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**Subject:** Middle East Update - March 28-April 12, 2011

**Date:** Wed, 13 Apr 2011 18:58:16 +0000

**Importance:** Normal

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## Middle East Update March 28-April 12, 2011

### Syria

Last Friday, Syria witnessed widespread demonstrations. Protests took place in Dara'a, Qamishli, Douma, Hasaka, Banias, Homs, Harasta, and Hama. The security forces reacted with brutal force. Estimates of fatalities range from 37 to 42, most of them in the city of Dara'a.

The authorities claimed that protesters and security personnel were shot in equal number by unknown armed groups. The Syrian television showed footage of masked men directing their fire at the protesters. This official version has however not turned public opinion.

On Monday, April 11th, the city of Banias came under military siege; many protesters and security personnel were, according to Syrian Government sources, killed.

As protests spread to more cities, sectarian tensions are also beginning to surface in Syria. In Dara'a, a predominantly Sunni city, protesters have accused Iran and the Lebanese party Hizbullah of participating in the suppression of demonstrations. In Latakia, clashes have also erupted along sectarian lines. Lebanese and Iranian involvement, however, seems improbable; the rising tensions are likely an expression of resentment directed at the powerful ruling family, who belong to the Alawi sect, and a show of disapproval of the Syrian-Iranian alliance.

Syrian protesters have advanced the following demands:

1. Repeal of the emergency law, instituted in 1963, which would necessitate the release of close to 2,000 political prisoners;
2. Constitutional amendments that provide for democratic life;
3. Authorization for political parties to operate freely;
4. Dissolution of both the government and the People's Council.
5. Call for early presidential and parliamentary elections; and
6. Abolition of Article 8 of the constitution, which stipulates that the Baath Party is by law the ruling party in Syria.

President Assad's speech to Parliament on March 31st was disappointing to many, who were expecting the speech to be a declaration of a new era of genuine reforms. His promise of new elections for the People's Council and for local administration rang hollow. He did not call for an end to the emergency law.

The popular perception is that the regime cannot be reformed. The Baath Party remains the supreme arbiter in Syria. President Assad's reluctance to propose reform measures, contrary to what had earlier been promised by Vice President Farouk Alshara'a, indicates that the leadership is split between pragmatists and hardliners (the security apparatus).

For the time being, President Assad seems to have sided with the latter; but, while repressive measures might temporarily tame the uprising, it is doubtful that the regime will succeed in suppressing it.

It seems, however, that the protests have had a sobering effect. The regime is concerned that if moderate Sunni Muslims and the Kurds join the protest movement, its own existence will be seriously challenged, and is now making concessions to moderate Muslims (e.g., authorization to teachers to wear Niqabs, closing of a casino opened only one year ago) and Kurds (e.g., plan to give citizenship to stateless Kurds).

A dissident member of the Assad family, Ribal Rifaat Al Assad, has warned his cousin, President Assad, that civil war will ensue unless the regime rapidly responds to the opposition's demands for democratic reforms. He went on to argue that there are many minorities in Syria, and that all of them "have arms, all will seek the defense of its group. Syria is nothing but a copy of Iraq."

## Yemen

The military elite that ruled the Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen) and later the Republic of Yemen, is divided. When President Ali Abdullah Saleh began to contemplate transferring power to his son, senior army officers from his home district of Sanhan vehemently opposed the move. It is probably the case that in-fighting among the Sanhan Military elite made it impossible to end the Houthis' rebellion, or stem the tide of the secessionist movement in the south of the country.

President Saleh did not work to extend the writ of the state beyond major urban centers lest the sheikhs turn against him. He also did not give as much attention to the deteriorating economic situation as he devoted to foreign policy. He genuinely believed that he was a pan-Arab leader and was intoxicated by Arafat's description of him as "the Knight of the Arabs."

The mounting pressure on President Saleh to step down, along with his son and nephews, is probably the reason for the violent escalation. The president and his sons mistakenly believe that they militarily best their rival, Gen. Ali Muhsen Alahmar, whose forces were weakened in fighting the Houthi rebels in the north of the country. The impasse in the political dialogue between the government and the opposition explains the increase in the level of violence.

The GCC countries and the United States, as well as the European Union, are alarmed by the deteriorating situation. Washington, who viewed developments in Yemen through an Iranian or al-Qaida prism and who invested heavily in military units commanded by the president's son and nephews, has recognized that its interests are better served by Saleh's exit. On April 5th the White House issued a statement asking for "meaningful political change" to take place soon.

The Saudi-backed GCC initiative on Yemen announced last week illustrates the wish of Riyadh to use its influence as Saleh's main financial benefactor to urge him to depart peacefully. Last week, the GCC proposed that President Saleh resign and transfer authority to his Vice President on the proviso that the latter will order a reorganization of the military forces and national security apparatus. A government of national unity will subsequently be formed, as well as committees to amend the constitution, to make it possible for parliamentary democracy, and redraft the election law. After these measures are taken, free and fair elections will take place. The proposal also calls for immunity for President Saleh.

The Foreign Ministers' council of the GCC met in an emergency session late Sunday, April 10th. They reiterated their initiative and called on President Saleh to transfer his duties to his vice president, Abdu Rabo Mansour.

