



# MIDDLE EAST DAILY BULLETIN

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## 1. IRAQ

- **Iraq says freeing prisoners 'daily' amid protests (The Daily Star)**

BAGHDAD, Jan 16: Iraq has freed around 400 prisoners since Sunni Arabs began anti-government demonstrations last month, and will press on with more releases on a daily basis, a top minister said on Wednesday.

Deputy Prime Minister Hussein al-Shahristani said that a committee formed in the wake of the protests would accelerate the process of reviewing prisoners' cases and would look to immediately release those who had been proven innocent.

Thousands of demonstrators have been rallying in Sunni-dominated areas of Iraq for more than three weeks, protesting the alleged abuse of anti-terror laws by the Shiite-led authorities and demanding the release of prisoners they say were unfairly arrested.

"The release of detainees will continue on daily basis, not just for media purposes," Shahristani told a news conference in Baghdad.

But, he added, "the demonstrations alerted us to the presence of a defect."

Shahristani said authorities had released 70 prisoners on Wednesday, bringing to more than 400 the number of detainees freed in recent weeks.

<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2013/Jan-16/202494-iraq-says-freeing-prisoners-daily-amid-protests.ashx#axzz2IAgFHI6e>

- **30.000 prisoners and detainees in Iraq, Shahristani (Aswat al-Iraq)**

BAGHDAD, Jan 16/ Aswat al-Iraq: Deputy Premier Hussein al-Shahristani announced today that the total figure of prisoners and detainees in Iraq reached to 30.000, including 682 women.

He disclosed today that 70 were released today, with promises to release more in the coming days.

In a press conference for the committee dealing with the demands of the demonstrators, attended by Aswat al-Iraq, he added that there are 20 investigation committees are working on the issue, with expectation that all cases will be resolved within one month time.

He added the convicts for terrorist cases reached to 6500, including 97 women, while detainees for terrorist charges reached to 6000, including 85 women.

The convicts for ordinary cases reached to 15.800, including 500 women, while the detainees for ordinary cases reached to 1000 only.

Shahristani added that each innocent citizen has the right to submit a complaint to the minister of justice for material compensation for his arrest period.

[http://en.aswataliraq.info/%28S%28aas4te55kbrddd3qggbu4wr55%29%29/Default1.aspx?page=article\\_page&id=152168&l=1](http://en.aswataliraq.info/%28S%28aas4te55kbrddd3qggbu4wr55%29%29/Default1.aspx?page=article_page&id=152168&l=1)

- **Iraq's Kurdish regional government condemned double bomb attacks in Kirkuk and Tuz Khurmatu.**

IRBIL

Iraq's Kurdish regional government on Wednesday condemned double bomb attacks in the northern cities of Kirkuk and Tuz Khurmatu, targeting the two major Kurdish political parties which left at least 30 people dead and more than 200 wounded.

"The Iraqi Kurdish government is ready to do what needs to be done to end attacks targeting the people," the regional government said in a press release.

The double suicide car bomb attacks targeted Kurdistan Democratic Party and Kurdistan Patriotic Union offices.

<http://www.aa.com.tr/en/rss/122647--iraqs-kurds-condemn-double-bomb-attacks-in-countrys-north>

- **U.S. delivers helos to Iraq (UPI)**

HUNTSVILLE, Ala., Jan. 16 (UPI) -- The U.S. military has delivered three armed helicopters to Iraq and is now transporting them to the country, officials said.

The aircraft, Bell 407 Scout helicopters, were delivered at Redstone Arsenal in Alabama to Iraqi officials as part of a 2010 Foreign Military Sale involving the U.S. Army Security Assistance Command, U.S. Army Aviation and Missile Command and the Army's Program Executive Office Aviation.

This marks the sixth completed delivery of Iraqi Armed 407 Scout helicopter through Foreign Military Sales that began in 2010.

"We are building partner capacity, which means the Iraqi's are building their own capability that allows them to perform operations that the U.S. is no longer there to provide," said Kevin Richardson, deputy director of USASAC's Central Command Region Operations. ""This Foreign Military Sales case is a 'total package' -- it also includes training for the pilots, some of which was conducted here at Redstone this summer, and other support that will sustain the systems and our partnership with the government of Iraq well into the future."

[http://www.upi.com/Business\\_News/Security-Industry/2013/01/16/US-delivers-helos-to-Iraq/UPI-79351358365622/?spt=hs&or=si](http://www.upi.com/Business_News/Security-Industry/2013/01/16/US-delivers-helos-to-Iraq/UPI-79351358365622/?spt=hs&or=si)

- **Bombers kill more than 35 across Iraq (Reuters)**

By Mustafa Mahmoud

KIRKUK, Iraq, Jan 16 (Reuters) - More than 35 people died in a suicide attack and other bombings in northern Iraq and Baghdad on Wednesday, worsening sectarian strife as Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki faces mounting pressure from minority Sunni Muslims and Kurds.

Shoppers and police helped drag bloodied survivors out of the rubble and wrecked vehicles after a car bomb and a suicide bomber in a truck set off huge blasts in Kirkuk, near the local headquarters of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP).

Maliki, a Shi'ite Muslim, is locked in a feud with ethnic Kurds in autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan over disputed oilfields and is also confronting Sunni protesters in a western province calling for him to step down.

"A suicide bomber driving a truck packed with explosives detonated the vehicle outside the KDP headquarters. It's a crowded area; dozens were killed and wounded," Police Brigadier Sarhat Qadir told Reuters in Kirkuk.

Local Kirkuk health officials and police said at least 25 people were killed and more than 180 were wounded.

Another five people died and 37 more were wounded in another bombing outside a rival Kurdish political party office in Tuz Khurmato, 170 km (105 miles) north of Baghdad.

Roadside bombs and gun attacks in Baghdad and Baiji, north of the capital, killed seven policemen and soldiers.

A year after the last U.S. troops left, Iraq's government of Sunni, Shi'ite and Kurdish parties is mired in a crisis over how to share power, increasing worries that the OPEC member state may relapse into wide-scale sectarian bloodshed

<http://www.trust.org/alertnet/news/bombers-kill-more-than-35-across-iraq/>

- **Iraq plans tough steps against Kurdistan, oil firms (Reuters)**

By Peg Mackey

Jan 16 (Reuters) - Iraq plans tough measures against the country's Kurdistan region and foreign oil companies working there to stop "illegal" crude exports in an escalation of its standoff with the autonomous enclave, the oil minister said in an interview on Wednesday.

Oil exports and contracts are at the heart of a wider dispute over territory, oilfields and political autonomy between Baghdad's Arab-led government and Kurdistan, where ethnic Kurds run their own regional administration.

Abdul Kareem Luaibi said Baghdad intends to sue Genel Energy - the first company to export oil directly from Kurdistan - and may slash the government's allocated budget to the region unless it halts what he rejected as smuggling.

Speaking from his office in the oil ministry in Baghdad, Luaibi said it was "high time" for the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) to stop "this very dangerous behaviour".

