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BRIEFING PAPER:

IRAQ / Iraq's Arab Spring

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Following its March 2011 elections, Iraq's recently established democracy underwent its biggest crisis yet. The lack of consensus among the country's principal political parties left it without a government for some nine months. Despite it now having gotten over that serious institutional crisis, the young democratic state is still having to combat other problems such as corruption or the lack of basic services. Indeed, in all the years that al-Maliki has been in power, basic services damaged in the US invasion of 2003 have still not been restored. Social discontent has been on the rise in recent years, leading in mid-2010 during the crisis over the formation of a new government, to street protests by thousands of people demanding improvements to basic services and the end of the endemic corruption that is devastating the country¹. The wave of uprisings that began in Tunisia have rekindled protests over the last few months. On 27 February, Maliki set a deadline of 100 days for the implementation of a series of promises, for new jobs to be created, and for an improvement to these same basic services. He also announced cuts to the defence budget and a reduction of government ministers' salaries.

Amnesty International has denounced the murders of dozens of civilians in recent months, as well as torture and threats against political activists. The worst date yet was 27th February - christened the Day of Rage - which saw thousands of protesters gather in the country's major cities. In several of these protests, the authorities opened fire on protesters. During a recent visit by Ban Ki-moon to Baghdad, the U.N. secretary general urged the Iraqi government to bring to a close the process of forming a government that began back in December 2009, to assist the implementation of political reforms and other popular demands. Ban also requested that the competent authorities investigate the deaths and violent attacks on the civilian population that occurred during the protests.

Iraqi Kurdistan

Protests against the semi-autonomous government of Kurdistan have been on the rise ever since the uprisings in Iraq began. Protesters have intensified their rhetoric against the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan party (PUK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) which together form the Kurdistan Alliance which controls the government in Erbil since it was created. Thousands have protested on an almost daily basis in Sulaymaniyah since mid-February, demanding an end to corruption and a renewal of the regional government of Kurdistan. On 9th April, Kurdish authorities arrested dozens of clerics who had launched sermons against the two parties in power. It is noteworthy that of the three provincial councils that make up Kurdistan region, Sulaymaniyah's is the only one where the Kurdistan Alliance does not have a majority. The Kurdish opposition parties, such as Gorran (Change) and the Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU) have made the most of the wave of uprisings across the Arab

¹ Transparency International placed Iraq fourth on its list of most corrupt countries in the world in 2010. See: http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/2010/in_detail

world to lay into the Kurdish government at a time when social unrest is growing.

The president of the region of Iraqi Kurdistan, Massoud Barzani announced in March that he would carry out a series of reforms to the regional government, but protesters have stated that they consider these to be insufficient and that the region needs more sweeping changes after more than two decades of control by the parties that form the Kurdistan Alliance. Meanwhile in a letter to Jalal Talabani, president of the Republic of Iraq and a prominent Kurdish leader, the prime minister of the the semi-autonomous region, Barham Salih, announced his intention to resign as leader of the PUK so as to renew the ranks of his party. In the same letter he affirmed that "mafia-like practices are being used in the party against the free press in the region" and that both the PUK and the KDP need to carry out reforms and appoint a new cabinet made up of technocrats.

Recurring anti-U.S. protests

In such a delicate moment for the region, with Syria involved in protests attempting to overthrow the Assads and less than one year after the 'Green revolution' in Iran, Iraq has more than ever become a strategic location for U.S. troops stationed in the region. While the complete withdrawal of the U.S. forces was scheduled for 31st December of this year, recent events and the ongoing instability of the Iraqi government have led to talk of the U.S. mission being extended. A possible confrontation between Arabs and Kurds for control of the oil-rich Kirkuk region and the ongoing presence of al-Qaeda in the country have also been used as excuses to reopen the debate on the U.S. presence in the country. This has not pleased many of the anti-American sectors of the population and protests have ensued.

About 5,000 people gathered in Mosul² on 25th April to protest against the U.S. presence in the country. Attended by Iraqi citizens and both members of the provincial council and tribal leaders, the protest was the largest since those that marked the eight anniversary of the toppling of Saddam Hussein's statue in Baghdad at the beginning of the month. The heads of some of the nation's largest tribes travelled from various points around the country to attend the protest.

Meanwhile, in Baghdad, the Shiite leader Muqtada al-Sadr has been leading the protests against the ongoing U.S. presence. The pro-Iranian cleric criticised as "undemocratic" the government's decision to restrict his protests to three Baghdad football fields, after he lead tens of thousands of protesters through the streets of the capital in April.

With the oil pipelines that run through Syria in danger due to the uprisings there, with Libya immersed in a civil war with no end in sight, and with the menace of uprisings affecting several Gulf countries, the destabilisation of Iraq would be a blow to western interests and oil

² The city of Mosul is considered to be al-Qaeda in Iraq's last remaining urban hotbed.

supplies. The question of Kirkuk³ has the potential to both cause serious civil strife and affect the international supply of crude. The recent death of Osama Bin Laden could still provoke a new wave of attacks in the country, despite the fact that the remaining pockets of al-Qaeda in Iraq have been seriously weakened. It remains to be seen then how events evolve and whether Maliki's promised changes are indeed carried out in 100 days. But whether these satisfy the demands of the population and the various political groups that have been protesting around the country since mid-February, is another question.

³ A referendum on the future of Kirkuk which according to the constitution should have been held years ago, has been continually put off until a mutually satisfactory agreement is reached between Baghdad and Erbil.