The opposition political parties initially welcomed the initiative, but the young protesters expressed grave reservations because it does not mention the immediate departure of the president, nor do the young protesters want to give up the right to hold the president and his relatives accountable for the killing of demonstrators.

On Monday, April 11th, President Saleh agreed to transfer his duties to the vice president in accordance with the constitution; in other words, he wants to complete his term, which will end in 2013.

The situation is precarious and it is unclear whether it will lead to the president's negotiated departure or to further military escalation.

## Jordan

The Jordanian protest movement is gaining momentum; the demonstrators are calling for the dismissal of the prime minister. Their aim is constitutional monarchy. Some in the opposition are proposing to rescind the amendments to the 1952 constitution, which stipulate that the regime must be a parliamentary and hereditary monarchy. The Jordanian parliament refused to entertain proposals from the opposition to proscribe the constitutional rights of the king.

## Bahrain

It appears that Wafaq, the largest opposition group, has dropped its conditions for negotiation with the regime (that the GCC troops must leave the country and that political prisoners be freed) and has accepted an offer of mediation by the Emir of Kuwait. However, the royal family has not agreed to the Kuwaiti initiative.

In response to the crisis, Bahrain decided to suspend flights to and from Iran and Iraq, the countries with the largest Shiite populations.

Relations with neighboring Iran are at their nadir. The Gulf foreign ministers' meeting in Riyadh condemned Iran's "naked interference in the internal affairs" of the Gulf countries.

Relations with Kuwaiti Shiite minority were also affected after the Bahraini media accused Saleh Ashour, a prominent Kuwaiti Shiite and member of parliament, of supporting extremists in Manamah.

The situation in Manamah has also stirred concern in Iraq, and the Iraqi parliament has suspended its deliberations for ten days, lest discussion of the Bahraini situation adversely impact the delicate sectarian balance.

Relations with Hizbullah have also soured after the Bahraini foreign minister accused the Lebanese party Hizbullah of terrorism and of training members of the Bahraini organization Al-Haq in military tactics.

An agreement to resume the national dialogue would sideline Iranian and Iraqi accusations that the demands of the Shiites in Bahrain were met with force. The sooner the national dialogue, the less likely the interference in Bahraini domestic affairs.

### **Saudi Arabia**

Sheikh Saleh Abdullah Al-Fozan, a high-ranking Saudi cleric, advised King Abdullah to release political prisoners, who have mostly been sentenced without trials, or risk the issue's becoming a time-bomb.

Municipal elections have been scheduled for September 22nd, with women's rights activists disappointed that females will not be able to participate. As of now, there is no organized Saudi protest movement apart from a few voices calling for reform.

### **Egypt**

The popularity of the Military Council is eroding. To counteract this trend, the Council declared that it would rescind the emergency law before the September parliamentary elections. It also decided to postpone the presidential elections, lest it be accused of siding with Muslim Brotherhood (who could use their organizational skills to the disadvantage of other parties). Moreover, the Military Council announced it would not allow former President Mubarak or his family to leave Egypt, even for medical purposes, and prosecutors ordered the detention of the former President and his two sons,

The Military Council also took steps to enhance the profile of its foreign policy:

- Nabil al-Arabi, Egypt's new foreign minister has expressed Cairo's willingness to turn a new page in relations with Tehran, stating that Egypt regards Iran as a neighboring state, not a hostile power or enemy.
- The statement of Minister al-Arabi came after two important decisions were taken by the new ruling Military Council: (1) it allowed two Iranian warships to cross the Suez Canal on their way to Syria; and (2) it permitted Hamas officials to travel through Rafah's crossing, thus reversing President Mubarak's policy on this issue.
- Sources claim that Egypt is also determined to improve relations with Syria, and rumors have surfaced that the new chief of Intelligence, Murad Muwafi, has secretly visited Damascus twice.

These developments have generated questions about the emergence of a new axis, but a likelier explanation is that the new leadership is determined to play a visible and leading role in foreign policy. It is certainly true that Egyptians were complaining that Cairo has lost its regional leadership to Saudi Arabia. These Egyptian moves can, probably, be read as way of placating Egyptian public opinion and endow its foreign policy with the necessary luster, by seeming to act independently of Washington and Riyadh.

### **Arab League**

Qatar has decided to nominate Mr. Abdulrahman al-Attiyah, former Secretary-General of the Gulf Cooperation Council, as the new Secretary-General for the League of Arab States, to replace Amr Moussa. The meeting of the Foreign Ministers of the GCC, held in Riyadh last weekend, has supposedly endorsed the Qatari nomination.

It is worth noting that all former Secretaries-General of the Arab League have been Egyptians, with the exception of Mr. Chedli Klibi of Tunisia, who assumed the post after the League's headquarters were moved to Tunis upon President Sadat's signing of the Camp David Agreements with Israel.

The issue will be a test for Egypt at a time when it is trying to restore its stature as the foreign policy leader of the Arab World.

The SG position of the Arab League remains of crucial importance for Egypt, particularly at this juncture; therefore, Cairo will nominate one of its best candidates, not excluding the current foreign minister, Nabil al-Arabi, who is well respected in the Arab World.