

Report 116
PROJECT ON BUSINESS AND POLITICS IN THE
MUSLIM WORLD

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This week report dwells much on Yahoo/AP/Reuters News, BBC, New York Times and Islamonline. The report remains a compilation of strategic political, economic, socio-cultural and Geo-strategic issues around North America/Canada, Western Europe, Latin America/Southern Europe, Southeast Europe and Oceania. It obviously begins with a summary of the whole report, a breakdown of easily comprehensible short notes.

Headlines

US/Canada

- A tale of two tea parties
- Poll: 4 out of 5 Americans don't trust Washington
- Obama links auto industry woes, financial overhaul
- Bill on Finance Wins Approval of Senate Panel
- Obama to Wall St.: 'Join Us, Instead of Fighting Us'
- U.S. Offers a Hand to Those on Eviction's Edge
- Controversy shrouds Muslim women's head coverings
- Islamophobia – Now in American children's textbooks?
- South Park and the frustration of being an American
- Anti-Muslim NC Rep. Linked to Extremist Group
- CAIR Seeks Probe of Anti-Islam Bias in Military Training
- CAIR Reps Meet with Lawmakers on Capitol Hill
- NC Imam Delivers Opening Prayer in House of Representatives
- Arizona Enacts Stringent Law on Immigration
- Obama invites Abbas for talks
- U.S. Faces Choice on New Weapons for Fast Strikes
- U.S. Resists Push by Allies for Tactical Nuclear Cuts
- Top general says US withdrawal from Iraq on track
- Gates says US is prepared on Iran's nuclear plan
- U.S. Lists Companies Aiding Iran's Energy Projects

Western Europe

- A Number of Muslim Women are Poised to Become British MPs
- France to submit bill banning Islamic face veils
- French Muslim woman fined for wearing veil
- Belgium could be first in Europe to ban burqa
- Belgium censured over veil ban
- Europe's air traffic 'back to normal'
- Papandreou says need for Greek aid package clarified within weeks
- Greece paralysed by another strike

- Greece requests activation of EU-IMF aid

Southeast Europe

- Airports across Balkans close due to volcanic ash
- Presidents of Hungary, Serbia, Croatia discuss co-operation

Albania

- Albania's SP decides to ramp up protests
- Albania's Berisha promises to resolve political stalemate
- Albanian opposition protests public broadcaster

Bosnia and Herzegovina

- Inzko says BiH's visa liberalisation may be delayed
- Anti-nationalistic BiH party holds first congress
- BiH buries Muslim wartime commander
- RS Constitutional Court upholds law on referendums
- FBiH prime minister refuses to resign
- RS authorities insist they are not denying Srebrenica crimes
- NATO offers BiH Membership Action Plan

Bulgaria

Croatia

- Croatia's ruling HDZ criticises Josipovic's remarks
- Croatia's Josipovic bristles at criticism over speech
- Croatia closes another EU negotiation chapter
- Croatia to abolish crisis tax by November
- Former Croatian ambassador to UN jailed for embezzlement

Kosovo

- Zannier says relations between UNMIK, Pristina improved
- Report: Kosovo's minorities have less access to justice system
- Giffoni says Serbian elections in northern Kosovo illegal
- UN's Ban concerned about northern Kosovo
- EULEX chief reiterates Kosovo institutions oversee rule of law
- Kosovo working on post-ICJ ruling strategy
- Kosovo must meet conditions for visa-free regime
- KFOR to transfer some border security duties
- EULEX chief reiterates Kosovo institutions oversee rule of law

Macedonia

- Macedonia's DUI to remain in government coalition
- Macedonian justice minister survives no-confidence motion
- Dozens arrested in Macedonia for disability fraud
- Macedonia might get EU accession talks date by July

Montenegro

Romania

- Romanian opposition parties plan no confidence vote
- Romanian parliament establishes committee on constitutional reform

Serbia

- US Senate urges EU to act on Serbia's application

Report Summary

USA/Canada

Political Issue

Senate Republicans and Democrats predicted on Wednesday that Congress would soon pass a far-reaching overhaul of the nation's financial regulatory system, indicating a potentially swift resolution of the latest partisan firefight on Capitol Hill.

If four (4) in five (5) Americans do not trust Washington, this is obviously ominous for the democrat-led government as political parties struggle for seats in forthcoming midterm elections. This is also more troublesome with the growing public resentment of the tea party conservatives.

Economic Issue

Having understood that the war against financial irresponsibility and repetition of another financial crisis cannot be won just by lashing the Wall Street institutions, President Obama this week rather called on the financial institutions to join him in putting American economy back to its place.

The fear of falling into the bracket of the poor and homelessness continues to haunt many Americans that have lost their jobs in recent times. Meanwhile, the government claims facility is in place to aid such people, while at the same time the ever growing conservative tea party says they are not interested in big government that will meddle in their economic affairs. The question is which way to go; this of course explains why the American political and economic sphere is now punctuated by two types of tea party groups, one against government interference and other supportive of government initiative.

Social/Humanitarian Issue

Post 9/11 has not been that good for American Muslims facing varieties of discrimination, public insult and sometimes religious blasphemy. More recently, Abdus Sattar Ghazali, the Executive Editor of the online magazine American Muslim Perspective called attention of Muslims to the 10-book series - entitled the "World of Islam," published by Mason Crest Publishing in collaboration with the Philadelphia-based pro-Israel and pro-war Foreign Policy Research Institute. The book is said to be an epitome of untrue information, embellished with anti-Islamic sentiments, portraying Muslims as inherently violent and deserving suspicion.

A cartoon comedy (South Park) in the United States recently made a blasphemous depiction of Prophet Muhammad and that has caused roar among American Muslims. RevolutionMuslim group threw in a confrontational response to South Park warning the producers of similar fate faced by the Dutch film maker Mr. Van Gogh. Meanwhile,

Ihsan Bagby, general secretary of the Muslim Alliance in North America urges Muslims to rather employ responsible civil mechanism of expressing grievances.

As American Muslims face the heat of discrimination and profiling, CAIR, America's largest Muslim civil liberties and advocacy organization deemed it fit to finding solutions to the situation. CAIR representatives across the United States thus met with lawmakers at Capitol Hill to discuss issues such as racial profiling, immigration reform and housing foreclosures. They asked the lawmakers to re-introduce and pass the End Racial Profiling Act and to reject racial profiling because it is an ineffective law enforcement tool.

Similarly, CAIR has also lodged complaint to the Naval Criminal Investigative Service (NCIS) to investigate a report of anti-Islam bias in the training offered to security personnel by that military law enforcement agency.

The offensive against American Muslims is not limited to ordinary citizens but also visible among public officers. U.S lawmakers have been quite noticeable making outrageous views of Islam and Muslim and believe Americans having friendship with Muslims are anti-Jews and Christian. Rep. Robin Hayes and Rep. Sue Myrick are in the roll of lawmakers projecting such view; they are linked with fundamentalist Christian groups such as the National Council on Bible Curriculum in Public Schools (NCBCPS).

Nonetheless, it does not suggest that all America is totally against its Muslim citizens. Abdullah Antepli, a first full-time Muslim chaplain from Duke University was invited to give the 10 a.m. prayer by Rep. David Price, a Democrat from Chapel Hill.

Gov. Jan Brewer of Arizona signed immigration law that has brewed lots of resentment and support. Both critics and supporters of the law say it is the strictest and broadest law America has seen in recent times. President Obama was also concerned about the law as the law allows police to arrest and detain person who might have forgotten his immigration document or appears as illegal immigrant. Hispanics community has taken offence to the law as being directed at them.

Food, Environment and Energy Issue

Geostrategic Issues

The recent memo on Iran released by Defense Secretary Robert Gate came just a week after the nuclear summit hosted by President Obama which Iran was not part of. The memo clearly criticizes the American government of not having concrete response to halt Iran from acquiring nuclear weapon. Gate was of the view that military response is not out of question and that might be indicative for Iranians recently indulging in war game in the Persia gulf as communication that Iran is ready for the worst. .

The Obama administration is expected to invite the Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas to Washington for talks which will be geared at re-opening the stalled Middle East

peace talk of 2008. It is unknown if Israeli Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu will also be invited as US-Israel relations is currently strained.

With the move towards reducing the number of WMD around the world, American leaderships believe there should be less emphasis on the use of nuclear weapons but more emphasis on developing weapon of tactical accuracy that can hit target any where in the world. This of course will be another cause of concern for Russia and might also further trigger the desire for protective shield by countries accused of harbouring WMD.

Signal of withdrawing American troops from Iraq and Afghanistan in the near future is indicative that U.S is coming to terms that American tax payers' money should not be unnecessarily expending abroad. That is much imperative as the American economy is yet to reassert its stamina.

Western Europe

Political Issue

Veiled Muslim women are facing challenge across Europe because of their attire seen in France as symbol of suppression and elsewhere in Europe as source of insecurity. Such characterization of European Muslim women did not stop the non-veiled Muslim from expressing their civic responsibility. It is election time in Britain and Muslim women are not sitting back watching men do all the politics rather seeking equal representation. There has been numbers of Muslim women making headline, exerting their political muscles. However, these women are either being supported by their constituency for supporting Islamic values or against for being too liberal.

Economic Issue

After weeks of airline traveling restriction imposed across Europe as a result of Iceland volcanic eruption, things are now becoming normal. Travellers across the world wanting to travel to and outside Europe were waylaid by the ash cloud crisis. It was momentous for Europe as it has never been witnessed.

Greece financial problem is yet to be off from the attention of members of the Eurozone. The financial trouble is becoming an exigent situation, thus reluctant Germany is preparing to aid the Greece economy. Similarly the role of IMF in the whole saga is another serious issue.

Social/Humanitarian Issue

Even before the government gets it way to ban the veil, a French police fined a veiled Muslim woman (\$29) on the premise that as a driver she needed sufficient field of vision, which her veil will hindered. However, her lawyer is contesting the fine on the ground that if the veil could be fined then motorcycle helmet is no exemption.

