



# MIDDLE EAST DAILY BULLETIN

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## 1. IRAQ

- **'Iraqi PM's coalition leading in most provinces'**

Iraqi election officials count ballots from the country's provincial elections in Baghdad on April 25, 2013.

Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's State of Law coalition is leading in provincial elections, preliminary results show.



On Thursday, the Independent High Electoral Commission announced the early results that showed Maliki's allies have won the majority in nine out of the 12 provinces, including Baghdad, Reuters reported.

The strong presence of Maliki's State of Law alliance consolidates his position ahead of parliamentary elections due in 2014.

Representatives of Shia and Sunni Arabs, as well as Sunni Kurds in the north are the heavy weights in the Iraqi political arena.

Iraqis voted on April 20 in provincial elections in the first polling since the withdrawal of US troops in December 2011. About 8,138 candidates are competing for 447 provincial council seats.

In two Sunni majority provinces, voting was deferred until July due to security matters.

Violence has increased since the beginning of the year and over a dozen candidates were killed prior to the elections. More than 100 people have been killed since Tuesday in clashes between militants and security forces.

On Thursday, at least ten Iraqi policemen and nine militants were killed in clashes in the northern city of Mosul, while the army was preparing to move into the town of Sulaiman Bek to drive out the militants who had seized the town the day before.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/04/26/300270/malikis-coalition-leading-in-elections/>

- **Inciting violence in Iraq is ‘playing with fire’: Iran official**



On Thursday, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki condemned the recent wave of violence, and said some regional countries are trying to drag the country into a sectarian war."

Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister for Arab and African Affairs Hossein Amir-Abdollahian has warned foreign sides against inciting violence in Iraq, describing the measure as "playing with fire."

Amir-Abdollahian said on Friday that Iraq is the land of vigilant and resistant people and leaders.

"Having failed in Syria, foreign sides are now seeking to create sedition in Iraq, whereas this is playing with fire," Amir-Abdollahian added, urging the outsiders to act wisely.

Clashes between Iraqi security forces and anti-government gunmen over the past few days have left over a 140 people dead across the country.

On Thursday, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki condemned the recent wave of violence, and said some regional countries are trying to drag the country into a sectarian war.

"There will be no winner in the sectarian strife, everyone will be a loser and let those who ignite it be prepared because it will burn their fingers too; whether they are insiders or outsiders," Maliki said.

Pointing to the ongoing unrest in Syria, Amir-Abdollahian said that those who have failed in the Arab country should avoid relying on the US and Israel and instead rely on their own nations or else they would be tagged as the "main agents of crisis and insecurity in the region."

He said that the Syrian people are fighting terrorism in the country, adding that the support of certain parties for the massacre of people as well as the sending of arms and militants into the Arab country has revealed the true nature of the Syrian developments.

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

The Syrian government says the chaos is being orchestrated from outside the country, and there are reports that large numbers of the militants fighting in Syria are foreign nationals.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/04/26/300297/iran-outsiders-playing-with-fire-in-iraq/>

- **Wave of violence kills more than 180 in Iraq**

The death toll from a three-day wave of violence in Iraq passed 180 after three hours of heavy fighting in Fallujah, west of Baghdad, police and a doctor said on Friday.



The clashes, which broke out at around 9:00 pm on Thursday, saw gunmen take control of

three checkpoints on the outskirts of the overwhelmingly Sunni Arab city after they were abandoned by federal police, police Lieutenant Colonel Yasir Hamid al-Jumaili said.

The fighting, which an AFP journalist said involved heavy gun and mortar fire, killed three federal police and wounded at least six, Jumaili and a doctor said.

The gunmen turned the checkpoints over to local police, who returned them to federal police on Friday, Jumaili said.

The latest wave of violence erupted on Tuesday when security forces moved in against anti-government protesters near the Sunni Arab northern town of Hawijah, sparking clashes that left 53 people dead.

A wave of subsequent unrest, much but not all of it apparently linked to the Hawijah clashes, killed dozens more people and brought the toll to 182 dead and 292 wounded over the three days to Thursday.

On Wednesday, Abdulghafur al-Samarraie and Saleh al-Haidari, leading clerics who respectively head the Sunni and Shiite religious endowments, held a joint news conference in which they warned against

sectarian strife and called for top politicians to meet at a Baghdad mosque on Friday.

The meeting at the Umm al-Qura mosque was scheduled for 5:00 pm on Friday, but it was not clear who would attend.

The protest-related violence is the deadliest so far linked to demonstrations that broke out in Sunni areas of the Shiite-majority country more than four months ago.

The protesters have called for the resignation of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, a Shiite, and railed against authorities for allegedly targeting their community.

Maliki himself warned of a return to "sectarian civil war" in remarks broadcast on state television on Thursday.

<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/mena/wave-of-violence-kills-more-than-180-in-iraq>

- **Iraq provincial elections: Half of Iraqis present, other half absent**



Election officials begin tallying votes as Independent High Electoral Commission says turnout was about 51 percent.

Election officials began tallying votes on Sunday from Iraq's first elections since US troops departed, a contest that served as a key test of its stability amid a spike in violence.

Attacks killed three people on election day, a fraction of those who died in a wave of violence preceding the polls on Saturday, which seemed generally well-organised.

Turnout for the provincial vote was about 51 percent, according to officials from Iraq's Independent High Electoral Commission.

IHEC board member Gaata al-Zobaie said ballot boxes and tallies from polling stations were being sent to Baghdad, and they would be entered in computers to tabulate the results.

But the credibility of the elections came into question, as 14 candidates died in attacks ahead of the polls and with a third of Iraq's provinces -- all of them mainly Sunni Arab or Kurdish -- not voting due to security concerns and political disputes.

The vote for provincial councils, responsible for naming governors who lead local reconstruction, administration and finances, is seen as a key gauge of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's popularity ahead of a general election next year.

Every Iraqi who votes "is saying to the enemies of the political process that we are not going back," Maliki said on state television after casting his ballot at the Rasheed Hotel in Baghdad's heavily-fortified Green Zone.

Security was tight on Saturday, with voters searched before entering polling stations and numerous new checkpoints set up by soldiers and police in Baghdad.

For most of the day, only approved vehicles were allowed on the streets, which were largely deserted except for security forces and groups of children who took the opportunity to play football.

Despite heightened security in Baghdad and elsewhere, militants were still able to carry out attacks, although the death toll was much lower than the previous six days, when an average of 20 people were killed daily.

Nine mortar rounds, four bombings and five stun grenades, all outside Baghdad, killed three people and wounded two, officials said.

And gunmen dressed in police uniforms entered a polling station near Baquba, north of Baghdad, burned ballot boxes, then escaped.

The elections, which came a decade after US-led forces ousted now-executed dictator Saddam Hussein, were the first since parliamentary polls in March 2010, and also the first time Iraqi forces secured elections without support from American or other international forces since 2003.

US troops withdrew in December 2011.

An estimated 13.8 million Iraqis were eligible to vote for more than 8,000 candidates, with 378 seats being contested.

Major issues affecting voters such as poor public services and rampant corruption were largely ignored during the campaign.

The United States and United Nations both called in statements for elections in Anbar and Nineveh provinces, which the Iraqi government said were postponed due to security concerns, to be held as soon as possible.

"Security concerns should not prevent all Iraqi citizens from expressing themselves democratically," the US statement said.

<http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=58261>

## 2. IRAN

- **Parliament Delegation Visits Iran's Trio Islands in Persian Gulf**

TEHRAN (FNA)- A group of Iranian parliamentarians visited the country's three Persian Gulf islands of Abu Musa, the Greater Tunb and the Lesser Tunb today, a senior legislator announced on Thursday.

