



Greetings from the Project on Middle East Democracy!

Last week saw Secretary Clinton pay a visit to Capitol Hill to testify on the foreign policy priorities of the administration. King Abdullah of Jordan became the first Arab leader to visit Washington and the White House during the Obama administration, with the announcement that Mubarak, Abbas, and Netanyahu are all likely to visit DC over the next month. Debate also intensified over the possible formation of a Palestinian unity government and what the U.S. approach to such a government might be. This week, a Conference Committee will convene to resolve differences in the House and Senate budget resolutions for FY2010.

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 27, 2009

Legislation

On Thursday (4/23), [H.Con.Res.108](#), sponsored by **Rep. Carolyn Maloney** (D-NY), a resolution which would express the sense of Congress that the Shi'ite Personal Status Law in Afghanistan violates the fundamental human rights of Women and call for its repeal, was introduced and referred to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs. [S.Con.Res.19](#), the resolution's senate equivalent, is sponsored by **Sen. Barbara Boxer** (D-CA). The concurrent resolution refers to the Shi'ite Personal Status Law signed by Afghan President **Hamid Karzai** in March. According the United Nations, "the law legalizes marital rape by mandating that a wife cannot refuse sex to her husband unless she is ill." The concurrent resolution calls on the Afghan government to declare the law unconstitutional.

Committee Hearings

On Tuesday (4/22), The **House Committee on Foreign Affairs** held a hearing

titled "New Beginnings: Foreign Policy Priorities of the Obama Administration" with Secretary of State [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#) attending as a witness. Secretary Clinton gave an update on the foreign policy goals and strategies of the **Obama** administration. In his opening statement, Committee Chairman [Rep. Howard Berman](#) praised Secretary Clinton's initial efforts to address the lack of capacity at USAID and the State Department and also expressed concern for the deteriorating security situation in Pakistan. The discussion touched on Palestine and Hamas, Afghanistan, Pakistan, funding diplomacy and development versus funding military operations, and the promotion of human rights and democracy around the world. To read POMED's notes on the hearing, [click here](#).

In Washington

Respecting Democratic Outcomes? During the recent [Summit of the Americas](#), **President Obama** noted that his administration would respect the "legitimacy" of all democratically elected governments, even when it "[might not be happy](#) with the results of some elections" and that he "condemn[s] any efforts at violent overthrows of democratically elected governments, wherever it happens in the hemisphere." It remains to be seen whether the Obama administration will extend these principles to democratic governments in other regions. But the administration's [apparent intention](#) to allow for U.S. assistance [to be provided to a Hamas-Fatah unity government](#) suggests a willingness to apply this democratic "doctrine" even when politically risky.

Meanwhile, some [criticized](#) the president for his friendliness toward Hugo Chavez and other authoritarian leaders saying Obama's engagement strategy is [bolstering dictators and demoralizing dissidents](#).

King Abdullah in Washington: Last Tuesday, **King Abdullah** of Jordan met with **President Obama** in DC, representing the [first White House meeting](#) between the president and an Arab leader since Obama assumed office. The talks mainly focused on the [Israeli-Palestinian peace process](#). Some speculated that Abdullah's main objective was to reiterate the principles of the Arab peace initiative and convince President Obama of the waning opportunity for peace. Also [slated to visit DC](#) in June for [separate peace talks](#) are Presidents **Hosni Mubarak**, **Mahmoud Abbas**, and Prime Minister **Benjamin Netanyahu**. This will be Mubarak's [first trip](#) to the U.S. since 2004. Some see the meeting with Netanyahu as Obama's [toughest](#) sit-down with a foreign leader to date.

Christopher Hill Confirmed as Ambassador to Iraq: After [lengthy debate](#), the U.S. finally has an ambassador to send to Iraq. On Tuesday evening, in a [vote of 72-23](#), **Chris Hill** was officially confirmed for the post. **Senator Brownback** (R-KS) had [opposed the nomination](#) and "accused Hill, the **Bush** administration's chief negotiator with North Korea, of ignoring North Korean human rights abuses and agreeing to a flawed disarmament pact with the regime...But a majority of senators decided Hill's confirmation to the critical post should not be delayed any longer."

