



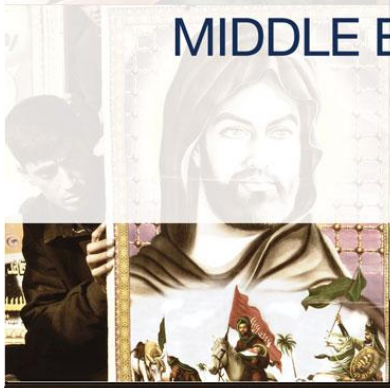
**ORSAM**  
ORTADOĞU STRATEJİK ARAŞTIRMALAR MERKEZİ  
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EASTERN STRATEGIC STUDIES

# GÜNLÜK ORTADOĞU BÜLTENİ

## MIDDLE EAST DAILY BULLETIN

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## 1. IRAQ

- **Baghdad governor threatens to kill any foreigner for security breach**



After four armed Americans were arrested by the security guards of Baghdad Governor Salah Abdul Razak, his statement threatening to kill any foreigner who would act as the four arrested Americans, raised questions over the state of law's sovereignty, the right of accused to a fair trial and the open authorities of officials that could extend to killing.

“If this incident occurs again, we might kill them. We do not allow for any similar violation to happen again. They might come under fire whether they were Americans or others. They will be treated as any terrorist would be treated”, Baghdad Governor Abdul Razak stated.

In a statement to Alsumaria, legal experts confirmed that diplomats are protected by virtue of international conventions mainly Geneva's pact for diplomatic commissions and committees. Iraq's sanctions law stipulates specific conditions that justify shooting in case of self defense stressing however that people's sense of danger is not a sufficient justification for shooting at others, experts argued.

Iraqi Human Rights Minister Mohammed Sudani clarified for his part that the right to fire is restricted to competent security forces. Whoever feels in danger should resort to Iraq's judiciary renowned for its justice, he said.

The New York Times had published earlier an article quoting sources from the US Embassy which reports that the Iraqi government has chased, arrested and threatened a number of US Embassy contractors in Baghdad. These acts are regarded by observers as an attempt by the Iraqi government to impose an influential role after the withdrawal of US Forces at the end of 2011.

<http://www.alsumaria.tv/en/Iraq-News/1-72923-Baghdad-governor-threatens-to-kill-any-foreigner-for-security-breach.html>

- **Iraq Presidency approves 11 death penalties against bloody Wednesday bombers**

Iraqi Presidency approved death penalty sentences against 11 convicted involved in 2009's bloody Wednesday explosions, a source from Iraqi presidency revealed on Thursday.

"Iraqi presidency approved, today, death penalty sentences against 11 convicted involved in the two explosions that targeted the Foreign Affairs and Finance ministries on August 19, 2009," Iraqiya channel cited a source from Iraqi presidency as saying.

Two bombed trucks exploded, on August 19, 2009, targeting headquarters of Foreign Affairs Ministry in Salihiya, central Baghdad, and Finance Ministry, western Baghdad which led to the death of 112 people and the injury of 575. Regions surrounding the explosion sites, Salihiya residential compound central Baghdad and Mohamed Qassim Bridge western the

capital were heavily damaged by the explosions.

Iraqi government accused, at the time, Baathist commands in Damascus of being behind explosions and called the UN to form an international tribunal to try the accused. These accusations resulted in tension that lasted for over a year between both parties. Iraqi authorities consequently undertook tight security measures, increased security checkpoints in the capital, and brought 29 security members, including high ranked officers, to justice for neglect and shortcoming, a source told Alsumaria.

<http://www.alsumaria.tv/en/Iraq-News/1-72936-Iraq-Presidency-approves-11-death-penalties-against-bloody-Wednesday-bombers.html>

- **Iraqiya List insists on boycotting Cabinet and Parliament sessions**

Thursday, January 19, 2012 15:35 GMT  
Iraqiya List headed by Iyad Allawi announced, on Wednesday, that it still insists to boycott cabinet and parliament sessions. The list will make a decision about members still attending sessions

within the two coming days, a source revealed.

“Iraqiya List resolved, during a meeting on Wednesday, to continue boycotting cabinet and parliament sessions until the government responds to its demands,” Iraqiya List MP Talal Al Zawbai told Alsumarianews.

“Iraqiya will be making a decision, within the two coming days, about its members who attended and are still attending parliament and cabinet sessions,” Zawbai indicated adding that the decision will be announced at the time.

Head of Iraqiya List Iyad Allawi called, on January 18, to name a new Prime Minister for Iraq in the event that the national congress fails to achieve its goals. The list called also to form a new government that would organize early constitutional elections, a source told Alsumaria.

State of Law coalition senior official Yassin Majid for his part, said he regrets Iraqiya’s persistence on boycotting cabinet and parliament sessions blaming the list for related repercussions. The options advanced by Allawi are strange and could push Iraq towards the unknown, Majid said.

“It is unfortunate that Iraqiya List decided to continue boycotting cabinet and parliament sessions,” Majid concluded.

<http://www.alsumaria.tv/en/Iraq-News/1-72925-Iraqiya-List-insists-on-boycotting-Cabinet-and-Parliament-sessions.html>

- **Iraq Vice-President of Baghdad Provincial Council arrested for terrorism charges**

An Iraqi police source reported, on Wednesday, that a special force arrested Vice-President of Baghdad Provincial Council Riyadh Al Adad for terrorism charges.

“A special force stopped, this morning, the convoy of Vice-President of Baghdad Provincial Council Riyadh Al Adad before it reached the council’s headquarters in Al Salihya District, Central Baghdad,” the source told Alsumarianews noting that the force arrested Adad.

“The arrest was executed after Iraqi judiciary issued an arrest warrant for Adad by virtue of Anti-terrorism Law Article 4,” the source told Alsumaria on condition of anonymity.

Baghdad Provincial Council elected Riyad Al Adad of Iraqi Accord Front as Vice-President of the council, in 2009, following Iraqi provincial councils' elections.

Article 4 of 2005's Anti-terrorism Law stipulates that every act of violence, threat, instigation and financing that intend to create sectarian strife or civil war through citizens' arming or inciting to arm each other is considered as terrorist act.

<http://www.alsumaria.tv/en/Iraq-News/1-72895-Iraq-Vice-President-of-Baghdad-Provincial-Council-arrested-for-terrorism-charges.html>

- **Atta: New confessions of Iraq VP's bodyguards to be published soon**

Baghdad Operations Command announced, on Tuesday, that it will display confessions of a second group of Iraqi Vice-President Tarek Al Hashemi's bodyguards within 72 hours of the statement. Initial confessions involve 3 accused including an Iraqi Interior Ministry Brigadier, the command revealed.

"Important confessions of a second group of Hashemi's bodyguards will be displayed

within 72 hours," spokesman of Baghdad Operations Command Brigadier General Qassim Atta told a statement reported by an Iraqi television channel. "Initial confessions involve 3 accused including an Iraqi Interior Ministry Brigadier," Atta indicated.

Interior Ministry displayed, on December 19, confessions of Hashemi's bodyguards assuring that he personally charged them to execute violent actions. Based on these confessions, Higher Judicial Council issued an arrest warrant for Iraqi Vice-President Tarek Al Hashemi who is now present in Kurdistan Region. Iraqi President Jalal Talabani, for his part, assured on December 24 that he is receiving Hashemi who is ready to appear before judiciary anytime and anywhere in Iraq.

Hashemi called for the transfer of his case to Kirkuk or Kanaqin after Higher Judicial Council of Iraq refused its transfer to Kurdistan Region. Higher Judicial Council of Iraq denied, for its part, having approved to transfer Iraqi Vice-President Tarek Al Hashemi's case to Kirkuk. Hashemi's case will remain in Baghdad, Higher Judicial Council announced noting that it will be examined by a judicial body of nine judges.

State of Law Coalition headed by Prime Minister Nuri Al Maliki assured, on December 30, that accusations against Hashemi are purely judiciary. Such cases can't be transferred upon suspect's demands, State of Law advanced arguing that the only authority competent to choose court's location is the tribunal. "Court should take place where crimes and confessions occurred," the coalition concluded, a source told Alsumaria.

<http://www.alsumaria.tv/en/Iraq-News/1-72856-Atta%3A-New-confessions-of-Iraq-VP%E2%80%99s-bodyguards-to-be-published-soon.html>

- **KA Spokesman expresses pessimism over the political processes future, concern from majority government be formed**

Baghdad (NINA) – Spokesman for the Kurdish Alliance, Farhad al-Atroushi, expressed pessimism over the future of the political process.

In a statement on Wednesday, Jan. 18, to Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), Atroushi expressed concern that the National Alliance or the State of Law

Alliance might resort to a forming a government of political majority, pointing out that such a choice is not beneficial to the country.

He added, "Each of Iraqiya and the National Alliance, especially the State of Law, have its opinion on the National Conference, called for by President Jalal Talabani to contain current political crisis."

"If no agreement reached on the Conference general frame, the country will enter into a dark tunnel." He warned.

It is worth mentioning that sides participating in the government have expressed desire to attend the Conference, but have set condition for that, mainly the Conference's agenda and the place where it is to be held.

[http://www.ninanews.com/english/News\\_Details.asp?ar95\\_VQ=FJLDMD](http://www.ninanews.com/english/News_Details.asp?ar95_VQ=FJLDMD)

- **Barzani officially introduces Nechirvan to head Kurdish government**

ERBIL, Jan. 19 (AKnews) – Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)\_ leader Massoud Barzani has officially introduced his

candidate to head the Kurdish regional government (KRG) for the next two years as the current Prime Minister Barham Ahmed Salih is preparing to step down as part of a political deal between the KDP and Salih's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).



Barzani's selection of Nechirvan – his nephew and a former KRG Prime Minister – came in a meeting today between the PUK and the KDP leadership.

Azad Jundaiyani, PUK politburo's spokesperson told AKnews that "in today's meeting, Massoud Barzani introduced

Nechirvan Barzani to the PUK and KDP politburo members as the KDP's only candidate for the position of KRG Prime Minister"

According to a political deal signed between the KDp and PUK, the two parties enter elections as partners and share government positions 50-50 including two years of premiership for each party's candidate.

Mr. Salih, the current Prime Minister from the PUK, took office in 2010. After two years in office, the KDP is now claiming its part of the four year term.

Also, as part of the deal, the position of the parliament speaker, currently held by the KDP, will go to the PUK.

But the PUK have not yet officially put forward candidates to fill the slot. "We are waiting for Jala Talabani, PUK leader, to come back from Baghdad to Kurdistan so that we can announce the candidate for the position officially"

<http://www.aknews.com/en/aknews/4/285302/>

- **Iraqiya deputies return to Baquba for sessions**



GARMIYAN, Jan.20 (AKnews)- Some deputies from Iraqiya List have agreed to attend the meetings of Diyala Provincial Council in the center of the province, Baquba, a Kurdish deputy in Diyala Council said.

