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Preventive Priorities Survey 2018

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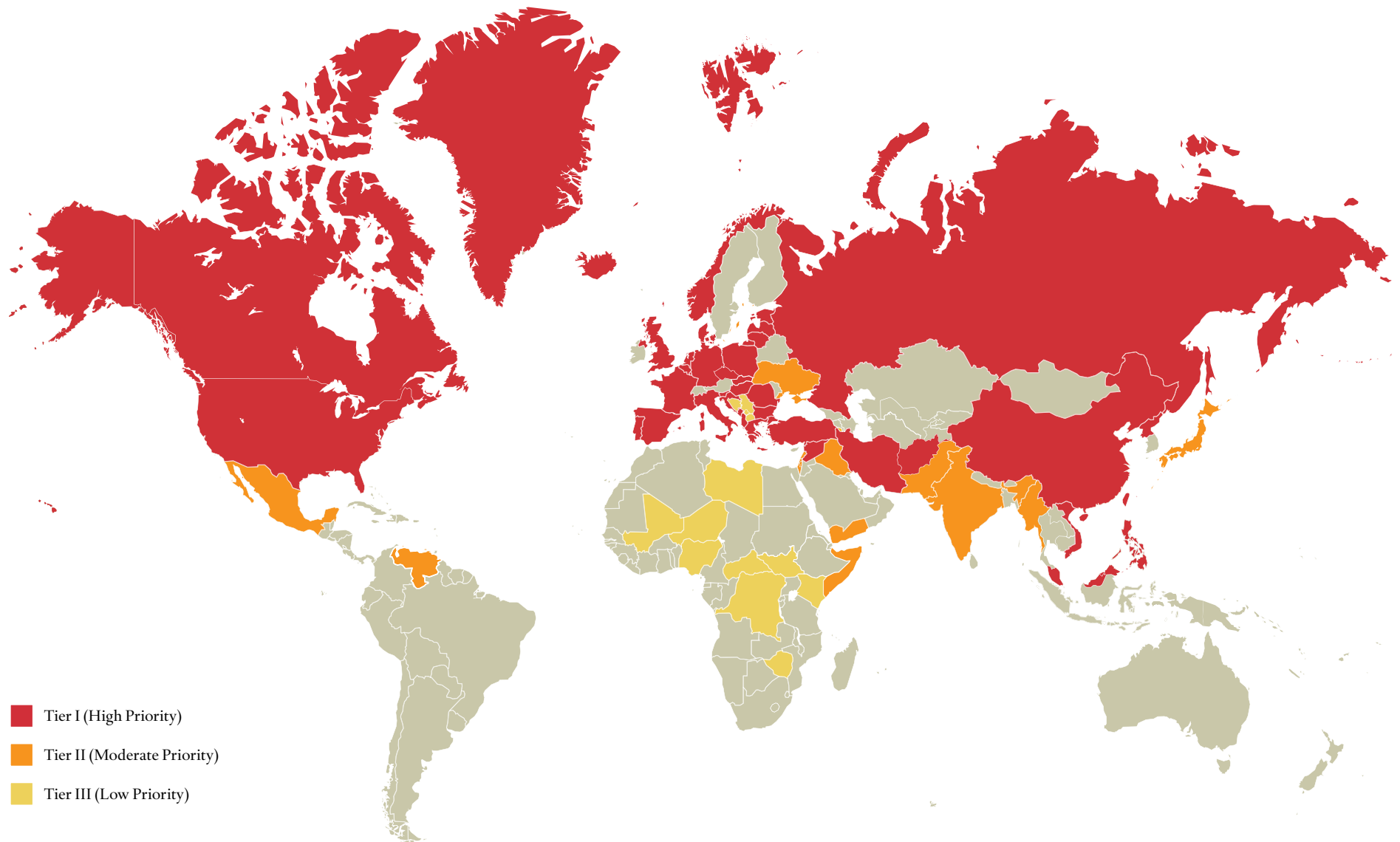
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Preventive Priorities Survey 2018

The Center for Preventive Action's annual Preventive Priorities Survey (PPS) evaluates ongoing and potential conflicts based on their likelihood of occurring in the coming year and their impact on U.S. interests. The PPS aims to help the U.S. policymaking community prioritize competing conflict prevention and crisis mitigation demands.

