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Iraq: Is Democracy the Problem?

Peter Sluglett

More than three and a half years after the fall of Baghdad to U.S. troops in April 2003, “dire” seems an almost optimistic description of the present situation in Iraq. Armchair critics already have ample evidence of the U.S. administration’s economy with the truth, inadequate planning, and many post-invasion blunders. The Republican reversal in the November 2006 congressional elections will surely engender commissions of inquiry producing yet more revelations of incompetence and corruption by varied U.S. actors. Although the recently-released Iraq Study Group report avoids passing judgment on the imperative of democracy promotion, the question remains: did the U.S. decision to foster a democratic style of government in Iraq help to bring about the current tragedy?

Among the serious blunders committed after the invasion—along with the absurd underestimation of the number of U.S. troops that would be needed to restore order—de-Baathification (especially supervised by the opportunist Ahmed Chalabi) was ill-advised for two main reasons. First, it gave Chalabi, whose name had little or no resonance in Iraq, the chance to get rid of potential challengers among senior administrators. Second, many Iraqi institutions could no longer function properly in the absence of their senior staff. The denazification process in post-World War II Germany soon became obliged to be selective for similar reasons. One could continue down this sorry list ad nauseam, but it is enough to mention the grandfather of all blunders, the decision to disband the army both without confiscating its weapons and without ensuring some means of support for those who suddenly found themselves unemployed.

In the period after the September 2001 terrorist attacks and before the invasion of Iraq, a number of more or less plausible day-after scenarios for Iraq were floated, mostly originating in the Department of State. One scenario that seemed attractive because of its apparent simplicity and potentially low cost was somehow—and therein lay the rub—to replace Saddam Hussein by a high-ranking military officer after a speedy U.S. intervention. It was expected that such an officer would promote a rather less beastly version of the status quo under Saddam. Of course the new dictator would have been beholden to the United States, and—with less blood on his hands than his predecessor—might eventually have been able move towards introducing various cosmetic political reforms à la saudienne, or even more ambitiously à l’égyptienne.

Identifying such an individual, let alone trying to make contact with him, was fraught with difficulty and the idea was evidently shelved along with recommendations contained in the Department of State’s Future of Iraq Project, which Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld famously forbade his subordinates to read.

Some argue that the neoconservatives’ grand design failed because it was too ambitious, that Iraqis were not ready for democracy, or perhaps that after nearly fifty years of totalitarian rule they were not capable of adjusting to a pluralist political system. There is ample evidence to suggest that this is not so; preliminary data from some provincial elections in 2003 and 2004 suggests that voters were perfectly ready, for example, to vote for candidates who were not from their own sect. In addition it is worth remembering that, despite the tense security situation, 58 percent and 70 percent of eligible voters turned out for the elections of January and December 2005 respectively. The main problem is not so much that Iraqis do not want or are not ready for democracy, but that there is an almost total absence of public security. This is due to the presence of several armed militias, funded by non-Iraqi individuals or groups, with various objectives ranging from Shiite revenge against former members of Saddam’s regime to the extreme anti-Shiism of the Salafis or Wahhabis.

Efforts to arrest the unfolding tragedy in Iraq should not, therefore, involve a turn away from democracy but rather toward defanging the militias. Apart from trying to restore more or less correct relations with Iran and Syria, the only sensible course of action for the United States at the moment is to try to track down and eliminate the sources of funding for the Sunni insurgency, most of which comes from Saudi Arabia, the Gulf, and possibly from Pakistan. With the leverage that will
come from better relations with Iran, at least some of the Shiite militias might then be brought under control. At the same
time, the United States should spare no effort to build up the Iraqi armed forces. Iraq desperately needs strong institutions
to enable the state to survive and to deliver the security that almost all Iraqis long to enjoy.

Peter Sluglett teaches Middle Eastern history at the University of Utah, Salt Lake City.

Bahrain: Elections and Managing Sectarianism

Fred Wehrey

Shiite and Sunni Islamist candidates dominated Bahrain’s late November parliamentary elections—winning a combined
total of 29 out of 40 seats—leading some observers to warn of a polarized parliament where civility and legislative action fall
victim to sectarian mudslinging. Others predict a tenuous détente, where the two sides avoid divisive issues such as anti-
Shiite discrimination and constitutional amendments and collaborate instead on social conservatism.

In either case the ultimate victor seems to be the monarchy, which continues to portray itself as an indispensable mediator
over a fractious body politic. “Without the monarchy,” a ministry official asserted, “Bahrain would go the way of Iraq and
Lebanon.” Echoing this assertion, a member of the king’s appointed consultative council, which has effective veto authority
over the parliament, described his institution as a “buffer” to prevent the country from being “hijacked by religious
extremists.” For the government, therefore, the elections appeared to be part of a broader strategy of managing the
problem of sectarian inequity rather than a step toward resolving it.

