



MIDDLE EAST DAILY BULLETIN

GÜNLÜK ORTADOĐU BÜLTENİ

Domestic Policy in the Middle East Countries

Bölge Ülkelerinde İç Siyaset

The Restructuring Procces of Iraq

Irak'ın Yeniden Yapılanma Süreci

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1. IRAQ

- **Iraqi Ambassador to UN Security Council Acknowledges Assyrian New Year (AINA.org)**

Assyrian International News Agency
(aina.org)

The Assyrian New Year, Akitu, was mentioned officially for the first time in the Security Council meeting in the presence of the 15 Members of the Security Council and was broadcasted live from the UN headquarters media center.

This was during the Statement of the Republic of Iraq before the Security Council on the Report of the Secretary-General of the United Nations on the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), on its 6937th meeting of the Security Council at the Security Council Chamber GA-TSC-01.

The Statement was in response of the Second report of the Secretary-General pursuant to paragraph 6 of resolution 2061 (2012), which was delivered by the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Iraq Mr. Martin Kobler. In paragraph 6 of its resolution 2061 (2012), the Security Council requested the

Secretary-General to report to it every four months on the progress made towards the fulfillment of the responsibilities of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI). The current report is the second submitted pursuant to that resolution. It covers key political and security developments as well as regional and international events concerning Iraq and provides an update on the activities of the United Nations in Iraq since the issuance of the previous Secretary General report, dated 16 November 2012.

<http://www.aina.org/news/20130324132656.htm>

- **Sadr: Ready for National Dialogue based on clear conditions (NINA)**

24 Mar. 2013

Najaf (NINA) – Leader of the Sadrist Trend, Muqtada al-Sadr, expressed readiness to join a National Dialogue within the Cabinet under clear conditions.

This came in response to the US Secretary of State's call on the Prime Minister to cancel his decision of postponing elections in some provinces.

Sadr commented that this is an interference in Iraq's affairs, expressing his readiness to join a National Dialogue within the Cabinet, without cancelling the postponement but under clear conditions, including forming a concerned security committee, but not neglecting the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC).

Sadr called for enacting a bylaw for the Council of Ministers to avoid dictatorship.

He pointed out the need to fulfill the protestors' legitimate demand and for reconstitute national unity.

Sadr condemned the US State Department's interfering in Iraq's affairs, pointing out that most Iraq forces rejected postponing the elections, including the religious authority.

- **Iraqi parliament calls on all MPs to attend next regular session (alliraqnews)**

24 Mar. 2013

Baghdad (AIN) -The Iraqi parliament called the MPs to adhere to the attendance in the parliament's next session on Tuesday.

The media office of the parliament reported on Sunday "The Iraqi parliament's chairmanship decided to resume the regular sessions on next Tuesday, so we call on all MPs to commit to the attendance."

The parliament will resume regular sessions on next Tuesday, which is the first session after ratifying the federal budget for 2013. /End/

- **Iraqiya charges the Commander in Chief full responsibility of any security breach (NINA)**

24 Mar. 2013

Baghdad (NINA) – Iraqiya Alliance charged the Commander in Chief and Acting Interior Minister the full responsibility of any security breach, accusing him of falier in providing security and services.

In a statement to the press on Sunday, March 24, in response to earlier in the day assassination of Iraqiya National Alliance nominee, Salah al-Ubaidi. Iraqiya said that it is not by accident, that Acting Interior Minister orders police force protecting the Alliance leader, Iyad Allawi, home and office to immediately withdraw, warning them that they will face strong

punishment for any delay; though the Government and the Interior Ministry know very well of the terrorists' plans against Allawi.

The statement pointed out that gunmen did not carry out the assassination with silencers, but the criminal used regular guns and are allowed to go before the eyes of police and security.

The statement concluded that the Commander in Chief and Acting Interior Minister are responsible of the life and security of every and each Iraqi, as well as for any security breach; demanding him to resign for failing to provide security to the people.

Earlier in the day, gunmen assassinated in Saydiya area, in Baghdad, Iraqiya nominee, Salah al-Ubaidi. This is the second assassination, in one week, carried out against Iraqiya nominee; the first took place last Wednesday, in Falluja against Iraqiya nominee. / End

- **Nijaifi: Postponing elections in Niniveh, Anbar is legal, constitutional violation (NINA)**

24 Mar. 2013

Baghdad (NINA) – Speaker of Parliament, Usama al-Nijai, asserted that postponing elections in Niniveh and Anbar is legal and constitutional violation, and contradict the principles of Iraq's growing democracy.

A statement issued by the Speaker's Office, quoted Nijaifi saying in his meeting with US Secretary of State, John Kerry, on Sunday, March 24, that reasons for postponing elections are not convincing, because last elections' security situation were much worst. Baghdad's current security situation has witnessed unprecedented deterioration, but the postponement has be decided for Niniveh and Anbar only, therefore we believe that this decision is much a political one.

He added that the political process impediment and slowness in democratic change, as well as not implementing political agreements reached between partners, in addition to human rights violations resulted in clear shatter of national unity and hindering the partnership movement. Pointing out the necessity that state building must be based on democracy, equality, justice, law and separation of power, as well as independence of independent bodies, as

well as not politicizing the armed forces, in addition to balancing.

In the meeting, the two discussed Iraq's political development, mainly the postponement of elections in Anbar and Niniveh, as well as means to get out of current crisis, taking into consideration legal and constitutional standards.

- **Despite Sec. Kerry's warning, no agreement yet between Iraq and U.S. over Iran flights (CBS.com)**

BAGHDAD Secretary of State John Kerry told Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki that Iraq must take steps to stop the flow of Iranian weapons and fighters to Syria through Iraqi airspace. But a nearly two hour long "spirited discussion" between Kerry and Maliki failed to produce any immediate agreement.

The U.S. believes that Iraqi allows Iran to use its airspace to deliver arms to the Assad regime on an almost daily basis. In a press conference following their meeting, Secretary Kerry said that the overflights from Iran are "problematic" and that they are "helping to sustain President Assad and his regime."

Kerry said that he agreed to provide more information on the Iranian overflights and their lethal cargo to the Iraqi government. The Iraqi government maintains that the Iranian planes are only delivering humanitarian support. A senior U.S. official traveling with John Kerry said that there is "substantial" intelligence that contradicts that claim but declined to detail how that intelligence was gathered or how many of these Iranian flights have taken place.

The Secretary of State also mentioned that there are members of Congress and others "who are increasingly watching what Iraq is doing." That comment recalled remarks by then-Senator Kerry who suggested last September that Congress should consider making U.S. aid to Iraq dependent on their compliance.

http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-202_162-57576016/despite-sec-kerrys-warning-no-agreement-yet-between-iraq-and-u.s-over-iran-flights/

- **Top U.S. diplomat Kerry asks Iraq to stop arms to Syria (Reuters)**

Arshad Mohammed

BAGHDAD, March 24 (Reuters) - U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry pressed Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki on Sunday to stop Iranian flights over Iraq from carrying arms to Syria during a visit to the Iraqi capital.

Kerry also urged Iraq's Sunni Muslim, Shi'ite and ethnic Kurdish factions to commit to the political process as the country's precarious intercommunal balance comes under growing strain from the conflict in neighbouring Syria.

A U.S. official said earlier on condition of anonymity that Washington believes flights and overland transfers from Iran to Syria via Iraq take place nearly every day, helping President Bashar al-Assad crush a two-year-old revolt against his rule.

Kerry said he had "a very spirited discussion" with Maliki about the issue and he made clear U.S. unhappiness about the suspected arms transfers on Iranian flights through Iraqi airspace.

"Anything that supports President Assad is problematic," Kerry told reporters. "I made it very clear to the prime minister that the overflights from Iran ... are in fact

helping to sustain President Assad and his regime."

Kerry's visit had not been previously announced to the public.

Speaking before the meeting, the U.S. official said Iraq had inspected only two flights since last July and that Kerry would argue Iraq did not deserve a role in talks about neighbouring Syria's future unless it tried to stop the suspected arms flow.

Iraqi officials denied allowing weapons to be flown from Iran to Syria through Iraqi airspace. Abbas al-Bayati, a member of the Security and Defence committee in parliament, said: "We have done our duty by randomly inspecting a number of Iranian flights and we did not find any leaked or smuggled weapons."

"If the U.S. is keen to push us to do more they have to give us the information that they have relating to this," he said.

At his news conference, Kerry said the United States had "agreed to try to provide more information" to the Iraqis and suggested that sentiment in the U.S. Congress may be turning against Iraq

because of the suspected arms transfers to Assad.

Iraq's Shi'ite-led government says it takes no sides in Syria's conflict, but its interests are closely aligned with those of neighbouring Shi'ite Iran, a strong supporter of Assad.

According to reporters at a picture-taking session during Kerry's talks with Maliki, the U.S. diplomat appeared to joke that Hillary Clinton, his predecessor, had said Iraq would do whatever Washington asked.

"The Secretary told me that you're going to do everything that I say," Kerry said, according to the reporters.

"We won't do it," Maliki, also joking, replied, they said.

CONSENSUS

More than a decade after the U.S.-led invasion that toppled Saddam Hussein, Sunni Islamist militants linked to al Qaeda are regaining ground and the country's power-sharing government is all but paralysed.

Thousands of Sunni protesters have taken to the streets since December in protest against Maliki, and Kurdish lawmakers are weighing their options after the Iraqi parliament passed the country's 2013 budget without their participation.

"When consensus is not possible, those who are dissatisfied should not just walk away from the system, should not just withdraw, just as those who prevail should not ignore or deny the point of view of other people," Kerry said.

Kerry held talks with representatives of all three communities, including Osama al-Nujaifi, the Sunni speaker of parliament.

He also spoke by telephone to Massoud Barzani, president of Iraq's Kurdistan region, which is defying the central government in pressing ahead with plans to build an oil pipeline to Turkey that Washington fears could lead to the break-up of the country.

Sunni protesters accuse the Shi'ite-led government of marginalising their minority sect and using anti-terrorism laws to target them.

During his talks with Maliki, Kerry also asked the Iraqi prime minister and his cabinet to reconsider a decision to postpone local elections in two Sunni-majority provinces, Anbar and Nineveh, the U.S. official said.

The Iraqi cabinet last week postponed the votes, which were due on April 20, for up to six months because of threats to electoral workers and violence there - a step Washington believes will only increase tensions.

While violence has fallen from the height of the sectarian slaughter that killed tens of thousands in 2006-2007, Sunni Islamist insurgents have been invigorated by the increasingly sectarian civil war next door in Syria.

More than a dozen car bombs and suicide blasts tore through Shi'ite Muslim districts in the Iraqi capital Baghdad and other areas on Tuesday, killing nearly 60 people on the 10th anniversary of the U.S.-led invasion that ousted Saddam.

A statement released by Maliki's office following the talks said they had agreed

on the need to find a political solution to the situation in Syria.

"The two sides also expressed concern at the development of events there (in Syria) and the urgency of working to contain it."

Separately, Kerry said U.S. President Barack Obama had described recent talks with Israeli and Palestinian officials as the most positive he had had to date, but that it would be "foolhardy" to express optimism considering that no negotiations are taking place.

(Reporting by Arshad Mohammed; Additional reporting by Suadad al-Salhy; Editing by Jason Webb)

- **Kerry: Iraq helping Syria's Assad by allowing arms flow (Washington Post)**

By Anne Gearan,

BAGHDAD — Iraq is helping to shore up the besieged regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad by allowing Iranian arms and fighters to cross into Syria from Iraq, Secretary of State John F. Kerry charged Sunday.

During an unannounced trip to Baghdad, Kerry lobbied Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri

al-Maliki for greater scrutiny of flights that cross Iraq. He appeared to make little headway with Maliki, a Shiite with long-standing ties to Iran and little inclination to do U.S. bidding 10 years after the American invasion that toppled dictator Saddam Hussein.

