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Insights and Analysis

Arab States: Security Services and the Crisis of Democratic Change

Amr Hamzawy

The lack of democratic breakthroughs worthy of mention in Arab countries has spurred debate about barriers to change. Much of this debate has focused on economic, social, and cultural factors, or on the fragility of political forces demanding democracy. The debate would be incomplete, however, without a discussion of the means by which the authoritarian Arab regimes control their societies, namely the critical roles performed by security services with their quasi-military (police and interior ministries) and intelligence (internal and external) components.

First, the security services restrict opposition political mobilization with a mixture of preemptive and repressive practices. Opposition groups often cannot hold mass meetings or demonstrations and get their supporters to polling places, and are prohibited from legitimate gains by falsified electoral results. The degree of oppression, and whether it is constant or episodic, varies from Syria to Egypt to Morocco. In any case, the result of the security services' oppressive role is the continuation of ruling regimes, many of which lack popular support, and a culture of fear and aversion to political participation amongst citizens.

Second, a cursory glance at the Arab regimes reveals the hegemony of the security services over the executive authority. This phenomenon is not limited to modern republics, founded by militaries that view the security apparatus as an extension of the regular army, but also extends to monarchies. While the unchecked hegemony of the security services in Saudi Arabia and Libya results from the almost complete absence of a political apparatus, in Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen the same phenomenon can be explained by the relative weakness of the ruling parties in the face of the organizational efficiency of the police and intelligence agencies. Moreover, the proliferation of emergency laws and special tribunals frees the hand of the security apparatus from judicial restraints in dealing with domestic political matters. Recent experiences in Egypt—the regime's reliance on security brutality against voters in order to salvage the 2005 elections in the face of Muslim Brotherhood gains, and the vicious manner in which the security services dealt with liberal opposition figure Ayman Nour—illustrate the phenomenon. Because Arab regimes lack effective political tools for exerting influence over society, even when claiming reformist intentions they often resort to their most effective weapon, oppression by security forces.

Third, officials with security backgrounds are overrepresented among the Arab ruling elites in comparison to other groups such as technocrats, businessmen, and university professors. Although there are fewer ministers with security backgrounds than there used to be in many Arab countries (with the important exceptions of Syria and Algeria), their penetration is still clear. One need only look at the provinces of Morocco, the governorates of Egypt, or the Saudi local councils to witness their heavy presence. Even more insidious is the fact that security services have been able to exercise influence—in some cases veto power—over appointments to leadership positions in legislative or judicial institutions. This security veto creates a structural bias within the Arab elite to the benefit of those desiring to preserve the status quo and against reformist elements, even those essentially loyal to the regime but striving to reform its institutions.

The mentality of the security apparatus fears nothing on this earth more than the call for change. The security veto, which represents a fundamental block to movement and renewal within the Arab elite, leaves Arab regimes either with a fragile band of true reformers with no real power, or with larger groups of phony reformers who advance in proportion to their adherence to the security mentality. Understanding this phenomenon can explain in large measure the schizophrenia of the Moroccan, Egyptian, and Jordanian political elites in recent years.

There remains the question of whether the security services are themselves beset by the same crushing social and economic crises that beset the majority of Arabs, and whether they too are lured by the siren call of political Islam. Or are security services merely a blind instrument for autocratic control, perpetually removed from society itself? Outsiders can venture only a few modest observations, based on limited evidence, as security apparatuses are generally a black box. Despite differences between low- and high-ranking members, security personnel all enjoy higher pay and better services than other segments of society, and are thus protected from unemployment and poverty. In addition, despite recent stories of Saudi security personnel belonging to radical Islamist organizations and of the sympathy of some Egyptian officers for the Muslim Brotherhood, in both cases those involved were either killed or purged. Thus far, it seems that opposition inroads are extremely limited and that security apparatuses continue to serve as an effective tool for the authoritarian control of society.

Amr Hamzawy is a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. This article was translated from Arabic by Kevin Burnham.

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Kurdistan-Iraq: Can the Unified Regional Government Work?

Gareth Stansfield

After months of negotiations, Nechirvan Barzani announced the formation of a unified Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Irbil on May 7, two weeks ahead of the announcement by Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri Al Maliki that a government for

Iraq had been formed. While the world's media remained focused on Baghdad, it largely overlooked the significance of the events in the capital of the Kurdistan region of Iraq.

The KRG is already the preeminent governmental authority in Kurdistan-Iraq, with Baghdad's influence being non-existent. Unifying the Kurdistan region is also a powerful symbolic act that may serve to enhance the legitimacy of Kurdish politicians in Iraq as they negotiate their people's future with their Arab counterparts in Baghdad.

But there are of course problems facing Barzani and his new cabinet. The first is the rivalry between the KRG's two most important participants: the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), led by Nechirvan's uncle Massoud Barzani; and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), led by current President of Iraq Jalal Talabani.

