



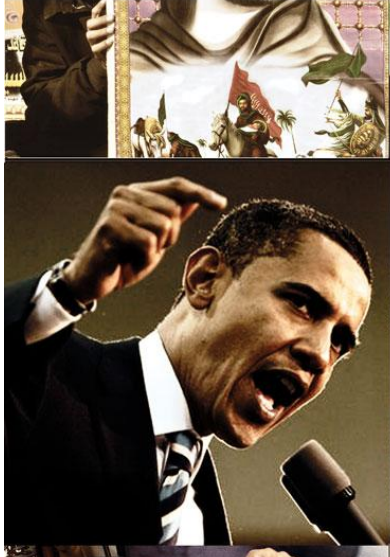
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ORTADOĞU STRATEJİK ARAŞTIRMALAR MERKEZİ
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EASTERN STRATEGIC STUDIES

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





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**MIDDLE EAST BULLETIN
GÜNLÜK ORTADOĐU BÜLTENİ
09 AUGUST / AĐUSTOS 2010**

CONTENTS / İÇİNDEKİLER

1. IRAQ / İRAK

2. IRAN / İRAN

3. ISRAEL - PALESTINE / İSRAİL – FİLİSTİN

4. EGYPT / MISIR

5. LEBANON / LÜBNAN

6. SYRIA / SURİYE

7. ARABIAN PENINSULA AND THE GULF OF BASRA / ARAP YARIMADASI VE BASRA KÖRFEZİ

8. SOUTH ASIA / GÜNEY ASYA

PAKISTAN / PAKİSTAN

INDIA / HİNDİSTAN

AFGHANISTAN / AFGANİSTAN

1. IRAQ / IRAK

- The death toll from explosions at a market in Iraq's second-largest city has risen to 43, Iraqi officials said Sunday, adding that as many as 185 people were also wounded in the blasts.

The new casualty figures from Saturday's explosions were released by Dr. Salah Abid, a spokesman for the emergency room at the health center in the southern port city of Basra.

An official in the city's morgue also put the number of bodies, some of which were badly burned, at 43. The morgue official spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to the media.

The scores of wounded were taken to at least four hospitals in Basra, which is located 340 miles (550 kilometers) southeast of Baghdad.

It's still not clear what caused the explosion. Two police officials, both speaking on condition of anonymity, said a roadside bomb and a car packed with explosives were the source of the blasts. But Basra Police Chief Adil Daham said the explosions were caused by a malfunctioning power generator.

In other violence Sunday, a car bomb exploded near a school and a cluster of stores in the former insurgent stronghold of Fallujah west of Baghdad, killing two people and injuring four. (Ashraq Alawsat)

- London, Ashraq Al-Awsat- Iraqi Interior Minister Jawad al-Bulani said that the terrorist attacks, which were carried out in the Al-Azamiyah Neighborhood of Al-Rasafah in Baghdad last week and in the Al-Mansur Neighborhood of Al-Karkh two days ago, were "attempts by terrorists to prove their presence."

He added: "Whenever the Iraqi security agencies defeat and tighten the grip on them, the terrorists carry out criminal actions against security agency personnel and civilians." He noted that these attacks are "a natural result of the situation in Iraq, given the imminent withdrawal of the US forces and the delay in forming a government."

Speaking to Asharq Al-Awsat from Baghdad by telephone, Al-Bulani said: "The latest two operations in Al-Azamiyah and Al-Mansur were part of the terrorists' attempts to impede the US forces' withdrawal plans."

He added: "These attacks came after our security agencies carried out qualitative operations based on intelligence plans against terrorists. Leading terrorists in the so-called Islamic State of Iraq were arrested during these operations, and the investigation of these leading figures helped us dismantle terrorist cells and arrest many of their members."

The Iraqi interior minister said: "The terrorists thought that withdrawal of the US forces and the delay in the efforts to form a government would serve as an opportunity for them to undermine the security situation that recently stabilized." He added: "The delay in the efforts to form a government will have many consequences that will lead to limited terrorist operations."

Al-Bulani, leader of the Iraqi Unity Alliance bloc, which consists of Iraqi politicians, Sunni and Shiite Arabs, Kurds, and non-Muslims, said: "A speedy action to form a government will be an important factor in deterring terrorism and organized crime in Iraq." He noted: "Security stability does not mean only security agencies, training, and equipment. Rather, it is associated with the general political and economic situation and services in Iraq."

Al-Bulani explained: "Formation of a new government will reinforce security capabilities a great deal and help stabilize the situation in the country because every new government seeks to assert its capabilities and presence."

He said: "Besides, the formation of a government means that there is a powerful parliament, a presidency of the republic, and firmly established institutions. This situation will make the citizens feel stability and will send a powerful message to the terrorists indicating that there is a powerful state that can deter them."

He added: "Formation of a government also means a stable Iraqi economy, investments, and jobs for the unemployed. These large numbers of the unemployed, the citizens' sense of hopelessness and need, and absence of services are all favorable circumstances for the terrorists and for the growth of the gangs of organized crime."

He continued: "On the opposite side, improvement of the political and economic situation and services will create a large number of jobs for the unemployed and will make people respect the law. Therefore, we believe that the next government's battle will be development and assertion of the need for development and construction projects, which require sincere efforts by devoted competent Iraqis."

Asked to what extent the US forces' withdrawal will affect the security situation in Iraq, Al-Bulani said: "The US forces' withdrawal will take place according to a definitive timetable under the Iraqi-US security agreement, and the aim behind the latest terrorist attacks was to confuse these plans."

He added: "The US forces will withdraw according to plan, and I am not absolutely sure that their withdrawal will have no effect on the security situation. This is because the terrorists will take advantage of these circumstances and of the delay in the formation of a government in order to find a way to attack security agency personnel and kill civilians. However, our plans that are based on reliable intelligence information face and confront the terrorists' plots."

Commenting on the Iraqi security agencies' preparedness to fill the vacuum that will be left by the US forces, Al-Bulani said: "The US forces withdrew from the streets of Iraqi cities long ago, and their task now is support and planning. When the US forces commander asserts that the Iraqi security and military forces are ready, we consider his

statement a testimony that our security agencies and forces enjoy field experiences that enable them to impose security and confront the terrorists and gangs of organized crime."

The Iraqi interior minister said: "If we go back to the terrorist attacks that were carried out during the years 2006 and 2007, we will find that 200 attacks were carried out and that 25-30 of them had an impact, while around 15 terrorist attacks were carried out this year and only three of them had an impact."

He added: "I am talking about attacks in Iraq as a whole, not only in Baghdad. The reason behind this decrease in the number of terrorist attacks is the training that the personnel of our security forces receive and these forces' high-level professionalism. Yet, we will need the remaining US forces' efforts for the purposes of training and consultation. Besides, our forces need equipment and advanced armament, and this is contingent on the formation of a new government."

Al-Bulani praised the level of security cooperation with some of the states that neighbor Iraq, "especially Saudi Arabia with which there is security coordination on the exchange of information and criminal cases."

He said: "Our battle against terrorism is a joint one, and stability of the security situation in Iraq is important to the neighboring states, especially Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia too suffers from the problem of terror and terrorists. God willing, we will agree on joint formulas to eliminate terrorism, as Iraq is an important state to the region and to security in the neighboring states."

With regard to the Iranian interference in Iraqi internal affairs, Al-Bulani said: "We are able to confront any foreign interference in the security situation. However, what is required is political immunity and prevention of interference in political issues, particularly in the formation of a government. We are confident that our politicians are able to take decisions in a high national spirit."

Al-Bulani called for the need to expedite the efforts to form a government because this will create a sense of trust between the political regime and the people who made sacrifices and behaved in a high spirit during the elections.

He said: "The security agencies too made sacrifices and created a favorable climate to hold successful elections. The need for a peaceful rotation of power must be asserted. Failing that, the citizens will have no confidence in any political regime and, therefore, will not turn up to vote in coming elections." (Ashraq Alawsat)

- Al-Qaeda in Iraq has begun offering cash to lure back former Sunni allies angry over the government's failure to give them jobs and pay their salaries on time, according to Sunni tribesmen and Iraqi officials.

The recruitment drive adds to worries that the terror network is attempting a comeback after the deaths of its two top leaders in April and is taking advantage of a summer of uncertainty. The political stalemate in Baghdad is entering its sixth month after inconclusive elections, just as the U.S. military is rapidly drawing down its forces.

Al-Qaeda's strategy is to provoke the Shiite majority into launching revenge attacks — a development that could re-ignite open warfare, split the Iraqi security forces along sectarian lines and cement al-Qaeda's leadership role among Sunnis.

But if the extremists are unable to win back their former Sunni allies, it would be difficult for them to rebound as a significant threat — though al-Qaeda could continue to be a deadly nuisance for years to come.

Al-Qaeda's overtures in recent weeks are notable because its militants have killed hundreds of former allies over the past two years, setting off blood vendettas between the Sunni extremist group and others in the Iraqi Sunni community. Many former insurgents also disliked al-Qaeda's imposition of a strict interpretation of Islam in areas under its control.

But tribesmen said the need for cash to feed their families is pushing some lower-ranking former al-Qaeda in Iraq members to rejoin the terror group — and that al-Qaeda's presence is growing in Anbar province west of the capital.

"The government must help us counter the resurrection of al-Qaeda in Anbar," warned Mahmoud Shaker, an influential tribesman from the province's Habbaniyah district.

Others warned that the recruitment could help al-Qaeda gain ground elsewhere in Iraq.

"I expect that if salaries continue to be paid late, Sahwa members will themselves seek to rejoin al-Qaeda," said Rafia Adel, referring to the Sunni tribesmen who turned against al-Qaeda and sided with the U.S. military and the government. Adel is a senior Sahwa leader from the city of Beiji in Salaheddin province.

Al-Qaeda is also exploiting continuing resentment by the Sunnis over their second-class status in Iraq since the fall of Saddam Hussein — particularly in Baghdad, which had been a Sunni-dominated city for 1,000 years.

The 2006 and 2007 revolt by Sunni tribesmen against al-Qaeda dramatically changed the course of the war. Former insurgents were organized into Awakening Councils, or Sahwa, to help U.S. and Iraqi troops fight al-Qaeda.

The U.S. military initially supervised and paid the salaries of the Sahwa fighters, whose numbers peaked to about 100,000 in 2008. The Iraqi government took over the Sahwa from the Americans last year, agreeing to give at least 20 percent of the fighters police and government jobs and to pay the rest to maintain security in Sunni areas. Other fighters simply returned to their old jobs.

Nowadays, the government pays the salaries of its estimated 650,000-strong police and army on time, including the estimated 20,000 Sahwa fighters who have been assimilated into the security forces.

But the remaining fighters on the government payroll go without their checks, in some cases for as long as three months. The government cites lack of funds or bureaucratic snags for the delays.

Another Sahwa complaint is that the government detained scores of its leaders on terrorism charges last year. Although most detainees were released — often because of U.S. pressure — the arrests were seen as a humiliation.

Exploiting these grievances, al-Qaeda operatives are approaching disgruntled Sahwa members with cash offers and telling them the government's repeated failure to pay their wages on time is helping al-Qaeda's recruitment drive, according to four senior Sahwa leaders — two in the Baghdad area and two in the mainly Sunni provinces of Anbar and Salaheddin.

They said al-Qaeda was in most cases offering to top by \$100 or more the average monthly salary of a Sahwa member, which ranges between \$250 and \$300.

"Al-Qaeda is spending a great deal of money to win back members of the Sahwa," Adel said.

Al-Qaeda in Iraq is thought to fund itself through private donations from sympathetic businessmen and charities in the Arab world and, increasingly, the robbery of banks, money changers and jewelry stores in Iraq. It is also rumored to be involved in kidnap-for-ransom operations.

U.S. officials believe al-Qaeda in Iraq no longer has ties to the overall al-Qaeda leadership, believed to be in Pakistan.

A senior Iraqi security official said he was aware of al-Qaeda's overtures to Sahwa members, adding that cash offers came in letters and messages sent through intermediaries to tribal chiefs in charge of Sahwa groups across Iraq. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to the media.

A Sahwa leader in southern Baghdad said al-Qaeda carefully chooses the time it approaches Sahwa members with cash offers, often targeting groups owed months of back pay to exploit their anger and need for money.

"It is during those times that we as leaders offer our men money to help them until their back pay arrives," said the leader from Dora, a former al-Qaida stronghold. He spoke on condition of anonymity out of fear for his safety.

It is unclear to what extent al-Qaida's drive has been successful so far, but it appears that the extremists have had some luck in luring low-ranking, cash-starved fighters — as well as those nursing other grudges against the Shiite-led government — but not, for the most part, influential tribal chiefs.

Ironically, some fighters may be drawn to al-Qaida simply because the government has failed to protect them from their attacks. And in some cases, al-Qaida is suspected of targeting the very people it is trying to recruit — as in a July 18 bombing that killed dozens of Sahwa members gathered to collect back pay outside an army base in Radwaniya, a Sunni suburb of Baghdad.

For now, analysts say al-Qaida's strength in Iraq is limited.

"The group is still more akin to a terrorist outfit than the vanguard of a broad-based popular insurgency," said Michael W. Hanna of the Century Foundation in New York.

Peter Harling, of the Brussels-based International Crisis Group, said that while al-Qaida has shown an enduring capacity to stage spectacular attacks, it remains a "fringe movement."

"Its real strength, during its heyday, derived from its prominent position within a much wider insurgency," he said. (Ashraq Alawsat)

- Nouri al-Maliki, the Iraqi prime minister, is in Irbil for talks with Kurdish leaders in his latest bid to build a coalition government and remain in his post as prime minister.

Al-Maliki will meet with Massoud Barzani, the president of Iraq's semi-autonomous Kurdish region, to "discuss ways to solve problems and form a new government," according to Barzai's spokesman.

Iraqi politicians have spent more than five months haggling over the next government, with no resolution in sight.

