

MONTHLY SECURITY FORECAST

FEBRUARY 2024

HEADLINES THIS MONTH

Africa

- 3 **Ethiopia-Somalia:** Tensions high over Somaliland
- 7 **Senegal:** Heightened risk of unrest to persist in presidential election campaign period
- 10 **On Watch** – Ethiopia, Kenya, Zimbabwe

Americas

- 11 **Ecuador:** Security environment to remain volatile amid escalation of gang violence, state of emergency
- 14 **El Salvador:** Incumbent president projected to comfortably win election for another term
- 17 **Mexico-US:** Security, logistical environment to remain affected by border-related issues
- 21 **On Watch** – Guatemala, Haiti, Mexico, Regional

Asia-Pacific

- 22 **India:** Expect widespread business, transport disruption due to farmers' protests
- 25 **Papua New Guinea:** Heightened tensions to persist following unrest
- 28 **Regional:** Expect heightened security measures, disruption around Lunar New Year holiday
- 31 **On Watch** – India, Indonesia, South Korea

Europe and CIS

- 32 **Germany:** Industrial action, protests to impact operating environment
- 35 **Russia-Ukraine:** Fighting remains attritional as second anniversary of conflict approaches
- 38 **On Watch** – Azerbaijan, France, Finland

Middle East and North Africa

- 39 **Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia:** Security environment complicated by series of protest anniversaries
- 42 **Iraq:** Attacks on US bases by pro-Iranian armed groups to continue over coming month
- 46 **Yemen:** Houthi attacks on shipping to continue despite UK, US strikes
- 49 **On Watch** – Lebanon, Sudan, Syria



MONTHLY SECURITY FORECAST

February 2024



The *Monthly Security Forecast* gives managers insight into our assessment of significant events and any likely changes to the risk outlook in the coming month, globally.

It covers key indicators or drivers of deterioration being tracked by our regionally based security specialists and provides recommendations on how you can prepare, factoring in any planning constraints we have identified.

Our *Monthly Security Forecast*, like our *Insight Reports*, is part of our broader Premium Workforce Resilience offer. It complements our *Regional Security Forecasts*, available weekly to all subscribers.

Legend	
Indicator & definition	Action required
Low likelihood of substantive change in reporting period (30 days unless specified)	None
Some likelihood of change; no substantive deterioration	Requires vigilance
Significant likelihood of substantive change	Increased readiness to adapt risk management plans
Critical change imminent	Action required to update or implement plans
Unpredictable high-impact, low-likelihood event	Be prepared to respond at short notice to account for workforce and/or amend plans

If you have any questions about the recommendations or assessments in this forecast, please call your nearest Assistance Centre.



ETHIOPIA-SOMALIA

- Diplomatic tensions between Somalia, Ethiopia and the self-declared independent state of Somaliland are heightened over a bilateral agreement between Ethiopia and Somaliland.
- Tensions will drive risks linked to militancy and unrest. Cross-border skirmishes are possible though direct conflict is unlikely. Public hostility towards nationals of either country is likely.
- The Somalia-based Islamist militant al-Shabab group will be more motivated to attack Ethiopia and Somaliland, though its capabilities to do so are limited.

Situation

On 1 January, Ethiopia and Somaliland announced that they had signed a bilateral agreement. Under the agreement, Ethiopia will lease a 12-mile (20km) stretch of land near Berbera port (Somaliland) for naval and commercial purposes. In exchange, Ethiopia will grant Somaliland a stake in its national airline and may recognise Somaliland's independence in the future. Other details of the agreement have not been made public. Ethiopia and Somaliland plan to formalise the agreement in **February**.

Somalia has rejected the agreement and announced that it will pursue all legal and diplomatic means to prevent Ethiopia and Somaliland from implementing it. As part of this effort, Somalia has recalled its ambassador to Ethiopia for consultations and signed a bill declaring the agreement void. It has also stated that it is willing to engage in conflict

if provoked by Ethiopia. Its position is guided by its rejection of Somaliland's independence, and it appears reluctant to have an Ethiopian naval force in Somaliland. As such, Somalia views the agreement as a threat to its territorial integrity. Several foreign countries have expressed support for Somalia, including Egypt, Eritrea and Turkey. Meanwhile, the African Union and other international actors have called for talks to de-escalate tensions.

Separately, al-Shabab has rejected the agreement and threatened violence against Ethiopia and Somaliland. On 6 January, the group declared that it would mobilise to Somaliland to prevent Ethiopia from claiming the land granted to it under the deal. Public opposition to the deal has also been displayed in Somalia and Somaliland through several peaceful protests, including within their respective capitals Mogadishu and Hargeisa.

Despite the opposition, Somaliland and Ethiopia appear to be committed to the implementation of the agreement. Ethiopia is driven by its ambitions to re-establish a naval force and reduce its dependence on Djibouti's port, which accounts for around 95% of Ethiopia's imports and draws high annual fees. Somaliland's motivation, on the other hand, lies in the fact that it is not internationally recognised. Ethiopia's recognition could trigger recognition from other countries, boost Somaliland's ability to participate on the international stage and increase opportunities for economic and other development.



Implications

Diplomatic tensions will persist **over the coming month** as neither side appears willing to change its position. Somalia has stated that it will only engage in talks if Ethiopia retracts the agreement. Tensions will heighten if Ethiopia proceeds with recognising Somaliland. This will drive militancy and unrest risks in each country, though the effects would mostly be felt in Somalia and Somaliland. The likelihood of direct conflict between Ethiopia and Somalia remains low. Contrary to statements from Somaliland, Ethiopia has not yet confirmed that it will recognise Somaliland. Without access to the full agreement, Ethiopia's real intentions regarding Somaliland's status remain opaque. We assess that Ethiopia's most-likely courses of action are to recognise Somaliland or to remain ambivalent.

Indicators suggesting that Ethiopia intends to recognise Somaliland include Somaliland's statements of Ethiopia's intentions, Ethiopia's policy objective to secure access to a port and Ethiopia's relative military strength compared to Somalia. This last factor would increase Ethiopia's willingness to risk conflict with Somalia over the agreement. On the other hand, Ethiopia has expressed its desire to avoid conflict and likely recognises the potential for recognition to drum up support for Somalia, with the consequent isolation from countries that stand with Somalia in opposing the agreement. While these considerations may discourage Ethiopia from recognising Somaliland, Ethiopia's construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam has proven the country's willingness to pursue its domestic agenda despite foreign opposition and threats of conflict.

If Ethiopia formally recognises Somaliland, Somalia will prioritise increasing diplomatic pressure on Ethiopia to change its stance over pursuing direct conflict. This is due to Somalia's reliance on Ethiopia for military support against al-Shabab. Additionally, Somalia's limited military capabilities would require it to undertake the difficult task of convincing other countries to provide military support. Eritrea may be willing to back Somalia militarily, but its support would likely be limited. Diplomatic pressure could include severing diplomatic ties with Ethiopia.

Increased hostility between the countries will nonetheless undermine their co-operation against al-Shabab. Ethiopia currently has around 5,000 troops stationed in central and south-western Somalia, most of which are scheduled to leave by **December** as part of the African Union Transitional Mission in Somalia phased withdrawal. A breakdown in relations between the countries may disrupt military operations and hasten Ethiopia's withdrawal. This would create security gaps which al-Shabab will seek to capitalise on to increase attacks against military and civilian targets in Somalia and consolidate its territorial control.

Despite threats from al-Shabab, the group's ability to launch attacks in Ethiopia is limited to rare low-impact incidents. These are most likely to occur in Somali regional state (Ethiopia) and target the security forces. Considering the relative difficulty associated with attacking Ethiopia and its plans to deploy to Berbera, al-Shabab is likely to prioritise attacks in Somaliland. The group's activity and influence in Somaliland is significantly lower than in Somalia. However, it occasionally stages small-scale roadside bombings against the security forces in eastern Somaliland. Despite this, security measures in Somaliland are unlikely to be robust enough to prevent a significant surge in al-Shabab's activity there.



How we can help

- **Presence in-region:** An accredited network of local logistics and security providers.
- **Services offered:** From ground transport services to assisting with evacuations.
- **Activation time:** Up to 24-48 hours to activate, depending on location and availability of resources at time of the request.
- **Secure accommodation:** Yes.

Heightened tensions between Somalia and Ethiopia will also drive the risks of sporadic cross-border skirmishes between their armies stationed along shared border areas. A marked deterioration of their relations could also involve Somalia providing covert support to rebel groups in Ethiopia, likely with some collaboration with Eritrea. In Somaliland, tensions also risk worsening the ongoing conflict in Sool region, which is linked to the region's desire to separate from Somaliland and gain statehood or fall under Somalia's administration. Planned talks between Somalia and Somaliland that were announced in December 2023 to resolve their dispute would also be spoilt.

Ethiopia's recognition of Somaliland would increase the frequency and scale of protests in Mogadishu and other major urban centres in Somalia and Somaliland condemning it. In Somaliland, these would carry an increased risk of unrest and forcible dispersal by the authorities. Reports of episodes of harassment by the security forces targeting public figures and journalists that express opposition to the agreement would likely increase in Somaliland. Anti-Ethiopia sentiment would likely increase in Somalia and fuel incidents of low-level harassment and occasional violence against Ethiopian nationals. Al-Shabab would also capitalise on anti-Ethiopia sentiment to boost recruitment and for propaganda purposes.

It is also possible that Ethiopia may not have decided whether it will recognise Somaliland and could be seeking to push its port access agenda as far as possible while it defines its position. Ethiopia may then seek to prolong the current state of uncertainty by formalising other tenets of its agreement with Somaliland without solidifying its position on Somaliland's recognition. This would sustain frosty relations with Somalia but limit the likelihood and scale of related worsening tensions and associated security risks.

This scenario assumes that Ethiopia may consider that gaining port access via Somaliland is not contingent on formally recognising the latter. This nonetheless appears contrary to Somaliland's position and may threaten the agreement. Tensions with Somalia will de-escalate if the agreement collapses over this or other issues such as Ethiopia's financial commitments or the logistics around its military presence in Somaliland. Ethiopia may also seek to use its current position to arbitrate between Somaliland and Somalia in the hopes that a resolution between the two would negate it from taking a position on Somaliland's status.

Recommendations

The current diplomatic tensions do not necessitate a change in the security posture for organisations operating in the region. However, managers should closely monitor developments, and review and regularly update escalation plans to account for different scenarios, including a potential deterioration of the security environment should Ethiopia recognise Somaliland. Plans should address security and profile-specific risks for workforce in affected locations. Managers should also be prepared to adjust security protocols in response to changes in the security environment.

Travel to Somalia and most parts of Somaliland should be for business-critical purposes only. It requires, among other measures, stringent security precautions, including professional 24/7 security support, and the latest locally sourced threat intelligence. Travel to Hargeisa can proceed with standard security precautions. Travel to Ethiopia may be possible, depending on the nature of travel and subject to an individual risk assessment of the current situation given various ongoing domestic conflicts.

Ensure that workforce is briefed on militancy risks in the region. Advise workforce to minimise time spent around potential targets for militant attacks, including government and security force interests and personnel, as well as high-profile hotels and leisure and shopping centres. Workforce should also avoid related protests as a precaution. Crisis- and incident-management protocols should be clear, tested and communicated to workforce.

Main indicators of deterioration	Assessment
Somalia expresses increased intent to pursue conflict	This will most likely be to pressure Ethiopia to retract the agreement. However, in the unlikely event of conflict, border areas between Somalia and Ethiopia will mostly be affected. This development could spur political divisions in Somali regional state and drive anti-government sentiment and a resurgence of militia activity.
Somalia severs diplomatic ties with Ethiopia	This will likely prompt the withdrawal of Ethiopian troops from Somalia at the behest of either country. This event will undermine counter-terrorism operations in Somalia and likely cause a gradual increase in militancy risks.
Conflict in Somaliland spikes and spreads beyond EXTREME-risk areas	The ongoing conflict in Sool has been largely contained to EXTREME-risk areas. The spread of the conflict to HIGH- or MEDIUM-risk areas in Somaliland, including Hargeisa, would mark a notable deterioration of Somaliland's security environment.
Al-Shabab increases attacks in Ethiopia or Somaliland	A small increase in low-level al-Shabab activity is likely in both locations as tensions persist. While the group will prioritise military targets, bystanders face incidental risks.
Ethiopia recognises Somaliland's independence	This will increase diplomatic tensions with Somalia and the risk of militancy, unrest and cross-border skirmishes.



SENEGAL

- A presidential election will be held on **25 February**. President Macky Sall will step down after completing two terms in office.
- The election follows large-scale demonstrations between May and June 2023 over a possible third term for Sall and in support of opposition candidate Ousmane Sonko.
- While we do not currently anticipate any restrictions on inbound travel, in-country workforce should exercise heightened vigilance and avoid protests due to the risk of unrest.