Maliki is a prickly leader whose relations with U.S. officials have grown more strained since the departure of American forces and the re-emergence of widespread sectarian violence in Iraq. Maliki's consolidation of power worries his U.S. backers. His dealings with Shiite Iran worry them more.

"Iraq's success will take enormous cooperation," Kerry said. "It'll take dialogue, and it'll take courage. It'll require the resolve to defend the sovereignty of the country and its airspace."

"We all want to see Iraq succeed," he added. "There's such an enormous investment of our treasure, our people and our money in this initiative."

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/kerry-asks-iraq-to-stop-syria-arms->

[flow/2013/03/24/61eec97e-9467-11e2-95ca-dd43e7ffee9c_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/kerry-asks-iraq-to-stop-syria-arms-flow/2013/03/24/61eec97e-9467-11e2-95ca-dd43e7ffee9c_story.html)

- **John Kerry Is Sick of Iraq Letting Iran Fly Whatever It Wants Into Syria (AP)**

AP

Secretary of State John Kerry made a surprise trip to Iraq on Sunday to urge Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to at the very least do something about the continued Iranian flights to Syria that go right through Iraq's airspace. Right now they're not doing very much.

Kerry lobbied al-Maliki with the argument that Iraq could play a larger role in discussions about the Syria's future in a post-Assad era, if Iraq decides to play ball now. Kerry's main concern is that Iran is shipping weapons into Syria, "including rockets, antitank missiles, rocket-propelled grenades and mortars, as well as Iranian personnel," intelligence officials told The New York Times. Iran insists it's only shipping in humanitarian aid and not weapons, but they're also one of Assad's biggest (and one of few remaining) allies.

The flights are going right through Iraq and the country is doing almost nothing about it. "[Kerry] will be very direct with

Prime Minister Maliki about the importance of stopping the Iranian overflights and the transits across the territory or, at a minimum, inspecting each of the flights," an official travelling with Kerry told Reuters before the meeting. It's the first time the serving Secretary of State has visited Iraq since Hillary Clinton made the trip in 2009. Kerry said his meeting with al-Maliki was a "very spirited discussion" afterwards.

This isn't the first time concerns about the cargo on Iranian planes flying to Syria has been raised with Iraqi officials. Following numerous reports of unchecked Iranian weapon shipments last year, Iraq announced it would start regularly inspecting the planes if they had suspicions about the cargo. But American officials contend only two planes have been inspected since July despite flights happening on an almost daily basis. One inspected flight was on its way back to Iran when it was checked. It's hard to find suspicious cargo when the suspicious cargo was already unloaded.

But one of the biggest problems Kerry faces is how little Iraq can really do about the Iranian planes. American military

planes no longer patrol the Iraqi skies and the country doesn't have its own air force. There's little they can do about Iran's favorite supply route but ask politely for them to stop. With the military relationship between Iraq and the U.S. supposed to be on the decline, there's little Kerry can do but ask Iraq to ask Iran to stop.

- **Iraqi PM, top US diplomat agree on political solution for Syria unrest (Press TV)**

The Iraqi premier's office says Nouri al-Maliki and the US Secretary of State John Kerry have agreed on the necessity of a political solution for the situation in Syria.

Kerry arrived in Iraq on Sunday and held talks with Prime Minister al-Maliki over the two-year conflict in Syria.

The top US diplomat accused Iran of sending military personnel and equipment through Iraq's airspace, a claim Baghdad has already denied several times, saying it inspects suspected flights.

Kerry's unannounced visit comes only days after the 10th anniversary of the US-

led invasion of Iraq that toppled Saddam Hussein's regime.

In addition to al-Maliki, Kerry met with Iraqi Parliament Speaker Osama al-Nujaifi, and also spoke on the phone with Massoud Barzani, the head of Iraq's semi-autonomous Kurdistan Region.

The trip is Kerry's first to Iraq since taking office earlier this year, and the first by an American secretary of state since 2009.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/03/24/295055/kerry-meets-with-iraqi-pm-over-syria/>

- **Baghdad, Washington express concerns over developments in Syria (KUNA)**

BAGHDAD, March 24 (KUNA) -- The United States and Iraqi governments expressed concern on Sunday over developments in Syria, calling for a political solution to the crisis there.

The position of both governments was expressed during a meeting held between Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki and U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, at the former official's office in Baghdad.

A statement by the Iraqi side said after the meeting, that the two sides "expressed their concern over developments in Syria, and the need to work collectively to contain these developments." According to the statement, "Kerry stressed his country's interest in the Iraqi viewpoint on regional issues - the Syrian crisis in particular." For his part, Al-Maliki said that "no country can isolate itself from what is occurring around it, as the region's problems are intertwined and its impacts mutual." On his country's own internal affairs, Al-Maliki said that his government supports dialogue and the constitution as the basis to resolve all internal problems.

Earlier, Kerry made an unannounced visit to Iraq - his first since assuming office.

<http://www.kuna.net.kw/ArticleDetails.aspx?id=2300397&language=en>

- **Nijaifi, Kerry discuss Iraqi, regional political situation (alliraqnews)**

24 Mar. 2013

Baghdad (AIN) –The Speaker, Osama al-Nujaifi, and the US Secretary of State, John Kerry, discussed the Iraqi and the Regional political situation.

A statement by Nijaifi's office received by AIN cited "During his meeting with Kerry, Nijaifi confirmed that the decision of postponing the elections in Nineveh and Anbar provinces violates the constitution and the democracy."

"Nijaifi stressed that deviation in the political process, the slow democratic changes and neglecting the political agreements among the partners negatively affected the national unity," the statement added.

"For his part, Kerry expressed his concerns over democracy in Iraq, calling all sides to cooperate to accomplish national partnership and to overcome crises," the statement continued.

"He also emphasized the US Administration's commitment to support Iraq under the strategic partnership between the two countries," the statement concluded. /End/

- **US embassy: Kerry's visit to Iraq aims to confirm partnership commitments (alliraqnews)**

24 Mar. 2013

Baghdad (AIN) -The US embassy in Baghdad announced that "The current visit of the US Secretary of State, John Kerry, to Baghdad came to stress the USA's commitment towards our strategic partnership with Iraq."

A statement by the US embassy said on Sunday "Kerry will meet during his visit to Iraq, with the Iraqi officials to confer about different issues including those related to the regional security, anti-terrorism and Iraq's constant efforts to build strong democracy and economy."

- **Iraq refrains from voting on granting Syrian opposition a seat (Shafaq News)**

24 Mar. 2013

Shafaq News / Iraq announced that it refrains from voting on allocating a seat to the Syrian opposition in the Arab League in order to be represented permanently there.

The move has been made during the ceremonies of the opening session of the Conference of Arab foreign ministers in Doha.

Hoshyar Zebari, the Iraqi minister of foreign affairs said that "we refrain from granting a seat to the Syrian opposition in the Arab League".

"We support all the aspirations of the Syrian people and reject whatever foreign interference in the Syrian crisis".

"We affirm our support to Brahimi's initiative for a peaceful solution in Syria," and he emphasized the necessity to "stand against all expiatory fatwas".

The meetings of Arab foreign minister's preparations for the twenty-fourth regular Arab summit were launched this afternoon in the Qatari capital of Doha, the summit supposed to be held on 26 and 27 of this month, where conferees will discuss several of issues but will highlight the Syrian file and the suffering of Syrian refugees as well as the Palestinian file, in addition to developments in the countries of the so-called Arab spring.

- **Iraq hands Qatar presidency of Arab League (alliraqnews)**

24 Mar. 2013

Baghdad (AIN) -The Iraqi Foreign Minister, Hoshyar Zibari, handed Qatar the presidency of the Arab League, 24th round.

A statement by the Iraqi FM cited on Sunday "Zibari chaired the Arab League council on Sunday during which he stressed Iraq's constant stance towards the Arab region's issues most notably the Palestinian issue and the Syrian crisis."

The Minister pointed out in his speech "Iraq supports the legitimate aspirations of all Syrian people and condemns the violence and fighting while calls to stop the bloodshed and resolve the crisis via peaceful solution and dialogue away from the foreign interventions." /End/

- **Iraqi, Australian officials discuss Iraqi refugees' return home (alliraqnews)**

24 Mar. 2013

Baghdad (AIN) -The Iraqi Migration Ministry Undersecretary, Salam al-Khafaji, stressed that "No forcible return for Iraqis from all world countries."

A statement by the Ministry quoted Khafaji during meeting the Deputy Australian Ambassador to Iraq and chief of

the Iraqi refugees file in Australia as saying "We have to exert further efforts to sensitize the Iraqi citizens who seek refuge in Australia or any other country via media outlets also to explain the nature of the illegal migration and its seriousness especially the overseas migration."

"The ministry is not with the forcible migration, but it supports the voluntary return," he added.

For his part, the Deputy Ambassador of Australian in Iraq stressed "The importance of the mutual coordination between Iraq and Australia to find the ways that would encourage the Iraqi refugees in Australia to voluntarily return home." /End/

- **Iraq-Egypt agree to solve electricity crisis in Egypt (alliraqnews)**

24 Mar. 2013

(AIN) –The Egyptian Ministry of Electricity announced that "The agreement with Iraq will solve the energy crisis in Egypt."

The Egyptian Minister of Electricity, Ahmed Imam, reported in press statement that "The Government exerts great efforts to provide the energy for the electricity

stations," pointing out that "The agreement between Iraq and Egypt will contribute in solving the electricity crisis in Egypt."

"The Iraqi-Egyptian relations witnessed an improvement during the past few days after the visit of the Egyptian Prime Minister, Husham Qindeel, to Baghdad on March 4th accompanied with a delegation of businessmen," he added, noting that "The visit included concluding many economic and commercial conventions.

Iraq suffers from serious shortage in production of electricity energy, though, the funds allocated to rehabilitate electricity reached USD (27) millions.

http://www.alliraqnews.com/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=30862

2. IRAN

- **China, Tanzania Agree to Forge Comprehensive Cooperative Partnership**

TEHRAN (FNA)- China and Tanzania agreed to build a comprehensive cooperative

partnership characterized by mutual benefit and win-win results.

The agreement was reached at a meeting between visiting Chinese President Xi Jinping and his Tanzanian counterpart Jakaya Mrisho Kikwete on Sunday.

Calling the East African country an old friend and a good friend of China, Xi said the two countries have maintained an all-weather friendship and China cherishes the time-tested bond with Tanzania, Xinhua reported.

China, he added, is ready to work with Tanzania to foster a comprehensive cooperative partnership characterized by mutual benefit and win-win results and lift bilateral relations to a higher level.

Noting that both countries face the task of national development, Xi said the two sides should trust, support and help each other and pursue common development.

They should maintain contacts and exchanges, continue to support each other on core interests and major concerns, and strengthen coordination

and cooperation on global and regional issues, added the Chinese president.

China, he said, is willing to continue to support Tanzania's socioeconomic development and encourage Chinese enterprises to invest in Tanzania.

Commenting on Africa's overall situation, Xi said Africa is a continent full of hope and has a bright future despite the many difficulties and challenges it faces now.

For his part, Kikwete extended a warm welcome to Xi and thanked China for its long-term support and assistance for his country, pledging that his country will continue to firmly back China on major issues concerning national sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Tanzania, he said, commits itself to economic development and hopes to strengthen cooperation with China both bilaterally and under the framework of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation in such areas as agriculture, energy, infrastructure, poverty alleviation and human resources.

After the talks, the two leaders witnessed the signing of several cooperation deals.

The meeting came hours after Xi arrived here for a state visit to Tanzania, the second leg of his maiden foreign trip as president following Russia.

China has become Tanzania's largest trading partner and second largest source of investment. Bilateral trade reached 2.47 billion U.S. dollars last year, up 15.2 percent year on year.

After Tanzania, Xi will also travel to South Africa and the Republic of the Congo. In South Africa, he will attend the fifth BRICS summit in the port city of Durban on March 26-27, the first to be held on the African continent.

