



Dear Friend,

Greetings from the Project on Middle East Democracy!

Last week saw lots of developments in the Middle East, with the headlines dominated by the eruption of the worst internal violence in Lebanon since the end of the Lebanese civil war in 1990. Also, Pakistan's new coalition government fell into a crisis of its own, as it failed to agree upon the reinstatement of 60 judges dismissed by President Musharraf last year. In Washington, debate raged over renewed accusations from the Bush administration against Iran and the role of Iran in Iraq. This week, Kuwaitis will vote in parliamentary elections in attempt to resolve the political crisis spurred by tensions between the monarchy and the parliament over economic reforms. On Capitol Hill, there is hope that the House and Senate will reach agreement this week on a joint budget resolution for Fiscal Year 2009.

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

May 12, 2008

### *Legislation*

On Wednesday (5/7), house resolution [H.R.5658](#) to authorize appropriations for fiscal year 2009 for military activities of the Department of Defense, to prescribe military personnel strengths for fiscal year 2009 was referred from House Armed Services Subcommittee to Full Committee. Originally introduced on (3/31) by **Rep Ike Skelton** (D-MO) of the House Armed Services.

On Wednesday (5/7), [H.RES.1129](#) was referred from the House Armed Services Committee to the Subcommittee on Readiness. The resolution states that "because readiness shortfalls exist within the Armed Forces of the United States, thus increasing risk to the national security of the United States, Congress should immediately act to pass a clean fiscal year 2008 global war on terror supplemental in the interest of national security and to ensure the integrity of the entire military force." The legislation was originally introduced by **Rep Randy Forbes** (R-VA) on (4/22).

On Thursday (5/8), **Rep Walter Jones** (R-NC) introduced [H.RES.1183](#) amending the Rules of the House of Representatives to observe a moment of silence in the House on the first legislative day of each month for those killed or wounded in United States engagements in Iraq or Afghanistan. The piece was then referred to the House Committee on Rules.

## *Committee Hearings*

**The Foreign Affairs Committee** (House 5/7) **Full Committee** held a hearing entitled "U.S. Foreign Policy in Pakistan: Implications for Regional Security, Stability, and Development." Witnesses included The Honorable Richard C. Holbrooke [no prepared statement], [The Honorable Thomas R. Pickering](#), General James L. Jones, USMC, Retired [no prepared statement]. Chairman [Howard L. Berman](#) presided.

**The Foreign Affairs Committee** (House 5/8) **Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia** began to hold a hearing entitled "U.S. Assistance to the Middle East: Old Tools for New Tasks?" Witnesses included [The Honorable C. David Welch](#), Assistant Secretary at the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs for the State Department, and [Mr. George A. Laudato](#), Administrator's Special Assistant for the Middle East at USAID. Subcommittee Chairman [Gary L. Ackerman](#) (D-NY) presided. Four members of the subcommittee gave opening statements before the hearing was suspended for the members of the subcommittee to participate in votes on the House floor. The voting took longer than planned and after 90 minutes the hearing was postponed until a yet-to-be determined time in the weeks ahead. Both witnesses submitted their written statements to be part of the record, but neither was able to make any oral statement or take questions from subcommittee members.

## *In Washington*

**Bush Administration Escalating Tensions with Iran?** Many have [commented](#) on the Bush Administration's renewed [accusations](#) directed toward Iran over alleged support of arms to inimical Iraqi militias. Some warned that Iran was being duplicitous in its public statements and behind-the-scenes actions, while [others stressed](#) the need for [diplomacy and political compromise](#) to defuse tensions. It was noted that recent accusations were largely [repetitions of old allegations](#). Also last week, a British [appellate court ruled](#) that "the British government was wrong to include an Iranian resistance group, the [People's Mujahedeen of Iran](#), on its list of banned terrorist groups," and contended that "the group says it is committed to restoring democracy in Iran and opposes any attempt by Iran to acquire nuclear weapons." The Mujahedeen e-Khalq (MEK) remains on the [United States terrorist list](#) maintained by the State Department. One analyst noted that while Iran is not a liberal democracy, "it is certainly a far cry from those fake democratic republics," and that as a result, increasing voter apathy is likely to "disrupt the delicate balance of theocracy and democracy - possibly [unleashing a crisis of legitimacy](#) in the Islamic Republic."

**Debate over Iraq Policy:** As the [five-year anniversary](#) of President Bush's declaration of the end of "major combat operations" in Iraq passed, analysts put forth [a variety of views](#) on what U.S. policy steps should now be to help spur Iraqi political reconciliation and development. Some [stressed](#) the importance of [formally integrating](#) Sunni factions "into the Shiite-dominated Iraqi security forces," but others saw this process as [set back](#)

by the U.S. embrace of independent Sunni militias during the "surge." Others support [focusing first](#) on economic development, arguing that establishing Iraqi economic independence will "show Iraqis that a federal political structure can serve all the people." Also stressed were [the need to use diplomacy](#) with all of Iraq's neighbors as well as the need to [begin planning](#) an "orderly exit."

**U.S. Foreign Policy, Democracy, and Oil:** Discussion continued last week on recent public polling data, with some [observing](#) that although "key features of U.S. foreign policy continue to generate animosity in the Middle East," it is still the case that "America seems to be winning the battle of ideas on some important fronts," including a decrease in support for terrorism and "broad support for democracy, capitalism and globalization." The author of a [new book](#) on foreign policy expresses concern "that the United States continues to have a maximalist view of international security - which sees any deviation from what we want as evidence of evil." Others [weigh in](#) that the ideological approach of the Bush administration has resulted in "not at all what the United States had hoped to accomplish." And recent setbacks on democracy in the region [were described](#) as partly the result of rising oil prices: "As the price of oil goes up, the pace of freedom goes down. As the price of oil goes down, the pace of freedom goes up."

