



MIDDLE EAST DAILY BULLETIN

GÜNLÜK ORTADOĐU BÜLTENİ

Domestic Policy in the Middle East Countries

Bölge Ülkelerinde İç Siyaset

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1. IRAQ

• Iraq's 'al-Qaeda chief' arrested

An Iraqi counter-terrorism official tells Al Jazeera that security forces have arrested the top al-Qaeda leader in Iraq and seized a list of names and locations of other operatives.

"We've spoken to an official in the counter-terrorism unit that actually arrested this man, and they maintain that he is the top al-Qaeda leader in Iraq, but they're not releasing his name because they say they're still interrogating him," said Al Jazeera's Jane Arraf, reporting from Baghdad.

"But what they do say is that he was arrested in Baghdad after a two-month long investigation tracking him, and that in addition to arresting him, they also seized the names and locations of other al-Qaeda operatives," said our correspondent.

Samir al-Shuili, spokesman for a counter-terrorism unit confirmed that members of the unit infiltrated the Islamic State of Iraq, an al-Qaeda umbrella group, and that operatives on the list were from other Arab countries and Iraq was seeking the help of those countries in arresting them.

Robert Grenier, the former head of the CIA's anti-terrorism centre, told Al Jazeera that officials had a good reason to withhold the name of the man they have detained.

"In counter-terrorism operations, as in military operations, the rule of thumb is that the first reports are never correct, so we may see a bit of that at work here," said Grenier.

"Also, there are indications that along with this individual capture there may have been quite a quantity of other materials providing leads to other militants, perhaps in other countries, and so the people responsible for this may want to keep a lid on it for a bit until they've had a chance to follow up on some of those leads with cooperating countries."

Iraqi media has been reporting that the man in custody is Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who was named head of the Islamic State of Iraq, an umbrella organisation of armed groups, two years ago after the killing of Abu Omar al-Baghdadi in a US air strike in 2010.

"It's not known whether Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the man who is said to have taken over the al-Qaeda organisation here is actually Iraqi, or, in fact, even exists or is a composite of several people," said Arraf.

"He has kept a very low profile, except for the regular bombings that have taken place [for which] the Islamic State of Iraq has claimed responsibility."

"He has not come out with a lot of statements or videos. He has been, even by al-Qaeda standards, quite a shadowy figure," our correspondent said, adding that the reports of al-Baghdadi's arrest are yet to be confirmed.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/12/201212214201962755.html>

- **Turkmen MP: We support forming a force to protect the disputed areas from their people.**

BAGHDAD / NINA / The Turkmen MP for the National Alliance, Mohammed Mahdi al-Bayati, said: "We support the directions of Prime Minister to form a forces, consist of the residents of "disputed territories "to protect these areas.

Al-Bayati added, in a press statement that "There is no possibility to apply Article 140 of the Constitution because it ended and there is a national dispute on it. Noting that "the Kurdistan region is moving towards the same style after 1991 in administrating the region, by which they were dealing with the former regime where they were not undergoing to the management of the center."

Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki has pointed out that he had sent a proposal to the Kurdistan region stipulates protecting the mixed areas by their people.

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

- **Arab Political Council calls for the return of the "cut off cities"**

Kirkuk / NINA / The Arab Political Council in Kirkuk called the federal government to restore, what he described as: "cut off cities from Iraq" Erbil, Sulaymaniyah and Dohuk," to the united Iraq.

The council said in a press release distributed yesterday evening in Kirkuk: "The provinces of Arbil, Sulaymaniyah and Dohuk are "cut off land of Iraq" and this is what goes in the minds of the wises' Iraqis."

The statement added: "What is required from the elected government, which came out from the will of Iraqis, including the Kurdish political forces to re-annex them again after being cut since 1991 by foreign's will, under the name of the safe region, and there is no reason for them to stay like that and must return to the authority of the Iraqi people under the Constitution, which the Kurdish political forces were fighting to pass it in the referendum in 2005. "

The Arab political Council demanded the US administration: "not to interfere in Iraqi affairs and leave the federal government to extend its authority over all Iraqi territories and not to remain sovereignty incomplete in the north and the south and "the cut off cities" must return".

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

- **Maliki announces dealing with political leaders to settle disputes between KR, CG (alliraqnews)**

Baghdad, Dec 02 (AIN) –The Premier, Nouri al-Maliki, announced that he has dealt with the heads of the political blocs to settle the disputes between Kurdistan Region and the Central Government.

A statement by Maliki's office received by AIN on Sunday cited "Maliki held a meeting on Saturday with the heads of the political blocs where they agreed to settle the disputes either by forming joint checkpoints that comprises Peshmerga elements and federal security elements according to the deals of 2009-2010 or by training some of the citizens of the disputed areas to secure their areas."

Earlier, an informed source stated to All Iraq News Agency (AIN) on Saturday "Maliki invited all the heads of the political blocs to attend a meeting at the Cabinet building to discuss the latest crisis with KR in addition to some other issues,"

http://www.alliraqnews.com/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=23769

- **Abdul Salam Maliki accuses Barzani of creating crises to separate from Iraq.**

BAGHDAD / NINA / MP, of state of law coalition, Abdul Salam al-Maliki, accused the president of the Kurdistan region, Massoud Barzani of trying to create a suitable ground for separation from Iraq by creating bubbles, asserting that his coalition will not allow it.

His press office quoted him saying in a press statement that "Barzani and his coalition's MPs, straining themselves from time to time to create a crisis or to violate the Constitution and the

law in order to find excuses to talk about separation or pretend to be persecuted and marginalized by the central government."

Al-Maliki expressed his astonishment "of those who claim that they are partners in the political process and the government, and at the same time strive to demolish all those ties in ways that do not fit with national leaderships."

Maliki warned, "That the state of law coalition will have to hold more power to defend Iraq and its people away from national and religious intolerance to some affiliated with the political process."

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

- **Talabani affirms to Beecroft his continuing efforts to calm down thing toward reaching solution to the crisis**

Baghdad (NINA) – President Jalal Talabani affirmed that he will continue his efforts to calm down the situation and urging all to resort to peace talk and frank dialogue toward reaching a comprehensive agreement that would put an end to the tense situation.

A statement issued on Sunday, Dec. 2, by the President's office, quoted Talabani during his meeting in sulaymaniya with US Ambassador to Iraq, Robert Beecroft, accompanied with a number of the Embassy's staff, saying that current situation can not take escalation and increased tension. it requires thinking of needed steps to solve the problems and encourage all parties for serious dialogue.

It added that relations between Iraq and the United States and means to develop and expand them are discussed in the meeting.

For his part, Ambassador Beecroft renewed his country's keenness and desire to develop and expand the fruitful relations between Iraq and the United States; affirming his country's support to all Iraqi sides without favoring one on the expense of others, urging them to work together to

overcome differences and obstacles to reach agreement and end political problems they are facing.

The statement went on quoting US Ambassador praising President Talabani's important and vital role, as well as his works to bring various political forces close together; asserting the United States keenness in supporting the President's role. He expressed desire for the President to speed up his return to Baghdad to carry on his anticipated role.

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

- **Iraqi premier says army mobilization aims at establishing security (Al-Iraqiyah TV)**

Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki has said that the Kurdistan Region breached the constitution repeatedly. In a press conference, Al-Maliki wondered about the reasons behind the expansion of the Kurdistan Region's border since 2003.

Al-Maliki added that the in the next phase, the president will ask the parliament to demark the governorates' borders, explaining that any unilateral opinion will be considered a violation of the constitution.

Al-Maliki also pointed out to the question marks raised regarding the mobilization of the Iraqi Army, explaining that the army's deployment aims at establishing security, not at declaring war against a certain state or group."

- **PM warns of 'ethnic conflict' in Iraq**

BAGHDAD, (AFP) - Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki on Saturday warned of the danger of "ethnic conflict" in Iraq, after negotiations aimed at easing Arab-Kurd tensions in the country's north stalled this week.

"If conflict erupts, it would be unfortunate and painful, and it will be an ethnic conflict" that is "not in the interest of Kurds nor Arabs nor Turkmen," Maliki told a news conference in Baghdad.

Talks between federal and Kurdish security officials aimed at easing high tensions between the two sides in northern Iraq broke down over Baghdad's refusal to scrap the Tigris Operations Command, the autonomous Kurdistan region's government said in a statement on Friday.

The establishment of the federal Tigris Operations Command, which covers disputed territory in northern Iraq, has drawn an angry response from Kurdish leaders who want to incorporate much of the area into their region.

Maliki also defended federal troop movements in the north, saying it is the army's right "to be in any part of Iraq."

And he ruled out the redeployment of US forces to help ease the tensions, saying it is "the responsibility of the Iraqi government and the (Kurdistan) region to work to end their problems without the assistance of a third party."

US forces played a coordinating role between Kurdish and Arab forces in disputed territory, forming joint patrols and checkpoints comprised of US soldiers, Iraqi troops, and Kurdish forces.

But US troops withdrew from Iraq last year, removing a buffer to Arab-Kurd tensions.

The dispute over territory in northern Iraq is the biggest threat to the country's long-term stability, diplomats and officials say. Ties between Baghdad and Kurdistan are also marred by disputes over oil and power-sharing.

