



GÜNLÜK ORTADOĞU BÜLTENİ

MIDDLE EAST DAILY BULLETIN

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1. IRAQ

- **Could Obama pay a price if Iraq spirals?**

Friday, 30 December 2011

By AFP

HONOLULU

Fears that Iraq will spiral into instability and slip under Iran's sway may foreshadow an election year row over President Barack Obama's core political achievement: ending the war.

Obama, currently on vacation in Hawaii, built his political career on early opposition to the 2003 U.S. invasion, capturing a public mood which helped propel him to the White House five years later.

So when he brought the last U.S. soldiers home this month, he touted a promise kept in extricating the United States from what critics see as a grand folly.

But long-time war supporters have questioned whether rising sectarianism and instability bubbling up after the U.S. exit could undercut Obama's hopes to use the withdrawal as proof of sound national security judgment.

"The question of the moment is not: 'Who lost Iraq?' but rather, 'Is Iraq definitely lost?'" wrote Frederick and Kimberly Kagan in the Weekly Standard.

"It certainly seems so."

Frederick Kagan was an architect of the surge strategy enacted by president George W. Bush which, if it did not provide the United States "victory" in Iraq, allowed U.S. troops to leave without the stigma of defeat.

Obama argued that American sacrifices forged an Iraq that was "sovereign, stable, and self-reliant."

But recent violent attacks, signs of revived sectarianism, a fragile governing coalition and fears of growing authoritarianism on the part of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki have challenged that view.

In a New York Times op-ed Thursday, leading members of the Iraqiya bloc accused Maliki of hounding Sunni opponents.

“The prize, for which so many American soldiers believed they were fighting, was a functioning democratic and nonsectarian state,” they wrote.

"But Iraq is now moving in the opposite direction — toward a sectarian autocracy that carries with it the threat of devastating civil war.”

So if Iraq tips into the mire, will Obama’s eventual Republican opponent in next November’s election have reason to bash his commander-in-chief spurs?

Or will Americans credit their president with getting American troops out of the deepening maelstrom and out of harm’s way?

Republican hawks imply Obama has squandered the legacy of the nearly 4,500 U.S. troops who fell in the Iraq war.

“All of the progress that both Iraqis and Americans have made, at such painful and substantial cost, has now been put at greater risk,” Republican Senator John McCain said in December.

Republican presidential front-runner Mitt Romney attacked Obama in a recent interview with Fox News Sunday, saying that the withdrawal was “precipitous” and that up to 30,000 U.S. troops should have been left behind.

Top Obama administration officials dismiss the idea that a residual U.S. force would have increased U.S. leverage in Iraqi politics.

And Marina Ottaway, of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, said the view that troops equals influence was false.

“Even at the height of the surge, when we had more than 140,000 U.S. troops in Iraq, the U.S. was never able to force or convince the Iraqi politicians to do things that they didn’t want to do,” she said.

The Obama administration notes that it took months for Iraqi leaders to form a coalition after 2010 elections, so political dislocation is nothing new.

And they argue that attacks in Iraq — like the blasts that killed more than 65 people last week — were a common occurrence

even when large numbers of U.S. troops were there, so cannot be pinned on the U.S. departure.

Even if Iraq does badly deteriorate, it is unclear whether Americans will blame for the legacy of a war that was so politically divisive.

And even hawks do not advocate sending U.S. troops back into Iraq.

“The only real issue that people care about is the economy,” said Ottaway.

“Americans have long since put the Iraq war behind them. Nobody wants to hear about it.”

In a Zogby poll in September, 74 percent of Americans asked said the U.S. withdrawal was a positive development, compared to 13 percent who disagreed, suggesting that for now at least, Obama is on solid political ground.

Duke University professor Peter Feaver, a veteran of the Clinton and George W. Bush National Security Councils, acknowledged there is no longer intense public debate on the Iraq war.

But he argued Obama could have exploited the low wattage of the issue to sell a continued U.S. presence, had U.S. lawyers thrashed out a deal to keep some forces in Iraq to promote stability and train local forces.

“He took the course that had the most political payoff for him ... but paradoxically, I would argue that it has the most risk,” said Feaver.

He went on to warn that a swift Iraqi deterioration could haunt Obama in the election year or in any eventual second term.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/12/30/185348.html?PHPSESSID=117pme41tpplkie3ddspv0n32>

- **Sadrists refused to take over our ministerial portfolios – Iraqiya bloc**

By Hamza Mustafa

Baghdad, Asharq Al-Awsat – Senior Iraqiya bloc MP, Ziad al-Dharib, informed Asharq Al-Awsat that “the Sadrist trend within the Iraqi cabinet strongly refused the proposal put forward by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to appoint Sadrist ministers, or

others, to replace the Iraqiya bloc ministers who did not attend the meeting.” This was after the Iraqiya bloc took the decision to boycott all ministerial and parliamentary meetings in protest to Nouri al-Maliki’s monopolization of decision-making, as well as the arrest warrant issued against Iraqi Vice President Tareq al-Hashemi.

Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki on Wednesday had threatened to replace ministers belonging to the Iraqiya bloc if they continued to boycott the national unity cabinet. During a news conference in Baghdad, al-Maliki said “ministers have no right to suspend their membership in the government because they will be considered [to have] resigned” adding “in the next cabinet meeting, if they do not come back, we will appoint replacements.”

Ziad al-Dharib, who head the Iraqiya affiliated al-Hal parliamentary bloc, told Asharq Al-Awsat that “there is no truth whatsoever to the claims that other ministers have taken over the ministerial portfolios of the Iraqiya bloc ministers, due to their non-attendance of the weekly cabinet meeting.”

He added “al-Maliki did indeed try to appoint Sadrist Minister for Planning, Ali Shukri, to act as Minister of Finance...but Shukri refused to take the proxy.” Al-Dharib also stressed that Shukri “contacted Finance Minister Rafie al-Issawi to inform him that he has refused this appointment.”

The Iraqiya bloc MP Ziad al-Dharib also revealed that “Minister for Transport Hadi al-Ameri [of the Shiite Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq] also announced his refusal [to take the proxy of an Iraqiya bloc minister] during the cabinet meeting itself, as such decisions cannot be rushed, particularly as there are discussions taking place with the Iraqiya bloc with the objective of reaching a quick resolution to the crisis.”

Answering a question about the Iraqiya bloc Minister of Electricity, Dr. Karim Aftan’s attendance of the cabinet meeting, al-Dharib clarified that “the Minister of Electricity did not only attend the cabinet meeting, but one day prior to this he attended the Committee on Energy headed by Deputy Prime Minister Hussain al-Shahristani, this was because he had

attended the meeting of Arab Energy Ministers in Cairo, during which an agreement was signed, and this is a technical issue that required him to attend the cabinet meeting.”

Al-Dharib also revealed that “al-Shahristani telephone Iraqi Minister of Science & Technology Abdulkarim al-Samarayee to call him to attend the cabinet meeting, but he refused.”

Al-Dharib confirmed that “the Minister of Electricity had no choice but to attend the cabinet meeting....as issues relating to the electricity agreement were being discussed.”

As for whether the Minister had coordinated with the Iraqiya bloc regarding his attendance of the cabinet meeting, al-Dharib said “in all honesty, he did not coordinate with us, he found himself embarrassed on a big issue that cannot be delayed.”

In a statement issued by the Iraqiya bloc today, Iraqiya bloc leader Iyad Allawi increased his demands to resolve the current crisis that is threatening to split the national unity government. Allawi has

said that the Iraqiya bloc will refuse to attend any meeting to resolve the present crisis which does not include the attendance of Kurdistan Region President Massoud Barzani, Sadrist trend leader Moqtada al-Sadr, and Islam Supreme Council of Iraq [ISCI] leader, Ammar al-Hakeem. He also called for the formation of a committee comprising major political leaders to investigate the integrity of the accusations that have been leveled at Iraqi Vice President Tareq al-Hashemi.

<http://asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&id=27893>

- **Maliki invites Egyptian PM al-Ganzouri to Iraq**

Cairo, Dec. 29 (AKnews) – Iraq’s Nouri al-Maliki has invited Egyptian Prime Minister Kamal al-Ganzouri to visit Iraq to consolidate ties between the two nations.