Vice-Chairman of the parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy

Commission Mansour Haqiqatpour said that the chairman of the commission and its members travelled to Iran's Southern port city of Bandar Abbas last evening and started their visit to the trio islands this morning.

He said that during the two-day visit, the lawmakers will examine the security, political, economic and social conditions of the three islands and hold meetings with local officials.

He added that during the talks with local officials, the lawmakers will study the needed plans and actions for all-out development of the region.

Last month, the Iranian Foreign Ministry lashed out at the Arab League for its interfering statement on the three Iranian islands of Abu Musa, the Greater Tunb and the Lesser Tunb.

At the 24th Arab League summit in the Qatari capital of Doha in March, Arab League Deputy Secretary General Ahmed Ben Helli read a statement advocating the unfounded claims laid by the United Arab Emirates about the three Iranian islands.

"The islands of Abu Musa, the Greater Tunb, and the Lesser Tunb are inseparable parts of the Islamic Republic of Iran," Foreign Ministry Spokesman Ramin Mehman-Parast said at the time.

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

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

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

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

<http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9107164506>

## • Iran Inaugurates Middle-East's Biggest Coke-Producing Plant

TEHRAN (FNA)- The Middle-East's biggest coke-producing plant equipped with a 7-meter-height battery was inaugurated in Isfahan, Central Iran, on Wednesday in the presence of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.



One of the unique features of the coke-producing plant which has been built in Isfahan's steel factory is its 7-meter-height battery, standing 2.5 meters higher than the tallest battery of coke-producing plants in the Middle-East.

Construction of the plant has cost the country \$161mln.

The plant can produce 900,000 tons of coke which will be used in the furnaces of Isfahan steel factory and saves the country 300mln euro each year.

Iran plans to boost its annual steel output capacity to 42 million tons in the near future.

"By the end of the Fifth Five-Year Economic Development Plan (2011-2015), the country's steel production output will stand at 42 million tons," Managing-Director of Mobarakeh Steel Company Mohammad Massoud Sameenejad said earlier this month.

"In the next 12 years, Iran's steel output will amount to 55 million tons," he added.

He noted that 40 countries in Asia, Europe, America and Africa are importers of steel from Iran.

Earlier this year, the World Steel Association (WSA) announced that "Iran is the largest steel producer in the Middle-East and North Africa.

According to WSA's report, Iran produced 14.463 million tons of crude steel in 2012, and was named the first largest producer of crude steel in the Middle-East and North Africa.

The country's main steel mills are located in Isfahan and Khuzestan provinces.

Iran has risen its steel production output by more than 9 percent, the WSA announced in January, adding that the country is now the world's 15th steel producer.

Among 62 world major steel producers, Iran jumped two steps higher and became the world's 15th steel producer in 2012, the report said. Iran ranked above UK, Spain and Canada.

<http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9107164162>

- **Iran Ready to Mediate in Korean Tensions**

TEHRAN (FNA)- Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad announced Tehran's readiness to play a mediating role in East Asia to soothe escalating tensions in the region.

"I ask you as a friend to settle the problems wisely and through talks and negotiations as in the past," Ahmadinejad

said, addressing East Asian countries, including China, Japan and South and North Korea, on Wednesday.

"You should be vigilant and Iran is ready to do mediation to help resolve problems through talks and negotiations," he added.

Ahmadinejad warned that enemies of East Asian states have plotted to prevent these countries' further progress through staging a devastating war in the region, and said, "You shouldn't allow the enemies of humanity to destroy you in a bid to improve their own conditions."

Tensions began escalating on the Korean Peninsula after international sanctions were imposed on North Korea in response to a long-range rocket launch in December, which world powers condemned as a ballistic missile test. North Korea responded by carrying out a third nuclear test in February, which was followed by more sanctions.

Pyongyang has threatened pre-emptive nuclear strikes against the US mainland and US military bases in the region.

North Korea has also repeatedly blamed its neighbors, but ultimately the US for the escalating tension, and explained the recent proposal to all foreign embassies to evacuate by "the increasing threat from the United States".

In the meantime, Washington has indeed been increasing its presence around the Korean Peninsula.

The USS Fitzgerald, which is positioned next to North Korea, is capable of shooting down any missiles launched from the country. The ship was initially supposed to return to base in Japan following recent annual joint drills with the South, according to US defense officials.

The advanced radar-evading F-22 Raptors were redeployed from Kadena Air Base in Okinawa to the Osan Air Base, which is the main American base in South Korea. B-2 bombers also flew in the vicinity of the North Korean border.

<http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9107164282>

- **'Iran awaiting P5+1 date for talks'**

Iran's deputy nuclear negotiator says the country is waiting for the world powers of the P5+1 group to set a date for a new round of talks about Tehran's nuclear program.



"We are waiting for [European Union foreign policy chief] Lady [Catherine] Ashton to call [Iran's chief nuclear negotiator] Dr. [Saeed] Jalili, and Dr. Jalili is obviously ready to take the call," Reuters quoted Ali Baqeri as saying on Thursday.

Ashton leads diplomatic contacts with Iran on behalf of the P5+1, which comprises the United States, Britain, France, China, Russia, and Germany.

"We are waiting to see whether Lady Ashton's response is going to cover the time and venue of another round of negotiations, or will she limit her response

to just discussing the substantive side of things," Baqeri said.

He reaffirmed Iran's readiness for the continuation of the talks, noting that there were "no limits as far as time is concerned."

Baqeri noted that the Islamic Republic's uranium enrichment activities have all been under the monitoring of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

"We produce 20 percent uranium to provide fuel for Tehran's research reactor, also four other reactors in four different parts of Iran which are under construction. With this in mind, plans have been drawn up to convert 20 percent uranium to 20 percent oxide."

Iran and P5+1 have held several rounds of talks mainly over Iran's nuclear energy program. Before their meeting on April 6 in Almaty, the two sides had met in the Kazakh city on February 26-27.

The United States, Israel, and some of their allies have repeatedly accused Iran

of pursuing non-civilian objectives in its nuclear energy program.

Using this false allegation as pretext, Washington and the European Union have imposed several rounds of illegal unilateral sanctions against the Islamic Republic.

Tehran rejects the allegation over its nuclear energy activities, maintaining that as a committed signatory to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and a member of the IAEA, it has the right to use nuclear technology for peaceful purposes.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/04/25/300245/iran-awaiting-p51-word-on-fresh-talks/>

- **West threatens Iran, targets nation with sanctions: Analyst**

A political analyst has slammed the Western countries for targeting the ordinary Iranian people by slapping sanctions against Iran over its nuclear energy program.

“They (Western countries) are threatening Iran and not only threatening Iran but carrying out the sanctions policy which is intended to harm the people as a whole,” Richard Becker said in an interview with Press TV.

He also criticized the double standards that prevail in the international arena, under which “the rich countries are free to do whatever they want to” while the countries which refuse to obey “the dictates of Washington...are battered.”

Becker noted that sanctions are intended “to deprive the people of adequate food and medicine just as it was done in Iraq.”

The analyst pointed to the humanitarian ramifications of the US-engineered sanctions against Iraq under the rule of former dictator, Saddam Hussein, which adversely affected the lives of millions of Iraqis.

“Why isn’t the United States and why aren’t the US and the British governments, which did what they have done to Iraq, why aren’t they held before international bodies and tried for their crimes against humanity?”

Iran has repeatedly announced that Western sanctions against Tehran are effectively hindering the imports of medicines to the country, thereby jeopardizing the lives of millions of patients suffering from special diseases such as thalassemia, hemophilia, hepatitis, multiple sclerosis, diabetes, and many others.

