



MIDDLE EAST DAILY BULLETIN

GÜNLÜK ORTADOĐU BÜLTENİ

Domestic Policy in the Middle East Countries

Bölge Ülkelerinde İç Siyaset

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1. IRAQ

- **Kurd MP: Constitutional solutions better than forming forces from residents of disputed areas.**

BAGHDAD / NINA / MP of the Kurdistan Alliance, Mehdi Haji called to "continuing dialogue between the Ministries of Defense and the Peshmerga to find constitutional solutions rather than the forming forces of the people in the disputed areas."

He explained in a statement to the National Iraqi News Agency / NINA / "So far there is no formal approval to the proposal of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki to form a force from people in the disputed areas, as well as forming armed forces from the people in this way is a clear violation of the Constitution, and may lead to an additional force, which is not linked to the defense or interior ministries, that may confuse the situation in Kirkuk. "

He added: "We must continue to discuss, in this regard, to be joint checkpoints only in the contact areas between the province and the areas of the federal government, and this leads to a state of reassurance to everyone and security breaches would not happen in the future." / End

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

- **MP accuses the Americans to fail Russian arms deal.**

BAGHDAD / NINA / MP, of the Iraqiya al-Hurra coalition, Alia Nussaif accused the U.S. administration to "work behind the scenes to thwart the Russian arms deal and poisoned relations between Iraq and Russia."

The Information Office of the coalition quoted her as saying that "The Americans have made a major intelligence effort by their agents to thwart the Russian arms deal and played a hidden role to prevent the completion of this deal."

She added: "The United States carried out its plans with the complicity of some political forces to thwart the deal and poison Iraqi-Russian relations."

It is mentioned that financial corruption charges against members of the negotiating team for the purchase of weapons from the Russian side, which led to the cancellation of the deal and dismiss the government spokesman Ali al-Dabbagh, from office. / End

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

- **MP: The direct dialogue between Arbil and Baghdad ensures resolving the political crisis.**

BAGHDAD / NINA / MP, of the state of law coalition, Khalid al-Asadi confirmed that "The direct dialogue between the central government and the Kurdistan region will guarantee the resolution of the political crisis of the / disputed areas /".

He said, in a statement to the National Iraqi News Agency / NINA / "There are positive signs to resolve the current political crisis, towards entering a direct dialogue between the governments of the center and the province through the initiative of the political blocs, which was adapted by the House Speaker Osama al-Nujaifi, and through the contacts of President Jalal Talabani with all political parties, to put constitutional and just solution to this problem."

He added "The relationships between the political parties do not need a mediators or foreign interventions, but need to open direct, technical, security and political dialogue between the Governments of the center and the region."

The head of the House of Representatives had visited Arbil last weekend and met with the President of the Kurdistan region, Massoud Barzani to negotiate with him to find appropriate solutions to end the crisis between the province and the center, and then met Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki upon his return to Baghdad.

The Information Office of the Prime Minister said, in a press statement that "Al-Maliki received al-Nujaifi at his official office. Al-Nujaifi transfer to al-Maliki a preliminary acceptance for his vision for a solution, based on joint checkpoints or rehabilitation a force from the people of mixed areas to manage and maintain security in these areas. / End

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

- **Kurdish lawmaker accuses al-Maliki to continue mobilizing military forces.**

BAGHDAD / NINA / MP, of the Kurdistan Alliance, Sharif Suleiman accused Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki to continue mobilizing the military forces in the disputed areas and near the Kurdistan region.

He said in a statement to the National Iraqi News Agency / NINA /: " continuation of rallying military forces in the disputed areas is a continuation of the escalation by the central government, despite the existence of a Kurdish delegation negotiating in Baghdad in order to solve the crisis and get out of the its consequences."

He added: "The Kurdistan region does not believe in escalation and wants dialogue, not to create crises, because the crisis is resolved through reliance on the many commons that both sides depended on before."

The Presidency of the Kurdistan Region attacked Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, accusing him, in an official statement yesterday, that he fabricate crises and excludes his political partners.

The Second Deputy Speaker, Arif Tayfur asked the U.S. President Barack Obama to intervene immediately to: "prevent the Iraqi army from using the U.S. weapons against the Kurdish people."

In the meantime, Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki had met on Thursday with a delegation of the Peshmerga in the headquarters of the Ministry of Defence in the presence of Saadoun al-Dulaimi, The acting Minister of Defense and discussed with them the developments of the crisis between the central government and the province./ End

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

- **Maliki downplays the importance of Muqtada's statement on arms deal.**

BAGHDAD / NINA / Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki downplayed the importance of the statement of Muqtada al-Sadr, the leader of the Sadrist movement on arms deal.

The Information Office of the Prime Minister, said in a press statement that "al-Maliki received a question in the communication window with journalists, on the statement of Muqtada al-Sadr in last week about the Iraqi arming deals, which included a number of serious charges, where Muqtada's statement stated that the purchase of arms should be for Iraq not for others. "

Maliki said, according to the statement: "Such statement is no longer important for being contradictory, where words do not match with the behavior."

He added, that: "For weapons and arming the Iraqi army, those who fired these accusations, they should prove legally or face the consequences of their accusations." / End

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

- **Araji accuses politicians of creating crises to achieve electoral gains**

Baghdad (AIN) -MP Zuhair al-Araji of the Hurra Iraqiya Coalition accused some political sides of creating crises to achieve electoral gains.

Araji stated to All Iraq News Agency (AIN) "The creation of crises and arousing problems by some political sides aims at getting electoral gains."

"The people now became aware enough and do not pay attention to what is claimed by the officials, so they will be able, through the upcoming local elections, to get rid of some figures which accompanied the political process over the past years," he added. /End/

http://www.alliraqnews.com/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=24256:araji-accuses-politicians-of-creating-crises-to-achieve-electoral-gains-&catid=35:political&Itemid=2

- **Maliki: Iraq not to be distinguished by one community, sect**

Baghdad (AIN) –The Premier, Nouri al-Maliki, assured that Iraq is one country and one people that cannot be distinguished by one community or sect for any reason.

A statement by Maliki's office received by AIN cited "Maliki received a delegation of the citizens of Kirkuk province where he confirmed that the settlements of the crises in Iraq will not be complete without treating all the citizens with justice and equality regardless their communities whether they were Kurds, Arabs or Turkmen.

"Our duty is not to allow any one to oppress the citizens by violating their rights," Maliki added, assuring that "Our interest as Iraqis is to build Iraq in all the areas without distinction and the constitution is the source which we have to consult on all the crisis in all the areas."

"It is not for the benefit of anyone to make the sectarian crises, but it is our interest to live peacefully and united in Iraq," he concluded. /End/

http://www.alliraqnews.com/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=24252:maliki-iraq-not-to-be-distinguished-by-one-community-sect-&catid=35:political&Itemid=2

2. IRAN

- **Iranian warships dock in Sudan, sparking Israeli concern**

Two Iranian warships docked in Port Sudan on Saturday, a witness said, marking the second port call by the Iranian navy in Sudan in five weeks.

The Iranian navy said the 1,400 ton frigate Jamaran and the 4,700 ton support ship Bushehr “docked in Port Sudan, after successfully carrying out their assignments in the Red Sea and were greeted by high-ranking Sudanese naval commanders.”

It did not say how long the warships would stay in port.

Khartoum said it was a “normal” port call but Israeli officials have expressed concern about arms smuggling through Sudan.

They have long accused the African country of serving as a base of support for militants from the Palestinian Islamist movement Hamas which rules the Gaza Strip.

Sudanese army spokesman Sawarmi Khaled Saad had initially announced the warship visit for Nov. 30.

“It is part of diplomatic and military exchanges between the two countries,” and will last for three days, he told reporters on Friday night.

A pair of Iranian navy vessels, the supply ship Kharg and corvette Admiral Naghdi, spent about two days at Port Sudan in late October.

Sudan’s links with Iran have come under scrutiny after Khartoum accused Israel of an Oct. 23 strike against the Yarmouk military factory in the capital, which led to speculation that Iranian weapons were stored or manufactured there.

Israel refused all comment on Sudan’s accusation about the factory blast.

But a top Israeli defence official, Amos Gilad, said Sudan “serves as a route for the transfer, via Egyptian territory, of Iranian weapons to Hamas and Islamic Jihad terrorists.”

Eight days of fighting between Israel and Hamas ended on Nov. 21 with an Egyptian-mediated truce after 174 Palestinians and six Israelis were killed.