Forgetting Afghan Democracy? One commentator advocated last week that the U.S. should have [a more limited role in the Middle East](#). But many felt this is [the wrong approach](#), especially regarding Afghanistan and Pakistan. Some are [concerned](#) over **President Obama's** [Af-Pak strategy](#) arguing he has "avoided any reference to

democracy in Afghanistan, while pointedly pushing democratic reforms in Pakistan...to defeat the forces of oppression, Washington must promote and protect the ideals of democracy and human rights."

Tyranny and Irony at U.N. Conference on Racism: Disappointed over the recent U.N. Racism Conference, some argued that "[America should rescue the human-rights agenda from its hijackers](#)." Instead of standing up for the world's oppressed, too many countries came to the conference to condemn the "colonial powers" of Israel and the West. What made this even worse was that "most of the governments that pile on to condemn [Israel and the West] have terrible human-rights records."

Supporting Iranian Democracy: One analyst emphasized that **Obama** "should [encourage all Iranians](#), in the strongest possible terms, to vote in the upcoming Iranian presidential election." It was argued that such a move would boost America's popularity among average Iranians, while nudging the Iranian government in a moderate direction.

Also Worth Reading

In a new [policy brief](#) for the German Marshall Fund, **John K. Glenn** analyzed the paths of democratization in the post-Communist world of central and eastern Europe and argued that "the United States and Europe should not retreat from their support for democratic reform abroad, but rather redefine the place of democracy promotion in a revitalized transatlantic agenda." Glenn explained "the new administration needs to continue the process of distancing democracy promotion from 'regime change' and to articulate its place among other competing foreign policy priorities...The lessons from postcommunism compel advocates of democracy promotion to be modest, recognizing that democracy is never exported but always driven from within and frequently fragile, subject to backsliding."

In the Middle East

Challenges of Forming a Palestinian Unity Government: One analyst argued that [forging a united Palestinian government will be extremely difficult](#), as no Arab society has ever succeeded in reconciling political Islam and secular nationalism. To facilitate reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas, it was argued that the U.S. would have to trade its boycott of Hamas for a "pragmatic stance that focuses on Hamas's behavior on the ground, rather than on abstract conditions. Others cautioned that outsiders [should not "romanticize" Hamas](#), pointing to a new Human Rights Watch [report](#) that details how Hamas has murdered and tortured fellow Palestinians in Gaza whom it accuses of aiding Israel or even Fatah. Meanwhile, one analyst posed that Palestinians [do not actually want a state at all](#) because they "embrace their statelessness as a source of power." And some [lauded](#) what appears to be an emerging U.S. stance on Hamas very similar to our approach to engaging Lebanon: engage with the government, but not radicalized elements of it.

Ahmadinejad Calls for "Justice and Fairness" in Saberi Case: It was reported that journalist **Roxana Saberi** plans to appeal her [8-year prison sentence](#) on the charge of spying for the United States. Her trial, lasting only one day, was [denounced](#) by human rights groups and the media as a sham. **President Ahmadinejad** [called upon the judiciary](#) to "do what is needed to secure justice and fairness in examining these charges [and to] take care that the defendants have all

the legal freedoms and rights to defend themselves against the charges and none of their rights are violated." His statement has been seen as political posturing, an attempt to demonstrate that he is a defender of human rights ahead of June's election and also an effort to "present himself as a man eligible for international talks and also dialogue with the United States." Some pointed out that this is [likely a ploy to soften his image with women and youth](#), "who in past years swung toward reformist candidates pledging greater personal liberties."

Meanwhile, another highlighted the plight of Iranian's 80,000 bloggers who live under the "[constant threat of surveillance, harassment, and imprisonment](#)." Yet, as little other alternatives exist to express free thought, bloggers continue to risk it all in an effort to speak out about freedom, human dignity, and the need for reform in Iran.

Taliban Furthering its Reach into Pakistan? Last week it was reported that the Taliban from Swat Valley is [tightening its grip](#) on a neighboring district - "patrolling roads, broadcasting sermons and spreading fear in another sign that [a government-backed peace deal has emboldened extremists to spread their reign](#)." In light of this, one analyst argued that "it's increasingly becoming clear that the 'Pak' side of the 'Af-Pak' equation is a [more objectively troubling situation](#)." Some stressed that "there is no way forward without rebuilding Pakistan's institutions, in particular a policing and justice system [under the rule of law](#)." Others [suggested](#) that the Zardari government should [increase military action](#) in the Swat valley, purge the intelligence service of Taliban loyalists, and improve the lives of Pakistanis through more effective aid programs.

