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Michele Dunne, Editor

Julia Choucair, Assistant Editor

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Yemen: Trying to Restore Reform Credentials

Gregory D. Johnsen

President Ali Abdullah Saleh's bid for reelection is requiring more effort than anticipated for a man in his twenty-eighth year of power—but not because he faces real competition. He is unlikely to face a serious challenger in the September presidential election, as none of the eleven potential candidates seem capable of gaining the requisite approval vote from the two house of parliament. The parliamentary vote, which could come as early as June, requires that at least 5 percent of the 301-seat elected assembly and 5 percent of the 111-seat appointed consultative council support a candidate before his name may be placed on the ballot.

The constitution does require that at least two candidates participate in the election, but it is unlikely Saleh will face anything other than a token opponent. So far none of the potential challengers has been endorsed by a political party. During the last presidential elections in 1999, Saleh squared off against a member of his own General People's Congress (GPC) party, while the largest opposition party, Islah, nominated Saleh as its candidate. Not surprisingly, Saleh won in a landslide.

Still, this year's campaign has been more complicated than that of 1999 because Saleh has to win over more than just his domestic constituents. He also has to convince the United States that he is serious about reform if he wants to continue to receive the substantial financial support Yemen will need in the coming years.

Saleh's problems with the external audience became apparent when he visited Washington in November 2005, expecting to be honored as an important ally in the war on terror. Instead he was criticized for corruption in his government and the erosion of democracy. Yemen was suspended from one U.S. assistance program, while the World Bank cut its aid package by one third, from \$420 to \$280 million.

Then in early February 2006 his reputation in the United States deteriorated even further when 23 prisoners, including 13 Al Qaeda suspects, broke out of a prison in Sanaa. Yemen has been able to do little to dispel the general assumption that the prisoners had help on the inside. In an interview with the pan-Arab daily *Al Hayat* later that month, Saleh said contacts were underway with the escapees, and nine of them have since been re-captured. But suspicions about Saleh still linger in Washington.

Saleh attempted to burnish his credentials as a reformer and reverse some of the damage to his reputation by reshuffling his cabinet on February 11. While most of the new appointees were uncharismatic bureaucrats, he did name a handful of women and reformers to the cabinet in an attempt to demonstrate that things were changing in Yemen. Saleh named reformers to head up the Ministries of Finance and Information, Saif Al Asali and Hassan Ahmad Al Lawzi respectively. These are two of the most important ministries to foreign governments and institutions worried about corruption and lack of freedom in Yemen. Al Asali supports the same type of economic reforms that the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank have been pushing for in Yemen. Al Lawzi is a popular poet who was expected to reverse some of the recent infringements on press freedoms.

Saleh also doubled the number of women in his cabinet. He replaced his outgoing Minister of Human Rights, Amat Al Suswah, with another woman, Khadija Al Hayshami. Al Suswah, who was extremely popular with western governments, was tapped by Kofi Annan to head the Arab office of the UNDP. He also named Amat Al Raziq Hamad, the highest ranking woman in the GPC, as Minister of Social Affairs.

One of the other major changes intended for western consumption was the replacement of General Yahya Al Amri as the governor of Sadah, epicenter of the low-level Al Huthi insurgency since 2004. Al Amri played a major role in sparking the initial fighting. He was replaced by General Yahya Al Shami, who presided over the release of 627 Al Huthi followers from prison as a goodwill gesture in early March.

Three months later, however, it is clear that these appointments have had little real impact. Sporadic fighting between the government and Al Huthi's followers broke out again in April, threatening the fragile truce. Al Asali and Al Lawzi have been ineffective in orchestrating significant changes in the financial and information realms; major economic reforms seem as far away as ever, while the trial of one journalist and the harassment of others continue. Observers inside and outside Yemen see clearly that Saleh's recent moves were little more than cosmetic. Thus, while he will stroll to an election victory in September, Saleh still has far to go to convince the United States that he is serious about change in Yemen.

Gregory D. Johnsen, a former Fulbright Fellow in Yemen, is an entering Ph.D. candidate in History and Middle Eastern and Islamic studies at New York University.