Iraq’s Minister of Housing and Reconstruction, Mohammed Saheb, who is in Cairo for an Arab League’s meeting, told a press conference on Thursday that he personally handed an invitation letter from al-Maliki to al-Ganzouri.

On Tuesday, Egypt and Iraq agreed on the establishment of two Egyptian-Iraqi

companies in transport and electricity generation sectors.

Saheb told the conference, following a meeting with al-Ganzouri, that Maliki has called on the Egyptian PM in his letter to "Start a new page of mutual cooperation between the two nations and end outstanding issues"

Iraqi government owes some US\$400 million in wages to owed to Egyptians who worked in Iraq in the 1980s. But the government said earlier this month that it will not be able to pay this year the money due to shortfalls in the 2012 budget.

Al-Darraji said He has held talks with al-Jandaouri about entry facilities for Egyptian investors into Iraq to do business there.

<http://aknews.com/en/aknews/4/281226>

- **Hashemi denies intention to leave Iraq**

BAGHDAD, Dec. 29 (AKnews) - The Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi does not intend to leave Iraq before resolving his case with the Iraqi judiciary, his office said Thursday.

Media leaks reported about the intention of the Vice President Tareq al-Hashemi, who is in the Kurdistan region, to travel to Turkey.

The political tension escalated in Iraq against after the issuance of an arrest warrant against Hashemi, on terrorism charges, and the sacking of Deputy Prime Minister Saleh al-Mutlaq after he described the Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki Maliki as "like a dictator".

The Iraqi judiciary has issued a decision preventing Hashemi and some of his bodyguards from traveling outside Iraq. Hashimi has refused any political mediation to resolve the charges against him.

This week Turkey said in principle it would not oppose Hashemi from visiting the country.

Hashemi said that the Iraqi judiciary is under the influence of the executive branch, and that his bodyguards' confessions presented by the government were taken under torture and threats.

Iraqi President Jalal Talabani and Speaker of the Council of Representatives Osama al-Nujaifi agreed two days ago to resolve Hashemi's case and called for an emergency national conference for all Iraqi political leaders to find a resolution.

The Iraqiya leader Ayad Allawi said yesterday the presence of the President of the Kurdistan Region Masoud Barzani and the two Shiite leaders Moqtada al-Sadr and Ammar Hakim would have to be in attendance if he was to attend. He also demanded a committee be formed to oversee the integrity of the investigation about Hashemi's issue.

A spokesman for the government said such a committee would be unconstitutional as it would be the executive interfering with the running of the courts.

By Haider Ibrahim

<http://aknews.com/en/aknews/4/281158>

- **Maliki says ready to execute Iraq Anbar provincial council demands**

Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri Al Maliki expressed, on Wednesday, his willingness

to execute all demands advanced by Anbar Provincial Council.

Many Iraqi Central Government's authorities will be transferred to local provincial governments, Maliki revealed.

"Demands advanced by Anbar Provincial Council are totally legitimate," Maliki said in a statement, which Alsumarianews received a copy of, following his meeting with a number of the province's Sheikhs and Dignitaries. "I am ready to execute all these demands except ones exceeding my constitutional authorities," he promised.

"We will transfer all authorities of Iraqi Central Government to local provincial governments except ones concerning sovereignty, security, international affairs and wealth distribution that should remain central in order to equally distribute them on Iraqis," Maliki explained.

"It is necessary to preserve national unity between all Iraqis and increase provincial authorities to enhance services and fasten provinces reconstruction," Maliki stressed, a source told Alsumaria.

<http://www.alsumaria.tv/en/Iraq-News/1-72226-Maliki-says-ready-to-execute-Iraq-Anbar-provincial-council-demands.html>

2. IRAN

- **US and Iran continue war of words over Hormuz**

Iran rejects US warning that it would 'not tolerate' closure by Tehran of vital oil route in row over nuclear sanctions.



Military personnel place a flag on a submarine during the the Iranian navy's Velayat-90 war games operation [Reuters] A standoff between Iran and the US over Tehran's threats to close the strategic Strait of Hormuz to oil tankers has worsened, with warships from each side giving weight to an increasingly bellicose exchange of words.

Iran's Revolutionary Guards rejected a warning that the US military would "not tolerate" such a closure, saying they

would act decisively "to protect our vital interests".

Iran had warned it would shut the strait if the West imposed more sanctions over its nuclear programme.

State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said on Thursday that Iran had exhibited "irrational behaviour" by threatening to close the strait.

"One can only guess that the international sanctions are beginning to feel the pinch, and that the ratcheting up of pressure, particularly on their oil sector, is pinching in a way that is causing them to lash out," she said.

The tough language came as two US warships entered a zone where the Iranian navy's ships and aircraft were in the middle of 10 days of war games designed as a show of its military capabilities.

A US navy spokeswoman said that the aircraft carrier USS John C Stennis and the guided-missile cruiser USS Mobile Bay had transited without incident on Tuesday, in a pre-planned, routine operation.

"Our interaction with the regular Iranian navy continues to be within the standards of maritime practice, well-known, routine and professional," Fifth Fleet spokeswoman Lieutenant Rebecca Rebarich said on Thursday.

The transit area was in waters east of the Strait of Hormuz, a choke point at the entrance to the Gulf through which more than a third of the world's tanker-borne oil passes.

'Not a drop'

Iranian Vice President Mohammad Reza Rahimi warned earlier this week that "not a drop of oil will pass through the Strait of Hormuz" if the West followed through with planned additional sanctions against Iran over its nuclear programme.

Admiral Habibollah Sayari, a navy commander, backed that up by saying it would be "really easy" to close the strait.

A US defence department spokesman said on Wednesday that "interference with the transit ... of vessels through the Strait of Hormuz will not be tolerated".

But Brigadier General Hossein Salami, the deputy commander of Iran's Revolutionary Guards, told the Fars news agency on Thursday that "our response to threats is threats".

"We have no doubt about our being able to carry out defensive strategies to protect our vital interests. We will act more decisively than ever," he was quoted as saying.

"The Americans are not qualified to give us permission" to carry out military strategy, he said.

Sayari said the US aircraft carrier was monitored by Iranian forces as it passed from the Strait of Hormuz to the Gulf of Oman, state television reported, while broadcasting footage of an aircraft carrier being shadowed by an Iranian plane.

Commodore Mahmoud Mousavi, an Iranian navy spokesman, told the official IRNA news agency the US carrier went "inside the manoeuvre zone" where Iranian ships were conducting their exercises.

He added that the Iranian navy was "prepared, in accordance with international law, to confront offenders who do not respect our security perimeters during the manoeuvres".

'Routine transit'

US officials had said on Wednesday that the Stennis and its carrier strike group were moving through the Strait of Hormuz.

Pentagon press secretary George Little said the deployment was to provide air power for the war in Afghanistan.

The US, whose Fifth Fleet is based in Bahrain, maintains a significant naval presence in the Gulf, in large part to ensure oil traffic there is unhindered.

Iran, which is already subject to several rounds of sanctions over its nuclear programme, has repeatedly said it could target the Strait of Hormuz if attacked or its economy is strangled.

Such a move could cause havoc on world oil markets, disrupting the already fragile global economy, although analysts say the Islamic Republic is unlikely to take such

drastic steps as it relies on the route for its own oil exports.

Iran's naval manoeuvres included the laying of mines and the use of aerial drones, according to Iranian media. Missiles and torpedoes were to be test-fired in the coming days.

Earlier this month, Iranian officials said a Revolutionary Guards cyber-warfare unit had hacked the controls of a US bat-winged RQ-170 Sentinel reconnaissance drone and brought it down safely.

Analysts and oil market traders are watching the developing situation in and around the Strait of Hormuz carefully, fearing that a spark could ignite open confrontation between the long-time foes.

The US had proposed a military hotline between Tehran and Washington to defuse any "miscalculations" between their navies, but Iran rejected that offer in September.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/12/2011123045151578686.html>

- **Iran's nation will create another epic in upcoming Majlis elections: Khatami**

Tehran, Dec 29, IRNA – Tehran interim Friday prayer leader, Ayatollah Seyyed Ahmad Khatami called on the congregational prayers to actively take part in the Majlis (Iranian Parliament) elections slated for March 2.



