



MIDDLE EAST DAILY BULLETIN

GÜNLÜK ORTADOĐU BÜLTENİ

Domestic Policy in the Middle East Countries

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1. IRAQ

- **Allawi's nomination for the presidency of Iraq, untrue news: Kurdistan Presidency (ekurd.net)**

ERBİL-Hewlêr, Kurdistan region 'Iraq',— The presidency of Kurdistan Region denied on Sunday, news that reported the existence of an agreement between the Kurdish leadership and al-Iraqiya List for the nomination of Ayad Allawi for the presidency of the republic as a part of a deal.

The Chairman of the presidency of region's office, Fuad Hussein said that "The press reports that talked about the agreement between the Presidency of Kurdistan Region and al- Iraqiya List to nominate its leader, Ayad Allawi for the position of president of the republic are untrue ."

Hussein said that "President, Jalal Talabani is still alive and we wish for him a speedy recovery and return."

Some press reports have pointed that there were consensus among the region's president, Massoud Barzani with the parliament Speaker, Osama Nujaifi , the leader in al- Iraqiya List, www.ekurd.net during the latter's visit to Erbil on the nomination of the leader of al- Iraqiya List, Ayad Allawi to take over the President Jalal Talabani's position who suffered from a stroke and was taken to Germany for treatment last Tuesday.

<http://www.ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2012/12/state6737.htm>

- **Sectarianism behind some politicians' statements, stances, says Esawi (alliraqnews)**

Baghdad, Dec 23 (AIN) –MP, Aboud al-Esawi, of the State of Law Coalition assured that sectarianism is behind some politicians' stances and statements.

He stated to All Iraq News Agency (AIN) "The fame and the dignity of the Finance Minister, Rafi al-Esawi, concerns Al-Esa tribe all over Iraq that whether they are Sunni or Shiite."

"We have to distinguish between the Minister and his guards who face judicial charges," he added, noting that "The detainees' issue will be settled by the judicial authorities rather than the irresponsible statements of some politicians."

He called "All the political sides to calm down the situation and to avoid exploiting the issue of Esawi's guards to launch sectarian statements that harm the stability in the country."

http://www.alliraqnews.com/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=25246:sectarianism-behind-some-politicians-statements-stances-says-esawi-&catid=35:political&Itemid=2

- **Issawi and Hashimi cases will be followed up, Iraqiya MP (Aswat al-Iraq)**

BAGHDAD, Dec 23/ Aswat al-Iraq: Parliamentary Iraqiya bloc Chairman Salman al-Jumaili stated that his bloc will follow up the finance minister Rafi' al-Issawi's case, as well re-opening vice-president Tariq al-Hashimi's case.

Jumaili, during a press conference, followed up by Aswat al-Iraq, reviewed the developments of Issawi's case and the steps to be taken by his bloc.

Last Thursday reports said that a number of finance minister Rafi' al-Issawi's bodyguards were arrested for terrorism charges, while Issawi's closed circles called for peaceful demonstrations in protest for such arrests.

Iraqiya bloc held an emergency meeting, during which Premier Nouri al-Maliki was criticized for "attacking the Sunni sect", as stated later.

http://en.aswataliraq.info/%28S%28jo1tx2qnxxy2rl55qurotkyy%29%29/Default1.aspx?page=article_page&id=151852&l=1

- **Demands to "topple" Maliki's government, demonstrators (Aswat al-Iraq)**

ANBAR, Dec 23/ Aswat al-Iraq: Fallujah city demonstrators called today to "topple Premier's Nouri al-Maliki's government and Anbar governor Qassim al-Mahdawi".

Demonstrators condemned Maliki's "attempt to neglect the Sunni sect".

Governor Mahdawi prevented live broadcast of the demonstration on Anbar TV, as told to Aswat al-Iraq.

Last Friday, demonstrators cut off the international highway connecting Iraq with Syria and Jordan in protest for arresting Issawi's bodyguards and neglecting the Sunni sect.

On the other hand, a Kurdish delegation arrived here today to participate in the demonstrations that called for toppling Maliki's government.

The Kurdish demonstrators carried Kurdish and Iraqi flags, as witnessed by Aswat al-Iraq correspondent.

http://en.aswataliraq.info/%28S%28jo1tx2qnexy2rl55qurotkyy%29%29/Default1.aspx?page=article_page&id=151853&l=1

- **Iraqi Turkmens seek Turkey's protection against attacks (Sunday's Zaman)**

Turkmens in Iraq are deeply anxious as attacks against the Turkmen population, amid the risk of civil war between Kurds and Arabs, have increased considerably in recent months.

"Should the situation deteriorate into an armed conflict in Iraq, and Turkmen people are targeted in the conflict, then Turkey should move to protect Turkmen with all its means," Yaşar Yakış, a former minister of foreign affairs and the president of the Ankara-based Center for Strategic Communication (STRATİM), has said.

The probability of a civil war breaking out in Iraq is non-negligible, with Iraqi President Jalal Talabani having felt the need at the beginning of this month, before he was hospitalized, to caution against an internal conflict.

Yakış believes Turkey should, with respect to the rules of international legitimacy, take a step to protect Turkmens in Iraq. “[In the case of civil war,] Turkey should make use of the concept ‘responsibility to protect’ as was the case in [the change of power in] Libya,” he told Sunday’s Zaman.

A wave of attacks against Turkmens have come one after the other in the past few weeks. Last Sunday, car bombs ripped through three residential neighborhoods and five others at various locations in districts of Kirkuk densely populated by Shiite Turkmens, killing more than 10 Turkmens and wounding more than 60. Two Turkmen teachers, who were kidnapped the same day, were found dead in Kirkuk. In protest, many Turkmen teachers and students demonstrated in Kirkuk at the beginning of the week, demanding officials protect Turkmens against attacks.

In another Turkmen-populated city, Tuzhurmatu, five Turkmens were killed in two attacks, and 24 others were wounded at the beginning of this week. As noted by Kemal Beyatlı, the head of the Federation of Türkmeneli Associations, in a press meeting held at the beginning of last week in İstanbul, it is the Turkmen people who have suffered the most, in terms of lives and wealth, in Iraq since the American occupation in 2003.

<http://www.todayszaman.com/news-301930-.html>

- **Iraqis protest against 'sectarian policies'**

Thousands demonstrate in cities of Ramadi and Falluja against what they call sectarian policies of PM Nouri al-Maliki.

