



# MIDDLE EAST DAILY BULLETIN

## GÜNLÜK ORTADOĐU BÜLTENİ

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## 1. IRAQ

- **State of law will hold an important meeting today.**

BAGHDAD / NINA / Hassan al-Sinead, a leader in the state of law coalition said that "an important meeting for the state of law coalition will be held today 8, Jan to discuss the latest developments in the political process."

A source told the National Iraqi News Agency / NINA / "Decisions, he described important, will be issued in this meeting" without clarifying the nature of these decisions.

The Prime Minister and the Chairman of the state law coalition, Nuri al-Maliki had called earlier to dissolve the parliament, and turn the government into a caretaker government, and hold early elections in the country.

[http://www.ninanews.com/English/News\\_Details.asp?ar95\\_VQ=GFHIJJ](http://www.ninanews.com/English/News_Details.asp?ar95_VQ=GFHIJJ)

- **Iraqiya's Ministers boycott the Cabinet**

BAGHDAD / NINA / Sources said that the Iraqiya coalition's ministers would boycott the Cabinet meeting today 8, Jan.

The sources told the National Iraqi News Agency / NINA /: "Boycotting the Iraqiya coalition's ministers meeting comes to protest against non-implementation the demands of the demonstrators."

[http://www.ninanews.com/English/News\\_Details.asp?ar95\\_VQ=GFHIJF](http://www.ninanews.com/English/News_Details.asp?ar95_VQ=GFHIJF)

- **Kurdish parties will hold a meeting to move toward ending the crisis.**

BAGHDAD / NINA / Azad Jundiyanı, spokesman of the Political Bureau of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) announced an agreement between the PUK and Democratic party of Kurdistan, to sustain efforts initiated by President Jalal Talabani to resolve the situation and find a way out to the political crisis.

Jindiyanı said in a press statement that "The Kurdish parties will hold a meeting to formulate a final position to the current crisis and to stars talks with the Iraqi National Alliance."

He added: "It was agreed with the Democratic Party to sustain efforts, since the current situation is volatile and needs quick moves."

Jindiyanı said: "The Kurdish regional president Massoud Barzani will begin consultations with the leaders of the Kurdish parties, and will hold an expanded meeting includes all Kurdish parties, in order to start serious talks with the National Alliance to move toward ending to the crisis."

He said: "The current situation is no longer possible, with serious repercussions."

President Jalal Talabani had begun, before his health dilemma, consultations and meetings with most of the Iraqi leaders and with Kurdish senior delegation consists of Barham Salih, Deputy Secretary General of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and Fadhil Mirani secretary of Democratic Party, in order to ease the situation and find a way out to the political crisis, but his sudden illness stopped those consultations.

[http://www.ninanews.com/English/News\\_Details.asp?ar95\\_VQ=GFHIJE](http://www.ninanews.com/English/News_Details.asp?ar95_VQ=GFHIJE)

- **MP: Justice and Accountability law is a constitutional, its cancellation needs a constitutional amendment.**

BAGHDAD / NINA / The head of the parliamentary citizen bloc, Baqir al-Zubaidi said that "The Justice and Accountability Law is a constitutional article and the issue of cancelling it needs a constitutional amendment and this is difficult at this time."

He said in a statement to the National Iraqi News Agency / NINA / "Some political blocs have the desire to cancel the Justice and Accountability Law as the demonstrators' request" noting that "cancelling the law put us in a constitutional problem, which needs to amend the Article concerning the law and this is difficult during the current period."

On today's session of the House of Representatives, Zubaidi said "The meeting will witness the return of the state of law bloc to its normal work in meetings and committees, and we hope that the Council will continue its work to read the laws and legislations."

The MP, of the Iraqiya coalition, Omar al-Jubouri said that the cancellation of the Justice and Accountability Law, as the demonstrators demand, is in accordance with Islamic Sharia law and international law as well as the Iraqi constitution.

[http://www.ninanews.com/English/News\\_Details.asp?ar95\\_VQ=GFHIHJ](http://www.ninanews.com/English/News_Details.asp?ar95_VQ=GFHIHJ)

- **Iraqiya MP: Dissolving the government is the way we would resort if partners continued stalling.**

BAGHDAD / NINA / MP, of the Iraqiya coalition, Mudhher al-Janabi said: "The option of dissolving the government and holding early elections is the way we would resort if the political partners continued stalling and lack of a sense of responsibility."

Janabi said in a statement to the National Iraqi News Agency / NINA /: "It seems that the political partners brought us, through indifference to our invitations for dialogue and communication, to a crossroads and this is a catastrophe by itself and might entered the country into chaos."

He explained: "The evidence for this, they did not have a stand in managing the crisis in the country," noting that "the boycott of the MPs of state of law, who are close to Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, to the parliament emergency session yesterday is a proof that they look to the other party and to their partners in the political process as they are outside the arc. "

He added: "The blocs, which refrained from attending yesterday's session fostered that this meeting is a sectarian meeting before it is hold," indicating that "they expect what they like and this is not a policy nor respectful others and communicate with them and this is what will drive us to resort to the option of dissolving the government and holding early elections ".

He continued: "The State of Law coalition is one of the poles to solve the crisis if it continued with the rest of the political parties to a radical solution to the crisis," calling it "to accommodate this crisis and to see his partners as genuine partners and communicate with everyone for the sake of the country."

It was scheduled that the House of Representatives holds an extraordinary session called by House Speaker Osama al-Nujaifi to discuss the current situation and the demands of the demonstrators in a number of provinces, but state of law coalition and the virtue bloc as well as the Supreme Council boycotted the session, causing the lack of a quorum. "/

[http://www.ninanews.com/English/News\\_Details.asp?ar95\\_VQ=GFHIHD](http://www.ninanews.com/English/News_Details.asp?ar95_VQ=GFHIHD)

- **Persian Gulf Arab states trying to destabilize Iraq, politico says**

The Arab states of the Persian Gulf have been conducting a massive campaign to destabilize Iraq since the fall of former dictator Saddam Hussein, Intifad Qanbar of the Iraqi National Alliance told Press TV.

“There’s a huge amount of foreign intervention in Iraq, unfortunately, a lot of it coming from [Persian] Gulf countries who are trying to destabilize Iraq since 2003,” Qanbar said.

He noted that the progress Iraq has made in its transition to democracy, its Shia-dominated government, and its friendly ties with Iran are the main reasons the Persian Gulf Arab states have adopted antagonistic strategies toward the country.

However, he expressed optimism that, through relying on its democratically elected government and parliament, Iraq “will continue to be a successful democracy.”

On Sunday, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki warned against what he calls foreign agendas to exacerbate the country’s political crisis and foment sectarian violence.

Iraq has been the scene of anti-government demonstrations since December 23, when bodyguards of Finance Minister Rafie al-Issawi were arrested on terrorism-related charges.

The demonstrators say the arrests were made based on sectarian biases and are demanding that the anti-terrorism laws be rescinded or revised. But the government says that only the parliament can rescind or revise those laws.

On Wednesday, Maliki said Baghdad would use force to end the demonstrations in Anbar, where protesters have blocked off a highway linking Iraq to Syria and Jordan. The Iraqi government says foreign hands are behind the demonstrations.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/01/08/282356/persian-gulf-arabs-destabilizing-iraq/>

- **Iraq's Mofti: Do not listen to flies' buzzing that does not distract men from their hard tasks**

Ramadi (NINA) - His Eminence Mufti of Iraq, Sheikh Rafi al-Rifa'e, sent a message addressed to the protestors in Anbar, telling them not to listen to the buzzing of the flies that does not distract men off their hard tasks.

In his message to the protestors, Sheikh Rifa'e called on protestors and demonstrators in Iraq to stand firm at their positions and continue protesting and demonstrating, not to be drawn after promises of those who do not keep promises.