Talib MohamadTaleb Mohammed told AKnews that after Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and Diyala Operations Command promised to protect their lives, seven Iraqiya deputies agreed to return to Baquba for sessions of the Council.

He added the Council members are trying to convince the rest of Iraqiya deputies to convene at the building of Diyala Provincial Council.

After Diyala Council, dominated by Iraqiya deputies, demanded regional autonomy turmoil swept through the province. The Council building was surrounded by protesters who asked the Council withdraw the demand. Iraqiya deputies who resided in Baquba fled either to some districts of Diyala or to Iraqi Kurdistan region and sessions of the Council were temporarily held in Khanaqin, a city in Diyala.

<http://www.aknews.com/en/aknews/4/285351/>

- **Iraqiya MP: U.S. Holding on to Maliki Government for Iran Ties**

Iraqiya MP Wihda al-Jumaili says the U.S. is “holding on” to PM Maliki’s government because it is trying to use the government’s strong ties with Iran for mediation between the two sides.

Politics & Governance

Council of Ministers Bans Boycotting Ministers [Iraqiya TV, Sharqiya, Sumaria, Bab News Agency, Jan 17)

According to Iraqiya TV and a press release from Ali Dabbagh, the Council of Ministers has decided to ban any ministers boycotting Council of Ministers meetings from entering their ministries, dealing with the public, and dealing with government officials. The council decided to instruct the senior undersecretaries in every ministry to reject any orders from the absentee ministers and to assign a special force to apply these decisions. Sumaria TV notes Government Advisor Ali al-Musawi said the decision has been taken specifically preventing Iraqiya's ministers of Finance, Science and Technology, and Education from conducting their official business inside their ministries until they end their boycott.

In addition, the Council of Ministers has also postponed the discussion on amending Article 140 of the constitution regarding the disputed areas. The council also decided to form a five-judge committee to examine Article 36 regarding the elections of the municipal

councils and address the Council of Representatives to decide on the mechanism for calculating the value of the electoral seat.

Sumaria, Jan 18

- **Source: Iraqiya will End Boycott**

An unnamed Iraqiya source said the bloc has decided to the end the boycott of its cabinet ministers and MPs unconditionally, adding the decision was made during an unannounced meeting on Tuesday. Earlier, Sadr MP Jawad al-Shiheili says his bloc boycotted an attempted vote inside the Council of Ministers to ban Iraqiya ministers from entering their ministries.

Sumaria News, Buratha News, Jan 17

- **Hashimi: GOI Launching Campaign Against Supporters**

In statements published Tuesday, Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi accused the Iraqi Government of launching a pursuit and arrest campaign against his supporters in Baghdad and in the southern and middle governorates in Iraq. Hashimi said the governmental campaign

was not limited to him in person but has started to target his supporters among the Iraqi people and launched arrest campaigns in Al-Amiriyah, Al-Ghazaliyah, and Yarmuk areas in addition to Al-Zubayr District in Basra Governorate, accusing those who assume power in Iraq of overstepping their authority and taking Iraq from one crisis to a more serious one. Iraqiya Warns GOI Channel from Broadcasting Hashimi Confessions (Sumaria, Jan 18)

A statement by Iraqiya MP Maysoun al-Demelouji has warned the government funded Iraqiya Channel from airing new confessions related to VP Hashimi's case, adding that the trial should take place in court rather than media outlets.

Sharqiya, Jan 17

- **Iraqi League for Human Rights Criticizes Televised Confessions Against Hashimi**

The Iraqi League for Human Right Activists addressed criticism to the Iraqi Government after the GOI announced its intent to disclose what it calls televised confessions against Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi. In a statement published

Tuesday, the League said using the media to broadcast confessions obtained by force is "indecent and illegal," and contradictory to legal and constitutional provisions, and seeks to affect judicial decisions. The League added in its statement: 'We have warned that this method proves there is not strong evidence against the accused parties and shows that the case of Hashimi and his bodyguards is a politicized case with political implications and aims at settling accounts.' The league mentioned its lawyers and a group of Arab and foreign lawyers are ready to take on this case.

Sharqiya, Jan 18

- **Sunni Cleric: "Occupation" Infected Everyone with Sectarianism**

Head of the Sunni Fatwa Association, Mahdi al-Sumayda'i, says he accepts dealing with PM Maliki because he [Maliki] is an Iraqi. The cleric goes on to call for ridding the country of the "remains of the American project", adding that the "occupation" infected everyone with "the disease of sectarianism."

Al-Mashriq, Jan 17

- **PM Maliki Emphasizes Stability of Government**

In an interview with an Iranian channel Tuesday, PM Maliki ruled out any possible collapse of the current government “due to VP Hashimi’s case,” stressing the case will proceed through the Iraqi judiciary. He also stated any potential withdrawal of any political blocs from the government will not affect the “continuation of a majority government.

Shafaaq News Agency, Jan 17

- **Maliki Increases Security over “Coup” Fears**

A source from PM Maliki’s office said PM Maliki has intensified the security measures around his resident and office inside the Green Zone, as well as his son’s residences, and some of his close advisors, closing down the main street leading to his home. The source hinted PM Maliki fears of "potential coups" against him and his government.

UR News Agency, Sotaliraq News, Jan 17

- **Turkish AKP Deputy Criticizes Maliki Statements**

Deputy Chairman of the ruling Turkish AK Party Ömer Çelik described Monday recent statements by Iraqi PM Maliki as having “the least wisdom in the history of the Middle East,” and calling PM Maliki “the most dangerous problem in Iraq.”

Radio Nawa, Jan 18

- **Sulaimaniya Chamber of Commerce: Iranian Businessmen Fall Behind on Payments**

Head of the Sulaimaniya Chamber of Commerce Sirwan Mohammed says Iranian businessmen are yet to pay \$500 million to their Kurdish counterparts in return for goods exported to Iran, adding that a senior Iranian government delegation is in the province to discuss the issue.

al-Mada, Jan 17

- **White Bloc MP: Kuwait Bribing Iraqi Journalists Away from Port Mubarak Coverage**

White Bloc MP Aliya Nusayif says Kuwait has been inviting Iraqi journalists to visit Kuwait and offering them bribes not to cover the issue of Port Mubarak. Head of the Iraqi Journalists Syndicate Muadi al-Lami said reporters who go to Kuwait without the syndicate's approval will be questioned upon their return.

Al-Mashriq, Jan 17

## 2. IRAN

- **SNSC Official Underlines Iran, Russia's Important, Influential Stands in World Arena**

TEHRAN (FNA)- Undersecretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) Ali Baqeri stressed the important positions of Tehran and Moscow in the world, and said the two countries always hold constant consultations on regional and international developments.

Baqeri said that the Islamic Republic and Russia have built consensus on regional and international developments.

Tehran and Moscow are aware of plots by foreign powers regarding regional issues and have carried out extensive

consultations over the recent months, he said in the Russian capital, Moscow, on Thursday.



Iran and Russia are two strong neighboring countries which enjoy a special position in the international arena. They held constant consultations on key regional and global issues in the past, he added.

Baqeri arrived in Moscow on Wednesday for a two-day official visit to hold discussions with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and the country's other political and security authorities.

The Iranian nuclear official further said that Tehran is on the threshold of a new round of talks with the permanent members of the UN Security Council - Russia, China, France, Britain and the US - plus Germany (G5+1).

Talks are underway to determine the exact date and venue for fresh discussions between Iran and G5+1, but no decision has yet been made in this regard, Baqeri added.

He noted that the two sides will also set the agenda for the talks.

Iran and G5+1 attended three rounds of talks in Istanbul, Turkey, in January 2011.

The Iranian side was presided by SNSC Secretary Saeed Jalili, while Catherine Ashton, the EU foreign policy chief, headed delegations from the six world powers.

<http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9010171757>

- **FM: Iran, Turkey Resolved to Increase Trade Exchanges up to \$30bln**

TEHRAN (FNA)- Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi stressed that Iran and Turkey, as the two neighboring countries, are determined to boost their trade exchanges to \$30bln in future.

Salehi is now in the Turkish capital, Ankara, at the head of a high-ranking

delegation to attend the 23rd session of the Joint Economic Cooperation Commission of the two countries.

Salehi said the main purpose of the session would be paving the way to further bolster economic and trade transactions between the two neighbors.

The value of "economic and trade transactions between the two countries hit USD15 billion in the past few years," the top Iranian diplomat told reporters, adding that the figure rose "from USD5 billion a few years ago and we plan to increase that level to USD30 billion. In that session we will discuss ways to achieve that goal."

Turkish officials also expressed their resolve to further enhance ties between the two countries.

During his Ankara visit, Salehi also held talks with Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and President Abdullah Gul behind closed doors.

Initiatives to enhance ties between the two countries were reportedly top on the agenda during both meetings.

Turkey's Economy Ministry, in a statement ahead of the economic session, said that the current level of trade ties between the two countries still do not match the much stronger political ties and cooperation between the two countries.

Iran and Turkey have in recent years increased their cooperation in all the various fields of economy, security, trade, education, energy and culture.

The two sides have exchanged several politico-economic delegations during the last few months.

Turkish President Abdullah Gul in a meeting with Iranian Parliament Speaker Ali Larijani earlier in February underlined the need for the removal of obstacles to the further expansion of bilateral economic ties with Iran in a bid to boost trade cooperation between the two countries.

"The level of economic and trade cooperation between the two countries is not appropriate for the age-old ties of the two nations and we should remove the obstacles to the development of mutual

cooperation between Iran and Turkey," Gul said at the time.

<http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9010171755>

- **Salehi: Iran-5+1 Talks Most Likely to Take Place in Turkey**



TEHRAN (FNA)- The future talks between Iran and the Group 5+1 (the five permanent UN Security Council members plus Germany) will "most probably" be held in Turkey, Iranian top diplomat Ali Akbar Salehi said.

"Talks between Iran and the G5+1 -- Britain, China, France, Russia, and the United States plus Germany -- will most probably be held in Istanbul," Salehi said in Ankara on Wednesday.

Salehi said Turkey's Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu was in contact with Iran's top nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili

and EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton, and the date of negotiations would be announced in the "near future".

Earlier, Davutoglu had announced that both Iran and the G5+1 are ready to resume their talks, adding that Ankara is also prepared for hosting the negotiations.

Speaking at a joint press conference with NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen in Brussels yesterday, the Turkish minister said he had contacts recently with Iranian officials and EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton and that 'both sides declared the intention to meet and restart the negotiations.'

"Of course, it is up to both sides to decide but as far as Turkey is concerned, we will be happy to host this new round of talks," he said.

Tomorrow (on Thursday), Davutoglu said, "I will be meeting with my Iranian counterpart Ali Akbar Salehi in Ankara to discuss this issue."

"We hope these negotiations will create positive result and an important

international concern will be thoroughly resolved," he added.

Iran and G5+1 attended three rounds of talks in Istanbul, Turkey, in January 2011.

