Long Walk to Deportation

Hundreds of thousands of migrants have braved the journey from Central America to the U.S. border. Washington wants to turn them back, before they even arrive.

BY LEVI VONK | JANUARY 8, 2016

MEXICO CITY — As she marched toward the line of over 100 armored policemen, Mildred Mendoza put on a brave face and held her youngest son, Marcos, close. For nearly two weeks, she and 400 other Central American migrants had barricaded themselves inside a migrant shelter in Ixtepec, Oaxaca, Mexico. Beyond its walls, federal police and immigration agents held them under siege, threatening to deport them all if they continued their 800-mile journey to Mexico City to denounce the government's heavy-handed immigration policy, a strategy known as the Southern Border Plan.

Now, their food and water were gone, and the walls seemed to be closing in. Confronting the police was the only option left.

Mendoza squinted into the sun to get a better look at the swarming mass of black riot gear. The policemen were advancing quickly now, their batons bristling. Mendoza had already braved hundreds of miles of gangs, hunger, and endless jungle — she wasn't about to give up now. She braced for the impact with the policemen, but was thrown back by the force as the group was hit by the front line. Marcos was ripped from her hands.

"Everything was spinning," said Mendoza. "Then we were crushed from all sides."

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In 2014, almost 70,000 unaccompanied minors were detained by U.S. Border Patrol along the U.S.-Mexico border in an unprecedented wave of Central American migration. Approximately 70,000 more "family units" — many of them single mothers with children — were also detained, a 361 percent increase in such apprehensions over 2013. Most claimed to be fleeing escalating violence in the Northern Triangle, the region comprising Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras.

More than a year later, violence in the Northern Triangle has spiraled even further out of control, with the ousting of Guatemalan President Otto Pérez Molina for corruption and a gang-ordered countrywide transportation shutdown in El Salvador. It is estimated that over 400,000 Central Americans fled their countries in 2015, as in previous years, heading northward. But despite this steady stream, midway through 2015 the number of undocumented minors and family units apprehended in the United States nearly halved to under 40,000 each, decreasing to near pre-crisis levels.

The tens of thousands of people who didn't make it to the United States didn't just disappear. Many of them simply never made it past the Southern Border Plan.

In July 2014, at the height of the migration crisis in the United States, Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto signed an executive order enacting Plan Frontera Sur, or the Southern Border Plan, which instituted an extensive and abrupt immigration overhaul within Mexico. The shift was fully funded by the United States through the Merida Initiative, a 2008 agreement between the United States and Mexico to combat drug trafficking. By May 2015, the U.S. Congress had given the Peña Nieto administration $79 million more than the Obama administration had requested to, among other things, "modernize Mexico's borders (north and south)," as a report from the Congressional Research Service put it. How that money would be spent was left to Mexico's discretion.

The impact of the Southern Border Plan was felt immediately. Within less than a year, Mexican deportations of Central Americans skyrocketed by 79 percent, and 541 percent for children ten and under between 2013 and 2014. Meanwhile, U.S. apprehensions of Central Americans plummeted.

Washington has managed to outsource its immigration crisis to the Mexican government. In doing so, it has entrusted a state embroiled in scandal and allegedly complicit in human rights abuses to apprehend and deport Central American migrants, many of them young children, before they can reach the United States.

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Mendoza and her three children — Dónovan, 16; Dayrin, 13; and Marcos, 10 — had little desire to ever leave their native Guatemala City. A decade earlier, her husband was murdered in the United States while working as a migrant farmworker, and she vowed to never set foot in the country. She supported her children by renting out several properties around Guatemala City, securing a livelihood that placed her family in the country's middle class.

But things changed in February, when a local gang demanded an "Easter bonus" of 10,000 quetzals — the equivalent of $1,300 — per rental property, on top of the monthly percentage she already paid them. If she didn't cough up the money, the gang warned, she would be killed and dismembered, her body parts hung up around the city. It was time to flee.

Mendoza surveyed her options. Before the Southern Border Plan went into effect, she could have ridden through Mexico atop the teetering boxcars of La Bestia, the famously dangerous but relatively speedy train passage that migrants have used to travel freely to the United States for decades. Once, Mexican immigration agents would rarely harass La Bestia's migrant passengers. But today, officers stationed at the new Southern Border Plan checkpoints peppering the tracks detain all who ride by.

"Immigration is like another kind of gang," said Brayan, an unaccompanied minor from Honduras who traveled with Mendoza's family. "To pass the checkpoints you have to pay [immigration authorities] a bribe, and if you can't, then they'll pull you off the train and beat you. And unlike the gangs they can deport you afterwards."