#### *Also Worth Reading*

In the [second part of an interview](#) with *Middle East Progress* last week, **Ambassador Francis J. Ricciardone**, who just ended his three-year tenure as U.S. ambassador to Egypt, examined the evolving role of the U.S. in the Middle East and efforts to maintain a strategic relationship with Egypt while promoting democracy and human rights. Ricciardone had tentative praise for some steps taken by the Mubarak government, but expressed frustration with the repression of the political sphere: "We cannot fathom why the Egyptian state does not give secular liberal democratic voices more political space, rather than positing what we see as an artificial binary choice between the ruling party vs. the Muslim Brotherhood."

#### *In the Middle East*

**Conflict in Lebanon:** The news from the region last week was [dominated](#) by the [outbreak of internal fighting](#) in Lebanon. Last week the Fouad Siniora government declared Hezbollah's independent communication network to be illegal and also announced that **Colonel Wafiq Shaqir**, the head of security for the Beirut airport, would have to step down amid allegations that he was assisting Hezbollah with surveillance. A general anti-government strike planned for Wednesday by the General Confederation of Labor Unions over stagnant wages and price increases began to [turn violent](#) as Hezbollah joined in and [closed off many Beirut roads](#) on Wednesday, including those to and from the airport, then proceeded to [seize control](#) of all of West Beirut on Thursday by defeating smaller Sunni and Druze militias. This followed a rare [public address](#) from Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah.

Over the weekend, Hezbollah withdrew from most of West Beirut, turning it over to the Lebanese Army, while fighting spread to the mountains east of Beirut. On Monday, heavy fighting erupted in the northern city of [Tripoli](#). Emboldened by their military success, Hezbollah has now [called for the resignation](#) of **Prime Minister Siniora**.

The violent clashes are seen by many as [reminiscent](#) of the fighting that raged in Beirut during the civil war from 1975-1990, and are considered the worst internal sectarian fighting in Lebanon since that time. Many observers put the current violence in the context of the [presidential vacuum](#) in Lebanon and the political stalemate that has paralyzed the government for more than a year. Some blamed Hezbollah for [exploiting](#) the "social dissatisfaction" of its supporters and resorting to violence for political gain, while others blamed the moves of the March 14 coalition or the [misguided policy approach](#) of the [Bush administration](#) since 2005. One analyst argued that the Sunni-Shi'a conflict in Lebanon is [not reflected](#) by the reactions of mainstream Islamist groups of either kind across the region. Some analysts [examined](#) the difficult [policy options](#) now available to the U.S. as President Bush [heads to the region](#) this week.

**Political Crisis in Pakistan:** The PPP and PML-N parties of the ruling coalition government [had agreed to vote](#) by yesterday on legislation to reinstate the 60 judges dismissed by Musharraf last year. However, when a compromise could not be reached by this deadline, nine PML-N cabinet ministers [resigned in protest](#), casting doubt on the ruling coalition government. Former Prime Minister **Nawaz Sharif's** PML-N wanted an immediate reinstatement of all 70 judges, while the PPP [wants a compromise](#) allowing some of the replacement judges to remain in office, in an attempt "to gradually erode Musharraf's power through legislation." One observer [stressed the need](#) for a redefined American relationship with the new Pakistani government, in which the U.S. engages directly with the Pakistani people, warning that "Failure to do so in the Bush administration's remaining months could cause irreparable harm to Washington's relationship with Pakistan." And a Pakistani speaker in Washington [examined the challenges](#) posed by political Islam for democratic development in Pakistan.

**Preview of Kuwait Elections on Saturday:** One analyst [argued](#) that parliamentary elections scheduled for this Saturday, May 17, "will produce little change" and will not resolve the underlying tensions that led to the current crisis, the dissolution of parliament, and early elections. It was further argued that "Kuwait's looming political crisis may have some serious implications for democracy in the Gulf," and could be "an important development the United States is overlooking." Another observer notes the [growing Kuwaiti discontent](#) with "too much democracy," and its perceived effect on slowing down their economy. The Kuwaiti public seems increasingly frustrated with its government's inability to reform the state-controlled economy and modernize as have Gulf neighbors like Dubai and Qatar. Public interest in Saturday's elections appears to be high, based on [reports](#) of the effects of the elections on the Kuwaiti travel and entertainment industries.

**Tensions Continue in Egypt:** In a recent [move](#), the Egyptian parliament voted Monday in favor of a package of price hikes and tax surges in order to pay a recently-announced 30% wage [raise](#). The decision follows steadily escalating tensions and demonstrations over soaring food prices and stagnant wages. One observer comments on [the effects](#) of inflations and rising food prices on the middle class, not only in Egypt but also in Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Last Sunday, a planned [nationwide general strike in Egypt](#) organized on Facebook and spread via email, did not have the same scale or impact as strikes a month earlier. Now, reports surface that one of the organizers of the strike [was seized and beaten](#) last week by Egyptian police. Meanwhile, [efforts continue](#) to free an Egyptian journalist and translator [detained since last month's protests](#).

*Also Worth Reading*

Human Rights Watch has released a 50-page report entitled "[Perpetual Minors: Human Rights Abuses Stemming from Male Guardianship and Sex Segregation in Saudi Arabia](#)," which is based on more than 100 interviews with women in the kingdom regarding their basic rights. The report is quite critical, arguing that the biggest obstacle to women's advancement in Saudi Arabia is "the imposition of male guardianship over adult women," and describes the Saudi regime as having taken few concrete steps to address the issue. However, some might argue that the fact that Human Rights Watch was able to interview the women and publish this report is a sign of at least limited progress.