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Egypt: Judges Win Public Support but not Government Concessions

Amy Hawthorne and Hesham Nasr

After a few months of quiet, Egypt's judicial independence movement in recent weeks has surged forward into a major confrontation with the Supreme Judicial Council, which pro-reform judges view as too closely aligned with the executive branch. Responding to the Council's impeachment proceedings against prominent reformist judges Hisham Al Bastawisy and Mahmoud Mekki for allegedly accusing other judges of committing election fraud, judges staged a mass sit-in at the Cairo Judges Club. Hundreds of protestors took to the streets in solidarity. Thousands of security forces were dispatched to break up the protests, leading to hundreds of arrests and reported beatings. The case became further complicated after Al Bastawisy suffered a heart attack on May 17. Although the two judges have become popular heroes and may even prevail in the present conflict, the movement's core goal of a new law to protect judicial independence is likely to remain elusive.

The judges launched their drive for change at a raucous assembly in May 2005 when they threatened to boycott their supervision of the fall 2005 elections unless the government met their demands for a new law and other reforms. So far, their main achievement has been to build a constituency by—quite atypically for judges—playing high-profile national politics. First, the movement's leaders astutely added to their rather insular agenda—ending Ministry of Justice control over the judiciary's budget, having the judiciary elect court presidents, and establishing the Judges Club, not the Supreme Judicial Council, as the official representative of jurists' interests—the more widely-shared goals of clean elections, ending the state of emergency, and protecting civil liberties. They used the mass media to disseminate their messages, issued scathing reports on the government's conduct of 2005 elections, threatened mass strikes, and forged ties with sympathetic legislators (mostly from the opposition). The Club also re-elected its pro-reform leadership in December 2005. These actions, along with the historic prestige of the judiciary and the nationalist colorations of key reformist judges, have made the movement Egypt's most respected reform force. The Muslim Brotherhood, political parties, the Bar Association, and other civil society groups, as well as many prominent journalists, champion their cause. The Judges Club's activism also has inspired ripples of defiance within other professional associations seeking to break free of state control.

The judges have not, however, yet won any concessions from the government, due partly to weaknesses in their movement. There is no action on a new law (a draft has been pending since 1991); the Club has not been able to compel the Supreme Judicial Council (which must review the draft law before it is sent to Parliament) to agree to Club's demands or even to issue its opinion on the legislation. The Judges Club ultimately backed down on its threat to refuse to oversee voting, depriving the movement of a key bargaining chip. Before the September presidential election, the Presidential Election Commission, under pressure from the Ministry of Justice, disqualified some 1,000 judges (reportedly those deemed too supportive of reform) as polling station chairmen. By the parliamentary elections a month later, rank-and-file judges, fearful of being on a ministry black list, signaled their readiness to fulfill their election duties. Threats of national court strikes have not materialized either, due to many jurists' creed that to maintain public trust they must stay far away from politics.

Fissures within the judiciary—most of Egypt's 8,000 judges endorse the reform agenda, but are essentially loyal state employees, leaving only a few hundred genuine activists—hinder the mobilization necessary to make the government truly feel the heat. The government reinforces such divisions with its official position that the dispute is simply an internal conflict between the Judges Club and the Supreme Judicial Council. Outside groups may not be dependable enough allies to press hard for reforms, especially those most important to ordinary judges. For example, despite prominent Bar Association members' loud backing of reformist judges, the Association has ignored the pervasive problem of lawyers assaulting judges in the courtroom. In fact, it was anger over an attack on an Alexandria judge last April that spurred so many judges to rally for reform.

The media's enthusiasm for the judges' cause may also be shallow. Many newspapers continue to publish articles whipping up public sentiment in favor of guilt or innocence in pending cases and disclosing confidential court information; the journalists' association refuses to punish these ethical and legal violations, which severely complicate judges' daily work. Such harassment of the judiciary triggers concerns that the judges' seemingly supportive coalition actually may be a collection of groups aligned against the regime and seeking to ride the judges' coattails, rather than a genuine movement for judicial independence and dignity and the rule of law. If such concerns prove true, then the brave activist judges will have to battle the state alone, reinforcing the executive's power as the ultimate arbiter in a divided and weak political society.

Amy Hawthorne is Director of the Hollings Center for International Dialogue. Hesham Nasr is completing his PhD in law.

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Syria: Media Reform and Its Limitations

Marwan M. Kraidy

The Syrian media sector is schizophrenic. On the one hand, Syrian musalsalat (television serials) are considered the best in the Arab world and compete head-to-head with their famed Egyptian counterparts. On the other hand, Syrian news and public affairs programming wallows in a protracted crisis exacerbated by an increasingly hostile geopolitical context and the Syrian-Lebanese media war that erupted after the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. Prompted by news that few Syrians watch state television news, Syrian writer Anwar Al Qassem commented in the London daily *Al Quds Al Arabi* that the motto of Syrian television appears to be “See not, hear not, speak not.” External challenges and loss of audience have driven Syrian media reform attempts, focusing on both the structure of the sector and the screen appearance of Syrian television. The question now is whether Syrian officials can apply to news the policies that produced successful television drama.

