



Greetings from the Project on Middle East Democracy!

Last week, Washington saw the inauguration of President Barack Obama, and his first few days in office sparked much debate over the course of foreign policy during his administration. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was confirmed by the full Senate, while George Mitchell and Richard Holbrooke were announced as envoys to the region. The fallout from the conflict in Gaza and strategies for preserving the fragile cease-fire there and advancing the peace process were also heavily debated. Later this week, all eyes will turn to Iraq, which will hold long-awaited provincial elections on Saturday.

For more detailed coverage of the debates surrounding U.S. foreign policy and the prospects for democracy in the Middle East, be sure to check out POMED's blog, the [POMED Wire](#).

The Weekly Wire

January 26, 2009

Legislation

No relevant legislation acted on last week.

Committee Hearings

On Thursday (1/22), the **Senate Foreign Relations Committee** met for the [nomination hearing](#) of **Deputy Secretaries of State-Designate James Steinberg and Jacob Lew**. The full text of statements by [Steinberg](#), [Lew](#), and Ranking Member [Richard Lugar](#) (R-IN) are available, as well as [video](#) of the hearing in full. In his opening statement, Committee Chairman **John Kerry** (D-MA) expressed the commitment of the committee to ensure the resources needed for an increase in diplomatic and civilian capacity-building. Senator Lugar reiterated Chairman Kerry's point, but also expressed his view that U.S. foreign policy must become more proactive to increase stability and reduce the likelihood that the use of force will be needed. Steinberg supported the idea of "smart power" and articulated the important role the State Department must play in such an approach. Lew stressed his commitment to ensuring the State Department works well, both internally and within

the inter-agency process. He also expressed his respect for diplomacy as the vanguard of President Obama's foreign policy.

In Washington

Obama's Inauguration: This week, as Washington saw the inauguration of a new American president, many sought to analyze what this could mean for the rest of the world. Some provided a [round-up](#) of how the inauguration was received in the Muslim world - from [feelings of relief to skepticism](#). Another [cautioned](#) that while "Israel was not mentioned in the speech, its leaders need to listen carefully to the message...Israel should internalize...[an] approach that favors dialogue and seeking paths toward understanding with yesterday's enemies." Meanwhile, **Richard Haass** offered [an interesting take](#) on what Obama's policy of change means for the rest of the world, claiming that while Bush's policy of going it alone was unpopular, Obama's calls for multilateralism will require others to commit significant resources, saying "Obama is likely to be more diplomatic than his predecessor, but he is also likely to be more demanding."

One analyst explained how Obama's inaugural address [settled some unanswered questions](#) regarding his worldview. While another touched upon the [shifting priorities of democracy promotion](#) under Obama, expressing concern that the new President may believe that "Voting matters, but maybe not as much as economic development, or women's rights, or honest judges." The President was quoted as saying "if people aren't secure, if people are starving, then elections may or may not address those issues, but they are not a perfect overlay...[Elections aren't democracy](#), as we understand it. They are one facet of a liberal order." Meanwhile, it was also posed that under the new administration we should see movement toward a [more subtle, diplomatic approach](#) to democracy and human rights. And speaking of subtle diplomacy, **Joseph Nye** explained how ["smart power"](#) will be a necessary tool for Obama to shuttle the U.S. into a new era of leadership.

George Mitchell as Middle East Envoy: Many [praised](#) the choice of **George Mitchell**, former Senate Majority Leader and overseer of the Northern Ireland peace process, as the new Middle East Envoy. One commentator [editorialized](#) that Mitchell's appointment signals the return of the U.S. as an "honest broker" in the peace process; while another [wrote](#) that Mitchell's primary [2001 recommendations](#), a freeze on Israeli settlements and a Palestinian crackdown on terrorism, still have merit, but that the current landscape is much more difficult. An article [drawing parallels](#) between Northern Ireland and the Israeli-Palestinian crisis highlighted Mitchell's stance on engaging all parties. On the other hand, [some were less optimistic](#) about the Mitchell appointment, citing his failure to blame Yasser Arafat and Ariel Sharon for provoking the second intifada. Another commentator [fears](#) that time may be running out on the two-state solution.

Obama's First Steps in the Middle East: This week, Prince Turki al-Faisal wrote in the *Financial Times* that the [recent events in Gaza](#) have changed the realities of U.S. policy in the region, warning that unless the U.S. is serious about standing against Palestinian suffering, stability and U.S. strategic alliances in the region are in danger. Regarding his [first phone calls to foreign leaders](#), one analyst commented, "Barack Obama placed calls to Egyptian President **Hosni Mubarak**, Jordan's **King Abdullah**, and Palestinian President **Mahmoud Abbas**. Excellent! What a [perfect opportunity](#) to talk to 'those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent.'" Meanwhile, another noted that these calls are [an important symbol to](#)

[the Arab and Muslim world](#), but argued that Obama missed an opportunity by not directly referencing the situation in Gaza in his inaugural address.

Meanwhile, Oliver North [argued](#) that preventing Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons should be the new administration's number one foreign policy priority. He criticized the position [articulated](#) on the White House website which states that the U.S. will engage in direct diplomacy without preconditions. Another commentator [questioned](#) President Obama's likely choice of Dennis Ross to handle the Iran portfolio, citing that Ross has no experience negotiating disarmament treaties and no particular credentials on Iran. And over at the Council on Foreign Relations, **Bernard Gwertzman** [interviewed Richard W. Murphy](#) on Hamas. Murphy stated, "I think we are now getting pulled into a more active position on the ground [in Gaza]. Whether this will lead to the opening of political contact with Hamas is the question. I don't think it will happen quickly but I think it is inevitable."

