



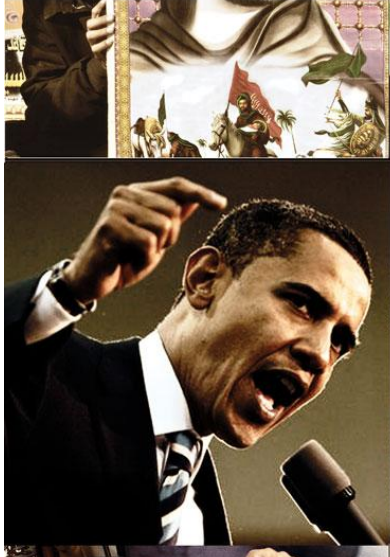
**ORSAM**  
ORTADOĞU STRATEJİK ARAŞTIRMALAR MERKEZİ  
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EASTERN STRATEGIC STUDIES

# GÜNLÜK ORTADOĞU BÜLTENİ

## MIDDLE EAST DAILY BULLETIN

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## 1. IRAK

- **Endowment law for Iraq's Christians, Yazidis and Sabeans almost ready**

DUHOK, Feb. 22 (AKnews) - Iraq's Religious Endowments (Awqaf) Committee is set to finalize the Awqaf endowment law for Christians, Yazidis and Sabean Mandaeans in a bid to strengthen the rights of the three groups.

The law will also replace the word "sect" with "religion" when used to describe the groups.

Committee member Sharif Suleiman said: "We're seeking to cancel any injustice or marginalization or prejudice against the people of the three religions due to the establishment of the endowment during the days of the civil governor Paul Bremer."

When Iraq's Awqaf Ministry disbanded in 2003 the Christian and Other Religions Endowment Council was formed during the governing period of

US administrator Bremer. The move came after the Governing Council failed to choose a Minister of Awqaf because of sectarianism disputes. The decision was made to create three councils: one for Shias, one for Sunnis and one for non-Muslims. The latter covers Christians, Yazidis and Sabeans.

"According to the new law the management of the Awqaf will be restructured and the rights of [Christians, Yazidis and Sabeans] will be kept in terms of the distribution of the budget allocated to this endowment, according to the... population," Suleiman added.

He explained that there are three proposals for the management of the Christian, Yazidi and Sabean endowment council. The first calls for a president and two vice presidents. The second concerns the development of the presidency body and the third stipulates that the presidency post should rotate between the three religions.

"The Yazidis have the right to head of the endowment council as they are the second religion in Iraq, after the declining number of Christians because of their migration out of the country."

Iraq's religious minorities hold 14 seats in the country's Council of Representatives: seven for Yazidis, five for Christians, one for Sabeans and one for Shabaks.

<http://aknews.com/en/aknews/1/291478>

- **Iraq welcomes new Saudi ambassador**  
BAGHDAD, Feb. 21 (AKnews) - Iraq has welcomed Saudi Arabia's steps to assign an ambassador to the country.

Advisor to Iraq's PM Maryam al-Rais said the Saudi Arabian Foreign Ministry informed the Iraqi Council of Ministers about its willingness to base an ambassador in Baghdad.

"Iraq is seeking to establish distinguished ties will all the [Arab]

states, including Saudi Arabia," Rais said.

Media reports have suggested that the Saudi ambassador to Jordan Fahd Zaid will be assigned as the ambassador of his country to Baghdad in anticipation of the Arab summit. The summit is due to be held in Baghdad in March.

Rais added that Iraq "does not object" if the Saudi ambassador works in Baghdad or from the Jordanian capital Amman.

Riyadh has not yet explained the reason for its lack of diplomatic representation in Baghdad, despite the fact that the majority of US forces who toppled Saddam Hussein's regime crossed the western and southern parts of Saudi soil to reach Iraq.

Iraq-Saudi relations cooled down after the 2003 US-led invasion. Relations between the two countries reached a climax between 1980 and 1988 when Saudi was the most influential

supporter of Iraq in its war against the Shiite-ruled Iran.

<http://aknews.com/en/aknews/4/291292>

- **Bahaa al-Araji discuss with Jordanian Ambassador preparation for the Arab summit .**

Head of Ahrar parliamentary bloc within the Sadrist Trend MP, Bahaa al-Araji, discussed with the Jordanian ambassador in Baghdad, Mohamed Tayseer the importance of preparations for holding the Arab summit in Baghdad .

A statement by Ahrar media office said: "It was also discussed during the meeting in the seriousness of the situation in the Arab region in addition to finding ways of cooperation between Iraq and Jordan."

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

- **Parliament starts its 24th session .**

Parliament started today its 24th session of the current legislative term

headed by Speaker Osama Nujaifi with 220 deputies attended the meeting.

The agenda of the meeting including reading the report of the Finance Committee about the federal budget for 2012 and the first reading of third amendment of the law of the Central Agency for Standardization and Quality Control.

The meeting also includes a second reading of the draft law amending the Penal Code and the second reading of the bill to exempt farmers and peasants borrowers of the benefits of previous loans"

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

- **Minister of Human Rights calls on EU countries to facilitate harboring Iranian Mujahidin Khalq members .**

Human Rights Minister Mohammed Shyaa called on EU countries to facilitate harboring Iranian Mujahidin Khalq members .

According to a statement by the Ministry today: "Shyaa met ambassador of the European Union in Baghdad, Ms. Jana Hapaschkova who praised the effort made by the Ministry of Human Rights in transferring hundred of members of the Iranian (PMOI) from / Camp Ashraf I in Diyala province to / Camp Liberty / near Baghdad international airport.

From another hand and in response to a question by the Ambassador about the of the death penalty, Shyaa said the sentences issued after taking into account accuracy of the legal proceedings that accompanied proving the sentences, explaining that "all the death sentences issued against those convicted of crimes of mass murder and crimes of prejudice to national security and peace.

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

## 2. IRAN

### • UN watchdog 'denied access to key Iran site'

IAEA head says Tehran refused to allow its inspectors to visit the Parchin weapons development complex.



The International Atomic Energy Agency has said that its team visiting Iran was denied access to a military site where the UN watchdog suspects activities related to the country's nuclear programme could be taking place.

