US airstrike in May 2020 killed a senior ISIS member near Afrin; another strike killed a senior ISIS member near Al Bab on June 20. ISIS will likely continue to expand its capabilities in the area. The Turkish-backed SNA is overstretched and may not prioritize fighting ISIS. The SNA remains focused on other lines of effort, including defending Idlib and fighting on Turkey’s behalf in Libya. ISIS could attempt to use its networks to attack into terrain controlled by the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), such as Manbij, or to launch a new wave of attacks against al Qaeda in Idlib from the north. The US should use this threat as an opportunity to encourage greater Turkish support for the anti-ISIS coalition.

IRAQI GOVERNMENT DEMONSTRATES CREDIBILITY AS IRAN RESUMES ATTACKS IN TWO THEATERS

The Iranian regime has resumed a multi-theater escalation against US and partner interests to erode US military influence in the Middle East. The regime’s Iraqi proxies and Yemeni partner, the al Houthis movement, resumed attacks against the US and its allies in May after significantly reducing such attacks for

two months in Iraq and eight months in Yemen. Iran’s Iraqi proxies previously conducted a campaign of rocket attacks against US personnel from October 2019 to March 2020 to raise the cost of and diminish Iraqi support for the American troop presence. Iran suspended this campaign in Iraq in April to enable Prime Minister Mustafa al Kadhimi to form a government. Iran and the Houthis also previously targeted US ally Saudi Arabia throughout the summer and fall of 2019 to frame the US as a poor security guarantor. Iranian-backed al Houthi militants resumed attacks targeting Saudi Arabia on May 28 and launched missiles that reached the Saudi capital, Riyadh, on June 23. An al Houthi official claimed on June 25 that Saudi security buildings house US personnel, indicating alignment with Iran’s objective to erode support for US presence in the region. Iraqi proxies also resumed rocket attacks against US personnel in Iraq, conducting nine attacks from May 5 to June 22.

Iraq’s new prime minister took major risks to constrain Iran’s Iraqi proxies, demonstrating credibility as a US partner amid ongoing negotiations over the future of US support to the Iraqi government. Prime Minister Mustafa al Kadhimi used the elite, US-trained Counterterrorism Services (CTS) to arrest 14 Kata’ib Hezbollah (KH) militants in Baghdad who were planning rocket attacks on US personnel on June 26. The move followed the announcement of a governmental campaign to use CTS forces to retake lucrative border crossings along the Iranian border from the Iranian proxy militias that currently dominate them and the temporary detention of several members of an Iranian proxy unit responsible for violence against protesters on May 11. Kadhimi released the KH detainees to the custody of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), the entity under which most of Iran’s Iraqi proxies operate, after KH deployed hundreds of armed militants to Baghdad’s Green Zone in a show of force, demonstrating the limits of Kadhimi’s power and the risks Kadhimi is taking to confront Iran’s proxies. The raid is an important demonstration of Kadhimi’s willingness to take action to protect US personnel despite the risks. The move strengthens Kadhimi’s credibility and negotiating position in the next round of Strategic Dialogue talks in Washington, DC, in July.

CHINA SHOWS ADDITIONAL SIGNS OF DISRUPTION, CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE U.S.

China is defunding parts of its global silk road project to help save the Chinese economy. China’s Foreign Ministry announced unspecified funding cuts to its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) on June 20 for the first time, reporting that economic fallout from COVID-19 has affected 50-60 percent of BRI projects. China has not made the details of the funding cuts public, but the reductions create a major opportunity for the US to propose alternative funding structures that do not entrap countries in extortionist Chinese lending schemes. The BRI cuts reflect the scale of China’s economic downturn. China announced a \$506 billion economic stimulus package on May 22 focused on supporting small business and bolstering employment. That package may be insufficient. China cannot inject a stimulus package on par with the US due to debt accumulated during China’s massive economic stimulus spending during the 2008 financial crisis, potentially limiting its economic recovery.

Key Upcoming Dates:

- July 1: Germany takes rotating EU presidency
- July 1: Putin holds referendum in Russia
- July 1: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu can begin to annex the Jordan Valley in the West Bank per the terms of his government formation deal with rival Benny Gantz
- July, TBD: Next session of the US-Iraq Strategic Dialogue in Washington, DC
- July 19: Syrian parliamentary elections
- September, TBD: G7 Summit at Camp David, US
- September, TBD: Hong Kong legislative elections



- October, TBD: Local elections in Russia-occupied eastern Ukraine
- November 30: OPEC+ meeting in Vienna, Austria

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ISW-CTP Geopolitical Risk Assessment #15

July 8, 2020

Compiled by Jennifer Cafarella with George Barros, Mason Clark, Richard DeKold, Katherine Lawlor, Kyra Rauschenbach, and Nicholas Carl

