

## Arab Reform Bulletin: October 2006

# Arab Reform Bulletin

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## Insights and Analysis

### Palestine: How Weak is Hamas?

*Jarrett Blanc*

Negotiations for a unity government between Fatah and Hamas are the fruit of international pressure, which has forced Hamas to consider sacrificing some of its formal authority within the Palestinian Authority (PA) despite the fact that the Islamic movement and its allies hold 77 out of 132 seats in the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC).

How the international community should react to Hamas-Fatah coalition negotiations depends in part on whether international pressure has also reduced Hamas's more informal sources of authority. If Hamas retains meaningful authority outside of PA institutions, forcing it from government would simply make the PA ineffective in serving the needs of either Palestinians or Israelis. Measuring Hamas's power relative to that of Fatah requires a look at its three bases: social services, military force, and popular support.

Palestinian and foreign observers ascribed Hamas's victory in 2005 local elections and 2006 legislative elections to its network of efficient and honest social service providers. These social service networks are more than just a basis of Hamas' popularity; they are also an indication of its organizational strength. While it is difficult to measure Hamas's social services precisely—it does not publish disclosure forms or annual reports—United Nations officials report that it remains as active as it was prior to the election. The stifling financial sanctions that have all but eliminated the PA's ability to provide government services have not, apparently, diminished Hamas's capacity to provide services on a smaller scale.

Hamas's military power gives it the ability to launch terrorist attacks on Israel and to fight Fatah military groups. From either perspective, military power equates to real authority within the PA. While it is also difficult to measure Hamas's military power directly, it is possible to observe its use. Clashes between Hamas and Fatah forces in Gaza since the beginning of October indicate that Hamas has, at the very least, retained a rough military parity with Fatah. Despite Israeli incursions targeting Hamas military forces, news reports indicate that one of Hamas's armed groups, the Executive Force, has become strong enough to force some Fatah commanders to leave Gaza.

Regular public opinion polling in the PA makes Hamas's popular support somewhat easier to measure. In the legislative election, Hamas and Fatah were close in terms of their share of the popular vote, with Hamas winning 44 percent to Fatah's 41 percent. Most opinion polls prior to the election showed Fatah with a small lead over Hamas, an error probably due to methodological problems in polling and an understandable reluctance of respondents to admit support for Hamas given the possibility of Fatah or Israeli reprisals. Immediately after the election, support for Hamas in polls jumped to just over its election result of 44 percent, perhaps indicating a combination of a honeymoon for the new legislative council and a reduction in respondent fear.

While it is possible to cite more recent polls, or parts of more recent polls, as evidence that Hamas is losing substantial support, the broader trend in polling data indicate that Hamas and Fatah remain evenly matched. Polls since June show support for the two parties settling at about 40 per cent support for each, although the most recent reputable poll shows a reduction of support for both parties, with Fatah at 35 percent and Hamas at 31 percent. Given the margin of error, methodological problems, and possible respondent fear factor, this result should also be seen as evidence of generally equivalent public support. Looking deeper into the polls, while Hamas has a 44 per cent negative rating for its role in post-election crises and a 60 per cent "poor" rating for implementation of its election program, 62 per cent still support Hamas's most important decision: not to recognize Israel.

After seven months of severe political and economic crisis, including the virtual closure of Gaza and financial cut-offs leading to 170,000 PA employees being paid less than two months' salary, Hamas has indicated a willingness to negotiate an agreement to share formal authority in the PA. But while continued pressure may succeed in forcing Hamas to cede more (or all) of their formal authority within the PA, experience thus far does not indicate that it will undermine Hamas's other sources of power.

In December 2005 and January 2006, the international community pressed the PA to conduct PLC elections as scheduled, overcoming strong Fatah reservations to the electoral process. In part, the international community took this position because the Fatah-led government did not reflect real power relationships in the PA and so was unable to deliver meaningful reform of PA institutions or improvements in security for Israel. In making decisions now about whether to accept a potential government of national unity, the international community must take into account Hamas's real and apparently enduring strength.

*Jarrett Blanc is a Council on Foreign Relations International Affairs Fellow based at the United States Institute of Peace. He was the International Foundation for Election Systems' Chief-of-Party in the Palestinian Authority from March 2005 through March 2006.*

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## **Egypt: A Leap toward Reform—or Succession?**

***Joshua Stacher***

Egypt's ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) convened its fourth annual conference September 19-21, advertising it as "The Second Leap Forward". Speeches by senior party members and carefully packaged briefing papers emphasized the party's achievements in economic and political reform and laid out a fairly ambitious agenda for the coming year. The real story at the conference, however, was Gamal Mubarak's increasing political weight and seemingly unstoppable ascent towards the presidency.

Senior NDP figures such as Hossam Badrawi added fuel to popular speculation that Gamal's succession is inevitable. In an interview published on the conference's first day in the party's new organ *Al Watani Al Youm*, Badrawi provided the most explicit scenario yet by saying, "It is our right as a party to nominate [during the next presidential election] whoever has the qualifications for leadership and it is his right to accept or decline... This is not succession because, at the end of the day, it must take place in a framework of transparency and democracy." Not to be outdone, Prime Minister Ahmad Nazif in his convention speech made sure that all 2,000 party members in attendance knew who was responsible for strengthening the party and its policies by singling out "our brother Gamal" for his efforts.