Yet for Shiite oppositionists, the subordination of the elected parliament to the appointed consultative council lies at the very
heart of this inequity. Graffiti in a polluted Shiite suburb of Manama illustrates a widely-held sentiment: “Our demands are
clear; there is no alternative except a parliament with full oversight and legislative power.” Suspicion that the parliamentary
cards were stacked against Shiites fueled their boycott of the 2002 elections.

In 2006, however, believing that it was important to have a voice inside government, the main Shiite political society Al
Wefaq mounted an electoral campaign marked by coalition building with liberal candidates from the National Democratic
Action Society. The two groups temporarily shelved their disagreement over a draft family law that would circumscribe the
influence of Islamic law courts. Shiite Islamists from Al Wefaq secured 17 of 40 seats, an impressive gain that was
tempered by the defeat of all but one of its liberal allies. In the election run-up, these liberal candidates were denounced as
“traitors” by some opponents; one text message accused them of working to implement Iran’s agenda to “make the Sunnis
of Bahrain just like the Sunnis of Iraq.”

Although the full details remain to be seen, at least two liberals blame their defeat on fraudulent votes cast in at-large
polling stations. These controversial centers, unattached to a particular district, were perceived by critics as a government
tactic for injecting loyalist votes from the Bahraini military and security services. Had they been elected en masse, the liberal
candidates intended to moderate the parliament’s sectarian discourse and to spearhead reform proposals, which in the past
have been discredited as being pro-Shiite.

The liberals’ loss was the gain of pro-government Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi candidates, who emerged with a 12-seat
parliamentary bloc. Previously competitors, these two groups did well despite criticism of their poor performance in the last
parliament and failure to send delegates to a series of pre-election debates covering civil liberties, the economy, and other
issues. In the new parliament, they will probably focus their energies on Islamic morality, education, and social welfare.

If the monarchy is the default winner of the elections, the ultimate losers could be middle and lower-class Bahrainis, who
face a serious housing crisis, unemployment, corruption, and a declining standard of living. Many Bahrainis feel alienated
from the government and the opposition, believing that sectarianism is a regime strategy for dividing the populace as well
as an elite game waged at the parliamentary level for personal gain.

Patience, especially in predominately Shiite areas, may be finite. Al Wefaq leader Sheikh Ali Salman has acknowledged the
difficulty of enacting reforms in the face of constitutional restrictions on the parliament’s power. But if Shiite parliamentarians
focus on sectarian battles or social conservatism and fail to deliver concrete benefits, Shiite support could shift toward more
confrontational groups such as Al Haq. Activists from Al Haq have warned of possible unrest within six months after the new
parliament convenes, citing the growing radicalization of Shiite youth. Echoing this, a clerical intermediary for Iraqi Grand
Ayatollah Ali Al Sistani warned that Shiite religious authorities could mollify young people on constitutional grievances but
not on poverty.
Fred Wehrey, an international policy analyst at the RAND Corporation, recently returned from Bahrain.

The ultimate test of Bahrain’s elections will therefore come in a series of choices yet to be made. Elected delegates may choose sectarian posturing or press for serious action on economic and other grievances for the sake of their constituents, and the monarchy may choose to use the parliament to manage sectarianism or to empower it in order to begin resolving the causes of communal resentment.


Kuwait: The Beginning of Real Politics?

Nathan J. Brown

Kuwaitis describe the country’s current parliament with an apparent contradiction: “The opposition is the majority.” In any parliamentary system this would be impossible; a government cannot serve without majority support. Even in presidential or mixed systems, the parliamentary majority enjoys a share of power through cohabitation or divided government. But while Kuwait displays more democratic features than most of its neighbors, the political system has always fallen short of allowing majority rule in the parliament to determine political authority.

