

REGIONAL THREAT WATCH: ASIA & THE MIDDLE EAST

SECURITY HOTSPOTS

IHS Country Risk assesses the most volatile security hotspots in the region

Syria/Iraq: ISIS expands



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The Islamic State (ISIS) captured the town of Palmyra (Tadmur) on 20 May 2015, following several days' fighting. ISIS can now link its Syrian administrative centre in Raqqa to Homs, and mount attacks from Palmyra in multiple directions. ISIS is likely to capture significant weapons and munitions supplies from the Palmyra area, especially if it seizes the weapons depots north of the city. This would allow the group to expand its operations even further. Aleppo may well become a target for the group, particularly the military bases south of the city. Additionally, if the group captured Tiyas airbase near Palmyra, it would likely be able to starve out the government soldiers that it has surrounded in Deir al-Zour, forcing their surrender. Such losses would seriously undermine the morale of government soldiers. The insurgents' ability to target hitherto relatively safe civilian areas, and to penetrate government core areas, makes it increasingly likely that Syrian government forces will withdraw, with or without orders, from their current areas of operation, such as Aleppo and Deraa to defend the Alawite homeland.

Myanmar: civil unrest

Myanmar's transition to civilian rule has been marred by rising unrest stemming from land and labour-related protests and communal violence. Fighting between the army and ethnic insurgents in the border states will also likely continue, especially in Kachin and Shan. Street protests have increased significantly since Thein Sein's government took power, as civil society embraces relaxed laws on freedom of expression and assembly. The most serious protest recently occurred in March 2015, when police forcibly dispersed students and monks marching to demand changes to education laws. The government denied that undue force was used, and subsequently arrested and charged those involved in the demonstrations. There is also an increased risk of communal violence between extremist Buddhists and Muslim minorities. Communal unrest in Western Myanmar's Rakhine (targeting ethnic Rohingya Muslims) state has already spread inland, and indications point to attacks escalating beyond Rakhine to Bago, Mandalay, Sagaing and Yangon, affecting Muslims of other ethnicities. The atmosphere has become increasingly toxic following the passage of legislation restricting political rights of religious minorities, and efforts by Buddhist-nationalist groups to incite violence (notably the 969 Movement led by extremist monk Wirathu). This issue has the greatest potential to trigger the re-imposition of sanctions.

Australia: spreading terror

An unnamed 17-year-old male was arrested by police during a counter-terrorism operation at his residence in the Greenvale area of the city of Melbourne in the state of Victoria in Australia on 8 May. The individual was arrested on suspicion of plotting to detonate three homemade improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in the city. Police stated that three devices were discovered at the suspect's residence and were neutralised. This alleged plot serves to illustrate the ongoing threat of Islamist attacks being carried out by small cells or individual actors in Australia. Two previous alleged Islamist attacks in 2015 were said to have involved the planned use of knives, while the December 2014 Martin Place siege in Sydney, which left two hostages dead along with the perpetrator, involved firearms. Although the use of explosives suggests a higher level of sophistication in this case than with previous plots, the police stated the devices uncovered were "very rudimentary". As such, this attack does not of itself indicate a significant increase in capability on the part of home-grown Islamists in Australia to use IEDs.

Thailand: separatist insurgency

The separatist insurgency in the south has mainly been confined to Narathiwat, Pattani, Songkhla, and Yala that have predominantly Thai-Malay and Muslim populations. The new military administration has announced a new round of peace talks, but these are highly unlikely to be successful, since the government has strictly ruled out autonomy – the insurgents' key demand. Although a decline in the insurgency's operational tempo has been recorded in the second half of 2014 (due to improved counter-insurgency operations and local surveillance networks), attacks have still taken place. The most serious attack occurred in April 2014, when a number of IEDs exploded at a furniture shop, a warehouse, a 7-Eleven store and an ATM in Yala. A vehicle-borne improved explosive device (VBIED) that detonated at the furniture shop caused a fire that subsequently razed more than ten houses in the vicinity. The economic damage from that attack is



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estimated at THB 150m. There is also a risk of the conflict widening to areas that have not traditionally been hit within the four provinces

themselves. In July 2014, insurgents detonated a VBIED in Yala's Betong, which had not been targeted seriously before.

South China Sea: rising tensions

China has laid claims on most of the islets in the South China Sea (SCS), most of which are actively disputed by the other states in the region, including Vietnam and the Philippines. Although several Spratly claimants have conducted land reclamation, the Chinese efforts are notable for their speed and extent. Under UNCLOS, only natural land features permanently above sea level are entitled to surrounding territorial seas, whereas many of the Chinese-occupied features are submerged at high tide. Although the United States has never accepted Chinese claims of territorial waters around the periodically submerged features, to date US forces have refrained from traversing the 12-nautical-mile limit. Any US air or naval patrol which travels within 12 nautical miles of Chinese-occupied features would be regarded as being in deliberate violation of Chinese sovereignty by Beijing, and would probably trigger a diplomatic confrontation between the US and China. Given the range of global security and economic issues on which Chinese co-operation is required – in particular



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the increasingly volatile situation in North Korea – the White House is unlikely to directly challenge Chinese territorial claims at this time. Instead, the US will probably respond to recent Chinese assertiveness by strengthening military co-operation with

the other SCS states. In October 2014, the US lifted its arms embargo against Hanoi, in place since the Gulf of Tonkin Incident in 1964. In the present scenario, US vessels are likely to patrol close to the 12-mile limit without breaching it.

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