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Insights and Analysis

Saudi Arabia: Shi'a Pessimistic About Reform, but Seek Reconciliation

Fred Wehrey

The Saudi Shi'i news service al-Rasid released its second annual human rights report in late April, a survey of discriminatory practices against the Kingdom's Shi'i minority. Noting a palpable stall in government reform efforts, the report cited the influence of Salafi hardliners in the clerical bureaucracy who dissuaded the ruling family from codifying further concessions to Shi'i identity. Other Shi'i activists have pointed to the stagnating effect of the wars in Lebanon and Iraq on the integration of the Shi'a and on reform in general. An oft-quoted phrase attributed to the late King Fahd has acquired new resonance, especially in the Eastern Province: "Why start fires on the inside, when there are fires on the outside?"

The resulting loss of momentum has caused many Shi'a to lose faith in official channels for reform such as the National Dialogue and the municipal councils. Consequently, Shi'i activists and clerics stand at a crossroads. Some, such as the cleric Nimr al-Nimr, have pursued a militant line, stirring fears of a resurgent Saudi Hizballah. More moderate figures such as Hassan al-Saffar, Ja'afar al-Shayeb, and Muhammad Mahfouz have adopted new tactics that augment the regime-sanctioned channels and focus on building cross-sectarian ties. The ultimate goal, according to one activist, is to create "space for the middle" and to diminish the appeal of sectarian mobilization advocated by radicals in both camps.

Seeking to counteract suspicions that Shi'a constitute an Iranian fifth column, some Shi'i intellectuals have pushed for Saudi-based clerical training in order to create a Saudi Shi'i *marja' al-taqlid* (clerical source of emulation). In their view, this would expedite the national integration of Shi'a and remove any basis for accusing them of loyalty to foreign authority. Advocates of this policy point to a Saudi government precedent in creating indigenous theological schools to mitigate outside influence, for example the establishment of Imam Ibn Saud University in 1974 to counter Egyptian and Syrian Muslim Brotherhood teaching at the Islamic University of Medina. It should be noted, however, that this initiative does not enjoy universal support among Shi'i activists; secularists argue that reducing the power of the clerics is a necessary first step in reforming Shi'ism before any national integration can be accomplished.

Shi'i intellectuals also play a role in dialogue with the Sunna. Scholar Muhammad Mahfouz, for example, recently published an edited volume entitled "Sectarian Dialogue in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia" (*al-Hiwar al-madhhabi fi al-mamlaka al-'arabiyya al-sa'udiyya*). The 2007 book includes contributions from noted scholars from Sunni and Shi'i schools of thought—Malikis, Hanbalis, Shafi'is, Hanafis, Zaydis, Isma'ilis and Twelver Shi'a—across the country, and presents a nuanced revision of previous attempts at rapprochement (*taqrib*), arguing instead for fraternity (*ta'akhi*).

Shi'i activists are also continuing a long-standing practice of dialogue and partnering with Salafi reformists in the western party of the country, who serve as what one figure described as a "strike force for reform, deep within the Najd" (the central province of Saudi Arabia from which the ruling family hails, and the birthplace of Wahhabism). Other efforts at inter-sectarian dialogue include Hassan al-Saffar's recent visit to the Salafi stronghold of al-'Unayza and his invitation for clerics from al-Burayda, also a Salafi bastion, to visit the east. But by their own admission, the Shi'i cooperation with other sects in the Kingdom has remained mostly at the informal level, through e-mails, personal contacts, and the occasional publishing of joint manifestos. Disagreements between Shi'a and Salafis about reform priorities—particularly about the inclusion of women's rights—are common.

At the local level, Shi'a point to the long-standing good relations between Sunna and Shi'a living in the Eastern Province as a buffer against Salafi puritanism, which many view as an import from the Najd. Local economic interdependence and social geography play a critical role in tempering the impact of this ideology and reducing the possibility of a spillover of Iraq's sectarian carnage. While there are acknowledged pockets of sectarian radicalism in provincial towns (al-Awamiyya for Shi'a and al-'Anq for Salafis), shared schools, courts, public parks and civil defense forces encourage Shi'i-Sunni harmony.

Whether local efforts at co-existence will translate into willingness by the al-Saud to re-energize reforms toward the Shi'a is unclear. In any case, these recent initiatives have the effect of keeping Shi'a engaged in dialogue and political activism and of preventing frustration at the sluggish pace of reforms from spiraling into widespread radicalism. Ironically, the al-Saud may not fully acknowledge such benefits, and might actually impede them by positioning itself as what one activist called

“the doorway through which all attempts at sectarian dialogue must pass.”

Fred Wehrey, an International Policy Analyst at the RAND Corporation, recently returned from Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province.

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Dubai Inc: Development and Governance, not Democracy

Jeremy Tamanini

Amid the political and security crises of recent years in the Middle East and the on-again off-again U.S. policy of democracy promotion, the oil-rich United Arab Emirates (UAE) have experienced rapid social and economic development in the absence of genuine democratic reform. Dubai provides the most striking case of a government carefully—and successfully—structured to serve this development.