Situation

Campaigning is set to commence on **4 February** and will last **until 23 February**, two days before polling day. Provisional results at the departmental level must be published **before 27 February**, while the release of the provisional results at the national level is expected **by 1 March**. If none of the candidates secure a majority in the first round, a second round will take place on **24 March**. The newly elected president is expected to assume office on **2 April**. The EU will deploy an electoral observation mission to oversee the election.

Potential candidates had until 26 December 2023 to submit an application, requiring signatures of at least 0.6% of the electorate, 13 members of the national assembly or 120 mayors and heads of regional councils. Out of the 93

potential candidates, 20 successfully advanced through the sponsorship stage. Notable validated candidates include incumbent prime minister Amadou Ba of the ruling Benno Bokk Yakaar coalition, former prime minister Idrissa Seck (in office 2002-04) and former Dakar mayor Khalifa Sall.

Nevertheless, several disqualified candidates have criticised the verification process and launched appeals, denouncing the perceived lack of transparency and an alleged faulty electoral register. Prominent opposition candidate Karim Wade of the Senegalese Democratic Party was excluded for allegedly holding dual citizenship at the time of his application. Sonko is also among those who have been disqualified as his application was deemed incomplete. However, his ally, Bassirou Diomaye Faye, saw his candidacy approved and will be contesting the forthcoming polls.

The upcoming election follows nationwide demonstrations in 2023 over the possible candidacy of President Sall and in support of Sonko. Sonko is currently detained for 'calls to insurrection and conspiracy' against the state. His supporters view this as politically motivated, and he denies all charges against him. The unrest involved demonstrators erecting barricades, blocking key roads, burning tyres and looting and vandalising buildings. The security forces responded with tear gas and live ammunition to disperse crowds, reportedly resulting in at least 23 people killed. Meanwhile, the authorities restricted access to mobile internet services and some social media platforms during the demonstrations. They also banned all demonstrations organised by opposition parties. However, the situation has remained relatively calm since Sall announced on 3 July 2023 that he would not run for a third term in the 2024 presidential election, despite Sonko being arrested on 28 July and his PASTEF party being dissolved.



Sonko retains a high level of support, particularly among Senegalese youth, due to his voicing frustrations over economic hardship and alleged corruption. Unemployment and the cost of living also remain prominent issues, as many regions are experiencing rapid demographic growth. Although Sall adopted a strong infrastructure policy of modernising cities, his critics say these efforts have focused solely on coastal cities, in particular Dakar. People residing elsewhere claim they do not feel the benefit of such projects. Additionally, Sall's government has been strongly criticised for its heavy-handed response to demonstrations in recent years, as well as the arrest of political opponents. As such, growing inequality and the country's democratic decline are key issues that will dominate the election.

Implications

Prime Minister Ba is most likely to win the upcoming election, given the support of the ruling party, including that of Sall. Nevertheless, due to the lack of an incumbent and the substantial number of opposition contenders, there is potential for the polls to go to a second round.

Although we expect the security environment to remain largely stable during the election period, a heightened risk of unrest, including clashes between rival supporters, will persist in the campaign period. Any move by the authorities to prevent the opposition from campaigning or staging demonstrations would heighten tensions and could result in unrest. While we do not expect to see similar levels of violence as in the spring of 2023, the events underscore the potential for sudden unrest, particularly if the opposition denounces any irregularities in the results.

In the event of unrest, demonstrators are likely to burn tyres and block roads, impeding overland movement. Acts of vandalism and looting are also possible. The security forces are likely to use heavy-handed measures such as tear gas and live ammunition to quell any unrest. Public transport may be disrupted, and some businesses may close on known protest days as a precaution.

Election-related rallies are particularly likely to affect Dakar and other urban centres such as Mbour and Thies (both Thies region), Saint-Louis (Saint-Louis region) and Ziguinchor (Ziguinchor region). Rallies are likely to be well attended. Potential flashpoints in Dakar include Cheikh Anta Diop University, Cite Keur Gorgui, the Palais de Justice (courthouse), the Mermoz and Medina areas. Should demonstrators manage to disrupt the A1 or N1 roads in Dakar, journeys to and from Blaise Diagne International Airport (DSS, Thies may also be affected.

Recommendations

We do not currently foresee any restrictions on inbound travel during the election period. However, managers should closely monitor relevant indicators for changes in the security environment and local circumstances that could influence their workforce's ability to travel to Senegal and remain in-country. Any significant or sustained outbreaks of unrest could prompt a change in our advice to minimise movement in affected cities. In-country workforce should therefore be equipped with sufficient supplies (food, water, medicine, fuel and cash) to remain in secure accommodation for up to 48 hours in the event of unrest.



How we can help

- **Presence in-country:** An accredited network.
- **Services offered:** From ground transport services to assisting with evacuations.
- **Activation time:** Up to 24-48 hours to activate, depending on location and availability of resources at time of the request.
- **Secure accommodation:** Yes.

Managers should map out key locations such as worksites, accommodation and preferred hotels in relation to main flashpoints. Consider additional security measures for assets near flashpoint areas to protect against vandalism and looting. Expect a heightened security presence around election day. The security forces are liable to use robust crowd-control measures, such as tear gas, rubber bullets and potentially live ammunition, posing incidental risks to bystanders.

Should large-scale protests and associated unrest resume, managers should ensure that in-country workforce are aware of flashpoint locations in relation to their accommodation and how these may impact their routes to and from work. They should ensure that workforce have identified secure modes and routes to access workplaces. Regular confirmation of the availability of local-national workforce, guarding-services personnel and drivers should be implemented as sustained unrest may impede movement across cities and prevent people from reaching their worksites. International assignees should liaise with local contacts for information on any gatherings in their area and avoid these as a precaution. Local nationals planning to attend such events should exercise caution and maintain reliable access to communications in the event of an emergency.

Main indicators of deterioration	Assessment
Protests increase in frequency and are accompanied by unrest, including acts of vandalism and looting	This would likely trigger a change in our advice to minimise movement in affected areas.
Opposition members allege fraud after the vote and reject the results	Given that the sponsorship stage has already been criticised, it is likely that the opposition will further denounce alleged irregularities to the electoral process. This is likely to trigger protests.
Mobile internet services and social media are disrupted during further demonstrations or around election day	This would further fuel discontent around concerns over democracy and corruption, potentially prompting further outbreaks of unrest.



AFRICA: ON WATCH

Ethiopia: The state of emergency (SoE) in Amhara state, due to expire on **6 February**, will likely be extended. The SoE was implemented in July 2023 after conflict between the Fano militia and the Ethiopian army escalated. The extensions will sustain related disruption, including from intermittent telecommunications outages and military checkpoints.

Kenya: The rising cost of living is driving increased anti-government sentiments and a risk of related protests. In recent weeks, opposition leader Raila Odinga made several threats to resume protests over the issue. If these gatherings materialise, they will likely occur in urban centres in central and western Kenya, including the capital Nairobi, and carry a high risk of unrest.

Zimbabwe: Disruption surrounding **3 February** by-elections will likely be limited to small demonstrations near polling stations. The by-elections were scheduled after several opposition Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) officials were recalled in late 2023. The CCC's rejection of the recalls will drive heightened tensions. The ruling ZANU-PF party will likely obtain sufficient votes to gain a two-thirds parliamentary majority.





ECUADOR

- The security environment in Ecuador will remain volatile over the coming month due to a recent escalation in gang violence.
- There is increased potential for violent outbreaks in peripheral areas of HIGH-risk cities in western provinces, such as Guayaquil (Guayas province).
- Expect heightened security in the capital Quito and other MEDIUM-risk areas due to an ongoing military deployment and possible isolated incidents.

Situation

President Daniel Noboa declared a nationwide state of emergency (SoE) and imposed a curfew on 8 January after two prominent gang leaders escaped from prison and riots subsequently broke out. Adolfo Macias 'El Fito' of Los Choneros and Fabricio Colon Pico of Los Lobos escaped from their respective prisons just before the government initiated security operations in prisons across Ecuador. These operations were intended to restore government control and dismantle criminal groups orchestrating activities within prisons by transferring prisoners. The operations proved unsuccessful, and the authorities struggled to regain control as mutinies broke out in six prisons on 8 January.

Additionally, several police stations were attacked overnight on 8-9 January, and vehicles were set alight in different areas of outlying neighbourhoods of Cuenca (Azuay province),

Esmeraldas (Esmeraldas province), Guayaquil, Machala (El Oro province) and Quito. During the afternoon of 9 January, incidents escalated significantly as a TV station was targeted during a live broadcast in Guayaquil. Other attacks included an attempt to break into a hospital and low-level criminal incidents at the University of Guayaquil. Faced with the heightened violence, Noboa declared a so-called internal-armed-conflict state, designating 23 gangs as belligerents. He doubled down on SoE measures, emphasising the deployment of military personnel on the streets to combat criminal groups.

Violence and brazen gang activity has de-escalated since 10 January. However, isolated instances continue to be reported, and a protracted security deployment will maintain a heightened potential for violent incidents.

On 15 January, the anti-explosives unit found dynamite and 131 explosive emulsions at a police unit in Quito. Previously, on 10 January, three people were killed in an explosion linked to gang activity in Puerto Francisco de Orellana (Orellana province). The police safely diffused another explosive device in southern Quito on 11 January. Scattered vehicle explosions have been recently reported, mostly in peripheral areas of HIGH-risk western cities like Esmeraldas, Guayaquil and Machala.

The SoE will remain in place until at least **8 March**. The SoE stipulates a nightly curfew and that military forces will assist the police with public security. Heightened security can be expected near government buildings, central squares, other main public locations and along major roadways.



Implications

The gangs' decision to carry out attacks in civilian areas and Noboa's enforcement of the SoE and declaration of internal armed conflict suggest the possibility of a continued unstable environment. This implies the security environment could worsen over the coming months. The epicentres of gang activity in the HIGH-risk western provinces are likely to bear the brunt of violence, confined to peripheral urban areas, including in Guayaquil. Additionally, areas with significant prisons controlled by gangs, including Cuenca, Latacunga (Cotopaxi province) and Riobamba (Chimborazo province), could also witness increased violence. Although related incidents cannot be ruled out in the outlying parts of Quito, major violence is not expected in central or upscale areas of the capital.

The government's failure to regain control of prisons during the 7 January operations and its inability to prevent gangs from executing attacks in civilian areas on 9 January suggest the security forces lack the capability to suppress current levels of violence promptly or effectively in the short term. Therefore, it is likely gangs will continue to challenge the government, staging attacks as a display of strength or in response to government security operations affecting their interests, such as the murder of a public prosecutor in northern Guayaquil on 17 January. Such actions can pose significant incidental risks to bystanders.

We expect heightened security and military deployments in urban centres to continue amid the SoE, increasing the potential for clashes with gangs mostly in Guayaquil and other HIGH-risk western provinces. While there is a possibility of isolated incidents of violence in Quito and other MEDIUM-risk areas, it is also likely the current trend of decreasing high-impact violent incidents will persist. Nonetheless, the security environment is expected to maintain a high degree of uncertainty, justifying the need for a more restrictive security posture and enhanced precautions.

Recommendation

Managers should remain abreast of developments throughout the month by monitoring International SOS alerts, maintaining close contact with local networks and tracking indicators of a new deterioration in the security environment. These include an increase in gang-related violence and anti-gang operations.

Managers should review contingency plans, factoring in the possibility of further violent crime that disrupts travel and business operations. The levels of exposure to crime-related threats should also be reviewed for workforce in areas that are most affected by spikes in violence. Those operating in and around ports and coastal areas, including Guayaquil and other HIGH-

How we can help

- **Presence in-country:** A robust vetted network of security providers.
- **Coverage:** Nationwide
- **Services offered:** Updates and advice on various travel and security risks. Secure ground transport, meet-and-greet and evacuations, with appropriate notice.
- **Activation time:** Generally shorter in major cities, such as Quito or Guayaquil, though it may vary according to provider availability and on-the-ground conditions. Preferred lead time for security or ground transport task is 24-48 hours.
- **Secure accommodation:** Available in most major cities. Hotels vetted by International SOS in Quito and Guayaquil.



risk western provinces, should review their security posture, including protocols for workforce, logistics and operating hours. Managers should ensure access to a robust and resilient local assistance network for ground movement and other operations, considering journey management and security support.

Managers should also ensure they can distribute essential and time-sensitive security information to workforce and be prepared to adjust operational protocols in the event of an escalation. Review communication procedures, identify triggers specific to your organisation for communicating important developments and protocols to your people and follow all official directives associated with the SoE.

Main indicators of deterioration	Assessment
Heightened security as part of the SoE or an increase in gang violence	Expect heightened security measures linked to the SoE to continue. Bolstering security in the immediate vicinity of high-impact locations, however, is unlikely to significantly reduce violent crime in urban areas of western provinces. Workforce in these locations should continue to adopt stringent precautions.
High-impact or co-ordinated attacks by criminal organisations in urban centres	Although less likely, these attacks would pose serious incidental risks to those in the vicinity.
A conflict expansion between gangs and the security forces	This would create an unsafe environment with the possibility of highly restrained availability of services.



