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ORTADOĞU STRATEJİK ARAŞTIRMALAR MERKEZİ  
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EASTERN STRATEGIC STUDIES

# GÜNLÜK ORTADOĞU BÜLTENİ

## MIDDLE EAST DAILY BULLETIN

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MIDDLE EAST BULLETIN

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## 1. IRAQ

- **U.S. says Iraq forces capable amid 'heinous' attacks that left 100s killed and injured**



Women mourn during a funeral of a victim who was killed in one of Thursday's bomb attacks before burial at a cemetery in Najaf. (Reuters)

By AL ARABIYA WITH AGENCIES

The White House insisted Iraq's security forces were capable of responding to attacks like the "heinous" strikes which swept across the country on Thursday killing scores of people.

Al Arabiya correspondent in Baghdad said that the capital Baghdad was hit by two car blasts on Thursday night, leaving three people dead and up to 12 other injured.

A wave of 14 bombings ripped across Baghdad early Thursday, killing at least 67 people and injuring as many as 185 others in the worst violence in Iraq for months.

The apparently coordinated attacks struck days after the last American forces left the country and in the midst of a major government crisis between Shiite and Sunni politicians that has sent sectarian tensions soaring.

The bombings may be linked more to the U.S. withdrawal than the political crisis, but all together, the developments heighten fears of a new round of Shiite-Sunni sectarian bloodshed like the one a few years back that pushed Iraq to the brink of civil war.

"Iraq has suffered heinous attacks like this in the past, and its security forces have shown they are up to the task of responding and maintaining stability," White House spokesman Jay Carney said in a statement, according to AFP.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility. But the bombings bore all the hallmarks of al-Qaeda's Sunni insurgents, The Associated Press reported.

Most appeared to hit Shiite neighborhoods, although some Sunni areas were also targeted. In all, 11 neighborhoods were hit by either car

bombs, roadside blasts or sticky bombs attached to cars. There was at least one suicide bombing and the blasts went off over several hours.

“Time and again, the Iraqi people have shown their resilience in overcoming efforts to divide them. We continue to urge leaders to come together to face common challenges.”

Carney said that Vice President Joe Biden had called Iraqi President Jalal Talabani on Thursday to offer full support, following his recent calls to other Iraqi leaders.

Apparently coordinated blasts in Baghdad and the slaughter of a family in Diyala province coincided with a political row that has threatened Iraq’s fragile political truce and coalition cabinet.

More than a dozen Baghdad attacks, the deadliest in more than four months, mostly targeted Shiite neighborhoods and coincided with the morning rush hour.

“We strongly condemn the terrorist attacks against innocent Iraqis, which serve no agenda other than murder and hatred,” Carney said.

“We offer our condolences to those whose loved ones were lost or wounded.”

Coordinated campaigns such as this generally take weeks to plan, and could have been timed to coincide with the end of the American military presence in Iraq, possibly to undercut U.S. claims that they are leaving behind a stable and safe Iraq. Al-Qaeda has long sought to sow chaos and provoke the type of Shiite militant counterattacks that defined Iraq’s insurgency.

The deadliest attack was in the Karrada neighborhood, where a suicide bomber driving an explosives-laden vehicle blew himself up outside the office of a government agency fighting corruption. Two police officers at the scene said the bomber was driving an ambulance and told guards that he needed to get to a nearby hospital. After the guards let him through, he drove to the building where he blew himself up, the officers said.

Sirens wailed as ambulances rushed to the scene and a large plume of smoke rose over the area. The blast left a crater about five yards (meters) wide in front of the

five-story building, which was signed and blackened.

“I was sleeping in my bed when the explosion happened,” said 12-year-old Hussain Abbas, who was standing nearby in his pajamas. “I jumped from my bed and rushed to my mom's lap. I told her I did not to go to school today. I’m terrified.”

At least 25 people were killed and 62 injured in that attack, officials said. They spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak to the media.

For many Iraqis and the Americans who fought a nearly nine-year war in hopes of leaving behind a free and democratic country, the events of the past few days are beginning to look like the country’s nightmare scenario. The fragile alliance of Sunnis and Shiites in the government is completely collapsing, large-scale violence with a high casualty toll has returned to the capital, and Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki is displaying an authoritarian streak and may be moving to grab the already limited power of the Sunnis.

Al-Maliki’s Shiite-led government this week accused Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi, the country’s top Sunni political leader, of running a hit squad that targeted government officials five years ago, during the height of sectarian warfare. Authorities put out a warrant for his arrest.

Many Sunnis fear this is part of a wider campaign to go after Sunni political figures in general and shore up Shiite control across the country at a critical time when all American troops have left Iraq.

Because such a large-scale, coordinated attack likely took weeks to plan, and the political crisis erupted only few days ago, the violence was not likely a direct response to the tensions within the government. Also, al-Qaeda opposed Sunni cooperation in the Shiite-dominated government in the first place and is not aligned with Sunni politicians so does not feel any responsibility to press for any Sunni role in Iraq's power structure.

The Sunni extremist group often attacks Shiites, who they believe are not true Muslims.

U.S. military officials worried about a resurgence of al-Qaeda after their departure. The last American troops left Iraq at dawn Sunday.

Al-Qaeda in Iraq is severely debilitated from its previous strength in the early years of the war, but it still has the capability to launch coordinated and deadly assaults from time to time.

The attacks ratchet up tensions at a time when many Iraqis are already deeply worried about security. The real test of whether sectarian warfare returns, however, will be whether Shiite militants are resurgent and return to the type of tit-for-tat attacks seen at the height of sectarian warfare in 2006-2007.

During that fighting, neighborhoods that used to contain a mixture of Shiites and Sunnis were purged entirely of one Muslim sect or another. Neighbors turned on neighbors in Baghdad, and the result today is city where neighborhoods are much less religiously mixed and sectarian lines are clearly drawn.

Iraqis are already used to horrific levels of violence, but many wondered when they

would be able to enjoy some measure of security and stability after years of chaos.

“My baby was sleeping in her bed. Shards of glass have fallen on our heads. Her father hugged her and carried her. She is now scared in the next room,” said one woman in western Baghdad who identified herself as Um Hanin. “All countries are stable. Why don't we have security and stability?”

While Baghdad and Iraq have gotten much safer over the years, explosions like Thursday's are still commonplace.

Al-Maliki's tactics are another source of concern, especially for Sunnis. He is also pushing for a vote of no-confidence against another Sunni politician, the deputy prime minister Saleh al-Mutlaq.

Ayad Allawi, who heads a Sunni-backed party called Iraqiya, laid the blame for Thursday's violence with the government. The Iraqiya coalition also includes al-Hashemi and al-Mutlaq, and Allawi has been one of al-Maliki's strongest critics. Allawi warned that violence would continue as long as people are left out of the political process.

“We have warned long ago that terrorism will continue ... against the Iraqi people unless the political landscape is corrected and the political process is corrected, and it becomes an inclusive political process and full blown non-sectarian institutions will be built in Iraq,” Allawi told AP, speaking from neighboring Beirut.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/12/22/184049.html?PHPSESSID=g5sk8usfe34ceur6fokrct2524>

- **Dozens killed in Baghdad blasts**

A series of bomb blasts across Iraqi capital leaves 65 people dead and 176 injured amid rising sectarian tensions.

Dozens of people have been killed and many more wounded in a series of blasts in the Iraqi capital, Baghdad.

At least 63 people died and 176 people were wounded in 12 bombings across the capital on Thursday morning, health ministry sources told Al Jazeera.

Two more bombs exploded in Baghdad late in the evening claiming two more

lives, according to the Reuters news agency.

The wave of bombings come amid renewed fears of sectarian strife following the withdrawal of US troops and a deepening political crisis over an arrest warrant issued for Tariq al-Hashimi, the country's vice president and most senior Sunni politician.

The attacks largely coincided with the morning rush hour, and security forces cordoned off bomb sites, AFP news agency correspondents and officials said.

Authorities believe the attacks were well co-ordinated, Al Jazeera's Omar al-Saleh said, reporting from Baghdad.

"We don't know who carried out the attacks, the Iraqi security officials did not identify any suspects yet," Saleh said, adding: "This I think is a major setback to the security forces on the ground who have a large presence in the capital. You have checkpoints, you have roadblocks, and you have both the military and the Iraqi police guarding different areas, yet these attacks do occur."

Iraqi officials said the bombs struck in the Allawi, Bab al-Muatham and Karrada districts of central Baghdad, the Adhamiyah, Shuala and Shaab neighbourhoods in the north, Jadriyah in the east, Ghazaliyah in the west and al-Amil and Dura in the south.

Nouri al-Maliki, the Iraqi prime minister, vowed that the bombers would not be allowed to have any impact on the political process.

"The timing of these crimes and their locations confirm once again to any doubters the political nature of the goals that those criminals want to achieve," Maliki said in a statement.

The US condemned the bombings, and US vice president Joe Biden spoke with Iraqi President Jalal Talabani to voice support for his efforts to calm sectarian tension, the White House said.

"We continue to urge leaders to come together to face common challenges," Jay Carney, the White House press secretary.

"At this difficult time, the United States stands with Iraq as a strategic partner and a close friend," he said.

Nabil el-Araby, secretary general of the Arab League, has strongly condemned the attacks and called on all Iraqis, particularly members of the Iraqi government, to stay away from a partisan mindset.

'Planned and co-ordinated'

The largest explosion took place near the Rahbaat (Sisters) hospital and the Integrity and Transparency Directorate in Karrada district, sources told Al Jazeera.

"I saw all the windows were blown out and glass scattered everywhere. The children were scared and crying"

- Raghad Khalid,  
Kindergarten teacher

The blast caused great material damage and the bodies of those killed were laid out in the streets, eyewitnesses said.

