



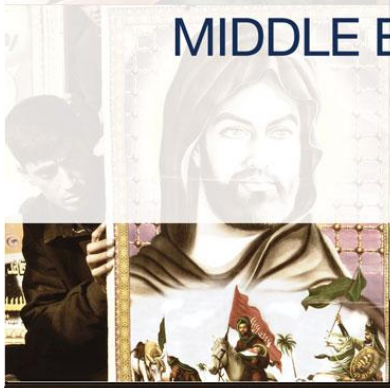
ORSAM
ORTADOĞU STRATEJİK ARAŞTIRMALAR MERKEZİ
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EASTERN STRATEGIC STUDIES

GÜNLÜK ORTADOĞU BÜLTENİ

MIDDLE EAST DAILY BULLETIN

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مركز الشرق الأوسط للدراسات الاستراتيجية

STRATEJİK BİLGİ YÖNETİMİ
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1. IRAQ

- **Iraq civilians killed and injured in Basra explosion**

A suicide bombing using an explosives belt left a number of civilians, including women and children, among killed and wounded western Al Basra, a police source announced on Saturday.

“A suicide bomber blew up himself, this morning, targeting civilians heading to Al Khotwa mosque, western Al Basra,” the source told Alsumarianews adding that the explosion led to the death and injury of an undetermined number of civilians including women and children.

“Ambulance cars rushed to the incident site and transported wounded to a nearby hospital for treatment and corpses to the department of forensic medicine,” the source declared on condition of anonymity adding that a security force cordoned off the region and blocked all roads leading to it, the source told Alsumaria.

Al Khotwa Mosque, situated near Al Basra city on the eastern entrance of Al Zubair District center, was the second mosque

built following Al Masjid Al Nabawi in the city of Medina, and the first one to be built outside KSA. Imam Ali Bin Abi Taleb prayed, during Al Jamal battle in 36 AH, at Al Khotwa mosque which bears a significant importance for Shiites who mass up by thousands in the mosque on religious occasions.

<http://www.alsumaria.tv/en/Iraq-News/1-72756-Iraq-civilians-killed-and-injured-in-Basra-explosion.html>

- **Baghdad Governor: Four armed Americans arrested in Iraq**

Baghdad Governor Salah Abdul Razak announced, on Thursday, that four armed Americans including two women were arrested as they were spotted wandering in a car near his house. Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs should undertake diplomatic measures to investigate this violation, Razak argued. He warned against the possibility of killing any other group regardless of the nationality in case the recurrence of a similar violation.

“A police detachment near my house stopped, this morning, a silver BMW carrying four Americans including two women,” Salah Abdul Razak told

Alsumarianews revealing that the four Americans carried weapons and wore protective shields. “The Police detachment arrested these Americans after examining their badges,” he added. “The security force drove detainees to sixth brigade headquarters in Kazimiyah to carry out necessary investigations and uncover the nature of their mission,” Abdul Razak declared noting that a diplomatic car carrying three Americans from the US embassy reached the detention facility 15 minutes following the incident.

“The four Americans were arrested in a popular residential area that doesn’t include vital sites,” Baghdad Governor explained indicating that there was no earlier consent by the province or its local government on the mission of these Americans.

“Detainees testified in preliminary investigations that they were ensuring the region’s security,” Abdul Razak uttered adding that he is skeptical about this statement. “Security forces could have shot them for penetrating the area without the consent or knowledge of

authorities,” he said, a source told Alsumaria.

“There are strict orders to shoot any person that penetrates the area without the consent of operations’ command,” Baghdad Governor declared stressing that killing these Americans would have aggravated the situation.

“Iraq’s security is an internal affair that doesn’t concern Americans even if they were intelligence members,” Abdul Razak argued considering that this incident was a clear US violation after Iraq recuperated sovereignty.

Foreign Affairs Ministry should undertake strict measures and demand diplomatic explanations from the US embassy, Baghdad Governor called warning that security forces would treat as terrorist whoever commits such violations regardless of the nationality.

<http://www.alsumaria.tv/en/Iraq-News/1-72726-Baghdad-Governor%3A-Four-armed-Americans-arrested-in-Iraq.html>

- **Kuwait postpones visit of Iraq Prime Minister Nuri Al Maliki**

Kuwaiti Government announced, on Wednesday, that it postponed Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri Al Maliki's visit to Kuwait because of its preoccupation with parliamentary elections. We are looking forward for Maliki's visit to complete negotiations and settle outstanding issues, Kuwaiti government advanced.

"Kuwaiti Prime Minister Jaber Mubarak Al Hamad Al Sabah contacted Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri Al Maliki by phone and asked him to postpone his visit to Kuwait because of Kuwaiti Government's preoccupation with parliamentary elections," Kuwaiti Deputy Prime Minister, Foreign Affairs Minister and State Minister for Cabinet Affairs Sabah Khaled Al Hamad Al Sabah told Alsumarianews on the sidelines of the inauguration of an information center for Kuwaiti Ministry of Information in preparation for 2012 elections.

"Kuwaiti Government is looking forward for Iraqi Prime Minister's visit to continue negotiations and settle outstanding issues," Al Sabah declared. "Iraqi-Kuwaiti joint committee established a plan to determine all solutions for unsolved issues

and continue negotiations that started in 2011," he indicated, a source told Alsumaria.

Iraqi Government declared, in mid November 2011, that Prime Minister Maliki received an invitation from his Kuwaiti counterpart Nasser Al Hamad to visit Kuwait in order to discuss the pending issues between both countries and find adequate solutions. This visit hasn't taken place yet because of political developments in Kuwait following the resignation of Kuwaiti Prime Minister Nasser Al Mohamed Al Sabah.

Prince of Kuwait Sheikh Sabah Al Ahmad Al Sabah had approved, on October 28, the resignation of Sheikh Nasser Al Mohamed Al Sabah's government following massive demonstrations calling for his resignation.

<http://www.alsumaria.tv/en/Iraq-News/1-72695-Kuwait-postpones-visit-of-Iraq-Prime-Minister-Nuri-Al-Maliki.html>

- **Iraqiya states its demands to the National Conference's preparatory committee]**

Baghdad (NINA) – At the end of a meeting held on Saturday evening, Jan. 14, chaired by its leader, Iyad Allawi, Iraqiya Slate decided to address a message to President Jalal Talabani stating its demands to attend the preparatory meeting preceding the National Conference, as a good will gesture to end the current political crisis.



In a statement to NINA, the official spokesperson for Iraqiya Slate, Maysoun al-Damalouji, said, “Iraqiya’s meeting today was centered on the necessity to make the proposed National Conference successful to end the political crisis if good will present and positive environments exist through implementing Iraqiya’s demands.”

Damalouji added, “Among Iraqiya’s demands are, not to politically influence the judiciary, carry a just trial to Tariq al-Hashimi to be held outside Baghdad, Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki withdraws

his request to Parliament to withdraw confidence from Iraqiya official, Saleh al-Mutlaq, forming a committee from political blocs to look into the cases of detainees who have suffered too long in detentions without having their cases look into and have just trials be carried in their cases.”

She added that the message will also include follow up what has been achieved of Erbil Agreement and draw a road map for the political process.

Damalouji pointed out that the message will be delivered to President Talabani by a delegation representing Iraqiya consisting of Sheikh Hussein al-Shalan, Adnan al-Janabi and Salman al-Jumaili. If Iraqiya’s demands are not met this means that Iraqiya will not attend the Conference’s Preparatory meetings.

http://www.ninanews.com/english/News_Details.asp?ar95_VQ=FJKHLD

- **Hashemi’s question legal not political, KRG PM**

ERBIL, Jan. 16 (AKnews) – Kurdistan Regional Government Prime Minister Barham Ahmed Salih said on Sunday that

the question of Iraq's Vice President Tareq al-Hashimi, who is wanted for terror charges, is a legal issue not a political one and should be treated so.

Hashemi was charged by authorities in Baghdad with using his bodyguards as death squads, bombing and shooting Shiite targets. Following the arrest warrant being issued in Baghdad, Hashemi fled to Kurdistan Region to seek protection where Kurdish leaders have defied court orders to bring him in.

Hashemi said he would not go to Baghdad for the trial because he believes the courts there were politicized while authorities in Baghdad have been pressing on the Kurdish government to turn him in. The issue has caused sectarian tension between the Mainly Sunni Iraqiya list and the Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's Shiite bloc.

Salih told reporters on Sunday at a book fair organized by Aras Publishers in Erbil that "Hashemi's problem is a legal issue and should not be mixed with politics. The President of Iraq and the President of Kurdistan Region are making efforts to find a solution that would guarantee the

independence of the courts and commitment to the constitution."

<http://www.aknews.com/en/aknews/4/284541/>

- **KIG and KDP met to discuss general situation**

ERBIL, Jan.15 (AKnews)- In the meeting today between Kurdistan Islamic Group and Kurdistan Democratic Party only the current political situation of Iraq and Kurdistan was discussed, a KIG politburo member said.

KobunawaSpeaking to AKnews, Abdul-Sattar Majid, said that today a delegation of KIG politburo, led by Emir of the party Ali Bapir, met with senior KDP officials in the office of Nechirvan Barzani, KDP's vice president, in Erbil.

The meeting today followed a visit by a KDP delegation to KIG's office last months, Majid added.

The official said that the leaders did not discuss whether KIG will participate in the new cabinet, to be led by a KDP representative.

"As part of the opposition our participation in the new cabinet or abstaining from it will be determined by the vote of the three parties in the opposition, " Majid said, "Therefore, we did not discuss this issue in the meeting."

KIG, Kurdistan Islamic Union, and Gorran (Change) Movement play opposition in the coalition government of KDP, led by Kurdistan Regional President Massoud Barzani and Kurdistan Patriotic Union, led by Iraqi President, Jalal Talabani.

KDP's meeting with Bapir last month was for the KIG to mediate between the KIU and the KDP.

Relations between the two parties strained over some recent events in Duhok province. KDP accused KIU of inciting the public to burn hotels, massage parlors, liquor shops while KIU pointed the finger at KDP supporters for burning its offices in Duhok. A committee found that the mobs were provoked to do violence and that the officials failed to control the situation and prevent violence.

<http://www.aknews.com/en/aknews/4/284479/>

• **Barzani to meet with Kurdish deputies in Baghdad**

ERBIL, Jan.15 (AKnews)- Massoud Barzani, Iraqi Kurdistan regional president will meet with Kurdish lawmakers and deputies to the Iraqi Council of Ministers on Wednesday in Baghdad.

Sarok BarzaniSaaed Rasul, a member of the Kurdistan Blocs Coalition, told AKnews that the meeting will be over the situation of Iraq.

After a major parliamentary bloc, Iraqiya List, led by Ayad Allawi, boycotted sessions of the House of Representatives and Council of Ministers, Iraqi President Jalal Talabani called for an urgent meeting of the senior party leaders to overcome the crisis of caused by the boycott. The summit seems unlikely as each party proposes preconditions, unaccepted by others.

Asked whether Gorran (Change) Movement will also attend the meeting, Shorish Haji, head of the Kurdish faction to Bagdad House of Representatives said "right now we will not make any statements about this."

Gorran and two Islamic parties in Kurdistan play opposition in the coalition government of Kurdistan Democratic Party, led by Barzani, and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, headed by Talabani.

Gorran separated from KBC whereas Islamic parties remained in the alliance to Baghdad.

<http://www.aknews.com/en/aknews/4/284469/>

- **Blocs' meeting called for national unity, nothing solved - Jaffari**

BAGHDAD / Aswat al-Iraq: The Chairman of National Alliance Ibraheem al-Jaffari disclosed today that the meeting of the political blocs called for national unity, abidance by the constitution and separation of powers, but did not solve any disputed question.

In a statement issued by his office, received by Aswat al-Iraq, he pointed out that the coming meeting will be held after the return of President Jalal Talabani from his trip".

Talabani left today for Germany for medical check-ups as reported by a presidential statement.

He added that the National Alliance stressed the importance of having political unity, strengthening the government, parliament and judicial power, with the necessity to separate the three powers.

Sunday meeting was upon an initiative made by President Jalal Talabani and attended by Premier Nouri al-Maliki, Parliament Speaker Usama Nujaifi and representative of main political blocs in the parliament, in preparation for holding the general national conference due at the end of this month.

http://en.aswatiliraq.info/%28S%28dkh5ji55k4znihen5dpy2s45%29%29/Default1.aspx?page=article_page&id=146513&l=1

- **Barzani, Burns discuss political developments - statement**

ARBIL / Aswat al-Iraq: The president of the Iraqi Kurdistan region Masoud Barzani met today with the deputy secretary of the US State Department William Burns to discuss the latest political developments on the

Iraqi scene, according to presidential statement.

