



Global Intelligence Summary

REPORTING PERIOD: 29 DEC 2023 – 05 JAN 2024



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Week 1: 29 December 2023 – 5 January 2024

Executive Summary

- **Israel's** transition to a third military phase is **likely** indicative of a degradation of Hamas and is **likely** an indicator of a future war with Hezbollah.
- The **US** strike on paramilitary headquarters in Baghdad is **almost certain** to result in further attacks by **Iranian**-backed proxy groups in **Iraq** and will **almost certainly** lead to growing calls for the US to leave the country.
- The Islamic State terror attack in **Iran** will **highly likely** elicit a strong response from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, with operations expected in the next reporting period.
- Tensions between **Ethiopia** and **Somalia** are **likely** to remain strained in the coming weeks following the former's latest agreement with **Somaliland**, but military conflict is **unlikely** at this time.



Figure 1: Significant activity identified during the current reporting period.

AMER

- 1 US:** Increasing pressure on Trump and Biden as election year begins
- 2 Ecuador:** President Noboa proposes security referendum
- 3 Argentina:** Court freezes President Milei's labour and economic reforms

EMEA

- 4 Lebanon:** Hamas senior leadership killed in Beirut
- 5 Israel/Gaza:** IDF moves to third phase of war as Hezbollah threat increases
- 6 Iraq:** PMF's headquarters hit in drone strike
- 7 Iran:** Twin bomb attack kills nearly 100 in Kerman
- 8 Sudan:** RSF are open to an immediate ceasefire
- 9 Somalia:** Mogadishu rejects Ethiopia and Somaliland maritime-access pact

APAC

- 10 Hong Kong:** Jimmy Lai pleads not guilty in his trial
- 10 South Korea:** Opposition leader stabbed and hospitalised
- 12 Japan:** Earthquake leads to tsunami and runway collision



Americas (AMER)

United States:

Increasing pressure on nomination favourites as election year begins.

As the US enters a presidential year, political pressure continues to develop for both expected candidates as well as the Republican and the Democratic parties. Former president Donald Trump this last reporting period has appealed the decisions by lawmakers in Colorado and Maine that removed him from the respective state's Republican primary ballot. Trump's appeal in Colorado has gone to the US Supreme Court, while in Maine the decision has gone to a superior court within the state. President Joe Biden is facing increased internal pressure over his handling of the conflict in Gaza. On 3 January a senior US Education Department official stepped down, and on the same day 17 Biden re-election campaign staffers issued a warning in an anonymous letter that Biden could lose voters over the issue. Elsewhere, Democratic New Jersey Senator Bob Menendez faces fresh corruption allegations, with him being charged this week with receiving bribes from Qatar in order to facilitate business deals in the US, as well as to speak positively about the Qatari government.

Assessment: For Trump, there is a realistic possibility that his appeals are successful, however it is likely that this is not the ultimate tactic of pursuing this legal route. Trump is likely looking to delay the outcome of as many of the court rulings he faces as possible, in order to free himself to campaign, almost certainly hoping that this leads to his victory and allows him to pardon himself from all charges. Regardless of whether Trump makes the ballot in Maine or Colorado, he is still the firm favourite to secure the Republican nomination given his current polling, and it is also highly likely that his position has been strengthened as the decision to ban him from the ballot will almost certainly galvanise his support base. For Biden, the conflict in Gaza is becoming an increasingly troublesome issue, with this only the latest sign of dissent in the administration. Biden is under pressure domestically with several Democrats mooted that a new candidate is needed already. If support falls away significantly, and voters start moving away from him because of his Gaza position, there is a realistic possibility that the current US stance will change. For Senator Menendez, the latest charges follow on from last month when he was accused of acting as a foreign agent for Egypt whilst chairing the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Menendez will highly likely be under increasing pressure from senior Democrats to stand down, given the optics of a corrupt politician in an election year. He has so far dismissed these calls, but it is almost certain that the longer the situation continues, the bigger the negative impact on the Democrats and Biden. Holistically, both sides of the political divide are highly likely working to discredit and undermine one another. The investigations into Hunter Biden and the Democrats taking advantage of Republican divides in the House are just two other recent examples. As the presidential election campaigns get underway in the coming months, it is almost certain that this race for the White House will be the most politically volatile in living memory, and there is a realistic possibility in an upsurge of violence, protests, and legal campaigning.

Ecuador:

President Noboa proposes security referendum to tackle criminal organisations.

President Daniel Noboa announced on 3 January that he is seeking to hold a referendum on imposing tighter security measures in Ecuador. In a nationally televised message, Noboa said that the main objectives of the referendum would be to introduce the armed forces into the fight against crime, empower the justice system so those convicted of the most serious and organised crime serve longer sentences, and to legalise casinos and similar businesses to remove them from the hold of international criminal groups who run these operations. Draft referendum questions have been submitted to the Constitutional Court, who have 20 days to respond.