In his message, Sheikh Rifa'e called on demonstrators and protestors in Anbar and other provinces not to believe or follow the languid who try to discourage determination and not to follow politicians who have no conscience or pledge.

He added that protestors and demonstrators did not go out in clitoris; rather they went out to tear down submission and injustice to tell the tyrant that you have overstepped your limits; prisons and graveyards are being full, your government's corruption has reached up high.

Sheikh Rifa'e pointed out that whatever phony slogans the authority and claims of democracy are mere lies. Calling on the protestors and demonstrators to stand firm in their position until their demands are met.

[http://www.ninanews.com/English/News\\_Details.asp?ar95\\_VQ=GFHIEJ](http://www.ninanews.com/English/News_Details.asp?ar95_VQ=GFHIEJ)

## 2. IRAN

- **Assad plan shows Damascus' resolve to implement reforms: Larijani**

Iranian Majlis Speaker Ali Larijani says the plan proposed by the Syrian president to end the crisis in the Arab country demonstrates Damascus's determination to implement political reforms.



The Syrian government's plan showed that Damascus "has a solemn resolve to implement political reforms and changes," Larijani said on Tuesday, adding that, "Naturally, security grounds [for this objective] must be provided."

"Majlis welcomes reformist measures based on the nation's vote in Syria," Larijani added.

Syria has been experiencing unrest since mid-March 2011. Many people, including large numbers of security personnel, have been killed in the violence.

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

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

Larijani said the plan aims to implement reforms based on elections and the will of the people and warned the "meddlesome countries" that opposition to this bid is tantamount to "waging war on the establishment of democracy in Syria."

Larijani expressed regret that, over the past two years, the Western countries and some regional states have “fueled insecurity” in Syria by sending arms and other equipments into the Arab country.

Meddlesome countries must now know that they cannot force changes in Syria by plotting and sending arms and forces to the Arab country, he added.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/01/08/282405/syria-government-resolved-on-reforms/>

- **Syria crisis, plot devised to ensure Israel security: Iran envoy**

Iran’s Ambassador to Lebanon Ghazanfar Roknabadi says the ongoing crisis in Syria was a plot devised to ensure the security of the Israeli regime.

“The trend of the developments in Syria proved that... a plot had been hatched to create a crisis in Syria in order to ensure the security of the Zionist regime (Israel),” Roknabadi said on Monday.

Syria has been experiencing unrest since mid-March 2011. Many people, including large numbers of security personnel, have been killed in the violence.

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.

The Iranian ambassador made the remarks in a meeting with Lebanese Coptic leader Archbishop Louis Urshalimi.

Stressing the necessity of strengthening stability and solidarity in the regional countries particularly Lebanon and Syria, the Iranian ambassador said the Islamic Republic does not spare any effort to facilitate unity among nations fighting against the occupying regime of Israel.

Urshalimi, for his part, said the situation in Syria is progressing toward stability but certain media outlets are trying to portray a distorted picture of the developments.

Urshalimi stressed the necessity of a political solution to the crisis in Syria and said the continuation of conflicts has no result but more devastation.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/01/08/282393/syria-crisis-plot-to-ensure-israel-safety/>

- **Reformists should reach consensus to avoid electoral defeat: Aref**

TEHRAN, Jan. 8 (MNA) – Mohammad Reza Aref, who has been mentioned as a possible reformist candidate in Iran’s 2013 presidential election, has said that pro-reform groups should reach a consensus on their policy on the presidential election in order to avoid an electoral defeat.

Aref, who is a member of the Expediency Council, made the remarks in a meeting with journalists and media people in Tehran on Monday.

“Pro-reform media outlets should change the present climate, and if we do not want to face a defeat, we should reach a consensus. If the reformists, led by Mr. Khatami, reach any consensus, I will accept (to run for presidency),” said Aref, who formerly served as vice president under Mohammad Khatami.

Commenting on the remarks by certain pro-reform figures saying that the reformists should not participate in the election, he said that such remarks are not in the national interest.

“Considering our position in the system and the Islamic Revolution, the boycott of the election is out of the question,” he said. “The reformists should come to the scene if they want to achieve the (desired) result.”

In addition, he said that the reformists should not set conditions, including the release of political prisoners, for the system to participate in the election because the system has shown over the past 30 years that it does not accept any conditions.

Elsewhere in his remarks, Aref said that he believes that the only solution to political issues facing the country is “moderation”.

<http://www.mehrnews.com/en/newsdetail.aspx?NewsID=1786143>

- **‘Consensus on a single principlist candidate not feasible’**

TEHRAN, Jan. 8 (MNA) – Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah Yazdi has said that reaching a consensus on a single principlist candidate for the 2013 presidential election is not feasible.

It cannot be expected that the principlists agree on one candidate unless the situation develops in such a way that “if we do not vote for this person, a corrupt person would win the vote,” Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi stated during a meeting with a number of the members of the central council of the Islamic Revolution Devotees Society on Monday.

He also called on the principlist groups to refrain from damaging each other’s reputation, saying that they all pursue a common goal, which is serving the religion and the revolution.

<http://www.mehrnews.com/en/newsdetail.aspx?NewsID=1786135>

- **Crisis in Syria deflecting public from Saudi, Bahrain suppression**

TEHRAN, Jan. 7 (MNA) – Former Iranian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs has said that anti-Assad regimes in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain are well-aware of a day when Islamic Awakening or Arab Spring breeze would embrace them as well.

Hussein Sheikh al-Eslami asserted that Saudi and Bahraini rulers fueled the Syrian crisis in order to deflect the public opinions from their suppression of public unrest.

He also provided comments on western reaction to Assad's speech and said that western powers, and US and Israel want to dry out Syrian government and army capabilities in inside conflicts, which have been equipped to deal with Israel.

"The Arab countries and their Emirs want disintegration of Syria. They think that Arab Spring is not Arab mass demands for political participation, but a Shiite-Sunni rivalry revived," he added.

Former Iranian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs asserted that Arabs are well-aware of a day when Islamic Awakening or Arab Spring breeze would embrace them as well; they want to deflect the public attention from revolutions in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, and to depict Syrian crisis as Shiite-Sunni rivalry, and bring Syria toward disintegration.

He also said that some countries dreamed of revived Ottoman Empire, and since it was not geographically viable, they have launched attempts to realize it at least in political grounds.

"NATO is an agent for fueling ethnic violence in Iraq, Syria, etc., as well in line with this intention," he believed. "Bashar al-Assad has presented the peaceful negotiations for terrorists and those warmongers in Doha to listen to his remarks," he added.

<http://www.mehrnews.com/en/newsdetail.aspx?NewsID=1785987>

- **Iran designing software for controlled social media access**

TEHRAN, (AFP) — Iran is designing "intelligent software" that would give citizens restricted and controlled access to banned social networking sites, local media on Sunday quoted police chief Esmail Ahmadi Moghadam as saying.

"Smart control of social networks will not only avoid their disadvantages, but will also allow people to benefit from their useful aspects," Ahmadi Moghadam said, as cited by the 7Sobh daily.

"The designing of intelligent software to control social networking websites" is underway, he added.

Facebook, Twitter and many other social websites are blocked by an official filtering mechanism as part of Iran's strict Internet censorship.

But many web users in Iran, where half of the 75-million population is connected to the Internet, have found ways around the blocks through sophisticated software known as VPN despite it being declared illegal in Iran.

Ahmadi Moghadam hinted that the new software would allow Iranians to have limited access to social networks.

"Smart control of social networks is better than filtering them completely," he said, without elaborating.

His comments came after the launch in mid-December of a Facebook page dedicated to the country's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei attracted a great deal of attention at home and abroad.

Authorities regularly warn Iranians against the dangers of social websites, arguing they are part of a Western-backed plot to undermine the Islamic regime.