Will Geddes, a security specialist with International Corporate Protection, told Al Jazeera that "a number of potential

motivations behind the attacks: It could be some means to destabilise the government and its credibility".

"It could also be message being sent out to the wider public in the international community to say that now that the US troops have left Iraq, this is a country which is still very much a security risk," he said.

"It is probably the worst co-ordinated attacks we have seen in a significant period of time. The attacks were very planned and coordinated and would have required a lot of resources.

"International community which has been very slowly engaging in Iraq for business opportunities may need to sit back over the new year and certainly see what happens in the short-term if there would be more sustained attacks in the future."

'Politically motivated'

"I saw all the windows were blown out and glass scattered everywhere. The children were scared and crying," said Raghad Khalid, a teacher at a kindergarten near the Karrada blast.

Smoke hung over the blast site in Karrada as ambulances rushed in to ferry the wounded to hospital.

Tensions between Iraq's Shia and Sunni communities have been heightened in recent days after Baghdad officials issued an arrest warrant for Hashimi over allegations that he ordered the killings of opponents.

Hashimi denies the charges and says they are politically motivated. Some Sunnis say the Iraqi prime minister is seeking to consolidate Shia control of the country following the departure last week of the remaining US troops stationed in the country.

"The fears of the people became reality," our correspondent in Baghdad said.

"I think the people are really scared and I think the politicians do know that their differences will be translated into attacks like these on the streets of Baghdad.

"From the official point of view, no one has come out yet saying there is a direct link, but among the general population

they do have a fear and a genuine belief that attacks like this are a direct result of the differences between politicians," he added.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/12/2011122262236659479.html>

- **Iraqi blasts leave behind 216 people among killed and wounded**

Iraqi Ministry of Health reported, on Thursday, that Baghdad bombings death toll rose to 216 killed and injured.

"Baghdad hospitals received this morning bodies of 49 dead and 167 wounded following explosions that occurred in different regions of Baghdad," spokesman for Health Ministry Ziad Tarek told Alsumarianews.

Tens of people were killed and injured in 6 car bombs and explosive belts blasts in different regions of Baghdad, an Iraqi police source told Alsumaria on Thursday.

"Two car bombs exploded at the same time in Abou Dashir region southern Baghdad," the source told Alsumarianews adding that another car exploded preceding an explosive belt blast near the Integrity Department central Baghdad.

"Two other car bombs exploded in Al Alawi region, central Baghdad leading to the death and injury of tens of people," a security source carried on.

"Ambulance cars rushed to incidents' sites to transport the dead and wounded to near hospitals," the source announced on condition of anonymity. "Security Forces undertook strict measures and blocked most of Baghdad's entrances," the source concluded.

<http://www.alsumaria.tv/en/Iraq-News/1-71985-Iraqi-blasts-leave-behind-216-people-among-killed-and-wounded.html>

- **Iraq PM Maliki warns Kurdistan of allowing Hashemi to escape**

Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri Al Maliki warned Kurdistan Regional Government, on Wednesday, of allowing Vice-President Tarek Al Hashemi to escape calling the government to hand him over. All evidence against Hashemi are in the hands of Iraqi judiciary, Maliki indicated.

"Kurdistan has to hand over the wanted," Nuri Al Maliki told a press conference which Alsumarianews attended on Wednesday in Baghdad. "The abstention of handing Hashemi or allowing him to

escape will only cause problems,” Maliki stressed adding that Kurdistan should not contribute to the escape of wanted.

“All evidence against Hashemi are before judiciary,” Maliki revealed noting that, three years ago, he presented a file of Hashemi’s countless violations.

“Security Forces didn’t search Hashemi’s house but looked into his office after it attracted the search dog’s attention,” Maliki said pointing out that Iraqi government will ensure a fair trial for Hashemi, a source told Alsumaria.

Interior Ministry displayed, on December 19, confessions of Hashemi’s bodyguards assuring that he personally charged them to execute assassinations and bombings in Baghdad in return of money. Based on these confessions, Higher Judicial Council issued an arrest warrant for Iraqi Vice-President Tarek Al Hashemi by virtue of article 4 of Anti-Terrorism Law.

Tarek Al Hashemi, for his part, blamed Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri Al Maliki for the terrorist charges addressed against him. I am ready to appear before court if my case was transferred to Kurdistan Region.

Hashemi said stressing that he didn’t rebel nor commit sins against Iraqis.

<http://www.alsumaria.tv/en/Iraq-News/1-71983-Iraq-PM-Maliki-warns-Kurdistan-of-allowing-Hashemi-to-escape.html>

## 2. IRAN

### • Iran to hold navel drill around key shipping strait

Friday, 23 December 2011



More than a third of the world's tanker oil passes through the Strait of Hormuz, making it a vital transit point. (File photo)

By AFP

TEHRAN

Iran will launch 10 days of naval drills from Saturday around the Strait of Hormuz, a crucial oil shipping route, media said, after a rumor earlier this month that it planned to close the waterway.

“Our naval drill will begin from Dec. 24 lasting 10 days covering east of Strait of Hormuz and the Gulf of Oman to the Gulf

of Aden,” navy commander Admiral Habibollah Sayari was quoted as saying on Thursday by the Fars news agency.

“This is the first time that we are covering such large area,” he added.

Foreign ministry spokesman Ramin Mehmanparast said on Dec. 14 that closing the strait was “not on the agenda,” after the rumor that appeared to stem from a comment by an Iranian lawmaker.

But Mehmanparast had hinted that the strait, a narrow stretch along Iran's gulf shore line, could be threatened if current rising tensions in the region ever spilled over into war.

When asked Thursday if the strait will be closed as part of the impending naval drill, Sayari said, according to the ISNA news agency: “The ability to do so exists... whether to go ahead lays with the regime's top officials.”

Oil prices spiked dramatically after the rumor, but quickly returned to normal once the rumor was discounted.

More than a third of the world's tanker oil passes through the Strait of Hormuz, making it a vital transit point. The United States maintains a naval presence in the Gulf to ensure it remains open.

Sayari said the “newest Iranian missile torpedo system,” and “coordination between submarines and warships to confront piracy, environmental threats and terrorism,” would be featured in the new drill.

Tehran’s navy is tasked with defending Iranian waters east of the Strait of Hormuz, while the Islamic republic's elite Revolutionary Guards is in charge of Iranian coast in the Gulf.

In recent years, both Iranian vessels and those of other nations have received Iranian naval escorts through the pirate-infested waters off Somalia.

Sayari has previously said that Iran's navy has escorted more than 1,300 ships and faced-off hundreds of armed clashes with pirates.

The United States also has a strong naval presence in the Gulf with the Fifth Fleet based in Bahrain.

State Department spokesman Mark Toner said in Washington: “Iran has, as every maritime nation does, a right to exercise its navy, and we're certainly going to do that with ours.”

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/12/23/184066.html?PHPSESSID=g5sk8usfe34ceur6fokrct2524>

- **Iran, Armenia presidents hold first round of talks**

Yerevan, Dec 23, IRNA – The Islamic Republic of Iran’s President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan on Friday held first round of talks on major topics concerning bilateral, regional, and international issues.



President Ahmadinejad in Yerevan on Friday was officially welcomed by

President Sargsyan at the presidential palace.

President Ahmadinejad’s visit to Armenia takes place upon an invitation by Armenian President Sargsyan and in line with expansion of bilateral ties between two countries.

Supply of oil products to Armenia and construction of railways are among main topics of discussion during President Ahmadinejad’s one-day visit to Yerevan.

Trade stood at dlr 270 million in 2010 between the two countries. The figure rose up to dlr 300 million in 2011.

Over the past 20 years, energy sector has played an important role in Iran-Armenia trade relations.

Relations between Armenia and the Islamic Republic of Iran remain extremely cordial and both Armenia and Iran are strategic partners in the region. Armenia and Iran enjoy cultural and historical ties that go back thousands of years. There are no border dispute between the two countries and the Christian Armenian minority in Iran enjoys official recognition.

In July, 2007, a memorandum was signed on the start of feasibility studies on the ideas of building an Armenian-Iranian railway and a Russian-owned oil refinery that would process Iranian crude.

The Armenian government is building a second, bigger highway leading to the Iranian border in the hope of boosting trade with Iran.

The two countries have reached a preliminary agreement to make joint TV serials. The joint venture would portray the social and cultural life of Iran and Armenia and expand cinematic ties between the two countries.

<http://www.irna.ir/ENNewsShow.aspx?NIID=30727032>

FM condemns abduction of Iranian engineers

Tehran, Dec 22, IRNA – Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi on Thursday condemned the abduction of eight Iranian engineers and technicians in Syria who worked at a power plant in the western Syrian city of Homs.



Eight Iranian engineers and technicians were on their way to the power plant in the city of Homs before they were kidnapped by unknown armed men.

According to Foreign Ministry's Information and Press Bureau, Salehi said that the Islamic Republic of Iran Foreign Ministry and other concerned bodies have called on the Syrian government and the Arab League, as well as international human rights organizations to do their best to secure the release of kidnapped Iranians.

“With the efforts of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Damascus, the employees of Iranian companies have been stationed in safe places,” Foreign Minister Salehi said while expressing regret over the incident.

<http://www.irna.ir/ENNewsShow.aspx?NIID=30726881&SRCH=1>

### 3. ISRAEL - PALESTINE

- **Israel cancels air surveillance deal with Turkey; aerial coordination between Ankara and Tel Aviv reactivated**

Friday, 23 December 2011



Israeli air force is likely to invite Turkey to participate in a large-scale international aerial drill that it will be hosting in Israel in 2013. (Reuters)

By AL ARABIYA WITH AGENCIES  
JERUSALEM

Israel cancelled the sale of air surveillance equipment to Turkey over fears that it might fall into the hands of countries hostile to the Jewish state, the Haaretz daily said on Thursday.