Syrian television drama is a stunning success story. Since the 1980s, the Syrian state has offered its production facilities to private directors in return for rights of first broadcast. This drew film makers and writers whose training in Soviet film realism led to stunning videography, solid dialogue, and engaging treatment of historical themes. This in turn attracted Gulf television programmers, who filled their Ramadan schedules with Syrian drama. Increased profits and recognition have emboldened the industry to tackle controversial contemporary issues such as terrorism and AIDS. This success has rattled the Egyptian television industry but also led some venerable figures such as Mohammed Ukasha, Egypt's leading drama writer and director, to collaborate with Syrian actors and directors.

Because Syrian officials have been either reluctant or unable to apply to news and current affairs the lessons of the drama sector, however, Syrian news lags far behind. Following the February 2005 Hariri assassination, Lebanese television networks such as the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation (LBC) and Future Television (FTV) accused Syria of having played a role in the assassination of Hariri. In addition to their leading status in Lebanon's terrestrial television landscape, both LBC and FTV have influential satellite channels with significant followings among Syrians and other Arab viewers. With its small following, Syrian state television was no match.

While Syrians, like most Arab viewers, gravitated to LBC's entertainment programs, they were aware of LBC's historically anti-Syrian politics. The surprise came from FTV, whose hitherto accommodating editorial line towards Syria turned vitriolic in the aftermath of the assassination. In its newscasts, talk shows, patriotic music videos, and virtually all other programs, FTV became a full time critic of the Syrian regime, collapsing its terrestrial and satellite broadcasting to become unabashedly "Hariri TV." It is therefore no surprise that newspapers talked of a "divorce" between Future TV and the Syrian public.

In response to these developments, Syrian officials announced an elaborate "plan to modernize media work," mentioned in the final resolution of the summer 2005 Baath Party Congress. Before the congress, then-Information Minister Mehdi Dakhlallah (a former journalist) publicly stated that Syrian newspapers were "unreadable," pressured Syria's chief censor to resign, and called on journalists to insist on "freedom of expression" and to abandon "the vocabulary of confrontation." Dakhlallah declared that Syrian media were in a transition from "dirigiste media" to "media with a purpose."

Structural reforms in the plan include establishing a Syrian Media City in the outskirts of Damascus, allowing privately-owned Syrian satellite television channels to operate within restrictions, permitting privately-owned FM radio stations, and appointing an increasing number of women in key positions in the sector. The newly-appointed director of Syrian television, Diana Jabbour (a Christian woman and non-member of the Baath), announced that her mission was to "make the screen a bridge between citizens and the state." Bolder steps have included allowing limited and controlled access to official newspapers by Syrian opposition writers—typically critics of corruption and not critics of the regime, the military, or the intelligence services.

While structural reform appears to be gaining steam, efforts to improve the screen image have been largely cosmetic—literally. In March, the six thousand employees of the Syrian Radio and Television Commission received a memorandum detailing "international criteria" for the physical appearance of television anchors, hosts, and presenters. Besides banning strong makeup for women, the guidelines stipulated that a television anchor's weight could not exceed the last two numbers of their height, so that a 160 centimeters tall newscaster could not weigh more than 60 kilograms. It is doubtful whether such changes will be sustainable, as they appear to be inspired by the Lebanese television channels (known for using women as visual attractors) rather than by the experience of Syrian television drama, whose success is based on artistic and policy innovation.

Marwan M. Kraidy is Assistant Professor of International Relations and International Communication at American University in Washington, DC, and a Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, DC. He is writing a book on the social and political impact of Arab reality television.

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Gulf States: Educational Reform's Real Goals

Ebtisam Al Kitbi

In recent years the Arab Gulf states— Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar, and Oman —have undertaken wide-ranging changes affecting many aspects of life. Among the most prominent areas of change is education, which lays the foundation for cultural, social and political consciousness. Although in general political leaders in the Gulf reject the idea of reform imposed from the outside, paradoxically they are receptive to such reform in the sensitive and critical field of education. A quick look at educational initiatives already underway and those under consideration can shed light on how new curricula will shape the minds of coming generations.