Luaibi also revealed a preliminary agreement with oil major BP to revive the giant but ageing northern Kirkuk oil field, which - apart from being at the centre of a feud between Kurdistan and Iraq - is suffering massive output declines.

Iraq's government insists it alone has the sole authority to export crude oil and sign deals, but Kurdistan says the constitution allows it to agree to contracts and ship oil independently of Baghdad.

<http://in.reuters.com/article/2013/01/16/energy-iraq-luaibi-idINL6N0ALCLB20130116>

- **MP calls to diversify resources of Iraq's economy (alliraqnews)**

Baghdad, Jan 16 (AIN) -Member of the Parliamentary Economy & Investment Committee, MP Salman al-Musawi, called to "Activate the taxes and upgrade the agriculture and industry sectors to be exploited as additional revenues beside the oil sector revenues," noting that "The economy of Iraq is growing increasingly but it still depends on oil sector only."

Musawi stated to All Iraq News Agency "Many countries predict high speed in the Iraqi economic growth due to the increase of the oil exports but at the same time we need wise management for those oil revenues."

He stressed on the need to "Launch the taxes and support the private sector as being resource for providing jobs for large category of the society which suffers significant unemployment."

[http://www.alliraqnews.com/en/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=26773:mp-calls-to-diversify-resources-of-irags-economy-&catid=37:economy&Itemid=41](http://www.alliraqnews.com/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=26773:mp-calls-to-diversify-resources-of-irags-economy-&catid=37:economy&Itemid=41)

## 2. IRAN

- **Iran's UN envoy stresses strengthening of Non-Aligned Movement**

Iran's Permanent Ambassador to the United Nations Mohammad Khazaei has underlined the need to strengthen the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and boost its efficiency in the international arena.

Speaking at a meeting of the NAM Coordinating Bureau in New York on Wednesday, Khazaei said that many distinguished countries of NAM, especially Iran, as the present chair of the movement, call for its practical reinforcement to pave the way for the implementation of its decisions.

In this regard, working groups are expected to be formed to study the aspects and legal considerations of possible changes, he added.

The meeting of the NAM Coordinating Bureau was attended by the ambassadors and permanent representatives of the NAM member states.

After the meeting, Khazaei also gave a report about the recent activities of the movement.

"For the last three [to] four months, we have been able to make more than three statements at the [UN] Security Council, General Assembly and other related meetings. More than 18 official documents have been ratified," he told Press TV correspondent.

"More than five statements on important issues from terrorism to Palestinian issues, to disarmament and so on have been issued by the chair of the NAM and I would like to mention that fortunately more than 120 official letters and corresponding letters... have been issued by the NAM... after consultations with distinguished members," he added.

The Non-Aligned Movement is made up of roughly two-thirds of the member states of the UN General Assembly. The organization is considered as not formally aligned with or against any major power bloc.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/01/17/284022/iran-stresses-reinforcement-of-nam/>

- **Iran, IAEA wrap up first day of talks**

Iran and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) have wrapped up the first day of their talks over the country's nuclear energy program in Tehran.



Negotiations started on Wednesday morning at the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) and will continue on Thursday.

IAEA delegation, headed by the agency's Deputy Director General Herman Nackaerts arrived in the Iranian capital, Tehran, earlier on Wednesday.

Nackaerts, who is also the head of the IAEA Department of Safeguards, said on Tuesday that Agency's inspectors also hope to win Iran's green light to visit Parchin military site.

Iran has rejected the allegation of nuclear activities being carried out at Parchin with Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi pointing out that it is technically impossible to clean up places where nuclear work has been done.

Iran and the IAEA last met and held talks in Tehran on December 14, 2012. Nackaerts said, at that time, progress had been made in negotiations between the Agency and the Islamic Republic.

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

Iran refutes the allegation and argues that as a signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty and a member of the IAEA, it is entitled to develop and acquire nuclear technology for peaceful purposes.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/01/16/283951/iran-iaea-wrap-up-first-day-of-talks/>

- **Ahmadinejad: Iran must reduce oil dependence**

Iranian president says economy must rely less on crude oil exports in order to overcome crippling Western sanctions.

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said Iran must move away from dependence on oil revenue to overcome Western sanctions that have slowed the economy and disrupted foreign trade.

"We have to change the flow of wealth and capital into the country. Problems will remain as long as this doesn't change... 25 percent of the gross national product is concentrated in Tehran. We need to make sure that the money is invested not just in one city but all over the country," Ahmedinejad said.

Speaking to lawmakers, Ahmadinejad said "enemies" are using the weak points in Iran's economy to pressure the country.

Many Iranian officials have described the Islamic Republic's reliance on crude oil exports as a weakness, but Ahmadinejad's call before parliament highlights a political desire to broaden Iran's economy. It also represents the first major acknowledgment by Ahmadinejad that the economic squeeze from sanctions demands "structural changes" in Iran's industries and exports.

Ahmadinejad also said Iran must further cut government subsidies on energy, which give Iranians some of the cheapest fuel in the world. Parliament has opposed the move.

'Economic war'

Tehran had long counted on crude oil sales as the backbone of the nation's economy, accounting for about 80 percent of foreign currency income.

But Western sanctions over Iran's nuclear program have targeted oil exports and shut Iran out of the international banking system, making it hard for its remaining customers in Asia and elsewhere to pay.

In a clear admission of the blow from sanctions, Gholam Reza Kateb, the head of the parliament's budget committee, said Iran's revenues from oil and gas exports have dropped by 45 percent. Iranian authorities have accused the West of waging an "economic war."

Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei insisted sanctions will not succeed.

"The arrogance front [the US and its allies] have employed all their might to force the Iranian nation through sanctions and pressures to surrender. But this nation will tolerate the hardships because it has recognised enemy plans, tactics and strategy," Khamenei said on Wednesday, according to Iranian state television.

The US and its allies fear Iran may ultimately be able to develop nuclear weapons.

Tehran denies the charges, saying its nuclear program is peaceful and aimed at generating electricity and producing radioisotopes to treat cancer patients.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/01/20131170271867822.html>

### 3. SYRIA

- **Iran, China consider Assad plan to end Syria crisis realistic: Iran official**

An Iranian deputy foreign minister says the Islamic Republic and China regard as realistic the peace plan proposed by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to resolve the crisis in the Arab country.

Deputy Foreign Minister for Arab and African Affairs Hossein Amir-Abdollahian made the remark after his meetings with Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi and Vice Foreign Minister Zhang Zhijun on the Middle East developments in Beijing on Wednesday.

Pointing to close viewpoints held by Iran and China on international issues, Amir-Abdollahian said both countries stress non-interference of foreign parties in Syria, complete halt of terrorist activities, and control of borders.

We believe that the situation in Syria is improving and we should help the Syrian people and that the Assad plan must be supported, the Iranian deputy foreign minister added.

He reiterated that the only solution to the Syria unrest is political, saying that military measures in Syria are bound to fail and certain countries' support of terrorist groups has had no result but human losses and infrastructural damages.

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

In a key speech on January 6, Assad called for an end to the terrorist operations inside Syria and urged "concerned states and parties" to stop funding, arming and harboring militants.

