

ZeroFox Intelligence Geopolitical Brief for August 2023



TLP: CLEAR

B-2023-07-28a

Executive Summary

With a likely coup unfolding in Niger, unelected leaders are now presiding from Africa's western coast of Guinea all the way to the eastern nation of Sudan in the area known as the Sahel. This is far from the only zone of conflict in Africa; Nigeria, its largest country, is the origin point for the historical jihadist violence afflicting Niger, and the government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Africa's second-largest country by landmass, is locked in constant violence against a myriad of rebel groups in the mineral-rich northeast. Further, Ethiopia—Africa's premier transportation economy and second-largest nation by population—recently ended a civil war, and Kenya, one of its leading economies, is seeing weekly violent protests.

The leading cause of political instability is jihadist violence, and successive governments in Mali and Burkina Faso were overthrown for their inability to battle the jihadists; the leader of Chad was killed in battle before his son replaced him. In Sudan, arguably the most strategic of the recent coup nations, conflict risks spreading continent-wide. Military rulers unable to give up power have played a part in causing the unrest, as has the current strife between the United States and Russia. Russia's Wagner group is strongly linked to the coup in Niger and previously established relations with the coup leaders in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Sudan. Wagner has the added incentive of pushing out the United States and France, which have deployed thousands of troops to support the overthrown governments. Russia's war in Ukraine has also worsened the cost-of-living crisis across the region, which likely added to popular support for coup leaders. The crisis in west Africa in particular looks set to worsen, with attacks escalating in Mali and Burkina after the coups—despite pledges by their leaders to be better-equipped to combat the violence. Former French colonies like Benin, Togo, and Ivory Coast are battling the same forces that first spread from Mali.

South Africa also looks set to play a role in the wider geopolitical dispute between the United States and Russia, as it is hosting the BRICS summit of emerging economies. Russian President Vladimir Putin will not be attending, but the summit will be a key metric in determining how the West's main political adversaries, Russia and China, intend to respond to a spate of Western trade and technology restrictions that were outlined at the May G7 summit in Tokyo. The BRICS bloc may seek to use its dominance of rare-earth and energy supply chains to entice traditional, smaller Western allies into joining the group.

Latin America also has a series of important elections in the next month. The months-long protest movement in Israel will be reinvigorated further as the government seeks to implement a judicial overhaul against protesters, contrary to investors' wishes. Leaders in Thailand and Cambodia have also been pushing back against protester demands. This risks operations at some of the key alternative supply chain hubs. Israel has served for years as a key tech and financial hub, while Thailand and even Cambodia are key to derisking supply chains from China. However, the ruling governments make operations difficult. Lastly, the end of 2023 will likely see consequential elections in Europe that could determine the trajectory of support for Ukraine going into 2024.

Key Findings

- Violent protests in the Middle East related to repeat Quran burnings in Sweden and Denmark are possible in August 2023, while threats of violence in Europe are escalating in response.
- Coup and military leaders are now in power from Africa's westernmost edge of Guinea to its eastern Edge of Sudan crossing the entire Sahel.
- Guatemala's incumbent government will likely interfere in the upcoming election to prevent a reformist government taking over.
- Protests are likely to escalate in Israel after key judicial reforms were passed.
- Instability from the Sahel region of Africa is likely to spread further into key economies backed by the United States and France.
- Argentina holds important primary elections that historically determine the next president.
- Ecuador is seeing another wave of drug-related violence ahead of August elections.
- The BRICS summit in South Africa could feature key economic agreements aimed at weakening U.S. dominance of global trade.
- Protests are likely in Thailand in August as the military blocks new governments forming.
- Unrest is possible in Zimbabwe if the government intervenes in elections.
- Ukraine is targeting Russian logistics in Crimea, while Russia targets Ukrainian trade infrastructure to damage the Ukrainian economy.

Key Threats and Developments



Russia ending the grain Initiative will worsen food price inflation.



Protests are likely throughout Israel in August 2023.



Social unrest is likely in Guatemala due to August elections.



Despite Spanish election results, far-right parties are growing in power across Europe.



Instability in the Sahel region of Africa is likely to spread southward.



Spain and the Netherlands will likely hold consequential elections before 2024.



A key ceasefire in Colombia goes into effect in August.



