

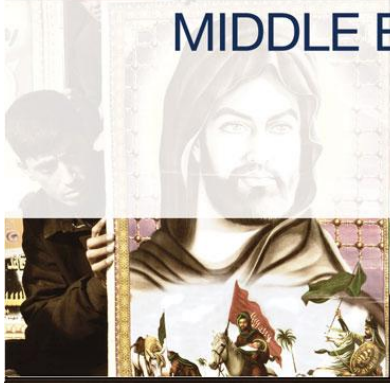
ORSAM
ORTADOĞU STRATEJİK ARAŞTIRMALAR MERKEZİ
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EASTERN STRATEGIC STUDIES

GÜNLÜK ORTADOĞU BÜLTENİ

MIDDLE EAST DAILY BULLETIN

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- * **Bölge Ülkelerinde İç Siyaset**
Domestic Policy in the Middle East countries
- * **Irak'ın Yeniden Yapılanma Süreci**
The Restructuring Process of Iraq
- * **Enerji Güvenliği**
Energy Security
- * **Ekonomi Haberleri**
Economy News
- * **Barış Süreci**
Peace Process
- * **Etnik ve Mezhepsel Gruplar**
Ethnic and Sectarian Groups
- * **Devlet-dışı Aktörler**
Non State Actors
- * **Batı'yla İlişkiler**
Relations with the West





MIDDLE EAST BULLETIN
23 JANUARY 2012
NO: 1311

1. IRAQ.....	2
• Iraq Sadr Movement rebukes Suleimani statements.....	2
• Iran VP emphasizes on reinforcement of Tehran-Baghdad ties.....	2
2. IRAN.....	3
• EU set to hit Iran with new sanctions.....	3
• Many drown in Iran boat accident.....	5
• EU agrees to slap oil embargo on Iran; U.S. carrier in Gulf after Strait of Hormuz pass.....	6
• Iran, China hold nuclear talks in Beijing.....	10
3. SYRIA.....	10
• Syria rejects Arab League transition plan.....	10
• EU adopts fresh sanctions against Syria's military brass: diplomat.....	13
• Syria rejects Arab League plan for power transition; opposition welcomes initiative.....	14
• Ambassador al-Ahmad: Syria Rejects all Decisions Issued by Arab League Outside of Arab Work Plan.....	19
4. ISRAEL - PALESTINE.....	21
• Hamas political chief to step down.....	21
• 'Mashaal planning to visit Gaza with Abbas'.....	22
5. NORTH AFRICA.....	24
• Egypt's new parliament to hold first session.....	24
• Muslim Brotherhood tops Egyptian poll result.....	26
• South Sudan says Khartoum seized oil worth \$815 million.....	28
• Libyan leader warns of possible 'civil war' if NTC quits as protests rage in Benghazi.....	29
• Egypt's new People's Assembly swears in today, but powers are dubious.....	33
6. JORDAN and LEBANON.....	37
• Jordanian Politician Demands Closure of Israeli Embassy in Amman.....	37
7. ARABIAN PENINSULA.....	38
• Yemen's Saleh heads to US for medical care.....	38
8. AFGHANISTAN - PAKISTAN.....	40
• US Resumes Drone Attacks in Pakistan.....	40

1. IRAQ

• **Iraq Sadr Movement rebukes Suleimani statements**

Iraqi Sadr Movement headed by Cleric Sayyed Muqtada Al Sadr rebuked, on Friday, Iranian Quds Forces Commander Qassim Suleimani for declaring that Iraq is subject to Iran's will and that there is a potential to form an Islamic government in Iraq. These statements are unacceptable, Sadr Movement argued assuring that it doesn't allow any pretext to interfere in Iraqi internal affairs.

"Sadr Movement rejects and doesn't tolerate Suleimani's statements which it regarded as unacceptable," Sadr Movement MP Hassan Al Jabouri told Alsumarianews pointing up that Iraq is an independent State that renounces interference from neighboring countries whether Iran, Turkey, KSA or others.

"Sadr Movement has a constant position that refuses Iranian interference which is why it insisted upon US forces' withdrawal to eliminate any pretext for neighboring countries' interference in Iraqi affairs," Jabouri uttered noting that Iraq, for its part, refuses to interfere in neighboring countries' affairs.

"Iraq seeks to engage in external relations based on mutual respect with all countries," Jabouri indicated.

Iranian Quds Forces Qassim Commander Suleimani announced, in a seminar entitled "The youth and Islamic awareness", that Iraq and southern Lebanon are subject to Iran's will and ideas. Iran can organize any action intending to form Islamic governments in both countries, he added, a source told Alsumaria.

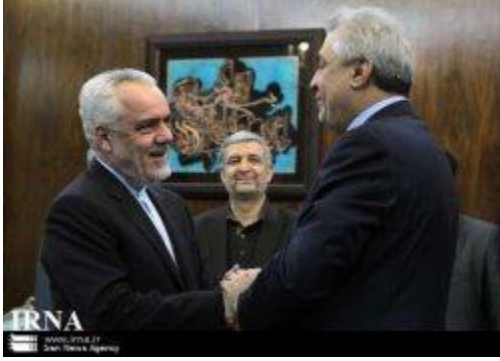
Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri Al Maliki defends, in countless occasions, the independence of his government and denies its submission to foreign interference especially from Iran. Many Iraqi parties, European countries as well as the US accuse Iran of interfering in Iraq's internal affairs, and of providing armed groups and Shiite militias with arms and explosives.

<http://www.alsumaria.tv/en/Iraq-News/1-72997-Iraq-Sadr-Movement-rebukes-Suleimani-statements.html>

• **Iran VP emphasizes on reinforcement of Tehran-Baghdad ties**

PNA-The Islamic Republic of Iran's First Vice-President, Mohammad Reza Rahimi,

has emphasized on usage of all opportunities and capacities to promote mutual cooperation and bilateral ties between Iran and Iraq.



According to IRIB World Service, in a meeting with Iraq's Oil Minister, Abdul-Karim Elaibi, in Tehran on Saturday night, Iran's first vice-president pointed out that the Iranian and Iraqi officials are determined to boost Tehran-Baghdad relations in all domains.

He underlined that Tehran and Baghdad should plan such to turn into powerful countries in the region and across the world through ever-increasing expansion of multilateral relations in the fields of oil, energy, and joint cooperation for maintenance of regional security.

In further remarks, Rahimi underlined that regional security should be maintained by the regional countries' mutual cooperation.

Meanwhile, the Iraqi oil minister, for his part, pointed out that Iran and Iraq, alongside each other are considered as important and influential powers in the world, and utmost efforts should be made to boost mutual relations in line with the two countries' interests.

<http://www.peyamner.com/English/PNAnews.aspx?nID=263796>

2. IRAN

• EU set to hit Iran with new sanctions

European Union governments are expected to finalise new economic sanctions against Iran over its nuclear programme on Monday, including plans to phase in an oil embargo.

The sanctions follow financial punishments signed into law by the United States on December 31 last year and will mainly target the oil sector, which accounts for some 90 per cent of Iranian exports to the European Union. Europe is Iran's second-largest oil customer after China.

"We want them to think, 'This is really getting very, very serious now'," one European diplomat told Reuters.

Monday's meeting in Brussels comes after French and British warships joined a US carrier aircraft group on Sunday and passed through the Strait of Hormuz, the narrow passage between Iran and Oman, which Iran has threatened to close in retaliation to tightening sanctions, thus imperiling much of the world's oil supply.

The manoeuvre was meant "to underline the unwavering international commitment to maintaining rights of passage under international law," a spokesman from the UK defence ministry said.

Western countries believe Iran's uranium enrichment programme is part of an effort to build a nuclear bomb, but Tehran says the programme is to generate electricity.

Grace period

In addition to the oil embargo, the EU measures are also expected to include sanctions against the Iranian central bank and a ban on trading in gold with the government, diplomats say.