Many analysts and experts have called for the trial of US President Barack Obama for the imposition of the illegal restrictions on Iran.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/04/25/300235/west-threatens-iran-targets-nation/>

### 3. ISRAEL - PALESTINE

- **Anti-Syria alliance seeks to hide Israeli occupation: Syrian envoy**



Syria says anti-Damascus Western powers and their regional allies are seeking to replace the Arab-Israeli conflict with an Islamic-Islamic one in an attempt to cover up Israel's occupation of other territories.

During a speech at the UN Security Council, Syrian Ambassador to the UN Bashar al-Ja'afari said the Israeli regime has been occupying lands in Palestine, Syria and Lebanon, while no internal effort has been made to end the occupation, Syria's official news agency SANA reported on Thursday.

"The overwhelming enthusiasm of some to adopt resolutions under the Chapter VII disappears when it comes to Israel," Ja'afari stated.

Western powers and their regional allies including Israel, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar are partners in supporting anti-Syria militant groups, including al-Qaeda-linked terrorists, to destabilize Syria and overthrow the government of President Bashar al-Assad.

The Syrian envoy further highlighted the Tel Aviv regime's illegal settlement activities in the occupied Palestinian

territories, saying that the international community has failed to give a firm response to the Israeli occupation.

The Tel Aviv regime introduced nuclear weapons to the Middle East, while sanctions are imposed on other countries which possess peaceful nuclear energy programs under the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and in cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the Syrian ambassador said.

Ja'afari also censured the nearly 45-year-old occupation of Syria's Golan Heights by the Israeli regime, saying that Tel Aviv offers logistic aid to the armed terrorist groups in the occupied Syrian land.

The Israeli regime seized the Syrian territory on the strategically important Golan Heights in the 1967 war. Tel Aviv annexed the territory on December 14, 1981 -- a move which was never recognized by the international community and was a violation of international law.

Israel is also massively expanding the construction of its illegal settlements in the occupied West Bank.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/04/26/300282/west-seeks-to-hide-israeli-occupation/>

- **PA, USAID work to reduce Qalandia traffic**

BETHLEHEM (Ma'an) -- The Palestinian Authority is working with the US Agency for International Development to reduce traffic on Qalandia road leading to Ramallah.

The minister of public works, Maher Ghneim, said Thursday that his ministry is working with USAID on plans to build a bridge and a tunnel to ease traffic in the area.

USAID will submit the plan to Israeli authorities for approval, Ghneim told Ma'an.

Commuters to Ramallah from Jerusalem and the southern cities of the West Bank face lengthy traffic jams due to poor

infrastructure. Traffic is also held up by an Israeli military checkpoint at Qalandia, between Jerusalem and Ramallah.

<http://www.maannews.net/eng/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=589562>

- **Hamas slams Palestinian Authority for postponing UN resolutions**

GAZA CITY (Ma'an) -- Hamas on Thursday condemned a reported decision by the Palestinian Authority to postpone five UNESCO resolutions following US intervention.



"This step is like a reward to the occupation for its crimes and violations," Hamas spokesman Fawzi Barhoum said in a statement.

"It is a contribution in erasing the Arabic and Islamic identity of Jerusalem, and it

encourages the occupation to continue its Judaization program," Barhoum said.

The Hamas official added that no one had the right to compromise the rights of the Palestinian people.

Israel radio reported Wednesday that the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority had agreed to postpone five resolutions condemning Israeli threats to Jerusalem's Palestinian character as well as Israeli activity in the West Bank.

The resolutions were to be presented to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, which admitted Palestine as a member in September.

Israel radio said the PA agreed to bury the resolutions as part of a deal with Jordan and Israel, brokered by Washington.

Jordan on Tuesday said Israel had agreed to allow a UN mission to "investigate and assess" heritage conservation in Jerusalem's Old City for the first time since 2004.

"Jordan and Palestine, supported by Arab states, succeeded in pressuring Israel, for

the first time since 2004, to accept and facilitate a UNESCO experts' mission to investigate and assess the status of heritage and conservation of the Old City of Jerusalem and its walls," a palace statement said.

The mission will start its work on May 15 "and it has to present its report and recommendations before June 1st, 2013, just before the beginning of the World Heritage Committee 37th session," it added.

According to the palace, Israel confirmed its decision in a letter to UNESCO director general Irina Bokova and in a statement read out on Tuesday at a meeting in Paris of UNESCO's executive board.

Israel also agreed to take part in a technical meeting of UNESCO "to discuss recent Israeli violations against the Mughrabi Gate," in Jerusalem, it added.

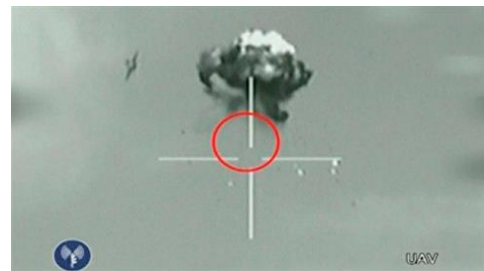
The Mughrabi ramp leads from the plaza by the Western Wall, the most sacred site at which Jews can pray, up to the adjoining the sacred compound, known to Muslims as Al-Haram Al-Sharif, which houses Al-Aqsa Mosque.

Tuesday's announcement comes after a deal was struck in March by which the Palestinian Authority confirmed a verbal agreement dating back to 1924 giving Jordan custodianship over Muslim and Christian sites in Jerusalem.

<http://www.maannews.net/eng/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=589444>

- **Israel shoots down drone, Hezbollah denies responsibility**

An Israeli fighter plane shot down a drone from Lebanon over the Mediterranean sea on Thursday as it was approaching the Israeli coast, the military said.



Lebanon's Hezbollah militant group, which sent a drone deep into Israel in October, said it was not behind the latest incident. Israel's military held back from accusing

the group, saying an investigation was under way.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said he was flying in a military helicopter to an event in northern Israel when the unmanned aircraft was spotted along the Lebanese coast by Israeli air defences. His helicopter landed briefly until the interception was completed.

There was no indication from Israeli officials who provided information about the incident that Israel suspected any connection between the dispatch of the drone and Netanyahu's flight, whose details had not been made public.

"I view with great gravity this attempt to violate our border. We will continue to do what is necessary to defend the security of Israel's citizens," Netanyahu said in a speech at his destination, a Druze village where he met community leaders.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the alleged aerial infiltration.

In a statement, Hezbollah denied sending "any surveillance plane towards the occupied Palestinian land".

Six months ago, a Hezbollah drone flew some 35 miles (55 km) into southern Israel before being shot down by an F-16.

Israel and Hezbollah fought a war in 2006, and Lebanon has complained to the United Nations about frequent Israeli overflights, apparently to monitor the group's activities.

The military said the drone shot down on Thursday was detected in Lebanese skies and intercepted by an F-16 fighter jet 5 nautical miles west of the Israeli port city of Haifa.

A military spokesman said the unmanned aircraft had been flying at an altitude of about 6,000 feet and had been monitored by Israel for about an hour before it was destroyed by an air-to-air missile.

"We don't know where the aircraft was coming from and we don't know where it was actually going," the spokesman said.

On Monday, Israeli Defence Minister Moshe Yaalon said Israel would not permit "sophisticated weapons" to fall into the hands of Hezbollah "or other rogue elements" in Syria's civil war.

"When they crossed this red line, we acted," Yaalon said at a news conference with U.S. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel, in comments widely interpreted as confirming reports that an Israeli air strike in Syria in January had targeted a Hezbollah-bound arms convoy.

<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Local-News/2013/Apr-25/215045-israel-aircraft-shoot-down-drone-from-lebanon-over-mediterranean-israeli-military.ashx#axzz2RTsIHGDG9>

- **Hamas Praises Erdoğan's Anticipated Visit to Gaza**

Ghazi Hamad says Turkish prime minister's expected visit to the Gaza Strip serves the interests of all Palestinians



Gaza, Asharq Al-Awsat—Hamas government official Ghazi Hamad emphasized that a successful visit by Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to the Gaza Strip would “serve the interests of all Palestinians.” Erdoğan has been invited to visit the Palestinian territory, although no trip has yet been scheduled.

