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ANOTHER STEP FORWARD FOR SAUDI REFORMS

As part of its ongoing social reforms, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is making strides toward greater independence for women. The Kingdom recently ruled to relax Islamic laws that previously required Saudi women to be accompanied by male family members while in public, and which prohibited them from living independently. The decision, which overhauls Article 169 of the country's restrictive "Law of Procedure before Sharia Courts," is part of an effort to keep the country's traditionally-restrictive religious customs in step with broader social changes that have been enacted by the House of Saud in recent years as part of its "Vision 2030" plan. (*Dawn*, June 22, 2021)

THE TALIBAN MAPS OUT ITS AGENDA...

The Taliban has declared that it is committed to peace in Afghanistan - on its own terms. Spokesmen for the opposition Islamist movement have reaffirmed their commitment to continuing peace talks with the government of Ismail Ghani in Kabul in the wake of America's withdrawal of forces from the war-torn nation, which is now underway. However, Taliban principals have also made clear that they see a reimposition of *sharia* law throughout the country as the only way to end hostilities. "A genuine Islamic system is the best mean[s] for solution of all issues of the Afghans," Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the group's deputy leader, has asserted. (*News 18*, June 20, 2021)

...AS AFGHAN FORCES BRACE FOR THE INEVITABLE

The Taliban's offensive against the Afghan government, meanwhile, is gathering steam. In recent weeks, the militant movement has seized control of a number of strategic provinces in the war-torn nation, and is now increasingly encroaching on the capital, Kabul. In response, the Afghan military has begun to scatter. Since mid-June, scores of Afghan troops have fled across the country's common borders with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The exodus has proved to be a conundrum for those Central Asian states. Uzbekistan has responded by reinforcing its common border with Afghanistan, and Uzbek and Tajik officials are now in close coordination over shared responses to the "alarming situation" unfolding in the region. (*Eurasianet*, June 24, 2021)

THE BROTHERHOOD IN CAIRO'S CROSSHAIRS

In Egypt, the government of President Abdel Fatah al-Sisi is pressing its advantage against the Muslim Brotherhood. In mid-June, the country's highest appeals court upheld death sentences for a dozen politicians affiliated with the Islamist group for their involvement in political unrest in 2015. The families of the political figures, whose ranks include former Youth Minister Osama Hassin and former parliamentarian Mohammed el-Beltagy, fear that the executions could take place "at any moment." Prominent international rights groups, including Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, have decried the verdicts, and urged more moderate sentences and judicial reforms. (*Middle East Eye*, June 25, 2021)

AMERICA URGES EUROPE TO ACT ON FOREIGN FIGHTERS

The Biden administration is appealing to the EU to take a more active role in the repatriation of ISIS "alumni." At the late-June meeting of the Global Coalition, the eighty-two member bloc that helped eliminate the Islamic State's territorial *caliphate* in Iraq and Syria, Secretary of State Antony Blinken described the situation in northern Syria, where many ISIS fighters and their families are now being held in refugee camps, as "untenable." "The United States continues to urge countries – including coalition partners – to repatriate, rehabilitate and, where applicable, prosecute its citizens," Blinken told European Union leaders.

The problem is a pressing one. As Gen Kenneth McKenzie, the commander of U.S. Central Command, noted in April, children at these camps "are being radicalised, and unless we find a way to repatriate them, reintegrate them and deradicalise them, we're giving ourselves the gift of fighters five to seven years down the road, and that is a profound problem." "It will be a military problem in a few years if we don't fix the non-military aspects of it now," he concluded. Yet European nations - in particular the UK and France - have been slow to act, preferring to keep these foreign fighters and their families at arm's length. (*Guardian*, June 28, 2021)