



MIDDLE EAST DAILY BULLETIN

20 MARCH 2013

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1. IRAQ

- **Ban, Kobler strongly condemn bomb attacks in Baghdad (KUNA)**

UNITED NATIONS, March 19 (KUNA) -- Secretary General Ban Ki-moon on Tuesday "condemned in the strongest terms" the bomb attacks earlier today in Baghdad, Iraq, and expressed his deepest condolences to the families of the victims, his press office said in a statement.

Ban did so after meeting with his Special Representative for Iraq, Martin Kobler, who also "strongly condemned" the wave of coordinated car bomb attacks and shootings that killed and injured dozens of civilians in several areas in the capital.

"Once again, innocent people going about their daily lives were viciously attacked. Nothing can justify such heinous crimes," Kobler said in a separate statement.

During the meeting, Kobler briefed Ban on the Iraqi Government's decision to postpone elections in some provinces of Iraq and on the latest situation with regard to the former residents of Camp Ashraf.

The Secretary General "expects and hopes" that the residents of Camp Hurriya (Liberty) would respond positively to the generous offer by the Government of Albania to accept 210 of them, and to cooperate with the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) to relocate in the coming weeks, his press office said in the statement.

"He urges other Member States to follow suit with similar offers," it added.

"The Secretary General underscores the responsibility which has been assumed by the Government of Iraq for the safety and security of residents of both Camp Hurriya and Camp Ashraf and the need to prevent any incidents," the statement noted.

Ban "unequivocally" supports Kobler's efforts to resolve the situation in exceptionally difficult circumstances, and again urges other parties to play a "constructive role in contributing to those efforts." He also urged "those who profess support for the residents of the Camps to cease spreading falsehoods about the Special Representative and instead help promote a durable solution." The Iranian-American Communities from across the United States, many of whom have

relatives at Camp Liberty in Iraq, are scheduled to stage a huge rally outside the UN Headquarters on Thursday, simultaneously as Kobler briefs the Security Council on Iraq. They are expected to call on the Iranian dissidents refugees in Iraq Mujahedin-e-Khalq to return to Camp Ashraf, and on Ban to replace Kobler in order to prevent another massacre of refugees in Camp Liberty.

<http://www.kuna.net.kw/ArticleDetails.aspx?id=2299457&Language=en>

- **Kobler condemns "organized" attacks in Baghdad (Aswat al-Iraq)**

19 March 2013

BAGHDAD/ Aswat al-Iraq: UN representative to Iraq Martin Kobler denounced the "organized" wave of attacks in Baghdad that led to tens of casualties here.

In a statement, copy received by Aswat al-Iraq, he described these attacks as "monstrous and unjustified crimes".

Baghdad suffered today a number of terrorist attacks in Sadr, Shu'la, Zafarniya, New Baghdad, Abu Dsheer, Mashtal, Karadat Mariam and Salhiya areas, where

great numbers of citizens were either killed or wounded.

- **Iraq shall suffer 300 sand storms this year, Ki-moon (Aswat al-Iraq)**

19 March 2013

BAGHDAD/ Aswat al-Iraq: UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon said that Iraq will suffer 300 sand storms this current year.

In his periodical report to the Security Council, he said that "Iraq has become one of the main exporters to storm sands due to the deterioration of environment during the last few decades".

He added that "it was discovered that 530 sand storms crossed the borders in Iraq during the years 2001-2010.

- **Talabani's Party: Authority monopoly, weak security performance behind Tuesday bombings (alliraqnews)**

19 March 2013

Baghdad (AIN) – Azad Jindiyanı, the spokesperson of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan condemned the explosions that rocked Baghdad and Babel today.

In a press statement received by AIN, Jindiyani condole “The families of the victims, wishing a speedy recovery for the wounded.”

“Tuesday’s bombings coincided with the current crisis where the political parties lost the confidence in each other and the bombings were caused due to the monopoly of the authority and the weak security performance,” he concluded.

- **Iraqiya condemns the terrorist explosions (NINA)**

19 March 2013

Baghdad (NINA) – Iraqiya Alliance condemned the continued violence, explosions and assassinations that take place in Iraq's various provinces, last is the explosions that occurred in Baghdad intending to take the country back to square one when sectarian fight and hate between the one people.

In its statement, Iraqiya accused the Commander in Chief the responsibility for security deterioration and wide open the door to terrorist forces, because of his insistence on monocracy and the policies of exclusion, as well as attacking partners in the political process.

- **PUK's Politburo condemns today's blasts (NINA)**

19 March 2013

Sulaymaniya (NINA) – Politburo of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), condemned the terrorist explosions that a number of Iraqi cities have witnessed on Tuesday, March 19, and resulted in tens of killed and wounded.

In a statement to the press, Spokesman for the PUK's Politburo, Azad Jindiyan, said that regrettably, terrorists detonated more than 10 car bombs in Baghdad resulted in the killing and wounding of more than 150 persons, as well as 2 car bombs in Babil causing human casualties and material damages.

He added that the PUK's Politburo strongly condemns the terrorist attacks, extending condolences to the victims' families and wishing the wounded speedy recovery.

Pointing out that the terrorist attacks came at a time Iraq is going through deep and dangerous crisis, causing distrust between political sides; monocracy and violating the Constitution, as well as government's lack in dealing with the

problems that opens the way for terrorists to carry out their attacks.

Jindiyan went on saying that it is on the government to bear the responsibility and treat the problems, not to overlook the Iraqis' constitutional demands because the government's current policy drives Iraq toward more dangers.

- **Syria strongly condemns "terrorist bombings" in Iraqi capital (Syrian news agency)**

Syrian news agency SANA website
19 March 2013

Damascus: The Syrian government condemns in the strongest terms the series of terrorist bombings which hit various quarters in the Iraqi capital Baghdad in the morning and claimed innocent lives, targeting restaurants, bus stations and shops, an official source at the Foreign and Expatriates Ministry said on Tuesday [19 March].

"These acts add to the armed terrorist groups' record of criminality and sabotage in the brotherly countries of Syria and Iraq," the source added.

It expressed Syria's deep condolences to the government, leadership and people of Iraq over the Iraqi martyrs due to the terrorist act and its wishes for a speedy recovery for the injured.

The source stressed "Syria's demand that the international community uproot this epidemic using all the means available to drain the swamp of terrorism and chase down its perpetrators, supporters and those standing behind them.

Over 56 Iraqis were killed and 200 others injured in a chain of terrorist bombings in a number of quarters in Baghdad.

The AP quoted an Iraqi Police source as saying that more than 13 terrorist attacks, mostly with car bombs, took place on Tuesday on the eve of the 10th anniversary of the US-British invasion of Iraq.

Turkey "strongly condemns" recent terror attacks in Iraq (Anatolia News Agency)

ANKARA (AA) -March 19, 2013 -Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) has condemned the recent terror attacks in

Iraq which killed at least 50 people and wounded more than 100 others.

In a statement released on Tuesday the Turkish MFA said that it learned with deep sadness that several attacks took place in Iraq on Tuesday.

"We strongly condemn such attacks which aim to erupt a sectarian-based fight in Iraq. We wish God's mercy upon those killed, and offer condolences to the relatives of the victims, and wish speedy recovery to those wounded. It is very distressing that the peace, security and stability have not been established yet in Iraq. Turkey will continue to support the efforts of building peace, stability and strengthen democracy in Iraq, and will be in solidarity with the brotherly Iraqi people in terms of their fight against terrorism," the statement said.

<http://www.aa.com.tr/en/news/134480--turkey-condemns-bomb-attacks-in-iraq>

- **Turkey says Baghdad attacks seek to fuel sectarian conflict (Today's Zaman)**

19 March 2013 /TODAY'S ZAMAN,
ANKARA

The Foreign Ministry has “vehemently” condemned Tuesday's bombing in Baghdad in an official statement released the same day, interpreting the attacks as intended to fuel sectarian-based clashes in the country.

The wave of bombings in the Iraqi capital on Tuesday resulted in 56 deaths and more than 200 injured.

“It is saddening that our neighbor, Iraq, has not yet been able to establish and environment of peace, confidence and stability. Turkey will maintain its support for the efforts to enhance internal peace, stability and democracy in Iraq and will continue to stand in solidarity with the brotherly people of Iraqi in their struggle against terrorism,” the statement noted while offering condolences for those killed and wishing a quick recovery to the injured.