The second problem is the dissatisfaction of many Kurds with the performance of the KRG to date. Accusations of corruption are rife, but so too is the popular belief that the leaders of the KDP and PUK are betraying their support base by making too many compromises in Baghdad rather than advancing Kurdish demands more forcefully. Both dynamics are opening a political space into which Islamist movements on the one hand, and ultra-nationalist groupings on the other, have emerged.

The third problem relates to the Iraqi Constitution passed in October 2005, which envisages a federal structure for the state that devolves significant powers to the regions. There remain several points of contention related to the relationship between Kurdistan and the central government. These include the ownership of natural resources and control of revenues accruing from them; the security responsibilities of the Kurdistan Army (the *peshmerga*) and, perhaps most saliently, the precise location of the boundary of the Kurdistan Region and the status of sensitive disputed territories, including Sinjar, Makhmur, and Kirkuk.

Many of the current challenges can be traced to the division of the KRG into two entities from 1994 onwards. Political competition between KDP and PUK leaders, an unworkable power-sharing system, and the destabilizing actions of neighboring states combined to push the KDP and PUK into a conflict that came to a draw in 1997. From this point on, Kurdistan's political geography stabilized into two distinct regions: one dominated by the KDP and covering Irbil and Dohuk; the other presided over by the PUK and including Suleimaniyah and the territories of Kirkuk outside the control of the Iraqi government. New KRGs were established in each region, with the result that Kurdistan had two cabinets, two prime ministers, two sets of legislative procedures—in effect, two administrative systems.

The United States applied pressure to unify these two administrations, leading to the Washington Agreement of 1998, but the matter became urgent only following Saddam Hussein's downfall in 2003. Since then the two Kurdish groups have agreed on the duration of Nechirvan Barzani's tenure as Prime Minister (ending December 2007) and the need to promote a transparent approach to government. In terms of ministerial distribution, the KDP heads 13 ministries and the PUK 14. Three ministerial portfolios are held by the Islamic Union and the Islamic Group, with Assyrian and Turkmen parties each having one ministry in a bid to show the inclusion of minority communities. Still, it is apparent that there is some way to go in the building of trust between the KDP and PUK. Sensitive ministerial portfolios, such as *peshmerga* (defense) and finance, remain double-staffed in Irbil and Suleimaniyah.

The vestiges of two de facto Kurdish statelets are numerous, leading to several structural problems that Barzani needs to manage by a process of extensive reform. These include a grossly overstuffed civil service, conflicting legislation in key areas such as personal status laws and foreign investment codes, and different cultural practices between civil servants from Irbil and Suleimaniyah.

In dealing with these challenges, Barzani must show that the unified KRG is not simply an extension of the KDP and PUK but rather is acting in the interests of the people of Kurdistan overall. By achieving this, the KDP and PUK will remain the leading popular political forces in Kurdistan-Iraq. If they fail, they will be increasingly challenged by Islamist movements, ultra-nationalist secessionists, and the Kurdistan region will again fall prey to the meddling of its neighbors.

Gareth Stansfield is Reader in Middle East Politics at the University of Exeter and an Associate Fellow of Chatham House. He has been a regular visitor to Kurdistan since 2003, undertaking research funded by a United States Institute of Peace grant.

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Kuwait: Struggle over Parliament

Ghanim Al Najjar

The current crisis over electoral redistricting—leading to the dissolution of the National Assembly and new elections set for June 29—is unusually sharp but by no means a first in Kuwait's 45-year history as an independent nation. If the issue is finally resolved, it could open the way toward a broader discussion of representation including the issue of possible legalization of political parties.

Since the 1960s, half of all Kuwaiti parliaments have been dissolved early. In 1967 the government falsified electoral results, leading to the resignation in protest of eight members elected to the National Assembly. The next crisis came in 1976 when the government dissolved the National Assembly unconstitutionally, that is, it failed to call new elections within 60 days of the dissolution. In 1980 the government tried to change the constitution in the absence of the assembly,

raising the number of electoral constituencies to 25. Another crisis occurred in 1986 when the government again unconstitutionally dissolved the National Assembly. The next came in 1999 when the government dissolved the Assembly, but this time observed the constitutional provision for new elections within two months. Thus we come to the Tenth National Assembly elected in 2003 and dissolved constitutionally in 2006, in the midst of a fierce political crisis between the government and popular movements representing most of the country's political currents.

The main controversy in Kuwaiti politics has been, and continues to be, electoral districts. The crux of the issue is that with a voting population as small as Kuwait's, a large number of electoral districts encourages vote buying and corruption and discourages debate of national issues. At the time of Kuwaiti independence in 1961, there was a division between popular support for a single electoral district for all of Kuwait, and a government desire for 20 constituencies. The struggle intensified to the point that a number of key political actors threatened to boycott elections if the government insisted on its position, leading to a compromise on ten districts. Four elections were held under that system, one of which was rigged (1967) and another of which led to an unconstitutional dissolution of the Assembly (1976). The government's displeasure with the ten-district system became clear in 1981 when it insisted on raising the number to 25 districts, which is the current system.