Like many migrants, Mendoza and her children concluded that their only option was to set out on foot across southern Mexico. To avoid Mexican immigration officials, migrants attempt to traverse hundreds of miles through thick jungle or desert, areas often controlled by gangs or cartels.

Mendoza's family managed to cross the border into Mexico, but the long walks proved arduous for Dayrin, who suffers from a chronic respiratory sickness. Whenever she began to wheeze, Mendoza and her family were forced to stop. Soon, the family ditched their suitcases, which contained all their clothes, family photographs, even a special mattress for Dayrin that helped relieve her labored breathing.

After struggling for four days, Mendoza's family had made it only to Tapachula, just 25 miles north of the border. For several days, they stayed in a cheap hotel on the seedy outskirts of town, hoping another option would present itself. "There was no way we could continue on our own," she said. "It is impossible with such small children."

But they got lucky. On their third night in Tapachula, another migrant staying at the hotel told Mendoza about the Viacrucis Migrante, an annual pilgrimage that promised to provide safe passage to Mexico City for undocumented migrants. Last year's Viacrucis, made up of 400 migrants from across the Northern Triangle and even Cuba, sought to highlight the alleged human rights violations committed under the auspices of the Southern Border Plan. (When translated, Viacrucis Migrante means "Migrant Stations of the Cross." It analogizes the migrant journey through Mexico to Jesus's persecution and last days.). Carrying crosses and signs reading "Jesus was a migrant" and "The Southern Border Plan: No More Blood," they aimed to march over 300 miles from the Guatemalan border town of Tecún Umán to Ixtepec, in Mexico, before continuing the journey to the Mexican capital on buses. Leading the march was a priest named Alejandro Solalinde, the founder and director of a widely admired migrant shelter, Hermanos en el Camino, located in Ixtepec.

With the Viacrucis, Mendoza and her children walked nearly 300 miles across southern Mexico, from Chiapas to Ixtepec. The stretch is considered one of the most dangerous for migrants, the area where Mexico's beefed-up security forces apprehend the majority of migrants, children in particular. But under the protection of the Viacrucis, Mendoza and the other migrants could stick to the main roads, charging defiantly through immigration checkpoints. Lacking the resources to detain hundreds of people at once, immigration officials could only look on helplessly.

Along the way, the Viacrucis relied on the charity of sympathetic town residents for food and shelter. On Easter, Mendoza and her children arrived safely at the Hermanos en el Camino shelter in Ixtepec.

Mendoza's children soon befriended Julia (not her real name), a 12-year-old girl traveling with her uncles, both undocumented minors as well, whom her mother had paid to smuggle her into the United States. Julia confided in Mendoza that her uncles had already spent all the money and were raping her, and planned to sell her into sex slavery once they arrived in Mexico City.

Theoretically, Julia should fall under the protection of Mexico's 2011 migration law, which says that any child eligible for repatriation must be given due process to determine whether the environment she is returned to could be detrimental to her safety. But under the Southern Border Plan, the Migration Law's assurances of due process are routinely ignored by the National Institute of Migration (INM), Mexico's central migration authority. According to an internal report authored by the United Nations this fall, the INM now immediately deports over 85 percent of the unaccompanied minors it detains.

Mendoza worried about reporting the uncles to the shelter. "What if they find out it was me? They could go after my children," she said. Eventually her conscience won out, and she warned shelter staff. Julia's uncles were apprehended.

That same day, a *pollero*, or migrant smuggler, approached Mendoza at the shelter in Ixtepec with an offer to take her family across the border. El Negro, as he was known by the other Viacrucis members, seemed to treat the march as a business opportunity. He bragged that he had crossed Mexico dozens of times and knew where to expect immigration patrols and whom to pay off.

The designers of the Southern Border Plan vowed that it would combat human trafficking. Partly because trafficking is so opaque, it is unclear how many migrants are trafficked through Mexico each year. Some migrants are smuggled involuntarily (through sex trafficking, for instance), but plenty of migrants seek out polleros to sneak them through the country. Polleros can be unreliable, abandoning migrants if they feel they are in danger or simply stealing migrants' money and stranding them.

Despite these risks, business has boomed for polleros since the Southern Border Plan made crossing more difficult for the average migrant. Smugglers now routinely charge migrants $7,000 or more to cross through Mexico and into the United States, twice the cost in 2013. Part of those fees is used to bribe INM officials to let them pass.

El Negro offered Mendoza a bargain at $1,500 per person, but she declined. She suspected his feigned generosity was actually a ploy to rob her. But El Negro persisted; it seemed to have become personal. He followed Mendoza around the shelter during the day and even pulled his mattress beside hers at night. He started groping her and tried to kiss her in front of her children. He said he loved her and that he would take her across the border for free if he could be with her. "I am scared of him," she said at the time. "I don't want him around my children."

