

## Arab Reform Bulletin: March 2007



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## Insights and Analysis

### Palestine: Professionalism or Factionalism in the New Government?

**Hossam Ezzedine**

Palestinians have been hoping that Hamas and Fatah will live up to their announced agreement that the government of national unity under formation would not concern itself with negotiations with Israel, which were supposed to remain the purview of President Mahmoud Abbas in his capacity as leader of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). The politicized way in which the new government is taking shape, however, and the fact that Prime Minister Ismail Haniyya is meeting with all Palestinian factions, indicate that these hopes will be disappointed. Haniyya's government will not differ significantly from the age-old pattern relied upon by the PLO in distributing portfolios on a factional basis. Thus it is likely that the new government—like its predecessors—will lack professionalism in providing services to the Palestinian people as well as representation based in electoral politics.

In parliamentary democracies, governments are typically formed based on the parliamentary representation of each party. This stems from the belief that those who have obtained parliamentary seats did so by democratic means, relying on the electorate over which that government will rule. Of the 13 Palestinian political factions, only five gained seats in the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) elected in 2006. They are: Hamas (74 seats and four additional belonging to independents supported by Hamas); Fatah (45 seats); the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (3 seats); an alliance composed of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the People's Party and the Democratic Union (2 seats), the Third Way (2 seats, occupied by liberals Salam Fayyad and Hanan Ashrawi), and Independent Palestine (2 seats, including former presidential candidate Mustafa Barghouti).

If Hamas and Fatah indeed have agreed to leave negotiations with Israel to the PLO and to task the new government only with the internal situation, then the Prime Minister should only discuss governmental formation with parties represented in the PLC, as they were chosen by the Palestinian electorate. Haniyya, however, has approached Islamic Jihad, which boycotted the legislative elections. He has also held talks with factions lacking the necessary popular support to win seats in the Council.

Furthermore, members of the parties represented in the PLC have been negotiating cabinet seats on an individual basis rather than as representatives of their parliamentary blocs.

If Hamas and Fatah are unable to distribute portfolios according to parliamentary representation, then at least they should choose technocrats with the ability to govern effectively. Hamas did make an important concession in this direction by ceding the Finance Ministry—one of the most sensitive posts in any government—to technocrat Dr. Salam Fayyad, as part of an effort to court the United States and Israel. This was a significant step for Hamas, which had previously held that the Finance Ministry must remain in the hands of the PLC's largest party.

Neither the proposed Finance Minister (Salam Fayyad, both a technocrat and an independent MP) nor the proposed Foreign Minister (independent MP Ziyad Abu Amr) will be able to work professionally and without constraints if the formation of the government is dependent on the principle of factional representation. Any factional dispute that occurs in the future, especially between Hamas and Fatah, will be a knife at the throats of the finance and foreign ministers as well as at any members of the government who attempt to work independently, which might well lead them to abandon professionalism in order to survive.

Independents in the PLC are calling for a government of technocrats, which will be protected to some extent from the political contention that is sure to occur. The first crisis this government will face is Israel's continued detention of thirty-nine PLC deputies, thirty-five of them from Hamas. As a result of these detentions, Hamas has temporarily lost its PLC majority to the benefit of Fatah and other blocs, which is likely to result in Hamas obstructionism. Hamas is likely to prevent a PLC session to approve the new government if Hamas deputies remain in detention, fearing the passage of motions they oppose.

On March 7—dubbed “Democracy Day” by the PLC—the Council ended its first session and was to have begun a new one, which would require new elections for PLC leadership. Hamas would have subverted this process, however, as it fears losing leadership of the PLC while its deputies are in Israeli jails. To overcome this hurdle, Hamas and Fatah agreed to postpone the PLC's second session for forty days. This decision, which violated standard parliamentary procedures, proves that factionalism and not professionalism is still the name of the game in Palestinian legislative politics.

*Hossam Ezzedine is a Palestinian journalist for the newspaper Al Ayyam. He has covered the Palestinian Legislative Council since 1996. This article was translated from Arabic by Kevin Burnham.*

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## **Egypt: The Regime, the Brotherhood, and Labor Pains of the Fourth Republic**

***Khalil Al Anani***

The “Al Azhar Militias” incident, in which some Muslim Brotherhood students staged a martial arts display in early December 2006, constitutes a turning point in the Brotherhood’s relationship with the Egyptian regime. It triggered a regime crackdown—not the first during the presidency of Hosni Mubarak but the harshest and potentially the most important—with President Mubarak calling the Brotherhood “a threat to Egypt’s security” and the Brotherhood announcing its determination to form a political party.

