



# MIDDLE EAST DAILY BULLETIN

## GÜNLÜK ORTADOĐU BÜLTENİ

**Domestic Policy in the Middle East Countries**

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**The Restructuring Procees of Iraq**

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## 1. IRAQ

- **Mahmoud Othman: Baghdad and Erbil resume talks next week.**

BAGHDAD / NINA / MP, of the Kurdistan Alliance, Mahmoud Othman described the meeting of the President Jalal Talabani and Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki as a positive and important at this stage.

He said in a statement to the National Iraqi News Agency / NINA / "The Kurdish military and political delegations will resume talks with the central government early next week to agree on security measures on the ground in the disputed areas, and then, their forces' withdrawal comes, and this takes time."

He added "If the meetings, between the Kurdish delegation with the government succeed, it would probably result a meeting attended by the President of Kurdistan, Massoud Barzani with Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, but not in the near, to resolve problems between the two governments, because they are major players and decision-makers in the two governments. "

President Jalal Talabani discussed, yesterday with Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, the current political crisis and the latest developments in the region./ End

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

- **Iraqiya coalition holds a meeting to discuss the participation in coming elections in one alliance**

BAGHDAD / NINA / sources said that the leaders of the Iraqiya coalition began, this morning 18, Dec a meeting to resolve the issue of forming an alliance among themselves in preparation for coming provincial elections.

The sources told the National Iraqi News Agency / Nina / today: "The meeting was devoted to resolving the issue of the participation in one alliance to participate in the coming provincial elections for the province of Baghdad." / End

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

- **Zebari, US Ambassador in Damascus discuss the Syrian crisis**

Baghdad (NINA) – Foreign Minister, Hoshiyar Zebari, discussed with the US Ambassador in Damascus, Robert Ford, developments of the Syrian crisis and Syrian refugees' humanitarian situation.

A statement issued on Monday, Dec. 17, by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that Zebari reviewed Iraq's stand and views toward the crisis and its continued work toward adopting a balanced position in the interest of the Syrian people, as well as its support to peaceful solution and the efforts being exerted by the UN-Arab League envoy for Syria, Lakhdar Brahimi.

Zebari stressed the importance of reaching international and regional consensus toward peaceful and democratic transfer of power and not to turning the conflict into a military one that increases the suffering of the Syrian people.

US Ambassador to Iraq, Robert Beecroft, and Foreign Undersecretary attended the meeting. / End.

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

- **Kurdish MP confirms the existence of a great political move by the Kurdish blocs to end the current crisis**

BAGHDAD / NINA / MP, of the Kurdistan coalition, Baker Hama Siddiq confirmed that there is a great political move by the Kurdish blocs to end the outstanding problems between the Kurdistan region and the central government.

He said in a statement to the National Iraqi News Agency / NINA /: "The representatives of the Kurdish blocs in the House of Representatives held meetings last week with a number of blocs of the National Alliance and a convergence of views and an agreement on a set of basic things took pace that are the subject of disagreement between all Iraqis."

Siddiq added: "the Kurdish blocs and the Presidency represented by President Jalal Talabani and Vice President Khudair Khuzaiie have conducted dialogues the last few days and we stressed that the current problems concern everyone, not just the center and the region." / End

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

- **Talabani, Maliki discuss the political crisis, the region's developments**

Baghdad (NINA) – President Jalal Talabani discusses on Monday, Dec. 17, with Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, the current political crisis and the situation in the area.

A statement issued by the President's Office that in the meeting, the two exchanged views on the situation in Iraq and the area; they decided that the Prime Minister is to invite Kurdistan Region's delegation to come to Baghdad to resume talks.

It added that the agreed to adopt calm and frank and transparent dialogue, as well as to work in the spirit of the Constitution, in addition to agreements reached are the required solutions to solve all problems toward building Iraq based on partnership fraternal relations and consolidate democracy. / End.

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

- **Iraq attacks death toll reaches 48: Officials**

At least 48 people have been killed and over 110 others wounded in a wave of deadly attacks targeting both security guards and civilians across Iraq.

Security and medical officials said on Monday that a car bomb went off at a car dealership, north of the Iraqi capital city of Baghdad, claiming the lives of at least 11 people and wounding around 40 others.

According to an interior ministry official, another car bombing left one person dead and wounded at least four others.

Meanwhile, a senior police official reported that armed assailants attacked a police checkpoint on a highway in Iraq's northern city of Tikrit, killing at least five police and wounding five others.

Another roadside bomb targeting an army patrol also killed three soldiers in the village of al-Buslaibi, while another attack by armed men on military checkpoints in the northern city of Mosul killed another three soldiers.

Seven people were killed and 12 others wounded in a car bomb in Khaznah village near Mosul, while five people lost their lives and 26 others were hurt in explosions in the northern flashpoint town of Tuz Khurmatu, security and medical sources said.

Three roadside bombs went off near Baquba, north of Baghdad, killing one person and wounding four others in Baqouba, located some 50 kilometers (31 miles) northeast of Baghdad. A shooting in the same city also killed two people.

Police sources further reported that a sticky bomb killed two Kurds in Baladruz, while armed assailants injured three Kurds in Jalawla in separate attacks in Diyala province.

A salvo of 10 mortar rounds killed two people and wounded nine others in the town of Rutba in Anbar Province.

Also on Monday, a car bomb near the town of Dujail, situated about 65 kilometers (40 miles) north of Baghdad, killed one Iraqi civilian and wounded at least 10 Iranian pilgrims.

According to police sources, a car bombing in Khaldiya, west of Baghdad, killed two civilians and two police forces, and hurt seven other people.

Reports further said that a roadside bomb on a police patrol in Madain, south of Baghdad, wounded three police and two civilians, while an attack by gunmen on a military checkpoint in the city of Kirkuk killed one person.

Monday marked the deadliest day in Iraq since November 29, when at least 50 people lost their lives in a string of attacks across the country.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/17/278626/iraq-attacks-death-toll-hits-48/>

- **More deadly bombings hit Iraq**

A series of car bombs near Shia places of worship has killed at least 20 people and injured many, a day after multiple blasts had hit two Iraqi cities killing nine people, a year after US forces departed the country.

Three gunmen attacked a police checkpoint on the highway west of Tikrit, killing one policeman and wounding three.

A police patrol then chased the gunmen, who abandoned their car and then detonated explosives in it, killing four more police and wounding two, a police lieutenant colonel told the AFP news agency.

In the village of Al-Buslaibi, north of Baghdad, a roadside bomb targeting an army patrol killed three soldiers, an army captain said.

A car bomb exploded in Khaznah, a village near Mosul in north Iraq populated by the small Shabak minority, killed seven people and wounded 12, while two car bombs near a Shia place of worship killed five and wounded 20 in

the northern flashpoint town of Tuz Khurmatu, police officers and doctors said.

Monday's violence comes a day after a string of bombings and a shooting which killed 19 people.

Kurds attacked

Two car bombs and seven roadside bombs on Sunday targeted two Shia places of worship in Kirkuk, one in the city's north and another in its south, killing a total of five people and wounding 14, a senior police officer told the AFP news agency.

The attacks occurred around 7:30pm local time (16:30GMT), the officer said. A doctor from Kirkuk general hospital confirmed the toll.