Gamal Mubarak for his part looked, sounded, and performed like a seasoned politician. During hours of briefing delegates and press conferences, Gamal appeared well versed in domestic and foreign affairs, attempting to bolster his populist and nationalist credentials by citing the urgent need to translate economic reforms into improved living standards for poor Egyptians and expressing independence from U.S. plans for the Middle East. Gamal also made all major announcements during the conference, including Egypt's intention to pursue nuclear energy for peaceful purposes and the need to redefine the U.S. -Egyptian relationship. President Hosni Mubarak's speech closing the conference merely reiterated themes already introduced by Gamal.

Although the younger Mubarak spoke in terms of consensus, process, committees, and programs, his descriptions did not match what actually took place. NDP delegates from the nation's 26 governorates used the conference to air personal concerns and rub shoulders with the country's political elite, but did not appear to be included seriously in policy debates. The few who offered constructive comments at plenary and committee sessions were often politely ignored as senior NDP members simply reiterated policy statements rather than addressing criticism or suggestions.

On the conference's final day, when attendees voted to transform the presentations into party policies, dissent was entirely absent. Secretary General Safwat Al Sharif reminded party members that the papers being voted on were well studied and that President Mubarak had approved the measures. The climatic moment of internal democracy happened in an instant. Almost before Al Sharif could finish saying "all those in favor," he declared the measures "approved" as hands immediately flung into the air.

The political reform proposals adopted in rapid succession are ambitious, if only on the surface. Political Training Secretary Muhammad Kamal said the NDP would propose amending 20-25 articles of the constitution during the parliamentary session that will begin in November. According to speeches and policy papers at the conference, amendments will pave the

way for replacing the state of emergency with a specific counter terrorism law, rebalancing parliament's powers vis-à-vis the executive, changing the electoral system (most likely to one of proportional representation), and increasing local governing council powers.

While the proposals sounded impressive, however, no specific amendments were discussed at the conference. Given the NDP's failure so far to consult with opposition forces, there is widespread suspicion that the actual legislation to be introduced will favor the interests of the ruling party's upper echelons.

Opposition parties and movements responded to the conference by trying to discredit it. The Muslim Brotherhood's parliamentary bloc discussed the impending onslaught of NDP-authored legislation and is preparing its own list of constitutional articles for proposed amendment, but in general opposition groups focused on the conference's popular perception. Speaking to *Al-Ahram Weekly*, Brotherhood Supreme Guide Muhammad Mahdi Akef characterized the conference as a step backward, arguing that "If this conference had Egypt's interests in mind, its agenda and the topics they wanted to discuss should have been made public. But there is consensus now that there is a group within the NDP that makes decisions and modifies laws that only enforce *tawreeth* (succession). All the laws and constitutional amendments they're cooking up point in this direction."

This year's NDP conference did not officially anoint Gamal Mubarak as Egypt's next president, but it did foreshadow how hands will raise when asked about his presidential candidacy. Whether Gamal is the heir apparent is no longer an open question in Egypt; the question for Egyptians and outside observers now is simply how soon the succession will take place.

*Joshua Stacher is a lecturer of Political Science at the British University in Egypt.*

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## **U.S. Policy and Yemen: Balancing Realism and Reform on the Arab Periphery**

***Jeremy M. Sharp***

In an ironic turn of events, Yemen's September 20 presidential and local elections garnered extensive favorable coverage by the normally critical *Al Jazeera*, while they received only scant attention from the U.S. government, heretofore eager to highlight any sign of reform in Arab states. Why did U.S. officials refrain from highlighting what many foreign observers have praised as successful elections? Possible explanations include a return to traditional priorities in which security interests supersede democracy promotion, a calculated U.S. effort to promote Arab reform more quietly, or simply an oversight due to other distractions.

Yemen, a resource-poor Arab country situated at a healthy distance from the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, is a crucible of sorts for U.S. attempts to strike a balance between reform and other goals. U.S. -Yemeni bilateral security and intelligence cooperation has been, and remains, the top U.S. priority. Since the 2000 Al Qaeda attack on the USS Cole, the United States has helped Yemen build its coast guard to patrol the Bab Al Mandab and to meet an Al Qaeda-inspired terrorist threat that recent events demonstrate to be very real. On September 19, the day before the elections, Yemeni security forces thwarted two terrorist attacks against oil installations in the northeastern region of Ma'arib and on the Gulf of Aden coast at Dhabba.

In Yemen the United States also faces the challenges of mixing encouragement and criticism of Arab regimes' liberalization efforts and of deciding how to deal with Islamists. This is also true in Morocco and parts of the Persian Gulf, where U.S. officials are quietly urging liberalization. U.S. policy toward engaging certain Islamist movements is left somewhat vague—perhaps deliberately so—but there are efforts being made to maintain contacts with moderate, non-violent Islamist factions. In Yemen members of the Islah party (a coalition of old guard Muslim Brotherhood members, Salafists, and tribes) appear to welcome dialogue on reform and have participated, along with other Yemeni political parties, in programs sponsored by the U.S. -based National Democratic Institute. Still U.S. officials exercise caution, as the leader of the Salafist strain of Islah, Shaykh Abd Al Majid Al Zindani, has been designated as a U.S. Specially Designated Global Terrorist by the U.S. Treasury Department for his alleged role in providing financial support to Al Qaeda operations and recruitment.

