

Arab Reform Bulletin: May 2005

Arab Reform Bulletin

نشرة الإصلاح العربي

Published by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
Translated by Dar Al-Watan for Journalism, Printing and Publishing.

May 2005, Volume 3, Issue 4

[Michele Dunne](#), Editor

[Julia Choucair](#), Assistant Editor

To view this issue as a PDF, click [here](#).

The Arabic edition of this issue of the *Arab Reform Bulletin* will be available by May 25 at <http://www.alwatan.com.kw/arb>.

Subscriber Information

Click [here](#) to receive the *Arab Reform Bulletin* via e-mail every month or to unsubscribe.

To subscribe to the Arabic edition of the *Bulletin*, click [here](#).

Click [here](#) to read past issues of the *Bulletin*.

We welcome your comments or suggestions. Please e-mail the editor at arb@CarnegieEndowment.org.

Note from the Editor:

This issue of the *Arab Reform Bulletin* features a special focus on the role of Shiites in political life in Arab countries. Authors explore the background and implications of increased political activism by Shiite citizens of Lebanon and Iraq, and our "News and Views" and "Read On" sections begin with overviews of recent developments and publications regarding Shiite communities. In addition, we bring you analysis and updates about important happenings in Palestine, Jordan, Egypt, and throughout the region.

—Michele Dunne

[Insights and Analysis](#)

[Shiite Politicization in the Middle East](#)

Rodger Shanahan

[Lebanon: Shiites Express Political Identity](#)

Amal Saad-Ghorayeb

[Iraq: Political Trends among Shiites](#)

Abbas Kadhim

[Palestine: Intense Wrangling Precedes Elections](#)

Nathan Brown

[Jordan: Democracy at a Dead End](#)

Shadi Hamid

[News and Views](#)

[Shiites in the Arab World](#)

[Egypt: Constitution Amended, Demands for Reform Spread](#)

[Iraq: New Cabinet and Constitutional Committee](#)

[Palestine: Municipal Elections Ongoing](#)

[Lebanon: Legislative Elections](#)

[Saudi Arabia: Municipal Elections End](#)

[Kuwait: Women's Vote on Hold](#)

[Bahrain: Legal Reform](#)

[Qatar: New Associations Law](#)

[Tunisia: Human Rights Developments](#)

[Algeria: Amnesty for Human Rights Abuses](#)

[Upcoming Political Events](#)

[Views from the Arab Media](#)

[Read On](#)

Recent publications on Shiite political movements, the "Arab Spring," Arab reform initiatives, a Euro-Mediterranean work plan, and building a viable Palestinian state.

[Subscriber Information](#)

Insights and Analysis

Shiite Politicization in the Middle East

Rodger Shanahan

Not since the Iranian revolution has the issue of Shiite political development been of such interest to observers of Middle Eastern politics. The success of Shiite candidates in the recent Iraqi elections, the prominent role played by Hizbollah in mobilizing its support base in Lebanon for pro-Syrian rallies, and the success of Shiite candidates in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province during that country's municipal elections have created the impression that there is a new expression of Shiite political identity underway within the region. With the United States' push for democratization in the region, the conditions may be present to alter the Shiites' historically inferior socioeconomic status through political action.

Before hastening to conclude that the recent electoral success of Shiite political parties in Iraq presages a surge in Shiite political activism in the region, observers should look at Shiite political activism in its local context. The diversity of Shiite political interests at play is perhaps best illustrated in Lebanon. Here, the pro-Iranian Hizbollah represents some, though by no means all, of the Shiite population. Hizbollah's communal rival Amal was founded by religious scholar Musa Sadr, but is now headed by non-cleric Nabih Berri and looks towards Syria, rather than Iran, for support. The leading Lebanese Shiite cleric, Ayatollah Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, is capable of exercising political leadership given the size of his following, but he maintains his independence from both Shiite political parties in his country, as well as from the Iranian leadership. The Shiites also maintain a strong presence in the Lebanese Communist Party.

There is an unstated fear of Shiite politicization among Western policy analysts that is, in large part, based on the outcome of the Iranian revolution and a belief that Shiite politicization is always directed by clerics—and hence automatically anti-American. Such a view ignores the fact that Iranian-style theocratic rule is attractive to only a small percentage of Shiite political groups. Iraqi Prime Minister Ibrahim Jaafari, for instance, moved his elements of the Dawa Party away from Iran to avoid becoming too closely beholden to Iranian views of political leadership. Just as American fears that the Soviet Union was behind all socialist political movements during the Cold War blinded the United States to the real sense of political and economic injustice that spawned many such parties, policy analysts need to look critically at the circumstances that the Shiites find themselves in within each country before they assume that all Shiite political roads lead to Tehran.

All of this is not to deny there is a Shiite ideological construct that is extraterritorial in nature, or that Iran actively influences some Shiite political parties. In Iraq for instance, Iran's historic and educational links with its co-religionists in the south of the country provide a firm basis for cross-border influence-peddling. At the same time, the late Ayatollah Khomeini's notion of *wilayat al faqih* (governorship of the jurist) provides an ideological bridge that links the Iranian leadership to other Shiites in the region. Lebanon's Hizbollah and Iraq's Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) are two examples in which ultimate authority on issues of political ideology (as opposed to concrete policies) rests with Iran. As Hizbollah has found in multireligious Lebanon, however, the conditions that allowed the concept of *wilayat al faqih* to be implemented in Iran do not exist in Lebanon. Hence clerical political leadership for them remains a distant goal, rather than one that is achievable in the short or medium term.