He said his government is always ready to hold talks with the opposition and political parties and will call for a "comprehensive national dialog" after foreign parties end their support for the militants and the terrorist activities cease in the country.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/01/17/284073/iran-china-deem-assad-plan-realistic/>

- **Syria allows UN to step up food aid**

World Food Programme to work with local groups to reach 2.5 million people, as deadly bombings are reported in Idlib.

Syria's government has authorised the UN World Food Programme to extend its reach in the country where 2.5 million people are suffering from hunger, according to officials.



Ertharin Cousin, the WFP head, said on Wednesday that Syria had allowed the organisation to work with local aid groups to reach more of those in need.

Until now most of the agency's food aid was delivered through the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, which was overstretched and only able to provide help to some 1.5 million Syrians a month.

To boost the number of people receiving emergency assistance, the Syrian government last week drew up a list of 110 local non-governmental organisations that were allowed to participate in the aid effort,

"We have assessed the operational capacity of that 110 and we have identified 44 NGOs on that list that will give us the ability to scale up to another 1 million persons," Cousin said.

The WFP aims to reach both government and opposition-controlled areas in all of Syria's 14 provinces, but Cousin stressed that the aid delivery depended ultimately on the fighting on the ground.

She said one challenge was attacks on supply vehicles by the opposition.

"We can usually talk to them and get our food back, but it makes it more difficult to go into these areas," she said.

Fuel shortages

The WFP is distributing wheat flour to rural families to help them bake bread.

It is also planning to distribute much-needed fuel to bakeries as part of its operation, Cousin said.

Shortages of fuel and flour have made bread production erratic across the country and people often wait hours to buy bread.

The UN says that more than 60,000 people have died since the uprising in Syria began 22 months ago and gradually turned into an armed conflict.

In the latest reports of violence, state media and opposition activists said suicide bombers driving vehicles packed with explosives blew themselves up near security targets in the northern Idlib province on Wednesday, killing at least 22 people.

Rebels fighting to topple President Bashar al-Assad control much of the countryside in the province, while the regime remains in charge of Idlib city.

The state-run SANA news agency said two suicide bombers hit a pair of roundabouts in the city, killing 22 people and wounding 30.

The UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported triple car bombings, and said they targeted security vehicles near the local security headquarters and a checkpoint.

At least 24 people were killed, most of them regime forces, it said.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/01/2013116141212963604.html>

#### 4. ISRAEL-PALESTINE

- **Echoing Obama, Olmert says Netanyahu isolating Israel**

Former prime minister says his successor threatens Israel's future by putting country at odds with US, jeopardizing Obama's aid; says government "refusing peace" by not negotiating with Palestinian moderates.



Former prime minister Ehud Olmert on Thursday accused Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu of threatening Israel's future by placing the country in direct conflict with the US.

"Is it in our interest to get into a blatant confrontation with the strongest man in the world?" Olmert asked during a conference in Tel Aviv, referring to US President Barack Obama. "Who builds airplanes? Likud Central Committee members who need to pose and flex muscles, or the president of the US?"

Olmert's comments came days after American journalist Jeffrey Goldberg earlier this week reported that Obama had said, "Israel doesn't know what its best interests are" and that Netanyahu was leading Israel into international isolation.

According to the former prime minister, the government chooses to argue with Obama despite his aid to Israel.

"Even when the American defense budget is cut, the US continues to support the Iron Dome [missile-defense system]. This is a president that says, in the middle of an argument, that he will not let Israel lose its [defense] advantage. But the Israeli government doesn't think so," Olmert told a business forum in Tel Aviv, sponsored by Haifa University.

Olmert also accused the government of "refusing peace. Refusing to take part in a process, refusing to talk to Palestinian moderates. It does not want an agreement. There is no other way to say it."

The former prime minister added that world leaders fear for Israel's future in light of its current diplomatic policies.

The comments come in the wake of Olmert's recent attack on Netanyahu on Channel 2, in which the former prime minister accused Netanyahu of wasting billions of shekels in planning an operation against the Iranian nuclear threat.

<http://www.jpost.com/DiplomacyAndPolitics/Article.aspx?id=299915>

- **Israel hints at apology to Turkey over Gaza flotilla**

Ayalon tells 'Hürriyet' gov't may attempt to smooth relations by using diplomatic language; Liberman advocates "expression of regret."

Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon told Turkish daily Hürriyet on Thursday that Israel may use diplomatic language inspired by the letter sent by Washington to Islamabad over the killing of 24 Pakistani soldiers in order end the impasse with Ankara.



"I see some kind of improvement and opportunities," Ayalon was quoted as saying, citing the "American-Pakistani formula" as an idea to renegotiate relations.

"Remember, recently there were 24 Pakistani soldiers killed by mistake by American forces, and the Americans sent a letter that was accepted in Pakistan. And I believe this could be a good platform to clear away the issue," Hürriyet quoted Ayalon as saying.

According to Hürriyet, when pressed to define the statement as an apology, Ayalon responded positively.

"If you read the text, I think that should be very clear to everyone. The American text that was sent to Pakistan, I think this is a good base to work [from]. This is what I suggest," Hürriyet quoted Ayalon as saying.

Commenting on the status of communication, Ayalon said Israel is engaging in back channel discussions with Turkey.

"Right now, we have some lower level and we have some back channels," Ayalon said.

Relations between the Turkey and the Muslim NATO power, a mainstay of Washington's influence in an unstable region, fell apart after Israel's navy killed nine pro-Palestinian Turkish activists who tried to breach its blockade of Gaza in May 2010.

On a similar vein, Avigdor Liberman also said on Tuesday that he was open to taking a page from US diplomacy in crafting a statement to try to mend ties between the two nations.

Liberman noted that, after the United States mistakenly killed 24 Pakistani soldiers in an air strike last November on the Afghan border, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said her country was "sorry for the losses suffered by the Pakistani military" and that Washington was "committed to working closely with Pakistan and Afghanistan to prevent this from every happening again".

Liberman said Clinton's statement could not be called an apology, "but an expression of regret on the killing of innocents".

"I say to you if this is the wording - if the Turks accept the American wording - I will certainly go with it. This is what I am willing to accept," he told his party in a speech whose transcript was provided to Reuters.

The signal from Lieberman, a powerful partner in Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's coalition government, was significant because he had been among the Israeli leaders most vocally opposed to accommodating the Turks' rapprochement demands.

Turkish officials had no immediate comment on Liberman's remarks. Ankara in the past has said it did not need a third party to mediate with Israel, saying all its communication channels were open and that if it wanted it would talk to Israel directly.

<http://www.ipost.com/DiplomacyAndPolitics/Article.aspx?id=299920>

- **Poll shows Likud loses seats in wake of US dispute**

Channel 10 poll finds the Left gains seats on Right for first time since election declared; Livni gains two seats.

Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu apparently suffered the impact of criticism attributed to US President Barack Obama Wednesday when a Channel 10 poll found that his Likud-Beytenu list had fallen by three seats in one week.



The Dialog poll found that Likud Beytenu fell from 35 seats to 32, 10 seats fewer than the parties combined have in the current Knesset.

