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# Middle East Change Observer

No. 7

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## Syria: a brutal crackdown

The Syrian regime has dramatically intensified its crackdown against the protesters in an attempt to quell the revolution by a stick and carrot strategy.

**Concessions** - First, Syrian President Bashar al-Asad abolished the emergency law and has dismissed two unpopular governors against whom there had been protests. He announced that there was no longer any reason for anyone to demonstrate, implying that further demonstrations would be dealt with harshly.

The newly-appointed cabinet held its first full-scale meeting and took a series of steps towards "reform". These included approving a draft decree replacing the emergency law it with a law "regulating the right to peaceful demonstration", "expediting" planned laws for political parties and the media, and a programme to create 10,000 new government jobs every year for young people. The lifting of emergency will make little or no difference: Many of the charges on which opponents of the regime are routinely imprisoned exist either within the Penal Code itself or as special laws or articles in the constitution.

**Protests** - Tens of thousands of Syrians came out again on "Great Friday" in numerous cities. Over 120 people were killed last weekend in April alone, bringing the number of deaths to 350. At least 3,000 troops, backed by tanks and heavy weapons entered Deraa, in the early hours of April 25. The army used tanks and indiscriminate shooting and proceeded to arrest hundreds around the country. There were numerous reports a mutiny in the units affiliated with 5th Division.

**Information war** - the Syrian government blames the attacks on Salafists groups, while opposition and media present the protests as civil uprising similar to those in other Arab countries. Also, opposition, Assad supporters and independents disagree about occurrence and magnitude of protests and accuse each other of propaganda.

## Libya: little progress on the front, new NATO tactics

The front remained largely unchanged. After a period of indecision, the NATO coalition has begun striking Qaddafi forces forcefully again and started employing drones. It attacked Qaddafi's headquarters in Tripoli. Despite the pledges of the Qaddafi government that its troops would cease attacking Misrata, they heavily bombarded the city both on Saturday and Sunday, killing at least 32 persons and wounding dozens. Two Western journalists were killed along with dozens of Libyans. After retreating into the port of Misrata last week, the rebels received humanitarian aid from the sea and had been able to push Qaddafi forces back and take much of the downtown area, including the central hospital, the last major bastion of the Qaddafi brigades. According to AFP that morale is extremely low among the Qaddafi



brigades there, and that they might have surrendered some time ago if they had not been afraid of persecution by the Free Libya forces.

On Monday, the youth of the Duraibi quarter of Tripoli announced releasing flocks of doves to signal their support of the Free Libya government. Huge petrol queues have sprung up again in Tripoli and surrounding towns.

## Yemen: closer to a solution

President Saleh agreed on April 24 to a formula by the Gulf Co-operation Council for him to transfer power to his vice-president within 30 days in exchange for immunity from prosecution. The nearly daily protests continue to demand he leave immediately.

## Egypt: further changes in administration

**Gas deal** - The public prosecutor indicted six people in relation with a gas deal with Israel. Former Minister of Petroleum Sameh Fahmi and five others have been indicted for harming national interests, wasting public money and corruption. Since 2008 the deal has been a subject of public outcry and of a recent public campaign for the revision of the gas which was concluded in 2005. It fixed for 15 years a maximum price on gas. Global gas prices in the meantime went up. Yet, since the currently-ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces declared in its fifth communiqué that it maintains all international deals and treaties, the gas deal cannot simply be changed.

**Protests** - Egyptians protested on Wednesday 20 April against Mustafa al-Fiqi as Egypt's candidate at the Arab League.

The recently appointed governor of Qena has been suspended after a week of violent mass protests and highway blockades in Qena. The protesters have said they do not object to Major Shehata Mikhail because of his Christian religion and instead accuse him of involvement in killing pro-democracy protesters during the 25 January revolution.

## Progress: Tunisia, Jordan, Oman and Morocco

**Tunisia** - PM Caid Essebsi announced that Officials of Tunisia's former ruling party in the past 10 years will be barred from standing in elections on July 24. Caid Essebsi said that to get round this obstacle, interim President Foued Mebazaa would draw up a "list by name" of people who directly collaborated with Ben Ali, particularly in his presidential cabinet and



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among his close advisors. Caid Essebsi also confirmed that the transitional government supported mandatory parity for men and women on the electoral lists for the vote in July.

**Jordan** - King Abdallah II has created a commission to suggest amendments to the Jordanian constitution.

**Oman** - Sultan Qaboos has acquiesced in protesters' demands that he release nearly 300 dissidents arrested since the protests began.

**Morocco** - protests continue to demand constitutional changes in third major protest since February. The government has given public sector workers a substantial pay raise ahead of the protests.

## Expected events

Yemeni opposition leaders and dictator Ali Abdullah Saleh will meet in Riyadh on Monday to sign an agreement on a peaceful transfer of power. Egypt awaits advance in the interrogation of ex-President Mubarak. Syria is likely to step up the repression and possibly witness first desertions from the army.