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Subject:

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Tunisia: Tunisia's transition suffered a terrible blow on February 6th when leftist opposition alliance founder and head of the Democratic Patriots party Chokri Belaid was shot dead outside his home in Tunis. The event drew thousands of protestors to the streets, clamoring against the leading Islamist Ennahda party. The events heighten the Islamist-secular divide that has featured in the Tunisian transition and the Arab Spring at large. Tunisian Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali described the event as the "assassination of the Tunisian revolution" and promised to dissolve the Islamist-led government and form a technocrat government aimed at promoting national unity at this divisive time.

Egypt: The second anniversary of the Egyptian revolution on January 25th was marked less by celebration than it was by violence, culminating in a week of unrest that took the lives of more than 50 people. The week was also marked by the imposition of a curfew, state of emergency, and large military deployment in the cities of Suez, Ismailiya, and Port Said. The events reflect the disillusionment of Egyptians, given the lack of progress on both political and economic fronts, while also revealing the state's limitations in restoring order and the rule of law to the streets. That the army—the country's most powerful institution—warned of the "collapse of the state" is a telling and serious message, conveying the institution's growing frustration with the political impasse.

The recent violence has also generated serious economic losses and fuel shortages, and caused yet another delay with the much-needed IMF loan. It will be interesting to see how the recent violence—as well as the general malaise caused by economic woes—affects the Muslim Brotherhood's performance in the upcoming parliamentary election (which is yet to be scheduled). A recent report issued by the Brotherhood's political bureau hinted that the party's popularity has been in decline.

Against this backdrop of political and economic turmoil, the 12th summit of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) convened in Cairo on February 5th with a number of key players in the region in attendance—among them President Gül of Turkey, Emir Hamad al-Thani of Qatar, and Saudi Crown Prince Salman. The summit aimed to discuss Syria, Mali, and the Palestinian issue. The spotlight, however, was on Mahmoud Ahmadinejad: the first Iranian president to visit Egypt since the 1979 Islamic revolution.

Libya: On January 31st, European Union foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton announced the launch of a two-year civil mission to help secure Libya's 4,000-kilometer border. The announcement was complemented by a surprise visit to Tripoli by David Cameron, who also announced his government's commitment to helping the Libyan military and police with training and support. Furthermore, a meeting in Paris the week of February 11th will bring together a number of countries to discuss security cooperation and the future of the Libyan legal system. These initiatives are a telling manifestation of the urgent need to address security in Libya—especially border security—given the Mali crisis, the recent terrorist incident in Algeria, and concerns about security and stability across North Africa.

Jordan: The results of the Jordanian parliamentary election came as no surprise: pro-government candidates strengthened their hold, though state television reported that the majority of the 150 seats had been won by independents (an indicator that tribal allegiance is becoming a more important factor than party politics). According to official figures, 56 percent of the country's 2.3 million registered voters turned out for the ballot, with the most obvious absence being that of the Muslim Brotherhood, which protested what it considered to be a biased ballot. It remains unclear who will succeed Prime Minister Abdullah Ensour (who submitted his resignation to King Abdullah on January 29th), although analysts and commentators consider it likely that a number of unexpected appointments will be made in an effort to address the growing malaise. Media reports speculate that there are also plans to set up an official channel for communication with the Muslim Brotherhood. Meanwhile, it appears that King Abdullah is seeking to bolster ties with regional allies, perhaps for both political and economic reasons: the King made visits to Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait from January 29th to February 4th.

Syria: Israeli warplanes are generally believed to have struck a convoy en route to Lebanon on January 30th, although this has not been confirmed by the government of Israel. The convoy was reported to have been carrying sophisticated anti-aircraft weaponry to Hezbollah. The attack—carried out on the outskirts of Damascus—was met by a sharp threat of retaliation from both the Syrian and Iranian governments: a significant indicator of the regional reverberations of the Syrian civil war and the general volatility permeating the region.

Despite the lack of progress of an international peace initiative spearheaded by Special Envoy Lakhdar Brahimi, a new plan by Syrian opposition leader Moaz al-Khatib—comprising a dialogue with President al-Assad based on the principle of the regime's departure—offers a glimmer of hope. Upon meeting with al-Khatib on February 3rd, the foreign ministers of Iran and Russia (the closest allies of the al-Assad regime) seem to have agreed to help facilitate this process—an interesting turn of events. The new plan comes as the humanitarian situation continues to deteriorate, although some help is foreseen from the \$1.5 billion in pledges made at a donors' conference on January 30th in Kuwait.

Israel: While recent elections kept Netanyahu's Likud party in the lead by winning 31 of 120 seats in the Knesset, the new centrist party Yesh Atid's ability to win 19 seats under the leadership of Yair Lapid garnered all the attention. The results generated media debate about the possibility of a shift in Israeli policy vis-à-vis the Palestinians. In fact, the election campaign and its results were centered on domestic and socioeconomic issues, and internal reform. Furthermore, Yesh Atid is known to maintain an ambiguous stance on the peace process.

On January 29th, Israel became the first country to boycott a United Nations review of its human rights practices, despite the United States' and other political players' advice to participate. This is a breach of an established practice of cooperation and thus represents precedence for noncooperation by other states. It also leaves the question of human rights in occupied Palestinian territories outside the jurisdiction of the international community. It remains unclear, however, whether the newly elected government will make a pragmatic effort to reengage with the UN review effort.

Bahrain: On January 21st King Hamad al-Khalifa issued a decree endorsing a renewed national dialogue. Subsequently, on February 4th, Minister of Justice Khalid bin Ali al-Khalifa announced that the national dialogue would resume on February 10th. Press reports indicate willingness by the opposition's to participate in the dialogue.

Iran: President Ahmadinejad was warmly welcomed by President Morsi upon arrival in Cairo on February 5th and, interestingly, by the Sunni leadership of Al-Azhar. The Iranian leader reciprocated by offering to provide Egypt with a "big credit line" to help its lagging economy, a telling indication of Tehran's desire for a rapprochement. The reaction on the Egyptian street, however, was generally negative, revealing the disconnect between a dominant Muslim Brotherhood political elite reaching out to an Islamist power and a critical faction of Egyptian society hostile to this shift. The meeting is not necessarily an indicator that bilateral ties will improve, given Egypt's much-savored relationship with other Gulf countries (not to mention the United States). It does represent a re-balancing of relationships in a changing Middle East nonetheless.

A new round of talks between Iran and the P5+1 (five permanent members of the Security Council plus Germany) has now been scheduled to take place on February 26th following weeks of conflicting reports and what seemed to be a diplomatic stalemate. This represents the first effort at talks at the political directors' level since the Moscow meeting in June of 2012. While the talks are restarting just over a month after the start of US President Obama's second term, Iran appears to have moved into its political season: tensions between President Ahmadinejad and the speaker of the Majlis, Larjani, have gone public with mutual recriminations about corrupt family members and associates.

Saudi Arabia: Former intelligence chief Prince Muqrin bin Abdulaziz was appointed second deputy prime minister of Saudi Arabia on February 2nd, a role traditionally associated with the incumbent being second in line to become king. Prince Muqrin is the youngest son of the kingdom's founder.

Yemen: A UN Security Council delegation visited Yemen on January 27th in a show of support to President Hadi and Yemen's political transition. The visit reflects the Security Council's interest in seeing Yemen move forward with the National Dialogue Conference. During the visit there were large demonstrations, as thousands demanded a fair and just approach in dealing with former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, who has received immunity under the Gulf Cooperation Council initiative.

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