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Executive summary

In Israel, after the January parliamentary election, Benjamin Netanyahu is likely to win a third term and form the next Israeli government. The outgoing Prime Minister's coalition won only 31 seats in the Knesset and Yair Lapid (19 seats) is emerging as a new star from Israeli politics.

Since the Peace Talks with Israel have reached a deadlock and a two-state solution is so far enough to seems unreal, at this time Palestinians main political actors are strongly committed to adopt a new stance on the international stage, by enlarging international support to the national cause and joining international diplomacy on one hand and promoting a reconciliation path between Fatah and HAMAS on the other.

In Jordan, the final results of the parliamentary elections are expected on January 31. After the passing of the latest electoral law in June 2012, a National List has been introduced to assign 27 seats (in addition to the 108 reserved for kingdom's governorates) and the women's quota has been raised from 12 to 15 seats.

In general Jordan succeeded in carrying out a credible election. Some observers reported incident in Amman, Irbid, Karak of vote-buying, campaigning inside the polling stations and repeat voting. Nevertheless, isolated events do not reveal a major trend.

As the conflict between the troops of President Bashar al-Assad and the opposition forces enters its 22nd month, the humanitarian crisis is getting worse and worse. The National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, commonly named Syrian National Coalition (SNC), held a conference in Paris on 27th January to plead for military and financial assistance from foreign countries. After repeatedly called on President Assad to step down, US President Barack Obama announced a new round of humanitarian assistance on 29th January, an additional $155 million.

Since the uprising erupted in Syria nearly two years ago, many concerns are emerging that the crisis could spills beyond its borders and threatens to engulf the region. But, as everyone knows, in Lebanon the risks are higher than in any other country of Middle East. Once again in Lebanon, external factors seem to be the main driver of politics, provoking instability or increasing sectarian clashes.

Situation report

Israel

After the January parliamentary election, Benjamin Netanyahu is likely to win a third term and form the next Israeli government. The outcome partially confirmed the polls, since the outgoing Prime Minister's coalition won only 31 seats in the Knesset and Yair Lapid is emerging as a new star from Israeli politics.

Lapid's Yesh Atid (There Is a Future) surprisingly won 19 seats, with Labour came in third with 15. The far-right Habayit Hayehudi (The Jewish Home) won 12 seats, while the ultra-Orthodox parties, Shas and United Torah Judaism, respectively gained 11 and 7. Meeretz doubled its representation from 3 to 6 and Tzipi Livni's Hatnua party also won 6 seats. United Arab List-Ta'al received 4 seats and Kadima secured its place in parliament with 2. The first session of the 19th Knesset is scheduled for February 5.

During his post-election speech, Netanyahu said he will seek "the broadest coalition possible". With less influence than polls had previously predicted, forming a new government will be certainly complicated to the conservative leader.

In October, Netanyahu merged his conservative Likud party with Avigdor Lieberman's Yisrael Beiteinu (lit. Israel Our Home). Nevertheless, many Likud voters did not want to support the new coalition, since Lieberman, who served as Foreign Minister in the former cabinet, was indicted for fraud and breach of trust.

Therefore, Netanyahu is very interested in including Lapid's secular centrist party in the broad government he is planning, alongside the Shelly Yachimovic's Labour party. Both Lapid and Yachimovic ruled out forming an anti-Netanyahu bloc. By also including the Tzipi Livni's Hatnuah party, this option would give to Netanyahu a reassuring majority of 71 seats.

Meanwhile, United Torah Judaism and Shas already established a joint religious front with 18 seats. By keeping the religious parties out of his government, Netanyahu could try to extend compulsory military service to the ultra-Orthodox Jews (actually exempted), a central issue in the political platform of both Yesh Atid and Labour.

It is still uncertain if Netanyahu is willing to make the far-right pro-settlement party, Jewish Home, another potential partner in his coalition. Naftali Bennett's faction substantially increased its strength with 14 seats and is a long time ally of the Likud party.

Considering an uncomfortable regional landscape, many parties reoriented their campaign on domestic issues, namely the social protests erupted in the summer of 2012, the high tax level and a compulsory military service for ultra-Orthodox. But foreign policy still matters and regional balance is vital to Israel's security. The Iranian nuclear programme, the attitude toward HAMAS-ruled Gaza, the resume of the peace talks with Fatah and the relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt will be so important to the next government and will be critical for its strength and popularity.

A top priority for the next government is to stop Iran from getting a nuclear threshold capacity. It is unclear if such a result can be pursued by military action or through a joint diplomatic effort (including new economic sanctions) with the US, at a time when ties between Washington and Tel Aviv are tense.

Another issue on the top of foreign policy agenda – and strictly related to US-Israeli relations - is the re-engagement in the Peace Process. A conservative ruling coalition will not seek any chance to negotiate with the Palestinians, since in their opinion the conflict can only be managed, not solved. But a new government with a large centrist component is likely to force Netanyahu to resuming peace talks.