Mendoza reported El Negro to the shelter's directors, who kicked him out. But other migrants told her that he had set up camp in the town square and bragged that with his pollero know-how, it would be easy to trail the Viacrucis wherever it went.

That the Southern Border Plan has made life harder for normal migrants while allowing a stalker like El Negro to roam freely was not lost on the migrants. "Man, that guy has been harassing that nice lady and her kids," said Axel, another Viacrucis member. "That dude can do whatever he wants and we're just the prey."

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Even before the Viacrucis arrived in Ixtepec in early April, its members had planned to rent buses and drive the remaining 500 miles to stage a climactic demonstration in Mexico City and testify against the INM at the headquarters of Mexico's National Human Rights Commission. Before their departure, Father Solalinde organized a procession through the town that would serve as a prayer for peace; reporters from national news outlets accompanied them. By the time the migrants returned to the shelter on the town's dusty outskirts, it was decorated in *papel picado*, or decorative streamers, and packed with media.

For the INM, this highly visible display was the last straw. On April 5, over 100 officers, clad in body armor and brandishing batons, surrounded the shelter, trapping almost 400 migrants inside. They announced that they would detain the migrants if they continued on to Mexico City.

The situation would quickly grow dire. The shelter normally supported only about 100 migrants a day. With more than 400 people holed up inside, its food supplies disappeared, its makeshift plumbing system broke down, and even its Internet connection jammed. Many in the Viacrucis suspected this was the police's intent. "They were starving us out," Mendoza said.

Agents also barricaded the four buses that the Viacrucis had rented to drive to Mexico City, and they threatened to arrest the drivers for human trafficking if they transported the marchers to the capital — a great irony, with El Negro lurking free in the town square. Solalinde said he had "never seen the city so under siege."

After nearly two weeks of cabin fever, the Viacrucis marchers decided that their only choice was to confront the authorities. Journalists and officials from the Human Rights Commission agreed to accompany them to document any abuses they might suffer at the hands of the police.

On April 15, as the sun beat down on the asphalt, they marched toward the buses, the men walking in lock step with arms linked to shield the women and children behind them. Marcos's young voice cut through the dusty air, calling the Viacrucis to move forward. The police surrounded the Viacrucis, slamming riot shields into the men's feet, trying to break the outer ring.

Suddenly, an INM agent ripped Marcos away from Mendoza. He fell to the ground, and the man kicked him in the stomach before she was able to pull him back into her arms. “I felt like I was drowning,” said Marcos. “All I could see was red, and then I couldn’t remember anything.”

After hours of struggle, several people had broken hands or feet, but they pushed themselves onto the buses and sped off to Mexico City. “Even Father Solalinde fought the police with us,” Mendoza said. “After it was over, he came up to Marcos and asked if he was OK. My son is very brave; he never cried. Mexico is no place for him.”

Marcos became the face of the migrants’ plight, his image plastered across the national newspapers that covered the march — a tiny David facing Goliath, bearing only a cross. The Viacrucis’s newfound celebrity, together with the Human Rights Commission’s testimony about police and INM brutality, pressured the government into awarding each migrant involved in the march an *amparo,* a special 20-day visa that allowed them to cross the country freely. Visas in hand, the Viacrucis held one last celebratory march to the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in the heart of Mexico City, triumphantly entering the basilica to the cheers of worshippers and a sea of media flashbulbs.

With the visa’s 20-day grace period ticking, Mendoza and her family caught the next bus to Tijuana, where, with the last of their money, they found a shabby apartment to rent. They asked family members in the United States to send more to hire a coyote to smuggle them into San Diego. But it would cost $5,000 just to take them across the 10-mile stretch; pooling that much money would take months.

Mendoza looked for work in Tijuana, but was turned away. “They offer nothing to migrants,” she said. Immigration authorities patrolled the poorer parts of the city, scooping up stranded migrants like Mendoza as they hustled for a few scant pesos to buy food.

Then, El Negro appeared outside her house, pacing the streets freely as other migrants avoided drawing attention to themselves, fearful of the INM. She didn’t know how he found her, and didn’t want to know. She kept her children locked inside and the windows shuttered, even when Dayrin’s respiratory sickness resurfaced with a vengeance.

With El Negro outside, Mendoza couldn't leave to look for work and was still months from being able to pay a coyote. Soon, her family's visas expired. If INM agents found them, they would be deported. She decided she had to make a move. They snuck out of the apartment in the dead of night, reaching the local migrant shelter. The next morning they met a group of migrants about to cross into San Diego through the border region's arid hills. It was do or die.