Maliki called the delay a "problem" in a recent interview, but denied that the political stalemate was having a negative impact on security or the economy.

"Yes, I am part of the problem, but I didn't create the problem," he said in an interview with the Reuters news agency. "I want to solve the problem."

Al-Maliki wants to serve a second term as premier, but his chances diminished greatly last week when the Iraqi National Alliance (INA), one of Iraq's two main Shia blocs, suspended talks with his State of Law coalition.

Ammar al-Hakim, the head of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq - one of the largest parties in the INA - said he would not negotiate with State of Law unless it nominated someone other than al-Maliki for the premiership.

Moqtada al-Sadr's party, the other main heavyweight in the INA, has already rejected a second term for al-Maliki.

Al-Maliki told Reuters he was now in "serious and strong talks" with the rival Iraqiya bloc, led by former prime minister Iyad Allawi. Iraqiya won the largest number of seats in the March parliamentary election.

"We don't want to exclude them from coalition formation. They should come and take their share if we form the government," he said.

The INA, meanwhile, said it was willing to talk with any bloc that "displays flexibility," suggesting it would be willing to negotiate with Allawi's coalition.

Despite al-Maliki's assurances, security in Iraq is indeed deteriorating: Iraqi ministries reported that 535 people were killed in July, making it the deadliest month since May 2008.

Sistani is a revered figure who rarely intervenes in Iraqi politics [AFP]

US officials say privately that they are concerned the political deadlock will lead to deepening insecurity.

The US magazine Foreign Policy reported last week that Barack Obama, the US president, sent a letter to Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the most senior Shia cleric in Iraq, asking him to get involved in the process.

A source described the letter to Foreign Policy as "a request for his intervention in the political situation to use his influence with the Shia groups and get them to compromise."

Al-Sistani is a widely respected figure in Iraq. He rarely intervenes in politics, although his spokesman hinted earlier this summer that the cleric might become involved if negotiations dragged on. (Al Jazeera)

- Iraq's military is ready and able to take over security operations as the United States ends its combat role and prepares for a major troop withdrawal, the commander of U.S. forces in Iraq said Sunday.

Gen. Ray Odierno said Iraq's military has "stepped up" to the challenge even as Iraqi politicians continue to squabble over the formation of a new government and new incidents of extremist violence are reported.

"We do believe they are ready to assume full operations in Iraq," Odierno said on ABC's "This Week." He praised the Iraqi security forces for their professionalism and neutrality during the months of political uncertainty that followed elections earlier this year.

Odierno added, however, that it is critical for Iraq to form a government after five months of delay, warning that insurgents will try to take advantage of the political vacuum.

"The Iraqis have to understand the importance of forming the government," he said.

Violence has dropped dramatically in Iraq since 2008, but insurgent attacks remain a daily occurrence, especially in the capital Baghdad, preventing the city from regaining a semblance of normalcy seven years after the insurgency broke out.

Still, violence has spiked over the past month as the U.S. moves ahead with a major drawdown of its troops to be completed by the end of August, when only 50,000 will remain in the country.

Odierno acknowledged that there were "ups and downs" but spoke of a "broad change in the security environment" as Iraqi security forces with U.S. assistance move against insurgents.

"I think they can handle it," he said. (Al Arabiya News Channel)

- Iran more than any other foreign state is meddling to fill a void in Iraqi politics five months after a general election left the war-wracked nation without a new government, a poll said Saturday.

The poll carried out by the Asharq Research Centre, a private Iraqi company, was a representative nationwide sample of people aged 18 and above in the country's 18 provinces.

Asked about the present political hiatus which appears to show no immediate prospect of resolution, 41.2 percent of 12,000 people questioned said Tehran was hindering Iraq's chances of establishing a new government in Baghdad

In comparison, 31.5 percent of respondents pointed the finger at the United States, 11.6 percent at Gulf states, and 8.9 percent at Saudi Arabia. Turkey (5 percent) and Syria (2.3 percent) were also blamed for interfering.

Iraq has been governed since 2005 by Shiite-majority rule since the U.S.-led invasion that two years earlier toppled the Sunni-dominated regime of now executed dictator Saddam Hussein.

Saddam's opponents and many of those that make up the current caretaker government in Baghdad, including Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, spent years in exile in Shiite-led Iran during Saddam's reign.

The U.S. invasion seven years ago ushered in an upheaval that ended more than 80 years of Sunni rule in Iraq.

For 38.3 percent of those questioned in person across the country, the delay in setting up a government was explained by a power struggle, while 19 percent blamed foreign intervention.

Former prime minister Iyad Allawi's Iraqiya bloc finished first in the March 7 election with 91 seats, with Maliki's State of Law alliance winning 89.

Both, however, fell short of a ruling majority in the 325-seat parliament and coalition negotiations with other parties have stalled, although neither leader conceded defeat and they remain locked in a battle for the top job.

Asked who would make the best prime minister, 35.5 percent of respondents said Maliki, compared with 25.5 percent who opted for Allawi, according to the poll which had a five percent statistical margin of error. (Al Arabiya News Channel)

- The senior official of Kurdistan Parties Coalition Mahmoud Othman confirmed that Grand Ayatollah Ali Al Sistani received a letter from US President Barack Obama at the time of US Vice President Joseph Biden to Iraq.

In a statement to Alsumaria, Othman said the fact that Al Sistani's office did not deny or comment proves indirectly that Al Sistani received a letter from the US President.

Al Sistani might interfere to support efforts deployed to form the government, yet, not in response to Obama's letter. (Al Sumaria Satellite TV)

- Leader of Iraqiya slate, Iyad Allawi, expressed readiness to withdraw his nomination for the post of Prime Minister, but at the same time he said that he will not give up Iraqiya's rights of its election results.

In an interview on Saturday evening, Aug. 7, with the semi official Iraqiya Satellite Channel, Allawi said that Iraqiya holds to its rights obtained as reflected in the ballots, which conform to the principles of democracy.

He accused the Federal Court of confusing the political scene through adopting a baseless opinion that no constitution in, the world adhere to, creating a state of chaos and confusion over Iraqiya's right to form a government.

Allawi announced that a document is being discussed to draw Iraq's political future by all political entities, including the State of Law Alliance.

He accused the current government of delaying in forming a government through holding to power and not abiding by the principle of peaceful rotation of power.

Allawi denied that there is a project to share power with the State of Law Alliance; pointing out that the project of a government of national partnership in which power must not be concentrated in the hands of one person. (NINA)

- The leader within the Iraqiya Slate Salih al-Mutleg warned that “The IS will have reactions on next days and would not stand still in case it was deprived from its rights in forming government.”

“The Slate would not allow any part to neglect electoral and constitutional merits of the Slate in forming government and it will practice its rights through going on to form the cabinet,” he stated to the National Iraqi News Agency.

“The rights of the Slate came from the voters who supported the IS to change the bad situation of the Iraqi People,” he added, noting that “The Slate will stand against all the parts who intend to marginalize Iraqi voter’s will.”

He stressed that “Neglecting constitution will open the way for more violations that would more complicate the issue of forming government.”

Everybody should realize the dangers of delaying the government formation, he concluded. (NINA)

- President Jalal Talabani arrived on Saturday afternoon, Aug. 7, in Sulaymaniya coming from Baghdad.

A statement issued by the President’s Office said that at hand in Sulaymaniya Air port were a number of Kurdistan region’s officials to welcome Talabani. (NINA)

- Khalid al-Attiya, a leading member of the National Coalition, paid a visit to top Shiite cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani at his office in Najaf to discuss the government formation crisis, according to a media source in the province on Saturday.

“Attiya paid a visit to Grand Ayatollah Sistani to discuss the crisis facing formation of a new government and also recent political developments,” the source told Aswat al-Iraq news agency.

He did not give further details.

The visit comes one day after U.S. President Barack Obama sent a message to Sayyed Sistani in which he urged him to intervene to settle the crisis facing Iraq to form a government, according to a source close to Sistani’s office in Najaf.

Other sources, however, declined to comment on Obama’s message. (Aswat Al Iraq)

- A delegation of the Kurdistan blocs will arrive in Baghdad on Saturday to start official negotiations with the Iraqi blocs to form the government, a well-informed source said on Friday.

“The delegation will return to Baghdad on Saturday (Aug. 7) to start official negotiations with al-Iraqiya Alliance, Dawlat al-Qanoon and the Iraqi National Alliance to form the new government,” the source told Aswat al-Iraq news agency.

The political chessboard in Iraq has been experiencing non-stop differences among the key blocs that won seats in the March 2010 legislative elections over the premiership and the government formation, namely between Maliki’s Dawlat al-Qanoon (State of Law) and former Premier Iyad Allawi’s al-Iraqiya bloc.

Several parliament sessions were postponed while the set constitutional deadline to election a new speaker and a president of a republic was breached.

The elections saw al-Iraqiya winning 91 seats, followed by Maliki's State of Law with 89 seats, the Iraqi National Alliance (INA), which comprises Ammar al-Hakim's Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council (SIIC), Muqtada al-Sadr's Movement and Fadila (Virtue) Party, with 70 seats and the Kurdistan Alliance (KA) with 57 seats.

The results prompt coalitions of several parties to guarantee a required majority at the 325-seat parliament in order to form a government. (Aswat Al Iraq)

2. IRAN / İRAN

- Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on Thursday hosted a mini-summit with his Afghan and Tajik counterparts, Hamid Karzai and Emomali Rakhmon, and denounced the deployment of foreign troops in Afghanistan.

"Our security is linked. We suffer from what is happening in Afghanistan from an emotional and security point of view," Ahmadinejad said as the three leaders signed two cooperation accords in Tehran.

"The Afghan question must be resolved within the region, and experience has shown that others are unable to solve problems in the region, as they have been unable to do in Iraq," he said of the United States and its allies.

It was the fourth gathering between the tripartite group of Afghanistan, Iran and Tajikistan, which with a combined population of 110 million people share the Farsi language and Persian culture.

Kabul has good relations with Tehran despite being heavily reliant militarily and financially on the United States, which has been at loggerheads with the Islamic republic for decades.

Secret US military documents posted on whistleblower website WikiLeaks suggest that Iran provides hefty support to insurgents fighting US-led troops in Afghanistan. Ahmadinejad has denied the allegations.

In a joint statement on Thursday, the three presidents pledged to boost cooperation in transport and business as well as in "the fight against terrorism and drugs trafficking."

They also agreed Kabul would host their next round of talks. (Ashraq Alawsat)

- İslam İnkılabı Rehberi'nin Uluslar arası İlişkiler Danışmanı Ali Ekber Velayeti dün sabah Suriye Cumhurbaşkanı Beşar Esad ile görüştü.

Sana ajansının haberine göre, görüşmede ikili ilişkilerin yanı sıra, korsan İsrail'in özellikle Lübnan ve Filistin topraklarına son saldırılarına ilaveten bölgede başka ülkeleri hedef almada aralıksız süren tehditleri gölgesinde bölgenin gündem konuları ele alındı.

Irak'taki durumların da ele alındığı görüşmede, Irak halkının desteğini haiz olacak, Irak'ın yanı sıra bölge istikrarı ve güvenliğine olumlu yansımalarda bulunacak bir hükümetin derhal kurulması gereği belirtildi.

Suriye-İran Yüksek Karma Komisyonunun geçen Nisan ayında Şam'da düzenlediği toplantılarda ekonomi, ulaştırma, telekomünikasyon, bilişim, kültür, eğitim, yüksek öğretim, tarım, turizm, çalışma ve sosyal işler, yerel idare, içişleri ve enformasyon alanlarında işbirliğini öngören belgelere imza atılmıştı. (Mehr News Agency / MNA)

- İran İslam Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaşkanı Mahmud Ahmedinejad, terör rejimi İsrail'in Lübnan devleti ve halkını tehdide dayalı tutumuna karşı İran'ın Lübnan'ı desteklemeye devam edeceğini söyledi.

Tahran'da Lübnan Dışişleri Bakanı Ali eş-Şami'yi kabul eden Ahmedinejad, Lübnan'ın siyonist İsrail karşısında direnişini takdir ederek, Lübnan'ın terör rejiminin tehdidi karşısında en ön cephede yer alan bir ülke olduğunu ama başta İran olmak üzere İslam ülkelerinin desteğini aldığını söyledi.

Ahmedinejad, Lübnan'da birlik ve beraberliğin, aynı zamanda siyasi gruplar arasında mevcut koordinenin, düşmanın Lübnan ve bölge üzerindeki hesaplarını bozduğunu hatırlatarak, bu durumun direnişin ve bölge milletlerinin güçlenmesine vesile olduğunu kaydetti.

İran İslam Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaşkanı, terör rejiminin 2006'da Lübnan'a karşı başlattığı ve 33 gün süren savaşta aldığı ağır yenilgiye de temas ederek, "Bugün siyonistler Lübnanlı siyasiler ve Lübnan halkı arasında fitne çıkarmaya çalışmak suretiyle 2006'daki yenilgiyi telafi etmek istiyorlar. Ama, Lübnanlı siyasilerin uyanıklılığı, düşmanın bu arzusuna ulaşmasına engel olmanın yanısıra dengelerin Lübnan ve bölge halklarının yararına değişmesine vesile olacaktır" dedi.

Söz konusu kabulde Lübnan Dışişleri Bakanı Ali eş-Şami de, İran'ın Lübnan'a yönelik her türlü yardımına teşekkür ederek, Tahran ve Beyrut arasındaki ilişkilerin en üst düzeye çıkmasının zaruri olduğunu söyledi.

Eş-Şami, terör rejiminin iki hafta önce Lübnan'a açtığı son saldırıya karşı Lübnan ordusu, direniş güçleri ve halkın birlikteliğinin düşmanın oyununu bozduğunu ve aynı zamanda halk, ordu ve direniş cephesinin çok daha güçlenmesine vesile olduğunu söyledi. (MNA)

- Judiciary chief Ayatollah Sadeq Larijani made a strong criticism against President Ahmadinejad, saying it is expected that the president use a decent language and be fair in making judgments.