Dorsa Jabbari with reactions from Iranians on the proposed sanctions

But EU sanctions are likely to take effect slowly. During weeks of negotiations among the EU's 27 members, Greece and other southern European states pushed hard for a lengthy grace period to limit their own economic costs.

Greece imports nearly a quarter of its oil from Iran and has argued that it needs time to find alternative sources.

EU foreign ministers meeting in Brussels are expected to agree to phase in the embargo, allowing existing contracts to be fulfilled for several months after the ban is imposed.

EU diplomats say the grace period will likely end on July 1, but ministers will also debate the idea of setting up a review beforehand to assess the impact and costs of the ban.

They will also reassure Athens that it will still be able to buy oil on reasonable terms after the ban goes into effect.

Greece, which relies on financial help from the EU and the International Monetary Fund to stay afloat, now gets Iranian crude on preferential financing terms.

"The financial situation of Greece at the moment is not the brightest one, and rightly they are asking us to help them find a solution," a senior EU official told reporters on Friday.

With a significant part of EU purchases of Iranian oil covered by long-term contracts, the grace period would be an important factor in the efficiency of EU measures.

The unprecedented effort to take Iran's 2.6 million barrels of oil per day off international markets has kept global prices high, pushed down Iran's rial currency and causing a surge in the cost of basic goods for Iranians.

A diplomatic push is under way, officials say, to secure supplies from other producers. Saudi Arabia, the world's top producer, said this month it would increase production by about two million barrels per day.

Speaking to Al Jazeera, Sadegh Zibakalam, a professor of political science at Tehran University, said that EU sanctions would not "terribly affect" Iran, which he said was counting on its three main European customers – Italy, Greece and Spain – to "resist" calls for total sanctions.

"The real problem for Iran comes [from] Asia and not from Europe," Zibakalam said. "That is to say if China, South Korea, Japan ... and India move towards ... reducing their oil from Iran that will create a serious problem for Iran."

The four Asian nations purchase about 59 per cent of Iran's oil each year, while EU countries account for 18 per cent.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/01/201212301359717976.html>

- **Many drown in Iran boat accident**

At least 16 people have died after a passenger boat sank off Iran's southern coast, the official IRNA news agency has reported.



The boat sank on Saturday evening while sailing between Hormuz island and the port city of Bandar Abbas on the mainland, local media reported.

Rescue teams saved five passengers and recovered 16 bodies. One passenger remains missing.

An eyewitness told The Associated Press news agency that most of the dead were senior citizens on a tour of nearby islands.

The boat began its 18km journey despite a travel ban on light boats by authorities, due to a storm with winds of 80kph, AP reported.

Provincial port authorities received a request for help from the boat after its engine had broken down because of heavy currents.

Authorities have blamed the boat's captain, who was one of the five rescued,

of ignoring the warnings. The captain is in detention and being questioned, officials told the semi-official Fars News Agency.

Every day dozens of passenger boats travel between Bandar Abbas and nearby islands near the strategic Strait of Hormuz, some 1000km south of the capital Tehran.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/01/2012122135512760184.html>

- **EU agrees to slap oil embargo on Iran; U.S. carrier in Gulf after Strait of Hormuz pass**

European Union nations agreed Monday to slap an oil embargo against Iran's oil exports in a bid to halt funding of the country's disputed nuclear program, EU diplomats said.



"There is a political agreement on an oil embargo," said a diplomat who spoke on condition of anonymity after early morning talks between ambassadors of the 27 EU nations. The deal is to be

formally approved by EU foreign ministers meeting in Brussels.

Their agreement was the final step before EU foreign ministers can give their formal approval to the measure. The EU's 27 foreign ministers meet in Brussels on Monday.

"(EU ambassadors) have agreed on Iran sanctions," the senior EU diplomat said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Under the deal, EU governments will have to stop signing new contracts with Tehran from the moment the ban comes into place -- probably as soon as this week -- but will be able to fulfill existing contracts until July 1.

The United States, France, Britain and Germany accuse Iran of seeking to build a nuclear bomb, but Tehran says its nuclear drive is peaceful.

U.S. aircraft carrier is now in Gulf
Meanwhile, the U.S. aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln passed through the Strait of Hormuz and is now in the Gulf, the Pentagon said, after Tehran threatened to close the strategic shipping route, while

the European Union readied to slap an embargo on Iran's oil exports Monday.

"USS Abraham Lincoln ... completed a regular and routine transit of the Strait of Hormuz... to conduct maritime security operations as scheduled," Pentagon spokesman Navy Captain John Kirby said in an email to AFP.

"The transit was completed as previously scheduled and without incident."

The carrier, which can have up to 80 planes and helicopters on board, was escorted by the guided-missile cruiser USS Cape St George and two destroyers.

Earlier, Britain's Ministry of Defense said a British Royal Navy frigate and a French vessel had joined the carrier group to sail through the waterway.

While allied ships often participate in U.S. naval exercises and sometimes are part of joint naval flotillas, the presence of British and French ships seemed to be a message to Tehran about the West's resolve to keep the route open.

“HMS Argyll and a French vessel joined a U.S. carrier group transiting through the Strait of Hormuz, to underline the unwavering international commitment to maintaining rights of passage under international law,” said a spokesman from Britain’s MoD.

He said Britain maintained “a constant presence in the region as part of our enduring contribution to Gulf security.”

Iran’s military and political leaders had warned they could close the strait -- a key transit route for global oil supplies -- if increased Western sanctions over Tehran’s suspect nuclear program halt Iranian oil exports.

The Islamic republic’s navy had also warned it will react if the United States tried to redeploy one of its aircraft carriers to the waterway.

U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta has repeatedly said that closing the strait would cross a “red line.” Two of the 11 U.S. aircraft carriers are currently in the region.

Since then, Iran has tried to ease tensions, with Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi saying last week that Tehran had never tried to close the strait.

“We want peace and stability in the region,” Salehi said.

This is really getting serious

The expected sanctions follow fresh financial measures signed into law by U.S. President Barack Obama on New Year’s Eve, and will mainly target the oil sector, which accounts for some 90 percent of Iranian exports to the EU. Europe is Iran’s second-largest oil customer after China.

“We want them to think ‘This is really getting very, very serious now’,” said one European diplomat, according to Reuters.

Other than the oil embargo, the EU measures are also expected to include sanctions against the Iranian central bank and a ban on trading in gold with the government, diplomats say.

But EU sanctions are likely to take effect slowly. During weeks of negotiations among the EU’s 27 members, Greece and other southern European states pushed

hard for a lengthy grace period to limit their own economic costs.

Greece, in particular, is heavily dependent on Iranian oil -- it sources nearly a quarter of its oil imports from Iran -- and has argued that it needs time to find alternative sources.

EU foreign ministers meeting in Brussels will also reassure Athens that it will still be able to buy oil on reasonable terms after the ban goes into effect.

Greece, which relies on financial help from the EU and the International Monetary Fund to stay afloat, now gets Iranian crude on preferential financing terms.

“The financial situation of Greece at the moment is not the brightest one, and rightly they are asking us to help them find a solution,” a senior EU official told reporters on Friday.

With a significant part of EU purchases of Iranian oil covered by long-term contracts, the grace period will be an important factor in the efficiency of EU measures.

The unprecedented effort to take Iran’s 2.6 million barrels of oil per day off international markets has kept global prices high, pushed down Iran’s rial currency and caused a surge in the cost of basic goods for Iranians.

A diplomatic push is underway, officials say, to secure supplies from other producers. Saudi Arabia, the world’s top producer, said this month it would increase production by about 2 million barrels per day.

Meanwhile, global powers involved in negotiations on Iran’s nuclear program are still waiting for a reply to a letter sent to Tehran months ago by EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton, her office said Friday.