The report said that the contract was signed in 2008 with Elbit Systems and worth some \$140 million (107 million).

Ynetnews, reporting the same story, said both the defense ministry and Elbit had confirmed the cancellation.

Haaretz's website said the decision was made "out of security concerns, principally in consideration of Turkey's ties with enemy states of Israel, particularly Iran."

Meanwhile, The Jerusalem Post reported that the coordination mechanism designed to prevent misunderstandings and potential clashes between Turkish and Israeli military planes over the Mediterranean Sea, is back.

Turkey ended its aerial cooperation with the Israeli military in 2009, in protest against the Israeli offensive in Gaza that killed about 1,4000 Palestinians.

A senior official of the Israeli Air Force, who kept his identity anonymous, told the newspaper, that the coordination mechanism was recently reactivated as part of the two countries' efforts to "stabilize and improve ties."

He said that the Israeli Air Force would also likely invite Turkey to participate in a large-scale international aerial drill that it

will be hosting in Israel in 2013. “There is nothing preventing them from participating,” the official said.

Meanwhile, according to the Turkey-based newspaper, Today’s Zaman, about two weeks ago, the Turkish military attaché to Israel attended an Israeli Air Force briefing for foreign military officers at the Ovda Air Force Base on the sidelines of the Israeli joint maneuvers with the Italian Air Force.

“Ties with Turkey are extremely important to the state [Israeli], but we have a security responsibility over any product that is given approval for export,” an Israeli security official told Haaretz.

Once-flourishing Turkish-Israeli ties plunged into deep crisis last year when Israeli forces killed nine Turks in a raid on a Turkish ferry, part of an activist flotilla carrying aid to Gaza.

#### Flotilla case dropped

Meanwhile, Israel’s attorney general has decided not to prosecute Israelis who participated in a Gaza-bound flotilla that was raided a year ago.

The suspects included an Israeli-Arab lawmaker and an Islamist leader.

A statement released Thursday by Attorney General Yehuda Weinstein’s office said the Israelis were suspected of trying to enter the Gaza Strip, which is barred to Israelis. It said the legal proceedings were stopped because of “the discovery of evidential and legal difficulties,” without giving specifics.

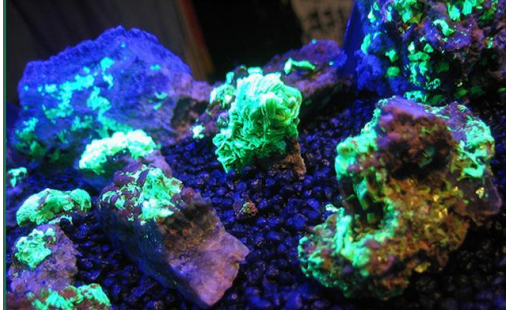
Nine pro-Palestinian Turkish activists were killed when Israeli naval commandos stormed the Gaza-bound ships. The raid prompted an international outcry in which Israel was accused of disproportionate use of force.

Both sides said they acted in self defense.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/12/23/184102.html?PHPSESSID=g5sk8usfe34ceur6fokrct2524>

- **Former head of the Mossad seeks uranium in the Israeli desert for his firm**

Friday, 23 December 2011



Gulliver Energy, chaired by the former Mossad chief Meir Dagan, is allegedly the first Israeli local company to search for uranium. (File Photo)

By AFP

JERUSALEM

An Israeli energy firm run by a former head of the Mossad spy agency is to start prospecting for uranium in the southern Negev desert, the company said on Thursday.

In a note to the Tel Aviv Stock Exchange, Gulliver Energy, chaired by former Mossad chief Meir Dagan, said it had received provisional approval from the water and energy ministry for an exploration license to be issued on payment of the required fee.

"The company has paid the said fee and it is to be expected that the license will be received in the coming days," said the

note, which was published on the stock exchange website.

The ministry's spokeswoman could not be reached for comment.

The Ynet news website said it would be the first search for uranium in Israel by a local company, although Gulliver would use foreign consultants and import technical equipment.

Another news site, Arutz Sheva, said Gulliver had told the ministry "seismic and other tests indicated that there was a 'strong likelihood' that uranium and other materials would be found at the site," around the desert town of Arad.

Israel has two nuclear reactors, one at Dimona, around 16 kilometers (10 miles) from Arad and the other in its nuclear research facility at Nahal Sorek, west of Jerusalem.

The Jewish state is widely believed to have around 200 nuclear warheads, but has a policy of neither confirming nor denying that, a stance which it calls "nuclear ambiguity."

Nahal Sorek is open to international inspection but Dimona is not.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/12/23/184095.html?PHPSESSID=g5sk8usfe34ceur6fokrct2524>

- **Fatah and Hamas leaders debate PLO reform in Cairo**

By AL ARABIYA WITH AGENCIES

The rival Palestinian factions Fatah and Hamas took an important step toward reconciliation on Thursday, announcing plans for the Islamic group to join the umbrella group that has overseen two decades of on-and-off peace talks with Israel.

The deal to admit Hamas into the Fatah-dominated Palestine Liberation Organization could have deep repercussions. Hamas has opposed the peace talks and rejects Israel's right to exist. A strong Hamas voice in the group would further complicate the already troubled Mideast diplomatic process.

Israeli officials reacted with alarm to the emerging agreement.

Hamas overran Gaza in 2007, and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, who is also the head of Fatah, has ruled only the West Bank since then. The division has been an obstacle in peacemaking efforts with Israel, since Abbas does not speak for all the Palestinians.

A full reconciliation could solve that -- or it could put Hamas in charge. The Islamist group won a parliamentary election in 2006, and a short-lived government Hamas formed with Fatah was shunned by Israel and the West, freezing peace efforts.

Under the agreement, Hamas' supreme leader, Khaled Mashaal, joined a committee that will prepare for elections of the PLO's parliament in exile. He will serve alongside Abbas.

"The reconciliation has taken off. It might take time, but we have started," said Azzam al-Ahmed, a top Fatah negotiator, after the talks in Cairo, according to The Associated Press.

Independent MP Mustafa Barghouti said the participation of unaffiliated delegates

such as himself and businessman Munib al-Masri alongside representatives of Hamas and Islamic Jihad was “a historic event.”

“It is the first time there is a unified leadership for all political and intellectual streams,” he told AFP.

The talks were focused on “national strategy and policy, and the program of resistance” as well as reforming the PLO, he said.

The election would clear the way for Hamas to become a full member of the body and gain an important voice in its decision making.

Any PLO election is likely years away because of logistics alone. The PLO represents all Palestinians, so the vote would have to include people spread throughout the world, including residents of refugee camps in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. In addition, political battles are likely to hinder the process.

In a separate step toward reconciliation, the sides have tentatively agreed to hold separate elections next year in the West

Bank and Gaza. That vote is meant to end the division and choose a single government for both territories, where Abbas hopes to establish an independent state.

On Thursday, Abbas issued a presidential decree naming a committee to oversee preparations for the local elections. Huge obstacles remain, most critically how to unify rival security forces that just a few years ago were battling each other.

Jibril Rajoub, a Fatah official and former West Bank security chief, said he was confident.

“There are difficulties ahead, but the train has left the station and no one can stop it,” he said.

Israel objects to any Palestinian government that includes Hamas, a group that is committed to Israel’s destruction and has killed hundreds of Israelis in suicide bombings, rocket strikes and other attacks.

Hamas has sent some signals that it might be willing to reach some sort of accommodation with Israel. The group has

largely adhered to a cease-fire with Israel since a brief war three years ago, and Mashaal has said he would not stand in the way if Abbas decides to resume negotiations with Israel. It also has indicated willingness to accept a state in the West Bank and Gaza as a first step toward replacing Israel with an Islamic entity.

Israeli government spokesman Mark Regev rejected any suggestions that Hamas is becoming more moderate. He noted that the group reiterated its calls for Israel's destruction at its anniversary celebrations early this month.

"No one in the international community should have illusions as to Hamas," Regev said. "This is a movement that is terrorist to the core. When Abu Mazen walks toward Hamas, he's walking away from peace," he said, using Abbas' widely known nickname.

Both Hamas and Fatah officials said the long-stalled reconciliation efforts got a boost from the Arab Spring protests that have shaken up the Middle East.

Hamas is feeling emboldened by the strong showing by Islamic parties in elections in Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt. "The Arab awakening is shaping the entire region," said Mohammed Nasr, a senior Hamas official.

At the same time, Hamas also may feel under pressure as it watches its key allies in the region, Syria and Iran, run into trouble internationally. Syrian President Bashar Assad has been battling a domestic uprising for months, while Iran faces sanctions and isolation because of its nuclear program.

A Hamas official confirmed to AP that relations with Syria are "cool," and his group is debating whether to move its headquarters out of the Syrian capital Damascus.

The official, speaking on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the matter, said dozens of Hamas officials already have left Syria in recent weeks due to security concerns and moved to Lebanon, Gaza, Yemen and Jordan.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/12/22/184037.html?PHPSESSID=g5sk8usfe34ceur6fokrct2524>

- **Report: Israeli company sold surveillance equipment to Iran**

According to a report by Bloomberg, Allot Communications Ltd. sent Internet-monitoring products to Denmark, where they were repackaged and sold to a distributor in Iran.