The head of the IAEA said on Wednesday that Iran had not accepted a request for its inspectors to visit the Parchin facility, a weapons development complex south of Tehran.

"It is disappointing that Iran did not accept our request to visit Parchin during the first or second meetings," said Yukiya Amano, the IAEA's director general. "We engaged in a constructive spirit, but no agreement was reached."

"Intensive efforts were made to reach agreement on a document facilitating the clarification of unresolved issues in connection with Iran's nuclear programme," the IAEA said in a statement.

The visit, led by Herman Nackaerts, the Vienna-based agency's chief inspector, was the second in less than a month and was aimed, the IAEA said, at clarifying all "outstanding substantive issues" surrounding Tehran's nuclear programme, in particular what it called "possible military dimensions."

Ali Asghar Soltanieh, Iran's envoy to the IAEA, was quoted by the Iranian news agency ISNA as saying the talks had been intensive and covered "co-operation and mutual understanding between Iran and the IAEA".

"These negotiations will continue in the future," Soltanieh said.

The trip was also seen as an important precursor to a possible resumption of talks between Iran and the P5+1 powers, the United States, China, Russia, France, Britain and Germany, which broke down in Turkey 13 months ago.

An IAEA report in November said that Iran had carried out activities in a number of areas "relevant to producing" a nuclear weapon. Iran denies it is seeking to develop nuclear weapons and said the report was based on forgeries.

Since its publication, the US and the European Union have stepped up sanctions on Iran's oil sector amid speculation that Israel could be preparing to launch a pre-emptive attack on Tehran's nuclear sites.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/02/201222202920481596.html>

- **Iran not seeking atomic bomb, supreme leader says after unsuccessful IAEA visit**

Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei insisted on Wednesday that his country is not seeking an atomic weapon, following an unsuccessful visit to Tehran by U.N. nuclear watchdog officials.



“We are not after an atomic weapon. We want to break the supremacy (of the world powers) that relies on nuclear weapons. God willing, the nation will reach this goal,” he told a meeting with Iranian nuclear scientists, according to an official government statement.

“Despite what the enemy (the West) says, nuclear energy is directly linked to our national interests,” Khamenei said, urging the scientists to “continue the important and substantial” nuclear work.

Khamenei's reiteration of Iran's longheld stance came after a five-strong delegation from the U.N.'s International Atomic Energy Agency left Tehran empty-handed following two days of talks focused on suspected military aspects of Iran's nuclear program.

The U.N. nuclear inspector heading the team, Herman Nackaerts, said on his return to Vienna the Iranians had not permitted the team to visit a military site in Parchin where apparently non-peaceful activities had been detected.

He also said “we could not formalize the way forward,” signaling that the delegation left with no further talks scheduled.

The IAEA named Parchin in a detailed report in November that lent independent weight to Western fears that Iran was working to develop an atomic bomb, an allegation Iranian officials reject.

The IAEA delegation was to submit its new report, “then we will have to see what are the next steps,” Nackaerts said.

The outcome seems likely to add to already soaring tension between Iran and Western powers, which have ratcheted up sanctions on the major oil producer in recent months.

No agreement, no further discussions Iran’s envoy to the IAEA, Ali Asghar Soltanieh, was quoted by the Iranian news agency ISNA as saying Tuesday that the talks had been intensive and covered “cooperation and mutual understanding” between the two sides.

Soltanieh added that Tehran expected to hold more talks soon.

But IAEA spokeswoman, Gill Tudor, made clear no further meetings were planned: “At this point in time there is no agreement on further discussions,” she said.

Iran rejects accusations that its nuclear program is a covert bid to develop a nuclear weapons capability, saying it is seeking to produce only electricity.

But its refusal to curb sensitive atomic activities which can have both civilian and military purposes, and its track record of years of nuclear secrecy has drawn increasingly tough U.N. and separate U.S. and European punitive measures.

The United States and Israel have not ruled out using force against Iran if they conclude diplomacy and sanctions will not stop it from developing a nuclear bomb.

#### Military nuclear technology

Last year’s IAEA report suggesting Iran had pursued military nuclear technology helped precipitate the latest rounds of European Union and U.S. sanctions, which are causing economic hardship in Iran ahead of a parliamentary election in March.

One key finding was information that Iran had built a large containment chamber at Parchin southeast of Tehran in which to conduct high-explosives tests, which the U.N. agency said were “strong indicators of possible weapon development.”

The IAEA said intensive efforts were made to reach agreement in the talks on a document “facilitating the clarification of unresolved issues” in connection with Iran’s nuclear program, particularly those relating to possible military dimensions.

“Unfortunately, agreement was not reached on this document,” it said in an unusually blunt statement.

In interviews late last week, diplomats told The Associated Press that Iran is poised to install thousands of new-generation centrifuges at the cavernous facility. That would mean that Iran would have the capability of enriching to weapons-grade level much more quickly and efficiently that

with its present, less efficient mainstay machines.

The IAEA mission’s lack of progress may also have an impact on the chances of any resumption of wider nuclear negotiations between Iran and the six world powers, the five permanent members of the Security Council plus Germany.

The West last week expressed some optimism at the prospect of new talks, particularly after Iran sent a letter to EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton promising to bring “new initiatives”, without stating preconditions.

But the United States and its allies may become more reluctant if they feel that the Islamic state is unlikely to engage in substantive discussions about its nuclear activities.

The deputy head of Iran’s armed forces was quoted on Tuesday as saying Iran would take pre-emptive

action against its enemies if it felt its national interests were endangered.

“Our strategy now is that if we feel our enemies want to endanger Iran’s national interests, and want to decide to do that, we will act without waiting for their actions,” Mohammed Hejazi told the Fars news agency.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/02/22/196215.html?PHPSESSID=13119pesivh0cfev5knace8tp5>

- **Russia welcomes resumption of Iran-5+1 talks**

Moscow, Feb 22, IRNA – Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman Alexander Lukashevich said Moscow welcomes Iran’s readiness to resume talks with the 5+1 and regarded it as an important step towards settling Iran’s nuclear issue through diplomacy.



Addressing a press conference on Wednesday, he said Iran has repeatedly announced its readiness for negotiations with the 5+1 on its nuclear program.

He hoped the talks would start as soon as possible.

On the current visit to Iran of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors, he said such visits are of high importance.