There is a long history of clashes between the Egyptian regime and the Brotherhood, but during the first part of Mubarak’s presidency (in the 1980s) the organization was allowed to participate in politics via alliances with legal parties. In the 1990s, however, as terrorist attacks by Islamic extremists escalated, the regime began to crack down on the Brotherhood, which it considered the incubator for extremism. Legal action against the Brotherhood began in 1992, with junior and senior leaders occasionally put to trial in military courts. In addition, dozens or even hundreds of political candidates and campaign workers from the Brotherhood have typically been arrested in the months leading up to parliamentary elections, to be released weeks or months later.

The current clash is more intense by several measures. First, the charges raised against nearly forty Brotherhood leaders transferred to a military tribunal (among them Deputy Supreme Guide Khayrat Al Shatir and Guidance Bureau Member Muhammad Ali Bishr) go beyond the standard accusation of membership in a banned organization. There are also accusations of involvement in terrorism, money laundering, and forming paramilitary militias along the lines of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, Hizbollah, and Hamas. Such charges are also being leveled at members living outside Egypt, including the millionaire Youssef Nada, who resides in Switzerland, and the Syrian Ghaleb Himmat. Second, the organization’s financial base has been hit with the arrest of businessmen and financiers whose combined investments are estimated to be worth \$4 billion. Furthermore, the Egyptian attorney general has frozen the assets, estimates of which range from \$200,000 to \$8 million, of twenty-nine Brotherhood leaders.

In addition to using legal and financial means, the regime is also using its constitutional reform program to undercut future political activity by the Brotherhood. Recent press reports on draft constitutional amendments under consideration by the Parliament suggest that Article 5 will ban the formation of any party not only “based on religion,” but even “with a religious reference point” (*marja’iya*), a formulation often used by Muslim democrat parties such as the Party of Justice and Development in Morocco. In addition, constitutional Articles 62 and 94 might be amended to reduce the ability of Brotherhood candidates to enter legislative elections as independents.

For its part, the Brotherhood has been flat-footed in its handling of the Al Azhar incident and its reaction to the regime’s escalation campaign. It failed to mollify fears, especially amongst the elite, of its masked students, who brought to mind the Brotherhood’s violent history during the 1940s.

The Brotherhood’s announcement that it will establish a party with an Islamic reference point seems to be an attempt to move the battle with the regime to the political level. Although the move represents a potentially constructive step towards transforming the Brotherhood into an openly political organization, it is also fraught with problems. The announcement came in reaction to the regime’s crackdown and not as a result of thorough consultations within the organization. It is unclear what a party’s relationship would be to the Brotherhood itself should the latter not be dissolved, what its religious authority would be, and the extent of its conformity to the rules of the democratic game. Thus this might be just the latest in a series of half-baked efforts by Brotherhood members to form parties, following in the footsteps of the abortive Consultative Party (1986), Reform Party (1990), Hope Party (1995), and Wasat Party (1996; still trying for licensing).

There are several ways of understanding the regime’s current attack on the Brotherhood. First, the regime wishes to deflate the Brotherhood’s expectations after the past two years of emboldening political victories, which perhaps led to the miscalculation evident in the “Al Azhar Militias” incident. Second, Mubarak’s regime has relentlessly eliminated any potential alternative to itself for the past quarter century, which explains much of how it deals with any group possessing social legitimacy. Third, the regime is determined to guarantee a quiet presidential succession, whether after the end of Mubarak’s term in 2011 or in the event of any alternative scenario. The current crisis seems to be the labor pains accompanying the birth of the Fourth Republic (since the 1952 coup), which means that Egypt is entering a critical stage of political suffering as its rulers put their house in order.

*Khalil Al Anani is an Egyptian scholar. His forthcoming book is entitled Al Su’uud al siyaasi li al Ikhwaan al Muslimiin: dalaalat wa maalat (The Political Rise of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood: Connotations and Consequences). This article was translated from Arabic by Paul Wulfsberg.*

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## **Morocco/Egypt: Educational Reform’s Selective Benefits**

***Florian Kohstall***

On January 22, Egyptian Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif officially launched *Nile University*. Located in the high-tech development zone *Smart Village*, 20 km northwest of Cairo, it is the first Egyptian private university focusing on post-graduate studies and research. Since 1996, more than ten private universities have been established. Four Egyptian private universities tested the terrain first; in 2002 French and German universities followed. Now, they are not only competing with the prestigious American University in Cairo (AUC) founded in 1919 but also with British and Canadian Universities. A Russian and a Chinese university are in the making.