Assessment: Violence in Ecuador has grown exponentially in recent years, with the murder rate quadrupling from 2018 to 2022, with 2023 the most violent year yet with 7,500 homicides. Noboa took office in November in an election that was dominated by the country's growing insecurity, especially after the assassination of a leading presidential candidate. With only 18 months until the next election, it is highly likely that internal security will be Noboa's primary domestic focus in the intervening period, as it would provide him greatest chance of re-election as well as improving the economy. It is highly unlikely that the Constitutional Court has any grounds to reject the referendum and with Noboa's strong stance on crime arguably the factor that won him the 2023 election, it is therefore likely that several, if not all, of the 11 questions he proposes to the public will pass. Immediate success is unlikely but if the referendums do pass, it is a realistic possibility that there is a marked improvement in Ecuador's internal security in the next 18 months.

Argentina:

Court freezes President Milei's "mega-decree" of labour and economic reforms.

Argentina's Labour Appeals Chamber has frozen newly elected President Javier Milei's so-called "mega-decree" of Labour reforms until the measures can be considered by Congress. The decree, which Milei signed on 20 December just days after taking office, eliminated, or pared back, over 300 rules and regulations across the economy including several labour rights and practices. The Appeals Chamber in its ruling questioned the necessity and urgency of some of the contents of the decree and stated others appeared repressive. It also questioned whether they should have been passed by an emergency presidential decree. The decree had been challenged by the country's CGT trade union which also argued to the court that the decree eroded basic worker protections. In the days following the decree being unveiled, thousands took to the streets to protest. In tandem with this, the CGT has also announced a general strike on 24 January to protest the decree and Milei's other reforms.

Assessment: When the decree was first announced, Milei stated its contents were the first steps to rebuilding Argentina's crippled economy, however, the backlash from the country's unions was immediate. They saw it as an attempt to roll back workers' protections and privatise state-owned assets with little actual attempts to fix the country's underlying economic issues. Whilst it is almost certain that the Milei government will seek to challenge the country's status quo, any such challenge may be founded on the fact that the judges did not necessarily freeze the decree due to its contents, but rather due to the method used by Milei. Rather than attempt to pass his decree through Congress, which Milei does not have a majority in, he used presidential emergency powers to pass it. As such, the court has suspended the decree because much of it shouldn't be passed under emergency powers, and instead, it is up to Congress to pass these measures. Given the radical nature of Milei's proposals, which effectively involve undoing much of the last 50 years of Argentinian economic policy, it is unsurprising that the unions have called a strike for 24 January, and also wished to challenge this decree. Indeed, this is likely to be the first of many such instances of industrial action which will mar Milei's time in office. Moreover, given that Milei lacks a majority in the country's Congress, it is also highly likely that Milei will face major political difficulties. Milei's argument has long been that under him short-term pain will in time be replaced by a functioning economy which works for everyone. Given the scale of protests against the decree which have already occurred, and the strikes scheduled for later this month, it would seem many Argentines remain unconvinced.

AMER Forecast. On 4 January, the first day back after the Christmas break, the US experienced its first school shooting of the year. It took place in an Iowan high school and left one dead and five injured. It is almost certain the US will see a cycle of political and civil anger followed by a push for gun reform which is stymied due to the pro-gun lobby and right-wing politicians. It is almost certain that the US will see further mass shootings both in schools and more widely throughout 2024. Indeed, as of 5 January, there have been five mass shootings already and in 2023, the country averaged 1.7 mass shootings every day.

In reaction to the British Royal Navy deploying a warship in support of Guyana, Venezuela has announced that it will conduct military exercises on their shared border, in proximity to the territory which Caracas claims. These will be “defensive” exercises and will see around 5,600 take part. This development follows last month's referendum and indicates ongoing tensions despite attempts to downplay the situation publicly. Additionally, Brazil is reinforcing its border by deploying military assets to the north of the country. In El Salvador, it has been reported that homicides dropped by over 70 percent during 2023, and this drop is almost certainly due to the state of emergency which was brought in by President Nayib Bukele. Many of these measures have led to accusations of authoritarianism, but they have succeeded in bringing stability back to the country. The news of this drop will only enhance his popularity ahead of the country's upcoming elections. Police in Argentina meanwhile have apprehended three individuals from Lebanon and Syria suspected of plotting a "terrorist act" in the country. Argentina in 1994 saw a terror attack against the AMIA building, a Jewish Community centre, and this attack killed 85 and left more than 300 injured. It remains the country's deadliest terror attack to date and Hezbollah and Iran were both implicated. This history, plus Argentina's large Jewish community, means Buenos Aires is acutely sensitive to potential repercussions of the Hamas-Israel conflict.

