



Greetings from the Project on Middle East Democracy!

While Congress was away last week for the weeklong President's Day recess, it was a week full of activity in the Middle East. In Egypt, Ayman Nour was unexpectedly released following three years in prison. In Saudi Arabia, King Abdullah made a number of changes to his cabinet, including the first appointment of a woman to a Cabinet-level position, with other progress reported on women's rights across the region. This week, look for the 111th Congress to begin its regular activity for the year, after a month dominated by the economic stimulus package. Tomorrow, President Obama will give a major address to a joint session of Congress, and the House is expected to begin work on an omnibus appropriations bill later this week.

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 23, 2009

Legislation

No legislation last week as Congress was away for the President's Day recess.

Congressional Hearings

No Congressional hearings last week due to the recess.

In Washington

Advice for Obama on Afghanistan and Pakistan : The [discussion](#) continued last week on the stance **President Obama** should take regarding Afghanistan and Pakistan, especially in light of the [recent deal struck](#) between militant factions in the [Swat Valley](#) and the Pakistani government. Some [highlighted](#) the challenges

President Obama will face in Afghanistan, and agreed that Pakistan's role may be the most critical.

Members of Congress Visit the Middle East: Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman **John Kerry** (D-MA) [recently visited](#) the Gaza Strip, on the heels of two other members of Congress. [Congressman Brian Baird](#) (D-WA) and Congressman **Keith Ellison** (D-WA) also [visited the war-torn region](#) on Thursday. Meanwhile, House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman **Howard Berman** (D-CA) recently [visited Syria](#).

Obama Administration Continues to Take Shape: With **President Obama** giving his first interview as President to Al-Arabiya, and **Secretary Clinton** [vowing](#) to reach out to the Islamic world, many people have been [speculating](#) who will be named undersecretary of Public Diplomacy and how this position [should operate](#). Some analysts [offered](#) recruiting a journalist as **President Kennedy** did with **Edward R. Murrow**.

One [article](#) noted the concerns of prominent democracy and human rights advocates regarding the Obama administration's foreign policy priorities. But there were also [reports](#) that Secretary of State **Hillary Clinton** is "likely to [elevate the oft-neglected posts](#)" of undersecretary for Democracy and Global Affairs and undersecretary for Economic Affairs. But meanwhile,

Iran and the Bomb: While the focus of U.S. policy has been on preventing Iran from producing a nuclear weapon, how would the Obama administration act if they do succeed? A [new U.N. report](#) says Iran has built up enough enriched uranium for one nuclear bomb. The most likely outcome, given the [previous public views](#) of those who now make up the Obama administration's Iran team, would be a policy of "containment and punishment."

President Obama's election may herald a [new trajectory of U.S.-Islamic relations](#). While this new path being cleared by the Obama administration is a positive step, at the heart of the new president's Middle East policy will be his willingness to address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in a fair and just manner. Some [compare](#) the euphoria of Obama's election to the feeling in Egypt after **Anwar Sadat** had agreed to peace with Israel. To seize this feeling that peace is again possible, [some argue](#) President Obama should make Cairo his stop.

Also Worth Reading

The Century Foundation released [a new report](#) by **Brian Katulis**, addressing on the failures of the Bush Administration's Freedom Agenda and recommendations for reforming the approach to democracy in the region. It was argued that pursuing democracy promotion with "an overemphasis on military means...sent a message that was counterproductive." From de-linking democracy promotion from the suppression of terror to working with moderate Islamists, a number of recommendations for correcting this policy were offered. The full PDF of the report can be found [here](#).

In the Middle East

Ayman Nour's Release: Last week, Egypt's [well-known opposition leader Ayman Nour](#) was [unexpectedly released](#) after spending three years in jail following his unsuccessful presidential bid in 2005. He was convicted on December 24, 2005 for allegedly forging signatures on petitions to [register his Al-Ghad party](#) in 2004 - the charge has widely been regarded as politically motivated; an attempt by **Hosni Mubarak** to eliminate potential opposition. Some [wondered](#) if his release was a [gesture](#) to the Obama administration. Others [noted](#) its timing, pointing out that Nour will now be barred from running for public office and that a main result of his release may be [an easing of outside pressure](#) for democratic reform. A number of observers had [called for](#) President Obama to demand Nour's release before the upcoming visit by President Mubarak to Washington. Many [cautioned](#) that civil liberties still have a long way to go in Egypt.