The boom of private universities in Egypt is only one of several aspects of internationalization affecting higher education in the Arab world. Many countries in the region—often considered resistant to trends of international homogenization—are drawing upon foreign expertise to build new universities as well as to modernize their public higher education systems. Since 2002, Egypt has implemented a World Bank-sponsored Higher Education Enhancement Program for its fifteen public universities and fifty-one technical colleges. A National Agency for Accreditation and Assessment, built on the Anglo-Saxon model, is one of the program's core projects. Morocco launched a reform of its public universities in the 2003-2004 academic year by introducing the European LMD (Licence, Master, Doctorate) degree system. With the support of the French government and the World Bank, Morocco aims to adapt its universities to international standards.

These efforts to modernize universities through international cooperation are not only an academic and economic endeavor; they also have at least an ostensible political dimension. Higher education ranks at the top of the agenda for the reform of authoritarian regimes in the region. Organizations including the European Union, UNESCO, and the World Bank promote decentralized universities, open to the international environment and able to train graduates for the job market. Donors ask governments to integrate stakeholders in the decision-making process in order to encourage the participation of faculty members and ease the state's grip on universities. In Morocco and Egypt, commissions of experts have been created to build consensus on sensitive reform issues. While donors' motivation in promoting development of universities may be primarily to encourage economic development—and thereby discourage migration to Europe—the declared objectives are often democratization and improved governance.

In contrast to political and economic reforms, which sometimes are demanded by the international community, in educational reform it is often Arab leaders who are reaching out for foreign expertise to help them implement unpopular reforms and overcome domestic resistance. In 1995, King Hassan II of Morocco asked the World Bank to provide him with a report on social reform issues. He later used this report to circumvent the Parliament's position on free education and impose a decision for the eventual introduction of enrolment fees. Egyptian Minister of Higher Education Moufid Shehab organised a national conference to build support for a reform program to be financed by the World Bank. The program shifts the focus in higher education reform from expanding access towards improving quality.

While international organizations keep pressing for a comprehensive strategy to reform education, so far Egypt and Morocco are adopting selective approaches that add new layers to the educational system rather than overhauling it. In addition, reform efforts are taking place in authoritarian settings that create severe distortion in the transfer of foreign models. While Moroccan and Egyptian policymakers use cooperation with the Bank and other donors to break with certain old patterns such as free university education, other patterns, such as centralized university administration and lack of autonomy for universities, remain untouched. Some reform steps, such as depoliticizing the selection of university presidents, are implemented partially. Morocco's new process for such selections introduces a measure of competition while leaving the ultimate choice to the king. Efforts to increase teaching quality favor those faculties (such as pharmacy, medicine, science, and engineering) that already suffer less than others from the structural crisis of overcrowding. Law and commerce faculties, which carry the major burden of students, so far have not been allocated resources in the reform process.

In addition to the selective approach to reforms, beneficiaries of reform and international cooperation also come from a select stratum of society. The current boom of private universities in Egypt, for example, creates opportunities for Egyptian philanthropists to invest in the business of education and come across as promoters of the "knowledge society" called for in UNDP's Arab Human Development Reports. And the results of such investments are only accessible to a small number of students who can afford private education. Elite politicians also benefit, as the countless committees, workshops, travel tours, and conferences organised by international organizations provide an important platform from which to present themselves as the true vanguard of reform.

*Florian Kohstall is Research Fellow at the Centre d'Etudes et de Documentation Economiques, Juridiques et Sociales (CEDEJ) in Cairo.*

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## **Syria: Reform Balance Sheet**

### ***Sami Moubayed***

As Syrian president Bashar Al Assad approaches the end of his first term in office, there is much debate on whether or not he has succeeded as a reformer. He is credited with establishing private universities, banks, and media. The general lack of public and media interest in parliamentary elections scheduled for April, however, reflects the frozen nature of political reforms.

The privatization of education is by far the biggest achievement of the past seven years. Four years after deciding to break

the state monopoly on education imposed by the Baath Party in 1963, there are eight private universities and many private schools. According to official figures, 380,000 students are enrolled in Syrian universities: 250,000 at the five state-run universities, 6,000 at private universities, and 2,500 at the Syrian Virtual University (which offers online learning). Al Kalamoun University's class of 2007 will be the first to graduate from a private university in Syrian history. The university also has the first independent School of International Relations and teaches many courses in English. Despite these successes in undergraduate learning, there are only 15,000 post-graduate students and only 2,100 students receive scholarships to study abroad. Government funds for education have actually been reduced, and now are only \$50 million out of Syria's annual budget of \$11 billion, while funds for academic research are only \$3.8 million.

