



MIDDLE EAST DAILY BULLETIN

GÜNLÜK ORTADOĐU BÜLTENİ

Domestic Policy in the Middle East Countries

Bölge Ülkelerinde İç Siyaset

The Restructuring Procees of Iraq

Irak'ın Yeniden Yapılanma Süreci

Energy Security

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Ethnic and Secterian Groups

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1. IRAQ

- **UNAMI's political adviser in Fallujah, to discuss the sit-ins' demands.**

Ramadi / NINA / UNAMI political adviser, Marwan al-Ali arrived to the city of Fallujah this morning 20, Feb.

Al-Ali met, upon arrival, with the Chairman of Fallujah cancel, Hamid Ahmed al-Hashem and Mayor, Adnan Hussein and a number of tribal leaders and representatives of the sit-in, in addition to a number of officers and security officials.

A source in the provincial council told the reporter of the National Iraqi News Agency / NINA /: that "Al-Ali discussed, with the officials of Fallujah, the possibility of finding a common solution to implement the demands of the protesters."

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

- **Independent MP calls to activate MPs' arrest warrants.**

BAGHDAD / NINA / The independent MP, Kadhim al-Sayadi called to activate the arrest warrants against a number of MPs.

He told the National Iraqi News Agency / NINA / "There are some wanted MPs for their participation in bombings and terrorist operations against the people and honestly their immunity should be canceled."

Sayadi said, "The government should terminate the demonstrations, by force, because they have become havens for terrorists, as he put it.

"the Government should deal with these terrorist havens by force and end the demonstrations and order the army to return to Ramadi and control it in order to arrest the terrorists who have made these tents as nests to plan and start implementing terrorist operations and establish terrorist armies funding by foreign countries known to all as the triangle to serve the Zionist entity composed of Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey," he said.

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

- **Sadrist MP accuses political sides to delaying endorsing General Budget**

Baghdad (AIN) –MP, Hussein al-Mansouri, of al-Ahrar bloc within the Sadr Trend accused some political sides of attempting to delay endorsing the General Budget of 2013 in order to target the parliament.

Speaking to All Iraq News Agency (AIN), he said " The General Budget became a political issue where some sides attempt to delay endorsing it in order to affect the parliament and its role and make the masses blame the parliament."

"The disputes over the Budget are limited to the suggestions of the political blocs where the heads of political blocs have to conduct a meeting to settle them," he added.

"The MPs wish to endorse the Budget to grant the rights of the people," he pointed out, assuring that "If the census is hold, all the sides will take their rights with flexibility."

Earlier, Member of the parliament Finance Committee, MP Majida al-Timimi, announced that "The political blocs agreed during meeting on Tuesday to

settle the controversial points between the Kurdistan Alliance and the Iraqiya Slate over the 2013 Federal Budget where all their demands were answered."

Timimi added in a statement received by AIN "The Federal Budget now is prepared for vote during the parliament's regular session of next Thursday."

http://www.alliraqnews.com/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=28821:sadrist-mp-accuses-political-sides-to-delaying-endorsing-general-budget&catid=35:political&Itemid=2

- **Othman denies holding initiative by Barzani to settle crisis in Iraq**



Baghdad (AIN) –MP, Mahmoud Othman, of the Kurdistan Alliance denied holding an initiative by the President of Kurdistan Region, Masoud Barzani, to settle the gather the political blocs in Erbil to settle the crisis in Iraq.

He stated to All Iraq News Agency (AIN) "There is no call for the political blocs to gather in Erbil, but there will be meetings and talks among the sides that gathered in Erbil and Najaf after Barzani's return from Russia in order to discuss the required means related to the situation in Iraq where they will declare they will decide whether Barzani hold the initiative or not."

It is worth mentioning that Barzani called the political blocs to gather in Erbil to settle the crisis in Iraq.

Some sides from the KA, the Iraqiya Slate and the Sadr Trend, held two meetings in Erbil and Najaf in 2011 to withdraw the confidence from the Premier, Nouri al-Maliki, but they failed to achieve the required support of the MPs to approve it in the parliament.

http://www.alliraqnews.com/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=28820:othman-denies-holding-initiative-by-barzani-to-settle-crisis-in-iraq&catid=35:political&Itemid=2

- **IS MP rules of dismissing Nijaifi**

Baghdad (AIN) –MP, Raad al-Dahlaki, of the Iraqiya Slate ruled out dismissing the parliament Speaker, Osama al-Nijaifi.

Speaking to All Iraq News Agency (AIN), he said " We do not know whether there are signatures collected to dismiss Nijaifi or not," noting that "The MPs have different stances regarding this issue."

"If the signatures are collected, they will not be able to achieve the legal number to dismiss Nijaifi," he added, assuring that "The current situation requires reformations in all the constituents of the political process."

Earlier, the SLC announced gathering 120 signatures to dismiss Nijaifi.

http://www.alliraqnews.com/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=28819:is-mp-rules-of-dismissing-nijaifi&catid=35:political&Itemid=2

- **President Talabani's health develops for better, statement**

BAGHDAD/ Aswat al-Iraq: President Jalal Talabani's office announced that "Talabani's health is improving and reacting to the medications and medical exercises in Germany".

In a statement, copy received by Aswat al-Iraq, the office pointed out the rapid development of Talabani's health in movement and speech.

No other details were given.

http://en.aswataliraq.info/%28S%28pj3jm2rcmjm2vbyw322mhuju%29%29/Default1.aspx?page=article_page&id=152463&l=1

- **Call to expose Arbil deliberations, MP**

BAGHDAD/ Aswat al-Iraq: MP Alia Nsaif called the political blocs met in Arbil recently to reveal the results of their meetings, stressing that "these should not be out of the constitutional limits".

In a press statement, copy received by Aswat al-Iraq, she added that "the results should incite another crisis in the country".

Nsaif pointed out that the previous first and second meetings of Arbil remained

"ambiguous" for a long time, so "we demand the results should be revealed to the Iraqi public".

"All secret agreements are completely rejected", she confirmed.

She expressed here reservation of Arbil meetings, "because most of the conferees give more privileges to Arbil, thus, we express our reservation, while Baghdad should be the main venue for such meetings".

Kurdish president Masoud Barzani held yesterday, Sunday, a meeting to Parliamentary Kurdish blocs in Baghdad, as well as the Kurdish ministers to the central government, to discuss the current crisis and the relation with Baghdad.

http://en.aswataliraq.info/%28S%28pj3jm2rcmjm2vbyw322mhuju%29%29/Default1.aspx?page=article_page&id=152461&l=1

- **Shahristani: Iraq will open three power stations every month**



Shafaq News / The Deputy Prime Minister for Energy Affairs, Hussain al-Shahristani announced on Wednesday, that Iraq will witness the opening of about three power stations per month to resolve the crisis for the shortfall in energy and called on citizens to cooperate in the implementation of the consumption rationalization.

Shahristani said in a speech at the opening of Qudos gas station in Baghdad, attended by "Shafaq News", that "we will open stations across the country and I do not say every month but two or three stations will be opened."

Shahristani said that "the Ministry of Electricity and the Oil Ministry and all state institutions and companies and its efforts are working to complete these projects cannot give results without the cooperation of the citizens", calling for commitment to rationalize consumption of electrical energy.

Iraq suffers from a shortage of electricity since the beginning of 1990, and increased power rationing hours after 2003 in Baghdad and the provinces, because of the old stations in addition to the sabotage of facilities over the past years.

<http://www.shafaq.com/en/news/5247-shahristani-iraq-will-open-three-power-stations-every-month.html>

- **Alawi: Iraq living major disorder**



Shafaq News / The independent MP, Hassan al-Alawi said on Wednesday that "the exposure of Medhat al-Mahmoud to expulsion from work and cancelling his civil rights in the absence of witnesses then after 48 hours it comes back with another decision that we believe is not different from including his with De-Baathification measures in terms of rapidity and lack of correct judicial

mechanisms “, expressing his belief that "the state live in considerable disorder."

Alawi objected to the method of including Mahmoud with De-Baathification measures, describing "the way of including him with Baathification measures give a message to people that there is no safety and no insure to your civil, human and administrative rights."

Alawi wondered that "the measures included Mahmoud and he is entitled by this job, so who protects the poor people, young employees and the general public from such procedures."

Alawi stressed the legitimacy of all "those included in de-Baathification procedures to submit now their objections to the appeal body to consider their cases by the same period that considered Medhat al-Mahmoud’s issue."

The Deputy Chairman of the Justice and Accountability, Bakhtiar Omar told "Shafaq News" yesterday that “the discriminatory body disaffirmed decision of including the head of the Federal Court, Medhat al-Mahmoud. De-Baathification measures

The accountability and justice body overthrew Mahmoud by including him with de-Baathification procedures decision a day after dismissing him from his post as the head of the Supreme Judicial Council.

<http://www.shafaq.com/en/news/5241-alawi-iraq-living-major-disorder-.html>

- **Iranian Consul Says Obstacles Prevent Tehran-Erbil Energy Cooperation**

By SIRWA HAWRAMI



ERBIL, Kurdistan Region – Tehran is ready to invest in the Kurdistan Region’s energy sector but is prevented by obstacles, Iran’s top diplomat in Erbil said.

Azim Hosseini, the Iranian consul general, added that the situation in Iraq is improving, that the Patriotic Union of

Kurdistan (PUK) remains important to Tehran, and that Iran continues to support the regime of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria in order to frustrate a “US agenda.”

“Iran is ready to invest in Kurdistan’s oil sector and it has what it takes to do so,” Hosseini told Rudaw. “Agreements have been signed, but protocols have not been successful due to issues that are not in our control,” he said.

“We have many friends, especially in Iraq, who want to work with us in the oil sector. But the current economic sanctions have discouraged them. They are also concerned that the international banks would block their money,” Hosseini said. “Due to the obstacles which are out of our hands, Iran cannot yet invest in Kurdistan’s oil sector.”

Husseini also said that his government has considered installing an oil pipeline to Iran from Iraq’s south, and that his government currently provides oil to the Kurdistan Region.