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said Friday that Iran must show a “seriousness and sincerity of purpose” if it is to resume the talks, according to AFP.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/01/23/189966.html?PHPSESSID=fuek6tu1rma36ll06vf63r5su2>

- **Iran, China hold nuclear talks in Beijing**

An Iranian delegation visited Beijing on Friday to discuss with Chinese officials the nuclear dispute between Tehran and the West.

The Iranian delegation, led by Supreme National Security Council deputy secretary Ali Baqeri, arrived in Beijing after talks with Russian officials in Moscow.

Both Russia and China sit on the 5+1 group which has been negotiating with Iran over its nuclear program.

"China believes the Iran nuclear issue should be resolved peacefully through dialogues and negotiations, and that sanctions and military means will not fundamentally address the problem," said Chinese Assistant Foreign Minister Wu Hailong at the Friday meeting.

The Iranian side "expressed its willingness to resume talks" with six countries involved in discussions and to "strengthen cooperation" with the International Atomic Energy Agency, Reuters reported.

<http://www.mehrnews.com/en/newsdetail.aspx?NewsID=1515052>

3. SYRIA

- **Syria rejects Arab League transition plan**

Syria has condemned a new Arab League initiative that calls on President Bashar al-Assad to cede power by holding early elections and forming a "national unity government".

Syrian state television, quoting an unnamed official source, said early on Monday morning that the resolution, passed on Sunday night, contradicted the will of the Syrian people and was a violation of its national sovereignty.

The source said the resolution was part of a conspiracy against the Syrian people.

The Arab League called on Assad to delegate power to his vice president and for elections to be held under a "national unity government," the latest steps in a slow-moving diplomatic effort to end 10 months of bloody uprising.

The bloc's members agreed to a political initiative that would call for a unity government and early elections to end the crisis, the Qatari prime minister said after

a meeting of the 22-member body in Cairo.

The new plan envisioned the "peaceful departure of the Syrian regime" and resembled the arrangement in Yemen, where Gulf nations convinced President Ali Abdullah Saleh to delegate power and leave the country, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim Al Thani, the Qatari prime minister, said.

Al Thani said the league would ask the United Nations Security Council to support its plan for transition.

"After the establishment of the government of national unity, there has to be a referendum and preparation for new elections. The Arab League's secretary-general is to send a new special envoy to Syria, and will call on the international community to support this national unity government to fulfill its functions," he said.

He also reiterated the Arab League's demands that the violence in Syria be brought to an end, that political detainees be released, that the Syrian military pull

out of cities and that citizens be allowed to demonstrate peacefully.

The league has called on the opposition and government to begin a new round of dialogue "within two weeks".

'Arab solution'

Al-Thani said that while the league was taking its case to the Security Council, it was not in favour of an international military intervention.

"We are looking into an Arab solution for this. We are not looking for a military intervention. The decision was by consensus, except Algeria which had some reservations. Lebanon has abstained, and we appreciate their situation there and we thank them for their co-operation," he said.

He also announced that the Arab League's observer mission in Syria would be extended, and that the observers would be given additional equipment after the head of the monitoring mission, General Mohammed Ahmed Mustafa al-Dabi of Sudan, said he wanted his mandate to be strengthened.

"We understand that al-Dabi has said to the Syrian committee that the mission has not gained enough momentum yet to get a full judgment on it," reported Al Jazeera's Mike Hanna from Cairo.

"He said that he needed more time with the added monitors that he's received in recent weeks and the added geographical places in which the monitoring mission is now extended to see if this mission can in fact work."

Nabil ElAraby, the League's secretary-general, said that Syria had not fulfilled its obligations, and that was why the observers' mission had been extended.

But Saudi Arabia said it would withdraw its observers from Syria because Damascus had not kept its promises in regard to the mission.

Syria's main opposition bloc, the Syrian National Council (SNC), has criticised the Arab League mission, saying that the conditions under which the observers have been forced to work, escorted by Syrian troops, did not allow them to present an objective report.

The SNC formally asked the league on Saturday to refer the Syrian crisis to the UN Security Council.

"We think that when the Arab League refers the case to the United Nations and to the Security Council the situation will change," Basma Elkadamny, an SNC spokesperson, said in Cairo.

Fresh violence

Sunday's meeting came amid reports of clashes between Syrian government troops and army defectors in Douma, a suburb of the capital, Damascus.

"Apparently there were some clashes between the regime's army and the FSA [Free Syrian Army] but the FSA has gone back to its positions," Rafif Jouejati, a spokeswoman for the Local Co-ordination Committees (LCC) activist network, told Al Jazeera.

Al Jazeera's Zeina Khodr, reporting from Beirut in neighbouring Lebanon, said the FSA appeared to be gaining strength in Doumam which had been a protest hub for some time.

"Last night there were conflicting accounts that the Syrian security forces were forced to retreat because of resistance from the FSA. What is clear is that neither side is in control [of the area]," our correspondent said.

Anti-Assad activist groups say that security forces fired on anti-government protesters in several locations around Damascus on Sunday, including Rankous and Douma, and in Karm al-Zaitoun in Homs.

Activists say that hundreds of people have been killed since the monitors arrived in Syria, with some reporting the deaths of as many as 740 civilians in the last month.

Critics say the Arab mission has only provided diplomatic cover for Assad to pursue a crackdown that has already killed more than 5,000 people since anti-government protests erupted in March 2011, according to a UN count.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/01/201212305618873831.html>

- **EU adopts fresh sanctions against Syria's military brass: diplomat**

EU foreign ministers adopted fresh sanctions against Syria's military brass on Monday, targeting a large number of security officials on a new list of people and firms hit by a travel ban and asset freeze.

Ministers targeted 22 people and eight companies in this 11th round of EU sanctions to protest the ongoing repression in Syria, said a diplomat who spoke on condition of anonymity.

"We call again for the violence to stop, for the (Arab League) monitors to be able to do their job unheeded," said European Union foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton as she went into talks with the EU's 27 foreign ministers.

"We're deeply concerned with the situation in Syria," she added. "There needs to be a peaceful transition in that country."

No details were immediately available on the identities of the new targets.

The EU has already agreed 10 rounds of sanctions against the regime of President

Bashar al-Assad, with some 120 people and companies targeted so far by an assets freeze and travel ban.

It is also enforcing an arms embargo and a ban on imports of Syrian crude oil.

In December, it expanded its sanctions list to include Syria's finance and economy ministers, state-owned oil companies and two media organizations.

The EU move comes after Syria rejected an Arab League plan for al-Assad to transfer power to his deputy and make way for a national unity government.

"Syria rejects the decisions taken which are outside an Arab working plan, and considers them an attack on its national sovereignty and a flagrant interference in internal affairs," state TV quoted an official as saying.

The Arab League on Sunday asked the United Nations to support a new plan for resolving the crisis in Syria that would see Assad transfer power to his deputy and a government of national unity within two months.

Assad should "delegate powers to the vice president to liaise with a government of national unity," to be formed in two months, according to a statement read by Qatari premier Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim Al Thani.

The statement followed a meeting of Arab foreign ministers in Cairo to determine the fate of their Syrian observer mission.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/01/23/190031.html?PHPSESSID=fuek6tu1rma36ll06vf63r5su2>

- **Syria rejects Arab League plan for power transition; opposition welcomes initiative**

Syria on Monday rejected an Arab League plan for President Bashar al-Assad to transfer power to his deputy, calling the initiative a "flagrant interference," state TV quoted an official as saying.



"Syria rejects the decisions taken which are outside an Arab working plan, and considers them an attack on its national

sovereignty and a flagrant interference in internal affairs,” the official was quoted as saying, according to AFP.

The Arab League late on Sunday asked the U.N. Security Council to support a new plan for resolving the crisis in Syria that sees Assad transferring power to his deputy and a government of national unity within two months.

Assad should “delegate powers to the vice president to liaise with a government of national unity,” to be formed in two months, according to a statement read by Qatari premier Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim Al Thani after Arab foreign ministers met in Cairo to determine the fate of their Syrian observer mission.

