



Greetings from the Project on Middle East Democracy!

Last week was largely dominated by reaction to and analysis of Iraq's recent provincial elections, while the recent conflict in Gaza continued to have repercussions in Egypt and elsewhere. In Washington, discussion shifted from whether the U.S. should engage Iran to what form that engagement may take and how it should proceed. Meanwhile, it was announced that **President Obama's** first budget request, for Fiscal Year 2010, will not be released until early April, with a "blueprint" outline of the budget being submitted to Congress on February 24. Also, last week was a very busy one for public events on Middle East policy in Washington - see the last section below for POMED's notes on many of them. This week will see a number of additional interesting events, including a Congressional hearing in the House to address the fallout from the Gaza conflict.

For more detailed coverage of the debates surrounding U.S. foreign policy and the prospects for democracy in the Middle East, be sure to check out POMED's blog, the [POMED Wire](#).

The Weekly Wire

February 9, 2009

Legislation

On Monday (2/2), [H.R. 792](#), sponsored by Rep. **Anthony Weiner** (D-NY), a bill which would prohibit foreign assistance to Saudi Arabia, was referred to both the House Committee on Foreign Affairs and the House Committee on Financial Services. The bill would prohibit all U.S. assistance to Saudi Arabia in the form of direct loans, credits, insurance, financial guarantees.

On Wednesday (2/4), [H.Res.130](#), sponsored by Rep. **William Delahunt** (D-MA), a bill which expresses support for the appointment of **Senator George Mitchell** as Special Envoy for the Middle East, was referred to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs. The bill aims to officially congratulate Senator Mitchell and pledge the support of the House of Representatives to his efforts. The bill would also call on the international community to "aggressively pursue efforts that facilitate a just and lasting resolution of these conflicts."

On Tuesday (2/3), [S.Con.Res.4](#), sponsored by **Sen. Ben Nelson** (D-FL), a bill which calls on President Obama and U.S. allies to raise the issue of **Robert Levinson** with Iranian government officials, was referred to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. The bill calls on actors to pressure the Iranians to live up to their pledge to assist the F.B.I. in their investigation into the disappearance of Mr. Levinson, who was last known to be in Kish Island, Iran. March 9 marks the second anniversary of his disappearance.

Congressional Hearings

No relevant committee hearings last week.

In Washington

Engaging Iran...and Possibly Syria? As U.S. engagement with Iran appears more likely, one analyst [offered](#) some possible scenarios once engagement begins. Another commentator [recommended](#) that Obama appoint an "A-Team" featuring former **Jimmy Carter, Zbigniew Brzezinski, George H.W. Bush, and Brent Scowcroft**. One [report](#) discussed the president's plan for "talk and toughness," while another [advised](#) the U.S. to lift the threat of regime change and outline regional security initiatives that will "break the debate in Iran wide open."

Meanwhile, Obama advisers have [reportedly](#) been engaged in "discreet talks" with Iran and Syria for the past few weeks. USIP announced last week that a group of their experts had met in Damascus with Syrian President **Bashar al-Assad**.

Thoughts on Obama's Outreach to the Arab World: Reactions continued to Obama's interview with **Hisham Melhem** of *Al Arabiya*, with some [arguing](#) that it sent "an important signal about the new administration and its desire to directly engage the people of the Middle East and the Muslim world." Others offered a [different take](#), seeing Obama's remarks as overemphasizing "the mood of the Arab street, rendering U.S. policy dependent on their judgment rather than ours."

Meanwhile, others weighed in on how President Obama should engage the Middle East, with one analyst advocating for a more nuanced and direct approach to [political Islam](#) and another focused on [empowering youth](#). As for Middle East envoys, it was [advised](#), "we do not need a 'pro-Arab' envoy. What we need is someone who is pro-justice and pro-fairness." Additionally, one article stressed that the new administration should adopt a [less obstructionist approach](#) which is not so hostile to the idea of a Palestinian unity government.

Democracy and Development: One analyst argued that the West's policies of democracy promotion are "riven with [double standards](#)" that have alienated the Arab world. An article focused on the roles [defense, development, and democracy](#) should play in U.S. foreign policy, with an emphasis on the last two. **Joseph Nye** [argued](#) that "self-determination has turned out to be an ambiguous moral principle" and demands for such should be judged on a case-by-case basis. And at the Center for Global Development there is a [brief Q&A](#) on the issues surrounding a much needed

rewrite of the [Foreign Assistance Act](#) of 1961.