Meanwhile, as Belgium drives along to be the first European country to ban the full veil from public sphere, a senior Western Europe researcher at Human Rights Watch, Judith Sunderland criticizes the move by the Belgium parliament to outlaw veil in the public. According to her it will simply lead to a lose-lose situations, as it violates the right of those who chooses to wear the veil.

Food, Environment and Energy Issue

Geostrategic Issues

Southeast Europe

Political Issue

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Geostrategic Issues

Report Detail

US/Canada

Tea party activists are divided roughly into two camps, according to a new POLITICO/TargetPoint poll: one that's libertarian-minded and largely indifferent to hot-button values issues and another that's culturally conservative and equally concerned about social and fiscal issues. The survey, an exit poll conducted Thursday by Edison Research at the massive Tax Day protest on the National Mall, found that the attendees were largely hostile to President Barack Obama and the national Democratic Party — three-quarters believe the president “is pursuing a socialist agenda.”

Yet they aren't enamored of the Republican Party as an alternative. Overall, three out of four tea party attendees said they were "scared about the direction" of the country and "want to send a message to both political parties."

The results, however, suggest a distinct fault line that runs through the tea party activist base, characterized by two wings led by the politicians who ranked highest when respondents were asked who "best exemplifies the goals of the tea party movement" — former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin and Rep. Ron Paul (R-Texas), a former GOP presidential candidate.

Palin, who topped the list with 15 percent, speaks for the 43 percent of those polled expressing the distinctly conservative view that government does too much, while also saying that it needs to promote traditional values. Paul's thinking is reflected by an almost identical 42 percent who said government does too much but should not try to promote any particular set of values — the hallmarks of libertarians. He came in second to Palin with 12 percent. When asked to choose from a list of candidates for president in 2012, Palin and Paul also finished one-two — with Palin at 15 percent and Paul at 14 percent. In general, those who turned out for the April 15 event tended to be less culturally conservative than national Republicans. Asked to rate their level of anger about 22 issues on a scale of one (not angry at all) to five (extremely angry), the issue that drew the most anger: the growing national debt. The least: courts granting same-sex couples the right to marry. Twenty-four percent said they're "not at all" upset about gay marriage.

WASHINGTON — America's "Great Compromiser" Henry Clay called government "the great trust," but most Americans today have little faith in Washington's ability to deal with the nation's problems. Public confidence in government is at one of the lowest points in a half century, according to a survey from the Pew Research Center. Nearly 8 in 10 Americans say they don't trust the federal government and have little faith it can solve America's ills, the survey found. The survey illustrates the ominous situation President Barack Obama and the Democratic Party face as they struggle to maintain their comfortable congressional majorities in this fall's elections. Midterm prospects are typically tough for the party in power. Add a toxic environment like this and lots of incumbent Democrats could be out of work. The survey found that just 22 percent of those questioned say they can trust Washington almost always or most of the time and just 19 percent say they are basically content with it. Nearly half say the government negatively affects their daily lives, a sentiment that's grown over the past dozen years. This anti-government feeling has driven the tea party movement, reflected in fierce protests this past week. "The government's been lying to people for years. Politicians make promises to get elected, and when they get elected, they don't follow through," says Cindy Wanto, 57, a registered Democrat from Nemacolin, Pa., who joined several thousand for a rally in Washington on April 15 — the tax filing deadline. "There's too much government in my business. It was a problem before Obama, but he's certainly not helping fix it." Majorities in the survey call Washington too big and too powerful, and say it's interfering too much in state and local matters. The public is split over whether the government should be responsible for dealing with critical problems or scaled back to reduce its power, presumably in favor of personal responsibility. About half say they want a smaller government with fewer services, compared with roughly 40 percent who want a bigger government providing more. The public was evenly divided on those

questions long before Obama was elected. Still, a majority supported the Obama administration exerting greater control over the economy during the recession. "Trust in government rarely gets this low," said Andrew Kohut, director of the nonpartisan center that conducted the survey. "Some of it's backlash against Obama. But there are a lot of other things going on." And, he added: "Politics has poisoned the well." The survey found that Obama's policies were partly to blame for a rise in distrustful, anti-government views. In his first year in office, the president orchestrated a government takeover of Detroit automakers, secured a \$787 billion stimulus package and pushed to overhaul the health care system. But the poll also identified a combination of factors that contributed to the electorate's hostility: the recession that Obama inherited from President George W. Bush; a dispirited public; and anger with Congress and politicians of all political leanings. "I want an honest government. This isn't an honest government. It hasn't been for some time," said self-described independent David Willms, 54, of Sarasota, Fla. He faulted the White House and Congress under both parties. The poll was based on four surveys done from March 11 to April 11 on landline and cell phones. The largest survey, of 2,500 adults, has a margin of sampling error of 2.5 percentage points; the others, of about 1,000 adults each, has a margin of sampling error of 4 percentage points.

WASHINGTON – President Barack Obama on Saturday cited encouraging signs of an auto industry rebound as he promoted stronger financial rules that he said would help prevent a repeat of the crisis that pushed carmakers to the brink. Senate Democrats have set a test vote Monday on legislation to tighten federal oversight of the financial sector. The auto industry was one of the biggest casualties of a recession fueled by risky lending and speculative trading practices of major financial institutions. But after shedding 400,000 jobs in 2008, bailed-out U.S. automakers are rebounding. General Motors Co. said this week it will repay \$8.1 billion in U.S. and Canadian government loans five years ahead of schedule. Chrysler LLC, now run by an Italian company, said it boosted its cash reserves by \$1.5 billion despite a first-quarter loss of almost \$200 million. In his weekly radio and Internet address, Obama said the auto industry is on more solid footing, but it will take more time for the economy to recover from the loss of 8 million jobs. He blamed the downturn on irresponsible risk-taking by Wall Street companies. In a speech Thursday in New York, Obama argued for new rules to protect consumers and hold financiers accountable. The changes would end taxpayer bailouts, bring complex financial dealings into the open and extend new rights and protections to consumers and shareholders. "That's how after two very difficult years we'll not only revive the economy, but help to rebuild it stronger than ever before," he said Saturday. The White House, in a report timed to GM's loan repayment, said the past nine months had produced the auto industry's strongest job growth in nearly a decade, with the addition of 45,000 jobs. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., has set a test vote on the financial overhaul bill for Monday, but acknowledged that the timetable could slip if bargaining with Republicans proved fruitful. Republicans say they don't agree the bill would end government bailouts and they want to keep negotiating. Without an agreement with the GOP, Democrats would need 60 votes to move forward in the Senate. They have 59 votes. In the weekly GOP message, Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison of Texas said Republicans aren't trying to block the bill but want to make sure it would end bailouts. "It's time for the name-calling to stop," Hutchison said. "Getting our economy back on

track is too important to allow political games to sidetrack these efforts. Both parties agree that any financial regulation should do one essential thing: No company should be considered too big to fail. And never again should taxpayers be expected to bail out those who made risky financial bets with other people's money."

WASHINGTON — Senate Republicans and Democrats predicted on Wednesday that Congress would soon pass a far-reaching overhaul of the nation's financial regulatory system, indicating a potentially swift resolution of the latest partisan firefight on Capitol Hill. But the sides offered starkly different reasons for their optimism. Republicans said that they had forced Democrats back to the bargaining table to negotiate a bipartisan accord, while Democrats said that Republicans were hastily abandoning their opposition in fear of a public outcry. With President Obama headed to New York City on Thursday to press the case for tougher rules for Wall Street, a first crack appeared in the Republican wall of opposition. Senator Charles E. Grassley, Republican of Iowa, voted with Democrats on the Senate Agriculture Committee in favor of imposing tougher rules for derivatives, the complex securities that were at the heart of the 2008 financial crisis. The Agriculture Committee, which deals with derivatives because it oversees commodities futures trading, voted 13 to 8 to approve the bill, which was sponsored by Senator Blanche Lincoln, Democrat of Arkansas, the panel's chairwoman. The bill is expected to be part of the wider regulatory overhaul put forward by the banking committee, though Democrats are still figuring out how to combine the proposals. Senate Republicans on Wednesday reported progress in negotiating changes to the wider bill. But they did not point to any specific concessions they had won, and Democrats said they made none. In a statement later, Mr. Grassley said that his vote did not mean he would support the larger financial bill, which he said "has a number of flaws that need to be resolved." But Democrats seized on his defection as a sign that Republicans were finding it increasingly untenable to oppose the legislation. Democrats said they would push for a first procedural vote on Monday, in what could be a serious test of Republican resolve. Senior Democrats said they viewed the vote as a no-lose proposition forcing Republicans to agree to begin debating the bill or be seen as obstructing it. The Democrats' efforts have been bolstered this week by a series of developments in Washington and on Wall Street, as regulators announced a fraud case against Goldman Sachs, and then both Goldman Sachs and Citigroup reported huge profits.

President Obama took his rhetoric of reform on Thursday to the nation's financial capital in a high-profile foray to chide Wall Street bankers for their "reckless practices" and to press for tighter regulations meant to avert another financial crisis. Addressing leaders of New York's financial giants, including Goldman Sachs, Mr. Obama described himself as a champion of change battling "battalions of financial industry lobbyists" and the "withering forces" of the economic elite. With his poll numbers sagging, the choreographed confrontation seemed aimed at tapping the nation's antiestablishment mood as well as muscling financial regulation legislation through Congress. But the president also struck a note of conciliation with an industry that has contributed generously to his party, beseeching bankers to work with him to forge a new regulatory structure. While he spoke, his Democratic allies in Washington moved to force a showdown in the Senate on Monday, scheduling a procedural vote that will test the

prospects for bipartisan compromise and Republican resolve to block the president's plans. "I want to urge you to join us, instead of fighting us in this effort," Mr. Obama said in his address at Cooper Union in Manhattan. "I'm here because I believe that these reforms are, in the end, not only in the best interest of our country, but in the best interest of the financial sector." The regulation battle has become the president's top legislative priority since he signed his health care program into law last month, and both parties are jockeying for position six months before midterm elections. Mr. Obama and his allies have eagerly portrayed Republicans as handmaidens of Wall Street while Republicans have accused Democrats of trying to strangle the market and institutionalize bailouts. While Mr. Obama avoided directly criticizing Republicans in his address, the partisan tension in the capital heated up again when Senate Republicans blocked an effort by Democrats to start debate on their regulation bill. Senator Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, the Republican leader, said Democrats were pre-empting negotiations, while Senator Harry M. Reid of Nevada, the Democratic leader, said Republicans were simply stalling.

