



Greetings from the Project on Middle East Democracy!

Last week **President Obama** made an effort to engage directly with the people of Iran in a statement on the occasion of *Nowruz*, the Iranian New Year. And **Omar Suleiman**, Chief of the Egyptian General Intelligence Services, visited Washington to meet with policymakers on behalf of the Egyptian government. Meanwhile, **Mohammad Khatami** withdrew his candidacy from the Iranian Presidential elections slated for June, while the Kuwaiti Emir once again suspended Kuwait's Parliament, viewed by the monarchy as obstructing economic measures necessary to confront the global economic crisis.

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 23, 2009

Legislation

On Wednesday (3/18), [H.Res.262](#), sponsored by **Rep. Carolyn Maloney** (D-NY), a bill which would express the concern of the House of Representatives about the actions of the Taliban in Swat, Pakistan, to restrict girls' access to education, was referred to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs. The bill urges the Government of Pakistan to take appropriate measures to halt the restriction of access to education for girls being orchestrated by the Taliban and calls on the Secretary of State to address the matter and report to Congress about progress to enforce the right to education.

On Thursday (3/19), [H.Res.267](#), sponsored by **Rep. Mike Honda** (D-CA), a bill which recognizes the importance of Nowruz, expresses appreciation to Iranian Americans, and wishes the Iranian people a prosperous new year, was referred to the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform.

Congressional Hearings

On Wednesday (3/18) the House Committee on Foreign Affairs held a hearing titled "Striking the Appropriate Balance: The Defense Department's Expanding Role in Foreign Assistance". The hearing, led by [Chairman Berman](#) (D-CA) focused on whether the Department of Defense (DoD) should be heavily involved in long-term humanitarian and development aid in post-conflict or peacetime. Ranking member **Ileana Ros-Lehtinen** (R-FL) stressed that the military must engage in some humanitarian aid in conflicts to win the support of the local population, but should not be involved in long-term development activities. Likewise, **Rep. Christopher Smith** (R-NJ) claimed that the military is effective at providing immediate comfort to local citizens after conflict or natural disasters; however, NGOs are better at sustaining aid efforts.

Witnesses included [General Michael W. Hagee](#), former commandant of the US Marine Corps, [Nancy Lindborg](#), President of Mercy Corps, [Philip L. Christenson](#), former assistant administrator of USAID, and [Reuben Brigety](#), Director of the Sustainable Security Program at the Center for American Progress Action Fund. Participants agreed that while DoD should play an immediate role in providing services they should not provide long term development. Consensus also emerged for more funding and flexibility for USAID. For POMED's notes on the hearing, [click here](#), or [here](#) to watch a full webcast of the hearing.

In Washington

Talking to the Enemy: Last week, one analyst [argued](#) that the U.S. must not only talk to its enemies but also give up its "colonial" carrot-and-stick strategy. Another [urged](#) Obama to follow up his rhetorical outreach to the Islamic world with substantive diplomatic engagement which would include groups like Hamas and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. But are our enemies ready to speak with us? In an [interview](#) with **Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Fadlallah**, widely considered the spiritual head of Hezbollah though not formally part of the organization, he voiced his support for democracy and engagement with the West. Others expressed the [opinion](#) that both Hamas and Hezbollah might be prepared to accept a long-term truce with Israel, though they are not yet ready to formally recognize the Jewish state.

Some raised questions about this new enthusiasm for diplomacy, [noting](#) that embracing groups which prescribe to a "Shariah agenda" is a dangerous policy. Others focused on the possible [motivations](#) behind western engagement, expressing the Iranian belief that Obama's purpose in re-opening relations with their country is to develop "internal opposition" to the regime in Tehran. **Meanwhile, a few showed concern** that the U.S. will sell out Lebanon's fragile democracy in negotiations with Syria and Iran.

Happy Nowruz! While the debate about engaging states like Iran continued, **President Obama** took a step closer towards direct negotiation. Obama recorded a [Nowruz message](#) to the Iranian people in which he spoke of "shared hopes and common dreams." He also spoke directly to the Iranian leadership calling for direct negotiations: "This process will not be advanced by threats. We seek instead engagement that is honest and grounded in mutual respect." Analysts were [enthusiastic](#) about the message and its potential for provoking [good will](#) amongst the Iranian people. Others [outlined](#) just how dynamic the statement was, as it essentially expanded the conversation outside of Iran's nuclear program for the first

time and remove any notion of regime change. [According to some](#), the most interested listener may have been Israeli officials, as a new relationship with Iran could directly impact the U.S.-Israel relationship.