EL SALVADOR

- Incumbent President Nayib Bukele is expected to win by a large margin in the first round of the general election on **4 February**.
- The political opposition is very unlikely to allege fraud or otherwise challenge the election's results.
- Significant disruption is unlikely amid the blackout period and on election day. Celebratory gatherings are likely after the announcement of the election's results.

Situation

The first round of the country's general election will be held on 4 February. Salvadoran voters will elect a president and vice-president, as well as 60 deputies to the unicameral Legislative Assembly. Bukele is expected to win by a large margin in the first round of voting. In the unlikely event that no candidate attains more than 50% of the vote, a second round of voting has been scheduled for **3 March**. This second polling day will be held irrespective of the presidential election result for voters to elect 44 mayors and councils, and 20 of El Salvador's representatives to the Central American Parliament.

Bukele heads into the election with a strong hold on all branches of government and widespread popular support. Although the Salvadoran constitution bans presidents from serving a second consecutive term, in November 2023, the Supreme Court ruled in favour of Bukele's presidential bid. The incumbent holds a 90% approval rating across opinion polls and maintains a strong lead in voting intention surveys. The positive impact of Bukele's policies on the security environment in the short-to-medium term has garnered him significant popularity. Fresh allegations that Bukele's government conspired with the Mexico-based New Generation Jalisco Cartel to capture a fugitive gang leader seem unlikely to significantly impact voter intentions.

The other contenders in the presidential race are Manuel Flores of the left-wing Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) and Joel Sanchez of the right-wing Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA). The FMLN has become severely weakened by corruption scandals in previous years. ARENA's base of supporters is small and concentrated in the capital San Salvador. The distance between both parties' presidential candidates and Bukele remains very wide in the lead up to the election. Beyond the presidential race, both FMLN and ARENA are also unlikely to challenge the hold of Bukele's party, Nuevas Ideas, on the Legislative Assembly.

The months ahead of the elections have witnessed little associated disruption. In comparison with previous years, rallies in support of competing candidates have been rare. Reports of surging violence by gangs seeking to influence the vote, which had been a hallmark of electoral processes in El Salvador in the past, have disappeared due to the country's evolving security environment.

Implications

Bukele will very likely win over 50% of the votes necessary to secure the presidency on 4 February. Additionally, it is almost certain that Nuevas Ideas will achieve an absolute majority in the Legislative Assembly. Despite FMLN and ARENA's vocal criticism of Bukele, the political opposition lacks the traction necessary to seriously



challenge his re-election bid. The unsuccessful candidates will likely accept Bukele's victory without alleging any fraud or electoral irregularities.

Associated disruption throughout February will be very limited, with the general election set to transpire peacefully. The blackout period ahead of 4 February and the prevailing state of emergency (SoE) measures will dissuade significant gatherings **over the coming days**. Celebratory gatherings, however, are almost certain in the hours and days after the results are announced. Small, anti-government protests are possible in the aftermath of the election but are highly unlikely to cause disruption. A heightened security force presence can be expected near polling stations, government buildings and at any public gatherings.

Incidents of political violence posing incidental risks to bystanders have decreased drastically when compared with previous electoral cycles due to Bukele's heavy-handed approach towards security. Instances of gang-related violence are highly improbable in the days ahead of and following the election. Isolated incidents are possible, but unlikely, in remote areas of El Salvador where gang remnants reportedly continue to operate. Clashes between supporters of rival parties are possible, especially in FMLN strongholds, but are likely to be localised and easily contained by the security forces.

After having secured his re-election, Bukele is liable to pursue and enforce new anti-corruption and anti-gang legislation, further empowering the Attorney General's Office to dismantle remaining criminal networks. However, the political opposition alleges these measures are intended to crack down on real and perceived dissent. Associated regulations may be implemented to restrict the activities of organisations involved in politically sensitive work, including civil society organisations, non-governmental organisations, media corporations and aid agencies, especially if they are perceived to be critical of Bukele.

Recommendations

Managers supporting workforce across El Salvador should monitor developments leading up to the election and in its aftermath. Managers should review levels of exposure, identifying associations or activities with at-risk groups or individuals, including opposition leaders, activists, news media and outspoken critics of the government. Review all internal communications for messaging that could be interpreted as anti-government and implement strict information security protocols to protect sensitive information.

Workforce should review their routes during commutes to work and in other daily activities during and after election day. Carry personal identification documents at all times to ensure smooth interactions with the police, being aware that the authorities may apply laws arbitrarily. Although significant anti-government protests are highly unlikely ahead of and following the first round of the election, workforce should avoid any such gatherings due to the risk of a heavy-handed response from the security forces.

Workforce should exercise prudence when engaging in conversations of a political nature in public, avoiding criticism of government policy. Similar discretion should be taken on social media, which is sometimes monitored by the authorities.



How we can help

- **Presence in-country:** A robust network of logistics and security providers.
- **Services offered:** Ground transport, meet-and-greet, security site assessments, personal security awareness training, evacuations and other assistance.
- **Activation time:** Up to 24 hours to activate, depending on location and availability of resources at the time of request.
- **Secure accommodation:** Yes.

Main indicators of deterioration	Assessment
Opposition parties call for demonstrations	The political opposition is highly unlikely to allege fraud or otherwise challenge the election's results. Demonstrations called for by the losing parties are likely to be small and localised, posing limited disruption in their immediate vicinity.
A second-round presidential run-off takes place on 3 March	President Bukele is projected to win by a very wide margin in the first round of voting. In the extremely unlikely event Bukele does not win 50% of the vote required, a run-off will take place on 3 March. This scenario is bound to heighten political tensions in El Salvador, emboldening the political opposition and its supporters. Bukele and his rivals may call for larger electoral rallies, posing significant disruption in their vicinities. There would also be a higher likelihood of localised clashes between protesters and the security forces.
The prosecutor pursues charges against opposition figures under anti-corruption legislation	The political opposition has accused Bukele's administration of approving and implementing the SoE, as well as new anti-corruption and anti-gang legislation, to crack down on political dissent. The Attorney General's Office may accuse political candidates of corruption ahead of the presidential run-off, issuing arrest warrants against them. If these actions are perceived to be in violation of civil and political rights, they may cause widespread anti-government protests. There would be a higher likelihood of localised instances of political violence and a heavy-handed response from the security forces.



MEXICO-US

- Expect heightened security and attendant disruption along the Mexico-US border following recent incidents.
- The Mexican authorities have increased border security. Overcrowded migrant camps and detention centres increase the potential for social unrest.
- Immigration and policies affecting the border will be key issues in the ongoing US general election cycle, resulting in increased political posturing and rhetoric.

Situation

Security measures have been tightened on both sides of the Mexico-US border following at least 302,000 migrant interceptions by the US authorities in December 2023. Although such interceptions decreased in January, associated disruption remains possible along the border.

The spike in illegal crossings has also resulted in increased diplomatic pressure from the US on the Mexican authorities. This has stoked the potential for social unrest. In the US, officials have intermittently closed border crossings,

amid tensions between state and federal bodies over how to respond. High-profile incidents have resulted in public anger and feuding between Texan and federal US authorities. These include the 13 January drowning of two children and a woman near Eagle Pass (Texas state, US) while attempting to cross the Rio Grande river.

Mexico

Under a bilateral agreement reached in December 2023, Mexico has increased its security force presence along its northern and southern borders. Patrolling is more frequent, checkpoints have been established and migrant interceptions have risen, particularly in the south and along the Mexico-Guatemala frontier. This has led to the dispersal of large migrant 'caravans' and the containment of migratory flows in Chiapas state, thereby reducing the mass arrival of migrants at the northern border.

The containment of migrants in Mexico has resulted in overcrowding in detention centres and migrant camps, prompting related demonstrations. On 6 December 2023, migrants on the Mexican side of the border blocked the Bridge of the Americas connecting Ciudad Juarez (Chihuahua state, Mexico) with El Paso (Texas). Migrants have also staged protests following high-profile incidents, such as a March 2023 fire at a detention centre in Ciudad Juarez, which killed 38 people.

US

US federal officials have instituted additional measures in a bid to reduce illicit migration into the country. In December 2023, four border crossings in Arizona state were closed, with similar measures instituted between Eagle Pass and Piedras Negras (Coahuila state, Mexico).

The Texas National Guard has bolstered border measures at Eagle Pass in response to what the Texan government believes is insufficient federal action against illicit migration. National Guard members have reportedly prevented US Border Patrol agents from accessing areas in and around the city. Texan officials have



taken control of Shelby Park and adjacent locations used by federal officials to process migrants. In response, the US Department of Homeland Security has filed suit against the state government, also citing other actions by Texan officials such as the use of razor-wire barriers along the border.

The 13 January deaths of the three migrants near Eagle Pass has inflamed public opinion in both countries. In the US, mayors in Texas and Democratic Party politicians blamed the state government for the incident. Meanwhile, Mexican activist groups supporting migrants have criticised recent decisions made by Texas' Governor Greg Abbott.

Implications

The security, transport, logistical and operational environments in both countries will continue to be affected by a range of border-related issues. Pressure from rising migrant crossings, queries over the capabilities of migrant-handling facilities and potential tensions between authorities seeking to police the border will persist throughout February.

Mexico

We do not anticipate the arrival of large migrant caravans at the northern frontier during February. Nevertheless, the heightened security force presence in border areas will affect the movement of people and goods. Travellers are likely to encounter additional security screenings and experience delays at border crossings. Heightened mobility restrictions and increased inspections of cargo transport may lead to delays. Although the likelihood of closures at border crossings remains low, they would have significant implications for supply chains.

Concerns linked to the migrant issue have the potential to trigger protests and gatherings on the Mexican side of the border. Potential hot spots include Ciudad Juarez and Piedras Negras, as well as Nuevo Laredo, Matamoros and Reynosa (all Tamaulipas state). Migrants and associated activist groups may hold demonstrations near migrant detention facilities or at border crossings, disrupting travel locally.

US

Despite the slowdown in immigrant arrivals in January there remains potential for isolated closures of US border crossings. These would only be instituted during periods of heavy travel due to the high impact even temporary and isolated closures have on the local community. Officials in towns most-heavily affected by border closures will face political, social and economic pressure to reopen the crossings.

How we can help

- **Presence in-region:** An accredited network of logistics and security providers and an Assistance Centre in Philadelphia (Pennsylvania state, US) and the Mexican capital Mexico City.
- **Services offered:** A robust offering of security services, including physical security support, secure transport, consulting and 24/7 access to advice and analysis from our local experts.
- **Activation time:** Up to 24-48 hours to activate, depending on the location and availability of resources at the time of request.
- **Secure accommodation:** Yes.



Tensions between state, local and federal officials will persist. Patrolling the US border is the responsibility of the federal government. However, Texan officials have sought to enact new laws to exert pressure on President Joe Biden's administration and add additional security measures. Further lawsuits between the state and federal governments are possible. Court decisions may lead to notable short-turnaround changes in state security force postures and measures. However, this is unlikely to result in noticeable differences for those crossing the border.

Immigration policy is widely expected to remain a contentious issue in the US, particularly as the general election approaches. Rhetoric is likely to increase over the coming month as the campaign strategies of Biden and his predecessor and main opponent, Donald Trump (in office 2017-21), take shape. Immigration was a key part of Trump's 2016 and 2020 presidential campaigns and will be once more. Republican lawmakers, particularly those in control of border states, may seek to exert pressure on the Biden administration on immigration, aiming to negatively affect Biden's re-election chances.

Immigration-related demonstrations are possible in the US but should remain small, peaceful and localised around border crossings, causing only limited disruption.

Recommendation

Those who frequently cross the Mexico-US frontier or with significant interest in travel between the two countries should continuously monitor the status of border crossings. All itineraries should be sufficiently flexible to adapt to the potential for border delays or closures. Ensure that all planned crossings are operating ahead of any travel. Consider allowing for travel to alternative land border crossings or via air ahead of planned journeys.

Organisations utilising cargo travel between the US and Mexico should anticipate logistics and supply chain disruption. Ensure that sufficient measures are in place to handle the potential for longer-term or more widespread border closures. Consider putting measures in place to minimise the impacts of significant border closures. Ensure that those reliant on cross-border trade are made aware of the potential for disruption, the status of border closures and associated supply chain concerns.

Mexico

Managers with interests near areas where migrant demonstrations have occurred or other sensitive locations including border crossings should continuously monitor for planned and impromptu demonstrations. Business-continuity plans should be in place ahead of major rallies. These policies should be well understood by all stakeholders, fully implementable and flexible. Documents should cover a wide range of eventualities, from isolated disruption to the potential for major disruptive gatherings.