Electoral districts remained a live issue after 1981, with many politicians insisting that the 25-constituency system was corrupt and in need of reform. Beginning with the 2003 National Assembly the government began to show signs of responsiveness, so several deputies put forth proposals and the government offered its own plan to the National Assembly. However, a proliferation of redistricting plans—including more than one from the government—created confusion and accusations of bad faith on the government's part, leading to failure.

When a new government headed by Sheik Nasser Al Muhammad Al Sabah was formed after the death of the former Emir in 2005, it presented itself as reformist and named electoral redistricting among its priorities. A committee was formed to deal with the issue and after careful deliberation concluded that the ideal solution was to divide Kuwait into five electoral constituencies. Opposition deputies announced their support of the five-district plan and mobilized a popular campaign on its behalf. The campaign, led by young people, chose the color orange as its symbol and included the participation of 29 (out of a total of 50) parliamentary deputies, while a smaller number of deputies came out against it. The government's position on the plan was ambiguous. After a group of parliamentary deputies demanded to interpellate the prime minister over the government's handling of the issue, the cabinet requested that the Emir dissolve the National Assembly.

While the June 29 elections will be held according to the 25-district system, the prospect of a reduced number of districts with a larger number of voters in each will shape debates and electoral outcomes. Above all, it will raise the importance of the issue of political parties, which would play an important role in a revised system. Although there are currently at least seven quasi-parties in Kuwait, they are technically illegal and the actual passage of a law regulating parties remains a distant proposition. Once the districting issue is resolved, those who hope to develop a party system in Kuwait will need to find ways to raise the profile of the issue and drum up public support and interest in parties, which so far is lacking.

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Syria: Conflict with West Spurs Economic, not Political, Reform

Joshua Landis

Political reform in Syria is not on. Last year's promises of a "great leap forward"—a rewritten emergency law, citizenship for stateless Kurds, and a new political party law before local elections in 2007—have been shelved. President Bashar Al Assad stated in a recent television interview that, given the situation in Iraq and Syria's mounting battle with the West, security would come first. That warning was the opening shot in a sweeping crackdown on opposition and human rights leaders, the most intense since the Damascus Spring leaders were imprisoned in 2001.

The Syrian regime insists it must clear the decks of potential fifth columnists as it prepares for a showdown with the Bush administration over Lebanon and the war on terrorism. June is a pivotal month. The new UN investigation into Rafiq Al Hariri's murder is expected to indict Syrian leaders; the question is whether the investigators have amassed enough evidence to move the Security Council to impose sanctions or initiate an international trial.

In addition to the threat from the West, the growing unity and tactical dexterity of the Syrian opposition worries the regime. Over the last year, not only has the internal opposition united and joined ranks with expatriates—read Muslim Brothers—in the promulgation of the "Damascus Declaration," but former Vice President Abdel Halim Khaddam (a Sunni Baathist) has come on board in an effort to split regime loyalists. The intended message to Syrians is: "this is not Iraq; we will not hunt Baathists. We are pluralistic, moderate, and non-sectarian; the regime is Alawite, extremist, and sectarian." The newly formed National Salvation Front met in London June 4-5 to agree on "an executive plan for the liberation and democratization of Syria."

Among the challenges identified at the London meeting is accelerating opposition efforts to build bridges to the Lebanese Cedar Revolution. Syrian oppositionists recently signed a joint declaration with Lebanese activists in support of UN resolution 1680 (calling on Damascus to resolve border controversies with Beirut, establish a permanent diplomatic relationship, and control the movement of arms into Lebanon), an initiative that became the pretext for the recent regime

crackdown. Lebanese Druze leader Walid Jumblat has met with Khaddam on several occasions and hosted a Muslim Brother delegation at his palace in Mukhtara in May. The next step would be for Future Movement leader Saad Hariri to champion the Syria opposition cause in Paris, Riyadh, and Washington, which would up the ante significantly.

If Syria's battle with the West has justified postponing political liberalization, it has hastened an economic opening. Washington's efforts to crash the Syrian economy and choke off its access to foreign finance have concentrated the mind of the regime. Last fall, when the Syrian currency lost 20 percent of its value overnight due to Western pressure, Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah Dardari insisted to a number of associates that he would "[expletive] the black-market profiteers." It is this lusty spirit of combat that has enabled regime reformers to drive forward the overhaul of Syria's financial sector, which is now considered a matter of survival.

Private banks have proliferated, and are growing rapidly although they have yet to capture a majority share of the market. Central Bank Director Adib Mayaleh said recently that the foreign ownership ceiling on private banks would be raised from 49 to 60-70 percent soon. Private currency trading has been legalized to eliminate the black market, and the Syrian lira has regained the value it lost last year. The finance ministry is also on its way to introducing treasury bills and issuing public debt, which will transform the government's ability to increase investment and plan budgets, a major step in modernizing the economy. So far, efforts by the United States and France to press private banks to cease underwriting lines of credit to Syria have had uneven results and failed to trump Syria's economic liberalization.