Among the most important changes in the Gulf is increasing reliance on the English language at the university level, despite the fact that English language instruction in elementary and secondary public schools in the region remains weak. The decision to change the language of instruction in the social sciences and humanities to English, although many students lack the required proficiency, has profound implications for education.

It is difficult for students to engage enthusiastically in the detailed discussion required to understand the sophisticated concepts, theories, and debates in the humanities and social sciences when it is clear to them that their English language

skills are not up to the task. Students are likely to question the usefulness of studying in a foreign language when they encounter obstacles that arise from language deficiencies despite their intelligence, motivation, and the effort they expend in scholastic achievement. When students discover that their failure to follow along in the reading material at the required speed, or to achieve acceptable grades in exams, or to produce a well-written research paper are all caused by their deficiency in a foreign language, many will be discouraged and will abandon educational pursuits. This would be an unfortunate societal loss.

With the exception of a small group of outstanding students who master English, many others who will resolve to adopt patience and perseverance in finishing their studies will have to be content with unremarkable scholastic achievement. Naturally, this is not the type of student that the public policies in the Gulf countries aim to produce, nor is it the type of student that is required by the demands of development efforts.

The increasing reliance on English is an example of the sort of proposed changes in educational systems that serve foreign interests more than they serve the societies of the Gulf. The insistence of foreign powers on a change in the educational philosophy in the Arab Gulf region comes within the context of the control and suppression of university youth so that their world view in the future will be compatible with and serve the interests of those powers. It is known that when the interactive relationship between the social and political contexts and the universities is strengthened, internal and external change results—as is made clear by the effective role of students in many Arab and international experiences. Altering the role of higher education neutralizes university students and prevents them from being an effective force for change.

Strategic reform of educational systems aiming, in the long run, to bring about an increase in national achievements would require greater cohesion between the coming generations and the issues relevant to the general population. It would also entail opening up space for popular participation in the political sphere and in socio-cultural action. The more the educational system is in step with society and complements public policies, the more the results will serve actual needs in the Gulf States.

Ebtisam Al Kitbi is assistant professor of political science at the United Arab Emirates University. This article was translated from Arabic by Kevin Burnham.

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News and Views

Iraq: Cabinet Posts under Debate

Disputes among Shiite, Kurdish, and Sunni politicians over the interior and defense portfolios in Iraq are delaying the formation of a government by prime minister-designate Nuri Al Maliki. Factions within the Shiite alliance are also wrangling over three candidates to head the Oil Ministry. Observers believe Maliki may take temporary control of the contested interior and defense portfolios in order to meet the May 22 deadline to form a government. The Sunni bloc has threatened to withdraw from the political process if it fails to receive its fair share in the new government.

In contrast to the discord at the national level, the parliament of Iraq's Kurdish region unanimously approved a 42-member cabinet on May 7 in an unprecedented show of unity between the region's two major parties—the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Nechirvan Barzani of the KDP was appointed prime minister and Omar Fatah of the PUK deputy prime minister.

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Kuwait: Electoral Law Reform; Amendments to Public Gatherings Law

A heated debate is taking place in Kuwait over the government's proposal to amend the 1962 electoral law to reduce the number of electoral districts from 25 to 10. After weeks of political feuding, the parliament voted on May 16 to refer the electoral reform bill to the Constitutional Court, as suggested by conservative and tribal MPs who oppose the bill. After boycotting the vote because they believe the referral to the Constitutional Court is designed to stall the reform process, proponents of the amendment—the liberal and Islamist MPs—decided on May 17 to interpellate Prime Minister Sheikh Nasser Bin Muhammad Al Sabah, a move that may set the stage either for the dismissal of the cabinet or the dissolution of parliament by the emir. They argue the electoral amendments will make the elections more broadly representative (and less based on sectarian or tribal factors) and will discourage vote buying by undermining candidates who depend on tribal links and the provision of services in smaller districts to win seats. Despite the boycott by more than half of the MPs, all 16 cabinet members were present and voted in favor of referring the issue to the Constitutional Court. Kuwait's legislature has 50 elected deputies, but cabinet members have the right to vote in parliament. Minister of Information Anas Al Rushaid resigned on May 9 in protest against the amendment and was replaced by journalist Muhammad Al Sanousi.