He stressed that Iran has always cooperated with the IAEA and will continue to do that.

<http://irna.ir/News/Politic/Russia-welcomes-resumption-of-Iran-5-1-talks/80000534>

### 3. SYRIA

- **'Journalists killed' in Homs shelling**

Activists warn of humanitarian crisis as two foreign journalists reported to be among latest killed in Bab Amr assault.



Two foreign journalists have been killed in Homs, activists say, as shelling of a district of the Syrian city continued amid warnings of an escalating humanitarian crisis.

Nine other people were also reportedly killed on Wednesday in shelling which struck a building used by activists as a media centre, an activist told Al Jazeera. A photographer was also said to be seriously wounded.

One of the slain reporters was an American woman and the other a French citizen.

"We can't even enter the area or the building where the media office is," Abu Jafar, an activist in the city, told Al Jazeera. "There's still heavy bombardment."

Government forces bombarded the Bab Amr neighbourhood for a 20th straight day, according to activists, and fears were growing of a humanitarian crisis in the area.

Hadi al-Abdallah, an activist in Homs, described the humanitarian situation in Bab Amr as "catastrophic" on Wednesday morning.

"Water has been cut off from Bab Amr for 18 days," he told Al Jazeera. "There's no electricity, cooking oil or even bread. Many people are literally on the brink of starvation.

"People have fled their homes in fear of being bombed. They took refuge in a mosque, and there they were bombed too."

#### Shortage of medicine

The Homs Revolutionary Council reported a shortage of medicine, and said a large number of killed civilians were buried under the rubble of buildings damaged in the shelling.

In the nearby Inshaat neighbourhood, the council said security forces, supported by the army and by armoured vehicles, had carried out house raids and arrests.

Bab Amr is a stronghold of the armed opposition, but activists say most of those killed in the assault on the area are civilians.

The Local Co-ordination Committees says about 3,000 people have been killed in Homs province since the uprising began in March last year. The activist network says more than 8,000 people have been killed nationwide.

Official media said government forces were targeting "armed terrorist groups who have been terrifying citizens and attacking security forces and robbing public and private property".

State-run news agency SANA cited residents of Homs saying food and services were available and that reports claiming the opposite were "lies".

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/02/201222291445322238.html>

- **Shelling of Homs resumes as U.S. signals possibility of arming Syrian opposition**

Syrian forces resumed the shelling of Baba Amro neighborhood in Homs on Wednesday for the 20th day as the United States appeared to open the door to eventually arming Syria's opposition, saying that if a political solution to the crisis was impossible it might have to consider other options.



The comments, made by officials at both the White House and the U.S. State Department on Tuesday, marked a shift in emphasis by Washington, which so far has stressed a policy of not arming the opposition and has said little about alternatives.

The U.S. comments came as Tuesday's death toll hit 106 people, who were shot dead by the fire of Syrian security forces, Al Arabiya reported, citing Syrian activists.

The deaths took place within two massacres; the first was in Idlib, where as many as 55 people were killed, while the second was reported in Baba Amro in the city of Homs, where 49 people were killed, activists at the Syrian Revolution Commission told Al Arabiya. The death included 10 children and 3 women.

In the besieged Baba Amro neighborhood, which has been under the Syrian forces' shelling for the past 18 days, a prominent activist and photographer was shot dead on Tuesday, Al Arabiya reported.

Ramy al-Sayyed, who was credited for circulating the video footages showing the massacres taking place in Baba Amro by the Syrian forces to TV channels along the past months, was

killed while trying to shoot one of those videos.

"What is happening in Baba Amro is mass killing. I reject when people sympathize with us by saying 'we are supporting you with our hearts'. What is needed is for people to protest in front of embassies," Ramy said minutes before he was shot dead, his companions told Al Arabiya.

The Red Cross called for daily ceasefires to allow in urgently needed aid.

"We still believe that a political solution is what's needed in Syria," White House spokesman Jay Carney said.

"We don't want to take actions that would contribute to the further militarization of Syria, because that could take the country down a dangerous path. But we don't rule out additional measures."

Asked if the United States was shifting its stance on arming the rebels, U.S. State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said Washington did not want to see the violence increase and was concentrating on political efforts to halt the bloodshed, according to Reuters.

“That said ... if we can't get Assad to yield to the pressure that we are all bringing to bear, we may have to consider additional measures,” she said, declining to elaborate.

The official comments on Tuesday followed a cautious assessment from General Martin Dempsey, chairman of the U.S. military's Joint Chiefs of Staff, who told CNN over the weekend that Washington still did not know enough about Assad's opponents.

“Until we're a lot clearer about who they are and what they are, I think it would be premature to talk about arming them,” Dempsey said.

Friends of Syria

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton will meet representatives of some 70 countries in Tunis on Friday for the first “Friends of Syria” meeting to coordinate the international community's next steps in response to the nearly year-long uprising against Assad.

The trip is “part of our ongoing efforts with our friends, allies and the Syrian opposition to crystallize next steps to halt the slaughter of the Syrian people and pursue a transition to democracy in Syria,” the State Department said in a statement, according to AFP.

The United States and its allies hope the Tunis conference will allow them to begin drawing up a plan for Syria after Russia and China vetoed a Western-backed Arab League peace plan at the U.N. Security Council.

With both Russia and Iran firmly backing Assad's government, political analysts say tacit U.S. support for arming rebel fighters could be risky given Syria's complex ethnic and

religious make-up and strategically important position.

“Force employed by the Friends of Syria should be the last step of an escalatory ladder,” Robert Danin, a Middle East expert at the Council on Foreign Relations, wrote in an opinion piece on Tuesday.

“Arming the Free Syrian Army and other opposition groups may eventually help topple Assad, but it also increases the potential for a fractured or failed state.”

A Syrian opposition figure who managed to get into Homs appealed for international help.

“The sound of bombardment and sniper fire are echoing across the city,” Moulham al-Jundi, a member of the Syrian National Council, told Reuters from Homs.

“The army prevents first aid or medical supplies from going in and electricity is cut off 15 hours a day. There has been

no mobile phone service for three weeks,” said Jundi, who lives in exile in Saudi Arabia and was smuggled into Homs.