The north-eastern United States should expect to see its largest snowstorm of the current winter period arriving on the evening of 5 January. It is expected to transit across Colorado and New Mexico, gaining intensity before bringing snow and freezing rain to major East Coast settlements such as New York, Boston, and Philadelphia.





Europe, Middle East & Africa (EMEA)

Lebanon:

Senior Hamas leadership killed in Beirut.

On 2 January, Hamas' deputy political leader and founder of the group's military wing, Saleh Arouri, was killed in a suspected Israeli drone strike on an apartment building in a densely populated suburb in southern Beirut. Hamas confirmed the death of Arouri along with six other Hamas members, including two senior military commanders of the al-Qassam Brigades. Lebanese Hezbollah have stated that the drone strike was an attack on Lebanon itself and its people, a claim Israel rejects. Hezbollah General Secretary, Hasan Nasrallah, delivered a speech shortly after the attack and threatened Israel with a "fight with no limits" should war break out but did not indicate that Hezbollah will be opening a front on Israel's northern border in response.

Assessment: The drone strike was Israel's first attack within Lebanon since the 2006 war and the assassination of senior Hamas leadership indicates that Israel may be willing to hunt down the organisers of the 7 October attack wherever they may be. As a senior Hamas political and military leader responsible for multiple attacks within both Israel and the occupied West Bank, it is almost certain that Arouri has been within Israel's sights for years. Most importantly, Arouri had been pulling Hamas closer into Hezbollah's and, by proxy, Iran's orbit, despite clear ideological and religious differences. An established Hamas footprint within Lebanon would make it almost impossible for Israel to effectively degrade the organisation and likely enables Hamas to procure more sophisticated weaponry for attacks on Israel. The attack has almost certainly increased the prospects of a war between Israel and Hezbollah and is likely the reason for a recent withdrawal of thousands of Israel Defence Forces (IDF) troops from Gaza. There is a realistic possibility that Israel has been seeking an opportunity like this to draw Hezbollah into the war. Hezbollah has amassed an estimated 150,000 rockets and Nasrallah claims to have 100,000 soldiers at his disposal. The current situation could provide Israel with a convenient opportunity to go to war with Hezbollah and degrade its military capabilities enough to significantly diminish its threat in the region, potentially setting the Iranian proxy group years. Such a prospect may not be welcomed by Iran, who likely wants to sustain a well-equipped Hezbollah on Israel's northern border in case Iran itself is attacked. However, the chance of miscalculation or escalation is currently higher than it ever has been since 2006 and the chances of a second front are becoming increasingly more likely. In such a scenario, a war between Israel and Hezbollah is likely to set off a series of escalation throughout the region, and potentially globally, with the recent arrest of suspected Hezbollah operators outside the Israeli Embassy in Argentina evidence of this.

Israel and the Gaza Strip:

IDF to transition to third phase as prospect of Hezbollah war increases.

During the last reporting period, the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) have continued clearance operations in northern Gaza and have degraded the command-and-control capabilities of Hamas' Khan Younis Brigades in the southern parts of the enclave. Hamas militants are conducting attacks in the IDF's rear areas across Gaza and have been complemented by Palestinian militias in much of the territory. The Israeli Defence Minister, Yoav Gallant, has announced that the IDF are now reorganising and will transition to the third phase of their military operations in Gaza. The third phase will be characterised by an end of major combat operations, a "reduction in forces" in the strip, the release of reservists, a "transition to targeted raids," and the establishment of a security buffer zone within the Gaza Strip. The third phase will also entail the creation of a new security regime in the Gaza Strip as well as the removal of Israel's responsibility for day-to-day

life in the territory and a new security reality for the people of Israel. Gallant has also stated that there will be no Israeli civilian presence in Gaza as part of the third phase. The Palestine Red Crescent and UNICEF have both continued to warn about the degrading humanitarian situation in Gaza, alluding to the repeat targeting of hospitals by the IDF and of severe acute malnutrition which is presenting the risk of famine. On 2 January, a Royal Navy auxiliary vessel delivered 87 tonnes of aid to Egypt for use in Gaza which was previously screened in Cyprus. Reports also indicate that Israel is considering opening the Erez crossing which connects Gaza to southern Israel for the facilitation of humanitarian aid.