Iran launched a "cyber police" unit in 2011 to confront anti-regime conduct online. But the death of blogger Sattar Beheshti in its custody in November provoked an international outcry, leading to the dismissal of its chief after an official inquiry.

Iran is also working on establishing a national intranet that it says will be clean of un-Islamic content. Authorities claim the "National Internet" would not cut access to the Internet.

Social networks and websites such as the video-sharing hub YouTube were used in organising street protests after the disputed re-election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2009.

Several activists, bloggers and journalists are reported to have been arrested due to their posts and comments on social networks.

The United States accuses Iran of maintaining an "electronic curtain" to cut its citizens off from the world.

<http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&id=32449>

### 3. SYRIA

- **Syria crisis can't have military cure, UN reiterates**

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has reiterated that there can be no military solution to the Syrian crisis, urging the international community to help end the unrest, Press TV reports.

"What the Syrian people desperately need at this time are real solutions to the crisis that is tearing their nation apart," Ban said through his spokesman Martin Nesirky on Monday.

Meanwhile, the UN chief shunned President Bashar al-Assad's calls and proposals for ending the ongoing unrest in the crisis-stricken country, echoing a Western call for regime change in Syria.

Nesirky was not prepared to further clarify Ban's stance.

Assad's speech, which called for dialogue with the opposition and vowed resistance against terrorists, was also condemned by the United States.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov met with UN Special Envoy to Syria, Lakhdar Brahimi last week, repeating his concern that many of the smuggled guns are going to terrorists.

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

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 fighting the Syrian government are foreign nationals.

Several international human rights organizations have accused foreign-sponsored militants of committing war crimes.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/01/08/282406/syria-crisis-cant-have-military-cure/>

- **Syrians rally in support of President Bashar al-Assad**

A large group of Syrian people have staged rallies in support of President Bashar al-Assad and expressed satisfaction with his recent speech and roadmap for ending the ongoing crisis in the Arab country, Press TV reports.

Shouting slogans in support of Assad, the protesters said a solution that does not involve foreign intervention and preserves the rights of the Syrian people to decide their country's future is acceptable.

"I support dialogue. Violence should stop. Those who want bloodshed to end have to listen to what president said," said a Syrian citizen.

On Sunday, the Syrian leader delivered a lecture and proposed a new strategic roadmap and the formation of a national reconciliation conference with the aim of ending the crisis.

Assad also warned against foreign intervention and lambasted certain Western states and their regional allies for funding the militants.

Meanwhile, political parties in Syria also welcomed Assad's proposed plan and described it as a positive step towards implementing a political solution.

The National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change, however, rejected Assad's vision for solving the unrest, saying the committee considers the Syrian president to be unrealistic.

"We refuse to participate in any dialogue meeting before the halt of violence and the release of prisoners. Then we would accept to indirectly negotiate, not have the dialogue with the government, under the supervision of the UN Arab League envoy Lakhdar Brahimi," the leader of the National Coordination Committee, Hassan Abdul Azim told reporters.

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Several international human rights organizations have accused foreign-sponsored militants of committing war crimes.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/01/08/282387/syrians-rally-in-support-of-assad/>

- **Syrian Army kills large number of militants in NW**

The Syrian Army has killed a large number of militants during clashes in the Idlib governorate in the country's northwest as fighting continues between government troops and foreign-backed armed groups.

The militants were killed in the al-Mastoumeh town of the governorate on Monday, the official SANA news agency reported.

Government troops also destroyed the militants' hideouts and confiscated their weapons.

The Army also killed and wounded many members of armed terrorist groups in the Taftanaz, Taoum, and Binnish towns in the Idlib countryside.

In addition, the security forces engaged militants on the outskirts of Damascus and killed several armed men on Monday. The Syrian troops also destroyed their hideouts and confiscated weapons.

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Several international human rights organizations have accused foreign-sponsored militants of committing war crimes.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/01/08/282373/syrian-army-kills-militants-in-nw/>

- **Syrian troops kill several militants in Aleppo**

Syrian Army soldiers have killed several foreign-backed militants fighting government forces in the flashpoint city of Aleppo.

The Army killed and wounded many members of a “terrorist group” in the fighting in Aleppo, the official SANA news agency reported on Monday.

Government troops also repelled a militant attack on a police academy in the northern city.

In addition, the security forces engaged militants on the outskirts of Damascus and killed several armed men on Monday. The Syrian troops also destroyed their hideouts and confiscated weapons.

On Sunday, the Syrian Army killed a large number of militants in the cities of Daraya, an-Nabk, Homs, Hama, and Douma.

And a unit of the Syrian armed forces ambushed militants in the town of Tebat al-Imam in the countryside near Hama and seized weapons.

An Army unit also confiscated weapons and munitions from militants who were travelling in a vehicle in the town of Nawa in the countryside near Daraa.

The cache included sniper rifles, assault rifles, bullets, detonators, and wires for explosive devices.

Syria has been experiencing unrest since mid-March 2011. Many people, including large numbers of security personnel, have been killed in the violence.

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 fighting the Syrian government are foreign nationals.

And several international human rights organizations have accused the foreign-sponsored militants of committing war crimes.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/01/08/282361/several-militants-killed-in-aleppo/>

- **Domestic Syria opposition rejects Assad offer**

Syria's tolerated opposition has rejected an offer to enter into talks with the government of President Bashar al-Assad to find a solution to end the 21-month conflict.

The National Coordination Body for Democratic Change in Syria (NCB) made the announcement on Monday even as Prime Minister Wael al-Halaqi said his cabinet would meet soon to draw up a mechanism for the peace roadmap announced by Assad.

On Sunday, Assad outlined in his first speech in months his vision to end the conflict that the UN says has killed 60,000 people.

The president called for an end to the violence and dialogue with opposition figures he deemed acceptable to chart a future course.

"We will not take part in a national dialogue before violence stops," the head of the opposition group, Hassan Abdel Azim, told a news conference in Damascus, setting the first of several conditions for talks with the regime.

He also demanded that any dialogue be preceded by the release of prisoners, a guarantee to ensure humanitarian aid is delivered to areas hit by the violence and the publication of a statement on the fate of missing Syrians.

"Any negotiation - not just a national dialogue - must be held under the aegis of the UN-Arab League envoy," he said.

Meanwhile, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said on Monday that Assad's rejection of the most important elements in an international roadmap to end the country's civil war means Assad has no real plan to end Syrians' "terrible suffering".

"The secretary-general was disappointed that the speech ... does not contribute to a solution that could end the terrible suffering of the Syrian people," said UN spokesman Martin Nesirky.

Ban and UN-Arab League envoy Lakhdar Brahimi will continue to work for a political transition that leads to UN-organised elections, he said.

The roadmap calls for a political transition and the establishment of a transitional governing body.

No 'political solutions'

Hours after Assad addressed cheering loyalists at the Damascus Opera House on Sunday, fighting erupted near the road to the city's international airport, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

The anti-regime activists said artillery hit the district of Aqraba, 5km from the Opera House.

Fighting continued all night and into Monday around the capital, as well as in the northern provinces of Idlib and Aleppo, it said.

In central Syria, the towns of Taybet Imam and Halfaya were bombarded with aerial strikes and artillery, said Abu Faisal, an activist speaking over the internet from Taybet Imam.

Abdel Azim and fellow NCB member Raja al-Nasser insisted that time had run out for "political solutions".

"Assad had to make such proposals at the start of the conflict, in April or May 2011, but he refused and opted for the security solution," Abdel Aziz said.

Nasser branded the initiative revealed on Sunday by Assad as a "war speech".

The official SANA news agency quoted Assad's embattled prime minister as inviting government ministers to meet "in order to set up the necessary mechanisms for the national programme" outlined by the president.

Assad outlined a three-phase plan, including entrusting the government with chairing a national dialogue conference with Syrians inside and outside the country to find a solution.