Tens of thousands of people have staged protests in western Iraq, blocking a highway leading to Syria and Jordan, against what they have termed the "sectarian" policies of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.

The protesters, including local officials, religious and tribal leaders, turned out on Sunday to demonstrate against the arrest of nine guards of Finance Minister Rafa al-Essawi.

Follow in-depth coverage of the nation in flux

Their arrest on terrorism charges has sparked a call from Essawi for Maliki to quit or be removed.

"We are gathered today not for Essawi and his bodyguards, but to change the course of this sectarian government and to overthrow Maliki's government," Hikmat Iyada, provincial councillor for Anbar, told the protesters on Sunday.

More than 2,000 Sunni demonstrators took to the streets in the cities of Ramadi, the capital of Sunni province of Anbar, and about 10,000 appeared in Falluja on Sunday in response to a call for a civil disobedience to protest what they called the sidelining of Sunnis in Iraqi politics.

A letter from Sheikh Abdul Malek al-Saadi, a leading Sunni cleric in Anbar, was read at the protest in which he called for Shias in the government to respect Sunni officials and the minority's entire population in Iraq.

Maliki was also condemned in a separate statement issued by fugitive vice-president, Tareq al-Hashemi, who praised the demonstration.

'Sectarian strife'

"Maliki is a prisoner of a sick mind, obsessed with power," said Hashemi, who has been handed multiple death sentences in absentia for charges he insists are politically motivated.

"The Islamic and Arab world looks at him now as the sponsor of the Safavid [Iranian] project in Iraq."

Hashemi also called for a no confidence in the prime minister, accusing Maliki of aiming "to get rid of his opponents". He said the current situation has reached a "deadlock".

The Iraqi prime minister allegedly ordered for the arrest of the finance minister's bodyguards on charges of terrorism on Thursday, in a move that has reignited a political crisis.

Maliki has denied the allegations and expressed "astonishment" at "linking the issue of the detainees with political disputes" and spoke out against pulling "the whole country toward sectarian strife".

The deepening political crisis seems to be getting worse as President Jalal Talabani, who has acted as mediator in the past, has been rushed to Germany for medical treatment after suffering a stroke last week.

Talabani also played a key role in mediating the growing dispute over oil between Baghdad and the autonomous Kurdistan region.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/12/20121223111030429167.html>

2. IRAN

- **Iran slams Canada for delisting MKO terrorists**

The Iranian Foreign Ministry has censured Canada's move to delist the Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization (MKO) from its blacklist of terrorist organizations.



“While the international community and the world’s public opinion consider terrorism as one of the main challenges to the world and have drawn up clear regulations to fight this vicious phenomenon, the Canadian government removes the MKO from its list of terrorist organizations,” the Iranian Ministry said in statement on Monday.

“This measure does not change the terrorist nature of this group. The use of terrorism as a tool, besides being a violation of international commitments, is a dangerous act that can undermine international peace and security,” it added.

The Ministry seriously warned Canada against becoming a haven for terrorists and cautioned against the dangers of such acts to the security of the Canadian society.

The statement said the “irresponsible” measure by the current Canadian government would not remove its responsibility to provide the security of Iranian expatriates in Canada and to safeguard the assets of the Islamic Republic against any violent or terrorist act by the MKO on Canada’s soil.

Canada's government said Thursday that it had removed the MKO from its official list of terrorist organizations.

Ottawa's move to delist the MKO terrorist group followed similar moves by the United States and the European Union.

The MKO is responsible for numerous acts of terror and violence against Iranian civilians and officials.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/24/279839/iran-raps-canada-move-to-delist-mko/>

- **'Iran, Afghanistan boost anti-drug cooperation'**

The Islamic Republic of Iran and Afghanistan have increased their border cooperation to fight drugs smuggling, Press TV reports.

General Ali Moayedi, the head of the anti-narcotics division of Iran's police force, said after a meeting with his Afghan counterpart, Abdul Rahman in Tehran on Sunday that the two countries are cooperating on a daily basis to fight the transit.

"As a result of the measures by Iran's police along the border, today, we have witnessed that the transit route has changed from the land to the sea," Moayedi said.

"This means we have done a good job along the land borders, but we have to focus more on waterways," he noted.

Rahman, for his part, said, "One of the first priorities of Afghanistan is to fight drug trafficking," adding, "In the past years, we have arrested eight drug lords as well as 1,300 drug smugglers."

Iran, which has a 900-kilometer-long (560-mile-long) common border with Afghanistan, has been used as the main conduit for smuggling Afghan drugs to narcotics kingpins in Europe.

Iran has spent more than USD 700 million to seal the borders to prevent the transit of narcotics destined for European, Arab, and Central Asian countries.

The war on drug trade originating from Afghanistan has claimed the lives of nearly 3,700 Iranian police officers over the past 30 years.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/23/279787/iran-afghanistan-boost-joint-drug-fight/>

- **Iran successfully bypassing oil sanctions: Qasemi**

Iran's Oil Minister Rostam Qasemi says the country has successfully bypassed sanctions imposed on its energy sector.

"Following the imposition of these sanctions, we were in bad condition for two months, [but] we've managed to weather that dire strait and...today we can export crude oil [again]," Qasemi said on Sunday.

The minister noted that sanctions were imposed by the United States and European countries as a last-resort tool against the Islamic Republic.

He added that the sanctions pursued three objectives, the most important of which was to prevent Iran's presence in the oil market and disrupt its oil deliveries.

The minister said difficult conditions were created for Iranian oil sector in June 2012, because "no vessel was authorized to sail towards Iran.... Moreover, crude oil tankers were denied insurance coverage at that time."

At the beginning of 2012, the United States and the European Union (EU) imposed new sanctions on Iran's oil and financial sectors.

On October 15, the EU foreign ministers agreed on another round of sanctions against Iran.

The illegal US-engineered sanctions have been imposed based on the unfounded accusation that Iran is pursuing non-civilian objectives in its nuclear energy program.

Iran rejects the allegation, arguing that as a committed signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty and a member of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), it has the right to use 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 Tehran's nuclear energy program has been diverted toward military objectives.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/23/279744/iran-successfully-bypassed-oil-bans/>

3. SYRIA

- **Air strike on Syria bakery 'kills dozens'**

At least 90 people queuing at a bakery in the town of Halfaya in Hama were killed in the attack, activists say.

