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Syria

Footage of Syrian soldiers refusing to shoot unarmed protesters has surfaced on Facebook and YouTube. The number of defectors, however, is small, and those concerned are mainly low-ranking. Unlike Egypt—where the army was relatively independent—the Syrian military, made up mostly of Alawite and Christian senior officers, remains at the core of the regime.

Syrian security authorities have escalated their arrest campaign in an attempt to stem the growing uprising. Insan, a human rights advocacy group, said it has documented the arrests of 2,434 people across the country, and is in the process of verifying the fate of 5,000 others. The regime is now also reportedly targeting key activists in an attempt to constrain the opposition movement by removing its potential leaders.

The Syrian army began preparing for greater crackdowns in the cities of Baniyas and Homs last week. The northern and southern entrances to the city of Baniyas were closed, as heavily armored security forces moved to regain the center of town, which has been under protesters' control. In Homs, the military fired tank rounds at the neighborhoods of Bab Amr and Aldubiyeh, both of which have persistently protested for reforms. Military tanks have also been directed to the cities of Hama and Tall Kalakh. Citizens of Tall Kalakh are seeking refuge from tank fire in bordering Lebanon.

Sectarian tension also appears to be mounting in Syria. Some in the opposition argue that they are defending Sunni Islam against "heathens." Moreover, they claim that Assad's regime is using elements from Muqtada Sadr's Mahdi Army, Hezbollah, and Iranian sharpshooters in suppressing the protest movement.

The Assad regime believes that Baniyas is heavily infiltrated by the Salafis. Supposedly, Syrian security forces recently intercepted a shipment of weapons smuggled from Lebanon, which was destined for the Salafis. Syrian authorities believe that Osama Hamdan, the top Hamas representative in Lebanon, masterminded the operation. At Syria's request, Hamas' leader Khaled Meshaal dismissed Hamdan from his position as a political leader of Hamas.

Syria's relations with Hamas are becoming increasingly strained for two reasons: Damascus wants Hamas' leadership to condemn the protests and pledge explicit support for the Assad regime, but Hamas is reluctant to intervene in Syria's domestic affairs as it considers itself merely a guest in the country. The Assad regime is also displeased with the fact that Hamas agreed to form a unity government with Fatah, without consulting Damascus.

The ninth extraordinary meeting of the Syrian People's Council (Parliament) was concluded without addressing Article 8 of the constitution, which stipulates that the Baath party is the leading party of the state and society.

However, the regime appears to be divided on how to address the protest movement. Some—like presidential adviser Bouthaina Shaaban and Vice President Farouk al-Sharaa—are reportedly open to reforming the system, but their influence pales in comparison to that of hardliners like Maher Assad, brother of President Assad and commander of the Fourth Armored Division, and the Republican Guards.

Turkey expressed its frustration over the Syrian leadership's failure to deliver promised reforms. Ankara believes that Damascus could find itself in the same position as the Qaddafi regime (that of pariah in the international community), unless reforms are undertaken forthwith. Turkey appears concerned that such an option would have destabilizing consequences on Syrian society.

According to reports, the Turkish leadership had offered to mediate between the Syrian branch of the Brotherhood—who are seemingly energizing their base to join the protests—and the Assad regime. Damascus has reportedly refused to make use of these good offices.

The Syrian exiled opposition purportedly planned to hold their first meeting in Cairo before the end of this month, but Egyptian authorities declined to grant the necessary permits.

Bahrain

The situation in Bahrain has reportedly stabilized. On Sunday, King Hamad Bin Isa al-Khalifa ordered that the State of Emergency be lifted by June 1, 2011. Analysts believe there are clear signs of an emerging shift in the ruling family's balance of power. Crown Prince Sheikh Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa—who advocated for dialogue with the opposition—appears to have become increasingly sidelined and has all but disappeared from public view.

The media are focusing attention on Sheikh Nasser, the younger brother of the Crown Prince; Sheikh Khalifah Bin Ahmed, Commander-in-Chief of the Bahraini Defense Forces; and his brother Sheikh Khalid Bin Ahmed Khalifah, Minister of Royal Affairs.

Reports from Manamah indicate that the state-owned Bahrain Petroleum Company has fired up to 300 workers, accusing them of taking part of pro-democracy strikes.