The Iranian side was presided by Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) Saeed Jalili, while Catherine Ashton, the EU foreign policy chief, headed delegations from the six world powers.

<http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9010171751>

- **Turkish PM Reiterates Ankara's Support for Iran's Peaceful N. Program**

TEHRAN (FNA)- Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan in a meeting with Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi renewed his country's support for Tehran's peaceful nuclear program.

Erdogan said Turkey always supported Iran's peaceful nuclear activities and thought cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency will help settle the issue.

During the meeting Wednesday night, the two officials also reviewed bilateral ties and explored ways of promoting Tehran-Ankara relations.



The Turkish prime minister voiced Turkey's readiness to expand cooperation with Iran in all possible areas.

He also expressed the interest of his country in exchanging views with Iran on regional issues with an aim of consolidating security, peace and stability in the region.

The two sides hoped for enhancement of their trade volume to \$30 billion by 2015.

They also exchanged views on Iran's nuclear program and the talks between Tehran and the Group 5+1 (the five permanent UN Security Council members plus Germany).

Iran and G5+1 attended three rounds of talks in Istanbul, Turkey, in January 2011.

The Iranian side was presided by Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) Saeed Jalili, while Catherine Ashton, the EU foreign policy chief, headed delegations from the six world powers.

<http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9010171749>

- **Iranian Culture Minister, Hezbollah Leader Meet in Lebanon**

TEHRAN (FNA)- Iranian Culture Minister Seyed Mohammad Hosseini and Lebanese Hezbollah Movement Leader Seyed Hassan Nasrallah in a meeting in Lebanon conferred on the latest regional and international developments.

Iran's Islamic Revolution of 1979 has been inspiring for Lebanese resistance movement against Zionist regime, Nasrallah said during the meeting on Wednesday.

"Blessings and positive effects of the founder of the Islamic Republic Imam Khomeini (P) still continues in the region

and world; Islamic revolution of Iran was encouraging for the oppressed people everywhere on the earth," Nasrallah added.



Iran's minister of culture and Islamic guidance for his part said that the Lebanese resistance was inspiring for regional nations in the ongoing popular Islamic Awakening in the Middle East and North Africa.

"Iran supports the Lebanese resistance against the Zionist occupying forces," he continued.

Hosseini noted that Tehran is eager to get engaged in joint cultural activities, including production of films and holding cultural weeks in the two countries.

"Agreements between Beirut and Tehran in the field of culture, art and production of movies are big steps forward in

expansion of cultural relations between Tehran and Beirut," he underlined.

Nasrallah and Hosseini emphasized on need for the expansion of bilateral and regional cooperation and discussed the latest regional and international developments.

Iran and Lebanon enjoy cordial relations and have further expanded these ties in recent years.

The two sides have exchanged several delegations of high-ranking officials in the last two years.

Iranian and Lebanese officials have recently doubled efforts to further expand the bilateral relations and mutual cooperation between the two nations.

The two countries signed a cluster of economic agreements during Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's landmark visit to Beirut in October 2010.

<http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9010171741>

- **Embassy dismisses claims Iran intended to do terror acts in Turkey**

TEHRAN, Jan. 20 (MNA) – The Iranian embassy in Ankara issued a statement on Thursday dismissing news reports claiming that Iran had intended to dispatch forces to Turkey with the aim of carrying out terrorist operations in the country.

“The Islamic Republic of Iran is one of the victims of terrorism and has gotten fed up with the scourge of terrorism. Besides, the martyrdom of Iranian scientists by elements affiliated with the corrupt Zionist regime is proof of this assertion,” the statement read.

“It is obvious that the Zionists and interventionist governments are not happy about close relations between the two friendly and brotherly countries of Iran and Turkey, and therefore have been sparing no effort to create tension in the relations between the two countries. However, what is a source of delight is that officials of the two countries are well aware of the issue, and constant bilateral consultations, particularly high-level bilateral meetings between officials of the two countries in recent weeks, are

indicative of great cooperation,” the statement added.

It also said, “The Islamic Republic of Iran’s policy is based on the principle of non-intervention in the internal affairs of other countries and (Iran) has always been seeking to participate (in efforts) to establish peace and stability in the region.”

The Iranian embassy also expressed hope that media outlets would check the authenticity of such reports before publishing them in order to help foil conspiracies against Iran and Turkey.

<http://www.mehrnews.com/en/newsdetail.aspx?NewsID=1514010>

- **Oil sanctions on Iran will affect world’s economy: Japanese envoy**

TEHRAN, Jan. 20 (MNA) – The Japanese ambassador to Tehran has said that the imposition of sanctions on Iran’s oil industry will negatively affect the economic situation of the world in general and Japan in particular.

“The law ratified in the United States has endangered the situation of Japanese

companies, and in the Japanese government's view, it is very difficult to implement these sanctions," Ambassador Kinichi Komano told the Mehr News Agency in an interview published on Thursday.

U.S. President Barack Obama signed into law a defense funding bill that imposes sanctions on financial institutions dealing with the Central Bank of Iran on December 31, 2011 with the aim of hampering Iran's crude oil exports.

Kinichi said that more than 30 Japanese firms have representative offices in Iran, adding, "All these companies are among large Japanese firms which have representative offices around the world, and hence these companies have representative offices in the United States."

"It should be stated clearly that these companies have more trade interactions with the United States than Iran, and therefore, these centers should take the interests of the entire country into consideration. And these interests are in the United States. Therefore, the law which has been newly ratified in the U.S.

has made the situation difficult for Japanese firms," he stated.

Kinichi added, "On the other hand, Iran is regarded as a very important country and as Japan's friend. And we have now told the United States that oil sanctions on Iran should not have a negative impact on the economic situation of the world and Japan."

"You are aware that economic situation in Europe is not very good. Japan's economic situation is better than Europe, but Japan's most important nuclear power plant in Fukushima was damaged in the tragic tsunami disaster and cannot be reconstructed.

"So this unpleasant incident compelled the government to examine other power plants in Japan, and for this reason, operations at a number of other nuclear plants have been suspended, and Japan is facing electricity shortages. We have been using our fossil fuel power stations and coal power plants and have increased the capacities of these plants.

"As a result, oil and gas consumption has increased in Japan, and if oil imports from

Iran decrease at this juncture, problems will be created.”

Iran’s advances have made world sensitive about its nuclear issue

Commenting on the dispute over Iran’s nuclear activities, the Japanese ambassador said, “I think Iran’s nuclear activities are 100 percent peaceful. However, there is serious concern in the international arena about Iran’s nuclear program which is justified because Iran has made considerable progress in the areas of science and technology,” and the military drills that the Islamic Republic recently held indicates Iran’s advances.

“These issues have made the world’s people sensitive about (Iran’s) nuclear issue, and therefore the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran should make more efforts to demonstrate the transparency of its nuclear activities,” Kinichi stated.

He also commented on relations between Tehran and Tokyo, saying, “The Iranian people have many affinities with the Japanese people, and the relations

between the two countries are based on mutual trust.”

<http://www.mehrnews.com/en/newsdetail.aspx?NewsID=1514039>

- **Iran warns region against "dangerous" stance on Hormuz**

ANKARA, (Reuters) - Iran's foreign minister warned Arab neighbors on Thursday not to put themselves in a "dangerous position" by allying themselves too closely with Washington in the escalating row over Tehran's nuclear activity.

Iran has threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz, used for a third of the world's seaborne oil trade, if pending Western moves to ban Iranian crude exports cripple its lifeblood energy sector, fanning fears of a descent into wider Middle East war.

Tehran, which denies suspicions it is seeking nuclear weapons, was riled earlier this week when Saudi Arabia asserted it could swiftly raise oil output for key customers if needed, a scenario that could transpire if Iranian exports were embargoed.

"We want peace and tranquility in the region. But some of the countries in our region, they want to direct other countries 12,000 miles away from this region," Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi said in English during a visit to Turkey.

The remark was an apparent reference to the alliance of Iran's Arab neighbors with the United States, which has a huge fleet in the Gulf and says it will keep the waterway open.

"I am calling to all countries in the region, please don't let yourselves be dragged into a dangerous position," he told Turkey's NTV broadcaster.

Salehi added the United States should make clear that it was open for negotiations with Tehran without conditions. He referred to a letter Iran says it received from U.S. President Barack Obama about the situation in the Strait of Hormuz, the contents of which have not been made public.

"Mr. Obama sent a letter to Iranian officials, but America has to make clear that it has good intentions and should

express that it's ready for talks without conditions," he said.

"Out in the open they show their muscles but behind the curtains they plead to us to sit down and talk. America has to pursue a safe and honest strategy so we can get the notion that America this time is serious and ready."

The United States, like other Western countries, says it is prepared to talk to Iran but only if Tehran agrees to discuss halting its enrichment of uranium. Western officials say Iran has been asking for talks "without conditions" as a stalling tactic while refusing to put its nuclear program on the table.

With EU foreign ministers preparing to approve a phased ban on imports of Iranian oil at a meeting on January 23, Salehi said on Wednesday that the Islamic Republic was in touch with world powers to reopen talks frozen for a year.

Washington and the EU have denied this, saying they are still waiting for Iran to show it wanted serious negotiations addressing fears that it trying to master ways to build atom bombs behind the

facade of a civilian nuclear energy program.

#### TARGETING IRANIAN CENTRAL BANK

In addition to an embargo on Iran's economically vital oil exports, EU diplomats said member governments had agreed in principle to freeze assets of Iran's central bank, but had yet to agree how to protect non-oil trade from sanctions.

Iranian politicians said Obama had expressed readiness to negotiate in a letter to Iran's clerical supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

"In this letter it was said that closing the Strait of Hormuz is our (U.S.) 'red line' and also asked for direct negotiations," the semi-official Fars news agency quoted lawmaker Ali Mottahari as saying.

Washington denied there were any new discussions under way about resuming talks with Iran, but declined to comment on whether Obama had written to Khamenei.

"There are no current talks about talks," State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said on Wednesday.

"What we are doing, as we have said, is making clear to the Iranians that if they are serious about coming back to a conversation, where they talk openly about their nuclear program, and if they are prepared to come clean with the international community, that we are open to that," she said.

The die was cast for international oil sanctions against Iran when Obama signed legislation on December 31 that would freeze out any institution dealing with Iran's central bank, making it impossible for most countries to buy Iranian oil. Similar measures are expected from Europe this month.

"On the central bank, things have been moving in the right direction in the last hours," one EU diplomat said on Wednesday. "There is now a wide agreement on the principle. Discussions continue on the details."

The State Department denial about talks was echoed by a spokesman for EU

foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton, who represents the six world powers trying to engage with Iran.

"There are no negotiations under way on new talks," he said in Brussels. "We are still waiting for Iran to respond to the substantive proposals the High Representative (Ashton) made in her letter from October."