Hamad, a representative of the Gaza government's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, described Erdoğan's expected visit as being “important and historical for all Palestinians.” He added that this visit “will represent strong support for and solidarity with the Palestinian people and their cause, and will also send a strong message against the Israeli occupation and the continuing blockade of the Gaza Strip.”

He said: “Since Turkey has a strong regional presence and extensive international relations, a visit by its prime

minister to Gaza represents a chance to draw attention to the nature of Palestinian suffering, particularly regarding the Israeli blockade of the Gaza Strip and the necessity of ending it.”

On Tuesday, Erdoğan announced that “there is no question of delaying this trip” following public appeals from US Secretary of State John Kerry to postpone.

Kerry said: “Surely, Mr. Erdoğan has the right to do or not to do what he wishes. We believe that the timing of the visit to Gaza is critical for the peace process we are trying to place back on the road. We want the sides not to be affected from outside. We think that it would be more beneficial if Mr. Erdoğan waited for the right conditions.”

Turkish government spokesman Bülent Arınç responded, “We are not in a position to receive permission from any other authority or accept their approval... Mr. Kerry knows this. The world knows this. Turkey has the strength to accomplish what it wants, when it wants.”

Hamad said that the Gaza government has yet to set a date for Erdoğan’s visit, but

that it will most likely take place before the end of next month.

The Hamas government official also criticized the inter-Palestinian divisions over Erdoğan’s forthcoming visit. He said: “These disputes are unjustified. It is not necessary to divide ourselves over the causes for every visit that takes place in Gaza. We believe that visits such as this support all Palestinians, and are not in favor of one party or another. They also support the domestic reconciliation file, and so should be welcomed and not used to provoke controversy.”

<http://www.aawsat.net/2013/04/article55299809>

#### 4. AFRICA and EGYPT

- **Maghreb interior ministers devise common strategy**

Interior ministers from Arab Maghreb Union (UMA) countries last week-end in Rabat adopted a draft security strategy.



The Rabat Declaration, approved at the April 21st meeting, highlighted the "desire for consultation and co-ordination expressed by the member states, especially in the fields of security and counterterrorism", Moroccan Interior Minister Mohand Laenser said.

Terrorism, organised crime, drug trafficking and civil protection topped the meeting's agenda.

Terrorism "needs to be tackled jointly, through on-going co-ordination. This is because Maghreb countries are neighbours and belong to the same regional area, and face common challenges and threats", according to the declaration.

They also stressed the importance of drying up terror funding. In particular, they suggested making it a criminal offence to pay ransoms to terrorists. The

ministers vowed to form a security partnership between Maghreb and Sahel states.

Maghreb countries need to intensify information exchange about activities of terror groups, their locations and sources of funding, the ministers agreed.

They reiterated the need to follow up on resolutions adopted by the Council of Ministers of Religious Affairs last September in Nouakchott. Last year, Maghreb ministers agreed to promote the Malikite school of Islam to immunise Maghreb societies from radicalism.

"Common strategies need to be developed to tackle the indoctrination of young people by terrorist organisations," the Rabat Declaration underlined.

In addition, the ministers agreed to strengthen the fight against drug trafficking. They urged more "exchange of expertise, information and technological knowledge to unveil the sources of these drugs and methods of their traffic and to detect money generated from this activity in order to confiscate it and prevent its laundering".

To implement these decisions in practice, the interior ministers agreed to hold annual meetings and appoint a follow-up committee that will report to the UMA General Secretariat and convene every three months.

Experts, however, warn that the decisions may be hard to enforce in reality, given the countries' political divergences.

"The ministerial meetings of the UMA are continuing, but they are doing little to realise the idyllic dream of Maghreb societies," Khalid Chegraoui, a research professor at the Institute of African Studies, told Magharebia. "Many declarations and resolutions arising out of this kind of meeting are leading nowhere because of a lack of willingness on the part of certain political entities within the UMA."

"By virtue of its final statement, the latest meeting is quite positive on the whole, but we are very doubtful that it can be implemented because of the contradictions between the political and security agendas in the region," he added.

[http://magharebia.com/en\\_GB/articles/a/wi/features/2013/04/25/feature-01](http://magharebia.com/en_GB/articles/a/wi/features/2013/04/25/feature-01)

- **Egypt's Islamist groups postpone planned Friday rally for 'purge' of judiciary**

Muslim Brotherhood and seven other Islamist groups call off planned Friday rally against Mubarak-era judiciary to allow for 'rational' discussion of judicial authority law



Eight Egyptian Islamist parties and groups on Thursday announced plans to postpone planned Friday protests to call for the 'purge' of Egypt's judiciary from Mubarak-era elements.

The groups included the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party, the Salafist Asala Party, the Building and Development Party, the Wasat Party, the Islah Party, the Amal Al-Gedid Party and

the Peaceful Front for the Protection of the Revolution.

Last Friday, Islamist groups staged thousands-strong protests outside Egypt's High Court in downtown Cairo against the judiciary, which they accuse of failing to convict former regime figures implicated in criminal activity.

In a joint statement on Thursday, the groups attributed their decision to postpone the planned rally to recent developments on the political stage, particularly the ongoing review of a controversial judicial authority law (no.46/1972) by Egypt's Shura Council (the upper house of parliament, currently endowed with legislative powers).

According to the statement, the decision was taken to allow for an "atmosphere of calm in which to discuss the law within the framework of rationality and concern for the interests of the judiciary, which is in the interest of the homeland."

On 19 April, Muslim Brotherhood members and supporters took to the streets in the thousands to call for a 'purge' of the judiciary. Clashes ensued

after unknown assailants attacked protesters outside the High Court, resulting in dozens of injuries.

The protests came within the context of the ongoing crisis between the judiciary, represented by the unofficial Egyptian Judges Club, and the presidency.

On Wednesday evening, the judges club, headed by Judge Ahmed El-Zend, convened a general assembly meeting at which El-Zend called on President Mohamed Morsi to apologise for alleged "insults" to Egypt's judiciary by Islamist figures.

<http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/70140/Egypt/Politics-/Egypst-Islamist-groups-postpone-planned-Friday-ral.aspx>

- **Egypt's prosecutor-general appeals court verdict ordering his removal**

Prosecutor-General Talaat Abdullah challenges a court verdict ordering for his removal and reinstatement of predecessor Abdel-Meguid Mahmoud



Egyptian Prosecutor-General Talaat Abdullah on Thursday appealed a court verdict, issued early March, to dismiss him from his position and allow the return of his predecessor Abdel-Meguid Mahmoud.

Abdullah asserted that the verdict was non-enforceable on grounds that it violated both the law and constitution, State Security Attorney-General Hisham El-Qarmooty told Ahram Online on Saturday.

On 27 March, an Egyptian appeal court reversed President Mohamed Morsi's November 2012 decision to dismiss former prosecutor-general Abdel-Meguid Mahmoud from his post. The declaration also gave President Morsi sweeping powers and shielded the Constituent Assembly, which drafted Egypt's new constitution, and Shura Council, Egypt's upper house of parliament, from being dissolved.

The removal of the prosecutor-general sparked uproar among the Egyptian opposition and the judiciary. Critics said the constitutional declaration had granted the president both executive and legislative powers.

Many opposition groups are demanding the dismissal of the current prosecutor-general, Talaat Abdullah.