Husseini also spoke about the future of the PUK in the absence of its leader Jalal Talabani, who suffered a serious stroke in

December. “The PUK and Iran have a long, deep relationship so we will not desert our friends,” Hosseini said. “The ultimate decision to appoint someone else to replace Talabani as the leader of PUK is up to PUK itself,” he said, replying to whether Tehran would try to influence the decision.

Asked whether Iran agrees with Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri Al-Maliki’s policies, the Iranian consular said, “We agree with the current policy. Iraq is a new country and it has a successful policy compared to many other Arab states.”

“It is fortunate that Iraq can now resolve its local issues without any international and regional help,” he said, adding that, “In general, Iraq has been progressing and no one can deny this.”

Hosseini said that Tehran remained loyal to Assad because, “The United States has an agenda in the region and we will stand against any US agenda in Syria. If the Syrian people decides to change Assad, then we have no problem with that,” he said.

The Iranian consular also spoke about Kurdish participation in the Iranian political process. “Currently, we have 25 Kurdish MPs in the Iranian parliament who participate in decision-making in Iran,” he said.

Responding to whether the Iranian government intends to negotiate with Iranian Kurdish rebels, Hosseini replied: “How can we negotiate with them when they are somewhere else and not Iran and have no participation in Iran. We have no problem with negotiation. However, they are the ones who should make up their minds and quit implementing a foreign agenda.”

<http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurds/5704.html>

- **Iraq’s Autonomous Kurdistan Region Becomes Regular Participant At Davos**

ERBIL, Kurdistan Region – Iraq’s autonomous Kurdistan Region, whose president took part in last week’s World Economic Forum in Davos, has been accepted as a regular participant at the annual summit, a presidential official said.

“From now on, Kurdistan will be invited to attend the forum every year,” said Fuad Hussein, who attended the summit with President Massoud Barzani.



The Kurdistan Region gained autonomy from Iraq’s central government in Baghdad following the 2003 US invasion that toppled Saddam Hussein. It has vast energy resources and is at the center of Kurdish aspirations for an eventual homeland, putting it at odds with Iraq’s central government in Baghdad.

Barzani joined dozens of heads of state and foreign economic ministers at Davos.

“From Iraq no one else had been invited and we found that quite strange,” Hussein told Rudaw.

He said that Barzani had attended a closed-door meeting about the Middle East and the crisis in Syria, presided by UN envoy Kofi Annan.

“The heads of state wanted to talk openly, that is why the meeting was held in private,” Hussein said. “President Barzani played a significant role, talking about the situation in Syria and the Kurds there.”

At Davos Barzani also met with Rex Tillerson, head of US oil giant ExxonMobil, just days after the executive held talks with Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki.

Hussein said the meeting with Tillerson was at the company’s suggestion, and that in the talks Barzani had reiterated the Kurdistan Region would honor oil deals it signed with the company.

<http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurds/5696.html>

2. IRAN

- **Iranian Kurdish Leader: We Are Stronger, While Tehran Regime is Collapsing**

By WLADIMIR van WILGENBURG

The Iranian government cannot destroy us, and we can also not destroy the Iranian army,” said PJAK leader Haji Ahmadi.



ERBIL, Kurdistan Region – The Iranian Kurdish rebel group Free Life of Kurdistan (PJAK) says that it is much stronger since a 2011 ceasefire with the government, while the Tehran regime is collapsing under international sanctions.

“We fight for a peaceful solution of the Kurdish question. We have shown our power. The Iranian government cannot destroy us, and we can also not destroy the Iranian army,” said PJAK leader Haji Ahmadi.

He said that the Iranians continue to arrest or execute Kurds because they are afraid of the different ethnic groups in Iran.

“In the beginning, only the Kurds in Iran wanted their rights, but now all the people in Iran want their rights,” he added.

Ahmadi said that international sanctions are biting hard on Iran’s rulers. “There is nothing that can stop the destruction of the Iranian regime, either economically, politically, or internationally,” he added.

“We hear Iranian politicians say that the embargo can’t stop Iran. But now they are ready for many compromises. Their only wish is that the embargo is ended. The international community knows this,” according to Ahmadi.

He questioned the cooperation between rival Kurdish parties from Iran who are based in Iraqi Kurdistan. “What can these banned parties achieve when they are not inside the country? It’s like, if three Kurdish parties in Europe unite. What can they accomplish”

The PJAK-leader said he believed that, currently the Europeans and Americans do not want any change in Iran because they are preoccupied with the uprising in Syria against President Bashar al-Assad. “When Assad is defeated, it’s the turn of Iran. Therefore, Iran supports Bashar al-Assad with everything,” he said.

Commenting on the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, Ahmadi said, “I don’t think the Muslim Brotherhood would be better for Kurds than Assad. I think they would be even more dangerous.”

“Kurds want a democratic Syria and equal rights in all the countries (where they live),” he said.

He told Rudaw that if Assad falls, the Iranian government will fall too.

About the assassination of three female members of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in Paris earlier this month, Ahmadi speculated that Turkish ultranationalists most likely played a role in the killings.

<http://www.rudaw.net/english/news/iran/5701.html>

- **Oil Minister Downplays Impacts of Sanctions on Iran's Energy Sector**

TEHRAN (FNA)- Tougher sanctions and restrictions imposed by the West against Iran's energy sector have failed to stop the country's oil industry from running, Iran's Oil Minister Rostam Qassemi stressed.



"Foreign countries imagined that Iran would not survive several months under such conditions, but the endeavors of oil industry staff showed that the problems would be set aside while oil industry projects are in good conditions," Qassemi said on Tuesday.

As regards gasoline production, the Iranian minister said that the country will start exporting gasoline by the end of the next Iranian year (ends on March 20, 2014).

Iran's premium gasoline output is expected to increase by 12 million liters per day with the launch of the first phase of the Persian Gulf Star Refinery within months.

Under the National Iranian Oil Refining and Distribution Company (NIORDC) plans, the country's processing capacity will rise to 526 million liters per day while storage capacity will hit 17 billion liters in 2025.

Boosting gasoline exports to 96.6 million liters, jet fuel to 59.7 million liters and gasoil to 50.5 million liters per day are among the other targets of NIORDC for the Year 2025.

Washington and its Western allies accuse Iran of trying to develop nuclear weapons under the cover of a civilian nuclear program, while they have never presented any corroborative evidence to substantiate their allegations. Iran denies the charges and insists that its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes only.

Tehran stresses that the country has always pursued a civilian path to provide power to the growing number of Iranian population, whose fossil fuel would eventually run dry.

<http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9107146066>

- **Parliament Commission Raps UAE's Meddling in Iran's Internal Affairs**

TEHRAN (FNA)- The Iranian Parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Commission lashed out at the United Arab Emirates' officials for their interfering

statements about the three Iranian Islands in the Persian Gulf.

In a statement on Tuesday, the parliament commission said that the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran has underlined its sovereignty over the three Iranian Persian Gulf islands of Abu Musa, the Greater Tunb and the Lesser Tunb.

"All arrangements and actions on these islands have always been done on the basis of the principles of the Islamic Republic of Iran's sovereignty and territorial integrity," the statement said.

"Therefore, we consider the contents of the (UAE's) statement as interference in our internal affairs and totally reject its contents and concept," it added.

Yet, the commission stressed that Iran has always pursued the policy of good neighborly relations and on the same basis "it welcomes bilateral talks with the UAE government to further consolidate the two countries' relations and remove possible misunderstandings".

"But, the Islamic Republic of Iran evidently views its territorial integrity and

sovereignty over the above-mentioned islands as non-negotiable," the parliament commission reiterated.

International documents clearly show that the three islands of the Greater Tunb, the Lesser Tunb and Abu Musa which were historically owned by Iran, temporarily fell to British control in 1903. The islands were returned to Iran based on an agreement in 1971 before the UAE was born.

Iran has repeatedly declared that its ownership of the three islands is unquestionable.

Under international law, no state can defy any agreement, which came into being before its establishment.

Yet, the UAE continues to make territorial claims against the Islamic Republic despite historical evidence and international regulations.

<http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9107145928>

- **Spokesman Rejects Bahrain's Accusations against Iran**

TEHRAN (FNA)- An Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman dismissed Bahrain's recent claims against Iran as baseless, and said such allegations are meant to deviate the public opinion from the crimes committed by the al-Khalifa regime against the Bahraini people.

"The remarks by certain officials of the regional countries who are faced with their people's demands are not the solution to these countries' internal problems," Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesman Ramin Mehman-Parast said in his weekly press conference in Tehran on Tuesday.

His remarks came after Bahrain's Interior Minister Sheikh Rashid bin Abdullah al-Khalifa on Saturday claimed that Manama has dismantled a "terrorist cell" linked to Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon.



Mehman-Parast blasted the allegations, and said, "If the people of the regional

states have some demands, they should be materialized, and accusing other states, including Iran, will not solve any problem. Therefore, these states had better listen to their people's voice instead of speaking about unreal issues."

Anti-government protesters have been holding peaceful demonstrations across Bahrain since mid-February 2011, calling for an end to the al-Khalifa dynasty's over-40-year rule, end of discrimination, establishment of justice and a democratically-elected government as well as freedom of detained protesters.

So far, tens of people have been killed, hundreds have gone missing and thousands of others have been injured.

In a recent development, hundreds of thousands of Bahraini protesters took to the streets in the capital Manama and other cities across the Persian Gulf island to mark the second anniversary of their uprising against the Al-Khalifa regime in February 2011, calling on the country's rulers to step down.

More than 300,000 protesters poured to the streets across the tiny Persian Gulf

island country on Friday in a bid to celebrate the beginning of the third year of their revolution against the al-Khalifa regime which started on February 14, 2011.

The massive population of protesters reiterated their opposition to dictatorship in the country, and called on the al-Khalifa regime to step down.

The al-Khalifa regime's security forces killed two protesters during popular protests on Thursday.

<http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9107145860>

- **Extra-regional forces pose danger to Eurasia security: Iran deputy FM**



An Iranian deputy foreign minister says the presence of extra-regional forces in Eurasia is a major source of concern that

could be detrimental to security in the region.