PUTIN EXTENDS POTENTIAL TERM IN OFFICE TO 2036 AND STRENGTHENS HIS POLICE STATE

Russian President Vladimir Putin used a rigged public referendum to secure authorization to extend his term in office to 2036. Putin enacted a package of constitutional amendments on July 4 after holding a public referendum on July 1. The package of reforms includes an amendment enabling him to essentially remain in office for the rest of his life. Other amendments legally enshrine the primacy of the Russian language and Orthodox Christianity to support the Kremlin’s desired state identity and commit the Kremlin to additional social spending, likely to increase support for Putin’s continued rule. The Kremlin employed an unprecedented level of vote falsification measures to achieve the desired voting results and turnout. Russian authorities reported 78 percent of voters supported the amendments with 65-percent turnout. Independent Western and Russian observers assess 45 percent of votes were likely falsified, with the true turnout likely being closer to 40 percent. The Kremlin’s need to falsify results at a scale easily perceptible to the Russian public – with an estimated 22 million falsified votes, compared to 10 million in the 2018 presidential election – undermines Putin’s narrative that there is popular support for his rule past the expiration of his current term in 2024 and incurs a long-term legitimacy cost among Russians.

Putin is building a police state similar to China’s that will give the Kremlin far greater surveillance capabilities than it had under the Soviet system. The emerging police state marries big data and 21st-century information to the Kremlin’s existing authoritarian governance. Russian independent media reported in mid-June that Russian state technology companies will equip all Russian schools with a facial recognition surveillance system. The technology will enable the Kremlin to build a nearly complete database of tracking information on Russian citizens within two generations. The Kremlin set conditions for this step beginning in early March. Putin exploited the start of the pandemic to empower Russia’s security services and police, test and expand digital surveillance capabilities, and tighten control over Russia’s information space. Moscow city authorities began testing and implementing new facial recognition technology using existing CCTV cameras to enable the Russian National Guard to enforce stay-at-home orders. Healthy individuals in Moscow could additionally leave home only if they obtained and scanned QR codes notifying authorities of their movement; COVID-19 outpatients were required to use smartphones to send regular geolocated pictures of themselves to Russian authorities to verify their compliance with quarantine measures. Putin also enacted a law creating a “unified register of information” on Russian citizens on June 8, providing the security services with a new central database to access newly collected information. The facial recognition data the Kremlin will now collect from Russian schools will feed into this database and significantly expand the Kremlin’s information on its population beyond Moscow.

More from ISW-CTP: [“Putin Deploys New Authoritarian Controls during the COVID-19 Pandemic”](#) (INTSUM), July 2020; [“Russia in Review: Kremlin Tests Authoritarian Social Control Measures During COVID-19 Crisis”](#) (INTSUM), April 2020.

US MARSHALS GREATER REGIONAL RESPONSE TO CHINESE AGGRESSION IN THE PACIFIC

China continues to signal preparation for military conflict with Taiwan. China is establishing a new deep-water naval port near Taiwan, which will allow China to support large naval vessels and potentially launch amphibious landing craft to invade Taiwan. China recently began dredging operations at a bay on the artificial Woody Island according to satellite images captured from April 17 – June 25. Woody Island hosts small China Coast Guard (CCG) and Maritime Militia vessels and was claimed by China as a new municipality and “administrative center” in May. An influential Chinese think tank linked to the military and Foreign Ministry released a report on June 24 stating that the likelihood of US-China military conflict in the South China Sea is increasing, indicating Chinese defense policymakers will continue to prioritize the construction of military infrastructure in the region. China is also normalizing incursions into Taiwanese airspace by sustaining a high level of sorties into Taiwan’s air identification zone throughout June.

The US and Taiwan are strengthening defensive measures to deter possible near-term Chinese military escalation. The US has broken previous diplomatic norms to signal its commitment to Taiwan. The US Army published a video of US-Taiwan joint military training exercises in Taiwan on June 16 amidst multiple US military aircraft flyovers of the island, a diplomatic step-change that emphasizes military ties. The US previously avoided showing direct military cooperation with Taiwan. Taiwan’s Marine Corps deployed units to the Pratas/Dongsha Islands in the South China Sea on June 27, strengthening Taiwanese defenses along a potential avenue of approach for a Chinese invasion. China reportedly plans to conduct amphibious landing exercises near the Pratas Islands in August and could use those exercises as a cover for offensive action. Additionally, the US is holding its first dual-carrier naval exercises in the South China Sea since 2014.