This may be changing. The opposition majority in the current parliament has clear ambitions to move Kuwait in a democratizing direction. In the past, Kuwait’s liberal, secular, leftist, and Islamist movements have regarded each other as rivals more than allies. The government and the ruling family have almost always been able to break up any opposition coalition by playing groups against each other, co-opting deputies, and using the fact that appointed ministers vote on many issues in parliament. On a few occasions the opposition has forced ministers to resign, aided by the constitutional provision that cabinet members cannot participate in votes of confidence. Yet earlier this year, the various opposition factions managed to put together a coalition supporting electoral reform to consolidate Kuwait’s tiny 25 electoral districts into five. Reformers felt this would diminish vote buying and force candidates to run on political platforms rather than family and neighborhood connections. When the government appeared to be sabotaging the effort, some parliamentarians took the unprecedented and audacious step of moving to interpellate the prime minister (a leading member of the ruling family)—a prelude to a vote declaring that the parliament could not cooperate with the cabinet, necessitating either a new cabinet or new elections. Rather than subject his nephew to this indignity, Emir Sabah Al Ahmed Sabah preempted any parliamentary move by calling for new elections. But these brought an unpleasant surprise to the ruling family; even though held under the old 25-district system, the elections produced a solid opposition majority. Now, even if the government brings in all of its ministers to vote, it can be defeated by a united opposition.

The problem for the opposition has been to maintain unity. It has certainly tried, first mustering the votes to pass the electoral reform and then moving to develop a more comprehensive program. Different groupings in the parliament coalesced with some agreeing to vote on major issues as blocs. And the three leading blocs—liberal, populist, and Islamic—drew up a list of twelve laws that they agreed to pass. They are also working toward joint action against certain ministers and government officials identified with corruption or with government intervention in the recent parliamentary elections.

As Kuwaiti politics change, actors in the heretofore self-absorbed system are looking outwards for models. Members of the opposition, even Islamists, speak quietly but definitely about moving toward a constitutional monarchy on a European model. All blocs are trying to anticipate how the new electoral law will work, but most anticipate that Kuwait is moving toward a pluralist political party system of a kind rarely seen in the region.

The ruling family, by contrast, shows signs of casting envious eyes elsewhere in the Arabian Peninsula, where rulers face less obstreperous (and sometimes unelected) assemblies. This has raised fears of what Kuwaitis refer to as an “unconstitutional dissolution” of parliament, a step that the previous emir took on two occasions (from 1976 to 1981 and 1986 to 1992). The ruling family has alternately encouraged and discouraged such speculation, although it is unclear whether it is seriously considering such a step or merely trying to frighten the opposition.

There are ways to avoid a full-scale confrontation between the ruling family and the parliament. A cabinet reshuffle bringing in some reformers might be one conciliatory step. And a confrontation might also be staved off if opposition unity begins to fray, which has already happened on some votes. Suspicions between the Islamists and the other two leading blocs are still extremely strong. Islamists see populists and liberals as lacking in popular support and uncommitted to democracy in cases where it enhances Islamist influences. And liberals and populists believe Islamists view democracy as a means and not an end; they also suspect that Islamists would sell out their allies, especially if given an opportunity to impose their deeply conservative social agenda.

Yet even if a conflict is avoided for the present, the current rivalry between the ruling family and the parliament could easily return after the next round of parliamentary elections (scheduled for 2010), which will be held under the new five-district system. In spring and summer 2006, the campaign for electoral reform and then the election itself brought large-scale rallies
and demonstrations, more ideological debates, and some pugnacious opposition language, giving Kuwaitis a sense of what a democratic future could look like.

Nathan J. Brown is a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and professor of political science and international affairs at George Washington University.


United Arab Emirates: A Toe in the Water of Political Reform

Amal Hashim

On December 16 the United Arab Emirates (UAE) will take the first tentative step on the road to political reform. As promised a year ago by Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed, the country will hold indirect elections for half of the 40 seats in the Federal National Council (FNC), the first experience of its kind for the UAE. Until now the Council has been appointed, with seats apportioned to the seven emirates, and has played little role in political life because it lacks any real oversight or legislative authority.

With the elections being indirect, only appointed members of an electoral board will have the right to vote. To oversee these appointments and supervise the elections, a Ministry of Federal National Council Affairs was created in February 2006 under the leadership of Anwar Qarqash, a businessman and liberal intellectual with close ties to the ruling elite. The appointed electors include 6689 citizens, 1189 (18 percent) of them women. Observers had expected the electors to be drawn from elite business and intellectual circles, but in fact they include a large number of citizens with little or no education. Regime supporters justify these appointments on the basis that the board should represent all classes within UAE society.

Observers expected initially that candidacy in the elections would be open to all citizens, but it was later announced that only electoral board members were eligible to run. So far 456 members (7 percent of board members) have announced candidacy for the 20 FNC seats, among them 65 women. While the large number of candidates might be considered a sign of enthusiasm for the electoral process, it is also expected to split the relatively small number of voters and impede substantive debate.

The mostly governmental Emirati media have made much of the upcoming elections, following developments in detail. The confinement of candidacy and voting to a narrow slice of UAE society, however, has led to a lack of coverage by regional and international media. The outside media’s lack of interest is also due to the fact that candidates’ platforms generally focus on local issues and service to constituents, for the most partly ignoring internal or external political issues.