What to Do about Afghanistan? The Obama administration is in the midst of [reviewing](#) U.S. [strategy in Afghanistan](#) with a [variety](#) of options [on the table](#) from "scaling back the U.S. mission to focus on counterterrorism and the training of Afghan forces" to a "civilian surge" of officials from agencies throughout the government. **Senators John McCain** and **Joe Lieberman** [urged the president](#) not to adopt a "narrow, short-term focus on counterterrorism," but instead to increase resources for U.S. efforts aimed at "[protecting the population](#), nurturing legitimate and effective governance, and fostering development," while maintaining the U.S. military commitment.

Supporting Reformers in the Muslim World: We recently [highlighted a letter](#), signed by more than 160 experts and activists, calling on **President Obama** to strengthen U.S. commitment to democracy in the Muslim world. Since its release, the letter has sparked "[energetic and informative debate](#)" in a [variety](#) of [venues](#). Also, last week, some argued in favor of increased [country-led development in foreign assistance](#). They argue that allowing aid recipients to dictate the ways in which assistance is appropriated "lets recipients themselves champion home-grown solutions to their needs and hold their governments accountable for the results."

Democracy, Human Rights, and U.S. Credibility: According to some commentators U.S. policies toward the various governments of the region contribute greatly to the perceived [credibility gap](#) of the U.S. One analyst [argued](#) that U.S. and the E.U. policy toward Israeli settlements in the West Bank contradicts the West's promotion of democracy and the rule of law. There was also speculation about Egyptian intelligence chief **Omar Suleiman's** visit to Washington last week. Some [claimed](#) his goal was to loosen the U.S.'s demand that Hamas recognize quartet principles, however, officials who met with him claim he was simply lobbying for more U.S. involvement in Palestinian unity government talks.

Democratiya 16: The Spring/Summer 2009 double issue of the journal *Democratiya* is now [available](#), containing a number of articles on democracy promotion and Middle East politics. Two articles examined the democracy promotion "impasse." Within a broad discussion of the challenges facing U.S. policy, one analyst stressed that Obama [cannot avoid the choice](#) between supporting authoritarian rulers and democratic activists. While another discussed how private citizens and NGOs [can promote democracy](#).

Also Worth Reading

The Century Foundation has released a new report by **Nicholas Noe** entitled "[Re-Imagining the Lebanon Track: Toward a New U.S. Policy](#)." It outlines a strategy that continues "to view Hizbullah's independent weaponry as the primary threat to U.S. interests in the country, but also would seek to broadly undermine the party's rationale (and therefore ability) for holding onto these weapons."

Noe outlines four major components of this policy strategy, recommending that the U.S. commit itself to: 1) removing the "bleeding wounds" that are potential

flashpoints for short-term violent conflict, 2) strengthening the Lebanese Armed Forces, 3) mitigating long-term threats to Lebanon, and 4) supporting political reform and the gradual deconfessionalization of the Lebanese political system. The full 95-page report is [now available](#) to view or download as a pdf. Also, be sure to take a look at an [interesting debate](#) that Noe has [engaged in](#) online in reaction to his paper.

In the Middle East

Khatami Withdraws: On Monday, **Mohammad Khatami** [withdrew](#) from Iran's presidential election and is now backing the candidacy of former Prime Minister **Mir Hossein Mousavi**. Some have posited Khatami's withdrawal "may boost **President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad**'s re-election chances," while others think the move will [help](#) unite the reformist vote. Meanwhile, some commentators called on President Obama to [press for human rights](#) when engaging with Iran, arguing that it "would bring integrity to any talks and prevent Tehran from using negotiations to obfuscate and avoid real change, including on nuclear activity."

Kuwait Dissolves Parliament...Again: For the second time in less than a year, Kuwaiti Emir **Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah** [dissolved the parliament](#) and was expected to appoint his brother as the new prime minister. The move came amidst a feud over a five billion dollar economic stimulus package which is supposed to help investment bankers gain access to loans. The parliament [had accused](#) the current prime minister of incompetence and had pushed to question him; as a result the government resigned. Some pointed out that unlike Iraq and Palestine, the Kuwaiti democratic experiment has [received little attention from US policymakers](#).