#### FAR APART OVER AGENDA FOR TALKS

Ashton underlined that talks must focus on Iran's underground uranium enrichment activity, whereas Tehran has wanted to discuss only broader security issues up to now.

Tehran denies wanting nuclear bombs, saying its enrichment work is for power generation and medical applications.

But a U.N. nuclear watchdog report in November lent weight to concerns that Iran has worked on designing a nuclear weapon, and Tehran is shifting enrichment to an underground bunker in a mountain fortified against air attack.

Israel, which is believed to have the Middle East's only nuclear arsenal but sees Iran's nuclear ambitions as a mortal threat, and the United States have not ruled out military action as a last resort to prevent an atomic "breakout" by Tehran.



However, Israeli Defence Minister Ehud Barak said on Wednesday that any decision about an Israeli assault on Iran was "very far off."

British Foreign Secretary William Hague said Iran had to be ready for serious negotiations. "It is significant that when we are discussing additional sanctions in the European Union an offer of negotiations emerges from Iran," he said.

"We will not be deterred from imposing additional sanctions simply by the suggestion there may be negotiations. We want to see actual negotiations," he told a news conference in Brazil.

The last talks between Iran and the permanent members of the U.N. Security Council - the United States, Britain, France, Russia and China - along with Germany stalled in Istanbul a year ago, with the parties unable to agree even on an agenda.

The six countries have also failed to agree on a common line in their relations with Iran.

Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao defended his country's extensive oil trade with Iran against Western sanctions pressure in comments published on Thursday. Even so, he said Beijing firmly opposes any efforts by Tehran to acquire nuclear weapons.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said a last-ditch military option mooted by the United States and Israel would ignite a disastrous, widespread Middle East war. Russia has also criticized the new sanctions.

<http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&id=28149>

### 3. ISRAEL - PALESTINE

- **Hamis officials: IDF arrests Palestinian parliament speaker in West Bank**

Abdel Aziz Duaik, a Hamas official and the speaker of the Palestinian parliament, reportedly arrested by IDF soldiers near Ramallah.

Hamis officials said Thursday that the speaker of the Palestinian parliament has been arrested by Israeli soldiers.

A Hamas official said Abdel Aziz Duaik was arrested Thursday near Ramallah. He was speaking on condition of anonymity citing security reasons.

The Israel Defense Forces confirmed that Israeli soldiers arrested Duaik on suspicion of being a member of a terror organization.

The Palestinian parliament has not functioned since Hamas seized control of Gaza in 2007 from the rival Palestinian Fatah Party.

According to Duaik, the Palestinian unity government will be established in the end

of January and will not have any diplomatic missions other than preparing for the elections. He said he will not be heading the Palestinian unity government.

Since then the Western-backed Fatah governs the West Bank while Hamas rules Gaza.

Duaik was arrested along with other Hamas officials in 2006 after militants abducted Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit. He was released in 2009.

Duaik's arrest is part of IDF efforts, after the completion of the Shalit deal, to prevent any possible operations by terror organizations.

<http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/hamas-officials-idf-arrests-palestinian-parliament-speaker-in-west-bank-1.408227>

- **IDF exposes Syria-funded Islamic Jihad terror cell in West Bank**

Israeli security forces arrest 10 militants near Jenin, who were allegedly planning attacks on IDF soldiers and received money from Islamic Jihad in Syria.

By Gili Cohen Tags: IDF Shin Bet West Bank Islamic Jihad Palestinians

Israeli security forces have recently discovered an Islamic Jihad terror cell which was planning attacks against Israeli soldiers, the Israel Defense Forces said Thursday, after a gag order was lifted in the case.



In a joint operation between the IDF and the Shin Bet, 10 Islamic Jihad militants were arrested near Jenin in recent months. According to the investigation, the military headquarters of the cell was communicating with the Islamic Jihad in Syria, who transferred the cell large sums of money to purchase weapons and to fund other operations.

Moreover, the terror cell also had ties with Islamic Jihad in Gaza and with the non-governmental organization "Soul of Jerusalem," which is sponsored by the Islamic Jihad and is outlawed by Israel.

According to the Shin Bet, the terror cell was planning attacks on IDF soldiers, shooting attacks in the settlements, and abducting Israelis.

During the investigation, Israeli security forces seized a kilogram of potassium which could be used to make bombs, a Kalashnikov gun and a magazine, some 150 bullets, and NIS 2,050 that the Shin Bet said was intended for terror operations.

The military prosecution has already served indictments against the 10 arrested militants last month. The suspects are charged with membership in an illegal organization, transfer of foreign money into the West Bank, contact with foreign agents, illegal possession of weapons, and conspiracy to trade military equipment.

<http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/idf-exposes-syria-funded-islamic-jihad-terror-cell-in-west-bank-1.408201>

- **Dempsey: Coordination will improve situation for all of us**

By YAAKOV KATZ

US military chief meets Gantz, Barak at Defense Ministry: The more we can continue to engage each other, the better off we'll all be; Dempsey visits in effort to convince Israel to give Iran sanctions more time.

Gen. Martin Dempsey, Chairman of the United States Joint Chiefs of Staff, began his round of meetings with Israel's top military and political leadership on Friday with a clear message – coordination and dialogue is the key to improving Israel's security standing in the region.

"We have many interests in common in the region in this very dynamic time and the more we can continue to engage each other, the better off we'll all be," Dempsey told IDF Chief of Staff Lt.-Gen. Benny Gantz and Defense Minister Ehud Barak at the beginning of their meeting at the Defense Ministry in Tel Aviv on Friday. Barak responded saying, "There is never a dull moment. That I can promise you".

Dempsey also assured Gantz of US commitment to Israel: "The simplest message of all, my presence here, I hope reflects the commitment we have with

each other and I'm here to assure you that's the case."

"I do know that both our countries share the same interests and values, and I'm sure that we can somehow work it out together," Gantz said to his US counterpart earlier in the conversation, seemingly referring to the issue of the Iranian nuclear threat.

Dempsey, the US's most senior military officer, arrived in Israel late Thursday night for talks that are aimed at getting the IDF and the government to put the brakes on plans to attack Iran's nuclear facilities. The US is hoping that Israel will move attack plans to the back burner and give diplomacy and sanctions more time to have an effect on the Iranian regime.

After arriving in Israel, Dempsey and his wife Deanie met Gantz and his wife Revital for dinner near Tel Aviv. Before the dinner, Gantz surprised Dempsey with a performance by the IDF orchestra which played Frank Sinatra's "New York, New York". Dempsey is a known Sinatra fan and often sings at various military ceremonies.

Dempsey will also meet with head of Military Intelligence Maj.-Gen. Aviv Kochavi, OC IDF Planning Directorate Maj.-Gen. Amir Eshel, President Shimon Peres and Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu. He will later visit the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial Museum before leaving Israel Friday evening.

The US army chief's visit comes amid rising tension between Jerusalem and Washington over Israeli frustration with the US and Europe's reluctance to impose tougher economic sanctions on Iran.

He is expected to try and reassure Israel that the Obama administration is committed to stopping Iran's nuclear program, even if it ultimately comes down to using military force. Top US officials have recently said that the US will not allow Iran to build a nuclear weapon.

While there are differences between the countries as to the type of steps that need to be taken to stop Iran, both Israel and the US share the same intelligence assessments regarding the status of Iran's nuclear program.

As reported last month in The Jerusalem Post, Israeli and American intelligence believe that while Iran has mastered all of the technology it requires to build a nuclear weapon, the regime has yet to make the decision to do so.

Ahead of Dempsey's visit, Barak tried to ease tensions with Washington, saying that an Israeli military strike against Iran is still "very far off." Barak said that Israel was coordinating with the US on how to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon.

"We haven't made any decision to do this," Barak told Army Radio on Wednesday, adding: "This entire thing is very far off. I don't want to provide estimates [but] it's certainly not urgent."

<http://www.jpost.com/VideoArticles/Video/Article.aspx?id=254448>

- **' Hamas will defeat Fatah in May elections'**

By KHALED ABU TOAMEH

Former PA minister Nabil Amr warns that his party will be defeated again if new

elections are held in Palestinian territories.



A senior Fatah official warned Thursday that Hamas would once again defeat his faction if and when new elections are held in the Palestinian territories.

Nabil Amr, a former Palestinian Authority minister, said that Fatah leaders have sent a letter to President Mahmoud Abbas (who also heads Fatah) calling on him to hold a conference to discuss preparations for the elections, slated for May.

Abbas has announced that he would like to hold elections on May 4. However, many Palestinians are skeptical that he would be able to hold the vote, largely due to the ongoing dispute between Hamas and Fatah.

Fatah has come under criticism for failing to draw conclusions from its defeat to Hamas in the 2006 parliamentary election.

Since the Hamas victory, Fatah has failed to come up with a new list of candidates.

Moreover, internal squabbling between Fatah's young guard and veteran leaders continues to undermine the faction's credibility in the eyes of many Palestinians.

Last week, Amr and several Fatah leaders held consultations in Jordan to discuss ways of avoiding another electoral defeat to Hamas, as was the case in the last parliamentary vote.

"Yes, we are concerned," Amr said in an interview with the London-based Al-Quds Al-Arabi newspaper. "Unless the situation in Fatah changes, what happened in the past could occur once again."

He pointed out that Fatah had lost not only in the parliamentary election, but also in elections for local councils and some unions.

Amr said that an "overwhelming majority" in Fatah believes there's a need for changes in the faction.

He revealed that several top Fatah representatives have appealed to Abbas to hold an emergency conference to "reorganize the internal affairs of Fatah."

Amr said there was also growing concern that many disillusioned Fatah members would not vote in favor of their faction in the next elections.

He also expressed concern over the "negative attitudes" voiced by many Palestinians towards the PA leadership.

Referring to the current Israeli-Palestinian talks in Amman, the top Fatah official said that many Palestinians feel that the PA leadership has not been sincere about its true intentions.

He pointed out that in the eyes of many Palestinians, their leaders have abandoned their demand for a cessation of settlement construction as a prerequisite for returning to the negotiating table with Israel.

<http://www.jpost.com/DiplomacyAndPolitics/Article.aspx?id=254423>

#### 4. AFRICA and EGYPT

- **Morocco eyes 5.5% growth in new programme**



Moroccan PM says new measures will stimulate growth, keep inflation low, reduce unemployment. 5.5 percent growth over the next four years

RABAT - Morocco will achieve 5.5 percent growth over the next four years and reduce unemployment and inflation, Prime Minister Abdelilah Benkirane told parliament on Thursday while unveiling his reform programme.

Benkirane said the measures would stimulate growth, keep inflation around 2.0 percent, reduce unemployment to 8.0

percent and cut the budget deficit to 3.0 percent of gross domestic product.

Morocco reached 4.5 percent growth in 2010 and has forecast 4.0 to 5.0 percent growth for 2011.

Official unemployment is 9.6 percent though skyrockets to 31.4 percent for those under 34 years old.