Still, economic liberalization has its limits, as Al Assad has not found the wherewithal to cut through the corruption, layers of socialist legislation, and cronyism needed to carry out real structural reform. Also, Al Assad's initial hope that rapid trade growth would lead Syria out of its economic doldrums has been disappointed. The U.S. closure of the Iraq market in 2003, followed by the expulsion of Syria from Lebanon in 2005, dealt Al Assad's plans a heavy blow, from which Syria has only partially recovered by reorienting its trade east to Russia, India, and China and sucking in some of the petrodollars washing through the Gulf.

Whether the Syrian regime can liberalize its economy, outmaneuver western sanctions, and preserve its power base is an open question. In the face of increasing Western and opposition pressure, high GDP growth and banner figures for foreign investment have become critical weapons for regime survival.

Joshua Landis, who spent 2005 as a Senior Fulbright Researcher in Damascus, is assistant professor of Middle East Studies at the University of Oklahoma and author of SyriaComment.com. His book, Democracy in Syria, will come out next year.

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Egypt: The Gamal Mubarak Paradox

Samer Shehata

Among the ironies of Egypt's stalled process of political reform is that it is inextricably linked to the future of 42-year old presidential scion Gamal Mubarak. The younger Mubarak fashions himself as a Western-oriented reformer and in fact has championed some notable economic and political liberalization measures. At the same time, many Egyptians would consider his eventual succession to the presidency—widely seen in Egypt as a *fait accompli*—antithetical to genuine political reform and competition.

Even before the Kifaya ("Enough") movement came into existence in late 2004, anti-Mubarak and anti-Gamal slogans were frequently heard at protests. Beginning with the mobilization against the Israeli reoccupation of the West Bank in the spring of 2002 and continuing through the 2003 anti-Iraq war protests, demonstrations that were originally organized around foreign and regional issues often became opportunities to express anti-regime sentiments.

Public criticism of the president, the regime, and Gamal has become more pointed as the number of independent newspapers in Egypt has increased. Few opportunities to criticize the president's son are missed and hardly a day goes by without at least one front-page story about Gamal. Independent newspapers have had a field day, for example, with Gamal's allegedly secret trip to Washington in May. The headline of the leftist *Al Ahali's* newspaper read, "Mubarak gives America a choice: Gamal or the (Muslim) Brotherhood." Banner headlines in *Al Usbuu* (nominally independent but closely linked to security services) declared "The Secret of Gamal Mubarak's Mysterious Visit," reflecting popular suspicion about Gamal Mubarak's meetings with President Bush, Vice President Cheney, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, and National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley. Other widely read independent papers such as *Al Dustour*, *Al Fagr* and *Sawt Al Umma*, in addition to the liberal and more professional dailies *Nahdat Masr* and *Al Masry Al Youm*, also prominently feature Gamal in their coverage.

Opposition to Gamal Mubarak's increasingly prominent role and likely succession has also motivated the creation of protest movements in recent years. The Egyptian Movement for Change, known as Kifaya and its numerous offshoot organizations were founded on the slogan "No to extension [of President Mubarak's rule], no to hereditary succession, yes to freedom." Even newly-formed issue-oriented reform groups, such as the March 9 Movement for the Independence of Egyptian Universities, are largely composed of individuals publicly opposed to hereditary succession.

The Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt's most popular and powerful opposition movement, as well as secular opposition parties, also oppose Gamal's succession. The Brotherhood's Supreme Guide Muhammad Mahdi Akef recently declared that his

organization “completely rejects” the possibility of Gamal “inheriting” the presidency. In a May 2006 statement, Akef highlighted Gamal's elitist image, saying that the younger Mubarak “has nothing to do with the people and knows nothing about the people.” Deputy Supreme Guide Muhammad Habib made similar remarks, interpreting a recent government crackdown on protests as “preparing the stage for an idea that is completely rejected by the Egyptian people, which is hereditary succession.”

In the increasingly free-wheeling political debate in Cairo, Gamal Mubarak's future has become daily fare. Public figures as diverse as veteran political commentator Muhammad Hassanayn Haykal, civil society activist Saad Eddin Ibrahim, and popular poet Ahmed Fouad Negm have all made public statements about Gamal's possible succession. At an event at the American University in Cairo on May 21, vice presidents of the Court of Cassation Mahmoud Mekki and Nagi Derballa were asked about a Gamal succession scenario. The judges responded that they had no objection to Gamal being elected president as long as the election was free and fair, but the mere fact that the issue was raised in a forum about judicial freedom reveals how intertwined political reform, Gamal Mubarak, and the nation's future have become.

Despite the ongoing controversy, if Gamal Mubarak were nominated as the ruling party's candidate and stood in controlled presidential elections, he would undoubtedly win. The process would be legal as per the amended Article 76 of the Egyptian constitution. Considering the weakness of the opposition and the Muslim Brotherhood's reluctance to challenge the regime directly, it is unlikely that the inevitable protests would result in anything more than temporary but surmountable turbulence for the regime.