The UAE’s strategy for these first elections—justified as a measured approach intended to avoid negative results—is excessively cautious even by standards within the Arabian Peninsula. Bahrain, with its complicated sectarian composition, has just undergone elections in which competition was intense. Qatar, which recent years has seen an overthrow of the ruler and another attempted coup, has held direct elections. Even Saudi Arabia, threatened by terrorism and fundamentalism, had held direct municipal elections. So why is the UAE, blessed with a history of political stability and harmony, so fearful about initiating democratic practices?

Part of the UAE’s caution is attributable to a fear of Islamist movements, whose absence from the appointed electoral board—which included representatives from other political and intellectual trends—was conspicuous. This exaggerated fear is unjustified, however, as the UAE is about the only country in the Peninsula in which such movements do not represent a problem. In comparison with Kuwait, Bahrain, or Saudi Arabia, Emirati religious movements have historically maintained good relations with the ruling authority. Their exclusion from the current electoral experiment may backfire in the end, leading to stronger popular support for such movements and deteriorating relations with the government.

Apart from concern about Islamists, the ultimate explanation for the UAE’s ultra-cautious political experiment is simply that the citizenry will go along with it. So far there are no organized political forces capable of exercising pressure. UAE authorities still can rely on the country’s impressive economic and developmental achievements, a degree of wealth distribution, and unofficial channels of communication between citizens and government officials in order to maintain stability and manage calls for change.

UAE officials describe the current political stage as transitional and have suggested they will hold direct elections for more (though probably not all) members of the FNC in four years. If all goes smoothly they might well deliver, but if for any reason—terrorism in the UAE or the Gulf, or greater tension between the United States and Iran, for example—they decide not to, they are unlikely to face objections from the country’s quiescent citizenry. There are also no serious demands to
increase the powers of the FNC, which are extremely modest and expected to remain so for the present.

Amal Hashim is an Egyptian political researcher. This article was translated from Arabic by Ellen Hunt.


United States: Congressional Politics and the Pursuit of Democracy

Deborah E. Bodlander

Democratic victories in the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate in November are causing something of an earthquake in U.S. Middle East policy. While it is clear that the White House is under significant pressure to shift course regarding Iraq and to consider a more robust peacemaking effort in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it is less clear how the shifting political balance will affect U.S. efforts to promote democracy in the Middle East. The foreign policy priority of the new Congress, when it takes office in January, is likely to be pressing President Bush to implement the recommendations of the Iraq Study Group, which he is under no obligation to do. Democracy in the Middle East is a more distant goal; Americans know from our own national experience that no democracy can be born overnight or even over a decade.

Relations between Capitol Hill and the Executive Branch are likely to be awkward for some time, one factor that will make it more difficult for President Bush to win support for his freedom agenda should he choose to continue to emphasize it. House of Representatives Speaker-elect Nancy Pelosi’s choice of outspoken critics of the Iraq war—Jack Murtha of Pennsylvania for Majority Leader (later defeated in favor of Steny Hoyer of Maryland) and Silvestre Reyes of Texas as chairman of the House Intelligence Committee—suggests that all the post-elections talk of bipartisan cooperation is indeed just talk.

The new Congress is likely to give the Middle East plenty of attention, not only because of Iraq but also because senior members who have demonstrated a strong interest in the region are rising to positions of greater prominence. In the House of Representatives Tom Lantos, the only Holocaust survivor in Congress, will ascend to the chairmanship of the House International Relations Committee (HIRC), which has jurisdiction over the scope and content of foreign aid programs. Lantos’s personal experiences underscore his dedication to human rights and individual freedoms and he will continue to be outspoken on such issues. The ranking Republican on the HIRC will be Ileana Ros-Lehtinen of Florida, the current chair of the Middle East Subcommittee, whose hopes to be the next HIRC chairman were dashed when her party lost control of the House. The new Chair of the Middle East Subcommittee is expected to be Democrat Gary Ackerman of New York. Thus the HIRC leadership will continue to be dominated by Jewish and pro-Israel members, the group within the Congress that cares the most about political developments in the Middle East.

The next chairman of the House Appropriations Committee—the body that actually cuts the check for foreign assistance—will be David Obey of Wisconsin, who has served as committee chairman once before. Obey cosponsored an unsuccessful initiative earlier this year—building on a similar action by Lantos in 2005—to cut assistance to Egypt due to Cairo’s harassment of opposition leaders such as Ayman Nour. Nita Lowey of New York, a strong supporter of Israel, is expected to chair the Foreign Operations Subcommittee, which approves the budget for the Department of State and United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Funding for democracy programs at State and USAID is likely to continue, though perhaps disguised as something else if Democrats want to distance themselves from President Bush’s freedom agenda.