The Jewish state has accused Iran of supplying Hamas with its Fajr 5 missile, used to target Tel Aviv during the conflict.

Khartoum said Israel was spreading “fabricated information” about links between the Yarmouk military factory, Hamas and Iran.

Sudan’s foreign ministry denied Iran had any involvement in the plant.

On Tuesday, Foreign Minister Ali Karti said Sudan welcomes the navies of any country, “except Israel.”

A Pakistani frigate visited Port Sudan in late November.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/12/09/254116.html>

- **‘Iran hopes for peace, stability in Syria’**

Iran's Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi has expressed hope that the ongoing crisis in Syria would soon be resolved and peace and security would be restored in the Arab country.

“We hope Syria’s problem would soon be resolved and we would witness peace and stability in the country,” Salehi said in a meeting with Syria’s newly-appointed Ambassador to Tehran Adnan Mahmoud on Sunday.

Syria has been experiencing unrest since mid-March 2011. Many people, including large numbers of security personnel, have been killed in the violence.

The Iranian foreign minister also attached importance to the expansion and reinforcement of strategic ties between Tehran and Damascus.

Mahmoud, for his part, lauded the strategic relations between Iran and Syria and expressed hope for the enhancement of the ties between the two countries during his tenure.

During the meeting, Mahmoud also submitted his credentials to the Iranian foreign minister.

In a separate meeting with outgoing South African Ambassador to Iran Ebrahim Mohammad Sali on Sunday, Salehi expressed Tehran's readiness to expand ties with Pretoria in various economic, cultural and trade fields.

The top Iranian diplomat said establishing ties with all African nations is a top priority in the Islamic Republic's foreign policy.

Reiterating the peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear energy program, Salehi censured the West for politicizing the issue.

"Westerners, who have turned technical issues into a political one, have realized the important point that this trend cannot be sustained and they should revise their approach."

Sali, for his part, said that his country fully backs the legitimate rights of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) signatories to use peaceful nuclear energy.

The United States, Israel and some of their allies have repeatedly accused Iran of pursuing non-civilian objectives in its nuclear energy program.

Iran rejects the allegations, arguing that as a committed signatory to the NPT and a member of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), it is entitled to develop and acquire nuclear technology for peaceful purposes.

Further saying that his country seeks to make use of Iran's experiences in various fields, the outgoing South African ambassador called for the expansion of Tehran-Pretoria economic cooperation.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/10/277199/iran-hopes-for-peace-in-syria/>

- **Iran Majlis set to make 'important changes' to presidential electoral law**

Iran's Majlis (Parliament) is set to make some important changes to the Islamic Republic's presidential electoral law.

"Election law needed to be reformed. The changes to the composition of the provincial executive board will definitely help the Interior Ministry during the whole process of elections," Iranian lawmaker Laleh Eftekhari has told Press TV.

Last week, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad criticized the planned changes, saying the amendments would pave the way for the parliament's interference in the electoral process.

Iranian MP Moayyed Hosseini Sadr said, "By the new amendments to election law, we do not mean to task the parliament with holding the elections. In fact, it is the executive board, comprising the interior minister, the board of trustees, and civil servants, which supervises the electoral process. Therefore, it is not true that the MPs want to interfere in the electoral process. And these changes are not unconstitutional...It is like saying that the Army interferes in the parliament's affairs by undertaking its security."

The changes will apply to the next presidential elections should they be approved by the parliament.

The president of Iran is elected for a four-year-long term in a national election. Candidates for the presidency must be approved by the Guardian Council.

Iranians will choose their seventh president to succeed Ahmadinejad in the next year's election, which is scheduled for June 14, 2013.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/10/277166/iran-majlis-set-to-change-election-law/>

- **Iran not breaking under Western sanctions: Ahmadinejad**

Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad says unilateral sanctions imposed against the Islamic Republic are childish and cannot break the Iranian nation.

"Iran is a great country with a vast economy and will not break under such problems," Ahmadinejad said in a meeting with the new Irish Ambassador to Tehran Oliver Grogan on Sunday.

The Iranian president added that despite sanctions, it is evident today that European countries have more economic problems than Iran.

The US, Israel and some of their allies falsely claim that Tehran is pursuing non-civilian objectives in its nuclear energy program. The US and European Union have used this unfounded accusation as a pretext to impose international and unilateral sanctions against Iran.

Tehran rejects the allegations against its nuclear energy activities, arguing that as a committed signatory to Non-Proliferation Treaty and a member of International Atomic Energy Agency, it has the right to use nuclear technology for peaceful purposes.

Ahmadinejad emphasized that justice can bring peace, security and friendship to the world, saying that the existing global problems have been caused by those who want to dominate the world.

Ahmadinejad added that there is no dark point in the history of Iran-Ireland relations and the two countries can expand bilateral ties without limitation.

Grogan, for his part, said his country seeks to elevate bilateral ties with the Islamic Republic and is determined to continue relations in a stable and logical manner.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/09/277117/iran-not-breaking-under-west-sanctions/>

- **Morsi's opponents served Mubarak for years: Iranian official**

TEHRAN, Dec. 10 (MNA) – Ali Akbar Velayati, a senior advisor to the Supreme Leader, has said that Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi's opponents had served former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak for years.

"Today's protestors in Egypt had served Hosni Mubarak, who had made Egypt a slave of the Israeli regime, for years, and these people are now confronting Mohamed Morsi" Velayati, who is the director of the Permanent Secretariat of the World Assembly of the Islamic Awakening, said on Sunday.

Over the past few weeks, opposition supporters in Egypt have staged rallies outside the presidential palace to protest both a draft constitution, which they say is biased toward Morsi's Islamist supporters, and a November 22 presidential decree that gives him powers unchecked by the courts, according to Bloomberg.

It was announced on Saturday that the decree, which had exempted Morsi's decisions from judicial review, had been revoked.

Commenting on the Islamic Awakening, Velayati, who formerly served as Iran's foreign minister, said that Western countries invented the term "Arab Spring" to describe uprisings in the Arab world in order to prevent the spread of Islamism.

“The Arab Spring means a revived Pan-Arabism, but the slogans being chanted in the streets of Arab countries are Islamic,” he explained.

<http://www.mehrnews.com/en/newsdetail.aspx?NewsID=1762271>

- **Iranian president calls for economic centralization**

TEHRAN, Dec. 9 (MNA) -- Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad put forward economic proposals at a meeting of the Expediency Council held on Saturday, according to EC Secretary Mohsen Rezaii.

During a press conference in Tehran on Saturday, Rezaii said that Ahmadinejad made a series of suggestions regarding the centralization of the country’s economy.

He said that the Expediency Council has finished studying the general policies concerning national production and supporting Iranian labor and capital and has also received the economic proposals from the president.

Replying to a question about the details of Ahmadinejad’s proposals, Rezaii said that the EC economic committee will hold a meeting with the president to study the suggestions.

<http://www.mehrnews.com/en/newsdetail.aspx?NewsID=1761242>

3. SYRIA

- **Syrian rebels elect new military commander**

AMMAN (Reuters) - Syrian rebel groups have chosen a former officer to head a new Islamist-dominated command, in a Western-backed effort to put the opposition's house in order as President Bashar al-Assad's army takes hits that could usher his downfall.

In Turkey, a newly formed joint command of Syrian rebel groups has chosen Brigadier Selim Idris, one of hundreds of officers who have defected from Assad's army, as its head, opposition sources said on Saturday.

Idris, whose home province of Homs has been at the forefront of the Sunni Muslim-led uprising, was elected by 30 military and civilian members of the joint military command after talks attended by Western and Arab security officials in the Turkish city of Antalya.

The unified command includes many with ties to the Muslim Brotherhood and to Salafists, who follow a puritanical interpretation of Islam. It excludes the most senior officers who have defected from Assad's military.

On the Damascus battlefield, Assad's forces used multiple rocket launchers on Saturday against several suburbs that have fallen to rebels who have fought their way to the edge of the city's international airport, where foreign carriers have suspended all flights.

Rebels, who have overrun several army bases near Damascus over the last month, appeared to be holding their ground, encircling a main military base in the northeastern suburb of Harasta, known as "idarat al markabat", near the main highway to Aleppo, according to opposition campaigners.

"The fighters made slight progress today. They captured a weapons depot and got to a tank repair facility in the base, but all 20 tanks inside were inoperational," said Abu Ghazi, a rebel who was speaking from the area.