Other measures announced include a massive construction campaign to eradicate slums and reduce the country's housing shortage to 400,000 units from the current 840,000 units.

Morocco's King Mohammed VI earlier this month named a new government dominated by moderate Islamists who won snap polls called by the monarch to abort protests inspired by the Arab Spring.

Benkirane's moderate Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD) took the most seats in the November election, and the party now leads a broad coalition.

<http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=50138>

- **Hunger strike against niqab ban as Salafists up pressure on Tunisia's universities**

TUNIS - Five Tunisian students said they went on hunger strike Wednesday against a ban on niqab veils imposed by a university, upping the ante in a dispute which began in November.



Mohamed el-Bakhti, spokesman of a group of ultraconservative Muslims from the University of Manouba's arts faculty, said the five were on hunger strike for an unlimited period in a "private place under medical monitoring."

The university at Manouba, 25 kilometres (15 miles) west of Tunis, had banned the garment, citing security concerns if the veil is worn with full-body garments.

But the group of Salafist Muslims had contested the ban, and held weeks of sit-ins at the university, forcing the faculty to shut for a month and a half and delaying examinations by three weeks.

El-Bakhti said the sit-in would go on alongside the hunger strike.

The faculty's dean, Habib Kazdaghli, said on Wednesday that he would try to evacuate the protestors before January 24 examinations.

"We will be mobilised for this -- all the teaching staff, including retired professors, who will be here as volunteers to lend a strong hand during the examinations," he said.

Four classes were suspended Wednesday after the Salafists tried to get a niqab-wearing student into a class.

"Conditions will not be good for the examinations if this group acts with impunity on campus, hindering tests with their speeches, chants and prayers using loudspeakers," said Kazdaghli.

Meanwhile, violence also broke out between Islamist and left-wing students at the humanities faculty of Sousse university, about 140 kilometres southeast of Tunis. Three people were injured in the fracas.

A spate of protest actions is paralysing parts of Tunisia a year after the north African country's popular revolt sparked the Arab Spring uprisings.

<http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=50128>

- **Libya, Tunisia sign accord to boost cooperation on security**

Two neighbour countries agree to boost cooperation on security, fight against 'terrorist groups', border controls.



TRIPOLI - Libya and Tunisia agreed on Thursday to boost cooperation on

security, the fight against "terrorist groups" and border controls, according to a memorandum of understanding signed in Tripoli.

The North African neighbours agreed to "exchange information on the activities and crimes of terrorist groups... their sources of financing and the movements of their leaders," said the accord.

It also envisages "redoubling efforts" to combat illegal immigration and the smuggling of weapons, drugs and stolen cars across the border.

At the same time, Tripoli and Tunis agreed to facilitate the movement of citizens across the frontier.

Thousands of people and goods cross between Libya and Tunisia every day.

Tunisia, which receives more than one million Libyans each year, gave refuge to tens of thousands of Libyans who fled the months of fighting last year that led to the collapse of Moamer Gathafi's regime.

However, the border saw numerous skirmishes in recent months, prompting

the closure of the Ras Jdir crossing for three weeks in December.

<http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=50134>

- **Libya number two flees protest in uprising cradle**

Angry students from University of Ghar Yunis in Benghazi accuse Ghoga of opportunism because of his belated defection from Gathafi regime.

BENGHAZI - The deputy head of Libya's National Transitional Council was manhandled by protesters on Thursday in the cradle of the uprising that ousted Moamer Gathafi last year, witnesses said.

Abdelhafiz Ghoga, who also serves as official spokesman for the interim government, had to be escorted away after being mobbed by angry students at the University of Ghar Yunis in Libya's second-largest city Benghazi, the NTC's wartime base.

Ghoga escaped unharmed from the assault but had to endure a tirade of abuse from the protesters who accused him of opportunism because of his

belated defection from Gathafi regime, the witnesses said.

Students have been demonstrating on the Ghar Yunis campus for weeks to protest against the perceived lack of transparency of the administration that took over after Gathafi's ouster and the prominent position in it of a number of his longtime lieutenants.



Meanwhile, at least one person was killed in a clash between two armed groups in the Libyan capital Wednesday evening, witnesses said.

The shootout started when revolutionary fighters responsible for security in the al-Hadhba district of Tripoli detained a resident who was apparently drunk, said the witnesses.

When his relatives gathered to demand his release, the situation escalated,

leading to a shootout that killed one person.

One witness said that two people were killed and that rocket propelled grenades were fired.

It was not immediately possible to confirm the deadly clash.

Another witness said that the group who detained the drunk man are seeking to ban alcohol consumption in the neighbourhood.

Libya remains awash with weapons following the civil war that brought down the regime of Moamer Gathafi who was killed in October, and former rebels remain armed to provide security in many areas.

<http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=50127>

- **Petrol panic eases in Egypt**

Long queues have receded at many Cairo stations which have been short on petrol, diesel since Sunday.

CAIRO - Fuel distribution improved in Egypt on Thursday after panicked motorists flooded gas stations for days, prompting the death of one person and scuffles that left several people hurt.



Queues receded at many Cairo stations, which have been short on petrol and diesel since Sunday, an AFP correspondent said.

Media outlets reported improvements since Wednesday, after the authorities moved to reassure the public in a bid to normalise the situation.

There was a "limited improvement in the domestic petrol and gas crisis in Cairo, but the problem continues in the provinces," read the headlines of the government-owned newspaper Al-Akhbar.

The daily said that cheaper, lower-octane petrol was nowhere to be found in certain areas, such as the province of Qaliubiya, north of Cairo.

The independent newspaper Al-Masri Al-Yom reported seven people were injured in clashes in front of petrol stations in Daqahliya, another province in the Nile Delta.

Al-Shuruq newspaper, meanwhile, said one person was shot dead in Helwan, south of Cairo, in a gunfight between a station's staff and taxi drivers.

Oil sector workers confirmed a resumption of distribution, stressing they were irregular and varied by region and fuel type.

The rush for fuel was sparked by a fear of inflated prices, which have been kept very low thanks to subsidies that severely weigh down the Egyptian budget.

The government blamed unfounded "rumours" of structural shortages and mounting prices, accusing speculators of provoking the crisis by reselling fuel on the black market.

Officials have also linked the crisis to smugglers who reportedly buy up the subsidised petrol to sell abroad.

Egypt, which has been mired in an economic crisis since president Hosni Mubarak was toppled by a popular revolt February 2011, has seen its foreign currency reserves plummet and its budget deficit rise.

The crisis has raised questions about the benefits of maintaining expensive fuel subsidies, as a portion is imported with terms of payments that have become increasingly difficult to meet in light of cashflow problems.

Cairo is currently courting the International Monetary Fund for a \$3.2 billion loan to relieve the crisis.

IMF Middle East director Masood Ahmed said on Wednesday that "energy subsidies and tax irregularities" are among Egypt's key woes, Al-Masry Al-Youm reported.

Planning and International Cooperation Minister Fayza Abul Naga said the IMF loan would help the government

implement its programme to cut the budget deficit and the balance of payments.

<http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=50125>

- **Mubarak 'has reverted to military rank': lawyer**

CAIRO, (AFP) — Civilian courts have no authority to hear corruption charges against ousted Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak because he reverted to his former military rank when he quit, his defence lawyer Farid al-Deeb said on Thursday.

Deeb cited a law adopted in 1979, during the presidency of Mubarak's predecessor Anwar Sadat, which exempts senior military officers from going into retirement and stipulates that if they take up civilian posts, they regain their military rank afterwards.

"Under this law, Hosni Mubarak rejoined the armed forces (when he resigned in February 2011), keeping the rank he formerly had, which is to say that he became General Hosni Mubarak once again," the lawyer told the court.

He also referred to a decree by Egypt's ruling military council, which stipulates that "military justice alone is authorised to try cases of illicit gains by the military."

"Consequently, the accusations directed at the former president by the prosecutor general regarding illicit gains are not admissible," Deeb said.

Mubarak -- who is in custody detained in a military hospital where he is being treated for a heart condition -- went on trial on August 3, after protesters stepped up demonstrations calling on the ruling military to try him and other former regime officials.

The prosecution has called for Egypt's ailing former strongman to be hanged for the killing of hundreds of demonstrators during the January-February 2011 revolt that forced him out of power.

Mubarak and his two sons, Alaa and Gamal, are also being tried on separate charges of corruption.

The last hearing is set for February 16.

The court is then expected to recess for deliberation after which the judge will set a date for the verdict.

<http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&id=28159>

## 5. JORDAN and LEBANON

- **Future movement MPs, Geagea discuss the Electoral Law**



A delegation of Future movement MPs on Thursday held talks with Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea at his residence in Maarab to discuss the general situations in the country and especially the issue of the electoral law,” MP Ahmed Fatfat said following the meeting.

The Future movement delegation included MPs Ahmed Fatfat, Hadi Hbeish and Ziad al-Qaderi. The meeting was attended by

LF bloc MPs Georges Adwan and Antoine Zahra.

“We discovered that we have several issues in common , as we all believe in the Taef Accord and the principle of equal power-sharing between Christians and Muslims, and everyone is aware of the legitimate concerns some Lebanese parties have, especially the Christians,” Fatfat said

“We stressed the importance of coexistence and the need to find an electoral which would appease the concerns of all parties and guarantee proper political representation in Lebanon and justice in the distribution of electorates,” the MP said, noting that “the Future Movement would only take a decision after coordination with its allies.”

Fatfat said the conferees discussed all the possibilities, noting that meetings would continue “until the March 14 forces reach a common vision in this regard.”

Asked whether the electoral law proposed by the Greek Orthodox Gathering had been shelved, Fatfat ruled out that, noting

that “there’s a possibility to adopt it partially or in its entirety.”

But he warned that a parliament produced by such an electoral law would not preserve coexistence among the various communities.

Asked about the proportional representation law proposed by Interior Minister Marwan Charbel, Fatfat said: “After discussing this proposal extensively at the Phoenicia (Hotel) conference, we found out that it contains several gaps and discrimination in the distribution of the electorates, which means that it does not achieve justice.”

Assad lost legitimacy

Earlier today Geagea called on Hezbollah to negotiate with political parties in Lebanon to reach a “historical settlement” over its arms and all the controversial issues amid the developments in the region.

“It may seem a hard step but it’s courageous and necessary... The sooner the better because changes (in the region) will decrease the value of its (Hezbollah’s)

arms,” Geagea said according to report by As Safir newspaper .

Commenting on the Syrian revolt Geagea said Syria will head towards more complications and escalations, confirming that the collapse of the regime is “inevitable and a matter of time, not more.”

“The regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad can no longer go on... it lost the local, Arab and international legitimacy,” he noted.

<http://www.yalibnan.com/2012/01/19/future-movement-mps-geagea-discuss-the-electoral-law/>

- **Sleiman denies strained relations with Aoun**

BEIRUT: President Michel Sleiman denied Thursday that his relations with Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun were strained, although he admitted differences with the FPM chief over public sector appointments.