Referring to the registration of aspirants in upcoming Majlis elections, he added at the second sermon of Tehran Friday Prayers that Iranians are duty-bound to vote.

Thanks to the Islamic Revolution, the Iranian nation managed to gain the right to determine its destiny by itself and elect all the officials through referendum, he said.

'That's a great achievement for the Iranians to elect all the officials either directly or indirectly,' he said, noting that the most senior officials such as president

and Majlis speaker, even the leader, are chosen through the voting procedure.

Khatami also contended that elections are valuable blessings.

Referring to the efforts to undermine elections, he said that the nation will pay no attention to such things.

The nation has always obeyed the recommendation of the late founder of the Islamic Revolution Imam Khomeini to attend the scene and massively turn out in elections.

Ayatollah Khatami's remarks regarding the elections come after certain opposition figures have tried to persuade people not to take part in the upcoming parliamentary elections slated for March 2. Ayatollah Khatami has referred to them as leaders of the sedition movement or seditionists (the losers of 2009 Presidential Election) who encouraged people to take to the streets and chant anti-government slogans after the victory of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2009 Presidential Election.

On December 30, 2010, millions of people took to the streets nationwide to voice their support for the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad which was a heavy blow to those who were trying to portray that people had lost their confidence in the Islamic system. That date is being remembered every year as the Epic of 9th of Dey (10th month in the Iranian calendar which coincided with December).

Elsewhere in his remarks on regional developments, Ayatollah Khatami also said that the regional uprising enjoys a fully Islamic nature.

Some argue that it is the US which manages the events, but this is a superficial analysis, Khatami said.

'The US has always tried to suppress the uprisings and curb the Islamic awakening,' the senior cleric noted.

<http://www.irna.ir/ENNewsShow.aspx?NIID=30740281>

- **US, not in a position to decide about Hormuz Strait: IRGC commander**

Tehran, Dec 29, IRNA – Acting chief commander of the Islamic Revolution's Guards Corps (IRGC) Brigadier General Hossein Salami said that the Americans are not in a position to allow or prevent Islamic Republic of Iran to close the Strait of Hormuz.



Brigadier General Salami made the remarks in response to recent statements of the commander of the US Fifth Fleet in the Persian Gulf in Tehran on Thursday.

"The history of US hostilities against Iran clearly reflects that," he added.

Brigadier General Salami said that if Iran's crucial interests are threatened in any way, Iran will also resort to threats and the Islamic Republic of Iran will not relinquish its strategies.

Referring to the fact that Iran does not take orders from any country for implementing its defense strategies, he recalled that the Islamic Republic of Iran throughout past 33 years has always achieved its objectives despite the US interfering policies.

“Islamic Republic of Iran is more determined than any other time before for implementing its defense strategies,” Salami added.

Referring to holding the Sea Military Drill titled Velayat-90 in the Sea of Oman and Indian Ocean, he pointed out that the Iranian Navy manifested the strength and advancements of Iran’s armed forces.

<http://www.irna.ir/ENNewsShow.aspx?NIID=30739372&SRCH=1>

3. ISRAEL - PALESTINE

- **Israel army rabbi blasts religious segregation**

Friday, 30 December 2011



Israelis have been protesting against violence by religious zealots trying to impose their religious code on the town of Beit Shemesh. (Reuters)

By AFP

OCCUPIED JERUSALEM

Israel’s chief military rabbi has condemned ultra-Orthodox Jews who discriminate against women and pledged such behavior will not be tolerated in the armed forces, media reported on Friday.

Radio stations and websites said Brigadier General Rafi Peretz had sent officers a memorandum denouncing as “immoral” a slew of acts such as the verbal abuse of a young female soldier for refusing to sit at the back of a public bus and attempts to segregate a town’s pavements.

“Of late there is a grave phenomenon of discrimination against women both outside the army and within it,” public radio quoted him as saying.

“I’m working to ensure that radical, wrong notions, such as those which inspired the events in Beit Shemesh, will not permeate the army,” he wrote according to news website Ynet.

Beit Shemesh, a town of 80,000 near Jerusalem, has been witnessing a wave of clashes between ultra-Orthodox activists and other residents.

On Thursday night, hundreds of activists there torched refuse bins, blocked streets and stoned police sent to disperse them, police spokesman Micky Rosenfeld told AFP.

“There were several hundred who took part in the disturbances,” he said. “Three people were arrested.”

Rosenfeld said that there were no reports of any new trouble so far on Friday morning.

“It’s coming back to normal,” he said, there’s a strong police presence in the area.”

There have also been contentious incidents within the army, with religious male soldiers walking out of official events where female troops sing, and women at celebrations are asked to move to segregated enclosures.

An orthodox Jew was charged with on Thursday with sexual harassment after he allegedly verbally abused 19-year-old soldier Doron Matalon for refusing to comply with demands to sit with other women in the rear of a bus.

Shlomo Fuchs, a 44-year-old father, was charged with allegedly calling her a “whore”.

“The increasing phenomenon of discrimination against women endangers democratic society,” a court hearing at which the suspect was charged was told.

He was granted bail of 20,000 shekels (\$5,260, 4,000 euros) until his case is heard, but he was unable to pay and was remanded in custody.

On Tuesday night, some 3,000 Israelis gathered at Beit Shemesh to protest against ultra-Orthodox extremists whose

campaign for gender segregation has erupted into verbal and physical abuse against women.

The majority of the town's residents are religious Jews, among them a large and growing ultra-Orthodox community.

Activists have posted signs in their neighborhood instructing women to dress "modestly" in long sleeves and calf-length skirts.

Israeli public radio reported that Attorney General Yehuda Weinstein set up a team on Thursday whose remit is to report back to the government with recommendations on stamping out the phenomenon.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/12/30/185337.html?PHPSESSID=1l7pme41tpplkie3ddspv0n32>

- **Israeli air strike on Gaza kills one, injures one: Palestinian medics**

Friday, 30 December 2011



A masked Palestinian fighter surveys the damage at a training camp after an Israeli air strike in Gaza on Thursday. (Reuters)

By AFP

GAZA CITY

An Israeli air strike east of Gaza City on Friday killed one man and injured at least another, Palestinian medical officials told AFP.

The Israeli military said that the target was a group of men preparing to fire a rocket into Israel. Palestinian eyewitness said they saw fighters in the area immediately before the strike.

"Aircraft targeted a terrorist squad that was identified moments before firing rockets at Israel from the northern Gaza Strip. A hit was confirmed, thwarting the rocket fire attempt," a military statement said.

“The aforementioned squad is responsible for the firing of rockets at Israel in the past number of days,” it added.

Palestinians named the dead man as Moamen abu-Daff, but did not immediately link him to a specific fighter group.

Palestinian fighters fired two rockets at southern Israel on Thursday, after Israeli warplanes attacked “terror sites” inside the Gaza Strip, the army said.

Both fell in open ground without causing injuries or damage.

Early on Thursday morning, Israeli warplanes targeted “terror sites” in central and northern Gaza in retaliation after rockets were fired across the border on Wednesday.

“Israeli air force aircraft targeted a terror activity site in the central Gaza Strip, and a terror tunnel in the northern Gaza Strip,” a military statement said, indicating it was a response after five rockets landed in Israel, none of which caused any damage or injuries.

Palestinian security sources said the air strikes hit a training ground used by Islamic Jihad fighters near central Gaza and another training ground northeast of Gaza which belonged to Hamas's armed wing, causing no casualties.

An earlier series of Israeli strikes overnight Tuesday had killed a Palestinian and wounded about 20 others, as the military struck what it described as “global jihad” targets who were planning cross-border attacks on southern Israel from the Egyptian Sinai.

On Wednesday, a senior Israeli officer said the military was preparing for a possible large-scale military campaign in Gaza if the Palestinians did not halt their rocket attacks.

“We are preparing and ready for an additional campaign... to renew the deterrence,” Tal Hermoni, commander of the Gaza division’s southern brigade, told reporters in remarks widely published in the Israeli press.