He said on Saturday, the day marking Journalist Day, some unfair statements were made against the Judiciary which “unfortunately” the president also took part in those discussions.

Larijani said it was said that Judiciary halts the issue of releasing jailed journalists or that a journalist is sentenced for writing something or that he is brought to court for many days and months.

It is not “so unexpected” if a reporter says an unrealistic story while it is not expected from the president, the Judiciary chief noted.

He said Judiciary is impendent since judges are independent in issuing rulings.

“Our path is law,” he insisted.

He also said there should be no room for insults in the society. (MNA)

- Iraq's envoy to Iran reminded his country's acute need for foreign investment, and called on the Iranian companies to boost their investments in the war-torn country.

Addressing a conference on Iran's investment opportunities in Iraq, Baghdad's Ambassador to Tehran Mohammad Majid Al-Shaikh said, "Iron and cement markets as well as supply of meat products to Iraqi people are (our) priorities for Iran's investment in Iraq."

The envoy reminded that Iraq imports most of its needed chicken meat and red meat from Brazil and Turkey, and added that Iraqi Muslims want such products to be imported from Islamic states, including Iran.

He also guaranteed high revenues for those Iranian companies and firms willing to make investments in Iraq's iron and cement markets.

During the conference, Iran's Deputy Minister of Agricultural Jihad Jafar Khalqani pointed to the production of 100 million tons of agricultural products inside Iran, and stated, "Iran has earned good capabilities in producing agricultural products and can transfer these experiences to the Iraqi companies."

Iran and Iraq have enjoyed growing ties ever since the overthrow of the former Iraqi dictator, Saddam Hussein, during the 2003 US invasion of the Muslim country.

Chairman of Iran's Expediency Council Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani had informed last year that impediments to the expansion of Iran-Iraq ties had been removed and the two nations could promote cooperation to further bolster their bilateral ties.

Also in April, Iranian First Vice-President Mohammad Reza Rahimi underlined the necessity for the expansion of economic exchanges between Tehran and Baghdad.

Speaking at meeting of Iran-Iraq joint economic cooperation committee here in Tehran, Rahimi said that the volume of economic exchanges between Tehran and Baghdad does not match the existing capacities of the two countries, and underlined the necessity for the further expansion of economic cooperation between the two neighboring countries.
(Fars News Agency / FNA)

- Iran's Defense Minister Brigadier General Ahmad Vahidi announced on Sunday that Iran has launched four home-built submarines in the country's southern waters earlier today in a move to protect security in the Persian Gulf.

"The chain of the country's defensive products was completed after the mass-production of these submarines and production of different rocket-launching frigates, and this capability (of our country) is at the service of peace, stability and security in the Persian Gulf and the Sea of Oman," Vahidi said, addressing an official ceremony held to mark the launch of the four Ghadir-class submarines.

Iran launched four light and advanced submarines today. The Ghadir-class submarines, made by the Defense Ministry's Marine Industries, officially joined Iran's naval fleet in an official ceremony attended by Vahidi and Commander of the Army's Navy Rear Admiral Habibollah Sayyari.

Vahidi further pointed to the specifics of the four submarines, and said, "In addition to rapid transfer of forces and detection of the enemy's surface and subsurface vessels, these submarines can identify military targets and carry special forces, while they also enjoy rapid swamp power and have radar (sonar) evading capability."

The Iranian minister described a modern torpedo-launching system mounted on the submarines as among their important features, and added, "The system enjoys high-precision in targeting."

Iran has been pushing an arms development program in recent years in a bid to reach self-sufficiency. It has produced its own jet fighters and armored vehicles as well as radar-avoiding missiles and other high-tech weapons.

Iranian officials have always stressed that the country's military and arms programs serve defensive purposes and should not be perceived as a threat to any other country.

Iran announced in June 2009 that a home-made submarine, named Ghadir 948, had joined the naval brigade of the first naval zone.

In November 2009, Iran announced that its first domestically built Ghadir class submarine launched operation.

The Iranian military said that the submarine can easily evade detection as it is equipped with sonar-evading technology and can fire missiles and torpedoes simultaneously. (FNA)

- Amerika'nın İran'a askeri saldırı ihtimalini Kabil muhabirimize değerlendiren İzedyar, mevcut şartlarda Amerika'nın, İran'a askeri saldırı gücünden yoksun olduğunu ve saldırı tehditlerinin sadece İran'ı müzakere masasına oturtmaya yönelik olduğunu kaydetti.

Afgan senatör, Amerika İran'a saldırma konusunda karar verebilecek konumda değil ve tüm bunlar müzakereler için, dedi ve ekledi: Eğer Amerika İran'a saldıracak olursa onları bölgede çok korkunç sonuçlar beklemektedir ve bu olumsuz sonuçlar bölge ülkelerini de etkileyecektir. (FNA)

- İran İslam Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaşkanı Mahmud Ahmedinejad, Ramazan ayı sonunda Lübnan'ı ziyaret edecek.

İran Dışişleri Bakanı Manuçehr Mutteki, Lübnan Dışişleri Bakanı Ali eş-Şami ile görüşmesinden sonra yaptığı açıklamada, "Cumhurbaşkanı, Ramazan ayının bitimini takiben en kısa sürede Lübnan'ı ziyaret edecek" dedi.

Mutteki, el-Şami ile görüşmesinde İsrail'in Lübnan'a saldırısının ele alındığını da belirterek, "İran, Siyonist rejimin tehdit ve saldırıları karşısında Lübnan ve Suriye halkı ve hükümetlerinin yanında yer almaktadır" ifadesini kullandı.

3 ülkenin bölgenin durumuyla ilgili daimi istişareler sürdürdüğünü sözlerine ekleyen Mutteki, "İran İslam Cumhuriyeti, kardeşlerinin her türlü talebine olumlu yanıt vermeye hazırdır" diye konuştu.

Eş-Şami de, İsrail'in saldırısının düşmanca nitelik taşıdığını belirterek, Tahran'ın Lübnan ve Suriye'ye desteğine teşekkür etti. (MNA)

- Lebanese Foreign Minister Ali al-Shami deplored the new UN Security Council resolution against Iran, and underlined Beirut's support for Tehran's inalienable right of access to civilian nuclear technology.

"We are completely aware of the Islamic Republic of Iran's legitimate right to use peaceful nuclear energy and we support it," Shami said in a meeting with his Iranian counterpart Manouchehr Mottaki here in Tehran on Sunday.

He described the recent UN Security Council resolution against Iran as cruel and unjust, saying intensification of sanctions against the country is an instance of the West's double-standard policies.

Despite the rules enshrined in the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) entitling every member state, including Iran, to the right of uranium enrichment, Tehran is now under four rounds of UN Security Council sanctions for turning down West's calls to give up its right of uranium enrichment.

Tehran has dismissed West's demands as politically tainted and illogical, stressing that sanctions and pressures merely consolidate Iranians' national resolve to continue the path.

Also during the meeting, Mottaki expressed pleasure in the growing ties between Iran and Lebanon in different political, economic and cultural spheres as well as in infrastructural projects, and urged for the continuation and increase of bilateral talks and consultations in different fields.

He also underlined that cooperation in trade, industries and infrastructural projects, specially in such areas as railroad and transportation and pipeline construction, would lead to long strides in the expansion of bilateral relations between Tehran and Beirut.
(FNA)

- Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki says that the imposition of a new war in the Middle East region would come at a high cost for the West.

“The imposition of war and the creation of conflicts in the region are no longer easy. The region has proven this over the past 10 years. This is no longer costless,” Mottaki said at a joint press conference with Lebanese Foreign Minister Ali Shami in Tehran on Sunday.

Through the imposition of several wars over the past three decades, the West has been seeking to drive a wedge between regional countries and intensify animosity, the Iranian foreign minister stated.

Afterwards, the Western powers benefited from selling weaponry to fight those wars and also reaped the profit of the reconstruction programs they conducted in the war-stricken areas, he added.

He said that he believes there might be a potential for another conflict in the region but stated that whether that potential becomes a reality is up to regional countries.

To avert a new war, “the first step is to foil their plots... and the second step is to send clear signals that the imposition of a new war would cause irreparable damage for them,” Mottaki noted.

On Israel’s recent attack on Lebanon, Mottaki said Iran strongly condemns the atrocity and added that the Lebanese government has a legitimate right to defend its sovereignty.

The Lebanese foreign minister criticized the United Nations troops deployed in southern Lebanon for their hesitation to act in a timely manner to avert the attack.

During a meeting with Mottaki before the press conference, Shami expressed his gratitude toward the Islamic Republic of Iran for supporting Lebanon’s Islamic resistance movement Hezbollah.

However, he criticized the international community’s double-standard policy toward Lebanon. (MNA)

- An economic figure representing the private sector says affairs must not be handed over to those extremists who seek to isolate Iran, insisting that opportunities must not be lost for dialogue.

Public diplomacy is of high significance in this regard, and the fact that the private sectors of other countries are interested to cooperate with Iran should be cherished, said Mohammad Nahavandian, the chairman of Iran Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Mines.

The recent anti-Iran sanctions indicate a new spate of economic pressure against the country, Nahavandian noted, warning that sanctions must not be downplayed and that plans must be to prevent losses.

Despite what the global powers claim sanctions will put pressure on people and will push prices up and increase unemployment, he explained.

Elsewhere in his remarks, Nahavandian noted that welcoming sanctions and inciting the enemies to mount pressure on the country are “not logical”.

He went on to say that it is a national duty to reduce the impacts of sanctions. (MNA)

- The Iranian ambassador to Afghanistan has said Tehran is not interested to hold talks with Washington about the current crises in Afghanistan.

In an interview published on ISNA news agency on Sunday, Fada Hossein Maleki said there has been no positive point in remarks made by U.S. President Obama so far so that Iran consider putting talks with the United States on its agenda.

“We have seen for many times that whenever Obama speaks of talks tomorrow he will take an action against Iran in the international arena with regard to Iran and nuclear issues,” Maleki said.

“We do not trust their remarks and stances, and of course the Americans are not trying to create a situation which can create confidence.”

Maleki was commenting on recent remarks by Obama that the U.S. is ready to hold talks with Iran over issues pertaining to Afghanistan and the region.

He said the presence of NATO and U.S. forces in Afghanistan has made the situation more convoluted.

He went on to say that the Afghans themselves can improve the situation in their country.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai called Saturday for the international community to stop supporting private security companies in Afghanistan, which he said have created parallel security forces in competition with police and army.

He also said foreign donors should help curb corruption by telling his government details about the reconstruction contracts they award.

Karzai spoke during a visit to the Afghan Civil Service Institute, which is training thousands of civil servants in Kabul and across the nation to bolster the capacity of the Afghan government. The president said that the recent international conference he hosted in the capital is proof that the government becoming stronger.

To help strengthen his government, the U.S. and NATO should eliminate private security companies, which Karzai said has created a security structure in Afghanistan that undermines the Afghan army and police.

"Afghan or foreign companies, there are some 30,000 to 40,000 people in these security companies," Karzai said. "They have created security problems for us, whoever is working in these private security companies, they are not working for the benefit of Afghan national interests. ... If they really want to be at the service of Afghans, they should join Afghan National Police."

The Afghan government has no oversight over the private security guards.

"Very urgently and seriously we want from the foreigners to stop creating private security companies," Karzai said. "We cannot tolerate these companies, which are like a parallel structure with our forces. We cannot have police, army and — at the same time — another force as private security companies." (MNA)

- Türkiye'nin İran büyükelçisi Ümit Yardım, Tahran-Ankara ilişkiler seviyesini en üst düzeyde olduğunu ve böyle kalacağını belirtti.

Yardım IRNA'ya yaptığı açıklamada, iki ülke arasında ilişkilerin son derece iyi bir düzeyde olduğunu belirterek, İran ve Türkiye'yi bölgenin iki önemli ülkesi olduğunu ifade etti.

Yardım, iki ülkenin tarihi ve kültürel çok sayıda ortak yönlerinin olduğunu belirttiği açıklamasında, ilişkilerin daha da geliştirilmesinin iki ülkenin coğrafi ve potansiyel gücü açısından zaruri olduğunu kaydetti.

İran'ın tarihi kentlerinden Çeharmahal ve Behdiyari eyaletini ziyaret eden Türkiye'nin İran büyükelçisi, halihazırda iki komşu ülke arasında ilişkilerin, siyasi, iktisadi, turizm, kültür ve diğer bir çok alanda çok iyi düzeyde olduğunu vurguladı. (IRNA)

3. ISRAEL - PALESTINE / İSRAİL – FİLİSTİN

- Israel's navy on Sunday fired warning shots towards a Lebanese fishing vessel in the Mediterranean, a military spokeswoman said.

"Warning shots were fired after a Lebanese fishing boat entered a closed zone," she said without confirming whether the boat had entered Israeli territorial waters.

After the shots were fired, causing no damage or injuries, "the Lebanese boat changed course," she added.

Relations between the two countries have been particularly tense since Tuesday when Israeli and Lebanese troops clashed along the border, in a deadly exchange of fire which killed two Lebanese soldiers and a journalist, as well as an Israeli officer.

The standoff was sparked when Israeli troops tried to cut down a tree on the border, prompting the Lebanese to open fire towards them. (Ashraq Alawsat)

- U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on Saturday named two veteran Turkish and Israeli diplomats to a panel that will investigate Israel's deadly May 31 commando raid on an aid flotilla.

Joseph Ciechanover, a former senior official at Israel's Foreign Ministry, will be the Israeli representative on the panel, while the Turkish member will be Ozdem Sanberk, a diplomat who held senior positions in the Turkish Foreign Minister and the United Nations.

Former New Zealand Prime Minister Geoffrey Palmer will be the chairman of the panel, with Colombian President Alvaro Uribe acting as vice chairman. The committee will hold its first meeting on Aug. 10 and expects to submit an initial progress report in mid-September.

