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Center for Preventive Action

Preventive Priorities Survey 2025



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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.

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Preventive Priorities Survey 2025

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About the Preventive Priorities Survey

The second Donald Trump administration assumes office at a moment of great peril for the United States. The level of armed conflict around the world has steadily grown in recent years, which in turn has increased the risk of costly U.S. military intervention. This is particularly the case in the Middle East, which continues to be wracked by deadly violence across multiple countries. This violence has clear potential to intensify and spread. The horrific war in Ukraine that by some estimates has already claimed a million casualties also shows no sign of abating. This conflict could likewise escalate in ways that threaten vital U.S. interests and necessitate much deeper and more costly involvement. While the situation in the Indo-Pacific region is comparatively peaceful, numerous flashpoints exist, not least across the Taiwan Strait and in the South China Sea, that could suddenly ignite and rapidly draw in the United States. The possibility that the United States could find itself in wars with not one but two major, nuclear-armed powers simultaneously is, thus, very real. The stakes today, in other words, cannot be overstated.

The Trump administration should not only be clear sighted about the risks of an increasingly turbulent world but also craft policies designed to deliberately lessen the dangers ahead. Otherwise, it could become overwhelmed by multiple concurrent crises with calamitous consequences for the United States. But where to focus finite U.S. resources, not to mention the limited attention spans of busy policymakers? Besides the conflict risks listed above, there are other ongoing or potential conflicts, especially in Africa, that may not have the same strategic importance but nonetheless repre-



A cloud of smoke erupts following an Israeli airstrike on the southern suburbs of Beirut, Lebanon, on October 19, 2024. (AFP via Getty Images)



A Ukrainian soldier of the forty-first brigade walks in a trench near the frontline outside Kupiansk, Ukraine, in the Kharkiv Oblast on January 23, 2024. (Roman Pilipey/AFP via Getty Images)

sent major humanitarian imperatives. In addition, emerging risks closer to home in the Western Hemisphere cannot be ignored, nor can domestic threats to political stability.

It was with this challenge in mind that CPA launched the Preventive Priorities Survey (PPS) seventeen years ago. Each year, the PPS polls hundreds of American foreign policy experts for their assessment of the likelihood and the potential harm to U.S. interests of thirty conflict-related contingencies that have been judged to be plausible in the coming twelve months (see methodology, page 4). The results are then collated, and the contingencies are sorted into three tiers of relative priority for U.S. preventive action.

The PPS is primarily focused on assessing relatively discrete political and military contingencies. It is not designed to evaluate the risk posed by broad trends such as global warming, demographic change, or technological developments. Those trends, which could easily trigger violent conflict in a specific place over

the next twelve months, are simply too difficult to gauge. Nor does the PPS attempt to evaluate the risk associated with events such as earthquakes, severe weather events, public health crises, or the death of a specific leader. Those events can trigger instability, but their likelihood over a short time frame is inherently unpredictable.

Additionally, the PPS does not evaluate more than thirty contingencies each year even though many more could be added. Respondents are given the opportunity, however, to name additional conflict-related concerns they believe warrant attention. Those suggestions appear in the list of “Other Noted Concerns.”

Finally, the results reflect expert opinion at the time the survey was conducted in November 2024. The world is dynamic, so geopolitical risk assessments need to be regularly updated, which CPA does with its award-winning “Global Conflict Tracker” interactive, accessible at cfr.org/globalconflictracker.

Methodology

The Center for Preventive Action carried out the 2025 PPS in three stages:

1. Soliciting PPS Contingencies

In October 2024, 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 to thirty contingencies deemed both plausible in 2025 and potentially harmful to U.S. interests.

2. Polling Foreign Policy Experts

In November 2024, the survey was sent to more than 15,000 U.S. government officials, foreign policy experts, and academics, of whom approximately 680 responded. Each was asked to estimate the impact on U.S. interests and likelihood of each contingency according to general guidelines (see risk assessment matrix 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	Tier I	Tier I	Tier II
	Moderate	Tier I	Tier II	Tier III
	Low	Tier II	Tier III	Tier III

- Tier I
- Tier II
- Tier III

Definitions

Impact on U.S. Interests

- High:** contingency directly threatens the U.S. homeland, a defense treaty ally, or a vital strategic interest, and thus is likely to trigger a U.S. military response
- Moderate:** contingency indirectly threatens the U.S. homeland and/or affects a country of strategic importance to the United States that is not a defense treaty ally
- Low:** contingency affects a country of limited strategic importance to the United States but could have severe/widespread humanitarian consequences