In the statement, received by Aswat al-Iraq, Barzani met William Burns and his accompanying delegation, where the Iraqi crisis was among the topics discussed between them.

According to the statement, Barzani confirmed his continued attempts to bring viewpoints closer, as well as supporting the moves by President Jalal Talabani to hold a general national conference for solving pending questions.

On the his side, Mr Burns evaluated Barzani's role in uniting Iraqi components, but expressed his concern for the conflicts that faced the political process in the country.

http://en.aswataliraq.info/%28S%28dkh5ji55k4znihen5dpy2s45%29%29/Default1.aspx?page=article_page&id=146512&l=1

2. IRAN

- **Diplomat Stresses Iran's Growing Influence despite West's Restrictions**

TEHRAN (FNA)- The influence of Iran in region and in the international community is growing every day despite all pressures and restrictions imposed on Iran by the West, a senior Iranian diplomat said.



"In spite of all-out pressures and plots in the recent decades by western countries, the regional and international status of the Islamic Republic of Iran is improving day-by-day," Tehran's Ambassador to Paris Ali Ahani said, addressing a gathering of Iranian Embassy staff members in Paris on Sunday.

Noting that although the enemies have joined hands to make the atmosphere more poisonous against the Islamic Republic of Iran, Iranian envoy pointed out despite all these efforts Iran has a unique status among international bodies such as Non-Aligned Movement (NAM).

Iran is under four rounds of UN Security Council sanctions for turning down West's

calls to give up its right of uranium enrichment, saying the demand is politically tainted and illogical.

The US and its western allies allege that Iran is pursuing a nuclear weapons program while they have never presented corroborative evidence to substantiate their allegations against the Islamic Republic.

But, Iran says its nuclear program is a peaceful drive to produce electricity so that the world's fourth-largest crude exporter can sell more of its oil and gas abroad.

Tehran also stresses that the country is pursuing a civilian path to provide power to the growing number of Iranian population, whose fossil fuel would eventually run dry.

<http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9010171371>

- **Minister: US, Israel, Britain Collaborate in Assassinations in Iran**

TEHRAN (FNA)- Iranian Intelligence Minister Heidar Moslehi underscored that the US, Israeli and British spy agencies

were involved in the recent terrorist attack against an Iranian scientist, and added that Iran will give crushing response to the terrorist acts.



Speaking to reporters after a cabinet meeting here in Tehran on Sunday, Moslehi stressed Mossad, CIA and MI6 involvement in Wednesday's terrorist attack, and added, "The US and Britain cannot pretend that they did not have anything to do with the terrorist attack."

"An important point which is quite evident in this incident is that the US and British governments cannot distance themselves from the terrorist act by claiming the Iranian scientist was not martyred by their agents," he stated.

Referring to the terrorist measures of the Zionist regime in the Middle-East, Moslehi pointed out that the US and Britain have installed the Zionist regime in the Middle-East to commit these crimes.

He pointed out that the Islamic Republic of Iran will give crushing responses to US, Britain and Mossad and their terrorist attempts.

"A national committee will be formed in coordination with the secretariat of the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) in order to provide the international legal organizations with the existing documents pertaining to the involvement of the Zionist regime in assassination of Iranian nuclear scientists," the minister said.

In the fifth attack of its kind in two years, a magnetic bomb was attached to the car of 32-year-old Mostafa Ahmadi Roshan during the Wednesday morning rush-hour in the capital, Tehran. His driver was also killed in the terrorist attack.

The Wednesday blast took place on the second anniversary of the martyrdom of Iranian university professor and nuclear scientist, Massoud Ali Mohammadi, who was also assassinated in a terrorist bomb attack in Tehran in January 2010.

The assassination method used in the Wednesday bombing was similar to the

2010 terrorist bomb attacks against the then university professor, Fereidoun Abbasi Davani - who is now the head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organization - and his colleague Majid Shahriari. Abbasi Davani survived the attack, while Shahriari was martyred.

Another Iranian scientist, Dariush Rezaeinejad, was also assassinated through the same method on 23 July 2011.

An Iranian court of revolution in August sentenced to death the terrorist who assassinated Ali Mohammadi in 2010.

Majid Jamali Fashi pleaded guilty to murdering Massoud Ali Mohammadi.

Tehran's Public and Revolution Courts Prosecutor Abbas Jafari Dolatabadi announced at the time that Jamali Fashi had been trained in Mossad's military bases.

Jafari Dolatabadi also stated that Jamali Fashi had received \$120,000 from the Zionist regime to carry out the assassination and then returned to Iran.

Majid Jamali Fashi said in his confessions aired by the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) on January 11, 2011, "I became acquainted with a number of Israeli officers on the Jerusalem-Tel Aviv highway after we had a visit to Israel and I received different training courses, including chasing, running, counter-chasing and techniques for planting bombs in a car."

The terrorist added that he had also been trained in that Israeli garrison how to carry out bomb attacks while riding a motorcycle.

Jamali Fashi also said that he had received psychological and operational briefings for assassinating Dr. Ali Mohammadi and had exercised the bombing plot for killing the Iranian scientist several times at the Israeli garrison.

He also mentioned during his confessions that small models of Dr. Mohammadi's house and his house surroundings were used during his training course.

<http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9010171367>

- **Spokesman: Iran Studying US Letter on Strait of Hormuz**

TEHRAN (FNA)- Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesman Ramin Mehman-Parast confirmed receiving a US letter on the Strait of Hormuz, and underlined that Tehran is studying the message and will respond to it if necessary.



Mehman-Parast reiterated that Iran has received a US message regarding the Strait of Hormuz via three different channels.

"The US Ambassador to the UN Susan Rice had handed a letter to Iran's Ambassador to the UN Mohammad Khazayee; the Swiss Ambassador to Tehran [Livia Leu Agosti] also conveyed the same thing; and Iraqi President Jalal Talabani delivered the same message to Iranian officials," he said on Sunday.

Mehman-Parast said Iran is studying the letter and "will respond if necessary."

The Us letter follows threats by Iran last month to shut off the Strait of Hormuz - the world's most important oil shipping lane - if new US and EU sanctions over its nuclear program halted Iranian oil exports.

The United States has said it would not allow Iran to block the Strait, calling it a "red line" for the US military.

In response, Lieutenant Commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) Brigadier General Hossein Salami dismissed the US warning over the closure of the strategic strait, and stressed that powerful Iran acts on its own and never asks for anyone's permission to carry out what it desires.

"The US is not in a position" to affect Iran's decisions, Salami told FNA late in December. "Iran does not ask permission to implement its own defensive strategies."

Meantime, US Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman General Martin Dempsey acknowledged that Iran is able to close the Strait of Hormuz.

"They've invested in capabilities that could, in fact, for a period of time block the Strait of Hormuz," Dempsey said in an interview aired on Sunday on the CBS "Face the Nation" program.

<http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9010171347>

- **Iran can use 'different tools' to defend interests: military advisor**

TEHRAN, Jan. 16 (MNA) – A senior military advisor to the Supreme Leader warns that if Iran is threatened it has different tools to “defend its national interests.”

“If the Islamic Republic of Iran is threatened (it) is able to use different tools to defend its national interests,” Major General Yahya Rahim-Safavi said without giving further details.

<http://www.mehrnews.com/en/newsdetail.aspx?NewsID=1510568>

- **'Certain inspectors have leaked info on Iranian scientists'**

TEHRAN, Jan. 15 (MNA) – Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Ramin Mehmanparast has said that there is

evidence that certain international inspectors, who have travelled to Iran to inspect (nuclear) facilities, have provided terrorist groups with Iranian nuclear scientists' particulars.

Mehmanparast made the remarks on Saturday on the sidelines of a ceremony held to commemorate the memory of Mostafa Ahmadi-Roshan, an Iranian graduate of Sharif University of Technology in chemical engineering and an official at the Natanz nuclear enrichment facility, who was assassinated in Tehran on January 11.

"Certain people travelled to our country as inspectors and identified nuclear scientists, and provided terrorist groups with their names. We will pursue the matter with international forums and will discredit them," he stated.

"The enemy explored all ways to prevent the progress of the Islamic Republic of Iran and achieved nothing. Now it has taken actions like assassination, which are totally indefensible," he added. "Those who talk about human rights and claim to be campaigning against terrorism are in

fact disgracing themselves by taking such actions."

On Saturday, the Iranian Foreign Ministry also issued two protest notes addressed to the U.S. and British governments holding them accountable for the terrorist attack on the Iranian academic.

The message addressed to the U.S. government, read, "According to authentic documents and reliable information, the assassination plot was directed, supported, and planned by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and was carried out with the direct involvement of the agents affiliated with this organization, and the government is directly responsible for it and should be answerable based on international regulations and rights and bilateral commitments."

In the note addressed to the British government, the Foreign Ministry pointed to the remarks that MI6 chief Sir John Sawers made on October 28, 2010, in which he said, "Stopping nuclear proliferation cannot be addressed purely by conventional diplomacy. We need intelligence-led operations to make it

more difficult for countries like Iran to develop nuclear weapons.”

<http://www.mehrnews.com/en/newsdetail.aspx?NewsID=1509877>

- **Iran tells Gulf states not to lift oil output**



Country's OPEC envoy threatens "consequences" if neighbouring states make up for oil shortfall caused by sanctions.

Iran has threatened to block the Strait of Hormuz, a key oil shipping route, in response to an international oil embargo [EPA]

Iran has warned its neighbours in the Gulf not to make up for any shortfall in its oil exports caused by Western sanctions.

A new round of US sanctions approved last month targets the Iranian central

bank, making it more difficult for Iran to sell oil abroad, though the US has delayed implementing those sanctions by six months.

And the European Union has agreed in principle to block imports of Iranian oil; it could reach a final decision on the embargo within the next week.



Those sanctions would almost inevitably create a shortfall in world markets: Iran is the second-biggest oil producer in OPEC, behind only Saudi Arabia; it pumps some 2.5 million barrels per day, and earns \$75bn annually from those exports.

Ali al-Naimi, Saudi Arabia's oil minister, said over the weekend that his country would make up for any shortfall caused by the embargo. But Iran warned on Sunday that oil producers would face unspecified "consequences" if they boost their output.

"We would not consider these actions to be friendly," said Mohammad Ali Khatibi, Iran's OPEC envoy. "If the oil production nations on the Persian Gulf decide to substitute Iran's oil, then they will be held responsible for what happens."

Relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia have long been tense, and they worsened last year over allegations of a plot to assassinate the Saudi ambassador in Washington.

'They are standing ready'

The question of a shortfall has been a key issue during EU debates over the proposed embargo. Alain Juppe, the French foreign minister, said earlier this week that "other countries" had agreed to increase their production in order to keep world oil prices from spiking.

"The producers don't want to talk about it, but they are standing ready," Juppe said.

Inside Story: Can Iran survive US sanctions?

The proposed EU sanctions would likely give oil producers "grace periods" on their

existing contracts, allowing them time to find alternative suppliers outside Iran.

Tensions have been mounting for weeks over the proposed embargoes. Iran warned last week that it would respond to international oil sanctions by blocking the Strait of Hormuz, the narrow waterway through which one-fifth of the world's oil is transported.

The United States has described such a move as a "red line," suggesting Iran would face a US military strike in response.

The sanctions are part of a growing Western effort to pressure Iran to abandon its nuclear programme. Analysts say several rounds of sanctions are beginning to take a toll on the Iranian economy. The Iranian rial fell earlier this month to an historic low against the dollar.

A spokesman for Iran's foreign ministry, Ramin Mehmanparast, said the proposed embargoes are part of a US-led effort to "eliminate economic rivals in the world."

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/01/201211595031725845.html>

3. ISRAEL - PALESTINE

- **Palestinian officials: Israel stripped Abbas of VIP status**

Abbas says given watered-down travel permit, says it's reflection of Israel's continued control over Palestinians; Israeli officials say permit is result of technical glitch.

Israel has stripped Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas of VIP status and given him a watered-down travel permit that is valid for just two months, Palestinian officials charged Sunday.

The officials said that Abbas complained about the permit at an internal meeting of his Fatah Party last week.

