

GEOSTRATEGIC ANALYSIS

Geo-World: Conflict & Social Unrest - March Update

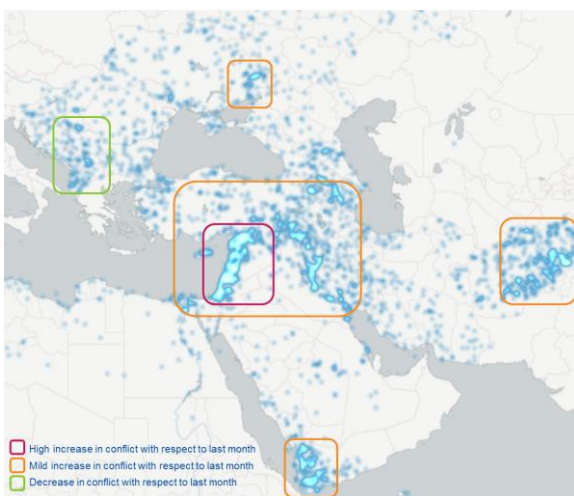
Álvaro Ortiz / Tomasa Rodrigo/ Joaquín Turina

After the chemical weapons attack on Syrian civilian population, the US launched its first military strike against the Assad regime sending a clearer message to Syria and North Korea. However, it is still early to know whether this is a tactical message or part of a broader strategy. Thus, uncertainty concerning US policy strategy in the region is alive as well as the response from key regional actors such as Russia and Iran. In Iraq, the ISF continued to gain ground. Tensions in North Korea also worsened and became one of the key concerns in Trump foreign policy. Social unrest in Latin America eased in most countries. Europe and Asia kept with low conflict levels, while in North Africa, instability rose after the recent attacks in Egypt.

The US intervened in Syria and Russia reacted by showing its defensive capabilities

Figure 1

**BBVA Research world conflict heatmap 2017
(cumulative number of conflicts/ total events)**



Source: www.dgelt.org & BBVA Research

US military intervention sent a clearer signal in the Middle East

The US launched its first military strike against the Assad regime in retaliation for the chemical weapons attack on civilian population.

North Korea nuclear weapons program escalated tensions with US

President Trump threatened to take action if North Korea does not curb its activities.

Conflict between Russia and Ukraine remained contained, although political tensions increased

A blockade set up by the nationalists heightened tensions in eastern Ukraine.

The BBVA Research World Conflict Intensity Index¹ increased during March after last month's relaxation. The main developments during the month were:

- **The US conducted its first missile attack against the Assad regime** base in northern Syria at the beginning of April in retaliation of the chemical weapons attack on civilian population, which killed close to one hundred people in a rebel-held town in Idlib Province. So far, **President Trump's reaction should be taken as a clearer signal about red lines but it is still early to define it as a reorientation of US strategy in the Middle East.** The Assad regime and Iran reacted cautiously to the US action, while Russia condemned the action and reacted conducting military exercises as a show of force of its defensive capabilities. During March, **Russia conducted aggressive air operations in central Syria while Al-Qaeda resumed large-scale offensive operations** against the regime after its consolidation

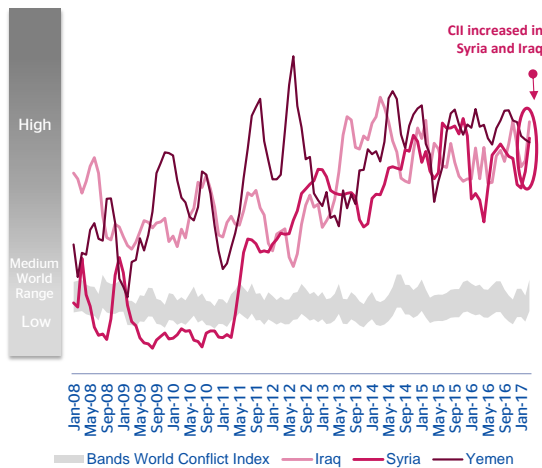
1: Details about methodology can be found in the following link: [Methodology, tracking protests and conflicts.](#)

in Northern Syria. In Iraq, the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) made significant progress in gaining ground on Mosul, although their advance had slowed by the end of the month. Russia is also attempting to gain influence on the region through economic agreements with Kurdish-Iraqi government. This seems to be a turning point in the Iraqi war where post-ISIS influence structures will be determined.