The NCB, which was set up in September 2011, six months after the outbreak of the Syrian conflict, brings together Arab and Kurdish nationalists, Marxists and independents, such as writer Michel Kilo and economist Aref Dalila.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/01/2013172143332758.html>

- **Syria rebels 'monitor' chemical weapons sites**

The rebel Free Syrian Army says it has formed special units to secure the country's chemical weapons.

The issue of what could come of Syria's cache of chemical weapons amid the instability and fighting in the country has prompted international concerns, with Russia and Israel weighing on where and how the weapons are being stored.

Rebel Brigadier General Salim Idris told Al Jazeera that the special units "provide us with intelligence on any movement at those sites and as soon as the regime falls, we have units tasked with securing the depots".

Al Jazeera's Hashem Ahelbarra reports from Antakya in neighbouring Turkey.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/01/201317154911587311.html>

## 4. ISRAEL-PALESTINE

- **Abbas orders issue of 'Palestine' passports**

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas has asked his West Bank-based government to prepare for replacing the words "Palestinian Authority" with "State of Palestine".

The order by Abbas on Sunday applies to all public documents, but Palestinian officials said on Monday they will not rush to issue new passports and ID cards to avoid confrontation with Israel.

Hassan Alawi, a deputy interior minister in the Palestinian Authority, said documents and stationery with the new emblem will be ready within two months, but all documents Palestinians need in their dealings with Israel will only be changed if there is a further decision by Abbas.

Mark Regev, an Israeli government spokesman, dismissed the name change as insignificant, but declined comment on whether Israel would retaliate in any way.

"Whether the changes are really implemented is unsure because of the political situation right now," said Al Jazeera's Jane Ferguson, reporting from Jerusalem. "But the move is to regain momentum after the UN vote."

In late November, Abbas won UN recognition of a state of Palestine in the occupied West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem, overriding Israeli objections to the largely symbolic step.

The UN bid gave the Palestinians new diplomatic leverage by affirming the borders of a future state of Palestine in lands Israel captured in 1967, but changed little in the day-to-day lives of Palestinians.

Set up two decades ago as part of interim peace deals with Israel, the self-rule government was meant to be temporary and replaced by a fully functioning state of Palestine - to be established through negotiations with Israel.

However, those talks repeatedly broke down, and for the past four years the two sides have been unable to agree on the terms of renewing the negotiations.

#### Financial turmoil

In an apparent response to the UN move, Israel in December halted its monthly transfer of about \$100m in tax rebates it collects on behalf of the Palestinians. That sum amounts to about one-third of the monthly operating costs of the Palestinian Authority, which now only takes in about \$50m a month in revenues.

Israel has said it used the withheld money to settle Palestinian Authority debt to Israeli companies, and it is not clear whether the transfers will resume.

As a result, the Palestinian Authority is on the "verge of being completely incapacitated", Prime Minister Salam Fayyad warned on Sunday.

In an interview with the Associated Press news agency, Fayyad attributed his government's "extreme jeopardy" and unprecedented financial crisis to failure by Arab countries to send hundreds of millions of dollars in promised aid.

The 22-nation Arab League has not kept a promise to make up for the funds Israel withholds, Fayyad said.

The cash crunch has gradually worsened in recent years, and the Palestinian Authority now has reached the point of not being able to pay the salaries of about 150,000 government employees, Fayyad said.

While European countries have kept their aid commitments, about \$200m in US aid was held up by Congress last year - a sum President Barack Obama's administration hopes to deliver to the Palestinians this year, along with an additional \$250m in aid.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/01/20131714937630686.html>

- **Netanyahu probed for accepting money from businessman**

Israel's Justice Ministry says that an investigation was launched last year over allegations that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had received a substantial sum of money from a businessman.

The ministry said Sunday night that businessman Dedi Graucher had passed on "hundreds of thousands of shekels" to Netanyahu, Haaretz reported.

"The state comptroller [former State Comptroller Micha Lindenstrauss] passed on this information [about Graucher] to the attorney general [Yehuda Weinstein]," the Israeli Justice Ministry said.

Two of Netanyahu's office workers claim to have witnessed the money exchange and Weinstein ordered police to start a discreet investigation of the transfer.

The alleged money transfer was exposed during the investigation of the "Bibi-tours" affairs, in which the Israeli prime minister was accused of using money from businessmen and donors for personal trips.

One of the allegations involves a NIS 48,000 (USD 13,000) New York hotel bill apparently paid for Netanyahu by Graucher's corporation.

However, Graucher has denied those accusations and claimed he only gave the prime minister a credit card for a security deposit.

Netanyahu also immediately denied the allegations against him as false, claiming the attorney general's decision to investigate him were politically motivated.

The Israeli police have so far concluded that there is not enough evidence to warrant a criminal probe.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/01/07/282249/netanyahu-investigated-over-illegal-funds/>

- **Israeli settlers attack village in Israel-occupied West Bank**

Israeli settlers have attacked the village of Qusra in the north of Israel-occupied West Bank, Press TV reports.

The armed settlers attacked the residential area in the village on Saturday afternoon, but were chased away by young people from the village.

They also made an effort to uproot trees belonging to Palestinian farmers in the village.

“The settlers opened live fire in the direction of the villagers, who went out to stop them, but that did not intimidate the youth from protecting their land and the blessed olive trees,” said Abdel Athim Wadi, the head of Qusra village council.

Those injured in the attack were taken to a local hospital for treatment.

One of the injured said the Israeli settlers were throwing stones at one of the houses when “we chased them away with stones and then the Army came and started firing rubber-coated bullets and gas canisters at us.”

Wadi also said there has been a change in the manner of the attacks as they “used to be spontaneous and barbaric, but now the attacks are organized...There seems to be a planned organization of the settlers and their attacks by some unified administration.”

Last month, Israeli officials said they would go ahead with plans to build 6,500 settler units on occupied Palestinian territory, despite the opposition of the United Nations and the international community.

More than half a million Israelis live in over 120 illegal settlements built since Israel’s occupation of the Palestinian territories of the West Bank and East al-Quds in 1967.

The UN and most countries consider the Israeli settlements to be illegal because the territories were captured by Israel in the war and are hence subject to the Geneva Conventions, which forbid construction on occupied lands.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/01/07/282184/israeli-settlers-attack-village-in-wb/>,

- **EU backing informal back channel Israeli-Palestinian talks**

Amid stall in formal peace negotiations, a number of different groups are looking at final-status “core issues” to formulate recommendations of incremental steps that could improve the atmosphere between the two sides.

With Israeli-Palestinian negotiations nonexistent for most of the last four years, informal talks between academics, public figures and former military and civil officials from both sides are once again currently taking place, often backed by the European Union.

When there are no formal negotiations to speak of, informal talks tend to flourish, said one participant in the informal dialogues collectively known as Track II diplomacy.

According to officials involved in the dialogues, which are being held discreetly, a number of different groups are looking at so-called final-status “core issues” – such as Jerusalem and security – to formulate recommendations of incremental steps that could be implemented to improve the atmosphere between the two sides.

The officials said there has been a lowering of the bar in the discussions from the late '80s and early '90s, when the Track II, or back channel, talks led to the Oslo Accords. Now, the officials said, there is much less talk about sweeping, comprehensive agreements, and more about small steps that could – if implemented – help rebuild trust between the two sides.

One of the officials involved said that if in the past the underlying principle of Israeli- Palestinian negotiations was that nothing was agreed upon until everything was agreed, now a different philosophy is emerging in some of these dialogues – that what is agreed upon should be implemented right away to rebuild confidence and show the skeptical publics on both sides that progress is achievable.

While the government is not behind these initiatives, the official said it is aware of at least some of the dialogues and kept abreast of the discussions. The official said that the initiatives can be

beneficial to the government down the line because if and when talks are restarted, some of the ideas that have been fleshed out in the informal meetings could be ready to be implemented immediately on the ground.

