



MIDDLE EAST DAILY BULLETIN

GÜNLÜK ORTADOĐU BÜLTENİ

Domestic Policy in the Middle East Countries

Bölge Ülkelerinde İç Siyaset

The Restructuring Procces of Iraq

Irak'ın Yeniden Yapılanma Süreci

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1. IRAQ

- **MP : Absence of Talabani, gives Barzani the opportunity to announce secession of Kurdistan from Iraq.**

Baghdad/ NINA /-- MP Karim Alewi for Iraqiyouon bloc predicted that ties between Federal government in Baghdad and the regional government in Erbil would be dramatically and gravely affected in case of absence of president Jalal Talbani.

He said in a press statement today: " President Jalal Talabani represent the safety valve and the link factor between the governments in Baghdad and Erbil stressing that in case of Talabani's absence , the relationship would be dramatically deteriorated , since the region's president, Massoud Barzani is trying to break away from Iraq and that the presence of Talbani constitute as obstacle in front of the concretization of the separation of Kurdistan, he said".

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

- **Essawi accuses Maliki of arresting members of bodyguards, demands apology**

Baghdad (NINA) – Finance Minister, Rafi al-Essawi, accused Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki of being responsible of arresting members of his bodyguards.

In a press conference held at the end of Iraqiya slate's urgent meeting held at the residence of Speaker of Parliament, Usama al-Nijaifi, the Minister of Finance demanded the Prime Minister to apologize for the operation, making responsible for the safety of the detainees and demanding him to release them.

He called on Parliament to reactivate the motion or withdrawing confidence from the Prime Minister, whom he described as not being faithful to partnership and does not adhere to the Constitution.

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

- **Chalabi, Arajii joint Iraqiya's urgent meeting**

Baghdad (NINA) – NINA learnt that the Leader of the Iraqi National Congress (INC), Ahmed al-Chalabi, and Leader of Ahrar Parliamentary bloc, Baha' al-Arajii, have joint the urgent meeting Iraqiya slate is holding, at the residence of Speaker of

Parliament, Usama al-Nijaifi, in response to arresting 12 members of the protection force of Iraqiya official Rafi al-Essawi, including the head of his office.

Lawmaker from Iraqiya, Hameed al-Zuba'e, told NINA that the Leader of the National Congress and the Leader of Ahrar Parliamentary bloc expressed solidarity with Iraqiya slate, in joining the meeting and condemning the raiding Essawi's office in the Green Zone by the Baghdad Brigade force, that follows the orders of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, arresting 12 of his guardsmen, including the head of his office, while Essawi was inside his office.

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

- **SLC MP: Dhari, his son must be presented to judicial sides**

Baghdad (AIN) –MP, Saad al-Mutalabi, of the State of Law Coalition called not to negotiate with the head of the Islamic Scholars Commission to join the National Reconciliation Project.



Speaking to All Iraq News Agency (AIN), he stated "It is impossible to negotiate with Dhari and his son Muthana because they are terrorists and wanted by the judicial sides."

"There are some media statements that over the negotiations between the government and Dhari in addition to some other commissions," he added, noting that "The National Reconciliation Project has regulations and it is impossible to include a wanted individual within this project."

Earlier, the Advisor Prime Minister for the National Reconciliation, Amir al-Khuzayi, revealed that the government is negotiating with Dhari to make him join the National Reconciliation Project.

http://www.alliraqnews.com/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=25113:slc-mp-dhari-his-son-must-be-presented-to-judicial-sides-&catid=35:political&Itemid=2

- **Talabani's death to encourage Barzani to split from Iraq, says Alewi**

Baghdad (AIN) –MP, Kareem Alewi, of the Iraqi National Alliance pointed out "The death of the President, Jalal Talabani, will encourage the President of Kurdistan Region, Masoud Barzani, to split from Iraq."

Speaking to All Iraqi News Agency (AIN), he said " Talabani is the safe link between the Central Government and the Kurdistan Regional Government so in case he passed away, the relations between them will be affected greatly especially if we consider that Barzani is seeking to monopolize the Kurdish leadership."

"Barzani seeks separation from Iraq but the main impediment for him currently is Talabani," he added.

"Barzani will exploit Talabani's absence to pressurize the CG to split KR from Iraq," he concluded.

http://www.alliraqnews.com/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=25112:talabanis-death-to-encourage-barzani-to-split-from-iraq-says-alewi-&catid=35:political&Itemid=2

- **Babel PC member criticizes performance of Local Government**



Babel, Hilla (AIN) –The member of Babel Provincial Council, Mazin Abdul Kareem, criticized the performance of Babel Local Government for its failure in running the projects and providing the services.

He stated to All Iraq News Agency (AIN) "The way of running the projects is vague where most of the projects especially those related to health, housing field and potable water are delayed."

"Babel lacks an advisory council specialized in the planning and design field," he added, noting that "Such council must be formed to provide a clear vision over the province."

Observers confirm the dilatory performance concerning erecting the

services projects in Babel despite the capacities of Babel Local Government.

http://www.alliraqnews.com/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=25111:babel-pc-member-criticizes-performance-of-local-government-&catid=35:political&Itemid=2

- **Talabani's health stable, MP**

BAGHDAD/ Aswat al-Iraq: Deputy Chairman of Kurdish Alliance announced today that the health of President Jalal Talabani is "stable"; pointing out that a German medical team arrived to help the Iraqi medical group, as well as another British medical team will arrive for the same reasons.

MP Muhsin al-Saadoun said in a statement, copy received by Aswat al-Iraq, it is expected that President Talabani will be sent to Germany to continue medical treatment there.

The semi-official TV station, in breaking news, denied these reports, but "he is under intensive care in Baghdad Medical City".

Media organs reported today the news of Talabani's death in a Baghdad hospital due deterioration in his health conditions.

According to Para.3 of Article 72 of the constitution, Iraqi vice-president will replace him for any reason, provided that the Iraqi parliament should elect another one within 30 days.

President Jalal Hussam al-Deen al-Talabani is one of the main Kurdish personalities in modern Iraqi history.

He was a graduate of Iraqi Law College in Baghdad University, who practiced political work in the Kurdish Democratic Party, headed by late Mustapha Barzani till he reached to a leading member.

In 1975, he formed, with others, a new separate Kurdish party, called the Kurdish Union Party, under his chairmanship, which is regarded one of the main two leading parties in Kurdish region.

http://en.aswataliraq.info/%28S%283urlqpiov1zy5rmgofqjs455%29%29/Default1.aspx?page=article_page&id=151805&l=1

- **Kurdish forces fire at an Iraqi helicopter**

BAGHDAD/ Aswat al-Iraq: Officials reported that Kurdish forces fired at an Iraqi army helicopter, Tuesday, according to Reuters.

The political situation between Baghdad and Arbil was tense for the disputed areas, which will cover greater conflict on oil resources.

Reuters said that the shooting was to prevent the helicopter from photographing the area.

Anwar Othman, deputy minister for military affairs was quoted that the fire was shot when the helicopter was flying over the Kurdish forces, "which we will have stronger response in future".

No official response from the central government was made.

http://en.aswataliraq.info/%28S%283urlqpiov1zy5rmgofqjs455%29%29/Default1.aspx?page=article_page&id=151804&l=1

- **The Kurdistan asking not to mix between political crisis and 2013 budget**



Shafaq News/on Friday, Kurdish alliance called on not to confuse Erbil-Baghdad crisis with the ratification of upcoming-year's budget, refusing at the same time any postponement to the implementation of constitutional article 140.

Muhsin al-Saadon, the deputy head of Kurdish Alliance told "Shafaq News" that "we are waiting to see what will happen next because we decided to be committed to the President's initiative; this is why we are waiting this issue to be resolved".

Saadon went on saying "there should be a deadline for the implementation of article 140, all these issues must be clarified to Iraqi people", calling on not to mix "political developments with budget ratification' as both are unrelated to each other, explaining that "there are obvious

constitutional violations took place recently, i.e. forming military units, this is why we reached to such level of dispute".