By Haaretz

An Israeli company has been selling Iran Internet-monitoring equipment through a distributor in Denmark, Bloomberg news agency reported on Friday. The report cites Israeli and Danish business partners of an Iranian man named Hossein, to whom the equipment was sent.

According to the report, the company, Allot Communications Ltd, sent the surveillance equipment to a Danish distributor, RanTek A/S, which repackaged the gear and shipped it to Iran. Trade with Iran is prohibited under Israeli law.



A mother watches her daughter, who is in class at Pishtaz School, from home via the internet, in Tehran October 19, 2011.

Photo by: Reuters

The report claims three former employees for Allot said it was well known inside the company that the equipment was headed for Iran. Officials at Allot told Bloomberg they have no knowledge of products sent to Iran.

NetEnforcer, the product sold to Iran conducts "deep packet inspection" of Internet networks, and has commercial uses such as optimizing traffic. Yet the software can be used to intercept personal emails and other private data, or to prevent people from using the Web. According to the report, "deep packet inspection" technology was used in Tunisia to arrest dissidents.

Bloomberg quotes Jay Kalish, executive director of investor relations at Allot, as

saying that "we do not authorize any sales to Iran." He said that if products were sent to Iran that would constitute a breach of contract.

The Danish company RanTek did not respond to Bloomberg's requests for comments.

<http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/report-israeli-company-sold-surveillance-equipment-to-iran-1.403107>

#### 4. AFRICA and EGYPT

- **U.N. urges Libya to sell off cache of 'yellowcake' uranium**



Yellowcake uranium, which is not highly radioactive, cannot be used for nuclear weapons unless processed and purified.

(File photo)

By REUTERS

UNITED NATIONS

U.N. experts are urging Libya to get rid of a large cache of "yellowcake" uranium because the warehouse where it is being

kept is neither safe nor secure enough for long-term storage, the U.N. envoy to Libya said Thursday.

Inspectors from the Vienna-based International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) completed an inspection of the Tajura nuclear facility in Tripoli and a warehouse in Sabha that stores yellowcake, a concentrated uranium powder, on Dec. 9, U.N. special envoy to Libya Ian Martin told the Security Council.

"In an initial debriefing the IAEA conveyed its overall conclusion that none of the previously reported nuclear materials in either facility had gone missing," Martin told the 15-nation council via video-link from Tripoli.

Former Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi had a clandestine nuclear weapons program, which he abandoned in December 2003. IAEA and U.S. experts verified at the time that the program was fully dismantled.

While there appears to be no immediate health or radiation risk posed by the uranium, Martin said, the IAEA is encouraging Libya to sell and transfer the

6,400 barrels of yellowcake out of the country because the barrels are deteriorating and the site is not secure enough.

“The present safety and security measures at the facility are not deemed sufficient longer-term,” Martin said. “There appears, however, to be no risk of proliferation given the weight and state of the barrels.”

Yellowcake uranium, which is not highly radioactive, cannot be used for nuclear weapons unless processed and purified.

Martin also confirmed a U.S. finding from last month that Libya’s missing stocks of shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles – “man portable air defense systems” or MANPADS - appear to be still in the country.

“While the focus of international concern continues to be the potential proliferation of MANPADs, as yet there seems to be little evidence of such weapons systems appearing in neighboring countries,” he said.

“Visits at weapon storage sites and brigades throughout Libya suggest that

most looted arms may be held by revolutionary brigades or local militias within a limited distance from the looted sites, thereby rendering it primarily a national Libyan arms control and disarmament concern,” Martin said.

He added that the U.N. Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) had agreed with Libya's Defence Ministry to set up a task force on MANPADS to “facilitate a country-wide mapping of weapons and storage sites and to coordinate the identification, collection and disabling efforts.”

The U.N. mission is also working to register MANPADS held by revolutionary brigades, Martin said.

Separately, the United States is working with Libya's Defense Ministry to create an inventory and destroy superfluous conventional weapons around in Libya, he said.

In the chaotic fighting to end Qaddafi’s rule, local militias trying to overthrow him raided arms depots and took the weapons for themselves.

The militias are largely loyal to the Western-backed government now in power, but there are questions over how securely they are storing the weapons.

Security experts have said that MANPADS could be acquired by militants or smugglers and taken across Libya's porous southern borders into neighboring Algeria, Mali, Mauritania and Niger.

Martin also said that the Netherlands-based Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) was making progress in accounting for chemical weapons and materials found at two previously undeclared sites in Libya.

He said that Libya's government submitted to the OPCW in late November a detailed declaration of the materials, which were transferred to the officially declared storage site. The OPCW plans to return in mid-January to work with the government on safe storage for the materials.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/12/22/184055.html?PHPSESSID=g5sk8usfe34ceur6fokrct2524>

- **Darfur rebels march towards Khartoum, say 'main fight with government has started'**



In 2008 more than 222 people were killed when JEM guerrillas drove about 1,000 kilometers across the desert to Omdurman, just over the River Nile from the presidential palace on the Khartoum side. (File photo)

By AFP

KHARTOUM

Rebels from Sudan's Darfur region have begun moving towards the capital Khartoum, their spokesman said Thursday, more than three years after they made an unprecedented attack on the capital.

"Now our troops are moving from Darfur in an easterly direction towards the capital Khartoum," Gibril Adam Bilal, of the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), told AFP from London.

"Our main fight with this government has already started."

Sudan's army spokesman could not be immediately reached for comment.

Bilal said JEM had reached En Nahud, about 120 kilometers (75 miles) east of Darfur in North Kordofan state, on a mission to change the regime led by President Omar al-Bashir.

In 2008 more than 222 people were killed when JEM guerrillas drove about 1,000 kilometers across the desert to Omdurman, just over the River Nile from the presidential palace on the Khartoum side.

Government troops repulsed them after heavy clashes and later sentenced dozens of rebels to death for their role in the assault.

"We are calling for all the political and military movements who are struggling against this government to work together to change this regime," Bilal said.

In July the government signed the Doha Document for Peace in Darfur with the Liberation and Justice Movement, an alliance of rebel splinter factions.

Darfur's main armed groups, JEM and factions of the Sudan Liberation Army headed by Minni Minnawi and Abdelwahid Nur, did not sign the deal.

Instead, last month they, along with the SPLM-North rebel group, ratified documents forming the new Sudanese Revolutionary Front dedicated to "popular uprising and armed rebellion" against the National Congress Party regime in Khartoum.

On Sunday the head of the joint African Union-United Nations Mission to Darfur, Ibrahim Gambari, told AFP the new rebel alliance means the door is closing for more groups to join Darfur's peace process.

According to the U.N. at least 300,000 people have been killed in Darfur since 2003 when fighting broke out between non-Arab rebels and the Arab-dominated Khartoum regime.

The government puts the death toll at 10,000.

U.N. officials say 1.9 million people are internally displaced and still living in camps in Darfur, with about 80,000 newly displaced by fighting this year.

JEM has previously carried out a number of high-profile attacks in Sudan, including raids on Chinese-run oil fields.

Six people including President Bashir are being sought or are before the Hague-based International Criminal Court (ICC) for crimes allegedly committed in the Darfur region.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/12/22/184041.html?PHPSESSID=g5sk8usfe34ceur6fokrct2524>

- **Islamists take Tunisia's foreign and justice top jobs**



Tunisian Prime Minister-designate Hamadi Jbeli delivers a speech in the constituent assembly to present his government in Tunis. (Reuters)

By REUTERS

TUNIS

Tunisia's Prime Minister-designate Hamadi Jbeli on Thursday named a fellow member of his moderate Ennahda Islamist party as foreign minister and made a non-partisan economist, a university professor, finance minister.

Addressing a Constituent Assembly elected in October polls won by Ennahda, Jbeli said he named Rafik Abdesslem as foreign affairs minister and Hussein Dimassi as finance minister.

"Tunisia has to be built by everyone, whether they are in the (coalition) government or the opposition, women or men," said Jbeli, promising 25,000 public sector jobs and closer ties with Libya, Gulf Arab and European countries.

"Our priority is to pay moral and material tribute to the families of the martyrs and the wounded of the revolution," he added. He said corruption would not be tolerated.

The new foreign minister is married to one of the daughters of Ennahda's leader, Rachid Ghannouchi.

Two other members of Ennahda, Ali Laarayedh and Nouredine Bhiri were appointed to the interior and the justice ministries respectively. Laarayedh is a former political prisoner.

Tunisia electrified the Arab world when it overthrew its autocratic leader in January, but since then the caretaker authorities have been buffeted by social unrest, political turmoil and rows over the role of Islam in the political system.

Jbeli named an independent, Nouredine Khadmi, to be in charge of the sensitive religious affairs ministry.

Ennahda won the biggest number of seats in the October election for an assembly to choose a new caretaker government, rewrite the constitution and schedule fresh elections. It was forced to form a coalition with the smaller, secularist parties, Ettakatol and the Congress for the Republic (CPR).

Women accounted for two of the 30-member cabinet: Sihem Badi from CPR was named minister for the woman and independent Mamia Elbanna took the environment ministry.

Finance Minister Dimassi is a 63-year-old economics PhD holder: He was critical of ousted president Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali's policies and an advocate of structural reforms for greater openness and transparency in financial transactions.

It was businessman Khayam Turki, of the left-wing Ettaktol party that is part of the Ennahda-led coalition government, who was initially lined up for Dimassi's role.

In remarks carried by the official TAP news agency, Turki said he conceded the job after UAE-based National Holding raised mismanagement allegations against him relating to the time he held an executive position in the company. Turki denied any wrongdoing at the company he resigned from in 2008, TAP reported.

Fellow members of his party were nominated as education and social affairs ministers. An Ennahda member was

appointed as minister for higher education.