On May 1, Kuwait's Constitutional Court revoked 15 clauses of the Public Gatherings Law No. 65 of 1979, which restricted public gatherings without prior permission from the authorities. The court ruled the law unconstitutional because it violated freedoms stipulated in the constitution. The law was enacted in 1979 by a decree from the late emir after he dissolved parliament. Observers believe this ruling sets a precedent in Kuwait by challenging the emergency powers of the emir; historically the Constitutional Court has shied away from ruling on the constitutionality of laws issued in the absence of

parliament.

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Bahrain: Government Pressures the National Democratic Institute

The Bahraini government is attempting to restrict the activities of the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI), a U.S.-based nonprofit organization that promotes democracy worldwide, ahead of upcoming parliamentary and municipal elections. The head of NDI's office in Bahrain, Fawzi Guleid, was asked by immigration authorities to leave the country by May 12 because his residency had expired. According to Lulwa Al Awadi, head of the governmental Bahrain Institute for Political Development (BIPD), Guleid's residency was not renewed because NDI's activities in Bahrain violate the Law of Political Association which prevents foreign organizations from funding political societies. NDI rejected these accusations and affirmed that it does not fund political societies but rather offers training courses for elected officials and leaders of civic groups, including the political opposition, which recently ended a four-year election boycott. Since its formation in 2005, the BIPD has demanded that NDI seek prior approval of contacts with Bahraini civic groups. NDI has rejected these demands on the basis that it operates independently in all other countries it works in (including nine Arab countries). NDI was invited into Bahrain in early 2002, ahead of Bahrain's first municipal and parliamentary elections in almost three decades. NDI announced it will continue its activities in Bahrain from its Washington office.

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Egypt: Crackdown on Protests

Egyptian police and security officers beat and detained participants in a May 11 rally near a Cairo courthouse where two reformist judges were to have appeared in disciplinary proceedings. There were also reports that plainclothes police harassed journalists covering the protests; journalists from Al Jazeera, Reuters, and Qatar national television said they were beaten and their equipment was smashed. Click [here](#) for more details. According to the Muslim Brotherhood, 300 people were arrested including some of its members, but security officials say only eight people were formally detained. Between April 24 and May 7, approximately 50 other activists were arrested for demonstrating in support of the judges. They face charges of "insulting the president, spreading false rumors, and disturbing public order." Click [here](#) for more details.

Fifty members of the Muslim Brotherhood were arrested for putting up posters and distributing leaflets protesting a two-year extension of the emergency law on April 30. The law allows indefinite detention without trial, permits trial of civilians in military courts, and limits freedom of speech and association by prohibiting gatherings of more than five people without permission. The law has been renewed every three years since its institution in 1981 after the assassination of President Hosni Mubarak's predecessor Anwar Sadat. Mubarak and Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif have pledged that the emergency law will be replaced by a more specific counter terrorism law.

Commenting on the events, State Department Spokesman Sean McCormack said on May 11 that the United States was deeply concerned about the path of political reform and democracy in Egypt and considered these actions incongruous with the Egyptian government's professed commitment to increased political openness and dialogue. He called on the Egyptian government to allow peaceful demonstrations for reform and civil liberties. Click [here](#) to read the full statement.

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Syria: Crackdown on Human Rights Activists; Election Law Committee

The wave of arrests and trial of human rights activists and opposition figures in recent past months is continuing:

- On May 14, Syrian authorities detained prominent writer and activist Michel Kilo days after he signed a petition calling on the government to improve relations with Lebanon. Kilo has long called for reform in Syria and has criticized the government's involvement in the political affairs of Lebanon.
- On April 30, security agents arrested Fateh Jammous, a prominent member of the Communist Labor Party and a member of the broad coalition of Syrian opposition figures known as the "Damascus Declaration," upon his arrival at Damascus airport from a trip to Europe where he met with other Syrian opposition figures. Jammous served 17 years in prison on charges of belonging to the banned Communist Labor Party before being released in 2000.
- Anwar Al Bunni, lawyer and member of the Human Rights Association in Syria, said on April 23 that Shafer Haissa (detained six months ago on charges of belonging to a banned Islamic group) died due to torture while in police custody. The government said that Haissa died of a stroke.
- Syrian writer Ali Al Abdullah and his son, arrested in April, will stand trial on June 18. Al Abdullah spent six months in jail last year for reading a statement by the exiled leader of the banned Muslim Brotherhood at the Al Atassi forum's meeting in Damascus on May 7, 2005.
- The Syrian State Security Court sentenced Mahmoud Ayoub Othman and Ibrahim Khalil Maho to up to four years in

prison on April 30, on charges of belonging to the outlawed Kurdistan Worker's Party. Said Mahmoud Khaled Bakri was also sentenced to four years on charges of belonging to an unidentified Islamist group. Click [here](#) for more information in Arabic.