The general terms of Dubai's development trajectory are well documented. Lacking significant energy reserves compared to Abu Dhabi, Dubai's leaders diversified their economy, becoming a regional center for finance and business services. Government continues to be the driving force behind development in Dubai, despite efforts to establish a more traditional private sector removed from government financing. The “free zone” strategy, offering full foreign ownership of businesses in a tax-free environment, continues to attract multinationals to establish regional offices here, with the arrival of Halliburton providing the latest evidence. Government operates these free zones as businesses, with management teams accountable to growth targets and the bottom line. Each free zone operates according to laws and regulations tailored to the businesses operating there. These laws often contradict federal ones, but thus far have not produced much public protest from Abu Dhabi, the most politically powerful of the emirates.

The largest development projects here, mostly in the real estate sector, also fall under a government umbrella. Dubai has consolidated most of its local and foreign projects in two holding companies, Dubai World and Dubai Holding (containing approximately one hundred five and twenty-six different companies respectively). These holding companies will continue to finance and execute large-scale development projects on the horizon, such as Dubailand and the offshore Jumeirah Palm and World. Emaar, a publicly-traded real estate firm building the Burj Dubai (planned to be the world's tallest tower), at one time contributed the largest share volume to the limited Dubai stock market. But Emaar recently announced a land-for-shares deal with Dubai Holding, increasing the government control as a majority shareholder.

The latest Dubai census figures released in March 2007 show a population around 1.4 million, of which fewer than 20 percent are Emirati citizens. A recent *Gulf News* editorial by a UAE University professor observed that by 2025, native Emirati citizens will constitute less than 1 percent of UAE residents if the current rate of foreign immigration persists. As Dubai and the UAE evolve towards this unprecedented model of a state with almost no citizens, governance is becoming an increasingly delicate balancing act between Dubai's native and expatriate constituencies.

Recent policy measures illustrate Dubai's sensitivity about the relationship between its population and development. For locals, there is increased government enforcement of the Emiratisation (encouraging Emiratis to become educated and to replace skilled expatriate workers) in Dubai institutions. The latest Dubai Strategic Plan, released in February 2007 by Dubai's ruler Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum, emphasizes social development through education and employment as a priority. The recent “Careers UAE Exhibition” received extensive press coverage, bringing over one hundred businesses to college campuses in order to connect Emirati students with prospective employers.

While Emiratisation is a long-term investment in human capital, government policy continues to cater to the expatriate labor force driving development at present. Recently, freehold real estate became available for purchase by foreigners. This move relieved growing discontent among expatriates who had been closed out of Dubai's booming real estate market. In mid-March, the Labor Ministry announced that a minimum wage will be established for the construction sector and also eased the paperwork associated with getting work permits, instituting a 24-hour online system for companies compliant with labor laws. But the ministry also devotes effort to enforcing hiring quotas for Emiratis.

In the midst of all this economic and business development, Emiratis have paid far less attention to the question of political reform than have many Arabs in other countries. Even the one cautious step taken toward political reform—the UAE's first-ever elections to the Federal National Council (FNC), an advisory body lacking legislative powers, in December 2006—were primarily a political expression of Emiratisation.

In the unique economic and demographic situation of the UAE, there is no reason for the United States to press assertively for political reform. But the United States can enhance the evolution of this customized Dubai model by advocating worker's rights, press freedom, and government transparency. Progress in these areas will further Dubai's economic growth in the short term and possibly ignite a more participatory political system in the longer term. Recent events—including a rare protest by laborers near the rising Burj Dubai, a forum on UAE press freedom organized by Emirati students, and the increasing size and influence of the local blogosphere—suggest there is an opening to begin addressing these sensitive areas.

Jeremy Tamanini is a Fulbright scholar in the United Arab Emirates.

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Iraq: Kurdistan's Tenuous Model

Bilal A. Wahab

Iraqi Kurdistan is the best functioning part of Iraq, an example of what stability and governance could theoretically bring to the rest of the country. Kurdish leaders have learned that they can achieve more with peace than with war. It has been a year since the two main Kurdish parties, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), joined forces in a unified Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) with symbolic participation from smaller parties. Ever since, Kurdistan has been booming economically and dreaming of becoming the next Dubai. But to achieve that dream the Kurds will have to address major challenges, including how to gain control of Kirkuk, manage oil revenues, protect stability, and conduct relations with the central government in Baghdad.

The Kurdish government has core institutions of governance, security, and legislation that function; unlike Baghdad, it thus has a chance to think strategically and beyond day-to-day emergencies. The KRG is promoting foreign investment, e-government, and staff training. The parliament is laying the legal foundation for the Kurdish ministries. It seems that the political leadership has developed a taste for success and for pleasing the public.

The region's security depends on layers of security forces, including police, intelligence units, and the *peshmerga* (Kurdish paramilitaries). The *peshmerga*, estimated at around a hundred thousand troops, are becoming increasingly professional despite various political allegiances, and are even part of the new plan to secure Baghdad. Kurdish officials are proud of the fact that no foreigners have been killed thus far in their region, but the car bombs in Erbil and Makhmur in May brought home the fact that Kurdistan is still part of Iraq.

