



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

Enerji Güvenliđi

Economy News

Ekonomi Haberleri

Peace Process

Barış Süreci

Ethnic and Secterian Groups

Etnik ve Mezhepsel Gruplar

Non State Actors

Devlet-dışı Aktörler

Relations with the West

Batı'yla İlişkiler



MIDDLE EAST DAILY BULLETIN

21MARCH 2013

NO: 1571

1. IRAQ.....	3
• Kobler concerned about postponement of council elections in two Iraqi provinces (KUNA)	3
• Maliki chairs a meeting of Crisis Cell to discuss security situation (NINA).....	3
• Maliki gives Sadrist ministers time until Sunday to clarify their stand on attending next ministerial session (NINA)	4
• Dialogue only path to end political crisis - Iraq's Vice President (KUNA).....	4
• Barazani: The Kurds are ready for dialogue, all other possibilities (NINA)	5
• Zebari warns against collapse of current government (NINA).....	5
• Sadr Office denies freezing the work of the Sadrist Trend's Political Body (NINA).....	6
• Sadr Trend's boycotting of Cabinet is preparation for forming opposition, says MP (alliraqnews).....	6
• Mahmoud Othman alludes to a potential withdrawing of confidence from al-Maliki (NINA)	7
• Recent explosions plan to divide Iraq, Secretary-General of Justice Movement (Aswat al-Iraq)	7
• Iraqi scholars call for punishment of perpetrators of Baghdad blasts (Al-Iraqiyah TV)	8
• Hakeem, Nujaifi reject elections postponement in Ninewa and Anbar provinces (Aswat al-Iraq)	8
• Hakim describes postponing local elections in Anbar, Nineveh as "very serious step" (alliraqnews).....	9
• Al Dayini: Postponing Iraqi provincial election is "yielding" before violence (Alsumaria TV).....	9
• IIP describes postponing local elections in Anbar, Nineveh as disappointing (alliraqnews).....	10
• Mottahidoon [UNITED] Alliance reject decision to postpone provincial elections in Anbar and Nineveh (NINA).....	10
• OIC chief concerned over insecurity in Iraq (KUNA)	11
• China, France condemn Tuesday bombings in Iraq (alliraqnews).....	11
• EU strongly condemns terror attacks in Iraq (KUNA).....	12
• Hakeem congratulates the Vatican Pope on his accession the Apostolic See (NINA)	12
• US Ambassador to Iraq congratulates Iraqis on Nowruz (alliraqnews).....	12
• US diplomatic presence in Iraq shrinking fast (AP)	13
2. IRAN	14
• Iran celebrates 62nd anniversary of oil nationalization	14
• Iran to pursue drunk Saudi diplomat car accident in Tehran.....	14
• 'Iran, P5+1 reviewed proposals put forward in Istanbul meeting'	15
• Sanctions helped Iran wean economy off oil money: Minister.....	16
• Iran, P5+1 reviewed proposals put forward in Istanbul meeting.....	18
3. ISRAEL - PALESTINE	18
• Prisoner to Continue Strike till Israel Ends His Detention	18
• Sharawneh to End Strike as Israel Offers Exile to Gaza.....	19
• Israeli Forces Arrest 11 Palestinians in West Bank.....	19
• Barack Obama makes first presidential visit to Israel	20
• Kerry expected to revive 2002 Saudi peace initiative	21
4. AFRICA and EGYPT	24



• Eye on the revolution: Ramy Kamil, a Coptic perspective.....	24
• Former Libyan ambassador arrested in Cairo	26
• Oil multinationals bid for Upper Egypt gas fields.....	26
5. JORDAN and LEBANON.....	27
• Lebanon workers brace for Thursday march	27
• A new consensual electoral law is ready, Geagea says.....	28
• Jordan king criticizes regional leaders.....	29
6. SYRIA.....	30
• Gemayel calls for further efforts to urge change in Syria	30
• FM: Syrian strike in Lebanon ‘a rumor’	31
• Some NATO members mull Syria military action	31
• US welcomes election of Syrian rebel PM.....	32
7. ARABIAN PENINSULA AND THE GULF OF BASRA.....	33
• Kuwait to reduce expats by one million	33
• Kuwait MPs pass in principle law to bail out debtors	34
• UAE jailed Islamists formed 'state within state': Witness.....	35
8. AFGHANISTAN - PAKISTAN	36
• NATO calls Karzai claim of secret US-Taliban talks ‘absolutely ridiculous’	36
• Roadside bomb kills 2, wounds 3	37
• Afghan gov't launches poppy eradication campaign in Kandahar	38
• Afghan police casualties increase by 15%	39
• Afghans in Wardak province want U.S. forces out.....	39

1. IRAQ

- **Kobler concerned about postponement of council elections in two Iraqi provinces (KUNA)**

UNITED NATIONS, March 20 (KUNA) -- The UN Special Envoy for Iraq Martin Kobler expressed "deep concern" about the postponement of governorate council elections in the western province of Anbar and the northern province of Ninewa, it was announced here on Wednesday. "There is no democracy without elections. The citizens of these provinces are looking forward to these elections with great hope. They should not be disappointed," Kobler said in a press release distributed here.

