



Greetings from the Project on Middle East Democracy!

Last week was relatively quiet in Washington as Congress and others were on vacation for Easter and Passover. President Obama concluded his first major trip abroad with a major speech to the Turkish Parliament and a surprise stopover in Iraq. Algerian President Bouteflika was unsurprisingly re-elected amid reports of fraud and low voter turnout, while protests in Egypt marking the April 6 demonstrations of a year ago were far smaller and weaker than anticipated. This week Congress remains in recess, with the FY2010 budget and appropriations process expected to accelerate once they return next week.

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 our blog, the [POMED Wire](#).

The Weekly Wire

April 13, 2009

Legislation

No legislation last week as Congress was away on a two-week recess.

Committee Hearings

No committee hearings last week due to the recess.

In Washington

Obama's Ankara Speech: Last Monday, **President Obama** [gave a speech](#) before the Turkish parliament in which he articulated, among other things, that the U.S. "would [never be at war](#) with Islam" - a statement that "is certain to get [huge play](#) throughout the Arab world." The president earned [praise](#) from Turks on both sides of

the secular/religious divide, and [many](#) saw this as a [welcome change](#) from the **Bush** administration, which had "viewed Turkey as a simplistic duality: pious masses led by the Justice and Development Party against the small secular elite and the military."

Nonetheless, while many praised the speech, others [focused on the need](#) to "translate the words into deeds." And [some](#) felt there was [little substance](#), arguing "[t]his was a box-checking speech, full of duck-billed platitudes and not a single deliverable." Meanwhile, a few commentators seized the opportunity to [call](#) on the Obama administration to pursue "a [joint U.S.-Turkish](#) approach to key [regional](#) issues," but also to "speak truth to power in the AKP government" about "minority protection, religious freedom and stemming xenophobia."

Obama Stops in Baghdad; Still No U.S. Ambassador There: As the nomination of **Christopher Hill** remains [held up in Congress](#), some are beginning to question, "where's our man in Iraq?" Highlighting some of the pressing issues the [next ambassador will face](#), one analyst argued "the longer we go without an ambassador, the more a disservice - a dangerous one at that - we do to our 140,000-plus troops and diplomats and to the Iraqi people." Meanwhile, **President Obama** concluded his first major trip abroad with an [unannounced stop-over](#) in Iraq. One analyst [wrote](#), "Obama has things on the right course" and he's sending the right message: "American troops [cannot be the answer](#) to Iraq's problems, they really are leaving, and it's now up to the Iraqis - whether things go well or they go badly." Others had a slightly [different take](#), saying Obama is "right to keep troop levels high through December's parliamentary elections, and to maintain as many as 50,000 trainers and counterterrorism troops in Iraq through 2011."

From Rhetoric to Action on Iran: Last week, the State Department [announced](#) that the U.S. will now be attending negotiations on Iran's nuclear program between representatives of Iran and the P5+1. This represents a [shift](#) from the **Bush** administration, which only sent a delegate to such a meeting on one occasion, after which **Condoleezza Rice** declared that the Iranians were not "[serious](#)" about negotiating. High level diplomats [look back](#) on the Bush policy as extremely detrimental to a comprehensive approach to the Iranian nuclear issue. Meanwhile, **President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad** made an announcement that Iran would [welcome negotiations](#) with the U.S. as long as they were "honest" and led to changes in U.S. policy. Some analysts called on the Iranian leadership to [reciprocate](#) by making an equally symbolic gesture of goodwill. However, one commentator wondered how successful negotiations will be, [noting the appointment](#) of **Dennis Ross**, a man who is "explicitly skeptical about the usefulness of diplomacy with Iran." Another asked if U.S. [policy](#) toward nuclear energy in the United Arab Emirates could be used as a potential model for Iran?

In other news, Tehran [announced](#) that **Roxana Saberi**, an Iranian-American journalist who has been [held in Iran since January](#), is being charged with espionage. **Secretary of State Hillary Clinton** called for her "speedy release."

From Conventional to COIN: Progressive security commentators are [excited](#) about **Secretary Gates'** [proposed](#) new defense [budget](#), which reallocates funding from some conventional weapons programs to preparing the military for counterinsurgency operations. Expanding on this notion, one analyst [explained](#): "One

of the main lessons of Iraq was that even though our conventional military capabilities were so powerful that we could destroy an enemy regime rapidly and with few troops, this still did not ensure a peaceful or stable aftermath - in fact so few troops and so much firepower served as a handicap."

Meanwhile, in an [interview](#), **Admiral Michael Mullen**, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, argued that success in Afghanistan is partially dependent on NATO countries increasing *nonmilitary* commitments. They could have an immediate impact by providing more "economists, agriculturalists, lawyers and other civilian advisers" to the effort. The same could be said for Pakistan, as one analyst advocated [refocusing aid](#) to support developmental growth as opposed to strengthening Pakistan's military. Special Envoy **Richard Holbrooke** [agrees](#) that focus must be placed on Pakistan's tribal areas to quell the anti-American sentiment of even their most moderate residents.

Changing Policy through Dialogue? Many are advocating that **Obama** needs to start following up his [rhetorical overtures](#) to the Islamic world with concrete policy shifts. Will this mean [talking](#) to organizations such as [Hamas](#) or the Taliban? Apparently the Afghan government and the Taliban have been holding secret talks in Saudi Arabia for months, and now **Mullah Omar** has [reportedly](#) stated that he is willing to negotiate with the United States. One commentator [argues](#) that talking with the group "costs nothing, kills no-one, and is compatible and complementary, at least initially, with every other strategy."