At least 90 people were killed and scores of others injured in an air strike on a bakery in Syria's central Hama province, activists said.

Mousab al-Hamad, activist in suburbs of Hama, told Al Jazeera airstrikes were "message" to the rebel-held town

Activists on Sunday told Al Jazeera that the death toll was likely to rise in the town of Halfaya, where the strike hit.

"There is no way to really know yet how many people were killed. When I got there, I could see piles of bodies all over the ground. There were women and children," said Samer al-Hamawi, an activist in the town.

Halfaya was seized by rebels few days ago as part of a campaign to push into new territories in the 21-month-old revolt against President Bashar al-Assad.

Another activist said residents picking through the bodies were still determining which were wounded and which were dead.

Mousab al-Hamadee, an activist in the suburbs of Hama, told Al Jazeera that Halfaya and nearby towns have witnessed heavy shelling since rebels began advancing in the province.

"Three days ago, Halfaya was liberated from regime forces. The airstrikes were a message from the regime. They came as a punishment for the residents of the town," he said.

Bakeries 'targeted'

Hamawi said more than 1,000 people had been queuing at the bakery. Shortages of fuel and flour have made bread production erratic across the country, and people often wait for hours to buy loaves.

"We hadn't received flour in around three days so everyone was going to the bakery today, and lots of them were women and children," Hamawi said.

New York-based Human Rights Watch condemned army air strikes on bakeries earlier this year, arguing that in some incidents the Syrian military was not using enough precision to target rebel sites, and in other instances it may have intentionally hit civilians.

Other air strikes on Sunday included a raid in Aleppo province, the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

"At least 13 people were killed in an air raid on the town of Sfeira," said the group, which relies on a network of doctors, activists and lawyers for its information.

Rebel fighters said they took control of a military base in Aleppo. Around 200 opposition fighters attacked the base in al-Hawa village on Saturday under the cover of fog and rain.

The group seized military vehicles and various types of weapons and ammunition from the base.

Warplanes also hit the town of Saqba in Damascus province, just north of the road linking the capital to the international airport, the Observatory added.

International envoy Lakhdar Brahimi was in Damascus on Sunday to push for a negotiated solution to the conflict. Previous efforts have proved fruitless.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/12/201212231694893146.html>

- **UN envoy Brahimi arrives in Damascus**

Lakhdar Brahimi, set to meet with Syrian President, is hoping to achieve "breakthrough", diplomats tell Al Jazeera.

International peace envoy tasked with ending Syria's conflict has arrived in Syria and is set to meet with President Bashar al-Assad.

Lakhdar Brahimi is hoping to "achieve a breakthrough", to broker a solution that would lead to a consensus transitional government with full authority, diplomatic sources told Al Jazeera on Sunday.

Brahimi's trip is his third to Damascus since taking his post in August.

Instead of flying directly to Syria as he has on previous visits, Brahimi landed in Beirut and travelled to the Syrian capital by land because of fighting near the Damascus airport, Lebanese officials said.

Brahimi did not speak publicly upon his arrival in Damascus.

Diplomats told Al Jazeera that the Geneva communique is "the basis of [Brahimi's] work".

The communique, which agreed terms for a transitional authority to oversee the end of violence in the country, was hammered out with the inclusion of Russia and China.

A deadlock had prevailed between the West and Russia over whether President Assad should step down or not. Russia had said the international community did not have the right to exclude anyone, not even Assad.

Diplomats told Al Jazeera that this deadlock seemed to be easing.

Russian position 'evolved'

Talks among the UN, US and Russia earlier in December "have signalled that the position of one party [Russia] has evolved," the diplomat told Al Jazeera.

"US and Russia's positions are now closer to each other, closer than it was six months ago," the diplomat said.

On Thursday, Vladimir Putin, the Russian president, said his country's main concern in Syria is the fate of the country and not of Assad.

"We are not concerned about the fate of Assad's regime. We understand what is going on there," Putin said.

"What is our position? Not to leave Assad's regime in power at any price, but to first [let the Syrians] agree among themselves how they should live next."

Brahimi, who represents the UN and the Arab League, has made little apparent progress toward brokering an end violence since he assumed his post, mostly because neither side appears interested in talks.

During his previous five-day stay in October, he held meetings with Assad and other top Syrian officials over a tentative ceasefire for the Muslim Eid al-Adha feast. Despite pledges, the truce did not hold.

'Negotiations may drag on'

Diplomats told Al Jazeera that it is not likely that a transitional government would be announced during Brahimi's current visit, saying negotiations may drag on for some time.

In a news conference on Sunday, Omran al-Zoubi, Syria's information minister, repeated the Syrian government's line that it is fighting "terrorist groups" backed by foreign powers who seek to destroy Syria.

Al-Zoubi said the government was willing to engage in dialogue but said the other side wasn't.

"We speak of dialogue with those who believe in national dialogue," he said. "But those who rejected dialogue in their statements and called for arms and use of weapons, that's a different issue. They don't want dialogue."

Rebel groups refuse to talk to Assad, demanding that he step down instead.

Al-Zoubi equated the rebels with al-Qaeda and denied that they had taken over any territory.

Meanwhile, also on Monday, foreign ministers from the Gulf Co-operation Council states are due to hold a meeting in the Bahraini capital Manama to discuss the Syrian crisis, among other issues.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/12/2012122315227897356.html>

- **Syria 'secures chemical weapons stockpile'**

Russia says government in Damascus consolidated its chemical weapons in "one or two" locations amid rebel onslaught.

© Syria has consolidated its chemical weapons stocks in one or two locations as rebels make advances in several parts on the country, said Russia's foreign minister.

Sergei Lavrov said Russia, which reportedly has military advisers training Syria's military, has kept close watch over its chemical arsenal.

He said the Syrian government had transferred weapons from several arsenals to just "one or two centres" to properly safeguard them. Israeli officials have also said that Syrian chemical weapons were under control "at the moment".

Lavrov announced that his country would be unwilling to offer sanctuary to President Bashar al-Assad, but would welcome offers from other nations.

"If there is anyone willing to provide him guarantees, they are welcome," he said. "We would be the first to cross ourselves and say: 'Thank God, the carnage is over.' If it indeed ends the carnage, which is far from certain."