Earlier on Sunday, a car bomb explosion near a Kurdish party office killed two Kurdish security recruits and wounded five in a disputed city north of the capital, Baghdad.

Security officials said the blast targeted the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) office in Jalawla some 125km northeast of the capital.

An officer in the Jalawla police said the bomb exploded at the local headquarters of Iraqi President Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan after a number of people seeking to join the Kurdish Peshmerga security forces had gathered.

Both Arabs and Kurds claim Jalawla, and a local policeman said the violence resulted from the tensions. He did not explain further.

Ethnically mixed Jalawla is in Diyalah province, and is one of the areas which Iraq's autonomous Kurdistan region wants to incorporate, over the strong objections of Baghdad.

The dispute over territory in northern Iraq is the greatest threat to the country's long-term stability, diplomats and officials say.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/12/201212178953348181.html>

## 2. IRAN

- **'US words at odds with its action on Iran'**

Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi says the United States' claims about seeking negotiations with the Islamic Republic don't square with its sustained hostility toward Iran.

"Various American officials and administrations usually act contrary to their declared stances," Salehi said on Monday in response to a question about the recent remarks by some US officials on the possibility of talks with Iran.

Salehi said Tehran is closely watching Washington's behavior, adding that the Islamic Republic has not observed any change in the antagonistic policies of the US vis-à-vis Iran.

"Praising Iran for its help in establishing a national and democratic government in Afghanistan on the one hand and placing Iran in the so-called axis of evil on the other hand is merely one example of their contradictory stances and actions."

"Their spying drones violate Iran's airspace...; they violate all legal, moral and international laws by imposing the most unprecedented unilateral sanctions...; they collaborate in the assassination of our scientific elite or arrest our innocent citizens such as our university professors... and after all these actions against the Iranian nation, they raise the issue of direct negotiations," Salehi said.

On November 30, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made claims about direct negotiations with Iran.

The United States, Israel and some of their allies accuse Iran of pursuing non-civilian objectives in its nuclear energy program. Washington and some its allies have used the pretext to impose a series of sanctions against Tehran.

Iran says its nuclear activities are entirely civilian, arguing that as a committed signatory to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and a member of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), it is entitled to develop and acquire nuclear technology for peaceful purposes.

In addition, the IAEA has conducted numerous inspections of Iran's nuclear facilities but has never found any evidence showing that Iran's civilian nuclear program has been diverted to non-civilian purposes.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/18/278713/us-words-at-odds-with-its-action-on-iran/>

- **US sanctions aimed at torpedoing Iran-IAEA talks: Analyst**

The latest round of Washington's sanctions against the Islamic Republic were aimed at "torpedoing" the nuclear negotiations between Iran and the UN atomic agency, a political analyst tells Press TV.

"You know, it's interesting that on Thursday, coinciding with the Tehran meeting, the US Treasury Department imposed new sanctions on several Iranian companies as well as individuals including the head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organization (IAEO) Mr. Fereydoun Abbasi," Boston-based author and political analyst Kaveh Afrasiabi said in an interview with Press TV on Monday.

Top officials from Iran and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) held talks over the Islamic Republic's nuclear energy program on December 13.

Following the meeting, IAEA Deputy Director General Herman Nackaerts said progress had been made during the talks, adding that more negotiations are due with Iran on January 16.

Iran's Ambassador to the IAEA Ali Asghar Soltanieh also described the talks as “constructive” and said “good progress was made.”

On the same day, the United States imposed fresh sanctions on seven Iranian companies and five nuclear experts, including Abbasi, for contributing to the country's nuclear energy program.

Afrasiabi pointed to the sanctions and said, “If there was good faith on the part of the US, they wouldn't engage in such sinister activities aimed at torpedoing progress in the nuclear talks. One expects these kinds of shenanigans to continue in the future.”

The political analyst said the progress achieved at the Iran-IAEA talks “sets the right tone for nuclear negotiations that are planned for 2013.”

Afrasiabi noted that Iran's cooperation with the IAEA and the country's willingness to address the concerns of the UN nuclear agency would have a “positive effect” on the upcoming talks.

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

Iran says its nuclear activities are entirely civilian, arguing that as a committed signatory to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and a member of the IAEA, it is entitled to develop and acquire nuclear technology for peaceful purposes.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/18/278695/us-aims-to-torpedo-iran-iaea-talks/>

- **Iran launches world's longest ethylene pipeline**

Iran has launched the world's longest ethylene pipeline, which carries the chemical compound from the southern Persian Gulf port of Assaluyeh to petrochemical complexes in the western provinces of Iran.

Ethylene was injected into the West Ethylene Pipeline in Assaluyeh Port in Bushehr Province on Monday, IRNA reported.

An engineering manager of the pipeline, Mohammad Reza Rahimi, said the injection had started from some time before and the transferring process had been satisfactory.

Kavian Petrochemical Complex, situated in Assaluyeh, is the main producer of ethylene for the pipeline with an annual petrochemical production capacity of 2.18 million tons.

Rahimi added that the first phase of the pipeline, which carries ethylene from the Pars Special Economic Energy Zone, is 1,200 kilometers long.

Iran has significantly expanded the range and volume of its petrochemical products over the past few years, and the National Iranian Petrochemical Company has become the second largest producer and exporter of petrochemicals in the Middle East after Saudi Arabia.

The Islamic Republic exported a total of 18.2 million tons of petrochemical and polymer products, worth about USD 14.2 billion, to more than 60 countries in the previous Iranian calendar year (ended March 19, 2012).

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/18/278701/iran-launches-major-ethylene-pipeline/>

- **Iran, 5+1 have decided to break deadlock over nuclear issue: Salehi**

TEHRAN, Dec. 18 (MNA) - Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi says that Iran and world powers have decided to end the impasse over Tehran's nuclear issue.

"The parties have come to the conclusion that they should end the current deadlock," Salehi said.

In reference to the news reports saying that a new round of talks between Iran and the 5+1 group (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany) is imminent, he said, "I am not informed about the date of the next round of talks."

He also expressed hope that the talks would be held in the near future.

The Washington Post reported on Saturday that a new round of talks between Iran and the major powers over the country's nuclear program might be possible in coming weeks.

According to the newspaper, the United States and five other world powers were hastily preparing for possible new talks with Iran amid signs that the country's leaders might be willing to hold a new round of nuclear talks as early as next week.

The report also quoted unnamed U.S. and European officials briefed on the matter as saying that the major powers had agreed on a new package of inducements to be offered to Iran if it agreed to freeze.

<http://www.mehrnews.com/en/newsdetail.aspx?NewsID=1769132>

### 3. SYRIA

- **Syrian forces surround Palestinian camp**

Syrian troops have surrounded a Palestinian refugee camp in Damascus a day after air raids killed at least eight people sheltering in a mosque there.

Many residents on Monday fled the area amid clashes between Palestinian factions loyal to and opposed to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

Rasim Abu Thawra, an activist who lives close to Yarmouk, told Al Jazeera that the neighbourhood has been bombarded again on Monday.

"Hundreds of families had the opportunity to escape the camp this morning," he said. "They headed to different destinations. Some of them have relatives outside the camp so they can take shelter there. Others went to mosques in neighbouring areas like al-Midan and al-Zahira."

