



Greetings from the Project on Middle East Democracy!

Last week the Senate kept busy trying to pass the omnibus spending bill for Fiscal Year 2009. A number of amendments to the bill were considered and rejected, including one attempting to expand sanctions against companies doing business with Iran, but passage of the full bill was delayed until this week. Secretary of State Clinton's visit to the Middle East included participation in the Gaza Donors' Conference in Egypt, while Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad caught many by surprise by announcing his resignation. Meanwhile, Gamal Mubarak made a visit to Washington to pave the way for a likely visit by his father next month.

At a Washington [press conference](#) tomorrow, a group of more than 80 prominent scholars and experts will release an open letter to President Obama urging him to make democracy a top priority in the Middle East.

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

March 9, 2009

### *Legislation*

Last week the Senate considered [H.R.1105](#), the **Omnibus Appropriations bill for Fiscal Year 2009**, and a number of amendments to the bill. The Senate had aimed to pass the bill before the expiration of [H.R.2638](#) [110<sup>th</sup>], a Continuing Resolution that had provided appropriations at FY2008 levels through March 6, 2009. In the end, passage of the bill was delayed until this week by passing a new Continuing Resolution, [H.J.Res.38](#), which extends appropriations until this Wednesday, March 11, 2009. Further amendments to the omnibus bill will be considered today.

**Senator Jon Kyl** (R-AZ) introduced a [series of Amendments](#) to the bill related to the Middle East. These included **S.Amdt.634**, introduced on Wednesday (3/4) and defeated in a 53-41 vote on Thursday (3/5). The bill had aimed to augment existing sanctions on Iran by prohibiting any funds from the appropriations bill to assist any company "having a business presence in Iran's energy sector, including Iran's

refineries, refined petroleum products, and oil and natural gas fields." On Friday (3/6), Kyl also introduced **S.Amdt.629**, declaring that "None of the funds appropriated or otherwise made available by this Act may be made available to resettle Palestinians from Gaza into the United States." Some observers [derided the bill](#), noting that no funding for the Palestinian territories is intended to resettle Palestinian refugees in the U.S., but is instead designated to provide emergency assistance including food and medical aid to Palestinians in Gaza.

On Tuesday (3/3), **Rep. Anthony Weiner** (D-NY) introduced [H.R.1288](#), the **Saudi Arabia Accountability Act of 2009**, which aims to "halt Saudi support for institutions that fund, train, incite, encourage, or in any other way aid and abet terrorism, to secure full Saudi cooperation in the investigation of terrorist incidents, to halt the issuance of visas to citizens of Saudi Arabia until the President certifies that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia does not discriminate in the issuance of visas on the basis of religious affiliation or heritage." The bill was introduced to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs and the House Committee on the Judiciary.

On Thursday (3/5), **Rep. Barney Frank** (D-MA) introduced [H.R.1327](#), the **Iran Sanctions Enabling Act of 2009**, authorizing State and local governments to direct divestiture from, and prevent investment in, companies with investments of \$20,000,000 or more in Iran's energy sector. The bill was referred to the House Committee on Financial Services.

On Friday (3/6), **Rep. Edward Royce** (R-CA) introduced [H.Res.220](#), calling on Turkey to respect the rights and religious freedoms of the Greek Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarchate. The bill calls on Turkey to uphold and safeguard human rights and religious freedoms, and in particular to grant recognition and increased freedoms to the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Turkey.

### *Committee Hearings*

On Tuesday (3/3), the Senate Foreign Relations Committee heard a hearing entitled "[Iranian Political and Nuclear Realities and U.S. Policy Options](#)." Witnesses included [Frank Wisner](#), former Ambassador to Zambia, Egypt, the Philippines, and India; [Richard Haass](#), President of the Council on Foreign Relations; [Mark Fitzpatrick](#), Senior Fellow for Nonproliferation at the International Institute for Strategic Studies; and [Karim Sadjadpour](#), Associate with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Opening statements were given by [Committee Chairman Kerry](#) (D-MA) and [Ranking Member Lugar](#) (R-IN). All agreed that comprehensive engagement that works toward confidence building on areas of mutual interest is the best policy option for the U.S. For POMED's notes on aspects of the hearing relevant to domestic political reform in Iran, [click here](#).

On Thursday (3/5), the Senate Foreign Relations Committee held another hearing on Iran, entitled "[U.S. Strategy Regarding Iran](#)." [Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski](#) and [Gen. Brent Scowcroft](#) provided testimony, with Senators [Kerry](#) and [Lugar](#) again giving opening statements.

