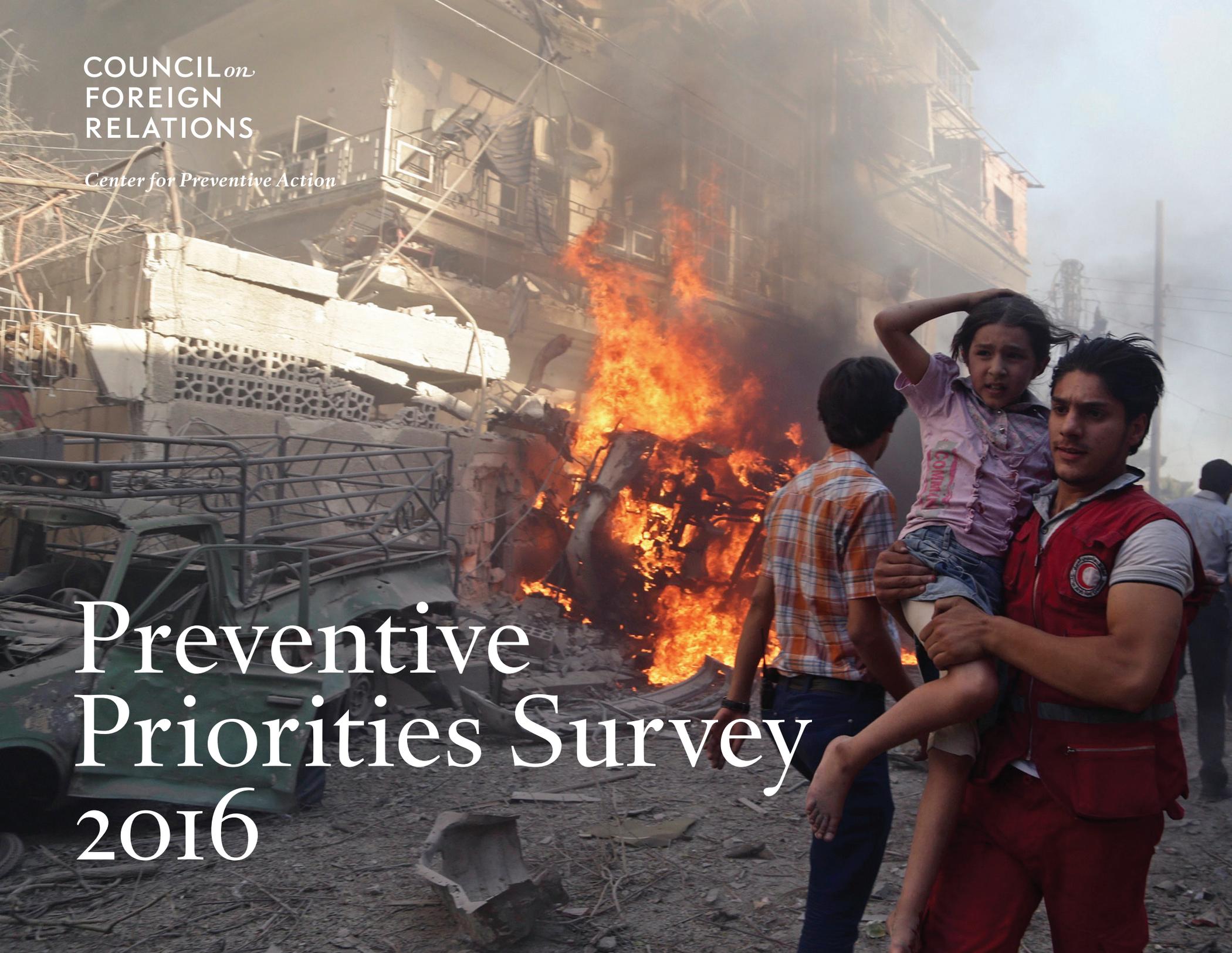


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*Center for Preventive Action*