<http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/70142/Egypt/Politics-/Egypst-prosecutorgeneral-appeals-court-verdict-ord.aspx>

- **Portrait Emerges of Tunisian Arrested in Terror Plot**

Chiheb Esseghaier, the native Tunisian arrested in Montreal for allegedly conspiring to attack a passenger train, has been described by many who knew him as a diligent student whose behavior had grown erratic since moving to Canada for graduate study.

Esseghaier, 30, was apprehended by authorities Monday.

From 2001 to 2008, Essaghaier, studied at the National Institute of Applied Sciences and Technology (INSAT) in Tunis, where he received a bachelor's in industrial biology and a master's degree in industrial biotechnology. Faculty there described him as a respectful student and diligent worker to Canadian newspaper La Presse.

A former teacher, Mohammed Boussaid, told the newspaper that he did not believe Esseghaier had any friends at the school and had no contact with girls. Another teacher, Adnene Abdelghani, said he was shy and respectful of his teachers' authority. La Presse reported that he received good grades and had no documented behavioral problems at INSAT.

But while living and studying in Canada, where he moved in 2008 for graduate work in biotechnology, his colleagues and neighbors perceived him much differently. The National Post interviewed a colleague who said Esseghaier had torn down posters of women, which he found offensive, and that he "was very religiously strict."

Reports from neighbors in Canada highlight erratic behavior and a religiously devout life. La Presse reports that Esseghaier was evicted from his apartment in December after complaints from neighbors about his actions, including making loud noises late at night and an instance in which he allegedly lit a charcoal grill indoors. Authorities became increasingly concerned last spring after Esseghaier behaved erratically on a plane to Mexico.

Esseghaier was arrested Monday in Montreal, according to the Toronto Star, for plotting to destroy a passenger train by blowing up a railroad bridge.

He allegedly made contact with a member of Al Qaeda before moving from Tunisia to Canada in 2008, and met his alleged accomplice, a Palestinian with U.A.E. citizenship, at a mosque in Canada in 2009, according to the Toronto Star. Canadian officials say that the plot was assisted by elements of Al Qaeda.

"We know that this Criminal Code is not a holy book," the Toronto Star reports him as saying yesterday in a hearing before the court. "It's just written by set of creations

and the creations they're not perfect because only the creator is perfect."

Members of Esseghaier's family in Tunis were interviewed yesterday by the Montreal paper La Presse. His father asserted that his son would never commit murder, and that Islam was "a moral support" for him. According to the article, Esseghaier had been in close contact with the family, calling and emailing them regularly, and they noticed no change in his speech or behavior recently. The family believed that he was the subject of racial and religious profiling, according to the article.

"I have known him since he was born. I am convinced they went after him just because of his appearance, because he is Tunisian, because he is a Muslim and because he wears a beard. And that is not a sufficient reason in a democracy like Canada," the Toronto Star quoted his aunt as saying.

<http://www.tunisia-live.net/2013/04/25/portrait-emerges-of-tunisian-arrested-in-terror-plot/>

## • Draft Constitution Completed, but Still No Consensus

The National Constituent Assembly (NCA) committee tasked with writing Tunisia's new constitution produced a final draft on Tuesday, but members of a commission of experts chosen to review it are refusing to do so.



The Joint Committee for Coordination and Drafting had a deadline of April 27 to complete its work. A commission of constitutional and linguistic experts was chosen to undertake a final reading of the draft before submitting it to the Speaker of the NCA, the Prime Minister, and the President.

However, most of the experts selected for the commission have refused to participate in its work. Acceptance by the commission is not legally required, but it was created as final stamp of approval for the draft constitution.

In an interview with Tunisia Live, constitutional expert Kais Saied explained the reasons behind his refusal to be a part of commission.

“As choices were already made, experts have nothing to add at this point,” said Saied. “It is now a political matter, not a legal one.”

Saied, along with other experts, attended sessions of the different subcommittees that assisted in drafting the constitution and shared his views and suggestions with members of the NCA, he said. This included perspectives from similar constitutional experiences in other countries.

“The final agreement has to take place among political parties,” he said. “Politicians should have the final say and be held responsible for it.”

Fadhel Moussa, a member of the NCA representing the opposition Al Massar party, told Tunisian radio station Mosaique FM that the experts panel was not well-chosen, as some of its members did not have a clear understanding of the

constitution. He also expressed doubts about reaching a political consensus on the final draft.

A national dialogue has been taking place during the past week among parties of the ruling Troika coalition, opposition parties, and Tunisia’s largest union, the UGTT. According to Mosaique FM, a consensus was not reached among political leaders on the structure of Tunisia’s next political system – whether it will be presidential, parliamentary, or mixed.

The same source also reported that Nidaa Tounes, a large opposition party, is no longer participating in the dialogue as an act of protest.

<http://www.tunisia-live.net/2013/04/24/draft-constitution-completed-but-still-no-consensus/>

## 5. JORDAN and LEBANON

- **Berri seeks to revive election law talks**

BEIRUT: Speaker Nabih Berri announced Friday that he has a plan to re-launch stalled talks on devising a new electoral

law for the upcoming elections in Lebanon.



“A plan is under way to revive the [parliamentary] subcommittee meetings,” Berri said in remarks published by local newspaper Al-Joumhouria.

Berri said he met with the subcommittee chairman MP Robert Ghanem as well as MPs Akram Shehayeb and George Adwan on Thursday to discuss the details of his proposed plan.

Ghanem announced Tuesday the suspension of the subcommittee meetings because its member’s points of view were too far apart.

Berri has urged the rival political factions to reverse a decision suspending the subcommittee meetings, insisting there was still time for members to come to an agreement.

He revealed that he also met a representative of the Maronite patriarch on Wednesday, stressing that he will not give up efforts to reach a new electoral law before a May 15 legislative session of Parliament.

“I won’t stay with my arms crossed until the May 15 session and won’t mind staying in contact [with politicians] even during the [Greek Orthodox Easter] holiday,” Berri said in separate remarks published Friday by the local daily An-Nahar.

<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Politics/2013/Apr-26/215134-berri-seeks-to-revive-election-law-talks.ashx#axzz2RTsIHdG9>

- **'Some 240,000 families receive cash support under 2nd tranche'**

AMMAN – Around 240,000 families have so far received their cash payments under the second tranche of the targeted fuel compensation to low- and medium-income Jordanians, a government official said Thursday.

Income and Sales Tax Department Spokesperson Musa Tarawneh told The Jordan Times that the number of individuals from these families who benefited from the JD100 million disbursement is nearly 2.4 million.

Cash disbursement started earlier this month and will continue until mid-May, Tarawneh noted.

The amount of cash distributed so far under the tranche is around JD29 million, he said, adding that the overall number of families eligible to benefit from the compensation is around 1.1 million households, comprising over 4 million individuals.

The overall value of the direct cash compensation is set to cost the budget JD300 million, but it would cut the subsidy burden on the Treasury by JD500 million as the generalised subsidy system for fuel products used to cost the government around JD800 million, according to official figures.

The direct financial assistance regime, disbursed over three instalments of JD100 million each, was implemented after the

government's decision to lift fuel subsidies in November last year.

Under the currently implemented cash support system, each individual from households that consist of six members or less, and whose income is less than JD800 a month or JD10,000 a year, is entitled to JD70 annually to compensate for the price increases.

Public sector employees, civil and military retirees, Social Security Corporation pensioners and National Aid Fund beneficiaries receive the cash through their bank accounts.

Private sector workers and the unemployed can collect the payments from the Housing Bank.

Official figures estimate that around 70 per cent of Jordanians are eligible to benefit from the cash support.

<http://jordantimes.com/some-240000-families-receive-cash-support-under-2nd-tranche>

- **Jordan remains against military intervention in Syria — official**

Washington — Jordan will not play a military role in Syria and will continue its efforts to find a political solution to the conflict in its northern neighbour, according to a senior Jordanian official.