Kobler, who is also the head of the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), noted that the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) is continuing the technical preparations for the polls in all the provinces and called on its members to ensure elections can take place "as scheduled in a peaceful and secure environment." It has been reported that the Iraqi Cabinet decided to postpone the polls in Anbar and Ninewa for a maximum period of six months, due to security

concerns, and that preparations are under way for the holding of the governorate council elections on 20 April in all other provinces, including Baghdad, which witnessed several bomb attacks yesterday. Preparations in those two provinces have been marred by ongoing demonstrations against Prime Minister Nour Al-Maliki's policies.

In his recent report to the Security Council, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon commended the IHEC for its professional and timely preparations for the 20 April polls, and encouraged all stakeholders to ensure that the elections be held "in accordance with the current timeline, in a peaceful and orderly manner and free from violence." Kobler is scheduled to brief the Security Council tomorrow Thursday afternoon on UNAMI activities in Iraq during the last few months.

- **Maliki chairs a meeting of Crisis Cell to discuss security situation (NINA)**

20 March 2013

Baghdad (NINA) – Prime Minister and Commander in Chief, Nuri al-Maliki, chaired on Wednesday, March 20, a meeting for the Crisis Cell to discuss security situation and its developments in

the wake of recent explosions Baghdad and other cities have witnessed.

Informed source told NINA that the meeting discussed security situation and its developments, as well as plans to deal with security shortcomings, which terrorism attempt to use in carrying its plans.

The said that Acting Defence Minister, Sadoun al-Dulaimi, National Security Advisor, and top military and security commanders have attend the meeting.

- **Maliki gives Sadrists ministers time until Sunday to clarify their stand on attending next ministerial session (NINA)**

20 March 2013

Baghdad (NINA) – Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki gave ministers of the Sadrists Trend time until Sunday to make their stand clear to attend Tuesday's ministerial session.

In a statement to the press on Wednesday, March 20, the Prime Minister's Media Advisor, Ali al-Mosawi, said that the ministers couldn't continue

carrying up their duties without attending the cabinet's meetings.

He added that Sadrists ministers would not be treated different from other ministers who boycott the cabinet's session.

In a press conference on Wednesday held at Ahrar headquarters, Sadrists ministers announced they suspend attending the cabinet's meetings. However, they will continue carrying their duties in serving the people.

It is noteworthy that since January 8, Iraqiya Alliance ministers are boycotting the cabinet's sessions, while Kurdish Alliance minister have not attended the cabinet's last two sessions

- **Dialogue only path to end political crisis - Iraq's Vice President (KUNA)**

BAGHDAD, March 20 (KUNA) -- Iraq's Vice President Khadair Al-Khuzayyeh said on Wednesday that dialogue is the only path to end the country's political crisis.

According to a statement by Iraqi presidential office, Al-Khuzayyeh made his remarks during a meeting with U.S Ambassador to Iraq Steven Beecroft.

Al-Khuzaye added that his government is committed to the rule of law, the constitution, and the political process in a democratic way, stressing that dialogue is the best solution to the problems facing the political process.

Al-Khuzaye called on all political parties to ignore terrorist groups that are trying to return Iraq to square one and disrupt the unity of the country through sectarian violence.

For his part, the U.S ambassador expressed his government wishes that Iraq can overcome this crisis and continue through the democratic process, reiterating US support for better relations with Iraq.

- **Barazani: The Kurds are ready for dialogue, all other possibilities (NINA)**

20 March 2013
Erbil (NINA) – President of Kurdistan Region, Massoud Barazani, affirmed that the Kurds are ready for dialogue and all other possibilities, declaring that problem with the Federal Government is "National Problem".

Celebrating lighting the Nowruz Torch in downtown Erbil on Wednesday, March 20, Barazani said that the Region's problem with the Federal Government is not administrative one; rather it is national, land, rights and borders, as well as the absence of real partnership.

Addressing a question to official of the Federal Government, Barazani said, "Are we real partners with you or not." He pointed out that the Kurds are ready to enter into dialogue to solve all disputes and outstanding issues.