SAN MATEO, Calif. — Two years into a merciless downward spiral, Antonio Moore was threatened with living on the street. He had lost his \$75,000-a-year job as a mortgage consultant, his three-bedroom house with a Jacuzzi, his Lexus sedan. He could no longer pay even the rent on his cramped studio apartment — not on his \$10-an-hour part-time job as a fry cook at a fast food restaurant. Faced with eviction, he was staring last month at the imminent prospect of joining the teeming ranks of the homeless. His last hope was a new \$1.5 billion federal program aimed at preventing that fate. Days after Mr. Moore applied, a check for \$775 was on its way to his landlord, enabling him to stay — at least for now. Much like the Great Depression, when millions of previously working people came to rely on a new social safety net for their sustenance, a swelling group of formerly middle-class Americans like Mr. Moore, 30, is seeking government aid for the first time. Without help, say economists, many are at risk of slipping permanently into poverty, even as economic conditions improve. The question is whether the modern-day safety net has enough money and the right initiatives to aid those who need it most. The answer could shape whether a considerable slice of the American population will recover from the trauma of recent years, and how long that will take. The plight of people like Mr. Moore has little to do with the complex, intertwined causes of homelessness of decades past, like substance abuse, mental illness and domestic violence. The current surge stems directly from the recession: Millions have lost their jobs or suffered a sharp drop in earnings. They have drained their savings, losing the ability to pay their rent. "Nationally, homelessness has now reached crisis proportions not seen since the Great Depression," says Maria Foscarinis, executive director of the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty. The severity of the situation prompted the Obama administration to create the Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing program within the \$787 billion economic stimulus package. The program rests on the assumption that intervention is the best course because once people become homeless, the odds and costs of regaining their lives escalate sharply.

College sophomore Hani Khan had worked for three months as a stockroom clerk at a Hollister Co. clothing store in San Francisco when she was told the head scarf she wears in observance of Islam violated the company's "look policy." The policy instructs

employees on clothing, hairstyles, makeup and accessories they may wear to work. When supervisors told Khan she had to remove the scarf, known as a hijab, to work at the store, she refused on religious grounds. A week later, she was fired. In February, Khan filed a federal job discrimination complaint against Hollister and its parent company, Abercrombie & Fitch. She is among a growing number of Muslim women who are filing complaints of discrimination at work, in businesses or in airports.

In 2009, 425 Muslim women filed workplace discrimination complaints with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Spokesman David Grinberg says the commission does not track filings by religious garb. The EEOC investigates complaints and dismisses or resolves them through mediation or lawsuits.

Iska Hain, an Abercrombie & Fitch spokeswoman, declined to comment on Khan's case but said in an e-mail that the company is "committed to ensuring a diverse and inclusive work environment." Khan, 19, says she was surprised by the store's action. "I live in the Bay Area where everyone is so open-minded. For that to happen here was astonishing."

The attempted bombing of a Detroit-bound plane on Christmas Day by a man with ties to al-Qaeda has made discrimination against Muslim women worse, says Ibrahim Hooper, spokesman for the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), an advocacy organization. He says women wearing hijabs are the visible face of Islam.

In the first three months of the year, CAIR received 43 discrimination complaints from women who wear hijabs, compared with 103 in all of 2009. Some of the complaints allege workplace bias. Others are from women who say they were singled out for additional security screening in airports, were stopped from entering banks because of security policies that prohibit hoods, hats and sunglasses, or were told to remove their hijabs before taking a driver's license photo. The Delaware Division of Motor Vehicles apologized last week after a clerk told a 16-year-old girl she had to remove her scarf to be photographed for her driver's license. After an argument, another clerk stepped in to say that was incorrect, but the girl was so upset that the photo shows her crying. "Most people understand the need for safety, including Muslim women, who want to make sure they are safe, too," says Khadija Athman, CAIR's civil rights manager. "But at the same time, Muslim women would appreciate it if their religious beliefs would be accommodated." Nadia Hassan, 40, a suburban Washington, D.C., real estate agent, says she was travelling from Dulles International Airport to California on Jan. 5 when she was ordered to remove her hijab before going through a metal detector. She refused and a security officer conducted a full-body search in view of other passengers, even though she had not set off the metal detector. She says another officer told her she had to go through the added security because of her scarf.

As if the adult media's vitriol wasn't enough, the seven-million strong American Muslim community, is now being faced by the alarming publication of a series of 'children's books', containing misleading and inflammatory rhetoric about the Islamic faith. The 10-book series - entitled the "World of Islam," - is published by Mason Crest Publishing in collaboration with the Philadelphia-based pro-Israel and pro-war Foreign Policy Research Institute. Anti-Islamic sentiment pervades the entire series, portraying Muslims as inherently violent and deserving suspicion. It encourages young readers to believe Muslims are terrorists, who seek to undermine U.S. society. For example: The book "Muslims in America", says that "some Muslims began immigrating to the United

States in order to transform American society, sometimes through the use of terrorism." The cover of *Radical Islam* features a machine gun and a Muslim head scarf, with what looks like bloodstains underneath the scarf and the title word *Radical*. The book is rife with incorrect information and fear mongering and ultimately seeks to paint a picture that Muslims in America are to be treated with suspicion and that they all have links to terrorism.

The text titled *Islam, Law and Human Rights* begins and ends with the same thing, that Muslim majority nations are the only ones that violate human rights laws set forth by the United Nations – for some reason China and North Korea are exceptions to that rule. The *History of Islam* offers only a stunted glimpse of Islamic History and focuses primarily on extremism and contains an outrageous quote: "Today, the great majority of Muslims accept the idea that jihad means a struggle against non-Muslims to increase the area under the rule of Islam." Another book shows an image of two 7-year-old girls wearing head scarves under the heading "Security Threats." The book *Islam in Europe* states that Muslim immigrants are the source of all social conflict and that Europe is in serious danger because of Muslim immigration. A chronology in the book starts with 1988 and lists 10 events, seven of which involve extremist Muslims participating in bombings, hijackings or other violence. It is a common knowledge that Muslims have been in Europe for hundreds of years. The 10-volume series includes volumes by Barry Rubin on "The History of Islam," the late Michael Radu on "Islam in Europe," Anna Melman on "Islam, Law and Human Rights," John Calvert on "Divisions within Islam," and Alan Luxenberg on "Radical Islam." The Foreign Policy Research Institute suggests that the books should be a mandatory purchase for all public libraries that support middle and high school curriculum on Islam. Tellingly, none of the authors in the series, designed for middle and high school students, are Muslim and a number happen to be Jewish. The books cited a well-known Islamophobe, Daniel Pipes, who received the "Guardian of Zion" award, in May 2006. The award is given annually to a prominent supporter of the state of Israel, from the Rennert Center for Jerusalem Studies at Bar-Ilan University in Israel. Not surprisingly, Pipes circulated his own e-mail to defend the controversial series. The books also cite anti-Islam activists such as Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a fan of Geert Wilders, an infamous Dutch lawmaker, renowned for being a rabid Islamophobe. The Pennsylvania chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations has begun a public awareness campaign against the books. "This is not about Muslims being offended," Moein Khawaja, the chapter's civil rights director, told a news conference on March 17, 2010. "Filled with incorrect information and deception, these books are contrary to the education mission of schools and libraries."

"The overall theme of the books is that Muslims are inherently violent, that Islam is a second-rate religion and that one should be wary of Muslims in any society," Moein Khawaja, said adding: "These books do not fulfill the mission of a school, which is to educate." CAIR called on schools and libraries to exchange *The World of Islam* for *Introducing Islam*, with another series published by Mason Crest that was written in cooperation with scholars of Islam and is more accurate. Khawaja said complaints from council chapters across the country lead him to believe the *World of Islam* series are on bookshelves in about two dozen states.

Cable channel Comedy Central delayed the release of “South Park” episode 201 online Thursday as part of its cautious approach to the episode, which drew veiled threats of violence for its depiction of Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) in a bear suit. Absurdity and insult are the stock in trade of “South Park.” But episode 201 was censored heavily after the website *RevolutionMuslim.com* insinuated that the “South Park” creators might suffer the same fate as Dutch filmmaker Theo Van Gogh. To mainstream Muslims, insinuations such as the one on *RevolutionMuslim.com* merely reinforce the worst stereotypes of Muslims as intolerant and prone to violence. But beyond the inexcusable behavior is an anger and frustration felt by many Muslim-Americans who struggle to reconcile the American freedoms they cherish with the often-callous ignorance of their faith here. “What is clear is national Muslim organizations ... reject the threat of violence against anybody voicing their free speech,” says Ihsan Bagby, general secretary of the Muslim Alliance in North America. What is more difficult is coming to terms with the fact that, particularly in a post Sept. 11 society, being a Muslim means having to endure satirical works that are often offensive. “We’re still negotiating that,” Mr. Bagby says. *RevolutionMuslim*, in the case of “South Park,” the context is clear: It is a comedy show and is designed to satirize everybody and everything in its path. In that case, “it’s a waste of time” to get offended, says Bagby. Yet “South Park,” too, betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of the most deeply held beliefs of devout Muslims. In Islam, it is not merely the lampooning that is offensive. The physical depiction of any of the prophets – in a bear suit or well clothed – is considered blasphemous, a form of idolatry. *RevolutionMuslim.com* posted a photo of the assassinated Mr. Van Gogh, who had made a movie asserting that Islam condones violence against women. The text of the website stated that “South Park” creators Matt Stone and Trey Parker “will probably wind up like” the filmmaker for their actions. A news article that listed the home addresses of Mr. Stone and Mr. Parker accompanied the posting, according to *Reuters*. The group is not facing criminal charges. Leader Younus Abdullah Muhammad defended his actions to *Reuters*, saying they were just “showing a case study right there of what happened to another individual who conducted himself in a very similar manner.”

