



Horizon 2014: the Arab world

by Florence Gaub

2014 will yet again be a crucial year for the Arab world, with a number of countries undergoing transitions, elections, and trials, in the coming twelve months.

Egypt: Following the referendum on 14-15 January, the country is set for presidential, and then legislative elections in the *spring*, with rumours abound that Minister of Defence General al-Sisi will run for the presidency. If elected, he would be the fifth president with a military background since the abolition of the Egyptian monarchy. Having been postponed in mid-January, one of four trials against former President Morsi is set to continue on 1 February. He stands accused of orchestrating the murder and torture of protesters in 2012, escaping from prison in 2011, insulting the judiciary and conspiring against Egypt with Hamas, Iran, and Hezbollah.

Syria: The long-planned Geneva II conference, which kicked off on 22 January, is the first occasion where representatives of both the regime and the opposition have met since the country's civil war began in 2011. Although expectations remain low, the meeting is considered to be a first step towards a political solution. While the fighting rages on, the regime is preparing for presidential elections in May, in accordance with the new constitution. This also introduced a multi-party system and open competition for the post of head of state (hitherto nominated by the Baath party). Incumbent President Bashar al-Assad is currently the only candidate.

Yemen: Following the conclusion of Yemen's National Dialogue initiated in March 2013, there are still a number of obstacles to overcome before the country can head for elections (originally scheduled for February 2014). Although the general terms for a new political system and a constitution have been agreed on, the charter still needs to be drafted and put to a referendum. A new electoral register needs to be compiled and the electoral law amended amidst ever-growing violence. While progress has been made overall, Yemen is behind schedule, and the elections are not to be expected before mid-2014.

Libya: The highly anticipated trial of Qaddafi's son Saif el-Islam and 37 other former regime officials is expected to continue from 27 February. Charged for several crimes committed during the 2011 war – including murder, rape, torture, inciting violence, and organising armed gangs – the defendants will not receive a fair trial, according to the International Criminal Court which has sought their extradition to The Hague. If convicted, they could face the death penalty. Meanwhile, Libya is running late in the drafting of a constitution which was scheduled to be submitted to a referendum in February, followed by legislative elections. As the 60-member constitutional committee still needs to be confirmed in order to proceed, again by referendum, further delays are expected.

Iraq: Legislative elections are on the agenda for 30 April, although rumours of a potential delay are



already rife. Scheduled to take place amidst rising sectarian tension and violence, the elections are likely to pit Prime Minister al-Maliki's largely Shia State of Law Coalition against the multi-confessional al-Iraqiya. While the latter came out on top in the elections of 2010, it was unable to form a viable alliance in Parliament and has since lost traction due to infighting. Al-Maliki is accused of displaying increasingly authoritarian tendencies, concentrating powers in the hands of his office, and deliberately excluding the Sunni population from power in the post-Saddam system. Meanwhile, terrorist attacks are once again on the rise and the fragmentation of the opposition continues to play into the incumbent government's hands.

Palestine: US-mediated talks between Israel and the Palestinians are due to come to an end in *April*. Since talks to solve the 65-year old conflict – held in absolute secrecy – resumed in late July 2013, both sides have declared that there has been very little progress on the core issues of borders, security, refugees, the status of Jerusalem, and mutual recognition. Despite these obstacles, US Secretary of State Kerry appears committed to reaching a final, not interim, agreement by spring. Meanwhile, the European Union is set to review its two CSDP missions designed to assist Palestinian statehood, EUBAM Rafah and EUPOL COPPS, by *June*.

Algeria: Amidst speculations about President Bouteflika's health, elections for his post are scheduled for *17 April*. While he has made no statement so far on his own intentions, several others have announced that they will run, among them former Prime Ministers Ali Benflis and Ahmed Benbitour, as well as the famous novelist Yasmina Khadra. If Bouteflika does not run – for what would be his fourth mandate – Benflis is likely to be the strongest candidate. As Algeria has remained largely untouched by the regional sea change of the past few years, the elections are seen as a watershed in its potential path to transition.

Morocco: The mandate of the United Nations mission supervising the referendum on Western Sahara's independence – established in 1991 – expires on *30 April*. The 39-year old conflict continues to have a negative impact on the region, and led to a suspension of Algerian-Moroccan relations in 2013. Although a settlement plan

exists, disagreements over its implementation have brought the process to a halt.

Lebanon: While war continues to spill over into Lebanon from neighbouring Syria, the country has finally emerged from the ten-month political deadlock which resulted from Prime Minister Mikati's resignation in March 2013. The Lebanese Parliament, which will elect the president on *May 25*, is itself facing new elections in *November 2014*. As it could not agree on the reform of its electoral law in the summer of 2013, the Parliament controversially extended its term to the end of this year. Alongside overdue reforms of the political system, the country is facing ever greater security challenges, largely stemming from Hezbollah's involvement in Syria's conflict and reviving fears of another civil war.

Tunisia: In the context of continuously deteriorating security environment, Tunisia has been politically deadlocked since the assassination of secular opposition politician Mohamed Brahmi in July 2013 (the second high-profile assassination that year). The country has set the *end of 2014* as the deadline for holding its second national elections since the fall of Ben Ali. By then, the government has to draft a constitution, amend the electoral law, and find a way out of the crisis which is pitting secular against religious forces.

The League of Arab States will hold its 25th summit in *March*. For the first time, the event will be hosted by Kuwait. Most Arab countries will experience a political slow-down to some extent during Ramadan, which will take place in *July*.

Florence Gaub is a Senior Analyst at the EUISS.

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