Ennahda's Samir Dilou was appointed in the newly-created role of minister for human rights and will also be the government spokesman.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/12/22/184040.html?PHPSESSID=g5sk8usfe34ceur6fokrct2524>

- **Egypt's activists call for mass rally; Islamists want to stick to army vote timetable**



Protesters pray during a march in Tahrir Square in Cairo. (Reuters)

By AL ARABIYA WITH AGENCIES

The Muslim Brotherhood, whose party is leading Egypt's staggered parliamentary election, came out on Thursday against bringing forward a presidential vote to end military rule, saying changing the timetable would wreak chaos.

Protesters who fought soldiers and police in central Cairo for five days before calm was restored this week want the ruling military council to cede power more swiftly.

Cairo clashes have left 17 people dead, the health ministry said Thursday, according to AFP.

The toll rose Thursday after two people died from their injuries, health ministry official Hisham Shiha told state television.

Shiha said the 46 people were still being treated in ministry hospitals and an undetermined additional number in military facilities.

The clashes broke out on Dec. 16 between security forces and demonstrators camped since late November in Cairo's administrative heart.

The activists were protesting against the nomination to prime minister of Kamal al-Ganzouri, who previously held the post under the Hosni Mubarak's toppled regime.

Activists have called for a mass rally on Friday, dubbed the “Friday of Restoring Honor,” to demand the military hold accountable soldiers responsible for abuses committed during the clashes, which have sparked international outcry.

#### Voting run-offs

Voters went to the polls again on Thursday in run-offs for the second stage of staggered parliamentary elections, a landmark vote that has been overshadowed by the protest deaths.

Many Egyptians, suspicious of the military’s stated commitment to democratic change, would like a presidential vote by Jan. 25, the first anniversary of the start of the uprising that ousted Hosni Mubarak. The vote is now planned for mid-2012.

The once banned Brotherhood, keen to seal its place in mainstream Egyptian politics via the six-week parliamentary vote after generations of state repression, kept a low profile during the latest clashes in Tahrir Square.

Essam al-Erian, deputy head of the Brotherhood’s Freedom and Justice Party

(FJP), which had the most candidates fielded in second-round runoff votes on Thursday, said his group backed the army timetable to hand power to an elected president by July.

“I think that is better than arranging it as soon as possible because this may create chaos,” he told Reuters.

He said holding a presidential vote before both houses of parliament were elected and able to draw up a new constitution risked handing too much power to a new president. “We are not going to create a new Mubarak,” he said.

Elections to both houses will not be completed until March.

But the liberal Egyptian Bloc, pushed into third place by the FJP and an ultraconservative Salafi Islamist group in the parliamentary vote so far, demanded a swift presidential vote.

“We believe the military should hand over power in no more than three months,” the liberal alliance said in a statement.

Protesters, who have stayed out in Tahrir since Nov. 18 despite several charges by police to clear the square, are angry at the army's fierce treatment of demonstrators and believe the military high command is trying to cling to power.

Many activists accuse the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists of betraying the protesters' demands by focusing on securing their own positions in the new power structure.

But analysts say an earlier presidential election would not necessarily eliminate the military's predominance in a new civilian-governed state, because all the viable candidates would likely have to have good relations with the generals.

#### Preventing further breakdown

The army is virtually the only institution that has survived Egypt's political upheaval intact and has vast economic and other interests, so any new president would need the military's nod to maintain order and prevent further breakdown.

"This is a transitional period where one party hands power to another. A deal

must be struck. This is politics," a source close to the military said.

Presidential contenders include Amr Moussa, a former foreign minister and ex-head of the Arab League. He, like some rivals, has joined a consultative council to advise the army, although the body suspended its activities in protest over the violence.

The violence of past days, and an earlier flare-up in November when 42 people were killed, shocked many Egyptians, although many still say only the army can restore order and want the nation to focus on the parliamentary vote, not protests.

"We had a revolution so we could make progress and fair election was a main goal so right now this is more important than anything," Mahmoud Sadek, 21, said in downtown Cairo, a few streets away from the hundreds of protesters still in Tahrir.

Army-backed Prime Minister Ganzouri, appointed in November under pressure from protests to sack the previous government, outlined the challenges and appealed for unity at a news conference. His cabinet was appointed this month.

He said that the economy had lost billions of dollars from the turmoil but received only \$1 billion from Arab states, while world powers had not followed through on aid pledges. He said differences among Egyptians were to blame.

“In the first months (after the uprising), everyone raced to help Egypt, but when we disagreed among each other in the past few months, they turned their backs on us,” he said.

#### Cairo clashes

The clashes in Cairo have driven a wedge between those determined to stay on the streets and other Egyptians desperate for a return to order to shore up the economy and entice back foreign tourists.

But many have been shocked by images of police and soldiers hitting protesters with batons even after they fell to the ground and, in one case, kicking, beating and dragging a woman by her black robe, exposing her bra, and then kicking her.

“I do not blame anyone nor do I defend anyone, I hope that everyone seeks to remove the appearance of violence. How

can the state of Egypt, at the center of its capital, have these depressing events?” Ganzouri said.

“Is it not necessary for us to decide as a people that this must be eliminated, so the tourist may come back, so the joy of the Egyptian people may come back?”

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton this week responded with some of the strongest U.S. criticism of Egypt’s new rulers, citing cases of women protesters being sexually assaulted.

The United States, for which Egypt under Mubarak was a crucial ally, gives Cairo \$1.3 billion a year in military aid.

Foreign Minister Mohamed Kamel Amr said on Wednesday that Egypt would not accept meddling in its affairs, and did not take comments such as Clinton’s lightly. Ganzouri condemned all forms of violence, particularly any directed at women.

Egypt’s economy continues to take a beating. The credit rating agency Moody’s downgraded Egypt’s debt on Wednesday and said it might knock it down another

notch because political uncertainty was undermining investor confidence.

A large number of the individual - rather than party list - seats up for grabs in the run-offs were being contested between Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi candidates.

Run-offs are held after each of the three rounds of the vote where no candidate received more than 50 percent to win outright. Egypt's system involves allocating two-thirds of seats of party lists with the rest going to individuals.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/12/22/184038.html?PHPSESSID=g5sk8usfe34ceur6fokrct2524>

- **Tunisia's post-revolution cabinet unveiled**

Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali announces his new cabinet lineup, with key posts going to Islamist Ennahdha party.



Hamadi Jebali [left] has taken over from interim prime minister Beji Caid Essebsi following the October election [AFP]

Tunisia's Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali has announced his new cabinet lineup, with key ministerial posts allotted to his dominant Islamist Ennahdha party.

The list of 41 cabinet members was announced on Thursday, two months after Tunisia's first free elections on October 23, which chose an assembly tasked with writing a new constitution following the ousting of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in January.

The constituent assembly is to meet on Friday to approve the premier's list of appointees, the subject of weeks of negotiations between the moderate Islamist Ennahdha and its two left-leaning allies.

The selection of a new government is a major milestone in Tunisia, following the country's protests against Ben Ali that began in December 2010.

The demonstrations triggered what would become the Arab Spring, a series of

uprisings across the Arab world against authoritarian regimes.

Ben Ali ultimately fled to Saudi Arabia, but Tunisia has charged him in absentia with many crimes including murder.

In Tunisia's first free elections, Ennahdha won the largest bloc of seats, gaining 89 out of 217 available, and Jebali, the party's number two, was designated premier earlier this month.

Moncef Marzouki of the Congress for the Republic (CPR) became president and the Ettakatol party's Mustapha Ben Jaafar was chosen as speaker of the assembly.

The north African nation is in the midst of a major economic crisis, with observers saying it's vital for the new government to get up and running as soon as possible.

From outside the main parties, Hassine Dimassi, an independent economist and university professor, was named as finance minister.

Faced with economic and political uncertainty, some foreign investors have already quit. Japanese group Yazaki, a

major maker of automobile electrical cables, on Tuesday shut one of its Tunisia factories following a strike.

The new government, however, may now be able to persuade companies that the business environment is improving.

"The Ennahdha Islamists are theoretically in a good place to convince investors and operators, both foreign and Tunisian," French-language daily newspaper La Presse said in a Thursday editorial.

Ali Larayedh, a former political prisoner and Ennahdha party senior official was picked for interior minister.

Nourredine Bhiri, currently the party spokesperson, was appointed justice minister and Rafik Ben Abdesslem, son-in-law of Ennahdha leader Rached Ghannouchi, was named to head the foreign ministry.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2011/12/20111222171424323622.html>

- **High elections commission predicts run-off results on Saturday**

Egypt Independent

Al-Masry Al-Youm Staff

A senior official at Egypt's High Judicial Elections Commission (HJEC) said on Thursday that the results of run-offs from the second phase of parliamentary elections will probably be announced on Saturday.

Yousry Abdel Karim, the head of the HJEC's technical office, told Al-Masry Al-Youm that the commission has not yet decided on a firm date for making the announcement, but that Saturday looks likely.

"We are eyeing Saturday, but that's not the final date," he said. "We are waiting for the results of expatriate votes. We do not also want to rush the provinces to declare their polling results," he said.

Abdel Karim said no voting related complaints had been received on Thursday, the second day of run-offs.

However, a report by the One World Foundation, an Egyptian human rights organization, detected incidents of collective voting and exposed ballot boxes in Aswan.

The report — citing several polling stations in Giza, Beni Suef, Aswan, and Ismailia — also highlighted the absence of voter lists guiding citizens to their polling stations.

Eyewitnesses told Al-Masry Al-Youm that a number of female members of the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) in Monufiya Governorate clashed with rivals from the Nour Party, the leading Salafi political party in Egypt.