Russia has been rowing back since the Kremlin's Middle East envoy was quoted this month as saying the rebels could defeat Assad and that Russia was preparing for a possible evacuation of its nationals, the strongest signs yet that it was positioning itself for a post-Assad Syria.

"Listen, no one is going to win this war," Lavrov told reporters aboard a flight returning to Moscow from a Russia-European Union summit in Brussels.

Deadly car bomb

Meanwhile, in the Syrian capital, a car bomb exploded in the eastern district of Qaboun on Saturday and initial reports said several people were killed while dozens were injured.

Activists on Saturday in Damascus said bodies were still being recovered from wreckage caused by the explosion. The UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights put the death toll at five people.

Also in Damascus, clashes between rebel fighters and forces loyal to President Assad took place on the edge of the southern neighbourhood of Hajar al-Aswad.

Opposition fighters are also reportedly engaged in fighting with the regime's forces in Qasyon, while the army continues to target armed groups in Daraya in the outskirts of Damascus, leaving dozens killed and injured.

Al-Nusra Front told Al Jazeera the regime was using commercial flights to transport military gear and troops

The latest reports of violence came as the al-Nusra Front (Jubhat al-Nusra), a group of fighters in Syria, declared what it called a "no-fly-zone" over Aleppo, stating that the Syrian army was using commercial flights to transport military equipment and troops.

In a video sent to Al Jazeera, the group warned any civilians against boarding commercial flights to avoid being used as human shields.

They also confirmed laying siege on the al-Nairab airfield, adding that any plane over the skies of Aleppo will be targeted.

Al-Nusra told Al Jazeera they would use anti-aircraft guns of 23mm and 57mm calibre to down planes.

The US, earlier this month, has put al-Nusra on its list of "terrorist organisations".

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/12/201212221532021654.html>+

4. ISRAEL-PALESTINE

- **HRW: Hamas rockets from Gaza violated laws of war**

Human Rights Watch releases report saying Hamas, other terrorist groups, broke international law during Pillar of Defense by firing rockets from densely populated areas in Gaza toward civilian populations in Israel.



Armed Palestinian groups firing rockets at Israeli population centers violated the laws of war during Operation Pillar of Defense, Human Rights Watch (HRW) said in a report released Monday.

“Palestinian armed groups made clear in their statements that harming civilians was their aim,” said HRW’s Middle East director Sarah Leah Whitson. “There is simply no legal justification for launching rockets at populated areas.”

The group also found that Gazan groups, including Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and the Popular Resistance Committee, justified targeting civilian centers as reprisal for Israeli strikes, an act also banned under international law.

Furthermore, such groups “repeatedly fired rockets from densely populated areas, near homes, businesses, and a hotel, unnecessarily placing civilians in the vicinity at grave risk from Israeli counter-fire,” the report said.

The detailed report included examples of rockets being launched from densely populated areas in Gaza, and noted that groups fired from underground tunnels with hatches for the first time. HRW faulted Palestinian armed groups for failing to alert civilians or urge them to evacuate prior to launching rockets in their vicinity.

As the ruling power in the Strip, the human rights group said, Hamas was responsible for reining in the behavior of other groups.

“As the ruling authority in Gaza, Hamas has an obligation to stop unlawful attacks and punish those responsible,” Whitson said.

A week earlier, HRW reported that Israeli attacks on journalists and media facilities during the operation also violated laws of war, saying that Israel provided no specific information to justify claims that they were military targets.

“Just because Israel says a journalist was a fighter or a TV station was a command center does not make it so,” Whitson said. “Journalists who praise Hamas and TV stations that applaud attacks on Israel may be propagandists, but that does not make them legitimate targets under the laws of war.”

Prof. Gerald Steinberg, the president of human rights watchdog group NGO Monitor, said in response to that report: “This is yet another example of HRW’s systematic lack of credibility and its biased approach to Israel.”

HRW, the group said, had lost "credibility over a number of Middle East-related issues."

<http://www.jpost.com/Defense/Article.aspx?id=297107>

- **PM visits Central Command amid increase in W. Bank violence**

IDF Chief of Staff Gantz briefs Netanyahu, Barak over escalation of Palestinian violence in east Jerusalem, West Bank; adds: We must act to protect security of Israeli citizens in settlements, entire country.



Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu visited the IDF's Central Command on Sunday along with Defense Minister Ehud Barak for a briefing on the situation in the West Bank from Chief of Staff Lt.-Gen. Benny Gantz, OC Central Command Maj.- Gen. Nitzan Alon and senior IDF officers.

The visit stems from an escalation of Palestinian violence in east Jerusalem and the West Bank in recent weeks.

On Sunday, an Arab taxi driver rammed his car into a vehicle exiting a police station in the Jerusalem neighborhood of Jebel Mukaber, injuring a Border Police officer and an east Jerusalem resident in what police said looked like a nationalistically motivated incident.

The suspect, who lives in Jebel Mukaber and has a police record for "minor security offences," allegedly tried to drive into the Oz police station.

After he was denied entry, the driver allegedly rammed his car into a vehicle that was just exiting the station.

A Border Police officer approached the taxi and asked to speak with the driver, at which point the driver allegedly ran his car into the officer, lightly injuring him in the leg.

Three police officers who witnessed the incident fired at the taxi, lightly injuring the driver.

MDA paramedics treated both men on the scene before evacuating them to Hadassah University Medical Center in Jerusalem's Ein Kerem neighborhood.

Jerusalem Police spokesman Shmuel Ben-Ruby said that the suspect was not a member of an armed organization. Police said that an initial investigation suggested that the incident was nationalistically motivated.

"I went crazy; I wanted to go into the police station," the suspect told police. He also reportedly said that he wanted to die, according to Ben-Ruby.

According to a report in London's Sunday Times, Netanyahu recently received a warning from Military Intelligence, supported by the Shin Bet (Israel Security Agency), that Hamas head Khaled Mashaal had instructed his terrorist group's sleeper cells in the West Bank to prepare to take over the area, just as they took over the Gaza Strip in 2007.

The newspaper cited the Military Intelligence as saying that Iran was behind the move in an effort to create a third source of pressure — in addition to Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza — in case of an Israel attack on Iran.

The Prime Minister's Office did not comment on the report.

During his visit to the IDF Central Command, Netanyahu said that he went there to get a briefing on the developments in the area.