His Majesty King Abdullah’s meeting with US President Barack Obama, scheduled for Friday, is part of efforts by Jordan to arrive at such a solution. The Kingdom does not condone efforts to resolve the conflict through military means.

The King is expected to advise the US against any military interference in the conflict, stressing that Jordan is against “having US military boots on Syrian soil”, the official told The Jordan Times.

The official continued that Jordan stands for starting a political dialogue at various

levels, including a US-Russian understanding related to stopping bloodshed in Syria and moving towards a new political era that “would preserve the interests of all”.

“The Syrian crisis should not be allowed to turn into a cause for another Cold War, and should be a reason for all, including the Americans, the Europeans and the Russians to come together,” the official added.

“The US should show political leadership in the global arena, starting with the Syrian crisis, which is having a great impact on Jordan,” he added.

Jordan plays host to around half-a-million Syrian refugees who constitute a great strain on the Kingdom’s limited resources, mainly water and energy, education and health.

UN officials expect the number of refugees to rise to over one million by the end of the year at the current rate of arrivals, to reach 20 per cent of Jordan’s population. They also believe the number would rise to some two or three million if the conflict remains unresolved next year.

Jordanian officials have warned that hosting this number would be beyond Jordan's capability, calling for efforts to stop the conflict, or create a safe haven for refugees inside Syria.

They also warn that the conflict might spread and impact on other countries of the region, affecting the security of all.

The official said that Jordan is keen to contain the conflict, which has turned into a sectarian feud, and to ensure that the forces of moderation would prevail to save the region from prolonged strife.

<http://jordantimes.com/jordan-remains-against-military-intervention-in-syria---official>

## 6. SYRIA

- **Covert help for Syria's rebels in Jordan**



More evidence has come to light of Syrian rebels receiving training from Western

sources in neighbouring Jordan - but the Jordanian Islamists are also taking an interest in the conflict, as the BBC's Gabriel Gatehouse reports.

Western governments and their allies in the Middle East are worried about the increasing dominance of radical Islamist groups in the Syrian conflict.

The US on Sunday pledged to increase what it calls "non-lethal aid" to the more secular-minded Free Syrian Army. But there have also been reports - officially denied - that US military personnel have been training select groups of FSA fighters in neighbouring Jordan.

In a nondescript block of flats in an anonymous Jordanian town, we met a senior commander from the FSA. He agreed to talk to the BBC only on condition of anonymity.

"The lessons focused on small and medium arms, as well as mortars, RPGs [rocket propelled grenades,]" he said.

The commander had not attended the training courses himself. But some of his fighters had and he had been asked to

provide a list of names to be put forward for more training in the future.

He said the training took place at a military facility outside the Jordanian capital. This information has been corroborated by other sources in the FSA, who told the BBC that fighters were trained in relatively small groups, on courses lasting two weeks.

The increasing strength of Islamist groups in Syria has caused alarm in Western countries

The government in Amman has denied that FSA fighters are receiving training on Jordanian soil. Washington has not officially commented on its alleged involvement, stressing only that its assistance to the FSA is strictly "non-lethal".

But off the record, officials in both capitals have been quoted as confirming the existence of both the camps and of the presence of American trainers. Earlier this month, the Washington Post reported plans to accelerate the pace of the training, in the light of recent rebel gains in southern Syria.

Western intelligence sources have suggested the training could be carried out by US-based private security contractors.

Asked how the Syrian rebels had identified the nationality of their trainers, the FSA commander said:

"Most of the rebels have some education; it was not hard for them to detect the American accent of the trainer. He spoke through a translator. But the way he spoke indicated that he was American."

But, he said, his men were dissatisfied with the level and quality of the training.

"Most of the fighters were unhappy, because the training was on a very simple level. When they joined the revolution, they were already proficient in the use of small- and medium-sized weapons. They said the training did nothing to increase the FSA's abilities on the ground."

But there are other groups too besides the FSA who are using Jordan as a base from which to further their aims inside Syria.

And those aims do not necessarily coincide with those of the Americans.

'God's law on Earth'

The town of Ma'an is a two-hour drive south of Amman through the featureless Jordanian desert.

Abu Sayyaf says he believes that after the fall of Assad's regime there will be "other battles"

In a compound on the outskirts we met one of Jordan's leading Salafists, a man by the name of Abu Sayyaf.

His full name is Mohammed al-Chalabi. In 2004 he was convicted of involvement in an al-Qaeda-linked plot to attack a Jordanian military base housing American soldiers.

Mr Chalabi was later sentenced to death. But his sentence was commuted, and now he is out, helping to recruit young Jordanians to cross into Syria and fight with the Islamist rebel group the al-Nusra Front.

"We have 500 of our men [Jordanian Salafists] fighting in Syria," he said, adding that more than 30 had been killed.

"I tell young men it is the duty of Muslims from all over the world to help the vulnerable people of Syria."

Earlier this month, leaders from al-Nusra announced their allegiance to al-Qaeda. Mr Chalabi said his Salafist movement shared the same goals.

"Our aim is an Islamic government that establishes God's sharia law. Any regime that doesn't do this is blasphemous and must be removed."

For now, the more secular-minded FSA and the Islamist al-Nusra Front also share a common objective: the removal of President Bashar al-Assad from power. But an ideological gulf separates the two groups. Some fear that could prolong the conflict.

"We hope that the fall of the regime in Damascus will bring about the end of the conflict in Syria," Mr Chalabi said.

"But my personal belief is that, after the fall of the regime, there will be other battles. The fight will last until God's laws are established on Earth."

"On Earth?" I queried.

"In Syria," Abu Sayyaf corrected himself.

Jordan's infrastructure is struggling to cope with nearly half a million refugees who have fled over Syria's southern border since the start of the conflict.

But it is the prospect of Islamists gaining control of parts of its frontier with Syria, with the help of Jordanian Salafists, that is really worrying Amman.

"This is the last thing we would like to see," said Mahmoud Irdaisat, the director of the Centre for Strategic Studies at the King Abdullah II Academy for Defense Studies in Amman.

"Having extremist groups in Syria - that will invite so many problems to us in the near future."

But current efforts to stem the rise of al-Nusra may be too little, too late. The FSA commander we met told us secular groups had been losing fighters to the better-financed, better-equipped Islamists.

"Our lack of funds has driven many people to join al-Nusra. There used to be no more than 10 or 15 al-Nusra fighters in our area. I used to know all their names. Now there are thousands."

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-22285555>

- **UN team ready to deploy in Syria soon for chemical weapons probe: UN chief**

UNITED NATIONS, April 25 (Xinhua) -- UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said Thursday the UN fact-finding team is "on stand-by and ready to deploy in 24-48 hours" to investigate the alleged use of chemical weapons in attacks in Syria.

"The fact-finding team is on stand-by and ready to deploy in 24-48 hours," UN spokesman Martin Nesirky told reporters here late Thursday. "The secretary-general has consistently urged the Syrian authorities to provide full and unfettered access to the team. He renews this urgent call today."

On April 8, the Syrian Foreign Ministry said that the UN request to conduct a full

investigation about chemical weapons on all Syrian territories runs counter to the request of the Syrian government.

The Syrian government has recently asked the United Nations to send a technical team to the northern town of Khan al-Asal to investigate what the government said was a chemical attack by the rebels, which killed more than 50 people and left scores of others at hospitals, stressing that the technical team should conduct its work only at the targeted site.

However, the opposition groups in exile called on the United Nations not only to send a technical team but also to conduct a full investigation.

The UN spokesman made the statement in response to a press question hours after the White House said that the Syrian government has probably used chemical weapons on a small scale in the Middle East country's armed conflicts, but insisted that U.S. President Barack Obama needed definitive proof before he would take action.