Democratization offers the Shiites a way of overcoming their political disenfranchisement through the use of their demographic strength. The Iraqi election gave the estimated 60 percent of the population who are Shiites the ability to achieve the strong political voice denied them in the past. In Lebanon, both Shiite parties advocate changes to the electoral law that allocates to Shiites far fewer parliamentary seats than their numbers would justify. While the Shiites' attempts to alter the political status quo throughout the region go back over 40 years—from the attraction of leftist parties to the intellectual activity of Najafi scholars in the 1950s and 1960s—what is different now is that there is a more permissive international environment for transforming demographic strength into political power. That does not mean that countries will become clones of Iran if the Shiites attain political power; it will be local conditions and local leaders who determine the political direction of the Shiites.

Dr. Rodger Shanahan is a visiting research fellow at the Research Institute for Asia and the Pacific, University of Sydney. His book The Shi'a of Lebanon: Clans, Parties and Clerics will be published by IB Tauris in August 2005.

[Return to table of contents.](#) [Printer-friendly version.](#)

Lebanon: Shiites Express Political Identity

Amal Saad-Ghorayeb

Despite its reactive origins, the recent mobilization of the Shiite community in Lebanon does not seem to be an ephemeral episode, but rather a new chapter in an ongoing epic of communal consciousness and activism with far-reaching political implications. The political climate following the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri engendered an unprecedented display of political unity within the community. The vociferous calls of the Sunni-Druze-Christian opposition for a Syrian troop withdrawal and political disengagement from Lebanon were met by a groundswell of popular support manifested visibly in the ensuing "Independence Uprising" demonstrations. As the movement gained momentum both domestically and internationally, the Shiites repositioned themselves from an initial stance of reticent neutrality to one of vocal participation, effectively transforming the Shiite community into an opposition to the opposition.

By Hizbollah's account, the secular opposition's self-appointment as the mouthpiece for all Lebanese and its portrayal in the local and Western media as representing the entire nation provoked alienated Shiites and precipitated their mass mobilization. As Hizbollah's Deputy Secretary-General Sheikh Naim Qassem explained, "we found that we had to say 'no, there is another view in Lebanon which rejects [UN Resolution] 1559 and internationalization.'" It is important to note that the Shiites' rejection of Resolution 1559 did not stem from their aversion to the clause calling for a Syrian withdrawal from

Lebanon, but rather the stipulation that all Lebanese (and non-Lebanese) militias be disbanded. As such, the main impetus behind the massive Hizbollah-organized demonstration on March 8, 2005 was the defense of Hizbollah's role as a resistance movement against Israel, a role Syria had safeguarded and enshrined in the Taif Accord of 1989. Support for Syria was therefore synonymous with support for the resistance. A recent poll by Zogby International reveals that 90 percent of all demonstrators claimed their motive for joining the demonstration was "support for Hizbollah." The survey also reported that the large majority of protestors denounced Resolution 1559 as well as the U.S. and French roles in producing it, thereby voicing their rejection of the perceived internationalization of the situation.

The March 8 demonstration drew between six hundred thousand and one million protesters, mainly Shiites, to the heart of Beirut. The designated hub of the demonstration was the opulent downtown area, a deliberate attempt to highlight the incongruity between protestors and venue and also a self-affirming communal gesture of national presence. The historically disenfranchised and deprived Shiites, more commonly associated with the city's suburban southern slums than its affluent center, were out to lay claim to the capital and the political arena it betokened.

The colossal size of the demonstration and the common motives of its participants, coupled with other indications of communal marginalization and discontent, illustrate the unique political identity shared by Shiites, which transcends the secular-religious divide as well as the cleavages of political affiliation and social class. When the components of this identity—resistance to Israel, anti-imperialism, politico-cultural Arabism, and Shiite empowerment—were called into question by certain elements in the opposition movement, this was perceived as a threat to Shiite identity.

These communal dynamics signal the eruption of a war of semantics through which different interpretations and definitions of highly charged concepts such as freedom, sovereignty, independence, nationalism, and terrorism are deconstructed and reconstructed by various sects. The Shiite community's reconstruction of these concepts takes the form of communal support for the resistance. Protecting the resistance is identical to the preservation of the Shiite political identity. Viewed from this perspective, the resistance's role in confronting Israel cannot be divorced from its capacity as the Shiites' communal guardian—a role that is never publicly acknowledged but is nonetheless etched in the collective Shiite subconscious. Thus, the resistance functions as a form of political compensation for Shiite political underrepresentation; although an estimated 40 percent of Lebanese are Shiite, the community is allotted only 21 percent of parliamentary seats.

Accordingly, any plan that seeks to disarm the resistance will be construed as a form of communal disempowerment and will render the Shiites a potentially destabilizing force, eager to upset the political status quo. The community might no longer content itself with the political configuration laid out in the Taif Accord and would seek to redress the imbalance by pursuing the abolition of political confessionalism. Unfettered by Syria or its priority of resisting Israel (for which it has made numerous political sacrifices), Hizbollah could well play a starring role in such a narrative, striving to enact its regional agenda through a majoritarian democracy and in so doing, entrenching itself as the custodian of the Shiite political identity.

Amal Saad-Ghorayeb is Assistant Professor at the Lebanese American University. She is the author of Hizbollah: Politics and Religion (Pluto Press, 2002).

[Return to table of contents.](#) [Printer-friendly version.](#)

Iraq: Political Trends among Shiites

Abbas Kadhim

Since the collapse of the regime of Saddam Hussein, the Shiites of Iraq have come to the forefront of the debate among Western and Arab intellectuals and politicians. A clear majority of more than 60 percent of the population, the Shiites of Iraq have never held a majority or even a powerful minority status in Iraqi politics since the establishment of modern Iraq eight decades ago. They were also subjected to sub-human living conditions by the governments that ruled over them, despite the fact that more than half of Iraq's oil is located in their territory.

