



Greetings from the Project on Middle East Democracy!

Last week began with President Bush's final State of the Union address, in which support for democracy abroad was affirmed, but less prominently than in previous addresses. Bush also signed the 2008 Defense Authorization Act into law, while asserting his privilege to ignore certain provisions that he sees as violating the constitutional powers of the executive. Debates continued in Washington over the crisis in Pakistan and the state of political progress in Iraq. This week kicks off with President Bush releasing his budget request for fiscal year 2009 today, while the House will later this week markup a bill addressing refugee populations and human rights in the Middle East and North Africa.

For more detailed coverage of the debates surrounding U.S. foreign policy and the prospects for democracy in the Middle East, be sure to check out POMED's blog, [the POMED Wire](#).

The Weekly Wire

February 2, 2008

Legislation

On Monday, [H.R.4986](#), the **National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2008**, was signed by President Bush and became Public Law No: **110-181**. However, in the accompanying [signing statement](#), Bush [asserted](#) that four provisions of the bill, including one prohibiting the establishment of permanent military bases in Iraq, violate the constitutional powers of the executive and that his administration is not bound to abide by those provisions. The law is very similar to an earlier version, [H.R.1585](#), passed by the House and Senate in December but vetoed by the President, except that it drops one provision that Bush objected to regarding lawsuits against countries that sponsor terrorism. For more detail on relevant portions of the law, see this [POMED report](#).

On Wednesday, [S.RES.437](#), sponsored by **Sen. Byron Dorgan** (D-ND), a resolution establishing a special committee of the Senate to investigate the awarding and carrying out of contracts to conduct activities in Afghanistan and Iraq and to fight the war on terrorism, was referred to Senate committee.

Committee Hearings

The House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform (House 1/29): **The Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs** held a hearing entitled, "Pakistani Elections: Will They Be Free and Fair or Fundamentally Flawed (Part II)." The hearing served as a follow-up to Chairman Tierney's December 20, 2007 hearing on the Pakistani elections that featured, among others, former Senate Majority Leader **Thomas A. Daschle**. Ambassador **Richard A. Boucher**, Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, U.S. Department of State, testified at the hearing. Subcommittee Chairman Rep. **John F. Tierney** presided over the hearing. For POMED's notes on the hearing, [click here](#).

The Senate Committee on Foreign Relations (Senate 1/31): held a hearing entitled, "Afghanistan: A Plan to Turn the Tide?" In Panel I, **Ambassador Richard A. Boucher**, Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, U.S. Department of State and Ambassador **David T. Johnson**, Assistant Secretary, International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, U.S. Department of State testified at the hearing. The second panel's witnesses were comprised of **General James L. Jones, Jr.**, USMC (Ret.), Former Commander, European Command and Supreme Allied Commander Europe, **Thomas Pickering**, Former Under Secretary for Political Affairs, U.S. Department of State, and Ambassador **Richard Holbrooke**, Former U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations. Committee Chairman Senator **Joseph R. Biden** presided over the hearing. For POMED's notes on the hearing, [click here](#).

In Washington

Bush's State of the Union Address and Responses: Many were quick to respond to **President Bush's** assertions on foreign policy during his [final State of the Union address last week](#). The goal of supporting democracy abroad featured somewhat less prominently than in previous addresses, though Bush did declare that "building a prosperous future for our citizens also depends on confronting enemies abroad and advancing liberty in troubled regions of the world. Our foreign policy is based on a clear premise: We trust that people, when given the chance, will choose a future of freedom and peace."

While Bush noted that "We've seen Afghans emerge from the tyranny of the Taliban and choose a new president and a new parliament," some argued that [it is not terrorists that hinder democracy in Afghanistan](#), but practices like [marrying women off at a young age](#) and the [conviction of journalists on "blasphemy" charges](#), practices that are "problems with the establishment." In response to Bush's depiction of Iraq as "good progress," lawmakers expressed their belief that "Bush's rosy depiction of the situation in Iraq [sends exactly the wrong message to Iraq's leaders](#) by relieving pressure on them to [make progress on political reconciliation](#)."

Concern about Upcoming Pakistani Elections: Many in Washington last week continued discussion of the [upcoming parliamentary elections](#) in Pakistan, analyzing [what went wrong](#) over the past two years and [what Pakistan and the United States can do](#) to recover stability in the country. Others looked at the

[stimuli for militancy](#) in Pakistan, finding that the United States' support of **President Pervez Musharraf** [has encouraged extremism](#), or expressed concern over [the conflicts Bilawal Zardari and Asif Ali Zardari will have to face](#) as the PPP's new leadership.