The Yemeni presidential election was about more than just esoteric notions of political reform; it was about the real issue of presidential succession. As in Egypt, where speculation abounds over the grooming of Gamal Mubarak for succession, there is widespread concern among Yemen's opposition parties over the prospect of President Ali Abdullah Saleh's 37-year old son Ahmed inheriting the reins of power. This fear was among the main motivations that brought Yemen's diverse opposition parties—socialists, Islamists, and Baathists—together in this year's elections. In a recent *Washington Post* interview, opposition presidential candidate Faisal Bin Shamlan (who received 21 percent of the vote) remarked that "We

subordinated our ideological agendas to the one thing we all had in common, which was a realization that political reform was a necessity if we were to save democracy in Yemen and stop the country's descent into endemic corruption.”

President Saleh's victory surprised no one; he is a populist leader who appeals to the everyman, and the ruling party's overwhelming resource advantage helped him considerably. Despite opposition allegations of fraud, foreign observers released preliminary conclusions that the election was relatively free and fair with the typical shortcomings seen in developing nations: there were breaches in voting secrecy, underage voters, and a number of inaccuracies in the voting registry. U.S. government officials were clearly encouraged by the relatively smooth election, believing that process is important despite imperfections.

The key policy question now is whether the Yemeni government will derive any tangible benefits from holding the election. In November 2005, the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) suspended Yemen's eligibility for assistance under its Threshold Program, concluding that after Yemen was named as a potential aid candidate in fiscal year 2004, corruption in the country had increased. Yemen can reapply in November of this year.

Despite the upcoming MCC decision, Yemen remains largely absent in public U.S. policy discussions regarding democratization. Regime-manipulated political reform is but one malady in a long list of Yemen's socio-economic problems. The country is still recovering from civil war and re-unification, and it has enormous social challenges including endemic poverty, high rates of illiteracy, and water depletion. Yet, in a sense, the general lack of U.S. attention to Yemen in itself creates opportunities. Unlike U.S. relations with more strategically important countries such as Egypt, U.S. -Yemeni relations are not under a microscope, giving policymakers on the ground flexibility and freedom to experiment.

*Jeremy M. Sharp is a Middle East policy analyst at the Congressional Research Service. The views expressed are the author's and not necessarily those of the Congressional Research Service.*

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## **Saudi Arabia: Local Councils Struggling to Produce Results**

***Jafar Muhammad Al Shayib***

The local councils of Saudi Arabia elected in spring 2005, still in their formative stages, have yet to make their mark on municipal decision making. They are caught between the promises that they made to voters during last year's elections and the reality of dealing with local governments known for deeply ingrained bureaucracy. Although it is difficult to evaluate fully the performance of the local councils during their short tenure so far, the general impression among Saudis is that the councils have far to go in order to produce tangible results for the citizenry.

Three main factors affect the local councils' effectiveness. The first is the council members themselves—elected and appointed—and their understanding of their duties. The second is the official administrative framework governing the councils' operation, authority, and ability to oversee local administration. The third is the general public and its role in monitoring the councils and interacting with them.

To begin with, the eight month gap between the councils' election and taking office had a negative impact, resulting in a retreat by the electorate and even by the elected members from local work. There had been great enthusiasm after the general elections—held in Saudi Arabia for the first time in many decades—and many citizens had held high hopes that the local councils would be a conduit for developing local services, improving conditions in the municipalities, and ending the spread of financial and administrative corruption. In addition, the selection of appointed council members caused several problems. Although the selection process was supposed to choose members whose capabilities were appropriate to the councils' activities, it in fact relied on additional factors such as the need for regional and tribal balance. This undoubtedly contributed to a rearrangement of the agendas of some of the councils according to the tendencies and backgrounds of these new members.

A number of administrative and legal problems surfaced in the relationship between the local councils and municipalities. Although there are statutes that clearly stipulate the councils' authority in supervising all work carried out in the municipalities, a number of conflicts have arisen in dealings with the executive apparatus due to the reservations of local officials and to the municipalities' bureaucratic nature. In most of these situations local councils have been forced to find a compromise solution or delay implementation of their decisions because there is no administrative framework to enforce their decisions.

Despite problems working with municipalities, during their first ten months the councils themselves have, on the whole, been active and dealt with a number of important issues. They first reviewed and approved municipal budgets for the year

2007, then focused on improving services in the municipalities in general and dealing with enduring issues such as land grants to citizens and reprioritizing municipal projects. So far councils have not tackled reorganizing municipalities and reviewing their financial improprieties which are among the councils' most important oversight functions. However, measures are underway in some of the councils to hold contractors responsible for negligence and poor performance. Some council members have proposed to do field research in order to more clearly understand citizens' needs and to learn about how other local councils function, whether in Saudi Arabia or abroad.

Saudi citizens have shown a good deal of interest in—and lack of satisfaction with—the performance of the local councils. A number of councils have held open meetings with citizens to present to them the work they have done. These meetings have witnessed sharp criticism of council members and demands that they be more active and focused on issues of importance to citizens. A number of citizens have also offered cooperation and professional expertise to help improve local services in their neighborhoods, but an appropriate framework for popular participation so far has not materialized.

The future achievements of the local councils will depend on their ability to carve out an appropriate position for themselves through which they can perform their prescribed duties. The councils can do this by working more actively with municipalities and delineating clear mechanisms for monitoring implementation of their decisions. They will also need to work on achieving a more mature relationship and greater unity of purpose among council members, as well as between them and the general public.