The 1991 uprising against the Iraqi regime brought the Shiite cause to world attention, but only briefly. The major focus was on the Kurds' plight, while the agony of the Shiites received little attention. At the heart of this scandalous oversight was the Western belief that a Shiite government in Iraq would duplicate the Islamic system in Iran. This failure to understand the Shiites of Iraq had its academic roots. Scholar Yitzhak Nakash has correctly pointed out that the West's received wisdom on the nature of modern Shiism comes mainly from the large number of studies on Iranian Shiite Islam, culture, and society.

For a better understanding of the religious and political dynamics in the new Iraq, one can examine how the Shiites have conducted themselves in the past two years. Two cases illustrate the main trends in Shiite activism in the post-Saddam era. First, in the Iraqi elections on January 30, 2005, the poor showing of the Iraqi Communist Party surprised many observers. In spite of it being the oldest existing party in Iraq, with a large membership and a wide base of sympathizers, the Communist Party's list, the People's Union won only two of the 275 seats in the Iraqi Assembly. To translate this into concrete numbers, the Communists gained fewer than seventy thousand out of eight million ballots. The next morning, the party's paper, *Tariq Al Shaab*, presented a candid analysis: part of the problem was that large numbers of the party's main constituency, the Shiites, voted for the United Iraqi Alliance, a list claiming the backing of Grand Ayatollah Ali Al Sistani. At the end of the day, the Shiite green and black banners awakened stronger sentiments than the red banners of the Communists.

The second case concerns the strong and energetic movement of the disenfranchised in post-Saddam Iraq, the Sadr Movement. The group rallied around the young Moqtada Al Sadr, son of the martyr Ayatollah Muhammad Sadiq Al Sadr and heir to a family known for its generous contribution to Shiite scholarship and Iraqi politics. Sensing the opportunity presented by a vacuum of power in the wake of the regime collapse, a group of youngsters donned black or white turbans and declared their allegiance to Moqtada Al Sadr, taking over as many mosques as they could, and setting up offices in several cities. They changed the name of the largest suburb in Baghdad (originally Revolution and then Saddam City) to Sadr City. Similarly, they renamed "Al Sadr" anything carrying Saddam's name—hospitals, districts, markets, etc.

After taking control of several Iraqi cities, Al Sadr's supporters imposed their own version of Islamic laws. Too young to be beyond the elementary stages of religious learning or even speaking standard Arabic at a credible level, they made appearances on TV stations like Al Jazeera and managed to assert themselves as a ruling clergy in cities like Najaf, Karbala, Basra and Kut, thanks to the guns of their thuggish bodyguards and the militia they conveniently called the Mahdi Army. They even set their own courts and held trials that often ended in cruel and unusual punishment for offenses ranging from the possession of alcohol to women's walking in public without what they deemed adequate veiling. Higher offenses, such as working for the occupation forces, normally received death sentences. The lack of religious credentials that plagued Moqtada Al Sadr and his fellow self-proclaimed clergymen did not deter hundreds of thousands from displaying sympathy toward the movement.

Decades of oppression on the basis of an ascriptive identity have served to blur the line between the religious and the profane. The realm of secular Shiite identity is shrinking continuously, while the realm of political religiosity is expanding. If secularism is unable to sustain itself, then it must give way to a form of politics more closely informed by religion. That is not necessarily a bad thing, as long as learned Shiite religiosity continues to prevail over ignorant fanaticism.

Abbas Kadhim is a PhD candidate in the Department of Near Eastern Studies, University of California, Berkeley.

[Return to table of contents.](#) [Printer-friendly version.](#)

Palestine: Intense Wrangling Precedes Elections

Nathan Brown

On July 17, 2005, Palestinians are scheduled to elect a new parliament. The stakes are enormously high, especially as groups that sat out the 1996 parliamentary election—notably Hamas but also smaller factions—will field candidates. Various parties have been squabbling over the electoral rules. Arab governments routinely tinker with election laws with a particular result in mind. What is unusual in the Palestinian case is that the electoral law is being amended not along lines dictated by

the government but by complex bargaining among several actors. Vital matters have still not been settled, and the protracted negotiations threaten to delay balloting.

In drafting legislation for the elections, the current parliament has debated registration procedures, a quota for women, and the age of eligibility for candidates. But the most contentious issue by far has been the mixture of proportional representation and district voting. While the 1996 elections were conducted solely on a district basis, it seems likely that now some seats will be apportioned according to a party's share of the national vote while other seats will go to the top vote-getters in 16 multi-member districts. The precise balance has important implication for the outcome of the elections, and the players have staked out sharply different positions:

- Smaller factions fear that candidates from the two largest parties, Fatah and Hamas, will swamp them in district voting. They have insisted on a large number of seats being awarded according to a party's total share in the national vote.
- Many incumbents calculate that their chances for re-election are greater if they can depend on their local constituencies. Converting to a proportional representation system might force them to compete nationally and to fight for a high place on their party list or (in the case of independents) be shut out completely.
- Under the current system, Gaza is mildly overrepresented in the parliament; Gazan deputies therefore wish to avoid reapportionment if districts are used.
- Hamas is less concerned with the precise formula, because it would run well both nationally and in districts. But the movement is anxious to hold elections while its popularity is high and therefore wishes to see the issue settled soon.
- Fatah is pulled in many different directions, with the specter of electoral defeat aggravating party divisions. Fatah could trump the smaller factions with district voting and protect the seats of many of its existing members. Younger Fatah activists have demanded party primaries, which have finally been scheduled for May 27.
- President Abu Mazen has suggested that all seats be decided by proportional representation. This might allow him to assemble an electoral coalition; it would also result in a parliament with a stronger sense of party discipline, all deputies having been selected by virtue of their party positions rather than their individual and local popularity.