<http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&id=32017>

- **Nujaifi: No fight in Iraq anymore (Shafaq News)**

Shafaq News, Dec 02 / The Parliament Speaker , Osama al-Nujaifi stressed Sunday, that declaring war decision in the country is confined to the parliament , confirming that the general trend is against the military escalation between the federal government and Kurdistan Region.

Nujaifi said in a news conference at the parliament building, attended by "Shafaq News" that "there are moves to stop the conflict between the federal government and Kurdistan, which was so close to military confrontation".

Nujaifi added that "any attempt to drag the country to war is illegal without the approval of the parliament and the general trend for everyone is against the military escalation," adding that "national peace and understanding must be restored and there will be not fight in Iraq anymore."

The relation between the federal government in Baghdad and Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) is witnessing an acute crisis due to several disagreements, most recently the formation of Baghdad to , "Dijla Operations Command" to take over security responsibilities in the disputed area.

Prime Minister, Nuri al-Maliki announced on Saturday sending a proposal to Kurdistan Region that stipulates that the sons of the disputed areas would take the responsibility of protecting these areas.

2. IRAN

- **Expanding neighborly ties, Iran's priority: Salehi**

Iran's Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi says expanding relations with neighboring countries is a priority in the Islamic Republic's foreign policy.

"The priority of Iran's foreign policy is to regulate relations with neighboring countries, because the Islamic Republic has many common interests with these states," Salehi said on Sunday.

The Iranian foreign minister made the remarks in a meeting to discuss measures of combatting smuggling in the southeastern border province of Sistan-Baluchestan.

“Expanding and establishing relations with all countries is of importance to the Islamic Republic, but establishing ties with 15 important and strategic neighboring states has more significance,” Salehi added.

He further noted that addressing the problems of the country’s border areas with the aim of facilitating their development and progress was one of the most important agendas of the Foreign Ministry.

“Sistan-Baluchestan is Iran’s only province with direct access to free waters and the ocean, and is adjacent to Afghanistan and Pakistan,” the Iranian foreign minister added.

Salehi said major investments had been made at Iran’s southeastern Chabahar port city, which he described as “very important” for the country and its neighbors.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/03/275879/expanding-neighborly-ties-irans-priority/>

- **Iran, Pakistan discuss IP gas pipeline project**

Iran and Pakistan have discussed plans to develop Iran-Pakistan (IP) gas pipeline project, which will deliver natural gas from Pars Special Energy Economic Zone in Assaluyeh in the southern Iranian province of Bushehr to Pakistan.

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Pakistani Minister of Oil and Natural Resources Asim Hussain held a meeting in Tehran on Sunday to talk on the multi-billion-dollar project.

The Iranian president called for expanding bilateral ties between the two countries, and expressed hope that the pipeline would become operational as scheduled.

Hussain, for his part, said Islamabad is determined to increase cooperation with Iran in all areas, particularly in the energy sector.

During a meeting with Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi on Saturday, the Pakistani minister said the construction of IP gas pipeline will benefit both countries.

The two officials also discussed ways to expand economic interactions between Tehran and Islamabad.

Hussain stressed the necessity of completing the project as soon as possible.

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

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/03/275849/iran-pakistan-discuss-ip-gas-pipeline/>

- **Democracy only way to save Syria out of crisis: Iran's Jalili**

Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council Saeed Jalili has stated that implementing democracy in Syria is the only way to save the Middle Eastern country out of crisis.

Jalili made the comment during a meeting with Haytham Manna, the vice chairman of Syria's National Coordination Committee opposition group on Sunday.

He said countries, which cause problems for Syria to achieve democracy, are part of the problem themselves.

He reiterated that the Islamic Republic of Iran is against any violence, and that the country is ready to help Damascus hold free elections.

Manna, for his part, said there must be an end to fighting before talks on democratic reforms can begin.

Earlier in the day, Manna met with Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister for Arab and African Affairs Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, who said the second round of the Syria National Dialogue meeting is planned to be held in Tehran.

“The second round of the meeting of Syrian groups, and national and popular figures will be held with the participation of representatives from the Syrian government,” Amir-Abdollahian said.

Amir-Abdollahian condemned the foreign-backed armed men fighting the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, saying the continued militancy has only inflicted destruction and damage on the country’s infrastructure, while increasing human casualties.

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

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

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/03/275837/democracy-only-way-to-save-syria/>

- **Ahmadinejad criticizes plan to amend Presidential Elections Act**

TEHRAN, Dec. 3 (MNA) – Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on Sunday criticized a plan to amend the Presidential Elections Act, saying it is in contravention of the Constitution.

On Sunday, MPs approved the generalities of the plan which calls for the revision of the Presidential Elections Act.

“No matter what the fate of the plan will be, the move itself goes against the Constitution, and the people’s time and money should not be used for this plan,” Ahmadinejad said.

The people’s vote and their entitlement to free elections have been enshrined in the Constitution, he said, adding that it violates the Constitution to devolve the examination of presidential candidates’ qualifications to a group which have not received their mandate from the people.

It is also illegal to only allow those candidates who have obtained the approval of certain officials to run in the election, he said.

“If you want to change the Constitution, announce it openly. It has its own mechanism,” he added.

<http://www.mehrnews.com/en/newsdetail.aspx?NewsID=1756870>

- **Iran starts developing gas field shared with Turkmenistan**

TEHRAN, Dec. 3 (MNA) - Iran has started drilling the first exploratory well at the Afshar-1 gas field, which is shared with Turkmenistan.

The Iranian section of the gas field measures around 9 square kilometers in area, equaling half the total area, ISNA reported on Sunday.

Seismic studies suggest the field contains considerable amounts of natural gas.

Iran has launched 17 development projects at oilfields which are shared with its neighbors, with the aim of boosting production at the sites to 800,000 barrels per day over the course of two years.

Iran shares 18 oilfields, four gas fields, and 6 associated oil and gas fields with neighboring countries.

The Islamic Republic has attached priority to boosting gas production capacity at its joint oil and gas fields shared with Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

Iran’s daily gas production is about 600 million cubic meters, and this is projected to increase to 1.2 billion cubic meters in the future. According to the National Iranian Gas Company, the country’s oil and natural gas reserves account for 10 percent and 16 percent of total world reserves, respectively.

Iran ranks fourth worldwide with 155 billion barrels of recoverable oil reserves, after Venezuela, Saudi Arabia, and Canada.

With 34 trillion cubic meters of natural gas reserves, Iran has the world's second-largest natural gas reserves after Russia.

3. SYRIA

- **Deadly Syria blasts hit upscale Homs area**

Two car bomb explosions in the central Syrian city of Homs have left at least 12 people dead and dozens of others injured, according to medics.

Sunday's blasts occurred in al-Malaab neighbourhood, an upscale government-controlled area in the centre of Homs.

Security forces surrounded the area and state-sponsored television arrived to film the scene.

Al-Malaab, where many cafes and restaurants are located, has seen frequent anti-government protests and ensuing crackdown by security forces. It has also been hit by deadly stray mortar rounds on several occasions since the uprising in the country began in March last year.

It currently houses hundreds of displaced people who fled their homes in violence-hit areas of the city where rebel strongholds have been shelled by government forces.

Meanwhile, Syrian rebels opened fire on a Lebanese army base in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley on Sunday. The Lebanese troops shot back, according to an army statement. No casualties were reported.

Damascus violence

Elsewhere in the country, clashes raged on Sunday as government forces hammered rebel positions around Damascus with artillery and air raids, as part of an offensive aimed at securing the capital, activists said.

The army also reportedly pounded the Damascus district of Kafr Souseh as it tried to block rebels from reaching the capital via its southwestern entrance.

Forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad have been trying to establish a secure perimeter around Damascus at all costs, turning the province into one of the main battlegrounds in the country's 20-month conflict.

The latest reports of violence came a day after Syria's internet connections were restored on Saturday after a two-day blackout, the worst communications outage since the uprising began.

The internet was back in most parts of the country, including in Damascus, the northern city of Aleppo, the central cities of Homs and Hama, and the coastal city of Tartus, residents in the areas told Al Jazeera.

Renesys, a US-based firm that monitors online activity, confirmed a "largely complete" restoration of internet service in Syria.

Experts said the outage was highly likely to have been caused by the state.

Assad's government has previously been accused of cutting internet and telephone connections to block opposition activist and rebel communications.

Authorities had attributed the latest outage to a "terrorist" attack or a technical fault. The government frequently uses the term terrorist to describe opposition fighters.

Russia-Turkey talks

In a separate development, Russian President Vladimir Putin heads to Turkey for a one-day trip focused on trade that is likely to be overshadowed by the two countries' differences over Syria.

During the talks on Monday, Turkey is certain to press Putin to stop backing Assad.

The Kremlin, however, has shown no inclination of relinquishing its support for its last Middle East ally, whom it has shielded from international sanctions and continued to provide with weapons amid an escalating civil war.

Russia and China have used their veto power at the Security Council to block any UN sanctions on Assad's regime over its crackdown on an uprising that began in March 2011.

Advocates say at least 40,000 Syrians have been killed in the fighting since then.