# Preventive Priorities Survey 2016



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**Paul B. Stares**

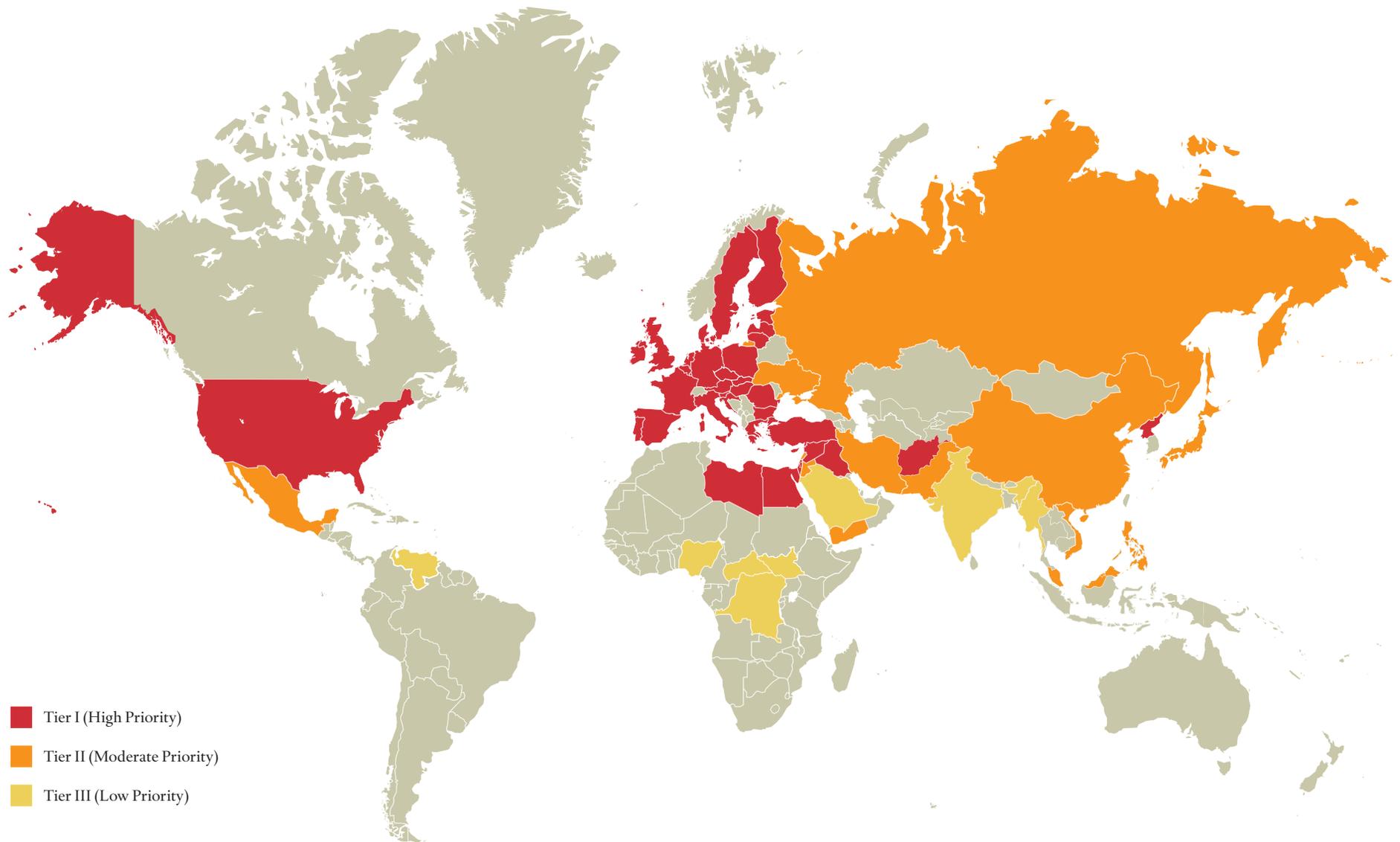
*General John W. Vessey Senior Fellow for Conflict Prevention  
Director, Center for Preventive Action*

# Preventive Priorities Survey 2016

The Center for Preventive Action (CPA)'s annual Preventive Priorities Survey (PPS) evaluates ongoing and potential conflicts based on their likelihood of occurring in the coming year and their impact on U.S. interests. The PPS aims to help the U.S. policymaking community prioritize competing conflict prevention and crisis mitigation demands.