- **In Eastern Europe, while the conflict eased for the second consecutive month, political tensions are on the rise.** Ukrainian activists started a blockade against territory in Eastern Ukraine occupied by Russian proxies which increased political and social tensions in the rest of the country. Russia increased its economic and political support of its proxy forces in order to put further pressure on Ukraine, which is struggling to deal efficiently with the blockade crisis.
- **Disputes in the South China Sea stabilized, but tensions in North Korea escalated** on the back of further proliferation of its nuclear weapons programme and ballistic missile testing. President Donald Trump reacted to the missile tests and asked China to take steps towards limiting North Korea's nuclear program and sending naval forces to the area.

Figure 2

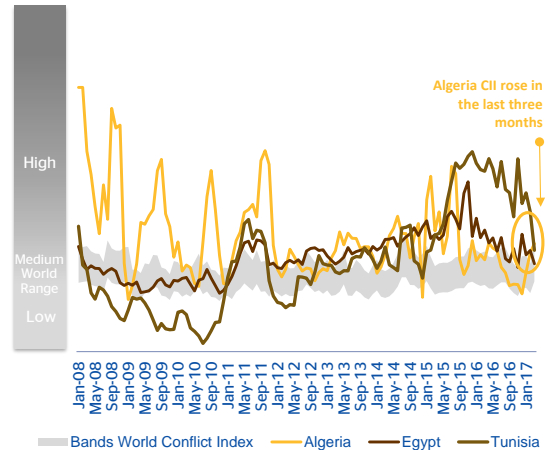
BBVA Research Middle East Conflict Intensity Index 2008-17 (Number of conflicts / Total events)



Source: www.dgelt.org & BBVA Research

Figure 3

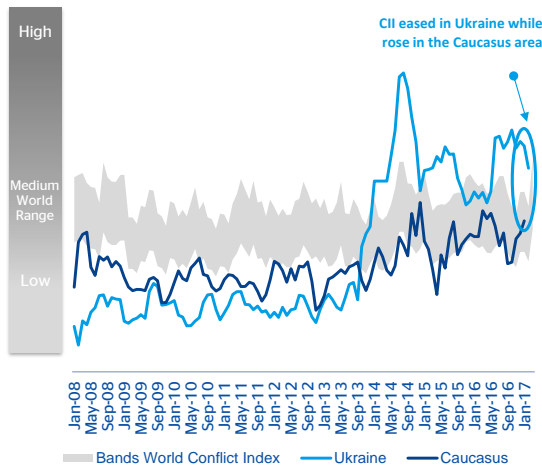
BBVA Research North Africa Conflict Intensity Index 2008-17 (Number of conflicts / Total events)



Source: www.dgelt.org & BBVA Research

Figure 4

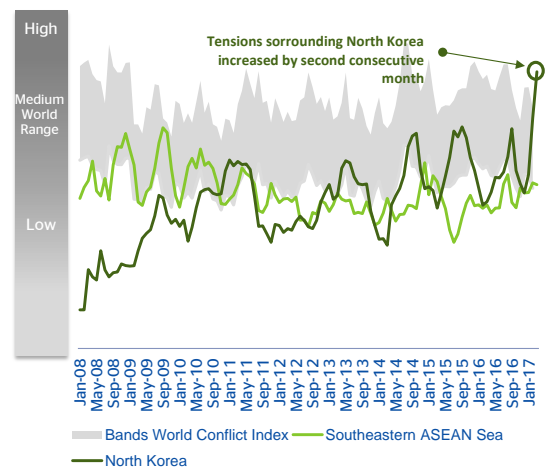
BBVA Research Eastern Europe Conflict Intensity Index 2008-17 (Number of conflicts / Total events)



Source: www.dgelt.org & BBVA Research

Figure 5

BBVA Research Asia Conflict Intensity Index 2008-17 (Number of conflicts / Total events)