Since 2000, six private banks have been established in Syria: Bank of Syria and Overseas (BSO), Banque BEMO, Bank Audi, the International Bank of Trade and Finance, Arab Bank, and Bank Byblos. At the time of privatization, their combined deposits were estimated at \$30-50 million. By the end of the first year, however, deposits in the private banking sector amounted to an impressive \$2 billion and today stand at \$3 billion. Encouraging as this may seem, these deposits have not really changed the climate for investment in Syrian society. Red tape and regulations hamper banking; for example, long-term real estate loans were off-limits to Syrian citizens until January 2007 because of restrictions imposed by the Central Bank of Syria. In 2005, private banks lent out only 17 percent of their total deposits, meaning that over 80 billion Syrian pounds remained in the vault. The private banks were not intended to be mere money incubators, as there are plenty of those in the public banking sector.

Media privatization also is a mixed picture. While conditions are much more promising today than they were before 2000, media reform has been extremely sluggish compared to that in other Arab countries such as Lebanon, the UAE, or Qatar. Shortly after coming to power, Bashar Al Assad authorized parties affiliated with the ruling Baath to establish political publications. The result was dogmatic political weeklies that preached thundering Arab nationalism, socialism, and anti-imperialism, which were read only by narrow constituencies. The independent satirical weekly *Al Domari (The Lamplighter)* by the acclaimed Syrian cartoonist Ali Farzat was a breath of fresh air, but the quality of the publication dropped after the first few issues and readership plummeted. After clashes with the government, *Al Domari* and *Al Mubki* (another weekly that criticized government officials) were shut down, leading to speculation that private newspapers would once more be subjected to strict censorship. Other private publications survived, including the political weekly magazine *Abyad wa Aswad (Black & White)* and the economic monthly *Al Iqtissad (The Economy)*, which run critical, reform-oriented articles.

As for political reform, government officials claim the process has been stalled by regional and international conditions, and that political reform cannot proceed under foreign pressures, namely from the United States. The Syrian leadership has not taken expected steps such as authorizing private political parties and amending article 8 of the Syrian Constitution which states that the Baath is the ruling party of state and society. But it is also true that the emphasis on Baathism has decreased significantly in recent years. In his speeches Assad stands next to Syrian flags, not Baath Party flags, and many non-Baathists have been appointed to senior posts. Dr. Hani Mourtada, an independent, became the first non-Baathist to head Damascus University and the first independent Minister of Higher Education since 1963. Other senior independents include Vice-President of the Republic Dr Najah Al Attar, deputy Prime Minister Abdullah Al Dardari, and Ambassador to the United States Imad Moustapha.

There is now speculation that a non-Baathist might replace Prime Minister Mohammad Naji Al Otari, and that a political party law might be passed after the April parliamentary elections and before the summer presidential referendum. But it is too early to tell whether such predictions will come true or are merely wishful thinking.

*Sami Moubayed is a Syrian political analyst and author of Steel & Silk: Men and Women Who Shaped Syria 1900-2000 (Cune Press, 2006).*

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## Readers React

Sufyan Alissa argues in his recent [article](#) (February 2007) that corruption is linked to the structure of the public sector and the nature of relations between the government and the economy. This micro concept of corruption is derived from the rent-seeking literature that focuses on what happens when the state intervenes in the economy and distorts markets. When the state restricts the operations of the market and creates different forms of rents, people start to compete to gain access to these rents. Hence competition for these distortions, or rent-seeking, can take place either legally by lobbying, or illegally through bribes or corruption.

What is missing from this argument is the relationship between corruption and the stability and legitimacy of Arab regimes. Rents or unproductive income (oil revenues, remittances, transit fees, and foreign aid) have played a significant role, as Arab regimes succeeded in playing a distributive role in which they bartered services for obedience. Hence corruption has not only been tolerated but encouraged. Petty corruption was encouraged in order to compensate for the inability of these states to deliver adequate services.

Economic reforms cannot help in fighting corruption because the political and economic elites in the Arab region are intimately linked. Any fight against corruption has to focus on the issue of political accountability; what is needed is a new social contract to replace institutionalized patronage and clientelistic networks. This is why many civil society organizations such as the Lebanese Transparency Association have, for the past few years, been focusing on political accountability and lobbying for a new and democratic electoral law for Lebanon.