Sleiman also renewed his call for national dialogue between rival political leaders in a bid to protect Lebanon from the

reverberations of popular upheavals currently roiling the Arab world. Speaking during a meeting with a delegation from the Journalists' Union at Baabda Palace, Sleiman was asked about his strained ties with Aoun.



“There is no strain with MP Michel Aoun or anyone else,” Sleiman said. He added that he had telephoned Aoun and invited him to lunch at Baabda Palace last week.

However, referring to a major bone of contention with Aoun, Sleiman said he has nominated a candidate, whom he did not name, to fill the vacant key post of the president of the Higher Judicial Council, while others have their own candidates – a clear reference to the FPM leader who has supported Judge Tanius Mashlab for the post. Sleiman was reported to have backed Judge Alice Shabtini, currently the

head of the Military Appeals Court, for president of the Higher Judicial Council.

Sleiman said he was continuing his efforts to bring the feuding parties from the Hezbollah-led March 8 alliance and the opposition March 14 coalition together at the dialogue table again.

“But nothing new has been decided yet on the date [of dialogue], until the contacts are completed,” he said.

His remarks apparently reflected difficulties in resuming all-party National Dialogue stalled since November 2010 because of sharp differences between rival factions over what topics to discuss.

However, Sleiman underlined the “significance of dialogue among the Lebanese in order to keep Lebanon distant from any reverberations” of the dramatic developments in the Arab world as a result of popular uprisings that have so far led to the overthrow of the leaders in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya.

Last month, Sleiman chaired a meeting of the preparatory body of the National Dialogue Committee that assessed the

prospects of relaunching the process. The last session of National Dialogue took place in November 2010 and was boycotted by most March 8 leaders amid divisions over the STL.

Both sides have set conditions for attending the proposed dialogue. Hezbollah has declared that its arms will not be the topic of any dialogue and is ready to discuss a national defense strategy to protect Lebanon against a possible Israeli attack. March 14 leaders, including Hariri, have voiced skepticism about the proposed dialogue, insisting that Hezbollah's arms should be the only topic up for discussion, or else they will not attend.

During his meeting with the Journalists' Union, Sleiman said all the Lebanese supported the STL, which has indicted four Hezbollah members in Hariri's assassination and demanded their arrests. "No one is against it [the STL] ... It is accepted by the Lebanese," Sleiman said.

<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Politics/2012/Jan-20/160492-sleiman-denies-strained-relations-with-aoun.ashx#axzz1jzMPo564>

## 6. SYRIA

### • Syrian opposition council leaders travel to Cairo to push for U.N. action

By Al Arabiya with Agencies

The opposition Syrian National Council (SNC) has said it was sending a delegation to Cairo on Friday to convince the Arab League to lift its hand on the crisis in Syria and refer the issue to the United Nations.

The Istanbul-based council said in a statement that its leader, Burhan Ghalioun, and a several council members will meet with Arab League chief Nabil al-Araby and Arab foreign ministers to try convince them to refer the Syrian crisis to the United Nations, the statement said.

The council would also seek a tough Arab League report on the violence in Syria following the end of an Arab monitoring mission. The statement said the council would request that Arab League expose and condemn acts of "genocide" and "war crimes in Syria.

The head of the monitoring team was still working on his report and would not arrive at the League's Cairo headquarters

until Saturday, the day before Arab foreign ministers are due to weigh their next move on Syria, a League source said.



The Arab League monitoring mandate was expiring on Thursday night, with the foreign ministers at odds over how to respond to the turmoil in which thousands of people have been killed.

“They are in a big mess,” a source close to the League said. “They are running out of options.”

The opposition council seeks a U.N. decision to establish a secured area in Syria, in similar to the situation in Libya, followed by a no-fly zone and even possible military strikes against the forces of President Bashar al-Assad.

An armed insurgency is taking hold in some areas, hardening what began 10 months ago as a mostly peaceful struggle

against President Bashar al-Assad’s authoritarian rule.

Residents of Zabadani said on Thursday troops and tanks that had besieged the insurgent-controlled town had pulled back after a deal to end days of fighting, according to an opposition leader.

Dozens of armored vehicles that had encircled Zabadani, a hill resort near the Lebanese border, withdrew to garrisons 8 km (5 miles) away, Kamal al-Labwani told Reuters.

The leader of Syria’s Muslim Brotherhood said world powers should pile diplomatic pressure on Assad and set up a no-fly zone and “safe zones” to help the opposition.

“The international community should ... should fully isolate this regime, pull out their ambassadors and expel the regime’s ambassadors,” Mohammad Shaqfa told Reuters in a telephone interview.

The U.N. Security Council is split over Syria, with Russia declaring it will work with China to block any move to authorize military intervention.

Western powers have acknowledged that a Libya-style campaign in Syria would be fraught with danger, but want the council at least to condemn Assad's repression and impose sanctions.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/01/20/189369.html>

- **Arab observers to report back on Syria mission; Kurd groups to unite against Assad**



By Al Arabiya with Agencies

As many as 25 people have been killed by Syrian security forces on Thursday across the country, Al Arabiya reported citing Syrian activists, as Syrian Kurdish groups will try to unite to explain their demands to Arab groups trying to topple the Syrian President.

The head of the Arab League's heavily criticized observer mission to Syria was

due in Cairo on Thursday to report on its first month of operations amid growing frustration at its failure to staunch 10 months of bloodshed.

The pan-Arab bloc's deputy leader, Ahmed Ben Helli, said the "decisive" report would evaluate the Syrian government's cooperation with the mission, while noting the observers' difficulty in gaining access to hot spots, according to AFP.

"We are at a turning point, as the Arab observer mission's report will be presented on Thursday, marking a month since the protocol was signed," Ben Helli told Qatari state media late on Wednesday.

"The report will be decisive," Ben Helli added.

Arab foreign ministers will hear the mission's report at a meeting on Sunday at which they will decide whether to seek Syria's agreement to extend it for a second month.

The first month expired on Thursday but the two sides agreed that the mission could continue until Sunday's meeting.

Expected report

The League's Syria operations chief, Adnan Khodeir, said mission leader General Mohammed Ahmed Mustafa al-Dabi was expected at the League's headquarters in Cairo at around 6:30 pm (1630 GMT).

He would then hand over the report to League chief Nabil al-Arabi, either later Thursday or early Friday, ahead of meetings of Arab ministers on Saturday and Sunday.

Qatar, whose Prime Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim Al Thani chairs the Arab League panel on Syria which meets on Saturday, has been pressing for the observer mission to be given teeth through the deployment of Arab peacekeeping troops.

The Qatari proposal is not formally on the agenda of Sunday's foreign ministers' meeting to discuss the mission's future but could be discussed, Khodeir said.

"Any country that wishes can bring up the issue," he said, referring to the call by Qatar's emir, Sheikh Hamad Ben Khalifa Al

Thani, to send Arab troops to Syria, which Damascus has flatly rejected.

"What we are talking about now at the Arab League is whether there will be a new approach concerning the observer mission," he told reporters on Wednesday.

Arabi has also said the idea could come up for debate.

As activists reported another nine deaths at the hands of the Syrian security forces on Thursday, a coalition of some 140 Arab human rights groups demanded the withdrawal of the League's "flawed" mission and called for U.N. intervention.

Among the dead, were four leading pro-democracy activists who had gone into hiding and were killed in an ambush in Idlib province in the northwest, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

The Arab mission, which currently numbers about 165 monitors, has been in Syria since December 26 to oversee an Arab road map under which President Bashar al-Assad's government agreed to end violence.

“No observers have been able to do their job: instead, the mission legitimizes the Syrian regime,” said Radwan Ziadeh, head of the Damascus Center for Human Rights Studies, in the rights groups' joint statement.

Mission not allowed to work

Former observer Anouar Malek, who resigned in protest over the mission's credibility and aims, echoed Ziadeh's criticism.

“I was threatened with death for doing my job as I watched people being killed, beaten up and arrested by police, soldiers and militiamen. The Syrian regime is plainly defying the Arab League,” he said.

The United Nations estimates that the unrest in Syria between the security forces and pro-democracy activists has left more than 5,400 people dead since it first erupted in March, with 400 killed since the observers' deployment.

French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe said it was clear that the observer mission was “in difficulty” and not being allowed to work.

“Syria is not respecting the undertaking it gave to the Arab League to withdraw its troops to barracks,” he said, adding that the observers' report should be submitted to the U.N. Security Council for further action.

But a tough Security Council resolution on Syria has been blocked by veto-wielding permanent members Russia and China, which defended the Arab mission on Wednesday.

“Since the Arab League observer mission began, the violence in Syria has not completely ended, but the security situation of major areas has improved,” said Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Liu Weimin.

This “shows the mission is effective,” he added.

For its part, Moscow has warned against Western calls for punitive measures against Damascus, insisting the Syrian opposition is as much to blame for the violence as the regime.

That has caused growing frustration among Western governments.

Germany's U.N. envoy Peter Wittig said the Security Council "did not live up to its responsibilities" in face of the vetoing by Moscow and Beijing last October of a European-drafted resolution that would have threatened Damascus with "targeted measures."

Syrian Kurdish groups

Meanwhile, Syrian Kurdish groups opposed to Assad will try to unite this month to explain their autonomy demands to Arab groups trying to topple the Syrian leader, activists said on Thursday, according to Reuters.

While security forces have clashed daily with protesters and insurgents demanding Assad's downfall in mainly Sunni Arab towns, Syrian Kurdish areas have remained relatively calm, despite many Kurds' long-standing opposition to the government.

Syrian Kurdish exile leaders say they do not trust the Arab opposition to heed their demands for self-rule in the mainly Kurdish northeast of the country.

Kurdish groups representing Syria's largest ethnic minority are also divided among themselves, with some factions backed by Iraqi Kurds, and another by Turkish Kurd rebels of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), independent analysts said.

"There will be a national conference of all the Kurdish parties to form one front," said Mahmoud Mohammed Bave Sabir, a leading member of the Democratic Union Kurdish Party of Syria, one of the oldest Kurdish opposition groups.

"The aim of the conference is to press the demands of the Kurds in Syria and to open a dialogue with the Arab opposition," he told Reuters.

A date for the meeting has not been set, but it will be held this month in Arbil, capital of the semi-autonomous Iraqi region of Kurdistan, the activists said. All the main Syrian Kurdish parties, plus intellectuals and independent organizations, have been invited.

"The Arab opposition does not care about the Kurdish cause," said Sarbast Nabi, a Syrian Kurdish politics professor at

Salahaddin University in Arbil. “All they have promised is to deal with us as Syrian citizens.”

Kurds say they have been sidelined from the opposition Syrian National Council, an exile group that was set up in Turkey to coordinate a 10-month-old uprising against Assad.

“The Arab opposition is made up of Islamists and Arab nationalists who do not accept Kurdish demands for a democratic, pluralist, secular state where the rights of all minorities are recognised,” Nabi said.