Yemen

The Gulf Cooperation Council has advanced a modified draft agreement to overcome President Saleh's reluctance to sign the earlier proposal. According to the new draft, fifteen members of the ruling party and an equal number from the opposition would be initial signatories. The agreement would then be approved by President Saleh and the UAE, which holds the rotating presidency of the GCC. This would allow Saleh the appearance of being a neutral arbiter in the political dispute between the ruling party and the opposition.

This modified agreement presents the Yemeni opposition with a difficult choice. The proposed amendments do not compel Saleh to step down. The signing of the agreement could lead to friction between the opposition and the Youth Movement, which demands the immediate departure of President Saleh. On the other hand, the opposition is reluctant to alienate themselves from the GCC, whose assistance they would need if they were to assume power.

The government, for its part, is insisting that the elimination of sources of security and political tensions (i.e., protests) must precede any resignation by the President, and that a new government can only be formed after an agreement with the opposition has been signed.

The communiqué from the GCC summit—held last week in Riyadh—made no mention of the situation in Yemen. Summit leaders reportedly disagree on how to approach the Yemeni issue. Qatar has informed Abdellatif Ziani, Secretary-General of the GCC, that in light of recent developments and procrastination about signing, it no longer considers itself in agreement with the initiative on Yemen. The Kuwaiti Ummah Council (Parliament) has called on its government to follow Qatar's lead and provide support of the Yemeni revolution.

Meanwhile, the security situation in Yemen is deteriorating. Reports indicate that the Yemeni armed forces are split between camps for and against the President and that both sides are arming their supporters. Civil disobedience and the takeover of essential government facilities in the capital and several provinces last week led to an escalation of violence. Central Security Forces (commanded by the President's nephew) reportedly clashed with members of the First Armored Division (commanded by a rebel General) who were defending protesters.

According to some news reports, last week's march toward the Prime Minister's office was instigated by opposition parties, particularly the Islah party (Muslim Brotherhood's branch in Yemen). On its part, the independent Youth Leadership committee issued a statement denying any role in the escalation.

Egypt

Protesters converged on Tahrir Square on May 6th to celebrate the 100th day of the Egyptian revolutionary movement, and to express solidarity with Arab brothers in their aspiration for freedom and democracy. A coalition of the Youth Movement and other forces called on Arabs everywhere to assemble in public squares in support of Arab revolution and its revolutionaries.

The revolutionary spirit engendered by the Egyptian Youth Movement—which might be interpreted as incitement by some—is important to watch, for it may signal growing tensions in intra-Arab relations. If it gains momentum in the upcoming parliamentary elections, it may revive an Arab "cold war," similar to that in the 1960s when Saudi Arabia led one camp and Nasser's Egypt another.

Amr Moussa, the leading candidate for Egypt's presidency in the upcoming November elections, is distancing himself from former President Mubarak's foreign policy. While stating his wish to maintain friendly relations with Israel, Moussa indicated to the *Wall Street Journal* that "former regime attempts to resolve the Palesinian-Israeli conflict have gone nowhere ...

Egypt now needs policies that reflect the consensus of the people." Moussa further underlined the importance of restoring Egypt's role in regional and global affairs.

The restoration of Egypt's role in the region has become a central theme in press commentaries in the country. Numerous voices deplore the loss of influence of Egyptian media to Gulf satellite channels. Many press commentators also criticize the fact that some Gulf countries make aid to Egypt contingent on the treatment of former President Mubarak.

In an apparent break with the Muslim Brotherhood, Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh—a senior member of the organization—has announced his decision to run in the upcoming Presidential election, despite previous pronouncements to the contrary. Aboul Fotouh—who is head of the Arab Doctors' Union and a member of the Brotherhood's legislative Shura Council—said he would run as an independent candidate. Aboul Fotouh is known as a moderate leader in the Brotherhood. He has promoted the importance of relations with the West, more rights for women and religious minorities, democratic reform within the party leadership and he has called for the separation of the religious work of the Brotherhood from its political activities.

Egyptians are complaining of high crime rates. Some accuse the former regime elements of fomenting trouble, while others believe that the police are afraid and demoralized.