The debate over the electoral format is difficult to resolve not only because of the number of interests but also because of the various decision-making bodies involved, including the presidency, the parliament, and the parties. The parliament took up the issue in 2002 but dawdled because elections seemed far off. Yasser Arafat's death in November 2004 required presidential elections, and Abu Mazen was able to ensure national unity only by pledging to hold parliamentary elections as well. Rawhi Fatuh, the acting president between Arafat's death and Abu Mazen's election, decreed the date of July 17, forcing the parliament to take up the matter in earnest. In March 2005, Palestinian parties met in Cairo and cut a deal to apportion the seats evenly between the two electoral systems. But parliamentary deputies then passed a bill that awarded only one-third of the seats according to proportional representation. Bowing to the president and the advocates of moving towards a system of full proportional representation, the cabinet returned the bill to the parliament asking that it be amended on its third and final reading. Responding to diverse pressure, the parliament has stalled by submitting the matter to the legal committee, leaving the bill unpassed two months before the scheduled election. Whether the parliament gives in to cabinet and party pressure or stands its ground, it must also amend the interim constitution, since the number of deputies under either version of the electoral law is larger than that specified in the constitution.

At this point, suspicion runs deep between the parliament and the parties, between an older Fatah generation that sees itself being shunted aside and a younger generation that fears it will be dragged to defeat by a corrupt old guard, and between Fatah and the other parties, who see the prolonged wrangling as an attempt to escape from the Cairo agreement or even delay elections. At the same time, Palestine might be showing the Arab world a new kind of electoral politics, one in which the rules of the game are not dictated according to the interests of those in power but are sharply contested among multiple parties. The resulting confusion may not seem enviable, but it is oddly democratic.

Nathan Brown is a senior associate in the Democracy and Rule of Law Project at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

[Return to table of contents.](#) [Printer-friendly version.](#)

Jordan: Democracy at a Dead End

Shadi Hamid

In a March 15th interview, ABC news anchor Peter Jennings asked King Abdullah II if Jordan would ever become a constitutional monarchy. “Absolutely,” the king said. When Abdullah came to power in 1999, there was widespread speculation that this young, charismatic Sandhurst and Georgetown-educated leader—and other young monarchs in the region—would be willing to embark on reforms and gradually share power. Yet, as of late, it has been non-monarchical systems such as Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt that have begun to experience democratic openings. Jordan, on the other hand, has witnessed a disturbing wave of de-liberalization.

First, there was the recent professional associations debacle, another manifestation of the struggle for the soul of a nation caught between its growing Palestinian majority and its close relationship with the United States. In a country with notoriously impotent political parties, a civil society with little grassroots reach, and a parliament dominated by pro-regime tribalism, the 120,000-member professional associations have become the primary venue for opposition to Jordan's controversial foreign policies—and apparently an intolerable annoyance to a government eager to demonstrate its usefulness to Washington.

Enter Interior Minister Samir Habashneh. Catching civil society off guard with a series of harsh statements in January 2005, he demanded that the associations “completely halt” all political activities. Demonstrations and sit-ins were banned, while the Professional Associations Council was ordered to remove political banners from its premises. Amman governor Abdul Karim Malahmeh announced that “any kind of event, gathering or meeting, save for weddings, should obtain prior approval.”

In early March, the government presented a draft professional associations law to parliament, requesting it be acted upon urgently. Most observers believe this 26-article bill would constitute a debilitating setback for democratization. It authorizes the Audit Bureau, for example, to monitor associations' funds to ensure they are spent only on internal activities. The draft law also changes voting procedures so that the professional councils are elected indirectly through “intermediary commissions.” To eliminate any doubt about the government's intentions, Habashneh stated openly that the law aimed to eliminate the “prevalence of one current”—meaning Islamists—within the associations.

The opposition launched a vigorous response, calling on parliament to fight the bill. Fifty-nine Members of Parliament (MPs) signed a memo asking that the government withdraw the draft, although nearly 20 withdrew their signatures, apparently due to government pressure. Several journalists went on record as saying that the government pressed newspapers to refrain from publishing news about the crisis.

Adding yet more tension to an already volatile situation, the government also proposed a new political parties law. The law prohibits the use of mosques, clubs, professional associations, or sports clubs for political party activities, bans recruiting and campaigning at educational institutions, and bans activities that could harm Jordan's relations with other countries.

With its knack for offending friends and foes alike, Prime Minister Fayez's government fell in April and Habashneh lost his job. At least temporarily, the brakes were put on Jordan's frightening skid toward full-blown authoritarianism. The king reaffirmed his country's commitment to political reform and promised that the new cabinet's policies would be in line with Jordan's ambitious 10-year national agenda. Yet there remains reason to be skeptical. Newly appointed Prime Minister Adnan Badran has used a less confrontational tone than his predecessor, but has not yet withdrawn either the professional associations law or the political parties law. Moreover, while his cabinet is filled with Western-educated technocrats and private-sector reformers, few are known for their love of democracy.

Badran's cabinet has come under unprecedented attack. MPs are angry that they were not consulted before its formation, and even regime loyalists accused Badran of neglecting the country's southern regions in his appointments. Thus far, 45 out of 110 MPs have said they will withhold confidence from the government; 17 from the Islamic bloc are expected to join them when it comes to a vote.

In response to the growing criticism, both the king and Badran have recited vague platitudes about Jordan's ambitious plans for reform. But while the king appears well intentioned, his focus on improving government performance and efficiency misses the mark. The real impediments to democracy lie in Jordan's political structure and anachronistic constitution which, among other things, ensures that the king is "immune from any liability and responsibility." With his vast powers, the king also appoints the prime minister and all 40 members of the Senate, whose approval is needed for any proposed bill to become law.

