



Greetings from the Project on Middle East Democracy!

Last week saw the Obama Administration unveil its new strategy for Afghanistan, while the Senate Foreign Relations Committee held confirmation hearings for newly appointed Ambassadors to both Afghanistan and Iraq. Debate also intensified over U.S. strategies for engaging Iran and Syria. Meanwhile, in the Middle East, there were alarming reports regarding the recent death of an imprisoned Iranian blogger, while in Turkey the ruling AK Party leads in yesterday's municipal elections. This week, the House and the Senate will focus on their Fiscal Year 2010 Budget Resolutions, before adjourning for a two-week recess for Easter and Passover. Meanwhile, President Obama makes his first overseas trip as President this week, with stops in Europe and Turkey, while Arab leaders gather in Doha for the annual Arab Summit.

If you haven't already seen it, be sure to take a look at the [open letter](#) urging President Obama to support democracy and human rights in the Middle East, and [click here](#) to add your name to its list of signatures.

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 30, 2009

## *Legislation*

On Tuesday (3/24), [H.Res.282](#), sponsored by Rep. **Jeff Fortenberry** (R-NE), a bill which recognizes the thirtieth anniversary of the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel, was referred to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs. The bill celebrates the success of the treaty and recalls the sacrifices made by Egypt and Israel to achieve peace. The bill also calls for strengthening the relationship between Egypt and Israel and for the United States to work to resolve conflict in the Middle East. It poses the recognition of the peace treaty as a potential mechanism for partner nations to overcome barriers to peace.

On Wednesday (3/25), [H.Con.Res.36](#), sponsored by **Rep. Robert Wexler**(D-FL), bill which calls on President Obama and U.S. allies to raise the issue of **Robert Levinson** with Iranian government officials, was ordered to be reported by unanimous consent. 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 marked the second anniversary of his disappearance.

### *Committee Hearings*

On Tuesday (3/24), [Jeffrey Feltman](#), the Acting Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs at the Department of State, appeared before the Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs to provide an update on U.S. policy toward Lebanon. Subcommittee chairman [Gary Ackerman](#) (D-NY) began the hearing by noting that U.S. diplomatic engagement with Syria should not compromise our commitment to democracy and peace in Lebanon or to the UN tribunal on the assassination of former Prime Minister **Rafik Hariri**. **Rep. Dana Rohrabacher** (R-CA) expressed his support for U.S. talks with Syria, but said that talking is not enough, and the U.S. must resist Syrian interference in Lebanon. **Rep. Ron Klein** (D-FL) asked what the U.S. response would be if Hezbollah wins a majority in the parliamentary elections scheduled for June, while **Rep. Michael McMahon** (D-NY) inquired about ways the U.S. can help moderate parties deliver tangible benefits for Lebanese citizens. For POMED's notes on the hearing [click here](#), or to view a webcast of the hearing [click here](#).

On Wednesday (3/25), [Christopher Hill](#), a [career diplomat](#) who led the U.S. delegation to the six-party talks on North Korea's nuclear program, appeared before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations as **President Obama's** nominee for Ambassador to Iraq. In his introductory remarks, committee chairman [John Kerry](#) (D-MA) described several ongoing challenges in Iraq, including settling the Arab-Kurdish dispute over control of Kirkuk, passing oil and gas laws, involving Iraq's neighbors in stabilizing the country, integrating the Sunni militias, helping Iraq's refugees and the internally displaced, and training Iraq's security forces. Ranking member [Richard Lugar](#) (R-IN) observed that the Iraqi economy is faltering since oil prices plummeted, and unemployment is high. The confirmation hearing also addressed issues such as Iraqi government corruption, diplomacy with Iraq's neighbors, and the future of the Sunni "awakening councils." To read POMED's notes on the hearing [click here](#).

