



MIDDLE EAST DAILY BULLETIN

GÜNLÜK ORTADOĐU BÜLTENİ

Domestic Policy in the Middle East Countries

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1. IRAQ

- **Amiriya Friday sermon urging moving army out of cities, cancel abolition law and article 4/ terrorism.**

Baghdad/ NINA /-- Amiriya Friday sermon urging moving army out of cities, abolition of accountability and justice law article 4/terrorism , operate according to the principle of balance in the state institutions.

Sheikh Adnan al-Ani touched in his sermon a number of demands approved by the Association of Imams and scholars of Amiriya mosques include "Cancellation of accountability and justice law , article 4 terrorism until the enactment of an replaceable law , and operate according to the principle of balance in all departments and institutions of the state according to the population components proportions in all provinces in Iraq.

The same source called on the government to "the immediate cessation of raids that conducted overnight , moving troops from cities to exercise their essential role in defending Iraq's borders, amending the constitution in accordance with article / 142 /, and lift the concrete barriers in Amiriya as well as in all residential neighborhoods."

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

- **Imam Juma / not bluffing / in Fallujah denounces policy of "stalling" by Maliki government to meet demonstrators demands.**

Baghdad / NINA /--Imam of / not bluffing / Friday unified prayers in Fallujah Sheikh Mohammed Kfeish said : "procrastination by the Maliki government to meet demonstrators demands push

them to be more determined to pursuit sit-ins and demonstrations until the implementation of their legitimate demands.

He said in his sermon: "The sit-ins of Anbaris entered the twenty-seventh day but Anbaris have not receive from Maliki government any evidence to meet their demands so far.

The same source pointed out that "a number of blocs and political parties are trying to distort Anbar and other provinces demonstrations and sit-ins through false and baseless accusations, stressing that at the same time we say our protestations and sit-ins are peaceful.

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

- **Security force prevent worshipers from entering mosque in Amiriyah, but after leaving their identities and their mobile.**

Baghdad/ NINA /--Security forces prevented worshipers from entering / Hassanain / mosque in Amiriya area , west of Baghdad, from entering to pray but after leaving their identities and their mobile phones to the detachment located at the mosque gate.

Nina reporter said : " Many worshipers gathered outside / Hassanain / mosque Alamal al-Shaabi Street where a unified Friday prayers took place , as refusing handing over their identities and mobile phones to the forces which surrounded the mosque, arguing that the same forces collected the last week identities and mobile phones from worshipers and then randomly throw them down the street.

He added: "The worshipers gathered outside the mosque, denouncing the fact that this armed force preventing them from entering the mosque and pray, chanting / Enough injustice/.

The source pointed out that the elements of security forces wearing black uniforms, put veil on faces, carrying guns, batons, and cover their military vehicles plates.

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

2. IRAN

- **Iran has no reason for interfering in Syria's internal affairs: MP**

An Iranian lawmaker has dismissed recent allegations by the so-called Free Syria Army claiming Iran is interfering in Syria, saying there is no reason for Tehran to meddle with internal affairs of the Arab country.

“We definitely have no reason to interfere in Syria’s affairs because this country has an army and extensive facilities and its army is comprised of armed popular groups which are resisting,” Chairman of the Majlis (parliament) Committee on National Security and Foreign Policy Alaeddin Boroujerdi said on Friday.

He added that armed opposition groups in Syria, backed by foreign countries such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar, are leveling such allegations against Iran due to their failure to change the current political structure in the Arab state.

The Iranian lawmaker reaffirmed the Islamic Republic’s support for Syria and added that Damascus has been at the forefront of fight against the Israeli regime for years and has always supported resistance groups, particularly Hezbollah, Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

Chief of the International Human Rights Commission Muhammad Shahid Amin Khan said in January that the so called Free Syrian Army is just a group of terrorists, stressing that Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia are granting money and weapons to the terrorists in Syria.

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

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

Several international human rights organizations have accused the foreign-sponsored militants fighting against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's government of committing war crimes and crimes against humanity.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/01/18/284219/iran-sees-no-reason-for-syria-meddling/>

- **IRIB chief slams West over ban on Iranian media**

Head of the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) Ezzatollah Zarghami has censured the bans by certain Western satellite operators on Iranian channels, saying the move is a clear example of the West's false claim of supporting freedom of opinion.

"The US hatched different plots since the victory of the Islamic Revolution in order to prevent the message of the Revolution from being exported and counter the anti-arrogance thoughts of the Iranian nation," Zarghami said on Thursday.

In another blow to the freedom of speech, Spain's satellite provider Hispasat took Iran's Press TV and Hispan TV off air on December 21 and ordered Overon, a subsidiary satellite company, to stop the transmission of the two international TV channels.

Overon said the ban on Press TV and Hispan TV followed a similar move by France's Eutelsat company, which had already taken several Iranian satellite channels and radio stations off air. It said the channels were removed because of "a wider interpretation of EU regulations."

In November, the Hong Kong-based Asia Satellite Telecommunications Co. Ltd. (AsiaSat) also took Iranian channels off air in East Asia.

In October, Eutelsat SA and Intelsat SA stopped the broadcast of several Iranian satellite channels, citing pressure by the European Union.

The EU has, however, denied the claims by the European satellite companies.

The IRIB head further pointed to bids by the government of US President Barack Obama to counter the Islamic Republic's ties with Latin America, saying, "While this region was regarded as the United States' backyard until about a decade ago, people in Latin American countries are currently familiar with the enlightening message of the Islamic Revolution."

On December 28, 2012, the US president enacted the law to counter Iran's growing relations with the Latin American countries. The so-called Countering Iran in Western Hemisphere Act requires the US Department of State to develop a strategy within 180 days to "address Iran's growing hostile presence and activity" in Latin America.

Major Latin American nations have enhanced their diplomatic and trade ties with Iran in recent years. The promotion of all-out cooperation with Latin American countries has been among the top priorities of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy over the past few years.

Washington considers Latin America as its strategic backyard, a term used to refer to the USA's traditional areas of dominance.

Zarghami also warned against enemies' plans to cause discord among Shia and Sunni Muslims and said Muslim countries can destroy the main enemy - the fake Israeli regime - through unity and integrity.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/01/18/284210/irib-chief-raps-west-ban-on-iran-media/>

- **Iran hosts fourth intl. conference of ‘Gaza, Symbol of Resistance’**

The Islamic Republic of Iran is hosting the fourth international conference of ‘Gaza, Symbol of Resistance’ in the capital, Tehran.

Iranian officials, Palestinian resistance figures and pro-Palestine activists from different countries are taking part in the two-day event.

The conference aims to commemorate the resistance shown by Palestinians especially the people of Gaza during Israeli aggressions against the Gaza Strip.

“We will never be defeated by Israel. Therefore, we should always maintain preparedness. We call on our friends to give us spiritual, political and military support like what Iran did,” Abu Sharif, the Islamic Jihad movement representative to the conference told Press TV correspondent.

In December 2008, Israel launched a wide-scale war on the densely-populated Gaza Strip, killing over 1,400 Palestinians, including at least 300 children among them women and children.

But after 22 days of resistance by the Palestinian resistance movements of Hamas and Islamic Jihad, Israeli troops were forced to withdraw and accept defeat.

In November 2012, Israel launched another war on the blockaded strip, which killed more than 160 Palestinians and injured some 1,200 others. In retaliation, Palestinian resistance fighters fired rockets and missiles into the Israeli cities, killing at least five Israelis. The Israeli regime was forced to accept a truce after 8 days of war.

Gaza has been under crippling Israeli blockade since 2007, when Hamas, the democratically elected administrator of Gaza, took control of the enclave.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/01/18/284209/iran-hosts-4th-intl-gaza-conference/>

- **Iran Majlis speaker lauds Hezbollah, Hamas, Islamic Jihad influential roles**

Iran Majlis Speaker Ali Larijani has lauded Lebanon's Hezbollah as well as the Palestinian resistance movements of Hamas and Islamic Jihad as influential powers in the region.

Speaking at the 4th international conference of 'Gaza, Symbol of Resistance' in the Iranian capital on Thursday, Larijani said that Hezbollah, Hamas and Islamic Jihad were among the most influential powers in the region due to their morale of resistance.

