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IPI Middle East Update
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Egypt: Trouble on the Sinai frontier reignited recently when seven members of the Egyptian security services (police and soldiers) were captured and later released on May 22nd. The kidnappers – unidentified Islamist insurgents heavily armed were allegedly demanding the release of a number of jailed Bedouin militants. The incident reflects the challenging security situation in the Sinai: a region which is made all the more sensitive by its proximity to Gaza, Israel and the Suez Canal. It also is a reminder of the August 2012 incident, when Islamist gunmen killed sixteen Egyptian soldiers near Israel's border. Recently leaked police reports have also revealed that Islamist militants in the Sinai were involved in the prison break-outs that occurred in early 2011 during the period when Egyptians took to the streets to oust then-President Mubarak. The leaked police reports are notable given that several high ranking members of the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas escaped from Egyptian prisons at that time.

News from Cairo has focused predominantly on a proposed law regulating civil society groups which was submitted to the country's top legislative body on May 29th. While the presidency has supported the draft as reflecting a balance between 'defending national security' and the 'freedoms of civil society groups', opposition groups have criticized it, fearing the amount of oversight it gives to state security agencies, particularly with regards to NGO access to foreign funding. Indeed, forty-one human rights groups interpreted the draft legislation as forming the 'bedrock of a police state'. Though the episode represents an ongoing debate regarding the future of civil liberties in the new Muslim Brotherhood-governed Egypt, it is also indicative of a nationalist backlash against NGOs perceived as tied to foreign funding sources.

Libya: Days before a law banning former Gaddafi officials from public office came into effect (June 5), Mohamed Megaryef, President of the General National Congress, announced his resignation on May 28th. The move came soon after the Minister of Interior Ashur Shwayel – another Qaddafi-era official – was replaced by Mohamed Khalifa al-Sheikh. It is likely that this new law – which affects any person who served under Qaddafi between September 1 1969 and the fall of his regime in October 2011 – will lead to the resignation of other members of the Parliament and several Ministers, a move which will have a potentially destabilizing effect on the already precarious transition while bringing new faces to the Libyan political arena. Some analysts interpret this development as creating a vacuum likely to bring the Islamists to the political fore.

Along with the political turnovers, the Libyan National Congress is mulling over a plan to move the headquarters of its state oil firm to Benghazi – the city where the 2011 uprising began – which would bring massive investment to the much-starved eastern region of Libya. Indeed, 80 percent of Libya's oil had always been located in the east yet Qaddafi maintained Tripoli as the epicenter of the country's oil activity.

Tunisia: As clashes between the government and radical Salafi groups continue to rock Tunisia – epitomized by the recent arrest of some 200 members of Ansar al-Sharia on May 20th – Tunisia's political transition has suffered a new blow as opposition blocs within the National Constituent Assembly (NSA) have threatened to sue Ennahda at the Administrative Court. The opposition threatened legal action against what they termed a legislative 'coup' aimed at drafting a constitution which impinged on human rights and freedoms and a direct overturn of a consensus that had already been reached on the draft constitution. The move threatens to bring instability to the Tunisian National Dialogue process – a process which was already shaken by the threat of an all-out labor strike last year – and represents the ongoing tension between the country's secular-Islamist divide.

Syria: Building on the Geneva Communiqué of June 2012, plans for a conference known as 'Geneva II' - spearheaded by the United States and Russia to bring an end to the violence which has ravaged Syria for the past two-plus years – are currently in the works. The aim of the conference is to start talks on a political process. Though the Syrian regime has agreed to participate 'in principle', the opposition remains bitterly divided on the matter. The meeting originally was scheduled on/about June 10 and 15 to mark last year's meeting. Now it seems more likely that the meeting will follow the G8 summit in Northern Ireland on June 17-18. It remains unclear how much of a turning point this meeting will be given that a plethora of involved actors - including an emboldened Hezbollah, the currently election-frenzied Iran and other major powers - are divided by different strategic interests. This is best captured by the recent lifting of the EU arms embargo on May 27th which gives Britain and France a green light to arm Syrian rebels followed by Russia's so-called 'stabilizing' act with the approval of the delivery of S-300 anti-aircraft missiles to the Syrian regime.

Israel/Palestine: After four trips to Israel and Palestine, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry is telling the Israelis and Palestinians to focus on the possibility of the resumption of serious peace talks. He met separately with Palestinian Authority leader Mahmoud Abbas as well as with Israeli Justice Minister Tzipi Livni and the Prime Minister's envoy Yitzhak Molcho on May 27th in Amman. One positive note came from a recent poll conducted by the Israel Peace Initiative which indicated that 69% of Israeli would be in favor of a peace plan based on the Arab Peace Initiative if it received backing from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. In addition, Kerry is also supporting investment as a way to support peace, inspired by recent efforts with former British Prime Minister Tony Blair and members of the global business community to revitalize the Palestinian economy.

Iraq: The fears of an all-out sectarian war continue to permeate the Iraqi political landscape. A number of bomb and gun attacks killed almost forty people on May 21st, a day after seventy others were killed in an anti-Shi'ite incident. Over 500 people have been killed as a result of violence in Iraq this May. Sunni empowerment in Iraq can be traced to the neighboring conflict in Syria, where sectarian cleavage - and the Sunni insurgency more particularly - remains a definitive part of the conflict. The violence is the worst Iraq has seen in five years and represents a major challenge to Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.

Iran: The presidential candidacy of Ali Akbar Hashem Rafsanjani, a former President and co-founder of the Iranian Revolution and Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei, President Ahmadinejad's chief of staff and key ally, was blocked by the Guardian Council on May 21st. The presidential race has – for now - been narrowed to a select few which include the country's chief nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili, former nuclear negotiator Hassan Rohani, former foreign minister Ali Akbar Velayati and the mayor of Tehran, Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, making it increasingly clear that the Supreme Leadership is pushing for a loyal conservative.

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