The larger issue is that significant segments of the public would not welcome Gamal's installation and would consider his assumption of the presidency illegitimate. It is difficult to predict the precise problems that might arise from such a legitimacy deficit, for example, whether opponents to Gamal in the military or security services would take advantage of such a situation. The potential for trouble will be increased if Gamal Mubarak becomes president under currently anticipated conditions—with no term limits, no clear plan for political reform, and few economic deliverables for the general population.

Samer Shehata is Assistant Professor of Arab Politics at Georgetown University's Center for Contemporary Arab Studies. He spent the last year in Egypt doing research on political reform.

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News and Views

Egypt: Crackdown on Demonstrators; Judicial Law Debated; Wafd Election

Tension is on the rise between the Egyptian government and opposition members after authorities cracked down on demonstrators protesting on May 18 in favor of two senior judges who were brought before a disciplinary committee for calling parliamentary elections fraudulent. Judge Mahmoud Mekki was acquitted while Hisham Al Bastawisy received a written reprimand. Human rights groups **reported** that several Egyptian and foreign journalists covering the protests were assaulted and detained. On May 24 the Egyptian State Security prosecutor charged three journalists who alleged fraud in last year's parliamentary elections with defamation. Click [here](#) for details by the Committee to Protect Journalists.

Also on May 18, Egypt's Court of Cassation rejected the appeal of Al Ghad Party leader Ayman Nour, convicted in December 2005 of forging signatures on petitions to establish his party. The U.S. Department of State criticized the highly politicized trial of Nour as a “miscarriage of justice by international standards;” [click here](#) for a text of the statement.

Hundreds of members and supporters of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood were detained during the May 18 protests, leading to a heated debate in parliament. In an unprecedented move, the Muslim Brotherhood has started a process to withdraw confidence from the government by requesting an interpellation of Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif.

The Muslim Brotherhood also clashed with the government regarding May 28 elections to the board of the Alexandria Chamber of Commerce. According to the Muslim Brotherhood, Egyptian authorities prevented its candidates from winning any seats by arresting 28 members and preventing voters from entering the polls. This was the first time Muslim Brotherhood candidates attempted to participate in Chamber of Commerce elections.

The Egyptian government is set to submit to the People's Assembly a controversial law of the judiciary, which was among the issues that precipitated the confrontation between the Judges Club and the government in 2005. The Judges Club has been lobbying the Egyptian government to pass a law freeing the judiciary from financial and administrative control by the Ministry of Justice. The government announced on June 5, however, that efforts to reach a compromise between the Judges Club and the Ministry of Justice had failed and that the government would move forward with its own draft law. Parliament is also discussing legislation to create a special court to try ministers and to regulate procedures for remanding citizens to custody. The People's Assembly also announced the formation of a three-member committee to study constitutional reforms.

On June 5, the Wafd Party announced that it had elected former parliamentary deputy Munir Fakhry Abdel Nour as its new secretary general. The selection of Abdel Nour came as a surprise and followed months of leadership controversy within the party, including accusations by Abdel Nour that the former Wafd leadership discriminated against him and caused him to lose his parliamentary seat because he was a Coptic Christian.

The Egyptian government has asked the International Republican Institute (IRI), a U.S.-based nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing democracy worldwide, to halt operations in Egypt until it acquires the necessary government permits. This action followed a newspaper interview in which the director of the IRI office in Egypt discussed IRI activities and prospects for democratization.

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Palestine: Debate over Referendum

President Mahmoud Abbas announced on June 6 he will extend the deadline for Hamas to accept a platform ([English text](#), [Arabic text](#)) that calls for the establishment of a Palestinian state within the 1967 boundaries alongside Israel. Abbas had given Hamas an ultimatum either to accept the platform or face a national referendum, but Prime Minister Ismail Haniyya argued that the Palestinian Basic Law prohibits referenda in Palestine. The platform was signed on May 10 by prominent Fatah and Hamas members imprisoned by Israel, but Hamas's leadership did not endorse it.

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Syria: Human Rights Activists Detained; National Salvation Front Meets in London

In a continuation of the arrests and trial of human rights activists and opposition figures in the past several months, between May 14 and May 23 Syrian authorities detained 12 activists who were among 300 Syrian and Lebanese intellectuals, writers, and human rights advocates to sign a petition ([Arabic text](#)) on normalization of relations between Syria and Lebanon. The May 12 petition called for a properly demarcated border, the release of political prisoners, and the exchange of ambassadors. Among those arrested were journalists Michel Kilo, human rights lawyer Anwar Al Bunni, and Mahmoud Meri of the Arab Organization for Human Rights. They face charges of "weakening national sentiment" and "spreading false or exaggerated news that can affect the standing of the state." Two of the twelve activists have since been released, and the remaining ten began a hunger strike on May 30. Click [here](#) for a May 20 statement by Human Rights Watch and [here](#) for a May 23 press statement by U.S. Department of State Spokesman Sean McCormack.