He said that Israel was crushed by Hezbollah during the 33-day war and added the Lebanese movement imposed a backbreaking defeat on Tel Aviv. Larijani said that Israel then launched the 22-day war to break Gaza but was defeated by Hamas and Islamic Jihad and added the Tel Aviv regime suffered its latest defeat in the recent eight-year war on Gaza.

The fourth international conference of 'Gaza, Symbol of Resistance' aims to commemorate the resistance shown by Palestinians especially the people of Gaza during Israeli aggressions. Iranian officials, Palestinian resistance figures and pro-Palestine activists from different countries are taking part in the two-day event.

On November 14, the Israeli regime launched a deadly offensive on the blockaded Gaza Strip, which killed more than 160 Palestinians and injured some 1,200 others. In retaliation, Palestinian resistance fighters fired rockets and missiles into the Israeli cities, killing at least five Israelis.

The November 2012 Israeli war on Gaza was Tel Aviv's second deadly attack on the Palestinian strip in four years. Israeli regime waged a 22-day war on the densely-populated enclave in 2008, which killed over 1,400 Palestinians, including at least 300 children.

Israel had also unleashed an all-out offensive on Lebanon in summer 2006 but received a humiliating defeat from Hezbollah. The invasion claimed the lives of nearly 1,200 Lebanese people, most of them civilians.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/01/18/284194/iran-speaker-hails-resistance-movements/>

- **'Iran beefed up cyber capabilities after Stuxnet'**

US official warns that after alleged US-Israeli cyber attack on Iran's nuclear facilities, Tehran has become a cyber force.

WASHINGTON - Iran responded to a 2010 cyber attack on its nuclear facilities by beefing up its own cyber capabilities, and will be a "force to be reckoned with" in the future, a senior US Air Force official told reporters on Thursday.

General William Shelton, who heads Air Force Space Command and oversees the Air Force's cyber operations, declined to comment about Iran's ability to disrupt US government computer networks, but said Tehran had clearly increased its efforts in that arena after the 2010 incident.

While no government has taken responsibility for the Stuxnet computer virus that destroyed centrifuges at Iran's Natanz uranium enrichment facility, it was widely reported to have been a US-Israeli project.

Western analysts say Iran has launched increasingly sophisticated cyber attacks in a growing confrontation with its adversaries, including the United States, Israel and Gulf Arabs, at a time of rising pressure on Tehran to curb its nuclear program.

Iran denies Western accusations it is seeking to develop a nuclear weapons capability, and says its program is aimed only at power generation and medical research.

This week, a senior Iranian commander was quoted as saying that the Islamic Republic could disrupt enemy communication systems as part of its growing "electronic warfare" capabilities.

Iranian officials have denied hacking into US banks in recent months, but have devoted resources to building up their cyber defense capabilities after suffering a string of cyber attacks in the past year targeting industrial sites, an oil export terminal and oil platforms.

"The Iranian situation is difficult to talk about," Shelton told reporters. "It's clear that the Natanz situation generated reaction by them. They are going to be a force to be reckoned with, with the potential capabilities that they will develop over the years and the potential threat that will represent to the United States."

Shelton said the Air Force expected orders in coming months to expand its cyber workforce of about 6,000 by 1,000 people. He said he was pressing Air Force leaders to boost funding for cyber operations, but added there were competing demands and the budget outlook remained uncertain.

<http://www.jpost.com/IranianThreat/News/Article.aspx?id=300002>

- **No deal in Iran-IAEA talks**

New meeting scheduled for February 12 after talks between Tehran and UN atomic agency falter.

Senior officials at the International Atomic Energy Agency, IAEA, have ended two days of talks with Iranian officials over allegations that Tehran may have carried out tests on triggers for atomic weapons, the Fars news agency reports.

Thursday's report went on to say that the two sides agreed to another round of negotiations scheduled for February 12.

A senior IAEA diplomat, demanding anonymity because he is not authorised to speak on the matter, said that the two-day talks were "not going very well", shortly before they came to an end.

Herman Nackaerts, head of the UN team, had hoped the IAEA would be able to "finalise the structured approach" that would outline what the agency can and cannot do in its investigation.

The IAEA, whose mission is to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons, has been trying for a year to negotiate a so-called structured approach with Iran giving the inspectors access to sites, officials and documents for their long-stalled inquiry.

World powers were monitoring the IAEA-Iran talks for any signs as to whether Tehran, facing intensifying sanctions pressure, may be prepared to finally start tackling mounting international concerns about its nuclear activity.

The six powers - the United States, France, Germany, China, Russia and Britain - and Iran may resume their separate negotiations later in January to try to reach a broader diplomatic settlement. They last met in June.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/01/2013117201346477613.html>

3. SYRIA

- **Iran supports Syria reforms based on public vote: Official**

A senior advisor to Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei says Iran supports reforms in Syria which are based on people's votes.

We believe that reforms should be carried out in Syria and they need to be based on the public vote, Ali Akbar Velayati said in an interview with the Lebanon-based al-Mayadeen TV channel.

Velayati, however, added that the reforms should not be carried out through violence or the support of the United States and certain reactionary regimes like Qatar, which provides militants with weapons.

Syria has been experiencing unrest since March 2011, and many people, including large numbers of security forces, 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.

Iran stresses that the crisis in the Arab state must be resolved politically.

The Islamic Republic has repeatedly condemned any foreign interference in Syria and denounced certain countries' support of militants carrying out terrorist activities in the country.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/01/18/284222/iran-supports-votebased-syria-reforms/>

- **Syrian Kurds, militants clash near Turkish border, reports say**

Reports say clashes have broken out between Syrian Kurds and militants near the Turkey-Syria border.

The militants in three tanks crossed into Syria via the Turkish border on Thursday in an effort to take control of the town of Ras al-Ain.

Foreign-sponsored militants have launched similar attacks on the border town, targeting Syria's Kurdish population.

Many people, including large numbers of security forces, have been killed in the turmoil that broke out in Syria nearly two years ago.

Meanwhile, militants from the notorious Farouq brigades clashed with another group of militants in the northwestern province of Idlib as divisions between the armed groups worsen.

The fighting was apparently in retaliation for the assassination of Tha'er al-Waqqas, a senior Farouq commander, in the northwestern town of Sarmada last year. Waqqas was reportedly linked to the killing of Firas al-Absi, a Saudi-born Syrian militant.

Rivalries and conflicts among the militants fighting against the Syrian government have turned into a problem for the supporters of the armed groups. There are several armed groups with different causes fighting in the Arab country.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/01/18/284206/syrian-kurds-clash-with-militants/>

- **Syria criticizes UNSC over failure to condemn Idlib, Aleppo attacks**

Syria has censured the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) for its failure to condemn the recent 'terrorist' attacks in northern Syria.

In letters to the UN secretary general and the chairman of the UN Security Council on Thursday, the Syrian Foreign Ministry said that preventing the Council from adopting stances in condemnation of these "terrorist acts" is "immoral" and encourages terrorism.

Terrorists conduct deadly attacks to silence the voice of the Syrians who oppose the presence of militants in the country, the letters included.

On January 16, at least 24 people, including Syrian security forces, were killed and dozens of others injured in three coordinated car bombings in the northern province of Idlib.

Over 80 people were also killed and scores of others wounded in two explosions carried out at Aleppo University in Syria's second largest city on January 15.

The Syrian Foreign Ministry also stated that the attacks in Idlib had been organized to "avenge" protests held by Syrians calling for terrorists to leave the region.

Many people, including large numbers of security forces, have been killed in the turmoil that erupted in Syria nearly two years ago.

The ministry reiterated that Damascus was determined to fight terrorism under UN Security Council Resolution 1373.

On Thursday, Russia slammed the United States for its 'blasphemous' accusation that the Syrian government was behind the deadly explosions at Aleppo University.

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad said on January 6 that Damascus was always ready to hold talks with the opposition and political parties and that he would call for a "comprehensive national dialog" after the terrorist activities stopped in the country.

The Syrian president also urged "concerned states and parties" to stop funding, arming and harboring militants.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/01/18/284199/unsc-censured-on-deadly-syria-attacks/>

- **Fierce fighting rages across Syria**

Battles follow reported massacre in Homs and attack on a university in Aleppo, which together left at least 200 dead.

Syrian warplanes and troops pursued a countrywide offensive, activists and state media have said, bombing rebel-held areas and clashing with armed groups who have pushed into cities.