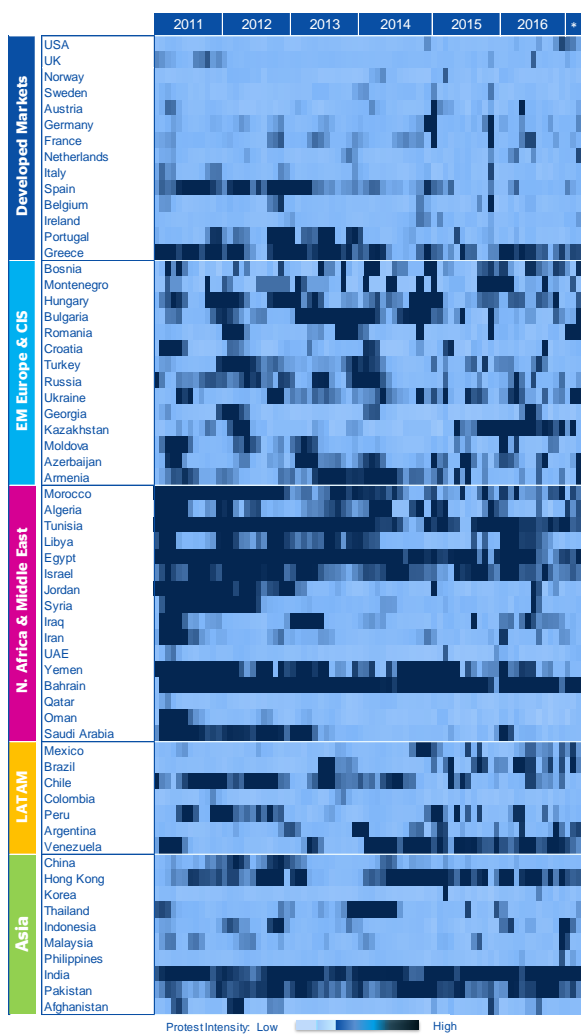
Source: www.dgelt.org & BBVA Research

... as well as social unrest

The World Protest Index also increased during March (as shown by our BBVA Research World Protest Intensity Index²). According to the BBVA Research World Protest Intensity Map, the key takeaway facts were:

Figure 6

BBVA Research World Protest Intensity Map Jan 2011 – Mar 2017 (Number of protests / Total events)



Source: www.dgelt.org & BBVA Research

Summary

US intervention in the Syrian war opens the door to multiple strategies such as a reorientation of US policy in the area with multiple actors on the ground. This, together with the concerns about North Korea activities surrounding its nuclear program, increases uncertainties concerning US strategy in the coming months. European upcoming elections should also be monitored.

- In regional terms, demonstrations calmed in US, while there was a slight increase in some European countries. Political noise in Western Europe persisted, but the main focus of instability continued to be the Middle East and North Africa. Social unrest eased in most Latin American countries, as well as in Asia:

- In the US, demonstrations eased during the month since Trump's election last November. In Europe, protests rose in **Netherlands** among Turkish citizens after it banned Turkish ministers from speaking in the Rotterdam. Social unrest continued high in **Greece**, while mildly rose in **Germany** and **Ireland**.

- In Emerging Europe, the social climate worsened in **Bosnia**, **Hungary** and **Bulgaria**, stayed at high levels in **Romania** and eased off in **Montenegro**. Instability continued to mount in **Ukraine** and erupted in the **Caucasus**, while it relaxed in **Kazakhstan**.

- In North Africa and the Middle East, social unrest sharply rose in **Egypt** after the church attacks, which led the country to declare a state of emergency. Instability also remained high in **Algeria**, **Tunisia** and **Morocco** as a result of anti-government protests.

- In Latin America, minor demonstrations in **Mexico** and **Brazil** continued and the situation in **Venezuela** continue to be challenging. Meanwhile, protests against government policies increased in **Argentina**.

- In Asia, protests' intensity rose in **Thailand** and decreased in **Indonesia** and **Pakistan**. **Hong Kong** and **India** remained as the key hot spots in the region.

2: Details about methodology can be found in the following link: [Methodology, tracking protests and conflicts](#).

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