Sheikh Hamad compared the proposal to a Gulf plan on Yemen, which saw President Ali Abdullah Saleh agree to hand over power.

“We are with the Syrian people, with their will and with their aspirations,” Sheikh Hamad said.

The Syrian official reacting to the Arab League’s call said the regional body should

instead “assume its responsibilities for stopping the financing and arming of terrorists,” the television channel reported.

Arab league initiative

The source added that the Arab League initiative ran counter to the interests of the Syrian people and would not prevent the country from “advancing its political reforms and bringing security and stability to its people who have shown, during this crisis, their support for national unity as they have rallied around President Assad.”

It was not clear, however, how the League might enforce its latest plan, given the failure of an Arab observer team in Syria to end the Assad government’s repression of an uprising in which the United Nations says 5,000 people have died.

Deep splits among the 22 member states have complicated the Arab League’s efforts to take a strong stand on the Syrian crisis, but Sunday’s proposal was approved by all save Lebanon, a smaller neighbor which has consistently opposed escalation. Algeria objected to taking the plan to the Security Council, according to Reuters.

The main opposition Syrian National Council, which has urged the Arab League for weeks to refer the Syrian crisis to the U.N. Security Council, welcomed the initiative.

“This confirms that all Arab countries today consider the tyrannical regime of Bashar al-Assad to be finished and that it must be replaced,” SNC chief Burhan Ghalioun told a news conference in Cairo, where the foreign ministers met.

“The Syrian people have lost confidence in the Arab League’s ability to stop the regime’s ongoing bloodshed,” the Local Coordination Committees (LCC), another opposition group which organizes anti-regime protests, said in a statement received in Nicosia.

“It is clear that the regime has been pulling the country towards chaos and destruction while the Arab League remains stagnant,” the statement said.

“The LCC finds the Arab League’s ... proposal unattainable and lacking proper implementation mechanism,” the statement said. “Thus far, it has not nor

will it put an end to the regime’s brutality.”

The group said 795 people were killed in the first month of the mission, “making it a failure in accomplishing all of its initiatives.”

It added that the extension of the observer mission marked “another deadline for the regime’s killing machine and a form of support in suppressing the revolution while Syrian society is being obliterated.”

“To pressure the Syrian regime into complying with the Syrian people’s demands, we call on the Arab League ... to declare the failure of its mission in Syria and to seek assistance from the United Nations,” the LCC said.

The Security Council is also split on how to address the crisis, with Western powers demanding tougher sanctions and a weapons embargo, and Assad’s ally Russia preferring to leave the Arabs to negotiate a peaceful outcome.

Asked about a previous Arab threat to impose sanctions on Assad, Sheikh Hamad

said: “Arab economic sanctions will be imposed via the Security Council.” He did not elaborate.

The new proposal came after Arab League monitors, in Syria since late December, found that Assad had failed to fully comply with an earlier plan to end violence, withdraw troops from urban areas, free detainees and allow protests.

Extending Arab League mission

Despite criticism over the monitors’ failure to end the bloodshed, the foreign ministers agreed to extend the mission, expand it and boost its technical and logistical support.

The extension was, however, overshadowed by Saudi Arabia’s decision to withdraw its own monitors and urge the international community to exert “all possible pressure” on Damascus.

“My country will withdraw its monitors because the Syrian government did not execute any of the elements of the Arab resolution plan,” Saudi foreign minister Saud al-Faisal said.

“We are calling on the international community to bear its responsibility, and that includes our brothers in Islamic states and our friends in Russia, China, Europe and the United States,” he said, calling for “all possible pressure.”

While none have so far followed suit, a diplomatic source said the remaining Gulf states backed the Saudi position.

Qatar, which has led calls for escalation, said it was time to rethink the mission and consider sending Arab peacekeepers.

“The reality says that the bloodshed has not stopped and the killing machine is still working and violence is spread everywhere,” Sheikh Hamad told the ministers earlier on Sunday.

He clarified that the Qatari idea, floated by the emir earlier this month, did not envisage a Libya-style military campaign against Syria but armed troops to enforce the peace.

The idea of a military campaign in Syria, which would require unanimous endorsement, had not been discussed or agreed.

Hundreds of Syrians have been killed since the unarmed civilian observers began their work. At least three monitors have told Reuters of deep civilian suffering and complained that the Syrian government has shown no will to end the crackdown.

Arab League ministers have called before for dialogue between the Syrian government and opposition but Sunday's eight-point initiative laid out the details along with a timeframe.

It sees the creation of the new unity government within two months and elections three months later to a constituent body which would draft a new constitution to be put to a referendum.

It also sees Arab League chief Nabil al-Araby dispatching a personal representative to Syria to follow up on the plan.

Regional rivals impatient for action against Assad

Qatar and Saudi Arabia, regional rivals of Syria and its ally Iran, are impatient for decisive action against Assad. But suggestions to send in U.N. experts to

support the Arab observers have made little headway and Damascus has said it would accept an extension of the observer mission but not an expansion in its scope.

Some states worry that weakening Assad could tip Syria, with its potent mix of religious and ethnic allegiances, into a deeper conflict that would destabilize the entire region. Some fear unrest among their own populations if he were toppled.

Syria, keen to avoid tougher foreign action, has tried to show it is complying with an initial Arab peace plan.

This month the Syrian authorities freed hundreds of detainees, announced an amnesty, struck a ceasefire deal with armed rebels in one town, allowed observers into some trouble spots and admitted some foreign journalists. Assad has also promised reforms. The violence, however, has continued.

Two Syrian army officers, an infantryman, a rebel and two civilians died in clashes on Sunday in Talfita, a village near Damascus, said the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. Syria says 2,000 security personnel have been killed in the revolt.

Intermittent fighting continued in the town of Douma, nine miles (14 km) northwest of the capital, which had been encircled by the military, said the UK-based rights group.

An opposition activist and a rebel fighter in Douma told Reuters by telephone the fighting had eased and the rebels held about two thirds of its main streets.

Masked fighters had set up checkpoints and a funeral procession for five civilians killed on Saturday was passing through the town, they said. Angry cries could be heard in the background as they spoke.

The rebel fighter said there were several casualties on Sunday but no confirmed deaths.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/01/23/189957.html?PHPSESSID=fuek6tu1rma36ll06vf63r5su2>

- **Ambassador al-Ahmad: Syria Rejects all Decisions Issued by Arab League Outside of Arab Work Plan**

CAIRO, (SANA)- Syria's Permanent Representative at the Arab League,

Ambassador Yousef Ahmad stressed that the decision issued by the Arab League Council comes within the framework of the premeditated and programmed preamble by some Arab parties, led by the Qatari government, for months to call the foreign interference in Syria's internal affairs.



Ambassador Ahmad on Monday said "Syria categorically rejects any decision issued by the AL outside the Arab Work Plan or the Protocol signed between it and the AL Secretariat-General,"

He added Syria considers the AL Council's decision a dangerous violation of the AL Charter and its decisions related to the Syrian crisis and a targeting of the Observer Mission's task on the ground to foil its report.

Ahmad stressed that the decision instigates some parties of the Syrian opposition to reject the peaceful political solutions and cancels the possibility of

holding a genuine national dialogue to reach a Syrian solution to the crisis.

" The decision constitutes a flagrant interference in Syria's internal affairs and deliberated abolition of the will of the majority of the Syrian people with the aim of calling the foreign interference," he said.

Ambassador Ahmad criticized the call of the Saudi Foreign Minister to activate the sanctions against Syria in spite of their effect on the living of the Syrian people and their security and stability.

He added that some Arabs were astonished by the objective and neutral report of the AL Observers , particularly that the Qatari government has bet from the beginning on Syria's rejection of the mission in a way that allows the implementation of the scheme of internationalizing the Syrian crisis and foreign interference.