To learn more about ongoing conflicts, visit the Global Conflict Tracker at [cfr.org/globalconflicttracker](https://www.cfr.org/globalconflicttracker)



About the Preventive Priorities Survey

The risk of violent conflict is growing in several regions of the world in ways that could threaten U.S. interests and even trigger a military response. Given the potential costs and harmful consequences of armed intervention, it is clearly preferable that the United States seeks ways to manage the most threatening sources of conflict before it faces the difficult decision to use force. While foreign crises can arise in genuinely unpredictable ways, in many instances the risk factors or warning signs are clear. The opportunity exists, therefore, to take preventive action to lessen the risk of events moving in an undesirable direction and to be better prepared if they do.

With the goal of helping U.S. policymakers identify and appreciate emerging risks of conflict, the Center for Preventive Action (CPA) at the Council on Foreign Relations conducts an annual survey of foreign policy experts to look ahead and provide their best judgment about the dangers that could be brewing just over the horizon. This is the tenth such survey. While there are similar efforts to assess emerging threats and potential crises, the Preventive Priorities Survey is unique in that it is designed to gauge not only the likelihood of plausible contingencies occurring over the next twelve months but also their impact on U.S. interests. Not all



A Hezbollah military vehicle is seen in Fleita in western Syria, near Lebanon, on August 3, 2017. (Ammar Safarjalani/Getty Images)



Afghan Local Police keep watch during a military operation in the Nad Ali district of Afghanistan's Helmand province on April 8, 2017. (Noor Mohammad/Getty Images)

potential crises, after all, pose an equal risk to the United States; some are likely to be more threatening than others, and preventive efforts should be prioritized accordingly. This is especially important given how much the press of daily events constricts the time and energy that busy policymakers can reasonably devote to worrying about the future.

Setting priorities can be contentious, however; experts often differ on where attention and resources should be directed. To establish a defensible set of preventive priorities, we first solicited the public to contribute suggestions of what to include in the survey (see the methodology section). From the nearly one thousand responses, we produced a list of thirty contingencies that we judged to be plausible in the coming year. Those taking the survey were also provided with guidelines to help them evaluate each contingency in a consistent and rigorous fashion. The results were then aggregated and the contingencies sorted into three tiers of relative priority for preventive action.

The final results should be interpreted with the understanding that the survey assessed the risk posed by violent contingencies. We excluded all potential contingencies

that we considered to be primarily economic or health-related in origin or that revolved around potential natural or man-made disasters, while recognizing that such events can harm U.S. interests. Respondents were given the opportunity, however, to write in additional conflict-related contingencies that they believed warranted attention. We have included their most common suggestions as noted concerns.

Finally, it should also be acknowledged that the survey was concluded in early November 2017. The results therefore reflect a snapshot of expert opinion at that time. The world is a dynamic place, and so assessments of risk and the ordering of priorities should be regularly updated. For this reason, ongoing conflicts are monitored on our Global Conflict Tracker interactive, accessible at cfr.org/globalconflicttracker.

Methodology

The Center for Preventive Action carried out the 2018 PPS in three stages:

1. Soliciting PPS Contingencies

In mid-October, CPA harnessed various social media platforms to solicit suggestions about possible conflicts to include in the survey. With the help of the Council on Foreign Relations' in-house regional experts, CPA narrowed down the list of possible conflicts from nearly one thousand suggestions to thirty contingencies deemed both plausible over the next twelve months and potentially harmful to U.S. interests.

2. Polling Foreign Policy Experts

In early November, the survey was sent to nearly seven thousand U.S. government officials, foreign policy experts, and academics, of whom more than four hundred responded. Each was asked to estimate the impact on U.S. interests and likelihood of each contingency according to general guidelines (see risk assessment definitions).

3. Ranking the Conflicts

The survey results were then scored according to their ranking, and the contingencies were subsequently sorted into one of three preventive priority tiers (I, II, and III) according to their placement on the accompanying risk assessment matrix.

Risk Assessment Matrix

		IMPACT ON U.S. INTERESTS		
		High	Moderate	Low
LIKELIHOOD	High			
	Moderate			
	Low			
		Tier I	Tier II	Tier III

Definitions

IMPACT ON U.S. INTERESTS

- **High:** contingency directly threatens the U.S. homeland, is likely to trigger U.S. military involvement because of treaty commitments, or threatens the supply of critical U.S. strategic resources
- **Moderate:** contingency affects countries of strategic importance to the United States but does not involve a mutual-defense treaty commitment
- **Low:** contingency could have severe/widespread humanitarian consequences but in countries of limited strategic importance to the United States

LIKELIHOOD

- **High:** contingency is probable to highly likely to occur in 2018
- **Moderate:** contingency has about an even chance of occurring in 2018
- **Low:** contingency is improbable to highly unlikely to occur in 2018



