



Greetings from the Project on Middle East Democracy!

Over the weekend, Iraq held its provincial elections, sparking debate over what lies ahead for Iraq's fragile democracy. Otherwise, most debate in Washington focused on the new Obama administration's approach to the Middle East. In Congress, a bill was introduced in the House aiming to transfer all military assistance to Egypt to economic aid. This week, expect much more commentary and analysis of the Iraqi provincial elections, while the Senate focuses primarily on the financial stimulus package, and the House has another short week, with the Democratic policy retreat beginning on Thursday.

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, 2009

Legislation

On Monday (1/26), [H.R.696](#), sponsored by **Rep. Anthony Weiner** (D-NY), which would prohibit U.S. military assistance to Egypt and instead provide economic support, was introduced and referred to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs. The bill calls for Congress to provide an equivalent amount of funds to Egypt but in the form of economic assistance rather than military aid. The bill would prohibit the use of economic assistance funds by the Armed Forces of Egypt and defines military assistance to include non-proliferation and anti-terrorism activities. The bill does provide a mechanism which would allow the president to waive the requirement due to national security concerns.

On Wednesday (1/28), [H.Con.Res.29](#), sponsored by **Rep. Steve Rothman** (D-NJ), which expresses the sense of Congress that the United Nations should improve the transparency and accountability of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), was introduced and referred to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs. The bill calls upon the United Nations to ensure UNRWA is not employing, funding or

support terrorists in any fashion.

Congressional Hearings

On Tuesday (1/27), the Senate Armed Services Committee met to receive testimony from **Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates** on the challenges facing the Department of Defense. In his prepared statement, [Secretary Gates](#) discussed U.S. military operations region by region. In his testimony, Secretary Gates asserted that the Defense Department's primary goal is to ensure Afghanistan is not used as a base of terrorism against the United States. He also stressed that in Afghanistan and Iraq there are no clear military solutions and that efforts to increase civil-military coordination will be primary to success.

In Washington

President Obama Speaks to Arab World: In his [first televised interview](#) as President, Barack Obama sat down with **Hisham Melhem** of *Al Arabiya*. In choosing the largest network news provider in the Arab world, President Obama chose to speak directly to the people of the region, as [advocated](#) by some prior to his interview. Some saw the interview as symbolic of a [new approach](#) to the Middle East, while others saw the substance of interview as [not so different](#) from previous administrations. Some commentators [reflected on the last eight years](#), while others speculate what Obama's plans will mean for the Middle East. In Iran, the president's overtures [received](#) a cool reception as officials await Obama's deeds, not words. Others [questioned](#) Obama's premise that U.S.-Muslim relations have suffered over the past thirty years, citing U.S. sacrifices on behalf of Muslims in the Balkans, Somalia, Kuwait, Afghanistan and Iraq.

As President Obama begins formulating policy, many look back to his campaign trail promises. The realities of turning campaign promises into policy reality go further than simply changing the rhetoric. While he may have succeeded in [changing the tone](#), he will ultimately be judged by his actions. Will he be willing to live up to his campaign promise to ensure democracy's [success in Afghanistan](#)? Will he backtrack on some promises, such as engagement in [Kashmir](#), to pursue others more aggressively? Engagement with Iran is speculated to be likely to include an [open letter](#) to the Iranian people, an approach consistent with speaking directly to the people of the Muslim world. And what role will the U.S. play in a number of [key elections](#) in the Middle East?

Relations with Iran: Thirty years after the Iranian revolution, debates swirl anew as how best to improve relations between the U.S. and Iran. While President Obama's calls for direct talks with Iran are applauded by most, analysts [point out](#) that Tehran may not be so willing to come to the table. British Defense Minister **Malcolm Rifkind** [posits](#) that the U.S. could stand to gain whether Iran decides to come to the table or not. If they decide to punt on talks, the U.S. position would be strengthened. If they come to the table, talks could lead to normalization. Another scenario exists however. The Iranians could use the talks as a means to continue their enrichment while looking like a serious partner in peace. Director of the IAEA **Mohamed ElBaradei** [discussed](#) the situation with the *Washington Post*. ElBaradei asserts that direct dialogue could break the stalemate between the two countries and help to rebuild the

trust which is necessary to make progress towards regional security.