Government forces clashed on Thursday with rebels in the cities of Deraa, Hama, Homs, Aleppo, Damascus and east of Deir al-Zor, the British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

Only the coastal government strongholds of Latakia and Tartous were spared violence.

Opposition activists said 15 people, including 7 children, were killed when an air strike hit a family home in Husseiniyeh, a suburb on the outskirts of the capital. They sent Reuters footage of people dragging the limp bodies of children out of the rubble.

In Hama province, the government said it had secured some areas and displaced families were returning to the area of Zor Abi Zaid after armed forces "cleansed the area completely of terrorists", a term authorities use for the rebels.

Activists and Turkish news agencies reported renewed clashes on the Syrian border town of Ras al-Ain, where rebel forces have been fighting armed Kurdish groups for control.

The Turkish Dogan news agency said one man on the Turkish side of the border was wounded by a stray bullet overnight and that schools in the area had been closed due to the clashes on the Syrian side.

In the power vacuum, some Kurdish groups are trying to assert control over parts of Syria through fights with rebels and government forces. The Observatory said clashes broke out between Kurdish militants and the Syrian army in Rameilan, a town in the northeast.

Ongoing massacres

More than 100 people were shot, stabbed or possibly burned to death by government forces in the Syrian city of Homs, a monitoring group said on Thursday.

The Observatory said women and children were among the 106 people killed by forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad forces who stormed Basatin al-Hasawiya, a poor district on the edge of Homs on Tuesday.

The town of Houla in Homs province was the scene in May 2011 of the killings of 108 people, including nine children and 34 women, which UN monitors blamed on the army and pro-Assad militia.

The United Nations sent observers to Syria in April 2011 but after several attacks on their convoys they left in August, complaining both sides had chosen the path of war.

The government and opposition blame each other for two explosions at Aleppo's university on Tuesday, which killed at least 87 people, many of them students attending exams.

US ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice said the attack was "beyond horrific".

"According to eyewitnesses, regime jets launched the strikes," she said on her Twitter account.

Russia, which has backed Assad throughout the revolt both in rhetoric and through its veto of UN Security Council resolutions condemning Assad, dismissed suggestions Damascus was behind the explosions.

"I cannot imagine any bigger blasphemy," Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov told journalists during a visit to Tajikistan.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/01/201311716944605506.html>

4. ISRAEL-PALESTINE

- **Israel won't dismantle settlements: Benjamin Netanyahu**

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has vowed that the illegal settlements in the occupied West Bank will not be dismantled if he is reelected.

In an interview with the Israeli daily Maariv on Friday, the Israeli premier said, "We haven't uprooted any settlements, we have expanded them."

More than half a million Israelis live in over 120 settlements built since the 1967 Israeli occupation of the West Bank and East al-Quds (Jerusalem). Much of the international community considers the settlements illegal.

The latest Israeli plans to build more settler units have also been censured by many countries.

The Maariv report was published a day after Israeli police took down a tent camp that had been set up by Palestinians in the West Bank in protest against the Tel Aviv regime's plans to construct a large settlement there.

On January 16, an Israeli court issued a ruling that permitted the Tel Aviv regime forces to remove the tents set up at E1 area near al-Quds (Jerusalem).

The Palestinians had received the court's temporary injunction allowing them to keep the encampment. However, Netanyahu called for the decision to be reversed.

Netanyahu's Likud Party is expected to win a majority of seats in the general elections which will be held on January 22.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/01/18/284227/israel-wont-dismantle-settlements-bibi/>

- **PM: Obama and I do have our differences on peace process**

A week before the elections, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu sat with 'The Jerusalem Post' to talk about Obama, Bennett, Abbas and why the country needs his hands – and only his hands – on the wheel.

He is in an enviable political position, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu. He is in a political position most other world leaders would die for. Here he is, just a few days from elections, and his worry is not whether he will win the upcoming elections, but rather by how much, by how large a majority, and who he will need to bring into his governing coalition.

Think about that for a moment.

This is a leader widely assailed by much of the world; a leader whom a US columnist this week reported was verbally dumped on by US President Barack Obama. This is a leader whose own commitment to peace has been not so subtly questioned by even his own president, and whose former security services head – Yuval Diskin – trashed a few weeks ago in a six-page spread in one of the nation's leading papers, a paper that itself has been driven by a campaign to dethrone him.

This is a leader whose predecessor – Ehud Olmert – blames for wasting NIS 11 billion on delusional, adventurous military plans. And yet this is a leader going to the elections on Tuesday not wondering whether he will win, but rather how wide his margin of victory will be.

And that explains the calm with which Netanyahu welcomed The Jerusalem Post on Tuesday to his small, map lined study in the Prime Minister's Office. "I always keep a map with me at any office," he said, "to remind me of where we live."

And where we live is a neighborhood in which he argues you need three components to survive: Unassailable defense, a robust economy, and the knowledge of what we are doing here in the first place.

One expects to hear riffs on security and the economy when sitting with Netanyahu. But what was a bit different this time – what he took obvious pains to stress – was the part about knowing why we are here.

Netanyahu said what has distinguished his government was not only an understanding that Israel needs military and economic prowess, “but also the need to deepen Jewish values, and the understanding and appreciation of our unique heritage.

“We have undertaken a heritage program, which is fantastic,” Netanyahu said eagerly of a NIS 400 million program his government launched to “take biblical sites and the sites of early Zionism and bring them back to life.”

All this, he added, was done to impart to our children a sense of belonging – that this is why we are here, “that we are not in Denmark or in any other country.”

Netanyahu stressed that he has reinstated the Prime Minister’s Bible Study group, and revived the national Bible Quiz for Adults. “This is real; it reflects my own values, what I was brought up with. That I received a deep Jewish education, grounded in Jewish history and grounded in the Bible. This is what I imparted in my children, and something I want to impart to all the children of Israel. It is deep, and people know it. It is not a flag we raise before the elections, it is something that emanates from a wellspring of values that animates me and the Likud as a whole.”

Call it the Bennett effect, the product of Netanyahu’s concern that Naftali Bennett – that upstart head of Bayit Yehudi with the straightforward, right-wing, Jewish- and Zionist-values message – was siphoning off Likud support, and will make it more difficult for him to govern.

Bennett’s campaign theme has been that he just wants to support Netanyahu from the Right, just wants to give him a “third hand” on the wheel. The prime minister’s response: “If you ever drove a car, you know that you have to have two steady hands of one driver on the wheel, and if you start having other people grab the wheel, pretty soon the car overturns.”

Beyond his obvious concern about Bennett, the other element that stood out in this preelection interview – something very telling of where the country is, or of where Netanyahu thinks the country is – is that it was not at all shot through with pie-in-the-sky promises of quick-fix solutions: not in the diplomatic realm, not in Israel’s ties with Obama, and not in the economic sphere.

Rather, sounding downright Churchillian, he said, “There are going to be tough years, but I am confident we can overcome the challenges.”

And, of course, he feels that only he has the steely ability, the fortitude, the leadership aptitude to face those challenges. On Tuesday we will all see to what extent the public agrees.

What follows are excerpts of Netanyahu’s pre-election interview with The Jerusalem Post:

What is your reaction to Jeffrey Goldberg’s column [quoting US President Barack Obama as saying Israel doesn’t know its own best interests]?

Well, I’m sure President Obama understands that only Israel’s sovereign and elected government can determine Israel’s vital national interests, especially its security.

Ultimately, Israel’s interests, and especially its security interests, can be determined only by an elected, sovereign government.

What do the comments say about the direction of ties for the next four years between you and the president?

Well, look, we cooperate on many things, especially on intensified security and intelligence cooperation, and I’m sure that cooperation will continue between America and Israel, especially our common goal of preventing Iran from achieving nuclear weapons.

I also appreciate the strong support the president gave us during our operation in Gaza and the support he and the Congress have given us on Iron Dome.

But President Obama and I also have our differences, especially on the best way to achieve and advance a defensible peace with the Palestinians. I respect the president and I know that we would both like to see peace achieved in this region, even if we sometimes disagree on the best way to achieve it.