Tijuana is one of the best-patrolled sections of the U.S.-Mexico border, equipped with infrared cameras, motion sensors, and a 24-hour armed Border Patrol. The group only made it several hours before being apprehended.

After spending a night in the detention area, the Border Patrol told Mendoza that she and her children would be released to a family member, with one caveat: She would have to wear an ankle bracelet tracking her whereabouts to ensure that she would attend her deportation hearing. Their release was likely due to a precedent set during 2014's border crisis, when tens of thousands of children were put in the custody of their relatives in the United States to await their deportation hearings. Well over 7,000 Central American children have been ordered deported since the crisis, with the vast majority of children still awaiting their court dates. Fewer than two-thirds of these children receive a lawyer.

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This past summer, just a year after its founding, Mexico's Office for the Attention of Migrants on the Southern Border was disbanded after failing to heed repeated calls for transparency from the media and left-leaning sections of the government. The office never published any of its findings. Nor did it disclose information about its new tactics to carry out the Southern Border Plan or account for how it spent its 100 million pesos in funding. Humberto Mayans, the former director of the office, has returned to his old Senate seat. But the office's closure will likely prove a Pyrrhic victory for critics of the Southern Border Plan.

In an August speech, Mayans said that the Southern Border Plan will continue for the next 18 years and will be integrated into pre-existing government bodies without any centralized supervision. Mayans also insisted that the policy's goals were infrastructure-based — that new security measures around La Bestia, for instance, were part of greater efforts to modernize Mexico's rail system — and that any talk of migrant deportations was a distraction. "It's not true we're doing these things to deter migrants from boarding [La Bestia]. It's just a necessity of the south-southeastern region to have a modern physical infrastructure," he said.

Of the six Mexican government officials I spoke to, not one could name a single person currently supervising the strategy. "Today the Southern Border Plan is focused on infrastructure, not this migrant nonsense," Director of Public Relations Karla Olmos told me, before abruptly ending the interview.

Such a response doesn't surprise Javier Urbano, coordinator of migratory affairs at Universidad Iberoamericana and one of Mexico's leading experts on migration. A lack of accountability, he said, is actually one of the main purposes of the strategy. "If no one is doing it, then no one can be blamed."

Mexico slow-moving human crisis, in many respects, brings it tragically closer to the rest of the world. "The things happening here in Mexico are happening around the world," Urbano said. "Syrian migrants being barred from Europe, the dead babies washing up on the shores. These things happen in Mexico as well; they are just not as visible. That is the goal of the Southern Border Plan. To make these problems go away."

But the problems aren't going away. Between Oct. 1 and Nov. 30, 2015, the number of children detained in the United States doubled compared with the same period in 2014, despite the 200,000 Central Americans the INM has caught since the start of the Southern Border Plan. The United States could well be poised for another border surge.

Today, Mendoza lives with family members in the Midwest but is too scared of possible deportation to offer more details about her location. Her children attend school. But because Mendoza is not allowed to work, she and her children must rely on their extended family for financial support. She stays at home, cooking and cleaning, and is looking for an attorney to help her family seek asylum before their upcoming deportation hearing. El Negro doesn't worry her anymore. But coming up with $18,000 for an immigration lawyer does.

She sometimes watches the news to learn English and is gripped by images of the tens of thousands of Syrian refugees clashing with European police. "That used to be us," she said. "But we aren't on American television. We are invisible. And now that we're in the United States, we must stay invisible, or else be deported."

Photo Credit: ALFREDO ESTRELLA/AFP

10 Conflicts to Watch in 2016

From Syria to the South China Sea, the conflicts and crises the world will face in the

coming year.

BY JEAN-MARIE GUÉHENNO | JANUARY 3, 2016

Pulling together a list of the wars most in need of international attention and support in 2016 is challenging for all the wrong reasons. For 20 years after the end of the Cold War, deadly conflict was in decline. Fewer wars were killing fewer people the world over. Five years ago, however, that positive trend went into reverse, and each year since has seen more conflict, more victims, and more people displaced. 2016 is unlikely to bring an improvement from the woes of 2015: It is war — not peace — that has momentum.

That said, there are conflicts whose urgency and importance rise above. This year's list of 10 is weighted toward wars with the worst humanitarian consequences: Syria and Iraq, South Sudan, Afghanistan, Yemen, and the Lake Chad basin. It includes those in influential and functioning states, like Turkey, as well as those that have collapsed, like Libya. It features conflicts that are already bad but are poised to get much worse without intelligent intervention, such as Burundi, as well as tensions, such as those in the South China Sea, that are simmering but have yet to boil over. The list also considers the hopeful example presented by Colombia, where considerable progress is being made toward ending a 51-year insurgency.