Moscow also has insisted that it would honor weapons contracts signed earlier with Syria for the delivery of anti-ship and air-defence missiles.

The Kremlin has argued that the Russian arms sales do not violate any international agreements and has rebuffed Western demands to halt the trade.

Russia reacted angrily in October when Turkey forced a Syrian passenger plane flying from Moscow to land in Turkey due to what Turkish officials said was military equipment on board. Moscow said the plane was legally carrying radar parts for Syria.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/12/20121221341681745.html>

- **Syrian rebels bombed, opposition open to peacekeepers**

BEIRUT, (Reuters) - Syrian jets bombed rebel-held areas of Damascus on Saturday, residents said, as the opposition indicated it could accept an international peacekeeping force if President Bashar al-Assad is forced from power.

Warplanes attacked the Damascus suburbs of Kafar Souseh and Darraya, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, an opposition-linked group. The air strikes follow intensified rebel activity in the capital, Assad's seat of power, as well as stormings of government military bases in recent weeks.

"Syrian regular forces are trying to control the areas surrounding the capital," the Observatory said. Bombings targeted a continuous arc of rebel presence in the capital's outer districts from the northeast to the southwest.

Opposition activists reported clashes and air strikes in the provinces of Homs, Deir al-Zor, Idlib and in Aleppo, where they said 14 rebel fighters were killed during an assault on an army base in the town of Khanasser early on Saturday.

It is difficult to verify such reports due to government restrictions on media access to Syria.

Syria's Internet connections began working again on Saturday after a two-day blackout, the worst communications outage in the 20-month-old uprising against Assad in which 40,000 people have been killed and hundreds of thousands forced to flee the country.

Opposition umbrella group the Syrian National Coalition might allow an international peacekeeping force into Syria if Assad and his allies leave power, coalition spokesman Walid al-Bunni said on Saturday.

Some opposition members have argued against international troops, saying their arrival could serve as a rallying call for Assad loyalists in an area near the Mediterranean where many of his minority Alawite sect live.

Assad, whose family has ruled autocratically for four decades, draws much of his support from the sect, an offshoot of Shi'ite Islam. Most of the rebels are Sunni Muslims.

Bunni said the coalition was open to any proposal if Assad and his allies, including top officers in the military and security apparatus, were removed.

"If this is the first condition then we can start discussing everything. There will be no political process until the ruling family and all those who underpin the regime leave," he said.

Bunni, a physician who spent most of the period after Assad inherited power from his father in 2000 in jail as a political prisoner, was speaking at a news conference marking the conclusion of the first full meeting of the opposition coalition in Cairo.

"IRON AND BLOOD"

Britain, France and Gulf countries have recognised the Syrian National Coalition as the sole representative of the Syrian people.

Most foreign powers have condemned Assad, who has relied on his allies to stay afloat, especially regional powerhouse Iran. Russia, Syria's main arms supplier, and China have vetoed three U.N. Security Council resolutions condemning Assad and reject the idea of sanctioning his government.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov accused Western states on Saturday of trying to advance democracy abroad through "iron and blood."

"Advancing democracy through iron and blood just does not work, and this has been made clear in recent months - the past year-and-a-half," Lavrov said, [nL5E8N11A3]according to state-run news agency Itar-Tass.

Russia repeated its opposition on Friday to NATO's potential deployment of Patriot missiles in Turkey, which wants them because of fears of a spillover from the war in Syria.

Syrian state television quoted an information ministry statement saying Damascus international airport was open on Saturday and that the road leading to it was safe.

Since Thursday, clashes have been reported near the Aqraba and Babilla districts on the southeastern outskirts of Damascus which lead to the airport, effectively closing the road and leading EgyptAir and Emirates to suspend flights.

U.S. web tracking firm Renesys said in a blog post that it could confirm "a largely complete restoration of the Syrian Internet".

Rights groups said the communications blackout was a precursor to a wider offensive by government forces in the capital. Syrian security sources and diplomats say the government intends to seal off central Damascus from the restive suburbs.

Authorities had attributed the Internet outage to a "terrorist" attack or a technical fault. On Saturday, state news agency SANA gave a third reason for the outage: "Maintenance work."

Residents contacted by Reuters in the capital, the central city of Homs, and northern Aleppo said they had connectivity.

<http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&id=32018>

- **Syria TV shows killed militants**

Syria's national television has aired footage showing the bodies of foreign militants, who were killed on Thursday while trying to cross into the country.

The television said on Sunday that the Syrian Army ambushed 21 armed men with the help of locals near the Syrian border town of Tal-kalakh.

It said the militants were trying to enter Syria via Lebanon's border town of Wadi Khalid.

The town is considered to be a main route for smuggling militants and weapons into Syria.

Meanwhile, a Lebanese television network said the militants were from Tripoli in Lebanon.

Syria has been the scene of unrest since March 2011, and many people, including large numbers of security forces, have lost their lives in the violence.

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

Foreign militants have been pouring into Syria from Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq, and Jordan to fight against the government of President Bashar al-Assad.

The Washington Post reported on Thursday that the militants in Syria had acquired “as many as 40 shoulder-fired missile systems in recent weeks,” and “at least some” of the weaponry had been provided by Qatar.

On Wednesday, The New York Times said the US administration “is considering deeper intervention to help push [Syrian] President Bashar al-Assad from power.”

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/03/275847/syria-tv-shows-killed-militants/>

- **Army secures road to Damascus airport**

Syrian Army soldiers have secured the road leading to Damascus International Airport, days after heavy clashes between militants and government forces in the area led to the closure of the road, Press TV reports.

The traffic flow was normal on Sunday with the presence of some Army checkpoints along the highway to maintain security, Mohammad Ali, Press TV correspondent in Damascus, said after visiting the road and the airport.

The surrounding areas of the highway such as Beit Sahem and Aqraba at times witness clashes. Syrian troops, however, said they would quickly confront the militants to keep the highway safe.

A Syrian Army officer told Press TV that the government troops have been chasing armed men and killed many terrorists but some of them escaped.

Gunshots were heard and black smoke was seen rising from the areas close to the highway.

A driver told Press TV that now the road is safe for travel.

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<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/02/275832/army-secures-road-to-damascus-airport/>

4. ISRAEL-PALESTINE

- **Top Hamas leader to visit Gaza for first time**

The leader of Hamas, which controls the Gaza Strip, plans to visit the besieged Palestinian territory for the first time next week.

Khaled Meshaal will arrive in the Gaza from Egypt to mark Hamas' 25th anniversary and congratulate its leaders and fighters for battling Israel during the recent eight-day offensive, a senior Hamas official said on Saturday.

The official spoke on condition of anonymity because of security concerns.

"I am thrilled and proud that I will be returning to Gaza," Meshaal said.

Meshaal, who has been in exile since the 1967 Six Day war, previously had been prevented from crossing into Gaza by longtime Egyptian leader Hosni Mubarak.

But Mubarak was ousted in February last year, and the Muslim Brotherhood, which has close ties to Hamas, has risen to power.

He has led Hamas since 1996, helping to build the movement into a potent force. Israel, the US and the European Union have branded the group as a terrorist organisation.

The Hamas leader survived an Israeli assassination attack in Jordan in 1997. Until recently, Meshaal was based in Syria but after the uprising in the country broke out there he relocated to Qatar.

The announcement of Meshaal's visit to Gaza comes after the UN voted overwhelmingly on Thursday to accept Palestine as a non-member observer state.

Hamas has refused to recognise state of Israel.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/12/201212203223225199.html>

- **Palestinians celebrate status upgrade at UN**

ubilant Palestinians have rejoiced at the historic - but largely symbolic - vote at the UN General Assembly in New York granting them non-member observer status.

Celebrations took place overnight in the occupied West Bank and the Gaza Strip, Al Jazeera's correspondents in both places reported.

"People here know that when they wake up on Friday they'll still be living under an Israeli occupation. They won't, for instance, be in control of their own borders," reported Nadim Baba from Ramallah, West Bank, amid deafening noise from ecstatic Palestinians.

"What they do hope is that when it comes to negotiations with Israel, the fact that Palestine might be able to refer Israeli officials to bodies like the International Criminal Court (ICC) could put pressure on Israel to halt or slow down its settlement expansion."

In Gaza, Al Jazeera's Casey Kauffman spoke of a "burst of enthusiasm" as people waved green flags for Hamas, the faction which controls the coastal enclave, and yellow flags for Fatah, the Palestinian group based in Ramallah.

Rashid al-Kor told the AFP news agency: "I'm happy they declared the state even though it's only a moral victory. There are a lot of sharks out there, but it feels good."

Nearby, Palestinian-American Laila Jaman was waving a handful of Palestinian flags and carrying a picture of Barack Obama, the US president, and Mahmoud Abbas, the president of the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank.

"I feel so good, I cannot describe my feelings, it's as if we reached the end of a dark tunnel. With a Palestinian state we are now united as a people and a leadership," she said breathlessly.

Long-sought victory

The UN General Assembly voted overwhelmingly to recognise Palestine as a non-member observer state on Thursday, delivering a long-sought victory for the Palestinians. But it was diplomatic defeat for Israel and the US, two of the nine countries which opposed and voted against the upgrade.