The Foreign Ministry had also released a statement after a previous attack in Iraq that happened last week. That attack had targeted the Iraqi Justice Ministry in downtown Baghdad, near the heavily fortified Green Zone, where several Western embassies and government

offices are located. The bomb attack killed at least 25 people, among whom were Iraqi police officers and civilians.

The Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), an umbrella group for al-Qaeda-linked Sunni insurgents, has claimed responsibility for last week's attack.

<http://www.todayszaman.com/news-310190-turkey-says-baghdad-attacks-seek-to-fuel-sectarian-conflict.html>

- **US condemns string of bombings across Iraq (KUNA)**

WASHINGTON, March 19 (KUNA) -- The United States condemns the series of deadly attacks across Iraq that has killed at least 65 civilians on the 10th anniversary of the US-led invasion, the State Department said Tuesday.

Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland told reporters that the US "condemns the terrorist attacks today, this kind of senseless violence such as this tears at the fabric of Iraqi unity." "Our condolences go to the families of the victims," Nuland continued, pledging the US will continue working with the Iraqi government "to combat Al-Qaeda and other threats to peace and security and

unity in the country." "That is the basis of our strategic partnership with Iraq and all the work we do together on security, on economic development, on stability across the country. Still difficult, but extremely important," Nuland said.

Several coordinated car bombs and explosives rocked across the country, targeting mainly government security forces and Shiite areas, according to eyewitness reports. Tuesday, falls 10 years after Former President George W. Bush's announcement that US forces would invade Iraq, on March 20, 2003.

Nuland said the US will continue working with Iraq to strengthen its economic development, security and stability, saying it is "still difficult, but extremely important."

<http://www.kuna.net.kw/ArticleDetails.aspx?id=2299454&Language=en>

- **Britain condemns Baghdad attacks (KUNA)**

LONDON, March 19 (KUNA) -- British Secretary of State William Hague condemned on Tuesday attacks which

took place earlier in the Iraqi capital killing 50 people and injuring 200 others.

"I condemn today's cowardly attacks in Baghdad, the vast majority of Iraqis want to leave behind the violence of the past to build a peaceful and prosperous country, and the UK Government will continue to support them to do so," Hague said in a statement.

"At this time in particular, we remember all those - British, Iraqi and others - who lost their lives in conflict in Iraq.

"We also recognize the sacrifices and determination of the Iraqi people, to overcome terrorism, conflict and division, and reassert our commitment to help Iraq as it rebuilds for the future," the secretary added.

- **Ahrar bloc to request hosting Maliki, security leaders in parliament over Tuesday bombings (alliraqnews)**

19 March 2013

Baghdad (AIN) –The Ahrar bloc within the Sadr Trend announced that it will submit a request to the parliament to host the General Commander of the Armed Forces, Nouri al-Maliki, and the security leaders over the security breaches that took place

in Baghdad and some provinces on Tuesday.

MP, Ali al-Timimi, of al-Ahrar bloc stated in a press statement received by AIN “We will submit a request to host Maliki and the security leaders in the parliament due to the security breaches that took place in Baghdad and the other provinces on Tuesday in addition to targeting the Justice Ministry.”

He assured “The security plans need to be reconsidered to know their ability to sustain security in Baghdad.”

“There are some security leaders in the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs who are Ba’athists and close to Maliki,” he concluded. /End/

- **Mol instructs to punish police officers of Diwaniya province (alliraqnews)**

19 March 2013

Baghdad (AIN) –The Ministry of Interior instructed to punish several police officers of Diwaniya police department on the background of the explosions that took place in Diwaniya province at the beginning of March, 2013.

The Ministry of Interior reported in statement received by AIN on Tuesday "The Secretary General of the Ministry of Interior, Adnan al-Asadi, instructed to direct a strict punishment for elements of Diwaniya police department by transporting them outside the province for failure in performing their duties."

"Asadi ordered to form an investigation committee after the terrorist attacks that occurred in Diwaniya province," the statement added.

Two car bombs exploded in a market for selling cattle in Diwaniya province and resulted in killing and injuring about 60 people

- **Mohammadawi calls Maliki to dismiss Baghdad Police Commander (alliraqnews)**

19 March 2013

Baghdad (AIN) –The Secretary General of the Sons of Iraq Alliance, Abbas al-Mohammadawi, called the Premier, Nouri al-Maliki and the Undersecretary of the Ministry of Interior to dismiss Baghdad Police Commander due to Tuesday bombings.

In a press statement received by AIN, Mohammadawi said "The government is request to assign a qualified police commander for Baghdad province who can be able to know the details of the security situation in Baghdad." /

- **Barzani warns against policy of arm-twisting and breaking of wills (NINA)**

19 March 2013

Arbel / NINA /-- President of Kurdistan region , Massoud Barzani stressed in a statement today that resorting to the constitution and to previous agreements would guarantee resolving all differences between the political parties.

Barzani added in his statement which made on the side line of the inauguration of the Association of Arab Universities Conference, which held today in Arbel : " The Kurds claim always to resort to the Constitution , to national consensus and genuine partnership, and not to endanger the political process to collapse, away from the policy of arm-twisting and breaking wills."

- **Sadrist ministers suspend attendance at cabinet's sessions (NINA)**

19 March 2013

Baghdad (NINA) – The Sadrist Trend's ministers announced suspending their attending the cabinet's sessions.

The announcement made in a press conference on Tuesday evening, March 19, held at the Ahrar bloc's headquarters in Baghdad.

Earlier, Sadrist Trend's Leader, Muqtada al-Sadr, said that staying in a government that sells the country's southern lands, claiming the Qaeda is in control of some of Iraq's western and northern provinces and a government without a President, as well as a lean Parliament and politicized judiciary makes it more harmful than useful, rather it helps the misdeed and aggression.

In his statement to the press, Sadr affirmed the necessity of coexistence between the Iraqi people, rejecting injustice that harms the Sunni population.

He renewed his total rejection of postponing the election, describing those who voted for postponing the election of being unjust to Iraq and the Shiites. Saying that postponing or cancelling election is in

the Prime Minister's power, it is undoubtedly consecrate dictatorship.

- **Neglecting Sunnis "unforgivable disaster", Sadrist leader (Aswat al-Iraq)**

19 March 2013

BAGHDAD/ Aswat al-Iraq: Sadrist leader Muqtada al-Sadr regarded "the stay in the government will lead to bad effects", stressing his rejection "to the injustice incurred on the Sunni sect".

In a statement, he reiterated his full rejection to the postponement of the elections.

He described neglecting the Sunni sect as "injustice" and the Premier Nouri al-Maliki's postponement of the elections as "dictatorship, which is also another injustice".

Sadr added that "the stay in a government that sells it is territories in the southern parts and claims the control of Qaeda organization in some western and Northern provinces, in addition to weak parliament and politicized legal system, has become something not good".

- **Nijaifi denounces postponing elections in Anbar, Niniveh (NINA)**

19 March 2013

Baghdad (NINA) – Speaker of Parliament, Usama al-Nijaifi, denounced the government's decision to postpone elections in Anbar and Niniveh provinces.

A statement issued on Tuesday, March 19, by the Speaker's Office, quoted Nijaifi saying that election is a constitutional right and no government, under any circumstances, can deny the people this right from the source of authority, which is the people, and it is for the people who decide whether to practice this right or not.

He added that the weakness of security situation, which the government leaned on in making this decision, is not an excuse to deny the people of their constitutional right; rather, it is the government's incrimination to itself for its weak performance to cope with domestic and foreign challenges, making it unable to guarantee civil peace and security.

Earlier in the day, the Council of Ministers decided to postpone elections in Anbar and Niniveh provinces.

- **Muqtada al-Sadr rejects the decision to postpone the elections, and the injustice that affects the Iraqi people (NINA)**

19 March 2013

Baghdad/ NINA /--Cleric Muqtada al-Sadr said : " staying under a government selling Iraq's territory and claiming that Al-qaida dominate on some of Iraq's provinces western and northern, and a government without President of the Republic, in addition to a scrawny Parliament and politicized Judicial became a grave issue that one cannot keep silent.

Sadr stressed in a press statement today on the need for co-existence between the Iraqi people and the rejection of injustice, which affects the Sunni of Iraqi people .