They added that FJP women prevented their Nour Party rivals from directing female voters to vote for their candidates. Both parties traded accusations of improperly influencing female voters, especially the illiterate.

<http://www.almasryalyoum.com/en/node/563776>

## 5. JORDAN and LEBANON

- **Hezbollah denies drugs and money laundering claims**



Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah greets his supporters during a Muharram procession to mark Ashura in Beirut. (Reuters)

By AFP  
BEIRUT

Lebanese group Hezbollah on Thursday denied charges by the United States that the Shiite militant movement was involved in drug trafficking and money laundering schemes to fund its activities.

“The United States’ allegations that Hezbollah is funding its activities illegitimately is merely another attempt to tarnish the image of the resistance in Lebanon ... after the failure and exposure of U.S. intelligence operations in our country,” said a statement from the Iranian- and Syrian-backed group, which is

blacklisted as a terrorist group by Washington.

“Hezbollah categorically denies the false charges of its direct or indirect involvement in money laundering, drug trafficking or illegal banking operations.”

A cold war has been heating up for months between Washington and Hezbollah, with the Shiite group denouncing the planting of “spies” in its ranks and the United States accusing the movement of illegal financial and drug dealings.

Earlier this month, U.S. prosecutors charged that Hezbollah was part of a massive web funneling hundreds of millions of dollars in criminal proceeds through the United States to West Africa.

A criminal complaint in a New York federal court targeted the Lebanese Canadian Bank and two Lebanon-based foreign exchange houses, the Hassan Ayash Exchange Co and Ellissa Holding, in the alleged scheme to launder profits from narcotics dealing and other criminal activities.

U.S. authorities also announced the indictment of alleged international drug dealer Ayman Joumaa, who is reportedly tied to the Hassan Ayash and Ellissa companies.

Joumaa is accused of using the money laundering scheme for funds made in importing cocaine from Mexico to the United States and is suspected of having links to Hezbollah and the powerful Zeta Mexican drug cartel.

In June, Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah revealed that members of his group had confessed to being CIA agents and slammed the US embassy in Lebanon as a “den of spies.”

The embassy has dismissed the accusations as “empty.”

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/12/22/184043.html?PHPSESSID=g5sk8usfe34ceur6fokrct2524>

- **Lebanon's Arabic press digest - Dec. 23, 2011**

December 23, 2011 10:04 AM

The Daily Star

Following are summaries of some of the main stories in a selection of Lebanese

newspapers Friday. The Daily Star cannot vouch for the accuracy of these reports.

As-Safir

Jumblatt displeased with way Cabinet handled pay hike ... Nahhas wants decree to be published

Salary decision to Shura Council: Will third time be a charm?

The ball once again is in the court of the Shura Council, which will put its recommendations on a [controversial] Cabinet pay hike decision in order to determine what the next steps would be. Perhaps the third time is a charm!

Ministerial sources said the Shura Council recommendations were likely to be announced ahead of a Cabinet meeting scheduled for Wednesday.

But the sources said the Shura Council was likely not to approve Cabinet’s decision and possibly suggest key modifications, particularly since the new agreement includes transportation and school allowances.

While Prime Minister Najib Mikati was displeased with the Cabinet decision,

guests who visited Progressive Socialist Party leader Walid Jumblatt said the Druze leader conveyed his dissatisfaction with the way the salary issue had been handled in Cabinet and expressed solidarity with Mikati.

Al-Joumhouria

Feltman's message to Lebanese: Get ready for a peaceful transition in Syria

An advance team from the Arab League arrived in Syria Thursday ahead of the deployment of monitors to judge whether Damascus is implementing a peace plan signed last month.

Meanwhile, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Jeffrey Feltman expressed regret over the photos coming from Syria and said these pictures contradicted Syria's public commitments made under the Arab League plan.

Feltman said it was time for Assad to step down and allow a peaceful and democratic transition of power in Syria.

The U.S. officials said that when he recently visited the region he heard from Lebanese officials a position that isolates Lebanon and distances it from the

repercussions of what is happening in the region.

Feltman said the Lebanese needed to think strategically and coexist with a Syria different from the previous Syria, which had caused many problems for Lebanon.

An-Nahar

Pay-hike decision faces collapse

Sleiman from the south: Rocket attackers don't care about resistance and steadfastness

Amid wide-ranging speculation that a recently adopted pay hike decision in Cabinet will not get the approval of the Shura Council when it receives it Friday from Labor Minister Charbel Nahhas, the prominent question today is: How will Cabinet overcome this new mess? Some observers believe the current muddle is equal to the crisis over funding for the Special Tribunal for Lebanon and the row over the electricity draft law.

Nahhas, whose pay-hike proposal won the majority of votes in Cabinet Wednesday, will send the amended salary draft law to the Shura Council Friday.

Nahas told An-Nahar that he was putting all his energy toward issuing the decree in the official Gazette Thursday.

In contrast, Economy Minister Nicolas Nahhas from Prime Minister Najib Mikati's ministerial team said he expects things to go back to "square one" if the Shura Council rejected the Cabinet's decision.

Meanwhile, Mikati left Beirut for Switzerland on a vacation that will last until Monday evening in time for a Cabinet meeting scheduled for Wednesday.

Al-Anwar

Abboud rebels against Cabinet [pay hike] decision: we have taken irrational step

Business associations lashed out Thursday at Cabinet's wage increase decision that would deal a strong blow to businesses, while others acknowledged that the Cabinet did not respect the consensus achieved between employers and workers.

They held an emergency meeting Thursday and issued a statement rejecting the increase, calling on the government to revoke its decision.

At the ministerial level, Labor Minister Charbel Nahhas described the decision as a "great achievement for the government."

However, Tourism Minister Fadi Abboud rebelled against the Cabinet agreement, saying: "I voted in favor of the plan politically, but I'm not convinced of Charbel Nahhas' proposal."

"I expressed rejection of the [Cabinet] decision during a meeting of the Change and Reform bloc and I said this would lead [Lebanon] into economic stress and unemployment," Abboud said.

<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Politics/2011/Dec-23/157736-lebanons-arabic-press-digest---dec-23-2011.ashx#axzz1hLUDY1eG>

## 6. SYRIA

- **Syria says 2,000 troops killed; Arab team arrives in Damascus ahead of monitors**

By AL ARABIYA WITH AGENCIES

Syria said on Thursday more than 2,000 members of its army and security forces

had been killed in armed attacks since the uprising against President Bashar al-Assad erupted in March.

It gave the figure in a letter to the United Nations which was published by the state news agency SANA as an advance team from the Arab League arrived in Syria on Thursday to prepare for the deployment of monitors who will assess whether Damascus is implementing a plan to end a nine-month crackdown on protests, a member of the team told Reuters.

“We arrived in Damascus safely,” Waguih Hanafy, a senior aide to Arab League chief Nabil al-Araby, said by telephone from the Syrian capital. Al-Araby has said the monitors could be sent before the end of December.

There was no let-up on Thursday with human rights activists reporting at least 40 more people killed and clashes between defectors and regular troops in flash points Homs and Idlib, Al Arabiya reported.

Sudanese General Mohammed Ahmed Mustafa al-Dabi also headed to the League headquarters in Cairo to be briefed on his

role in leading the 150-strong observer team that could be sent to Syria before the end of December, provided preparations go smoothly.

Syria agreed in November to an Arab plan demanding an end to fighting, the withdrawal of troops from residential areas, the release of prisoners and the start of a dialogue with the opposition. It balked for six weeks over letting in monitors.

In that time, the League imposed economic sanctions and threatened to escalate the matter to the U.N. Security Council, while the death toll has soared as Syria has turned its troops and tanks against demonstrators.

It finally signed a protocol on monitors on Monday.

Dabi, who coordinated between Sudan’s government and international peacekeepers there, told reporters at Cairo airport he would meet League Secretary-General Nabil al-Araby to follow up on arrangements for the observer mission.

He said observers would work “with complete transparency to observe the situation in Syria,” adding it would hold continuous meetings in the field with all factions, including the Syrian army, opposition, security forces and humanitarian groups.

Al-Araby told Reuters on Tuesday that 150-strong observers would demand free access to hospitals, prisons and other sites across the country.

He also said the team would issue daily reports that would be shown to but not vetted by the Syrian authorities. Al-Araby said the monitors could be in Syria before the end of December.

The advance team making preparations for the mission is led by top League official Samir Seif al-Yazal and comprises 11 people, including financial, administrative and legal experts, officials said, according to Reuters.

“During our visit to Syria, we will work on some necessary arrangements to receive the mission on the ground, such as accommodation, transport,

communications and security,” Yazal said shortly before he flew out of Cairo.

Al-Araby said monitors would need no more than a week from arrival to see whether Syria was abiding by the peace plan. He said 10 four-wheel drive vehicles were being sent from Iraq to Syria to help out the observers.

Opposition leaders have charged that Syria’s agreement to the observer mission on Monday was a mere “ploy” to head off a threat by the Arab League to go the U.N. Security Council.

The opposition Syrian National Council charged on Wednesday that regime forces had killed 250 people in 48 hours in the run-up to the advance team’s arrival, according to AFP.

Pro-democracy activists called on Facebook for nationwide protests on Friday against the observer mission, with the slogan “Protocol of death, a license to kill.”

Foreign ministry spokesman Jihad Makdisi said it was “honest and important” that the text of the protocol referred to

violence on all sides as well as armed groups, “because it takes into account armed gangs.”

Foreign Minister Walid Muallem has said he expects the observers to vindicate Damascus’ claims that the unrest has been caused by “armed terrorist groups,” not peaceful protesters as maintained by Western governments and human rights watchdogs.