"Our goal is to maintain the security of Israeli citizens in the settlements, and – of course – in the entire country. We are aware of an increase in activity, and I want to get an exact briefing. We must act here, as on other fronts, to ensure the country's security, and that is what we are doing," he said.

Earlier, Netanyahu held a special discussion on the lessons of Operation Pillar of Defense together with the main agencies dealing with the home front.

Among the issues discussed were improving bomb shelters, integrating warning systems, reinforcing essential facilities and upgrading command and control systems.

The home front agencies “performed very successfully during the operation,” Netanyahu said, adding that it “saved the lives of many citizens, and allowed daily life and vital services to be maintained in a situation of prolonged missile fire.”

Netanyahu said that since the home front is “one of the main fronts in any security scenario,” the government will “continue to invest in it.”

During Sunday’s cabinet meeting, the government unanimously approved a supplemental allocation of NIS 9.5 million to assist those in the South – particularly immigrants and the elderly – impacted by last month’s Gaza operation.

<http://www.jpost.com/MiddleEast/Article.aspx?id=297088>

- **Likud declares war on rivals in Center-Right bloc**

Bennett: Netanyahu opened the gates of hell; Likud also opens fire on Shas, attacking party leader for Oslo support.

Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and his Likud allies took aim at the party’s rivals in the Center-Right bloc on Sunday, releasing new negative ads, slogans and messages targeting Bayit Yehudi and Shas.

The first ads released by Likud last week targeted only left-wing politicians, mocking Labor’s Shelly Yacimovich, Yesh Atid’s Yair Lapid, Meretz’s Zehava Gal-On, and the leaders of The Tzipi Livni Party. But the Likud’s strategy changed following Bayit Yehudi leader Naftali Bennett’s statements Thursday night regarding refusing orders to evacuate settlements.

The Likud published anonymous newspaper advertisements on Sunday declaring Bennett irresponsible. A Likud ad released later in the day compared Bennett’s controversial statements to those of dovish Labor candidate Merav Michaeli, who said two years ago that she does not believe mothers should have to send their sons to the army.

“Soldiers will refuse to guard settlements in Judea and Samaria and attack enemy countries,” the Likud warned in the commercial.

Party officials said the goal of the ads was to reinforce the message that Israelis on the moderate Right cannot support Bennett and his political allies in Bayit Yehudi, including Hebron residents Orit Struck and Hillel Horowitz.

Bennett responded with an advertisement of his own, signed by 62 veterans of his elite General Reconnaissance Unit (Sayeret Matkal) defending and praising him. At several public events on Sunday, Bennett called upon Netanyahu to stop attacking him.

“You might have gotten advice from your strategists to pile on more and more, but it is tearing apart Israeli society,” Bennett said. “We are from the same camp; we served in the same unit. Don’t fire inside the tank. The attacks from within the national camp must stop.”

Bennett clarified his stance on refusing orders in his parents’ native English before a group of a few hundred people, many of whom were young professionals, at a lecture in Tel Aviv on Sunday night.

“On Thursday night, I was interviewed by Nissim Mishal, a very tough interview, and that’s the understatement of the year, and I was asked whether I would expel Jews from their homes if ordered to,” he said.

“I want to be very clear now. I did a lot of thought over the weekend, and by the way it was Shabbat so I didn’t know Netanyahu and the Likud had opened the gates of hell on me over Shabbat.”

Bennett continued by saying that he was no longer a private citizen, and he understands the responsibility he now has.

“So what I say now is what I stand behind,” he said. “Any soldier in the IDF that gets an order, a terrible order to uproot a Jewish village or an Arab village for that matter, which is horrible, too much to tolerate, but if the government voted for that... every soldier has to obey democratically given orders, myself included. I don’t think I can be clearer than that; that is what I stand behind.”

On Sunday Likud also opened fire on Shas, warning that the party would soon draft legislation requiring yeshiva students to serve in the IDF, vowing to take the Construction and Housing Ministry back from Shas and promising ads attacking one of Shas’s leaders, Arye Deri, for supporting the Oslo diplomatic process.

“Deri is not our natural partner the way Shas used to be when only Eli Yishai was in charge,” a Likud official said in a remark that angered leading Shas officials.

Sources in Shas said it was now clear that Netanyahu did not want them in his next coalition. They said all political options would be open to the party, including recommending to President Shimon Peres that Labor leader Shelly Yacimovich form the next government instead of Netanyahu.

“Netanyahu is known in politics as someone who takes advantage of people and then throws them away without even letting them know,” a Shas official said.

On Saturday night, Shas spiritual leader Rabbi Ovadia Yosef defended Shas’s tenure in control of the Construction and Housing Ministry, saying that its current Minister Ariel Attias had worked for all sectors of society.

“There was a whole stream of construction and housing ministers who didn’t do anything,” the rabbi claimed. “They sat and smoked [their] water pipe.”

Politicians on the Center-Left mocked Likud for attacking Bayit Yehudi and Shas when there are several candidates on the joint Likud-Yisrael Beytenu list who have publicly advocated refusing to dismantle settlements.

They cited Energy and Water Minister Uzi Landau, MK Tzipi Hotovely, and candidate Moshe Feiglin.

“Netanyahu is leading the union of the refusers: refusers of service, refusers of order and refusers of negotiations,” Livni said.

“The combination of Netanyahu, Bennett and his haredi associates creates this union of refusers. In Israel, there is a struggle over the source of authority of our lives here – there is a group that thinks it’s the Halacha and rabbis, and not the law and judges.

We cannot accept this situation and we must form a union against this union of refusers.”

<http://www.jpost.com/DiplomacyAndPolitics/Article.aspx?id=297072>

- **Emir: Qatar will assist Palestinian Authority**

BETHLEHEM (Ma'an) -- Qatar will pay its share of the Arab financial security net pledged to the Palestinian Authority, Emir Sheikh Hamad Ibn Khalifa al-Thani said Sunday.



Sheikh al-Thani phoned President Mahmoud Abbas on Sunday evening and confirmed Qatar was committed to supporting Palestinian people in their struggle for independence, the PA news agency Wafa reported.

Abbas told the Qatari emir he would receive a warm welcome when he visits the West Bank later in December.

Abbas' political adviser Nimir Hammad said Friday that Sheikh al-Thani would visit Palestine on Dec. 31. Arab League chief Nabil al-Arabi is expected to visit the West Bank on Saturday, Hammad said.

