



Greetings from the Project on Middle East Democracy!

Last week was another relatively quiet week in Washington, as Congress remained on recess and observers continued to discuss President Obama's recent visit to Turkey. Meanwhile in the Middle East, there were some signs of progress and other signs of stagnation in Iraq, with a few setbacks for women's rights across the region. Over the weekend, President Obama attended the Summit for the Americas in Trinidad and Tobago, where he made a number of remarks in support of democracy and human rights. This week, Congress returns to session, aiming to resolve differences between the House and Senate versions of the FY2010 budget resolution, while Secretary Clinton will testify on Capitol Hill on foreign policy priorities for the new administration on Wednesday.

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 20, 2009

Legislation

No legislation last week as Congress completed a two-week recess.

Committee Hearings

No committee hearings last week due to the recess.

In Washington

A New Freedom Agenda: Last week, one analyst argued that despite the Bush administration's missteps, America should not abandon "[freedom as a touchstone of our national security strategy](#)." Going forward, instead of focusing on structural

elements of democracy, such as elections, the U.S. should "make the cultivation of constitutionalism a primary goal of a post-Bush foreign policy." One observer [encouraged President Obama](#) to use his own community organizing and political campaign experience to inspire civil society activists abroad. Another commentator urged the U.S. government to [speak out forcefully on human rights in the Islamic world](#), because of our potential to influence debates in the region. Meanwhile, speaking at the Summit of the Americas over the weekend, President Obama [asserted](#) that " it is important to send a signal that issues of political prisoners, freedom of speech, freedom of religion, democracy -- that those continue to be important, that they're not simply something to be brushed aside."

The Future of U.S.-Turkish Relations: Turkey has been the [talk of the town](#) since **President Obama's** recent visit and speech before Turkish parliament. As relations between the two countries have been strained in recent years, some [argued](#) that strategic relations aside, Obama's "early-bird visit" to Turkey underscores the importance of its secular, democratic character and a recognized need to "capture the broken hearts and confused minds of Muslim populations around the world." And some argued that it is "time for Turkey to display [quiet and responsible diplomacy](#)," and that Turkey's EU accession should be viewed as "one of the best guarantees of Turkey's political stability...it would also help improve relations between Islam and the west."

Who's Running USAID? One analyst pointed out that three months into a new administration the [post of Administrator for USAID remains vacant](#). It was argued "if you are going to have a national development agency - and you are going to take it seriously - then you need to make its ability to do its job a priority...if the **Obama** Administration is really interested in making its rhetoric about development and democracy promotion being a priority in US foreign policy - they need to put somebody in charge of AID. And they need to do it immediately."

Hold Off on Those Talks with the Taliban? One analyst argued that "negotiating with the Taliban...is the [worst possible approach](#) to stabilizing Afghanistan, and one that would fail." The U.S. must fight the urge toward quick-fix policies and hunker down for the long haul, because "building an effective Afghan state is the only way to achieve victory and defend U.S. national security objectives."

Also Worth Reading

John Tirman at the MIT Center for International Studies published a [report](#) calling for normalized economic and diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Iran as a way to resolve the ongoing conflicts between the two countries. As well as contributing to the solution of security problems, Tirman claimed negotiations could also lead to improvements in Iran's human rights practices. However, rapprochement will require the U.S. to abandon its particular, existing "'democratization' program, which was widely and plausibly viewed as a soft power tactic for regime change." In fact, he noted that even Iranian democracy advocates such as **Akbar Ganji** and **Shirin Ebadi** "speak out strongly against the so-called democratization program." At the same time, he suggested that normalizing relations with the Islamic Republic may - paradoxically - help the democratic reformers' cause.

In the Middle East

Ups and Downs of Iraqi Democracy: More than two months have passed since Iraq's provincial elections, "but the political bickering and laborious electoral procedures have [slowed the creation of provincial bodies](#) and the choosing of governors." The process has been stalled by walkouts, boycotts, and protests in provinces such as Wasit, Diyala, Basra, and Nineveh. Meanwhile, there has been an [alarming spate of human rights abuses](#) - from the murders of 25 gay men to numerous arrests of those critical of the government. However, there were a couple signs of progress yesterday, as Iraq's Parliament finally [elected a new speaker](#), **Iyad Samarrai** of the Sunni Iraqi Islamic Party, a choice [widely viewed](#) as a setback for **Prime Minister Maliki**. Also yesterday, Iraq's stock exchange began to use [electronic trading](#) on a limited basis, as opposed to [trading all shares](#) using whiteboard and markers, as it had done since opening in 2004.