Despite "Operation Pillar of Cloud" carried out by Israel against the military leadership of HAMAS in the last November, Israeli relationship with the backed-Islamist Egyptian government did not collapse. Muhammad Mursi, the Egyptian president, is facing a serious internal turmoil at this time and the 1979 peace treaty is out of danger.

Moreover, the posture of Israel on the international stage will depend on the post-election bargaining, which usually takes several weeks to come to an end.

Palestinian Territories

Since the Peace Talks with Israel have reached a deadlock and a two-state solution is so far enough to seems unreal, at this time Palestinians main political actors are strongly committed to adopt a new stance on the international stage.

This strategy aims to enlarge international support to the national cause, by joining international diplomacy on one hand and promoting a reconciliation path between Fatah and HAMAS on the other.

On November 2012, the United Nations upgraded Palestinians membership to that of a non-member state, a move that allows Palestinians representatives to debate in the General Assembly and improves the chances of joining UN agencies.

The vote came after the launch of "Operation Pillar of Cloud", an eight-day Israeli military air campaign in the Gaza Strip, aimed to reduce HAMAS' weaponry. Since the militant party seized the control over Gaza in 2007, HAMAS has been faced two Israeli military campaigns (included Operation Cast Lead at the end of 2008).

This is why Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced a new round of settlement-building in East Jerusalem and West Bank. Yet the United Nation Human Rights Council (UNHRC) urged Israel to stop settlements, as Israeli representative refused to appear before the Council in Geneva for the periodic review, becoming the first country boycott it. The UNHCR's decision is likely to bolster the Palestinians following the vote last November.

At the same time, there is a new opportunity to restore the internal rift between the two Palestinian ruling factions. With HAMAS able to rally several Arab countries in the wake of Operation Pillar of Defence, Fatah leadership finds itself uncomfortably on the edge. So the president of the Palestinian Authority (and head of Fatah after the death of its historical leader Yasir Arafat in 2004), Mahmoud Abbas, opened to his HAMAS counterpart, Khaled Meshal.

In February 2012, the two leaders have reached a deal to head a unity government to prepare for elections in the West Bank and Gaza. On the path of reconciliation, HAMAS held an unusual rally in the West Bank celebrating the 25th anniversary of its founding in December 2012. Now, in January 2013, thousands of Fatah supporters rallied in Gaza celebrating the UN vote of the last November.

It is finally clear that both parties would be able to take mutual benefits from this strategy. HAMAS is willing to get a kind of international legitimacy since the Palestinian Authority represents Palestinians at international bodies. And Fatah has now a real chance to retrieve its own popular consensus, given the failure of the peace process.

Jordan

The final results of the parliamentary elections are expected on January 31. After the passing of the latest electoral law in June 2012, a National List has been introduced to assign 27 seats (in addition to the 108 reserved for kingdom's governorates) and the women's quota has been raised from 12 to 15 seats.

An Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) has been established to oversee the transparency of the process and international observers were invited too. The IEC reported a strong 56.6 % turnout (higher than the 52% in the 2010), with 2.3 million of Jordanians eligible to vote. The electoral turnout seems to show an increasing engagement in the political process.

Traditionally, elections in Jordan are about tribal and family loyalty, rather than political ideology or party affiliation.

For the most part, Jordanians succeed in pulling off a credible election. Some observers reported incident in Amman, Irbid, Karak of vote-buying, campaigning inside the polling stations and repeat voting. Nevertheless, isolated events do not reveal a major trend.

In his 13th year in power, King Abdullah II is facing a real challenge to its long reign. The political upheaval, erupted in October 2012 against the growth in fuel prices and cuts in food, has made a violent call to overthrow the monarchy. For this reason, Abdullah dissolved the parliament and called early elections.

So the government has been involved in a slight process of political and economic reform aimed to end the endemic corruption affecting the country. Now, the high voter turnout can be described as an endorsement of King Abdullah's reform plan.

Despite these changes, the opposition largely criticized the government for moving too slowly.

The Islamic Action Front (IAF), a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan, called for a boycott of parliamentary election. The opposition held a rally on January 18 urging Jordanians not to participate in the election.

Moreover, another opposition movement has emerged in Jordan. Known as al-Hirak, the faction is not aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood. Mostly gathering people from the East Bank of the Jordan river, al-Hirak is a tribally based pro-democracy movement committed to reforming the nation's corrupt politics. Hirak's local chapters are spreading across Jordan, hailing supporters from the East Bank tribes, who had been the bulwark of support for King Abdullah.

Even if the limited changes did not address the endemic problem with the electoral system and the votes are still cast along tribal and family lines, there is something new in politics and reform in Jordan. The king clearly stated that the winning coalition will form the next government, seemingly transferring some of the monarchy's privileges to the parliament.