US

Immigration remains a politically and culturally sensitive topic. These sensitivities are expected to increase as the US general election grows closer. All communications regarding border-related issues should take these concerns into account. Communication should be limited to security concerns or transport and logistical implications and avoid potential political implications. This increases the chance that communications will be acted upon appropriately.



Main indicators of deterioration	Assessment
Continued tensions and legal actions between US federal and state authorities	Continued legal challenges to both US and federal state border policies and activities are probable. Rulings are unlikely to result in significant operational changes.
A high-profile death of a migrant is reported along the Mexico-US border	<i>Mexico:</i> The death of migrants during border crossings could lead to protests. <i>US:</i> Tensions at checkpoints and border crossings could increase, potentially on both sides of the border.
An influx of migrants into, or passage of a migrant caravan towards the US	<i>Mexico:</i> This is possible but unlikely due to Mexico's containment efforts. <i>US:</i> This would prompt heightened rhetoric by prominent politicians, particularly those with direct interests in the 2024 election. Expect increased security along the border, while a very large influx would prompt crossing closures.
Short-term closures of specific border crossings	This may occur in the event of a rapid influx of migrants, social unrest, and/or security operations by Mexican or US authorities. However, it is likely that both sides will seek to quickly reopen the crossings.
Extended or multiple border crossing closures	Any such closure would probably be initiated by the US authorities. These can be highly disruptive to local communities and as such are unlikely to be implemented, particularly ahead of the 2024 election.



AMERICAS: ON WATCH

Guatemala: President Bernardo Arevalo's supporters will likely call for protests demanding the resignation of Attorney General Consuelo Porras. Tensions related to the unresolved conflict over San Carlos University's rector are also likely to reignite, which may result in demonstrations. Expect gatherings to remain peaceful but pose disruption to traffic. Any localised unrest can pose incidental risks to bystanders.

Haiti: Protests calling for the resignation of acting prime minister Ariel Henry are likely, particularly in cities outside the capital Port-au-Prince, following a 26 January decision by Kenya's high court blocking police force-deployments to combat gang activity in Haiti. The Kenyan president has promised to appeal the ruling. Anti-government activists decry the Kenya-led intervention as serving to legitimise Henry's government.

Mexico: The New Generation Jalisco Cartel's associates in Chiapas threatened to escalate violence against the security forces, accusing them of collaborating with the Sinaloa Cartel. In Tamaulipas, the Gulf Cartel 'Escorpiones' faction's leader's capture triggered a restructuring of the local criminal landscape. Associated violence can pose incidental risk to bystanders and result in road disruption.

Regional: Expect heightened security, transport disruption and increased criminality around celebrations related to the Christian period of Lent. Brazil, Trinidad and Tobago and the US will see major celebrations, though celebrations occur throughout the Americas. The large number of attendees, drug use and alcohol consumption increase the potential for crime. Sexual violence is a concern regardless of the victim's gender.



INDIA

- Farmers' unions have called for mobilisation campaigns over several long-standing issues on **13** and **16 February**, which are likely to witness high participation.
- Their demands highlight structural problems in India's agricultural sector, exacerbated by climate change, unpredictable rainfall and droughts, particularly in 2023.
- The protests could lead to significant business and transport disruption, and potential clashes with the authorities, necessitating heightened security measures.

Situation

Farmers' unions and umbrella bodies, such as the Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM), have called for mobilisation campaigns in February. The SKM plans to hold a tractor-trolley march towards the capital New Delhi on **13 February**, with the aim of laying siege to the city, similar to their widespread protests in 2020-21. It has also called for a *Bharat bandh* (nationwide shut-down strikes) on **16 February**. The unions have threatened to conduct road and railway blockades, village *bandhs* (shut-down strikes), demonstrations and picketing of central government establishments.

The SKM spent January mobilising support. Its units in 20 states organised a *Jan Jagran Yatra* campaign from 10 to 20 January to create awareness about the alleged pro-corporate economic policies of the central government. The platform of Central Trade Unions (CTUs) and federations/associations has pledged its support to the SKM's countrywide mobilisation on 16 February. Around 20 *kisan mahapanchayats* (public meetings) have been organised in the lead-up to the protests. On 26 January, the SKM-led rallies with tens of thousands of tractors and other vehicles in 484 districts across 27 states and union territories. The demonstrations included trade unions, students and youth activists.

Among the slew of demands pressed by the farmers, the most significant is the minimum support price (MSP) for agricultural produce. The central government annually establishes the MSP, the rate at which the government offers to procure the produce, for 23 crops. This acts as a safeguard if market prices fall too low for farmers to sell produce for a sufficient sum on the open market. Farmers' unions advocate a comprehensive cost calculation, which would increase the MSP. Additionally, the unions are demanding a legal guarantee or legislation mandating the enforcement of the MSP, and an expansion of the MSP to cover more crops.

A key demand is loan waivers, including those taken from the central and state governments. Also, they are seeking a complete withdrawal of the Electricity (Amendment) Bill, 2022, which they allege will accelerate the privatisation of the power sector, increase tariffs and deprive them of subsidised electricity rates.

The farmers' protests come weeks ahead of the general election, scheduled for **April-May**. Farmers' demands have remained constant with successive governments at the central and state levels, highlighting that they are structural issues within India's agricultural sector. Additionally, climate change and unpredictable rainfall are significantly impacting agricultural production and incomes. The El Nino weather phenomenon, which will persist until at least **April**, is causing droughts and extreme summer temperatures in many places. In 2023, India witnessed a 6% deficit in rainfall compared with the long-period average of 50 years. Around 31% of



the country received below-normal rainfall during the south-west monsoon season. Climate change is also exacerbating unseasonal rainfall, which led to widespread flooding in northern states, including Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and Punjab in mid-2023. During poor-yield seasons, farmers greatly depend on government interventions through MSPs, subsidies, loan waivers and efficient crop insurance disbursement.

Weather-related events also tend to increase food inflation, leading to government interventions. During the crucial election year, the government has banned the export of essential crops such as wheat, non-basmati rice and onions, and reduced import duties on edible oils and pulses. This has triggered protests from farmers, as their earnings have declined. According to reports, sugarcane production has also been hit and sugar could see the next export ban.

Implications

Farmers' unions hold significant political influence and mobilisation capabilities, especially in north and east India. Expect rallies to be concentrated in Haryana, Punjab and western Uttar Pradesh states. Anticipate protests in states such as Karnataka over demands for drought compensation and declaring 2023-24 as a drought year.

The farmers' protests in February will likely see high participation. The significant structural changes to the agricultural sector required to meet their demands mean they are unlikely to be addressed in the short term. The Model Code of Conduct will be enforced in **March**, ahead of the general election. These protests will likely be aimed at putting pressure on the government and the political parties as they seek to build their voter base and popularity.

The centrally ruling Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) had success in recent assembly elections in Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan states, where a significant portion of the population is engaged in farming. These results will likely assure the BJP of electoral support for its central policies among the farming community. The opposition I.N.D.I.A. alliance is likely to placate farmers by giving verbal assurances and support for the movement. Active political support is unlikely.

The protest march towards New Delhi on 13 February will likely see participation from tens of thousands, which will cause significant traffic disruption along the route. The authorities are highly likely to increase security at Delhi's borders to stop activists from coming from neighbouring states. Participants may use tactics such as roadblocks or *dharnas* (sit-down protests) at the border, which can invite forcible dispersal measures, posing incidental risks to bystanders. The 16 February call for *bandh* has received support from workers' unions and is likely to be supported by major opposition political parties as well. The strike will be well observed in Chandigarh union territory, Haryana, Punjab, and opposition ruled states such as Karnataka, Telangana and West Bengal. Expect associated business and transport disruption if the unions follow up on their warnings to conduct rail and road blockades.

Further shut-down strikes and marches by farmers are likely nationwide ahead of the general election. Potential protest locations include prominent government buildings, public squares, open grounds and key thoroughfares. Past instances have seen gatherings of tens of thousands of individuals. The events will be held amid heightened security. The authorities are likely to adopt heavy-handed measures, including the use of batons, to disperse unruly gatherings or prolonged road blockades.



Recommendations

Manager should liaise with local contacts and monitor developments in political proceedings and any related protests in their vicinity. Maintain a communications plan and emergency communication protocols. Verify the information and disseminate it in a timely manner. Ensure that alternative forms of communication are available in case the primary means experiences difficulties. Review business-continuity plans and consider whether in-country workforce should work from home on days when major protests are planned.

In-country workforce should avoid all gatherings, even if they appear peaceful, due to the persistent risk of unrest. Avoid prominent landmarks and key government buildings as a standard precaution during periods of heightened political tensions. Reconfirm the status of routes if travelling through an area where protests are known to be taking place. Be familiar with security plans and protocols in case of an escalation.

Workforce should expect an increased police presence in urban centres, especially near government offices, offices/residences of political parties/leaders and protests. Carry relevant identification documents to ease passage through security checks. Route selection should also avoid protest venues.

How we can help

- **Presence in-country:** An accredited network of logistics and security partners.
- **Services offered:** From meet-and-greet and ground transport services to assisting with evacuations.
- **Activation time:** Up to 24-48 hours to activate, depending on the location and the availability of resources at the time of request.
- **Secure accommodation:** Yes.

Main indicators of deterioration	Assessment
Protests continue at their current level	These gatherings are likely to be held with a heightened security force presence and should pass off peacefully, though they may cause localised disruption. Sporadic incidents of clashes and forcible dispersal by the police may occur.
Demonstrations increase in frequency and impact, especially in urban centres	Significant disruption and a higher risk of unrest at gatherings, primarily due to police dispersal, are likely. However, widespread violence is unlikely and will not persist due to the upcoming elections.
Protests increasingly turn unruly, especially in urban centres	The authorities are likely to impose restrictions on an intermittent basis, including bans on gatherings and internet services. Any attempts to defy the restrictions would be met with a strong police response. Widespread violence is unlikely.



PAPUA NEW GUINEA

- Widespread unrest and looting took place on 10-11 January over alleged tax increases impacting public service workers.
- Tensions are expected to remain high in the coming weeks, with a potential vote of no-confidence looming over Prime Minister James Marape.
- Further sporadic bouts of unrest are likely in urban centres despite the government's efforts to maintain law and order.

Situation

A 14-day state of emergency (SoE) was declared on 11 January in the capital Port Moresby following nationwide violent unrest that began on 10 January. At least 22 people were killed in unrest-related incidents, which began as protests by public servants, including members of the Papua New Guinea Police Force (PNGPF) and the Papua New Guinea Defence Force (PNGDF). Participants were protesting against the alleged implementation of tax reforms which impacted compensation for the police and public service workforce. The authorities later stated that the additional deductions to workers' pay were a result of a payroll glitch.

As part of the protest, about 200 security personnel started to strike and refused to respond to any incidents. This triggered widespread looting and vandalism of shops and offices in the capital and other urban centres, including Kokopo (East New

Britain province) and Lae (Morobe province). The unrest temporarily led to the closure of businesses and a shortage of essential supplies, including food, water and fuel.

The events between 10 and 11 January depict a fragile security situation across the country. While incidents of opportunistic looting and armed robbery are common, the widespread nature of the unrest and palpable anger that was observed was unique. Factors including high unemployment rates in urban centres, the rising cost of living and long-standing issues with the security forces are likely to have contributed to the observed frustration.

Implications

We assess that the security situation in urban centres in the coming weeks will remain tense following the unrest. The implementation of the SoE and the use of heavy-handed techniques by the security forces managed to contain unrest and prevent a protracted state of lawlessness. However, this has not ameliorated the grievances that have surfaced. Urban centres are likely to witness sporadic, though isolated, instances of unrest and looting in the coming weeks. A similar deterioration in the security environment may prompt authorities to consider stronger measures, including the implementation of nightly curfews in urban centres.

Sporadic shortages to essential supplies are also likely to persist in the coming weeks as businesses continue to recover following the unrest. Most supermarkets and businesses in the Gerehu and Sabama areas in Port Moresby were completely looted. Losses from the looting have been estimated to be at least 600m kina (\$161m). Businesses are seeking financial support from the government as compensation and the security forces are



also conducting operations to recover goods that have been stolen during the unrest. Fuel stations were also among businesses that temporarily closed during the unrest.

The government is expected to implement notable policy changes and reforms in the coming weeks. Police Commissioner David Manning was suspended immediately after the unrest and Marape has already announced a reshuffle of his cabinet. The government is also likely to implement a Vagrancy Act that has been in discussion since 2021. The act aims to provide police officers with more power to evict people living in informal settlements in urban centres found to be involved in crime and unrest.

However, efforts to curb crime across the country are likely to be impeded by issues within the nation's security forces. In addition to having one of the lowest police-to-population ratios in the world, the security forces are beset by disciplinary challenges. According to the authorities, more than 115 police personnel were arrested in 2023. On 30 December 2023, five police officers were arrested for breaking in and looting a shop in Port Moresby's Boroko suburb. The interoperability between the PNGPF and PNGDF has also hindered crime prevention efforts. In Tari (Hela province), on 17 December 2023, one PNGDF soldier was shot dead during a drunken confrontation with the police.