Two of the seats were gained by The Tzipi Livni Party, which rose from seven seats to nine, and this was the first time the Left bloc gained at the expense of the Right since the election campaign began.

The poll predicted 16 seats for Labor, 14 for Bayit Yehudi, 11 each for Shas and Yesh Atid, six each for United Torah Judaism and Meretz, four each for Hadash and Balad, three for the United Arab List, and two each for Kadima and Strong Israel.

It was the first poll that was partially taken after US columnist Jeffrey Goldberg published statements from Obama warning that Netanyahu was leading Israel to isolation.

Netanyahu defended himself on a tour of the South on Wednesday, saying he had withstood pressure from Washington and he would continue to stand firm on Israel's vital interests.

The Likud accused Goldberg of conspiring with Livni to harm Netanyahu.

Environmental Protection Minister Gilad Erdan, who heads the Likud's response team, cited Goldberg's August 2011 interview with Livni in which she praised Obama for pressuring Netanyahu and suggested that the US should keep up the heat.

Asked by Goldberg in the interview whether US pressure on Netanyahu had been constructive, Livni said: "When Obama pushed Bibi, Bibi made some steps forward.

The American pressure led those who don't believe that time is of the essence to a better understanding that there is no status quo option.

For Israelis, when they wake up in the morning and ask themselves, what is the general situation today, the litmus test for them is the health of the relationship between Israel and the United States."

The Livni Party responded to the conspiracy charge by calling upon Likud Beytenu to work to get the US and Obama to help Israel “rather than do everything possible to distance them.”

Goldberg responded to the accusation on Twitter, saying “They think Livni actually asked me to write that column? That’s ridiculous.”

Likud sources said on Wednesday that it was very unlikely that Netanyahu would give Livni’s party a serious offer to join the coalition if he wins Tuesday’s election, due to the animosity between the two. They said he preferred a coalition with Yesh Atid and Kadima on the Left, and religious parties on the Right.

The Likud sources said Netanyahu would likely only invite Bayit Yehudi to join the government when his coalition would already have 61 MKs, so he would not have to rely on the party remaining in the coalition following diplomatic concessions.

Bayit Yehudi started a new campaign on Wednesday featuring a picture of Netanyahu and Bayit Yehudi chairman Naftali Bennett with the slogan “Supporting Netanyahu, voting Bennett.” Bayit Yehudi officials said they hoped the ads would encourage Netanyahu to include Bayit Yehudi in the next coalition.

But a joke by Bennett on Channel 10 that was seen as insulting Netanyahu’s wife, Sara, might have made that possibility less likely. After Bennett, who sparred with Sara when he was her husband’s bureau chief, recalled that he and the prime minister had served in the same army unit, he was asked about Sara.

“Sara and I did a course on terror together,” Bennett said.

Later on, Bennett apologized, saying: “I’m sorry the press takes a joke and makes it a top headline. I have worked together with Netanyahu and we will know how to work well together. I will be a good partner and we will start working on fixing the real problems of the country despite such nonheadlines.”

<http://www.ipost.com/DiplomacyAndPolitics/Article.aspx?id=299842>

- **Israel razes Bab al-Shams protest village**

BETHLEHEM (Ma'an) -- Israeli forces tore down tents in the Bab al-Shams protest village overnight Wednesday following an Israeli high court ruling, activists and police said.

Activist Ali Abedat told Ma'an that Israeli forces deployed heavily in the area on Wednesday, sealing entrances to the village with cement blocks.



Overnight, four Israeli bulldozers, several military vehicles and dozens of settlers raided the village and tore down the tents, Abedat said.

Israeli police spokesman Micky Rosenfeld said all tents had been cleared from the area. "There were no disturbances," he added.

Bab al-Shams village council member Mahmud Zawahra told Ma'an that activists would rebuild the village soon.

On Sunday, police evicted 50 protesters from the so-called "E1" area outside the Palestinian suburbs of East Jerusalem, where planned Israeli settlements could split much of the West Bank - a worry for world powers who want to see a Palestinian state set up in the territory seized by the Jewish state in the 1967 war.

The activists' large, steel-framed tents had remained standing in accordance with an Israeli court order while judges considered a Palestinian claim of ownership of land where the encampment was built.

The Supreme Court approved removal of the tents on Wednesday, agreeing with the government's argument that they could be a magnet for violent Palestinian protests. That ruling was decried by activists who describe Bab al-Shams as a non-violent implementation of Palestinian rights.

Jewish settlements in areas captured by Israel in the 1967 Middle East war are illegal under international law and most world powers echo concerns voiced by Palestinians that building more settler homes could deny them a viable and contiguous state.

E1 covers some 12 square km and is considered particularly important because it not only juts into the narrow "waist" of the West Bank, but also backs onto East Jerusalem, where Palestinians want to establish their capital.

<http://www.maannews.net/eng/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=556807>

- **Islamic Jihad says members detained by Israel overnight**

GAZA CITY (Ma'an) -- Islamic Jihad said Thursday that Israel detained several of its members in overnight raids in the West Bank.

Israel targeted Islamic Jihad activists organizing solidarity events for hunger-striking prisoners, the movement said in a statement.

Prominent Islamic Jihad members Samer al-Ghoul, Bassam Dyab, Jalal Melhm, Ibrahim al-



Swaiti and Muhanad Fayyad were among those detained, the movement added.

An Israeli military spokesman said six Palestinians were detained in overnight raids in Deir Istiya, Kafr Rai and Qalandia. He was not familiar with their political affiliations.

Earlier Wednesday, Israeli forces detained Islamic Jihad militant Awni Bani Uдах in a raid on Rojib village near Nablus, locals and Islamic Jihad said.

<http://www.maannews.net/eng/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=556824>

- **PA to pay partial salaries on Sunday**

NABLUS (Ma'an) -- The Palestinian Authority will pay public sector workers partial December salaries on Sunday, the finance minister said Thursday.



Nabil Qassis said in a statement that government employees would receive half their December wages, with a minimum of 1,500 shekels (\$402) and capped at 4,000 shekels (\$1073).

Full salaries for public sector workers have not been paid in almost three months and government initiatives to increase revenue by collecting years worth of electricity and water bills from the public have been hampered by street protests.

The PA has been hard-pressed to pay more than \$300 million in monthly expenditures since Israel announced it would confiscate \$100 million dollars it collects in customs taxes on their behalf each month.

Qassis said Wednesday that Saudi Arabia had pledged \$100 million to the PA and that salaries would be paid as soon as the funds were received.

President Mahmoud Abbas has struggled to convince Arab countries to deliver a \$100 million monthly "safety net" they promised when he secured de facto UN recognition of a Palestinian state in November, prompting Israeli sanctions.

Abbas thanked Saudi Arabia, a longtime benefactor to his government, for the funds.

"The state's budget is facing a large deficit as a result of the docking of Palestinian money by the Israeli government as a punitive step after the UN recognition of Palestine as an observer state," Abbas said in a statement.

The Saudi aid will make little progress toward lowering the government's debt of more than \$1.3 billion to Palestinian banks and hundred of millions of dollars in unpaid contracts to the private sector.