Soldiers of the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) cheer during the commemoration of SPLA Day in Juba, South Sudan, on May 18, 2017. (Albert Gonzalez Farran/Getty Images)



A group of Rohingya protect themselves from rain at Palong Khali in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, on October 17, 2017. (Getty Images)



A fighter from the Syrian Democratic Forces stands next to debris and damaged buildings in Raqqa, Syria, on September 25, 2017. (Rodi Said/Reuters)

2018 Findings

Many of the contingencies identified in previous surveys remain concerns for 2018. Of the thirty identified, twenty-two were considered risks last year. Much has changed, however, and several findings stand out:

Two new contingencies emerged as Tier I priorities. In light of concerns over increased tensions in the Middle East between Iran and Saudi Arabia as well as both countries' involvement in the war in Syria, the possibility of an armed confrontation between Iran and the United States or one of its allies has become a top concern. So too is the potential for an armed confrontation over disputed maritime areas in the South China Sea between China and one or more Southeast Asian claimants. These two contingencies join six others as Tier I priorities: the threat of a major terrorist strike or cyberattack against the United States, a military conflict involving North Korea, increased violence and instability in Afghanistan, a military confrontation between Russia and a North Atlantic

Treaty Organization (NATO) member state, and a violent reconsolidation of government control in Syria.

Eight new contingencies appeared in this year's survey. The risk of intensified clashes between Israel and Hezbollah, increased violence and political instability in the Sahel region of Africa, and escalating tensions or extremist violence in the Balkans represent completely new contingencies this year. In addition to the risk of conflict with Iran, four other contingencies were selected from the initial crowdsourcing: an escalation of sectarian violence and forced displacement in the Central African Republic, growing political instability and violence in Kenya, an escalation of organized crime-related violence in Mexico, and intensified sectarian violence in Myanmar.

Two contingencies surveyed last year received a higher-priority ranking for 2018. In addition to a potential military confrontation in the South China Sea moving up from a Tier II to Tier I concern, the likelihood of continued al-Shabab attacks in Somalia moved up from Tier III to Tier II.

The priority rankings of two contingencies were downgraded for 2018. The intensification of violence between Turkey and various Kurdish armed groups within Turkey and neighboring countries changed from Tier I to Tier II, and the probability of greater violence in Libya following a breakdown of the peace process moved down from Tier II to Tier III.

Three contingencies have evolved significantly since last year's survey. After the September 2017 Kurdish independence referendum, concerns about instability in Iraq caused by political fracturing and violent clashes among Sunni, Shia, and Kurdish communities have been replaced by apprehension over an escalation of conflict between Iraqi security forces and armed Kurdish groups. Intensification of the civil war in Syria has also been regularly mentioned in previous surveys. The focus was previously on the effects of increased external support for the warring parties, but this year the source of concern has shifted to encompass the violent reconsolidation of government control by domestic actors and a rise in tensions among the parties providing external support.

Eight contingencies assessed last year were not included for 2018. These include an intensification of the political crisis in Burundi, political instability in Colombia following a collapse of the peace agreement between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), growing civil unrest and ethnic violence in Ethiopia, political

instability in European Union countries exacerbated by the influx of refugees and migrants, military conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh region, growing opposition to the government's domestic and foreign policy agenda in the Philippines, political instability in Thailand resulting from the uncertainty over royal succession, and increased political instability in Turkey stemming from growing authoritarianism. While the underlying dynamics that led to these contingencies' inclusion have not disappeared, none were identified as significant concerns in the initial pool of crowdsourced contingencies and thus were not included in the 2018 survey.

Other Noted Concerns

Although the survey was limited to thirty contingencies, government officials and foreign policy experts had the opportunity to suggest additional potential crises that they believe warrant attention. The following were the most commonly cited:

- a reversal of the peace process between the Colombian government and FARC
- an armed confrontation between Russia and the United States or a NATO member over territorial claims in the Arctic
- increased tensions between Qatar and Gulf Cooperation Council countries
- a confrontation between Greece and Turkey over disputed territory in the eastern Mediterranean Sea
- an accidental or intentional clash between the United States and Iran in the Persian Gulf
- destabilization of the Philippines by Islamist militant groups, particularly militants affiliated with the self-proclaimed Islamic State
- political instability and civil unrest in EU countries stemming from nationalist and separatist movements
- increased political instability in Egypt, including terrorist attacks, particularly in the Sinai Peninsula