Israel's May 31 attack on a Turkish aid flotilla attempting to break through the Israeli blockade of the Gaza Strip resulted in the deaths of nine Turkish pro-Palestinian activists and sparked international outrage.

The action led to a sharp deterioration in Israeli-Turkish relations and forced Israel to ease the blockade, which the Jewish state says aims to prevent Palestinian Hamas militants from acquiring the military capacity to attack Israel.

Ankara denounced the raid as a violation of international law, immediately recalled its ambassador and cancelled three planned joint military exercises with the Jewish state.

After reacting coolly to the idea of a U.N. investigation -- Israel has already completed its own military investigation and started a civilian one -- Israel eventually agreed to cooperate with an investigative panel set up by Ban.

The Obama administration strongly urged Israel to cooperate with the panel, diplomats in New York have told Reuters.

U.N. officials said that the panel will look at the circumstances of the raid and review the results of the Turkish and Israeli investigations, as well as consider ways to avoid similar incidents in the future.

Western diplomats, however, say privately that the panel's mandate remains unclear.

U.S. ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice infuriated Turkey this week when she issued a statement saying that the panel was "not a substitute for those national investigations" and its focus was "appropriately on the future."

The Turkish Foreign Ministry summoned the U.S. charge d'affaires in Ankara and expressed its irritation at what a Turkish official told Reuters was an "alternative interpretation" of Ban's investigative panel.

The 47-member Human Rights Council, which condemned the Israeli raid as an "outrageous attack" during an emergency session just days after the operation, has also decided to set up a commission of inquiry.

The panel is due to present its findings in mid-September. (Al Arabiya News Channel)

- United States President Barack Obama and British Prime Minister David Cameron agreed during a phone conversation Friday that Israel and the Palestinians should "move to direct talks as soon as possible," the White House said.

In a statement, the White House said Obama and Cameron discussed a range of international issues, including the British leader's visits to India and Turkey and his meetings with Pakistan's President Asif Ali Zardari.

"The president and the prime minister also discussed ongoing efforts to advance peace in the Middle East, and agreed on the need for the parties to move to direct talks as soon as possible," the statement said.

The Palestinians and Israelis have since May been holding indirect "proximity" talks, with former U.S. senator George Mitchell acting as an intermediary.

The two sides have not held direct negotiations since Israel launched a military offensive against Hamas fighters in December 2007.

Abbas has conditioned the resumption of direct negotiations on a complete Israeli halt to settlement building in the Palestinian West Bank.

Jews and Arabs, Meanwhile, marched shoulder-to-shoulder in occupied east Jerusalem and in towns across Israel on Friday in a joint protest against the eviction of Palestinians to make way for Jewish settlers.

In the Sheikh Jarrah residential neighborhood, close to the line between mainly Arab east Jerusalem and the Jewish west side, Israeli, Palestinian and foreign protesters rallied to mark one year since the clearances there began.

Avner Inbar of the Sheikh Jarrah Solidarity Movement told AFP that about 1,000 people took part and about the same number marched in Tel Aviv.

Eyewitnesses and media put attendance at about 500. Police could not be reached for their estimates on Friday evening, eve of the Jewish Sabbath.

The Sheikh Jarrah protests have become a regular event over the past year, but to mark the anniversary Tel Aviv was added and Inbar said there were smaller gatherings in the mixed Jewish-Arab city of Haifa, in Israeli Arab towns in central Israel and in the middle-class Jewish town of Raanana.

In the southern Israeli city of Beersheba there were about 100 demonstrators, he said.

In Jerusalem, marchers carried banners reading "Together we shall stop house demolitions" in English, Hebrew and Arabic. In Tel Aviv protesters held signs proclaiming "Let justice triumph in Sheikh Jarrah."

Israeli author David Grossman, a regular at the Jerusalem protests, said he hoped that all opponents of the evictions would continue to fight the policy.

"I hope that this is just the beginning," he told news website Y-Net.

Israel captured east Jerusalem in the 1967 Six-Day War and later annexed it in a move not recognized internationally.

It sees all of Jerusalem as its "eternal, undivided" capital and does not consider construction in east Jerusalem to be settlement activity.

The Palestinians want to make the east of the city -- home to some 200,000 Jewish Israelis and 268,000 Palestinians -- the capital of their future state.

Several Palestinian families from Sheikh Jarrah have been forced out of their homes since August 2009, on the grounds that the properties belonged to Jews before the state of Israel was founded in 1948.

The policy has drawn protests from the international community and from local human rights groups.

Construction in east Jerusalem is exempted from a 10-month moratorium on housing starts decreed by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government on settlements in the occupied West Bank. (Al Arabiya News Channel)

- Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has begun his testimony in front of panel investigating Israel's raid of a Gaza-bound Turkish aid flotilla on Monday, in the first such testimony before the investigative committee's headed by former justice Jacob Turkel. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu attends a cabinet meeting in Jerusalem, August 1, 2010

In his opening remarks, the premier reiterated what he saw as the importance of Israel's naval blockade of Gaza, saying that the measure was intended to stop shipments of arms from arriving at the Hamas-ruled Strip.

Netanyahu added that the world was bent on considering the situation in Gaza as a humanitarian crisis, even though there had been photos published of Gaza market stalls filled "to the brim" with food.

On May 31, Israeli Navy commandos boarded one of the flotilla ships, occupied mainly by IHH activists, in efforts to prevent the ship from reaching Gaza in violation of an Israeli naval blockade. Aboard the ship, the commandos were met with violence and a clash ensued, resulting in the deaths of 9 Turkish activists.

The panel investigating the raid on a the Turkish Gaza flotilla was recently granted greater authority after Turkel told the government the committee could not do its job without expanded investigative powers.

Until the change in the committee's mandate, the panel was only supposed to determine whether Israel's efforts to stop the flotilla from reaching Gaza accorded with international law, and whether the soldiers' use of force was proportionate.

It had no power to subpoena witnesses and cannot draw personal conclusions against those involved in the raid.

However, following Turkel's demand to turn the panel into a full-fledged governmental inquiry committee with real teeth, the committee was granted the power to subpoena witnesses and documents, warn those who testify before it that the panel's findings could harm them, and hire outside experts in relevant fields.

The committee does, however, have the authority to subpoena IDF soldiers.

Soldiers and officers instead testified before the internal army probe into the raid's operational aspects that was headed by Maj. Gen. (res.) Giora Eiland, who is scheduled to present his findings to the Turkel Committee. (Hareetz)

- The Wall Street Journal said Monday that the United States had signed on to sell dozens of F-15 fighter jets to Saudi Arabia, but that details in the final deal had been negotiated to quell Israeli concerns over the possible exchange.

Last month, a senior defense source told Haaretz that Israel was trying to prevent the United States from selling new F-15 fighter jets to Saudi Arabia in order to upgrade the 150 F-15s already in the Saudi air force.

Defense Minister Ehud Barak raised the deal in meetings with U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates and National Security Advisor General Jim Jones over a month ago in Washington.

It was also reported that Israel made its reservations clear at a meeting in Tel Aviv between top Israeli defense officials and a delegation led by U.S. under secretary of defense for policy Michele Flournoy.

According to the Wall Street Journal report, the Obama administration in fact agreed to sell advanced F-15 fighter jets to the Saudis, however excluding long-range weapons systems as well as other components in order to quiet Israel's concerns.

However, despite the reported Israeli concerns over the weapons deal, U.S. officials speaking to the Wall Street Journal made it clear that Washington did not make changes to appease Israel.

"It's not that Barak swoops into town, we suddenly make a bunch of concessions that the Israelis never knew about before, and they're assuaged," the official said. "There were no refinements, no changes."

The official concluded that Israel had acquiesced to the deal not because of changes made to it, but as a result of Israeli officials having a better understanding "what the configuration looks like."

The report said that the \$30 billion, 10-year package came after U.S. officials offered "clarifications" to Israel about the deal, with officials close to the deal saying that, while Israel still had its reservations, it was unlikely to challenge the sale.

In addition to the exclusion of long-range weapons, according to the Wall Street Journal, the 84 F-15s included in the deal will have onboard targeting systems of the kind the U.S. sells to foreign nations, yet inferior to those in American-used F-15s.

Last month, security sources told Haaretz that if the deal would indeed be completed, Israel hoped Saudi Arabia will receive fewer advanced versions of the F-15 than those possessed by Israel, which seeks to maintain its air force's superiority. "Today these planes are against Iran, tomorrow they might turn against us," the source said.

Israel and the United States held a number of meetings over the past 18 months on maintaining Israel's security standings in the Middle East.

The two sides agreed that neither would surprise the other by agreeing to a military deal with a third party. A senior source in the U.S. administration told Haaretz the United States has promised Israel it would have priority access to any new weapons system and, in some cases, exclusive rights to buy new weapons systems, as opposed to Arab states.

"The administration is conducting open and completely transparent talks with Israel on the matter, and we are updating Israel on any planned deal to hear its reservations," the official said. "We believe that there are many cases in which the Iranian threat commits us to strengthen the ability of states in the region to defend themselves." (Haaretz)

- Egypt held alleged terror squad prior to Eilat rocket attack, report says

Egypt investigating possible connection to rocket volley as al-Sharq al-Awsat says 3 men arrested with materials to construct bombs, improvised explosive devices.

By Jack Khoury and Haaretz Service Tags: Israel news Hamas Egypt Eilat

Egyptian security forces arrested a suspected terror squad in the Sinai five days before last week's rocket attack on Eilat and Aqaba, the pan-Arab newspaper al-Sharq al-Awsat reported on Sunday, adding that it was not clear if there was a connection between the two incidents.

A Jordanian citizen was killed and five others wounded last week when a volley of Grad-type Katyusha rockets fired from Sinai at Eilat overshot the Israeli city and struck hotels at the Jordanian city of Aqaba.

One rocket hit fields north of Eilat and another is believed to have landed in the sea.

No group has so far claimed responsibility for the attack but both Israel and Egyptian sources have pointed their fingers at Gaza Strip rulers Hamas.

According to Sunday's report, Egypt's Sinai security forces apprehended three men in a vehicle five days prior to the attack, with equipment and material that could be used to assemble bombs and improvised explosive devices in their possession.

While Egyptian sources indicated that they saw a connection between the arrested squad and last week's attack, no evidence of such a link has yet been found.

The al-Sharq al-Awsat report added that news of the arrest had initially been held by Egyptian authorities in an attempt to maintain the summer tourism season, and to prevent injury against the tourist sites in the Sinai resort of Sharm el-Sheikh.

On Friday, Palestinian security officials claimed the commander of Hamas' military wing in Rafah, Raed al-Atar, was responsible for ordering the firing of Grad-type Katyusha rockets at Eilat and Aqaba.

That report came as the Palestinian news agency Ma'an reported yesterday that Egypt had declared a state of emergency in the Sinai Peninsula as part of a manhunt for the militants who fired the rockets.

Hamas had steered clear from carrying out terrorist attacks against Israeli targets from the territory of a third country, and it certainly has not targeted Jordan. But Hamas members have been arrested on their way to attack Israeli targets in Egypt.

In Jordan many Hamas operatives have been arrested, along with weapons that apparently were part of a plan to strike Jordanian targets or Israeli targets in Amman.

A day after the rocket attacks the Jordanians said they knew who was behind the operation, until Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced Wednesday that the attacks were carried out by Hamas.

If Hamas is indeed guilty, the incident may worsen relations between the Palestinian Islamist group and Egypt and Jordan.

Meanwhile, the Israel Defense Forces has stepped up its preparedness along the border with Egypt, amid concerns that militants planned to carry out further attacks from Egypt.

The Egyptians have also stepped up activity on their side of the border with increased patrols by troops in armored personnel carriers. (Hareetz)

- An Israeli Navy vessel opened fire on a Lebanese fishing boat over the weekend, after the ship sailed into a restricted zone and ignored warnings to leave the area, the IDF Spokesman’s office confirmed on Sunday.

The army’s confirmation came after Lebanese Army reports of the incident surfaced over the weekend.

“Early Saturday morning a Lebanese fishing boat left the permitted fishing area, and when the ship did not heed calls from the Israeli military to return to the permitted fishing area, shots were fired,” an IDF spokesperson told The Jerusalem Post on Sunday.

“There were no injuries in the incident,” the spokesperson added.

In response to the incident, the Lebanese army issued a statement in which it claimed that Israel “continues to violate UN Resolution 1701,” although no specifics were given.

While the incident was comparatively minor, it came less than a week after a flare-up on the northern border between the LAF and the IDF left an Israeli officer and three Lebanese soldiers dead.

A Lebanese journalist from a Hezbollah-affiliated newspaper was also killed during the incident, which began when the LAF opened fire on IDF soldiers who were carrying out a routine operation in the area that involved crossing the border fence – but not the border itself – between the two countries.

The IDF returned fired at LAF positions in southern Lebanon in response.

During the incident, which was the most serious escalation of tensions in the area since the 2006 Second Lebanon War, 45-year-old Lt. Col. (res.) Dov Harari, from Netanya, was killed by sniper fire directed at his position from southern Lebanon.

Another IDF officer sustained severe wounds during the ensuing clash, and is currently being treated at Rambam Medical Center in Haifa where he is listed in stable condition.

While members of the international community have urged restraint in the wake of the incident, no further escalations have occurred on the ground.

Nonetheless, the area remains tense, and Syrian and Iranian government officials have continued to make official pledges of “defense” for Lebanon in face of “Israeli aggression.” (Jerusalem Post)

- A US State Department advisory issued Friday warning Americans against visiting Israel following last week’s rocket attacks on Eilat and Akaba raised the ire of Tourism Minister Stas Meseznikov.

The travel warning advises US citizens to avoid travelling to Israel, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The report says that Americans who visit Israel should be aware of the potential dangers, and should not go to Gaza at all, and that Americans in Eilat and the rest of southern Israel should keep track of the closest bomb shelter.