Amid a downturn in its construction and manufacturing sectors and with its economic prospects hamstrung by Israeli restrictions, the West Bank government has been deeply dependent on foreign aid to pay its bills.

A high of \$1.8 billion in foreign aid in 2008 plunged to \$600 million last year, with Gulf countries scaling back their giving because of increased domestic spending over two years of Arab political uprisings and the global financial downturn.

An earlier \$100 million gift from Saudi Arabia last July and donations from Iraq, Algeria and other Arab countries provided much of the Palestinians' foreign aid in 2012.

On Wednesday, the European Union announced some \$133 million in annual assistance to the Palestinians and UN aid agencies servicing Palestinian refugees, in line with previous years.

The United States continues to withhold \$200 million dollars in budgetary assistance, around half the aid it delivered to the PA in 2012, amid Congressional objections to their bid for statehood.

<http://www.maannews.net/eng/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=556964>

- **France condemns latest Israeli settlement plans**

BETHLEHEM (Ma'an) -- France on Thursday condemned Israeli plans to construct 198 new homes in Jewish settlements in the southern West Bank.

Israel's housing ministry on Wednesday released government tenders inviting developers to bid on two building projects in Efrat and Kiryat Arba settlements, Israeli media reported.

A spokesman for the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs said France was "especially concerned about the impact of these two projects on the territorial contiguity of a future Palestinian state."

"It therefore calls on the Israeli government to reverse this provocative and illegal decision," the spokesman said in a statement, adding that settlement activity fueled tensions on the ground and constituted an obstacle to peace.

<http://www.maannews.net/eng/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=556914>

## 5. AFRICA and EGYPT

- **Opposition groups plan revolution anniversary protests**

With the Islamist-dominated government now the object of their protests, opposition parties and political groups are preparing to mark the second anniversary of the 25 January revolution with mass



demonstrations, marches and sit-ins next week.

Nearly two years after protests brought down President Hosni Mubarak, the demonstrators and activists who started the revolution have made little headway in mainstream politics. Dozens of opposition groups have often failed to come together, only recently uniting in their objections to former Muslim Brotherhood leader President Mohamed Morsy and his government.

Various groups say they have been meeting to agree on basic demands and the route of their planned marches, which are expected to end in Tahrir Square and in front of the presidential palace in Heliopolis a week from Friday.

April 6 Youth Movement leader Tareq al-Kholy said the group would join the Revolutionary Socialists, the Free Egyptian movement and the National Salvation Front in the protests.

Kefaya movement youth coordinator Mohamed Abdel Aziz said five marches would coalesce in Tahrir from Shubra, Sayeda Zeinab, Imbaba, Ramsis Square and Mostafa Mahmoud Mosque in Mohandiseen.

The Popular Current Party led by opposition figure Hamdeen Sabbahi, as well as other parties, have proposed the protest slogan "No to the Brotherhood state, the revolution continues." Other revolutionary forces reportedly favor "The regime has not yet fallen."

Yasser al-Hawary, a member of Mohamed ElBaradei's Dostour Party, said revolution youth would stage sit-ins across Egypt against the weak performance of the government and what they see as the president's bias toward the Muslim Brotherhood.

Some opposition activists have said a Tahrir sit-in would continue until "the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood."

The National Salvation Front is expected to meet on Sunday to set demonstration plans for six governorates: Suez, Port Said, Assiut, Minya, Alexandria and Gharbiya. The opposition coalition

plans to escalate its actions until 11 February, the date that former President Hosni Mubarak was forced from power in 2011, Hossam Foda, a Free Egyptians Party secretary said.

The Muslim Brotherhood Guidance Bureau on Wednesday instructed members to stay away from opposition protests planned for 25 January and avoid clashes. Instead the group has planned neighborhood clean-ups and beautification activities in specific areas.

The Salafi Jihadi Movement announced it would boycott the protests and celebrations, saying the revolution objectives have not been achieved. The group noted that it was not forbidding its members from participating. It also called on Morsy to "correct the path" and apply Islamic Sharia and group leader Morgan Salem said Mubarak-era officials should be removed from state institutions.

After announcing last week that it was discussing plans to take to the streets to celebrate the new Constitution and support Morsy, Jama'a al-Islamiya has not revealed any additional details.

<http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/opposition-groups-plan-revolution-anniversary-protests>

- **National Salvation Front rifts threaten electoral gains ahead of key vote**

The National Salvation Front on Saturday delineated 11 conditions that would ensure the integrity of the upcoming parliamentary elections, for which preliminary procedures are set to begin on 26 February.

The coming election is a decisive battle pitting the NSF, which brings together 13 political powers spanning the political spectrum, against Islamists, whose domination over the political sphere in a sense created the opposition from which the NSF was born.

Parties of all shades are frantically gearing up for the House of Representatives race, which comes on the heels of the new Constitution, passed with a 63.8 percent referendum vote in

which there was a lower turnout than in any poll in the past two years.

The tumultuous constitution-writing process created deep rifts between the country's divergent forces, from the Constituent Assembly formation to the rushed approval of more than 200 articles and the snap decision to hold the referendum.

The NSF formed within this volatile climate, thus coalescing the opposition, which must now jostle for a place in Parliament.

The most prominent NSF parties include the Dostour Party, led by former International Atomic Energy Agency chief Mohamed ElBaradei; the Egyptian National Congress Party, headed by former Arab League chief Amr Moussa; and the Popular Current, founded by leftist former presidential candidate Hamdeen Sabbahi.

Among other conditions, the NSF demand judicial supervision over every ballot box, a spending ceiling for electoral campaigning, and the prohibition of using houses of worship for campaigning.

The NSF says it is setting up three committees. One would establish the criteria upon which NSF members would be chosen for candidacy. A second committee would look into funding for the elections, and a third would monitor and document electoral violations.

### Shaping Egypt's future

The majority in the new House of Representatives will form the Cabinet and pass a plethora of vital legislation to restructure state institutions, as laid out in the Constitution.

For this reason, many say this parliament will be of utmost significance, in that it is expected to set the tone for post-uprising political and economic development.

But just ahead of the most crucial and decisive of political battles, there are already signs of divisions within the NSF, which threaten its chances of challenging Islamists' cohesion. Islamist groups excel at organizing their ranks before pivotal polls, conveying a unified vision and clear philosophy that have so far earned them parliamentary and political gains.

Hassan Abu Taleb, an expert at the Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, says the NSF was mainly created to oppose President Mohamed Morsy's 22 November constitutional declaration, with which he granted himself sweeping powers by immunizing his decisions from reversal or judicial review.

While the NSF was able to mobilize the masses to protest the constitutional declaration, Abu Taleb says, it later became apparent that the NSF lacked a long-term political vision.

Many have argued it was indeed the masses who took to the streets first, out of their own volition, thus creating a suitable environment for a legitimate opposition, more or less, forcing the long-scattered political players to unite.

"The future of the NSF depends on its ability to run as one bloc in the elections, and any divisions threaten its goal of countering the Islamist current. But the power of the front will be lost in internal battles between parties over the percentage of representation in the coming House of Representatives," Abu Taleb predicts.