“Civilians need safe zones and a way has to be found to ensure that medicine and basic supplies reach Homs. There are no hospitals, no schools, no work, no government departments open and most shops are shut.”

Opposition to meet Red Cross officials  
A delegation from the Syrian National Council, the main Syrian opposition grouping, is due to meet Red Cross officials in Geneva on Wednesday.

Since Feb. 11, Red Crescent and ICRC teams have managed to enter the cities of Homs, Bludan, al-Zabadani and Madaya to provide humanitarian relief, according to AFP.

Rights groups say more than 6,000 people have been killed in the regime’s crackdown which began in March last year.

Activists' accounts of the violence could not be independently verified. The government bars most foreign journalists from Syria.

Official media said government forces were targeting "armed terrorist groups who have been terrifying citizens and attacking security forces and robbing public and private property."

The Alawite minority, an offshoot of Shiite Islam, have dominated Sunni majority Syria for the last five decades. Under Assad, who is an Alawite, members of his clan have extended their control on key sectors of the economy, such as oil, telecom and state procurement.

After months of a military crackdown, armed opposition to Assad has emerged along with street demonstrations, especially in the suburbs of Damascus and the provinces of Homs and Aleppo, all joined by the main highway connecting the north of the country to its south.

Anti-Assad protests have also hit the capital over the past week, undermining Assad's assertion that the uprising against his rule is limited to the provinces and is the work of saboteurs.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/02/22/196206.html?PHPSESSID=13119pesivh0cfev5knace8tp5>

- **Syria Sends Letters to ICRC, UN, HRC Refuting Misleading Provocative Campaign on its Health Sector**

DAMASCUS, (SANA) – In response to the misleading and provocative campaigns carried out by suspected organizations and channels, Syria on Wednesday sent messages to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), United Nations (UN) and the Human Rights Council (HRC).

In these messages, Syria pointed out that the Syrian government gave priority to its health sector in order to provide free health services to all its citizens through 124 public hospitals

and 1919 health centers in addition to 387 private hospitals.

The messages outlined that the health institutions affiliated to the Health Ministry provided more than 30 million services and received about 4.5 million persons in the last 9 months, adding that the health centers have provided more than 24 million services.

The messages stressed that several external sides are insisting on using the health sector as a tool to achieve political ends, adding that the health sector suffered heavy losses in lives and materials as the armed terrorist groups targeted hospitals, health centers and medical and paramedic staffs.

The messages added that "For example, armed terrorist groups targeted al-Naimi Hospital in Homs and looted its equipment. 15 doctors and paramedics were martyred, 27 paramedics were injured by armed terrorist groups while trying to

transport wounded citizens to hospitals."

The messages added that there are organized kidnapping operations against doctors, paramedics and ambulance vehicles, adding that 129 ambulance vehicles were sabotaged, 17 hospitals were partly destroyed and some hospitals, such as al-Qsair Hospital in Homs, were looted.

The messages pointed out that the unjust sanctions imposed by the USA and some Arab and European countries resulted in a shortage of some medical equipment and materials.

The messages stressed that despite the aforementioned losses, workers at the health sector are continuing providing services to citizens within the available capabilities.

The messages also stipulated that Syria, despite those losses, stresses its right to protect its citizens adding that Syria is committed to the

comprehensive reform program despite all external attempts at hindering them.

Concluding the letters, Syria condemned the unilateral procedures and sanctions imposed by some countries, condemning that criminal acts targeting the health institutions and medical staffs.

Syria held the external sides, which are funding and arming the armed terrorist groups with the aim of targeting the infrastructure institutions, including public and private hospitals, health centers and paramedic staffs, responsibility for these acts.

<http://sana.sy/eng/337/2012/02/22/401990.htm>

#### 4. ISRAEL-PALESTİNE

- **Jerusalem Mufti condemns marathon as Judaization**

Sheikh Mohamed Hussein, the Mufti of Jerusalem, warned of the political undertones of holding a marathon in

the disputed city and accused Israeli occupation of using a sports event to further the Judaization of the occupied territories.



“The marathon is one more attempt by Israeli occupation to erase the Arab identity of Jerusalem,” Hussein, who is also the imam of al-Aqsa Mosque, said in a statement.

The Jerusalem Marathon, he added, is not a sports event but another political tool to prove Israel’s dominance in the city, especially its predominantly Arab neighborhoods.

“The same will be later applied to all Palestinian territories.”

Hussein called upon Palestinians inside and outside the Occupied Territories as well as all activists who support the Palestinian cause to intervene to end

the Israeli Occupation's policy of devising all possible means to deny the existence of Palestinians.

“Efforts on the official, diplomatic, and sports levels should be made to prevent this from happening.”

Despite wanting to erase all traces of any non-Jewish identity from Jerusalem, Hussein said, Israel is still using Islamic and Christian holy sites to promote the marathon.

“They use the Aqsa Mosque, the Dome of the Rock, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, and other holy sites in East Jerusalem as part of the propaganda for the marathon to give the world the impression that all those places belong to Israel.”

Hussein also expressed his reservation to using the name of Jerusalem in the marathon and which makes it officially an Israeli city.

The Popular National Council for Jerusalem also condemned the

marathon and objected to its planned route.

The marathon, the council explained in a statement, will go right through the Old City as runners will enter from Jaffa Gate and will exist from Zion Gate.

The marathon, the statement added, will also pass by the Arab neighborhood of Wadi al-Joz and Sheikh Jarah and will reach the borders of the town of al-Issawiya, which Israel wants to seize to build a national park.

The council agreed with the mufti as far as using sports for political gains is concerned and called upon all Arab and foreign activists and rights organizations to declare solidarity with the Palestinian people and to condemn the Judaization of Jerusalem.  
<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/02/22/196294.html?PHPSESSID=13119pesivh0cfev5knace8tp5>

- **Obama to address pro-Israel lobby meeting; U.S. aide says sanctions on Iran need time**

U.S. President Barack Obama will address the annual conference of the pro-Israel lobby group AIPAC on March 4, one day before meeting Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the White House said Tuesday, as a top Obama aide assured Israel's leaders that there is still time for diplomacy to keep Tehran from getting a nuclear weapon.



"The president welcomes this opportunity to speak to the strengths of the special bonds between Israel and the United States," said spokesman Jay Carney.