Additionally, the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations has created a [new subcommittee](#) that will focus specifically on global women's issues to be chaired by Senator **Barbara Boxer** (D-CA). And it was [reported](#) that the State Department will be forcing the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor out of the main State Department building in Foggy Bottom to the Red Cross Building on E Street, seen by some as a dangerous signal regarding the place of democracy and human rights among priorities at State.

Also Worth Reading

In *The Wall Street Journal*, Senator **Joseph Lieberman** (I-CT) [expressed](#) hope that Clinton, Holbrooke, Petraeus and Gates will be able to bring success to Afghanistan but also recognized that Afghan support for coalition initiatives is wavering. His recommendations for bolstering support included a "nationwide, civil-military campaign plan", an increase in coalition civilian assistance at all levels of government, and a more coherent embedding of civilian experts with military units. Lieberman also argued that the U.S. should offer the Afghan government a decade-long development and governance package contingent on the Afghans meeting specific performance benchmarks.

In the Middle East

Iraq's Provincial Elections: There was [no lack](#) of [commentary](#) this [week](#) on [Iraq's](#) recent [provincial elections](#), viewed as an important barometer ahead of parliamentary elections later this year. While most [agreed](#) that the [peaceful proceedings](#) were a [positive sign](#), it was also acknowledged that the [true test](#) will come in the [months ahead](#). There was some confusion among voters over [proper polling locations](#) and one report [examined](#) the several dozen reports of abuses toward journalists by the security forces. Several reports highlighted post-electoral [unrest in Anbar](#) and [violence in the Kurdish](#) regions. One analyst offered some [insight](#) on the elections by Iraqi voters.

Early projections [suggested](#) a stronger-than-expected performance of Prime Minister Maliki's al-Dawa party, surprising results among rival Sunni groups in al-Anbar province, and a shift in the balance of power in the north away from Kurdish party dominance. On Thursday, Iraq's Independent High Electoral Commission released preliminary election results, with immediate [analysis](#) noting that in nearly every province, votes were relatively evenly distributed among many parties, with no party approaching a majority. Another commentator [stressed](#) that voters appear more concerned with the governance of their country than with the U.S. occupation, that we may be seeing a return to a "kinder, gentler form of nationalism," but that this may revive sectarian conflict.

Egypt, Gaza, and the Brotherhood: This week saw an interesting article examining the [role Egypt will play in the fate of Gaza](#), citing its position as mediator of the ceasefire and its control of the Rafah border crossing. Additionally, Mubarak's fear of Hamas' perceived ties to the Muslim Brotherhood may present problems for Egypt's broader engagement over Arab-Israeli peace. And speaking of the Brotherhood, one

analyst [translates and comments on](#) an interesting two part piece in Egypt's Arabic newspaper *Al-Dostor* regarding the Muslim Brotherhood and its potential for broad political power. Meanwhile, a [German-Egyptian activist](#) who has been critical of the Egyptian government's response to the Gaza crisis was [seized and detained](#) by Egyptian state security services. Another **report outlined** the [first public opinion poll](#) conducted throughout the Palestinian territories since the Gaza war. As many anticipated, Hamas appears to have gained support and Fatah has been weakened.

On Iran's Readiness for Talks: One [article](#) last week discussed how the political and social environment in Iran is ripe for dialogue with the US. While one analyst [pointed](#) to **Ayatollah Khamenei's** silence over **Obama** offering a hand in peace if Iran unclenched its fist, another asked if **Mohamed Khatami** could pose a significant challenge to **President Ahmadinejad** in the [June elections](#). It was also [argued](#) that Iran may have gained a stronger presence in Iraq with the success of the Dawa party in last week's elections.

Three Demons that Plague the Arab World: Of the problems facing the Middle East, **Rami Khouri** [identified](#) the big three: security state autocrats, local terrorists, and foreign armies. The solution? "This situation can only change through homegrown evolution into more democratic, pluralistic governance systems, working with likeminded partners worldwide."

Update on the Doha Debates: We [previously reported](#) on the January 18th rejection of the motion 'this house believes that political Islam is a threat to the West' at the Doha Debates. You can now view [video](#) of the debate, which includes POMED Research Director **Shadi Hamid's** argument against the motion, which was narrowly voted down by those in attendance.