Al-Arabi has communicated with Arab countries asking them to deliver funds pledged to the PA, Foreign Minister Riyad al-Malki told Ma'an on Sunday.

Arab countries agreed in March to provide a financial safety net to the PA in the event of Israeli sanctions, which were imposed in November.

<http://www.maannews.net/eng/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=550629>

5. AFRICA and EGYPT

- **Iran congratulates Egypt on approving Islamist-backed constitution**

Iran has welcomed the early results of Egypt's constitutional referendum, which indicate that the draft constitution backed by Islamists is likely to be approved.

Iranian foreign ministry spokesperson Ramin Mehmanparast said Iran considers the constitution a crucial step toward democracy in Egypt, according to Iranian Students' News Agency.

Diplomatic relations between Tehran and Cairo were cut in 1980 following Iran's Islamic Revolution, largely due to the peace treaty Egypt signed with Israel in 1979.

Tehran has expressed a desire to exchange ambassadors with Egypt since the election of President Mohamed Morsy, but this has not yet occurred.

<http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/iran-congratulates-egypt-approving-islamist-backed-constitution>

- **Journalists hold silent protest against attacks on press freedom**

Dozens of journalists held a silent protest at the headquarters of the Journalists Syndicate Sunday to protest repressive media censorship policies and the killing of a colleague at a protest earlier this month.

The journalists, from various independent newspapers such as Al-Wafd, Al-Dostour and Al-Fagr, wore masks and wielded pens and cameras to protest what they decry as government attacks on freedom of journalism and expression.

Protesters raised banners reading: “No to handcuffing the media and journalism,” “No to a constitution that suppresses the freedoms of media and journalism,” “No to attacking newspapers’ headquarters,” and “Down with the Shura Council,” in reference to the body’s control over selecting the heads of state-owned newspapers.

They also mourned Al-Fagr photojournalist Al-Husseini Abu Deif, who was killed at a protest outside the presidential palace on 5 December.

Gamal Fahmy, deputy chief of the Journalists Syndicate; Alaa al-Attar, editor-in-chief of the Al-Ahram website; and Yehia Qallash, head of the committee in defense of freedoms, took part in the protest, which aimed to pressure the ruling regime to stop harassing journalists.

Since being elected president, Mohamed Morsy has attacked the media in general, accusing it of serving the ousted regime of former President Hosni Mubarak. Dozens of journalists have been summoned to trial in recent months for expressing critical views of Morsy.

Last August, Morsy issued a decree to prohibit the pre-trial detention of journalists accused of “publishing offenses,” after a court remanded into custody a newspaper editor standing trial for defaming the president.

But critics say that the detention of journalists is still possible following any convictions in these “publishing offenses” trials. And since the incident, the president’s office has continued to file complaints against journalists and other public figures expressing critical views of Morsy.

This month, the president’s office reportedly complained about psychiatrist Manal Omar, who critically analyzed Morsy’s character on television.

The complaints against journalists have not only come from the president’s office, with Islamist activists bringing charges of their own.

On Sunday, Public Prosecutor Talaat Abdallah ordered an investigation into charges brought by former Salafi MP Mamdouh Ismail saying that Ibrahim Eissa, a prominent newspaper editor and television presenter, committed religious blasphemy and threatened national unity on his TV show. In his charge, Ismail said Eissa mocked verses of the Quran and spoke ill of the president.

Essam Sultan, vice president of the Wasat Party, demanded on Facebook Sunday that President Mohamed Morsy waive all charges against journalists.

He also called on the Shura Council to reduce the punishment for anyone convicted of insulting the Egyptian president to a fine, instead of the current penalty of imprisonment.

<http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/journalists-hold-silent-protest-against-attacks-press-freedom>

- **FJP invites opposition to comprehensive dialogue over future**

The Freedom and Justice Party on Sunday invited opposition forces, led by the National Salvation Front, to an unconditional comprehensive dialogue over how to approach Egypt's problems in the coming months, less than a day after preliminary results indicated that the draft constitution had been approved.

"We can talk now that the reasons pressuring the opposition to refuse [the constitution] have gone," Ibrahim Abu Ouf, an FJP member, told Turkish-run Anadolu Agency.

Ouf added that there would be laws complementary to the constitution that need national consensus, such as the Judicial Authority Law, the Elections Law, the Shura Council Law and the Demonstrations Law.

FJP member Gamal Heshmat said the dialogue should have an agenda that serves as a springboard for the coming phase.

Mohamed al-Beltagy, another FJP member, said the Muslim Brotherhood and National Salvation Front will find consensus in the coming months, especially pertaining to certain constitutional amendments.

"Let us have this Friday be a day of national reconciliation and give each other flowers," he suggested.

<http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/fjp-invites-opposition-comprehensive-dialogue-over-future>

- **Prosecution to reinvestigate Battle of the Camel murders**

Central Cairo's prosecution office decided on Sunday to reinvestigate the killing of protesters in the incident widely known as the Battle of the Camel, a judicial source told Al-Masry Al-Youm.

On 2 February 2011, amid the widespread protests of the 18-day uprising against former President Hosni Mubarak, prosecutors say 24 senior officials of the former Mubarak regime sent armed men on horseback and camels to attack anti-government protesters. During the attack, at least 11 protesters were killed and hundreds injured.

But after a trial that lasted over a year, a court acquitted all of the defendants last October.

The judicial source added that the investigations were reopened after prosecutors received new complaints related to the case.

One of the complaints was filed by attorney Mohamed Mowafy, who alleged new evidence implicating Mubarak, his wife Suzanne, former Manpower and Immigration Minister Aisha Abdel Hady, and former head of the state-dominated Egyptian Trade Union Federation, Hussein Megawer.

Abdel Hady and Megawer were among the former officials acquitted in the Battle of the Camel trial.

The move to reinvestigate the case doesn't automatically mean a new trial will be held. The prosecution will first have to decide whether to send the entire case to criminal court.

<http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/prosecution-reinvestigate-battle-camel-murders>

- **Egypt opposition alleges referendum 'fraud'**

National Salvation Front claims irregularities in constitution poll, after Muslim Brotherhood says charter was approved.

Egypt's opposition has said it will keep fighting the Muslim Brotherhood-backed constitution after the group, the main faction backing the charter, claimed it passed with a 64 per cent "yes" vote in a referendum.