By any standard, Jordan is nowhere close to joining the ranks of the world's democracies and remains, in form and function, an absolute monarchy—a fact emphasized by the latest political crises. In his interview with Peter Jennings, King Abdullah claimed that Jordan was on its way to becoming a constitutional monarchy. The heavy-handed government actions of recent months, however, give ample reason for doubt.

Shadi Hamid is a Fulbright Fellow in Amman, Jordan, conducting research on democratization and political Islam in the Arab world.

[Return to table of contents.](#) [Printer-friendly version.](#)

News and Views

Shiites in the Arab World

While changing political conditions in Iraq and Lebanon have allowed for a more assertive political role by Shiites in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, they continue to be subjected to political, social, and economic discrimination. Although reliable statistics are rare, Shiites in Saudi Arabia are believed to constitute between 8 and 10 percent of the population. They are not well represented in official institutions; there are no Shiite ministers, no Shiite members of the Council of Senior Islamic Scholars (the country's highest religious authority), and only two Shiites in the 150-member Majlis Al Shura (consultative council). They also face limited employment opportunities; the government restricts employment of Shiites in the oil and petrochemical industries and in national security-related positions. Shiite candidates won most local council seats in recent municipal elections in the Eastern and Southern provinces, where Shiites are a majority.

Bahrain's Shiites represent around 60 percent of the local population but Sunni Muslims dominate politically and economically (the ruling Al Khalifa family is Sunni). Shiites complain that they are excluded from positions of power. Unemployment—officially estimated at 15 percent although it is probably higher—is concentrated in the Shiite community. Recently, thousands of demonstrators participated in a rally calling for constitutional reform organized by the Al Wefaq National Islamic Society and the Islamic Action Society (Shiite opposition groups; political parties are illegal). Observers are concerned that if not managed properly, these tensions could escalate into a conflict between Shiites and Sunnis.

In Kuwait, Shiites constitute around 25 percent of the population and maintain more cordial relations with the government, but are disadvantaged in representation in upper levels of government. Five Shiites were elected to the 50-seat National Assembly in July 2003 and the prime minister appointed one Shiite to the 16-member cabinet, although he later resigned.

Yemen's Zaidi Shiites, around 30 percent of the population, are concentrated mainly in the north. Since June 18, 2004, government forces have clashed in the mountains of the northwest with followers of Hussein Badreddine Al Houthi, a Shiite cleric who founded a radical group known as Believing Youth. The rebellion is not aimed at spreading Zaydi Shiism but rather is a protest against President Ali Abdullah Salih's pro-U.S. policies.

In Lebanon, the Shiite population is the largest single confessional group (approximately 40 percent). Under the leadership of Musa Al Sadr, it began to mobilize in the 1970s in response to its relative social deprivation. Al Sadr's influence led to the emergence of two major Shiite political parties: the Amal Movement and Hizbollah. Amal's leader Nabih Berri has been Speaker of Parliament (the highest political position that a Shiite can occupy according to the Lebanese Constitution) since 1992 and the party has 11 Shiite MPs in the 128-seat parliament. Hizbollah has 13 Shiite MPs and forms coalitions with other blocs in parliament. There are seven Shiite independent deputies.

The overthrow of the Baathist regime in Iraq resulted in major changes in the political representation of Iraqis. Iraqi Shiites (around 60 percent of the population) moved to the forefront of the political transition in Iraq, setting an agenda that addressed issues of Shiite political participation, the role of religion, and the coalition presence. To ensure their voting power was not diluted in the elections, leading Shiite political parties joined forces in the United Iraqi Alliance, which includes the Islamic Dawa Party, the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), the Iraqi National Congress, and the Shiite Political Council. The new 32-member Iraqi cabinet is led by Shiite Prime Minister Ibrahim Jaafari and includes eighteen Shiite ministers.

[Return to table of contents](#)

Egypt: Constitution Amended, Demands for Reform Spread

The People's Assembly approved on May 10 an amendment to article 76 of the Egyptian Constitution, which will allow multi-candidate elections for the presidency. Each registered political party is permitted to field a candidate during the 2005 elections, but in future elections a party would need to have been licensed for at least five years and to hold at least 5 percent of the seats in the lower and upper houses of parliament to get on the ballot. Independent candidates would need to garner signatures from 250 elected officials, a mix of parliamentarians and local council members. The presidential election will be supervised by a commission composed of ten members, five senior judges and five nonpartisan figures. The measure will be put to a popular referendum before the end of May.

Thousands of supporters of the banned Muslim Brotherhood protested in Cairo and several cities in the Delta and in Fayoum on May 4. Security forces say 400 people were arrested for violating a ban on street protests and allegedly "wounding several officers and soldiers." A Muslim Brotherhood statement put the number at 1,500. On May 6, Egyptian authorities arrested Issam Aryan, the official spokesman of the movement's supreme guide.

Over 1,000 judges meeting in Alexandria on April 15 declared they will not supervise the upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections unless new laws are passed guaranteeing the full independence of the judiciary. Judges complain their role was minimal in the 2000 election, the first time they were allowed to oversee the voting process. They are also calling on parliament to adopt legislation that would limit the powers of the government to control the pay and careers of judges. The proposed reforms would place control of the judiciary in the hands of a council elected by judges with disciplinary powers and an independent budget for salaries. The General Association of Judges will hold a larger meeting in Cairo on May 13 to discuss the issues further.

On April 17, the Cairo Criminal Court sentenced three journalists to one year in prison and fined them 10,000 Egyptian pounds (\$1,720) for libeling Housing Minister Ibrahim Suleiman. President Hosni Mubarak announced at a February 2004 conference of the press syndicate that prison sentences for journalists convicted of libel would be abolished, but the promised reform has yet to be enacted.