Barazani concluded that Nowruz means freedom, independence and new beginning, as well as a step toward the waited victory. / End.

- **Zebari warns against collapse of current government (NINA)**

20 March 2013
Baghdad (NINA) – Foreign Minister, Hoshyar Zebari, warned that withdrawing from the government and suspending participations in its sessions, as well as security deterioration might lead to the collapse of current government.

In a television interview on Wednesday evening, March 20, Zebari said that the Kurd's boycott the government is posing to re-examine the course and know of the political process direction.

Zebari added, "Our demands are not specifically Kurdish, rather we have demands we share with other political blocs; we do not want to blame anyone, but what we see today of withdrawals, consultations and suspend participation, will lead to the collapse of the Government."

He stressed that recent increase in sectarian rhetoric will dangerously affect Iraq and its future.

- **Sadr Office denies freezing the work of the Sadrists Political Body (NINA)**

20 March 2013

Baghdad (NINA) – Office of the Sadrists Trend's leader, Muqtada al-Sadr, denied reports of freezing the Trend's Political Body.

Some media outlets have reported that the Trend's Leader, Muqtada al-Sadr decided to freeze the work of the Trend's

Political Body, headed by Karar al-Khafaji, for three months.

- **Sadr Trend's boycotting of Cabinet is preparation for forming opposition, says MP (alliraqnews)**

20 March 2013

Baghdad (AIN) -MP Wihda al-Jumaili of the Iraqiya Slate described the withdrawal of the Sadr Trend's Ministers from the Iraqi Cabinet as a preparation for forming an opposition front.

Jumaili said "We welcome this decision over boycotting the Council of Ministers as it represents a rejection to the monopolization and marginalization policy adopted by the government."

"The boycotting of the Cabinet's sessions by the Kurds, Iraqiya Slate and the Sadr Trend's ministers would lead to couple alternatives, the first one is dissolving the parliament and the government and conducting early elections," she added.

"For the second alternative, it is to form strong opposition front at the parliament which could correct the government's performance," Jumaili added expecting an

agreement to be reached among IS, ST and the Kurds to form an opposition side."

- **Mahmoud Othman alludes to a potential withdrawing of confidence from al-Maliki (NINA)**

20 March 2013

Arbil / NINA /-- MP Mahmoud Othman for Kurdistan Alliance insinuated to the possibility of reactivate the former demand by major political blocs to withdraw confidence from Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki.

He told NINA in a statement today : " Suspend Sadrist ministers of their memberships in the government of PM, Maliki made this government losing / 17 / ministers representing Kurds and Iraqiya Slate ministers.

Othman pointed out that Stat of Law coalition has not responded so far to all the invitations to abide by the constitution and return to previous agreements that brought al-Maliki and his government to power ,on the basis of national consensus and partnership not on basis of majority,".

- **Recent explosions plan to divide Iraq, Secretary-General of Justice Movement (Aswat al-Iraq)**

20 March 2013

NINEWA/ Aswat al-Iraq: Secretary General of Justice and Reform Movement described here today the latest explosions of Baghdad, Mosul, Basra and Babel that led to 60 killings and more than 100 wounded as "aiming at the security and unity of the Iraqis that come within an international and regional plan to denominational actions, dividing the country and plundering its wealth".

Sheikh Abdulla al-Yawar, in a press statement, copy received by Aswat al-Iraq, added that "the current government and its components, proved its failure in administering security and political dossiers".

"The recent explosions come within a series of bloody actions that lasted for ten years to divide the country, amid governmental security failure", he elaborated.

- **Iraqi scholars call for punishment of perpetrators of Baghdad blasts (Al-Iraqiyah TV)**

Baghdad, 20 March 2013

The Iraqi Scholars Association has condemned the blasts that took place yesterday and resulted in the martyrdom or wounding of scores of citizens, holding the cheap sectarian escalation responsible for these attacks. The association underlined in a statement the sanctity of the Iraqi blood and stressed the necessity to criminalize those who allow shedding the blood of Muslims.

The association called for fairly punishing all the parties involved in those malicious crimes, as well as the parties which financed and supported these crimes. The association held the evil sectarian voices full of obscenity and cheap sectarian escalation responsible for all these crimes which aim at affecting the national unity and helping adopt sectarian projects.

- **Hakeem, Nujaifi reject elections postponement in Ninewa and Anbar provinces (Aswat al-Iraq)**

20 March 2013

BAGHDAD/ Aswat al-Iraq: Higher Islamic Council Chairman Amar al-Hakeem rejected governmental resolution to postpone provincial elections in Anbar and Ninewa province, stressing necessity to abide by the date of elections in all provinces.

