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## Middle East Update April 19-25, 2011

### Syria

In his speech to the new Cabinet earlier this month, President Assad had stressed that as a consequence of his decision to lift the emergency law, protests would no longer be tolerated.

He had signed three decrees:

- Decree 161, which ends the state of emergency imposed in 1963;
- Decree 53, which ends the mandate of the Supreme State Security Court; and
- Decree 54, which subjects demonstrations to prior authorization by the Ministry of the Interior.

The Syrian President, however, did not address one of the core demands of protesters, namely to rescind Article 8 of the Constitution, which, by law, makes the Baath the leading party of the state and society. For protesters, democracy cannot be realized unless Article 8 is amended to allow other political parties. Likewise, protesters are calling for the abolition of Law 49, which imposes the death penalty on any Syrian deemed to be a member of the Muslim Brotherhood.

The policy of zero tolerance toward protests will most likely usher in a period of increased violence and a test of wills. But the greater the violence, the more the protesters will escalate demands for political reforms and regime change.

In Homs, the authorities have stated that a Salafi revolt is targeting both civilians and security forces. Syrian human right monitors believe, however, that the deterioration of the situation there and in other cities is tantamount to rejection of President Assad's reform promises. Furthermore, reports from Homs indicate that security forces and "ghost" fighters are provoking armed tribes in the area. According to activists, last Saturday, tensions surfaced after the security forces brought back the corpse of Sheikh Farag Abu Musa, who had been arrested one week ago.

Last Friday was particularly violent. Estimates of civilian deaths range from 88 to 114, and 11 more civilians were killed on Saturday, as burials of the dead invariably turn into demonstrations.

Two of the representatives of the city of Daraa in the Syrian Parliament have submitted their resignations in protest over the killing of unarmed civilians.

Sunday was relatively quiet. The security forces meanwhile proceeded to arrest leaders of the protest movement.

On Monday morning the Syrian borders with Jordan were closed as tanks, and other heavy weapons were used in attacks against the cities of Daraa, Douma, and Harasta.

Neither Damascus nor Aleppo, however, played a central role in the latest spasm of protests; the reason is probably inertia, but also the fact that the regime still commands the loyalty of the political, military, and the economic elites. Syrian minorities, moreover, have not deserted the regime. They are concerned about a repeat of the Iraq's upheaval.

The Assad regime is apparently determined to arrest the Arab Spring before it spreads to the main urban centers of Damascus and Aleppo.

### **Jordan**

Last Friday was quiet. The Salafist Group was compelled to cancel its scheduled protest in the Palestinian refugee camp of Baca. Leaders of the camp accuse the group of sponsoring extremist and terrorist activities and have announced their intention to resist Salafist incursions into their camp. Meanwhile, the Jordanian security forces have arrested 113 Salafists up to this point.

Moderate opposition parties have decided to postpone their protest activities until May 1st. The unions of physicians, dentists, and nurses are continuing with their strike to demand better salaries.

### **Yemen**

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has proposed a third version of its mediation initiative, which amalgamates elements of its former proposals as well as suggestions from the US and the Europeans:

- The ruling party and the opposition would form a new cabinet. The President would ask a member of the opposition to be Prime Minister. Each side would account for 50 percent of the cabinet posts.

- The new cabinet would be entrusted with ending "the causes" of the crisis, that is to say sit-ins and protests.

- Parliament would pass a law so that neither the President nor members of his family would be prosecuted.

- President Saleh would then transfer his duties to the Vice President and submit his resignation to Parliament.

- The temporary President and cabinet would form committees to prepare for Presidential elections to take place within 60 days.

Both President Saleh and the opposition have accepted the GCC's initiative. President Saleh did so with the knowledge that the opposition still has reservations about the initiative.

The opposition is concerned about the part in the GCC's initiative which conditions its implementation on the end of the protest rallies and sit-ins. The opposition parties do not have control over the youth movement and they consider protests a constitutional right.

The opposition parties are, moreover, uncertain that the ruling party members in Parliament (the majority) will approve Saleh's resignation. The Yemeni constitution requires the acquiescence of a two-thirds majority for the resignation of a President to be valid. The opposition agrees, however, to join a coalition government with the ruling party *after* the President resigns. And it will not go along with providing immunity from prosecution to members of the regime who do not submit resignations.

In the meantime, a new political party was formed in Sana'a: its members are former high-ranking officials who resigned from President Saleh's government. The new party will go by the name "Justice and Construction Bloc."

### **Bahrain**

According to well-informed sources, US intervention compelled the Ministry of Justice in Manamah to withdraw its request to a Bahraini court to dissolve the Wefaq opposition group.

The Prime Minister of Bahrain, Sheikh Khalifah Bin Salman, expressed gratitude in a visit to Riyadh to King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia for helping his country defeat "the coup." The Prime Minister went on to say that "it is obvious that what happened in Bahrain was an attempted military coup; therefore, those who are involved must be punished." Protesters have called over the last few weeks for reforms, including making the Kingdom into a constitutional monarchy.