[Return to table of contents.](#)

Iraq: New Cabinet and Constitutional Committee

Iraq's National Assembly approved a new cabinet after a three-month political impasse. Five ministries—including defense, oil and electricity—were originally filled with temporary appointments due to a last-minute failure to reach a compromise. Prime Minister Ibrahim Al Jaafari, a Shiite Arab, heads the 32 ministerial posts and four deputy premiers. There are 18 Shiite Arabs, eight Kurds, eight Sunni Arabs, a Christian and a Turkoman. The main goal of the cabinet is to write a

permanent constitution that will be put to voters in a referendum later this year.

The National Assembly named a 55-member committee on May 10 to draft a permanent constitution. The committee is composed of 28 members of the Shiite alliance and 27 nominees from other groups including the two main Kurdish parties, outgoing prime minister Ayad Allawi's group, and smaller non-Shiite religious and ethnic groups. The assembly is scheduled to adopt the constitution by August 15 and submit it to a national referendum by October 15, before new elections in December 2005 for a five-year government.

[Return to table of contents.](#)

Palestine: Municipal Elections Ongoing

Unofficial results of the most recent stage of Palestinian municipal elections, held on May 5, show Fatah having won 50 of 84 municipal councils in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and Hamas winning around 30 councils, including key urban areas such as Rafah in Gaza and Qalqilya in the West Bank. Chairman of the Palestinian Higher Commission for Local Elections Jamal Shoubaki has postponed the announcement of final results pending an investigation into allegations of irregularities and fraud; both Hamas and Fatah disputed the preliminary count. A total of 2,509 candidates ran for 906 council seats in 84 councils, 76 in the West Bank and eight in the Gaza Strip. There will be a further round of municipal elections after the legislative elections that are planned for July 17.

[Return to table of contents.](#)

Lebanon: Legislative Elections

Lebanon's new Prime Minister Najib Mikati promised to hold legislative elections on schedule, between May 29 and June 19. Saadeddine Hariri, the son of late former prime minister Rafik Hariri, announced he will be a candidate for parliament. After heated debate in parliament over the electoral law, it was decided that elections will be held according to the 2000 electoral law. The law, which divides certain areas into small districts and others into large districts, is widely perceived to have been designed to benefit specific political leaders in the last elections.

A UN team will provide technical assistance to the Lebanese government in the elections and the European Union will send 90 election monitors. The Lebanese Coalition to Monitor Elections, led by the Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections, has started to train election observers. A group of Lebanese lawyers have proposed a [bill](#) to allow Lebanese expatriates to vote.

A poll by Zogby International released on April 21 finds important areas of agreement that could form the basis for national unity and democratic reform in Lebanon. Click [here](#) for details.

[Return to table of contents.](#)

Saudi Arabia: Municipal Elections End

Elections for half of the seats on municipal councils in Saudi Arabia ended with the final of three rounds on April 21 in the Western province, which includes Mecca, Medina, Jeddah, and the Northern region. As in the elections held in Riyadh on February 10, Islamist candidates won most of the seats. Defeated candidates have filed complaints with the Elections Grievances Committee, alleging Islamists received support from influential clerics and formed a coalition in contravention of electoral laws. In elections in the Eastern and Southern provinces on March 3, Shiite candidates won all of the seats contested in Qatif, the traditional stronghold of the Shiite minority in the kingdom, as well as five of six seats in the mixed Sunni-Shiite area of Al Hasa. The government will appoint the remaining council members. Women were excluded from voting or being candidates. Click [here](#) for detailed information on the elections.

[Return to table of contents.](#)

Kuwait: Women's Vote on Hold

The Kuwaiti Parliament failed to pass a law to allow women the right to vote and run for office in municipal elections scheduled for June 2, 2005. Although the legislation initially passed on April 19, a second vote for ratification failed on May 2. Parliament voted 29-2 in favor of the bill but 29 MPs abstained, leaving the measure two votes shy of the 33 votes needed for passage. Although the Emir could appoint women to the municipal council—six of the 16 members are appointed—this turn of events marked a symbolic defeat in light of calls to grant women suffrage and the right to run for office in parliamentary elections.

[Return to table of contents.](#)

Bahrain: Legal Reform

Bahrain's government has announced a plan to overhaul the judicial system, with an emphasis on including new courts to ensure speedy trials. Meanwhile, several new laws are being debated. The government proposed a new anti-terrorism law that stipulates the death penalty for terrorist groups and jail terms for those “who use religion to spread extremism, put up posters inciting hatred, disrespect divine religions, harm national unity, or disrupt public order.” Several MPs and political societies have rejected the draft law on the grounds that certain articles could be used to restrict constitutional freedoms.

Activists are asking a committee of clergymen from the Islamic Affairs and Justice Ministries to open up discussions about the draft family law to include other groups. One of their main criticisms is that the current draft widens the gap between sects and threatens national unity by including different laws for Shiites and Sunnis.

[Return to table of contents.](#)

Qatar: New Associations Law

Qatar's Ministry of Civil Service Affairs and Housing promulgated new regulations for nongovernmental societies and professional associations that streamline the operating requirements for associations, but forbid affiliation with groups outside Qatar and restrict membership in organizations to Qatari nationals over 18 years. The societies are not allowed to deal with political issues and all their activities, including fundraising, will be monitored by the ministry.

[Return to table of contents.](#)

Tunisia: Human Rights Developments

The Tunisian government announced on April 26 that it will allow the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) regular visits to prisons in Tunisia. The ICRC has similar agreements with Algeria, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, and Kuwait, but its reports are submitted exclusively to the authorities and are not made public. Tunisia also approved access to prisons for the New York-based organization, Human Rights Watch. No independent human rights organization has been granted access to prisons since 1991 when the Tunisian League for Human Rights was allowed a single visit. On April 19, the government also announced the end of solitary confinement for more than ten days and Human Rights Watch released a [report](#) charging that the government is holding as many as 40 political prisoners in prolonged solitary confinement. In another [report](#) Human Rights Watch also criticized Tunisian authorities for convicting lawyer Muhammad Abou to 18 months in prison for an article he wrote comparing conditions in Tunisian prisons to those in the U.S.-run Abu Ghraib detention facility in Iraq.