Netanyahu was also to deliver a speech at the meeting of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) lobby on the evening of March 5, after meeting Obama, according to AFP.

U.S. politicians often flock to AIPAC to gain backing and air their pro-Israel positions -- with the November election approaching, this year's event is set to be even more hotly political than usual.

In his address to the group last year, Obama pledged to stand by the Jewish state through thick and thin, stressing Washington's "ironclad" commitment to Israel's security.

His upcoming talks with Netanyahu comes amid rising tensions with Iran, and with increased speculation over whether Israel is planning to attack Iranian nuclear facilities.

The U.S. leader was also expected to address the state of U.S.-backed peace talks between Israeli and Palestinian negotiators, after several rounds of exploratory meetings have failed to spark a move back to direct talks.

Meanwhile, a top aide to Obama told Israel's leaders this weekend that

there is still time for diplomacy to keep Tehran from getting a nuclear weapon, the White House said on Tuesday, amid growing concerns that Israel might resort to a preemptive strike.

National security adviser Tom Donilon told Israeli officials that Washington shares their concern about Iran's nuclear push but also stressed the need to let sanctions work, White House spokesman Jay Carney said, according to Reuters.

"We certainly understand the heightened concern that Israel has given its geographic location and other circumstances that are involved here for Israel," Carney told reporters, discussing Donilon's visit and the White House view on Iran's ambitions.

"Having said that, we believe that the approach this administration has taken has resulted in a level of consensus within the international community regarding Iranian behavior that has never been attained before that's resulted in a level of punitive sanctions

that have never been attained before ... and that that has had an impact," he said. "We believe that there is time and space to attempt to resolve this peacefully."

Iran says its nuclear program is meant to develop energy, not weapons.

But its recent shift of uranium enrichment to a mountain bunker and refusal to negotiate guarantees that the program is peaceful have raised security fears -- particularly in Israel -- and also stoked concerns about Gulf oil supplies.

Donilon was the latest in a series of high-level U.S. officials who have traveled to Israel in recent weeks to impress U.S. concerns over any attack on Iran.

James Clapper, the U.S. Director of National Intelligence, said last week he would soon visit Israel to discuss intelligence sharing.

General Martin Dempsey, chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, who traveled to Israel last month, acknowledged in a weekend television interview that the two long-time allies have divergent views of the best course of action on Iran.

“I’m confident that (Israel’s leaders) understand our concerns that a strike at this time would be destabilizing and wouldn’t achieve their long-term objectives,” Dempsey told CNN. “I also understand that Israel has national interests that are unique to them. And, of course, they consider Iran to be an existential threat in a way that we have not concluded that Iran is an existential threat.”

Speculation has been growing that Israel may attack Iran’s nuclear facilities to set back the Islamic Republic’s weapons progress. However, the head of the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, Lieutenant General Ronald Burgess, told Congress last week that U.S. intelligence

agencies believe Israel has not made a decision to strike.

It is widely believed that an outside attack on Iran would drive up oil prices, endangering the U.S. economy and perhaps even Obama’s chances for re-election. Obama, who has been criticized by Republican presidential candidates for being soft on Tehran, could come under pressure to back Israel in whatever action it took.

Dempsey, the top U.S. military officer, said in the CNN interview that a military strike on Iran would be premature because it is unclear Tehran will actually use the nuclear capabilities to build an atomic bomb.

He said he was confident Israel knew that this was the U.S. attitude, but stopped short of suggesting that the Americans had persuaded the Israelis that it was best not to attack Iran.

On Tuesday, Carney repeated the White House took no options off the table in how to resolve the standoff

but offered no details of what is being considered.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/02/22/196262.html?PHPSESSID=13119pesivh0cfev5knace8tp5>

## 5. AFRICA

### • **Egypt court rules parliament vote system unconstitutional**

An Egyptian court has ruled that the voting system that elected the new parliament was unconstitutional, creating a fresh source of uncertainty as Egypt tries to set up a governing system a year after Hosni Mubarak was toppled.



Judge Magdy al-Agaty of the High Administrative Court said the elaborate system that apportioned seats among individuals and political parties violated the constitution. He referred parts of the election law to

the Supreme Constitutional Court for a final judgment.

It was not immediately clear if the ruling could eventually lead to courts overturning the results of the elections, which were held over three stages from late November to January.

Egyptian politicians speculated that the ruling could hold up the functioning of parliament, which is supposed to name a council to draw up a new constitution.

Egypt has been ruled by the military since Mubarak stepped down. The new parliament is dominated by Islamist parties and also contains a sizable number of liberals. Its primary task is to pick a 100-member council to draw up a constitution to pave the way for presidential elections.

The parliamentary election, hailed as Egypt's freest vote in decades, was held under an elaborate system under which a third of seats were allocated

to individuals and two thirds to political parties.

Agaty said this ratio violated the constitution and half of seats should have been reserved for individuals. He also said parties should not have been permitted to field candidates for the seats reserved for individuals.

“The court views that allowing political parties to run for independent seats violates the principles of constitutional equality and has doubtful constitutionality,” Agaty said in the ruling, which was handed down on Monday and released on Tuesday.

Confusion over the election law lasted until the eve of the vote, which took place over a staggered three-stages. Parties haggled to guarantee they could field candidates for the seats reserved for individuals in the 498-member assembly.

Lawyer Gamal Eid told Reuters the ruling reflected ambiguity in Egyptian law. The ruling council has suspended

use of the text of the Mubarak-era constitution, but has also occasionally relied on its wording for decisions.

“The entire situation is a reflection of the complicated legal situation. You are in some ways following the old constitution and in others following an interim text,” he said.

“Anyone who tells you the legal situation is clear is lying. No one is doubting the fairness of the vote, but what is being raised now is the procedures which it followed,” he added.

Egyptian politicians and officials were weighing the impact of the ruling. Mohammed ElBaradei, former U.N. nuclear watchdog chief who has pulled out of the presidential race in objection to how the army council has managed the transition, wrote on twitter: “How can this parliament choose a committee for the constitution before hearing the ruling from the court?”

Under Mubarak, the Supreme Constitutional Court used similar arguments to rule election laws illegal in 1987 and 1990, forcing the dissolution of parliament, overhauls of the electoral system and early elections.