Ministerial Reshuffling in Saudi Arabia: Last Saturday **King Abdullah** of Saudi Arabia [made history](#) when he appointed the first woman, **Nora al-Fayez**, to the cabinet as head of education for girls. The king also [made](#) legal reforms and ousted [several members](#) of the cabinet thought to be considered religious hardliners. Some were [cautiously optimistic](#) with the [shakeup](#), "If there is any truth in the adage 'personnel is policy,' this may be the first real sign that the King, who ascended to the throne in 2005, intends to live up to his long-term but, until now, overblown reputation as a reformer." Others [reminded us](#) that Abdullah must balance consensus between the various factions of the al-Saud family and the Wahhabi clerical establishment. It was argued that the monarchy must enlist the support of progressive Islamists, "the most potent source of ideas for renewal."

Human Rights for Women and Others: The appointment of the first woman cabinet member in Saudi Arabia is not the only sign of progress for [women's rights advocates](#) in the Middle East. Throughout the region women [seem to be making](#) incremental [advances](#). A new Freedom House [report](#) described a "seismic shift" in women rights in the Gulf region, with many important steps have been taken, but acknowledging that significant [challenges still remain](#). Also, in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood [removed a ban](#) on Copts and women becoming president from their draft party platform.

Others [recognized](#) progress in developing a "knowledge society" through increased access to education, more scientific publications, and a boom in high-tech exports. As for religious rights, the UN Human Rights Council was [urged](#) to refrain from passing further "defamation of religions" resolutions. While perhaps well-intentioned, they have helped legitimize government repression of [religious minorities](#), political dissidents, and human rights advocates. Meanwhile, acclaimed author **Margaret Atwood** has [decided to boycott](#) the inaugural International Festival of Literature in Dubai over the censorship of **Geraldine Bedell's** *The Gulf Between Us*.

Hope for Reform Amid Religious Persecution in Iran: There was continuing [hope and speculation](#) that if **Mohammad Khatami** can win the presidential election in Iran, it will open the door for both a drastic change in U.S.-Iranian relations, as well as reform within Iran. However, reform may not come soon enough for some, as [seven Baha'i Iranians](#) are being tried on the dubious charges of "spying for Israel" and "insulting religious sanctities and propaganda against the Islamic Republic."

Some [argued](#) that this trial is very much a test from the Iranian government and that, "nothing will telegraph to Tehran Washington's impotence than if the White House remains silent while Iranian authorities target and perhaps execute religious minorities."

Israel's Elections and Prospects for Peace: As it appears **Benjamin Netanyahu will lead** the new Israeli government, one editorial [asserted](#) the need for the peace process to continue. Also last week, CFR.org [interviewed](#) Ambassador **Daniel Kurtzer** on the Israeli election and its effects on the peace process. Kurtzer argued that divisions among the Israeli electorate may create "paralysis in the political process" which could lead to a "hiatus" in peacemaking.

Work to be Done in Iraq: With [reports](#) of alarming levels of corruption in Iraq and with increasing levels of [unemployment](#), many [warned](#) that much work remains to be done. Meanwhile, one commentator [addressed](#) the consequences of Iraq's central government on the country's Kurdish population. Another [argued](#) that Iraq's recent elections have ushered in a new era of nationalism that may spell trouble for U.S. relations with that country. Also, an interesting [new report](#) was released entitled, "Iraq, its Neighbors, and the Obama Administration: Syrian and Saudi Perspectives."

Troubles in Lebanon? While activity along the Israeli-Lebanese border has been extremely calm since the 2006 war, one analyst [foreshadowed](#) that hostilities between Lebanon and Israel have the potential to flare up. And a new [study](#) addresses the dangerous implications of Lebanon's policy toward its Palestinian refugees.

Engaging Syria: In a [rare newspaper interview](#), Syrian **President Bashar al-Assad** voiced his hopes of a new relationship with the U.S. which could include the return of a U.S. ambassador to Syria, as well as a meeting with **General Petraeus**. However, one analyst offered a [sobering perspective](#), reminding us that "in the Middle East talking is often a substitute for action" and if Syria is truly serious about engaging with the U.S. and Israel it will need to make considerable trade-offs.

The AKP, Moderation, and Turkey's Foreign Policy: Some commentators [called on](#) Turkish Prime Minister **Recep Tayyip Erdogan** to improve relations with Israel and work towards normalization of relations with Armenia and Cyprus. Others were less optimistic, claiming that the AKP's previous calls for moderation were [nothing more than rhetoric](#). While Erdogan's recent actions may help him at the ballot box, they threaten Turkey's relations with its most powerful Western allies.

