

IRAQ

- Iraq on 7 March for the general election campaign officially began the process. While the race for the 6172 candidates in 310 seats across the country, the Turkmen participation in the elections to increase the Turkish 'would choose Iraq' is actually banner. The 325-seat parliament's 15 seats will be given to Christians and other minorities. (*Turkmeneli TV*)
- Iraq's appeal panel allowed 28 banned candidates to stand in parliamentary elections. Out of 177 candidates who had submitted contests, the panel allowed the participation of 28 candidates only, spokesman for Justice and Accountability Commission Ali Mahmoud told. (*Al Sumaria*)
- Leader of Al Qaeda in Iraq, Abu Omar Al Baghdadi, threatened to carry out attacks during Parliamentary elections. Al Baghdadi warned in an audio recording to stop Iraqi parliamentary elections by "military means". (*www.kerkuk.net*)
- Iraqi officials confirmed that appeals by prominent Sunni politicians against a move to ban them from next month's election had failed. (*www.kerkuk.net*)
- Iraq's Presidency ratified the State's 2010 general budget estimated at 83 trillion Iraqi Dinars in addition to a number of laws. (*Zaman*)
- The Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) of Iraq mentioned "the commissioners' council decided to impose fines on a number of political blocs with an amount of 15 million Iraqi Dinars for violating the law of electoral campaign, where they had started their campaign before the scheduled time." (*PUK Media*)
- The commander of the guard forces of the second area Brigadier Haqi Ismail said that his forces have arrested 19 infiltrators in Tal Mushraf border area. Ismail added that the infiltrators were coming from Syria. (*PUK Media*)

- A total of 95,000 observers from civil society organizations and different political blocs have been registered to monitor Iraq's upcoming parliamentary election, scheduled to take place next month. (*Aswat Al Iraq*)

IRAN

- Iran's First Vice-President Mohammad Reza Rahimi is due to visit Doha in the near future to confer with Qatari officials on the expansion of all-out ties between the two countries. (*Farsnews*)
- Iranian and Pakistani officials are slated to attend a third meeting on consular affairs in Islamabad on Monday. Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister for Consular, Parliamentary and Expatriates' Affairs Hassan Qashqavi will represent Iran in the two-day meeting. "Considering the illegal visits alongside the two countries' lengthy borders, the two sides plan to discuss ways to find shared methods and measures to organize border visits and facilitate issuance of visas for the two countries' nationals," Shakeri ,Iranian Ambassador to Islamabad, told FNA. (*Farsnews*)
- China has announced readiness to make use of its veto right to nullify any anti-Iran decisions by the United Nations Security Council, media reports said. (*IRNA*)
- US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has said the US would welcome peaceful engagement with Iran but not "while they are building their bomb". (*BBC*)

ISRAEL-PALESTINE

- The Lebanese army said in a statement that its units used anti-aircraft fire Sunday to force the Israeli warplanes out of Lebanese airspace. The army said the planes were in southern Lebanon and the Bekaa Valley in central Lebanon. (*Yediot Ahronot*)
- While mostly being mentioned in relation to his trial, former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert made a rare public appearance Sunday, during which he criticized Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu regarding Israel's conduct vis-à-vis Turkey, Syria and the Palestinians. Olmert made the statements during a conference at the Tel Aviv University. Amid growing tensions with Turkey and Israel's refusal to accept it as a mediator in negotiations with Syria, Olmert said, "We can reach an understanding with the Syrians which would change the map in the Middle East. (*Yediot Ahronot*)