The United Nations estimates that more than 5,000 people have been killed in the regime’s crackdown since mid-March.

Sarah Leah Whitson, Middle East director at Human Rights Watch, said the Arab League needs to show that its observers are “independent and able to work effectively” to dispel “well-founded fears of yet another Syrian stalling tactic.”

Muallem has said the observers will be able to access so-called “hot zones” but not sensitive military sites. Human Rights Watch called on Damascus to grant full access.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/12/22/184025.html?PHPSESSID=g5sk8usfe34ceur6fokrct2524>

- **Syrians to rally against Arab League mission**

Activists plan protest against an observer mission they say will stall tougher action against Assad's government.



Even after the Arab delegations' arrival, activists reported more violence across the country [Reuters]

Activists have called for fresh protests across Syria against an Arab League observer mission they say will stall tougher action against the government over its opposition crackdown.

An Arab League advance team arrived in Syria on Thursday to oversee a plan to end nine months of bloodshed as the opposition accused government forces of "massacring" hundreds in two days.

But using the slogan "Protocol of death, a licence to kill", activists called on

Facebook for nationwide protests against the mission after midday prayers on Friday.

'Ploy'

Opposition leaders have charged that Syria's agreement to the mission was a mere "ploy" to head off a threat by the Arab League to go to the UN Security Council.

"We call on the Arab League to refer the matter of the crisis in Syria to the UN Security Council," Omar Edelbi, a spokesman for the Local Co-ordination Committees activist network, said.

He called the observer mission "another attempt by the regime to bypass the Arab initiative and empty it of its contents".

Even as the advance team arrived there was no let-up in the killing, with activists reporting at least 21 more people dead, and clashes between defectors and troops in the flashpoint cities of Homs and Idlib.

The observer mission is part of an Arab plan endorsed by Syria on November 2 that also calls for the withdrawal of the military from towns and residential

districts, a halt to the violence and the release of detainees.

The advance team consists of a dozen security, legal and administrative staff from the Arab League's secretariat who will make the logistical preparations for the arrival on Sunday.

Between 30 to 50 officials were expected to be part of the first mission, which is headed by Samir Saif al-Yazal, one of the Arab League's assistant secretary-generals.

Once all the officials arrive, they will indicate cities they will be visiting in accordance with the peace plan.

Nabil el-Araby, the Arab League chief, has stated that protecting members of this mission is the Syrian government's responsibility.

'Hot zones'

The Arab League mission's leader, veteran Sudanese military intelligence officer General Mohammed Ahmed Mustafa al-Dabi, said its numbers would swell to a total of between 150 and 200 in the following days.

Their task will be to monitor the "cessation of violence on all sides, and to ensure the release of detainees arrested in connection with the current crisis," according to the text of the protocol.

The Enough Project, a non-governmental organisation, on Thursday condemned the fact that the mission is headed by a general it said was in charge of the Sudanese intelligence agency when "genocide" was committed in Darfur.

Walid Muallem, Syria's foreign minister, has said he expects the observers to vindicate Damascus's claims that the unrest has been caused by "armed terrorist groups", not peaceful protesters as maintained by Western governments and human rights watchdogs.

Muallem has said the observers will be able to access so-called "hot zones" but not sensitive military sites. Human Rights Watch called on Damascus to grant full access.

Violence continues

In the run-up to the advance team's arrival, however, the Syrian National

Council, Syria's main opposition bloc, said on Wednesday that government forces had killed 250 people in 48 hours.

A day later, Syria's state news agency said on Thursday that more than 2,000 members of the security forces had been killed since anti-government protests erupted in March.

The UN, however, estimates that more than 5,000 people have been killed in the government's crackdown since mid-March.

As violence continued across the country, the UN Security Council remained deadlocked over a resolution to condemn the violence in Syria.

In New York, France said "significant progress" had been made at a UN Security Council meeting on Syria.

There were tensions at the meeting, however, with Russia renewing demands for an inquiry into NATO air strikes in Libya in a move US ambassador Susan Rice called "a cheap stunt" to divert attention from the Syria crisis.

Russia and China have already vetoed one resolution proposed by European countries condemning Syria.

Russia, which accuses the West of seeking "regime change" in Syria, last week proposed a new text, which the European countries say is not tough enough on Bashar al-Assad, the Syrian president.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/12/2011122353147515588.html>

- **President al-Assad Meets Delegation of Clans' Leaders...Clans are National Sample of Traditions and Principled Stances**

DAMASCUS,(SANA)- President Bashar al-Assad on Thursday reviewed with a delegation of clans' leaders in Deir Ezzour, Raqqa and Hasaka the developments witnessed in the Syrian arena and the campaign launched against the country with the aim of undermining its security and stability.



Clans' leaders expressed confidence in the Syrian people's ability to overcome what Syria is facing of plots, affirming support to the current reforms under the leadership of President al-Assad.

They stressed that the solution can only be Syrian through uniting the ranks and going forwards in the reforms.

For his part, President al-Assad expressed great appreciation of the efforts exerted by the clan's leaders for maintaining the security and stability and for contributing to building the homeland.

The President hailed the national role played by the Syrian clans in different crucial stages which the country has passed through, considering that the clans have always been a national sample of traditions and principled stances with their national and pan-Arab dimensions.

Clans' leaders in Deir Ezzour, Hasaka and Raqqa had earlier held a forum in Deir Ezzour on December 15th at the conclusion of which they issued a statement stressing adherence to the national unity and their unity in face of the conspiracy targeting Syria.

They asserted rejection of the foreign interference in Syria's internal affairs, voicing support to the program of comprehensive reform led by President al-Assad.

They indicated that the current crisis in Syria will only be solved by the Syrian people, stressing that the process of comprehensive reform constitutes the sole exit from the crisis.

President al-Assad met clans' leaders in al-Raqqa on November 7th after performing Eid al-Adha prayer.

<http://sana.sy/eng/337/2011/12/23/389990.htm>

## 7. ARABIAN PENINSULA AND THE GULF OF BASRA

- **Yemen protesters demand Saleh trial; EU calls for 'inclusive' democratic transition**



A woman shows a message written on her hands as she marches in Sana'a during a demonstration to demand the trial of President Ali Abdullah Saleh. (Reuters)  
By AL ARABIYA WITH AGENCIES

Thousands of Yemenis marched toward the capital on Thursday, demanding President Ali Abdullah Saleh face trial for killings of protesters over 11 months of demonstrations against him and denouncing a new government that would spare him prosecution.

The European Union said that Yemen's democratic transition must be inclusive in order to succeed as the United Nations, which endorsed a pact brokered by Yemen's wealthier neighbors to stave off civil war by easing Saleh from power, said he would need medical treatment abroad while the country prepares to elect a successor.

The struggle over Saleh's fate has rekindled the poor country's multiple conflicts, and fanned fears in Washington that the Yemeni wing of al-Qaeda could grow stronger if the Arabian Peninsula state descends further into chaos.

“The goal is to bring down the regime and try its figures, to refuse giving Saleh and his aides any parliamentary immunity,” said Waddah al-Adeeb, an organizer of the march which set out from the southern city of Tazeh earlier this week, according to Reuters.

“And we reject the unity government, because it just reproduces the regime itself,” he said by telephone from some 100 km (62 miles) south of the capital Sana’a.

He was referring to a government split between members of Saleh’s party and opposition parties tasked with leading Yemen to the vote in February.

It is also to oversee the disengagement of troops loyal to Saleh - including a well-armed unit led by his son - and those of tribesmen and rebel army factions that have waged war in Sana’a and elsewhere.

Meanwhile, EU chief diplomat Catherine Ashton told Yemeni Vice President Abdrabuh Mansur Hadi on Thursday that his country’s democratic transition must be inclusive in order to succeed.

Ashton said she called Hadi to underline her “firm support” for his efforts after veteran President Ail Abdullah Saleh agreed last month to hand over power to his deputy following February elections.

“I confirmed the EU’s continued support to Yemen and to a Yemeni-led, inclusive and democratic transition process on the basis of a sustainable national consensus,” she said in a statement, according to AFP.

“I assured the vice president that we will stand by him in his efforts towards a better future based on democracy, justice and human rights,” she said.

“I also underlined the EU’s view that to succeed, the transition process must be inclusive: we discussed how best to reach out to the large numbers of unemployed young people, the youth movements and other groups.”

A national unity government, headed by the opposition, was sworn in earlier this month to lead a three-month transition period until early polls are held and Saleh formally steps down.

After the February elections, Hadi will take over the presidency for an interim two-year period under a Gulf-sponsored deal drafted to resolve Yemen's political crisis.

The government's role is laid out in the transition pact, echoed by a U.N. Security Council resolution, that would make Saleh the fourth leader to surrender power after mass protests that have redrawn the political map of the Middle East.

U.N. Yemen envoy Jamal Benomar, who is attempting to implement the transition plan, said on Wednesday that efforts were underway to arrange treatment for Saleh, who suffered burns and other injuries in an apparent assassination attempt in June.

Yemeni government and opposition officials said on Wednesday that efforts to pull pro-Saleh forces and those of tribal leader Sadeq al-Ahmar from the capital's Hasaba and Soufan districts, where they have clashed sporadically, had bogged down.

Any successor government will face multiple challenges including resurgent separatist sentiment in the south,

formerly a socialist republic that fought a civil war with Saleh's north in 1994 after four turbulent years of formal union.

The region is also home to Islamists who have seized chunks of Abyan province. Ensuing fighting with government troops has sparked mass flight, compounding humanitarian crisis in a country with some 500,000 internally displaced people.

An official in Abyan, whose capital Zinjibar fell to Islamist fighters in May, said that seven government troops and as many as 20 Islamist fighters had been killed since Tuesday in a fresh round of fighting in that city.