Tier I ■

IMPACT: HIGH

LIKELIHOOD: MODERATE

- Military conflict involving the United States, **North Korea**, and its neighboring countries
- A deliberate or unintended military confrontation between **Russia** and **NATO** members, stemming from assertive Russian behavior in Eastern Europe
- A highly disruptive cyberattack on **U.S. critical infrastructure and networks**
- An armed confrontation between **Iran** and the United States or one of its allies over Iran's involvement in regional conflicts and support of militant proxy groups
- An armed confrontation over disputed maritime areas in the **South China Sea** between China and one or more Southeast Asian claimants—Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, or Vietnam
- A mass casualty terrorist attack on the **U.S. homeland** or a treaty ally by either foreign or homegrown terrorist(s)

IMPACT: MODERATE

LIKELIHOOD: HIGH

- Violent reconsolidation of government control in **Syria**, with heightened tensions among external parties to the conflict
- Increased violence and instability in **Afghanistan** resulting from the Taliban insurgency and potential government collapse



Tier II ■

IMPACT: HIGH

LIKELIHOOD: LOW

- An armed confrontation in the **East China Sea** between China and Japan stemming from tensions over the sovereignty of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands

IMPACT: MODERATE

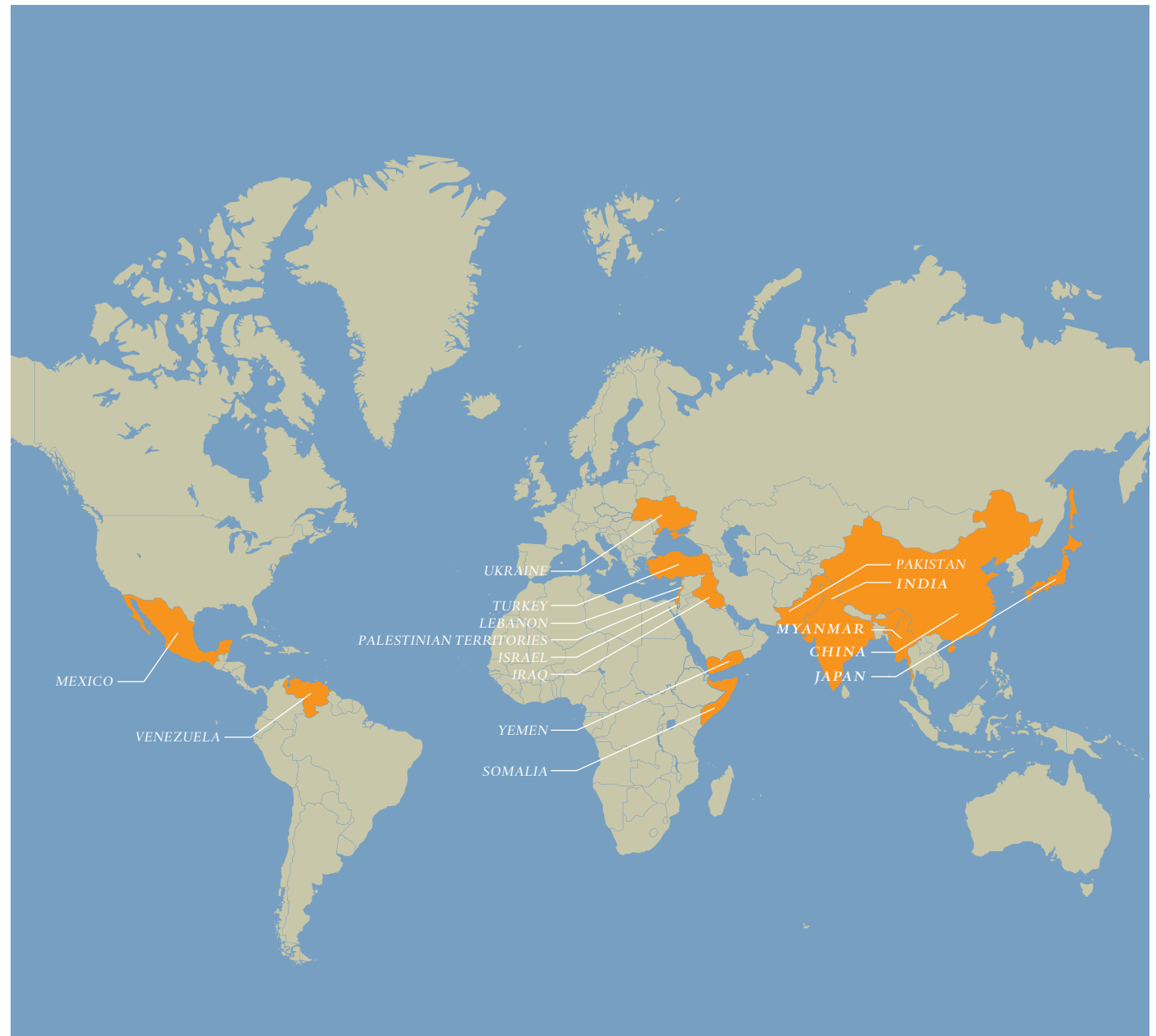
LIKELIHOOD: MODERATE

- Escalation of organized crime-related violence in **Mexico**
- Intensified violence in eastern **Ukraine** between Russian-backed militias and Ukrainian security forces
- Escalation of conflict between **Iraqi security forces** and **armed Kurdish groups** in Iraq
- Intensified clashes between **Israel** and **Hezbollah** either along the Israel-Lebanon border or in Syria
- Increased violence and political instability in **Pakistan** caused by multiple militant groups and tension between the government and opposition parties
- A severe **India-Pakistan** military confrontation triggered by a major terrorist attack or heightened unrest in Indian-administered Kashmir
- Heightened tensions between **Israelis** and **Palestinians** leading to attacks against civilians, widespread protests, and armed confrontations
- Intensification of violence between **Turkey** and various **Kurdish armed groups** within Turkey and in neighboring countries

IMPACT: LOW

LIKELIHOOD: HIGH

- Deepening economic crisis and political instability in **Venezuela** leading to violent civil unrest and increased refugee outflows



- Worsening humanitarian crisis in **Yemen**, exacerbated by ongoing foreign intervention in the civil war
- Continued al-Shabab attacks in **Somalia** and neighboring countries

- Intensified sectarian violence between government security forces and Muslim Rohingya in **Myanmar** and increased refugee influx into Bangladesh

Tier III ■

IMPACT: LOW

LIKELIHOOD: MODERATE

- Intensified violence and political instability in **Nigeria** resulting from conflicts in the Delta region and the Middle Belt and with Boko Haram in the northeast
- Escalated violence in **Libya** following a breakdown of the peace process
- Escalating tensions or extremist violence in the **Balkans**—Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia—resulting in political instability and armed clashes