Syrian Kurdish groups are also wary of Turkey’s influence on Syrian Arab dissidents based in Istanbul, given Ankara’s historic hostility to demands for autonomy for its own large Kurdish minority.

In 2004, Syrian Kurds fought deadly clashes with security forces for days after an incident at a football stadium in the main Kurdish city of Qamishli. At the time, they said they received no support from Arabs now leading the opposition.

But student activists say they are still mobilizing support inside Syria in preparation for taking to the streets.

Many thousands of Kurds live in the capital Damascus, as well as in the northeast, and if they swung their weight behind the uprising, it would deal another powerful blow to Assad.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/01/19/189316.html>

- **Syria's Muslim Brotherhood tells world to isolate Assad**

BEIRUT, (Reuters) - The leader of Syria's Muslim Brotherhood said world powers should pile diplomatic pressure on President Bashar al-Assad and he called for a no-fly zone and "safe zones" to be set up to help the Syrian leader's opponents.

Mohammad Shaqfa told Reuters that the Arab League, which has sent monitors to assess Syria's implementation of a plan to end 10 months of violence, should press the U.N. Security Council to take "deterrent measures" against Assad.

"The Syrian people are determined. Nobody will go back to their homes unless Bashar leaves. There is a determination and God willing the people will reach this goal," he said in a telephone interview late on Wednesday.

"The international community should take the right position ... They should fully isolate this regime, pull out their ambassadors and expel the regime's ambassadors."

Shaqfa said the Brotherhood, which in 1982 staged an armed uprising ultimately crushed by Assad's father, backed peaceful protests and wanted insurgents to restrict their operations to defending demonstrations against Bashar al-Assad's 11-year rule.

"In the Muslim Brotherhood we reject taking up arms. We are with the peaceful revolution. We will not slip into militarising the revolution," he said.

Asked what further action the Arab League should demand from the United Nations, Shaqfa said he wanted to see "a no-fly zone and safe zones" established,

although he denied this would amount to military intervention.

There is little international inclination for any Libya-style military intervention in Syria due to its position at the crossroads of Middle East conflict, including an anti-Israel alliance with Iran. The United States, European Union, Turkey and Arab League have announced economic sanctions against Syria.

Bashar's late father, President Hafez al-Assad, suppressed the Brotherhood's armed revolt in Hama 30 years ago, killing thousands of people and razing parts of the city in an assault still remembered bitterly by Assad's opponents.

"WE DON'T WANT WAR"

Demonstrations against Assad erupted in March, driven by anger at corruption, poverty and lack of freedom over 42 years of Assad family rule. Syrian dissidents were also inspired by uprisings against entrenched autocrats around the Arab world.

The United Nations says more than 5,000 people have been killed in a crackdown on what began as mainly peaceful protests.

Syria says it is fighting Islamist militants whom it blames for killing 2,000 members of the army and security forces.

The revolt has become bloodier with army deserters and other rebels under the Free Syrian Army (FSA) umbrella taking up arms against security forces dominated by Assad's minority Alawite sect, pushing Sunni Muslim-majority Syria closer to civil war.

Shaqfa said his Islamist group had urged the FSA to only defend itself and protesters. "We do not advise the Free Army to launch any attacks. Only defensive attacks (are accepted). We do not want a war. We do not want confrontation."

Shaqfa confirmed that the Brotherhood rejected an indirect approach from Iran to mediate with Assad, saying Tehran must first distance itself from Syrian authorities and dismissing any proposal that would allow Assad to stay in power.

"They sent a Turkish mediator but we rejected the dialogue and told the mediator that we will not talk to the Iranians if they do not amend their position towards the regime," he said.

"They offered (us) participation in power. The most important thing is they wanted to guarantee that Bashar stays. For us, after all these crimes, it is not acceptable any more that Bashar stays."

<http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&id=28151>

## 7. ARABIAN PENINSULA AND THE GULF OF BASRA

### • UAE welcomes Iran's softer tone on key oil strait

Emirati FM hails Iran's denial it has ever tried to close Strait of Hormuz, says such attitudes must prevail.

DUBAI - The United Arab Emirates on Thursday welcomed Iran's softer tone on the key Strait of Hormuz, through which much of the world's oil passes, saying such attitudes "must prevail."

"I welcome the comments by my Iranian counterpart" Ali Akbar Salehi, UAE Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdallah bin Zayed Al-Nahayan told reporters.



"This is the kind of attitude that must prevail," he added at a joint news conference with visiting Tunisian Foreign Minister Rafik Abdessalem.

Salehi denied on Thursday that Tehran had ever tried to close the Strait of Hormuz, the vital shipping route threatened by escalating tensions between the Islamic republic and the West.

"Iran has never in its history tried to prevent, to put any obstacles in the way of this important maritime route," he told NTV television during a visit to Turkey.

Iran threatened in December to close the narrow waterway, a chokepoint for one

fifth of the world's traded oil, in the event of a military strike or a severe tightening of international sanctions over its controversial nuclear programme.

"All parties in the region are making efforts to reduce tension, as we do not want anything to affect stability" in the region, Sheikh Abdallah said.

The UAE is currently constructing a pipeline that would allow oil exports to bypass the key strait, at the mouth of the Gulf, and is due to be finished by June.

Abdessalem, meanwhile, stressed Tunisia's determination to forge stronger ties with Arab nations in the Gulf, saying that the case of deposed president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali "would not be an obstacle to developing closer ties with our brothers in the Gulf."

Ben Ali took refuge in Saudi Arabia after being ousted last January. Tunisian justice officials say Riyadh has twice refused to extradite him.

<http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=50137>

- **Qatar promises labour reform before 2022**

Head of organising committee pledges international labour standards will be met as Gulf state prepares for tournament.

Qatar 2022 World Cup organisers will ensure contractors adhere to international labour laws at construction projects before the tournament, the head of the event's organising committee has said.

Hassan al-Thawadi, the Qatar 2022 general secretary, said on Tuesday that progress was being made on the labour front.

"Major sporting events shed a spotlight on conditions in countries," al-Thawadi said, adding: "There are labour issues here in the country, but Qatar is committed to reform."

"We will require that contractors impose a clause to ensure that international labour standards are met ... Sport, and football in particular, is a very powerful force. Certainly we can use it for the benefit of the region."

Poor working conditions are common across the oil-rich Gulf region, where impoverished men and women from South Asia have come for decades to toil on construction sites or to work as domestic help.

'Inhuman' conditions

Conditions on building sites in Qatar had been described as "inhuman" last year by the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), which wants world football's governing body, FIFA, to ensure that standards are met for migrant workers.

In November, the ITUC and other groups met with FIFA's general secretary to inform him that they would hold a campaign in opposition to the 2022 World Cup being held in Qatar unless the country improved working conditions.

At the time, ITUC chair Sharan Burow said the organisation would "not accept people working to build stadiums without respect for workers' rights".

Labour advocates also say the sponsorship system, in place across much of the Gulf -

and the lack of a minimum wage - allow migrant workers to be exploited.

All foreign workers in the region must work for a local sponsor, and it is legally difficult to leave the sponsor before an employment contract ends without the sponsor's consent. Many sponsors keep their workers' passports.

#### Massive building effort

Qatar has embarked on a massive domestic building programme in the run-up to the tournament. It is spending \$11bn on a new international airport, \$5.5bn on a deep-water seaport and \$1bn for a transport corridor in the capital, Doha. It will also spend \$20 billion on roads.

A management contract to oversee construction projects for the 2022 tournament would be awarded in the first quarter of this year, Thawadi said.

"It will be in the first quarter, definitely. [The programme manager] will ensure the infrastructure projects are delivered on time, and that there is a contingency plan in place in case of a delay," Thawadi said.

The contract, originally expected to be awarded late last year, will oversee co-ordination with government agencies on large infrastructure projects, including the construction of stadiums, on which the country plans to spend \$4bn.

Qatar has said it will build nine new stadiums and renovate three existing facilities.

A construction industry source told the Reuters news agency in October that more than six companies were vying for the contract, including British construction consultants Arup, Mace and Turner International.

Samir Aita, editor of Le Monde Diplomatique's Arabic edition, told Al Jazeera that the World Cup would "shed light on Qatar and all Gulf countries, since all reports say they are not respecting basic human, social and economic rights".

"When the same person is a minister and the president of a company, can a worker go to the minister and ask him to sue the company?" he asked. "This doesn't work."

"This occasion of the games could be a good step [if] Qatari people and Qatari authorities respond point-by-point to [International Labour Organisation] demands," Aita said.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/01/2012118182959566572.html>

- **Yemen 'amends' proposed immunity law**

Minister says controversial legislation will shield aides of outgoing President Saleh only in "political cases".



Yemenis angry at the draft law have been regularly taking to the streets calling for Saleh to be put on trial [AFP]

A Yemeni draft law granting immunity to the outgoing president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, from prosecution over the killing of protesters, has been amended to limit the

protection his aides would enjoy, according to a minister.

The new immunity draft law, which has been heavily criticised by rights groups, the UN and Yemeni protesters, will now shield the aides only in "political cases", Mohammad Makhlafi, the legal affairs minister, told the Reuters news agency.

It had previously offered blanket immunity to associates of Saleh, who will still get full protection himself, Makhlafi said, without elaborating on what kinds of cases could be tried.

Under a power transfer plan brokered by Yemen's Gulf neighbours and signed by Saleh in November, the Yemeni leader was promised legal immunity to help ease him out of office and end months of protests against his 33-year rule.

#### Al-Qaeda fears

Yemenis angry at the draft law have been regularly taking to the streets calling for Saleh to be put on trial, and Navi Pillay, the UN human rights chief, earlier this month said the immunity offer could violate international law.

Discussion of the law in parliament has repeatedly been put off, but Makhlafi said it would now take place on Saturday.

In Video

All-Qaeda-linked group's threat to take over Sanaa

The US and neighbouring Saudi Arabia are keen for the plan to work, fearing that protracted political upheaval will let al Qaeda's regional Yemen-based wing establish a foothold along oil-shipping routes through the Red Sea.

Already, a suspected al-Qaeda-linked group that took over Radda, a small town in Yemen about 170km southeast of Sanaa, has said it is closing in on the Yemeni capital.

Tareq al-Dahab, the Ansar al-Sharia chief, is related to Anwar al-Awlaki, a US citizen who was accused by the US of a leadership role in the Yemeni branch of al-Qaeda and who was assassinated in a drone strike last year.

The fighters swept up from the southern and eastern provinces on Sunday - to within just a few hundred miles of Sanaa.

'Political instability'

While the government in Sanaa has been preoccupied with steering Yemen towards elections scheduled for February, the fighters are taking advantage of the political instability.

Earlier, al-Dahab released a video online, repeating demands for jailed members of his group to be freed.

For more on Yemen, visit our Spotlight page

Tribesmen negotiating with the group on behalf of the government said the fighters, agreed to leave if their leader's brother and several others were freed.