Eid said he expected the Supreme Constitutional Court to create a new constitutional principle that would effectively approve the voting process, in light of the circumstances of the election.

“There is no way to tell, but I expect the court to allow parliament to continue working and in the process set in stone a new constitutional principle,” he said.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/02/22/196232.html?PHPSESSID=13119pesivh0cfev5knace8tp5>

- **British PM says Somalia should be enjoying its own Arab Spring**

Somalia should be enjoying an Arab Spring of its own but its al-Shabaab

insurgents are fomenting jihad both in and out of the country, British Prime Minister David Cameron said Wednesday.



Speaking on the eve of an international conference on Somalia being held in London, Cameron said the terror threat emanating from the Horn of Africa country “if we are not careful, could get worse.”

World powers gather in London on Thursday for the conference, with recent glimmers of hope overshadowed by a litany of woes including al-Qaeda-linked militants, piracy and famine.

“Al-Shabaab has just taken the step of linking itself specifically with al-Qaeda: that is a desperately backward step,” Cameron told the BBC’s Somali service.

“Clearly there are young people who take up arms in Somalia. We need to say to those people, ‘don’t do that, give up that path.’ You are joining an organization that is now an international terrorist organization.

“Instead, let us give this country and its young people the hope of a job and a voice.”

“We could see it all across north Africa, the prospects of an Arab Spring, where people actually start to have more of a say in their country and how it’s run, and that should be the case in Somalia as well as in the Arab world.”

A British fighter with Al-Shabaab was killed last month during a drone attack in the capital Mogadishu. The Royal United Services Institute think-tank estimates that around 50 Britons are among their ranks.

Speaking of the danger posed by al-Shabaab, Cameron said: “The security threat is real; it is substantial.”

Al-Shabaab “encourages violent jihad not just in Somalia but also outside Somalia.”

“And there is a very real danger of young British Somalis having their minds poisoned by this organization. So there is a terrorist threat that is current today, and if we are not careful, could get worse.”

Meanwhile Oxfam, the British-based aid and development agency, called on the conference participants to meet immediate needs rather than focusing on anti-terror concerns.

In its report entitled “A Shift in Focus -- Putting the Interests of Somali People First,” the non-governmental organization said state-building and military interventions had been exacerbating the country’s humanitarian crisis.

“It is time for a new vision of engagement that meets Somalis’ immediate and future needs, while providing the space for a negotiated

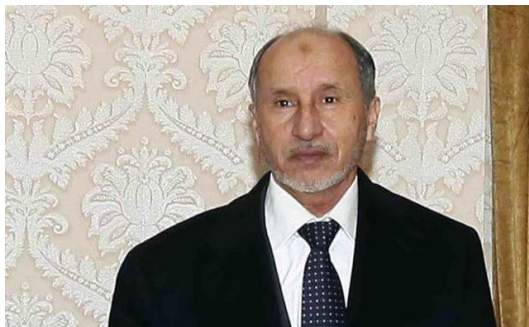
peace process that puts Somalia on the road to recovery,” said Oxfam chief executive Barbara Stocking.

“Those attending the London Somalia conference must seize this opportunity and help start the process to address the causes of the conflict in Somalia and put the interests and aspirations of the Somali people center stage.”

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/02/22/196224.html?PHPSESSID=13119pesivh0cfev5knace8tp5>

- **Libyan leader acknowledges mistakes in post-Qaddafi era**

Libya’s leader has acknowledged that his transitional government is powerless to control militias that are refusing to lay down their arms after ousting Muammar Qaddafi as it struggles to impose control over the oil-rich North African nation.



In a wide-ranging interview Tuesday with The Associated Press, Mustafa Abdul Jalil warned that remnants of the former regime also still pose a threat and it will take years for Libya’s new leaders to overcome a “heavy heritage” of corruption and distrust after more than four decades of Gadhafi's rule.

Abdul Jalil said the governing National Transitional Council has made mistakes, but he also criticized former rebels who have formed powerful militias and local governments that have emerged as rivals to the Tripoli-based central government that assumed power after Gadhafi was ousted.

“Both are to blame,” he said. “The governmental program to integrate the militias is slow and the revolutionaries don't trust it.”

Libya is celebrating the first anniversary of the Feb. 17 start of the revolution last year when peaceful anti-government protesters took up

weapons in the face of a deadly crackdown by Qaddafi's forces against their rallies. Libya declared liberation after Qaddafi was captured and killed in October and is getting ready for national assembly elections in June. The new assembly will form a government and set up a panel to draft a constitution.

However, the country has been plagued by revenge attacks by those who suffered at the hands of Qaddafi's forces during the brutal civil war. Human rights groups have documented reports of widespread torture and killings of detainees.

Hundreds of armed militias that fought against Qaddafi's forces are the real power on the ground in the country, wielding control over cities, neighborhoods and borders while the transitional government has been unable to rein in fighters, rebuild decimated institutions or stop widespread corruption.

Underscoring the turmoil, some 50 civilians have been killed in the past 24 hours in tribal warfare in southern Libya, witnesses said Tuesday. But there were conflicting accounts about the cause of the conflict.

Abdul Jalil said Qaddafi's regime loyalists were "seeding sedition" in Kufra but declined to elaborate on which of the tribes are connected to the former regime.

Salem Samadi, who heads a revolutionary militia and has tried to mediate a truce between the two sides, blamed the outbreak of violence on a fight over smuggling.

Abdul Jalil, 60, who has led the NTC since it was formed in opposition, said Libyans need years to overcome a culture of corruption, mistrust and build state institutions and rule of law.

"What Qaddafi left for us in Libya after 40 years is a very, very heavy heritage," he said, speaking in his office in Tripoli. "It is very heavy and

will be hard to get over it in one or two years or even five years.”

He also said that Qaddafi’s relatives and loyalists remain a danger because they are hosted by countries that don't have control over them. He didn’t name the countries but said that Libya’s future relations with neighbors will be determined by how they respond to Libyan demands to hand over former regime forces on their territories.

As the Libyan capital of Tripoli fell to rebel forces, Qaddafi’s daughter, Aisha, her mother and two of her brothers fled to neighboring Algeria, while another son al-Saadi and dozens of senior military officers went to Niger.