These flaws date back to before the revolution, and have constantly impeded the formation of a strong, united political opposition. Abu Taleb adds that there are NSF members who insist on making the divisive distinction between revolutionary and non-revolutionary powers within the front.

How many lists?

The NSF's cohesion has been faltering ever since amendments to the law organizing parliamentary elections were proposed two weeks ago.

The draft says two-thirds of the House of Representatives will be elected through closed proportional lists and one-third through the single-winner system.

Before this, NSF leaders had said they would contest the elections on one list comprising of candidates from the diverse parties. Now, members of the NSF are considering running on two lists, thus risking scattering votes.

One camp within the NSF believes it should run a unified list in the country's 46 constituencies. Proponents of this view include the Free Egyptians and Wafd parties, both of which prefer to avoid splintering votes, and instead capitalize on the popular bases they have in all governorates.

The other camp's preference for two lists stems from an attempt to contain the anger of young members of other NSF parties, namely Dostour and the Popular Current, which oppose the presence of members they see as affiliated with the now-dissolved National Democratic Party.

These youth want to segregate revolutionary members and others, mainly from the Wafd and Congress parties, arguing that both of these parties have former NDP members among their ranks.

In an interview with Al-Masry Al-Youm this week, Sabbahi said the issue is not how many lists to run on, but rather that individual constituencies should be examined to determine how much clout civil powers have there.

Sabbahi adds that having two lists responds to the demands voiced by younger NSF members, who think they would have better chances in the elections this way — one list to attract the votes of youth who supported the revolution and another to lure more conservative voters.

Mahmoud al-Alaily, assistant secretary general of the Free Egyptians Party, says the NSF's elections committee decided to have one list, dismissing Sabbahi's view.

Wafd Party leader Essam Shiha, meanwhile, says it is only acceptable to have two lists for 10 percent of constituencies, where some parties are proven to have significant popularity. Having a list to attract young voters, he says, is not “politically pragmatic.”

He says it is not true that the Wafd, Congress and Free Egyptians parties will include former NDP members on their lists. It is not even possible, says Shiha, since Article 232 of the Constitution prohibits senior NDP members and political bureau members who ran in the 2005 and 2010 elections from participating in the upcoming race.

While these total about 1,400, Shiha says, there are more than 2 million former NDP members who were on local councils or part of the disbanded party’s secretariats in governorates. They are popular and belong to big families, especially in Upper Egypt, he says, adding that the front should make good use of them.

“Young members of Dostour and the Popular Current should be well aware of the rules of the political game, because we are now playing politics; we are no longer in the midst of a revolution,” he adds.

Al-Shorouk newspaper reported Wednesday that NSF sources said the priority for candidacy would be given to former MPs and those who are popular, be they members of big families or labor leaders.

Ahmed Saeed, Free Egyptians Party chief, submitted a proposal at the NSF meeting Sunday suggesting a mechanism for choosing which candidates to field in the elections, whereby parliamentary hopefuls are given points on the basis of their ability to compete.

Abu Taleb, meanwhile, says the front has multiple leaders, crippling its decision-making capabilities.

“It seems that the political calculations of each party will determine the rules of the game and the criteria for choosing the candidates. ElBaradei and Sabbahi are wary of allying with remnants

of the former regime, to avoid unrest within their parties. The Wafd and Congress parties, meanwhile, will not give up on NDP tactics, which call for depending on members of big families,” he says.

But eventually, parties cannot ignore the wishes of their supporters, he adds.

It may be inevitable that parties which offer the most campaign financing have the final say on the configuration of lists, particularly Wafd and the Free Egyptians.

“From now until elections, anything can happen. There may be even more than two lists, and entire parties may withdraw from the NSF,” he says.

#### Opposition still weak

In the first post-revolution Parliament, the Freedom and Justice Party won 236 seats. The Nour Party and other Salafi groups won 121 seats, the Wafd Party 39 seats, and the Egyptian Bloc 36 seats. All in all, Islamists seized over 70 percent of Parliament.

Several observers see the civil opposition’s performance in that Parliament as unconvincing and unorganized, mainly due to the lack of a unified platform and relatively low representation.

Some fear the same scenario will play out once again.

Alaily says the NSF is an electoral rather than ideological alliance, and so it will not have one electoral platform. Sabbahi, meanwhile, says the front tasked leftist economist Ahmed al-Sayed al-Naggar with preparing a plan that would achieve social justice and steer clear of free-market policies.

Samer Atallah, economics professor at the American University in Cairo, says it is impossible for NSF parties to agree on one platform for a specific legislative agenda, particularly regarding economic legislation.

“It is illogical, for instance, for the Free Egyptian Party, for which the key to achieving social justice is equal opportunity, to ally with the Popular Socialist Alliance Party, for which social justice means distribution of wealth,” he explains.

With the upcoming parliamentary majority expected to form the Cabinet and amend laws regarding state institutions, and with Islamists projected to win a parliamentary majority, the opposition should have some MPs with political experience, understanding of legislation, and an ability to maneuver, Abu Taleb says.

So far, the NSF is not focusing on these issues, and has not announced specific philosophy on legislation, he adds, and these defects risk taking the opposition back to square one.

<http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/national-salvation-front-rifts-threaten-electoral-gains-ahead-key-vote>

- **Dozens of hostages 'killed' in Algeria**

Thirty-five hostages and 15 kidnappers reported killed, a day after Western and Algerian gas field workers are seized.

Thirty-five hostages and 15 kidnappers have been killed in southern Algeria, according to the group holding the hostages.

Thursday's reported deaths came a day after dozens of foreigners and Algerians were taken hostage by heavily armed fighters near the In Amenas gas field.

The fighters said they seized the hostages in retaliation for Algeria letting France use its airspace to launch operations against rebels in northern Mali.

The spokesman for the Masked Brigade, which had claimed responsibility for the abductions on Wednesday, told a Mauritanian news agency that the deaths were a result of an Algerian government helicopter attack on a convoy holding kidnappers and hostages.

The spokesman said that Abou el-Baraa, the leader of the kidnappers, was also killed in the helicopter attack.

A resident of the locality where the incident took place told Reuters news agency that the Algerian military opened fire on vehicles of hostage takers and that many people were killed.

The hostage drama began with the ambush of a bus carrying employees from the gas plant to the nearby airport, according to the Algerian government, which said three vehicles of heavily armed men were involved. Two people were killed on Wednesday.

Norwegians, Americans, Japanese and French citizens were among the hostages.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2013/01/201311713160194432.html>

- **France increases troop deployment to Mali**

Soldiers on the ground doubled to 1,400, as Chad sends combat troops and EU agrees to provide military training mission.

France now has 1,400 troops on the ground in Mali, more than half the total of 2,500 it plans to deploy in its former colony, Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian has said.



The soldiers have been sent to the West African state as part of an operation against al-Qaeda linked groups who are in control of the north.

Troop numbers have risen quickly since the first French forces were deployed on January 11 after armed groups seized the town of Konna.