Political Situation in Iraq: In the latest attempt to [measure political progress of Iraq](#), there was indication of a "broad acceptance of the new constitutional regime," even though "many obstacles remain and there is little time in which to surmount them, given the American pressures for continuing withdrawal." In acknowledgement of the success of the troop surge in improving Iraqi security, some note that [the country's pressing problem is political](#), and urge **President Bush** to withdraw his support for **Prime Minister Nouri Maliki** if his government continues to be so ineffective.

U.S. Relations with Hamas? After successful parliamentary elections for Hamas in the West Bank and Gaza in 2006, the U.S. and Israel have strongly supported Fatah movement's **Mahmoud Abbas**, begging the question, "[Isn't it now time for the United States to find a way to deal with Hamas](#), directly or indirectly?" Others argued that the U.S. should [express no interest](#) in [talks with Hamas](#) unless they first relinquish control in Gaza.

Islam, Democracy Promotion, and the Presidential Candidates: In response to an analyst's argument discussed last week, one article [disputed the notion](#) that some presidential candidates are using "Islamophobic" rhetoric as a short-term political tool. While some of the candidates themselves [praised the current administration's efforts to encourage democratic reform](#) in the Middle East, [others](#) made [no mention](#) of democracy promotion.

Also Worth Reading

Michael Fitzpatrick analyzed the [U.S. diplomatic shift](#) towards Iran after the National Intelligence Estimate declared that Iran suspended its nuclear weapons program in 2003. Fitzpatrick argues that the NIE effectively removed the option of a U.S. military strike, allowing the American government can now practice peaceful diplomacy. Nonviolent tools, such as UN sanctions, are now more viable and credible. "There is now a greater window of opportunity for moving ahead on a path that does not include war among its more probable outcomes."

In the Middle East

Declining Situation in Syria: While some commented on [the closing gap of opportunity of Israeli-Syrian negotiations](#), others were alarmed at the arrest of [Syria's eleventh political prisoner since December](#), **Riad Seif**, leader of the nation's largest opposition coalition, seen as "a clear sign that the Assads, once engaged and afforded any sense of legitimacy, [tend to misbehave even more not less.](#)"

Democracy Slowly Developing in Muslim World: One observer looked at the ["long, messy and painful process" towards democratic government](#) in three non-Arab countries from the Muslim world: while Pakistan has "shown the world that an unpopular military government is failing to hold the country together," Turkey's Justice and Development Party "knows full well that [continuing political](#)

[success and the underlying legitimacy of the party](#) depends on listening to the desires of the voters.”

Freedom in Turkey: In response to two major Turkish parties submitting a joint plan to [ease the ban on the Islamic headscarf in universities](#), some were quick to note that “the move is [likely to enrage the country’s secularists and clear the way for a more openly religious society](#).” The recent conviction of **Atilla Yayla** for expressing his “negative” opinions of the late Turkish founder **Mustafa Kemal Atatürk** caused many to describe it [as one of Turkey’s steps backward](#) in its “long struggle to build a liberal society.”

Egypt’s Prospects for Democracy: Analysts concluded this week that the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood’s “leadership has remained [remarkably consistent in its adherence to the democratic process](#)” and “[has also matched its words with deeds](#).” Elsewhere **President Hosni Mubarak** was criticized for having “ruled Egypt with [little regard for competence](#) or change,” as can be seen in the regime’s [undemocratic methods during the 2005 elections](#).

Dwindling Hopes for Resolution of Lebanese Political Crisis: Many worried about the [timing of Lebanon’s latest car bomb assassination](#) of **Captain Wissam Eid**, suggesting “a broader political motive” and doubting that Hezbollah’s attempts to change its public image [signal an honest change](#) in its mission or its violent activity and Hezbollah “perhaps unintentionally, is [pushing Shiites into a confrontation](#) with the rest of Lebanese society to protect itself.”

Also Worth Reading

POMED’s **Stephen McInerney** [examined](#) a number of recent steps towards improved women’s rights in Saudi Arabia. These included allowing Saudi women to stay in hotels without being accompanied by a male guardian, allowing the establishment of the first women’s rights organization, and an announcement that women would be permitted to drive by the end of 2008. McInerney noted that “lifting the ban on driving would be a move of great symbolic value, as Saudi Arabia is the only country to prohibit women behind the steering wheel, and this fact is the most often cited example to demonstrate the oppression of Saudi women.”