Also Worth Reading

Check out the February [issue](#) of the *Arab Reform Bulletin* from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Of particular interest to POMED readers: **John Tures** [writes](#) on **Moqtada al-Sadr** and Iraqi Elections, **Gregory Johnsen** [foreshadows](#) parliamentary elections in Yemen, and **Abdullah Shayji** [says](#) Kuwait's democratic model is in danger. Equally fascinating, **Dina Guirguis** [addresses](#) the consequences of a draft law restricting NGOs in Egypt and **Omran Risheq** [discusses](#) Hamas' legitimacy in the wake of the Gaza war.

In Case You Missed It

On Friday (1/30), AEI held an all-day event on the Islamic Revolution in Iran and its effects thirty years later. There were five panel discussions, two of which ("Where is the Revolution Going?" and "The Future of U.S.-Iran Relations") are outlined in the notes below. For POMED's full notes on these two panels [click here](#).

On Monday (2/2) the Carnegie Endowment, in cooperation with USIP, hosted a conversation with **Shirin Ebadi**, Nobel Peace Prize winner in 2003. She was both the first Iranian and the first Muslim woman to receive the prize. For POMED's notes on the event [click here](#).

Also on Monday, the Middle East Institute hosted a discussion with **Daly Belgasmi**, Regional Director for the Middle East, Central Asia, and Eastern Europe for the World Food Programme. Belgasmi focused on the recent Gaza war and its impact on an already dire food shortage in the Palestinian territories. [Click here](#) for POMED's notes on this discussion.

On Tuesday (2/3), The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars hosted a panel on what the new Obama administration should *not* do in the Middle East. The speakers included **Robert Satloff**, Executive Director of the Washington Institute for Near East policy; **Aaron Miller**, Public Policy Scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Center; and **Robert Malley**, former Special Assistant to President Bill Clinton for Arab Israeli affairs and current Program Director for Middle East and North Africa at the International Crisis Group. For POMED's notes on this event [click here](#).

Also on Tuesday, USIP and CSIS co-hosted a panel discussion addressing the causes and spread of militancy in the Northwest Frontier Province of Pakistan. Issues such as supporting vulnerable youth, improving socioeconomic conditions, and forming active partnerships with the people of the region were discussed. Panelists included **Faiyisal AliKhan**, **Shuja Nawaz**, **James Bever**, **Frederick Barton**, and **J. Alexander Thier** (moderator). For POMED's notes on this event [click here](#).

On Wednesday (2/4), the International Republican Institute hosted a panel discussion on the recent provincial elections in Iraq. The panel featured **Nikolay Mladenov**, member of the European parliament, **Julija Belej Bakovic**, Washington DC based Director of the Iraq program for IRI, **Erin Mathews**, Washington DC based Director of the Iraq Program for the National Democratic Institute, and via video teleconference, **Robert Varsalone**, Iraq based Resident Country Director IRI. For POMED's notes [click here](#).

Also on Wednesday, AEI and Brookings co-sponsored a discussion on Capitol Hill regarding the future of U.S. engagement with Iran. Addressing this issue were **Kenneth Pollack**, Director of Research at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings; **James Dobbins**, Director of the International Security and Defense Policy Center at RAND; **Danielle Pletka**, Vice President for Foreign and Defense Policy Studies at AEI; and **Jackson Diehl** of the *Washington Post* moderating, with a special introduction by **Senator Tom Coburn** (R-OK). For POMED's notes on this event [click here](#).

On Friday (2/6), POMED, the Open Society Institute, and the Democracy Coalition Project hosted an event marking the release of the English translation of a major report from the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, [From Exporting Terrorism to Exporting Repression: Human Rights in the Arab Region](#). POMED's Executive Director **Andrew Albertson** moderated a discussion among **Bahey eldin Hassan**, General Director of The Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS), **Radwan Ziadeh**, director of the Damascus Center for Human Rights Studies, and **Michele Dunne**, Senior Associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. The report outlines the state of human rights in the Arab world focusing on specific human rights violators and the efforts of human rights activists, relying on contributions from sixty-two human rights organizations across the region. For POMED's notes on this event [click here](#).