For the vast majority of Muslim-Americans, it is clear that living in a non-Muslim country means making certain compromises. But when the misunderstanding turns to discrimination, many are trying to raise their voice in a more constructive way – organizing protests, much in the same way civil rights pioneers did 40 years ago.

Rep. Sue Myrick (R-NC) is one of North Carolina's staunchest defenders from Islamic extremism. When it comes to Christian extremism, though, the record is more mixed. Myrick held a forum on Thursday, Feb. 25, with about 200 of her Charlotte-area constituents from the Muslim community to address what many see as a record of offensive statements: She has suggested that U.S. House and Senate members shouldn't hire Muslims as interns—they might be trying to infiltrate the government. And she has openly voiced concerns about the number of Muslims operating convenience stores across the country. In 2008, she lobbied then-Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to revoke former President Jimmy Carter's passport for meeting with leaders of Hamas. At last week's two-hour forum, Myrick presided over a largely civil discussion of her record as a member of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, which has

oversight of anti-terrorism strategies, and a somewhat less civil exchange over her defense against Islamic extremism, which itself has bordered on the extreme.

However, Myrick's concern over religious extremism seems relegated to practitioners of one religion. At the forum, she pointedly avoided applying the label of "terrorist" to Joseph Stack, the 53-year-old Texan who flew his airplane into an IRS building in Austin in February.

Perhaps of greater concern, though, is Myrick's work with a right-wing evangelical group whose cause celebre violates the First Amendment's establishment clause. The National Council on Bible Curriculum in Public Schools states on its Web site that it aims to "bring a state certified (sic) Bible course (elective) into the public high schools nationwide." The council claims that its curriculum is in place in 532 school districts in 38 states. (The NCBCPS doesn't release specifics, so this claim is difficult to verify.) In its literature, the council echoes other Eurocentric groups' concerns over the U.S.'s increasing diversity. "There has been a great social regression since the Bible was removed from our schools," the group claims in its justification of the legality of its cause. "We need to refer to the original documents that inspired Americanism and our religious heritage." On its Web site, the NCBCPS lists members of its advisory board, many of them North Carolina elected officials. Myrick's name is third from the top, and is followed by that of fellow N.C. Rep. Robin Hayes.

WASHINGTON, A prominent national Muslim civil rights and advocacy organization today said it has asked the Naval Criminal Investigative Service (NCIS) to investigate a report of anti-Islam bias in the training offered to security personnel by that military law enforcement agency. The Washington-based Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) received a report that a three-day NCIS surveillance detection course at the U.S. Naval Observatory in Washington, D.C., included the viewing of a propagandistic anti-Islam film that features notorious Islamophobes such as Daniel Pipes, Nonie Darwish and Walid Shoebat. [Shoebat told a Missouri newspaper that he sees "many parallels between the Antichrist and Islam" and "Islam is not the religion of God -- Islam is the devil." (Springfield News-Leader, 9/24/07) Darwish, a self-styled "former Moslem," said "Islam is cruel, anti-women, anti-religious freedom and anti-personal freedom in general." Daniel Pipes once warned a Jewish convention of the "true dangers" posed by "the presence, and increased stature, and affluence, and enfranchisement of American Muslims." (American Jewish Congress, 10/21/2001) Pipes has also been a vocal supporter of the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II.]

According to the trainee, the film and the course promoted the theme that "Islam is synonymous with Nazism." The briefing presenter also allegedly used the term "Hajji" as a pejorative in reference to Muslims and stated repeatedly that "Islam is not a religion of peace." In his letter to NCIS Director Mark D. Clookie, CAIR National Executive Director Nihad Awad wrote in part: "NCIS has an important role to play in securing our nation and can best carry out that role when its actions are based on accurate and balanced information, not on religious or ethnic stereotyping." Awad requested an investigation "to ensure that our nation's security personnel are receiving training that is free of political or religious agendas." CAIR is America's largest Muslim civil liberties and advocacy organization. Its mission is to enhance the understanding of Islam,

encourage dialogue, protect civil liberties, empower American Muslims, and build coalitions that promote justice and mutual understanding.

WASHINGTON, Representatives from a number of chapters of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) met recently with elected officials and staffers at dozens of Capitol Hill offices in Washington, D.C., to discuss issues such as racial profiling, immigration reform and housing foreclosures. Lawmakers were asked to re-introduce and pass the End Racial Profiling Act and to reject racial profiling because it is an ineffective law enforcement tool. The CAIR representatives asked that any comprehensive immigration reform legislation include 1) measures that regulate wages and working conditions to protect workers from being exploited and 2) security procedures that ensure professional and effective border enforcement while respecting basic legal protections.

Elected officials were asked to support legislation that would give bankruptcy judges the ability to rework defaulted home mortgages to make them affordable. They were also asked to support the recently-created unit within the Department of Justice that will target unfair lending practices.

CAIR has published a "Civic Participation Handbook" designed to provide best practices and step-by-step guides for everything from holding voter registration drives to making the most of a meeting with elected officials.

CAIR is America's largest Muslim civil liberties and advocacy organization. Its mission is to enhance the understanding of Islam, encourage dialogue, protect civil liberties, empower American Muslims, and build coalitions that promote justice and mutual understanding.

Duke University's Muslim chaplain will deliver the opening prayer for the U.S. House of Representatives today, an honor few clergy, and even fewer Muslim clergy, get. Abdullah Antepi, appointed the university's first full-time Muslim chaplain in 2008, was invited to give the 10 a.m. prayer by Rep. David Price, a Democrat from Chapel Hill. The Turkish-born chaplain is one of a dozen Muslim chaplains at U.S. universities, of which only a handful are full-time staff members. He directs religious programs for Duke's Muslim students and teaches in the Duke Divinity School and the Duke Islamic Studies Center.

PHOENIX — Gov. Jan Brewer of Arizona signed the nation's toughest bill on illegal immigration into law on Friday. Its aim is to identify, prosecute and deport illegal immigrants. The move unleashed immediate protests and reignited the divisive battle over immigration reform nationally. Even before she signed the bill at an afternoon news conference here, President Obama strongly criticized it. Speaking at a naturalization ceremony for 24 active-duty service members in the Rose Garden, he called for a federal overhaul of immigration laws, which Congressional leaders signaled they were preparing to take up soon, to avoid "irresponsibility by others." The Arizona law, he added, threatened "to undermine basic notions of fairness that we cherish as Americans, as well as the trust between police and our communities that is so crucial to keeping us safe." The law, which proponents and critics alike said was the broadest and strictest immigration measure in generations, would make the failure to carry immigration

documents a crime and give the police broad power to detain anyone suspected of being in the country illegally. Opponents have called it an open invitation for harassment and discrimination against Hispanics regardless of their citizenship status. The political debate leading up to Ms. Brewer's decision, and Mr. Obama's criticism of the law — presidents very rarely weigh in on state legislation — underscored the power of the immigration debate in states along the Mexican border. It presaged the polarizing arguments that await the president and Congress as they take up the issue nationally. Mexico's Foreign Ministry said in a statement that it was worried about the rights of its citizens and relations with Arizona. Cardinal Roger M. Mahony of Los Angeles said the authorities' ability to demand documents was like "Nazism."

As hundreds of demonstrators massed, mostly peacefully, at the capitol plaza, the governor, speaking at a state building a few miles away, said the law "represents another tool for our state to use as we work to solve a crisis we did not create and the federal government has refused to fix." The law was to take effect 90 days after the legislative session ends, meaning by August. Court challenges were expected immediately. Hispanics, in particular, who were not long ago courted by the Republican Party as a swing voting bloc, railed against the law as a recipe for racial and ethnic profiling. "Governor Brewer caved to the radical fringe," a statement by the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund said, predicting that the law would create "a spiral of pervasive fear, community distrust, increased crime and costly litigation, with nationwide repercussions."

RAMALLAH, West Bank: US President Barack Obama has invited Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas for talks in Washington next month, chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat said Sunday. The announcement was made as Obama's Middle East envoy George Mitchell wound up a trip to the region to ramp up peace efforts. The invitation was delivered by Mitchell when he met Abbas on Friday. Erekat said the exact date of the talks is yet to be determined. The two leaders were expected to discuss efforts to revive peace talks suspended since Israel launched a devastating assault on Gaza in December 2008. Washington has not yet officially announced the invitation and a US official declined to comment on whether Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu would also be invited. Briefing the Israeli Cabinet on his meetings with Mitchell, Netanyahu said it would soon become clear whether peace talks would get under way. In a statement summing up his visit, Mitchell said he held "positive and productive talks" with Israeli and Palestinian leaders in an effort "to improve the atmosphere for peace and for proceeding with proximity talks," a reference to indirect, US-mediated negotiations.

The United States has been pressing the two sides to return to negotiations for months, but the Palestinians have refused to do so without a complete freeze on Israeli settlement construction in the occupied West Bank, including annexed Arab East Jerusalem. Netanyahu has given no ground publicly over US and Palestinian calls to halt the construction of homes for Jews on occupied territory, an issue that has opened a rift between Israel and the United States. Palestinian sources said Mitchell proposed a compromise in which the Palestinians would begin indirect talks in return for an unwritten commitment by Washington to assign blame publicly to any party that took action compromising the negotiations. The formula appeared to envisage a situation in

which Israel would quietly delay implementing some housing projects in and around East Jerusalem, without declaring a freeze that could anger pro-settler parties in Netanyahu's governing coalition.

The Al-Quds newspaper reported Sunday that three Israeli bulldozers started groundwork for the construction of houses for the Ramat Shlomo settlement on Palestinian land in the East Jerusalem neighborhoods of Beit Hanina, Shu'fat and Lifta. "Three Israeli companies are working under the protection of Israeli border police to complete building of the separation wall near the three neighborhoods," the paper added. In another development, Prime Minister Salam Fayyad gave the go-ahead on Sunday for local elections in the West Bank in July, despite opposition from Hamas, which governs the Gaza Strip. "The Cabinet decided to continue with all necessary preparations for carrying out the polls for local councils in the West Bank on July 17," the Fayyad government said in a statement.