Kurdish Alliance in the Iraqi Council of Representatives accused -this week- the State of Law of politicizing 2013' budget ratification by using it as a pressure tool on Kurds.

<http://www.shafaq.com/en/news/4446-the-kurdistani-asking-not-to-mix-between-political-crisis-and-2013-budget.html>

- **Draft budget of Kurdistan arrives to regional parliament**



Shafaq News /The media adviser to Speaker of Kurdistan Parliament, Tariq Jawhar announced Thursday the arrival of the budget draft of the regional government for the coming year 2013 to Kurdistan Parliament.

He told "Shafaq News", that "general budget law for 2013 arrived Thursday to the presidency of Kurdistan Parliament and was directed by the speaker of the Parliament to the Financial and Economic Committee to inform all other committees."

"We expect that the presidency of the parliament would include the budget law as soon as possible within the parliament sessions program to hold an initial reading to it and then directed to the Finance and Economy committees and all other committees in the parliament in order to study the law and prepare a report of the Finance Committee during the legal limit, which is 30 days from the day of the arrival of the law to them. "

<http://www.shafaq.com/en/news/4444-draft-budget-of-kurdistan-arrives-to-regional-parliament.html>

- **Three armed groups led by Iraqi arrested**



Shafaq News / An official security source revealed Thursday arresting three armed groups in Babel province led by an Iraqi who used to live in Saudi Arabia.

The source, who requested not to mention his named said in an interview with "Shafaq News", that "a special security force from the Interior Ministry arrested in Msayab , north of Babel, three armed groups composed of 17 people led by an Iraqi who used to live previously in Saudi Arabia."

The source added that "the arrest operation took place after raiding the armed groups' dens on the basis of accurate intelligence."

According to observers al-Qaeda is starting to be active again in the areas north of Babel province , in Nineveh , Diyala, Salahuddin and Kirkuk, in addition to the presence of sleeper cells, according to Iraqi security sources in southern Iraq,

that implement armed attacks from time to time.

<http://www.shafaq.com/en/news/4443-three-armed-groups-led-by-iraqi-arrested-.html>

- **Kurdish Leaders Warn Baghdad Against**

ERBIL, Kurdistan Region—Kurdish and Iraqi troops came close to confrontation south of Kirkuk on Tuesday when Peshmerga forces fired at two unmanned Iraqi aircrafts.

A Peshmerga commander who wished to remain anonymous told Rudaw "Our Peshmerga forces shot down an manned Iraqi surveillance aircraft,"

The commander said that the aircraft had been sent by the Iraqi army to collect information on Peshmerga troops deployed in the disputed territories.

Deputy Minister of Peshmerga Anwar Haji Osman said that Kurdish anti-aircraft guns fired at the plane but that they weren't "sure if the plane was down."

“However, information we have gained from the Iraqi army confirms that the plane had been shot down,” Osman added.

Erbil and Baghdad have been locked in a serious dispute for weeks, since Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki dispatched his newly-formed and controversial Dijla forces to take over security in disputed northern territories which are also claimed by the Kurds, who sent in thousands of their own Peshmarga troops.

On Wednesday, the chief of staff of the ministry of Peshmerga Jabar Yawar released a statement, saying, “The Kurdish forces only fired warning shots at two Iraqi aircrafts to make them leave the Peshmerga units.”

Yawar maintained that his ministry has warned the Iraqi government that such incidents shouldn’t occur again.

“Tuesday’s incident was not premeditated and it wasn’t conducted upon orders of the Kurdistan leadership,” Yawar said. “What triggered it was the aircrafts that came too close to the Peshmerga units.”

According to Yawar, a high level team from the Peshmerga Ministry visited the area on Wednesday and advised the Kurdish units against repeating such acts in the future.

The president of the autonomous Kurdistan Region Massoud Barzani told Kurdish troops on the frontlines of a standoff with Iraqi forces last week that he hoped for a peaceful resolution of a row with Baghdad over disputed territories, but that if there was war the Kurdish cause was just.

“War is not a nice thing. Throughout history the Kurdish nation has never liked war, but they were always ready to protect their land and dignity. They would rather die than live under oppression,” Barzani said, accompanied by the Peshmarga minister.

<http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurds/5565.html>

- **Iraqi President's Condition "Stable and Improving"**

ERBIL, Kurdistan Region—Official sources from the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) said on Wednesday that Iraqi

President Jalal Talabani will be flown to Germany for further treatment.



Dr. Najmaldin Karim, a member of Talabani's medical team and a senior PUK official said, "If it is necessary the president will be flown abroad for treatment,"

Meanwhile, Dr. Karim added, "The president's condition is stable and improving,"

Dr. Karim confirmed that a medical team from Germany has arrived in Baghdad to treat the Iraqi president.

Talabani, 79, has struggled with his health in recent years and he underwent knee surgery in Germany last summer.

Kurdistan Region President Massoud Barzani wrote on his Facebook page on Wednesday, "I am saddened by my dear

brother and president Talabani's ill health and I wish him a speedy recovery."

"In following President Talabani's condition I am in touch with the doctors in Baghdad," Barzani wrote.

The US Embassy in Baghdad also released a statement wishing a speedy recovery for Talabani.

"The Embassy of the United States of America expresses its best wishes for the speedy recovery of the President of Iraq, Jalal Talabani. Our thoughts are with the President, his family, and the people of Iraq," read the statement.

<http://www.rudaw.net/english/news/iraq/5564.html>

2. IRAN

• Larijani Calls Iraqi Counterpart, VP to Discuss Talabani's Health Conditions

TEHRAN (FNA)- Iranian Parliament Speaker Ali Larijani in separate telephone conversations with his Iraqi counterpart Osama al-Nujaifi and Vice President Barham Saleh discussed the latest health

conditions of Iraq's President Jalal Talabani.



During the conversations, he got first-hand account about President Jalal Talabani's latest medical situation and prayed to God for his betterment.

Larijani hoped that President Talabani's physical condition will improve at the earliest.

He described Talabani as one of the great and influential figures in the region and as the one who played a key role in setting up a new democratic government in Iraq, and lauded Talabani's efforts to promote friendly ties with the Islamic Republic of Iran.

On Tuesday, some media outlets alleged that Talabani had died in a Baghdad hospital after a stroke.

Iraq's presidential office denied reports about Talabani's death, saying that "reports about Talabani's death are not true, and his condition is stable."

<http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9107128795>

- **Envoy Urges Regional Figures to Support Iran's Proposed Plan for Syria**

TEHRAN (FNA)- Iranian Ambassador to Beirut Qazanfar Roknabadi called on political and religious figures in the region to support Tehran's 6-point plan to settle the crisis in Syria.

In a meeting with the new Antakya Orthodox Patriarch, Youhanna Yazigi, in Beirut on Thursday, Roknabadi called for the support of the regional political and religious figures for Iran's 6-point peace plan for the settlement of the Syrian crisis and form a national reconciliation government.

Patriarch Yazigi, for his part, stressed the need to stop killing and violence in Syria and said that national reconciliation is the only solution to the crisis in Syria.



He said regional nations, especially the Syrians, whether Christian or Muslim, should think of dialogue as the only way out of the crisis and resort to wise manners to prevent violence and bloodshed.

Iran's proposed plan calls for an immediate end to violence and a start of the national dialogue. The third step is to create a reconciliation government and provide humanitarian aid to the people of Syria. The next step is the release of prisoners, who have not committed a crime against Syrians. And the final point is to allow media's full access to Syria.

Tehran has recently doubled its efforts to settle the problems in Syria which has been experiencing unrests since March 2011 with organized attacks by well-armed gangs against Syrian security forces and border guards.

On November 18, Iran hosted the Syrian National Dialogue Conference, with the motto "No to Violence, Yes to Democracy".

Over 200 Syrian religious and political figures, leaders of tribes and parties as well as representatives and leaders of the opposition groups took part in the two-day meeting in Tehran.

A number of Syrian parliament members as well as senior political figures from Sudan, Algeria, Turkey, Egypt, Lebanon, Iraq, Brazil and Zimbabwe also took part in the meeting.