Only taking bolder step on this path, King Abdullah II will be able to tackle the serious economic troubles and political corruption. This is a real chance to preserve his power and insulate the kingdom from the regional turmoil.

Indeed, the cross-border flow of refugees and foreign jihadists from the neighbouring Syria could represent a concrete threat for Amman.

Syria

As the conflict between the troops of President Bashar al-Assad and the opposition forces enters its 22nd month, the humanitarian crisis is getting worse and worse. An estimated 2.5 million people are displaced inside of Syria and over 678,000 have fled to bordering country, while about 4 million of Syrians rely on international assistance to cope with hunger and violence.

Dealing with the increasing lack of funding which threatens food supplies, the United Nations has called for international donations. The upcoming international conferences in Paris (28 January) and Kuwait (30 January) are supposed to address the dramatic issue.

The Syrian army has systematically carried out a brutal crackdown on cities and villages supporting the rebels in the North and East of the country, in a ruthless attempt to erode the opposition's popular support.

Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev said Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's chances of retaining power are "getting smaller and smaller", according to an interview with CNN. But the Russian Prime Minister pointed out that any external powers could force Assad to step aside. "This must be decided by the Syrian people", repeated Medvedev.

Russian concerns over a military intervention lie on geopolitical reasons: Moscow is seriously worried about an extension of the Western presence in the area. This strategy is a good fit for Iran, always committed to bolster the ties with its Lebanese proxy Hizb'Allah trough the Alawite-dominated Assad regime.

After repeatedly called on President Assad to step down, US President Barack Obama announced a new round of humanitarian assistance on 29th January, an additional $155 million. On the other side, US military intervention in the Syrian conflict is all but certain. "Can we make a difference in that situation?" Obama said in an interview last week, pointing out a central issue in the current deadlock of the crisis. Indeed, failing to provide a real benefit to the population, a military intervention could trigger even worse violence.

Meanwhile, the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, commonly named Syrian National Coalition (SNC), held a conference in Paris on 27th January to plead for military and financial assistance from foreign countries. The SNC is recognised as the legitimate representative of Syrian people by the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (CCG), the Arab League and NATO countries. Addressing the opening of the conference, French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius asked the international community to do more with Syria and support the SNC in order to avoid the country fall into the control of Islamist militant groups.

Deep concern over jihadist militants fighting autonomously in the anti-Assad rebel forces is rising.

Besides Bashar al-Assad and the opposition forces, currently many others are playing a role in the Syrian match, namely the Western countries, the Gulf States, Iran, China and Islamist militias. With Syrian territory cracked into parts with different types of political and military control, a common concern is not to let it take a regional dimension and subsequently affect the volatile security of the area.

A military action or exacerbating the unrest by arming the rebels could eventually worsen the situation. While the conflict has seemingly reached a stalemate, given the far superior weaponry of Assad, a negotiated solution remains the best option to come to an end.

Lebanon

Since the uprising erupted in Syria nearly two years ago, many concerns are emerging that the crisis could spills beyond its borders and threatens to engulf the region. But, as everyone knows, in Lebanon the risks are higher than in any other country of Middle East.

Clear signals already emerged that Damascus would seek to weaken his neighbour as much as possible to show the potential negative effects could affect the security and stability of the region. Such a move would be a clear attempt to prevent a stronger support from Western countries and the Gulf States to the rebels fighting the Assad regime.

Therefore, Lebanese border areas have been marked by weapons smuggling, refugee flows, kidnappings and several attacks against local communities. Moreover, a bomb blast shook the city of Beirut on October 2012, killing among the others also a Sunni top security official, a kind of targeted killing carried out by the Lebanese allies of the Shiite Syrian government.

The country's political dysfunction has been always well-represented by the Sunni-Shia confessional fracture and prompted by external alliances.

After the crisis over the international tribunal investigating the killing of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, the political landscape is still dominated by the struggle between Hizb'Allah, the Iran-backed Shiite party who dominate the Southern region of Lebanon, and the March 14 Coalition, a Christian-Sunni alliance named after Syria withdrew its forces in 2005.

In June 2011 Najib Mikati was appointed Prime Minister, with Hizb'Allah expanded its political influence gaining several seats in the government. For now, the movement is interested in preserving the domestic status quo, avoiding to exacerbate political confrontation and attract international condemnation. The main reason for Hizb'Allah to preserve its own influence is the fact that a regime change in Damascus would inevitably reduce its weight in the political arena.

Notwithstanding, even if Assad will not succeed in retaining its power, the Shiite Lebanese movement will eventually count on Teheran's financial and military backing. As evidence of the close military cooperation, a failed plot has been allegedly carried out in late 2011 by Iran's elite Quds force and Hizb'Allah affiliated in Washington, DC, aimed to kill the Saudi ambassador to the US.

Once again in Lebanon, external factors seem to be the main driver of politics, provoking instability or increasing sectarian clashes. In the next months, the presidential election will be probably the stage of this enduring disease.