The Kurds have a strong political presence in the Iraqi capital—holding the presidency, as well as the positions of deputy prime minister and foreign minister—and try to play their cards wisely. For example, they have effectively mobilized Baghdad's opposition to Turkish military threats to the Kurdish region. Kurds also try to manipulate Baghdad politics—in this case, to weaken central government control—when it comes to control of Kirkuk and oil. It was an achievement for the Kurds to put article 140 into the Iraqi Constitution, which calls for de-Arabization of the town and a referendum on whether it should join Kurdistan. Kurds have so far stubbornly refused calls (including in the Baker-Hamilton report) to postpone the scheduled referendum on Kirkuk, although rhetoric is softening a bit, suggesting a possible agreement to extend implementation.

The KRG dislikes relying on Baghdad for revenue—and often blames on the capital its failure to deliver—and thus is pushing for the right to control oil contracts in its region. The draft oil law put forward by the Iraqi government provides population-based revenue sharing among Iraq's provinces through a national treasury. Accordingly, Kurds would receive some 17-20 percent of national oil revenues. It also allows regions, as well as individuals, to invest in the oil sector as long as they abide by regulations established by a commission appointed by the prime minister. Many in the Arabic and Kurdish media have criticized the law for harming national interests, as it will allow foreign companies to reap as much as 75 percent of oil profits. The law also lacks a specific mechanism to resolve disputes between the capital and the regions. The KRG is already discussing with Baghdad several petroleum deals it has already signed with Turkish, Norwegian, and Swiss companies; the Kurds have learned how to create facts.

Although greater oil exports are an attractive prospect for Kurds, they also imply management challenges. The KDP and PUK still have not merged the Finance and Interior Ministries into the unity government. In fact, the two parties carve up the region's budget that comes from Baghdad without consulting the Kurdish Parliament or the smaller parties in the unity government. Moreover, many Kurds still remember intra-Kurdish fighting over custom revenues before the U.S. invasion. Many voices in the Kurdish media are also expressing concerns about corruption. Seeing how privatization and the reconstruction boom have further enriched the ruling elite, many fear that oil contracts will bring more of the same.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, control over the region's oil might prove to be more of an incentive for Kurds to stay within Iraq than to secede. With oil prospects, Kurdish leaders will need to be pragmatic and to build bridges with neighbors, on whom Kurdistan is increasingly dependent for food, power, and gas. The KRG will need to find a legal solution to the presence of armed PKK militants on its soil, for example, in order to avoid hostilities with Turkey. The KRG also will need to be alert to security threats and to cultivate cooperation with neighboring regions and states. In this regard, it was a wise move for the Kurdish leaders to break the norm of mass arrests and instead to ask for help from the population following the May bombings. Kurds need to see security in a larger framework, realizing that Kurdistan cannot be at peace while Baghdad is ablaze.

Bilal A. Wahab is a former Fulbright fellow currently working on governance issues in Iraqi Kurdistan.

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Algeria: Bouteflika and Civil-Military Relations

Rachid Tlemçani

The low voter turnout in the May 2007 legislative elections (about 36 percent, compared to 65 percent in 1997 elections) showed that Algerians still believe that their votes do not make a difference. Clearly power rests somewhere other than in

the elected legislature. But while it was clear for many years that it rested in the hands of the military, President Bouteflika has subtly altered the structure of political power during his time in office.

The main feature of the Algerian state is that the pivotal institution in the post-colonial era has been a repressive apparatus—the armed forces—rather than a civilian institution. When Algeria's war of liberation war ended in 1962, the army emerged as the only organized group. It filled the vacuum left by the colonial rulers, thus becoming the driving force behind state-building and modernization from the very beginning. Today the top echelons of the military establishment play a crucial role in the country's political life through high-ranking officers holding public office as well as indirect means of influencing policy. The army perceives itself as the only institution with the historic legitimacy to exercise full authority. It is commonly said that it is not the state that has an army, but rather the army that has its own state.

After riots in October 1988, the regime began to open up. The ANP (*Armée Nationale Populaire*) withdrew its representatives from the Political Bureau and Central Committee of the National Liberation Front (FLN) as part of a rapid process of political opening and pluralism. But this trend ended precipitously when the military intervened to cancel the 1991 legislative elections, the first democratic balloting in the post-colonial era, due to the impending victory of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS). Military rule became more pronounced than ever during the ensuing civil war, as the country was ruled under emergency law.

Since his rise to power, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika has struggled to sever the traditional link between the power structure and the military. Even during his 1999 presidential campaign—in which the army supported him and all other candidates withdrew—Bouteflika sent messages to the army that civil-military relations needed to change. The army, according to Bouteflika, had arrogated to itself extra-constitutional powers during the exceptional and painful circumstances of the civil war. According to the constitution, Bouteflika said, the army should be under the president's authority.

During his first term in office Bouteflika maneuvered to diminish military involvement in politics. At the beginning of his presidency, Bouteflika struggled to control cabinet appointments, at one point protesting that he would not be “three-quarters of a president.” Looking to boost his popularity, Bouteflika publicly repudiated the cancellation of the 1991 elections, calling it “an act of violence.” He gradually began to place personal and political allies in top posts in the ministries and regional institutions, while launching a process of shifts in the army high command to acquire loyalty among those most able to undermine his efforts.