To learn more about ongoing conflicts, visit the Global Conflict Tracker at [cfr.org/globalconflictracker](https://www.cfr.org/globalconflictracker)



- Tier I (High Priority)
- Tier II (Moderate Priority)
- Tier III (Low Priority)

## About the Preventive Priorities Survey

Political instability and violent conflict around the world can threaten U.S. interests in direct and indirect ways. The United States is too much a part of the fabric of global affairs for it to remain untouched by even the most distant events. Where possible, therefore, it should endeavor to reduce the risk of war and violent instability through deliberate preventive measures while also taking steps to mitigate the potential harm should the worst happen.

However, relying on early and accurate warning of emerging threats to galvanize preventive action is challenging, given the general uncertainty of predicting the onset or escalation of violent conflict. The inclination is to wait for confirmation before taking action, by which time the policy choices may have narrowed and the costs grown. Anticipating areas of instability and, in particular, plausible contingencies that could harm U.S. interests can help to trigger early action and thus reduce the likelihood of belated and costly responses.

The Preventive Priorities Survey is designed with this goal in mind. In addition to asking respondents to assess the relative likelihood of thirty plausible contingencies occurring around the world in the coming year, it also asks them to consider the relative impact of these contingencies on U.S. interests were they to happen. Asking both questions permits



*A Syrian refugee prays on the beach after arriving on the Greek island of Kos in a dinghy, after crossing part of the Aegean Sea from Turkey on May 26, 2015. (Yannis Behrakis|Reuters)*



*Members of the Ukrainian armed forces gather on armored vehicles on the roadside in the Donetsk region of Ukraine on June 9, 2015. (Oleksandr Klymenko|Reuters)*

a balanced comparison of their overall risk to the United States. This, in turn, allows for a deliberate ordering of U.S. conflict prevention priorities, since the various contingencies do not all pose the same risk. Thus, it makes sense for busy policymakers to apportion their attention and resources accordingly.

Some caveats to this exercise need to be acknowledged. There are clearly many plausible contingencies that could have been included in the survey but were not. For practical reasons, we limited the selection to those that we believed warranted inclusion on the basis of an earlier crowdsourced pool of suggestions. However, respondents were allowed to write in contingencies not included in the survey that they felt deserved attention and to note their concerns.

Each contingency in the survey is primarily a political or security-related scenario. Potential economic crises, extreme weather events, and other conceivable natural or man-made disasters were not included, even though such events can precipitate instability and conflict. However, postulating such events in a context-specific and meaningful way is difficult.

Finally, by its very nature, the survey represents the informed judgment of many experts at the time it was taken in November 2015. It is unavoidably subjective and reflective of contemporaneous concerns. We did, however, provide guidelines to help respondents assess the contingencies in a rigorous fashion. The world is a dynamic place and thus assessments of risk and the ordering of priorities should be regularly updated. For this reason, all thirty contingencies—as well as other crises that occur in the coming year—are monitored in the online Global Conflict Tracker interactive, accessible at [cfr.org/globalconflictracker](http://cfr.org/globalconflictracker).

# Methodology

The Center for Preventive Action (CPA) carried out the 2016 PPS in three stages:

## 1. Soliciting of PPS Contingencies

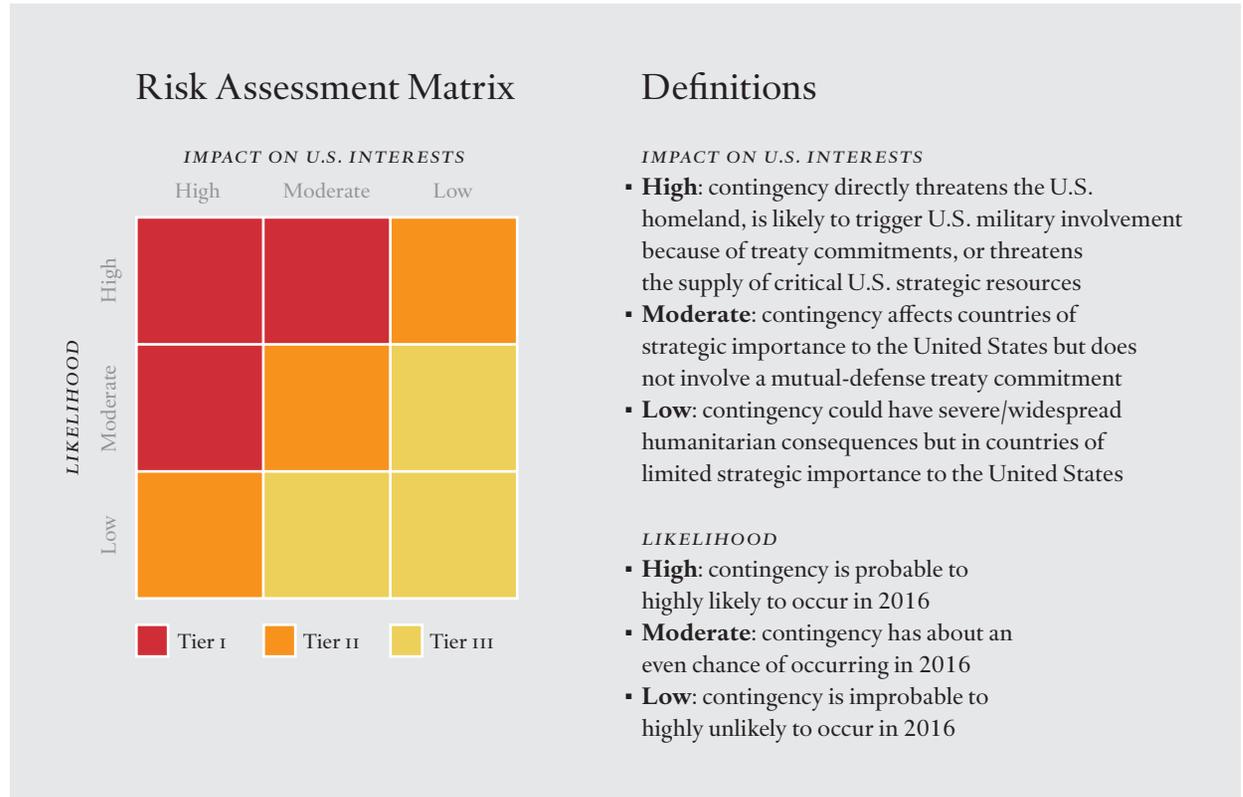
CPA harnessed various social media platforms and blogs to solicit suggestions about possible conflicts to include in the survey. With the help of the Council on Foreign Relations' in-house regional experts, CPA narrowed down the list of possible conflicts from nearly one thousand suggestions to thirty contingencies deemed both plausible over the next twelve months and potentially harmful to U.S. interests.

## 2. Polling Foreign Policy Experts

The randomized survey was sent to nearly six thousand U.S. government officials, foreign policy experts, and academics, of whom close to five hundred responded. Each was asked to estimate the likelihood and impact on U.S. interests of each of the contingencies according to some general guidelines (see risk assessment definitions).

## 3. Ranking the Conflicts

The survey results were then scored according to their ranking, and the contingencies were subsequently sorted into one of three preventive priority tiers (I, II, and III) according to their placement on the accompanying risk assessment matrix.



Migrants, who were found at sea on a boat, collect rainwater during a heavy rain at a temporary refugee camp in Rakhine state, Myanmar, on June 4, 2015. (Soe Zeya Tun|Reuters)



A demonstration against candidates for a national unity government is guarded by a soldier in Benghazi, Libya, on October 23, 2015. (Esam Omran Al-Fetori|Reuters)



Women are screened for malnutrition at a Rapid Response Mission, which delivers critical supplies and services to those displaced by conflict, in Jonglei state, South Sudan, on March 3, 2015. (Siegfried Modola|Reuters)

## 2016 Findings

Concerns over the implications of growing instability and conflict in the Middle East dominate the results of the 2016 survey. Of the eleven contingencies classified as Tier I priorities, all but three are related to events unfolding in that region. Half of the Tier II priorities also involve Middle Eastern countries. A further intensification of the Syrian civil war tops the list as the only contingency in the entire survey judged to be highly likely and liable to have a high impact on the United States.

Five new contingencies appear in this year's survey. Of these, political instability in European Union (EU) countries stemming from the influx of refugees and migrants was ranked a Tier I priority and increased tensions between Russia and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member states was ranked a Tier II concern. Three new contingencies appear in Tier III: political instability in Saudi Arabia, escalation of Islamist militancy and violence in Russia, and growing political instability in the Democratic Republic of Congo ahead of scheduled elections.