In all, 138 countries voted in favour and 41 others abstained.

A Palestinian flag was quickly unfurled on the floor of the General Assembly, behind the Palestinian delegation.

The new status is an indirect recognition of the Palestinians' claims on statehood in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip. It allows them to join a number of UN agencies, as well as the ICC.

Abbas, the Palestinian Authority chief, addressed the General Assembly, saying that Palestinians were not seeking to "delegitimise" Israel, but to affirm the legitimacy of Palestine as a state.

Referring to the Israeli assault on Gaza, he said Palestinians had come to the UN at a time when they were "still tending to [their] wounds and still burying [their] beloved martyrs of children, women and men who have fallen victim to the latest Israeli aggression".

"What permits the Israeli government to blatantly continue with its aggressive policies and the perpetration of war crimes stems from its conviction that it is above the law and that it has immunity from accountability and [the] consequences [...] The moment has arrived for the world to say clearly: Enough of aggression, settlements and occupation."

Ali Abunimah, a Palestinian-American activist and the founder of Electronic Intifada, told Al Jazeera that the celebrations were uncalled for and that the UN was a "giant distraction".

"I wish that all this hype and dancing in the streets of Ramallah and self-delusion among the people were for a real achievement that actually returned rights to the Palestinian people.

"There is something incongruous and tasteless about the Palestinian Authority sponsoring a dance festival on the streets of Ramallah while families in Gaza are still mourning their children.

"This [vote] is a giant distraction; a cheap gesture, which allows people to celebrate as if they were in a football match."

US criticises upgrade

Immediately after the results were announced, Susan Rice, the US ambassador to the United Nations, branded the move "counter-productive", and the state department warned the status change could lead to a reduction of US economic support for the Palestinians.

"Today's unfortunate and counter-productive resolution places further obstacles in the path to peace. That is why the United States voted against it," Rice said.

"The backers of today's resolution say they seek a functioning, independent Palestinian state at peace with Israel - so do we. But we have long been clear that the only way to establish such a Palestinian state and resolve all permanent status issues is through the crucial, if painful, work of direct negotiations between the parties.

"Long after the votes have been cast, long after the speeches have been forgotten, it is the Palestinians and the Israelis who must still talk to each other and listen to each other."

Other countries that voted against the upgrade include Canada, the Czech Republic, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Nauru, Palau and Panama.

Meanwhile, Ban Ki-moon, the UN secretary-general, renewed his call for the resumption of direct negotiations between Israel and Palestine.

"Today's vote underscores the urgency of the resumption of meaningful negotiations," Ban said.

"My position has been consistent all along. I believe that the Palestinians have a legitimate right to their own independent state. I believe that Israel has the right to live in peace and security with its neighbours. There is no substitute for negotiations to that end."

'Distortion of history'

Israel reacted swiftly to the news of the upgrade, with Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu describing Abbas' comments as "hostile and poisonous", and full of "false propaganda".

Mark Regev, spokesperson for Netanyahu, told Al Jazeera that the comments made by Abbas "make it more difficult" for his country to negotiate with Palestinian officials.

"Instead of speaking the language of reconciliation, we had libelous charge after libelous charge against the Israeli people," he said.

Regev dubbed Abbas' characterisation of the UN resolution calling for a two-state solution exactly 65 years ago "a distortion of history" .

"The way he talked about it. He forgot the most important thing. It was the Israeli side, the Jewish side that accepted two states for two people."

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/11/20121129223421111270.html>

- **Netanyahu brushes off world condemnation of settlement plans**

JERUSALEM, (Reuters) - Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Sunday brushed off world condemnation of Israel's plans to expand Jewish settlements after the Palestinians won de facto U.N. recognition of statehood.

"We will carry on building in Jerusalem and in all the places that are on the map of Israel's strategic interests," a defiant Netanyahu said at the weekly cabinet meeting.

In another blow to the Palestinian Authority (PA) in the West Bank, Israel also announced it was withholding Palestinian tax revenues this month worth about \$100 million because of a \$200 million PA debt to the Israeli Electric Corporation.

Yasser Abed Rabbo, a senior Palestinian official, said confiscation of the funds due the cash-strapped Authority and vital to meeting its payroll, was "piracy and theft".

Stung by the U.N. General Assembly's upgrading on Thursday of the Palestinians' status from "observer entity" to "non-member state", Israel said on Friday it would build 3,000 more settler homes in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, areas Palestinians want for a future state, along with Gaza.

An Israeli official said the government also ordered "preliminary zoning and planning work" for thousands of housing units in areas including the so-called "E1" zone near Jerusalem.

Such construction could divide the West Bank in two and further dim Palestinian hopes, backed by the United States and other international sponsors of the Middle East peace process, for a contiguous country.

But Israeli officials said it could up to two years before any building begins in E1.

At the cabinet meeting, Netanyahu said the "unilateral step the Palestinians took at the U.N. is a gross violation of previous agreements signed with Israel". The government of Israel, he added, "rejects the General Assembly's vote".

The upgrade, approved overwhelmingly, fell short of full U.N. membership, which only the Security Council can grant. But it has significant legal implications because it could allow the Palestinians access to the International Criminal Court where they could file complaints against Israel.

Israel's settlement plans, widely seen as retaliation for the Palestinians' U.N. bid, have drawn strong international condemnation from the United States, France, Britain and the European Union.

"The recognition of Palestine as a state changes a lot of the facts, and aims to establish new ones," Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas told a cheering crowd in the West Bank city of Ramallah on his return from the United States.

"But we have to recognize that our victory provoked the powers of settlement, war and occupation."

INTERNATIONAL CRITICISM

Netanyahu heads a pro-settler government and opinion polls predict his Likud party will come out on top in Israel's January 22 parliamentary election, despite opponents' allegations that his policies have deepened Israeli diplomatic isolation.

"All settlement construction is illegal under international law and constitutes an obstacle to peace," the EU's foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton said in a statement on Sunday.

The United States said the plan was counterproductive to any resumption of direct peace talks, stalled for two years in a dispute over settlement expansion in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, both captured by Israel in a 1967 war.

Netanyahu says Israel, as a Jewish state, has a historic claim to land in the West Bank and to all of Jerusalem. Palestinians want East Jerusalem as the capital of a future state. Israel considers all of the holy city as its capital, a claim that is not recognized internationally.

Israeli Housing Minister Ariel Attias said that within weeks the government would publish invitations for bids from contractors to build 1,000 homes in East Jerusalem and more than 1,000 in West Bank settlement blocs.

"E1 is in planning, which means sketches on paper," Attias told Army Radio. "No one will build until it is clear what will be done there."

The E1 zone is considered especially sensitive. Israel froze much of its activities in E1 under pressure from former U.S. President George W. Bush and the area has been under the scrutiny of his successor Barack Obama.

Benny Kashriel, mayor of the Maale Adumim settlement adjacent to E1, told Army Radio building "will take a year or two".

Yariv Oppenheimer, head of the Israeli anti-settlement group Peace Now said: "If we build in E1 the two-state vision will truly be history ... it is a strategic point that if built, will prevent the Palestinians from having a normal state."

Approximately 500,000 Israelis and 2.5 million Palestinians live in the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

<http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&id=32021>

- **Israeli settlement bid a 'fatal blow' to peace: Ban**

U.N. leader Ban Ki-moon warned Sunday that if Israel implemented its latest plan for new settlements it would deal an "almost fatal blow" to any prospects for peace with the Palestinians.

Israel's announcement about the 3,000 Jewish settler homes, whose planned location was not revealed, came in the wake of a historic vote by the United Nations General Assembly to upgrade Palestine's diplomatic status.

Israeli media reported that some of the new construction would be in E1, a highly contentious area of the West Bank that runs between the easternmost edge of annexed east Jerusalem and the Maaleh Adumim settlement.

Palestinians bitterly oppose the E1 project, as it would effectively cut the occupied West Bank in two, north to south, and make the creation of a viable Palestinian state even more problematic.

“It was with grave concern and disappointment that the secretary general learned of Israel’s announcement of 3,000 new settlement units in east Jerusalem and other parts of the West Bank,” a statement from Ban’s spokesman said.

“This would include reported planning in the so-called E1 envelope, which risks completely cutting off east Jerusalem from the rest of the West Bank.

“Settlements are illegal under international law and, should the E1 settlement be constructed, it would represent an almost fatal blow to remaining chances of securing a two-state solution.”

Ban’s statement represented an unusually strong condemnation of Israeli settlement plans from the U.N. chief and followed a chorus of disapproval from the United States, Britain, France and the European Union.

“The secretary general repeats his call on all concerned to resume negotiations and intensify efforts towards a comprehensive, just and lasting peace and urges the parties to refrain from provocative actions,” Ban’s statement said.

On Thursday, the U.N. General Assembly overwhelmingly backed a resolution recognizing Palestine within the 1967 borders as a non-member observer state.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had warned that by going to the U.N., the Palestinians had “violated” previous agreements with Israel, such as the 1993 Oslo Accords, and that his country would “act accordingly.”

In another tit-for-tat, Israeli Finance Minister Yuval Steinitz said Sunday that the Jewish state would not transfer tax and tariff funds it collects for the Palestinians this month.

