



# 2016: Into the Storm

## Paul Rogers

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### Summary

The [January 2015 briefing, \*A Perfect Storm?\*](#), looked ahead to the potential for a difficult year in terms of security, environment and the world economy. This briefing uses the same categories to examine what seemed likely a year ago, what actually ensued and the possible trends in 2016. It finds that, while the COP21 negotiations on reducing carbon emissions made better progress than expected in 2015, the intensification of the war in Syria in late 2015, the associated increase in Islamic State-linked attacks on western and Russian targets, the increasing western appetite for renewed intervention in Libya, and this month's collapse in Saudi-Iranian relations pose major threats to global security just as the Chinese economy falters and economic risks are rising.

### Introduction

ORG's security analysis has long argued that the combination of socio-economic divisions and environmental constraints together constitute the most substantial longer-term threats to peace and security, constraints that are exacerbated by a security outlook that is strongly rooted in the "control paradigm" that suppresses violent opposition rather than addressing underlying problems. It is in the context that ORG has analysed the wars that have evolved since the 9/11 attacks.

### International Security

The end of 2014 had seen a considerable increase in Western involvement in the war against the Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Iraq. The early shock of

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the *Charlie Hebdo* attack in Paris may not have been connected with IS but it had an impact across the western world and led to an increase in community tensions in France. During the course of 2015 there was a marked increase in attacks in western countries or against their nationals that were directly or indirectly related to IS. These included the killing of tourists at the Bardo Museum in Tunis and the Tunisian resort of Sousse, the bombing of a Russian tourist jet after take-off from Sharm el-Sheikh Airport in Egypt and a mass shooting in California. The greatest impact, though, was the series of attacks in Paris in November on a rock concert, cafes and bars, killing 130 people. The early weeks of 2016 saw attacks in Istanbul and Jakarta, the former directly aimed at foreign tourists. Similar attacks by al-Qaida's affiliate in the Sahel-Sahara on upmarket hotels in Bamako (November) and Ouagadougou (January) appear to have been intended to 'compete' with IS, which made significant inroads into Libya and Nigeria in 2015.

The attacks overall represent a departure in the strategy of IS which has previously been focused primarily on strengthening its proto-caliphate in Syria and Iraq, centred on the northern Syrian city of Raqqa. Now it is involved in direct conflict overseas and there are competing theories as to the reasons for this change. One argument is that IS was in retreat in the war against the coalition, given that the year saw a huge expansion in the air war and the loss of several towns and cities, most notably Ramadi in Iraq. A counter view is that though the losses have been considerable, with more than 20,000 IS supporters killed, recruitment is still buoyant, and taking the war overseas will actively encourage more Islamophobia and the further marginalisation of Muslim communities in the West. This, in turn will aid recruitment to the cause.

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In any case, while the taking of Ramadi by Iraqi government forces was hailed as a great achievement, close examination points to two more problematic experiences - it proved exceptionally difficult to dislodge IS from urban areas and only at the cost of very high levels of destruction, and even since victory has been announced there are IS elements still active in the immediately surrounding areas.

Meanwhile, Russian involvement in the air war in Syria has proved to be a substantial aid to the Assad regime given that most Russian airstrikes have been directed not at IS but at other anti-Assad rebel groups. During the coming year Russia is highly likely to maintain and possibly expand its presence, determined to ensure that the Assad regime either survives or is replaced in an internationally agreed process by an administration acceptable to Moscow.

In the final year of Barack Obama's presidency it is unlikely that there will be a further major intensification of the air war, not least because of the difficulty in identifying targets, but there is likely to be an increase in the use of Special Forces. More generally there are strong indications that there will be more emphasis on northern and sub-Saharan Africa, with the United States and France likely to enhance their forces supporting individual states.

Libya, in particular, remains in a parlous state with much of the country beyond the control of either rival administration, allowing the expansion of IS elements currently centred on the coastal town of Sirte but extending towards some of the Saharan oil and gas fields. There may be moves by the United States and coalition partners to develop air operations in Libya. Indeed, France acknowledged it had begun reconnaissance overflights of Libya in November and US aircraft attempted 'targeted killings' of al-Qaida and IS leaders there in June and November.

2015 saw the successful conclusion of an agreement on Iran's nuclear programme. While involving multinational negotiations the focus was on the United States and Iran, and the agreement was seen as the one example of progress across the entire region. Furthermore, December saw Iran completing a major programme of low-enriched uranium exports to Russia as part of the agreement. In the coming year there are indications that the improvement in US-Iran relations will continue, but there are two important caveats. One is that November will see the US Presidential election and the possibility that a more hard-line administration will emerge and the other is that Israel and Saudi Arabia are deeply suspicious of Iran.

Saudi Arabia, in particular, is greatly concerned at the easing of Washington's relations with Tehran and is also worried about the survival of the Assad regime and Russia's involvement in that. Since March, Saudi Arabia has led a high tempo air and ground campaign against Houthi rebels in Yemen, seeing these as backed by Iran. This is a major war involving a coalition of at least ten Arab and African states. The Saudi execution of a leading Shi'a cleric in early January raised further tensions with Iran, leading Riyadh and many of its allies to suspend diplomatic relations with Iran.