On Thursday (3/26), [Karl Eikenberry](#), a Lieutenant General who completed two tours in Afghanistan and served as Deputy Chairman of NATO, appeared before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations as the nominee for Ambassador to Afghanistan. **Senator Warner** (R-VA), along with **Senator Inouye** (D-HI) introduced Eikenberry as the right man for the job due to his extensive military and academic accomplishments. In their opening remarks, Senators [John Kerry](#) (D-MA) and [Richard Lugar](#) (R-IN) highlighted Eikenberry's credentials as a Lieutenant General. Some commentators have [noted](#) that in addition to "knowing the country extremely well... [he] has put a strong emphasis on enhancing Afghan governance, in particular the Afghan army." For POMED's notes on the hearing [click here](#).

## *In Washington*

**Reactions to Obama's Message to Iran:** Last week, many [discussed](#) **President Obama's** Nowruz message to Iran and the subsequent response by Iranian leadership. Some [praised](#) the approach and others [posed](#) that [engagement](#) with Iran could lead to a cooling of U.S.-Israeli relations. A few [appeared skeptical](#), with one analyst [criticizing](#) the administration for continuing to dictate rules to Iran. In regard to **Khameini's** response, it was [argued](#) that it was not so much a rebuff but a carefully postured speech meant to demonstrate the need for real, not rhetorical change.

One commentator [questioned](#) whether **Obama** will listen to Iran's dissidents when engaging with their leaders. On the nuclear front, it was suggested that inroads could be made if the U.S. pursues a [more practical relationship with Syria](#), while a group of prominent House Democrats [sent a letter](#) to President Obama, arguing for conditions on talks with Iran. Also, more than 800 peace activists signed a [letter calling on Iran](#) to "cease and desist from the threats to **Shirin Ebadi**, to move immediately to prevent any further harassment, and to ensure Shirin Ebadi's safety and security." Ebadi, the 2003 Nobel Peace Laureate, has faced "considerable danger" in recent months with the government closure of her Defenders of Human Rights Center and the confiscation of documents and computers from her private law office.

**President Obama and Democracy Promotion?** Some are [quite concerned](#) over what appears to be the diminishing role of human rights and democracy promotion in the **Obama** administration. One commentator explained how the U.S. can continue to ["smartly" promote democracy in the Middle East](#) through programming that transcends the electoral aspects of democratization and instead focuses on "civic education and civil society support." **Richard Gephardt** and **Vin Weber** argued that continued U.S. support for democracy should [not be a question of if but how](#). Additionally, citing the [release](#) of **Ayman Nour** in Egypt, they highlighted the importance of vigorously defending democracy activists, even in countries to which we are "linked for security and other reasons."

**A New Strategy for Afghanistan:** Last week, **President Obama** [unveiled](#) his administration's [new Afghanistan policy](#). Thoughts on the troop surge were mixed, with some [arguing](#) that what worked in Iraq [won't work](#) in Afghanistan, and others [suggesting](#) that the additional troops will help strengthen village-level governance. Some advocated that the [real problem](#) actually lies in Pakistan with al Qaeda. Additionally, there was no lack of advice on what this [new policy should entail](#). Several reasons [were offered](#) as to why the U.S. needs to redouble its efforts in Afghanistan, with an approach that incorporates defense, diplomacy, and development. And [several experts were asked to provide an analysis](#) of potential U.S. engagement with moderate elements of the Taliban. All agreed some form of negotiation should take place; however, they differed on the timing and style.

**Elections in Mauritania?** Recently, **Les Campbell** of the National Democratic Institute [visited Mauritania](#) to meet with political leaders and civil society representatives to discuss the prospects of a June election. This election would represent the first since the [coup](#) last August, which saw the ousting of the country's first democratically-elected leader. Campbell stressed that "while there are several possible options that could pave the way for a return to a democratic path in

Mauritania, elections held without consensus among all the major political movements and without the participation of Mauritanian society would further hinder political and economic development."

**Should America Reach Out to Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood?** Some observers [argued](#) that Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood is pragmatic, no longer violent, and no more radical than the Taliban with whom the U.S. is contemplating negotiations. Yet it's argued that the U.S. refuses to talk to the Muslim Brotherhood out of deference to the Egyptian and Israeli governments. It was also [reported](#) that the Supreme Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood movement, 81-year old **Mohammad Mehdi Akef**, will be stepping down in a few months, to be replaced by a new leader chosen by an internal election. It was posed that the "change in leadership has potentially wide-ranging implications for moderate Islamist movements throughout the Middle East."