### *In Washington*

**Building a New Foreign Policy:** As **President Obama** formulates his foreign policy, many are offering advice on priorities. Some are quite [pleased](#) with Obama's "radical moves in foreign policy" and his apparent willingness to wield U.S. influence

via diplomacy. Others [gave advice](#) regarding the president's promise to soon give a speech in a Muslim capital. One commentator [analyzed](#) what President Obama's recent [speech on withdrawal from Iraq](#) means for his foreign policy. Meanwhile, Senator **Richard Lugar** [advocated](#) the importance of strengthening U.S. public diplomacy efforts abroad. Secretary Clinton engaged in some public diplomacy on her first visit to the Middle East as Secretary of State, including an appearance on a [Turkish talk show](#) and on a television program targeting [Palestinian teenagers](#).

There were also two major reports released this week relevant to U.S. policy toward Middle East democracy. The first [argued](#) that supporting democracies should remain a primary aspect of U.S. foreign policy, but that President Obama should employ a new approach which is "non-confrontational, measured, cooperative, and empowering." The second [addressed](#) key challenges confronting the Middle East and President Obama and argued that U.S. foreign policy must embody a greater respect for the dignity of the people of the Middle East and a collective rejection of the status quo.

**Strategies for Engaging Iran:** Ambassador **James Dobbins** [argued](#) that the simplest and quickest way to begin dialogue is to allow low-level discussion between U.S. and Iranian diplomats. One analyst [emphasized](#) how Iran's June elections complicate U.S. engagement, with the outcome being "vital to determining whether U.S. overtures will be met with a clenched fist or an open hand," while another [asserted](#) that "America must accept Iran as an equal partner." This may appear to be [happening](#) as Secretary of State **Hillary Clinton** explained that if the NATO intervention in Afghanistan is to succeed, all of its neighbors, [including Iran](#), should be involved. Another option oft discussed this week was a [U.S.-Syrian rapprochement](#) that could have the [added bonus](#) of pressuring Iran.

**Gamal Mubarak Visits DC:** Last week **Gamal Mubarak**, son of Egyptian President **Hosni Mubarak**, [quietly slipped into Washington](#) for a visit with the suspected purpose of gauging American sentiment ahead of his father's trip later this spring and lobbying policymakers "against any sort of conditionality or earmarking in appropriations of U.S. aid to Egypt." Mubarak is widely viewed to be his father's successor, a fact which **Ayman Nour** [categorically opposes](#). Nour's recent release from prison was seen by some [as a signal](#) to the **Obama** administration of Egypt's desire for better relations with the U.S. Whether or not this act will afford President Mubarak a warm welcome in Washington remains to be seen.

**Senator Kerry on Mideast Peace:** On Wednesday, Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chair **John Kerry** (D-MA) spoke at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy on restoring American leadership in the Middle East, focusing primarily on the challenge of the Arab-Israeli peace process. In his [remarks](#), Kerry expressed the Obama administration's "renewed willingness to listen and lead."

#### *Also Worth Reading*

The State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor recently released its annual *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for 2008. It outlined [three trends](#) for the past year: "a growing worldwide demand for greater personal and political freedom, governmental efforts to push back on those freedoms, and further confirmation that human rights flourish best in participatory democracies with vibrant civil societies."

**Egypt** saw a decline in respect for freedoms of speech, press, association, and

religion. **Iran** intensified the intimidation of reformers, academics, and journalists through arbitrary arrests, detentions, torture, and secret trials occasionally ending in execution. **Jordan** saw the passage of a new law (yet to be implemented) allowing the government to deny registration of NGOs for any reason and dissolve or intervene in the internal matters and activities of NGOs. **Syria** continued to violate privacy rights and impose restrictions on basic freedoms. **Tunisia** continued its severe repression of freedom of expression and association and remained intolerant of criticism of the regime. For full country reports for the Near East and North Africa [click here](#).

### *In the Middle East*

**Fayyad Resignation and Gaza Donors' Conference:** Over the weekend, many were surprised by the [resignation](#) of Palestinian **Prime Minister Salam Fayyad**, who announced that he will leave office by the end of March. Fayyad hopes that his resignation will help [pressure](#) Fatah and Hamas to reach an agreement on a National Unity Government, while others see the move as [a real setback](#) to progress on the peace process. Some observers [urged](#) the Obama administration to "look carefully at how to reach moderate Hamas elements."

Meanwhile, [many were disappointed](#) with the recent [donors' conference](#) in Egypt, despite the pledging of [\\$4.48 billion](#) in aid for the reconstruction of Gaza. One commentator [pointed out](#) that neither Hamas nor Israel were present, "meaning that neither of the two most relevant players in Gaza reconstruction were represented at the Gaza reconstruction conference." While another [declared](#) "we have enough adults in the Middle East who act like animals; the last thing we need is adults in the international donor community who act like children," others [cautioned](#) against such negativity, reminding us that "there is a big difference...between what the United States is willing to do with its money, and what it might do diplomatically."