*Jafar Muhammad Al Shayib is president of the local council of Al Qatif Governate in Saudi Arabia. This article was translated from Arabic by Kevin Burnham.*

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## **Iraqi Kurdistan: Time to Get Serious about Governance**

### ***Bilal Wahab***

Virtually autonomous since 1992, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq has followed an uneven path on the road to good governance. Six months have passed since the formation of the current united Kurdish cabinet. While Kurdistan has been increasingly stable and secure, its potential for accountability and clean government has yet to be fulfilled. Corruption, low wages, incompetence, poor management skills, and lack of opportunity for young people are significant challenges facing the KRG.

After years of discord, conflict, and parallel governments, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) formed a broad coalition and competed jointly in the two post-2003 elections for the Iraqi National Assembly as well as in the elections for the Kurdish National Assembly. Despite the 50-50 power sharing structure and the co-chairing of some key ministries, the new cabinet has performed better than many observers anticipated.

Yet governance in Kurdistan faces challenges due to the legacy of decades-long dictatorship, wars, sanctions and political party monopoly. When left to run the country in 1992, the Kurds had one model of governance to follow: that of the former regime. Hence government institutions became vehicles through which political parties maintained power. The government also remained the largest employer; the KRG spends 60 percent of its budget in salaries to heavily overstuffed public offices. Overstaffing wastes revenues and also gives public officials the opportunity to dispense patronage and abuse their position.

Until recently Kurdish administrations have had little incentive to better their performance. Government officials in earlier Kurdish cabinets were political appointees, and as such were accountable only to their parties. Having just emerged from almost a decade of monopolistic rule, the current cabinet has little experience with accountability and transparency. Moreover, the role of Kurdish political parties other than the PUK and the KDP has been diminishing. These smaller parties are financially or politically dependent on the government, and hence are either co-opted into alliances or silenced through pressure.

Increasing public discontent, however, may mean that the KRG will soon have to address its poor performance. Like the rest of Iraq, Kurdistan has been suffering a shortage of gas and electricity. Demonstrations and rebellions against corruption and lack of services broke out across the region in the spring and summer of 2006, with demonstrators accusing party officials of reaping the benefits of the reconstruction boom. Discouragement about job prospects has led to a new trend of emigration among young people and intellectuals.

Furthermore, an increasingly vibrant media and civil society demand more responsive governance. Although the bulk of the media are still party controlled, the audience for the few independent newspapers and one independent radio station is

growing. Supported by local and international NGOs, these free outlets have acted as public mouthpieces and raised issues considered taboo before.

Iraqi Kurdistan's need for foreign investment is another important incentive to improve governance and curtail corruption. The region is expected to produce oil by the end of 2006. Recent remarks by Iraq's Oil Minister casting doubt on the legality of the contracts signed by the KRG enraged Kurdish authorities, who deemed such comments aimed at undermining the region's efforts to appeal to investors. Having already approved a new investment law, the Kurdish parliament is expected to also approve a draft oil law that recognizes the threat of corruption in the oil industry and seeks to curb it.

On the positive side of the ledger, Kurds—whether officials or not—have a sense of ownership of their region. Even the many Kurdish officials accused of becoming overnight tycoons invest their newfound wealth in the region rather than stashing it in Western banks. And the KRG seems willing to respond to increasing demands for transparency and good governance. Steps in the right direction by the current cabinet include choosing technocrats rather than politicians as ministers and hiring Westerners and returned expatriates as consultants in building institutions, collecting better data for all sectors, and teaching at universities.

Although the KDP-PUK deal dictates that the two parties run jointly in 2007 elections, the two groups should present separate platforms and compete amicably in order to encourage accountability. They should also tolerate other opposition groups. Kurdish politics after Saddam have become more open and outward looking, but there is still room for some serious house cleaning.

*Bilal Wahab is a Fulbright fellow from Iraqi Kurdistan enrolled at American University in Washington, DC.*

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## **Readers React**

It was refreshing to read Moataz El Fegiery's conclusion (September 2006) that in the Arab Middle East (and perhaps elsewhere) official and semi-official media are not helping secular candidates to win elections. Building constituencies is a painstaking, complicated process not amenable to a quick fix by the media, and one in which Islamists show more patience and expertise than their secular rivals. Many Arab voters also are deeply suspicious of their local state-owned media, so when this media promote certain candidates or parties it might do them more harm than good.

In addition to what El Fegiery has rightly touched upon, there is a need to explore the impact of regional (as opposed to local) Arab media on national elections. It has been fascinating to see how fiercely candidates and parties compete to appear on *Al Jazeera*, *Al Arabiyya*, and other pan-Arab satellite channels during elections. The relative credibility and professionalism of these media outlets, along with their extensive coverage of elections in Arab countries, attract large audiences who follow their local elections on regional media. In studying election coverage by these media there may be additional lessons to learn.

*Khaled Hroub*  
Director, Cambridge Arab Media Project

I have just read Mahdi Abdul Hadi's note on the social impact of the Islamist-secularist struggle in Palestine (September 2006), which attributes the process of social Islamization in Palestine to external factors, primarily the policies and practices of the Israeli military occupation and to currents in Israeli culture including Jewish religious revivalism. The article reminded me of a conversation I had more than thirty years ago with Shaykh Muhammad Ali Ja'bari in Hebron. Ja'bari decried the influence of Israel on Palestinian society, which he insisted was the cause of growing secularization. Whom to believe? In any event, the idea of attributing to Israel a process of social Islamization in Palestine that is also taking place to one degree or another throughout the entire Muslim world strikes me as rather forced.