Meseznikov intends to meet with US ambassador James Cunningham early this week to protest the travel advisory, especially the decision to single out Eilat but not Akaba, despite the fact that the rockets’ only fatality was in the Jordanian city.

“This advisory gives a prize to terror and undermines regional stability and the sense of security that Israel gives to everyone who enters the country,” Meseznikov said. “Differentiating Israel from its neighbor that actually suffered loss of life is improper.”

Sources close to Meseznikov said it was not the first time that American travel advisories had discriminated against Israel. They said that when Meseznikov complained in the past, the American Embassy in Tel Aviv and the State Department in Washington pointed fingers at each other.

Meseznikov instructed Israeli tourism attachés around the world over the weekend to spread word that Eilat was safe. (Jerusalem Post)

- It doesn't matter whether the document published Friday is genuine or forged, superbly crafted or a bluff meant to undermine Major General Yoav Galant's race for the post of IDF chief of staff. What we've discovered this weekend, again, is that all red lines had been crossed under Benjamin Netanyahu's leadership. What we have here is anarchy and chaos.

PR consultant Eyal Arad files complaint with police, says document suggesting smear campaign best way to land chief of staff post is forged. Minister Ben-Eliezer calls for 'thorough' probe

Everyone does whatever they wish and there's nobody out there who would pound the table and put things in order. There is no king in Israel. When looking at Israel's deteriorating global status, the PM's zigzags in respect to significant decisions, and now the Galant affair- which also encompasses the publicized, ugly dispute between the army chief and defense minister – one gets the feeling that everything is permissible, and that there's nobody out there who would call the rebellious kids to order.

“There is no reason for the prime minister to respond to this,” Netanyahu's close associated said with a shrug. “The defense establishment has a father, and that's the defense minister. Finally we see an affair that has nothing to do with the PM, so why should he intervene?”

Yet Netanyahu is not alone. As it turned out, the defense minister also managed to stumble en route to making almost every significant decision. Ehud Barak apparently likes to humiliate the people under him. When he took his post he did the same to Ephraim Sneh, whom he deluded for many days before informing him that he has no intention of keeping him as his deputy.

In recent months, Barak has been putting Army Chief Ashkenazi through a tortuous road as well; in recent days the defense minister is doing the same to the candidates for the next chief of staff. Barak is apparently unable to take decisions in an easy, appropriate, commonly accepted and dignified manner. When comparing him to his predecessor Amir Peretz, the differences are like night and day.

Even though he was smeared in the media, to Peretz's credit we can say that the appointment processes during his tenure were relatively smooth. Ashkenazi, who was an outside candidate for the post of army chief, was appointed within a few weeks without any chaos, without humiliation, and without odd affairs. The same was true for Defense Ministry Director General Pinhas Buchris and for other sensitive appointments.

The latest affair, whether real or not, raises endless question marks and mostly prompts one big question: How could it be that the appointment of one of Israel's most important and sensitive posts is managed like a Turkish bazaar? How could it be that in a democratic state anyone can influence, smear, eliminate candidates, and change reality? And how is it that the PM and defense minister don't throw over the table, clear the atmosphere immediately, and curb the deterioration of Israel's public life time after time, affair after affair. (Yedioth Ahranot)

4. EGYPT / MISIR

- Egypt held alleged terror squad prior to Eilat rocket attack, report says

Egypt investigating possible connection to rocket volley as al-Sharq al-Awsat says 3 men arrested with materials to construct bombs, improvised explosive devices.

By Jack Khoury and Haaretz Service Tags: Israel news Hamas Egypt Eilat

Egyptian security forces arrested a suspected terror squad in the Sinai five days before last week's rocket attack on Eilat and Aqaba, the pan-Arab newspaper al-Sharq al-Awsat reported on Sunday, adding that it was not clear if there was a connection between the two incidents.

A Jordanian citizen was killed and five others wounded last week when a volley of Grad-type Katyusha rockets fired from Sinai at Eilat overshot the Israeli city and struck hotels at the Jordanian city of Aqaba.

One rocket hit fields north of Eilat and another is believed to have landed in the sea.

No group has so far claimed responsibility for the attack but both Israel and Egyptian sources have pointed their fingers at Gaza Strip rulers Hamas.

According to Sunday's report, Egypt's Sinai security forces apprehended three men in a vehicle five days prior to the attack, with equipment and material that could be used to assemble bombs and improvised explosive devices in their possession.

While Egyptian sources indicated that they saw a connection between the arrested squad and last week's attack, no evidence of such a link has yet been found.

The al-Sharq al-Awsat report added that news of the arrest had initially been held by Egyptian authorities in an attempt to maintain the summer tourism season, and to prevent injury against the tourist sites in the Sinai resort of Sharm el-Sheikh.

On Friday, Palestinian security officials claimed the commander of Hamas' military wing in Rafah, Raed al-Atar, was responsible for ordering the firing of Grad-type Katyusha rockets at Eilat and Aqaba.

That report came as the Palestinian news agency Ma'an reported yesterday that Egypt had declared a state of emergency in the Sinai Peninsula as part of a manhunt for the militants who fired the rockets.

Hamas had steered clear from carrying out terrorist attacks against Israeli targets from the territory of a third country, and it certainly has not targeted Jordan. But Hamas members have been arrested on their way to attack Israeli targets in Egypt.

In Jordan many Hamas operatives have been arrested, along with weapons that apparently were part of a plan to strike Jordanian targets or Israeli targets in Amman.

A day after the rocket attacks the Jordanians said they knew who was behind the operation, until Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced Wednesday that the attacks were carried out by Hamas.

If Hamas is indeed guilty, the incident may worsen relations between the Palestinian Islamist group and Egypt and Jordan.

Meanwhile, the Israel Defense Forces has stepped up its preparedness along the border with Egypt, amid concerns that militants planned to carry out further attacks from Egypt.

The Egyptians have also stepped up activity on their side of the border with increased patrols by troops in armored personnel carriers. (Hareetz)

- More than 200 people voted in elections for the president of the Ghad opposition party yesterday, where former president Ayman Nour garnered a sweeping victory over former vice president Yasser Abdel Hamid.

Nour managed to get 273 votes against only 34 for his rival.

Some party members were unable to vote due to the fact that their names had been misspelled. Several women also passed out due to the heat.

Abdel Hamid froze his party membership following the voting and accused Nour of falsifying the results.

Nour has said that his first action after winning will be to accept the collective resignations submitted by some party members in Alexandria.

Gamila Ismail, Nour's ex-wife and member of the party's supreme authority, said her vote went to Nour, who is also the party's founder.

In other news, Mahmoud Saleh, head of the election committee, said he is resigning from the party after some of its members put up a poster reading, "He Won't Rule"-- which also happens to be the title of a campaign against transfer of power to Gamal Mubarak -- above pictures of the party's current president. (Al Masry Al Youm)

- Nagi al-Shehab, president of the opposition Al-Geel Party, has said he plans to form a coalition of seven small opposition parties including the Ghad, Al-Ahrar, Misr, Al-Arabi, Al-Khodr, Al-Takaful and Shabab Misr parties.

"We aim for clean parliamentary elections under judicial supervision," said al-Shehab, adding that the proposed coalition intended to participate in all political activities.

He said his decision came following the failure of a quadripartite coalition--which includes the Wafd, Tagammu, Nasserite and Ghad opposition parties--to "meet the demands of the people."

"We will nominate a candidate for upcoming presidential elections," said al-Shehab, contending that Mohamed ElBaradei, a would-be independent candidate in next year's presidential races, lacked the expertise necessary for the post.

He went on to describe the ongoing campaign to promote presidential scion Gamal Mubarak for the presidency--along with subsequent counter-campaigns--as "political chaos." (Al Masry Al Youm)

5. LEBANON / LÜBNAN

- This week's arrest of a well-respected retired general and politician allied with Hezbollah on suspicion of spying for Israel has sent shock waves through Lebanon and left many wondering how deep the Jewish state has infiltrated the country.

Fayez Karam, a member of the Christian Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), is the first political figure to be arrested in Lebanon as part of a wide-ranging probe launched in 2009 into Israeli spy networks.

A well-informed source close to the investigation told AFP that after his detention last Monday on the orders of the prosecutor general, Karam confessed to spying for Israel.

"You don't arrest someone like him without rock-solid proof and there was enough evidence against him," the source, who requested anonymity, said.

"He may not have given the Israelis much technical information, but his arrest has a huge political impact because of his position and rank," he added.

He said Karam, 62, who stood in parliamentary elections last year, allegedly used cell phones with roaming numbers from European countries to contact his Israeli handlers.

He reportedly met them in Paris, where he travelled regularly, and was nabbed because of an unspecified mistake.

Ironically, in the 1980s Karam headed the Lebanese army's anti-terrorism and counter-espionage unit where he worked closely with FPM leader Michel Aoun, who was army chief at the time and who also served as interim prime minister.

Aoun was staunchly anti-Syrian and was forced into exile in France at the end of Lebanon's 1975-1990 civil war when Damascus imposed its rule over its tiny neighbour.

Aoun returned to Lebanon in 2005, one month after Syria withdrew its troops following a 29-year presence.

In a controversial move in 2006, he entered an alliance with the Iran- and Syria-backed Shiite group Hezbollah. Aoun also caused a stir by visiting both Damascus and Tehran.

Karam, who through the years has remained close to Aoun, was himself arrested by Syrian troops in 1990 and spent five months at the notorious Syrian jail of Mazzeh.

He went to Israel after his release through southern Lebanon, which was then occupied by Israel, and then headed to France where he set up a dry-cleaning business.

"He may have begun to spy for Israel in reaction to the harsh treatment he suffered during his detention at the Mazzeh prison," the source said.

Karam's arrest, which has been the talk of the capital Beirut, has shocked political circles in Lebanon, which along with Syria is still technically at war with Israel.

"We are stunned," said Simon Abi Ramia, a deputy with the FPM. "We just cannot believe it."

Another retired general who knows Karam well and who considered him to be a friend said the entire military community was incredulous.

"We're all in shock because he is really the last person you would expect to be implicated in this," the ex-general, who requested anonymity, told AFP.

"He is extremely polite, honest and very disciplined," he added. "That's all we have been talking about this week at the officers' club."

Local media reports questioned whether Karam had provided Israel with information about Hezbollah since he was very close to Aoun.

"Did Fayez Karam have details on the timing of the meetings that took place between Aoun and (Hezbollah chief) Hassan Nasrallah?" asked the Arabic-language daily Al-Akhbar, which is close to Hezbollah.

Members of the militant party refused to comment on the case.

Some 100 people have been arrested in the spy probe, among them members of the security forces and telecommunications employees.

Karam's arrest has many people now wondering who will be next.

"When you catch a big fish like him you always have others that follow," the source close to the investigation said. (Ashraq Alawsat)

- Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah is to reveal evidence implicating Israel in the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri, a spokesman for the militant group told the Palestinian news agency Ma'an on Sunday.

A United Nations tribunal was established in 2007 to try suspects in the 2005 assassination of Rafik Hariri, father of current premier Saad Hariri. The elder Hariri was killed in a massive bomb blast in Beirut, along with 20 other people. His allies have accused Syria and its followers in Lebanon of being behind the murder, a charge Damascus has repeatedly denied.

Late last month, Nasrallah indicated that he had been informed that the UN tribunal would indict some Hezbollah members, saying that "out of his keenness to ensure national unity, [Lebanese Premier Saad] Hariri told me that the UN tribunal indictment will be issued and will accuse some members of Hezbollah."

Speaking to Ma'an on Sunday, Hezbollah spokesman Ibrahim Mousawi said that the group's leader would reveal "thunderous news" in a press conference scheduled for

Monday, presenting what he called "comprehensive, revealing conclusive information" linking Israel to Hariri's 2005 assassination.

Referring to rumors of an upcoming indictment of Hezbollah members, Nasrallah said last week that his organization rejected "reject the idea that Hezbollah members might be indicted," noting that the indictment does not accuse Syria.

The Hezbollah chief warned that "there's a new scheme that targets the resistance [Hezbollah], Lebanon and the region through the Special Tribunal for Lebanon."

Nasrallah in March confirmed that UN investigators had interrogated members of his Syrian- and Iranian-backed Hezbollah movement.

Last month, the Lebanese daily Al Akhbar quoted Syrian President Bashar Assad as saying that if a finger is pointed at Hezbollah for being behind the assassination, this may result in the destruction of Lebanon.

Assad said that in the past the court had blamed Syria, a claim later proven to have been baseless, but nearly destroyed Lebanon and the entire region, and now the same scenario is being repeated against Hezbollah.

According to a Lebanese judicial source, the tribunal will be issuing at least two rounds of the indictments starting from September and around the end of this year.

Lebanese media reports indicated that in the first round UN prosecutor Daniel Bellemare will indict "three to five members of Hezbollah and in the second round about 20 with various ranks including some key officials."

The reports added that Bellemare was informed by Lebanese military leaders in an informal way that the Lebanese army would not arrest any members of Hezbollah party if they should be indicted.

A report in the German news magazine Der Spiegel last year revealed a link between Hezbollah and the Hariri assassination.

The reports about the indictments against Hezbollah have raised fears in Lebanon that the security situation will deteriorate, and Premier Hariri on Thursday attempted to assure the Lebanese that there would not be a crisis or sedition in the country.

"There are political disputes - but nothing will happen," Hariri said. Hareetz)

- Lebanon said Saturday it was committed to building up its armed forces after complaints by Israel about Western assistance to the military following a deadly border clash between the two countries.

Two Lebanese soldiers, a Lebanese journalist and a senior Israeli officer were killed in a rare cross-border skirmish on Tuesday, the worst such violence since a 2006 war between Israel and Iranian-backed Hezbollah guerrillas.

The clash -- in which Lebanon and Israel gave different accounts of what happened -- raised fears of wider conflict. Both countries have since worked to calm tension at the border.