Sadr, confirmed his full and complete refusal to postpone the elections in Anbar, describing the tiny minority who voted to postpone the elections as they harmed Iraq.

He ended : " canceling or postponement of elections, however in the hand of commander of the armed forces, Nouri al-Maliki order devoting dictatorship of Al, maliki, however

- **Delay of elections worsens situations, Ninewa officials (Aswat al-Iraq)**

19 March 2013

NINEWA/ Aswat al-Iraq: Ninewa provincial Council's members expressed their rejection for the delay in the local elections here, stressing that this delay will worsen the situation.

Member Lamy'a Ahmed al-Dabbagh told Aswat al-Iraq that her bloc, al-Hadba', is "against the postponement of the elections under the pretext of the security situation".

She added that the postponement will "lead to the deterioration of the security situation".

On the other hand, the Christian member in the Council Saad Tanyous told Aswat al-Iraq that "there are security threats in the province, but we support holding the elections in time".

Members of Justice and Reform bloc remained silent on the subject, but they added they "will not comment unless official statement of the postponement is released".

Iraqi Cabinet decided today the postponement of the provincial election in Ninewa and Anbar province for a period of six months, utmost.

It was decided that the provincial elections will take place on 20 April next to be followed by other elections to lower administrative levels after six months.

- **Mottahidoon united coalition headed by Nujaifi refuses to postpone the elections in Anbar and Nineveh (NINA)**

19 March 2013

Baghdad/ NINA /-- Mottahidoon / united / coalition headed by Speaker Osama Nujaifi rejected the decision made by the government to postpone the elections in Anbar and Nineveh provinces under any justification, describing the Cabinet's decision to postpone the elections in these two provinces as a political game.

The official spokesman of the coalition mp, Dhafer al-Ani told the NINA today : " Mottahidoon coalition fully refuses to postpone local provincial council elections in Nineveh and Anbar, stressing that this decision aims at consecration of the

injustice exclusion policy by the government.

The Cabinet decided earlier in the day to postpone provincial elections in each of the provinces of Nineveh and Anbar.

- **Emir of Dulaim Tribes: Maliki postponed elections in Anbar in fear of a new strong Council that demands the province's rights (NINA)**

19 March 2013

Ramadi (NINA) – The Emir of Dulaim Tribes, Sheikh Ali Hatim al-Sulayman, said that Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's decision postponing elections in Anbar, is because of fear of a new strong Council that demands the rights of province and its citizens.

Sheikh Sulayman told NINA on Tuesday, March 19, that most of Anbar's current Council members use double standards, one time the support the protestors, and on other time they support the government, against interests of citizens in Anbar, to protect their interests.

He added that if election is held on time, most Council members will lose their seats.

Earlier in the day, the Council of Ministers decided to postpone elections in Anbar and Niniveh provinces, because of their security situation.

- **Islamic Party: Postponing election a coup against the political process (NINA)**

19 March 2013

Ramadi (NINA) – The Islamic Party in Anbar criticized postponing the elections in Anbar, describing the decision as a coup against the political process in Iraq.

In a statement issued on Tuesday, March 19, the Islamic Party said that the Cabinet's decision to postpone elections in Anbar is disappointing and a coup against Iraq's political process.

It went on saying that there are sides, in Anbar, having dubious relations with decision makers in Baghdad that caused the decision.

The Islamic Party said that previous elections were held in circumstances worst than the current ones; therefore, postponing elections now is a going back from the right understanding of the

process peaceful rotation of power. It demanded the political entities, tribal forces and organizations of civil society to stand up against those who want to keep their posts in the province.

Earlier in the day, the Council of Ministers decided to postpone elections in Anbar and Niniveh provinces.

- **Twenty-two Iraqi Kurdistan Region MPs call for probe into population figures (Awene)**

19 March 2013

Twenty-two MPs of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region parliament have signed a petition calling for the establishment of a parliamentary committee to investigate recent reports about reported dramatic increase in population figures of the region in the run-up to multiple elections, website of privately-owned Awene weekly reported on 19 March.

The website carried the text of the petition which is dominated by MPs from ruling Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and opposition Change Movement.

This comes after the local media reported that according to regional Planning

Ministry's latest figures the population of the Kurdistan Region has risen to around 5.3 million, up from around 4.5 million in 2010.

These figures are only estimates based on the ministry's field work as no official census have been carried in the country for over a decade.

According to the opposition and private media outlets, there is particularly a dramatic increase in the population figures of the areas dominated by the ruling Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), whose official Ali Sindi is the planning minister.

These reports have said that the opposition and the ruling PUK, currently a KDP partner in the regional coalition government, are concerned that the KDP may try to exploit these figures for the vote registers in the upcoming elections. Source: Awene website, Sulaymaniyah, in Sorani Kurdish

- **Shimmari: Nasra group with QTO returns to Iraq after being failed in Syria (alliraqnews)**

19 March 2013

Baghdad (AIN) –MP, Kadhim al-Shimmari, of the White bloc stated “The Nasra group within al-Qaeda Terrorist Organization returned to be active in Iraq after being failed in Syria.”

In a press statement received by AIN on Tuesday, he said “The lack of the accurate intelligent information and the lack of the cooperation between the security forces facilitated executing the bombings that took place in Iraq on Tuesday.”

He called the government and the parliament to “Re-consider the security file in cooperating with the security forces and adhering to intelligent information rather than deploying the security forces in the streets.”

- **US mission in Iraq to be slashed by two-thirds (ME Online)**

US mission in Iraq will slash its numbers by two-thirds by end of this year from its peak figure of over 16,000.

Middle East Online,19 March 2013

BAGHDAD - The US mission in Iraq -- the biggest in the world -- will slash its numbers by two-thirds by the end of this

year from its peak figure of over 16,000, the American ambassador to Baghdad said.

Overall staffing levels at the US's embassy in Baghdad and its consulates in the southern port city of Basra, the Kurdish regional capital of Arbil and the disputed northern city of Kirkuk, will drop to around 5,500, including contractors, by the end of the year.

"A year ago, we were well above 16,000, now we're at 10,500," Ambassador Stephen Beecroft told reporters. "By the end of this year, we'll be at 5,500, including contractors."

"The diplomatic presence is down below a thousand."

The American embassy had swelled in size due to the departure from Iraq of US forces in December 2011, because planners believed the diplomatic mission would have to take on a wide array of responsibilities left by the military.

As time has gone on, however, the embassy has handed over multiple sites to

the Iraqi government and reduced the number of diplomats working in Iraq.

All US troops except for a small number under US embassy authority left Iraq at the end of 2011.

<http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=57638>

2. IRAN

- **Iran celebrates 62nd anniversary of oil nationalization**

Some scholars believe that nationalization of Iran's oil industry was the main reason behind the 1953 joint CIA-MI6-sponsored coup d'état, codenamed Operation Ajax, which overthrew Mosaddeq."

Iran has marked the 62nd anniversary of the nationalization of its oil industry as a momentous breakthrough in the nation's movement for independence, Press TV reports.

On March 20, 1951, members of the Iranian parliament passed a bill introduced by then Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq on the nationalization of the oil industry.

Mosaddeq garnered the support of his nationalist party and religious groups led by prominent cleric, Ayatollah Abolqasem Kashani, for the initiative.

Experts say before nationalization of Iran's oil industry, the British government, which controlled Iran's oil industry through the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, reaped higher profits from Iran's oil resources than the Iranian government.

Some scholars believe that nationalization of Iran's oil industry was the main reason behind the 1953 joint CIA-MI6-sponsored coup d'état, codenamed Operation Ajax, which overthrew Mosaddeq.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/03/19/294378/iran-marks-oil-nationalization-day/>

- **Iran to pursue drunk Saudi diplomat car accident in Tehran**

The Foreign Ministry immediately followed the issue through judicial and diplomatic channels after being informed [of the accident] and has taken the necessary measures in this regard."

Iran Foreign Ministry says it is following up on the recent deadly car crash caused by a drunk Saudi diplomat in Tehran through judicial and diplomatic channels.

“The Foreign Ministry immediately followed the issue through judicial and diplomatic channels after being informed [of the accident] and has taken the necessary measures in this regard,” Iran Foreign Ministry Spokesman Ramin Mehmanparast said on Tuesday.