Following the unrest, we also assess that a vote of no confidence is likely. Marape's immunity to a vote of confidence following his re-election in 2022 expires on **8 February**. While no obvious candidates to replace Marape have emerged, only a minimum of 11 Members of Parliament (MPs) are required to sign on to its proposal for it to be tabled in parliament. Following the unrest, at least eight MPs resigned from their government roles, citing a lack of confidence in Marape's leadership. The leader of the opposition continues to allege that the government had attempted to implement tax increases despite repeated denials by Marape. Related protests by both supporters of Marape and the opposition are possible in the coming weeks.

Recommendations

Managers should also ensure that workforce is adequately briefed on the latest developments and is able to navigate the operational landscape without incurring additional risks. Managers should ensure that inbound travellers to Papua New Guinea are fully briefed on prevailing threats and necessary mitigation measures prior to travel. This includes local trouble spots and any movement constraints due to the current SoE.

Managers should also ensure business-continuity plans address the storage of essential supplies including water, food, medicine, fuel and cash for workforce in the event of future disruption to supply chains. This should also include stand-fast arrangements that ensure access to secure accommodation, transport and reliable communication devices. Managers should monitor developments and consult local sources regarding political developments, including possible a vote of no confidence.

Assess your organisation's potential exposure to crime hot spots and review security policies and escalation protocols accordingly. Organisations with offices in urban centres may consider allowing flexible work hours or work-from-home in the event of an increase in political tensions or the breaking out of widespread looting.



How we can help

- **Presence in-country:** An accredited network of air charter providers and security partners in Papua New Guinea who have capacity to operate countrywide.
- **Services offered:** Our security partners offer support with a full range of services, including consulting, secure escorts, armed escorts, static guards, cash-in-transit, asset protection and evacuation support.
- **Activation time:** Up to 24-48 hours to activate, depending on location and availability of services at the time of request. Depending on the urgency of the request, security partners may be activated at short notice.
- **Secure accommodation:** International SOS has vetted several hotels deemed to meet our security standards for HIGH-risk locations countrywide.

Main indicators of deterioration	Assessment
The Vagrancy Act is passed	Following the unrest, the government is likely to expedite the passing of the Vagrancy Act, which will apply nationwide. This is likely to lead to the implementation of security measures to curb violence, including the removal of settlements. This may trigger renewed violence or protests by impacted migrants.
The proposal of a vote of no confidence in Marape	Related protests in urban centres are possible. Heightened political tensions may trigger associated tribal clashes, including in Port Moresby.
The resumption of widespread unrest, including looting and rioting	This remains unlikely given the heightened security measures employed by the government. However, if it were to take place there would be a similarly rapid decline in the security environment, with indiscriminate targeting of local businesses in urban centres nationwide. An SoE is likely to be declared, with possible nightly curfews.



REGIONAL

- The Lunar New Year holiday period will begin on **8 February** and last **until at least 14 February**. The festival will be celebrated on **10 February**.
- The authorities will increase security measures, including the deployment of additional security force personnel, and impose traffic restrictions in certain areas to maintain order.
- Workforce should expect travel disruption. Overcrowding at transport hubs and tourist sites will increase the likelihood of exposure to petty and opportunistic crime.

Situation

The Lunar New Year, also known as the Spring Festival, is an important traditional festival celebrated by many Asian communities around the world.

In **China**, it is the most significant and widely celebrated festival, typically lasting over 15 days, with family reunions, extensive travel and various events held across the country. The official holiday period will be observed **from 10 to 17 February**. The authorities expect an increase in travel related to the holiday period **until 5 March**.

In **Hong Kong (China SAR)**, a large-scale night parade will be held in the Tsim Sha Tsui area on **10 February** for the first time in five years. At least 150,000 spectators are expected at the parade, which will start at the Hong Kong Cultural Centre, travel along Canton Road and Haiphong Road and end near a hotel on Nathan Road. The authorities in Hong

Kong have indicated that some border checkpoints are likely to extend their operational hours throughout the Lunar New Year holiday period.

In **Macao (China SAR)**, the holiday period will last **until 24 February**. Related events will be held near Sai Van Lake Square and the Macao Tower.

In **Taiwan (China)**, several events are held, with extensive travel and family reunions. The holiday period will be observed **from 8 until 14 February**. Most businesses will be closed **from 9 to 11 February**. This year, a pilots' union has threatened to observe a strike during the holiday period over salary-related grievances, if the authorities fail to meet their demands. Separately, employees of the Taiwan High Speed Rail Corporation recently threatened to stage a strike during the Lunar New Year, though the strike was reportedly called off following talks with unions representing workers.

In **Singapore**, the authorities have stepped up security measures, including announcing road closures in the Chinatown area during the holiday period. The heightened security measures have been implemented to curb heavy footfall **until 9 February**. The Temple Street has been closed to vehicular traffic since 19 January at certain times, including: Monday to Thursday **from 16.00 to 23.00** (all times local), Friday, Saturday and Sunday **from 14.00 to 23.59** and on the eve of Lunar New Year **from 14.00** on 9 February **to 01.30** on 10 February. Emergency services are exempt from the restrictions.



Similar security measures are expected in **South Korea** during the festival (known locally as Seollal). The authorities also usually announce additional public transport services, including intercity buses and trains, during the holiday period to ease traffic congestion.

In **Vietnam**, the authorities will increase security during the annual Lunar New Year (locally known as Tet (Tet Nguyen Dan)) holiday period. The official public holiday falls **between 8 February and 14 February**. Due to an increase in travel, aviation authorities have increased nightly flights to ease reported overcrowding at the capital Hanoi's Noi Bai International Airport (HAN) and Ho Chi Minh City's Tan Son Nhat International Airport (SGN). The Director of the Provincial Police has issued an order to deploy additional security force personnel to ensure adequate security during the holiday period.

Implications

The authorities are expected to tighten security measures in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan (China), Macao, South Korea, Singapore and Vietnam. Heavy air traffic is expected at major airports, including Beijing Capital (PEK), Guangzhou Baiyun (CAN), Shanghai Pudong (PVG) and Shenzhen Baoan (SZX, all China) international airports. Several airlines have increased the number of flights they operate. In Taiwan (China), however, flights are likely to be disrupted if the pilots' union proceeds with the threatened strike, especially as passenger numbers typically peak during the holiday season.

Security measures, including the deployment of law enforcement personnel, are typically in place to ensure the safety of those travelling. Increased travel during the Lunar New Year holiday period can lead to congestion and potential traffic-related incidents. Local authorities usually implement traffic control measures to manage the influx of people and vehicles. Large public gatherings and events are common during the holiday period.

The security environment across the region during the Lunar New Year is generally stable, with the authorities taking proactive measures to ensure the safety of citizens and visitors. However, it is important for individuals to remain vigilant, exercise caution in crowded areas and adopt best practices to enhance overall security during this festive period.

Local law enforcement agencies are well prepared to address potential challenges and maintain public order throughout the celebrations. The ongoing winter season could also cause transport disruption and exacerbate congestion. Government offices, banks and businesses are also likely to be closed during the period. Overcrowding at busy transport hubs increases the likelihood of exposure to petty and opportunistic crime.

Recommendations

Expect disruption to travel and business activity during the holiday period. Maintain flexible itineraries and allow additional time to complete journeys due to increased congestion. Arrive early at transport hubs and be prepared for checks on local health and travel history codes at entrances. Exercise vigilance to mitigate the risk of petty crime, particularly theft, in crowded areas such as transport hubs. Carry only what you need.

Book accommodation, train tickets, flights, taxis and rental vehicles well in advance. Reconfirm itineraries with the relevant air carrier and/or hotel due to the ongoing winter season. International SOS does not hold information



about specific flights or other transport schedules. Contact the relevant service provider to reconfirm schedules. In the event of any cancellations, your travel agent will be able to assist with alternative arrangements.

Carry relevant identification documents at all times to expedite passage through security checkpoints. Copies of residence permits and the identification and visa pages of passports should be accepted in most cases. For travellers who do not speak Mandarin, consider carrying a card stating your details in Chinese (in simplified characters, not long-form characters and not Romanised letters).

Overcrowding at transport hubs and tourist areas increases the likelihood of exposure to petty and opportunistic crime. Business travellers and foreign nationals should exercise increased vigilance in these areas.

How we can help

- **Presence in-country:** An accredited network of air charter providers and security partners in Papua New Guinea who have capacity to operate countrywide.
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- **Secure accommodation:** International SOS has vetted several hotels deemed to meet our security standards for HIGH-risk locations countrywide.

Main indicators of deterioration	Assessment
The pilot union's strike in Taiwan (China) goes ahead	This would likely result in air travel delays. Additionally, the strike may manifest itself in the form of protests and rallies near airports, causing traffic congestion in the area.
Impacts of the Winter season	The ongoing winter season, with heavy snow, dense fog and poor visibility, can cause short-notice disruption to flights and rail services and hamper road traffic.

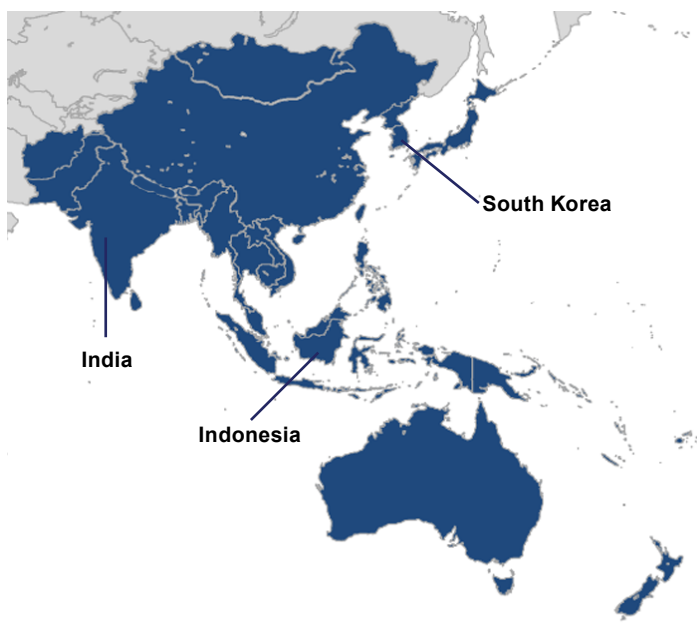


ASIA-PACIFIC: ON WATCH

India: Expect an increase in political gatherings in February, ahead of the general election scheduled for **April** and **May**. Political gatherings are likely to be well attended and cause significant travel disruption in their vicinity. The authorities are likely to maintain an elevated security posture around gatherings organised by major political parties.

Indonesia: A general election is scheduled for **14 February**. Campaign rallies and related gatherings are likely to be well attended. Gatherings are usually held in large public spaces, such as stadiums and convention centers, and will cause travel disruption in their vicinity. Expect a heightened security presence near protest hot spots and sensitive government buildings.

South Korea: Expect an increase in political activity throughout February ahead of the national assembly elections on **10 April**. Related political gatherings are likely to garner significant attendance. Although elections are rarely disruptive in the country, protests by the opposition and civil society groups are likely to increase in the lead-up to the polls, especially amid recent strong anti-government sentiment.





GERMANY

- Protests by farmers, triggered by cuts to agricultural subsidies, will continue in the coming weeks.
- Rail unions are yet to come to a negotiated settlement with rail operators, protracting industrial action.
- Anti-far-right protests have revived following an investigation which revealed that centre- and extreme-right leaders discussed controversial deportation plans.

Situation

Protests led by farmers have spread across the country in recent weeks after the government announced it would cease to provide long-standing agricultural fuel subsidies. The decision followed a ruling by the constitutional court in November 2022 that has had significant budgetary consequences.

In response, leaders of farmers' unions organised mass demonstrations across the country over several days, both in December 2023 and January. Demonstrators disrupted travel significantly by blocking central parts of most urban centres with tractors, including Bremen (Bremen state), Cologne (North Rhine-Westphalia

state) and Hamburg (Hamburg state), as well as key routes and motorways. In January, the week of action culminated in a final gathering in the capital Berlin that at least 10,000 participants attended with 5,000 vehicles. Although the gathering passed off peacefully, some localised clashes with the security forces were reported.

As a result, the government has decided to grant some concessions, including rolling back a tax on agricultural and forestry vehicles. Additionally, subsidies on agricultural diesel will be reduced over time, rather than immediately. The German Farmers' Association (DBV), however, denounced this and demanded all changes be reversed.

Separately, in January, train drivers led a three-day nationwide strike, severely disrupting rail traffic. Involved unions organised the industrial action to ask for salary increases due to inflation and cost-of-living issues. Such rallies and walkouts come amid months of instability within the ruling coalition that consists of the Social Democrats, the Greens and the Free Democratic Party. Polls indicate the alliance has lost significant electoral support amid external crises and internal disputes.