"The weather cleared and MiG fighters hit rebel positions around the base. Rocket launchers did not stop for the last three days. The site is crucial for the regime," he added.

BOMBARDMENT NEAR AIRPORT

Heavy army bombardment was also reported on the town of Harran al-Awamid near the airport, which is 20 kilometers southeast of Damascus, and on the suburb of Hajar al-Aswad, at the southern entrance of the capital, which has been at the forefront of the Sunni-led revolt against Assad.

Western officials have begun speaking about faster change on the ground in a conflict that is becoming increasingly sectarian and deepening the Shi'ite-Sunni fault lines in the Middle East, a hallmark of politics in the region since the 1979 Iranian revolution.

Like his father, the late President Hafez al-Assad who ruthlessly put down an Islamist challenge, the younger Assad is portraying himself as the only hope for survival of the Alawite minority, an offshoot of Shi'ite Islam that has dominated power in majority Sunni Syria since the 1960s.

Moscow, Assad's strongest foreign backer, and Washington, which says it supplies only "non-lethal" aid to the rebels, sounded downbeat about the prospects of a diplomatic push to end the conflict after talks this week.

The head of Germany's foreign intelligence agency said Assad's government is its final stages and will be unable to survive as more parts of the country slip from his control.

"Armed rebels are coordinating better, which is making their fight against Assad more effective," Gerhard Schindler told the Frankfurter Allgemeinen Sonntagszeitung newspaper, in an interview made public on Saturday.

"Assad's regime will not survive. "Evidence is mounting that the regime in Damascus is now in its final phase," Schindler said

Setbacks for the Alawite-led military, whose core units are stationed in Damascus and on hill tops surrounding the capital, have raised Western concerns that the ruling elite may use chemical weapons to turn the tide of the war.

In a letter to the United Nations Security Council published by official state media, the Syrian foreign ministry said "Syria will not use chemical weapons under any circumstances".

"We are seriously afraid that some countries that support terrorism would supply chemical weapons to the terrorist armed groups and claim that the Syrian government is the one that is using them," the letter said.

<http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&id=32104>

- **End drawing close for Syria's Assad-German spy chief**

BERLIN, (Reuters) - Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's government is its final stages and will be unable to survive as more parts of the country slip from his control, the head of Germany's foreign intelligence agency (BND) said.

"Armed rebels are co-ordinating better, which is making their fight against Assad more effective," Gerhard Schindler told the Frankfurter Allgemeinen Sonntagszeitung newspaper, in an interview made public on Saturday.

"Assad's regime will not survive."

Rebels fighting to topple Assad declared Damascus International Airport a battle zone on Friday, while Moscow and Washington both sounded downbeat about the prospects of a diplomatic push to end the conflict after talks.

Fighting around the capital city has intensified over the past week, and Western officials have begun speaking about faster change on the ground in a 20-month-old conflict that has killed 40,000 people.

"Evidence is mounting that the regime in Damascus is now in its final phase," Schindler said.

Although neither Assad nor the rebels had been able to take the upper hand, Assad was losing control of more and more parts of the country, and was focusing his energy on defending Damascus, key military sites and airports, Schindler added.

Schindler's comments echoed remarks made yesterday by U.S. ambassador to Syria Robert Ford, who was withdrawn last year.

<http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&id=32101>

- **Syrian rebels set sights on Damascus airport**

BEIRUT, (AP) — Syrian rebels fighting to topple President Bashar Assad set their sights Friday on the capital's international airport in a bid to cut off the regime's supplies, clashing with government troops nearby and again forcing the closure of the airport road.

A fighter who is part of the push against Damascus International Airport declared it a legitimate target, claiming that the regime has stationed troops and elite forces there as well as military planes that transport ammunition.

Losing control of the airport would be a major blow to the regime, which has recently lost two air bases near the capital.

It was unclear just how close to the airport, a few kilometers (miles) south of the capital, the battles reached. Fighting has intensified in the past week in the southern districts of the Syrian capital and its suburbs.

"The rebels have made major military gains, and have been fighting closer to the regime's nerve center, which is the airport, for days, systematically chipping away at the political and military power off the Assad regime," said Fawaz A. Gerges, head of the Middle East Center at the London School of Economics.

The clashes around Damascus, a city of 1.7 million, have already forced the suspension of commercial flights over the past week, although airport officials insist the facility remains open and was functioning normally on Friday.

Rebels said they were targeting the airport in an effort to cut military supplies to the government.

"This would send a very strong political message to the regime. It will be a moral victory, to say the least," said the fighter, who gave only his first name, Nour, for security reasons. "The battle to cut off the regime supplies from the airport has started."

Another rebel, speaking on condition of anonymity for the same reason, said the airport is now considered a "military zone."

"We urge civilians to stay away," said the rebel, a member of the Damascus area military command involved in Friday's fighting.

Iran and Russia are widely believed to be supplying the Assad regime with weapons through the airport.

Tehran has not given details of its direct military aid to Assad's regime but has acknowledged that Revolutionary Guard envoys have been advisers in the past.

Moscow has rejected Western sanctions against Assad's regime and said it would honor earlier signed weapons contracts with Syria for the delivery of anti-shiping and air defense missiles. The Kremlin insists that the Russian arms sales don't violate any international agreements.

At talks in Belfast, Northern Ireland, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said Friday that the United States and Russia are committed to trying again to get Assad's regime and the rebel opposition to talk about a political transition, setting aside a year and a half of U.S.-Russian disagreements that have paralyzed the international community.

Clinton stressed, however, that the U.S. would insist once again that Assad's departure be a key part of that transition, a position not shared by the Russians.

On Friday, Syrian government forces were firing rockets and mortars at suburbs south of Damascus amid heavy clashes with rebels, according to activists. Most of the fighting was taking place in the towns of Aqraba and Beit Saham near the airport.

An airport official said the highway leading to the facility was closed Friday because of the fighting. The official said, however, that the airport was functioning as normal and that people were reaching it through side roads.

The official declined to be identified because he was not authorized to give official statements.

Meanwhile, video posted online by activists showed rebels with a helicopter they claim to have captured from the Syrian army in an air base outside of Damascus.

"Your days are few, run away because we are coming to you, Bashar," one of the rebels is heard saying on the video that was posted Friday. The activist video appeared genuine and in line with Associated Press reporting.

The fresh violence around the capital, including near the airport, comes amid growing international concerns about the use of chemical weapons in the civil war.

Syria has not confirmed it has non-conventional weapons, and insists it would never use such arms against its own people. U.S. officials say intelligence suggests the government does have the weapons and has moved some of its stockpiles in recent days.

U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon renewed a call for Syria not to use chemical weapons, saying Friday the move would amount to an "outrageous crime" against humanity.

Speaking to reporters after visiting Syrian refugee camps in Jordan and Turkey, he also called for an end to the violence.

"The slaughter in Syria must stop," Ban said. "The military path is a dead end. It only fills the streets with more blood."

<http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&id=32093>

- **Syrian Free Army names Salim Idris new chief of staff**

The opposition Free Syrian Army elected a new military command, replacing Colonel Riad al-Asaad with Brigadier General Salim Idris, Al Arabiya television reported early on Monday

Idris told Al Arabiya in a telephone interview that the new command was elected by hundreds of rebels. Because they "are the real fighters on the ground, they decided to choose who leads them in the battle against Bashar al-Assad."

The unified command includes many with ties to the Muslim Brotherhood and to Salafists, who follow a puritanical interpretation of Islam. It excludes the most senior officers who have defected from Assad's military, according to Reuters.

On the Damascus battlefield, Assad's forces used multiple rocket launchers on Saturday against several suburbs that have fallen to rebels who have fought their way to the edge of the city's international airport, where foreign carriers have suspended all flights.

Opposition fighters, who have overrun several army bases near Damascus over the last month, appeared to be holding their ground, encircling a main military base in the northeastern suburb of Harasta, known as "idarat al markabat," near the main highway to Aleppo, according to opposition campaigners.

On Sunday seized control of a sector of Sheikh Suleiman base west of Aleppo, bringing them closer to holding a large swathe of territory extending to the Turkish border in the north.

The fighters took control of Regiment 111 and three other company posts located inside the base after fierce fighting overnight, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

“Two rebels and one soldier were killed, while five soldiers were captured. The prisoners said that 140 of their men had fled to the scientific research center on the base,” Observatory director Rami Abdel Rahman told AFP.