The emerging-economy group of BRICS consists of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa.

<http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9107155482>

- **Ashton urges diplomatic resolutions on Iran nuclear issue**

EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton has reaffirmed the importance of resolving Iran's nuclear issue through diplomatic channels.



Speaking at a press conference held at the end of the informal meeting of EU foreign ministers in Dublin on Saturday, she added that the latest round of expert-level talks between Iran and the P5+1 group in the Turkish city of Istanbul cannot be considered as political negotiations.

She noted that experts of Iran and the P5+1 group held technical talks to clarify the proposals put forward by the two sides.

Ashton said that Iran and the P5+1 would meet again in Almaty, Kazakhstan, adding the six countries would be able to explain their proposals to Tehran in detail.

Iran and the P5+1 group -- China, Russia, France, Britain and the US plus Germany -- held their latest round of expert-level negotiations in Istanbul on March 17-18.

Iran and the P5+1 agreed to hold the expert-level meeting during their previous negotiations in Almaty, Kazakhstan, on February 26-27. The two sides agreed to convene again in Istanbul on April 5-6 to continue the negotiations.

In a statement issued on March 19, Iran's Supreme National Security Council said experts of Iran and the P5+1 discussed various aspects of proposals put forward by both sides.

Michael Mann, a spokesman for EU foreign policy chief, also said in a statement on March 19 that the meeting provided an opportunity for experts of both Iran and the P5+1 group to explore each other's positions on a number of technical subjects.

The United States, Israel and some of their allies have repeatedly accused Iran of pursuing non-civilian objectives in its nuclear energy program, with the United States and EU using this pretext to impose

several rounds of illegal unilateral sanctions against Tehran.

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

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/03/24/294982/eu-insists-on-diplomacy-with-iran/>

- **Majlis deputy speaker to run for president**

Deputy Speaker of Iran Majlis Mohammad Hassan Aboutorabi-Fard has officially announced his decision to run for president in the country's upcoming presidential election.



Aboutorabi-Fard announced his candidacy during a visit to the former war zones in southwest of Iran on Sunday, Fars News Agency reported.

The Islamic Republic's eleventh presidential election will be held in June and presidential hopefuls will register from May 7 to May 11.

So far, Head of the State Inspectorate Organization of Iran Mostafa Pour-Mohammadi, senior member of Iran Expediency Council, Hassan Rohani, First Vice Speaker of the Majlis Mohammad Reza Bahonar, Secretary of the Expediency Council Mohsen Rezaei, former intelligence minister, Ali Fallahian, and former foreign minister, Manouchehr Mottaki have declared their intention to run for president.

Iran's former minister of housing and urban development, Mohammad Saedi-Kia, declared his candidacy on March 18.

The president of Iran is elected for a four-year term in a national election and the Guardian Council vets the candidates for qualifications.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/03/24/295043/mailis-deputy-speaker-to-run-for-president/>

- **India to ink transit agreement with Iran to ship goods to Afghanistan**

India is set to sign a transit agreement with Iran, and invest over USD 100 million in the southeastern Iranian port city of Chabahar in order to facilitate the transportation of commodities to Afghanistan.



Unnamed sources in India said on Sunday that it would be in India's interest to take advantage of the potentials of Iran's Chabahar port to ensure a link into Afghanistan for its goods, The Indian Express reported.

The report added that the Indian government plans to improve the berthing

facility of Chabahar port and expand its container terminal.

Chabahar port -- located 72 kilometers (44 miles) west of Pakistan's Gwadar port -- holds immense strategic and economic significance for India.

The port is already connected to the city of Zaranj in Afghanistan's southwestern province of Nimruz and can serve as India's entry point to Afghanistan, Central Asia and beyond.

India, Iran and Afghanistan have signed an agreement to give Indian goods, heading for Central Asia and Afghanistan, preferential treatment and tariff reductions at Chabahar.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/03/24/295030/india-to-sign-transit-accord-with-iran/>

- **Iran Navy to boost presence in international waters: Iran MP**

An Iranian legislator has praised the high capabilities of the Iranian naval forces, saying that the Islamic Republic's Navy plans to enhance its presence in the international waters.



“The Iranian Armed Forces have made tactical and technological advances in recent years, and Iran’s Navy is now a transregional maritime power,” member of Iran Majlis National Security and Foreign Policy Committee Mohammad-Saleh Jokar said on Sunday.

On March 21, the 24th fleet of Iran Navy docked at the Port of Colombo in Sri Lanka after patrolling Southeast Asia's Strait of Malacca and successfully conducting its mission in the Indian and Pacific oceans.

Commander of the 24th fleet of Iran Navy Capitan Seyyed Omid Golestaneh said the fleet, comprising Sabalan destroyer and Kharg helicopter carrier, has conveyed the message of peace and friendship to regional countries, Eastern and Southeastern Asian states in particular.

The fleet docked at China's Zhangjiagang port on March 4 after sailing 13,000 kilometers in 40 days.

In recent years, Iran Navy has been increasing its presence in international waters to protect naval routes and provide security for Iranian merchant vessels and tankers.

In addition, in line with the international efforts to combat piracy, the Iranian Navy has been conducting anti-piracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden since November 2008 to safeguard the vessels involved in maritime trade, especially the ships and oil tankers owned or leased by Iran.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/03/24/295019/iran-to-boost-presence-in-intl-waters/>

- **India to set up fund for insuring Iran crude tankers**

Indian refiners HPCL, Mangalore Refinery and Petrochemicals Limited (MRPL) and Essar are the main clients of Iranian crude oil.

A senior Indian official says New Delhi plans to establish a fund for insurance

companies providing cover for importers of Iranian crude in order to counter Western sanctions against Tehran.

"According to the proposal, public sector insurance companies and the Oil Industry Development Board under the petroleum ministry would contribute money for the fund that would provide reinsurance for the state-owned insurers," Vivek Rae, Secretary for India's Ministry of Petroleum & Natural Gas, said on Sunday.

The measure is reportedly aimed at countering the effect of sanctions imposed by the European Union, banning the bloc's members from purchasing Iran's oil or extending insurance coverage for tankers carrying its crude. The EU bans entered into force on July 1, 2012.

"What will be the size of this fund, how much we are required to contribute, whether it is enough to cover reinsurance -these are the details that insurance companies have to work out," Rae added.

Indian refiners HPCL, Mangalore Refinery and Petrochemicals Limited (MRPL) and Essar are the main clients of Iranian crude oil.

The US, Israel, and some of their allies have repeatedly accused Iran of pursuing non-civilian objectives in its nuclear energy program.

Using the unfounded allegation, the US and its European allies have imposed unilateral sanctions against the Islamic Republic.

Iran rejects the allegation, arguing that as a committed signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty and a member of the International Atomic Energy Agency it is entitled to develop nuclear technology for peaceful purposes.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/03/25/295129/india-to-insure-importers-of-iran-oil/>

3. ISRAEL - PALESTINE

• Israeli forces detain 5 in arrest raids

BETHLEHEM (Ma'an) -- Israeli forces detained five people overnight Monday, locals and Israel's army said.



In Nablus, Israeli soldiers arrested Omar Sawalmeh, 21, and Qais Abu Juneid, 22, witnesses told Ma'an.

Awad Hassan, 15, was arrested in Ramallah and Muhammad Abu al-Haiaja, 20, was detained in Jenin, locals said.

An Israeli army spokeswoman said that five people were detained overnight, two in Nablus, two in Hebron and one in Jenin.

<http://www.maannews.net/eng/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=578547>

• Israel to gain if Turkey rapprochement fails, minister says

Environmental Protection Minister Amir Peretz says world would have seen Israel extending its hand in peace

If Israel and Turkey don't end up repairing relations because of Ankara's demands,

Jerusalem will earn credit with the international community for offering to make amends with its former ally, Environmental Protection Minister Amir Peretz (Hatnua) said Monday.

Speaking on Israel Radio Monday morning, the former defense minister said that should the Israel-Turkey reconciliation deal fall through because of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Israel would score points on the world stage for having extended the olive branch and being rebuffed.

Erdogan on Sunday appeared to vacillate on his agreement to restore normalized relations with Israel, in a phone conversation with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu two days earlier. Netanyahu, in a dramatic US-brokered phone call to Erdogan, apologized “for any errors that could have led to loss of life” in the 2010 Mavi Marmara incident, and “agreed to complete the agreement on compensation.”

Nine Turkish citizens were killed after the IDF boarded the ship bound to the blockaded Gaza Strip.

Erdogan accepted Netanyahu’s apology and the two agreed to return their respective ambassadors and pledged to overcome differences. In an apparent backtrack, however, the Turkish premier said Sunday that normalized relations with Jerusalem would only happen if Israel implemented its side of an ostensible new bargain with Turkey which, he said, included lifting the blockade.



Peretz’s statement came a day after his party leader, Justice Minister Tzipi Livni, told Channel 2 that Netanyahu’s apology to Erdogan on Friday was “better late than never.”

The most important thing, she stressed, was to reassure the naval commandos that the apology involved zero criticism of the soldiers who participated in the event. The commandos who boarded the Marmara did what they were asked to do, and they did so without any moral flaws,

she said. Netanyahu acknowledged “operational errors” in the incident, she noted, precisely as an Israeli investigation had done.

“There were attempts to heal the rift before Obama’s visit,” but various events — including Erdogan’s perceived anti-Semitic comments — stalled the process, Livni told the news station.

Also on Sunday, during a special interview at the President’s Residence with CNN Turk, President Shimon Peres urged Turkey to restore normalized relations with Israel, citing mutual interest and common history as two of several factors that require the mending of ties between the former allies.

“I can think of a thousand reasons why Turkey and Israel should be friends,” Peres said. “I cannot find one reason why they shouldn’t be friends.”

<http://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-to-gain-if-turkey-rapprochement-fails-minister-says/>

- **Israel releases Palestinian activists detained in Hebron**

HEBRON (Ma'an) -- Israel released three Palestinian activists on Sunday after detaining them during a protest in Hebron last week.

Issa Amro, Badi Dweik and Muhammad Zghayer were released on bail by Ofer military court. They were arrested on Wednesday after wearing masks of Martin Luther King and US President Barack Obama and demonstrating through Hebron's Old City.

"We will continue resisting the Israeli occupation until settlers give up, and we will not accept any other results. People of Hebron are able to take this challenge and make it succeed," Badi Dweik said Sunday.

"The people of Hebron in their wisdom, steadfastness, and defiance can take this challenge and make it succeed," he added.

Issa Amro, coordinator of activist group Youth Against Settlements, said last week that he was hoping that the first black president of the United States would be more fair with Palestinians.

An Israeli military spokeswoman said soldiers had arrested six people at the

demonstration because they entered a "closed military zone".

Meanwhile, Palestinian journalist Abdul Aziz Nofal was detained on Sunday while filming with a crew from Al-Jazeera in the Tel Rumeida area of Hebron.

The Palestinian liaison department has been on contact with Israel's DCO to release them, Brigadier Nader Hajji told Ma'an. The Israeli DCO demanded 1,000 shekels (\$274) to release them, which the Palestinian side refused to pay.

Israeli authorities must give journalists complete freedom to report, Hajji added.

Around 800 Jewish settlers live in Hebron's Old City among 30,000 Palestinians in the parts of the ancient city that are under Israeli control following a 1997 agreement.

<http://www.maannews.net/eng/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=578483>

- **Rivlin, Peres top public-approval rating poll**

Elder statesmen are most popular politicians, whereas few are happy with

the state comptroller and the Supreme Court president

By Philip Podolsky March 25, 2013, 10:19 am 0

Former Knesset speaker Reuven Rivlin is the most popular figure in the Israeli political establishment, followed closely by President Shimon Peres.