By the way, these differences between American presidents and Israeli prime ministers are not new. They go back to the founding of the state. prime minister [David] Ben-Gurion disagreed with thensecretary of state [George] Marshall and declared the Jewish state in 1948 [despite Marshall's fierce opposition]. Prime minister [Levi] Eshkol disagreed with president [Lyndon] Johnson when he decided to break the siege of the Arab armies around Israel in the Six Day War.

Prime minister [Yitzhak] Rabin disagreed with president [Gerald] Ford, who demanded that Israel unilaterally withdraw from parts of the Sinai. Prime minister [Menachem] Begin disagreed with president [Ronald] Reagan over the Reagan administration's peace initiative. Prime minister [Ariel] Sharon disagreed with president [George W.] Bush, who asked him to immediately stop Operation Defensive Shield and withdraw forces.

Yet, despite these differences, decade after decade, the American-Israeli alliance grew progressively stronger. So I believe it can grow even stronger if we face the common challenges ahead. I am confident that President Obama understands that only a sovereign Israeli government can determine what Israel's interests are.

It is one thing when Tzipi Livni says you are leading Israel to international isolation, but what is the Israeli public supposed to think when the president of the US says it?

I think that standing up for Israel's vital interests is part of what Israeli leaders must do. It can sometimes involve taking a stand that is not popular, but that is what leadership is for. Leadership is not doing what is popular and what is easy; it's about sometimes doing what is unpopular and difficult, but vital for the security of our nation.

We live in a world where perception is often more important than reality. Do you feel that the perception that exists in America that you backed Mitt Romney is hurting your relationship with Obama?

I treated candidate Romney exactly as candidate Obama was treated when he came to Israel. Then prime minister Olmert invited him to dinner – and I, as opposition leader, had an extensive discussion with him about the region – and that is exactly what happened with candidate Romney. So there was no preferential treatment.

Do you think the leak to Goldberg had anything to do with payback; that it was Obama’s attempt to try to interfere in our election?

I think that everybody understands that the people of Israel determine who will lead the state, and that only the citizens of Israel can determine what their vital interests are and who will protect those interests.

So you don’t think this was an attempt to interfere?

Well, I think that people appreciate what I just said; I’m sure that includes the president.

Naftali Bennett told us that you would prefer a coalition with Tzipi Livni over him, is that true?

There is so much spin right now. Some say I will make a haredi government, some that I will make a left-wing government. These are all self-serving spins of political parties.

Having said that, when you lie in bed at night and think about a future coalition, what is your dream coalition?

Well, I don’t lie that much in bed at night because I work very long hours. The dream coalition is the one with the broadest possible Likud Beytenu chassis, if you will. Because that is really what determines what drives stability and effectiveness...

If we go the other direction, of fragmentation and sectorial parties, you’re going to have an ineffective government. I know that people say, ‘We’ll strengthen Netanyahu from the Right, we’ll strengthen Netanyahu from the religious side, we’ll strengthen Netanyahu from that side.’ We want our hands on the wheel. If you ever drove a car, you know that you have to have two

steady hands of one driver on the wheel, and if you start having other people grab the wheel, pretty soon the car overturns.

We want to continue in the stable, solid direction of improving Israel's capabilities, its military prowess and ensure the deepest foundation of education, especially Jewish education.

When one watches the election ads, it's tough to escape the feeling that Bennett is the largest threat to Likud, and one of the attacks on Bennett is that his is an extremist party. Isn't it a bit disingenuous of the Likud, with Moshe Feiglin on its list, accusing Bennett's party of being extremist?

I think everybody knows what the Likud list consists of. And to be honest, I think Feiglin is an exception. All our people support military service, reject military disobedience and oppose vehemently separation of woman. We have very clear values.

There are many things we share with other parties, including Bayit Yehudi. There are some things we don't share, and I think during the election it is important to highlight the differences.

We don't hide who our candidates are; they are picked apart with almost boring regularity. Yet I think it's important to know when you are voting for other parties who you are voting for, and then make the decision.

You know Bennett very well – you worked with him. In your mind, is he an extremist?

I'm not rating anyone, and I am not disqualifying anyone. But I think it's important for people to realize that the only way we can lead the country is to have a very strong ruling party... You need a prime minister that can focus on the main issues, and that can't be done if you have to attend the needs of sectorial parties...

When you look at the region – and you often explain dramatically how dangerous it is – do you see any ray of hope out there, and ray of light?

I think over time the aspirations for freedom and the technology for freedom will fuse. I think, in historical perspective, it will be very hard to maintain these enclosed, backward-looking Islamist

theocracies. I think they will simply not be able to provide the needs of the people with economic growth that can only be achieved by freedom and initiative. I think ultimately this trend toward Medievalism will give way to the modern.

But that may take a long time. I can see the mountaintop, but there are deep ravines between us and the crests of those mountains, and we'd better make sure that we don't fall into the ravines. I always gaze into the future, but my feet are firmly on the ground and I look very carefully at the next step that we have to take to make sure that we don't fall off the cliff.

But in the immediate future, is there any ray of light?

There are going to be tough years, but I am confident we can overcome these challenges. We have overcome extraordinary challenges. The state of Israel is immeasurably stronger than it was at its inception.

We've become a technological world power, we are changing our education system and our children now are clearly at a different place. We have unbelievable innovation, both in industry and in our military, and the Israeli economy is surpassing just about every advanced economy in the West.

It doesn't mean we don't have problems, but it does mean we can create and achieve results that astound the world. We are even number two in life expectancy for men, as I read today. That is a reflection of the changes...

The hope comes from the Jewish genius; the hope comes from the heart of the nation that is committed to overcoming the difficulties and ensuring the Jewish future, for ourselves and for our children.

That is where the hope comes from. It doesn't come from shutting your eyes; it comes from keeping your eyes open, looking at the reality as it is and creating the bulwark of defense and the unique capabilities of the Jewish State.

King Abdullah gave an interview yesterday in which he said that after the election, the Europeans will come with a new initiative. Do you know anything about that? Do you plan to put anything of your own on the table?

I'm sure there will be many initiatives, and certainly we'll have an important task in trying to tell the truth to the world: that the Palestinian problem is neither the core of the instability in the Middle East (people actually believed that until the Arab Spring; I think they're a little wiser now), nor that the question of settlements is the core of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The core of the conflict is the persistent refusal of the Palestinians to recognize the Jewish state in any boundary.

Can Israel withstand the pressure on the settlements? Can we build in east Jerusalem and Ma'aleh Adumim with the Europeans saying, 'If you do we might boycott you'?

I think that many recognize that while there are differences inside Israel, there is a common acceptance that the so-called settlement blocs will remain part of Israel in any settlement, and that's where the majority of construction is taking place.

But the Europeans are not saying that.

Some of them are not saying that, it's true. But I think that there is recognition that ultimately there has to be a real and fair solution, and that certainly doesn't include driving out hundreds of thousands of Jews who live in the suburbs of Jerusalem, and in the suburbs of Tel Aviv in the Ariel bloc. I think that is unrealistic.

There is an attempt to escape this simple reality, and we will have to get the world to focus on the real issues, the real problem – and to resist attempts to impose a solution that would deprive Israel of its security and fundamental national interest. A peace that you can't defend will not exist; will not last for a second.

President Shimon Peres says PA President Abbas is a real potential peace partner, while former foreign minister Avigdor Liberman says he's not. Where do you stand?

Well, so far he hasn't been because he's avoided negotiations. He's run away from negotiations for the last four years. He's piled on precondition upon precondition.

He went to the UN for a unilateral resolution, which is a fundamental breach of the Oslo Accords. He embraced Hamas. If he changes that and comes back to the table without preconditions, he'll find me there, if I'm elected prime minister.

Would you consider alternative ideas to the two-state solution?

I don't think it is a good idea for the Jewish state [for the Palestinians to be incorporated as citizens of Israel]. On the other hand, I don't shut my eyes, the way some suggest, and say 'Let's just get out and sign a treaty – that will protect us.' No, peace treaties don't protect us; security protects us. And what protects us is the ability to understand that you need two things: You need a change in the Palestinian attitude toward the Jewish state so they recognize that if they want a Palestinian state, they will have to accept the idea of a Jewish state as the nation state of the Jewish people and to end the conflict with us once and for all. And the second thing is to recognize that even if the [Palestinian] leadership accepts that [a Jewish state and end to conflict], you can't be guaranteed that this will take root in the general public. They will have to change the way they educate their children, and the national propaganda that they spew forth in their state-controlled press.