Limiting Free Speech: Egypt began [pushing for a resolution](#) among the delegations currently serving on the UN Human Rights Council that calls for "further limitations on speech that could be construed as defaming religions." One analyst [warned](#) that "this is moving down the road of incorporating anti-blasphemy laws into freedom of expression protection and international law." And Tunisia, long known to take care of [how it is portrayed abroad](#), was reportedly successful in pushing Beirut to [refuse a visa](#) request from a Tunisian dissident living in France. **Moncef Marzouki** was slated to speak about Arab democracy at the Orient Institute in Lebanon.

Sectarianism and Arab Politics: Emerging political alliances in Iraq are viewed by some as signaling the waning importance of sectarian identity in forming political alliances. Prime Minister **Nouri Al-Maliki** has [broached an alliance](#) with **Saleh al-Mutlak**, a secular Sunni and leader of the Iraqi National Dialogue Front. Meanwhile, an [editorial](#) examines three options for electoral reforms in the context of rising sectarian tensions in Lebanon, while another [looks at the effects](#) of the recent UK decision to re-engage with Hizbullah.

Victory for Bahais in Egypt? Last week it was [reported](#) that "[a]fter years of legal hurdles, Egypt's High Administrative Court upheld a verdict granting the minority Bahai community the right to be themselves, at least when it comes to official documents." Up until recently Bahais had been forced to declare Islam, Christianity, or Judaism in order to receive identification documents in Egypt. It was noted, "[p]reviously, several verdicts had been handed down in favor of Bahais, however, they were not implemented, which leaves many Bahais cautiously optimistic about

today's ruling."

Evolving Situation in Pakistan: After considerable drama, **Iftikhar Chaudhry** was [reinstated last week](#) as chief justice of Pakistan's supreme court. As a result, **Nawaz Sharif** [called off the "Long March"](#) which was aimed to rally for Chaudhry's reinstatement. Some analysts [argued](#) that this was a victory more for Sharif than the [people](#) of Pakistan. It was explained that because **Zardari** restored Chaudhry's position as a concession to Sharif he is now in a [weaker position](#). While some [expressed relief](#), saying "the Pakistani state has taken a significant step toward becoming more responsive to its people," others [argued](#) that Pakistan is at risk of becoming a "nuclear-armed Afghanistan."

Also Worth Reading

The Democracy Coalition Project (DCP) published its [annual scorecard on human rights](#), providing an analysis of countries' positions on six relevant U.N. General Assembly resolutions. To conduct the analysis, the DCP sets a "preferred position" and then gauges whether the state has moved toward the preferred position, symbolizing improvement, or away from the preferred position, symbolizing regression. The DCP finds a divide between the majority of OIC governments and Western countries, particularly on the issues of "combating defamation of religions." The full report can be accessed [here](#), with the detailed scorecard at the end.

In Case You Missed It

On Tuesday (3/17) POMED and the Woodrow Wilson Center hosted a panel discussion on the relationship between democratization and conflict, asking whether democratization is likely to be a force for stability or unrest in the Middle East. In light of the ongoing problems in Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, and the Palestinian territories, the event asked: What lessons have we learned? Panelists included **Thomas Carothers**, Vice President for Studies at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, **Audra Grant**, a political scientist at the RAND Corporation, **Karin von Hippel**, Co-director of the Post-Conflict Reconstruction Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, and **Amjad Atallah**, Co-director of the New America Foundation's Middle East Task Force. For POMED's notes on the discussion [click here](#).

On Wednesday (3/18) the New America Foundation and *Democracy Journal* hosted a panel discussion focused on an article in the latest edition of the journal by Georgetown professor **Charles Kupchan** and Georgetown graduate student **Adam Mount**: "The Autonomy Rule: An Alternative to Democratization and Liberal Internationalism." The article essentially argued that democracy promotion should not be an objective of U.S. foreign policy. For POMED's notes on the event [click here](#).

Also on Wednesday, the Middle East Institute hosted **Ahmed Herzenni**, President of the Advisory Council on Human Rights (CCDH) in Morocco to discuss the efforts of CCDH to expand and protect human rights in Morocco. Much of his lecture focused on problems within Morocco's system of education and how best to address them. To read POMED's full notes on this event [click here](#).