Sheikh Suleiman sprawls over nearly 200 hectares (500 acres) of rocky hills about 25 kilometres (15 miles) from Aleppo city, an area now almost completely under rebel control.

Elsewhere in northern Syria, 10 were reported killed in regime shelling of the town of Maraayan, while five civilians, including a child, were killed as Ahsam village in Idlib province was shelled, the Observatory said.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/12/10/254251.html>

- **Video shows traces of chemical weapons used against civilians in Syria**

Global concerns over Syria’s chemical weapons stockpiles grew after U.S. officials this week privately said the regime had begun mixing chemicals that could be used for the lethal nerve agent sarin.

On Saturday, Syrian told the United Nations that it would never use chemical weapons against its peoples and warned that opposition fighters are the ones who could use chemical weapons.

But videos uploaded on the web by activists proved otherwise.

The video showed the destruction caused by what they identified as chemical weapons. They said the fire was caused by a tank dropped from a Syrian warplane and was uncontrollable by either water or dirt and was releasing toxic substance as it was bubbling underneath the ground.

In another video, armed opposition captured equipment used as a protection against chemical weapons or gases.

Some media reports said that the substance had been loaded into bombs for warplanes.

British Foreign Secretary William Hague said on Saturday there was evidence the Syrian government could actually employ chemical weapons against the insurgency as an effort to try and contain the conflict which resulted in the death of 42,000 people in nearly 21 months.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/12/09/254218.html>

- **Nine Syrian judges defect amid opposition gains**

Nine Syrian judges and prosecutors have defected in a video posted on online as opposition gains on the frontlines have helped drive a surge of diplomatic efforts among Gulf Arab states and the West to support the opposition and its newly-formed umbrella group.

The Britain-based Observatory for Human Rights says the latest defectors from the regime of President Bashar Assad come from the northern city of Adlib.

In video statement, posted On YouTube Sunday, the nine judges identify themselves by name as one of them reads a joint statement and urges others to break ranks with Assad.

Many government officials and army officers have abandoned the regime to join the opposition since the uprising started in March 2011.

Ex-Prime Minister Riad Hijab is the most senior Syrian official to defect so far.

Damascus has become a focal point of battles over the past week, as rebels effectively shut the international airport by clashing with Assad's forces near there. Foreign flights have been suspended and residents say the airport road is closed.

Rebels who have called their campaign "Operation Opening the Road to Damascus", uploaded video on Sunday that showed heavy gunbattles and explosions rocking several rural towns around the capital. The video also showed rebels firing a fully functioning tank which they had captured from the army.

But there is no clear winner yet in a battle where neither side seems to have advanced. The Syrian army has claimed many successes around the capital, airing footage on state television of soldiers raiding parts of the rebel stronghold of Deraya.

“Our noble forces in Deraya have destroyed some of the terrorist dens used by al Qaeda terrorists to store weapons and other criminal tools,” said a report on Syria TV, which usually refers to rebels as terrorists. “Many terrorists were killed.”

Syria’s opposition is dominated by members of the country’s Sunni minority. Assad’s regime is predominantly Alawite, an offshoot group of Shiite Islam.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/12/10/254286.html>

4. ISRAEL-PALESTINE

- **'Israel to pay high price over settlements'**

Former Israeli Premier Ehud Olmert says the Israeli regime will have to “pay a high price” over the settlement policies of incumbent Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

"Bibi Netanyahu is isolating Israel from the entire world in an unprecedented way, and we will pay a high price in every facet of our lives, and the Israeli public should know it," Olmert said on Saturday.

On November 30, Israel approved a plan to build 3,000 more units in East al-Quds (Jerusalem) and the West Bank, including in the controversial E1 area, in what is widely seen as a response to the UN recognition of Palestine as a non-member observer state the previous day.

Olmert added that Israel’s announcement of the settlement plans that came after the US objected to the upgrading of Palestine’s status at the UN General Assembly was a slap in the face of Tel Aviv’s main ally.

Many countries have censured the Tel Aviv regime over the settlement expansion plan. At least eight countries have summoned Israeli ambassadors in the past week to protest the plan, including such close Israeli allies as Germany, Italy and Britain.

Swedish Minister for Foreign Affairs Carl Bildt also slammed the move as “pure vengeance against the Palestinians following the UN vote.”

Meanwhile, the United States urged Israel to "reconsider these unilateral decisions and exercise restraint as these actions are counterproductive and make it harder to resume direct negotiations.”

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/09/277041/israel-to-pay-high-price-over-settlements/>

- **‘Israel settlement expansion bid bares Bibi political insecurity’**

Tel Aviv’s plan to construct more illegal settlement units on occupied Palestinian lands has exposed the ‘political insecurity’ of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, a new report says.

Citing Israeli analysts, the Friday report accused Netanyahu of trying to “cement support among those Israeli Jews who have considered forgoing voting for his right wing Likud movement and instead choosing more radical, pro-settler parties”.

On November 30, Israel approved a plan to build 3,000 more units in East al-Quds(Jerusalem) and the West Bank, including in the controversial E1 area, in response to the UN recognition of Palestine as a non-member observer state the previous day.

The report highlighted that the move announced by the Israeli prime minister was also aimed at testing Tel Aviv’s Western allies to assess how much support Israel could lose if it goes ahead with Jewish settlements.

The premier "is probably preserving for himself the option of retreating when he sees that international allies are starting to be serious" in their condemnation of the settlement plans and possible sanctions against Israel, the report quoted an Israeli analyst as saying.

Many countries have censured the Tel Aviv's regime over the settlement expansion plan. At least eight countries have summoned Israeli ambassadors in the past week to protest the plan, including close allies such as Germany, Italy and Britain.

The report added that Netanyahu's decision last month to launch an eight-day military operation in the Gaza Strip was also "at least partly attributed by commentators to his ambition to gain support from the right", as he is uncertain of his political standing among right-wingers.

More than half a million Israelis live in over 120 settlements built since the 1967 Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories of the West Bank and East al-Quds(Jerusalem).

The settlements are considered illegal by the UN and much of the international community.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/08/276932/israel-settler-units-bare-bibi-insecurities/>

- **Israel approaching collapse: Iranian commander**

Following the victory of the Gaza Strip over Israel during the eight-day war against the Palestinian coastal enclave, an Iranian commander says the Tel Aviv regime is on the brink of collapse and cannot stand against the Palestinian resistance.

"The trend of the victories of the resistance during the 33-day, 22-day and 8-day wars showed that the Zionist regime (Israel) is losing its strength, and its capability to resist the [Palestinian] resistance attacks is declining," Brigadier General Mohammad Hejazi, Deputy Commander of the of Iran's Armed Forces Chief of Staff, told IRNA on Saturday.

He added that Israel's current situation indicates "the failure of the policies of this fake regime" and stated that the Zionist officials could not even imagine the victory of the Palestinian Islamic resistance in the Gaza Strip.

The Iranian commander emphasized that American and Western experts have repeatedly announced that there would be no trace of the Israeli regime within the next 10 years and this shows that they have also heard Israel's death knells.

He noted that the Tel Aviv regime faced defeat in the "unequal war" against the defenseless and oppressed people of Gaza and Lebanon despite its possession of "the most advanced military equipment."

Over 160 Palestinians, including women and children, were killed and about 1,200 others were injured in the Israeli attacks on the Gaza Strip from November 14 to 21. In retaliation, Palestinian resistance fighters fired rockets and missiles into Israeli cities, killing at least five Israelis.

The violence ended after the Israeli regime and the Palestinian resistance movement, Hamas, agreed to an Egyptian-brokered ceasefire.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/08/276833/israel-on-verge-of-downfall-iran-cmdr/>

- **Gazans naming newborns after Iran's Fajr-5 missiles**

Palestinian parents in the Gaza strip are naming their newborn babies after Iranian-made Fajr-5 rockets as a way to show gratitude to the Islamic Republic for its support during the recent eight-day Israeli war, Press TV reports.

Muhammad al-Shafi'i Abu Nassat, a Gazan father named his newborn baby Fajr on Friday to show his appreciation to Iran for providing the resistance with the rockets that "struck the enemy for eight days," Gazan Media reported.

In Northern Gaza, a Palestinian mother also named her child Fajr, saying she picked out the name even before she went into labor last week.

Amira Abu Assus said that her child would have "a bright future within the Palestinian resistance. He would carry the rockets whose names he bears so as to free Palestine from Israeli occupation."