Speaking in the southern Lebanese village of Adaisseh where the clash occurred, President Michel Suleiman said the cabinet would meet to ratify a three- or five-year plan to arm the military "so that it can protect the nation's dignity."

"The government will put forth a plan to arm the army regardless of the position of some countries," Suleiman was quoted as saying by the National News Agency. He did not say when the plan would be approved.

Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak said he had spoken to France and the United States about the Jewish state's worries.

"We think it is a mistake to arm the Lebanese army with weapons, with advanced systems," Barak said in an interview with Israel Radio earlier this week.

"Because these things are liable to be -- we used to describe the danger that these things would end up in Hezbollah hands, but before our eyes something more troubling is happening, and they are being used directly by the Lebanese army against us."

Asked whether Paris or Washington had paid attention to Israel's complaint, Barak said: "Not really. Not really.

Hezbollah did not take part in the clash, although its leader, Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, said his powerful Shi'ite guerrillas would intervene if Israel attacked the army again.

By Israel's account of Tuesday's events, a Lebanese army sniper hit two Israeli officers as they watched a tree-pruning operation on the security fence below the U.N. "Blue Line." The Lebanese army said it first fired warning shots, then Israelis fired at their soldiers. Israeli artillery and tank fire followed.

The United States has provided more than \$720 million in assistance to the Lebanese army since 2006, according to the U.S. embassy website.

In Washington, asked whether the United States was confident the Lebanese army was not being "manipulated by any particular political group," State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley said:

"We are, as we've said many times, we're in support of the civilian government in Lebanon," he said according to a transcript of an August 5 daily press briefing.

"And we think improving the capability and performance of the Lebanese government, both across the government, but including in the security sector, contributes to stability in the region and is in our interest." (Ashraq Alawsat)

- Kataeb Party leader Amin Gemayel told MTV on Sunday that Hezbollah Secretary General Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah should present his alleged proof that Israel killed former Prime

Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005 to the authorities, instead of revealing it through the media on Monday.

Nasrallah said last Tuesday that he will reveal during a press conference on August 9 irrefutable evidence proving that Israel was behind the assassination.

The only valid reference that can check the credibility of this evidence is the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL), Gemayel said, adding that there must be a neutral side to differentiate right from wrong.

“Nasrallah does not decide what is right or wrong,” he added.

Gemayel also said that there might be spies in Lebanon working for countries other than Israel, referring to the recent arrests of telecom employees and retired Brigadier General Fayez Karam on suspicion that they were collaborating with Tel Aviv.

“The Baabda summit is not clear and it does not foster national unity,” he said, but added that it is a good start.

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdel Aziz and President Michel Sleiman held a summit on July 30 in Baabda in a bid to defuse political tension following Nasrallah’s July comments rejecting the credibility of the STL and its pending indictment.

Assad and Abdullah urged Lebanese parties to avoid resorting to violence in the face of mounting political turmoil in the country. (Now Lebanon)

- Local officials on Sunday praised President Michel Sleiman’s visit to the south over the weekend during which he called for equipping the Lebanese Army, amid expectations that such a topic is to be addressed by the Cabinet this week.

Interior Minister Ziyad Baroud told the press on Sunday that a plan to equip the Lebanese Army would be discussed by the Cabinet in line with Sleiman's "keenness to preserve the military establishment, its role and in appreciation of its sacrifices."

Sleiman on Saturday toured army positions along border between Israel and Lebanon that saw clashes between armies of the two countries last week after Israeli soldiers attempted to uproot a tree which Lebanese officials said was on the Lebanese side of the fenced border.

Syria's Al-Watan newspaper reported on Sunday the Adaysseh incidents increase the probability of a war, adding that a new conflict is likely to take place within the next year.

The paper said that Israel was testing scenarios, and while it played old cards, Lebanon and the Lebanese Army played new ones, prompting anxiety within the ranks of the Israeli government. Israel did not expect the Lebanese Army to defend itself, it added.

The altercation killed two Lebanese soldiers and a journalist as well as a senior Israeli officer. The dead Lebanese soldiers were from the army's 11th brigade.

During his visit to the south, Sleiman urged the Lebanese investors along with friendly states to help in securing arms and equipment for the LAF.

"I call upon friendly states to help the Lebanese Army if they are really interested in the establishment of a state in Lebanon," said Sleiman.

The president said that if friendly states refuse to sell arms to Lebanon "this will represent a political stance [against Lebanon]."

"We are asking for defense weapons," Sleiman added.

Sleiman said that equipping the army was part of the Cabinet's policy statement, and vowed to rush the Cabinet's approval of such a move.

Addressing officers from the army's 11th brigade at its headquarters in the southern village of Tibneen, Sleiman pressed wealthy Lebanese to take part in funding the arming and equipping of Lebanese troops.

"I call upon capable Lebanese who plan to invest in Lebanon to build the army because when the army becomes strong and capable of easily carrying out its missions, ... then any investment in Lebanon becomes possible," he said.

Former Prime Minister Salim Hoss praised the president's call for the Lebanese investors to help the army, as he urged them to heed Sleiman's calls.

"We rely on the generousness of expatriates that have achieved considerable success abroad," said the statement.

After the clashes, Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon voiced his fears that Hizbullah was taking control of the army.

Concerns that the US might reassess its military support to the army have risen as well, amid reports that Israel has launched a campaign to convince Western states to refrain from providing it assistance.

Sleiman hailed the sacrifices of the 11th brigade members.

"I am proud of visiting the 11th brigade after the heroic act it carried out," he said.

"Your mission is hard, but your will is stronger, and I am confident of the role you are playing," added Sleiman.

Sleiman landed by a helicopter at the army headquarters in the village of Kfardoneen, after which he boarded a car and toured a number of LAF positions that were hit by Israelis during last week's clash. Upon his arrival to the 11th brigade headquarters, Sleiman was received by head of army brigades operating to the south of the Litani River Brigadier Khalil Mosen, the commander of the 11th brigade Brigadier Sadeq Tleis, and

Commander of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) Major General Alberto Asarta Cuevas.

Asarta extended his condolences to Sleiman over the death of the Lebanese soldiers, stressing that UNIFIL would continue to coordinate with the army.

Defense Minister Elias Murr, Lebanese army Chief of Staff Major General Shawqi al-Masri and head of Army Intelligence Edmond Fadel, along with military and media delegations accompanied Sleiman in his visit.

Sleiman emphasized Lebanon's commitment to Resolution 1701 and cooperation with UNIFIL, saying it was Israel that is violating the resolution.

The president labeled the LAF as "the safety valve of national unity," adding that the army that was able to carry out its mission on borders could perform its duties inside Lebanon.

He lashed out at Israeli claims that Hizbullah has taken control of the army. "The army is the army ... but this does not prevent the people along with Lebanon's national capabilities from being on the disposal of the army," said Sleiman.

"The political decision covers you, and the military decision is clear," he added.

Sleiman said that Lebanon has launched a campaign to arm the army in the face of all sides trying to prevent it from obtaining needed weapons. "The Cabinet will lay down a 5 or 6-year plan to provide the army with all needed arms," said Sleiman.

The president toured the scene of last week's clashes and was fully briefed on the incident. (The Daily Star)

6. SYRIA / SURİYE

- Syria on Thursday demanded that Israel release all the Syrian detainees in the Israeli jails and withdraw from the occupied Syrian Golan in implementation of the relevant international resolutions.

Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem sent messages to the UN Secretary General, Head of the UN Security Council, Head of the UN Human Rights Council, Head of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and Head of the International Committee of the Red Cross related to Israel's continued violations in the occupied Golan and its arrests of Syrian citizens in the village of Majdal Shams on fabricated charges in an attempt to intimidate them.

Al-Moallem called on the UN to assume its responsibilities through seriously pressuring Israel to stop its repeated violations of the UN resolutions, the international community and the international humanitarian law and of the basic human rights laws.

The Foreign Minister warned of a worsening situation in the region if Israel continues to put itself above all international laws and conventions, which will reflect negatively on the security and stability in the region and the world. (SANA)

- Suriye-Türkiye iş Konseyi ve Denizcilik Odası Başkanı Abdülkadir Sabra, Suriye ve Türkiye arasındaki ekonomik ilişkilerde işbirliğinin süreklilik içinde olduğunu söyledi.

Sabra bu işbirliğinin İş Konseyi ile Türk oda birlikleri, borsalar ve dış ticarete ilaveten iki ülkede değişik bakanlar ve ekonomik kurumlar arasındaki temaslarla temsil olduğunu ifade etti. Aynı zamanda iki ülke arasındaki ekonomik ilişkileri pekiştirme amacıyla iki taraf arasında sürekli bir iletişimin sağlandığına dikkat çekerken, İş Konseyinin iki ülke arasında ticari alışveriş ve ithalat-ihracat önündeki engelleri kaldırma çabaları yürüttüğünü belirtti.

İş Konseyinin 200 milyon dolarlık bir sermayeye sahip Türk-Suriye bankası kurma çabaları yürüttüğünü söyleyen Sabra söz konusu bankanın, Türkiye'de en büyük devlet bankalarından biri sayılan Ziraat Bankasıyla %60 oranla temsil edileceğini kaydetti. Ayrıca Suriye'ye geri kalan %40 oranlık temsilciliğinin %30'u devlet bankaları %10'ise Suriyeli işadamları tarafından temsil edileceğini ekledi.

İş Konseyi Başkanı Sabra kurulacak bankanın; emlak, kalkınma, sanayi ve tarım sektörlerinin tümünü finanse edeceğini, Suriye ve Türkiye arasındaki ticaret işlemlerinin kolaylaştırılmasına yardımcı olacağına işaret etti. Aynı zamanda bu yıl üç milyar dolara değerine çıkması beklenen ikili ticaretin kolaylaştırılması için bir gereklilik taşıdığına inanmaları itibarıyla Suriye ve Türkiye Maliye Bakanları tarafından büyük destek aldığını söyledi.

Türk tarafının büyük bir deneyime sahip olması nedeniyle turizm alanında yatırımlara önem verilmesi çağrısında bulunan Sabra, İş Konseyinin Türk yatırımcıları bu sektörde yatırımlarda bulunmaya teşvik ettiğini açıkladı. Ayrıca, bu konuda bilgi ve deneyim alışverişinin önemine vurgu yaparken, turizm sektöründe Türkiye'nin Avrupa genelinde dördüncü sırayı aldığına dikkat çekti.

İş Konseyi Başkanı fiyat rekabeti, kalite, deneyim ve bilgi aracılığı ile Suriye endüstrisinin korunması gereğinin altını çizerken, ticaret ve sanayi idarelerinde genç kadroların eğitilmelerine önem verme çağrısı yaptı. Sabra, üniversite kadrolarının yetenek ve deneyimlerini pekiştirmek için uzman kurumlarda eğitilmeleri gereğine dikkat çekti.

Emlak, endüstri ve turizm alanlarında yatırım projeleri kurmak için alt yapı hazırlama gereğine dikkat çeken Sabra, çünkü bu tür bir projenin gerekli ve uygun alt yapı olmadan kurulmasının mümkün olmadığını söyledi.

Suriye-Türkiye İş Konseyi Başkanı denizcilik ve nakliye işlerinde Suriye'nin coğrafi konumundan faydalanma davetinde bulunarak Suriye limanlarının yoğun koordinasyon neticesinde dört denizi birbirine bağladığına işaret etti. (SANA)

- Türk-Arap Parlamenter Diyalogun 1. Tur Toplantıları dün sabah Şam'daki Arap Parlamento binasında başladı.

Toplantılara Türkiye Büyük millet Meclisinde (TBMM) Dış İlişkiler Komisyonundan Komisyon başkanı Murat Mercan başkanlığında bir heyetin yanı sıra Arap Parlamentosunda Dış İlişkiler politika ve Milli Güvenlik Komitesi Başkanı Muhammed Ebu Hdeyb başkanlığında bir heyet katılıyor.

Ebu Hdeyb Türk ve Arap milletleri arasındaki ilişki ve bağları metanetleştirmekle birlikte değişik ekonomik, politik ve kültürel ilişkileri geliştirmede TBMM ve Arap Parlamentolarından temsilcilerin katıldığı bu toplantıların önemine dikkat çekti.

Arap ülkeleri ile Türkiye arasındaki ilişkilerin tarih ve coğrafya olarak iki boyuta dayandığı görüşünü ifade eden Ebu Hdeyb, dolayısıyla bunun Türkiye'nin Ortadođu ve Kuzey Afrika ülkeleri arasında güçlü ilişkileri olmasını gerektirdiğini kaydetti.

Komisyon Başkanı; Düzenlenen Parlamenter Diyalog toplantılarının taraflar arasında geniş ufuklar açmasını temenni ederek, koordinasyon, parlamenter ilişkileri güçlendirme ve bir çok konuyu tartışmak üzere Kuveyt'te düzenlenecek ikinci diyalog toplantılarına güzel bir temel teşkil etmesinde umutlarını ifade etti. Aynı zamanda Arap tüm liderlerin komşu Türkiye ile bu gibi diyalog toplantılarının düzenlenmesi gereğine inandıklarını sözlerine ekledi.

Ebu Hdeyb, iki taraf arasında kültürel ve ekonomik işbirliğini tartışacak uzman komitelerin kurulması ve bu komitelerin periyodik toplantılar düzenlemesi öneminin altını çizerken, TBMM'nin Arap Parlamentosunda gözetmen sıfatıyla temsil edilmesi olanağına dikkat çekti.

TBMM'de Dış İlişkiler Komisyonu Başkanı Mercan, ortak değer ve paydalardan hareketle bu diyalogun Türk ve Arap halklarına olumlu yansılarda bulunacağına vurgu yaparak, bölge ve dünya barışını etkileyecek bir çok konuda koordinasyon fırsatı verdiğini söyledi.