Brig.-Gen. (res.) Udi Dekel, appointed by then-prime minister Ehud Olmert to lead negotiations with the Palestinians following the 2007 Annapolis meeting, is taking part in one of these dialogues: an ongoing EU-funded project dealing with the way a two-state solution would impact regional security and the regional balance of power.

Dekel's working group is part of a trilateral (Israeli, Palestinian and Jordanian) research project led and managed by the S. Daniel Abraham Center for Strategic Dialogue at Netanya Academic College, in partnership with Palestinian and Jordanian partners organizations, under the auspices of the EU's "Partnership for Peace" Program.

The overall goal of the project is to present the regional implications of the establishment of a Palestinian state.

Dekel, who said that neither the Palestinian nor Jordanian participants wanted their names revealed at this time, met them in Jordan and is working with them on a regular basis on the project via the Internet. The idea, he explained, was to posit that an Israeli-Palestinian agreement had already been reached and that a Palestinian state was already a reality, and to then look at various models of regional cooperation.

"Our premise is that we already have an agreement, so the question is what kind of regional cooperation can we talk about," Dekel said, admitting that the initial premise – about an agreement – is a giant leap.

Nevertheless, he said, the exercise is worthwhile because by positing a final structure, or how cooperation could look years down the line, policy makers may be better able to figure out the tactics needed to get there.

<http://www.jpost.com/DiplomacyAndPolitics/Article.aspx?id=298779>

- **PM: Iran is greatest world danger, not settlements**

Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu on Monday evening said Israel is "prepared to make compromises for peace," but the rest of the world must "wake up" to the great challenges from Iran and Syria.

Addressing the Taglit-Birthright Israel "Mega Event" crowd, where Birthright was celebrating its 13th year, Netanyahu said: "I believe that it's time for the rest of the world to wake up."

In an apparent dig at the US and European condemnation of recent plans to build in the E1 corridor, the prime minister said the greatest danger to the world is "not from Jews building in our ancestral capital in Jerusalem."

Continuing, he said: "It's from nuclear weapons in Iran, those weapons that are built in Iran. It's chemical weapons in Syria falling into the wrong hands. That's the danger we have to focus on," the prime minister said.

Netanyahu stated that Israel understands and deals with the dangers, but called on "responsible leaders" of the international community to address the "real challenges to all of mankind.

The prime minister reiterated Israel's desire for peace, saying the country is "prepared to make compromises for peace."

He also addressed the issue of gender equality, saying that "men, women and minorities are free to pursue any dream they have." In an exclamatory tone, the prime minister said: "We have new pilots in the Israeli Air Force. Five women pilots! That's the real Israel."

<http://www.jpost.com/DiplomacyAndPolitics/Article.aspx?id=298796>

## 5. AFRICA and EGYPT

- **Egypt's Mursi backs calls for Assad war crimes trial**

Cairo, (AFP) - Egyptian President Mohamed Mursi told CNN Sunday he backs Syrian calls for Bashar al-Assad to be tried for war crimes, and predicted Assad's regime would fall in the country's bloody civil war.

"The Syrian people, through their revolution, and through the movement will, when the bloodshed stops, move to a new stage where they will have an independent parliament and the government of their choosing," Mursi said, according to excerpts released by the network.

"And then they will decide what they want to do against those who committed crimes against them. It is the Syrian people who decide."

Mursi spoke through a translator after being asked if he believed Assad, the president of Syria, should be tried by the Netherlands-based International Criminal Court.

"This phase is the phase of the people. Similar to what the Egyptian people wanted, the Syrian people want it. And we support the Syrian people. And they are going to win and they have the will to win," he said.

Over the past 21 months, the Assad regime's crackdown on anti-government protests has ballooned into a bloody civil war that the United Nations says has claimed more than 60,000 lives.

Earlier Sunday, Assad offered a road map to end the conflict in a rare speech -- his first in public in seven months -- in which he branded the opposition "slaves" of the West and told foreign powers to stop backing the rebels.

In Washington, the US State Department described the road map as "detached from reality" and reiterated its call for Assad to resign. The European Union also called on him to step aside.

<http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&id=32461>

- **Constituent Assembly members organizing association to promote Constitution**

Members of the Constituent Assembly started taking steps to establish an official association aimed at educating the public about the Constitution.

Muslim Brotherhood spokesperson Mahmoud Ghozlan and Pharmacists Syndicate head Mohamed Abdel Gawad are among the assembly members organizing the new association.

Constituent Assembly member Amr Abdel Hady said in a press statement on Monday that the formal request to establish the association would be filed within days, and that it would be open to those who are not members of the Constituent Assembly, "because a large number of Shura Council members have requested to join the new association after it is established."

The association would ensure that no legislative or executive body would abuse the Constitution, by fighting for the correct provision of its articles, said Constituent Assembly member Nour Eddin Ali.

Hossam al-Gheriany, the head of the Constituent Assembly, would also head up the association.

<http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/constituent-assembly-members-organizing-association-promote-constitution>

- **Egypt Copts mark Christmas with fear of future**

CAIRO (AP) — Egypt's minority Christians were celebrating their first Christmas after the election of an Islamist president and a new pope — and following adoption of a constitution many argue has an Islamist slant.

Christians gathered in Cairo's main cathedral Sunday for Midnight Mass on the eve of Orthodox Christmas led by their new pope. Pope Tawadros II was elected in November to replace longtime Pope Shenouda III, who died in March after 40 years as the leader of the church.

Islamist President Mohammed Morsi called Tawadros with Christmas greetings and sent one of his aides to the Christmas mass.

Concerned for their future and their ancient heritage in Egypt, some Copts are reportedly considering leaving the country.

As Egypt struggles with the role of religion in society, many Copts are aligning themselves with moderate Muslims and secular Egyptians who also fear the rise of Islamic power.

Amir Ramzy, a Coptic Christian and a judge in Cairo's court of appeals, said Christmas is a chance to retreat and pray for a "better Egypt."

"Christians are approaching Christmas with disappointment, grief and complaints, fearing not only their problems but Egypt's situation in general," Ramzy said. "During the reign of (ousted President Hosni) Mubarak and the (military rulers), mainly Christians were facing problems, but now with the Muslim Brotherhood leaders, each and every moderate Egyptian is facing problems."

In one of his first public messages after his enthronement, Tawadros said the ouster of Mubarak opened the way for a larger Coptic public role, encouraging them to participate in the nation's evolving democracy.

Egypt's Coptic Christians, who make up about 10 percent of Egypt's 85 million people, have long complained of discrimination by the state and the country's Muslim majority. Clashes with Muslims have occasionally broken out, sparked by church construction, land disputes or Muslim-Christian love affairs.

Following the ouster of Mubarak in 2011, sectarian violence rose, and attacks on churches sent thousands of Coptic protesters into the streets. A protest in October 2011 was violently quelled by the country's military rulers, leaving 26 people dead and sparking further outrage.

Ereny Rizk, 34, whose brother George died in that incident, said it was the second Christmas without him, but that the election of a new pope has raised her spirits.

"I felt like he's my father. Having him lessened the severity of my grief," she said. "I definitely thought about leaving the country, but two things stopped me. First the churches and the monasteries in Egypt, our heritage that I'll be missing. Also, I decided not to let my brother's blood go in vain."

The violence has abated, and 2012 was characterized more by the struggle for political and religious rights, said Hossam Bahgat, the director of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights.

"It is not actual frequent sectarian violence, it is fear of further marginalization and second class citizenship," he said, adding that Egypt has been deeply polarized as it drafted the constitution. Christians and liberals walked out of the committee writing it, complaining that their concerns were not being addressed by the Islamist majority.