The Syrian parliament announced on May 6 it will form a committee to draft a new electoral law before legislative and municipal elections in 2007. The committee will debate changing the current simple majority electoral system to a proportional representation system. Currently, candidates for legislative elections run in direct simple majority elections in 15 constituencies.

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Palestine: Hamas and Fatah Prisoners Sign Joint Petition

Amid violent clashes between members of the rival Fatah and Hamas parties, imprisoned members of both parties drafted a joint platform on May 10 that calls for the establishment of a Palestinian state within the 1967 boundaries alongside Israel. The document's two main signatories were Fatah leader Marwan Barghouti and a prominent Hamas figure, Abdel Khaliq Al Natsheh. While President Mahmoud Abbas welcomed the document, the response from Hamas was guarded. A "national dialogue" meeting between Hamas and Fatah to produce a common platform and pave the way for a government of national unity is scheduled to take place by the end of May.

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Jordan: First Private Television Station

Jordan's first private television station, ATV, is set to be launched in the coming months. According to the station's managing director Muhind Khatib, former journalist at pan-Arab satellite station *Al Arabiya*, ATV is aimed at satisfying the dire need for a private Jordanian station focused on domestic issues. ATV, which has the same ownership as the independent daily newspaper *Al Ghad*, received a license from the Jordanian Council of Ministers in 2004.

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Libya: U.S. Restores Full Diplomatic Ties

U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice announced on May 15 that the United States will remove Libya from a list of state sponsors of terrorism and reopen an embassy in Tripoli "in recognition of Libya's continued commitment to its renunciation of terrorism and the excellent cooperation Libya has provided to the United States and other members of the international community in response to common global threats faced by the civilized world since September 11, 2001." Relations between Libya and the United States dramatically improved after Libya committed to forswear support for terrorism and dismantle its weapons of mass destruction programs in 2003.

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Algeria: President Pardons Journalists

In an unprecedented move, Algerian president Abdelaziz Bouteflika announced on May 3 a pardon for journalists sentenced to prison for "gross insult to state officials, offending the president of the republic, injuring state institutions, defamation, and insult." The pardon only applies to journalists who have been definitively convicted after appeal, and not to those whose appeals are still pending. The pardon also excludes renowned journalist Mohamed Benchicou, who has been in prison since June 14, 2004, because he was not convicted of defamation but of violating the currency laws. His sentence, however, was widely viewed as retaliation for his daily *Le Matin's* critical editorial line against the government.

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Morocco: Electoral Law Reform; Crackdown on Press Freedom

The Moroccan ministry of interior is drafting a new electoral law and will refer it to parliament in its spring session, which began April 14. The amendments are being debated by Morocco's main political parties. The Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP)—the party with the most parliamentary seats (50/325)—is calling for maintaining the current proportional representation system but increasing the size of the electoral districts and the percentage of votes a party must obtain to enter parliament. Currently, parties that win over three percent of the vote in legislative elections are allowed representation in parliament. The National Rally of Independents (RNI, 41 seats) prefers a single-member district system. According to the Party for Justice and Development (PJD, 42 seats), a single-member district system would increase corruption and state interference in the elections. Like USFP, the PJD is also calling for an increase in the three percent threshold.

Politically motivated prosecutions of independent newsweeklies are rolling back press freedom in Morocco, according to a new **report** by Human Rights Watch. In the past year, courts have imposed heavy fines on four weeklies or imprisoned their journalists; they are now instituting proceedings against a fifth weekly. The newsweekly facing the heaviest pressure is *Le Journal Hebdomadaire* after an appeals court upheld sentence of in a defamation suit. The punitive damages against the weekly's publisher Aboubakr Jamaï and writer Fahd Iraqi were the biggest ever given to journalists in Morocco: 3.1 million dirham (US \$356,500) to the head of the European Strategic Intelligence and Security Center, a think tank in Brussels. The court also fined the magazine \$10,900. Some rights groups argue that the government is using this case to intimidate independent media.

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Press Freedom Reports

According to a **report** by Freedom House released on April 27, the Middle East and North Africa region continues to rank the lowest for press freedom in the world due to extremely restrictive legal environments in most countries. In a positive trend, however, the spread and influence of pan-Arab satellite television networks has led to greater openness in the media environment throughout the region. Also four countries—Algeria, Morocco, Jordan, and Egypt—have seen improvements since 2004 and are only one point away from being ranked as Partly Free on the Press Freedom Index.