Protests are likely in the Middle East if Quran burnings continue in Europe.

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Russia-Ukraine Conflict

- The Ukrainian counteroffensive remains in much the same situation as it did in late June. Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in three directions towards Zaporizhia Oblast, Donetsk Oblast, and around Bakhmut. As in June, Ukrainian forces made minimal gains in July, slowed by the complex network of entrenched Russian defenses. The offensive will likely continue at a grinding pace for several more months as Ukraine seeks to break these defenses.[1]
- Ukraine is increasingly striking Russian logistics positions and other high-profile targets far from the frontlines. Ukrainian forces have employed this strategy since May 2023 to disrupt Russian force readiness and create potential weak points. [2] Ukraine increased the tempo of these strikes—especially in the Crimean Peninsula—in the last 10 days of July. Crimea serves as an important logistics and transportation hub for Russian forces; Ukraine is likely trying to disrupt these operations to limit Russia's ability to support its forces in Zaporizhia and Donetsk.

Forward Look:

- Several Ukrainian leaders, including President Volodymyr Zelensky, have admitted the offensive is proceeding slower than planned. These statements should not be interpreted as a sign the offensive has failed.[3] Ukraine has not yet committed its decisive reserve force; it will remain too early to judge the outcome of the offensive until Ukraine does so.
- The fallout from Wagner leader Yevgeny Prigozhin's armed rebellion continues to play out. The rebellion did not impact Russia's military operations in the short-term. Russian forces were able to maintain their defensive positions and begin an offensive push towards Kupyansk in northeastern Ukraine. However, medium- and long-term consequences are becoming more clear. In the weeks following the rebellion, the Russian military arrested or dismissed several commanders it deemed to be not sufficiently loyal to the Kremlin.[4] This purge of commanders sparked outrage from some troops and compounded morale concerns.

Black Sea Grain Initiative

- Russia is stepping up attacks on Ukrainian grain infrastructure to destroy the Ukrainian economy, blackmail the West into sanctions relief, and sow divisions between Ukraine and European Union (EU) member states.[5]
- In the week since Russia's withdrawal, Russian forces targeted the port city of Odesa with almost daily drone strikes. These attacks damaged grain supplies and key export infrastructure. On July 24, Russian drones also struck the Danube port of Reni, again damaging food stockpiles and port infrastructure.[6]

Forward Look:

- Even though the Black Sea Grain Initiative was somewhat defunct during its last two months of existence, the agreement still allowed huge volumes to ship that will be difficult to compensate for via other routes.
- Global grain prices are highly sensitive to the news cycle right now.

European Politics

- **The Netherlands:** Government disbanded and PM Rutte leaves politics ahead of general election in November 2022
- **North Macedonia:** Agrees on key constitutional change to begin EU membership bid with referendum in August 2023
- **Spain:** General elections on July 23 yield an uncertain result
- **Bulgaria:** Political stability finally

Forward Look:

- After the ruling government collapsed over disagreements on immigration, the Netherlands will hold new elections in November 2023. Rutte, the longest-serving PM in Dutch history, said he would be resigning from politics and not participating in the snap election; he will remain as the leader of a caretaker government until a new cabinet is formed after the next election. However, the last cabinet was just formed in January 2022 after the longest coalition talks in Dutch history; that government was supposed to rule until 2025. In local elections held in early 2023, a new populist pro-farmer party, the Farmers Citizens Movement (BBB), gained a majority in provincial elections despite it being their first campaign. While BBB is a new party, it currently leads in polls. They have ruled out forming a government with Rutte's People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD). BBB's main campaign issues are opposition to environmental restrictions on the farming sector; the VVD has led the passage of environmental bills that are coming into effect now and will force the closure of hundreds of farms to reduce emissions. A rare combined ticket between the Labour and Green parties also looks like it could form a government and offset any gains for BBB or far-right parties hoping to capitalize on cost-of-living and immigration issues. Expect lengthy government formation talks.
- On July 25, the Parliament of the Republic of North Macedonia's Committee on Constitutional Affairs approved proposed constitutional changes that are key to joining the EU. The proposed changes will add Bulgarians to the country's constitution, ensuring better protection of their rights. This step will pave the way for North Macedonia's accession talks with the EU to begin. A parliamentary referendum is the next step in mid-August.
- On July 23, 2023, Spain held a general election. This vote was originally scheduled for December 2023 but was moved forward after the ruling Socialist-led (PSOE) coalition suffered considerable losses during regional and municipal elections in May. Prior to the election, most polls predicted an increase in support for the conservative People's Party (PP) and the far-right Vox Party. However, neither left-wing nor right-wing political groups in Spain were able to gain enough seats within the Congress of Deputies to assemble a majority and install a new government. In the case of Vox, the party lost support—its share of seats declined from 52 to 33. Political analysts predict a lengthy period of negotiations and efforts at coalition-building within the legislature or potentially yet another general election at some point in the fall. For the time being, current Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez will remain in place.[7]
- After five elections in two years, Bulgaria has finally formed a government, although one that will see rotating leaders every nine months. Bulgaria's new coalition government has pledged to keep Bulgaria, a NATO and EU member, on a firm pro-Western track; to fight Russian influence in Bulgaria's security sector; and to guarantee support for Ukraine's defense against Russia. It also hopes to join the EU's visa-free Schengen area and the eurozone and secure the release of billions of euros in EU recovery funds. Bulgaria's foreign and domestic policies are shifting in the direction of becoming a more mainstream European nation through judicial reforms that will align the country more closely with the EU, combat corruption, and limit Russian interference.

FOOTNOTES

[1] <https://www.understandingwar.org/background/ukraine-conflict-updates>

[2] <https://www.wsj.com/articles/ukrainian-strike-on-crimea-prompts-evacuations-as-kyiv-seeks-to-erode-russian-logistics-d20e61db>

[3] <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-65971790#:~:text=President%20Volodymyr%20Zelensky%20has%20acknowledged,at%20stake%20is%20people's%20lives.%22>

[4] <https://www.understandingwar.org/background/ukraine-conflict-updates>

[5] <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/nearly-30-ships-stop-around-ukraines-izmail-gateway-after-russian-danube-strikes-2023-07-24/>

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] <https://www.economist.com/europe/2023/07/23/spains-election-ends-in-deadlock>



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Latin America Security updates

- **Colombia:** Ceasefire between National Liberation Army (ELN) rebels and military starting on August 3, 2023
- **Ecuador:** State of emergency until September 24, 2023, after leading Mayor assassinated[8]

Forward Look:

- Colombia's largest rebel group, the left-leaning ELN, and the government of President Gustavo Petro agreed to an official ceasefire starting on August 3. The drop in violence will have some impact on easing security concerns around the mining and energy industries, and it is possible both sides can negotiate a peace agreement that sees the ELN disband. Colombia has a series of armed conflicts, and Petro has made resolving them one of his key initiatives. Given that Congress is deeply divided, these peace initiatives are more achievable than labor and tax reforms.
- President Guillermo Lasso declared a new state of emergency after Agustin Intriago, the Mayor of Manta, Ecuador's third-largest city, was assassinated. Emergency orders apply to Manta, as well as Manabí province, where Manta is located, and Los Rios.
- Ecuador is experiencing the worst levels of violence in its history, led by powerful drug-trafficking networks tied to neighboring Peru and Colombia as well as Mexico. This has coincided with a spate of prison massacres and sophisticated attacks on security forces and government officials. Ecuador's murder rate has also skyrocketed. Ecuador has instituted countless states of emergency due to the violence, and the latest imposes a curfew from 10:00 PM to 5:00 AM.

Argentina: General Elections in August and October 2023

- Argentina will hold primary elections in August followed by general elections in October 2023.[9]

Forward Look:

- Candidates were confirmed on June 24 ahead of the August 13 primaries. Campaigning will start on September 2 before the first-round elections on October 22; a possible second-round election is slated for November 19.
- The ruling Frente de Todos (FdT) party changed its name to "Unión por la Patria" and nominated Economy Minister Sergio Massa as its candidate. The party name will be used during the August primary elections and in the October general elections. The main opposition party remains the conservative Juntos por el Cambio party, while outsider Libertarian candidate Javier Milei is also performing well in the polls. Argentina is suffering through historic inflation and a foreign currency crisis under FdT, which may have partially been behind the name change. It likely also demonstrates unease between President Alberto Fernandez and his Vice President, Cristina Kirchner. FdT was created for the purposes of the last election; with Fernandez no longer a palatable candidate and having opted out of running, it has been left to the Kirchner family to rename the powerful leftist political grouping known as Peronismo. Kirchner is also not running, although both she and her deceased husband, Nestor, were previous presidents and maintain large grassroots support, which means the party cannot be discounted electorally.
- Patricia Bullrich of the Juntos por El Cambio party remains the frontrunner, although Milei is performing well. Milei, who is not attached to a traditional party, would struggle to get reforms through Congress. Historically, the best-performing candidate in the August primaries goes on to become president. Expect an increase in protests ahead of the elections.

Guatemala Elections

- Guatemala: Election commission certifies vote before banning opposition party ahead of run-off elections on August 20, 2023[10]
- Election-related violence possible
- Possible support surge for Bernardo Arévalo, who is the closest to being a political outsider in the race

Forward Look:

- On July 12, 2023, Guatemala's election commission certified the first-round presidential election results from June 25, after several conservative parties challenged the outcome. However, that same day, the attorney general's office suspended the second-placed Movimiento Semilla of presidential candidate Bernardo Arévalo over irregularities surrounding signatures. Electoral authorities insist the second and final round of presidential elections will still feature Arévalo against Sandra Torres. The contradictory decisions could lead to social unrest; since the attorney general's decision, there have been protests. Further efforts to constrain Arévalo and the Semilla Party could lead to worsening unrest.
- Critics suggest that the ruling government of President Alejandro Giammattei wants to disqualify Arévalo specifically because of his anti-corruption policies. Arévalo performed surprisingly well in the election, which came after numerous other anti-corruption candidates were disqualified under dubious circumstances. However, now that he has advanced, Giammattei may fear Arévalo poses a serious threat to the political status quo—unlike Torres, who is a former first lady—explaining the belated attempts to disqualify him. The Semilla Movement is a nascent political party; even if Arévalo wins the presidency, it will have little control over the legislature to pass reforms. However, he could enact anti-corruption efforts against elite politicians.

Ecuador

- Ecuador holds first-round elections for 137 members of the National Assembly and president and vice president on August 20. A second round vote for president and vice president is likely on October 15.[11]

Forward Look:

- A second-round vote will be needed for the president and vice president, who are elected separately, if no candidate gets 50 percent of the vote or 40 percent with a margin of 10 percent over the closest rival. None of the eight candidates are close to 50 percent in polls. The most likely winners are candidates affiliated with former President Rafael Correa, known as Correísmo. Correa is living in exile in Belgium. This means Luisa González is the frontrunner for president ahead of Otto Sonnenholzner, a former vice president who led charges against Correia, and indigenous activist Yaku Perez, who did well in the 2021 elections that brought recently-impeached President Guillermo Lasso to power. Opponents were able to impeach Lasso over his inability to control violent drug-related crime, which has made the historically peaceful country among the most violent in the region. Expect a moderate version of Correísmo used by candidates in recent elections if they win control of the government.
- The first iteration of Correísmo was characterized by excessive social spending from mining and energy profits, which is less sustainable given lower commodity prices and environmental concerns. Domestically it was socially conservative, and there was a major crackdown on dissent. It was also categorized as having a far-left foreign policy akin to Venezuela's. Moderation when it comes to social spending, cultural issues, and some foreign policy areas is likely under the new Correísmo. However, retribution against political rivals and censorship are likely. Correísmo also has no clear policy on the drug-related crime that is likely to continue.

FOOTNOTES

- [8] <https://www.telemundo.com/noticias/noticias-telemundo-en-la-noche/crimen-y-violencia/video/el-gobierno-de-ecuador-toma-medidas-de-emergencia-ante-una-dramatica-ola-de-violencia-tmvo1235970>
- [9] <https://www.argentina.gob.ar/elecciones-2023/lo-que-hay-que-saber-sobre-las-elecciones/elecciones-primarias-2023>
- [10] <https://www.rti.it/en/international-news/20230713-guatemala-court-clears-way-for-runoff-presidential-vote>
- [11] <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-65444444>



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BRICS Summit

- South Africa to host three-day BRICS summit from August 22-24

Forward Look:

- Leaders of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS), are set to meet in Johannesburg, South Africa, from August 22-24, 2023. The summit will cover a wide range of topics, including the expansion of BRICS to adopt new members and deepening economic cooperation with developing countries. Heads of state from the entire African continent will also be invited to attend, and much of the summit will be focused on enhancing political and economic cooperation between BRICS and African countries.[16]
- The BRICS organization is aimed at providing alternative policies to the G7, as critics allege the G7 relies too heavily on imposing Western standards and values.[17] An estimated 20 countries have applied to join the organization, which may signal discontent with traditional international organizations that are typically led by Western countries. U.S. officials are concerned that the expansion of BRICS, particularly for developing countries, may signal a move toward less cooperation with Western global institutions. [18]

African Political Developments

- **Zimbabwe** to hold general elections on August 23, 2023
- **Mozambique:** Southern African Development Community (SADC) confirms mission until 2024 and new mission in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in September 2023
- **Gabon** elections on August 26, 2023

Forward Look:

- Incumbent President Emmerson Mnangagwa of the African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) and Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) Party leader Nelson Chamisa are set to compete in general elections on August 23. ZANU-PF has ruled Zimbabwe since 1980. However, difficult economic conditions and the narrow results of the 2018 general election will likely make the upcoming election a highly contested one; the winning candidate must secure 50 percent of the vote, or a second round in October is necessary. Political unrest may occur in the lead-up or following the elections and has the potential to turn violent over issues concerning election fairness and transparency. [19]
- SADC is extending its mission in Mozambique until July 2024. This is the third and final extension for the grouping of states led by South Africa that is battling Islamic State insurgents in the northern Cabo Delgado province. SADC has largely been of secondary importance to the more forward-looking Rwandan troops, both of which arrived in July 2021. The Rwandan troops in particular have been effective at gaining ground, allowing French energy company Total to resume natural gas exploration in the area. Both SADC and Rwanda are under pressure to be utilized elsewhere, and SADC will begin withdrawing troops starting in December. If Rwanda follows suit, a resurgence of jihadist activity is possible.
- SADC will begin a new mission in the northeastern DRC starting in October 2023. SADC would like to have some success ahead of the DRC elections in December 2023.
- In Gabon, President Ali Bongo is expected to win re-election against 18 other candidates in the relatively wealthy nation. Social unrest tied to 60 years of Bongo family rule is possible but unlikely.

Niger: Another Coup Attempt

- Instability in Niger could provide an opening for greater Russian influence.
- From Guinea to Sudan, there are now coup leaders in power.

Forward Look:

- On July 26, members of the armed forces and powerful presidential guard appeared on television and dissolved the constitution, suspended all institutions, and closed the its borders. This came after reports that President Mohamed Bazoum had been detained by the Presidential Guard. However, Bazoum said there has been no coup and that he remains in power. There has been no violence reported, and intermediaries, including Beninese President Patrice Talon, are in the country negotiating the crisis. Generally, when members of the military declare an end to the government on state-run television and subsequent military groups come out in support of the coup, they were successful.
- There is a strong likelihood the Presidential Guard was encouraged to stage the coup by Wagner private military contractors, who maintain a large security presence in neighboring Burkina Faso and Mali—both of which have had two coups in recent years. Under Bazoum, Niger remains a strong French and U.S. partner in the battle against jihadism in the region. Russia would seek to gain from growing its presence in another Sahel country and, notably, denying France access to the uranium it needs to power its nuclear power plants. Wagner has grown in Mali and Burkina Faso since the coups, which were staged over the inability to handle jihadist violence. Niger has had longer bouts of jihadist violence, especially coming from its eastern regions bordering Nigeria. However, the crisis, which has moved from Mali to Burkina Faso, is hitting Niger's west, too. This is the latest bout of instability in the former French colonies, where coups have also been held in Guinea and Chad, which also had military takeovers. The instability risks spreading further, especially to the Littoral States of Benin, Togo, Ghana, and Ivory Coast; there is also an ongoing civil war in Sudan.