"The secretary-general has taken note of the letter from the White House to

Congress regarding chemical weapons in Syria," Nesirky said. "He takes seriously the assessment presented in that letter."

"However, the United Nations is not in a position to comment on assessments based on national intelligence information," said the UN spokesman. "Senior advisers at UN Headquarters have been in contact with the U.S. authorities on the latest developments."

"The secretary-general has already put together a technical expert team to conduct a fact-finding mission to look into all serious allegations of the possible use of chemical weapons in Syria," he said. "He has requested supporting information from the relevant Member States."

On March 26, Ban announced the appointment of Professor Ake Sellstrom of Sweden to head the UN fact-finding mission, which is tasked to investigate alleged use of chemical weapons in Syria.

Ban and other top UN officials already made it clear that the UN technical team, if allowed into Syria, will only conduct an investigation to find out whether the chemical weapons had been used in the

Syrian violence, but will not give any opinion on who used them.

On Tuesday, Israel's top military analyst, Brig. Gen. Itai Brun, told a security conference in Tel Aviv that the Syrian government had used chemical weapons, reports said.

Last month, Britain and France voiced similar concerns to the United Nations. In letters to Ban, France and Britain laid out allegations of chemical weapons attacks in the Syrian city of Aleppo and suburbs of Damascus on March 19, urging a thorough investigation from the world body.

<http://english.cntv.cn/20130426/103641.shtml>

- **Syrian army seizes rebel town near Damascus**

Soldiers take control of Otaiba, which rebels has used as a weapons supply route for the past eight months.



Fierce gunbattles have remained unrelenting across Syria, as forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad seized a strategic town east of Damascus, state media and opposition activists have said.

Activists and fighters said on Wednesday that the army had entered the town of Otaiba, which has been used by rebels as a weapons supply route for the past eight months.

"The disaster has struck, the army entered Otaiba. The regime has managed to turn off the weapons tap," a fighter from the town told Reuters via Skype.

Rebels said they had pulled out of the town, a gateway to the eastern rural suburbs of Damascus known as al-Ghouta, in the early hours on Wednesday after more than 37 days of fighting in which they accused the government of using chemical weapons against them twice.

The government has denied using chemical weapons and accused rebels in turn of firing them in Aleppo.

"Now all the villages will start falling one after another, the battle in Eastern Ghouta will be a war of attrition," another fighter in the area said, speaking by Skype.

The heavy gunbattle in Otaiba was just part of the wider devastation caused by the conflict, which began more than two years ago and already killed more than 70,000 people, and displaced more than a million people.

#### Cross-border shelling

Elsewhere, Syrian rebels have fired shells hitting the Lebanese border region Hermel, a bastion for the Lebanese Shia movement Hezbollah, in what they said was retaliation for strikes by the group.

On Tuesday, two new mortar rounds hit the city of Hermel, causing light damage to a house there, while raising fears that Lebanon is being drawn further into the Syrian conflict.

Rebels have threatened to "move the battle into Lebanon" if the Syrian government offensive, which they described as Hezbollah-led, continues.

Hezbollah has said those fighting are Lebanese party members who have lived in Syrian border villages for decades and are defending themselves against "rebel attacks".

Meanwhile, sheikh Ahmad al-Assir, a controversial Lebanese Salafist, has urged his followers to join Syrian rebels fighting troops loyal to Assad and Hezbollah.

The call came as a second Sunni Lebanese sheikh called the fight against Assad's regime a "jihadist duty".

"Today, everyone recognises the danger posed by the intervention of [Hezbollah chief Hassan] Nasrallah and his shabiha [pro-Assad militia] in Syria," Assir, who is based in the southern Lebanese city of Sidon, told his followers late Monday.

Syria's opposition and monitoring groups have accused Iran-backed Hezbollah of sending elite fighters to battle alongside regime troops in al-Qusayr, an area of

Syria's central Homs province near the Lebanese border.

"Nasrallah and his shabiha have taken the decision to enter into these areas [Qusayr] in order to massacre the oppressed people there," Assir added.

"There is a religious duty on every Muslim who is able to do so... to enter into Syria in order to defend its people, its mosques and religious shrines, especially in Qusayr and Homs.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/video/middleeast/2013/04/2013424155756695862.html>

- **Syrian refugees could get camps in Lebanon, minister says**

Caretaker Social Affairs Minister Wael Abu Faour said that there was a possibility of establishing camps for the Syrian displaced in Lebanon.

"The possibility of establishing camps for Syrian refugees could be put on the table after we sensed a change in the stance of those who had objected to the matter," Abu Faour said in remarks published by As-Safir newspaper on Friday.

He added that he had proposed to President Michel Suleiman and caretaker Prime Minister Najib Miqati "the possibility of calling for a special meeting of the Security Council to discuss the issue of Syrian refugees."

Lebanon is facing difficulties dealing with the increasingly high number of Syrian refugees on its soil after they fled the increasing violence in their country.

The official figures put the number of refugees living in makeshift camps in Lebanon at around 400,000 while other unofficial reports claim that about 1 million have already sought refuge in Lebanon.

Moreover, the severe funding shortage over the Syrian humanitarian crisis is a major concern for the United Nations, with UNICEF facing a 57 percent funding gap in its Lebanon program for Syrian children, and other agencies seeing similar problems.

Syria is witnessing a violent uprising against the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, which has killed more than 70,000

people since its outbreak in March of last year, according to figures released by the UN

<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/lebanonnews/syrian-refugees-could-get-camps-in-lebanon-minister-says>

- **Troops backed by militia battle rebels around Damascus**

Fresh fighting broke out on the edges of Damascus on Friday, as troops took on rebels in the north, south and east, backed in some areas by tanks and militia, a watchdog said.

"Fierce clashes are raging in Barzeh district pitting rebels against troops and members of the pro-regime popular committees," the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

The north Damascus neighborhood also came under tank fire by the army, the Britain-based group said.

The militiamen were brought in from the Esh al-Warwar district, which has a population mainly drawn from the same

Alawite minority as President Bashar al-Assad, it added.

Most of the rebels are from Syria's Sunni Muslim majority.

In its third year, the conflict has grown increasingly sectarian, as Assad's regime has armed militia among the Alawites and other minority groups.

Analysts say the militia have better knowledge of the ground than the largely conscript army and are more adept at street fighting.

Rebels and troops also fought in several areas of south Damascus, parts of which have been reduced to rubble by months of clashes.

In the east of the capital, fighting broke out in Jobar district, where the rebels hold a number of enclaves, the Observatory said.

The army also shelled the eastern suburbs, where the rebels have rear-bases they have used to launch attacks inside the capital.

In violence on Thursday, at least 130 people died, the Observatory said -- 53 civilians, 27 soldiers and 50 rebels.

<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/newsyriala-testnews/troops-backed-by-militia-battle-rebels-around-damascus>

## 7. ARABIAN PENINSULA AND THE GULF OF BASRA

- **UAE is staunch supporter of rights, justice: Mohammed**



The UAE is a staunch supporter of the rights and justice and a key contributor of humanitarian assistance aimed at alleviating the sufferings of people undergoing political and military turmoil or natural disasters, His Highness Shaikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice-President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai, said on Thursday.

These views were expressed by Shaikh Mohammed while talking to European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso at the Marmoum Resthouse.

Barroso lauded the UAE's humanitarian stances across the world and its generous assistance to bring a smile to the face of the underprivileged in Third World countries, especially those struck by natural catastrophes.

He also commended the progress that the UAE has achieved under the wisdom and vision of its leadership. The UAE, he noted, has become a model in the region of humanitarian, social and cultural co-existence between the different nationalities that make up its diverse social fabric.