“We have to take a strong stance with neighbors,” he said.

Libyan officials were angered earlier this month when al-Saadi Qaddafi, who Niger says is under house arrest, warned in a television interview that

his homeland was facing a new uprising. Qaddafi’s son told Al Arabiya in a telephone interview that supporters of his father’s ousted regime “are suffering tremendously” in Libyan prisons at the hands of the country’s new rulers. He also said his return to Libya was imminent.

Abdul Jalil also said that Qaddafi loyalists have infiltrated revolutionary forces and even formed their own militia.

“We call them the revolutionaries after the revolution,” he said.

With regard to the upcoming national assembly elections, Abdul Jalil said the council will issue a new law banning foreign funding for political parties. Islamists in Libya have been linked to oil-rich gulf country of Qatar, which was a favorite exile for top Libyan Islamists, including those from the Muslim Brotherhood.

“Within 10 days, we will issue rules ... banning receiving funds from outside

the country,” he said. Abdul Jalil has said he won’t run in the presidential race or seek a future political role.

Abdul Jalil, who was justice minister under Qaddafi when he defected to the rebels’ side, said the NTC has been paralyzed by the need for consensus in decision making and that has stopped it from carrying out much-needed reforms.

“We committed many mistakes,” he said. “Democracy and taking votes to make decision in many, many incidents led us to these mistakes,” he said. “My vote as someone who entered the council last year is considered equal to a vote of a member who joined the council this February.”

Abdul Jalil enjoys a great amount of popularity in Libya, but he has increasingly been criticized for lacking leadership skills and the inability to take decisive measures.

Mohammed Abdullah, a leading member of Libya National Salvation

front, a longtime opposition movement that is transforming itself into a political party, said that was true of all members of the NTC.

“The way the NTC is run is just similar to the old regime with no vision,” he said.

Despite his complaints about the inability to rein in armed fighters, Abdul Jalil paid homage to the sacrifices of fighters in cities that suffered most during the revolution, particularly Misrata.

He said the failure to seriously investigate Qaddafi-era war atrocities as well as the absence of police and courts has left the door open for individuals to take matters into their own hands. Even families who were not linked to Qaddafi regime but fled during the war have been tagged as traitors and forced to leave their houses when they returned.

“Misrata suffered the most, more than any other city but it is also going too

far in enmity and expulsions,” he said.  
“Dealing with victorious soldiers is much harder than dealing with the ones defeated.”

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/02/22/196222.html?PHPSESSID=13119pesivh0cfev5knace8tp5>

- **Egypt’s court to set date for issuing final verdict in trial of Mubarak, sons, aides**

Egypt’s Cairo Criminal Court on Wednesday will set the date for issuing the verdict in the trial of former president Hosni Mubarak, his two sons Alaa and Gamal, former interior minister Habib al-Adly and six of his aides, who are accused of graft as well as killing protesters during the January 2011 uprising.



More than 850 people were killed in the uprising that forced Mubarak to step down on Feb. 11, 2011. A military

council has been ruling the country since then.

Mubarak is the first Arab leader to be put on trial by the people in modern history.

The date of the verdict is expected to be announced by Judge Ahmed Refaat, head of the Cairo Criminal Court, who is the presiding judge in the famous trial, dubbed as “Trial of the Century.”

The court on Tuesday refused to consider a lawsuit demanding the referral of Refaat, to a disciplinary board, Egypt’s daily al-Masry al-Youm reported on Wednesday.

The lawsuit was filed by a lawyer named Mostafa Ghoneim, who said Refaat admitted Mubarak to the courtroom lying on a bed with his feet facing the judges and the lawyers, which he considers an insult.

According to the report published by al-Masry al-Youm, Ghoneim also said that Refaat allowed Former Interior

Minister Habib al-Adly to sit alone on the front bench inside the court cage with his assistant behind him as if he still holds his rank, and that he did not separate the case of demonstrators' deaths from the case of squandering public funds.

The court said it has no jurisdiction to refer judges to disciplinary boards, an issue that is in the hands of the justice minister and not the State Council, which handles disputes between citizens and state institutions.

The court listened Monday to the prosecution's final case and the civil rights plaintiffs on the arguments raised by the defense in the case.

Attorney General Moustafa Suleiman said that that slander and fabrication, either intentionally or unintentionally, by the defendants' lawyers in Mubarak's trial over the last month is against the law and requires legal action, a report carried out by the Daily News of Egypt said.

Suleiman said in his closing remarks that the former president should be given the death penalty, saying he authorized the use of live ammunition and a shoot-to-kill policy against peaceful protesters.

"This is not a case about the killing of one or ten or 20 civilians, but a case of an entire nation," he told the court, according to the newspaper report.

He explained that there are more than 1,500 witnesses who agreed that the police attacked demonstrators, and that it was impossible for the prosecution to reach the original perpetrators – the police officers – as they were distributed over the squares and in the middle of large crowds.

"We hope that someone's conscience is awoken and the unknown principal perpetrators are reported, but this doesn't mean that the defendants will escape punishment," he was quoted as saying by the Daily News of Egypt.

As for accusing unidentified foreign elements and the security of the American University in Cairo (AUC) of killing protesters, Suleiman said that the investigation did not reach any of these elements, adding that the only role Hamas and Hezbollah played was smuggling their kin after storming Egyptian prisons.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/02/22/196218.html?PHPSESSID=13119pesivh0cfev5knace8tp5>

- **More than 100 people killed in south Libya clashes**

Fierce clashes between two tribes in Libya's remote southeastern desert have killed more than 100 people over the past 10 days, tribal sources said on Tuesday.



At least 113 people from the Toubu tribe and another 23 from the Zwai tribe have been killed in the town of

Kufra since fighting erupted on February 12, the sources said.

“We are under siege since a week. Since the start of the clashes, 113 people (from our side) have been killed, including six children,” Toubu chief Issa Abdelmajid told AFP by telephone.

He said another 241 members of his tribe have been wounded.

Abdelmajid, a former opponent of Moamer Qaddafi who fought the slain dictator's forces in last year's conflict, was previously tasked by the ruling National Transitional Council with monitoring Libya's southeastern border.

At least 23 people from the Zwai tribe have also been killed and another 53 wounded in the clashes, said sources from Zwai tribe.