In the Senate, the new chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee will be Senator Joseph Biden of Delaware, who may still harbor presidential aspirations. Six months ago, Biden joined with the Council on Foreign Relations to sponsor a specific plan for Iraq that emphasized peaceful incentives, and has now promised to conduct extensive hearings on Iraq in order to help promote non-military options. The chairman of the Near East Subcommittee remains to be named, but the current Chairman, Richard Lugar of Indiana, will be the panel’s ranking Republican member.

Thomas Jefferson, drafter of the Declaration of Independence and the third President of the United States, was prescient when he said, “My God! How little do my countrymen know what precious blessings they are in possession of, and which no other people on earth enjoy.” Although most members of Congress have a personal commitment to the principles of the U.S. constitution and desire to share the blessings of democracy, it is unclear whether one or two will choose to champion the issue of democracy in the Middle East. Their constituents were clear in wanting the United States out of Iraq as soon as possible, and most will give priority to that call.

Deborah E. Bodlander was the former senior professional staff member for Middle East Affairs at the House International Relations Committee under Chairman Benjamin A. Gilman (R-NY). She is currently consulting privately as the president of DEB Strategies.
Readers React

Phil Wilcox's short discussion of reform and peace in the Palestinian context (November 2006) contains much relevant analysis and several useful ideas. But I find it severely inadequate because of what it ignores. First, Palestinians had a shot at state building between 1994 and the outbreak of the second intifada in late 2000, and flubbed it. Yes, Israel bears some blame, but this is essentially a Palestinian failure. So is the shocking inability to make good on their second opportunity, when Israel left Gaza in August 2005. Second, the real problem with U.S. policy in recent years is that it actively enfranchised militant Islamists in Palestine (as well as in Lebanon and Iraq). Without a dramatic change in this direction, Washington cannot begin to accomplish anything. Third, the current Palestinian government refuses to recognize Israel or negotiate with it. Its primary decision making locus is in Damascus, not Gaza or Ramallah. Without recognizing and dealing with these realities, none of Wilcox's ideas can begin to work.

Yossi Alpher
Co-Editor, Bitterlemons

Ayman Abd Al Nour (interview November 2006) is right that political reform in Syria has completely stalled. Economic reform, however, has been picking up pace. Reforms that have already been enacted have seen Syria's ranking in the World Bank's indicator for the ease of starting a business jump from 135 to 91. In 2007, the top corporate tax rate will be slashed from 65 percent to 35 percent. A number of private banks have begun operations in the past several years, ATMs are now a common sight in Syria's major cities, and the government is preparing to float bonds for the first time. The United States has been trying to crash the Syrian economy as a means to persuade Syria to cooperate with U.S. objectives in the region, but with little success. The Syrian economy grew faster in 2005 than it has in years.

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News and Views

Bahrain: New Cabinet and Consultative Council after Elections

King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa formed a new cabinet on December 11, appointing a Shiite Muslim, Jawad bin Salem Al Oraied, as a deputy prime minister for the first time in Bahrain’s history. The other two deputies of Prime Minister Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa are members of the ruling family. The cabinet’s key portfolios were unchanged. A new portfolio, oil and gas, was given to the head of the National Oil and Gas Authority, Abdul Hussain bin Ali Mirza. Click here for a list of members. The king also appointed a new 40-member consultative council (the upper house of parliament) on December 5. Observers believe the king appointed mainly liberal candidates to offset the victory of Islamists in elections to the lower house. The new members include 10 women. Click here for a full list of members.

Islamist candidates swept legislative and municipal elections held on November 25 and December 2. Bahrain’s largest political society and the main opposition group, the Shiite Al Wefaq National Islamic Society, won 17 of the lower house’s 40 seats. Sunni Islamist parties Al Manbar National Islamic Society and Al Asala Islamic Society won 7 and 5 seats respectively. Other pro-government candidates won 10 seats. A liberal candidate allied with Al Wefaq won one seat. The secular National Democratic Action Society failed to win any seats. Although the 206 candidates included 16 women, only Latifa Al Gaoud, a pro-government female candidate who ran unopposed, was able to win a seat. Click here for detailed results. According to the Supreme Elections Commission, the turnout rate was 72 percent. Election monitors from the Bahrain Human Rights Society pointed to circumstantial evidence that pro-government Sunni Muslims used fraud to win a majority of seats. Three liberal opposition candidates filed lawsuits seeking to overturn the results but Bahrain’s highest court rejected their cases.