The group are also promising that the town, and the country, will soon be under strict Islamic law.

But not all the locals are happy to see the group.

The political opposition blames the government for losing control of the security situation, and despite earlier indications that the elections might be postponed, the government says it is sticking to the timetable.

Yemen's foreign minister says a presidential election will be held as scheduled.

In a statement released on Wednesday, Foreign Minister Abu Bakr al-Qirbi said his government was committed to hold presidential elections on February 21.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/01/201212064413492432.html>

## 8. AFGHANISTAN - PAKISTAN

### • Peace talks between Pakistan and Taliban

ISLAMABAD, (Reuters) - Exploratory peace talks between Pakistan and al Qaeda-linked Taliban insurgents have made little progress, a senior security official told Reuters on Thursday.

The official said the group, seen as the biggest security threat to the strategic U.S. ally, had flatly rejected a demand that it work through tribal elders to reach a deal whereby fighters approach authorities and lay down their arms.

"They felt it would be humiliating," he said. "The talks are not making progress."

A total breakdown in talks, especially if it led to any new waves of Taliban suicide bombings or shootings, would likely make Pakistan's civilian government -- accused of widespread corruption and ineptitude -- even more unpopular.

It would also add pressure on the army in Pakistan, a nuclear-armed, strategic U.S. ally with one of the world's largest militaries.

The government is currently under severe pressure from the Supreme Court and Pakistan's generals, who have ruled the country for more than half of its 64-year history through a series of coups, or from behind the scenes.

Pakistan's Supreme Court on Thursday adjourned a contempt hearing for Prime

Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani in a case that could push him from office.

Gilani was in court to explain why he should not be charged with contempt for failing to re-open old corruption cases against President Asif Ali Zardari. The government maintains Zardari has presidential immunity.

<http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&id=28150>

- **Six NATO troops killed in Afghanistan helicopter crash**

Friday, 20 January 2012

The Helmand governor's office said 22 others were wounded in Thursday's blast in Kajaki district in Afghanistan. (Reuters)

By The Associated Press  
KANDAHAR

A NATO helicopter has crashed in southern Afghanistan, killing six members of the international military force, the U.S.-led coalition says.

A coalition statement said that there was no enemy activity in the area at the time of Thursday's crash.

The cause of the crash is still being investigated. The coalition did not disclose the nationalities of those killed.

The helicopter crash occurred on the same day that a suicide car bomber killed at least seven civilians outside a crowded gate at Kandahar Air Field, a sprawling base for U.S. and NATO operations in the south. The Taliban insurgents claimed responsibility, saying they were targeting a NATO convoy.

It was the second suicide bombing in as many days in southern Afghanistan, officials said. The coalition said no NATO troops were killed Thursday. It does not disclose information about wounded troops.

The Taliban have been stepping up attacks in southern Afghanistan, the birthplace of the insurgency, with a wave of bombings and the assassinations of three local Afghan officials this week. The violence comes even as the U.S. is moving ahead with plans for negotiating with the Taliban

to try to end the 10-year-old war in Afghanistan.

Two witnesses told The Associated Press that they suspect Thursday's suicide car bomber was trying to hit U.S. troops because he detonated his explosives just as two pickup trucks, which they say are often used by American special forces, were leaving the base.

Taliban spokesman Qari Yousef said that NATO forces opened fire after the bombing and that they killed three of the seven civilians who died. The coalition denied this, saying there was no fighting after the blast.

Earlier, officials reported that the suicide bomber was walking near the gate, but the Afghan Ministry of Interior later said the attacker was driving a Toyota Corolla.

Zalmai Ayubi, the spokesman for the Kandahar provincial governor, said two children were among the seven civilians killed. He said eight other civilians, including two children and one woman, were injured in the explosion.

Gates to the larger U.S. bases in Afghanistan often are crowded with trucks waiting to deliver goods and services, and local Afghans going to or coming back from jobs on the compounds.

Safiullah, a 40-year-old fuel tank driver from neighboring Zabul province, was waiting his turn to enter the base when the blast occurred.

"There was dust and smoke everywhere," said Safiullah, who uses just one name. "I got down on my knees. When the smoke lifted, I moved closer. I saw two children dead at the side of the road."

At the time of the explosion, two pickup trucks were leaving the base, he said. He said he remembered that because he and another man were conversing at the time about how U.S. special forces sometimes use that kind of truck.

The explosion shattered the window of a taxi driven by Sabiullah Khan, who was at the gate waiting for customers.

"I put my head down in my car," he said. "For three or four minutes I was afraid. I was reciting the words of the Quran," the

Muslim holy book. “When the smoke cleared and I knew I was OK, I started looking outside. People were shouting for help. I saw one vehicle on fire. The Afghan army were running and taking out the wounded.”

He said that when he got out of his taxi, he also saw the two pickup trucks.

“Nobody was in them, but from the condition of the vehicle, I’m sure that if they were not killed, they were wounded,” he said.

On Wednesday, 13 civilians, including three Afghan policemen, were killed when a suicide attacker blew himself up in a bazaar in neighboring Helmand province.

The Helmand governor’s office said 22 others were wounded in the blast in Kajaki district.

The coalition said some international troops were killed and wounded in the attack, but did not disclose details.

Late Wednesday, NATO reported that one coalition trooper had been killed in an explosion in southern Afghanistan, but

would not say whether the service member died in the Kajaki bombing, or some other incident.

U.S. Gen. John Allen, the top commander of American and NATO forces in Afghanistan, condemned the Kajaki attack, saying it was evidence that the Taliban insurgents had “declared outright war” on the Afghan people. He said that such violence “will only further isolate the Taliban from the process of peace negotiation.”

The U.S. has been working to broker talks between the Taliban and President Hamid Karzai’s government to end the 10-year war. The insurgents recently said they would open a political office in the Gulf state of Qatar to pursue negotiations but would also continue fighting.

Several current and former U.S. officials said the most substantive give-and-take to date between U.S. and Taliban negotiators could happen in the next week, with the goal of establishing what the U.S. calls confidence-building measures - specific steps that both sides agree to take ahead of formal talks.

However, U.S. intelligence agencies recently offered a gloomy prognosis in their latest Afghanistan report.

The Afghan National Intelligence Estimate warns that the Taliban will grow stronger, using the talks to gain credibility and run out the clock until U.S. troops leave Afghanistan, while continuing to fight for more territory, say U.S. officials who have read the classified document. They spoke on condition of anonymity to describe the roughly 100-page review, an amalgam of the intelligence community's predictions of possible scenarios for the Afghan war through the planned end to U.S. combat in 2014.

The report says the Afghan government has largely failed to prove itself to its people and will likely continue to weaken and find influence only in the cities. It predicts that the Taliban and warlords will largely control the countryside.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/01/20/189374.html>

- **Pakistan to re-open NATO route as Taliban talks falter; official says ties with U.S. on hold**

Pakistan expects to re-open supply routes to NATO forces in Afghanistan, halted after a NATO cross-border air attack killed 24 Pakistani soldiers in November, but will impose tariffs, a senior security official told Reuters on Thursday.

The move suggests tensions with the United States and NATO have eased, but greater cooperation was needed to fight militancy in the border region which U.S. President Barack Obama has called the world's most dangerous place.

The official said the fees were designed to express continued anger over the Nov. 26 attack and raise funds for the state to fight homegrown Taliban militants blamed for many of the suicide bombings across the country.

"The tariffs will cover everything from the port to security to roads which, after all, belong to Pakistan," the security official, who asked to remain anonymous, told Reuters.

No date was given for reopening the supply routes. Pakistan's trade ministry

was working out details of the tariffs, said the official.

A senior Obama administration official said there was no official word from Pakistan and that the U.S. position on the issue of supply routes had not changed.

The NATO attack plunged relations between troubled allies Pakistan and the United States to their lowest point in years.

Ties had already been severely strained by a secret raid by U.S. special forces that killed Osama bin Laden on Pakistani soil in May last year. This embarrassed the military, which has ruled the country for over half of Pakistan's 64-year history and sets security and foreign policy.

Asked if the re-opening was a sign that the crisis in relations could be tackled, the official said there was some way to go before normalcy was possible.

Pakistan's Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar told Reuters in an interview on Thursday that relations between Islamabad and Washington were currently on hold.

"I would say they are conveniently on hold until we start re-engaging," Khar said.

The two land routes to Afghanistan through Pakistan account for just under a third of all cargo that the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) ships into Afghanistan.

Aside from friction with the United States, Pakistan faces a slowing economy heavily dependent on foreign aid and is struggling with militant violence.

Exploratory peace talks between the homegrown Taliban, which is close to al Qaeda, and Islamabad, raised hopes that Pakistan's leaders could eventually have one less major problem to deal with.

But the talks have made little headway, a senior security official told Reuters on Thursday, after the Taliban flatly rejected a demand that it work through tribal elders to reach a deal whereby fighters approach authorities and lay down their arms.

"They felt it would be humiliating. The talks are not making progress," the official

said. “If they want to be included in the political system, that is what they will have to do.”

The Pakistani Taliban, allied with the Afghan Taliban movement fighting IASF forces in Afghanistan, are entrenched in Pakistan’s northwestern tribal areas, along the porous frontier with Afghanistan.

U.S. officials have urged the Pakistanis to persuade militant groups to pursue peace in Afghanistan, and to tackle them if they don’t cooperate.

Pakistan argues that the United States needs to be patient and gain a greater understanding of the region's complexities before acting, and that pressure would only hurt efforts to pacify Afghanistan.

“‘Push’ is never wise. I think that every country must be allowed to develop their own strategy and their own timing,” said Khar, stressing that another incursion by NATO or the United States would be harmful.

Past peace talks have merely given the Taliban time and space to consolidate and launch more suicide attacks on army

installations, police stations and crowded street markets.

A new wave of violence could further undermine a government under pressure from the Supreme Court and the military.

The Supreme Court adjourned on Thursday a contempt hearing for Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani. This case could push him from office and imperil hopes that the longest-running civilian administration in Pakistan’s history can complete a five-year term.

Gilani was in court to explain why he should not be charged with contempt for failing to re-open old corruption cases against President Asif Ali Zardari.

The government maintains Zardari has presidential immunity.

“It is my conviction that he (Zardari) has complete immunity inside and outside the country,” Gilani told the court.

The prime minister, however, appeared not to have convinced some judges.

“On the next date, let’s hear you convince us the issue is of the president’s immunity,” said Justice Sarmad Osmani, a member of the seven-panel bench. “Let’s grab the bull by its horns.”

While the immediate battle is about Gilani, the larger political crisis is about Zardari -- who has had his own run-ins with the chief justice -- and the fate of his government which is also increasingly at loggerheads with the military.

Tensions between the civilian leadership and the army, at their worst since a 1999 coup, were sparked by a mysterious memo last year that sought U.S. help in reining in the generals.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/01/19/189339.html>

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

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