This was the first time that both Syrian opposition figures and the minister of national reconciliation Ali Haidar, as the representative of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's government, discussed ways of finding a solution to the Syrian crisis.

The Islamic Republic of Iran is in favor of negotiations between the Syrian government and opposition groups to create stability in the Middle Eastern country.

<http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9107128859>

- **Minister: Iran Discovers 32 Tons of Drugs at Eastern Borders in 2 Weeks**

TEHRAN (FNA)- Iranian Police forces have discovered and seized over 32 tons of different types of narcotics at the country's Eastern borders in the last two weeks, Interior Minister Mostafa Mohammad Najjar said.

In the past two weeks 32 tons of various kinds of narcotic drugs were discovered on Eastern borders, especially the borders with Pakistan, Najjar said in a meeting with UN Undersecretary General and Executive Director of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) Yuri Fedotov in Tehran on Wednesday.

He said the confiscated drugs included 28 tons of pure drugs and four tons of residues.

Najjar also added that a number of traffickers were either killed or injured and arrested and 17 cars were confiscated.

He also underlined that poppy cultivation in Afghanistan has reached an alarming level.

According to the UNODC, these days, 93 percent of the world's opium is produced in the neighboring Afghanistan, 60 percent of which is destined for the EU and specially US markets, and the main transit route is Iran, where the country's dedicated police squad risk their lives to make the most discoveries of drug cargoes, disband drug-trafficking gangs and organizations and much more in a bid to rescue not only the Iranian youth but also all those living in Europe and the US.

Iran has always complained about the EU and other international bodies' lack of serious cooperation with Iran in the campaign against drug trafficking from Afghanistan.

The UNODC Opium Survey 2011 reported that despite increased efforts to combat poppy harvests, rising prices and growing demand boosted cultivation by seven percent in 2010, spreading to new regions of Afghanistan.

While Afghanistan produced only 185 tons of opium per year under the Taliban, according to the UN statistics, since the US-led invasion, drug production has surged to 3,400 tons annually. In 2007, the opium trade reached an estimated all-time production high of 8,200 tons.



Afghan and western officials blame Washington and NATO for the change, saying that allies have "overlooked" the drug problem since invading the country 10 years ago.

Eastern Iran borders Afghanistan, which is the world's number one opium and drug producer. Iran's geographical position has made the country a favorite transit corridor for drug traffickers who intend to smuggle their cargoes from Afghanistan to drug dealers in Europe.

Iran spends billions of dollars and has lost thousands of its police troops in the war against traffickers. Owing to its rigid

efforts, Iran makes 85 percent of the world's total opium seizures and has turned into the leading country in drug campaign.

The anti-drug squads of the Iranian Law Enforcement Police have intensified their countrywide campaign against drug-trafficking through staging long-term systematic operations for the last three years.

<http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9107128855>

- **Envoy: Iran Attaches Great Importance to Relations with Armenia**

TEHRAN (FNA)- Iranian Ambassador to Yerevan Mohammad Rayeesi stressed the age-old and close ties and cooperation between Tehran and Yerevan, and said the relations with Armenia are of great importance to Iran.

The Islamic Republic of Iran welcomes expansion of ties with Armenia, Rayeesi said on Thursday, adding that Iran is willing to develop cooperation with Armenia in all areas on mutual interests.

He made the remark during his tour of Yerevan College for International Relations Studies.

The ambassador said that given the age-old relations and the cultural affinities with Armenia, Iran attaches importance to upgrade economic cooperation with Armenia.

In recent years, Iran and its Northern neighbor Armenia have boosted cooperation, signed agreements on energy cooperation and agreed to cooperate in technology and research and to enhance ties in commerce and economy.

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his Armenian counterpart pledged in December 2011 to further expand "high-level relations" between their nations and, in particular, give new impetus to the implementation of joint energy projects that have fallen behind schedule.

In early October, Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi and his Armenian counterpart Edward Nalbandian met at the UN Headquarters in New York to

discuss bilateral ties and regional and international issues.

In a relevant event in June, a senior Iranian official announced Iran and Armenia's plans to establish a joint free trade zone.

Caretaker of Aras Free Trade Zone Sadeq Najafi made the remarks in a meeting with the governor-general of Sionik province, during which the two sides inked a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on cooperation in investment, trade and environmental sectors.

"In this MoU, it was agreed that an Iranian-Armenian free trade zone will be established for joint investment by Aras Free Trade Zone and Sionik province," Najafi said.

The two sides also agreed to create a joint border market at Nordouz border which is located within the boundaries of Aras Free Trade Zone, he added.

<http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9107128849>

- **Japan's JX renews 2013 Iranian crude contract**

TEHRAN, Dec. 20 (MNA) – Japan's top oil refiner, JX Nippon Oil & Energy Corp, renewed its term crude contract with Iran from January next year, chairman of the company, Yasushi Kimura, told reporters on Wednesday.

JX has a term contract to buy an estimated 83,000 bpd of Iranian crude and condensate until the end of December. But volumes for next year have not yet been decided, Kimura said.

Japan imported about 160,000 bpd in October and averaged 187,717 bpd for the first ten months of this year, down 41.3 percent from a year earlier, calculations based on trade ministry data show.

"That means we would make some reductions from the current level," Kimura said, referring to JX's purchases of Iranian oil.

JX has put on hold the renewal of another Iranian crude contract for 10,000 bpd that expired in March.

Crude shipments from Iran have more than halved in 2012 due to the U.S. and European sanctions on its oil trade, straining Tehran's finances, pressuring its currency and igniting inflation.

<http://www.mehrnews.com/en/newsdetail.aspx?NewsID=1771080>

- **Govt. can still fully implement subsidy reform plan: Ahmadinejad**

TEHRAN, Dec. 20 (MNA) – Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad criticized the Majlis on Wednesday for passing a bill temporarily preventing the administration from implementing the next stages of the subsidy reform plan.

Ahmadinejad made the remarks as the administration marked the second anniversary of the beginning of the subsidy reform plan, which has been described as the most important "economic surgery" in the history of Iran.

According to the parliamentary ratification, the administration is obliged to implement the subsidy reform plan in three stages over the course of five years.

The president said his administration could have fully implemented the subsidy

reform plan in a single step without any problems. He added that in the remaining months of his administration, it would still be possible to completely free up prices.

“From the beginning... we could have implemented it one hundred percent. In the remaining five to six months of the (last) year (of the presidential term), it is still possible to implement this plan fully without any problem being created,” Ahmadinejad stated.

He went on to say that the best way to counter the sanctions is the implementation of the subsidy reform plan in its entirety.

“The only way to circumvent the enemies’ sanctions is the full implementation of the subsidy reform plan, and it is possible to do this, provided that this train has only one driver because the economy cannot be directed from two sides,” Ahmadinejad opined.

Pointing to the importance of implementing the subsidy reform plan, he said everyone in the country believes that economic reform is necessary.

He added that his government had prepared a blueprint for the implementation of the subsidy reform plan in 2008, but some people within the administration said since elections were scheduled to be held in 2009, it was possible that the administration would be dealt a blow.

If a problem is not resolved this year, the problem will not remain the same three years later, he noted.

“The enemy implemented a plot and some inside (the country) cooperated with them. They created disturbances in the foreign currency market which we should not attribute to the subsidy targeting.”

He also said that his administration has devised a plan to remove some zeros from the national currency.

<http://www.mehrnews.com/en/newsdetail.aspx?NewsID=1771076>

- **Naval exercise in Strait of Hormuz for regional security**

TEHRAN, Dec. 20 (MNA) – Iranian defense minister has said that the country’s armed forces will stage naval war games in the

Strait of Hormuz in order to maintain the security of the region.

“Since the Islamic Republic of Iran is the most important provider of security in the region, the aim of the war games to be held by Iranian armed forces in the Strait of Hormuz is to increase military preparedness and maintain the security of the region,” Brigadier General Ahmad Vahidi told reporters after the cabinet meeting on Wednesday.

In addition, Vahidi said that the maneuvers will be carried out to test new military systems and practice new military tactics.