In a speech, he pointed out that the elections "reflect a state of democracy and a constitutional step that should be respected in timing".

"Delay, for security reasons, could be for days, not for indefinite time which should not be a new crisis in the country", he confirmed.

He criticized security silence on the reasons for recent explosions in Baghdad.

On the other hand, Parliament Speaker Usama Nujaifi stated in a press conference that "the election is a right guaranteed by the constitution and no government can cancel it".

He described the government's resolution as "bad in timing and intentions".

http://en.aswataliraq.info/%28S%28tg0u1p45pwiiem45d0jrav55%29%29/Default1.aspx?page=article_page&id=152779&l=1

- **Hakim describes postponing local elections in Anbar, Nineveh as "very serious step" (alliraqnews)**

20 March 2013

Baghdad (AIN) -The head of the Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council, Ammar al-Hakim, upheld on Wednesday, the politicians who objected the postponement of the next local elections in some provinces, describing this decision as very worrying step.

Hakim said on Wednesday "Postponing the upcoming provincial elections is very serious and worrying step and cannot be adopted whatsoever since the local elections have political and social dimensions, therefore they must be conducted according to their indentified date as per the constitution."

"Such a decision should be consulted with the Independent High Electoral Commission, the parliament and the security forces rather than taking it exclusively," he stressed.

- **Al Dayini: Postponing Iraqi provincial election is "yielding" before violence (Alsumaria TV)**

Iraqiah list MP Nahed Al Dayini criticized on Wednesday March 20, the Central Government's decision to postpone provincial council elections in Al Anbar and Nineveh. She demanded that this decision be reviewed and the election be held in the previously set time. She reiterated that this decision is a form of yielding to violence groups' agenda.

"The Central Government's decision to postpone provincial council elections in Al Anbar and Nineveh under the pretext of security instability is not justifiable and ambiguous", said MP Nahed Al Diyani in a statement to Alsumaria.

"Last elections in 2005 were conducted in the context of hard security situation in both provinces and weren't postponed despite the bomb that we showered on the election centers", she revealed.

"This decision is a sign of yielding to the agendas of violent groups that aim to stop elections", she highlighted, stressing that "the act of postponing reflects a dark and

pessimistic look to the security file for the public opinion”.

Diyani also demanded that “the government review the decision to postpone elections in Al Anbar and Nineveh and make sure they are held on previously set time” and stressed on “the protection and continuity of the democratic process in the country, since it’s based on the people’s choice and without it all will collapse”.

<http://www.alsumaria.tv/news/73208/al-dayini-postponing-iraqi-provincial-election-is/en>

- **IIP describes postponing local elections in Anbar, Nineveh as disappointing (alliraqnews)**

20 March 2013

Anbar (AIN) -The Iraqi Islamic Party/ Anbar Wing, described the Iraqi Cabinet's decision over postponing the local elections in Anbar and Nineveh as disappointing and coup on the political process in Iraq.

A statement by the IIP stressed on Wednesday "This decision was made by certain sides in Anbar and Nineveh which

have suspicious relations with the ruling parties in Baghdad."

"The previous two parliamentary elections as well as the local elections were conducted in a security situation worse than the current one," the Party added expressing "Rejection to this resolution which represents a decline in handling the peaceful transition of power."

"The IIP called on all the political sides, civil society organizations and the tribal forces to stand against all those who offended their provinces yesterday who want to keep their powers as long as possible," the statement concluded.

- **Mottahidoon [UNITED] Alliance reject decision to postpone provincial elections in Anbar and Nineveh (NINA)**

20 March 2013

Baghdad/ NINA /-- Mottahidoon / united / Alliance rejected the government's decision to postpone provincial elections in Anbar and Nineveh provinces, expressing its belief that such a decision hooded under a political aim and of lack of legal basis, reflecting a coup against democracy as well.

Spokesman for the Alliance Zafir al-Ani said in a press statement today: "The position of the Sadrist movement does not only reflect the national commitment and solidarity, but also reveals that who are ruling the country today are a few do not represent all Iraqis.

Al-Ani highly praised on behalf of the Alliance the stand of Cleric Moqtada Sadr , expressing the Alliance's thanks and appreciation for the position, which he described as patriotic and national shown by cleric Moqtada al-Sadr to "reject the unjust postponement decision via suspending attending the cabinet meetings by ministers of Sadrist trend .

- **OIC chief concerned over insecurity in Iraq (KUNA)**

JEDDAH, March 20 (KUNA) -- Secretary-General of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu on Wednesday expressed concern over the deteriorating security situation and continuing political crisis in Iraq.