Hundreds of Palestinians also crossed into Lebanon.

The attack on the Yarmouk refugee camp comes as activists said another Palestinian camp in southern city of Deraa was raided by the government forces.

UNRWA, the UN agency for Palestinian refugees, said Yarmouk camp was "said to be in a chaotic state; with ongoing fighting in the southern parts of the camp inching northwards, and reports coming in of families trying to escape on foot as cars and other forms of transportation are not able to move within the camp".

The UN has said it is extremely worried for the safety of nearly 500,000 Palestinian refugees living in Yarmouk, which has also been housing Syrians displaced by violence in nearby districts.

Heavy fighting broke out two weeks ago between Palestinians from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC), supporting the Syrian regime, and rebels supported by other Palestinian fighters.

UN chief alarmed

UN chief Ban Ki-moon called the attack "a matter of grave concern" and his spokesman said he was alarmed by the "dramatic escalation" of the Syrian conflict.

"The secretary-general is alarmed by the continued dramatic escalation of violence in Syria over the past several days, and the grave danger facing civilians in areas under fire," said spokesman Martin Nesirky.

In response, Syria's Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallem told Ban that Palestinians should not offer "shelter or assistance to terrorist groups" in Yarmouk, according to state television.

Amid the continued violence, Syrian Prime Minister Wael al-Halaqi on Monday toured battle-scarred Aleppo for the first time since the outbreak of fighting in the northern city in July, according to state television.

"The prime minister went to Aleppo at the head of a delegation to assess the hardships faced by the city due to the criminal actions of terrorist gangs," the broadcaster said.

Meanwhile, Farouq al-Sharaa, the Syrian vice-president, said in an interview that neither the government nor the rebels can win the country's 21-month conflict.

"The opposition cannot decisively settle the battle and what the security forces and army units are doing will not achieve a decisive settlement," he told the Lebanese al-Akhbar newspaper, adding that the rebels fighting to topple Syria's leadership could plunge it into "anarchy and an unending spiral of violence".

He said a "historic settlement", involving formation of national unity government needed to end conflict, which the opposition says has killed more than 40,000 people.

A Turkish newspaper reported on Monday that Turkey has made a new proposal to Russia for an orderly peaceful transition in Syria.

The proposal calls for Assad to step down in the first three months of 2013 and for the transition process to be undertaken by the opposition National Coalition, which was recognised as the sole representative of the Syrian people by Arab and Western states last week, the Radikal newspaper reported.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/12/2012121717419248502.html>

- **2 Russian, 1 Italian kidnapped in Syria: Lavrov**

Russian Foreign Minister Segei Lavrov says two Russian nationals have been kidnapped in Syria amid ongoing clashes between the Syrian Army and foreign-backed militants.

During a visit to Uzbekistan on Tuesday, Lavrov said that two Russians as well as an Italian steel worker had been kidnapped in the Arab country on a motorway from the city of Tartus.

"By all appearances, they are Russians," Lavrov said.

Moscow was taking "all the necessary steps both in Syria and other countries" to free the men, he added.

The Russian embassy in Damascus also confirmed the news, and named the Italian as Mario Belluomo.

Russian embassy spokesman Sergei Markov said the three worked for a private Syrian factory in Tartus, located about 90 kilometers (56 miles) from main port city of Latakia.

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

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 militants are foreign nationals.

Several international human rights organizations have accused the foreign-sponsored militants of committing war crimes.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/18/278722/2-russians-kidnapped-in-syria-lavrov/>

- **Concerns over fate of Syrian prisoner**

Friends and colleagues of Bassel Khartabil, a Palestinian-Syrian, say they fear he is in imminent danger of a quick military trial and possible execution.

A coalition of his friends and supporters said on Monday that he was transferred from a civil prison to a military prison and denied a lawyer.

The 31-year-old computer engineer was detained in a wave of arrests in the Mazzeh district of Damascus on March 15, 2012.

Since then his family has received no official explanation for his detention or information regarding his whereabouts, according to freebassel.org, an online campaign for his release.

Oussama Al Rafai, Khartabil's uncle who lives in the UAE, told Al Jazeera that his family in Damascus was devastated.

"Family members outside of Syria are in contact with Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International - we are trying to highlight Bassel's situation," his uncle said.

"We still have no contact with Bassel and no lawyer is allowed to see him. We hope that international pressure will help his situation."

"We have received information through friends in Syria that Bassel's health condition is getting worse because of the prison conditions - he is also in very bad physical and psychological shape," Rifai said.

His family had learned from previous detainees at the security branch of Kafr Souseh, Damascus, that Khartabil was first held at that location.

Khartabil was named by Foreign Policy magazine as one of 2012's top 100 thinkers for "fostering an open-source community in a country long on the margins of the internet's youth culture".

As a computer engineer living in Damascus, his "innovative programming skills helped integrate Syria into the online community".

The prospects of a fair trial are slim in the military prison that Khartabil is believed to be held in now.

Military courts "are composed of military judges and have jurisdiction over crimes committed during wartime and military operations," the Geneva-based International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) said.

"Accused persons before these courts have no right to defence and proceedings are conducted in secret. These courts do not apply existing laws or procedures and their decisions are final, not subject to any form of appeal or review," the ICJ said in a report on Reuters.

Khartabil, also known as Bassel Safadi, launched his career ten years ago in Syria, working as a technical director for a number of local companies on cultural projects.

Since then, he has become known worldwide for his strong commitment to the open web, teaching others about technology, and contributing his experience freely to help the world.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/12/20121217133619491813.html>

- **Syria's enemies may deliver chemical weapons to militants: Syria envoy**

Syria has rejected the Western claims that Damascus has plans to use chemical weapons against militants, adding that the government is concerned that certain countries may deliver such weapons to the terrorists.

On Monday, Syrian Ambassador to the UN Bashar Ja'afari said in letters to the UN Security Council and UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon that the foreign-backed militants could use

chemical weapons against Syrians and shift the blame to the government, the Associated Press reported.

Damascus is "genuinely worried" that Syria's enemies could provide chemical weapons to armed groups "and then claim they had been used by the Syrian government," he said.

On December 3, US President Barack Obama claimed that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad intends to use chemical weapons against the militants.

There would be consequences if Assad were to use these weapons, Obama said.

"The use of chemical weapons is and would be totally unacceptable and if you make the tragic mistake of using these weapons, there will be consequences and you will be held accountable," he stated.

The Syrian envoy dismissed the allegations that Damascus intends to use chemical weapons to end the crisis, saying that, "Syria will not under any circumstances use any chemical weapons..."

He added that the government is defending its people "from terrorists backed by well-known states, at the forefront of which is the United States of America."

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

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 militants are foreign nationals.

Several international human rights organizations have accused the foreign-sponsored militants of committing war crimes.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/18/278686/militants-may-get-chemical-arms-syria/>

- **Russia: No blue helmets should enter Syria**

Russia has opposed any possible deployment of United Nations peacekeepers in Syria.

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Gennady Gatilov has been cited as saying, “There is neither peace [in Syria] for peacekeepers to keep, nor truce for them to monitor.”

