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# Middle East Change Observer

No. 5

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## War in Libya

While fighting between the rebels and Qadhafi militias appeared as a stalemate around the towns of Brega and Ajdabiya, two peace plan initiatives were on the way. The Turkish PM worked out a plan with the Libyan minister of foreign affairs and sent the proposal over to Tripolis. An African Union (AU) peace mission, including three presidents, was invited to Tripoli by president Qadhafi, worked out a plan that Qadhafi accepted. However, when it arrived to Benghazi later, it received a hostile welcome from the protestors. The difference between the two plans is that the AU does not require the regime forces to retire from besieged cities as a condition of ceasefire. It is therefore likely to be rejected by Benghazi insurgents.

## Syria

**Concessions** - Pres. Assad sought to quell unrest by offering a Syrian nationality to the estimated 200,000 Kurds formerly classified by the government as stateless persons and by announcing the closing down of Syria's first and only casino, which had enraged Islamists. Further, schoolteachers who had been dismissed last year for wearing the niqab, a type of face veil, would be allowed back to work. This decision appeared to be the most immediately significant result of a Tuesday meeting between Mr. Assad and a popular Islamist leader, Said Ramadan al-Bouti. Acc. to Ayman Abdel Nour, a Syrian writer, about 1,200 women would be affected by the niqab decision. Other concessions offered at the meeting, Mr. Abdel Nour said, included permission to create an Islamist satellite channel and to form an Islamist political party. But the president failed to put an end to emergency law or to release political prisoners – two of the protestors' demands.

**Repression** - More than 10,000 protesters took to the streets of several cities, including the capital, Damascus, on Friday, April 8. Three dozens were killed in Dera'a, Douma. The protests were followed by more protests and clashes during the funerals. The government sealed off the port city of Baniyas where four were killed. There have been reports of violent pro-regime militias, the so called *shabiha*. Syrian security forces have reportedly used live bullets against anti-government protesters at Damascus University's science faculty.

**Dissent** - An editor at the state-run newspaper Tishreen, Samira Masalma, was sacked after she criticised the shootings on al-Jazeera television.

## Egypt

**Protests** – On April 8 some 100,000 protesters gathered in the Tahrir Square in downtown Cairo during a “Friday of purification”, demanding that deposed president Hosni Mubarak be put on trial for corruption. A group of some 4,000 protesters still filled the square late Friday night, and the protesters were joined by a group of around 15-20 army Officers in defiance of an official order banning army personnel from participating. The move increased tensions in the square. On the morning of April 9 the army violently cleared the square with tear gas and fierce gun firing, mostly into the air. At least one person was killed.

**Concessions** – The army's policy of repression-concession cycle continues. On April 10, prosecutors summoned former President Hosni Mubarak and his sons for questioning and arrested former Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif. Mubarak and his family are accused of abusing their political positions to accumulate “illegal personal profits, illegal amassing of wealth, and the seizure of public funds.”

Egyptian Prime Minister Essam Sharaf ordered the Ministerial Security Committee to release all civilians detained in Tahrir Square on Friday and Saturday.

**Army** - On Monday, an Egyptian military court jailed a blogger for three years for criticising the armed forces. Maikel Nabil Sanad, a 25-year-old activist, wrote that “the army supplied police forces with extra ammunition to shoot protesters on Jan. 28”, adding that “the military later put protesters in Tahrir Square under siege and attempted to forcibly evacuate the demonstrations more than once.”

Egypt has nominated a top member of the former ruling party, Mustafa el-Fiqqi, to be the new head of the Arab League.

**Islamists** - Members of the Ansar al-Sunna Association - known in Egypt for its Salafi orientation - declared on Tuesday they will join the upcoming parliamentary race. Salafis recently gained national headlines following the destruction of several Sufi shrines near Egyptian northern cities including Alexandria, a Salafist stronghold, and Qalubiya. The Muslim Brotherhood condemned the attacks as an act endangering the unity of Muslims and declared that destroying public propriety contradicted the spirit of the January 25 revolution.

## Protests elsewhere

In **Yemen**, more than 100,000 people converged in the capital, Sanaa, for rival demonstrations on Friday. Scores were killed in Taizz. The president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, appeared to accept the offer from the regional Gulf Cooperation Council to mediate the terms of his departure but the proposal was rejected by the opposition because it would give the president immunity from prosecution.

A man set himself on fire in Amman, **Jordan**, emulating the action of the Tunisian Mohamed Bouazizi whose self-immolation helped spark the Arab Spring.

In **Iraq**, masses converged from the south and from the Diyala province east of Baghdad, heeding the call of Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr for a million-person demonstration to mark what the Sadrists and many Sunnis see as 8 years of American military occupation.

## Expected events

In **Libya**, the two cease-fire plans are going to be discussed while the military situation appears as a stalemate. Col. Qadhafi is likely to accept the AU plan, while the transitional council on Benghazi might consider the Turkish one. The mediation of GCC will continue in **Yemen**. **Syria** entered a spiral of repression that is likely to deepen.