Three contingencies surveyed last year received a higher-priority ranking for 2016. In addition to the Syrian civil war

supplanting conflict in Iraq as the number one concern, the continued political fracturing of Libya, intensified political violence in Turkey involving various Kurdish groups and Turkish security forces, and increased political instability in Egypt rose from Tier II to Tier I priorities.

The priority rankings of three contingencies were downgraded for 2016. An armed confrontation in the South China Sea is now considered to be unlikely, though its potential impact on U.S. interests remains high. It is now classified as a Tier II priority. Similarly, the likelihood of renewed fighting in eastern Ukraine between Russian-backed militias and Ukrainian security forces is now judged to be lower than it was in 2015 but still remains a Tier II concern. Intensified sectarian violence and political instability in Nigeria related to Boko Haram was also judged to be less likely in 2016, slipping from Tier II to Tier III.

Two contingencies have evolved significantly since last year's survey. Apprehension over the possibility of military strikes against Iran's suspected nuclear facilities has been replaced by concern about a confrontation arising out of its support for militant groups involved in various regional conflicts. The focus on the potential growth in Yemen of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has also shifted to anxiety

over the implications of Yemen's intensifying civil war and external intervention. Both remain Tier II priorities, however.

Five contingencies assessed last year were not included in the 2016 survey. Growth of political unrest in China, particularly among the Uighur population; surge in popular unrest and political instability in Sudan; growing political instability and unrest in Thailand, potentially exacerbated by a royal succession crisis; political instability stemming from the impacts of Ebola in West Africa; and an outbreak of military conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh were not included in this year's survey, as they were not identified as significant concerns in the initial pool of crowdsourced contingencies. All five were judged Tier III priorities in 2015.

## Other Noted Concerns

Although the survey was limited to thirty contingencies, government officials and foreign policy experts had the opportunity to suggest additional potential crises that they believe warrant attention. The following are the most commonly cited:

- growing violence in Somalia and Kenya resulting from increased attacks by al-Shabab
- increasing gang-related violence in Central America
- widespread unrest in Zimbabwe surrounding the electoral process and/or the death of President Robert Mugabe
- competing territorial claims in the Arctic
- potential mass atrocities in Burundi
- a high mortality pandemic affecting global trade/travel
- increased tensions with China across the Taiwan Strait
- violence and attacks in Bangladesh against foreigners and secularists
- civil unrest in South Africa due to continuing corruption, xenophobia, and inequality
- breakdown in the peace process between the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the Colombian government

## Tier I ■

Contingencies judged high preventive priorities for U.S. policymakers

**IMPACT: HIGH**

**LIKELIHOOD: HIGH**

- intensification of the civil war in **Syria** resulting from increased external support for warring parties, including military intervention by outside powers