[Return to table of contents.](#)

Algeria: Amnesty for Human Rights Abuses

Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika announced his intention to hold a referendum on an amnesty law that will grant exemption from prosecution to any member of an armed group, state-armed militia, or the security forces for crimes committed in the conflict that began in 1992. Bouteflika first publicly discussed the prospect of a general amnesty in November 2004. A group of international human rights organizations warned that a general amnesty for human rights abuses committed in the country's brutal internal conflict may permanently deprive victims or their families of their right to truth, justice and reparation. Click [here](#) to read their statement.

[Return to table of contents.](#)

Upcoming Political Events

- Egypt: Referendum on constitutional amendment allowing election of president, by the end of May
- Lebanon: Parliamentary elections, between May 29 and June 19
- Brussels: U.S.-EU Conference on Iraq, June 22
- Palestine: Legislative Council elections, July 17
- Amman: Iraq Donors' Conference, July

[Return to table of contents.](#)

Views from the Arab Media

Arab satellite TV networks featured live discussions about the latest developments in the region.

On Al Jazeera's political debate show, "[Min Washington](#)" (From Washington) on April 21, host Hafez Al Mirazi discussed the role of the U.S. Congress in Arab reform with three Arab intellectuals—Amr Hamzawy, Najib Ghabbian, and Azzeddine Layachi—who testified before the House Committee on International Relations on the same day. Hamzawy outlined the next steps that need to be taken by the Egyptian government and by the United States to further political reform. Ghabbian asserted that the United States must pressure the Syrian regime to launch a process of top-down reform. Participants agreed that U.S. policy is changing to reflect a greater willingness to speak with moderate Islamists in the region and consider their role in the reform process.

U.S. dialogue with Islamists was the subject of another Al Jazeera show on April 12, "[Al Ittijah Al Mu'akis](#)" (The Opposite Direction), which pitted Martin Indyk, director of the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, against Muhammad Ibrahim Mabrouk, an Islamist Egyptian writer. Mabrouk asserted that attempts by the United States to engage in dialogue with Islamists were part of a strategy to subdue Muslims. He argued that meetings such as the U.S.-Islamic World Forum in Doha were a sham. Indyk countered that U.S. interest in democratization in the region was real.

In an op-ed [article](#) in *Al Hayat* on May 4, Tunisian writer Salah Al Din Al Jurshi argues that Islamists were caught by surprise by the U.S. and Europe's invitation to dialogue and find themselves contemplating two options: either they accept this invitation and break out of the blockade imposed on them by Arab regimes, or they refuse the offer in fear of being seen as traitors by their constituencies. Hamas and Hizbollah's agreement to dialogue indicates that pragmatism will triumph over ideology.

In an [article](#) in *Ash-Sharq Al Awsat* on April 30, Diana Mkalld criticizes the U.S.-based Arabic language satellite channel *Al Hurra* for failing to provide viewers with updated, comprehensive reporting on regional and international affairs. Mkalld says that although many blame the low ratings on the fact that *Al Hurra* was doomed from the start because of its American identity, the primary reason for its failure is a professional one. Readers' responses featured diverse views with some

agreeing while others (mainly from readers in Iraq) arguing that *Al Hurra* is the only objective Arabic satellite channel.

Writing in [Al Hayat](#) on May 4, Syrian writer Hazem Nahar discusses the issues that will be on the agenda at the upcoming Syrian Baath Party Congress in June. He calls on political forces to demand a revision of the electoral system, a new democratic political party law, an end to the emergency law, the release of political prisoners, and the acceptance that there is a political opposition in Syria.

Discussing the prospects for the multi-candidate presidential elections in Egypt in September, Hassan Nafea observes three points of view in Egypt. The first, mainly held by members of the ruling National Democratic Party, fears that this initiative could open the door to unexpected and uncontrollable events in the country. The second, common among opposition groups, particularly the Kifaya movement, believes the amendment is a cosmetic change and argues for pressuring the regime to make more concessions. The third view, that of the silent majority in Egypt, regards recent events with a mixture of suspicion and hope ([Al Hayat](#), May 4, 2005).

[Return to table of contents.](#)

Read On

A selection of recent writings on Shiite political movements in the Middle East:

- In a new report, "[Bahrain's Sectarian Challenge](#)" (ICG, Middle East Report no. 40, May 6, 2005), the International Crisis Group (ICG) warns that if urgent steps are not taken to address the grievances of the marginalized Shiite community, Bahrain could be in for dangerous times. The report calls on the United States to moderate its praise of Bahrain and urge the government to continue the process of reform and find ways to alleviate sectarian conflict.
- In another report by the ICG, "[Understanding Islamism](#)" (Middle East/North Africa Report no. 37, March 2, 2005), deals principally with Sunni Islamism but also includes a section on Shiite Islamic activism. Unlike Sunni Islamism, Shiite Islamism has remained integrated due to its status as the minority form of Islam and the leading political role of the ulama.
- A recent book by Reuel Marc Gerecht, [The Islamic Paradox: Shiite Clerics, Sunni Fundamentalists, and the Coming of Arab Democracy](#), argues that "those who have hated the United States most—Shiite clerics and Sunni fundamentalists—hold the keys to spreading democracy among the faithful" (Washington, DC: AEI Press, 2004).