The UN has been reportedly planning to deploy 10,000 peacekeepers inside Syria.

The Russian official has stated that “there is no clear separation line between the conflicting sides” in Syria.

Gatilov has also said Moscow would veto any UN Security Council resolution aimed at military intervention in Syria and criticized previous Security Council resolutions passed on the situations in Iraq and Libya, saying that those resolutions were misused to allow unilateral military interventions.

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Several international human rights organizations have accused the foreign-sponsored militants of committing war crimes.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/18/278685/no-blue-helmets-should-enter-syria/>

- **Syria prime minister pays first visit to Aleppo since start of unrest**

Syrian Prime Minister Wael al-Halaqi has arrived in the northwestern city of Aleppo to inspect the situation in the crisis-hit city for the first time after the outbreak of unrest in 2011.

“The prime minister went to Aleppo on top of a delegation to assess the hardships faced by the city due to the criminal actions of terrorist gangs,” the Syrian state TV announced on Monday.

Basic commodities including bread and fuel have become extremely expensive in Aleppo over the past few months as the fighting has damaged the city’s economy.

The visit comes two days after commander of foreign-sponsored Liwa al-Tawhid militant group Yusef al-Jader was killed in an operation conducted by government forces in Aleppo.

Jader was reportedly involved in heavy fighting in Aleppo's Salaheddin and Saif al-Dawlah neighborhoods, which have been the scene of some of the fiercest clashes over the past few months.

Syria has been experiencing unrest since March 2011. Many people, including large numbers of security forces, have been killed in the turmoil.

Damascus says some Western states, especially the US, and their regional allies including the Saudi regime, Qatar, and Turkey are trying to fuel the unrest.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/17/278633/syria-pm-arrives-in-aleppo/>

## 4. ISRAEL-PALESTINE

- **Israel approves 1,500 more settler homes**

Israel has approved a construction plan to build 1,500 housing units in annexed East Jerusalem, prompting the Palestinians to warn they would seek a UN Security Council meeting on the issue.

Efrat Orbach, Israel’s interior ministry spokeswoman, said on Monday that the ministry's planning committee had given developers the go-ahead but told applicants to trim their request to build 1,600 new housing units at Ramat Shlomo to 1,500 and resubmit it "for final approval".

The plan caused a diplomatic rift with Washington when it was first announced in 2010 as US Vice President Joe Biden met top Israeli officials in Jerusalem to boost Israeli-Palestinian peace talks.

It has lain dormant since August 2011 but two weeks ago the ministry announced that it had been revived.

The Palestinian leadership said on Monday it would seek a UN Security Council meeting over the issue.

The leadership is about to take "important and necessary measures against Israel's settlement building, including recourse to the UN Security Council, to prevent implementation of these decisions," Nabil Abu Rudeina, President Mahmoud Abbas's spokesman, told AFP news agency.

Ramat Shlomo is a Jewish settlement in the mainly Arab eastern sector of Jerusalem which Israel seized in 1967 and later annexed in a move not recognised by the international community.

Monday's announcement will only add to an international outcry caused by a separate Israeli decision to plan 3,000 more settler homes in the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem after the Palestinians won upgraded status at the United Nations last month.

Some of that construction is to take place in a controversial corridor of land east of Jerusalem called E1, which critics say could effectively cut off the northern West Bank from the south, and ultimately threaten the territorial contiguity and viability of a future Palestinian state.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/12/2012121717843819903.html>

- **US condemns Israel plan to build settler units in East al-Quds**

The United States has criticized the Israeli regime's plan to construct some 1,500 illegal settler units in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

US State Department spokesman Victoria Nuland criticized the Tel Aviv regime on Monday for its decision to construct more settler units in East al-Quds (Jerusalem).

Nuland called on the Israeli authorities to refrain from “unilateral actions,” saying that Washington’s stance regarding the construction of illegal settlement has not changed.

The remarks came after Israel gave the initial approval for the construction plan on Monday.

Mark Toner, State Department’s deputy spokesman, said two weeks ago that Washington “opposes all unilateral actions, including West Bank settlement activity and housing construction in East Jerusalem, as they complicate efforts to resume direct, bilateral negotiations, and risk prejudging the outcome of those negotiations.”

A spokesman for the acting Palestinian Authority (PA) chief, Mahmoud Abbas said the PA would turn to the UN Security Council over Israel’s plan to expand its illegal settlements in the territories.

The Palestinian leaders were about to take “important and necessary measures against Israel’s settlement building, including recourse to the UN Security Council, to prevent implementation of these decisions,” Nabil Abu Rudeineh said.

On December 10, the European Union criticized the Israeli regime over its plan to build thousands more illegal settler units on the occupied territories, saying the bloc is “deeply dismayed” by the move.

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.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/18/278699/us-condemns-israel-settler-plan/>

- **Jerusalem concerned by Syria's chemical weapons**

Netanyahu tells Texas senator-elect that Israel, US closely monitoring, coordinating on Damascus's stockpile of weapons.

Israel is increasingly concerned that Damascus's stockpile of chemical weapons could "become a part of the Syrian crisis," a government official said Monday, explaining comments on the matter Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu made prior to meeting visiting Republican senator-elect Ted Cruz from Texas.

The Prime Minister's Office issued a statement following the meeting, underlining the chemical weapons issue.

According to the statement, Netanyahu told Cruz – on his first visit to Israel – that Washington and Jerusalem share not only common values, but also common dangers.

"One of these dangers is the unfolding events in Syria," he said. "We're monitoring very closely the possibility of the use of chemical weapons in Syria.

[US] President [Barack] Obama has spoken forcefully about this. Israel and the United States have close consultations about this issue and it highlights the dangers of these regimes receiving such weapons, and that these weapons can even go from there to terrorist organizations."

"This is a threat to Israel, a threat to America, a threat to others in this region. We treat it accordingly."

That the prime minister stressed this issue, and that his office decided to release his comments on the matter to the press – out of all the issues that were discussed between the two men – underscores the heightened sensitivity to the matter in light of the continued bloodshed and growing chaos in Syria.

Explaining Netanyahu's comment, the government official said it was important that "all the actors in Syria understand that this is a very sensitive issue not only for Israel, but for the entire international community."

He said "irresponsible behavior" with the chemical weapons would not be tolerated.

"We were not speaking this way two or three weeks ago," the official added.

Without elaborating, he said, "there are reasons for our concerns."

Cruz, a Cuban American who won his state's senate seat in November, said he believed the US should stand "unshakably" alongside Israel. "I thank you personally, I thank your nation for its leadership for democratic values in a very dangerous region of the world."

Cruz continued giving thanks "for your leadership protecting the security of the nation and ultimately of the United States as well, with respect to weapons of mass destruction – whether in Syria or Iran or elsewhere. I look forward to continuing to work together to strengthen that friendship," he said.

Meanwhile, Damascus said it is "genuinely worried" that some countries might equip extremist groups with chemical weapons and then claim they were used by the Syrian government, the country's UN envoy said in a letter to UN chief Ban Ki-moon and the Security Council.

Syria's UN Ambassador Bashar Ja'afari also accused the US government of supporting "terrorists" there and waging a campaign that claims Syria could use chemical weapons in the 20-month-old civil war that has killed at least 40,000 people.