Half of the conflicts on this year's list involve extremist groups whose goals and ideologies are difficult to accommodate through negotiated settlement, complicating efforts to plot a path to peace. Looking ahead to 2016, it's time to dispense with the notion that fighting against violent extremism suffices as a plan for world order — or even the basis of a solution for a single country like Syria. To be sure, stopping the abominations of the Islamic State and other jihadis is vital, but it also exposes policy dilemmas: The fear of what follows the demise of authoritarians (Iraq and Libya being prime exhibits) creates a strong incentive to back repressive regimes, but order based solely on state coercion is not sustainable. The dramatic increase in the reach and influence of jihadis over the past few years is a symptom of deeper trends in the Middle East: mounting sectarianism, a crisis of legitimacy of existing states, and escalating geopolitical competition, particularly between Saudi Arabia and Iran. When the enemy comes from within a given region, military action directed from abroad is more likely to aggravate than assuage.

There is an alternative to this approach: States could work pragmatically at managing differences rather than overcoming them while leaving political space open for local actors to speak up. This will require courage, patience, and creative diplomacy, but the two most important diplomatic successes of 2015 — the Iran nuclear deal and the agreement on climate change — give reason to believe an international approach based on finding common interests could work. There are other glimmers of hope, too: major strides forward in Colombia's peace talks, a cease-fire in Ukraine bolstered by the Minsk process, progress in Myanmar's democratic transition, and a welcome, if long overdue, resolution from the U.N. Security Council on Syria.

Most of the conflicts listed here require action at several levels — between major powers, regionally and locally — and none are amenable to a quick fix. Given the challenges of ending conflicts amid the upheaval of a revolutionary era, it is all the more urgent to provide humanitarian aid and to mitigate the human toll of violence — evidenced starkly in the hundreds of thousands of refugees who have fled toward Europe in the past year. States must also redouble efforts to forge political agreements, taking advantage of even the narrowest openings to find opportunities for compromise. The fluidity of the present moment can and must be used to shape a new, better-balanced order.

Syria and Iraq

At the close of the year, the war in Syria is the world's gravest, with its effects stretching across the region and sucking in major powers. More than a quarter of a million Syrians have been killed and almost 11 million — about half the country's population — displaced in or outside the country. The rise of the Islamic State, which now controls a large swath of eastern Syria and northwest Iraq, has drawn in firepower from countries including the United States, France, the United Kingdom, and Russia. As yet, however, none of these countries has articulated a coherent strategy to defeat the Islamic State.

Worse still, Moscow and Western powers have been working at cross-purposes, with Russian jets bombing anti-Islamic State rebels that Washington considers partners against the jihadi group. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime continues to use indiscriminate aerial bombardment and other methods of collective punishment, inflicting civilian casualties in Sunni-majority areas that dwarf the numbers of victims claimed by the Islamic State's violence. Assad's tactics fuel continued cycles of radicalization, in Syria in particular, but also across the region, by fanning sectarian flames and feeding the sense of Sunni victimization from which the Islamic State profits.

The pace of diplomatic action has quickened, spurred in part by Russia's military intervention in Syria in September and the Islamic State-sponsored terrorist attacks in Paris in November. While the growing internationalization of the conflict presents many dangers, it may also open possibilities for diplomacy. In December, the U.N. Security Council unanimously adopted a resolution calling for a cease-fire and political solution in Syria. The resolution sets forth an ambitious timetable, with talks between the government and the opposition to start in January; a Syrian-led political process to establish "credible, inclusive and non-sectarian governance" within six months; and elections within a year-and-a-half. Questions about Assad's future — which provoke the most vehement disagreement between major powers on the Security Council, rival regional powers, and Syrian factions — remain unaddressed.

Despite many reasons to be skeptical, it is worth hoping that this latest initiative marks the beginning of a meaningful effort to resolve the conflict. A conference in Riyadh in December exceeded expectations by bringing together an unprecedented range of the opposition's armed and political factions to agree on a negotiating team. Participants pledged their commitment to a pluralistic Syrian future and conditional willingness to engage in the peace process. For a national cease-fire to work, however, there must be a strategy for dealing with spoilers — especially al Qaeda affiliate al-Nusra Front, which is geographically, and often operationally, integrated into the non-jihadi opposition in much of western Syria.