Mitchell's Mission: New Middle East envoy **George Mitchell** [began his mission](#) in Cairo. In a discussion with **President Mubarak** he stressed the importance of supporting Egypt's efforts in extending and consolidating the Gaza ceasefire. Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, and Islamists in general, have failed to constructively engage with the international community over Gaza. Analysts [point out](#) that the Brotherhood has not attempted to differentiate between its support for Gaza and its opposition to the Egyptian regime. Former IRA leader and current Belfast West MP **Gerry Adams** [highlights](#) Mitchell's accomplishments in negotiating a lasting peace in Northern Ireland, but points out that ultimately "the U.S. and the international community have to engage with this issue in a concentrated way and treat the participants on the basis of equality." Others [urge caution](#) in comparing the crises, arguing that dialogue with Hamas will not prove fruitful if its objectives are non-negotiable.

Also Worth Reading

The Middle East Institute has launched a year-long series of its publication, *Viewpoints*, devoted entirely to the tumultuous and influential events of 1979 in the Middle East. The first installment focuses on the [Islamic Revolution in Iran](#), with diverse essays from 53 policy experts. The essays "discuss the Revolution's effects on many different facets of life in Iran, including gender issues, education, media, the environment, energy, and foreign policy [and] provide an opportunity for reflection on the Revolution's positive and negative outcomes, as well as its long-term influence and future prospects."

In the Middle East

Provincial Elections in Iraq: Campaign fever [swept](#) through Iraq as provincial elections took place on Saturday. More than 15 million Iraqis registered to vote out of an estimated 17.2 million eligible. Early reports pointed to [success](#) by secular parties and allies of Prime Minister Maliki, amid [lower than expected turnout](#), which some analysts tried to [explain](#). 14,400 candidates had been cleared to run for 440 seats, with 4000 of those candidates being women. While the elections will have little effect on the Federal parliament or cabinet they may be most important for their [potential effect](#) on the voices in the center of Iraq's political spectrum. A government run [opinion poll](#) made predictions of results. The [stakes](#) are not as high as for the 2005 elections as significant progress has been made, although similar [logistical problems](#) may surface this time around. The [fractured Shia](#) of Iraq are symbolic of the internal power struggle that has taken place after the U.S. invasion.

Challenges in Pakistan and Afghanistan: Pakistani **President Asif Ali Zardari** [called on President Obama](#) to increase U.S. aid to Pakistan in order to defeat extremists, urging Congress to pass the *Enhanced Partnership with Pakistan Act*. He argued that a stable Pakistan is key to long-term, U.S. strategic interests. Meanwhile, the Taliban has tightened its grip on Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province. As women's rights rapidly deteriorate, some [question the willingness](#) of the Afghan and Pakistani governments to negotiate with the Taliban. Others [caution](#) that an increase in foreign military forces in Afghanistan may not necessarily prove effective, or [claim](#) the White House is favoring military force over development. A more balanced approach [could include](#) fighting extremism and strengthening governance through a multi-layered approach incorporating comprehensive counterinsurgency coupled with

development and good governance activities.

Saudi Judiciary and the Media: Recent [comments](#) by Saudi **Sheikh Lohaidan** have reignited the debate over the struggle for control of the judiciary in Saudi Arabia. Lohaidan denounced the owners of satellite networks who air vulgar and indecent programming, asserting their actions are punishable by death in Saudi courts.

Also Worth Reading

EuroMeSCo has published a [report](#) entitled *Pragmatism Rather than Backlash: Moroccan Perceptions of Western Democracy Promotion*. This comprehensive study examines the various Western actors engaged in democracy promotion in Morocco and the ways in which they are perceived by civil society, political parties, journalists, and the government. A similar publication from the Council on Foreign Relations provides an [interesting survey](#) of current controversies surrounding the world of democracy promotion.

In Case You Missed It

On Tuesday (1/27), Freedom House hosted an event discussing the findings from its recently published *Freedom in the World 2009* [survey](#). The report shows that global freedom is continuing its retreat, with 34 countries registering declines. Participants in the discussion included **Arch Puddington**, Director of Research for Freedom House; **Thomas Carothers** of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; **Larry Diamond**, Senior Fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution; **Josh Muravchik** of the American Enterprise Institute; and **Jackson Diehl** of the Washington Post. For POMED's notes on this event, [click here](#).

On Thursday (1/29), POMED and the SAIS International Development Program co-hosted a panel discussion focused on the issue of foreign assistance in light of the current economic crisis. Will the new administration increase or decrease aid to the Middle East? Will institutions such as MEPI and the MCC be preserved? How can development institutions affect political reform? Addressing these questions were **Navtej Dhillon**, Director of the Middle East Youth Initiative at Brookings; **Daniel Brumberg**, Acting Director of the Muslim World Initiative at USIP; and **Jim Kolbe**, Member of the U.S. House of Representatives, 1985-2007. The discussion was moderated by POMED's Executive Director **Andrew Albertson**. [Click here](#) for POMED's notes on the discussion.