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Syria

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is gambling that he can stem the tide of the reformist movement in the country by using force. Reports suggest that the regime is relying exclusively on Alawite-dominated military units to crackdown on protesters, fearing that the army may otherwise splinter. Aside from evoking resentment against the Alawite sect, this tactic may push Syria to the brink of sectarian conflict.

President Assad continues to side with the hard-liners in his inner circle, including his brother Maher—who commands the Fourth Armored Division—and his brother-in law Assef Shawkat—the military intelligence chief—who believe that giving in to protesters' demands would betray weakness on the part of the regime and only elicit more demands. Vice President Farouk al-Sharaa and presidential adviser Bouthaina Shaaban—who initially divulged to the public the President's intention to undertake serious reforms—have fallen silent.

Last week, armed units were deployed to the hills surrounding Banias to prepare for a crackdown to end the protest movement in Syria's most rebellious city. In an apparent challenge to the military's efforts, demonstrators marched on the streets of the city calling for the downfall of President Assad's regime.

Tensions also remain high in the city of Daraa as the military siege continues. On Sunday morning, Syrian security forces, with reinforcements, managed to reach the old quarter of the city and occupy the Omari Mosque. Troops are surrounding the residence of the Mufti of Daraa, who submitted his resignation in protest at the crackdown.

Reports suggest that soldiers from the Fifth Division have joined the protesters and are involved in a military confrontation with the regime-loyal forces.

Meanwhile, residents of Daraa are appealing to Jordan to extend its mobile networks to the Syrian side of the border, so they can tell the world what is transpiring in the embattled city.

The heavy-handed crackdown by the Syrian army on Friday, April 29th, was meant to deter protesters from challenging the regime. Instead, demonstrations spread to more Syrian cities and villages, the rallying point being lifting the military siege on the city of Daraa.

Damascus accuses Hariri supporters, Khaddam's mercenaries, Muslim Brothers, Salafists, al-Qaida terrorists, and sleeper cells planted by the former Egyptian Chief of Intelligence Omar Suleiman of fomenting sedition in Syria. Students at Damascus University also issued a statement on Friday, accusing Iranian and Hizbullah students of collaboration with the Syrian Students Union (Baathist) and Syrian security agencies in arresting demonstrating students.

The Syrian uprising does not, as of now, have credible leadership to provide coherence and coordination in response to the regime crackdown—without which it might lose momentum. The National Initiative for Change—a group that was recently formed—is still an unknown commodity in terms of filling this leadership gap.

Assad's regime is not facing an imminent existential threat (the spread of the protest movement and the indignation of the international community notwithstanding) in large part due to the fears of neighboring countries, and the abiding loyalty of the army. The collapse of the regime would impact the Arab-Israeli peace process and would have strategic implications for Turkey, Israel, Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan, as well as for the power balance in the broader region.

In a special session on Friday, the UN Human Rights Council condemned violations of human rights in Syria and decided to investigate the matter further. The US Department of State officially declared its opposition to Syria's aspiration to a seat in the UN Human Rights Council. (The endorsements of Syria's candidacy by the Asian Group in the UN and by the Arab League preceded the Syrian uprising.)

The US administration has issued an executive order to freeze assets of senior Syrian security officials, including Maher Assad; Ali Mamluk, Chief of the Intelligence Organization; and Atif Najib, head of Intelligence in Daraa, and to ban them from conducting business deals with the US. These measures also extend to the Iranian Quds force, through which Tehran supplies the Syrian security forces with tear gas and batons.

Egypt

The new Egyptian government has succeeded in bringing about reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah. In this, Egypt was aided by the unfolding Arab uprising, particularly in Syria. Hamas calculated that the time was right to strike a deal because it would lose its protector and sanctuary if Assad's regime were to collapse, and gain only a weaker negotiating position. Fatah, frustrated by the continuing expansion of Israel's settlements in Palestinian territories, saw no alternative but to reconcile with Hamas if the Palestinians are to secure a fair peace deal.

The agreement between the two rival Palestinian factions would likely not have happened without a serious reappraisal by Egypt of its foreign-policy goals in general, and the Arab-Israeli conflict in particular. Cairo seems to have concluded that playing an activist role will better serve its interests, and is increasingly determined to play an independent and pivotal role in regional politics.

