

IRAQ

- A ban on election candidates accused of links with Saddam Hussein's Baath party threatens to drag Iraq into civil war, İyad Allawi, a former prime minister and head of a group seen as a strong contender in the polls, said. (*PUK Media*)
- The U.S. government should put no pressures on the Cassation Commission with respect to Debaathification issues, a high ranking member of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's Dawa Party said. (*Peyamner News Agency*)
- Six al-Qaeda gunmen were killed and one soldier was wounded in clashes between Iraqi army and gunmen in south of Makhmour district, an army source said. (*Peyamner News Agency*)
- US Ambassador to Iraq Christopher Hill affirmed that the US Government is deploying utmost efforts to support displaced and help improve their economic status. (*Al Sumaria*)
- Police forces in Falluja arrested an active operative of Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) Organization in an operation north the city. (*Aswat Al Iraq*)
- The Iranian consul in North of Iraq said that some hostile forces use the northern region as a launch pad for attacks on his country. (*Aswat Al Iraq*)

IRAN

- IRI Foreign Minister said here Monday in a meeting with secretary general of Palestinian Islamic Jihad Palestinians' struggles proved that resistance is secret of achieving victory and embracing prosperity. (*IRNA*)

- British Ambassador to Tehran Simon Gass in a letter to a senior parliamentarian called on Iran not to downgrade its relations with Britain. In a letter to Chairman of the National Security and Foreign Policy Commission of the Majlis Alaeddin Boroujerdi, Gass said any decision by the Iranian Parliament to downgrade relations with Britain would be "regrettable". He added that it was untrue that Britain or its embassy in Tehran was interfering in Iran's domestic affairs. (*IRNA*)
- Iran kicked off Tuesday the % 20 uranium enrichment processes at its Natanz nuclear site in Isfahan province, Head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran Ali-Akbar Salehi said. (*IRNA*)
- Foreign Ministry spokesman Ramin Mihman-Parast said on Tuesday that Iran's readiness for 20-percent enrichment is not in contradiction with the issue of fuel swap. Talking to reports during his weekly press briefing, he stressed that almost all countries support Iran's peaceful nuclear activities. He added that only certain states are exerting pressures on Tehran to cease its peaceful nuclear program. (*IRNA*)
- Iranian Parliament Speaker Ali Larijani and his Pakistani counterpart Fahmida Mirza in a joint statement here in Tehran stressed the necessity for both countries to increase their consultations to help establish peace and security in the region. (*Farsnews*)
- The Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Berlin celebrated the 31th anniversary of the victory of the Islamic Revolution at a special ceremony on Tuesday. Hundreds of guests, among them senior German government officials and politicians attended the ceremony as well as industrial and business leaders, political experts and media representatives. (*IRNA*)
- President of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov sent a message of felicitation Wednesday to his Iranian counterpart Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on the 31st victory anniversary of the Islamic Revolution. Karimov hoped for further Tehran-Tashkent cooperation in his message. (*IRNA*)

ISRAEL-PALESTINE

- Israeli warplanes bombed several sites in southern Gaza overnight in response to rocket fire from the Hamas-run enclave, the army said on Wednesday, as Israel's foreign minister said that Indirect Middle East peace talks should begin soon. (*Al Arabiya*)

- Khaled Mishaal, the chairman of the political bureau of Hamas, said that his Movement was looking forward to an advanced Russian role in the Palestine cause especially in breaking the siege on Gaza and ending its people's suffering. (*Palestine Information Center*)
- A Palestinian teen was injured Tuesday evening in the West Bank village of Iraq Burin, apparently from gunshots fired at him by settlers. The 18-year old was hurt during clashes that broke out between settlers from Har Bracha and Palestinian residents of the village in the fields nearby. (*Yediot Ahronot*)
- Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman on Tuesday began a three-day visit to ex-Soviet Azerbaijan, a close ally of Turkey, where he is to meet with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and other top officials. Speaking to Azerbaijan's Lider television during a visit to Baku, Lieberman lashed out at Turkey's frequent criticisms of Israel and slammed it for its recent "anti-Israeli" stance but said the Jewish State would continue efforts to rebuild ties with long-time ally Ankara. (*Now Lebanon*)

LEBANON

- Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri on Wednesday said that he was concerned over Israel's "escalating" threats to Lebanon and Syria, and that if Israel were to attack, he would stand united with his own people. (*Daily Star*)
- President Michel Sleiman Monday voiced concern over the latest Israeli warnings to Lebanon's Hizbullah movement and its backer Syria, saying he could "no longer take them lightly." "The world today knows that Israeli threats against Lebanon are no longer to be taken lightly," Sleiman said in a statement released by his office. (*Now Lebanon*)

SYRIA

- Syrian newspaper AL-WATAN reported on Wednesday that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad sent his French counterpart, Nicolas Sarkozy, a verbal message through Sarkozy's envoy, senator Philippe Marini. According to French sources cited by the daily, Assad's letter included his perspective on regional issues. According to AL-WATAN, Marini, during his meeting with Assad, focused on Paris's role as a mediator, alongside Ankara, to resume dialogue between Tel Aviv and Damascus. (*Now Lebanon*)

AFGHANISTAN-PAKISTAN

- Pakistan has told the United States that it wants a central role in resolving the Afghan conflict, a New York Times report said. Pakistan has also offered to mediate with factions of the Taliban who use Pakistani territory and have long served as its allies, the report said. A top US official told NYT that Pakistan's army chief, General Ashfaq Pervaiz Kayani, had made Pakistan's willingness clear at a meeting last month with top American military officials at the Nato headquarters. (*Dawn*)

YEMEN

- Saed Elshari, al-Qaeda's number two in the Arabian Peninsula, has called for attacks against US interests "everywhere". The message was contained in an audio tape released on Monday and posted on a website often used by Islamist groups. Elshari also congratulated Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda's leader, over the apparent attempted bombing on a US plane on Christmas Day. (*Al Jazeera*)