WASHINGTON — In coming years, President Obama will decide whether to deploy a new class of weapons capable of reaching any corner of the earth from the United States in under an hour and with such accuracy and force that they would greatly diminish America's reliance on its nuclear arsenal. Yet even now, concerns about the technology are so strong that the Obama administration has acceded to a demand by Russia that the United States decommission one nuclear missile for every one of these conventional weapons fielded by the Pentagon. That provision, the White House said, is buried deep inside the New Start treaty that Mr. Obama and President Dmitri A. Medvedev signed in Prague two weeks ago. Called Prompt Global Strike, the new weapon is designed to carry out tasks like picking off Osama bin Laden in a cave, if the right one could be found; taking out a North Korean missile while it is being rolled to the launch pad; or destroying an Iranian nuclear site — all without crossing the nuclear threshold. In theory, the weapon will hurl a conventional warhead of enormous weight at high speed and with pinpoint accuracy, generating the localized destructive power of a nuclear warhead. The idea is not new: President George W. Bush and his staff promoted the technology, imagining that this new generation of conventional weapons would replace nuclear warheads on submarines. In face-to-face meetings with President Bush, Russian leaders complained that the technology could increase the risk of a nuclear war, because Russia would not know if the missiles carried nuclear warheads or conventional ones. Mr. Bush and his aides concluded that the Russians were right. Partly as a result, the idea "really hadn't gone anywhere in the Bush administration," Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates, who has served both presidents, said recently on ABC's "This Week." But he added that it was "embraced by the new administration." Mr. Obama himself alluded to the concept in a recent interview with The New York Times, saying it was part of an effort "to move towards less emphasis on nuclear weapons" while insuring "that our conventional weapons capability is an effective deterrent in all but the most extreme circumstances."

TALLINN, Estonia — Fresh from signing a strategic nuclear arms agreement with Russia, the United States is parrying a push by several NATO allies to withdraw its aging stockpile of tactical nuclear weapons from Europe. Speaking Thursday at a meeting of NATO foreign ministers here, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said the

Obama administration was not opposed to cuts in these battlefield weapons, mostly bombs and short-range missiles locked in underground vaults on air bases in five NATO countries. But Mrs. Clinton ruled out removing these weapons unless Russia agreed to cuts in its arsenal, which is at least 10 times the size of the American one. And she also appeared to make reductions in the American stockpile contingent on Russia's being more transparent about its weapons and willing to move them away from the borders of NATO countries. "We should recognize that as long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO will remain a nuclear alliance," Mrs. Clinton said. "As a nuclear alliance, sharing nuclear risks and responsibilities widely is fundamental." The push to withdraw tactical weapons from Europe has gained momentum in recent weeks, with Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg and Norway jointly petitioning NATO to take up the issue. Many analysts consider these weapons a dangerous relic of the cold war, expensive to safeguard and deadly if they fell into the wrong hands. Domestic politics has also played a part: Germany recently elected a coalition government that favors removing tactical weapons from its soil. President Obama's nuclear security summit and his successful effort to negotiate a successor to the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty with Russia have helped put disarmament back on the agenda. "This is big progress, compared to the situation a few months ago," said Guido Westerwelle, the German foreign minister, whose Free Democratic Party calls for the weapons' removal. But other NATO members, including Turkey and several former Soviet satellites, are reluctant to remove them, fearing it would make them vulnerable to Russia. Given the deep political divisions, officials on both sides of the Atlantic fret that this debate could splinter the alliance. Mrs. Clinton's speech amounted to an appeal for all sides to take a deep breath. "We view tonight as the beginning of this discussion," she said, noting that any decisions should be put off until a meeting of NATO leaders this fall. The meeting on Thursday came at a time when NATO's 28 members had been rethinking the rationale for this 61-year alliance. The United States is pushing to streamline NATO's bureaucracy and make it more responsive to combat missions in places like Afghanistan. NATO, American officials note, has 14 agencies, 6,000 employees, and an annual budget of nearly \$7 billion. NATO's secretary general, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, took up the American cry for an overhaul. "We are not just talking about cosmetic surgery," Mr. Rasmussen said in a news conference. "Our headquarters is a paradise for people who love committees, but I have to tell you, I am not one of those." He also lined up with Mrs. Clinton on the nuclear question, saying he believed that "the presence of American nuclear weapons in Europe is an essential part of a credible deterrent." Even those eager to see an end to these weapons acknowledged the process would be lengthy and would require unity within NATO. "We're not in a hurry," Poland's foreign minister, Radoslaw Sikorski, said in an interview. "We don't believe in acting fast or acting unilaterally."

WASHINGTON – The planned withdrawal of nearly 45,000 U.S. troops from Iraq by the end of August is on track in spite of a recent increase in attacks by militant forces, the top U.S. military commander in Iraq said Sunday. Army Gen. Ray Odierno said that al-Qaida's strength in Iraq is steadily degrading. Unless there's a dramatic and unforeseen change in the security situation, the U.S. troop drawdown will go ahead as scheduled, he said. There are now about 95,000 U.S. troops in Iraq, according to Odierno. The U.S. plans to cut that number to 50,000 by Aug. 31, when it will end combat

operations. "I fully expect us to be at 50,000 by the first of September," Odierno said on "Fox News Sunday." As part of an agreement with Iraq, the U.S. will withdraw all forces by the end of 2011. Odierno's remarks came as he prepared to leave Iraq at the end of the summer as part of a scheduled rotation. His replacement will be Lt. Gen. Lloyd Austin, the staff director for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, The Associated Press reported last week. The announcement has not been formally made by the Pentagon. "Nobody has contacted me yet about leaving," said Odierno, who has been the senior U.S. commander in Iraq since 2008. A wave of deadly bombings in and around Baghdad following Iraq's disputed March 7 parliamentary elections raised doubts about whether Iraqi security forces were prepared to protect the country as American forces began to leave. But Odierno described al-Qaida in Iraq as an enemy on the run. The number of attacks and casualties to civilians and military personnel dropped in the first three months of 2010, he said. "Iraqi security forces are now in the lead at going after al-Qaida," he said. Neighboring Iran continues to play a destabilizing role, providing lethal aid and training for insurgent elements, Odierno said. Asked if he'd like the authority to go into Iran and take out the training camps, he said he doesn't think it is necessary to conduct such operations. "I think what's more important is to build up the Iraqi capability to protect their own homeland," he said.

WASHINGTON – Defense Secretary Robert Gates asserted Sunday that the U.S. is prepared to take a range of actions against the Iranian nuclear program and told friends and foes not to fall for any perception Iran can catch Washington off guard. Gates said a memo he wrote in January identified steps to be taken in defense planning after the Obama administration decided to increase pressure against Iran's nuclear ambitions. It was not, he insisted, a "wake-up call" that set off a scramble by an unprepared government, as was suggested by sources who disclosed the memo's existence to The New York Times. Even so, it's clear administration planning is very much in motion. Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said in a speech Sunday at Columbia University that Iran "has been a great focus for years, not months" and "the military option has been on the table and remains on the table." Yet, he added: "The diplomatic, the engagement piece, the sanctions piece — all those things, from my perspective, need to be addressed." Gates released a statement saying his memo to the White House merely laid out an orderly and timely decision-making process as various agencies work together to make policy on Iran in the months ahead. "There should be no confusion by our allies and adversaries that the United States is properly and energetically focused on this question and prepared to act across a broad range of contingencies in support of our interests." President Barack Obama has been pushing for tougher international sanctions and has increased military activity in the region since Iran spurned his offer to come to the table by the end of last year to resolve concerns about Iran's accelerated nuclear development. Obama and other administration figures have vowed Iran will not be allowed to become a nuclear state but have not said what the U.S. would do if Iran gained the ability to produce a weapon. Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., has complained that the administration has not put tough action behind its talk. He said Sunday he did not need a secret memo to convince him the U.S. lacks an effective Iranian policy.

WASHINGTON — Over the past five years, 41 foreign companies have helped Iran develop its oil and gas sector, which accounts for more than half of the Iranian government's revenues, Congressional investigators reported Thursday. The Government Accountability Office said the companies provided expertise, equipment and financing and did construction work on oil and gas pipelines, enabling Iran to increase energy production and profits. No American companies were listed in the report, but the China National Petroleum Corporation was reported to be financing an oil field in an agreement with the Iranian government estimated to be worth more than \$2 billion. Daewoo Shipbuilding and Marine Engineering of South Korea was reported to be building tanker ships for Iran under a \$384 million contract. The report did not determine whether the companies had violated the Iran Sanctions Act, devised to punish foreign companies that invested more than \$20 million in a given year to develop Iran's oil and gas fields. "Clearly, we need to take a tougher stance against companies tied to Iran's refined petroleum capacity," said Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, Democrat of New York, who has been pushing for hearings on companies that do business in Iran. "Companies whose profits fuel Iran's nuclear ambitions should not be allowed to do business with the U.S. or benefit from the U.S. economy — period," she added. The House and Senate have passed legislation aimed at strengthening sanctions on companies doing business with Iran, and are working to iron out differences in the bills. The United States and its European allies are trying to win support for a tough new sanctions aimed at pressing Iran to rein in its nuclear program, but China and Brazil have resisted. Both countries have companies that work in Iran's energy sector, the report says. Last month, The New York Times disclosed that over the past 10 years, the federal government gave more than \$107 billion in contract payments, grants and other benefits to foreign and multinational American companies while they were doing business in Iran. That includes nearly \$15 billion paid to companies that defied American sanctions law by making large investments that helped Iran develop its vast oil and gas reserves. In the 14 years since the law was passed, the government has never enforced it, in part for fear of angering America's allies. A number of companies have recently announced that they will end or curtail their operations in Iran. The French oil giant Total and the Italian oil company Eni are also said to be considering ending their operations in Iran. Both companies were named in the investigators' report, which was requested by Senator Joseph I. Lieberman, independent of Connecticut, and Senator Jon Kyl, Republican of Arizona.