Israel's last major operation against Gaza was Operation Cast Lead, a 22-day offensive launched on December 27, 2008

that cost the lives of 1,400 Palestinians– at least half of them civilians– and 13 Israelis, including 10 soldiers.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/12/30/185332.html?PHPSESSID=117pme41tpplkie3ddspv0n32>

- **Amid bloodshed, Hamas prepares to leave Syria**

RAMALLAH, West Bank (AP) — Alarmed by bloody unrest in Syria, the Hamas militant group has pulled out many of its lower-level cadres from its Damascus headquarters and made contingency plans to move its leadership to locations across the Middle East, senior Hamas members have told The Associated Press.

The Hamas members say the group remains appreciative of Syrian leader Bashar Assad and there is no immediate intention to abandon their base in Damascus. But they confirmed that dozens of low and midlevel members have already left Syria as the security situation grows increasingly precarious.

"Most of Hamas has left Damascus. We have a plan B for leaving if things deteriorate," said a senior Hamas official, who spoke on condition of anonymity

because he was discussing the inner workings of the secretive group.

Hamas, an Iranian-backed Palestinian group, has been based in Syria for more than a decade. Assad has allowed Hamas, branded a terrorist group by Israel and the West, to use his territory for military training, and provided a valuable headquarters in the heart of the Arab world.

But the uprising in Syria has put Hamas in a difficult place. The U.N. estimates that more than 5,000 people have been killed in violence since March, and Hamas is wary of being associated with the government crackdown.

If Hamas does pull out completely, the move could force it to change the way it operates since the leaders would become dispersed across the region and their new hosts may not give them as much freedom. Hamas' supreme leader, Khaled Mashaal, for instance, is set to go to Qatar, a Gulf state with close ties to the U.S. Other leaders would go to Egypt, another American ally, while others would end up in Lebanon, Turkey or the Hamas-run Gaza Strip.

Fawzi Barhoum, a Hamas leader in the group's Gaza stronghold, says Hamas "hopes that Syria will get out of its difficult internal crisis through a political solution ending further bloodshed in the country." He said there has been "no decision" to leave Damascus.

The plan is the latest sign of change in the Islamic group amid the convulsions of the Arab Spring across the Middle East the past year. The uprisings have been a mixed blessing for Hamas. On one hand, allies like Syria are in trouble. On the other hand, Islamic groups have made strong gains through peaceful elections. While Hamas leaders say they haven't abandoned their dream of destroying Israel, they also seem to be realizing that they can advance their agenda through nonviolent means.

In recent days, Mashaal said Hamas would turn focus on nonviolent protests against Israel, though he refused to renounce violence.

He also signaled that Hamas might be willing to accept a Palestinian state alongside Israel in the West Bank and

Gaza Strip, the areas captured by Israel in the 1967 Mideast war. Hamas has in the past endorsed the 1967 lines as the first stage toward eliminating Israel.

Hamas also last week began the process of joining the Palestine Liberation Organization as it reconciles with the rival Fatah movement. The Fatah-dominated PLO has long sought a political settlement with Israel. Joining the PLO could give Hamas a voice, and possibly veto, in future peace efforts.

Israeli officials dismiss any suggestion that Hamas, which has killed hundreds of Israeli civilians in suicide bombings, rocket attacks and other violence, has changed. They cite the hardline speeches delivered at Hamas' 24th anniversary celebrations earlier this month, when speakers proudly called for "armed resistance" and the destruction of Israel.

"Unfortunately there is no evidence that Hamas has in any way moderated its extremist agenda," said government spokesman Mark Regev.

Barhoum said the group has not abandoned its ideology. Instead, he said it

has merely changed its tactics as it adjusts to the times.

"There is a new environment around us," he said. "That doesn't mean Hamas is giving up its rights and its clear program as a resistance faction."

Hamas began its transformation into a political movement in 2006, when it defeated Fatah in Palestinian legislative elections in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

A brief power-sharing arrangement disintegrated into violence the following year, leaving Hamas in control of Gaza and the Fatah-dominated Palestinian Authority in charge of the West Bank. The sides are now holding reconciliation talks and hope to hold new elections next year.

In Gaza, Hamas on Tuesday marked the third anniversary of an Israeli military offensive in the seaside strip. The offensive, launched in response to months of intense rocket barrages, killed some 1,400 Palestinians, including hundreds of civilians, and caused widespread damage. Thirteen Israelis also died in the fighting.

At memorial ceremonies, speaker after speaker voiced their support for continued armed confrontation with Israel. After suffering heavy losses in the fighting, Hamas has largely maintained a cease-fire with Israel the past three years. Still, it is believed to have restocked its arsenal with more powerful weapons.

But Raed Nearat, a political science professor in the West Bank who is close to Hamas, said that behind the rhetoric, Hamas is in the midst of a significant change.

He said the revolutions across the Middle East, as well as elections that have voted heavily in favor of Islamic movements in Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco, have emboldened Hamas.

"The Arab Spring has made Hamas much more confident, pragmatic and open," he said. "It's much more confident now that it can lead."

This week, the prime minister of the Gaza government, Ismail Haniyeh, left the territory for the first time since the 2007 takeover on an official tour of the Muslim world. His first stop was Egypt, with

planned visits to Sudan, Qatar, Bahrain, Tunisia and Turkey.

Hamas officials say the goal of the trip is to improve ties with Muslim countries swept up in the uprisings shaking the Arab world. In Egypt, Haniyeh met with the leader of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, the biggest winner in the first parliamentary elections since the Feb. 11 fall of Hosni Mubarak.

<http://asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&id=27885>

- **One killed as IDF hits Gaza militant squad about to launch rocket into Israel**

Army spokesman says airstrike hits same crew responsible for Qassam attacks in recent days; IDF: Israel will not suffer attempts to hurt its citizens.

By Jack Khoury, and Gili Cohen

Tags: IDF Gaza Strip

Israeli aircraft struck a Palestinian rocket-launching squad in the Gaza Strip on Friday, amid a string a violent incident along Israel's border with the coastal enclave in recent days.

Palestinians sources said one man was killed in the incident and five were wounded. The wounded were reportedly farmers working nearby.



Smoke rising from a Hamas training camp after an Israeli airstrike east of Gaza City, Thursday, April 7, 2011.

Photo by: AP

According to the Israel Defense Forces Spokesman's Office, the militants were spotted and hit as they were about to launch a projectile into Israel, adding that it was the same squad responsible for rocket fire in recent days.

In a statement the IDF said that it would not suffer "any attempt to hurt Israeli citizens and soldier and will continues to act against any element which enacts terrorizes against the State of Israel."

On Wednesday, Gaza militants launched rockets into Israel in various times throughout the day, with a total of 4 rockets exploding in open fields in the

western Negev. No injuries or damages were reported.

On Tuesday, Israel Air Force aircraft struck Gaza twice, targeting and killing an Islamic Jihad operative in the northern Strip, and later striking a vehicle holding what the IDF called global Jihad operatives. Ten were wounded in both strikes.

<http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/one-killed-as-idf-hits-gaza-militant-squad-about-to-launch-rocket-into-israel-1.404565>

- **'US reassures Israel over Saudi fighter jet deal'**

By JPOST.COM STAFF

Arms deal to Saudi will booster Israeli security over Iranian threat, 'Wall Street Journal' quotes US official as saying.



Officials in the United States have sought to reassure Israel that the \$29.4 billion sale of fighter jets to Saudi Arabia will boost Israeli security in the region, the Wall Street Journal reported Friday.

According to the report, Assistant Secretary of State for Political Military Affairs Andrew Shapiro told Israel from Washington that the sale, which includes 84 new F-15 fighter jets, will not affect Israel's "qualitative military edge."

The United States was confident that the Saudi purchase would benefit Israeli security by "bolstering moderate allies in the Gulf," especially in light of Israel and the Gulf country's shared beliefs about the need to curb the influence of Iran.

Officials in Jerusalem have not officially responded to the sale.

The United States announced Thursday that it will sell \$29.4 billion in fighter jets to Saudi Arabia, in a deal the White House said would support more than 50,000 jobs and help reinforce regional security in the Gulf amid mounting tension with Iran.