Also Worth Reading

The Carnegie Endowment published a [report](#) concluding that a recent resurgence of Kurdish nationalism has the potential to ignite violence and instability in Iraq and the surrounding region. Some recommendations include continued support for the federal system of governance outlined in Iraq's constitution, solidifying dialogue between Turkey and the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq, and partnering with European allies to resolve Turkey's internal Kurdish dispute. The full PDF of the report can be found [here](#).

In Case You Missed It

On Tuesday (2/17), **Anita M. Weiss**, professor in the Department of International Studies at the University of Oregon and author of several books including *Walls Within Walls: Life Histories of Working Women in the Old City of Lahore* recently returned from Pakistan and spoke at the Middle East Institute. Her talk was particularly timely given the news of Swat adopting Sharia law. She explained that Pakistan over the past several years has been transformed and now consists of numerous contradicting strands. [Click here](#) for POMED's notes on the discussion.

Also on Tuesday, the Georgetown Lecture Fund, the Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, and the Georgetown Israel Alliance hosted a discussion with **Daniel Kurtzer**, former U.S. Ambassador to Israel and Egypt. Ambassador Kurtzer focused on the motivations and implications that stem from the recent Gaza conflict. While many analysts debate that this war, along with Israel's elections last week, do not bode well for the peace process or a two-state solution, Kurtzer cautioned that it's too soon to tell. For POMED's notes on this event [click here](#).

And on Tuesday, The Center for Contemporary Arab Studies at Georgetown hosted a lecture with **Dr. Rashid Khalidi**. Khalidi discussed two universes for viewing the Israeli occupation - one which focuses solely on American and Israeli perceptions, and another which sees the conflict through the principles of international law. His message was consistent throughout the lecture: a just solution can only be achieved by returning to the rule of law and ending double standards. For POMED's notes on this event [click here](#).

On Wednesday (2/18), the Millennium Challenge Corporation and Oxfam America held a panel discussion on the concept behind country ownership (country-led development) and its impact on foreign assistance. Participants included **Rodney Bent**, acting CEO of MCC; **John Ambler**, Oxfam Senior Vice President for Programs; **Alicia Phillips Mandaville**, MCC Associate Director for Development Policy; **Sean Mulvaney**, German Marshall Fund Transatlantic Fellow; and **H.E. Ombeni Sefue**, Tanzanian Ambassador to the U.S. For POMED's notes on this event [click here](#).

On Thursday (2/19), the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings hosted a discussion on the results of Israel's February 10th elections and its implications for Middle East peace and U.S.-Israeli relations. As some grow nervous over Israel's apparent shift toward the right, it was cautioned that it's still too soon to make authoritative assumptions and in building a coalition, **Netanyahu** will most likely bring in moderate forces to balance the more extreme elements. The discussion was moderated by **Tamara Coffman Wittes**, Senior Fellow and Director of the Middle East Democracy and Development Project at the Saban Center; and included **Martin Indyk**, Senior Fellow and Director of the Saban Center; with **Stanley Greenberg**, Chairman and CEO of Greenberg Quinlan Rosner. For POMED's notes [click here](#).

Also on Thursday (2/19), the Center for Contemporary Arab Studies at Georgetown University hosted post-doc fellow **Dr. Katja Niethammer** to address political reform and religious confessional identity in Bahrain. She focused on efforts by Shiite parties in Bahrain push for political reform and an increase of power to the parliament, noting that the ruling elite currently have most of the powers consolidated. She also outlined a variety of small reforms that have taken place over the past ten years,

including the legalization of opposition parties. [Click here](#) for POMED's notes on the discussion.

On Friday (2/20), the Heritage Foundation held a panel discussion focused on defining and achieving objectives in Afghanistan. Panelists included **Seth Jones**, political scientist at RAND and an adjunct professor at Georgetown; **Ashley Tellis**, Senior Associate in the South Asia Program at the Carnegie Endowment; **Lisa Curtis**, Senior Research Fellow in the Asian Studies Center at Heritage; and was moderated by **James Phillips**, Senior Research Fellow for Middle Eastern Affairs at Heritage. All agreed that a long-term commitment focused in strengthening democracy is the best method for ensuring lasting stability. For POMED's notes [click here](#).

Also on Friday, The Center for Global Development hosted **Anne Peters**, a PhD candidate at the University of Virginia, to present an abstract of her dissertation, entitled "Special Relationships, Dollars, and Development: U.S. Foreign Aid and State-Building in Egypt, Jordan, South Korea, and Taiwan." Peters focused on the internal political differences between the Arab examples and the Asian ones, arguing that these pre-existing differences account for U.S. assistance generating development in Asia but merely distribution to patronage networks in the Arab world. [Click here](#) for POMED's notes on the presentation.