With time, Bouteflika's efforts began to tell. By May 2003, Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Muhmmad Lamari announced that the army would not have a preferred candidate in the 2004 presidential election and that it would be prepared even to accept an Islamist as president if he were committed to upholding the democratic institutions of the Algerian state. Bouteflika was re-elected, and took advantage of his constitutional prerogatives by creating the position of General Secretary within the Ministry of Defense. Another important indication that Bouteflika was asserting his authority came with the official resignation of Lamari, who was then replaced by Bouteflika's close friend Major General Ahmed Salah Gaid. Bouteflika was also able to consolidate his authority over the Ministry of Defense by appointing retired General Abdelmalek Guenaizia to the newly created post of Deputy Minister.

As Bouteflika nears the end of his second term, it is clear that he has diminished the military's power over the presidency. But he did so in order to increase his own freedom of action, not in order to democratize Algeria. Now, with the possibility that the Constitution will be amended in order to allow the president to serve more than two terms, Algeria joins the ranks of Arab and North African countries that face the problem of excessive power concentrated in the hands of a single ruler.

Throughout the Arab world, control of institutions by the armed forces, intelligence agencies, and police remains a major obstacle to change. Such control will need to be gradually loosened and ultimately broken completely for democratic transformations to take place.

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Arab States: The Paradox of Press Freedom

Kamel Labidi

The second of June marked the second anniversary of the assassination of Lebanese writer Samir Qasir, with no indication of who ordered the car bombing that silenced one of the loudest Arab voices criticizing autocratic Arab regimes, particularly the Assad family in Syria. The fact that the perpetrators have escaped punishment has paved the way for similar crimes, for example the murder of Gibran Tueni, the owner of the newspaper *al-Nahar* and a member of the Lebanese parliament, and the attempted assassination of the journalist Mai Shadyaq. Then there was the discovery of the body of Libyan journalist Dayf al-Ghazal, mutilated by torture, in the city of Benghazi in the same week as the murder of Qasir. With the exception of the Libyan intelligence services, no one knows who kidnapped and tortured to death the journalist who had resorted to the internet to write about the oppression and corruption under Colonel Muammar al-Qaddafi. The last few years have produced a strange situation in which journalists feel under threat across the region, whether they work in countries where constraints on freedom of expression have intensified—Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, and Libya—or those in which red lines have begun to disappear, such as Morocco, Algeria, Egypt, and Yemen.

The situation in Egypt typifies this paradox of greater freedom along with harsh measures against some of those who transgress ambiguous limits. Egypt has permitted the establishment of independent newspapers (notably *al-Masri al-Yawm* and the return of *al-Dustur* after nearly seven years of prohibition), leading to a notable improvement in the quality of political debate. It has also witnessed greater exposure in the media, even the government media, for opposition figures and civil society activists who in the recent past were treated as enemies of the regime. But at the same time, Egypt has seen a sharp rise in legal cases against journalists due to their writings, especially those that deal with corruption or torture, some of them resulting in prison sentences despite the promises of President Mubarak that he would work to end this practice. For example, in February the blogger Karim Amer was sentenced to four years in prison for expressing contempt for Islam and insulting the president. In May, journalist Huweida Taha was sentenced in absentia to six months imprisonment for damaging Egypt's national interests and publishing false news. Taha had made a documentary on torture broadcast by *al-Jazeera* television and also raised doubts about Mubarak's readiness to push Egypt toward true democratic reform.

In several other countries there is a similar situation, in which the regime uses the judiciary to settle accounts with journalists. For example, in Algeria Muhammad Benchicou (publisher of the now defunct *Le Matin*) was sentenced to two years in prison in 2004 following the publication of a book highly critical of President Bouteflika. In Yemen, journalists are imprisoned from time to time under fabricated political accusations or are beaten or kidnapped, as happened to Jamal Amer in 2005. In recent weeks, a number of news websites have been shut down in Yemen.

Journalists in Morocco, which has seen bolder political reform than most other Arab countries, also are still at the mercy of regime retribution, reinforced by legislation that places the king and his family above the law. The sentencing of Ali Lmrabet to three years in jail in 2003 and the imposition later of a ten year ban on his writing for defaming the king and threatening territorial integrity of the nation is a prime example. Journalist Bubakar al-Jama'i was forced to leave the country early this year due to repeated prosecution and harassment. At least Morocco openly acknowledges that its judiciary lacks independence, perhaps winning some points for honesty.

Add to these cases of prosecution and abuse the many attacks on journalists in Iraq since the 2003 U.S. invasion, and it is clear that the Arab region has become the most dangerous place in the world for journalists. The United States and Europe have ignored the problem, clearly more concerned now about securing the cooperation of Arab rulers than about supporting freedom. Nevertheless, this grim reality has not deterred Arab journalists and bloggers from continuing to sacrifice themselves in order to challenge the limits on freedom of expression. What the international community owes such journalists, at a minimum, is insistence on prosecution of those who have committed the most egregious crimes, such as the killers of Qasir and Tueni. Although pursuing such cases will be difficult, it has begun to look more like a possibility after the adoption of UN Security Council resolution 1757, which establishes an international tribunal to investigate the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri and other crimes.