Equally, even if that happens, you have to assure yourself against the possibility that there will be a change of regime or change of policy in the Palestinian areas. And that is why you need very, very solid security arrangements that protect Israel.

These are measures that were not present in Gaza. We walked out and Hamas walked in, which means Iran walked in. I'm not going to have that replicated.

There are two positions that I think are important. We don't want a binational state, we don't want to govern the Palestinians.

But at the same time, we don't want them to govern us or threaten our existence by irresponsible agreements that are made without a realistic appreciation of the Islamist tide that is sweeping the region and the speed in which Israel can move from relative strength to great

vulnerability because we didn't take care of our vital security needs – because we trusted a peace of paper. That's not where I've been and that's not where I'm going to be.

I think the people of Israel know that they can rely on me to stand on our vital national interests, even when it's hard – and it's not going to be easy.

I don't think there is anyone better to stand on these issues and to navigate the shoals of the great international river that is flowing around us.

A recent US think tank report that said Iran could produce enough weaponsgrade uranium for a bomb by mid-2014 backs up what you have been saying. What is your timetable now on Iran?

The timetable depends on Iran. I've laid out a clear red line; so far, Iran has not crossed it. The question of the timetable depends on their decision, whether they intend to move forward with further enrichment to accelerate enough weapons-grade uranium for the first bomb. So far they haven't crossed the line, but it is their decision.

You have a NIS 40 billion deficit. It needs to be dealt with. How?

I don't want to raise taxes, and I don't see any reason to do so. And, if necessary, I would always prefer cutting back on government spending rather than raising taxes; that has always been my natural inclination... There is always room for government efficiency. Believe me, government offices are not wiry thin – they have a lot of excess fat.

Can you cut the defense budget?

Defense is a place where you can always achieve greater efficiency, but it is also a place that is continuously a challenge. It is not something that you address lightly.

People who say, 'Let's cut defense' without thinking about the challenges we face should look at the map. I always keep a map with me at any office – here at my Tel Aviv office, at the Prime Minister's Residence, there is a map to remind me of where we live.

We have the Iranian nuclear threat, we have chemical weapons in Syria, we have rockets and missiles with Hamas and Hezbollah and we have terrorist infiltrators from the Sinai. I have spent considerable amounts to address those threats.

Are there places to save in the army and the Defense Ministry?

You bet. But there are also places to spend. We have to figure out the right mix. Some of the threats are not as acute as they once were. For instance, the Syrian army is not a threat anymore; Egypt less so right now than in the past because of its economic problems.

Some of the threats have been reduced, at least momentarily. Others have been increased. We live in a missile age; we have to recognize that. We have offensive capacities against these threats, and we have proven defensive capacity. But they require expenditure.

Some of the political parties have made extraordinary statements – not about containing the deficit, but about increasing spending in such a way that the Israeli economy would collapse, or reach the state of Spain or Greece. I have great respect for these countries, but I think we manage our economies better. Ultimately, we live here because of the ability to stay strong, and that strength is a combination of military, economic and cultural strength that has given the Jewish people the power to perform a miracle. Coming back to this land, rebuilding our sovereignty is – I suppose – nothing short of miraculous in a historical perspective. But it is not a miracle. It is something that is done by deliberate acts of a people that can prioritize and put its national needs in the right order.

I think we have shown we can do that. I'm not sure that the public discourse about those needs are always measured, or always accurate. I think we should remember at all times what neighborhood we live in, and what we need to remain strong while navigating in a very difficult international environment that requires a lot of experience and leadership. I think we have shown that we have both.

<http://www.jpost.com/Features/FrontLines/Article.aspx?id=299991>

- **Final ‘Post’ poll: Likud Beytenu, Livni fall again**

Poll conducted 4 days ahead of election finds Netanyahu's party lose a seat to Bayit Yehudi, Livni lose a seat to Yesh Atid.

Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's Likud-Beytenu fell from 34 seats to 33 in the final Smith Research poll legally permitted to be published before Friday's deadline of four days before the election.

The Likud had held steady from the previous week at 34 seats in a poll taken Tuesday and Wednesday that was published in Friday's Jerusalem Post print edition. But Smith took another poll for JPost.com Wednesday and Thursday night that found that the Likud had lost a seat to Bayit Yehudi, which rose from 13 to 14.

Bayit Yehudi gaining a seat means that Atlanta native Jeremy Gimpel, who is 14th on the party's list, would enter the Knesset. Gimpel said he saw being on the cusp as a challenge to immigrants to Israel from English-speaking countries to carry him into the Knesset as their representative.

"It is now within our hands to elect the first American immigrant in decades to the Knesset and take our message of choosing aliyah to all of Israel," Gimpel said.

The Tzipi Livni Party fell in the poll from seven seats to only six, the same number won by Meretz and United Torah Judaism. Yesh Atid received the mandate lost by Livni, rising from 11 mandates to 12.

While the Tuesday-Wednesday poll found that Strong Israel would pass the two percent electoral threshold and Am Shalem would not, the Wednesday-Thursday poll found the opposite, with Amsalem predicted two to three seats.

The rest of the parties' poll numbers remained unchanged: Kadima two, Labor 17, Shas 11, Hadash four, Balad four, and United Arab List three.

Pollster Rafi Smith said he found that among voters under 30, Likud Beytenu received the most support, followed closely by Bayit Yehudi, Yesh Atid and Labor. The Tzipi Livni Party received nearly no support among voters under 30, even falling behind two parties not expected to pass the 2-percent electoral threshold, Eretz Chadasha and Green Leaf.

Livni and the candidates on her list tried to reach out to young people on Thursday by visiting a mall and handing out coffee packets bearing a message “Israel, Wake Up!” Livni received an endorsement on Thursday from singer Ahinoam Nini.

Twenty-nine-year-old Jerusalem city councilwoman Merav Cohen, who is ninth on the Livni list, predicted the party’s standing among her fellow young people would improve.

“I’m talking to lots of young people, and there are many undecided people among them,” Cohen said. “I can get them to realize that Tzipi might not be the most in style but she is the best option for Israel, because she is the only chance for a diplomatic agreement. My place in Knesset is far from guaranteed, I will have to work hard and earn it.”

Meanwhile, Likud Beytenu vigorously denied a Channel 10 report on Thursday night that the joint list’s world renowned American strategists, Arthur Finkelstein and George Birnbaum, had left the campaign.

The exclusive report by Channel 10 political correspondent Nadav Perry said the American strategists had left amid a power struggle in the Likud Beytenu campaign with Israeli campaign director Gil Samsonov and other Likud officials. Perry reported that Finkelstein and Birnbaum had returned early to the United States.

The Likud responded that not only did Finkelstein and Birnbaum not leave the campaign, their departure was coordinated with the party two months ago. The party even produced a copy of Finkelstein’s itinerary printed two months ago to prove it.

“The report is much ado about nothing,” a source connected to Finkelstein’s office told The Jerusalem Post by phone from the United States.

“Arthur is never here on Election Day. Birnbaum usually is, but he is not this time for personal reasons.”

But another source close to Finkelstein confirmed the report telling Jerusalem Post columnist Ben Caspit that Finkelstein had left because of the behavior of Netanyahu who “interfered too much and made it impossible to work.”

The source said Netanyahu changed his mind too much and created negative energy that lost him many mandates.

The first source denied reports that Likud Beytenu was doing much less well than the strategist had predicted at the start of the campaign. The reports had said that Finkelstein predicted 45 Knesset seats for the joint list, which now receives as few as 32 in polls.

The source noted that Finkelstein had actually predicted that Likud Beytenu would receive the 42 mandates the two parties won last election, “plus or minus two or three seats.”

Likud Beytenu’s internal polls predict the joint list winning 38.

Livni, Yesh Atid chairman Yair Lapid, and Bayit Yehudi chairman Naftali Bennett all called for the formation of a national unity government at a conference in Eilat on Thursday. Bennett surprised many at the conference by saying he backs removing outposts built illegally on private Palestinian land.

Bennett took pains to distance himself on Thursday from a potentially harmful endorsement for Bayit Yehudi from former prime minister Yitzhak Rabin’s assassin Yigal Amir. Bennet said he would pass on Amir’s support. He attacked the media for obsessively focusing on things that did not matter.