Meanwhile, far-right parties, such as the Alternative for Germany (AfD), have been accused of attempting to leverage this discontent by associating themselves with the farmers' protests. Some party members campaigned at the protests, though farmers' unions have attempted to distance themselves from right-wing policies. Recent election polls have indicated the AfD is the second-most supported party in Germany, with more than 20% of support. State elections are scheduled to take place in late 2024, including in Brandenburg, Saxony and Thuringia, where the AfD is leading the polls with more than 30% of the projected vote.

On 10 January, an investigative report was released which indicated two senior AfD party members had attended a meeting with far-right individuals where they discussed plans to deport those of foreign ethnicity. In



response, anti-far-right protests were staged in more than 100 locations around the country, with estimates of 100,000 people gathering in Berlin and 300,000 others nationwide. Some political leaders have called for an examination into whether the AfD should be banned.

Implications

Although the government repealed certain changes to agricultural subsidies, many of them will still be reduced, albeit over three years. The DBV, however, has expressed that amendments are not sufficient and has vowed to protest further. Since the supposed final protest in Berlin, several smaller-scale rallies have occurred in rural towns, indicating the farmers' willingness to continue demonstrating. Additional rallies, for the most part peaceful, will continue similarly, with participants using vehicles to block key inter- and intra-city routes and motorways. Traffic disruption and travel delays should be expected.

Although the government reached an agreement on 18 January regarding the 2024 budget, clear signs of division remain. The perceived weakness of the authorities, who ultimately approved some concessions following the farmers' protests, will encourage participants to stage further rallies in the hope of extracting additional guarantees.

Other unions may also be emboldened to take on protest or industrial action. The German Train Drivers' Union called a nationwide strike on 23 and 29 January, significantly disrupting travel. Participants have been involved in ongoing negotiations with the state rail operator, Deutsche Bahn, to try to negotiate better working conditions. Further walkouts should be expected, leading to significant rail disruption, including delays and cancellations. Reports indicating the finalised budget includes a reduction in funds for rail transport will exacerbate the likelihood of such action.

Anti-far-right protests will continue in the short term both in urban centres and more rural locations. Such demonstrations, however, are liable to generate counter-protests by supporters of the AfD and other far-right groups. If a ban on the party was enforced, it would lead to more related rallies with an increased possibility of unrest.

Main indicators of deterioration	Assessment
The government expedites pledges to reduce agricultural subsidies	Farmers' unions would perceive this as a betrayal, which would spur on larger and more unruly protests.
Public transport unions fail to reach a negotiated settlement with rail operators	Rail workers would likely protract the strike, significantly impacting train travel for extended periods of time.
The authorities ban the AfD party	Although unlikely, such a decision would potentially trigger significant protests by AfD supporters who could be met by anti-right-wing demonstrators, increasing the likelihood of unrest.

Recommendations

Managers should monitor local and international news for reports on political developments as any changes in government rhetoric or policy could trigger protests. In-country workforce should sign up for and monitor International SOS alerts for planned or spontaneous rallies of significant impact. Travel plans should be



coordinated with such demonstrations in mind to minimise delays. If workforce come across a protest, they should follow all official directives and leave an area at the first sign of unrest.

Similarly, organisations should ensure they are aware of any industrial action, particularly in the transport sector. In the event of significant delays and cancellations to rail or bus systems, managers may wish to consider enabling their workforce to work from home on impacted dates.

How we can help

- **Presence in-country:** An accredited network.
- **Services offered:** From ground transport services to assisting with evacuations.
- **Activation time:** Up to 24-48 hours to activate, depending on location and availability of resources at the time of the request.
- **Secure accommodation:** Yes.



RUSSIA-UKRAINE

- The second anniversary of the Russia-Ukraine conflict will be marked on **24 February**. Fighting on the ground has stalled, while Russia's aerial campaign has intensified.
- The US presidential election in **November** and domestic political pressure in EU states will exacerbate the current downturn in western assistance to Ukraine.
- This reduction will significantly undermine Ukraine's position and makes the prospect of negotiations a more realistic outcome.

Situation

Two years into the conflict, fighting has stalled along front lines that have remained largely static over the last 12 months. Ukraine's 2023 counter-offensive was relatively unsuccessful, and its leaders are fighting for international military support amid a drop off in assistance from western partners.

Ukraine achieved some strategic victories during its most recent counter-offensive campaign. Its forces broke Russia's Black Sea blockade, by some estimates destroying 20% of Russia's Black Sea Fleet and struck several Russian military targets in Crimea. They also reported successful operations on the eastern bank of the Dnipro River, though reports of them establishing a foothold are often exaggerated. Ukrainian troops are present on the eastern side but are generally pinned down by heavy Russian fire. Elsewhere, however, they were unable to regain significant territory, slowed by Russian defences and superior firepower.

Military funding to Ukraine from its largest partner the US has been frozen since October 2023, impacting its military supplies. Ukrainian forces have reportedly scaled back assaults due to low artillery supplies. A shortage of surface to air missiles is also impactful, while a lack of air defences leaves civilians in cities such as Kharkiv (Kharkiv province) and Odesa (Odesa province) vulnerable to deadly Russian airstrikes.

Meanwhile Russia has intensified and expanded its aerial campaign against Ukrainian cities since December 2023. Buoyed by increased domestic production and supplies from Iran and North Korea, it has targeted Ukraine with hundreds of ballistic missiles and drones on a near daily basis. Ukrainian air defences were previously intercepting most aerial strikes, but that has drastically changed since Russia changed tactics. Ukraine's air defences are overwhelmed and steadily degrading, while the simultaneous drop off in Western financial support leaves them struggling to replenish them.



This new Russian strategy has led to a sharp increase in deadly strikes on Ukrainian cities, which in turn has led to increased Ukrainian retaliatory action within Russia. These attacks seek to target Russia's supply chains, but also stir public discontent with the leadership and bring the impact of the conflict home to Russian citizens. As a long-term strategy, this may be impactful if it is significantly increased in scale. However, there is little western support for Ukraine expanding such attacks and, thus far, it has failed to inspire Russian objections to the conflict.

Ukrainian military leaders have admitted a significant improvement in weaponry and/or manpower is required to break the current deadlock. While the UK recently announced increased military aid for Ukraine in the coming financial year, it does not come close to matching previous US sums. The UK will send more than \$3bn of military assistance, but the stalled US bill allocates an additional \$61bn for weapons and military support to Ukraine.

Implications

Neither side is likely to make any significant territorial breakthroughs in the coming months. Any territorial gains over the next few months will be slow, incremental and extremely hard fought with high numbers of casualties. As attritional fighting continues on the front lines, Ukraine will likely sustain its aerial operations on Crimea. As a significant staging post for Russia, this may hinder its supply lines to a limited extent. However, it is unlikely to significantly assist Ukraine in exploiting weak points in the front line, considering how well established Russian defensive lines are.

Ukraine's goal remains the full restoration of its territory. However, it cannot achieve an offensive victory of this scale, considering Russia currently holds around 16% of its territory, without a substantial escalation in Western funding and weaponry. This remains unlikely, given waning international support. We expect the US presidential election and domestic political pressure in EU states to prompt further reductions in international aid to Ukraine.

Even if there is an increase in current assistance levels, it would make relatively little impact given the size of the front line, which is more than 621 miles (1,000km) long, and Ukraine's manpower disadvantage compared with Russia's.

How we can help

- **Presence in-country:** An accredited network.
- **Services offered:** From ground-transport services to assisting with evacuations.
- **Activation time:** Up to 24-48 hours to activate, depending on location and availability of resources at the time of the request.

Troop mobilisation will be a contentious issue in Ukraine in the coming months. Ukrainian military leaders have said they need an additional 500,000 troops in 2024. Efforts at moving new mobilisation legislation have thus far been unsuccessful. There will be increased public pressure for soldiers who joined up in the early stages of the conflict to be rotated off the front lines. Lawmakers see the need for additional forces but are concerned about the

potential for corruption among draft officers and the impact on the already-suffering economy of withdrawing further people from the workforce.



Potential for negotiations

Ukraine's proposal for a peace settlement includes the withdrawal of Russian forces from all its territory, including Crimea, as well as the prosecution of war crimes and the payment of reparations. Ukraine is opposed to negotiations without a full withdrawal of Russian troops. It believes Russia would take the opportunity of talks to consolidate its positions, regroup and relaunch its attacks.

There is little incentive for Russia to agree to such terms, which amounts to defeat, considering its current manpower and firepower advantages. Ukraine may hope that Russia's resolve weakens in the coming months as casualties mount and its defence spending spirals. However, with western funding reducing, Ukraine may no longer find itself able to wait out its neighbour, which has a much larger fighting force and artillery supplies.

In public statements, Russian president Vladimir Putin has said Russia's conflict aims have not changed. However, there are ample indications that Russia is open to negotiating a settlement which would freeze conditions along the current lines. This falls considerably short of Russia's initial conflict aims. Nonetheless, it could be reasonably construed as a victory to both a domestic and international audience, which is one of Putin's primary concerns. Ukraine's aim to completely restore its territorial integrity is unlikely without a significant boost in both consistent funding and manpower. If the current situation persists, Ukraine may find itself agreeing to negotiations due to battlefield realities, or the current situation will become a frozen conflict.

Recommendations

Managers should ensure in-country workforce are prepared to stand fast for at least 72 hours, ensuring their accommodation has adequate supplies of food, water, backup power supplies and other essentials. Do not act upon unverified information. Remain informed of the latest developments via verified sources, including International SOS alerts, diplomatic missions, and local government sources.

We advise to defer travel to EXTREME risk areas of Ukraine, except for the capital Kyiv. Essential travel to Kyiv is feasible, though it requires robust security measures.

People in Ukraine should abide by official directives, including any local emergency and evacuation procedures, movement restrictions, curfews and/or road closures. Identify the nearest shelter to be used in the event of air raids or artillery shelling.

Main indicators of deterioration	Assessment
The US government fails to secure congressional approval for further assistance packages for Ukraine	This will significantly reduce Ukraine's capabilities to replenish its air defences, leading to more civilian casualties. It will also impact the military's capability to resupply, further reducing the prospect of Ukrainian territorial gains in the coming months.
Russian aerial strikes on Ukrainian cities increasingly result in civilian fatalities	Without additional air defences, as long as Russia continues its heightened campaign, civilian casualties will increase.
Ukraine expands its attacks inside Russia, including aerial strikes and sabotage operations	We expect Ukraine to launch more attacks on infrastructure and government targets inside Russia. However, the number of attacks will be relatively limited as domestic defence is Ukraine's primary resource concern.



EUROPE AND CIS: ON WATCH



Azerbaijan: Early presidential elections will be held on **7 February**. The election is expected to pass off peacefully, though opposition parties have boycotted the vote. Incumbent President Ilham Aliyev is widely expected to win, considering his high approval ratings and lack of genuine opposition. In-country workforce should avoid discussing potentially sensitive topics online or in person as a precaution.

France: The country's largest farmers' union is set to organise nationwide protests in opposition to new taxes, among other grievances. Some farmers have already taken action in and around Toulouse (Occitanie region), blocking key highways and vandalising government buildings.

Finland: Expect flight delays and cancellations on **1 and 2 February** due to a strike by the airport workers union. Roughly 12,000 personnel are likely to participate. National airlines have stated the industrial action will have a significant impact on flight schedules.



ALGERIA, MOROCCO, TUNISIA

- The anniversary of the killing of Chokri Belaid, on 6 February, is a historical date for protests. However, they are not expected to be disruptive this year.
- The anniversary of the Hirak protests in Algeria on 16 February will serve as a critical barometer for the country's presidential election later in the year.
- Although unlikely to be disruptive, protests marking the anniversary of the 20 February protest movement in Morocco have the potential to propagate.

Situation

Three countries in the Maghreb have protest anniversaries in February. The tenth anniversary of the murder of Chokri Belaid in Tunisia falls on 6 February. At their height in 2013, these protests were highly disruptive, with calls for a general strike and resulting in the resignation of the government. The anniversary of the Hirak protests in Algeria falls on **16 February**. At their height in 2019, these protests took place regularly in Algeria's major cities, attracting thousands of participants and occasionally being dispersed forcibly by police. The anniversary of protests in Morocco falls on **20 February**. Initially part of the Arab Spring movement, at their height in 2011, these shook the social fabric of the Moroccan state and resulted in concessions from the government.

Each of these protest movements has since declined. The COVID-19 pandemic, reforms, the suppression of protests and economic changes have all altered the social fabric from which these protests emerged, reducing their disruptiveness. Despite this, many of the grievances central to these protest movements remain unaddressed, meaning there is a potential for a resurgence of protests and related disruption.