Iran supplied the Palestinian resistance movement with the technology to develop Fajr-5 rockets, which hit Tel Aviv and al-Quds (Jerusalem).

The rockets were fired from the Gaza Strip in response to an Israeli onslaught on the besieged territory from November 14 to 21, 2012, in which over 160 Palestinians, including women and children, were killed and about 1,200 others were injured.

On November 21, Egypt announced that the Israeli regime and the Palestinian resistance movement, Hamas, had reached a ceasefire agreement under which the Palestinians and Israelis agreed to end all hostilities.

The Gaza Strip has been under an Israeli blockade since June 2007, which has resulted in mass unemployment, extreme poverty and food price hikes.

The Israeli regime has repeatedly refused to lift the Gaza Strip blockade.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/08/276937/gazans-naming-kids-after-fajr5-missiles/>

- **Resistance only way to liberate Palestine: Hamas**

Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal says resistance is the only way to liberate Palestine and Palestinians will not make any concession on a single inch of their land.

"Palestine is ours from the river to the sea and from the south to the north. There will be no concession on an inch of the land," Meshaal said Friday in a fiery speech during his first ever visit to Gaza in 45 years.

The Hamas political bureau chief also stressed that resistance is the only way to achieve liberation from the Israeli occupation.

"We will never recognize the legitimacy of the Israeli occupation and therefore there is no legitimacy for Israel, no matter how long it will take," he added.

The visit comes just two weeks after an Egyptian-brokered ceasefire put an end to the eight-day Israeli war on Gaza which killed over 160 Palestinians.

Hamas Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh also addressed the crowd and said the victory over Israel's November war, among other things, was achieved due to unity among all resistance factions.

Tens of Thousands of Palestinians gathered in Gaza on Friday to celebrate their recent victory over the Tel Aviv regime in the eight-day Israeli war on the Gaza Strip and the 25th anniversary of the founding of the Hamas resistance movement.

Meshaal is from a village in the occupied West Bank, but he went into exile with his family after the 1967 Middle East war only to return for a brief visit in 1975.

He will use his two-day visit to Gaza to promote the growing stature of Hamas in the Arab world and push the case for reconciliation with the movement's rival in the West Bank, Fatah.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/08/276926/resistance-only-way-to-free-palestine/>

- **Arab states agree on aid for Palestinians**

Arab League foreign ministers have agreed during a meeting to send hundreds of millions of dollars in aid to the Palestinian Authority to make up for punitive measures imposed by the Israeli government after a successful bid for recognition at the United Nations.

The UN General Assembly voted overwhelmingly last month to recognise Palestine as a non-member observer state, an historic though largely symbolic move.

Israel responded by withholding some \$100m per month in taxes and customs duties it collects on behalf of the Palestinian Authority (PA).

The Israeli government said the money will instead go to pay Palestinian debts owed to Israeli companies.

Saeb Erekat, the chief negotiator from the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), an umbrella group of Palestinian political factions, said that Arab states agreed on Sunday in the Qatari capital, Doha, to make up for the shortfall.

"We agreed that Arab states activate a resolution of providing \$100m per month," he said.

"The Qatari prime minister and the Arab League secretary-general will follow up the implementation of this resolution within two weeks."

Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian president, had warned that the PA could collapse without the funds. Many of the authority's employees have not received their full wages for months. "We can't pay the salaries," he said.

'Reconsider the peace process'

Also at the meeting, Qatari officials called for a rethink of the so-called Arab Peace Initiative, a long-stalled 2002 initiative which offered normalisation with Israel in exchange for a withdrawal from the occupied territories and a "just settlement" for Palestinian refugees.

"It is logical after 10 years to objectively reconsider the peace process, including the Arab initiative," Hamad bin Jassim Al Thani, Qatari prime minister, said.

Hamad, who heads the Arab League's follow-up committee on the initiative, said the proposal "would not be on offer forever."

Abbas, for his part, told the ministers in Doha that he opposed withdrawing the plan, warning that it could lead to regional conflict.

"It is not permissible to talk about sidelining the Arab peace initiative. It should stay," he said.

"It is a very important initiative, and I hope we would not talk every time about shelving it, because that would mean war."

Hamad also criticised the Quartet on the Middle East, a diplomatic body made up of the US, the European Union, Russia and the UN, describing it as a "failure, and unable to make any achievements".

He called for a "re-evaluation of its performance".

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/12/2012129134036903903.html>

5. AFRICA and EGYPT

- **Egypt prosecutor orders probe in opposition leaders' 'treason' case**

Egypt's new Prosecutor General, Talaat Abdullah, on Sunday ordered a probe in a complaint against opposition leaders and former presidential candidates Amr Moussa, Mohammed ElBaradei and Hamdeen Sabbahi of grand treason and sedition.

The daily Youm7 newspaper reported that the complaint contained allegations that the three prominent leaders were plotting to overthrow elected President Mohammed Mursi by inciting protests and encouraging protesters to break into the presidential palace.

Founder of the Constitution Party ElBaradei, head of the Conference Party Moussa and founder of the Popular Current Party Sabahy all declared their support and participation in the ongoing sit-in in Cairo's Tahrir Square until Mursi's constitutional decree is revoked.

The complaint against the former presidential candidates, as well as Wafd party leader Sayed Badawi was filed by Hamed Sadek, a lawyer, and it claimed as well that the prominent opposition leaders "secretly met Israel's former foreign minister Tzipi Livni to drum up domestic turmoil and bring the country to its knees."

Egypt tipped into turmoil after Mursi grabbed powers to stop any court action aimed at hindering the transition. An assembly led by the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists then swiftly approved the constitution it had spent six months drafting.

Opponents, including minority Christians, had already quit the assembly in dismay, saying their voices were being ignored.

A leftist group led by defeated presidential candidate Sabahy demanded the referendum be deferred until a consensus could be reached on a new draft, saying there could be "no dialogue while blood is being spilled in the streets."

After the dialogue hosted by Mursi, a spokesman announced that the president had issued a new decree whose first article “cancels the constitutional declaration” of Nov. 22. He said the referendum could not be delayed for legal reasons.

The decree ignited more than two weeks of sometimes bloody protests and counter-rallies in Egypt. Mursi’s foes have chanted for his downfall. Islamists fear a plot to oust the most populous Arab nation’s first freely elected leader.

The April 6 movement, prominent in the anti-Mubarak revolt, derided the result of Saturday’s talks as “manipulation and a continuation of deception in the name of law and legitimacy.”

Islamists reckon they can win the referendum and, once the new constitution is in place, a parliamentary poll about two months later. The Islamist-led lower house elected this year was dissolved after a few months by a court order.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/12/09/254202.html>

- **Brotherhood lawyers fined for withdrawing challenge to Administrative Court judges**

The Administrative Court has fined Muslim Brotherhood lawyers LE1.47 million for withdrawing appeals they had previously filed in an attempt to change the judges set to rule on the legality of President Mohamed Morsy’s 22 November constitutional declaration.

According to Egyptian law, plaintiff and defense lawyers have the right to request a new judges’ panel if they feel an existing panel is partial to one side.

Legal experts argue that Brotherhood lawyers had demanded the judge changes in order to delay a decision on the constitutional decree until a constitutional referendum is held on 15 December. However, the attorneys withdrew their appeals Sunday after Morsy issued a new constitutional declaration the day before, nullifying the 22 November decree. The court decided not to consider the appeals.

The Administrative Court fined the Brotherhood lawyers LE6,000 for each judge they requested changed. Five judges sit on each panel, and 35 appeals were filed in total.

<http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/brotherhood-lawyers-fined-withdrawing-challenge-administrative-court-judges>

- **Egypt opposition rejects referendum, calls for protests**

Egyptian opposition groups have rejected President Mohamed Morsi's referendum, scheduled for mid-December to sound out support for the country's draft constitution, and called for more protests on Tuesday.

The opposition National Salvation Front made the announcement on Sunday, saying, "We do not recognize the draft constitution because it does not represent the Egyptian people."

"The Front calls for demonstrations in the capital and in the regions on Tuesday as a rejection of the president's decision that goes against our legitimate demands," it said in a statement at a news conference.

The statement added that the referendum "will certainly lead to more division and sedition."

The recent development comes as massive protests against Morsi have broken out in the country after he issued a controversial decree on November 22, declaring that no judicial body can dissolve the Constituent Assembly, which was writing the draft.

The decree allowed the president to take "any decision or measure to protect the revolution." It also made decisions and laws issued by the president "final and not subject to appeal."