The Demise of Egypt's Opposition? Many continued to express disappointment over the April 6 movement - one commentator [argued](#) that "the most casual observer will see that the failure of April 6 to achieve anything other than an ever more potent sense of apathy is only a reflection of the failure of all of Egypt's so-called opposition currents, and the demise of the civil society awakening which we briefly witnessed from 2004 to 2006." Meanwhile, another [argued](#) that "the reason for the [April 6] movement's quick growth - the use of online social networking - is also cited as one of the reasons for its failure. Its appeal was limited mostly to the relatively small (but growing) proportion of Egyptians that have [access to the internet](#)." But on a more positive note, it was [reported](#) that Egypt has lifted a ban on granting official ID cards and birth certificates to adherents of previously "non-recognized religions" such as the Baha'is.

Hard Times for Women's Rights: Women's rights are in trouble in [Pakistan and Afghanistan](#), as both countries have passed discriminatory and dangerous laws in an effort to maintain peace. **President Zardari** has just [signed a bill](#) that formally imposes Sharia in Swat; this, along with the recent video of a [woman being flogged](#), explains the widespread [skepticism](#) on Zardari's commitment to women's rights. Meanwhile, in Afghanistan **President Karzai** is allegedly backing down on some elements of the recently passed Shi'a personal status law, including the part legalizing rape within marriage. But one commentator argued that this [misses the point](#); "[t]he issue should not be construed as a couple of objectionable provisions of Shiite Islamic law, but the desirability in a democracy of having a uniform civil code for all citizens."

And, apparently a Saudi court has refused for the second time to annul a [marriage between an 8 year old girl and a 60 year old man](#). Saudi Justice Minister **Mohammad Issa** claims the ministry of justice is seeking to regulate marriages of young girls "but gave no indication the practice would be stopped."

UAE Moves to Restrict Press Freedom: Human Rights Watch released a [report](#) on a new law passed by the United Arab Emirates' legislature that would place new restrictions on freedom of the press. If signed by **President Shaikh Khalifa Bin Zayed Al Nahyan**, the new law will levy massive fines on organizations that "disparage" the government or the royal family.

Roxana Saberi Espionage Case Begins: The trial against Iranian-American journalist **Roxana Saberi** on espionage charges [began on Monday](#), with a verdict to

be declared in the next few weeks. [Several reasons](#) have been posed for [Saberi's arrest and the subsequent charges](#), with one analyst [arguing](#) that this case is the product of hard-line attempts to sabotage negotiations between the U.S. and Iran.

Democracy and the Muslim Brotherhood? As the Muslim Brotherhood seeks to moderate its image, one commentator warned that the organization [cannot be trusted](#) to preserve democracy if it wins elections. It was argued that the most effective way to head off the Islamist threat is for broad coalitions of moderate parties to compete with the Brotherhood in free elections, and for governments to undermine extremism's appeal through economic reform and social services. Meanwhile, another observer [noted](#) that despite calls for greater gender equality within the Brotherhood's political structure, the role for women in the organization remains lacking.

In Case You Missed It

On Monday (4/13), the Brookings Institution held an event titled "U.S.-Turkish Relations: A Historic Era?" The event comes just after President Obama delivered a speech to the Turkish Parliament outlining shared interests between the U.S. and Turkey. The discussion was moderated by **Mark Parris**, a visiting fellow at Brookings and former U.S. Ambassador to Turkey. The program included comments from **Soli Ozel**, a professor at Bilgi University in Istanbul, as well as **Omer Taspinar**, Director of Brookings' Turkey Project. Introductory remarks were delivered by **Arzuhan Dogan Yalcindag**, chair of the Turkish Industrialists' and Businessmen's Association (TUSIAD). For POMED's complete notes on this event [click here](#).

On Tuesday (4/15), the Institute for Middle East Studies at George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs hosted a panel discussion Tuesday on the political economy of the contemporary Persian Gulf states. The panelists were **Scheherazade Rehman** of GWU, **Kristin Smith Diwan** of American University, and **Michael Herb** of Georgia State University. IMES Faculty Associate **Marc Lynch** moderated. For POMED's notes on the event, click [here](#).

On Thursday (4/16), the Woodrow Wilson Center hosted a discussion with **Asli Aydintasbas**, a Turkish journalist and former Ankara Bureau Chief for Sabah. The talk was focused on the implications of **President Obama's** recent trip to Turkey. The visit and subsequent speech given before Turkish parliament is widely seen as a positive step forward for U.S.-Turkish relations. Aydintasbas was pleased overall with the president's remarks; however, she expressed disappointment over his lack of emphasis on reform and democracy. For POMED's full notes on this event [click here](#).