In the West Bank, multiple daily clashes continue between the IDF and Palestinian fighters and it is estimated that over 300 people have been killed in the territory since the start of hostilities. The majority of fighting is taking place within or near sensitive areas like the Palestinian refugee camps in Tulkarm, Jenin and Nablus. There have also been widespread demonstrations after the assassination of the deputy Hamas political leader. In the north of Israel, Hezbollah continue their cross-border strikes and targeting of Israeli surveillance equipment on the border. The Israeli military chief of staff, Herzi Halevi, toured the northern border and President Benjamin Netanyahu has stated that Israel seeks a fundamental change on the Lebanon border.

Assessment: The IDF's decision to transition to a third a final stage is likely because the IDF have degraded Hamas military capabilities, tunnel networks and defensive positions sufficiently enough to warrant a gradual withdrawal of IDF forces from Gaza. However, the decision to decrease the intensity of military operations within Gaza has also likely been influenced by the growing threat posed by Hezbollah along Israel's northern border, especially after the IDF's suspected drone strike against Hamas senior leadership in Beirut. The tour of the border by the Israeli military chief of staff and the comments made by Netanyahu are likely indicative of the IDF producing defensive and offensive plans for a war with Hezbollah with the chances of conflict higher than they have been since the 2006 war. It is also likely that Israel wishes to strike first, degrade Hezbollah's military capabilities, and set the Iranian proxy back a generation. Gallant's comments that Gaza will have no future Israeli civilian presence but failure to comment on the future of the IDF likely suggests that there will be a sustained Israeli military presence in Gaza for many months, potentially years. Such a scenario is likely to sustain high tensions across the region, isolate Israel, and result in systemic violence in the West Bank. The humanitarian situation is likely to improve with the potential opening of the Erez crossing and use of Cyprus as a vetted hub for Western aid. However, improvements will be limited given the extent of the damage in Gaza, the levels of internal displacement, loss in public services and the slow process involved in inspecting and approving any humanitarian aid.

Iraq:

Iranian proxy force leader killed by US drone strike.

At around noon on 4 January, a US drone strike impacted a logistical facility in Baghdad, located in close proximity to Iraq's Ministry of the Interior. The logistical facility was the under the control of Harakat al-Nujaba, an Iraqi Shite paramilitary group aligned with the Islamic Resistance of Iraq (IRI). The attack resulted in three fatalities, including Abu Taqwa al-Saeedi, the alleged leader of Harakat al-Nujaba. Taqwa al-Saeedi also served as an assistant commander of the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF); an Iraqi state-sponsored group of militias tasked with combating the influence of the Islamic State (IS) within Iraq. In response to the strike, Iraq's Prime Minister Muhammad Shiaa Al-Sudani announced plans to set in motion a complete withdrawal of the US-led coalition forces from Iraq.

Assessment: The killing of a high-ranking PMF official by US forces is likely to see an escalatory response from the Iranian-backed IRI. The Iranian proxy groups have been responsible for around 100 air strikes against US military bases in both Iraq and Syria in response to the US support of Israel in Gaza. Harakat al-Nujaba has been viewed as dominant force in pushing for such strikes and is generally viewed as having direct ties with the general command of Iran's Islamic

Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The growing willingness by both the US and IRI to carry out strikes so openly suggests similar attacks are highly probable in the coming weeks. The proposals to end the US presence in Iraq by Sudani would certainly reduce tensions between the US and Iran and its network of proxy groups. Moreover, the original mandate for the US presence in Iraq, the rise of IS, has been brought into question in recent years by the rapid decline of IS' power and influence in both Iraq and Syria. With the group now only capable of conducting a low-level insurgency, it is highly likely that many feel a sustained Western military presence in Iraq is counterproductive.

Iran:

Nearly 100 killed in twin bombing attack at commemoration ceremony in Kerman.

On 3 January, up to 95 people were killed and at least a further 200 people were injured following twin bomb blasts at the fourth anniversary ceremony of the killing of General Qassam Soleimani, the head of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC) elite Quds Force. The first explosion occurred in the Kerman Martyrs Cemetery, near Soleimani's grave, and the second occurred 20 minutes later as emergency service workers were responding. The following day the Islamic State (IS) claimed responsibility for the attack, with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi condemning the "heinous and inhumane crime," and Iran's top authority, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, vowing revenge.