Shaikh Mohammed and Barroso also discussed a variety of humanitarian issues in conflict-hit zones, in particular the humanitarian situation of people in Arab countries experiencing internal problems. The meeting, which was attended by Shaikh Maktoum bin Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Deputy Ruler of Dubai, explored ways of enhancing cooperation and coordination between

the UAE and the European Community (EC) as well as between the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the EU, to achieve welfare and to bring peace to the people of the region and the world at large.

Meanwhile, General Shaikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Supreme Commander of the UAE Armed Forces, also met Barroso, at the Emirates Palace in Abu Dhabi. Barroso is visiting the UAE to take part in the Global Vaccine Summit.

Talks at the meeting revolved around the fields of cooperation between the UAE and the European Union and ways to reinforce them and enhancing bridges of communication and understanding to ensure a mutually beneficial cooperation between the two parties.

Barroso commended the role that the UAE plays in the humanitarian and charity field, praising the support given to various initiatives and programmes launched by international humanitarian organisations all over the world.

[http://www.khaleejtimes.com/kt-article-display-1.asp?xfile=data/government/2013/April/government\\_April39.xml&section=government](http://www.khaleejtimes.com/kt-article-display-1.asp?xfile=data/government/2013/April/government_April39.xml&section=government)

- **Bahrain bills US rights assessment report as ‘far from truth’**

Government spokeswoman deplores report for lacking objectivity, totally siding with terrorists who seek to sow chaos in whole region



Authorities in Bahrain, which has been rocked by Shiite-led protests for two years, have voiced "dismay" over an assessment by the US State Department of the rights situation in the kingdom.

"The report includes texts which are totally far from the truth, adopting a manner that fuels terror and terrorists

targeting Bahrain's national security," state news agency BNA late on Wednesday quoted government spokeswoman Samira Rajab as saying.

The strategic tiny kingdom of Bahrain, home to the US Fifth Fleet, has been hit since February 2011 by a wave of Shiite-led protests calling for the ouster of Prime Minister Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa, an uncle of King Hamad, in office since 1971.

A US State Department report released on April 19 said that "the most serious human rights problems included citizens' inability to change their government peacefully; arrest and detention of protesters on vague charges, in some cases leading to their torture in detention."

It criticised the "lack of due process in trials of political and human rights activists, medical personnel, teachers, and students, with some resulting in harsh sentences."

The report claimed that "discrimination on the basis of gender, religion, nationality, and sect persisted, especially against the Shiite population" which makes up a

majority in Bahrain -- ruled by the Sunni Al-Khalifa dynasty.

Rajab "deplored the report for lacking objectivity, totally siding with the terrorists who seek to sow chaos in the whole region."

Bahrain refers to protesters who clash frequently with police forces in Shiite villages as "terrorists" it claims are backed by Shiite-majority Iran.

The kingdom "reiterated full commitment to comply with the human rights principles and standards in confronting terror which targets Bahrain and innocent civilians," said Rajab.

The State Department report acknowledged that "some protesters engaged in lethal acts of violence against security forces, including the use of improvised explosive devices, Molotov cocktails, and other improvised weapons."

Rajab in her statement "urged the US State Department to help countries protect their national security and back their stability, the way the US itself does in the war it is waging on global terror."

Human rights groups say the political violence in Bahrain has killed at least 80 people since 2011.

Watchdog Amnesty International echoed criticism of Bahrain's rights record in a statement late on Wednesday after the UN's Special Rapporteur on torture Juan Mendez voiced "deep disappointment" over a decision by the kingdom's government to postpone his planned visit.

Mendez said he had received on April 22 a letter from the Gulf kingdom informing him that the ongoing national dialogue was taking longer than expected and that his visit could impact negatively on the proceedings.

"This latest cancellation shows that Bahrain is clearly not serious about implementing human rights reforms," said Amnesty.

"There are no reforms in Bahrain, but rather human rights abuses continuing unabated," said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Amnesty's MENA deputy chief.

She urged Bahraini authorities to "immediately release all prisoners of conscience and conduct independent, effective and transparent investigations into allegations of torture."

"Bahrain's allies have been far too keen to rely on the facade of reform and to go on with business as usual," she said. "The cancellation of the visit means there is no pretending anymore."

<http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=58353>

## 8. AFGHANISTAN - PAKISTAN

- **Pakistan court remands Musharraf over Bhutto killing**



A Pakistani court on Friday slapped a three-day house arrest order on former military ruler Pervez Musharraf over the

murder of Benazir Bhutto more than five years ago, a prosecutor said.

Musharraf is already under a two-week house arrest period, set to expire on May 4, over the sacking of judges when he imposed emergency rule in November 2007 and the fresh order will run concurrently.

The retired general appeared in court in Rawalpindi for his remand hearing under tight security. He is accused of conspiracy to murder former prime minister Bhutto, who died in a gun and suicide attack in December 2007.

It is the second of three cases, dating back to his 1999-2008 rule, for which Musharraf has been arrested since returning to Pakistan on March 24 after four years of self-imposed exile, promising to contest elections.

“We requested a three-day remand of retired general Pervez Musharraf and judge Chaudhry Habib-ur Rehman gave a three-day remand and adjourned the case until Tuesday,” prosecutor Chaudhry Azhar told AFP.

“However, we can present him to the court even before Monday, if we complete the investigation,” he added.

Musharraf is being held at his plush villa on the edge of Islamabad where his party complained that he has been confined to two rooms and stripped of his personal staff.

He is also barred from running in next month’s general election on May 11 and has been threatened with death by the Taliban.

Nobody has been convicted or jailed for Bhutto’s assassination. Musharraf’s government blamed the killing on Pakistani Taleban chief Baitullah Mehsud, who denied any involvement and who was killed in a US drone attack in August 2009.

In 2010 a UN report said Bhutto’s death could have been prevented and accused Musharraf’s government of failing to give her adequate protection.

But Bhutto’s son, Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, who is chairman of the outgoing Pakistan People’s Party, has accused Musharraf of her murder.

[http://www.khaleejtimes.com/kt-article-display-1.asp?xfile=data/international/2013/April/international\\_April1021.xml&section=international](http://www.khaleejtimes.com/kt-article-display-1.asp?xfile=data/international/2013/April/international_April1021.xml&section=international)

- **Taliban set conditions to release foreigners held in Logar**



According to local authorities in eastern Logar province of Afghanistan, Taliban group has for the first time set conditions for the release of kidnapped foreigners who were held following an emergency landing of a helicopter in this province.

Provincial council chief Dr. Abdul Wali Wakil said they have held talks with the local Taliban commanders regarding the foreign hostages and Taliban group is demanding prisoners exchange to release the hostages.

The foreigners including Turkish engineers were kidnapped by Taliban militants in Azra district on Sunday evening after they helicopter made an emergency landing.

In the meantime deputy provincial governor Mohammad Hashim Faizi says that they have not been able to achieve a satisfactory result despite ongoing talks with the Taliban militants during the past five days.

Mr. Faizi also added that Taliban militants have shifted the hostages back to Azra district after they were temporarily taken to Hesarak district in Nangarhar province.

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

- **8 Pakistani Taliban militants arrested in Kandahar**

According to local authorities in southern Kandahar province of Afghanistan, Afghan security forces arrested at least 8 Pakistani Taliban militants in Panjwai district.

District governor for Panjwai, Haji Fazal Ahmad confirming the report said the Pakistani Taliban militants were sent to suppress anti-Taliban uprising forces.

Mr. Fazal Ahmad further added Taliban district governor for Zherai was also among those arrested.

In the meantime local officials in Panjwai district said militants attacked Afghan security forces while they were eradicating opium from the fields in this district.

The officials further added at least one Afghan police officer was injured and their equipments were set on fire by militants during the gun battle.

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

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*\*This media summary is prepared by **ORSAM** research assistant **Miray Başar**. 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.*