"Since the issue was raised, Syria has stated countless times that it will not under any circumstances use any chemical weapons that it may have against its own people," he said.

The issue of chemical weapons in Syria is likely to come up on Tuesday as well, when Netanyahu meets visiting Estonian Prime Minister Andrus Ansip.

Ansip arrived on Monday for a 24-hour visit, the first by a European leader since diplomatic tensions flared between Israel and the EU over the EU's November vote on the Palestinian state issue in the UN General Assembly, and the Europeans' furious reaction to Israel's announcement of plans to further construction plans in E1 linking Jerusalem to Ma'aleh Adumim.

Estonia was one of 12 EU countries that abstained on the Palestinian upgrade bid at the UN. Fourteen EU states voted for the resolution, and only the Czech Republic, among the 27 EU states, voted against it.

Estonia's vote at the UN was discussed during a meeting soon after Ansip's arrival, which he held with Foreign Minister Avigdor Liberman.

Liberman's recent verbal attacks on the EU, on the other hand, were not discussed.

This was Liberman's last official meeting as foreign minister before his resignation comes into effect Tuesday morning.

<http://www.jpost.com/DiplomacyAndPolitics/Article.aspx?id=296377>

- **Rebels take control of Damascus Palestinian camp**

Syrian rebels seize camp after pro-Assad fighters pull out; report states 95 percent of Palestinian families flee Yarmouk.

BEIRUT - Syrian rebels took full control of the Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp on Monday after fighting raged for days in the district on the southern edge of President Bashar Assad's Damascus powerbase, rebel and Palestinian sources said.

The Palestinian ambassador said on Tuesday over 95 percent of Palestinians in the Syrian refugee camp of Yarmouk have fled, Palestinian news agency Ma'an reported.

Mahmud al-Khalidi told Ma'an refugees fled to UNRWA schools after fighting raged for days in the district on the southern edge of President Bashar Assad's Damascus powerbase, rebel and Palestinian sources said.

According to Ma'an, Al-Khalidi requested the Syrian Foreign Ministry to end airstrikes on the camp, but officials insisted rebels must leave the camp first.

The battle had pitted rebels, backed by some Palestinians, against Palestinian fighters of the pro-Assad Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC). Many PFLP-GC fighters defected to the rebel side and their leader Ahmed Jibril left the camp two days ago, rebel sources said.

"All of the camp is under the control of the (rebel) Free Syrian Army," said a Palestinian activist in Yarmouk. He said clashes had stopped and the remaining PFLP fighters retreated to join Assad's forces massed on the northern edge of the camp.

The battle in Yarmouk is one of a series of conflicts on the southern fringes of Assad's capital, as rebels try to choke the power of the 47-year-old leader after a 21-month-old uprising in which 40,000 people have been killed.

<http://www.jpost.com/MiddleEast/Article.aspx?id=296366>

- **Liberman resignation takes effect; plea bargain unlikely**

Yisrael Beytenu party leader no longer foreign minister; Financial crimes unit set to file indictment for fraud, breach of public trust, ending years of speculation over a potential plea bargain.

Yisrael Beytenu party leader Avigdor Liberman will be formally indicted for fraud and breach of public trust in Belarus Ambassador Affair on Tuesday by the state's financial crimes unit in the Jerusalem Magistrate's Court.

The indictment will be filed following the expiration of his parliamentary immunity and his resignation as foreign minister is to take effect at 10:00 a.m., the Ministry of Justice confirmed Tuesday morning, barring any last minute surprises.

The expected indictment will end years of speculation about what Liberman would be indicted for and if there would be a plea bargain.

Although it is possible that there could still be a plea bargain even in the middle of the trial, it would be unusual, especially in such a high profile case where there have been extensive contacts and discussion of the evidence between Liberman's lawyers and the state attorney's office for years.

This means that a court will decide and seal Liberman's legal and political fate.

Meanwhile on Monday night, a report surfaced that several members of a Foreign Ministry appointments panel were never questioned in regard to the investigation involving Liberman and former Belarusian ambassador Ze'ev Ben-Aryeh.

Information from those sources could contradict Liberman's story in the Belarus Ambassador Affair, signaling a possible breakthrough in the case against the outgoing foreign minister.

According to a Channel 10 report Monday night, some members of a Foreign Ministry appointments panel – who were never questioned in the investigation – say Liberman actively pushed for Ben- Aryeh's promotion in the ministry.

Until now, Liberman has maintained and the prosecution has accepted, that his main alleged criminal act was not actively revealing to the appointments committee Ben-Aryeh's illegal conduct.

Liberman announced his resignation as foreign minister on Friday after his indictment on charges of fraud and breach of trust last week, but remains an MK and head of the Yisrael Beytenu party.

Ben-Aryeh was forced to resign from the Foreign Ministry after he confessed last year to passing classified information on to Liberman regarding an investigation into the foreign minister. The Justice Ministry requested in 2008 that Ben-Aryeh pass on a document requesting legal assistance from the Belarusian authorities in an investigation of Liberman, and Ben-Aryeh copied the information and gave it to Liberman. Ben-Aryeh was convicted for his actions of obstruction of justice in June.

At least one panel member said Liberman later pushed for Ben- Aryeh's promotion in the ministry.

"I'm not senile and I remember exactly what happened there," said one of the eight members of a Foreign Ministry appointments panel who has not been questioned as of yet. If the report is proven true, it could lead to new, more serious charges and could hurt Liberman's credibility.

The report also said that Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon, who sat on the panel and is still currently No. 2 in Yisrael Beytenu, was not questioned.

Responding to the report, Liberman's spokesman said that all of the protocols of the investigations until now are public and available, and that any new anonymous accusers should "come forward" and not hide. It was not clear Monday evening why the panel members were not questioned in the investigation and why they waited until now to come forward.

The expected immediate filing of the indictment could signal that the state will not follow-up on the Channel 10 report, but not necessarily, as the state can still amend and expand on the indictment after filing it.

Earlier on Monday, after meeting with Attorney-General Yehuda Weinstein to discuss issues relating to the indictment pending against their client in the Belarus Ambassador Affair, Liberman's attorneys, including lead attorney Giorda Aderet, said it was possible to fast-track the case.

Prior to the meeting, media reports had suggested that Liberman's attorneys requested the meeting in order to examine the possibility of reaching a plea bargain with the attorney-general.

But following the meeting, the attorneys did not mention a plea bargain and did not provide specific estimates about how fast the trial could proceed, or if it could conclude before the January election or the formation of a new government.

With no plea bargain in sight, the indictment could possibly be submitted as early as Tuesday.

The Justice Ministry offered no comment on the meeting.

Until now, all leaks regarding a plea bargain appear to have come from Liberman's camp, although on Sunday he denied seeking a deal and said he was happy to clear his name in court.

A plea bargain would help Liberman avoid a conviction of "moral turpitude," which would bar him from holding public office for seven years.

Government Services Minister Michael Eitan (Likud) wrote Weinstein a letter on Monday urging him not to deem Liberman's indictment as lacking moral turpitude, warning that such a step would shame the entire country.

Eitan said Liberman should have known Ben-Aryeh was unfit to be an ambassador because he tried to give him information about the investigations against him.