- In his article published in Jerusalem Post, Alon Ben-Meir wrote that “The United States will have to remain relentless in its efforts to advance the Israeli-Syrian peace and may find Turkey to be the best interlocutor between the two nations. An Israeli-Syrian peace will fundamentally change the geopolitical condition in the Middle East.” (*Jerusalem Post*)
- Vice President Joe Biden is expected in Israel within a month for meetings coming fast on the heels of US military chief Adm. Michael Mullen’s visit here on Sunday, in what appears to be an indication of unprecedented cooperation on the Iranian nuclear issue. (*Jerusalem Post*)
- On the eve of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's visit to Moscow, senior Russian security officials were speaking out on defense-related issues that have provoked tensions between the two countries. An hour before Netanyahu's plane took off on Sunday Russian officials said that Moscow sees no reason to delay the sale of the S-300, a powerful air-defense system, to Iran. (*Haaretz*)
- The head of the U.S. armed forces said he was concerned about the unintended consequences of a military strike on Iran's nuclear program. Mullen appeared keen to relay a public message to Israel: The U.S. is leading the international effort to levy harsh sanctions on Tehran, so Israel must exercise complete restraint. (*Haaretz*)
- Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian president has suspended his chief of staff amid allegations of financial impropriety, Palestinian media have reported. (*Al Jazeera*)
- Gabriel Sibon in his article titled “Syria is no different from Hamas or Hezbollah” published by Haaretz wrote that Syria poses same threat with Hamas and Hezbollah to Israel. (*Haaretz*)

LEBANON

- Tens of thousands were collected in Beirut for fifth commemoration of former PM Rafik Hariri’s assassination on Sunday. PM Hariri, Kataeb leader Gemayel, LF leader Geagea and former PM Siniora addressed the crowd at Martyrs Square, reiterating the principles of the Cedar Revolution. Meanwhile, PSP leader MP Walid Jumblatt left the ceremony early. (*Now Lebanon*)
- The National News Agency (NNA) reported that Loyalty to the Resistance bloc MP Nawwaf al-Moussawi said during a ceremony in the South on Sunday that Israel is not

strong enough to engage in a war against Hezbollah again. He added that any conflict against Hezbollah or Syria would be a total war. (*Now Lebanon*)

- Prime Minister Saad Hariri called Sunday for a new page in Lebanese-Syria ties away from power struggles between regional axes in order to guarantee Lebanon's stability as thousands of Lebanese gathered in Beirut to mark the fifth anniversary of former Premier Rafik Hariri's assassination. While the premier refrained from tackling Hezbollah's weapons, Future Movement bloc head MP Fouad Siniora called along with Lebanese Forces chief Samir Geagea and Phalange Party leader Amin Gemayel for restricting the possession of arms and decisions of war and peace to the state's authority. (*Daily Star*)
- Free Patriotic Movement leader MP Michel Aoun defended Hezbollah and its arms during an interview with Sawt al-Mada radio station on Sunday. Aoun said the statements made at the Feb. 14 rally against Hezbollah weapons reflect immaturity. (*Ya Libnan*)
- The US will grant \$267 million in military aid to Lebanon, said Defense Minister Elias Murr on Friday during his visit to Washington. (*Daily Star*)

EYGPT

- In response to a question at a joint press conference with Qatari Premier and Foreign Minister Hamad bin Jasim bin Jabir al-Thani, Premier Recep Tayyip Erdogan Sunday called on UN to warn Israel over the siege imposed for years on Gaza that nearly 1500 Palestinians were killed in the 22-day offensive. Turkish PM also urged Egypt to change its policy over the siege. (*Egypt Daily News*)
- The U.S. military chief has met with Egypt's president at the start of a Middle East tour that Arab media reports say is focused on concerns about Iran's nuclear program. (*Egypt Daily News*)
- Egypt began the trial on Sunday of 25 men suspected of forming an Islamist militant group and murdering four Coptic Christians, judicial sources said, in a case reflecting official fears of resurgent militancy. (*Egypt Daily News*)

SYRIA

- People of the occupied Syrian Golan on Sunday commemorated the 28th anniversary of the open strike they announced in 1982 against the Israeli occupation authorities' decision of annexing the Golan and imposing the Israeli laws and identity on the Syrian citizens by force. (*SANA, Syria Official News Agency*)
- French Prime Minister Francois Fillon will begin on Friday 19 February a two-day official visit to Syria upon the invitation of Syrian Prime Minister Mohammad Naji Otri. (*SANA, Syria Official News Agency*)