Assessment: The twin bombing in Kerman is the biggest attack within Iran's borders since the 1979 revolution and will therefore almost certainly elicit and demand an emotional and thorough response. It is highly likely that security nationwide will be significantly increased in the coming weeks, especially in places most likely to be targeted by terrorists, such as religious landmarks and transportation hubs. In the immediate aftermath, senior IRGC officials blamed Israel and the US, however this is standard practice, often done without evidence and Iranian officials very quickly changed their rhetoric to blame terrorists. With tensions between Tehran, Washington and Tel Aviv already at a high given Israel's war on Iran-backed Hamas, it is almost certain that every effort was made in the immediate aftermath to prove this was a non-state actor. The veracity of the IS claims to the attack are highly likely accurate, given the sophistication of the attack, IS' history of attacks in Iran, and the groups virulent hatred for Shiites, Iran's dominant sect. More specifically, it is likely the attack was mounted by Afghanistan's IS group known as IS-Khorasan Province (ISKP). While the group has been largely weakened domestically, following a crackdown by the Taliban, the group has continued plotting operations outside the country, both in neighbouring countries and in the West, with several plots foiled in recent years., In the coming weeks, it is highly likely that the IRGC, and primarily the Quds Force, will conduct several security operations against all known terrorist entities, not just IS-linked elements and their operations could provoke further terror attacks within Iran.

Sudan:

Rapid Support Forces declare they are open to an immediate, and unconditional ceasefire.

Sudan's paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) announced on 2 January that it is willing to engage in an immediate, unconditional ceasefire through talks with the Sudanese army. The RSF signed the Addis Ababa Declaration alongside the Taqadam civilian coalition and invited the army to do the same. The declaration aims to lay the groundwork for further negotiations and a political settlement. RSF leader Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo expressed readiness to sign a similar document from the army and highlighted commitments in the declaration, such as the return of millions of displaced people, creating safe passages, and involving civilians in peace talks.

Assessment: The RSF's signing of the Addis Ababa Declaration represents a notable commitment to ending the nine-month war in Sudan which has displaced over five million people and led to an estimated 9,000 deaths, although real figures are almost certainly much higher given the difficulties in calculating accurate figures in a war-torn country with very limited external

observation. However, there will almost certainly be scepticism regarding the RSF's genuine commitment to any ceasefire, given the group's alleged crimes against humanity and likely attempts of genocide. Even though Dagalo has publicly apologised for violations and promised accountability, reports of occupied homes, looting, mistreatment and extra-judicial killings continue, combined with sustained military activity conducted by the RSF. Moreover, the RSF is a loose amalgamation of militias and there will be questions over to how much control Dagalo asserts over these groups and to what extent the RSF leadership can control their paramilitary forces. Should a ceasefire be agreed upon, isolated incidents of fighting are likely, and the enduring threat will invariably deter displaced people from returning home. Furthermore, the RSF are still likely reticent to agree to the Sudanese military's original demand, which is also the root cause of the conflict, that the RSF are integrated into the official military structure of Sudan. It is improbable that Khartoum has relinquished this demand, further complicating the ongoing negotiations and potential resolution of the conflict.

Somalia:

Ethiopia granted access to Somaliland port after signing Memorandum of Understanding.

Somaliland and Ethiopia have signed a maritime-access agreement allowing the latter to use the Port of Berbera in return for Ethiopia agreeing to be the first country to recognise Somaliland as an independent nation in due course. The deal would give Ethiopia its much-desired access to the Gulf of Aden, and subsequently the Red Sea, and Somaliland would also receive an unspecified stake in state-owned Ethiopian Airlines. Almost immediately after the announcement, Somalia rejected the pact with President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud declaring "no one has the power give away a piece of Somalia" following an emergency cabinet meeting. In the following days Somalia also recalled its ambassador to Ethiopia, while the government in Mogadishu received support from Egypt, Qatar and the EU.

Assessment: Ethiopia have not had access to the Red Sea since being cut off in 1993, when Eritrea seceded and declared independence. This has forced Ethiopia to move its maritime trade through Djibouti, which has almost certainly had a detrimental effect on their economy. Since ascending to power Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has made it a stated goal to re-secure access to the Red Sea, highly likely for both military and commercial means. Ahmed had been exploring several avenues to secure this and has not ruled out using military force. Somaliland declared autonomy from Somalia in 1991, however, Mogadishu still claims the region, and is strengthened in this position by the fact no country has recognised Somaliland as an independent nation in the intervening 33 years. It had recently been reported that following mediation efforts led by Djibouti, Somalia and Somaliland had agreed to resume talks aimed at resolving their disputes. However, this process has highly likely collapsed in the wake of the new agreement, with tensions almost certainly heightened. Protests have already occurred in Mogadishu and more should be expected, as well as in Somaliland if the pact is rejected. If the agreement does proceed, Somalia's claim over Somaliland makes it a realistic possibility that they will attempt to blockade the port, or the transit routes from Berbera to Ethiopia. This would inevitably involve military assets, significantly increasing the chances of a fresh conflict on the Horn of Africa. In the short-term, diplomatic relations between Mogadishu and Addis Ababa have almost certainly been strained, but it is highly unlikely short-term military action will occur without significant escalatory steps.