In Tunisia, the potential for protests this year to mark Belaid's murder is low. Turnout in 2023 was low, with only one event held in Sfax (Sfax governorate) by students and teachers. However, the potential for the mobilisation of demonstrators is illustrated by prior anniversaries in 2021 and 2022. In the events in 2022, around 500 people demonstrated in the capital Tunis following the dissolution of the Conseil Supérieur de la Magistrature. The events of 2021 had thousands of participants. The possible backing of the influential UGTT trade union is an important signifier of likely attendance. The political landscape has largely moved on since 2013. Tunisia's politics remain potentially divisive, with some opponents of President Kais Saïed, such as the Free Destourian Party's leader Abir Moussi, in jail ahead of the forthcoming presidential election. However, political apathy is a defining trend, and years of dissatisfaction with politics have made much of the Tunisian public feel distant from politics. This trend is illustrated by the fact that self-immolations have become semi-regular. However, they do not generate the same fury they did when Mohamed Bouazizi killed himself to spark the Arab Spring in 2010.

In Algeria, the likelihood of disruption is very low. Only small demonstrations took place in 2023, including protests in Djelfa (Djelfa province) organised by the UGTA union and in Annaba (Annaba province) organised by a labour group. It was a protest in Djelfa (Djelfa province) organised by the UGTA union and a protest in Annaba (Annaba province) organised by a labour group. Since 2019, increased government expenditure,



new laws targeting protests and the prosecution of members of Abdelaziz Bouteflika's (in office 1999-2019) government have all contributed to reducing protest momentum.

In Morocco, protests are likely to occur throughout urban centres on and around 20 February. In 2023, demonstrations were organised on 19 and 20 February in Casablanca (Casablanca-Settat region), Marrakech (Marrakech-Safi region), the capital Rabat and Tangier (Tanger-Tetouan-Al Hoceima region). The hundreds of protesters were motivated by concerns over the cost of living and political freedoms. Social issues still need to be addressed, such as weak economic growth, higher-than-usual inflation and a lack of progress on political freedoms. These issues could motivate demonstrators again this year. However, a larger turnout would likely depend on having a specific trigger take place. In 2011, the discovery of five bodies of protesters in Al Hoceima (Tanger-Tetouan-Al Hoceima region) and in 2016, the killing of Mouhcine Fikri acted as protest triggers.

Implications

In Tunisia, the implications of the anniversary of the murder of Belaid are likely to be limited. Should protests emerge they will likely be focussed on central areas of the capital Tunis. Demonstrations will most likely occur at Human Rights Square (Chokri Belaid Square) on Mohamed V Avenue and around Habib Bourguiba Avenue. Demonstrations are unlikely to garner large numbers of participants but may be accompanied by enhanced security force deployments. Demonstrations may be forcibly dispersed.

In Algeria, demonstrations are likely to be sparsely attended. Demonstrations are more likely to occur in the Kabylie region, including the cities of Bejaia (Bejaia province) and Tizi Ouzou (Tizi Ouzou province). Protests have historically been common in the region, linked to its Berber identity and related calls for greater autonomy. Any events will occur with a robust deployment from the security forces, who may make arrests and look to disperse demonstrations. Related localised travel disruption is possible in the vicinity of events. Should protest activity pick up and gain momentum, it could lead to a sustained protest movement as it did in 2019 prior to that year's presidential election.

Morocco's demonstrations marking the anniversary of the 20 February uprising will have the most severe security implications. Nonetheless, they are likely to pass off peacefully. Demonstrations are likely in the capital Rabat and main cities such as Casablanca, Tangier and Marrakech. An enhanced police presence can be expected near demonstrations, especially those in the Rif region. The principal cities of Al Aaroui, Ben Taieb, Driouch, Imzouren, Midar and Nador (all Oriental region) and Al Hoceima may function as venues for demonstrations. The area has historically had poor relations with the central government owing to issues of ethnic identity, levels of economic development and historical grievances. Protests

How we can help

- **Presence in-region:** An accredited network.
- **Services offered:** From ground-transport services to assisting with evacuations.
- **Activation time:** Up to 24-48 hours to activate, depending on location and availability of resources at the time of request.
- **Secure accommodation:** Yes.



could propagate across Morocco for a prolonged period. This is most likely in the event of an emotive trigger event taking place. However, it is unlikely due to concessions made following the initial protests in 2011 and the potential for reprisals from the authorities.

Recommendations

Managers should recommend that workforce exercise caution near protests due to the potential for unrest and the forcible dispersal of demonstrations.

Monitor related developments for signs of growing frustrations at the government and the potential for increasing protests. Any developments in protest-related disruption should be accompanied by more stringent advice for in-country workforce. In Tunisia and Algeria, in the event of highly disruptive regular protests, travel restrictions for non-essential inbound travel are likely around the country's election later in the year.

Main indicators of deterioration	Assessment
The security forces forcibly disperse demonstrations	Given the low turnout at related events in recent years, this outcome is unlikely but would gain in likelihood in line with higher numbers of attendees.
Security force actions against demonstrations result in the death of demonstrators	Such an occurrence could result in even greater numbers of demonstrators and herald greater disruption at further demonstrations.
An emotive issue sparks a cross-border regional anti-government protest movement	Although unlikely, the shared issues felt by the populations of each country are similar and could resonate across borders.



IRAQ

- Tit-for-tat strikes between the US and pro-Iranian armed groups will persist amid the ongoing Israel-Hamas conflict.
- The Islamic Resistance in Iraq (IRI) will continue to target US military interests. The US military response will likely be calibrated to avoid further escalation.
- Attacks against US military interests are likely to decrease in frequency and intensity if a renewed ceasefire agreement between Hamas and Israel is established.

Situation

In recent months, the Israel-Hamas conflict has led to a resumption and escalation of tit-for-tat attacks between the US and the Iran-backed groups in Iraq. Since 17 October 2023, there have been 57 confirmed attacks in Iraq and 83 in Syria targeting US interests. In response, the US military has conducted at least six counter strikes in Iraq.

The IRI, an umbrella term encompassing pro-Iranian militias, has claimed responsibility for most of these attacks. The IRI has specifically targeted US military interests, resulting in substantial material damage and several injuries. However, the overall impact on US interests has been limited due to effective US air defence capabilities.

Various sub-groups operating under the IRI banner loosely act as proxies for the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), enabling Iran to avoid any direct involvement in the attacks. US retaliations against IRI members are perceived by

the Iraqi authorities as a direct violation of its sovereignty. This highlights that many of these groups officially operate under the Iraqi army's command.

A key development was a US drone attack on 4 January, targeting the headquarters of Harakat al-Nujaba militia in the capital Baghdad. The attack resulted in the death of the militia's leader and two members. This incident is the most notable US retaliation against Iran-backed groups in Iraq and the most significant US military operation in Iraq since the killing of Qasem Soleimani in January 2020. In response to the attack, the Iraqi government announced its intention to use a bilateral committee to address the presence of the US-led coalition against the Islamic State in the country. Such calls are not new, having been originally implemented following Soleimani's killing. Despite these efforts, US military presence continued in the country after the January 2020 incident.

Tactically, the IRI has consistently used weapons like mortars, drones, rockets and missiles. Recent attacks, however, signify an escalation from the less-sophisticated methods that were previously used. On 20 January, US Central Command attributed the use of close-range ballistic missiles to the IRI in an attack targeting the Ain al-Asad airbase (Anbar governorate), which resulted in the injury of at least two soldiers. Given that they are significantly harder to intercept, the incorporation of close-range ballistic missiles may pose a heightened risk to US personnel and infrastructure. In its latest retaliation on 24 January, the US conducted attacks against paramilitary group Kataib Hezbollah in the south of Baghdad and Anbar governorate.



Separately, on 16 and 17 January, the IRGC conducted strikes with ballistic missiles near Erbil International Airport (EBL) and the US consulate (both in Kurdistan Region (KR)), leading to the temporary suspension of airport operations. The IRGC claimed that the strikes, which resulted in damage to residences and a Kurdish intelligence centre, were targeting bases of Israel's national intelligence agency in Erbil. The IRGC attack prompted demonstrations across urban centres in KR, including Akre, Duhok, Erbil and Zakho.

Implications

Attacks on US bases by pro-Iranian armed groups will continue over the coming month in Iraq and Syria, at least for the duration of the active conflict between Israel and Hamas. Periodic retaliatory strikes against these groups by the US, as well as attacks targeting Iranian proxies in the region by the US and Israel, will prolong this tit-for-tat dynamic.

Pro-Iranian armed groups under the IRI umbrella are likely to persist in attacking US-linked targets, despite the risk of US retaliatory action. US bases across the country and diplomatic interests in Baghdad and Erbil will present as the primary targets for such attacks. US military personnel located near Baghdad International (BGW) and Erbil International (EBL) Airports are also likely targets. Future attacks on US positions at these facilities may temporarily disrupt flights and airport operations.

If a new ceasefire between Israel and Hamas is agreed upon, pro-Iranian factions are likely to reduce the number and intensity of their attacks against US targets. Attacks against US airbases decreased during the implementation of a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip (Palestinian Territories) from 24 to 30 November, indicating that the IRI was respecting the truce negotiated between Israel and Hamas. Nevertheless, there are multiple groups under the IRI umbrella with varying degrees of autonomy and levels of coordination with Iran. Thus, there remains a risk of further attacks against US interests even during a potential, renewed ceasefire agreement.

Separately, further attacks against suspected Israel-linked targets by the IRGC in KR may occur, though they are likely to remain infrequent. During such attacks, the IRGC is expected to avoid attacking US-linked targets directly to prevent an escalatory retaliation.

The killing or injuring of US nationals in an attack is likely to be the main trigger for strikes by the US that target Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) bases or command-and-control personnel. Although the US has not responded to every attack, any potential cycle of retaliatory incidents is likely to be concentrated in central and northern federal Iraq. In the southern governorates of Iraq, the low concentration of US military and diplomatic personnel reflects the low incidental risks associated with these tit-for-tat attacks.

The repetitive pattern of retaliation poses a significant challenge to US relations with the Iraqi government. The targeting of PMUs, many of which are supportive of Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani, will further complicate US-Iraq relations. This tension in US-Iraq relations will, in turn, aid Iran's long-term goal of achieving a complete withdrawal of the US military from the country.

Concurrently, public demands for a US withdrawal are likely to increase, putting pressure on the Iraqi government to balance its relations with PMUs and the US. On 24 January, following US airstrikes, reports indicated that the US may initiate talks with the Iraqi government regarding the withdrawal of the US-led coalition and its



MONTHLY SECURITY FORECAST

Middle East and North Africa



replacement of enhanced bilateral relations. However, a full withdrawal would likely require a significant amount of time to carry out a thorough negotiation, with the outcomes likely to remain unclear. Should negotiations be dropped, domestic anti-US sentiment is likely to be exacerbated, manifesting in calls for protests and the intensification of attacks.

Related gatherings outside the US embassy and near the entrance to the International Zone have repeatedly occurred since 7 October 2023. Such events are likely to persist in the coming months. Gatherings are often well attended and accompanied by a heightened security force presence, which is liable to use forcible measures to disperse crowds.

How we can help

- **Presence in-country:** An accredited network of security providers.
- **Services offered:** Soft-skin and armoured vehicles, secure ground transport services, close protection and assistance with evacuations.
- **Activation time:** Up to 24-48 hours to activate, depending on location and availability of resources at the time of the request.
- **Secure accommodation:** Yes.

Recommendations

Managers should conduct a risk assessment for individuals planning travel to Iraq in coming weeks, including individuals' exposure to additional risks based on nationality or citizenship. US military and diplomatic interests will continue to be at risk of further attacks and managers should consider such risk in the approval of their travellers and in-country workforces' itineraries.

In-country workforce and international assignees should exercise enhanced caution and avoid all public gatherings. Minimise time spent in the vicinity of potential flashpoints, including government buildings, public squares and political party offices. People should be prepared to suspend movement and stand fast at a secure location in the event of violence or unrest in their vicinity.

Managers should ensure that escalation plans are updated, tested and rapidly implementable for a wide range of scenarios, including most-likely and worst-case scenarios. Reconfirm that workforce can stand fast at an adequate and assessed secure location, with provisions in place for a period of at least 96 hours (i.e., food, water, essential medications and cash).



MONTHLY SECURITY FORECAST

Middle East and North Africa



Main indicators of deterioration	Assessment
PMUs call for anti-US demonstrations	Related unrest will be concentrated in Baghdad and the southern governorates. Should demonstrations become unruly, the security forces are liable to use heavy-handed measures against protesters, while the authorities may call for further restraint.
PMU strikes result in the death of US security officers	The killing of US personnel, particularly senior officers, would result in retaliatory strikes targeting senior PMU members that may result in a further intensification of attacks.
Attacks intensifying with the US embassy also being actively targeted	Although an attempted attack on the US embassy would most likely be small in scale, a large-scale attack would mark a significant deterioration in the security environment.
Further strikes resulting in the killing of key Iranian officials within Syria or Iraq	In the scenario where a senior IRGC member is killed within Syria either by US or Israeli strikes, the group would likely seek to retaliate within KR. Retaliatory attacks would seek to avoid the risk of escalation. However, in the case that a senior IRGC member is killed within Iraq, the group would more likely respond firmly by directly targeting US-linked interests, such as the US embassy in Baghdad.
The targeting of foreign-linked commercial interests by Iran-linked groups	Despite being a low-likelihood scenario, such incidents would prompt strong retaliation by members of the US-led coalition.