*Mark A. Heller*  
Director of Research, Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies

Notwithstanding the positive developments indicated by Paul Salem (September 2006), the political structure in Lebanon remains extremely fragile and susceptible to manipulation by external forces, principally Iran and Syria. Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Siniora finds himself subject to a vicious campaign by the Hizbollah-Aoun alliance supported by Syria, aimed at eliminating him politically. A cabinet crisis could easily degenerate into a constitutional crisis, and tense Sunni-

Shiite fault lines—seen in the context of increasing polarization between these two communities in Iraq and other Arab countries—have all the makings of a dangerous conflict. It is difficult to see how the conflicting visions for Lebanon presented by Hizbollah and by those who would address the dysfunctional sectarian system while developing relations with the outside world can be reconciled any time soon. As the election of a new president approaches in fall 2007, the Lebanese body politic will face a moment of truth it has tried to avoid since the end of the civil war.

*Hisham Melhem*

Washington correspondent, *Al Nahar* newspaper and *Al Arabiyya* television

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## News and Views

### Iraq: Parliament Passes Federalism Bill

After months of deadlock, the Iraqi parliament passed a law on October 11 setting up a mechanism to implement a constitution provision allowing the formation of federal regions in Iraq, despite vehement opposition by the Sunni coalition and two Shiite parties. The bill was submitted by the largest Shiite bloc, the United Iraqi Alliance, with the aim of creating a Shiite autonomous state in southern Iraq with broad powers over security and petroleum resources. The Sunni Iraqi Accord Front and the National Dialogue Front of Saleh Al Mutlaq boycotted the parliamentary session but a quorum was reached with 138 lawmakers (of 275) passing the 200 articles of the bill unanimously. On September 24, Sunni parties agreed to allow the bill to be presented for a vote after reaching a deal that the law would not come into effect for 18 months and that a 27-member committee would be created to review the constitution. Sunni Arab politicians fear that regional autonomy would deny other regions access to oil revenues and want to amend the constitution to strengthen the powers of the central government.

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### Yemen: Presidential and Local Election Results

After threatening to encourage its supporters to stage street protests, Yemen's opposition parties stated they would accept results of the September 20 presidential election "for the sake of peace and stability." The opposition coalition known as the Joint Meeting Parties that fielded former oil executive Faisal Bin Shamlan as its presidential candidate initially rejected election commission results giving incumbent Ali Abdullah Saleh 77.17 percent of the vote and Bin Shamlan just 21.82 percent, claiming that the government had seized polling stations and stolen ballot boxes. President Saleh acknowledged "mistakes" in the elections and pledged to rectify them in the next one, but stood by his victory and thanked the opposition for giving him his first real challenge in 28 years in power.

In its **preliminary report** released on September 21, the European Union Election Observation Mission described the elections as "an open and genuine political contest" but cited shortcomings including underage voting, voter intimidation, arrest of opposition candidates, and the overwhelming use of state resources by the ruling party during the election campaign. Les Campbell, Director of the National Democratic Institute's Middle East Program, which assisted in monitoring the elections, said that "Having watched democratic developments for 10 years in the Middle East, this may have been the most significant election so far." A **report** by the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information highlights restrictions imposed on freedom of the press.

The Election Commission on October 4 postponed the announcement of results of local elections also held September 20, citing a lack of final results from all districts. Allegations of fraud and election-related violence, including the deaths of candidates and election officials, have stalled the process. The commission reported that 90 percent of the vote count is complete and that initial results show a victory of the ruling General People Congress with over 80 percent of votes in the provincial councils and 70 percent in district councils. Approximately 65 percent of the 9.2 million registered voters cast ballots. Click [here](#) for more details.

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## **Bahrain: Run-Up to Elections**

Protesters and opposition parties are accusing the Bahraini government of extending citizenship and voting rights to Sunni migrants from other Arab countries as well as Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India in order to dilute the voting power of the Shiite majority in parliamentary elections scheduled for November 25. A report by former government advisor Salah Al Bandar describing a conspiracy by senior government officials to rig the upcoming elections to reduce the powers of Shiites has added to the tension. According to the report, this effort is led by the State Minister of Cabinet Affairs and head of the Central Informatics Organization Sheikh Ahmed bin Ateyatallah Al Khalifa. Sheikh Ahmed (who also heads the committee overseeing the November elections) denied the claim, saying that the report was an attempt by Al Bandar to erode national unity, sow doubts about the forthcoming elections, and undermine the credibility of officials preparing the elections. Click [here](#) to access the report.

Bahrain's largest Shiite political society Al Wefaq, which is planning to contest at least 19 seats in the 40-member lower house, has called for an independent probe into the report's allegations. Al Wefaq and four other political societies boycotted the 2002 elections to protest constitutional changes that granted the appointed upper chamber of parliament equal legislative powers to the elected lower chamber. Nine candidates, including former member of parliament Abdulnabi Salman, have established a new alliance called the National Unity Bloc. Its platform calls for promoting constitutional reforms that would place legislative power entirely in the hands of the elected lower house, allow for the establishment of political parties, and redraw electoral constituencies.