EMEA Forecast. On 2 January Saudi Arabia formally became a member of the BRICS bloc of countries. This development occurs against the backdrop of geopolitical tensions between the US and China, and China's growing influence in the kingdom. Despite maintaining strong ties with the US, Saudi Arabia has shown a growing inclination to pursue an independent path, driven by concerns that Washington may be less committed to the security of the Gulf region compared to the past. Iran has also joined the BRICS, which could help legitimise the regime, improve relations with Saudi Arabia and its other Sunni rivals, and will likely be of huge economic benefit to Tehran. Elsewhere in the Middle East, the US has reached a deal to extend its military presence at the Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar for another 10 years. This base, located in the desert southwest

of Doha, hosts the largest US military facility in the region and strengthens Qatar's position status as a major non-NATO US ally, a designation given to only a few. Additionally, Doha continues to play a mediation role for the US and remains a host to offices for both the Taliban and Hamas.

In Sierra Leone, authorities have filed treason charges against 12 individuals, including former President Ernest Bai Koroma, in relation to the foiled coup attempt in November. The government had previously asserted that the failed coup was primarily orchestrated by Koroma's bodyguards, with Koroma briefly under suspicion. The likelihood of civil unrest is now low, and the immediate threat from this coup attempt appears to have subsided. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), President Felix Tshisekedi has secured re-election for a second term, receiving over 73 percent of the vote, according to the country's election commission, CENI. The declaration of the results comes after days of opposition complaints regarding the election's conduct, citing logistical challenges, an overrun on election day, and a lack of transparency in the vote count. Given the disputed nature of the election it is highly likely that political unrest and possible violence will persist in the aftermath of the election. In Senegal, the country's Supreme Court has announced that they will be upholding a six-month suspended prison sentence for the opposition leader Ousmane Sonko. Sonko, who is popular with the country's youth, has long faced legal battles as he seeks to run in the country's upcoming elections. This latest news makes it realistically possible that a resurgence of the violent unrest seen around the time of Sonko's arrest in April 2023 will occur. On 8 January, parliamentarians in the Puntland region of Somalia are set to choose a new leader following proposed changes to the state's electoral system, which have already incited violent street clashes between rival troops. Given the high level of tensions preceding the vote, the potential for further violence remains significant, especially if allegations of electoral irregularities surface, potentially escalating hostilities between the rival military factions. In Mali, the UN peacekeeping mission, MINUSMA, will fully withdraw from the country on 7 January. This will likely stoke fears of a resurgence in militancy. Rebel groups and the national army are likely to vie for control over the areas vacated by the UN, exacerbating the overall destabilisation of Mali, a situation that will likely be exploited by violent extremist organisations linked to Al Qaeda and the Islamic State. Whilst the UN is leaving Mali, it has been announced that the US is exploring opportunities to base reconnaissance drones in West Africa, with options being considered in the Ivory Coast, Benin and Ghana. This is almost certainly in response to the growing threat of extremism in the Sahel, where Western forces have largely been forced to withdraw from and have lost most of their capabilities to monitor the situation, as a result of the recent spate of coups in the region.

Major companies in Western Europe have issued warnings of potential shortages due to recent attacks by Houthi rebels on vessels in one of the world's busiest shipping lanes in the Red Sea. These incidents have compelled firms to steer clear of the affected area, opting for longer routes and raising concerns about disruptions to the supply chain. The Danish shipping giant, Maersk, has stated that it will avoid the Red Sea for the foreseeable future and other major shipping companies will almost certainly follow suit given the now indiscriminate threat posed to merchant shipping. In Germany, an Islamist plot to attack Germany's famed Cologne Cathedral on New Year's Eve was foiled and resulted in an increased security posture across much of the country. Further incidents of extremism cannot be discounted as Germany continues its support for Israel. The foiling of this plot also further demonstrates that Germany has a wide-ranging extremist problem, as recent plots have been uncovered involving Islamists, the far-left, and the far-right. Meanwhile, in Turkey, it has been announced that 34 individuals have been detained accused of being involved in spying and planning abductions on behalf of Israel's Mossad intelligence agency. This development is likely to further strain relations between the two nations, which had shown some signs of improvement before 7 October. Further crackdowns are likely to be witnessed as the operations are highly likely to prove popular with Erdogan's base.

