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Algeria

On Tuesday, April 12th, approximately 10,000 people demonstrated for the first time in Algiers. Their demands focused on the high cost of university tuitions.

Hussein Ayat Ahmed, a former leader of Algeria's war of independence and the chairman of the Socialist Forces Front, an opposition party, said "Algeria must learn from the Arab uprisings which have shaken history ... peaceful reforms must be enacted and very soon."

In a speech on Friday, April 15th, President Abdulaziz Bouteflika declared that he would pursue significant reforms, including changes to the constitution and electoral law. A commission made up of members of recognized political parties and legal experts will work on the constitutional reforms before proposing a new law, either to Parliament or in a referendum. The opposition was largely skeptical of the President's speech, for it believes that the same Parliament that amended the constitution to allow the President to run for a third term cannot be trusted to pass the required reforms. The opposition asserts that if the President is serious about reforms, he should dismiss the current Parliament and call for new elections.

Egypt

Iran's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Ambassador Mohammad Khazaee, has been entrusted by Tehran to travel to Cairo to negotiate the resumption of diplomatic relations.

Foreign Minister Nabil al-Arabi of Egypt said that the government had decided to nominate Mustafa Al

Faqi as a candidate to the post of Secretary-General of the Arab League. A former Egyptian diplomat and a classic Arab nationalist, Al Faqi is currently Deputy Speaker of the Arab Parliament. He previously chaired the Arab and Foreign Affairs Committee in the Egyptian Parliament, and is a former Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs and Permanent Representative of Egypt to the Arab League. The Youth movement has expressed serious reservations about the nomination of Al Faqi to the post, due to his close association with President Mubarak.

Libya

Prominent opponents of Muammar Qaddafi are talking of the prospect of a divided Libya. The longer the military and political stalemate, the greater the possibility that Libya would be divided into two states: Barqah (Cyrenaica)—i.e., East Libya—and Tripolitania and Fezzan—i.e., West Libya. Tripolitania and Fezzan constitute more than 50 percent of Libyan territory and their residents remain loyal to Qaddafi.

Sheikh Mohamed Ben-Ghalbon, head of the Libyan Constitutional Union (an opposition group), declared that Libya was already divided between revolutionary East and Qaddafi-ruled West. Ben-Ghalbon said that the city of Misrata was paying the price of its aspirations to freedom. Many powerful tribes not far from the besieged city refrained from helping embattled Misrata out of loyalty to Qaddafi. He expressed fear that NATO was leaving Qaddafi the necessary leeway to retake the city.

Qaddafi's truncated state would be able to export oil from Zawiyah; while the rebels would export oil from the port of Marsa el-Hariga, near the city of Tobruk. The seesaw battles of the war would concentrate around Brega, Ras Lanuf, and the rich oil fields in their vicinity.

Syria

Protests were widespread after Friday prayers and took place in several cities, including Latakia, Homs, the eastern city of Deir Ezzor, and the predominantly Kurdish city of Qamishli in the northeast. Thousands marched in the southern city of Dara'a, where this time the security forces remained invisible. But security forces and "ghost" fighters attacked protesters in the village of Bayda, a suburb of Baniyas. For the first time Damascus also witnessed a large demonstration, egged on by restive suburbs.

On Monday, Syrian security forces dispersed a demonstration by students of Damascus University, in solidarity with victims of the protest movement in Dara'a and Baniyas. According to the Kurdish Committee for Human Rights (RASED), protests also erupted at the University of Aleppo. If the protest movement takes root in universities, it will generate momentum for even larger demonstrations that the Syrian government will find difficult to quell.

The wrath of the protesters is aimed at the new "aristocracy" that has recently risen in Syria. In Dara'a, the protesters chanted against President Assad's cousin, Rami Makhlouf, who epitomizes the emerging aristocracy. Makhlouf owns Syriatel, the country's cell-phone network, and symbolizes the intertwining of wealth and power.

President Assad remains reticent about meeting the demands for reforms. He seems to believe that he ought not tread the paths of Presidents Ben Ali of Tunisia or Mubarak of Egypt, whose concessions only increased the demands of protesters for more reform.

President Assad ordered the release of prisoners that had been arrested during recent demonstrations, and, in a speech to his new Cabinet, declared that the emergency law would be rescinded in less than a week. But in return, the President wants an end to unsanctioned protests and he instructed the Interior Ministry to be firm in implementing the law.

Some in Syria consider this a step in the right direction; some of these people, however, also believe the President did not go far enough. They argue that without revoking Article 8 of the Constitution, which stipulates that the Baath Party is by law the ruling party in Syria, democracy will be difficult to realize.

The Alawite community is concerned that some protesters are associating it with Assad's regime. One incident took place in Homs during a funeral procession for a member of the protest movement who was killed by the security forces. But such incidents seem isolated at this stage and protesters appear to be trying to overcome the sectarian divide.

It is worth noting that Iran does not consider the events in Syria part of what it calls the "Islamic Awakening," but rather as an American-Zionist conspiracy against a country which supports the resistance.

