

IRAQ

- The number of American troops in Iraq has dropped below 100,000 for the first time since the 2003 invasion, the American military said. (*The New York Times*)
- The first train service in decades has set off from northern Iraq to Turkey. Both countries hope the re-opening of the historic rail link will contribute to the fast-growing trade between them. (*BBC*)
- General Odierno told an event organized by the Institute for the Study of War that Iran is still using its Quds Force to fund, train and equip Shi'ite militias in Iraq. He said although Iraqi military action has broken up many such groups, several remain, and continue to plant powerful roadside bombs directed at U.S. and Iraqi forces, and carry out other attacks aimed at discrediting the Iraqi government. (*www.kerkuk.net*)
- Premier of Northern Irak Regional Government Dr. Barham Salih met with representative of the Arab League in Iraq ambassador Naji Ahmed Shalgham in Erbil. (*PUK Media*)
- Britain, France and Italy called on Iraq to halt use of the death penalty, expressing concern at a growth in the number of executions in the past two years. (*PUK Media*)
- Iraq will seize heavy weapons from foreign security firms and expel within days ex-Blackwater contractors still in the country, Interior Minister Jawad al-Bolani said. (*PUK Media*)

IRAN

- Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei has said that Iran will not allow certain arrogant governments to hold the fate of the world in their hands, and Iran wants peace, brotherhood, and dignity for regional and Islamic countries. (*TehranTimes*)
- Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesman Ramin Mehman-Parast on Wednesday reiterated Iran's readiness to buy nuclear fuel from potential suppliers as one of the many options available to Iran for supplying fuel for the Tehran research reactor. (*FarsNewsAgency*)
- A statement against a bill that would curb women's rights appeared to be the Iran's first burst of activism in months not related to the disputed presidential election last summer. (*NewYorkTimes*)
- Iranian Ambassador to Qatar Abdullah Sohrabi and Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu met in Doha and discussed bilateral ties and other issues of mutual interest. (*FarsNewsAgency*)
- Iranian deputy energy minister said twenty power plants will be privatized in the first half of the next Iranian year (to end September 20, 2010). (*TehranTimes*)
- The appointment of Robert Ford as US Ambassador to Syria is part of the Obama administration's general policy of engagement with America's foes. Its timing to coincide with Under Secretary of State William Burns' visit to Damascus, however, has a wider purpose. The move is part of a massive diplomatic push in the Middle East to isolate and roll back Syria's ally, Iran. (*The Independent*)

ISRAEL-PALESTINE

- Hamas blames Israel of murder of one of its leaders Mahmoud Mabbouh in Dubai. Yesterday thousands of Hamas supporters protested Israel in Gaza. (*Al Jazeera*)
- The Israeli channel 2 TV has revealed Tuesday that Israeli premier Benjamin Netanyahu presented a new offer to swap captured Israeli corporal Gilad Shalit with Palestinian captives in Israeli jails, describing it as the "last offer". The channel further revealed that German mediator Gerhard Conrad would arrive in Israel within few days to discuss the

new offer and get an answer from the two parties to achieve the deal. (*Palestine Information Center*)

- President Peres in his meeting with Austrian Foreign Minister Michael Spindelegger said that if the world cannot stop Iran's nuclear program, Middle East will be a region that nuclear conflicts will occur. (*Jerusalem Post*)
- Defense Minister Ehud Barak reiterated his view on the necessity of peace with Syria and he added that Syria should not test Israel. (*Jerusalem Post*)

LEBANON

- Hezbollah Chief Hassan Nasrallah said that Hezbollah would bomb Israel's infrastructure including its airports and refineries if Israel attacks Lebanon. (*Al Jazeera*)
- Lebanon cabinet decided to apply proportional representation system for June's municipal elections. (*Now Lebanon*)
- Speaker of the Parliament Nabih Berri said that to abolish sectarianism in Lebanon is "national duty" and he called for protesting Arab League Summit which would be held in March in Libya. (*Now Lebanon*)

EYGPPT

- The first candidate for 2011 presidential elections is determined. The founder of Al Ghad Party Ayman Nour declared his candidacy for elections. (*Egypt Daily News*)

SYRIA

- President Bashar Asad in his meeting with Austrian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs said that as long as Israel keeps being reluctant, a regional peace will not be achieved. (*SANA, Syrian Official News Agency*)
- France's Prime Minister François Fillon declared that his upcoming visit to Syria aims at signing of various agreements regarding the enhancement of bilateral relations. (*SANA, Syrian Official News Agency*)