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IPI Middle East Update

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Egypt: Egyptian politics is showing its dynamism, as presidential candidates come forward to position themselves for an expected two rounds of elections. The first round is scheduled for May 23-24, with the second to take place on June 16-17. The winner is expected to be announced by June 21. Amr Moussa and Abdel Moneim Abul Futuh are currently the most prominent candidates.

Amr Moussa, a former Secretary-General of the Arab League and a long-serving member of the Mubarak Government (including as Foreign Minister), later became a detractor of the Mubarak regime. Abul Futuh, an Islamist, recently deserted the Muslim Brotherhood and, given his prominence, his departure has the potential to split the Muslim Brotherhood vote. Similarly, Hazem Salah Abu Ismail, a lawyer and Islamic scholar, is the candidate favored by young Salafis, but lacking a broader base, his established party, Al Nour, does not support his candidacy. Egyptian liberals hope a secular figure will prevail in the upcoming presidential elections. The Egyptian Army also prefers a secular choice, since it hopes it could more easily convince a secular president not to meddle in its affairs.

Meanwhile, members of parliament, led by the Muslim Brotherhood, are increasingly challenging the military rulers by mounting no confidence motions against the current civilian government, which under an interim agreement, the parliament has the power to disband, though not to reappoint. In addition, a motion in the Egyptian Parliament to expel Israel's ambassador from the country and to cut the natural gas supply to Israel, while symbolic for now, since the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces would not enforce the measure, is an example of possible repercussions from the Palestinian-Israel conflict which will play a significant role in Egyptian politics once power is handed over to a new civilian government.

Iran: Most commentators believe that Iranian spiritual leader, Khamenei, came out the winner

over President Ahmedinejad in the battle of the conservatives that recently played out in the Majlis (parliamentary) elections held on March 2. This realignment of political power allows Khamenei more flexibility and greater access to work with legislators.

On March 17, SWIFT (the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunications, incorporated in Belgium, and subject to European Union regulation) – the dominant service for international financial transactions – halted service for some two dozen Iranian banks that have been sanctioned by the European Union, including Iran’s central bank. The cutoff dealt a significant additional blow to Iran’s economy as it isolates the Iranian financial system, making Iranian trade more costly and financially cumbersome.

Palestinian-Israeli Relations: The Palestinian leadership in Ramallah expressed its disappointment that the issue of a two-state solution for Israel and Palestine did not figure prominently in the March 5 meeting between Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Obama in Washington, D.C. The lack of any concrete proposals coming out of the discussions of the Middle East Quartet at the United Nations on March 12 reinforced the Palestinians’ sense of neglect.

Coincidentally, the Israeli killing of a Palestinian militant leader in the Gaza Strip on March 9 sparked a new round of violence that left 25 Palestinians dead. This latest round of violence is indicative of the competition between the Islamic Jihad, responsible for firing most of the recent round of rockets going into Israel, and Hamas, the official authority in Gaza. The Islamic Jihad is more willing to confront Israel militarily, whereas Hamas, repositioning itself in internal Palestinian politics following the Fatah-Hamas unity government agreement and the closing of the Hamas Damascus office, has much to lose in a military confrontation with Israel.

Syria: The March 21 UN Security Council Presidential Statement on Syria, approved by all 15 Council members, sends a strong and united message from the international community. The non-binding statement endorsed the six-point plan put forward by UN-Arab League Special Envoy Kofi Annan to end the violence. The Council expressed its full support of his efforts which call for secure access to humanitarian agencies, the release of detainees, and the start of an inclusive political dialogue to address the concerns of the Syrian people.

This significant development came after more than one month of disunity among Council members during which the violence and death toll in Syria (estimated at 8,000 by the United Nations) had increased. Syrians are facing continued repression by the Assad Government and a stalled economy that has been hit hard by sanctions, a drought, and the damage and disruption from the fierce battles between the Assad Government and the mobilized popular opposition

forces.

Politically, the opposition Syrian National Council operating outside of the country remains divided and is marked by serious internal dissent; in contrast, the internal opposition groups seem more organized. Of note, there are some cracks beginning to show in the Assad Government's unity. The deputy oil minister resigned in a video released on March 7 and, according to press reports, several high ranking military officers have also joined the opposition. The more the Syrian Army suppresses its own population, particularly through close quarters combat (small units engaged at very short range), the more likely defections from the government will increase.

Trends in Algeria, Iraq and Yemen: Upcoming elections in **Algeria** bear watching, as Islamic movements in Algeria have learned much from the Moroccan experience. **Iraq** continues to be wracked by almost daily armed attacks and bombings (25 policemen were killed on March 5 alone). Internally, as reported in the press, tribal leaders are organizing themselves with the support of local political and security officials in order to prevent new bouts of insurgency. These tribal affinity groups have long been a political force in the country. On the international stage, Iraq is preparing to host the next Arab League Summit scheduled to take place on March 29 in Baghdad. High-level attendance from other Arab League member states is expected at the upcoming summit which many experts believe will rehabilitate Iraq in Arab eyes and is seen as a symbol of Iraq rejoining the Arab world as a major player. The Iraqi Government's Arab counterparts, however, will be watching closely to see if the al-Maliki Government curtails what appears to be the growing influence of Iran in its internal affairs.

In **Yemen**, outside forces and remnants of the old regime are reportedly meddling as Yemen's new government faces the country's long-standing economic, political, and social challenges. Recent press reports of the interception of Iranian weapons' shipments to Houthi rebels in the north of Yemen are problematic for Yemen and point to Iran's interest in destabilizing Saudi Arabia, Yemen's neighbor to the north. Meanwhile, al-Qaeda appears to be taking advantage of the new political situation, reportedly instigated by remnants of the old regime, as seen in the recent clash with the Yemeni armed forces in the south.

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