Mehmanparast mentioned violating Iranian laws, exceeding the speed limit and driver’s intoxication as the causes of the deadly accident, adding that Iran has strongly protested to the Saudi Embassy staffer’s behavior and has notified the Saudi Arabian Embassy in Tehran of its complaint.

On Monday, a drunk Saudi Embassy staffer killed an Iranian driver and injured a passer-by in a car accident in a northeastern neighborhood in Tehran.

The Saudi staffer rammed his vehicle into the Iranian car before veering off the road. The Iranian driver was killed on the spot.

Four bottles of alcoholic beverage have been found in the Saudi Embassy employee’s car. Police were present at the scene and started an investigation into the case.

The Saudi Embassy has made no comment on the incident yet.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/03/19/294371/iran-to-pursue-saudi-diplomat-accident/>

- **‘Iran, P5+1 reviewed proposals put forward in Istanbul meeting’**

In an interview with Austrian broadcaster ORF on March 1, Iran’s Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi described the latest round of the talks as a “milestone” and a “turning point in the negotiations.”

Iran says the experts of Iran and the group of six major world powers have reviewed proposals put forward by the both sides in their meeting in the Turkish city of Istanbul.

In a statement issued on Tuesday, Iran’s Supreme National Security Council said the Iranian and P5+1 (Britain, China, France, Russia, and the United States plus

Germany) experts have discussed various aspects of proposals put forward by both sides.

According to the statement, the discussions revolved around proposals presented by Iran during the meeting in Moscow in June 2012, and offers given by the P5+1 during negotiations held in the Kazakh city of Almaty on February 26-27.

The statement added that results achieved in the two-day meeting will be presented at the upcoming round of talks in Almaty on April 5-6.

"The meeting also provided an opportunity for both (six-power) and Iranian experts to explore each other's positions on a number of technical subjects," Michael Mann, a spokesman for EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton, said in a statement earlier on Tuesday.

Iran and the P5+1 have both expressed optimism about the future of the talks. On February 28, Reuters quoted an unnamed Western diplomat as saying that, "This was more constructive and more positive than previous meetings because they

were really focusing on the proposal on the table."

In an interview with Austrian broadcaster ORF on March 1, Iran's Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi described the latest round of the talks as a "milestone" and a "turning point in the negotiations."

The United States, Israel, and some of their allies have repeatedly accused Iran of pursuing non-civilian objectives in its nuclear energy program, with US and EU using this pretext to impose several rounds of illegal unilateral sanctions against Tehran.

Tehran refutes the allegation, maintaining that as a signatory of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and a member of the International Atomic Energy Agency, it has the right to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/03/19/294350/iran-p51-reviewed-proposals/>

- **Sanctions helped Iran wean economy off oil money: Minister**

Iran's Minister of Economy and Finance Shamseddin Hosseini says US-led

sanctions have assisted the Islamic Republic in achieving its objective of weaning its economy off petrodollars.



“...Thanks to the sanctions [imposed] by enemies, a historical dream of Iran is being realized as the oil revenues’ share in the administration of the country’s affairs has been reduced,” the minister said on Tuesday in a message ahead of Persian New Year beginning on March 21.

“We passed the [calendar] year 1391...with the enemies of the Islamic Republic targeting the country’s economy and imposing extra sanctions against our country in a bid to block Iran’s progress,” Hosseini added.

He boasted that his ministry managed to “counter and blunt the impact of economic sanctions.”

On Monday, Managing Director of the Iranian Oil Terminals Company (IOTC)

Seyyed Pirouz Mousavi said the country has succeeded to indigenize the manufacture of some 170 equipment needed for oil export operations.

Despite political and economic pressures on Iran, the country’s oil industry has managed to progress by relying on specialized capabilities and scientific knowledge of its own experts, Mousavi said.

At the beginning of 2012, the United States and the European Union imposed new sanctions on Iran’s oil and financial sectors with the goal of preventing other countries from purchasing Iranian oil and conducting transactions with the Central Bank of Iran.

On October 15, 2012, the EU foreign ministers reached an agreement on another round of sanctions against Iran.

All these sanctions have been imposed on Iran for the groundless charges of military diversion in Iran’s nuclear program.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/03/19/294345/sanctions-helped-wean-iran-off-oil/>

- **Iran, P5+1 reviewed proposals put forward in Istanbul meeting**

TEHRAN, March 19 (MNA) – Three round of talks between the Islamic Republic of Iran and G5+1 behind closed door in Istanbul concluded Monday night, it was announced on Tuesday.

The meeting was held following an agreement reached during the Almaty meeting between Iran and G5+1 to continue negotiations on Iran’s peaceful nuclear activities.

According to diplomat sources in Turkey, the meeting was held behind closed doors upon request of the two sides’ officials.

The Istanbul talks prepared the grounds for continuation of negotiations between the two sides.

Political observers believe that this round of talks would play a crucial role for the next round of talks in Almaty.

Based on the agreements reached between the two sides in Almaty of Kazakhstan, it was agreed that the two sides’ experts hold a joint meeting in Istanbul from March 17-18 to exchange

views and reach a consensus prior to the Almaty meeting.

The Iranian experts who attended the meeting came back to Tehran on Tuesday.

<http://old.mehrnews.com/en/newsdetail.aspx?NewsID=1818983>

3. ISRAEL - PALESTINE

- **Prisoner to Continue Strike till Israel Ends His Detention**

RAMALLAH, March 18, 2013 (WAFA) – Palestinian prisoner Younis al-Haroub from Hebron, who has been hunger striking for 27 days, said that he will not end his hunger strike until Israel releases him, Monday said the Palestinian Prisoner’s Club (PPC).

It said, following a visit to al-Haroub, that he lost six kilograms since his arrest and that he will not end his strike until Israel ends his administration detention.

Israel arrested al-Haroub on July 9, 2012 and his detention was renewed for six months twice.

<http://english.wafa.ps/index.php?action=detail&id=21912>

- **Sharawneh to End Strike as Israel Offers Exile to Gaza**

RAMALLAH, March 17, 2012 (Wafa) – Hunger striking prisoner Ayman Sharawneh Sunday agreed to end his strike, which lasted for seven months, and to be exiled to the Gaza Strip for 10 years, according to the Palestinian Prisoner’s Club (PPC).

Head of PPC Qaddura Faris said, in a press release, that Israel offered to deport Sharawneh outside of Palestine, but then offered to exile him to Gaza for 10 years after he expressed complete rejection to the first offer.

Sharawneh is expected to be transferred from Soroka Medical Center in Beersheba to Beit Hanoun checkpoint and then to Gaza.

Faris said that Sharawneh reached his decision after months of hunger striking to protest against his detention and after numerous warnings by the doctors regarding the severe deterioration in his health.

Sharawneh’s lawyer Jawad Bulous said that the decision comes only a day before a hearing session scheduled to be held in Ofer Military Court, which was expected to convict Sharawneh and imprison him for another 28 days as the prosecution demanded.

<http://english.wafa.ps/index.php?action=detail&id=21906>

- **Israeli Forces Arrest 11 Palestinians in West Bank**

JENIN, March 17, 2013 (Wafa) – Israeli forces Sunday arrested 11 Palestinians from across the West Bank, including five teenagers, in addition to a child, according to local and security sources.

They told Wafa that forces arrested two Palestinian brothers, 17, 21, from the town of Yamoun, west of Jenin, after raiding and searching their family homes.

Forces also arrested a 22-year-old Palestinian from Dheisheh Refugee Camp, south of Bethlehem, after storming his family house.

In Tulkarm area, Forces arrested two Palestinians, 35, 45, after raiding their homes.

Forces arrested four teenagers aged 16, 17, 18, and a 12 year-old boy from the Hebron area.

<http://english.wafa.ps/index.php?action=detail&id=21901>

- **Barack Obama makes first presidential visit to Israel**

Obama is flying in for first visit as president, meeting Israeli and Palestinian leaders, discussing Iran, Syria, the peace process, and speaking to young Israelis. Follow every moment of his visit here

President Barack Obama is making his first visit to Israel as president, the fifth serving US president to do so. We're live-blogging his entire visit here at The Times of Israel.