The existence of two major proxy wars in the region – in Syria and Yemen – has long been seen as one of the greatest obstacles to resolving both conflicts and that it is necessary to bring those proxy elements together in order to make progress. This is especially the case in Syria where Iran and Russia support the regime and Saudi Arabia, Turkey and a coalition of western states oppose it. The Saudi-Iranian tensions make progress much less likely in the coming year though it is probable that the Obama administration will work intensely to that end in its final months in office, however poor the prospects.

## Environment

Last January's briefing reported that the 20th meeting of the Conference of Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP20) had taken place in Lima, Peru in December 2014 and while there was little direct progress there were indications of a wider international recognition of the risks arising from climate change. There was therefore cautious optimism that the next meeting (COP21) in Paris at the end of November 2015 would see serious progress made. During the course of 2015, that sense of optimism was maintained and was aided by 2014 having been the warmest year since accurate records began.

There was, in particular, evidence emerging that the so-called "pause" in global warming was, as many climate scientists thought, a temporary phenomenon caused by the Southern Oscillation and its best known element, El Niño, damping down the warming for perhaps five years. The phase of the oscillation now appeared to have ended which meant that the oscillation and background warming were now in synchrony and would be so until the end of the decade. During 2015 that appeared to be confirmed by a further record-breaking year and a confident prediction that 2016 will be warmer still. If this is the case then more extreme weather events are probable and these will further encourage acceptance that climate change really does require rapid moves towards ultra-low carbon economies.

If COP21 is judged in this context then on the positive side there was more general agreement than before that carbon emissions have to be cut and that the objective of avoiding a global temperature increase of 2.0 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial has to be lowered to 1.5 degrees Celsius. At the same time the great majority of the pledges to reduce carbon emissions are voluntary

rather enshrined in national law and even if all were implemented on the timescale that doesn't even start until 2020 then that would not be enough to keep to a 1.5 degree rise.

Thus there has been some progress but much more needs to be done. There remains a particular question mark over US policy after the Obama administration, which has been unusually willing to expend political and diplomatic capital on pushing for carbon reductions. If the issue recedes from the international political agenda during 2016 then that will be an indicator of a continuing if underlying refusal to recognise the dangers inherent in current fuel usage.

## **The World Economy**

There was uncertainty a year ago about world economic prospects with a concern over low oil prices, a continuing failure to bring in effective financial regulation and a concern over the growth of political opposition to austerity, especially in southern Europe. The uncertainty has been replaced by a more established and worrying view that the world economy is getting close to recession, with considerable social and political implications.

Last January's briefing reported a 2014 overall growth rate of 3.3% with a prediction of a modest increase to 3.8% anticipated for 2015, though this was predicated on continuing high rates of growth across South and East Asia, especially China and India. In the event the growth rate slumped to 2.4%, commodity prices overall fell by 20% and oil prices by close to 60%. While such decreases might be expected to aid fuel-importing countries the impact was low, and the effect on the economies of major oil producers, especially those with large populations, was considerable. Furthermore, China simply did not

meet its growth targets and while UN sources predicted a 2.6% growth rate for 2016, an ominous sign was that fifteen of the largest developing economies recorded a decline in investment.

The state of the oil market is of particular note since the price collapse has come at a time of considerable instability among some major producers such as Libya and Iraq, the expectation being that such uncertainty would normally encourage speculation and higher oil prices. This has been avoided mainly because the dominant producer, Saudi Arabia, has been deliberately over-supplying crude in an effort to damage the Iranian and Russian economies; the market thus remains flush with oil at the time of a price slump. The end of international sanctions on Iran will further flood the oil market in early 2016. Cheap oil, of course, means less incentive to invest in alternative, sustainable energy sources.

While the Chinese growth rate is still impressive by the standards of any other major economy, the relative decrease in growth rate has the effect of limiting imports of a wide range of commodities and, given the sheer size of the Chinese market, this affects the wider world economy. By early January there were even warnings from diverse sources that the world economy is now at risk of serious disruption, possibly at the level of 2008.

A counter argument to critiques of the failure of the neo-liberal economic model has long been that it may have its faults and may be a potential source of inequality but if there is continuing economic growth these faults may be masked by improvements across society, even among the economically marginalised. There is growing evidence from the growth of political movements such as Syriza and Podemos that this factor has weakened and if



the world economy enters recession then a very powerful reaction should be expected.

## Conclusion

There is some limited cause for optimism on the issue of climate change as the most dangerous of environmental constraints, though 2016 is likely to establish how realistic that optimism is. In relation to the world economy, the outlook is more pessimistic than a year ago and in relation to security there appears to be little or no sign of any move away from the control paradigm. One indicator of a lack of foresight has been the inability of many European states to recognise the problems of mass migration, both in terms of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa and refugees from the wars in the Middle East. Given that migratory pressures will be hugely greater if climate change is not prevented then that is an indication of how much work there is to do if we are to achieve a more sustainable and peaceful security environment.

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## About the Author

**Paul Rogers** is Global Security Consultant to Oxford Research Group (ORG) and Professor of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford. His **Monthly Briefings** are available from our website, where visitors can sign up to receive them via our newsletter each month. These briefings are circulated free of

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