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Egypt: Tensions between the government and the judiciary were reignited when the Islamist-dominated Upper House of Parliament (the country's temporary legislative authority) moved quickly to consider a series of judicial reforms that have met with wide skepticism and sparked a judicial revolt. If passed, the reforms would end the terms of more than 3,000 judges by lowering their retirement age. The Muslim Brotherhood's unofficial stance claims that this move would "cleanse" the country's political arena of the "remnants" of the ousted regime, while the opposition has interpreted this as a purge of lawyers and judges who have, in recent times, voiced criticism of President Morsi and consider it another power grab aimed at consolidating the party's grip. The episode led to the resignation of Justice Minister Ahmed Mekki—considered an Islamist himself—and also brought new waves of violence to the street, near the presidential palace and at the Supreme Constitutional Court.

As the political turmoil continues to rock Egypt's transition, the country continues to deal with further economic woes and social malaise. On the former issue, press reports indicate that President Morsi may be looking eastward for a sizeable loan from Russia to help give his foreign currency reserves a much-needed boost in the wake of an ever-elusive IMF loan. On the latter front, the abrupt closure of *Egypt Independent*, an independent English daily and go-to source of news for international readers, once again raised questions about press freedom in the supposedly democratic post-Mubarak Egypt.

Syria: It appears that the "red line" which the Obama administration had declared over the use of chemical weapons in Syria has been crossed after the United States announced on April 25th that such weapons—specifically, the agent sarin—were likely to have been used on a "small scale" by the Syrian government against its own people. The confirmation came after weeks of speculation about the issue, most recently after confirmed Israeli intelligence reports. Though "all options are on the table," a military intervention is not imminent. But a shift in policy is being hotly debated in the media given that the US had previously described the use of chemical weapons as a "game-changer."

This latest development comes about following a week-long offensive by government forces on the Sunni district—and former rebel stronghold—of Jdeidat al-Fadel outside Damascus, which culminated in one of the bloodiest incidents of the conflict. News agencies reported that more than 100 were killed (some activists claim the death toll was much higher), many of whom were civilians. As the death toll rises, the humanitarian situation continues to worsen to the extent that the UN high commissioner for refugees announced last week that approximately 8,000 Syrians flee the country every day.

Jordan: While there are conflicting reports, it appears that Jordan may have given the Israeli government a green light to send drones into Syria through Jordanian airspace. The drones are intended to collect information and conduct reconnaissance missions but are also capable of carrying missiles. If this is true, it could indicate a willingness by Jordan to counter the spillover risks more actively, particularly after the April 18th announcement that the Pentagon would be sending about 200 troops and army planners to Jordan.

Palestinians: International support for Hamas will get another boost during the Turkish prime minister's upcoming visit to Gaza. While the visit was discouraged by US Secretary of State John Kerry, Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan remains set on visiting at the end of May. The visit, as well as a recent trip by Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas to Turkey, has led to press speculation that Turkey is positioning itself to assume what has been Egypt's role as an honest broker in oft-discussed reconciliation talks between Hamas and Fatah. Alternatively, the Turkish prime minister may be trying to

balance his recent acceptance of an apology from Israel's Prime Minister Netanyahu for Israeli Defense Forces' stopping of the Gaza blockade-busting ship, Marmara, in 2010. The Marmara incident led to the death of nine Turkish citizens and generated a significant rift between Israel and Turkey, two otherwise long-time political and economic partners.

Iraq: Above all else, the recent situation in Iraq has recently been marked by a wide and deepening sectarian conflict. As Iraqis went to the polls for provincial elections on April 20th, the first elections since US troops withdrew, deadly sectarian violence spread across the country. As of April 26th the UN Mission in Iraq estimated the toll of the dead and wounded across the country to be in the hundreds and the UN envoy to Iraq called for both sides to show "restraint." The clashes are among the fiercest since the US pullout from the country in 2011.

Bahrain: Ten weeks and fifteen rounds of talks later, the Bahraini National Dialogue continues. According to press reports, the dialogue faces some procedural issues regarding the agenda, structure, and outcome of the talks. Some believe that the issues should be put forth in a referendum while others affirm that the king should be allowed to exercise his executive rights and decide on the ultimate process himself. There has been much speculation that Prince Salman will enter the dialogue, though he says that he will only "step in" at the necessary time. Bahrain's human rights record has received international attention: a top-level European parliamentary delegation visited Manama on April 29th to discuss human rights, among other issues, and the Bahraini government criticized as 'biased' the annual US State Department report on the rights situation in the kingdom.

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