In another development, the National Salvation Front formed by exiled Syrian opposition leaders held a conference in London on June 4-5 to discuss a plan of action for peaceful regime change in Syria. Participants in the National Salvation Front (including former Syrian vice president Abdel Halim Khaddam, leader of the banned Muslim Brotherhood Ali Sadreddine Al Bayanouni, and smaller Kurdish and communist parties) insisted that the regime should be removed through peaceful and democratic means without outside intervention. They called on the Syrian army and security forces not to enforce the leadership's orders.

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Lebanon: Debate over Electoral Law

The Lebanese cabinet is reviewing a draft electoral law proposed by the national electoral law committee on June 1. Headed by former minister Fouad Boutros, the 12-member committee (equally divided among Muslims and Christians) was commissioned nine months ago with drafting a replacement for the law passed in 2000 when Syria still exercised political and military control over Lebanon. While there is a general consensus on the need for a new law, politicians are deeply divided over several issues, primarily electoral districting. The draft law proposes that 51 MPs be elected by proportional representation in the large governorates (muhafazat) and 77 MPs by majority vote in the smaller districts (qada). Other amendments include bringing down the voting age from 21 to 18, allowing Lebanese expatriates to vote, instituting a quota for female candidates, and holding elections throughout the country on the same day instead of the existing month-long process. In an attempt to increase transparency in elections, the draft also proposes creating an independent electoral commission, prohibiting cabinet members from running in legislative elections, and preventing amendments to the law in an election year. After review in the cabinet, the law will be submitted within one month to parliament, where it is expected to be the subject of heated debate.

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Jordan: Government Approves Anti-Terrorism Law

Jordan's government approved a new anti-terrorism law on May 27 that includes provisions allowing security forces to place suspects under tight surveillance, seize their financial assets, and detain them for two week periods that may be renewed without a court order. Under the current Penal Code, suspects may be held for only 24 hours before a court order authorizing further detention is required. Leaders of opposition groups and professional associations decried the bill as turning Jordan into a police state and argued that the regular penal code already includes clauses pertaining to combating terrorism. Secretary General of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood Jamil Abu Bakr said the law would "strengthen the grip of the security forces and limit public freedoms." The Jordan Professional Association Council, an umbrella group of 14 professional associations, plans to launch a nationwide campaign against the bill. The legislation was first proposed in November 2005 in the wake of the terrorist bombings in Amman. It is scheduled to be debated in parliament in an extraordinary session in July.

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Iraq: Key Cabinet Posts Filled

On June 8 the Iraqi parliament approved the appointment of three ministers to critical positions: Abdul Qader Muhamma Jassim Al Mifarji (a Sunni Arab) as Minister of Defense; Jawad Al Bohani (a Shiite) as Minister of Interior; and Sherwan Al Waili (a Shiite) as Minister of National Security. During the regime of Saddam Hussein, Al Mifarji was expelled from the Iraqi army and jailed for seven years for criticizing the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.

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Kuwait: Run-Up to Elections

The Kuwaiti political scene is volatile in anticipation of the June 29 parliamentary elections. Emir Sheikh Sabah Al Ahmed Al Jaber Al Sabah dissolved parliament on May 21 after weeks of political feuding over the electoral districts (click [here](#) for an Arabic text of his speech). The 29 MPs who demanded the reduction of the number of electoral districts from 25 to 5 have announced the formation of an Alliance for Change front. Among the 402 candidates contesting the elections are 32 women, who will be the first female candidates to participate in elections in Kuwait.

A debate over the constitutionality of members of the royal family contesting elections ensued after Fahd Salem Al Ali Al Sabah, Sheikh Sabah Al Muhammad Al Sabah, and Sheikha Fawzia Al Muhammad Al Sabah announced their intention to run. Kuwaiti constitutional experts argue that while no provision of the constitution bans ruling family members from voting or standing in polls, an explanatory note advises royals to stay away from elections. Ultimately the three candidates withdrew their nominations upon request from the emir. No ruling family member has ever contested parliamentary elections in Kuwait, although a number have in the past expressed a desire to run.

In another development, some Kuwaiti tribes have organized quasi-primaries in various districts to elect one or two candidates from the tribe in a bid to boost their chances of winning seats in parliament. The government arrested several candidates and released them on bail because the 2003 electoral law bans such practices.

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Bahrain: New Press and Association Laws; Run-Up to Elections

Bahrain's lower house of parliament approved on May 18 amendments to the Public Gatherings Law of 1973 that bans rallies near airports, hospitals, shopping malls, and locations deemed security-sensitive by the interior minister. According to the law, rally organizers must inform the authorities three days before the scheduled date and assume full civil and criminal responsibility for damage to private or public property during a demonstration. The law also bans carrying firearms or knives during demonstrations, stipulates that rallies may not be held before 7am or after 11pm, and notes that funeral processions may not be turned into political rallies.

A parliamentary committee agreed on May 30 to amend clauses in a draft press law stipulating prison terms for journalists, after a three-week campaign by journalists and rights activists. The first version of the law announced on May 3 mandated prison terms for "incitement to hatred, denigration of religious sects and vilification of parliament." The new draft specifies that journalists can only be imprisoned for six months if found guilty of insulting Islam, the Quran, the king, or of inciting political regime change. The bill will be debated soon in parliament.