He said "Some Arab parties don't accept the report presented by the Observer Mission as it unveils what is happening on the ground, particularly regarding the violence, killing and sabotage acts

perpetrated by armed groups against the Syrian people and their properties where Qatar's Prime Minister described the crimes of the armed terrorist groups as "self-defense."

Ahmad pointed out that what was raised to be discussed in the meeting of the Arab Ministerial Committee concerned with the situation in Syria and the Arab Ministerial Council was the report of the Head of the AL Observer Mission to issue recommendations connected with the mission's work and developing it on the ground in a way that contributes in the implementation of the Arab Work Plan.

" In spite of the positive aspects occurred in the report regarding the Syrian government's commitment to the plan, facilitating the work of the mission but the Presidency of the Arab Ministerial Committee ,backed by the stances of some Arab parties, seek to exploit the cover of the AL to undermine Syria's security, stability and territorial integrity," the Ambassador said.

He added that the scheme has been exposed as some Arab parties work for implementing a premeditated plots which

ignore the report of the Observer Mission and the reform process launched by President Bashar al-Assad and his speech on January 11, 2012 in which he announced the state's steps to consolidate the principles of democracy, political pluralism and to change the constitution soon.

"Some Arabs have forgotten the situation, the strength and effectiveness of Syria, believing they have a real and effective presence in the region and can, through their money, their petroleum and support of United States and the West, make unilateral decisions that address the Arab identity and interfere in Syria's internal affairs to decide its future as planned in Western capitals," the Ambassador said.

He reiterated Syria's determination to go ahead in the reform process and make it a success due to the unity and will of the majority of the Syrian people who reject all form of foreign interference and seek to help their homeland getting out of its current crisis through a national solution based on consolidating the concepts of the modern and democratic state .

<http://sana.sy/eng/22/2012/01/23/396001.htm>

4. ISRAEL - PALESTINE

• Hamas political chief to step down

Khaled Meshaal, the leader of Hamas' political bureau, has confirmed that he intends to step down after eight years in the post, the Islamist movement has said.



"Political bureau chief Khaled Meshaal has notified Hamas' consultative council that he does not wish to be a candidate for the movement's future leadership," a statement released on Saturday said.

Senior Hamas figures have asked Meshaal, 55, to reconsider, the statement said, adding that he has been urged to allow the consultative council to make a decision on the issue, as it was "not a purely personal matter".

Meshaal, who is normally based out of the Syrian capital Damascus, will remain active in Hamas "in the service of the people, the movement and the Palestinian cause," the statement said.

The political bureau is Hamas' principal decision-making body, and its members are elected through a secret ballot by the consultative council.

The next elections are expected later this year.

'Final call'

Fawzi Barhoum, a Hamas spokesman in Gaza, confirmed that the consultative council would make "the final call" on Meshaal's decision to step down.

Meshaal has been based in Damascus since 2001, fearing for his safety and hoping to avoid the restrictions on his movement in Gaza. He has been the chief leader of Hamas' political wing since 2004.

Israel blames Meshaal for planning many attacks that have killed hundreds of its soldiers and civilians. In 1997 he was the subject of a failed assassination attempt by Mossad agents, an incident that caused a rift in Israel-Jordan relations.

Late Jordanian King Hussein forced Israel to supply the antidote for a lethal injection Meshaal was given, and to

release the group's founder, Ahmed Yassin, from prison in 1997.

Hamas has been in control of the Gaza strip since 2007, after a brief conflict with fighters loyal to Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian president.

Hamas and Abbas' Fatah agreed to a reconciliation plan last year, but it is an agreement that is yet to be implemented.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/01/2012121165619762142.html>

- **'Mashaal planning to visit Gaza with Abbas'**

Hamas leader asked Egypt to grant him passage through Rafah; visit will be 'first of its kind' for Mashaal, 'Al Hayat' reports.



Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal is planning a trip to the Gaza Strip along with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas in an effort to support reconciliation between the governments

in Gaza and Ramallah, pan-Arab newspaper Al Hayat reported Monday,

Mashaal, who visited Egypt this past week for meetings with Egyptian and foreign officials, asked Cairo to grant him passage to the Gaza Strip through the Rafah crossing, a "reliable Palestinian source" told the London-based daily. The Rafah border crossing is the only land crossing in Gaza not abutting Israel.

RELATED:

' Hamas will defeat Fatah in May elections'
Mashaal not to seek reelection as Hamas chief

The source did not give a precise date for the visit, saying it would occur at the "appropriate time" because of the "sensitivity of the visit," according to the newspaper.

The report said that the trip would be the "first of its kind" for Mashaal, who was born in the West Bank but spent most of his life abroad in Kuwait, Jordan and Syria. The external and exiled leadership of Hamas operates out of its Damascus-based political bureau, which Mashaal has led since 1996.

Mashaal requested that Abbas accompany him on his visit to Gaza in order to underline cooperation between Hamas and Fatah, and in order to continue pursuing a reconciled, unified Palestinian government, according to Al Hayat.

The report came a week after Hamas announced Mashaal would not seek reelection to head Hamas's political bureau, what some saw as a blow to reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah.

Sources close to Hamas said that the movement's leadership in the Gaza Strip was opposed to the rapprochement between Mashaal and Abbas.

Hamas's top leaders in the Gaza Strip, Ismail Haniyeh and Mahmoud Zahar, have also expressed their opposition to Mashaal's call for a nonviolent, popular intifada against Israel, the sources said.

<http://www.jpost.com/MiddleEast/Article.aspx?id=254726>

5. NORTH AFRICA

- **Egypt's new parliament to hold first session**

Just days after finishing a historic election that put Islamists in the legislative driving seat, Egypt's lower house of parliament on Monday will sit for the first time since former president Hosni Mubarak was deposed nearly one year ago.

The Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice party, which took roughly 43 per cent of the People's Assembly, has vowed to guide Egypt through the transition from military to civilian rule while upholding personal liberties.

The Brotherhood has also promised not to ally with the ultra-conservative Nour Party, which largely represents Egypt's fundamentalist Salafi community and came in second, winning around 21 per cent of available seats.

The rise of the Islamists marks a sea change from the Mubarak era, when parliament was a compliant body dominated by a supermajority of his National Democratic Party (NDP).

Al Jazeera interviews Abdullah Alashaal on the Egyptian parliament

The Brotherhood was officially banned, and though its members won an unprecedented fifth of parliament in 2005 by running as independents, in practice no party but the NDP could ever affect legislation.

The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, which took power on February 11, have promised to remain in charge only until a presidential election in June, though many Egyptians suspect the army may seek to cling on to power from behind the scenes even after that.

"It will be a historic session in Egypt's transition to democracy and civilian rule," Mohamed Beltagy, a leading member of the Freedom and Justice Party, said on Sunday.

One of the first steps in Monday's session will be electing the speaker. The FJP has nominated its secretary-general, Saad el-Katatni, and he will probably be approved.

Youth protest

Youth movements, who sparked and led Egyptians in the 18-day revolt against Mubarak, said they would demonstrate outside the assembly to ensure protesters killed in the uprising were not forgotten.

They are barely represented in the People's Assembly. After the FJP and Nour, whose coalitions combined make up 70 per cent of the lower house, there is the Wafd, an eight-decade-old party with eight per cent, and the Egyptian Bloc, a new liberal coalition led in part by billionaire telecom mogul Naguib Sawiris, which won almost seven per cent.

"We do not contest the popular mandate of parliament, but it better deliver on the rights of martyrs and wounded. We fear political parties may vie for political gain and ignore the youth," activist Mohamed Fahmy said.

Though liberals and youth harbour suspicions and even fears of the Brotherhood and the Salafis, most agree that the main obstacle to a democracy is the military council, which has failed to reform the loathed security forces and halt military trials of civilians. Military

police have also attacked and killed demonstrators on multiple occasions.

The Brotherhood represents the most powerful counter to the military, and though its members have said they are willing to negotiate with the SCAF during the transition, the two sides have clashed over the powers of the new parliament.