Likelihood

- High:** contingency is probable to highly likely to occur in 2025
- Moderate:** contingency has an even chance of occurring in 2025
- Low:** contingency is improbable to highly unlikely to occur in 2025



National Guard soldiers stand guard on the banks of the Rio Grande River at Shelby Park in Eagle Pass, Texas, on January 12, 2024. (Brandon Bell/Getty Images)



A Chinese Coast Guard ship is seen from a Filipino Coast Guard ship during a supply mission to Sabina Shoal in the South China Sea on August 26, 2024. (Jam Sta Rosa/AFP via Getty Images)



Fighters of the Sudan Liberation Movement insurgent group attend a graduation ceremony in Sudan's southeastern Gedaref state on March 28, 2024. (AFP via Getty Images)

2025 Findings

There are several notable takeaways from this year's survey:

- There have never been so many contingencies rated as high likelihood/high impact events (five) since the PPS began in 2008. Put differently, the level of anxiety that survey respondents feel about the risk of violent conflict over the coming twelve months has never been greater. Of the thirty contingencies surveyed, twenty-eight are judged to be either highly or moderately likely to occur in the next twelve months. Eighteen of those, moreover, would have a high or moderate impact on U.S. interests.
- A further deterioration of ongoing conflicts in the Middle East in 2025 represents the leading concern of survey respondents. This includes a continuation of the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza, an increase in clashes between Israeli security forces and Palestinians in the West Bank, an escalation of hostilities between Iran and Israel, and, finally, persistent fighting between Israel and Hezbollah militants and state collapse in Lebanon. Since the survey concluded in November, there have been signs that the level of violence could lessen in parts of the Middle East. Past experience, however, cautions against being overly optimistic.
- Second only to the Middle East as a source of Tier I concerns are those conflicts that stem from the aggressive behavior of Russia (toward Ukraine and in other parts of eastern Europe) and China (toward Taiwan and in the South China Sea). However, whereas Russia-related contingencies are



Anti-government protesters march toward former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's palace as army personnel stand guard in Dhaka, Bangladesh, on August 5, 2024. (Munir Uz Zaman/AFP via Getty Images)

considered highly likely to occur in 2025, those that are China-related are judged as moderately likely.

- The ranking of several contingencies included in last year's PPS has risen significantly. These include aggressive Chinese actions in the South China Sea (from Tier II to Tier I), crisis in Haiti (from Tier III to Tier I), and ongoing conflicts in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, and Sudan, as well as between India and Pakistan over Kashmir (all from Tier III to Tier II).
- Meanwhile, the risk associated with various kinds of North Korean provocations fell in the rankings (from Tier I to Tier II). Finally, whereas the likelihood of domestic terrorism and other acts of political violence in the United States remains a top-tier concern in 2025, it no longer occupies the predominant position it had in the 2024 survey.

Additional observations warrant mention:

- Six new contingencies were included in the 2025 Preventive Priorities Survey. Three of those—increased conflict over Israeli settlements and Palestinian political rights in the West Bank, intensification of the Israel-Hezbollah conflict and accelerating state collapse in Lebanon, and Russian provocations in east European countries—were judged to be highly likely and moderately or highly impactful. Other new contingencies included resurgent terrorist violence in Nigeria, the governance crisis in Bangladesh, and tension over Ethiopia's Red Sea access ambitions in the Horn of Africa.
- Six contingencies assessed in 2024 were not included in the 2025 Preventive Priorities Survey. Potential political instability in Egypt, Iran, and Russia was not included, reflecting a general consolidation of power by authoritarian governments in 2024. The border dispute between China and India was also removed following a bilateral agreement to reduce tensions. Similarly, the conflict over the disputed enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh was dropped to reflect the continuing cease-fire between Armenia and Azerbaijan since September 2023. South Sudan's internal conflict was moved to the list of "Other Noted Concerns" because crises in Bangladesh, Nigeria, and the Horn of Africa were deemed more likely to deepen in 2025 (see page 10).
- Five contingencies changed significantly from last year's Preventive Priorities Survey. The Israel-Hamas war contingency focuses solely on the humanitarian crisis in Gaza

rather than the risk of wider regional conflict. The risk posed by uncontrolled migration to the U.S. southern border was reoriented to include emerging U.S.-Mexico tensions. The Ukraine contingency now reflects the potential emergence of a cease-fire favorable to Moscow in 2025. The contingency regarding Yemen has been changed to reflect the threat of Houthi strikes on shipping in the Red Sea, and a previous contingency regarding Kosovo-Serbia tensions now includes the threat of conflict across the western Balkans region.

