



Greetings from the Project on Middle East Democracy!

Last Tuesday, a group of more than 160 leading policy experts, scholars and political activists submitted an [open letter](#) to President Obama stressing the importance of supporting democracy in the Middle East during his administration. Last week also saw the Senate finally pass the annual appropriations bill for Fiscal Year 2009, with the act being signed into law on Wednesday. In the region, all eyes were on Pakistan as widespread protests erupted across the country. This week, the House and Senate Budget Committees will hold hearings on President Obama's proposed budget for Fiscal Year 2010.

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 16, 2009

Legislation

On Monday (3/9), **Sen. Ron Wyden** (D-OR) introduced [S.Res.71](#), condemning the Government of Iran for its state-sponsored persecution of the Baha'i minority in Iran and its continued violation of the International Covenants on Human Rights. In addition to a general condemnation of Iranian persecution of its Baha'i minority, the bill calls for the release of all prisoners held in Iran on account of their religion, and identifies ten such prisoners by name. The bill was referred to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations.

On Tuesday (3/10), the Senate passed [H.R.1105](#), the **Omnibus Appropriations Act for Fiscal Year 2009**, without amendment in a Voice Vote. This passage followed the rejection of several amendments by the Senate and the withdrawal of additional amendments that had been offered. On Monday (3/9) the Senate voted [64-31](#) against **S.Amdt.630**, offered by **Senator Kyl** (R-AZ), which would have required the Secretary of State to submit a report to Congress on whether funds given to the government of Egypt in military assistance could be used to improve efforts to combat smuggling of weapons into Gaza. Additionally, on Tuesday, **S.Amdt.629**, also offered by **Sen. Kyl**, was withdrawn from consideration. This amendment would

have prohibited assistance to the Palestinian territories from being used to resettle Palestinian refugees in the United States, although it had been noted that the specified funds are not in fact designated for that purpose, with or without the amendment. The appropriations act was signed into law by **President Obama** on Wednesday, March 11.

On Thursday (3/12), **Rep. Jane Harman** (D-CA) introduced **H.R. 1463** [text not yet available], to restrict U.S. military assistance to Pakistan. The bill was referred to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs.

On Thursday (3/12), **Rep. Carolyn Maloney** (D-CA), introduced [H.Res.236](#), 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. It is an expanded version of [H.Res.220](#), offered by **Rep. Edward Royce** (R-CA) the week before. This newer version includes several references to the EU admission criteria on issues of human rights and religious freedom.

Committee Hearings

On Thursday (3/12), the **Subcommittee on International Monetary Policy and Trade Hearing of the House Financial Services Committee** held a hearing on [The Iran Sanctions Enabling Act of 2009](#), a piece of legislation ([H.R.1327](#)) recently introduced by **Rep. Barney Frank** (D-MA) aiming to authorize state and local governments to divest from companies heavily invested in Iran's energy sector. Four witnesses testified before the committee: [The Honorable Ted Deutch](#), Member of the Florida State Senate; [Trita Parsi](#), President, National Iranian-American Council, [Mr. Jason Isaacson](#), Director of Government and International Affairs, American Jewish Committee; and [Professor Orde F. Kittrie](#), Professor of Law, Sandra Day O'Connor College of Law, Arizona State University. **Rep. Gary C. Peters** (D-MI) presided over the hearing and gave an [opening statement](#).

In Washington

Urging Support for Middle East Democracy: Last week, a group of more than 160 leading policy experts and democracy activists submitted an [open letter](#) to President Obama stressing the importance of making support for democracy in the Middle East a priority of his administration. The letter, organized by a coordinating committee including POMED's Research Director **Shadi Hamid** and **Radwan Masmoudi** of the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy, was released at a press conference on Tuesday (see *In Case You Missed It* section below for more detail and notes on the press conference). The letter [elicited](#) a number of supportive [reactions](#), including a *Washington Post* [editorial](#) over the weekend that viewed the letter as evidence that "the Obama administration could find many allies for progressive change in the Middle East - if only it looks beyond the rulers' palaces."