Rivlin, who served as Knesset speaker during the last two governments, and whom Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu replaced with former Diaspora affairs minister Yuli Edelstein, enjoys a public-approval rating of 75 percent, 1 point higher than Peres — the runner-up and last year's most popular pol — according to a poll published in Haaretz on Monday.

The annual survey, conducted by Professor Camil Fuchs of Tel Aviv University, aimed to canvass Israeli opinion on 15 of the country's key political, defense, justice and economic figures. The survey polled 473 respondents, with a margin of error of 4.6%.

Rivlin also scored the largest gain in popularity in the past year, with a jump of 9% approval among the poll's respondents.

The joint third and fourth spots went to resigning Bank of Israel chief Stanley Fischer, who navigated the Israeli economy through the global financial downturn, and IDF Chief of General Staff Benny Gantz. Both enjoyed an approval rating of 67%.

Israel's newly reelected prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, proved moderately popular among respondents, garnering 48% approval, but scored a 5-point decline in popularity in the past year. One place ahead of him — in fifth place, with a 50% approval rate — was outgoing defense minister, Ehud Barak.

At the far end of the popularity scale were the State Comptroller, Yosef Shapira, with only 25% popular approval; Attorney General, Yehuda Weinstein, with 28%; and Supreme Court President, Asher Grunis, with 29%.

The Haaretz report attributes the Shapira and the Grunis poor ratings to their recent

appointments to their positions, having replaced Micha Lindenstraus and Dorit Beinisch respectively last year, and because of their relative obscurity in public affairs.

Yisrael Beytenu chief Avigdor Liberman was the lowest polling politician, with 37% approval. The former foreign minister is expected to be reappointed as Israel's top diplomat should he be cleared of the corruption charges against him.

<http://www.timesofisrael.com/rivlin-peres-top-public-approval-rating-poll/>

- **Israel extends closure of Gaza crossing**

GAZA CITY (Ma'an) -- Israeli authorities kept the Kerem Shalom crossing closed for a fifth day on Monday, after imposing a closure last week following rocket fire from Gaza.

Israel closed the Gaza commercial crossing on Thursday after a rocket was fired at southern Israel and reduced the fishing zone around Gaza from 6 to 3 miles.

The zone had been extended to 11 km as part of an Egyptian-brokered ceasefire

that ended an eight-day conflict between Israel and Hamas in November, in which 166 Palestinians and six Israelis were killed.

Magles Shoura al-Mujahedeen, a hardline Islamist Salafi faction with a small presence in Gaza and the neighboring Egyptian Sinai, claimed responsibility for the rocket salvo on Sderot last week.

The crossing will likely be opened after upcoming Jewish religious holidays, Palestinian sources said.

<http://www.maannews.net/eng/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=578521>

4. AFRICA and EGYPT

- **Job protests engulf south Algeria**

By Nazim Fethi in Algiers for Magharebia–
24/03/13

Thousands of demonstrators on Saturday (March 23rd) swarmed the Place de la Résistance in Laghouat in southern Algeria to press for jobs and recruitment transparency.

After the "Dignity March" held in Ouargla ten days ago, protests are spreading all over Algeria's southern provinces. More rallies are slated for El Oued and Tamanrasset next week.

"We are moving into all provinces so that the authorities will agree to talk to us and find solutions to our problems," National Committee for Protection of the Rights of the Unemployed spokesman (CNDDC) Tahar Belabes said.

The spread of the protest movement to south-eastern provinces is, he claimed, a response to the attempts made by governors to torpedo the movement by having MPs travel to these regions. On Monday, parliamentarians were driven out of Laghouat, 400km south of Algiers, by unemployed people in the province.

Street demonstrations will continue, Belabes added, until the authorities agree to talk to representatives of the CNDDC, which is looking to have a say in the activities of employment agencies.

"We are the slaves of recruitment companies created by the big shots of the system for the benefit of their offspring,

and we suffer from the racism of foreign companies," activist Tarek Mameri claimed.

Young people are asserting themselves where political parties have failed – in the street, according to CNDDC co-ordinator in Laghouat Belkacem Khancha.

"The streets are ours and society supports us," he said.

As happened during the demonstration in Ouargla, the security forces kept their distance and observed the peaceful event from afar.

Activists from across the country travelled to the province to show support for protestors. Some turned out to air their own grievances. Among them were family representatives of those who went missing during the Black Decade and human rights campaigners from Ghardaia.

The sprawling protest movement, however, is whetting the appetites of some politicians, who try to use the momentum to their advantage. One of them was Abdelfattah Zeraoui Hamadache, whose salafist party project

was rejected by the interior ministry in February. He arrived with a large contingent of supporters.

In what some saw as a clear attempt to hijack the campaign, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) on Friday issued a statement in "support" of southern protestors. The terrorist organisation claimed that young people continue to bear the consequences of not having sharia as the mode of governance.

Though demonstrators "cannot forbid anyone from taking part" in the protest movement, according to Khancha, they will stay true to their course.

Protestors have made very clear demands, he said, which include greater transparency in hiring policies and the work of the national employment agency, as well as an overhaul of training and education systems in the south.

The government, however, had already begun taking measures to help the situation.

During an interdepartmental meeting held earlier this month in Algiers, the

government adopted a raft of measures intended to address the expectations of people living in southern provinces.

According to the government's new guidelines, it is now compulsory for companies operating in southern provinces to prioritise local labour.

http://magharebia.com/en_GB/articles/a-wi/features/2013/03/24/feature-01

- **Algeria, Mauritania strengthen partnership**

By Bakari Gueye in Nouakchott for

Algeria and Mauritania on Thursday (March 21st) signed new co-operation accords in employment, fishing, energy, agriculture, and other sectors.

While the 17th Joint High Committee session in Nouakchott focused on creating partnership agreements, Mauritanian Prime Minister Moulaye Ould Mohamed Laghdaf and his Algerian counterpart Abdelmalek Sellal also used the occasion to discuss shared security concerns.

"This meeting comes at a time when the region and the entire world are undergoing profound changes and face

major challenges that require our two countries to turn over a new leaf in their partnership," Ould Mohamed Laghdaf said.

Such challenges require joint efforts, he said, "to thwart anything that can threaten the security and stability of our two nations".

"The meeting of this commission reflects the sincere desire of both nations to embark on a new process of co-operation and partnership between the two countries," the Mauritanian premier added.

Algerian Prime Minister Abdelmalek Sellal agreed, saying that the meeting embodied the "political will of the leaders of both countries and their constant desire to boost and expand co-operation to the benefit of both nations".

"We discussed security matters, especially the crucial issue of the Sahel region and the state of Mali and the importance of finding a solution for the stability and security of the region. There is a consensus of opinion on this point," Sellal said.

Mali was of particular concern to the Algerian prime minister.

As soon as he arrived in Nouakchott, the Algerian premier issued an appeal to the international community "to put an end to the acts of violence in northern Mali" and warned against "tribal and racial responses, which will only make the situation in this country... more difficult".

"Both countries are committed to the unity of Mali, determined efforts to tackle terrorism and crime and opening up a forum for dialogue to resolve the problem in Mali, as dialogue is the only way of achieving a consensus between all parties," Sellal said.

"It is no coincidence that Sellal laid great stress on the importance of security co-operation and co-ordination between the two countries to tackle the challenges brought by the crisis in Mali," Maghreb Affairs Professor Sidati Ould Cheikh said.

Noting the close military co-operation between the two countries, Ould Cheikh highlighted the increased dialogue over the past few years.

"In April 2010, the two countries, which are the worst affected by the activities of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and other armed criminal gangs, took the step of creating a Joint Operational Committee of Chiefs of Staff (CEMOC)," he said.

Security analyst Jidou Ould Sidi noted that Algeria and Mauritania were the "first to understand the need to co-operate in the field of counter-terrorism".

Together, he said, they have "decided to wage a ruthless battle against terrorist groups".

http://magharebia.com/en_GB/articles/a/wi/features/2013/03/22/feature-01

- **Disenchanted former rebels protest Libya government**

By Essam Mohamed in Tripoli for

Scores of Libyans gathered in Tripoli's Martyrs' Square on Tuesday (March 19th) to voice anger over Ali Zidan's government.

The protestors from the High Council of Revolutionaries then proceeded to the

cabinet headquarters, where some wrote slogans on its walls demanding the ouster of the prime minister.

In a statement issued Wednesday night, they called for withdrawing confidence from the interim government and accused it of threatening to use foreign forces to restore order, failing to provide tangible solutions for the problems facing the country, and of enabling civilian and military symbols of the former regime.

The protestors also accused the government of overstepping the legislative powers of the General National Congress (GNC) and allowing state sovereignty to be violated.

They also demanded that parliament choose an independent figure from the February 17th revolution to form a government.

For his part, Prime Minister Zidan issued a strong statement in response to the demonstrations. He said that the revolution was for all Libyan people and that everyone must take part in protecting it. Zidan added that the government was

for all Libyans, not for one side against another.

"The government won't be broken and will only give in to the will of Libyans through ballot boxes," he said.

"We won't allow anyone to impose anything on it without the will of Libyans through the GNC, which had its legitimacy from the Libyan people," he added.

He then adopted a lighter tone by focusing on the importance of hearing opinions from all categories of society and political forces.

"We're opening the door for dialogue, for understanding, listening to advice, ideas and visions from everyone," he said.

"However, the entity that makes decisions and draws up policies is the GNC and the entity that implements that is the government."

"Everyone must know that the establishment of state is an important issue, and that respect of law and people's will is important," the prime minister added.

He said that the government would proceed with its operations through the joint security force, after it began sweeping the dens of vice and crime, and the places where many people were detained after being abducted.

"The government has stormed these places one after the other, and have succeeded," the Libyan premier said. "The aim is to make Tripoli, Benghazi and all Libyan cities without dens of crime."

He noted that this was not targeting anyone. "Rather, it's aimed at establishing the sovereignty of law and order, consolidating security and protecting this homeland so women and children can securely walk at streets.

"This will prevent the kidnapping of people for the purpose of blackmailing their families. This practice is there now, and we'll put an end to it with all our might and capabilities," he said.

He also thanked revolutionaries for their service and expressed hope that their co-operation with the government would continue, noting that former fighters would be given the chance to study and

rehabilitate either under the civilian or security programme.

"We'll also support them by integrating a number of revolutionaries into military academies to train, whether inside or outside Libya, until an army of young revolutionaries capable of protecting our country and of engaging in security battles with anyone who assaults our country is formed," the premier said.

http://magharebia.com/en_GB/articles/a/wi/features/2013/03/22/feature-02

- **New terror threat to Tunisia**

By Monia Ghanmi in Tunis for Magharebia

Tunisian salafist jihadists announced their allegiance to al-Qaeda this week, accepting the group's invitation to wage a holy war.

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb's call Sunday (March 17th) to fight Westerners, secularists, reformers and other so-called "enemies" was welcomed by Tunisian salafist jihadists, the movement's leader Mohamed Anis Chaieb told Assabah.



This was the first time Tunisia's salafist jihadist groups officially declared their allegiance to al-Qaeda. And the terror group's call to arms could not have come at a more critical juncture for the still-fragile state.

With jihadists returning from the conflicts in Mali and Syria, and Libyan arms still circulating in the Maghreb, Tunisia is facing unprecedented security challenges.

The new fear is that Tunisia could become the next base for al-Qaeda.

The warning bells have been sounding for months. Long before the al-Qaeda statement, the leader of Tunisia's Ansar al-Sharia movement – who remains a suspect in the September 14th assault on the US Embassy in Tunis – spoke out against the involvement of young Tunisians in foreign holy wars.

Abou Iyadh (real name Seif Allah Ben Hassine) said that rather than going to Syria for jihad, Tunisian youths should begin their extremist struggle at home.

"Tunisia needs its young people and cadres more than any other country," the

salafist leader said last month in a YouTube video.

"Abou Iyadh said he considered Tunisia to be the natural place for jihadists currently in Syria," political analyst Nouredine Mbarki told Zawaya.