**Call for Competitive Elections to UN Human Rights Council:** Last week, a group of over 30 human rights organizations (including POMED) [sent letters](#) to each of the regional delegations to the UN urging them to support competitive elections for seats on the Human Rights Council. Three of the five regions - Latin America and the Caribbean, Asia, and Western Europe/others - currently select only as many candidates for the Human Rights Council as there are seats allotted to their regions. (The African and Eastern European groups are planning to send extra candidates this year.) The public letters called on all regions to send competitive slates of candidates to the UN so that the General Assembly can choose countries based on their human rights record, as advised in Resolution 60/251, which created the council.

#### *Also Worth Reading*

There is a new [report](#) out on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process by a bipartisan group of foreign policy experts, including **Brent Scowcroft** and **Zbigniew Brzezinski** among others. Among other recommendations, the report calls on the **Obama** administration to "shift the U.S. objective from ousting Hamas to modifying its behavior, offer it inducements that will enable its more moderate elements to prevail, and cease discouraging third parties from engaging with Hamas."

#### *In the Middle East*

**News from Lebanon:** Monday's [assassination of Kamal Medhat](#), deputy of Palestinian representative **Abbas Zaki** in Lebanon, "seems to have united the Palestinians and the Lebanese [as] both communities felt that the attackers were targeting the security in Lebanon and the refugee camps." One commentator posed that [Syria and Iran stand to gain](#) from Medhat's death. Representatives for Hamas and Fatah were in Cairo last week discussing a Palestinian unity government, and Syria and Iran fear such an agreement would be a prelude to a peace deal between the Palestinians and Israel. And in other news, Syria appointed **Ali Abdel Karim Ali** as its [first ambassador](#) to Lebanon. The move was widely praised as a "welcome development" that will contribute to Lebanon's security.

**Municipal Elections in Turkey:** On Sunday, [municipal elections](#) took place across Turkey, but were marred by [violence](#) in Southeast Turkey in which at least five were killed and close to 100 wounded. With 75% of the votes counted, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AK Party) [leads](#) with approximately 39% of the vote

nationally, with the secularist Republican People's Party (CHP) finishing second with 20% of the vote. However, 39% would represent a modest drop in support for the AKP, which won 46% of the vote in 2007, and was [predicted](#) to perform more strongly in yesterday's vote.

**Face-Off in Saudi Arabia:** One commentator alerted us to the [internal debate between conservative and reformist camps](#) in Saudi Arabia. Some hardliners are [calling](#) for a ban on women appearing on television or in newspapers and magazines, as well as a ban on the playing of music and music shows on TV. On the other end of the spectrum, it was [reported](#) that a Saudi human rights group, the National Society for Human Rights, released a report critical of the kingdom's religious police, judiciary, and security agencies and calling for a change to laws that discriminate against women. One analyst discussed the [state of repression for Saudi Shiites](#). Citing a 2005 [report](#), it was explained that Shiites are underrepresented and marginalized at all levels of Saudi society.

Meanwhile, some see evidence that a "[quiet revolution](#)" is brewing in the region; one steeped in traditional values but with a goal of adapting to the 21st century. It was explained that "today's revolution is more vibrantly Islamic than ever. Yet it is also decidedly antijihadist and ambivalent about Islamist political parties."

**Apathy in Afghanistan:** If a constitutional crisis and debates over the actual date of Afghan elections weren't enough, it seems that a deeper problem may be whether people will turn out to cast their votes. Many have grown [indifferent and even hostile](#) toward the democratic process as the Taliban gains strength and the **Karzai** government becomes seen as corrupt and grossly ineffectual. Some asserted that this is an attitude that "should have the international community worried as it prepares to support what will surely be a complex and dangerous election process. For Afghanistan's presidential elections to be credible and their results accepted, all ethnic groups in every region of the country must feel included."