Abbas Araçchi, Iran's deputy foreign minister for Asia and Oceania affairs, said on Tuesday that the Eurasia region has turned into a competition scene for world powers due to the presence of extra-regional forces, which is one of the main sources of concern for regional countries.

Araçchi made the remarks during the closing ceremony of the Iran and Eurasian Cooperation Conference in the Iranian capital, Tehran, on Tuesday.

The Iranian official added that the establishment of new bases for foreign forces in the region or the continuation of their presence in some of the regional countries, including the presence of the US forces in Afghanistan, is "worrying."

The United States and its allies invaded Afghanistan in 2001 as part of Washington's so-called war on terror. The offensive removed the Taliban from power, but insecurity remains across the country.

Araqchi also stated that ‘Iran did not believe that the presence of US forces in Afghanistan would help establish security in the war-torn country.’

The Iranian deputy foreign minister described the increase in drug production and trafficking in ‘the Eurasian countries, including Afghanistan, as one of the consequences of the presence of foreign forces.’

Araqchi said a regional approach must be adopted to provide and maintain security in Eurasia.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/02/20/289899/iran-warns-of-dangers-to-eurasia-security/>

- **Larijani to visit India to expand Tehran-New Delhi ties**



Iranian Majlis (Parliament) Speaker Ali Larijani is scheduled to pay an official visit

to India to explore new avenues for the expansion of bilateral ties, particularly in the area of parliamentary cooperation.

Hossein Sheikholeslam, Majlis director general for international affairs, said on Tuesday that Larijani will hold talks with Indian President Pranab Mukherjee, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, and a number of other senior officials.

He added that the four-day visit, which will begin on February 24, comes at the invitation of Meira Kumar, the speaker of the lower house of the Indian parliament.

In a meeting with the Indian ambassador to Iran on February 5, Larijani underlined the need for the enhancement of bilateral relations and cooperation between Tehran and New Delhi in various areas.

He emphasized the leading roles of the two countries in international arenas, saying Majlis is keen to increase parliamentary ties with India.

Ambassador Shri D.P. Srivastava described talks on regional issues between Iranian and Indian officials as constructive, and said Larijani's upcoming visit to India

would be an important step toward the expansion of friendly relations between the two countries.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/02/20/289851/larijani-to-visit-india-to-expand-ties/>

- **Iran's sovereignty over three Persian Gulf islands is non-negotiable, MPs say**

Map shows the location of the three Iranian islands of Greater Tunb, Lesser Tunb, and Abu Musa.



The National Security and Foreign Policy Committee of the Iranian Majlis (parliament) has emphasized that the Islamic Republic's sovereignty over the three Persian Gulf islands of Greater Tunb, Lesser Tunb, and Abu Musa is non-negotiable.

In a statement issued on Tuesday, the Iranian MPs strongly dismissed the United

Arab Emirates' claims about the three islands and stated that Tehran has repeatedly reaffirmed its sovereignty over the three Iranian islands.

The statement added that all of the measures and actions Iran has taken in regard to the three islands have always been in conformity with the principles of its territorial integrity and sovereignty.

It also noted that Iran regards the latest UAE statement about the three Iranian islands as intervention in its internal affairs and roundly rejects it.

In a recent statement, the UAE censured the efforts of Iranian legislators to visit the islands.

"The Islamic Republic of Iran has always pursued the policy of friendship and good neighborliness with all its neighboring states and welcomes bilateral talks with the UAE government to explore ways to expand relations and resolve the current misunderstandings," the Majlis statement said in conclusion.

The UAE has repeatedly made baseless claims to the islands of Greater Tunb, Lesser Tunb, and Abu Musa.

However, the islands have always been part of Iran historically, proof of which can be found in and corroborated by countless historical, legal, and geographical documents in Iran and other parts of the world.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/02/19/289848/3-persian-gulf-islands-nonnegotiable/>

3. ISRAEL - PALESTINE

- **Egypt brokering talks between Hamas and Israel on humanitarian issues**

BETHLEHEM (Ma'an) – For the second time in a week, Israeli security officials visited Cairo for talks with Egyptian officials focusing on the ceasefire brokered by Egypt last year between Israel and the Palestinian factions operating in the Gaza Strip.

A high-level Hamas official told Ma'an that the ongoing Egypt-brokered negotiations between Israel and the Islamist movement

do not address “political issues but rather pure humanitarian issues.”

He explained that the talks were meant to consolidate the ceasefire terms and highlighted that Israel has been violating these terms recently on a daily basis.

The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, dismissed claims that the ongoing talks were related to a comprehensive agreement upon which Israel could end Gaza blockade and open all crossings in exchange for demolishing all smuggling tunnels.



He highlighted that the Egypt authorities started to demolish tunnels unilaterally despite Hamas' opposition. Hamas, he added, asked Egypt to provide alternatives on the ground to the underground tunnels. “However, the Egyptians are convinced that the tunnels are used to

smuggle weapons, but that isn't true," added the official.

Asked about the daily announcements by the Egyptians about seizing weapons and explosives, he says there is exaggeration and misrepresentation by Egyptian media: "We control the tunnels and monitor everything that comes in and out."

According to the source, Hamas submitted through the Egyptians a report about Israel's violations of the ceasefire agreement in the northern and the southern Gaza Strip. The report also included incidents of shooting on Gaza fishermen, and requested entry of more goods into Gaza, he added.

Also Tuesday, Israeli sources reported that an agreement is being negotiated between Hamas and Israel upon which Israel will end the Gaza blockade in exchange for halting weapons to Hamas. Smuggling tunnels will also be demolished as part of the deal, according to the Israeli sources.

However senior Hamas official Mahmoud Zahhar told reporters Tuesday that there are ongoing negotiations between the

Egyptians and Israel. These negotiations are related only to the border crossings agreement, the hunger striking prisoners in Israeli jails, and getting Israel to comply with the ceasefire agreement signed last year.

"We are not negotiating core issues such as land and Jerusalem, but rather humanitarian issues," he said.

Similarly, deputy chief of Hamas' politburo Mousa Abu Marzouq denied there were indirect negotiations between a Hamas' delegation and Israeli security officials through Egyptian officials.

"These are mere lies circulated by the Israelis," he said.

<http://www.maannews.net/eng/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=566990>

- **Official: Israel allows more improvements on Gaza borders**

GAZA CITY (Ma'an) – Israel has informed the Palestinian borders and crossings department in Ramallah that more improvements will be introduced on Gaza borders, says official.



Nathmi Muhanna, chief of the borders and crossings department told Ma'an Tuesday that Israel decided to allow entry of new empty domestic gas cylinders into the Gaza Strip. He highlighted that since several years shipping new gas cylinders to Gaza was banned. He also mentioned that 125 new cars would be allowed every week instead of 100.

The Israeli authorities agreed as well to install a new phone and internet line from Israel to the Gaza Strip.

According to Muhanna, four new fuel trucks and two new gas trucks will be shipped to Gaza.

<http://www.maannews.net/eng/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=566996>

- **Israeli forces clash with protesters outside Ofer jail**

RAMALLAH (Ma'an) -- Israeli forces clashed with protestors outside Ofer detention center near Ramallah on Tuesday at a demonstration in support of Palestinian prisoners.

The rally in solidarity with hunger-strikers marched towards the Israeli prison from Birzeit, Beitunia and Ramallah.

Israeli forces fired tear gas at protesters and youths responded by throwing stones at military forces.

At least 18 people were lightly injured, witnesses told Ma'an, and journalists at the scene said Israeli forces deliberately targeted them with smoke bombs and sound grenades.

An Israeli army spokeswoman said "approximately 150 Palestinians rioted and hurled rocks and firebombs at security personnel, who responded with riot dispersal means."

The protest is the latest in a series of popular demonstrations to voice anger at the condition of Palestinian prisoners on hunger-strike.

In a statement on Monday, France's Foreign Ministry urged Israel "to be sensitive to the risk of a tragic outcome and to take appropriate measures as a matter of urgency".

Islamic Jihad said a truce with Israel that ended eight days of fighting in November could unravel if any hunger striker died.

Nearly 800 prisoners in Israeli jails launched a one day hunger strike on Tuesday to show solidarity with long-term hunger strikers, a prisoner group said earlier.

On Monday, protesters rallied in Bethlehem, Hebron and Ramallah in support of hunger striking prisoners in Israeli jails, as Palestinian Authority Minister of Prisoner Affairs Issa Qarage warned of a popular uprising.

Last week hundreds of Palestinians protested across the West Bank in solidarity with prisoners on hunger strike, sparking a series of clashes with Israeli forces.

<http://www.maannews.net/eng/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=566846>

- **Livni: Joining Netanyahu not a betrayal of Hatnua voters**

PA official optimistic about presumptive justice minister's prospects as a negotiator; Yishai: Shas not in the coalition yet

A day after she shook up the political system by becoming the first party leader to join Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's emergent government, Tzipi Livni on Wednesday said that her decision to sign on to a Likud-Yisrael Beytenu-led coalition was an expression of the two parties' "common goal" and did not constitute a betrayal of her voters.

The Hatnua party's about-face — Livni had asserted that she'd never serve as a "fig-leaf" in a right-wing Netanyahu government, a sentiment expressed in even stronger terms by her party's number three, Amir Peretz — will land her in the position of justice minister and chief negotiator with the Palestinians. Peretz will serve as environmental protection minister.

"We understand there was nothing personal," Livni said, downplaying past disagreements between Netanyahu and herself. The "common goal" she shared

with the prime minister was not a “sudden” revelation, Livni told Israel Radio, but rather the result of many hours of talks since the January 22 elections.

Livni, who based the Hatnua campaign on calling for a resolution of the Palestinian issue, cited statements by Netanyahu — both in the past four years and on Tuesday evening, when he and Livni announced their agreement — that the conflict could only be resolved via a two-state solution. Netanyahu, she said, “has an interest in pushing this forward.”

That the prime minister had not committed to a two-state solution in writing, and did not have the full backing of his party to carry out dramatic concessions, was not a deterrent, Livni said. Rather, in conducting negotiations — according to the agreement with Likud, she will be subordinate only to the prime minister in such matters — she would be guided by Netanyahu’s policy statements, both in public and in private conversations with her.