The sale covers 84 new Boeing F-15 fighters with advanced radar equipment and digital electronic warfare systems plus upgrades of 70 older F-15s as well as munitions, spare parts, training, maintenance and logistics.

While the sale was previously okayed by Congress, the White House announcement comes at a moment of rising tensions in the Gulf region.

Both the United States and Saudi Arabia, which sees Iran as a significant potential threat, are worried over Iran's nuclear program. Iranian officials this week repeated threats to close the Strait of Hormuz in response to mounting US and European economic sanctions.

The sale also comes as President Barack Obama prepares to accelerate his campaign for reelection in November 2012, a campaign likely to be fought over the US economy and job growth.

A White House spokesman said the Saudi arms sales would give the US economy a \$3.5 billion annual boost and help bolster exports and jobs.

The Obama administration cleared with Congress more than a year ago the potential sale of more than \$60 billion of military hardware to Saudi Arabia over 10 to 15 years, including the F-15s,

helicopters and related equipment and services.

The Saudi buildup, part of a wider US buildup of its regional friends and allies, could help offset the departure this month of the last US combat troops in Iraq.

In a statement released in Honolulu, where Obama is vacationing, White House deputy press secretary Josh Earnest said the kingdom had an important role to play in keeping watch over the region, which has also seen protests and political turmoil in Yemen.

<http://www.jpost.com/International/Article.aspx?id=251549>

4. AFRICA and EGYPT

- **Egypt security forces storm NGO offices**

Police raid at least 17 non-governmental organisations, including two US-based pro-democracy groups.

Egyptian security forces and police have stormed non-governmental organisation (NGO) offices throughout the country, temporarily detaining employees and searching computer files, an activist and security official have said.

The official MENA news agency said 17 "civil society organisations", including two prominent US-based pro-democracy groups that run programmes training political parties, had been targeted as part of an investigation into foreign funding of such groups.

"The public prosecutor has searched 17 civil society organisations, local and foreign, as part of the foreign funding case," MENA cited the Egyptian prosecutor's office as saying.

"The search is based on evidence showing violation of Egyptian laws including not having permits."

Gamal Eid, the head of the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, said an employee trapped inside one of the NGOs called him to say security forces were removing laptop computers.

The raids targeted local offices of the US-based International Republican Institute (IRI) and National Democratic Institute (NDI), among others, said a security source and employees at some of the organisations.

"Security forces who said they were from the public prosecutor are raiding our offices as we speak. They are grabbing all the papers and laptops as well," said one person working at NDI.

The NDI said in an e-mailed statement that the raid took place on its offices in Cairo, Alexandria and Assiut, from where police confiscated equipment and documents.

"Cracking down on organisations whose sole purpose is to support the democratic process during Egypt's historic transition sends a disturbing signal," Kenneth Wollack, NDI president, was quoted as saying.

US expresses deep concern

The US expressed deep concern over the raids and urged Egyptian authorities to immediately halt "harassment" of non-governmental organisation staff.

The US state department said the raids were "inconsistent with the bilateral cooperation we have had over many years", hinting it could review its \$1.3bn in military aid if they continued.

"We do have a number of new reporting and transparency requirements on funding to Egypt that we have to make to Congress," Victoria Nuland, the state department spokeswoman, said.

"The Egyptian government is well aware of that and it certainly needs to be aware of that in the context of how quickly this issue gets resolved."

Nuland said US officials had been in touch both with Egyptian Prime Minister Kamal al-Ganzouri and with Egypt's ambassador in Washington to underscore Washington's concern.

Her comments come after stinging criticism from US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton over the "systematic degradation" of women during protests in Cairo this month in which 17 people were killed, saying it "disgraces the state".

Germany's Foreign Ministry said it would summon Egypt's ambassador in Berlin on Friday after the raid targeted the German-based Konrad Adenauer Foundation, which is close to Chancellor Angela Merkel's Christian Democrats.

Employees detained

The security source said employees at the offices were not allowed to leave while the searches continued.

The NDI and IRI, loosely associated with the US Democratic and Republican political parties, say they take a neutral political stance, fostering democracy in Egypt by training members of nascent parties in democratic processes.

"The National Democratic Institute has been training new parties ... in how to participate in elections," a leading member of a liberal party said on condition of anonymity.

"This has been with the full knowledge of authorities and was not clandestine."

The NDI said on its website that it works toward fostering exchanges of ideas between countries regarding democratic transitions.

The IRI said it is working with Egyptian activists to strengthen their knowledge of

political party development, campaign strategy and public opinion research.

Egypt's military has vowed to investigate how pro-democracy and human rights organisations are funded and has said repeatedly it will not tolerate foreign interference in the country's affairs.

Some Egyptian rights groups that have been at the vanguard of protests are demanding that the army, in power since February, hand power swiftly to elected civilians

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/12/20111229152611424630.html>

- **U.S. 'encouraged' by Tunisia's governing party: senator**

Friday, 30 December 2011



Visiting U.S. Senator Joe Lieberman said Tunisia's dominant Islamist Ennahda party is a great example to follow for the rest of

the region if they continue on the same path. (File Photo)

By AFP

TUNIS

Visiting U.S. Senator Joe Lieberman said Thursday that Washington was encouraged by the actions of Tunisia's dominant Islamist Ennahda party, and pledged help from Congress and the U.S. government.

"So far the behavior and actions by those elected have been extremely encouraging. I and others in the Congress and the executive branch want to be even more helpful," Lieberman said at a press conference in Tunis.

Lieberman, on his second visit to Tunisia since the ouster of longtime strongman Zine el Abidine Ben Ali in January, held talks with President Moncef Marzouki, Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali and the president of the country's constituent assembly Mustapha Ben Jaffar.

Ennahda, which swept to power after the October 23 election— the first since the popular uprising that toppled Ben Ali— controls key ministries in the coalition

government it shares with its left-leaning allies.

Lieberman said Tunisia’s Islamists “will do a tremendous service to the entire world, the non-Muslim world if they continue on the same path they have chosen since taking office this month.”

“We must judge people by their behaviour and by their actions,” he said, adding that officials in Washington were reassured by statements made by Jebali and Ennahda party leader Rached Ghannouchi.

“We are quite optimistic about their commitment to respect democracy, the rule of law and the rights of women.”

Lieberman said he would return to the United States “to make sure that we stand with the people not only in protecting their freedoms but also to create new economic opportunities.”

“There will be an increased assistance to the army to have the equipment to protect the security of the people,” he said adding that he would “try to make Tunisia a high priority for American support because of the opportunities.”

Lieberman said the U.S. Congress had voted to finance U.S. guarantees for easy Tunisian access to low-interest loans and that Washington has also offered help to facilitate U.S. investment in the North African country.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/12/30/185301.html?PHPSESSID=117pme41tpplkie3ddspv0n32>

- **Gaddafi-era minister forced to resign**

By Khaled Mahmoud

Cairo, Asharq Al-Awsat- Despite the celebrations that have swept various Libyan cities for the first time to mark the 60th anniversary of its independence in 1951- an occasion that the regime of the late Colonel Muammar Gaddafi had consistently ignored- the National Transitional Council [NTC] and its interim government are coming under growing pressure from the Libyan street. This pressure has led to the resignation of Economy Minister Al-Tahir Sharkas, less than one month after he assumed his post.

In another development, a Libyan military official said that Libya disposed of Sam-7

missiles at NATO's request during the military operations for fear that they might be used against NATO's helicopters.

In what seemed as a positive response to the demands of the demonstrators, who took to the streets over the past few days in several cities demanding that dismissal of the symbols of the former Libyan regime, Sharkas gave up his post as economy minister in the ad interim government, led by Abdul-Rahim al-Kib. A Libyan government official told Asharq Al-Awsat that Al-Kib accepted Sharkas's resignation immediately after he found out that the latter was one of the members of the former Libyan government, led by Al-Baghdadi al-Mahmudi, prior to the fall of Gaddafi's regime. It is to be recalled that Al-Kib recently told Asharq Al-Awsat that he was ready to immediately expel any minister or official in his government if he finds out that he was one of the symbols of the former regime.