In a speech, Abbas said the new permit, similar to those required for Palestinian laborers entering Israel, was a reflection of Israel's continued control over the Palestinians, and suggested that Israel was trying to punish him for applying for Palestinian membership in the United Nations.

The officials spoke on condition of anonymity Sunday because they were not allowed to brief reporters.

Maj. Guy Inbar, a spokesman for the Israeli agency that issues travel documents to Palestinians, said there has been no change in policy. He said the permit was the result of a technical glitch that should be resolved soon.

"Freedom of movement ... remains exactly the same as it was," Inbar said.

The VIP permit allowed Abbas to travel whenever and wherever he wanted. Palestinian officials acknowledged the new permit has not prevented Abbas, a frequent traveler to world capitals, from moving in and out of the West Bank.

On Sunday, Abbas flew to London for talks with British leaders.

Dozens of local Facebook users spread what appeared to be a copy of Abbas' travel permit, in many cases with sarcastic comments about Abbas' weakness. "See you at the checkpoint," wrote one user, identified as Nidal Ahmed.

Adnan Dmiri, spokesman for the Palestinian security forces, said dozens of Palestinian officials have lost VIP cards since the middle of last year ... shortly before Abbas' appeal to the United Nations in September. Israel bitterly opposed the UN gambit, saying the Palestinians should be admitted to the world body only as part of a negotiated peace agreement.

"We believe that Israel is using all means to pressure the Palestinian Authority to step away from its political path of resorting to the international community," Dmiri said.

Israeli-Palestinian peace talks have been stalled for more than three years over the issue of Israeli settlement construction in the West Bank and east Jerusalem.

Early this month, the chief negotiators from the two sides began meeting again in hopes of finding a formula for the formal resumption of talks.

<http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/palestinian-officials-israel-stripped-abbas-of-vip-status-1.407471>

- **'Mossad agents on the ground killed Iran scientist'**

'Sunday Times' publishes account of what it claims were Roshan's last minutes and the Israeli agents who took his life.

The London-based Sunday Times published what it claimed is an account of Iranian nuclear scientist Mostafa Ahmadi Roshan's last minutes on earth and the final preparations of the alleged Israeli Mossad agents that took his life.

According to the Times's unverified account published Sunday, the covert assassination mission was complicated by unusual activity at the Iranian intelligence headquarters in Tehran last Wednesday morning, but having decided that his agents "would never escape anyway," the on-the-ground mission commander gave the go-ahead anyway.

From that point, almost all the details are known. Men on a motorcycle sped up to the scientist's car, attached a magnetic explosive device and sped away. Roshan was critically injured in the resulting blast and died later in a Tehran hospital.

In addition to the Times, TIME magazine and senior Iranian officials have all in the past week accused Israel of being behind most recent, and a string of killings targeting Iranian scientists over the past two years.

While Israel has not taken responsibility or fully denied involvement, two top IDF officers, Chief of General Staff Lt.-Gen. Benny Gantz and Spokesman Brig.-Gen. Yoav Mordechai sent out cryptic messages that provided Israel's accusers with fodder for their speculation.

Stressing that he did not know who assassinated the scientist, Mordechai wrote on his Facebook page last week: "I will definitely not shed a tear for him."

Gantz, speaking to the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee last week, said that 2012 would be a "critical year" for Tehran. He added there may be more "unnatural" events in Tehran.

For his part, President Shimon Peres said that as far as he knows, Israel was not involved in the assassination.

<http://www.jpost.com/IranianThreat/News/Article.aspx?id=253806>

- **Israel, Palestinians spar over Quartet deadline**



PA: Jan. 26 is deadline to present comprehensive border, security proposals; Israel maintains it has another 2 months.

Jerusalem hopes the Palestinians are not looking for an excuse to leave direct negotiations just two weeks after they began, an Israeli government official said Sunday.

He was responding to a report in the London-based Al-Hayat newspaper asserting the Palestinians are considering ending the talks in Jordan and searching for alternatives.

According to the report, the Palestinians were considering a number of different

steps, including turning to the UN and asking it to demand an end to construction in the settlements.

Israeli envoy Yitzhak Molcho and chief PLO negotiator Saeb Erekat met Saturday night at the headquarters of the Jordanian General Intelligence Department in Amman for the third round of Jordanian-sponsored talks since January 3. For the first time, neither representatives of Jordan nor the Quartet – the US, EU, UN and Russia – participated in these talks.

Al-Hayat quoted a senior Palestinian official as saying there would be only one more meeting between the two sides, on January 25.

The official said the planned meeting would be decisive because it would determine whether the two parties would be able to move to direct negotiations or declare the failure of the Amman talks.

The Palestinians say January 26 is a deadline imposed by the Quartet on the two sides last September to present comprehensive proposals on border and security issues.

The Palestinians have already presented their proposals.

Israel, however, maintains January 26 is not a deadline, and the Quartet said in its September statement outlining a path to renewing the talks that the two sides needed to present their proposals 90 days after direct talks began.

“It is not logical to think that we could solve all these issues and present proposals 21 days after the talks began,” one Israeli government official said. The official said Israel was more than willing to present its proposals after 90 days, although he would not say whether this included a willingness to present the Palestinians a map of where precisely Israel wanted to draw the borders of a future Palestinian state.

One PA official in Ramallah said the US Administration and some EU governments were putting heavy pressure on PA President Mahmoud Abbas to continue the talks with Israel after January 26.

He said American and European government officials have told Abbas the Quartet deadline clock started only when

the Israelis and Palestinians began their talks in Amman two weeks ago.

“Now they are telling us that the deadline expires in March.” he said.

But Abbas Zaki, a senior Fatah official, announced Sunday the Palestinians would not agree to hold further talks with Israel after January 26 “because the Israeli government is not serious about moving the peace process forward.”

Zaki claimed the Israeli government was afraid of achieving progress with the Palestinians because of upcoming elections in Israel.

Israel’s elections are not scheduled until late 2013, and despite a great deal of political maneuvering in recent weeks, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu has not given any indication he intends on calling them early.

According to the Palestinian official quoted in Al- Hayat, Abbas is now in the process of seeking international assistance in exerting pressure on Israel to freeze construction in the settlements and east Jerusalem.

“Settlements will be at the core of the upcoming Palestinian diplomatic offensive because they undermine the foundations of the two-state solution,” the Palestinian official said.

Israeli officials said it was not clear whether the Palestinians, as they have threatened, would indeed return to efforts to seek statehood recognition at the UN, or take other unilateral steps in various international forums.

“The Palestinians have a history of brinkmanship,” one official said. “But I would remind you that if the Palestinians take unilateral steps, Israel has options on that track as well.”

Following the Palestinian success in gaining acceptance in UNESCO in October, Israel declared it was expediting the construction of 2,000 new units in east Jerusalem, Ma’ale Adumim and Gush Etzion, and cutting off the transfer of tax payments it collects on behalf of the PA.

<http://www.jpost.com/DiplomacyAndPolitics/Article.aspx?id=253747>

4. AFRICA and EGYPT

- **Egypt's greatest enemy is poverty – Amr Moussa**

Cairo, Asharq Al-Awsat – In an extensive interview with Asharq Al-Awsat, former Arab League Secretary-General and Egyptian presidential hopeful Amr Moussa spoke on a number of topics, including the political situation in Egypt, his presidential campaign, and his hopes for the future of the country.

Amr Moussa served as Egyptian Minister of Foreign Affairs between 1991 and 2001, following a career in the diplomatic service. Following this, Moussa served as Arab League Secretary-General between 2001 and 2011, leaving the post to return to Egypt following the ouster of former president Hosni Mubarak. Amr Moussa is perhaps the most prominent Egyptian presidential candidate to have thrown his hat into the ring, and opinion polls consistently show him as leading the Egyptian presidential race. The last such poll, conducted in November 2011, by the Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, showed Moussa winning 39 percent of the vote.

The following is the full text of the interview:

[Asharq Al-Awsat] You were amongst the Egyptian politicians who signed the Al-Azhar charter last week. What can you tell us about this?

[Moussa] There was an important document at Al-Azhar [University] which we signed. This was signed by the Prime Minister [Kamal al-Ganzuri], the Pope [Shenouda III of Alexandria], the General Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood [Mohammed Badei], and myself. In addition to this, the party leaders also signed this document, including the leaders of the Freedom and Justice party, the Wafd party, the al-Nour party, and others.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] How does this document or agreement differ from the other agreements that have been made?

[Moussa] It is an addition [to the other agreements]. It includes a very important article, called “completing the goals of the revolution”, and its [other] major articles confirm freedom of belief, freedom of opinion, freedom of expression, freedom

of scientific research, freedom of creativity in literature and the arts, and more. All of this is coming from Al-Azhar University, which speaks about development, scientific research, freedom of worship, freedom of expression and more, and so this is something that is very good, and that is why I confidently signed this agreement. Al-Azhar is regaining and recovering its leadership role, informing the Egyptians and all the Muslims around the world that these principles are righteous Islamic principles, namely freedom of belief and worship....and therefore this is something that is very beautiful.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] You mentioned freedom of creativity in literature and the arts. Is this a response to the fears that the Islamists will restrict Egypt's literature and arts?

[Moussa] No, I do not believe this. However this might be viewed as being a "response" to stagnation. Among those who attended the Al-Azhar signing was the leader of the [Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated] Freedom and Justice party Dr. Mohamed Morsy who said something very important. He said, we have won a

majority [in parliament] but we believe that every Egyptian decision in the future requires consensus of opinion, otherwise this will result in one viewpoint dominating other viewpoints, one party dominating [other] parties, without any concern being paid to [parliamentary] majority and minority.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] As we approach the one-year anniversary of the 25 January revolution in Egypt, do you believe that the revolution has achieved its objectives, particularly as some people are claiming that what has happened is nothing more than superficial change; one corrupt and autocratic regime being traded in for another?

[Moussa] No, this is an extremely narrow point of view, which perhaps intends to inflame the situation. Otherwise, how can we explain the recent Egyptian parliamentary elections, which were completely different than all other elections that have taken place in Egypt over the past decades? Doesn't this represent an essential step on the road to democracy, and which can be considered one of the objectives of the revolution? So, this is one objective that has been

fulfilled. We can also take the specification of a deadline for a new president to be elected, which is 30 June, as the fulfillment of another revolutionary objective. This means that there is a transition from the era of dictatorship and autocratic hegemony to the era of a president being elected, not appointed. This was also one of the objectives of the revolution. What about the former president and pillars of the former regime being brought to trial? Wasn't this also one of the revolutions objectives? The priorities of the political authorities, the presence of the revolution and revolutionary political parties and coalitions, and the main principles that everybody is talking about today...all of this is completely different from the past. When the proposal was put forward for a decentralized [political] system in Egypt, starting with the election of governors and mayors, and the presence of village, municipal, and provincial councils...this shows that democracy can now be found at all levels [of Egyptian politics]. Isn't this the fulfillment of one of the objectives of the revolution? What about the change in Egyptian society at its most basic level, the change of rule, and the manner of ruling Egypt? When you hear everybody talking

about reviewing Egypt's legal and economic system, and rebuilding the country...all of this represents the fulfillment of the objectives of the Egyptian revolution. As for power being transferred from the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces [SCAF] to an elected national authority by 1 July [2012]...this will represent the fulfillment of one of the major objectives of the revolution.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] However despite these achievements, many people in Egypt – particularly the youth who drove the 25 January revolution – are disappointed about the course of events following Mubarak's ouster. There are some fears that 25 January, 2012, may see the people taking to the street en masse to express their anger. Is this likely?

[Moussa] This is a good question, and some people do indeed believe that 25 January 2012, may be a day of clashes, or some forces of chaos may seek to incite such clashes.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] These people are demanding that SCAF immediately hand over power to a civil government. What is your view of this issue?

[Moussa] The issue of power being transferred immediately is not acceptable; otherwise we will be a Jamahiriya [Gaddafi's Libya] and not a jumhuriya [republic]. This is not possible, there will be a transition to an elected national authority, and I stress the term elected here, by the deadline that is already in place. As for the public discussion about the 25 January anniversary, this will be a day of celebration, a day of unity and coming together, not a day of clashes and chaos.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] What about those who fear bloody clashes breaking out in Egypt between 25 January and 11 February, the anniversary of the ouster of the Mubarak regime? Do you think there is any possibility of this happening?