In Iraq, meanwhile, the Western strategy to defeat the Islamic State relies largely on military offensives by Iraqi Kurds, a mostly Shiite Iraqi army, and Iran-backed Shiite militias. This risks feeding the resentment of Sunni Arabs in areas currently under Islamic State control. Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's government is under pressure from rival Shiite factions for a host of reasons — including anger over corruption, the state's failure to provide basic services and security, resistance to his reform agenda, and intramural jockeying for power. Shiite militias are not only fighting the Islamic State, but have organized to fill the security vacuum and defend Baghdad and Shiite holy sites. The militias' partial success resonates with many unemployed youth, who have been at the forefront of street protests. The Islamic State rules partly through brutal coercion but also by exploiting fear of the Shiite-dominated government and by empowering formerly marginalized segments within the Sunni community. Iraqi forces have spent months trying to retake Ramadi, the capital of Anbar province, after a humiliating withdrawal last May, and in the last week of the year managed to finally gain control of the city. The next priority will be to oust the Islamic State from Mosul, the northern city where it is perhaps best entrenched.

Turkey

Recent photographs from the southeastern city of Diyarbakir show young militants with assault rifles manning sandbagged roadblocks and engaging in bloody urban battles. Such images capture a dangerous escalation in Turkey's long conflict with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a confrontation that has killed more than 30,000 people since 1984. Many factors have fueled the sharp upsurge in violence following the end of peace talks last spring and the collapse of the cease-fire in July. Turkey's Kurdish movement backs the PKK's Syrian affiliate, the PYD, which has made gains in fighting against the Islamic State. Ankara worries that cross-border Kurdish solidarity will further strengthen demands for a separate state. This perceived threat has weakened Turkey's focus on the fight against the Islamic State, leading many Turkish Kurds to conclude that Ankara supports the terrorist group that is ostensibly their common enemy.

Over the past six months, the conflict has escalated to its most violent point in two decades. Both sides know that there is no military solution; however, each wants to weaken the other as much as possible while waiting for the Syria quagmire to settle. To prevent the Middle East's ethno-sectarian violence from spilling further into Turkey, both sides should urgently end violence, agree on cease-fire conditions, and restart peace talks. Free from electoral pressures for four years, the new Justice and Development Party (AKP) government should formulate a concrete reform agenda to address demands for Kurdish rights — including decentralization and mother-tongue education — that can be advanced within a democratic framework.

Yemen

The Saudi-led war in Yemen — backed by the United States, Britain, and allies in the Gulf — has been grinding on since March 2015, with no end in sight. U.N.-sponsored peace talks in Switzerland in mid-December yielded only an agreement to resume negotiations on Jan. 14. Nearly 6,000 people have reportedly been killed, almost half of them civilians. More than 2 million people have been uprooted from their homes; an additional 120,000 have fled the country. The war has destroyed the country's already weak infrastructure, deepened political divides, and introduced a narrative of sectarianism where previously there had been little or none. The conflict threatens the security of the Arabian Peninsula, particularly Saudi Arabia itself, by feeding the growth of terrorist networks like al Qaeda and the Islamic State.

The violence has its roots in a botched political transition following the departure of longtime President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who was forced out amid protests in 2011. After years of indecision about the country's political future, Houthi militias took matters into their own hands and captured the capital, Sanaa, in September 2014. The Houthis — a predominantly Zaydi Shiite movement rooted in the north — began moving south in alliance with forces loyal to Saleh. On March 25, 2015, they seized a strategic military base near Aden and held the defense minister hostage. The next day, Saudi Arabia launched a major military campaign — Operation Decisive Storm — to roll back the Houthi advance and restore the government of President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi. The Houthis bear much of the responsibility for triggering the war, but the Saudi-led campaign has only escalated the violence and thus far proved largely counterproductive.

Saudi Arabia sees the Houthis as proxies for Iran. While Iran's role has been minimal, Tehran has not hesitated to make political hay of Houthi successes, thereby further raising the stakes in a volatile region. The perception that it is meddling has alarmed Saudi Arabia, which sees Iran as ascendant and having hegemonic ambitions. A peaceful solution to the Yemen war may well require a prior accommodation between these two regional superpowers, currently a remote possibility.

Libya

The Islamic State's apparent consolidation of its base around Sirte, on Libya's Mediterranean coast, has brought fresh urgency to international efforts to end a political crisis that has left the country in a shambles.

Following NATO's military intervention and the ouster of longtime dictator Muammar al-Qaddafi in 2011, assorted political parties, tribes, and militias have been fighting for power and control over the nation's vast oil and gas riches. Since mid-2014, the country has been governed by two rival factions — another way of saying that no one is really in charge. A U.N.-brokered deal to form a national unity government emerged in December, thanks to heavy lifting from the United States and Italy. Members of both factions signed up, but many powerful constituents still oppose the deal. The unity government may not be able to govern much, especially if opponents prevent it from taking a seat in Tripoli.