Reports indicate that Hamas' political leadership might move to Doha and the Ezzedine al-Qassam military wing could, in the absence of a host, relocate to the Gaza Strip.

The Egyptian Youth Movement, which played an instrumental role in dismantling President Mubarak's regime, is splintering. The movement was an amalgamation of various political stripes, united only by mutual contempt for Mubarak's regime. Key members are leaving the movement to devote themselves to helping the Egyptian people understand the workings of democracy and the notion of civic duty.

As in Tunisia, an unpredictable future, a deteriorating economy, and a rising crime rate are leading to a general feeling of insecurity in Egypt. In the preparation for Parliamentary and presidential elections at the end of the year, newly established parties and liberal politicians will be at a disadvantage compared to organized parties like the Muslim Brotherhood. On their part, the Salafis—subscribers to an extension of Wahabbism— have become increasingly influential among Egypt's poorest (approximately 30 percent of population).

Amr Moussa, who appears to be a front-runner in the presidential campaign, may be facing some difficulties. During rallies in rural areas, people have probed Moussa on his loyalty to President Mubarak during his tenure as Foreign Minister. Activists have also pointed out that Moussa's rallies are well-attended by members of the former ruling party, the NDP.

Yemen

The Gulf Cooperation Council's compromise initiative was finally accepted by both the opposition and President Saleh last week. The compromise agreement stipulates, inter alia, that President Saleh will relinquish power within thirty days, on the proviso that he and his family be provided with immunity from prosecution. The President and the opposition leaders were supposed to meet with the Foreign Ministers of the GCC for a signing ceremony in Riyadh, but President Saleh reneged and insisted on Saturday that his presidential adviser sign on behalf of the ruling party. The opposition maintains that the President himself should sign, since he is the one who will be relinquishing power. The GCC decided to send its Secretary-General back to Sanaa, in an attempt to work out these differences.

The violent reprisal by the security forces on Wednesday, April 27th, which killed twelve unarmed protesters and wounded 190 more, is casting dark shadows on the possibility of a peaceful transfer of power.

In a telephone call to President Assad, President Saleh expressed solidarity with his Syrian counterpart; during the conversation the two presidents complained about a "conspiracy to undermine the stability" of Yemen and Syria.

Bahrain

Manama has complained in a letter to the UN Secretary-General that the Lebanese party Hizbullah is conniving to overthrow the ruling Khalifah family. The government accuses Hizbullah of training Bahraini dissidents in the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon, and at a site north of Tehran.

Manama has also asked the Oxford Aviation Academy to suspend the training of pilots who participated in a London rally calling for reforms in Bahrain.

Libya

The Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) Luis Moreno-Ocampo announced that he will submit a report to the UN Security Council on May 4th, in response to a Council request to investigate possible crimes against humanity and war crimes in Libya. He plans to also ask ICC judges to issue arrest warrants, potentially to Qaddafi and three of his sons, among others.

On May 3rd, Turkish Prime minister Erdogan called on Colonel Qaddafi to step down from power.

Morocco

On February 24th, the Moroccan Youth Movement organized protests in seventy cities across the Kingdom. Protesters called for greater freedom, democracy, and anti-corruption measures. Assertions by recently released prisoners that they had been tortured and subjected to unfair trials gave calls for reforms an added urgency.

On March 9th, King Mohammed announced his intention to advance constitutional reforms; for this purpose, he formed a committee to provide amendments to the 1996 constitution, whereby the King would transfer more of his duties to the Parliament and the Prime Minister.

The King's reform initiative was well-received and the committee is already preparing the draft amendments, and exchanging views on the substance of reforms with the political, social, economic, and legal components of the Moroccan society. The King has further ordered the establishment of a Moroccan Human Rights Council and an Economic and Social Council and pledged to redouble efforts to fight corruption and nepotism.

Some parties and movements of various political proclivities—in particular, fundamentalists, leftists, and the Youth Movement—refused to participate in the dialogue with the reform committee, because "the proposed reforms are not comprehensive." These parties are calling for a committee to be entrusted with drafting a new constitution altogether. Article 19 of the current constitution is the most controversial, because it designates the King as "Emir of the Faithful," thus endowing him with absolute power.