Demonstrations in Africa

- Raila Odinga calls for disruptive actions in **Kenya** into August
- **Central African Republic (CAR):** Constitutional referendum removing term limits on July 30, 2023

Forward Look:

- Violent demonstrations in Kenya's major cities, particularly Kisumu and Nairobi, throughout 2023 have resulted in widespread casualties and disruptions. Business operations and traffic are routinely disrupted as citizens protest over high inflation rates and difficult economic conditions. Most recently, clashes between protesters and police officers broke out after the opposition Azimio la Umoja party called for demonstrations on July 19 against recent tax hikes. Negotiations between government officials and opposition groups have stalled due to recent protester deaths, which will likely result in further violent demonstrations in August.[20]
- On July 30, 2023, CAR will hold a constitutional referendum to remove a two-term presidential limit. President Faustin-Archange Touadéra narrowly won reelection in 2020, but Russian private military contractors from the Wagner group helped him fight off a rebel insurgency. Wagner has remained in the country and now controls vital industries. The constitutional referendum is expected to be approved, which will likely solidify Touadéra and Russia's relationship. Unrest linked to the consolidation of power is possible, especially if Russia's war in Ukraine reduces the resources allocated in Africa.

FOOTNOTES

[16] <https://www.voanews.com/a/more-countries-want-to-join-brics-says-south-africa-7190526.html>

[17] <https://www.reuters.com/world/brics-currency-not-august-summit-agenda-south-african-official-2023-07-20/>

[18] <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/brics-resurgence-based-on-grievance-against-west-by-ana-palacio-2023-05>

[19] <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-65775996>

[20] <https://nation11.com/kenya/news/azimio-calls-off-wednesday-protests-asks-kenyans-to-hold-vigil-for-victims-of-police-brutality-4314460>



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Asia-Pacific Updates

- **Thailand:** Protests are possible despite possible new government by August 4, 2023^[12]
- **Cambodia:** PM Hun Sen to hand power to his son Hun Manet on August 10, 2023
- **South Korea:** KCTU unions announce Greater General Strike in second half of 2023
- **Malaysia:** Key state elections on August 12, 2023

Forward Look:

- On July 19, 2023, Pita Limjaroenrat of the progressive Move Forward Party (MFP) failed to secure enough votes from parliament to become the country's next prime minister. Pita announced he would no longer be a candidate for PM, and Thailand's upper house must now select a new prime minister from the remaining candidates. MFP secured the most votes in the mid-May general elections, and Pita was the preferred candidate. Pita is an anti-establishment candidate whose policies include ending the military and the monarchy's dominance of Thai politics and business. However, the military has an effective veto on PM picks and has exercised that in the PM nomination process to prohibit Pita from assuming office. Pita may also be disqualified from parliament altogether if the constitutional court decides he held illegal shares in a media company. The case against Pita was launched just as the PM votes were taking place, likely as a secondary measure to disqualify him.
- Expect widespread protests by MFP supporters, especially in Bangkok around the Democracy Monument and near government buildings. Other Bangkok protest locations include the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre, OneSiam Skywalk, City Hall, Lumpini Park, Victory Monument, and Ramkhamhaeng University. The most likely PM candidate will come from the Pheu Thai Party, which received the second-highest amount of votes and is also considered a reform party—although not on the scale of MFP. None of its PM candidates, including the daughter of a former PM, have the grassroots youth vote of Pita, and protests are likely regardless. Pheu Thai has decided to delay the vote for PM from July 27 to August 4 because it appeared the party would not get a majority. This indicates the military rulers are taking a tough stance on any candidates seen as threatening military and monarchy rule and are likely seeking more assurances from Pheu Thai that it will not pursue reforms to the monarchy and the revenue streams controlled by the military.
- On July 26, 2023, three days after Prime Minister Hun Sen won re-election in Cambodia, he announced he would resign and hand over power to his son, Hun Manet, starting August 10.^[13] Hun Sen will retain leadership of the ruling Cambodian People's Party, which still gives him ultimate control. Little change is expected after Hun Manet's takeover. However, he may face more challenges, as the Cambodian public is increasingly against authoritarian dynastic rule, which has led to a severe crackdown on democratic parties and poor economic development, making Cambodia one of Southeast Asia's poorest countries while its neighbors thrive.
- Such a brazen handover of power to an unelected leader is likely to worsen some of Cambodia's economic relationships. Companies seeking alternatives to China are less likely to go to Cambodia, which could worsen the economic situation just as neighboring countries are prospering economically. This increases the risk of social unrest.