Open Letter to Obama: Discussion over the [open letter](#) to **President Obama** continued with an interesting exchange between **Tarek Osman** and **Shadi Hamid**. Osman [argued](#) that while the letter is sincere and well-intentioned it ignores the fact that "political Islam is on a clashing path with U.S. foreign policy in the Arab world." In response, Hamid cites [examples](#) of increasing acceptance among Islamists of a potential two-state solution for Israel and the Palestinians. Furthermore, Shadi argues that Islamists "represent the largest opposition forces throughout the region. If democracy will ever come to be in the Arab world, Islamist groups will figure prominently in that future." Therefore, "Western nations would be wise to prepare themselves for the change to come. It is better to have leverage with Islamist parties before they come to power, not afterwards when it is too late."

Calls for Greater Aid to North Africa: Last week, one commentator [pointed out](#) that while the U.S. provides Morocco \$110 million annually to address "drivers of youth disaffection," Washington lacks a policy for promoting human rights and political reform in Tunisia and Algeria. Echoing this sentiment is a new [report](#) by the Potomac Institute and the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) on why and how the U.S. should promote regional cooperation in the Maghreb.

April Edition of the Arab Reform Bulletin: The [latest edition](#) of Carnegie's *Arab Reform Bulletin* is now available. The April issue includes articles on the pressures faced by Hamas in reconciliation talks, Syria's economy and engagement with the U.S., the ramifications of women's rights initiatives in Egypt, constitutional amendments in Bahrain, and the long-running dispute over Western Sahara.

Also Worth Reading

Maria Figueroa Küpçü and **Michael Cohen** have just published a new report for the New America Foundation titled "[Revitalizing U.S. Democracy Promotion: A Comprehensive Plan for Reform](#)." This analysis focuses on the "challenges facing America's democratization agenda" as well as "the need to create a new division of labor in the foreign assistance bureaucracy, which will require a reconsideration of the panoply of existing foreign assistance programs." Some of their recommendations include creating a cabinet-level agency for international development, conditioning more aid along the criteria used by the MCC, doubling funding for the NED, and creating a new position in all U.S. embassies tasked with coordinating foreign assistance efforts.

In the Middle East

Egypt's "Day of Anger" Remains a Low Simmer: The police turned out in [full force](#) in anticipation of the [one-year anniversary](#) of the [April 6, 2008 protests](#). But turnout was [low](#) as "[barely one hundred demonstrators gathered in downtown Cairo](#)." Some [noted](#) that the few protesters who did take part were mainly students, with workers and the opposition parties sitting on the sidelines: "Although it supports April 6, it seems that the Egyptian political opposition is taking a more cautious and calculated approach, which may have weakened April 6's ability to mobilize." Some [criticized](#) the Muslim Brotherhood for not playing a more significant role. **Abdel Rahman Fares**, a [blogger who was arrested](#) last Sunday for handing out fliers about the protest, was released from jail on Tuesday night, but is now reported missing. Be sure to check out POMED Research Associate **Chris Assaad's** [discussion](#), taking stock of the April 6 movement after the disappointment of last week's protests.

"Re-electing" Bouteflika: Algeria held a presidential election last Thursday in which it was widely [believed](#) that the incumbent **President Abdelaziz Bouteflika** would easily win. The Algerian government was [expected](#) to use fraud and intimidation to ensure the president's reelection. In the end, low voter turnout may have improved the incumbent's margin of victory, but was widely seen as undercutting his perceived [legitimacy](#).

Challenging Populist Appeal in Iran: As Iran's presidential election is drawing near, one analyst [shed some light](#) on current Iranian president **Mahmoud Ahamdinejad**, explaining he's a "throwback to the ideological verities of the first years of the Islamic Republic...For many Iranians, Ahmadinejad's promise of restoring Iran's 'rightful place' in the world - and providing subsidies and jobs - holds great appeal." In [challenging this appeal](#), another argued that [reformists](#) must do a better job at addressing the needs of the poor.

A Long Road Ahead for Women's Rights: Discussing some of the small gains women have made in political rights and education in the region, one analyst [called our attention](#) to the activism of **Hoda Shaarawi**, the first president of the Egyptian Feminist Union, who is best known for deliberately removing her veil in public. Despite modest improvements in women's rights, male chauvinism and [harsh consequences](#) for departure from tradition still dominate most Middle Eastern societies. For instance, the Afghan parliament [recently passed a bill](#) intended to give [minority Shia](#) their own identity that alarmingly [strips Shia women of basic rights](#) and

would allow a man to have sexual intercourse with his wife even if she says "no."

Coalition Building in Lebanon: Some [wondered](#) if the Cedar Coalition can prevail over the Hizbullah-Syria-Iran alliance in the upcoming Lebanese elections. It was argued that financial support from other Arab states as well as a change in the election calendar may prove to bolster the Cedar Coalition. Conversely, others [wrote](#) that the elections in June will mark the end of the Cedar Revolution. "Whether it is the March 14 coalition and its allies that wins, or the March 8 coalition with the Aounists, the forthcoming Parliament will be much friendlier to Syria than the current one is, representing a marked return of Damascus' hegemony over Lebanon."

Also Worth Reading

The United States Institute of Peace (USIP) has published a new report by **Radwan Ziadeh**: "[The Kurds in Syria: Fueling Separatist Movements?](#)" Ziadeh explains that "the Kurds of Syria, in contrast to the Kurds of Iraq and Turkey, are little known in the West, but they have similarly strained relations with the state that governs them and face human rights abuses as a minority." The report highlights the problems faced by the Kurdish population, both in Syria and throughout the region, and calls on the international community to support Syrian Kurds in their fight to gain equal social, economic, and political rights.