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IPI Middle East Update
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Algeria: On March 3rd, President Bouteflika announced his official candidacy for a fourth presidential term. Despite severe health problems—he has appeared only twice in cabinet meetings since his stroke last year and has not directly addressed the public since 2012, except for this brief and recent statement—many consider Bouteflika's fourth presidential victory a foregone conclusion. "Le Pouvoir," the powerful military-industrial complex behind all decision-making in Algeria, seems to have opted for a continuation of the status quo over any alternative. As expected, several opposition parties and politicians have said they will boycott, including ex-prime minister and much admired political figure Mouloud Hamrouche. However, in the lead-up to the April 17th presidential election, attention may be better placed on the scale and rhetoric of potential ground-level protests rather than elite political commentary. Protests against poor socioeconomic conditions may be accepted, but large-scale, anti-establishment messages decrying Bouteflika's presidency and the preservation of the political status quo at the cost of the country's citizenry most likely would not be. On the security front, the Algerian army continues to announce its successes against extremist elements, seizing more than 40 rockets and surface-to-air missiles smuggled by elements of Al Qaeda in the Maghreb in the province of Illizi near the Libyan border and destroying all Mali-bound weapons and equipment.

Egypt: Ibrahim Mehleb was appointed prime minister of Egypt, following the resignation of the cabinet of Hazem Beblawi on February 24th. Mehleb was the Minister of Housing in the Beblawi government and is a former construction mogul who served briefly during the Mubarak era. What was initially interpreted as a reshuffle aimed to relieve Field Marshal Al-Sisi of his role as Minister of Defense (and thus give him a green light to enter the presidential race), the move came as puzzling to many once it became clear the Al-Sisi kept his post (as did 14 other ministers from the former cabinet, including the ministers of interior, foreign affairs, tourism, and information). It appears that Al-Sisi, who is still seen as a presidential favorite, is waiting for the election law to be finalized before officially stepping down from his post as minister and announcing his bid for the presidency. It is likely that the cabinet reshuffle is part of a larger choreography to enhance the political image of the interim leadership ahead of the announcement, given that Beblawi and a number of his closest aides were becoming deeply unpopular on the Egyptian street. The new cabinet has promised various economic reforms and a revival of the much-troubled tourism industry—pledges that will be hard to meet in light of the rising insecurity and instability permeating the country for the last six months, particularly the rising threat of the Jihadist Sinai-based group Ansar Beit al-Maqdis.

Libya: Violence, lawlessness, and insecurity continue unabated, most recently culminating in a dramatic storming of the General National Congress in Tripoli on Sunday, March 2nd. One day prior, Libya's electoral commission announced the preliminary polling results for an assembly to draft a new constitution, despite the fact that 13 of 60 seats remained vacant after unrest and insecurity in several areas prevented citizens from voting. In the face of such violence and growing unrest, lawmakers are debating various options for political movement forward, with some calling for a system of early elections that would replace the legislature and government (leaving the constitution to be finished at a later date) and others arguing against proceeding with polls until political tensions have been defused and a semblance of security has been restored. Nuri al-Abbar, head of the panel tasked with preparing for elections, resigned on Sunday, saying Libya had to "end political tensions and restore order" before holding polls for parliamentary elections. The international community came together at the ministerial level on March 6th in Rome to review the challenges—governance, borders, and securing weapons—and assess progress on commitments, prior to the expected renewal of the UN mandate later in March.

Yemen: On February 26th, in a show of support for Yemen's democratic transition, the UN Security Council adopted a resolution authorizing sanctions against any individual in Yemen who obstructs the country's political transition or commits human rights violations. The resolution did not, however, specifically list any names, and it delegated asset freezes and travel bans on particular individuals to a newly created UN sanctions committee, which will suggest a first grouping of names by June 25th, several months from now. Among those suspected to be on this list is ex-president Saleh, stirring anger among Saleh's supporters and potentially further complicating the delicate security situation in the North. Of possible connection, on February 28th, clashes broke out at a security checkpoint in the northern province of al-Jawf, just outside of the capital Sana, between armed Houthis and government forces, resulting in at least 13 deaths and a strengthened Houthi foothold in the North. Meanwhile, fighting and drone strikes targeting Al Qaeda members continue in both the south and east of the country.

Iran: Technical talks were held in Vienna between Iran and the P5+1 from March 5–7, in parallel with the Board of Governors meeting of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). The talks have been portrayed as a forum to discuss the fine details of the comprehensive accord that parties are aspiring to. In addition, the EU's Catherine Ashton, who is leading the high-level negotiations for the P5+1, is scheduled to visit Tehran mid-month, although the exact dates of her trip are being juggled as she is deeply involved in diplomatic efforts regarding the situation in the Ukraine. The international community continues to strive to use this opportunity for a new chapter with Iran in light of a looming July 20th deadline, when the original six-month grace period is set to expire.

Arab League Summit: Preparations are underway for the next League of Arab States Summit to take place in Kuwait on March 25th and 26th. The agenda will most likely focus on the Syrian crisis and its implications for refugee-hosting countries, the Palestinian issue, and Arab League reform. Press reports emerging from Lebanon have indicated that President Michel Sleiman, who is due to lead his country's delegation at the summit, will be using the opportunity to seek more aid from neighboring countries to assist with Lebanon's development burdens (particularly Gulf actors like Saudi Arabia, which recently donated \$3 billion to the Lebanese Armed Forces).

On March 2nd, the committee tasked with the reform and development of the regional organization met to discuss issues that would be addressed at the summit, including potential amendments to its charter and ways to bolster and develop various departments within the league. Of particular note will be the relatively underdeveloped though nascent humanitarian wing of the league, which, in light of the deteriorating situation in and around Syria, has been among the key priorities of the secretary-general. The reforms suggested will be drafted into a resolution at the March summit and member countries will be invited to submit suggestions on the amendments before proposals are finalized at the foreign ministers' gathering in September. While Arab press reports highlight the much needed face-lift, it remains unclear whether such reforms will help promote better regional cooperation between member states that have become all the more divided over developments in Syria.

Gulf Cooperation Council: On March 5th, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain recalled their ambassadors from Doha: a gesture explained as a protest of Qatar's interference in internal affairs. The decision came after a meeting of the GCC foreign ministers in Riyadh the day before and a lack of agreement to "ensure non-interference, directly or indirectly, in the internal affairs of any member state" or the "support [of] any party aiming to threaten security and stability of any GCC member." The diplomatic language is a reference to Qatar's support for the Muslim Brotherhood—an organization banned in most Gulf States—across the Middle East and North Africa in recent years. Such so-called meddling is flaring up in Cairo in particular, where a number of Al Jazeera journalists—the Qatar based news agency—have been detained for allegedly spreading rumors, false news, and promoting instability. The diplomatic spat (and the statement issued by the aforementioned three Gulf countries) reflects an inability to agree to a unified non-interference policy that was initially agreed upon in a mini-summit held in Riyadh last November. The episode is also indicative of the effects of the Arab uprisings and the Syrian crisis on intraregional Gulf dynamics, most recently brought to the fore by the Omani-Saudi rift on plans for a more integrated GCC security arrangement in December 2013.

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