Western Europe

A large number of Muslim women candidates have a good chance of being one of the first British Muslim women MPs. Among them are:

1. Salma Yaqoob: parliament candidate for the new Hall Green constituency.
2. Shabana Mahmood: fighting Clare Short's old seat in Birmingham Ladywood.
3. Nusrat Ghani: the Conservative parliamentary candidate for Birmingham Ladywood
4. Yasmin Qureshi: who inherits a big Labour majority in Bolton South.
5. Rushanara Ali: who could well take the Bethnal Green seat back for Labour.
6. Maryam Khan: the Labour candidate for Bury North.

All in all, up to a quarter of the 16 Muslim females standing as candidates at the next month's general elections are in prominent positions to win parliamentary seats for the first time, according to an analysis carried out exclusively by *The Muslim News*. The total number of Muslim MPs could also continue to double, including at least one of two Conservatives being elected for the first time. The first Muslim MP was elected in 1997, the second in 2001 and the number doubled again at the last election to four, all have so far been Labour.

Salma Yaqoob is regarded as the most prominent Muslim woman in British public life. She wears a headscarf, a powerful symbol of a faith she has accommodated with her passionate leftwing politics. She is standing as a candidate for the tiny and fractured Respect party. In some streets around the new constituency of Hall Green, her poster is on every window. Since her narrow defeat for Westminster in 2005, she has built up support through her work as a local councillor, as well as building a national profile through her appearances on BBC's Question Time. She might just topple Labour from a seat in an area which, in 1997, it counted as one of its safest. Boundary changes have brought much of the old Sparkbrook and Small Heath constituency (Labour majority: 19,526) into the new Hall Green. Her result is looking close.

What will help Yaqoob is that her Labour opponent, Roger Godsiff, who has held the seat since 1992, has been badly damaged by the expenses scandal. His second-home claims were among the highest in England, and despite charging £163,885 to the taxpayer in 2007-08, last year he spoke in only five debates and voted in 56% of divisions.

Yaqoob was wooed by Labour after 2005. She acknowledges that "My values are traditional Labour, but New Labour has gone to the right". She was even courted by the Liberal Democrats and the Tories, a tribute to her rare capacity for fair-minded plain speaking, most evident in her Question Time appearance earlier this year, at Wootton Bassett, when she earned respect for her handling of questions about British soldiers killed in Afghanistan, a war she opposes.

But she has stuck with Respect, despite its internal disputes, since 2005, and is probably now better known than her party. She is accused by prominent Labour and Liberal Democrat Muslims of "leading the community into a "cul-de-sac" but defends her politics vigorously. "I couldn't speak like I do if I was in Labour. I'm not here as a career politician, but because I want to offer an alternative to the neo-liberal model, which is patently failing. I now punch above my weight, working with other parties and influencing them. I want to try and open the space for discussion and debate, which is crucial right now, and nudge Labour into a more principled position."

She says she won't "make a tactic into a principle", clearly indicating that she would come back to Labour on the right terms. In the meantime, her gamble to be her own woman and to speak her mind without having to submit to party discipline is surviving against all the odds. A recent independent assessment argued that she is among Birmingham's three most influential councillors.

Ironically, her toughest battles are probably within the Muslim community. Contrary to assumptions that this is where the core of her support lies, she has had to pick her way very carefully through the sensitivities of conservatives within her community. The old Sparkbrook and Small Heath had the highest number of Muslim votes of any constituency in the country, and many of them are now in Yaqoob's patch.

In Ladywood, the Conservatives hope to take the seat from Labour. The Conservative candidate, Nusrat Ghani, is a Muslim woman, as well as her Labour rival Shabana Mahmood. They both grew up in this area of Birmingham. Both can call on the family connections vital to winning votes. Mahmood's father is the chair of the Birmingham Labour party.

Both are able to get beyond the "front room campaigning" of previous elections; candidates and canvassers sit in family sitting rooms and are served delicious tea spiced with green cardamom, while the conversations run on in Urdu or Mirpuri. The questions here are about family and which village the candidate is "from" back in Pakistan. There is no mistaking the pride and delight among these women to see a female candidate. "My generation had a much more traditional life and you listened to your husband on who to vote for, but my daughters have a completely different outlook," says Maqsood Bibi through a translator. "It's a good thing for women to come forward so that it is not just men in politics. As a Muslim, I believe God gives you, as a woman, the same rights as he gives to the men. So why shouldn't you become an MP?"

Along the street, Gulshan Begum was even more forthright. "My generation of women are often illiterate and we need women in power to support us."

The debate over face-covering Islamic veils continues to heat up in France, where the government is speaking out in favour of an all-out ban. Spokesman Luc Chatel explained President Nicholas Sarkozy's rationale for a bill that prohibits women from wearing the full veil, or burqa, which, he said, "hurts the dignity of women and is not acceptable in French society." While some agree with the move, which they say will prevent families from forcing women to cover up, others deride it as an encroachment on personal freedom. France is a firmly secular country but has western Europe's largest Muslim population, estimated at some 5 million. France worries about clashes in values as well as about a spread of radical Islam. Authorities widely see the veil in light of gender equality and security issues. In neighboring Belgium, a similar initiative for a ban on full veils in public places, including in the streets, is expected to become law in July. Muslim leaders in France say that the face-covering veil is not a religious requirement of Islam but have cautioned against banning the garment. France outlawed Muslim headscarves and other "ostentatious" religious symbols from classrooms in 2004 after a marathon parliamentary debate and, "we are acting in the same way today. We have decided to legislate," Chatel said. Numerous school girls wore headscarves in class, but only a tiny minority of women wear the all-covering veil. Nevertheless, debate on the question of whether a law is needed and how far it should reach has continued for nearly a year. Muslim leaders say that the debate itself has stigmatized Muslims, as has a national debate on the French identity.

Even within Sarkozy's own conservative UMP party, the question of forbidding face-covering veils in streets is divisive. One of the party's leading lawmakers, Jean-Francois Cope, had already filed his own preliminary bill for a global ban on the garments — which should be superseded by the government's. Cope called Sarkozy's decision "wise" and said the government needs to move rapidly "so the French know that, on this point, we are truly determined." Cope, speaking to reporters, suggested the law should be passed by the end of July — but followed by a six-month consultation period before it is applied. Sarkozy insisted that "everything should be done so that no one feels

stigmatized," Chatel said without elaborating. The French parliament is already slated to discuss a nonbinding resolution on May 11 that sets out political principles, including the need for women to keep their faces uncovered.

Traffic police in France have fined a Muslim woman for wearing Islamic face veil while driving, according to her lawyer Jean-Michel Pollono. The woman was fined \$29 in early April in the western city of Nantes, her lawyer said on Friday. The fine was based on a rule that says drivers should have "freedom of movement and a sufficient field of vision." Pollono said on France-Info radio that he is protesting the decision, saying a veil is "the same as a motorcycle helmet" in terms of hindrance to vision. The French government is set to consider a bill that bans Muslim women from wearing full-face veils, known as burqa, in public places. France is home to the largest Muslim population among the 27 European Union member states. Nearly 10 percent of the 62 million French population is Muslim. According to the French government, the legislation if approved would affect around 2,000 Muslim Frenchwomen.

Antwerp: Belgium soon may be the first European nation to outlaw the burqa and other Islamic garb even as France and the Netherlands are seen moving in the same direction. "There is all-party public support for this," says Leen Dierick, a conservative member of the Belgian parliament's interior affairs committee that unanimously backed the proposed ban on March 31. The initiative is expected to become law in July and would apply to all public places, including streets. Swiss voters recently voted to ban the construction of new minarets. In recent years, both mosque and minaret construction projects in many European countries, including Sweden, France, Italy, Austria, Greece, Germany and Slovenia, have generated protests, some of them violent.

French President Nicolas Sarkozy favours a burqa ban, saying the veils compromise women's dignity. Unlike the Belgians or the Dutch — who see a clear and straightforward public security issue — the French are struggling with the constitutionality of outlawing a religious dress code.

"The point is public security, the need to show one's face in public. Not religious freedom," says Dierick. The proposed Belgian ban partly underscores how populist politicians across Europe are making a big imprint on attitudes and policies toward immigrants and minorities, especially Muslims. Belgian lawmaker Filip Dewinter says mainstream politicians back a ban on burqa-type attire for fear of losing more ground to his far-right Flemish Interest party — a fringe factor 15 years ago but who today hold 17 of the 150 parliamentary seats. "We were the first to propose a burqa ban," says Dewinter. "Now the parliament votes for a ban [drafted by a] traditional government party. Whatever! It's the outcome that counts."

The Human Rights Watch has criticized Belgium for planning to impose a ban on wearing veil, saying it violates the fundamental rights to freedom of religion. Belgian lawmakers are set to pass a bill on Thursday that would forbid the wearing of an Islamic veil in public places. The federal parliament's home affairs committee voted unanimously last month to endorse the ban. "Bans like this lead to a lose-lose situations," senior Western Europe researcher at Human Rights Watch, Judith Sunderland, said Wednesday. "They violate the rights of those who choose to wear the veil," she added. Twenty out of

589 municipalities in Belgium already prohibit wearing full Muslim veils in public. Similar local restrictions also exist in parts of Italy and the Netherlands. However, approval of the current bill by the parliament would make Belgium the first country in Europe to adopt a nationwide ban.

European air traffic has returned to normal, with nearly all restrictions imposed during the volcanic ash cloud crisis now lifted, officials say. The European air traffic agency, Eurocontrol, said it expected 29,000 flights on Friday. There were 27,284 on Thursday. EU Transport Commissioner Siim Kallas said "Europe's airspace is getting back to normal operating capacity". He also called for "a single European regulator for a single European sky". "The absence of a single European regulator for air traffic control made it very difficult to respond to this crisis," he said, lamenting Europe's "fragmented patchwork of 27 national airspaces". A statement on Eurocontrol's website at 1230 Brussels time (1030 GMT) said "almost all European airspace is available, with the exception of part of northern Scotland". "Since yesterday... traffic across Europe has been back to normal levels, as almost all European airspace has been available and almost all restrictions have been lifted." Ash from Iceland's Eyjafjallajokull volcano triggered a shutdown of European airspace last week, paralysing many airports and stranding hundreds of thousands of tourists and business travellers.