Youssef Sidhom, the editor of Egypt's main Coptic newspaper, Watani, said Christians are more concerned for the identity of Egypt, saying that legislation based on the new constitution will be focus of attention out of fear of restrictions on the way of life of Christians and their freedom of worship and expression.

"Egypt is stepping into 2013 split and divided between Copts and moderate Muslims on one side confronting political Islam and fundamentalists on the other side," Sidhom said. "It will only be (resolved) through reconciliation, and this is the challenge that we will have to meet."

Ishak Ibrahim, a researcher with EIPR who monitors religious freedom cases in Egypt, said Coptic Christians are facing two new sets of problems: cases of insulting Islam and fear for their life style because of increasingly assertive radical Islamists.

In October, two Coptic boys were put in a juvenile detention after locals accused them of urinating on pages of the Quran, Islam's holy book. It was one in a series of cases against Coptic Christians in the same period, following the fury over an anti-Islam film produced in the United States. The case against the boys was later dropped after mediation.

Ibrahim said some wealthy Copts, who have connections abroad, have temporarily sought to leave Egypt.

"But the majority (of Christians) are also less fortunate," he said. "Like most Egyptians, they are with little education and have difficult economic conditions."

Verna Ghayes, a 21-year old arts student, also noted the deteriorating economic situation. Her father, an architect, lost his job because of a tight market. She felt the hardships, have, in turn, encouraged Christians to seek relief from God.

"With all the unfortunate events that are happening to Egypt, Christians came closer to God, they started to pray more, believing that only God could handle it," she said. "For me that's the good thing, and everything is according to God's plan," she said.

<http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&id=32460>

- **Egypt's Morsi denies targeting satirist**

The office of the Egyptian president has issued a statement denying reports that Mohamed Morsi's government is cracking down on satirists and the freedom of the press.

The denial came amid reports that Bassem Youssef, a popular satirist who hosts a television programme often likened to the Jon Stewart's Daily Show in the US, will be investigated by prosecutors for "undermining" President Morsi.

In a statement sent to Al Jazeera on Sunday, Morsi's foreign-affairs office stated that neither the Egyptian government nor the presidency had pursued any legal action against Youssef, and that the complaints against Youssef were "mainly individual initiatives by independent lawyers".

The statement further added that Egypt's new constitution does not include any articles that single out the president as immune from criticism or even defamation.

"The Egyptian constitution, approved by a majority of Egyptians in a democratic vote, safeguards civil liberties and human rights including freedom of speech and press," the statement said.

It was earlier reported that the prosecutor general had ordered an investigation into a formal complaint against Youssef by a lawyer. The complaint reportedly accused the satirist of "insulting" Morsi, and "undermining his standing".

But the statement from Morsi's office said that no violations of the rights and freedoms enshrined in the new constitution would be tolerated.

"A violation of these articles is not only unconstitutional; it also amounts to a violation of one of the fundamental demands of the January 25th revolution."

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/01/2013171111399533.html>

- **CAR rebels arrive in Gabon ahead of talks**

A delegation of rebels from the Central African Republic (CAR) have arrived in Gabon, where talks with the government they are trying to topple are set to get under way in the coming days.

Talks had been expected to start on Tuesday, but a plane carrying the government delegation along with members of the country's political opposition failed to leave Bangui, the capital, as scheduled.

Denis Sassou-Nguesso, president of the Republic of Congo, said negotiations were to begin no later than Friday.

He met the embattled leader of CAR, Francois Bozize, on Monday.

Sassou-Nguesso declined to comment on reports that rebels, who now control much of the country's north, are still seeking Bozize's ouster as a condition of the talks.

"In our capacity as mediator, we can't interpret the declarations of others," he said. "The fact that we hold to is that all the parties have agreed that we are going to negotiations."

Earlier on Monday, Eric Massi, who identifies himself as a spokesman of the rebel alliance, collectively known as Seleka, reiterated calls for the removal of the president, saying he has "lost all credibility" to lead the country.

"He has to leave power," Massi told Al Jazeera from Paris.

He rejected Bozize's offer to form a coalition government with the rebels, instead calling for a "peaceful transfer of power".

Commenting on the delayed flight carrying the government delegation, Abdoulaye Issene, president of the CPJP, a rebel group that signed a peace agreement with the government, said passengers were told it was cancelled due to a "technical problem" and would fly to Gabon early on Tuesday.

The upcoming meetings between rebels, the government and the country's political opposition in Libreville, Gabon, come a month after fighters from several armed groups began their rebellion against a government that has wielded little power over its vast and sparsely populated north.

While the rebels have halted their advance toward Bangui, they now hold a dozen cities and towns. The rebellion poses the greatest threat to Bozize's presidency since he himself seized power in 2003.

Bozize already has offered up the possibility of a coalition government, a proposal the rebels have dismissed. A rebel spokesman has said the fighters want Bozize gone, a stipulation that could derail talks altogether.

The government's chief mediator, Willibiro Sako, said the objective of the talks is "to try to look into the problems of our country and find solutions for the peace, security and development of Central African Republic."

In the nation of 4.4 million, many have little faith the government will be able to reach a lasting agreement with the rebels, especially because multiple peace accords already have been signed over the years with several different groups.

"Even if the rebel leaders reach an agreement with the Bangui government, their people on the ground will not get their piece of cake," Henry Yenzapa, a history professor at the University of Bangui, told The Associated Press.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2013/01/20131719710217358.html>

- **Rebels capture Mali government troops**

Rebel fighters in Mali have captured at least 12 government soldiers along with their vehicle and equipment, reports say.

The incident on Monday took place during a government patrol outside the town of Kona and near the city of Mopti, as fears rise that the rebels, who seized vast swathes of Mali's north, are moving increasingly closer to areas under government control.

Earlier on Monday, government soldiers fired on the al-Qaeda linked group, Ansar Dine, 60km east of Mopti.

Heavily armed Islamist groups in convoys of pick-up trucks had been reported in the Mopti region, where government troops have been stationed since the revolt, a Malian military official told the Reuters news agency.

"The rebels have been advancing and have been sighted in several places ... We are waiting for them. If they attack us, we will fight back," said the official, who asked not to be identified.

A military official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorised to speak to the media, said the rebels had reached the village of Bourei, only 40km from the last town under the purview of Mali's military.

An employee of a bus company called Binke Transport also confirmed that the rebels had arrived in the village.

"There are numerous Islamists in Bourei aboard all-terrain vehicles and even armored vehicles that they have stolen from the Malian military," Mamadou Guindo told The Associated Press.

Rising tensions

"There is a real tension there, and we are considering stopping bus transport between Gao and Sevre (towns) for the security of our passengers."

Mali's government lost control of the northern half of the country - an area the size of France - in April after the rebels took advantage of a power vacuum following a March coup that overthrew the democratically elected president.

A group called Ansar Dine has been implementing its strict version of Islamic law in the north, carrying out public executions, amputations and whippings.

An Ansar Dine spokesman declined to comment on the reports on Monday of a stepped-up rebel presence closer to the line of government control.

The UN Security Council has authorised military action to wrest the north back, but says there must first be political progress made following the military coup last year.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2013/01/2013181147990618.html>

- **Libya national assembly president survives 'assassination attempt'**

The President of Libya's national assembly, Mohammed Megaryef has survived an assault on his hotel in the southern oasis of Sabha.

The assembly chief's spokesman, Rassmi Beruwien said the attack was carried out on Thursday, January 3, and lasted for "three hours," adding, "There was sniper fire. It seems to have been an assassination attempt."

Beruwien went on to say that three people "from military security" sustained injuries in the attack "but unfortunately nobody was caught."

He further said, "Attacking where the president is staying -- that is an assassination attempt."

Meanwhile, Megaryef himself also commented on the incident, saying, "At around 2 a.m. there were explosions and sniper shots at the hotel where we were staying. The exchange of fire lasted about three hours."

