

From: Office of Terje Rod-Larsen <[REDACTED]>
Subject: IPI Middle East Update - June 3, 2014
Sent: Tuesday, June 3, 2014 9:25:35 PM

INTERNATIONAL PEACE INSTITUTE
IPI Middle East Update
June 3, 2014

Egypt: Field Marshal Abdelfattah Al Sisi won the presidential election in Egypt with approximately 96% of the vote. The election, originally scheduled for May 26th and 27th, required a one-day extension due to low voter turnout in the first two days, indicating that the Al Sisi campaign was more hollow than initially predicted and that voter apathy in Egypt had reached a new high. By the third day (and after a virulent media campaign urging voters to take to the polls) the election committee announced that 25 million people (out of 54 million registered voters) took part in the election. The figure represents a drop of 6% from the 2012 presidential election, which brought the Muslim Brotherhood to power with 52% of voters casting their ballots. Lower turnout in this election can also be attributed to boycotts—not only by the Muslim Brotherhood but also by the April 6 youth group that spearheaded the 2011 uprising that overthrew Mubarak and has now been deemed public enemy number two, after the Brotherhood. The elections themselves have been described by a European Union team of observers as conducted “in line with the law,” though the same organization regretted the lack of participation of certain stakeholders. Democracy International, on the other hand, deemed a “democratic presidential election impossible” in light of the “repressive political environment.”

Al Sisi is now tasked with organizing a parliamentary election in the fall and addressing the country’s most pressing problems, notably a precarious security situation and an ailing economy. On the latter front, Al Sisi announced his “Map of the Future” economic plan days before the election: a costly and extravagant showcase project reminiscent of the Mubarak era, which calls for the redrawing of Egypt’s governorate borders, 48 new cities, renewable energy plants, and eight new airports. The project, which comes with a \$140 billion price tag, will be funded with Gulf support and foreign direct investment.

Palestine/Israel: After seven years of division and rivalry, the reconciliation pact signed between Hamas and Fatah crystallized into a new unity government, which took its oath on June 2nd. President Abbas described the event as the end of the division which had “greatly damaged the [Palestinian] national cause,” while Hamas spokesperson Sami Abu Zuhri also hailed the national consensus government. Israel’s Prime Minister Netanyahu was quick to urge the international community not to recognize the new Palestinian government due to Hamas’ involvement, despite President Abbas’ insistence that the new government will not be made up of ministers involved in either political factions and that it would be a government that both recognizes Israel and renounces violence. The next few weeks will be critical for Palestine, particularly as Israel considers the use of sanctions against the new government or any change of posture in its dealing with the Palestinians. Already, three nominated ministers who live in Gaza were denied entry to the West Bank for the swearing-in ceremony. Press reports indicate that the new government, headed by Rami Hamdallah, will have 17 ministers, 5 of whom are from Gaza. The prime minister will also serve as minister of interior.

Yemen: Following a relative reprieve earlier this year, heavy fighting in the north has resumed

between Houthi fighters, tribes aligned with the Ahmar clan and the Sunni Islah party, and government security forces. In the past two weeks, clashes—particularly around the area of Amran, northwest of the capital Sanaa—have resulted in more than 30 deaths. A ceasefire brokered by a presidential committee on May 25th lasted only two days before fighting reignited. However, a recent threat made by President Hadi to label the Houthi movement a terrorist organization if its members do not renounce violence may have stemmed some of the bloodshed, since this could provide evidence for the preventive capabilities of the current UN sanctions regime against spoilers of the transitional process in Yemen.

Meanwhile, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has stepped up its retaliatory efforts following a U.S.-backed offensive by security forces in the southern province of Hadramawt. An attack on a government institution in Seiyan resulted in at least 27 deaths.

Libya: The security situation continues to deteriorate in Libya, with continuous gunfire and clashes in Benghazi and an increase in kidnappings, assassinations, fighting, crime, and general lawlessness throughout the country. Fuelling this insecurity is the uncertainty regarding the rightful holder of the position of prime minister and the rise of anti-Islamist General Hiftar and his self-proclaimed “national Libyan army” in the east, both of which play into the growing divide between Islamist, non-Islamist, and regional leaders. While the General National Congress (GNC) confirmed Islamist-backed Ahmed Matiq as prime minister for the moment, the decision remains contested within the GNC and recent attacks on his compound further illustrate the violent polarization gripping the country and its political institutions. Matiq is Libya's fifth prime minister since the fall of Qaddafi in 2011. Meanwhile, General Hiftar, who has refused to recognize Matiq and who many Libyans fear is primarily concerned with his own personal gain, has nonetheless won support from various militia, tribal, and political leaders as a counterweight to Libya's more extremist and conservative militias. Parliamentary elections remain scheduled for June 25th.

Morocco: Labor demonstrations and student unrest have returned to the streets of Morocco and its campuses recently, in parallel with the government's move to end subsidies in place since the Arab Spring in 2011. Months-long negotiations between three Moroccan labor unions and the Ministry of Employment over unemployment, working conditions, wages, and living standards seem to have reached an impasse. Social activists have joined the labor demonstrations and 11 members of the anti-regime, pro-democracy 20 February movement were arrested following their involvement in a labor union march on April 6th. Furthermore, animosity between certain Islamist and secularist student groups recently escalated and resulted in the death of Abderrahim Hasnaoui, a student leader of Attajdid Tollabi, a group close to the ruling Islamist Justice and Development Party. The government has since vowed to end violence on university campuses, arresting suspects in the death of Hasnaoui and altering protocol to allow security forces to intervene earlier on campuses, risking government over-reach.

Iran/GCC: While a P5 + 1-Iranian nuclear deal continues to simmer, new signs of a détente between Iran and Arab Gulf countries continue to appear. Kuwait's Emir Sheikh Sabah Al Ahmad Al Sabah arrived in Tehran on June 1st for a landmark two-day visit, which aimed to close the rift between Iran and its Sunni-ruled neighbors in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). This was the Kuwaiti emir's first visit to Tehran as head of state. His delegation included ministers of oil, finance, industry, and foreign affairs. The latter minister, Khaled al-Jarallah, took this opportunity to discuss the situation in Syria and potential rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran, according to press reports. Meanwhile, Saudi foreign minister Prince Saud al-Faisal has invited his Iranian counterpart Mohammad Javad Zarif

to visit Riyadh; Zarif has accepted but no date has been set. Similarly, Saudi Arabia invited Iran to attend the two-day meeting of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation that opens on June 18th.

For more information please contact:

Maureen Quinn at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]

or

Camilla Reksten-Monsen at [REDACTED] [REDACTED]

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