Rear Admiral Ali Fadav, the commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps, announced on Monday that naval forces of the IRGC plan to hold war games in the Strait of Hormuz by the end of the current Iranian calendar year, which ends on March 21, 2013.

IRGC forces practiced their ability to block the Strait of Hormuz, the world’s most important oil shipping waterway, during a naval exercise which was conducted in January in the Persian Gulf.

Iranian military officials have said that the country’s armed forces may consider blocking the strategic waterway if Iran is faced with any military threats.

IRGC to take delivery of new submarines

Elsewhere in his remarks, Vahidi announced that the project to manufacture new domestically designed submarines to be delivered to the IRGC is well underway.

He added that the country’s defense doctrine has been formulated based on an asymmetrical warfare strategy, so Iran designs and manufactures pieces of military hardware which can be used in “asymmetrical battles”.

He also announced that the country’s new achievements in space technology will be unveiled on February 2, 2013, which is National Space Industry Day.

<http://www.mehrnews.com/en/newsdetail.aspx?NewsID=1771078>

- **Iran denounces UN for 'political' human rights resolution**

The Islamic Republic of Iran believes that dialogue, serious cooperation and avoiding political moves are the best solution for the promotion and improvement of human rights in the world."

Iranian Ambassador to the United Nations
Mohammad Khazaei

Iranian Ambassador to the United Nations
Mohammad Khazaei has censured a resolution by the UN General Assembly about human rights in Iran, saying it fails to mirror realities.

"The Islamic Republic of Iran believes that dialogue, serious cooperation and avoiding political moves are the best solution for the promotion and improvement of human rights in the world," Khazaei said in an address to the General Assembly meeting in New York on Thursday.

He denounced hostile measures certain countries have adopted against the human rights situation in Iran and warned that politicization of the issue can land a blow to the concept.

"We have always stressed the necessity for dialogue and mutual respect as the foundation of human rights," Khazaei pointed out.

The UN General Assembly on Thursday voted on a Canadian-sponsored resolution on alleged human rights violations in Iran. The 193-member body passed the measure 86-32 with 65 abstentions.

The Iranian diplomat emphasized that the resolution was introduced for political purposes and did not seek to improve the human rights situation in the country.

Khazaei took a swipe at Canada as a major backer of the measure, asking how a country sprinkled with violations of human rights against its indigenous people and ethnic minorities could seek for a broadside against the situation of human rights in Iran.

Khazaei, however, emphasized that the resolution cannot hinder Iran's efforts for the promotion of human rights.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/21/279275/iran-raps-un-political-hr-resolution/>

- **Experts, ex-officials urge Obama to change tactics on Iran**

A group of 24 experts and former officials have called on US President Barack Obama to change tactics on Iran, warning against tougher sanctions against the Islamic Republic.



“There should be an appropriate and proportional paring back of international sanctions on Iran,” the signatories, mainly researchers and former ambassadors of European countries to Tehran, wrote in a letter dated December 6, but published on Thursday.

The letter made mention of “ordinary Iranians suffering from the effects of the sanctions” and reminded the US president of his pledges to “resolve the Iranian nuclear issue diplomatically.” “Time is of the essence, and we hope you will utilize the weeks and months ahead to pursue a robust diplomatic initiative,” it said.

“We encourage you to direct your team vigorously to pursue serious, sustained negotiations with the Iranian government...With greater determination, creativity, and persistence, we believe that such a deal is within reach,” they wrote.

They also warned Obama against envisaging military option against Iran over the Islamic Republic's nuclear program, saying it “would be counterproductive and costly.”

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

Iran argues that as a signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty and a member of the International Atomic Energy Agency, it is entitled to develop and acquire nuclear technology for peaceful purposes.

The letter likewise argued, “International sanctions...even if tightened further, are unlikely to stop Iran's nuclear pursuits.”

In addition, the IAEA has conducted numerous inspections of Iran's nuclear facilities, but has never found any evidence of divergence towards military objectives in the Islamic Republic's nuclear energy program.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/20/279244/obama-urged-to-change-tactics-on-iran/>

- **Pakistan decided on Iran gas project**

Pakistani Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar has reaffirmed her country's determination to push ahead with the building of a multi-billion-dollar gas pipeline, which would carry natural gas from Iran to the Islamic Republic's eastern neighbor.

Khar said on Thursday in Islamabad that Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari is scheduled to travel to Tehran in near future to discuss the finalization of the project.

Underscoring Pakistan's daily-growing demand for Iran's gas, which is increasing on a daily basis, she said the project would be pursued under any condition.



Khar noted that Pakistan intends to broaden its relations with Iran as her country faces serious energy crisis.

The pipeline, projected to cost USD 1.2-1.5 billion, would enable the export of 21.5 million cubic meters of Iranian natural gas to Pakistan on a daily basis.

Iran has already built more than 900 kilometers of the pipeline on its soil.

Earlier this month, Pakistan dismissed reports that it might pull out of the project amid renewed efforts by the US to convince the country to abandon the project.

"It is a project, which is in our national interest and we are determined to pursue it," Pakistan's Foreign Office Spokesman, Moazzam Ahmed Khan said on December 14.

Pakistani Minister of Oil and Natural Resources, Asim Hussain said on September 4 that the project would become fully operational in 2014.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/20/279233/pakistan-decided-on-iran-gas-project/>

3. ISRAEL - PALESTINE

- **Official: Arab League chief to visit Palestine**

BETHLEHEM (Ma'an) -- Arab League Secretary-General Nabil al-Arabi will visit Palestine on Dec. 29 to meet with President Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian Authority foreign minister said Friday.



Riyad al-Malki said al-Arabi would discuss the financial safety net pledged by the

Arab League to the Palestinian Authority to ease the West Bank government's financial crisis.

The League has yet to deliver the pledged money, forcing banks to lend the PA \$100 million to pay November salaries to public sector employees. The PA says the short-term loan will be repaid when money arrives from Arab countries.

Al-Arabi will update Abbas on regional contributors to the fund, al-Malki told Ma'an.

Al-Malki said the Arab League chief and Abbas would discuss Palestine's next steps following its admission as a non-member state to the UN, a move that prompted Israel to withhold the PA's revenue, exacerbating the fiscal crisis.

The officials will also talk about a decision by the Arab League follow-up committee to send ministerial delegations for consultations with the UN Security Council to end Israeli settlement expansion and release Palestinian prisoners of Israel.

Arab foreign ministers will accompany al-Arabi on the one-day visit, al-Malki said.

<http://www.maannews.net/eng/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=549933>

- **Official: Palestine mulling ICC if UN takes no action on settlements**

BETHLEHEM (Ma'an) -- Palestine may complain to the International Criminal Court if the UN Security Council does not take action over Israeli settlement plans, the political adviser to President Mahmoud Abbas said Friday.



Nimr Hammad told Ma'an that several European countries were lobbying the US to take a serious position against Israeli settlements at the 15-member council.

On Wednesday, the US was the only council member that did not make a statement opposing Israeli plans to expand Jewish settlements around Jerusalem.

The other 14 countries on the council issued statements as a "Plan B" after it was clear the US would veto a resolution on the issue, India's UN ambassador Hardeep Singh Puri said.

Hammad said if the UN Security Council did not take action against Israeli settlements, Palestine would consider complaining to the International Criminal Court, an option made available by Palestine's admission as a non-member state to the UN in November.

Israeli settlements are illegal under international law.

The Security Council resumed talks on a resolution condemning settlements after Israel said last month it would build 3,000 more homes in the West Bank including East Jerusalem. Israel has since announced plans to build thousands more units.

But it became apparent that the United States was unwilling to support a resolution, diplomats said.

<http://www.maannews.net/eng/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=549937>

- **Israel complains to UN about rearming by Hezbollah**

UNITED NATIONS (Reuters) - Israel's UN envoy urged the Security Council on Thursday to condemn what he described as significant rearming by Hezbollah, saying the Lebanese group now possessed an arsenal of tens of thousands of missiles capable of hitting Israel.

Israel's UN Ambassador Ron Prosor said in a letter to the 15-nation council that the buildup was in clear violation of a UN arms embargo.