Livni stressed that her move wasn’t a “betrayal” of her voters, and did not contradict her “deep criticism” of the

previous administration; nor, she averred, had that criticism diminished. “The question is whether or not we can still implement those policies that we discussed, both in negotiations [with the Palestinians] and with the Justice portfolio,” she said.

Livni criticized the nationalist Orthodox Jewish Home party after some members on Tuesday said that her inclusion in the government would make it more difficult for them to join Netanyahu. She called on center-left parties Yesh Atid and Labor to “do today what we have done, and create a government that enables us to push forward” with the peace process.



MK Uri Orbach of Jewish Home on Wednesday did not rule out the possibility that his party would sit in a government that included the dovish Hatnua. He said that while his party was not happy that Livni had been chosen to head peace negotiations, it understood Netanyahu’s

need to assemble as broad a coalition as possible.

Zahava Gal-on, the head of the left-wing Meretz party, on Tuesday night blasted Livni for entering the coalition.

“When Tzipi Livni entered the election race, moments before the deadline for filing lists, she decimated the hope that a center-left government would be formed. Today, despite all the slogans she spread in her campaign, she is the first to go crawling into the forming right-wing coalition,” Gal-on wrote on her Facebook page. “Livni’s entrance into the government is a slap in the face for her voters, who dreamed of a diplomatic shift and discovered that their votes were stolen and given to the right.”

Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas’s political adviser, Nimer Hamad, called Livni’s appointment to head negotiations “a positive sign.”

Hamad praised Livni’s stated views that the “settlements are an obstacle to peace” and said she had “a broad understanding in what is needed for the

peace process, and a vision of the Palestinian point of view.”

The ultra-Orthodox Shas is seen as the next party in line to join a Netanyahu government.

The party’s leader, Interior Minister Eli Yishai, on Wednesday morning said there had been progress in his party’s negotiations with Likud-Beytenu, but that some gaps still remained. He estimated that the two factions would not finalize a deal before the end of the week.

On Tuesday night, Channel 10 reported that negotiations between Likud and Shas saw “significant progress” toward bringing the 12-seat party into the government, including on the contentious issue of a universal draft bill that would include the ultra-Orthodox.

The deal would be based on a proposal put together by Eugene Kendall, the head of Israel’s National Economic Council, according to which the IDF would draft upwards of 60% of ultra-Orthodox Israelis aged 18-24 within five years, and the government would provide monetary incentives to those who comply while

penalizing the yeshivas of those who don't.

The Yesh Atid and Jewish Home parties rejected the Kendall proposal when Netanyahu's team pitched it in coalition talks last week.

On Wednesday morning, Yishai said that differences between his party and Likud centered on the universal draft, as well as economic considerations.

<http://www.timesofisrael.com/after-joining-netanyahu-livni-cites-common-goals/>

- **Livni: World congratulated us on coalition agreement**

Hatnua chairwoman convenes her faction members to explain decision to join Netanyahu's government. 'We are creating new hope,' she says

VIDEO - After being the first to sign a coalition agreement which will make her part of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government, Hatnua Chairwoman Tzipi Livni convened her faction Wednesday to explain the move criticized by many in the political arena.

"Today we're smiling but everything is still ahead of us," Livni told reporters at the start of the meeting.

"We created a new hope," Livni said, "and we have received congratulations from all over the world. That's very important."

Livni spoke of Netanyahu's attempts to get her to join his previous coalition four years ago, when she was the chairwoman of Kadima and had 28 Knesset seats.

At the time, she said, he tried to do so "so that we would be a fig leaf for a policy he dictated. Today it's a completely different picture. It was the prime minister's choice to start with us, and the question what the government will look like remains open."

According to the coalition agreement, published Tuesday, Livni will serve as justice minister and head peace talks with the Palestinians. Netanyahu will supervise over the negotiations, and any draft agreement will require the government's approval.

Another faction member, most likely Amir Peretz, will be appointed environmental protection minister.

Wednesday's meeting was opened by MK Meir Sheerit, who explained that the justice portfolio will allow the faction to "strengthen our ability to advance laws. We have an opportunity to further legislation on all the issues we have addressed, like an equal share of the burden."

The tension between the faction members was apparent before the beginning of the short press conference. MK Peretz, approached Hatnua's No. 2, MK Amram Mitzna, who has a promise from Livni that he will be the faction's second minister, and tried to shake his hand and congratulate him on his birthday.

Mitzna refused to shake Peretz's hand and said, "Yeah, these things happen too."

The agreement between Livni and Netanyahu was reached without the knowledge of Hatnua faction members. Haim Ramon, Livni's political ally, was not informed of the deal either.

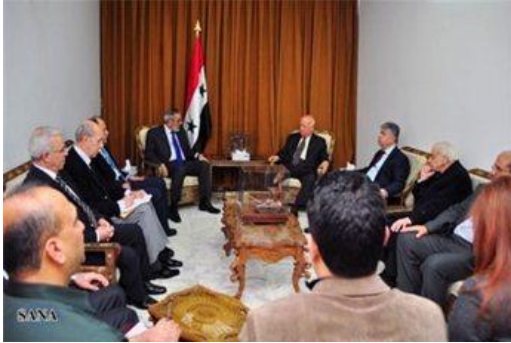
"The commitment to (peace) negotiations led to a partnership," Livni told reporters during a joint press conference with Netanyahu on Tuesday evening. "Two and a half months ago my colleagues and I formed Hatnua, and we vowed to fight for a diplomatic agreement, even if it doesn't pay off politically. This led to a partnership with the prime minister after I was (given the necessary authority) to negotiate with the aim of ending the conflict with the Palestinians.

"The diplomatic issue is at the center of our lives. This is what is bringing the president of the United States (to the region)," she said. " Hamas controls Gaza and wants to take over the West Bank. This could lead to the loss of the State of Israel's Jewish identity."

<http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4347209,00.html>

- **PLO delegation head briefs Gaza factions on Syria visit**

GAZA CITY (Ma'an) -- The head of a PLO delegation briefed political factions in Gaza on Wednesday about a recent visit to Syria.



Zakaria al-Agha headed a high-level delegation to Syria last week to discuss the situation of Palestinians caught up in the internal conflict.

The PLO delegation met with Syrian officials, faction representatives in Palestinian refugee camps and officials from the UN agency for Palestinian refugees.

Al-Agha said the visit was coordinated between different PLO factions to best protect the interests and goals of Palestinians in the country.

Fatah spokesman in Gaza, Fayez Abu Aita, praised the visit and stressed that the PLO must continue to monitor the situation of Palestinian refugees caught up in the Syria conflict.

<http://www.maannews.net/eng/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=567081>

4. AFRICA and EGYPT

• Salafist street patrols worry Tunisians

The phenomenon of Salafist security details patrolling cities and neighbourhoods has many citizens wondering whether Ansar al-Sharia is trying to take over law and order in Tunisia.

By Monia Ghanmi for Magharebia in Tunis
– 19/02/13

Bands of baton-wielding salafists have mounted security patrols in Tunisian cities in recent weeks, leaving many citizens to question what is behind the phenomenon.

Salafists say they are patrolling neighbourhoods in the name of safeguarding citizens and their property, amid increased instability in Tunisia that followed the February 6th slaying of opposition leader Chokri Belaid.

Since his assassination, Salafist security patrols became more prevalent in Tunis and other cities. The patrols, which each number dozens of members, move about on foot or on motorcycles, or in cars flying black flags.

An online call by Ansar al-Sharia mobilised salafists to fan out and patrol the streets as unofficial security details. The radical salafist group posted the call on Facebook for its supporters to protect citizens and property in the aftermath of Belaid's killing.

"They do not have any hidden agendas," young salafist Ali Zaghouani said.

"Their goal is not to replace the security apparatus but to support its efforts in maintaining security during these security lapses that are taking place from time to time," he added.

Yet Ansar al-Sharia does want to bring Sharia law to Tunisia, and has resorted to violent acts of extremism. The group is widely seen as responsible for a series of attacks in Tunisia in May 2012 and last September's protests at the US embassy in Tunis that left four dead and 49 others injured.

With the street patrols, however, many Tunisians say that the salafists are up to something sinister. To some, the radical Islamists are encroaching on the

government's security apparatus and ability to maintain and law order.

This could weaken the state and undermine its civil character, Social Democratic Party spokesman Samir Bettaib told Magharebia.

"This is something we cannot accept and it really angers us," Bettaib said.

"If anything, it shows the weakness of the state, especially its security apparatus, in ensuring security for citizens and the protection of their properties."

The Salafist patrols are illegal and a clear encroachment on state institutions as well as the privacy of citizens, said Adel Soltani, a 34-year-old resident of Ettadamon, a suburb of Tunis.

He said he saw uniformed salafist patrolmen stopping passers-by, asking for their I.D. and sometimes even carrying out arrests.

"We do not want those who seek to impose a trusteeship on the security of citizens or interfere in private lives, because only state agencies are

authorized to perform this job," Soltani said.

For college senior Firas Jouini, the salafist patrols have a nefarious goal.

"I think that there is a blueprint being prepared by these groups to strike the official security apparatus and compromise the country's security," he said.



Responding to the concerns raised by citizens, Interior Minister Ali Larayedh denied accusations that the salafists were running a security service parallel to the police and the National Guard.

"While we praise the initiative of some citizens, regardless of their political and ideological affiliations to protect their residential areas from violence, we caution that no one is entitled to replace

the security apparatus," according to a statement issued by the ministry.

For its part, the Reform Party said "there is no parallel security system that could replace public security".

"Young people who came out during the events in their neighbourhoods did so to protect public and private establishments and properties along with citizens and shopkeepers," the Reform Party added. "They protected them in response to the call of duty and to consecrate their high sense of patriotism and social responsibility."

http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/en_GB/features/awi/features/2013/02/19/feature-01

- **Cost of living spurs Morocco concerns**

Morocco is working to fight corruption while expanding social services in an effort to soften the blow of rising prices.

By Siham Ali and Naoufel Cherkaoui in Rabat for Magharebia – 19/02/13

With the cost of food, fuel and other basic goods on the rise in Morocco, members of Parliament last week raised the issue with Prime Minister Abdelilah Benkirane.