Send your views on what you have read in the Arab Reform Bulletin to the editor at arb@carnegieendowment.org.
Saudi Arabia: Human Rights Watch Visit

A delegation from the New York-based Human Rights Watch began on December 1 the group’s first significant fact-finding mission in Saudi Arabia. During the three-week visit, the delegation will interview government officials, organizations, and individuals and will focus on the criminal justice system, political rights, the status of women, and foreign workers’ rights. Amnesty International is scheduled to make its first major visit to the kingdom in late January 2007.

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Yemen: Anti-Corruption Draft Law; Editors Imprisoned

Yemen’s parliament is debating an anti-corruption draft law which, if passed, will establish a National Authority for Fighting Corruption to investigate corruption in state institutions. According to the draft law, Yemen’s elected lower house of parliament would elect 11 members from a list of 30 candidates (including civil society representatives, private sector representatives, and women) submitted by the appointed upper house of parliament. The law also stipulates that those convicted of involvement in corruption will face prison sentences of at least five years and a fine of no more than YR 5 million (US $28,593).

Yemeni courts are prosecuting editors for reprinting cartoons of the Prophet Mohammad that first appeared in a Danish daily in September 2005. On December 6, a court fined Mohammad Al Assadi (editor-in-chief of the English daily Yemen Observer) 500,000 rials ($2,859) for denigrating Islam. In November a court sentenced Kamal Al Aalafi (editor of Al Rai Al Aam newspaper) to a year in jail for reprinting the cartoons. The editor of another publication, Al Hurriya, faces similar charges.

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Palestine: Debate over Early Elections

President Mahmoud Abbas might call for early elections if negotiations with Hamas over the formation of a national unity government remain deadlocked, according to members of the Palestinian Liberation Organization’s executive committee. Prime Minister Ismail Haniyya warned on December 10 that early elections would exacerbate tensions and accused Abbas of trying to force Hamas out of government. It is unclear whether Abbas has the legal right to call for early elections. Abbas’s advisors claim that the president is allowed to dissolve parliament if he also submits to the vote. Constitutional law experts argue that parliamentary elections before 2010 would require that the Palestinian Basic Law—the interim constitution for the Palestinian authority—be amended. Please click here for a guide to the powers of the Palestinian president by Carnegie Senior Associate Nathan J. Brown.

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Jordan: Cabinet Reshuffle; New Public Opinion Poll; Anti-Corruption Law

On November 22, King Abdullah reshuffled the cabinet, which had been in office for a year, bringing in three former ministers and six newcomers. According to Prime Minister Marouf Al Bakhit, the reshuffle is intended to bolster the government’s program of political and economic reforms. Click here for a full list of the new cabinet.

A public opinion poll released by the University of Jordan’s Center for Strategic Studies (CSS) on December 6 showed that economic concerns (unemployment, poverty, and rising cost of living) top the issues citizens would like to see the new government tackle immediately. The poll showed that roughly half of respondents thought the previous government successful in promoting political reform and freedom of expression. Click here to access the poll results in Arabic.

King Abdullah on December 4 approved legislation passed by parliament to fight corruption through the creation of a “financially and administratively autonomous” six-member commission tasked with investigating corruption, including suspects among current and former officials. Jordan is one of six Arab countries—Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Algeria, and Djibouti—that have ratified the UN Convention against Corruption, adopted by the UN General Assembly in October 2003.

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Syria: Human Rights Trials

Syria's State Security Court (SSSC) sentenced four citizens to prison terms ranging from 45 days to five years on December 3 for alleged membership of the Islamic Liberation Party, according to the National Organization for Human Rights.

The SSSC held the first trial on November 28 of eight students arrested nine months ago for founding a public discussion group. The court has accused seven of the eight students of “subjecting the state to the risk of hostile acts” and “publishing false news that may offend the dignity of the state.” According to the Syrian Youth for Justice group, the students have been held incommunicado and without access to legal counsel since their arrest.

On November 19, the SSSC sentenced Nizar Restanawi, founding member of the Syrian branch of the Arab Organization for Human Rights, to four years' imprisonment for “spreading false news” and “insulting the president.” Ristnawi was arrested on 18 April 2005 and detained incommunicado until August 2005. Click here for more details.