Prosor said an explosion in the southern Lebanese town of Tair Harfa on Monday was at a weapons depot.

"This explosion offers yet another reminder to the world about the grave danger before our eyes in Lebanon," he wrote.

"In flagrant breach of (Security Council) resolution 1701, Hezbollah has built its arsenal to unprecedented levels, amassing 50,000 deadly missiles in Lebanon -- more missiles than many NATO members have in their possession," he said. "These

missiles can reach all of Israel and well beyond."

A Lebanese security source said Monday's blast was caused by a rocket that had been fired into Lebanon during Hezbollah's 2006 war with Israel but which did not detonate on impact.

Israel has long complained that the UN arms embargo on Lebanon has been unsuccessful.

"I call on the Security Council and all responsible members of the international community to send a clear signal that Hezbollah's rapid rearmament will not be tolerated - backed by concrete steps on the ground," he said.

"A logical first step is to ensure that Hezbollah is placed on relevant terrorism watchlists in all corners of the globe, including in the European Union," Prosor said.

A Reuters reporter in Lebanon on Monday said members of Hezbollah, the Lebanese Army and around 50 members of the UN peacekeeping force UNIFIL were at the

site of the blast but that he was prevented from approaching the area.

UNIFIL has about 12,000 troops and naval personnel in Lebanon after its expansion under UN Security Council Resolution 1701 that halted the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war in southern Lebanon. The south remains a Hezbollah stronghold.

Despite domestic demands for the group to disarm, Hezbollah keeps stockpiles of weapons -- including thousands of rockets -- saying it will need them in the event of a new war with Israel.

On Oct. 3, three Hezbollah members were killed in an explosion at a weapons warehouse in the town of Nabi Sheet in eastern Lebanon.

<http://www.maannews.net/eng/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=549938>

- **Japan Deplores Israeli Settlement Plans**

TOKYO, December 20, 2012 (Wafa) – Japan deeply deplored Israeli plans to expand settlements in East Jerusalem, said

a foreign ministry statement on Wednesday.

The statement said that the “Israeli government continues its plan for settlement construction and accelerates such acts in recent days at a time when the international community is making utmost efforts to resume direct negotiations between Israeli and Palestinian sides.” This clearly goes against the ongoing efforts by the international community toward realizing a two-state solution.”

It added “settlement activities are a violation of international law, and Japan has repeatedly called upon Israel to fully freeze settlement activities.”

It said “the Government of Japan strongly calls upon Israel to refrain from any unilateral act that changes the current status of East Jerusalem as well as not to implement the above-mentioned plans of construction for the sake of progress in the peace process.”

<http://english.wafa.ps/index.php?action=detail&id=21368>

- **Quartet’s Blair says Settlements Undermine Prospects of Talks**

JERUSALEM, December 20, 2012 (Wafa) – Quartet representative Tony Blair Thursday criticized Israel’s settlement policy in the occupied Palestinian territories saying it undermines prospects for a negotiated peace settlement.

“The problem is not only the building of such settlements itself but also that this is a moment when it is vital to re-start a proper negotiation and all such announcements do is to put new obstacles in the way of progress and undermine the prospects for a negotiated peace leading to a viable Palestinian state living side by side with a safe and secure Israel,” he said in a statement.

Blair expressed support to statements the US State Department and the four European members of the UN Security Council have made regarding Israel’s settlements.

The US and European statements strongly criticized Israeli plans to build thousands of new housing units in settlements in the occupied territories, including in East Jerusalem, particularly the controversial

E1 project which they said will destroy all prospects to create a contiguous Palestinian state.

“All parties should refrain from unilateral actions that harm efforts to achieve peace,” Blair concluded his statement.

<http://english.wafa.ps/index.php?action=detail&id=21367>

4. AFRICA and EGYPT

- **Egypt's Islamists call for Friday rally 'to defend scholars and mosques'**

Following the siege of prominent Egyptian sheikh for 14 hours in Alexandria mosque, Islamist forces call for a mass protest in defense of houses of worship

A number of Islamist groups are calling for a rally "to defend scholars and mosques" in front of the Qaed Ibrahim mosque in Alexandria on Friday.

The protest comes after iconic Alexandria sheikh Ahmed El-Mahalawy was trapped inside the mosque for 14 hours on Friday, 14 December by worshippers angry at his sermon, which called for a 'Yes' vote in the national constitutional referendum.

According to a statement released on the Muslim Brotherhood's Facebook page on Tuesday, the groups who plan to participate include the Brotherhood and its political arm the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), the Salafist Calling and its political arm Nour Party, Asala Party, Al-Gamaa Al-Islamiya, and Building and Development Party.

The Islamist forces blamed the liberal Constitution Party, headed by Mohamed ElBaradei, and the opposition group Egyptian Popular Current, led by former presidential candidate Hamdeen Sabbahi, for spearheading the attacks on the mosque.

The Brotherhood statement said that the rally will be in "response to the attacks by the militias of the Popular Current and the Constitution Party on the Qaed Ibrahim mosque, siege of Sheikh El-Mahalawy for more than 14 hours inside the mosque, and attempt to assault more than 100 worshippers, including women and children."

Anas El-Kady, the official spokesperson of the Brotherhood's Alexandria branch, said

the rally will be against the "thuggery" of the two opposition groups.

"It began with attacking the (Brotherhood's) headquarters, then with the assaulting of Brotherhood leaders' homes and houses of worship and Islamic preachers," El-Kady said.

Several Brotherhood headquarters were torched by protesters, following President Mohamed Morsi's controversial 22 November constitutional decree, in which he placed himself above judicial review.

El-Kady added that the siege of El-Mahalawy showed the "ugly face" of Egypt's "secular groups" hostile to Islam.

"Yet, the Egyptian people are religious by nature. Egyptians are protective of Islam and will not accept this kind of behavior," he said.

He also accused the leaders of Egypt's opposition groups of forcing the Islamists to resort to violence.

"However, Islamist leaders were able to exercise self-control. They managed to maintain their non-violent ideology and

their belief in dialogue and peaceful work,” El-Kady said. “This is different than the secular groups, who prefer violence than dialogue and democracy.”

The Preacher’s Syndicate has also released a statement on their official website, announcing their planned participation in Friday’s rally after what they called a “savage attack by seculars, liberals, and members of the old regime, which culminated in the attack on the Qaed Ibrahim mosque, an icon of the revolution, and the siege of El-Mahalawy, a revolutionary preacher.”

The syndicate accused these forces of trying to drag Egypt into a civil war after they failed attempt to destroy the legitimacy of the regime and obstruct the path of the revolution.

The syndicate also urged the Egyptian people to protect places of worship. It asked the Ministry of Interior to protect houses of worship and arrest and punish all those responsible for this “heinous act.”

El-Mahalawy is a staunch supporter of President Mohamed Morsi.

Shortly after he was released, he revealed in a press conference that his supporters had wanted to violently disperse the siege but he told them to "wait."



“My sons [supporters] gave me a call and said that they are on their way to save me with automatic weapons, but I told them to wait for my instructions," he said.

Several vehicles were set ablaze in the ensuing violent clashes, and on-the-scene videos suggested anti-Brotherhood protesters destroyed cars carrying the logo of the Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party.

The planned Islamist protest in Alexandria is scheduled to be held one day before the second stage of the constitutional referendum, where 17 governorates will cast their vote.

Unofficial final results of the constitution referendum's first round, held on 15 December, show a 56.5 per cent approval for the draft charter while 'No' votes reached 43.5 per cent.

<http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/60989/Egypt/Politics-/Egypts-Islamists-call-for-Friday-rally-to-defend-s.aspx>

- **Egypt's presidency 'open to dialogue': Spokesman**

Presidential spokesman says the constitution will be open to dialogue even after results

Presidential spokesman Yasser Ali said the regime is open to dialogue about the constitution regardless of the outcome, in a press conference on Thursday.

“Regardless of whether people vote yes or no in the referendum, we will be open to dialogue,” Ali said during the conference, which took place at the presidential palace.