Talking With the Taliban? As **President Obama** [considers dialogue](#) with the Taliban, there was much [debate](#) last week about the wisdom of such a policy. One analyst [wondered](#) if there actually are any moderates in the Taliban and cautioned that attempts to divide the group into "moderate" and "radical" factions could

ultimately backfire. **Vice President Biden** [seems to think](#) that outreach to the Taliban could be worthwhile but should be initiated by the Afghan government. Some [argued](#) that any deal sanctioned by the West should be done from a position of strength. Meanwhile, others [urged](#) the Obama administration to acknowledge Hezbollah and Hamas as legitimate political actors in the Middle East.

Dialogue with Iran: On engaging Iran, one commentator [discussed](#) the "two clocks" problem of the U.S. wanting a gradual, sustained dialogue while Iran's continuing uranium enrichment does now allow the luxury of time. Regardless of how fast negotiations commence, it was [argued](#) that "U.S. officials [must] change their language and behavior toward Iran" to gain the trust of Iranian negotiators. Some [praised](#) Obama's plan to pursue talks with Tehran, explaining "we disagree with the adage that familiarity breeds contempt, and would say instead that communication builds confidence. There's already enough contempt."

Clinton, Obama, and Turkey: On her recent trip to the region, **Secretary Clinton** [appeared](#) on a Turkish television show in an effort "to resurrect America's shabby image in Turkey, where, according to a 2007 public opinion survey, only nine percent of the population held favorable views of the US, down from 52 percent in 2002." Her outreach included [enthusiastic praise](#) for Turkey's "tremendous progress in freedom of speech and freedom of religion and human rights," contradicting her Department's [official human rights reports](#). On another front, it appears that **President Obama** has chosen [Turkey as the location](#) for his promised speech in the Muslim world. A few analysts outlined what type of [message he should deliver](#).

Engaging Syria: With many arguing that peace with Syria will increase pressure on Iran, others seem to think this is foolish. One analyst [wrote](#), "The notion that Iran would be 'isolated' even if Syria became Israel's best friend...is-to put it mildly-a fantasy difficult to fathom...Those who seek strategic leverage in the Middle East must look to Tehran." Another argued that [Syria has shown no sign](#) that it is willing to work with the U.S. and Israel. Meanwhile, one commentator [cautioned](#) against "pressing for peace over human rights" when engaging with Syria.

Democracy in the 21st Century - Growth or Retreat? There was some interesting reading last week regarding the debate over the long-term survival of democracy. One article [asserted](#) that "nationalism/political Islamism" poses the biggest threat to democracy. While another [argued](#) that the U.S. should focus its limited democracy assistance budget to newly formed democratic governments and skip aid to authoritarian countries altogether. A few commentators [stressed](#) that the notion that democracy is in permanent retreat is false, explaining that modernization is the key to creating the environment conducive to democratization. Others [focused](#) on the importance of *supporting* democracy rather than exporting it.

March Issue of Arab Reform Bulletin: Check out the [latest edition](#) of the Carnegie Endowment's *Arab Reform Bulletin*. The new issue includes an [interview](#) with **Karim Tabbou**, Secretary-General of the Socialist Forces Front in Algeria, and articles on the rise of [Salafism](#) in Egypt, the recent agreement to postpone parliamentary [elections](#) in Yemen, and the fortieth [anniversary](#) of the accession to power of Libya's **Muammar al-Qaddafi**.

Also Worth Reading

The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) released an [extensive report](#) Wednesday, entitled "Democracy in U.S. Security Strategy: From Promotion to Support," arguing for continued U.S. support for democracy abroad, based on a more a humble strategy. The report found that the spread and consolidation of democracy remains in the U.S.'s strategic interest, but argued for rhetoric of "supporting" rather than "promoting" democracy, since the latter has connotations of imposing our will. The experts Lennon interviewed also recommended that the U.S. should 1) set a good example on human rights, 2) acknowledge that our policies on democracy will vary across countries according to their needs and competing U.S. interests, 3) provide assistance for good governance initiatives proposed by recipient governments, and 4) use economic assistance to reduce poverty and corruption.