Egypt: Constitutional Amendments; Muslim Brothers Released; Blog Writers Arrested

Egypt's Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif announced on December 4 an 18-month timetable for constitutional amendments. According to Nazif, the government will present proposed changes to parliament in the coming months, with a referendum on those changes expected in the summer of 2007. The ruling National Democratic Party is expected to propose constitutional amendments that would relax rules for political parties to nominate candidates for presidential elections, increase parliamentary oversight powers, and pave the way for a new counter-terrorism law to replace the state of emergency in place since 1981.

A Cairo court released on December 10 the two most senior Muslim Brotherhood officials in detention, overruling a move by prosecutors to keep them under house arrest. Essam Al Erian and Muhammad Morsi were among more than 500 members detained by authorities in May when several demonstrations were held in support of two reformist judges facing disciplinary action. In August, a lower court ordered their release after they spent three months in jail without being charged, but two days later a higher court overturned that decision.

Egyptian authorities are cracking down on blog commentators who post material critical of the government. Rami Siyam was arrested in Cairo on November 19 and Abdel Karim Sulaiman Amer was detained in Alexandria on November 6. Amer is charged with “spreading information disruptive of public order,” “incitement against Muslims,” and “defaming the president.” Click here for more details.

Libya: Another Critic Detained; U.S. Call for Al Jahmi Release Reiterated

Libya's internal security agency has held Idrees Muhammad Boufayed, a critic of Libyan leader Muammar Qadhafi, in incommunicado detention since November 5. Under Libyan law, the police can hold a detainee for up to 48 hours and the prosecution has up to six days to file charges, although a judge can extend this period for up to 30 days. Click here for more details.

Amid questions about whether Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice will travel to Tripoli, the U.S. Department of State spokeperson on November 16 reiterated calls on the Libyan government to release Fathi Al Jahmi, a leading human rights activist. Al Jahmi is charged with holding an unauthorized meeting with a foreign official (believed to be a U.S. diplomat). He was initially arrested in October 2002 after delivering a speech at a conference in Tripoli calling for democracy, and then released in March 2004, after U.S. Senator Joseph Biden advocated on his behalf during a meeting with Qadhafi. Libyan authorities detained Al Jahmi again two weeks later, after he reiterated calls for reform in several international media interviews. Click here to read the U.S. statement.

Morocco: Party of Justice and Development Prepares for Elections

The Secretary General of Morocco's Islamist Party of Justice and Development (PJD) Saad Eddin Al Othmani announced on November 20 that his party will run candidates in most districts in the 2007 parliamentary elections. The PJD gained the third-highest number of seats in parliament in the 2002 elections, despite the fact that it ran in only 55 of Morocco's 91 constituencies. In an interview in Ash Sharq Al Awsat (Arabic text) Othmani dismissed the possibility of his party winning a
majority, citing the “nature of the Moroccan political scene.” The electoral system and the large number of political parties make it nearly impossible for one party to capture a majority of seats.

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Upcoming Political Events


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Views from the Arab Media

The report of the U.S. Iraq Study Group led by former Secretary of State James Baker and former Democratic Congressman Lee Hamilton, was the subject of many commentaries in the Arab media:

- The Bush administration will probably selectively implement the report’s recommendations as a face-saving measure rather than engage in a comprehensive resolution of the regional crises, predicts Ayman Al Safadi in a December 8 article in Jordan’s Al Ghad. The administration is looking for an exit strategy from the problems it has created, but it is not interested in dealing with core issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

- The Iraq Study Group placed U.S. interests over Iraqi interests and therefore the report’s recommendations will not restore stability to the country, argues a December 7 editorial in the United Arab Emirates’ Al Khaleej.

- Whether or not the U.S. administration follows the recommendations, the report was a step in the right direction and evidence of the ability of U.S. policy to be self-critical, argues Youssif Al Dayni in an article in Ash Sharq Al Awsat on December 8. The study group resisted political pressures and dealt with the Iraq situation with objectivity. Arabs and Muslims should ponder when they will be able to deal with their own crises through objective and independent study groups.

- Participants on Al Jazeera’s “Akthar Min Rai” (More than One opinion) debated the report on December 8. Saad Jawad Qandil, member of the Political Bureau of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, argued that his party is opposed to an immediate withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq because it would leave a huge security vacuum. He also called for the integration of militias into the Iraqi security forces. Muhammad Bashar Al Faydi, spokesman for Iraq’s Muslim Scholars Association, praised the report for its accurate and precise assessment of the situation in Iraq.

Palestinian politics are nearing a point of no return, asserted Mkhaimar Abusada in a December 8 article in Al Ghad. As the prospects for a Fatah-Hamas national unity government diminish, full-fledged violence between the two groups seems likely. Ironically, such a confrontation will only be avoided—or at least postponed—in the context of an Israeli invasion of Gaza that would bring Hamas and Fatah together.