The opposition alleged vote fraud on Sunday and demanded an investigation - a sign that the referendum will not end the turmoil that has roiled this country for nearly two years since the uprising that ousted Hosni Mubarak.

Many Egyptians, especially the tens of millions who live in extreme poverty, had hoped the new constitution might usher in a period of more stability.

A heated political debate over the past month leading up to the referendum at times erupted into deadly street battles.

Security was tightened around the Egyptian presidential palace, but there were no mass opposition demonstrations on Sunday after the unofficial results came out.

Renewed violence and political tensions have further imperiled Egypt's already precarious economy, reeling from dwindling resources and a cash-strapped government whose plans to borrow from the International Monetary Fund had to be pushed back.

The finance ministry said on Sunday the budget deficit reached \$13bn in the five months from July-November, about 4.5 per cent higher compared to the same period last year.

Official results of the referendum are not expected until Monday.

If the unofficial numbers are confirmed, it will be a victory for President Mohamed Morsi, who is from the Brotherhood.

Al Jazeera's Rawya Rageh, reporting from Cairo, said that while the results were so far unofficial, the Muslim Brotherhood's figures on elections have usually been close to accurate. She said that the low turnout figures, however, were of concern to both camps.

"Some 30 per cent only of eligible voters turned out to vote in both rounds, once again raising questions of how the leadership of both the opposition and the Islamic camp have failed to appeal to the public and get them to vote in the first place," she said.

'Not the end game'

The opposition allegations look likely to prolong the fight. Beyond allegations of fraud, the opposition will likely challenge new laws issued on the basis of the constitution as well as Morsi's economic policies.

"The referendum is not the end game. It is only a battle in this long struggle for the future of Egypt," said the National Salvation Front, the main opposition group. "We will not allow a change to the identity of Egypt or the return of the age of tyranny."

The opposition claims the new constitution seeks to enshrine Islamic rule in Egypt and accuses its backers of trying to monopolise power.

The latest political battle began with Morsi's November 22 decrees that gave him powers to protect the panel writing the constitution and dismiss the country's top prosecutor, a holdover from the Mubarak era.

Although Morsi subsequently rescinded the powers that gave him immunity from judicial oversight, his decision to replace the prosecutor general was viewed by many in the judiciary as trampling over their powers.

Hundreds of prosecutors held a rally on Sunday demanding the new, Morsi-appointed prosecutor general quit, days after he retracted his resignation claiming it was rendered under pressure.

Adding to the anxiety, state television reported on Saturday amidst voting on the referendum that the central bank governor had resigned, then retracted the report.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/12/20121223171356237726.html>

- **Egypt's vice president resigns amid polls**

Mahmoud Mekki, who took leading role in hosting "national unity" talks, quit as country voted on draft constitution.

Egypt's vice president has announced his resignation on the day of a referendum on a new constitution, state TV reported.

Mahmoud Mekki's resignation on Saturday was announced just hours before the end of voting in the second and final round of a referendum on a disputed Muslim Brotherhood-backed constitution.

Mekki, a career judge, has said he intends to quit once the charter is adopted.

The new constitution eliminates the post of vice president.

However, a statement by Mekki read on state TV hinted that the motive of his hurried departure could be linked to the policies of President Mohamed Morsi.

"I have realised a while ago that the nature of politics don't suit my professional genesis as a judge," he wrote.

He said he first submitted his resignation last month but events forced him to stay on.

Unity talks

Mekki took a leading role in hosting "national unity" talks called by Morsi, although the main opposition politicians stayed away.

Mekki, 58, was a respected judge before Morsi named him to the post in August.

He led judicial opposition to ousted leader Hosni Mubarak, but eschewed calls to become a presidential candidate himself, saying he wished to stay politically independent.

Egypt's Central Bank chief also reportedly resigned on Saturday, state television reported, before later citing a cabinet source denying that he had stepped down.

State television reported that Faruq El-Okd, the bank's head since 2003, might be replaced by his former deputy, Hisham Ramez.

The conflicting reports come amid economic turmoil in the country, which has seen its currency reserves dwindle and foreign investment shrink two years after an uprising overthrew president Hosni Mubarak.

Al Jazeera's Mike Hanna, reporting from Cairo, said if true, Okd's resignation would be "significant".

"He's been central in economic development, in particular, shoring up the pound in recent months, which has come under immense pressure from international currencies," said Hanna.

"And critically, he's been at the centre of negotiations with the International Monetary Fund about a critical \$4.1bn loan which Egypt is attempting to secure," said Hanna, adding that those negotiations are on hold because of what the IMF said was "the political situation in Egypt".

Voting extended

After a first round vote last week, polls opened on Saturday in areas analysts expected would give another "yes" vote.

The latest polls had been scheduled to close at 17:00 GMT, but remained open until 23:00. Voting was also extended in the first leg.

The vote comes a day after clashes between supporters and opponents of President Morsi in the Mediterranean port city of Alexandria.

The violence, which hurt several dozen people, is the latest episode in more than four weeks of turmoil over the president's powers and the constitution.

The proposed new constitution has deeply divided Egypt, with supporters of Egypt's elected president backing the new documents, and mainly liberal opponents decrying it as too partisan.

The first phase on December 15 produced a "yes" majority of about 56 percent with a turnout of some 32 percent, according to unofficial results.

A comfortable "yes" majority would strengthen Morsi and his Muslim Brotherhood supporters.

The opposition, however, said voting in the first round was littered with abuses. But officials overseeing the poll have said there were no major irregularities.

In an interview with Al Jazeera on Saturday, Seif Allah al-Khawanky, of the National Salvation Front, said the low turnout is "an act of showing the rejection to this project, which they don't believe in".

"The legitimacy of this referendum is really questionable," al-Khawanky said. "No one was represented except one group in drafting this constitution."

New constitution

Morsi and his backers say the new constitution is needed to seal a transition from decades of military-backed autocratic rule, while opponents say it ignores the rights of women and minorities, including the 10 percent of Egyptians who are Christian.

A leading Muslim Brotherhood official dismissed concerns that the new constitution will lead to greater division or upset Egypt's fragile political balance.

"Egypt is not divided and is not facing any internal dangers," said Essam El-Erian, the deputy head of the Brotherhood-affiliated Freedom and Justice Party.

"In reality Egypt is now on the verge of building a new political system that will be open to all political forces," he said.