Israel

- On July 24, 2023, the Israeli Parliament (Knesset) passed the first significant portion of the government's controversial and long sought after judicial overhaul. This came in the form of the Reasonableness Law, which removed the ability of the Supreme Court to strike down decisions made by the prime minister and parliament that it deems "unreasonable"—in other words, laws the body finds too political, practically unworkable, or those that could significantly undermine the public's trust in the state. The final vote passed 64-0 after the opposition boycotted the proceedings.
- In the days immediately leading up to and after the law was passed, opposition protests increased in size and frequency across the country, particularly in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. Demonstrations also saw an uptick in violence, as police attempted to disperse participants with increasingly heavy-handed means, including the use of rubber bullets and water cannons. Dozens of arrests were reported, as well as injuries to police officers and anti-government activists.

Forward Look:

- The passing of the Reasonableness Law was likely the final major legislative act of the Knesset's summer session; it will recess from July 31, 2023, until mid-October 2023. However, tensions are unlikely to de-escalate, at least in the near- to medium-term. Shortly after the final vote, several opposition organizations and prominent politicians announced they would be challenging the law at the Supreme Court, prompting a number of justices to return prematurely from an official trip in Berlin in anticipation of proceedings related to the case. On July 26, 2023, the Supreme Court ruled it will hear an appeal against the law in September 2023. Should the court overturn the law, as many analysts believe is likely, Israel would be plunged into a constitutional crisis.
- While the government will not be in session again for several months, there is no guarantee that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition will survive until October. Numerous reports indicate that Netanyahu has been sidelined by the most conservative elements of his government and that members of his own party, Likud, are dissatisfied with the overhaul and recent course of events.^[14] If the government collapses, most polls indicate that the opposition would sweep into power, gaining approximately 10 seats.^[15]
- The cohesion of the current coalition will also face extreme external pressure. Labor agitations have increased in recent days, with medical professionals and a prominent business council launching strikes. Furthermore, Israel's largest public labor union, Histadrut, is also considering a general strike. Its decision to do so in March 2023 was widely credited as being the final blow that forced Netanyahu to freeze the reforms, and a similar move would likely paralyze the country.
- The policies have also proven unpopular with the international business community and Israel's powerful technology sector. Expect Israel's economy to struggle, as economic metrics like the value of the currency have declined since the reforms were passed. Foreign investment will likely decline as well.

FOOTNOTES

[12] [hXXps://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/thailand-s-parliament-prepares-to-hold-fresh-pm-vote-on-aug-4](https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/thailand-s-parliament-prepares-to-hold-fresh-pm-vote-on-aug-4)

[13] [hXXps://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3228936/cambodians-expect-more-same-hun-sen-son-set-take-power-we-have-no-hope](https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3228936/cambodians-expect-more-same-hun-sen-son-set-take-power-we-have-no-hope)

[14] [hXXps://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2023/07/24/a-blow-against-israelis-supreme-court-plunges-the-country-into-crisis](https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2023/07/24/a-blow-against-israelis-supreme-court-plunges-the-country-into-crisis)

[15] [hXXps://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-07-25/ty-article/post-judicial-coup-election-polls-give-gantz-30-seats-netanyahus-govt-losing-majority/00000189-8e3a-d4ba-a3e9-ce3fb50a0000](https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-07-25/ty-article/post-judicial-coup-election-polls-give-gantz-30-seats-netanyahus-govt-losing-majority/00000189-8e3a-d4ba-a3e9-ce3fb50a0000)