Preamble: The president is due to land at Ben-Gurion Airport a little after noon Israel time. Here's his itinerary. And here's Raphael Ahren on why he's going where's going — places like the Israel Museum to see the Dead Sea Scrolls — and not going

where he's not going — places like the Western Wall.

President Shimon Peres meets with then-US Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama at the President's Residence in Jerusalem July 23, 2008 (photo credit: Olivier Fitoussi /Flash90)

President Shimon Peres meets with then-US Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama at the President's Residence in Jerusalem July 23, 2008 (photo credit: Olivier Fitoussi /Flash90)

Obama, who's visited Israel twice before, is the fifth serving president to come, after Richard Nixon, Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton (four times) and George W. Bush (twice). Here's a photo essay showing those previous presidential visits.

Obama said in an interview last week that he'd be coming to "listen," but doubtless he'll be doing plenty of talking too behind closed doors with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu today and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas in Ramallah tomorrow. Here's David Horovitz on the differences on opinion and mindset between Obama and

Netanyahu, especially over settlements and Iran.

Our Matti Friedman, at Ben-Gurion Airport awaiting Obama, says hundreds of journalists have been there for ages, clearing security and poised for the arrival of Air Force One. The IDF's honor guard is making its final preparations to greet the president.

<http://www.timesofisrael.com/president-barack-obama-visits-israel-wednesday-march-20-2013/>

- **Kerry expected to revive 2002 Saudi peace initiative**

President Obama seeks to contain, not solve issues; but secretary of state may try to kick-start Israeli-Palestinian talks

While US President Barack Obama's visit to the region has been described as a listening tour, for Secretary of State John Kerry the visit is all business. According to a report in Yedioth Ahronoth Tuesday, Kerry is in the region to kick-start peace talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, using the 2002 Saudi Peace initiative as the starting point of future talks.

Kerry's arrival in Israel on Tuesday afternoon, a day before Obama lands, was somewhat unusual in that his staff did not reveal his schedule to the media. At a press conference in Washington, State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland only said Kerry would "have a meeting or two, in preparation for the president's arrival" and that the "schedule was being worked out."

According to Yedioth Ahronoth, Kerry intends to put the Arab League peace initiative, proposed by Saudi Arabia in 2002, back on the table for Israel and the PA. According to that plan, Arab nations would recognize and make peace with Israel in exchange for Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 armistice lines, an agreed solution to the Palestinian refugee issue, and acceptance of the formation of an independent Palestinian state.

Then-crown prince, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, when he first proposed the initiative, acknowledged that it was to only serve as a basis, not a dictate, and all of its points were open to negotiation. Kerry too has warned the Palestinian leadership in the past that it would have

make concessions on some of the clauses laid down by the peace plan.

Former deputy foreign minister Danny Ayalon, who was the foreign policy advisor of then-prime minister Ariel Sharon, said that although the government rejected the offer, it did make efforts to further explore the idea.

“He sent me to find out if the Saudis are serious,” Ayalon told reporters recently, adding that he tried to arrange, through middlemen, a meeting with Adel Jubeir, who at the time was an advisor to Abdullah. “We almost met in a restaurant in Washington and in the last-minute he didn’t want to meet,” Ayalon recalled. “We promised it would be under the radar, it would be very low-profile,” but the Saudis reneged on the scheduled meeting.

Ayalon said the government didn’t like about the proposal that it was on a take-it-or-leave-it basis, with no room for discussions, but indicated that it could serve “as a basis for negotiations in the future, when conditions are much clearer here.”

Sources close to Obama said his first priority in the visit will be resetting his oft-troubled relationship with Netanyahu and evaluating the new coalition government Netanyahu laboriously cobbled together.

The president also will look to boost his appeal to a skeptical Israeli public, as well as to frustrated Palestinians. “This is not about accomplishing anything now. This is what I call a down payment trip,” said Aaron David Miller, an adviser on Mideast peace to six secretaries of state who is now at the Woodrow Wilson International Center.

Kerry will accompany Obama on his visit from Wednesday and depart with him to Jordan on Friday, but will return to Israel on Saturday night for an additional meeting with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Kerry and Obama are scheduled to meet with Abbas in Ramallah on Thursday morning.

Maariv reported on Wednesday that Kerry will try to arrange a three-way meeting between Obama, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas.

Israelis and Palestinians have not held direct talks since the fall of 2010, when the talks broke down after Israel refused to agree to the Palestinian Authority's demands that it extend a settlement construction freeze in the West Bank and East Jerusalem as a pre-condition for talks.

Last November, the PA gained nonmember observer state status at the UN, despite objections by the US and Israel. Since the UN vote, Israel announced a series of construction plans for areas of East Jerusalem and the West Bank, including in the controversial E1 corridor, located between Maaleh Adumin in the West Bank and Jerusalem.

The Palestinians have demanded that Israel halt settlement construction as a pre-condition for returning to the negotiating table. Israel, for its part, maintains that there shouldn't be pre-conditions for peace talks since all final status issues — security, Jerusalem, refugees, and borders — will be agreed upon during the course of negotiations.

A source close to Mahmoud Abbas told Israel Radio Tuesday morning that the Palestinian president will ask Obama to

pressure Israel into making gestures of goodwill to the PA .Among the requested gestures will be the release of Palestinian prisoners from Israeli jails, the transfer of additional land to PA control and the handing over of armored vehicles donated to the PA by Russia.

Netanyahu reportedly was already considering offering a package of goodwill gestures to coincide with the presidential visit. A Maariv report earlier this month said that Israel's defense establishment has drawn up a package that includes the transfer of authority over two access roads — one to the new Palestinian city Rawabi, and the other to the West Bank city of Tulkarem — to full Palestinian control, the approval of building plans for 10 Palestinian villages currently deemed illegal and under threat of being demolished, the release of many of the 123 Fatah prisoners arrested by Israel before the Oslo peace talks and the transfer of small arms ammunition to Palestinian security forces.

However, Palestinian officials have expressed little, if any confidence in the immediate future of revived peace talks. Nabil Shaath, a PA official and former

member of the Palestinian negotiation team, noted in an interview to Palestinian newspaper al-Ayyam, that the new Israeli government, sworn in on Monday, contains more settlers and fewer religious legislators than previous administrations. The settlers, he said, are more extremist and more dangerous than the religious MKs.

Top Palestinan negotiator Saeb Erekat said Tuesday night that there was no need for Obama to bring a new initiative to the region, nor was it necessary to arrange a summit meeting with Netanyahu and Abbas. "The only thing needed is to set a clear timetable for an Israeli withdrawal to the pre-1967 borders," Erekat told al-Arabiya.

Erekat was quoted on Wednesday by Israel Radio saying that the new Israeli government, sworn in on Monday, was formed in order to destroy the principle of a two-state solution to the decades-old conflict.

<http://www.timesofisrael.com/kerry-expected-to-revive-2002-saudi-peace-initiative/>

4. AFRICA and EGYPT

• **Eye on the revolution: Ramy Kamil, a Coptic perspective**

As the political impasse deepens, Ahram Online asks those who made the January 25 revolution what they think now compared to what they thought then

Soon after the January 25 revolution, Ramy Kamil, a student of law and an activist, decided to join one of the newly established Coptic groupings that champion Coptic rights. His aim was not to "impose" Coptic matters on the wider national agenda. But he is convinced that the national scene will always be influenced by Coptic grievances.

Excerpts:

There is so much that could be said about the failure of President Mohamed Morsi to honour his commitment to be a president for all Egyptians, but whatever we say we cannot start to suggest that the unfairness against Copts was initiated with the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood. A few days ago, there was an attack against a church in Fayoum, but the attacks against the churches of El-Omraniyah and the Two

Saints Church were in 2010, when Hosni Mubarak was president. Before there was Nagaa Hamadi. There was also the horrid attack of 9 October under the rule of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces.

Egypt has for long acknowledged a form of association between Copts and Muslims, but true cohabitation is still to be found. It was not there before the January 25 Revolution; it was there in Tahrir Square when we were there — a brief moment that vanished. In fact, cohabitation is yet to be found amongst followers of different churches in Egypt, and even amongst Muslims of different affiliations.

Had political parties attended to the grievances of Copts under the rule of Mubarak the matter would have been well integrated into the national agenda and we would not be talking today of sectarian agendas. But the fact of the matter remains that even the liberal and leftist parties declined to address the issue for fear of sectarianism labelling.