He added that Egypt’s economy is going through a “critical” phase that requires all of Egypt’s forces to work together. “We

are all aware of the rules of democracy, the most important of which is the peaceful transfer of power,” Ali said. “Dialogue is the only solution for those who want a democracy.”

The second phase of the referendum will take place on 22 December.

<http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/60996/Egypt/Politics-/Egypts-presidency-open-to-dialogue-Spokesman.aspx>

- **Sources: Morsi to announce remaining Shura Council members Friday**

Official sources say that President Morsi wants to transfer his legislative powers to the Shura Council before People's Assembly elections

Official sources close to the Egyptian presidency revealed to Al-Sharq Al-Awsat newspaper Thursday that President Mohamed Morsi would announce the names of the remaining third of the Shura Council Friday, before the second stage of the referendum on the constitution Saturday.

According to the sources, Morsi will complete the membership of the upper chamber of the parliament so he can transfer legislative powers to the Shura Council until People's Assembly elections are conducted within two months of passing the new constitution.

Two thirds of the Shura Council were elected in February. The then-ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) refused to appoint the remaining third, leaving it to an elected president.

The Shura Council is composed of 270 members, one third appointed by the president according to law. In Shura Council elections held earlier this year, the Freedom and Justice Party — the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood — won 58.8 per cent of the seats while Salafist El-Nour Party won 25.5 per cent.

<http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/60956/Egypt/Politics-/Sources-Morsi-to-announce-remaining-Shura-Council-.aspx>

5. SYRIA

• Syria Unleashes Cluster Bombs on Town, Punishing Civilians

Tyler Hicks/The New York Times

MAREA, Syria — The plane came in from the southeast late in the afternoon, releasing its weapons in a single pass. Within seconds, scores of finned bomblets struck and exploded on the homes and narrow streets of this small Syrian town.

After the screams and the desperate gathering of the victims, the staff at the local Freedom Hospital counted 4 dead and 23 wounded. All were civilians, doctors and residents said.

Many forms of violence and hardship have befallen Syria's people as the country's civil war has escalated this year. But the Syrian government's attack here on Dec. 12 pointed to one of the war's irrefutable patterns: the deliberate targeting of civilians by President Bashar al-Assad's military, in this case with a weapon that is impossible to use precisely.

Syrians on both sides in this fight have suffered from the bloodshed and sectarian

furies given dark license by the war. The victims of the cluster bomb attacks describe the tactic as collective punishment, a mass reprisal against populations that are with the rebels.

The munitions in question — Soviet-era PTAB-2.5Ms — were designed decades ago by Communist engineers to destroy battlefield formations of Western armored vehicles and tanks. They are ejected in dense bunches from free-falling dispensers dropped from aircraft. The bomblets then scatter and descend nose-down to land and explode almost at once over a wide area, often hundreds of yards across.

Marea stands along an agricultural plain, surrounded for miles by empty fields. Even at night, or in bad weather, it cannot be mistaken for anything but what it is — the densely packed collection of small businesses, offices and homes that together form a town.

Two journalists from The New York Times were traveling toward Marea as the attack occurred and arrived not long after the exploding bomblets had rippled across its neighborhoods.

Blood pooled on the street, including beside a water-collection point at an intersection where Nabhan al-Haji, 18, was killed.

Another victim, Ahmad Najjar Asmail, had been riding a motorcycle when a submunition landed beside him. He was decapitated. Ramy Naser, 15, was also fatally wounded.

The hospital was crowded with patients. Many more were en route to hospitals in Turkey.

The use of cluster munitions is banned by much of the world, although Syria, like the United States, is not party to that international convention. In the detached parlance of military planners, they are also sometimes referred to as area weapons — ordnance with effects that cover a sprawling amount of ground.

In the attack on Marea, at least three dispensers, each containing 42 bomblets slightly smaller than a one-liter bottle and packed with a high-explosive shaped charge, were dropped squarely onto neighborhoods and homes.

Two funerals began as the sun set, the latest in a town that rose early against Syria's government, and has been one of the seats of defiance.

One homeowner, Ali Farouh, showed the place where a PTAB-2.5M struck an exterior wall on his patio. His young son held up bits of shrapnel.

"Bashar is a horse," Mr. Farouh said, almost spitting with disgust as he said the president's name. "He is a donkey."

An examination of the area by daylight found the signature signs of an air-delivered cluster munitions attack, including unexploded PTAB-2.5M submunitions, the tail sections and fins of three dispensers and three main dispenser bodies.

One resident also displayed the nearly intact remains of an ATK-EB mechanical time fuse associated with the same dispensers. Fragments of the submunitions' fins were in abundance. An interior spacer and dispenser nose plate were also found.

Throughout the town, many of the narrow, telltale craters made by shaped charges could be seen. Some cut deep holes through asphalt into the dirt below, almost like a drill.

It was not immediately clear why Marea was attacked, although many residents ascribed motives that mix collective punishment with revenge.

The town is the home of Abdulkader al-Saleh, a prominent rebel field commander in the Aleppo region. Mr. Saleh, charismatic and lean, is locally known with near reverence as Haji Marea, and is celebrated by his townspeople for his mix of battlefield savvy, courage and luck. This month, just days before the cluster attack on his hometown, he was named a leader in the reorganized Free Syrian Army, as many rebels call themselves.

Residents said Marea's recent history, and its indelible connection to the commander it produced, has earned it a high place on Mr. Assad's list of targets.

"The regime especially hates us," said Yasser al-Haji, an activist who lost a cousin in the attack.

No one disputes that Marea has repeatedly been attacked by some of the Assad government's most frightening weapons. On Thursday, residents reported being hit by cruise missiles, perhaps Scuds, which they said landed just north of the town with tremendous, earth-heaving explosions.

In the case of the cluster munitions attack, one of the submunitions did strike a building being used by the rebels — a school where some of Haji Marea's fighters are based. It blasted a small hole in the concrete roof and sprayed bits of concrete and shrapnel into the room below, which was empty.



Several fighters, who were meeting in the next room as the jet screamed overhead — and the sole bomblet, out of more than 100, hit their building — chuckled at their near miss. But they were enraged by the attack.

They spoke of the government's escalation of weapons throughout the year — from mortars, tanks and artillery to helicopter gunships, then to fixed-wing attack jets. Since summer, Mr. Assad's military has used cluster munitions repeatedly, and recently began using incendiary cluster munitions, too. This month, Syrian activists and officials in Washington said the government had ratcheted up the pressure with one of the last unused weapons left in its stock — cruise missiles, with conventional warheads. Analysts who have watched the gradual escalations said the Assad government has followed a “boil-the-frog-slowly” strategy.

With the incremental escalations, they say, Mr. Assad has prevented the West from finding cause to enter the war, as NATO did against Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi of Libya after he rolled out almost all of his military's full might at the war's outset.

One fighter, who gave his name as Mustafa, said that Mr. Assad had little left that he had not used. The fighter said he expected no restraint.

“In the coming days, he’ll use the chemicals and he’ll destroy everything,” he said. “And will burn the people, and kill all the people — children, women, old men, the elders.”

Mr. Assad, Mustafa said, “just needs to kill.”

http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/21/world/middleeast/syria-uses-cluster-bombs-to-attack-as-many-civilians-as-possible.html?_r=0

- **Putin further distances Russia from Syria's Assad**

Russian President Vladimir Putin says Russia can't support Syrian leader Bashar Assad 'at any price.'

By Sergei L. Loiko and Patrick J. McDonnell, Los Angeles Times

December 20, 2012, 5:38 p.m.

MOSCOW — Russian President Vladimir Putin declared Thursday that change was needed in Damascus, further distancing Moscow from Syrian President Bashar Assad in another sign that Assad's support

may be fraying even among his few remaining allies.

Putin made the comments as a United Nations panel concluded that Syria's raging conflict had become "overtly sectarian" and was drawing foreign fighters after almost two years of violence and tens of thousands of deaths.

Putin said Russia would not back Assad, long a close ally, "at any price," and he used some of the Kremlin's strongest language to date indicating that Russia recognized that Assad's days were numbered.