Egypt's First Free Trade Union: Last week, "the 27,000-member Real Estate Tax Authority Union was formed when [workers voted to form a union](#) following a national strike and 12-day sit-in by 10,000 employees in front of the prime minister's office in Cairo." One analyst explained, "[t]he broader political implications of the independent union's formation are as yet unclear. According to one analysis, "fissures could emerge within the state-backed federation which could have a 'ripple effect' in the political arena."

Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation? A Swiss brokered framework for easing tensions was [announced](#) in a joint statement from the Armenian and Turkish governments. Some saw the agreement as a means for weakening the mood for a U.S. Congressional resolution recognizing the events of 1915 as genocide. An Armenian official acknowledged the [coincidence of the timing](#), but asserted that the framework was the result of ongoing negotiations and is much more serious than a political maneuver. Meanwhile, POMED Research Associate **Nick Danforth** argued for [a more nuanced look](#) at the issue of the Armenian genocide, with the goal of constructively influencing debate within Turkey.

The Battle for Lebanon's Elections: While some argued that the parliamentary election race in Lebanon is "the freest and most competitive to be held in decades, with a record number of candidates taking part, it may also be the most corrupt." The contending parties are engaged in [rampant vote buying](#), and governments around the Middle East, seeing Lebanon as a battlefield in the struggle for [regional influence](#), are pouring in funds to support their preferred factions. Secretary of State **Hillary Clinton** [visited](#) Lebanon on Sunday, declaring that "The people of Lebanon must be able to choose their own representatives in open and fair elections, without

the specter of violence or intimidation, and free of outside interference."

Also Worth Reading

The Council on Foreign Relations released a new backgrounder on [sharia, militancy, and U.S. policy](#). Citing a 2008 Gallup poll indicating that "most Muslim populations are not advocating theocracy when they envision sharia's role in governance," the report stressed that "many Muslims view sharia as a means to be liberated from government corruption and believe it can exist within a democratic and inclusive framework." The biggest problem lies in troubled and failed states where "extremists often gain influence when they espouse what they tout as a purer - and harsher - form of Islam" having little to do with the Quran.

In Case You Missed It

On Monday (4/20), the Wilson Center hosted a discussion with **Wijdan Mikha'il Salim**, Iraq's Minister of Human Rights. The discussion was moderated by **Haleh Esfandiari**, Director of the Middle East Program at the Wilson Center. Salim spoke of the important role the Ministry of Human Rights plays in Iraq as well as its current efforts and challenges. For POMED's full notes on this event [click here](#).

On Tuesday (4/21), Human Rights First hosted a series of discussions on establishing the proper balance between national security interests and universal human rights. In light of **President Obama's** decision to close the detention center at Guantanamo Bay and the recent release of the **Bush** administration's interrogation memos, many are wondering - where do we go from here? Addressing this issue were two panels of distinguished scholars and practitioners along with an introduction by **Chuck Hagel** and concluding remarks by **Madeleine Albright**. For POMED's notes on this event [click here](#).

On Wednesday (4/23), the New America Foundation hosted a panel highlighting the recent report: *Revitalizing U.S. Democracy Promotion: A Comprehensive Plan for Reform*. As U.S. development assistance and democracy promotion have suffered from a lack of coherent and consistent policies, many are debating the proper remedy. Engaging in this discussion were **Michael Cohen**, Senior Research Fellow for the New America Foundation; **Thomas Melia**, Deputy Executive Director of Freedom House; **Chris Homan**, Foreign Policy Advisor to Senator Richard Durbin (D-IL); and was moderated by **Maria Figueroa Küpçü**. For POMED's notes on this event [click here](#).

On Thursday (4/23), **Jean-Pierre Chauffour**, an economic advisor at the World Bank, today discussed his new book "*The Power of Freedom: Uniting Human Rights and Development*," arguing that basic economic freedoms should be the highest priority in developing countries. **Susan Aaronson**, of Georgetown University and the Danish Institute for Human Rights, provided a critique, and **Ian Vasquez**, Director of Cato's Center for Global Liberty and Prosperity, moderated. For POMED's notes on the event, [click here](#).