Bahrain's judicial authority announced that it will for the first time fully supervise the elections. The November elections will be only the second time that Bahrainis will elect fully representative municipal councils and the lower house of the National Assembly. The 2002 parliamentary elections were Bahrain's first since 1975, when former ruler Sheikh Isa bin Salman Al Khalifa suspended the constitution and dissolved parliament.

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## **UAE: First Elections Coming; Crackdown on Human Rights Activists**

The UAE government will hold its first-ever indirect elections for half of the members of the 40-member Federal National Council (FNC), the closest body the country has to a parliament, on December 16. The FNC serves in an advisory capacity and lacks legislative powers. Minister of State for FNC Affairs Anwar Gargash announced election procedures in September; click [here](#) for details. The ruler of each of the seven emirates has named members to the electoral colleges (6, 689 members in total, 1, 189 of them women), who will then elect half the FNC members from amongst themselves. The other half of the council's members will continue to be appointed by the leaders of the emirates. The UAE is the only country among the six Gulf Cooperation Council states that has yet to hold any form of elections. In the past months, security officials and the judiciary in the United Arab Emirates have targeted several prominent human rights defenders. A travel ban and arrest warrant was issued on June 17 against Muhammad Al Mansoori, president of the independent Jurists Association and a prominent lawyer and human rights activist. According to Al Mansoori, the warrant charged him with "insulting the Public Prosecutor" on the basis of his human rights advocacy. Security officials detained prominent lawyer and human rights defender Al-Muhammad Al Roken on July 27 for 24 hours and again on August 23 for three days on charges of "immoral behavior" and questioned him about his human rights activities and contacts. Also, the Ministry of Social Welfare has not replied to applications by two human rights groups for licenses since 2004. Under the Associations Law, the ministry should have replied within 30 days. In a letter to UAE president Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Human Rights Watch called on the UAE to halt the harassment of human rights defenders and allow independent human rights groups to operate legally. Click [here](#) to read the letter.

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## **Kuwait: MPs Blame Government for Electoral Violations**

A parliamentary committee established in July to investigate electoral violations in Kuwait declared on October 1 that it has evidence of government interference in the June parliamentary elections. The committee has not released details of its findings but has requested that the government ask the head of the Citizen Services Apparatus Sheikh Muhammad Al Abdullah Al Mubarak Al Sabah to step down for three months while the investigation unfolds. Government officials have responded that the constitution does not allow a parliamentary committee to make such requests.

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## **Jordan: King Pardons MPs; Parliament Approves Laws**

Jordan's King Abdullah pardoned on September 30 two Islamist MPs, Mohammad Abu Fares and Ali Abul Sukkar. The two were sentenced to 13-month prison terms on charges of fuelling national discord and inciting sectarianism after they attended the funeral of Al Qaeda militant Abu Musab Al Zaraqawi in June. The Islamic Action Front (IAF) welcomed their release but insisted that the sentence had been unfair and that they should regain their parliamentary seats.

Relations between the government and the IAF have been further strained by legislation to tighten control over mosque preachers. On September 27, parliament approved the draft iftaa (Islamic verdicts) law that requires written approval from the religious affairs minister for new mosque preachers and anyone teaching the Quran in mosques. Under the law, violators face penalties of up to one month in prison and a fine of \$142. On September 13 parliament approved a measure that allows only a state-appointed council to issue fatwas (religious edicts) and makes it illegal to criticize these fatwas. IAF MPs rejected the law on the basis that it curbs religious freedoms and freedom of expression.

Parliament also approved legislation on September 27 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. To the dismay of many human rights activists, parliament endorsed a last-minute amendment to allow the Prime Minister to appoint the members.

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## **Syria: Human Rights Developments**

- Journalist Ali Abdullah and his son, Muhammad, were released from prison on October 4 after completing six month-terms on charges including "broadcasting abroad false or exaggerated news which would damage the reputation of the state." A further charge connected with allegations that he insulted the Syrian president was dropped. Click [here](#) for more details.
- Khalil Hussein, Mahmoud Issa, Suleyman Shummar and Muhammad Mahfouz, considered prisoners of conscience by Amnesty International, were released on bail of 1, 000 Syrian Lira (US \$20) on September 25 after they were arrested for signing the Beirut-Damascus Declaration of 12 May 2006.
- According to the National Organization for Human Rights, Abdo Khalaf Wlo, a former leading member of the Kurdish Syrian Democratic party, was released from prison after being arrested in mid-June.
- Anwar Al Bunni and Michel Kilo (who have been held since 14 May) remain in prison, reportedly on charges including "weakening nationalist feelings and inciting racial or sectarian strife." There is no date as yet for their trial or information about which court will hear their case. Click [here](#) for more details.
- Eight Syrian students from the University of Damascus arrested between January and March 2006 continue to be held incommunicado and without legal counsel. The charges are not known, but they were reportedly involved in developing a youth movement and in writing political articles for various websites. They were scheduled to appear before the State Security Court September 26, but the trial has been postponed until November 26. Click [here](#) for more details.

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## **Libya: Verdicts by Abolished Courts Upheld; Prison Clashes**

A court in Tripoli upheld on October 4 the decision of the now abolished People's Court to convict 190 prisoners arrested in the second half of the 1990s on charges related to membership of or links with an unauthorized organization, believed to be the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group. The court had been ordered to retry the cases by Libya's Supreme Court, which reviewed and overturned the original sentences following the abolition of the People's Court in January 2005. Violent clashes in which at least one prisoner was killed took place in the Abu Salim Prison in Tripoli on October 4, after some prisoners were brought back to the prison following the hearing. Hundreds of political prisoners have been detained there in recent years and the prison was the scene of a mass killing of detainees in June 1996, with estimated figures of those killed ranging up to 1, 200. Click [here](#) for more details.