[Moussa] Why would this happen? This is not one of the demands of the revolution. This is an anarchist demand, and there is a big difference between those calling for revolution and those calling for anarchy.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] When will candidates begin to register their candidacy for the Egyptian presidential elections?

[Moussa] This will begin on 15 April, although it may be moved forward by a week or two. Then an agreement will be made regarding a roadmap [for the presidential elections], with the final deadline for this being 30 June. This date is not far away, rather it is fast approaching. From 15 April until that day...this is when the presidential elections campaigns will take place.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] What about the debate that is raging regarding whether a new constitution should be drafted before the presidential elections?

[Moussa] There is a debate going on...and it is possible that we can bring an end to the issue of the [new] constitution within the next two months. There is more than enough time to draft a constitution before the presidential elections, particularly as the majority of the constitutional issues have been agreed upon. The disputes are confined to the issue of the ruling system, whether this will be a presidential or parliamentary system, and regarding the precise powers of the president and parliament. In addition to this, there are other issues such as Egypt's identity, the

representation of “worker” and “farmer” members of parliament and more. It will not be difficult to reach an agreement on these issues. The constitutional role of the military institution must also be decided. This is an institution that must be respected as one of the key institutions of the state.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] In your own opinion, would you prefer to see the president elected first, or the new constitution drawn up before the presidential elections?

[Moussa] Neither one nor the other; the [new] president must be elected and in office on 1 July, 2012, whether the constitution has been drafted or not. This is something that must not delay the presidential election; however it would be better if the constitution was in place by that date.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] What are the priorities for the next president?

[Moussa] Speaking for myself, I believe that my mission is to rebuild Egypt, or rather, to lead the operation to rebuild the country, coordinating between all the

national forces. In order to rebuild Egypt we would need to implement three things, namely: democracy, reform, and economic development. By democracy, I do not just mean the ballot box, but also human rights, separation of powers, and the independence of the judiciary. As for the issue of reform, the first thing that we must do is eliminate corruption, and let me tell you how. Corruption did not come out of nowhere, it was institutional. Look at the hundreds of laws that were issued over the previous years and you will find that they are full of exceptions and loopholes that lead to corruption not being penalized; this is something that came at the expense of Egypt’s poor people and can be seen in the laws regarding construction of buildings, laws of [purchasing] agricultural land, and even the laws regarding the licensing of stalls. As citizens in a third world country, we must realize that poverty is the basis of corruption, for everybody wants to take as much as they can. Therefore, one must keep in mind that Egypt’s greatest enemy is poverty, and therefore the basis of one’s program and action is to combat poverty, in every sense of the word, and so this means material poverty, but also moral poverty. As for the third point,

which is economic – and social – development, we must put in place an economic program for the future. The short-term [economic] program that is being implemented today is the responsibility of Egyptian Prime Minister Kamal al-Ganzuri, because he is in charge of ruling the country until 30 June. However we must also look to the future, and make medium and long-term economic plans.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] Let us talk about the trials that are taking place of former regime figures. Some people are casting doubts about these trials, particularly as many of them are still ongoing. What is your view of this issue?

[Moussa] I would say that since there are trials there must also be judgments...that is expected. The issue is not trials taking place in order for an audience to observe this; rather this is in order to achieve justice. We are waiting for these judgments, and I believe that the ruling in the trial of former president [Hosni Mubarak] will be issued sometime this month.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] Returning to the 25 January revolution, how would you respond to the claims that there have been attempts to distort the image of the revolution and portray them as foreign agents, following accusations that they have received funding from foreign countries?

[Moussa] You can add the anarchists' entry on the scene to this, for they have also distorted the image of the revolutionaries. Someone who wants to burn down a ministry, or disrupt [political] operations, and more...is certainly not a revolutionary. I have heard how many of the revolutionary youth have taken action to prevent such acts and disruption. I would therefore agree that there are indeed attempts being made to distort the image of the revolution and the revolutionaries, however achieving the objective of the revolution will vindicate the revolution and the revolutionaries.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] Politics in Egypt has always been centralized, even during the Mamluk and Ottoman periods. The power has always been held in the hands of a small ruling class, whether we are talking about land barons during the Ottoman era

or the army following the 1952 revolution. After all of this, will it be easy for true democracy to take root in Egypt?

[Moussa] Over the past three decades, power was not in the grip of the Egyptian armed forces, but rather the hands of a harsh security-based regime. There is a difference between the two. The regime over the past thirty years was authoritarian and dictatorial based upon a brutal security service that had besieged the people; it [power] was not in the hands of the army. This centralized regime caused a number of social phenomenon to occur in Egyptian society. Firstly, 50 percent of Egyptians are living below the poverty line. In other words, 1 out of 2 Egyptians is poor, whilst the second is most likely not rich. 30 percent of Egyptians are illiterate, or in other words, 1 out of 3 Egyptians cannot read or write. The figures also say that Egypt has an unemployment rate of between 20 and 25 percent, or that approximately one out of every 4 or 5 Egyptians is out of work. Why has all of this happened? This is due to poor governance, excessive centralization of power, and cruel dictatorship. However we have now replaced dictatorship with

democracy...there can be no doubt about this, at least.

The other issue, with regards to administering the country, is that this must be managed by officials who are close to the people. Here we come to what I previously called for, namely governors and mayors must be elected by the people. Not elected and forgotten about, but rather elected and held accountable by a legislative council, whether we are talking about a village council, neighborhood council, or provincial council, in addition to parliament. I proposed this idea and published it in an article, and it was even commented on in Asharq Al-Awsat newspaper. This will result in the creation of a generation of politically aware youth. The minimum age for a parliamentary candidate [in Egypt] is 25 years old; however this is 21 for local councils. The same goes for women, and young women will have the opportunity to enter such councils. So let us open the door to restructuring political operations and tools of governance in Egypt. This is part of my own personal view of what is required from the next president.

Returning to the current situation, and with the approaching anniversary of the 25 January revolution, we cannot measure the revolutionary achievements every week or month, because there are achievements that will not be fully realized even in 20 years' time. However there are achievements that have been made on the ground and the important thing is that we are moving forward. When the president is elected, it will be his mission to review the unjust laws, begin to fight corruption and poverty...these are the things that will achieve the objectives of the revolution in a sustained manner.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] The Egyptian people have not been used to being politically in charge, and even Gamel Abdul Nasser, in his book "Egypt's Liberation: The Philosophy of the Revolution" said that the Egyptian people are politically passive. Do you think that the Egyptian people can engage with democracy today?

[Moussa] Of course, the Egyptian people can do this; they took action to save themselves during the era of dictatorship. The Egyptian people are like all people...why should the Egyptian people

be an exception from all the other people in the world and unable to engage with democracy? The Indian people, the Vietnamese, the Malaysians, the Turks, and the Tunisians all engaged with democracy...why not the Egyptians? Such statements aim to harm the Egyptian people and convince them that they are unable to do so...but I say that the Egyptian people are capable, and you will see this in the future. We have seen the parliamentary elections take place, and the presidential elections are on the way...whilst elections will soon take place at all levels, including village, municipal, and provincial council elections. This will represent a great boost to the democratic process in Egypt.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] Bearing in mind the famous proverb, those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it, let us look to Egypt's past. In 1805, for example, al-Azhar was a major player, and one of the reasons why Muhammad Ali Pasha was chosen as the Ottoman administrator for Egypt. Today, al-Azhar is also exerting its influence in the political scene, whilst the Islamists are in the ascendancy, whether we are talking about the Muslim Brotherhood or the

Salafists. In your own opinion, which party is the most dominant today with regards to choosing the presidency? Who should a presidential candidate gamble on?

[Moussa] Presidential candidates must gamble on all of these forces and not preclude any of them. Many regimes, particularly the former Egyptian regime, gambled that the army, the police, its supporters, funds, and even foreign powers, would protect it. However they forgot the most important thing, namely the people. Therefore anybody who wants to stand for the [presidential] election must not rely on this political force or that political force, but rather the Egyptian people. A presidential candidate must convince the people at a grass-roots level to endorse their candidacy. I believe that the people now understand that a major imbalance was in place in Egyptian society, and this requires a number of things [in order to resolve]. This requires a strong and politically aware presidency, cooperation between the presidency and parliament, an efficient and capable government, and strong Egyptian relations with the Arab world and international community, based upon mutual trust and confidence. All of this is needed if we are

to extricate ourselves from the problems we are facing today. Therefore, the next president will face a difficult presidential campaign, and a large responsible [following his election], this won't be a picnic, but rather a harsh responsibility for whoever becomes the president.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] You are putting yourself forward as an independent presidential candidate, without any connection to the political parties and coalitions that are present in the Egyptian political arena today. How will you respond if all the major parties put forward presidential candidates to compete against you?

[Moussa] It is up to the people to decide. There are major parties and coalitions who put forward parliamentary candidates who succeeded. The Freedom and Justice party has won a parliamentary majority, whilst the al-Nour party has also won a large number of parliamentary seats, not to mention the Wafd party and the Kutla al-Masriya. Some of these parties will undoubtedly nominate presidential candidates...but I am saying "this is my [political] program and this is what I think, and I believe that I will be completely capable of resolving the

problem and leading the process of reconstruction in Egypt should I be elected.” It is up to the Egyptian people to vote. Democracy means that candidates must be prepared for victory as well as defeat.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] In the forthcoming period will there be any reliance on any particular coalition? Will you try to convince any parties to back your candidacy?

[Moussa] Of course, I will talk with all parties and coalitions and indeed all people, and even with you personally to convince you to vote for me! I have already started to visit villages and small towns and provinces to speak with the people.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] Are you afraid of presidential candidates trying to use religion to secure votes?

[Moussa] The Egyptian people are aware [of this]. We, as Egyptians, know that our feelings can be influenced by religion; therefore, I am not afraid of this, because I myself am one of the people whose feelings can be influenced by religion and

with the principles and tolerance of religion. However we must also not forget that inside each of us there is the religious side, and the patriotic side....and this is why the country is drowning, and there must be serious political operations to address this. I want to guarantee job opportunities at home and abroad to our youth, as well as develop our own industries, particularly tourism and agriculture. This is something that we must do.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] During the parliamentary elections, despite the law and the constitution banning religion being used in politics, most members of the Islamist parties did so, using mosques during their election campaigns, for example. What is your view of this?

[Moussa] I believe that Egypt’s collective [political] awareness is far too advanced to view this situation as being an issue of worship only. The issue is one of respecting other religions. As an Egyptian Muslim, I respect the Islamic religion, and so it would not be right for me to go beyond this, and if I did go beyond this, I should return to it. However I also have another duty, namely to read and learn

and work with modern science; to express my opinions; to enjoy literature and the arts. What is Egypt? Egypt is al-Azhar, the well-educated elite that has led sciences, literature, and art throughout the Arab world and the Middle East over the past years. Therefore Egypt is Taha Hussein and Abbas al-Akkad. Egypt is Umm Kalthoum and Mohammed Abdel Wahab. It is Ahmed Shawqi and Hafez Ibrahim. It is the renowned scientist Ali Moustafa Moshrafa. It is Naguib Mahfouz. This is Egypt. If we wanted it to be without writers, artists, intellectuals, and scientists...then this is not Egypt.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] Despite all this, many people have expressed their fears that many of Egypt's freedoms will take a step backwards, particularly with regards to the parliamentary majority enjoyed by the Islamists. Were these parliamentary results a source of concern for you?

[Moussa] No, I am not concerned about this at all, because this is democracy. What can you say about an Islamist parliamentary majority...when this is what the people decided...and we are still waiting for the results of the presidential elections. Some people are saying that

there were a lot of irregularities in the parliamentary elections...however whatever the case, these results reflect the mood in Egypt today. As for the public's mood regarding Egypt's future, I think the public wants to see a balance between the different components [of the Egyptian government].

[Asharq Al-Awsat] There have been claims that the Muslim Brotherhood affiliated Freedom and Justice Party will back current Arab League Secretary-General Nabil Elaraby for the presidency. Have you given this scenario any thought?

[Moussa] No, I have not thought about this. I am in contact with everybody, and with Dr. Nabil Elaraby, and also with [Advisory Council president] Mansour Hassasn, and others. Their position is that they are outside of the scope of presidential candidacy, however even if this did occur...then I welcome it. When the name of Nabil Elaraby, or any other, is put forward, this does not bother me, indeed I welcome it.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] What about if SCAF decided to lend its support to a particular candidate? What if SCAF chairman Field

Marshall Hussein Tantawi decided to stand for the presidency? Would you continue your candidacy?