“By taking such steps, Ben- Aryeh became an unacceptable candidate to represent Israel, and he even became dangerous,” Eitan wrote Weinstein. “By violating his loyalty to the state and its laws, the ambassador became a security risk with wide access to classified information about the country’s defense, internal security and diplomatic relations.

It should have been clear to Liberman that Ben-Aryeh should have been prevented from becoming an ambassador.”

Eitan said that by appointing Ben-Aryeh, Liberman put his own personal interests over those of the state. He said he believed Liberman attempted to appoint Ben-Aryeh in order to receive future services from him.

Kadima MK Dalia Itzik came to Liberman’s defense, blasting Weinstein and the State Attorney’s Office for initiating the indictment.

“I don’t know what they know now that they didn’t know before,” Itzik said. “Why did they have to do it a month before the election? It [causes] the public’s faith in the State Attorney’s Office to deteriorate. It is legal torture and it looks bad.”

<http://www.jpost.com/DiplomacyAndPolitics/Article.aspx?id=296393>

## 5. AFRICA and EGYPT

- **Egypt's new public prosecutor steps down**

Egypt's new public prosecutor, Talaat Ibrahim, who was appointed to the post last month by President Mohamed Morsi, has stepped down, judicial sources say.

Ibrahim tendered his resignation late ON Monday after continuous protests by Egyptian judges and prosecutors about his appointment, Reuters reported.

In November, Morsi sacked Mubarak-era Prosecutor General Abdel Meguid Mahmoud, replacing him with Ibrahim.

The appointment was announced after Morsi adopted sweeping new powers in a controversial decree issued on November 22, which made the president's decisions beyond judicial oversight.

Members of the judiciary believed the president's sacking of Ibrahim's predecessor was an attack on their independence.

Ibrahim's resignation is expected to be presented to the Supreme Judicial Council next Sunday.

Massive demonstrations broke out in Egypt over President Morsi's decree. The president later rescinded the decree, but his hasty organization of the referendum on the draft constitution sparked more demonstrations.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/18/278677/egypts-new-public-prosecutor-steps-down/>

- **Protesters pelt Tunisian president, parliament speaker in Sidi Bouzid**

Tunisian demonstrators have hurled stones at President Moncef Marzouki and Parliament Speaker Mustapha Ben Ja'afar in the town of Sidi Bouzid, considered the birthplace of the 2011 revolution in Tunisia.

On Monday, protesters who gathered near the main square of the central town to mark the anniversary of the revolution threw stones at the two senior officials following their speech.

Demonstrators also shouted slogans such as, "The people want the fall of the government." Security forces tried to disperse the protesters.

After the incident the Tunisian president issued a statement, saying, "I understand this legitimate anger. But the government has diagnosed the problem. In six months, a stable government will be in place and will provide the remedy to heal the country's problems."

"For the first time, we have a government which is not stealing from the people," Marzouki stated.

The revolution in Tunisia brought an end to the 23-year-old dictatorship of former President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in January 2011. Since then, the country has been grappling with high rates of poverty and youth unemployment.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/17/278582/tunisian-demonstrators-pelt-president/>

- **M23 rebels trying to terrorize people of Goma: North Kivu governor**

The governor of North Kivu province of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) says that March 23 (M23) movement rebels are trying to terrorize the people of the provincial capital Goma.

"The M23 wants to keep the population of Goma on edge to put pressure on Kampala" in Uganda, where delegates from the Congolese government and the M23 rebel group are negotiating, AFP quoted Julien Paluku as saying on Monday.

Paluku noted that the rebels were maintaining "pressure to show that at any moment, if this or that isn't done in Kampala, they will take Goma."

On Monday, the spokesperson for the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO), Kieran Dwyer, said that UN peacekeepers in the DRC had received reports of M23 rebels moving into some positions around Goma.

Paluku also said that inmates of Goma's prison who escaped during the chaos last month had become a major security threat.

"We face two main challenges: the more than 1,170 inmates -- including more than 700 soldiers - - who escaped from prison during the capture of Goma, and disguised M23 members who want to make life unbearable to show that the city is badly governed," the governor said.

There have been reports that many Goma residents are leaving the city and heading toward Bukavu, the capital of South Kivu province. However, Paluku has denied the reports.

The rebels seized Goma on November 20 after UN peacekeepers gave up the battle for the frontier city of one million people. The rebels withdrew from the city on December 1 under a ceasefire accord.

The M23 rebels defected from the Congolese army in April in protest over alleged mistreatment in the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo (FARDC). They had previously been integrated into the Congolese army under a peace deal signed in 2009.

Since early May, over 900,000 people have fled their homes in the eastern Congo. Most of them have resettled inside Congo, but tens of thousands have crossed into neighboring Rwanda and Uganda.

Congo has faced numerous problems over the past few decades, such as grinding poverty, crumbling infrastructure, and a war in the east of the country that has dragged on for over a decade and left over 5.5 million people dead.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/18/278671/m23-rebels-terrorizing-people-of-goma-north-kivu-governor/>

- **Protesters planning mass demo return to presidential palace**

Protesters headed back to the Ettehadıya Presidential Palace on Monday in preparation for a mass demonstration the National Salvation Front has planned for tomorrow against the alleged rigging of the first round of voting in the constitutional referendum.

In front of the palace's main gate, protesters chanted slogans against the manipulation of the referendum results and called for President Mohamed Morsy's resignation. Tight security measures were taken in the area.

Small scuffles broke out between protesters and security forces when the demonstrators attempted to pass the barriers in front of the gate. Central Security Forces arrested some of the protesters.

<http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/protesters-planning-mass-demo-return-presidential-palace>

- **Opposition to protest referendum at Tahrir, presidential palace**

Opposition movements will protest in Tahrir Square and in front of Ettehadia Palace Tuesday, against what they allege were vote rigging attempts during the first round of the constitution referendum.

The National Salvation Front, the main political opposition to President Mohamed Morsy and one of the main campaigners for a "no" vote on the constitution, called for nationwide protests Tuesday demanding a redo of the first round of voting, while also denouncing electoral fraud and calling for the constitution to be scrapped altogether.

In a statement Monday, the group also cited electoral irregularities and violations during the first round and pressed for better supervision during the second round, scheduled for Saturday.

Various opposition parties have announced via Facebook and other social media that marches in Cairo will begin at 4 pm from Nour Mosque in Abbasseya and Rabea al-Adaweya Mosque in Nasr City to the presidential palace, while demonstrators will march from Shubra and Mostafa Mahmoud Square in Mohandiseen to Tahrir.

The constitution's approval rate after the first round of voting stands at 57 percent, falling short of the president's expectations.

Political groups participating in the marches include the Free Egyptians Party, the Wafd Party, the Constitution Party, the Democratic Egyptian Party, the Tagammu Party and the April 6 Youth Movement, along with the Popular Current.

<http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/opposition-protest-referendum-tahrir-presidential-palace>

- **Expat vote count begins**

Embassies and diplomatic missions abroad began counting the votes of expatriate Egyptians in the constitutional referendum on Monday.