With the January 25 Revolution, Copts made it out from behind the walls of the cathedral. Today, we will not let anyone, either from the church or the state push

us back behind these walls. We will decide our next move as Copts, in line with our judgement. But meanwhile, we will not accept to be isolated from the wider national interest because that would be similar to pushing us back behind the walls of the cathedral.

We cannot just keep on fighting; we have to think of the future of this country. We need to attend to our economic problems, simply because the worse the economic situation gets, the worse the social problems, including sectarianism.

There were many things that were mismanaged during the interim phase and also during the first seven months of Morsi's presidency ... I think there are many things that need to be reworked today, on top of which is the constitution that fails miserably to acknowledge equal rights for equal citizens. And I am not just talking about Copts here, but also talking the poor.

<http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/66880/Egypt/Politics/-Eye-on-the-revolution-Ramy-Kamil,-a-Coptic-perspe.aspx>

- **Former Libyan ambassador arrested in Cairo**

Former ambassador Ali Maria is wanted by Interpol for crimes related to the Gaddafi regime in Libya

Maria, who was ambassador under deposed leader Muammar Gaddafi, is accused of a number of crimes related to the former Libyan regime and is currently wanted by the Libyan government.

After several hours of negotiations at his residence in Sheikh Ziyad, a satellite city on the western outskirts of Cairo, Maria handed himself over to security forces.

The Egyptian authorities will hand him over to Interpol.

Ahmed Gadhaf Al-Dam, a close aide and cousin of former Libyan ruler Gaddafi, was also arrested in Cairo on Tuesday.

The new Libyan administration has been demanding the extradition of Gadhaf Al-Dam and Maria from Egypt to face trials for alleged involvement in crimes during the Gaddafi era.

<http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/67239/Egypt/Politics-/Former-Libyan-ambassador-arrested-in-Cairo.aspx>

- **Oil multinationals bid for Upper Egypt gas fields**

Several oil multinationals show interest in launching exploration and drilling activities in Upper Egypt, says chairman of state-run Ganoub El-Wadi petroleum holding company (GANOPE)

The Egyptian government has invited top oil multinationals to bid for exploration licenses in sites located in Upper Egypt known for being rich in natural gas and petroleum, Sherif Ismail, chairman of the state-owned Ganoub El-Wadi petroleum holding company (GANOPE), told Al-Ahram daily newspaper.

Several multinationals have already submitted exploration and drilling proposals, showcasing that Egypt has the potential of attracting foreign investments, despite the current state of political uncertainty that has hit the country, explained Ismail.

"The government's offer has attracted an overwhelming number of oil companies

both foreign and local, and companies are currently assessing the financial and technical costs of drilling projects in the area," said Abu Bakr Ibrahim, vice president of GANOPE for drilling and exploration.

During a recent visit to Egypt's Sohag, one of Upper Egypt's most prominent cities, President Mohamed Morsi said his government is working to put an end to ongoing developmental and economic woes in Upper Egypt and promised to focus on job creation efforts.

In an effort to meet Egypt's growing fuel needs, the government sealed an agreement in early March with Iraq to build crude oil pipelines between the two countries.

<http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/3/12/67223/Business/Economy/Oil-multinationals-bid-for-Upper-Egypt-gas-fields.aspx>

5. JORDAN and LEBANON

- **Lebanon workers brace for Thursday march**

The chief of Lebanon's Syndicate Coordination Committee pledged to rally against the government's delay wrapping up new wage increases for public employees.

"Thursday is the day when we march toward [the presidential palace in] Baabda. The airport will be shut down and private schools will be closed," Gharib said during a sit-in near the motor vehicle registration authority in Dekwaneh on Wednesday.

"Parents and students are going to march that day."

He also addressed Prime Minister Najib Miqati calling on him to transfer the new ranks and salaries system during the cabinet session.

The SCC has vowed to hold a strike on Thursday after public employees and school teachers voiced their anger in an ongoing strike that began on February 19 to demand that the government speed up its approval of salary raises.

In early September 2012, the Lebanese cabinet approved a new ranks and salaries

system. However, a debate is ongoing regarding the requisite funds to cover the wage increase for public employees.

<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/lebanonnews/lebanon-workers-brace-for-thursday-march>

- **A new consensual electoral law is ready, Geagea says**

Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea said that he came to an agreement with the parliament speaker and the Future Movement on a new consensual mixed electoral law.

“I can say that there is an electoral law that is ready for consensus,” Geagea said in remarks published by Al-Akhbar newspaper on Wednesday.

“There’s almost one unique law proposal between [the LF, Speaker Nabih Berri and the Future Movement], and we are the one who are maintaining close contacts with the two other parties.”

The LF leader also said that the law proposal being prepared by the three parties, which joins both majority rule and proportionality, would “secure fair

representation for the Christian electorate.”

Asked whether he informed President Michel Suleiman of his willingness to back the extension of the parliament’s term, Geagea said: “No, this is not true and is not on our radar, since it is a disaster waiting to happen.”

“I only back a postponement [of the elections] for technical reasons,” he, added.

The LF leader also said that he supported extending the mandate of the country’s security chiefs, including Lebanese Armed Forces commander General Jean Qahwaji and Internal Security Forces Director General Ashraf Rifi.

The electoral law issue has gripped the Lebanese political scene for several months and resulted in the approval of the Orthodox law that calls for proportional voting along sectarian lines by the parliament’s joint commissions.

The Orthodox law was initially backed by the major Christian parties including the

LF and opposed by their March 14 allies the Future Movement.

<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/lebanonnews/a-new-consensual-electoral-law-is-ready-geagea-says>

- **Jordan king criticizes regional leaders**

Jordan's King Abdullah II launched a broadside against regional leaders in an interview published Tuesday in a US magazine, saying Egypt's president has "no depth" in reading the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and that Turkey's premier sees democracy as a "bus ride".

In remarks to The Atlantic, that the palace said were "taken out of context," the king also said "wolves in sheep's clothing" ran the Muslim Brotherhood, criticizing some Western allies for failing to understand that.

He reserved some harsh words for Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi.

"I was trying to explain to him how to deal with Hamas, how to get the peace process moving, and he was like: 'The Israelis will not move.'

"I said: 'Listen, whether the Israelis move or don't move, it's how we get Fatah and Hamas [the rival Palestinian factions] together," the king told The Atlantic's Jeffrey Goldberg.

"There's no depth to the guy."

He said Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan "once said that democracy for him is a bus ride. 'Once I get to my stop, I'm getting off'."

"Instead of the Turkish model, taking six or seven years -- being an Erdogan -- Morsi wanted to do it overnight," king added.

Asked if Syrian President Bashar al-Assad was "a bit of a provincial," the king replied: "There was a dinner with me and him and the king of Morocco, at the king's residence in Cairo. And so Bashar at dinner turns to us and says, 'Can you guys explain to me what jet lag is?'"

"He never heard of jet lag."

King Abdullah, whose country is a key US ally, believes his Western allies are naive

about the Brotherhood's intentions, saying he was told that "the only way you can have democracy is through the Muslim Brotherhood," the report said.

"I see a Muslim Brotherhood crescent developing in Egypt and Turkey," he added.

"The Arab Spring highlighted a new crescent in the process of development," he added, insisting that "our major fight" is to prevent that.

The royal palace in Amman issued a statement saying the report "contained many errors and the king's remarks were taken out of context."

"The writer reflected his own analyses, attributing remarks to the king in an inaccurate and dishonest way," it said.

<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/mena/jordan-king-criticizes-regional-leaders>

6. SYRIA

- **Gemayel calls for further efforts to urge change in Syria**

Lebanon's Kataeb Party leader Amin Gemayel called on Tuesday for intensifying efforts on both the Arab and international levels to urge change in Syria, the National News Agency reported.

"It is high time now for the Syrian regime to leave power," Gemayel said following his meeting with Kuwaiti Speaker Ali Fahd al-Rashed, whereby they discussed most recent developments in Lebanon and Syria.

He also warned against "the spiraling hard-line extremism, which might happen if the Syrian crisis continued."

Gemayel called on the Lebanese people to avoid being dragged into the "mazes" of the Syrian crisis.

Beirut is politically divided over the Syrian revolt. Hezbollah, which is allied to Iran, backs President Bashar al-Assad's regime while the pro-Western March 14 movement supports the revolt.