He stressed in a release that the Iraqi government should live up to its duties for ensuring security and stability nationwide, saying his organization is ready to play any

role required by Iraqi parties for supporting inter-Iraqi reconciliation.

The OIC chief reiterated his call for all Iraqi political and religious leaders to exert concerted efforts to stop mounting violence in their country and to build genuine national reconciliation with a view to safeguarding Iraq's security, stability and national unity.

- **China, France condemn Tuesday bombings in Iraq (alliraqnews)**

20 March 2013

(AIN) -China and France condemned the bombings that shook Iraq on last Tuesday.

The spokesperson of the Chinese Foreign Ministry, Hong Li, said in a statement on the 10th anniversary of the war on Iraq in 2003 "China rejects all forms of violence against the innocent civilians and condemns the series of bombings that occurred in Iraq on last Tuesday, which led to dozens of deaths and injuries."

"China constantly supports Iraq's safety and sovereignty and upholds the compliance to the UN Charter and the essential principles of the international relations in dealing with the regional affairs," he added.

Hong Li confirmed "his country support for Iraq's efforts devoted to achieve security, stability and development."

On other hand, a statement by the French Foreign Ministry reported on Wednesday "France stresses support for the Iraqi government's action to combat the terrorist operations."

http://www.alliraqnews.com/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=30633:

- **EU strongly condemns terror attacks in Iraq (KUNA)**

BRUSSELS, March 20 (KUNA) -- EU High Representative Catherine Ashton Wednesday condemned "in the strongest possible terms the wave of terrorist attacks in the past days in Iraq," targeting innocent civilians as well as government institutions.

Dozens of people died as a result of these unacceptable attacks, and many more have been injured, she noted in a statement.

"I am confident that the Iraqi people will remain steadfast in their continued rejection of attempts by extremists to

undermine the security and the stability of their country," she said and repeated calls on the Iraqi Government and all Iraqi leaders to engage in an inclusive and genuine dialogue to address the many challenges facing the country.

- **Hakeem congratulates the Vatican Pope on his accession the Apostolic See (NINA)**

20 March 2013

Baghdad (NINA) – Leader of the Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council (SIIC), Ammar al-Hakeem, sent a message of congratulations to Pope Francis I on his accession to the Apostolic See.

A statement on Wednesday, March 20, by the SIIC quoted Hakeem expressing his aspiration that the new Pope contributes in consolidate relations between the followers of other religions, especially Islam and Christianity, and to bring all religions close together around joint values of tolerance, mutual respect and human dignity.

- **US Ambassador to Iraq congratulates Iraqis on Nowruz (alliraqnews)**

20 March 2013

Baghdad (AIN) -The US Ambassador to Iraq, Steven Beecroft, extended his congratulations to the Iraqi people on Nowruz Festival.

A statement by the US embassy reported on Wednesday "I would like to exploit this occasion in which the Iraqi families gather to celebrate Nowruz Day, to express my best heartfelt wishes to the Iraqi people."

"The US people would like to share with you the celebration of the coming of Spring season and it looks forward to continue efforts to consolidate the friendship between the two peoples," the statement added.

The USA is adherent to support all Iraq's communities and sects in their efforts to build a democratic Iraqi state that enjoys prosperity under free federal pluralistic regime.

- **US diplomatic presence in Iraq shrinking fast (AP)**

By ADAM SCHRECK
Associated Press

BAGHDAD (AP) -- A decade after the start of the war in Iraq, the American diplomatic footprint here is shrinking fast.

As recently as a year ago, the immense U.S. Embassy in Baghdad and other sites around the country were staffed by more than 16,000 personnel. Today, that number has fallen to about 10,500, U.S. Ambassador Robert Stephen Beecroft said this week.

By the end of the year, Beecroft said he expects to have just 5,500 employees in Iraq. Most of them will be security personnel and other outside contractors assigned to support the fewer than 1,000 diplomats who remain. More cuts are expected beyond the end of the year.

"That number will continue to go down. . . And they'll go down largely on the contracting side," Beecroft said in his residence on the heavily guarded compound on the banks of the Tigris River.

The sprawling, fortress-like U.S. Embassy officially opened in early 2009 at a cost of more than \$730 million as the largest

American mission in the world. But it has been under pressure to cut costs.

http://hosted.ap.org/dynamic/stories/M/ML_IRAQ_US_EMBASSY?SITE=FLPET&SECTION=HOME&TEMPLATE=DEFAULT

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-Zalzalah 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..

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- **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 Afghanan 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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