“There are serious issues in this country,” he said. “People can’t afford to finish the month, and you are focusing on the [former] prime minister’s killer.”

Yoni Dayan and Tovah Lazaroff contributed to this report.

<http://www.ipost.com/NationalNews/Article.aspx?id=300041>

- **Hamas, Fatah agree to implement unity agreements**

Representatives of two factions set end of January as target to form a Palestinian unity government.

Hamas and Fatah agreed Thursday to implement, by the end of this month, previous reconciliation agreements signed between the two parties.

The new agreement was reached during talks between representatives of the two sides in Cairo.

Azzam al-Ahmed, head of the Fatah delegation to the talks, announced that the two parties agreed, among other things, to launch consultations over the formation of a Palestinian unity government, with the hope of reaching agreement within the next two weeks.

The most recent reconciliation agreement, which was signed in Doha, Qatar, envisages the establishment of a unity government headed by Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas.

Hamas and Fatah also agreed that the Palestinian Central Elections Commission would resume the registration of voters in the Gaza Strip – a process that had been halted by Hamas several months ago. Hamas accused the commission of being biased in favor of Fatah.

The commission is expected to resume its work in the Gaza Strip before the end of the month, Ahmed said.

The two parties also agreed to resume the work of joint committees entrusted with discussing the release of prisoners from both sides and ending mutual attacks in the media, he added.

The Egyptians will head a committee consisting of Hamas and Fatah representatives and whose task will be to ensure the implementation of the new-old agreements.

Izzat al-Rishek, head of the Hamas delegation, said the Cairo talks were held in a “positive” atmosphere.

Abdullah Abdullah, a top Fatah official in the West Bank, welcomed the latest agreement, saying his faction was prepared to implement it immediately in order to achieve national unity.

<http://www.jpost.com/MiddleEast/Article.aspx?id=300020>

5. AFRICA and EGYPT

- **Justice Minister: Mubarak will not be forgiven**

There will be no amnesty for former President Hosni Mubarak due to his poor health, and if there was, that would be for the prosecutor general to decide, Justice Minister Ahmed Mekky said on Friday.

In an interview on the privately owned Al Arabiya satellite channel, Mekky responded to rumors that Mubarak would be released from prison by saying that "there is a judicial conflict over the period he [Mubarak] spent in prison."

Mubarak entered a preventative detention period in April 2011, and that period would end in April 2013. The Cairo Criminal Court already found Mubarak guilty of responsibility for the killing of protesters during the 18 days of the 25 January revolution, but the Court of Cassation has ordered his retrial.

"The law stipulates that if the defendant is given the death penalty, preventative detention should not exceed 24 months. However, there is some controversy, because some legal experts see the preventative detention period as including the period between detention and appeals, while others don't. "But this is still uncertain," Mekky said.

If the court determines to include the period of time between detention and appeal, then Mubarak would have been imprisoned for 24 months by this April.

After the ruling was issued against Mubarak in June 2012, the decision to retry the former president was made seven months later, in January.

Mekky added that there was no chance the court would reconcile with Mubarak, but added that "being Muslim, I would lean toward amnesty. The Quran mentions 'those who forgive people' ... However, that depends on what the victims' families want."

When asked about businessman Hussein Salem, who fled the country after being accused of involvement in the case of exporting gas to Israel, Mekky said, "Salem has assets with the government, although much of that money is abroad. We could negotiate and reconcile to regain those funds, as his crime is not related to bloodshed."

The minister was also asked about the problem of the legality of the Muslim Brotherhood. "The group's current situation is not the best," Mekky answered. "The law should be applied equally to everyone. The group should be a role model."

<http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/justice-minister-mubarak-will-not-be-forgiven>

- **Growing divide in Shura Council over elections law**

The Shura Council approved a set of Cabinet-backed amendments to the draft parliamentary elections law late on Thursday, causing several council members to withdraw from the discussion in protest.

The Cabinet rejected any monitoring of vote counting by civil society organizations. Assistant Justice Minister Omar al-Sherif said that elections monitoring violates the sovereignty of the state. The council approved this recommendation, rejecting a proposal from MPs Ehab al-Kharrat and Sameh Fawzy to stipulate international oversight of elections.

The council also agreed that the law would ban high-level members from the now disbanded National Democratic Party from running for Parliament, or allowing MPs who served in the last two parliamentary sessions from being nominated for the next 10 years.

The council adjourned its sessions to Saturday after several members withdrew from the session in protest, according to state-run news agency MENA.

Several Shura Council members said the council speaker and Freedom and Justice members rejected without basis their proposed amendments to the draft parliamentary elections law.

Among those who withdrew were the Coptic deputies and representatives of the Salafi Nour Party, the Ghad al-Thawra Party, the Egyptian Trend Party, the Wafd Party, a member of the Freedom and Justice Party and a number of independent deputies.

The Shura Council, which is temporarily responsible for legislation as stipulated by the new Constitution, on Wednesday discussed the Constitutional and Legislative Committee's report on amending Law 38 of 1972 concerning the election of Parliament, and Law 73 of 1956 on the practicing of political rights.

Once the council approves a law, it is sent to the president, who then forwards it to the Constitutional Court to review before he endorses it.

<http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/growing-divide-shura-council-over-elections-law>

- **South Sudan starts army withdrawal from Sudan border**

South Sudan has started withdrawing its army from the border with Sudan to set up a buffer zone between the African neighbors, the government said on Thursday.

The withdrawal would be completed by 4 February, the government in Juba said in a statement, adding that it expected Sudan to do the same in what would be a step forward in efforts to cool tensions between the neighbors.

"By withdrawing its forces ... the government of South Sudan is clearly demonstrating its full compliance with the signed security agreements and full commitment to their implementation," the statement said.

There was no immediate comment from Sudan.

The neighbors came close to war in April in the worst border clashes since South Sudan declared independence from Sudan in 2011.

After mediation from the African Union, both agreed in September to resume oil exports from the landlocked South through Sudan, a lifeline for both struggling economies.

But mutual distrust remains deep and neither side had yet withdrawn its armies from the border, a condition for both to restart oil flows.

Security officials from both countries are currently holding talks in Addis Ababa to discuss practical steps to set up a buffer zone along the disputed border.

The deal has been complicated by fighting on the Sudanese side of the boundary between Sudan's army and SPLM-North rebels who have vowed to topple Bashir.

Khartoum say South Sudan supports the insurgents. Juba denies that and says Sudan is backing militias in its territory.

South Sudan became independent in July 2011 under a peace agreement which ended decades of civil war fuelled by ideology, oil, ethnicity and religion.

<http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/south-sudan-starts-army-withdrawal-sudan-border>

- **US to send fighter plans, tanks to Egypt on Monday**

The United States plans to send a batch of F-16 fighter planes and 200 military tanks to Egypt on Monday, despite opposition from some Congressmen, said William Taylor, the special coordinator for Middle East Transitions.

“Congress did not change the laws on selling arms to Egypt,” he said. “The US administration listens to all views, but does not necessarily [concede to] them all.”

Since signing a peace treaty with Israel in 1979, Egypt has received US\$1.3 billion in annual military aid from the US. But after Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated President Mohamed Morsy was sworn into office, some Congressmen have called for cutting aid to Egypt.

<http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/us-send-fighter-plans-tanks-egypt-monday>

- **Under new Constitution, the battle continues against military trials of civilians**

Many let out a sigh of relief when President Mohamed Morsy sent some of the country's leading military generals into retirement in August 2012, believing that this could be the end of an 18-month struggle to halt military trials of civilians.

But that relief seems to have been premature.

At least 12,000 civilians were subject to military trials during the military council's reign following the ouster of former President Hosni Mubarak. That number has continued to rise since the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated president was sworn in this past June.

And now, certain articles in the recently ratified Constitution have been criticized for legalizing the military trials of civilians — a major setback for activists, some say.

The divisive Constitution passed in a snap referendum late December includes Article 198, which says civilians can be tried before military courts if their alleged crime “harms the Armed Forces.” The definition of “harm” is left up to the law.

New cases amid less support

Activists say that regular citizens are starting to be brought before military trials. While under the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces most of the known cases of military trials were against political activists, under Morsy's rule cases are predominantly brought against citizens with no political affiliation who have run into trouble with the army institution or its personnel.