Severe snowfall and arctic conditions are impacting all the constituent countries of Scandinavia. These harsh weather conditions are expected to persist into the coming days causing substantial disruptions to travel and possibly communications in the coming days. In the UK, Storm Henk has

brought considerable rain to much of the southern and central portions of the country. Henk has come not long after the country has seen the passing of three other winter storms, and as such this precipitation fell on already waterlogged ground. Subsequently, multiple areas have witnessed major flood events, and rivers have overflowed their banks. Whilst water levels are expected to recede in the coming days, travel disruptions are likely to persist as repair and clean-up work is undertaken. Zambia has seen a recent rise in cholera cases as the October 2023 outbreak continues to impact the country. On 4 January, 14 cholera-attributed deaths were recorded by authorities, marking the highest number of fatalities since the initial outbreak. The epidemic is expected to grow and with it bring further disruptions nationwide over the coming months.





Asia Pacific (APAC)

Hong Kong:

Jimmy Lai pleads not guilty in his trial.

On 2 January, the prominent Hong Kong businessman, activist and former media tycoon, Jimmy Lai pleaded not guilty to sedition, colluding with foreign entities, publishing seditious material, and committing “hostile actions against China” at the city’s West Kowloon Magistrates Court. Lai, who is a British citizen, founded the now-closed Apple Daily Newspaper and was a supporter of Hong Kong maintaining its autonomy. He supported the country’s pro-democracy protests and activists during the Umbrella Movement of 2014, as well as the major protests of 2019 and 2020. Lai is one of the most high-profile people who have been arrested under Beijing’s controversial National Security Law. If found guilty, Lai faces life imprisonment.

Assessment: When he was arrested, Beijing stated that Lai was the mastermind behind the unrest Hong Kong witnessed in 2019 and 2020, and that he was also a puppet of London and its “colonial mindset.” The trial has also named several other high-profile foreign nationals as alleged co-conspirators. This includes the international investor Bill Browder and the director of the UK’s Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China, Luke de Pulford. The trial will be closely monitored by foreign governments and international firms with a presence in Hong Kong. This is because many are seeing the trial as a litmus test for how much, if any, judicial independence from Beijing the Hong Kong Courts still retain. If Lai is convicted, which is the most probable scenario, it is likely to significantly diminish Hong Kong’s status as an international business hub. The city’s reputation relies on having an impartial and non-political judiciary, coupled with clear rule-of-law standards, which are crucial for attracting and sustaining international business activities. There is also a realistic possibility that if Lai is found guilty, the UK and perhaps other allies will seek to retaliate against key Hong Kong officials with sanctions, or they may review the nature and scope of any extradition treaties that are currently in place with Hong Kong and China.

South Korea:

Opposition leader stabbed and in hospital.

On 3 January, opposition leader Lee Jae Myung was stabbed in the neck by an assailant whilst he was visiting the port city of Busan in the country’s southeast. Lee was walking in Busan when he was stabbed on the left-hand side of his neck. He was stabilised at the scene and transferred to the hospital where he underwent an operation to repair major blood vessels, and at the time of writing is still recovering. The assailant was subsequently arrested and refused to answer questions about motive, but stated he aimed to kill Lee. Police have since raided the perpetrator’s home and office; however, they have not revealed any further details.

Assessment: South Korea has a long history of politicians suffering from violent attacks, despite its strong restrictions on gun and weapons ownership. Lee’s immediate Democratic Party predecessor was attacked in 2022 with a blunt object, whilst Park Geun Hye, who was president between 2013 and 2017, was stabbed in 2006. This latest attack has only strengthened the calls for South Korean politicians to have an increased security detail whilst out and about. It has also raised fears of the country’s increasing political polarisation as the attack has come in the run-up to the country’s April parliamentary elections. South Korea has witnessed deepening polarisation in recent years, which in turn has driven extremism in the country. Some of the polarisation has been driven by the country’s notoriously cut-throat economy and increasing inequality. Other aspects have been driven by the political rivalry between Lee, and President Yoon Suk Yeol of the Conservative People Power Party. Since Lee narrowly lost the 2022 election to Yoon, state

prosecutors have launched a series of investigations against Lee and tried to arrest him on various corruption and criminal charges. Lee has stated he is innocent and being persecuted. Death threats, hate and violence are now seen as routine within South Korean politics. Given the looming prospect of the April elections, it is almost certain that the situation will not improve in the short-term, and there is a realistic probability that between now and the elections other politicians may face similar attacks.

Japan:

Magnitude 7.6 earthquake near Noto Peninsula leads to tsunami and runway collision.