On Wednesday, French troops began direct ground combat against fighters belonging to al-Qaeda-linked groups, including Ansar al-Dine.

Ansar al-Dine fighters and their Tuareg allies occupied northern Mali in April 2012

The Malian army, backed by French troops, was still fighting to retake Konna on Thursday.

The French are also involved in a battle for the town of Diabaly, which is within government-controlled territory and was seized by fighters on Monday in a counter offensive launched after the first French airstrikes around Konna.

International support

The first 200 troops of the 2,000-strong contribution pledged by Chad to the African force in Mali have left N'Djamena, a senior military official said on Thursday.

"Two hundred Chadian special forces left N'Djamena last night," the official told the AFP news agency on condition of anonymity, adding that the contingent was currently at a military base in Niger.

Meanwhile, Western nations have offered to help France logistically, but have stopped short of pledging to send combat troops.

During a meeting of European foreign ministers in Brussels on Thursday, the EU approved sending 450 to 500 non-combat troops, half of them trainers, to Mali as quickly as possible.

"The Dutch government supports the French action in Mali," said Frans Timmermans, Dutch Minister for Foreign Affairs, at the meeting.

"It was necessary, to make sure that Mali will not be overrun by Jihadist terrorists and the next stage would be for the EU doing its utmost to make sure that the UN-mandated mission in Mali can become a success."

No combat role is envisioned for the EU training mission.

While the US takes the fight with al Qaeda-affiliated fighters in Mali "very seriously," according to Defense Secretary Leon Panetta on Wednesday, it has not yet agreed to provide assistance to the French-led mission.

Panetta added that Washington is considering how to best offer its support for the foreign intervention, adding that, "I'm confident that we're going to be able to provide that assistance."

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2013/01/2013117114015728807.html>

- **US to recognise Somali government**

Secretary of state Hillary Clinton will announce shift in meeting with Somali president, ending 20-year hiatus.

The United States will recognise the Somali government in Mogadishu, ending a diplomatic hiatus that has lasted more than 20 years, a senior US official said.

US secretary of state Hillary Clinton will announce the shift during a meeting on Thursday with visiting Somali president Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, whose election last year marked the first

vote of its kind since warlords toppled military dictator Mohamed Siad Barre in 1991, assistant secretary of state Johnnie Carson told reporters on Wednesday.

"When the secretary meets with Hassan Sheikh tomorrow, she will exchange diplomatic notes with him and recognise the Somali government in Mogadishu for the first time in 20 years," Carson told a news briefing.

The US never formally severed diplomatic ties with Somalia, whose slide into anarchy was highlighted by the 1993 "Black Hawk Down" incident which saw militia fighters shoot down two US military helicopters over Mogadishu.

In subsequent years, Al Qaeda-linked Al Shabab insurgents seized control of large areas in the south and central parts of the country before Ethiopian, Kenyan and African peacekeeping (AMISOM) troops began a long, US-supported counter-offensive aimed at restoring order.

The formation of the new government, led by Mohamud, is the culmination of a regionally brokered, UN-backed effort to end close to two decades of fighting that has killed tens of thousands of people.

Carson said the US decision to formally recognise the new government underscored the progress toward political stability that Somalia has made over the past year, including "breaking the back" of Al Shabab's insurgency.

"We are a long way from where we were on October 3, 1993 when Black Hawk Down occurred," Carson said. "Significant progress has been made in stabilising the country, in helping to break up and defeat Al Shabab."

"Much more needs to be done, but we think enormous progress has been made and we have been at the very centre of this in our support for AMISOM."

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2013/01/201311715639188977.html>

## 6. JORDAN and LEBANON

- **Proportional representation law referred to Parliament**

BEIRUT: The Cabinet referred an electoral draft law based on proportional representation to Parliament for debate, President Michel Sleiman said Thursday.



His announcement came during a Cabinet meeting to discuss 53 items on the agenda including a proposal by the Finance Ministry to increase value added tax by 2 percent.

“Ministers should not deviate from consensus,” Sleiman said at the beginning of the Cabinet meeting at the Presidential Palace in suburban Baabda.

Sleiman stressed that parliamentary elections, due this June, will take place on time.

“That’s why I signed a decree to open an extraordinary parliamentary cycle to facilitate the approval of a new Lebanese-made electoral law and not one imposed by anybody,” he told Cabinet.

Regarding the Syrian refugee crisis, Sleiman said Mikati will attend a conference addressing the issue in Saudi Arabia.

The President said he will also personally attend a donor conference in Kuwait that is especially dedicated to the growing number of Syrian refugees.

More than 200,000 Syrians have sought refuge in Lebanon since the outbreak of violence in Syria in March 2011.

Sleiman and Prime Minister Najib Mikati met separately prior to the session at Baabda Palace which coincided with a protest by Lebanese University contract teachers asking the government to employ them full time.

The possible increase in VAT is part of a series of measures under study by the Cabinet to secure funds for the public sector's new salary scale, which is expected to cost the treasury more than \$1 billion a year.

The Union Coordination Committee, which represents teachers and public sector employees, has been at loggerheads with the government for months over the adoption of a new salary scale, but Mikati refuses to refer the draft law to Parliament without securing proper funds.

The current 10 percent VAT rate was passed under Law 379 of 2001 and has not been amended since. Finance Minister Mohammad Safadi's proposal increases VAT to 12 percent, a rise that has been rejected by some government officials.

Another proposal on the Cabinet's agenda Thursday is a request for an estimated \$400,000 by the Interior Ministry for its preparations for the upcoming parliamentary elections.

<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Politics/2013/Jan-17/202610-cabinet-discusses-increase-of-vat.ashx#ixzz2IEznCtIm>

- **Blaze kills family in Jordan refugee camp**

Syrian family of seven killed when gas heater started a fire in their hut in a camp in northern Jordan.

Seven members of a family of Syrian refugees were killed when fire broke out in their prefabricated hut in a refugee camp in northern Jordan, officials said.

The fire was started by a gas heater, officials said. The hut was located in a public park being used for refugees in the border town of Ramtha, near the border with Syria.

"The fire spread quickly to floor mattresses, where the refugee family was sleeping, killing all its members," said Colonel Fareed Sharaa, a spokesman for Jordan's civil defence.

At least three other people were reportedly injured in the fire, the latest tragedy to befall tens of thousands who fled the violence in Syria only to face difficult winter conditions on the border.

Abu Mohammed, a relative of the victims, blamed their deaths on the poor living conditions in the camp.

"What happened today has never happened anywhere in the world. It's true that this is God's will, but there is a reason, [and] the reason is an electrical short," he said. "We have been suffering for four months from the officials in the camp."

More than 200,000 Syrian refugees are now living in towns and cities across Jordan. The largest refugee camp, at Zaatari, houses at least 50,000.

An unusually bitter winter, accompanied by driving snow and rain last week, some of the worst in the region in years, has raised concern for the plight of both Syrian refugees and displaced people within Syria.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/01/2013116224216504972.html>

## 7. ARABIAN PENINSULA AND THE GULF OF BASRA

- **Gunmen assassinate top Yemeni security official: Report**

Unknown gunmen have shot dead a top Yemeni security official in the western province of Dhamar, a report says.