[Moussa] I am committed to standing for the [presidential] electoral battle, God willing, until the end. I understand that the Field Marshall is not interested in standing as a candidate. We make assumptions on this...and then ask questions about these assumptions, and create a confused and tense position. The man [Tantawi] did not say that he will stand for election, so why are we even discussing this. Let me also say that I welcome all candidates, for it is the [Egyptian] people that will decide, and which will seek to uncover the shape of every candidate. Everyone must get involved and take part in campaign tours and speak with the people and receive the insults [from political opponents], with the people supporting some views, and being against others...so it is not easy. It is no longer a case of this candidate is being supported by this figure, therefore it's over...no...the candidates will have to go to the villages and talk to the Egyptian people, and they will say yes or no, whether you are good enough or not.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] You have stressed that you intend to take part in the presidential electoral battle “until the end”, but what can you tell us about your policies? Do you see yourself as belonging to the left-wing, the right-wing, or the moderate?

[Moussa] My basis is Egyptian nationalism. This may require me to take a left-wing position, or a right-wing position, or a moderate position [depending on the circumstances]. The main thing is to take a nationalist position...that is in the interests of Egypt and the Egyptian people. As I am part of the Arab world, I must also respect the Arab and African dimensions. I believe that Egyptian vitality is a trinity...namely Arabic, African, and Mediterranean.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] Some of your political opponents have made references to the fact that you were a minister under the former regime, saying this makes you unsuitable to preside over the new Egypt. What is your opinion of this?

[Moussa] Yes, I was a minister under the former regime. Indeed, I was not just any minister in the former regime, I was the foreign minister. I was the Egyptian Foreign Minister between 1991 and 2001,

and I carried out my duties and responsibilities according to my conscience. It makes me happy to recall the overwhelming support and respect that Egyptian diplomacy enjoys from the Egyptian people, Arab world, and international community. This is an issue that I do not fear, and my answer is that this is something that is not said by the revolutionaries, but by [opposing] political campaigns that want to take advantage of the people. If former Egyptian prime minister Essam Sharaf was a minister under Hosni Mubarak and a member of the National Democratic Party ...and was chosen and nominated as Prime Minister by Tahrir Square [following the ouster of Mubarak], so what if I was [also] a minister? This is double standards and cheap talk.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] What about the claims that you are receiving financial backing from Saudi Arabia? There have been reports that you have received as much as 50 million Egyptian pounds for your presidential campaign...is this true?

[Moussa] This is completely untrue. Saudi Arabia is a friend and sister state [to Egypt], and it is waiting to see what will

happen in Egypt. Saudi Arabia has taken the same line with regards to all the candidates and political trends in Egypt. As for the issue that Saudi Arabia sent me money, I completely deny this. This did not happen, and will never happen. I call on those who make such claims and write such things to comply with God Almighty, because this is not true.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] The future of Egypt's relations with Israel is an issue that weighs large in the minds of Egypt's citizens. What is your view on this issue?

[Moussa] I visited many villages in Upper Egypt and elsewhere, and whilst talking about various domestic issues such as services to citizens, education, and more, no meeting would end without the question of Palestine being raised. Since the beginning of the 25 January revolution, when I was Secretary-General of the Arab League, the youths - when speaking to me - would always include questions about Palestine, the state of Palestine, Gaza, and Hamas. Let me tell you that the Middle East region needs a new system. The Arab world and the Middle East are in the process of change, and so the previous way of doing things is

no longer good enough. Firstly, we must put forward a new political, economic, and security system in the region. Secondly, and with regards to Egypt, the Arab – Israeli conflict, and the Palestinian Cause, Egypt must and will continue to be part of the Arab Initiative [for peace]. Egypt’s policy on the Arab – Israeli conflict, and its resolution, must be based on the Arab Initiative. As for Egyptian – Israeli relations, the Egyptian – Israeli peace treaty is in place, and I do not think there are any circumstances that will lead to its cancellation. I do not think this will happen, and I do not think it would be wise for this treaty to be cancelled. The treaty will continue so long as each party respects it...as for the security situation in the Sinai Peninsula and the presence of Egyptian forces there, I believe that the security articles of the treaty should be reviewed in this regard. This is something that can be discussed within a political framework. As for the Palestinian Cause, Egypt must not turn its back on this, for this is part of Egypt’s national security. As Egyptians, we are the largest neighbor to Palestine and Israel, and so we must work to control the situation in this region. This is via three points: solving the Arab – Israeli conflict in a just and respectable

manner, solving the Palestinian Cause through the establishment of a genuine Palestinian state, and by establishment an atmosphere where everybody feels safe, most prominently through nuclear non-proliferation

[Asharq Al-Awsat] What about the issue of Egypt’s sale of natural gas to Israel? Will this deal remain unchanged?

[Moussa] There are two issues that must be decided. Firstly, whether we will sell natural gas to Israel or not, and secondly, how such sales will take place. There is a lot of corruption in the gas deals that occurred in the past. This corruption must be immediately addressed. As for the issue of whether we will continue such sales, the [Egyptian] political apparatus must look into this and consider how it will manage Egypt’s gas and oil policies, environmental policies, etc.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] When you were Arab League Secretary-General, you played a major role in internationalizing the situation in Libya during the Libyan revolution; however following your departure it seems that the Arab League has suffered one setback after another,

particularly with regards to the situation in Syria. What is your view of this?

[Moussa] I believe in taking the issue of change in the Arab world very seriously. The Arab's League's operations in this regard should be in line with the course of history. Therefore I completely reject the issue of practicing violence against citizens and suppressing revolutions and attempts to stop the wheel of change.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] What about the Syrian regime continuing to kill Syrian citizens at this time? It seems that the Arab League is not dealing with the Syrian revolution in the same manner as the Libyan revolution. Why is that?

[Moussa] Libya was in between two countries where change had taken place, namely Tunisia and Egypt; therefore it was hard to avoid such change. Syria is in a region that does not respond to revolutions. It is also an extremely sensitive region...being next to Israel, as well as Arab states that fear certain political developments. Syria is next to Iraq, Turkey, and others. However this by no means justifies the use of violence against citizens, nor does it justify the

death of 5,000 citizens in clashes with the government. I am not in the picture regarding what precisely the Arab League is doing [with regards to Syria], but I believe that the Arab League delegation of monitors must be considered a first step, and not the end of the road. As I said, the situation in Syria is different to Libya. There are a number of complexities surrounding the Syrian situation; however this does not justify the bloodshed that is being seen in the Syrian streets. I believe that the Arab League should take a clear position regarding change [in Syria], and that violence against the [Syrian] citizens must stop, otherwise it is up to the relevant international security authorities to take action.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] If you were the Arab League Secretary-General today, how would you resolve this crisis?

[Moussa] Firstly, there must be a halt to the violence against the citizens.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] However how would you achieve this?

[Moussa] The Arab League observers must submit daily reports about what is

happening. How can Syrian citizens be fired upon when they are in Syria? Moreover Arab diplomacy must become more active, and the Arab States must act together as a group, not individuals, along with the Arab League, to communicate with the international community [about the situation in Syria]. All countries are concerned about what is happening in Syria, due to the sensitive regional position it occupies. The Syrian crisis is already internationalized, but this did not take. Egypt must also play as prominent a role as Turkey and Iran in confronting and resolving the situation in Syria.

<http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&id=28098>

- **Egypt military ruler 'to visit Libya'**

CAIRO, (AFP) — Egypt's military ruler Field Marshal Hussein Tantawi is to visit Libya on Monday to bolster ties between the two neighbouring countries where popular protests have unseated veteran leaders, the state-owned Al-Ahram newspaper reported.

"Tantawi will visit Tripoli the day after tomorrow to open a new page with Libya," the newspaper said on Saturday.

He will hold talks with the leader of the National Transitional Council, Mustafa Abdel Jalil, it added.

Tantawi heads the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) which has ruled Egypt since veteran president Hosni Mubarak was ousted in February last year following an 18-day popular uprising.

His talks with Libya's interim rulers, including Prime Minister Abdel Rahim al-Kib, will include "Egypt's participation in the reconstruction of Libya" as well as Libyan investments in Egypt.

Last week, Abdel Jalil said that Libya will review all its investments abroad, with some overseas projects expected to be stopped.

"There are some investments that could be developed and others that it would be better to terminate for the good of the Libyan people," he said.

Until its overthrow last year, the regime of Moamer Kadhafi invested vast sums of money in Africa, the Arab world and beyond, from a sovereign wealth fund set up in 2006.

"Field Marshal Tantawi's visit underscores the importance of ties between the two countries," NTC deputy chief Abdel Hafiz Ghoga told Al-Ahram, adding he expected Libya's investments in Egypt to grow.

According to the paper, several cabinet ministers were to travel to Libya on Saturday ahead of Tantawi, including the ministers of electricity, tourism, planning and labour. Libya is home to a huge community of Egyptian expatriates.

<http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&id=28086>

- **ElBaradei says not to run for Egypt presidency**

CAIRO, (AFP) — The ex-head of the UN nuclear watchdog and Nobel laureate Mohamed ElBaradei said on Saturday he would not run for the Egyptian presidency, saying there is still no real democracy in the country.

"My conscience does not allow me to run for the presidency or any other official position unless there is real democracy," ElBaradei said in a statement received by AFP.

He praised the revolutionary youths who led massive popular uprisings that ousted president Hosni Mubarak last year but said "the former regime did not fall."

ElBaradei compared the revolution to a boat and charged that "the captains of the vessel ... are still treading old waters, as if the revolution did not take place."

He charged that corruption was still rife in post-Mubarak Egypt, which is being ruled by a military council since the veteran president was ousted from power in February following an 18-day popular uprising.

"We all feel that the former regime did not fall," he said in the statement.

ElBaradei denounced the "repressive" policies of Egypt's new rulers, who he said were putting "revolutionaries on trial in military court instead of protecting them

and punishing those who killed their friends."

His comments reflect growing disenchantment with the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces.

The SCAF has repeatedly pledged to cede full powers to civilian rule when a president is elected by the end of June but there is widespread belief that the military wants to maintain a political role in the country's future.

The military has also come under fire over its human rights record in recent months in the face of accusations that it has been resorting to Mubarak-era tactics to stifle dissent.

Egypt witnessed deadly clashes between democracy protesters and regime forces in November -- before parliamentary polls began -- and again in December.

Mubarak is on trial and the prosecution has called for him to be hanged for the killing of hundreds of demonstrators in the January-February 2011 revolt.

<http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&id=28095>

- **Tunisians mark year after Ben Ali's exit**



Tunisian President Moncef Marzouki, right, welcomes Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika at Tunis airport, Saturday, Jan,14, 2012. (AP)

A Tunisian woman makes a peace sign during a gathering at Habib Bourguiba avenue in Tunis to celebrate the one year anniversary of the revolution, Saturday, Jan. 14, 2012. (AP)

A Tunisian shouts during a gathering at Habib Bourguiba avenue in Tunis to

celebrate the one year anniversary of the revolution, Saturday, Jan. 14, 2012. (AP) TUNIS, (AFP) — Thousands of Tunisians Saturday turned out in central Tunis to demand jobs and dignity as the north African country marked a year to the day since its despot Zine El Abidine Ben Ali fled into exile.

"Work, freedom and dignity", "Work is a right", and "We will continue the fight", were among the slogans chanted by demonstrators brandishing banners on the avenue which was the epicentre of the popular uprising that gave birth to the Arab Spring.

"We made this revolution against the dictatorship to impose our right to a dignified life and not to help certain opportunists realise their political ambitions," 33-year-old Salem Zitouni told AFP.

Other demonstrators, wearing the red and white of the national flag, called for recognition of the "martyrs" killed during the weeks of unrest before Ben Ali was toppled.

"We are faithful to the blood of the martyrs," and "We will never forget our martyrs," their banners read.

Some also chanted the now famous "Get lost" and "Good riddance" that had accompanied calls for Ben Ali's resignation in the weeks leading up to his ouster on January 14, 2011.

Several people who were wounded in the revolution began a sit-in outside the government headquarters in the old town Kasbah.

Pride of place was given to the memory of Mohamed Bouazizi, the 26-year-old vegetable seller from the central town of Sidi Bouzid, whose desperate act in setting fire to himself was the trigger of the revolt.