ZeroFox Intelligence Geopolitical Brief for August 2023

TLP: CLEAR

B-2023-07-28a



Protests Over Quran Desecrations

- Protests have broken out in several Middle Eastern countries—including Iraq, Iran, and Lebanon—over desecrations of the Quran committed by demonstrators in Sweden and Denmark. While most protests have been peaceful so far, a group of Iraqis stormed and set fire to parts of the Swedish embassy in Baghdad on July 24.
- Multiple times over the past month, demonstrators have burned, torn, and stomped on the Quran in front of Middle Eastern embassies in Stockholm and Copenhagen. Because Sweden and Denmark protect such acts as freedom of speech, desecrations often take place under police protection. This has angered many majority-Muslim countries.[21]
- The controversy has created a diplomatic row with majority-Muslim countries on one side and Sweden and Denmark on the other. Iraq expelled Sweden's ambassador and recalled its own charge d'affaires after Sweden refused to stop an Iraqi refugee from desecrating the Quran in front of the Iraqi embassy on July 21. Sweden and Denmark have also drawn calls of condemnation from influential religious and political authorities, including Moqtada al-Sadr in Iraq, Hassan Nasrallah in Lebanon, Ayatollah Khamenei in Iran, and Egypt's Al-Azhar Mosque. While Swedish officials have condemned the desecrations, they are unable to stop them.[22]

Forward Look:

- Over the coming months, Islamic extremist groups may attempt to target Swedish organizations and individuals residing in or traveling through Middle Eastern countries. While Western and Middle Eastern security services will attempt to detect and neutralize such attempts, the possibility of violent attacks cannot be ruled out.
- European activists, especially from the far-right, may attempt to exacerbate the controversy by staging additional Quran desecrations.
- Boycotts of Swedish companies and products will likely increase in majority-Muslim countries.

ABOUT ZEROFOX

ZeroFox (Nasdaq: ZFOX), an enterprise software-as-a-service leader in external cybersecurity, has redefined security outside the corporate perimeter on the internet, where businesses operate and threat actors thrive. The ZeroFox platform combines advanced AI analytics, digital risk and privacy protection, full-spectrum threat intelligence, and a robust portfolio of breach, incident, and takedown response capabilities to expose and disrupt phishing and fraud campaigns, botnet exposures, credential theft, impersonations, data breaches, and physical threats that target your brands, domains, people, and assets. Join thousands of customers—including some of the largest public-sector organizations as well as finance, media, technology, and retail companies—to stay ahead of adversaries and address the entire lifecycle of external cyber risks.

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Get in touch with us today

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APPENDIX A: ZeroFox Intelligence Probability Scale

All ZeroFox Intelligence products leverage probabilistic assessment language in analytic judgments. Qualitative statements used in these judgments refer to associated probability ranges, which state the likelihood of the occurrence of an event or development. Ranges are used to avoid a false impression of accuracy. This scale is a standard that aligns how readers should interpret such terms.

Almost No Chance	Very Unlikely	Unlikely	Roughly Even Chance	Likely	Very Likely	Almost Certain
1-5%	5-20%	20-45%	45-55%	55-80%	80-95%	95-99%

APPENDIX B: Traffic Light Protocol for Information Dissemination

TLP: RED

HOW IT IS USED

Sources may use TLP: RED when information cannot be effectively acted upon by additional parties and could lead to impacts on a party's privacy, reputation, or operations if misused.

HOW IT IS SHARED

Recipients may NOT share TLP: RED with any parties outside of the specific exchange, meeting, or conversation in which it is originally disclosed.

TLP: AMBER

HOW IT IS USED

Sources may use TLP: AMBER when information requires support to be effectively acted upon but carries risks to privacy, reputation, or operations if shared outside of the organizations involved.

HOW IT IS SHARED

Recipients may ONLY share TLP: AMBER information with members of their own organization and its clients, but only on a need-to-know basis to protect their organization and its clients and prevent further harm.

Note that TLP: AMBER+STRICT restricts sharing to the organization only.

TLP: GREEN

HOW IT IS USED

Sources may use TLP: GREEN when information is useful for the awareness of all participating organizations, as well as with peers within the broader community or sector.

HOW IT IS SHARED

Recipients may share TLP: GREEN information with peers and partner organizations within their sector or community but not via publicly accessible channels.

TLP: CLEAR

HOW IT IS USED

Sources may use TLP: CLEAR when information carries minimal or no risk of misuse in accordance with applicable rules and procedures for public release.

HOW IT IS SHARED

Recipients may share TLP: CLEAR information without restriction, subject to copyright controls.

FOOTNOTES

[21] <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/7/20/protesters-storm-swedish-embassy-in-baghdad-over-quran-burning>

[22] <https://the arab weekly.com/quran-desecration-sparks-iraqi-swedish-diplomatic-crisis-sadr-seizes-moment>