Meanwhile, lawlessness continues to take a heavy toll. Thousands of detainees languish in prisons without proper judicial review while kidnappings and targeted killings are rampant. Libya is also a major transit hub for refugees and migrants trying to reach Europe from other parts of the Middle East and Africa. The unchecked flow of arms and fighters through Libya has fueled conflicts across the Sahel, including in Mali and the Lake Chad basin (see below). Western intelligence officials say that the impoverished Fezzan region in the south is swiftly becoming a haven for criminal networks and radical groups. On top of all this, economic collapse looms on the horizon unless oil production increases and officials act to maintain the integrity of Libya's core financial institutions, which the two rival administrations have been squabbling over.

The first task for the new Libyan government, and its international partners, must be to bring aboard those Libyans who currently oppose it. At best, the recently signed agreement should be seen as a beginning, not an end, to the peace process.

Lake Chad basin

Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon face an evolving threat from the jihadi militant group Boko Haram. Over the past six years, the group has transformed itself from a small protest movement in northern Nigeria to a powerful force capable of mounting devastating attacks across the Lake Chad basin. Last March, it pledged allegiance to the Islamic State — an affiliation that appears to have had little impact beyond improving Boko Haram's online presence.

This past summer, Cameroon experienced the greatest increase in attacks by Boko Haram, followed closely by Niger and Chad. Nigeria, however, remains the epicenter of the conflict. Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari, who took office in May, ambitiously pledged to end the insurgency by December. While this remains a distant goal, Buhari — a former army major general — has shaken up his country's security establishment and joined with regional forces to drive Boko Haram from the areas in northeastern Nigeria it had seized earlier in 2015.

Boko Haram is, however, resilient, adaptable, and mobile. Military efforts, to date, have had limited success in countering its use of suicide bombers, who are often young women and girls. Its terrorist attacks on remote and unprotected villages — and even on regional capitals, like N'Djamena — continue. Indiscriminate responses by state security forces and insufficient efforts to win over the affected communities only pour fuel on the fire. Regional governments are still failing to address the factors behind radicalization. Decades of political corruption, festering grievances, and poor access to basic social services have bred deep anger and alienation. These issues are compounded by rapid population growth and environmental degradation, which drive social tension and migration.

South Sudan

Yet again, the world's newest country is at risk of descending into full-blown civil war. The peace agreement reached between the government and the largest armed opposition group in August after intensive African-led mediation is on the brink of collapse. Meanwhile, independent armed groups outside the deal are proliferating.

The roots of the conflict date back to internecine competition among various factions during South Sudan's decades-long independence struggle. South Sudan won independence from Sudan, only to explode into civil war on Dec. 15, 2013, as divisions within the ruling Sudan People's Liberation Movement led to fighting and targeted ethnic killings in the capital of Juba. Only hours after the conflict erupted, tens of thousands of people sought refuge at U.N. bases to escape ethnic massacres and sexual violence. Today, nearly 200,000 people live under the direct protection of U.N. peacekeepers.

Over the past two years, more than 2.4 million people have been displaced, and tens of thousands have been killed. A report released by the African Union in October detailed atrocities by both sides, including mass killings and rapes. Now, with an increasing number of the country's more than 24 armed groups aligned with neither the government nor the main opposition forces, the prospect of a multipolar war is real. Regional actors, especially members of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), which mediated the peace agreement, and international powers, including IGAD partners China, Norway, the United States, and the United Kingdom, must take urgent, united action to push South Sudan's leaders to respect their commitments to the peace deal and avert a catastrophic return to war.

Burundi

Almost daily, dead bodies appear on the streets of Bujumbura, with the circumstances surrounding their deaths often unknown. More than 300 people have been killed since last April, when President Pierre Nkurunziza announced plans to seek a third term in office despite widespread opposition. Nkurunziza's re-election in July, following a failed coup attempt, sparked a season of confrontation between government forces and armed opposition fighters. Escalating violence raises fears of a return to conflict after a decade of relative peace. At least 300,000 people died during Burundi's 12-year civil war, which ended in 2005 after dogged peace-building efforts led by former Presidents Julius Nyerere of Tanzania and Nelson Mandela of South Africa.

In December, the African Union Peace and Security Council took the bold step of authorizing an African Prevention and Protection Mission in Burundi to halt the slide toward civil war and mass atrocities. Nkurunziza reacted angrily and said Burundians would "stand up and fight" against foreign troops. The African Union has reached out to the government and is calling on both sides to cooperate with peace talks, with the next round scheduled for Jan. 6. It is not clear if the African Union has sufficient member support to impose a mission against the will of the Burundian government.