Widespread demonstrations erupted when Morsi awarded himself sweeping powers on November 22, and then fast-tracked the constitution through a drafting assembly dominated by his Muslim Brotherhood allies and boycotted by many liberals.

Late on Saturday, Morsi announced the names of 90 new members he had appointed to the upper house of parliament, state media reported, and a presidential official said the list was mainly liberals and other non-Islamists.

Morsi's main opponents from liberal, socialist and other parties said they had refused to take any seats.

Two-thirds of the 270-member upper house were elected in a vote early this year, with one third appointed by the president.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/12/201212221603489388.html>

6. JORDAN and LEBANON

7. ARABIAN PENINSULA AND THE GULF OF BASRA

- **Omanis vote in municipal elections**

Activists say the poll in the Gulf state is a sign of progress, but take a "wait and see" attitude until results are in.

Hoping for jobs and democratic change, voters in Oman have cast ballots in their first municipal election.



The poll on Saturday is a sign of modest reform in response to protests inspired by the Arab Spring.

The small Gulf oil producer, ruled since 1970 by Sultan Qaboos, sits opposite Iran on the Strait of Hormuz, the conduit for nearly a fifth of globally traded petroleum.

Its only other elections are for the Shura Council, a body that has some limited legislative powers.

Increased democracy was a main demand of protesters in Omani cities during the Arab uprisings last year, along with jobs and an end to corruption.

Activists from last year's protest movement welcomed the election but cautioned that it was too early to tell whether it would lead to meaningful change.

"It's good. This is what we've been protesting for, but it's too early to celebrate. Let's wait and see," said activist Ismail al-Rasbi.

Some 1,475 candidates are seeking places on 192 local councils in the country of 2.8 million people.

There were no reports of protests or other incidents across the country on Saturday afternoon. Each polling station had a police car parked outside to prevent trouble.

Protests erupted in several Omani towns early last year inspired by the Arab Spring uprisings, as demonstrators blocked major roads and went on strike demanding better pay, more jobs, action against graft and some democratic changes.

But Sultan Qaboos remains a popular figure in a country that was mostly undeveloped and faced war in its Dhofar region when he seized power from his father.

After the demonstrations, he swiftly reshuffled his cabinet and the government promised to create thousands of jobs, announced plans for municipal polls and granted the Shura Council some legislative power, with the right to approve or reject draft laws.

The sultan, however, retains the final say.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/12/201212231657710943.html>

8. AFGHANISTAN - PAKISTAN

- **Afghan policewoman kills US adviser: police**

An Afghan policewoman killed an American adviser at the Kabul police headquarters, an Afghan police official said.

Kabul's Deputy Police Chief Mohammad Daoud Amin said an investigation was underway to determine whether the killing Monday was intentional or accidental.

It was not known whether the victim was a military or civilian adviser.

The Nato military command said it was looking into reports of the shooting but had no independent information.

At least 53 international troops have been killed by Afghan soldiers or police this year, and a number of other assaults are still under investigations.

Nato forces, due to mostly withdraw from the country by 2014, have speeded up efforts to train and advise Afghan military and police units before the pullout.

<http://dawn.com/2012/12/24/afghan-policewoman-kills-us-adviser-police/>

- **Taliban not demanding Afghan power monopoly**

KABUL: Taliban representatives at a conference did not insist on total power in Afghanistan and pledged to grant rights to women that the militant group itself brutally suppressed in the past, according to a Taliban statement received Sunday.

The pledges emerged from a rare meeting last week involving Taliban and Kabul government representatives.

The less strident substance and tone came in a speech delivered at a conference in France. The French hosts described it as a discussion among Afghans rather than peace negotiations.

It was hard to determine whether the softer line taken by the Taliban representatives reflected a real shift in policy or a salvo in the propaganda war for the hearts and minds of Afghans.

The speech said that a new constitution would protect civil and political rights of all citizens. It promised that women would be allowed to choose husbands, own property, attend school and seek work, rights denied them during Taliban rule, which ended with the 2001 US invasion. The speech was emailed from Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid.

“We are not looking to monopolise power. We want an all-Afghan inclusive government,” the speech said. It was delivered by two Taliban officials, Mawlawi Shahbuddin Dilawar and Muhammad Naeem during the conference on Thursday and Friday.

Afghanistan’s Foreign Ministry spokesman said the government welcomed such talks but did not expect them to bridge the gap between the warring sides.

The United States started to embrace the idea of peace talks after President Barack Obama took office, but discussions stalled in recent years, despite the formation of an Afghan government council tasked with reaching out to the Taliban and the establishment of a Taliban political office in Qatar.

“The peace initiative is a process, and one or two or three meetings are not going to solve the problems. But we are hopeful for the future,” Foreign Ministry spokesman Janan Mosazai said. He said the government’s preconditions for the talks with the Taliban have not changed: a cease-fire, recognition of the Afghan constitution, cutting ties with international terrorists and agreeing to respect the rights of Afghan citizens including women and children.

The Taliban speech reiterated the group’s own longtime policies, declaring that the current constitution was “illegitimate because it is written under the shadow of (US) B-52 aircraft” and that the Taliban remained the legitimate government of the country, a reference to the US-led campaign that drove the Taliban from power.

It also called for the withdrawal of all foreign forces and said a 2014 national election was "not beneficial for solving the Afghan quandary" because it would take place while the country was still under foreign occupation.

Most Nato forces are scheduled to be withdrawn by 2014. The Kabul government and its international backers hope that a peace deal can be brokered with the Taliban and other militant groups before the pullout.

Nato still has more than 100,000 troops, including 66,000 US soldiers, on the ground. Washington is now determining the size of a scaled down force the United States will keep in Afghanistan after 2014.

"The occupation must be ended as a first step, which is the desire of the entire nation, because this is the mother of all these tragedies," the speech said.

The conference was also attended by the Hezb-e-Islami group, which is allied with the Taliban, and political opponents of President Hamid Karzai, whom the Taliban regard as a puppet of Washington.

<http://dawn.com/2012/12/24/taliban-not-demanding-afghan-power-monopoly/>

This media summary is prepared by **ORSAM Middle East Research Assistant Sercan DOĞAN. It covers news and commentaries as reported by the national media sources publishing in the Middle Eastern countries. The views expressed are not those of ORSAM and their inclusion does not imply factual accuracy.*

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