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 additional contingencies were proposed by several survey respondents:

- Violent competition among criminal organizations in **Ecuador**, deepening the public security crisis
- A leadership crisis in **Iran**, leading to political instability
- Renewed fighting between armed groups and inter-communal conflict in **South Sudan**, triggered by the postponement of national elections, deepen the humanitarian crisis and further destabilize the central government
- A power struggle between armed groups in **Syria**, compounded by foreign intervention and terrorist activity, undermines governance and exacerbates the refugee crisis
- Increased political repression and economic hardship in **Venezuela** lead to regime instability and a renewed refugee crisis
- A mass casualty terrorist attack on the **United States** or a treaty ally directed or inspired by a foreign terrorist organization

Tier I ■

Likelihood: High
Impact: High

- A** A continuation of the Israel-Hamas war, including further destruction of civilian infrastructure, deepens the humanitarian crisis in the **Gaza Strip**
- B** Increased conflict between Israeli security forces and Palestinians in the **West Bank** over Israeli settlement construction, Palestinian political rights, and the war in Gaza
- C** Major Russian military gains in **Ukraine**, including the widespread destruction of critical infrastructure, and decreasing foreign assistance to Kyiv lead to a cease-fire favorable to Moscow
- D** An escalation of the conflict between **Iran** and **Israel**, including attacks on energy and nuclear facilities, leads to wider instability across the Middle East and deeper U.S. involvement
- E** Deployment of U.S. security forces to the southern border triggers a humanitarian crisis among migrants in the border region and heightens tensions with **Mexico**