Libyan government sources said that Al-Kib is in the process of appointing a new minister for the economy portfolio to replace Sharkas, who preferred to voluntary give up his post in response to

the Libyan street's pressure and to avoid embarrassing the prime minister.

Libyans view with much indignation the insistence of the NTC and the government to keep officials who previously worked under Gaddafi, and demand that the government remove such officials from any official and government posts. Sharkas' resignation, the first of its kind in Al-Kib's new government, represents the first real test to the extent of the ad interim government's response to the demands of the demonstrators. The demonstrators call on the NTC and government to observe transparency in running the country's affairs during the transitional period, which will end in six months. This development came amid almost daily demonstrations in the major Libyan cities, notably Tripoli and Benghazi, after political activists started a sit-in in front of the NTC's former headquarters in Benghazi. They said that they would not end their sit-in until all their demands are met.

<http://asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&id=27888>

- **Egypt expects tourism rebound in 2012, security key**

Egypt expects tourism revenues to rebound by more than a third next year if the country's security situation improves in the wake of the uprising that toppled Hosni Mubarak in February and the subsequent political turmoil that sent tourists packing.

Tourism used to account for more than a tenth of Egypt's gross domestic product (GDP) before this year's upheaval and also employs an estimated one in eight in a country where high joblessness fuelled the anger that led to the uprisings.

"We can get back to the 2010 figures of \$12.5 billion in terms of income and 14.7 million tourists in 2012 if perceptions change. And perceptions won't change unless security prevails and calm is restored," Tourism Minister Mounir Fakhry Abdel Nour told Reuters in an interview on Thursday.

Security across the Arab world's most populous nation worsened after the country's police forces melted away from the streets in late January and after Mubarak's ouster.

But the newly appointed government said it would tighten security measures and beef up police presence in the streets.

"The police are now much more present in Cairo's streets," said Abdel Nour, adding that security has always been good in the main tourist destinations across the country.

Tourism is a crucial source of much-needed foreign currency for Egypt, and analysts say the country's most pressing problem is the slide in foreign reserves as tourism and export earnings suffer from the unrest and capital flees the country.

Reserves have tumbled from around \$35 billion at the start of 2011 to about \$20 billion by the end of November, and may in coming months reach levels where the Central Bank is no longer able to prevent sharp falls in the Egyptian pound.

Dust settling

Tourism revenue in 2011 is expected to have tumbled by about a third to \$9 billion with 10 million tourists visiting the country this year.

"Probably 90 percent of those tourists, maybe more, were around the beaches ... where life was absolutely normal," Abdel Nour said.

"The dust is settling and the situation is calming down, and I think it will calm down completely once the electoral process is finished."

Egypt's parliamentary election process, which began on 28 November and ends on 11 January, has been marred by a flare-up of clashes in Cairo between police and protesters demanding an immediate end to military rule. At least 17 people were killed in the protests in the latest wave of violence.

The army has promised a transition to civilian rule and a presidential poll in mid-2012.

Still, the strong lead held by Islamists in the parliamentary poll has aroused fears among liberals and others in Egypt that it could lead to rules that would ban alcohol sales and outlaw mixed bathing and bikinis in popular resorts.

For an industry that employs an estimated one in eight of Egypt's workforce, tourism will be protected by politicians and government alike, Abdel Nour said.

"I don't think that any responsible politician would venture and take a decision that would jeopardize a major sector of the economy," he said.

"Whatever government is in place, it cannot do without revenues of tourism, it cannot do without the job opportunities that are open in the touristic sector, and cannot do without the foreign exchange that is generated from this activity."

Egyptian unemployment stood at 11.8 percent in the second quarter of 2011, based on official figures, but experts say that figure is misleadingly low because the number estimated as employed includes millions struggling in the informal sector.

<http://www.almasryalyoum.com/en/node/575296>

5. JORDAN and LEBANON

• Bombs, threats ahead of New Year in Lebanon resort

TYRE, Lebanon,(AFP) — Zuheir Arnaout seethed with anger as he surveyed the

damage from a bomb that targeted his restaurant in Tyre, one of the few cities in southern Lebanon where alcohol is still tolerated.

"What is it they want? To stop people from drinking, from having a good time?" he demanded outside the popular "Tyros" restaurant on the scenic Mediterranean seafront.

On Wednesday, a bomb made of two kilos of TNT exploded and caused extensive damage to the restaurant, destroying the "Tyros" band's instruments in the process.

The attack came a few days before New Year's Eve and was the third of its kind targeting alcohol-friendly restaurants in Tyre in the past two months.

No one has yet claimed responsibility for the bombings in Tyre, an ancient Phoenician city that boasts a picturesque port and Roman archaeological sites.

Home to both Muslims and Christians, Tyre is also popular among expats and UN peacekeeping troops deployed in southern Lebanon along with their families.

Like many Tyre townsfolk, Arnaout believes the bombings aim to kill off the city's lucrative tourism sector, which peaks in summer, as well as its popularity during the winter holiday season.

"There are rumours going round that some want to prevent the New Year's Eve countdown from being celebrated in Tyre," he said.

But Arnaout insisted he would not give in to threats.

"New Year's Eve will be celebrated in this restaurant -- the livelihood of 32 families depends on it," he told AFP.

Another restaurateur, who asked not to be identified, said he had received an anonymous call advising him not to organise anything for New Year's Eve.

"They said it would be best for me and my restaurant," he said.

But he said the blows dealt to business in Tyre by a string of bombings in recent months has left him no choice but to push on with the festivities.

"My restaurant cost me half a million dollars to build, and since the last bombing we have basically had zero business," he said.

Other restaurant owners are taking a more cautious approach, with some hanging signs in their windows reading: "We regret we are unable to offer alcohol."

Another restaurant owner who also requested anonymity said: "We were hanging posters advertising our bash with alcohol galore on the evening of December 31.

"They were torn down overnight, and we have no idea who might have done it." On November 16, twin bombings hit Tyre in an attack officials said targeted the few remaining alcohol-friendly shops and clubs in conservative southern Lebanon.

The targets of the November bombings were a nightclub in a Shiite neighbourhood popular with UN troops and a liquor store in the Christian quarters of the city.

The campaign to rid the south of alcohol has been running for years.

Alcohol shops in the southern town of Nabatieh, where the majority of residents are Shiite Muslims, were forced to close their doors this year after popular protests demanding that the town become alcohol-free.

The recent bombings, combined with a campaign of intimidation by local conservative parties and their supporters, have also forced several liquor vendors in Tyre to close shop.

Tyre is politically controlled by the Shiite Amal Movement, a party led by parliament Speaker Nabih Berri and allied with the powerful militant group Hezbollah.

Salah Sebraoui, vice president of Tyre's municipality, told AFP officials had taken measures aimed at lessening the tension, installing surveillance cameras across the city.

But despite such measures, the streets of the normally bustling Tyre were eerily

empty on Wednesday, as tension gripped the city's neighbourhoods.

Some people have even begun to change their plans for the New Year, a holiday that is wildly popular in multi-confessional Lebanon.

"We have cancelled our reservation for 20 people on New Year's Eve and we'll probably head to Beirut to celebrate instead," said Hisham Bitar, a 44-year-old Muslim who is married to a Christian.

"If fundamentalists are behind these bombings, if their aim is to drag Tyre back to the Middle Ages, this is totally unacceptable," said Hoda, a shopkeeper in Tyre.

"Why don't they just let people live their lives?"

<http://asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&id=27887>

6. SYRIA

- **Syria's opposition calls for head monitor's exit; Russia reassured by 'calm' situation**

Friday, 30 December 2011



Demonstrators hold a poster of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad shaking hands with the head of the Arab League mission, Mustafa al-Dabi, during a protest in Kafranbel, near Adlib. (Reuters)

By AL ARABIYA WITH AGENCIES
CAIRO AND DAMASCUS

Syria's opposition has called for the removal of the Sudanese general heading the Arab League mission on a fact finding mission in Syria because he held key security positions in the regime of President Omar al-Bashir, who is wanted on international charges of committing genocide in Darfur.