"The Egyptian military seems at this point determined to carve out an exception to democratic rule for its area of power and interest," Human Rights Watch's executive director Kenneth Roth said on Sunday at the launch of the group's annual report in Cairo.

Parliamentarians see the new assembly as bringing Egypt a step closer to ending military rule.

"We say that we respect and appreciate the army but the military council must be held accountable for any mistakes ... No one is above accountability," the Brotherhood's general guide, Mohamed Badie, said last week.

Some analysts have suggested the army will not fully abandon politics unless the

Brotherhood and other prominent political parties offer guarantees that it will not face legal retribution over the killing of protesters.

Mubarak, 83, is now on trial for his role in the deaths of 850 people during the uprising. Scores of people have been killed in sporadic eruptions of violence since then, including demonstrations against army rule in November and December.

A Brotherhood source said its members would form a human chain around parliament to stop any protest turning violent.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/01/201212303321178501.html>

- **Muslim Brotherhood tops Egyptian poll result**

The Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), which represents Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, has won 47 per cent of all seats in the country's election for the lower house of parliament, the election commission has said.

The FJP won 235 seats in the new People's Assembly, Abdel Moez Ibrahim, the head

of the country's election commission, announced on Saturday.

It also secured 127 seats on party lists, while its candidates won another 108 in first-past-the-post constituency votes, where votes were cast for individual candidates.

The hardline Islamist Salafi al-Nour party has won 24 per cent of all seats on offer.

The liberal al-Wafd party won about seven per cent of the seats, according to the latest results. The remaining 22 per cent of seats were split amongst smaller political parties.

The election commission says that voter turnout was 54 per cent in the polls.

The FJP has named Saad al-Katatni, a leading Muslim Brotherhood official who has previously sat in parliament as an independent, as speaker of the assembly.

Katatni has told the Reuters news agency that he intends for the role of the assembly to be "reconciliatory".

"The priorities are meeting the demands of the revolution, including the rights of the injured and those killed in the uprising," he said.

New constitution

The landmark elections for the lower house of parliament, held in three stages, were the first since the fall of Hosni Mubarak, who was overthrown as president by a popular uprising in January last year.

Two-thirds of the 498 seats up for election were reserved for those belonging to registered political parties [referred to as 'closed party lists'], while the remaining one-third of seats were contested by individuals.

Ten seats were reserved for appointees of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), the military council that has been ruling Egypt since Mubarak fell.

"This parliament, that has its opening session on Monday, has very limited powers," reported Al Jazeera's Sherine Tadros from Cairo, the Egyptian capital.

"The most important thing that it will be doing in the coming weeks and months, is setting up a 100-member body that will then write the constitution."

Elections for the upper house of parliament will be held in February, after which the constituent assembly will be chosen.

A new president is to be elected by June under a timetable decided by the SCAF. Candidates can register for that election by April 15.

Detainees freed

In a separate development, Field Marshal Hussein Tantawi, the head of SCAF, ordered the release on Saturday of 1,959 people being held in prisons after having faced military trials.

"It is the biggest pardon since the ouster of then President Hosni Mubarak. All of these people were incarcerated after the SCAF took over and they subjected about 12,000 people to military trials since then," reported Al Jazeera's Sherine Tadros from Cairo.

"Most of those who are incarcerated and are now being pardoned, are mainly in there for cases to do with rioting, attacking public buildings and so on. There has been a lot of talk about military trials. There's a big movement here to try and get rid of these military trials, people saying that they violate human rights."

Maikel Nabil, a prominent blogger who was convicted of insulting the military and sentenced to two years in jail, was among those ordered to be released.

"[Nabil was] the first blogger to be incarcerated by military trial back in April ... and he was against the military and he spoke out against the military and wrote about the military and his case very much resonated across the country at that time because it ... fed into this idea that the country was just going back to its old ways," said Tadros.

"All of this coming just a few days before the first anniversary of the revolution, January 25. SCAF is very adamant to make this a day of celebration, whereas others are trying to make it into a day of demonstration."

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/01/2012121125958580264.html>

- **South Sudan says Khartoum seized oil worth \$815 million**

South Sudan President Salva Kiir accused Sudan on Monday of seizing \$815 million worth of its crude oil in a row over how to share oil revenues between the former civil war foes.



South Sudan seceded last July under a 2005 peace deal that ended decades of civil war between north and south, but the two countries are locked in a row over sharing oil revenues.

The new landlocked nation needs to use a northern pipeline and the port of Port Sudan to export the crude but has failed to reach an agreement with Khartoum over a transit fee, prompting Sudan to seize part of its oil as compensation.

Juba said last week it was preparing to shut down its oil output, which officials had said was 350,000 barrels a day.

“In total, the revenue that the government of Sudan has looted since December amounts to approximately \$815 million,” Kiir told parliament in Juba.

He accused Khartoum of having built a tie-in pipeline to divert 120,000 barrels per day of southern production flowing through the north.

Officials in Khartoum could not immediately be reached for comment.

Sudan President Omar Hassan al-Bashir said this month Khartoum would impose a fee since Juba had failed to pay any fee for using northern export facilities since its independence.

“Given our history with the administration of President Bashir, we realize that unfortunately we must prepare for a disruption of revenue that could last many months,” Kiir said.

Sudan said last week it would continue seizing southern oil as part of

compensation for what it said were unpaid transit fees. Khartoum is demanding \$1 billion for fees since July and \$36 a barrel, officials have said.

Kiir said the government would have to reduce its dependence on oil revenues, which make up 98 percent of state income.

“We will need to find other sources of funding. In doing so I have instructed the ministry of finance to initiate contingency plans for revenue collection and allocation,” he said.

Ravaged by decades of civil war, South Sudan is one of the most underdeveloped countries of the world. The government wants to diversify the economy away from oil, but analysts see little progress so far.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/01/23/190048.html?PHPSESSID=fuek6tu1rma36ll06vf63r5su2>

- **Libyan leader warns of possible ‘civil war’ if NTC quits as protests rage in Benghazi**

Libyan leader Mustafa Abdul Jalil said on Sunday the nation would fall into a “civil war” if the ruling National Transitional

Council resigned, as it faced its first major challenge with protests raging in Benghazi.

Angry protests in the eastern city of Benghazi -- the city which first rebelled against Muammar Qaddafi last year -- have dealt a severe blow to the NTC's functioning. It led its deputy head Abdel Hafiz Ghoga to resign on Sunday, three days after furious students had manhandled him.

"We are not going to resign because it would lead to civil war," NTC head Abdul Jalil said in an interview on the Libya al-Hurra television station late Sunday.

Abdul Jalil said some "hidden hands" were "pushing the demonstrators."

"Who is pushing these sit-ins prompting protesters to invade the headquarters of the council with such savagery?" the new Libya's leader said, referring to the attack on NTC offices in Benghazi Saturday, according to AFP.

Crowds of protesters threw several home-made grenades at and stormed the NTC offices with iron rods and stones before

setting the building's front ablaze, witnesses and council members said.

They even threw plastic bottles at Abdul Jalil, who is respected across Libya for his active role in the anti-Qaddafi rebellion. He had to be escorted out of the premises.

Benghazi protesters rampaged through the NTC's offices, denouncing what they said is a "non-transparent" body. The protesters also accused the NTC of having marginalized some wounded veterans of the uprising that toppled Qaddafi in favor of people who were previously loyal to the slain dictator.

Defending the NTC and its work, Abdul Jalil paid tribute to Ghoga, despite the fury of the protesters.

"We must praise the role played by Abdel Hafiz Ghoga. He chose his country before himself," Abdul Jalil said. His onetime deputy had supported the anti-Qaddafi revolution when others "were in Egypt or hidden elsewhere."

Ghoga stepped down Sunday after about 4,000 students protested against him in

Benghazi's University of Ghar Yunis where he was manhandled on Thursday and had to flee from the campus to escape the angry mob.