YEMEN

- The Iran-aligned, Yemen-based Houthi group will continue to target ships in regional waters for the duration of the active phase of the Israel-Hamas conflict.
- UK and US strikes in Yemen are unlikely to significantly degrade the Houthis' military capabilities and will motivate them to continue attacks in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.
- The Yemeni peace process continues, as all parties involved, including Saudi Arabia, appear committed to finding a resolution to the near decade-long conflict.

Situation

Tensions remain heightened across the Middle East as the Israel-Hamas conflict persists. In the Red Sea region, this has manifested as maritime tensions since the Yemen-based Houthi group began targeting Israeli-linked ships in November 2023. The Houthis, an Iran-aligned group which controls a significant portion of Yemen, claim to be acting in a show of support with Gaza. They have launched over 30 drone or missile attacks against military and commercial ships in the Red Sea, the Bab Al-Mandab Strait and the Gulf of Aden since November 2023.

Although the Houthis initially claimed that they would only target ships linked to Israel, their targeting range has gradually increased. In early December 2023, they started launching attacks at any vessel that they believed was headed to Israeli ports. Despite these claims, reports indicate that many of the vessels targeted did not fit in either category. This has considerably affected maritime traffic, causing increased shipping costs and delays.

In response, the US and the UK began leading airstrikes against military targets in the Houthi-controlled part of Yemen on 11 January. This has failed to deter the Houthis, whose attacks persist. They have now directly attacked US and UK military ships and threatened their interests on land. The Houthis have previously proven capable of conducting drone and missiles attacks in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), though they have only caused limited damage.

The Houthis are part of Iran's 'axis of resistance' and, though they are considered to be autonomous in their decisions, they coordinate military actions with other Iran-aligned groups. For instance, they largely respected the week-long temporary ceasefire between Israel and Hamas in November 2023. The Houthis are also known to receive weapons and financial support from Iran. However, the extent of Iran's involvement in the current maritime tensions is unclear. International media reports indicate that Iran could be providing intelligence to the group and supporting their targeting decisions. Iran, however, has denied any involvement in the attacks in the Red Sea.

In parallel, peace talks between the Houthis and other parties to the Yemen conflict, including Saudi Arabia, have continued to progress. In December 2023, amid Houthi military operations in the Red Sea, the UN announced a comprehensive ceasefire plan for the Yemeni conflict. Saudi military operations in support of the Aden-based internationally recognised government in Yemen had previously subsided following the signature of a temporary ceasefire agreement in April 2022.



Even with the peace talks moving forward, the domestic situation in Yemen remains fragile. In September 2023, despite a tightly controlled security environment, growing discontent about the Houthis' governance drove large opposition protests. Skirmishes between the Houthis and forces of the internationally recognised government also continue to be frequently reported along the frozen front line, which crosses several Yemeni governorates.

Implications

The Houthis will continue their military operations as long as the active phase of the Israel-Hamas conflict persists. As such, the situation in the Red Sea will remain tense in the coming weeks. Although the US and UK's airstrikes could temporarily affect the Houthis' military capabilities, they are unlikely to significantly degrade them unless the intensity and frequency of the strikes significantly increase. The Houthis have previously resisted several years of Saudi airstrikes, showing that they have the capacities to replenish their arsenals even under direct threat. The strikes are also unlikely to deter the Houthis from further attacks, as they claim to be ideologically motivated and to act from a principled stance.

On the contrary, the Houthis will be further motivated to launch retaliatory strikes in the Red Sea, the Bab al-Mandab Strait and the Gulf of Aden. They are likely to suffer some setbacks and adapt their tactics, but maritime traffic in the Red Sea will continue to be significantly impacted. They could also target US military bases located in other Gulf countries, as they have previously threatened to do. However, they are unlikely to conduct such attacks as these would directly jeopardise the ongoing peace process.

The US and the UK will continue to lead targeted strikes in Houthi-controlled territory to try to weaken their military capacity. The strikes should remain focused on military targets, which mostly includes bases located in rural areas. Key cities that could also be impacted are the capital Sanaa, the major port city of Hodeidah (Al Hudaydah governorate) and the traditional Houthi stronghold of Saada (Saada governorate). The parts of Yemen controlled by actors other than the Houthis, such as Aden (the temporary capital for the internationally recognised government) and Mukallah (Hadramaut governorate), are less likely to be affected.

The Houthis' maritime operations have bolstered their domestic and regional support. Their popularity has grown amongst the Yemeni population, which is largely pro-Palestinian. Their active involvement in the Israel-Hamas conflict has also deflected public attention from governance issues that had previously caused public discontent. Regionally, the impact of their attacks has also demonstrated the strategic value of the Houthis amongst Iran-aligned groups.

The Yemeni peace process will continue to be overshadowed by the ongoing maritime tensions. The parties to the peace process, including Saudi Arabia and the Houthis, appear committed to finding a long-lasting solution to the Yemeni conflict. As such, peace talks will continue, though they will be affected by the recent events and a final agreement is likely to be delayed for the duration of the Israel-Hamas conflict. The Houthis' improved domestic and regional standing is likely to put them at an advantage in the determination of the post-conflict political system. Further regional escalation could, however, negatively impact the peace process, particularly if the Houthis act on their threats of targeting US bases in Saudi Arabia. However, even if peace talks fail, cross-border attacks between Saudi Arabia and Yemen are unlikely to resume. A more immediate consequence would be the resumption of fighting between the Houthis and other Yemeni factions along the frozen front lines.



Recommendations

We continue to advise to defer all travel to Yemen, which we rate as an EXTREME-risk country.

If workforce travel to the country, managers should ensure that they maintain professional 24-hour security support to ensure access to the latest locally sourced threat intelligence, trip-specific assessments, operations-room tracking, reliable communications and immediate access to emergency support. A robust and resilient local assistance network (logistical, security and medical) should be in place, as well as access to secure accommodation, power, communications, fuel, food, water, medication and other goods.

Elsewhere in the region, managers and in-country workforce should closely monitor regional developments. Ensure that escalation plans are updated and rapidly implementable. Israeli and US nationals in countries across the Middle East and North Africa should exercise caution and maintain a low profile given the current heightened tensions. Managers should brief workforce to minimise time spent near all diplomatic missions, particularly those of Israel and the US, across the region as a precaution, and to refrain from discussing the situation. Ensure workforce liaise with local contacts to stay abreast of potential demonstrations in or near their location. They should avoid all gatherings as a precaution. Remain informed of the latest developments via verified sources, including International SOS alerts, diplomatic missions and local contacts. Do not act upon unverified information.

How we can help

- Presence in-region:**
International SOS has a fully staffed 24/7 Assistance Centre in Dubai (UAE).

Main indicators of deterioration	Assessment
An increased rate of success of the Houthis' strikes on ships due to change in tactics, or acquisition of new weapon technology	This would further disrupt maritime traffic in the region and lead to an increased number and intensity of US and UK strikes in Yemen.
Direct and evidenced Iranian intervention in the attacks in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden	This would deepen the regional escalation and could trigger more direct confrontations between the US and Iran.
The US begins 'boots on the ground' operations to Yemen	This is highly unlikely but would result in a definite breakdown of peace talks and a costly, long-term conflict to overthrow the Houthis.



MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA: ON WATCH

Lebanon: Cross-border hostilities will persist between the Lebanon-based Shia Muslim Hizbullah movement and Israeli forces along Lebanon's southern border during the active phase of the Israel-Hamas conflict. Precision strikes targeting Hizbullah or Hamas leaders in Lebanon are also expected in the coming weeks. Negotiation efforts are unlikely to yield results until the intensity of fighting decreases in Gaza.

Sudan: The situation in the country will remain volatile in the coming weeks as the likelihood of a diplomatic resolution to the conflict continues to decrease. Army General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan suspended Sudan's membership of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development following a series of failed mediation attempts. Hostilities persist across the country, including in the capital Khartoum.

Syria: Turkish military operations against Kurdish militias in the north of the country are likely to intensify in the coming weeks. This follows the killing of 21 Turkish soldiers in Iraqi Kurdistan by members of the Kurdistan Workers Party. There are growing indications that Turkey could decide to lead a large-scale operation in northern Syria to retaliate.

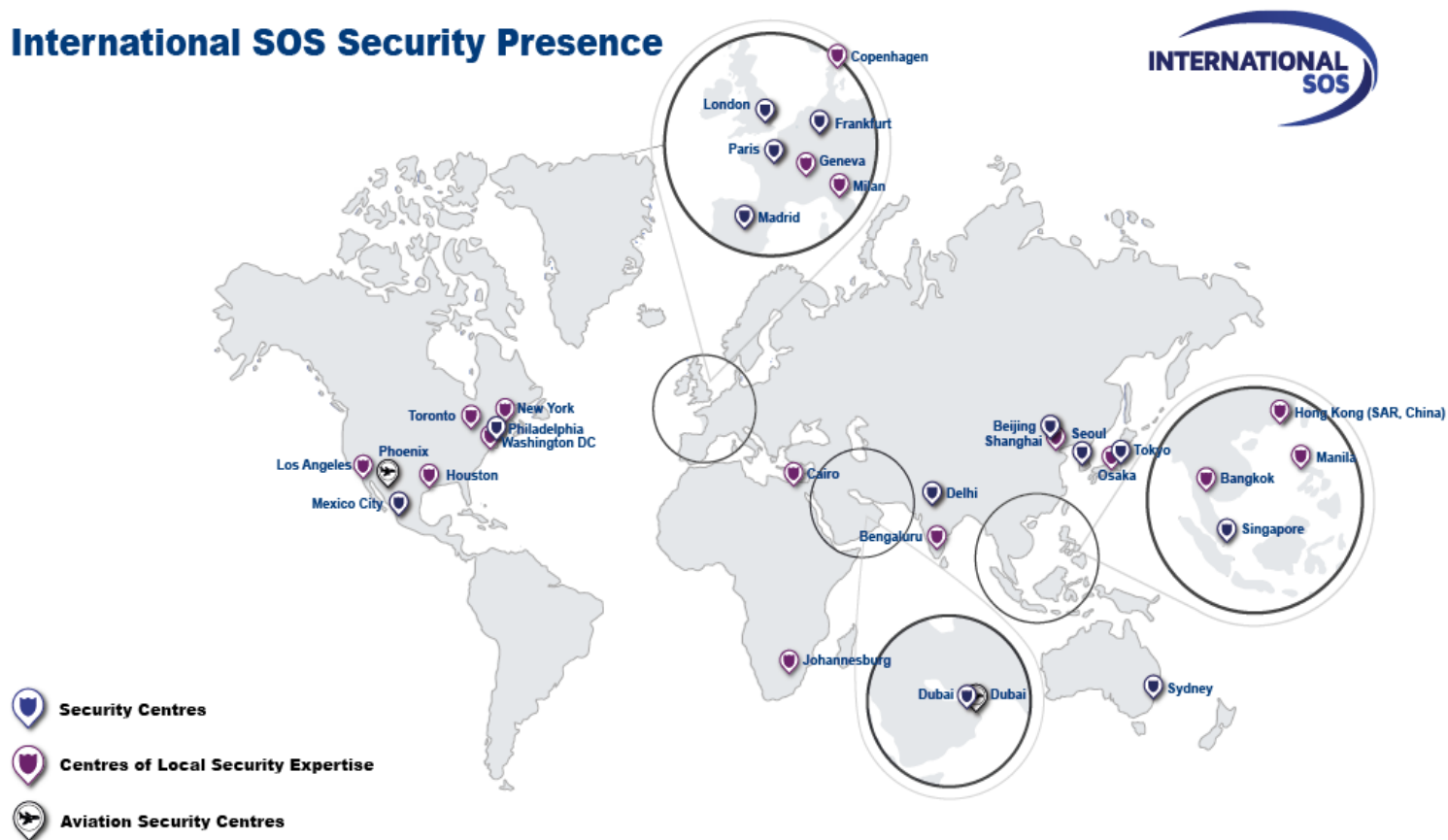




ACTIONABLE INSIGHTS AND UNPARALLELED SERVICES

International SOS and its network of partners combine the world's leading security and medical risk specialists. With an access to over 3,200 security specialists led by our 200 dedicated security experts based in our Assistance Centres and offices around the world, we provide a comprehensive suite of integrated security risk services for the global workforce and managers tasked with keeping people safe, secure and healthy. We deliver timely, actionable security intelligence, analysis, advice and on-the-ground assistance.

International SOS Security Presence



For follow-up questions about the assessments or recommendations in this Report, please call your nearest Assistance Centre.

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