Former presidential candidate, Mohamed Selim El-Awa told a press conference in Cairo late on Saturday night that Morsi had annulled the decree.

The referendum will be held as planned on December 15, he added.

The Egyptian Armed Forces has urged in a statement, "The path of dialogue is the best and only way to reach agreement and achieve the interests of the nation and its citizens."

The Alliance of Islamist Forces, an umbrella group that includes Morsi's ruling Muslim Brotherhood party, announced on Sunday that it "is calling for a demonstration Tuesday under the slogan 'Yes to legitimacy'" to support the referendum.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/09/277146/egypt-opposition-rejects-referendum/>

- **Islamist-leaning draft constitution divides Egypt**

President Mohammed Mursi is unlikely to worry if Egypt's Islamist-leaning draft constitution passes by only a small margin in a Dec. 15 referendum, since he and his backers tout his 51 percent election victory in June as a "popular mandate" that is beyond any challenge.

Still, an idea taking root among many secular Egyptians is that a constitution requires a reasonable degree of consensus to qualify as a charter for all - and that it is fundamentally illegitimate to ram one through by a simple majority despite opposition from key sectors of society that oppose giving religion such a major role in the affairs of state.

"It is irrational to have a constitution that does not genuinely represent everyone," said Kahlil al-Anani, a British-based expert on Egypt. "It is important that a constitution is passed with a comfortable majority, but it does not make the document less credible if it is a modest majority."

The proposed constitution is at the heart of the nation's worst political crisis since the overthrow nearly two years ago of authoritarian President Hosni Mubarak. The charter has divided Egypt, with Morsi and his Islamist backers, including ultraconservative Salafis, in one camp, and secularists and leftists, including minority Christians and women, in the other.

At least six civilians have been killed in street clashes and several offices of the president's Muslim Brotherhood torched in the unrest.

With such deep polarization, Mursi on Saturday offered the opposition a mixed bag: He rescinded decrees he issued Nov. 22 that gave him near absolute powers, but he insisted the referendum go ahead as scheduled.

The opposition's response was to call for more street protests to try to force him to abandon the draft constitution.

There may only be a small chance of Mursi doing that.

Islamists from the Muslim Brotherhood and other like-minded groups are already campaigning for a "yes" vote, marketing the referendum and the adoption of a constitution as the door to stability and economic recovery. If adopted, elections for parliament's lawmaking lower chamber - dissolved by a court ruling in June - must be held within two months.

The opposition's apparent despair over whether it can stop the referendum from going ahead is deepening the schism between Islamists and non-Islamists. Many Egyptians worry it will produce a constitution that is far from representative of the country's 85 million people.

Critics say Egypt is approaching the referendum with a heavy heart rather than the jubilation that supposedly accompanies an occasion that, at least in theory, should be a milestone in the shift from authoritarian rule to democracy.

"This is a constitution that will not contribute to stability," said prominent rights lawyer Negad Boari. "The president wants the referendum, regardless of the cost. They are creating a religious state that they had long dreamt of and waited for. It is now within reach."

The question of whether to rally a "no" vote" or boycott the referendum is a challenging one for the opposition as it comes under scathing criticism as isolated and motivated by its refusal to accept the position of power gained by the Islamists following a string of electoral wins since Mubarak's ouster in February 2011.

Islamists accuse the opposition of being - knowingly or not - part of a conspiracy by Mubarak loyalists to destabilize Egypt and derail its transition to democratic rule.

An opposition spokesman told a news conference Sunday that it is “completely rejecting” the referendum and would not accord legitimacy to a charter that will further divide the nation. But there was no word whether the opposition was calling for a boycott or urging supporters to cast a “no” vote.

The ambivalence may be a reflection of divisions in the ranks of the opposition. None of its main leaders addressed the news conference.

Urging a “no” vote would give the referendum legitimacy, especially if the draft is passed, as expected. Only a simple majority is needed for adoption.

A boycott would allow the opposition to claim the vote was illegitimate, especially if staying away from the polls significantly reduces turnout.

Not everyone is convinced, however, that the discipline and commitment of the hard-core Islamist voters would deliver the victory Mursi wants, citing his narrow win in June and the 25 percent of the vote he received in the presidential election’s first round, when he ran in a field of 13 of mostly Islamist candidates.

But Mursi, the chief proponent of the document, may have succeeded in the past two weeks in rallying firmly behind him the entire spectrum of Islamist groups, not just his relatively moderate Muslim Brotherhood.

“He faced the choice of losing his credibility or his popularity. He went for the latter,” said al-Anani, alluding to Mursi’s repeated promises in his early days in office that he would never put the constitution to a vote unless it enjoyed consensus.

The problem with the constitution began months before the current political crisis.

The predecessor of the panel that drafted the charter was dissolved when a court ruled that it was not inclusive enough. Similarly, the second one was dominated by Islamists, and the same court was widely expected to dissolve it in a session scheduled for Dec. 2.

In anticipation of such a ruling, the panel - packed with Mursi supporters and chaired by an Islamist - held an all-night session on Nov. 29-30 to adopt the document, voting overwhelmingly in favor of each of its 234 clauses.

Many Egyptians watched the session televised live with a mix of bemusement and horror as the chairman, career judge Hossam al-Ghiryani, doggedly pushed the members to finish, badgering some of them for wasting time arguing some of the clauses. In the session's final hours, several new articles were hastily written and added to resolve lingering issues. On Dec. 1, Al-Ghiryani gave the document to Mursi, who then called for the Dec. 15 referendum.

But the Islamists' job was not done.

They are now using their time-honored tactic of employing religion to influence the vote. That tactic was widely used in a March 2011 referendum on a constitutional declaration that the Islamists supported and again in the election for both chambers of parliament.

They say a "yes" vote is one for God, Islam and the faithful. A "no" vote is portrayed as being against them.

The draft constitution largely reflects the conservative vision of the Islamists, with articles that rights activists, liberals and others fear will lead to restrictions on women and minorities, as well as on civil liberties in general.

One article underlined that the state will protect “the true nature of the Egyptian family ... and promote its morals and values” - phrasing that suggests the state could intervene to prevent anything deemed a threat to families.

The draft also says citizens are equal under the law, but an article specifically establishing women’s equality was dropped because of disputes over the phrasing.

A new article added to the customary mention that “principles of Islamic law” provide the basis of legislation points to theological doctrines and their rules, wording that could give Islamists the tool for insisting on stricter implementation of Shariah rulings.

Another new article states that Egypt’s most respected Islamic institution, al-Azhar, must be consulted on any matters related to Shariah. Critics fear that measure will lead to legislative oversight by clerics.

“This is not the constitution that will turn the page and usher in a new Egypt,” said Hossam Bahgat, a legal expert and human rights lawyer. “The issue of the constitution will continue to be on the political agenda of Egypt with persistent calls to replace it with a more balanced one.”

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/12/10/254226.html>

6. JORDAN and LEBANON

- **Deadly clashes continue in Lebanon's Tripoli**

Clashes linked to the 21-month conflict in Syria have killed four people and wounded 40 others in neighbouring Lebanon, a security official said.

The latest fighting between Sunni Muslims and Alawite co-religionists of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in the northern city of Tripoli on Sunday came as Lebanese authorities received the first three bodies from a group of 14 Lebanese and Palestinian nationals killed in Syria.

Clashes with machineguns and rocket-propelled grenades left two members of each community dead, the security official said.

Tensions in northern Lebanon have run high since at least 14 Sunni Muslim Lebanese and Palestinian fighters from the area were killed by Syrian security forces a week ago in a Syrian border town.

Fighters from northern Lebanon had long been suspected of entering neighbouring Syria, but the killing of the men reignited Tripoli's long simmering tensions.

Sectarian fighting

Syria's conflict has not only stirred sectarian fighting in its own population, it has also revived sectarian clashes in Tripoli, whose communal makeup reflects that of Syria.

Majority Sunnis in the city support Syria's mostly Sunni-led uprising, while Alawites, the Shia-linked minority sect to which al-Assad belongs, are generally supportive of the Syrian president.

Syrian state television aired graphic video of the dead Lebanese gunmen, their bloodied corpses riddled with bullet holes.

Families of the dead demonstrated last week to demand the return of the bodies, as clashes resumed in Tripoli.

An agreement was eventually reached between Syrian and Lebanese officials to transfer the bodies gradually, with the first three being delivered on Sunday.