At around 16:00 (local time) on 1 January, a 7.6 magnitude earthquake struck along Japan's western coast, near the Noto Peninsula in Ishikawa prefecture. Within minutes Japan's Meteorological Agency (JMA) issued a major tsunami warning, albeit later tapering this down to an advisory, and almost 100,000 people were evacuated along Japan's nine west coast prefectures. Waves of about one metre were later recorded along Japan and South Korea's coastline. As of 5 January, at least 92 people have been killed as a result of the earthquake. With search and rescue operations beginning apace in the aftermath of the quake, on 2 January, a Coast Guard aircraft intending to take off and deliver aid to the region crashed into a Japan Airlines (JAL) flight that was landing at Tokyo International Airport (HND), and both aircraft immediately burst into flames. Despite dramatic pictures across social media, all 367 passengers and 12 crew members were evacuated from the JAL plane with only 14 people injured, however, five of the six crew aboard the Coast Guard aircraft were killed.

Assessment: With 242 people still missing in Ishikawa prefecture and survivors facing freezing temperatures and prospects of heavy rain, it is almost certain that the death toll from the earthquake will rise, and it is likely that the number of fatalities will surpass 200. The earthquake has also placed Japan's nuclear energy sector back in the spotlight, with the government having last week lifted an operational ban on the world's biggest nuclear plant, Kashiwazaki-Kariwa, which has been offline since the 2011 tsunami. Whilst no irregularities were reported by the Nuclear Regulation Authority, the threat of another nuclear disaster as a result of Japan's significant seismic activity will highly likely see the debate re-ignited, with protests a realistic possibility. The plane crash at HND is also a result of the earthquake. HND is the world third busiest airport, and the amount of traffic increased in response to the earthquake with the Coast Guard plane about to make its third emergency trip within 24 hours to the earthquake zone when it collided with a passenger jet. It is almost certain that parallel air crash investigations by police and civil safety authorities will take place and are just as likely create tensions; police-led inquiries are designed to apportion blame while civil safety research relies on open discussion to help improve safety. There is a realistic possibility therefore that the different investigations gather different evidence. Given the transcripts that are currently available however, it is likely that the pilot of the Coast Guard aircraft, the sole survivor, and Air Traffic Control will be deemed to be at fault. It is also almost certain that the incident will be studied thoroughly by investigators globally, and highly likely justifies the change to carbon-composite airplanes by Airbus in 2015, with the compounds less susceptible to fatigue and more resistant to extremities. It is highly likely that other manufacturers now also move to the new high-tech composite airliners.

APAC Forecast. Bangladesh will hold a contentious general election on 7 January. Whilst the army has been deployed to try and keep the peace, electoral violence will likely break out, with such incidents likely be concentrated in major population centres. The opposition are boycotting the vote due to thousands of political prisoners being jailed in recent months. It is almost certain that the incumbent, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, will return to power. Taiwan will enter the final days before its elections on 13 January. As such, expect increased rhetoric from Beijing, Washington, and Taipei and for demonstrations of military strength from China. This reporting period alone has seen spy balloons and comments from senior Chinese officials about Taiwanese people making the "right choice" and "peaceful reunification." Meanwhile, officials in Taiwan are readying a report that shows Chinese meddling in their elections.

In Pakistan, the government has voted to further delay its elections which were due to be held in the final quarter of 2023 to beyond 8 February 2024. This follows news that the country's election body has rejected former Prime Minister Imran Khan's nomination to contest the 2024 national elections. The further delay to the election, plus the rejection of Khan's nomination, is only likely to further drive electoral violence and political polarisation between now and the election when it does occur. Alongside this, on 11 January, Pakistan and the IMF executive board plans to discuss, and most likely approve, the second instalment of Pakistan's USD 3 billion deal with the organisation, as the country continues to recover from its calamitous economic collapse and implement necessary economic reforms. As such, the country looks increasingly likely to avoid default in 2024.

Myanmar has announced its annual prisoner amnesty will again take place, marking the nation's, Independence Day; over 9,000 prisoners will be released. This comes as the country's ruling military junta has an increasingly precarious grip on power. Of those to be released, around 114 are believed to be foreign citizens, whilst others being released are said to include political prisoners and rebel fighters. If so, it is almost certain that they will simply return to their anti-junta activities, potentially providing a manpower boost to anti-government forces.

Pyongyang has announced that it intends to launch three more satellites, produce more nuclear material, and debut attack drones in 2024. The pace of such endeavours will likely increase as the US Presidential election draws closer. It is also likely that North Korea will seek to stage a demonstration of its capabilities in the coming weeks as South Korea prepares for parliamentary elections. Whilst Pyongyang may be capable of fulfilling these pledges, there is also a possibility it is simply using its rhetoric in the hope that if Donald Trump is re-elected to the White House, it can use these pledges as potential bargaining chips for sanctions relief.

In China, expect residual disruption to transport and travel after major cities saw extremely dense fog and poor visibility on 4 January. These conditions led to highways being closed and delayed flights and high-speed trains connecting major cities. Whilst meteorologists issued warnings that the poor conditions were improving, disruption will likely persist until 6 January.