Peace talks have been on hold since September 2010, with the Palestinians insisting on a settlement freeze before returning to the negotiating table and the Israelis insisting on no preconditions.

Israel has long feared that if the Palestinians won the rank of a U.N. non-member state, they could pursue the Jewish state for war crimes at the International Criminal Court -- particularly over settlements.

With their newly-acquired status, the Palestinians now have access to a range of U.N. agencies, as well as to the ICC, though Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas said he had no plans to immediately petition the tribunal.

The Palestinians want east Jerusalem as capital of their state and vigorously resist expansion plans for Maaleh Adumim, which lies three miles (five kilometers) from the city's eastern edge.

Arab East Jerusalem was captured by Israel with the rest of the West Bank in the 1967 Six-Day War and later annexed in a move not recognized by the international community.

Israel considers all of Jerusalem as its "eternal, indivisible" capital, and does not view construction in the eastern sector to be settlement activity.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/12/03/253036.html>

5. AFRICA and EGYPT

- **Egypt judges reject role in constitution vote**

The head of Egypt's Judges Club, which represents judges across the country, has said his members will not supervise a referendum on a draft constitution, amid a tense standoff between the president and the judiciary.

"It has been agreed by all the judges of Egypt and the Judges Clubs outside the capital not to supervise a referendum on the draft constitution and to boycott it," Ahmed al-Zind said in a statement carried by the official MENA news agency.

Earlier on Sunday, Egypt's Supreme Constitutional Court shelved its work indefinitely after protests by President Mohamed Morsi's supporters outside its headquarters prevented judges from meeting.

The judges were scheduled to rule on whether to dissolve the upper house of parliament and the constituent assembly which passed the draft constitution. Several top lawyers have also been dismissed.

"The court registers its deep regret and pain at the methods of psychological assassination of its judges," the court said in a statement.

The top court had earlier announced it had postponed its ruling, blaming pressure from pro-government supporters. It is not known whether a new date has been set for the ruling.

Any ruling from the court would be a direct challenge to Morsi - who last month gave himself near absolute powers, placing himself and the assembly above any oversight, including by the judiciary.

After receiving a copy of the document, Morsi had announced on Thursday that a referendum on the draft constitution would be held on December 15.

Anti-Morsi protesters continued to occupy Cairo's Tahrir Square on Sunday.

'Rushed through'

Morsi called for the vote in a speech on Saturday night before members of the constituent assembly, the 100-member panel that drafted the controversial document.

The president is accused by his detractors of usurping sweeping powers and pushing the agenda of the Muslim Brotherhood, of which he used to be a member, in drawing up the draft constitution.

The secular opposition has promised a civil disobedience campaign against the vote.

Al Jazeera's Rawya Rageh, reporting from Cairo, said that the constituent assembly was "immunised by this presidential decree".

"But remember the constituent assembly itself rushed through the vote on the draft constitution in a marathon session that lasted for 17 hours, and effectively it becomes dissolved after they put forward this draft constitution," she said.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/12/20121221944559259.html>

- **Egypt's Islamists surround Supreme Court ahead of session on constituent assembly**

Hundreds of Islamists marched towards the High Constitutional Court (HCC) in Cairo on Saturday night, ahead of a Sunday court session expected to issue a ruling on the Constituent Assembly's legality.

Supporters of President Mohamed Mursi spent the night outside the Constitutional Court headquarters building in Cairo, as the court is scheduled on Sunday to review lawsuits demanding the dissolving of the current constituent body.

The president's recent constitutional decree prevents the top legal body the Supreme Constitutional Court from potentially dissolving the Islamist-run constituent assembly.

In the same vain, Mursi called late on Saturday for a Dec. 15 referendum on a draft constitution and urged a national dialogue on the "concerns of the nation" as the country nears the end of the transition from Hosni Mubarak's rule.

Mursi was speaking after receiving the final draft of the constitution from the Islamist-dominated assembly that wrote it.

He urged "all citizens to examine in detail and objectively the articles of the draft" constitution.

He reiterated his call "to reopen a real dialogue over the concerns of the nation ... to end the transitional phase as quickly as possible and protect our newborn democracy."

The constitution has taken center stage in the country's worst political crisis since Mursi's election in June, squaring Islamist forces against secular-leaning opponents.

Liberals, leftists and Christians walked out of the constituent assembly, leaving a largely Islamist panel in charge of drafting the charter which has been criticized for failing to represent all Egyptians.

"Mursi put to referendum a draft constitution that undermines basic freedoms & violates universal values. The struggle will continue," tweeted leading dissident and former U.N. nuclear watchdog chief Mohamed ElBaradei.

Mursi addressed the nation on Saturday night following the finalization of the draft constitution, amid mass rallies in the country turning out to support and oppose the president.

Tens of thousands of protesters gathered in Cairo on Friday to pile pressure on Mursi after a panel dominated by fellow Islamists rushed through the controversial draft constitution.

The draft constitution, which was finalized following a 15 hour-long voting process by 85 members from the 100 member beleaguered assembly, is expected to be ratified by Mursi.

Mursi will review the draft on Saturday, said assembly head Ghiriani, and is then expected to call for a popular referendum within two weeks.

Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, along with fellow Islamist movements, called for mass rallies on Saturday to support Mursi, a day after thousands of the president's opponents protested in several governorates to denounce the latest constitutional declaration.

Tens of thousands of anti-Mursi protesters have claimed over the past few days the draft restricts freedom of speech, minorities' rights, and places other limitations on freedoms.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/12/02/252919.html>

- **Boko Haram suspected in deadly Nigeria attack**

Members of the Nigerian armed group Boko Haram are suspected of killing 10 Christians in northeastern Nigeria.

Sunday's attack happened in a village called Chibok, in a remote part of Borno state, at the heart of a violent campaign led by Boko Haram, which is fighting Western influence and wants to form an Islamic state in Nigeria's north.

"Suspected Boko Haram came at night and set people's houses on fire before killing their victims," said Nuhu Clark, a former councillor of the village who escaped the attack.

He said he counted 10 bodies afterwards.

A local government official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said "the attackers came in around 9pm chanting 'Allahu Akbar', which made us suspect they are Boko Haram. They moved into selected homes in the predominantly Christian part of the town and slaughtered 10 people like sheep".

A police spokesman said they were aware of the incident but were still trying to confirm casualties.

Armed fighters have killed hundreds of people since launching a rebellion against the government in 2009, the usual targets being security forces, government officials or Christians, whom Boko Haram sees as infidels.

Human Rights Watch has said about 3,000 people have been killed in the conflict since its insurgency intensified in 2010.

Boko Haram 'commander killed'

In another development, security forces said on Sunday they had killed a senior Boko Haram commander, Mohammed Ibrahim, one of several who had a bounty placed on his head last week of 25 million naira (\$158,900) in his case.

"He was killed in an operation in Gwange ward [Borno state] along with two of his unit commanders," a spokesman for joint military and police forces in Borno state, Lieutenant-Colonel Sagir Musa, said.

Attacks on Christians seem calculated to ignite sectarian tensions in Africa's most populous nation, which is split roughly evenly between Muslims and Christians.

They mostly live side by side in peace, although bouts of violence between the communities sometimes flare up.

Boko Haram wants to carve out an Islamic state in northern Nigeria.

The US has designated three of Boko Haram's senior members as terrorists.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2012/12/201212305648361809.html>

- **DR Congo rebels demand negotiations**

"If negotiations have not started by tomorrow at 2pm, 48 hours since our withdrawal, or if there are attacks on citizens in Goma, we will take back the city," he said. "We know that President [Joseph] Kabila is not trustworthy, but we want to give a chance for our friends to realise that too."

The M23 rebels took the capital of North Kivu on November 20, after battling the Congolese army.

Despite the rebels' retreat from Goma, which was a pre-requisite set by the Congolese government for negotiations, Kabila has not yet made clear if the government will negotiate.

"The head of state said that he will listen to the M23's grievances and re-evaluate the 2009 peace agreement, and then he will give an answer," said government spokesman Lambert Mende. "No one will give them the chance," to return to Goma, he told The Associated Press.

Police deployed

Authorities assumed gradual control of the key area on Sunday, with hundreds of police arriving in the city. About 600 government soldiers are also reported to be on their way to Goma.

But the rebels remain just outside the city, having pledged to withdraw only 20km under the regionally brokered deal.

The eight-month-old M23 rebellion is led by fighters from a now-defunct rebel group, who agreed to lay down their arms on March 23, 2009, in return for being allowed to join the ranks of the Congolese army.

The rebellion, which takes its name from that accord, began in April this year when hundreds of soldiers defected from the military, saying that the terms of the agreement had not been respected.

The rebels have sought the implementation of the 2009 accord, and have also added a list of demands including the liberation of all political prisoners and the dissolution of the current electoral commission which was in charge during fraudulent elections last year.

But most analysts believe the origin of the rebellion is a fight over DR Congo's vast mineral wealth, a much of which is found in the North Kivu province.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2012/12/2012122211559911764.html>

- **Islamist protest shuts down Egypt's top court**

CAIRO, (Reuters) - Protests by Islamists allied to President Mohamed Mursi forced Egypt's highest court to adjourn its work indefinitely on Sunday, intensifying a conflict between some of the country's top judges and the head of state.