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## Upcoming Political Events

- Bahrain: Legislative and municipal elections, November 25, 2006.
- Algeria: Referendum on constitutional revision, fall 2006.
- United Arab Emirates: Elections to the Federal National Council, December 16, 2006.

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## Views from the Arab Media

Many Arab pundits commented on U.S. Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice's recent visit to the region:

- In an **article** in *Al Hayat* on October 8 Mahmoud Awad argued that Rice's recent trip failed to address the region's real problems. The U.S. government hoped to mobilize moderate Arab leaders against Iran and Hamas. Rice found, however, that the leaders of Egypt and Saudi Arabia were more interested in a comprehensive resolution to the Arab-Israeli conflict than in supporting Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas against Hamas. They were also more worried about a nuclear Israel than a nuclear Iran.
- An October 2 **article** in Jordan's *Al Ghad* by Mohammad Abu Rumman argued that the U.S. strategy of rallying moderate Arab states against Iran's ambitions in the region cannot succeed without a final solution of the Palestinian problem. But due to the lack of Israeli willingness to negotiate now and the deteriorating situation in Palestinian internal politics, there are no viable diplomatic initiatives on this front. In this context, the moderate Arab states seem destined to continue to lose political credibility to Islamist groups and Shiite movements.
- In an October 10 opinion **article** in the UAE's *Al Ittihad*, Ahmed Youssef Ahmed contended that Rice's assertions during her recent visit highlight the contradictions inherent in the U.S. democracy promotion policy. First, the new focus on so-called moderate Arab states such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan proves that the United States continues to seek alliances with anti-democratic regimes. Second, when the United States speaks of democracy, it is not really interested in the democratic process per se but in a desire to see friendly forces come to power in particular Arab countries. Finally, Rice's insistence that democracy will pave the way for peace in the region ignores the fact that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has nothing to do with democracy in Israel or Palestine.
- An October 2 episode of *Al Arabiyya*'s "**Panorama**" debated whether Rice's visit to the region signified a change in U.S. policy. Riad Tabbara, former Lebanese ambassador to the United States, argued that the influence of neoconservatives is decreasing and that the administration is now more willing to work with Europe and through the United Nations. Journalist Yehya Al Amir stated the administration was turning to countries such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan for help in solving the messy situation it created in the region. Palestinian political analyst Ali Al Jarbawi asserted that there has been no fundamental change in the principles underlying U.S. policy yet, only tactical adjustment.
- Abdul Monem Said wrote in a **commentary** in *Ash Sharq Al Awsat* on October 4 that the problem with U.S. policy is not tactics but the strategy of preemption, which is not suited to solving the problems of the Arab world. The United States needs to recognize that it needs a new strategy of engagement with its partners in the region. Only in this way can the United States acquire legitimacy for its actions.

In an **article** in *Al Ittihad* on October 11, Khaled Hroub argued that the polarization occurring in the region between moderates and extremists leaves no room for a large section of public opinion that does not ascribe to either of these axes. Given the weakness of civil society and independent organizations in the region, these voices are unfortunately the weakest link. Intellectuals who seek to maintain their neutrality are finding themselves marginalized in a system that seeks to place everyone on one side or the other of the divide.

*Al Jazeera's "Akthar Min Rai"* (More than One Opinion) hosted an October 6 discussion of the prospects for the Arab world in light of rising tensions. Marwan Bishara, lecturer on international relations in Paris, argued that the deep internal divides in Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine call for national dialogue processes where all sides can reach a compromise. A situation where 51 percent of the population in these countries governs over the remaining 49 percent is unsustainable. Walid Sharara, political analyst at Lebanon's *Al Akhbar* newspaper, argued that the U.S. drive against Iran targets not just that country but all voices of opposition and resistance to U.S. ambitions in the region.

An opinion **article** by political scientist Hassan Nafea in Egypt's *Al Masry Al Youm* on September 24 argued that Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's speech at the annual conference of the ruling National Democratic Party on September 21 showed that the president bears responsibility for Egypt's deteriorating situation. Instead of focusing on rebuilding and modernizing the country, he is concentrating on clearing the path for his son's succession to the presidency

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## Read On

Yemen's elections in September and the country's difficult political history inspired several publications:

- The September 20 presidential ballot solidified President Ali Abdullah Saleh's position while giving foreign governments the political cover they need to continue dealing with him, argues Gregory D. Johnsen. In this highly personalized system it will be up to Saleh to decide whether to work to soften the inevitable economic crash that will come when Yemen's oil runs out or to invest his energies in creating a family dynasty ("**The Election Yemen Was Supposed to Have**," *Middle East Report Online*, October 3, 2006).
- Yemen's failed post-civil war experiment with democratic elections in 1993 can shed light on the challenges facing regionally divided countries such as Iraq, argues Stephen Day in "Barriers to Federal Democracy in Iraq: Lessons from Yemen" (*Middle East Policy*, vol. 13, no. 3, Fall 2006, 121-39).