Expats cast their votes on Wednesday, and in some countries the voting extended over three days. The first round of voting in Egypt took place on Saturday 15 December, resulting in a narrow approval of the new draft constitution with a reported 57 percent.

The second round is scheduled to take place on Saturday 22 December.

A diplomatic source told the state-run MENA news source that 215,878 expatriates voted in the referendum.

Most countries that have reported numbers so far have seen a majority of yes votes. Ambassador to Pakistan Saeed Hendam said 63 percent of expats there voted for the draft, and 37 percent against it, while in Yemen, Ambassador Ashraf Aql reported 74 percent voted in favor and 26 percent against. Ambassador Abdel Ghaffar al-Deeb in Khartoum said 57.7 percent voted for the draft and 42.3 percent against it.

In Lebanon, however, 65 percent of voters are reported to have voted against the constitution, and only 35 percent for it, Ambassador Ashraf Hamdy told ONA News.

<http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/expat-vote-count-begins>

- **Angry crowd hurls stones at Tunisian leaders**

Angry protesters have hurled rocks at the Tunisian president and parliamentary speaker in Sidi Bouzid, the cradle of the revolution that erupted in the north African country two years ago.

The incident began after a speech by President Moncef Marzouki in the central Tunisian town, where celebrations are taking place on Monday to mark the anniversary of the revolution.

Mustapha Ben Jaafar, the parliamentary speaker, was about to address the crowd when the violence began.

Security forces swiftly evacuated the two men to the regional government headquarters, the AFP news agency reported.

The protesters invaded the square where the head of state had been addressing the crowd, shouting "the people want the fall of the government".

Growing anger

The police held back, after violent clashes over the past few months, which have often followed attempts to disperse protesters angry over the government's failure to improve living conditions in the poor region.

Clashes and strikes have multiplied across Tunisia in the run-up to the second anniversary of the start of Tunisia's revolution.

When the president took to the podium on Monday, many in the crowd of around 5,000 started shouting "Get out! Get out!" - one of the rallying cries of the revolution that toppled the regime of former dictator Zine El Abedine Ben Ali.

Marzouki promised economic progress within six months to the people of Sidi Bouzid, where poverty and unemployment were key factors behind the uprising that began there on December 17, 2010, after Muhammad Bouazizi a street vendor set himself on fire in protest at police harassment.

"I understand this legitimate anger. But the government has diagnosed the problem. In six months, a stable government will be in place and will provide the remedy to heal the country's problems," said the president, who was jeered by the crowd.

"For the first time, we have a government which is not stealing from the people," he said.

Marzouki had been heckled earlier in the morning, when he visited the grave of Bouazizi.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2012/12/20121217113425585914.html>

## 6. JORDAN and LEBANON

- **Massive explosion rocks town in southern Lebanon**

A massive explosion has rocked an area near a town in southern Lebanon close to the border with the Israeli occupied territories, Lebanese security sources say.

The sources reported on Monday that the explosion occurred at 6:45 a.m. local time near the town of Tair Harfa. The blast was caused by Israeli ammunition that had been unexploded and left over from the Tel Aviv regime's 33-day war on Lebanon in 2006.

The border town was heavily bombarded by Israeli forces during the war.

Local residents said the blast caused no casualties.

Meanwhile, Lebanon's resistance movement Hezbollah denied reports that the explosion had hit its weapons depot.

Lebanese media said Hezbollah had cordoned off the site of the explosion, preventing the army and the United Nations peacekeeping forces to enter the area.

At least 1,400 Lebanese civilians were killed and around 3,000 others wounded when Israeli forces launched a deadly war on Lebanon in 2006.

However, Hezbollah was able not only to confront the Israeli war machine, but also to create a balance of fear by firing rockets into Israeli cities in an unprecedented way to retaliate against the Tel Aviv regime's bombardments.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/17/278597/massive-explosion-hits-southern-lebanon/>

- **U.S. brands former Lebanese minister linked to Syria a "terrorist"**

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - The United States dubbed former Lebanese government minister Michel Samaha a terrorist and froze his assets on Monday, saying he had supported attempts by Syria to incite violence in Lebanon.

The U.S. Treasury designated Samaha, a former minister of information and tourism, as a "global terrorist" and said he had collaborated with the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to destabilize Lebanon.

"The United States will continue to expose any attempts by the (Assad) regime to meddle in the affairs of its neighbours and further destabilize the region," Treasury said in a statement.

Treasury said its designation, which freezes any assets held by Samaha under U.S. jurisdiction, also prohibits Americans from doing business with Samaha.

Samaha was arrested by Lebanese authorities in August for allegedly plotting to incite violence in Lebanon. He has been an outspoken supporter of Assad during the 17-month-old Syrian uprising.

He served as a minister in three Lebanese governments between 1992 and 2004, when Syria dominated politics and security in its smaller neighbour. Samaha is also a former member of parliament.

In 2007, he was named on a White House-issued list of Lebanese and Syrian figures suspected of working to undermine Lebanon's stability and the Western-backed Beirut government in office at the time.

<http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&id=32206>

## 7. ARABIAN PENINSULA AND THE GULF OF BASRA

- **Bahraini regime forces break up demos, arrest 25 protesters**

Saudi-backed Bahraini security forces have arrested 25 protesters at anti-regime demonstrations in and around Manama, activists say.

On Monday, demonstrations were held in Manama and several villages near the capital to commemorate the anniversary of the martyrdom of two activists in 1994.

Sayed Yousif Al-Muhafda, the head of monitoring and evaluation of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, was one of the people arrested.

Bahraini security forces used tear gas, rubber bullets, and stun grenades to disperse the demonstrators.

The protesters called for the release of all jailed activists and demanded that King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa step down.

Since mid-February 2011, thousands of pro-democracy protesters have staged numerous demonstrations in the streets of Bahrain, calling for the Al Khalifa royal family to relinquish power.

On March 14, 2011, troops from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates invaded the country to assist the Bahraini government in its crackdown on the peaceful protesters.

According to local sources, scores of people have been killed and hundreds arrested.

Physicians for Human Rights says doctors and nurses have been detained, tortured, or disappeared because they have "evidence of atrocities committed by the authorities, security forces, and riot police" in the crackdown on anti-government protesters.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/17/278656/25-protesters-arrested-in-bahrain/>

- **Bahraini police fire tear gas to disperse anti-regime protesters**

Bahraini security forces have fired tear gas and rubber bullets to disperse anti-regime protesters gathering to commemorate the Day of Martyrs in the capital city of Manama.

Hundreds of protesters once again took to the streets of the capital on Monday to mark the annual commemoration of two protesters martyred by the Al Khalifa regime forces in 1994.

Outraged demonstrators chanted anti-regime slogans in the streets, where Bahraini police tried to disperse them by stun grenades and tear gas.

According to reports, the Bahraini military had already set up checkpoints and extended patrols across the capital ahead of the Monday demonstration.

In a similar move on Sunday, the Saudi-backed Bahraini forces attacked hundreds of protesters who censured an annual speech by King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, in which he praised security forces of the country.

The Bahraini uprising began in February 2011. The regime promptly launched a brutal crackdown on the protests and called in Saudi-led Arab forces from neighboring Persian Gulf states to help crush the demonstrations.