"Salafist jihadists refuse to participate in the political process, consider democracy a form of apostasy and call for the application of Sharia," Mbarki said.

Tunisian security analyst Hechmi Mira confirmed that the country's salafists had been encouraged "to establish an Islamic emirate".

Tunisian leaders are frank about the threat.

Terrorism – whether home-grown or imported – represents the greatest danger to national security, new Prime Minister Ali Larayedh said a week ago.

"By terrorism, I mean an organised group that uses violence and arms against individuals or to seize power," he said.

The influx of battle-hardened extremists comes from two fronts. Al-Qaeda's Syria affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN) used sympathy for the Syrian people to lure new fighters from the Maghreb, just as armed extremists in Mali attracted recruits by portraying the battle as a religious calling.

And they are all starting to head home.

To limit the numbers, Tunis prosecutors on March 19th launched a wide dragnet of extremist groups that recruit young Tunisians for jihad in other countries, particularly Syria, Tunisie Numerique reported.

Home-grown extremists from Ansar al-Sharia had already resorted to violence. Along with the deadly assault on the US embassy, the group is widely seen as responsible for a series of attacks in Tunisia.

Retreating mujahideen fighters only adds fuel to the fire, observers say.

"If young people who are deeply influenced by al-Qaeda make their return, they will keep promoting this

organisation's ideas and attempting to attract new recruits," Sahara Media reporter Mohamed Ould Zine warned.

"Al-Qaeda will not cease to exist with the death of its leaders," he warned.

Riadh Sidaoui, the director of the Arab Centre for Research and Political and Social Analysis (CARAPS), agrees that the return of fighters from Syria and Mali poses a serious threat to Tunisia's stability.

"For young Tunisians who return with military training and have become accustomed to killing and weapons, murder is no longer taboo. If weapons are available, along with chaos and the weakness of security agencies in the country, then they will be able to use them against fellow citizens," Sidaoui says.

If the estimated 12,000 Tunisian fighters in Syria (a figure cited by Echorouk last February) return from battle only to launch a holy war in their homeland, the consequences for Tunisia would be devastating, experts caution.

Tunisia had always been seen as a land of preaching, not of jihad.

According to Moncef Khabir, a 27-year-old rights activist in Tataouine, Abou lyadh's recent suggestion that Maghreb mujahideen leave Syria and Mali to settle in Tunisia is a clear indication that something serious is afoot.

"We know very well that Tunisia was never a land of jihad. Yet what we see today on the political scene - in terms of instability, the proliferation of weapons, jihadist camps and the lack of control inside mosques, in addition to the difficult social conditions - are all factors that could affect the minds of unemployed youth, who could then end up with al-Qaeda," Khabir tells Magharebia.

Moreover, jihadist groups have an unprecedented freedom of movement in Tunisia to spread their ideas and recruit with ease, says terrorism analyst Bassel Torjeman. There is also no control over their funding sources, he notes.

Given these factors, he says Tunisia is ripe to become a "land of jihad".

"As for the timing for when blind violence will explode in the face of civilians in Tunisia, this remains hard to answer," the analyst adds. "However, it will not be too long before it happens, unless we start drying up their financial, political and military sources."

Naceur Khechini, a university professor in Islamic law, also fears that Tunisia will turn into a land of jihad and violence.

"Based on the Takfiri and military approach of jihadist salafists, they could turn any area into rubble and ruin, especially since weapons and funding are available. In addition, they are receiving media support from channels that were created specifically for this purpose," the professor tells Magharebia.

Terrorism in Tunisia could be worse than even the analysts project.

Laâroussi Derbali (aka Abou Talha Ettounissi) was one of the eleven Tunisian terrorists involved in the attack on Algeria's In Amenas gas complex that killed dozens in January. During his interrogation, Abou Talha said Tunisians were in northern Mali, "co-ordinating with

other cells to launch attacks in Tunisia", Echorouk reported.

True jihad is not terrorism, imam says

But the religious argument offered by the jihadists is flawed, according to Tunisian imam Adnen Fillani.

"There is a big difference between jihad and terrorism, a gigantic one. God authorised jihad in Islam but prescribed neither terrorism nor extremism. It is necessary not to confuse these two terms," he says.

"Jihad is to spread the religion of Allah and defend the oppressed. It is part of the path of the prophets and the messengers, which is a just war to counter aggression or remove unjust dictatorships. Jihad is not about forcing people to embrace Islam," the imam explains.

Terrorism, Fillani adds, is an "illegal act of aggression rejected and forbidden by all religions".

The real key to preventing violence may be to educate young jihadists, Tunisian sociologist Hayet Ben Salem says.

"It's necessary to hold dialogues with young people who performed jihad with a wrong understanding of Islam. There should be private discussions with them in religious matters and confront them with the Qur'an and the tradition of the prophet," Ben Salem tells Magharebia.

"The reintegration of jihadists must be a priority for the new government, in case these people return to the country. Turning a blind eye and ignoring them could have a negative impact on the state," he adds.

Security analysts are concerned that it may already be too late to turn the tide.

The climate after the Tunisian revolution was appropriate for the growth of al-Qaeda in the country, legal analyst Naceur Heni said March 3rd at a Tunis counter-terrorism conference.

Armed extremists are now trying to exploit regional chaos "to create a nucleus of al-Qaeda operating from Tunisia", Heni added.

Noureddine Neifer, an expert in global security strategies, told the forum that after the assassination of Chokri Belaid, Tunisia became threatened internally and externally by terrorism.

The world today is facing the fourth generation of al-Qaeda, which grew up after the Arab Spring. Neifer described it as "mentally developed and militarily trained".

"This 'fourth generation' is by far the most lethal," he said. "This generation received good training in Libya and Syria on how to use weapons. This generation is hostile to the West and seeks to undermine its economic interests in Muslim lands."

It includes drug-trafficking networks and money-laundering gangs, Neifer added. And it is not afraid of death.

Tunisia, meanwhile, has been struggling to secure its borders with Libya and Algeria to prevent the infiltration of terrorists and arms.

Tunisia asked for the help of the Algerian army in tracking and monitoring more than 300 jihadists who quit al-Qaeda and

MUJAO camps in Mali to continue their armed activities in Tunisia.

Algerian authorities answered the call for assistance and have reportedly conducted surveillance of the fighters as they head from Mali back towards Tunisia.

http://magharebia.com/en_GB/articles/a-wi/reportage/2013/03/22/reportage-01

- **Tunisian salafist announce al-Qaeda support**

By Monia Ghanmi in Tunis for Magharebia

Tunisian salafist jihadists announced their allegiance to al-Qaeda this week, accepting the group's invitation to wage a holy war.

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb's call on Sunday (March 17th) to fight the French, westerners, secularists and other so-called "enemies" was welcomed by Tunisian salafist jihadists, the movement's leader, Mohamed Anis Chaieb, told Assabah.

"The statement posted by AQIM calls for the preservation of the gains of the Tunisian revolution and the salafist jihadist movement will heed this call and defend these gains," the movement's

leader, Mohamed Anis Chaieb told Assabah.

He added that the "onslaught of secularism" is what made sheikhs and al-Qaida urge young people in the Maghreb not to leave their countries because "these lands had become vulnerable".

This was the first time for Tunisia's salafist jihadist groups to officially announce their allegiance to al-Qaeda, though some of their leaders were known to be linked to the terrorist organisation.

This is the case of Ansar al-Sharia leader Saif Allah bin Hussein (aka Abou Iyadh), who is currently being investigated by security services.

Since the overthrow of ousted President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in early 2011, security forces clashed on more than one occasion with gunmen belonging to militant religious movements.

"Tunisians see the phenomena as a threat to the way of life of the majority," President Moncef Marzouki said in November, warning against those extremists who try to "impose their law by

force in some mosques and neighbourhoods in the country".

This is "a scheme by the salafists to establish an Islamic emirate in Tunisia, similar to what happened in Iraq and Afghanistan", former Interim Prime Minister Hamadi Jebai said.

For secondary school teacher Neila Makhoulf, al-Qaeda's "call for support is an indication of its defeat and disintegration, as well as a decline in its popularity after the Arab revolutions".

But the organisation will try to take advantage of the prevailing insecurity in the region, she added.

"They want to fight secularism with violence, murder and sabotage. Yet I tell them that there is another way to confront and combat secularism, which is with knowledge and science," she said.

"They support al-Qaeda in the fight against France and secularists but do not support the economy of the country or the poor and orphans. Fighting France and secularism is not the solution for Tunisian people, because arms and the subsequent

terrorism are a problem and not a solution," Fourat Yahmadi said.

http://magharebia.com/en_GB/articles/a/wi/features/2013/03/21/feature-02

- **UN peacekeeping force planned for Mali**

By Jemal Oumar in Nouakchott for

With news that the United Nations (UN) will soon deploy a mission to northern Mali, Arab and Touareg refugees currently living in Mauritania, Algeria and Niger are now hopeful that they could soon return home.

The Friends of Mali on Sunday (March 17th) held a meeting in Nouakchott to discuss the option of sending troops to northern Mali under the UN umbrella before April.

The deployment of a peacekeeping mission is the best way to consolidate stability in Mali's northern regions, according to the country's neighbours and regional African organisations.

"A UN delegation has recently visited Mali to evaluate the situation and prepare a report to be presented to the UN before

next April to discuss the limits and tasks of the peace mission in Mali," UN Secretary-General Special Representative for West Africa Said Djinnit said.

The peacekeeping mission in Mali must be formed under Chapter 7, added Djinnit, to boost security and peace. It would also support Mali in implementing a roadmap that would kick off a comprehensive dialogue among all parties to promote national harmony and reach permanent solutions, he noted.

The Nouakchott meeting addressed practical measures for Mali's neighbours to participate in the UN peacekeeping force.

Mauritania is expected to take part in the force with about 400 troops, according to Turkey's Anadolu Agency, citing President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz.



Touareg refugees in Mauritania welcomed Djinnit's announcement.

"Real guarantees would expedite their return to their homes," Amkanas Ag Akal, a founding member of the Association of Azawadi Refugees in Nouakchott, told Magharebia.

"Reassuring Arab and Touareg refugees can be basically done by providing them protection against the Malian army," he added. "The UN forces should be based in an area separating Touaregs and Arabs from the Malian army so the refugees can be reassured for their lives."

Malian refugees must be reassured about the availability of a suitable ground for them to return to their homes, noted Malian journalist Bab al-Salek.

The return of the first batch of Songhai refugees from Niger "is a very important step", added al-Salek. Yet, he explained that the Songhai "didn't flee their homes for the same reasons as Arabs and Touaregs".

"The Arabs and Touaregs fled [for] fear of liquidation as happened in the 1990s at the hands of Kunda Kui militias and the Malian army," he explained. "And also their fear of al-Qaeda."

"The Songhai fled because of fear of al-Qaeda alone, and most of those who stayed and were governed by al-Qaeda were from Songhai," al-Salek concluded.

According to political analyst Mohamed Ould al-Imama, Mauritians will be more accepting of their country's participation in a UN peacekeeping force than they were of France's military intervention in Mali.

"The decision is seen to be more ethical," he noted.

http://magharebia.com/en_GB/articles/a/wi/features/2013/03/21/feature-03

- **NSF condemns Friday violence, points finger at Brotherhood**

Egypt's opposition umbrella group condemns Friday's violence at the Muslim Brotherhood's headquarters but maintains that it was the latter that initiated the country's cycle of violence

Egypt's opposition coalition, the National Salvation Front, condemned the violence between supporters and opponents of the Muslim Brotherhood at the Brotherhood's Cairo headquarters on Friday.

The opposition group said that the violent confrontations were triggered by the Brotherhood, when its supporters attacked protesters at the presidential palace in December, where deadly clashes ensued.

"We condemn violence against citizens or property and we will not remain silent against excessive violence by security forces, nor against violence by individuals belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood or other far-right religious groups," said a statement by the NSF on the violent clashes on Friday that left at least 100 injured from both sides.