The Supreme Constitutional Court said it would not convene until its judges could operate without "psychological and material pressure", saying protesters had stopped the judges from reaching the building.

Several hundred Mursi supporters had protested outside the court through the night ahead of a session expected to examine the legality of parliament's upper house and the assembly that drafted a new constitution, both of them Islamist-controlled.

The cases have cast a legal shadow over Mursi's efforts to chart a way out of a crisis ignited by a November 22 decree that temporarily expanded his powers and led to nationwide protests.

The court's decision to suspend its activities appeared unlikely to have any immediate impact on Mursi's drive to get the new constitution passed in a national referendum on December 15.

Three people have been killed and hundreds wounded in protests and counter-demonstrations over Mursi's decree.

At least 200,000 of Mursi's supporters attended a rally at Cairo University on Saturday. His opponents are staging an open-ended sit-in in Cairo's Tahrir Square, the cradle of the uprising that toppled Hosni Mubarak in February 2011.

Mursi and the Muslim Brotherhood, which propelled him to power in a June election, hope to end the crisis by pushing through the new constitution hastily adopted by the drafting assembly on Friday. The next day the assembly handed the text to Mursi, who called the referendum and urged Egyptians to vote.

"The Muslim Brotherhood is determined to go ahead with its own plans regardless of everybody else. There is no compromise on the horizon," said Hassan Nafaa, a professor of political science at Cairo University.

Outside the Supreme Constitutional Court, Muslim Brotherhood supporters rallied behind the referendum date. "Yes to the constitution", declared a banner held aloft by one protester. Chants demanded the "purging of the judiciary".

The interior minister told the head of the court that the building was accessible and the protests were peaceful, according a statement from the ministry.

The protest reflected the deep suspicion harbored by Egypt's Islamists towards a court they see as a vestige of the Mubarak era. The same court ruled in June to dissolve the Muslim Brotherhood-led lower house of parliament.

Since then, several legal cases have challenged the legitimacy of the upper house of parliament and the 100-member constituent assembly that wrote the constitution.

Those against the upper house have focused on the legality of the law by which it was elected, while the constitutional assembly has faced a raft of court cases alleging that the way it was picked was illegal.

STOCK MARKET RALLIES

Mursi believes that securing approval for the new constitution in a popular referendum will bury all arguments on the legality of the constituent assembly, as well as controversy over the text it worked through the night to finish on Friday.

It will also override the November 22 decree that prompted statements of concern from Western governments and a rebellion by sections of the judiciary that saw it as a threat to their role. The decree shielded Mursi from judicial oversight.

Judges supervise voting in Egypt, so Mursi now needs them to oversee the referendum. Vice President Mahmoud Mekky said on Sunday he was confident the judges would perform that role, though Mursi's critics in the judiciary may call for a boycott.

While the Islamists' critics, including representatives of the Christian minority, have accused the Brotherhood of trying to hijack the constitution, investors appear to have seen Mursi's moves as a harbinger of stability. They were also relieved that Saturday's mass Islamist protest went off calmly.

The main stock market index, which lost a tenth of its value in response to Mursi's November 22 decree, rallied more than 2 percent when the market opened on Sunday.

"The events that took place through the weekend, from the approval of the final draft of the constitution and the president calling a referendum, gave some confidence to investors that political stability is on track," said Mohamed Radwan of Pharos Securities, an Egyptian brokerage.

But the political opposition, made up of leftist, liberal and socialist parties, have been infuriated by what they see as the Brotherhood's attempt to ram through a constitution that does not enjoy national consensus.

Mursi's opponents warn of deeper polarization ahead.

"LET EVERYONE HAVE THEIR SAY"

Leading opposition figure Mohamed ElBaradei said on Twitter that the "struggle will continue" over a draft constitution that "undermines basic freedoms".

Liberal figures, including former Arab League chief Amr Moussa, pulled out of the constituent assembly last month, as did Christian representatives.

The draft constitution contains Islamist-flavored language which opponents say could be used to whittle away human rights and stifle criticism. It forbids blasphemy and "insults to any person", does not explicitly uphold women's rights and demands respect for "religion, traditions and family values".

The New York-based Human Rights Watch said it protected some rights while undermining others.

The text limits presidents to two four-year terms, requires parliamentary approval for their choice of prime minister, and introduces some civilian oversight of the military - although not enough for critics. Mubarak ruled for three decades.

Mursi described it as a constitution that fulfilled the goals of the January 25, 2011 revolution that ended Mubarak's rule. "Let everyone - those who agree and those who disagree - go to the referendum to have their say," he said.

The Islamists are gambling that they will be able to secure a "yes" vote by mobilizing their core support base and many other Egyptians keen for an end to two years of turmoil that has taken a heavy toll on the economy.

Nafaa of Cairo University said the constitution would likely be approved by a slim majority. "But in this case, how can you run a country with a disputed constitution - a constitution not adopted by consensus?" he asked.

<http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&id=32015>

- **War crimes suspects form Kenya poll alliance**

Two Kenyan presidential hopefuls suspected of war crimes have said they intend to join forces in next year's vote by running on the same ticket.

Deputy Prime Minister Uhuru Kenyatta and former cabinet minister William Ruto announced the deal at a rally hosted by Ruto's United Republican Party (URP) and Kenyatta's The National Alliance party in the Rift Valley town of Nakuru, 140km northwest of the capital Nairobi, on Sunday.

Under the agreement, Kenyatta will seek the presidency and former rival Ruto will be his vice-presidential running mate.

"We have agreed here to make a government with Uhuru Kenyatta as the president, and William Ruto will be the vice president. We have agreed that God-willing, next year URP and TNA will form the next government," Ruto told thousands of supporters gathered in a stadium.

Both Uhuru and Ruto face charges of crimes against humanity before the International Criminal Court (ICC) for their alleged role in having orchestrated post-election violence in 2007-2008 that killed at least 1,300 and displaced more than 600,000.

Kenyatta faces five charges of crimes against humanity, including murder, rape, persecution, deportation and other inhumane acts, while Ruto faces three charges of crimes against humanity.

Both have claimed their innocence, remain free and have promised to co-operate with the court.

"Our union is not to attack anyone, but to build Kenya," Kenyatta said at Sunday's rally in one of the areas worst hit by the post-poll ethnic violence. "Our work is to preach peace, and make sure there is no blood spilt again."

'Winning ticket'

Al Jazeera's Mohammed Adow said the two candidates make a serious political force in the country.

"Uhuru Kenyatta comes from the largest ethnic group in the country. William Ruto comes from the third most popular tribe in Kenya. So together, they actually make the winning ticket," Adow said.

Adow said a future administration combining these two politicians is worrisome to many Kenyans.

"These are two men who've got charges of crimes against humanity hanging over their heads. Although they deny them, these are very serious charges and the International Criminal Court is trying to pin down convictions," he said.

"They want to save themselves and they will do anything within their powers to make sure they survive any conviction and even if it means defying the ICC.

"To defy the ICC, they need to win the elections."

Kenya, as a signatory of the Rome Statute of the ICC, would be forced to act on any arrest warrant issued by the court should the pair refuse to attend trial.

Worst wave of violence

The ICC trials, set to begin on April 10, could coincide with the elections, set for March 4, but which potentially could enter a second round vote within a month.

The pair received a boost this week after the unexpected withdrawal of a petition seeking a court ruling on whether they are eligible to run, as under a new constitution adopted in 2010 those holding public office and charged with a crime must step down.

The violence shattered Kenya's image as a beacon of stability in east Africa when the then-opposition leader Raila Odinga accused President Mwai Kibaki of rigging his way to re-election.

What began as political riots quickly turned into ethnic killings of Kibaki's Kikuyu tribe, which launched reprisal attacks, plunging Kenya into its worst wave of violence since independence in 1963.

Despite efforts to heal the wounds of the ethnic killings four years ago, tensions still run deep between communities, with many key grievances that fed into the violence -- most notably land ownership rights -- still unresolved.

Several presidential hopefuls are expected to unveil alliances ahead of a Tuesday deadline, including Kenyatta's expected main challenger, Prime Minister Raila Odinga, himself a former ally of Ruto.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2012/12/201212293351420258.html>

- **Tunisia reaches deal with Siliana protesters**

Tunisia's government has reached an agreement with the labour union of the flashpoint town Siliana, where police are battling to maintain order for the fifth straight day.

Under the deal, the assistant governor will run the town after ongoing protests calling for Governor Ahmed Ezzine Majjoubi to resign, Al Jazeera's Hashem Ahelbarra reported from Siliana on Saturday.

Violent confrontations between police and protesters have left more than 300 people wounded since Tuesday, as residents demanded the governor's resignation, financial aid for economic development of the region and the withdrawal of police.

Ahelbarra said: "We have learned that a deal has been reached between a delegation of representatives from Siliana and the government whereby the governor is going to be replaced by his deputy.

"This is a face saving solution for the government, which in the beginning had refused to bow to the demands of the protesters.

"Then they have to tackle the biggest issue which is developing this region where people have been complaining for decades about marginalisation, discrimination and also lack of genuine will from the previous government, including this one, to implement dramatic change in the living standards of the local population."