It is clear that the members of the Quartet should do all in their power to assure a peaceful relationship between Israel and Palestine, and that the Palestinian government's acceptance of international and bilateral treaties with Israel is an important part of that. Muriel Asseburg makes a strong case in her recent [article](#) (February 2007) that, as currently administered, the EU's Temporary International Mechanism does not convey the message of peaceful EU intentions towards the Palestinians, nor does it effectively engage the Hamas-led Palestinian government in seeking a peaceful *ménage de vivre* with Israel.

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Send your views on what you have read in the *Arab Reform Bulletin* to the editor at [arb@carnegieendowment.org](mailto:arb@carnegieendowment.org).

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## News and Views

### Mauritania: Presidential Election

Two candidates will go to a runoff on March 25 in Mauritania 's first free presidential election, two years after the end of 21 years of authoritarian rule by President Maaouiya Ould Sid Ahmed Taya. Sidi Ould Sheikh Abdellahi (who served in the ousted government and is supported by a coalition of 18 groups previously loyal to the regime of President Taya) received 24.79 percent of the vote in the first round and Ahmed Ould Daddah (Coalition of the Forces for Democratic Change, which won 41 of 95 seats in the November 2006 legislative elections) received 20.68 percent. None of the 19 candidates—11 independent and 8 from political parties—crossed the required 50 percent threshold.

The Military Council for Justice and Development led by Ely Ould Mohammad Vall, who staged the coup in August 2005, is due to surrender power to the winner. In June 2006, Mauritians voted to limit the president's mandate to two five-year terms.

Initial reports from international observers declared the poll, which drew a 70 percent turnout of eligible voters, free and fair. The European Union's 80-member elections observer mission stated: "For the first time, the people have been able to vote freely, without intervention."

### Egypt: Constitutional Amendments; Crackdown on Brotherhood; Blogger Sentenced

Opposition MPs formally announced on March 13 their rejection of amendments to 34 articles of the constitution currently under discussion in the parliament. A joint statement signed by more than 100 members of the parliament's 454-seat lower house rejected the proposals on the grounds that they will limit judicial monitoring of elections and ban the formation of political parties that have a religious frame of reference. The draft amendments were approved by parliament's upper chamber, the Shura Council, on March 12 and will be presented for a single vote by the People's Assembly on March 20. Opposition members of parliament are planning to boycott that session. The ruling National Democratic Party controls the two-thirds majority needed to pass constitutional amendments. If approved, the amendments will go to a nationwide referendum in April.

In a continuation of the government's crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood, police arrested eighteen members on March 13, ten on March 5, and seventy-three on February 15. According to the Muslim Brotherhood, those arrested were mostly members who were expected to run in the April elections for the Shura Council. Over 300 members are currently detained, according to New York-based Human Rights Watch. Click [here](#) for details. A court ordered a freeze on the assets of twenty-nine known financiers of the Muslim brotherhood on February 28.

Egyptian blogger Abdel Kareem Nabil Suleiman, imprisoned since November 2006, was sentenced to four years in prison on February 22 on charges of inciting hatred of Islam and defaming the president. The case is the first in Egypt in which an Internet writer has been prosecuted for his published material. Click [here](#) for details and [here](#) for a statement by Amnesty International.

### Kuwait: Government Resigns

Kuwait 's emir re-appointed Sheikh Nasser Al Muhammad Al Sabah as prime minister on March 6, after the previous government resigned on March 4 in a move observers believe was aimed at avoiding a no-confidence motion against Health Minister Sheikh Ahmed Al Abdullah Al Sabah. Ten MPs presented the motion in February over suspected financial and administrative breaches at the ministry. The vote was due to have taken place in parliament on March 5 and Sheikh Ahmad, a member of the ruling family, would have had to step down if legislators had voted against him. In December, Information Minister Muhammad Al Sanousi resigned a day before he was due to face questioning in parliament.

### Yemen: Islah Congress; Millennium Challenge Corporation Funding; Editors Prosecuted

Yemen's main opposition party Islah reelected on February 27 its ailing leader Shaikh Abdullah bin Hussein Al Ahmar for the fourth time since 1990. Under Islah's internal law, the presidency of the party is restricted to three terms, but the party's central committee made an exception. The 4,000 representatives attending the party's fourth general congress in Sanaa also elected 130 members to its Shura Council, including—for the first time—thirteen women. Mohammed Ali Ajaan was elected president of the Shura Council, replacing Abdul Majid Al Zindani, who is on the U.S. Treasury Department's list of suspected supporters of terror activities. Click [here](#) for details about the congress.

