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Subject: IPI Middle East Update - July 30, 2014
Date: Wed, 30 Jul 2014 21:38:59 +0000

INTERNATIONAL PEACE INSTITUTE
IPI Middle East Update
July 30, 2014

Egypt: Egypt continues to deal with a bout of armed extremism that has destabilized its borders significantly since the ousting of Muslim Brotherhood President Mohamed Morsi in 2013. Unidentified militants killed 22 soldiers and injured 4 using machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades at a checkpoint on Egypt's western border with Libya on July 19th. Meanwhile, to the east, Egyptian troops killed over 20 militants between July 27th and 29th in shoot-outs in Sinai, where an insurgency continues to simmer.

In trying to mediate between Israelis and Palestinians during the recent confrontation, Egypt has found itself in a different diplomatic quagmire. Ties with Turkey—already strained since the ouster of President Morsi—may be deteriorating further following the Turkish prime minister's public criticism of the Egyptian president. Erdogan twice referred to Al Sisi as a "tyrant" and accused Egypt of being an insincere mediator. Turkey's charge d'affaires was summoned twice within a week, and Cairo continues to threaten with "further action." While an Egyptian ceasefire plan to end the conflict was rejected, Egypt has kept its Rafah border closed to Palestinians and certain press reports have indicated the difficulties faced by humanitarian groups trying to bring aid into Gaza.

Algeria/Tunisia: Against the backdrop of regional insecurity—recently highlighted by the death of 14 Tunisian troops on the border with Algeria—Tunisia and Algeria continue to strengthen cooperation over security, including counterterrorism and combating arms trafficking. Discussing stronger ties at a recent meeting co-chaired by Algerian Prime Minister Sellal and Tunisian Prime Minister Jomaa, Algerian Foreign Minister Lamamra highlighted the critical opportunity for a "comprehensive and deep analysis of all the changes relating to the security, development, and bilateral relations," while also discussing living conditions on the joint borders and the different development programs.

Libya: Fighting escalated recently, as rival militias on July 19th and 20th fought for control of Libya's Tripoli airport, resulting in 47 deaths and the most violent day since the end of the 2011 revolution. The US Embassy closed "temporarily" on July 25th and evacuated its staff by road, joining other diplomats who have left the country. To the east in Benghazi, several people were killed and many more injured in fighting between Khalifa Haftar's forces and Ansar al-Sharia, among other Islamist groups. Libya's foreign minister, Muhammad Abdul Aziz, appealed to the UN Security Council for military advisers to bolster state forces guarding ports, airports, and other strategic locations, but the request is not moving forward, and an approach from the region may be taking greater shape. Foreign ministers from Tunisia, Algeria, Sudan, Egypt, Chad, and Niger, as well as Libya's ambassador to Tunisia, met in Tunisia on July 13th and 14th to discuss a regional response, including security issues within as well as emanating from Libya, coordinating neighboring countries' security efforts, and bolstering Libya's recently elected parliament (a vote for which less than half of Libya's eligible voters turned out).

Israel/Palestine: Following a brief humanitarian ceasefire, hostilities between Israel and Hamas have resumed. The death toll on both sides continues to rise while the United Nations has deemed Gaza in "critical condition." Spillover into the West Bank (where this crisis originated following a series of kidnappings) has also placed the Israeli military on high alert, with a number of reported deaths and the constant threat of a third intifada (tens of thousands Palestinians took to the street in the West Bank and East Jerusalem from July 24th–26th).

The humanitarian dimensions are of particular concern given the number of civilians affected. Over 170,000 Gazans (almost 10 percent of the population) are seeking protection at facilities managed by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). Recent attacks of medical facilities and schools (including an Israeli-acknowledged mortar strike on a UN school on July 24th) pushed the UN to consider whether Israel has violated international "in a manner that could amount to war crimes." The UN has also been subject to casualties (five UNRWA employees have been killed as of July 29th). Meanwhile, the UN Human Rights Council voted in favor of launching an independent inquiry into the alleged violations of international humanitarian and human rights law in Occupied Palestinian Territories.

Iraq: Amid continuing violence and attacks from the Islamic State, Iraqi lawmakers elected the country's new president, Faoud Masoum, a veteran Kurdish politician and one of the founders of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan party on July 24th. This vote comes at a time of increasing speculation of a partition of Iraq into three entities: Sunni, Shia, and Kurdish. The president of the already semi-autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan Region, Masoud Brazani, has said that the process of greater separation is already, de facto, underway. However, division within the Kurdish political class has complicated what a future Kurdistan might look like, fueled by speculation of increasing competition between Turkey and Iran for influence in Kurdistan and the region's estimated reserves of 45 billion barrels of oil, and as much as 6 trillion cubic meters of natural gas. As Iraq struggles to form a viable government and the question of a future independent Kurdistan looms, the Islamic State continues to wreak havoc in Iraq and has thus far faced stiff resistance from the Kurdish Peshmerga forces, protecting the Kurdish region and its natural resources.

Meanwhile the Islamic State issued a decree to the Christian population of northern Iraq (and eastern Syria): convert to Islam, pay a religious tax (*jizya*), or face death. The decree led to a massive Christian exodus from Mosul, where over 1,500 families were forced to find shelter nearer to Irbil, Kirkuk, and other relatively tolerant Kurdish zones. At least two-thirds of Iraq's Christian minority had already fled Iraq since the US invasion in 2003, so the recent development does not bode well for an already threatened population.

Yemen: President Hadi recently visited the town of Amran, 30 miles north of the capital of Sanaa, the site of intense fighting between Houthi militants, Sunni tribesman largely affiliated with the Islamist Islah party (the primary opposition party), and certain brigades of Yemen's armed forces. In a statement, President Hadi said he had gone to ensure the "return of the situation in the city to normal and address the effect of the unfortunate events of armed confrontation that took place recently." While Hadi ordered all armed groups and parties to withdraw from Amran, he seemed to refrain from solely blaming the Houthi movement (which is assumed to receive backing from Iran) for the escalation of violence. As Hadi attempts to contain or engage the Houthi movement at this time, he faces a difficult balancing act among internal and external interests.

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