Ghoga, who served as official spokesman for the NTC, had come under increasing opposition from Benghazi residents who accuse him of opportunism because of what they said was his belated defection from the Qaddafi regime.

"My resignation shows that the NTC is a tribune for fighting for a cause and not a governing body," Ghoga told AFP.

"We are not looking for posts," he said, adding that his decision was in the "best interests of Libya."

He said "since the end of the war of liberation an air of hatred had begun to dominate which does not serve national interest."

"To prove that we are with the interest (of Libya) and that we are a movement of struggle, we decided to give way to other patriots... the important thing is to preserve the NTC... we do not want our country sliding into chaos."

The NTC had staunchly backed Ghoga after the Ghar Yunis incident, saying an attack on him represented "an attack on the sovereignty of the Libyan people and its glorious revolution."

Protesters say the NTC has failed to live up to the aspirations of the revolt against Gaddafi, the most violent of the "Arab Spring" uprisings.

"We hoped for security, peace and transparency. We have seen the opposite," said Miftah al-Rabia, 28, who was standing outside the NTC's Benghazi headquarters on Sunday with a group of protesters, according to Reuters.

The violent protests against the NTC and Ghoga in particular even forced the council to meet at an undisclosed location on Sunday to discuss the nation's new electoral law.

NTC member Abdul Razzak al-Arabi told AFP that the meeting had postponed the adoption of the law to Jan. 28. It was expected to scrap an article reserving 10 percent of the seats of the proposed 200-

member constituent assembly for women, he added.

Several women's bodies and rights groups had criticized the article, saying it does not go far enough in giving women a say in post-Qaddafi politics.

Arabi said the NTC had set up an election commission comprising 17 members, including lawyers, judges and human rights activists, to oversee future polls.

Abdul Jalil, meanwhile, said despite the protests he was "optimistic" about the future of Libya.

"Libya will see prosperity as she has not seen before. But we need help and support" from the people, he said.

The protests add to the list of challenges facing the NTC.

It is struggling to bring to heel dozens of armed militias who have carved the country into rival fiefdoms and are so far refusing to join a newly created national army.

Foreign states are worried about the NTC's capacity to secure its borders against arms traffickers, al-Qaeda insurgents and migrants trying to reach Europe illegally.

The NTC was formed in the early days of the revolt against Qaddafi from a hastily-assembled group of lawyers, government officials who defected, Muslim clerics, tribal leaders and civil society activists.

At the time, Qaddafi's troops were using automatic weapons to fire on protests in Benghazi and elsewhere, and there was little time to vet the members.

But nearly six months on from the moment the rebellion took control of the capital Tripoli, Libyans are started to question the council's legitimacy.

In particular, some people have cast doubt over the loyalties of former Qaddafi lieutenants who are now in the NTC. These include Abdul Jalil himself, who was justice minister under Qaddafi before defecting early in the uprising.

The council says it will dissolve itself once elections are held for a transitional

national assembly. That vote is scheduled to take place in about six months.

“We still don't know who exactly is in the NTC. There is no transparency,” said Al-Rabia, a protester standing outside the building with a group of about 30 other men.

Another protester, 24-year-old Mohammed Mahmoud, said he fought against Qaddafi during the revolt and wounded his shoulder and hand.

“We fought on the front line and received injuries but we did not see the NTC with us,” he said. “I have one single question: Why has the NTC failed at everything except selling oil? We want to correct the path of the revolution.”

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/01/23/189973.html?PHPSESSID=fuek6tu1rma36ll06vf63r5su2>

- **Egypt's new People's Assembly swears in today, but powers are dubious**

Egypt's first post-Hosni Mubarak People's Assembly will hold its first session today amid skepticism over the level of autonomy the newly elected lawmakers

will yield vis-a-vis the ruling military council.



Photographed by Mohamed Abdel Ghany

The Muslim Brotherhood-led Democratic Alliance reaped 235 of the People's Assembly's 498 contested seats, rising as the largest parliamentary bloc, according to the final results. The ultra-orthodox Islamist coalition led by the Salafi-oriented Nour Party garnered 123 seats. Among the major secular parties, the Wafd Party and the Egyptian Bloc — which is made up of three parties — earned 38 and 34 seats respectively.

While the Islamist majority is celebrating the imminent inauguration of the People's Assembly as the moment in which the generals will finally cede legislative authorities to elected lawmakers, Supreme Constitutional Court Vice President Tahani al-Gebali contends that

the military will still hold the right to ratify or veto bills.

Under the military-issued temporary constitution, the generals hold the president's authorities, so they should sign off on bills coming out of Parliament before they become effective, Gebali says.

Such an arrangement ensures a balance of power between the legislature and the executive, adds the constitutional judge, who is believed to be close to military circles.

The same 63-article temporary constitutional declaration gives the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) the right to veto legislation.

"If there is a disagreement, the bill shall return to the People's Assembly to look into why the SCAF objected to it. If the disagreement between the two continues, the matter shall be referred to the Supreme Constitutional Court," says Gebali.

Since the generals took over in February, they have held both the executive and legislative powers. They issued several

laws that regulated the establishment of political parties and the exercise of political rights, and criminalized protests that would obstruct production. Most of these laws had been drafted by the military-appointed cabinet before they were issued as military decrees.

In recent weeks, the cabinet had drafted at least three bills that could reform Al-Azhar, regulate civil society organizations and lay out procedures and requirements for the presidential election. All bills have proven controversial.

While junior clerics argued that the Al-Azhar bill seeks to tighten the grip of the old scholars on the institution, civil society activists decried the bill on NGOs as highly oppressive. Some of the military's detractors suspected that the SCAF was rushing to issue the presidential elections law before Parliament convenes to shut out unwanted presidential hopefuls. The SCAF could not ratify any of these bills before Parliament convenes.

Gebali says the generals will still be able to turn these bills into effective laws independently from elected lawmakers even after they are sworn in. She argued

that even after Parliament is formed, the SCAF has the right to issue any bill that has been already drafted by the cabinet.

“There is no obligation to send the law to the parliament because it had already gone through all required procedures that were instated before the parliament was elected,” she explained.

However, lawmakers will not remain silent about what they say are potential attempts to tread on their mandate.

“We will consider unconstitutional and non-binding any laws that are issued without being referred to Parliament,” Mohamed Hamed, a parliamentarian representing the liberal Free Egyptians Party, told Egypt Independent.

The Muslim Brotherhood’s Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) leaders ruled out that the constitutional declaration could be used to bypass elected parliamentarians.

“We are not worried; simply they [SCAF] cannot do it,” Hussein Ibrahim, the leader of the FJP parliamentary bloc told reporters on Sunday. “The Parliament represents the popular will.”

In the meantime, Sobhi Saleh, an FJP lawyer and member of the People’s Assembly, downplayed the significance of the clause that grants the military the right to approve legislation, arguing that it is pro forma.

Saleh said there is a different mechanism to sort out disagreements between the generals and Parliament over bills.

“If the SCAF vetoes the bill, it goes back to Parliament. If Parliament approves the bill by two-thirds, it goes into effect automatically,” he told Egypt Independent.

In fact, the temporary constitution is silent on how to resolve such legislative disputes between Parliament and the SCAF, and leaves the matter open to various interpretations. In the meantime, it does not specify how the People’s Assembly can oversee the government’s performance.

“The constitutional declaration is drafted in a particular way that makes the SCAF the custodian of the political system throughout the transitional period,” said

Samer Soliman, a political science professor at the American University in Cairo. “It is true that it gives Parliament the right to legislate, but the relationship between Parliament and the SCAF remains ambiguous.”

The constitutional declaration also falls short of specifying how Parliament can oversee the cabinet. Earlier, SCAF member Mamdouh Shahin told the media that Parliament will have no right to appoint ministers or withdraw confidence from the cabinet.