Libya and Syria were ranked the fifth and ninth most censored countries in the world respectively in a May 3 **report** by the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ). According to the report, Libya has the most tightly controlled media in the Arab world. The government owns and controls all print and broadcast media and does not allow news or views critical of Libyan leader Muammar Qadhafi or of the government. In Syria, the media are under heavy state control and influence; some newspapers and broadcast outlets are in private hands but are owned by regime loyalists or are barred from disseminating political content. The regime has harassed critics through arrests or warning.

A special CPJ report ("**Princes, Clerics, and Censors**") released on May 9 finds that independent reporting on politics remains nearly absent from the Saudi press. According to the report, the country's conservative religious establishment acts as a powerful lobbying force against enterprising coverage of social, cultural, and religious matters and government officials dismiss editors, suspend or blacklist dissident writers, order news blackouts on controversial topics, and admonish independent columnists over their writings to deter criticism or to appease religious constituencies.

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Upcoming Political Events

- Iraq: National Reconciliation Conference in Baghdad, June 11-12.
- Bahrain: Municipal elections in May; legislative elections in October.
- Jordan: Municipal elections expected in mid-2006.
- Yemen: Presidential and municipal elections, September 2006.

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Views from the Arab Media

Al Jazeera's political debate show "**Ma Wara Al Khabar**" (Behind the News) featured on May 12 a discussion on the status of Syrian opposition movements. Fayez Sayegh, director-general of state-run Syrian television and radio, accused the Syrian opposition in exile of being out of touch with the reality in Syria and distorting the situation to appeal to Western governments. He asserted that there is a national movement within the Syrian Baath Party that is trying to introduce reforms without undermining Syria's sovereignty and national interests. Misef Halfawi, a leader in a new London-based Islamist movement, argued that his movement has supporters in Syria but that it had to be announced from London because the Syrian government prohibits free expression. Hazem Nahar, member of the founding committee of the Damascus Declaration, admitted that the Syrian opposition is still in its infancy but said that all its members are working for the interests of the Syrian people.

Syrian writer Shadi Qahwash criticizes the Syrian government's attempts to reform the political party and electoral laws in a May 11 opinion **article** in *Ash Sharq Al Awsat*. He contends that despite the government's claim, the changes proposed in the draft political party law do not encourage pluralism. By stipulating that only parties that accept the National Progressive Front platform will receive licenses, the law excludes real opposition parties. Qahwash also doubts the electoral committee's capacity to draft a fair electoral law because it is composed mainly of Baath party members.

A May 8 episode of "**Ma Wara Al Khabar**" discussed the rising tension between Hamas and Fatah. Bassam Al Salhi, member of the Palestinian Legislative Council, argued that the situation has escalated because Fatah did not respect election results and continued to interact with Hamas as if it were still an opposition party. Journalist Yasser Al Zaatera added that there is a concerted effort by some Palestinian officials to deprive Hamas of any actual power.

In an April 27 opinion **article** in *Ash Sharq Al Awsat*, Saleh Al Qilab, former Jordanian minister of information and director of

Al Arabiya, argues that the arms smuggling dispute between the Jordanian government and Hamas highlights a split in the Hamas leadership since its electoral victory. The reactions from different Hamas leaders to the accusations leave no doubt that there are two movements: an external movement led by Khalid Mishal and an internal one headed by Ismail Haniyya.

A May 14 [article](#) in Jordan's independent daily *Al Ghad* by Mohammad Abu Rumman posits that the Hamas dispute has unmasked tense relations between the Jordanian government and the Muslim Brotherhood. To date Jordan has provided a model of cohabitation for the region because the relationship between the government and the Islamists was founded on common principles: working peacefully under the constitutional umbrella, rejecting violence, recognizing the importance of political stability, and placing Jordan's national interest above other regional interests. This dispute provides an opportunity for both parties to renew their commitment to these principles. In this context, Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood has a responsibility to act as an effective mediator between the government and Hamas.

On *Al Arabiya's* political show "[Panorama](#)" on May 8, hostess Najwa Qassem interviewed Kuwaiti politicians on the electoral reform debate. Kuwaiti parliament member Saleh Ashour argued that the main issue in the debate is the size of the electoral districts and that they must be drawn in a way that ensures that the difference in the population of the districts is between 10 and 30 percent. He added that the resizing of the districts will reinvigorate the political scene by allowing the entry of new political actors.