Several recent publications discuss reform-related developments in **North Africa**:

- Despite its limitations, **Morocco's** Equity and Reconciliation Committee should be recognized as the Arab world's first experience in transitional justice, argues Mohammad Ahmad Bennis in "**The Equity and Reconciliation Committee and the Transition Process in Morocco**" (Arab Reform Initiative, October 2006).
- **Morocco's** top-down reforms have improved economic, social, and human rights conditions significantly but have not changed the distribution of power or the nature of the political system, argue Marina Ottaway and Meredith Riley in "**Morocco: From Top-Down Reform to Democratic Transition?**" (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Carnegie Paper no. 71, September 2006).
- Confronted with challenges such as maintaining legitimacy, dealing with Islamist oppositions, and supplying basic needs to growing populations, **Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia** face three possible regime scenarios: Islamization of the political sphere, continuation of the authoritarian status quo, or accelerated evolution towards democracy (Bruce Maddy-Weitzman, "**Maghreb Regime Scenarios**", *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, vol. 10, no. 3, September 2006, 103-19).
- In dealing with the challenges of Islamic radicalism, **Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco**, have made changes to their constitutions and political systems to allow the inclusion of Islamist groups in formal politics and head off any possible challenges to the survival of the regimes, according to Michael Willis (*Mediterranean Politics*, vol. 11, no. 2, July 2006, 137-50).
- On October 4, Reporters Without Borders released a report based on its first fact-finding visit to **Libya** in 20 years. The report states that despite a relaxation of restrictions in the past few years, the media remain controlled by the Libyan regime and criticism of Muammar Gaddafi continues to be taboo ("**In Libya, You Can Criticize Allah but**

not Gaddafi.”) Click [here](#) for the English version and [here](#) for the Arabic version.

- A recent Human Rights Watch report documents how officials in **Libya** have arbitrarily arrested undocumented foreigners, mistreated them in detention, and forcibly repatriated them (“**Stemming the Flow: Abuses Against Migrants, Asylum Seekers, and Refugees**,” September 13, 2006).

Several new publications treat developments in Egypt and Gulf states:

- In “Constitutional Authority and Subversion: **Egypt's** New Presidential Election System,” Kristen Stilt examines the legal and political context of Egypt's recent constitutional amendment allowing for the country's first multi-candidate presidential elections (*Indiana International and Comparative Law Review*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2006, 335-73).
- In the “**Islamization of Egypt**,” Adel Guindy argues that the Islamic transformation **Egypt** has undergone since the 1970s has turned Copts into second class citizens and led to a regression in modernization and westernization efforts in the country (*Middle East Review of International Affairs*, vol. 10, no. 3, September 2006, 92-102).
- The challenges facing **Egypt's** ongoing democratic transformation include the contested role of religion in politics and the continued centralization of power, argues Egyptian Ambassador to the United States Nabil Fahmy in “Egypt's Unwavering Path to Democratic Reform” (*Mediterranean Quarterly*, vol. 17, no. 3, Summer 2006, 1-11).
- The Bush administration's efforts to manage the war on terrorism and promote regional democracy have led to increased congressional scrutiny of relationships with **Saudi Arabia** and **Egypt**, according to David Dumke (“Congress and the Arab Heavyweights: Questioning the Saudi and Egyptian Alliances,” *Middle East Policy*, vol. 13, no. 3, Fall 2006, 88-100).
- Behind the façade of the **United Arab Emirates'** development boom lies a myriad of deficiencies, including an education system focusing on training rather than developing intellectual content; a culture that sometimes rewards fantasy more than actual accomplishments; and a social structure that discourages young women from making an economic contribution (Timothy N. Walters, Alma Karagic and Lynne M. Walters, “**Miracle or Mirage: Is Development Sustainable in the United Arab Emirates**,” *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, vol. 10, no. 3, September 2006, 77-91).

Several new publications highlight developments in the **Levant**:

- There is no clear basis in **Jordan's** laws for the General Intelligence Department's law enforcement role, finds a recent Human Rights Watch report, which documents the department's continued arbitrary arrests and mistreatment of detainees (“**Suspicious Sweeps: The General Intelligence Department and Jordan's Rule of Law Problem**,” September 19, 2006).
- In “**Ending the Palestinian Political Stalemate: Abbas's Electoral Option**” Mohammed Yaghi and Ben Fishman argue that President Mahmoud Abbas's only effective option to salvage the Palestinian political system may be an early presidential election (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Watch no. 1153, October 12, 2006).
- In ***Hamas: A Beginner's Guide***, Khaled Hroub explains the reasons for Hamas's electoral success and provides an overview of the movement's attitudes toward Israel and its grassroots activities (London: Pluto Press, 2006).
- ***Palestinian Hamas: Vision, Violence, and Coexistence*** places Hamas's ascendancy into context and shows that contrary to its violent image, it is a social and political organization that provides services and makes careful political choices (Shaul Mishal and Avraham Sela, New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

The United States must realize that the real war on **terrorism** can only be won within Islam and at a religious and ideological level, argues Anthony H. Cordesman in “Winning the ‘War on Terrorism’: A Fundamentally Different

Strategy" (*Middle East Policy*, vol. 13, no. 3, Fall 2006, 101-8).

So far the question of permanent U.S. bases in Iraq has triggered no major political debate, but developments point to the necessity of maintaining a military presence in Iraq for several years, notes Walter Posch in "Staying the Course: Permanent U.S. Bases in Iraq?" (*Middle East Policy*, vol. 13, no. 3, Fall 2006, 109-20).

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