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INTERNATIONAL PEACE INSTITUTE

IPI Middle East Update

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Egypt: Egypt's bilateral relations with the United States remain in the headlines as President Morsi traveled to New York for the United Nations General Assembly during the week of September 24th. Americans were introduced to President Morsi's views on bilateral relations in a lengthy interview published September 23rd in the *New York Times*. Three points of note – Morsi asserted Egypt's independence from the West (not hostile, but less compliant than Mubarak), called on the US to fulfill its commitments to the Palestinians under the Camp David Accords to have Israel withdraw from the West Bank, and, while noting shared objectives with the United States, pointed out that these objectives are framed by very distinct customs and values in the two countries.

As protests against the anti-Islamic online video trailer produced in the United States have subsided in Egypt, analysts looked for a deeper understanding of what fueled the demonstrations. One factor contributing to them is the popular Egyptian campaign for the release of Omar Abdel Rahman (known as the Blind Sheikh), who is serving a life sentence in the United States for his role in the 1993 attack on the World Trade Center in New York City. There are regular demonstrations, sometimes described as sit-ins, of the Blind Sheikh's supporters outside the US Embassy in Cairo. In addition, perhaps in a nod to populism, President Morsi publicly stated in June that he will pursue the release of the Sheikh.

The militant activity in the Sinai Peninsula, despite the current Egyptian military campaign against it, continues to raise concerns. On Friday, September 21st, militants from a previously unheard of group, "Supporters of the Holy Places," fired across the border, killed one Israeli soldier, and wounded another. Security forces, in response, killed the three attackers. The incident puts further pressure on the government to rein in the militants and to adeptly manage sensitive security relations with Israel. Given that the Camp David Accords limit Egyptian military activity in the Sinai, the Israelis are warily watching the Morsi government's actions. In seemingly good news for Egypt and Israel on security issues, President Morsi appointed Mohamed Raafat Shehata to

serve as the new intelligence chief. Mr. Shehata played a pivotal role in the mediation that led to the release of the Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit from Hamas. Thus, he is a known quantity to his Israeli counterparts and his appointment would appear to bode well for a level of trust in the lines of communication on the most sensitive security issues.

Libya: The death of Ambassador Chris Stevens and three other Americans during violent attacks against American facilities in Benghazi on September 11th has generated strong responses from the Libyan people and government. On Friday, September 21st, in actions reminiscent of the 2011 Arab Spring, thousands of Libyans took to the streets in Benghazi and overwhelmed the camp of the militant Islamic group, Ansar al-Sharia (Supporters of Islamic Law), perceived to be the perpetrators of the crime. The protesters later took over a camp of another militia group and invited the police to assume responsibilities for the two sites. Two militias in the city Darna voluntarily dissolved themselves. The Libyan government subsequently demanded militias not cooperating with the Ministry of Defense to dismantle their camps and surrender to the state.

Two dynamics are worth highlighting here. First, Libya is witnessing a multiplicity of political forces (old regime diehards, new liberals, Islamic fundamentalists, Islamic extremists, groups of ethnic or regional affiliation) competing for power politically. Secondly, the recent series of events – circulation of the online anti-Islamic video, violent street protests, the West's consistent defense of free speech, and the subsequent publishing of caricatures of the Prophet Mohamed in a French newspaper – reinforces the cultural divide between the Islamic world and the West. The Islamic world perceives the West as having nothing but contempt for Islam and cannot understand the West's commitment to free speech when it attacks the divine. The West is perceived as irrationally inflexible on this issue. In turn, the West sees the Islamic world as intolerant and violent. This divide serves to reinforce the extremes on both sides of the issue. Salafists (the Islamic fundamentalists), in particular, are major beneficiaries.

Tunisia: Protests in Tunis directed at the US Embassy and American school over the anti-Islamic online video resulted in the deaths of two Tunisians on September 14th. In response, the Tunisian Ministry of Interior banned demonstrations on Friday, September 21st, out of fear of further extremist violence. The government's concern had increased following a French newspaper's publication of caricatures of the Prophet Mohamed. After being suppressed for years by the Ben Ali regime, Salafists are challenging the state and appear intent on reversing the rights secured by Tunisian women. The Salafists' relations with the ruling Islamist party Ennahda are a roller coaster ride circling between cooperation and animosity. Some Salafists reject party politics and are working under the banner of Ansar al-Sharia (Supporters of Islamic Law – same name but distinct from the Libyan group). The Tunisian group is not calling for jihad at this time, but sees the country as ripe for proselytizing. Having rejected party politics and opposed the recent Tunisian elections, the group regards the elected assembly as an infidel organ. To them, legislating is solely the provenance of the almighty. In a recently released press statement, the leader of Ennahda, described the Salafists as a threat to society and said he expected the government and

security forces to protect public order. Highlighting widespread concern in Tunisia regarding the emergence and activities of the Salafists, former Prime Minister Beji Caid Essebsi (in office from February 2011 to December 2011) denounced government policy as permissive and accused the ruling coalition of failing the country and allowing the democratic process to stagnate.