- Intensified violence and political instability in the **Sahel**, including in Mali and Niger, related to increasing militant activity
- Escalation of the civil war in **South Sudan** stemming from political and ethnic divisions, with destabilizing spillover effects into neighboring countries
- Growing political instability and violence in the **Democratic Republic of Congo**, resulting in continued forced displacement and destabilizing effects on neighboring countries
- Growing political instability and violence in **Kenya** following the 2017 elections
- Widespread unrest and violence in **Zimbabwe** related to the succession of former President Robert Mugabe
- Escalation of sectarian violence and forced displacement in the **Central African Republic** between the Seleka rebels and anti-balaka militias resulting in continued forced displacement and destabilizing effects on neighboring countries



About the Center for Preventive Action

The Center for Preventive Action (CPA) seeks to help prevent, defuse, or resolve deadly conflicts around the world and to expand the body of knowledge on conflict prevention. It does so by creating a forum in which representatives of governments, international organizations, nongovernmental organizations, corporations, and civil society can gather to develop operational and timely strategies for promoting peace in specific conflict situations. The center focuses on conflicts in countries or regions that affect U.S. interests, but may be otherwise overlooked; where prevention appears possible; and when the resources of the Council on Foreign Relations can make a difference. The center does this by:

- *Issuing regular reports* to evaluate and respond rapidly to developing sources of instability and formulate timely, concrete policy recommendations that the U.S. government, international community, and local actors can use to limit the potential for deadly violence.
- *Engaging the U.S. government and news media* in conflict prevention efforts. CPA staff members meet with administration officials and members of Congress to brief on CPA's findings and recommendations, facilitate contacts between U.S. officials and important local and external actors, and raise awareness among journalists of potential flashpoints around the globe.
- *Building networks with international organizations and institutions* to complement and leverage the Council's established influence in the U.S. policy arena and increase the impact of CPA's recommendations.
- *Providing a source of expertise on conflict prevention* to include research, case studies, and lessons learned from past conflicts that policymakers and private citizens can use to prevent or mitigate future deadly conflicts.

For more information, to sign up for the CPA Newsletter, or to access the Center for Preventive Action's latest work, please visit our website at cfr.org/programs/center-preventive-action or follow us on Facebook at facebook.com/CFRCenterforPreventiveAction or on Twitter @CFR_CPA.

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*A missile is launched during a drill in this
undated photo released by North Korea's
Central News Agency on August 30, 2017.
(Korean Central News Agency|Reuters)*

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