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Middle East Update June 1-6, 2011

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Syria

Syrian authorities are employing a combination of military and political measures in an effort to quell the growing violence and unrest. Damascus announced a reform package early last week that included amnesty for crimes committed prior to May 31, 2011. Opposition members quickly dismissed the announcement as too little too late, as it would not pardon political prisoners, only reduce their sentences. Most importantly, the proposed reforms would not abolish Article 8 of the constitution that stipulates the Baath party to be the leader of state and society. The opposition contends that the maintenance of Article 8 will only serve as an obstacle to a peaceful path to democracy.

Last Wednesday, President Assad issued a presidential decision announcing the formation of a committee charged with formulating an agenda for a national dialogue. The committee is chaired by Vice President Farouk al-Sharaa.

Exiled opposition figures met in the Turkish city of Antalya early last week in support of the Syrian revolution and to create a roadmap for a democratic transition in Syria. This movement has been largely leaderless and disorganized. The meeting gathered three hundred and fifty activists from a broad spectrum of ideological and ethnic backgrounds including representatives of the Kurds, Arabs, Alawaites, Druze, and Christians. Delegates called on President Bashar Assad to resign immediately, but were unable to reach a consensus on a plan to achieve democratic change.

At the conclusion of the Antalya meeting, the representatives elected a 31-member advisory council to act as the international representative of the opposition and to provide logistical support to protesters inside Syria. The election of a nine-member administrative committee was postponed to a future meeting. Syrian authorities view the conference as a foreign conspiracy purportedly financed by the Ford Foundation.

A second group of Syrian opposition figures—most of whom did not participate in the Antalya meeting—assembled in Brussels to support the protest movement. The participants agreed to form a committee to provide assistance to the protest movement and called for an independent inquiry into the violent repression of protesters. The Brussels meeting did not claim to speak for the protest movement, but offered its support to the call for an end to the Assad regime.

Syrian authorities cut off most internet services and mobile data on Friday morning following a renewed round of unrest and an escalation in violence. This move aimed to limit protesters' ability to plan demonstrations and to disseminate information abroad.

Demonstrators in Hama were met by gunfire as they marched toward the town center carrying flowers for members of the security forces. The police fired no warning shots, but shot to kill. Funerals were held on Saturday, despite the sixty tanks stationed outside the city's southern gate. Ten people were killed in Hama on Saturday and an additional ten protesters were killed in neighboring provinces.

Reports by human rights activists indicate that forty-one civilians in Restan, a suburb of Homs, were shot dead by Syrian security forces.

Yemen

President Ali Abdullah Saleh's regime is fighting on three fronts—the tribesmen, the protesters, and the international community—to retain power.

The tribal response is of great concern to the regime as tribesmen are joining the uprising in large numbers. In addition, units of the First Armored Division are now supporting Sheikh Sadiq al-Ahmar, the leader of the Hashid tribe. Ahmar loyalists successfully blocked a convoy of heavy tanks sent by the Republican Guard—commanded by Saleh's son—to reinforce army defenses. Tribes from the Taiz province and beyond agreed to send fighters—already engaging President's Saleh military units—to the city to protect the demonstrators. Saleh will likely shift his focus from the peaceful youth demonstrations to the tribal uprisings.

The ceasefire between government forces and the supporters of Sheikh Ahmar came to an end on last Monday. The agreement stipulated that Ahmar's supporters would withdraw from the government ministries they were occupying and that Saleh's forces would withdraw from the building they had seized near the Sheikh's residence. Hashid's tribesmen vacated some local administration buildings, but the ceasefire fell through when the government failed to fulfill its parts of the agreement. The President may have felt that the agreement gave too much authority to the tribal leaders challenging the regime's power,

Last week's government crackdown against peaceful protesters in Taiz's Freedom Square—where 103 protesters were killed and up to 1000 wounded—has evoked an international outcry.

Civilians are fleeing heavy fighting in Sanaa and in Zinjibar, a city that government troops are attempting to recapture from al-Qaeda fighters.

Fighting will likely continue in the absence of an initiative to end it. The opposition will not accept a coalition government including the ruling party after the violence of the last ten days. One alternative is to create a transitional council—comprised of youth protesters, independent experts, and members of the opposition parties—to guide the transition until a new constitution has been drafted and put to a referendum, and fair elections have been held. The ongoing violence continues to thwart the mediation efforts of the Gulf Cooperation Council.

The US and Saudi governments are concerned that the instability in Yemen will allow Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) to gain a stronghold in the country and fears of a spillover effect to neighboring Gulf countries have grown. Last Saturday, Saudi leadership, weary of Saleh's diminishing authority and increasingly tenuous control of the armed forces, has reportedly mediated a one-week ceasefire between the ruling party officials and the rebel tribesmen. Washington continues to pressure Saleh to step down.

President Saleh and several top Yemeni officials—including the prime minister, the speakers of the parliament, and members of the consultative council—were injured in an attack during Friday prayers last week. The President suffered head, face, and neck injuries after a hidden explosive device detonated inside the presidential mosque. Saleh had, for security reasons, opted to pray in the presidential compound rather than attend a public rally. Saleh initially accused the Ahmar family of being behind the attack but, after further investigation, determined that Al-Qaeda was the likely perpetrator. Most experts in Yemen believe that it was an inside job. President Saleh flew to Saudi Arabia for medical treatment shortly after.

Vice President Abdu Rabo Mansour has been left in charge while Saleh recuperates in Saudi Arabia. According to reports, President Saleh's son and nephews have prevented Mansour from governing effectively.

Bahrain

Protests resumed on June 1 following the lifting of emergency law. The king announced last week that a dialogue with the opposition would commence on July 1. The Obama Administration considered the call for national dialogue to be a "step in the right direction."

The Crown Prince of Bahrain and the country's foreign minister met with UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon late last week. Bahraini officials informed the Secretary-General that Manamah has decided to form two committees, one to start an unconditional dialogue with the opposition and the other to investigate the security forces' handling of protesters. Since the protests began in March, at least thirty people have been killed and more than one hundred people have been arrested including opposition leaders.

Libya

For the first time in its Libyan campaign, NATO has employed attack helicopters against Qaddafi's forces. NATO commanders believe the introduction of these helicopters, which can attack with precision accuracy, could make a decisive difference in a conflict that has reached a stalemate. After 3640 sorties, and with the cost of the campaign mounting and stress on aircrews growing, finding a way to break the stalemate has become a priority.

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