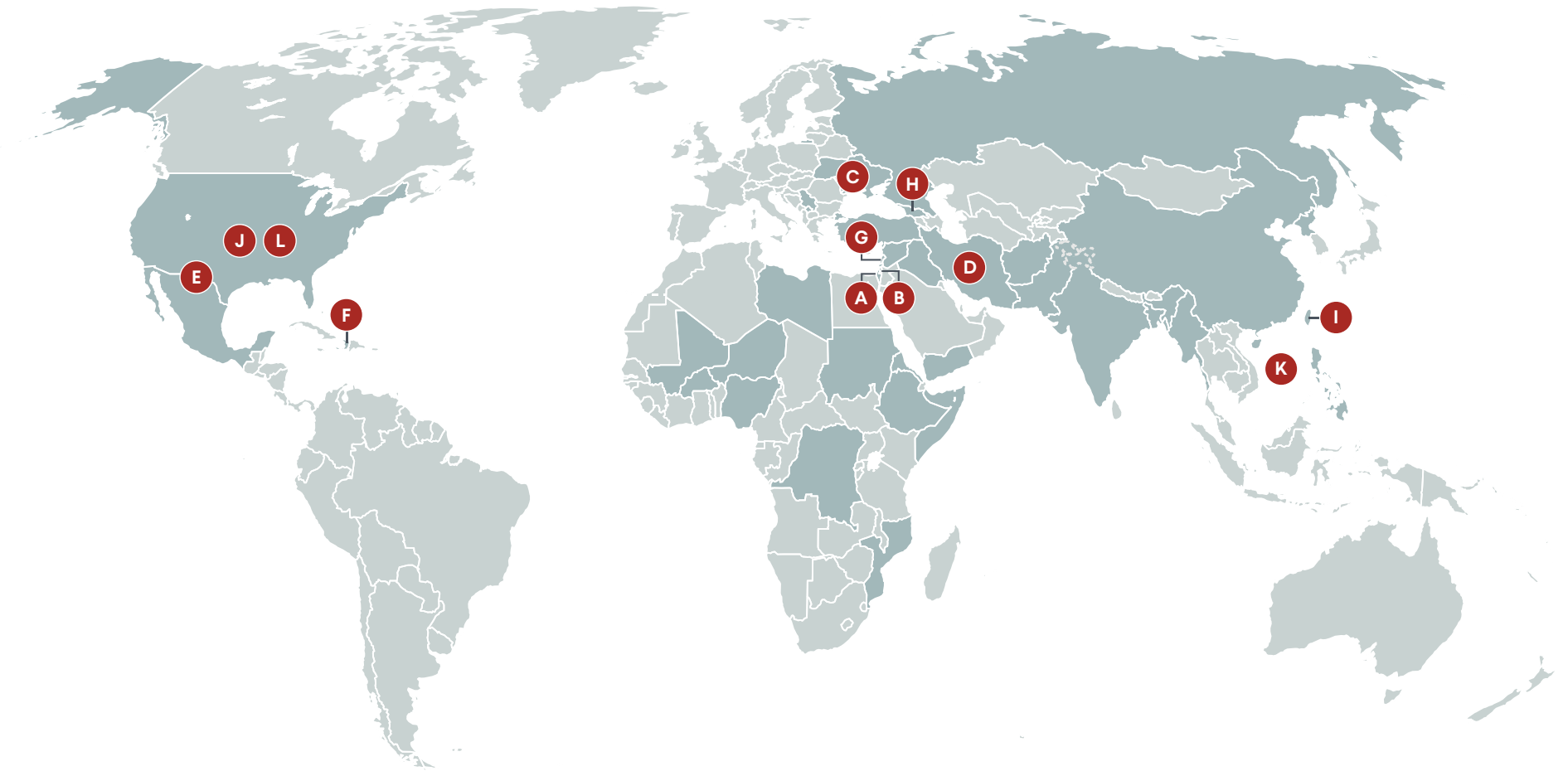
Likelihood: High
Impact: Moderate

- F** International stabilization efforts in **Haiti** fail to contain criminal violence, deepening the humanitarian crisis and accelerating state collapse
- G** Accelerated state collapse in **Lebanon** and continued fighting between Hezbollah and Israel worsen sectarian conflict and civilian displacement
- H** Increased Russian military provocations and influence operations in eastern Europe (especially **Georgia** and **Moldova**) foment popular unrest and regional political instability

Likelihood: Moderate
Impact: High

- I** Intensified military and economic pressure by **China** toward **Taiwan** precipitate a severe cross-strait crisis involving the United States and other countries in the region
- J** A highly disruptive cyberattack on **U.S. critical infrastructure** by a state or nonstate entity
- K** Aggressive Chinese actions in the **South China Sea**, especially toward the Philippines, lead to an armed confrontation involving China, the United States, and U.S. allies
- L** Heightened political antagonism in the **United States** resulting from the reelection of Donald Trump leads to acts of domestic terrorism and political violence

Tier I ■
(continued)



Tier II ■

Likelihood: High
Impact: Low

- A** Ongoing civil war and spreading ethnic violence in **Sudan** intensify the humanitarian crisis and regional political instability
- B** Ongoing conflict between government forces and al-Shabaab militants in **Somalia** leads to worsening humanitarian conditions
- C** Continued repressive actions by the Taliban, economic hardship, and clashes involving armed groups in **Afghanistan** lead to worsening humanitarian conditions and additional refugee outflows

Likelihood: Moderate
Impact: Moderate

- D** Increasing Houthi strikes against shipping in the **Red Sea** and **Gulf of Aden** trigger intensified military engagement by the United States, United Kingdom, and other foreign powers
- E** An increase in militant activity and popular unrest in **Pakistan**, leading to growing political instability and escalating clashes with the Taliban in **Afghanistan**
- F** Escalating violence between Turkish security forces and various armed Kurdish groups within **Turkey, Iraq, and Syria**
- G** Militant activity and repression in Indian-administered Kashmir provoke renewed tensions between **India** and **Pakistan** and a breakdown of cease-fire commitments

Likelihood: Low
Impact: High

- H** **North Korean** weapons tests and border provocations trigger an armed confrontation on the Korean Peninsula involving the United States and other regional powers