ATHENS, Greece -- Within several weeks, the government will be able to say whether Greece will need the EU's financial support to overcome its financial crisis, Prime Minister George Papandreou said in an interview with Newsweek on Saturday (April 17th). On Friday, he told lawmakers that Greece is ready to use the aid offered by the EU and the IMF if necessary, but this would not mean that the country is bankrupt. The EU, the IMF and the European Central Bank sending experts to Athens on Monday to discuss a proposed 40 billion-euro aid package in the form of loans.

In other news, EU Economic and Monetary Affairs Commissioner Olli Rehn announced on Saturday that the bloc is investigating the role US banking and investment firm Goldman Sachs may have played in concealing Greece's actual budget deficit, which resulted in the country's grave financial crisis. Goldman Sachs is suspected of assisting Greece's former government in reducing the deficit -- on paper anyway -- through financial manipulations, thus allowing Athens to attract more credit. The scheme was exposed in February.

ATHENS, Greece -- Hundreds of thousands of state employees are staging a 24-hour strike Thursday (April 22nd) against harsh austerity measures the government has announced in a bid to end the financial crisis. The protesters insist that the move to cut salaries in the public sector and raise consumer taxes are pointless since such cost-cutting efforts may actually lengthen the recession. The strike is affecting all state institutions.

On Wednesday, IMF and EU experts began talks in Athens on a possible 45 billion-euro package of financial aid. Finance Minister George Papaconstantinou says the talks will last two weeks. Greece has repeatedly said it is up to Athens to decide if it needs the money.

In other news Wednesday, police smashed a cigarette smuggling operation that has allegedly sold 3 million packs of cigarettes since the beginning of the year, causing losses of 9m euros to the state budget. Police seized about 100,000 packs of cigarettes at a hangar in Acharnon, northwest of Athens, along with weapons and ammunition.

ATHENS, Greece -- Prime Minister George Papandreou on Friday (April 23rd) asked for the activation of an EU/IMF aid mechanism totalling 45 billion euros. In a televised address, Papandreou said that it is "a matter of national and pressing necessity" to request the aid. The announcement comes a day after the EU's statistical service, Eurostat, revised figures for Greece's 2009 deficit from 12.9% to 13.6% of GDP, prompting the credit rating agency Moody's to downgrade Greece's credit rating.

Southeast Europe

REYKJAVIK, Iceland -- A massive cloud of dangerous ash from an Icelandic volcano moved southward Saturday (April 17th), forcing many countries in the Balkans to close their airspace amid fears that the ash could get sucked into the planes' engines, causing them to cut out. Romania, Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, most of Croatia and the northern part of Bulgaria closed their airspace to flights. The unprecedented shutdown left thousands of passengers stranded. Although some airports in the region continued to operate, many flights to and from central and Western Europe were cancelled as airports there closed. Forecasts suggest the cloud of ash will persist and impact flight through Monday.

BUDAPEST, Hungary -- President Laszlo Solyom hosted a meeting in Pecs on Friday (April 16th) with his Croatian counterpart Ivo Josipovic and Serbian President Boris Tadic to discuss ways to boost co-operation among their countries. Solyom, whose country assumes the EU's rotating presidency in January, said Hungary strongly supports the EU bids of both Belgrade and Zagreb. Tadic said he would like to see Croatia become an EU member as soon as possible, because this would signal that Serbia too will fulfil its strategic goal. Josipovic said he hopes his country can wrap up its accession talks by the end of this year. The three presidents agreed they'd like to see the post of European commissioner for ethnic minorities established

TIRANA, Albania -- The main opposition Socialist Party (SP) says it plans to hold more protests against the government and in support of "revealing the truth about the 2009 general elections". The decision, backed on Sunday (April 18th) at the party's congress, came less than two months after the SP ended a complete boycott of parliament staged for months over the government's refusal to open ballot boxes and investigate the June 2009 elections. "We will continue to protests to give freedom to the people, not tyranny," SP leader Edi Rama said on Sunday. They will start on April 30th. The SP also presented a strategy to strengthen the economy.

TIRANA, Albania -- Prime Minister Sali Berisha said on Monday (April 19th) that he has reassured European officials he will make every effort to resolve the political stalemate in Albania. Berisha said that the legal system and other state institutions are capable of investigating the June 2009 general elections. The government's refusal to

open some ballot boxes has prompted the opposition to stage an on-again off-again boycott of parliament for the past several months. Berisha is just back from Brussels, where he delivered Albania's responses to a questionnaire that is crucial to achieving EU candidate status.

TIRANA, Albania -- Lawmakers from the main opposition Socialist Party (SP) and their supporters staged a rally Wednesday (April 21st) against the material that public operator TVSH is broadcasting. The protestors accused the government of using TVSH for "propaganda and agitation". SP lawmaker Besnik Baraj says "The public broadcaster has been turned into a private TV for [Prime Minister] Sali Berisha, while all citizens pay taxes for its existence."

SARAJEVO, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) -- High Representative Valentin Inzko said on Saturday (April 17th) that BiH's EU visa liberalisation process may be delayed by three or four months, beyond the summer timeframe. "Some were hoping, including myself, that this will happen on July 1st, in the beginning of the holiday season," Inzko told Deutsche Welle. He said that there is a certain degree of fatigue in European countries and institutions over the lack of progress in reforms. He added that some European officials and experts believe that in the months before the October presidential and parliamentary elections, no significant progress can be expected in terms of implementing reforms.

SARAJEVO, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) -- The young anti-nationalistic group Our Party (Nasa Stranka) held its first congress in Sarajevo on Saturday (April 17th). Members rejected ethnic divisions and vowed to work for BiH's EU accession. Speaking to nearly 300 delegates, party leader Bojan Bajic said that they are launching a historic campaign for the general elections in October, a campaign that will end two decades of nationalistic politics. Established in 2008, Nasa Stranka is unlike other any other party, as its members include representatives of all ethnic groups.

SARAJEVO, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) -- Several thousand people attended the funeral Monday (April 19th) of Bosnian Muslim wartime army commander General Rasim Delic. He was buried in Sarajevo with the highest military honours. Delic, 61, died last week of a heart attack as he awaited a ruling by the UN war crimes tribunal. He was appealing the three-year prison sentence handed down in 2008 for allowing his troops to rape, torture and murder dozens of Croats and Serbs in BiH between 1993 and 1995.

SARAJEVO, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) -- The Republika Srpska (RS) Constitutional Court concluded on Tuesday (April 20th) that a recently passed law on referendums does not violate the vital national interests of Bosniaks. Parliament passed it in February but Bosniak representatives in the RS Council of Peoples vetoed the legislation, insisting on more amendments. Constitutional Court President Mirko Zovko says the court rejected the Bosniak caucus's motion because they failed to mention exactly how the measure violates their interests. RS Prime Minister Milorad Dodik said on Tuesday that the entity will likely organise a referendum on decisions imposed by the high representative before the October general elections.

SARAJEVO, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) -- Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH) Prime Minister Mustafa Mujezinovic said on Wednesday (April 21st) he will not resign as war veterans insist, but assured them that the government will discuss their demands. About 70 people, half of them policemen, were injured when a protest by thousands of war veterans turned violent in Sarajevo on Wednesday. Police clashed with protesters as they tried to storm the government building and set it on fire. About 5,000 of the veterans gathered to protest a government resolution that would reduce by 20% the number of war veterans and their families who receive social aid. They say that austerity measures have disproportionately affected them.

BANJA LUKA, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) -- Republika Srpska (RS) President Rajko Kuzmanovic denied on Wednesday (April 21st) that the entity is attempting to minimise the crimes committed in Srebrenica in July 1995. On Tuesday, High Representative Valentin Inzko criticised a recent decision by the RS government to revise a report drafted by the previous government on the number of those killed in the Bosnian enclave. Inzko said that Banja Luka's decision is "a despicable attempt to question that genocide took place in Srebrenica by deliberately distorting established historical and legal facts". Kuzmanovic insisted RS has no intention of denying the Srebrenica crime, but rather, wants "to fix" some elements for the sake of both history and the future.

TALLINN, Estonia -- NATO foreign ministers agreed on Thursday (April 22nd) at an informal meeting in Tallinn to offer Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) a Membership Action Plan (MAP). The ministers, however, set conditions for implementing the MAP, including resolving the defence property issue. The ministers agreed that BiH has made progress with reforms since December and praised the country's decision to destroy its surplus weapons and to send troops to Afghanistan.

ZAGREB, Croatia -- Leaders of the ruling Croatian Democratic Party (HDZ) on Friday (April 16th) criticised President Ivo Josipovic for some comments he made during a visit last week to Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), accusing him of apologising for the 1990s war. The HDZ, headed by Prime Minister Jadranka Kosor, said the president's statement to the BiH parliament contradicted a declaration about the war in Croatia passed by parliament in October 2000. It concluded that Croatia led a just and legitimate, defensive and liberating war, and not an aggressive and occupational war against anyone. Josipovic says his speech was misinterpreted. He insists he did not apologise for the war, rather, expressed "regret over the events in the past".

ZAGREB, Croatia -- President Ivo Josipovic is reacting sharply to Prime Minister Jadranka Kosor's criticism of a speech he made in Sarajevo last week, in which he apologised for Croatia's policy toward Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) during the 1990's. Local media reported on Saturday (April 17th) that he has all but invited Kosor to initiate an impeachment procedure against him, if she believes that his statements were unconstitutional. If, however, it turns out they were not, he will ask for her resignation. This is the first serious political confrontation between the cabinet and the president since Josipovic took office in mid-February.