Tunisia's revolution, which culminated in a peaceful election in October, has inspired reform movements throughout the Middle East, including the downfall of long-standing autocrats Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and Moamer Kadhafi in Libya.

Leaders from Tunisia's neighbours as well as other Arab countries were expected to

take part in anniversary celebrations over the weekend.

Among the most prominent guests that Tunisia's democratically elected leaders will host on Saturday, Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika -- who was a minister in his country's first post-independence government half a century ago -- has so far weathered growing social discontent.

The emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, seen as one of the main sponsors of the Arab Spring, is also expected in the Tunisian capital.

Foreign Minister Saad-Eddine El Othmani will represent Morocco, where King Mohamed VI introduced reforms curbing his near absolute powers to nip growing Tunisian-inspired street protests in the bud.

The head of Libya's new National Transitional Council, Mustafa Abdel Jalil, was expected for the celebrations, for which no detailed programme has been issued.

Weeks after Ben Ali hurriedly fled Tunisia for Saudi Arabia, a rebellion started in

neighbouring Libya, eventually toppling Kadhafi's regime.

Ben Ali has been convicted of economic and other crimes by Tunisian courts and was granted exile in Saudi Arabia after his plane was denied permission to land in France.

According to the new authorities in Tunisia, Saudi Arabia has twice ignored extradition requests for Ben Ali, who faces an avalanche of trials if he returns.

Tunisia's Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali, of the moderate Islamist Ennahda party, has been officially invited to visit Saudi Arabia.

Among the problems that remain to be solved by the new authorities are soaring unemployment of 19 percent nationally -- up to 50 percent in certain inland areas overlooked for investment in the past -- and widespread social discontent.

Corruption also remains a challenge, with Transparency International downgrading the country from 59th to 73rd place out of 183 countries on its corruption list amid fears that former regime officials have blended into the new political landscape.

Also to mark the anniversary, Tunisia granted an amnesty or conditional release from prison to 9,000 detainees.

The amnesty on what is now a public holiday in Tunisia had been expected and includes Tunisian and foreign prisoners.

Capital punishment of another 122 detainees was converted to life imprisonment.

The death penalty remains on the books in the north African country but is no longer applied

<http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&id=28096>

5. JORDAN and LEBANON

• Death toll in Beirut building collapse rises to 12

The death toll from the collapse of an old six-story apartment block in the Lebanese capital has risen to 12, Al Arabiya correspondent in Beirut said.

The national ANI news agency reported earlier Monday, citing the Lebanese Red

Cross, that “up until now, 11 bodies and 11 injured Lebanese nationals and foreigners have been recovered from the rubble.” The report added that rescue operations mounted during the night were continuing Monday morning.



The apartment block, in Beirut’s eastern Ashrafiyeh district, came crashing down without warning on Sunday evening. It was known to house Lebanese and Sudanese families.

Neighbors said dozens of people had lived in the building.

Among the dead was a 15-year-old girl while her grandmother, a Lebanese man of 73, at least two Sudanese, an Egyptian and a Filipina were among the injured.

“It was like an earthquake” when the block collapsed, one witness told the local MTV channel.

ANI said the building had been in a state of disrepair made worse by recent torrential downpours.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/01/16/188575.html>

- **Jumblatt: We share with Turks concern over Syria**

Progressive Socialist Party leader MP Walid Jumblatt said in remarks published on Monday that he discussed with Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu the situation in Syria, which has witnessed unrest since mid-March 2011.

“We share with the Turks concern over the situation in Syria, especially that many chances [to resolve the crisis] have been missed,” Jumblatt told As-Safir newspaper.

According to the United Nations, more than 5,000 people have been killed in the crackdown on pro-democracy protesters in Syria.

The PSP leader also said that Turkey is concerned the situation in Syria may negatively affect Lebanon, adding that he

discussed with Davutoglu the importance of stability and dialogue in Lebanon to resolve all issues.

Davutoglu arrived in Beirut on Saturday.

<http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=352963>

6. SYRIA

- **Arab League may debate Syria troops call; U.N. chief tells Assad to ‘stop killing’**



By Al Arabiya with Agencies

The Arab League said a Qatari proposal to send Arab troops to Syria will be discussed this week as the U.N. chief told Bashar al-Assad to “stop killing” his people and the Syrian leader offered an amnesty for “crimes” committed during a 10-month-old revolt against him.

Jabr al-Shoufi, a member of the Syrian National Council, told Al Arabiya that the Syrian regime will prevent by force any Arab troops from entering the country.

Arab League chief Nabil al-Arabi said on Sunday that a ministerial meeting this week could discuss a Qatari proposal to send Arab troops to unrest-hit Syria, where as many as 33 people were killed on Sunday according to Syrian activists.

“All ideas will be open for discussion,” he told reporters in Manama when asked if Saturday’s meeting will debate the proposal by Qatari Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani.

In an interview to be aired on U.S. television, Sheikh Hamad said he favors sending Arab troops to Syria to stop Damascus’ bloody crackdown on 10 months of democracy protests, according to AFP.

Asked if he was in favor of Arab nations intervening in Syria, Qatari Sheikh Hamad told the U.S. broadcaster CBS: “For such a situation to stop the killing ... some troops should go to stop the killing.”

The emir, whose country backed last year’s NATO campaign that helped Libyan rebels topple Muammar Qaddafi, is the first Arab leader to call publicly for Arab troops to be deployed in Syria, where the U.N. estimates more than 5,000 people have been killed in the crackdown since mid-March last year.

The comments by the emir, whose wealthy nation once enjoyed cordial ties with Damascus, come with the Arab League set to review the work of its Syria monitoring mission, amid increasing concern about its failure to end the violence.

According to a U.N. official, 400 people have been killed since the beginning of the Arab League mission to the crisis-hit country on Dec. 26.

Former Arab League secretary general Amr Moussa also said on Sunday the League should consider sending troops to Syria.

However, Tunisian President Moncef Marzouki said in an interview published on Sunday he opposed foreign military intervention in Syria, saying it would spark

an “explosion” across the entire Middle East.

“Such intervention would signify that the war will spread across the whole region, opening the way to all powers, following the example of Turkey, Israel, Iran and Hezbollah. That would mean the whole region exploding,” he said.

“Stop killing your people”

Meanwhile, the U.N. chief told Assad on Sunday to stop killing his people, according to Reuters.

“Today, I say again to President Assad of Syria: stop the violence, stop killing your people. The path of repression is a dead end,” U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon told a conference in Lebanon on democratic transitions in the Arab world.

“The winds of change will not cease to blow. The flame ignited in Tunisia will not be dimmed,” he added.

Ban’s comments came as Assad announced a general amnesty for crimes committed during the popular unrest that on Sunday entered its eleventh month.

“President Assad issued a decree stipulating a general amnesty for crimes committed during the events between March 15, 2011 and January 15, 2012,” the official SANA news agency reported.

Assad’s amnesty will run to the end of January, covering army deserters and people who possessed illegal arms or had violated laws on peaceful protest, the state news agency SANA said.

Syria’s Addounia television said Arab monitors discussed the amnesty with Damascus police on Sunday.

Opponents of Assad said the amnesty was meaningless because most detainees were held without charge in secret police or military facilities with no due process or legal documentation.

“The problem is not those who have reached trial or have been sentenced to terms in civic jails but those who are imprisoned and we don't know where they are or anything about them,” said Kamal Labwani, who was freed last month after six years as a political prisoner and is now in Jordan.

The Arab League's Syria committee, whose Qatari chairman has said the observer mission has failed to staunch the bloodshed, will discuss a report by the monitors on Friday, Egypt's MENA news agency said.

The Cairo-based League will not send any more monitors to Syria before the Arab foreign ministers meet next Sunday, MENA said.

Anti-Assad protests began in March inspired by a wave of popular anger against autocratic rulers sweeping the Arab world.

Assad has issued several amnesties since the start of protests, but opposition groups say thousands of people remain behind bars and many have been tortured or abused.

Freeing detainees

The Avaaz campaign group said on Dec. 22 at least 69,000 people had been detained since the start of the uprising, of whom 32,000 had been released.

Freeing detainees was one of the terms of an Arab League peace plan which also

called for an end to bloodshed, the withdrawal of troops and tanks from the streets and a political dialogue.

The movement to end more than four decades of Assad family rule began with largely peaceful demonstrations, but after months of violence by the security forces, army deserters and insurgents started to fight back, prompting fears of civil war.

China and Russia have blocked any action against Syria by the U.N. Security Council. The United States, the European Union and the Arab League have announced economic sanctions, although it is not clear if the Arab measures have been implemented.

Turkey, whose foreign minister was in Beirut at the weekend, has also imposed sanctions on Syria after the violence prompted it to turn against a neighbor it had once courted assiduously.

British Foreign Secretary William Hague said he hoped more sanctions on Syria could be agreed in the next 10 days or so, referring to a Jan. 23 meeting of EU foreign ministers.

In an interview with Sky News television, Hague also questioned the sincerity of Assad's amnesty offer and said he hoped the Arab League would refer Syria to the United Nations if the monitoring mission failed to halt the violence.

He dismissed the idea of a no-fly zone in Syria, saying there was no chance for now of Security Council approval for such action, which was not necessarily appropriate anyway.

"It's not primarily by flying aircraft that the Assad regime is repressing its people," Hague said.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/01/16/188547.html>

- **Prominent Syrian parliament member joins opposition against Assad and his regime**

By Al Arabiya And Agencies

Imad Ghalyoun, a member of the Syrian Peoples Assembly who is closer to the ruling Ba'ath party, told Al Arabiya TV on Sunday he was joining the Syrian opposition against the regime of President Bashar al-Assad.

Ghalyoun, who chairs the budget committee in the Syrian parliament, added that many parliament members would like to voice their opposition to the regime but that they fear for their lives.

Ghalyoun's defection came as Syrian opposition in Turkey plan to form a high military council, headed by a top defector, to oversee military operations against the regime as they boost their efforts to isolate Assad's government.



General Mustafa Ahmad al-Sheikh, the most senior commander to defect from the Syrian army, is due to announce the council's formation in Turkey, where he sought refuge 12 days ago, his media adviser said.

Sheikh, 54, was in charge of security in northern Syria before defecting. In a statement, he said he had deserted

because he was sickened by the regime's ruthlessness and the killings.

"This council, headed by Sheikh, will oversee military operations in conjunction with the Free Syrian Army (FSA)," Fahad Almasri told AFP.

"It will also help organize defections within the army and will be in contact with officers in the regular army to encourage large-scale rather than individual defections."

Formed from deserters from the regular army, the FSA says it has some 40,000 fighters.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/01/15/188522.html>

- **Assad offers 'amnesty' for opposition**

Syrian fighters have regrouped in Lebanon to plan raids on Syrian government checkpoints [Al Jazeera]

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has offered amnesty to anyone accused of alleged crimes in connection with the last

10 months of anti-government unrest and resulting violence.

Assad has made similar decrees on three previous occasions in May, June and November. Sunday's announcement was made on the official SANA news agency and broadcast on state television.

Since the outbreak of the uprising against Assad's rule in March, Assad has freed 3,952 prisoners, according to SANA. The opposition claims there are thousands more in Syrian prisons and said that 26 people had died on Sunday, including a policeman and soldier killed by security forces for refusing to fire on protesters.

The new amnesty decree was granted "for crimes committed in the context of the events taking place since March 15, 2011, till the date of issuing the decree", SANA reported.

It encompasses those who have peacefully demonstrated, evaded Syria's military draft or carried unlicensed weapons and ammunition. But the "fugitives" covered by the decree must turn themselves in to authorities by January 31, SANA said.

The United Nations estimates at least 5,000 people have been killed since initially peaceful protests against Assad's government were met by a brutal security crackdown, sparking an ongoing armed conflict in which both the military and the opposition, which includes army defectors, have conducted attacks.

Assad heading for 'dead end'

Meanwhile on Sunday, the secretary-general of the United Nations called on Assad to end the crackdown against anti-government protesters.

"Today, I say again to President Assad of Syria: Stop the violence. Stop killing your people. The path of repression is a dead end," Ban Ki-moon said in a keynote address at a conference on Arab world democracy in the Lebanese capital, Beirut.

Ban also said that the revolutions in the Arab world showed that people would no longer accept tyranny.

"The lessons of the past year are eloquent and clear. The winds of change will not cease to blow. The flame ignited in Tunisia

will not be dimmed. Let us remember as well, none of these great changes began with a call for a regime change. First and foremost, people wanted dignity," he said.