Cars brought the bodies up to the northern Lebanese border, where security forces and local religious authorities came to receive them.

The Lebanese Higher Defence Council held a meeting on Sunday to discuss the fighting in Tripoli between the Bab al-Tabbaneh and Jabal Mohsen districts.

The official Lebanese news agency said the army responded to sporadic rifle fire on late Saturday, without being able to stop the clashes.

The council reviewed the measures taken by the Lebanese Armed Forces to restore calm in the northern city.

The meeting was held in the presence of President Michel Sleiman, Prime Minister Najib Miqati, as well as Defence Minister Fayez Ghosn and Interior Minister Marwan Charbel.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/12/2012129113034684755.html>

- **Israeli planes violate Lebanon airspace**

Two Israeli military aircraft have penetrated Lebanese airspace and flown over several areas of the country in a clear violation of a UN Security Council resolution.

The fighter jets crossed into Lebanon's airspace over the southern border village of Kfar Kila, located 96 kilometers (59 miles) south of Beirut, at 9:22 a.m. local time (0622 GMT) on Sunday, according to a statement issued by the Lebanese military.

The warplanes flew over several areas in Lebanon before leaving Lebanese airspace at 11:15 a.m. local time (0815 GMT) while flying over the southern border town of Alma al-Shaab.

Israel violates Lebanon's airspace on an almost daily basis, claiming the flights serve surveillance purposes.

Lebanon's government, the Hezbollah resistance movement and the UN Interim Force in Lebanon, known as UNIFIL, have repeatedly condemned the overflights, saying they are in violation of UN Resolution 1701 and the country's sovereignty.

UN Security Council Resolution 1701, which brokered a ceasefire in the war of aggression Israel launched against Lebanon in 2006, calls on Israel to respect Lebanon's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

In 2009, Lebanon filed a complaint with the United Nations, presenting over 7,000 documents pertaining to Israeli violations of Lebanese territory.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/10/277174/israeli-planes-violate-lebanon-airspace/>

- **Syria-linked clashes kill four in Lebanon**

TRIPOLI, Lebanon, (AFP) — Sectarian clashes linked to the 21-month conflict in Syria killed four people and wounded 40 in neighbouring Lebanon before dawn on Sunday, a security official said. The latest fighting in the northern city of Tripoli between Sunni Muslims and Alawite co-religionists of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad came amid growing international concern about the potential for neighbouring countries to be dragged into the conflict.

Sunni residents of the port city's Bab al-Tebbaneh district exchanged machinegun and rocket fire with Alawite residents of the neighbouring Jabal Mohsen district leaving two members of each community dead, the security official said.

The fighting broke a tense calm that had held since the army deployed troops between the two impoverished neighbourhoods early on Friday.

During the night, troops held their positions on sidestreets but not on the ironically named Syria Street that forms the frontline.

"The clashes are light now," the official said on Sunday morning, adding that no decision had yet been taken on whether to send in more troops.

The latest deaths brought the toll from fighting in the city since Tuesday to 17, including two children.

Longstanding tensions in Tripoli escalated in mid-week when 22 Sunnis from the city who had crossed into Syria to join the armed rebellion against Assad's rule were killed in an ambush by troops.

Damascus later agreed to repatriate the bodies, and on Sunday three of the slain fighters were received at the Lebanese border, a security source said.

<http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&id=32099>

- **150,000 Syria refugees in Lebanon: UN**

The UN Refugee Agency says some 150,000 people coming from Syria have taken refuge in Lebanon over the past months.

“There are around 109,000 refugees formally registered within the agency and 41,000 others currently contacting it to be registered,” the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) said in a statement on Saturday.

The agency added that around 55,872 Syrian refugees are stationed in northern Lebanon and that 44,178 are settled in Bekaa, adding that 9,031 others are in the capital Beirut and the south of the country.

The UN agency said it is evaluating ways to safeguard the refugees living in the northern city of Tripoli, where recent clashes between supporters and opponents of the Syrian government have killed over a dozen people.

The clashes broke out between supporters of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad from the neighborhood of Jabal Mohsen and the opponents of the Syrian government from the Bab al-Tibbaneh neighborhood.

Syria has been experiencing unrest since March 2011.

The Syrian government says that the chaos is being orchestrated from outside the country, and that certain Western states and their regional allies such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey have been trying to fuel the turmoil.

There are reports that a very large number of the militants are foreign nationals. Several international human rights organizations have accused the foreign-sponsored militants of committing war crimes.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/09/277013/150000-syria-refugees-in-lebanon-un/>

- **Bodies of foreign militants killed inside Syria arrive in Lebanon's Tripoli**

Lebanese authorities have received the first three dead bodies from a group of 17 foreign-backed militants recently killed by the Syrian army inside Syria.

Local clerics said on Sunday that a funeral was held for Mohammed al Meer, one of the militants, in the northern port town of Tripoli, at the border with Syria.

Two other bodies were also returned to their relatives in Tripoli.

On Wednesday, Syrian Ambassador to Lebanon Ali Abdel Karim Ali announced that Damascus had agreed to repatriate the militants' bodies.

Tensions in Tripoli have been mounting since reports emerged that the militants were killed inside Syria, after they joined the armed opposition groups.

Earlier in the day, at least six people were killed and 40 others injured in Tripoli as clashes broke out between supporters and opponents of the Syrian government.

The latest deaths brought the toll from fighting in the city since Tuesday to 19.

Although the violence in Tripoli is linked to the current conflict in Syria, some people in the city blame the Lebanese government for the continuation of the fighting.

Tripoli has been the scene of clashes between the two groups over the past months, and the fighting has forced residents to leave the volatile neighborhoods.

The Syria crisis began in March 2011, and many people, including large numbers of army and security personnel, have been killed.

The Syrian government says that the chaos is being orchestrated from outside the country, and there are reports that a very large number of the insurgents are foreign nationals.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/10/277153/bodies-of-syria-rebels-arrive-in-tripoli/>

- **Jordanian troops fire toward Syria after soldier injured**

Jordanian troops have fired toward Syria following an incident where a stray bullet fired from inside Syria wounded a Jordanian soldier on the border.

A Jordanian armed forces spokesman said on Friday, “The border area in Tel Shehab has in the past few hours witnessed heavy fighting between the Syrian army and the (so-called) Free Syrian Army.”

“Shells and bullets fell on Jordanian territory. A stray bullet hit Jordanian soldier Oday Hussein Momani in the shoulder.”

The soldier was rushed to a local hospital and “now he is in good condition,” he said.

Syria has been experiencing unrest since March 2011.

The Syrian government says that the chaos is being orchestrated from outside the country, and that militant groups supported by certain Western states and their regional allies such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey have been trying to fuel the turmoil.

There are reports that a very large number of the militants are foreign nationals. Several international human rights organizations have accused the foreign-sponsored militants of committing war crimes.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/08/276813/jordanian-forces-open-fire-toward-syria/>

7. ARABIAN PENINSULA AND THE GULF OF BASRA

- **Bahraini king meets with UK foreign secretary in Manama**

Bahraini King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa has met with UK Foreign Secretary William Hague in Manama amid ongoing demonstrations against the Al Khalifa regime.

The meeting was held on the sidelines of the 8th International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) Regional Security Summit in the Bahraini capital named the “Manama Dialogue” on Saturday.

The two sides discussed regional and international developments and ways to increase bilateral ties.

The meeting came as the UK government faces censure for supplying the Manama regime with weaponry to crush peaceful protests in Bahrain.

Bahrain has been gripped by anti-regime demonstrations since February 2011. The Manama regime has been crushing the protests using harsh security tactics that have so far killed dozens of people and injured many more.

However, the UK authorities and their Western allies have effectively closed their eyes to what is happening in the country.

Bahraini demonstrators say they will continue holding anti-regime protests until their demand for the establishment of a democratically elected government is met.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/09/277023/bahrain-king-meets-uk-foreign-secretary/>

- **Bahraini opposition groups welcome call for national dialogue**

Bahraini opposition groups have welcomed a recent call by Prince Salman bin Hamad bin Issa Al Khalifa for a national dialogue.

The opposition groups, led by al-Wefaq, said in a statement on Saturday that they “look favorably upon the appeal by the crown prince.” They also called for a “serious dialogue with agreement on the participants, agenda and duration.”

“The opposition is ready to take part in a dialogue whose result must be put to the people, the source of all powers. From the very beginning, the opposition has opted for peaceful means to gain democracy,” the statement added.

