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The International Peace Institute's (IPI) Regional Insights covers select regional and thematic developments based on information from a variety of sources. It draws on the research of IPI experts and is provided exclusively to major donors and members. Each monthly issue covers challenges and opportunities related to international peace, security, and development.

Africa

African Union Summit: At the recently concluded AU summit in Equatorial Guinea, African heads of state adopted the "Protocol on Amendments to the Protocol on the Statute of the African Court of Justice and Human Rights," granting themselves and other undefined senior officials immunity from prosecution for a range of crimes including crimes against humanity, war crimes, and genocide. This action is purely symbolic, as the African Court of Justice is a long way from being established and it does not impact the International Criminal Court's (ICC) capacity to investigate and prosecute African or other state leaders for these crimes. Nonetheless, it is a major setback for the goal of justice in Africa, a rebuke to the recent decision of the Assembly of States Parties to the ICC not to grant immunity to heads of state, and a rejection of the fundamental principles underlying the African Union Constitutive Act. The media, NGOs, and think tanks in Africa have condemned this action as reflecting the self-interest of heads of state while disregarding the crimes perpetrated against tens of thousands of Africans in recent and ongoing conflicts. The issue is likely to arise again at the next session of the ICC Assembly of States Parties later this year.

Mali: The Malian government and Tuareg rebel groups held peace talks in Algiers on Wednesday, July 16th, after an exchange of prisoners helped to get the negotiations started. The talks, seen as a major breakthrough by regional and international partners, included representatives from the United Nations, European Union, African Union, and the Economic Community of West African States. While the talks themselves represent a breakthrough, an agreement reached between the government and Tuaregs in Algiers may not necessarily carry weight with the diverse and fragmented rebel groups in northern Mali.

South Sudan: The European Union has imposed sanctions in the form of a travel ban and asset freezes on army commander Santino Deng and rebel chief military leader Peter Gadet, for obstructing the peace process and their roles in committing atrocities in the past six months of fighting in South Sudan. These sanctions, which are intended to send a strong message to both President Salva Kir and opposition leader Riek Machar are a sign of the growing frustration on the part of international partners and regional leaders with the continuing violence and the inability of the parties to find a resolution to the conflict. Calls for sanctions from the United Nations Security Council could be an uphill battle given that China and Russia have expressed reservations regarding sanctions. In addition,

both sides have been unwilling to include independent voices from civil society organizations in the talks in Addis Ababa, leading to skepticism about the parties' willingness to commit to forming a transitional unity government. Deterioration of the humanitarian crisis, including an outbreak of cholera and a looming famine, could lead to further displacement of people internally and across the region.

Middle East

Egypt: July 3rd marked the first anniversary of the ousting of Muslim Brotherhood President Mohamed Morsi. A protest mounted by Islamist supporters was quickly quashed by Egyptian police: 39 key activists were arrested ahead of the protests while 157 protestors were detained on the day. Several key districts in Cairo were affected as authorities closed various squares and cordoned off a number of main streets. While overall turnout for the protest was low, this is less an indicator of Islamist sentiment in Egypt than of fear of confronting the authorities at a time when anti-Brotherhood attitudes remain overwhelming. Upcoming parliamentary elections, set to take place in the fall, will reveal a more accurate profile of Egyptian political leanings, particularly as Salafi factions are poised for a big win. President Al Sisi issued a decree on July 15th forming a Supreme Electoral Commission to oversee the election.

On the economic front, the government has taken some of the boldest action in recent Egyptian history by implementing a series of subsidy reforms on July 4th. Fuel prices increased by 78%, while higher taxes on cigarettes and alcohol were put into place. The government also signed off on a capital gains tax and hinted that the price of electricity would increase over the next five years. While this decision was deemed a massive risk and an unpopular move—even President Al Sisi referred to it as “bitter medicine”—the blowback has been weaker than expected. It could yet provoke public anger, however, as food prices are likely to increase in light of higher transportation expenses associated with the fuel subsidy reform. This will be particularly true in Cairo, given that all food products are either transported from the countryside or brought in from port cities. Approximately 30% of the Egyptian budget was spent on fuel and food subsidies before the reform.

Iran: With the July 20th deadline looming, it appears the P5+1 nuclear talks with Iran may end inconclusively or require an extension. Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif's called for an extension—an indicator that enough headway has been made that, in Zarif's words, “this is a process worth continuing.” Secretary of State John Kerry told the press as he was leaving Vienna, the site of the talks, that he was headed back to Washington to consult with the US president and congress about “whether or not more time is warranted” for negotiations.

Israel and Palestine: As the death toll mounts in the latest conflict, Egypt—in a first for the Sisi government—stepped in to negotiate a new ceasefire between the Israelis and Hamas following the recent cross border rocket attacks and airstrikes. Hamas turned down the proposal, which was supposed to take effect on July 15th. The rejection of the ceasefire is also telling of the new dynamic between Egypt and Hamas: while the latter enjoyed a close relationship to the Morsi regime, the Sisi era has brought with it widespread popular hostility against Hamas, adding a layer of tension between the two sides (Hamas has gone as far as claiming that they were not even consulted on the ceasefire draft before it was submitted). Efforts to negotiate a ceasefire continue, as both the Israelis and Palestinians find themselves under enormous external pressure to stop the fighting. Press reports

have indicated that Qatar and Turkey are now working on alternative ceasefire plan: indeed, Prime Minister Erdogan and Sheikh Tamim met on July 16th to discuss the potential effort to end hostilities.

