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IPI Middle East Update
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Arab League Summit: The 2013 summit, which opened in Doha on March 26th, was well managed and choreographed, given the underlying tensions in the Arab League. President of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces Moaz al-Khatib urged in a moving speech for wider international support for the Syrian tragedy while his delegation, in a powerful symbolic gesture, took their seats in lieu of the government of the Syrian Arab Republic. Though this conjured memories of the Libyan rebels who took Qaddafi's seat in the Arab League's 2011 meeting, it also has led to speculation that other major multilateral organizations may follow suit, which would thus serve a deeper blow to the Assad government's legitimacy. The response to the presence of the Syrian opposition at the summit was mixed: both Lebanon and Iraq vehemently opposed it (although not to the point of boycott).

The second star item on the agenda was Qatar's announcement of a \$1 billion fund to help protect the Arab and Islamic heritage of Jerusalem. This announcement prompted a discussion on the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative — which offers Israel recognition by Arab countries in return for a conclusive settlement with the Palestinians — and the need to revisit that possibility through consultations with Washington in April. However, the gesture was, according to press reports, snubbed by a number of Israeli politicians. The Qatari effort to promote dialogue and unity in the Arab world at the summit—a role it has been pursuing aggressively over the last two years—was a relative success. The Arab League's internal divisions and rivalries, however, are likely to continue to inhibit its ability, as an institution, to deal with these thorny issues.

Syria: The Syrian opposition has scored a number of victories over the past few weeks including: the capture of a Syrian military intelligence compound near the Golan Heights on March 17th, major gains in the contested battleground of Homs on March 18th, the appointment of Ghassan Hitto as prime minister for the Syrian opposition National Coalition on the same day, and a formal seat representing the Syrian people at the Arab League Summit in Doha.

A more troubling issue that has surfaced, however, is that of an alleged chemical attack in a northern Syrian village on March 19th, which, if true, would be the first of its kind since the conflict began. Both the government and the opposition traded accusations for the attack and the incident has already escalated into a fully fledged international controversy. While the UN has called for an investigation and will likely begin its probe next week following approval from Damascus, Russia clashed with Britain and France at the Security Council over the extent of such an investigation, arguing that the issue was being overblown to serve political objectives. If the allegations prove true, the use of chemical weapons represent a "game changer" — at least as far as US foreign policy is concerned — and would represent a further deterioration of an already catastrophic humanitarian crisis.

Egypt: The Egyptian political atmosphere remains mired in controversy and uncertainty. In the middle of March, violence returned to the streets after police used tear gas to disperse demonstrators who had gathered around several of the Muslim Brotherhood's headquarters in the country. The most notable incident came at the Cairo headquarters on March 23rd when approximately 3000 protestors clashed with hundreds of regime sympathizers in what was a telling display of the country's polarized dynamic. As a result of the continued uncertainty, the postponed Egyptian parliamentary election may not take place before October. The postponement is another blow to the country's transition that will have wide ramifications on a much-needed economic recovery. Economic indicators are grim. Inflation hit a notable high of eight percent in February. The stock market is down just over five percent since the start of 2013. Press reports indicate funding from Gulf monarchies may be drying up, and Morsi is turning to Iraq and Libya.

A recent incident involving a popular television host (a counterpart to American television's Jon Stewart) has also opened a debate on the future openness of society in the new Muslim Brotherhood-governed Egypt. Bassem Youssef, satirist and host of "El Barnameg," sat through a five-hour interrogation—interpreted by the press as an intimidation tactic against government critics—and was released on bail on April 1st. Considering that, in recent times, arrest warrants for five other prominent anti-government activists have been issued, the latest incident sheds light on the worries about freedom of speech and press in post-Mubarak Egypt.

Israel: Israel's 33rd government was sworn in at the Knesset on March 19th—with returning Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at the helm—following long negotiations and exhausting debates among the Likud, Habayit Hayehudi (Jewish Home), Yesh Atid (led by rising political icon Yair Lapid), and Hatnua (led by Tzipi Livni) parties. The arduous process reflected the current complexities of the Israeli political landscape yet the strange mix of left and right reflects a potential contradictory foundation for this alliance, which may prove troublesome for Netanyahu in the future. This is a uniquely centrist-secular government — despite the presence of Jewish Home. It is crucial to note, however, that the coalition agreement focused predominately on economic and social issues (as opposed to the issue of the peace process and the Palestinians): this is a telling indicator of the political priorities in Israel today. In light of Lapid assuming the role of finance minister, he is likely to rock the boat by tackling the controversial issue of defense cuts (which currently represent one-sixth of the government's entire budget).

Lebanon: The resignation of the Mikati government in Lebanon on March 22nd, albeit no surprise given the tumultuous and polarized dynamic of the last two years, is having serious political repercussions on the country. In light of both the country's drastic political divisions and the destabilizing spill-over from the crisis in neighboring Syria (manifesting itself primarily in a huge refugee presence and constant border flare-ups), the formation of a new government will be a daunting task for President Michel Sleiman. With hopes that the president can keep the country united and prevent the situation from unraveling, a new round of national dialogue, which according to the press started on March 28th, is seen as the best approach to address the political vacuum as soon as possible.

Saudi Arabia: The appointment of women to Saudi Arabia's Shura Council in January—which acts both as a parliament and an advisory body to the king—is showing signs of fresh and potentially progressive reform. The ban on women drivers has, according to press reports, been on the council's agenda and generated a serious debate in the parliament's chambers after approximately 3,000 citizens signed a petition on March 18th urging the Shura members to address the issue.

Yemen: With the National Dialogue in full swing, Yemen is providing the world with an alternative post-Arab Spring narrative: a civilized and all-encompassing initiative that addresses the country's future and the demands of the population. Both UN envoy Jamal Benomar and President Hadi expressed their optimism about the process and referred to it as a "historical opportunity" to address Yemen's problems and determine the state's future. The optimism contrasts with a number of clashes that took place between security officials and members of the southern Hiraak, the most radical elements of which have chosen not to participate in the dialogue. Even as the process faces daily challenges and uncertain success, the dialogue is being closely watched as a model for its transitioning neighbors as well as potentially providing a conclusive solution to some of Yemen's most divisive problems.



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