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/01/07/282174/libyan-leader-escapes-assassination-bid/>

## 6. JORDAN and LEBANON

- **Turkey blamed for Lebanese pilgrims hostage drama in Syria**

The families of Lebanese pilgrims taken hostage in Syria since May 2012 hold Turkey responsible for the kidnapers' foot-dragging on the release of the hostages, Press TV has learned.

They told Press TV on Monday that the region where the pilgrims are held along Turkey-Syria border is run by Turkish security officers.

The kidnapers, financed by Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, have told the families of the abductees that the key to their release remained in the hand of Lebanon's Hezbollah movement, an allegation the families deny outright.

On their way back from a pilgrimage in Iran, eleven Lebanese pilgrims were kidnapped in the Syrian city of Aleppo last year. Two of them were released in August and September.

The families of the pilgrims have called on the Lebanese government to undertake further efforts for their release. They have also decided to hold sit-in protests outside companies affiliated with the Turkish government in a bid to get their message heard.

On January 3, Hezbollah leader Seyyed Hassan Nasrallah called on the Lebanese government to enter into direct talks with the kidnapers.

“The way the government has dealt with this case is not satisfactory with all due respect to the efforts by officials...but now is the time to directly negotiate with the kidnappers and designate a Lebanese official to do so,” Nasrallah added.

Syria has been the scene of turmoil for nearly two years and many people, including large numbers of security forces, have been killed in the unrest.

The Syrian government says the chaos, which began in the country in March 2011, is being orchestrated from outside and there are reports that a very large number of the armed militants are foreign nationals.

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad said in a speech on Sunday that the ongoing conflict in the country is not between the state and the opposition, but between the nation and its enemies.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/01/07/282330/turkey-behind-syria-hostage-drama/>

- **Army contains north Lebanon tension after Assad speech**

BEIRUT: The Lebanese Army has contained tension in the northern city of Tripoli following a weekend speech by President Bashar Assad, the military said in a statement.

“The army was able to restore normalcy to Tripoli following tension in the city,” the Army said in a statement late Sunday.

The northern city of Tripoli saw in 2012 frequent clashes between supporters and opponents of Assad.

According to the army statement, some residents fired celebratory gunshots in the air in Jabal Mohsen Sunday afternoon.

The gunfire in Jabal Mohsen, which strongly supports Assad, came following a rare speech by the Syrian leader in which he vowed to carry on combating what he described as foreign-backed “terrorism” in his country and proposed an initiative to end the 21-month long crisis.

The celebratory gunfire was soon followed by light arms’ fire between Jabal Mohsen and Bab al-Tabbaneh, the Army said.

Residents of Bab al-Tabbaneh strongly support the Syrian rebels fighting Assad.

In December 2012, 17 people were killed and more than 70 wounded in clashes between the rival Tripoli neighborhoods in the wake of an ambush by the Syrian army that killed several Lebanese fighter in the Syrian town of Tal Kalakh.

In its statement Sunday, the military said that a homemade bomb was thrown in the city but did not specify the location of the incident. There were no casualties, it said.

In response, the Army, which beefed up its presence in accordance with a government plan last year, deployed in the area, launching patrols in the two neighborhoods.

The military also raided a number of homes of those suspected of triggering the tension in the city and handed them in to the relevant authorities.

<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Local-News/2013/Jan-07/201155-army-contains-north-lebanon-tension-after-assad-speech.ashx#axzz2HNB4N9B8>

- **U.S. gives Lebanon 200 armored vehicles**

BEIRUT: The United States has given 200 armored vehicles to Lebanon, the Lebanese Army said Monday, bolstering forces that have been struggling to deal with sectarian violence inflamed by the war across the border in Syria.

The M113 armored personnel carriers arrived by ship to Beirut Sunday, the army said in a statement. A Lebanese security source said the army now had 1,200 APCs.

A U.S. diplomat said the shipment of vehicles would support the Lebanese armed forces' "capabilities and their mobility and ability to respond to crises. It is also to protect borders and internal stability."

The diplomat, who preferred not to be identified, said the vehicles shipped, while used, were all in "very good working order and will be refurbished here in Lebanon."

The United States has provided more than \$140 million in equipment and assistance to the Lebanese armed forces in the past six months, including six Huey 2 helicopters, a 42-meter coastal security craft, more than 1,000 guns – including grenade launchers – and 38 million rounds of ammunition.

Lebanon, still rebuilding after its 15-year Civil War, has seen several clashes between gunmen loyal to opposing sides in neighboring Syria's 21-month conflict, mostly in the northern port town of Tripoli, but also in the capital Beirut and the southern coastal city of Sidon.

Syrian forces have occasionally breached the Lebanese border to battle with rebels who are fighting to oust Syrian President Bashar Assad and take refuge in Lebanese border towns. Syrian mortar bombs have also targeted Lebanese villages.

Few expect a fight between Lebanon and its much larger neighbor Syria, a country whose troops were garrisoned in Lebanon until 2005 and still has influence over the security services.

But Lebanon's army is ill-equipped to deal with powerful internal armed groups, including Hezbollah, which the United States counts as a terrorist organization.

<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Politics/2013/Jan-08/201242-us-gives-lebanon-200-armored-vehicles.ashx#axzz2HNB4N9B8>

## 7. ARABIAN PENINSULA AND THE GULF OF BASRA

- **Saudi protesters call for release of jailed women, children**

Protesters have taken to the streets across Saudi Arabia to condemn the recent arrest of women and children in demonstrations against the ruling Al Saud regime, Press TV reports.

On Sunday, protests were held in the capital Riyadh, the holy city of Mecca as well as Buraydah.

Earlier in the day, Saudi forces detained dozens of women and children during an anti-regime protest rally in the city of Buraydah.

The protesters were demanding the release of their relatives jailed for political reasons.

Since February 2011, protesters have held demonstrations on an almost regular basis in Saudi Arabia, mainly in Qatif and Awamiyah in Eastern Province.

The demonstrations turned into protests against the Al Saud regime after November 2011, when Saudi security forces killed five protesters and injured many others in the province.

Saudi forces have also arrested dozens of people including prominent Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr.

The country's officials warned in October, 2012 that they would deal "firmly" with anti-regime demonstrations. Amnesty International slammed the warning, and urged the authorities to "withdraw their threat."

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/01/07/282257/saudis-want-jailed-women-kids-released/>

- **Bahrain court verdict against jailed activists sparks protests**

Angry protests have erupted in Bahrain in reaction to a court verdict against 13 jailed opposition activists.

Protesters set tires on fire and blocked main roads in several towns and villages near the capital, Manama, on Monday, when Bahrain's highest court upheld sentences handed down to the political activists for organizing demonstrations against the Al Khalifa regime.

A military court originally issued the sentences in 2011. The rulings, which range from five years in prison to life sentences, were upheld by a civilian court in September 2012.

The Monday ruling was the last chance the 13 had to reverse their convictions, which Amnesty International has described as an outrage. The rights organization has urged the Bahraini regime to overturn the sentences.

Those given life sentences include prominent human rights activist Abdulhadi al-Khawaja and opposition leader Hassan Mushaima.

The Bahraini uprising began in February 2011. The regime promptly launched a brutal crackdown on peaceful protests and called in Saudi-led Arab forces from neighboring states.

Bahraini police have frequently used tear gas and rubber bullets against the demonstrators. Security forces have also arrested hundreds of people, including doctors and nurses.

A report published by the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry in November 2011, found that the Al Khalifa regime had used excessive force in the crackdown. It accused Manama of torturing political activists, politicians, and protesters.

Bahraini protesters say they will continue holding anti-regime demonstrations until their demand for the establishment of a democratically elected government is met.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/01/07/282333/bahrain-court-verdict-sparks-protests/>

- **Al-Wefaq denounces Bahrain court ruling**

The Bahraini opposition bloc al-Wefaq has condemned a court decision upholding prison terms for 13 pro-democracy activists, including eight life sentences.