Mercan Türk ve Arap Parlamenterlerin iki gün sürecek toplantılarında bölgedeki durum ve konulara ek olarak parlamenter ve ekonomik işbirliğini ele alacaklarına dikkat çekti. Aynı zamanda TBMM'nin uluslararası ve bölgesel bir dizi komisyonda üye olması nedeniyle sahip olduğu deneyimden faydalanma imkanının bulunduğu işaret etti.

Kendi tarafından Arap Parlamentosu Genel Sekreteri Adnan Omran, Arap ülkelerinin dış politikalarına ilişkin alanlara ilaveten ekonomik ve kültürel konsolidasyon doğrultusunda çalışan politik bir Arap kurumu olması itibarıyla Arap Parlamentosunun çalışmaları ve sorumluluklarına ilişkin bir sunum yaptı.

Diyalog toplantılarına katılan Arap ve Türk parlamenterler, iki taraf arasındaki ilişkileri düzeltmekle birlikte doğru yola koymada bu toplantıların önemine işaret ettiler. (SANA)

- President Bashar al-Assad received here Sunday afternoon His Highness Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, the Emir of Qatar.

Talks dealt with the distinguished fraternal relations binding Syria and Qatar, and with scores of issues of common interest.

The latest developments at Arab and regional arenas were also reviewed during the meeting.

President al-Assad, during his talks with Sheikh Hamad in Doha last May, underlined determination to continue work and coordination on issues of the region and challenges that face its countries on the regional and international levels.

Also in May, a tripartite meeting between President al-Assad, Emir of Qatar and Turkish Prime Minister was held in Istanbul where they underlined the importance of pushing relations among the three countries forwards to achieve a strategic cooperation that will be positively reflected on the stability in this region. (SANA)

- Meetings of the Syrian-Yemeni Joint Higher Committee concluded on Sunday with the signing of 13 cooperation agreements, executive programs, memos of understanding and protocols, in addition to the meetings' minutes.

The Committee's meetings were chaired by Syrian Prime Minister Mohammad Naji Otri and Yemeni counterpart Ali Mohammad Mujur.

The two sides signed an agreement in the field of finance on cooperation, exchanging expertise in developing small and micro projects, and supporting small and medium-sized enterprises.

Agreements include an executive program for cooperation in the field of education for 2011-2012-2013, a memo of understanding in the field of housing and construction, a memo of understanding in the field of drinking water and sanitations for 2010-2011, and a memo of understanding for planning and international cooperation.

Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister Dr. Fayssal Mikdad and Yemeni Foreign Minister Abu Bakr al-Qurbi signed an executive program on cooperation and coordination between the two countries' foreign ministries, in addition to a memo of understanding on cooperation between the two ministries' diplomatic institutes.

The meetings' minutes included the cooperation issues that were discussed in the fields of politics, economy, culture, social affairs, commerce, investment, industry, finance, petroleum, mineral resources, electricity, agriculture, fishing, housing, construction, water, sanitations, transport, media, tourism and education.

Syria and Yemen affirmed their support for achieving Palestinian national reconciliation due to its importance in defending the just Palestinian rights of return to the homeland and establishing an independent Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital according to resolutions of international legitimacy and the Arab Peace Initiative.

They called for exerting all possible efforts to lift the Israeli siege imposed on Gaza Strip, condemning the brutal Israeli aggression on the Freedom Flotilla.

They also denounced the latest Israeli aggression against Lebanon, stressing their support of Lebanon in its defense of its land and peoples, noting that Israel proved again to be the main cause of tension and lack of stability and security in the region.

The two sides called for expediting the formation of a national unity government in Iraq and achieving reconciliation among all spectrums of the Iraqi people to preserve the country's sovereignty, unity and Arab identity, in addition to voicing support for the Sudanese government and its efforts to handle the situation in Darfur and restore security and stability in the region. They also rejected the politicizing of the International Criminal Court.

The Yemeni side affirmed its support of Syria's right to restore the occupied Syrian Golan to the June 4th 1967 line, while the Syrian side affirmed its commitment to the unity, stability and security of Yemen and rejecting interference in its internal affairs.

Premiers Otri and al-Mujur held a bilateral meeting followed by an expanded meeting, during which they discussed agreements in various fields of cooperation and the various draft agreements to be signed, in addition to means of developing and expanding cooperation.

The two sides said that future directives are based on the economic and natural resources of Syria and Yemen, affirming the importance of employing these resources to achieve economic integration between the two countries and establish bases for true partnerships that serve the process of overall development in the two countries.

Later, Syria's Ambassador to Yemen Abdul-Ghafour al-Sabouni held a dinner banquet in honor of Prime Minister Mohammad Naji Otri and the accompanying delegation.

The banquet was attended by Yemeni Prime Minister Ali Mohammad Mujur and a number of ministers, MPs and Arab ambassadors to Yemen. (SANA)

- President Ali Abdullah Saleh of Yemen reviewed with Syrian Prime Minister Engineer Mohammed Naji Otri , the outcomes of the meetings of the 10th session of the Syrian-Yemeni High Joint Committee as well as issues of cooperation discussed and agreements to be signed at the conclusion of the Committee session.

President Saleh asserted the necessity for deepening prospects of cooperation between Syria and Yemen in fields of economy, trade, taking necessary measures to expand future prospects of cooperation in fields of agriculture, transport, culture and other developmental and service sectors.

Arab and new developments at the Palestinian arena were touched upon; President Saleh expressed high appreciation for Syria's stances, under the leadership of President Bashar al-Assad, on Arab Causes, reiterating Yemen's support for Syria and for her efforts to restore the occupied Syrian Golan.

On his part, Engineer Otri referred to the importance of what has been achieved during the Committee 10th session as far as the bolstering and developing of cooperation relations between both fraternal countries, reiterating Syria's support for the unity of Yemen and care about its security and stability.

Later on, Premier Otri discussed with Speaker of the Yemeni Shura Council Abdul-Aziz Abdul-Ghani cooperation relations between both fraternal countries and prospects of bolstering them at economic, developmental and parliamentary level.

Conditions at the Arab arena were also reviewed; both sides underscored the importance of Arab solidarity and joint action as to encounter the challenges faced by the Arab Nation.

The Yemeni Shura Council experience, tasks, mechanism of work, and coordination between it and the Yemeni Parliament as far as legal, legislative and developmental tasks was also reviewed.

Later, Premier Otri and the accompanying delegation toured the old city of Sana'a, where they were briefed on its architectural and heritage landmarks and its importance in terms of culture and tourism. (SANA)

7. ARABIAN PENINSULA AND THE GULF OF BASRA / ARAP YARIMADASI VE BASRA KÖRFEZİ

- Gunmen killed three members of Yemen's security forces in an attack on a checkpoint in the southern town of Zinjibar on Thursday, witnesses and a hospital official said.

Three masked men attacked the security forces near the town's intelligence headquarters, killing two and wounding a third, witnesses said. The wounded man apparently died of his injuries.

An official at Al-Razi hospital in Jaar, just north of Zinjibar, said the bodies of three security forces members were brought in, all of whom had been shot in the head.

The assailants rode a motorcycle, one of them carrying a Kalashnikov assault rifle in a black bag, a security official said. Security forces were in hot pursuit of the attackers.

South Yemen, where many residents complain of discrimination by the Sanaa government in the allocation of resources, is the site of frequent protests and periodic unrest.

The south was independent from 1967 until 1990 when it united with the north. It seceded in 1994, sparking a short-lived conflict which ended with the south overrun by northern troops. (Ashraq Alawsat)

- A Japanese oil tanker damaged in the Strait of Hormuz off Oman last month was hit by an explosives-laden dinghy, the Emirati state news agency has said.

The report on Friday was the first official confirmation that the incident that left a large dent in the hull of the M.Star was an attack.

An al-Qaeda-linked group said on Wednesday that one of its suicide bombers had hit the tanker to avenge the plunder of Muslim wealth.

If true, the claim by the little-known Brigades of Abdullah Azzam would mark the first time the armed group has attacked the Japanese.

Emirates' WAM news agency on Friday quoted an unnamed government official as saying the investigation revealed traces of homemade explosives on the hull of the tanker.

WAM said investigators believe a small boat carrying explosives had approached the tanker and that the presence of explosives "indicates the tanker was subjected to a terror attack".

Seiji Maehara, the Japanese Transport Minister, has instructed his ministry to ask the UAE to check the facts of the investigation, Kyodo news agency reported.

There have been conflicting reports about what happened to the M. Star supertanker in the Strait of Hormuz, a transit point for about 40 per cent of tanker-shipped oil worldwide.

A crew member was injured and the vessel sustained a square-shaped dent on the rear side of the hull during the incident.

The Marshall Islands-flagged ship, loaded with 270,000 tons of oil, was heading from the petroleum port of Das Island in the United Arab Emirates to the Japanese port of Chiba outside Tokyo.

In its claim posted on the internet, the al-Qaeda-linked Brigades of Abdullah Azzam carried a photo of the purported bomber pointing to a photograph of a tanker on a laptop.

It said the bomber was a "martyr", meaning he had died in the attack.

The group also said it had delayed the announcement of the incident until several group members who were involved in the operation "returned safely to base".

The WAM report said the vessel left the Emirati port of Fujairah on Friday after the damage to the hull was fixed.

The Brigades have in the past claimed responsibility for the August 2005 firing of Katyusha rockets that narrowly missed a US amphibious assault ship docked at Jordan's Aqaba Red Sea resort, killing a Jordanian soldier.

It had also claimed the July and October 2004 bombings at Egypt's Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheik and two other resorts that killed a total of 98 people.

Al-Qaeda has carried out attacks on oil infrastructure on land in nearby Saudi Arabia, as well as a 2002 suicide bombing against a French oil tanker off the coast of Yemen and the 2000 bombing of the USS Cole in the Yemeni port of Aden. (Al Jazeera)

- The U.S. Embassy in Saudi Arabia said Westerners face possible attack from unidentified extremists in the central province of al-Qassim, in the first warning of its kind this year.

"We have received credible information that an unidentified extremist (s) in Saudi Arabia may be planning to attack Westerners working and living in al-Qassim, Saudi Arabia," the embassy said in a statement posted on its website.

"The timing and method of potential attacks are currently unknown," said the statement dated August 4, urging U.S. citizens to "exercise prudence and enhanced security awareness at all times".

Al-Qassim is among the most conservative regions in the kingdom. The key U.S. ally is ruled by the Al Saud family in alliance with clerics from the austere Wahhabi school of Islam.

Mansour al-Turki, spokesman for security affairs at the Interior Ministry, said he could not immediately comment.

Militants carried out attacks against Western targets, government symbols and oil facilities between 2003 and 2006. The attacks included suicide bombs at Western housing compounds, the interior ministry's headquarters in Riyadh and oil and petrochemical companies, plus an attempt to storm the world's biggest oil processing plant at Abqaiq in 2006.

A large-scale security crackdown and a rehabilitation program of militants sponsored by pro-government clerics have helped Saudi security services to stay ahead of plots to destabilize the country's absolute monarchy in recent years.

But concerns over the security situation in the kingdom resurfaced after its top anti-terrorism official, Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, was slightly hurt in a suicide attack in his house in September by a Saudi posing as a repentant militant returning from Yemen.

Saudi Arabia arrested 113 mainly Saudi and Yemeni al Qaeda-linked militants in March, including two suicide bomb teams. (Al Arabiya News Channel)

- Al-Qaeda's Yemen-based arm said it was behind two attacks that killed at least 11 soldiers in an oil province last month, and threatened more strikes on government targets.

The attacks in the southern Shabwa province on July 22 and 25 were among five raids on state targets since June which have been blamed on the resurgent militant group.

Officials have said al-Qaeda may have been also behind an attack that killed three soldiers on Thursday.

"Anyone who stands with (Yemeni President) Ali Saleh and his government, and with the Crusader (Western) campaign is against our Muslim people is our enemy and a legitimate target for us," Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula said in a statement posted on an Islamist website on Saturday.

Another statement claimed responsibility for the attack on a military convoy in Shabwa on July 22 in which militants killed at least five soldiers and seized their vehicle and weapons.

The group previously focused its high-impact strikes on foreign targets but has started to aim at the state in response to enhanced U.S.-Yemeni cooperation in a crackdown that has included air strikes and raids.

Al-Qaeda's Yemen-based regional wing earlier claimed responsibility for a failed suicide bombing of a U.S.-bound plane in December, focusing Western security concerns on the impoverished Arab country, which is a neighbor of top oil exporter Saudi Arabia.

Yemen, which is also struggling with rebels in the north and a rising separatist movement in the south, is under international pressure to quell those two domestic conflicts and focus on the resurgent al Qaeda wing in the country.

The Sanaa government has intensified its operations against Al-Qaeda, under pressure from Washington, since the network's local affiliate claimed the attempted bombing of a U.S.-bound airliner on Christmas Day last year. (Al Arabiya News Channel)

- Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) on Wednesday slammed Israel for its “aggression” on Lebanon, a day after a border clash between Lebanese and Israeli soldiers in which four people were killed.

The UAE condemned “Israel’s aggression on the Lebanese Army in south Lebanon as a flagrant infringement and blatant violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1701,” which ended the 2006 summer war that Israel launched against Lebanon, the official news agency WAM said.

Senior Foreign Ministry official Sultan al-Ali, quoted by WAM, called for respect of Resolution 1701 “to avoid any repercussions that impact on security and stability in the region.”

Kuwait’s Foreign Minister Mohammad al-Sabah also condemned what he termed “Israeli aggression on the Lebanese Army,” and expressed solidarity with Lebanon, the official Kuwaiti news agency KUNA reported.

Yemen, meanwhile, accused the state of Israel of “blatant aggression.”

On Tuesday, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) head Abdelrahman al-Attiyah said the “Israeli aggression on the Lebanese Army” was incompatible with the UN charter and international law, in a statement on the GCC’s website.

The GCC groups Kuwait and the UAE with Bahrain, Oman, Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

Lebanon and Israel have blamed each other for sparking Tuesday’s incident on their border in which two Lebanese soldiers, a Lebanese journalist and a senior Israeli officer were killed.