Ban also discussed the crisis in Syria with Ahmet Davutoglu, the Turkish foreign minister, in the Lebanese capital on Saturday, a spokesman for Ban said.

"They discussed a range of regional matters, in particular the situation in Syria as well as Iran and Cyprus," said Martin Nesirky. "The secretary-general said the dangerous trajectory of the crisis in Syria was a source of grave concern."

Turkey shares a 910km border with Syria, its former ally, and has strongly condemned the Syrian government's crackdown on dissent.

Call for dialogue

The statements from Ban came as Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Lebanon's Hezbollah, called on the Syrian opposition to respond positively to President Bashar al-Assad's "reform plans" and urged dialogue to resolve the ongoing crisis.

Addressing a party rally in the town of Baalbek by video link, Nasrallah, who has been in hiding since 2006 for fear of assassination, said: "We call on the Syrian opposition inside and outside Syria to respond to the calls of the dialogue by President Assad and to co-operate with him in implementing the reforms he has announced, which are very important reforms.

"We can resolve Syria's problems and we call openly for the return of calm and stability and for arms to be laid down and for resolving issues through dialogue."

Nasrallah called on Arab countries, Turkey and Iran to participate in resolving the crisis in Syria.

"We call for the unification of efforts by the Arab countries and the Arab League and the influential Muslim countries in the region, Iran and Turkey, to help end the crisis in Syria and not drive people into corners and drive the situation towards an explosion," Nasrallah said.

He also dismissed a UN call for his staunchly anti-Western and anti-Israeli group to disarm, saying it was determined

to maintain a military capacity to defend Lebanon.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/01/20121155350991399.html>

7. ARABIAN PENINSULA AND THE GULF OF BASRA

- **IRENA Pacific leaders' meeting to accelerate new energy deployment in the region**

By Al Arabiya With Agencies

World leaders, international agencies and advocates of renewable energy gathered this week in Abu Dhabi, UAE, for the Second Assembly of the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA), to accelerate renewable energy deployment in the region, which is currently heavily dependent on fossil fuels.

"The Pacific Region is an area where volatile fuel prices, long and costly supply routes, and relatively small energy markets have resulted in high costs and limited access to energy," said IRENA's director-general, Adnan Z. Amin. "Renewable resources are a competitive, low-cost alternative for fossil fuels for the

Pacific, and some inspiring renewable energy goals are being set. Some States are aiming for 100 percent renewable power supply, while others plan to balance their increased use of renewables against substantial reductions in fuel imports.” He added “We must bring all actors to the table; we must provide the knowledge base to support action globally. Above all we must be transparent and effective.”

The meeting – which included six heads of state and IRENA members from the Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu, gathered around the theme “Powering Sustainable Innovation” to discuss IRENA’s proposed role in accelerating its deployment opportunities for collaboration with other stakeholders and development partners, and provided guidance on IRENA’s new proposals.

During the meeting, leaders welcomed IRENA’s activities and agreed to work with the agency to map the renewable energy readiness of the region’s countries and territories to measure opportunities for

implementation and identify pathways to close any gaps

“Limited land and water resources, the isolation of many communities and the high cost of polluting fossils have long been a barrier to the region’s economic growth,” said Henry Puna, prime minister of the Cook Islands. “At the same time our region includes some of the nations most threatened by climate change and environmental degradation. With IRENA as our partner we can liberate local innovation and industry, bring electricity and light to remote villages, and balance energy costs.”

In an opening address Dr. Sultan Ahmad Al Jaber, president of the First IRENA Assembly, said this was one of the most important meetings IRENA would organize.

“This is your opportunity to openly share your ideas on what concrete, actionable and measurable activities IRENA can take in both the medium and short term in your countries,” he told the delegates. “Tangible progress in the Pacific Islands will demonstrate IRENA’s capability to support – through action – the

acceleration, development and deployment of renewable energy technologies.”

Although the Pacific Region has some hydropower resources, 99 percent of the rest of the energy used for transportation and electricity comes from fossil fuels. Increased fuel prices have cost most Pacific Island countries and territories some 10 percent of their gross national income.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/01/16/188590.html>

- **Kuwait police abused transgender women: HRW**

By AFP
Kuwait City

Human Rights Watch on Sunday accused Kuwaiti police of torturing and sexually abusing transgender women and called on the Gulf state to hold officers accountable.

In a report, the New York-based group said that police have been using a “discriminatory” amendment to the penal code passed by parliament in 2007 which

arbitrarily criminalizes “imitating the opposite sex.”

Transgender women are individuals who are born male but identify themselves as female.

The arbitrary and ill-defined provisions of the law have allowed numerous abuses to take place against them, said the 63-page report based on interviews with 40 transgender women, as well as with interior ministry officials, lawyers, doctors, and members of civil society.

The accusations were based on the accounts of the 40 victims “all of whom gave almost a similar story on what they faced,” Rasha Moumneh, HRW’s Middle East and North Africa researcher, told a press conference in Kuwait City.

“We have met with officials from the interior ministry ... and presented the findings to them but have not yet received any response,” Moumneh said, adding that Human Rights Watch does not know the exact number of transgender women in Kuwait.

Kuwaiti police have a free rein to determine whether a person’s appearance constitutes “imitating the opposite sex,” without any specific criteria being laid down for the offence, the report said.

Transgender women reported being arrested even when they were wearing male clothes and then later being forced by police to dress in women’s clothing.

In some cases documented by Human Rights Watch, transgender women said police arrested them because they had a “soft voice” or “smooth skin.”

“No one regardless of his or her gender identity deserves to be arrested on the basis of a vague, arbitrary law and then abused and tortured by police,” Sarah Leah Whitson, HRW’s Middle East director, said in a statement.

“The Kuwaiti government has a duty to protect all of its residents, including groups who face popular disapproval, from brutal police behavior and the application of an unfair law,” the statement said.

Abuses include degrading and humiliating treatment, such as being forced to strip and paraded around police stations, being forced to dance for officers, sexual humiliation, verbal taunts and intimidation, HRW said.

“In several cases, Human Rights Watch found that police officers took advantage of the law to blackmail transgender women into sex,” the report said.

Redress for these violations was difficult for fear of retribution and re-arrest, said the rights watchdog.

“HRW calls on the Kuwaiti government to repeal the amendment to article 198, criminalizing imitating the opposite sex,” the report said.

Pending repeal of the law, the interior ministry should issue a moratorium on arrests of individuals and the government also should work to protect transgender individuals, it said.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/01/15/188463.html>

- **Bahrain's king proposes constitutional reforms to boost parliament powers**

By AL ARABIYA WITH AGENCIES

Bahrain's king announced constitutional amendments on Sunday giving parliament more powers in overseeing governments selected by the ruling monarchy.



In a televised address, King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa said the new powers will include approving Cabinets proposed by the ruling dynasty and greater authority to question and remove Cabinet officials.

"Our people have proven their desire for continuing with reforms... We complete the march today with those who have an honest patriotic desire for more progress and reform," the king said.

"I must mention here that democracy is not just constitutional and legislative

rules, it is a culture and practice and adhering by the law and respecting international human rights principles," he added.

"I beseech all sectors of society to work together so that all their sons adhere to the law, which is linked to coexistence and tolerance..."

But the opposition said the new constitutional powers fell far short of demands for democracy that have driven a year of unrest in the Gulf Arab state.

The Gulf island nation, home to the U.S. Fifth Fleet, is seen by the United States and Saudi Arabia as a key ally against non-Arab Shi'ite power Iran just across Gulf waters.

The amendments, which increase powers to question ministers and withdraw confidence in the cabinet, emerged from a national dialogue King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa organized last year after the Sunni-dominated government quelled demonstrations dominated by majority Shi'ites.

The main opposition party Wefaq withdrew from the dialogue, saying it did not go far enough to offer real reform.

Activists were scathing about the speech, which comes after a number of deaths in recent weeks resulting from the tense security situation.

Meanwhile, tensions are set to rise ahead of Feb. 14, the anniversary of the uprising last year after Egyptians and Tunisians succeeded in forcing out unpopular leaders.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/01/15/188459.html>

Qaeda militants seize Yemen town, Norwegian kidnapped

15/01/2012

SANAA,(Reuters) - Al Qaeda militants have seized a small town southeast of Yemen's capital Sanaa on Sunday in another setback to efforts to restore order after President Ali Abdullah Saleh formally handed over power following almost a year of mass protests against his rule.

A police source and witnesses said the militants met little resistance from a small police force when they entered the town of Radda in al-Baydah province, 170 km (105 miles) from Sanaa, on Saturday night, seizing an ancient citadel and mosque.

The capture of Radda expanded al Qaeda control outside the southern province of Abyan, where they have taken over several towns since the uprising against Saleh began.

Saleh signed a deal brokered by Yemen's Gulf neighbours in November under which he shifted formal power to his deputy. But he has not yet left the country and continues to wield a great deal of power through relatives' control of security forces.

"I call again on President Saleh to abide by the terms of the agreement," U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon said in Beirut during a Middle East visit, noting that a U.N. mediator had been "at the heart of negotiations" with Saleh.

The anti-Saleh unrest has emboldened groups linked to al Qaeda's Yemen-based regional wing, which the United States has

called the most dangerous branch of the militant network.

The United States and Saudi Arabia, the world's No. 1 oil exporter, are keen for the Gulf-backed power transfer deal to work, fearing that a vacuum in Yemen may give al Qaeda space to thrive near key oil and cargo shipping lanes in the Red Sea.

U.N. EMPLOYEE KIDNAPPED BY TRIBESMEN

Underscoring the continued lawlessness in Yemen, a Norwegian working for the United Nations was kidnapped in Sanaa at the weekend, Norway's foreign ministry said.

A tribal source said the Norwegian was abducted by tribesmen from oil-producing Maarib province demanding the release of a suspect accused of killing two members of the security forces.

Residents in Radda, which has a population of 60,000, said the militants who took over the town were led by Tareq al-Dahab, who had been handed over by Syria to Yemen recently after being detained while trying to slip into Iraq.

Dahab is a brother-in-law of a U.S.-born, Yemen-based Muslim cleric linked to al Qaeda killed in an air strike last year.

Yahia Abu Usba, deputy head of the Yemeni Socialist Party and a Saleh critic, said security forces appeared to have done little to prevent militants entering Radda. He said al Qaeda would target Maarib Province next, bringing it closer to Sanaa.

Yemeni officials were not immediately available for comment.

The United States and Saudi Arabia backed Saleh through much of his autocratic 33-year rule, fearing that any vacuum would be exploited by al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, or AQAP, based in Yemen. As street protests intensified against Saleh, however, they endorsed the Gulf-brokered deal for Saleh to step down.

Under the plan, the opposition and the ruling General People's Congress party (GPC) shared out cabinet posts between them, forming a unity government to steer the country towards presidential elections in February.

But little headway towards reinstating order on the ground has been made since then.

In Sanaa on Saturday, a 48-hour deadline given to armed opponents and supporters of Saleh to withdraw after months of street fighting passed but there was little change in the armed face-off, according to residents.

Fighting against Islamist militants in the south has continued, forcing about 97,000 people to flee. More than 300,000 others have been displaced by tribal rebellion in north Yemen, according to U.N. estimates.

<http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&id=28102>

- **Little optimism over promised Bahrain reforms**

A new round of modest constitutional reforms proposed by the king of Bahrain will do little to stop the nearly year-old uprising in the island kingdom, activists and opposition leaders said on Sunday.

King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa delivered a televised address on Sunday morning in

which pledged to limit the power of the executive branch. Under the proposed reforms, members of parliament would have more power to question cabinet ministers, and more protection from dismissal by the king.



But the speech will not be a breakthrough for the Bahraini government as it tries to stop a nearly year-long uprising. Members of Al Wefaq, the country's largest opposition party, quickly dismissed the changes as "cosmetic" and demanded much wider reforms.

"Nothing was new. The opposition was expecting something like this from 10 years before," said Ali al-Aswad, a member of Al Wefaq. "This is not the demand of the street. The demand is different now, after what has happened in all the Arab countries."

'A better balance'

All of the proposed reforms are small in scale. The king promised "new safeguards" to limit his ability to dissolve the lower house of parliament, for example: He would have to "consult" with leaders of both houses, and the head of the constitutional court, before dismissing lawmakers, an action which right now requires only the approval of the king and the prime minister, who is also the king's uncle.