BRUSSELS, Belgium -- Croatia closed the chapter on free movement of goods in its EU accession negotiations at an inter-governmental conference in Brussels on Monday (April 19th). Eighteen of the 33 negotiation chapters are now closed. Three chapters have yet to be opened, but are expected by end June.

In other news Monday, the Slovenian parliament ratified the country's maritime border agreement with neighbouring Croatia. Lawmakers from the ruling coalition backed it, while the opposition boycotted the vote, claiming there was not enough time for debate and that the agreement is detrimental to Slovenia. Prime Minister Borut Pahor called the ratification a historic step. The agreement will now be submitted to a public referendum, expected in June. Under the deal, the maritime border dispute will be subject to international arbitration. Croatia has already ratified the document.

ZAGREB, Croatia -- Prime Minister Jadranka Kosor announced at a press conference Monday (April 19th) that the cabinet will completely abolish the temporary crisis tax on income as of November 1st, two months ahead of schedule. This refers to the additional rate of 4% on taxable income above 820 euros. Last month, the government decided to abolish another crisis tax, a 2% tax levied on those with taxable income of between 415 and 820 euros effective July 1st. Kosor says the cabinet plans to reduce spending by cutting public administration and public companies staff by 5% before the end of the year. Remaining employees will not be receiving Christmas bonuses. Moreover, the cabinet will be cutting so-called privileged pensions and reduce the number of job categories that qualify for such pensions, such as war veterans.

ZAGREB, Croatia -- A court in Zagreb sentenced the former head of Croatia's mission to the UN, Neven Jurica, to 18 months in prison Thursday (April 22nd) for embezzling more than 90,000 euros of state funds. He was also banned from diplomatic activities for five years. The court rejected his arguments that he spent the money on lobbying activities, rather than for private purposes, as charged. Last year, Jurica asked to be relieved of his duties, citing health issues. In November, the anti-corruption office USKOK charged him with abuse of power and embezzlement.

PRISTINA, Kosovo -- UNMIK chief Lamberto Zannier says relations between the UN mission and Pristina have improved, though differences remain on some issues, including "the strategy in the north", Zannier was quoted as saying on Sunday (April 18th), in an interview with the Belgrade based daily Politika. Government spokesperson Memli Krasniqi, disagrees however, about the status of ties, saying "Relations between Kosovo institutions and UNMIK have neither improved nor worsened." Zannier says UNMIK supports implementing the strategy in the Serb-dominated north through dialogue and by involving all concerned parties, adding that the rule of law is the key to improvements. He believes conditions for dialogue will be more favourable after the International Court of Justice renders its opinion on the legality of Kosovo's unilaterally declared independence.

PRISTINA, Kosovo -- The level of access minorities have to the justice system is unsatisfactory, the Humanitarian Law Centre in Kosovo concluded in a report published on Tuesday (April 20th). Project Co-ordinator Drita Vala blames a low level of

awareness among minorities of their rights as well as a failure to recruit minority candidates for jobs in the justice system.

PRISTINA, Kosovo -- The EU representative for northern Kosovo, Italian Ambassador Michael Giffoni, said on Wednesday (April 21st) that the EU will not recognise structures resulting from municipal elections organised by Serbia. "These elections cannot be considered legal in Kosovo and this should be clear. Of course, we are against everything that supports actions of some illegal structures," Giffoni said. The Serbian Election Commission has published three lists ahead of the May 30th municipal elections in the northern Serb-dominated part of Mitrovica.

PRISTINA, Kosovo -- UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has voiced concern about possible tensions in northern Kosovo if Pristina authorities fail to implement their strategy in a transparent manner, in dialogue with local communities and other relevant stakeholders. In a report published Thursday (April 22nd), Ban noted that UNMIK authorities were not consulted in either the drafting or implementation of the strategy. Pristina is trying to solidify its control over all of Kosovo, in the face of Belgrade-backed parallel structures in the Serb-dominated north.

PRISTINA, Kosovo -- EULEX chief Yves de Kermabon said on Wednesday (April 21st) that Kosovo institutions are primarily in charge of the rule of law in the young country. Rather than political intervention in the judiciary, he urged officials to work harder to fight corruption. Addressing the Joint Co-ordinating Rule of Law Board, de Kermabon said Kosovo authorities "are in the driver's seat in the process".

PRISTINA, Kosovo -- The government is drafting a joint strategy with countries that have recognised Kosovo's independence regarding actions Pristina should undertake after the International Court of Justice (ICJ) rules later this year on the legality of the 2008 independence declaration. "We expect, together with our international friends, to be more active in representing Kosovo, the image of Kosovo and to lobby for recognition," Deputy Prime Minister Hajredin Kuci said on Sunday (April 18th). Kuci added that the ICJ opinion will end the hesitation felt by countries that have not recognised Kosovo.

PRISTINA, Kosovo -- The country faces a series of technical requirements before the process of lifting its visa regime with EU countries begins, reforms that include "reintegration and repatriation", Khaldoun Sinno, chief of the Political, Economic and European Integration Section at the European Commission (EC) Liaison Office in Pristina said on Monday (April 19th). The EC office said that the negotiation process will focus on improving border management, immigration management, fighting organised crime, terrorism and corruption, human and minority rights, free movement and issuing of personal documents. Interior Minister Bajram Rexhepi predicted on Sunday that Kosovo will see the visa regime lifted by 2011, or 2012 at the latest.

PRISTINA, Kosovo -- NATO officials announced on Monday (April 19th) that KFOR will transfer its duties related to securing the border with Albania to the Kosovo Police next week. "I think the transfer ... will happen on April 28th," KFOR Commander

Markus Bentler said. The NATO Commander of Allied Joint Force Command Naples, Admiral Mark Fitzgerald, who is visiting Kosovo, described it as a positive sign. For the time being, there are no plans to transfer responsibility for the borders with Montenegro and Serbia.

PRISTINA, Kosovo -- EULEX chief Yves de Kermabon said on Wednesday (April 21st) that Kosovo institutions are primarily in charge of the rule of law in the young country. Rather than political intervention in the judiciary, he urged officials to work harder to fight corruption. Addressing the Joint Co-ordinating Rule of Law Board, de Kermabon said Kosovo authorities "are in the driver's seat in the process".

SKOPJE, Macedonia -- Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski welcomed on Sunday (April 18th) statements by Ali Ahmeti -- leader of junior coalition partner Democratic Union for Integration (DUI) -- that his party will remain in the coalition, even if the name dispute with Greece is not resolved by June. During a visit to Tetovo's flooded Raotince village, Gruevski insisted that problems can be resolved through dialogue. Ahmeti said his party decided to remain in the ruling coalition because leaving would be harmful to the country. Ahmeti stressed that DUI is working with its partners to find a mutually acceptable solution to the name row, the main obstacle to Macedonia's NATO accession

SKOPJE, Macedonia -- Parliament rejected late on Monday (April 19th) a motion to remove Justice Minister Mihajlo Manevski. The vote was 16 in favour, 65 against. The opposition Social Democratic Alliance of Macedonia had accused the minister of nepotism, financial irregularities in the justice ministry as well as blaming him for poor prison conditions. Manevski rejected all accusations as groundless.

SKOPJE, Macedonia -- Police detained more than 30 doctors and officials of the Pension and Disability Insurance Fund on Monday (April 19th) for suspected fraud. The investigation started a year ago. Among those arrested were doctors from state and private hospitals who allegedly diagnosed patients without disabilities to allow them to receive pensions. The patients are believed to have paid at least 1,500 euros for the fake documents.

SKOPJE, Macedonia -- Spanish Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Moratinos voiced optimism Tuesday (April 20th) that Macedonia may get a date for starting EU membership talks during Spain's presidency of the bloc, which ends on July 1st. At a press conference with his Macedonian counterpart Antonio Milososki in Skopje, Moratinos said Madrid will put all its energy into that goal. He predicted that this will be a good year for Macedonia's bid to join both the EU and NATO, as long as both Skopje and Athens work to resolve their longstanding name dispute.

From Skopje, Moratinos travelled to Belgrade, where he met with Serbian counterpart Vuk Jeremic and visiting Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu. Afterwards, Moratinos said that one topic of the trilateral meeting was the June EU-Balkans summit in Sarajevo. Serbia boycotted last month's Balkan summit in Slovenia due to Kosovo's participation.

BUCHAREST, Romania -- The two largest opposition parties, the Social Democratic Party and the National Liberal Party, are planning to launch a vote of no confidence against the government within the next two weeks. Party leaders announced on Monday (April 19th) that the main issue is the cabinet's series of severe spending cuts, necessitated by the recession.

BUCHAREST, Romania -- Parliament established a joint committee on constitutional reform Tuesday (April 20th) amid efforts by President Traian Basescu to turn the bicameral legislature into a unicameral one, reducing the number of lawmakers from 471 to 300. The Liberal Democratic Party is the only party that supports all of Basescu's ideas. All other parties, including the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians, a member of the ruling coalition, reject the idea of a unicameral parliament. Most parties support some reduction in the number of lawmakers. According to existing procedure, constitutional amendments require the approval of two-thirds of all parliament members, and must then be put to a legally binding referendum. In order to be valid, at least a 50% turnout is required.

In other news Tuesday, the Senate judicial committee amended the procedure for implementing Constitutional Court rulings, in ongoing cases. Up until now, when legislation was declared unconstitutional, trials were stopped if the matter affected the proceedings, thus derailing thousands of cases. Now, arguments related to questionable legislation will be revised, rather than throwing out the whole case.

WASHINGTON, United States -- The Senate has adopted a resolution congratulating Serbia on submitting its EU membership application and urging the EU to adopt a clear position on Serbia's bid in a timely manner, media reported on Thursday (April 22nd). The Senate described EU prospects as a source of stabilisation, security and prosperity for all of Europe and said the EU should continue to support the integration efforts of countries in the Western Balkans. At the same time, the senators urged Serbia to fully co-operate with The Hague war crimes tribunal and to arrest the two remaining fugitives, Ratko Mladic and Goran Hadzic. The EU is expected to discuss Serbia's EU membership application in June.

Slovenia

Oceania