Prices have continued to climb without any measures put in place to protect the purchasing power of citizens, National Rally of Independents member Hassan Bouhrize said during the February 11th session.

"The indicators are worrisome and we note an increase in the unemployment rate. A large segment of society lives below the poverty line. Many people who have taken micro-loans cannot pay them back," Bouhrize said.

The same alarm was rung by the chairman of the parliamentary bloc of the Authenticity and Modernity Party, Abdellatif Ouahbi.

He argued that the real problems were unemployment and limited incomes. He accused the government of lacking a clear vision with regard to the economic problems facing society.

Urgent measures must be implemented to address the high cost of living and to avoid a negative impact not only on ordinary citizens but also on the viability of domestic firms, according to Socialist Union of Popular Forces (UFSP) MP Abdelhadi Khairat.

"In the face of higher prices, more and more people resort to smuggled goods from China and Turkey, which affects negatively Moroccan firms," he said.

For his part, Prime Minister Benkirane noted the efforts by the government to maintain price stability, particularly through grants from the Compensation Fund, the fight against speculation, and market control.

But citizen Samiha Ferkhani said the premier was trying to downplay the situation.

"In eight years, the cost of my market basket has tripled. Everything has gone up, the prices of vegetables, fruit, housing, and education... The situation must be corrected," she said.

One thing Morocco is doing to tackle the problem is work to root out corruption. Parliament is currently discussing a bill to create a new anti-graft agency with expanded powers.

The Central Authority for the Prevention of Corruption (ICPC) was established in 2007, but as per the latest constitutional amendment, the body will become "The National Commission for Integrity, Prevention, and the Fight against Corruption".

"Corruption is a form of terrorism conducted against the community and there should be a system to deter corruption, due to its risk of threatening the entity as a whole," commented Lahbib Choubani, the minister in charge of relations with Parliament.

"There should be concerted efforts by journalists and politicians to subdue corruption through the logic of law and the rule of the state," he continued.

Choubani added that Morocco needs a new generation of reforms that serve the overall security of the simple citizen and

make them feel protected from various types of corruption.

One of the main problems for the ICPC is independence, agency chief Abdesselam Aboudrar said.



"The authority became convinced of the need to clarify this concept, draw its limits, and conjure its implications," the ICPC head said.

"This put us before the inevitability of establishing requirements related to the legal functionality of the National Independent Authority, its position as an institution, its financial control, and the

mechanisms of appointments. There was also the question of representation as far as diversity and balance of members are concerned," Abouddrar added.

Though the large task of combatting corruption is prevention, it should not be limited to one institution, Research Network of Anti-Corruption Agencies (ANCORAGE-NET) Director Luís de Sousa said.

"Establishing a multitasked institution does not guarantee an exhaustive inventory of all the varied and many problems of corruption," de Sousa added.

http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/en_GB/features/awi/features/2013/02/19/feature-02

- **Algeria denies licence to salafist party**

Algerian authorities barred the "Free Awakening Front" from holding its founding convention.

By Walid Ramzi in Algiers for Magharebia
The Algerian Interior Ministry refused to license the first salafist party in the country.

The Free Awakening Front had planned to hold its founding convention on Saturday (February 16th). The interior ministry officially notified the party officials, through Algiers wali, that their application for the convention had been denied.

The interior ministry did not explain the decision.

"We were surprised with the rejection because our file has met all legal requirements," salafist party head Abdelfattah Zeraoui Hamadache told reporters. "We think that this involves an illegal move on the part of security authorities."

"We've tried to get explanations from Algiers wilaya officials about the reasons for rejection, but they said they don't know anything and can't comment on that," he added.

Hamadache said that his group would "stage a sit-in opposite Algiers wilaya and interior ministry headquarters to demand our right to engage in politics", if their demand for a meeting with officials was rejected.

The salafist party "hasn't wreaked havoc in land, hasn't thrown stones, hasn't attacked a road, hasn't sown chaos, and hasn't undermined the country's security and stability", Hamadache said.

There were indications suggesting that the Algerian authorities would refuse to give a licence to the party.

Religious Affairs Minister Bouabdallah Ghlamallah had recently accused the salafist movement in Algeria of trying to seize power. During a seminar on the Algerian religious marji'ya held in Dar al-Imam on February 12th, Ghlamallah said he never feared those who called for salafism.

"What do those people want?" he wondered. "Do they want to correct Islam or seize power?"



Ghlamallah added that pursuant to law, the interior ministry wouldn't license religion-based parties.

The amended version of the law pertaining to political parties, which was issued last August, bans licences to religious parties. It also bars anyone linked to the Black Decade from returning to politics.

"Islamic parties that declare their affiliation to a system other than the republican and democratic system wouldn't be licenced," Nourredine Lajal, a professor of political sciences, explained.

"The government won't give up on this regardless of the pressures that some parties try to exercise over it taking advantage of the Arab Spring events that brought the Islamists to power" [in the Maghreb]," Lajal added.

Kamal HadeF, a journalist specialising in security affairs, said that the "unrest which some countries are witnessing following the accession of Islamists to power, such as Egypt and Tunisia, serves the interest of the Algerian government".

HadeF noted that Islamist parties have a real presence in the scene and are politically active. But they have not been able to build a popular base that would enable them to win election and come to power, he added.

"These parties have understood the rules of democracy and refuse to use violence as a means to get to power," HadeF said.

"They just don't want to repeat the same mistake of the disbanded Islamic Salvation Front (FIS)."

The new salafist party did not receive much support from religious young people, with some even saying that the

formation of parties was "a factor for division and, therefore, a contradiction with the Sharia".

"Some of them believe that they shouldn't engage in politics and should suffice with preaching, while others believe that they must seize the chance and move politically to reform the existing conditions," explained sharia professor Mohamed Ramadhani.

"Recently, the popularity of Islamic parties in Algeria has somewhat dropped, unlike some other countries where Islamists have achieved remarkable success," Ramadhani added.

"Fears might have haunted Algerians about the return of the turmoil of the 1990's, which left behind a heavy toll of dead, displaced and missing people," he suggested.

http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/en_GB/features/awi/features/2013/02/19/feature-03

- **New US secretary of state Kerry to visit Europe, Turkey, Egypt, Gulf on first trip**

Secretary of State John Kerry will travel to four Western European countries as well as Turkey, Egypt and the Gulf from Feb. 24 to March 6 on his first trip as the top U.S. diplomat, the State Department said on Tuesday.

Kerry will visit London, Berlin, Paris and Rome, where he will attend a gathering of foreign ministers to discuss the civil war in Syria, and then on to Ankara, Cairo, Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Doha, State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland told reporters at her daily briefing.

Kerry was sworn in as secretary of state on Feb. 1, replacing Hillary Clinton.

<http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/65167/Egypt/Politics-/New-US-secretary-of-state-Kerry-to-visit-Europe,-T.aspx>

- **Port Said Prison: Bloodstains but no answers**

As the Suez Canal city continues its civil disobedience campaign, Ahram Online traces the story of last month's bloodshed and finds grief, anger and conflicting accounts

Port Said Prison was a scene of chaos. Blood was splattered on the floor. Bullets were flying and fumes from Molotov cocktails filled the air.

Two policemen were the first to die in the violence. A judge announced that 21 Port Said locals would receive the death penalty for their role in last year's Port Said stadium disaster. Minutes later, all hell broke loose.

“Right after the verdict was read, the prison was attacked by a barrage of gunfire from all directions. Two policemen were shot dead, so we armed the Central Security Forces (CSF) with the prison's weapons to defend themselves and the prison,” a high-ranking figure from the Egyptian Interior Ministry told Ahram Online inside Port Said prison, speaking on condition of anonymity.

It was the end of a difficult year for the people of Port Said. On 1 February, 2012, violent clashes erupted after a league game between fans of the local Masry football club and supporters of the Cairo-based Ahly.

The clashes left 72 Ahly fans dead. Following the deadly game, 73 Port Said locals, including nine security officials and three Masry football club officials, were put on trial. The death sentences, which were announced on 26 January of this year, left the city reeling.

“We died three times; firstly when guests died in our city, secondly when our innocent sons received death penalties, and thirdly when we were killed treacherously,” said the father of Mohamed ‘Hommos’ Adel Shehata, a leader of hardcore Masry fan group the Ultras Super Green, who was one of the defendants who received the death penalty.

On the day of the verdict, which was eagerly awaited by Ahly fans to “bring relief to the mothers of the martyrs,” clashes erupted throughout the city of Port Said, leaving more than 40 people dead and around 1,400 injured. At least 120 of the injured are suffering from serious injuries as a result of the attacks, according to the local hospitals' records.

“They died from suffocation and we died by treachery,” read many signs across the streets of Port Said.

Inside the prison

Port Said Prison bore the brunt of this rage. It is not yet clear who was behind the attack, which took place as soon as the verdicts were announced.

Walking around the prison, it’s obvious that an ugly massacre happened there. Heavy police and military security surrounds the area, gunshots marks are visible all over the prison’s walls and buildings, and there are blood stains on the floor.

“We were listening to the sentence on the radio next to the prison when suddenly we were surprised by a hail of gunfire,” said Ibrahim El-Masry, a former Masry and Egypt footballer who has been advocating for the rights of the men on trial and for Port Said residents injured in recent clashes.

The families of the detained had been waiting, with El-Masry, next to the prison, some hopeful for good news. The

announcement of mass death penalties was a shock.

The police tell a similar story; that they too were taken by surprise at the sudden burst of fire at the prison after the verdicts were announced.

We were “surprised by the gunfire barrage” said one experienced policeman to Ahram Online, adding that “the CSF unit sent from Cairo to secure the area around the prison on the day of the verdict didn’t have any sort of arms except tear gas bombs. Orders were given to immediately arm them with the prison’s weapons to protect themselves and the vital facility.”
Policeman blood

Ahmed El-Balky, a CSF captain, had been sent by the interior ministry along with a number of colleagues to secure Port Said prison after hundreds protested angrily outside it in the week before the verdicts were announced, when rumours spread that the detained men would be transferred to Cairo.