Violent protests

Separate clashes erupted on Saturday between police and demonstrators in Bargou, about 20km east of Siliana.

In Siliana itself, about 100 stone-throwing youths attacked the police, injuring one of them in the head, an AFP news agency journalist reported. Security forces fired tear gas in response.

The protesters erected barricades from branches and tyres, setting some of them on fire.

Precarious living conditions, widespread unemployment and police brutality were driving factors behind the revolution that toppled former president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in January last year and touched off the Arab Spring.

Residents in Bargou blocked a road and hurled stones at police vehicles heading for Tunis, with the police firing tear gas in response.

There were similar clashes overnight in at least two other towns, local media and witnesses reported, as the crisis appeared to be spreading.

President Moncef Marzouki had warned of such a scenario on Friday evening, saying the government of Islamist and rival Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali was not meeting the expectations of the people.

"We do not have a single Siliana... I am afraid that it could spread to several regions and threaten the future of the revolution," Marzouki said in a televised speech.

"The expectations of the people are huge and the performance of the government is not meeting those expectations," he added, stressing that Tunisia was at a crossroads between "the road to ruin and the road to recovery".

Later on Friday, police fired tear gas at protesters who took to the streets of Sbeitla, near the central city of Kasserine, in support of the people of Siliana, located about 120km southwest of Tunis.

'Excessive force'

The army withdrew from the flashpoint town just hours after it entered on Friday, a police official said.

"The army had offered to come and provide security for a few days, but the interior ministry refused," the official told AFP, in remarks echoed by two police sources.

The authorities have said they would not give in to the blackmail of violence, accusing the protesters of triggering the crisis by attacking police first.

Clashes had intensified in the early evening on Friday, when police fired warning shots and tear gas after hundreds of protesters hurled stones and petrol bombs at them and erected barricades in the town centre, setting some of them on fire.

Amnesty International and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay both called on the authorities to end the use of "excessive force" against the protesters in Siliana.

The latest violence follows mounting clashes, strikes and attacks by Salafis across Tunisia that have plunged the country into a political impasse.

It also comes ahead of the second anniversary of the revolution, triggered on December 17, 2010, when a young fruit and vegetable seller set himself alight in the town of Sidi Bouzid to protest against police harassment.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2012/12/2012121165214413284.html>

6. JORDAN and LEBANON

- **Lebanese army clashes with Syrian opposition fighters**

Lebanese troops fought with Syrian rebels on the border between the two countries on Sunday, in what a security source said was the first such clash between Lebanon's army and the rebels.

The clash occurred when a Lebanese border patrol spotted the rebel fighters along the border and the rebels opened fire to prevent the patrol from approaching, a Lebanese military source said. He said there were no casualties.

There has been frequent violence on Lebanon's border with Syria ever since an uprising broke out against President Bashar al-Assad's rule in March last year.

There has been repeated stray fire, including shelling, as well as a series of cross-border shoot-outs in recent months.

Syria has accused Lebanon of lax control of its side of the border that has allowed rebels to smuggle in both fighters and weapons.

The Syrian regime dominated its smaller neighbor both politically and militarily for almost 30 years before withdrawing its troops in the face of the outcry that followed the assassination of former prime minister Rafiq Hariri in Beirut in 2005.

Syrian army pounds Damascus suburbs

Meanwhile, Syrian army forces pounded rebel-held suburbs around Damascus with fighter jets and rockets on Sunday, activists said, killing and wounding dozens in an offensive to push rebels away from the airport and stop them closing in on the capital.

At least 173 people were killed across Syria by security force gunfire on Saturday, according to activists at the Local Coordination Committees, Al Arabiya TV reported.

The army struck hard after a week of rebel advances, including the capture of two military bases near the capital. Rebels had been planning to push into central Damascus from their strongholds on the outskirts and fighting in the past week has been fierce.

Activists said heavy rocket fire struck towns close to the Damascus airport highway, where rebels and the army were locked in three days of clashes. Some described constant shelling, similar to carpet bombing, in towns like Beit Saham.

“It was frightening because it was the first time we heard continuous shelling. Really powerful explosions, one after the other, were shaking the area. I could see fire coming up from the town,” said Samir al-Shami, from the opposition’s Syrian Youth Union, speaking by Skype.

“This was the worst day in those people’s lives.”

In a sign the government had regained some control over the airport, EgyptAir said it was resuming flights to Damascus and Aleppo on Monday after a three-day halt in which Damascus airport was effectively closed due to unrest. The airline's head said conditions were stable.

The army's assaults appear to have staved off a rebel advance into central Damascus so far. But neither side has gained ground in recent days, and fighting continued along the outskirts of the city despite heavy shelling by Assad's forces.

But rebels said the area around Damascus airport was not secure, with clashes still erupting along the highway. It is difficult to verify opposition reports because the government restricts media access into Syria.

Other activists said the highway was in army hands but the area was still unstable due to fighting in nearby towns like Beit Saham, about 1 kilometre away.

"No one controls that road. The army has tanks along the road, but the whole area is exposed to rebel attacks and they could fire on it any time," said one, asking not to be identified.

Car bombs

In Syria's central city of Homs, a car bomb killed at least 15 people and wounded 24 on Sunday, Syria's state news agency SANA said. It said the blast in the city's Hamra district also damaged many nearby residential buildings. The government and the opposition traded blame for the blast.

There has been a rise in the number of car bombs around the country. The British-based Observatory, which has a network of activists across Syria, reported four car bombs on Saturday.

The group gave a preliminary death toll for Sunday's fighting of 140, including about 39 in the Damascus suburbs.

Violence has risen in Syria particularly since rebels began to contest Assad's control around the capital and Syria's largest city Aleppo, but foreign powers remain deadlocked.

Western countries support the opposition but Russia, Syria's main arms supplier, and China have blocked three U.N. Security Council resolutions condemning Assad and reject sanctions.

Assad, whose family has ruled Syria autocratically for four decades, says he is fighting off radical Islamist militants funded by the West and Gulf Arab countries.

State television on Sunday said the army was "eliminating al Qaeda terrorists" in the rebel stronghold of Daraya.

Rebels said the army entered part of Daraya, a suburb on the southern outskirts of Damascus where fighters have launched mortars into the capital. Rebel spokesman Abu Nidal said the army had entered one side of the town but that rebels were still in control of the rest of the area and were fighting back.

The army was firing heavy artillery and rockets into the town, rebels said.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/12/03/253013.html>

- **Seven Israeli military aircraft skim skies of Lebanon**

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

An Israeli unmanned aerial vehicle entered Lebanese airspace over the southern village of al-Naqoura, located 91 kilometers (57 miles) south of the capital Beirut, at 8:20 a.m. local time (0520 GMT) on Sunday, according to a statement issued by the Lebanese military.

The remote-controlled aircraft carried out surveillance flights over Bekaa Valley region in the east before it left the country's airspace at 12:40 p.m. local time (0940 GMT).

Two Israeli fighter jets crossed into Lebanon's airspace over the southern village of Kfar Kila, located about 96 kilometers (59 miles) south of Beirut, at 9:45 a.m. local time (0645 GMT).

The warplanes flew over several areas in southern Lebanon and the capital Beirut before leaving the Lebanese airspace at 10:15 a.m. local time (0715 GMT) while flying over al-Naqoura village.

Two other Israeli warplanes entered Lebanese airspace over Kfar Kila village at 9:50 a.m. local time (0650 GMT).

The fighter jets flew over several areas in southern Lebanon and Beirut before they left the Lebanese airspace at 10:20 a.m. local time (0720 GMT) while flying over the southern border town of Alma al-Shaab.

Two Israeli jets also crossed into Lebanon's airspace over Kfar Kila village at 11:50 a.m. local time (0850 GMT). They flew over several areas of Lebanon before leaving the country's airspace at 1:25 p.m. local time (1025 GMT) while flying over al-Naqoura village.

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

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

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

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

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/03/275862/israeli-planes-violate-lebanon-airspace/>

- **Lebanon beefs up military presence in Tripoli**

Lebanon has increased the number of its military forces in the city of Tripoli following a deadly incident where a group of Lebanese militants were killed in Syria's town of Tal Kalakh near the border with Lebanon, Press TV reports.

Local Lebanese media said the militants had ties with radical and Salafi groups in Tripoli, and that they had been sent into Syria to fight against the Syrian government.

Syrian security forces killed nearly 20 militants in an ambush in Tal Kalakh on Friday.

Sheikh Zakhariyeh Trabouise, a member of Tripoli's Salafist Movement, confirmed to Press TV that a group of militants left the city for Syria to fight the Syrian troops.

There are speculations that that the March 14 alliance led by former Lebanese Prime Minister Sa'ad Hariri is playing a major role in funding and arming the militants in Syria.

Commentators say the March 14 alliance would gain more powers inside Lebanon if Syrian President Bashar al-Assad steps down.

Syria has been the scene of unrest since March 2011 and the government says the chaos is being orchestrated from outside the country.

Some Western states, especially the United States, and their regional allies including the Saudi regime, Qatar and Turkey support the militants in Syria.