"We are not concerned with the fate of Assad's regime," Putin told journalists in Moscow. "We understand what is going on, given that the [Assad] family has been in power for 40 years and that the need for change is certainly on the agenda."

Iran — Assad's other major ally — floated its own peace plan last weekend that could, in theory, lead to elections that would see Assad replaced. Like Moscow, however, Tehran has rejected calls from Washington and elsewhere for the departure of Assad. Putin provided no hint

that Russia was close to signing off on any deal that would guarantee Assad's ouster.

Assad's vice president, Farouk Sharaa, said in comments published in a Lebanese newspaper this week that neither government forces nor opposition fighters could score a military victory. Some analysts viewed the remarks as a sign that the regime could be increasingly concerned about its survival as rebels mount an offensive for the capital.

Rebels have made steady territorial gains in Syria, though Assad's forces still control the capital and maintain considerable support among segments of the population fearful of Iraq-style chaos should the rebels triumph.

There is speculation that U.S., Turkish and Russian diplomats may be trying to craft some kind of follow-up to an agreement reached in June in Geneva that called for a transitional government in Syria but did not call for Assad to step down. At the time, Moscow balked at U.S.-backed language that would have mandated Assad's departure.

Moscow has said for some time that its interest was to avoid a further bloodbath and anarchy in the heart of the Middle East. The Russian president repeated the Moscow position that negotiation must be the path to resolve the Syrian crisis.

"I think agreements based on a military victory are out of place here and cannot be effective," Putin said, adding, "What will happen there primarily depends on the Syrian people themselves."

Moscow has been wary of the Middle East's wave of "Arab Spring" revolutions, citing heightened regional instability and the rise of Islamist power. Russia's aim, Putin said, is to prevent Syria from descending into "a never-ending civil war."

Russian leaders have often cited the chaotic situations that have unfolded when Arab strongmen such as Iraq's Saddam Hussein and Libya's Moammar Kadafi have fallen after Western-led intervention. Still, analysts note a perceptible shift in the Kremlin's position on Assad and thinly disguised annoyance with the Syrian leader's reluctance to make decisive changes.

Last week, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov said the rebels might succeed in ousting Assad, the first such public acknowledgment from a Russian insider. Moscow sought to backtrack the next day, insisting that Bogdanov's comments were mischaracterized, but the remarks did appear to reflect a broader view.

"Obviously the Kremlin tried to assert its influence recently to compel Assad to make some compromises ... but to no avail," said Andrei Kortunov, president of the New Eurasia Foundation, a Moscow-based think tank, in an interview. "That certainly rubbed Putin the wrong way, and the Russian leader is having a hard time hiding his irritation with Assad."

Just a few months ago, Kortunov noted, the kinds of comments that Putin uttered Thursday about Assad would have been unthinkable.

"The time is working against Assad, and Moscow increasingly understands that the longer the civil war goes the less chances Assad has to come out victorious," Kortunov said.

Russia has long been an ally of Assad and his father, the late Hafez Assad, who ruled for 30 years before his son succeeded him 12 years ago. Russia has a naval resupply base in Syria's Mediterranean city of Tartus and thousands of Russian citizens reside in Syria. Moscow is reportedly making contingency plans to evacuate its citizens should the situation continue to deteriorate.

Meanwhile, a new U.N.-commissioned report outlines a dire scenario in the war-ravaged nation and asserts that ethnic and religious differences are now stoking the escalating violence, drawing in militants and extremists from throughout the region.

"Entire communities are at risk of being forced out of the country, or of being killed inside the country," said the U.N.-impaneled Commission of Inquiry on Syria, in the interim report.

The fighting has sliced through Syria's complex fabric of ethnic and religious groups, shattering the peace between communities that had long lived side by side.

<http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/middleeast/la-fg-syria-putin-refugees-20121221,0,2772996.story>

- **UN says Syria conflict is 'overtly sectarian'**

Report finds conflict increasingly pits Sunni rebels against state forces supported by religious and ethnic minorities.

Syria's civil war is increasingly turning into a sectarian conflict pitting majority Sunni rebels against government forces supported by the country's religious and ethnic minorities, a new UN human rights report has said.

Sergio Pinheiro, a Brazilian expert who heads an independent commission investigating abuses, said on Thursday the bulk of the victims of the nearly two-year war were civilians, and blamed both sides for abuses including torture and illegal executions.

Activists say about 40,000 people have died on both sides since the conflict erupted in March 2011.

The report, commissioned by the UN Human Rights Council, found that foreign fighters, many linked to hardline Sunni groups, are infiltrating into Syria.

They are operating in independent units that coordinate actions with the Free Syrian Army - the Western-backed armed group that is the rebels' main military force.

"The commission is extremely worried by the presence of foreign fighters ... who are not fighting for human rights and democracy," Pinheiro told reporters in Brussels. "By their own admission, they are very proud of their breaches of humanitarian law."

Although Pinheiro visited Damascus, the panel was not allowed into Syria and was forced to compile its report - which covers September 28 to December 16 - from interviews with Syrians who have fled the conflict.

Hundreds of thousands of Syrians have escaped into Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq.

Dividing lines

Pinheiro noted that anti-government rebels were hiding in Syrian cities where they were "failing to distinguish themselves" from the civilian population, triggering strikes by government artillery and the air force.

While the sectarian divide is sharpest between the Sunni and Alawi communities, from which most of the senior government and military leaders hail, other minority groups have been increasingly drawn into the conflict, the report said.

"As battles between government and anti-government armed groups approach the end of their second year, the conflict has become overtly sectarian in nature," it said, adding that Christians, Armenians, Druze and others have largely aligned themselves with President Bashar al-Assad's regime.

"The commission has received credible reports of anti-government groups attacking Alawis and other minority communities," the report said.

Almost all of the 80,000 Christians who used to live in the central town of Homs, the scene of intense fighting between the warring sides, have fled to Damascus or Beirut, the report said.

Jabhat al-Nusra, the largest grouping of hardline foreign fighters in Syria, is said to have a significant presence in Homs.

Syria's Kurds, who predominantly live in the northeast, have clashed with both government and anti-government armed groups over control of that territory, the report said.

But in recent months, as the Syrian army ceded control of the region, clashes between Kurds and opposition groups and foreign fighters have intensified.

"We think this is a war where no military victory is possible," Pinheiro said. "It is a great illusion that providing arms to one side or the other will help end it."

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/12/2012122015525051365.html>

6. ARABIAN PENINSULA AND THE GULF OF BASRA

- **Oman to stage first local poll after unrest**

Oman starts its first municipal elections in a regime bid to contain unrest inspired by Arab uprisings last year

Omanis vote in their first municipal election on Saturday, a modest opening apparently designed to stem discontent about graft and lack of jobs in what is normally one of the Arab world's quietest corners.

Stability in the small Gulf oil producer and U.S. ally is important because it sits opposite Iran on the Strait of Hormuz, the conduit for almost a fifth of petroleum traded worldwide.

One of the oldest Arab states and under absolute rule by Sultan Qaboos for 42 years, Oman experienced unrest inspired by Arab uprisings elsewhere early last year, with several strikes and protests against unemployment and corruption.

The government swiftly promised to create thousands of jobs, announced

plans for municipal polls and granted the sultanate's only elected body, the Shura Council, some legislative power.

According to government figures, Oman created more than 52,000 public sector jobs between January and October this year, as well as at least 22,000 in the private sector.

An official said the number of registered unemployed fell to 17,230 at the end of October 2012 from 68,007 a year earlier.

But the municipal polls appear to be drawing scant attention among the native population of about two million.

Although Muscat's normally staid streets have been plastered with posters of candidates promising to fix roads or build parking lots, many Omanis say the local vote is meaningless because municipal councils hold little or no power.

"I don't think these guys will make any significant changes because they will not be politicians and can't make changes where needed," said Malik al-Malki, a civil servant.

"They are not like the Shura Council members, who can make enough noises to create jobs for our children."

STRIKES AND PROTESTS

The Shura Council has been elected regularly since 1991 by a limited pool of voters. Universal suffrage was adopted in 2003.