Kamel Labidi is a journalist from Tunisia. This article was translated from Arabic by Kevin Burnham.

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Readers React

In your recent [interview](#) (May 2007), Dr. Mutawakkil makes the important point that Yemen's 2006 election was "crucial in terms of developing political culture; it introduced the idea of competition through the ballot box." While there were some problems with the election, the process increased people's expectations that politics be at least partly conducted in public and through a competitive process. For the first time, President Saleh was forced to contend with an opposition that could muster significant popular support.

However, Dr. Mutawakkil is perhaps only partly correct when he says, "the opposition is competing not against a party, but a state." President Saleh and the ruling General People's Congress (GPC) did use the resources of the state to their advantage, at times illegally, but also proved effective at mobilizing some communities. The opposition Joint Meeting Parties (JMP) will have to improve its ability to coordinate efforts with its grassroots constituents if it wants to improve its performance in 2009.

Sarah Phillips
Political consultant

The [article](#) (May 2007) by Abdul Nabi al-Ekry, a leading advocate for political reform in Bahrain, nicely articulates the challenges facing Bahrain's largest Shi'i political organization since it decided to participate in the 2006 parliamentary elections. While al-Wefaq holds enough seats in parliament to make noise, it is unable on its own to achieve the kinds of political changes for which the opposition has long been calling. Some in the opposition argue that al-Wefaq has surrendered whatever leverage it once held when outside the political system, and the rise of Haqq has stripped al-Wefaq of considerable support.

In spite of these challenges, it is too early to declare al-Wefaq's decision to participate a political defeat. From inside the parliament, al-Wefaq has a better platform to oppose the status quo, such as the Sunni government's sectarian policies revealed in the 2006 Bandargate scandal. Al-Wefaq will likely remain unable to reverse those policies with which it disagrees or usher in important constitutional reforms, but it now possesses the legitimacy that comes with participation, putting more pressure on the government to take seriously its grievances. Al-Wefaq also maintains the ability to hamstring

parliamentary business and embarrass the pro-government MPs, as it did earlier in 2007 when it staged a walkout in opposition to the reluctance of Sunni MPs to address the issues of corruption and sectarianism. Al-Wefaq's biggest challenge will likely be sustaining its commitment to struggling for change and using the parliament to give voice to its supporters' grievances.

Toby Jones
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Send your views on what you have read in the *Arab Reform Bulletin* to the editor at arb@carnegieendowment.org.

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News and Views

Egypt: Shura Council Elections and Other Political Developments

In June 11 elections for Egypt's upper house of parliament, 587 candidates competed for eighty-eight seats in twenty-four provinces. According to preliminary results, the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) won the majority of the seats, the leftist Tagammu party won one seat in Alexandria, and the Muslim Brotherhood did not win any seats. The NDP won forty-five seats in seventeen provinces; twelve seats were uncontested and went to candidates from the NDP. NDP candidates will participate in runoff elections on June 18 in nine provinces. Only one seat went to a female candidate. Clashes between ruling party supporters and independents outside polling stations resulted in the death of an opposition supporter in the northern Nile Delta region. Domestic election observers stated that polling station officials only permitted NDP supporters inside the polling station in many provinces, prevented opposition supporters from casting ballots, and prohibited observers from entering some polling stations. Click [here](#) for a preliminary report in Arabic by the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights.

The National Democratic Party (NDP) fielded 109 candidates, twenty-one more than the eighty-eight seats up for grabs. Competing in Shura elections for the first time, the Muslim Brotherhood presented nineteen candidates. Most other opposition groups did not participate. Eleven of the eighty-eight seats were uncontested and went to candidates from the NDP. Only 176 members of the Shura Council are directly elected for six-year terms, while the president appoints the remaining eighty-eight. Elections and appointments are executed on a rotating basis, with one half of the council renewed every three years.

Egyptian police detained more than 200 members of the Muslim Brotherhood, including as many as 100 on election day, in the last month as part of a crackdown against the opposition group in the lead up to Shura Council elections. The detainees, who include six candidates for the elections, are accused of membership in a banned group, campaigning before the official start of the campaign period, and using religious slogans. The Brotherhood campaigned under its traditional "Islam is the Solution" slogan despite a recent constitutional amendment banning any political activity on a religious basis. Shura Council Speaker Safwat al-Sharif asked the recently-formed Electoral Commission on June 5 to remove the names of seventeen candidates from the ballot because of their affiliation with the Brotherhood, but the commission declined.

According to Human Rights Watch, more than 1,000 members of the Muslim Brotherhood were detained between March 2006 and March 2007, and over 800 are currently imprisoned. Blogger Abdel Monem Mahmoud was released on June 2 after a forty-five day detention on charges of belonging to the Brotherhood and defaming the government. The Egyptian government on June 3 refused to allow human rights groups to observe the military trial of thirty-three members of the Muslim Brotherhood. The court adjourned until July 15. Click [here](#) for details.

