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Middle East Update June 7-13, 2011

Middle East Update presents a summary of on-going developments in the Arab world based on information from the Arabic press, expert analyses, and other sources. This service is provided by the **International Peace Institute** (IPI) exclusively to its major donors. The views expressed in the *Middle East Update* do not necessarily represent those of IPI.

Yemen

Yemen is in a state of political paralysis and the power vacuum is enticing to separatist and terrorist movements. President Saleh's future political plans remain murky. German and Saudi doctors operated on the President in Riyadh removing shrapnel from his chest and neck. Saleh will need to undergo cosmetic surgery to his face which sustained second degree burns in the assassination attempt on June 3rd. Government sources believe al-Qaida operatives have infiltrated the Special Forces and suspect the Mu'azin of the mosque in the presidential compound of perpetrating the attack.

Saleh's top aides maintain that he will return to Yemen in a matter of days, but the US, EU and GCC are increasing pressure on Saleh to step down. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has called for an immediate transfer of power. The Qatari Prime Minister has asked Riyadh to convince Saleh to surrender power to Vice President Mansour Hadi. The Saudis appear reluctant to do so as Arab tradition dictates that a guest must not be made to feel uncomfortable. However, the Saudi Cabinet met under the chairmanship of King Abdullah and appealed to Saleh to sign the GCC-sponsored plan.

Qatar had initially withdrawn its support for the GCC-initiative, following Saleh's numerous refusals to sign. It seems, however, that Doha has reconsidered its position after talks with the Yemenis, who emphasized that the crisis would deepen in the absence of an alternative plan for a political resolution to the conflict. Western officials said that they will give President Saleh time to recuperate before re-engaging him in a conversation to accept the GCC plan.

Yemeni opposition parties held meetings to discuss the formation of a national unity coalition as well as possible presidential candidates. The ruling party will likely perceive these kinds of deliberations—at a time when the president is seriously ill—as highly provocative. The stalemated political process threatens Yemen with even greater instability. The US is taking advantage of the current situation in Yemen to attack al-Qaida strongholds. At the same time, the Administration is aware that collateral damage could alienate tribes and provide al-Qaida with additional recruits. Opposition leaders reaffirmed their commitment to fighting al-Qaida, irrespective of the outcome of the struggle with President Saleh.

Syria

The violence continues to escalate in Syria. Security forces reportedly killed more than 30 protesters on Friday and used attack helicopters in the northwestern town of Jisr al-Shughour. The following day, Damascus announced that 120 police and security forces were ambushed and killed by terrorist elements in Jisr al-Shughour. There were reports of armed clashes with citizens in several Syrian cities. The regime was planning a brutal repression in Jisr al-Shughour, but counted on infantrymen from the region to carry out the policy. Many soldiers defied orders and chose to defend their kinsmen instead. In some other cases, residents spoke of infighting among the security forces.

International pressure is increasing against Assad's regime. The Jordanian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood has escalated its rhetoric against the regime, calling the ongoing events a "crime against humanity" and declaring that "any leader who orders his (police forces) to fire on unarmed civilians and confiscate their right to free expression has lost legitimacy." The World Federation for Muslim Theologians has also called for an end to the killings and the siege of cities and villages.

Moscow—in a sign of disapproval of the Syrian leadership's handling of the uprising—announced that it has decided to receive a delegation from the Syrian opposition.

Syria's former Vice President, Abdul Halim Khaddam, (who has been living in Paris since he split with the Assad regime in 2005) criticized the meeting of the opposition which took place in Antalya two weeks ago, arguing that the delegates did not produce concrete proposals in support of the popular revolt, but rather recognized the legitimacy of the state. Khaddam argued that President Assad is the head of the regime—not the embodiment of the regime—a distinction he believes the opposition failed to make when they called for Assad's removal instead of regime change.

In the meantime, Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallem wrote to the Secretary-General of the United Nations arguing that Syria is fighting terrorists and that a Security Council resolution against Syria would be tantamount to supporting terrorism. Furthermore, he asked for support for Damascus' in its "fight" against terrorism. President Assad has been avoiding calls from UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon.

Bahrain

King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa has asked the Chairman of the Council of Representatives, Khalifa Ahmed Al Dahrani, to take charge of the dialogue with the opposition. The largest opposition group, Wefaq, has declined to participate in the talks. The Wefaq wants a member of the ruling family, preferably the Crown Prince, to take charge as they believe no one outside the Khalifa family can deliver.

New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof recently appealed to the King of Bahrain for the release of his friend Hassan al-Sahaf. The publication of Kristof's column was timed to coincide with Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa's visit to Washington, DC.

According to reports, uncertainty over the political situation is leading some foreign and local investors to withdraw assets and may create difficulties in the banking sector—which once accounted for over one fourth of Bahrain's wealth.

A recent anti-American campaign in the Bahraini press targeted the US embassy in Manamah, accusing it, among others, of colluding with Shiite groups.

Egypt

The January uprising led to a substantial decline in foreign investment and Egypt's tourist industry. The annual growth slowed to less than 2%, from a projected 5%, and Egypt's currency plunged by 25%. People are expressing anger because the revolution has not delivered economically and some civilians are considering returning to the streets for another revolution.

The Left is arguing that, in the light of the failure of capitalism, the state should revitalize the public sector. The Muslim Brotherhood has proposed imposing a 7.5% tax (Zakat) on the income of all Muslims and channeling this revenue to charitable institutions under government oversight. Liberals, on the other hand, have called for a continuation of Mubarak's policy of increased economic openness and believe that government efficiency is the key issue. The G8 members have pledged \$20 billion in financial assistance to Egypt and Tunisia over the next few years.

The ruling Military Council is facing conflicting pressures from the public. Some civilians—fearing a new military dictatorship—are calling for a swift transfer of power. Others worry that early elections could favor the Muslim Brotherhood and are pushing the interim government to postpone the elections.

Egypt has resumed supply of natural gas to Israel following pressure from the Obama Administration. Supplies were halted following an explosion on April 27 that damaged the pipeline carrying natural gas to Jordan, Israel, Syria, and Lebanon. The supply did not resume immediately though maintenance was completed. Israel considers the gas deal to be an integral part of relations between the two countries. The US made economic assistance to Egypt contingent upon the proviso that it meets its security obligations in the northern Sinai which includes shipments of natural gas to Israel.

Tunisia

Election of the Constitutional Assembly in Tunisia have been postponed to October 23, three months later than originally scheduled. The interim government announced its decision last Wednesday, citing technical reasons as the cause for the delay. Once elected, the Assembly will draw up bylaws to determine whether Tunisia will have a parliamentary or a presidential system, and if the government will have a secular or an Islamic character.

The political process in Tunisia is vital to the equality and empowerment of women, yet to be achieved in the Arab world. Authorities are requiring participating parties to select equal numbers of male and female candidates and to alternate them

on the ballots. The Nahda, the main Islamic party, accepted this condition as it has more female members, since many of its male members were prosecuted during the ben Ali regime.

The deferral will likely benefit the dozens of new political parties that are still in the process of assembling their rosters of candidates.

Lebanon

A delegation from the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt met with important political actors during a visit in Lebanon. For the first time, it did not ask for a meeting with Hizbullah leader Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah.

The current relationship between the two factions is markedly different from the decades of alliance against western influence in the region. The Brotherhood is moving away from the axis of resistance and is signaling a rapprochement with American-supported movements such as the Turkish ruling party. The Egyptian Brothers are trying to project an image of moderation and are distancing themselves from their Syrian counterpart and its struggle against the Assad regime.

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