Hundreds of people were arrested in protests in 2011, when two people died and more than 100 were wounded in clashes with security forces. Most of those detained were later pardoned.

Strikes in the critical oil industry occurred in May 2012, when hundreds contracted to firms working with the main state oil company downed tools to demand wage hikes. The company, Petrol Development Oman, said the dispute was largely over by June 2 and most of the strikers returned to work.

Up to 200 young Omanis demonstrated in the industrial town of Sohar on June 30 with placards demanding jobs, better living conditions and an end to corruption.

After last year's protests, Sultan Qaboos decreed that at least seven portfolios in his 28-strong cabinet must be held by Shura Council members. Nine serve in the present cabinet.

The sultan's constitutional amendment also gave the council the right to approve or reject draft laws. But the final say remains with Qaboos, who wields much of the state's power.

Of the 1,475 candidates vying for 192 municipal council seats, fewer than 50 are women, reflecting a belief among some Omani women that men do not want to see them in public office.

"Men vote for themselves and ask their wives and daughters to vote for male candidates," said Salha al-Mudathir, a businesswoman who owns a chain of boutique shops.

<http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/2/8/60959/World/Region/Oman-to-stage-first-local-poll-after-unrest.aspx>

- **UAE shuts down office of U.S. research institute RAND**

UAE shuts down a policy research institute in Abu Dhabi amid the closure of other think tanks and research institutions in the major oil Gulf state

The United Arab Emirates has shut down the Abu Dhabi office of the RAND Corporation, the American policy research institute, in the latest of several closures of foreign research institutions and think tanks in the Gulf Arab state this year.

The UAE, a major oil exporter and regional business hub, has not seen the unrest that has ousted autocratic Arab rulers elsewhere, but analysts and diplomats say the U.S. ally is anxious to prevent any instability spreading to its turf.

In March, the UAE closed two international think-tanks promoting democracy overseas, Germany's Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) and the U.S.-funded National Democratic Institute (NDI), citing licensing irregularities.

"We were asked by the authorities in Abu Dhabi to close the office," Jeffrey Hiday, director at RAND's office for media relations, told Reuters in an emailed statement.

He declined to comment on the reason for the closure.

No UAE official was available for comment.

RAND has had a small representative office in Abu Dhabi since 2010, Hiday said, which "facilitated evidence-based research and analysis by RAND experts in such areas as education, public safety and environmental health".

The clients for RAND research were emirate- and federal-level government institutions, he said.

The closures of NDI and KAS caused consternation in Washington and Berlin. NDI is loosely affiliated with the U.S. Democratic Party, while KAS has close links with German Chancellor Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (CDU).

A spokesman for KAS said in April that the group, which did not have a licence, had been trying to obtain one for the past two years and was in Abu Dhabi at the invitation of the emirate's crown prince.

Merkel herself told reporters that UAE officials had said they were closing all Western foundations in the Gulf state.

The Abu Dhabi Gallup Center, which was a branch of the U.S. polling and research firm, also closed down earlier this year.

Over the past year the UAE has shown little tolerance of home-grown dissent, detaining more than 60 local Islamists, who the authorities say are members of the Muslim Brotherhood and were plotting to overthrow the government.

In recent days at least another four people have been arrested in what human rights campaigners said might be part of a crackdown on online dissent and a tightening of the Gulf Arab state's Internet law.

<http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/2/8/60960/World/Region/UAE-shuts-down-office-of-US-research-institute-RAN.aspx>

- **Kuwait shuts opposition-linked television**

The Kuwaiti government shuts down the anti-regime Al-Youm TV network for failing to 'rectify its situation in line with the law'

Kuwait on Thursday closed private television station Al-Youm, which backs the opposition, for allegedly failing to meet administrative conditions, the government said.

"The information ministry has scrapped the licence of a satellite station for violating the terms of the licence and after failing to meet a deadline to rectify its situation in line with the law," the ministry said, quoted by the official KUNA news agency.



Al-Youm chairman Ahmad Al-Jabr confirmed to AFP via an SMS text message that the satellite channel had received orders to shut, and the station went off the air immediately.

Mohammad al-Daas, general manager of the channel which was established more than a year ago, said it would challenge the decision in court.

"Al-Youm channel has received a letter from the information minister scrapping the station's licence with immediate effect. The station will seek recourse in court against this unfair decision," Daas said on Twitter.

The station has broadcast programmes sympathetic with the opposition.

It interviewed many leading opposition figures in the run-up to a December 1 parliamentary election, and after the results were announced.

The Islamist, nationalist and liberal opposition, angry over an amended electoral law, has since been staging protests almost every night to demand the dissolution of the parliament.

On many occasions, the demonstrators were dispersed by riot police which used tear gas and stun grenades. Scores of

youth activists have also been arrested and face trial.

<http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/2/8/60951/World/Region/Kuwait-shuts-oppositionlinked-television.aspx>

7. AFGHANISTAN - PAKISTAN

• Afghan president welcomes UK pullout plan

Press TV

December 20, 2012

Afghan President Hamid Karzai has welcomed an announcement by the UK government about the withdrawal of British troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2013.

Karzai's office released a statement on Thursday saying that the "Afghan national forces are ready to provide the security and defend their country."

On Wednesday, UK Prime Minister David Cameron said Britain would withdraw 3,800 troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2013, reducing the number of the UK forces in the war-torn country from 9,000 to 5,200.

Britain has the second largest force in Afghanistan after the United States. Most British troops are stationed in the southern province of Helmand.

“We have two decisions to make. First of all, the decision about the drawdown of troops between now and the end of 2014,” the UK premier told the House of Commons.

The United States claims that the war in Afghanistan will come to an end in 2014. The US-led foreign forces reportedly prepare for a full handover of security to Afghan forces at the end of 2014.

However, US President Barack Obama and Hamid Karzai signed a deal in May which provides a framework for a post-2014 US role in Afghanistan.

The strategic deal provides aid, advisers, and support for Afghan forces for a period of 10 years after the expected departure of foreign combat troops in 2014.

The United States and its allies invaded Afghanistan in 2001 as part of Washington’s so-called war on terror. The

offensive removed the Taliban from power, but insecurity remains across the country.

<http://www.aopnews.com/today.html>

- **Afghan, Taliban Officials Discuss Country's Future**

VOA News

December 20, 2012

Afghan officials are meeting with the Taliban and other militant groups to discuss the country's future as NATO forces prepare for a 2014 withdrawal.

France is hosting the two-day closed-door session which begins on Thursday near Paris.

The meeting marks the first time that Taliban officials, senior leaders of the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance and members of the country's High Peace Council have held face-to-face talks on the country's future.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai set up the Peace Council in 2010 in a bid to start dialogue with Taliban militants and

persuade them to end violence and join the political reconciliation process.

In a Wednesday news conference, Karzai said his country had a "desire for peace" and supported "all real and honest steps taken for peace."

The meeting comes on the heels of France ending its combat mission in Afghanistan. The country, on Tuesday, withdrew its remaining 500 combat troops from a province northeast of the capital, Kabul.

Hizb-e-Islami representative Ghairat Baheer says his militant group and the Taliban are attending the meeting in France because they admire the French government's decision to withdraw from Afghanistan.

He said as long as there is a foreign troop presence in Afghanistan, "there would not be any peaceful solution to the conflict."

France had been the fifth-largest contributor to the NATO-led coalition in Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, President Karzai, on Thursday, said he welcomed an announcement from

Britain that it would be pulling out nearly half of its troops next year.

Britain currently has about 9,000 troops in Afghanistan, the second largest force after the United States.

In another development on Thursday, Afghan coalition forces said they killed a Taliban leader, named Mahjur, and another insurgent, during a security operation, on Wednesday, in Kunar province.

In a Thursday statement, the coalition said Mahjur had planned attacks against Afghan government officials and coalition forces.

<http://www.aopnews.com/today.html>

This media summary is prepared by **ORSAM Middle East Research Assistant Nebahat Tanriverdi O. It covers news and commentaries as reported by the national media sources publishing in the Middle Eastern countries. The views expressed are not*

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