Bahraini protesters say they will continue holding demonstrations until their demands for the establishment of a democratically elected government and an end to rights violations are met.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/17/278584/bahraini-forces-tear-gas-protesters/>

- **Gunmen shoot dead intelligence colonel in east Yemen**

Unknown assailants have shot dead a high-ranking Yemeni intelligence officer in an overnight attack in the eastern province of Hadramawt.

"Two unidentified gunmen on a motorbike intercepted Colonel Shakir Awad al-Bani, who was heading home also on a motorbike, wounding him before fleeing," a security official told AFP on Monday on condition of anonymity.

He added that Bani later died of his wounds.

Yemeni security forces frequently come under attack by gunmen especially in the southern and eastern parts of the country, where al-Qaeda militants are still active.

Al-Qaeda has taken advantage of the weak Yemeni central government during about a year and eight months of anti-government demonstrations to expand their presence in the impoverished country.

Al-Qaeda loyalists have carried out a spate of deadly attacks against Yemeni security forces since Ali Abdullah Saleh's successor, President Abdrabuh Mansur Hadi, came to power in February 2012.

In May, the Yemeni military launched an all-out offensive and retook a string of towns in Abyan Province, where al-Qaeda loyalists had established themselves.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/17/278529/top-yemeni-intelligence-officer-killed/>

## 8. AFGHANISTAN - PAKISTAN

- **Rocket attack kills Pakistani soldiers**

Three Pakistani soldiers have been killed and three others severely injured in a rocket attack on an army vehicle in northwestern Pakistan.

On Monday, militants armed with rockets attacked the military vehicle in Shadikhel area of Lakki Marwat District of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, said district police officer Nisar Ahmad.

No group or individual has claimed responsibility for the attack, but it is likely to be linked to the pro-Taliban militants.

On December 15, at least four people were killed and dozens more injured in a similar attack targeting an airport in northwestern Pakistan.

The militant attacks in Pakistan mainly target Pakistani security forces, but civilians also fall victim to the assaults.

Many Pakistanis have lost their lives in bombings and other militant attacks since 2001, when Pakistan joined an alliance with the United States in the so-called war on terror.

Thousands of people have also been displaced by the wave of violence in the country since late 2009.

The Pakistani army has been engaged in operations to stop such attacks, but the militants have managed to spread their influence in various regions of the country.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/17/278604/rocket-attack-kills-pakistani-soldiers/>

- **Bomb attack outside US firm near Afghan capital kills one**

At least one person has been killed and 15 others wounded in a car bomb attack outside the offices of a US company near Afghanistan’s capital, Kabul.

The bombing on Monday was carried out outside the offices of the US military contracting firm Contrack on the outskirts of the Afghan capital.

“A small truck packed with explosives detonated between Contrack and Najeeb Zarab factories -- one person is dead and 15 others are wounded,” said Kabul police chief Mohammad Ayoub Salangi.

Salangi added that it was not immediately clear that “there was someone in the truck or it was detonated remotely.”

Initial reports said five foreigners, including Americans and South Africans, were among the wounded.

The Taliban militant group claimed responsibility for the bomb attack.

Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said in a statement that the company was “under the surveillance of” the militants “for a while” and that “today the opportunity was provided to attack it.”

Reports say Contrack builds military facilities for Afghanistan’s army and police.

Meanwhile, the US embassy in Kabul has reportedly gone into a lockdown for security reasons.

The bombing on Monday came shortly after a landmine explosion killed ten Afghan girls, all aged between nine and 11, while they were collecting firewood outside a village in the Chaparhar district of Nangarhar Province.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/17/278620/one-killed-outside-us-firm-near-kabul/>

- **Kabul's 'roadmap for peace' calls for 'securing Pakistan collaboration'**

KABUL: Kabul has laid out an ambitious five-step plan that could bring hardline Taliban Islamists into government as efforts to broker peace accelerate ahead of the withdrawal of Western troops.

The first step in the "Peace Process Roadmap to 2015", obtained by AFP this week, calls for a focus on "securing the collaboration of Pakistan", which Kabul accuses of harbouring Taliban insurgents.

This should be followed by moves towards formal direct negotiations with the Taliban in Saudi Arabia in the first half of next year, with the backing of the US and Pakistan, the four-page document says.

The Taliban, however, have so far publicly refused to talk directly with the government of President Hamid Karzai, dismissing him as a puppet of the Americans.

The US itself began exploratory contacts with the Taliban in Qatar this year, but the militants broke them off a few months later.

Step three of the roadmap, set for the second half of 2013, calls for agreements on a ceasefire and the transformation of the Taliban and other armed groups into political parties which could take part in elections.

Leaders of the Taliban could also participate “in the power structure of the state, to include non-elected positions at different levels”.

The final steps in the plan include securing a peaceful end to the conflict during the first half of 2014 and moves to sustain the “long-term security and stability of Afghanistan and the region”.

The Taliban regime was ousted by a US-led invasion in 2001 and there are concerns that their return to any sort of power could see an erosion of gains in democracy and human rights, particularly the rights of women.

But with the the United States and Nato due to withdraw their combat troops in 2014, there are also concerns that a multi-sided civil war could erupt, and the search for peace has taken on a new urgency.

<http://dawn.com/2012/12/18/kabul-roadmap-for-peace-calls-for-securing-pakistan-collaboration/>

- **Death toll rises to 21 after Khyber agency attack: officials**

PESHAWAR: The death toll from a car bomb attack on a marketplace in northwestern Pakistan’s Khyber Agency has risen to 21, officials said Tuesday.

The bomb exploded on Monday in Jamrud, part of the tribal district of Khyber, close to where passengers were waiting to catch buses across the country.

“Four more people died of their wounds at the Hayatabad Medical Complex overnight, raising the death toll in the attack to 21,” Doctor Sohail Ahmad told AFP.

Local administration official Jehangir Azam confirmed the new toll and said 43 people were still being treated for injuries.

<http://dawn.com/2012/12/18/death-toll-rises-to-21-after-khyber-agency-attack-officials/>

- **Grenade attack at Nowshera army facility wounds 10**

PESHAWAR: Two men on a motorcycle hurled hand grenades at the main gate of an army recruiting center in northwestern Pakistan on Tuesday, wounding 10 people, police said.

The injured in the attack in the garrison town of Risalpur in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province included civilians and security personnel, said senior police official, Ghulam Mohammed.

Mohammed said the police have launched a manhunt to trace and arrest the attackers.

No one immediately claimed responsibility for the attack, the latest in a string of assaults in recent days that illustrate the continued challenge Pakistan faces from militants despite military operations against the Pakistani Taliban and their supporters.

Tuesday's attack came a day after a car bomb exploded in a crowded market in Pakistan's northwestern town of Jamrud near the Afghan border, killing 17 people and wounding more than 40 others.

Earlier on Saturday, ten Taliban fighters armed with rockets and car bombs attacked the military section of an international airport in Peshawar, killing four people and wounding over 40 others.

Five of the militants were killed during the attack and the other five died Sunday after hours-long shootout with security forces.

<http://dawn.com/2012/12/18/grenade-attack-in-nowshera-injures-seven/>

*\*This media summary is prepared by **ORSAM Assistant Ebru DEMİR**. 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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