Nevertheless, the 2012 Parliament stands as the first fairly elected legislative body in nearly six decades. It will be entrusted with electing a 100-member constituent assembly to write the new constitution.

“The first mission of Parliament is to make a law that specifies the rules and procedures of the constituent assembly. It shall be ready by the time the Shura Council elections are concluded,” FJP Vice President Essam al-Erian said in a news conference on Sunday. These rules are set to specify the eligibility conditions and the decision-making mechanisms within this assembly.

So far, this particular issue has proven to be the thorniest in Islamist-military relations.

On several occasions, the generals sought to bypass Parliament by settling these matters before it met, out of fear that an Islamist majority would monopolize the process of drafting the new constitution. The Muslim Brotherhood has stood up firmly to such attempts and threatened to take to the streets.

In the same news briefing, FJP parliamentarians told reporters they seek to cooperate with all political parties, the military and the incumbent cabinet until the transitional phase is over. Meanwhile, they said they are contemplating a number of bills that would ensure retribution for the revolution’s victims, achieve social justice, combat corruption and instate political liberties.

“We have a thick legislative agenda,” Azab Mostafa, an FJP lawmaker, told Egypt Independent in a phone interview. He said his party has already prepared 51 draft bills, including ones on reforming the police apparatus, by downsizing its

personnel and ensuring strict oversight of its practices, instating a maximum and minimum wage, eliminating monopolies, redistributing public subsidies and easing restrictions on civil society.

Nearly five months stand between Egyptians and the scheduled end of the transitional period. According to the latest-announced schedule, elections for the Shura Council, Parliament's less-significant upper house, will kick off on 29 January and end by 28 February. A new president should be elected by the end of June.

<http://www.almasryalyoum.com/en/node/614861>

6. JORDAN and LEBANON

- **Jordanian Politician Demands Closure of Israeli Embassy in Amman**

TEHRAN (FNA)- A senior Jordanian politician called on the government to end its peace treaty with Israel and close the regime's embassy in Amman.

"We demand the closure of the Zionist enemy's embassy," Secretary-General of Jordan's Islamic Amal Front Sheikh Hamzeh Mansour told FNA on Monday.

He also requested an end to Jordan's peace accord with the Zionist regime of Israel, and said the Jordanian revolutionaries want their country to take an unfriendly and belligerent position against Israel similar to what Syria, Lebanon and Egypt have done.

Jordan signed the Wadi Araba treaty with Israel in 1994, ending decades of enmity. The Kingdom was the second Arab state to sign peace following Israel and Egypt's 1978 Camp David Accords.

17 years since Jordan signed the Wadi Araba Peace Treaty with Israel, activists and opposition leaders question the benefits of the accord for Jordan.

The National Committee for Anti-Normalization had earlier announced in a statement that Jordan benefited "little" from the treaty.

"Fifteen years have passed since the agreement was signed and the conclusion is that Israel is the only beneficiary," the committee said in a statement.

"(Arab) land remains under Israeli occupation while our water problem

remains and continues to worsen and the water we receive from Lake Tiberias is polluted," the statement added.

<http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9010172169>

7. ARABIAN PENINSULA

• Yemen's Saleh heads to US for medical care

Ali Abdullah Saleh, Yemen's outgoing president, has left for neighbouring Oman on his way to the United States for medical treatment, Yemeni officials said.



The US state department said Saleh's request for a visa "has been approved".

"As we have indicated, the sole purpose of this travel is for medical treatment and we expect that he will stay for a limited time that corresponds to the duration of this treatment," it said in a statement on Sunday.

A Sanaa airport official said Saleh's plane took off in the evening.

The Yemeni news website Mareb Press quoted an unidentified source at the airport as saying Saleh left on a private Saudi plane a few hours after his family's departure.

"God willing, I will leave for treatment in the United States and I will return to Sanaa as head of the General People's Congress party," Saleh was quoted by the state news agency, SABA, as telling a meeting with party officials on Sunday.

"I ask for forgiveness from all my people, men and women, for any shortcomings during my 33-year-long rule," he said.

While an aide to Saleh said he would stay there in Oman for several days before heading to the US, an Omani official told the Reuters news agency that he would be in transit for only a few hours.

Diplomats in Sanaa said that Saleh's eldest son Ahmed - who commands the Republican Guard - was "already in Oman" to prepare for his father's arrival.

Sultan al-Barakani, a senior official of the GPC party, said last week that the 69-year-old president would visit Oman and then Ethiopia before travelling to New York for treatment for wounds he sustained in a bombing at the presidential palace last June.

'Execute the butcher'

Meanwhile, tens of thousands of Yemenis staged protests against a law granting immunity for Saleh, from prosecution over a deadly crackdown on dissent.

The protesters carried banners during Sunday's rallies in Sanaa calling on parliament members to reverse their decision.

"It is our duty... to execute the butcher," chanted the protesters gathered in the Yemeni capital's Change Square, the centre of the democracy movement that has been calling for Saleh's removal since January last year.

The demonstrators tried to march to the US embassy but were stopped by Yemeni security forces.

"To the lawmakers, we say there will be no immunity at the expense of the blood of our martyrs," the protesters said, referring to the hundreds killed in the government crackdown.

Saleh's immunity is part of a Gulf Co-operation Council-brokered power transition deal aimed at ending the unrest in the country.

Early presidential elections are scheduled to be held on February 21.

Yemen's parliament adopted the law on Saturday giving Saleh "complete" immunity from prosecution in return for stepping down.

Public outcry

Parliament also adopted a law approving Saleh's longtime deputy, vice-president Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi, as the consensus candidate in the election for Saleh's successor.

The law offers partial protection from legal action for Saleh's aides, saying they cannot face prosecution for "actions that were politically motivated and carried out in the exercise of their duties."

The final text of the immunity law specified the amnesty "does not apply to acts of terrorism", though no further details were revealed as to what actions may fall within that category.

The transitional government of national unity, which is led by the parliamentary opposition, had submitted eleventh-hour amendments on Friday reducing the scope of the amnesty offered to Saleh's aides following a public outcry.

The UN envoy to Yemen, Jamal Benomar, has criticised the immunity law, arguing that it neglects the rights of "victims".

Speaking before departing Yemen late on Saturday, Benomar said that though "the law was amended ... it does not live up to our expectations.

"The UN in principle stands against this type of blanket immunity."

Benomar further called on the Yemeni parliament to enact a "transitional justice and reconciliation" law that would allow victims to be heard and make claims for compensation.

He said the UN could not condone a broad amnesty that covers crimes against humanity, war crimes or gross violations of human rights.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/01/20121221525562988.html>

8. AFGHANISTAN - PAKISTAN

• US Resumes Drone Attacks in Pakistan

TEHRAN (FNA)- More people were killed in the US drone attacks in Pakistan after security officials confirmed that at least five people were killed in two strikes carried out by a US drone in the Pakistani North Waziristan tribal region.

Security officials said on Monday that the American drone targeted a vehicle and a house with two missiles, killing five people at Degan village near Miranshah, the main town of North Waziristan on the Afghan border.

The death toll is expected to rise, and the rescue operation is underway in the area.

The US has resumed its drone operations after it halted the CIA-operated strikes in November 26, 2011, when 24 Pakistani

soldiers were killed in NATO attacks on two Pakistani military border checkpoints in Mohmand agency.

The use of unmanned armed aircraft over Pakistan has been a sore point with the public and Pakistani politicians, who describe them as violations of sovereignty that produce unacceptable civilian casualties.

Sixty-four US missile strikes were reported in Pakistan's tribal belt last year, down from 101 reported in 2010.

The US refuses to discuss drone strikes publicly, but the program has dramatically increased during the Obama administration.

But the missile strikes fuel widespread anti-American resentment, especially high since the deadly US air strikes on November 26.

Islamabad is now reviewing its entire alliance with the US and has kept its Afghan border closed to NATO supply convoys for two months.

<http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9010172135>

**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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