The US has a strategic opportunity to marshal a more coherent regional response to growing Chinese aggression in the South China Sea. US partners in the Indo-Pacific are demonstrating more willingness to confront Chinese behavior. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), issued a joint declaration affirming the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) on June 27. The statement is ASEAN’s first unified rebuke of Chinese aggression and indicates growing Indo-Pacific political will to contest Chinese claims. The US is working to expand and integrate a loose naval coalition between the US, Japan, India, and Australia known as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (aka “Quad”). The US helped convene representatives of the “Quad” for closed-door meetings in late March. The US effort included weekly calls with New Zealand, South Korea, and Vietnam in an effort to incorporate them into an expanded “Indo-Pacific Coordination Group.” India and Australia signed a mutual logistics support agreement (MLSA) allowing for reciprocal use of naval bases on June 4, a step they previously refrained from taking for fear of provoking China. India has continued to retaliate against China in response to the ongoing standoff along disputed portions of the Indian-Chinese border, announcing mass restrictions on Chinese imports and social media applications to curb Chinese influence and impose economic costs.

Rising US military commitments to the Indo-Pacific help build confidence among US partners. Officials from Japan, India, and Australia have historically expressed skepticism that the US has the necessary political will and naval resources in the Pacific to support the Quad and a potential broader security pact. The US Senate approved \$6 billion for the Pacific Deterrence Initiative to strengthen US forward operating positions on June 11, focusing on enhancing defenses at Guam which serves as a key node for US naval force projection into the South China Sea. The 2021 US National Defense Authorization Act, under review in the Senate, includes plans to allow Quad-aligned fighter pilots to train at Anderson Air Force Base in Guam, expanding a December 2019 agreement with Singapore. The US has moved to enhance its force posture in the Pacific. The United States Marine Corps (USMC) is radically restructuring its combat units to counter China in the

South China Sea through its “Force Redesign 2030 Initiative,” which would enable Marine Infantry battalions to conduct simultaneous amphibious assaults on Chinese military island chains. The growing US focus on the Pacific has helped spur Australia to allocate \$185 billion to defense upgrades as part of a new strategy to counter Chinese naval expansion; the upgrades and related timelines are to be announced July 8.

WHAT WE'RE WATCHING

- **Iran’s Iraqi proxy militias are increasing pressure on Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi to reject a long-term US military presence in Iraq as he negotiates with the US over the future of US-Iraqi relations.** Kadhimi has demonstrated his credibility as a US partner by cracking down on proxy militias for their attacks on US facilities in Iraq and violence against protesters. Iran’s proxies are retaliating violently. They are likely responsible for a high-profile assassination of a prominent advisor to the prime minister in Baghdad on July 6. Prime Minister Kadhimi has pledged to provide justice for the assassination, which is a major threat to his legitimacy and risks a new round of escalation between Iran’s proxies and Iraqi Security Forces. Iran’s proxies also conducted their eighth indirect rocket attack on US facilities since early June on July 5.
- **Covert action, reportedly by Israel, targeted Iran’s nuclear program and will trigger Iranian reprisals.** An explosion at one of Iran’s most important nuclear sites, a fuel enrichment plant in Natanz on July 2 set back operations at the facility by months according to Iran’s Atomic Energy Organization. Unidentified Iranian officials and other regional officials cited separately by the New York Times and Washington Post claim Israel is responsible for the explosion. Four additional explosions and fires have targeted other Iranian facilities since June 26, possibly indicating a wider covert effort to call attention to the risk of a potential Iranian nuclear escalation. Iranian retaliation against Israel for real or perceived involvement could follow existing patterns of cyber-attacks or escalations from the Syrian side of the Golan Heights, including suicide-drone attacks.
- **ISIS seeks to overcome successful Jordanian efforts to disrupt the group’s cross-border movement.** Jordanian security officials revealed in June 2020 that they thwarted three separate attack plots by Jordanian ISIS cells in early 2020, including attacks on an unspecified security site in Irbid and the General Intelligence Directorate building in Zarqa Province in February 2020 as well as an Armenian Church and a liquor store in Amman sometime in early 2020. At least two of the attack cells were in contact with ISIS members in Syria or in the Sinai and pivoted to planning attacks within Jordan after failing to leave the country due to effective border security.

Key Upcoming Dates:

- July, TBD: Next session of the US-Iraq Strategic Dialogue in Washington, DC
- July 19: Syrian parliamentary elections
- September, TBD: G7 Summit at Camp David, US
- September 6: Hong Kong legislative elections
- October, TBD: Local elections in Russian-occupied eastern Ukraine
- October 18: UN arms embargo on Iran expires
- November 30: OPEC+ meeting in Vienna, Austria

For questions or requests for detailed briefings on any of these topics, please contact the Institute for the Study of War or Critical Threats Project.

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