**IMPACT: HIGH**

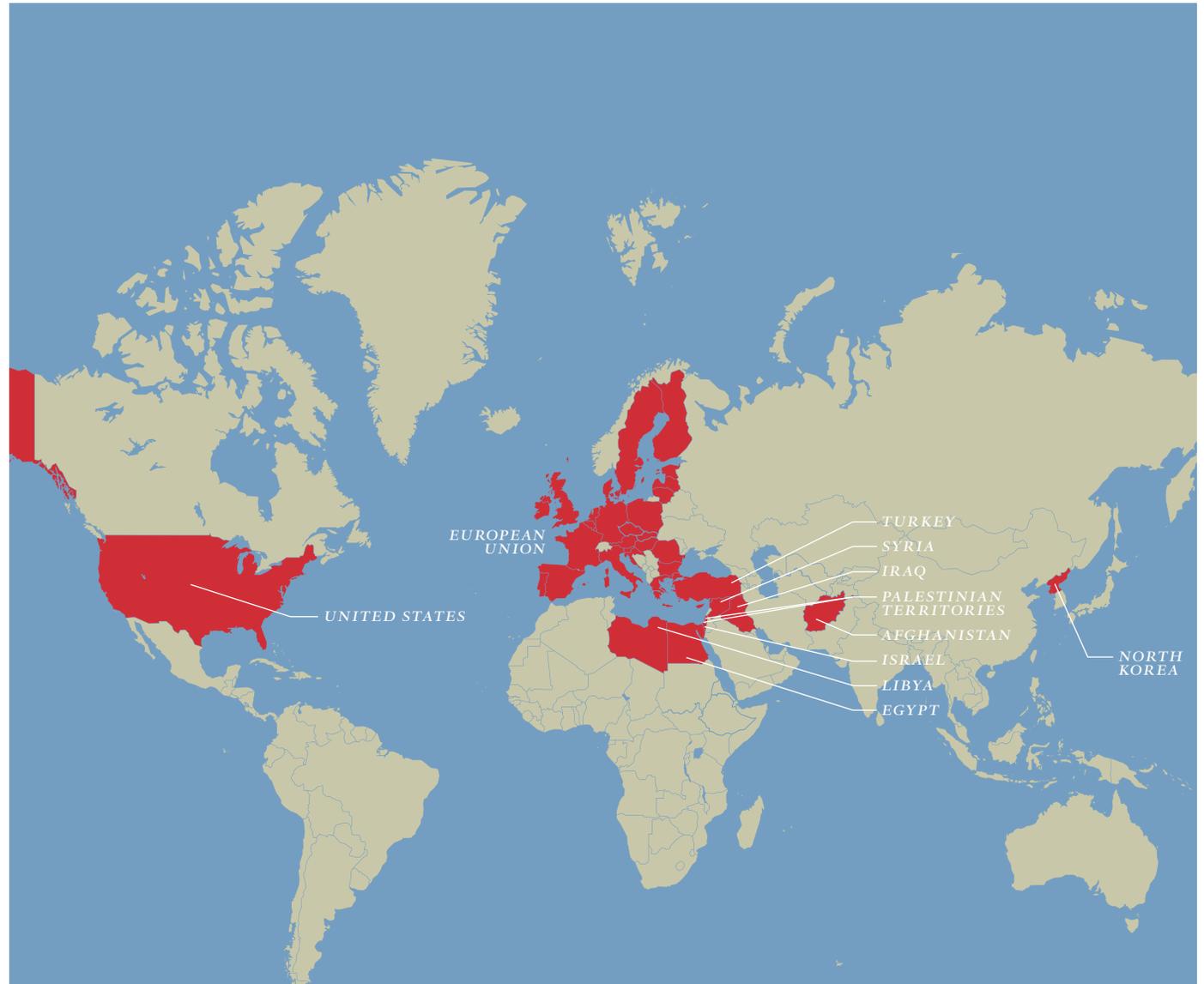
**LIKELIHOOD: MODERATE**

- a mass casualty attack on the **U.S. homeland** or a treaty ally
- a highly disruptive cyberattack on **U.S. critical infrastructure**
- a severe crisis with or in **North Korea** caused by nuclear or ballistic missile weapons testing, a military provocation, or internal political instability
- political instability in **EU countries** stemming from the influx of refugees and migrants, with heightened civil unrest, isolated terrorist attacks, or violence against refugees and migrants

**IMPACT: MODERATE**

**LIKELIHOOD: HIGH**

- continued political fracturing of **Libya**, with heightened violence and further military intervention by Arab states
- heightened tensions between **Israel** and the **Palestinian territories** leading to attacks against civilians, widespread protests, and armed confrontations
- intensified political violence in **Turkey** involving various Kurdish groups and Turkish security forces, exacerbated by spillover from the Syrian civil war
- increased political instability in **Egypt**, including terrorist attacks, particularly in the Sinai Peninsula



- increased violence and instability in **Afghanistan** resulting from the strengthening of the Taliban insurgency
- continued fracturing of **Iraq** due to territorial gains by the self-proclaimed Islamic State and ongoing Sunni-Shia sectarian violence

## Tier II ■

Contingencies judged mid-level preventive priorities for U.S. policymakers

*IMPACT: MODERATE*

*LIKELIHOOD: MODERATE*

- escalation of organized crime–related violence in **Mexico**, with spillover effects into the United States
- increased internal violence and political instability in **Pakistan** caused by multiple militant groups, primarily Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan
- increased sectarian violence and political instability in **Lebanon** due to spillover from the Syrian civil war
- intensification of fighting in eastern **Ukraine** between Russian-backed militias and Ukrainian security forces, with potential overt Russian military intervention
- growing political instability and civil violence in **Jordan**, triggered by spillover from the Syrian civil war
- intensified civil war in **Yemen** as a result of fighting among national loyalist forces, Houthi rebels, and intervening outside forces