The Millennium Challenge Corporation's Board of Directors reinstated on February 14 the eligibility of Yemen for participation in the Millennium Challenge Account (MCA) Threshold Program on the basis that the country has worked aggressively and demonstrably to improve performance on the selection criteria. Yemen was eligible for Threshold Program assistance in 2004, but the Board suspended its eligibility in November 2005. Click [here](#) for the press release. Morocco and Jordan are the only other Arab countries designated as eligible for MCA assistance so far.

Three Yemeni editors are being prosecuted on charges of defamation: Independent weekly *Al Deyar* Editor-in-Chief Abed Al Mahthari was charged with defaming Watani Bank for Trade and Investment; *Al-Shoura.net* Editor Abdelkarim Al Khaiwani was charged with publishing false information about the Defense Ministry; and independent *Al Wasat* Editor Jamal Amer was charged with defaming the Religious Endowment Ministry and the police. If convicted, each journalist could face up to one year in jail or a maximum fine of 10,000 riyals (U.S. \$50) for each charge under the Yemeni press law. Click [here](#) for details.

### **Bahrain: Activists Released**

Political activists Muhammad Said Al Sahlawi and Hussein Abdul Aziz Al Habshi, arrested on November 16 and sentenced to six and twelve months in jail respectively for possession of leaflets calling for the boycott of parliamentary and municipal elections, were released on February 25 reportedly based on a royal pardon from the king. The public prosecutor charged them under articles 160, 161, and 168 of the Bahraini Penal Code, which criminalize the dissemination and possession of materials that could "damage the public interest." Click [here](#) for details.

### **Saudi Arabia: Travel Ban on Government Critics**

Saudi Arabian authorities barred twenty-two prominent critics from foreign travel according to a February 9 letter by the New York-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) to King Abdullah. The critics include Matrook Al Faleh, Abdullah Al Hamed, and Ali Al Domaini, three constitutional and political reformers arrested on March 16, 2004 for signing a petition for reform and pardoned by the king in August 2005. Click [here](#) for details. After its first significant fact-finding mission in the country that began on November 27, 2006, HRW reported numerous cases of unfair trials, prisoner abuses, labor abuses, restrictions on women's legal identity, and cases of children's detention. Click [here](#) for details.

### **Syria: Upcoming Parliamentary Elections; Activist Released; Muslim Brothers Sentenced**

Syrian parliamentary elections will be held on April 22, as announced on March 8 by President Bashar Al Assad. Parliament is elected by popular vote from fifteen multi-seat constituencies to serve four-year terms. One hundred sixty-seven of the 250 seats are reserved for members of the National Patriotic Front, a coalition of the ruling Baath party and its six smaller allies. Opposition groups boycotted the last elections, held March 2003, claiming the vote was undemocratic.

Secretary of the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Unity Party Muhi Al Din Sheikh Aali was released on February 16 from a Political Security detention center in Damascus after being held incommunicado since December 20, 2006. Click [here](#) for more details.

The State Security court sentenced eight members of the banned Syrian Muslim Brotherhood to jail terms of up to 10 years, according to a March 5 statement by the National Organization for Human Rights in Syria. The members were arrested in early 2004 and charged with having ties with the group and possession of banned books and tapes. Syrian authorities did not confirm the sentences.

### **Jordan: Parliament Approves Controversial Press Law**

Jordan's parliament endorsed on March 4 controversial amendments to press legislation that retain clauses allowing imprisonment of journalists for violations relating to defaming religion, offending religious prophets, inciting sectarian strife or racism, slandering individuals, and spreading false information or rumors. Journalists operating in the kingdom could face fines of up to 10,000 Jordanian dinars (U.S. \$14,114) and prison terms ranging from one day up to three years. The new law also places the licensing of new publications under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Industry and Trade. The Jordan Press Association deplored the adoption of the draft law and urged the upper house of parliament, where the draft now goes for further discussion, to amend the legislation.

King Abdullah announced on March 2 that parliamentary elections will take place by the end of 2007, ending speculation that he would delay elections until next year. Parliament's four-year term ends in April.

### **Algeria: Human Rights Lawyers Trial**

Human rights lawyers Amine Sidhoum and Hassiba Boumerdassi, on trial since August on charges of handing unauthorized documents to their clients in prison, face up to five years in prison if convicted and a fine of 10,000 to 50,000 dinars

(US\$141 to \$705). Click [here](#) for details.

On February 7, authorities banned the Truth, Peace and Conciliation seminar organized by five Algerian organizations that represent families of the thousands of disappeared persons during the civil war in the 1990s. On February 6, Algeria's foreign minister signed the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Forced Disappearance.