Israel said its troops reacted after being fired upon while clearing out shrubbery along the border. Lebanon said its troops only opened fire after an Israeli patrol crossed a border fence.

Meanwhile, Spain's Foreign Affairs Ministry regretted in a statement on Wednesday the border clashes between Lebanon and Israel and expressed its condolences to the families of the victims. "The Spanish government has undertaken measures with the Israeli and Lebanese authorities to return the calm to the borders between Lebanon and Israel, calling on both parties to refrain from causing incidents that could lead to an escalation of tension," the statement said.

"Furthermore, the Spanish government calls on the parties to continue deploying their efforts in order to maintain the ongoing good coordination through the UNIFIL (United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon) mission to ensure the full implementation of Resolution 1701," it added. (The Daily Star)

8. SOUTH ASIA / GÜNEY ASYA

PAKISTAN / PAKİSTAN

- President Asif Ali Zardari was to confront David Cameron in formal talks on Friday over the British prime minister's claims that Pakistan is an exporter of terrorism.

Relations between the two countries have soured since Cameron hit out at Pakistan while on a visit to India last week.

"We cannot tolerate in any sense the idea that this country (Pakistan) is allowed to look both ways and is able, in any way, to promote the export of terror, whether to India or whether to Afghanistan or anywhere else in the world," he told an audience in Bangalore, southern India.

The remark infuriated Islamabad, especially as it was made on a visit to Pakistan's regional rival, India.

Cameron and Zardari held a private dinner on Thursday, to seek to repair relations, and were to have formal talks on Friday.

Zardari has been put under intense pressure at home to put the British leader straight on where Islamabad stands.

Downing Street confirmed the leaders would discuss fighting terrorism in the wake of Cameron's comments.

"The leaders are expected to discuss the threat, review ongoing efforts, and explore what more can be done," said a spokesman.

"The UK already has a significant programme of counter-terrorism assistance in Pakistan with Foreign Office counter-terrorism assistance rising to 9.5 million pounds (15.1 million dollars, 11.5 million euros) in 2010-2011.

"It is an important opportunity to reinforce the strong links between the UK and Pakistan and continue to support stability, security, democracy and prosperity in Pakistan."

Zardari, whose late wife, Benazir Bhutto was assassinated by militants in 2007, has argued that Pakistanis are often the victims of terrorist attacks on home soil and that Islamabad is committed to fighting extremists in the region.

He has vowed to express Islamabad's anger "face to face" when he meets Cameron.

Cameron's remarks prompted the Pakistani government earlier this week to summon Britain's high commissioner (ambassador) to Islamabad.

Zardari came under enormous pressure to cancel his trip over the controversy, but his office insisted that the visit gives Pakistan a chance to make its case.

Despite standing by his comments, Cameron has accepted that Pakistanis are often the victims of attacks.

The leaders are also set to discuss the devastating floods in Pakistan which have killed around 1,500 people and affected more than four million others.

Zardari's failure to return home immediately in the aftermath of the disaster has drawn criticism from opposition politicians in Pakistan and lawmakers of Pakistani origin in Britain.

Other issues on the agenda include the war in Afghanistan and how to boost trade between Britain and Pakistan.

The two leaders met for the first time Thursday since the row erupted over Cameron's criticism, getting together for dinner at Chequers for what sources said would be an informal celebration of Bhutto.

After meeting Cameron, Zardari was to attend a Pakistan Peoples Party rally with his and Bhutto's son Bilawal, his PPP co-chairman, on Saturday in Birmingham, central England. (Ashraq Alawsat)

- Pakistan's president has said he is willing to embark on negotiations with the Taliban in his country, despite the group intensifying its campaign of attacks in recent months.

Asif Ali Zardari's comments came hours after a meeting on Friday with David Cameron, the British prime minister, aimed at ending a diplomatic row over whether Pakistan was doing enough to combat terrorism.

"We never closed the dialogue," Zardari said. "We had an agreement, which they broke. Talks will resume whenever they feel we're strong enough and they can't win, because they won't win."

Last year Pakistan struck a deal with the Taliban in the Swat Valley giving them de facto control over the region, but the agreement broke down when the fighters moved into other parts of Pakistan.

Zardari's comments are likely to raise eyebrows amongst Pakistan's western allies, who have been encouraging the country to fight the Taliban, not talk to them.

Speaking to Al Jazeera, PJ Mir, a political analyst, said: "I feel this is going to bring in a lot of criticism.

"People are losing lives on an everyday basis in Pakistan and, of course, on the borders.

"So to talk and sit down with them [the Taliban], and again, give them time to regroup, and again, bring their mindset, it's going to be a very difficult task."

Pakistan's approach to dealing with armed groups was thrust into the spotlight last week after Cameron ignited a spat between the two countries by accusing Islamabad of "exporting terror" and looking "both ways" in the battle against the Taliban.

"We never closed the dialogue. We had an agreement, which they broke. Talks will resume whenever they feel we're strong enough and they can't win, because they won't win."

Zardari hit back at the allegations of double-dealing, arguing that Pakistanis are often victims of attacks on their own soil and insisting that Islamabad is committed to fighting armed groups in the region.

The prime minister's remarks prompted the Pakistani government to summon Britain's ambassador to Islamabad earlier this week for a dressing down.

Pakistan intelligence chiefs cancelled a trip to the UK in retaliation for the comments and Zardari also came under pressure to abandon his trip over the controversy.

Despite standing by his words, Cameron has accepted that Pakistanis are often the victims of attacks, including the one that killed Zardari's late wife Benazir Bhutto, the former premier assassinated in Pakistan in 2007.

The two leaders agreed to put the dispute behind them during Friday's meeting, with Zardari insisting that the two countries will "stand together" in the face of difficulties.

Mir said: "I think that what president Zardari has done is defuse a very, very tense situation.

"When he goes back I'm sure he will be directing his intelligence chiefs and others to resume the meeting that was cancelled."

Alan Fisher, Al Jazeera's correspondent outside the meeting venue, said both sides needed to get past the dispute to "frame the ongoing relationship" between the two countries.

"Both sides realise that they need to cool the temperature ... because there has been a war of words over the last week or so."

The Pakistani Taliban, which is loosely based in the tribal regions close to the Afghan border, was allegedly involved in the failed Times Square car bombing in New York and a suicide attack on a CIA base in December in Afghanistan that killed seven CIA employees. (Al Jazeera)

INDIA / HINDISTAN

- Moderate separatists in Indian-administered Kashmir have turned down an offer from the government to enter into fresh talks.

The decision on Saturday follows weeks of violent protests against the central government in the region, which have left 49 people dead.

The majority of those killed were young men and teenagers who were shot dead by the police. About 30 people have died in just over a week.

Demonstrations were ignited when a teenager was killed by a police tear-gas shell in June.

On Friday, P Chidambaram, the home minister, said that the government was ready to hold talks with the separatists in the Muslim-majority state.

he move was apparently made to ease tensions during the unrest.

However, Mirwaiz Umar Farooq, one of the leaders of the separatists who oppose Indian-rule in Kashmir, rejected the offer.

Farooq said that the current protests are in support of ending Indian rule of Kashmir.

"Where is the scope for engagement, when a reign of terror has been let loose by them against a people for demanding their basic right?" Farooq said.

He has previously entered into talks with the central government.

During those negotiations Farooq has asked for the removal of troops in the region and the release of political prisoners. However, he now says that those demands have not been met, undermining any potential talks.

A curfew in the area, imposed last week, was briefly lifted on Saturday in Srinagar, the main city.

Shops reportedly ran out of supplies during the two-hour break in the curfew as residents scrambled for goods. (Al Jazeera)

AFGHANISTAN / AFGANİSTAN

- More than 1,300 civilians have been killed in Afghanistan so far this year, mostly by Taliban insurgents, a leading Afghan rights group said Sunday.

Taliban militants were responsible for about 68 percent of the 1,325 deaths while Afghan and NATO troops were to blame for 23 percent, Afghanistan's Independent Human Rights Commission said.

Violent but "unknown factors" killed the rest, it said.

The new toll shows a five percent increase over the same period last year, the group said, citing a nationwide count of civilian casualties by its regional offices, senior commissioner Nader Nadery told reporters.

Most of the casualties caused by the insurgents were killed by improvised explosive devices, the Taliban's weapon of choice which is also responsible for most military deaths in Afghanistan.

Nadery said fewer people had died in NATO-led airstrikes but more had been killed in rocket attacks targeting insurgents, but he did not give figures.

Civilian casualties have become a critical issue in the nearly nine-year Afghan war and reducing the number of such incidents is seen as crucial to a US-led counter-insurgency strategy designed to end the conflict. (Ashraq Alawsat)

- Six Americans and two other foreigners on a medical mission were shot and killed by the Taliban who ambushed their vehicles in a remote part of northern Afghanistan, a charity said Saturday.

Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid told The Associated Press in Pakistan that they killed the foreigners because they were "spying for the Americans" and "preaching Christianity."

Dirk Frans, director of the International Assistance Mission, said the eight-member medical team, which also included one German, one Briton and two Afghan interpreters,

was driving to Kabul from an eye clinic in northeastern Nuristan province when they were killed in Badakhshan province to the north.

The group had decided to head through Badakhshan to return to the capital because they thought that would be the safest route, Frans said.

"This tragedy negatively impacts our ability to continue serving the Afghan people as IAM has been doing since 1966," according to a statement released by the nonprofit Christian organization. "We hope it will not stop our work that benefits over a quarter of a million Afghans each year."

Among the dead was team leader Tom Little, an optometrist from Delmar, New York who has been working in Afghanistan for more than 30 years, Frans said.

Little was expelled by the Taliban government in August 2001 after the arrest of eight Christian aid workers — two Americans and six Germans — for allegedly trying to convert Afghans to Christianity. He returned to Afghanistan after the Taliban government was toppled in November 2001 by U.S.-backed forces.

Provincial police chief Gen. Agha Noor Kemtuz said the victims, who had been shot, were found Friday next to three bullet-riddled four-wheel drive vehicles in Kuran Wa Munjan district. He said villagers had warned the team that the area was dangerous, but the foreigners said they were doctors and weren't afraid. He said local police said about 10 gunmen robbed them and killed them one by one.

He said the two Afghan interpreters were from Bamiyan and Panjshir provinces. A third Afghan man, who had been traveling with the group, survived.

"He told me he was shouting and reciting the holy Quran and saying 'I am Muslim. Don't kill me,'" Kemtuz said.

Kemtuz said the survivor told him that the group was surrounded by gunmen and then attacked. Kemtuz speculated that robbery could have been a motive in the killings.

"We couldn't find any passports or anything," he said. "Nothing was left behind." (Ashraq Alawsat)

- Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on Thursday hosted a mini-summit with his Afghan and Tajik counterparts, Hamid Karzai and Emomali Rakhmon, and denounced the deployment of foreign troops in Afghanistan.

"Our security is linked. We suffer from what is happening in Afghanistan from an emotional and security point of view," Ahmadinejad said as the three leaders signed two cooperation accords in Tehran.

"The Afghan question must be resolved within the region, and experience has shown that others are unable to solve problems in the region, as they have been unable to do in Iraq," he said of the United States and its allies.

It was the fourth gathering between the tripartite group of Afghanistan, Iran and Tajikistan, which with a combined population of 110 million people share the Farsi language and Persian culture.

Kabul has good relations with Tehran despite being heavily reliant militarily and financially on the United States, which has been at loggerheads with the Islamic republic for decades.

Secret US military documents posted on whistleblower website WikiLeaks suggest that Iran provides hefty support to insurgents fighting US-led troops in Afghanistan. Ahmadinejad has denied the allegations.

In a joint statement on Thursday, the three presidents pledged to boost cooperation in transport and business as well as in "the fight against terrorism and drugs trafficking."

They also agreed Kabul would host their next round of talks. (Ashraq Alawsat)

- A senior adviser to the Afghan president has told Al Jazeera that the government has begun talking to some Taliban leaders and a number have left the insurgency.

"I see it [the reintegration] as a good, positive, momentum," Masoon Stanekzai, a senior adviser to Hamid Karzai, the president, said.

"But let's wait and be patient for awhile," he told Al Jazeera, refusing to provide exact details about how the programme was working or where it is taking place.

Karzai has repeatedly stressed his desire to bring "moderate" elements of the Taliban and other armed groups in the country into the political process in they lay down their arms.

International donors have backed the plan, which offers support for those Taliban fighters who come over to the government side.

Al Jazeera's James Bays, reporting from Kabul, said that the comments marked the first time a senior government official had said that fighters were actually coming to talk to the government about changing sides.

But he said that Stanekzai was "worried that if he gave specific geographic areas, specific villages and towns, then the Taliban may focus on those areas and take their revenge on those who had changed sides".

The concerns show the influence that Taliban and other armed groups still wield in Afghanistan, almost nine years after a US-led invasion forced them from power in Kabul.

Plans to bring the so-called moderate Taliban onto the government side were discussed at a peace conference or "jirga" in Kabul, the capital, in June.

The meeting of elders and officials was seen as a national attempt to end the worsening violence and years of war and foreign interference.

The success of the jirga's plan "depends very much on the support of the whole Afghan nation," Stanekzai said.

Al Jazeera's Bays said that "a huge government trust fund," was set-up at that jirga which can be used to buy off the so-called ten-dollar Taliban, who fight because they do not have jobs or income.

Nato countries and their allies say they are trying to find employment alternatives, so low-level fighters can walk-away from the conflict.

The United Nations security council has removed 10 Taliban names from a blacklist of people affiliated with the Taliban in a move some say is designed to convince low-level fighters that they can leave the organisation without sanction.

The peace jirga had asked for the security council move as part of its reconciliation plans.
(Al Jazeera)

**This media summary is prepared by ORSAM Middle East Research Assistants Sercan Doğan and Nebahat Tanrıverdi O. 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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