Tunisia

Several comparisons can be made between Tunisian and Egyptian postrevolutionary experiences:

- The way the transitional authority assumed power differs in each country: in Tunisia the speaker of Parliament Fouad Mebazaa—a former member of Ben Ali's ruling party—became the interim President in accordance with the constitution. In Egypt the Supreme Military Council assumed power on its own, to become the transitional authority;
- The devolution of power also reflects the respective weight of the military in both countries. In Egypt the army has been an important political actor since the 1952 revolution, whereas the Tunisian army never played a prominent role in politics (however, the army there was central to the removal of Ben Ali's regime);
- A Supreme Commission has been established in Tunis to realize the objectives of the revolution. The Commission has been tasked with advancing political reforms, drafting the necessary legislation for parliamentary elections (to be held on July 24th), and supervising the performance of the Interim Government. The establishment of the Commission—which has 155 members from twelve political parties and seventeen NGOs—was necessary for the normalization of political life in the country. The absence of similar mechanism in Egypt compels emerging forces to call for street protests in order to air their grievances;
- There are approximately sixty-three political parties in Tunisia today, largely due to the fact that Tunisian electoral law does not limit the number of signatories necessary for the establishment of new ones. Additionally, the Ben Ali regime—unlike that of Mubarak—allowed a degree of latitude in forming political parties. Egypt has fewer political parties, which will likely prove helpful in forming a coalition government;
- Tunisians interact more frequently with European intellectuals than with Egyptians, which may explain why some of the emerging political parties in Tunisia put forward ideas that are currently common in Europe. The absence of this phenomenon in Egyptian politics, however, may allow for greater social and political cohesion;
- Both Egyptians and Tunisians are concerned about the proliferation of religious parties, but the emergence of religious parties is novel for Tunisians, who have been secular since independence. Despite persecution of religious movements, religious parties were never completely banned in Egypt and have thus historically been part of the country's political landscape.

Libya

Turkey's Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu announced last week Ankara's decision to temporarily close its embassy in Tripoli. Turkey's withdrawal is a setback in the country's attempt to mediate a peaceful solution to the Libyan conflict. Turkish diplomats helped secure the release of the journalists detained by Qaddafi's forces, and Ankara has tried to play a mediating role, but neither the Qaddafi regime nor the rebels in Benghazi appear interested in reconciliation.

The prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) Luis Moreno-Ocampo announced on Monday that he had requested arrest warrants for Muammar Qadhafi; his son, Saif al-Islam; and Abdullah al-Senussi, Libya's head of espionage, on charges of crimes against humanity.

The resistance to Qaddafi forces has spread to areas of strategic importance for the outcome of the war. Berber and Arab opposition forces are engaging government troops in the Nafusa Mountains, close to the Tunisian borders. This area is not only important because of the spillover of the resistance to new fronts, but because of the big oil, gas, and water pipelines that run through it from the resource-rich Ghadames Basin to the south. The fighting in the Nafusa Mountains could be vital to the regime's ability to retain power.

League of Arab States

In light of developments in the Arab states, the Arab League has decided to postpone the Arab Summit Conference until March 2012. Iraq will retain its right to host it in Baghdad.

Arab Foreign Ministers, meeting in Cairo on May 15th in an extraordinary session, elected Egyptian Foreign Minister Nabil al-Arabi as the new Secretary-General of the Arab League.

Egypt had initially nominated Mustafa Al Faqi to the post, but Cairo withdrew his nomination shortly before Sunday's meeting. Qatar—which had the only other candidate for consideration—decided to withdraw its nominee, in order to secure consensus and retain Arab unity.

Gulf Cooperation Council

The GCC Summit in Riyadh invited both Jordan and Morocco to join the Council as full members.

The invitation came as a surprise to Amman, whose previous requests for admission have been repeatedly sidelined by the Council. Jordan, if admitted, stands to economically benefit from GCC membership, which would allow it access to cheaper oil, greater work opportunities for Jordanians in the Gulf, and to obtain developmental assistance to bring its standard of living to a level close to those of other member states.

Morocco—whose economy is intrinsically linked to that of Europe—was equally surprised by the move, as it seemingly has not requested admission to the GCC.

The invitation to Amman and Rabat to join the GCC is interpreted differently across the region. Tehran may likely perceive it as an attempt to strengthen the alliance against Iranian policies in the region, whereas Cairo may see it as a way to strengthen Arab monarchies and a means to compensate for Egypt's postrevolutionary change of foreign policy.