A Zwai source said of those killed three died in new clashes on Tuesday, while 13 others were wounded.

“People from the Toubu tribe are being helped by foreign elements from Chad and Sudan. We have arrested several Chadian and Sudanese fighters,” said Yunus Zwai, spokesman for Kufra local council.

At first, both groups used light arms, but eventually started firing rocket-propelled grenades and anti-aircraft guns, local sources said.

“I appeal to the international community to intervene and stop these clashes which are aimed at exterminating my tribe,” said Abdelmajid.

“We tried calling the NTC but it has not responded,” he added.

NTC spokesman Mohammed al-Harizi told AFP that Libyan thuwar (anti-Qaddafi revolutionaries) were heading to Kufra on Tuesday.

“The thuwar are moving there to secure the southern border, to ensure

that there are no foreign elements entering Libya and to secure the town of Kufra,” Harizi said without confirming the casualties but adding that the situation remained “critical.”

On Monday he told Libya’s official LANA news agency that the situation in Kufra was “not calm.”

“There is an armed conflict between certain members of the society there in which several have been killed and wounded,” Harizi said.

An NTC source, on condition of anonymity, said control of lucrative smuggling routes was at the root of the conflict.

Zwai, meanwhile, said those fighting members of his tribe were not Libyan Toubu tribesmen, but “foreign elements.”

“There is an invisible hand in the fighting. The Libyan Toubu are safe in their homes,” he said.

Members of the Toubu tribe are dark-skinned and present in southeastern Libya as well as in Chad, Sudan and Niger.

Kufra, with a population of about 40,000, is located in a triangle sharing borders with Egypt, Chad and Sudan. The Toubu tribe faced discrimination under Qaddafi's regime.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/02/22/196198.html?PHPSESSID=13119pesivh0cfev5knace8tp5>

## 6. THE ARABIAN PENINSULA

### • Officials claim high turnout for Yemen vote

Officials say 60 per cent of voters participated in election set to confirm vice president Hadi as Yemen's new leader.



Vote counting is under way in Yemen, a day after a presidential election that

is expected to confirm Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi, the current vice president, as the country's new leader.

Electoral officials said on Wednesday that voter turnout reached 60 per cent nationwide, despite threats of violence and boycott calls in some parts of the Arabian peninsula nation.

Votes are being counted manually and results are expected within two days, although they can take up to 10 days under Yemeni law.

Hadi, the 66-year-old former deputy to Yemen's long-time leader Ali Abdullah Saleh, was the lone candidate in the elections as part a US-backed one-candidate election.

Saleh agreed to step down after months of anti-government protests and clashes across the violence-wracked country.

More than 10 million Yemenis were eligible to vote in the referendum-like election.

The poll was marred by violence with 10 people killed across the country's south, most of them in the port city of Aden.

The voting percentage was low in most of the country's south with turnout running at 50 per cent in Aden and between 30 to 40 per cent across other southern regions, officials said.

Al Jazeera's Hashem Ahelberra, reporting from the capital Sanaa, said that any turnout upwards of 35 per cent was considered "very good news" for Hadi, enabling him to claim legitimate authority as he seeks international support for his leadership.

The election was backed by the Common Forum parliamentary opposition and youth groups who had led the uprising against Saleh.

However, two major opposition groups, the Southern Movement as

well as northern Shia rebels, boycotted the polls.

Political role for Saleh?

Al Jazeera's Ahelberra said: "Basically Yemenis are looking for two things: Starting of a new nation from the scratch to lay the ground for new political establishment where the rule of law, democracy, pluralism and free elections would become part of a ritual here."

"At the same time they would like the president to address the dire economic situation as Yemen remains one of the poorest countries in the world," he said.

"They would also like this government to provide job opportunities and improving the living standard.

"The international community, particularly the US, the neighbouring countries and the GCC are saying, they are willing to provide Yemeni government with cash and with political support to move forward."

Mohammed al-Qadhi, Yemeni correspondent for Emirati newspaper, National, told Al Jazeera that deposed president Saleh was planning to make a comeback.

"Spokesman of Saleh party said that former president is definitely coming back so that he can participate in the inauguration of the new president," al-Qadhi said.

"He also said that Saleh was going to lead the party and that there was nothing in the GCC deal that prevented him from running again in coming elections.

"But he said that Saleh is not ready for any other post and will help in creating leaders of the future."

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/02/20122229166354908.html>

## 7. AFGHANISTAN-PAKISTAN

### • India, Pak extend deal on cutting risk of nuke weapon accidents

New Delhi, Feb 22, IRNA -- India and Pakistan Tuesday announced they have extended the tenure of the Reducing the Risk from Accidents Relating to Nuclear Weapons Agreement for another five years.

The two countries decided to extend the validity of the agreement aimed at reducing risk from accidents related to nuclear weapons after it ended yesterday.

The decision was in line with an understanding reached during the sixth round of bilateral expert-level talks on nuclear confidence-building measures held in Islamabad on December 27, 2011.

'In accordance with Article 8 of the Agreement between the Republic of India and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan on Reducing the Risk from Accidents Relating to Nuclear

Weapons of 21 February 2007, both countries have agreed to extend the Agreement for another period of five years,' the Ministry of External Affairs said in a statement in New Delhi.

The agreement had come into force on February 21, 2007, for an initial duration of five years. The existing validity was up to 20 February 2012.

'It aims at reducing the risk from accidents related to nuclear weapons,' the Pakistan Foreign Office said in a separate statement issued in Islamabad, pti reported.

During the talks held in December, India and Pakistan decided to move forward on proposals to extend two key agreements related to pre-notification of ballistic missile tests and reducing the risk from accidents related to nuclear weapons.

The two sides reviewed a range of existing nuclear and conventional CBMs and discussed proposals for additional measures in areas where

the two countries could make forward movement.

A proposal for an agreement to prevent 'incidents at sea', involving naval vessels of the two countries, also came up during those talks.

The talks on nuclear and conventional CBMs were part of the peace process that resumed last year after a gap of over two years in the wake of the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks which were blamed on Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba.

<http://irna.ir/News/Politic/India,-Pak-extend-deal-on-cutting-risk-of-nuke-weapon-accidents/30830147>

*\*This media summary is prepared by  
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