Tier III ■

Likelihood: Moderate

Impact: Low

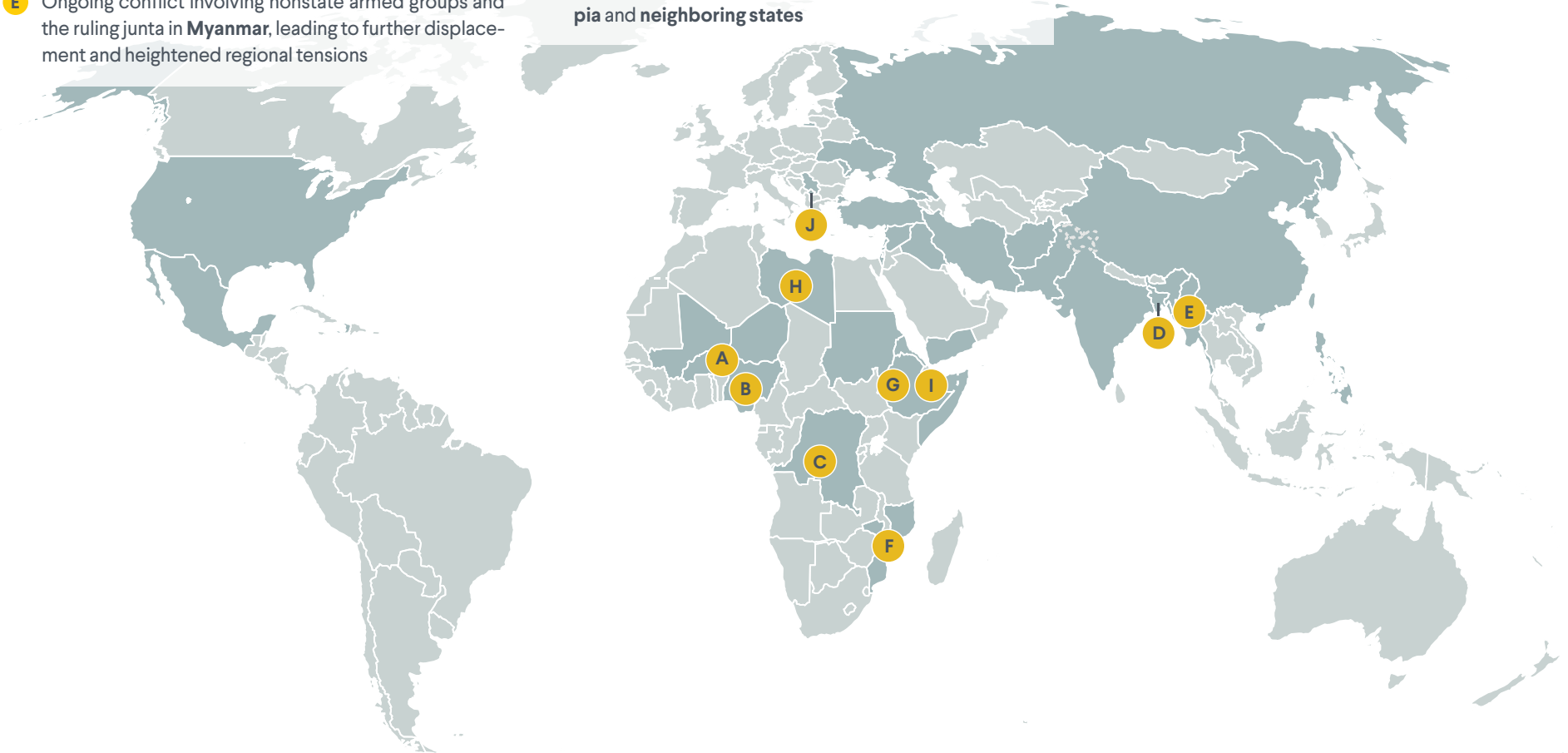
- A** Heightened violent conflict and weak governance in the **Sahel** (especially in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger) exacerbate regional instability and human insecurity
- B** Resurgent terrorist violence and state weakness in north-eastern **Nigeria** increase nationwide political instability
- C** Protracted ethnic and political conflict in the eastern **Democratic Republic of Congo** over territory and natural resources leads to worsening humanitarian conditions and regional tensions
- D** A deepening governance crisis in **Bangladesh** leads to growing civil disorder and political violence
- E** Ongoing conflict involving nonstate armed groups and the ruling junta in **Myanmar**, leading to further displacement and heightened regional tensions

- F** Resurgent conflict in Cabo Delgado province and increasing political violence across **Mozambique** lead to increased civilian casualties
- G** Widespread civil conflict in **Ethiopia** destabilizes the central government and leads to a worsening humanitarian crisis
- H** Worsening armed conflict within and between warring coalitions in **Libya** increases civilian casualties and displacement
- I** Political tension over Ethiopian efforts to obtain Red Sea access, compounded by regional resource competition, triggers an armed confrontation between **Ethiopia** and **neighboring states**

Likelihood: Low

Impact: Moderate

- J** An increase in ethnic and political violence in the **western Balkans** (especially between Kosovo and Serbia) triggers an armed confrontation, necessitating foreign intervention



Cover: *An Israeli tank drives past damaged buildings near the Gaza Strip border in southern Israel on January 19, 2024. (Jack Guez/AFP via Getty Images)*

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