A number of publications focus on Shiite politics in Iraq:

- Rodger Shanahan finds that Iraq's Dawa party has earned support among the Shiite population due to its position as Iraq's oldest Shiite Islamist party and the persecution it suffered under Saddam Hussein, but that its fractious nature and the rise of rival Shiite groupings will prevent the party from regaining its past influence ("[The Islamic Dawa Party: Past Development and Future Prospects](#)," *MERIA*, vol. 8, no. 2, June 2004, 16-25).
- Vali Nasr's article, "[Regional Implications of Shia Revival in Iraq](#)" posits that a Shiite-led regime in Baghdad and the broader Shiite cultural revival in Iraq will tip the regional balance of power in favor of Shiites but will also strengthen radical Sunni movements (*The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 27, no. 3, Summer 2004, 7-24).

- Faleh Abdul Jabar's book *The Shi'ite Movement in Iraq* analyzes the social, cultural, and economic dimensions of the Shiite political movements, stressing that Iraq's Shiites have never constituted a homogeneous group (London: Saqi Books, 2003).
- Yitzhak Nakash's *The Shi'is of Iraq* provides a comprehensive history of Iraq's Shiite community, and challenges the belief that Shiite society and politics in Iraq are a reflection of Iranian Shiism. Nakash also asserts that the tension fueling the sectarian problem between Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq is primarily political rather than ethnic or cultural (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

Several works examine Shiite movements in Lebanon with an emphasis on Hizbollah:

- The newest addition to this literature, Rodger Shanahan's *The Shi'a of Lebanon: Clans, Parties and Clerics* (London: I.B. Tauris, forthcoming August 2005), examines how the Shiite community in Lebanon transformed itself from a politically marginalized and largely rural population to a major force in Lebanese politics.
- The 2004 municipal elections in Lebanon demonstrated the potential political power Hizbollah could exercise in the 2005 parliamentary elections, observes Rodger Shanahan in "[Hizbollah Rising: The Political Battle for the Loyalty of the Shi'a of Lebanon](#)" (MERIA, vol. 9, no. 1, March 2005, 1-6). Although both Hizbollah and the Amal Movement compete for the same communal vote, Hizbollah emerged the much stronger party.
- In "[Hizbollah's Dilemma](#)" (foreignaffairs.org, April 13, 2005), Daniel Byman updates, in the context of recent developments in Lebanon, his earlier essay, "[Should Hizbollah Be Next?](#)" (*Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2003), which argued that while Hizbollah is a natural target in the war on terror, Washington's only option is to confront Hizbollah indirectly by pressing Syria and Iran to help change its focus from militancy to politics.
- Ahmad Nizar Hamzeh's *In the Path of Hizbullah* details Hizbollah's emergence, its clerical leadership and hierarchical structure, and examines its shifts between militancy and gradualist pragmatism (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2004).
- In *Hizbollah: The Changing Face of Terrorism*, Judith Palmer Harik traces the development of Hizbollah into a mainstream party in Lebanese politics, as well as U.S. policy towards the group (London ; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2004).
- In "[Factors Conducive to the Politicization of the Lebanese Shia and the Emergence of Hizbullah](#)," Amal Saad-Ghorayeb argues that while Hizbollah has succeeded in striking a delicate balance between ideological integrity and political reality, allowing this balance to tip too heavily either way will spell its eventual demise (*Journal of Islamic Studies*, vol. 14, no. 3, September 2003, 273-307).

New Publications on Political Reform

The latest issue of *Foreign Affairs* features articles by Fouad Ajami and Bernard Lewis on Arab political reform. According to Ajami, the changing context in Syria and Lebanon demonstrates that the entrenched systems of control in the Arab world are beginning to give way and that the "old Arab edifice of power" might finally crumble due to the U.S. willingness to "gamble on the young, the new, and the unknown" ("[The Autumn of the Autocrats](#)," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2005, 20-35). Bernard Lewis contends that events in Iraq have launched a process of democratic political and social order in the region—"The Iraqi election may prove a turning point in Middle Eastern History no less important than the arrival of General

Bonaparte and the French Revolution in Egypt more than two centuries ago” (“[Freedom and Justice in the Modern Middle East](#),” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2005, 36-51).

A report by Mona Yacoubian, “[Promoting Middle East Democracy II: Arab Initiatives](#),” examines reform initiatives emanating from the Arab world and provides recommendations as to how the U.S. government should respond (United States Institute of Peace, Special Report no. 136, May 2005)

A new article by Vali Nasr asserts that “Muslim democracy” is an emerging electoral platform that seeks to dominate the middle by integrating Muslim values into broader socioeconomic demands, rather than a theoretical construct or a call for religious reform. It is reminiscent of the Christian Democratic parties of Europe and provides a model for pragmatic change with broader influence across the Muslim world (“[The Rise of ‘Muslim Democracy’](#),” *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 16, no. 2, April 2005, 13-27).

The EU Commission released a [work program](#) to reinforce the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) on its tenth anniversary. Affirming that the Barcelona process did not result in a significant advance in democratization in the region, it proposes greater cooperation on this issue in the next five years. It calls for the creation of a “democracy facility that will serve to promote, support and reward those partners that show a clear commitment to common values and agreed political reform priorities.”

A RAND Palestinian State Study Team publication, [Building a Successful Palestinian State](#) describes how an independent Palestinian state can be made successful, and suggests options for strengthening governance, security, economic development, and education (RAND Corporation, 2005).

[Return to table of contents.](#)

Subscriber Information

Click [here](#) to receive the *Arab Reform Bulletin* via e-mail every month or to unsubscribe.

To subscribe to the Arabic edition of the *Bulletin*, click [here](#).

Click [here](#) to read past issues of the *Bulletin*.

We welcome your comments or suggestions. Please e-mail the editor at arb@CarnegieEndowment.org.

[Return to table of contents.](#)

Copyright © 2005 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. All Rights Reserved.

URL: <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=16907&proj=drl>

Created by [Matrix Group International, Inc.](#) ®