"Such groups were involved in attacking peaceful protesters in front of the presidential palace [in December]. They were also the ones who besieged the High Constitutional Court and the media production city, as well as stormed a

number of party and newspapers headquarters [in the past months]."

Activists issued the call to protest on Friday after Muslim Brotherhood members and guards reportedly attacked a group of anti-Brotherhood protesters and graffiti artists outside the Islamist group's headquarters a week before. Several political parties and movements announced during the week leading up to Friday that they would participate in the demonstrations.

The NSF in its statement condemned such attacks and labelled them a "new black chapter in the history of far-right religious groups."

The front also rejected earlier statements made by the Brotherhood's secretary-general Mahmoud Hussein, who said at a press conference Saturday that the Brotherhood members could have "eaten [protesters] without weapons" but did not retaliate "for the sake of the greater good."

"Among the Brotherhood's secretary-general's statements was one to the effect that one member of his group is equal to a

hundred of its opponents. This is a clear reflection of how the Brotherhood ignores the fact that all Egyptians should be equal and their blood is dear regardless of their political or religious affiliations," the statement said.

The front stated that impunity is a key factor in why violent episodes keep recurring in the country, and called for a "serious and impartial" investigation into all the past incidents of violence which have occurred intermittently in Cairo and several other governorates since December.

Egypt's Prosecutor-General Talaat Abdullah had ordered Saturday the opening of investigations into a complaint filed by lawyers representing the Muslim Brotherhood against 14 political figures and parties accused of inciting violence against the Islamist group following Friday's clashes.

<http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/67659/Egypt/Politics-/NSF-condemns-Friday-violence,-points-finger-at-Bro.aspx>

- **Egypt president warns opposition against 'promoting violence'**

President Mohamed Morsi warns politicians against providing cover for 'violence and vandalism' after attacks on Muslim Brotherhood offices by opposition supporters

President Mohamed Morsi has denounced Friday's attacks on Muslim Brotherhood offices and called for action against politicians found guilty of inciting the violence.

"If investigations prove politicians are guilty [of incitement], the necessary action will be taken against them despite their status," President Morsi said during a speech at the Initiative for the Rights and Freedoms of Egyptian Women on Sunday.

Politicians must not provide a "political facade" for acts of violence or vandalism, he added.



President Morsi stressed that everybody would be treated equally before the law, whether they are "a supporter or an opponent [of the government], a police officer or a statesman."

The violence on Friday had nothing to do with the January 25 Revolution, he said.

"Everyone has the right to protest peacefully, but what is happening now has nothing to do with the revolution," the president said. "Instead they are acts of violence and vandalism, and assaults on public and private property."

President Morsi said he would take "any measures required to protect the country" and he was "about to do so."

"Attempts to portray the state as weak have failed. The state apparatuses are recovering and are able to deal with lawbreakers.

"All Egyptian blood is precious and we will not permit more of it to be shed..."

The president called on Egyptians to "preserve security and exercise self-control."

"I am a president for all Egyptians, and I will not allow the nation to be harmed," he added.

Clashes on Friday between supporters and opponents of the Muslim Brotherhood at its headquarters in Cairo and in several other cities left at least 200 injured.

Prosecutor-General Talaat Abdullah has ordered investigations into a complaint filed by lawyers representing the Muslim Brotherhood against 14 political figures and parties accused of inciting violence against the Islamist group.

<http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/67627/Egypt/Politics-/Egypt-president-warns-opposition-against-promoting.aspx>

5. JORDAN and LEBANON

- **Kataeb MP calls for national salvation government**

Kataeb bloc MP Samer Saadeh voiced his party's advocacy for a national salvation cabinet that would fill the vacuum caused by the resignation of Prime Minister Najib Miqati.

"A national salvation government is our primary request," Saadeh told Al-Joumhouriya newspaper in comments published on Monday.

The opposition official explained the importance of such a cabinet which "we are in dire need of," saying that it would serve to "oversee the parliamentary elections and actively implement the disassociation policy in regard to the Syrian events."

Saadeh later added that his bloc's participation in this government "depends on the premier commissioned to form it."

Lebanon's government fell on Friday following Prime Minister Najib Miqati's resignation from his office after the cabinet failed to approve the formation of

a supervisory electoral body and did not vote on the extension of the tenure of Internal Security Forces chief Ashraf Rifi.

Talks have emerged since on the nature of the new cabinet, with the Kataeb Party calling for a salvation government, the Future Movement advocating the formation of a neutral cabinet, while Speaker Nabih Berri rejected the idea of a new cabinet based on neutrality or technocracy.

<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/lebanonnews/kataeb-mp-calls-for-national-salvation-government>

- **Berri rejects formation of neutral cabinet**

Lebanon Speaker Nabih Berri voiced his objection to the formation of a new government based on neutrality or technocracy after the old cabinet resigned.

"[What Lebanon] needs is a political cabinet that could pull [the country] out of this phase with the least possible losses," Berri told As-Safir newspaper in comments published on Monday.

He explained that he personally opposes the formation of a neutral or a technocrat cabinet, “because such a composition would not work given the country and the region’s situation.”

The speaker also urged the country’s political leaders to convene at the national dialogue table, adding that dialogue has become “necessary and urgent, in order to [discuss] the elections and the formation of a [new] cabinet.”

Lebanon’s government fell on Friday evening after Prime Minister Najib Miqati resigned from his office, dropping a political bombshell on a country suffering a week of sectarian strife that saw intense clashes explode in Tripoli.

The resignation came after the cabinet failed to approve the formation of a supervisory electoral body and did not vote on the extension of the tenure of Internal Security Forces chief Ashraf Rifi.

Elsewhere, Berri warned that if some political figures presented their candidacy for the upcoming parliamentary elections based on the 1960 electoral law, then he would “call for an immediate legislative

session to vote on the Orthodox proposal.”

Earlier this month, President Michel Suleiman and caretaker Premier Najib Miqati signed a decree to hold the elections on June 9, a move that would have the elections take place according to the current 1960 law if the country’s political parties fail to reach a consensus on a new electoral draft.

This decision sparked angry responses from the March 8 coalition, who refuse to contest an election under the 1960 law and advocate for the adoption of the sectarian-based Orthodox proposal, which was approved by the joint parliamentary commissions in February.

<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/lebanonnews/berri-rejects-formation-of-neutral-cabinet>

- **Miqati: Resignation was the right choice**

Caretaker Prime Minister Najib Miqati said that stepping down from his post was the right move to make.

“I am convinced that my decision to resign was correct,” Miqati told As-Safir newspaper in comments published on Monday.

He also denied that his resignation was the result of foreign pressure, echoing comments he had made a day earlier to An-Nahar daily that his “decision was purely personal.”

Miqati later expressed his “respect” of Hezbollah’s refusal to extend the term of Internal Security Forces chief Ashraf Rifi, “even if it was the reason behind my resignation from the cabinet.”

He also mentioned that Future Movement leader Saad Hariri phoned him to “congratulate him for his bold step.”

Meanwhile, the recently resigned prime minister said that the consequences of his move cannot be seen yet because the country’s political leaders are still in the process of reacting to it.

“Fathoming the shock takes time,” Miqati commented.

The now caretaker premier also addressed Speaker Nabih Berri’s reaction to his decision, saying that by calling for dialogue, Berri “made the [parties] believe that this resignation allows for breaching the wall of the current crisis.”

Miqati went on to state that he was still undecided on whether he would accept the post of prime minister in the new cabinet if offered it, especially since the previous phase “saw many failures.”

Lebanon’s government fell on Friday evening after Miqati resigned from his office, dropping a political bombshell on a country suffering a week of sectarian strife that saw intense clashes explode in Tripoli.

This resignation came after the cabinet failed to approve the formation of a supervisory electoral body and did not vote on the extension of the tenure of ISF chief Ashraf Rifi.

<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/lebanonews/miqati-resignation-was-the-right-choice>

- **Lebanon president dismisses fears of vacuum**

President Michel Suleiman said that the Lebanese should not be concerned about a political vacuum occurring following the cabinet's recent resignation.

"There is no fear of vacuum [because]... a new government can be formed [to replace] the one that resigned," Suleiman told As-Safir daily in remarks published on Monday.

He further eased the Lebanese's concerns, by reassuring that "our problems can be solved with dialogue."

The head of state went on to express his approval of Prime Minister Najib Miqati's resignation, saying that this move could "create a positive shock that would improve the [country's] situation."

Lebanon's government fell on Friday evening after Miqati resigned from his office, dropping a political bombshell on a country suffering a week of sectarian strife that saw intense clashes explode in Tripoli.

This resignation came after the cabinet failed to approve the formation of a

supervisory electoral body and did not vote on the extension of the tenure of Internal Security Forces chief Ashraf Rifi

<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/lebanonnews/lebanon-president-dismisses-fears-of-vacuum>

6. SYRIA

- **Arab League reportedly gives Syria's seat to rebels**

Arab official says vacant seat to go to opposition delegate ahead of Tuesday meeting; FSA's Colonel Riad al-Asaad wounded in Syria

The Arab League transferred the Syrian seat in its 22-member bloc to the Syrian opposition, an Arab official told AFP on Monday, ahead of a scheduled meeting in Doha on Tuesday.

The move represents a blow to the regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad, whose seat has been vacant since its suspension in November 2011, several months after the unrest in the country began.

The Arab League's decision is unlikely to mean much in practical terms to Assad's

regime, which has already been abandoned by many Arab states that are siding with rebel forces in the two-year-long civil war. But it reflects pressure being exerted by key rebel backers — Qatar and Saudi Arabia — for a show of Arab solidarity against Assad at a two-day Arab League summit beginning Tuesday in Doha.

The gathering comes amid a serious shakeup within the opposition, and follows an attack on a former leader of the Free Syrian Army.

On Monday, a spokesman for the rebel group told Al-Arabiya that a high-ranking officer was severely wounded and is receiving treatment in Turkey.

An explosive device was reportedly attached to Colonel Riad al-Asaad's car in Al-Maydan, in Syria's eastern Deir el-Zour province, where fierce clashes between rebel fighters and Assad forces have occurred in recent months. The blast also injured one of Asaad's aides, according to reports.

FSA spokesman Louay Almokdad said the rebel force suspected the bomb was

thrown at the car and not planted in it, but the details of the incident were unclear at this point.

“[Syrian President Bashar] Assad's attempt to kill Riad al-Asaad was to punish the eastern areas, such as Al-Reqqa and Deir el-Zour, held by rebels,” Louay Almokdad told Al-Arabiya. “No matter who they [Assad forces] kill, and no matter what they destroy, the uprising against the regime will continue.”

On Sunday, Syria's opposition plunged further into disarray as its president quit and its military chief refused to recognize the newly elected prime minister of an interim government for rebel-held areas.

The moves reflected deep splits in the body the US and its allies hope will emerge as the united face of the opposition and advance the fight to topple the Assad regime.

The first blow to the opposition Syrian National Coalition was the surprise resignation of its president Mouaz al-Khatib, who said he was quitting in frustration over what he called lack of

international support and constraints imposed by the body itself.

Khatib, who rose to prominence as a preacher in the most famous mosque in Damascus, said in a statement posted on his Facebook page that he was making good on an earlier vow to quit if undefined “red lines” were crossed.

He also blamed world powers for not offering Syria’s rebels the support they demand and complained that “international and regional parties” tried to push the Coalition toward negotiations with the Assad regime — something most members refuse.

Despite electing a new, US-educated prime minister last week to head a planned interim government, the Coalition has failed to make much of a mark inside Syria, where hundreds of independent rebel brigades are fighting a civil war against Assad’s forces.

Reflecting the growing dissension over that move, the head of the Coalition’s military branch, Gen. Salim Idris, said his group refused to recognize the new prime minister, Ghassan Hitto, a little-known IT

professional from Texas, because he lacked broad support among the opposition.