Residents of nearby Jaar said columns of smoke were rising from parts of the city where there had been intense fighting, and that the bodies of Islamist fighters had been carried out for burial.

In another southern province, Lahej, a local official said six men suspected of membership in al Qaeda had been detained.

Saleh's opponents accuse him of fomenting chaos and ceding territory to

Islamists in the region to underline his claim that only his rule can contain the country's al-Qaeda branch, which has planned attacks abroad, abortive to date, from Yemen.

The United States, which long backed Saleh as a cornerstone of its "counter-terrorism" policy and has carried out drone attacks in Yemen, has thrown its weight behind the plan to replace him, seeing him as more a liability than asset now.

There have also been repeated attacks on Yemen's main oil pipeline, paralyzing the country's largest refinery and leading to acute fuel shortages and cut-offs of exports that in turn fund imports of staple foodstuffs.

The Yemeni state news agency on Wednesday quoted the oil minister as saying those attacks had cost Yemen \$700 million, without elaborating whether that sum came from lost exports, estimated damage to infrastructure or both.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/12/22/184028.html?PHPSESSID=g5sk8usfe34ceur6fokrct2524>

- **UAE strips six of citizenship**

Security concerns cited, although those affected say they are being unjustly targeted for their political views.



The United Arab Emirates is taking the rare step of revoking the citizenship of six men because of alleged security concerns, although those involved say they are being unjustly targeted for their political views.

The order was issued earlier this month by Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the president of the UAE, according to an announcement made by state news agency WAM on Thursday.

The move is likely to renew debate about the UAE's handling of calls for reform in the wake of this year's Arab Spring uprisings.

The Gulf nation has not seen any of the street protests that have rocked other countries in the region, although officials

have taken steps to stamp down any signs of dissent.

The six Emirati men, along with another man who said he had also been stripped of citizenship, denounced the move in a statement posted on the internet.

One of them, Islamic scholar Mohammed Abdel-Razzaq al-Siddiq, said in an interview that he and others losing their passports had signed a petition earlier this year calling for legislative changes and freer elections.

He said he believes they were "targeted because we demanded political reforms".

'Suspicious' personalities

In the online statement, the men described themselves as members of an Islamist organisation known as the Reform and Social Guidance Association. They urged the UAE's leaders to "stop all oppressive measures against advocates of reform in the country".

The state news agency quoted an unnamed source at the General Administration for Naturalisation,

Residency and Ports Affairs who said the six men had acted to threaten "the national security of the UAE through their connection with suspicious regional and international organisations and personalities".

Some of the men were associated with groups that have been linked with terrorist financing, the state news agency said. They were granted Emirati citizenship between 1976 and 1986, according to the report.

The report didn't provide details or say where the men, who were naturalised citizens, originally came from.

A person familiar with the case told the Associated Press news agency that four of the men were of Iranian origin and two came from Yemen. He said the men's Emirati citizenship status was revoked "once it became clear that the rules under which they were granted [citizenship] were being violated".

The person spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorised to discuss the matter publicly. Officials at

the naturalisation and residency office couldn't be reached for comment.

Political activists

Al-Siddiq said he has family ties to Iran, but added that he was born in Kuwait and moved to what would become the UAE as a young boy.

Political activity is severely restricted in the UAE, an alliance of seven semi-autonomous states, each ruled by a hereditary sheikh. There are no official opposition groups in the country and political parties are banned.

The parliament serves as an advisory body, and its 40 members are either directly appointed by the ruling sheikhs or elected by voters hand-picked by the rulers.

Five political activists, including a prominent blogger and an economics professor, were convicted late last month on anti-state charges that included insulting the UAE's top leadership, endangering national security and inciting people to protest.

They were pardoned by the federation's president a day after their sentences of two to three years in jail were handed down.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/12/20111222154624388439.html>

## 8. AFGHANISTAN - PAKISTAN

### • Pakistan rejects US probe into border deaths

The military says US findings on deadly border strike that left two dozen Pakistani soldiers dead is "short on facts".

Pakistan has rejected the conclusions of a US investigation into a NATO air strike that killed two dozen Pakistani soldiers last month along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

In a statement on Friday, Pakistan's military said the inquiry report was "short on facts".

"Pakistan's army does not agree with the findings of the US/NATO inquiry as being reported in the media," the statement said.

"(A) detailed response will be given as and when the formal report is received," it said.

US officials, unveiling the results of their investigation into the November 25-26 incident that left 24 Pakistani soldiers dead, said on Thursday that both the US and Pakistan were to blame.

The inquiry, headed by a top US general, said on Thursday that the soldiers' deaths were partly rooted in an "overarching lack of trust" between the US and Pakistan, as well as several key communication errors and misunderstandings.

#### Admitting blame

Brigadier-General Stephen Clark, an air force special operations officer who led the investigation into the incident, said "the US forces used the wrong maps, were unaware of Pakistani border post locations and mistakenly provided the wrong location for the troops".

Clark described a confusing series of gaffes rooted in the fact that US and Pakistan do not trust each other enough to provide details about their locations and military operations along the border.

"As a result, US forces on that dark, November 26 night thought they were under attack, believed there were no Pakistani forces in the area, and called in air strikes on what they thought were enemy insurgents," he said.

The US military admitted it was partly to blame for the strike, but it did not offer an apology. In a statement, it said its investigation into the incident revealed that there was "no intentional effort to target persons or places known to be part of the Pakistani military".

The Pentagon said that "the US wants to learn from the mistakes and take any corrective measures needed to make sure such mistakes are not repeated".

"For the loss of life and for the lack of proper co-ordination between US and Pakistani forces that contributed to those losses, we express our deepest regret," George Little, Pentagon spokesman, told reporters.

#### 'Self-defence'

The NATO alliance agreed with the inquiry's findings, adding that both sides

had made mistakes in the incident, and that forces were unable "to properly coordinate their locations and actions, both before the operation and during the resulting engagement".

NATO also said that the combined force did not knowingly fire at the Pakistani forces.

"The investigation has substantiated that close air support was employed in self-defence in response to intense, heavy machine gun and mortar fire initiated by what turned out to be Pakistan forces near the border in the vicinity of Salala," a NATO press statement said.

Pakistan has sought a full apology from US President Barack Obama for the strikes, and some officials have alleged it was a deliberate assault on Pakistani troops.

Since the November 26 attack, the Pakistani government has shut down NATO supply routes to Afghanistan and forced the US to shut its operation from Shamsi air base in southwestern Baluchistan province.

The base was used to maintain drones deployed in strikes against armed groups hiding in safe havens in Pakistan's tribal belt on the Afghan frontier.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia/2011/12/2011122345544826763.html>

- **Pakistan PM fears plot against his government**

Yousuf Raza Gilani says certain institutions were behaving like a state within a state.



Gilani criticised the security forces' inability to detect Osama bin Laden's presence on Pakistani soil [EPA]

Yousuf Raza Gilani, Pakistan's embattled prime minister, has said conspirators were plotting to bring down his government, delivering an unprecedented tirade against the country's powerful military.

Without directly naming the military, Gilani said on Thursday that certain institutions were behaving like a state

within a state and warned that everyone should obey the elected parliament.

"I want to make it clear that conspiracies are being hatched here to pack up the political government," he said, speaking to an audience at the National Arts Gallery.

Gilani's outburst comes at a time when the government is being increasingly isolated over a letter allegedly written by former envoy to Washington Husain Haqqani, asking the US to help avert a military coup in Pakistan after the killing of Osama bin Laden.

Rampant speculation that President Asif Ali Zardari could be forced out of office over the scandal has refused to die, despite his return to the country following two weeks of medical treatment in Dubai.

Two weeks ago, Interior Minister Rehman Malik dismissed rumours that a coup could overthrow the government, but Gilani's remarks appeared to show that members of the administration believe their early departure is possible.

At the gallery, Gilani called the army "disciplined", saying that they "follow the

constitution" and "will remain under the government".

'No control over armed forces'

But heading off questions in the parliament, he took aim at the army after the defence ministry told the Supreme Court "it does not exercise any operational control" over the armed forces or ISI, the country's powerful intelligence agency.

"If they say that they are not under the ministry of defence, then we should get out of this slavery, then this parliament has no importance, this system has no importance, then you are not sovereign," he told lawmakers.

"Nobody is above the law, all the institutions are subservient to the parliament," Gilani insisted.

Appearing to lose patience, he said the government had stood by the security services over a storm of US pressure over the bin Laden's presence on Pakistani soil, the November 26 NATO attack, and the 2008 attacks on Mumbai.

"In the worst circumstances we doubled their salaries. They have to be accountable to parliament."

"But I want to ask how was (bin Laden) living here for the past six years? On what type of visa was he living here? Why was security not taken care of, if he entered Pakistan without a visa?"

President Zardari and his government have earned praise for successfully navigating scandals and calls for their resignation since taking office after the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) won elections in February 2008.

But any decision from the Supreme Court to investigate the memo, as recommended by the military, would build significant pressure on the president at a time of huge tension between the army and the civilian government.

Elections are not due until February 2013, but the opposition has begun campaign rallies in earnest and many observers expect polls some time in 2012. No civilian leader in Pakistan has ever completed a full term in office.

Former prime minister Nawaz Sharif this week demanded snap elections.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia/2011/12/2011122215143225409.html>

*\*This media summary is prepared by ORSAM Middle East Research Assistants Nebahat Tanrıverdi O and Sercan Doğan. It covers news and commentaries as reported by the national media sources publishing in the Middle Eastern countries. The views expressed are not those of ORSAM and their inclusion does not imply factual accuracy.*

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