**Iran's "Reformists":** With June's presidential election fast approaching, Iran is poised to "change the region drastically, [for better or worse](#)." Some argued that if a reformist came to power it is very likely he may "shy away from any bold departures in foreign policy," as reformist are painfully aware of their past failures and the Ayatollah's watchful eye. One commentator [opined](#) that **Mohammad Khatami** is actually little different than current president **Mahmoud Ahmadinejad** when it comes to policy. Despite his rhetorical support for "tolerance" and "dialogue between civilizations," it was argued that Khatami took a hard line on support for terrorism, Iran's nuclear program, democracy, and Israel.

In other news, discussion continued surrounding the [death](#) of 25 year-old Iranian blogger, **Omid Reza Mirsayafi**, with much skepticism toward the Iranian government's official story that he committed suicide. Also, we previously [reported](#) on the pledge to release Iranian-American **Roxana Saberi**, being held at Evin Prison in Tehran, a promise that as of yet remains undelivered. Last week, her father [discussed](#) how she is now being told by officials that she may remain in custody for months or even years.

**Democracy Ebbing?** Democratic ideals were under attack in a number of Middle East states this past week. In Libya, where some argued there is [no sign of political or economic progress](#), ruler **Moammar Gadhafi** is using his [new position](#) as chairman of the African Union to tout Libyan-style "[direct democracy](#)" as a superior alternative to multi-party democracy and to [call](#) for ending term limits for Africa's

presidents. According to some analysts, the influx of Iranian goods in Iraq may [threaten its democracy](#), as the Iraqi commercial class is destroyed by the stifling of the market for Iraqi goods and the resulting rise in unemployment. In Tunisia, activists [called out President Zine El Abidine Ali](#) for his intimidating comments during his Independence Day address, in which he asserted that a critical press is no sign of freedom or democracy. In Morocco, the government is [cracking down on Shi'ites and gay activists](#), a move which seeks to link homosexuality and Shi'ism as dual attacks against the kingdom's conservative mores and Sunni Malekite beliefs.

**Pakistan's Message:** Some [pointed to Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry's](#) reinstatement as evidence that there's never a dull moment in Pakistani politics. The reinstatement, commonly viewed as a victory for democracy and the rule of law, may be a message that the popular revolt in Pakistan is inching towards victory. Analysts called for U.S. policy to focus on the desires of the Pakistani people and strengthening that state's institutions.

**Bashir Visits Egypt, Doha:** Sudan's president **Omar Hassan al-Bashir** continues to thumb his nose at the ICC, following up a trip to Eritrea with a [visit to Egypt](#). While **Mubarak** and Bashir are certainly not the closest of friends, some believe Cairo wishes the ICC indictment had not occurred, as [one expert pointed out](#), "the stability of Sudan is Egypt's primary security interest because it's the only place where the head waters of the Nile can be dammed. They hate Bashir, but they don't see any alternatives to him and they will do everything they can to avoid the destabilization of Sudan." Over the weekend, Bashir [arrived in Doha](#) for this week's Arab Summit, while it appears that Mubarak will bypass the Doha summit, signaling [persistent tensions](#) among the Arab states.

### *In Case You Missed It*

On Tuesday (3/24) the New America Foundation and **Steve Clemons**, the foundation's Director of American Strategies program, hosted **Juan Cole** to discuss his new book, *Engaging the Muslim World*. In his address Cole outlined some of the myths that dictate U.S. foreign policy in the Muslim world, from linking terrorism with Wahhabi Islam to the overblown hysteria over Iran's nuclear program. He explained how U.S. policies have largely been the product of misinformation and just plain misunderstanding of Islam and the political climate in the Middle East. For POMED's notes on this event [click here](#).

On Thursday (3/26) the Hudson Institute hosted a conference on U.S. engagement with Syria, and the afternoon session focused on Syria's pro-democracy opposition movement. The panelists were **Radwan Ziadeh**, founder and director of the Damascus Center for Human Rights Studies and a visiting scholar at Harvard's Carr Center for Human Rights, **Ahed Alhendi**, founder of the Syrian Youth for Justice movement, **Abdul Razak Eid**, cofounder of the Committees for Civil Societies in Syria who helped draft the "Damascus Declaration," and **Najib Ghadbian**, Associate Professor of Political Science and Middle East Studies at the University of Arkansas. For POMED's notes on the event, [click here](#).