“For the purpose of giving power to a prime minister to unite the revolutionary forces and lead the Syrian revolution toward certain victory, we unequivocally declare that the Free Syrian Army... conditions its support and cooperation on the achievement of a political agreement on the name of a prime minister,” Idris said in an online video.

An aide to Idris said many prominent Syrian opposition figures opposed the election of Hitto, who received 35 out of 48 votes cast by the Coalition’s 63 active members.

While Khatib’s resignation surprised many Coalition members, some said it reflected problems that have caused five other members to resign in the past week.

<http://www.timesofisrael.com/arab-league-reportedly-gives-syrias-seat-to-rebels/>

- **Blast hits Free Syrian Army commander Asaad**

Riad Asaad, commander of the rebel Free Syrian Army, was injured overnight in a blast that hit his car in eastern Syria, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights watchdog said on Monday.

"An explosive device exploded last night near the car carrying Free Syrian Army commander Riad Asaad, who was conducting a tour of the town of Mayadeen in Deir Ezzor province," Observatory director Rami Abdel Rahman told AFP.

Abdel Rahman had no information on Asaad's wounds, but a relative of the commander, speaking to AFP, said he had been transferred to Turkey for treatment after the blast.

Asaad was one of the first officers to defect from the Syrian state military to the rebel forces, joining their ranks in 2011, not long after the uprising began.

He served as commander of the rebel forces but has seen his official role diminished by the creation of a rebel military command headed by Brigadier General Salim Idriss.

Asaad has remained a prominent figure though, regularly appearing with rebel fighters on the ground.

<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/newsyriala-testnews/blast-hits-free-syrian-army-commander-asaad>

- **France says Syria's divided opposition must reunite**

Syria's fractious opposition, further weakened by the shock weekend resignation of its leader, must reunite to prevent extremists from taking over, the French foreign minister said Monday.

Laurent Fabius also told Europe 1 radio that he was aware of a rumor that President Bashar al-Assad had been assassinated by an Iranian bodyguard but said that the information published on a website "has not been confirmed."

Syrian opposition chief Ahmed Moaz al-Khatib on Sunday announced his resignation from the National Coalition, saying he wanted to "work with a freedom that cannot possibly be had in an official institution."

Neither the Coalition's presidential office nor its general assembly has yet accepted Khatib's resignation, the group said in a statement.

"If we want to prevent Syria from exploding and from extremists finally taking over, we have to find a political situation," Fabius said.

"For that we have to find a rebalancing of the forces on the ground," he said.

"The opposition has to reunite again," Fabius said. "We want the opposition to stick to its reformist parameters and we absolutely do not want a drift towards extremism."

The National Coalition is a dissident group recognized by dozens of states and organizations as legitimate representative of the Syrian people. It was set up in Doha in November.

Khatib's surprise resignation came just days after the first election in Istanbul of a rebel prime minister, Ghassan Hitto, and just over two years after the outbreak of a popular revolt against Assad.

An opposition source in Doha, where the Arab League is to hold a summit on Tuesday, told AFP that Khatib accused "certain countries, notably Qatar, of wanting to control the opposition" and of having imposed Hitto.

<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/newsyriala-testnews/france-says-syrias-divided-opposition-must-reunite>

- **CIA helping boost arms shipments to Syria rebels**

Arab nations and Turkey, helped by the CIA, have dramatically increased military aid to Syrian rebels in recent months, The New York Times reported Monday.

The US Central Intelligence Agency was helping their efforts, the newspaper added, citing air traffic data and interviews with unnamed officials and the rebel commanders.

The airlift has grown to include more than 160 military cargo flights by Jordanian, Saudi and Qatari military-style cargo planes landing at Esenboga Airport near Ankara, and at other Turkish and Jordanian airports, the report said.

US intelligence officers have helped the Arab governments shop for weapons, including a large procurement from Croatia, it said. They had also vetted rebel commanders and groups to determine who should receive the weapons as they arrive.

Turkey had overseen much of the program, fixing transponders to trucks ferrying the military goods through Turkey so it could monitor shipments, the paper added.

"A conservative estimate of the payload of these flights would be 3,500 tons of military equipment," Hugh Griffiths, of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), told the paper.

"The intensity and frequency of these flights," were "suggestive of a well-planned and coordinated clandestine military logistics operation," he added.

The armed uprising against the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad sprang up in response to the Damascus regime's crackdown two years ago on opposition protests.

<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/newsyriala-testnews/cia-helping-boost-arms-shipments-to-syria-rebels>

7. ARABIAN PENINSULA AND THE GULF OF BASRA

- **Saudi Arabia: \$100 a barrel 'reasonable' price for oil**

OPEC's largest oil producing member Saudi Arabia said on Monday that \$100 a barrel is a "reasonable" price for oil as prices of the crude rose in Asian trade.

"In 1997, I thought 20 dollars was reasonable. In 2006, I thought 27 dollars was reasonable," Saudi Oil Minister Ali al-Naimi told reporters in Kuwait City on the sidelines of a Gulf oil conference.

"Now, it is around \$100 ... and I say again 'it is reasonable'."

Oil prices rose in Asian trade Monday after Cyprus and its international creditors struck a 10 billion euro bailout deal, averting collapse of the country's banking system.

New York's main contract, light sweet crude for delivery in May, added 52 cents

to \$94.23 a barrel and Brent North Sea crude for May delivery increased 62 cents to \$108.30 in afternoon trade.

<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/gulfnews/saudi-arabia-100-a-barrel-reasonable-price-for-oil>

- **Bahrain dialogue steers clear of divisive issue**

Participants agree to postpone discussion on including representative of king

Manama: Bahrain's national dialogue has survived its first serious scare after the 27 participants agreed to set aside a controversial issue and move forward with the other issues on the agenda.

Ambiguous statements and sabre-rattling by several participants on Sunday had raised concerns that there would be no progress on Wednesday at the ninth round of the national talks between the two major political alliances, the parliament and the government to break a political impasse that has gripped Bahrain for almost two years.

However, participants wearing broad smiles reported a serene atmosphere as

they left the dialogue venue late in the evening.

The opposition alliance, which brings together six political societies, had insisted on the presence of a representative of King Hamad Bin Eisa Al Khalifa at the talks. The opposition argued that such a point man would help achieve results and lend greater significance to the talks process.

However, Al Fateh, an alliance of 10 political societies, the government and the parliament have rejected the demand, stressing that an earlier agreement between all the interlocutors did not stipulate the presence of a representative of the king.

"We have agreed to postpone the discussion of this issue in order to be able to continue the dialogue," Shaikh Khalid Bin Ali Al Khalifa, the justice minister and one of the three ministers representing the government at the talks, said following the discussions on Wednesday. "The principle of discussing this issue has not been finalised. However, for us, there is no concession and the issue of the representatives has been settled," he said.

Jameel Khadim, the spokesperson for the opposition, insisted that the issue had not been settled and that the opposition had merely consented to change its priorities. “We look around us and we see that talks in countries like Yemen do involve the president,” he said.

However, Shaikh Khalid refused comparisons with talks elsewhere, saying that each country had its own ground reality. “Everybody should be looking at the reality here,” he said. “We wish all the others luck, but the situation is vastly different in Bahrain. What we do need is that people should be open with one another and engage in a serious national dialogue. I am confident we can do it. Our moderators are well qualified and have impressive mediation experience. The priority is to address the internal audience, not the foreign one,” he said.

Another point of contention relates to the formalisation of the dialogue results. The opposition says the only option is to conduct a referendum, while Al Fateh says the outcome should be referred to the elected parliament.

“We need to have the people’s views on the results and therefore, we should go for a referendum. The results are conveyed to the king and then they are put to a referendum,” Khadim said.

However, Ahmad Juma, the spokesperson for Al Fateh, said that such a move would undermine the role of the parliament. “We do have constitutional institutions and they cannot be sidelined, overlooked or ignored,” he said.

The parliament is represented in the dialogue by eight lawmakers, four from each chamber. Each of the two political alliances has eight delegates.

The next round of talks will be held on March 31, the participants said.

An action group selected by the four parties to the talks will hold a session to go through the points to be raised at the next round.

<http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/bahrain/bahrain-dialogue-steers-clear-of-divisive-issue-1.1161489>

- **Oman praised by rights groups for pardon of protesters**

Amnesty says they should not have been arrested in the first place

Muscat: International rights groups and others are hailing Oman’s decision to pardon all activists jailed for offending the nation’s ruler or joining protests.

The move by Oman’s leader, Sultan Qaboos Bin Saeed, runs counter to widening social media crackdowns by other Gulf Arab states.

Dozens of people have been charged in recent months across the Gulf for blogs, Twitter messages and other posts deemed insulting to rulers or threats to state security.

Amnesty International on Sunday called Oman’s decision a positive step and urged authorities to further lift restrictions on freedom of expression. The Omani Lawyers Association also praised the blanket pardon announced last week.

“The Sultan’s pardon is a very welcome step and we are delighted that dozens of prisoners of conscience on whose cases

we have been campaigning are back at liberty and able to rejoin their families and friends,” said Philip Luther of Amnesty International’s Middle East and North Africa programme.

“However, individuals peacefully exercising their right to freedom of expression should never have been put in prison in the first place, nor tried on charges that criminalise freedom of expression.

“The pardon should act as a spur for the Omani authorities to lift restrictions on freedom of expression by repressive laws,” he said.

The prisoners were expected to be freed beginning Sunday. No figures were given, but dozens have been jailed on -nternet- or protest-linked charges since early 2011.

<http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/oman/oman-praised-by-rights-groups-for-pardon-of-protesters-1.1162129>

- **Tiny Qatar uses riches to forge key regional role**

Qatar’s rulers want to leave a country ‘that counts on the world map’

Dubai: Qatar, the small Gulf nation that on Tuesday hosts an Arab summit, has become a key regional player thanks to its support for Arab uprisings and the marginalisation of traditional heavyweights.

But the “chequebook diplomacy” of this energy-rich state — a staunch US ally — and its backing for Islamists who have managed to seize power in some countries rocked by the Arab Spring have triggered criticism.

The emir, Shaikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani, is “obsessed by an ambition to leave his heirs a country that counts on the world map after it was practically unknown only 20 years ago”, said Olivier Da Lage, author of the recently published French book “Qatar: the new masters of the game.”

“Qatar’s place, disproportionate to its size and population, is explained notably by its considerable financial capabilities... and the extended absence of the historical actors in the Arab world,” he said in reference to Egypt and, to a lesser extent, Saudi Arabia.

Qatar has a population of less than two million people, mostly foreign expatriates lured by work opportunities in the desert state that sits on the world’s third largest natural gas reserves and 13th proven oil reserves.

Paul Salem, director of the Carnegie Middle East Centre, argued that Qatar is not a unique case in history of a small state becoming a regional power, citing Venice among other examples, in a study published in December.

“But this influence poses a question on the impact of the media and the power of money,” he said of Qatar’s Al Jazeera news channel which has played a pivotal role in the coverage of Arab Spring uprisings.

In Tunisia, the ruling Islamist Al Nahda party is accused of being funded by Doha with the aim of establishing an Islamic state.

“Doha sees in forming an alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood by using chequebook diplomacy a way to create a regional base with economic and political influence in

the Middle East and beyond,” wrote Egyptian French-language weekly Al Ahram Hebdo in an editorial on March 20.

“The massive financial support awarded by Qatar to Egypt,” including \$5 billion (Dh18.36 billion) and a pledge to invest \$18 billion more over five years, stirs fears of the “domination this could give the small emirate in defining and formulating the internal and foreign politics of Egypt”, it said.

Qatar is reaping the fruits of its relations with Islamists whom it has always supported, providing shelter to their leaders when they were wanted opponents of regimes in their home countries.

It is now the strongest ally of the new governments in Tunisia and Egypt.