In the Middle East

Problems in Pakistan: Pakistan's [political woes](#) came to a head last week, with many embarking on a [Long March](#) to [protest the government](#). Some [pointed out](#) that "THIS is what democratic, nonviolent, resistance looks like...This is what we should expect in a society where the government and the people are out of step." Others [claimed](#) that despite all the hype over the Taliban's resurgence in FATA, what really "has the potential to tear the country apart" is this current crisis between the [Pakistan People's Party](#) and the [Muslim League](#). Some [urged President Obama](#) to "press Zardari to compromise on the dispute over Pakistan's courts and to allow Sharif to run for office...[and] ensure that any new aid to Pakistan strengthens [democratic institutions](#), not just whoever is president." Also, a [new report](#) argued that controlling Pakistan's intelligence agencies must be one key aspect of the broader democratization agenda.

Palestinian Prime Minister Resigns: Several commentators weighed in on the significance of the [resignation](#) of Palestinian **Prime Minister Salam Fayyad**. Some [opined](#) that the resignation was "a noble gesture for righteous goals - that of improving the chances of a possible unity government of Fatah and Hamas." While others [thought](#), "Fayyad submitted his resignation to build his political credentials and to demonstrate his indispensability ahead of [this week's Hamas-Fatah talks](#) ... his pre-emptive resignation would leave him in a stronger position come April."

Reformist Candidates in Iran? As we all know predicting the election outcome in Iran is next to impossible, but surely the [candidacies of three reformists](#) must mean something. **Mohammad Khatami**, **Mir-Hossein Mousavi**, and **Mehdi Karroubi** have all officially announced their bids for the presidency. **Mohammad Reza Aref** rejected reports that Khatami would step down in favor of Mousavi. However, "Aref did express hope...that the Reformist camp would reach a consensus on one single candidate to win a majority of the votes."

Human Rights in the Gulf: The recent [Saudi ruling](#) to sentence a 75 year-old woman to 40 lashes and 4 months in prison for mingling with two men that were not her relatives was addressed last week. Even though **King Abdullah** has made some

government reforms, many saw the decision to subject an elderly woman to such punishment because two young men were delivering her bread as [demonstrating](#) how much progress is still needed on reform in the Kingdom. Meanwhile, ahead of a hearing before the UN Human Rights Council next week, the UAE [has adopted](#) 36 out of 74 human rights recommendations made through the UN. And an article [highlighted](#) the rise of investigative journalism in Yemen, particularly female journalists.

Iraq's Future: Some [argued](#) that Iraq is stable enough for the US to leave, explaining that the troop surge helped but the main reason's for Iraq's current stability can be found in domestic and regional factors. And one commentator [offered an analysis](#) of Iraqi Prime Minister **Sadiq al-Rikabi**'s recent [remarks](#) that a referendum on the Status of Forces Agreement is unnecessary.

Also Worth Reading

Freedom House released its [Worst of the Worst](#) report, a survey of the most repressive societies as outlined in the *Freedom in the World 2009* report. Of the 17 countries and 4 territories profiled in *Worst of the Worst*, 4 reside in the Middle East: Libya, Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Western Sahara.

In Case You Missed It

On Tuesday (3/10), **Radwan Masmoudi, Saad Eddin Ibrahim, Michele Dunne, Geneive Abdo,** and **Larry Diamond** gathered at the National Press Club to formally issue a [letter](#) urging **President Obama** to adopt a consistent and credible policy that supports democracy in the Muslim world. The letter, which contains over 140 signatures from experts both in the U.S. and abroad, states that for decades the United States has "supported repressive regimes that routinely violate human rights, and that torture and imprison those who dare to criticize them." It is finally time for U.S. policy to fully reflect America's ideals of freedom and democracy.

The letter demonstrates strong bi-partisan support for a renewed commitment to supporting democratic reform and the political inclusion of Islamist parties. Among the signatories were those mentioned above and scholars and advocates such as **Francis Fukuyama, Morton Halperin, Anwar Ibrahim, Jennifer Windsor, Peter Beinart, John Esposito, Robert Kagan,** and **Shadi Hamid.** For POMED's notes on the press conference [click here](#).