Last week, the Syrian newspaper Al Watan published the names of 142 foreign militants from 18 countries who were killed while fighting against the Syrian army. Almost 50 of the slain militants were Saudi nationals.

According to the daily, the militants had entered Syria via Turkey and Lebanon, and they were mostly extremists who were already members of al-Qaeda or they had joined the terrorist group after arriving in the country.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/02/275722/lebanon-army-beefs-up-tripoli-presence/>

7. ARABIAN PENINSULA AND THE GULF OF BASRA

- **Qatari poet jailed for life to appeal**

A Qatari poet, who has been sentenced to life for comments said to be critical of the Qatari leadership, will take his case to an appeal court, his lawyer Najeeb al-Naimi has said.

Muhammad Ibn al-Dheeb al-Ajami, 36, was sentenced to life imprisonment on Thursday for what is said to be attempts to destabilise the country.

Bashar Jaafari, the Syrian ambassador to the United Nations, criticised the Qatari government for the harsh sentencing.

"The international community must admit that there is international terrorism in Syria supported by states, states that claim to want to protect human rights in Syria, states which do not hesitate to condemn a poet to a life sentence merely because he had the temerity to write a poem condemning the emir of his country," Jaafari said on Friday.

Al-Ajami, who has been largely held in solitary confinement, spoke to the Reuters news agency in the presence of prison guards and others.

"The Emir is a good man," he told the agency. "I think he doesn't know that they have me here for a year, that they have put me in a single room.

"If he knew, I would be freed," he said.

"This is wrong," al-Ajami said. "You can't have Al Jazeera in this country and put me in jail for being a poet."

Al-Naimi said he would appeal next week against the verdict, which was handed down after six hearings. The poet was arrested in November 2011.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/12/201212195556278357.html>

- **Qatar releases 15 Iranian prisoners**

Fifteen Iranian prisoners, who were mostly arrested for illegal entry into Qatari territorial waters, have been released from detention and returned home, Iran's ambassador to Doha says.

Ambassador Mohammad Javad Asayesh-Zarchi said Sunday that following intense diplomatic efforts by the consular section of the Iranian Embassy in Doha, the prisoners were allowed to return home.

The Iranian ambassador added that "the prisoners were divided into two groups of eight and seven people" and one of the groups had gone to court 64 times.

In May 2011, Qatar released 16 Iranian sailors arrested by its Coast Guard for what it claimed was "illegally crossing the maritime border."

A Qatari court ordered the release of the sailors after "the detainees were cleared from the charges."

Qatar shares maritime borders with Iran in the Persian Gulf.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/02/275768/qatar-releases-15-iranian-prisoners/>

8. AFGHANISTAN - PAKISTAN

- **Suicide bombers attack U.S. base in Afghanistan**

JALALABAD, (Reuters) - Suicide attackers detonated bombs and fired rockets outside a major U.S. base in Afghanistan on Sunday, killing five people in a brazen operation that highlighted the country's security challenges ahead of the 2014 NATO combat troop pullout.

Local police officials said bodies in Afghan police and military uniforms were scattered around the entrance of the airfield in the eastern city of Jalalabad after a two-hour battle. A Taliban spokesman said the militant group had launched the 6 a.m. assault.

The Taliban, who have been fighting U.S.-led NATO and Afghan forces for more than a decade, sometimes dress in uniforms for attacks.

Two suicide bombers died after blowing themselves up in cars, said Nasir Ahmad Safi, a spokesman for the provincial government.

Seven other bombers were killed in the a gunbattle with Afghan and coalition forces. Three Afghan soldiers and two civilians also died, said Safi.

U.S. helicopters circled overhead.

"There were multiple suicide bombers involved," said Major Martyn Crighton, a spokesman for the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).

Several coalition troops were wounded, he said.

The United States and Afghan government are scrambling to stabilize Afghanistan before most NATO combat troops withdraw at the end of 2014 and hand over security to Afghan forces.

Some Afghans doubt government security forces will be able to defend the country against any Taliban attempts to seize power again after foreign troops withdraw. There are also growing fears that a civil war will erupt.

President Hamid Karzai's government say Afghan security forces have made good progress.

Afghanistan's defense ministry spokesman said there were rocket attacks at the Jalalabad base followed by suicide bombings.

In a text message, Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said : "This morning at 6 a.m. a number of our devotees attacked the major U.S. Base in Jalalabad city and so far have brought heavy casualties to the enemy."

In February, a suicide car bomber killed nine people at the base, almost exclusively used by NATO and the U.S. military.

<http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&id=32014>

- **Blast near Peshawar checkpoint kills two policemen**

PESHAWAR: An explosion near Shahab Khel police checkpoint on Kohat road in Peshawar's Budh Bher area early on Monday killed two policemen and injured two others.

A police mobile van was the target of the attack which was completely destroyed. One of the victims was identified as an ASI in the police.

SP (rural) while talking to Dawn.com's correspondent said that the explosion was carried out by a remote-controlled Improvised Explosive Device (IED) and that two kilograms of explosives was used in the bomb.

Rescue and emergency forces reached the site of explosion.

Security forces cordoned off the area as investigations into the blast went underway.

<http://dawn.com/2012/12/03/two-policemen-killed-two-injured-in-blast-near-checkpost-in-peshawar/>

- **Shahbaz accuses Zardari of robbing billions from nation's wealth**

LAHORE: Chief Minister Punjab Shahbaz Sharif on Monday accused President Asif Ali Zardari of robbing the nation of billions of rupees, adding that, the nation would retrieve its wealth from the president, DawnNews reported.

Addressing an inauguration ceremony of the Pakpattan hydro electric power project at Kumhari Wala headworks, the chief minister said “the traders of Islamabad had set up a market to buy off loyalties...but no one agreed to sell his/her conscience”.

Chief Minister Shahbaz added that the Pakistan People's Party-led government had taken the country to the brink of destruction.

Regarding the project, the chief minister said that it would produce 2.82 megawatts of electricity.

He said the project would cost some 1048 million rupees and would be completed by 2014.

<http://dawn.com/2012/12/03/shahbaz-accuses-zardari-of-robbing-billions-from-nations-wealth/>

- **Suicide Bombers Attack NATO-Afghan Airbase**

ISLAMABAD — Eight suicide bombers attacked the Jalalabad air base in eastern Afghanistan Sunday, but were killed by Afghan forces before entering the complex.

Taliban suicide bombers detonated two cars filled with explosives at the main gate of a joint NATO-Afghan airbase in Afghanistan's eastern Nangahar province at dawn Sunday. According to

the Ministry of Interior, the vehicles had been stopped by Afghan forces, and follow-up attackers were killed in a fierce gunfight.

Tariq Khan, who lives in an apartment near the Jalalabad airbase said he was preparing for his morning prayers when he heard a large explosion. He said he ran to the roof of his apartment building and saw smoke rising around the base and jet fighters responding to the attack.

"Jet planes took off and fired on the attackers. The first jet flew in really low, then a helicopter took off, searching for the insurgents and fired on them. Then someone fired back from the area the helicopter was firing at," said Khan.

It was the second attack on Jalalabad this year, and the third large attack against a joint NATO-Afghan airbase since September. At least five people were killed in Sunday's attack, and local officials said several bodies were found in the area.

NATO forces spokeswoman, Lt. Amy Hession said no international forces were killed in the assault.

"We can confirm that insurgents, including multiple suicide bombers attacked Jalalabad airfield this morning. None of the attackers breached the perimeter and there are currently no reports of ISAF [International Security Forces] fatalities," she said.

Hession said there were three suicide bombers involved, and that an investigation was under way.

The Taliban in a statement claimed responsibility for the attacks and said they had killed dozens of Afghan and coalition soldiers. The Taliban frequently exaggerate Afghan and coalition death tolls.

In September the Taliban attacked and breached a joint British-U.S. base in southern Helmand province, killing two U.S. Marines and destroying six Harrier jets. Then in October, a suicide

bomber blew up a gate in a joint NATO-Afghan base in eastern Paktia province, wounding several Afghan and international soldiers.

The Jalalabad base is near a main Afghan highway linking Afghanistan to neighboring Pakistan, and is said to cover coalition forces' operations across four eastern Afghan provinces.

The attacks underscore the challenges NATO and Afghan forces are facing in stabilizing the country prior to the final pullout of international combat forces in 2014.

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

- **US-led soldier killed in Afghanistan**

One US-led soldier serving with the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) has been killed in an attack in southern Afghanistan.

NATO announced the death on Sunday but did not reveal the nationality of the soldier or the exact location of the attack.

According to latest figures released by the website icasualties.org, at least 3233 foreign soldiers have been killed in Afghanistan since the US-led invasion of the country in 2001.

The United States and its allies invaded Afghanistan as part of Washington's so-called war on terror. The offensive removed the Taliban from power, but insecurity remains in the country.

Meanwhile, multiple explosions took place in front of the US military base in the eastern city of Jalalabad on Sunday. Reports say over a dozen people, including two civilians, were killed in the incident.

A senior Afghan security official said three Afghan guards were also among the victims.

The Taliban militants said they had carried out offensives, including a bomb attack, against the airport complex in the city which contains a major US air base. The militants also fired mortars and RPGs at the complex.

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

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

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