The Shura Council's Political Parties Committee granted on May 24 a license to the Democratic Front, a liberal party formed by appointed Shura Council member Osama al-Ghazali Harb, a former member of the ruling National Democratic Party, and former cabinet minister Yehia al-Gamal.

A Cairo court rejected on May 31 a bid by Ayman Nour, the former head of the opposition al-Ghad party, to be released from prison on medical grounds. Nour was convicted in December 2005 of forgery and sentenced to a five-year term.

Egypt was elected to the UN Human Rights Council, the UN's highest human rights body, on May 17. A briefing paper ([English text](#), [Arabic text](#)) by the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights and Human Rights Watch argues that Egypt's "terrible human rights record made that country a poor choice for membership" but "welcomed the Egyptian government's public pledge to improve its practices domestically and to strengthen the capacity of the council."

Jordan: IAF Members Arrested Ahead of Municipal Elections

Jordanian security forces arrested nine members of the Islamic Action Front (IAF) between May 21 and June 5 for engaging in acts "threatening national security." Seven remain in custody. According to the head of the IAF, Zaki Bani Irsheid, the activists were arrested for promoting the party's candidates ahead of the July 31 municipal elections. The IAF announced in April it would participate in municipal elections despite its opposition to some elements in the new municipalities law. The party announced on June 4 it will participate in legislative elections expected to take place in November.

For the first time in Jordan's history, a woman judge, Ihsan Barakat, was appointed as head of an appeals court on May 28. Jordan has had women judges since 1996.

Algeria: Election Results

Algeria's ruling alliance—the National Liberation Front (FLN), the National Democratic Rally (RND), and the Movement of Society for Peace (HMS)—maintained control of the new parliament after winning 249 out of 389 seats in the May 17 legislative elections. Independent candidates obtained thirty-three seats, the Workers' Party won twenty-six seats, and the Rally for Culture and Democracy nineteen seats. In total, twenty-two political parties constitute the national assembly. Click [here](#) for detailed results. Sa'id Bouchair, the head of the Independent National Political Commission of Election Surveillance, initially reported that ballot boxes in the Algiers District and the southern city of al-Oued were being stuffed with FLN ballots, and that observers were being prevented from attending. He later retracted his statement and apologized. Approximately 15 percent of the 6.6 million ballots were void. The Constitutional Council rejected appeals regarding the election on May 30.

Interior Minister Nouredine Yazid Zerhouni announced on May 30 that the electoral law will be amended and that municipal elections will be held in three months.

Morocco: Crackdown on Activists

Moroccan authorities cracked down on Western Sahara independence activists after a group of students held a sit-in on May 7 at a university in Agadir to demand better healthcare and housing and voice their support for the Western Sahara independence movement Polisario ahead of U.N.-backed talks on the territory's future. Twenty-five students remain in prison. Moroccan police arrested three leading human rights campaigners in Western Sahara on May 20: Brahim Elansari and Hassana Douihi, members of the Saharawi Association for Human Rights Victims (ASVDH), and Naama Asfari, president of the Paris-based Committee for the Respect of Human Freedoms and Rights in Western Sahara. A court also extended prison terms on May 22 for Brahim Sabbar and Ahmed Sbai, leading members of the ASVDH.

Kuwait: Ministers Questioned about Corruption

Kuwait's oil minister, Sheik Ali al-Jarrah al-Sabah, a member of the ruling family, will be questioned in parliament on June 25 for telling a newspaper he had sought advice from a previous oil minister implicated in a corruption case. Al-Jarrah apologized for his statements on May 30, but parliament's Popular bloc (populist) and National bloc (liberals) insisted on questioning him. Previous motions to question ministers in parliament have led either to cabinet resignations or to dissolution of the legislature. A number of Salafi MPs are also pushing for interpellation of Minister of Religious Endowments Abdullah al-Matouq regarding financial transgressions.

In another development, Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM) Secretary General Badr al-Nashi announced the establishment of a new ICM office for women, which will support legislation to protect the civil and social rights of women and children.

Saudi Arabia: Morality Police under Pressure

Saudi Arabia's Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice announced on June 10 the creation of a "department of rules and regulations" to ensure the activities of commission members comply with the law, after coming under heavy pressure for the death of two people in its custody in less than two weeks. Eighteen commission members (*mutawa'in*) were detained and questioned June 3. The governmental National Society for Human Rights criticized the behavior of the religious police in May in its first report ([Arabic text](#)) since its establishment in March 2004. In May 2006, the interior ministry issued a decree stating that "the role of the commission will end after it arrests the culprit or culprits and hands them over to police, who will then decide whether to refer them to the public prosecutor." *Mutawa'in* had until recently enjoyed unchallenged powers to arrest, detain, and interrogate those suspected of moral infractions.

Qatar: Second Doha Conference on Democracy and Reform

Qatar hosted the latest gathering of democracy advocates in the Middle East. More than 300 civil society activists, professors, journalists, and political party members from across the region met May 27-29 in Doha for the second conference of its kind sponsored by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the National Human Rights Committee (the first took place in June 2004). The forum called on Arab nations to eliminate restrictions on freedom of speech and press, and urged Arab governments to deepen foundations of democracy and expand public participation in the political field. It also established the Doha-based Arab Foundation for Democracy to monitor Arab governments' progress on reform and to track the fate of other reform initiatives. The Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, announced he will contribute \$10 million to the foundation. Click [here](#) for details.