Senator Kerry on Pakistan: Senator John Kerry (D-MA), Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, [argued that the U.S. must do more to support Pakistan](#). He stated that he will work to pass the Enhanced Partnership with Pakistan Act, a bill which will provide direct aid for the Pakistani people and help to strengthen the Pakistani democracy. By speaking directly to the people of Pakistan and to its civilian government, the U.S. will bolster chances for success in Afghanistan and help stabilize Pakistan. Senator Kerry's assertions are based partially on his recent visit to the region.

Also Worth Reading

The Saban Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings has released a [new report](#) providing a strategy for moving beyond E.U.-U.S. tension on Middle East democracy promotion towards a more coordinated and unified approach. In comparing and contrasting the two approaches, Tamara Cofman Wittes and Richard Youngs find that while significant disagreements existed between the U.S. and the E.U. in their approaches, the rift was not as great as is generally believed. Both were committed to post-9/11 democracy promotion in the Middle East and the trajectory of these policies was consistent. The study puts forth a series of suggestions for the E.U. and the U.S. to collectively pursue Middle East democracy promotion. The full report can be downloaded as a pdf [here](#).

In the Middle East

Post-War Palestinian Politics: As the war between Israel and Hamas comes to a close, one analyst discussed how "[the ongoing Palestinian civil war shows no sign of abating](#)," citing that Fatah and Hamas have already begun to dispute who will distribute humanitarian aid to Gazans. Meanwhile, another highlighted the [problems inherent in the Palestinian plight](#), aptly stating, "the average Arab citizen faces an unsatisfying choice between a brand of Islamist-nationalist military resistance that trigger enormous Israeli attacks and Arab death and destruction, and a brand of Arab autocratic governance that breeds mediocrity, corruption and perpetual vulnerability and dependence."

Internet Activism and Repression in Egypt: A pair of interesting articles last week addressed online political activism in Egypt and the Egyptian regime's struggle to stifle online dissent. The first [examined in detail](#) the use of Facebook in last year's April 6 protest and since that time, asking "What does it mean to have a vibrant civil society on your computer screen and a police state in the street?" The second article [explains](#) efforts by the Egyptian government to stifle more moderate Islamist voices which reject Shariah law. It highlights the case of a moderate Islamist blogger, **Reda Abdel Rahman**, who was recently imprisoned through Egypt's Emergency Law and, despite a recent ruling by the Egyptian High National Security Court ordering his release, still sits behind bars.

Israeli Election: Bret Stephens of the *Wall Street Journal* [conducts](#) his weekend interview with potential Israeli Prime Minister **Benjamin Netanyahu**. If the election were held today, Netanyahu would likely become the country's prime minister. Netanyahu, who has discussed Israeli security matters with President Obama, may be more inclined to clash with the Obama administration, as was the case the last time he held the country's top post.

Electoral Backlash for Religious Parties in Iraq?: One [report](#) questioned whether religious parties in Iraq can hold on to power "despite a bitterness felt by voters starved of services and security." The odds appear to be against them ahead of the January 31 provincial elections, as an opinion poll showed that "68 percent of those questioned rejected the use of religious appeals in the campaign and 42 percent said they favored secular parties, while 31 percent supported religious parties."

Also Worth Reading

On January 18, "the first installment of the [Doha Debates](#) in 2009 ended in its closest ever result," as the motion 'this house believes that political Islam is a threat to the West' was [defeated by 51% to 49%](#). Those arguing in favor of the motion claimed that "Islamism leads to segregation along sectarian lines, and this make groups dehumanize each other which can lead to violence." Arguing against the motion, POMED's **Shadi Hamid** stressed that regarding the "key indicators that matter to Western democracies, most groups have begun to moderate themselves."

In Case You Missed It

On Wednesday (1/21), the Brookings Institution hosted a discussion analyzing Barack Obama's inaugural address and its significance for U.S. foreign policy. Panelists included **Michael Fullilove**, Program Director for Global Issues at the Lowy Institute and Visiting Fellow at Brookings; **Michael Gerson**, Roger Hertog Senior Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations and former head of speechwriting for President George W. Bush; **Vinca LaFleur**, Partner at West Wing Writers and former foreign policy speechwriter for President Bill Clinton; and was moderated by **Carlos Pascual**, Vice President and Director for Foreign Policy at Brookings. All seemed to agree that while it may not have been one of Obama's more moving speeches it was effective in setting the tone for his new administration. For POMED's notes on this event [click here](#).

On Friday (1/23), the Woodrow Wilson Center hosted a discussion on enhancing the

role of women and youth in promoting conflict resolution and capacity building in the Middle East. Recommendations ranged from bolstering grassroots movements to fostering advocacy, training, and dialogue. Panelists included Lunah Saadeh of the Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counseling in Palestine; Jinane Doumit of the Permanent Peace Movement in Lebanon; Rawan Natsheh of the Palestinian Welfare Association; Anat Reisman-Levy of the Citizens Accord Forum in Israel; and was moderated by Carla Koppell, Director of the Institute for Inclusive Security and Hunt Alternatives Fund. For POMED's notes on this event [click here](#).