The Bahraini parliament rejected on May 31 by a 15-11 vote a proposal to require ministers to take questions in public before the whole legislature rather than behind closed doors in parliamentary committees.

Bahrain's largest political society, Al Wafaq National Islamic Society, is criticizing the government for failing to set a date for municipal and legislative elections supposed to take place in the fall of 2006. According to the constitution, elections dates must be set 45 days in advance. Al Wafaq announced earlier this year it will participate in elections. Al Wafaq, along with four other political societies, boycotted the 2002 elections to protest constitutional changes that granted the appointed upper chamber of parliament equal legislative powers to the elected 40-seat lower chamber. In another development, 21 Bahraini women announced they will run in elections. No female candidates won seats in the 2002 legislative elections, but the king appointed six women to the upper chamber of parliament.

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Algeria: New Prime Minister

Algeria's President Abdelaziz Bouteflika appointed his close ally and leader of the ruling National Liberation Front Abdelaziz Belkhadem as prime minister on May 25. Observers believe the appointment is a preparation for constitutional changes that will allow the president to run for a third term in office. Although no official reason was given for former Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia's resignation, he is known to have opposed a constitutional amendment.

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Morocco: Detention of Al Adl wal Ihsan Members

Between May 24 and June 3, Moroccan authorities briefly detained between 300 and 400 members and leaders of the Islamist Justice and Charity group (Al Adl wal Ihsan), which is believed to be the largest (non-party) opposition group in Morocco. Mass arrests in several cities, quickly followed by releases, were made after the group launched an "open doors" campaign to recruit outside traditional areas such as mosques and universities. Group officials denied they have told their followers to prepare for an uprising this year, as reported in some Moroccan newspapers.

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Upcoming Political Events

- Iraq: National Reconciliation Conference in Baghdad, June 22.
- Kuwait: Legislative elections, June 29.
- Bahrain: Legislative and municipal elections, fall 2006.
- Jordan: Municipal elections expected in mid-2006.
- Yemen: Presidential and municipal elections, September 2006.

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Views from the Arab Media

Holding a referendum is the only way to avoid civil war in the Palestinian territories, argues Abdullah Iskandar in an opinion [article](#) in *Al Hayat* on June 6. The situation in Palestine has become unsustainable and the Palestinian public should be allowed to decide the future course. If the public votes for the platform, they will have withdrawn confidence from Hamas, which must then step down from government. If the platform fails to pass, President Mahmoud Abbas should allow Hamas complete power to manage relations with Israel as well as internal politics.

Al Jazeera's political debate show "[Al Ittijah Al Mu'akis](#)" (The Opposite Direction) featured on May 23 a discussion on the relationship between the U.S. government and some Arab opposition movements. Iraqi writer Samir Abed accused Arabs who cooperate with the United States of betraying their country's interests for U.S. interests in the region. The United States will sell out democracy for other interests, as the recent rapprochement with Libya demonstrates. Farid Al Ghadry, leader of the Syrian Reform Party based in Washington, argued that Arab opposition movements are not naïve and understand that ultimately the United States will follow its own interests, but they seek to make democratization a top U.S. interest in the region.

A May 16 episode of "[Al Ittijah Al Mu'akis](#)" discussed the membership of seven Arab countries in the newly-created UN Human Rights Council. Mohammad Al Arabi Zaytout, member of the Geneva-based Karama organization, argued that none of the countries—Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Morocco, Bahrain, Jordan, Tunisia, and Djibouti—deserve membership in this council because their governments are all guilty of severe human rights violations. He asserted that the voting process was politicized and that their membership in the council undermines its credibility and its effectiveness.

Another *Al Jazeera* live debate show "[Hiwar Maftouh](#)" (Open Dialogue) hosted a conversation on May 20 with Mustafa Ramid, an MP from the Party for Justice and Development (PJD) on the political situation in Morocco. Ramid defended his party against accusations by Abd Al Hamid Badawi, member of the Socialist Party's politburo, of being coopted by the government and not posing real opposition to the government. He argued that the PJD believes in participating in the political process because only through it can they make a difference, but acknowledged that the nature of the Moroccan system limits the actions of opposition movements.

In a May 30 [commentary](#) on the Muslim Brotherhood's official website *Ikhwanonline*, scholar Rafiq Habib contends that Egypt's regime has started to pursue amendments to the constitution and the electoral law to try to avoid an electoral victory by the Muslim Brotherhood in the 2010 elections. The amendments will probably occur through an electoral system that undermines the chances of independent candidates. The Muslim Brotherhood should begin to rally public support against such changes.

Commenting on the recent bout of street unrest in Lebanon after Hizbollah's Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah was parodied on a political satire show on the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation, Mshari Al Zaidy argues that the reactions were inappropriate because Nasrallah should not be immune to media criticism. Al Zaidy's June 6 [article](#) in *Ash Sharq Al Awsat* contends that by entering the political game, Nasrallah is no longer solely a religious leader and is therefore fair game for criticism in a free press environment.