The Kataeb leader also lashed out at Hezbollah's weapons "which are blocking the Lebanese institutions and provoking Sunnis."

<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/lebanonnews/gemayel-calls-for-intensifying-efforts-to-urge-change-in-syria>

- **FM: Syrian strike in Lebanon ‘a rumor’**

Lebanon’s Foreign Affairs Minister Adnan Mansour contradicted the remarks made by the president concerning an air raid conducted by Syrian forces inside Lebanon.

“I was informed during my stay in Nigeria and through [diplomatic] channels that what has been said about Syrian air force strike against border locations is a rumour,” Mansour said in remarks published by Al-Jumhuriya newspaper on Wednesday.

The minister, who is on an official visit to Nigeria alongside President Michel Suleiman, made his remarks following those of the president who said during a meeting with Lebanese expatriates on Tuesday that he obtained information confirming that the air raid “took place.”

Regarding the request made by Suleiman to Mansour "to send a message of protest

to the Syrian side so that such operations are not repeated," the minister said that the Syrian embassy in Lebanon had already informed the Lebanese authorities of “incidents” occurring along the border.

A new escalation along the Lebanese-Syrian border took place on Monday when Syrian warplanes bombed East Lebanon prompting strong condemnation from France and the US.

A Lebanese security services official on the ground confirmed that four missiles were fired at Syrian rebel positions on the Lebanese side of the border.

<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/lebanonnews/fm-syrian-strike-in-lebanon-a-rumor>

- **Some NATO members mull Syria military action**

NATO members are mulling plans for possible military action in Syria, but any intervention would only occur with a UN Security Council resolution and agreement from the alliance's 28 members, NATO supreme commander Admiral James Stavridis said Tuesday.

Stavridis told the US Senate Armed Services Committee that some NATO members considered targeting Syria's air defense network, a strategy successfully used in Libya in 2011.

But any NATO intervention would follow the same procedure which governed the action in Libya, Stavridis stressed -- a UN Security Council resolution and agreement from the alliance's membership.

"We are looking at a wide range of operations, and we are prepared, if called upon, to be engaged as we were in Libya," Stavridis said.

NATO's sole involvement in Syria's brutal civil war to date has been to position Patriot missile batteries along the Turkish border in order to prevent any air or missile launches from the Syrian side.

Stavridis said the Syrian conflict was deteriorating.

"The Syrian situation continues to become worse and worse and worse -- 70,000 killed, a million refugees pushed out of the country, probably 2.5 (million) internally

displaced, no end in sight to a vicious civil war," he said.

<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/newsyriala-testnews/some-nato-members-mull-syria-military-action>

- **US welcomes election of Syrian rebel PM**

Victoria Nuland

The United States on Tuesday welcomed the election of a long-time Texas resident as the Syrian rebel prime minister, voicing hopes he can foster "unity and cohesion among the opposition."

US officials "know and respect" Ghassan Hitto from his work with the Syrian coalition on humanitarian efforts in Syria, State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland told reporters.

Citing "privacy concerns," she refused to confirm Hitto was a US citizen, however, saying only that "he spent about 25 years in Texas" and was educated at Purdue University in Indiana.

"This is an individual who, out of concern for the Syrian people, left a very successful life in Texas to go and work on

humanitarian relief for the people of his home country," Nuland said.

"We got to know him when he went back to Turkey and started leading the Syrian opposition's direct relief effort and most recently as head of the coalition's assistance," she said.



Hitto was chosen early Tuesday by a majority of the main opposition National Coalition members, after hours of closed-door consultations in Istanbul.

The 50-year-old will be tasked with setting up an interim government which would be based in rebel-held territory in Syria.

The election comes some two months after coalition chief Ahmad Moaz al-Khatib proposed talks with regime officials with conditions, including that some 160,000 detainees be released.

Several coalition members told AFP the election of an interim rebel premier and the establishment of a government canceled out the possibility of talks with the regime.

Hitto said in his first speech laying out the opposition government's priorities that he will not enter into dialogue with the regime of President Bashar al-Assad.

<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/newsyriala-testnews/us-welcomes-election-of-syrian-rebel-prime-minister>

7. ARABIAN PENINSULA AND THE GULF OF BASRA

- **Kuwait to reduce expats by one million**

Kuwait, where expats make up 68 percent of the population, plans to reduce the number of foreigners living in the Gulf state by one million over the next decade, a minister said on Tuesday.

"The ministry will take decisions and measures... aimed at reducing the number of expatriate workers by 100,000 every year for 10 years to reach one million,"

Social Affairs and Labor Minister Thekra al-Rasheedi told the official KUNA news agency.

The measures were to be taken to "eliminate the phenomenon of a marginal workforce," she said, without specifying.

OPEC member Kuwait has a foreign population of 2.6 million, 55 percent of whom are Asians and 40 percent Arabs, against 1.2 million natives, according to the latest official figures.

There are 1.8 million foreign workers in the wealthy Gulf state, the overwhelming majority of whom are Asians working in menial jobs. More than 600,000 are domestic helpers.

Around 1.7 million expat workers are employed in the private sector while around 80 percent of national workforce of 350,000 work in the government.

<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/gulfnews/kuwait-to-reduce-expats-by-one-million>

- **Kuwait MPs pass in principle law to bail out debtors**

Kuwait's parliament on Tuesday passed in principle a bill that requires the government to buy billions of dollars of bank loans owed by citizens and reschedule them after waiving interest.

Thirty-three MPs voted for the law, three opposed it while 20 members including all cabinet ministers present abstained.

To become effective, the law must pass another round of voting in parliament in the coming few weeks, approved by the government and then signed into legislation by the ruler of the oil-rich Gulf state.

The government expressed reservations at the law with State Minister Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah Al-Sabah saying "the law requires fundamental amendments" to be acceptable.

"The government rejects the law in its current form but will abstain from voting as a sign of cooperation," he told the house just before the vote.

Finance Minister Mustafa al-Shamali said the cost of the bailout under the law is

"unknown and it could be between \$3.5 billion and \$14 billion."

Head of parliament's financial and economic affairs committee MP Yussef al-Zalalah said the cost to be borne by public funds is around \$3.3 billion.

Under the law, the government will purchase all loans taken by Kuwaiti citizens before March 30, 2008 from conventional and Islamic banks and financial companies.

The government will then waive all interest and reschedule repayment over a period not exceeding 15 years provided that the instalment will not be higher than 40 percent of the debtors' income.

<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/gulfnews/kuwait-mps-pass-in-principle-law-to-bail-out-debtors>

- **UAE jailed Islamists formed 'state within state': Witness**

Jailed Islamists accused of being part of a secret organisation linked to international network of Muslim Brotherhood

Dozens of UAE Islamists accused of plotting to seize power had formed a "state within the state" organisation linked to the Muslim Brotherhood, a witness told court, according to press reports on Tuesday.

The witness, a security officer, told UAE's security court on Monday that a "probe has discovered a secret organisation linked to the international network of the Muslim Brotherhood" of Egypt, the Emaratallyoum daily quoted him as saying.

"On the surface, the organisation worked to reform the society, but in secret, it was plotting to seize power."

He said the organisation began operations in the wake of the Arab Spring uprisings which hit several Arab nations, adding that a "structure resembling a state within the state" was formed by the accused.

The organisation featured a consultative council of 30 members, in addition to an administration council and a six-member women council, the witness said.

The top security court reconvened on Tuesday and heard more testimonies in

the case of 94 defendants, including 13 women, accused of plotting against the state in the largest trial in the history of the United Arab Emirates but which is not open for foreign media.

The court adjourned the hearing to next Tuesday, WAM state news agency said in a brief report on the trial, saying 73 male defendants and 12 women appeared in court.

Ten defendants are being tried in absentia, while women have been out on bail since the trial began on 4 March .

The prosecutors say that the accused are linked to Al-Islah group, which has ties with the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood.

UAE attorney general Salem Kobaish last month said the defendants would be tried for "having created and led a movement aimed at opposing the basic foundations on which the state's political system is built and at seizing power".

The group had formed a "secret organisation" which was in contact with individuals and organisations "abroad", including the Brotherhood, and had also

created or invested in real estate firms to finance their organisation, he said.