Most recently, the case of 25 civilians facing military trials in relation to the Qursaya Island eviction has been in the spotlight.

Since 2007, Qursaya residents have been fighting allegations that the land they live on belongs to the army, despite a February 2010 court order granting civilians the right to live and work on the

island. On 18 November, military forces stormed the resources-rich Nile island at dawn, killing one and detaining 25 others as they attempted to forcibly evict residents.

The detainees have been accused of attacking the military and its property, and are now facing military trials. They are awaiting a final ruling to be issued at the end of January.

Sherif al-Hosary, a 33-year-old father of two, is facing a military trial on charges of possessing army secrets, according to a report filed against him by a retired military general. But activists say Hosary, who owns a computer repairs shop, was arrested after a financial dispute with the general. He has been released pending investigation.

Sheikh Mohamed Nada, an elderly, blind preacher at a mosque in Ismailiya Governorate, has a story similar to that of the Qursaya residents. The sheikh had built a house on land he owns, but has since been the victim of crackdowns by members of the adjacent military unit, who claim that the land belongs to them.

While official documents in Sheikh Nada's possession prove otherwise, he and his family have been subject to eviction attempts by military forces. When he filed a lawsuit demanding compensation, his son was arrested and is now facing a military trial, with the next court session set for 21 January.

Members of the No to Military Trials campaign say the level of support for cases implicating ordinary citizens is disappointing.

"One of the most crucial problems we face is that all of these cases occurred during the debate surrounding the Constitution, so most political figures were busier with the 'yes' and 'no' campaigns [ahead of the referendum]," Maha Maamoun, a member of the group, tells Egypt Independent.

The story of independent journalist Mohamed Sabry, arrested in Sinai while allegedly filming a military unit, illustrates what can happen when enough attention is given to a case.

Investigators claim that Sabry took photos of border troops' vehicles and guard towers at the Karam Abu Salem crossing, while Sabry said he was reporting on a story about the defense minister's decision to ban land ownership along the Israeli border. He is now facing a military trial, but due to the sizeable support and attention he received, the military court decided to release him pending investigation. Sabry's next hearing is scheduled for 21 January.

"We are doing our best to make the cause grow. On Sunday, hundreds of well-known activists, like Alaa Abdel Fattah and Takadum al-Khatib, joined us in a protest in Ismailiya to support Sabry and Sheikh Nada," Maamoun said.

Constitutional dilemma

As Article 198 of the new Constitution states, "The military judiciary is an independent judicial institution, the only body specialized in the jurisdiction over all crime committed by military officers and soldiers."

Civilians cannot stand before military courts "except in crimes that harm the Armed Forces," the article continues. Coupled together, the two articles give the Military Judiciary Law the power to define these crimes and jurisdictions.

In addition, the same article says that judges in the military judiciary are independent and cannot be sacked, and shall have the same privileges, rights and duties of civilian judges.

Privileges and safeguards granted the military institution — when it comes to military trials, the lack of oversight of the military's budget and the powers of the Military Defense Council — are exceptional under the new Constitution, critics say.

The new powers undermine the power of elected civilian institutions, a dynamic thought to have shifted when Morsy forced the top military generals into retirement.

The 1971 Constitution granted citizens the right to resort to their own civilian judges in Article 68, while Article 183 stipulated that the law should organize the powers of the military judiciary, and did not grant the institution any constitutional privileges.

Even as late President Gamal Abdel Nasser cemented military rule, the 1954 Constitution referred to the military judiciary as “military councils” entitled only to investigate violations by military members.

“Our struggle now is doubled,” says Ahmed Ragheb, rights lawyer and head of the Hisham Mubarak Law Center.

“We are struggling to modify these constitutional articles related to military tribunals as well as our normal struggle to free those who have been detained,” he says.

There are two problems with the constitutional role given to the military judiciary. The first, Ragheb argues, is equating military judges with their civilian counterparts, which further legitimizes the role of an institution that does not commit to the very basic standards of fair trials. “The military judiciary is highly politicized and not independent,” he adds.

The second problem is the legitimization of military trials by including the exception of crimes related to the Armed Forces. “All of the cases facing military trials since the revolution fall under this broad exception,” he says.

Activists have slammed the Islamist forces that dominated the Constituent Assembly tasked with drafting the Constitution, suggesting that the articles related to the military were a product of a deal brokered between the Muslim Brotherhood and the military council.

“We rejected the Constitution primarily for imposing a military guardianship,” says Ahmed Imam, member of the Strong Egypt Party’s political communication committee.

To Imam, it is clear that a deal was worked out, namely after seeing the reaction of Islamist members regarding his party's calls to amend these articles during sessions of the national dialogue.

"We were told that this is the farthest they can reach with the military, and that the military institution cannot be humiliated," he says, describing an utter lack of political will or any genuine intention to give these articles a second glance.

"We all feel that these dialogues are cosmetic and not serious," Imam says.

<http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/under-new-constitution-battle-continues-against-military-trials-civilians>

- **Uncertainty over missing Algeria hostages**

Fate of hostages unclear after reports that at least 30 were killed in military operation that ended a 36-hour standoff.

At least 30 hostages and 11 members of an al-Qaeda-affiliated group were killed when Algerian forces stormed a desert gas plant to free the captives, drawing international attention to al-Qaeda in North Africa.

Eight Algerians and seven foreigners, including two British, two Japanese and a French national, were among the dead, an Algerian security source said.

The military says some of the gunmen who took hundreds of hostages at the gas facility, are still holed up inside.

Nine foreign nationals were released but the fate of a number of those who had been held by the fighters remains unclear.

The hostages included Algerians, as well as foreigners from at least nine countries - including the US, Britain and Japan.

At least 22 hostages are still missing - eight from Norway and 14 from Japan.

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe cut short a visit to Indonesia on Friday, reports said, to fly home and deal with the hostage crisis in Algeria in which numerous Japanese are caught up.

The Japanese government criticised the Algerian army for the bloody end to the hostage crisis.

Japan's foreign ministry also summoned the Algerian ambassador demanding answers over the rescue operation

Yoshihide Suga, the Chief Cabinet Secretary, said: "There is still much confusion in the information but we are receiving reports of casualties.

"We deeply regret the actions taken by the Algerian military."

Communication Minister Mohamed Said said troops had been forced to act after talks with the kidnappers failed.

He said many fighters had been killed in the operation at the In Amenas gas field.

Details lacking

Algerian officials says those behind the attack were part of an Al-Qaeda linked group and included Egyptian, Algerian and Tunisian nationals.

The government said it was forced to launch the military operation because the fighters had threatened to blow up the gas plant.

The Philippines government says one Filipino managed to escape with a Japanese citizen before the military operation started.

"We have also received a report from our embassy in London that around 34 Filipinos working with different companies in the gas field are being evacuated by chartered plane to London via Parma, Italy," Paul Hernandez, spokesperson of the Philippines department of foreign affairs, said.

Oil giant BP has chartered two flights from Algeria to London, while a US plane landed at an airport near the desert gas plant.

The plane will evacuate Americans caught up in the crisis, a local source said.

France Interior Minister Manuel Valls said that two French workers were back safe from Algeria, adding that "very few" were working at the gas plant at the time of the attack.

"There were very few French on this especially sprawling base," the minister told French radio.

"We have news from two of those who are back. Regarding the two others, if there were two others, we don't have more information at this stage and hope to have more later in the morning," he added.

A British diplomatic source said that they had not received word from Algeria that the hostage crisis ended.

"The terrorist incident in Algeria remains ongoing," said a Foreign Office spokeswoman, adding that British Prime Minister David Cameron would chair a meeting of Britain's COBRA emergency committee on Friday.

'Libyan fighters'

The Masked Brigade said its fighters seized the workers on Wednesday in retaliation for Algeria letting France use its airspace to launch operations against rebels in northern Mali , but security experts said the raid appeared to have been planned well in advance.

The fighters came from Libya, according to the Algerian interior minister.

"According to the information we have, the terrorist group which attacked the In Amenas site came from Libya," Dahou Ould Kablia told Algeria's Arab-language daily Echorouk.

Kablia had said on Wednesday the kidnappers were from the region, denying that they came from Libya or from Mali as some of them claimed.