Al Wefaq's Khalil al-Marzooq says the changes King Hamad is calling for "can be done outside the constitution with bylaws".

The proposed changes would also require the king to issue a "royal order" explaining the process for appointing members of the Shura Council, the 40-member upper house, which is entirely appointed by the king.

Parliament would also play a larger role in determining the state budget, and the lower house would have the right to "question and withdraw confidence from ministers," who are also appointed by the king.

All of these changes are in proposed constitutional amendments, which Al Khalifa said will be transmitted to the parliament.

"The proposed amendments bring greater harmony in the relationship between the executive and legislative branches, in order to achieve a better balance between them," the king said in his speech.

The changes outlined on Sunday would partly fulfill one of the core recommendations from the "national dialogue" conducted over the summer. Many others, including efforts to reduce corruption and "sectarian division," remain unimplemented.

Al Wefaq withdrew from that dialogue, which it called "not serious," though some other opposition representatives remained involved.

Activists admit that some of the proposed reforms are modest steps in the right direction, but complain the king is moving far too slowly.

"People very clearly wanted an elected government, they want parliament that has actual power," said Nabeel Rajab, the head of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights in Manama. "If we go into this detail, and go step by step... it's going to be 100 years before an elected parliament has power."

A 'different direction now'

The king has delivered several high-profile addresses in recent weeks, one in December to mark Bahrain's national day, another in November after an official commission released its report on abuses committed during this year's unrest. None of them included major concessions sought by the opposition, like a general amnesty for prisoners.

Several activists and members of Al Wefaq described the speeches as "missed opportunities."

"Even Assad issued an amnesty today," said one Bahraini activist reached by telephone, referring to Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, who issued a "general amnesty" on Sunday. "Why couldn't Khalifa do the same?"

The king's speech instead included a few thinly-veiled swipes at members of the opposition. He promised, for example, to work with anyone who "has a genuine patriotic desire for further progress and reforms." The government has often tried to portray protesters as obstructionist.

Al Wefaq has demanded much wider reforms than those offered on Sunday, including the creation of a fully elected legislature and an elected prime minister. Activists outside of Bahrain's formal political parties, particularly among the youth, tend to go further, calling for the ouster of the Khalifa family which has ruled for two centuries.

Al Wefaq has tried to moderate those demands, but politicians warn that the king's speech - which several called a "missed opportunity" - will only anger the opposition.

"If we accept this, we will have no power in the streets. We couldn't control the streets," al-Aswad said. "The youth might go in a different direction now."

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/01/20121159958662428.html>

8. AFGHANISTAN - PAKISTAN

- **Perry defends urinating US Marines**

Press TV

January 15, 2012

The Republican presidential hopeful, Rick Perry, says US Marines videotaped urinating on dead Taliban fighters in Afghanistan are just an example of "kids" being kids.

"Obviously 18, 19-year-old kids make stupid mistakes all too often and that's what's occurred here," Perry said in an interview with CNN on Sunday.

The Texan Governor also accused the US President Barack Obama's administration of "over-the-top rhetoric" and "disdain for the military" in their condemnation of the incident.

"These kids made a mistake, there's not any doubt about it. They shouldn't have done it, it's bad - but to call it a criminal act, I think is over the top," Perry added.

The footage, which was posted on the video-sharing website, YouTube, as well as other websites on Wednesday, shows the four members of the US Marine Corps in camouflage uniforms making lewd jokes, while urinating on the bodies of three Taliban militants.

None of the four Marines have been charged yet with any crimes, but the Geneva Conventions forbid desecration of the dead.

The incident also stirred up already strong anti-US sentiment in Afghanistan after more than a decade of war that has seen other cases of abuse.

The US-led invasion of Afghanistan took place in 2001 under the pretext of combating terrorism, and toppling the Taliban regime.

However, insecurity continues to rise across Afghanistan despite the presence of foreign forces in the country.

<http://www.aopnews.com/today.html>

- **US-led chopper crashes in Afghanistan**

Press TV

January 15, 2012

A helicopter operated by the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) has crashed in Logar province in eastern Afghanistan, Press TV reports.

The incident took place in the Baraki district of eastern Logar province on Saturday.

There is still no official word on possible casualties or the cause of the crash. The Taliban have not commented on the incident, either.

The Taliban say they have shot down several aircraft and NATO choppers in different parts of Afghanistan over the past few months.

Last year, Taliban militants downed a US helicopter in Afghanistan's eastern province of Wardak. Thirty one members of the US special forces were killed in the incident which was the biggest single loss of life for American forces since the 2001 US-led invasion of Afghanistan.

Insecurity continues to climb across Afghanistan despite the presence of 130,000 US-led forces in the war-ravaged country.

The US-led war in Afghanistan has become the longest war in US history.

<http://www.aopnews.com/today.html>

- **Two US-led soldiers killed in Afghanistan**

Press TV

January 15, 2012

The Western military alliance, NATO, says two more US-led of soldiers have been killed in Afghanistan's troubled south.

The alliance claimed the troops had died due to non-combat-related injuries sustained yesterday. This is while most US-led soldier casualties are combat-related.

The alliance has not released further details regarding the incident.

The recent deaths put the total of NATO soldiers killed in Afghanistan since the beginning of 2012 at 15.

Last year was the second deadliest year for the alliance in Afghanistan since the US-led invasion of the country in 2001.

The increasing number of military casualties in Afghanistan has caused widespread anger in the US and other NATO member states, undermining public support for the Afghan war.

The US-led invasion of Afghanistan took place in 2001 under the pretext of combating terrorism, toppling the Taliban regime, and establishing security in the country.

However, insecurity continues to rise across Afghanistan despite the presence of thousands of foreign forces in the country.

The war in Afghanistan has become the longest military conflict in US history.

<http://www.aopnews.com/today.html>

● **Mortar shell injures 5 Afghan children**

Press TV

January 15, 2012

Five Afghan children have been injured in an incident during which an unexploded mortar shell blew up when they threw it into the fire while playing in the western province of Herat, Press TV reports.

The incident took place in the Adraskan district of the province, located 640 kilometers (396 miles) west of the capital Kabul, on Saturday morning.

Ahmad Farhad Raoufian, the governor of the Adraskan district, said that the injured children were taken to the hospital to receive medical treatment.

Despite the presence of tens of thousands of foreign forces in Afghanistan, the United Nations says the violence has peaked and is now at its highest level since US-led forces attacked the country in 2001.

A UN report on Afghanistan issued on September 28, 2011 said the average monthly number of security incidents

recorded for the year through the end of August rose nearly 40 percent compared to the previous year.

The report also said civilian casualties, already at record levels in the first six months of the year, rose 5 percent between June and August 2011, compared with the same three-month period in 2010.

Around 130,000 Afghans were displaced by the conflict in the first seven months of 2011, up nearly two-thirds from the same period a year earlier.

<http://www.aopnews.com/today.html>

- **Taliban's hardline casts shadow on Afghan peace talks**

by Abdul Haleem, Chen Xin

KABUL, Jan.15 (Xinhua) -- Though Taliban's decision to open a political office in Qatar raised expectation for a negotiated end to the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan, the ousted regime consistently rejected a pre-condition set by Afghan government for any talks with the rebels -- accept the constitution.

"We have increased our political efforts to come to mutual understanding with the world in order to solve the current ongoing situation. But this understanding does not mean surrender from Jihad (holy war) and neither is it connected to an acceptance of the constitution of the stooge Kabul administration," Taliban said in a statement sent to media on Thursday.

Afghan government has repeatedly said that the door is open for talks with those Taliban who sever ties with al-Qaida network, renounce violence and accept the constitution.

The militant group, which has turned down peace talks unless the foreign troops withdraw from Afghanistan, also vowed to continue fighting Afghan government troops and NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).

"The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (the ousted Taliban regime) is utilizing its political wing alongside its military presence and Jihad (holy war) in order to realize the national and Islamic aspirations of the nation and its martyrs," said the statement written in Pashto and English.

Overcoming the conditions and pre-conditions set by warring sides for Afghan peace talks seems difficult at the moment, as neither sides exercise flexibility.

The gap between the two sides can be gauged when Afghan Second Vice President Mohammad Karim Khalili pointed out that Taliban should accept the constitution and all values envisaged in the national laws.

"Taliban should give away the ideology of Talibanism and accept constitution and they (Taliban) should realize that the people of Afghanistan will not tolerate the Taliban emirate for which they are fighting," Khalili categorically said in his speech inside a mosque on Friday.

On January 3, Taliban confirmed that it had agreed to open a political office in Qatar for talks with the "international community".

However, Taliban marginalized Afghan government and emphasized that the U.S. and the "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan" are the real sides involved in the Afghan conflict over the past 10 years.

Afghan government has noted that any peace talks should be led by Afghans.

Though Kabul and Washington welcomed Taliban readiness for talks, the elusive Taliban chief Mullah Mohammad Omar who had rejected any Afghan government's offers for talks in the presence of foreign forces, has yet to make comment.

Some Afghan officials are doubtful that the Taliban leadership really want to find a peaceful settlement on the negotiating table.

"We are not very much optimistic about talks with Taliban because they do not accept the constitution which guarantees the right of women and human rights. We support the peace talks but the condition is that Taliban should accept the constitution," Hajji Mohammad Mohaqiq, a legislator and member of the High Peace Council, said in a television panel discussion Saturday.

<http://www.aopnews.com/today.html>

- **10 militants surrender to gov't in W. Afghanistan**

HERAT, Afghanistan, Jan. 15 (Xinhua) -- Ten anti-government militants surrendered to government in western Afghan province of Herat on Sunday.

"A 10-member group of militants, including their commander namely Khud-i-Raham, renounced violence and joined the government in Pashtun Zarghun district of Herat province Sunday morning," provincial police Chief Sayed Agha Saqib told Xinhua.

He said the former group of militants was belonging to Hezb-e-Islami, the second militants group fighting government.

More than 3,000 anti-government insurgents, according to officials, have laid down arms in Afghanistan over the past year, a claim rejected by Taliban outfit as propaganda.

<http://www.aopnews.com/today.html>

- **2 Taliban killed, 26 detained in Afghanistan**

KABUL, Jan. 15 (Xinhua) -- Security forces have killed two Taliban insurgents and detained 26 others over the past 24 hours, the Afghan Interior Ministry said on Sunday.

"Afghan National Police (ANP), Afghan National Army and Coalition Forces have launched 10 joint operations in Nangarhar, Kandahar, Helmand, Wardak, Logar and Ghazni provinces over the past 24 hours," the ministry said in a press release.

"As a result of these operations, two armed insurgents were killed, one wounded and 26 others were arrested by the ANP," it said.

The joint forces also seized a handful of weapons besides defusing 35 anti-vehicle mines in the above operations, it said.

<http://www.aopnews.com/today.html>

- **Pakistan Taliban denies reports on death of top Taliban leader**

ISLAMABAD, Jan. 15 (Xinhua) -- Pakistan Taliban on Sunday denied the reports about the killing of top Taliban

commander Hakimullah Mehsud in U.S. drone strike in northwest Pakistan.

Pakistan's Dawn television reported Sunday evening that Hakimullah Mehsud has been killed in a U.S. drone strike in the country's North Waziristan tribal region.

Taliban rejected the report as baseless and a group's spokesman said that Mehsud was not in the area at the time of the strike.

Taliban spokesman Ihsanullah Ihsan said that Hakimullah Mehsud is alive and safe.

Dawn TV said that Pakistani security sources have confirmed Mehsud had been killed in the U.S. drone strike on Jan. 12.

The report said that the strike had targeted a vehicle near Miranshah, center of North Waziristan, killing four people.

Local media had earlier reported that militants from Turkmenistan had been killed in the strike.

It is the second time that media has reported the death of Hakimullah Mehsud. Local and foreign media had

reported in February 2010 that he was killed in a U.S. drone strike. Later he released an audio to deny the rumors.

The U.S. Department of State has offered rewards of up to 5 million U.S. dollars for information leading to the location of Hakimullah Mehsud.

He was appointed the TTP chief after the death of Baitullah Mehsud, the TTP founder, in a U.S. drone strike in August 2009.

Hakimullah Mehsud appeared in a video in January 2010 with the informant-turned-suicide bomber who killed five CIA officers and two CIA security contractors a month earlier in Afghanistan's Khost province.

<http://www.aopnews.com/today.html>

**This media summary is prepared by ORSAM Middle East Research Assistants Nebahat Tanriverdi 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*

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