The UAE has not seen any of the widespread pro-reform protests which have swept other Arab countries, including fellow Gulf states Bahrain and Oman, but authorities have stepped up a crackdown on dissent and calls for democratic reform.

<http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/2/8/67237/World/Region/UAE-jailed-Islamists-formed-state-within-state-Wit.aspx>

8. AFGHANISTAN - PAKISTAN

• NATO calls Karzai claim of secret US-Taliban talks 'absolutely ridiculous'

NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen

Press TV

March 19, 2013

NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen has called Afghan President Hamid Karzai's claim about secret talks between the US and Taliban an "absolutely ridiculous" accusation.

"I reject the idea that was publicly launched by President Karzai that ... there is so-called collusion between NATO, ISAF, the US and the Taliban. It is an absolutely ridiculous idea," Rasmussen told a news conference in Brussels on Monday.

The NATO chief added the members of the western military coalition "fully respect the sovereignty of Afghanistan but we would also expect acknowledgement from the Afghan side that we have ... invested a lot in blood and treasure in helping President Karzai's country to move forward."

In recent weeks, Afghan President Hamid Karzai has made several anti-US remarks and accused Washington of colluding with the Taliban in an attempt to justify the presence of foreign forces in Afghanistan.

The Afghan president also banned the foreign forces from entering university campuses.

On March 10, Karzai said there were "ongoing daily talks between Taliban, American and foreigners in Europe and in the [Persian] Gulf states."

The Afghan president also referred to two bomb attacks carried out by the Taliban in the capital, Kabul, and the eastern city of Khost on March 9, stating, "Those bombs... were not a show of force to America. They were in service of America. It was in the service of the 2014 slogan to warn us if they (Americans) are not here then Taliban will come."

Meanwhile, the Afghan presidential office said in a statement on March 14 that Washington was "a friend and strategic partner of Afghanistan." The Afghan president's recent comments have been to "correct rather than damage this [US-Afghan] relationship," the statement added.

The United States and its allies invaded Afghanistan in 2001 under the pretext of fighting terrorism.

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

- **Roadside bomb kills 2, wounds 3**

HERAT, Afghanistan, March 19 (Xinhua) -- Two police including a senior officer were killed and three others sustained injuries

as a roadside bomb struck police van in Shindand district of Herat province with Herat city as its capital 640 km west of Kabul on Tuesday, police said.

"A mine planted by militants on a road in Shindand district struck the vehicle of Nasir Ahmad the police chief of Herat-Farah highway today, killing him along with one of his bodyguards and injured three others," police chief of the western region Toryali Abdiak told Xinhua.

Those injured in the blast are also police personnel, he added. He did not furnish more details.

Taliban militants fighting the government have yet to make comment..

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

- **Afghan gov't launches poppy eradication campaign in Kandahar**

KANDAHAR, Afghanistan, March 19 (Xinhua) -- The government of Afghanistan launched poppy eradication campaign in Taliban former stronghold Kandahar 450 km south of Kabul and have destroyed 2,800 acres of poppy fields, spokesman for

provincial administration Jawed Faisal said Tuesday.

"In the anti-poppy drive which launched some two weeks ago across the province, so far 2,800 acres of poppy-cultivated farmlands have been destroyed by police," Faisal told Xinhua.

Covering several districts including Maiwand, Panjwai, Takhtapul, Khakriz, Shah Walikot and the restive Ghorak, the official said that the campaign will continue till the wiping out of the illegal crop from the province.

There were no conflicts during the campaign and no police personnel have been hurt, Faisal contended.

With producing 3,700 tons opium poppy in 2012, according to United Nations Office on Drug and Crime (UNODC) Afghanistan has topped the poppy producing nations.

The Afghan illegal product in 2012, according to the UN anti- drug body had fallen down 36 percent against 5,800 tons in 2011.

Afghanistan's southern provinces including Kandahar and the western region where Taliban-linked militancy has damaged security, according to UNODC report produced 90 percent of the whole illegal crop in 2012.

The conflict-ridden Afghanistan, reportedly is supplying 90 percent of the raw material used in manufacturing heroin to the world.

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

- **Afghan police casualties increase by 15%**

Press TV
March 18, 2013

Afghanistan's Interior Ministry says that the number of Afghan police officers killed and injured have increased by 15 percent.

"Unfortunately, 1,800 Afghanistan national police lost their lives to maintain security and to protect Afghan citizens," this Persian year that is due to end on March 20, ministry spokesman Sediq Sediqqi said on Monday.

Sediqqi said more than 3,000 forces were also injured in the attacks in the same period.

"This shows a 15-per-cent increase in police casualties if we compare it with the previous Afghan year," he added.

Over 3,600 attacks were carried out against police forces in Afghanistan this year, which is an increase of 13 percent compared to last year, Sediqqi also said.

The United States and its allies invaded Afghanistan in 2001 under the pretext of combating terrorism. The invasion removed the Taliban from power, but Afghanistan remains insecure despite the presence of many US-led forces there.

The US-led war, which has caused record-high civilian and military casualties, has become the longest military conflict in American history.

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

- **Afghans in Wardak province want U.S. forces out**

by Farid Behbud

MAIDAN SHAR, Afghanistan, March 19 (Xinhua) -- War-weary residents of the eastern Afghan province of Wardak located near capital Kabul have called for the removal of the U.S. Special Forces from the province for alleged misconduct and crimes against them.

"We do not know why the U.S. Special Forces come to Wardak. They claim to provide security but why are they involved in harassing and torturing civilians?" Rahimullah Khan, a 53-year-old resident, told Xinhua in provincial capital Maidan Shar.

Khan said he is concerned over the security situation in Wardak. "We hope that after the withdrawal of U.S. forces, the security situation would get better. Because there would be no occupation and no pretext for insurgents to fight the government," Khan said.

On Feb. 24, Afghan President Hamid Karzai issued a two-week deadline for U.S. Special Forces to leave Wardak following reports that Americans and Afghans working for them were involved in harassing and torturing, or even murdering, civilians.

The president's order has yet to be implemented by the U.S. Special Forces.

"The Special Forces stop vehicles along main roads; Without any evidence they accuse people of having links with insurgents; They arrest innocent people. It is an oppression and injustice," said Mohammad Harif, a 38-year-old shop owner.

He said nine people disappeared recently in the Nirkh District following their arrest by the U.S. forces. In another case, a young student was taken away at night from his residence a couple of weeks ago and his tortured body was found later, Harif said.

Munir Ahmad, a 23-year-old baker, said "We do not want foreign forces to stay in Wardak anymore. You know, 11 years on, we haven't seen any tangible changes in our life yet. There are still explosions and insurgent attacks similar to those in the past years. We want our local forces to secure Wardak."

"The U.S. and NATO troops have been deployed to secure Wardak over the past

decade. But we never enjoy a peaceful environment," said Mohammad Musa, a 38-year-old farmer from Deh Afghanistan village of Jalriz District.

Mohammad Shah, a resident of Jalriz District, said that after midday, people are afraid to walk in the streets."They do not have the freedom of movement. They are scared from the Taliban as well as from the U.S. troops. It is difficult particularly when a family member falls ill. They cannot bring the sick to the hospital in Maidan Shar for treatment," he said.

Shah, 34, who recently returned from neighboring Iran but could not find a decent job yet, went on to say that "it is in the fundamental interest of Afghanistan, its neighbors and the region to safeguard peace and security in the country."

According to local media reports, hundreds of Taliban fighters as well as members of Haqqani militant group are active in Wardak province from where they organize terror attacks on Kabul.

In November last year, three civilians were killed and 90 others were wounded when Taliban militants detonated a car bomb

near a government office building in Maidan Shar. The blast also destroyed 30 government buildings and civilian houses around.

On Saturday, more than 500 people staged a peaceful demonstration in front of the parliament building in Kabul protesting the continued presence of U.S. Special Forces in Wardak province.

The protesters also demanded the release of nine locals whom they said have been detained by the U.S. forces. The protesters were carrying banners with slogans such as "Where is justice?" "Americans go out," and "I am a student, I am a farmer and why do you murder me by the name of terrorist?"

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

This media summary is prepared by **ORSAM Middle East Research Assistant Nebahat Tanrıverdi O Yaşar. It covers news and commentaries as reported by the national media sources publishing in the Middle*

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