Families of the detained youngsters were worried, not because of the sentence, but because of the threats of hardcore Ahly

fans, the Ultras Ahlawy, to “get revenge themselves” if the verdict didn’t satisfy them.

“In an attempt to disperse protesters, El-Balky climbed this watchtower to shoot a tear gas bomb that didn’t really go past the prison’s walls,” said a leader inside Port Said prison, pointing to bloodstains on the ground.

“When a gunman shot him from one of the buildings around the prison, his colleagues weren’t immediately able to carry his dead body away, because of the continuing gunfire,” the policeman said. “He was a good young man. He is the real martyr.”

All eye-witnesses Ahram Online spoke to agreed that El-Balky and his colleague were the first two people to be shot, but accounts varied as to who the snipers were. Ahram Online contacted the captain’s family but they declined to speak to the media.

“Yes, the two policemen died first, but we all know who did that,” said El-Masry, referring to the security authorities. “No one has access to the roofs of the

buildings around the prison apart from the police. They and they only have the keys for them, as they clearly threaten the building's security.”

'No house without grief'

“There is a feeling around the city that Port Said as a whole is under some sort of mass punishment. This verdict was obviously politicised,” says El-Badry Farghaly, a former local MP and a well-known leader of leftist political party Al-Tagammo.

“I am against conspiracy theories but at the same time I say that what is happening to Port Said is all premeditated,” Farghaly told Ahram Online.

Egypt's President Mohamed Morsi appeared on national television a day later, on 27 January, declaring a 30-day state of emergency in Port Said, Suez and Ismailia.

The exceptional procedures didn't stop the clashes, or ease the tension between the different sides, but they did create a feeling of isolation among locals.

Violence continued sporadically over the next week, not only next to the prison but also at the El-Arab and El-Sharq police stations, at the local police sports club, and at the funerals of those killed, when unknown men on motorcycles would shoot dead mourners walking in funeral processions in the street.

“Port Said had three days of funerals. We go to bury martyrs, then other martyrs killed in the funeral processions themselves,” El-Masry said.

“Gunmen tried to raid El-Arab police station in an attempt to make us leave our positions for days,” said a policeman who was at El-Arab, the city's main police station, during the violence.

“If El-Arab police station were to surrender, forget about security in Port Said for a long time. They wanted us to leave our positions to cause chaos. It's our home. We will die here if we have to,” said another policeman.

“Two police cars roamed around the stations shooting people in El-Talatinay Street and other streets randomly. Yes,

they were brutal, but people should have gone home to help the police determine the thugs, no?" the owner of a shop behind El-Arab police station told Ahram Online.

"There is no house in Port Said that is not feeling grief because a member has died, been injured or received the death penalty unjustly," Farghaly said.

"In all cases, the police will be blamed," said an enthusiastic young police officer sharing worries over his career and own safety inside Port Said prison. "If we do our job ending riots and street clashes, we will be questioned for violence and if we stand neutral, we will be accused of dereliction. What should we do?"

The turbulence in the city is far from over. A campaign of civil disobedience is currently being carried out by residents who demand that their voices be heard in Cairo.

"Injustice leads to explosion," said the leader of the largest Masry fan group, the Ultras Green Eagles, Ali 'Spicy', who called for the current civil disobedience. "A message from Port Said people; we are

suffering from all sorts of injustice, so beware the anger of the city of courage."

"We want justice for the martyrs and want recognition as part of the revolution martyrs [who receive indemnities from the state]. An official apology from President Morsi is also essential," said El-Masry.

"Hommos cannot hurt anybody. It was just an accident. Why do we have to pay? Why have all these good boys died in the stadium or around the prison? " said Abou-Hommos, the father of the Masry fan sentenced to death.

"But I told my wife, don't cry. God will give us justice either in this life or the life hereafter. There are dozens who died just because they were backing your son. They are even better than him. They are the real martyrs."

"With our lives, with our blood, we will sacrifice ourselves to you martyrs: Either we avenge you or we die like you!" chanted protesters during this week's marches in the city.

Advocates for the locals are clear that the only way forward is justice.

“Port Said was just a crime scene. Search for the criminals,” Farghaly said.

<http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/65102/Egypt/Politics-/Port-Said-Prison-Bloodstains-but-no-answers.aspx>

5. JORDAN and LEBANON

- **Future MPs slam Orthodox law**

The approval of the Orthodox electoral draft by the parliamentary joint committees prompted widespread condemnation by Future bloc MPs.

Future lawmaker Atef Majdalani considered the Orthodox law a “continuation of Hezbollah’s plan... which aims at controlling the country through [parliamentary] elections that would ensure its winning the majority [of the seats].”

“Unfortunately, some March 14 [parties] were drawn into this [scheme],” he added.

Majdalani also precised in his talk to Voice of Lebanon (100.5) Radio that “there was

no Christian consensus over this law, but rather Maronite parties that approved it.”

Lebanon’s four major Christian parties, including the opposition Lebanese Forces and Kataeb Party, endorsed the Orthodox Gathering’s draft law which proposes citizens vote for candidates of their own sect. However, the Future Movement, Progressive Socialist Party and independent March 14 Christians opposed the draft, with the country’s president also voicing his objection to this proposal.

Meanwhile, Future bloc MP Mohammad al-Hajjar described the Orthodox law as “a proposal that paves the way for strife among the Lebanese,” in remarks published in As-Siyasah Kuwaiti newspaper on Wednesday.

He also said that the Free Patriotic Movement and its ally Hezbollah were working on postponing the elections “so that the [current] government, which political decisions they control, would remain in power.”

In turn, another opposition official affiliated with the same party, MP Mohammad Qabbani, strongly denounced

the Orthodox proposal which he labeled a “draft for collective suicide,” and “the start of the end of a unified Lebanon” because it is a “step toward fragmenting” the country.

Qabbani reiterated in his comments to the same Kuwaiti daily that his party will revoke this law if it is adopted.

Elsewhere, Future bloc MP Ahmad Fatfat told Al-Anbaa Kuwaiti newspaper that the Orthodox proposal will be “the cemetery of the Taif Accord [which brought a negotiated end to Lebanon’s 1975-1990 civil war].”

He also accused FPM leader MP Michel Aoun of only “going after the presidency of the republic,” and said that for being elected president, Aoun would be ready to “waive everything for Hezbollah.”

Future bloc MPs walked out of the joint parliamentary committees’ Tuesday session along with PSP lawmakers as well as independent Christian MPs, as voting on the approval of the second article of the Orthodox draft law was underway.

Following the approval, Future Movement leader and opposition leading figure MP Saad Hariri wrote on the social networking site Twitter that the decision was “a black day in the history of legislative work.”

The Orthodox draft was met with criticism from the parties opposing it on the grounds that it could lead to sectarian alignments.

However, this proposal was approved by the joint parliamentary commissions on Tuesday following a second day of meetings.

The meeting came after weeks of deliberation at the end of which the country’s competing political forces failed to reach a unanimous agreement to choose a proposal that would replace the 1960 electoral law currently on the books.

<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/lebanonne/ws/future-mps-slam-orthodox-law>

- **Lebanon speaker to remain neutral on electoral law**

Lebanon’s Speaker Nabih Berri said he will not stand against any electoral proposal in

order to preserve his role as a mediator among the country's political parties.

“The 1960 law is behind and the Orthodox [proposal] is ahead of us. I will remain in the middle for consensus,” Berri told An-Nahar newspaper in remarks published on Wednesday.



The speaker's remarks came following his meeting with former minister Khalil al-Hrawi, who was delegated by President Michel Suleiman to visit Berri in Ain al-Tineh Tuesday evening.

Berri and Hrawi discussed the possibility of reaching a consensus over an electoral draft that would combine proportional and majoritarian voting.

“The door is still open to [reach] a consensus,” Berri said.

On Tuesday, Lebanon's joint parliamentary commissions approved in their second day of meetings the Orthodox law which proposes citizens vote for candidates of their own religious sect.

The meeting came following weeks of deliberation at the end of which the country's competing political forces failed to reach a unanimous agreement to choose a proposal that would replace the 1960 electoral law currently on the books.

<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/lebanonnews/lebanon-speaker-to-remain-neutral-on-electoral-law>

- **Lebanon labor strike to intensify**

Lebanon's public sector strike is set to widen Wednesday amid the demands of state employees and teachers for cabinet action on wage increases. Meanwhile, Lebanon's political rifts deepened after a parliamentary commissions meeting greenlit the Orthodox draft law.

After holding what he called a “negative” meeting with Prime Minister Najib Miqati on state salaries, SCC chief Hanna Gharib

called Tuesday for more protests and strikes across Lebanon in the coming days and urged employees to "intensify their actions."

The SCC branch for the North also called for a mass protest Wednesday in Tripoli outside the city's Serail, the National News Agency reported.

On the government side, Finance Minister Mohammad Safadi vowed that the ranks and salaries system for public wage increases would be finalized and sent to the parliament "within two weeks maximum," but did not elaborate on his statement.

Also, Miqati met with a cabinet commission tasked to find a way to fund the ranks and salaries regime, but no announcements were made on a potential mechanism for financing state wage increases. Ministerial sources told An-Nahar newspaper the the cabinet meeting scheduled for Wednesday is not expected to tackle the issue.

On Tuesday morning a mass protest was held in Downtown Beirut while public school teachers across the country

suspended their work, including teachers in schools in Kesrouan, Beirut, Baabda, Koura, and Iqlim al-Kharoub.

Later in the day, the joint parliamentary commissions' approval of the Orthodox draft law sparked a political firestorm as parliamentarians spoke out in fervent support and opposition of the proposal that calls for proportional voting along sectarian lines.

Civil society activists gathered in Downtown Beirut on Tuesday evening to protest against the proposal, temporarily blocking the road in front of Beirut's municipality and holding banners denouncing the Orthodox electoral draft and calling for "living with dignity."

Lebanon's parliament commissions approved the draft after opposition Future bloc MPs walked out of the session that took place on Tuesday morning along with Progressive Socialist Party MPs as well as independent Christian MPs as voting on the the second article of the proposal was underway.