Bahrain: Activists Arrested

Fifteen Bahraini Shi'i activists were arrested between May 16 and 20 following demonstrations against the police. Thirteen remain in custody, according to the Bahrain Youth Society for Human Rights. Ali Said al-Khabaz and Hassan Yusif Hamid were released on June 7 after Human Rights Watch (HRW) asked Bahrain's government to investigate allegations of police torture in connection with their detention. Click [here](#) for details.

Yemen: Press Censorship

News websites in Yemen are being censored in the wake of clashes in the northern province of Saada between government forces and Shi'i rebels, according to the Yemeni Journalists Syndicate. The Ministry of Telecommunications blocked two news websites for "covering the war in Saada in a way that runs counter to official media reporting." The annual report of the Yemeni Centre for Training and Protecting Journalists' Freedoms reported on 500 violations against journalists in the country over the past four years. Click [here](#) for details.

Press Freedom: Journalists Criticize Limited Access

The New-York based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) criticized the Iraqi Interior Ministry's May 13 decision to limit journalists' access to scenes of bomb attacks. According to a CPJ [letter](#) to Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, "journalists in Iraq believe the ban is intended to limit their coverage to information that is filtered through the Interior Ministry, obstructing their ability to report independently."

The CPJ also expressed concern that journalists have been prevented since May 21 from entering a Palestinian refugee camp in northern Lebanon during clashes between Islamist militants and the Lebanese Army. Attacks against journalists were also reported. Click [here](#) for details.

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Upcoming Political Events

- Egypt: Shura Council Election runoffs, June 18, 2007.
- Jordan: Municipal Elections, July 31, 2007; Legislative Elections, November 2007.
- Syria: Municipal Elections, August 2007.
- Morocco: Legislative Elections, September 7, 2007.
- Lebanon: Presidential Election, September 25, 2007.
- Algeria: Municipal Elections, October 2007.
- Oman: Shura Council Elections, October 2007.
- Qatar: Legislative Elections, 2007 (date to be determined).

Views from the Arab Media

Several articles in the Jordanian press commented on the significance of elections in light of the various recent or upcoming elections around the region.

- Electoral campaigns in the Arab world have replaced references to "Arab unity" and "socialism" with slogans about democracy and freedom, but the shift is only rhetorical, according to a May 30 [article](#) in Jordan's *al-Arab al-Yawm* by editor-in-chief Taher al-Adwan. Mauritania is the only Arab country that can boast about free elections and prove that Arabs can play the democratic game.
- Arab journalists should be more involved in elections in the region by encouraging and contributing to electoral debates, argues Jordanian columnist Ibrahim Gh u rayba in a May 28 [article](#) in Jordan's *al-Ghad*. Only then will Arab media be involved in the creation of new trends, thoughts, and markets in the region rather than simply reacting to their emergence.
- Jordan's recently-amended municipalities law will result in unfair results in the July elections, argues Jordanian writer Jamil al-Nimri in a June 4 [article](#) *al-Ghad*. The manner in which the current female quota system operates gives female candidates in larger electoral districts an advantage over their competitors in smaller electoral districts.

Al-Jazeera's "al-Ittijah al-Mu'akis" (The Opposite Direction) featured a May 22 debate about whether the short-lived reform current in the Arab world can be revived. Lebanese writer Aqab Saqr argued that Arab dictators have used the war in Iraq to scare their citizens about reform by portraying stability and reform as mutually exclusive. Arab reformers find themselves stuck between dictators on the one hand and Islamist fundamentalists on the other who accuse them of being agents of Israel and the United States. Abdul Salam Walad Hurma, head of Mauritania's al-Sawab party, argued that the main priority for Arab nations is resistance against external occupation, regardless of whether their leaders are democratic or not.

In a June 8 [article](#) in the UAE's *al-Bayan*, Bahraini scholar Baqer al-Najjar explores why liberalism has failed to become an effective and influential ideology in the Arab world's political, social, and cultural spheres of Arab countries. Despite rising levels of education, urban migration, and the spread of new communication technologies, Arabs' loyalty to ethnic and religious identities rather than ideological affiliations undermine liberalism. Liberalism is also limited by Arab regimes' use of religious institutions for legitimacy.

Stubbornness is not an adequate policy for the U.S. administration in Iraq, argues Lebanese columnist Jihad al-Khazen in a June 4 [article](#) in *al-Hayat*. The Bush administration's refusal to acknowledge that it lost the war in Iraq and that the plan to increase troops has resulted in the death of dozens of Iraqis and American soldiers. The Democrats who took control of Congress in the last elections have also failed to force the administration to set a timetable for withdrawal.

Lebanese journalists' reporting on the ongoing crisis in Lebanon, especially in television broadcasting, is exacerbating the divisions between the contending factions and enflaming sectarian hatred, according to Lebanese journalist Bissan al-Sheikh in a May 19 [article](#) in *al-Hayat*.