No solution to Lebanon’s crisis is possible unless politicians start calling problems by their true names, argued Lebanese writer Fawaz Trabulsi in an article in Lebanon’s Al Safir on December 7. Arguments about an international tribunal to try the suspects in Rafiq Hariri’s assassination or the make-up of cabinets reflect sectarian divides and the deeply-rooted flaws of the Lebanese political system.

Disputes in the Arab world regarding questions of identity, the role of religion in politics, and Iran’s increasing power in the region call for a new kind of constructive and self-reflective dialogue among Arab intellectuals, argued Raghida Dargham in a December 8 commentary in Al Hayat. Arab moderates should abandon discourse about the Arab nation and instead press their governments to introduce reforms needed to strengthen the concept of the state in the face of severe challenges from anti-state militias backed by external forces.

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Read On

While attention focuses largely on the report of the Iraq Study Group (click here for text), several other recent publications
treated aspects of the Iraq issue:

- Laurie King-Irani argues that Iraqis and Americans are now intimately and problematically linked, although the current tragedy in Iraq might have been averted, in “Iraq: A Look Back” (Orbis, Winter 2007, 91-106).

- Examining the cases of Iraq and Bosnia, Carrie Manning challenges the assumption that installing the right political elites into power is conducive to the establishment of stable democratic states (“Political Elites and Democratic State-building Efforts in Bosnia and Iraq,” Democratization, vol. 13, no. 5, December 2006).

- Notwithstanding disagreements on certain security matters, Jordan and the United States have similar goals in Iraq and Jordan has made positive contributions to post-Saddam Iraq, concludes Scott Lasensky in “Jordan and Iraq: Between Cooperation and Crisis” (United States Institute of Peace, Special Report no. 178, December 2006).

- Improving counterinsurgency operations will be a crucial element in the war on terrorism according to a recent Rand Corporation study by Austin Long (“On ‘Other War:’ Lessons from Five Decades of Rand Counterinsurgency Research,” 2006).

- Iraq’s civil war risks triggering civil wars throughout neighboring Gulf states, warn Daniel Byman and Kenneth Pollack in “Explosive Affinities: Cross-Border Consequences of Civil Strife” (Berlin Journal, Fall 2006).

Several recent publications discuss reform related developments in Arab countries:

- December 4, 2006 the European Union released Progress Reports evaluating the implementation of the European Neighborhood Policy in Jordan, the Palestinian Authority, Morocco (French), and Tunisia (French).

- The state of political parties at the moment of independence—not Islam, class structures, levels of development, or international factors—was key in pushing Turkey toward democracy but Arab states toward authoritarianism, argues Michele Angrist in Party Building in the Modern Middle East (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006).

- In Contesting the Saudi State: Islamic Voices from a New Generation, Madawi Al-Rasheed explores religion and politics in the kingdom and suggests that Saudis are beginning to contest traditional religious interpretations (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

- Carsten Wieland examines the domestic challenges facing Syria’s Baathist regime, explaining the sources of authority that keep it in power in Syria-Ballots or Bullets: Democracy, Secularism, and the Levant (Seattle: Cune Press, 2006).

- Rather than being an obstacle to peace, support for Hamas is a symptom of the Palestinian Authority’s lack of sovereignty and its complete dependence on Israel, argues Mandy Turner in “Building Democracy in Palestine: Liberal Peace Theory and the Election of Hamas” (Democratization, vol. 13, no.5, December 2006).

- The Jordanian government is treating more than one million Iraqis who have fled persecution and violence as illegal immigrants rather than refugees, finds a recent Human Rights Watch Report (“The Silent Treatment: Fleeing Iraq, Surviving in Jordan,” Human Right Watch Index no. E1810, November 28, 2006).

- The December 2006 issue of Al Mustaqbal Al Arabi, published by the Beirut-based Center for Arab Unity Studies, contains analysis of U.S. Middle East policy after the mid-term elections and the Lebanon war by Amr Hamzawy, and bipolarity in the Palestinian political system by Ayman Talal Youssef.

- The UN Arab Human Development Report 2005: Toward the rise of women in the Arab world argues that women in the Arab world are not realizing their full potential and are still denied equality of opportunity. The report affirms that some achievements have been secured; most Arab countries now have a parliament, a cabinet or a
local council in which at least one woman participates. However, Arab women must be given greater access to
education, employment, health care and public life. The report also contends that Islamic movements have been in
many cases at the vanguard of women’s empowerment.

The Arab Reform Bulletin is published monthly except for January and August. Our next issue will be February 2007.

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