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Read On

Several recent publications focus on developments in **Iraq**:

- In *[Iraq: The Logic of Withdrawal](#)*, Anthony Arrove makes the case for immediate withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq; he asserts that the U.S. presence is the main source of instability in the country (New York: The New Press, 2006).
- Civil war has already begun in Iraq, and the U.S. presence only exacerbates terrorism. Immediate withdrawal from Iraq might be the best means for achieving U.S. interests in the greater Middle East, argues William E. Odom in "[Cut and Run? You Bet](#)" (*Foreign Policy*, May/June 2006).
- The United States is losing the Iraq war, concludes Nir Rosen. Rosen's first-hand account *[In the Belly of the Green Bird: The Triumph of the Martyrs in Iraq](#)* describes Iraq's occupation, reconstruction and the country's apparent descent into civil war (New York: Free Press, 2006).
- Adeed Dawisha and Larry Diamond argue that Iraq's three elections in 2005 demonstrate the limits of electoral system design in managing polarizing divisions ("Iraq's Year of Voting Dangerously," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 17, no. 2, April 2006, 89-103).

Several recent publications discuss **Egypt**:

- Supporting liberal ideas and figures in Egyptian politics represents a realistic approach for transforming the regime from within, contends Hala Mustafa in "[A Policy for Promoting Liberal Democracy in Egypt](#)" (Foundation for Defense of Democracies, White Paper Series, May 2006).
- Recent clashes between Muslims and minority Coptic Christians in Egypt triggered unprecedented public debate over sectarian tensions in the country. National consensus on issues of political reform and citizenship is a precondition for answering the Coptic question, argues Issandr El Amrani in "[The Emergence of the 'Coptic Question' in Egypt](#)" (*Middle East Report Online*, April 28, 2006).
- Egypt's 2005 presidential and parliamentary elections—widely dismissed as a sham—in fact marked a significant departure in the Egyptian political scene, argues Yoram Meital in "The Struggle over Political Order in Egypt: The 2005 Elections" (*Middle East Journal*, vol. 60, no. 2, Spring 2006, 257-79).

Several publications address reform in specific Arab countries:

- In "[Syria: What Reforms While a Storm is Building](#)," Samir Aita examines the prospects for political reform in **Syria**, and analyzes the impact of regional and international developments on the domestic situation (Arab Reform Initiative, Arab Reform Brief no. 60, April 2006).

- Robert G. Rabil's *Syria, the United States, and the War on Terror in the Middle East* provides a history of the modern U.S.-Syrian relationship, putting America's war in Iraq and democracy promotion agenda in the context of this contemporary history (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2006).
- The Islamic Action Front's reaction to the arms smuggling dispute between **Jordan** and Hamas reflects the party's own emboldened attitude following Hamas's January 2006 electoral victory, argues David Schenker in "**Hamas Weapons in Jordan: Implications for Islamists on the East Bank**" (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Watch no. 1098, May 5, 2006).
- Fatah's efforts to combat Hamas by consolidating power in the presidency will lead to its own marginalization in **Palestine**, argues Charmaine Seitz in "**Fatah Ventures Into Uncharted Territory**" (*Middle East Report Online*, April 19, 2006).
- *Al talim wa atharuhu ala al ada al siyasi li adaa majlis al auwab al Yamani: 1997-2003* (Education and Its Effects on Political Performance of Members of the Yemeni House of Representative: 1997-2003) measures the relationship between educational qualifications and the level of participation and engagement of legislators in **Yemen** (Gulf Research Center, Dubai).

Several recent publications in Arabic address regional trends related to reform:

- The May 2006 of *Al Mustaqbal Al Arabi* (The Arab Future) includes analysis of the challenges to democratic reform in the Arab world, the situation in Iraq, and the 2005 Egyptian parliamentary elections.
- *Buhuth fi thaqafat al dimuqratiya wal nizam al arabi* (Studies in the Culture of Democracy and the Arab System) by Libyan political scientist Zahi Al Mogherbi explores the problems of democracy and development in Africa, and the clash between the culture of democracy and authoritarianism in the Arab public and political spheres (Benghazi: Dar Al Kutub Al Wataniya, 2005).
- Libyan human rights activist Jumaa Ahmad Atiqa discusses the cultural and political impediments to the emergence of effective human rights organizations in the Arab world in *Huquq al insan: Muqarabat* (Human Rights: Approaches) (Cairo: Arajin, 2005).

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