But Russia's Foreign Ministry said on Friday that the comments from Arab League observers in Syria sent to check whether government forces have halted violence against protesters showed that the situation in the country was "reassuring."

“Judging by the public statements made by the chief of the mission al-Dabi, who in the first of his visits went to the city of Homs...the situation seems to be reassuring,” the ministry said in a statement on its website.

The ministry said that Moscow was counting on the team’s “professionalism and impartiality.”

Lt. Gen. Mohamed Ahmed Mustafa al-Dabi when started his Syria visits in Homs said that the situation was “calm” and not frightening despite sniper gunfire and the sight of deserted armored vehicles on the streets.

The controversy swirling around al-Dabi raises troubling questions about whether Arab League member states, with some of the world’s poorest human rights records, were fit for the mission to monitor compliance with a plan to end to the crackdown on political opponents by security forces loyal to President Bashar Assad.

The Syrian opposition has branded the League’s mission a farce, citing the ongoing violence against anti-government

protesters across the country even as the monitors worked on the ground. Arab League officials said the mandate of the monitors was not to intervene to stop the violence but to observe and report back to the group’s secretary general.

The 60 Arab League monitors who began work Tuesday are the first that Syria has allowed in during the nine-month uprising. They are supposed to be ensuring the regime is complying with terms of the League’s plan to end its crackdown.

The United Nations says more than 5,000 people have been killed in the uprising since it began in March.

The Arab League plan requires Assad’s regime to remove security forces and heavy weapons from city streets, start talks with opposition leaders, free political prisoners and allow human rights workers and journalists into the country.

Opposition critical of the mission

The Arab League’s decision to appoint as the head of the observer mission a Sudanese general on whose watch severe human rights violations were committed in Sudan risks undermining the League's

efforts so far and seriously calls into question the mission's credibility

Amnesty International

Syrian opposition groups have been critical of the mission, saying it gives Assad cover for his crackdown.

Amnesty International said Dabi led Bashir's military intelligence service until August 1995, when he was appointed head of external security in Sudan. "During the early 1990s, the military intelligence in Sudan was responsible for the arbitrary arrest and detention, enforced disappearance, and torture or other ill-treatment of numerous people in Sudan," it said in a statement.

"The Arab League's decision to appoint as the head of the observer mission a Sudanese general on whose watch severe human rights violations were committed in Sudan risks undermining the League's efforts so far and seriously calls into question the mission's credibility," Amnesty said.

Haytham Manna, a prominent Paris-based dissident, urged the Arab League to replace Dabi or reduce his authority.

"We know his history and his shallow experience in the area," he said.

Another opposition activist, Omar Idilbi of the Local Coordination Committees, described Dabi as a "senior officer with an oppressive regime that is known to repress opposition," adding that there are fears he might not be neutral.

The conflict in Darfur broke out in 2003, but has tapered off since 2009. The U.N. estimates 300,000 people died and 2.7 million have been displaced in the conflict. Dabi, unlike his mentor Bashir, is not formally accused of any crimes in Darfur.

De Waal, who interviewed Dabi for a book on Darfur he co-authored in 2008, said the Sudanese served in 1999 as Bashir's representative for western Darfur, where serious fighting had broken out related to intertribal tensions and Darfur's frustration with the Khartoum government.

"Dabi brought the situation under control with a show of force, including stationing military helicopters in the state capital and using them to intimidate the rebels. Many

were arrested during his tenure, and thousands of refugees fled to Chad.”

The Darfur rebels, according to de Waal, said Dabi’s time in the area was “the beginning of the organization of the Janjaweed,” the name given to pro-government militiamen blamed for many of the atrocities committed against Darfurians.

Dabi argued at the time that it was necessary to show a firm hand in the face of dissent, de Waal said.

“It is striking that although he had retired from the army at that point, Dabi insisted he be allowed to wear a military uniform on his mission, on the grounds that this would ensure that he was respected,” De Waal said.

Protests continue

Tens of thousands of protesters rallied near Damascus on Thursday as Syrian security forces killed at least 25 civilians nationwide and peace monitors spread out to areas hit by unrelenting violence.

Some 30,000 people gathered in a square outside the Grand Mosque in Douma just

north of the capital, prompting security forces to pull back from previously held positions, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

Earlier, as Arab League observers arrived at Douma city hall, security forces opened fire on protesters outside the mosque, killing at least four and wounding several others, the rights group said.

The observers, on the third day of a mission aimed at halting the bloodshed in Syria, also visited the central city of Hama, Idlib in the northwest, and Deraa in the south, according to Syrian television.

SANA, the official news agency, said observers visited the Baba Amro neighborhood of Homs, Harasta city, Deraa and Hama provinces “and met a number of citizens.”

Deraa is the cradle of the unprecedented nine-month protest movement against President Bashar al-Assad’s regime, which has ruled Syria with an iron fist for 11 years.

The United States said Thursday the presence of Arab monitors in Syria had

offered some benefit to protesters even if it had failed to halt the regime's deadly crackdown.

“We are concerned... that even though we have monitors on the ground and they are playing a role in some places, we also have a continuation of the violence,” State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland told reporters.

Nuland cited reports of people killed in Homs, Hama and Idlib on Wednesday even as “monitors were trying to deploy” in those cities following the Arab League deal with the Assad regime.

“That said, if you go up on YouTube today, you can see great pictures of a democracy rally in Idlib that went forward with quite a crowd, at the same time that the monitors were there,” Nuland said.

“So clearly, their presence appears to have provided some space for public expression.”

The Arab League monitors’ mission, according to top Syrian opposition leader Burhan Ghalioun, was to ensure that the group’s agreement with Damascus is

implemented, “stopping the killing and shooting.”

Speaking in Cairo after meeting League chief Nabil Elaraby, Ghalioun said Assad’s regime was holding more than 100,000 prisoners, with some kept in military barracks and on ships off the Syrian coast. There is danger that they could be killed so they are not found, he warned.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/12/30/185320.html?PHPSESSID=117pme41tpplkie3ddspv0n32>

- **Opposition call for fresh protests in Syria**

Activists urge opponents of the government emboldened by the presence of Arab League observers to take to the streets.

Syrian activists are urging opponents of the government emboldened by the presence of observers to take to the streets on Friday, a traditional day of mass protests, despite the country’s unrelenting bloodshed.

The appeal comes after activist groups reported that at least dozens of civilians were killed while tens of thousands of

people demonstrated on Thursday, as Arab League observers expanded their mission across the country.

"On Friday we will march to the squares of freedom, bare-chested," the group Syria Revolution 2011 said on its Facebook page.

"We will march as we did in Homs and Hama where we carried olive branches only to be confronted by Bashar's gangs who struck us with artillery and machine gun fire."

On Thursday, Syrian activists called for the removal of the head of the Arab League monitoring team in a new blow to the credibility of the mission.

The opposition has condemned the observer's presence as a farce to enable President Bashar al-Assad to buy time and avoid more international censure and sanctions.

The 60 Arab League monitors are the first set of observers allowed in to the country during the nine-month uprising.

Their remit is to ensure that the government is complying with the terms of the League's plan to end the crackdown on protests.

Syrian activists, however, doubt Arab monitors are getting the access they need to be able to give a fair assessment of the violence that the UN estimates has left more than 5,000 people.

They say the Arab team is only coordinating its work with the authorities and complain that security escorts, from the very forces that have sought to crush the protests, mean many activists dare not approach the monitors.

A member of the observer team told Al Jazeera the situation in Syria is "very dangerous".

The official, who declined to be named, said there was constant shelling in the city of Homs with some areas under control of the Free Syrian Army, an umbrella group of armed anti-government fighters.

The source said he believed the Arab League mission was certainly going to fail.

Civil disobedience

The Syrian Local Co-ordination Committees, an umbrella group of anti-government activist organisations, put the death toll in Thursday's violence at 38, many of them in cities that the Arab League delegation will tour.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said most of those were killed when Assad's forces opened fire on countrywide protests. Six reportedly died in the central city of Hama, where monitors recently arrived.

The group said security forces fired on a protest in Douma, a Damascus suburb, and killed four people.