*IMPACT: HIGH*

*LIKELIHOOD: LOW*

- potential confrontation between **Iran** and the United States or one of its partners or allies over Iran's involvement in regional conflicts and support of militant proxy groups
- an armed confrontation in the **East China Sea** between China and Japan, stemming from tensions over the sovereignty of the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands, which draws in the United States
- an armed confrontation over disputed maritime areas in the **South China Sea** between China and one or more



- Southeast Asian claimants, which draws in the United States
- increased tensions between **Russia** and NATO member states leading to an unintentional or deliberate military confrontation

## Tier III ■

Contingencies judged low preventive priorities for U.S. policymakers

*IMPACT: MODERATE*

*LIKELIHOOD: LOW*

- a severe **India-Pakistan** military confrontation triggered by a major terrorist attack or heightened violence in Kashmir
- political instability in **Saudi Arabia** caused by growing economic stress, tensions within the royal family, and the cost of war in Yemen

*IMPACT: LOW*

*LIKELIHOOD: MODERATE*

- intensified sectarian violence and political instability in **Nigeria** related to Boko Haram, with potential spillover into nearby countries
- escalation of Islamist militancy and violence in **Russia**, including civil unrest in the North Caucasus region
- protracted civil war in **South Sudan** stemming from political and ethnic divisions
- escalation of sectarian violence in the **Central African Republic** between the ex-Seleka rebels and anti-balaka militias
- an intensification of sectarian violence between Buddhists and Muslim Rohingyas in **Myanmar**, potentially exacerbated by postelection political instability
- deepening economic crisis and political instability in **Venezuela**, leading to heightened civil unrest
- growing political instability in the **Democratic Republic of Congo** ahead of scheduled elections, resulting in widespread violence and destabilizing effects on neighboring countries



## About the Center for Preventive Action

The Center for Preventive Action (CPA) seeks to help prevent, defuse, or resolve deadly conflicts around the world and to expand the body of knowledge on conflict prevention. It does so by creating a forum in which representatives of governments, international organizations, nongovernmental organizations, corporations, and civil society can gather to develop operational and timely strategies for promoting peace in specific conflict situations. The center focuses on conflicts in countries or regions that affect U.S. interests, but may be otherwise overlooked; where prevention appears possible; and when the resources of the Council on Foreign Relations can make a difference. The center does this by:

- *Issuing Council Special Reports* to evaluate and respond rapidly to developing conflict situations and formulate timely, concrete policy recommendations that the U.S. government, international community, and local actors can use to limit the potential for deadly violence.
- *Engaging the U.S. government and news media* in conflict prevention efforts. CPA staff members meet with administration officials and members of Congress to brief on CPA's findings and recommendations, facilitate contacts between U.S. officials and important local and external actors, and raise awareness among journalists of potential flashpoints around the globe.
- *Building networks with international organizations and institutions* to complement and leverage the Council's established influence in the U.S. policy arena and increase the impact of CPA's recommendations.
- *Providing a source of expertise on conflict prevention* to include research, case studies, and lessons learned from past conflicts that policymakers and private citizens can use to prevent or mitigate future deadly conflicts.

For more information, to sign up for the CPA Newsletter, or to access the Center for Preventive Action's latest work, please visit our website at [www.cfr.org/thinktank/cpa](http://www.cfr.org/thinktank/cpa), follow us on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/CFRCenterforPreventiveAction](http://www.facebook.com/CFRCenterforPreventiveAction), or on Twitter @CFR\_CPA.

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*A member of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent carries  
a girl from a site in Damascus hit by airstrikes  
on August 24, 2015. (Bassam Khabieh/Reuters)*

Council on Foreign Relations

58 East 68th Street  
New York, NY 10065  
tel 212.434.9400  
fax 212.434.9800

1777 F Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20006  
tel 202.509.8400  
fax 202.509.8490

[www.cfr.org](http://www.cfr.org)