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IPI Middle East Update
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Egypt: On March 26th, army chief Abdel Fattah Al Sisi ended months of speculation by finally announcing that he was stepping down from his role in the military to contest the presidency, promising to rid the country of “terrorism.” The news sparked a wave of civil unrest in Egypt as police clashed with supporters of deposed President Morsi in the streets of Cairo, Alexandria, and elsewhere over the weekend. Similarly, supporters of the popular presidential hopeful also took to the street—including Cairo’s Tahrir Square—to celebrate the news, resulting in a series of clashes between the two camps. The episode was a reminder of the real cleavage that still exists within Egyptian society, especially heated given the recent court ruling two days before that sentenced 529 Morsi supporters to death for rioting. The ruling sentences were handed down after a two-day trial, sparking an international controversy that the UN called a “breach of international human rights law.”

The electoral commission announced that the presidential election will now take place on May 26th and 27th. If there is no clear winner, the election will go into a second round (as occurred in 2012), but this outcome is highly unlikely given Al Sisi’s popularity and status, which serves as somewhat of a deterrent to other candidates. The only other main candidate that has come forward so far is the Nasserist politician Hamdeen Sabbahi, who came third in the previous presidential election against Morsi.

Lebanon: Spillover violence from the neighboring civil war in Syria reached a flashpoint in the northern city of Tripoli where 26 people—mostly civilians—were killed in clashes between pro- and anti-Damascus elements. The warring districts of Bab al-Tebbaneh (predominantly Sunni) and Jabal Mohsen (predominantly Alawite) have had a long history of rivalry, but the Syrian conflict has reignited sectarian tensions there during the last three years. Tripoli locals described the latest episode as a “war of attrition.” The Lebanese capital of Beirut also saw violence in recent days: a gunfight broke out between pro- and anti-Damascus factions on March 31st killing one and injuring several people.

The violence comes at a time when Lebanese politicians are walking a tightrope to meet a deadline. President Michel Sleiman's mandate ends on May 25th, and there are real concerns that a successor will be hard to find given the disagreements between Lebanon's rival political blocs. Despite successive Lebanese parliaments' inability to elect a president on time in the past, the new cabinet under Prime Minister Salam issued a policy statement emphasizing that the government will work to hold presidential elections on May 25th as planned. In addition, a national dialogue started on March 31st. Many parties boycotted the first session of the dialogue, most notably Hezbollah, which did not take part in protest over the continued criticism it has received from President Sleiman regarding its militant role in Syria. The first session of the dialogue was chaired by President Sleiman and included a discussion on a new National Defense Strategy. Without Hezbollah in the room, however, any discussion over security threats is likely to remain superficial at best.

Iraq: On April 1st, campaigning began for Iraq's first parliamentary elections since the US troop withdrawal in late 2011. This was coupled with a series of attacks north of Baghdad, which killed at least eight soldiers and wounded several others. While parliamentary elections are scheduled for April 30th, a sustained surge in violence, an increased presence of extremist groups from Syria, a growing sectarian divide, and confusion over electoral laws all threaten the already delicate political transition process. As recently highlighted by UN Special Envoy to Iraq Nickolay Mladenov, the conflict in Syria has provided terrorist networks the opportunity to build links across the Iraq-Syria border and expand their support base. Of particular concern is the Sunni-dominated Anbar province and its city of Fallujah, where the government is not in control and al-Qaida-inspired militants and tribesmen vie for power. However, with an ever-growing Sunni estrangement from politics, the absence of Sunni unity (with some tribes calling for a boycott of the elections), and the fragmentation of the Shia political landscape, Premier al-Maliki still seems to be the front-runner, particularly if elections are marked by low Sunni turnout.

Israel/Palestine: Last-ditch efforts to hold together the current round of US Israeli-Palestinian peace talks begun nine months ago hit a new moment of crisis on April 1st, as Palestinian President Abbas announced that Palestine would continue in its bid for full UN recognition. Tension had been building over Israel's refusal to release the fourth and final group of Palestinian prisoners, as previously agreed to, without a guarantee from Palestine that it would hold off on its bid at the UN.

Despite the current spotlight on shuttle diplomacy, the multilateral dynamics do not appear to be the most critical element for this negotiation process; rather, it is the politics playing out within Israel and Palestine. The US consideration of a release of Israeli spy Jonathan Pollard, a deeply emotional figure for the Israeli public, may have been enough to keep Netanyahu's coalition members from walking out of the Knesset, as had been threatened, should any additional Palestinian prisoner release deals be signed. Similarly, Abbas continues to face an internal political battle, as he struggles to save face among the Palestinian public and fight off Fatah political rival Mohammed Dahlan, who is a Gaza native and Abbas's ex-security chief.

Whether or not negotiators are able to agree to overcome this most recent impasse, with little substantive progress on the key issues aimed at setting a framework for further negotiations for a two-state solution, it remains unclear if Kerry will be able to push for a continuation of the peace talks beyond the previously established deadline of April 29th.

Arab League and the GCC: On March 26th, the Arab League held its 25th regular summit, with an agenda including Israel-Palestine peace talks, the war in Syria, and an increased presence of al-Qaida inspired groups. Despite a brief scene of reconciliation ahead of the opening session, as the Kuwaiti emir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah walked hand in hand with Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani of Qatar and Prince Salman of Saudi, divisions in the league loomed large. A dispute among the Gulf states over Qatar's perceived support for the Muslim Brotherhood continued as the Qataris called for national dialogue in Egypt—challenging the Al Sisi led crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood and its Gulf neighbors—especially Saudi Arabia, which named the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization in March.

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