In Libya, Doha took a spearhead position in the fight against the regime of the late dictator Muammar Gaddafi, sending arms and men to support the rebels while its warplanes, under Nato leadership, swooped on Gaddafi’s forces.

Encouraged by the fall of Gaddafi, who was killed by rebels, Qatar called for the arming and financing of the rebellion against the government of Syrian President Bashar Al Assad.

Through its powerful Al Jazeera news channel, Qatar has realised that “it could be a key player in the new region in transition, instead of being the protector of an old order in agony”, said Salem.

However, Qatar’s diplomatic role remains mainly aimed at “serving the political and economic interests of Qatar itself”, said Amel Boubekur, a researcher at the Brookings Institution in Doha.

<http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/qatar/tiny-qatar-uses-riches-to-forge-key-regional-role-1.1162357>

- **Iran denies links to spy cell**

Saudi Arabia and Iran are locked in a struggle for influence across the region

Dubai: Iran’s foreign ministry said the country was not linked to a group of alleged spies arrested in Saudi Arabia, Iranian media reported on Sunday.

Saudi Arabia said on Tuesday that it had detained an Iranian, a Lebanese, and 16 Saudis for spying. Political analysts and press in Saudi Arabia have accused Iran of being behind the alleged espionage. The two countries are locked in a struggle for influence across the region, backing opposing sides in Bahrain, Yemen, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq.

Gulf Arab foreign ministers, meeting in Riyadh last month, issued a statement condemning what they said was Iranian “meddling” in their countries — an accusation Tehran rejects. Iran’s foreign ministry spokesman, Ramin Mehmanparast, denied that an Iranian national was involved in the alleged spying and called the allegations a “repetitive scenario”, according to Iran’s English-language Press TV on Sunday.

“Raising such baseless issues at the media level is merely for domestic consumption,” he said, according to Press TV.

Leaders of Saudi Arabia’s Shiite minority have also criticised the arrests of 16 members of their community, which they

said sought to exploit sectarian tension. The Saudi government has previously blamed unrest among Shiites in the Qatif district of the oil-producing Eastern Province on an unnamed foreign power, which officials privately acknowledge means Iran — a charge local Shiite activists have denied.

Sixteen people have been killed in Qatif in clashes with police in the past two years.

<http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/saudi-arabia/iran-denies-links-to-spy-cell-1.1162051>

- **Kuwait blogger jailed for 2 years**

Saudi mufti says microblogs are misused to spread false information

Manama: A Kuwaiti court on Sunday sentenced Rashid Al Hajiri to two years in prison for posting remarks deemed offensive to the country’s emir and encouraging participation in illegal demonstrations.

However, the criminal court ruled that the prison sentence against the blogger would

be suspended if he paid 2,000 Kuwaiti dinars (Dh25,778).

In two separate cases, a court adjourned the trial of blogger Hamid Al Khalidi to March 31 while Nasser Al Mutairi, another blogger, saw his court case adjourned to April 28 for further studies.

The two men are facing charges of using their Twitter accounts to undermine the status of the emir.

Kuwaiti authorities had pledged to take legal action against bloggers who “misused” the microblog or social networks to break the law.

The public prosecution meanwhile ordered the release of activist Abdul Hakim Al Fadhli upon the payment of a KD300 bail.

Al Fadhli was last week acquitted by the country’s court of appeals after it dropped the two-year jail sentence pronounced earlier by the criminal court.

The lower court issued its verdict based on the charges of organising outlawed demonstrations, encouraging people to

take part in illegal rallies and assaulting the police.

However, Al Fadhli will remain in police custody and will have to answer to charges in another case. He is expected to appear before the judges on Monday.

In neighbouring Saudi Arabia, General Mufti Shaikh Abdul Aziz Al Shaikh said that microblogging site Twitter has turned into “a platform for the ostentatious and a corruption space for those who post false, misleading and phony tweets.”

“Most of young and not so young men and women and even children as young as five today fill hours with useless activities,” the Mufti said. “They waste their time on smartphones and the Internet, particularly social networks and microblogs that have become a source of misleading and deceptive remarks,” he said, quoted by Saudi Arabic daily Al Watan.

Al Shaikh however did not ban the use of the Internet for other purposes, including online shopping.

Commenting on the Mufti's remarks, Saadia, a blogger, said that the issue should be placed in the right context.

"There are many social networks and blogs that allow people to make remarks," she posted. "However, the real issue is not with these social networks, but rather with those who misuse it."

A survey conducted in December found that Facebook, the social network, was used by 59 per cent of high school girls in Saudi Arabia, a country ranked 33rd in the world for Facebook use thanks to its 5,906,220 users.

According to the study prepared by Saudi researcher Fawzia Al Harbi, social issues dominated the chat and posts, while politics and sports were of the least interest for the teenage girls, mostly aged between 16 and 18.

According to the research, 62 per cent of the students, from government and private schools in the Saudi capital Riyadh, used the social network to chat with friends while only two per cent said they used it to communicate with their teachers, prompting calls to education

officials to work on improving the rate for the sake of better learning and teaching standards.

<http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/kuwait/kuwait-blogger-jailed-for-2-years-1.1162110>

8. AFGHANISTAN - PAKISTAN

• India to ink transit agreement with Iran to ship goods to Afghanistan

Press TV
March 24, 2013

India is set to sign a transit agreement with Iran, and invest over USD 100 million in the southeastern Iranian port city of Chabahar in order to facilitate the transportation of commodities to Afghanistan.

Unnamed sources in India said on Sunday that it would be in India's interest to take advantage of the potentials of Iran's Chabahar port to ensure a link into Afghanistan for its goods, The Indian Express reported.

The report added that the Indian government plans to improve the berthing

facility of Chabahar port and expand its container terminal.

Chabahar port -- located 72 kilometers (44 miles) west of Pakistan's Gwadar port -- holds immense strategic and economic significance for India.

The port is already connected to the city of Zaranj in Afghanistan's southwestern province of Nimruz and can serve as India's entry point to Afghanistan, Central Asia and beyond.

India, Iran and Afghanistan have signed an agreement to give Indian goods, heading for Central Asia and Afghanistan, preferential treatment and tariff reductions at Chabahar.

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

- **Afghan warlord's son held over civilian deaths in Parwan**

By SAYED JAWAD - 24 Mar 2013, 9:49 pm

Khaama Press

Afghan police forces arrested at least four people including son of Khwaja Mohammad Nabi, former Afghan Afghan

warlord in northern Afghanistan in connection to an incident that result in deaths of three civilians during Nawroz — New Year celebration, the officials said.

At least three others were also injured the gunfire during Nawroz celebrations, the officials added.

Provincial governor for northern Parwan province of Afghanistan Abdul Basir Salangi confirming the report said, “At least four suspected individuals including Ferdaw — son of Khwaja Nabi, former Afghan warlord have been arrested in connection to the incident.”

Mr. Salangi urgig the National Security Council of Afghanistan to strictly follow the incident said, “The cases of the four individuals including the son of the influential warlord will be sent to Attorney General tomorrow.”

According to reports that incident took place between Afghan police forces and Ferdaws while the security forces were looking to search his vehicle. A number of security guards of a lawmaker, Mir Rahman Rahmani were also involved in the clashes that led to civilians casualties.

In the meantime provincial council officials for Parwan province also accused Ferdaws for creating problems to local residents in this province.

Abdul Basir Salangi expressing doubts regarding the capabilities of Afghan security forces to take action against Ferdaws said people are still concerned that police and judiciary institutions will remain helpless to take actions against him.

Deputy provincial council chief Abdul Zahir Salangi also said, "Son of former Afghan warlord Khawajah Nabi is involved in major cases including murder of ordinary people, and the people of Parwan province are expecting strict actions against him which has not happened so far."

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

- **1 civilian killed, 4 injured in W. Afghanistan**

HERAT, March 24 (Xinhua) -- One civilian was killed and four others sustained injuries in Shindand district of Herat province 640 km west of Afghan capital

Kabul on Sunday, a local official confirmed.

"The police ordered a civilian car for checking in a checkpoint in Shindand district this morning but the driver ignored the order and continued to drive which prompted the police to doubt and opened fire, killing a commuter," spokesman for provincial administration Mohiudin Ghori told Xinhua.

However, the locals took to the streets in protest and began hurling stones on police, he said, adding the police opened fire injuring four protesters.

Civilians often bear the brunt of conflicts in Afghanistan as 2,754 non-combatants had been killed in the conflict-related incidents in the militancy-hit country in 2012, a UN report released here in February said.

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

- **Karzai To Visit Qatar To Discuss Taliban Peace Talks**

March 24, 2013

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty

Afghanistan's Foreign Ministry says President Hamid Karzai will visit Qatar to hold meetings about the establishment of peace talks with the Taliban.

The ministry said on March 24 that Karzai's talks with the ruler of Qatar will also include the opening of a Taliban office in the Gulf state.

Afghanistan has already agreed that the Taliban can open an office in Qatar if the group cuts all ties with Al-Qaeda and renounces terrorism.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Janan Mosazai did not specify the exact date of Karzai's visit, but it is expected to take place within weeks.

Based on reporting by AP and Reuters

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

- **Pakistan awards Pride of Performance to Afghan singer Nagma**

By GHANIZADA - 24 Mar 2013, 8:46 pm

Khaama Press

Prominent Afghan singer Shahperai Nagma received the best civil award from the Pakistani president Asif Ali Zardari for her best performance in conveying the peace message.

The civil, military awards were conferred by president Asif Ali Zardari on the eve of Pakistan Day celebrations on Saturday during an investiture ceremony held at Aiwan-e-Sadr in Islamabad to award civil and military awards as part of the Pakistan Day celebrations.

Other high level Pakistani officials including Prime Minister Raja Pervez Ashraf, Chairman Senate Syed Nayyar Hussain Bokhari, Speaker National Assembly Dr. Fehmida Mirza, former members of the Federal Cabinet, Senators, services chiefs, foreign diplomats and senior civil and military officials also attended the ceremony.

Afghan singer Shahperai Nagma received the president's pride of performance award along with Shahida Minni and Shahida Latif.

Nagma was born as Shahperai (Fairy) on January 1, 1964, in Kandahar, Afghanistan.

She belongs to the Pashtun ethnic group and is one the prominent Afghan singer who started in the early 1970s.

Naghma sings in Pashto and Dari (Persian). Her music is popular in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Tajikistan.

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

- **Ex-President Pervez Musharraf returns to Pakistan despite threats**

Press TV
March 24, 2013

Former Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf has returned home after four years of self-exile despite threats by pro-Taliban militants to kill him upon his arrival.

On Sunday, Musharraf's plane touched down at Karachi International Airport after a flight from Dubai.

He has returned to stand in the upcoming general elections which are slated for May in defiance of death threats from militants. Musharraf, who was a US ally in the so-called war on terror, left Pakistan in

2008 and has been living in London and Dubai since then.

On Saturday, Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) said in a video that the militant group had prepared a "death squad" to kill Musharraf.

"I am feeling concerned about the unknown.... there are a lot of unknown factors of terrorism and extremism, unknown factors of legal issue, unknown factors of how much I will be able to perform (in the elections)," Musharraf said before heading to Dubai airport.

The former army chief-turned-president faces a string of charges including involvement in the 2007 assassination of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, but a court in Karachi has secured Musharraf's freedom by granting him 14 days' bail.

Human Rights Watch has called on the Pakistani government to hold Musharraf accountable for widespread and serious human rights abuses under his rule.

A few hours before his return, a bomb attack at a checkpoint in Pakistan's North

Waziristan tribal region left at least 17 soldiers dead.

Militant groups have carried out numerous attacks against Pakistani security forces and civilians over the past few years.

Thousands of people have lost their lives in bombings and other militant attacks in Pakistan since 2001, when Islamabad entered an alliance with Washington in the so-called war on terror. Thousands more have also been displaced by the wave of violence and militancy in the country.

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

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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 Eastern countries. The views expressed are not those of ORSAM and their inclusion does not imply factual accuracy.*