Jordan

Amman witnessed a peaceful demonstration by supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood and secular elements; but in the city of Zarqa the situation was different. Hundreds of Salafis clashed with supporters of King Abdullah; many were injured and about seventy Salafis were arrested. The leadership of the Kingdom is facing multiple challenges, the latest of which is coming from radical Salafis.

Followers of Salafism—theologically an extension of Wahabbism—are now joining the protest

movements in many Arab countries, after first opposing protests on the basis that to rebel is to move astray from the path of the "Guardian, the Ruler," which is to them tantamount to sowing sedition and division in Muslim society.

Yemen

The Foreign Ministers of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) announced on Sunday, April 10th, a new version of their initiative aimed at helping the Yemeni government and the opposition find a solution to the current impasse.

This second version of the initiative, presented less than one week after the initial one, includes two major changes which are meant to accommodate President Saleh:

- Whereas the first version asked the President to step down, the second version only asks him to transfer his duties to the Vice President.
- The new version of the initiative also calls for a dialogue between the government and its opponents, provided that the parties "remove sources of political and security tensions," (i.e., end the demonstrations).

President Saleh has indicated that the initiative provides a general basis for discussions and that he has no problem with a smooth transfer of his duties to the Vice President in accordance with the Constitution. That is to say, he will not resign until the end of his term, in 2013. Saleh recently called the leadership of the Gulf monarchies to impress upon them the fact he wants to leave with dignity; immediate departure, he argued, is far from dignified. Most Gulf leaders, with the exception of Qatar, seemed sympathetic to the President's plea.

The opposition is split: some would prefer to welcome the initiative and then try to improve it, while others—in particular the protesters and the youth movement—reject it. A delegation from the opposition met over the weekend with the Foreign Ministers of the GCC, in Riyadh. It sought a timeline for the President's departure and clarifications as to what is meant by "transfer of duties." Furthermore, the opposition wanted guarantees from the GCC that President Saleh will have to respect an agreement for leaving if they are to commit to the initiative.

A meeting of Sheikhs and religious leaders, hitherto allies of the President, called on him to step down, without granting him or his relatives immunity from prosecution. The Sheikhs and religious leaders rejected any initiative that would not stipulate the immediate departure of President Saleh and argued that Saleh's constitutional legitimacy dissipated when government forces opened fire on peaceful

protesters. Furthermore, they expressed confidence that new authorities would shoulder their responsibility in local and regional security, and would cooperate with the international community in "drying up fertile grounds of terrorism, wherever it is located."

President Saleh believes time is on his side: protesters will get bored and will eventually go home. But rallies continue to assemble in support of the immediate resignation of President Saleh.

According to well-informed sources, an all-out military confrontation between units supporting the uprising and the Republican Guards supporting President Saleh was averted on more than one occasion last week. The American Ambassador in Sanaa seems to have played a role in defusing tensions.

In the absence of a political solution, the risk of a military escalation remains high.

Bahrain

Recent reports from Manamah indicate that the Ministry of Justice has initiated legal action against the Al Wefaq National Islamic Society and the Islamic Labor Association. Both organizations have mostly Shiite members. The Wefaq is the main opposition group in Parliament; it was able to mobilize about a hundred thousand peaceful protesters when the government allowed demonstrations to take place. Wefaq counts 18 of the 40 members of the Bahraini Parliament among its own membership; all 18 have, however, resigned in protest against the suppression of the demonstration.

Well-informed sources indicate that the government is, however, not seeking to dissolve the Wefaq and that members of Parliament who have resigned will be able to campaign again for their seats in by-elections.

The Foreign Minister of Bahrain has announced that the countries of the GCC have asked that the Arab Summit, scheduled to take place in Baghdad in May, be cancelled. This position illustrates deteriorating relations between the GCC and countries which have expressed disapproval of the situation in Bahrain. This move will certainly cast clouds on GCC relations with Iraq, which is eager to show that it is stable, no longer under occupation, and capable of hosting such a summit.

Relations with Iran also continue to deteriorate. The leader of the Islamic Revolution Bloc in the Iranian Parliament, Ruhollah Hosseinian, wants Tehran to "take a firm position" on the presence of Saudi forces in Bahrain and has expressed the view that the Iranian army must be ready "when other Gulf forces are sent to other countries." Hosseinian went on to say "we should not allow Saudi forces to be

close to our borders."

The spokesperson for the National Security and Foreign Affairs committee in the Iranian Parliament, Kazem Jalali, evinced similar views, claiming that "the Americans are doing their utmost to prolong the age of dictatorial regimes in order to escape the aftershocks of the great Islamic Awakening."

Oman

After the arrest of a writer and of a media personality, political activists denounced attacks against freedom of thought in Oman.

Last Friday, the army was preparing for a day of rage in the city of Sohar. To avoid confrontation with the protesters, the Omani Army executed an innovative plan: it brought ten empty buses to the city square after Friday prayers, with senior officers holding signs that said "Whoever needs work must get on the bus." Within an hour, 1,000 young people were completing measures for employment in the army. Sultan Qaboos bid Said al Said has instructed that university graduates be accepted without conditions.