The Chairman of the Iraqi National Congress, Ahmed Shalabi, stated that he discussed with the Speaker of the Iranian Parliament the Bahraini situation. However, a source in Prime Minister Maliki's government said they had no information about the visit and the nature of the discussions.

It must be recalled that, in March, the Iraqi Parliament had suspended its meetings for ten days in solidarity with the Bahraini people. For its part, the GCC asked earlier in April for the cancellation of the Arab Summit Conference which is to be held in Baghdad in May. The GCC decision was an unwelcome development for Iraqi diplomacy, as the Iraqis wanted to showcase their country as an independent state, and usher in its return as a pivotal Arab player. Iraq's Ministry of Foreign Affairs is in a difficult position, trying to find a way to hold the summit as scheduled.

In this matter, Iraqi diplomacy is being helped by an unexpected party: Sadrist leaders are calling for the convening of the Arab Summit in Baghdad as scheduled; they, now, consider the situation in Bahrain to be an internal matter.

## **Oman**

Approximately 3,000 protesters took to the streets after Friday prayers in the Omani city of Salalah, demanding more jobs, better pay, and a crackdown on corruption. Apparently, the protest was free of violence and, more importantly, no political demands were posed.

It is worth noting that if the main thrust of the "Arab Spring" is at this stage confined to Arab republics, its effects are nonetheless felt by the less prosperous Arab monarchies: Morocco, Jordan, Bahrain, and Oman.

## **Egypt**

Foreign Minister al-Arabi announced that Egypt will commence the process of joining the International Criminal Court and will become a party to all international human rights instruments. This move will obviously have ramifications for the country's relations with Sudan.

Egyptian-Israeli relations are undergoing some strains. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met with European ambassadors to complain about the attitudes assumed by post-Mubarak Egyptian leaders. He cited statements by different officials:

- Egypt's Minister of Finance, Samir Radwan, reportedly said that "Egypt does not need investments from the Israeli enemy";
- Deputy Prime Minister, Yahya Aljamal, was quoted as saying that Israel "nakedly tampers with security and stability of the region"; and
- Egypt's Prime Minister, Isam Sharaf, announced that his government will reevaluate the agreement on gas sales, which causes concern in Tel Aviv.

## **Algeria**

The Libyan Transitional Council has asked the Arab League to form a committee to investigate what it called "suspicious violations by the Algerian Air Force and Algeria's National Airlines, which carried military equipment and mercenaries for the Qaddafi regime."

Algeria denied the Council's complaint and recalled Algeria's neutrality in the Libyan dispute. It also stresses that Libya's membership in the League is suspended and therefore the Libyan Council has no legal standing in the League of Arab States. Algiers considers the "so-called Algerian Mercenaries" a fabrication concocted by an Algerian opposition group located in Geneva.

## Libya

Reports suggest divisions within the Libyan Rebel Army, which makes it exceedingly difficult for the rebels to resist Qaddafi's well-trained and well-organized forces. Reports, furthermore, indicate that the rebel army lacks discipline and experience, as well as effective command-and-control structures. Western powers, including the UK and Italy, are sending military advisers to eastern Libya in a move to address these deficiencies.

The division of the country and the military stalemate provide fertile ground for conspiracy theories: some Libyans believe that it is in the interest of the West to have a divided Libya; why otherwise, the argument goes, is the West allowing Qaddafi to massacre the people of Misrata and look the other way as his forces re-conquer Ras Lanuf, Brega, and Ajdabiya?

Mustafa Abduljalil, Chairman of the Libyan Transitional Council, accused Algeria, Chad, Niger, and the Sudanese opposition (Abdulwahid Noor) of providing Qaddafi military units with logistical and military support.

Mustafa Abduljalil also accused Ahmed Jibril, the leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine—General Command, of providing Qaddafi with 1,000 fighters. Abduljalil appealed to the Shiite Lebanese parties, Hezbollah, and Amil to restrain Ahmed Jibril, and he asserted that Jibril was behind the disappearance and killing of Lebanese Shiite Imam Musa Sadr in 1978 (a source of friction between Lebanon and Libya).

## Tunisia

Tunisia, given its educated population and history of secularism, should make a relatively smooth transition to some form of democracy. But the country faces major challenges as its economy, which was disrupted by the revolution, has not yet recuperated.

On July 24th, Tunisians will elect a constituent assembly, whose mandate is to draft a new constitution and election law. Parliamentary elections will take place next year.

Residents of Tunis seem optimistic about the future, particularly the economic prospects of the country. But this optimism is not shared in the rest of the country, where people expected that the fall of the Bin Ali regime would inaugurate an era of immediate prosperity. While this hope proved elusive, strikes and protests remain commonplace.

Public opinion, particularly in the poor South, demands an immediate improvement in the situation. People blame the local authorities for not being able to attract foreign investments to revive the local economy; and hence, alleviate their sense of economic deprivation. Anger is being directed at the local governors and what remains of Bin Ali's appointees; some of the discontented, claimed that they have got rid of the dictator, but not the dictatorship.

The way Tunisia navigates through the maze of seemingly insurmountable difficulties is closely watched over in other Arab countries.