**Iranian-American Journalist Held in Iran:** This week, [information](#) was released on the recent imprisonment of Iranian-American freelance journalist, **Roxana Saberi** in Iran. She was [arrested](#) in late January on charges of buying alcohol. However, her press credentials were revoked in 2006 which meant any information she gathered in Iran for news reporting was "illegal." As "Iran has been under [great pressure](#) since word of Saberi's detention spread," an Iranian judiciary official [announced](#) on Friday that Saberi "will be released in the next few days." In 2008, Iran had investigated or detained [over 30 journalists](#), making it the sixth leading jailer of journalists worldwide, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists.

**Women's Rights and Islam:** One analyst [highlighted](#) the challenges ahead for those wishing to work toward *Musawah*, "the global movement for equality and justice in the Muslim family." Others addressed the Arab world's "[hidden pandemic](#)" of violence against women, or [highlighted](#) recent human rights abuses incurred by Shia pilgrims in Medina, resulting in violence and protests. However, the protests did demonstrate a level of boldness normally "unheard of in the tightly controlled nation" of Saudi Arabia. Also, one commentator offered a [sobering perspective](#) in light of the recent shake-up of the Saudi cabinet, "even if **King Abdullah** succeeds, it would not necessarily advance democracy. In a sense domesticating a threatening religious establishment would merely continue the al Saud family's march to absolute power."

**Public Opinion on Islamists and U.S. Policy:** A [study](#) was recently [released](#) on

perceptions of al Qaeda, Islamist movements, and U.S. policy in the Muslim world. The survey reflected the widely held belief that Islamist groups should be allowed to organize political parties and participate in elections. Furthermore, less than half of participants believed that the U.S. is sincerely trying to promote democracy, with many saying that "the U.S. favors democracy only if the government is cooperative" or "the U.S. simply opposes democracy in the Muslim countries."

One analyst [drew a distinction](#) between Islamists "who are violent and those who are merely extreme." While acknowledging that the recent deal to reinstitute Sharia in the Swat Valley of Pakistan is bad news for democracy, we are reminded that although residents of Swat voted for a secular party in recent elections, "if the secularists produce chaos and corruption, people settle for order."

**Struggling with Internet Freedom:** Just as the availability of information via the worldwide web can be used to promote democracy, it can also be used to manipulate public opinion. One article [highlighted](#) the use of the internet by authoritarian governments as a social and political tool. Another outlined [some of the many ways](#) Middle Eastern governments restrict access and monitor every click. On the [other end](#) of the spectrum, the internet does provide an unprecedented outlet for a meeting of minds (where the opportunity exists). **Esraa al-Shafei** along with her website MideastYouth.com has provided a powerful forum for a diverse population to "act in unity for peace and tolerance."

**Afghanistan, Elections, and Interpreting the Constitution:** [Many](#) were [up in arms](#) about President **Hamid Karzai's** recent announcement that Afghanistan's presidential [elections would be moved up](#) to April from August. Some offered [insight](#) on how this problem belies the greater debate surrounding Afghanistan's separation of powers and the ambiguity over which branch of government should settle constitutional disputes.

**Striking a Balance in Lebanese Politics:** In the delicate balance that is Lebanese politics, it was [argued](#) that the first-past-the-post, winner-take-all election rules suggested by several leaders are unacceptable. Instead, "Lebanon would be best served if the results of the parliamentary elections produced a near 50-50 split between the two broad political camps. In that way they will be compelled to work together to avoid perpetual paralysis." On another note, one commentator provided a [primer](#) of what will presumably be a series on the special tribunal regarding the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister **Rafiq el Hariri**.

#### *Also Worth Reading*

In a [policy brief](#) for the Carnegie Endowment, **Nathan Brown** argued that in regard to Israeli-Palestinian peace, "it's time for plan B." His version of plan B includes moving from a cease-fire to a longer term armistice (5 -10 years) that could provide the stability necessary to rebuild the Palestinian Authority, if all involved parties are willing to take Palestinian democracy more seriously. The first step in this process, however difficult, will be the reconciliation of Hamas and Fatah. This cannot happen without international pressure, especially from the United States and Egypt. Brown argued that this will be "a first step, not a final one." Eventual reconciliation should not result in power sharing between the two factions but a revival of Palestinian democracy through "constitutional rule and routinely free elections."

### *In Case You Missed It*

On Tuesday (3/3) The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace hosted an event titled "Democracy Promotion Under Obama." The event highlighted two recent reports published by **Thomas Carothers**, Vice President for Studies at Carnegie, which discuss U.S. democracy promotion and provide recommendations to the Obama administration as it looks to build a new set of principles. Also participating in the program were **Thomas Malinowski**, Washington Advocacy Director for Human Rights Watch, and **Robert Kagan**, a Senior Associate at the Carnegie Endowment. To read POMED's notes on this event, [click here](#).