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Read On

Recent publications on **Iraq** include:

- The United States should engage Ayatollah Sistani given the positive role he could play in the democratization of Iraq if sectarian tensions subside, argues Babak Rahimi in "[Ayatollah Sistani and the Democratization of Post-Ba'athist Iraq](#)" (United States Institute of Peace, Special Report no. 187, June 2007).
- Premature U.S. withdrawal could create conditions for a civil war that do not currently exist, argues David A. Patten in "[Is Iraq in a Civil War?](#)" (*Middle East Quarterly*, vol. 14, no. 3, Summer 2007).
- A trend of increasing corruption, nepotism, and abuse of power is eroding democracy and stability in Kurdistan, warns Kamal Said Qadir in "[Iraqi Kurdistan's Downward Spiral](#)" (*Middle East Quarterly*, vol. 14, no. 3, Summer 2007).
- U.S. policy toward Iraq must come to grips with the country's complicated and intertwined problems in order to have any chance of engendering a sustainable peace according to Carlos Pascual and Kenneth M. Pollack in "[The Critical Battles: Political Reconciliation and Reconstruction in Iraq](#)," (*Washington Quarterly*, vol. 30, no. 3, Summer 2007, 7-19).
- [Al-Iraq `am 2020: ru'ya mustaqbaliyya](#) (Iraq in the Year 2020: A Future Vision), published by the Gulf Center for Strategic Studies, explores the problematic political situation in Iraq and posits possible scenarios for regional and domestic conditions in 2020.

Several new publications focus on **Syria**:

- The 2007 Syrian parliamentary elections witnessed several violations of basic electoral standards, including fraud, the banning of electoral programs, and government domination of state-owned media, according to two reports in Arabic by the [Damascus Center for Theoretical and Civil Studies](#), and [Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression](#) (May 28, 2007).
- Eyal Zisser's [Commanding Syria: Bashar al-Asad and the First Years in Power](#) evaluates Bashar's continuing hold on power following Syria's retreat from Lebanon in spring 2005, the effectiveness of Bashar's attempt to move away from his father's shadow, and the prospects for reform (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007).
- For the Syrian regime to survive, it needs radicalism, control over Lebanon, regional instability, and anti-Americanism, argues Barry Rubin in [The Truth About Syria](#) (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

Other recent publications address reform-related developments in Arab countries:

- William Harris explores the Hariri murder inquiry, Hizballah's confrontation with Israel, and implications for **Lebanon** and the Middle East in "Crisis in the Levant: Lebanon at Risk?" (*Mediterranean Quarterly*, vol. 18, no. 2, Spring 2007, 37-60).
- The comprehensive peace agreement between the National Islamic Front government and the people of southern **Sudan** is unlikely to survive, warns Roger P. Winter in "Sudan and the National Congress Party" (*Mediterranean Quarterly*, vol. 18, no. 2, Spring 2007, 61-66).

Several recent publications address region-wide developments:

- Amnesty International's 2007 report on the state of human rights around the world reveals a pattern of impunity in the human rights record of countries throughout the **Middle East and North Africa**. Torture and other ill treatment continues to be widespread in several countries, including **Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, and Jordan**, and were reported **Kuwait, Libya, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen**. The limits of dissent remains tightly draw in most of the region.
- Security sector reform can help change behavior and attitudes toward government by citizens in the Arab world, contends Ellen Laipson in "Prospects for Middle East Security-Sector Reform," (*Survival*, vol. 49, no. 2, Summer 2007, 99-110).
- In "The Muslim Middle East: Is There a Democratic Option?" Thomas McCabe suggests that the United States should stress good governance and gradual democratization in the Middle East as an immediate democratic opening likely to bring to power profoundly undemocratic groups that possibly hostile to the United States (*Orbis*, vol. 51, no. 3, Summer 2007, 479-93).
- Ra'id Fawzi Ahmud calls on Arab political parties to engage in a critical revision of their programs and political discourse in "Al-ahzab al-siyasiyya fi al-'alam al-'arabi wa ishkaliat al-'ilaj ("Political Parties in the Arab World and the Problems of [Finding] a Remedy," *al-Mustaqbal al-Arabi*, no. 340, June 2007, 52-68). Click [here](#) for a table of contents in Arabic.
- The inaugural issue of the quarterly *Arab Insight* contains several articles on Islamist movements and U.S. policy, including an [interview](#) with Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood leader Essam al-'Erian.
- Although women's rights are enshrined in Arab constitutions, in practice Arab women have not enjoyed these rights in politics, marriage, divorce, freedom of movement, education, or work, contends Judith Colp Rubin in "[Lagging Far Behind: Women in the Middle East](#)" (*Middle East Review of International Affairs*, vol. 11, no. 2, June 2007).
- Anti-terrorism legislation in several developing countries has allowed political leaders to further restrain civil liberties; in other places it has actually fostered civil society activism and encouraged open debate, much of it anti-American in tone, according to Beth Elise Whitaker in "Exporting the Patriot Act? Democracy and the 'War on Terror' in the Third World" (*Third World Quarterly*, vol. 28, no. 5, 2007, 1017-32).

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