### Tunisia: Court Bans Human Rights Congress

A Tunisian court barred the Tunisian Human Rights League from holding a congress on February 17. The organization has been unable to hold a congress since 2005 after twenty-two members, who are also members of the ruling Constitutional Democratic Rally party, filed suit accusing the director of violating internal rules and abusing his position. The organization's president, Mokhtar Trifi, says the government is using the case to stifle the group. A verdict in the case initially scheduled for June 2006 has been postponed twice.

The U.S. Department of State (March 1 [statement](#)) and the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists (February 28 [statement](#)) called on the Tunisian government to free activist Muhammad Abbou jailed two years ago on charges of defamation of the judicial process and assault after publishing articles on the internet critical of President Zine Al Abidine Ben Ali.

The Tunisian government banned issues of two French publications, the daily *Le Monde* and the weekly *Le Nouvel Observateur* that carried articles critical of President Ben Ali by Tunisian journalist Taoufik Ben Brik. Click [here](#) for details.

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### Upcoming Political Events

- Mauritania: Second Round Presidential Elections, March 25, 2007.
- Qatar: Municipal Elections, April 1, 2007; Parliamentary Elections (Date not set)
- Egypt: Referendum on Constitutional Amendments, April 2007; Shura Council Elections, April-May 2007.
- Syria: Legislative Elections, April 22, 2007; Presidential Referendum, May 2007; Municipal Elections, August 2007.
- Algeria: Legislative Elections, May 2007.
- Morocco: Legislative Elections, September, 2007.
- Oman: Shura Council Elections, October 2007.
- Jordan: Legislative Elections (Date not set).

### Views from the Arab Media

Muhammad Abu Rumman criticizes Islamic Action Front (IAF) MPs in Jordan for voting for the controversial press law in a March 6 [article](#) in *Al Ghad*. Such an assault on democratic liberties was expected from conservative and pro-government MPs but not from the IAF. The IAF's support of the new draft law merely on the basis that it penalizes journalists for religious defamation demonstrates that the movement is willing to abandon its push for reform in favor of its Islamist ideology.

Kuwaiti Islamist writer Abdullah Al Nefisi's [comments](#) that the Muslim Brotherhood should disband because it has become a burden on Islam elicited many responses in the Arab media:

- Mshari Al Zaydi argues in a February 20 [article](#) in *Ash Sharq Al Awsat* that Nefisi's comments are a reminder that Islamist movements are above all political experiments and do not enjoy divine protection as they like to argue explicitly and implicitly.
- The main problem is not Islamist movements but rather authoritarian states that do not accept the principle of rotation of power, posits Yaser Abu Hilala in a February 24 [article](#) in *Al Ghad*. Nefisi's proposal may be feasible in some Gulf states such as Qatar, but not in a state like Egypt.

Arab states such as Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt share some of the blame for the tragic developments in Iraq, according to Jordanian political analyst Mustafa Hamarneh on *Al Jazeera*'s "[Bila Hudud](#)" (Without Boundaries) on February 28. These states could have been involved in non-military activities in Iraq to fill the bureaucratic vacuum and avoid the total collapse of the state.

The meeting between Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad and Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah reflects a realization on the part of Iran that the attempt by the United States to distance it from its Arab neighbors is succeeding and that this would be disastrous for Iran's strategic interests, argues Yaser Al Zaatra on a March 4 episode of *Al Jazeera*'s "[Ma Wara Al Khabar](#)" (Behind the News). Saudi Arabia is committed to avoiding new conflicts in the region and as such is pushing for a

resolution of the Iranian nuclear crisis through negotiation, according to Mohammad Said, professor at Ain Al Shams University in Cairo.

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## Read On

On March 6, the U.S. Department of State released the congressionally mandated Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2006. The reports document continued human rights abuses and limitations on the rights of citizens to change their government in Arab countries. Click [here](#) to access reports concerning the Near East and North Africa region.

Recent publications focus on **Iraq**:

- Notwithstanding the Bush administration's reluctance to label the conflict in Iraq, a civil war has begun and the historical record suggests that Washington can do little to avert bloodshed, argues James D. Fearon in "Iraq's Civil War" (*Foreign Affairs*, vol. 86, no. 2, March/April 2007).
- The United States should have an end game as part of its strategy for Iraq rather than simply focusing on winning in Baghdad and fighting insurgents, argues Anthony Cordesman in "[The British Defeat in the South and the Uncertain Bush 'Strategy' in Iraq: 'Oil Spots,' 'Ink Blots,' 'White Space,' or 'Pointlessness?'](#)," Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 21, 2007.
- Impressive figures about the number of newly trained Iraqi security forces underlie a troubling reality regarding the loyalty and quality of these forces, argues Robert Perito in "[Reforming the Iraqi Interior Ministry, Police, and Facilities Protection Service](#)" (United States Institute of Peace Briefing, February 2007).
- Absent intensified civilian peacebuilding efforts aimed at political reconciliation and economic stabilization, a troop surge in Iraq will not suffice, contends Daniel Serwer in "[Civilians Will Make the Difference in Iraq](#)" (United States Institute of Peace Briefing, February 2007).
- In "[The Calm Before the Storm: The British Experience in Southern Iraq](#)," Michael Knights and Ed Williams report that British military and civil plans in southern Iraq were challenged by rampant disorder, well-organized Islamist movements, interference from countries including Iran, and the weakness of government security forces (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Focus no. 66, February 2007).