On Friday, the Bahraini prince called for dialogue with the opposition, saying only talks could solve the political unrest in Bahrain.

“I soon hope to see a meeting between all sides - and I call for a meeting between all sides - as I believe that only through face-to-face dialogue will any real progress be made,” he said in an address to a conference organized by the International Institute for Security Studies.

However, no opposition figures were invited to the conference.

The uprising in Bahrain began in mid-February 2011.

The Manama regime promptly launched a brutal crackdown on peaceful protests and called in Saudi-led Arab forces from neighboring states.

Dozens of people have been killed in the crackdown, and the security forces have arrested hundreds, including rights activists, doctors and nurses.

Bahraini demonstrators say they will continue holding anti-regime protests until their demand for the establishment of a democratically elected government is met.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/09/276989/bahrain-opposition-welcomes-dialogue/>

- **UAE authorities arrest teen blogger**

Human rights activists say authorities in the United Arab Emirates have arrested an 18- year-old blogger as part of a widening crackdown on perceived dissent.

Mohammed Salem al-Zumer was arrested by state security officers in the emirate of Sharjah on Wednesday and taken to an unknown destination, according to the London-based Emirates Center for Human Rights (ECHR).

Al-Zumer had reportedly posted comments on the Internet supporting jailed activists.

Last month, the Persian Gulf littoral state tightened its law on Internet use, making it an offence to deride or damage the state or its institutions and organize protests.

According to the ECHR report, Zumer was driving a car when he was stopped by security personnel, and was escorted to his home, where plainclothes officers searched for more than an hour.

The UAE has launched a crackdown on activists campaigning for free speech and political freedom in the past year and more than 60 activists have been arrested since then.

UAE officials have also revoked the citizenship of several activists who had called for reforms.

Al-Zumer is the son of a well known poet in the Emirates and his mother is the sister of Khaled al-Sheiba al-Nuaimi, who was detained in July.

Rights groups have slammed Abu Dhabi for the ongoing crackdown.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/08/276912/uae-authorities-arrest-teen-blogger/>

8. AFGHANISTAN - PAKISTAN

- **US assassination drone strikes kill four in Pakistan**

US assassination drones have killed at least four people in Pakistan's tribal region of North Waziristan near the Afghan border.

Local Afghan officials said the unmanned aircraft fired four missiles at a compound in the Tabbi village, about five kilometers (three miles) north of the town of Miranshah.

Pakistan's tribal regions are attacked by US assassination drones almost regularly, with Washington claiming that militants are the targets. However, casualty figures clearly indicate that Pakistani civilians are the main victims.

The killing of Pakistani civilians, including women and children, in the airstrikes has strained relations between Islamabad and Washington.

Last month, Pakistan's Jama'at ud-Da'wah political group took legal action against the ongoing drone attacks. The group said despite a resolution passed by the Pakistani parliament in condemnation of the US attacks, the drone strikes continue to claim the lives of civilians.

In addition, the Lahore High Court called on the Pakistani government on November 3 to immediately respond to the group's petition that had called for an end to the US airstrikes.

Over the past months, massive demonstrations have also been held across Pakistan to condemn the United States for violating Pakistan's sovereignty.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/09/277033/us-terror-drones-kill-3-in-pakistan/>

- **Pakistan condemns assassination attempt on Afghan intelligence chief**

Pakistan has denounced the recent assassination attempt on the Afghan intelligence chief and vowed to continue cooperation with Afghanistan to fight terrorism.

"Pakistan strongly condemns the attack in Kabul yesterday that wounded Mr. Assadullah Khalid, head of the Afghan National Directorate of Security. Our thoughts and prayers are with him. We hope for his early recovery," the Pakistani Foreign Ministry said in a statement released on Friday.

"The two countries face the common threat of terrorism. We will continue to work closely with Afghanistan to eliminate this scourge."

Khalid, who heads the National Directorate of Security (NDS), was the target of a bomb attack in the upscale Kabul district of Taimani on December 6.

The Taliban militant group claimed responsibility for the attack. They said the bombing also wounded several other Afghan government officials.

The bomb attack bore striking similarity to the bombing that killed head of Afghanistan's High Peace Council, Burhanuddin Rabbani, in October 2011.

His death seriously strained relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan, and created a welter of accusations that Islamabad had been behind the attack.

Pakistan denied that the country's spy agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), was involved in Rabbani's assassination.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/08/276866/pakistan-slams-attack-on-afghan-official/>

- **Taliban suicide bombers kill eight in Pakistan**

Four Taliban suicide bombers attacked a police station in northwest Pakistan on Monday, killing at least eight police and local residents, security officials said.

The Pakistan Taliban took responsibility for the attack near Bannu in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province, close to the border with Afghanistan, a hotbed of insurgency where attacks on security forces are common.

"Three suicide bombers blew themselves up, while one was shot by police before he could blow himself up," an intelligence source said.

A spokesman for the militant group said the bombing was revenge for the killing of the nephew of former leader Baitullah Mehsud last month. Baitullah died in a U.S. drone strike in 2009.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/12/10/254277.html>

- **Extremists will not be allowed to impose their agenda: PM Ashraf**

ISLAMABAD: Prime Minister Raja Pervez Ashraf on Monday said the government would safeguard the fundamental rights of the people, adding that, extremists would not be allowed to impose their agenda on the public, DawnNews reported.

Speaking at a ceremony in Islamabad on the International Human Rights Day, Prime Minister Ashraf said the government had successfully ratified seven out of the nine international conventions relating to human rights — those mostly include the rights for children, women and the elderly.

The premier added that Pakistan's Constitution ensured rights for all sections of society and that the country was also aware of its obligations on an international level.

The prime minister said democracy and peace were mandatory, adding that, the public should stand by the government's efforts to sustain democracy, to foster tolerance and to safeguard the rights of the people.

On the occasion, Prime Minister Ashraf referred to the steps taken by the government with respect to safeguarding the people's rights.

<http://dawn.com/2012/12/10/extremists-will-not-be-allowed-to-impose-their-agenda-pm-ashraf/>

- **US drone strike kills another al Qaeda commander in Pakistan**

DERA ISMAIL KHAN, Pakistan, (Reuters) - A U.S. drone attack killed a senior al Qaeda commander in Pakistan's northwest on Sunday, military intelligence officials said, the second militant leader to be killed in strikes by the unmanned aircraft in three days.

The attack killed Mohammad Ahmed Almansoor and three others in a village close to Miranshah, the main town in North Waziristan, near the Afghan border.

The drone fired missiles at a house with Almansoor inside, destroying two rooms and a car. Four drones were seen flying over the area during the attack, residents and government officials said.

A similar attack on Thursday in North Waziristan killed another senior al Qaeda commander, Abu Zaid, who replaced Abu Yahya al-Libi as one of the militant Islamist group's most powerful figures, intelligence sources said. A U.S. drone attack also killed Libi in June.

Unmanned aerial attacks have crushed al Qaeda's network along Pakistan's border with Afghanistan but have drawn trenchant criticism in the two countries.

Al Qaeda has been weakened steadily in Afghanistan and Pakistan since the killing of Osama bin Laden in a raid by U.S. Special Forces on a Pakistani garrison town in May 2011.

<http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&id=32111>

- **Pakistani minister urges tourism cooperation between Tehran, Islamabad**

Pakistan's Sindh Minister for Education and Literacy Pir Mazhar Ul Haq has called for the expansion of tourism relations between Tehran and Islamabad.

In a meeting with visiting Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesman Ramin Mehmanparast on Sunday, Mazhar Ul Haq said that both countries enjoy vast capacities to improve their tourism industry.

The Pakistani official added that Tehran and Islamabad should increase their cooperation in order to strengthen their tourism industry.

Mehmanparast, for his part, stressed the necessity of expanding media and cultural cooperation between the Islamic Republic and Pakistan.

The Iranian official added that Iran and Pakistan could benefit from each other's cultural productions for further identifying the realities of both countries.

Heading an Iranian media delegation, the Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman arrived in Pakistan on December 2 to hold talks with Pakistani officials.

Iran has always attached particular significance to enhancing ties with neighboring countries based on mutual respect and good neighborly relations.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/10/277188/tourism-ties-urged-between-iran-pakistan/>

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<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/12/10/254277.html>

This media summary is prepared by **ORSAM Middle East Research Assistant Sercan DOĞAN. It covers news and commentaries as reported by the national media sources publishing in the Middle*

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