Following the draft's approval, Future Movement leader and opposition figure

MP Saad Hariri wrote on the social networking site Twitter that the decision was “a black day in the history of legislative work.” Later in the evening, his party said the law “threatened Lebanon’s future and was the best gift that could be presented to the Israeli enemy.”

Meanwhile, Hariri’s political foe Free Patriotic Movement leader MP Michel Aoun hailed the commissions’ approval of the law, saying “Today is the whitest of days in Lebanon.”

The Orthodox draft—which proposes citizens vote for candidates of their own religious confession—is opposed by the Future Movement, Progressive Socialist Party and independent March 14 Christians, while the Future Movement’s allies the Kataeb Party and Lebanese Forces back it along with March 8’s FPM and Marada Movement.

Kataeb bloc MP Sami Gemayel said the approval of this draft was a “continuation of the democratic path.”

Fellow opposition lawmaker, Lebanese Forces MP George Adwan, described the joint committees’ approval of the

Orthodox draft as the “beginning of a new phase in the adoption of an electoral law.”

Adwan stated, however, that “discussions [will continue] until a new electoral draft is voted on in the General Assembly.”

Amid the rifts over the Orthodox law, the March 14 General Secretariat meeting set for Wednesday was delayed until next week.

<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/lebanonews/lebanon-labor-strike-to-intensify>

6. SYRIA

• **Parliament Advisor: Tehran Welcomes Egypt's Plan to Settle Syrian Crisis**

TEHRAN (FNA)- Senior Advisor to the Iranian Parliament Speaker for International affairs Hossein Sheikholeslam announced that Tehran welcomes the plan proposed by Egyptian President Mohammad Mursi for the settlement of the crisis in Syria.

Tehran welcomed Mursi's plan for Syria since the proposal was against war and in favor of political solution, Sheikholeslam said in Tehran on Tuesday.

Tehran and Cairo were currently working to find a solution to the turmoil in Syria, he added.

Sheikholeslam underlined that many countries have come to the conclusion that only a political solution can resolve the crisis and that continuing the war and violence in Syria would be detrimental.

Earlier this month, presidents of Iran, Egypt and Turkey in a meeting in Cairo underscored the necessity for an immediate stop in the bloodshed, violence and crisis in Syria.

In their trilateral meeting on the sidelines of the Organization of the Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Summit, Ahmadinejad, Mursi and Gul proposed several initiatives and discussed various issues related to solving the Syrian crisis, but they were all agreed on the point that the massacres and bloodshed there needed to end immediately.

The three political leaders at the meeting commissioned the three countries foreign ministers to have a series of meetings to sum up the discussed issues and present them to the concerned parties and

officials in Syria so that the crisis and bloodshed there would hopefully come to an end.

Syria has been experiencing unrest since March 2011 with organized attacks by well-armed gangs against Syrian police forces and border guards being reported across the country.

Hundreds of people, including members of the security forces, have been killed, when some protest rallies turned into armed clashes.

The government blames outlaws, saboteurs, and armed terrorist groups for the deaths, stressing that the unrest is being orchestrated from abroad.

In October 2011, calm was eventually restored in the Arab state after President Assad started a reform initiative in the country, but Israel, the US and its Arab allies are seeking hard to bring the country into chaos through any possible means. Tel Aviv, Washington and some Arab capitals have been staging various plots in the hope of increasing unrests in Syria.

The US daily, Washington Post, reported in May that the Syrian rebels and terrorist groups battling the President Bashar al-Assad's government have received significantly more and better weapons in recent weeks, a crime paid for by the Persian Gulf Arab states and coordinated by the United States.

The newspaper, quoting opposition activists and US and foreign officials, reported that Obama administration officials emphasized the administration has expanded contacts with opposition military forces to provide the Persian Gulf nations with assessments of rebel credibility and command-and-control infrastructure.

According to the report, material is being stockpiled in Damascus, in Idlib near the Turkish border and in Zabadani on the Lebanese border.

Opposition activists who several months ago said the rebels were running out of ammunition said in May that the flow of weapons - most bought on the black market in neighboring countries or from elements of the Syrian military in the past - has significantly increased after a

decision by Saudi Arabia, Qatar and other Persian Gulf states to provide millions of dollars in funding each month.

<http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9107146074>

- **Blasts near a presidential palace in Syria capital**

No one was reported injured in the shell blasts in Damascus

Two mortar shells fired by "terrorists" exploded near the Tishreen presidential palace in the west of the Syrian capital on Tuesday, state news agency SANA reported.

The mortars "landed near the southern wall of Tishreen palace, only causing damage", SANA quoted an unnamed official as saying, blaming "terrorists" for the attack.

<http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/2/8/65154/World/Region/Blasts-near-a-presidential-palace-in-Syria-capital.aspx>

- **Russia warns Syria rivals risk "mutual destruction"**

Russia on Wednesday urged the regime and rebels in Syria to swiftly halt their almost two-year conflict, warning that seeking a military settlement risked leading to mutual destruction.

"It's time to end this two-year conflict," Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said after a meeting with Arab League chief Nabil al-Arabi and other top Arab diplomats. "Neither side can allow itself to bet on a military settlement as this is a path to nowhere, a path to the mutual destruction."

<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/newsyriala/testnews/russia-warns-syria-rivals-risk-mutual-destruction>

- **Islamists and Kurds end hostilities, to fight Syria regime**

Islamist rebels and Kurdish militias have ceased hostilities in the northern Syrian city of Ras al-Ain after sealing an accord that will see them fight together against the regime, activists said Tuesday.

Intermittent and sometimes deadly clashes have taken place between the two sides since rebels entered the majority

Kurdish city, located on the border with Turkey, several months ago.

A statement was issued at the weekend detailing the terms of the final accord between the rebel Free Syrian Army and the Kurdish popular committees.

A Kurdish activist from Ras al-Ain confirmed to AFP over the Internet on Tuesday that "there have been no confrontations following the agreement."

"Hostilities ended between the two parties a week ago and yesterday things were calm. The number of battalions in the city has decreased a lot and those that remain are stationed at the entrances," he said, giving his name only as Hevidar.

Sunday's agreement, which was brokered by prominent Christian dissident Michel Kilo and other opposition activists, calls for the "complete withdrawal of military forces and displays of arms from the city", said the statement.

Ras al-Ain would be governed by a civilian council, which would also manage the border crossing with Turkey in accordance with both parties, the statement added.

The Kurdish fighters and rebels also agreed on "cooperation and coordination between the Free [Syrian] Army and the people's protection forces to liberate cities that remain under regime control," it said.

<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/newsyriala-testnews/islamists-and-kurds-end-hostilities-to-fight-syria-regime>

7. ARABIAN PENINSULA AND THE GULF OF BASRA

- **Saudi king swears in first women members of Shura Council**

Saudi King Abdullah swore in the country's first female members of the Shura Council, an appointed body that advises on new laws, in a move that has riled conservative clerics in the Islamic monarchy

Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah, who has not been seen on television since shortly after a back operation in November, was shown on state media on Tuesday sitting in a palace chamber to give a short speech as he swore in the new council members.

King Abdullah is seen as having pushed to cautiously advance the role of women in Saudi society.

The health of the king, who turns 90 this year, is closely watched in the world's top oil exporter because he has the final say on policy.

Major speeches in recent months have been made on Abdullah's behalf by his heir, Crown Prince Salman. State media have also listed Salman as chairing the weekly cabinet sessions in place of the king.

"Your place in the Shura Council is not as those who have been honoured, but as those who have been charged with a duty, as you represent part of society," he said, addressing the new women members.

One fifth of the new Shura Council are women. The decision to appoint women to the body, which functions in place of an elected parliament, was announced in 2011 but their names were only made public last month.

The Shura Council is remodelling parts of its chamber to ensure strict gender segregation between members.

Saudi Arabia's government is entirely appointed by the king, who is also prime minister. The country's only elections are for half the seats on municipal councils that have few powers.

Women will also have the right to vote and stand for office in the next municipal ballot, Abdullah said in 2011.

The decision to appoint women to the Shura Council prompted a protest by dozens of conservative clerics outside the royal court in January.

They complained that the move, and other reforms aimed at making it easier for women to work, went against sharia law.

In the ultra-conservative kingdom, women are banned from driving and need the consent of a male "guardian" to work, travel abroad or open a bank account.

[http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/2/8/65159/World/Region/Saudi-king-](http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/2/8/65159/World/Region/Saudi-king-swears-in-first-women-members-of-Shura.aspx)

[swears-in-first-women-members-of-Shura.aspx](http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/2/8/65159/World/Region/Saudi-king-swears-in-first-women-members-of-Shura.aspx)

- **Seven die as Yemen military aircraft crashes in Sanaa: Medics**

At least seven people killed following deadly helicopter crash near site of main protest square in Yemen

A Yemeni military aircraft ploughed into a building in a residential neighbourhood of Sanaa on Tuesday killing at least seven people, mostly civilians, the emergency services said.

The pilot and six civilians were killed in the crash which occurred near Change Square, an epicentre of the revolt that ousted president Ali Abdullah Saleh.

The toll is expected to rise as the aircraft crashed and badly damaged a building which houses residences and shops.

An AFP correspondent reported several ambulances reaching the scene of the crash while helicopters flew overhead.

Television footages showed thick black smoke billowing from the burning wreckage of the aircraft as residents gathered around it.

In November, an Antonov M26 of the Yemeni air force crashed during a training mission in a northern district of Sanaa, killing all 10 occupants.

<http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/2/8/65127/World/Region/Seven-die-as-Yemen-military-aircraft-crashes-in-Sa.aspx>

- **Saudi recalls envoy from Sri Lanka**

Saudi Arabia has recalled its ambassador from Colombo in a tit-for-tat move amid tensions after a Sri Lankan nanny convicted of murder was beheaded in the kingdom, the official SPA news agency reported.

"Based on the decision by the Sri Lankan government to withdraw its ambassador from the kingdom, the [Saudi] foreign ministry has recalled its ambassador in Sri Lanka for consultations," SPA reported late Tuesday quoting a ministry spokesman.