On Monday, Bahrain's highest court rejected the jailed activists' appeal and upheld their sentences for their roles in anti-regime protests in 2011.

Later in the day, al-Wefaq said in a statement that it considers "the verdict political and [it] reflects the absolute absence of an independent judiciary."

"The judiciary is being controlled and used by the regime in the political conflict to punish dissidents, and... the revolution must continue," the statement added.

Al-Wefaq party leader Sheikh Ali Salman also commented on the ruling, saying, "These judgments confirmed the rulings issued before by the military court which were condemned by the whole world. I think it is accurate to call these rulings political persecution."

In addition, Brian Dooley, director of the Human Rights Defenders Program at the US-based group Human Rights First, stated, "It confirms that the Bahrain regime is refusing to take its chances to reform and seems to be deepening its own human rights crisis."

After the court ruling, anti-government protests broke out in Bahrain.

The demonstrators set tires on fire and blocked main roads in Manama and several towns and villages near the capital

The protesters called for the release of all jailed activists and demanded that King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa step down.

Since mid-February 2011, thousands of pro-democracy protesters have staged numerous demonstrations in the streets of Bahrain, calling for the Al Khalifa royal family to relinquish power.

On March 14, 2011, troops from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates invaded the country to assist the Bahraini government in its crackdown on the peaceful protesters.

According to local sources, scores of people have been killed and hundreds arrested.

Physicians for Human Rights says doctors and nurses have been detained, tortured, or disappeared because they have "evidence of atrocities committed by the authorities, security forces, and riot police" in the crackdown on anti-government protesters.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/01/08/282358/alwefaq-denounces-bahrain-court-ruling/>

## 8. AFGHANISTAN - PAKISTAN

- **Afghan president in US for talks on security, troop withdrawal**

Afghan President Hamid Karzai, heading a high-ranking delegation, has left for Washington for talks with American officials on security issues and bilateral ties.

"President Karzai will hold separate meetings with President Barack Obama and other high-ranking US officials to discuss various key issues," Karzai's office said in a statement after his departure from Kabul on Monday.

The withdrawal of US-led combat troops from Afghanistan in 2014, equipping Afghan forces, efforts to negotiate peace with Taliban, and a security agreement with Washington will top the agenda of the three-day official visit, the statement added.

Reports say a decision could be made during the talks on the presence of US troops in Afghanistan beyond 2014.

The US has reportedly prepared plans to keep more than 9,000 soldiers in Afghanistan.

The Commander of the US-led forces in Afghanistan, General John R. Allen had earlier submitted three plans to US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, outlining troop levels ranging between 6,000 and 20,000, the New York Times cited a senior Pentagon official as saying on January 2.

The United States, which currently has about 66,000 troops stationed in Afghanistan, led the invasion of the country in 2001, under the pretext of eradicating Taliban forces and bringing stability to the country.

The invasion removed the Taliban, but torn apart by a war that has lasted for 12 years, Afghanistan is still dealing with untamed violence, rising insecurity, and social problems.

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

- **Afghans ask for US spy balloons after 2014 pullout**

Afghanistan has asked the United States to provide them with the American spy balloons currently in service in the southern Afghan city of Kandahar, after the US-led forces leave the country by the end of 2014.

Afghan security officials voiced concerns over the country's security after the US forces leave Afghanistan and take their balloons, laden with surveillance gear, with them, the Wall Street Journal reported.

Chief of police Niaz Mohammad said how Afghan police should provide "the eyes in the sky." At nighttime when they [militants] want to come and put in roadside bombs for us, we can't see them. We don't have technology like balloons...and that is a big thing for us."

The US sent soldiers to Arghandab, in central part of Kandahar, as part of the 2010 surge, taking balloons, equipped with cameras and other intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance gear. The deployment of the balloons to Afghanistan became a priority for the Pentagon by former Defense Secretary Robert Gates.

US military officers described the spy balloons as a "force multiplier" for monitoring areas and protecting operating bases from possible threats.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai is expected to raise the request for military equipment during his visit to Washington. Afghan officials said spy technology like drones, balloons, and other equipment, would be on the list of Afghanistan's demands.

The US administration has not yet made any comment regarding the issue. However, senior US officials voiced concerns over Afghans' focus on the equipment despite their military's incapacities.

US Army Brigadier General Paul Nakasone, who is serving in Afghanistan, said that the balloons could be a useful asset for the Afghan military in theory, as they do not have surveillance drones.

"They are not going to have the airborne fleet that we have right now. This is a great enabler for them as they look to the future to provide persistent stare on a target," he said.

The Afghan forces are familiar with the spy gear, as they launched the spy balloons in a trial in Arghandab in December.

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

- **6 Afghan police officers missing in Farah province**

According to local authorities in western Farah province of Afghanistan, at least 6 Afghan police officers are missing from a security check post in Pusht-e-Rud district.

The Afghan police officers disappeared from the check post on Sunday evening.

Deputy provincial governor Mohammad Younis Rassouli confirmed the report however he did not disclose further information regarding the incident.

In a separate incident and Afghan security service member was killed following attack by unknown gunmen in Farah province.

Provincial governor spokesman Abdul Rahman Zhwandai said the attack took place on Monday morning, killing an Afghan security service member and injuring another one.

In the meantime local officials are saying Afghan security forces have launched a search operation to find the missing Afghan police officers.

A spokesman for the Taliban group said the police officers have joined Taliban group but the report has not been confirmed by officials in Farah yet.

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

- **Terror drones kill 8 in North Waziristan**

Eight people have been killed and four others injured in two attacks carried out by US assassination drones in Pakistan's North Waziristan tribal area, which borders Afghanistan.

In the first attack, US drones fired eight missiles at a compound in the village of Haiderkhel in the Miranshah district in the early hours of Tuesday morning, killing five people and injuring four others, the Pakistani television network Express News reported.

Shortly after the first attack, US drones fired two missiles at a house in the village of Essukhel in the Miranshah district, killing three people.

On Sunday, 16 people were killed in a US drone strike on the tribal area of South Waziristan.

Pakistan's tribal regions are often attacked by US assassination drones.

Washington claims that its airstrikes target militants crossing the border with Afghanistan, but local sources say civilians have been the main victims of the attacks.

In September 2012, a report by the Stanford Law School and the New York University School of Law gave an alarming account of the effect that assassination drone strikes have on ordinary people in Pakistan's tribal areas. The report noted, "The number of 'high-level' targets killed as a percentage of total casualties is extremely low -- estimated at just 2%."

The killing of Pakistani civilians, including women and children, has strained relations between Islamabad and Washington.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/01/07/282350/terror-drones-kill-8-in-north-waziristan/>

- **Pakistan blocks over 3,000 Afghan transit containers**

Pakistan has blocked over 3,000 containers belonging to Afghan merchants despite a transit agreement between Islamabad and Kabul, an Afghan official says.

Khan Jan Alkozai, the deputy head of the Afghanistan Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI), said in a statement issued on Sunday that the transit containers have been blocked for “more than 17 days in the port city of Karachi.”

Pakistan closed the Torkham crossing on its border with Afghanistan following harassment of a group of Pakistani workers by Afghan National Army (ANA) soldiers on December 28, 2012.

Alkozai also stated that problems facing Afghan merchants have increased over the past months despite the Transit Trade Agreement signed by Kabul and Islamabad in 2010.

The blocked shipment also includes “hundreds of food containers,” Alkozai said.

On January 2, Pakistan’s Prime Minister Raja Pervez Ashraf said Islamabad would release the containers within ten days.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/01/07/282324/pakistan-blocks-afghan-transit-containers/>

*\*This media summary is prepared by **ORSAM Assistant Ebru Demir**. 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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