Several recent publications discuss **political Islam and Islamist movements** in the Arab world:

- The Muslim Brotherhood's relative moderation offers Washington a notable opportunity for engagement as long as such engagement is considered on a case-by-case basis, argue Robert S. Leiken and Steven Brooke in "[The Moderate Muslim Brotherhood](#)" (*Foreign Affairs*, vol. 86, no. 2, March/April 2007, 107-21).
- In "[What Islamists Need to Be Clear About: The Case of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood](#)," Nathan Brown, Amr Hamzawy, and Marina Ottaway identify the issues of Sharia law, dual religious and political identity, organizational structure, universal citizenship, and women's rights, as issues on which the movement needs to achieve greater clarity if it is to gain credibility in the West (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Policy Outlook no. 35, February 2007). Click [here](#) for Arabic.
- **Kuwait 's** Islamic Constitutional Movement faces the challenge of reconciling a socially conservative agenda with the need to form cross-ideological alliances that are necessary for progress towards greater political reform (Nathan Brown, "[Pushing Toward Party Politics? Kuwait 's Islamic Constitutional Movement](#)," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Carnegie Paper no. 79, February 2007). Click [here](#) for Arabic.
- If it is to effectively deal with the challenge posed by Hizbollah, the United States needs to recognize Hizbollah's self-projection as a broad-based Muslim resistance movement against the United States and its allies rather than focusing solely on its identity as a militant Shiite organization (Bilal Y. Saad and Bruce Riedel, "[Expanding the 'Jihad': Hizbollah's Sunni Islamist Network](#)," Brookings Institution, February 2007).
- *[Al Din wal Siyasa fi al Sharq al Awsat](#)* (Religion and Politics in the Middle East), published by Gulf Center for Strategic Studies, discusses the nexus of religion and politics in the Middle East, the role of Islamist movements in

Arab political systems, and perceptions of Islam in the West and vice versa.

- Fatah's defeats on the ground enabled Hamas to score most of the gains from the Mecca accord, argues Mohammad Yaghi in "[Hamas's Victory: From Gaza to Mecca](#)" (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Watch no. 1200, February 16, 2007).
- **Israel** and the international community should engage Hamas to create a nationalist-Islamist coalition with the goal of ending violence and occupation while enabling the creation of a sovereign **Palestinian** state, argues Khalil Shikaki in "[With Hamas in Power: Impact of Palestinian Domestic Developments on Options for the Peace Process](#)" (Brandeis University Crown Center for Middle East Studies, Working Paper no. 1, February 2007).

Several recent publications discuss reform related developments in Arab countries:

- A February 14 [report](#) (Arabic) by the International Freedom of Expression Exchange documents increasing attacks on journalists and freedom of the press in **Jordan** in 2006, despite the proliferation of new media and the establishment of programs aimed at supporting journalists.
- The **Egyptian** regime's recent sentencing of blogger Abdul Karim Suleiman, which is symptomatic of the censorship of internet speech in Arab states, undermines long-term U.S. interests in the region, argues Andrew Exum in "[Internet Freedom in the Middle East: Challenges for U.S. Policy](#)" (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Watch no. 1025, February 27, 2007).
- If **Yemen** is to remain a viable state, aggressive political and economic reform must weaken the current patronage system, argues Sarah Phillips in "[Evaluating Political Reform in Yemen](#)" (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Carnegie Paper no. 80, February 2007). Click [here](#) for Arabic.
- In "[Requiem for Palestinian Reform: Clear Lessons from a Troubled Record](#)," Nathan Brown examines the successful establishment of democratic reforms in **Palestine** from 2002 to 2006, the changing nature of international support for reform following Hamas' electoral victory in 2006, and lessons for the Arab and international community on the failure of democratic reform (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Carnegie Paper no. 81, February 2007). Click [here](#) for Arabic.

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