Syria could witness a repeat of the Iraq situation, according to an [article](#) by Syrian writer Muhammad Ajlani in the London-based pan-Arab daily *Al Quds Al Arabi* on May 29. Existing sectarian tension could escalate rapidly in the absence of strong state control or in case of deterioration of the economic situation.

In a more optimistic portrayal, in a June 6 [article](#) in the United Arab Emirate's *Al Ittihad*, Ahmed Al Baghdadi posits that Arab reformers have started a movement across the region that will not be stopped. Arab regimes should realize that it is too late to halt the mobilization by activists in Syria, Egypt, Lebanon, Kuwait, and Bahrain and that their only choice is to introduce political reforms.

Read On

Several recent reports highlight ongoing problems regarding human rights and freedom of expression:

- Amnesty's International annual **report** for 2006 documents the persistence of grave human rights violations in the **Middle East and North Africa**. It suggests that it is not yet clear whether developments such as the work of Morocco's Equity and Reconciliation Commission and Saudi Arabia's first municipal elections indicate real change.
- According to a report (**English text, Arabic text**) by the International Freedom of Expression Exchange (IFEX) on May 25, violations of freedom of expression, freedom of the press, and freedom of association are rampant in Tunisia. The report, based on findings of an IFEX mission to Tunisia between April 18 and 22, criticizes the Tunisian authorities for imprisoning individuals for their views; blocking websites; harassing, intimidating, and restricting the freedom of movement of human rights defenders and political dissidents; and harassing attorneys and judges who press for the judiciary's independence.
- According to a new **report** by the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) released on May 23, seven Arab governments have taken punitive measures against journalists and newspaper editors for running edited versions of the Prophet Mohammad's cartoons that created an international controversy. Focusing on the case of Editor Mohammad Al Asaadi in Yemen, the report argues that these governments used the controversy as a pretext to retaliate against the press and to deflect public attention from domestic problems.
- In a June 3 report (**Arabic text**) on press freedom in the Arab world, the Arab Journalists Union classified Kuwait as having the most media freedom, followed by Jordan, Egypt, and Qatar. The report said that 25 Arab journalists were killed in 2005: 22 in Iraq, one in Lebanon, and one in Libya.

Recent publications in English and in Arabic address reform-related developments:

- If not for heavy external pressures to disarm, **Lebanon's** Hizbollah would be forced to take a more serious stance toward reform, contends Reinoud Leenders in "**How UN Pressure on Hizbollah Impedes Lebanese Reform**" (*Middle East Report Online*, May 23, 2006).
- David Schenker argues that **Lebanese** Druze leader Walid Jumblat's uncompromising stance on Hizbollah should be rewarded with continued U.S. support ("**Taking Aim at Syria and Hizbollah: Walid Jumblat's Brave Stance**," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Watch No. 1102, May 11, 2006).
- By isolating the Hamas government financially and diplomatically, the United States and its allies are pushing **Palestine** into political chaos that will serve no-one's interests, argues Nathan Brown in "**Living with Palestinian Democracy**" (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Policy Brief No. 46, May 2006).
- The increased role of civil society and citizens' participation in Egyptian politics is one of the key features of **Egypt's** recent political opening, according to an article by Thana Fouad Abdullah entitled "Malamih wa afaq al tahawul al siyasi fi masr" (Features of Political Transformation in Egypt) in the June issue of the political magazine **Al Mustaqbal Al Arabi** (The Arab Future).
- The spring issue of *Al Dimuqratiya* (Democracy), a quarterly journal published by Al Ahram in Cairo, explores the issue of Islam and the West and its relation to the lack of political freedom in Arab countries. Click **here** for the English website and **here** for the Arabic website.
- The June 2006 issue of *Al Muraqib Al Arabi* (The Arabian Observer) focuses on the prospects for democratization in **Syria**. Articles include "Is the Syrian Street Ready to Accept Democracy?" by Muhammad Habash, and "The Syrian Impasse" by Akram Al Bunni.
- A new Stimson Center report suggests that while security sector reform is a new issue for the **Gulf**, it is likely to gain traction and is worthy of study and policy attention (Henry L. Stimson Center, Southwest Asia Program, "**Security Sector Reform in the Gulf**," May 2006).

- The *Gulf Yearbook 2005-2006*—the third in the Gulf Research Center's annual series of the GRC Yearbook—examines important regional economic and political developments, such as Saudi Arabia's municipal elections, human rights conditions, and the role of external actors in influencing political reform processes.
- Pascal Menoret's *The Saudi Enigma: A History* moves beyond clichés about the role of oil wealth and fundamentalist Wahhabi Islam in an attempt to offer a more complex understanding of Saudi society, including the reformist manifestations of national identity (London: Zed Books, 2006).
- The June issue of the monthly *Hiwar Al Arab* (Dialogue of the Arabs), published by the Beirut-based Arab Thought Foundation, focuses on the relationship between state and tribe in contemporary Arab societies.

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