Enraged residents launched a civil disobedience campaign and thousands reportedly flooded the main square for a sit-in.

"The activists have called for complete civil disobedience. The roads have been blocked, stores are shut down and the city is paralysed," said Rami Abdelrahman, head of the UK-based Observatory.

Monitors did not announce plans to inspect Douma on Thursday, but some residents said they saw cars with Arab League logos.

If true, it would be the team's first surprise visit, but no residents have reported seeing or speaking to monitors.

'Armed terrorist groups'

Speaking to Al Jazeera, Hadi Abdullah, an activist in Homs, said that monitors witnessed the crackdown on protests, but he was suspicious on how they would report it.

Observers plan to visit protests hubs in the country

"The observers saw a lot of violence in the city. They saw how security forces shoot at protests. They also saw the bodies of dead people," Abdullah said.

"The monitors also saw destruction in the city. One of the observers asked residents of Baba Amr neighbourhood 'How can you live in this place?'"

Another activist, Aram al-Dumi, from Douma, told Al Jazeera that there was a lack of co-ordination between activists and the observers.

"The delegation is relying solely on street signs when visiting the cities, they should rely on satellite images in order to locate the areas," Dumi said.

"There has been reports of security forces changing the street signs, this has been the case in Douma, today we went to the grand mosque square after a funeral procession to demonstrate and greet the observers but the army fired at us."

International diplomats from China, Russia and the US have urged Syria's government to facilitate the observer mission.

The Arab League plan endorsed by Syria on November 2 calls for the withdrawal of the military from towns and residential districts, a halt to violence against civilians and the release of detainees.

The Syrian government says most of the violence has been perpetrated by "armed terrorist groups" that are working against the government.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/12/201112308042806333.html>

- **Russian Foreign Ministry: Speeding up Convening of a National Political Dialogue in Syria Needed**

MOSCOW, (SANA)_ Russia voiced hope that members of the Arab League Observers Mission to Syria would reflect professionalism and objectivity in their work as to evade any violence and open the way before the implementation of the Arab Action work-plan for a peaceful solution to the crisis in Syria.

The Russian Foreign Ministry, in a statement Friday, underscored the need for speeding up the convening of a national political dialogue in Syria without any foreign interference, calling for regional and international coordinated support to the Observers' Mission, evaluating the Mission work positively in light of its actual activity in different Syrian Governorates.

The Russian Ministry statement added that it was clear through the statements made by the Mission Chairman, Mohamad al-Dabi, who visited Homs that the situation in Homs is satisfactory, where

members of the mission asserted that the Syrian Authorities provided every necessary support to them.

The Russian Statement called on the Syrian Authorities to continue their constructive cooperation with the Mission providing appropriate circumstances for it as to carry out the tasks stipulated by the Protocol signed in Cairo on December 19th between the Syrian Government and the League of Arab States.

The Russian Foreign Ministry Statement pointed out that the work of Arab Observers is still in its beginnings, asserting that such a positive work by the Observers was called for by Russia since the very beginning through Russia's contacts with all countries of the region, out of the necessity as to have unbiased and objective information regarding the ongoing in Syria.

<http://sana.sy/eng/22/2011/12/30/391405.htm>

7. ARABIAN PENINSULA AND THE GULF OF BASRA

• Bahrain to try police officers over 'torture'

Five officers to be tried over alleged torture of detainee who later died in custody, weeks after probe into crackdown.



Bahrain's rulers have pledged a policy of 'zero tolerance' towards any abuse of political detainees [Reuters]

Five police officers are to be put on trial in connection with the alleged torture of a detainee who later died in custody, Bahrain's Information Affairs Authority has said.

Nawaf Hamza, the country's top prosecutor, said in a statement that two unnamed officers have been charged with torture and mistreatment, and three others with negligence for failing to report the incident.

No details were provided about the five officers or the detainee. There were also no information about when and where the alleged torture took place.

The prosecution of the officers follows promises by Bahrain to address shortcomings highlighted in a scathing report on rights abuses during weeks of anti-government protests in the Gulf nation earlier this year.

Last month, a special commission authorised by Bahrain's Sunni rulers outlined the harsh treatment of anti-government protesters as state security forces put down the uprising by the country's majority Shia population.

The 500-page report documented the use of torture, excessive force and fast-track trials by the government.

Earlier on Thursday, Hamza said the Gulf kingdom had concluded an investigation into an alleged Iranian-linked terrorism cell and planned to put eight suspects on trial next month.

Hamza said the unnamed suspects will be tried in the island nation's High Criminal Court on charges of espionage and of having ties to an outlawed group that uses terrorism to achieve its goals.

Bahraini authorities in November accused the group of having links to Iran's powerful Revolutionary Guard and planning attacks against high profile sites, including the Saudi embassy and a Gulf causeway linking Bahrain and Saudi Arabia.

Court hearings are to begin in early January, with Iran rejecting the allegations.

'Zero tolerance'

Meanwhile, Bahrain's rulers have pledged a policy of "zero tolerance" towards any abuse of political detainees, to reinstate all public workers sacked for dissent and to allow foreign media into the kingdom.

The government said in a statement late on Wednesday that the measures were in line with the recommendations of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI).

The kingdom would demonstrate a "zero tolerance policy towards torture, inhuman treatment and degrading detention practices", said the statement carried by state news agency BNA.

The steps also include "reinstating all public sector employees by 1 January 2012 charged with free speech activity", said the English-language statement.

The government would also begin "signing contracts with leading international and regional news and feature channels and broadcast outlets guaranteeing a pluralist, inclusive media environment that encourages responsible journalism while minimising speech inciting hatred, and sectarianism", it added.

'Violence and sabotage'

Authorities on Saturday dropped charges relating to freedom of expression in 34 cases linked to anti-government protests in February and March, BNA reported.

The news agency cited Ali al-Bouainain, the prosecutor general, as saying the move affected 343 suspects, but that some of them facing other charges

"including acts of violence and sabotage" would still be prosecuted.

In March, security forces boosted by about 1,000 Gulf troops, mainly from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, crushed the month-long uprising in Manama's Pearl Square, epicentre of an anti-government movement that apparently took its lead from Tunisian and Egyptian protests.

The BICI said 35 people were killed in the unrest, including five security personnel, and five detainees who were tortured to death while in custody. Hundreds were also injured.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/12/201112305416407787.html>

8. AFGHANISTAN - PAKISTAN

• Roadside bomb kills four civilians in Afghanistan

KABUL: A roadside bomb killed four civilians in Afghanistan's southern province of Uruzgan on Friday, the provincial head of the crime investigation unit said.



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“Four civilians were killed and one injured when their vehicle hit a Taliban-planted mine in Trinkot city this morning,” said Gulab Khan.

All the victims were male and the civilian who was injured was in a critical condition, he added.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the attack, but roadside bombs are frequently planted by Taliban-led insurgents fighting a decade-long war against Nato-led foreign troops and Afghan government forces.

There are around 130,000 international troops, mainly from the United States, in Afghanistan helping government forces combat the insurgency.

The United Nations said the number of civilians killed in violence in Afghanistan rose by 15 per cent in the first six months of this year to 1,462, with insurgents blamed for 80 per cent of the killings.

<http://www.dawn.com/2011/12/30/roads-ide-bomb-kills-four-civilians-in-afghanistan.html>

- **Afghan-Nato raids kill, capture Taliban commanders**

KABUL: Nato says joint raids with Afghan forces have killed at least three and captured 11 Taliban commanders and facilitators who provided logistical support and weapons to insurgents.



Friday’s statement from the coalition says an operation earlier this week in Bakwah district in Farah province resulted in the killing of a senior insurgent leader and two of his commanders, as well as a “number of additional insurgents.”

Early on Friday, Nato and Afghan troops captured 11 Taliban fighters or sympathizers in five separate operations across the country.

Nighttime kill-and-capture raids, in which a number of civilians have died, have become a flashpoint for anger over



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foreign meddling in Afghanistan. President Hamid Karzai has demanded that foreign troops stop breaking into homes.

<http://www.dawn.com/2011/12/30/afghan-nato-raids-kill-capture-taliban-commanders.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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