Palestinians: At the United Nations General Assembly the Palestinians requested non-member state status, a step back after last year's failure to gain acceptance as a state by the Security Council. 2012 has not been a good year politically or economically for the Palestinians. Economic conditions are deteriorating, Israeli settlement expansion continues, the peace negotiations have been on pause, and Palestinian Authority reconciliation with rival Hamas seems to be a distant possibility. The evolutions of the Arab uprisings and the Iranian nuclear program have the attention of the international community rather than the Palestinian cause. There is increasingly more talk in some quarters of abandoning the peace process and dissolving the Palestinian Authority. According to press reports, President Abbas told the Palestine Liberation Organization leadership that on his return from the United Nations General Assembly ministerial (the week of September 23rd), he wants a decision either to abrogate the Oslo Accords or hold a national election to replace him. Experts see this more as posturing than a serious position. Abbas has made similar pronouncements in the past.

Syria: The London-based Syrian Observatory on Human Rights claim that August was the bloodiest month since the start of the uprising. The watch group estimated one-fifth of the 25,000 killed since March 2011 died in August. The large death toll appears to have resulted from the opposition's reach into densely populated neighborhoods in Damascus, which drew an indiscriminate counterattack by the Bashar Al Assad government. In addition, the Syrian conflict continues to spill over into neighboring countries. When the opposition forces evicted the Syrian army from a border post aiming to secure their supply lines from Turkey, the intensity of the fighting forced Turkish schools in the area to close. Turkey's already restive Kurds are also taking advantage of situation. Inspired by Kurdish advances in northeastern Syria, Kurdish fighters have been re-energized in their push for autonomy, and Turkey has responded and sent its air force in hot pursuit of the Kurds into Iraq. Simultaneously, the conflict in Syria is sharpening the sectarian divide in Iraq and pushing the Baghdad government further into the embrace of Iran.

There are multiple, and seemingly competing, new diplomatic initiatives on Syria. Strong Russian pressure on the Al Assad government made it possible for the Syrian domestic opposition to meet in Damascus. While Syria's external opposition alleged it was a public relations move orchestrated by Al Assad, the meeting's final communiqué, released in the presence of the Russian and Chinese ambassadors, called on President Assad to transfer power peacefully. It also supported a ceasefire and withdrawal of the regular army from towns and cities. The United Nations and Arab League Joint Envoy to Syria, Lakhdar Brahimi, reported to the Security Council on September 24th. He remains reticent regarding the possibility of a peaceful solution and is conducting further international consultations before proposing a new diplomatic approach.

Egypt is also pursuing its Islamic quartet initiative (Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey) and hosted a meeting in Cairo on Syria. The Syrian National Council's Abdulbasat Sida declared his group opposed to the inclusion of Iran. The Saudi foreign minister did not attend the Cairo meeting; while this was ostensibly for medical reasons, it would appear that the Saudis have serious reservations about Tehran's participation in the process.

Iraq: Press reports claim Western intelligence has concluded that the Iranian supply operation to the beleaguered Syrian regime is bigger and more systematic than first thought. Tens of tons of arms and military personnel are reportedly being transported on civilian aircraft daily. The United States and other Western governments are putting pressure on the Iraqi government to abide by its obligations and respect the UN embargo on arms exports from Iran and North Korea. Under pressure, Iraq denied permission for a North Korean plane bound for Syria to use its air space. In addition over the September 22-23rd weekend, an Iraqi government spokesman said authorities would introduce the practice of random searches of Syrian-bound Iranian planes. Senator John Kerry, chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, warned that US aid to Iraq might be contingent on cutting off flights carrying arms from Iran to Syria.

Yemen: Saba News Agency reported that that Yemeni President Abed Rabbu Mansour Hadi with cabinet approval has formed a committee to investigate human rights crimes committed during the 2011 uprising in the country. The committee's mandate may include the ability to indict former president Ali Abdullah Saleh for alleged crimes, even though under the Gulf Cooperation Council Initiative he was given immunity for handing over power.

In other developments in September, the United States refused to grant former president Saleh a visa to visit the US for medical reasons without any explanation for the decision. Yemeni political parties and senior officials in the new government are very concerned that former President Saleh is working to undermine the transition in the country. A major concern is that Saleh's son continues to control the Republican Guards, perhaps the most potent military unit in the country. Ambassador Peter Wittig of Germany, serving as the Security Council President this month, noted that the Council is concerned about ongoing attempts to undermine the transition process. In addition a high level meeting of the Friends of Yemen was held in New York City on September 27 to reaffirm the international community's support for the ongoing transition.

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