Tensions between both countries have been strained since the January 9 execution at a prison in Riyadh of Sri Lankan maid Rizana Nafik, who was only

17 when she was charged with smothering a four-month-old baby in Saudi Arabia in 2005.

Nafik was found guilty of smothering the infant in her care after an argument with the child's mother, the Saudi interior ministry said.

Last month, Sri Lanka's Information Minister Keheliya Rambukwella announced that women under 25 were now banned from going to Saudi Arabia to work as maids, adding that it was the first step towards a worldwide travel ban for low-paying jobs.

The United States and the United Nations have led international condemnation of the execution.

Rape, murder, apostasy, armed robbery and drug trafficking are all punishable by death under Saudi Arabia's strict version of sharia, or Islamic law.

In 2012, the ultra-conservative Muslim kingdom executed 76 people, according to an AFP tally based on official figures. The US-based Human Rights Watch put the number at 69.

This year, it has so far beheaded 14 people.

<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/gulfnews/saudi-recalls-envoy-from-sri-lanka>

- **Clashes erupt at Bahrain Shiite memorial service**

Protesters clashed with Bahraini police on Tuesday at a memorial service for a teenager killed last week in demonstrations marking the second anniversary of a Shiite-led uprising, witnesses said.

Police fired tear gas and stun grenades to disperse hundreds of people who gathered in the Shiite-populated village of Daih, near Manama, to pay tribute to Hussein al-Jaziri, the witnesses said.

The 16-year-old was killed in Daih on Thursday as rallies were staged on the anniversary of the start of the uprising on February 14, 2011. A policeman was also killed on the same day at Al-Sahla village, also near the capital.

Protesters on Tuesday called for the ouster of Bahrain's king, shouting "Down Hamad," according to the witnesses.

The Interior Ministry, in a message posted on Twitter, said security forces dispersed "saboteurs" who had briefly blocked traffic on a road near Manama after the memorial service.

Clashes broke out on Saturday at the funeral of Jaziri with police also using tear gas against mourners, witnesses had said.

Jaziri died after being shot in the stomach by security forces, according to Al-Wefaq, the main Shiite opposition bloc, during Shiite-led protests against the kingdom's Sunni rulers.

The police officer died after he was hit by a petrol bomb during clashes in Al-Sahla, the Interior Ministry said.

Bahrain has seen two years of political upheaval linked to opposition demands for a real constitutional monarchy, with the unrest claiming at least 80 lives, according to international rights groups.

Tuesday's unrest came on the eve of a new round of a national dialogue between opposition groups and the government.

But a Sunni group, the National Islamic Forum, said Friday it will boycott Wednesday's session to protest the "silence" of the opposition following the latest violence.

<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/gulfnews/clashes-erupt-at-bahrain-shiite-memorial-service>

8. AFGHANISTAN - PAKISTAN

• UN: US Drones Killed More Afghan Civilians in 2012

TEHRAN (FNA)- The UN said American drone strikes have killed many more Afghan civilians in 2012 than in the previous year.

It comes as the US stepped up the use of drones as it prepares to leave war-torn Afghanistan by 2014.

According to a report by the UN mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) unmanned aerial aircraft fired 506 times in 2012, killing 16 civilians and wounding three. In 2011, 294

weapons were launched, resulting in just one casualty, RT reported.



The UNAMA called for a review of tactical and operational policy on targeting, as most of the civilian casualties resulted from weapons aimed directly at insurgents, with some targeting errors. It cited an incident where four boys were killed October 20 in Logar province when a drone struck after a clash between pro-government forces and insurgents a few kilometers away from the area.

Most of the covert drone operations have been carried out in Pakistan to fight insurgents in Northwestern areas of the country, seriously deteriorating relations between Washington and Islamabad. Now, the US appears to be stepping up the use of unmanned aerial aircraft in Afghanistan.

Georgette Gagnon, the head of human rights for UNAMA, said it was the first year

the UN had tried to document civilian casualties from drones.

Meanwhile, the full-year toll of civilian deaths in Afghanistan in 2012 declined to 2,754, a 12 percent decrease from 3,131 in the same period a year earlier, according to the annual report on civilian casualties released by the UN on Tuesday. It stated that the Taliban and other insurgents were responsible for 81 percent of the civilian casualties last year.

<http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9107146036>

- **Pakistan orders operation after deadly bombing**

Following weekend bombing in Pakistan targeting Shiite Muslims in southwestern city of Quetta, which killed 89 people and sparked protests, Prime Minister Raja Pervaiz Ashraf orders operation

Pakistan's prime minister ordered an operation Tuesday in the southwestern city of Quetta following a weekend bombing targeting minority Shiite Muslims that killed 89 people.

It's unclear whether the order will appease thousands of Shiites protesting in Quetta for a third day. The protesters have refused to bury the bombing victims until the army takes control of the city and launches a targeted operation against sectarian militants attacking them.

A statement issued by Prime Minister Raja Pervaiz Ashraf's office that announced the operation provided no details about who would carry it out or who would be targeted. Shiites have criticized police and paramilitary troops under control of the Interior Ministry in Quetta for failing to protect the minority sect, which make up about 20 percent of the country's population of 180 million.

Radical Sunni militants have stepped up attacks against Shiites over the past year because they do not view them as real Muslims. Violence has been especially bad in Baluchistan province, where Quetta is the capital, which has the highest concentration of Shiites in the country. A double bombing at a billiards hall in January in Quetta killed 86 people.

The bomb that ripped through a produce market on Saturday, killing 89 people, was

hidden in a water tank that was pulled into the market by a tractor. The militant group Lashkar-e-Jhangvi has claimed responsibility for the attack, as well as the one against the billiards hall in January.

The prime minister's order did not specify whether Lashkar-e-Jhangvi would be the target of the upcoming operation. Shiite leaders in Quetta have also demanded the army go after another banned sectarian group, Sipah-e-Sahaba, which has also targeted Shiites.

The order simply stated that the prime minister has ordered a "targeted operation aimed at eliminating those responsible for playing with lives of innocent civilians and restoring peace and security in Quetta."

Pakistan has launched numerous military operations against militants in recent years, but the focus has been on the Pakistani Taliban, who have been waging a bloody insurgency against the state that has killed thousands of people.

Rights organizations have criticized the government for not doing enough to target militant groups attacking Shiites.

They explain this apathy by pointing to past connections between the country's military and anti-Shiite militants, and also allege the sectarian groups are seen as less of a threat than the Taliban because they are not targeting the state.

Last year was the bloodiest in history for Pakistan's Shiites, according to Human Rights Watch. Over 400 were killed in targeted attacks across the country, at least 125 of whom were died in Baluchistan.

With two massive bombings targeting Shiites in as many months this year already, 2012 looks like it could be even worse.

<http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/2/9/65124/World/International/Pakistan-orders-operation-after-deadly-bombing.aspx>

- **'Afghans protest killings of Shias in Pakistan'**

Press TV

February 19, 2013

A group of Afghan activists have thronged outside the UN office in the capital Kabul

to protest against Shia killings in the town of Hazara, near the city of Quetta in southwestern Pakistan, Press TV reports.

At least 10 protesters, belonging to Shia Hazara community started hunger strike in front of UN compound on Tuesday, demanding the Pakistani government to put an end to the violence against Shia Muslims in the neighboring country.

A bloody bomb attack on a vegetable market in the town of Hazara on Saturday claimed the lives of at least 89 Shia Muslims and injured 200 others.

The violent slaughter of Pakistani Shias provoked massive protests across Pakistan and other countries with demonstrators calling on Islamabad to find the perpetrators of the attack and secure a better protection for the Shia community in the country.

Families of the victims, meanwhile, have refused to bury the bodies of the victims in protest against the government's inaction against terrorist groups.

This is while, Pakistan has arrested seven suspects in connection with the bomb attack.

In a similar attack on January 10, a twin bomb explosion at a crowded billiard hall killed more than 90 people, mostly Shia Muslims, in Quetta, which is the capital of Balochistan province. Lashkar-e-Jhangvi said it carried out the bombing.

Shias make up about 20 percent of Pakistan's population of over 180 million.

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

- **Pakistani PM receives anti-Taliban Afghan leader**

ISLAMABAD, Feb. 19 (Xinhua) -- Pakistani Prime Minister Raja Pervez Ashraf Tuesday announced support for intra-Afghan dialogue in meeting with a senior anti-Taliban leader in Islamabad, an official statement said.

Haji Mohammad Mohaqiq, Member of Afghan Parliament and Head of the Shiite 'Hizb-e-Wahadat Mardam-e-Afghan Party' is visiting Islamabad at the invitation of the Pakistani government in a move to

increase interaction with Afghan ethnic and opposition leaders.

Prime Minister Ashraf told the Afghan leader that Pakistan is desirous of friendly relations with all ethnic and political groups in the neighbouring country.

"Pakistan would extend its full support to an intra-Afghan dialogue among all segments of society for the peace and security of Afghanistan," an official statement quoted Mr. Ashraf as telling Mohaqqiq.

The prime minister reiterated Pakistan's firm resolve for a peaceful, stable and prosperous Afghanistan and assured the delegation of all possible support, adding stability in Afghanistan is essential for stability in Pakistan.

Talking about the recent tragic incident in Quetta involving the Hazara Community, the prime minister said that his government has ordered a targeted operation against elements responsible for killing innocent civilians. He expressed the resolve of the government to fight this menace till they are completely wiped out. He said that they are enemies of mankind.

Haji Mohammad Mohaqqiq agreed with the prime minister to work jointly to defeat the forces of terrorism and militancy, the statement said.

He expressed condolences on the death of those who passed away in the tragic incident in the Pakistani southwestern city Quetta.

Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar also met the Afghan leader and told him that Pakistan wanted to have close relations with all ethnic and political groups of Afghanistan including Hizb-e-Wahdat.

It is widely believed that Pakistan supports ethnic Pashtoons in Afghanistan. However, Pakistan is now also pursuing the policy to improve relations with non-Pashtoon community in Afghanistan.

Islamabad's efforts to encourage the Taliban, mainly Pashtoon, to enter the intra-Afghan dialogue, has not yet been successful as the Taliban say they would not hold talks with the Karzai administration as "it is powerless."

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



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