On Wednesday, armed assailants on a motorbike attacked the security official, Saba news agency reported.



“Two gunmen on a motorbike opened gunfire on Colonel (Abdullah) al-Mushki killing him immediately,” a security official told Saba.

“Security services are carrying out vast investigations to hunt down the criminals behind this crime which carries the fingerprints of al-Qaeda,” added the official, whose name was not mentioned in the report.

A similar attack was carried out on December 29, 2012, when two armed men killed Lieutenant Colonel Mutei Baqatyan in the city of Mukalla, in southern Yemen.

On December 18, the military intelligence chief of Yemen’s southeastern province of Hadramout, Colonel Mohammed Hadiq escaped an assassination attempt.

Yemeni security forces frequently come under attack by gunmen especially in the southern and eastern parts of the country.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/01/17/284044/yemeni-security-official-assassinated/>

- **Kuwaitis demand dissolution of parliament**



Kuwaitis have staged a demonstration in the Persian Gulf country to demand dissolution of the parliament.

The protest rally was staged in the capital Kuwait City on Wednesday, AFP reported.

On Sunday, demonstrators staged a similar protest rally in the streets of Sabah al-Nasser, a predominantly tribal area just southwest of the city.

The parliament was elected on December 1, 2012 in general polls, with a voter turnout of about 40 percent.

Since then, the opposition has been staging protests to demand that the new parliament be dissolved and the changes made to the electoral law be reversed.

Kuwait was the first Arab state in the Persian Gulf to establish an elected parliament in 1962.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/01/17/284008/kuwaitis-demand-parliament-dissolution/>

- **Saudi Arabia silences voice of dissent: activist**

An activist, who has been on trial for several months in Saudi Arabia, says the country is attempting to silence the voice of dissent.



"We have a number of cases where people are thrown in prison arbitrarily, torture, forced disappearances. ... Whatever rights abuses (you could think of), you could find in Saudi Arabia," said Mohammad Fahad Muflih al-Qahtani, one of Saudi Arabia's prominent human rights activists, on Wednesday.

In June 2012, Qahtani was charged in a Saudi court on 11 charges including “breaking allegiance to” Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud.

"Of course, there will be a price to be paid, and we are more than willing to pay that price," the 46-year-old added.

Meanwhile, Tamara al-Rifai, spokeswoman for Human Rights Watch's Middle East and North Africa division, also condemned Riyadh for targeting activists.

"This has been a systematic approach by the authorities in Saudi Arabia -- namely, the targeting and harassing of activists across the country," al-Rifai stated.

She added that many people in the Arab kingdom "are being arbitrarily arrested and detained for exercising rights that are stipulated by all international human rights laws" and “the Arab Charter on Human Rights to which Saudi Arabia has adhered."

In June 2012, Amnesty International (AI) said in a statement that Qahtani’s trial “is just one of a troubling string of court cases aimed at silencing the kingdom’s human rights activists.”

“The case against him should be thrown out of court as it appears to be based solely on his legitimate work to defend human rights in Saudi Arabia and his sharp criticism of the authorities,” AI's Middle East and North Africa director Philip Luther said in the statement.

Anti-government protests have intensified in Saudi Arabi since November 2011, when security forces opened fire on protestors in Qatif, killing five people and leaving scores more injured.

Activists say there are over 30,000 political prisoners in Saudi Arabia.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/01/17/283991/ksa-silences-voice-of-opposition/>

## 8. AFGHANISTAN - PAKISTAN

- **Pakistan government begins talks with cleric**

Opposition cleric Tahir-ul Qadri tells thousands of supporters to remain in place while he talks with negotiators.

A populist Pakistani cleric calling for electoral reforms and an end to corruption has called on tens of thousands of his followers camped outside parliament in Islamabad to remain in place while he holds negotiations with the government.



Canadian-Pakistani academic and preacher Tahir-ul Qadri had given the government until 3pm local time [10:00 GMT] on Thursday to negotiate on his demands for key reforms.

Four representative of the government were reported to have begun negotiations with him at 3.45pm [10:45 GMT].

The committee members includes Farooq Sattar from the MQM, a key ally of the ruling coalition, and Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain from the PML Q, also a coalition partner.

Many of Qadri's supporters have been camped out on the road and grassy verges of the main commercial avenue in Islamabad since early Tuesday, often covering under sheets to fend off the bad weather.

Addressing the crowds before news of the government negotiations, Qadri said "The situation does not allow me to put all the people, young people, children, women to further test.

"I give the government, I give the rulers a deadline of one and a half hours. This deadline will end at 3pm. Then we will announce our next action.

"Today is the last day of this sit-in. Tomorrow there will be no sit-in. We have to end it today."

'Last chance'

Earlier Raja Pervez Ashraf , the prime minister, had chaired a meeting of coalition partners, several of whom have urged the government to start dialogue with Qadri.

Deputy information minister Samsam Bukhari told private TV station Geo the government was open to talks.

Qadri wants parliament dissolved and a caretaker government set up in consultation with the military and judiciary to implement key reforms before free elections can be held.

Interior Minister Rehman Malik threatened overnight to disperse the crowd, but President Asif Ali Zardari quickly intervened to say that force would not be used.

"I want to give negotiations a last chance. I want to give peace a last chance and I want to give democracy a last chance," said Qadri.

The government has so far stuck to its position that parliament will disband in mid-March to make way for a caretaker government, set up in consultation with political parties, and elections within 60 days, sometime by mid-May.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia/2013/01/201311792626820218.html>

- **Marine who urinated on Afghan to be demoted**

Edward W Deptola, a US sergeant, to be demoted one rank in plea deal after urinating on the corpse of a Taliban fighter.

A US marine who pleaded guilty to urinating on the corpse of a Taliban fighter in Afghanistan is likely be demoted one rank under a plea agreement.

Staff Sergeant Edward W Deptola admitted to multiple charges at a court-martial on Wednesday, including that of violating orders by desecrating remains and posing for photographs with the corpses.



Deptola and another marine were charged last year after a video surfaced showing four marines in full combat gear urinating on the bodies of three Afghans in July 2011.

In the video, one of the marines looked down at the bodies and said: "Have a good day, buddy."

The New York native is married with two children, but military officials declined to give his age.

The sergeant admitted to the judge that he urinated on one of the three corpses and posed in the "trophy photographs".

Deptola said he failed to supervise the marines under him when the desecration began, even though he had been briefed that such behaviour violated a marine corps general order.

"I was in a position to stop it and I did not. ... I should have spoken up on the spot," he said.

When asked by the judge why he did it, Deptola replied, "I have no excuse, no reason, ma'am. ... It was not the correct way to handle a human casualty."

The judge said she would have sentenced him to six months confinement, a \$5,000 fine, demotion to private and a bad-conduct discharge.



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But she is bound by terms of the plea agreement the sergeant reached with military prosecutors.  
A general will review the sentence and could choose to lower it.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia/2013/01/2013117101214997578.html>

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

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