Jordan: Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood—the Islamic Action Front (IAF)—seems to have taken a more moderate tack recently, possibly in an attempt to heal rifts within the party between moderate and conservative voices while gaining favor in the eyes of the government as the lesser of two Islamist threats. At a news conference on July 2nd, IAF announced an extensive economic policy proposal for the country, which was circulated to various government ministries. While Jordan's executive branch remained largely silent, media officials commented that "They [the IAF] are a part of the national fabric...We hope this signals a more meaningful engagement in public affairs."

In an apparent indication of the Jordanian concern of spillover from Syria and Iraq, Jordan's army recently announced a drive for new recruits. While officials maintain that this is standard procedure, there is speculation that it directly relates to the advances of the Islamic State in Iraq, given that Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi—considered the Islamic State's "spiritual father"—was a Jordanian national who headed up al-Qaeda in Iraq until he was killed by US forces in 2006. Recent demonstrations in the area of Ma'an saw protestors align with the Islamic State by calling themselves the "Fallujah of Jordan" and thus, suggest the possibility of some grassroots support for IS within certain pockets of Jordanian society.

Kuwait: Politics in Kuwait heated up again this month, as Kuwaitis took to the streets in illegal protests and demanded political reform—in particular, a more empowered and representative national assembly and the release of imprisoned political leaders (most recently, opposition leader Musallam al-Barak). In an apparent response to the increase in public pressure, the Kuwaiti government recently threatened to revoke the citizenship of those suspected of undermining the security and stability of the state, further fueling political tensions.

The government announced an "iron fist" policy against those who threaten the state and increased scrutiny of the activities of nongovernmental associations to make sure they are not engaging in political arenas. Protests have been taking place in Kuwait since 2006 and bring together various disaffected groups, including young people, powerful tribal groups, Islamists, nationalists, human rights activists, and "bidoun" Kuwaitis who lack full nationality and rights. The tensions are likely to continue to run high as opposition leader al-Barak's trial for insulting the supreme judicial council and slandering its chairman (a crime for which he could receive three years in jail) is set to resume in September and as the political turmoil and Islamist advance continue in neighboring Iraq.

Yemen: Following a several-day battle in the northern area of Amran between Houthi militants on one side and local army units and tribes affiliated with the Islah party on the other, the UN Security Council issued a statement on July 11th "demanding that the Houthis and all armed groups and parties involved in the violence withdraw" and urging the Panel of Experts "to look into [peace] spoilers as a matter of urgency and to present expeditiously relevant recommendations to the [Sanctions] Committee established pursuant to the resolution 2140 (2014)."

While violence initially subsided following mediation efforts of UN Special Envoy Jamal Benomar, fighting has since resumed over strategic vantage points despite efforts to put in place a more neutral army unit in Amran. Further, the fallout of this most recent fighting in the north has highlighted internal complexities within the armed forces, as two high-ranking army commanders have been sacked and another seen to be closely aligned with the Islah movement has had his powers curtailed.

These decrees follow increasing concerns over fragmentation within the Yemeni political and security forces' infrastructure, which were further highlighted by the Security Council's call for "military units to remain committed to their obligation of neutrality" in its July 11th statement.

Central and South Asia

Afghanistan: US Secretary of State John Kerry brokered an election deal between the two presidential candidates Abdullah Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani on Saturday July 12th. For the time being, the deal holds out hope for a nonviolent conclusion to the election process, once an internationally monitored audit of the votes is complete. There is speculation that the results may not be known by August 2nd when outgoing President Karzai is constitutionally expected to step down, further raising concerns about this important handover of power. The ongoing political uncertainty is deeply damaging to the already desperate economic situation and the fragile security situation. An attack by a suicide bomber killed at least 41 people in Paktika province on the border with Pakistan on July 15th. The bombing is almost certainly linked to the pressure on militants across the border in Waziristan, Pakistan (see below). Early speculation is pointing to the Haqqani network as likely behind the attack, which has been rumored to have had advance notice when the Pakistani offensive began a month ago.

Pakistan: The military offensive against the Pakistani Taliban and foreign fighters continues in north Waziristan. The offensive has produced an estimated 950,000 internally displaced people. While the press has little or no access to the areas of fighting, Pakistani military sources are allowing photos of captured weapons, and articles are describing recently abandoned suicide bombing schools.

Sri Lanka: The effects of intercommunal violence and riots that erupted on June 14th are playing out in coastal towns south of Colombo, known as the country's resort region. At least four people were killed and nearly 80 seriously injured in the immediate aftermath of clashes in two Muslim-majority towns, after the Buddhist nationalist group Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) held a protest march. While violence was contained to these towns, armed police and military stood guard at mosques and Muslim-owned shops across the country into the first week of July. President Mahinda Rajapakse and his administration faced criticism for their limited response to the violence, while Justice Minister Rauf Hakeem, who is also leader of the country's main Muslim party, warned that continued discrimination against the Muslim community could increase the influence of outside radical groups.

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*The International Peace Institute (IPI) is an independent, not-for-profit think tank with a staff representing more than 20 nationalities with offices in New York across from the United Nations and in Vienna. IPI promotes the prevention and settlement of conflicts between and within states by strengthening international peace and security institutions. To achieve this purpose, IPI employs a mix of policy research, convening, publishing, and outreach. The views expressed here do not necessarily represent those of IPI.