The humanitarian situation is dire. More than 200,000 people have fled the country, and U.N. officials have warned that without immediate action there is a risk of "catastrophic violence." So far, the crisis is more political than ethnic. However, some leaders appear to be exploiting ethnic divisions, and there is a risk of mass atrocities if violence continues unchecked. It also threatens to further destabilize the fragile Great Lakes region, with increasing numbers of refugees fleeing to Rwanda, Tanzania, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Afghanistan

U.S. President Barack Obama's endgame in Afghanistan seems ever more remote, as the country remains mired in conflict more than 14 years after the United States intervened to oust the Taliban and destroy al Qaeda. Today, the Taliban, despite internal splits, are still a formidable force; al Qaeda maintains a presence, and the Islamic State has established a foothold. A short-lived breakthrough in Pakistan-brokered peace talks last July was scuttled after opponents of the talks disclosed that the Taliban's reclusive leader, Mullah Mohammed Omar, had died in 2013. The Taliban eventually confirmed these reports and announced that longtime deputy Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour had taken over. Mullah Mansour, who reportedly has close ties to Pakistan's intelligence services, consolidated his leadership position with a string of military victories, including the temporary capture of Kunduz in late September. Yet factionalism continues to bedevil the Taliban movement. Unconfirmed reports surfaced in early December indicating that Mullah Mansour may have been injured or killed in a firefight with rivals in Pakistan. A handful of field commanders throughout the year declared allegiance to the Islamic State.

Fighting across multiple provinces continues to inflict heavy civilian casualties — one reason that Afghanistan is second only to Syria as a leading source of refugees. Rampant corruption and abuse of power by local authorities continue to be the chief drivers of support for the insurgency. The United States now says that it will maintain troop levels at 9,800 for most of 2016, and NATO's Resolute Support Mission is committed to providing financial support for Afghan security forces until 2020. But given the potency of the insurgency, there is clearly no military solution to the conflict. And the splintering and proliferation of militant groups threaten future efforts to broker peace. President Ashraf Ghani's attempts to resume negotiations with the Taliban are controversial and strain the cohesion of his national unity government. For talks to succeed, they must be broadly Afghan-led and owned, and driven more by the interests of the Afghan people than by those of powerful external players like Pakistan and the United States.

South China Sea

The South China Sea risks becoming a theater of big-power competition, as the United States challenges China's large-scale land reclamation and construction on several disputed reefs. China's aggressive assertion of its territorial claims sets it on a collision course with several Southeast Asian nations with competing sovereignty claims in one of the world's busiest waterways, an area rich with fisheries and possible oil and gas reserves. Tensions flared in May, when a U.S. spy plane flew near Fiery Cross Reef in the Spratly archipelago, where China is building an airfield. U.S. Defense Secretary Ash Carter called for an immediate and lasting halt to land reclamation in the disputed area and announced that the United States "will fly, sail, and operate wherever international law allows." In October, a U.S. Navy warship approached another disputed reef in the Spratlys, prompting a sharp rebuke from Beijing that the action was illegal and posed a threat to its national security. In November, Obama announced an aid package worth $259 million over two years to boost the maritime security of Vietnam, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Malaysia, all rival claimants to China.

In what could prove a landmark case, a tribunal in The Hague is considering an arbitration request filed by the Philippines accusing China of violating international law in the South China Sea. Beijing refuses to participate or accept the court's jurisdiction, but the case could still help unite international opinion and nudge China toward greater cooperation. A decision is expected in 2016.

Beijing should realize that its use of sharp elbows diminishes confidence in regional self-governance and encourages its neighbors to turn to the United States for protection. In turn, Washington must use its words and actions to defend the global commons and support multilateral diplomacy, rather than merely asserting its military supremacy. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations should drive negotiations with China to commit all parties to a code of conduct to manage maritime disputes before small ripples grow into big waves.

Colombia

Peace talks in Havana between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) achieved a series of breakthroughs in recent months, raising hopes that the country may finally see an end to its 51-year-old armed conflict in 2016. The conflict has claimed the lives of an estimated 220,000 people; 50,000 have been "disappeared," and a staggering 7.6 million people have registered as victims of the conflict.

In December, the two sides announced a milestone agreement on transitional justice, one of the toughest issues on the agenda. They had previously reached agreements — with some matters left open for discussion — on rural development, political participation, and drug policy.

President Juan Manuel Santos has declared an ambitious March 23 deadline for reaching a final agreement, but he has pushed back the date for a bilateral cease-fire. Sensitive questions continue to dog the disarmament and reintegration of rebel forces, as well as monitoring mechanisms to ensure implementation. Other complex issues include how to confirm the peace agreement: The government has committed to a popular vote, while the FARC has long called for a constituent assembly. A smaller rebel group, the National Liberation Army (ELN), must also join the peace process. And the huge challenge of healing the scars left by decades of war in a country still plagued by illegal armed groups remains. All that said, there are positive signs that the continent's longest-running, and last-remaining, armed conflict will soon come to a conclusion.

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