Algeria's official APS news agency said nearly 600 Algerian workers and four foreign hostages - two Britons, a Frenchman and a Kenyan - had been freed during the operation. The Irish foreign ministry said an Irish man had also been freed.

In Washington, White House Press Secretary Jay Carney said the US administration was "concerned about reports of loss of life and are seeking clarity from the government of Algeria".

'Brutal aggression'

The fighters, communicating through media in neighbouring Mauritania, said they had dozens of men armed with mortars and anti-aircraft missiles in the compound and had rigged it with explosives.

"We hold the Algerian government and the French government and the countries of the hostages fully responsible if our demands are not met, and it is up to them to stop the brutal aggression against our people in Mali," read one statement carried by Mauritanian media.

A Briton and an Algerian were killed on Wednesday, after fighters launched an ambush of a bus carrying employees from the gas plant to the nearby airport.

The In Amenas gas field is jointly operated by British oil giant BP, Norway's Statoil and Algeria's Sonatrach.

France launched a major offensive against the rebel group Ansar al-Dine in Mali on January 11 to prevent them from advancing on the capital, Bamako.

Algeria had long warned against military intervention against the rebels, fearing the violence could spill over the border.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2013/01/201311719454517593.html>

- **US to provide French air transport in Mali**

Hillary Clinton confirms US transport role as West African forces arrive in Bamako to support French and Malian troops.

The United States announced it will provide transport planes to French forces fighting in Mali but has yet to decide if it will offer refueling tankers for French warplanes, officials have said.

"We've agreed to help the French with airlift. And we're now working out the details," a defence official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, told the AFP news agency on Thursday.

However, there was still no final approval on a request from Paris to help refuel French warplanes with American tanker aircraft, he and another defence official said.

The US government had already agreed to bolster intelligence sharing to assist the French, including information from surveillance drones and spy satellites, officials said.

Hillary Clinton, the US secretary of state, confirmed the move to put intelligence resources and transport planes at the disposal of French troops.

"We are supporting the French operation in Mali with intelligence and airlift," she said in Washington after meeting Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud.

The American transport planes would likely be used to ferry French tanks, armoured vehicles and other heavy equipment.

The United States has a vast fleet of military transport planes at a network of bases in Europe and elsewhere, along with refueling tankers, which are in increasingly short supply in France and other NATO countries.

'Terrorist state'

The first West African regional forces also arrived in Mali on Thursday to reinforce French and Malian troops battling to push back al-Qaeda-linked rebels after seven days of French air strikes.

A contingent of around 100 Togolese troops landed in Bamako and was due to be joined by Nigerian forces already en route.

Nigerien and Chadian forces were massing in Niger, Mali's neighbour to the east.

The scrambling of the UN-mandated African mission, which previously had not been due for deployment until September, will help France, the former colonial power in Mali.

President Francois Hollande ordered the intervention on the grounds that the Islamists who had taken over the poor West African country's north could turn it into a "terrorist state" which would radiate a threat beyond its borders.

Hollande has pledged they will stay until stability returns to Mali but, in the first apparent retaliatory attack, al-Qaeda-linked militants took dozens of foreigners hostage at a gas plant in Algeria, blaming Algerian cooperation with France.

A total of 2,500 French troops are expected in Mali but Paris is keen to swiftly hand the mission over to West Africa's ECOWAS bloc, which in December secured a UN mandate for a 3,300-strong mission to help Mali recapture its north.

Military experts say France and its African allies must now capitalise on a week of hard-hitting air strikes by seizing the initiative on the ground to prevent the insurgents from withdrawing into the desert and reorganising.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2013/01/201311813241652988.html>

6. JORDAN and LEBANON

- **Lebanese minister says survived assassination attempt**

TRIPOLI, Lebanon: Minister Faisal Karami said Friday he was a target of an assassination attempt Friday while he was on his way to Friday prayers.

“I was a target of an assassination attempt when my convoy was attacked by gunfire and they were aiming at me,” Karami was quoted as saying.

<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Local-News/2013/Jan-18/202786-lebanese-minister-says-survived-assassination-attempt.ashx#ixzz2IKZ34FCv>

- **Siniora, Berri meet over electoral law**

BEIRUT: Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri met Friday with the head of the Future parliamentary bloc MP Fouad Siniora in a bid to break the deadlock over a new electoral law for the upcoming elections.

The officials met at Berri's Ain el-Tineh resident in Beirut.

<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Politics/2013/Jan-18/202796-siniora-berri-meet-over-electoral-law.ashx#ixzz2IKZEbb9X>

7. ARABIAN PENINSULA AND THE GULF OF BASRA

- **Yemeni protesters once again hold demo in Sana'a**

Yemeni protesters have once again staged a demonstration in Sana'a to express discontent with the government's failure to fulfill their demands following the ouster of former dictator Ali Abdullah Saleh, Press TV reports.

The demonstrators took to the streets of the capital on Thursday, calling on President Abdrabuh Mansur Hadi to reorganize the army and release all political prisoners.

The protesters also denounced foreign interference in the internal affairs of the country.

Fatima al-Muhagiri, a young activist among the protesters, told Press TV, "Western nations say they want to help us out. However, this is not their true intention. What they really want is to exploit us."

"The Yemeni people will determine their own future," she added.

Yemeni demonstrators further called for the prosecution of former regime officials, who were involved in the killing of peaceful protesters during the uprising of 2011.

“We demand the prosecution of all the killers and the revocation of the immunity bill which grants murderers immunity from prosecution. There should be no such law which protects killers,” said another protester.

Saleh formally stepped down and handed over power to then Vice President Hadi in February 2012. The power transfer occurred under a Saudi-backed deal brokered by the [Persian] Gulf Cooperation Council in April 2011 and signed by Saleh in Riyadh on November 23, 2011.

Hadi, who is a UK-trained field marshal, was sworn in on February 25, 2012, following a single-candidate presidential election on February 21, which was supported by the United States and the Saudi regime.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/01/18/284180/yemenis-hold-another-demo-in-sanaa/>

- **Saudi Arabia to grant \$100m to Palestinians**

The Palestinian government is struggling to cover its expenditures since Israel announced it would withhold tax revenue.

Saudi Arabia will give the Palestinian government in the Israeli-occupied West Bank \$100m to help alleviate a worsening budget crisis, the Palestinian president's office has said.

"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," Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas said in a statement on Thursday.

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

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

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 Saudi aid will make little progress toward lowering the government's debt of more than \$1.3bn 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 \$1.8bn in foreign aid in 2008 plunged to \$600m 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 \$100m 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 \$133m in annual assistance to the Palestinians and UN aid agencies servicing Palestinian refugees, in line with previous years.

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

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/01/201311764936719632.html>

8. AFGHANISTAN - PAKISTAN

- **Pakistan strikes deal with opposition cleric**

Canadian-Pakistani Tahir-ul Qadri calls off four-day protest in Islamabad after government makes concessions.

A cleric demanding electoral reforms and a fight against corruption in Pakistan has called off a four-day street protest in the capital, Islamabad, after a deal was reached with the government.

"I congratulate you. Today is the day of victory for the people of Pakistan. You should go home as peacefully as you came here," Canadian-Pakistani academic and preacher Tahir-ul Qadri told his supporters after signing the deal with the prime minister.

Qadri had called on tens of thousands of his followers camped outside parliament to remain in place while he held negotiations with officials on Thursday.

"The government constituted a committee and ten members of that committee, all from the ruling coalition partners ... went into a meeting held inside the bomb-proof container where Qadri has been sitting for the last four days," Al Jazeera's Kamal Hyder, reporting from Islamabad, said.

"While Qadri has been sitting inside that container, women and children have been sitting outside in pounding rain, waiting for good news."

Caretaker government

Qadri demanded the government be dissolved and replaced by an independent caretaker government in consultation with the military and judiciary to implement key reforms before free elections can be held.

A negotiation team member said the government agreed to dissolve the National Assembly a few days before its term ends in March, giving 90 days until elections are held. That gives time to make sure politicians are eligible to stand for election, he said.

The government also agreed that the caretaker administration, which normally precedes elections, would be chosen in consultation with all parties, the negotiator said.

A declaration laying out the agreement between the government and Qadri was signed by Prime Minister Raja Pervaiz Ashraf as well as the high-level government officials who made up the negotiating team, an official in the prime minister's office said.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia/2013/01/2013117161813918263.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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